



**BETWEEN**

*Hello & Goodbye*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**EMMA SCOTT**

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*Hello & Goodbye*

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Between Hello & Goodbye

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# BOOKS BY EMMA SCOTT

(Free through Kindle Unlimited)

## **Duets**

[Full Tilt](#)

[All In](#)

[Bring Down the Stars \(Beautiful Hearts #1\)](#).

[Long Live the Beautiful Hearts \(Beautiful Hearts #2\)](#).

## **Series**

[How to Save a Life \(Dreamcatcher #1\)](#).

[Sugar & Gold \(Dreamcatcher #2\)](#).

[The Girl in the Love Song \(Lost Boys #1\)](#).

[When You Come Back to Me \(Lost Boys #2\)](#).

[The Last Piece of His Heart \(Lost Boys #3\)](#).

[RUSH \(RUSH #1\)](#).

[Endless Possibility \(RUSH #1.5\)](#).

## **Standalones**

[Love Beyond Words](#)

[Unbreakable](#)

[The Butterfly Project](#)

[Forever Right Now](#)

[In Harmony](#)

[A Five-Minute Life](#)

*Someday, Someday*

*The Sinner*

**MM Romance**

*Someday, Someday*

*When You Come Back to Me (Lost Boys #2)*

**Novellas**

*One Good Man*

*Love Game*

# PLAYLIST

*I Am a River* // Foo Fighters (opening credits)

*Faith* // George Michael

*Soul of a Man* // Beck

*Bang!* // AJR

*Save Yourself* // KALEO

*You Learn* // Alanis Morissette

*Immortals* // Fall Out Boy

*Goodbye* // Cage The Elephant

*Somewhere Over the Rainbow* // Israel Kamakawiwo'ole (IZ)  
(closing credits)



# CONTENT WARNING

This novel explores themes of grief and loss that might be triggering to sensitive readers. For those who would like a more explicit explanation of the content, please email: [emmascottpromo@gmail.com](mailto:emmascottpromo@gmail.com)

*For Teresa, who helped me to see the sun behind every storm  
cloud. With love.*

# PART I

*Goodbyes are only for those who love with their eyes. Because  
for those who love with heart and soul there is no such thing  
as separation. —Rumi*

# PROLOGUE

*Asher*

*North Bend, Pennsylvania, fourteen years ago...*

“Asher?”

A little hand jostled my arm.

“Asher, wake up.”

I blinked my eyes open, and they immediately began to sting. “Morgan? What is it?”

“I woke up to pee and smelled it.” My eleven-year-old brother was a dim outline in the predawn light.

I rubbed my eyes. “You smelled pee?”

“Smoke.”

I shot to sitting, fully awake and adrenaline racing through my veins. Our bedroom in the double-wide trailer was hazy with smoke, and flames licked from under the door.

*Oh shit...*

“Get your clothes,” I barked, bolting out of bed. “Your jacket and shoes—No! Forget it. Here.”

I shoved open the window and yanked Morgan toward it.

“Asher...”

“Go!”

He climbed out and jumped down to the scrubby grass that was going to go up like straw any second now.

“The Hill, Morgan,” I said, tossing his shoes out the window, followed by his jacket. “Get up The Hill.”

The Hill was our name for an embankment of dirt and rocks piled high from where they were digging foundations for new houses in the development. After school, Morgan and I would

climb The Hill and look down on the construction zone that was going to kick the Pine Hills Trailer Park off the land and make us homeless.

*We're homeless now.*

“What about Mama and Dean?”

“Fuck them.”

“Asher...”

“Go!”

My clothes and Morgan's were in a heap on the floor in our messy room. I shoved them all out the window. I slept in jeans and an undershirt, mostly because I was already on internal high alert since our mother started using. I found my boots and tossed them out too. You aren't supposed to take anything when your house is on fire. Getting out is supposed to be your main priority. But now my little brother was my main priority. Not my mom and her latest loser boyfriend and their spoons and lighters and little baggies and the needles sticking out of their arms...

“No more,” I muttered, grabbing my school backpack. I dumped the books out. A lunch-size bag of Fritos fell out with my schoolwork: a math test with an A+ in red and an essay I wrote on the French Revolution, A-. My future, and it was all going up in flames.

I stowed the Fritos and a tin box of money I'd been saving from odd jobs into the backpack. About four hundred bucks. I'd wrapped the box in a pair of boxers and hidden it in my underwear drawer so my mother or Dean wouldn't steal it and shoot it up their veins.

“Asher...” Morgan was at the window, fear making his voice waver. He was still in his jammies, making him look younger than he was.

“I told you to get up The Hill,” I said, then coughed. Smoke was pouring in from around the door, and the ceiling was beginning to blacken. The air felt like the inside of an oven.

Frantically, I tried to think what else we would need, but we didn't have much and there was no time anyway. I chucked my bag out the window, then dropped down beside it. Morgan had put his shoes on but refused to budge. I grabbed an armful of clothes, shouldered my pack, and took his little hand. We tore out of the Pine Hills Trailer Park, through the construction zone, and scrambled up The Hill. Our feet slid and sank into the piles of shoal and dirt; nothing that would burn.

At the top, I tossed my bag over, then helped Morgan up. We hunkered down on our stomachs on the other side as dawn broke over North Bend.

“What about Mama...?”

I nearly snapped at him to shut up. She didn't care about us. Still, a wave of relief hit me to see her and Dean staggering out of the blazing inferno that was our trailer, clutching each other's arms, bent over, coughing.

I pointed. “There.”

Morgan's eyes filled with tears. “Mama...”

“She's gone, Mo,” I said. My heart felt like it was filling with concrete.

“She's not. She's—”

“Going to jail. Her and Dean both, for a long time. And even if they don't, this is going to happen again. And maybe next time you don't wake up to pee first, you get me?” I put my hand on his shoulder. “We're all we have. Each other.”

We'd been that way for a long time, since Dad left five years ago. Mom hurt her back working two jobs to keep us afloat, and the doc gave her a pill. Oxy-something. Got her hooked so that she wanted more, long after the prescription ran out. Turned out, heroin wasn't too different from the “medicine” and so we lost our mom too.

Sirens sounded in the distance, and the inhabitants of other trailers were shouting at our mother and Dean while dragging hoses and filling buckets to protect their homes.

“She's gone,” I said. “Just like Dad.”

“Dad left—”

“Yeah, he left, but Mom did too. When she started up on the drugs. She’s right there.” I jerked my chin at our junkie mother who’d fallen to the ground like a drunk person. “She’s right there but she’s really not.”

Morgan nodded and wiped his nose. He was a smart kid and sweeter than me. He didn’t deserve this shit. He should’ve had a mom who packed him a lunch every day and a dad who watched his soccer games. Not an older brother trying to make up for all of it.

But life didn’t give a crap what you deserved. Sink or swim. That was it. I wasn’t big on signs or omens, but I could read the writing on the wall. The years since Dad left were a run-up to this morning. It was up to me to protect Morgan from whatever bad shit wanted to wreck him and turn my happy-go-lucky little brother into something else.

*I’ll be something else. I’ll take it all to keep him safe.*

I nudged his arm. “Come on.”

“What? Where?”

“We gotta get out of here before the cops find us. They’ll separate us and put us in homes.”

He looked at me with round, dark eyes. Eyes like mine, dark hair like mine, but he was slighter and skinny, whereas I was already bulking up from yard work, construction work, whatever odd job someone would give me. I was sixteen—seventeen in June—but Alice at the grocery and Phil at the hardware store both told me I could pass for twenty. Maybe older.

“They’re going to separate us?” Morgan asked, the tears coming again. “They can’t.”

“I’m not going to let that happen.”

*They’ll have to kill me first.*

Morgan turned back to the scene unfolding below. The firemen had arrived in a truck almost as big as our trailer. Their hoses blasted what was left of our home, while cops had

Mom and Dean sitting on the curb. Neither looked panicked or even concerned that there might be two boys still inside the blackened, charred heap. Too high to care or remember we existed.

“Let’s go,” I said.

Morgan sniffled and wiped his nose. He gave the scene a final glance, then followed me as we half-walked, half-slid on our asses down the other side of The Hill. To the north, Allentown was a cluster of buildings just waking up on the spring morning, about twenty miles away.

“Too close,” I muttered, thinking quickly. We had to get out of the state if I had any chance of keeping the authorities off our backs. It was a longshot, already.

“Where are we going?” Morgan sounded small. Lost.

I put my arm around his skinny shoulders. “Home.”

“Where is that?”

“Wherever we make it. It’ll be like an adventure.”

But Morgan was too smart for that fairytale bullshit. He started to cry, and I hunched down in front of him.

“Hey. Hey, look at me.”

He raised his eyes and the fiercest love surged through me. I almost didn’t recognize it as love, it was so tangled with pain and rage at the unfairness of it all.

“I’m going to take care of you,” I vowed, infusing my entire being into those words. “I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you. You hear?”

He nodded.

“I swear it. I swear on my life, I got you. Okay?”

He threw his arms around my neck, and I hugged him tight—but only for a minute. He was going to squeeze emotions out of me that I didn’t need or want. They were only going to get in the way of what I had to do.



I had four hundred bucks and a packet of corn chips to my name, but I was going to keep my promise to my little brother. Protecting Morgan and building a life for him out of the smoldering ruins were all that mattered. Somehow, someday, I'd make sure he went to school, had a roof over his head, and that no one would take him away from me.

We turned our back on the burning trailer and walked away.

# CHAPTER ONE

## *Faith*

*Seattle, Washington, present day...*

A buzzing sounded from...somewhere, and I made the horrible mistake of opening my eyes. Pain lanced through my head, carried on a bolt of sunshine. My vista was a mountain range of white sheets leading to a valley of tanned skin over smooth muscle.

Jake? Jack? I couldn't remember. Or maybe I never knew.

The buzzing came again. I shut my eyes and let the sound guide my hand. I found my phone under my pillow and peered at it with one eye.

A text from Viv, decorated with eggplant and waterspout emojis.

**Well??? How was he?**

My head thundered and it felt like I hadn't drunk any water in approximately eight years.

*But tequila? I'd had plenty of that.*

Just the thought made my stomach roil. The manly lump beside me stirred and resettled again, turning his face toward me. Chiseled chin. Cheekbones for days. I peeked under the sheet. Impressively endowed. The guy checked all my boxes for a one-nighter. I couldn't remember much of the actual event, but Viv didn't need to know that.

I typed back: **Epic, of course. Came four times. U?**

The rolling dots of her reply appeared, but my heavy eyes happened on the time in the upper right corner of my phone. Panic ripped through me, making me gasp. Suddenly, last night came roaring back in all its drunken clarity. Vivienne had talked me into a Thursday night happy hour at Gracia. I'd sworn up and down that I wouldn't party too hard; I had the

Nestle people coming into the agency at nine a.m., and if I landed this account, my promotion to partner would be all but assured. Instead, we met two Ken dolls in three-piece suits, and the margaritas flowed like Niagara.

I don't remember much after that.

“Shit shit shit!”

Another text from Viv came in but I was too busy scrambling out of my bedmate's king-sized barge of Egyptian cotton and mahogany. I was tugging on my dress that was balled on the floor when Jack-or-Jake stirred and sat up. Dirty blond hair fell over his brow in an adorable mop that I vaguely remember tugging my fingers through last night.

“Where's the fire?” he asked with an easy smile.

“Oh, hi...?”

“Jack. Phillips.”

“Right, Jack. I...uh, I'm Faith,” I stammered, my face heating at the cringe of introducing myself to a guy I'd already slept with.

“I remember,” Jack said, smiling. “Would you like some breakfast, Faith?”

Nice smile and a gentleman, too. If only he'd been a heavier sleeper, I could've made a clean escape.

He started to turn back the covers.

“No, no, don't get up,” I said, hopping on one foot to get my heels on. “I'm late for a meeting. A big one.”

“Coffee?”

“I can't. So very late...”

I spun in a circle in search of my Marc Jacobs. Jack sat propped against his pillows, watching me, amused.

“The chair,” he said.

I grabbed my bag. “Thanks. Well, it's been nice. Great...I think.”

“It was pretty great,” Jack said. “Can I call you?”

“Um, sure...” I mumbled, tossing my phone into my bag and shouldering it. “Looking forward to it.”

He chuckled. “I’ll need your number.”

“Right. Talk to you soon...”

I hurried out of the bedroom. Gentleman Jack—whoever he was—was loaded. His condo was almost as nice as mine, with stunning views of a brilliant Seattle morning that stabbed me in the eyeballs. I found my jacket and made my way to the front door.

A familiar song and dance. Jack’s place could have been a set in a play, one I starred in every week. Just change out a few details, switch out a few props, but the rest was the same. The same hangover, the same rush to get to work, the same walk-of-shame that I’d never actually felt shame about.

Except now.

Regret was mixing uncomfortably in my upset stomach when I’d made a vow to myself to never regret a thing. To live life to the fullest and all that crap.

*But is it living life when you can’t even remember it?*

I called an Uber as the posh elevator took me down. Another text from Viv popped up.

**Where’d you go?**

I jabbed back: **Nestle meeting! I’m late!!!**

**Oh shit!** Followed by laughing emojis. **#ThatsSoFaith**

Normally, I’d laugh along, and we’d trade last night’s war stories. Maybe it was the headache making me grouchy, but I irritably jammed my phone in my bag as my Uber pulled to the curb.

In the posh Queen Ann neighborhood, I took another elegant elevator up to my floor and hurried as fast as my hangover would allow. I stripped out of my coat and dumped it and my purse on the floor of my spacious condo.

*My condo* was a loaded phrase.

Technically, it was purchased for me two years ago by Silas Marsh, billionaire scion of the pharmaceutical giant Marsh Pharma, for services rendered—me playing fiancée to appease his bigoted father. That plan had fallen apart when he met his now-husband, Max, but I still got this plush condo out of the deal, and—even better—Silas had become my best friend next to Viv. And because my BFF could buy a whole neighborhood of Queen Ann condos, I'd felt zero guilt for asking for this one. But lately, it'd been feeling less like mine every day.

“This is stupid,” I said, my head aching. “It’s been years. Why is this bothering me now?”

My empty condo had no answer, but a little voice whispered that maybe it was because I could afford to buy my own place if I got serious about...basically everything. That annoying little voice was getting louder and louder with each passing day. Waking up in yet another stranger’s bed seemed to have given it even more volume than usual.

By the time I pulled my blond hair into an updo and dressed in my Burberry power suit in pale pink with white silk blouse, I was more than twenty minutes late. My headache didn’t show any sign of relenting, so I threw on oversized Chanel sunglasses and called another Uber.

The car let me out at the downtown high rise, where *Coleman & Cross* had the entire fifteenth floor. The elevator spilled me out into the ad agency’s reception. From behind the desk, Benny beamed his usual smile and made a show of checking his watch.

“It’s not even ten a.m. What brings you in so early, Ms. Benson?”

“Ha ha. Are they here?”

“Conference room.”

“Shit. How long?”

“About fifteen minutes.”

“Shit shit shit.”

The Nestle people were early. Which meant I was now thirty-five minutes late.

I rushed toward the offices, reaffixing my sunglasses against the assault coming at me on all sides from the wall-to-wall glass windows. My co-workers milled around the open-concept floor plan in suits, the place smelling of coffee and expensive colognes and perfumes. I made a beeline for my corner office.

Jess Davidson popped up from her desk as I approached. My assistant—God bless her soul—had a Starbucks in one hand and a bottle of Fiji water in the other. The woman was like a circus performer: juggling my appointments, contorting herself around my shifting schedule, and swallowing the flames of my bosses' ire when I failed to appear at the appointed times.

Which was frequently.

"They're early," I said, storming into my office.

Jess bit her lip. "Er, well..."

"Okay, fine. I'm late."

*Again.*

"Carl is stalling them."

"*Carl?* I'll have to peel his lips from their asses." I dumped my purse and glasses on my desk, chugged some water and chased it with coffee, then strode back out of my office. Jess scurried to keep up.

I held out my hand. "Art."

She handed me the leather-bound portfolio from the art department she'd had tucked under her arm.

"Is it what I wanted?" I asked.

"You haven't looked at it?"

"Is it what I asked for?"

"Well, yes..."

"Great."

Outside the conference door, I forced my headache to take five and heaved another breath. “How do I look?”

“Perfect.”

“You’re an angel. Wish me luck.”

Without waiting for a reply, I pushed open the conference room door. On the table’s huge expanse of polished wood were the remnants of coffee and pastries. Three executives from Nestle were looking about ready to murder Carl, a junior client liaison, doing his kiss-ass soft shoe.

“Gentlemen.” I breezed inside. “Thank you for waiting. Carl.”

I gave him a you-can-go-now look. He returned an affronted glance. “You’re welcome,” he murmured and slipped out.

“We have meetings with two other potential agencies today, Ms. Benson,” said Mr. Nevinson of Nestle Corp. He tapped his Rolex meaningfully. This guy was the decision-maker. The snake I needed to charm.

“Well, aren’t you lucky you’re seeing me first?” I flashed him a brilliant smile and opened the portfolio. “Gentlemen, I’m about to clear your schedule.”



“Ms. Benson...? Faith?”

A light touch on my arm roused me from a dream in which the hot stranger from last night was tapping my forehead with a ball peen hammer.

“Hmmm?”

I jerked awake, disoriented. Jess set a glass of water and two Advil on my desk, where I’d been sleeping, my head pillowed on my arms.

“Terrance wants to see you.”

“What for?”

“He didn’t say, but the Nestle people have signed.”

“Already?” I rubbed my aching temples. “What am I saying? Of course they have.”

Naturally, I’d slayed the pitch. By the time I was through with them, dour Mr. Nevinson was laughing and inviting me to play tennis at the club.

I downed the Advil and chased it with a swig of water. A hand mirror appeared in my line of vision along with a Kleenex.

“Lipstick,” Jess said.

“You’re a sainted woman.”

I wiped the smear of pale pink from my chin, smoothed my rumpled blouse, and put my suit jacket back on. “How do I look?”

Jess beamed. “*Coleman, Cross & Benson* has a nice ring to it.”

She was right, it would be something to see my name on the letterhead...and on the front of the building, and on basically everything our agency touched. My stomach rolled and it wasn’t the hangover. It was all so very...permanent. The kind of move you can’t take back.

I heaved a breath and tugged my suit jacket down. “Okay, I’m going in.”

I strode across the offices and blushed to my newly touched-up roots as my coworkers rose to give me a standing ovation. The Nestle account meant millions, and they all knew it.

I smiled modestly, concealing all evidence of the thundering headache pounding behind my eyes, and stood before my favorite boss’s door. The other door read *Cynthia Cross* and was closed. The agency’s second partner was in Manhattan locking up the establishment of a second office; my recent victory was sure to seal the deal.

I knocked on the door, then peeked in. “You decent?”

“Come in, Faith.”



Terrance Coleman was pacing behind his desk, rubbing his chin in thought. He resembled Idris Elba—sharp and handsome as hell in his gray Brioni suit and maroon tie. But his expression reminded me of my vice-principal at Roosevelt High—gravely serious and mildly disappointed to see me in front of him after whatever trouble I’d gotten myself into. Again.

“Everything okay?”

He gestured. “Sit. We need to talk.”

I sank into the plush seat across from the immense glass and chrome desk.

“What’s wrong, Terry? Why do you look like it’s someone’s funeral? Mine, specifically.”

Terrance pursed his lips. “Cynthia and I want to make you a partner.”

I held my breath. *Here it is. Everything I wanted. Isn’t it...?*

“But I might have to fire you instead.”

I gripped the back of the chair in front of his desk, the air going out of me. “Uh, wow, Terrance. That’s quite a spectrum to lay on a gal. I heard Nevinson signed.”

“He did. A multimillion-dollar, three-year contract for us to handle their online, print, and overseas marketing for the entire Pacific Northwest. We’ve been trying to land them for years. Thanks to you, we got them.”

“So clearly, I should be *fired*.”

Terrance folded his hands on the desk, his gold wedding band glinting as brightly as his Patek Phillippe watch. “You’re brilliant, Faith.”

“Thank you—”

“But you’re too damn flaky. You’re charming and fun, and I enjoy working with you. We all do. But we can’t trust you.”

I blinked. “You can trust me to land multimillion-dollar accounts. Nestle is my third this year and it’s only April.”

“And imagine what you could be doing if you actually kept a normal schedule like everyone else? If you came in on time, stopped taking three-hour lunches, stopped showing up late for client meetings...” He leaned forward. “Imagine if you actually worked full-time like we’re *paying* you to.”

“The American workweek is overrated. They’ve done studies...”

“They tell me you kept Stan Nevinson waiting for forty minutes. This isn’t *Mad Men*, Faith. You’re not Don Draper. You can’t just come and go as you please.”

“Don Draper landed all the big accounts,” I protested weakly. “That’s what I do, Terrance. I’m your ringer.”

But out loud, the words sounded like the pathetic, sorry excuses they were. The yucky feeling I’d woken up with that morning in the bed of yet another stranger hadn’t gone away but had followed me into my office.

“Cynthia and I have discussed this at length,” Terrance continued. “We’d love nothing better than to make you partner. But given your questionable work ethic...well, it leaves us in a tight spot.”

“Terry, what are you saying?”

“You’re going to take a leave of absence. Two weeks. I’ll have Frank handle your clients.”

He sat back and I could see him bracing himself for my protests. I imagined I’d have a hundred ready to sell him, but my mind was blank.

“Okay,” I said after a minute.

Terrance was too refined to gape, but his eyes widened. “Okay?”

“I’m lazy and spoiled and untrustworthy.”

*Especially to myself.*

“I’m listening,” Terrance said slowly, leaning back in his chair and steepling his fingers.

I nodded absently as an idea formed, growing the same way it did when I had a winning idea for an ad campaign—one piece at a time. A mosaic, until I could see the whole. I needed a mental spring-cleaning so I could put the chaos of my life into some kind of order. I needed to go somewhere and sit still for a change. Quiet my mind and try to find some equilibrium.

“I’ll take the two weeks and go somewhere remote. Somewhere beautiful and...spiritual.” I nearly gagged on the word. “I’ll get my head on straight and come back a new person.”

“I like your enthusiasm, Faith, but problems don’t just magically change with the geography. You take them with you.”

“That’s not entirely true. Addicts go to rehab. People take safaris or go to ashrams in India or wander around ancient ruins to try to find their purpose again. A mental reset. I know it sounds like my usual bullshit, but I woke up this morning and wished I wasn’t...” I glanced down at my hands. “I can’t keep going like this.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Terrance said. “Because neither can we. We’d hate to see you go, but we have to do what’s best for the integrity of the company, not just its bottom line. Consider these two weeks an investment. When you return, be prepared to have a serious conversation about your future with this company. Decide what it is you truly *want*.”

The rebuke stung my ego and wounded my pride, but to be fair, I hadn’t given him much choice.

I stood up and straightened my jacket.

“Got it, boss. I won’t let you down.”



“You’re going *where*?”

That night, Silas Marsh sprawled his six-foot-two frame on my bed. My best friend leaned on one elbow and watched me throw clothes in an open Louis Vuitton bag.

“Hawaii,” I said. “Kauai, specifically. I did a lot of research, and I think it’s perfect. Kauai is the smallest, remotest island, but it’s not a million miles away.”

“But it’s still *Hawaii*.” He chuckled. “Your solution for working harder is to take a vacation? Sounds on par for you.”

“It *is* a vacation,” I said, tossing silk underwear and bras into the bag. “A working vacation. Working on me. I need to do this. I need to get away from the booze and parties and be...better.”

“Can’t you be better in Seattle?”

“Not surrounded by all the same stuff that gets me in trouble. Not living here, in this condo that *you* bought for me.”

Silas arched a brow, playfully. “This is new. You didn’t seem all that bothered when you asked for it.”

“Well, it bothers me now,” I said, storming into the bathroom to pack toiletries.

“What brought all this on?” Silas called.

“My boss wants to make me partner,” I said, returning to the bedroom. “Or fire me. They could go either way.”

Silas’s confused frown returned. “Congratulations?”

“I don’t know if I want it. I thought I did, but now I’m not so sure. And he knows I don’t know what I want, and so he’s forced me to take a leave of absence to figure it out.” I stopped my whirlwind packing and dropped my hands to the side. “I don’t know what I’m doing with my life, Si.”

My friend’s handsome face morphed into concern. “Hey, come here.” He held out his hand and I sat beside him on the bed. “Tell me.”

“I should want to be made partner, right? I’m good at my job. Great at it, actually.”

“You are.”

“But I can’t tell if I like my job or if I just like the fact that I’m good at it.” I peered up at him. “I’m not like you. You’re taking on the evils of the pharmaceutical world and trying to

make it better. What do I do? I sell stuff. I'm really good at making people want things."

"There's nothing wrong with what you do, Faith, except how you feel about doing it. If you don't like it, quit."

I rested my head on Silas's strong shoulder. "I think it's more that the idea of having that much responsibility scares the shit out of me. I'm not used to having people rely on me."

"You were there for me when I needed you," Silas said. "Big time."

"That's because you're so damn loveable."

"So are you."

"I'm not," I said. "But I want to be. You and Max are so beautiful together it makes me sick."

Silas rubbed his chin. "Gee, I think I read that on a Hallmark card once..."

"I want what you have, Silas, but I don't know how to let someone in. Because what if I do and they don't like what they see? I don't. Not lately."

"And you think going to Hawaii is going to change that?" he asked gently.

"I think being by myself and doing that thing...what do you call it? Where you take a good hard look at yourself?"

Silas smirked. "Introspection?"

"Right. Introspection without distraction. There's a Hindu temple there and beautiful waterfalls. I'm going to hike and meditate—"

He coughed a laugh.

"Yes, *meditate*," I insisted. "Oh, and no men. No one-night stands. No meaningless sex."

Silas put the back of his hand to my forehead. "You feeling okay? Maybe I should call someone..."

"Ha ha." I knocked his hand away and rose to continue packing. "I'm serious. I'm going celibate. And not just in

Hawaii. I'm going to be my own company for a while." I made a face. "Did I seriously just say that? Maybe I'm having a stroke..."

My phone on my bed chimed a text. Silas was closer and peered over at it. His handsome face immediately stiffened.

"Viv wants to know if you're up to going out tonight."

"Step one to personal betterment..." I grabbed the phone and put it on silent.

"You're not going to answer?"

"I'm not even going to tell her I'm going to Hawaii until I get there."

Silas's blue eyes darkened. "Wise move."

"Are you being protective of me?" I teased.

"Yes," he said, not teasing.

"I know you don't like her—"

"Accurate."

"—but she's harmless."

"Then why aren't you telling her your plan?"

"Because...I love her to pieces, but she'll come over with booze to 'help me pack' and then talk me out of going in the first place. Or I'll get plastered and miss my flight. Or she'll want to come with."

"That's probably true. But don't you think the grown-up thing to do is to be honest with her?"

"Baby steps," I joked, but Silas didn't crack a smile. "Look, there isn't much historical evidence that I possess one iota of self-discipline, but that's the whole point. I want to do this. Be better. For me, for my career, and for whatever future man is out there waiting for me."

Silas got to his feet. "Then I support you, one hundred percent."

"You do?"

He pulled me in for a hug. “Of course, I do. You’re amazing, Faith. You can do whatever you set your mind to.”

“Thank you, Si.”

I rested my head against his chest, letting his belief in me seep in.

I was going to need it.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Faith*

A day and a half after my pep talk from Silas, I was in the lush green forests of Kauai, walking the Ho'opi'i Falls Trail. There was a beautiful waterfall midway through the two-mile hike, and it ended with another larger waterfall that fed into a beautiful pool. I'd learned immediately that they didn't call Kauai "the Garden Isle" for nothing. It rained constantly and the trail was slick from a recent deluge.

I hated mud.

Unless I was paying someone to smear it on my skin in an expensive spa, no thanks. Now, my legs were covered to the knees, and mud squelched between my toes. I cursed the makers of my allegedly "all terrain" sandals. Instead of the serene, self-explorative start to my trip, I'd spent my time slipping and sliding over rocks and tree roots. But I turned a fallen branch into a walking stick and heroically persevered.

Finally, the sound of rushing water from the second of the two waterfalls could be heard through the forest ahead.

"Just breathe. Almost there," I told myself, then let out a squeal as my feet slipped in different directions like a newborn deer. I landed with a hard thud on my ass, mud splattering all over my designer athletic pants. "Dammit."

I was about to call it quits, but from my lowered vantage, I could see the waterfall through a part in the trees. It poured into a large, rock-strewn pool where other visitors were swimming or having picnics on the sun-drenched boulders. Quitting now would be silly. I'd still have the two-mile return trip and no selfies to show for it.

I hauled myself to my feet and picked my way carefully down the trail. I was nearly there; only one more hurdle awaited—a short drop to the ground from a rocky outcropping, then the waterfall. I sat down on the ledge and scooted off.



It was only a three-foot drop, but the rocks were slick, and my “hiking” sandals were coated with mud. I hopped down and a yelp escaped me as my right foot slipped and then bent sideways in a manner that no human ankle was meant to bend.

I hit the ground with pain flaring around my foot, then shooting up my leg. Mild shock constricted my lungs and I sat for a few agonized moments in the throbbing ache and tried not to cry. Finally, I sucked in a deep breath and assessed the damage with trembling fingers. My ankle, naked but for the Velcro sandal straps, already looked as if it were pregnant with a golf ball, the skin stretched and shiny.

“Oh no. Oh no, no, no.”

“Are you okay?”

A middle-aged dad who looked like Rob Reiner picked his way from the pool toward me. Behind him, two tween boys were splashing each other in front of the Falls.

“I...I don’t know,” I said through trembling lips. “It hurts.”

“I’d say so. What can I do?”

Lying injured on the ground in the middle of a rainforest triggered a terrible sense of helplessness, inching toward panic. “I have to get out of here. Help me up?”

“You sure? Maybe you should rest.”

“No, I have to get off the ground.”

The guy helped me to stand, and I let out a cry as I nearly slipped again. Rob Reiner caught me, saving me from another tumble. I repaid him by covering his khaki shorts with mud.

“Whoa, hey. I got you.”

I pressed my lips together, willing the tears to back down. My ankle throbbed. I glanced up the way I had come and exhaled a shaky whisper, “Impossible.”

“I think you should sit down,” the man said. “Are you here with someone? Who can I call?”

“No one, I’m here alone. God, this was so stupid...”

“You’re going to be okay.”

Rob Reiner 2.0 gently helped me to hop toward a chair-level rock, each movement creating a deeper throb in my ankle. I sank onto the stone and wished longingly for Silas. He’d jump in one of his private jets to rescue me.

*...and be here in about six hours.*

With shaking hands, I pulled my phone out of my mud-splattered backpack. No reception.

The guy rubbed his salt-and-pepper beard. “You’re not going to have bars down here. I’ll climb up to a higher elevation and call emergency services.”

“No, you don’t have to do that.” I jabbed at my phone. “I’m sure it’ll come in...”

“Wouldn’t count on it.” He smiled kindly at me. “Be right back.”

The guy wrangled his sons and all three went climbing back up the trail and out of sight, leaving me to contemplate my life choices. I slumped forlornly on my rock chair. The panic was ebbing away, leaving me feeling tired and foolish.

*This was a mistake. I should’ve stayed in Seattle.*

I waited for who-knew-how-long, a second heartbeat pounding in my ankle that now looked like it had swallowed a softball. Other hikers picked their way around me to and from the Falls, some stopping to wince at my ankle on my behalf.

“That doesn’t look fun,” said one helpful commenter.

“Ouch!” said another.

I bit back a dozen smart-ass remarks and forced a weak smile, wondering how in the hell I was going to get off this trail.

After a short eternity, Rob Reiner 2.0 returned. He introduced himself as Mike and told me the EMTs were on their way.

“Thank you, Mike,” I said, defeated. Not here a day and I’d already needed a man’s help, and *he’d* gone to find a bunch

more men to rescue me from this ridiculous predicament.

“No problem, sweetheart. Can I do anything else?”

“Mix me a martini? Dry, two olives.”

He chuckled, and he and his sons resumed playing in the water. I suspected they all had their fill of the Falls but were hanging around for my sake.

*Because I'm a train wreck. As usual.*

Half a century later, five men in dark blue uniforms with FIRE written in bright yellow across the back stomped toward me in their combat boots. The whirring of a helicopter sounded from above.

“How we doing, miss?” asked a gruff, deep voice.

“Never better.”

I brushed my hair off my face to glance up. My eyes widened and for a few blissful moments, my ankle was forgotten.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I murmured.

A beautiful beast of a man stood over me—six feet of muscle, reeking of cool competence and packaged in a uniform that announced *I save lives for a living*.

The firefighter was looking at me expectantly—impatiently—but I was too busy admiring the perfect geometry of his face, all chiseled planes and hard angles. Both hair and eyes were a rich, soft brown, but his gaze was stony and cool. His handsome features amounted to a brick wall—hard, strong, and not letting anything in.

“Yes, hi, I’m your problem child today.”

“Name?”

“Faith Benson.”

He squatted in front of my mud-splattered legs to examine my ankle. “Move your toes for me.”

I did as he said. Commanded, really. “Are you a doctor too?”

“EMT.” He laid two fingers on the top of my foot, feeling for a pulse. “These shoes aren’t appropriate for this trail.”

“I’m *painfully* aware.”

He snorted. “If I had a dollar for every tourist who traipses in here after a rain, utterly unprepared...”

His disdain smacked me back to my reality, and the pain came rushing back with it.

“You have a lovely bedside manner,” I said. “And you don’t look Hawaiian, by the way, so maybe cool it on the dumb tourist talk? This hurts like crazy.”

He grunted in response and turned to his fellow firefighters. They huddled for a moment about what to do with me, one speaking into a walkie-talkie affixed to his shoulder. The helicopter came into sight again—a red mosquito flitting across the blue sky.

“Okay, time to get you out,” my firefighter said.

“How?”

He pointed a finger upward.

I shook my head. “Oh no, no, no. That’s not necessary.”

“We have to evacuate you from the area, ma’am.”

“I’m not a *ma’am*, and a helicopter? That’s a tad dramatic, don’t you think?”

Just the sort of drama I was trying to erase from my life.

*Silas will never let me hear the end of this.*

“It’s necessary for your safety and to prevent further injury,” said a second, huge guy with a bald head and muscles for days. He turned to my new friend. “Ash, you ready?”

“Ready, Cap.”

So the *Hottest Firefighter in the World* is named Ash, I thought. Made sense. He probably set panties on fire.

*Stop it.*

“Your name is Ash?”

“Asher. Only the guys call me Ash.”

“What do the girls call you?”

He smirked, a crack in his stony demeanor. “Come on. Let’s get you out of here.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said, as Asher and the captain moved to either side of me to lift me up. “Can’t you just piggyback me out?”

Asher’s brows furrowed. “For *two* miles? On whose back?”

My gaze slid over his uniform shirt that clung to his chest and highlighted the muscles in his arms. “You appear capable.”

He snorted, but his smirk deepened into a hint of a smile. “As fun as that sounds, we’re using the chopper.”

“How are you going to land a helicopter on a waterfall?”

“We’re not.”

I didn’t have time to ponder the meaning of his words as Asher and his captain hooked my arms around their brawny shoulders and lifted me around the waist. I bit back a small whimper as they carefully sloshed their way into shallow water and found an outcropping to sit me on.

In the exact center of the pool.

Mortified, I waited while the EMTs talked into walkie talkies. Hikers loitered nearby, taking photos of me and the casket-shaped metal basket that was slowly making its way down a cord from the chopper. A guy in an orange uniform and white helmet came down with it.

“You’re going to put me in *that*?”

“Don’t worry,” Asher said, crouching beside me again. “Roy is the best in the business.”

My glance darted to the basket, the cables, and the dinky-looking helicopter hovering hundreds of yards in the air above us. I looked back to see Asher’s granite expression had softened a little.

“Is there someone I can call?” he asked.

“Question of the hour,” I said, willing the tears back. “No. There isn’t.”

“You’re on the island alone?”

“Yes, okay?” I spat. “I came here to work on myself. That’s not exactly a team sport. If I’d brought a gaggle of girlfriends, we’d have spent all our time drinking and shopping. Which is exactly what I do in Seattle. I needed a reset.” I flapped my hand at my ankle. “This was not on the itinerary. *Obviously.*”

Asher wore a grudging look of...mild surprise? Understanding? Doubtful. To him, I was just another dumb tourist. Even dumber for coming here solo.

Roy and his Basket of Doom were brought over in a tangle of straps and buckles.

My pulse kicked up another notch.

“You want me to lie down in that? On purpose?”

“It’s safe, I swear,” Asher said.

“I’ll bet you say that to all the girls.”

The guys helped me into the basket. I lay down flat on my back, clutching my muddy backpack to my chest. Silent under his white helmet, Roy busily worked attaching various buckles and straps.

“Where are you taking me, Roy?”

“They’re going to land you on dry ground,” Asher said when Roy declined to comment. “An ambulance is waiting to take you to Wilcox Hospital. Where are you staying on the island?”

“Kapa’a.”

“Then you’re right there.”

A lot of good that would do me. I couldn’t drive. Couldn’t walk. Outside of Silas, there was no one I wanted to call to help me get through this. I wasn’t one for freaking out, but at that moment, it took all I had to not burst into tears. I was

allergic to being emotional, but I felt so helpless when I'd come here expressly for the opposite reason.

Asher read my expression and frowned, a furrow forming between his brows. "You good?"

"Just peachy," I managed. There was no way I was going to lose it in front of this guy. "Does it change anything if I say I'm afraid of heights?"

"You're going to be okay. I promise."

"Thanks." I looked up at the helicopter above. "This is nuts. Do I have time for a photo?"

"Seriously?"

"When is this going to happen to me again?"

"Next week?"

"You're cute, but you still need to work on your bedside manner." I fished my phone out and took a shot of the helicopter above me, then whipped my phone to the right and grabbed a pic of Asher. "To show the folks at home the hero who rescued the dumb tourist with the bad shoes."

"That's Roy. Not me. And you're not dumb. Shit happens."

Did I detect a twinge of remorse in his gruff, manly-man voice? I had no time to contemplate. Takeoff was imminent and I wasn't going to see Asher again.

"Take care, Faith," he said as he and the rest of the guys backed away. "And be more careful next time."

"Thanks, but there is no next time. This trip is over with a capital O."

*Over before it even began.*

Roy made a circular arm motion, and the chopper rose higher, taking us off the ground. Through the basket's mesh bars, I caught sight of Mike with his sons amid a bunch of gawking tourists. He waved at me. I waved back.

Only a slender cord, curved by the breeze, tethered Roy and me to the helicopter above us. Below, the earth—beautiful as it

was—swept beneath us at a frightening distance.

I looked to Roy, attached to the side of the basket by cords and buckles. “You do this often?”

Either Roy was the silent type, or he couldn’t hear me from inside his helmet, but he wasn’t talking. I squeezed my eyes shut and waited for the ordeal to be over. Three minutes later, it was. We landed the basket in the playground of an elementary school, mercifully empty on a Sunday.

“So that happened,” I said to the sky.

As promised, an ambulance was waiting. Two more EMTs—neither of them Asher, I noticed—rushed out with a stretcher.

“I’m fine, guys,” I protested. “A hospital seems like overkill.”

“Might be broken. Better to have an X-ray.”

I sighed. It wasn’t like I had anywhere else to be.



For four hours, I waited on a gurney in the ER of Wilcox Hospital, shivering with cold. The thin blanket they’d given me was purely decorative, and the ice pack on my ankle felt like it weighed a hundred pounds. An X-ray determined nothing was broken. A young dark-haired doctor named Dr. Akana gave me the news.

“X-ray shows no broken bones. Ultrasound shows no ligament tears,” she said. “Without an MRI we can’t be one hundred percent certain, but in my experience, it looks like a bad sprain. You’re lucky.”

“Yep, lucky. That’s me.” I brushed a tangle of hair out of my eyes. “What happens now?”

“We’ll give you a boot to stabilize your foot, a pair of crutches, more ice packs to take home. Is there someone we can call to come get you?”



“If I had a dollar...” I forced a fresh round of tears back down. “No. I’m here by myself.”

Dr. Akana frowned and nodded toward my mud-splattered legs. “I can have the nurses clean you up if you’d like.”

“And wait another four hours in this Arctic enclosure? No, thanks. Someone less *lucky* probably needs this bed anyway. I’ll call an Uber.”

“Suit yourself.” She patted my arm gently. “I’ll have them bring your paperwork.”

The doc left, and a nurse appeared nearly thirty minutes later to wrap my ankle and put it in a black boot that came to mid-shin. I signed some papers, and they rolled me in a wheelchair to the front of the hospital. The orderly waited with me until the Uber arrived. A young guy jumped out of a small white Kia.

“Faith?”

“That’s me.”

I hauled myself out of the wheelchair, and the orderly handed me crutches. Twelve of my nearly thirty years had been spent in high heels and I’d never needed crutches. Letting go of the chair and taking my first wobbly steps made me feel like an astronaut being cast out of the space station.

*Don’t be dramatic. Just get back to the condo.*

And then what? I had no clue how I’d be able to maneuver into a bath to clean myself up. I could change my flight and get the hell out of here, but I had three pieces of luggage to somehow get to the airport. Just the thought of packing made me tired. And my rental car? How would I return it? I couldn’t drive.

*The condo, I thought again. Get to the condo and figure out the rest later.*

I slowly crutched three steps to the Kia. The Uber driver eyed my muddy clothes dubiously.

“Um, is there a towel we can put down? For my back seat?”

“Seriously?”

My ankle throbbed and ached in the heavy boot.

The driver gave me an apologetic smile and ran after the orderly who was already taking the wheelchair back, leaving me standing on the curb. Alone.

The dam finally broke, and I burst into tears.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Asher*

There was absolutely no reason for me to drive to Wilcox Hospital after my shift. None. I had friends there, of course—docs, nurses, and other guys in my line of work whom I saw on the regular. But I had no plans with anyone there that night and didn't normally make a habit of hanging out at the island's only hospital for shits and giggles. Kapa'a wasn't even my fire station; I'd covered a shift for a buddy at the last minute. I shouldn't have been working the Ho'opi'i Falls Trail or anywhere near Faith Benson and her crappy hiking shoes.

So why was I driving there like a bat out of hell? Still in uniform, no less.

*You know why.*

Something she'd said stuck with me.

I'd heard variations of the self-improvement song and dance hundreds of times from tourists who thought a selfie at the Hindu temple was going to solve all their problems back on the mainland. But *reset* had been Morgan's exact phrasing four years ago when he convinced me—begged and threatened me, actually—to trade New York City for the smallest island in Hawaii. The fact that Faith Benson used it wouldn't get out of my head.

"It's just a coincidence," I muttered and yet I hit the gas harder.

I liked to drive fast, and I drove faster, though it was likely too late. Faith had been admitted hours ago and was probably long gone by now. But when I tore my Jeep into the emergency roundabout, there she was, propped up by a pair of crutches at the curb. Her blond hair fell around shaking shoulders. She was crying and for some mysterious reason, that was utterly unacceptable.

Tires squealing, I screeched alongside the pick-up/drop-off curb and parked behind a dinky white Kia. I climbed out of the Jeep and strode over to her.

“Hey. You okay?”

“No, I am not okay!” she cried, then blinked tearfully up at me in confusion. “Oh. It’s you.”

Her lips parted in surprise, and her green eyes shone with tears as she gazed up at me with something like relief. Like she was just as glad to see me as I was glad to have caught her before she vanished.

Then she tore her gaze away and hurriedly wiped her cheeks. “What are you doing here? Come to get a few more digs at the dumb tourist?”

It was the slap to the face I needed. She didn’t like me, and I had no reason to like her.

*Just get her home and get on with your life.*

“Is someone picking you up?”

“That’s my Uber.” She jerked her chin at the Kia. “The driver’s trying to find a towel. He doesn’t want my muddy ass on his seat. Can’t blame him but...” Faith’s lower lip trembled but she pulled it together and shook her head defiantly. “No. Never mind. I’m perfectly fine.”

I smirked. “Sure, you are.”

“And your bedside manner hasn’t improved since last we met,” she muttered, then gestured furiously at her muddy leg. “How did this happen? I came here for personal growth. Does this look like personal growth to you? My entire trip is ruined.”

“Maybe not,” I said. “How long are you here for?”

“Two weeks.”

“That’s not so bad—”

“I got here *yesterday*.”

“Oh.”

“What is so wrong with shopping sprees and long weekends?” she demanded of the parking lot. “What’s so terrible about sleeping in and cocktail parties and meaningless sex?”

“Not much,” I muttered, trying to ignore how those last words zipped straight down my spine.

“This was stupid. I should’ve stayed at home.” Faith huffed a steadying breath, then glared at me. “Asher, right? Once again, why are you here?”

I started to answer, but then she winced as a flash of pain came over her. She didn’t need to be standing on a curb. She needed to get cleaned up, elevate her leg, and get some ice on that ankle.

“Forget the Uber,” I said. “I’ll take you.”

Her green eyes flared and then she tilted her chin stubbornly. “I don’t need your help.”

I blinked irritably. “You want to wait for Towel Boy?”

“I thought you didn’t like me.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Oh, nothing. Just everything you’ve said to me since the moment we met.”

“Maybe you’re growing on me.” I shot her a half-smile. “Like a barnacle.”

She huffed indignantly and was about to protest when the Uber driver rushed over, waving a white towel.

“Got it.” He beamed. “Ready, ma’am?”

Faith winced. “Why is everyone calling me ma’am? I’m twenty-nine, for God’s sake.” She looked between me and the driver, hesitating.

I took a step closer to her so that we were face to face. “I’ll get you home safe,” I swore. “It’s what I do.”

She arched a brow, but I didn’t miss the hard swallow in her delicate throat. “Do you practice lines like that in the mirror?”

“I don’t need to practice.”

Her eyes flared again, and her lips parted but this time she had no snappy comeback. I took the crutches out of her hands and thrust them at the Uber driver. “Carry these,” I barked and then slipped my arm around Faith’s slender waist. I lifted her easily, cradling her around her back and under her knees, and carried her to my Jeep.

“My hero,” Faith said.

She was valiantly trying to maintain her sarcasm, but I felt her melt against me. Carefully, I maneuvered her into the front seat, stowed her crutches in the back, and sent the Uber driver on his way.

“Where are you staying?”

“Pono Kai condos.” Faith watched me throw the car in drive and take off, wincing as I hit the gas. “You don’t need GPS?”

“I’ve lived here for four years,” I said. “And this island isn’t exactly huge. Why aren’t you at one of the big resorts in Poipu or Princeville?”

“Because if I stayed there, I’d *stay* there. At the pool bar, specifically. No personal growth, remember?”

“I remember,” I said, keeping my eyes on the road.

“But that’s over.” Faith sighed. Not a dramatic one, but a real letting go of something she wanted. Or needed.

I wanted to tell her it didn’t have to be over, but that was bullshit. Everything would be a struggle because she had no one to help her through the first, hardest days.

I could practically see Morgan’s annoying, expectant smirk and promptly ignored it.

“I’ve had a day.” Faith yawned and leaned her head against the glass. “I’m going to take a little nap, if that’s possible with your stellar driving.”

“That bad, eh?”

“The helicopter was less traumatic.”

I scoffed but had to hold back a stupid grin, still wondering what the hell it was about Faith Benson that was making me sacrifice the rest of my day to put up with her. I was supposed to be in Hanalei in a few hours. Not to mention, I'd made it a personal rule to never get involved with tourists for more than one night in the sack. Two, tops. But sex wasn't on my mind.

*That's a goddamn lie.*

Okay, fine. Faith was a stunningly beautiful woman, and I was a red-blooded male. But she was injured, alone, and needed help—not to be taken advantage of. I was many things, but a lowlife wasn't one of them.

I stole a glance at Faith, her head pillowed against the window, eyes closed. Her face was relaxed and free of pain and worry for the first time since I'd met her. I liked that I'd done that for her. I liked *her*. She was a pain in the ass, but I liked her fire and her wit...

My brother's knowing smirk returned. *That's a lot of liking.*

"Shut up," I muttered.

"Hmm?" Faith murmured.

"Nothing."

Ten minutes later, I pulled into the Pono Kai parking lot. The condo complex wasn't a resort, but not a dump either—a midrise of condos, most of which were now likely vacation rentals. I woke Faith up and carried her past a koi pond to her condo's front door. She keyed the door and I kicked it open.

"Ooh, that felt very firefighter-y," she said.

She was smiling up at me, and it took all I had to keep my gaze on her clear green eyes and not let it drop to her mouth. But staring into her eyes was just as bad. Rimmed with long dark lashes, they glinted with humor and more than a little heat, too.

I tore my gaze away. "Where?"

"Couch."

The condo wasn't huge but modern, with all the usual Airbnb-approved-ocean-themed crap on the walls. The setting sun's soft orange light streamed in from large windows, and the beach was a short walk from her lanai, for all the good it would do her now. I pulled the coffee table closer to the couch so she could rest her foot on it.

"Thank you," she said.

"You need ice." I went to the freezer in her chrome and marble kitchen.

"They just wrapped up my foot..."

"I can rewrap," I said, putting ice cubes in a Ziploc. "Besides, don't you want to get cleaned up?"

Faith arched a perfect eyebrow. "Are you heroically offering to bathe me?"

I brought the kitchen mallet hard on a bag of ice cubes and coughed. "I'm a professional. I cut clothes off people every day."

"I'll bet you do," she purred.

*Christ...*

"I'll call a nurse friend."

"That's very sweet of you, Asher...?"

"Mackey." I came around to sit on the coffee table. Carefully, I removed the boot and bandages from Faith's ankle. Gripping the delicate muscle in her calf, I set a dish towel over her swollen foot and a bag of crushed ice over that.

"Hurts," she whispered.

"Already looks better than earlier."

Her gaze darted to me hopefully. "You think so?"

"Definitely. I bet you'll be walking by the end of the week."

She shook her head. "I'm not staying a week. I'm done."

"Giving up already? I thought you were here for a reset?"



“Did I say that?”

I shrugged. “Something like that.”

“Well, whatever I came to do isn’t happening. It’s back to Seattle for me.” She watched me gently settle the ice so that it stayed put. “Where are you from?”

“New York City.”

“Were you a fireman there too?”

“Nope.”

She raised her brow, waiting for me to elaborate, but my business was my own and it was going to stay that way.

“You’re quite the conversationalist,” she mused. “I could never leave my city for a tiny island in the middle of the Pacific. The upheaval...” She shook her head as if she couldn’t imagine it. “Kauai is pretty but so far away from literally everything.”

“That’s exactly why I like it.”

“I didn’t take you for a recluse.”

“You gotta be a recluse to live in one of the most beautiful places on earth?”

“No, but to give up what you’ve given up...that doesn’t happen overnight, does it?”

She was sharp, this one, and if I let her, she’d come close to touching something I didn’t want anyone poking at.

“Sometimes it does.” I got to my feet. “Water. You need to stay hydrated.”

“Aren’t you sweet.”

“Not especially,” I said, filling a glass at the sink.

“If you weren’t fighting fires, what did you do in New York?”

“You ask a lot of questions.” I returned with a glass of water.

“You’re a mysterious person, Asher Mackey.”

*And you're making it difficult to dislike you, Faith Benson.*

“What do *you* do for a living?” I asked. “Let me guess: fashion blogger. No, you're an Instagram...what do you call it? Influencer.”

It wasn't exactly a compliment, but Faith's hand flew to her heart.

“Oh my God, thank you! But no, I'm in advertising.” She rolled her eyes at my grimace. “So, I'm not saving lives—”

“No, you're keeping the capitalist machine rolling, selling people crap they don't need, want, or can afford.”

“Hey, Judgy McJudgerton, there's a tad more to it than that.”

“Like what?”

“I don't sell anything,” she said. “A salesperson is there for the sale. My job is to grab someone's attention first. To key into their desire. To make them *want*.”

*Fucking hell, job well done...*

Faith sighed and turned her gaze to the ocean. “It's ironic. I work for an ad agency but mostly just on paper. I take a lot of time off because I can. Because my salary is like a bonus. Because I find guys who want to take care of me. They bankroll my life of leisure, and I take full advantage. Unapologetically. I hit the jackpot with one guy. That was a wild ride, but...”

Faith caught my dark look and tilted her chin defiantly.

“I know, I'm a shallow gold-digger, right? But that's why I'm here. Silas—the jackpot—he and I are best friends now, and I'm done taking his or anyone else's money. Now I'm just trying to figure out who I am without all *that*.” She flapped her hand in Seattle's general direction. “But alas, my voyage of self-discovery is over.”

I said nothing aloud while thoughts warred in my mind. *Don't let her go* fought the hardest. But nothing was going to come of this. Not even sex, given Faith's injury, though I

realized with some alarm that I'd be happy just to sit on the couch with her and talk.

*This is ridiculous. Get out of here before you lose your damn mind.*

I got to my feet and snatched my phone out of my uniform back pocket. "You need to get cleaned up. I'll call Paula, my nurse friend."

"Thanks, Asher. I appreciate it."

"Yep."

I stepped outside to call Paula Harold, who lived in Kapa'a. Fortunately, she was home and happy to help.

"What are you doing, Asher?" Paula teased. "Personalized tourist care packages?"

"Ha ha."

She laughed. "Be there in fifteen."

I hung up and reentered the condo.

"Paula's on her way," I told Faith and then made another ice pack to store in the freezer. Job done, I stood in her living room feeling awkward and stupid. Two feelings I wasn't used to having. "I'm going to take off. I have...plans."

I was having dinner with my brother and his wife, but it sounded like I had a date. Faith read it that way too.

"If you must," Faith said with a flirty smile that didn't quite touch her eyes.

"You going to be good?"

"Me? Never."

"I meant—"

"I know what you meant. I'll be fine. I'm going to order some food, sleep early, and organize a flight home tomorrow."

Disappointment nipped at me but what else could she do?

*Without someone helping her...*

I cut that thought off at the root. I wasn't about to waste my four days off playing nurse to some tourist. Nothing could come of...whatever I was feeling at that moment. Faith was going to leave eventually, whether I helped salvage her vacation or not.

"Shoo." She waved a hand. "There are other damsels in distress waiting for you to save them. And I have your number if I need you again."

"I didn't give you my number..."

"911?" She arched a brow at me. "You walked right into that one, Asher Mackey."

*Christ, she's turning my brains to mush.*

Paula poked her head in. "Someone call for a mobile sponge bath?" she asked, making Faith laugh and putting her at ease.

While the women got acquainted, I made my escape. I'd intended to take off but got as far as my Jeep and then leaned against the hood, scrolling through my phone.

Paula emerged forty-five minutes later. "That Faith is a hoot. It's a shame about her foot. She had her whole trip ahead of her."

"Yeah, well, shit happens."

"Indeed." Paula was a mom of four teenage boys. Consequently, not much bullshit got past her. "But her ankle's not all that bad. Grade One, I'd say. Give her a week and she'll be hobbling around like a champ." She tapped a finger to her chin thoughtfully. "If only someone were around to help her through the hard parts."

I coughed, hearing my own thoughts read back to me.

Paula laughed at my flummoxed expression and keyed the locks to her Camry. "Do I have to spell it out for you, Mackey?"

"*Goodbye*, Paula," I said and opened my Jeep's door.

Her smile dropped. "Wait...you're leaving?"

“You got her situated?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then she doesn’t need me anymore.”

I flashed her a tight smile and slid behind the wheel. The engine was loud as I tore away from Pono Kai, putting the condos in my rearview.

What I needed—or *wanted*—could stay there too.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Asher*

“Are you stupid or something?”

Morgan stared, incredulous, while Nalani hid a smile in her shoulder and got up from the dinner table, leaving her husband—my pain in the ass little brother—to gape at me.

“You left a beautiful woman stranded and alone?” Morgan demanded. “As a paramedic, is that even allowed? Don’t you have a...whatsit. A duty to act?” He blew out a whistle. “Some hero you are.”

I rolled my eyes and speared a green bean with my fork. “She’s a tourist. I don’t fu—”

“*Language...*” Nalani warned as she returned to the table and gave a nod at the little boy sitting beside me, happily shoveling fried rice and vegetables into his mouth.

“I don’t *mess* around with tourists,” I amended. “And I’m no one’s hero.”

“That’s not true. You’re my hero, Uncle Ash!” Kaleo said brightly, and my stupid heart damn near split in two. Not that anyone needed to know that.

The seven-year-old had his mother’s Polynesian features with Morgan’s curling black hair and skinny build. How that little bugger could contain the amount of love we had for him in that little body, I couldn’t guess. He was the center of his parents’ universe. Mine too, if I were being honest.

“Thanks, buddy,” I said, ruffling his hair and giving him a smile. Then I turned my scowl back to my brother. “Don’t know why I bothered telling you about Faith in the first place.”

“I have an idea,” Nalani said. She tossed her long black braid over her shoulder and rested her chin in her hand, eyelashes fluttering.

“I was just making conversation.” I picked up my dinner plate and went to the kitchen for a second helping of ribs. When I came back, my brother and sister-in-law were still wearing the same expectant expressions. “Christ.”

“I worry about you, Ash,” Nalani said. “Chloe is right here —”

“Miss Barnes!” Kal piped up. “She’s my favorite teacher.”

“And Asher is her favorite firefighter,” Morgan said with a wink.

“But you’re not interested in Chloe,” Nalani continued. “I’ve never seen you seriously interested in *anyone*.”

“There’s a reason for that.”

She pursed her lips. “That was fine four years ago, but you’re thirty now.”

Morgan grinned. “Thirty-one.”

“You’re old, Uncle Ash,” Kaleo said solemnly.

“He sure is,” my brother agreed and then laughed as I pretended to scratch my eye with my middle finger.

Nalani leaned forward. “We’re not trying to interfere—”

“Yes, we are,” Morgan put in.

“But don’t you want...more?”

I glanced up from my food to meet Nalani’s caring expression, her hand tucked in her husband’s, both resting on their dinner table that held the remnants of a homecooked meal. The ocean crashed on the shore below their small bungalow in Hanalei, not far from mine, and the setting sun cast a warm glow over the family, the food, the *home* that my little brother had made here.

*Good. That’s what he deserves.*

I shrugged. “Faith’s a pain in the ass.”

“So are you.”

I rolled my eyes and shot a wink at Kaleo, who was giggling at my bad language.

“That’s really it, huh?” Morgan leaned back in his seat. He was a younger, less bulky version of me, with enough of our mother in his face to make my heart clench. “And by the way, you *do* mess around with tourists. Sleeping with beautiful women who are only here for a handful of days is your specialty. Suddenly, you’ve gone shy?”

Kaleo blinked up at me. “What do you do with the women, Uncle Ash?”

“He has sleepovers,” Nalani said, giving her husband’s arm a light punch.

“Shy?” I snorted and tore into a rib. “Sure. That’s me.”

“But you’re not even *having a sleepover* with her,” Morgan persisted.

Nalani nodded. “This one feels different. The way you talked about her—”

“I didn’t talk about her any differently than any other call,” I said. “Though I now deeply regret saying anything at all.”

Morgan spoke as if he hadn’t heard me. “You have the next four days off. What else are you going to do?”

“It wouldn’t kill you to show Faith the island,” Nalani said. “She came all this way.”

“Yeah, Asher. She came all this way,” Morgan echoed, the two of them blinking and grinning like idiots.

For a second, they almost got me. I didn’t have any plans but to hang with some guys from the firehouse, maybe surf, maybe play video games. And sure, maybe lately I’d been feeling a few twinges of...something. I wasn’t fucking *lonely* but...

*But getting there?*

I shoved away that feeling of want and buried it under painful memories. Morgan had been able to get over our fucked-up childhood—a major victory. I’d done everything in my power to not let it take root in him the way it had in me. My pain ran deep, and I used it to keep me from being betrayed. I didn’t want to *want* anything, ever again.



I pushed my plate aside. “What’s for dessert?”



“She seems brave,” Kaleo said, tossing me the baseball in the yard as the sky darkened to deep purple above us.

“Who does?”

“That Faith lady.”

I frowned and tossed the ball back. “You were listening to all that?”

“I like to listen.” Kal caught the ball in his mitt with a natural ease and chucked it back.

“That’s the truth. How do you know she’s brave?”

“A helicopter lifted her into the air, and she wasn’t scared. I’d be scared.”

“She handled it pretty well,” I admitted.

“Because she’s brave,” Kaleo said. “It sucks she hurt herself. Remember that time I skinned my knee?”

The falling dark hid my smile. I’d lost count of how many times my nephew skinned his knee. The ball went back and forth between us.

“I remember.”

“I still got to go on the field trip to Waimea Canyon,” Kal said.

“What’s your point?”

“It would’ve sucked if I had to miss it.”

“I’d have just taken you the next week.”

“But the Faith lady doesn’t have someone to take her next week. She’s missing the canyon and everything else.”

Not for the first time, I noted my nephew was a lot smarter than any seven-year-old needed to be.

“What do you think I should do about it?”

Kaleo grinned, toothy white in the dimness of dusk. “You should take her around in the firetruck!”

I laughed. “Pretty sure that’s what *you* want to do.”

“Can I?”

“Again? We went twice last month.”

He rolled his eyes. “Like I’m ever going to get tired of that, Uncle Ash.”

I caught his last toss, then dumped my mitt and the ball to the ground. “Come on. It’s getting too dark to see.”

He joined me and I slung my arm around his little shoulders as we crossed the thick, overgrown grass of the yard. My brother’s house was perched on a bluff, tucked into the green of Kauai. Below, the Pacific Ocean stretched out, black and huge under a sky as infinite and scattered with stars.

“You should go back to Faith,” Kaleo said.

I stiffened. “You too, huh? Why is everyone in my business about it?”

“Don’t you want to get married?”

“Nah. I’m not the marrying type. Why?”

“Because the sooner you get married, the sooner you’ll have a baby and then I’ll have someone to play with. Besides”—he looked up at me, scrutinizing—“you’re not getting any younger.”

I snorted a laugh. “Ask your smartass parents to give you a sibling.”

“Does sibling mean little brother?”

“Or sister.”

Kaleo sighed gravely. “I would, but babies are expensive.”

“Where the hell did you hear that?”

“Mama. When she was talking to Daddy about the business being in trouble.”

I jerked to a stop. “The business is in trouble?”

His hand flew to his mouth. “I wasn’t supposed to say anything.”

“Why not?”

“He said you’d try to fix it with your New York money.”

I muttered a curse.

My brother had been an avid photographer since forever. When he was eighteen, I gifted him a trip to Hawaii for his high school graduation. He fell in love with Kauai’s scenery and Nalani Soriano—in that order—and never looked back. Together, with a modest starter investment from me, they opened *Island Memories*, a little photography studio in Princeville.

Kaleo tugged my hand. He was sensitive and sweet, like his dad, but more serious. Solemn. “Please don’t tell on me, Uncle Ash.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said through my teeth and stormed back into the house, ready to confront my brother the minute Kal went to bed.

Instead, I was confronted with Nalani shoving a tinfoil-covered pie into my hands. Her famous key lime, judging by the scent.

“Take this to her.”

“To who...?” I began and then rolled my eyes. “Shit, seriously, Nal?”

“It is not the aloha spirit to leave her without giving her a little something from the island. You know this.”

Nalani gave me a stern look that reminded me of her grandmother, Momi. The look that said, *I’m older and wiser than you and you’re going to do what I say.*

Nalani was four years younger than me, but there was no arguing with her all the same.

“Fine.” I took the pie. “I’ll just go to make sure she got dinner. That’s it.”

“Sure, sure.” My sister-in-law broke into a grin, turned me around, and shoved me back out the door. “Hurry. Before it’s too late.”



I drove the forty-five minutes from Hanalei in the north, down to Kapa’a on the eastern coast, with Nalani’s key lime on the passenger seat. My thoughts drifted back to my New York City days. It’d been a dick move to accuse Faith of promoting mindless materialism when I’d worked in finance on Wall Street for four years. My entire job was to make money for clients simply by moving it around. Turned out, I was good at it. I moved enough of mine around to hit my own jackpot.

*That life nearly killed you, so we don’t need to think about it anymore.*

Instead, I drove and made use of a residual skill required to survive on the floor of the Exchange—assessing multiple pieces of information simultaneously to make split-second decisions.

*I have four days off on my rotation starting tomorrow.*

*She’s sexy as hell.*

*She’s trying for a reset, like I did all those years ago.*

*Great sense of humor.*

*She’s sexy as hell.*

“You said that already,” I muttered.

I arrived back at the Pono Kai condos around nine. At Faith’s door, I knocked, then opened it a crack. “You decent?”

“Never,” sniffed a voice from the couch. “I’m distinctly *indecent*.”

That was the damn truth.

The wall TV was on mute, and she was lounging on the couch with her foot up on the coffee table, dressed only in a silk bathrobe. Her blond hair was still damp from the shower

and brushed back from her face. No makeup, bronzed skin under the flimsy robe, and legs that went on forever...

"You should lock your door," I said and set the pie and my keys on the kitchen counter.

"Then you wouldn't be able to come back to me," Faith said, sounding strained. "Why *did* you come back to me?"

"Pie," I said absently, glancing around her place. No sign of dinner. "Did you eat?"

"I'd planned on it but getting cleaned up with Paula took it out of me." She smiled tightly and I noticed her green eyes were shining. "And because it's *me*, I forgot to pack even one tablet of my beloved Advil."

My eyes flared and I really looked at her. Her slender body was tense, her hand gripping the TV remote in a vise. I'd been around enough people in pain to know it when I saw it.

"The fuck? They didn't give you anything at Wilcox?"

"They did, but it seemed to have worn off. I...I'm fine."

"The hell you are," I said, taking an awkward step toward her. "Faith, I'm sorry."

"Why? It's not your fault I'm a complete disaster." Her eyes spilled over. "My ankle is screaming at me and all I can do is sit here, flipping channels to distract myself."

I ground my teeth and grabbed my keys off the counter.

"Where are you going?" she asked, almost panicked at the idea of me leaving.

*No, she's panicked at the idea of being left alone again, you jackass.*

"Advil," I said. "And food. You need to eat."

"You don't have to. It's too late and—"

But I was already at the door. Getting her some aspirin was a no-brainer, but moreover, an internal call siren had gone off in me. The same alarm that had gone off when Kal said the photography business was struggling. The same alarm—on a

lower key—that had gone off all those years ago when the trailer burned to the ground and Morgan’s safety became my entire fucking world. The only thing that would shut it off, was to answer it.

“I’ll be right back.”



I drove to the nearest drug store and stocked up on Ace bandages and Advil. Most restaurants were closed in Kapa’a, but I was able to grab two orders of fries with wasabi and soy sauce from my favorite food truck before they shut down for the night.

Back at Faith’s, I knocked once, then strode to the kitchen.

“That was fast, Mario Andretti,” Faith said with a weak smile.

I poured her a glass of water and brought her three Advil.

“Your mother raised a gentleman,” she said and gratefully took the pills, missing my grimace.

*My mother raised no one.*

“You should’ve told me you didn’t have anything earlier,” I said darkly. “Or told Paula.”

Faith shot me another of her wry, flirty looks, already improved by imminent pain relief. “I was too busy being happy to have the mud off me. Besides, the whole point of coming here was to not need a man for once in my life. I didn’t even make it one day.”

“Shit happens,” I muttered, remembering how I’d given her grief back at the Falls. I took two containers out of the food bag. “You need to eat.”

“Now that you mention it, what is that heavenly smell?”

“Food truck fries.”

“That sounds...interesting,” she said dubiously.

“Don’t knock it till you try it. Hurricane Fries are the best...unless you don’t like spicy.”

“Me? I *love* spicy.”

*Of course, she does.*

I set up the food on her coffee table. Faith took a forkful of fries dripping with soy sauce and drizzled with wasabi and then moaned in a way that should be illegal.

I coughed. “Good, right?”

“That’s amazing.” She took another bite. “Island specialty? And to think I would have missed it.”

She didn’t mean anything by it, but knowing Kauai like I did, everything else she was going to miss came at me in a neat, orderly list. I busied myself with my food and when we were finished, I served up the pie.

“That did not come from the food truck,” Faith said.

“My sister-in-law makes the best key lime,” I said, cutting two slices. “This is from her for you.”

“You told her about me?”

*Shit.*

“I have dinner with my brother’s family a few nights a week. Sometimes I tell them about my calls.” I shot Faith my own arch look. “It’s not every day we chopper a tourist out of Ho’opi’i.”

She smirked. “I find that hard to believe.” I returned to the couch with the pie and Faith forked a mouthful. “This is homemade? Tell your sister-in-law I love her.”

“Her name is Nalani, and she had some thoughts about your vacation,” I admitted. “So did Paula.”

“Oh?”

“Your ankle sprain is Grade One,” I said slowly. “That means in a few days, you’re going to have more mobility, but right now you need to rest it, ice it, and try to stay off it. Which isn’t easy to do alone.”

“Tell me about it.”

I tossed down my napkin, like throwing in the towel. A flag of surrender. But who was I kidding? I'd known how my four days off were going to be spent the second I got back in my Jeep with Nalani's pie.

"It's not in my personal protocol to involve myself with tourists but... I'd like to help keep you from losing your entire time on Kauai."

She glanced up quickly in surprise. "You would?"

"I have some time off. I'll pop in now and then, help you through these first, hard days. After that, I go back to work, but you should be able to get around on your own."

"Why would you do that for me?"

"Because..." I stammered, thinking quickly. All the reasons I wanted to keep spending time with this woman flooded my brain and I rejected all of them. She leaned forward, waiting for the rest. I snagged on something Morgan said earlier that night. "Because I'm an EMT. We have a duty to act."

Faith wrinkled her nose. "Even on your days off?"

"Always," I said. "Firefighters, police, and emergency responders never clock off the job completely. It's not in our DNA."

It wasn't quite the truth but not exactly a lie either.

She nodded, thinking. "That's very generous, Asher, but I barely know you. That's never stopped me before, mind you..."

Of course, she had zero reason to trust me. I hadn't given her one shred of something personal to even out the scales. I could throw her a scrap. Seemed only fair.

"You asked about what I did in New York. I was a hedge fund manager on Wall Street."

Faith's eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed thoughtfully. "I can see that about you. Fireman calendar pin-up looks *and* smarts. Why did you trade Wall Street for this little island?"



“The abridged version? That lifestyle was chaos. Lots of booze, drugs, sex—”

“Where do I sign up?”

I couldn't hold in my laugh. Faith's brassy, nothing-fazes-me demeanor was wearing me down, drawing me in.

“It was constant high-pressure,” I continued. “Stress was our actual commodity. I never built anything. Nothing tangible, anyway. Just moved money around to make more money. It wasn't enough.”

Faith settled back on the couch cushion. “Not enough how?”

“Mentally,” I said. “Spiritually, I guess.”

“So you came here for personal growth too. A *reset*?”

*I came here so I wouldn't give myself a cocaine heart attack...*

I shrugged. “Hawaii's a good place for that.”

Faith smiled. “I knew there was something deeper going on with you behind your perfect manly physique and less-than-perfect bedside manner. Maybe we have something in common after all.”

“I wouldn't go that far. I didn't quit after one day.”

Faith's arch look returned. “You didn't bust an ankle and require a private helicopter tour of the local hospital, either.”

“No, but calling it quits doesn't seem like you.”

“And you know this because...?”

“I don't,” I said. “Something about you. I think you'd have crawled out of that trail if you had to.”

She seemed genuinely surprised. “You do?”

“Am I wrong?”

Faith glanced at her hands. “I don't know. I'd like to think I would have.”

“Prove it.”

Her eyebrows went up again. Thoughts flashed behind her green eyes. “Fine. I’ll stick around for a few days, but you have to do something for me.”

“And here I thought using my four days off was something.”

“It’s a big deal, and I appreciate it, but it’s not going to be super fun if you’re scared the whole time.”

“*Scared?*”

“Of getting emotionally attached to me.”

I leaned back on the chair and crossed my arms. “I think you’re overestimating how much fun you are to be around.”

“Impossible. I’m *loads* of fun,” she said with a wink. “But my job is to read people, remember? I see beyond their objections and boundaries and get to what they really want.”

“And what do I really want?” I asked, tensing all over. I hadn’t asked myself that question in years and now here was this woman, breaking me down like a damn sledgehammer.

“You don’t want any messy complications with a hapless yet irresistibly charming tourist, so you’ve put up this gruff firefighter-who’s-seen-it-all act to keep your distance.” She smiled victoriously when I shifted in my chair. “I’m *really* good at my job.”

“I can see that.”

“But I’m also in the same boat, except I hide my allergy to emotions with bad jokes and meaningless sex.”

I smirked. “Where do I sign up?”

Faith’s smile was blinding. “Ah! I knew you had a sense of humor lurking in there. Your hotness factor just ratcheted up ten notches.” She shook her head and made a *tsking* sound. “What a shame. Part of my misguided attempt at personal growth is that I’ve sworn off men for the foreseeable future, and here you are, kicking in the door to my life.” Her tongue touched the top of her parted lips and her eyes darkened as they grazed over every inch of me. “The universe is testing me. Hard.”

My groin tightened at the word *hard* coming out of her mouth and the heated scrutiny of her gaze, drinking me in. Christ, everything about her begged me to take her on the couch right then and there.

“It’s testing the hell out of me too,” I admitted gruffly and dragged my eyes away from the bronzed skin of her thigh.

“We must stay strong. Friendly.” She thrust out her hand. “Hi, I’m Faith Mabel Benson from Manhasset, New York. Daughter of Millie Monroe Benson and Kevin Benson of Sag Harbor, who is currently in Bali on his third honeymoon.”

“Wait...*Mabel*?”

Faith whacked my arm. “Hush. Your turn.”

“Uh, Asher Mackey of the North Bend Mackeys. Brother to Morgan, uncle to Kal, brother-in-law to Nalani of the key lime pies.”

“Parents?”

“Out of the picture,” I said in a tone that invited no further discussion.

“Fair enough. There. Now you don’t have to try so hard to keep your distance. Four days, and I’ll be out of your life.”

That didn’t sound as appealing as it should’ve.

“You’ve got that stiff look again.” She cocked her head. “Would it break the ice more to tell you my new stepmother is five years younger than me?”

Maybe it was the way Faith batted her eyelashes, her lips twisted wryly, or something about *her* that was sort of irresistible, but I burst out laughing.

“Four days,” she said, “and then I’ll reevaluate my prospects. And I’m not going to sleep with you, firefighter.”

“I don’t expect you to,” I said and couldn’t help but grin, “but let’s leave that door open.”

“Closed,” she corrected with a sly smile. “But I’ll leave it unlocked.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Faith*

The next morning, Monday, my phone chimed a text I barely heard for all the birds singing and the roosters crowing outside my window. No one had mentioned that Kauai is chock-full of chickens. They meandered all over the grass and walkways outside my condo and even perched in the trees.

I reached for the phone on the bedside table, squinting through early morning sunlight at a text from Viv.

**Barneys today, maggies after. Meet at noon?**

I carefully pushed myself to sitting up against the pillows and stifled a yawn. Asher Mackey hadn't left until nearly midnight. I'd never spent so much time in a man's presence just *talking*. I started to type a response to Viv about the novelty of conversing with a man—and remembering it the next day—when I recalled that I'd neglected to tell my friend that we were no longer in the same time zone. I'd basically high-tailed it out of Seattle without so much as an aloha to anyone but Silas.

I bit my lip and typed in over-compensating all-caps. **HEY YOU! Can't today.**

Viv's response came punctuated with champagne glass emojis. **Out late last night? I thought U were quiet.**

I sighed. No point in dragging it out. **I'm in Hawaii.**

My phone rang instantly. I gingerly put it to my ear. "Hey, Viv."

"You're *where*? Since *when*?"

"I got in Saturday night." Which felt like a lifetime ago, all things considered.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"It was sort of last minute. My boss wasn't happy about my being late to the Nestle meeting—"

“So he punished you by sending you to Hawaii? Where do I apply?”

I eased a breath to hear Viv laughing. “It’s a leave of absence. Two weeks, and I just thought Hawaii might be a good place to...I don’t know.” I plucked the bed sheet. “Get my head on straight.”

“That’s cute, Faith.”

“I’m serious. I closed the deal and they want to make me partner, but I need to get my shit together before—”

“Right, right, right,” Viv said teasingly. “Who is he?”

“Who is who?”

“Whichever guy swept you off to his villa on...wait, which island are you on?”

“There’s no guy,” I said, and immediately Asher’s impressive, manly bulk shouldered its way into my thoughts. “I mean, not really...”

I could hear her knowing smile. “Yeah, not *really*.”

I gritted my teeth. My ankle was starting to ache and the bottle of Advil *that a man had to go and fetch for me* was out in the living room. “I gotta go, Viv.”

“You know what... I’m looking at my calendar, and if I shuffle a few things, I’m free for the next week.”

Of course, she was. Vivienne Simon was an heiress to the fortune of a French-Canadian oil magnate. *Shuffling a few things* for her meant postponing lunch dates and spa appointments. A week ago, she’d been my hero, and now I was hiding from her across the Pacific.

*How’s that for personal growth?*

“Wouldn’t it be perfect?” she was saying. “You and me in paradise? Looking hot A-F on Waikiki beach, shopping in Honolulu... You’re on Oahu, right?”

“Um...”

Outside my window, a rooster crowed.

“Or a farm?” Now Viv’s laugh was short and tight. “Seriously, where are you?”

I nearly told her. She was my friend, after all. But if I gave away my secret location, she would storm over with a martini in her hand and a truckload of Louis Vuitton luggage, and we’d never get off the beach. Thanks to Asher getting me through the next few days, I had a chance to salvage this trip.

While I hesitated, Viv huffed. “Are you really not going to tell me where you are? Seriously?”

“Well...it’s just that—”

“Wow, Faith. Just...wow.”

“Viv, it’s not like that. I need some time alone. And oh my God, I already have stories for days,” I added brightly. “Stories involving helicopters and—”

“Yeah, whatever, Faith, I have to go.”

I sagged. “Don’t be mad. It’s not about you, I promise. It’s just something I need to do for myself.”

“Who’s mad?” she asked coldly, her voice clipped. “Enjoy your alone time, *wherever you are.*”

The phone went aggressively silent. I tossed it aside and rubbed my eyes.

“Crap.”

It wasn’t even seven a.m.; close to ten, Seattle time. About the hour I’d start thinking about rolling out of bed on a Monday morning—workday or not—if I weren’t anchored down by a hangover. But after making Viv feel like shit, my guilt wasn’t going to let me go back to sleep and neither would my ankle.

Asher had left my crutches propped against the wall next to my bed. I reached for them and noticed the beautiful man had also left a glass of water and two Advil on my bedside table.

I smiled to myself, a warm feeling in my chest. Asher Mackey was a mystery. A grouchy teddy bear who was giving

up his time off to help me, even if he wasn't going to get a thing out of it. Not even sex.

“A crying shame,” I muttered, thinking of his numerous impressive physical attributes. But I must've been on the path to enlightenment, since talking to him last night had been satisfying in an entirely different way from orgasms. Intimate in a way I wasn't accustomed to.

“Oh my God, one decent convo doesn't make you the Dalai Lama.”

I tore aside the bedcovers to examine my injury. My ankle was still puffy and decorated with bruises in various shades of purple but not as swollen as it had been yesterday. Still, four days didn't seem like enough time to get back on my feet, so to speak. But four days was all I had. After, Asher would go back to work saving lives, and I'd be on my own.

I puffed out a breath and gingerly swung my legs over the side. I made my way to the bathroom to pee, both crutches nearly clattering to the floor when I washed my hands. Then I trekked to my open luggage on the floor and put on white shorts and a yellow tank top. What should've taken me five minutes took me twenty.

I debated crawling back into bed, but Asher said he'd drop by sometime this morning to check on me. I had to make an effort. I brushed my hair and contemplated makeup, but why bother? We were just friends.

“That less-fun F word,” I muttered.

But as I crutched over to unlock the front door, I found that I was looking forward to Asher's visit. To just being with him. His rugged magnificence aside, my firefighter was a tough nut to crack. Like a stubborn client I had to wear down, and I knew there was more to his Coming to Hawaii story than he'd let on.

*Or you could, I don't know, respect his privacy?* mused a voice that sounded like Silas.

I grabbed an icepack from the freezer, smiling to myself. If Viv was the devil on my shoulder, Silas was the angel. I set

my foot on the coffee table and balanced the ice pack when there came a knock on the door. It opened a second later and Asher strode in, his chiseled features stony and serious.

“You should lock your door,” he said and set a grocery bag on the counter, along with a tray of two coffees.

“Good morning to you, too. And haven’t we already covered the door situation?”

But either he’d forgotten that little bit of flirtation from last night or had changed his mind. His expression remained hard, brows furrowed.

“It’s not safe.”

“Fear not. I unlocked it this morning specifically so you could barge in.”

That drew a reluctant smirk out of him, and he crouched on his heels in front of my foot to inspect my ankle. Immediately, I was inundated with the heady, masculine scents wafting from Asher—expensive cologne over no-nonsense soap and shampoo. His dark hair was still damp, and his jaw freshly shaved. Firefighters weren’t allowed beards, I supposed.

“Diagnosis?”

“I’ve seen worse.”

“How encouraging. Your bedside manner still needs work,” I said, frowning as Asher returned to the kitchen to unpack the mystery bag on the counter. “What’s all that?”

“Lunch and breakfast,” he said, putting bottles of iced tea in the fridge, along with sandwiches wrapped in plastic, and a bunch of bananas in a bowl on the counter. I took a moment to appreciate the way the muscles in his back and his broad shoulders moved under a tight, dark blue T-shirt before I came to my senses.

“I didn’t know shopping for me was part of the deal but thank you. What do I owe you?”

He ignored that and dumped a handful of creamers and sugar packets on the table. “I didn’t know how you took your coffee.”



“Directly into my veins,” I said, taking a cup. “You’re a saint.”

He grunted and set down two beautiful açai bowls on the coffee table. Sliced bananas and strawberries sprinkled with bee pollen were arranged in perfect spirals on top of cold, puréed açai berries.

*He’s staying for breakfast.*

My greedy smile must’ve been obvious because Asher’s face stiffened the way it did when he remembered he was supposed to be grouchy and remote.

“I can’t stay,” he said shortly, digging into his bowl.

“I’ll take what I can get,” I teased. “And it is really nice of you to do this for me, Asher. Even though it’s exactly the opposite of what I came here for.”

“The fact that you’re sticking it out means something,” he said and graciously bestowed upon me his first, fleeting smile of the day. “Maybe your initial step toward personal growth is you cut yourself some slack.”

“That’s sweet of you to say, but you just summed up my life in a nutshell. All I do is cut myself slack. I could stand to be a little hard on myself.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. I have some work to do in the adulting department. I didn’t even tell a good friend where I was going. I skipped town without so much as a text. She busted me this morning.”

“Why didn’t you tell her?”

“Because if I told her I was leaving she’d have tried to convince me to stay or invite herself to come with. Which she did.”

“Did you tell her what you wanted out of this?”

“Yes, but she didn’t believe me. Then again, I’ve given her no reason to expect anything different.” I spooned a honey-drizzled strawberry into my mouth. “Me being here is sort of like going to rehab. I had to remove myself from all

temptations and cut myself off from the vices that get me in trouble in the first place.” I leveled the spoon at Asher. “Which makes having you in my apartment even more ironic. You, firefighter, are a hulking, manly mass of vice.”

Asher smirked. “It’s not exactly usual for me to hang out with women and not...”

“Have naked relations? Me too. I’m not surprised Viv didn’t believe me. *I don’t believe in me.*”

“Maybe you should get some new friends.”

“I have Silas.”

Asher grimaced. “The billionaire jackpot you were telling me about?”

“That’s the one. It was all very dramatic but not at all what you’re thinking. I didn’t prostitute myself or anything. Silas is gay and his dad’s a bigoted prick. He wasn’t about to turn the business over to his son unless he changed his *lifestyle.*” I rolled my eyes. “So I pretended to be his fiancée.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. But when Silas fell in love with one of his dad’s caregivers, the jig was up. My services were no longer required, but I made sure I was adequately compensated.”

“Compensated how?”

I took a sip of coffee. “With a condo.”

“He bought you *a condo?*”

“When you say it like that...” My smile faded. “Terrible, isn’t it? But I came out of the deal with a best friend and that’s better than anything.”

“Is this guy best friend-enough to actually know where you are?”

“Yes, he’s very supportive. You remind me of him, actually. You’re both sweetness wrapped in grumpy packaging.”

Asher looked away. “You keep calling me that. I’m not—”

“Yes, you are. Why else would you give up your four days off to help me out? Especially if you’re not getting any sex out of it.”

“Is that all you’re good for?” Asher asked. “Because I don’t think that’s true.”

My cheeks heated. “No, that’s not what I meant but...okay, I guess that is what I meant. My point is you’re not getting anything in return.”

“Let me worry about that. And I have a question for you,” he said before I could protest. “How come you didn’t call me out for giving you shit about your job when mine in New York was just as bad?”

I smiled. “Not my style. I’m not a very judgmental person.”

“Except to yourself.”

“A necessary evil for the time being. My boss has required that I do some serious introspection.”

“You get in trouble?”

“I closed a multimillion-dollar deal and they want to make me partner.”

Asher laughed, shaking his head. “Sounds dire.”

“It is!” I said and gave his arm a playful shove that didn’t budge him an inch. “I don’t know if I’m ready to take on that kind of responsibility. If I accept a job like that, I should know for sure it’s what I want to do, right?”

“Probably. Sounds like you’re being awfully responsible to me.”

“Does it? Thank you! I mean, just look at the sheer volume of willpower I’m exhibiting right now with you.”

He cleared his throat, not looking at me. “We both might be better off if you stop saying stuff like that.”

“I don’t have much of a filter.”

“You don’t say?”

“What’s the point of being coy or shy? I like telling the truth and the truth is, Asher Mackey, you are every woman’s fantasy.”

He shook his head with another laugh, but his cheeks reddened slightly.

“But Jesus, I didn’t even ask if you were seeing someone,” I said. “Or...married?”

“None of the above.”

I drowned a twinge of happiness in a swig of coffee. “I would imagine it’s pretty slim pickings on an island this small. How—and who—do you date?”

“Tourists,” he said. “And I don’t know that I’d call what we do *dating*.”

The rough timbre of his voice and heat in his deep brown eyes sent a lick of flame down my spine.

“What if you want to settle down?”

“I don’t.”

“Not ever?”

“Do you?” he challenged.

I shrugged. “I think so. Someday. I can’t quite imagine it in my current state, but I know I don’t want to still be dating when I’m fifty.” I took a bite of cold açai, watching him. “Tell me for real. How do you live in such an isolated place?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Kauai is the opposite of a big city, and four years ago, that’s what I needed. Still do.”

“That’s what vacations are for. But to stay forever?” I shook my head. “I’d get a terminal case of island fever.”

“How do you know? You’ve only been here”—Asher pretended to check his watch— “thirty-six hours.”

“And I’m already wondering where the Sephora is.”

He chuckled and went back to his food, allowing me a few moments to take him in, starting with that watch on his impressive—and ridiculously sexy—forearm. It was heavy-

duty and manly but also retailed for about nine grand. His clothes, upon closer inspection, were simple but high quality, and his Jeep was no junker either. Seems as if Asher had brought something from his finance days with him across the ocean, which wasn't even the most interesting part about him.

*Asher Mackey is entirely made up of interesting parts.*

The man was an iceberg: what he gave up front was just a fraction of who he was down deep. Granted, I'd only known him a handful of hours (thirty-six, by his count), but my finely-honed interpersonal skills told me I'd barely begun to scratch the surface. He was a mass of contradictions: full of kindness but trying—and failing miserably—to hide it; an outdoorsman whom I could easily picture ordering fine wine in a fancy restaurant; a guy who traded stocks and bonds to be an EMT on a remote island in the middle of the Pacific.

*Why?*

“Nice watch,” I said after a moment. “TAG Heuer Carrera Chronograph, right?”

He frowned and automatically covered the watch with one hand. “I guess. How do you know?”

“I put one on Tom Brady for an ad campaign two years ago.” I arched a brow. “Not bad, Mackey.”

“It's durable,” he said darkly. “Something wrong with that?”

“Not at all,” I said. “Quite the opposite; I would think it'd take a few luxuries to survive out here in the wilderness.”

“I haven't given up civilization, just the bullshit.”

“I take it you have no online presence?”

“Online presence?” He said the words as if they tasted rotten. “No, I have no *online presence*. The internet is a hoax.”

“A hoax.” I arched a brow. “Tell me more.”

“It isn't real. At best, it's a bunch of people showing off filtered photos of their lives and pretending they're happier than they actually are. At worst, it's a virtual townhall to bitch

and moan and treat opinions like facts instead of the polished turds that they are.”

“Wow, tell me how you really feel,” I said with a laugh. “There are positives to it too, you know.”

“Name one.”

“I could name a hundred. It’s essential in my line of work, for one thing. But there are also some really damn funny and clever people out there, too. I once saw this meme of a cat—”

He was already shaking his head. “Look outside,” he said, gesturing to the window. “Real life is out there, not on a screen. I mean, have you ever been with the ocean?”

“*Been with the ocean?*”

He shrugged self-consciously. “I meant, just sat and looked at it?”

“Of course, I have,” I said. “Lots of times. In Cancún, the Bahamas, Jamaica...” I tapped my fingernail to my teeth. “Although now that you mention it, I believe I stuck closer to the pool in all scenarios. Less sand in the crevices.”

Asher balled up his napkin. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“To the beach.”

“I thought you had to leave.”

“Well, maybe I don’t.”

That hot, sexy feeling he’d sent down my spine now reversed course and settled warmly in my chest. I hadn’t realized how badly I didn’t want him to go until he said he could stay.

“Do you think I’m beach-ready?”

“Yes.”

Within minutes, Asher had packed up a cooler with bottles of something called Shaka iced tea and the sandwiches he’d brought for lunch. He grabbed towels, sunscreen, and two beach chairs from the closet where the Airbnb owners had

stashed a bunch of supplies. My firefighter carried all the stuff while I crutched slowly after him along the sidewalk that led from my condo to the beach. He went on ahead into the sand to set us up, then came back for me.

“Ready?”

*For you to hold me again? Yes, please.*

I gripped my crutches in one hand while Asher lifted me carefully. My vow of celibacy was hanging by a thread already, but to be in his arms... My body felt like it was molding itself to him, melting into his embrace where I felt perfectly safe and protected. I had to refrain from burying my face in his neck and inhaling deeply.

Asher trudged across the sand and gently helped me into one of the beach chairs. He propped my foot on the cooler and then sat beside me. It was quiet; there was no one around on the stretch of pristine sand for at least fifty yards in either direction. In front of us, the water was a beautiful deep blue with gentle waves bearded in white, crashing on the shore.

“You want to know how come it’s easy for me to give up New York,” Asher said, his eyes on the endless vista. “This is why.”

“It’s beautiful,” I said, “but I don’t think—”

“Don’t think. Just look and listen and breathe.”

I nearly rolled my eyes, ready to make some snarky joke. Instead, I shut up and did what he said. I sat back and just looked. The ocean stretched into forever, a deeper blue than the sky that touched it on the horizon, with only a few wispy clouds overhead.

Minutes passed, and I glanced over at Asher. His face free of hard angles, his guard down. He looked peaceful.

He felt my glance and looked to me. “Well?”

“Sorry,” I said. “No major epiphanies.”

“It’s all right. It took me a while too.”

“To what?”

“To let it in.” He looked out over the ocean, his gruff voice losing its sarcastic edge. “It sounds stupid or cheesy, but I feel connected to something bigger when I sit with the ocean. Like I’m a part of something old and deep.” Asher grasped a handful of sand and let it sift through his fingers. “I felt untethered to anything real or permanent when I was a kid. Maybe this is me making up for it. But I’m grateful, and I think it’s the gratitude that makes me feel connected. I’m grateful to the ocean just for being here.”

I nodded mutely. I’d never heard anyone say something that personal, and certainly no one had thought to say something like that to me. I didn’t feel that same connection to the ocean, but listening to Asher just then, I felt like someday maybe I could. We sat in a softer silence for a while, and for once I didn’t feel the need to fill it up with gossip or chitchat or even questions about himself which I desperately wanted to ask.

Eventually, an older couple—maybe in their sixties—strolled up to us, smiling, her arm tucked in his.

“I’m so sorry to bother you,” the woman said, “but you are such a lovely couple, I can’t help but ask. Are you on your honeymoon?”

Asher shook his head. “No, we—”

I elbowed him to be quiet and rested my hand on his arm. “Yes, we are.”

The couple exchanged satisfied smiles. “We thought so. You just look so beautiful together, we had to say something.”

“Thank you so much!” I said. “You’ve made our day.”

The couple beamed and strolled on. When they were out of earshot, I flashed Asher a teasing smile. “You hear that, honey? We’re a lovely couple.”

Asher wasn’t smiling. “Why’d you say that?”

“Because,” I said, gingerly moving my foot off the cooler for a bottle of iced tea. “If I’d told them the truth, they’d be disappointed and maybe embarrassed. Instead, for the rest of the day, they’re going to feel good about their compliment. Did you see their smiles?”



“Well, yeah...”

I shrugged. “So I let them believe it. To make them happy.”

Asher seemed like he was about to reply and then didn't. I struggled to get the cap off the tea, and he was still watching me, a strange expression on his face.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Wordlessly, he reached over, took the tea from me, popped the cap, and handed it back.



“I’ve kept you all day,” I said at four o’clock when we were back at the condo. Asher made me another ice pack while I took up my spot on the couch.

“Are you going to be okay for dinner?” he asked, settling the ice over my foot.

I grinned, fighting the urge to put my finger in the little crease between his furrowed brows. “If I can’t handle ordering one dinner, there’s no hope for me.”

“Don’t let the delivery guy in,” he said. “Tell him to leave it outside the door and don’t get it until he leaves.”

Asher’s protectiveness brought back that warm feeling in my chest. One that I wasn’t familiar with but could definitely get used to if I let myself.

“I will, I promise,” I said. “You’re the only one allowed to barge in unannounced.”

Asher seemed to think about smiling but changed his mind. “Do you need anything else?”

“Nope. I’m just peachy.”

“You sure? Because—”

“I’m good,” I said. “You’ve already given up more of your day than you were supposed to.”

“I don’t do anything I don’t want to, Faith.”

*Lord have mercy...*

I waved my hand. “That’s enough of your masculine gallantry for today, firefighter. A gal can only take so much and keep her clothes on.”

“Christ, woman...” He rubbed his hands over his face and went to the door.

“Asher.”

He stopped. “Yeah?”

“Thank you.” I cleared my throat, my usual flirty façade replaced by genuine gratitude. “Today was a good day.”

His answering smile was softer than I’d ever seen him wear. “Yeah, it was.”

Then he stepped out and locked the door behind him.

## CHAPTER SIX

*Asher*

I pulled into the Pono Kai around ten the next morning with a small voice in the back of my head noting that this was the fourth time. Coming here had slipped right into my routine the same way pulling up to Morgan's house for dinners or arriving at the fire station had—too easy. I opened Faith's front door without knocking because I could and found her crutching around her kitchen, making coffee.

"Hey, you," she said, smiling as I came in and set two bags of groceries on the counter. "I wasn't expecting you back so soon. Not that I'm complaining..."

Her hair was fresh-out-of-bed messy, no make-up, and she was only wearing some kind of long sleep shirt. No bra that I could see. It was too easy to imagine this was how she'd look after a night in my bed.

*Don't go there.*

She held up a mug. "Coffee?"

"I can't stay."

I'd decided on aisle three of Mana Foods that morning that I'd deliver some groceries and get out. No more long talks, no more spending entire days off with a woman I wasn't going to see after next week. But now I found my damn feet rooted to the floor of her kitchen.

She cocked her head. "My coffee's not that bad, I promise."

"I'm having lunch with my brother, up in Hanalei."

"At ten in the morning?"

"I have some stuff to do first..."

She was already waving her hand. "None of my business. You do you." She gestured at the bags on the counter. "But at least let me pay you back for all this."

“Nope,” I said. “Just something to get you through the next few days.”

“A few days? This is enough for a few weeks.” She rummaged through the bag and pulled out a frozen pizza the size of a wagon wheel. “Dinner for one?”

“I figured you could have leftovers,” I said lamely. “How’s the ankle?”

“Better. Or maybe I’m just better at the crutches.”

“Couple more days and you’ll be able to get around just fine.”

She nodded and set the pizza down, not looking at me. “I haven’t decided if I’m staying the whole two weeks or not. The idea of venturing out by myself is still a little bit daunting.” She offered me a small smile. “The last thing I want is for you to get a call and have to come rescue me again.”

*I can think of worse things...*

Faith nudged my arm. “So...thanks for all this. Putting it away will kill some time.”

I jerked into action. “Shit, let me...”

“Asher, I was kidding.”

“Go sit down and put your foot up,” I said, unpacking the bags. “I got this.”

“Thank you,” she said and then froze, contemplating how to carry her coffee to the living area with crutches. “God, I’m hopeless.”

“You’re not. You have your hands full, that’s all.”

I grabbed her mug and set it on the coffee table, then went back to the freezer for an ice pack. She sat on the couch, and I settled the bag on her foot, then returned to unpack the groceries, rationalizing like a bastard.

*It’s shitty to leave her alone all day, doing nothing. Keeping her company doesn’t have to mean anything except maybe you’re not a complete asshole.*

Before I could talk myself out of it, I blurted, “You want to come with?”

“To meet your family?” She smiled over her coffee mug. “Do you think we’re ready for such a big step?”

“We’re on our honeymoon, remember?” I said with a smirk. “You should see Hanalei before you go. That’s my neck of the woods.”

“Oh? I didn’t know that. Come to think of it, I have no idea where you live.”

And I planned to keep it that way. That’s the least I could do—keep her out of my personal space before things got even more personal.

*But you’ll bring her to meet Morgan? Cool story, bro.*

I coughed. “So do you want to go?”

“Well, I did have plans to spend a riveting day watching other people walk to the beach...” She grinned. “I’d love to see Hanalei and meet your family, but I don’t want to intrude. You were supposed to only check up on me and I already monopolize all your time.”

“I told you, I don’t do anything I don’t want to do.”

Except that was turning into complete bullshit the more time I spent with this woman. What I wanted to do was whatever she needed me to do.

“I’ll go on one condition.”

I smirked. “You have conditions.”

“Yes. We go for shave ice afterward. On me.”

“I don’t know,” I said gravely. “Hawaiian shave ice is pretty serious business.”

“So I’ve heard. I want one before I leave.”

“Deal.”

Her grin and the laughter in her eyes sent warmth radiating through my chest. She was a blazing inferno that melted all cold fronts and made it impossible to keep my distance.

While she crutched to her room to change, I sat in her living room and shot Morgan a text.

**I'm bringing her to lunch.**

The return text came in almost immediately. I expected no end of shit from my brother, and he didn't disappoint.

**Just "her." Becuz we all know who's the special lady in your life. ☐**

I rolled my eyes. **Be there in an hour.**

The vibration of another text came in, but I ignored it. When it came to Morgan's smartassery, it was best not to encourage him.

Faith came out of the bedroom wearing a summer dress, white with blue flowers, and her hair in a ponytail. The straps of the dress hinted at the perfect shape of her small breasts and revealed her long neck that tapered to an elegant collarbone.

I quickly averted my eyes, but it was too late.

"Thank you," Faith said.

"I didn't say anything."

She smiled. "You didn't have to."

Faith had taken my stare as a compliment when it was actually a fierce urge to put my hands on her. To pull her to me and put my mouth to the delicate hollow of her throat. To taste her skin and feel the pulse of her heart under my lips...

*This is a bad idea.*

But I didn't say that either.



The drive up to Hanalei from Kapa'a took about forty minutes. We made it in thirty.

"Do you always drive this fast or are you just trying to impress me?" Faith said as I careened my Jeep around a rental sedan on the northbound highway.

"Depends. Is it working?"

“No,” she said, then flashed me that flirty smile that made my blood heat. “Okay, maybe a little.”

“Most locals drive fast,” I said, keeping my eyes on the road and not on the fact that her dress had ridden up, showing me more of her thigh than it should’ve. “That’s how you know they’re local. It’s the slow-ass tourists you gotta look out for.”

“Not the cops?”

“I know all the cops.”

“A job perk, clearly.” She gripped the handle above her window as I tore around a curve. “But I should remind you, there is no actual fire.”

I chuckled and slowed down. A little.

The road took us along the northern curve of Kauai, past Princeville, to the small town of Hanalei.

“This place is so cute,” Faith said, watching it go by in a blink outside her window. “Aaaand...there it goes.”

“Each island has a Hanalei,” I said. “Old settlements that have been filled with boutiques to attract tourists. Oahu has North Shore, Maui has Paia...”

“You’ve been all over Hawaii, then?”

“Sure. The flight to Honolulu is only half an hour. I need a dose of action from time to time.”

“There’s hope for you, yet,” Faith said. “But what about your brother? How’d you convince him to join you in your hermitage?”

“Morgan came here first, actually, about ten years ago. He was barely eighteen and working on becoming a photographer.”

“And he just decided to stay?”

“Meeting Nalani was strong motivation. They got married three months after they met, and my nephew was born nine months to the day after that.”

“You have a nephew?” She waved a hand. “No, you mentioned him yesterday. What’s his name?”

“Kaleo.”

“Oh my God, your face just now.”

I frowned. “What about my face?”

“I can tell he’s special to you.”

“Well...he’s my nephew.”

“Mmh hmm.” Faith smiled. “So you followed your brother out here to be close to him?”

“Something like that.”

I felt Faith’s eyes on me and waited for her to probe further into territory I didn’t want to revisit. But she nodded to herself.

“That’s sweet,” she said finally. “I don’t have any siblings. Must be nice to have a partner in crime.”

“Yes and no,” I said. We’d pulled into the drive of my brother’s bungalow. “Sometimes I want to kill him. Like now.”

Faith looked to the front porch of the maroon house with white trim, and her hand flew to her mouth, stifling a laugh.

Morgan, Nalani, and Kaleo were standing on the steps as if posing for a family portrait, all wearing bright smiles and waving.

I killed the engine. “That asshole.”

Faith laughed. “Oh, this is gonna be fun.”

I strode around to the passenger side to help Faith out. She crutched past me, straight up to my idiot brother. “Hi, I’m Faith Benson.”

“Aloha, Faith! It’s so nice to meet you, you have no idea,” Morgan said, ignoring my death glare. “This is my wife, Nalani, and our boy, Kaleo. He’s not playing hooky; it’s Spring Break at school this week, and he’s *very* excited to meet you.”

I intensified my death glare but Morgan only smiled innocently.



“Aloha, Faith,” Nalani said. “Welcome.”

“You rode in a helicopter!” Kal said.

“I sure did,” Faith replied, smiling down at him. “Actually, riding *in* the helicopter would have been nice. I rode more on the *outside* of it. Dangling from a cord, specifically.”

“Was it scary? I bet it was scary.”

“A little.” Our eyes met and she shot me her trademark, suggestive smile. “But your uncle was on the ground, ready to catch me if I fell.”

Kal’s big dark eyes wheeled to me, and I felt Nalani and Morgan’s stares digging in.

“Were you, Uncle Ash?”

“It’s hot out and she needs to sit,” I said.

“We’ll get the full story later.” Nalani put her hand on Faith’s back. “Come in, come in. Let’s get that foot up.”

They went inside, Kal scampering ahead, leaving Morgan and me to follow.

My brother slapped me on the back. “Holy hell, man! She’s a stunner.”

“I’m not blind, you moron.”

“She’s got great energy too. You know how you get a vibe about someone where you like them instantly?”

“Yeah, I get it,” I said. That pretty much summed up Faith—she was instantly, frustratingly likeable. “She’s also not staying.”

Morgan chuckled. “Maybe she just needs the right motivation.”

We stepped out of the thick heat of Kauai in April, into the coolness of the house. Ahead, Faith was making her way through the cozy living area, crutching over the hardwood floors, and remarking to Nalani on the family portraits and various works of local artists that she and my brother had collected through the years.

“You have a beautiful home,” she said as they passed through the kitchen where scallops were sizzling in a pan, out to the lanai. “And this view. Are you kidding me?”

Faith stared out over the yard and its overgrown grass to the tops of the lush forest, then out to the ocean far below. A rooster crowed from inside the branches of a lime tree. She turned to Kaleo who had been stuck to her side since the moment she arrived. “Do you have a rooster in your tree?”

He nodded eagerly. “We have six! And a bunch of chickens.”

“What’s with all the chickens, anyway? That was definitely not in the brochure.”

“There are wild chickens all over Hawaii,” Nalani said. “But they seem to like Kauai best.”

“They have good taste,” Morgan put in. “Here, Faith. Sit.”

They got her situated in one chair with her foot propped on another, and then Nalani went back into the kitchen while Morgan served up some lemonade.

“Does it hurt?” Kaleo asked, inspecting Faith’s ankle that was wrapped in an Ace bandage. “It doesn’t look so bad.”

“Your uncle has been taking excellent care of me.”

“Is that so?” Morgan grinned like a proud father. I shot him a look which he ignored. “Asher tells me you’re in advertising.”

“Oh?” Faith smiled. “What else did he tell you?”

“He said you were brave in the helicopter,” Kal piped up.

“Did he?” She looked to me, her eyes softening.

I shifted in my seat. “I said you handled it well. Which you did.”

“Thank you,” she murmured and turned back to Morgan. “Yes, I’m in advertising. In Seattle.”

She and my brother instantly became wrapped in a conversation about her job and her life on the mainland, as if

they had known each other forever. Nalani emerged with scallops and salad, and we all settled down around the table. Conversation flowed freely; Nalani and Morgan told Faith about their photography studio in Princeville, and Morgan did what he usually did—roamed the lanai taking candid photos of us with his Nikon as we talked. The laughter was plentiful, and it was becoming hard to imagine that two days ago there was no Faith in my life.

*She's not in your life, I reminded myself. She's only passing through.*

Whatever the deal, it was beginning to get under my skin how much *she* was getting under my skin. A few days ago, my life might've been emptier but at least it was solid. Settled. Uncomplicated. And yet I couldn't keep myself from inviting her into it.

"Everything was wonderful," Faith said as the table was being cleared. "I'm sorry I can't help you clean up."

"Nonsense," Nalani said. "You're our guest. Besides, I'm just carrying plates. Morgan has to wash."

He smiled fondly at his wife. "That's the deal. I can't cook for shit, so I'm on dish duty. Asher has to help."

I held up my hands. "Not me. I'm a guest."

Morgan snorted. "My ass." He turned to Faith. "He's here four nights a week, despite having his own huge place right on the beach."

"It's not huge and most places on Kauai are *right on the beach*," I said with a pointed glare.

That shut Morgan up, but I felt Faith's eyes on me. Her smile dimmed for the first time all day, and after a short silence, she got to her feet and reached for the crutches.

"Where are you going?" I half-rose out of my chair.

"I'm running away, don't try to stop me." She cocked a hip. "I'm going to use the restroom, if it's all right with you."

I sat back down. "Oh. Sure."

“Just past the kitchen,” Morgan told her.

She made her way off the lanai, and I heard her stop to speak with Nalani. Kaleo had gone off to his favorite hideaway—under the front porch—leaving Morgan and me alone.

“What was that all about?” he asked. “She doesn’t know you’re loaded?”

“Loaded with my *New York money*?”

Morgan frowned, confused for a second, then sagged in his chair with realization. “Dammit, Kal...”

“Don’t blame him. You should have told me if the business was in trouble. Is it?”

“And if it is, what are you going to do? Make me another loan?”

“Fuck that. I’ll just *give* you the money.”

“I don’t want your money. The first time was an investment. A loan that I paid back—”

“Which I didn’t ask you to pay back.”

“—but Ash, you have to stop.”

“Stop what? Worrying about you and—?”

“Yes! Stop worrying. Stop babying me. So the business hit a rough patch? I’ll figure it out. I *want* to figure it out. I don’t want to face every obstacle in life knowing I have a safety net.”

I sat back in my chair, teeth clenched. “Yeah, that must be fucking rough.”

“I’m sorry,” he said in a low voice. “I didn’t mean it like that. I know how hard you worked for us—for *me*—when we were kids. I will never be able to repay you for that, Ash. Never.”

“I’d never ask you to.”

“But we’re not kids anymore. You don’t have to take care of me.”

I shook my head irritably. “You’re family. I have it. Why not give it?”

“You’ve been giving to me your entire life.” His grin reappeared; arguing never did sit right with Morgan. “Take a break, brother. I got this.”

“Fine,” I gritted out. “But if you’re really hurting...if it gets to the point where you’re on the verge of going under—”

“Then I’ll consider another loan. But until or unless that happens...” He kicked back and laced his fingers behind his head. “I mean, what if I’m just not very good at running a business? You going to keep pouring your money into a black hole?” He *tsked*. “I thought you were good with finances.”

“How can you joke about this?”

“Because I’m not going to rob myself of happiness *right now* by worrying about something that hasn’t happened *yet*.” He held up a hand when I started to protest. “I’ll figure it out.”

“Figure what out?” Faith asked, hobbling onto the lanai. Her smile dropped at my dark expression. “Am I interrupting?”

“Not at all,” Morgan said. “Asher and I were discussing the natural ebb and flow of business fortunes. Like the tide. Sometimes it’s high and flush and other times, it recedes a little bit. That’s all. Right, Ash?”

“If you say so.”

Faith took her seat and put her foot up, her observant glance moving between us. “On an island this small, I’d imagine you’re only going to get so many clients per year,” she ventured.

“True,” Morgan said. “But we’re about to head into the busy wedding season.”

“Though we don’t want to bank everything on one season,” Nalani said, rejoining us. “We’re looking for ways to expand.”

Faith nodded. “Do you have an online presence?”

I rubbed my face. “You have to stop using that phrase.”

She stuck her tongue out at me and turned to Morgan. “Do you have a website?”

“We do. It’s not great.” Morgan bit his lip. “Would you mind...taking a look? It’d be nice to have a pro tell us all the stuff we’re doing wrong.”

“No, we can’t ask...” Nalani began hesitantly.

“I don’t mind at all,” Faith said. “I can’t promise anything, but I’m happy to look.”

Morgan and Nalani exchanged hopeful glances. “You sure?”

“It’s what I do,” Faith said with a shrug and smile.

Nalani went and retrieved a laptop. She and Morgan sat with clutched hands, as if they were in a doctor’s office awaiting a diagnosis, while Faith studied their webpage.

I slipped away into the kitchen with no small amount of relief—and gratitude—for Faith’s help. If Morgan wouldn’t take my money, maybe she could give them a boost.

*And if she can’t, they’re getting the money anyway.*

Morgan had his pride, but he didn’t understand that the entire point of selling my soul on Wall Street had been to ensure he’d never have to want for anything. I didn’t almost kill myself so that I could watch him suffer. From the moment I opened my eyes to a smoke-filled morning and his scared-to-death expression, he’d become my responsibility. It was ingrained in me, and nothing was going to change that.

I loaded our lunch dishes into the washer while watching the scene on the lanai through the window. My brother and his wife talked and laughed with Faith, listened to her advice with smiles of hope and excitement blooming on their faces. My chest felt warm with pride, as if I could take credit for her. As if she were part of our little clan. As if she belonged here.

*As if she were mine...*

I shook my head to clear the bullshit out. She wasn’t mine and wasn’t going to be. I didn’t have relationships that lasted longer than a night or two, and even if I did, she lived

thousands of miles away. She needed her big city, while I couldn't imagine stepping foot on the mainland ever again. I'd finally found a modicum of peace here. The islands helped temper the rage that constantly simmered in me that our parents had broken my and Morgan's childhood and left me to put the pieces back together. Faith was beautiful and fun, and her sly, flirty smiles gave me inappropriate thoughts, but it couldn't—and shouldn't—go any further.

The fact I had to keep giving myself these mental cold showers was driving me fucking nuts.

*Enough already.*

"You moved here because you love the island, right?" Faith was saying when I came back out onto the lanai. "Because it's beautiful and serene and all that jazz."

Morgan laughed. "All that jazz. Yep, about sums it up." He turned his huge grin up to me. "Faith has some fantastic ideas."

"Oh yeah?" I asked, not looking at her.

"I was just suggesting they could take their clients on excursions around the island and photograph them at the falls or the beach..."

"Or at the canyon!" Kal piped up as he clambered up the wooden stairs. Dust from his foray under the porch coated his hair and clothes.

"Right, the canyon. Whatever that is," Faith said, shooting him a smile. "Or that trail that tried to kill me. Photograph your clients in the beauty of the island, and they'll feel like they've become a part of it. That's what they'll take home with them."

"I love it," Nalani said.

"Me too," Morgan said. He put his hand to his chest. "Mahalo nui loa, Faith."

"It's nothing," she said. "I was just thinking about how when I leave, I like the idea of taking a little piece of the island home with me."

Because she was leaving. End of.

“Time to get going,” I said dully.

My family walked us to the front porch, and Kaleo tugged Faith’s arm. “Are you coming back? You have to meet Momi. That’s my great-grandma.”

“My grandmother,” Nalani explained. “And yes, we’d love to have you back again.”

Faith’s smile didn’t touch her eyes. “It was very nice meeting you all.”

And in that moment, I knew she wasn’t staying another day, never mind the rest of her trip. She turned and crutched toward my Jeep without another word. I said my goodbyes, gave Kal a hug, and followed after.

“I’m pretty tired,” Faith said when I got behind the wheel. “I’d like to go back to the condo.”

“What about the shave ice?” I asked. Now that I knew the minutes with her were ticking down, I wanted all of them.

“I changed my mind,” she said.

“Okay.”

We drove in silence the entire ride back to Kapa’a. In the lot in front of her complex, I threw the car in park and faced forward.

“Your family is great,” she said after a moment. “That little Kal is a cutie. He obviously worships you. Morgan too. You’re lucky to have them.”

“Yep.”

Another silence.

“I’m going back to Seattle,” she said. “Tomorrow. I’ve decided.”

“I figured.”

“It’s better that way for both of us. You’ve done enough for me. Too much, probably. I came here to try to have some shred of independence. To stop relying on men and take care of



myself for a change, but I've needed your help since the moment I got here."

I wanted to tell her that needing help wasn't the same as mooching off someone, but she was right that this was better. Better for me to get back to normalcy and better for her to get back to her life in Seattle and carve a path to self-improvement that didn't involve me drooling all over her one minute and pushing her away the next.

"I get it," I said, unsmiling. "You have to do what you have to do."

"Such a manly response." Her teasing tone fell away. "Thank you for everything, Asher."

"No problem."

I still couldn't look at her but heard her little sigh. She reached for the door, stopped, then filled my space with her nearness, her warmth, and the flowery scent of her perfume.

She planted a soft kiss on my cheek. "Goodbye, firefighter."

Too soon, the kiss was over. Faith climbed out of the Jeep and retrieved her crutches from the backseat on her own while I was immobile, sitting in the feeling of her lips on my skin. If I moved, I'd grab her or tell her to stay, and then what? Another conquest with a tourist.

*She's not that. I don't know what she is, but she's not that.*

Faith shot me a small, parting smile and I waited until she was safely in her condo. The door closed behind her, and this time, I knew it would be locked.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Faith*

I'd just started to fall asleep when the roosters cranked up.

“Perfect.”

I'd hardly slept all night, tossing and turning as much as my ankle would allow, my brain tossing and turning too. Never in my life had unsettling thoughts kept me up—I'd never let anything bother me enough to lose sleep over it. But all through the dark hours, on the eve of my escape from Kauai, a nagging feeling gnawed at me. Now dawn's first rays were seeping into the bedroom, and I was wide awake.

I tossed the covers back and crutched to the bathroom, then the kitchen. I was getting better at it, but the rubber arm braces dug-in painfully and I still couldn't put weight on my foot without my ankle complaining.

I made coffee and managed—slowly—to crutch it to the living area while only sloshing a teaspoon or so down my good leg. I winced at the burn but persevered and sank gratefully into the couch. The sun rose fully, and I sat feeling as if I were waiting for something. I needed to call the airline to change my flight. I needed to call a service to help wrangle my luggage. But my phone sat beside me on the couch, untouched, and I realized what I was truly waiting for was Asher Mackey to come barging through the front door.

My phone chimed a text, making me jump and nearly spilling my coffee. Again.

**Ignore this if you're busy introspecting, but wanted to say hi and check in.**

I smiled and hit *call*.

“Hey you,” Silas answered. “How's it going over there?”

“Oh, it's been a journey.”

He chuckled. “Already? It's only been four days.”

*Four of the fullest days of my life*, I thought and glanced longingly at the front door. *Stop it.*

“Faith? You okay?”

“I’m fine. Just a little banged up.”

I told Silas about my mishap at the Ho’opi’i Falls and subsequent helicopter ride, leaving all mention of grouchy firemen out of it.

“Damn, Faith, I’m sorry. Wait, this happened on Day One? Why didn’t you call me? How are you getting around?”

I plucked at the couch pillow. “Well, that’s a whole other story.”

I wanted to confide in him about everything. My thoughts were still a tangled mess and needed sorting. Silas could tell me what to do. He could help me...

*Or you could figure this stuff out on your own.*

Asher Mackey was out of my life. That was definitive. No point in rehashing more man-drama with Silas. The only thing to decide was what I was going to do with my time. With my life. Give up and go back to Seattle or stick it out and do this on my own. *Without* a man’s help.

The idea of staying was daunting but going back felt like defeat.

“But I’m good,” I said brightly.

“You’re good.” Silas sounded dubious.

“Yep! My ankle’s not that bad and I can’t let one little sprain ruin my whole trip. I came here to do some work on me and that’s what I’m going to do.”

Saying it out loud helped solidify my decision, and a flood of optimism filled me.

“Are you sure? Doesn’t sound easy.”

“I need to take a break from *easy* and do the hard things.”

“Well, I admire your dedication, but listen, Faith, you call me if things get rough. Immediately. Not four days later.”

I smiled. “You’re the sweetest. Like the big brother I never had.”

Immediately, I thought of Asher and his devotion to Morgan but shoved thoughts of my firefighter aside. He was no longer my firefighter, and if the universe were merciful, we wouldn’t run into each other for the rest of my time here. He had one more day off, but then he’d be occupied, putting out fires and saving other tourists...

*Pretty young women who’d gladly turn an ankle for him...*

I gave my head a shake. “Anyway, I can do this on my own, but I’ll check in with you so you can sleep at night.”

Silas didn’t laugh. “Are you sure about this?” he asked again. “Ten days with a bum ankle, alone, doesn’t sound that fun.”

“I didn’t come here for fun, I came to...”

*Be with the ocean...*

“Be with myself for a bit. I’ll be fine.”

“Well, good for you, Faith. I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks, Si,” I said. I was pretty proud of me too, and that didn’t happen very often. Or...ever. “Give Max a kiss for me and tell Eddie I’ll bring him a souvenir.”

“I will. He’s been asking after *the whereabouts of the lovely Miss Benson.*”

I laughed. “I love your brother. And I love you.”

“Love you too, babe. Talk soon.”

I hung up with Silas and nodded resolutely as the day stretched out before me. Ten of them, actually.

“I can do this,” I said and got my ass off the couch.



Turns out, crutching around inside a small condo is not the same thing as crutching anywhere else for longer than ten minutes. My underarms were rubbed raw and my shoulders

sore from bearing the weight of my ankle in the heavy boot as I made my way to the curved walk that would take me to the beach.

The plan had been to have a little picnic. Carrying a beach chair was out of the question, but I figured I could plant myself on a towel. Sitting down would be easy—*thanks, gravity!*—and I'd worry about how to get up when the time came. But the bag full of food and my towel kept banging against my crutch, threatening to knock it out from under me. Not to mention, maneuvering over lumpy sand was a million times harder than on concrete. Three steps in, and I realized I was not ready to go off-roading. With sweat dripping down my back and my hair sticking to my forehead, I reversed course, back through the complex until I found a bench next to a koi pond.

My ankle was throbbing, and I realized the boot wasn't helping but felt like a lead weight. I fed hunks of sandwich crust to the fish and caught my breath. My beach picnic became bench picnic, but I did not give up!

And then it began to rain.

“You're kidding.”

Clouds had rolled in fast and before I knew it, I was drenched. The rain cooled me down and then I was shivering as I packed my stuff and slowly headed back to my condo, fearful of slipping on the wet pavement at every step.

Inside, I slumped on the couch and removed the boot.

“TV it is,” I muttered to no one. But the rainstorm cleared up as fast as it had come in, and the sun shone brightly, daring me to try again and not lose the whole day.

I recalled that I never did get my Hanalei shave ice. It was a risk, heading north into Asher territory, but what I'd seen of that little town outside his Jeep window had been so darn cute. I vowed to do some shopping—I deserved that at least—get my shave ice, then call it a day. It wasn't exactly spiritual, but maybe crutching around by myself was the hardship the

universe wanted of me. Thanks to my beloved Peloton back home, I was in good shape. I could do this.

I dried off, changed, and rewrapped my foot in the Ace bandage Asher had bought me. It felt a million times better without the weight of the boot, and I steeled myself for another outing.

It was nearly four in the afternoon by the time I was ready to call the Uber, half-certain there was only one driver on this godforsaken little rock, and that the dude with the white Kia was going to pull up. But a gray Camry arrived fast, and the next thing I knew, I was in Hanalei.

Boutiques and restaurants lined the main street on either side, and a little expanse of green grass with picnic tables made up the town center, such as it was. I quickly realized Hanalei was only small if you're driving or walking on two legs. On crutches, everything felt miles apart.

"Don't exaggerate and make it worse," I muttered to myself and spied a little shop with silver jewelry glinting in the window. Like a magpie attracted to shiny things, I made my way there first.

The blue sky was clumpy with gray clouds here and there, but it was mostly hot and sunny. I hobbled into the shop's cool confines and sighed with relief.

"Aloha," called the shopkeeper from behind a display. She was an older lady, covered in silver and gemstones.

"Um, hi," I said, still feeling too awkward to use *aloha*. I wondered if I was even allowed, considering I wasn't local.

"Oh dear, would you like to sit for a minute?"

"I'd love that, thank you."

The shop was dim and full of glass displays of rings, bracelets, and loose gemstones. Necklaces hung from branch-like stands, some with intricate pendants of gems and pearls, others with huge, raw stones. Smooth wood carvings lined the shelves on the wall, and soft, New Age-y music laced the air along with incense.

“You have a beautiful shop,” I said and sank gratefully onto the little foldout chair the woman brought me.

“Are you looking for anything in particular?”

“A new ankle?” I said with a tired smile.

She nodded seriously and turned to a tall glass display near me with four shelves of crystals, some in raw clusters, some smoothed into rounded stones, some set into earrings and necklaces. “Amethyst is strong in healing energy,” she said, touching a purple shard, then took up a smooth egg of green. “Bloodstone, too.”

“I imagined bloodstone would be...bloodier.”

“Green jasper with red inclusions of hematite,” she explained, showing me the specks of red. “Good for the circulation. But I think you need something stronger.”

“Oh, I don’t actually need—”

“Here we are.” She pulled a necklace off a display, letting the delicate silver chain fall over the back of her hand. The pendant was a two-inch carved shard of clear crystal with a row of seven colored gems set in silver along its front. “Quartz is the most powerful healing stone of them all.”

“It’s beautiful,” I said. “What are the other stones?”

“They represent the chakras. The energy centers within us. Are you familiar?”

“No, and I’m not sure I believe in that stuff,” I said apologetically. “Or that crystals hold healing powers in the first place.”

“That’s the beauty of the world’s energies,” the woman said. “They work whether you believe in them or not.”

I laughed a little. “Okay.”

She shot me an indulgent smile. “Why do you think so many people come to the islands every year? I’m not speaking of the tourists of Waikiki, mind you, though I wouldn’t write them off either. I mean those who come with pain in their

hearts and minds and are seeking relief? They are drawn to Hawaii because Hawaii itself has healing properties.”

“I get that,” I said. “That’s actually why I came, even though I’ve been...distracted.”

A strange little pang of pain flickered in my chest with thoughts of Asher. Or more specifically, how I wasn’t going to see him again. I had to put him away, put him out of my mind, out of my thoughts, and out of other places (in the vicinity of my heart) he kept busting into.

“Do you have anything that’ll help me stop thinking about a certain sexy man with whom it would be a terrible idea to get involved?”

The woman smiled. “Quartz is the master healer of all maladies, physical and spiritual.” She took the necklace and moved behind me to fasten it. “This crystal will help keep your mind pure.”

“Pure? Let’s not go that far.”

She laughed. “I don’t mean pure in the sense of innocence but in the ability to think more clearly. Rationally.”

“That’s exactly what I need,” I said. “There is nothing less sexy than being rational.”

She finished fastening the clasp. The crystal with its seven smaller stones sat against my skin, cool and a little heavy. “It sits right over the heart, doesn’t it?” She held a small mirror to me. “Lovely.”

I touched the pendant. Like sitting with Asher in front of the ocean, I felt no great epiphany, but I wondered how many of life’s mysteries we write off immediately due to cynicism. How many avenues of healing or growth do we shut the door on because we think they’re not for us?

*What if this is for me?*

Not that I believed this crystal was going to magically heal my ankle, much less sort out my tangled thoughts about Asher, but I figured it couldn’t hurt to keep my mind—and heart—open to the possibility.



*Leave the door unlocked...*

I smiled in the mirror. "I'll take it."



I crutched out of the air conditioning and back into the heat of the day. Not three steps away from the shop, my ankle throbbing and sweat slipping between my shoulder blades, I felt foolish for spending seventy-five dollars on the pendant under my shirt.

"I've been had," I muttered.

But the shop owner had been right—I came here to heal and that's what I was going to do, even if it killed me.

I spied a bright blue sign that read *Wishing Well Shave Ice* about a hundred yards up. A hundred yards roughly translated to ten miles in crutching distance. By the time I got in line (which was a dozen people long) my hair was stuck to my forehead in sweaty clumps, and my arms were shaking from the exertion.

Just ahead of me was a middle-aged couple in Bermudas and sun visors. The woman turned and gave me a once-over.

"Oh, honey. What happened to you?"

"The Ho'opi'i Falls," I said, mustering a smile.

Her husband's eyes widened. "Wait a sec. Did you get helicoptered out of there?"

My already hot cheeks reddened. "You saw that?"

The woman nodded in vigorous agreement. "That's right! A few days ago. Yes, we saw the whole thing."

I smiled wanly. *This island is too damn small.*

The woman frowned. "Are you here alone, dear?"

"Oh gosh, no," I said. "My friends are...at the beach."

"And they just left you?" She *hmped*. "Some friends."

The hot sting of tears pricked the corners of my eyes. "I'm fine. I can manage one shave ice."

And there was my “personal growth” in a nutshell. Pathetic.

The couple mercifully left me alone, and approximately ten years later, it was my turn to order. The guy in the window set down an enormous bowl of cherry shave ice on the high counter in front of me. Immediately, the flaw in my grand plan became apparent. I desperately needed to sit, but the shave ice stand had only two tables, both occupied. Across the street, the picnic tables on the grass were available, but they might as well have been a million miles away. I couldn’t crutch over there and carry my shave ice too.

*Yes, I can!*

I would not be defeated by a bowl of chopped ice and sugar syrup. I took the bowl and attempted to hold it along with the handle of my crutch like I had my coffee this morning. One hopping step later, the bowl slipped out of my grasp, hit the ground, and sprayed red in all directions. People in the blast radius gave little shouts of surprise as the shave ice splattered ankles and bags.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” I muttered over and over, ready for the ground to swallow me up. I fought back tears while asking the guy behind the counter for some napkins. But cleaning the mess was beyond me. If I didn’t sit down soon, I was going to fall down.

“This wasn’t her fault,” came a low, rough voice in anger. “One of you could’ve helped.”

And there was Asher Mackey, hunkered down, picking up the bowl. I stared as a chaotic mess of emotions—relief, desire, irritation, and something deeper that was too foreign and unsettling to deal with—all came bubbling up, stealing my breath. My face flushed as red as the shave ice.

“You,” I said, breathing heavily.

“Me,” he said. He went to the guy in the window. “Hey, Chad. Can I get some napkins?”

“Sure thing, Ash.”

Asher mopped up the mess, not looking at me as he worked. “I thought you were leaving.”

“I am,” I said. “I’m done. I tried to stick it out on my own and failed...and now here you are again.” I shook my head. “No, no, no. You can’t be here. I put you away!”

He scowled and tossed the wad of napkins in the trash. “What does that even mean? I *live* here.”

“One day,” I said, conscious that people—some still grumbling about cherry splatter—were watching. “I just wanted *one* day to try to do *one* thing on my own. One thing without you—or anyone else—swooping in to rescue me.”

“You think pushing yourself beyond your physical limits is self-improvement?”

Tears threatened to spill over. “*One* stupid shave ice—”

“Is not the measure of your competence, Faith,” he said in a low voice. “Come on. You gotta put that foot up.”

He searched the immediate vicinity, glaring at our audience. His dark eyes found the picnic tables with their benches across the street. He nodded to himself, then wheeled on a young guy sitting at the nearest shave ice table with his girlfriend.

Asher jabbed a finger. “You. Up.”

Mortification washed over me and yet I couldn’t help the little thrill that shot down my spine at how fast the guy and his girlfriend scampered out of their seats with muttered apologies.

Asher guided me to sit, then took my crutches.

I wiped my nose. “I sort of need those.”

“Be right back.”

I watched him cross the street and claim a table with the crutches. Then he came back for me. He held out his hand. “Come on.”

My emotions had drained, leaving me exhausted. Or maybe it was the failed exertion of the day, but I still had a shred of pride left.

“I’m not going to let you carry me across town in front of all these people,” I whispered.

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

He pulled me to standing, then took both my hands in his, engulfing them in his large, strong grip. In one smooth motion, like some sort of dance move, he turned his back to me while lifting my arms up and then lacing them around his neck. He hunched down a little and hoisted me onto his broad back. My face was right over his shoulder, my cheek touching his.

“Hold on.”

I did as he commanded, and he let go of my hands to hook his arms under my knees, then started across the street. I felt every move of his muscles, the power and heat in him. His cologne became my atmosphere, and I inhaled and let out a deep sigh. My body melted against his and I could’ve taken a nap right there.

“I was right.”

“About what?” His deep voice was a rumble against my chest.

“You could’ve carried me out of the Falls like this.”

He made a sound I couldn’t identify, and then—too soon—the journey was over.

Asher set me down on the bench where he’d left my crutches, and I put up my throbbing ankle. “Cherry, right?” He jogged back across the street without waiting for an answer, and despite the line, he returned quickly with two shave ices—one cherry, one coffee. Because he knew everyone. Because this was his town and it had been reckless to come up here.

*Reckless or exactly what you hoped for?*

Asher set the red bowl down in front of me and dug in to his without a word. I had a full-on Bridgerton-Duke-of-Hastings moment, lust balling in my stomach, as I watched him lick his spoon.

*Damn him.*

I grabbed my bowl and turned as far away from him as my outstretched leg would allow and dug into my shave ice. I ate too fast and—because that’s how this day was going—

promptly gave myself brain freeze. I set down my bowl with a curse to find Asher watching me, eyebrows raised.

“Better?”

“No.”

He snorted a laugh. “What gives, Faith?”

I rubbed my temples. “I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m doing here. I thought leaving was giving up but staying is stupid.”

“Pushing yourself too hard is stupid. You could wind up hurting yourself worse.”

“Given this trip so far, I’m pretty sure I’m about to be struck by lightning.” I poked my spoon into cherry slush. “What are you doing here? Staking out the shave ice stand, waiting for me?”

“Yes. I spent all day watching from the car with binoculars,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I told you, I live here. Well...close to.”

“Not here? Princeville?” I flapped my hand. “Forget it. You don’t want to tell me. You don’t want me to know you have money.”

“What are you talking about? I never said—”

“You didn’t have to say anything. When Morgan mentioned your beach house it was pretty clear you wished he hadn’t. And it’s fine, I get it. You probably think I’d just try to use you for your dough like I used Silas.”

“I don’t think that, Faith,” Asher said in a low tone. “I have my reasons for keeping my shit private and they have nothing to do with you.”

“How you keep showing up for me...taking care of me. I never asked for that.”

“I know, that’s on me,” he said, toying with his spoon. “Morgan’s always bitching at me for the same thing.” He tossed his spoon down. “But helping someone out isn’t the worst thing in the world I could be doing.”

“It’s not,” I said with a sigh. “It’s just bad timing. Here I am trying to be more independent and I’m completely helpless.”

“You’re not completely helpless, but whatever you’re looking for...maybe you’re looking in the wrong place.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe you’re not supposed to be doing this by yourself.”

“That was the original plan.”

“Plans change,” he said, gesturing at my ankle. “You need to decide if you want to be partner at your ad firm, right?”

“Right.”

He shrugged. “So maybe just set that decision aside and just...be. And when your trip is up, ask yourself again and see what you think.”

I made a circle of slush in my shave ice bowl. “Ten days is an awfully long time for someone in my predicament. What am I supposed to do with myself?”

Asher looked out over the little town. “I have four twelves coming up, then four more days off.” He turned his gaze to me. “My shifts start at four a.m. and end at four p.m.”

“At which point you’ll be tired. Asher, I can’t...”

He held up his hand. “Do you want to go back to Seattle right now? Don’t think, just answer.”

“No,” I said. “I’m not ready.”

“So here’s what you do. I have one last day off. You chill and keep your foot up, and I’ll keep you company. Then for the next four days, I’ll come by after work and take you out—*help* you get out in the evening,” he corrected. “When my shifts are over, and I have time off again, we can see where you’re at. No doubt you’ll be in better shape to explore the island, with or without me.”

*Without Asher...*

Already those words were giving me chills. Which was bad. I didn’t get attached. I didn’t catch feelings. I didn’t let

my emotions become tangled up in a man, mostly because I never spent time with one longer than a night or two.

“Silas Marsh, my gay fake fiancé, was the longest relationship I’ve ever had,” I blurted.

Asher’s fist flew to his mouth, choking on a bite of shave ice. “Okay.”

“That actually lasted a few months. He’s high profile, so I didn’t mess around with anyone else lest I be discovered ‘cheating’ on him.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you should know that’s how terrible I am with relationships. As in, I don’t have them.”

“I don’t either.”

“And I’m leaving in ten days, so it isn’t a good idea to try to flex those atrophied muscles with you.”

“I don’t disagree.”

“And not being physical is one of my hard and fast rules. I don’t know what I’m trying to do here but I *do* know that I need to keep my hands to myself and focus on me. If I sleep with anyone, it’d be like falling off the wagon.”

“Noted,” Asher said. He shot me an arch smile. “But if you *do* want to fall off the wagon, I volunteer as enabler.”

I tossed my napkin at him. “Don’t tempt me, firefighter. But I have a question.”

“Shoot.”

“You’ve already given up free time for me. Why keep doing it?” I gestured at my sweaty, tired, bum-ankle-self sprawled on the bench. “I mean, I get it. I’ve never looked better...”

Asher smiled but it faded fast. He glanced out over the grass again where kids were chasing chickens and couples were eating ice cream. “When I came here four years ago...it was sort of life or death. Morgan practically demanded that I leave New York and I knew he was right.”

“Right about what?”

“It was killing me,” he said. “*I* was killing me. The drugs and booze I told you about? I made it sound like a party, but I got into it pretty heavy. My childhood wasn’t great and I’m not going to talk about that shit, but let’s just say it messed me up. Keeping the worst of it away from Morgan gave me something to do. I worked really damn hard to make sure it didn’t touch him. But when he moved here and began his own life, I was lost.”

I sat, frozen as he spoke. For once I didn’t interrupt or make a stupid joke. I wanted to reach across the table and hold his hand or hug him, but I didn’t do that either. I just listened.

“I don’t need to give you the gory details,” Asher continued, “but I was successful in my job and imploding everywhere else. Just so fucking pissed off all the time. No direction. No purpose. I came here to figure my shit out.” He looked at me seriously. “I know what that’s like, to feel like you’re at a breaking point and I guess it just means something to me if I can help you get through it.”

I swallowed hard. “That’s literally the nicest thing anyone has done for me, and Silas bought me a whole-ass house.”

Asher burst out laughing, dispelling the dark shadows lurking in his eyes, which made me feel good about myself. I laughed too and then we settled into a warmer, easier silence.

“My stuff isn’t as life or death,” I said, “but it’s a big deal. My version of a big deal.”

He nodded. “We all have our stuff. It’s all valid.”

I heaved a sigh. “In that case, I accept your very generous offer, Asher. I appreciate it more than I can say.”

“That’s what friends are for.”

“Friends,” I mused. “Won’t that be a new experience?”

“For you and me, both.”

I smiled, then stifled a yawn. “God, I’ve had a day.”

“Let’s get you home.”



Asher tossed our trash and ran ahead to his Jeep. He pulled up to the curb so I wouldn't have too far to go.

Thirty minutes of Asher's daredevil driving later, we sat out on my tiny lanai in twin chairs and watched the sun set. I wanted to ask him about everything. His childhood, his life in New York, his life here... The more Asher revealed of himself, the more I wanted to know. To go deeper beneath the surface of this iceberg man. But respecting boundaries was a skill I needed to work on, so I let my questions go and just enjoyed being with him. We talked about the easy stuff as the hours drifted. Long silences fell too, and those were just as perfect.

When it was dark, and the ocean was a stretch of black under a starry sky, my eyes began to droop. My head tilted and landed against Asher's shoulder. For a time, I lived in that twilight space between asleep and awake, not quite either, relishing the feel of his strong muscles under my cheek and the steady rise and fall of his breath.

Eventually, Asher gently rose and carried me to bed. He sat with me as I sank down, saying nothing. Just watching over me. Vaguely, as if in a dream, I felt him find the pendant around my neck. Its weight lifted off my skin as he examined it. I was too tired to open my eyes, but somehow, I *felt* him smile as he returned it to its spot, just over my heart.

A final thought came before sleep took me. I wasn't in danger—I'd never felt safer with a man in my life, and I'd put myself in more than one extremely compromising situation over the years. No, this thought sounded from somewhere down deep in me as Asher Mackey guarded my rest. An alarm that came straight from my heart.

*Be careful with me.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Asher*

“Yo, Ash,” Billy called from the other side of the shower/changing room. The rookie wore an eager, young-pup smile. “Bunch of us are going to Kalypso’s to kick-off the end of our twelves. You coming?”

“Nope. Thanks, though.” I’d finished showering and changing and now grabbed my jacket and keys from my locker.

“He’s busy,” Cap said, grinning from a bench behind me. Captain Abe Reyes resembled Dave Bautista and did a mean impersonation of Drax from *Guardians of the Galaxy* if he was in the right mood. “Mackey has a girlfriend.”

I smiled at the round of juvenile whistles and hollering from the eight guys at their lockers, but I wasn’t about to give ’em anything.

“Ash? A girlfriend?” Travis grinned his trademark grin. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Is it that teacher of Kaleo’s that keeps showing up, bearing gifts?” Cap asked, running a hand over his bald head. “What’s her name? Kyla? The one who brought brownies for us but couldn’t stop making eyes at our boy.”

“Yes!” Travis said, elbowing Roy Huang at the next locker who, per his usual, had nothing to add to the conversation. “Have you finally caved to the pretty young teacher, Ash?”

“Her name is Chloe, and no.” I slammed my locker shut. “See you in a few.”

“Oh, come on, Mackey,” Billy said, clearly relishing *not* being the one ragged on for a change. “Spill it. Who is she?”

The question of the hour. Faith didn’t fit into any neat category. We were technically friends, but as far as I knew, friends didn’t lust after each other every minute. And when

she returned to Seattle in a week, what would we be then? Pen pals?

I left the station with a wave and a vow to teach Billy his place when I got back. But that would come later. Now, I walked into a perfect Kauai twilight in May and four full days with Faith ahead of me.

*Pretty sure friends don't get this stupidly excited about hanging out, either.*

Not to mention, I had plenty of friends and not one of them occupied my every waking thought like she did. They weren't the first thing I thought of when I woke up in the morning or the last thing I thought about as I drifted to sleep, and I sure as shit didn't *dream* about them. Hell, I'd nearly bungled relaying an order during a call—something I never did—because I'd been thinking of *her*. Faith infiltrated every part of my life and I'd actively made it happen.

“Hey, Ash, wait up.”

Captain Reyes jogged across the parking lot to catch up to me.

“What's up, Cap?”

“You know what.”

I turned and squinted into the setting sun with a sigh. “I'm still thinking about it.”

“You've been *thinking about it* for two months. With Valdez transferring to Honolulu, I need a lieutenant.”

“What about Roy? He has seniority.”

Cap glowered. “Can you picture *Roy* in the field, shouting orders?” He shook his head. “Every guy has the perfect role in this outfit. Roy is exactly where he should be, but you need to level up. I need you.” He cocked his head. “You happy being a grunt?”

“Yes,” I said automatically. “But I'll think about it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Cap grumbled. “The tests are coming around in two weeks. In the meantime, *think harder*.”

He slapped my shoulder and headed back into the station. I hated disappointing Cap; we all did. It's what made him such a great captain. He commanded loyalty and respect just by being himself. But being his lieutenant meant I was in it for the long haul, and while I had zero plans of ever leaving Kauai, my internal alarm was always keyed up. The one that made me sleep in my clothes as a kid, ready to escape a burning trailer at a moment's notice. Or pull up stakes in a new town when the authorities sniffed too close to Morgan and me after we'd fled...

I brushed the memories away and took a deep breath to quell the anxiety squeezing my guts that came with them then drove like a bat out of hell straight to Faith.

At her condo, I opened the door to find her in her usual spot on the couch, foot up, gorgeous in a yellow dress with a book in her hand.

"Hey, you," she said, her smile going straight to my chest like it always did. "Your shifts are finally over and now you're all mine."

Fucking hell, the woman knew how to choose her words to ensure I was always on the verge of grabbing her and putting an end to this *want* that surged in my veins every time I was near her.

*And yet I can't stay away.*

"You're in a good mood."

"Are you seeing this?" Faith held up the book. "I found it on a shelf in the bedroom and I'm actually reading it. Worse, I'm enjoying it."

"Worse?"

"I'm a Twitter kind of gal," she said. "I usually take my words in short, digestible paragraphs, but I'm discovering I have an attention span when I'm not on my phone twenty-four-seven. But that's not all."

Faith got to her feet without her crutches and then took a step toward me, putting weight on her bum ankle. Then another step, then another, until she was right in front of me.

Close enough I could smell her flowery perfume, the warmth of her skin; could feel her breath waft through her parted lips.

She gazed up at me. “Miracles do happen, I’m living proof.”

It would take the slightest movement—an inclination of my head—and I could capture her mouth with mine...

“That’s great,” I said too loudly, turning for the kitchen. “How’s the pain?”

“Not bad. I’m not ready for heels, but it’s a start. We should celebrate. I’m dying to get out of this condo.”

Over the last four days, we’d made small excursions in the evening after my shifts, but for the most part, she rested and gave her ankle a chance to heal.

“Sure,” I said. “Dinner? I know a place.”

“I would hope so.” She laughed. “And yes, I’d love to.”

*Great*, I thought with no small pang in my chest. *It’s a date.*



Ten minutes later, we pulled into the gravel driveway of *Reggie’s*. The pink restaurant with blue trim sat tucked into the greenery, off the main road. A huge wooden patio curved around from the side, where most of the dining took place. Faith crutched along with me up the front steps, gingerly putting weight on her foot, wincing now and then but never complaining. A rooster perched on a bench out front heralded our arrival.

“This island and its chickens.” She laughed.

“No chickens served here,” I said as we made our way inside. “This place is vegan.”

She looked dubious. “I’ll try anything once. *Once.*”

I chuckled. “It’s good, I promise.”

“Not grass burgers and kale?”

“Grass burgers are my specialty,” said a voice, and Kyoji Hayashi approached us with a grin. “Ash! Good to see you, man.” He extended a heavily tatted arm, and we shook hands.

“Reggie, I presume?” Faith said with a warm smile. “Faith Benson.”

“Aloha, Faith. I’m Kyoji. Reggie was my dog. I named this place in honor of him.”

“That’s sweet.”

“He was a good boy,” he said, leading us through his restaurant to the back patio. “How’ve you been, Mackey? Long time, no see.”

“Been busy.”

Kyoji’s eyes darted to Faith and back. “I guess so.”

He set us up with some menus, then left to get our drinks.

“You really know the entire population, don’t you?” Faith asked over her menu. “Seems like you’d have no privacy on this island. Everyone knows everyone else’s business.”

I shrugged. “No different than a small town on the mainland.”

“Which is why I live in a huge city,” she said, perusing the options. “I prefer my sins to go unnoticed.”

“Kyoji’s like me,” I said. “A transplant from New York.” The proprietor returned with our drinks—Tahitian lemonade and mint iced tea, both in mason jars. “Hey, Ky, tell Faith what you did in NYC.”

“I was a fashion designer.”

Faith stared. “Get out!”

“True story. I had my own line and wasn’t doing too bad. But I was working with a lot of leather, and it started to take a toll on me.”

“So you gave up a life of high fashion in New York City to come here.”

He grinned. “Never looked back. Right, Ash?”

“Amen.”

Faith shook her head, looking as if Martians had landed on the table. “Wow. This place must have magical properties.”

At those words, her fingers went to the pendant hanging from her neck. I’d noticed it a few days ago and would have wagered a million bucks that she’d gotten it from Anna’s shop in Hanalei. But I never asked Faith about it; teasing her about it might make her self-conscious. I knew better than anyone that when you were trying to do better, anyone giving you shit—even well-meaning shit—felt...shitty.

Moreover, the necklace had taken on less spiritual connotations for me—I’d imagined Faith wearing it and nothing else numerous times over the course of my four work days.

Kyoji took our dinner order, and Faith set her elbows on the table, fingers laced.

“Tell me about your job, firefighter. You kept pretty quiet about it on your post-shift visits.”

“Because there hasn’t been much to tell,” I said. “A few heart attack calls, a couple of elderly falls...” I shot her a look. “A tourist or two trying to duck out of the two-mile Ho’opi’i return trip by calling in a chopper.”

“Very funny.” She smirked. “Not many actual fires, is what you’re saying.”

“Not lately.” I knocked on the table. “Mostly medical. We’re all trained EMTs or paramedics. When an ambulance is called, we come too and usually arrive first.”

“First responder,” Faith said, her smile turning sly. “I’m pretty sure that’s one of the sexiest phrases in the English language.”

I took a long pull of my cold tea and her smile brightened; she was clearly enjoying my discomfort.

“What’s the difference between an EMT and a paramedic, anyway?”

“Both are trained in basic life-saving skills, but paramedics perform more procedures.”

“Which are you?”

“Paramedic.”

“Of course, you are. Wait, you told me at the Falls you were an EMT.”

I lifted one shoulder. “Not about to split hairs.”

“So modest,” Faith said. “And are you planning on remaining a paramedic firefighter forever?”

“As long as I’m able. Although my captain wants me to test up to lieutenant.”

“What does a lieutenant do?”

“Runs daily operations, training drills, coordinates emergency responses. When the captain’s out, a lieutenant’s in charge.”

Faith took a sip of her lemonade. “I could see you in charge, barking orders, and making grown men scurry to obey. Like that poor guy at the shave ice table. I thought he was going to break his own leg scrambling to do as you commanded.” She put her lips around her straw and took another pull. “You’re very *commanding*.”

*Jesus.*

“And you’ve got a mouth on you,” I said, my voice low, my eyes on her lips.

“Don’t I, though,” she purred.

I coughed. “Friends, remember? This is hard enough.”

“Is it *hard*?”

“Dammit, woman,” I said gruffly, on the verge of being exactly that. Being around Faith, my entire body felt like it was on call, ready to react or move or respond to her the instant she said the word.

“I’m sorry,” Faith said, not looking a bit sorry. “I’ll behave. I’m just in a good mood now that I’m on the mend. But to be



fair, you don't make it easy for me, sitting there, looking like you do."

"Likewise," I muttered, our eyes meeting over the small table.

Now it was Faith's turn to shift in her chair. It heated my blood even more to know I got under her skin the way she got under mine. That this game we were playing wasn't one-sided.

"Here we are." Kyoji appeared and set down our plates—stuffed mushrooms for Faith and tofu chermoula for me. "Enjoy, my friends."

"Thanks, Ky," I said, and Faith and I dug in, both channeling our attention to our food. Safer that way.

"Okay, I'm sold," Faith said after a moment. "This is incredible."

"Kyoji's a master chef. Self-taught."

"Hmm," Faith said. "But we were talking about *your* job. About whether you have aspirations for leadership. When are the lieutenant tests?"

I speared a purple potato samosa with my fork. "Not sure I'm going to take them."

"Why not?"

"Don't know that I want the job. I like where I am."

Faith stared. "Hold on, your boss wants to promote you but you're not sure you're up for it." She tapped a fingernail to her chin. "Gee, this sounds *so* familiar..."

"It's not the same thing as your situation."

"Are you sure? Because it sounds exactly the same as my situation."

"You don't know if you want the responsibility. I do but... it's hard to explain."

"Give it a whirl."

"I...it's childhood BS. You don't want to hear it."

“I actually do,” she said. “Me of two weeks ago wouldn’t have put herself in the position to hear personal, private stuff. Moreover, she wouldn’t have *wanted* to hear it. Because being confided in is also a kind of responsibility, one that shouldn’t be taken lightly. But the me of today?” She smiled, almost shyly. “She’s all ears.”

My fingers drummed the table. Only a handful of people knew what Morgan and I had endured as kids, but the more I kept it private, the more it ate at me. I’d shoved it in the dark, hoping to let it die, but it’d come out in coke parties and weekend benders back in New York. I’d gotten over all that shit—being in Kauai was my rehab—but that old anger was still there, like a low-grade fever that never completely subsided. Always there, ready to flare up.

But that wasn’t the kind of crap I wanted to lay on Faith.

*She doesn’t need to carry around your baggage for the five days she has left.*

“It’s not a big deal,” I said finally with a shrug. “Morgan and I had to move around a lot as kids. The experience left something in me that’s always ready to get up and go if I need to. If I take the promotion, I’ll be more entrenched.”

It was the truth—a boiled-down, harmless version, maybe, but still true.

“I thought you loved Kauai,” Faith said slowly, and I could see the gears turning behind her sharp eyes. “I thought you were here to stay.”

“I am,” I said. “But...it’s nothing. An irrational feeling. I’ll get over it someday. Hell, I’ve only been on the team for a few years, anyway. Plenty of time for advancement later if I want it.”

Conscious that I was on the verge of rambling, I grabbed my drink and took a long pull to shut myself up. Faith watched me and then turned to her food. Maybe I was getting better at reading people too, or maybe it was just Faith, but I was starting to notice the small changes in her expressions—what a tilt of her chin meant and how to gauge the various degrees of

her stunning smile. Judging by the tightness around her lips and the way she didn't look me in the eye—a rarity—she knew there was more to my story, and it stung her a little that I wouldn't share it.

But because she was Faith, her inner light came back to full intensity a moment later. “Your precious nephew was talking up Waimea Canyon the other day. I was thinking of heading there tomorrow. Do you think I can cut it, or is that too advanced for me?”

“You could do it,” I said. “But I have other plans.”

“Oh, I wasn't suggesting you had to take me—”

“I have other plans for you.”

Faith froze for a moment, then tried to flash me a coy smile, but there was a tremble in her voice that went straight down my spine. To my crotch, specifically.

“You have plans for me?”

“For us.”

“Us.”

“Snorkeling,” I said, my voice thick now too. I coughed. “You can't come to Hawaii and not snorkel. It's a law somewhere.”

“So it's more of a necessity for me than something you want to do.”

“I want to. I haven't been in a while.” God knew I was fucking dying to see this woman in a bathing suit, but that was beside the point. “A buddy of mine takes small charters out to a wreck off the south shore. I was thinking we could tag along with him tomorrow morning.”

Faith took a sip of lemonade, then ran her finger along the lip of the glass. “My ankle is just starting to feel better. Putting fins on seems like a bad idea.”

“No fins.”

“Then how?”

“Leave it to me. I got you.”

If I could've snatched those words back, I would've. Too late, they hung between us, and I watched Faith take them in.

“By the way,” she said softly. “When I said that I wasn't suggesting you take me to the Canyon, that was a lie. I was one hundred percent hoping you'd take me.”

“I know,” I said in a low voice.

She toyed with her fork as her eyes rose to meet mine. “Are we in trouble, firefighter?”

I understood her meaning. Because I could read her, and she could read me, and neither one of us wanted to do much else besides figure each other out.

“Not yet,” I said quietly. “But we're getting there.”

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Faith*

Asher arrived the next morning to take me snorkeling at the ungodly hour of six thirty a.m. Per his usual, he barged in, this time with a duffel bag in hand, just as I was about to smear sunscreen on my face.

“*Stop.*”

I froze as he crossed to me, took the lotion out of my hands, and scanned the label.

“Morning, sunshine,” I said. “Hey, what—?”

Asher strode over to the kitchen trashcan and chucked the lotion. “This is not reef safe. It’ll kill the coral.”

“Oh shit, I had no idea. I’m more of a pool gal, so I didn’t think about it. Forgive me?”

“It’s cool, I got you.” He pulled out a bottle from his duffel. “Use this.”

“Thanks.”

The man really needed to stop saying *I got you*. He’d noticed when he said it last night, but this morning it rolled off his tongue like it was nothing. It sent a little shiver down my spine and made me want to be...gotten.

“Welp, I hope the fish are awake and ready for me.” I took up my crutches. “Shall we?”

“Wait, I have something for you.”

Asher rummaged in his bag and pulled out a neoprene ankle sleeve. “It’s waterproof and will help keep you stable.”

I smiled at his consideration. “You think of everything, don’t you?”

Also, per his usual, the compliment bounced off him and he turned to practical matters.

“If at any time today you feel like it’s too much, or anything starts to hurt, let me know. Here let me...”

I’d sat back down on the couch to put on the sleeve, but Asher swiftly knelt and began unwinding the Ace bandage from my foot.

“The last thing you want is to re-injure yourself,” he said as he worked.

“You still haven’t told me how I’ll snorkel if I can’t swim,” I said, watching his large hands gently but skillfully slip on the neoprene sleeve over my lumpy ankle that was much less lumpy than it had been just a few days ago.

“You’ll see.” He finished his work, still holding my foot. “All set.”

“Thank you, Asher,” I said softly.

His dark eyes met mine and held for a moment. Then he blinked and abruptly stood up.

“Let’s go.”



Driving as if someone had put a bomb in his car that would detonate if we went slower than eighty, Asher took us to a little marina near a town called Poipu in the south of Kauai. In the parking lot, he pulled a small surfboard from the back of his Jeep and tucked it under his arm.

“I think your hopes for me are running a little high,” I teased.

“You’ll lay on top of the surfboard and put your face in the water. I’ll do all the swimming.”

“I guessed that was your plan, but can we still technically call that snorkeling?”

“You’re going to see everything. Trust me.”

Oh, I did, that was the problem. I trusted Asher more than I’d trusted any man for just about any reason, outside of Silas. What I did not trust was my stupid heart. My body lusted after

Asher Mackey; that was to be expected. But I was beginning to want him in a way that had nothing to do with sex, and that was downright terrifying.

Asher had already taken a few steps down the wooden-plank dock. “You coming?”

I blinked out of my unsettling thoughts and crutched after him.

We made our way down the gently swaying dock toward a boat with *Lucky 13* painted on her bow. There, we met a couple in their early sixties. Asher clasped hands with the man and kissed his wife on the cheek and introduced them to me as Captain Gary and his wife Cindy.

“You’ve been running charters for...what is it now?” Asher asked.

“About forty years.” Captain Gary turned to me. “Charters, fishing, whale watching, funeral services... We’ve done it all.”

“Funeral services?”

“Yep,” Cindy said, nodding with a gentle smile. “We’ve laid a lot of ashes in these waters.”

“Oh.”

Asher leaned into me. “It’s not a taboo subject around these parts.”

Captain Gary smiled. “But where are my manners? Aloha, Faith. Let’s get you aboard. Carefully, eh?”

He gave me his arm—wiry and tanned from decades on the sea. Asher offered the other—bulging with muscle and obscenely sexy wearing that black and white TAG watch. With their help, I hopped down the precarious two steps into the boat, where we joined two other couples and a mom and dad with their little boy.

Ten minutes later, Captain Gary guided the boat to open water while his first mate wife tied and untied rigging and climbed over rails and around posts with a casual agility that was awesome to witness.

The morning was golden, the sun rising high in a sky of perfect cerulean, while the ocean was a rich midnight blue. Once we arrived at the destination, Captain Gary shut off the engine and explained over his loudspeaker that there was an old sunken barge just under the water.

“The old tanker is more than seventy years old,” Captain Gary said. “The sea has reclaimed it, turning it into a new coral reef habitat. You should be able to see a lot of our local marine and maybe even some sharks.”

I shot Asher a look. “Sharks?”

“Nurse sharks, mostly,” he said. “Only one or two great whites.”

I smirked. “*Only.*”

Asher’s lips hinted at a grin and for once, the perpetual furrow between his brows was absent. “A dozen, tops.”

The other couples began putting on wetsuits they’d rented from a local shop. I stared helplessly until Asher pulled a women’s wetsuit, short-legged and short-sleeved, from inside his magic duffel bag.

“Where did you get that?” I asked.

“Rental shop.”

“And you didn’t think to consult me first?”

“It saved me the time I would have spent taking you down there and watching you try on a bunch of different suits when I knew this one was going to be perfect.”

I crossed my arms. “There’s a fine line between being helpful and being insufferably presumptuous.”

“Was I wrong?”

I rolled my eyes. “Give it to me.”

I snatched it out of his hands, trying to hold onto my irritation. A pathetic barricade against my attraction to him, but it was useless.



I glanced over just in time to see him remove his shirt in order to put on his own wetsuit. It was the first time I've seen him bare-chested. His tight T-shirts had promised that every chiseled ounce of him would be spectacular, and they delivered. Pecs, abs—all highly defined and tanned to a beautiful bronze. A light smattering of hair along his chest—not too much—was the proverbial icing on the cake. I quickly averted my eyes, but the damage had been done.

*Damn him. Damn damn damn damn...*

I yanked off my sundress. Underneath, I wore a yellow and white striped bikini. Now I felt Asher's eyes on *me*, igniting little fires along my skin everywhere they roamed. Instead of hurrying to cover up, I took my time with the wetsuit. I found myself wanting to be sexy for him, to be alone on the boat with him, to let him strip off my suit one piece at a time and put his hands on me wherever he wanted...

*Jesus, woman! Snap out of it!*

I quickly finished zipping myself into the wetsuit that—damn that man again—fit me like a glove. I turned to Asher, and a smartass remark died on my lips to see him taking in my neoprene-clad figure with the same hooded gaze as when I was in the bikini.

Our gazes clashed and we quickly looked away like a pair of nervous teenagers.

*This outing is rapidly turning into a disaster of repressed lust.*

Throwing myself overboard and swimming back to shore felt like an easier option than spending one more second in this man's presence and not doing anything about it.

The other snorkelers jumped in and spread out. Asher jumped in ahead of me with our snorkeling gear (from the Airbnb and my one contribution, thank you very much) and held the surfboard steady as I scooted on my stomach on top of it. I concentrated on not toppling over and then nearly did anyway to see my firefighter soaking wet with rivulets running down his square jaw and hanging off his chin. Fortunately, it's

difficult to look sexy while wearing a snorkeling mask. We put ours on, and he swam us to the wreckage, both of us with our faces in the water.

For a while, I forgot about my sexual frustration and became immersed in the underwater world in front of me. The water wasn't deep, and the wreckage had been overtaken by forests of chunky coral and swaying plants. Small schools of bright yellow fish, streaked with blue and silver, darted among clusters of rainbow-colored coral. Eels slithered among rocky outcroppings, and sea horses flitted among delicate pink anemones.

These were creatures I'd only seen in the tropical fish section of pet stores, and they were right in front of me, reminding me that this was their world, and *I* was the visitor. I understood why Asher was protective of these habitats that were being threatened—life was precious down here. Delicate. I had an inkling, too, of what he meant when he said he was grateful for the ocean. I felt an inexplicable sense of gratitude for all that swam and swayed around me.

After a time, I took off the mask and sent Asher to swim freely with the others while I watched, lying with my head pillowed on folded arms and letting the current rock me. My firefighter would dive for long minutes, then surface, jetting water from his snorkel tube like a whale, always keeping tabs on me so I wouldn't drift too far away.

I smiled, unable to remember when I'd felt this calm. Utterly content.

After a time, Asher returned to me and removed his mask. "You good?" he asked, holding on to the nose of the surfboard.

"Perfect."

His face was inches from where I rested my chin on my folded hands. I allowed myself a few greedy moments to take him in and then a thought made me laugh.

"Oh my God, do you see this? We're a reenactment of the scene at the end of *Titanic*. Except—unlike Rose—I'd gladly

share my door with you and not let you freeze to death like poor Jack did.”

Asher rolled his eyes. “Here we go again.”

“Again? Have we previously discussed the *Titanic* door raft without my knowledge?”

“Kal loves shipwrecks and it’s Nalani’s favorite movie. Consequently, I’ve seen the damn thing a hundred times and get an earful from her every time about how Jack could’ve been saved.”

“And you disagree?”

“Yes. The door couldn’t hold them both and it doesn’t matter, anyway. That’s not the point of the scene.”

I smiled at the seriousness of Asher’s conviction. The adorable furrow between his brows returned with a vengeance.

“Clearly you’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“Against my will.”

“Want to hear my preferred scenario? Rose could’ve laid on top of Jack, wrapped in his arms. Their shared body heat would’ve helped to keep them both alive.”

“Or their combined weight would’ve pushed the door under the surface, and she’d have woken up stuck to his dead corpse.”

“A lovely visual. Okay, how about lying side by side?”

“Major ballast issues.” When I started to protest, Asher shook his head. “Look, they could’ve made a bunch of attempts to both get on the door and would’ve spent a lot of time flailing around in the icy water. Jack knew that was too dangerous. Of all the options, he chose the one that was going to give Rose the best shot at surviving. You can see the exact moment he understands what has to happen and how he instantly makes peace with it.”

“Well, when you put it that way...” I managed, glad I was off my feet, or my knees would’ve gone weak. “You’re a romantic.”

“I’m practical. He did what he had to do to keep her alive.”

“At the cost of his own life.”

He shrugged. “If that’s what it takes...”

A strange shiver went through me that was both thrilling and profound. It skimmed along my skin while sinking deep into my bones at the same time. Asher’s face was still inches from mine, drops of ocean water on his full lips that dared me to lean down and taste their salty warmth. To kiss the mouth that said such courageous things so casually, as if giving his life for someone else was a foregone conclusion.

But kissing Asher would be a Very Bad Idea and break my Number One Rule and a bunch of other Capitalized Adjectives that served to protect my heart from this man. But I could not be this close to him on such a glorious morning, after hearing such a declaration, and do nothing.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I kissed the tip of my index finger and touched it to the furrow between his brows. It smoothed out instantly as Asher’s expression relaxed into a kind of mild surprise, his eyes darkening and his breath catching.

“What was that?” he asked gruffly.

I swallowed hard, scared my voice was going to be high and fluttery like the erratic beats of my heart. “That was a thank you.”

“For what?”

“Being you.”

We were floating a mile from shore with a half a dozen other people nearby and yet we might as well have been alone in the middle of the ocean. Asher’s intense gaze held mine and then dropped to my mouth. For a few breathless seconds, I thought he was going to shatter my Number One Rule and kiss me. His Adam’s apple bobbed in a hard swallow, on the brink of breaking free of his restraint...and then he wrenched his gaze away.

“Time to head back.”

He took hold of the nose of the surfboard and swam me back to the boat. We said nothing on the return voyage to the marina, but when it came time to disembark, Asher handed the crutches to his captain friend and wordlessly offered me his hands. I took them, and he pulled the maneuver he had the other day at the shave ice stand—he spun to give me his broad back and I wrapped my arms around his neck. He piggy-backed me off the boat and onto the gently swaying dock. We said our goodbyes, but still, he didn't put me down. He took the crutches and carried them and me until we got to solid ground.

But when it came to my feelings for Asher Mackey, there was no solid ground. I was standing on a precipice, about to fall in. Or jump.

## CHAPTER TEN

### *Faith*

Though it was another Very Bad Idea, I agreed to have dinner with Asher in Hanalei later that evening. He drove me back to my condo and walked me to the door, holding it open for me so I could hobble inside.

There was a short moment as I crossed the threshold when I entered the protective circle of his body as he held the door. I felt the heat of him, smelled the ocean salt on his skin, instantly intoxicated by his nearness while visions of him shirtless danced in my head. I nearly turned into that circle, nearly let the crutches fall to press myself against the brick wall of his body, tilting my mouth up to let him have me and damn all my rules.

But I slipped inside and shut the door behind me with a murmured *thank you*, and if that's not self-restraint of the most epic and admirable proportions, I don't know what is.

"The monks have nothing on me," I muttered.

I rested my foot for the rest of the afternoon, made a few calls to the agency to check on my accounts.

"They really want you back," Jess told me. "Have you heard of Zuma?"

"The winter wear company, right?" I said. "Snowboarding gear, skiing..."

"That's them," my assistant said. "With the Winter Olympics coming up, they're circling the agency but want you specifically."

"That feels nice," I said and realized I wanted them too. I actually missed my job and the opportunity it gave me to be creative and—dare I say it—artistic. "Thanks for the info, Jess."

"Of course. How are things there?"

I was about ready to burst with desire—sexual and otherwise—for a truly good man that lived thousands of miles away from me. That’s how *things* were.

*Quite the predicament you’ve gotten yourself into, Benson.*

“Everything’s great. See you in a few,” I said.

I hung up with Jess and got ready for dinner. As I maneuvered through a shower and dressed, I noticed the vast improvement in my ankle, despite the day’s exertions. I could take halting steps without crutches now and the swelling was nearly gone.

*I can handle a lot more physical activity...*

“Stop it.”

I put on a dress that went to mid-thigh, pale blue with spaghetti straps. Back in Seattle, Viv called it my Man Killer. The dress was more like a slip than anything that should be worn in public. In my hurried exodus from the mainland, I’d packed it because it’d been one of a handful of garments appropriate for the Hawaiian climate.

*It’s borderline inappropriate in any climate.*

The silky material flowed over my skin like water, highlighting my breasts and teasing the outline of my nipples, since wearing a bra with it was out of the question. With only a thong underneath, I felt practically naked. Nothing a woman wore gave men implicit consent but when I put on this dress, I had an agenda.

“It’s an invitation,” I murmured and waited for the woman in the mirror to snap at me to take it off and put on something else. To be responsible instead of reckless.

*Don’t you dare change.*

So much for responsible.

Apparently, I was willing to toss my cards on the table and play them as they lay. Because depriving myself of Asher’s body wasn’t working. My stupid heart was stripping itself bare for him whether I touched him or not.

He arrived-slash-barged in at six-thirty, as the light outside was dimming to muted gold. One look at me and he came to a screeching halt, his dark eyes widening, then roving over me as I stood up from the couch.

“What are you wearing?” he demanded, alarmed.

“A dress,” I said, my breath catching at the heat in his eyes and the way his hands flexed, as if they itched to touch me.

“A dress,” he repeated, and for a moment I wondered if dinner was going to be postponed for the aforementioned physical activities I wanted. But he gave his head a shake and turned away. “Reservation’s at seven.”

“That’s half an hour from now for a place that’s forty minutes away,” I said with a smile, regaining my composure. “I thought the Autobahn was in Germany.”

He didn’t smile but held the door for me, and the same scenario as earlier that day repeated itself, only this time I heard his soft inhale of my perfume, felt his entire body vibrating as I passed. I waited for him to break free of his restraint and grab me, strip off this nothing dress, and take me right on the floor. Or against the wall. Or on the counter.

I wasn’t picky.

But either I was overestimating my sex appeal, or the man was a rock; I passed by untouched, and we got into his Jeep without saying a word.

As we headed north, I let my gaze slide over Asher as he drove with controlled skill along the winding forest highway. He’d dressed up too. My firefighter looked devastating in a lightweight black jacket over a white T-shirt and dark pants. His wardrobe, I’d noticed, was casual but not cheap. No jeans—denim was too heavy for Hawaii—but all high-quality items, likely made from sustainable material.

But Asher’s clothing was mostly notable for how much I wanted to tear it off of him.

*Jesus, he’s a beautiful beast of a man. How have I not seen him naked?*



Because of my Number One Rule. Asher respected my flimsy boundaries—boundaries that I was mentally tearing down every second I spent with him.

The restaurant was Italian and elegantly dark and posh—a slice of city in the middle of the rainforest. No doubt he'd chosen it for me, but it just served to remind me that I had four days left, three of which he'd be working.

“You don't like it?” he asked, studying my frown as we were seated at a romantic table for two near a window with views of the ocean under a sunset in hues of purple and tangerine.

“No, I love it. It's perfect.” I refused to think about my departure, so I steered the conversation away as we perused the menu. “So I was thinking of our *Titanic* discussion earlier.”

He rolled his eyes with his adorably irritated expression I'd come to love.

*Too much. I love it too much.*

“And?” he prompted.

“I was just wondering how you came to work in a field that's all about saving lives. Like, the chicken or the egg—did you always have this heroic streak, or did you acquire it with the job?”

He frowned. “Heroic...”

“Don't argue with me, firefighter. Heroism is in the actual job title.” I propped my elbows on the table. “So?”

Asher shrugged. “I don't know. I had to take care of my brother a lot when we were young. My parents...”

“Were out of the picture,” I said gently, remembering his earlier explanation.

“More or less,” he said. “When I left New York for Kauai, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. But in my mind, Hawaii had always felt like a place where people vacationed. I wasn't on a vacation. I needed to *do* something.”

“Something worthwhile?”

He nodded. “I’d always been pretty good at numbers. I leveraged that skill on Wall Street to make some cash and got the hell out. But I wasn’t retired. It’s not like I could afford to sit on my ass and play golf for the rest of my life, and even if I could, it wouldn’t be enough.” He shrugged again. “The service just seemed to fit.”

“Like a calling.”

“I guess so.”

I was adept enough at reading people—and Asher specifically—to know that there was much more to his story, but he wasn’t ready to spill. Or he didn’t want to spill it to me.

“What about you?” he asked, after the waiter took our order. “What drew you to advertising?”

“What made me want to *keep the capitalist machine rolling?*” I asked with a smile.

His frown deepened. “I shouldn’t have said that. It’s just that advertising feels like it belongs with everything I left behind and never want to return to. Big cities, consumerism... all that stuff.”

“All that stuff that I love. We’re very different in that way,” I said, my smile tilting and a sinking feeling settling in my chest. I glanced up at him. “Do you really *never* want to live somewhere more...exciting?”

He shook his head slowly. “I’ve done *exciting*. I don’t think it’s good for me.”

I nodded, the sinking feeling becoming a leaden ball.

*There you have it. He’s here, I’m there, and that’s the end of the story.*

“But anyway, advertising,” he said after a minute. “How did you come to it?”

“Well, my parents are richer than God. East Coast blue bloods on both sides, old money, yadda yadda. They sent me to all the ‘right’ boarding schools that prepped me for an Ivy League university. Didn’t matter which one. As far as my parents were concerned, I had no choice. Not that I’m

complaining,” I added hastily. “Debt-free, world-class college is nothing to sneeze at and I’m grateful for it. But it would’ve been nice if they’d been as concerned about who I was as much as they were about who they wanted me to be.”

Asher nodded. “Yeah, I get that.”

“Despite being on disciplinary probation for basically the entire length of my formative years, I kept my grades up and got into Brown.” I shot him a look. “My parents didn’t buy my way in, is what I’m saying.”

“That doesn’t surprise me in the least.”

I smiled at that and sipped my wine. “I graduated with a degree in Quantitative Economics...” I laughed as he coughed over his drink. “Now you’re surprised.”

He wiped the spill of wine off his lower lip. “No, I just...I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“You thought it’d be fashion design or maybe marketing? Me too. But I was also pretty good at math, and I liked the puzzles of economics. Figuring out what was going to happen next based on what’s happened before, reading trends... But once I graduated, I had no idea what to do. I never stuck with anything for long but bounced around, trying on careers like shoes. Most didn’t fit until I found advertising. Each account is like a puzzle, too, figuring out what’s going to be the key to making something pop. Turns out I have a knack and it doesn’t bore me to death, so...?” I shrugged. “It stuck.”

“How long have you been at your agency?”

“Forever! Almost three years. Longest I’ve ever been anywhere.”

He choked out another laugh. “Wait, let me get this straight. You’ve been at your job for less than three years and already they want to make you partner?”

I didn’t want to need the admiration in his brown eyes, but it felt nice. More than nice. Asher Mackey was a goddamn saint compared to me, but my own competence wasn’t something I normally contemplated. I spent too much time

partying with Viv and letting men take care of me to consider I was actually capable of taking care of myself.

“You good?” he asked, studying my frown.

I gave my head a shake and offered a weak smile. “Yeah. Sure.”

“So...how’re things going back in Seattle?” he asked, almost reluctantly.

“They’re great,” I said. “I’ve checked in a few times—just today, actually. Turns out I care about my accounts and clients. Who knew?”

He smiled mildly. “I knew.”

That frustrating *want* of Asher flared at his simple declaration. And the way he looked darkly handsome in the dim light. And how he looked at *me*. Emotions stirred and roiled to see myself reflected in his brown eyes. I took a long pull of wine, feeling more naked than I ever had, and it had nothing to do with my skimpy dress.

Our food arrived—scampi for him and pasta primavera for me. I pushed the vegetables around with my fork.

Asher looked up from his food. “Talk to me, Faith. You’ve been a little up and down all night. What’s going on?”

A loaded question. I answered with a safe reply that wasn’t: *I want you to take me on this table right now...*

“I was just thinking about how I came here to break my bad habits with men, and yet I’ve been letting you take care of me, twenty-four seven.”

The furrow between Asher’s brows arrived right on schedule.

“Not this again.” He shook his head. “You don’t give yourself enough credit. Despite my best efforts, you pay for more than half of our activities. And it’s not about money anyway.”

“Then what’s it about?”

“Give and take,” he said. “I don’t want to put words in your mouth, but it sounds like when you were with those other guys, you did more of the taking.”

“*All of the taking.*”

“That’s not the case here.”

“It’s not? We’re not even sleeping together. What are you getting out of this deal?”

“You.”

I sat back in my chair. “Me.”

“Yeah, Faith.” His gaze grazed over me, then met my eyes with an intensity that was full of depth and heat. “I get you.”

*Damn him.*

Worse than the no-sex, this was far from the first time he’d said something that made my heart feel strange. As if I’d been starving it for years, and now it was gorging on Asher Mackey until it was warm and satisfied in a way it hadn’t been before.

*This is bad. Real bad.*

My fork clattered to my plate. “I can’t take it anymore.”

Asher blinked. “Sorry?”

“What are we doing? This. You and me. What are we doing?”

“Having dinner,” he said, his voice low.

“Stop that,” I said. “Stop being so...unflappable. You can’t just say the incredible things you say to me and then eat your scampi as if we’re discussing the weather.”

“Faith—”

“I’m supposed to be here fixing myself, remember? Not fall —” I huffed a breath and took a sip of wine. “Never mind. Forget it. I’m fine.”

Calmly, Asher sat back, turning his glass around by the stem. “I’ve never spent this much time with a woman and not slept with her. Being with you, talking to you...” His eyes met mine over the table. “I don’t want to stop. I have three twelve-

hour shifts and a twenty-four coming up, and I'm already thinking about how I can see you as much as possible in between."

"Before I leave, you mean." I shook my head. "This... whatever we're doing, is nuts. Isn't it?"

He nodded, his expression hard. "But I can't help myself around you. I know, rationally, we're different people. There's a literal ocean between us, and yet..." He reached across the table to take my hand. "I don't see how this can go anywhere, but the last fucking thing I want to think about is saying goodbye."

*Oh God...*

No man had ever said something like that to me before. No man had *looked* at me the way Asher Mackey looked at me. I wanted to live in that reflection. Bask in it. Drown in it.

So I did the logical thing: I snatched my hand away, stood up, and limped out of the restaurant.

I went around to the side and leaned against the stucco wall. The air was warm and did nothing to snap me out of my emotional freefall. My entire body was trembling, and I hugged my elbows.

After a minute, Asher rounded the corner. "You could've just told me it was my turn to get the check."

I whirled on him. "We need to sleep together."

He froze. "We do?"

"Yes."

"Now?"

"Right now."

His eyes darkened and he exhaled a ragged breath. "I thought we had rules," he said, even as he moved closer. "No kissing, no getting naked—"

"I've changed my mind."

"Faith—"

“I can’t do this anymore!” I cried. “This...*chaos* I’m feeling? It’s only my body telling me that I’m about to combust if I don’t have you. Isn’t that why I can’t stop thinking about you every minute of my life? I wake up from dreaming about you, spend all day with you in a ridiculous bliss, then go to sleep every night hoping to dream of you some more.”

“It’s the same for me, Faith. Exactly the fucking same.”

“Don’t say that. You’re only making this worse!” I pushed a finger into his chest. “You have completely infiltrated every part of me.”

“Good.”

Asher’s hand snaked out to grip me by the back of the head, under my hair, in a delicious tingle of shivers mixed with a twinge of pain. He hauled me to him, practically lifting me off the ground, and held me pressed against him. His brown eyes dark and hooded as they roamed my face, I had just enough time to release a little moan of want before he crushed his mouth to mine.

*God help me...*

That lone thought was drowned in a tsunami that crashed over me with Asher’s kiss. His mouth mauling me, the taste of him, finally—*finally*—overwhelmed me. He was everything I knew he’d be—raw, masculine power—and more than I could’ve imagined. For long moments, I could hardly do more than let him take my mouth with a sucking pull that stole my breath while his tongue skillfully worked every corner. I clung to his neck until a surge of pure desire coursed through me. I fought back, trying to match his ferocity, trying to devour him like he was devouring me, both of us starved for the other.

“Feel that?” Asher said thickly, when he wrenched his mouth away, his breath coming hard like mine.

“Yes...”

He pressed in closer. “That’s what it will be like when you’re in my bed, Faith. It’s going to feel like that while I’m fucking you.”

*Sweet Jesus...*

His thumb brushed over my lip. “We can’t pretend we’re something we’re not.”

“What are we?” I breathed.

“Don’t know. But it scares me too.”

Asher bent his head and kissed me again, sucking on my lower lip, tasting me and turning my insides to mush. I’d felt lust before, plenty of times. But this was...more. A desire that went beyond my body. A need for Asher Mackey that sank deeper with every passing minute, touching a part of me that’d been kept tucked away, safe and sound where no man could reach me. Every caress dropped little flares into that untouched space, revealing something raw and naked. Vulnerable and soft and so delicate, it would break at the slightest mishandling. It was the part of me I kept protected from pain and—I realized—the most perfect joy.

It was too much. I concentrated on what Asher was doing to my body as his lips moved down to my neck. Everywhere he touched me sent licks of heat skimming over my skin, down my back, between my legs. I could only cling to him, my muscles loosening like sand under his touch, and then moan into his mouth as he captured me in another searing kiss.

Finally, I pushed at his chest with both hands. “Car. Now.”

“Your condo is forty minutes away.”

“And your house is...?”

“Less than that.”



The short ride to Asher’s house went by in a blur. Night had fallen, and a panorama of diamonds smattered across the sky as he took the road east. I could hardly look at Asher for wanting him so bad and took his hand that was on the gearshift. I’d only intended to hold it, but instead, I hiked up my dress and laid it on my thigh.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said coarsely.



I moved his rough palm over my smooth skin, higher.

“Faith...I’ll miss my turn.”

Now I pressed his fingers against the dampness of my panties and a whimper escaped me at how good it felt. How *right*.

“Jesus...” he growled.

“Eyes on the road, firefighter.”

I moved his fingers where I wanted them, and then he took over. His hand slipped under the silk of my thong, and I stifled a cry as his fingers found naked flesh. Jaw clenched, eyes hard and facing straight ahead, Asher worked me over, his calloused fingers on my most delicate, sensitive skin, moving in circles before plunging two fingers inside me.

“Ah, God...” I cried, arching off the seat.

For a few ecstatic moments, I held his hand where I wanted him, but he tore away too soon, breathing hard and muttering, “Going to have an accident.”

Thankfully, I only had to endure the torture for a few more minutes, as he made a hard left and a sign flashed outside my window: *Anini Beach, Private Drive*.

My eyes widened as we drove through a small neighborhood of not-so-small houses tucked into Kauai’s lush greenery, each overlooking the ocean. Asher continued on an even more secluded road and pulled into the drive of a huge old-country Hawaiian-looking two-story house—red with white trim, much of the ground floor elevated by wooden slats.

I climbed out of the car, and my heart swelled another ten sizes that this man could’ve had a sleek, pampered life in the city, and instead chose to work a grueling job, saving people’s lives.

Asher misread my incredulous stare as he came around to my side. “You disapprove?”

“Disapprove?” I ringed my arms around his neck and the words poured out. “Everything you do and everything you are, Asher, just makes me want you more.”

He kissed me softly, then harder, and the flame that had been simmering rekindled. I shifted against the car to let him in closer. A low sound issued from deep in his chest as I moved his hand between my legs again.

He growled hotly against my ear. “I’m about ten seconds away from fucking you on the hood of my Jeep.”

“Do it,” I breathed, delirious at the feel of his fingers touching parts of me that had ached for him so badly.

He bit off a curse as he went deep, and I cried out, riding his hand. Too soon, he shook his head and withdrew.

“No. Bed...”

Asher lifted me up and my legs went around his waist. Somehow, he managed to get us inside while kissing me, his hands cupping my ass. His house was dark, lit only by moonlight. Impressions of it came to me in heated flashes. Huge with modern fixtures and furniture, despite its barn-like exterior. A state-of-the-art sound system and mega TV sharing space on a wall with tribal art that I didn’t recognize, and a Maui hook carved from wood. Masculine décor that honored the island.

*Because this isn’t just his house, it’s his home. This island is his home.*

I squeezed my eyes shut against the thought and kissed him harder.

Asher carried me all the way upstairs to his bedroom. He lay me on the bed, then sank on top of me—so perfectly heavy—kissing me roughly. His hands were in my hair, and mine sank into his thick silken locks at the back of his head while our hips rose and fell together, grinding and frustrated by clothes.

“Please...Asher. Hurry.”

“Your ankle,” he said against my mouth. “I should be careful.”

I made a disbelieving sound—the time for being careful was over. We’d moved further from *careful* with every failure

to stay away from each other. We were now in reckless territory, freefalling into the precipice together.

Our kisses became frenzied then, releasing days' worth of tension and pent-up need. I pushed him back so that I could sit up and get my dress off. Asher took over, lifting it over my head, then tore off his own shirt and knelt in front of me. Before I could think, or move, his mouth was on me, moving over the bare skin of my throat, down to my clavicle.

"Here," he growled, his breath hot and his tongue flickering. "This is what I've wanted. Right here. So fucking sexy."

*Of all the places...*

I felt dizzy at every sensation, inside and out, that this man was creating in me.

His mouth moved over my heart, and his thick, soft hair brushed my chin. I raked my fingers through it as my eyes nearly rolled back to feel his hands on my breasts, hefting their weight in his palms. He ran a calloused thumb over one nipple while his mouth found the other, biting and sucking. My hands grazed over his scalp and then down his back, pulling him to me.

"We should have been doing this from Day One," I whispered and then cried out as Asher took one nipple between his teeth and sucked.

"Then it wouldn't be this fucking perfect," he growled.

He moved back up to my mouth and kissed me while pressing me down until I lay sprawled on my back. With another feral sound of want, he roughly dragged off my thong panties and stood staring down at me, naked and exposed and ready for him.

"I've dreamed about tasting you," he said gruffly, his fingers trailing idly over my sex, fingertips teasing the wetness. "Since the day we met."

"Asher...for God's sake..."

I flailed and then gripped the bedspread for dear life as Asher knelt and put his mouth on me, tongued me, nipped and sucked me. I stared at the ceiling, incoherent sounds pouring out of me as he went at me, sending wave after wave of pure sensation coursing through me. Every cell in my body lit on fire and I arched off the bed, into him, wanting all of it. Even the twinge of pain in my ankle added to the tsunami that took me higher, higher...

Then Asher took my clit in his mouth the same way he had taken my nipple and sucked it between his teeth.

The wave crashed.

I clutched at the bed as if it could keep me from floating away or disintegrating into a million pieces. I screamed his name; it came pouring out of me on a tide of pleasure and heat that I'd never felt before with any man. Because it wasn't just sex. It was sex with *him*.

Asher stood and stared down at me, like a conqueror over his prize. "I'm not done with you."

He went to the nightstand for a condom. I hauled myself to sitting, watching him move—big but graceful in the dark.

I wasn't done with him, either. I hadn't even started.

"Come here," I said, when he had the condom in hand.

I felt calmer now that the first need had been satiated but only barely. I wanted him inside me and could hardly believe it was about to happen. Anticipation, nerves, want...as if I'd never done this before.

*I haven't. Not like this.*

Asher stood in front of me while I sat on the edge of the bed. I undid the button on his pants, then the zipper while kissing the warm skin of his stomach. I ran my tongue along the hard lines and ridges of his abdomen as I shoved his pants down. His erection strained against his boxer-briefs, and the flame of want burned white hot in the center of me at the sight of it. Slowly savoring the moment, I pushed his underwear off his hips, and the cut V of his abdomen led my gaze straight to his magnificent cock—huge and hard and perfect. I stroked

him once, experimentally, to feel the velvet of his skin over the hard length of him.

“Faith,” he said tightly.

“Just getting acquainted.”

I took the condom packet from Asher, but instead of opening it, I sheathed him with my mouth.

“Ah fuck,” he groaned, his hand landing heavily in my hair, gripping and sending delicious licks down my spine.

Little sounds of want were issuing from my throat as I took him deep, then shallow, swirling my tongue and pumping him in my fist. Every sound he made, every muttered curse, every tightening of his hold on my hair spurred me on. He was holding himself back, trying not to fuck my mouth. I would have let him; except I couldn’t wait any more.

“Now,” I said, breathless, releasing him and rolling the condom down. I scooted back on the bed and lay back, wanton and needy, my legs spread. “Right now, firefighter.”

He kicked aside his pants and underwear and moved swiftly over me, on top of me, the head of his cock brushing against my warm wetness. He hooked one of my legs over the crook of his elbow, spreading me wider, and buried himself inside me in one smooth, hard thrust.

Time stood still, allowing my delirious mind and body to savor the feel of him—heavy, thick, and so, so deep in me. A warm, aching pleasure was stoked at that first thrust and grew heavier, stronger with the next hard slam of Asher’s hips to mine. And the next, and the next, each one faster and more intense, each driving me higher and higher while pinned beneath the perfect heavy weight of him.

I could not get enough of him, couldn’t get him deep enough. I clawed his broad back, trying to keep him tight to me, to meld his body with mine. I lifted my hips in answer to his every move, and all the while he kissed me when our frantic bodies allowed it—a wet mashing of teeth and tongues.

“I-I’m close...” I managed.

Asher hooked my other leg on his elbow, bending me in half. He pressed himself up, palms flat on either side of me, driving into me with mindless need. With desire so raw and potent, I could hardly believe it was all for me.

One moment melted into the next, climbing toward euphoria. He sent me over the edge and my orgasm erupted, wiping out all thought. Ribbons of white-hot pleasure coursed through me from my center where his cock still moved in me, drawing my release out longer while taking him closer to his.

“Come,” I breathed, my hands on his glorious forearms, nails digging in. “Come inside me, Asher.”

With a grunted cry and a last few earth-shattering thrusts, he came hard—abs tight, neck corded, his face a pained mask of ecstasy. He had on a condom, but I imagined him spilling his release deep inside me, filling me with him, marking me as his.

A pang of unease lanced through the hot haze of my orgasm.

*I can't feel like this about him. I'm leaving.*

And then he was on top of me, skin to skin, warm and heavy, kissing me gently, thoroughly, reverently. So much so that tears sprang to my eyes, and that was definitely not allowed. I did not cry over men. Ever.

And yet, I kissed him back with just as much depth and care, not wanting to do anything else but hold him and kiss him and stay in this moment forever.

Finally, he broke away and gently withdrew from me to lie on his side. “How’s your ankle?”

“I have ankles?” I managed weakly. “My entire body is one pulsating orgasm.”

“Good. Want some water? A nap? But just a short one.”

“Because you’re still not done with me?”

“Not even close.”

God, his smile—a gentle thing on his hard, granite features—made my pulse quicken even more than his words. The pang of unease turned dire. Sleeping with Asher hadn't fixed anything. It had only made it worse. My body was satisfied—temporarily—but my heart was still clamoring for more.

I reached for him again to drown the unwanted thoughts in the sensations of him. For hours. But when dawn's light crept in through the window and we lay tangled in each other, I stared at the ceiling in perfect conflict—contentment and belonging making my heart warm while one thought clamored through my mind.

*We've made a terrible mistake...*

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Asher*

A slant of morning light fell over me, pulling me out of a heavy sleep. I peeked an eye open at the woman beside me, and a slow grin spread over my lips that had been everywhere on her last night. Finally sleeping with Faith—touching her, kissing her, being inside her... Fucking bliss.

And it fixed nothing.

My grin faded as I swung my legs over the side of the bed and hung my head in my hands.

“Shit.”

Nothing felt satiated or settled by having Faith all night because it wasn't just her body I lusted after so desperately. The pure, mind-blowing want of her didn't begin and end with sex. I felt it in every corner of my heart—neglected, broken corners I didn't let anyone touch and few suspected even existed. My desire for her felt like a ravenous animal, starved from countless quiet nights and an empty house.

An empty life.

I'd had dozens of women in my bed, but she was the only one I wanted to stay there.

Quietly, I padded in my underwear to the en suite bathroom to brush my teeth and try to get a grip on myself. I had the day off—Friday—then four long shifts. Faith left on Sunday.

*What the fuck do we do with that?*

The bed sheets rustled, and I watched in the mirror as Faith limped to me, naked but for her barely-there thong and her quartz pendant. My fantasy had come true—I'd had her all night with her wearing nothing but that necklace. It'd dangled between us as she rode me...

I snapped out of it as Faith's perfect tits pressed against my back when she wrapped her arms around me.



“Mmm,” she sighed and laid her cheek to my skin. “So warm.”

I spat the toothpaste out, rinsed, and then turned around to hold her. I brushed a lock of blond hair out of her eyes. “Hi.”

“Hi.” She cocked her head, studying me. “Something on your mind?”

“Something’s *not* on yours?”

“Not a thing.” She slapped my ass and then used the bathroom, leaving the door open. “Don’t look so scandalized, Mackey. I sat on your face last night. You can handle some pee.”

I frowned, even as her words instantly conjured the image of her silky thighs on either side of me, my hands on her hips, my mouth latched between her legs, sucking her as if I were dying of thirst...

I coughed. “We need to talk.”

“About what?”

“You know what.”

She nudged me aside with her hip to wash her hands. “About how I’m walking unaided? Pretty great, right?”

“I knew that’d happen from the beginning.”

*I also knew getting involved with a woman who lived on the other side of the Pacific Ocean was a bad idea, yet here we are.*

Faith rolled her eyes and hopped up onto the sink. “Yes, you’re very smart. And handsome.” Her fingers trailed over my chest. “And sexy...”

She leaned in to kiss me, but I pulled away. “Faith...”

“Asher.”

The air was thick between us. A cloud of residual heat and desire from last night that was ready to re-ignite, tinged with emotions neither of us was equipped to deal with.

My phone rang from the bedside table.

Faith cocked her head. “You going to get that?”

I didn’t budge but she held my gaze unflinchingly, unwilling to break. Another ring, and she gave me a gentle push.

“Go.”

I frowned and crossed my bedroom. I snatched up the phone, jabbed the green answer button. “*What?*”

“My brother, ladies and gentlemen.” Morgan laughed. “Just calling to remind you that the Friends and Family picnic at Kal’s school starts in an hour.”

“Shit, that’s today? I forgot.”

“Which is why I called. Problem?”

I turned my back to the bathroom and lowered my voice, bracing myself. “Faith is here.” I held the phone from my ear until there was a break in the ensuing crowing and hollering. “Are you done?”

“No, just catching my breath.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes. “I’m going to be late to the picnic. I have to drive Faith back and then—”

“Drive her where? Bring her, you jackass.”

“It’s a family thing.”

“It’s a *friends* and family thing. Faith is officially our friend for her advice about the business, and she’s yours for...other reasons. Friends with benefits, apparently. *Finally.*”

I glanced over my shoulder at Faith, still perched on the sink and still topless, lost in thought. Her fingers toyed with the quartz pendant.

“I’ll ask.”

I hung up before Morgan could add more commentary and rejoined Faith at the sink.

“Ask me what?”

“Kal has a school picnic thing today. Kind of like a mini carnival with pony rides and games and all that shit.”

“*All that shit* sounds cute. When’s it start?”

“Soon.”

“Then we’d better hurry.”

She gingerly hopped off the sink and climbed back into bed, stretching her long, lithe body on my sheets. As if a magnetic switch had flipped on, I automatically moved to join her. I pulled her close so that I could feel every inch of her naked skin on mine.

“Give me a little bit more time with you,” she said, kissing my chin, her hands in my hair. “Then I’ll Uber back to my place and you can go to Kal’s picnic.”

“If we don’t do Waimea today, you might not get there. You could come to the picnic with me and then we’ll hit the canyon.”

Faith’s expression stiffened and she looked away, her eyes on her fingertips that traced the lines of my neck. “I don’t know. Seems more like a family thing.”

My argument exactly, yet I held her tighter to me.

“Morgan invited you. *I’m* inviting you.”

Faith hesitated, then smiled, though it looked forced. “Maybe I should put in an appearance. I won’t have another chance to say goodbye to them before I go.”

*Fuck.*

Our eyes met and then she lunged at me, kissed me hard. Kissing me instead of talking about all the shit we didn’t want to face. I’d said too much at the restaurant last night. I’d kicked open doors that needed to stay shut.

I kissed her back just as urgently, rolling her onto her back and settling myself on top of her, as if I could weigh her down and keep her where she was...with me.

A condom was procured, and we fell into each other, trying to burn out our feelings with every feverish touch. I drove into her hard and fast, mindless in my want of her. She wrapped her arms and legs around me tightly, holding me deep inside

her while the orgasms came—white-hot and more intense than they’d ever been with anyone.

After, she showered, and I gave her one of my button-downs to wear over that pale blue scrap of nothing she called a dress. I took my turn in the shower, standing in a spray of hot water until it became cold.

Didn’t help.

I dressed and made us coffee that we drank in my kitchen, hardly saying a word. Everything we needed to say hung between us in a cloud of heated need that wanted to crash us together. On top of everything else, I’d never been with a woman as sexually compatible as Faith. She took everything I wanted to give her and gave back just as intensely. I wanted nothing more than to spend all day in bed with her, fucking and talking and then fucking some more, until we both passed out and I could just hold her...

*Jesus, I am truly screwed...*



At Hanalei Elementary, the front walk was festooned with a giant banner that read *Friends & Family Day Jubilee!* and decorated with multi-colored little handprints.

“How cute,” Faith said without much energy.

It was more than either of us had said on the ten-minute drive. I parked and strode to the passenger side just as she got out, bracketing her against the Jeep before she could slip away again.

She sighed and pressed her forehead into my chest. “Asher...”

“I don’t know what to do, Faith.”

“Me neither. *Obviously.*” She looked up at me, her eyes liquid green and swimming with the same conflict that tormented me. “Let’s just have a good time for Kal, okay?”

I nodded, and she kissed me softly, then took my arm. I helped her down the walk toward the back of the school. She’d

tied a knot in the shirt I'd lent her, leaving the front mostly unbuttoned. You'd almost not know it was an improvised outfit.

*Morgan would know*, I thought as we stepped out onto the school yard. But my little brother's smart aleck remarks were the least of my worries. *Because she's leaving.*

The yard was crowded with booths, games, and picnic tables from the lunch area. A bouncy house was set up on the east side and a mobile petting zoo on the west. Under a brilliant sun, dozens of kids chased each other around, laughing and screeching and cramming popcorn into their mouths. Faith and I made our way to the folding table where school staff were selling tickets for food and games. I bought more tickets than we could possibly need and passed them out to random kids who ran by.

I could feel Faith smiling up at me. "Why do I have the feeling a big donation was made to the school at some point. Anonymously, of course."

"It's no big deal and the least I can do," I said. "Educational funding is abysmal. As usual."

She didn't say anything but squeezed my arm, and I liked it too much how she was looking at me. How she smiled at me. I could get used to it. All of it. Waking up with her in my bed, wearing my shirt, taking her to the canyons or the beach or literally any goddamn place she wanted. Men liked to think they conquered women. What a crock. We were the weaker sex, helpless in the face of our lust. Brought down by a look, a whiff of perfume, the hint of a collarbone on a graceful neck...

I wrenched my gaze from Faith as Morgan and Nalani approached, my brother grinning ear to ear, his Nikon D7500 hanging from a strap around his neck. Nalani looked beautiful in a long flowing dress tied at the shoulder.

"Ash! Faith! Glad you could make it!" Morgan boomed and kissed Faith on the cheek. "Look who's walking. Doing better?"

"Better, but I think I need to sit."

“Aloha, Faith,” Nalani said. “So good to see you again. Come. You must meet my grandmother, Momi.”

Nalani took possession of Faith and they chatted and walked toward a picnic table not far, while Morgan rocked on his heels, hands in his pockets.

“Shut up,” I muttered.

“I haven’t said anything...yet.” He laughed, but it faded instantly at my dark look. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Where’s Kal?”

“Playing with friends at the jumpy house. And don’t tell me nothing. What’s up? Did you and Faith have a fight?”

“No.”

“It’s worse than that,” Morgan teased gently. “You like her.”

A retort shot to my lips. I swallowed it down. “It doesn’t fucking matter. She’s out of here on Sunday.”

“Well...okay. Have you discussed what comes after Sunday?”

“What’s to discuss? She’s going back to her life in Seattle and I have my life here.”

“Maybe you could work something out. Fly back and forth —”

“How many times?” I demanded. “And to what end? I hate big cities. She hates isolated islands. There’s nowhere for this to go.”

“Yeah, but—”

“But nothing. It’s over. Stupid to get involved in the first place.”

“I disagree. I’ve never seen you this worked up over a woman. You and her together...” He shrugged. “I like it.”

So did I. Which was the entire fucking problem.

“I’m going to say hi to Kal.”

I turned and strode toward the bouncy house that was a big red square with a clown smiling maniacally on the front. Kaleo was one of half a dozen kids being tossed around by the inflated floor and bouncing off the inflated walls.

*I care about him*, I thought, waving as my nephew caught sight of me. He waved back, a little flurry of his hand. *He's important. Morgan and Nalani and Cap and the guys...my fucking life here is important.*

But as I watched Kal bounce up and down, I realized my life had felt about the right size until I got a distress call at Ho'opi'i Falls Trail. Now it was full of empty space. Space I wanted to fill with more.

*With her.*

I shoved that thought away. If my past had taught me anything, it was that wanting too much was fucking dangerous. Being in control at all times was the only way to stay safe, and around Faith I had no control. My feelings ran rampant. I did things and said shit I wouldn't normally say. I knew better.

I glanced over my shoulder. Distantly, I made out Faith sitting with Morgan and Nalani and her eighty-two-year-old grandmother in her wheelchair, made frail by arthritis.

*You and her together...I like it.*

"Fuck me," I muttered and scrubbed a hand over my face.

"It's only noon and you're at a kids' carnival," said a soft voice. "How bad can it be?"

I looked to see Chloe Barnes, Kal's teacher, standing in front of me. Her brown hair was up, and she wore a sundress and a bright smile.

"Oh, hey, Chloe. Sorry. I'm just...thinking out loud."

"It's okay. Want to talk about it?"

Chloe was twenty-four, pretty, and single, which, on this tiny island, had always made her a prime candidate in Morgan's eyes to break me out of bachelorhood. But while I liked Chloe for being so good with Kal, I'd never entertained

the idea of starting something with her. Having a one-night stand with my nephew's third grade teacher would put me firmly in lowlife territory and I wasn't interested in a commitment.

*You sure about that?* I thought and my gaze itched to find Faith.

"Nah. I'm good," I said finally. "I was just going to—"

"Uncle Ash! Miss Barnes!" Kaleo ran up and threw his arms around Chloe's waist.

She laughed and knelt down to speak eye to eye. "Aloha, Kal. Having fun?"

"The best!" He looked to me. "Mama said she has more tickets for me. Let's go! You too, Miss Barnes."

I chuckled at his manic, sugar-fueled energy. "Come here, dude." I lifted him up on my shoulders and wrapped my arms around his legs. Chloe smiled softly and walked close beside me.

"You're so good with him," she said. "How have you been? It's been a while."

"I've been busy. Long shifts."

"I'm always available to swing by with something to eat," she said. "Something homecooked. Don't want you always resorting to fast food when you're working."

My glance slid to her and back. It wasn't the first time she'd offered. "You don't have to, Chloe."

"I don't *have* to. I want to."

She peered up at me, her smile pretty but with none of Faith's wit behind it. No fire in her eyes, only mild warmth. She was a Level One burn—low intensity, light mop up, little damage.

But Faith...

*Faith's a Level Six, five alarm, code red inferno.*



Chloe's hand on my arm broke me out of my thoughts. "What's that smile for?" Her gaze was demure and flirty at the same time. "Something I said?"

"What? No, I—"

"There they are!" Kal announced from his high vantage.

I looked to see Faith, wearing my shirt and sitting among my family, and couldn't deny my goddamn heart felt like it was waking up from a long hibernation.

Chloe touched my arm again. "You seem a little out of it today. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Sorry, just tired."

Because I'd gotten little sleep last night. Because I'd been tangled with Faith in a heated frenzy and never wanted it to end.

But it was ending and well past time I got the fucking message before whatever I was feeling ran uncontained and out of my control.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *Faith*

I left Asher with Morgan to walk with Nalani, my firefighter's face drawn tight. We needed to talk—I knew it, and he clearly knew it, but I guessed I wasn't sufficiently self-improved to trust myself with that conversation. There were a million feelings boiling in me—upsetting and thrilling and scary as hell and all running into the same brick wall: I was leaving. What was the point of talking about anything?

*I'll just keep having sex with him until an hour before my flight.*

Except today was his last day off and I'd be long gone by the time he was free again.

"God..."

Nalani turned. "You okay?"

I forced a smile. "Peachy."

We'd arrived at the picnic table strewn with the remnants of lunch. An older woman sat at the end in a wheelchair wearing a multicolored dress over a thin, frail frame. Her fingers were gnarled and crooked with arthritis, but her dark eyes were sharp and her smile warm as we approached.

"Momi, this is Faith Benson. She's a friend of Asher's."

"Aloha, Faith."

"Alo—um... hi."

"You can say aloha, my dear."

"Can I?" I said, sitting beside her. "Given my colonizer status, it feels a little bit like cultural appropriation, even if it's just hello or goodbye."

Momi chuckled. "It's an aspect of Hawaiian culture I wish was appropriated more. "Hello. Goodbye." She shook her

head. “There is no equivalent in English that captures such profound emotion.”

“Momi is *mana wahine*,” Nalani said with a proud smile. “A powerful woman. A keeper of traditions.”

I could see that. I could *feel* that. The woman seemed to contain the wisdom of the ages in her slight form, and I suddenly wished that I could sit with her and pour every confused and conflicted thought in her lap.

Momi caught my expression. “Dear?”

“I was just thinking that I’d love to learn more about the islands’ culture. I came here to expand my horizons, so to speak, but the only thing I’ve learned is that I have terrible taste in hiking shoes.”

Except that wasn’t entirely true. I did feel different. More awake and clear-headed than I was in Seattle.

*Except where Asher Mackey is concerned.*

Momi smiled. “The aloha spirit is the harmony between the mind and heart within us. It asks us to come to ourselves and to extend good feelings toward others. It’s compassion and care with no expectation of return.” Her gaze seemed to dig deeper. “Aloha means to hear what is not said, to see what cannot be seen, to know the unknowable.”

“See what I mean?” Nalani said fondly.

I nodded. I’d have given anything to know the unknowable. Namely, what the hell I was supposed to do with my heart because there was no harmony there, only a longing that was completely foreign and starting to feel immovable. Permanent.

Momi reached out to pat my knee. “Enough of that. You didn’t come to listen to a lecture. Nalani tells me you’re in advertising.”

“I am,” I said, and my posh office in downtown Seattle had never felt so far away—lightyears from this brilliant afternoon, surrounded by palm trees and sitting with a Hawaiian wisewoman.

“Faith gave Morgan and me some great ideas for our business,” Nalani said. “We’re already booking photograph tours for Ho’opi’i.”

I made a face. “Make sure you get them to sign a waiver first.”

Nalani laughed and Momi nodded at my wrapped ankle.

“I hope you’re well. I heard about your accident.”

“Asher was on the shift when the call came in,” Morgan put in, joining us and taking a seat beside Nalani, across from me. He lifted his camera and took a few shots of Momi and me.

“You already told me all about her rescue, keiki lapuwale,” Momi scolded gently.

Nalani glanced around. “Where is Ash?”

“He’s gone to find Kal.” Morgan turned to me. “So tell us, Faith. Ankle sprains aside, how are you liking Kauai?”

“It’s very beautiful,” I said. “But...small.”

“Too small for you,” Nalani said, the teeniest hint of a question in her tone.

“Too small for me,” I admitted truthfully. “I’m a city girl. It’s in my blood.”

“You never know, it could grow on you,” Morgan said. “When Ash and I were in New York, I didn’t like it much, but the last thing I imagined was coming all the way out here and wanting to stay.” He smiled affectionately at his wife. “Then again, I had the best motivation.”

“I didn’t know you were in New York with Asher.”

“The state, not the city,” Morgan said. “When we had to leave North Bend, Ash found us a little place in Elmsford, about twenty miles north of Manhattan.” He cocked his head. “He didn’t tell you this?”

“No,” I said slowly. “I’ve only heard bits and pieces, and maybe we shouldn’t—”

Morgan snorted. “Of course, he didn’t tell you. It’s like pulling teeth to get him to talk about what he did for us. For me. Our dad split when we were little. For a few years, Mom tried to keep it together, but she got into some bad stuff. When I was a little older than Kaleo, we had to leave North Bend without her.”

“Just the two of you?” I asked, forgetting myself in my surprise. “How old was Asher?”

“Sixteen, nearly seventeen,” Morgan said. “I don’t know how he did it, but he got us a place, enrolled us in school, and managed to keep the authorities off our back. I know he had help but he never told me who. Never let any of that worry touch me. He’s so damn smart, when he graduated, he got himself into Columbia. Full scholarship.” Pride washed over Morgan’s words. “The guy was up every morning at the crack of dawn to get me ready for school, then took a train into the city—an hour and a half each way—and managed to get back in time for dinner.”

Morgan’s eyes shone. Nalani slipped her hand into his and he smiled gratefully, then cleared the emotion out of his voice.

“Anyway, Ash graduated with honors and Wall Street snatched him up. I was only fifteen, so he worked in the city and commuted until I graduated high school.”

“Morgan came here a few years later, Ash eventually followed, and here we are,” Nalani said, prudently skipping over the parts about Asher’s time on Wall Street that were not meant for a kid picnic.

“Right,” Morgan said, catching her drift. “It’s his story to tell, but he always forgets to add the part where he worked his ass off to keep us together. People should know that.”

“Should know what?”

Asher was suddenly there, Kal on his shoulders, dark eyes moving between Morgan and me, wary and scrutinizing. A pretty young woman stood close beside him. So close that the back of her hand brushed his arm when he moved.

*They look like a family.*

The thought felt like swallowing a boulder—it went down hard and sank into my gut.

“Hey, Chloe,” Morgan said with a smile and turned to Asher. “I was just telling Faith a little bit about our evacuation from North Bend, PA.”

“You told her...” Asher bit off his words, and a tense silence fell between the brothers.

Kal squirmed to be let down. “Mama! I found Miss Barnes. And I need more tickets. And I want some cotton candy. Can I?”

“Whoa, slow down, sugar rush. Hi, Chloe,” Nalani said warmly. “You remember my grandmother, Momi, and this is Faith. Asher’s...friend.”

Chloe smiled. “Aloha, Momi.”

The woman nodded in answer, watching everything.

“Nice to meet you, Faith,” Chloe said, her gaze zeroing in on the man’s shirt I wore over my dress. Her bright smile tilted. “How, um...do you two know each other?”

Every catty, bitchy, jealous instinct in me—and there were multitudes—flared up. I nearly replied sweetly that I knew Asher very well from all the sex we had last night, but I must’ve matured in the last twelve days. The fire flamed out, and the heavy ache in my stomach got heavier.

“I had a mishap at Ho’opi’i,” I said. “Asher came to my rescue.”

*He saved me and ruined me at the exact same time.*

“Oh,” Chloe said, her smile tight. “I’m so glad he was there for you.”

“Yes, he’s been great, showing me around the island, but I’m leaving on Sunday.”

*Then he’s all yours.*

Suddenly, I felt sick, and the sun was too hot, and I had a crazy urge to get up and run away.

“Ash?” Morgan chuckled but stared meaningfully at his brother who still hadn’t said a word. “You with us?”

“Yeah,” Asher said, releasing his brother from his death glare. “Aloha, Momi.” He knelt beside her chair and took her frail hands in his strong ones. “How are we doing here? Better?”

“Better,” she said. “The new medicine you arranged for me is very good. I’ll be playing piano again before we know it.”

He smiled, but concern lurked in his brown eyes. “Tell me if there are any side—”

“Yes, yes,” she waved him away. “Let’s not neglect your guest with boring talk about an old lady’s arthritis. Faith, would you like some lunch? I brought homemade saimin noodle soup.”

All eyes turned to me, and I felt like I’d wandered into this school by mistake, took a seat at the wrong table with a family that wasn’t mine and a man I couldn’t keep.

“No, thank you,” I murmured and got to my feet. “I’m not hungry and I...I have to go.”

Morgan frowned. “Go? Already?”

“I should. I-I’m sorry.”

“I’ll take you,” Asher said automatically.

Kaleo pouted. “You just got here, Uncle Ash.”

“He can stay,” I said, aiming the words at Asher with a pointed look. “I’ll find my way back.”

“*I’ll take you,*” he repeated, his own hard glance telling me that arguing with him was useless.

I turned away from the pained look in his eyes that mirrored mine and addressed the family. “It was so great meeting you all. Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Lovely to meet you, Faith,” Nalani said, coming around to hug me. “I hope you’ll consider coming back and visiting us again very soon.”

“You’re welcome here any time,” Morgan said. He kissed my cheek and gave me a hug. “*Any time.*”

“Faith, wait!” Kal jumped up to stand in front of me. “My birthday is next month. I’m going to be eight. Can you come to my party?”

My eyes stung with sudden tears as I ruffled his hair. “I don’t think so. But thank you for the invitation. I hope you have the best time at your party.” I turned to Momi, and though I barely knew the woman, I bent down and kissed her cheek. “Aloha, Momi.”

“Aloha, Faith.” She patted my hand with her gnarled one. “A hui hou kakou. Until we meet again.”

*Lord have mercy.*

I turned quickly, flashed Chloe a smile, and limped away as fast as I was able. I heard Asher mutter his goodbyes, then he caught up to me.

“Faith—”

“I wasn’t prying,” I said, not looking at him as we made our way across the grass. The uneven terrain made my ankle ache, but I wasn’t about to stop for anything.

“What are you talking about?”

“I didn’t ask about when you were kids. Morgan started talking.”

Asher’s lips made a line. “I know. That’s what he does. But...Jesus, Faith, can you slow down before you hurt yourself? Talk to me—”

We’d arrived at the front of the school, and I stopped and whirled on him.

“Why? What do you want me to say, Asher? You don’t want me to know your whole story or see where you live, but we can fuck all night long and—”

“No, that’s not it,” he shot back. “I...I’m pissed at Morgan because it’s easier than feeling whatever the hell I’m feeling



now. That's all. And it's not like you've spilled your guts to me about your childhood or—”

“Because there's nothing to tell! It sucked, my parents are awful and...”

And I had no clue what having a real family felt like. But that didn't mean I needed to hijack Asher's.

I shook my head. “Look, I don't have the first clue what I'm doing either, but I'm leaving in two days so I shouldn't be sitting there, listening to private stories of your past with your beloved grandmother and your sweet little nephew...” I swallowed hard. “I...I don't belong here.” Tears were gathering but I refused to cry over him or any man. I heaved a steadying breath. “It's all gotten too personal and too messy. I think we both need to admit that it was a mistake and...say our goodbyes now.”

He scrubbed his hands over his face. “Christ.”

“Go back to the picnic. Be with Kal. Be with Chloe. I think she'd like that.”

His eyes flared. “Fucking hell, Faith, really?”

“She's pretty and she likes you, and you and I aren't... anything.”

His pained expression dropped like a mask and he stiffened. “Right,” he said stonily. “We're not anything.”

“We aren't *possible*.” I shook my head, my tone softening. “This has been pretty wonderful, but I can't, you can't, *we* just...can't. And you know it.”

He crossed his arms. I hugged mine. Time stood still for a few moments, and I held my breath. Waiting. Then he nodded and that sort of broke my heart.

*What did you expect? He'd leave his beautiful family and run away with you to Seattle? Or are you willing to skip the flight home and stay here?*

No, I had to be level-headed for a change. Responsible. Not the flighty, impulsive, unreliable person I'd been, but a woman who was trying to get control of her life and make something

with it, independent of any man. Especially not a man I'd known for a handful of days.

Another thought tried to break through my cold rationale to whisper that Asher Mackey wasn't just any man, but I couldn't let it.

"I'll call an Uber," I said into the silence. "Go. *Go*," I said gently but firmly when he didn't move. I mustered a wavering smile. "They're waiting."

Asher's face was stony still, but conflict raged behind his eyes. Finally, he nodded and walked away. I watched him go, feeling as if he were carrying some essential part of me and I'd never get it back.

*Nope, it's fine. I'm fine. Everything is fine fine fine...*

My fingers trembled as I called the Uber. It took twenty minutes to arrive, and though the front entry to the school was quiet and empty, I knew my firefighter was watching the entire time to make sure I was safe.



I spent Saturday on the beach, sitting in a chair and watching the waves crash. When I thought I'd drown in my own thoughts, I grabbed my phone and called Silas Marsh.

"Hey, Faith, what's up? How's—?"

"When did you know?" I blurted.

"Sorry? When did I know what?"

"You and Max. When did you know there was something between you?"

"I don't know, ten milliseconds after meeting him? Not that I could admit it to myself..."

I groaned and held my head in my hands.

"Wrong answer?"

"Yes," I said. "You're supposed to tell me real things take time and anything else is just a temporary infatuation."

“Uh huh. What’s going on?”

“Don’t laugh at me.”

“Never.”

“I met someone.”

I’d never said that before. Characters said it in movies all the time where it caused knowing smiles and butterflies. I’d always wondered what it would feel like if I ever had a reason to say it. The butterflies were there, but tears stung my eyes, too.

*That’s not how it’s supposed to go.*

“I’d say I’m happy for you,” Silas said slowly, “but you sound serious.”

“No, I’m being silly. I don’t know why am calling you. I just...”

“Wait, slow down. You met someone and you really like him?”

I looked to the ocean. It stretched out into forever, and I lived on the other side of it.

“Faith? Talk to me.”

I heaved a steadying breath, firmed my voice. “I will. I’ll tell you everything when I get home. Tomorrow. I’ll be home tomorrow.”

There was a pause, and I knew Silas was trying to figure out what I needed him to say. Finally, he said, “I’ll pick you up at the airport.”

*Correct answer.*

“Thank you, Si. I’ll see you then.”

That night, I packed my three bags, and Sunday morning, I called an Uber to take me to the airport. I waited on the lanai, staring at the ocean, my fingers toying with the pendant around my neck.

When my app said the driver was a few minutes away, my front door opened and Asher barged in. My heart pounded as

he joined me on the lanai. He sat on the other chair, arms on his knees.

“Hey.”

“So that’s it?” I asked, my voice trembling. “You just walk in the door without knocking? Like we live together or something?”

“No,” he replied in a low voice.

“Because we don’t live together, Asher. Do we?”

He sighed. “No, we don’t live together. But I always just walk in. Because you leave the door unlocked. For me.”

“Well, that’s...stupid,” I said, my eyes filling. “And unsafe. To let anyone bust in and...and hurt me.”

“I’m not anyone,” he said. “And I’m hurting too.”

I glanced over at him helplessly. “What are you doing here?”

He shrugged with a small smile. “You have my shirt.”

A sound that was half-laugh, half-sob burst out of me. “Well, too bad you came all this way for nothing. I’m taking it with me.”

“Good.”

“Don’t you have work?”

“I moved some things around.”

“Asher...”

“Come on. You’ll miss your flight.”

I canceled my Uber and sat in the front of Asher’s Jeep as he loaded my luggage. The airport in Lihue was fifteen minutes away. We made it in twenty, because Asher wasn’t driving at breakneck speed but taking his time.

At the tiny airport, he got my luggage checked for me and walked with me as far as security. Wordlessly, he took my face in both his hands and kissed me. A deep, soft, reverent kiss that shook me to my core.

He shocked me again when he broke the kiss and wrapped his arms around me. Holding me close. Outside of Silas, no man had ever *hugged* me.

I buried my face in Asher's chest and clung to him. His voice rumbled in my ear. "Call me when you land."

I pulled away to gaze up at him. No one had ever said that to me, either. I swallowed hard. "You really want me to?"

The furrow between his brows appeared. "Yeah, Faith. I really do."

"Okay." I kissed my finger and pressed it to that worry line. "Aloha, Asher."

"Aloha, Faith," he said. "Till we meet again."

## PART II

*Each time, you happen to me all over again. —Edith  
Wharton, *The Age of Innocence**

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Asher*

“Lieutenant? I have the supply reports you wanted.”

Billy was at the door of my new office—hardly larger than a closet but more than I needed. Since my promotion, the rookie’d been on his best behavior. He laid the folder on my desk with deference, and I was too exhausted to tell him to knock it off. Turns out, I missed the ribbing and giving each other shit that comes with being a grunt.

*“Give it time,”* Captain Reyes had told me. *“You’ll find the right balance between brotherhood and leadership.”*

Even just newly promoted, I could feel his intentions—Cap was going to be Chief when Hutchins retired in a few years and would need a replacement.

*One fucking thing at a time.*

“Thanks, Billy,” I said and waited until he’d gone before stuffing the file in a drawer. The reports could wait—they’d all look like hieroglyphics to me anyway, I was so damn tired. I drew on my jacket, shoulders aching, and headed out.

Four days of grueling shifts had just ended when we’d gotten the call: Kīlauea, on the Big Island, was showing fresh activity, smoking and oozing lava. The volcano had been erupting off and on for ten years. But since the devastating eruption a few years back—one of my first calls—we didn’t waste time waiting to see what she was going to do before we took action. I’d helped Cap coordinate a team to assist local crews in Lava-Flow Hazard Zones 1 and 2, and we set off for another four days. Fortunately, Kīlauea went back to sleep.

Which is all I wanted to do.

We’d returned just this morning, and thanks to the OT I’d put in, I had five days off. I had big plans that involved a lot of napping, eating, and trying not to think about Faith Benson. But who was I fucking kidding? The only times I wasn’t

thinking about her was on the job, and my nights were less about sleeping and more about jerking off to memories of our lone night together.

I stepped out into the heat of early June and started across the parking lot.

“See ya, Lieutenant,” Travis called.

I waved, the weird nostalgia returning. I cursed at the irony. I missed being just one of the guys, and I missed Faith.

*So naturally you got your ass promoted.*

My phone rang, showing Morgan’s name.

“Hey, Mo,” I answered as I climbed into the front seat of my Jeep.

“Hey, man. How was the trip?”

“Uneventful, thankfully.”

“Good to hear it. Listen, I know you just got back and you’re probably tired as hell, but I’m in a jam.”

I rubbed my eyes. “Nah, I’m good. What’s up?”

“It’s Kaleo. Nal and I are booked solid today with clients. Chloe was going to take him after school, but her principal called a last-minute faculty meeting at three. I hate to cut into your first afternoon off, but can you take him?”

“Of course,” I said, clearing the exhaustion out of my voice. “Hey, that’s great about being booked up.”

“Thanks to Faith.” I heard the smile in Morgan’s voice. “We implemented her ideas and Nal had a few more of her own, and now we’re flying.”

“That’s great.”

“Great for us. Not so great for you.”

“You know I’m always happy to have Kal.”

“You sure? You sound terrible.”

My throat was a little scratchy, likely from the poor air quality around the volcano. I checked my watch; it was after



two o'clock. "I'm fine and school's out. I gotta get him."

"Chloe said she could bring him to your place before her meeting."

I let out a slow sigh. "Great."

"Thanks, you're the best. I'll let her know."

"Yep. Talk to you later."

"Talk soon. Oh, and Ash?" Morgan cleared his throat. "I'm glad you're back safe."

My chest constricted. "Yeah, okay..." I mumbled. "Whatever, shut up."

Morgan chuckled. "Love you too, bro."

I drove to my place and Chloe was there, just climbing out of her silver Camry. Kaleo was already on the tire swing I'd put in the front yard. Kal had insisted on a few upgrades. I'd been watching the kid a lot lately, thanks to Morgan's business taking off, and now that the school year was ending, I figured I'd be having him even more.

"Hi, Uncle Ash!" he called, twisting the rope above him into a tight coil, then letting it go. The tire spun around and around.

"You're going to make yourself puke," I called, then muttered, "Again."

"Hey, Asher," Chloe said. She wore a light blue dress and a sunhat to keep the blazing June sun off her face. "I'm sorry for the change of plans."

"Not your fault. Thanks for bringing him."

"Of course." She reached into the backseat of her car and came up with a glass tray covered in foil. "Poblano fried rice with shrimp and pineapple," she said and put it in my hands. "I made it this morning. I figured you'd be too tired to cook."

"Oh...you didn't have to do that."

She smiled up at me. "I know. But you never let me, so I just went ahead and took the initiative."

Her gaze was soft but pointed, her meaning clear.

*When are you going to take the initiative with us?*

“Well...thanks,” I said. “It smells great.”

“You look dead on your feet and sound worse. Morgan tells me you put in some overtime on the Big Island?”

“Yeah, but it turned out to be precautionary.” I glanced over at Kal who was clinging to the rope and hanging back until he was almost upside down. “So, thanks, again, Chloe...”

She smiled, and before I knew what was happening, she pushed back the brim of her hat and shyly kissed me on the cheek. “I’m glad you’re back. Get some rest and maybe tell me all about it sometime.” Before I had time to answer, she turned and waved at Kal. “Bye, Kaleo! See you Monday in class.”

“Bye, Miss Barnes!” he called back, upside down.

She gave me a small, parting smile and drove out.

“Fucking hell,” I muttered. The dish in my hands smelled amazing and my stomach grumbled. “Hey buddy, you hungry?”

“Yes!” Kaleo climbed off the tire swing and walked with me to the back door of my house. “Did Miss Barnes kiss you?”

“You saw that, eh?”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Does that mean you like her now instead of Faith?”

I winced. “No. Chl—Miss Barnes just gave me a peck on the cheek. Doesn’t mean anything.”

“She likes you.”

“How do you know that?”

He scoffed. “I have eyes, Uncle Ash.”

“I see your point.”

“Plus, she asks about you sometimes. *A lot* of sometimes.”

“Yeah, well we don’t need to talk about it anymore.”

We entered my kitchen and Kal brought two plates from a cupboard so I could nuke two scoops of the rice dish. When it was ready, I served Kaleo who'd settled himself on a stool at the island. Standing across from him, I took one bite of mine and pushed the rest aside.

Kaleo glanced at my full plate. "No good? I think it's yummy."

"I'm just...not hungry," I lied.

My problem in a nutshell. I had someone right here I could possibly make something with if I gave her half a chance, but I'd rather starve if I couldn't have Faith. No one else was going to cut it.

*But she's there and you're here. Same fucking roadblock every time.*

I shot Kal a forced smile. "So your mom and dad's business is picking up. That's great."

He nodded and spoke around a mouthful of pineapple. "Mama's not worried about money anymore. She said Faith's idea was really good." He peered up at me. "Is she going to come back to visit?"

I glanced down at my uneaten food. "I don't know."

"Why not?"

"We've both been really busy with our jobs lately." I cocked my head. "What's with all the questions?"

He tilted a shoulder. "I like Miss Barnes a lot but she's my teacher. It'd be weird if you two got married."

I laughed gruffly. "Faith and Miss Barnes are my only options?"

"That's who Mama and Dad talk about most. They're worried about you because now you're working even harder than before. Dad says he wants you to be happy."

I expected to be pissed at my brother for constantly being in my business, but warmth flooded my chest.

“Yeah, well, I’m not getting married any time soon. If ever.”

“Because Faith doesn’t live here?”

*Jesus, this kid.*

“I’m not really *with* her, bud,” I said, and fuck me if that didn’t stab me in the chest. “We’re sort of in a holding pattern.”

“What does that mean?”

“Remember when we flew to Maui last Christmas? And how we couldn’t land for a while because the captain said there was an airplane traffic jam on the runway?”

“I remember. We had to fly around the island a bunch of times.”

“That’s a holding pattern. You’re off the ground but not really going anywhere.”

Kal’s face scrunched up in a frown. “How long does a holding pattern last?”

Question of the year. Over the last two months, Faith and I texted and called as much as our schedules would allow. We even FaceTimed once. Once and never again. Seeing her smile and hearing her laugh made me stupid with missing her, which had translated to me being super fucking awkward. She’d teased me that I’d spent too much time in the wilderness to use technology properly. The Seattle skyline had been her backdrop, and the whole fucking ordeal just served to remind me how far apart we were.

*So do something about it.*

I had five solid days off. Faith had been buried in work on some big-time ad account. But the last time we talked—a few days ago—she’d said it was finally winding down. Maybe...

My pulse picked up at the mere idea of seeing Faith, but I’d be breaking my vow to never step foot on the mainland again. Not just the mainland, but a bustling city of concrete and noise and everything I’d come to associate with my time on Wall Street—the years I’d put in to buy Morgan and me some

stability when we'd had none. I'd hated every second of it. Going back felt like taking a step backward, away from whatever healing I was searching for.

But seeing Faith again...

*Being with her might be its own kind of healing.*

I nodded. It was just a visit. My baggage could stay locked away for a few days. She was worth it. Moreover, I didn't know how much longer Faith and I could hold out on texts and phone calls. A holding pattern had to end before the plane ran out of fuel and crashed.

I cleaned up the dishes and Kal ran to the living room to play on my Xbox. I opened my laptop on the kitchen counter and searched flights, then stepped out onto the lanai. The sun wasn't even thinking about setting, and the ocean was the deepest blue. I texted Morgan a brief outline of a plan and told him to call me when he was free.

Kal and I tossed a ball around, played a card game, and when twilight approached, my phone rang.

"Give me a sec, buddy," I told Kaleo.

"Can I watch *Tales of Arcadia*?"

"I don't know what that is, but...sure." I waved him toward the TV and answered the phone. "Hey."

"You're going to Seattle?" Morgan asked immediately.

"Yeah, I wanted to make sure you'd be okay without me watching Kal for a few days."

"We'll be fine. Go."

I snorted a laugh; he sounded more eager than me. "Okay, I'm going to head out tomorrow night—"

"Tonight."

"What?"

"There are flights tonight, right? Redeyes?"

"I suppose..." I tucked the phone against my ear and went back to my laptop. "Yeah, one. At eleven tonight."

“Grab it. If you’re feeling up for it. You still sound like shit. Are you sure—?”

“I’m fine. Stop asking.”

“Then go to Seattle. Tonight.”

“Jesus, do I seem that fucking desperate to everyone? Between you and Kal and—”

“You have five days off, Ash. Make the most of them.”

I started to protest but no words came out.

“Exactly.” Morgan laughed. “I’m on my way to get the boy. Pack up, my brother. You’re going to do something for yourself for a damn change if I have to drive you to the airport myself.”

He hung up and I had to laugh for a moment, but it burned up fast at the thought of seeing Faith again. How I felt about her raged uncontained in my blood, in my thoughts, in my heart. It was probably fucking crazy to keep whatever we had alive. Neither of us were equipped to handle something real and would probably crash spectacularly.

That might be worth it too.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *Faith*

“Ms. Benson?”

I jerked out of a doze and lifted my head from my desk. “Hmm, what?”

My assistant, Jess, was standing over me. “Terrance wants to see you.”

I blinked and sat up. For a second, dopey déjà vu came over me, and I expected the pounding headache of a hangover to land on me. But it was plain, old-fashioned exhaustion that had me taking a catnap on my desk at four in the afternoon. I’d pulled three all-nighters in a row to finish a national commercial for Zuma, an athletic clothing brand based in Seattle, and submitted the final rough cut of the ad to Terrance earlier today. I must’ve dozed off waiting to hear the verdict.

“Am I in trouble?”

“Judging by the fact he can’t stop smiling, I’d say the opposite.”

I rose from my desk, smoothed my hair, and straightened my suit jacket—dark blue with white pinstripes. “Wish me luck.”

“Luck?” Jess smiled at me, disbelieving. “You’ve seen your ad, right? It’s...” She shook her head. “Let me put it this way, I’ve never teared up watching a commercial about snowboarders before.”

“Thank you,” I said and eased a breath, then headed for Terrance’s office.

Truthfully, I was pretty proud of the work my team and I had put in, but I hadn’t yet had the chance to fully grasp that it was finished. Four weeks of long nights, location shoots in Vancouver and Denver, and meetings all up and down the West Coast left me burned out. So burned out, that instead of wanting to celebrate with my usual brand of all-nighter—

partying it up with Viv—I just wanted to go home, take a hot bath, and sleep.

*That's not exhaustion, that's Kauai.*

Since I'd returned from my leave of absence, I'd approached my job differently. Intently. The Nestle account was locked in but that was a huge, slow-moving barge of a campaign. Meanwhile, Terrance had made me creative director for the Zuma commercial, and I'd thrown myself at it, initiating an advertisement that focused on the personal stories of snowboarders, their triumphs and defeats, as they tried to make their Paralympic and Winter Olympic dreams come true. The focus had been family. The connections between the athletes and their teams, their coaches, their partners, and their parents who'd sacrificed so much to support their goals.

All the things I lacked.

*Slow down, Freud. Let's not be dramatic.*

But two weeks in Kauai with my beautiful firefighter somehow scrambled my DNA—I hardly recognized myself and found I was examining my life as if it were the quartz prism around my neck, turning it over and over and seeing things differently. *Feeling* them differently. Or maybe letting myself feel them for the first time.

“It's all Asher's fault,” I muttered and smiled sweetly at a passing colleague.

*We don't think about him at work*, I reminded myself as I approached Terrance's office. That's likely why I was everyone's favorite Employee of the Month—working my ass off until I passed out every night was the only way to keep from thinking about Asher Mackey.

Or touching myself to the memories of his body moving over and inside mine.

Or crying over him...

*Nope! Not going there.*

I knocked loudly on my boss's door, then peeked my head in. Judging by his beaming smile that looked like a permanent



fixture, I guessed Jess was right.

“Faith.” Terry shook his head, and I could hear the rough cut of my ad running on his desktop monitor. “Come, sit.”

“Turned out pretty good, right?”

“Pretty good?” My boss chuckled and shut off the ad. “This has *Clio Awards* written all over it. Josh Johnson—remember him? Zuma’s tightwad exec VP? He wants to throw a party in your honor.”

“Glad they like it.”

Terrance’s smile slipped. “You okay?” Before I could answer, he waved a hand. “You’re exhausted, and I don’t blame you. I know how hard you’ve been working on this, Faith, and I have to say, any and all hesitation about making you partner has evaporated. I don’t know what happened to you in...Tahiti?”

“Hawaii,” I said. “Kauai, Hawaii.”

“Right. Whatever happened there...I like it.”

*Asher Mackey happened.*

I nearly closed my eyes at the sudden pang in my heart for how much I missed my firefighter. Over the last two months, we’d tried to keep whatever we had alive with texts and phone calls, but it wasn’t working. Not being with him, not touching and kissing him, not seeing that adorable furrow in his brow when he was grumpy...it had taken a toll.

*I didn’t think it’d be this hard.*

Terrance sat back, laced his fingers over his Armani suit front. “So what do you say? Partner? It’s just sitting here, waiting for you.”

“It’s a generous offer, but—”

“I think you’re primed, Faith,” Terrance cut in. “You don’t have the burden of family obligations to weigh you down at this particular juncture in your career. I feel like I can give you every major account we have, and you’ll fly with it.”

“Right,” I said slowly, reading between the lines. “Because I’m so unattached.”

I had nothing tying me to anything, but if I made partner, I’d be tied to the agency. To Seattle. That was another annoying aspect to come out of Kauai. Seeing Asher’s beautiful family—one he and his brother made from scratch—was like shining a light on my own empty spaces. The relationship with my parents was nonexistent; I had no one to come home to...

Terrance frowned. “Do you still need to think about it?”

“What does Cynthia think?” I blurted. The agency’s other partner had been out of town again, this time in London, but suddenly, I really wanted to hear a boss-lady’s perspective. Cynthia Cross had a husband and three kids. Sounded like she had plenty of “family obligations” and still managed to make it work.

“She’s on board, of course.” Terrance held up a hand. “Go home. Get some rest. Come back on Monday and we’ll talk.”

I nodded and rose from the office. At the door, Terry’s stopped me.

“An award-winner, Faith.” He pointed at his monitor. “Mark my words.”

I smiled thinly and headed out. I sent Jess home and sat at my desk in my huge, empty office. Twilight was falling outside the massive windows, bathing Seattle in hues of orange and purple. Spires and towers of concrete as far as the eye could see. The urge to call Asher and hear his voice was overpowering. But a few days ago, he’d been called to the Big Island to deal with an erupting volcano.

I’d made an ad for snow pants.

*He wins.*

But Asher’s imagined voice followed on the heels of the thought, scolding me gently for being too hard on myself. For not giving myself enough credit for what I’d created. My win at my job wasn’t life or death, but it wasn’t nothing. I wanted to celebrate. Just a little.

Silas was on the East Coast on business, but it was Friday night. Viv was—or had been—always down to hang out, even if things between us had been strained lately. I grabbed my phone and sent a text.

**Hey, Viv. I finished the ad. Could use some company, I** sent and added a few celebratory emojis.

I waited with my breath held. After returning to Seattle, we'd texted a few times, but they'd been tense and short. Viv still hadn't forgiven me for skipping town without telling her. My work didn't interest her in the slightest either, so she was constantly pissy with me that I'd been too busy to resume our normal nocturnal activities. But I couldn't afford to lose work time to a hangover and wasn't about to hook up with any man not named Asher Mackey.

The reply came a few moments later. **Finally! Altura tonight?** she sent, followed by champagne glasses.

I bit my lip. **I'm dead tired. How about my place with a bottle of wine and a movie?**

A pause and then, **Booooring. Damn, girl. Talk to me when you're ready to have an actual good time.** A petulant text followed the first. **Like you used to \*\*\*\*before\*\*\*\* you went to Hawaii.**

I sighed and sat for long moments in the quiet. The entire agency was still, everyone having gone home for the day. The silence became unbearably loud. I picked up my phone again, and because I'd evidently lost my mind, I called my mother.

It went to voicemail.

"Hey, Mom," I said haltingly. "It's been a while and I... Well, I've got some good news at work and just wanted to share. Anyway, call me back when you have a sec. Love you."

I hung up and touched my forehead to my desk. I hadn't spoken to my mother in a meaningful way in more than a year and suddenly I was calling her for...what? Validation? Approval?

"Just go home," I muttered.

I grabbed my purse and was about to shove my phone in it when it lit up with Asher's name. I sank back down into my chair, my heart thudding loud and hard.

"Hey, you," I answered. "How...how are you?"

"I'm good," he said. "And I miss you."

"I miss you too."

Bam, *I miss you*. It was the first time either of us had said something like that on a call, never mind right off the bat. We'd kept everything as light as possible, as if we were both afraid to say more than our geographical separation would allow. We hadn't even sexted, for crying out loud, and now my entire body and heart felt like they were reaching across the Pacific for him.

"You sound hoarse. Was it very smoky on the Big Island?"

"It wasn't great," he said. "I probably didn't wear my mask enough, but it's too hard to shout orders."

I nodded against the phone. My firefighter was shouting orders because he was now my *lieutenant* firefighter. The fact that he'd taken his promotion spoke volumes, but I shoved the ramifications away. It was too good to talk to him.

"I finished the ad," I said. "Turned out pretty well."

"Yeah? I'm not surprised in the least. Congrats."

Hot tears sprung to my eyes. "Thank you. I sort of needed to hear that from someone who doesn't stand to make millions off of it."

"No, you made something out of nothing with your own two hands, right? You had a vision and you made it real. We have to celebrate."

"We?"

"I was thinking of coming to visit. Tonight."

I nearly dropped the phone. "Really? Tonight?"

"There's a redeye that leaves in a few hours. Gets in tomorrow morning."

“Yes!” I practically shouted, then mentally kicked myself. “I’d love that. How long can you stay?”

“I have five days off. That’s probably too much for you with your work schedule...”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll take personal leave, or I can work around it... Hell, I’ll tell them I’ve been kidnapped and won’t be released for exactly five days.”

Asher chuckled, his deep voice sounding rougher and sexier than ever. “I’ll grab a hotel and—”

“Jeez, Mackey,” I said, trying to sound flirty and light over my pounding heart. “We’ve been naked together. No hotel. You’ll stay with me. Okay?”

“Okay,” he said quietly. “I’ll text you when I land. See you soon, Faith.”

“Tomorrow,” I said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”



The following morning, I showered and primed and prepared my body for ravishment, but no text arrived from Asher. At nine a.m. I checked the flight times online. The only Lihue-to-SeaTac redeye should’ve arrived around seven-thirty in the morning. I texted him but there was no answer.

Finally, at around ten-thirty, just when I’d convinced myself he’d changed his mind and stayed home, a text came in.

**Sorry. I’m in town. Had to sleep.**

I frowned and texted back. **Where are you?**

**Hotel. Don’t want to get you sick.**

I fumed. **Hotel? We talked about this. What’s wrong?**

**Prob just laryngitis. It happens after a call sometimes. Be gone in 24.**

That wasn’t going to cut it. I itched to call him, but if it hurt to talk, I didn’t want to add to his pain. My fingers flew. **Which hotel? I’ll come over.**

**If it's a bug, don't want to give it to you.**

**You won't. I haven't had so much as a sniffle in years which is pretty amazing considering the only vitamins I take are V-O-D-K and A.**

There was a pause in which I knew my firefighter was wrestling with the decision, putting me first when what he needed was someone to bring him soup or medicine. He needed to let someone take care of him for a change.

I heaved a breath and sent another text.

**Being sick wouldn't feel as terrible as being in the same town and not seeing you.**

Another pause and then, **Centennial Hotel. Room 333**

My pulse ratcheted up again. **Be there soon <3**



After a pit stop at a supermarket for lozenges, gourmet soup, bottled water, and flowers, I arrived at the Centennial. On the third floor of the elegant hotel, I shuffled the bouquet under my arm and knocked on door 333.

I huffed a breath, amazed at how crazy-nervous I felt. Now that Asher was here, every minute of our two-month separation smacked me in the face. I'd dressed in a pretty violet shift dress and brushed my hair out so that it fell in soft waves over my shoulders. I wanted to be beautiful for him.

The door opened and Asher's expression—tired but somehow more handsome than I remembered—completely came undone. His eyes widened, his jaw dropped, taking me in.

“Hi,” I said.

*Hi*, he mouthed and motioned me in. He seemed unable to take his eyes off me, and I couldn't stop staring at my firefighter, either. It was almost hard to believe he was here after living for so long in my fevered imagination.

I stepped inside the room—a suite, with a couch in front of a TV and a small kitchenette. I set the items down on the counter. When my arms were free, I moved to him, pressed myself against him. “Asher...”

He brushed the hair from my face, eyes roaming. His brow furrowed with an intense expression I’d never seen him wear, as if he were just as troubled by the pull between us, the heat and longing. The *need*...

I moved to kiss him, but he turned his head. “Don’t want to get—”

“You don’t want to get me sick,” I said. “I know. But I don’t care.”

“*I care.*”

He pulled me to him and instead of kissing me, he held me close, one hand in my hair, the other wrapped around my waist. My eyes fell shut and I melted against him, reveling in the feel of his strong body pressed to me and the scent of him. It was a little bit scary how good it felt to simply be held by him, with no expectation of something more.

*Because he missed me too.*

Tears sprang to my eyes, but I blinked them away and pulled back. “I’d imagined our reunion would be more of you tearing off my clothes and having your way with me for all hours, but playing Florence Nightingale works too.” I took his hand and led him back to the couch.

“Sorry,” he said, sitting down heavily. His voice was scratchy and rough, and clearly, it hurt to speak. “Wanted to take you out, do something special for you...”

“Don’t be sorry,” I said, moving to the kitchenette and busying myself with the soup. “And don’t say things like that, you’ll make a girl cry.”

I brought him the container of soup—chicken noodle—and a spoon and sat beside him. He took it gratefully, eyes still on me. Feeling was mutual: I couldn’t pry my eyes from him if I tried. Somehow, he made flannel pants and a V-neck undershirt look impossibly erotic.

“You look tired.” I smoothed the hair above his ear. “Too much work.”

“You too,” he croaked.

“Probably,” I said. “My ad got made in record time because it was the antidote to thinking about you.”

He nodded, and the intensity in his brown eyes said more than he was able. He spooned a few bites of soup then set it on the coffee table.

“You want something for the pain?”

He shook his head, and I could see he needed rest. I pulled him to me and put his head in my lap, grazing my fingers lightly through his hair.

“Feels good,” he whispered, moments away from sleep. My fatigue from the last few weeks crashed over me. Before either of us could pass out, I gently pushed him against the couch lengthwise. He stretched out and I stretched out along with him.

“This okay?” I asked, my head pillowed on his chest.

His arms around me tightened. “Perfect.”

My heart ached, because being with him again was perfect...and temporary.

“Asher? Remember back at your friend’s restaurant when I asked if we were in trouble?”

“Yeah.” He sighed, his chest rising and falling under me. “I know.”



I woke sometime in the late afternoon to Asher rummaging in the kitchen for some water. He looked better already, that is to say—ungodly sexy.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hi.” I pushed myself to sitting. “You sound better.”

“Told you. Twenty-four hours.”



I frowned. “Does that happen often? You get laryngitis from what? Smoke inhalation?”

“I wouldn’t say often.”

My frown deepened. “Once is too many. That can’t be healthy.”

“I’m fine,” he said, coming to sit beside me. He slipped his hand to cup my jaw, his thumb brushing over my lower lip. “And you’re beautiful.”

“Don’t change the subject.” I took one of his hands in mine, my heart overflowing and me not having the first clue what to do about it. “How bad was it? Did the volcano erupt?”

“Not this time.”

“This time? You’ve been there before?”

“The Kīlauea volcano was one of my first calls when I joined the fire station,” Asher said. “About four years ago. Twenty-four fissures opened and the summit collapsed. We were called in to assist the local crews when the lava flows wouldn’t quit. It was a shit show. Seven hundred houses lost.”

“God, I can’t imagine watching that happen right in front of you.”

“It’s terrible but kind of majestic, too. Lava isn’t like fire,” he said. “You can’t aim a hose at it and put it out. It just keeps coming, rolling like a slow wave, eating everything in its path. All you can do is surround and drown nearby structures and help people stay out of its way. Be a shoulder to lean on when you tell them they’ve lost everything.” Asher’s voice thickened and he cleared it with a rough shrug. “Anyway, that’s what you sign up for.”

I had a million more questions, but I hadn’t seen him in months and felt we were both resettling into each other. He didn’t like me prying in his personal stuff anyway. I had no idea where this visit was going but maybe that was for the best. Maybe we should attempt to maintain some distance.

*Yeah, good luck with that.*

“How are Morgan and Nalani?” I asked instead. “And little Kal?”

“They’re great. Busy, thanks to you.”

“Definitely not just me. They know what they’re doing. They just needed a little fresh innovation.”

“Maybe. Whatever it is, it’s working. My solution was just to throw money at them until they figured out how to use it.”

“Because you take care of them.” I nudged his arm. “It’s pretty much your thing.”

“I suppose.” Asher looked at me. “I’m sorry I got shitty with you about my childhood stuff.”

“I get it. It’s hard to imagine, but we haven’t known each other all that long. You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to tell me. And I should never have made you feel weird about keeping your privacy.”

“You didn’t.” Asher’s gaze held me intently. “I was trying to keep you at a distance but that’s fucking impossible.”

I swallowed to hear my thoughts in his voice.

“I guess I felt weird about it,” he continued, “because it’s some shit that he and I went through, and I want it to be over, but it never is.”

“What do you mean?”

“You asked me why I became a firefighter. I think it’s because that’s how it started for Morgan and me. With a fire.”

I sat, rapt, while he took a sip of water and began to talk, erasing whatever lingering distance remained between us with every word.

“Our mom got hooked on pain killers, and pain killers became heroin faster than you’d believe. The next thing we knew, she wasn’t there anymore. She and her sleazy boyfriend—one in a chain of many—set our trailer on fire. If Morgan hadn’t woken up to use the bathroom...” Asher shook his head. “He was eleven. I was about seventeen. I knew if he got put in the foster system, he’d be taken away from me. Maybe

put somewhere I couldn't get to him. That wasn't about to fucking happen, so I got us out of there."

"To New York," I said when he took more water.

He nodded. "I had four hundred bucks to my name. I got us in a cheap hotel, got Morgan enrolled in school, took the GED, and got a job while applying for any college scholarship I could find."

*At Columbia flipping University*, I thought, waiting for Asher to mention that part, but of course he didn't.

"For a stretch, I lived in constant fear the authorities would come busting down the door and take Morgan away from me."

"How did they not?"

"I don't think they looked for us," he said, his expression dark. "If they did, they didn't look very hard. Don't know what happened to my mom. For all I know, she thinks we didn't make it out of that fire. She's probably dead by now or in jail if she's lucky."

I waited, watching the bitterness and pain wash over his face.

"But I had help," he said after a minute and another sip of water. "The secretary at Morgan's school caught on pretty quick that I was the one signing papers and making excuses for parent-teacher conferences that were never going to happen. I think she protected us as best she could. When I was eighteen, out of the hotel and in an apartment, I applied to be his legal guardian." He shrugged, his gaze distant. "The image of Morgan standing there, in that smoke-filled room, looking scared... It was the beginning of the end of a normal childhood, not that it was all that great to begin with. And since then, I guess I'm always putting out fires." He gave a rueful laugh. "I'm a walking psych cliché."

I rested my cheek against his shoulder. "I think it's beautiful what you did for him. How hard you worked to stay together."

"I'd do it a million times over, but the upshot is that part of me is always on high alert, waiting for the next shoe to drop—

a phone call in the night, an alarm. At least when they come at the fire station, I go and fight.”

“No more fighting,” I said softly. “At least for the next five days.” I leaned in to kiss him, but he turned away again. “Asher...”

“I want to kiss you so fucking badly I can hardly breathe,” he said. “But—”

“Then do it,” I said. “You aren’t sick and even if you were, it’s worth it. *You* are worth it.”

His eyes flared at that, then darkened with want. He kissed me, then. Finally. I felt it in every corner of my body, lighting little flares that rocketed all through me and making my heart swell ten sizes. With that kiss, I knew, without a doubt, that whatever we had, it wasn’t a fling or an infatuation. The depth of it was real and scared me to death because no matter how close we were in that moment, we lived thousands of miles apart.

*Not now. Right now, he’s right here...*

Our kisses became more heated and urgent, and we moved to the bed, leaving a trail of discarded clothing behind. When we were naked, he rolled us onto our sides, the wall of his chest warm and hard against my back. He kissed the arch of my neck, my shoulder, his tongue flickering, teeth grazing.

“Are you trying not to breathe in my face?” I asked incredulously, even as shards of white-hot pleasure streaked down my spine with his every wet, heated touch.

“Maybe,” he growled, his voice still husky. “Or maybe I just want to fuck you from behind.”

I moaned and melted against him, surrendering to whatever was going to happen next.

One of his arms slid under me, and he grasped my breast, pinching and teasing the nipple. His other hand went around the front, between my legs. He slid his fingers along the wetness that was there, using it to make circles over my clit.

I bit back a cry and reached behind me to take his cock in my hand and stroked it in conjunction with his fingers.

“Fuck, Faith, I have to get in this pussy,” he ground out, and I could’ve come right then and there at the raw need in his words. “Condom...”

He started to untangle himself from me, but I held onto him tight.

“Asher, wait,” I said, my voice thick. “I had a checkup for my ankle when I got back. Full checkup, *Depo* shot, and...I haven’t been with anyone since you.”

He froze, lifting his head to look at me over my shoulder. “No one?”

I shook my head and held my breath.

“Neither have I,” he said. “I can’t fucking *look* at another woman, Faith.”

I exhaled. “Then no condom. Just you.”

Those words spurred him. His mouth savaged my neck, biting and licking until I was half out of my mind, arching myself into him, my hand stroking his huge erection and guiding it to my entrance.

“Faith,” he said tightly, like a prayer, and pressed into me.

If the word *finally* could be a feeling, it surged all through me. Finally, I had him again. Finally, he was mine, and the heavy pressure of him filled me, leaving room for nothing and no one else.

“Yes,” I managed, reaching up to bury my fingers in his hair. “Just like that, firefighter. Fuck me just like that.”

Asher curled his arm under my thigh and lifted my leg to thrust deeper, faster, hitting that perfect spot inside me again and again. I’d been deprived of him for so long that I came within seconds, the orgasm ripping through me hard and fast and leaving me weak. I slumped onto my stomach, taking him with me. He braced himself with his forearms on top of me, still thrusting, still biting and licking, stoking a second orgasm from the first.

“I felt you come, Faith,” he growled in my ear. “You came hard around my cock...”

I nodded, delirious, his words like their own kind of touch, hitting me deep where he still moved in and out of me.

“And you got wetter for me, didn’t you? So wet...”

“Yes...” I whispered.

“Let me feel it.”

He slipped his other hand under me, between my legs. His fingers slid over the wetness while still slowly pumping his cock in and out. Then faster, harder, deeper.

“Oh God,” I murmured incoherently into the pillow, driven by his merciless thrusts. I slid my hand on top of his, moving his fingers how I liked it while he drove into me. He was right where I needed him to be, and I was buried under him, just where I wanted to be.

“Yours,” I whimpered. “All yours...”

“Because no one’s going to be here but me.”

“No one.”

“*Mine*,” he said and punctuated the word with a hard thrust. “This sweet pussy comes only for me.”

I cried out, clutched his forearm, nails digging in while my other hand stayed on top of his that was stroking me in tandem with his cock, driving me to the edge. We rocked together, our hips stacked, his chest sealed to my back. A second orgasm erupted through me and I tensed, my chest constricting so I could hardly move or breathe. The pleasure flooded me—like lava, I imagined—searing hot and devouring everything in its path.

Asher’s thrusts deepened, then he made a sound low in his chest and emptied himself inside me. It was hot and sticky and raw, and the sounds he made while coming were the sexiest I’d ever heard in my life, yet I felt like crying.

*Because this is what I want. Always.*

His pistoning hips slowed and then stopped. He withdrew to slump back onto his side. He took me with him, arms wrapped around me, but this time holding me securely. His mouth was gentle now as he laid kisses between my shoulder blades, my neck, my ear.

Eventually, I got up to use the restroom and clean myself up. When I came back to bed, he reached for me and put me in the same exact position—wrapped up in him.

As we drifted into heavy, satiated sleep, I realized I could've stayed there forever. Me, who'd never let a man keep me for longer than a night, settled into Asher's protective embrace, and I never wanted him to let me go.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Asher*

I woke, disoriented, and with a raging hard-on. The room was dark and unfamiliar, and the erotic dreams about Faith I'd had last night were still lingering. Then a figure in bed beside me stirred, and I blinked fully awake.

"Hey, you," Faith purred, pressed up against me and gloriously naked. "Good morning."

It all rushed back in, and a profound relief flooded me that it wasn't a dream. I was here, with her.

"Hey," I said, stroking her hair that was messy from having my hands in it all night. "You been up long?"

"For as long as you have," she said, indicating my erection that tented the sheet. "I've been waiting impatiently for you to wake up so I can have my way with you."

I pushed myself up to sit against the hotel headboard. "You don't need to wait for me to wake up," I said, my voice rougher with need than anything else now. "Don't let me stop you."

Faith shook her head, fingertips trailing over my chest. "Consent, my darling. It goes both ways."

I chuckled. "I appreciate that, but you don't need a permission slip from me."

She smiled slyly and pulled back the sheet. "Let's just take it one salacious interlude at a time, shall we?"

I laughed, and the laugh turned into a hiss as she wrapped her luscious mouth around my cock and began to suck.

"Fuck..." I gritted out. "Faith..."

I lay back against the pillows while she worked me over, her mouth warm and wet, her teeth grazing lightly until I was ready to combust.



“I planned for just this,” she said after a few moments, sitting up. “But I’m too selfish.”

She swung her leg, straddling me, hands on my shoulders. Taking control. Her confidence and ease in her own body was so fucking hot, I could hardly restrain myself. She leaned in, her tongue flicking over my lips, and I craned to kiss her. She allowed me a taste while reaching between us and pressing my tip against her entrance, brushing my cock back-and-forth, teasing, torturing.

“Faith...” I warned.

“Always so ready for you,” she breathed, slicking the length of me with her arousal. “Always...”

My chest tightened and I gripped her hips. “Jesus Christ...”

“If you want me, firefighter...” She returned her hands to my shoulders, bracing herself. “Then take me.”

With a muttered curse, I brought her down on me while driving up at the same time. She arched her back into that thrust, head thrown, and let out an X-rated moan. Watching her take me inside her nearly undid me but I restrained myself from complete animal abandon. A few slow, deep thrusts and then we fell into a rhythm. Faith rode me, forehead pressed to mine. My world eclipsed to a heated delirium that was just her, grabbing and grasping at her smooth, silky flesh, trying to cram two months of separation into the four days I had left here.

And that’s how we spent the rest of the morning.

We ordered room service at nine but couldn’t keep our hands off each other long enough to eat it. I licked honey off her tits, then went down on her until her cries made the neighbor bang the wall.

We took a shower, and I had her again as water streamed off her body in rivulets, hot and wet.

An eleven a.m. checkout forced us to take a break. We dressed and went to her place, a sleek condo in a rich neighborhood. It all looked like city sameness to me—cement, noise, too many people.

“Shall I give you the tour?” Faith asked, inside her place that had views of the skyline, light streaming in from huge windows.

“Sure,” I said, pulling her in close. “Start with the bedroom.”



The rest of the day was a blur of heated hours in her bed, takeout food, and talking. I liked talking to Faith as much as I liked fucking her, if not more. She made me laugh harder than I could remember, and I didn't feel bottled up around her. I was myself—or closer to whatever *myself* was—when I was with her. As if my own damn skin fit me better.

Monday morning, we put clothes on—flannel sleep pants for me, a flimsy silk slip for her—and managed to keep them on while we sipped coffee in her spacious kitchen that was all stainless steel and white marble. Faith called into her work to take a few personal days.

“That felt strange,” she said, setting her phone back on the counter. “I used to take personal days when a new club opened or when Saks had a sale.”

“Then don't take it,” I said. “I don't want to interfere.”

“For the last two months, I worked late nights, weekends, sixteen-hour days—or longer. Stop the presses, ladies and gents, but I think I've actually *earned* a few days off.”

I smiled, a strange concoction of admiration and misery mixing in me. She was slaying at her job because she obviously wanted to achieve something with it. Build something.

*And you took a promotion, jackass. Suck on that one.*

“Sounds like the commercial was important,” I said. “How'd it turn out?”

Faith's cheeks turned pink, and she toyed with her coffee spoon. “My boss likes it. He thinks it could win a Clio. That's like an Emmy but for commercials. Kind of a big deal.”

“Jesus, Faith. That’s...huge.” I strode over to her, took her coffee mug out of her hand, and wrapped my arms around her. “Why did you wait so long to tell me?”

“We’ve been *busy*.” She ringed her arms around my neck and kissed me, hot and wet and full of intention.

“Don’t change the subject,” I teased and pulled back before the clothes came off again. “And we definitely need to celebrate. *Outside*.”

“If you insist,” she said, though I could see it made her happy. And that made me happy. “What should we do? Do you want to see the sights?”

I had zero interest in exploring the city but on the flight over, I’d vowed to make an effort for her sake.

“I’m open,” I said. “Whatever you want to do.”

“Well, our physical exertions over the last two days have left me ravenous. Let’s get lunch, and tonight, I want you to meet Silas.”

“The good best friend.” I said.

She smiled. “The *best* best friend.” Then her smile slipped as a sudden thought occurred to her. “Oh shit.”

“What is it?”

She looked at me almost fearfully. “You said your mother became addicted to painkillers.”

I nodded. “Yeah, Oxy-something.”

“Oxy-Pro.” Faith murmured, looking dazed. “God, I’m so stupid.”

“What’s wrong?”

She faced me directly. “Silas Marsh is the CEO of Marsh Pharma, the maker of Oxy-Pro.”

I stared, my brain trying to work out the ramifications, the bizarre coincidence, as if Faith were playing a joke on me. I chuckled, disbelieving. “What? No...”

But Faith's expression was uncharacteristically serious. "Yes."

"Wait, you're telling me your best friend...?"

She nodded. "But he wasn't in charge then. His father and his cronies were the criminals, and Silas wrestled control from them. He's been trying to fix it every day since." She studied me, biting her lip. "I'm sorry. I could have told you sooner, but it wasn't my story to tell. But now there's a connection..."

"It's okay," I said.

"It is?"

I nodded slowly, surprised that it was the truth. I expected to be completely fucking enraged at Silas's family for tearing mine apart, but the anger that simmered in me wasn't running as hot as it used to. One look at Faith and I knew why—she was like a cool water over the burn, and when I was with her, the old pain seemed farther away. Less powerful.

*She's making me a better man...*

"It wasn't his fault," I said, answering her worried expression. "Was it?"

"Well, no..." Faith gazed at me, her eyes full, then wrapped her arms around my neck. "You're amazing. And you have every right to be hurt, but I promise you, Silas is a good man. And so are you."

"Getting there," I said, then kissed her.

"You arrived a long time ago," she said and smiled tremulously, her eyes shining. "I'm a lucky gal."

Then she turned away to conceal her emotions and made a joke, and I just smiled and watched her, thinking all the while about the crazy curveballs life threw at us. And that maybe the key to survival wasn't trying to avoid them—impossible—but how we reacted to them. I could've ruined Faith's night, ruined her anticipation of me meeting the guy who was so important to her, but what for?

Wrecking Faith's happiness was pretty fucking low on my list of things I wanted to do, and instead of holding onto

resentment or anger toward Silas, I did something that would make Momi proud and let it go.



We showered, and I put on dark pants and a lightweight jacket over a white button-down. Faith changed into a white dress with large, colorful flowers all over it, belted at her slender waist. She'd put on make-up, perfume, a few pieces of jewelry, and high heels. My heart stuttered to see her, so beautiful and so comfortable. *Cosmopolitan*, I guessed was the word.

*Because she looks like she stepped out of a magazine.*

"You don't like?" she asked, twirling her dress.

"I like a lot," I said. "You're stunning."

She kissed her finger and put it between my brows. "Let's go."

We stepped out to the street and instead of calling an Uber, Faith raised an elegant arm and a cab stopped immediately. Another guy standing nearby, not seeing me, rushed to open the door for her.

She smiled prettily at him and climbed in.

"I got it from here," I told the guy with a glare. He backed off with a muttered apology.

"This restaurant is one of my favorites," Faith said as the car took us into a section of the city that bustled with cafés, restaurants, and shops. Her hand gripped mine suddenly. "Are you okay being here? I remember what you said about your time on Wall Street and maybe... Shit, I'm sorry. I wasn't even thinking."

"It's fine," I said. "It's not like I have PTSD from being in a city. It's more like..."

*It's more like I don't belong here anymore. But she does.*

"I'm fine, I swear." I leaned in to kiss her. "Thank you."

"For what?"

“Being you.”

“I see what you did there.” She smiled slyly, but her cheeks colored again, and then she kissed me with a different kind of intention. Just because she wanted to.

*We are so fucked.*

We stepped inside the restaurant that was bright and busy with a glass wall behind the bar that made the bottles glitter. People in business attire sat talking with briefcases by their sides instead of beach bags. It all seemed loud and chaotic, but Faith was in her element. She chatted with the maître d’ as if they’d known each other forever, and then we were guided to the bar to wait for our table.

We hadn’t been there for longer than a minute when a gasp cut through the bar chatter.

*“Faith?”*

A woman with dark hair and dressed in designer clothing from bag to shoes approached, her eyes fixed on me. “I thought that was you.”

“Viv!” Faith said, looking suddenly nervous. The women air-kissed each other’s cheeks. “Asher Mackey, this is my friend, Vivienne Simone.”

Clearly, this was the friend whom Faith didn’t tell about Hawaii. Also clearly, Faith hadn’t told her about me either. A knowing smile I didn’t like spread over Vivienne’s red lips.

“A pleasure. Faith has been keeping you a secret, apparently.”

Faith laughed lightly. “What are you doing here, Viv?”

“Oh, I’m meeting Jill and Bianca for lunch,” Viv said, still sizing me up. “But who cares, I’m dying of curiosity. Tell me, how ever did you two meet?”

“It’s the craziest story,” Faith said. “I twisted my ankle on a trail and Asher was one of the firemen who came to my rescue.”

Vivienne's eyes widened, her voice turning cool. "I see. This happened in Hawaii. Two months ago."

"Well, yes," Faith said.

Vivienne brightened, appraising me all over again with fresh eyes and looking strangely triumphant. "A firefighter. Now it all makes sense." She laughed loudly, like a clanging bell. "A little souvenir from your trip?"

My hackles went up. "No, it was more like I couldn't stand to be away from Faith for another second."

"Uh huh. Take a number, honey." Viv looked at the door. "My friends are here. This restaurant's a bit played out. I think I'll take them somewhere else. *So* nice to meet you, Asher."

She shot Faith a wink and sauntered out to join two women at the entry. All three looked our way, whispering together, then went out in a burst of laughter.

"She seems fun," I muttered.

"I used to be like that," Faith said. "Not all that long ago, either." She raised her eyes to mine. "You might not be able to tell, but she's glad to see you. The distance between her and me lately now makes sense to her." Her phone on the bar buzzed a text. "Yep. See?"

She showed me the text from Vivienne that read **That's my girl**, followed by three flame emojis.

Faith gave a small sigh. "At least it's universally acknowledged that you're hot." Her smile faded. "She thinks you're just another guy in a long line of guys I won't remember being with in the morning."

"Doesn't matter," I said. "It doesn't make you anything *less than*, Faith."

"I know. But she thinks she knows what's happening between you and me, and she wouldn't believe it if I told her it was something else. As if I weren't capable."

"That's on her." I reached across the table and took Faith's hand. "You don't have to prove yourself to anyone but you."

“You’re sweet.” She gave my hand a squeeze. “Before you, I only had Silas saying things like that to me. It’s like you go along on a certain path, and it seems fine and fun and maybe a little reckless. But you don’t know what else is out there until you sit still for a minute.” She shook her head. “Anyway, it feels nice having someone else who believes in me.”

“Where are your parents?” I asked. “Do they know?”

“Know what?”

“That your agency wants to make you a partner and that you probably made an award-winning commercial. Do they know any of that?”

“They’re here but they’re not really *here* if you know what I mean. I called my mother a few days ago and left a message, telling her about the ad. Like shouting into a void. Still waiting for the return call.”

I scowled. “What the hell is her problem?”

“Where do I start?” Faith toyed with a cocktail napkin, then glanced up at me. “You really want to hear this?”

“If you want to tell it.”

“There’s not much to tell. I told you about their money and how they wanted me to go to a good college and all that. But that was basically the beginning and end of their actual parenting. They divorced when I was ten and the ensuing custody battle was a little rough on me.”

“They fought for you,” I said, but she shook her head.

“They made me choose who got custody.”

“What the fuck... You were *ten*?”

She nodded. “Neither was truly hoping to be the Chosen One, by the way. They just wanted to use me as a weapon against the other. I opted to live with my dad but only because Carmella worked for him, and she was my favorite housekeeper. I knew she’d end up taking care of me more than either of them, but my mother never forgave me. Which is kind of silly because she was never cut out to be a mom. She should’ve stuck with her horses and that awful hairless cat...”



I coughed a laugh, mostly out of admiration for this woman who was stronger than she knew. But I'd known. I knew it when I told her she could've crawled out of Ho'opi'i if she had to.

"Anyway," Faith continued. "My mother stopped speaking to me and my father—immediately upon achieving his marital freedom—began taking a series of girlfriends, each one younger than the last. I like to make a lot of jokes about my father's proclivities with younger women but it's actually kind of terrible."

"I believe it."

"After I graduated college, I moved as far away from both of them as I could. Now my mother's in Connecticut and my father's in Miami with my new twenty-four-year-old stepmother. And here I am."

*Here she is. Basically alone but for Silas.*

"And you know, it didn't bother me for a really long time," Faith continued. "Or at least I didn't feel like it bothered me. I've been partying it up with Viv and basically acting like my father's mistresses—taking advantage of men with money, even though I don't need it. It wasn't until I met Silas and saw how he was with his husband, Max... I think that's when things started to shift for me. Hawaii must've pushed me over the edge." She arched a brow. "Or down a trail, which wasn't very nice if you think about it."

I smiled. "I get it. I'm the opposite. I never stopped being pissed off at my parents even though it's been years. I should just fucking let it go but I can't."

"You're always waiting for that alarm to go off," Faith said quietly. "For me it's more like a silence. A void. My parents never told me I was disobedient or dumb or made me feel bad about myself. They just didn't tell me anything. I grew up not knowing what to think so I let other people decide for me because I was pretty, or because I like to have fun, or maybe I was just trying to avoid figuring it all out for myself." She pretended to shiver dramatically. "Well that was deep. I'm

going to need a cocktail after that little psychological breakthrough.”

I laughed and whatever was between us settled down deeper, brought us closer. We had lunch and went back to her place. I kissed her deeply, undressed her slowly, and moved inside her with a kind of reverence I’d never felt for anyone. Our eyes were locked and neither of us could look away, and I wondered just how the fuck I was supposed to leave her.



“I’m so nervous,” Faith said after another shower and another change of clothes. Now she wore black slacks and a white sleeveless blouse. Her hair was piled on her head, showing off the elegant length of her neck that made me lose my mind. Because she was completely allergic to cooking, she ordered food delivery from a gourmet restaurant.

At six o’clock, a knock came at the door. She opened it to a tall blond guy, imposing and reeking of power. I’d seen his kind on Wall Street plenty of times, but Silas Marsh was a cut above. His clothes and hair and the watch on his wrist all screamed real wealth, but it was the way he carried himself that said we were talking billions, not millions.

*Billions in drug money.*

But the thought couldn’t sink any teeth in me, and I didn’t let it, anyway.

Stepping in behind Silas was another guy, not as tall or built but athletically slim with brown hair and eyes and a wide friendly smile. Where Silas’s expression looked wary and hard (like mine, probably), Max was immediately and instantaneously likable.

Faith kissed them each on the cheek and then moved to lace her arm in mine.

“Asher Mackey, this is Silas Marsh and his husband, Max Kaufman-Marsh.”

“Good to meet you,” Silas said, shaking my hand in a hard grip, his gaze even harder. Sizing me up.

*To see if I'm worthy of her.*

His loyalty to Faith made him instantly likeable too.

“Nice to meet you, Asher,” Max said nudging his husband aside and shaking my hand firmly but with less of a death grip than Silas. “I hear you were first on the scene when our gal ran into some trouble.”

“Something like that.”

“Asher put me in a helicopter basket and sent me on my way,” Faith said, guiding them to the living area where bottled sparkling water and canapes were arrayed on her coffee table. “It was at the hospital later that he really rescued me.”

She smiled softly at me. Gratefully. As if she weren't rescuing me right back.

“You've definitely got us beat,” Max said, laughing. “Silas and I met at an NA meeting. Not the stuff of romance.”

My head jerked up and Silas met my eye from across the coffee table.

“Oh hush,” Faith said. “Your love story is epic. I've always envied it until...” Her gaze darted to me then she smiled brightly. “Who's hungry?”

Silas was still watching me, and I got the message loud and clear.

*You and I should talk.*

I nodded in return; the NA comment had me curious as to what curveball was coming next. But he and Max were good people who obviously cared about Faith and were protective of her, all pluses in my book. Dinner flowed with easy conversation and laughs, but when Silas took some plates into the kitchen, I followed after him.

“Hey,” I said, joining him at the sink with dirty dishes.

“Hey. How are you liking Seattle so far? Big change from Kauai, I'd imagine.”

“You could say that,” I said. “But Seattle has its upsides. Or...one upside.”

“Her.”

I nodded. “So you and Max met in NA?”

“We did.” Silas leaned against the counter and faced me, arms crossed.

“You and I have something in common. Besides *her*.”

His stance relaxed. “Oh yeah?”

“I used to live in New York. Worked on Wall Street. Had a little too much fun, if you know what I mean. And my mother...” I cleared my throat. “She had less fun. Hurt her back and was prescribed Oxy-Pro.”

Silas stared a moment, then his head bowed. “Shit. I’m sorry for that. That doesn’t mean much after the fact—”

“It’s okay. From what Faith says, it happened before your watch. I didn’t tell you to make you feel like shit, I told you because you’re important to Faith and maybe this is my way of saying I appreciate it. Because she’s important to me too. I’d rather there not be any bullshit between us.”

Silas nodded, arms crossed and leaning against the counter. “You’re awfully generous, man. For what it’s worth, I sampled the company product myself. That’s what the NA comment from Max was about. So I know what that addiction feels like, and sure, it might not have been on my watch, but I’m really fucking sorry about your mom all the same.”

I nodded. “Thanks. Strange, though. I feel like this isn’t the first time we’ve met. I know that’s nuts but...”

“No, I get it,” Silas said with a wry smile. “That’s a strange side-effect of addiction. Closes distances. Like we’re members of a secret club and we all know the password.”

“Pretty much sums it up.”

A short silence fell in which any weirdness evaporated, and we relaxed into what I thought might be the start of a friendship.

“How long are you in town for?” he asked.

“Couple more days.”

“And then what happens?”

I thought my hackles would go up at his pointed question, but he was being upfront too. No bullshit.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what the fuck’s supposed to happen next.”

“I don’t want to get all up in your business—”

“Yes, you do because Faith is your business,” I said. “I’d be a dumbass to get in the way of that and wouldn’t want to, anyway.”

“I just don’t want her to get hurt. You’re the first guy she’s ever wanted me to meet. The first guy she’s ever mentioned *by name*.”

“She’s the first woman I’ve stepped onto the mainland for in years,” I said. “The only one I’d do it for.”

Silas nodded. “I know she really cares about you. Probably more than she’s willing to admit. But...I hate to point out the obvious; you haven’t been together all that long.”

He was right. Faith and I were new, but how I felt about her seemed like it was set deep down in me. As if it’d been there forever and had just been waiting for her.

“It’s hard to remember that sometimes.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Silas said. “She seems really happy. But you’re there and she’s here and that’s fucking rough. I get it. But maybe you don’t need to figure it all out in these few days. Maybe let things happen the way they’re supposed to happen.”

That was the opposite of how I operated. Being in control and staying that way had been my life’s goal. The second you let your guard down...

Silas broke me out of my thoughts with a hand on my shoulder. “You’re a good guy, Asher. I can see that.”

I smirked. “And if I hurt Faith, you’ll kick my ass.”

“Correct,” Silas said with a grin. “But that’s not what I was going to say. I was going to say, because you’re a good guy,

I'm not worried. Things will work out." His grin widened and his eyes softened. "If you don't believe me, go talk to Max. He's positivity personified."

We clasped hands, this time without the death grip of suspicion on his part and rejoined the others. The conversation flowed even easier now, and Max and Silas didn't leave until close to midnight.

When they'd gone, Faith and I cleaned up, then curled up in her bed.

"I noticed you and Silas had a long chat in the kitchen," she said, her head tucked under my chin. "Everything okay? Seems like you two hit it off."

"We got our shit sorted."

She relaxed against me. "I hope he didn't give you a hard time."

"Not much. He wanted to run a background check, criminal record..."

She laughed. "He's protective. It's sweet."

I pulled her closer. "I'm glad you have him."

*Someone to take care of her when I can't.*

Faith could take care of herself, but that didn't stop me from wanting to protect her. Keep other people's negative bullshit off of her and let her be who she wanted to be. Because I knew it could be something special if given half a chance.

*But not in Hawaii.*

The island had put her in crutches, and her time there was spent in pain, sweaty and struggling. Here, she was effortless—elegant and sexy in designer dresses and heels. Cabs screeched to a halt for her, and men broke their arms hurrying to open doors. She was alive and vibrant in a completely different way than she was in Kauai. This city was her natural habitat, and I snuffed out whatever unspoken hope may have been lurking in my heart.

It wasn't fair to her to do anything else.



“Here we are again,” Faith said two days later at the Departures terminal at Sea-Tac. “We’re stuck, aren’t we? Trapped somewhere between hello and goodbye.”

I nodded, my arms around her waist.

She gazed up at me searchingly. “What do we do?”

I thought about what Silas had said. “We just keep going. Make it work the best we can.”

“A long-distance relationship?” Faith frowned. “More like long-distance *relationshit*.”

“Let’s just take it day by day and see what happens.”

She nodded, her green eyes searching mine. “A relationship means...”

“No fucking around with other people,” I said. “I won’t, Faith. I promise. I think you’re...”

*I think you’re it for me.*

“I won’t,” I said again.

Her smile was beautiful and kind of broke my heart because I knew no one had given her that kind of consideration before. It made me glad it was me.

“I won’t either,” she said. “I don’t think I could anyway. You’ve set an awfully high bar, firefighter.”

“Same, woman.”

I bent and kissed her, and we said our goodbyes.

Again.

And as I walked away from Faith, I had a deep certainty that there weren’t too many more times I was going to be able to do that.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *Faith*

*Six months later...*

“Faith, can I see you a minute?”

I looked up to see Cynthia Cross standing in the doorway to my office. Not her assistant, not a buzz from her office to mine, but her actual presence. Instantly, I was back in high school after getting caught breaking the rules. Which was frequently.

“Y-yes, of course.”

“My office, please.”

My assistant, Jess, looked up from the papers she was shuffling on the couch across from my desk, and we exchanged glances.

I stood and straightened my suit jacket. “If I’m not back in ten minutes...”

“I can have your Fendi?”

“The blue hobo with the silver buckle? *Nevah.*”

She chuckled. “Good luck.”

Jess could buy her own Fendi bags. I’d given her as many raises as accounting would allow, and she was getting ready to take on the role of account manager. I was going to miss her, but then I’d been the one who recommended her for promotion.

*Because I just love doing hard things for the right reasons, apparently.*

Well, not every hard thing. Asher was still thousands of miles away and neither of us seemed ready to change that, no matter how hard it was getting.



Not hard—torture.

I composed myself in front of Cynthia's office, then peeked in. "You wanted to see me?"

While Terrance's workspace was sleek and a little bit cold, Cynthia's was welcoming and warm. Which was ironic because of my two bosses, Cynthia intimidated the crap out of me. Her office resembled a study in an old manor home with photos of her family, loads of books, and plush furniture.

"Faith," she said from behind her mahogany desk. "Have a seat."

I sat in the overstuffed chair as she fixed me with an intimidating expression. She reminded me of the actress Cherry Jones, with straight graying hair that touched her shoulders and piercing blue eyes.

"I have some good news," she said tonelessly. "The Clio nominations have been announced. Your Zuma commercial has been nominated."

"Holy crap," I breathed, pushed back in the chair by the news. Terry had been talking it up for months, but now that it had happened, it touched me more than I expected. "Wow, that's great. I'm thrilled and honored..."

"They are going to do simultaneous live award ceremonies in early February, each linked up via satellite," Cynthia said. "One in London, one in New York, Chicago, Sydney, et cetera. And one here in Seattle. I don't think I have to tell you that your commercial is a shoo-in for the Gold in its category but will more likely take home a Grand."

"I don't even know what to say."

"I'm aware." Her gaze sharpened. "Which brings me to my next point—the issue of you being made partner. We are still waiting for an answer."

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry..."

"It's been six months, Faith. The only reason we haven't offered the position to someone else is because there isn't

anyone else we want to give it to. But the time has come. Shit or get off the pot as they say.”

“If I don’t take it, will you fire me?”

“Does it have to come to that?” Cynthia cocked her head. “Is there a specific reason why you are hesitant to pull the trigger? You’ve been working steadily and impressively for nearly a year. A one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turnaround from your comings and goings of earlier. It would appear that you’re dedicated to this agency and to doing your best with every account we throw your way.”

“I am.”

“Well?”

God, what was I going to tell this super successful lady boss? That there was *a man* holding me back? That for the last few months I felt like I was standing in front of two different doors, one that had a life with Asher in it and one that did not. But that I was paralyzed and couldn’t muster the courage to fully step through either one.

I glanced at a photo on Cynthia’s desk of her and her husband and their three teenage children, all dressed in snow gear. Probably in Aspen or Switzerland.

“Can I ask you a question?”

She sat back. “Of course.”

“How did you make it all work?”

Cynthia thought for a moment, then spoke deliberately. “It wasn’t easy. Sacrifices had to be made, from both my husband and me. But the way through it is to choose your North star—the one thing that means the most. For us, that was our children. Doing right by them was the most important thing and any career opportunities or disappointments arranged themselves around what they needed. And if that meant I couldn’t take a promotion when it was in front of me, then I didn’t take it. Or he didn’t. But when the time was right, I made new opportunities for myself.” She leaned forward. “But only when the time was right.”

I nodded, thinking. Wasn't Asher my North star? Or was it my career? Or was it my new-found confidence? I felt stronger, surer of myself than I'd ever been, artistically and creatively. Did I pack all that up and leave everything I've been building for that dinky little island? Or did I ask Asher to leave Morgan and Kal? I could never.

I held my head in my hands. "Ugh. Being an adult isn't all it's cracked up to be."

Cynthia's eyes narrowed. "I hear you travel to Hawaii frequently."

"As often as I can. My boyfriend lives on Kauai."

"Hawaii is very beautiful, Kauai especially. But very remote."

"Tell me about it."

"Christmas vacation begins in a couple of days. Are you planning another trip?"

"Yes, but I won't leave until after the holiday."

"I see."

"Asher—the boyfriend—invited me to spend Christmas with his family but I couldn't do it. I felt like I'd be intruding or..."

"Or making a statement about your intentions?"

"Something like that," I admitted.

"I find it's better sometimes to be decisive, no matter how difficult. Put your North star in front of you and don't waver." Cynthia sat up straight in her chair. "On that note, I'll give you the holiday, Faith, but when you get back, I'll expect an answer about the partnership."

"O-okay," I said, startled by her sudden harshness.

"Have a lovely Christmas break."

"You too."

I rose and then stopped at the door. "The Clio awards are going to be simulcast remotely with live ceremonies

happening across the globe, right?”

“That’s correct.”

I bit my lip and decided to just throw it out there.

“I just think it’s amazing what they can do with technology these days. So much can be accomplished, even by people thousands of miles apart, working...remotely.”

Cynthia met my gaze pointedly. “It is, isn’t it? But this agency prides itself on its personal touches. It’s what sets us apart. Clients want to be face-to-face with the people who are running their business and know that their product is in good hands. The rest of the world might be moving toward remote work, but our industry—this agency—is not one of them.”

*That answers that question.*

She straightened some papers on her desk. “Anything else?”

“No,” I said with a tight smile. “That’s about it.”



My parents were out of the country for the holidays; my mother was in Sorrento, and my father’s new wife had convinced him to do a tour of Southeast Asia. I received a standard Christmas card from both—clearly something their household staffs prepared. I spent Christmas with Silas and Max and Silas’s brother, Eddie. Everyone was wonderful and did everything they could to make me feel welcome, but I still felt like an interloper.

When Christmas Day was safely behind me, I got on a plane and flew to Kauai. I tried to look at it in a new light. An audition of sorts, imagining myself there for something that wasn’t a vacation. Cynthia’s words echoed in my head, like a door slamming shut.

*The rest of the world might be moving toward remote work, but our industry—this agency—is not one of them.*

“Remote being the operative word,” I muttered as the plane landed on the tiny island. Even if I managed to carve out some

kind of career here, I'd still be in the middle of the ocean, hours from the rest of the country. What happened if I upheaved my life only to find out I couldn't handle the island fever?

*Same flaky Faith, only the stakes would be so much higher...*

But there was a deeper question I was avoiding. One that came from my heart and was getting more insistent every day I was away from Asher. It demanded to know if it belonged to him. Handing it over to him was both the absolute only thing I wanted to do and the most terrifying. What if he didn't feel the same? What if he got sick of me? What if—?

“Shut up,” I muttered as I walked down the gangway, garnering a look from a passerby.

Asher met me at baggage claim. I clung to him, inhaling him and basking in the solidity of him. Falling into his arms felt like pieces of myself falling into place.

*Like coming home?*

“How was your flight?” he asked, pulling back to hold my face in his hands, his thumbs brushing over my cheeks.

“Long,” I said. “The kid behind me wouldn't stop kicking my seat.”

Asher nodded absently, his gaze roaming.

I grinned. “You didn't hear a word I said.”

“Yes, I did. You said you wouldn't stop kicking the kid behind you.”

I laughed and kissed him and put all the turbulent thoughts on hold to just be with him.

We went back to his house and spent several long, heated hours becoming reacquainted. After the first need had burned itself out, we lay tangled and naked, while the sun set in hues of violet and honey outside his bedroom windows.

“How was your holiday?” I asked, tucked in his arms.

“Good,” he said. “But we got a bit of shit news. Morgan and Nalani’s house is in a mudslide zone, apparently.”

“Oh, no, really? What’s going to happen to it?”

“We’re still waiting on the final report from the surveyor but it’s not great. If they’re in danger of sliding off the mountain, they have to move.”

“That’s awful. They’re home is so beautiful and cozy and... homey.”

He nodded gravely. “I’m worried about Momi, too. Her arthritis is getting worse. The wheelchair used to be only for major outings but now it’s permanent.”

“I hate that,” I said. “Can we see her?”

“She’ll be at the family lunch tomorrow.”

“And how is everyone else? Mudslides aside.”

Asher and I had stayed in close communication since we’d embarked on our *relationshit*, but it wasn’t like hearing the new developments in his voice. Because no matter how often we talked or FaceTimed or grabbed a few days either here or in Seattle, it just wasn’t the same.

*And getting impossible.*

“They’re doing great,” he said. “Christmas is always a busy season for their business but now even more so. They’re expanding pretty fast.” His fingers tangled idly in my hair. “The humpbacks are here now, and Morgan is going to start boating excursions for tourists to take their photographs with the whales.”

“That’s absolute genius.”

“It’s going to be incredible. Not to be weird about it, but seeing the whales up close, watching them breach, and the mothers with their calves...it’s kind of a spiritual experience. Especially in February when they’re everywhere. You should see it.”

He held my gaze intently, the intention coming through those dark eyes of his loud and clear.

*You need to be here. In February.*

My stomach dropped as I realized Cynthia wasn't the only person growing impatient with the way things were. I smiled weakly and glanced away. "I bet it'll be beautiful."

Asher stiffened at my non-answer. "Yep." He withdrew from me to sit on the edge of the bed and drew on a pair of sleep pants. "It will be."

"February's looking a little exciting for me, too," I said lightly. "Apparently, I have an award show to attend."

Asher glanced over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

"My snowboard ad was nominated for a Clio."

The tension in his face evaporated. "Are you serious? Faith...that's fucking great. I'm so happy for you." He climbed back into bed and kissed me.

"It's more exciting than I thought it would be. When Terry kept saying it was going to happen, I sort of didn't believe him."

"I had no doubt." Asher's smile tightened. "We need to celebrate. You've never been to a luau in all your visits. Might be the perfect occasion."

"Sounds lovely, but...I'm going to need some hot firefighter arm candy for that award ceremony." My smile wavered. "I was hoping you'd be there with me."

*There. Now we've both put it out there.*

I supposed Asher's reluctance to upheave his life was just as potent as mine, because he stiffened up all over again.

"I'll see what my schedule looks like. I've got a lot of shit going on..."

"Oh," I said, my stomach dropping. "Sure. We can play it by ear."

He got up from the bed. "Going to take a shower."

I flopped back on the pillows, my eyes stinging. "I'll be right here."

*For the next few days anyway. And then what?*



The following afternoon, we visited with Asher's family at their bungalow. Kaleo was already taller than last I'd seen him while Momi looked more frail in her chair, older by years somehow instead of months. But they all seemed happy, laughing, and talking and teasing one another. The family that I never had and that Asher had always wanted.

*He's not going to leave them, I thought with a sinking heart. Why would he?*

Everyone made a big fuss over my nomination. Nalani made her key-lime pie and Morgan barbecued ribs and cooked up some homemade Hurricane fries. We sat out on the lanai, the ocean below and greenery all around. I felt Asher's eyes on me frequently, hard and tense. This wasn't new—usually there was a silent question floating between us of when we were going to be alone so we could have sex again. But this time around, his glances were heavy with a different kind of impatience.

*God, being an irresponsible party girl was so much easier.*

After dinner, I sat with Momi on the lanai while Asher and Kal threw a football around and Morgan snapped photos. Nalani left to take some limes from her tree to a neighbor.

I felt the older woman's eyes move between Asher and me.

"He's a good man," she said suddenly. "But he worries me."

"Why? Is something wrong?"

"No, dear. He's healthy in body, but in spirit...very troubled."

"Oh. How?"

"Caught between what he thinks he must do—his duty—and the desires of his heart."



I shifted in my chair, cleared my throat. “And what would those be?” I asked weakly.

Momi was quiet for a moment, lips pursed. When she spoke, it was as if to herself. “He’s never forgiven his father for abandoning them when they were young or his mother for abandoning them to her addiction. Carrying that anger in him is not good for the soul.” She gave a definitive nod of her head. “He needs to practice the Ho’oponopono.”

“The Ho’opono...what?”

“It’s a Polynesian tradition of forgiveness and healing. Very old, very profound, but very simple. One only need focus on the object of discord and say: *I’m sorry, please forgive me, thank you, I love you.*”

I frowned. “Why would Asher need to ask forgiveness from his parents? They’re the ones who made a mess of everything.”

“Not from them. He must forgive himself.” Her dark eyes turned to me. “But also thank himself for his strength and goodness and to love himself for who he is. Ho’oponopono is about healing, not atonement.”

Momi looked to my firefighter who was swinging Kal in circles by his wrists while the boy shrieked with laughter.

“Asher believes everything should stay still—in his control—because he thinks that’s what keeps him safe. But life doesn’t hold still. It’s abundant with experiences, not all of them easy. Hardship opens doors in our hearts that would otherwise remain locked. The neglect of his parents is a hardship, but he should try to see it as a gift that has helped make him who he is. Good, kind, protective of those who need him.” She touched her gnarled fingers to my wrist and smiled. “I suspect how he feels about you is one of those experiences that he cannot control, no matter how hard he tries. But it is opening doors in his heart.”

“Mine too,” I whispered. “I feel like I’m just beginning to take control of my life and build something real in Seattle, but

how I feel about him...it's so much. I don't know what I'm supposed to do next. About...us."

Momi patted my hand, then resettled hers in her lap. "I can't tell you what to do—"

"You totally can," I said. "In fact, I'd prefer it if you did."

She chuckled. "Have patience with him and with yourself. If something is meant to be, it will come to be."

"That's nice. Is it an ancient Hawaiian saying?"

Momi tapped her chest. "It's a saying from this ancient Hawaiian."

I burst out laughing and hugged her gently. "Everyone needs a Momi."

"I won't disagree."



On my last night, Asher drove us to the luau which was at a venue that had once been a sugar cane farm. People were filing into a huge pavilion to the sound of ukulele music and the scent of plumeria on the wind. Once we were signed in, we walked past wood carvers, jewelry makers, and dancers attempting to teach hapless tourists how to do the hula.

We joined a table with three other couples, under a roof that was laced with lights and lush greenery. The entire drive over—and the last few days in general—had been quieter than usual. More tense. The furrow between Asher's brows was a permanent fixture and I couldn't even tease him about it.

"This has been a nice visit. Everyone seems to be doing great," I said when we'd been seated for five solid minutes in total silence. "How is Kaleo liking the fourth grade? I never got a chance to ask him."

"He likes it fine," Asher said. "He misses Chloe, but his new teacher's great, so..." He shrugged, his eyes on his drink.

I nodded, stiffening at the woman's name.

*She Who is Here.*

I took a long pull of my Mai Tai.

The emcee, a woman with dark hair that flowed down the back of her white dress, took the stage. “Before dinner begins, we’d like to have the couples celebrating anniversaries and special occasions come up here for a dance.” She beckoned. “Come on, lovebirds. Don’t be shy.”

Asher leaned in. “Dance with me.”

I blinked and set down my glass. “Really? I didn’t think public gyrations was your thing.”

“Tonight it is.”

He stood up and offered his hand. The others at our table smiled and shared knowing looks as I got to my feet. We headed to the dance floor where Asher pulled me close. I laid my cheek on his chest, my head tucked perfectly under his chin, and we swayed while the emcee sang an old Hawaiian love song, “The Sand and the Sea.”

“Do you know what she’s saying?” I asked against his dress shirt.

“Yes,” he said. “She’s saying, stay in my arms for a moment more.”

I squeezed my eyes shut against sudden tears. “Really?”

“Really.” He tilted my chin to look at him, and a tear escaped to spill down my cheek. His brow furrowed, pain and something deep and warm swam in his eyes. “Now she’s saying, a tear rushes down to the sand.”

“She is not,” I said, sniffing.

“Scout’s honor. Now she’s saying, the sea will bring her love to her.” His voice thickened and he shook his head. “Christ, Faith...I’m really fucking trying but...”

“I know,” I whispered. “Me too.”

His expression softened and he held my face in his hands. “Maybe it doesn’t have to be this hard.” He swallowed and inhaled a ragged breath, then exhaled the word, “Stay.”

My pulse pounded in time to his and my throat went dry. Finally, it was out there, hanging between us. One of us had said it and now there was no going back.

“Stay...?”

“Don’t fly back tomorrow.” He held me tighter. “Stay here. With me.”

My eyes were locked on his, my jaw working, completely unsure of what was going to pop out of my mouth. A hurricane of conflict warred in me in those few seconds. I wanted to say yes, to take the plunge and fling myself at a new life with him. To give him my heart and let everything else fall into place. But another part whispered that I wasn’t strong enough. Not brave enough. I’d miss the city I loved, and being at the agency, and the life I knew. What would happen when I realized I couldn’t cut it on the island? I’d have ruined my career and us at the same time.

The fear wrapped me in a tight grip, pushing the air out of my lungs, pushing out the words.

“I...I can’t.”

Asher stiffened, his hopeful smile turning to a hard grimace. “Why not?”

“Well...for a lot of reasons,” I said, firming my voice. “There’re the Clio awards in February, and my bosses are demanding an answer about partnership. Not to mention, my life is there and...”

Asher’s hands dropped from me abruptly, leaving me cold. The song had ended, and the other couples were returning to their seats.

“I can’t fucking do this.”

“Asher...”

“Seriously, Faith, what the hell are we doing?”

“I...I...”

He shook his head, conflict darkening his expression, then turned and strode for the exit. I followed him out to the

deserted parking lot, my heart clanging madly.

“Asher,” I called, catching up to him where he stood pacing in a small circle. “You have to talk to me—”

“What’s there to say?” He whirled on me, his face a mask of anguish. “Something’s gotta give, Faith.”

“Well...why do I have to be the one that gives it?”

“Because I have family and you don’t,” he thundered. I recoiled as if he’d slapped me, and he softened, instantly remorseful. “I’m sorry. I just mean...you could have a family, too. You could be a part of it—”

“That’s not fair,” I said, my voice quavering. “I may not have what you have, but I have a life in Seattle. I have Silas and I have my career and I have...Silas...”

“I know,” Asher said, carving his hand through his hair. “A few months ago, I thought I’d made peace with that. But I was wrong. I can’t keep going on like this.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying *I can’t go on like this*, Faith. You there and me here. Grabbing a few days at a time in between long stretches of nothing. It’s too fucking hard.”

“You think it’s easy for me?” I demanded. “You think I don’t miss you every day...every *hour*?”

“Great, so we both know something has to change. Maybe you could move here for six months. Just try it. See what it’s like.”

“I know what it’s like. It’s small and quiet and miles away from anything.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Why don’t you move to Seattle for six months?”

He made a face as if he’d smelled something sour, and I scoffed.

“Yeah, exactly. And no matter who gives it a try, six months later we’re going to have this exact same conversation.”

“Yeah, well...I don’t want this conversation at all,” Asher said and resumed his pacing.

My breath caught in my chest. “Are you giving me an ultimatum?”

He stopped and tore at his hair. “No, I’m just saying...fuck! Tell me what I’m supposed to do, Faith. You tell me what I’m supposed to do. I want you and I need you and I want to be with you, but—”

“I want the same thing, but they’re about to make me partner and I want that too. I’m building something and I’ve never built anything before. Nothing that’s lasted. I don’t want to just walk away.”

Asher stared a moment. My words sank in, and his face turned stony and impassive, like staring at a brick wall. “Well, I guess that’s it then.”

I shivered though the night was warm. “What do you mean?”

“I think we need a break. Figure shit out.”

“A break,” I stated, crossing my arms, hugging myself. “You mean you want to break up with me.”

“No. I don’t know. Maybe.”

I nodded, dazed, feeling as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water at me. “Sure. Fine. If that’s what you want.”

“Of course, it’s not what I fucking want. But...” He shook his head helplessly.

“No, no, I think that’s a good idea,” I said, even though it was also the last thing I wanted. “We should take a break and reevaluate. Decide what we really want.” I heaved a breath. “I’ll go.”

“Faith...” Asher’s stony façade cracked, and a flash of pain escaped. Then the moment passed, and he bottled it back up. Stayed in control. “Okay.”

“Okay,” I echoed and felt my heart split in two, right down the middle. “Goodbye, Asher.”

I turned around, my back straight, chin high, while inside I was crumbling to pieces. I waited for him to call me back, but

he never did.

I supposed I'd been lying about not wanting to walk away after all, because I walked away from him.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Asher*

*Three weeks later...*

Ladder Company #9 arrived at the Hanalei structure fire at precisely 3:03 p.m. I made a quick note in the log from the front passenger seat as Travis brought the truck to a halt in front of the burning house. We flew out, along with six other men, and I began directing the operation.

My team sprang into action—two assessing the perimeter, two entering the building for occupants, two uncoiling the hose from the truck and affixing it to the street hydrant.

“Charge the line,” I ordered.

“Yes, sir,” Dickens said as the hose fattened with water. “It’s live.”

“Go.”

The two men on the hose ran to the front door. The kitchen faced the street, and flames licked up the curtains while oily black smoke billowed out of the window.

*Grease fire*, I noted, watching the men run headlong into danger while I remained on the street. Captain Reyes was on another call, so I was in charge. I’d only go in if I had to.

I hoped I had to.

“Manning,” I barked at one of my men who’d come around from the back. “Status?”

“Under control.”

*Under control* wasn’t the same as the fire being out, but unless there were surprises, experience told me this was a simple structure fire, and my team would have it extinguished in minutes. I was proven correct when Travis emerged from the house with a blackened pan in his glove.



“Class B. Guy left a pan with oil in it and forgot about it. Curtains, cupboards went up. He’s going to need a new stove, but the structure is intact.”

I nodded, watching my guys help an elderly man around from the backyard where he’d gone to escape the flames. His face was a grimace of dazed pain, bubbling burns climbing up his right arm. The paramedics who’d arrived after us took over for my guys and packaged the occupant into the ambulance for transport to Wilcox.

“No one else?”

“None.”

“Except this little guy.” Billy joined us, a fluffy Maine coon cat in his soot-stained hands.

“Get him secured,” I told him and turned back to Travis. “We good?”

“Yep. The rest of the house is clean.”

I nodded, and we set about retracting and securing the hose, then called it a day.

In my office, I wrote up the action report and waited for some kind of relief to find me. I’d built a weird psychology for myself—a therapy where each blaze I extinguished was supposed to prove I had my shit together. That the broken parts of me would find their way back to wholeness if I just kept at it.

It wasn’t working.

I loved my job, but the conflict in my heart was no longer about control. I had none.

*Because I’m in love with Faith Benson.*

I rested my elbows on my desk and held my head in my hands as I let myself have the thought for the first time. No use denying it or pretending it was something else. I was fucking crazy in love with her, and the thought scared the shit out of me while flooding me with serenity at the same time. The serenity I’d been searching for my whole life.

*Fuck.*

It had been several weeks since I'd kicked her out of my life. The anguish of missing her and wanting her had to stop, and so I stopped us. I stupidly thought ending things would give me some control. As if I'd magically stop loving her and could go back to my old life.

But that life was gone, and I didn't want it back anyway.

"I want her."

Today was the last shift of mine for several days. I went back to my place, too big for just me—huge and empty. I'd just showered and changed when my phone rang with Morgan's number.

"What's up?"

"Momi is in the hospital," he said, his voice tense with worry. "Her neighbor called me. She fell out of her wheelchair. They think it's a broken hip."

"Fell out...? How the hell did she fall out? I thought the state paid for a nurse to be with her a few days a week."

"Yeah, well, apparently this was one of the days without."

"Fucking hell. I'll hire her a better nurse. Private. Round the clock."

"You're the best brother. She's at Wilcox. Meet you there?"

"On my way."

I arrived at Wilcox and was directed to the third floor where Momi looked small and frail in a big bed, the head tilted to a slight incline. She looked to be asleep, but she peeked one eye open when I stepped in.

"Aloha, Asher," she said with a tired smile.

"Shit, I'm so sorry, Momi," I said, moving to pull a chair by her bed.

"What are you sorry about? That I'm a frail old lady? That I tried to get in my chair without help when I knew better?"

"I should've hired better help a long time ago."

She snorted. “Oh, sweet boy, when are you going to realize that you can’t keep everyone safe or free from pain? Least of all yourself.”

“I’m not thinking about me right now.”

“And that is the root of your problem. You rarely think about you.” She patted my hand. “The time has come to take care of your own heart.”

“Okay, but you’re—”

“Knock, knock,” said a voice at the door, and Morgan stepped in with a bouquet of yellow roses. “Did Asher bring flowers? No? I win. I’m the best grandson-in-law.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Nalani is on her way.” Morgan kissed Momi’s cheek. “The doc tells me it’s a hairline fracture. Could be worse but you’ll have to make some lifestyle changes. No more Jazzercise for at least a month.” He took her hand. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine, fine.” Momi shot me a pointed look. “I’m not the one who needs fussing over.”

Morgan’s gaze went between us. “What are we talking about?”

“Nothing,” I said.

Momi scoffed. “Asher and I were about to discuss a few necessary lifestyle changes that need to be made for *his* health.”

Morgan’s confusion vanished and he pulled another chair up. “Ah, yes, say no more. Not to gang up on you, bro, but I agree with Momi.”

“Agree about what?”

“Lifestyle changes. One big ole change, specifically.” He smiled with a twinge of sadness. “Time for you to do for you.”

I scowled. “Okay, we’re not here to talk about my problems. Momi—”

“I’m going to be fine,” she said. “And if not, there’s nothing you can do about it. I’m an old lady. I’ve lived a full life, and though I’m not quite ready to say goodbye, when I do, I’ll look back on all my years, at the love I have, and be grateful. Because that is the measure of a life, my dear. The love you have. It’s worth everything.”

Morgan’s eyes met mine, solemn and grave. “It’s time, brother.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about Faith,” he said. “You love her, right?”

I started to protest but it was useless. And I didn’t want to, anyway. “Yeah. I do.”

“So the real question is not who lives where, but do you trust her with your heart? And can she trust you with hers? If the answer is yes...” Morgan shrugged. “The rest is just logistics.”

“Pretty fucking serious logistics,” I said. “Sorry, Momi.”

She sniffed. “Now shush, listen to Morgan.”

He turned to me, arms crossed. “What did you say when I told you I was moving to Kauai eight years ago?”

“I said you’re crazy.”

“After that.”

“I don’t know...”

Morgan’s smile softened. “You said, *Whatever makes you happy, bro*. And I am. I’m ridiculously happy. I have everything I could ever want. And it’s all thanks to you.”

“It’s not—”

“You made it possible.” His eyes shone and his voice grew thick. “You made a promise to take care of me and you did. Now it’s your turn. To take care of yourself for a damn change. To be happy with her.” His face broke into a grin. “We’re going to be okay. We’ll miss you like hell, but we’ll be okay.”

Sudden tears flooded my eyes. “The fuck. Are you kicking me out?”

“Yes,” Momi and Morgan said together. My brother chuckled. “We are voting you off the island.”

I laughed and wiped my eyes. “Asshole.” I fought for another argument, but I had none. “I thought it’d be impossible to leave. But...all I want to do is give Faith everything. And that includes the life that she wants. Her perfect life.”

“Her perfect life has you in it.”

I nodded slowly as I realized that that *only* life I wanted had Faith in it. And maybe it didn’t matter where I was—so long as I was with her, I’d be home.

I glanced between Morgan and Momi, my voice thickening. “This is going to suck.”

“As if you’re going to get rid of us,” Morgan said. “You’re a plane ride away.”

“I’ll be unemployed.”

Morgan scoffed. “They’ll have fires in Seattle, just for you.”

I snorted and wiped my nose.

“Doesn’t she have some kind of big award ceremony coming up?” Momi asked, brows raised.

“This weekend,” I said. “It’s a big deal and she’s going to win, I know it.”

“Then you’d better be there with her when she does,” Morgan said.

We sat with Momi for a few hours more until she became tired and kicked us out.

I stood up and then bent to kiss her on the cheek. “Mahalo nui loa. For everything.” Then I fixed her with a stern look. “You know, you didn’t have to break a hip to stage an intervention. A phone call would’ve worked.”

“What can I say? I’m very dramatic.” She patted my cheek. “Go to your wahine nani.”

*My beautiful woman.*

The idea that Faith could be mine permanently was almost too good to imagine. I turned and gave Morgan a hug. “I’ll give you the info on a new nurse.”

“Of course, you will. But don’t say goodbye to me just yet. Don’t you have some shopping to do?”

I heaved a breath. My heart feeling lighter than it had in ages. The chaos and conflict settling with that decision that wasn’t as difficult as I thought it’d be now that I’d actually made it.

“Yeah. I guess I do.”



Three days later, I checked into the Centennial Hotel in Seattle, Washington. I unpacked my clothes which consisted of my usual casual shit, plus one expensive suit. From my carry-on, I pulled out a small black velvet box and stuffed it in my jacket pocket, then I sent a text.

**I’m here**

The reply came quick. **Meet me at the Charleston Bar & Grill in 15.**

I nodded and went out.

Hawaiian rain came and went, with skies pouring and then becoming blue at the drop of a hat. Seattle in February was gray and drab, and the clouds looked as if they’d never leave.

*Get used to it, pal.*

Silas Marsh was waiting for me at a table tucked in the back of the restaurant, away from the windows. He looked elegant in slacks, a black turtleneck, and coat.

“Hey,” I said, shaking his hand. “Thanks for meeting me.”

“Of course. So...” A grin spread over his features. “You’re going to make an honest woman out of her, eh?”

A nervous laugh coughed out of me. “She still has to say yes. And forgive me for being an asshole.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “She’s been a little upset lately. Kind of all over the place.”

“My fault,” I said. “I shouldn’t have freaked out on her.”

“I think she was freaking out a little too. I can’t blame her. How I felt about Max...the enormity of it all was fucking terrifying. To hold someone’s heart and keep it safe? It’s a big responsibility, and I know she doubts herself.” He raised his eyes to mine. “I think she was trying to protect you as much as she was protecting herself by running back here. She was afraid of hurting you.”

I nodded. “That pretty much sums it up for me, too.”

“What finally did it?”

“What made me want to give up the island for her?”

“Couldn’t have been an easy decision,” Silas said, studying me, and I knew he was trying to pry into my soul to see if I could cut it or if I was going to break Faith’s heart in three or six or ten months down the road.

“I thought so too, but it feels right,” I said. “I thought I needed the island to heal, and I did for a long time. But I think maybe—with Faith’s help—I grew beyond that. It’s time to take the next step. For her. And for me too.”

Silas still appeared dubious, and I held up my hands.

“I’m not saying it’s a piece of cake to leave my family, but it’s not as impossible as I thought it would be. I have a feeling a lot of the misery we go through is because of the story we tell ourselves.” I shrugged. “You rewrite the story, and you get a different ending.”

“There’re going to be adjustments,” Silas said slowly.

I leaned over the table. “She’s it for me, man. If she wants to live in fucking Siberia, I’ll do it.”

Silas relaxed a little, a small smile tugging at his lips. “Can I see it?”

I pulled the velvet box out of my pocket and slid it across the table. Silas opened it, and I studied his expression, hoping I hadn't fucked up.

"Dammit to hell." Silas blew out his cheeks and dabbed his eyes with a napkin.

I let out another short, nervous laugh. "Good?"

Silas shut the box and slid it back to me. "She's going to love it."

I eased a breath and tucked the ring back into my jacket pocket. A waiter came by with a bottle of sparkling water Silas must've ordered earlier.

"The champagne of the mineral water world," he said once two glasses had been poured. He held up a glass to me. "Congratulations. I'm really happy for you. And her."

"Thanks, man. That's actually what I needed to hear. Maybe it's some old-fashioned shit, but I came here to ask for your blessing."

Silas stiffened. "*My* blessing?"

"Her father's not around and he sounds like an asshole, anyway. But you know that because you're closer to Faith than anyone. You *mean* more to her than anyone else." I shrugged. "You're the guy to ask."

Silas sat back wearing a small, mystified grin. "Well, I'm honored and...touched. You don't need my blessing, but you have it. Absolutely, you have it. From the second I laid eyes on you—no, correction—from the second I saw *Faith* lay eyes on you, I thought *finally*. Someone for my girl to share her life with. Because it couldn't be me."

"When you put it that way..." I said, my throat thick.

"She deserves to be happy and so do you," Silas said, blinking hard. "And now we need to talk about something else."

"Amen," I said, and we both laughed, glad the emotional shit was out of the way. "What do I do now?"



“I’m supposed to attend that awards show with her on Sunday night,” Silas said. “I was going to pick her up at six, take her to dinner, then to the ceremony at Bell Harbor.” He shrugged with a smile. “You show up instead.”

“Just surprise her like that?” I frowned. “You don’t think she’ll give me a kick in the balls?”

“She might,” Silas said. “But just a little one. To get it out of her system.”

We both laughed again, and he raised his glass to mine.

“Asher, my friend, welcome to Seattle.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### Faith

Friday night, I opened the door to my condo and tossed the keys on the front table, then dropped both coat and bag on the floor. The sun was setting somewhere behind gray clouds, the sky growing darker by the minute. No sooner did I slump on my couch, exhausted from another long day on the new Red Bull account, than thoughts of Asher infiltrated my brain and heart.

Three weeks and not one word from him. Granted, I hadn't reached out either, but he was the one who initiated the breakup. I had my pride after all.

But pride, I realized, was about as useful as...something not useful.

I was too drained to think. My new duties as partner at the agency filled my daytime hours and then some, but the nights were long, quiet stretches where I had nothing to do but miss him.

I called for Chinese takeout and settled in to watch some Netflix. I flipped aimlessly through a zillion shows, none looking appealing. At the ridiculously early hour of eight o'clock, I settled myself into bed and picked up the book on my nightstand. I'd begun reading *The Age of Innocence* at the condo in Kauai when I'd first arrived all those months ago and had bought myself a copy to finish here.

It was the story of a young aristocrat in the 1870's—Newland Archer—who was engaged to a pretty young woman but finds himself falling in love with the intriguing, scandal-ridden Countess Olenska. The prose was a tad old-fashioned for my taste, but the story smacked me in the face. Newland and the Countess kept meeting after long absences, stealing moments here and there, neither able to give their love freely. Duty to the lives they'd already chosen kept them apart.

I let the book fall against my chest.

My heart clenched and I willed the tears back as I touched the quartz pendant that lay against my skin. What had all this personal growth gotten me? I was slaying at my job, but I'd always had that capability. What I hadn't known was that I had the depth to care about someone as deeply as I cared about Asher. Like a canyon of layers, each with different hues and shades, imbedded in the core of me.

But now it all had nowhere to go.

Asher wanted a break from me. Maybe permanently. He'd chosen his life and I'd chosen mine and they were half a world away. I set the book aside and removed the pendant. I laid it in my jewelry box on my dresser, then—before I could talk myself out of it—I picked up my phone.

**Let's go out,** I texted.

Viv replied less than a minute later. **For real?**

It'd been a while since we'd spoken, and I wasn't sure if our break was also permanent.

**Meet me at Oltini's? One hour.**

**You don't have to tell me twice,** she replied, followed by champagne emojis.

“Yes, lots of that,” I muttered.

I got dressed, ignoring the warning bells in my head—and heart—that told me it was a mistake.

But hell, I'd made plenty of those. Never stopped me before.



A slant of silvery winter light fell over me and I groaned. It'd been a while since I'd had a hangover; I'd forgotten how much fun they were.

“Oh, God,” I mumbled and wrapped myself tighter in the Egyptian cotton sheets. Cotton sheets that were not *my* cotton sheets. Different color, different scent...

*They smell like a man.*

I peeked an eye beneath and found I was clad only in my black silk bra and panties.

“Oh shit,” I shot to sitting, a terrible pain hammering my heart worse than any headache. “Oh no. Oh no, no, no...”

“Hi.”

I gave a shriek and pulled the bedsheets up to my neck. On the other side of my tangle of hair, sat a man in a chair near the window in this—his—huge bedroom. Blond, big, sexy in sleep pants and an undershirt.

He cocked an amused smile. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

“Umm...”

Last night had been a blur. Cocktails with Viv, the company of handsome, rich gentlemen...and then not much else.

“Sorry.” I held my head in my hands. “But don’t take it personally—I don’t remember last night at all.”

*Because when things get hard, I revert to my old tricks...*

The guy shook his head. “I wasn’t talking about last night. I’m Jack Phillips. We met almost a year ago under similar circumstances.” He offered a teasing grin. “I can see how it’d be confusing.”

“Jack...” I stared, memories rushing in—blurry and booze-soaked. “Oh my God. Yes, you and I...”

“Slept together,” he said. “I wanted to call you again after, but you sort of vanished.”

“We slept together,” I murmured, my eyes falling shut.

*Asher...*

“A year ago,” Jack clarified. “Last night...not so much.”

My head shot up. “We didn’t?”

“Nope. You cried on my shoulder for half the night, telling me over and over how you’re in love with some firefighter, and then you passed out.” He smiled dryly. “It was a super fun time for me.”

I pushed myself to sitting, keeping the sheets tight around me. “Wait, wait, hold on. I said I...?”

“Loved him, yes. *In love* with him. You were quite emphatic on that point.”

“And you and I did not sleep together.”

“We did not.”

“Then why am I in my underwear?”

“I took off your dress to make you more comfortable,” Jack said. “That’s all, I promise.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Where did you sleep?”

“Couched it.”

“Did we do...other things?”

He grinned, clearly enjoying himself. “Like what?”

“Did we kiss?”

*Please say no...*

He shook his head. “No kissing. Not for lack of trying. I leaned over to kiss you in the car and that’s when you burst into tears.”

“And that’s when I said...what I said.”

Jack nodded. “You were a little bit of a mess. I didn’t know what else to do so I told my driver to bring us here. I made you tea—”

“You made me *tea*?”

He smiled. “Seemed like the thing to do. But you mostly just wanted to talk about *him*.”

“And you and I didn’t do anything at all.”

“Not so much as a suggestive handshake.”

I relaxed and eased a shaky sigh. “You’re a true gentleman, Jack. I’m so sorry I put you in that position.”

“It’s all right.” He cocked his head. “Who’s the firefighter? Boyfriend?”

I nodded. "But we're on a break."

"A Ross and Rachel kind of break?"

I laughed. "You make tea for houseguests and reference *Friends*. Some gal is going to be really lucky to have you, Jack."

"But it won't be you." He smiled ruefully. "Just my luck. It sucked a little that you didn't remember me when we met again last night, but I figured it was a second chance to make a first impression. Guess not."

"I'm sorry. But thank you for being so great. Twice."

"I have to admit, the first time was a lot more exciting," he said with a grin and got to his feet. He nodded at the plush bench in front of the bed. "Your dress is there. Would you like some water or coffee?" He smirked. "Tea?"

"No, thanks. I'd better get out of here before I make a bigger fool of myself."

"You weren't all that big of a fool," he said at the bedroom door. "You obviously love the guy. I hope it works out for you."

He went out, closing the door behind him to give me privacy.

I sat and basked in the relief that I wasn't completely hopeless. But the ache still gripped my heart. My drunken self knew what I wanted better than I did. I was in love with Asher. Even at my most reckless, I couldn't give myself to anyone else. And now that the feelings I'd been trying to deny were running free, out in the light of day, the canyon-depth of them stole my breath.

"Oh, Asher," I whispered, my eyes filling with tears. "Is it too late?"

I dressed and found Jack in the kitchen making coffee. He held up a mug to me. "You sure you don't want?"

"I'm good. I should go..." I headed for the door, then stopped and redirected my steps to join him. I pecked him on the cheek. "Thank you, Jack."

“Hey, if things don’t work out with the firefighter, you know where to find me. Since you’re a frequent houseguest and all.”

I slugged his arm, forcing a small laugh. If things didn’t work out with my firefighter, I was going to be an even bigger mess than I was last night.

I went back to my place, showered, and—still wrapped in a towel—called Silas.

“I’m in trouble,” I said when he answered.

“Which jail is it this time? I’ll arrange bail...”

“Ha ha. I’m serious. I...I miss Asher. A lot. To say the least.”

“Oh, Jesus, is that all? You scared me.” Silas’s laughter died. “Wait. How does that put you in trouble? Faith...what did you do?”

“Nothing, thank God. It’s what I almost did. Asher won’t talk to me, and I didn’t know what to do with myself, so I kind of went out and nearly made the worst mistake of my life.”

“Nearly isn’t the same as actually.”

“Yes, but—”

“Look, you have a very important award ceremony coming up. Let’s just get through that and then...go from there.”

I frowned. “Why do you sound so chipper? I’m having a crisis.”

He laughed, then coughed it down. “Nothing, sorry. Something Max said. What time did I say I’d pick you up on Sunday? Six?”

“You know it’s six. You’re being weird.”

“I have to go. Something’s come up. Just go take a bath or something and remain calm. Don’t do anything rash. Maybe... don’t leave your house. Once the awards excitement is out of the way, you’ll have a much better handle on things.”

“I guess,” I muttered. “But you’re right. I’ll get through this weekend and then...”

*Then I’ll rip my heart out of my chest and airmail it straight to Kauai.*

“Of course, I’m right. When have I ever steered you wrong?” Silas was saying. “Gotta run. See you soon.”

And then he hung up on me.



Sunday, I prepped and prepared for the Clios. The official invitation and notice of my nomination were right there on my bathroom vanity on hard paper stock, printed in gold leaf.

*Entrant Company: Zuma*

*Medium: Fashion and Beauty*

*Entry Type: Fashion and Beauty Marketing*

*Creative Director: Faith Benson*

I ran my fingers over my name. I thought I’d be nervous or even anxious about possibly winning one of these suckers, but all I wanted was to get through the night and talk to Asher. Tell him that I loved him. Just throw it out there and even if he was still upset with me, at least he would know.

Around five, I dressed in a body-hugging, black sequined halter dress with an oval cutout at the bust and a black ruffle of tulle at the calf. I pulled my hair into an updo, and because this probably wasn’t going to happen again, I went extra glam with a dramatic smoky eye and red lip.

*Fire engine red...*

The door buzzed at six o’clock on the dot.

I hit the intercom. “Come on up.”

I unlocked the door and left it open a crack while I checked myself in the living room mirror to make sure I didn’t have



lipstick on my teeth. Footsteps sounded at the entry.

“Hey, Si,” I called. “I’m not nervous but I’m getting there...”

My words died to see my firefighter barge through the front door, devastating in a dark gray suit, and crimson tie over a white button down.

“You’re not Silas,” I murmured.

“Your date canceled. I’m filling in.” Asher’s gaze swept over me. “Jesus, Faith...” He swallowed hard. “You look so beautiful. So fucking beautiful.”

“So do you,” I murmured, in a daze and wondering if this were a mirage or if this were real.

Asher took a hesitant step forward. “I’m so sorry, Faith, I shouldn’t have let you go. I shouldn’t have driven you away. I was a mess and didn’t know what I was doing.”

“Me neither,” I whispered. “I’m sorry I walked away. Ran away, honestly.” My smile wavered. “I’m shocked I didn’t twist another ankle.”

“I didn’t give you much choice.”

“I think we were both afraid of saying what we really felt, because...it’s a lot, Asher. How I feel about you...” My own throat had gone dry. “It’s so much that it scares me, and I didn’t know what to do with it all. When it sounded like you wanted to end things, I jumped at the chance to go back to my old life. But I can’t. That door is closed and locked forever.”

“Mine too.” His smile was pained. “Can I kiss you now? We have more to talk about, I know, but Christ, Faith...”

He took another step toward me, but I took a step back. “Wait. I...I have to tell you something.”

“Okay.”

“I did a bad thing.”

His expression froze. “Okay...”

“Two nights ago, I went out and partied with Viv, and I don’t remember much but...I woke up in another man’s bed.”

Asher stared at me.

“Nothing happened,” I said quickly. “I know that sounds ludicrous, but I swear to God nothing happened. He...he was a complete gentleman, and we didn’t even kiss because it turns out all I could do was cry over you.”

“Okay.”

I huffed a breath. “Asher, you have to say something besides *okay*.”

“Well...” He blinked and shook his head. “I mean, I don’t *love* that, but technically we were broken up.”

“True, but even so... I hate it. It was stupid. Just me trying—again—to turn around and go back to the life I had. But I can’t.” I glanced up at him. “Do you believe me when I say nothing happened?”

“Well... Yeah. Of course.”

“You do? I mean, it’s the truth. I don’t want to be with anyone else, and my drunken self knew to say it out loud when my sober self couldn’t.”

“Knew to say what out loud?” he asked. His eyes were so beautifully dark and rich.

“That I... Oh God, okay, here goes.” I swallowed. “That I love you. I’m crazy in love with you and I don’t want to ever take a break or be apart or spend one more night without you beside me because I love you. Which I said already but I’m going to say it again because I’ve never said it before.” Tears filled my eyes. “I love you, Asher.”

Asher stiffened and then relaxed, as if my words struck him and then took a moment to sink in. And then my firefighter’s face transformed with an expression I’d never seen before. Something so breathtaking, I could hardly believe that the emotion that radiated from behind his dark eyes and hard angles was all for me.

“I love you too, Faith,” he said, finally. Simply. “I’m in love with you and think I have been for a really long time.”

“Me too,” I whispered. “A really long time.”

He took another step closer, slipping his hands around my waist and pulling me close. “Is there anything else I should know about?”

“No. That’s it.”

“Good. Can I kiss you *now*?”

“God, yes.”

Asher bent his head and put his mouth on mine. His kiss was soft and deep and with an energy I hadn’t felt before. As if something that had been restless in him had settled into place.

*Like serenity.*

I felt the same, as if all my crazy chaos and self-doubt and uncertainty were laid to rest with Asher. He trusted and believed in me. And I believed in me, that I could love him the way he deserved to be loved.

“We should go,” he said after a moment. “I want to take you to dinner, and we can talk more about...things.”

I smiled and grabbed a tissue from the box on the table to wipe my red lipstick off his mouth. “Sounds good. I love talking about *things* but hold on. Where’s Silas? You two are clearly in cahoots.”

“Nope,” Asher said as we moved toward the door. “I clubbed him on the way over here, stole his town car, and stashed him in the trunk.”

I rolled my eyes with a laugh. “That butthead. I could tell something was off when I talked to him the other day. He was giddy and Silas Marsh doesn’t get *giddy*.”

Asher’s eyes flared. “You talked to him?”

“Just to confess my-almost sins.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“There’s that *okay* again. Are *you* okay? You suddenly seem more nervous than I am.”

“This ceremony’s a big deal.” He tugged at his shirt collar. “You’re going to win, Faith. I can feel it.”

“Maybe,” I said as we stepped into the elevator. “Maybe not. I’m just so happy you’re with me. But Asher...we still have the same problems we had the last time I was in Kauai. Worse—I accepted the promotion. They’ve made me partner.”

He seemed unperturbed. “Of course, they did. Because you’re brilliant.”

I started to speak again but he kissed me silent, and my knees literally went weak at the intensity in it. The gentle, sucking pull of his mouth and the thoroughness of a kiss that felt like it was leaving a permanent mark on my heart.

“Wow,” I said when he broke away. “What was I saying?”

The elevator doors opened, and Asher put his arm in front of them, motioning for me to go first. “We’ll talk at dinner.”

He hadn’t been kidding about borrowing Silas’s town car; a driver opened the door to the sleek black sedan and took us to my favorite Italian place near the Bell Harbor Center.

At a table for two in front of the glittering water, Asher ordered champagne and tugged at his collar again, as if the suit were too tight. We lifted our glasses in a toast and then he set his right back down again, sloshing bubbly on the tablecloth.

“I can’t do this.”

My heart skipped a dozen beats. “You can’t...what?”

“Shit, no, I’m sorry.” Asher waved his hands. “Jesus, I’m already fucking this up. I was going to do this whole thing with dessert, but I’m not going to make it to dessert. I have to do it now.”

He reached into his jacket pocket at the same instant his cell phone rang. The timing was so uncanny, it was as if he anticipated someone was going to call him at that exact moment.

He frowned and pulled his phone from his pocket. "It's my captain," he said. "Sorry, Faith, I should get this." He hit *answer*, his expression wary. "What's up, Cap?" He listened and his frown deepened. "No, I'm at a restaurant, why?" A pause, and I saw fear spark in his eyes. "No, you can tell me right the fuck now."

The air around us suddenly dropped twenty degrees. My skin broke out in gooseflesh, and every muscle in my body tensed as the blood drained from Asher's face, leaving him a ghastly pale white. He sucked in a breath and then another, struggling to breathe. With his free hand, he gripped the edge of the table, arm stiff and knuckles white.

"*What?*" he croaked.

I reached across the table to him. "Asher...?"

"No, he's not," he said into the phone. "No, he's not... *Nalani*...? No. *No*. Stop fucking with me, Cap," he said, his voice rising, hard with anger but fraying at the end with outright terror.

People at other tables were starting to turn. My heart was thundering.

"Asher, what is it? What's happening?"

Asher's eyes met mine, and I nearly let out a cry at the horrified shock painted over his features. He stared at me, *through* me, and then nodded stiffly, sucking in a slow breath.

"Okay, Cap," he said, suddenly flat. Toneless. "I understand. I'll be right there."

He pulled the phone away with shaking hands and carefully set it on the table, as if it were made of glass.

"Asher...?"

He took another gasping inhale, and when he spoke, his voice was nothing like I'd ever heard. Airless and strangled.

"They're gone. Both of them."

"Both?" I could hardly speak over my own pounding pulse. "Who? Not..."

“Nalani and Morgan. Morgan is dead.” Asher looked at me helplessly. “My brother is dead.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### *Faith*

I stared, unable to move or breathe for a few shocked moments. Asher now gripped both edges of the table, bunching the linen tablecloth and sending his knife and spoon clattering to the ground. The sound broke me out of my stasis, and I jumped out of my chair.

“Come on, baby. Come on...” I tugged Asher to his feet with one arm, and with the other, I motioned for the maître d’ to get his ass over here. “Get our car, please. *Now.*”

He nodded and hurried away.

“Come on, Asher,” I said gently but firmly. “Walk with me.”

Like a zombie, Asher got up and followed me through the restaurant. The car screeched to the curb just as we stepped out onto the sidewalk. The driver read the direness of the situation and hurried to open the door. We climbed inside.

“Where to, ma’am?”

“Um, back to my place,” I said and turned to Asher. “We’ll go there and plan what to do next, okay?”

He didn’t move or respond but stared out the window, his breaths coming in short, shallow gasps. I took his hand in mine and held it tight, as if I could channel some kind of comfort to him, even as my own heart was breaking for Morgan and Nalani.

*This can’t be. It can’t be...*

I wanted to ask how, but I couldn’t torture Asher like that by making him say it out loud.

*Where it can’t be taken back.*

I harbored a wild hope, as if something could happen that *would* take it all back and make it right. Asher could get

another phone call, one that said, we've made a mistake. Everything is just as it should be.

But it wasn't.

*And won't be ever again.*

At my condo, I opened the door with shaking fingers and stripped out of my coat. Asher stepped into the living area and began pacing in small circles, his harsh breaths coming faster now. He tugged at his collar, then tore off his tie and let it fall. His suit jacket went next, crumpling in a heap on the floor.

I could barely hold my phone, but I got a grip on myself—Asher needed me to not fall apart. “Who do I call?”

“I have to...I have to get back,” he said, his voice gruff and thick. “I have to get to Kal. We should've gone straight to the airport. Get the first flight back. Tonight.”

“There aren't any at this hour,” I said in a small voice.

Asher's head whipped around to me. “What?”

I recoiled at the bloodshot, almost crazed stare in his eyes. “I've made the trip so often... There won't be any flights until tomorrow morning.”

“I have to get back,” he said, not comprehending. “I can't be here right now. I can't...fucking *be here* right now...”

Hyperventilating, he turned in a small, panicked circle, as if looking for a way to escape. My preliminary art mock-ups for the Red Bull campaign were all over my coffee table. With an agonized roar, Asher swept everything off. A glass paperweight hit the wall and shattered while papers fluttered to the floor. He was breathing hard, his eyes wild and tear-filled as they glanced around the room, seeing nothing. Seeing a future without his brother in it. I had no idea what to do, except he was in so much pain and I wanted it to stop.

“Asher...”

I reached out my hand, fingertips brushing his shirtsleeve, then taking hold. Then pulling him to me. Then tucking myself into him and wrapping my arms around him. Giving him something to hold on to. The tension in him vibrated against



me, the grief that was like a deep, thrumming electrical current that needed an outlet.

He stiffened, and I thought he'd push me away, but then his hands grasped at me, making fists in my dress, my hair, over and over. Finally, his arms wrapped around me, held me tight, clinging to me as the first wave crashed. Holding Asher in those moments was like trying to hold the ocean—an energy bigger and more powerful than me in my arms, rocking me, tossing me on the current of his pain that I couldn't begin to fathom but felt running through him. My heart ached to the point of breaking and I closed my eyes against his chest and held on.

*I won't let you go. I'll never let you go...*

Dry sobs heaved against me and then he thrust me away with shocking suddenness and resumed pacing, scrubbing his hand over his mouth.

“I have to get back. I have to...”

I nodded frantically, trying to think. “Okay...maybe a private jet? Silas! I'll call Silas.”

With trembling fingers, I grabbed my cell while Asher paced the room like a caged animal. As the phone rang, I went to the kitchen to pour some water—the shock had made me utterly dehydrated; I could hardly imagine how Asher must feel.

*Turned inside out...*

“Hey, you,” Silas answered brightly. “It's too early for award results. I hope you're calling to tell me—”

“Silas, I need your help.” I pressed the phone to my ear and poured a glass from the Britta. “It's an emergency.”

The smile fell out of his voice at my tone. “What is it? What's wrong?”

My voice quavered, tears threatening to burst. “There's been a...tragedy. A terrible tragedy.”

I went to Asher and handed him the water. He held the glass without feeling it, staring out the window.

“Faith?” Silas was frantic in my ear.

I took a few steps away and whispered, “It’s Asher’s brother and his wife. They’re gone, Silas. Gone.”

“Oh, fuck. Oh, shit. Faith, God, I’m so sorry.” Silas paused and I knew he was pulling himself together. “What can I do?”

“I need your jet. Tonight. We have to get back to Kauai.” I stared at Asher, his back to me at the window.

*To his nephew who lost his parents. Oh my fucking God...*

“Of course. Faith, listen to me. Are you listening to me?”

“Yes. I’m here.”

“Breathe, honey. Get a pen and paper. I’m going to give you the airfield details. You’re going to want to talk to Kevin Barker, okay? He’ll take care of everything. They’ll have to get fueled up and talk to air traffic control. A few hours, tops.”

I nodded and frantically wrote the details on the fridge whiteboard where I kept a grocery list of take-out numbers.

“Thank you, Silas. Thank you so much.”

“Anything. Should I come over? Do you need my help?”

*Yes. Make this all go away. Take it all back for him.*

“No, we’re leaving now.”

“Okay, you call me if you need anything. I’ll keep my phone ready. And tell Asher...” Silas’s voice broke. “Just... I’m here, okay?”

“Okay. Thank you. Bye.”

I hung up and took a steadying breath.

“It’s done,” I told Asher, hurrying back to the entry to grab my coat. “Let’s go.”

He nodded then stopped, shell-shocked and dazed. Like a man stumbling out of the rubble of an exploded building. He glanced at the mess of papers on the floor. “I did that. And your award...”

The ceremony, my nomination, even the perfect moment of telling Asher I loved him...That all seemed to belong to another lifetime. A life where things were beautiful and full of promise instead of suffocating with grief.

“Forget it.” I reached out my hand and took his arm. “Come on, honey. Come on.”

He nodded absently and followed me out.

Downstairs, I told Silas’s driver to take us to King County Aviation. The airport was a row of private jet hangars. As twilight darkened, I followed Silas’s instructions to where his jet was being prepped, a crew already in action. A steward led me in my evening gown and Asher in his suit, minus the tie and coat, inside the jet.

Asher hadn’t said a word on the drive over and remained silent as we prepared for takeoff. He stared out the window, seeing nothing, but his hands were clenched in fists.

The steward came by offering water and food in a low voice. No doubt Silas had told them this wasn’t a pleasure flight.

“Water, please,” I said. “Asher, you need water.”

I pressed the glass into his hand, but he didn’t drink. Just held it, eyes on the runway beneath us, and they stayed there until the runway became ocean, until night fell and there was nothing to see but black.

## PART III

*I'm trying to picture me without you but I can't.* —Fall Out  
Boy

## CHAPTER TWENTY

*Asher*

The early hours came and went, like snapshots.

When Faith and I arrived at dawn, we went straight to the house. Momi was there with her nurse, tears streaming down her cheeks. Chloe Barnes was there too. She'd just gotten Kaleo to bed, but I had to see him. He was awake and crying. He was asking me about his mom and dad. He was clinging to me like I'd go away too, and then he mercifully fell back to sleep.

Over the next few days, Nalani and my brother's house was always full of people. Friends, clients from their business, guys from my fire station, police buddies, hospital friends. Paula, Chloe, and Momi, some faces I didn't know. Arrangements needed to be made, *Island Memories* needed to be handled, and Kaleo...

My heart was being held together by fraying threads and he was the only thing keeping them from snapping altogether. In his face, I saw eleven-year-old Morgan, standing in a burning trailer...

*No fucking way...*

I buried it. Buried it all, which was easier thanks to the numb shock that made everything seem dreamlike and unreal.

*This is an emergency, I told myself. Deal with it.*

I went into action, directing the arrangements and handling shit like I was on call.

But I hadn't been. Not when it counted.

It had been raining steadily that day. The rainiest season on an island where it rained every day. It wasn't even dark that afternoon, but the clouds were thick, they said. The roads were slick, they said. Right about the time I was telling Faith I loved her, Morgan was over-correcting to avoid hitting something in the road, or maybe taking a turn too fast. Or maybe he was

driving carefully as usual. Because I was the one who drove like a maniac and he never did, yet it happened to him anyway. They slid, skidded, and then rolled down a muddy embankment. Given the damage to the car, it must've rolled three or four times, if not more. The car landed upside down. They were both killed instantly, they said. It must've been painless. That's what they told me.

Other people had to tell me what happened because I wasn't there.

*I wasn't there. I wasn't there. I wasn't there.*

At some point—I don't remember when or where—strong hands gripped my shoulders. Captain Reyes. “Hey. Talk to me, Ash. Don't take this all on yourself. *Don't do it.*”

I stared at him, perplexed that he didn't understand the simplest truth. “Cap,” I said. “I have to keep moving or I'm going to die.”

He got out of my way, then.

Faith was there. Helping, managing, organizing. Crying. She was in that sequined evening dress for almost twenty-four hours before Paula, my nurse friend, brought her shorts and a T-shirt. One of Faith's bosses—Terrance—had texted her. She'd won the Clio. Instead of celebrating her win with a glitzy party, Faith was in borrowed clothes, making phone calls to tell people my brother and his beautiful wife were dead when I didn't have it in me to say it one more time. When she wasn't working, she was sitting with Momi. I don't think she left her side for longer than a few minutes at a time. Whenever our eyes met, she shot me furtive, agonized glances.

I always looked away. I couldn't look at her because when I looked at her, I saw a future that no longer existed. Married to Faith, living in Seattle, visiting Morgan and Nalani at summer and Christmas time, having Kal come for a visit in the city to play with his cousins...

That was over. And very soon, the planning and the visits and the condolences and the people moving in and out we're going to stop too. Life was going to get really quiet, and it was

just going to be me and Kal. He was mine now, though I didn't actually believe I was the right guy for the job. How could I trust myself when I failed Morgan so fucking badly?

*I wasn't there. I wasn't there. I wasn't there.*

The memorial service to put Nalani and Morgan's ashes in the ocean was coming up. Captain Gary and his wife Cindy organized a flotilla of boats because their one schooner couldn't hold all the people who wanted to pay their respects.

I remember in college, reading a CS Lewis book that he'd written after he lost his wife. He said no one had told him how much grief felt like fear.

No one had told me, either.

A deep, dark dread filled me at the idea of going to that ceremony, to see the mourners' tears and hear their cries and put my brother into the ocean...

*No fucking way.*

But I'd deal with that later. Until then, I had things to do. I didn't sleep; I just kept doing, directing, controlling...

Control. What a farce. A cruel joke.

On the morning of the memorial service, Faith put on a long Hawaiian-style dress and a flower in her hair, and I wondered how it was possible to love someone so much and yet still have to tell them goodbye. But then again, that's what I'd been forced to do with my brother. I hadn't been ready to say goodbye. Not even close. But I didn't have a choice.

Except this time, I did. *This* goodbye, I could control. Another task that needed to be handled.

The grief in me was like a volcano that had not yet erupted. Tectonic plates of pressurized strain that hadn't yet slipped. Worse, when I looked at Faith there was a storm of anger and guilt and resentment that wasn't fair to her but was there anyway. And it all boiled down to that one sentence. That one unrelenting fact.

*I wasn't there. I wasn't there. I wasn't there.*

I wasn't there because I'd been with her.

Her soft touch fell on my shoulder. "Asher? It's time to leave for the marina."

The day had come, but I was not going to put my brother in the ocean. Not today. I'd made a decision. Why was everyone in such a fucking hurry? Funerals and memorials only days after the fact? As if everyone were eager to be done being sad and get back to their lives. *They* had that option. Some of us didn't. I was going to keep Morgan a little longer.

But not Faith. I had to let her go.

I couldn't bring Kal to Seattle, away from his home after he'd lost everything. He'd lost more than any of us. And Faith couldn't be with me. Not here. She might try to make a go of it for my sake, but I couldn't take her away from the life she loved and strand her in the wreckage of mine. She didn't have to make that choice. I could do that for her, at least, when I'd failed everywhere else. I failed in my duty. Took my foot off the gas. Relinquished control. The alarm had gone off and I was across an ocean and hadn't heard it.

They said there's nothing I could have done, but I'll never know.

Because I wasn't there.

I looked up at Faith, her eyes were red and puffy from crying but still so beautiful and full of love for me. My vision blurred but I couldn't cry or I'd fucking splinter in a million pieces. I reached up and touched her hand that was on my shoulder, feeling her skin for the last time, holding it.

Then I let go.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### *Faith*

“It’s time for you to go home,” Asher said.

We were alone in the backyard where I’d found him staring at the ocean, arms crossed, feet planted in the grass. His face was haggard, his eyes bloodshot and ringed with dark circles—I don’t think he’d slept more than a few hours in the four days since we’d been back. I’d hardly had a moment alone with him, and now I kicked myself for not seeing how badly he was doing. I’d handled what he needed me to handle and had given him space, but that was a mistake.

“Go home? No, I don’t have to. I’ll stay as long as you need me.” I swallowed hard. “I’ll stay f—”

“*No*,” Asher said, and the ice in his voice cut through me like a knife, making me shiver. “You need to leave.”

“Asher...I don’t understand. Did I do something wrong?”

His dark gaze was on the horizon in front of him. “Not you. Me. I shouldn’t have left. I should never have...” His jaw clenched; muscles ticked in his cheek. “Go home, Faith. Go back to your home.”

Tears filled my eyes. “Asher, I—”

“*Can’t you hear me?*” he thundered, whirling on me so suddenly, I took a step back.

The house was filled with people, ready to leave for the marina and the memorial service. My cheeks burned hot, and my heart felt like it was ripping in half when it was already cracked for Morgan and Nalani.

“Go back to Seattle, Faith,” Asher said. “You need your shopping and your fancy lunches and your pampered lifestyle, and this little island isn’t it. You can’t cut it and you know it.”

“That’s not...that’s not fair,” I breathed. “I...”

He barreled on as if he hadn't heard me. "You don't belong here. And I don't belong there. I should've been here. With him. I promised to always protect him. I *promised*..."

His voice wavered but he sucked in a breath, like sucking the pain back in before it could break free. He blamed himself. Because of course he did. He was a protector who thought he failed.

"Asher, don't do that," I said, my voice trembling. "It's not your fault. You couldn't have—"

"Don't tell me what I could or couldn't have done," he snarled. "Because we'll never fucking know, will we?"

I recoiled from the accusation imbedded in those words. But pain and grief raged over his face like a storm. He held my gaze and I saw the cracks in his armor where the love tried to seep out.

"You don't have to do this," I said softly. "I can do whatever you need or...be wherever you need me to be. I love y—"

"I need you to leave," he said. "That's what I need."

I stumbled back a step, the finality in those words cutting me to the core.

"O-okay," I whispered. "If that's what you want."

He said nothing but resumed his vigilance over the ocean, arms crossed, closed off to me. Like a locked door.

Feeling as if I were drugged—half out of my body—I turned and walked across the lawn and up the lanai steps. Momi was in her chair, and she reached out a frail hand.

"Faith...don't."

I stopped and knelt beside her. "I have to. It's what he needs, and I can't..." Tears choked my throat and I swallowed them down. "When he looks at me, he sees himself in Seattle and not here. I can't add to his pain when he already has so much. I can't do that."

“He doesn’t know what he needs,” Momi said, her own eyes shining. “It’s too new, too raw. Time... That’s the healing we all need. He just needs a little time...”

I shook my head. “I have to respect his wishes.”

She nodded, eyes on the figure in the yard, staring down at the ocean. “I understand. The only way I make sense out of the insensible is to feel there must be a larger picture waiting to reveal itself to me. But I can’t see it yet. Not yet.” She held me in her bird-like arms. “Aloha, Faith.”

“Aloha, Momi. If you need anything, you can call me. Any time.”

Empty words. I would be so far away. From her, from Kal, from Asher...

I kissed her cheek and then hurried into the house, past Chloe Barnes and Captain Reyes and firefighters and friends and Paula; everyone waiting for the departure to the marina. I slipped by before anyone could stop me, grabbing my purse on the way out.

I had nothing with me when I arrived and now, I was leaving with nothing. Less than nothing, because now I didn’t have Asher.



At my condo, I opened the door and stepped into the wreckage of that terrible phone call. My living room was strewn with my work for the Red Bull ad. Asher’s suit jacket and tie were still in a crumpled heap on the floor. It was like walking into a crime scene.

I left it all and took a long, hot shower, then climbed into bed. I expected tears—for Asher and Morgan and Nalani. For sweet little Kaleo. For my own broken heart. But I fell immediately into sleep, diving into the merciful black.

The following morning, I made a pot of strong coffee and faced the messages on my phone. Missed calls from Silas and Terrance. One voice message from Cynthia wanting to know if I had the specs for Red Bull. But for a brief call with Terry in

Hawaii to explain why I wasn't there to pick up my Clio, I hadn't checked in with work.

I texted him now. **I'm back in Seattle.**

**How are you?** he returned.

The simple question nearly undid me and there was no way to answer it.

**I'm okay. Will be back in the office this afternoon.**

**Take your time. There's no rush.**

But there was. I couldn't sit around in my condo by myself for much longer.

**See you soon,** I sent.

There was a pause and then, **Only if you feel up to it. And give my sincere condolences to your boyfriend.**

I closed my eyes and set the phone down. I gave myself a few more moments of quiet but it grew too loud, too fast. Tears were threatening and I couldn't do that. If I started, I wasn't sure when I'd stop, and I had to get to work

Because I was a responsible person now and that's what responsible people did.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*Asher*

As predicted, the house got real quiet a few days later. My house. I'd had to move Kal to my place on Anini while we waited to know if Morgan and Nalani's house was still inhabitable. It wasn't official yet, but the rains weren't stopping, and I suspected it was simply too dangerous. So my nephew not only lost his mother and his father, he was about to lose his home too.

I looked across the kitchen counter at him one evening, where he was working on a drawing, and studied him—searching for clues that he was going to be okay. With Chloe's help, I'd gotten him into grief counseling immediately. I wanted to be sure that I didn't miss any signs. He seemed to be holding up, but shit, how would I know? I had no frame of reference. My parents split on us—they weren't ripped away.

“Hey buddy,” I said. “You getting hungry for dinner?”

He shrugged, still scratching at his drawing. Near as I could tell, it was of some kind of giraffe. I took it as a good sign it wasn't a sketch of the world set on fire but just an animal.

Kal took a sip from his cup that was sitting beside him. It slipped as he went to set it down. He caught it before it spilled all over, but a large splatter of pineapple juice landed on the upper corner of his drawing.

“No,” he said. “Nooo...”

“Oh hey, let me help you.” I hurried and grabbed a paper towel and dabbed at the stain. “See? Not so bad. Just got the corner here.”

“No, it's ruined,” Kal said. Then louder, “It's ruined!”

His breath started hitching, and he clutched the paper in both hands, wrinkling the edges, damaging it much more than the juice.

“Hey, bud, it's fine. It's not ruined. Just a little splash—”

He shook his head and jumped off the stool. “It’s ruined,” he screamed. He threw the paper on the floor and stomped on it, tearing it, and leaving shoeprints. “It can’t go back to the way it was. It can *never* go back to the way it was!”

My heart that was somehow still pumping, nearly shut down on me. Kal was in full-blown tantrum mode now, crying and sobbing. He snatched the paper off the floor and tore it to shreds.

“Never go back,” he cried. “Never...”

I knelt and took his shoulders in my hands. “Hey, Kal, look at me. Breathe, buddy, okay? It’s going to be okay.”

A crock of shit, but I said it anyway. Maybe he’d believe me.

His breathing calmed and he began to cry in earnest. I gathered him to me, hugging him, and suddenly, I was back in the trailer with Morgan at eleven with smoke all around him and tears in his eyes. Needing me to fix everything. To put it back the way it was, but I couldn’t because it was ruined.

So I just hugged Kal and willed myself not to fall apart because not falling apart for Kal’s sake was Job One these days. I woke up with crushing pain and carried it around all day, not looking at it, not even attempting to think about Morgan except in brief flashes. If I thought about who he’d been, the depth and enormity of a whole human, now lost, I’d go insane. The memories—thousands upon thousands, some profound, some simple—tried to get at me every other minute.

The simple ones were the worst. The little slices of life that were more human and real than the dramatic moments. His laugh, his dumb jokes, how it was impossible for him to hold a grudge. How he’d actually baked a cake for me when I graduated Columbia...

*No fucking way.*

I needed to get back to work or I was going to lose it. Not to mention, I’d taken as much leave as I possibly could. I was a lieutenant now; I had duties and responsibilities.

I felt stretched to the breaking point—and then my gaze landed on Morgan’s urn, sitting on the shelf in the living room. I hadn’t been able to put him in the ocean. A lot of people hadn’t understood why I wasn’t ready to let him be with Nalani, together under the waves.

*Well, we don’t always get what we want, do we?*

“Uncle Ash?” Kal sniffed, pulling out of my embrace. “I want to go home.”

“I know you do, buddy. But it’s too dangerous. You have to stay here for a little while longer, okay? I’m going to take care of you, I promise. I know it’s a lot...” I heard how weak and pathetic my words sounded but kept going. “We’re just going to have to do our best, okay?”

He nodded and wiped his nose. “Okay.”

“Okay,” I agreed, though nothing was okay or would be. An entirely different life stretched out in front of both of us and there was nothing okay about it.

I fed Kal dinner and he took a bath. Then I sat with him until he fell asleep in one of the spare bedrooms that was now his bedroom, wondering just how on earth either one of us was going to get out of this alive.



Two days later, I started my first of four twelves: four a.m. to four p.m. Chloe picked up Kaleo from school and hung out with him at my place until I showed up. Weeks of not sleeping told me this was going to be a rough next few days but I welcomed it. If I didn’t keep my brain occupied, I was going to have a mental breakdown. I wouldn’t be any good to Kal and he was the only thing that mattered now.

I entered the house to find him playing video games and Chloe sitting at the kitchen table.

She smiled warmly. “I made you guys some more poblano fried rice. It’s in the fridge. Just pop it in the oven at 350 for twenty minutes to heat it back up.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I appreciate it and I appreciate you taking care of Kal for the next four days. You need to let me pay you.”

“Absolutely not,” she said. “I’m happy to do it.”

I smiled thinly. It was all I had in me to give.

She studied me. “You look so tired. Have you been sleeping at all?”

“Not really.”

But that was okay, because lying down to try to fall asleep was when the thoughts came. I had to stay up as late as humanly possible and then pass out only to have my alarm go off what felt like minutes later. Sometimes it was.

“I’m fine,” I added when Chloe frowned, concerned.

“I just don’t want you to hesitate to call me if you need anything,” she said, and then her eyes filled. “Nalani and Morgan were special. Not just the parents of my favorite student but good friends too.”

I nodded mutely. The grief in me was like a giant black hole, sucking in everything it touched. It was hard for me to imagine that other people were hurting too but there was nothing I could do for them. I had nothing in the tank and what little there was belonged to Kal.

“You’ll eventually have to go back to working twenty-four-hour shifts, won’t you?”

“Eventually.”

“So I have an idea,” Chloe said, glancing down at the island counter. “What if I moved in?”

I froze in the act of pouring us each a glass of water. “What?”

“I’d sleep in a spare room,” she added quickly. “That way, I could always be here for Kal. And for you.” She put her hand on my arm. “You need someone to take care of you, Asher. To take some of the stress off. I want to be here for you. All the time—”



“No,” I said harder than I intended, yanking away from her touch. “No, thanks, Chloe. Picking Kal up from school and hanging out with him all the time is plenty. I can’t ask you to do more.”

“You don’t have to ask.” Her smile was a peculiar mix of shyness and boldness. “Think about it?” She reached out to touch my hand again. “See you tomorrow.”

I watched her go and rubbed my tired eyes. She was right. I’d said I’d have to go back to twenty-fours eventually but *eventually* was actually *soon*. Captain Reyes was giving me as much leeway as he could, but we were shorthanded, having lost two more guys who couldn’t hack living on Kauai. They thought a job in Hawaii was all about living in paradise until they realized how remote the smallest island really was.

*Which is why I did the right thing with Faith.*

Except it didn’t feel right, but how would I know? I was a fucking mess.

My exhaustion unhelpfully conjured a woman living in my house, being there when Kal came home from school, someone watching over him while I worked my twenty-fours. Someone to come home to. Someone in my bed...

I snapped out of it. Faith wasn’t cut out for island life and didn’t deserve to play housemaid to a broken wreck of a man and his lost nephew.

I picked up my phone and shot a text to Silas Marsh.

**Did you tell her about the ring?**

The reply came fast. **I haven’t said anything. Been away on business. Wondered where things stood.**

My thumbs flew. **Don’t tell her.**

**Don’t shut her out,** he countered. **I figure right now you’re doing what you have to do to survive but don’t shut her out. Please.**

I closed my eyes and inhaled a steadying breath. **Keep it between us. If you have any respect for me at all, you will do that for me.**

The rolling dots of another text popped up, but I shot off one first.

**Thanks for everything Silas**, I wrote and then put my phone on mute and joined Kal at the TV.

“Is Miss Barnes going to live with us?” Kal asked, his eyes on the video game.

“No.” I glanced at him. “Why? You want her to?”

He shrugged. “You could marry her instead of Faith.”

I flinched as if he’d socked me in the chest. “What...why would you say that?”

“Because you’re alone, Uncle Ash. And sad.”

“I’m sad about your mom and dad.”

“And Faith because she’s not here?”

I swallowed hard. “Yeah. I’m sad about that too.”

“She doesn’t want to live here?”

“I don’t think so, buddy. It’s not for everyone.”

A sudden thought jolted him, and he looked at me with wide, fearful eyes. “Do we have to move to Seattle?”

“Nope. We’re staying here.”

“Oh, because Daddy said...” Kaleo got choked up but composed himself with more gravitas than I thought an eight-year-old possessed. “Daddy said you were going to move to Seattle and marry Faith.”

“Yeah, well that’s not going to happen anymore. You don’t have to worry about that, okay?”

“Okay.”

And then he leaned his head on my shoulder and played his game while the tears dried on his cheeks.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### *Faith*

A knock came at my office door and Terrance peaked his head in.

“Heya. Busy?”

I looked up from the pile of work on my desk, the mountain I was climbing instead of thinking about Asher. Of course, that was impossible, but a gal could try.

*I could also try jumping to the moon on a pogo stick and have the same result.*

I smiled. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to let you know that the Red Bull people are extraordinarily happy with your work. And so are we. Cynthia sends her kudos.”

My smile thinned out. “I’m so glad.”

Terry frowned and he stepped in the office. “Can I sit for a minute?”

“Be my guest.”

He took a seat in the chair opposite my desk and sighed, studying me. “How are you, Faith? And please don’t insult me with some bullshit. I’d like to hear the truth.”

“I don’t know how to answer that,” I said. “I’m doing my best? Hanging in there?”

He nodded. “I’m not your boss anymore; I’m your business partner. And hopefully, your friend.”

“Of course.”

“On that note, if you need anything, I want you to come to me as a friend *and* as a business partner. Do you understand what I’m saying? If you have any requests, or plans, or ideas, come to *me*. Okay?”

My smile was so forced it made my cheeks ache. “If you’re worried about me skipping town and going to Hawaii, you don’t have to. It’s not going to happen.”

“No? You’ve been back and forth so often, I wondered if...”

“No, it’s over,” I said, the words stabbing me in the chest. “He has a lot to deal with there and I have work here and it’s... It’s what he wants.”

“And what do you want?”

I blinked. I didn’t dare let myself ask that question because I was both terrified and exhilarated by the answer...and then overwhelmed with hopelessness. Because no matter what I was willing to do—*wanted* to do—Asher didn’t want me in his life.

When I didn’t answer, Terrance started to speak but his phone buzzed a text. “Shit. I have to handle this.” He smiled and stood up. “I’m just saying, let’s not lock any doors, okay?”

*Keep them unlocked so my firefighter can barge in.*

Terrance stepped out and I brushed away the tears that burned my eyes. They tried to flood out of me ten times an hour, but I couldn’t let them. It was too scary to dive into that pit of pain and let it have me. No, I had to keep moving. Because life went on, whether you were ready or not.

At lunchtime, I met Viv at our favorite Italian restaurant, Altura. She came breezing in ten minutes late in a cloud of Chanel No. 5 and a bundle of shopping bags on her shoulder.

“Oh my God, the traffic on Belmont was ridiculous.” Viv slumped gracefully in the booth and ordered a martini from the waiter who appeared a moment later.

“Just water for now,” I told him.

The waiter left and Viv narrowed her eyes at me. “Are you on some sort of cleanse you haven’t told me about?”

“I have a pile of work waiting for me when I get back. Need to keep a clear head.”

She pursed her lips. “That never stopped you before. You look tired, babe. And sad. You’re not still crying over that fireman, are you? Girl, he dumped you. *Twice.*”

Instantly, I regretted telling Viv the whole sordid story a few weeks ago. But the loneliness was crushing me, and Silas had been out of town on business for what felt like years.

“It’s more complicated than that,” I said.

“Probably for the best, anyway. Can you really see yourself on that tiny little island? With a kid who’s not even yours? I’m sorry to sound like a bitch but I know you don’t want any part of that.”

“I love him,” I said simply, and I realized with some surprise I could have been talking about Asher or Kal. The sweet little boy had snuck into my heart through the same door Asher had busted open.

Viv perused the menu. “I love my Louboutins but I’m not going to give up my entire lifestyle for them when there’s a galaxy of other shoes to choose from. And from what you’ve told me, he sounds like a major asshole.”

“He’s not. He’s in pain.”

*God, so much pain. And he’s dealing with it alone.*

Viv snorted. “So he takes it out on you?”

I toyed with my fork. “I think maybe he was pushing me away. Trying to protect me. That’s what he does.” Then I remembered the anger in Asher’s eyes and his cutting tone when he told me I didn’t belong in Hawaii. “Or maybe he meant it. He was upset that he was here with me and not there with his brother.”

She scoffed. “Like that’s your fault.”

“It’s not my fault but it’s what happened.”

Viv let the menu fall flat. “You’d move to Hawaii for him out of guilt?”

*Not guilt. Love. Love would take me to him.*

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, the ache in my heart like a permanent fixture. “He’s not speaking to me, and I have to let him go.”

“Give it time. You’ll get back into the swing of things.” Viv’s eyes widened. “Hey, what about that Jack guy we keep running into? He’s hot, mega-rich, and he seemed really into you. Doesn’t get better than that.”

Viv went back to her menu while I contemplated that future. In flashes, I saw myself going out, meeting up with Jack Phillips, possibly having a relationship with him that lasted more than one night. Working at my job, lunch dates with Viv, shopping, dinners out... None of it was terrible and it was all completely wrong.

The dam I’d built in me to hold back the pain of missing Asher began to waver. Cracks were forming. The place in my heart where he lived was a throbbing ache, and tears rushed up in a torrent.

I stood up on shaking legs. “I have to go.”

Viv frowned. “We just got here. What about lunch?”

“Sorry.” My voice was a croak. “I can’t...”

“Girl, you are so weird lately, I don’t even know what to do with you. It’s like you’re not the same person anymore.”

“I suppose that’s true,” I said and shouldered my purse.

Viv’s martini arrived, which seemed to mollify her. She heaved a sigh. “Drinks this Friday at least?”

The automatic, *Sure, I’ll call you* rose to my lips, but I smiled through the impending deluge of sobs instead.

“Goodbye, Viv,” I said, because in that moment, I knew I wasn’t going to see her again.



I made it to my condo just in time. No sooner had the door shut than the dam burst. The keys dropped from my hands as great heaving sobs rolled through me like waves in a tsunami.

Sobs so deep and hard, my hands begin to shake, and I felt dizzy.

I sucked in deep breaths, staring wildly around until my frantic gaze landed on the hall closet. Asher's jacket. I needed something to hold on to or I was going to break apart.

I opened the closet and wrapped my arms around the jacket, sobbing into the lapel, inhaling the remnants of his cologne that was fading away. I clenched and unclenched the fabric, sagging on it, straining the hanger. And then my grasping fingers felt a hard lump in one of the pockets.

I slipped my hand inside and touched something covered in velvet. Slowly, I withdrew a box.

“Oh my God.”

It was black and small and most definitely the kind that might hold a ring. Then, like a dream from another lifetime, I remembered that dinner, Asher saying he couldn't wait any longer... He reached into his pocket and instead of drawing out this box, he pulled out his phone that carried nothing but tragedy.

The jacket slipped off the hanger and I sat on the floor with it in my lap, the box in my hands.

“Oh, Asher.”

And then the tears that fell were warm and soft, my breathing easier, as some of the cracks in my heart began to fill with hope.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

*Asher*

The rains had hardly let up for a week and the radio in my Jeep said a storm was coming.

“No shit,” I muttered. A storm had begun the second I got that fucking phone call from Cap and showed no signs of quitting.

I’d just come from a meeting with my business manager. I’d assigned Al Jacobs to look into *Island Memories* and tell me where it stood. After a thorough audit, he discovered that at the time of the accident, the business had been on a profitable upswing.

“But the family-run aspect was its greatest asset,” Al had said. “You can hire new people, but I don’t know that it’d be the same.”

Not even close. Nalani’s warm smile and charisma and Morgan’s photography made their business what it had been. I couldn’t hire anyone to take their place—they were irreplaceable—and even if I did, I was stretched too thin to keep tabs on it.

“Sell it,” I’d said, the bile rising in my throat. “Whatever it makes, put in a trust for Kaleo’s college.”

“Very good. And the house...”

Morgan and Nalani’s house, Al told me, would have to be torn down. It and three other homes on their road were one bad storm away from sliding down to the ocean.

Kal could never go home again.

“Move everything to storage,” I’d replied.

“Everything?” Al frowned. “Maybe you could hold a sale to get rid of—”

“I’m not *getting rid* of one goddamn thing that belonged to my brother,” I’d thundered. I eased a shaking breath. “Storage.



All of it.”

Al had nodded, but he didn't get it. Like the people who wanted Morgan's urn in the water. You giveaway all the stuff and you sell the business and you put the ashes in the ocean and then what do you have left?

*Nothing. There's nothing left.*

I pulled into the drive of my house just as the sun was setting. Chloe's car was there, of course. She picked Kal up after school every day and stayed with him until I came home from work. Captain Reyes had told me that starting next week, I'd have to take a few twenty-fours. The fire station was operating on a skeleton crew, and I had to step up.

Exhaustion seeped so deep in me, it was in my soul. Stretched to the breaking point. If something didn't change, it was all going to fall apart. I needed help. Glue, to hold it all together.

Inside, I could hear Chloe bustling around in the kitchen, likely making dinner though I never asked her to. Kal was doing homework at the living room coffee table.

I ruffled his hair. “How was your day?”

“Good.”

He'd always been a quieter kid, but I wished he'd tell me more. I wished I knew what to ask. For a kid who'd lost both his parents several weeks ago, he seemed inhumanly “good.” His grief counselor told me kids were resilient but now I had to deliver more bad news. Another loss.

I knelt beside him. “So I need to tell you something, buddy.”

He looked at me. “We can go home now?”

*Christ.*

He'd been asking me that nearly every day, and I'd ducked and weaved, but there was no more evading it now.

“That's just it. I got final word from the surveyors, and they said it's too dangerous because of the threat of mudslides. A

few houses on the street can't be lived in anymore.”

*Including yours.*

He frowned. “We can't go back?”

He kept saying “we” because he correctly assumed I would come live with him in his old house. I'd have moved to a colony on Mars if that's what he wanted, but I couldn't give him the simplest of his wants—the only home he'd ever known.

“No, buddy. I'm sorry.”

“What's going to happen to it?”

“Well, they'll probably...tear it down.”

Kaleo sat still for a moment, then faced his papers. “I want to go home.”

My eyes fell shut at the pain that squeezed my chest. “I know you do, and I wish we could. I'd give anything for that, but...”

He looked at me with his big brown eyes, wide with fear because no one had told him that's what grief could be either. “Can't you fix it, Uncle Ash? Can't you and your firemen friends fix it so it won't slide?”

*I can't fix anything. Not a goddamn thing.*

I shook my head. “I wish we could, buddy. But you're going to live here, and we can decorate your room the same way. However you want.”

“I'm going to live with you forever?”

“Yeah. I'll...”

I almost said *I'll take care of you*, but anger gripped my throat in a chokehold. First Morgan, then Kal. The universe, or God, or whoever the fuck kept stealing parents from little kids and leaving it to me to step in. As if I could replace them.

“Okay,” Kaleo said dully and went back to his work.

I didn't know what else to say, so I ruffled his hair again and joined Chloe in the kitchen. The scent of spaghetti sauce

laced the air, along with the garlic bread baking in the oven.

“Hey,” she said with a smile. “How was the meeting with your manager?”

“Terrible,” I said in a low voice. “Have to sell the business and I just had to tell Kal the house is gone. Too dangerous.”

“Oh no.” Chloe took oven mitts from a drawer. She knew my kitchen like the back of her hand. “How did he take it?”

“I don’t know. I’m sure it’s fucking horrible, but I can’t read him.” I rubbed my eyes for the millionth time and glanced around. Chloe had cooked dinner and the table was set. Kal was doing his homework. Stability. Something I was struggling to give him.

“Chloe...I was thinking about your offer to move in here.”

“It still stands.”

“But you’d keep your own place,” I said. “And it wouldn’t be permanent. I couldn’t ask that. Just until I get my shit together.”

Her smile was wide and her eyes warm as they looked at me. “That’s what I want. To help you however I can.”

I nodded. “But...and I don’t want to sound like a presumptuous ass, but I can’t be anything to anyone right now.”

An understatement. My heart was completely shattered but every little piece still belonged to Faith and always would. Missing her was another brick on the pile I carried around. One of the heaviest.

“I know,” Chloe said. “And I’m not trying to pressure you. There are no conditions for me being here or expectations on my part. But maybe...” Her cheeks turned pink. “Maybe just keep an open mind?” She looked up at me through lowered lids with a glance that was entirely full of expectation. “And an open heart?”

Mental alarms went off, but they were lost in the cacophony that was already there. And because I had no fucking idea what I was doing anymore, I nodded absently.

“Sure.”

Chloe smiled, satisfied, and pulled the bread out of the oven. “Dinner’s ready.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### *Faith*

I barged into the penthouse condo Silas shared with Max without knocking. His concierge had told him I was coming but I couldn't wait for more niceties. Silas had been out of town for weeks, testifying before Congress on the severity of the opioid epidemic, and his luggage was still by the door. Max must've been at work, because Silas was alone; I found him sitting at his baby grand piano, playing some insanely complicated piece of classical music.

He saw me out of his periphery and stopped, turned on the bench to face me.

"Faith, hey..."

"What is this?" I thrust him the velvet box I'd been clutching in my hand for almost twenty-four solid hours.

Silas stared. "You haven't opened it?"

"Not so much as a peek. Because if it is what I think it is, this is not how I want to see it for the first time." I swallowed hard. "Is it what I think it is?"

He nodded, his voice low. "Yeah, it is."

"Oh God..." I moved to the couch and sank down, my knees giving out.

*Asher was going to propose to me. He wants to marry me.*

"*Wanted* to marry me," I muttered, tears stinging my eyes. "Past tense. Now it's all ruined."

"Nothing's ruined, Faith." Silas sat down beside me, the ring box in his hand. "Hey. Did you hear me? Nothing's ruined. It's just...terrible timing. The worst ever."

"He doesn't want to see me, Si," I cried. "He doesn't want anything to do with me."

"I beg to differ." Silas held up the box. "Exhibit A."

“That was before. Now it’s too late.”

Silas pulled me to him and wrapped his arm around my shaking shoulders. “It’s not.”

“How can you keep saying that? You don’t know...” I lifted my head and studied his face through my tears. “Wait. You didn’t seem all that surprised to see that box. How do you know what’s in it?”

“Because I’ve seen it before.”

I jerked away. “You *what?*”

Silas blew out a sigh, cheeks puffing, and ran a hand through his golden hair. “Asher came to me a few days before your awards ceremony.”

“When you two arranged to swap places.”

He nodded. “He was going to ask you to marry him, and he wanted my blessing.”

“Your blessing? Why?”

“I don’t know. Since your dad is MIA, I guess Asher figured I was the next best thing.” Silas’s expression turned grave. “He was going to move to Seattle. For you.”

I stared, the implications sinking deeper, rooting me to the couch. “He...he was?”

“I hate telling you like this. It was all going to be so fucking perfect until he got that call.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“He asked me not to. He was grieving and I felt I should honor his wishes and not interfere. And then I got called to DC and was wrapped up in the Congressional hearings...”

“A likely story,” I sniffed.

Silas smiled but it faded fast. “But I didn’t like keeping it from you. I just didn’t know what my place was in all this. But in D.C. my silence kept eating at me. *My place* is being your friend. I guess a part of me thought once the worst pain let go

of him, he'd come around. I didn't want to spoil that. But he hasn't—yet—and I'm sorry for keeping it from you."

"It's okay. It's all such a mess, I can't blame you." I glanced at him tearfully. "Was he really going to give up his life? For me?"

Silas turned the ring box over and over in his hand. "I think it's more that you *are* his life, Faith. He's only going to be truly happy wherever you are. But his nephew needs him now and he can't make the same kind of move. That little boy's life has been upheaved in the worst way, and his well-being needs to come first."

"It does," I said, fresh tears for what Kaleo had lost rushing to my eyes. "Asher will protect him. Because that's what he does. He protects people. It's in his DNA."

"Including you." Silas touched my hand. "Look, I was an expert at pushing people away for a lot of years, thinking it was better for *them*. I recognize the move when I see it. Asher drove you away because he thinks that's best for you. To protect you from having to give up your life for him. That's it. No other reason."

"He told me..." Tears choked my throat. "He told me I don't belong in Hawaii. That I'm too spoiled and materialistic and..."

"Ah yes, the old break-their-heart-so-they-hate-you-and-move-on-faster maneuver. Oldest trick in the book."

"I don't know, Si. It felt pretty real."

"I can imagine. But you didn't see the man come to me with this box in his hand. Nervous as hell. More than nervous. I've never seen him so...vulnerable?" He made a face. "Ugh, I hate that word. Don't tell Max I used it, or I'll never hear the end of it."

A laugh tried to burst through my tears. "I'm trying to picture my big, strong firefighter being nervous about anything."

"He was a mess," Silas said. "But I don't blame him. There was a lot on the line. You, babe. You're pretty damn

important.”

I sat back, absorbing everything. “What do I do now?”

Silas shot me a look. “Do you really have to ask?”

I stared another moment, feeling everything inside me alter and shift around, making space, making adjustments...falling into perfect place. My chest felt warm and full—fuller than it ever had—and twanged with electric nerves. With excitement, fear of the unknown, and more than anything else, my own vulnerability, naked and raw.

“I’ve never felt this way before. Not for any man.” I huffed a breath. “I don’t like it.”

Silas laughed. “Yes, you do. You love it. You love *him*.”

“No, I don’t,” I said and continued before Silas’s shocked reaction could take hold. “I’m completely, madly, hopelessly in love with him. And even saying that doesn’t feel like enough.”

The word *aloha* flitted across my thoughts.

*“Hello. Goodbye.” Momi shook her head. “There is no equivalent in English that captures such profound emotion.”*

“Yes, that,” I murmured and wiped my tears. I looked over to see Silas watching me with heavy eyes.

“I’m going to miss you,” he said.

“Holy shit, this is happening, isn’t it?”

“Apparently so.”

I threw my arms around his neck and held him tight. I clung to him and waited for the wild moment to pass. For the love to let go and release me back to my normal life.

It didn’t. I knew it never would. And worse, I didn’t want it to.

Silas held me tight, and I sniffled into his chest. “You’re wrong, by the way,” I said.

“Me? Never. What about?”



“You said that you’re the next best thing. You are *the* best thing, Silas. I love you so much.”

“Love you too.” He pulled back to meet my eyes. “And for what it’s worth, when Asher asked for my blessing, I gave it. Which is not something I’d give to any schmuck who comes around and tries to take my best girl. He’s a good guy, Faith. One of the best.” He smiled fondly and turned his wedding band around on his finger. “I would know. I have one too.”

The idea that I could have something as beautiful and real as what Silas had with Max stole my breath.

“You think I still have him?” I asked, my voice cracking. “Truly?”

Silas pressed the ring box into my hand. “Go and prove me right. Again.”

“I don’t know. He’s in so much pain, Si.”

Silas’s expression sobered. “I know he is, but once he sees you, he can stop being the hero. Stop pretending he doesn’t need anyone.” He smiled gently. “That’s when the healing will start.”



The following day, at the offices of *Coleman, Cross & Benson*, I knocked on Cynthia Cross’s door and then opened it without waiting for a reply. Terry was there, standing behind her chair, both of them bent over the art for the Banana Republic account. They both looked up when I came to stand in front of Cynthia’s desk.

“I’m going to Kauai,” I declared, the firmness in my voice shocking me.

Cynthia frowned. “For how long? The Red Bull account—”

“Is ready for production. And I don’t know how long I’ll be gone. I may be there for a few days or maybe... forever.”

*Until I know if Asher still loves me... Until I know it’s not too late for us.*

Terrance was smiling while Cynthia's frown deepened.

"You're going to move to that tiny island for that man?"

"I'm going to move there for the love of that man. I've never felt anything like this in my life and I'm not going to give it up. I can't. It might be a huge mistake, or it might be everything I need but I won't know until I stop being so damn afraid of how much I love him." I looked at Cynthia. "You had a North star, right?"

"My *children*." She crossed her arms. "He's yours?"

"No," I said. "I'm following my love for him and the faith in myself that I'm doing the right thing. That I'm strong enough. That's my North star." I tilted my chin. "And if you want to fire me, I'm going to fight. I don't want to stop working for this agency. I love my job and when you love something, you figure out how to make it work. If you value me as you seem to, then *you* will help me make it work." I let out a shaky breath. "So that's where I stand. Just...thought you should know."

They both stared at me, but time was wasting. I turned and strode out. I was nearly at my office when Terrance caught up to me.

"Faith, wait."

I turned. "I'm sorry, Terry. That was probably more personal than is appropriate for the office, but I have to do what I have to do."

"And I'm here for it." He shook his head and chuckled at my mystified expression. "Didn't I tell you to come to me with any requests?"

"You're okay with me leaving?"

"Like you said, we can make it work." He cocked his head. "That was quite a speech, though. One for the books."

I eased a breath. For all my bravado, I'd still been scared shitless they'd laugh me out of my job. "It might be for nothing." I swallowed hard. "It might be a short trip."

He smiled. “Maybe not. But you won’t know unless you go, right?” He offered his hand and gave a firm shake. “Good luck. We’ll miss having you here in the office.”

“Thanks, Terry,” I said and breathed out another sigh of relief...which lasted all of ten seconds.

The entire plane ride to Lihue, my surety disintegrated, and a thousand panicked, inane thoughts crowded in to steal my peace.

*This is a big fucking step. The biggest. What am I doing? Giving up my fabulous condo? Will Asher still want to see me? Can I even bring my Peloton to Hawaii?*

“Excuse me.” I clutched at a passing flight attendant. “Can I please have a double vodka martini?”

But when she handed me the drink, I didn’t throw it back in one gulp as I’d planned. For all my brain’s hamster-wheel panic, the deeper truth was like a solid heart stone. A north star.

They say growth comes through adversity and strength is built by resistance. I wasn’t growing in Seattle. I was stagnant in my own complacency, marinating in a sparkling, bubbly, adversity-free existence that had been wearing me down. I’d needed to step out of my comfort zone and grow, which was why I sought out Kauai in the first place.

*And it gave me Asher.*

I loved that man with all that I was. I loved his island because it was where he called home. He’d been prepared to give it all up for me. He’d been willing to sacrifice being with his family, his friends, his buddies on the job, the contentment and peace that he’d been searching for his whole life and had found on little Kauai...he’d been ready to trade it all. And I had to hope the only reason he’d do that was if he felt some shred of that peace when he was with me.

More than I wanted cocktail hour and city streets and shopping sprees, I wanted to love him and be loved by him. Not to become lost in Asher and give myself up to him, but to

be *more* with him. More of myself than I yet knew. Because I had something to give, too.

I touched the quartz pendant around my neck and smiled out over the ocean that stretched for miles. Endless. Like possibilities. Life wasn't just one thing. Or even one place. It was boundless potential and experiences waiting to be explored. Seattle would always be there for me, but what I felt for Asher wasn't going to come around again.

I refused to let it go.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

*Asher*

The storm arrived.

Dark, thick clouds rolled in, and the rain was constant. Late that afternoon, after my shift, I checked-in with Momi to make sure she and the live-in nurse I'd hired were going to be safe. I drove to Momi's little house in Hanalei, not far from where Morgan and Nalani lived.

*Had lived. Past tense.*

I had to remind myself of that often. My brain was hardwired to expect my brother's goofy smile, hear his voice on the phone, his laugh and his dumb jokes, and his hugs that I pretended I didn't like but actually needed more than I could have known.

“Stop it.”

The grief was circling close today, like a hungry wolf. Always shadowing me, ready to sink its teeth in and tear me to shreds.

*Not yet...*

I pulled onto the drive that led to Momi's bungalow. The house was pure old Hawaii—wood interiors and filled with island art—koa wood sculptures, woven rugs, beads, and old photographs of Momi's family. All dead now. Including her daughter, Nalani's mother, who'd raised Nalani alone until cancer took her. Momi had outlived her daughter and her granddaughter and was still here. She hadn't given up.

The nurse—Maryanne—met me at the door and we walked through her emergency supplies and procedures. Then she told me that Momi was in her room, about to nap, but wanted to see me.

“Aloha, Asher,” she said as I walked in, though her eyes were on the window where rain smattered the glass. Don Ho was singing about *Beautiful Kauai* on an old turntable. Momi

turned to me, thinner and even more frail since the broken hip. Her long hair, that recently had a little bit of black in it, was now completely white.

*Grief will do that to you. It sucks a piece of your soul away.*

“Come. Sit.”

I pulled a chair up to her bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Old,” she said. “And running out of time.”

“Jesus, don’t say that.”

She scoffed weakly. “I’m not dying this minute, child, but I’m going to say what I need to say to make sure it’s said.” She fixed me with a pointed look. “Where is Faith?”

“You know where she is,” I said in a low voice. “I can’t bring her back here, Momi. I can’t make her live a life she doesn’t want.”

“How do you know what she wants? Have you asked her? Or did you push her away because you assumed that was best for her?”

“She thrives in the city. She told me a hundred times the island is too small...” I waved my hands. “Doesn’t matter. Chloe offered to move in, and I said yes.”

Momi’s eyes flared. “Ai, ke akua e kokua mai ia’u,” she muttered, shaking her head.

“I need help with Kal and maybe...”

“Maybe you’ll fall in love with her the way you love Faith?” Momi snorted. “And you’re supposed to be the smart one.”

I scrubbed my eyes. “The other day, I had a meeting with my business manager. *Island Memories* has to shut down. I can’t run it and even if I hired someone, it was all Morgan. His photos...” I cleared my throat. “And their house is going to be torn down and I had to tell that to Kal and it’s all just...”

“Too much? Oh, my boy.” Momi patted my hand. “I wish I were strong enough to help carry your burdens, but I have a

feeling you wouldn't let me. The only thing I can do is give you our words and I want you to listen."

"*Our* words?"

"Mine and Morgan's."

"What do you mean?"

Momi turned to the rain on the window. The rivulets that streamed in random patterns.

"When you are as old as me, you notice things. Signs. Serendipities. And when there is great loss, you notice them then too. The little gifts that let you know you're not as alone as you think you are."

She turned to me.

"Signs are not the same as coincidences, though the cynic will say so. But a sign feels different than a mere coincidence. You feel it deep in your soul. Sometimes a whale is just a whale, breaching on the horizon. Sometimes it's not. Sometimes the whale comes right when you need to see it, and you are comforted."

I nodded, mostly to be respectful, but I didn't deny that the islands had an energy that was different than anywhere else. The ocean and forest and the great yawning canyon... They all had so much to offer just by existing.

"Don't you find it strange," Momi was saying, "that from the very beginning, Morgan wanted you to be with Faith?"

I thought for a moment and realized she was right. From the very first time I mentioned the beautiful tourist with the sprained ankle, he seemed hellbent on making something of us.

Momi nodded, reading my thoughts. "He was so happy with my Nalani, and he wanted you to have that happiness too. Urgently, it seems. I feel that Morgan encouraging you toward Faith was a sign. As if he knew, somehow, you would very soon need to have someone there to catch you."

"I don't believe in that stuff, Momi," I said, my throat thick. "He didn't know what was going to happen to him."

“Not on the surface, no. Not in his everyday consciousness. But perhaps, somewhere deep down where we can’t remember, there are secrets that aren’t so secret.”

She smiled at my dubious expression.

“Even if these are the musings of a crazy old woman, it brings me peace to think he was trying to protect you as best he could. And isn’t doing what brings you peace the most important thing?” She reached out to take my hand, her gaze intent. “Loving her, Asher. Didn’t that bring you peace?”

I started to tell her it was too late. The terrible things I said to Faith... How I hurt her. Blamed her...

But Momi deserved the truth. And maybe I did too.

“Yeah. It did.”

“There you go.” She smiled and patted my hand. “Now go on. I have to take a nap and you have things to do.”

I kissed her cheek, warm gratitude for her flooding over some of the cold pain, then receding and leaving behind a little bit of hope.

“The storm’s going to be bad,” I said. “Are you sure you don’t want to come live with us? The offer still stands.”

She shook her head. “This is my home. We have weathered more than a few storms together. You have your own home to build.” She fixed me an arch look. “And I think you know who belongs in it and who doesn’t.”



The rain was coming down in sheets and the sky darkening to black by the time I got to my place. Chloe rushed to greet me as I came in.

“It’s getting bad out there,” she said. “You okay?”

“Fine. Where’s Kal?”

“Upstairs. He’s had dinner and is playing in his room. He says the storm doesn’t bother him but I’m not sure. It’s hard to tell how he’s doing. He’s so quiet lately. More than usual.”



I nodded and moved away from Chloe who was standing too close to me. She'd been moved in for two weeks which I now knew was fourteen days too long. It was wrong. Her and me...all wrong, and we'd never be right. She would never be who I wanted to come home to, and I hated myself for giving her hope that we had a chance.

"Chloe, we have to talk," I began, and then my glance landed on the large manila envelope on the kitchen counter. "What's this?"

"That came for you today," she said, following me to the kitchen. "It's from your business manager. I think they're photographs."

Wordlessly, I took the envelope that was heavy and stiff and sat with it on the couch. I tore it open, and photos spilled over the coffee table. Morgan's photos. A note from Al Harris said they were the last roll in his personal camera.

With shaking hands, I fanned them out, hardly able to look at any one for longer than a moment. Photos of Nalani and Kal at their house, laughing or being silly. Of us at a dinner on their lanai with the sun sinking into the ocean. Of Momi and her quiet, knowing smile. And of Faith and me, sitting at their table. She was laughing—full and real—and so goddamn beautiful, my chest constricted. And there was me, smiling at her, seeing only her because even then, she was becoming my entire world.

I felt Chloe hovering.

"They're beautiful photos," she said. "Morgan's?"

I nodded, and the grief sank razor-sharp teeth into my chest. "They're his so he's not in them. He's not in one single fucking picture..."

I bent, covering my eyes with one hand as a terrible sob tightened around me like an iron band. The couch dipped as Chloe sat beside me, her hands on me, wrapping around my arm. Her touch brought me back from the brink because she wasn't the one I could fall apart with. Somehow, I sucked it all back down, forcing it down my gullet as she rested her cheek

on my shoulder. I looked over at her, confused, likely my brow furrowed the way Faith always teased me about.

“Chloe...”

“I’m here,” she said, soothing. “I’m right here...”

Her chin tilted up, her eyes went to my mouth, and then she leaned in...

My eyes flared and I tore off the couch. She recoiled as I heaved a breath, trying to keep my emotions under control when they wanted to rage like the storm outside.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But I can’t do this. You can’t...I should never have asked you to move in. It was wrong and I’m sorry.”

She stared, surprised indignation sweeping over her features. She got up from the couch, arms crossed. “I see. I thought you needed my help with Kal. I thought you couldn’t handle it all by yourself. I thought I was *helping* you.”

“You were. You are. But not like this.”

“You love her,” she said, gesturing at a photo of Faith.

“Yeah, I do,” I said. “I’m in love with her and she—”

“Isn’t here,” Chloe snapped. Her voice cracked and tears flooded her eyes. “You’re grieving and in pain and she’s not here. But I am, Asher. I’m right here and worse...” Her jaw quavered. “I always have been. Always.”

My head bowed. I’d been so stupid. So careless.

“I’m sorry, Chloe. I am. But I can’t be what you want me to be. I appreciate everything you’ve done but...I have to fix what I broke.”

“And Kal? Suddenly you can manage him without help?”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I’ll figure it out.”

Lightning crashed and a few seconds later, thunder boomed, shaking the house.

“I’ll go,” Chloe said.

“No way. Not now. Not in this storm. Let me check on Kal and we can talk more and just...give me a minute, okay?”

She nodded reluctantly, hunching deeper into her sweater.  
“Sure. Fine.”

“Thank you.”

I took the stairs up to the second floor and knocked on Kaleo’s door. No answer.

“Hey, Kal?” I cracked it open. “It’s getting pretty gnarly out there. You doing okay?”

I pushed the door open all the way. His bed was empty. Desk chair, empty. The room was empty, but the window was open, and Kal was gone.



## Faith

I’d seen plenty of rain in Seattle, but a tropical storm was another beast altogether.

The rental car guy at Lihue Airport tried to talk me out of driving, especially as someone who’s not used to the weather, but I turned on my considerable charm to convince him and hit the road.

“Because I have considerable charm... for a lunatic.”

My nerves were already shot as it was, wondering how Asher was going to react to seeing me. I drove with white-knuckles, hands at ten and two like they taught us, and took the rain-slicked highway up to Anini Beach as fast as I dared.

Which wasn’t much.

The rain lashed the windshield as if someone were throwing buckets of water at the glass instead of rain drops. My wipers could barely keep up.

“The crazy shit people do for love,” I muttered and then I could’ve wept with relief as my GPS told me Anini Beach Drive was just up ahead.

Even so, I nearly missed the turn through the torrent. But I was going about eight miles an hour (with no one behind me,

thankfully, because no one else was dumb enough to be out in this mess,) and I found the drive.

I crept the car along the private road to Asher's huge place and parked, relieved to see lights on. Because I had rushed out of Seattle with only a small bag of luggage and no raincoat, I hurried up to the front door in jeans and a sweater and was soaked instantly.

"This is it. The rest of my life starts now." I heaved a breath and knocked.

Footsteps approached and my nerves became half-anxiety, half-excitement. No matter what happened, I was going to see Asher. Even if he kicked me right back out into the storm, I could tell him one more time that I loved him and that I—

Chloe Barnes opened the door.

We stared at each other; she looked about as horrified to see me as I was to see her. She glanced behind her and crowded the door so I couldn't see in, and no one could see out.

"Chloe," I said stiffly, mustering my pride, even though I must've looked like a drowned rat. "What are you doing here?"

She crossed her arms and tilted her chin up. "I *live* here."

"You...live here."

"With Asher, yes."

"Oh," I said, and lightning crackled in the sky. Or maybe it was my heart cracking right down the middle. "Okay."

*So that's that.*

I waited for the relief to find me. I wouldn't have to give up Seattle. Wouldn't have to trade a cosmopolitan life for an endless vista of greenery in the middle of an ocean.

But it never came.

Numbness washed over me, wiping me clean of thought and feeling, leaving only the instinct to flee from the pain as fast as possible.

I nodded absently. “Right. Well. Sorry to bother you.”

And then I turned and walked back to my car, the rain drenching me to the bone. I wished it would just sweep me away.



*Asher*

I came thundering down the stairs, my heart pounding in abject terror. “Kal? Kal, where are you, buddy?”

But I knew in my gut he wasn’t here.

*Because he’s gone home.*

I hit the living room just in time to see Chloe close the front door. I rushed to join her.

“Do you see Kal? Is he out there?”

“What, no...”

I pushed past her and threw open the door. “Who’s there?”

“No one,” Chloe said, her voice wavering. “Kal’s not in his room?”

I squinted through the dark and the rain and by the light of a lightning flash, there was Faith. I thought for a second my brain must’ve finally snapped, but it was her, golden-haired and beautiful in the rain...

Already bombarded with a thousand emotions per second, I could’ve cried. For the first time in weeks, I felt something besides pain. Relief. As if my beleaguered heart was finally going to catch a break.

*Not if I lose Kal.*

I whirled on Chloe. “You sent her into that?”

She stammered, but I was already grabbing a flashlight from my emergency kit at the door. “Stay here in case Kal comes back,” I ordered in the same tone I used during a call. The tone that tolerated zero disobedience.

Chloe nodded quickly and I ran out into the deluge. Faith was just about to climb into her car.

“Faith!”

Though drenched in rain, her hair plastered to her cheeks, there was nothing and no one more beautiful in the world. She froze and stared at me, the hint of a smile touching her lips and then fading again.

“Asher...”

I wanted to grab her, hold her, beg for her forgiveness...

“I need your help,” I said. “Kal is missing. I think he went back to his house. In Hanalei.” My chest ached. “He wanted to go home.”

Faith’s hand flew to her heart. “Oh, God. Okay. What do you need?”

“There’s a footpath from here to there, through the Princeville golf course. He probably took that. He knows the way. I’m going to take it and see if I can catch up with him. I need you to drive ahead to the house. You can’t let him go in. It’s too dangerous.”

Confusion flashed over her face, but she didn’t waste time with questions. “Okay. I’ll call you when I have him.”

*When. Not if.*

The terror that I’d failed and was going to lose Kal too relaxed its grip on me for a short second, only to come rushing back because I was putting Faith in danger.

“Faith. *Be careful.*”

Faith flashed me the smallest, arch smile. “You too, firefighter,” she said pointedly. “*You too.*”

Then she dove into her car, and I began to run.



*Faith*

I drove as fast as I dared to Morgan and Nalani's house. The rain began to let up, coming down in fat drops instead of buckets. I turned onto their drive and my heart sank to see yellow caution tape barricading the front door and lanai. Wood planks were nailed over the windows.

"God, what else can this family go through?"

My headlights splashed yellow light over the front of the house as I pulled in, and I caught a glimpse of a blue shirt. Kal was climbing under the front porch. His favorite hiding spot. Relief flooded me, but the boarded-up house screamed danger.

I left the headlights on and shot Asher a fast text.

**He's here. Under porch.**

Then I climbed out of the car and picked my way over the squelching earth that sucked at my shoes.

"I hate mud," I muttered and smirked at the irony. "This is how you and I met, Kauai. Are you testing me? Again?"

I crouched on my hands and knees and peered under the wooden slats to the dark alcove. I just barely made out the outline of the little boy.

"Kal?"

"Hi, Faith," he said dully. "What are you doing here?"

"It's a really long story. Why don't you come out and I'll tell you all about it?"

"No."

"I heard it's not exactly safe under there. Come on out and \_\_\_"

"*No.*"

I blew a sigh and brushed rain-matted hair from my face. "Okay, can I sit with you? But just for a minute."

"I guess."

"Awesome."

I got down on my stomach and army-crawled over the mud, wedging my way under the porch that was likely home to

God-knew how many spiders, worms, and other icky things. There was more space closer to the house, and I was able to sit hunched over beside Kal who was sitting with his knees pulled up to his chest, arms wrapped tight. The whole place groaned and swayed against the storm, and water streamed in from between the porch slats.

“Cozy little spot you got here,” I said and tried to smile. “It’s a pretty bad storm to be out in, don’t you think?”

“I wanted to go home,” he said, his voice small. “But I can’t.”

“I know,” I said, my heart breaking for this little boy who’d lost so much. “But this house isn’t safe anymore, right?”

He nodded. “Because of the mudslides. They’re going to tear it down.”

My pulse ratcheted up at the idea that the house was about to careen down the mountain at any second.

“I can’t imagine how hard all this has been for you,” I said to Kal. “But you’ll have a new home now. One with your uncle—”

“Uncle Asher doesn’t know what to do with me. I heard him tell Miss Barnes. He can’t manage it all. He said it’s too hard.”

“He meant being without your mom and dad,” I said, gently. “That’s the hard part, Kal. The hardest thing.”

He nodded. “Yeah, it is.” Tears filled his eyes; they shone in the dimness. “I don’t want it to be so hard for him. What if he gets too tired and doesn’t want me anymore?”

“Oh, honey.” I put an arm around him. “Asher would *never* not want you. Never.”

“He doesn’t sleep, and he has to work a lot.”

*My firefighter...*

“It’s hard for him too,” I said. “Your daddy was Asher’s brother and he loved him a lot. But he loves you just as much. Can’t you feel it?”



Kal thought for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah. I can. It feels like how mommy and daddy...” He buried his face in his arms and his little body shook with sobs.

I gathered him to me, and my tears mixed with the rainwater. I had no idea what to say. I wasn’t good at this. I’d never been in a situation this fraught with pain, where the slightest wrong word could make things a million times worse.

I closed my eyes for a second and stopped thinking. I breathed, blocked out the storm and the creaking house and just told him the truth.

“It’s a lot of changes, isn’t it?” I said, rocking Kal under the porch in the muddy filth. He nodded against me. “Change is hard. And scary. But you’re brave, Kal. You’re one of the bravest kids I’ve ever met.”

“I don’t feel brave. I feel scared.”

“That’s part of the deal. You’re scared but you do the hard stuff anyway. That’s what being brave is all about. And I’m going to tell you something else and then we really have to get out of here, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Your Uncle Asher needs you as much as you need him.”

He raised his mud-and-tear-streaked face. “He does?”

“Absolutely.” I nodded. “He’s tired all the time because he takes care of everyone but himself. But maybe if you guys take care of each other, you’ll be okay again.”

“Are you going to take care of him too?”

I swallowed. “I don’t know. It seems like Chloe...Miss Barnes is taking care of him.”

“Not anymore,” Kal said. “Tonight, Uncle Asher told her she had to leave. He said it was a mistake.”

I faced forward. “Oh.”

Footsteps sounded from the rain that was finally letting up. A flashlight beam swept over us.

“Kal? Faith?” Asher called, his voice ragged with fear and exhaustion.

“In here!” I called and looked to Kal. “Can we go home now?”

He thought for a moment and then nodded. “I guess so.”

“Thatta boy. You’re my hero.”

“Me? I thought only firefighters like Uncle Ash could be heroes.”

The tears threatened again but I forced them back. “They are. He is. But brave little boys can be too. One hundred percent.”

*Brave little boys who lose everything and keep going.*

Kal smiled and wiped his nose. “I like that.”

He crawled out from under the porch, and I followed. Asher was waiting for us, drenched and haggard, relief flooding his expression and tears filling his eyes. He dropped to his knees, head bowed, and the flashlight fell from his hands to splat in the mud. Kal rushed to him, threw his little arms around his neck. Asher wrapped his arms around the boy, both of them clutching one another, both sobbing. Both letting the storm break over them, finally.

I hung back, smiling, though my own eyes streamed watching that sweet little boy and my firefighter, wracked by grief and love at the same time.

Because in the end, they were the same thing.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### *Faith*

I drove us back to the house and waited in the kitchen while Asher had a few quiet words with Chloe. The rain had stopped, and she didn't live far, so he felt it was safe enough to let her go. I don't think she would've stayed anyway. The look she gave us when we came in said everything.

I felt bad for her. I couldn't think of a greater torture than loving Asher Mackey and him not loving you back.

Asher took Kal upstairs to give him a bath and put him to bed while I made use of the downstairs shower and washed all the cold rain and mud off of me. I was covered head to toe thanks to my little foray under the porch.

After, I wrapped myself in a towel and went to the living room where Asher was waiting in sleep pants and an undershirt, having freshly showered too, his hair still damp. His eyes widened when he saw me and my almost-nakedness. I sat on the armrest of the couch, my palms on either side of me, as if bracing myself. For him.

“Faith...”

I shook my head. “Later,” I said, my voice thick, my entire body flooded with a hundred different emotions, one stronger than any other—pure, unadulterated love for him.

Asher read my meaning and his eyes darkened. “I didn't touch her,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“I know,” I said and leaned back a little, my legs parting. “Come here and put your hands on me.”

Because I knew what he needed, and it wasn't to have to rehash all of his pain and his reasons for doing when he did. We'd have time enough to talk later. Right then, in that moment, he needed relief. He'd let himself go with Kal in the rain, but I was going to give him another kind of release and

show him he wasn't going to have to do this alone. Not anymore.

Asher took a step toward me and then another until he was right in front of me. My heart pounded but I felt calm at the same time. Serene.

He raised his hands to my face, holding me reverently. But it wasn't time for that, either.

I moved his hands down to my shoulders, to the edge of the towel. I watched him swallow, his Adam's apple bobbing and then he sucked in a breath, and with one hand, undid the tuck in the terrycloth. The towel fell open.

Asher's eyes flared again and then the next second, his mouth was on mine, kissing me with a need so powerful, it stole my breath. But I could take it. I wanted it. I wanted everything he had to give, so I grabbed him by the hips and pulled him to me. His erection strained against his flannel sleep pants, brushing against my nakedness. He grunted and kissed me harder—biting, deep kisses and I responded in kind. Mauling him. The need and want that had been simmering for so many weeks all poured out at once, turning us frenzied. We devoured each other whole.

He filled his hands with my breasts while I tugged at the waistband of his pants. I reached in and wrapped my hand around the huge, hard length of him. But there was too much clothing between us.

“Take it off,” I breathed.

He released me long enough to take off his shirt. As soon as he did, my mouth was on his skin, warm from the shower and hard—hard abs of pure muscle, hard pecs, hard pounding of his heart for want of me.

He stripped out of his pants and then lifted me and carried me around to the front of the couch and laid me down. The weight of him on top of me... I never wanted to forget what that felt like. I never wanted to be without these touches, the heat of his kisses, the power of his body moving on top of

mine. He slipped inside me with one easy thrust and made a sound that was half sob, half growl of pure need.

“Faith...” he breathed into my neck.

I clung to him, my arms wrapping around his broad shoulders, while he spread my legs another few inches to get at me better. Deeper. To drive into me harder when I was already delirious and on the verge of an orgasm. A few heated thrusts was all it took, and it crashed over me.

Asher felt the pleasure shuddering through me and gripped my hip, driving hard and slow to draw it out. After a few moments, with the aftershocks still running along my limbs, I pushed against the hard wall of his chest till he was sitting. Then I straddled him, reached between us, and guided him back inside me.

He gazed up at me, exhausted to the bone but still fighting. His eyes were darkly beautiful and full of love for me but swimming with pain too. I silently vowed to take as much from him as I could. For the rest of my life. Starting that night.

“Give it to me,” I whispered hotly in his ear, writhing on top of him, rolling my hips. “Give me everything.”

I felt his answering grip on my hips tighten as he pressed his face into my neck. He knew what I meant. I began to ride him harder, and he moved me up and down on him, using my body.

“Yes,” I breathed. “Just like that.”

His jaw clenched and his eyes turned black as I craned down to kiss him, a biting, sucking kiss. He grunted into my mouth, and then the suddenness of another orgasm burst through me with his relentless thrusts. The wet sounds of arousal, the scent of our bodies, the heat of the breaths we shared all created a delirium, a fever dream I never wanted to wake up from.

“Yes, Asher,” I said, feeling him close, feeling his body tense against me as I rode him with intensifying urgency.

He made a sound deep in his chest but couldn't contain it. A pained grunt issued from his throat as he came. He emptied

himself inside me, his face a mask of relief, his fingers on my hips holding me into his release. I felt it surge through him and into me, and then he sank back on the couch. I continued to roll my hips, making sure every last drop was mine. Only when I was sure he was spent, did I let myself fall against him, sweaty forehead to sweaty forehead, both of us breathing hard. He wrapped his arms around me, lifted his chin to kiss me, and brushed away the strands of hair that stuck to my cheek.

“I love you,” he whispered. “I don’t know much of anything anymore, but I know that. Whatever is left of me, is yours.”

“I love you,” I said against his mouth that I was still kissing, his tears and mine mingling. “I’m never going to walk away from you again.”

He held my face in his hands, his eyes beautifully soft and dark and shining.

“And I swear on my life I will never give you a reason.”



The next morning, I woke early, wrapped in Asher’s arms in his bed where we’d moved to continue our reunion.

*We have to be quieter now. We have a child to think about...*

I suppressed a laugh. My life had been on pause for so long and was now suddenly on fast forward, and yet everything was perfectly right. Exactly the way it was supposed to be.

I slipped out of bed and drew on my underwear and one of Asher’s T-shirts. The house was quiet and still as I crept outside and took the short path from his backyard to the beach. The storm had blown itself out, and the sun was making its way from behind the clouds. I had forgotten to bring a towel, but it didn’t matter. I plopped myself right on the damp sand and sat with the ocean.

I leaned back on my hands; they pressed into the grains, and though it may have been my imagination, it seemed I could feel the energy of the island humming beneath me.

Welcoming me, maybe. It had tested me and found me worthy. The water came and went in gentle surges, washing over my ankles, like an apology.

“I’m sorry, too, for calling you ‘godforsaken,’” I said, then laughed. “And now I’m talking to an island.”

But we made our peace, and I took in the horizon. The endless blue. I inhaled deeply, tasted the salt of the sea on the air, and listened to the crashing waves. Then footsteps.

Asher sat beside me, wearing a shirt and long shorts. That adorable frown was between his brows and his eyes heavy.

“Something on your mind?” I asked gently.

“Faith, I’m sorry.”

I nudged his elbow. “Pretty sure all the sex last night was to show there’s no hard feelings.”

He didn’t smile. “I still need to say it.”

He stared out over the water, lost in thought for long moments, saying nothing. But I could feel some relief in him—the worst of his grief had been purged last night with Kal in that storm, and what was left was almost sort of beautiful. Like the sun breaking through storm clouds. Gold light through heavy gray, each making the other more lovely.

“I miss Morgan. I miss my brother.”

“I know you do,” I said softly, my heart aching at the simple declaration.

“It was always *Asher takes care of Morgan*. For our entire lives. That’s what I thought—it was my life’s mission to keep him safe. He’d say it too, that I watched over him and protected him. He *thanked* me for it, which is bullshit because the truth is just the opposite.” Asher’s voice thickened and tears gathered in his eyes. “*He* watched over me. He protected me from my own worst instincts. From the rage that was eating me up inside. I channeled it into doing right by him because he was the best of us. He saved me just by existing. And then he up and left me, and I was lost.”

I said nothing but sat with Asher while he wiped his eyes with his shoulder and composed himself.

He turned to me. “I was so lost, I brought Chloe into the house after pushing you away and saying horrible shit to you, and I just... I didn’t know what the fuck I was doing.”

“Neither did I. It was like there was a tsunami going on in here,” I said, tapping my chest. “I ran away, back to Seattle. But that’s exactly what I needed to do. I needed to go back and attempt a life there that didn’t have you in it.”

He shook his head. “I can’t ask you to—”

“Don’t. I’m here.” I smiled. “Ask me something else.”

He inhaled a ragged breath and nodded, then reached into his pocket to pull out the black velvet box.

“That looks familiar,” I managed lightly, though my heart was racing. “Have you been rummaging in my carry-on?”

He smirked. “You left your bag open, and it was sitting right on top.”

“Can you blame a girl? I’ve been dying of curiosity for weeks.”

“I lost track of it,” Asher said, turning the box over in his hands. “I lost track of a lot of things but not how I feel about you.” Then he frowned. “Wait, you haven’t looked at it?”

“Nope, and I think we need to take a moment to appreciate the Herculean amount of willpower I have exhibited on that front.”

He laughed and shook his head. “God, Faith. How can I laugh right now? How can I be so crazy in love with you when my heart feels like it’s been trampled a thousand times?”

“Because we have an infinite supply.” I reached out and touched his cheek. “Your heart is safe with me. I’ll take good care of it. I promise.”

Asher made a gruff sound, his eyes shining, and the next thing I knew he was on one knee next to me in the sand. He



held the box out and reached to open it, then stopped and fixed me with a grouchy look.

“You have to stand up or else all this kneeling doesn’t mean anything.”

I laughed with tears in my eyes and got to my feet. “So bossy.”

“Faith,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I don’t know what’s coming next. I don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow or even in the next hour, but I know that I love you. That is something that will never change, not so long as I live and breathe. Whatever happens, I will always love you.”

He opened the box and there it was—a beautiful shimmery gray pearl surrounded by diamonds in a wide gold band.

My hand flew to my mouth. “Oh my God, I never imagined... So beautiful. It’s like Hawaii with little city lights all around it.”

“It’s us,” Asher said gruffly. “Faith...will you marry me?”

I nodded slowly at first and then vigorously, the joy bursting out of me.

“What was the point of standing up if I’m just going to fall on top of you?” I cried and then did just that, flinging my arms around him, both of us on our knees, kissing while I said *yes*, over and over again.

He slipped the ring on my finger where the pearl seemed to absorb and reflect the gray of the ocean after a storm while the diamonds captured the glint of the sun peeking through the clouds. Storm clouds rimmed with sunlight. Like sadness and joy, grief and love—I wanted all of it—but only with this man.

I kissed Asher, and our future felt like the horizon—sun and storms both, stretching out into forever and taking us wherever we wanted to go.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### *Asher*

The mid-morning water was calm as I took my speedboat out to the coordinates that Captain Gary had given me.

I headed toward open water, checking the dial now and then, and keeping an eye on the salt urn strapped securely to the seat beside me. It was pale peach streaked with white and would sink to the bottom, to the same place where Nalani's had gone down. Over time, it would dissolve into the water, its salt blending with the salt of the ocean. The ashes would flow out and the current would catch them and carry them all over the world, then come back here. To this place. Home.

When I arrived at the coordinates, I killed the engine and let it drift. I took the salt urn and sat with it at the stern of the boat, on the gunwale. It was heavy, heavier than I had expected it to be when I first received it, and yet so light. How could one small vessel contain a whole life? But it couldn't, I knew, because Morgan was not ashes in an urn. He was all around me. The water, the whales, the light, and the sand. All of this life and everything in it...that's how big he was.

Tears streamed down my cheeks. I stopped trying to hold them back and let them fall, then inhaled a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," I said, my voice breaking. "Please forgive me."

I held the urn a moment longer, my hands running over the surface, smooth and cool. I inhaled raggedly and continued.

"Thank you. Thank you, Morgan."

I bent over the side of the boat and touched the urn to the water. My tears dropped beside it and were absorbed into the vast blue ocean.

"I love you," I whispered and let the urn slide gently into the sea, to take its place beside Nalani's.

It sank down, glowing bright blue as the salt caught the reflection of the light, and when I couldn't see it anymore, I sat

up and closed my eyes. I felt the warmth of the sun over my face while the waves rocked softly beneath me.

And I smiled because he was with her again and they were home.

## EPILOGUE

*Faith*

*Two years later...*

I stared out over the Seattle skyline that was gray and heavy with rain. Behind me at the conference table, I heard low murmurs and the shuffling of paper. I smiled to myself. The Coffee Company people could pretend like they had something to talk about, but at the end of the day, they knew my campaign was the one they wanted.

“Ms. Benson.”

I turned and slipped my hands into the pockets of my Chanel suit. It was easier to surreptitiously touch the subtle curve of my belly that way.

“Gentlemen. You have thoughts?”

Mr. Galveston, the VP of Marketing, nodded. “We feel that your vision for our product is the most closely aligned with our vision.” He extended his hand. “Congratulations. I don’t recall that we’ve ever had a more invigorating or innovative approach to selling coffee than yours.”

I smiled broadly and had to refrain from glancing at my watch. “Kind of you to say. I’m just happy that you’re happy. Now, if you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I will leave you in the capable hands of Jess Browning, our head of account management.” I gestured at my former assistant with a smile. “She’ll take care of wrapping up any details.”

I exited the conference room as fast as I could without appearing to be hurrying. My flight wasn’t until the following morning, but in my mind, I was already back in Kauai. Back home.

My hand slipped to my belly for the millionth time.

*Not to mention, I need to share the latest developments with my husband, that sexy bastard.*

Terrance fell in stride next to me. “Another home run, from what I hear.”

“Already?” I smiled. “Word travels fast in this joint.”

“It’s good to see your face, Faith. In person, I mean, as opposed to Zoom.”

“Don’t get used to it, Terry. You’re not going to be seeing me around these parts for a while.”

“Well, I’m glad you made it back for this meeting and a taste of the city. Tell me, do you miss us at all?”

“A little,” I said, although I was finding my desire for skyscrapers and sidewalks to be a lot less potent than it used to be. “Mostly I miss my best friend, Silas, and his husband, Max. And you of course, Terry.”

“Naturally,” he said with a grin. “I guess the next time I see you there’ll be a new Benson-Mackey in the family.”

“At least one,” I said and checked my watch. My pearl and diamond ring glinted in the light, and I paused to admire it. Again. Even years later, it still snagged my gaze, but what could I do? As I liked to tease Asher, when you have the World’s Most Beautiful Ball and Chain on your finger, you can’t help but admire it.

Terry gave me a brief hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Congratulations, again. And don’t be a stranger now.” He started down the hall. “I’ll send you the specs for the new potentials.”

“I’m on the job.”

“Thank God for that,” he called.

Over the last two years, I hadn’t spent many more than a handful of days in Seattle. With Terry smoothing things over, we convinced Cynthia that I was perfectly capable of doing my job remotely. I set about proving that while Asher set about impregnating me as soon as humanly possible. The man was too potent for his own good and our daughter, Alani

Grace, was born almost nine months to the day after our beach wedding.

I quickened my step, eager to get back to my little Peanut, and Kal who is growing like a weed, and my husband—my firefighter—who was on the verge of being made captain. I was proud of him beyond words, but that pride was edged with nerves. His job was dangerous, and that wasn't ever going to change.

I had to trust.

That night, I had dinner with Max and Silas, and because if I didn't share the news soon, I was going to burst, I told them about my "little development" in the baby department.

They were both overjoyed, with Silas shaking his head as Max teared up, the big softy.

"Does Asher know?" Silas asked.

"That he knocked me up again? Of course. But not about..."

"The bonus material?" Max put in with a grin.

Silas and I groaned together and tossed our napkins at him. We all dissolved into laughter that lasted well into the night and would have to keep me until next I saw my beloved best friend and his hubby, who had fast become my *other* best friend.

I left their penthouse in the wee hours filled up with gratitude to have so much love in my life. A family that I'd had to make when my own failed me but a real and true family, nonetheless.



Asher picked me up at the airport the following afternoon. He gathered me in his arms and pulled me close. I loved that he always hugged me before he kissed me, as if reacquainting himself with my presence was more important than anything.

I melted into his arms and then he kissed me deeply, slipping his hand down to my rounded belly. "How is

everyone?”

“Oh, we’re all great,” I said with a smile.

*The whole bunch of us.*

I nearly told him right then and there but heroically restrained myself. Asher was not a big fan of public displays of emotion in the middle of crowded airports.

“How is everyone over here?” I asked as we made our way to baggage claim.

“Great. Kal got an A-plus on his math test. *A-plus*. Boy’s smart as hell.”

“And the Peanut?”

“Perfect. She’s the perfect baby,” he said fiercely, the love flowing out of him, unfiltered.

“Not so much a baby anymore,” I said. “I don’t want to miss another day, or the next thing I know, she’ll be starting high school.”

“Pretty sure that’s going to happen anyway.”

“Don’t remind me.”

Paula Harold retired from nursing shortly after Alani was born. With her boys all grown up—some moving off the island—and her house empty, she offered to be our nanny. The timing could not have been more perfect. She moved into one of the spare bedrooms to take care of Kal and Peanut when I was away on business and Asher worked his long shifts. And more than being a nanny savior, she became yet another best friend to me, someone I could confide in and laugh with.

It was as if there’d been a violent storm that disrupted everything, wrecked Kal and Asher’s lives and left them like debris washed up on the shore. And mine too, a little. But slowly, over time, we rebuilt a life from the one that had been blown apart. Kal was a quiet boy, but his grief counselors told us he was doing well. He spoke a lot with Momi, which was its own kind of therapy. I saw more moments of joy in that sweet little boy than grief. More and more every day.

In the car, Asher drove a lot slower than his usual breakneck speed due to my delicate condition.

“How did the meeting go?” he asked.

“Nailed it,” I said. “They signed the same day.”

Without taking his eyes off the road, Asher offered up a high five. “That’s my sugar mama. Bringing home the big bucks.”

I laughed. “Yeah, well, it’s going to be a lot of work. Late nights and long weekends.”

“But you stay home, right?” he asked and moved his palm to my rounding belly. “No more travel?”

“No more travel,” I said, covering his hand with mine. “Because I know how my man wants me—barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen.”

He made a face. “God no, not the kitchen.”

I laughed and swatted his arm. “I burned *one* dinner.”

“Try four.”

I fixed him with a dark glare and when he glanced over at me, we both laughed. I took his hand and kissed it, then put it back on my stomach, smiling to myself.



At the house, I breathed in the warm ocean air and let out a sigh of relief. The energy was just so different here—quieter yet humming with life at the same time. I felt more at peace every day when I never thought that would be possible.

I looked out over the yard. Momi was in her chair on the lanai with Paula sitting next to her, the two women chatting and laughing. They both watched Kaleo sit in the tall grass with Alani. He pointed out different bugs and watched her squeal with laughter when a ladybug landed on her chubby little hand. Lately, he’d taken to introducing her as his “little sister” which never failed to make Asher and I choke up.

“So beautiful,” I murmured.



“The most beautiful,” Asher said, but his eyes were on me. I leaned over and kissed him and nearly told him then—again—but something told me to wait. Not to mention, I couldn’t wait one more second to get to my kids. I greeted Paula and Momi, exchanging hugs and kisses, then hurried down into the yard.

“Mama!” Alani shrieked and came toddling toward me as fast as she could, her blond, wispy curls floating out around her like a halo.

“Holy crap, my heart’s going to explode,” I murmured just as she reached me. I scooped her up and smattered kisses all over her chubby cheeks. “Hello, baby. Have you been a good girl? Oh my gosh, I missed you so much.”

Kaleo joined us. He was nearly eleven now and getting so tall. “She was about to eat a ladybug, but I stopped her.”

“My hero. I’m sure the ladybug thanks you, too.” I set Alani on my hip and pulled Kal to me for a hug and kiss to his forehead, then ruffled his hair. “I missed you. Why are you getting so big? Stop it.”

“I missed you too,” he said and wrapped his arms around me and then briefly, awkwardly, patted my stomach. “It’s bigger already!”

*Just wait...*

“Is it? No, I had a big lunch.”

He laughed and a thought crossed my mind, one that I’d been having more and more.

*We’re all going to be okay.*



The sun sank slowly while Asher grilled hamburgers. Paula had made a pasta salad and my contribution was to put ketchup and mustard on the table. We sat down to dinner that was full of easy talk and laughter, and Peanut fell asleep on my lap, her soft curls brushing my chin.

After a while, Momi and her nurse went home, and Paula helped Kal get ready for bed. I put Alani down, and Asher and I were finally alone in our bedroom.

I changed into a short, satiny night gown that barely concealed anything. It drew Asher to me instantly—which was why I put it on in the first place. He came up behind me, kissing my neck and then rubbing away the knots of work stress.

“Yes, please.” I leaned into his touch. “I needed this desperately.”

His hand slipped down over my breasts. “How about here? You mentioned they get sore...”

I rolled my eyes with a laugh. “Actually yes, they’re sore as hell.”

“Already?” he asked, his mouth on my neck again. “You’re only twelve weeks. Seemed like with Alani, it took longer for the discomfort to set in.”

“*The discomfort.* Is that what we’re calling it? You’re too cute.”

His hand slipped down lower, over my belly. “Pretty soon we’ll be able to know if it’s a boy or a girl, right?”

“Not for another six or eight weeks, but I did have a scan while I was in Seattle.”

Asher froze, then pulled away and turned me around. “Why? Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine,” I said. “It just seemed to me this pregnancy is happening in overdrive. I only have three speeds these days: exhausted, nauseated, or horny. There is no middle ground.”

“One out of three ain’t bad,” Asher teased though the concern was still bright in his eyes.

“And so,” I said, moving to my carry-on luggage that was still at the foot of the bed. “I wanted to make sure that it was all normal hormonal craziness. And it is, I promise. But...”

I held up a sonogram with my finger covering one half of the grainy black and white candid of my uterus.

“This is our baby,” I told Asher and watched his face melt with pure joy and love. Then I moved my finger. “And this is our other baby.”

His eyes widened and he stared at me, then to the sonogram, then back to me. “Twins?”

“Indeed, firefighter. You are too damn virile for your own good. I used to joke around that you only needed to look at me sideways and I’d get pregnant, but I’m beginning to think I was right.”

Asher grinned. The grin turned into a chuckle, and the chuckle turned into a laugh until he fully lost it. Tears of mirth streamed down his face, and he clutched his sides.

I gave him a little shove in the chest. “It’s not funny!” I cried, laughing also. “Do you know how big I’m going to get? Not to mention, we just doubled our child count in one fell swoop. I’m going to have to sell my condo in Seattle to pay for college for all these kids.”

Asher just laughed harder because that wasn’t exactly true. He still had all his investments chugging along, and I may have been prone to exaggeration.

He sat on the edge of the bed, his laughs slowing, and pulled me onto his lap. “I can’t believe it,” he said, his hand roaming over my belly again with a new curiosity. “Twins.”

“Believe it, pal.” I said and rested my palms on his cheeks, cherishing this man because sometimes I didn’t have the words for the love I had for him and the life he gave me.

“I can just hear it, can’t you?” he said softly. “Morgan. Laughing his ass off.”

“I can hear it,” I said. “And Nalani, elbowing him with teary eyes because she’s so happy for us.”

“They both are.” He gazed up at me. “*I’m* happy for us.”

“Me too,” I whispered, stroking his cheek. “Me too.”

THE END

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I set out to write this book, I knew the major plot events, but it wasn't until Asher got *that* phone call, that the impact of what I was writing hit me. I nearly deleted it and started over because it seemed almost unfair to do that, even to fictional characters. But I write about trauma. Specifically, I write about people surviving and eventually learning to thrive and heal after trauma, because that is what my life has become since losing my daughter in 2018. That process is fascinating to me, and vital. As if I'm trying to unlock the mystery to it with every book. And sometimes trauma isn't a bad childhood or a past incident; sometimes it whacks us out of the blue in real time. A smack in the face that sends us reeling so that we feel like we'll never find our feet again. I never want to be dishonest or sugarcoat anything, so I kept this plot the way it is because that's what the story is about. It's not *about* that phone call, it's about what to do with life after it. To survive and thrive and to know that our capacity to love doesn't diminish with loss. The single candle can light a thousand more, and we find our way out of the dark again.

That's what this book represents for me. Three years after my daughter Izzy died, the grief took a turn. Instead of sharp and stabbing and obvious, it settled like a malevolent cloud that never seemed to want to lift. For a long time, I contemplated whether I would write romance again, would write anything at all, again. And to be perfectly honest, most days I contemplated whether this whole experiment called life was worth it anymore. Thanks to therapy in which I stared my worst agony and guilt right in the eye without blinking, the clouds parted. I keep coming back to the imagery I put in this book—the gold light emanating through gray storm clouds and that pearly beauty that you can't have unless there's been a storm.

I weathered the storm and know there might/will be others. But there is great beauty in loss. Profound. The experience has been transformative, and some might say, why put it in a romance? I say, where else? Aside from a memoir (coming sometime soon-ish) this is my outlet. And there is no greater

genre that understands love in all its facets or explores it like this one. I have always maintained that everyone is worthy of love despite the odds, despite trauma, despite our own self-destructive voices, and I strive to show that in every book. Because it's true and will never *not* be true. I say it over and over again, not only for my readers but for me, because it is my life's task to understand that and live in it. If my characters can do it and they come from me, then maybe I can too. I'm grateful to all of you for providing me this outlet. I'd write no matter what, but it wouldn't be the same without you.

And on a lighter note, Faith's mishap on the Ho'opi'i Falls Trail on Kauai, Hawaii is based on true events! In Feb 2020, I was the one being helicoptered out of the middle of the Falls with a dislocated knee (which is far less romantic and cute than a twisted ankle, let me assure you). There was a silent Roy in his white helmet attached to the basket and a cadre of hot EMTs, none of whom took me up on my offer to piggyback me out of the Falls instead of dangling me from a helicopter. They say, "write what you know" and I took that quite literally. ;)

Also very real was our angst about moving to Kauai. My family and I—after Izzy—had always found so much peace in Hawaii and had been wanting to relocate there. We eventually decided it wasn't the right time. Our other daughter Talia's schooling and friends here are too important—but at the time, we were test-driving islands, visiting each. Maui holds my heart forever—it's where the ashes of Izzy and my dad rest—but we sampled Kauai and found it to be much too tiny and isolated. So Faith's struggle was not born of plot angst alone. Island fever is very real, and I felt it acutely on Kauai. (We've since kissed and made up).

Everything about Hawaii that is special and beautiful could not be contained in one book, but I tried. It is a place of healing, wisdom, and natural beauty and I'm grateful for the peace it has given me.

Thank you for reading. <3

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# SOMEDAY, SOMEDAY

Faith Benson first appeared in the award-winning MM romance, *Someday, Someday*. You can read her origins and Silas and Max's emotional love story here:

[\*Someday, Someday\*](#)

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma Scott is a *USA Today* and *Wall St. Journal* best-selling author whose books have been translated in six languages and featured in *Buzzfeed*, *Huffington Post*, *New York Daily News* and *USA Today's Happy Ever After*. She writes emotional, character-driven romances in which art and love intertwine to heal, and love always wins. If you enjoy emotionally charged stories that rip your heart out (and put it back together again) with diverse characters and kind-hearted heroes, you will enjoy her novels.

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