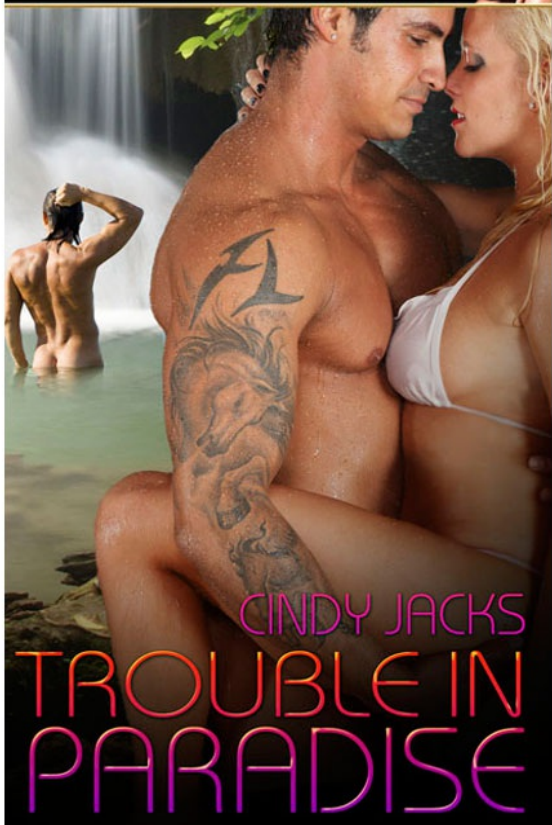


ELLORA'S CAVE **BRANDED**



CINDY JACKS
**TROUBLE IN
PARADISE**

Trouble in Paradise

Cindy Jacks

Meeting and marrying in one of the most romantic places on earth, Clarissa and Mika seem to have it all—promising careers, plans for the future and passion that burns bright enough for everyone to see. But all is not as it seems.

Family is central to Mika, and he's ready to start a brood of his own with the woman he loves. A *haole* from the Mainland and from a

broken home, Clarissa isn't as eager to jump into parenthood. When Mika's hunky cousin Sione declares he's always had feelings for Clarissa, crystal-blue waters turn cloudy and stormy.

Drawn to Sione and his rebel-without-a-pause ways, Clarissa struggles with her love for Mika and her desire for freedom. Mika sets her aflame, body and heart, but Sione seems to see into her soul. Unless Clarissa and Mika can find a way to bridge the divide, it's

trouble in paradise for both of them.

*A Romantica® marital heat erotic
romance from Ellora's Cave*

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

Cindy Jacks

Chapter One

Hot breath and lips on her skin roused Clarissa. Her eyes fluttered open.

“Hey, beautiful,” he said, kissing down her neck.

“Mika, I’m tired.”

“Am I keeping you awake? I’m sorry, baby. I’ll stop.”

But he didn’t. He skimmed his lips along her bare breasts, down to the sensitive curves of her rib cage,

belly and hips, flicking his tongue over her skin. The shiver darting through her and the pulsing of her pussy overrode her desire to go back to sleep. She turned into her husband's kisses and snaked her arms around him. No more invitation needed, he freed himself from his boxers and pressed between her legs. As the head of his cock teased her open, she grew warm and moist against his erection. One slow push and he was inside her. Clarissa moaned,

grasping handfuls of Mikaela's thick, dark hair.

No need to adjust his technique, no coaching necessary. With ease, he found the spot deep inside her that shook her to the core. He'd always been able to do this, as though he'd kept a map of her body in his heart and soul. She pushed her pelvis up to meet his forward thrusts. His mouth engulfed one breast, sucking at it with playful bites to the nipple. She tightened her grip on his hair but Mika didn't

complain. Attention and gaze focused, body pressed to hers, in this moment he owned her. Every ripple of muscle and every whisper of breath moved through her very center.

Growing more urgent, he drove his cock deeper into her. She spread her legs wider to take all of him in, his sac tickling her ass. Their bodies shook together, a climax just on the horizon. A few whimpers at first, then unintelligible exclamations from both of them. Clarissa

squeezed her eyes shut, tensing her body to hold on to the pleasure coursing through her. Ragged gasps and violent spasms rocked Mika as well. He pulled her closer, his strong arms flexing.

His body came to rest on top of hers. He kissed her forehead. Her cheeks. Her eyelids.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him, noting the smile of satisfaction on his face. "Mmm. Can't a woman sleep around here? Waking me up in the middle of the

night and ravishing me.”

“You’re the one sleeping in the nude, it’s not my fault.” He laughed and combed his fingers through her hair.

He withdrew then slid onto the mattress, spooning next to her, his deep bronze skin a stark contrast to her paler, golden complexion. She traced his *pe’a* with one finger, letting it meander from the bands of tribal tattoos around his waist to the extension of those patterns on his hips and thighs. Smaller

versions encircled each of his arms.

Meeting his gaze, she asked,
“How was work?”

“Hot and exhausting. One cool thing—they interviewed me for the sous-chef position.”

“You know you got it on lockdown.”

“Shh, don’t jinx me.”

“You shouldn’t worry. You’re the best cook in that kitchen.”

“Being the sous isn’t just about cooking. They’ve gotta feel like I

can run the kitchen, manage the staff."

Clarissa stroked his brow, studying the lines of concern around his dark-brown eyes, and then kissed the top of his head. "You'll get it, sweetheart. Stop worrying."

"It's just with that job we can get a bigger place, move out of Kaimuki to where the schools are better."

"Uh-huh," she murmured. She didn't feel like going down this

road tonight. Let Mika plan for kids they didn't have yet — and wouldn't have for a couple more years. He didn't understand why she wanted to wait and she didn't understand why he was in such a damn hurry. *Just let it slide*, a little voice inside her head warned.

“How was class?” he asked, yawning.

“Long and exhausting, but my students got to break out their plaster investments today so they could see how their bronze castings

came out.”

“Mmm...”

“Yeah. There’s this one girl who’s really talented. I’ve been talking with her about switching her major from English to art. I think she could be a good artist if she applies herself. You should’ve seen the casting she made. The delicate work in the wax really came through in the bronze.”

Silence.

“Mika?”

A light snore.

“And you’re asleep,” she muttered.

He’s not trying to be rude or inattentive, she told herself. It was the long hours he kept, she knew that, but still...why didn’t he seem to care about the things that interested her? Why did he even ask if he had no intention of listening to her answer?

“You’re overreacting.” She sighed. But was she? This wasn’t the first time and she knew it

wouldn't be the last. He'd come home, have sex with her and then roll over and go to sleep without any concern at all for her feelings. Was this it? Was this the way it was going to be for the rest of their marriage?

Tamping down her annoyance, she draped herself over his body and snuggled into the crook of his neck. He smelled of citrus body wash. It was the only thing that could get rid of the scent of garlic and mahi mahi that seeped into his

pores.

Work, work, work. It seemed like that was all they did. Well, work and make love. That wasn't so bad, was it? It showed he hadn't lost interest in her. But sometimes, in the far recesses of her brain, something niggled at her. Had she lost interest in him?

No. Absolutely not. Every day wasn't supposed to be a thrill ride. This was life. Plain and simple.

"I love you," she murmured.

She did, of course she did. She

just didn't love the routine, the rut they'd fallen into. But that was life. Right?

Of course it was.

She melted against him and allowed a blanket of sleep to fall over her.

* * * * *

There are lots of blue Honda Accords in Honolulu, Clarissa reminded herself. Still, a flutter of excitement blossomed in her

stomach. An inappropriate and scandalous blossom of excitement. But if she ran into him here... Well, it would be a chance meeting. Kismet, right? Then maybe they could steal a few hours and grab a coffee. She could cancel her classes. Maybe they could hang out at the beach all day.

She strained to look inside the gas station mini-mart window, but saw only the backs of people's heads, none of which looked like Sione's. As often as he dropped by

the house, she should have his license plate memorized. Then again, the thought itself made her feel like a stalker. Hell, she hadn't even memorized her own license plate, much less that of her husband's cousin. And why the hell was she so excited at the prospect of running into him?

It's just a little crush, she told herself. It was. No harm in it. She didn't intend to do anything about it. It would pass. It had to.

The gas pump clicked off,

pulling Clarissa from her thoughts. She wiped a bead of sweat from her forehead. Eighty-seven again today —already eighty this morning—a light shower expected this afternoon on the Windward and Mauka sides of the island, as usual. She toyed with the idea of cutting her hair short, but Mika preferred it long so the mane of sandy blonde locks hung down her back in a sloppy ponytail, a few soggy tentacles clinging to her neck.

She replaced the gas cap and

climbed into the belly of her Easy-Bake Oven-on-wheels. No AC in the VW Vanagon. Cranking down the windows, she caught a glimpse of the blue Honda's owner. A short, skinny Japanese man climbed into the vehicle. Definitely not Sione. Broad shoulders, full lips, golden skin over sinewy musculature, chocolate-brown eyes—*that* was Sione.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she asked her reflection in the rearview mirror. Whatever the

cause of these feelings, she had to get over them and right quick.

When she twisted the key the van grumbled a bit, but finally the engine turned over. Clarissa wiped another droplet of sweat from her face. Back to reality. After all, the bronze sculpture in her studio wasn't going to finish itself.

* * * * *

Early morning in the University of Hawaii Art Building found the

structure devoid of its usual hustle and bustle. Sure, a few hungover grad students staggered to the coffee machine, having slept in their studios. A gaggle of freshmen milled around the halls of the first floor, too low on the registration totem pole to avoid the 7:05 a.m. Intro to Fine Art slot. But for the most part the classrooms and studios sat peacefully deserted. It was this quietude that drew Clarissa in so early each day.

Passing by the bamboo garden

that surrounded the University Art Gallery, she cut through a corridor of lockers to the sculpture courtyard. The center of the space had no roof, displaying a cross section of the building's three floors like the layers of a triple-decker sandwich. The first floor housed the 3-D artists—sculptors, ceramicists and glassblowers. Often clad in leather and utilizing sharp, hot and heavy objects, they were seen as the “jocks” of the art department. The intellectuals—the art history majors

— made their home on the second floor, viewed by the studio majors as their own personal groupies. On the third floor, painters, photographers and graphic artists sulked and brooded over fine art's loftiest ideals and then attempted to express those ideals in their chosen media. Whatever.

On autopilot, Clarissa flipped a series of light switches, illuminating her workspace, and then pulled on her leather apron, dust mask and face shield. A bronze

replica of a bird skeleton lay on her table. Each casting required a little finishing work before she could weld the pieces together. There'd been some flashing during the pour — cracks in the mold that left ridges of metal along the edge of each piece. She'd already cut off the sprues and other superfluous bronze that had once been pathways for the molten metal through the plaster investment.

With a push of a button, her grinder whirled to life. The coarse

grit of the wheel made short work of the delicate bits of metal. Clarissa repeated the process for each piece. Before she knew it, two hours had passed.

Damn. Time to head to class. Not that she minded the teaching responsibilities that came with being a grad student but sometimes, when she was in the zone, she resented the intrusion.

After she stripped off her gear, Clarissa picked up a hefty binder. It held lesson plans and files on each

of her students. Today she had Intro to 3-D, a sculpture course for freshman would-be sculptors and non-art majors. They required little effort to impress or inspire. Still, she did her best to give each of them the personal attention they wouldn't receive in the typical introductory class. Passionate about sculpture, she enjoyed sharing the art form with novices.

She hurried out the door and paused to lock it behind herself. When she turned around she

recognized an all-too-familiar gait.

“Hey, Sione.” Clarissa looked up at his tanned, angular face.

“Kala. Howzit?”

The sound of his baritone voice gave her goose bumps, especially when he used the Polynesian version of her name—Kalalika. Kala for short.

“Rushing off to babysit?” he asked.

“C’mon, it’s been a pretty good class this semester,” she replied.

“Whatevahs. See you at the Gardens tonight?”

“Yeah, I’m sure I’ll need a beer by this evening.”

“Later, sistah.”

“See you later.” Clarissa watched Sione saunter away, his ass jiggling ever so slightly in his board shorts. A jolt of attraction shot through her, settling between her legs.

Wrong, wrong, wrong. She shook her head.

Finally she broke free of the ass-induced hypnosis and hurried off to the second floor. After wandering with her head in a fog for two minutes, she realized she'd taken the wrong stairway to get to her classroom.

* * * * *

Idyllic in many ways, the perpetual sunshine and cooling breezes of the Hawaiian Islands kept the temperature in the low to

mid-eighties year-round. In the foundry, however, the warm weather made the suede insulated safety gear damn near unbearable.

Clarissa trotted down the concrete stairwell to the sculpture courtyard in time to watch Sione strip off his leather jacket and apron. His white undershirt clung to the ripples of his muscular chest and abdomen. Like that male model in a diet soda commercial, he grabbed the water hose and turned it on himself, wetting his head and

neck.

Clarissa looked skyward. *Why, God, why?*

Rivulets of water ran down his dark skin, his hair forming loose curls around his face. He unhitched his overalls and let them fall around his waist. Working the pants over his boots, he revealed a pair of shorts underneath. Next the shirt came off, exposing part of Sione's tattoos, which were similar to Mika's.

Again he soaked himself with

the hose. His dark nipples drew into tight buds, making it known that the water indeed had cooled him.

“Kala,” he called to her. “Come look.”

She jogged the rest of the way down the stairs, trying to ignore her throbbing pussy. After he ducked into his studio to grab a towel and a fresh t-shirt, he led her to the foundry. Lying to cool on a workbench in all its glory was a sword like those carried by samurai

in feudal Japan. Though it had not yet been sharpened or polished, the elegant curve of the blade was already apparent.

“It’s gorgeous. Did you forge this yourself?”

“Shige helped some with the folds, but yeah, it’s coming along.”

“Hell yeah. It’s incredible. Hey, could you make one for Mika’s birthday? I’ll pay you, of course.”

His gaze wandered over her, but he seemed to bite back his initial response. “Nah. Since you’re

family, I'll let you have this one after my thesis exhibit."

"Sounds like a deal. We'll swap for it. You can have anything of mine you want."

"Can I really?" Again with the expressive eyes.

She shuffled off in the direction of her office and called over her shoulder, "Art. I meant any of my art you want."

Sione chuckled, clearly pleased with himself.

Why did he have to flirt like that? She knew he meant nothing by it. He flirted with everything with boobs, but still, it made her current predicament that much harder to bear. And just where this unbridled attraction to Sione had come from remained a mystery.

Yes, she'd always thought Sione was a handsome guy, but since she'd fallen for Mika, she couldn't think of any other man. Not in *that way*. But for months now her attraction to Sione had been

building and it was downright disgusting. She felt so ashamed.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she asked herself for the second time that day.

* * * * *

The afternoon trudged by in a repetitive dance of grinding, sanding, welding, filing, polishing and patina application. The bird's skeleton was coming together. A couple more days' work and the

piece would be ready. Then she would add it to the portfolio for her thesis.

Symbols of freedom and escape pervaded her work, although at the moment, she didn't care about her artistic statement or underlying symbolism. Her eyes ached and she had sweated through her cutoffs. A few cold beers would hit the spot before heading home.

Settling into their usual table at Manoa Gardens, she ordered drinks. Sione and a close friend,

Michelle, showed up at seven on the dot.

Michelle was petite, but in comparison to Sione's thick frame, she looked even smaller. Considered *hapa*—the local word for “mixed”—Michelle came from Japanese and Portuguese heritage, which made itself apparent in her straighter-than-straight black hair, almond-shaped eyes and snowy pale skin. Even in platform heels, she was a good foot shorter than Sione.

“Hey, blondie.” Michelle gave Clarissa’s ponytail a playful tug.

As soon as Sione and Michelle sat down, the three friends fell into a comfortable pattern. A couple hours flew by, spent grouching and laughing.

Sione’s bass voice and singsong speech pattern rang in Clarissa’s ears, amplified by the pitcher of beer they had worked through.

“So yeah, he’s using the oxyacetylene torch and a spark sets Andrew’s shorts to smoking. I’ve

told that kid over and over to wear the protective gear, but he doesn't listen. Maybe now that he almost scorched his nuts, he will."

"Well, he's not the smartest peanut in the turd," Michelle chimed in, "but, man, he's easy on the eyes."

Clarissa waved a hand. "I second that emotion."

Sione chuckled her on the shoulder. "Settle down, you, before I tell my cuz you're checking out

the scenery at school.”

“He knows. He says as long as I bring it home to him, right?”

They all laughed and took sips from their mugs.

Michelle went on to complain about her studio mate, the *haole* from hell. “It’s like he’s trying to torture me. What’s with you white people and your OCD?”

“You’re asking the wrong *haole*. I’m allergic to cleaning,” Clarissa said.

“Oh my God, I moved his soldering iron so I could reach an electrical outlet and he freaked out. I’ve gotta transfer studios next semester. I can’t take it anymore.”

“You poor thing. I’m lucky, I almost never see Frank. He doesn’t like to work indoors.” Clarissa checked her watch and started to gather her bag. “I gotta bail, guys.”

Mika would be home soon and she had precious little time with him as it was.

Sione stood. “I’ll walk you to the

parking garage.”

“I think I’ll take the bus home, leave the van here. I’m a little too tipsy to drive.”

“Then I’ll walk you to the bus stop. Wouldn’t want you to get molested on the way home.”

Shouldering her backpack, she teased, “How do I know you won’t molest me?”

“Hey, I’ve always said, if you weren’t my cousin’s wife...” He let the statement trail off but

punctuated it with a smile.

Clarissa's stomach flip-flopped. Just what would he do if she weren't his cousin's wife? Would he take her back to his place, kiss a trail from her lips to her breasts and then—Jesus fucking Christ. She squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head to clear it.

When she opened them, she noticed Sione's gaze still fixed on her. Hopefully he didn't know he starred in lascivious thoughts that ran through her mind all day, every

day. Still, she couldn't help but wonder, if he knew how she felt, would he respond in kind? Bidding Michelle good night, Clarissa headed toward the university's main thoroughfare. Sione followed.

Kiave trees and tuberose lined the walk to the bus stop. Crushing seedpods beneath her *slippah*-clad feet, she inhaled the pungent floral scent of the small white flowers nestled amongst dense foliage. In her mind, their fragrance had become melded with Sione's

presence. How many times had he walked her through the darkened campus? Almost nightly. It was perhaps this attention that had led Clarissa to her current predicament.

When Mika was home—and could stay awake—he was as attentive. Just as handsome. And as sexy. *When he was home.*

Mika worked fifty- or sixty-hour weeks to, as he put it, “provide for Clarissa”, something she had never asked him to do. She would have her own career, provide for herself.

Then again, that topic of conversation only brought up another argument.

“No wife of mine is going to have to work,” he’d said.

“I’m not saying I have to. I want to.”

“But why? Someone has to stay home with the kids.”

Had he really been so single-minded when they’d been dating? No, she was sure he hadn’t, but once they had gotten married his attitude changed. Gone were the

carefree days when they both skipped school or work to spend the day making love. Now he thought only of moving up at work, buying a home and baby-making—none of which Clarissa was ready to do. And the pressure didn't stop with Mika. His whole family kept asking. Apparently once she had taken her marriage vows, Clarissa had become nothing more than a walking uterus.

Suddenly aware of the debate raging in her head, she looked up at

Sione with a sheepish smile. The ever-present trade winds ruffled his wavy hair. A lock fell across his eyes and he tossed it aside with a flick of his head. A signature move. One of his best features, his hair was always on the long and unruly side.

“Cat got your tongue?” he asked.

“Nah, just thinking.”

“About?”

“Same old, same old. I don’t feel like talking about it.”

Picking a flower from a nearby pikake bush, he tucked it behind her right ear.

“Wrong side,” she said.

“Leave it there. It’s a reminder that you’re your own woman, no matter what my cousin thinks.”

Clarissa wanted to kiss him and, at the same time, sock him in the jaw. The differences between Sione and Mika made it hard for her to contain her inappropriate impulses. Why did Sione have to be so damn

insightful? Maybe it was the creative side of him that made him more sensitive than Mikaela.

I'm in love with Mika, I'm in love with Mika, I'm in love with Mika, she reminded herself. And she was. He was kind and smart. Funny and caring. Romantic and sensual. If only he wasn't so hell-bent on doing the family-man thing. And really, what a complaint to have.

Clarissa knew other women whose boyfriends or husbands didn't want kids, had no ambition

or played around on the side. Mika was a good man. A good husband. If he only understood that she wanted a couple more years to explore before she settled into motherhood, he would be perfect.

But no one was perfect...not even Sione, though he appeared to be. There had to be some flaw like rampant flatulence or toe fungus. Clarissa glanced down at the man's feet. Perfectly groomed toes graced his rubber slippers. Nope, no fungus. Damn it.

Crossing the street, she settled into the bench at the bus stop. "Thanks for the escort."

"I'll wait with you 'til the bus comes."

"It's cool. I'm sure you have better things to do than wait around with me." Standard banter every time he walked her to the bus stop. Each time she told him he didn't have to stay and each time he refused to leave her alone. It wasn't as though there was a lot of crime in Manoa Heights, but still he

stayed. Clarissa wondered if he enjoyed her company as much as she enjoyed his.

“Did you get much work done today on your Ku image?” she asked.

“A little. There was a bad spot in the wood, had to work around it so the grimace is not as symmetrical as I’d like. I hate to go back and rework the other side though. I’ll see how I feel about it in the morning.”

His master’s thesis dealt with

updated images of Polynesian religious icons. Ku, the Hawaiian god of war, he portrayed as a modern soldier in full battle gear—flak jacket, helmet, night-vision goggles—but with the gaping, fierce mouth of traditional depictions. Part Samoan, part Hawaiian and a mélange of other ethnicities, Sione used art to explore his heritage. A heritage Mika explored in other ways, namely cooking.

At times Clarissa felt cowed by

their rituals and cultural history. Her family observed no such traditions. Since her parents' divorce they were rarely in the same state much less the same mental plane. She'd grown up in the Southeast, states like Alabama, Louisiana and Florida. Her father had been an outside sales rep for a company that produced fishing and power boats of various sorts. After the split, her mother settled in Florida, her dad in California, and Clarissa had wound up in Hawaii,

if for no other reason than to put an entire ocean between herself and her bickering parents.

“I don’t know what to do when you stay quiet,” Sione said.

“Just a lot on my mind. Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, I just want you to know, I’m here if you need to talk. I know things haven’t been exactly smooth with Mika lately. He means well, you know?”

“I know,” she lied. If he meant well, why did he keep badgering her about kids and a white picket

fence? They talked in circles every time the topic came up, which was more and more often as of late.

Sione went on, "Hey, if you were my girl, I'd want to make babies with you too."

At this she laughed.

"See, I knew I could get you to smile."

He could always make her laugh and the intimacy this skill created felt a little too good. Staring at the outline of his mouth, she wondered

what it would feel like to touch lips. What would he smell like, taste like? She imagined their bodies pressed together, bare flesh to bare flesh. A shiver darted up her spine followed by an aching heat between her legs.

Wrong, her frontal cortex screamed, *wrong, wrong, wrong*.

Clearing her throat, she groped for a topic of conversation but came up short. Finally, the bus rumbled up the avenue...and not a second too soon.

Chapter Two

The clock on the nightstand read 10:00 a.m. Clarissa loved the one Sunday a month Mika had off. It was the only day they had to lounge in bed together. They had been known to spend the entire day under the covers, not sleeping of course. The feel of his warm erection pressed against her buttocks indicated today would be no exception.

“Good morning, baby.” Mika

pulled her onto her back.

He planted meandering kisses over her neck, chest and shoulders. Flames licked her skin with every touch. Aching need tightened her core. She stroked his tattooed abdomen, letting her fingertips wander down his hard cock. As she caressed it, he sucked in a slow breath between clenched teeth. Goose bumps pebbled his arms.

Hand brushing between her thighs, he stroked her pussy. Gently at first, then with more urgency. He

slipped a finger inside and she moaned as he flicked the spot that turned her to jelly. Cunt already soft and wet, she clung to his wide shoulders and buried her face in his neck.

The musk of their bodies blended until she could no longer tell where she stopped and Mika began. Conscious thought faded into a stream of pure physical awareness. He had a way of making the rest of the world disappear. Surrounded by his heated flesh, she

gave herself over to the tide of emotion and ecstasy.

Brushing a finger over her clit, he played her body, the reaction to each stimulus timed perfectly. Mika watched her tremble, drinking her in with his gaze, all the while pushing her closer to coming without letting her fall over the edge.

Fingers moving inside her, he took one nipple into his mouth, rolling it between his teeth. A jolt of pleasure shook her. He felt so

good and he was just getting started. Her pussy contracted, juices wetting her labia. In and out, hard then slow, he coaxed her to the height of arousal.

Clarissa raked her teeth over his shoulder, eager for release, but at the same time adrift in the delicious torture. Pressure and unbearable heat coursed through her veins. About the moment she could take no more teasing, he withdrew his fingers and rolled her onto her belly.

Pulling her onto all fours, he slid behind her then pushed himself into her. She clamped her pussy around his cock, wanting to swallow every inch of him. An exhalation hissed between his clenched teeth. She caught a glimpse in the dresser mirror of him fucking her from behind, golden skin stretched over rippling muscle. His round buttocks clenched with every thrust. A shock of arousal gripped her at the sight and she moaned.

Hand caressing her backside, he stared down at her, his chiseled features slack. "Push your ass against me."

She did as she was told, impaling herself on his cock and bouncing against his pelvis.

"Like that, Kala. Shit." He hissed, his teeth once again clenched.

Fingertips skittering over her skin, he slid his hands up to her breasts. Mika kneaded her nipples, pinching and tugging to the edge of

pain, but never pushing past.

Her cunt tightened, milking his shaft. Her legs trembled, cream wetting her thighs. Moments away from climaxing, she ground against his pelvis, desperate to come. He moved deeper, his hands tight around her hips, fucking her hard and fast. Mika leaned forward, kissing and licking her back. Her body shook, pure ecstasy taking hold. Clarissa arched against him and let the orgasm wash over her. A few more thrusts and Mika

buried himself within her, his body jerking and twitching. A sharp inhalation held for several seconds, then a long sigh. He came to rest on top of her as he planted tiny kisses over her shoulders and along the ridge of her spine.

“I love you, Kala,” he whispered.

“I love you too.” She shivered, goose bumps rising on her arms.

Pushing forward, he pressed her against the mattress, still grinding against her ass. After a couple more

pumps in and out, he withdrew and collapsed next to her. She wriggled around to face him and wrapped her arms around his neck, brushing her lips against his. Hand cradling her face, he slipped his tongue along the length of hers. A soft moan escaped him. Opening his eyes, he gave her that Cheshire cat grin, all pearly white teeth set against a ripe strawberry mouth.

“Good morning.” An Elvis-like crookedness tugged at his upper lip.

“Very good, I’d say.”

They spooned for a while, their conversation meandering with no agenda other than savoring the time together, but eventually the pull of hunger drew them from their love nest. She donned one of his t-shirts, which fit her more like a dress, and he pulled on a pair of boxer briefs.

Making a pit stop by the bathroom to freshen up, Clarissa washed down a birth control pill with a glass of tap water. A look of

annoyance flashed across Mika's face but he held his tongue. At least they wouldn't rehash that argument today. Instead, he scooped her up, hands beneath her buttocks, and pressed her against the wall, kissing his way from her lips to her breasts.

"You keep that up," she said, "we'll never get around to breakfast."

"It's your fault. You're too sexy."

"Even when I brush my teeth?"

He laughed. "Especially when

you brush your teeth.”

Tongue flicking over her skin, he nuzzled her neck, giving her shivers. She threaded her fingers in his hair, grinding her pelvis against his cock. Drawing one leg around his hips, he parted her sticky folds with two fingers. Pussy still throbbing from the first round, she melted against the wall, ecstasy rippling through her.

“You’re still wet,” he murmured, lips to her ear.

Goose bumps rose on her arms. "What are you going to do about it?"

Once he'd freed his cock from the fly of his underwear, he boosted her up, wrapping her other leg around him. She guided the velvety head to her opening, then one slow push and he was inside. A moan on her lips, she clung to him, arms wrapped tight around his shoulders.

Mika thrust forward and up simultaneously, drilling into her

pussy, his pubis brushing against her clit. Hardly able to catch her breath, she inhaled the scent of their mingled juices. The musky aroma only spurred on her arousal.

Turning her head to one side, she could see their reflection in the bathroom mirror. He had her splayed open, his ass flexing as he pumped in and out of her. A jolt of excitement passed through her and she couldn't stop watching her husband fuck her even if she'd wanted to...but she didn't want to.

The sight thrilled her as her tits bounced, Mika's back rippling. God, he was so fucking sexy.

He turned his head, a smile on his lips, his gaze meeting hers in the mirror. "You like watching us together?"

"Love it."

Licking his lips, he thrust harder and faster. Her back was crushed against the wall to the point of hurting, but the slight pain took her higher.

"Yes, like that." She watched a

red flush creep into her cheeks, her lips parted with panted breath.

Fingers sinking into her soft hips, he worked his cock at different angles. Her cunt clamped around his shaft, small contractions spreading throughout her center.

“I’m close,” she murmured, gaze still fixed on their reflection.

He didn’t break rhythm though beads of sweat dotted his forehead; clearly he was determined to get her there.

“Yes, Mika.” She leaned forward, biting his shoulder, the sensation now too much to bear.

The first wave of pleasure hit her like a tsunami, rushing over her, dragging her under. She cried out, tilting her head back, gripping his back. Still, he didn't slow down. Thrust after thrust took her higher as the orgasm reached its peak. She shook, her whole body racked with ecstasy. Her cunt spasmed over and over, echoed by the quaking of her thighs and abdomen. She struggled

to suck in enough air, moans and whimpers catching in her throat.

As the climax receded a little at a time, Mika still pounded her pussy, the aftershocks sucking at his cock. Letting her body go limp against his, she continued to watch in the mirror as he grew closer to coming. At first there were little hitches in his rhythm, but then his movements grew stiff and jerky until he finally slammed into her, unloading hot spurts deep inside.

She rode the undulations of his

orgasm, kissing his neck and collarbone, the rumbling of his muted groans vibrating against her lips. When he came to a halt, he pressed her against the wall, his cock still buried inside her. His chest heaved and his arms trembled. Surely he was exhausted from holding her up.

Easing her legs from around his hips, she found her footing, carefully sliding his cock out before she stood with her feet flat on the floor. Her thighs quivered, her

knees threatening to buckle. She leaned against Mika, who still shivered from time to time.

He drew her face up with one hand and kissed her. Lazy, sloppy swipes of his tongue spoke to his fatigue, his heavy exhalations rushing over her cheeks.

“You too tired to cook?” she asked, grazing her lips over his chin. “We could go out to breakfast.”

“Nah, I just need a second.” He blew out a deep breath, wiping the

sweat from his brow. "That was quite the workout."

"I'm sure." Her stomach rumbled. "But seriously...you have to feed me."

He mussed her hair. "All right, all right. I'll be in the kitchen."

After he righted his underwear, he grabbed a towel and continued to dry rivulets of sweat.

She watched his backside as he turned the corner into the hallway of their studio apartment. That his

form still turned her head was not lost on her. In December, they'd celebrate their seventh anniversary together. Four years in college and three as a married couple. She'd fallen in love with him the moment they'd met.

Chapter Three

Clarissa's first week in Honolulu, the rusted-out Dodge Colt she'd purchased from a used-car dealer—aka the Hoopty-mobile—overheated on the Kalaniani'ole Highway. Strong, handsome and tallish for a local boy, Mika materialized from his surfer van as if he were a bronzed god climbing down from his place on high.

“What wen' happen?” he asked in Pidgin, the local language. It was

actually Hawaii Creole English—a mélange of English, Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese and several other languages brought to the islands by waves of immigration. But she didn't know that then.

“Pardon?”

“Ah, you're new around here.”

A grin parted his lips and lit up his espresso-colored eyes. “I asked what happened to your car.”

“Oh. Hell if I know. I think it's the radiator.”

Displaying great machismo, Mika popped the hood, took a look around her car's innards and declared it was indeed the radiator. It had run dry. He offered her a ride to the nearest service station and when she demurred, he made the trip himself.

Upon his return, he performed some unfamiliar ritual on the car, mixing this, filling that. As if by magic, the car sprang to life as soon as he turned the ignition key.

“Thank you so much. You’re my

hero,” she teased, though half-serious.

“No problem. Where you headed?”

“Nowhere in particular. I was just driving around. I’m going to school at UH and it’s my first time in the islands.”

“Your first time? Then you need o n e *kama’aina* fo’ show you around.”

“A kama—what? What’s that?”

Mika winked at her. “That’s

me.”

They spent the rest of the day traveling along the H1 and H2 highways. It took only four hours to circumnavigate the entire island. They stopped to eat at Mika’s favorite spots. He showed her the best beaches, the ones the tourists didn’t know about. At sunset, they shared a six-pack of ice-cold Primo at Kaaawa, watching the last rays of sunlight bathe the sky in outrageous gold and fuchsia tones. It was then that Mika stole their

first kiss. Little did he know, he'd also stolen her heart.

Only a few weeks later, she gave him her body. That evening had begun much the same way their other dates had—a cookout and a few beers on the beach—but on the drive home, she told Mika to take her to his place.

“Really?” He gulped, eyes wide.

“Really.”

He ground the gears of his van and laid heavy on the gas.

As soon as they reached his small cottage, they latched on to each other as if they couldn't bear one more second apart. Shirts, flip-flops and other articles of clothing dropped to the ground, a trail of passion rushing them through the screen door.

Mika kissed his way down to her abdomen, dropping to his knees and sliding her bikini bottoms to her ankles. Tongue flicking over her warm skin, he traced the curves of her breasts and hips. Her sun-

drenched body burned, the cool trail of his licks drawing her nipples into tight buds. She sighed, wrapping her arms around his head. The saline scent of the beach mixed with his natural aroma and the clean smell of his shampoo.

Need claimed her pussy, tension and pleasure rolled through her like the tide. She sank to her knees. Dragging her tongue along his neck, she tasted the salt clinging to his skin. Another shiver passed through her, his breathtaking

beauty overwhelming. Bronze skin was marked with dramatic black tribal tattoos, broad shoulders sculpted by ropes of thick musculature. Allowing her hand to stray to his firm penis, she stroked his erection and cradled his sac. Shudders and faltering breath shook him.

Making her way down his taut abdomen, she licked at his head.

“Oh shit,” he groaned.

She had encircled his cock with her hand, but he nudged her

backward then pounced on her, pinning her wrists to the floor.

His mouth engulfed her sex, his tongue invading her warm, soft and wet. He pressed long, languid kisses onto her clit and labia. Her pulse skyrocketed, her cunt contracting with each swipe of his tongue.

Tremors rippled through her core. She held tight to his shoulders, writhing against the tatami mat. Gasping, she sucked in a ragged breath. It had been so long

since anyone had touched her like this and really, she was sure no one had ever touched her quite like Mika. Quickly, he'd brought her to the brink of orgasm.

Pussy swollen and throbbing, she pulled his face up to look at her. "Not like this. I want to come with you inside me."

Clearly no more explanation needed, he helped her to her feet and then swept her off them, carrying her to his bedroom. Once he'd placed her on the bed, he slid

up her body, brushing his lips over her bare thighs, torso and neck.

“Just a second,” he murmured in her ear.

Squeezing her legs together, she savored the pulsing need. Her hands strayed to her breasts as she watched him fish a condom from his bedside table and roll it down his cock. Clarissa could hardly stand the wait.

As if sensing her impatience, Mika quickly nestled between her thighs and stroked her moist slit.

Slowly he eased inside, exhaling as the base of his shaft met her mound.

Gasping at the intense sensation, she wrapped her legs around him, overcome with arousal. Though she grasped at his back, urging him to thrust harder and faster, he used a long, drawn-out stroke, sliding from tip to base, in and out. Body rippling against hers, he made love to her. Her pussy grew wetter and more swollen, an unbearable heat piercing her center. Moans vibrated

in her throat, her inner walls clamped around his cock.

“You feel so good,” he murmured.

“So do you.” She met his gaze, saw the fire dancing in his eyes.

Pleasure washed over her, seeping into her every pore, every breath. Nipples brushing against his chest, she rocked back and forth, meeting his forward thrusts. Filled with emotion, she clung to him, tears wetting her lashes.

He pushed deeper and deeper,

his cock stroking her G-spot. She bit her lips, whimpering. The stimulation was too much to bear. Trembling and panting, she closed her eyes, color and light playing behind her eyelids. Release tantalizingly close, she drew in a deep breath and held it. Her pussy contracted, pumping ecstasy through her. The orgasm shook her, racking her with wave after wave of sensation.

Tears leaked down her face. Unable to suppress a sob, she

buried her face against his chest. Spasms continued to shake her though they lessened in intensity.

“Hey.” He cradled her face. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I-I don’t know why I’m crying.” She stole furtive glances at him, trying to calm down. A crooked smile warmed his heavy-lidded expression.

Holding her close, he kissed her cheeks and neck. Gentle thrusts pushed him deeper. She gasped, squeezing her eyes shut, teardrops

still wetting her lashes. Pleasure blossomed again in her core, need and heat tightening her inner walls.

Their mingled scent surrounding her, she trembled. Her body tingled, every synapse crackled with anticipation. Her pussy swelled and throbbed, needing release. Breath ragged, core tense, she writhed, moaning. What was happening? Was she going to come again?

“Oh...M-Mika.” Her voice cracked as her nipples brushed his

chest.

“Yeah, baby?” He grazed his lips over hers.

She couldn't reply but managed several gasps, every breath taking her nearer to climaxing. The second orgasm hit her and she cried out.

“Kala,” he groaned as he too exploded, his thrusting more frenzied.

Cock twitching, his whole body spasmed. She hugged her arms around his neck and shoulders, riding out the storm of pleasure.

Little by little, he came to rest atop her.

Gently he withdrew and disposed of the condom, then settled her onto his chest.

“You okay?” he asked, nuzzling her head.

“Yeah, sorry I cried. How embarrassing.”

“Nah, it’s sweet.”

Still, her cheeks flushed. Clearly, this had been more than just sex. At least for her. Peppering his chest

with soft kisses, she closed her eyes, desperate to block out the noise in her head.

Was she already in love with him? That wasn't possible...was it? Heart pounding, she tried to rein in her emotions. They'd only been going out a little while. How in the world could she feel this way so quickly?

"Kala," he murmured, breaking her internal monologue. "I think I'm falling for you."

She gave a halfhearted chuckle,

shifting to look at him. “I’m sure you say that to all the girls.”

Meeting her gaze, he shook his head. “No, I don’t.”

“Well,” she swallowed hard, “I feel the same. It’s not like we have to define it or put labels on each other or anything—”

He cut her off with a deep kiss.

* * * * *

After that, no other man existed for Clarissa. She’d barely noticed

Mika's cousin, though the two were joined at the hip. The same age, the boys had grown up together, more like brothers than distant relatives. Sione had been Mika's best man at the wedding. But unlike Mika, Sione always had some drama going on, usually in the romance department. One too many girlfriends or a girlfriend with one too many husbands.

The man was a mess. He drank too much, smoked too much *pakalolo* and held little regard for

other people's expectations. Sione enjoyed his bachelorhood and didn't intend to give it up any time soon, no matter how many pretty travel agents or retail clerks his aunties set him up with.

Clarissa's trouble with Sione didn't begin until a year ago. About the time Mika turned up the pressure about starting a family, Sione's brand of freedom became intoxicating—his looser morals, his less-stringent ideas about commitment. So what if he played

around a lot? Sione wasn't the type of guy you married, but the dalliance would be one hell of a ride while it lasted. She'd heard as much from Michelle, who'd dated him for several months—yet another reason Clarissa knew Sione was off-limits. Aside from the obvious fact that screwing Sione would mean screwing up her marriage, her life, her...well, everything.

* * * * *

The smell of French toast pulled her from her memories. She plaited her hair into a long braid and squeezed into a pair of ultratiny jersey shorts before she made her way to the kitchen.

“Oh my God, that smells divine,” she said.

“Order up in five minutes.”

She set the table and poured the coffee. If her nose did not deceive her, Mika had made syrup from pureed tropical fruits. A scoop of vanilla ice cream would round out

the dish—his famous Pacific Rim French toast à la mode. Thoughts of Sione ebbed further from her mind. Mika had it all over his rebel-without-a-pause cousin. Clarissa admonished herself to remember this fact.

After breakfast, she settled in on the couch with her e-reader and a second cup of coffee. With little time for pleasure reading during the week, she often stole a few hours on Sunday to indulge. A far cry from the heavy art theory tomes

the university expected her to master, a light whodunit or contemporary romance gave her a vacation without ever having to leave the house.

Mika headed to the gym for a couple hours to run and lift weights before he'd shoot hoops with Sione and the rest of the cousin posse. The man had more cousins than Clarissa had family members. Their Sunday game was his way of blowing off a little steam.

In an attempt to give him a

break from the kitchen, Clarissa volunteered to make dinner. To say that her cooking skills didn't match her husband's would be like saying a toddler lacked Michael Jordan's ability to dunk. Still, she put forth her best effort and kindly, Mika never complained.

She thought tonight she might tackle the mysteries of chicken cordon bleu. Whatever the result, Sunday dinners proved an adventure.

She kissed him on the cheek and

bade him a good workout as she turned the virtual page to find out the latest Stephanie Plum predicament and steep herself in Steph's number one question—Ranger or Morelli? Clarissa could sympathize with this plight. Sione or Mika?

“Mika,” Steph whispered.

“I know, I know.” Clarissa waved away the imaginary voice.

* * * * *

Blobs of chicken sat tense and forlorn on a porcelain serving platter, burned on the outside but still too pink on the inside. Clarissa had not a clue how to fix this catastrophe. And all the cheese had run out of the center, forming a chewy brown collar around the cutlets. Damn it to hell. She'd seen Mika make this dish a thousand times. He'd even left the recipe card out for her. And she'd followed the instructions...at least she'd tried to.

The sound of the front door closing drew her from the kitchen.

“Something smells... interesting,” Mika said.

“It’s a disaster, another disaster. I don’t know why I bother. Next time let’s just get takeout from the get-go. Honestly, I don’t know why I feel the need to try.”

Sweaty from his workout, Mika stripped off his shirt and toweled dry before heading into the kitchen. As usual, her gaze was drawn to his elaborate tattoos. If she’d seen them

once, she'd seen them a million times, but they never ceased to draw her in.

Mika's ink had taken weeks of work by a relative who utilized old-school methods—a mallet and sharpened combs made of shark's or pig's teeth to apply the dye, literally carving the tat into Mika's skin. An unbelievably painful process and one Clarissa could not imagine enduring.

“Let's see what we've got here.” He inspected the chicken. “Maybe I

can fix this.”

Folding her arms, Clarissa watched as he did his best to repair the meal to no avail.

“I’m going to have to call it.” He shook his head playfully.

“You did your best, doc.”

“Mama Ding’s?”

She sighed. “Mama Ding’s it is.”

* * * * *

Once the food had been delivered, they sat at the dinette.

Mika offered her a forkful of his twice-cooked pork.

“Delicious meal I made.” She kissed his cheek. “Next Sunday dinner, stop me before I kill again, okay?”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. I couldn’t sculpt anything to save my life. We’re just good at different things. That’s all.”

A sip of chardonnay washed down the spicy pork. Slicing a bit of sesame chicken, he fed her another bite.

“I can feed myself.” She giggled around a mouthful of food.

“It’s more fun this way.”

A forkful of lo mein came next. Each time she reached for her own cutlery, he pushed her hand away. Alternating bites, he fed the two of them until both plates were clean.

They claimed their respective fortune cookies, eating the cookie before they could read the fortune as was their habit.

Eying hers dubiously, she

wrinkled her nose. “Jump in with both feet? That’s not a fortune, it doesn’t even make any sense. How else would you jump into something?”

“Mine’s not much better. ‘True understanding is the key to all hearts’.” He shrugged and tucked the fortune in his shorts pocket.

“Do we have anything else for dessert?”

He ran to the kitchen and scooped out a bit of ice cream and smothered it with fudge sauce.

He set the bowl before her as though it were a sacred offering. "To finish us off."

"You're the best. I guess it's a good thing I'm good in bed."

"Why's that?"

"Well, there are only two ways to a man's heart and I certainly can't make it there through your stomach."

Dotting a bit of ice cream on her lips, Mika kissed away the sweet residue. "My heart is all yours, bad

cooking or not.”

“Ew. You’re still sweaty.” She gave him a playful shove.

“Let’s go soap me up then.” He caught her hand and pulled her to her feet.

“What about our ice cream?”

“The ice cream can wait.”

Leading her to the bathroom, Mika stripped her clothes off and shed his as well. Mouth pressed to hers, he adjusted the water, backing her through the stall doorway.

Warm water surged over her body, each rivulet licking at her skin just as Mika soon would. Her nipples grew tight, her pussy pulsing in anticipation.

He quickly soaped his body and rinsed, then turned her around, pulling her back against his slick front. Hands mapping her curves from every angle, he lathered her as well.

Reaching behind, she stroked his solid erection as she rubbed her ass cheeks against his pelvis. No more

foreplay, he bent her forward and buried his cock in her slick folds. She gasped, biting her lip. Each forward thrust crushed his head against her G-spot.

“Like that,” she moaned, letting her hands stray to her breasts.

As she pinched and tugged at her nipples, Mika drove into her harder and faster. Hands grasping her hips, he collided against her, the smack of his pelvis warming her ass almost as much as the water. He reached around to tease

her clit, hastening the buildup of tension and pleasure in her core.

Her cunt tightened around his cock, her legs trembling. They had played this game before—how fast could he make her come? He had become an expert at the fast and furious quickie.

As he strummed her swollen bud, she felt herself nearing the edge. She impaled herself on his shaft, riding every inch of him until finally, the dam broke and wave after wave of pleasure washed over

her.

"Yes." She spread her legs, bracing her hands against the shower wall.

Milking his cock, her pussy contracted over and over again. The soft sucking sound reverberated around the stall. She quaked, bucking against him. He pushed her forward, pinning her to the cool wall. Cock pulsing inside her, he too came, ragged breath grazing her ear.

After their bodies had calmed,

she felt laughter rumble in his chest.

“I think that might be a new record,” he said.

With a chuckle, she nodded. “I think so.”

She wriggled free, letting his cock slip out, and turned to face him. His hair clung to his face and neck. She kissed the streams of water running down his chest.

He finished rinsing off and handed her the shower head.

Washing away the cum leaking down her thighs, she shivered at the stream of water passing over her still-engorged clitoris.

Once they'd shut off the faucet and toweled off, they scurried, naked, into the living room to find that they hadn't been quick enough. The ice cream had turned into a bowl of hot fudge soup.

Chapter Four

Monday morning began like most weekday mornings. Mika slept in since the dinner shift didn't start until three in the afternoon and ended at midnight. As much as she would've loved to lounge in bed with him until she had to leave for classes, there never seemed to be enough hours in a day to focus on her own projects. Not that Mika would've been conscious anyway. The hours he kept rendered him

comatose until at least eight or nine. Clarissa got up around six in the morning to squeeze in some work time before her first class at eight. Her hubby had set up the coffeemaker to start brewing at five-fifty. By the time she dragged herself from the bathroom, a fragrant pot of coffee awaited her.

One mug of coffee and one toaster waffle later, Clarissa climbed into the Vanagon and headed to the Art Building. As she approached her studio through the

courtyard, she noticed an envelope taped to the door. The note read—

Clarissa, come see me when you get in. I've got some exciting news for you.

—H.

Her adviser, Hector Ross, didn't often request to see her, but for him to consider the news exciting, it had to be something big. She dropped her backpack and headed down the corridor that led to the glass and ceramics courtyard. The door to Hector's workspace hid in this darkened hallway. Easy to miss if

you didn't already know it was there. She knocked on the open door.

“Clarissa, come on in. I see you got my note.” The older man looked at her over a pair of drugstore reading glasses perched atop a beaklike nose.

“Yep. So, what's up?”

He set aside the figurine he was fiddling with and took off his glasses. Turning his swivel chair toward her, he crossed his spindly legs, making himself comfortable

for what Clarissa hoped would be a brief conversation. In truth, the old man creeped her out a little. Balding, too thin, with the faint scent of whiskey on his breath, Hector seemed to cultivate others' dislike of his company, and she tried to spend as little time with him as possible.

Fingers steeped, he said, "I assume you've heard about the sculpture garden that's to be installed in the new Honolulu Performing Arts Center."

“I have.”

“I assume you’ve also heard that slots are invitation only, voted upon by the Center’s board of directors.”

“Yep.” Sigh. Would he cut to the chase already?

Instead of going on with his mysterious question-and-answer session, he handed her an envelope. “Open it.”

She did as she was told and skimmed the contents of the letter

within. Though eleven of the twelve slots had been awarded to local artists and UH faculty, the board had decided to open up the last slot for competition among a select few grad students. Her name was on the list—along with Sione's and a ceramicist named Kim Nakamura.

“Holy crap!”

“Indeed,” Hector replied.

“Congratulations. Your work, should you choose to submit one, must center around the theme of

music. Preferably an interactive exhibit that makes some sort of sound.”

God only knew what she’d come up with to fulfill those requirements, but she’d give it her best shot.

He went on, “Should your piece be selected, you’ll be paid for materials—with a cap of a few thousand dollars—plus receive a fee of twenty grand for the work.”

“Holy crap!”

“Yes, dear, you keep saying

that.”

“Sorry, I don’t know what else to say.”

“I take it you’re interested, then?”

“Hell yeah I’m interested.”

“Good. I thought you would be. Tanya and I will help you three come up with the best possible pieces. I’d like to see your first design by Friday and a scale model by the end of the month.”

“No problem.”

“Make us proud, eh?”

She assured her adviser she would and scampered back to her studio to begin the design process. Musically themed, interactive, makes sound and aesthetically pleasing. Her instincts also told her it should reflect the unique flavor of Hawaii itself. How to say all that with one sculpture? Well, she had some time before Hector's first deadline. Something would come to her. It always did.

* * * * *

Thursday night found Clarissa in a foul mood. She'd come up with nothing of any merit for the contest. Everything that came to mind seemed too pedestrian, too static, too uninspired. But the harder she pushed herself to be brilliant, the further her creative impulses receded.

Screw it. She'd worried enough about the submission. If inspiration

struck between now and tomorrow evening, great. If it didn't, it just wasn't meant to be. But how could she let an amazing opportunity like this just slip through her fingers? Shoulders tense and nerves frazzled, she decided to join Michelle and Sione at the Gardens for a drink.

She found her friends at the usual table, a pitcher of beer half gone.

“Get yourself a glass, girly. You've got some catching up to

do,” Michelle told her.

But instead of a mug of beer, Clarissa ordered a double bourbon. Making her way back to the patio table, she took down half the glass in one gulp.

“Whoa,” Sione said. “You mean business tonight, sistah.”

“Damn skippy.”

“What’s wrong?” Michelle asked.

“It’s that fucking Performing Arts Center contest. I got squat.

Nada. Can't come up with shit." That her vocabulary had degraded told her the whiskey had already gone to work. She'd had little to eat so the liquor went straight to her head.

"Oh boo hoo hoo. Cry me a river." Michelle rolled her eyes. "At least you got an invitation."

"True dat," Sione piped up.

Clarissa leveled her gaze at him. "I bet you've got your idea all mapped out, don't you?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

She threw back the rest of the bourbon and waggled the glass at Sione. “Another please. *Mahalo* plenty.”

“Okay, but only because you’re depressed. You want something else, Mich?”

Michelle declined anything stronger than beer. When Sione returned, he brought not only Clarissa’s shot but also a double of tequila for himself. Burning through the forty bucks they had

on them, the two proceeded to get, for lack of a better term, shitfaced.

“You know when I said you had some catching up to do,” Mich said, “I was only kidding.”

Clarissa giggled. “Now you’re the one who needs to catch up.”

“Afraid not. I gotta get going. You two okay to leave here alone?”

“We’re doing jus’ fine,” Sione slurred.

“Very reassuring. Call me when you get home, girl.”

Clarissa waved goodbye to her friend.

“Ready for another?” Sione asked.

Not foolish enough to try to keep up with the man, she shook her head. A dizzy spell clouded her vision. “Woo. I think I’ve had more than enough.”

“You gonna blow chunks?”

“Nope. But I need some fresh air.”

He laughed. “We’re already

outdoors.”

“Shut up. I wanna go for a walk.”

“You’re da boss.” Sione took her hand and helped her to her unsteady feet.

Walking through the campus at night could be downright eerie. Tall trees lined the sidewalk, their giant roots buckling the pathway in some areas. Spooky or not, Clarissa’s favorite tree on the university grounds was a huge banyan that gradually expanded its empire with

each passing year. Left untended, the imports from India could choke out all surrounding vegetation.

She fell to her knees at the foot of the giant tree and spoke to it, “Are you going to eat the planet like in *The Little Prince*?”

“Sistah, you *lolo*? Talkin’ to a tree? Besides that was a baobab tree in *The Little Prince*.”

Flopping onto her back, she looked up to the foliage far overhead and the great tangled mass of aerial roots that dropped

down from the branches. “That’s right. Oh my God. I love that you know that.”

“Come on. Time to get you home before Mika kills both of us.” He extended a hand, but instead of helping her up, she pulled him off balance. Sione tumbled to the ground in a gale of laughter.

“Isn’t it beautiful under here?” she asked.

He scooted next to her. His exhalations grazed her cheek as he turned his face toward hers. “Yeah,

it is.”

Her good sense drowned in a sea of bourbon, she turned her head to face him and found they were almost nose to nose. Studying his angular bone structure, she noted what a gorgeous man he was. She could smell the musky liquor on his breath and clean scent of his aftershave. A dull ache formed between her thighs and tension twisted in the pit of her stomach. She wanted him, God help her, she did. It was wrong in every way

imaginable, but she did.

Her heartbeat sped up, the same hammering rhythm echoed by her pussy. It clenched tight, sending a burst of pleasure through her.

A chorus of “this is wrong” ricocheted around her brain, but she was unable to break the thrall. Fortunately, Sione turned away first, clearing his throat.

Apropos of nothing, he said, “My mother died when I was eight years old.”

The comment threw a wet

blanket on the fire between her legs. She nodded. "I know. It broke my heart when Mika told me that."

"Yeah. He felt the loss too. My mom was close with his mom. Auntie Na'ilah had me over for dinner every night when Mom was sick and after she passed. Mika would help me with my homework. Mika's always been smarter than me, even in third grade—"

"That's not true. You two are smart in different ways."

“Ha. You’re sweet, but it’s okay. I know he’s smarter. I’m cool with it.” He waved a hand as though to dismiss the digression. “So like a week after Mom’s funeral we had a book report due. The class read *The Little Prince* and we were supposed to write an essay about our favorite part, but I’d missed a lot of school. I missed most of the book. Thinking about it now, I should’ve just talked to the teacher, but you know, stuff like that doesn’t come to you when you’re little. I was seriously stressed

about it.

“I tried to read the book on my own. I tried, but I couldn’t. That night, Mika finds me crying on the lanai, asks me what’s wrong. I tell him and he was cool about it. He said he’d write my report for me since his was finished. But I didn’t want that. I was mad I’d missed reading the story with my friends at school, mad at my mother because her being sick made me miss the story. How fucked-up is that?”

Clarissa touched his arm and electricity crackled against her fingertips. "You were a child. You can't blame yourself for that."

"I guess I know that now. At the time it was really confusing, to be mad at Mom like that. So Mika takes the book from me, tells me to sit down and starts to read to me. I don't mean like skipping through it or leaving out the big words, he read it to me word for word. But for the life of us, we couldn't figure out what a baobab tree was."

Sione's shoulders shook with silent chuckles. "We thought it was like a name like 'Bay-o-Bob'. We went out into the backyard and started looking for the biggest tree we could find, which was Uncle Johnny's prize mango tree. Tree looked huge to us back then. We used our pocketknives and carved 'Bay-o-Bob' into it. *Auwe*, Uncle Johnny beat us the next day, but it was worth it. For my essay, I wrote about the tree named 'Bay-o-Bob' as my favorite part. Mrs. Tanaka

must've took pity on me because she wrote 'excellent' on my paper. Only time she ever wrote that on one of my assignments. Anyway, that's why I know what the tree is in *The Little Prince*."

"What happened to Johnny's mango tree?"

"It got a fungus and died. He told us we wen' kill the tree."

"Poor tree."

"Yeah," Sione said, then fell quiet.

They listened to the wind, letting the silence stretch out. She imagined surging forward, planting her lips to his and climbing on top of him. She could feel his stubble against her cheek, taste his tongue, smell his skin. What was wrong with her that she longed to betray her husband? But there it was—that throbbing, pulsing, tense arousal that claimed her every time she was near Sione.

An exhaustion almost as profound as the attraction weighed

on her too. It was this constant internal struggle—good versus bad, right versus wrong. It shouldn't be a struggle, should it? Then again, what was the harm in one kiss?

A jolt of clarity compelled her to sit up. She'd gone too far already. The bourbon had allowed her to take too many liberties. Dangerous thoughts could turn into reckless action faster than she could react to stop it and, worse, she might not want to stop.

But you have to stop, she

reminded herself.

Unable to bear the tug-of-war any longer, Clarissa made a show of yawning and stretching. “Best get me home. I’m gonna have to take the bus again.”

He lay still for a moment longer then pulled himself to his feet. “I’ll walk you, make sure you get on the bus all right.”

“You don’t have to. I’m good. I can make it on my own.”

To her surprise, Sione shrugged and said, “If you’re sure. I’m beat.

I'm going to call it a night myself."

Confusion swirled in her head and chest, mixed with relief and disappointment in equal measure. Tired of conflicted feelings, Clarissa trudged to the bus stop. By quarter of eleven she'd made it home safe and sound.

After a quick call to Michelle, she settled in on the couch to wait for Mika's return.

* * * * *

She must have drifted off, but then the jangle of her husband's keys at the front door created a spark. When she opened her eyes, she half expected to find herself lying under the banyan tree.

Banyan trees and house keys.

Crack!

The strike of inspiration was palpable. She jumped up from the sofa.

"You okay, baby?" he asked.

"I'm better than okay. I got it. I

got the idea.”

Desperate to document the design before she lost it in her drunken haze, she dashed off for her sketchbook.

* * * * *

Hector sat back in his chair and studied Clarissa’s design. A rub of his stubbly chin, then a sigh.

He hates it, Clarissa worried, preparing to be leveled. What did she expect? She’d thrown the

project proposal together early this morning while battling a fierce hangover.

He put down the papers and took off his glasses. "I like it. Nice idea."

"Really?"

"Really. I love it. The design, the title, the philosophy behind it. I'm impressed, Clarissa."

He probably wouldn't be as impressed if he'd known how she'd come up with the idea, but who cared—a flash of brilliance was a

flash of brilliance no matter the origin.

She'd designed a six-foot banyan tree, the trunks, branches and leaves to be cast from bronze. The long, open-air roots that dropped from the branches would be made of strands of keys linked together by rings. The banyan, not indigenous to Hawaii, symbolized the various cultures that had come to the islands and put down roots. The keys worked in three ways—one, to evoke the idea of

opening doors, two, giving the piece the function as a musical instrument since the strands could be strummed to make a sparkling, chime-like sound, and three, as a visual pun for the musical meaning of the word “key”. The title of the piece echoed this double entendre — *In Key*.

First obstacle cleared, she faced the task of finding funds to bring her genius idea into reality. One worry at a time. Still, she couldn't help but think that Mika wouldn't

be happy about such a large withdrawal from their savings. The condo-and-baby fund. The sacred cow. But somehow she'd have to convince him.

This could be her big break, not unlike when he'd taken a pay cut to migrate from a line chef position at a mid-quality chain restaurant to that of prep cook at the resort. In the long run, the swanky hotel offered him more training and a more aggressive platform on which to make his mark.

Tough competition marked the battle for culinary supremacy in the islands. His innovations were more likely to be noticed in a gourmet kitchen than a place that defrosted much of its menu. This was her *haute cuisine*. He'd have to understand.

Chapter Five

Mika's entire clan had descended on Kailua Beach. There were more aunts, uncles, cousins, parents, grandparents and great-grandparents than Clarissa could shake a stick at.

The picnic tables overflowed with salads, grilled fish, sashimi, sliced fruit and of course the star of the show, the kalua pig. Mika had traded shifts with a coworker to attend the gathering. Clarissa

hadn't yet worked up the courage to broach the topic of her sculpture budget with him, but watching him clown around with his brothers and sisters, a beer in one hand, barbecue chicken leg in the other, she thought he looked more relaxed than she'd seen him in ages.

"He one good-looking boy, isn't he?" Mika's mother nudged her, handing off a dish of macaroni salad.

"That he is, Momma Na'ilah. You make beautiful babies."

Clarissa made room for the umpteenth salad.

“When you two going to make some beautiful babies?” Tutu Lelani, Mika’s grandmother, arched an eyebrow.

“Soon.”

“You keep sayin’. You two having trouble...you know?”

Both women looked at Clarissa expectantly as if ready to dole out sex advice. Her throat constricted to the point of choking her, but

Clarissa forced a smile on her face.
“No, no trouble with that. Thanks.”

“Course not.” Na’ilah went back to arranging the food. “I bet he like his father. Sex, sex, sex all the time. Why you think I have so many kids?”

The women dissolved into giggles.

This wasn’t happening. Clarissa was not going to discuss her love life with her in-laws, much less listen to stories about theirs.

Clearing her throat, she asked,

“Where’s Sione?”

At this Na’ilah’s face pinched into a scowl. “Dat boy. He stood up my hair stylist’s sister’s daughter last night. I worked for weeks to set up that date. I don’t even want to talk about it. He knows better than to show up today.”

“Oh.” Clarissa nodded, simultaneously relieved and disappointed that Sione would not be making an appearance.

* * * * *

The rest of the day passed in a blur of food, music and “talking story” —the tradition of connecting with the family, sharing one’s triumphs and tribulations, listening to tales one had heard a thousand times, but which bore repeating to keep the legends alive. It was one of the many things Clarissa loved about Mika’s family. No one buried their nose in their iPad or smartphone. They all gathered, laughing or even arguing, but they

did it as a family. Together.

Mika and Clarissa stole a moment to themselves, watching the sun move lower in the perfectly blue sky.

“You been distracted all day. You okay?” Mika asked.

“Yeah. I just need to talk to you about my piece for the competition. Hector loves the idea.”

“Great. We’ll chat when we get home.” He kissed her cheek, letting his mouth meander to her lips. “Too bad I have to go to work

tonight. We could stay for the night, slip away to one of the dunes..."

As he nuzzled her neck, his lips and tongue brushed over sensitive skin, giving her shivers.

Momma Na'ilah's voice interrupted his momentum.

"Der you are. Don't mean to butt in. I packed you some plates fo' take wit' you."

"Thanks." He nodded. "Sorry, I have to get to the resort."

“You work too hard.” She cupped her son’s face in her hands.

“I know, Mom. But that’s what youth is for.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

Then the woman engulfed Clarissa in a bear hug. Na’ilah smelled of plumerias and ti leaves. “Thanks for taking care of our boy.”

“I try.”

* * * * *

Once they got home, Clarissa

laid out her plans for the banyan tree piece and, as she'd expected, Mika was not pleased.

"No way, Kala. It's not like you're even guaranteed a spot. We could fork out all this money for nothing." He shook his head and leaned against the kitchen counter, arms crossed over his chest.

"Well, it's not like the piece would just evaporate. The bronze I can reuse if the piece is a failure. But who's to say that someone else wouldn't buy it? A private collector

or another gallery. Besides, I'm going to win the competition so your point is moot."

"It's not that I think you can't win, but you can't control what the board is going to find appealing. You've said yourself that jury selections don't always come down to the quality of the art. There are a lot of other considerations."

"Hector thinks I have a good shot."

"Hector has to tell you that. He's your adviser. It's his job to

encourage you.”

“I was under the impression encouragement is part of your job description as well.”

Mika let out a heavy sigh. “It is. You know I support you, but this is too much money. You’ve allotted fifteen hundred for key blanks alone. Fifteen hundred for key blanks, Kala. That’s not something you can reuse if the sculpture doesn’t fly.”

“Think of it this way, we can make lots of copies of the house key

when we buy a home.”

Her attempt at a joke fell flat.

“Listen,” she switched tactics, “when I win the competition, we’ll be reimbursed for the cost of supplies, plus twenty grand. That’s a damn fine down payment on a condo.”

“If. The keyword there is ‘if’.”

“You really have no faith in me, do you?”

“It’s not you I don’t have faith in. It’s that the decision is out of

your control. And you've got some pretty stiff competition."

"So, what, exactly are you saying? That you think Sione's a better artist than I am?"

"That's not what I said. His work is different. But you have to think about the fact that he's local."

"I see. Just because I'm a *haole*, I won't win?"

"Sometimes it's like that and you know it, Kala."

"But that's the whole point of

the piece—the outside cultures that have taken root here, that brought their arts and traditions here. That’s the beauty of Hawaii today. It’s a true melting pot.”

“And maybe the Arts board doesn’t want to celebrate outside cultures.”

Clarissa slammed a hand on the counter. “That’s the whole fucking point of the Performing Arts Center. Theater, music and dance from Polynesia, Asia, Puerto Rico, Portugal, all the arts of the people

who call Hawaii home.”

“Let’s just drop it for now, okay? We’re getting all worked up and we don’t know if it’ll fly. Let’s see how the scale model works out and we’ll go forward from there.”

“And once again you dictate when we’re finished discussing something.” She set her jaw.

“What else do we have to talk about?”

“Nothing.” She snatched up her purse. “Nothing at all.”

“Where are you going?”

“Out.” The front door slammed behind her.

She stomped up the sidewalk to Koko Head Avenue, the main street that cut through Kaimuki. This area of Honolulu had an old-time feel, many of the buildings and storefronts art deco in design. Mom-and-pop businesses stood shoulder to shoulder with a couple national chains, but the franchises were few and far between. Located behind Diamond Head with no

beach in the immediate vicinity, the neighborhood was ignored by tourists and corporations alike.

On the corner near their apartment, a little bar called Pau Hana made a mean vodka martini. The décor played into every hackneyed tropical stereotype. From the inflatable palm trees in each corner to the paper lanterns and flowery garland strung around the perimeter of the ceiling, the place had been her and Mika's hangout since they'd moved into

the neighborhood. The desire to brood alone pulled her inside.

She swung open the heavy wooden door and headed for a barstool. The bartender, Jared, waved to her. Without exchanging a word, he mixed Ketel One with the tiniest splash of vermouth and garnished it with a twist of lemon.

Clarissa gave him a weak smile and ten dollars. "Thanks."

"You look like you need 'em."

Wasn't that the truth? She sipped at her drink and tried to

clear her head. Mika would come around. He always did. At least she hoped he would. What was with him and his freaking obsession to buy into the American dream? Clarissa didn't care if they ever bought a home. Not to mention they were both in their twenties. What was the rush to start a family? Plenty of time to put off all that responsibility, at least for a little while longer.

Exhausted by the same old outrage swimming around her

brain, she dug change out of her purse and put a few songs on the jukebox.

“Kala, Kala.” A familiar voice behind her drew her attention.

No. No, no, no! Why is he here?
Her stomach clenched, her posture stiffening at the sound of his rich baritone.

“Hey, Sione,” she replied without turning around.

“Somebody’s in a bad mood. What happened?”

“Your cousin’s an ass sometimes, that’s what happened.”

“Ah. I coulda told you that. Come on, I’ll buy you another drink.”

She made her last play selection and headed to Sione’s booth, collecting her martini along the way.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Getting over a bad night.”

“I heard Na’ilah’s none too

happy with you.”

“*Auwe*. Auntie keeps pushing these girls on me. I never ask her fo’ set me up. Why she gets so bent out of shape when I don’t wanna go?”

“Yeah, well, I’m just a walking uterus, so...”

Sione took a gulp of beer and studied the table. “What you and Mika beefing about now?”

“Same argument, different twist. I wanted to take some money out of savings for my Performing Arts piece and he doesn’t want to

dip into the precious 'Enslave Clarissa Fund'."

"Why you call it that?"

"You're not dumb, Sione. You know once we start having kids and doing the family thing, my options will be vastly pared back. Mika will still be free to make his mark on the world, but I won't. I'll be expected to stay at home with the rug rats all day, doing laundry and dishes and changing diapers. I'm not ready for that right now."

“But you want kids one day?”

“One day, sure.”

“Didn’t you talk about all this before you got married?”

Clarissa rubbed her forehead and took a sip from her drink. “Yes. We did, but I suppose we weren’t specific enough about it. I told him I wanted to wait a little while before we have children. And he agreed. I guess our definition of ‘a little while’ differs.”

“You guys been married for

three years.”

“Don’t you start with the shit too.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “Nah, nah, nah. I get what you’re saying. It’s the same reason I don’t want to get married in the first place. All that responsibility. No, thanks.”

The Patti LaBelle song she’d chosen, *If You Don’t Know Me by Now*, came on. How many times had her mother sobbed into a glass of Jack and Coke listening to Patti

croon? Softly, Clarissa sang along, thinking the songstress made an excellent point. If Mika didn't know her by now, he would never, never, never know her. Ooh, ooh, ooooooh.

Sione played the clown, lip-syncing the words of the song and got to his feet. "Come, sistah. We dance."

"No. I don't feel like it."

"Come on. Don't make me bust out *fa'ataupati* up here by myself. You know I will." He started to

smack his chest and thighs, a wicked grin on his face.

“Christ, stop it. I don’t even see how you could do a slap dance to this song.”

“Then you better get up and dance with me.”

People around the bar had begun to stare at them. Not that it mattered to Sione, but Clarissa wanted to sink into the sticky carpet and disappear.

“Fine.” She pushed her way out

of the booth. “Just stop acting like an idiot.”

He held out his arms in a proper slow dance posture. She shook her head and took hold of his hands. Surprised at how well he led, she allowed him to sweep her around the small dance floor.

The heat radiating from his broad chest filled her nostrils with his fragrance—a mixture of sporty deodorant, spicy body wash and his natural scent that was similar to Mika’s but different. While Mika’s

skin smelled warm and strong, like brown sugar or coffee, there was a decadent undertone to Sione's body chemistry. Like cinnamon or cardamom. Both pleasant, but one more sinful than the other.

Banishing thoughts about Mika, she rode along on the warmth of Sione's embrace...and the heat building between her legs. The slow pulse of arousal matched the easy beat of the song. The pounding of her sex intensified with every measure. Why did he have to feel

so damn good? Why was she feeling this way? Tears of frustration flooded her eyes but she blinked them away.

Acting on an impulse she knew she should fight, Clarissa leaned her spinning head against Sione. He didn't rebuff or scold her. His heart pounded. She closed her eyes and tried to block out thoughts of anything but here and now. His body heat enveloped her and she imagined the two of them intertwined, skin to skin, mouth to

mouth, his cock filling her. Would she find peace then? She knew the answer to that question, but railed against it.

The peace she sought didn't come. It would never come. His heartbeat tapped out the wrong rhythm, his scent was all wrong. This was nowhere she could hide, nowhere to find shelter. Instead, uneasiness prickled at the back of her neck as though trimmings from a haircut had fallen down the back of her collar.

She looked up at Sione. He grinned down at her, the picture of a nervous schoolboy at the homecoming dance, his palms a little moist.

“Kala?” another voice came from behind her. She turned to see Mika’s face. Written across it were lines of worry. “I looked for you at your studio and at the Gardens. This was my last guess. Lucky for me I guessed right.”

Her once-heated blood now turned to ice water though her

cheeks felt as though they'd caught fire. Jesus fucking Christ, what was she doing? Shame clawed at her heart. But it was just a dance... wasn't it? Nothing bad had happened. Only in her mind and that could happen anywhere... couldn't it?

“Hey, brah.” Sione waved to Mika, releasing Clarissa immediately. “Just keeping an eye on your girl.”

“*Mahalo*, cuz. I'll take it from here.” Mikaela nudged out Sione

without a hint of the usual playfulness.

“Yeah. You two talk it out, ‘kay?” Sione made his retreat.

Mika stepped in to dance with his wife. His familiar moves, the comfortable way their bodies fit together, the scent of his skin felt right, as though she’d come home from a perilous journey. Desperate to say something—*anything*—she opened her mouth, but no words came out. She should explain, though an explanation would only

make her look guilty. She *was* guilty, wasn't she? Of exactly what, she wasn't sure. An emotional betrayal perhaps. She'd sought comfort with another man. It was almost as bad as bedding him. Or was it? Maybe it wasn't. Maybe this was all nothing and she was being melodramatic.

It didn't feel like nothing. It felt huge. A two-thousand-pound gorilla parked in the corner of the room, staring at her and scraping its pointer fingers together, scolding

her.

Closing her eyes, she tried to block out the cacophony of thoughts and fears.

“What’s he doing here?” Mika asked, jerking his head in the direction of his cousin.

Clearing her throat, she managed a reply. “He was here when I came in. Trying to forget a bad night, he said.”

Could be her imagination, the guilt of being found in an intimate moment with Sione, but Clarissa

thought she saw a look of annoyance travel across Mika's chiseled features, a flash of granite in his eyes. Oh God, he knew. He knew. Beads of sweat dotted her forehead.

He broke the uncomfortable silence. "Come on. Let's go."

It occurred to her she'd come here because she'd been angry with Mika, but now she found she couldn't muster the indignation to refuse, considering the circumstances. As she followed him

out of the bar though, she noted he hadn't bothered to apologize for upsetting her either.

Chapter Six

Clarissa glanced at her cell phone. Ten o'clock at night. She'd practically lived in her studio since Saturday, perhaps still too chagrined by the scene at the bar to face Mika. She should head home soon, but the scaled-down maquette model for her competition submission still needed a few tweaks here and there. A few more licks with a buffing wheel and it would be ready to patina.

Just when she had eye protection in place, ready to fire up the Dremel multipurpose tool, a knock interrupted her work. She turned to see Sione in the doorway.

“Hey, you,” she said.

“Hey. Howzit?”

“Good. Thanks. Just trying to finish this up for tomorrow.”

He stood for a while, staring up at the little models and technical exercises that lined a shelf around the top of the room. Unsure of

what to do or say, Clarissa needlessly took a file to the base of her miniature banyan tree.

Finally, he spoke. "Sorry if I was out of line the other night. I felt like Mika wasn't thrilled, you know?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, knowing damn well what he meant.

"He didn't say anything at b-ball this week, but he ran over me a couple times. Rougher than usual." Sione rubbed his jaw. "I felt kinda... You know?"

She did know, but damned if she'd admit it. Bad enough that they'd taken things this far. Her schoolgirl crush would only lead to further trouble, further pain in her marriage. Whatever the trouble between her and Mika, Sione wasn't the answer. Still, why did the man have to look so damn good in t-shirt and cutoffs?

Clearing her throat, she replied, "Mika hasn't said anything to me. Whatever you imagined the other night, don't worry about it. It's all

good.”

He stayed in the doorway, eyes fixed on the shelf above.

After a few minutes, she asked, “What’s wrong?”

Sione shook his head but didn’t move or speak. She took off her goggles and wiped a bead of sweat from her forehead. Standing up, she waited in front of him, forcing him to look at her.

“What’s on your mind, Sione?”

A hand ran through his mop of

hair. “You, Kala. You’re on my mind.”

The words didn’t make sense to her at first. She looked up at him, wondering what in the world he was talking about. He cradled her face in his hands. The gesture felt strange for one she’d imagined over and over again. Too intimate, inappropriate. And was he saying what she thought he was saying?

Clarissa turned her head away, bracing her hands against his chest. “Don’t.”

“But I gotta say this.”

“No. No, you don’t. Please don’t.” She pushed past him and stalked into the courtyard. A deep breath of night air did little to calm her. Talk about blindsiding a woman. This was the last conversation she’d expected to have with him. What absurd, cruel twist was this?

Sione came up behind her. “Kala, I need to tell you this.”

“Keep it to yourself.”

“I have feelings for you. I have since Mika first brought you to the family picnic.”

“That was almost seven years ago. Stop being silly.”

“You were wearing a yellow dress with little white flowers on it. Your hair was shorter then.”

“Really? Because I can’t even remember what I wore.”

“I do.”

“Just hush. If you cared about me you wouldn’t be saying this

right now. Or ever.”

“I don’t expect you to do anything about it. Not like this, but if you were free... If I was free then too. You know... Maybe...”

“That’s a lot of ifs. And I don’t give a crap about what you do or don’t expect. How could you do this to me? Put me in this position?”

Casting his gaze upward, his throat strained against the same heavy emotions she felt. “I’m sorry, Kala. Go ahead, hit me. Kick me in

the shins. I deserve it.”

Her hands shook with anger, mouth gathered into a tight grimace. “I don’t want to hit you, you dumbass.” She turned to face him. “I want to kiss you. Every fiber of my being is begging me to kiss you.”

His stance softened, no longer apologetic, as if he’d won some victory. The fire in his eyes mellowed but didn’t die out. It turned in on itself, glowing embers replacing dancing flames. He

inched closer to her, dipping his head. Ribbons of curls fell across his eyes. His breath grazed her shoulder, mouths too close for comfort. His skin smelled of surf and suntan oil. Heat licked at her thighs, her pussy throbbing. Her stomach churned with indecision—what she wanted to do versus what she knew she must do.

Another drop of sweat slid down her cheek, Sione raised a hand to wipe it away but she took a step back.

His wounded expression said more than his words ever could. He alternated between looking at her and looking at the ground. "Just give me a chance to explain what I mean."

"No."

"Why? You think I don't see how you look at me? You think I didn't understand why you danced so close to me the other night? You feel it too. I know you do." Again, Sione reached for her, and again, she stepped back.

Hands still trembling, she waved him away. "No. This doesn't happen, tonight or any other night. We don't talk about this again and we don't tell Mika. Is that clear?"

"But—"

"I'm married to Mika. I'm in love with Mika. I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression. It's my fault too that we've come to this point, but let's just walk away from it before we do something that's not so easy to walk away from. Okay?"

Sione nodded.

Still flush with anger, hopelessness and sadness, Clarissa walked out of the courtyard, out of the building and to the parking garage. Only once she'd made it home did she realize she'd left her studio wide open.

The phone call physically pained her, but she forced herself to dial. Too much expensive equipment there.

Sione picked up on the third ring.

“I need a favor,” she said through clenched teeth.

“Kala, I’m so sorry.”

“Hush. I didn’t call you to talk about that. Are you still at the Art Building?”

“Yeah.”

“Could you lock up my studio, please?”

“Already did.”

“Thanks. Good night.”

“Good night, Kala.”

She ended the call, then

collapsed on the couch. Her mind raced along, trying to sort out thoughts and emotions that could not be sorted. This whole thing with Sione was a knotted mess, each string leading to an imperfect and potentially disastrous outcome. Exploring either of their amorous impulses was out of the question. Being honest with Mika seemed insane. The only option left was to ignore what could not be ignored—not in Sione's presence, not in her most private thoughts, not when

she was honest with herself. But she had to. She had to. This was no way to live, walking on the edge of a razor blade. One false move and she'd be cut to ribbons.

Curling into a ball, she sobbed until she fell into a fitful slumber.

At twelve thirty, Mika crawled in.

"Tough night, sweetheart?" she asked, yawning and stretching.

Faced with her husband's gentle smile, she wondered how there could be any doubt at all. She loved

him. Plain and simple.

“Yeah, we were packed.” He sank down beside her and kissed her cheek. “You been crying, baby?”

“Nah. My eyes are just tired from some fine detail work.”

“Then let’s fall into bed together.”

“That’s the best offer I’ve heard all day.”

Mika took her hand and followed her to bed. Though the

conversation with Sione played inside her mind in an endless loop, Clarissa managed to fall asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

* * * * *

Clarissa swirled her disposable cup, hoping to free a few more droplets of orange soda from the ice cubes.

Slurp. No such luck.

Michelle picked at the last of her sushi, gaze fixed on the large wall

of glass.

The two had decided to take a couple hours for lunch and window shopping at Ala Moana Center—a break from a typical Wednesday smack in the middle of a week that seemed to drag on without end. Tourists usually proved a source of endless entertainment—but today an unusual silence rested between Clarissa and her friend.

They stared across the food court out the picture window that gave a view of the beach park,

neither one paying much attention to the parade of scantily clad arms, legs, bellies and backsides. Clarissa and Michelle took for granted the white sand, graceful arches of palm trees and blue-green water that shifted from turquoise to deep indigo as it met the cloudless sky on the horizon.

“Okay, we’re too damn quiet,” Michelle said.

Clarissa set aside her drink. “Can I ask you something?”

“You know you can.”

“It’s kinda uncomfortable to talk about and if you don’t want to talk about it just tell me so.”

“This sounds serious.”

“It’s not. Well, maybe it is. It’s just...” Clarissa groped for words. How could she explain the events of the past few days? Only one word came to mind. “Sione.”

Michelle’s brows drew together. “What about him?”

What did she want to ask? Well, she knew what she wanted to ask.

What do his lips taste like? How warm are his hands against bare skin? What sound does he make when he sinks himself inside... *No, stop it.*

Finally, she said, "Why did you two break up? You never told me why and I know you don't like to talk about him. Just tell me to mind my own beeswax if you don't want to answer."

Her friend giggled. "Did you just say 'beeswax'?"

"Ha. Yeah, I did."

“You’re such a white girl,” Michelle teased. Chewing on her lip, she seemed to go over some sort of internal dialogue. “How to put this? Sione and I are like... We’re like gasoline and fire. The good things about each other we heighten, but same goes for the bad things. My temper gets hotter, his rebellious streak gets wider. At least that’s the way it felt. Why do you ask?”

Clarissa drew in a deep breath, scenes from Sione’s confession

flashing through her mind. Her throat constricted as if to contain the words. She didn't want to tell anyone that things had gone as far as they had. When she was honest with herself, she knew the way she'd skirted the edge of cheating on Mika was a betrayal. And with his own cousin for crissakes. What would her friend think if she knew the truth?

"Earth to Kala." Michelle snapped her fingers.

"Sorry." Clarissa shook her head

to clear it, but instead tears rushed to her eyes. "I have to talk to someone, but I think you're going to think badly of me."

"Hey, you know it's not like that with us. Spill it, girl."

A shaky breath failed to loosen the tension binding her rib cage. "I've been having these thoughts about Sione."

Michelle shrugged. "We always talk about him like that. It's okay."

"Yeah, but for a while now, every time I'm around him, I feel

like he sucks all the oxygen from the room.”

“Well, he’s pretty good at that. It’s part of his charm.”

“And with all the fights Mika and I have been having...I almost kissed him the other night.”

“Who?”

Clarissa balled her hands into fists and pressed them to her lips, her voice a mere squeak. “Sione.”

“Oh. Wow.”

“I mean, not almost kissed him.

We could've kissed, the opportunity was there and I barely stopped myself. But I wanted to. God, I wanted to."

"That's not so bad. You can't control how you feel all the time, but at least you didn't act on those feelings."

"True." Clarissa wrapped and unwrapped a strand of hair around one finger. "But all the things he was saying... It was hard to control myself and I can't stop thinking about it now."

“What did he say?”

“Some nonsense that he’s always had feelings for me and how hard it is that I’m his cousin’s wife. And if we were both free... I don’t know, it’s crazy.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him I didn’t appreciate being put in this position and that he should never talk to me like that again.”

“Good for you.”

Stacking the paper plates and

empty cups on a tray, Michelle stayed quiet. The women bussed their table and headed for the parking lot. Michelle's Toyota hybrid waited in its shaded spot.

As they climbed into the car, Clarissa asked, "Do you think badly of me?"

"No. It was just a moment of weakness. You're beating yourself up too much. You did the right thing."

"I guess. I just wish I could stop thinking about him. It's like he

opened the door and now I can't slam it shut again."

Michelle whipped the little car out of the parking space and headed for Ala Moana Boulevard. "I tell you this much, Sione isn't worth the stress. He's an irresponsible jerk who thinks he can say and do anything he wants without consequences. And believe me, your negative reaction is enough to scare him off. Anything too real or too complicated would be too much like work for him.

Trust me on that. Don't waste another minute thinking about him."

"Did I touch a nerve here?" Clarissa asked. "I didn't mean to."

"No, why do you say that?" The engine revved.

"No reason."

Gripping the passenger door handle, Clarissa cringed as Michelle cut around a slow driver in the fast lane. Yeah...no reason at all.

* * * * *

The front door slammed with more vigor than usual, especially for a Saturday night. And a couple hours early too.

“Baby, you home?” Mika called out.

“In the kitchen.” Clarissa put away the small casting she was sanding.

Still dressed in his chef coat and checked pants, he planted a kiss on

her cheek. He smelled of grilled salmon.

“Ew, you didn’t shower.”

“Sorry, baby, but I have such great news I didn’t want to wait.”

“What’s up?”

“I got it. You’re looking at the new sous chef.”

Clarissa jumped up and threw her arms around his neck. “Oh my God. That’s awesome. I knew you were a shoe-in.”

He kissed her, cradling her face

in his hands. "We have to celebrate."

"First things first. You need a shower, fish-boy."

"Maybe you can help me out with that?" He tugged at the waistband of her shorts.

"Maybe."

Shedding clothes along the way, they scurried through their bedroom into the bathroom. Mika started the water, climbed into the shower ahead of Clarissa and started to soap up.

“So when do you start?” she asked, letting her hair down.

“In about a month. I’ve got to train my replacement and go through a couple weeks of management classes.”

“That’s awesome. Is it safe to get in?” she asked.

“Yeah. All fish has been eliminated. Get your pretty little ass in here.”

She climbed in and took a moment to admire her husband’s

wet, naked form. Water surged over her body and she relaxed into the hot stream. His hands slid down her body and he dropped to his knees, burying his face between her legs.

“Whatcha doing?” she asked.

“Thought you’d like a little attention, just for you.”

“Mmm, I love the idea.”

Using long strokes of his tongue, he swiped at her soft folds. She shivered, latching on to the back of his head and leaning against one

shower wall. The heat of the water and his mouth against her pussy set her body on fire. Immediate need blossomed in her core, the tension spreading through her body.

Mika put one of her legs over his shoulders. His tongue slipped inside her and back over her clit, taking advantage of the greater access. She flexed her thighs, each little squeeze tugging at her mound. Ripples of pleasure moved out from her cunt. Her breath quickened and caught in her throat.

She gave herself over to the ecstasy of each pass of his tongue. The soft lapping sound filled the shower. Little by little, he edged her closer to coming.

She moaned and arched against him, a wordless plea for release, but he teased her, easing the pressure.

Hands tangled in his hair, she pulled gently. "Don't stop."

A chuckle vibrated her clit. He was having fun. Pushing her mound against his face, she held him firmly in place. He laved with

renewed ardor, clearly taking her not-so-subtle hint. When he finally brought her to climax, he continued to lick and suck until the powerful sensations buckled her stance.

Getting to his feet, he embraced her, his strong arms encircled her and she rested against him. She could tell by his quick breathing he wasn't finished with her. Not by a long shot.

Hand trailing down her torso, he slid his fingers between her wet folds. Her swollen clit throbbed. He

turned her around, his cock nestled between her ass cheeks. Arching her back, she pressed her opening against the velvety head.

Slowly he eased inside her. She sighed. Though she loved when he gave her head, nothing compared to the way he filled her.

Leaning her forward, he settled his torso against her back. His slick skin slid over hers with each thrust. Their bodies united, she trembled not only with pleasure but with emotion. This was what she needed

—tenderness, passion, affection, intimacy. Mika loved her and she loved him. Why couldn't every minute together be this simple, this clear?

Pussy clenched around his cock, she panted, trying to manage the sensations racking her body. As he held her close, he pumped harder, faster, his cock passing over her most sensitive spots.

So perfect, so right, she let the pleasure sweep her along. Cunt tight with the need to come,

emotion pressed at the walls of her chest. Tears sprang into her eyes. This was all she ever wanted, ever needed. Just like the first time they'd been together.

As tremors pulled her closer to orgasm she cried out. Her body belonged to Mika, he owned her. He always had. More tears leaked down her cheeks. Grateful for the camouflage of the shower, she planted her hands against the tile wall. Bracing herself, she gasped for air. It was all too much, her love for

Mika and the pleasure he gave.

Pushing into her, he held her fast. As his cock twitched, another wave of pleasure hit her. She came with him, hiding her sobs with moans.

Little by little the world returned to her. She noticed his smooth skin against hers, the water running over them both. She blinked away the guilt and pain, embracing the affection blossoming in her core.

Lips to her ear, he murmured,

“Where would you like to go tonight?”

A lazy shrug on her part. Dinner was the furthest thing from her mind.

They finished showering and continued to throw out ideas about where to eat. At first they thought to paint the town red at a fancy restaurant, but then again maybe not. Since Mika dealt with gourmet cuisine every night, they decided to go to their favorite Mongolian barbeque joint to celebrate. He

pulled on a pair of Jams and a t-shirt. Clarissa wore jeans shorts and a spaghetti-strap tank top. Casual fun, like the old days.

Laughing and full of good humor, they made their way to the restaurant and seated themselves in an empty booth. Red vinyl seats, checkered vinyl tablecloth, but what the décor lacked, the smell of beef and chicken seared in sesame oil more than made up for. Their usual waitress greeted them with two beers.

“To you, sweetheart. I knew you could do it.” Clarissa raised her glass to her husband.

Mika clinked his mug to hers. “Thanks, baby. You make me feel like I can do anything.”

“You do great all on your own.”

“Speaking of greatness, how goes the project for the Performing Arts Center?”

“Good. Hector loved the model. I’ve collected about two-thirds of the bronze I need from scraps and

by bartering with my friends and professors. I'm going to be chained to the TIG welder next semester."

"Hmm...you in leather all day. I like that idea."

"Yeah, all sweaty and stinky. Very sexy."

"Well, if it brings down the out-of-pocket expenditure, you can be as sweaty and stinky as you want to be."

"Yep. Now I just have to figure out where to get all those keys." She gave him her best puppy dog

eyes.

“My hours will be changing soon,” he said, clearly eager to change the topic of conversation. “I’ll be running the swing shift from ten to six so I’ll be home for dinner every night.”

“That’ll be cool.”

He covered her hands with his. “Everything’s coming together. You finish your thesis this spring. By then we’ll have saved for a down payment.” Pausing, he continued to

stroke her palms. Clarissa knew what would come next. Lips pressed together, she braced herself.

Just stay calm, stay noncommittal.

Mika went on, "Do you think then we'll be ready to start trying?"

"Maybe. I mean, let's see what kind of job offers I get."

He cleared his throat. "You know, you won't have to work once my raise kicks in and the stock options and everything."

“I know, but I want to. I love teaching.”

Releasing her hands, he slumped back against the booth and took a drink of beer. Irritation tugged at the corners of his mouth.

“Why don’t we talk about something else? We’re supposed to be celebrating, not fighting,” she said.

“Yep.”

The waitress appeared with their soup. Clarissa crumbled fried

lumpia into hers and added two dashes of shoyu. With a blank expression, Mika did the same.

“You’re mad at me.” She sighed.

He shook his head. “No. Just frustrated.”

“I promise in the spring we can talk about all this, okay?”

“Yeah. And I know how that conversation will go. I’ll say I want to try, then you’ll come up with another excuse to put it off. You’ll have just started a new job or there will be another big project or

whatever.”

She dropped her soup spoon into the bowl. “I don’t see what the rush is.”

“Because I’d like to have kids before I’m fifty years old.”

“You knew when we got married I didn’t want to start a family right away.”

“Three years later isn’t right away.”

“Can’t you try to see it my way?” She rubbed her temples, a

headache developing over her brow. "A child doesn't change much for you. Sure, you'll lose some sleep making a token effort to get up in the middle of the night once in a while. You won't be able to go out with the guys as often, but that's it. You'll still exist outside the house. But it doesn't work like that for me. You expect me to give up my job, my artwork, everything that makes me who I am so I can sit home all day vacuuming and breastfeeding."

“Are you kidding? You really think I don’t have to make any sacrifices? I was perfectly happy working at that dive on the North Shore, surfing every day and partying every night. But when we got engaged, I took the job at the steakhouse so we’d have health insurance and a 401(k). I hated working there, but I never complained about it. Then I transferred to the resort—to a job beneath my skills—so I’d be able to make more money in the long run.

That plan is finally coming to fruition. I'm tired of hearing what you'll have to give up if we take the next logical step in our marriage."

"Do you hear yourself? 'The next logical step'. Is that the only reason you want children?"

"Of course not. I love you, Kala. I can't think of anything better than a little person who's half me and half you."

When he put it that way, she felt like an ass for not being ready to take the plunge. But they were still

in their twenties, granted late twenties, but her eggs had plenty of time to sit unused on the shelf.

Sione wouldn't pressure me like this. The thought alarmed her. Wrangling her emotions, she did her best to stay on track with the issue at hand.

“Baby, I’m not saying I want you barefoot and pregnant. And I wouldn’t mind if you want to work part-time,” Mika said.

Did he... Did he really just say what she thought he said? “Gee,

thanks for the permission, boss.”

“That’s not how I meant it.”

“I think it’s exactly what you meant. Well, I’ve got news for you —I don’t need your permission to work. You’re not my father, and even he doesn’t get to tell me what to do anymore.”

“Yeah, and if you have it your way, I’ll never be anyone’s father.”

At this she took her napkin from her lap, wiped her mouth and stood. She collected her purse and

started to walk away.

“Kala, where are you going?” he asked.

An eye roll her only response, she stormed out of the restaurant. At first she considered stopping by home to get the van, but she didn't want to run into Mika. Too tired and angry to rehash this argument, she found a bus stop two blocks away from the restaurant.

The bus that would take her near Michelle's grad student housing pulled up. Its door opened

with a heavy whoosh of air, but she shook her head and told the driver she was waiting on the number fifty-two line. He shrugged and gave her an apathetic wave.

Fifteen minutes later, the right bus showed up. Or perhaps the wrong bus. The number nine ran through Palolo Valley, one stop along its route sat dangerously close to the duplex Sione shared with two roommates. Ignoring her trepidation, Clarissa climbed aboard and paid her fare.

She'd managed to put Sione from her mind for the last week. Michelle's outburst had struck a chord, but now too many conflicting urges swirled around her brain. Thus far, devotion to Mika and reason had prevailed, but what had that gotten her? What if she acted on impulse? What if the sun didn't rise and set by Mika? What if she pretended for just one night that Mika didn't exist? Her words to Sione echoed in her mind — *That's an awful lot of ifs.*

Three knocks. Clarissa had banged on the door three times and no one answered. Figured Sione would be out the one night she wanted to see him. Deflated, she turned and walked down the steps.

The creak of a screen door caught her attention. She looked up to see Sione on the upper deck. He wore only a pair of cutoffs, his hair a tousled mess.

“Kala, you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, I just wanted to talk. Did I wake you?”

“Nah. What’s up?”

She walked upstairs and joined him on the stoop. “Mika and I had a huge argument.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He picked at the skin around his thumbnail.

A tense pause hung heavily in the night air, but not born of the usual sexual tension. Something else. His words terse, his body

turned toward the door, Sione gave off impatience in waves.

“Did I catch you at a bad time?” she asked.

He rubbed his neck. “Yeah, kinda.”

“I’m sorry. I just don’t feel like going home. Can I come in? I’ll stay out of your way. You won’t even know I’m here.”

“That’s the thing.” He scrunched up his nose. “I wouldn’t mind you hanging out, but I’m... I’m not alone.”

“Oh.” The full meaning of what he’d said took a moment to sink in. “*Oh*. God, I’m an idiot. Serves me right for popping in on you. Sorry. Good night.”

Clarissa couldn’t hurry down the steps fast enough. She ignored his calls after her. Her cheeks burned with humiliation. Earlier, when she made the decision to see Sione, she’d imagined him home, forlorn and brokenhearted, pining for her. And all his crap about wanting her. If she were free—if he

were free... Embarrassment at her gullibility turned her stomach.

He jogged up beside her as she hurried across the street. "Kala, don't leave mad."

"I'm not mad. I feel stupid. I bought the bullshit you were slinging the other night. But thank you. Really, I'm glad you were otherwise occupied tonight. At least I never actually slept with you, right?"

"What? You came over here tonight to sleep with me?"

“No.” Though the thought had crossed her mind on the way here. A lot. Exhausted, she flopped onto the bus stop bench and sank her head into her hands. Her eyes stung as she blinked away teardrops. What a mess.

Sione sat down and rubbed her shoulders. “What did you two fight about?”

“You should go back to your date. Don’t worry about me.” Even as she said the words, her voice

trembled and jumped two octaves, undercutting her bravado.

“It’s okay, Kala. Tell me what happened.”

Wiping her cheeks, she sniffled. “It’s the same thing we always fight about. He wants me to commit to making babies this spring and I want a little more time.”

“For what?”

Clarissa shrugged. “I don’t know. To get settled into a job. To work on my art career. The usual stuff.”

He continued to massage her upper back, his strong hands working the knots from her neck. After a while, he said, "I'm going to say something you aren't gonna like, but I'm going to say it because I'm your friend and you need to hear it, 'kay?"

She nodded.

"Mika's right. You make excuses to put off what he wants because you're afraid of the responsibility. And before you bite my head off,

let me just say that I see the behavior in you because I do the same thing. We don't want to grow up, but maybe it's time we both did."

As she looked up at him, her first instinct was to dispute his assertion. But how could she? He'd hit the nail on the head. Every time Mika brought up children, she felt as though a hippo had parked itself on her chest. Scared and cornered, her only recourse was to lash out. How could she tell the man she

loved that his hopes and dreams felt like a straitjacket to her?

Sione planted a kiss on her cheek. "And I'm sorry if I—not 'if' —*that* I muddied the waters."

Clarissa took a deep breath. "Wasn't just you. We both did."

"Michelle's here," Sione said to the ground more than Clarissa.

"What?"

"Michelle's my hot date."

"Holy crap." She clapped a hand over her mouth, giving Sione a

pinch on the arm. "You should've told me."

"Auwe. Sorry, sistah."

"Oh God, she must think I'm pathetic, showing up like this. Apologize to her for me."

"Nah. She knows you're going through a rough time. That's why she came over last night, to rip me a new one. She was pissed after you told her what I did. Yelled at me for like an hour, told me I was messing where I had no right to mess. When she finally let me get a word in, I

said she was right.

“Then we talked about us for a while. There’s something between us, always has been.”

“Which is why you ran away from her,” Clarissa interjected.

“Exactly. After that, one thing led to another...” A sly grin completed his thought. “When she saw you were at the door, she sent me out here ‘to clean up after myself’.”

Clarissa squeezed the bridge of

her nose between her thumb and forefinger. "This whole situation is one big, fat, hairy mess. I didn't mean to interrupt you two. You should be inside making up with Michelle, not playing wet-nurse to me. I feel like an idiot."

The weight of her foolishness bore down on her. A few sobs clutched at her throat. Though she fought to keep her composure, she lost the struggle. Fat tears welled up in her eyes and spilled down the bridge of her nose, taking her

mascara with it. She swiped at them, leaving black smudges on her fingertips.

A sheltering arm wrapped around her. He whispered to her, "Sh, sh, sh."

Of all the intimate moments they'd shared in the past weeks, this one felt real, felt good. Built not on misplaced affections, but the security of a friendship that had weathered a storm. Sione held her as she cried, the hum of the occasional passing car the only

indication the outside world still existed. But one vehicle didn't drive past, and the slam of a car door drew their attention.

“What the fuck, man?” A sharp tone of indignation rang out, perhaps more than that—a deep wound. Mika stalked across the street, parking himself in front of his wife and his cousin.

Sione stood up. “Brah, it's not what you think.”

“You.” Mika gave an accusatory jab to Sione's shoulder, moving the

man backward. "You don't talk to me right now, Sione, or I'll bash your fucking face in. Let's go, Kala."

"You've got the wrong idea." She rushed to get up.

"Didn't I just say I don't want to talk about this now? Just get in the car, Kala."

"Cuz, nothing happened. Nothing happened," Sione called after Mika.

Mika spun around, chest

heaving. “Who you trying to convince? Me or you?”

“Don’t worry,” Clarissa said to Sione. “I’ll talk to him.”

Sione gave her a curt nod, his lips tight against his teeth.

Her feet weighed down by anchors, body wooden, she trudged to the van and climbed in. Mika tore away from the curb.

“I get that you’re upset, but could you not drive like a madman?” she said.

“What were you doing there?”

He gripped the steering wheel tighter.

“Talking, that’s it. I swear.”

“What you two have to talk about, huh? This is the second time I find you with him after we fight. Is there something going on?”

Clarissa didn’t reply.

He turned left onto the main thoroughfare without signaling. His teeth ground against each other. “I’ve been looking all over

the place for you. To apologize. But I couldn't find you anywhere. So I come over to Sione's to grab a couple beers while you cool off and I find you there, making a fool out of me with my own cousin."

"I didn't do anything but cry on his shoulder." She set her jaw—it was time to come clean. "But I find him so much easier to talk to than you. He's easier to be around."

Mika flinched "Are you telling me you want to be with him?"

"No. I just... I have doubts about

us. I think we want different things.”

“Doubts? Why is this the first I’ve heard of you having doubts?”

She flung up her hands. “Are you kidding me? I tell you all the time, you just don’t listen!”

“But I bet Sione listens real good, huh?”

Objections and excuses evaporated on her lips. The hard fact of the matter was she had no good excuse for her behavior. She

could protest her innocence all she wanted, but her intentions tonight hadn't been innocent. By dumb luck, she and Sione had dodged a bullet. If Michelle hadn't been there... Clarissa didn't finish the thought.

Silence stretched into a chasm between them. Clarissa stewed in her own guilt as Mika pulled in front of their apartment building. Reaching across her, he shoved open the passenger-side door.

"You're not coming in?" she

asked.

“Nope.”

Sheer anguish colored his face, a harsh, ruddy hue licking at his cheeks. Eyes like granite, he swallowed hard.

“Mika—” she began, but words failed her.

She felt dirty, angry with herself, foolish. She couldn't stand his expression.

“Nothing happened,” she croaked.

“You went to another man for comfort, my *cousin*. How do you think that makes me feel?” He nearly spat the words through clenched teeth.

She couldn't think of a response.

“There's nothing to say, Clarissa. Just get out of the van.”

The use of her proper name cut her more than any knife could. It spoke of a distance, gaping and unbridgeable.

“Where are you going?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not running to another woman if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Again his words cut her, but she deserved it.

“Please, go.” He motioned for the door.

She swallowed hard, nodding. “Don’t do anything stupid, Mika.”

“I need time to think.”

“How much time?”

“I don’t know. Just go inside.”

Nothing left to do, nothing left

to say, she unbuckled her seatbelt and stepped out onto the sidewalk. Mika slammed the door and took off without a backward glance.

* * * * *

The sun came up over Diamond Head. Bold brushstrokes of hot pink and deep purple painted another glorious Hawaiian sunrise. Clarissa had come to take them for granted most days, but not today. She stood on the lanai, entranced by the subtle changes in the sky. The

coolness heated little by little to a warm orange glow.

By sunset that evening, Mika still hadn't come home. Clarissa grew more alarmed the longer he stayed away. Melodramatic absences were more her style. Sione and Michelle had called around seven to check on her.

"I'll tell him I was here and that nothing happened. You two really did just talk," her friend said.

"But he's right." Clarissa's voice

quavered. "I was thinking about—"

"Thoughts and actions are two different things, Kala. You two didn't act on what you felt. That should count for something."

Sure it counted for something, but she'd still been in the wrong. They ended their call and Clarissa poured a glass of merlot. Panic and fatigue battled for supremacy over her state of mind. Sinking onto the sofa, she allowed the battle to continue with nothing more than a few gulps of wine to calm it.

A photo album sat open on the coffee table. Their wedding album. One of the few occasions that brought her mother and father to the islands for a visit. Somehow they'd managed to refrain from sniping at each other, a minor miracle in and of itself. Not like their epic arguments from her childhood.

Most of the time, they'd save the knock-down-drag-out fights for after Clarissa's bedtime, as if the yelling and door slamming

wouldn't wake her. She'd sit in the dark, frightened, listening to harsh words. Sometimes she tried to look them up in the dictionary, but few of the words they hurled at each other appeared in *Webster's*. Not in the *Oxford English Dictionary* either. Their cruel language was punctuated by dashed coffee cups or dinner plates, which sounded distinctly different from a broken wineglass or beer bottle. Once the words dissolved into her mother's sobs and her father's silent retreat,

Clarissa would focus on a poster of dolphins frolicking in the Hawaiian surf—a gift from one of her father's many business trips.

In the morning, they'd pretend nothing was wrong, though the palpable tension made breakfast her least favorite meal of the day. Dinner was a close second with mouths pinched into flat lines of disgust. Sad point of truth, lunch at the school cafeteria became the only meal she could enjoy in peace.

Her parents divorced when she

was seventeen. With an adolescent disregard for her mother's feelings, she'd asked Mom what had taken them so long to split up. Her mom replied they'd stayed together for Clarissa's sake. At this Clarissa had burst out laughing. Not her finest moment, but she couldn't fathom how her parents had come to the conclusion that their cantankerous relationship would be a nurturing environment in which to raise a child.

The divorce settlement took

another embattled year to negotiate. By then, Clarissa had run away to Hawaii. Though she found few dolphins playing in lagoon-like settings, she'd found Mika and his family—a totally different experience from hers. Sure, there were squabbles, even long-standing feuds, but *'ohana* came first. *'Ohana* was everything. She found herself surrounded by more family than she knew what to do with. Aunties, uncles, tutus, great-tutus, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters and a

multitude of cousins. The specific relation took on less meaning than the bond of family itself. She'd fallen in love not only with Mika but his entire clan.

Her gaze fell on the juxtaposed photos, their formal wedding portrait and a snapshot of her and Mika dancing at their reception. Her smile in the portrait, though toothy and brilliant, hinted at her exasperation with the forty thousand shots the photographer had taken. In the candid picture

though, her smile showed an unencumbered joy. A joy born of uniting her life with Mika's.

Michelle's words echoed in her mind. Indeed thoughts and actions were two very different things. Was it nobler never to feel temptation or, having felt it, to have resisted it?

A rattle at the front door interrupted her thoughts.

"Kala?" Mika called out, squinting as his eyes adjusted to the dim house. She hadn't bothered to turn on any lights.

“Hey.”

He lugged two ten-gallon drums with him and dropped them in the foyer. “Hey.”

Taking a few tentative steps toward her, he shifted his keys from hand to hand.

She rushed toward him but stopped short of reaching out. “Mika, I’m sorry. I am so very sorry. I know I screwed up. It won’t ever, *ever* happen again.”

Putting a gentle finger to her

lips, he shook his head. "Don't make promises you can't keep."

A shard of ice pierced her heart. No, he couldn't give up on them. He couldn't think so badly of her... could he?

"Mika, I—" She clutched his hand, at a loss for words.

Again, he shook his head. Tears glittered in his eyes and he set his jaw against them. "If you don't love me, Kala, tell me now. If you want something...*someone* else, tell me now."

His voice cracked and a tear streamed down his cheek. He swatted at it as if it were a bothersome fly.

“No, Mika. No. I don’t.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “I just get so scared sometimes.”

He nodded, swallowing hard. “You’ve tried to tell me that, tried to show me.”

He walked to the sofa, sinking onto it as if he’d deflated. “All my dad did was work. That’s what a man does. A man provides for his

family. The times he was out of work, they crushed him. I don't ever want you to see me like that so I work hard. I push us forward."

She sat beside him, perched on the edge of the cushion. "Sometimes I need you to be here now."

Meeting her gaze, he nodded.

"And I am here. I will always be here. And I will try to listen better."

Clarissa sighed. His words felt like an apology and she knew she

should be the one apologizing. "It's still no excuse for my behavior. I know I hurt you."

He laced his fingers with hers.

She went on. "I have to make up for that. You did nothing wrong."

"That's not true. You've been skittish about marriage and kids from the start. I knew it going into a relationship with you and I know why you feel that way. I thought if I shoved you in the direction I wanted us to go that you'd have to just deal with it, learn to love it."

“I don’t think that’s going to work.” She gave a halfhearted chuckle.

“No, it’s not.” He smiled weakly. “It hit me last night—after a lot of beer—that if having a baby meant I couldn’t be a chef anymore, I wouldn’t be so gung ho to have a child either.”

She trembled, amazement and relief flooding her.

“But,” he went on, “you have to tell me if you ever get so close...if you ever feel like you need

something *different* again.”

Clarissa let out a hiccup and a sob. “Where you found me last night...you didn’t deserve that.”

His jaw tightened, fighting against tears that wet his lashes. A gulp of air turned into a staccato sigh. “I felt like I couldn’t breathe when I saw his arms around you. I wanted to kill him and handcuff you to me so you couldn’t leave me.”

She closed her eyes and

massaged the sockets with the palm of her hands. "Oh Mika, I'm so sorry, but I swear, nothing happened."

"I know." He lifted her chin to look at him. "I know that. I trust you and I trust Sione."

"Can you forgive me?"

He swallowed hard. "Maybe we forgive each other. At least that was Moki's advice last night."

Clarissa smiled to herself. Moki, yet another cousin and the night maintenance worker at the resort.

Mika went on. "Mok set me straight. He gave me a shot of tequila and a smack in the head. He told me if I don't show you that what's important to you is important to me, there's always somebody else who will. And he's right. Sione's been goofy over you since the day he met you. That much I know. I also know he shares a part of your life that I don't. He's an artist and he understands your creative impulses more than I do. If I don't play my cards right, what's

to stop you from kicking my ass to the curb?"

"Because I'm in love with you, not Sione."

"Thank God, right?" He fished a scrap of paper out of his pocket. "And I found this. Must've gotten washed with my shorts."

It was the fortune from weeks ago. *True understanding is the key to all hearts.*

"I figured out what it means," he said, kissing her gently. "Loving you isn't just about feeling it or sex

or even providing for you. It's about understanding that you have this beautiful, creative mind and supporting you in your expression of that. I finally get what you're saying. It's not what you do, it's who you are."

Clarissa squeezed Mika's hand, unable to speak.

An impish grin parted his thick lips. "And speaking of keys."

Mika scurried over to the buckets in the foyer and slid one

closer.

Clarissa walked over and stared down at the bright-green drum and hoped it didn't really hold kosher dill pickles. "What's this?"

"Open it."

She pried the lid off to find keys, hundreds and hundreds of keys.

"Holy crap! Where'd you get these?" She clapped her hands together, taken aback by the incredible gift.

"I mentioned your sculpture to

Moki and he said he knew where I could get at least a thousand of them for free. He led me to the basement storage and showed me these buckets. When the hotel switched from metal keys to the card system, they threw all these in storage and no one has touched them since. I asked the manager if I could take them. He said sure, as long as you mention the donation in the artwork's signage. Free advertising for them, thousands of keys for you."

The man beamed with pride.

“You never cease to amaze me. You’re my hero — yet again.”

“Here’s hoping I always will be.” He dipped his head and covered her mouth with his. Pulling her close, Mika folded his arms around her.

No more words, just sweet kisses that built in depth and intensity. He eased her to the floor, wiping away a few stray teardrops. He licked at the sticky trail they left, flicking his tongue gently over

her cheeks.

Fixing his gaze on hers—just like the first time they made love—he knelt before her. His eyes glittered with tears but also glowed with a fire she hadn't seen in a long time. One hand clasping her nape, he drew her closer, brushing his mouth over her lips. She breathed in his scent, drinking him in. He filled her nostrils and lungs, seeped into her pores. He existed in her arms, her heart, her soul—everywhere at once.

“I love you,” she breathed.

Instead of a rote reply, he closed his eyes as if wishing on a star. Brushing his thumb over her cheek, he eased her back, his body weight solid, imposing and thrilling.

Lips grazing over her neck, he worked his way down to her breasts. He freed them from her tank top and worked the nipple with his teeth. She groaned, arching her back. Pure sensation shot from her tit to her cunt. Suckling there until a tight bud

punctuated her breast, he moved to the other side. Again, he teased the nub until it was so hard it hurt.

She reached for his shorts but he pushed her hand away, his message clear—the moment belonged to him and him alone. He pulled off the Jams and threw them aside.

As he stripped off her shorts and panties, his hips parted her legs. His cock dotted her thigh with sticky pre-cum. Clarissa wrapped her body around his, ankles intertwined, holding him flush

against her pelvis. For the first time in as long as she could remember, she felt sure she understood what she needed and wanted. What she wanted was Mika. Like this. Forever.

He took his time, letting his cock sear a brand against her pussy. Her body pulsed in time with his heartbeat. His tongue opened her mouth in the same way she longed for his cock to open her pussy. Feeding on her, he kissed her as if it might be the last time, but they

both knew it wouldn't be. This was the beginning of their happy ending.

Pushing inside, he filled her. Her core quivered, a sigh on her lips as she spread wider. More than the physical pleasure, she drank in the affection, the renewed faith in herself and her marriage. That the man she loved more than life itself moved inside her set off a rush of emotion. Tears leaked down her face.

Pelvis flush against hers, he

rocked against her mound with an intense swaying motion. Breath caught in her throat. The move felt gorgeous, powerful, different from anything he'd ever done. More intimate.

He peppered her face with kisses, then settled his mouth on hers. Their tongues slid against each other, their bodies melding into one. She closed her eyes, still sobbing, but forced herself to focus on the pleasure coursing through her.

She moved against him, her clit rubbing against his pubis, ecstasy within her grasp. Mika proved he was in no hurry, his undulating strokes taking her higher...higher... and higher still.

He swept her hair across the floor and held her immobile with his massive frame, making love to her with increasing passion. Her body trembled and every thrust pushed her closer to coming. She flicked open her eyelids, but then broke with his stare. He turned her

face back toward his. Clarissa gave in to his unfaltering gaze, her chest starting to heave.

“Mika,” she gasped.

“Tell me you’re mine,” he said.

“I’m yours.” She wanted to say more, to tell him she’d always been his, to beg again for his forgiveness, to assure him she was no longer afraid. Not of the future, not of anything as long as she was in his arms, but she was too far gone to speak.

A strong climax shook her. She

clutched him closer, grasping his broad back. He buried himself inside, her pussy milking him. His head ducked, rapid exhalations spreading out warmth across her chest, and she felt him coming. The intervals between waves of pleasure and bursts of respiration slowed, at first by effort, then finally by a shared sense of calm.

He withdrew, melting off her and puddling onto the floor. His forefinger traced her bone structure, making a leisurely path

from her collarbone to her hips and back again.

“I’m all yours,” Clarissa repeated, sighing.

“I know, baby.” Mika hugged her. “I know.”

* * * * *

Later that night, after Mika had fallen asleep, Clarissa slipped out of bed. Rooting through a ceramic jar on her dresser, she found her fortune from last Sunday’s dinner.

Jump in with both feet, it read. Her heart pounded, her palms sweated. She was terrified, but there was no denying she knew exactly what it meant.

Epilogue

One year later

Mika leaned down and gave his wife a kiss. “You feeling okay?”

Clarissa sat at her dressing table, trying to cover her pallor with a little makeup. A bad case of butterflies twisted in her stomach. Waves of nausea threatened to bring up the bit of dinner she’d been able to choke down.

“I could use some soda. Ginger ale, please,” she said.

“Coming right up.”

He returned with ginger ale with a dash of bitters. One of the bartenders at work had recommended it to him as a surefire remedy for a queasy stomach. A few sips doused the sour taste in Clarissa's mouth. Soon the churning in her tummy settled down too.

Getting to her feet, she scowled at her reflection in the full-length mirror. A floral, knee-length skirt and peasant-style blouse were the

only pieces of clothing that still fit her. She'd gained ten pounds in the last month. Water weight, everyone said. Regardless of whether it was water or fat, the extra pounds made her feel like a ripe mango, swelling against its peel. And she'd only just begun to gain weight.

“You look beautiful.” Mika hugged her from behind, gaze fixed on hers in the mirror. “You might not like it, but I love how you’re filling out.”

“Liar.” She shot him a suspicious

look, but his erection pressed to her ass confirmed the veracity of the statement.

Lips skimming the back of her neck, he slid one hand down her hips and let it meander to her pert nipples.

With the hormonal roller coaster she was riding, she never knew how she would respond to his overtures. Tonight, he was in luck. Her pulse pounded between her thighs, a surge of arousal tightening her core.

“I just got dressed,” she offered a halfhearted protest, melting against his chest.

Dropping to his knees, he lifted her skirt and slipped her panties down to her ankles. As he stood, he glided his hands up her legs, gathering her skirt over her hips.

She patted the front of his trousers, searching blindly for his fly. Once she felt the button, she unfastened it and unzipped his pants. Pushing down his trousers and boxer briefs, she freed his cock.

Mika eased her forward, running one hand over her bare buttocks, letting his fingertips brush over her pussy lips. Tongue teasing her earlobe, he opened her with two fingers. Already swollen and throbbing, her cunt clenched tightly.

“God, you’re so soft and wet,” he whispered, lips tickling her ear.

Goose bumps rose on her arms. She reached behind with one arm, caressing his neck and silky hair. Kissing a path down her neck and

shoulders, he pressed his mushroomed head to her opening. As he filled her, she sighed.

One hand against the wall, she pushed back to meet his forward strokes. Ripples of pleasure radiated from her pussy through her entire body. His hot exhalations grazed over her skin, the scent of musk and his cologne filling her nostrils. He seeped into her pores, coursed through her veins, taking over her senses.

Breath urgent and ragged, she

struggled to draw in enough air. Every sensation amplified, she felt as if she could come any second. Mika caressed her nipples, sending a jolt of ecstasy straight to her cunt. Spasming, her pussy tightened around his shaft. A hiss escaped his lips, but he continued the steady rhythm, licking and sucking at her neck.

Small tremors grew in intensity. She braced herself for the impending climax, could feel that it was more powerful than usual and

would hit her like a truck. As soon as the contractions began, her knees buckled. Mika snaked an arm around her waist, holding her flush against his body. Whimpering and panting, she weathered the storm of pleasure. One of the few perks of early pregnancy—the sex was fucking fantastic.

Gaze fixed on her reflection in the mirror, he pushed his cock into her all the way to the base and then held her still. Biting her shoulder softly, Mika quaked, his torso

undulating as he came. A little of his cum leaked down her thigh.

Breathless, she chuckled, resting her head against her hand on the wall.

“Now I’m all messy,” she teased.

“I’d apologize, but I’m not really sorry.” He kissed her cheek and carefully withdrew.

“Me neither.” She chuckled. Wrangling her undies, she righted her skirt and skittered off to the bathroom to clean up.

Once she had freshened up, she emerged from the bathroom and inspected her reflection in the full-length mirror again.

“I guess this is as good as it’s going to get.” She sighed.

Wrapping his arms around her, Mika kissed her. “Do I have to show you again how sexy you are?”

“Believe me, I’d rather spend the night in bed with you.”

“I know you’re dreading this, but I think you’ll regret it if you

don't put in an appearance."

Nodding, she replied, "Yeah. Let's go before I change my mind."

His arm protective around her, Mika planted a kiss on top of her head as they walked to the driveway. He opened the van door and ushered her inside.

"I can open a door for myself. I'm pregnant, sweetheart, not dying."

"I know," he said, climbing in the driver's side. "But I don't want you to hurt yourself. Your joints are

all rubbery now, you know.”

Heaven help her. She'd had to hide the tattered copy of *What to Expect When You're Expecting* his mother had given them. Everything the damn book said he'd taken to heart. It was going to be a long six months, though he meant well.

A crowd of cars lined the streets of Honolulu that led to the Performing Arts Center. A symphony of steel and glass in its own right, the building arched and curved into a graceful round,

hollow space. Perfect acoustics, not that Clarissa knew much about such things.

Mika turned the VW over to a valet and helped her climb the steps to the front door. Inside a crush of people in floral fabrics of all kinds milled around, the general din of mixed conversation hummed in her ears. Smoked glass doors to the inner lobby bore a red ribbon binding their handles together. One of the mayor's aides greeted her with a lei. The pungent scent of

plumerias set off a fresh bout of nausea. She sent Mika on a mission for more ginger ale, with or without bitters.

He returned with fizzy beverages in three champagne flutes. One for her—the requested soda to settle her stomach. Two for him. He tossed back the glasses of sparkling wine.

“Nervous?” she asked.

“Hey, I’m drinking for two now.”

Scanning the sea of faces, she

picked out Sione and Michelle. They hurried over, arms held wide.

“Sistah, congratulations.” Sione hugged her.

Michelle followed suit and teased, “Yeah, we’re not too jealous.”

“Thank you, guys, for coming.” Tears sprang into her eyes. Damn hormones.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Michelle hijacked Clarissa’s glass. “Should you be drinking

this?"

"It's ginger ale and I'm going to vomit all over you if you don't give it back."

Michelle made a show of folding Clarissa's hand around the flute and patted it.

More family showed up. Mika's mother, Moki and more of the cousin posse. Even Tutu Leilani came and patted Clarissa's belly, which hadn't yet begun to show.

"Some skinny, girl. You need eat mo'," Tutu said, filling out her own

muumuu with voluminous amounts of flesh. The mother of seven children, she knew a thing or two about pregnancy. Clarissa would've loved to eat, if only she could keep something down. Mika gave her an emergency saltine. He'd taken to carrying a baggie of them in his pocket.

Her own mother had come all the way from Florida for the event. Helen hugged her close and kissed her cheek. "I couldn't be more proud of you, sweet pea."

“Thanks, Momma.”

“My baby.” Mom cupped her hands around Clarissa’s cheeks.

“Artist and mommy-to-be.”

“Momma,” Clarissa chided.

“All right. I’m just so thrilled. And when does your position with the school start?”

“In the fall. The Art 4 Kids grant is for the next school year. I should be big as a house by then.”

“You got someone to cover for you while you’re on maternity

leave?"

Clarissa glanced at Sione and Michelle. "Yep, we're good to go."

The lights flickered on and off as the mayor stepped up to the podium to speak. For Clarissa, the speech dragged on in un-air-conditioned agony, but finally the man cut the ribbon and ushers pulled the doors wide. More aides led Clarissa and Mika inside with the other artists.

Each sculpture was brilliant in its own right—an Asian-style

folding screen made of piano keys that emitted electronic notes when pressed, a pathway of carved musical key notations that led the viewers around to the various exhibits. The word “key” was used in each of the artworks, a strange lucky break on Clarissa’s part, tempting her to believe in divine inspiration.

In the middle of the path sprouted her piece, altered from six feet to ten feet, allowing visitors to pass beneath it and stir the strands

of keys. They made a shimmering, effervescent sound with each jangle. The resort had covered the cost of the extra bronze.

While she'd labored to give birth to this glowing masterpiece, Clarissa had let her prescription for the Pill lapse. She and Mika had been careful to use protection for a few months, allowing the hormones to clear her system and her menstrual cycle to return to normal.

Two months later she'd gotten

the letter from the concert hall board. They'd awarded her the slot reserved for UH's graduate submission. This was also the day Clarissa's period was officially one week late. The drugstore pregnancy test strip read "pregnant".

Panicked at first that she'd be unable to construct the now massive sculpture on-site, Clarissa was so relieved Sione and Michelle had jumped at the chance to help. Though they'd told her no thanks was necessary, the artwork signage

listed their names as contributing artists.

Faced with the culmination of not only a year's worth of work, but a lifetime of building relationships she'd had no blueprint to construct, a surge of emotion felled her. A familiar anxiety clutched at her throat. She wanted this, all of this so badly it hurt. So many things could go wrong and life always changed. This much she knew to be true. She excused herself for a moment and made her way outside

for a little fresh air. As always Mika hurried, only two steps behind her.

The night wind caressed her face, taking some of her fears with it.

“You okay, baby?” he asked.

Clarissa drew in a deep breath, staving off more teardrops. She was tired of crying. “Overwhelmed.”

He drew her into a gentle embrace. “It’s okay, baby. Everything’s fine.”

In his arms, trade winds rustling

her hair, she nodded. The man whose arms encompassed her—the man who'd learned to trust that she held the key to his future—Clarissa knew he too held the key to hers. Whatever trouble the future might hold they would face it...together.

About Cindy Jacks

Prior to becoming a multi-published writer of romantic and erotic fiction, Cindy went to college at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and graduated with a BFA in Art. After a brief attempt at an art career, she decided the “starving artist” life wasn’t for her. She worked for ten years in the corporate arena, but now spends her days as a full-time author.

When not chained to her laptop,

she enjoys hanging with her family, belly dancing and exploring the culinary arts.

Cindy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email addresses on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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