

# The Ohana Tree



BY REBECCA ADDISON

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Rebecca Addison (Sample Chapters)

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*For Jemima and Ben.*

*Be brave, be loud, and always follow your dreams*



ALSO BY REBECCA ADDISON

# Still Waters

Most people in the small town of Jefferson thought she had it all – beauty, brains, money, status. It seemed that everything came easily to Hartley Preston. And then there was her boyfriend David, good-looking, charming and on his way to the top just like she was. But no one knew better than Hartley that things aren't always as they seem.

After making a devastating discovery that tears her world apart, Hartley runs away to an isolated coastal town. She's searching for freedom and independence but what she finds is Crew Sullivan, a man who is running from life even faster than she is.

Hartley wants to escape her future. Crew needs to be released from his past. And with the way they feel about each other, it could have been more than perfect. Except for one, small thing.

Hartley is keeping a secret.  
And Crew has more than a few of his own.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to say thanks to you, reader, for choosing a book by an Indie author. Your support is so appreciated, and I hope you fall in love with Tessa and Kai just as much as I have. I have some exciting things planned for these two, and you will be able to read all about them in the next installment in the 'Ohana series, due for release late 2016. For release dates and other book news, see my links at the end. I would like to say thank you to my editor Neville Wakem, for your support and helpful advice, and to Lea-anne for your proofreading skills. To my beta reading team – Kylie, Lauren, Mel, Anita, Talia, Lea-anne, and Kerry; your encouragement kept me from giving up more than once. You're all champions and I am so thankful to have you as the very first readers of my books. My thanks to Mitchell Dwyer, my cultural advisor on this project, for your helpful comments relating to all of the Hawaiian elements of the novel. And lastly, the biggest thank you of all to my family for putting up with having me locked away with my laptop for hours on end. I love you.



# ‘Ohana

All those who are claimed,  
loved, and nourished  
by a family group.



*He po 'i na kai uli, kai ko 'o  
'a 'ohe hina pūko 'a*

Though the seas be deep and rough,  
the coral rock remains standing





## CHAPTER ONE

Even today, if you stand on the ridge and look down past the line of banana and papaya trees to the rocks that line the cliff, you'll see it, still standing there inconspicuous in a sea of mottled green. It's nothing special to look at, just another mango tree at the end of a long row, but out of the whole orchard that spans the width of the Onakea family property, that tree alone is mine.

I was ten when Pa gave the tree to me. He gave me a look and opened the screen door, leading me out into the warm spring night. We stood side by side for a moment, gazing up at the stars and enjoying the cool, soft grass beneath our bare toes. As we moved away from the lit up windows to the dark purple and black of the fruit trees, he told me the story of the Nightmarchers in a quiet, hushed voice. I'd heard the story many times before by then but the thought of ghostly warriors and their pounding drums still made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. The papaya trees loomed in the darkness, their thin, straight trunks lit up by the moon. My eyes darted to the spaces between them, my shoulders slumping, my heart slowing to a normal rhythm as we grew closer. There was nothing there. The Nightmarchers were busy somewhere else that night.

We made it to the mango trees and my Pa stopped at the end of the row, kneeling down. I had grown up hearing the story of that tree. Its place in our family history was committed to my memory. It was as if I had always known it, like I knew my name, or that the ridge behind the house marked the border of our land. My father asked me to tell him the story now.

“My ancestor was working on the land when he saw a beautiful woman walking along the shoreline with her sisters. She was so beautiful that he dropped the mango he was eating, and

pressed it into the ground with his foot as he ran to her. The tree grew from that seed, and that's why if you eat one of our mangoes, your life will be as sweet as the flesh. Because it was made from love," I recited, quietly pleased that I hadn't stumbled over any of the words.

"Kailano, i nā mālama 'oe i ka 'āina, na ka 'āina malama iā 'oe," he said. If you take care of the land, the land will take care of you. Then he picked up my hand and pressed it to the trunk of the tree and told me that I was now in charge.

For over a hundred years people from all over the island had counted the days until our fruit was ready, and up until my eleventh birthday, I was my dad's right-hand man. I loved the office jobs, especially working out delivery schedules and filing invoices in the tall metal cabinet with the key. The office was my sanctuary, a place where I sorted and tidied without having to speak to anyone. There, I was away from the constant gaze of my father and protected from my uncles who never grew tired of teasing me about my soft voice and debilitating shyness. As I worked in that office, I imagined myself growing until I was as tall as my dad and just as broad across the shoulders, my voice deepening and hairs growing on my top lip and chin. I pictured myself telling a story in a strong, deep voice around a fire late at night with everyone listening intently. There were many uncertainties to getting older - I didn't know how I would ever be able to speak to a girl, and the strange things my teenage cousins whispered about were still a mystery, but one thing was certain. I would devote my life to the land, just as my father had done, and his father before him. I saw that life played out for me daily by my father, uncles, and older cousins. It never occurred to me that I could become anything else.

But then everything changed.

Just a few short weeks later, the tree that was once the pride of the 'ohana stood empty and barren, never to fruit again. The rest of the fruit in our orchard fell to the ground where it rotted, filling the air with a sickly, sweet stink. And slowly, year by year, fewer people on the island remembered our mangoes.

But the tree was still the first thing my eyes searched for every time I went back to the plantation. When I was sure I was alone, I went down to the mango grove and watched it from a distance before walking toward it and placing my hand on the trunk. I talked to it and asked the fruit to come back to me. I did this often. More often than I wanted to admit to myself. Because the year I turned twenty-eight my need to see the tree fruit again had become more desperate than it had in years. That was the year I felt sick in my soul every time I saw it. Its empty limbs were like a rebuke, reminding me of that terrible night and all the things I could have prevented. **It was also the year a girl named Tessa arrived on the island, bursting into my carefully managed life and causing the ground to shift violently beneath my feet.**



## CHAPTER TWO

I never slept well in the summer, but that year my insomnia had taken a cruel turn. My brain didn't just whirl and spin late into the night, it taunted me with images of the past and the sounds of voices I hadn't heard since I was a boy. When exhaustion finally forced me into a restless, fitful sleep sometime near dawn, I dreamed that I was walking alone on an empty beach, the tide steadily rising until I was swallowed by warm, churning water. I tasted salt on my tongue and my lungs burned in my chest, but I never tried to save myself. I let the ocean take me to its depths where my body eroded until I was nothing but sand. When I woke, my mouth was dry and my brain pulsed inside my skull. The only weapon I had to fight the exhaustion was coffee, and I drank it by the bucketful. I was tired, in every possible way a human could be tired. Mind, body and soul. I couldn't say what the trigger was, no traumatic event had preceded it, and nothing out of the ordinary had tipped the scales in the wrong direction. Perhaps that was the problem. Nothing out of the ordinary ever happened to me. I was still young, my body strong and my head full of dreams and ideas. But I felt old, and my world grew smaller and smaller with each passing year.

There were expectations.

That I would stay on the island.

That I would look after our land.

That I would watch over my family.

And I did all of these things and more because I loved my 'ohana and no matter what anyone said about my father, he taught me the importance of living pono - doing what was selfless and morally right. But as hard as I tried, the work and the

responsibilities and even the knowledge that I was *doing the right thing* did nothing to quieten the small flicker of need in my belly. I needed to experience life on my own. I needed to be free from a future that was laid out like a carpet in front of me, stretching on and on and on to the horizon. And most of all, I needed to play music.

I've written songs since I was a child, firstly to entertain my baby brother and then as a way to join the men, who were often singing and playing guitar out on the lanai after dinner. The stammer that plagued me disappeared when I sang, and with my guitar against my chest, I felt safe and almost hidden. I still felt that way. As a child, I played to be seen. And as a man, I played both professionally and for myself. But there was never enough time. Since leaving high school, I'd worked for my dad either out on landscaping jobs or up at the family plantation, beating back the forest that never stopped trying to swallow it whole. And when the sun finally went down, signaling the end of another long day, I picked up my guitar and walked along the beach to my cousin Pete's Bar.

The bar was intended to be a high-end restaurant that Pete and his parents hoped would attract wedding parties from the mainland. It only took seven months of working with brides and their mothers for Pete to build a stage and install a bar made from a long, marbled slab of Koa wood, closing the restaurant for good. Within six months, it was the most popular live music venue on the island. He had bands lining up to play in his bar; I knew I was lucky he'd given me a regular gig. But it didn't stop the knot in my stomach from forming each night as I walked along the sand with my guitar on my back. The tourists who packed Pete's to capacity weren't there to hear my music. They were there to get drunk and get laid, all while having the

quintessential Hawaiian holiday experience. Pete had the tiki carvings and the hula dolls with their plastic grass skirts lined up on the bar. And he had me, the Hawaiian looking Hawaiian. Singing Hawaiian songs.

“Aloha,” I said into the microphone. My voice shot away from me, the loudness of it giving my heart a start. I wasn’t one of those performers who excelled at mid-song banter. There were no calls of ‘Is everybody having a good time tonight?!’ when I was on stage. Because Pete asked me to, I introduced each song before we played it, but other than that I tried to stick to the song list. Get in, get out. A few months ago, Pete brought in some hula dancers to do a tourist show on Saturday nights. They were the shows I dreaded the most. I couldn’t get away with hiding on Saturdays. I had to wear an aloha shirt with *Pete’s* written on the back and mingle with the audience, taking the microphone with me as I weaved between tables singing *Aloha ‘Oe*.

“Show us ya tats!” a girl screamed from the back as I stepped off the stage and started my walk around the floor. The table had been hassling me all night; a group of British girls on holiday and all of them blind drunk. I changed directions, making my way to a couple who looked like they were on their honeymoon and behind me, I heard the girls boo.

“Come on!” one of them shouted. “Take ya shirt off! This is fucking boring!”

The woman in front of me winced at her partner and took a long drink from her mai tai. I was so sick of this shit. I scanned the room for Pete but he was busy behind the bar, looking intently at the drink he was pouring. Pete and I were more like brothers than cousins. We could communicate just by looking at each other. I willed him to turn around and look at me now. I

had a few words I wanted to say. He didn't, of course, and soon the girls were yelling again.

"I'd let you stick your umbrella in my pineapple!"

I caught the eye of Julia, one of the hula dancers who performed on the small dancefloor to the right of the stage. She raised an eyebrow as she spun around to hide her laugh. Our tourist show didn't attract the middle aged mainlanders and families in matching hibiscus print clothing. We were too far from the big resorts for that, and we didn't offer a proper lu'au or fire dancing. We were considered second-rate by the travel agents who sold the tickets. So we got the spring breakers, the backpackers, the people on all inclusive budget vacations. In other words, the drunks and the lousy tippers.

Pete looked up, his face transformed into cool indifference. I hid my smile. Pete could switch from joker to Manager in a nanosecond. His eyes scanned the crowd looking for potential problems; someone who had drunk too much and needed to be cut off, men, eyeing each other up, ready for a fight. His focus was on the back table and I knew he was working out how much money he'd already made from them, and if he could justify kicking them out. I made another pass around the room, finishing the last song just as I stepped back on stage.

"This is a joke!" one of the friends shouted. "She broke up with her boyfriend, yeah, and we promised her a good time tonight to take her mind off it." She stood up, holding the edge of the table for support. "We're not fucking eighty years old, right, we want some real entertainment, don't we girls!" She looked around the room, glassy-eyed, and got a few half-hearted cheers.

I put the microphone back into the stand and spoke into it. "What do you want?"

“What we paid for!” the blonde one said.

“What was that?”

“Give us a good time! That’s what the flyer said. It said we’d have a good time, right, so take off ya clothes and dance for us!”

This time, there were a few more cheers. The band laughed behind me, not even bothering to hide it. A few of the more sober members of the audience were giggling into their drinks, but feeling bad about it, and behind the bar Pete’s mouth had set in a hard line.

“You don’t want to see me dance,” I said, my voice sounding strangled.

“So just take ya shirt off then, and show us ya tats!”

The room went silent, waiting with bated breath to see what would happen next.

“Listen,” I said, “I’m not here to-”

“All right, you three,” said Pete, finally, “time to go.”

All three stood up at once. The tall one took off her sparkly blue jacket and threw it on the seat behind her, getting ready to throw the first punch. They didn’t get far. Pete’s was run exclusively by our family. I knew that a couple of uncles would be standing by to act as security and that my cousin Mark would already be sitting in his cop car outside, ready if we needed him.

I looked out over the dancefloor as I unplugged the lead from my guitar. The doors to the deck had been left open so that the clean, mineral scent of the sea mingled with the smell of alcohol and dancing bodies.

I stepped off the stage but was stopped from going any further by a hand on my arm. “Come on baby, you know you want to.”

I looked down. I didn't want anything from her but she was too drunk to see that. She flashed a smile, all fake tan, and thick

eye makeup and bit her lip. She thought she was sexy. And her friend was just as bad, standing there swaying from side to side as she curled her index finger and mouthed, "Come here." I stood up straighter and peered over the crowd toward the bar. Pete caught my eye and raised his glass.

"Thanks for coming," I said politely. "I hope you enjoyed the show."

I kept my body language casual and made sure I was smiling. Lots of girls in the club meant lots of guys. And more importantly for Pete, lots of bar sales. He hadn't said it out loud, but we both knew that me playing there was conditional on showing my face after the set and keeping the girls happy. And I hated it.

The short one slid her hand up my arm until she gripped my bicep, scratching my skin lightly with her nails. What was it with women and vacations?

"Sorry to disappoint you," I said, as I grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand out from under the sleeve of my shirt. "But I'm not going to be the big Hawaiian *kāne* you sleep with on your holiday and then talk about once you get back to the office. If you're looking for that, try that guy over there." I placed my hands on her shoulders and spun her around so that she faced the dance floor. Like always, Nick was already waiting.

"Can I buy you a drink?" Pete asked me when I passed him. A small scuffle was breaking out near the doors where one of my uncles was trying to escort the British girls outside. I rested my guitar against a stool and sat down.

"So you're actually paying for drinks now?"

He glanced at me sideways and we both laughed. "What's your problem, brah? That short girl over there is hot."

"I wasn't interested," I said as I leaned my elbows on the bar.  
"And she was drunk."

"Come on, man. You're exactly what all the haoles want when they come here. A nice, sexy Hawaiian with tattoos and a big - "

"Shut up, Pete."

He laughed. "Seriously, man. You could have a different one every night if you wanted to. Why not? You're single."

"You wouldn't understand." I yawned and picked up my guitar. "And I'm beat, so I'm heading home. You up for a surf in the morning?"

"Sure. Don't be late again, though."

I was never late. Pete was always late. Pete was *famous* for being late.

"Yeah, okay, funny guy, I'll try my best. And Pete?" I said, yawning again and stretching my arms above my head. "I'm not interested in any of the girls because those girls aren't interesting. It's as simple as that, brah. See you in the morning."



## CHAPTER THREE

The car park was full of tourists waiting for a ride back to their resorts. The girls huddled in groups, some bored and checking their phones, others drunk and falling over their feet as they screamed stuff like, "Fucking Aloha!" into the night air. The guys were either circling the girls or getting ready to head to the next bar. I threw my guitar strap over my shoulder and made my way past them as fast as I could.

Once away from the bar, I walked home slowly, enjoying the sound of the ocean and the silence of the night air. After a shower and some food I went to bed, but I knew I wasn't going to be able to sleep. I always tried, though. I was stubborn about that. Even when I knew I was going to lie there until morning, I still went to bed at roughly the same time. I wasn't going to let it win. I lay there for an hour watching the ceiling fan spin on its axis, counting the seconds it took to make one rotation, five, twenty. The sheets were knotted around my legs and a car at the beach across the road had their headlights on, casting a bright, yellow glow up the wall. I tugged the pillow over my face and tried for another ten minutes before giving up and pulling on my trainers.

I stepped out into the night, taking my usual route, up the main street then past a row of houses that were dotted up the hill as the road inclined. There were a few people out. A couple of teenage boys I didn't recognize were walking toward the beach and an old friend of my father's was walking his beagle, Orla. I dragged myself up the road, then ran down a narrow lane with trees so dense they obscured the moon. There were the usual sounds; my heart pounding in my ears, my feet on the asphalt,

crickets singing in the long grass and the distant hush of the ocean. But as I made my way further down the street, there was another sound, high and fine, weaving its way through the night air. It grew louder and I found myself searching for it in the trees, in the houses, but it was quiet and then loud, fast then slow, dancing away from me the moment I thought I knew where it was coming from. As I made my way around the last bend in the road, the sound was suddenly clear. It was a violin. It was being played furiously, I could almost feel the vibrations it made rattling my chest bones. I picked up my feet and ran faster, making it up the last hill with no effort at all.

There were only two houses this far down the street. One of them belonged to Mrs. Lee, an elderly Chinese woman who I knew would be long asleep by now. The other belonged to Garrett Lincoln, an ex-pat from Texas, who I had trouble picturing on the end of a violin. I slowed to a walk and made my way to two cottages nestled side by side, set back from the street. They were built in the 1920s by a woman and her companion. A communal garden linked the two. Now there was a little fence separating them, but I knew that Mrs. Lee was often on Garrett's side of the property, and he was often on hers. As I suspected, Mrs. Lee's windows were black, but Garrett's house was lit up from the inside, the yellow glow of it spilling across the street. Two shadowy figures were out on his covered verandah. One of them was playing the violin.

She was small, I saw that much, but it was difficult to make out any of her features in the dark. She had stopped playing almost as soon as I approached and I saw her take a drink from a glass before bursting into surprised laughter. I could make out Garrett, he was sitting in his armchair and his low, gruff voice carried through the air.

"Just play me a damn song, will you?"

The girl pretended to curtsy and my cheeks lifted in a smile. I watched, stepping back into the shadows as she lifted her violin and settled it on her shoulder as Garrett passed her the bow. There was a hush over the street, I was sure that even the crickets were silenced and the waves had paused, suspended, before breaking on the shore. The air was charged and I found myself holding my breath, waiting for her to start.

What followed next was strange and melancholy, it was like nothing I had ever heard before. Even as I was taken aback at the sound, my musical ear searched for the secret, the key that would unlock it for me so that I could understand it. The music started soft and quiet, but built and built until I had to resist the urge to press my hands to my ears the way my brother had as a little boy. It reminded me suddenly of the day my grandfather died. We had arrived at the house before my grandmother was ready for us and had found her crying. Not crying. Keening. The sound the violin made was like that, like grief and loss and pain. I watched, knowing I should have called out or slipped away but completely unable to move.

A fat black cat ran across the path, setting off the sensor light and illuminating the front of the house in a white glow. The girl stopped playing and put her hand over her eyes and I froze. If she looked across the road, there was nowhere for me to hide. I raced to find a plausible explanation for lurking in the darkness that didn't make me sound like a serial killer. But then the light switched off again and I was saved. I muttered a prayer of thanks and slipped out of the shadows and down the street.

My shoes dragged along the asphalt and my shoulders ached, but I wasn't tired. My mind was racing. I already knew I wasn't going home to sleep. Listening to live music had made me feel

jumpy and excited ever since I was a boy, but the violin I'd heard was something different. She was clearly talented, if not some kind of musical prodigy, but that wasn't it. I walked slower, trying to figure it out. There was something about it that reminded me of Hawaiian music, even though they didn't sound alike. By the time I stood under the bright street light on the corner of the main road, I had it. She told stories with her music, just like we did.

I walked past my cottage, continuing to the path to the beach instead. I was alone on the sand but the thump of music and the high tinkle of glassware and laughter carried over the breeze from the bars. I took off my shoes, tying the laces and hanging them over one shoulder so that I could walk through the surf. When the sand gave way to rock, I turned up the long, rough track that five generations of my family had used to get to the sea. At the top, I pulled my flashlight out of my pocket and used it to guide me through the trees to where the land opened up and the plantation began.

The house lay just beyond the orchard. No matter how many times I saw it from there, its smallness always surprised me. When I was a kid, the house felt like a palace. But that night all my adult eyes saw were the boards that needed replacing, the paint that peeled away and the roof that wouldn't last another year. I waited for a minute, looking at it. And then I saw the kitchen light switch on.

"Aloha ahiahi," he said from the table when he heard the door open.

"Hi, Pa."

"You play at Pete's tonight?"

"Yeah. It's crazy down there," I said, kicking off my shoes and ducking my head as I stepped inside. "People everywhere."

He nodded and glanced at my guitar like maybe he wanted to play it. I was about to offer when he said, "That's Saturday night for you. See anyone you liked?"

I smiled and shook my head. "I don't think any of the girls at Pete's are daughter-in-law material, Dad."

A hint of amusement twitched at the corner of his mouth as he collected his papers and sorted them into a tidy pile. "Well, you know I was married with a son by the time I was your age. It's good for a man to be settled."

He was dangerously close to the topic we never talked out, and my heart leaped as I desperately tried to think of something to say to keep the conversation going. But I was too late.

"There's no work tomorrow, son," he said, "the hotel has some fancy guests arriving and they don't want the landscapers working out front when they arrive." He kept his eyes on his hands where they rested on the table and I pulled out a chair and sat down, hoping it would make him look at me.

"Do you want me to come up here instead? I can help fix the fencing or plant out the new trees?"

He leaned back in his chair, lifting his face. Our eyes met and I felt the air freeze in my lungs. "Take the day off, Kai." He pushed his chair away from the table and stood up. "You look like shit."

I watched him leave. "Night, Pa."

And so do you.

I was about to get up myself when he called out from the end of the hallway, "Kailano? Go to sleep. Tomorrow, we'll talk." And then his door clicked shut and I was alone, sitting in a kitchen thick with old memories.

I went to my room but I didn't sleep. I lay in my old childhood bed, my feet hanging over the end and my shoulders

brushing the sides and I thought about the way I always seemed to end up back here, no matter how hard I tried to drive a wedge between my father's life and my own. And I wondered why I kept expecting things to be different when nothing ever was. No matter how often I walked up there, we were never in the same room for more than a few minutes. He always said, *Tomorrow, we'll talk*. But when tomorrow arrived, the night's promises were forgotten and the talking never came.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Pete walked up the path to my house and leaned his board against the wall. "You coming in?"

"Why are you even asking me?" I said. "I live here."

"Whatever, brah." He kicked off his flip flops and shook out his long hair, covering me with a spray of seawater and sand.

I whipped him with my towel and placed my board next to his. "When are you going to move out of home anyway?"

"I don't live at home."

"Oh, right," I said, "you have your own apartment, I forgot."

He narrowed his eyes. "It *is* an apartment."

"Garage."

"Shut up."

"Go in," I said, "use my shower, eat my food, watch my TV. I'm going to shower out here and head into town."

He pushed open the door and we both walked in. I grabbed some clean clothes and headed outside, and minutes later I heard the shower running and Pete's smooth, warm voice belting out Maroon 5's *One More Night*. He was committed to getting the opening "Ooooh Ooh Ooh" parts right, except he was saying 'Kai' instead, just to annoy me.

"You're a fool!" I yelled at the bathroom window. He cracked it open and sang even louder through the gap.

The outdoor bathroom was one of my favorite things about the house. It wasn't much, just a pipe connected to the rainwater tank that I used as a shower and an old bathtub I set up down the back. Back there, I let the garden do what it wanted, and eventually, it became so overgrown that I showered outdoors without being seen by anyone. After a quick rinse, I changed and

thumped on the wall of the house with my fist to let Pete know that I was leaving. He was still in the shower wasting all of my water.

The main street in town only had a few shops and restaurants, but there was everything I needed. Even though the island had been heavily developed in the time since I was a kid, the main street had managed to stay exactly the same. Three years before, a new shopping mall had been built near the resorts and it kept most of the tourists out of this part of town.

I walked down the sidewalk, hugging the store fronts so that I stayed in the shade. It was going to be another hot day and even though it was early, the sun prickled my scalp through my baseball hat. A few people waved and said hello but no one stopped to talk. Everyone on the island knew I was quiet, and it was a belief I actively encouraged. I still didn't like talking to people.

As I got closer to the corner, I felt a warm glow of contentment. Going to Lulu's Cafe felt comforting and familiar. I imagined it was what arriving home was like for most people, and my steps slowed as I tried to remember the last time going home had felt that way for me.

"Aloha," Lulu said when she heard the bell over the door. She leaned around the hot pink coffee machine she'd installed recently and smiled. Lulu was one of my favorite people. When I was a boy, I loved leaning into her soft, squishy body as she read me stories or showed me how to weave with hala leaves. Sometime in her early forties, she'd gone on a health bender that eliminated just about every food group known to man, and as a result, she'd lost over half her body weight. These days her devotion to nutrition bordered on the religious. She was trim,

tanned and taut with a closely shaved head and a tattoo of a pineapple on her right bicep. But she was still Lulu.

"Same as usual, Kai?"

"Yes please, Aunty."

"How about a Dandelion Coffee?"

"What? No."

"Yerba Mate' tea?" she teased, reaching for a takeaway coffee cup and disappearing back behind the machine. "No work today?"

I leaned my elbows on the counter and watched her make the coffee. "No. I've got a day off."

"Nice one," she said, keeping her eyes on the two ribbons of dark liquid that were snaking their way into the cup. "Going up to see your dad?"

"Nah. I stayed there last night, snuck out early this morning. He told me I looked like shit."

She laughed and shook her head. "He's an asshole."

"Yeah."

She handed me my cup and waved my hand away when I tried to pay her for it. "Kailano?"

"Yes?"

"Do something nice with your day. Don't waste it."

I raised my cup in a salute and she put her hands on the counter, pushing herself up and leaning across to give me a kiss.

"Aloha, Aunty."

"Aloha."



I rarely got a day off, so I didn't get to do it often. But I loved it when I could. I reached the front of the shop and waited out front for a minute or two while I pretended to look at a couple

of surfboards they had on display. But really, I was looking at him. He was behind the counter with his back turned, arranging sunglasses on shelves. He straightened them, then used his finger as a measuring stick to make sure the gap between each pair was even before going back to the first row and starting again.

I walked through the door of Makai Surf and waited for him to turn around at the sound of the bell. "Hey, buddy!"

"Kai!" he shouted as he barreled toward me, narrowly avoiding a rack full of t-shirts as he went. "Kai is here! Garrett! Kai is here!"

Garrett's short, wiry body briefly popped out from the storeroom and he lifted a hand, before disappearing again. The shop was old and weather-beaten, just like Garrett was. The floorboards were soft and smooth and the wooden planks on the walls had been left unpainted. It was a bit like the boatshed I used to play in once, but bigger, with tall vaulted ceilings.

Akamu put his hands on my shoulders. He wore a freshly ironed shirt and clip-on tie. I couldn't stop myself. I wrapped my arms around him and he indulged me for about four seconds before stepping away to formally shake my hand. "Welcome to Makai Surf, Kai. Can I help you today?"

"I'm not here to shop," I smiled. "I came to see you."

He leaned in to whisper in my ear. "But I'm training a new person today, Kai. She just came this morning." I looked to where he pointed.

And I just about jumped out of my skin. Because she was there, the girl with the violin. Despite only seeing her for a few minutes in the dark, I recognized her immediately. She was unforgettable like that. Hair that was almost white and perfectly straight, hanging to her hips. Narrow shoulders and legs that were a little too long and lanky for her height. She sat cross-

legged on the floor pulling bikinis out of a cardboard box and carefully placing them into piles.

"Let's go and see Dipper," Akamu said, grabbing my hand. He pulled me along behind him until we were standing over the girl. She glanced up when we approached and her eyes grew wide. "Hello," she said as she stood and awkwardly tugged at the bottom of her t-shirt.

"This is Dipper and Garrett told me she doesn't know anything about surfboards," he said, "and that's a problem because we mostly sell surfboards." I saw Garrett give him a reassuring nod.

"Do you think you could teach me?" she asked. She was so small that she had to tip her head backward just to look at his face.

"I don't know if I can teach you," he said carefully, "because it's very important and I don't know if you're good at paying attention because we just met. You have to know all of the surfboards. If you don't know them, you might give someone the wrong one, and they could have an accident."

"That's true," Garrett said in his rough, raspy voice as he walked out from the storeroom, scratching his cheek through his patchy gray whiskers. "But it's okay for you to teach Dipper about surfboards. She's a good listener and she'll promise to pay attention."

Akamu's shoulders relaxed and he smiled. His was a smile that started slow and crept up on him until his whole face beamed.

Now that I knew Akamu was happy, I moved my attention to the girl, holding out my hand. "I'm Kai."

She quickly shook it and then pulled her hand away as she opened her mouth. I thought she was about to introduce herself, but like most people, she wasn't fast enough for Akamu.

"Dipper is new here because she started today and we went to get our 9.30 juice and guess what, Kai? Mango and Pineapple is her favorite."

"Are you kidding, bro?" I said, "Mango and Pineapple is *your* favorite!"

"I know!" he grinned. "She likes it *with ice* too!"

"I'm Tess," she said to both of us. "But in Hawaii people call me Dipper."

"In Hawaii?"

"It's a long story."

Akamu nudged the box on the floor with his foot. "We can't leave the box here. It's a tripping hazard. It's very dangerous to leave things on the floor in a shop because people might not see it and fall down." He frowned and put his hand on his head.

"Of course," she said, "I'll sort these out right away." I listened carefully to her voice to see if there was any hint of sarcasm or cruelty there, but there wasn't any. When I glanced back, she was sitting down again, back to sorting bikinis. Akamu lifted his watch to his face and then hurried away toward the counter.

"So you're brothers," she said, keeping her eyes on the floor. "Who's older?"

"I am. Aka is five years younger than me."

"He's a tough boss." She held up a hot pink string bikini top and let it dangle from her finger. "He said he's going to quiz me on those surfboards over there tomorrow, and I'm kind of worried about what will happen when I get all of the answers wrong."

"Don't worry about it," I said, "I can tell he likes you."

"That's nice, but he's tried so hard to teach me, I don't want to let him down."

I took a seat on the edge of the window sill and watched her rifle around in the box for a while. The way her hands were quickly tucking in straps and flicking over swing tags reminded me of the way her fingers danced on the neck of her violin before. I wanted to ask her about her music but I didn't know how to bring it up. It felt as though I had intruded on a private moment when I'd seen her play. So instead, I just sat there like an idiot for a few minutes and then when the silence became awkward I said, "Where are you from?"

She straightened up a pile of bikini bottoms carefully and then looked up, her eyes meeting mine. If my eyes were the earth, then hers were the sea. Not the deep ocean where the water is dark, but the way it looks right near the shore, where it's aqua and bright and so pale that you can see the sand between your toes.

"I'm from nowhere and everywhere," she said, pulling her eyes away from mine so that she could resume her sorting. I didn't know what to say to that. But I liked the idea of being from everywhere. Nowhere, not so much.

"Dipper, is that young man annoying you?" Garrett's voice called out from the back of the shop.

She rolled her eyes. "No!"

"Are you sure? Because I can have him thrown out of here if he's distracting you from your work."

Tess glanced at me quickly and I stood to my feet. I was pretty sure I knew what was coming next.

"Excuse me," Akamu said from behind the counter. "I am the Manager at Makai Surf and this is where we work, Kai. We have to work when we're here."

"I understand, Aka."

"This is very serious, Kai," he scolded, walking up to me, and placing a hand on my shoulder. He dipped his head so that he peered intently into my face. "We have important work to do."

I smiled patiently. "I'm just leaving. I'll come back at twelve to take you surfing."

His face froze. "Garrett takes me surfing, Kai. That's Garrett's job."

"Right," I said. "I forgot. Can I take you out for dinner at least?" I quickly ran through Akamu's schedule in my head and of course, it was Thursday. "Thursday is burgers at Grilled." He was pleased that I remembered. "Well, I'll call you tonight then after you get home."

He clapped a couple of times and then turned his attention to Tessa. "Take Dipper to dinner."

"Ah, well, I-," she said, her face flushing red.

"Kai," Akamu said mischievously, picking up my hand and holding it out toward Tess, "you should take her to dinner because we don't know her so you can get to know her at dinner and you can tell me everything about her in secret."

To her credit, she managed to keep the mortification from her face as she put her hand in mine and said, "Thank you, Akamu, that's a nice idea." Her eyes flicked over to where Garrett was standing in the doorway of the storeroom before coming back to rest on my face.

"What time do you finish?" I said, still holding her hand. I knew I should probably let it go, but I didn't want to.

"You can go now," Garrett yelled at her from the back.

Tess scowled. "Are you kidding me? I just got here."

He caught my eye. "Get outta here, Dipper."

She pulled her hand out of mine and looked at me helplessly.

"I guess I'm leaving then." Akamu took the box from her and then she followed me outside, sliding her feet into a pair of red flip flops she'd left next to the door.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Akamu can get a little excited about things. I hope you didn't feel uncomfortable."

"Of course not. I like your brother a lot."

"He likes you, too. Hey, if you don't want to go to dinner, that's okay. We can tell him we went and he won't know the difference."

She didn't answer. I didn't know if that meant she was offended or relieved.

"How about we just go for a drive?" I managed. "I can show you some of the places that the tourists don't know about."

She peeked over her shoulder to where Akamu was grinning at us from the window and laughed, the sound of it husky and sweet. "Let's go, then."



## CHAPTER FIVE

"My place is down there," I said, pointing up the street. "We can grab some food and then I'll take you on a tour. Have you been to Hawaii before?"

She shook her head and fell into step beside me. "I've been to Honolulu, but this is the first time I've visited any of the other islands."

"Are you liking it so far?"

"What's not to like," she said. Through the gap between two shops, a slice of ocean sparkled like topaz. "Beach, sun, nice people, no traffic.. if anything, it's too perfect."

"How can anything be too perfect?"

"I don't know, I just think you need a bit of darkness sometimes, so you can appreciate the light. It keeps things interesting."

I nodded but didn't say anything. We reached the end of the road and then turned right, down a small street to a line of cottages facing the ocean.

"Hawaii has a hard side, too, you know," I said as I opened my front gate for her. "It's not all coconut trees and hula dancing."

She walked through and stepped to the side so that I could shut the gate. "Sorry, Kai, I didn't mean to imply that -"

"Sometimes," I said, "it gets so cold here that we have to wear shoes. I'm not kidding. And once, last year, Kenneth's truck broke down in the middle of the road and it backed traffic up for over an hour. My grandmother gave him the finger."

She smiled suddenly and looked at me like maybe I was somebody she wanted to know. And I felt it, and passed it back, hoping she would feel it too.

When we reached the porch, I kicked off my flip flops and pushed open the door.

"This place is cool," she said, as she followed me into the living and dining room. The room was relaxed and beachy with an old sofa in the middle and a couple of surfboards leaning up against the wall. "Do you live here alone?"

I led her into the small galley kitchen and started rifling through cupboards. "Yeah. But it doesn't feel that way. My family have an open door policy, whether we all agree to it or not." She gave me a long, quizzical look then moved her eyes away. I pulled out a loaf of bread and a packet of cookies and opened the refrigerator.

"I've never lived alone before," she said to my back. "Not really. I've been by myself while I've been traveling, but I've never had a house to myself. What's it like?"

I turned back to her with my arms full. She took a jar of mustard and a container full of chicken out of my hands and I offloaded the rest of it onto the countertop.

"It's.. freedom," I said, watching her carefully.

"Living with no one watching."

"Exactly."

We made sandwiches and I carefully wrapped them, packing them into a cooler bag while Tess filled up our water bottles. When everything was ready, I grabbed my keys off the counter. "I'm just going to get changed. Do you want to stop at your place so you can grab a swimsuit?"

I hadn't told her anything about where I was planning on taking her but I figured a swim and a picnic would please just about anybody.

"That would be great," she said. "Thanks."

I walked down the hallway, singing something to myself, and turned into my bedroom at the end, leaving the door open.

"I think Aka likes you," I called out, pulling my shirt over my head and looking around the corner. "He's not like that with everyone. It usually takes him a while to warm up to new people."

She was sitting on a wooden stool next to the counter. "I like him too. How long has he been working there?"

"About three years, I think." I rounded the corner, pulling a fresh t-shirt over my head. "Garrett gave him his first job. He started part time and worked his way up. You ready?"

My truck was an old Ford F-150 with faded red paint and a pile of equipment in the back. It broke down about once a month but it was never expensive enough to fix that I considered replacing it with a newer model. I opened her door and threw the bag inside, before stepping out of the way as she climbed in. After I had shut her door, I pointed to the window, telling her to wind it down.

"Sorry, no air conditioning," I said when I climbed into my seat. "I should get it fixed, but I kind of like driving with the windows down. I hope you won't be too hot."

"I'm fine. Do you need directions?"

I shook my head and started the engine. "I know where it is."

When we pulled up outside, I jumped out and went next door to talk to Mrs. Lee while Tess got changed. When she walked out a few minutes later, we were talking about something while I

helped her pull up weeds in her front garden. Mrs. Lee must have been at least ninety and her head only came up to Tessa's shoulders. Next to her, I was a giant.

"Tessa!" she cried when she approached the fence. "I was just telling Kailano what a lovely young woman you are."

"Thank you, Mrs. Lee," she said. "I think you're lovely, too."

Her eyes sparkled. "You two have a wonderful day. Thank you for your help, Kailano."

"Call me when the lawns need to be mowed," I said. "I don't want you doing them yourself."

"Take her to the North Side," she called back when we got to the truck. "Take her to The Hidden Place."

I waved politely and then we climbed back in the truck and were on our way.

"So where are we going?" she asked as soon as we pulled away from the curb.

I smiled but kept my eyes on the road. "To the North Side. She totally ruined it."

"Do we get to go to 'The Hidden Place' too?"

"Of course."

We continued along a road dotted with houses until I made a left, slowing down as soon as we made the turn. The road was small and winding, and it was empty apart from us.

"How long have you been here?" I asked her. "I haven't seen you in town, or at any of the clubs along the beach."

She wound her window down the rest of the way and leaned out. The trees were changing, getting darker as we climbed higher. "Three weeks. I haven't been out much. I've mostly been at the house, and down to the beach in the early mornings." She sat back in her seat and ran her eyes over my face. "You look like

your brother. But the angles of your face are sharper, and he has darker skin."

"I'm more like our mother than he is. How long are you here for?" I reached into the bag and passed her a bottle of water.

"I don't know," she said. "Until it's time to go, I guess."

"How do you know Garrett?"

"Well," she said, "that's kind of complicated. I guess you could say he's a friend."

"How old are you?"

"Forty-three."

I flicked on the radio, smiling to myself. "That's what I thought."

We drove in silence for a few more miles and then I pulled into a small car parking area, stopping the truck under the shade of a tree. "How old are you really?"

"Why?"

"You look young," I said, searching her face, trying to figure it out. "But you act older."

She picked up the bag and I jumped out of the truck, walking around to help her climb down.

"Twenty-four," she said when she was on the ground and I took the bag from her. "And I feel older."

I wanted to tell her that I felt that way too, but instead I pointed toward a small opening in the trees. "We're going in there. Are you okay to do a bit of a walk? It's not long, but it's steep up the top."

"Lead the way."

I disappeared through the gap and she followed behind. In seconds, we were enclosed in forest and shadows.

"I haven't been up here for ages," I said over my shoulder. "I used to come swimming here all the time when I was a kid."

We walked along a muddy track that climbed up and over the rocks, and every now and again I bent down to move a branch that had fallen on the path. There were no sounds around us, except for a few birds squawking in the trees above and the sound of our labored breaths as the climb got harder.

"Almost there," I said at last, sitting down on a boulder and passing her a drink. She sat down next to me and tucked her knees up.

Below us, a small waterfall tumbled into a large pool of deep, dark water. I snuck a look at her face. She was staring as if she didn't want to blink in case she missed a second of it.

"That's not it," I said.

"It's not?" She peered down and frowned. "How can that not be it?"

"Come on," I said, standing up again. "It's slippery going down. I'll give you a hand."

We climbed between two enormous boulders and then I stepped in front of her and held out my free hand. She took it and my fingers wrapped around hers. We made our way down to the edge of the pool slowly, it really was slippery, and we both lost our footing more than once.

"We have to swim across," I said, letting go of her hand once I'd made sure she was on level ground. I put down the bag and lifted my shirt up and over my head before tossing it onto a rock. I felt her eyes follow the tattoos that covered my right arm and half of my chest but when I glanced at her, she quickly looked away. It made me feel strange, like I was fifteen again, too scared to open my mouth in case something dumb came out of it. I told myself to get a grip. "You can leave your things here. No one will take them."

She unbuttoned her shirt and undid the zipper on her denim skirt, stepping out of it, before folding it quickly and placing everything next to my t-shirt. I kicked off my shoes and Tess put her sandals next to my clothes, and then I waded into the water, the bag held high above my head with both hands.

"Ah! I always forget how cold it is!"

"This isn't what I pictured when I saw myself swimming in Hawaii," she said through chattering teeth as she made her way next to me. "Why the hell is it so cold?"

"It's fresh spring water. And it's about to get deep. Be careful." I spun onto my back and swam to the other side holding the bag up out of the water with one hand. She hovered at the shelf of sand and stones, the depth of the water spreading out in front of her. And then she took a big mouthful of air and dove under.

"Swim faster, it will make you warmer," I shouted from the other side when she surfaced. I sat on a rock watching her, my legs bent at the knees and my skin dripping wet.

"Thanks for the tip," she yelled when she'd reached the middle of the pool.

"No problem."

When she finally made it to the other side, I moved out of the patch of sunlight I was sitting in to make room for her. She wrung out her hair, wrapping her arms around her knees as she shivered.

"I could give you some swimming lessons," I said, leaning back on the rock. "You need to be a stronger swimmer than that if you're living here. The ocean can be mean sometimes." She took the sandwich I offered her and turned her back toward the sun.

"So where is this 'hidden place'?" she said when we'd finished.

I stood up and pulled her up by the hand. "It's right behind you."

She spun around and ran her eyes down the large rock covered with vines. I couldn't hide my grin.

"What?" she said, narrowing her eyes. "There better be a 'hidden place,' Kai because I didn't just freeze my ass off for nothing."

"I told you," I said, leaning past her. "It's right behind you."

She watched as I pushed my hand through the vines. My arm disappeared and I pushed the branches away so that she could see inside. There was a small tunnel, only two or three feet long, and light poured through it from the other side.

"After you," I said, stepping back.

She pushed the vines aside and climbed through. She only had to duck a little bit, but I knew from experience that I'd have to crawl over the rough rock and would end up with bloodied knees.

"It's nice, isn't it," I said behind her when I'd made it through.

It wasn't nice. It was breathtaking. We were in a natural amphitheater made of rock and below us lay a crystal clear pool of water. There was another waterfall and a small beach. And there were pink flowers everywhere.

"Come on," I said, leading the way down to the water. "Your first swimming lesson starts now."

## CHAPTER SIX

She was actually a decent swimmer. Even if she were caught in a rip, she would probably do fine. But I'd panicked before, thinking of the two of us swimming alone, the long empty hours stretching in front of us, and all of that silence to fill. At least if we were swimming, I wouldn't have to think of things to say.

"I can't believe how amazing this is," she said after our fifth lap, flipping over and tipping her head back into the water. "How many people know it's here?"

I swam next to her and rolled onto my back so that we floated side by side. "All of the locals know about it. But we don't advertise it. We don't want it to end up in a tourism brochure somewhere."

Her eyes closed as she relaxed into the water and I swam away to the shallows. I watched her bobbing on the surface for a few seconds, opening my mouth to speak, and then changing my mind again. I wanted to ask her about her music, but Dad always said that when you entered The Hidden Place, you didn't talk about anything that happened on the other side of that rock. Illness, arguments, financial worries, even your work - none of that was welcome.

"What are you thinking about?" Tess said. She was swimming toward me in smooth even strokes. She didn't need lessons. And by the expression on her face, she knew it.

"Nothing much. You happy here, or do you want to go?"

"Happy," she smiled, before ducking under the water. She was a streak of white along the bottom, and then she shot up, breaking through the surface.

"It was nice watching someone see it for the first time," I said as she walked out of the pool toward me, more and more of her revealed as the water dropped away.

She couldn't have been more different from me. Her skin was snow white on her stomach and legs, but a light spray of caramel colored freckles traveled up her arms and spilled over the curves of her shoulders. The fine hairs on her arms caught the light, and her long blonde hair hung over her shoulder where she'd twisted it into a rope. Her limbs were long and thin and she had bony knees. I thought I could fit my hands right around her waist if I tried. Next to her I felt clumsy and too big, like an oaf. I was going to trip over my feet at any moment.

"Thanks for bringing me here," she said. "What were you thinking about just then?"

I met her eyes and tried to keep my face composed. Because I was pretty sure she just caught me staring at her. "What?"

"Just then. You had this look on your face. Like you were far away."

"I just remembered something," I said quietly, realizing it was true. I *was* remembering something. Or, someone. "Hey," I said, changing the subject. "We have a name for people like you."

She raised her eyebrows. "Oh, yeah?"

"It's nothing like that. It's Kama Hele. It means traveler. Someone who moves around."

"Like the Hawaiian version of a hobo?" she laughed and I heard myself laughing with her.

"No, more like a gypsy. Or a nomad."

She pushed the hair off her face. "Well, I guess that's pretty accurate."

Above us, I was surprised to see the shadows advancing over the rocks. We had been there for hours, but it felt like minutes.

"It's getting late. We'd better walk back. The cold pool is worse the later you leave it."

"Urgh," she groaned, "I forgot about that."

I followed her up the path to the opening in the rock and waited for her to go through. When I saw the vines fold back over of the entrance, I got down on my hands and knees and made my way to her.

"I don't want to get back in there," she said as she put our things back into the bag we'd left on the rock. Now that the sun had moved, the pool was cast in shadow and the low mist that came in the evening was just making its way over the ridge. I saw that she was eyeing up her clothes on the opposite of the pool.

"Don't even think about it. It's way too dangerous. We're swimming."

She scanned the ridge. "You're bossy."

"I'm not bossy. I'm sensible."

"Sensible makes you boring."

I pointed to the section of the cliff that fell down in last year's storms. There was no way anyone could jump it without killing themselves. "Sensible keeps you *alive*."

"You win, Kai," she said, putting her hands up in surrender as she made her way to the edge of the water. "You put up a persuasive argument." She followed me until we were shoulder to shoulder, looking out across the velvet water. "So, who are you going to be?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know, for the Olympics? Are you the man ready to fulfill his destiny after training for this moment his whole life? Or are you the plucky underdog, only recently discovered by an aging gold medalist turned coach?" She was bouncing on her

toes as she stared at the opposite shore, like a boxer in the corner of a ring, psyching herself up to fight.

"Ah, I'm from Hawaii?"

"No!" She glanced at me sideways. "You can't be from Hawaii! You have to choose something else."

I watched in amusement as she clasped one wrist with the other hand and lifted her arms up and over in a sideways stretch. "I am Svetlana from Russia and I'm the reigning champion of cold pool racing. I'm undefeated. No one can take me down."

"I see." I put my hands on my hips and met the challenge in her eyes, raising my eyebrows. "In that case, I'm from Japan. And I've been cold pool racing since the day I was born. You may as well forfeit now, little girl, you've already lost."

We walked in up to our knees and gave each other frozen smiles as we tried not to let the coldness of the water show on our faces. Tessa held her hand in the air and lifted her pointer finger. "On three. One, two -"

I dove in, smiling as I imagined her outrage, and as soon as it was deep enough I tipped my body down, moving deeper, going as far as I could without losing sight of her. The water was so cold it stung my skin and made my eyeballs ache when I looked up through the indigo and cobalt blue to Tessa, her shape warbled and rippling up above. She was on the surface, splashing furiously, her legs kicking from the knee and her long, slender arms powering through the water. Her movement sent bubbles down to where I hovered below, fizzing and popping against my skin. I waited until she was almost to the other side and then darted under her, pushing off a shelf of rock with my feet and shooting up so that I broke the surface a couple of feet in front. It was an easy win.

"Nooooooooo!" she cried, putting her head in her hands when she found her footing. I met her eye as we stumbled out of the water and she made a fist, shaking it at me in mock fury.

"You weirdo."

"It's more fun that way, though, right?" she said, sitting down on the rock and picking up her clothes. "I used to do that when I was little. If I didn't want to do something, it was always a little easier to get it done if I pretended it was the Olympics."

"Why the Olympics?"

She threw me my shirt. "Why not? You can choose your country and make up a name, and besides, everyone loves the Olympics. Don't you?"

"I guess so. Feel like playing again? We forgot the bag."

She balled the clothes in her hand and dropped them onto the sand. "You're on."

"Hey!" she said when we were getting ready to climb back up to the track. "You didn't give yourself a Japanese name."

I glanced at her, smiling at the earnest look on her face. "You choose."

"Alright. I have to think about it, though. It has to be perfect."

The sun was low in the sky so we hurried to make our way up over the rocks before we lost the light. Once we were at the top, it was just a short downhill walk to the car park.

"Thanks for taking me all the way out here," she said when we were back inside the truck. "I hope I didn't ruin your plans for the day."

"Not at all." She had her legs crossed on the seat and her body turned so that she was almost facing me. "I had fun."

Actually, it was the most fun I'd had all year. But I didn't tell her that.

She leaned forward to switch on the radio, and then we were bumping our way out of the car park and back on the road into town. A few minutes into the drive she leaned her elbow on the door and rested her cheek in her hand, and the next time I glanced at her, her eyes were closed. Her chest rose and fell with the deep breath of sleep and every few seconds her thick gold eyelashes fluttered. And I drove slowly, desperately trying to keep my eyes on the road in front of me and away from her.

As soon as I parked, she woke with a sleepy but mischievous smile on her face.

"Mikio," she said, opening her door and climbing out. "That's your Olympic Games name."

"Mikio?"

"Definitely." She shut the door and turned toward the house, stopping just before the gate to glance back over her shoulder.

"It means tree trunk man."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

From that day on, all I could think about was Tessa. I ran over the details of our day at the Hidden Place as I lay in bed at night, still unable to sleep even though the season has slipped into Fall. I'd laughed more in that one afternoon with her than I had all year. She made me feel young and stupid again. I liked it. Every night, I ran past Garrett's house hoping to catch her out on the lanai with her violin. But she was never there. All I knew was that I wanted to spend more time with her. I just hoped I'd be able to convince her to spend time with me. Especially since when it came to women, I was very out of practice.

I had broken up with my last girlfriend over two years before, a local girl who my family thought would make a perfect wife, and I had stayed resolutely single ever since. No one thing was wrong with any of my past relationships, including the most recent one. I even managed to stay friends with every woman I had been involved with. I wasn't the type to get into heated arguments or take offense at things, and I was open to the idea of a long-term commitment. There was just something missing. Something I couldn't name. And I knew enough about marriage and parenting by then to know that I wasn't going to make that kind of commitment unless every piece of the puzzle fit.

"Kailano!" Akamu shouted as soon as I walked into the shop. "You are here again?"

"I am, buddy," I said, putting my dirty hands into the pockets of my shorts. My gray t-shirt was covered in streaks of mud. "Sorry. I should have changed."

"Well, look who it is," Garrett said, walking around the counter with an eyebrow raised. "Here to take Akamu out for lunch?"

I pulled my cap down and scanned the room.

"I can't have lunch with you, Kai, because it's almost twelve o'clock and Garrett takes me surfing from twelve o'clock until two o'clock and we close the store, Kai. The store is closed."

Garrett smiled and slapped Aka on the back. "Don't worry, mate, he's not here to see you."

"What?" That was Tessa, making her way out of the storeroom behind the counter, having just heard the whole thing. "Oh! It's Mikio. Hello again."

"Hi."

"That is not Mikio. That is my big brother, Dipper. He is *usually* nice but sometimes he pushes me off my surfboard and that is very mean, and when he lived at Onakea his feet smelled very bad, Dipper. Very bad."

"Aka!"

"Kai is here to take you to lunch, Dip," Garrett cut in, trying not to smile.

I narrowed my eyes at Akamu before turning to Tess. "Is that okay? Do you have plans?"

She put down the binder she was holding and glanced at Garrett before turning back to me. "Ah, no, no plans. I brought my lunch from home, though. We could share?"

Garrett put his hand on Akamu's shoulder and nudged him into the storeroom. "Twelve o'clock! Come on, let's go see what the waves are doing." I heard the back door click shut and then Akamu's voice grew faint as they walked around the side of the building and across the road to the sea.

"Brothers, huh?" she said as she walked past me to the front of the store. She flipped over the sign. "I usually eat out the back."

I followed her to the small patio area I had designed for Garrett when he first took over the shop and sat down under the shade sail. "I would have called first, but I don't have your number."

She put two containers on the table and pulled off the lids. "Salad. Is that okay? And don't worry. I'm easy to find."

I took a plate from her outstretched hand. "So am I."

We ate our salads and drank a bottle of water each and then she reached into the bag she had hooked over the back of her chair and pulled out a newspaper that had been folded until it was a square not much bigger than my hand. "You do that one, and I'll do this one," she said, pulling out another one. "Then we can help each other if we get stuck."

I slid the paper across the table. "What is it?"

"Sudoku. Ever tried it? All you have to do is make sure every row, column, and box have every number in it from one through nine. I'm addicted to them."

She rolled a pen across the table and I picked it up and stared at the puzzle. Tessa was already bent over her page, scribbling furiously.

"Hmmm. Not bad for your first try," she said a few minutes later, peeking over at my paper. "You did good, Mikio."

I checked my watch and reluctantly stood up. "I have to get back to work."

She stood up too, staring up into my face with laughing eyes. "Okay."

I clenched my jaw as the familiar knot of anxiety twisted in my gut. *For fuck's sake. Just ask her.* I formed the words in my

mind before I let them reach my mouth. "Can I see you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" A shadow of wariness crossed her face.

"Yes. I can come down at twelve again. I'll bring the food this time."

She picked up the containers and plates and narrowed her eyes. "*Okay.*"

"What does that mean?"

"Look, Kai, just so you know, I'm not sticking around." She lifted a shoulder awkwardly and put the plates back down.

I mentally rehearsed what I should say back. I considered, 'Hey, we're just hanging out, I'm not asking you to move in.' But that would have made me look like an asshole who wasn't interested in her. And I was interested. I wanted to know everything about her.

She gave up waiting for me to reply and blurted, "I just, you know..wanted to be honest," before looking away.

For something to do, I picked up the plates and opened the back door for her, inclining my head to tell her to walk through. And then I said the first thing that came into my head. "Honesty is important."

"I'm happy you think so, too," she said, stopping on the opposite side of the doorway so that we were face to face. "Then we can be friends."

The following day, I pulled my truck into the only available parking space at twenty minutes past twelve. I'd had trouble getting away from the site after one of my uncles smelled a rat and hid my keys. I drove the road into town in a state of white-hot panic at the thought of being late and missing our date. She was sitting in a chair in the corner of the garden when I rounded the corner, wearing a big pair of black sunglasses and a brightly

colored scarf tied around her head like a gypsy. Her feet rested on the edge of a plant pot as she did something with a large notebook balancing on her legs.

"Hi," I said, as I walked over to her.

She tapped the end of her pencil to her bottom lip. "Hey there, Kai. How's your morning been?"

"Okay. What's that?"

She dipped her eyes to the page and after a moment's hesitation, picked up the book and spun it around to show me. It was a sketch of Akamu next to a surfboard. She'd captured him perfectly. "Just mucking around."

"Have you shown him? It'll blow his mind."

She wrinkled her nose. "You think?"

"Show him. Trust me, he's going to love it."

She lifted her feet off the planter and stood up, closing the notebook with a shy smile. "Maybe I will."

We sat at the same table as the day before, but this time, I served the food. I'd spent an hour at Lulu's kitchen table the night before quizzing her on what I should make. Finally, I'd decided to keep it simple and just make what I'd want to eat.

"Since I was Mikio in the Olympics, I made Japanese. I hope you like seafood."

She peered into the first container and raised her eyebrows. "Did you make this?"

"Yes. Akamu and I took a night class last year. He was a disaster."

"Wow," she said, pulling out a thumb-sized nigiri with a slice of pink salmon laid over the top. "This is pretty fancy. Are you trying to impress me?"

I laughed, surprised at how direct she was, and put my hand on the back of my neck. "I guess?"

She took off her glasses and looked at me carefully. "Well. Thanks. No one has ever brought me lunch before."

I sat down opposite her and opened the containers, passing her a pair of chopsticks and pouring her a mug of miso soup from my thermos. "No one has ever brought you lunch?"

She took a bite of a California roll and groaned. "Yum! And, no."

"So I'm the first. I like that. I'm going to keep on doing it."

She swallowed another bite and opened up the second container. "You'd better."



We ate lunch together every weekday after that. We never said we would, I just kept turning up and she was always waiting. We didn't make any other plans either, even though I wanted to ask her out every time I saw her. I found myself checking my watch as I worked, waiting for the moment when I could sneak away and call it a lunch break. I practically skipped my way back after seeing her, flying high on adrenaline and the energy and wellbeing that comes from talking with someone you really like.

About three weeks into our lunch dates, I surprised her by walking in early with a picnic basket and a blanket over one arm. Akamu was talking a tourist into a surfboard that was obviously way out of her price range and Garrett was sitting on a stool at the front counter, reading a magazine.

"Aloha," he said, lowering the pages to his lap as he took in the picnic basket. "Bringing in the big guns, I see."

I shrugged. "It's just a picnic."

"Is it? Taking a woman on a picnic is never about the food and the blanket, kid." He stood up and nodded at Akamu. "The sales shark is at it again."

He was. There weren't many people who could resist Akamu when he was in full sales mode. I heard him rattling off statistics and details about how the board was made. The girl must have only been about eighteen. She gave him a strained smile and reached for her purse, following him to the register. While Aka rang up the sale, I went out back to find Tess. She was sitting at our table working on a new sketch, this one of Garrett's face with his glasses on the end his nose and his eyes down as if he were reading.

"Hi," she said, without looking up. "You're early today."

"Hey." I moved behind her chair and leaned down. "That's a good one. You've managed to get every wrinkle on there."

She screwed up her nose and studied it. Garrett's skin was so sun damaged that in the right light, the grooves on his face made me think of my mother's old tooled leather bag. "Well, it *was* a challenge getting them all on there, but I like this drawing. It's not bad."

I put a hand lightly on her shoulder and felt her muscle stiffen under my palm. That was new for us. I hadn't touched her before then, apart from shaking her hand and helping her down the rocks at the pool. "It's great. Want to get out of here? I packed a picnic."

I removed my hand and she put down her paper and pencil. "Okay, now you're definitely trying to impress me."

I moved in front and pulled her to her feet by her hands, holding them for a second before letting go. "Are you liking it?"

She met my eyes and after a moment's hesitation suddenly rose up onto her tippy toes and kissed me quickly on the cheek. "I'm liking it."

We walked across the road and down the small track through the grass to the beach. We were close to Pete's which meant we

were being watched by at least one Aunty from a window, so I put my hand in the small of her back and led her through the coconut trees to the small grassy area I knew would be deserted at that time of day. The kiss had given me confidence and now I found myself reaching for her constantly. I wanted to touch her back and walk too close so that our arms brushed together. I wanted to loop my fingers through hers. More than once, I had to create some distance between us and put my hands in my pockets.

"Sandwiches," I said when we'd laid out the blanket and opened the basket. "Chicken or ham?"

"Ham."

I passed her a sandwich and a bottle of juice from Lulu's and sat down beside her. "How's it going at the shop?"

She swallowed her mouthful and grinned. "That brother of yours is something else. Did you know he made me try every juice combination at Lulu's so that I would really know which one was my favorite? I thought my bladder was going to burst."

I laughed. "That sounds like something he'd do."

"You're lucky," she said, "to have him as your brother."

I met her eyes briefly. "I know it."

We finished our food and packed everything back into the basket. I lay back under the shade of a big old kamani tree that had been there for as long as I remembered and she followed me. Neither of us spoke. I wanted to ask her about herself, but I didn't know where to begin. We'd spent a lot of time together by then, but somehow we never talked. We ate and worked on Tessa's sudoku puzzles or read the paper. Any conversations we did have were just funny stories or focused on Akamu, and I wondered if we were both avoiding talking about anything personal, or if it was just me.

"Go on," she said, nudging me with her elbow.

"Go on what?"

"Ask."

She had been doing that a lot lately, reading my mind. "I'm thinking."

"Okay, but if you think too long I might change my mind."

"I want to make sure it's a good question. You might not ever answer one again."

She rolled onto her side so that her nose almost touched my skin. Her breath was warm and soft where it blew against my t-shirt. "Am I that difficult to get to know?"

"Am I?"

"Let me think," she said, rolling onto her back. The light above was turning golden as it moved through the leaves, and I wondered how late it was. "I guess I don't know much about you, other than who your brother is and that your job involves dirt." She propped herself up onto her elbows and glanced down at my work boots. "What about me?"

"I don't know anything about you," I admitted, looking up into her downturned face. I hesitated for a couple of seconds before pressing my fist just under my ribs. "But Tess, I feel you. Here."

She lay back down and this time, she was touching me, her lips moved against my skin of my arm as she talked. "I met Garrett when I was ten. He was friends with some people I was living with. He's a recovering alcoholic, did you know that?"

I nodded. Garrett was open about it. When he first arrived on the island after selling everything he owned and a long stint in rehab, he'd started a support group that still met every Monday night at the community center. He was an interesting guy. On the outside, he was rough and gnarly, even a little mean. But you

only had to speak to him for a few minutes to learn that these days, all he was interested in was meditation, surfing and making people happy.

"I moved a lot as a kid. But Garrett always followed me. He wrote me letters and sent me money tucked into a book or a packet of stickers. He visited me a few times a year, no matter where I was. When he was drunk, he'd call me up and cry or yell about his wife. And I loved it. It made me feel important and grown up. Like someone needed me. Garrett is the only family I've got. That's why I'm here."

"I'm the eldest son of the eldest son in a family that can trace their genealogy back for hundreds of years," I said. "And that's why I'm here."

We were silent after that. The wind had picked up and the branches and leaves shook overhead. We lay shoulder to shoulder in the warm afternoon air, the smell of grass and damp earth around us and the soft burr of insects in the background. And after a while, I found myself not thinking of anything other than being there with her. Everything else, for the moment, had quietly slipped away. I found her hand and gently wove my fingers through hers.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Three days later I was working on the family property, planting trees. It was the hottest day we'd had in a month, a brief resurgence of summer, and I was working alone, having sent the workers home the week before knowing we wouldn't be able to cover any more of their wages. I was working on a windbreak, digging holes and planting saplings and after each one I planted, I checked my watch. At 11, I planted the last tree, pressing the soft, red soil with my boot. I wiped my face with my t-shirt and threw my shovel into the wheelbarrow, picking up the handles and turning it toward the house. I planned on showering and picking a basket of fruit from the trees for Tessa before I had to leave for town. As I got closer to the house, I saw Garrett's truck parked in the driveway and I picked up my pace. Akamu wouldn't come home early from work unless he was sick. There wasn't any other reason for the truck to be there. I parked the wheelbarrow along the side of the house and rounded the corner, expecting to see Garrett standing there in one of his fisherman's hats and t-shirt full of holes. But it was Tess, standing a few feet away from the front of the truck with her hands nervously pulling at the hem of her shirt as she talked to my dad. I walked around the back of the truck and they both turned at the sound. I'd been working hard and I knew I was dirty and wet with sweat. As I got closer to her, I spun my cap around and hoped I didn't stink.

"Hi," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"Your brother didn't feel up to working today," Dad said.

"Do you two know each other?"

"Is Aka okay?"

Dad nodded. "He'll be fine. Kai, I've got some paperwork to sort out. You can finish up for the day. We won't get anything else done out here now." He walked back up the steps to the house, shutting the door behind him without another word.

"What happened?" I lifted the bottom of my t-shirt and wiped the sweat off my face.

"I don't know. He was a bit wound up this morning, I guess. And he had trouble putting the surfboards out the front. Then he locked himself in the bathroom and wouldn't come out."

"Ah, shit." I pulled my phone out of my pocket and typed in the passcode. "I'll give Garrett a call."

"There's no point," she said, placing her hand on my arm. "He's gone for a surf. The shop is shut for the day." I glanced down at her hand, cool against my hot skin, and she snatched it back.

"Do you want to go for a swim?"

"Now?"

I nodded toward the house. "I need to check on Akamu first. Come in, I'll make you a drink."

"But your dad.." she whispered, following me back up the steps to the verandah.

"What about him?"

But I knew. I knew how he would have talked to her when she'd arrived unannounced. I heard his words, clipped and cold, ringing in my ears.

"It's okay," she said. "I should go. I got the feeling that he wasn't in the mood for visitors."

As soon as the words left her mouth the door opened and Dad poked his head out. His eyes came to rest on Tessa and then he looked at me. "Can you come and talk to him? He wants you."

I nodded and Dad stepped out fully, closing the door behind him. He leaned up against the doorframe with his arms crossed over this chest. If he was trying to tell her that she wasn't welcome in the house, then he was doing a mighty fine job of it. As if his refusal to acknowledge she was standing there wasn't enough, now he was physically blocking her from going in.

"Kai, I'll just catch you later," she said, pulling the keys from her pocket. "It was really nice to meet you, Mr. Onakea."

He gave her nothing.

"No," I said, pushing the door open a little harder than was necessary and fixing him with a long, level stare. "I own this house. Pa, let her in."

"I'm sorry about him," I said once we were inside and Dad had disappeared into his study. "He's not himself."

She put her hands into the back pockets of her shorts and looked around the room. "Don't worry about it. Should I wait here while you go and see Akamu?"

She was hovering by the door, unsure of what to do. "Come with me. I bet he'll want to show you his room."

I led her into the living room and down the hallway to the bedrooms. Akamu's was the last door.

"Hey, Aka," I called out as I knocked. "Can I come in? Dipper is here, too."

"You can come in Kai but please shut the door because I don't want to talk to him anymore today. Not anymore at all, Kai."

He was sitting on his bed with his box of shells on his lap, his face brightening when he saw Tessa come into the room behind me.

"Dipper is in my house?"

He stood up to walk toward her and the box fell off his lap, sending shells across the floor. "Don't move!" he gasped. "These are very precious shells. You might stand on them if you move even a little bit. Stand very, very still, Kai."

I froze on the spot and stared at the floor. "How can I help you clean it up if you won't let me move?"

He scowled. "This is a real mess, Kai."

"It sure is."

"I think, I think *Dipper* will help. Because she is very small, Kai. She can get in all the gaps and not stand on any of the shells."

Tess was already crouched down, carefully placing shells into a little pouch she'd made with the front of her t-shirt. She worked her way around Akamu and me, picking up shells and putting them back into the box. A few times, she winked at Aka and jumped into the air, landing neatly in a small shell-less spot on the floor. He thought it was wonderful, of course. And I kind of did, too. Before long she had him dancing and giggling until he was so excited I had to take the box out of his hands before the shells ended up on the floor again.

"You're like a ballerina, Dipper!" he cried when she landed on one foot and grabbed the windowsill to stop herself from toppling over. "You're very pretty."

She made her way to me, doing her best ballerina impression as she went, and dropped the last shell into the box. It was a small sunrise shell, the pink and orange of it bright against her palm.

"I would like to be alone, now," Akamu said suddenly. He sat down heavily on his bed and took the box from me. "Please go out of my room."

"Okay, bud," I said. "I'll come and say goodbye before I go home."

"Goodbye," Tess said. "I'll see you at work soon."

But he didn't answer, he was lost in his shells, his lips moving slowly as he counted them to make sure they were all there.

"Kai?" Tessa said from behind me. I had my head in the fridge, trying to find something decent to offer her to drink.

"Yep."

"Do you mind if we don't swim? I got a lot of sun yesterday, and it's so hot out there."

I straightened up and looked out the windows. The sky was cloudless and the heat was rising off the driveway. "How about a tour of the orchard? There's lots of shade. I can pack us some food."

She leaned back against the cupboards. "Do you have a hat I can borrow?"

"Yes, but not one that will fit."

"Then yes," she grinned, "I'd love to see your orchard."

After I threw on a fresh t-shirt and found an old baseball cap for Tess, we quickly packed some food into a backpack and walked outside. As I thought, the cap just about swallowed her head. It came down to her eyebrows and nearly hid her ears, but she was happy with it, and besides, she looked cute. We walked down to the kitchen garden and through the gates at the end, then kept walking over the grass until the fruit trees began.

"It's like a forest," she said. "I've been to an orchard before, but those trees were all in rows and covered with netting. These guys seem like they've been living here longer than your family has."

"Not quite," I said as I led her down the path that would take us to the avocado and jackfruit trees. "But close. Some of these trees have been here for a long time. The mangoes, especially."

But I wasn't taking her to see those. I'd been down to see my mango tree that morning, and it was still there, standing barren and empty in a sea of trees heavy with fruit.

I slowed down and let her walk a little way in front of me so that I could watch her weave her way around the trunks of the trees. Every now and again she lifted her face, her hand pressing the hat to her head to stop it from falling off.

"Do you sell the fruit?" she asked, "there's so much here."

"We used to export it, but we haven't done that in a long time."

We walked until the trees got thinner and then the land opened up again. If we kept walking, we'd end up at a cliff above the sea. "There's a good spot up here," I said, catching up with her. "There's a tree we can sit under, and there's a good breeze that comes up from the sea."

The land was hilly there, and outcrops of rock broke through the grass. She made her way carefully over them, looking down often to stop herself from tripping over. When we got to the small cluster of macadamia nut trees, I took the bag off my back and pulled out a couple of pareo for us to sit on.

"What was it like growing up here?" she asked when we'd kicked off our shoes and were lying side by side under the shade of the tree. Above us, the tips of long, thin branches were covered with shiny green balls, like fish caught on a line. She rolled onto her side and took the hat off, placing it between us.

"I don't have anything to compare it to."

"It must have been magical," she said, bending her arm and resting her cheek on her elbow. "All of these trees, and the sea

right there. I would have loved it." Her voice trailed off and her lips curved, but it wasn't a real smile. There was no warmth in it.

"We were always outside," I said, "but there was a lot of work to be done, too. We didn't have a lot of free time to be out here playing. My dad made us both work really hard. As you can probably imagine."

She sat up and crossed her legs. "He seems pretty tough. But he loves you. I can see it."

"I know," I said, lifting my eyes to hers. "But I still wish he wasn't like that."

She let her hand drop from her knee so that the back of it lightly rested against my palm. I closed my fingers around it and felt a warm ache travel from my fingertips, along the inside of my arm and across my chest to my heart.

"What did you mean when you said you owned the house? You don't live up here."

"It's a long and complicated story." I pressed my thumb into her palm. "I'll tell you about it sometime. The short version is that I bought Onakea from my dad a few years ago."

"You don't want to live in the house?"

I shook my head. "Where did you grow up?"

She didn't like that question. But I hoped she was going to answer it anyway.

"Nowhere," she said softly. "And everywhere."

I let go of her hand and sat up so that we were facing each other. "You said that before. Do you always speak in riddles?" She smiled, and that time it was a good one.

"I was born in San Francisco, but I've lived all over the US. The last place was a house in Texas, and when I turned eighteen I left and I haven't gone back."

"Army brat?"

She shook her head. "Not even close."

"What, then?"

"I was a foster kid and not a very good one. I kept running away."

"Where did you go when you turned eighteen?"

Her shoulders relaxed. "I got a job at Starbucks and when I'd saved enough, I bought a ticket to Vietnam."

"Wow," I said, passing her a sandwich. "That's ballsy."

"Is it?"

"I think so."

"Thanks."

We ate and when we'd finished we lay back under the trees again and gazed up through the branches.

"This is like some kind of dream," she said, closing her eyes.

"What is?"

"This whole place. I can feel myself winding down like maybe soon I'm going to be walking slower, talking slower, sleeping all day."

"You have heard of Hawaiian Time, haven't you?" I said.

She yawned. "I believe in it now."

"Go to sleep if you're tired." I wanted nothing more than to sit there and watch her sleep again. But she shook her head.

"No way. I'm not falling asleep in front of you again."

"Why not?"

"Because it's weird!" she said. "And creepy. Do not under any circumstances let me fall asleep, Kai."

"Can I take you for lunch on Saturday?" I asked before I lost my nerve. She rolled onto her side so that she faced me.

"Kai," she said, her face suddenly serious. "I don't know how long I'll be sticking around, and -"

"It's the same as every other day except it'll be the weekend."

She gave me a long, thoughtful look. "It's not the same."

I tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Say yes. It'll be the same, except I'll pick you up at home and someone else will make the food."

She glanced down at my mouth and then back up to meet my eyes. "Yes."

That time, I couldn't hide my smile.

We spent the next two hours talking and eating the rest of the food and then she did fall asleep. And I let her. After a while, I covered her with my pareo and walked to the cliff and back and when I returned, she was just waking up. When she saw me, she sat up and narrowed her eyes.

"Sorry," I said, sitting down on the grass beside her. "You looked too cute. I couldn't do it."

"How long was I sleeping this time?"

"A while."

Her eyes widened like she'd just remembered something and she quickly stood up, walking out from under the tree. "How late is it?"

I looked at my watch and then back at her. "It's five thirty."

"Shit." She rushed back to the tree and stuffed the rest of the food and the pareo into the bag. "I need to get back to the house."

"Do you have to be somewhere?"

She shook her head. "I can't drive after dark."

I took the bag from her and picked up the hat she'd left on the ground, pulling it down over her head. "Why not?"

"I have pretty bad eyesight. I need special glasses to drive, and I can't drive at night. There's a chance that one day I won't be able to drive at all."

"I'm sorry."

She lifted one shoulder and raised her eyes to mine. "I'm not ashamed. And you've probably thought it already, anyway. I have albinism, Kai. That's why I look like this." She picked up the length of her hair and dropped it again as if to say, 'See?'

"You're unbelievably lovely," I said before I stopped myself. My heart hammered in my ears.

She looked away.

"Come on," I said, as I started walking back toward the fruit trees. We were quiet for a while and it didn't seem to bother her. When she slipped behind the trunk of a big jackfruit tree, I leaned around and caught her wrist. She looked back, her eyes widening with surprise as a small smile played on her lips. I walked around to meet her, closing the gap between us. "Don't run away. How does it affect your vision?"

She tugged her wrist out of my hand and began walking again, only stopping when she reached the noni trees. I hung back and watched her pick up a fallen fruit, turning it over in her hand. "I have oculocutaneous albinism type 2, so I have a small amount of pigment in my skin and hair and my eyesight is better than it would be if I had OCA1. But I still have trouble with bright lights and I have glasses for driving and reading. I don't see well in the dark."

"It's going to be dark by the time we get to the house," I said. The light was changing to gray and blue. "I'll drive you home in Garrett's truck. I can walk back to my place from there."

She threw me the noni fruit and started walking again. "Thanks, that would be great. I can't go home yet, though. I was planning on camping out at one of the cafés in town. Garrett is *entertaining*."

"Ah, right." I knew who he was entertaining. Everybody else on the island did, too. But no one talked about it because they

knew it would upset my father. Lulu was 48 years old and fierce. She should have been brave enough to stand up to my dad but, like the rest of us, she knew it was easier to just toe the line. We emerged from the cover of the trees and quickly walked across the grass to the kitchen garden gate.

"We'll take the long way back, then, and pick up some laulau for dinner on the way. It's pork, wrapped in taro leaves," I said when I saw her face. "She usually leaves at about nine."

She stopped with her hand on the gate, turning around so that she leaned on it. "Does everybody here know everyone else's business?"

"Pretty much."

"In that case," she said, opening the gate and walking through. "You'd better fill me in on the drive home. If everyone is going to know what I'm up to, then it should, at least, be a level playing field."



## CHAPTER NINE

"Hey, Tess," I said the following Saturday as I opened her door. "How's your week been?"

"Pretty good. I've had a hot lunch date every day this week."

"Is that right?" I said. "How hot?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Pretty hot. It's been awkward, though, because before he whisks me away to his beachside mansion, this other guy turns up at the shop every day, and that guy is a *real* loser.."

"Really not funny."

She stepped out and closed the door behind her before threading her arm around mine. "I like my loser just fine. Where are we going? Wait, don't tell me."

"Aka has been telling us these wild stories about you at dinner every night. Last night he was sitting there way after we'd finished talking about Mumbai."

She smiled, her eyes lighting up with the memory. "That was a crazy trip. There was this one bar we went to where this man came up to a friend of mine and offered him a snake in exchange for his watch."

"I know," I laughed, following her down the path to the truck. "Akamu told us. He asked me to find out what kind of snake it was, what you fed it, and where it slept at night."

I trailed behind her, watching the way she moved and the way she kept pulling her bag back up over her shoulder. It was an ordinary morning, an ordinary moment, and if you asked anyone else they would have said nothing much was happening. But something *big* was happening to me. Every time I saw her I thought Tess was pretty. She had a soft pink mouth and big blue

eyes that really saw me. Her hair was long and silky and even though it was light blonde from a distance, up close it was white, gold and yellow. And it sparkled in the light. Anyone could see that Tessa was a pretty girl. But that afternoon, on that path, was the first time I realized how beautiful she was. I don't remember what she was wearing, or how she'd done her hair. But I do remember the dull, creeping pain as my heart swelled up in my chest when she opened the door and the way I wanted time to stand still just so I could keep looking at her.

We drove into town and she told me what she'd done that week. She said she was making a map of the island for her travel journal out of watercolors and pencil. I asked her to describe it to me and then she talked about working in the shop while I smiled at the road in front of me. It always made me happy to picture my little brother at work in his shirt and tie, bossing people around.

"Is it okay if we walk?" I said when we'd parked. "It's not far."

"Sure."

I hesitated for a second and then picked up her hand, crossing the road so that we walked in the shade.

"I just realized I never asked you what you do," she said quickly and I wondered if I was making her nervous.

"I work with my dad. He has a landscaping business."

"That makes sense. It must be cool, working outside all day."

I pulled her closer. "Not really. Being outside is good, I guess, but it's mostly hot, dirty work."

"Has your family lived here long?"

"We've been on the island since the beginning."

"It's so beautiful here. I wake up in the morning and forget where I am for a second, and when I remember, I feel like pinching myself."

I gave her hand a squeeze.

We walked to the end of the road, past the last shop and down a long driveway to a car park, then across, over some grass and down a sandy track. There was a wooden building at the bottom, half of it built on a rock shelf and the other half held up by enormous posts so that the front deck was suspended out into the ocean. It had a traditional thatched roof and lanterns lining the open verandah.

"This is Pete's. It's a cafe by day, club by night," I said as I led her toward the small wooden bridge that had been built on the top of the rock. We got to the bridge and I stopped, glancing down at her hand. The bridge wasn't wide enough for us to walk side by side. Someone was going to have to let go.

"The bridge isn't wide enough," she said.

We were still holding hands.

"Walk behind me, then."

She smiled in response so I walked, happy that she didn't want to let go, either. I stepped onto the bridge and bent my arm behind my back so that she could follow me without letting go. Halfway along I glanced over my shoulder and she met my eye, nearly making me trip over my own feet.

"Aloha!" I called through the doorway.

"E komo mai!" a voice called back. I tugged her hand and we walked through to a large room with a bar along one wall and a stage on the opposite side. There were a few tables and chairs stacked up and my Aunty Kalea was mopping the floor.

"Hi Aunty," I said, dropping Tessa's hand. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her shove it into the back pocket of her shorts. I bent down and kissed my aunt on her cheek before turning to Tessa.

"Aunty, this is Tess. She's new in town. Can we get some lunch?"

"Aloha," she said, leaning forward to kiss her cheek. "Go and sit outside, I'll bring you some food."

Tessa followed me out onto the deck and took a seat at a table right on the edge where she could see the water. "I thought you said this was a cafe during the day," she said as soon as I sat down.

"It is."

"Then where are the customers?"

"It's kind of an informal café. It's not open to the public, but family come in to eat if we're in town."

"So she's your Aunty?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't she be?"

"I don't know," she said, "I thought it might be just what people call their elders here. I heard Akamu say 'Aunty Lulu' in the cafe the other day."

I picked up her hand, rubbing my thumb in little circles on the back of it. It sent goosebumps up and down her arm and I pretended not to see them. "She's also an Aunty. My dad has four sisters. This place is owned by my cousin Pete and his parents."

"Your favorite!" my Aunty cried as she walked through the doorway with a tray. When she reached the table, she glanced down at our hands before giving me a long, cool stare. She made a sound in the back of her throat and thumped the tray down.

"This looks good," Tess said weakly.

"Just ignore her." I picked up her plate. "Have you tried any of this before?"

"I've had pulled pork."

"That's a cool story. But have you had this before?"

"Well, smarty-pants," she said, "I guess I don't know what that is."

I loaded her plate then sat back in my chair. "Try it."

She picked up her fork and I found mine. We each took a bite.

"It's kalua pork," I said, smiling when I saw her face. "Good, right?"

"Mmm hmm, it's so good."

"Ono." I put some more food onto her plate. "We say that when something is delicious. Try the other one."

She did and told me that it was just as ono as the pork.

"So how did you get into landscaping?"

"After we stopped exporting fruit we needed another source of income. The landscaping business is something my dad dreamed up a few years ago. I've been working with him since I finished school."

"That must be fun," she said, "working with your dad."

"Well, you've met my dad." I took a big sip of water. "So, Tess, what about you?"

"What about me?"

"It's your turn."

"Who made up these rules?"

I smiled. "Just tell me something about you."

She put her fork down next to her plate. "There's not much to say. I've been traveling around the past few years and I'm here now because I've known Garrett since I was a kid, and he's always bugging me to come and visit him."

"Where have you been?"

"All over the States, a few places in Central America, South East Asia, most of Europe. You?"

I shifted in my seat a bit and looked at the sea. "This is it."

"Do you want to travel?" I met her eyes. She had beautiful eyes.

"Yeah, I've always wanted to." I dropped my gaze. I didn't feel like telling her the rest of that sentence yet.

When we'd finished, I let my Aunty know we were leaving and then I led her back through the club to a fire escape on the side of the building. She followed me down the stairs and kicked off her flip flops when she touched the sand. The water glistened and a small cluster of coconut trees bowed to the sand in the distance. I picked up a pebble and threw it into the waves.

"Feel like a walk?"

"Sure."

"Let's go this way."

We walked for a few minutes in silence, but it didn't feel awkward at all. I was relieved that she didn't feel the need to fill the gaps with small talk like most girls did. I liked quiet. I reckoned she did, too. After a while, the sand met the rocks and I stopped, noticing her bare feet. "You can't walk over those without shoes on."

"Nope."

"Can I tell you something?" I asked. I had a feeling I was about to cross a line, but I was going to do it anyway. I'd been working up to it since the first time we'd had lunch. Even then, I knew there shouldn't be any secrets between us.

"Yes."

I walked under the shade of a tree, sitting down on the sand and pulling her with me by the hand. "I heard you play your violin. I was out on a run and you were on the lanai at Garrett's place. I stopped and listened. I'm sorry, I should have let you know I was there. But the way you played, Tess, it felt strange. I

don't know how to describe it other than it felt like it had energy, it had mana."

"What do you mean?"

But I think she knew what I meant.

"What was that?" I said. "I've never heard anything like it before."

"I don't know what it is," she said honestly. "I just make it up."

I kept my eyes on the waves. "You're very talented, you know that?"

"So people keep saying."

"I've never met anyone like you before."

I placed a hand on her knee, my palm buzzing where it touched her skin. She hesitated for a second before leaning in and lightly resting her head on my shoulder.

"People keep saying that, too."



## CHAPTER TEN

She said she had some things to do so I walked her back to town, taking the longest way I knew. When we got to her house, she stopped at the start of the path.

"Thanks for lunch, I had fun."

I pulled the gate open and she stepped through, turning around to say goodbye.

"If you feel like going out tonight, I'll be at Pete's from eight," I said before she disappeared and I missed my chance. "I can introduce you to some people."

She refused to look at me.

"Tess," I said, and she reluctantly lifted her eyes to mine. "It doesn't have to be a date. In fact, it can't be a date, because I'll be working."

She chewed on her bottom lip as she thought. "Maybe I'll stop by later."

"Do you remember how to get there?"

She nodded. "See ya later, tree trunk man."

It was Saturday night in the middle of peak season, so when I arrived at 7.30 pm to set up, I wasn't surprised to see that the tables were full and there was already a line at the bar. I searched every face as soon as I walked in. She wasn't there.

The rest of the guys arrived one by one and by the time eight o'clock rolled around we were all ready to play. Pete came up to the stage and did his 'Band Manager' bit where he gave us a pep talk and reminded us to play what the girls wanted to hear. The last part was directed at me since I was the one who chose the songs. A big group of girls on a hens' night made their way into

the club and Pete pointed them to a table he'd reserved. It was front and center, and I was going to be singing to them all night. I caught Pete's eye and he grinned at me. I nodded to let him know that I got it. Because of them, he was going to make enough money to cover his expenses for the entire week. More, if I played my cards right.

"Aloha everyone," I said into the microphone as I sat down on the stool next to me. "Welcome to Pete's." The girls in front screamed and waved their glasses in the air and the one in the pink bridal veil shook her boobs at me. They'd obviously started their night early. A few other people in the room clapped politely and Pete yelled "Yeah!" from somewhere in the back.

"We're going to start with a song you all may know," I said as I strummed my ukulele and Sam came in with the opening notes of John Cruz's *Island Style* on his acoustic guitar. Just like every night, people stood to their feet and cheered. Because that was exactly what they wanted to hear when they were on vacation in Hawaii. I got it. I even smiled at the girls as I sang it. When I finished, Pete met my eye and gave me the thumbs up.

I made my way through the first half of the set list on autopilot. Sing, smile, wink a couple of times. Walk around the tables, choose an unsuspecting guest to go and dance the hula with the girls. Pull the bride to be on the stage, sing a song in Hawaiian, just for her. And the whole time I didn't stop watching the door, waiting for Tessa to walk through it. By the time we stopped for a half hour break, she still wasn't there and I was so wound up I headed straight for the fire escape. All I wanted was to be alone for a while before I had to go back in there and do it all again.

"Wait," someone said, putting a hand on my back. I froze with my fingers on the doorknob. Because I was going to have to

try damn hard to be polite, and I wasn't sure if I could do it. I turned around slowly, expecting to see one of the girls from the table. Or worse, the bride to be.

But it was her, of course.

"You came," I said weakly. "I didn't see you walk in."

"I've been here since seven," she said. "I've been helping your Aunty Kalea in the kitchen."

"What? Why?"

Her smile grew wide. "Why not? I thought she might be one of those people who need to get to know me before they can like me."

I smiled and shook my head. She was wearing a strapless beach dress that came down to her ankles and her hair was braided loosely and twisted at the nape of her neck. She had bony shoulders. And a neck I desperately wanted to kiss.

"So did it work?"

"Well," she said, "I think she likes me now. But she definitely doesn't like me being friends with *you*. She keeps asking me if I have a boyfriend and when I'm leaving Hawaii."

"Ah," I said. "Sorry. My family is traditional. And we can be a bit too involved in each other's lives. It's nothing personal."

"Oh, I know that," she said. "I know it's not about me."

It was unsettling the way that she saw everything, understood everything, without knowing anything at all.

"I watched you," she said, raising an eyebrow. "You didn't tell me you were a musician. Even after you heard me play." She crossed her arms and lifted her chin. But she wasn't mad. She was adorable. "You have an incredible voice."

"Come outside with me," I said, wanting to be alone with her. I pushed the door open. "It's too loud in here."

She hesitated at the open door, before nodding and walking through. I shut it after me and followed her down the fire escape until we were standing on the sand.

"Have you ever thought about playing your own stuff?"

But I couldn't answer her because the moonlight was touching her hair and face making her look as if she'd been dipped in silver.

"Come on," I said instead, picking up her hand. She looked down at where they were joined but didn't pull away. "Let's walk down the beach. I've got thirty minutes."

She kicked off her sandals and placed them on the bottom step, and then we were walking side by side in the cold sand, the music and the people growing quieter by the second.

"I do write my own songs," I said, letting her hand go. "But my music isn't what that crowd in there wants to hear." She frowned and I wrapped an arm around her shoulders. I felt her stiffen and then relax against my side. She was even smaller than she looked.

"Why not? What kind of music is it? Wait, it's death metal. I knew it."

I couldn't see her face. But I swear I *felt* her smiling.

"How did you guess?" I laughed, and she poked me in the side. "It's a mix of stuff. Some in Hawaiian and some in English. Mostly acoustic, folk rock, I guess. It's hard to explain what it is. I'd have to play you some."

She stopped walking and stepped out from under my arm so that we were facing each other. "I'd like that. When?"

I was about to answer but then there was a crashing sound coming from the club. I couldn't see much, but it sounded like a fight was breaking out on the deck.

"Kai!" Pete yelled down the beach. "Kai, get back in here! I need you back on!"

I found Tessa's face in the dark. "I don't know. How about tomorrow?"

She grabbed my hand in the dark, gripping it tightly in both of hers. "How about now?"

I didn't know what had come over me, but I knew it was going to get me in trouble later.

"Aloha, folks. Thanks for waiting. For the next song, we're going to do something a little different."

I put my uke away and picked up my guitar, keeping my eyes down while I attached the strap to the side. I made sure not to look anywhere near the bar because I knew Pete was over there, glaring at me. Hell, he was probably flipping me off. When I glanced up, I saw Tess making her way through the crowd toward the stage. She pulled a chair away from a table and joined the hens' night girls right up front, but spun around so that she faced me. She took a sip out of her glass and propped her bare feet up on the edge of the stage. We were only a few feet apart. I smiled at her and she grinned back and waved to the guys in the band. And then before I changed my mind, I gave Sam the nod and he started to play.

"This is a song my dad wrote for my mother," I said into the microphone. "It's called *Pearl's Song*."