



HAWAIIAN HEROES

**BLOOMING
IN
THE WILD**

CATHRYN CADE

Dedication

To The Rose City Romance
Writers 2007-12, without whom I
would never have been published.
You'll always be my home crowd!

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Prologue

If she'd been awake, of course she would never have jumped.

But in the dream, she stood on the edge of a cliff. The mountain fell away below her in a cascade of misty green. Down between the tall trees, a wild profusion of shrubs and vines clung to the rich soil.

Standing on the brink, she tipped back her head and lifted her hands, palms upward in a hosanna of joy to the misty clouds above and the warm rain pattering down. Her island drank, and she was grateful.

At her gesture, the trees stretched out their branches to her. She laughed, and they leaned farther, obeying her summons, their leaves caressing her bare skin. Delight filled her. They were hers, all of them. And she was theirs.

She wore nothing but a brief kapa skirt, crown and lei of fragrant plumeria and red hyacinth, their petals soft against her forehead and bare breasts. Odd but right.

A cry slashed the quiet – a scarlet ‘I’iwi bird, swooping from an ohia tree to call a warning.

She frowned in displeasure as a motor growled through the quiet forest. Reaching out her hand, she commanded

the trees to part. Below her, a large vehicle rumbled along a narrow road. She couldn't see the occupants behind the shaded windows, but she knew they'd come to do harm to those who dwelled here.

Rage sprouted inside her, an explosive growth that must be released.

She beckoned, and a long vine slipped down from its supporting tree and twined through the air into her hand. Without hesitation, she launched herself out and down, swooping through the rain like an avenging angel, supported only by the vine. Around her, the forest came alive, the trees swaying, branches lashing, rain

flying in silver streams from their leaves. The shrubs and plants lining the ground shivered, as if they would follow her.

They were all hers, and they would obey her, help her destroy the intruders.

Wait – destroy?

She wasn't a killer. The forest had hypnotized her. Lulled her into believing she belonged to it, that she must fly to the rescue of those in it.

But she couldn't fly. She wasn't a creature of the forest, she was...

No! She couldn't remember who she was. Was she this wild wahine, or her quiet, everyday self?

Bereft of belief, she began to fall, plummeting toward the ground below. The speed of her descent sucked the breath from her lungs, branches slashed at her, the hard dark lava of the road bed rushed up to meet her.

She woke with a strangled scream of terror, her heart pounding, skin damp with perspiration, to find herself sitting upright in the middle of a strange bed. Struggling to steady her gasping breaths, she peered around her in the shadows. A tidy hotel room, with a desk, a chair, a lamp and a suitcase, open on the rack.

Her suitcase, her business suit hanging in the open closet beside it. Her tablet computer, ready on the desk.

This was her reality. She was Bella Moran, businesswoman.

She was here on Maui, Hawaii, for a meeting with her company's financial officers and local manager, ready to open DelRay Sporting Goods' first Hawaiian branch factory and store.

In a day and a half, she'd be leaving by boat for the wild stretch of coastline south of Kona on Hawaii's Big Island, in charge of a photo shoot to showcase the new

summer line of outdoor products. She was in charge of making sure the expedition went smoothly, that everyone got along and worked well together.

She was Bella Moran, from Portland, Oregon. And she was afraid she was losing her mind.

Blinking at the hot tears that filled her eyes, Bella crawled through the tangled sheets to the edge of the bed and reached out to grasp her cell phone. She swiped her wet cheeks with a corner of the sheet and peered at the bright little screen in her palm. Four thirty in the morning, local time, but she

had to talk to someone, had to hear the voice of someone who might understand.

Finding a name, she hesitated, and then tapped it with her thumb. She lifted the phone to her ear and waited until a male voice answered, rough with sleep.

“It’s Daro. What’s wrong, *nani*, pretty one?”

“I’m sorry to wake you,” she managed, her voice trembling. “But I need to know. Do you ever have... dreams?”

Chapter One

To Do: Organize one group of pampered divas, a boatload of camping equipment and gourmet provisions. Escort them into the tropical Hawaiian wilderness.

God save him from the princesses of the world.

Joel Girand was damn tired of waiting for the last passenger for the Hawaiian Dive boat. Tipping his head back against one of the tall pilings that supported the dock, he heaved a sigh, willing himself to

calm. Behind him, the forty-foot catamaran rocked gently on the water of the small yacht-club basin, the evening sun sliding through the clouds to gild the tall mast and glint off of the white hull.

Joel had arrived at the Kona Yacht Club dock forty minutes ago to make sure all the equipment had arrived for this weekend expedition to a remote area of the Big Island. Even though he wasn't technically in charge, the gig had his name on it alongside DelRay Sporting Goods, and he always made sure everything was in place before he went into the backcountry. Missing

equipment made for an uncomfortable or downright dangerous expedition. He didn't mind doing uncomfortable if it was necessary, but he'd rather his danger had some fun attached, instead of being caused by sloppy gear prep.

Of course, this particular trip was all about gear, so there was a plethora. DelRay wanted an expert, him, to try out their new summer line of clothing and camping equipment, and give them lots of photo ops while he did so, in one of the most beautiful places on earth, Hawaii. They'd managed to find a

wild spot that was less than two hours south by boat along the Kona coast, and the company had taken care of all logistics. Everything was long-since packed on the boat — tents, mess kits, clothing and his own duffel.

There were plenty of people along too, three of them a lot prettier than his usual crew. He grinned as he thought of the pithy comments Al and Jorge would make about that comparison. His photographer and assistant had bitched about being left out of this plum assignment, but he knew Al was off to spend time with his

family, and Jorge planned to do some fishing in Baja. He wouldn't have minded having them along, either. This trip might not be physically dangerous, but it was crucial if he wanted to hang on to his career.

All but one of the other passengers had arrived shortly after he did. The photographer and a guy who was her boyfriend or assistant, as well as two younger women and a man, were relaxing in the shade. He figured the latter trio to be the models. The pretty redhead was hanging on the guy, playing some game on his phone with him.

The blonde was tall and reed-slim, except for her breasts. She smiled at Joel and gave him a special viewing in her low-cut sundress as she took off her little jacket. He was pretty sure those melons weren't real, but he was a guy — he enjoyed the show anyway.

She spent the rest of her time inspecting her nails, so his interest cooled a bit. He appreciated a pretty woman, but he'd just as soon she wasn't wrapped up in her appearance, especially when she was headed out into the wild. Although she got paid for looking good, so maybe on her personal

scale, a chipped nail counted as a real tragedy.

The redhead was shorter, her hair in wild curls around her head and shoulders. She had a tattoo around one slender ankle and wore a halter and tight shorts that displayed her curves. A guy had to love the tropics, where the wahines wore no more than they had to.

The photographer wasn't a knockout like them, but she looked interesting. Elegant. A slender, fit woman in her thirties or early forties, she wore a hat over her dark auburn hair, and a light top and shorts. She was smiling to herself as

she watched the others, as if she found them amusing. Her assistant, a youngish Asian man with hair bleached a strange platinum Joel had last seen on a hooker on a street corner in LA, sat flipping a fancy folding knife end over end. He looked as bored as Joel.

Joel rolled his head against the dock post behind him, looking without hope toward the parking lot. The small area was framed by a high bank overgrown with the huge philodendron vines the locals called monstera, glossy leaves hanging quiet in the warm, damp air.

Not that Joel minded hanging around a quiet Hawaiian waterfront, but he'd just as soon do it with a cold beer and some music. He was about to haul out his own phone and look for a game. He'd taken to playing strategy games on his last trip into Asia, with long waits at every airport. His current favorite involved freeing an explorer from a mythical forest full of strange traps in the fewest moves possible — without getting killed, of course.

That was when he saw her — finally. A dark-haired beauty strode down the dock toward them, hips

swaying, high heels tapping on the dock. He recognized the red duffel she pulled behind her. It was one of the new lines they'd be testing. He'd never seen the woman before. He would have remembered. She was Hawaiian, but the Honolulu version, from her red stilettos to her little white froth of a suit.

She stopped before him. He rose in one lithe motion.

“Bout time, Princess,” he drawled.

She cocked her hip, planted one hand on it and looked at him from behind her sunglasses. “Did I keep you waiting? Well then, I’ll have to

make up for lost time, yeah?" Her voice was low and clear, and laced with sweet sarcasm.

Letting go the handle of her duffel, she opened the single button of her little jacket and shrugged out of it in one lithe motion. It dropped onto her bag. He just had time to note the red spaghetti-strap tank she wore beneath it when she unfastened her skirt too.

The short garment slithered down, revealing a tiny pair of bikini bottoms, cut high on sloping rounded hips that lengthened into a pair of toned, pretty legs, every inch the color of Hawaiian honey.

She stepped out of the skirt and tossed it onto the duffel as well, leaving her standing there in the undies and red fuck-me heels like a contestant in a dockside beauty pageant. She lifted her arms and unfastened her dark hair from the coil high on her head. As she shook her head, her hair slithered down her back in a fall of near-black silk.

Stepping out of her shoes, she wriggled her bare toes on the dock. She had a little red flower thing painted on one of her dainty toenails. His gaze slid back up the line of her legs, over those hips, her small waist and breasts, and up to

her face.

The designer shades hid her eyes, but her soft, red lips curved up in a smirk that said she knew he'd been riveted to every move of her little strip show. "Fast enough for you, moke?"

She cocked her head to look past him, and her smile widened into the real thing, flashing white teeth and dimples at the corners of her mouth.

"Hi, Frank. Sorry I'm so late — the meeting ran long."

Released from his sensual spell, Joel blinked. He sucked in a long breath and shook his head slightly.

Damn! He'd stopped breathing about the time her skirt slid down. Of course, her tiny tease of a garment was really a swimsuit, and not the barest one he'd seen in Hawaii. However, the shock of her little strip show had had his mind going further, fast.

He watched in bemused lust and irritation as she bent over, her back to him, to gather up her suit and shoes and bundle them into the duffel. The move presented her heart-shaped ass and rounded legs as if she were offering to let him finish undressing her. Yeah, he'd like to run his hands right under

those little bottoms and pull them down, letting them drift to her ankles as he slid his fingertips between her thighs and cupped her where she'd be soft and wet and hot.

Her ass was surprisingly lush on her fit body. And that thin top—as she straightened, pulling the duffel toward the boat, the move outlined her breasts. They might be small, but on her they were...*ka nani*, so pretty, like halves of a ripe papaya.

The captain of the boat, a lean, wiry Hawaiian with silver in his dark hair, grinned back at her, his amusement clear. “Aloha, Bella.

Welcome back to Kona.”

“*Mahalo*. Let me get my bag, and we can get going.”

Going—right. They needed to get going. He was going somewhere, not having hot monkey sex on a public dock. Blowing out a long breath, Joel leaned over and grabbed her duffel, swinging it forward and onto the boat, where it was scooped up by a skinny Hawaiian in a white Hawaiian Dive T-shirt and baggy shorts. Kobe—no, Frank had introduced him as Eddy. The stocky one was Kobe.

Ms. Hawaii’s dark brows scrunched together, a crease

between them, but then her face smoothed as if a curtain had fallen. "Mahalo."

Joel gestured with ironic courtesy that she should board the boat first. She stepped up onto the cat and walked across to the far side. She balanced lightly, tossing her hair back over her shoulder. It shone in a last ray of sun, glossy as a bird's wing with reddish highlights among the espresso-hued strands.

"All right, everyone," Frank called. "Welcome aboard. Let's go to Na'alele."

Damn straight Joel was ready to

go — a mellow three-day cruise into a gentle wilderness with few bugs, no large predators or hostile natives, with full cell phone service and great food, surrounded by gorgeous women, even if one of them was by turns seductive as a hula dancer and prickly as a noni fruit. At least she didn't smell like a noni. The small, prickly Hawaiian fruit was known for its medicinal qualities and its stench.

He didn't know what he'd been worrying about. This gig was going to be a cinch. He'd get some great publicity, and take it back to the network execs, as proof that he was

a bankable commodity. Joel was smiling to himself as he stepped onto the boat.

Bella flung herself onto the bench seat, only to recoil when her backbone connected painfully with the boat rail. She gritted her teeth against the pain and then deliberately made herself relax, letting her back curve into the railing. She was not going to allow herself to be rattled by some equipment cowboy with a macho swagger.

Although she'd had a little fun with him. She couldn't quite

believe she'd done that — stripped off her business suit right in front of him and everyone else on the dock. All the irritation and frustration of the long day of meetings and last-minute checks to ensure everything was in place not only for the store opening but for this trip had channeled into a flush of anger, and she'd sort of...snapped.

Their celebrity star had watched every move, she could tell. Bella straightened her sunglasses and eyed him surreptitiously through the dark lenses. As he sauntered past her, she crossed her legs, swiveling her knees away.

He was big enough that she'd come only to his shoulder when they'd been standing on the dock, and she'd been dwarfed by his broad shoulders and brawny physique. He certainly filled out his clinging white T-shirt, which bore the palm tree logo of DelRay's summer line, and, his ass was tight and round under the thin fabric of his khaki cargo shorts. Although the hair curling up in loose commas from under his baseball cap was reddish, he was tanned, not a freckle in sight.

Realizing she was staring, Bella jerked her gaze away, her cheeks

hot. She glanced around, but no one seemed to have noticed her interest. She blew out an impatient breath. Enough of that silliness. It was just that she wasn't used to such strongly conflicted feelings about a guy. On one hand, any guy who called her a princess didn't deserve a second look, even if he was drool-worthy. On the other hand, he was extremely drool-worthy. Besides, since when was she impressed with guys just because they were big? Well, since forever.

Of course, he wasn't as big as David or Daniel. Polynesian to the

core, her newly discovered Hawaiian cousins were built like the volcanic peak that loomed above the boat, the top hidden in the clouds. She wished the Ho'omalus were here now, with her two best friends. Melia had married David two months ago, here on the beach. Claire and Daniel would be married in August, on the beach at Nawea Bay, the family's private enclave.

When this four-day expedition was over, Bella would continue on with Frank and his boat to Nawea for a few days' visit. She could hardly wait. She and Melia and

Claire were as close as sisters. Now, oddly enough, they really were going to be related, by marriage.

She sighed, rolling her shoulders to ease the tension and weariness of sitting—in boardrooms, cars and airplanes. She'd been on the islands for three days now, and all she'd had time for was meetings with the other DelRay people. Launching the new factory and store was a big venture for the Oregon-based sporting goods company. They'd made their name with eco-friendly clothing and equipment constructed of recycled and manmade fibers as much as

possible.

Delton Rayburn had a second home on Maui, and he wanted his company to have a foothold there as well. Bella was one of the people in charge of making that happen.

She'd do it too, even if it meant spending most of her time here wearing high heels, carrying a briefcase and ducking from one air-conditioned space to the next. At least on this portion of her trip, she'd be outdoors, on the forested slopes of Pele's volcanoes.

The other expedition members filed onto the boat. The redhead was next, holding her phone in one

hand, carrying an enormous bag that matched her hot-pink shorts. A tiny white tank revealed a flowered bikini top that barely contained her full breasts. Bella squared her shoulders, rejecting her urge to hunch. So what if her own breasts were small? She was a grown-up, and she was happy with her body. It was toned and fit and did all the things she wanted it to do.

The blonde model wore a low-cut halter dress and Roman sandals that climbed her willowy ankles. She smiled as she passed Bella, revealing perfect white teeth. The male model close behind her smiled

too, and Bella blinked. Whoa, with his Hawaiian good looks, he'd be perfect for a photo shoot at one of the resorts. He wore his hair long, like her cousin Zane, and it was the same deep coffee hue, although the resemblance ended there. This man didn't have the Ho'omalulu jaw, or their eyes, dark as ebony and surrounded with thick, black lashes and slashing brows.

She now knew she had Ho'omalulu eyes too. She'd spent years plucking her brows to keep them under control and watching her friends learn mascara and eyeliner, things she hadn't really

needed, feeling the odd girl out even though they groaned about how lucky she was. She wore makeup at work as part of her polished, professional look, but on her days off, she rarely bothered. And now that she'd met her father and his extended family on her last visit to the Big Island, she knew at last where she'd gotten her ebony brows and lashes, her mane of coffee-dark hair, her golden skin.

The night before Melia's wedding, Bella's mother had confessed that Bella's father, a holiday fling twenty-five years before, was Daro Kai, a cousin of

the Ho'omalus. Since they were a very large family, it was not as big a coincidence as it seemed that Bella's best friend was marrying into that very family.

DelRay had hired this Hawaiian model as an extra for the group photos, but for this shoot, intended to showcase their new line of tropical camping gear and clothing, the big sporting goods tester, Joel What's-his-name, was the star. So she guessed she had to be nice to him — although any more smart-ass remarks and he might end up modeling a vine wrapped around his thick neck.

And after her dream, she was half afraid she could do it. But that was ridiculous — as if she could command vegetation to harm someone. Last night's dream had been the wildest in an ever more vivid string, but still, just a dream that had ended nightmarishly.

Although her father seemed to think it was more than that. When she'd called him in the wee hours of the morning, Daro had wanted to fly to Maui and bring her straight to the Ho'omalus here on the Big Island to talk with them, to delay her arrival in the forest until she had, as he put it, "*more*

understanding of what might be at stake for her".

She had thanked him but refused. Knowing she had someone nearby who was willing to drop everything and come to her if she needed him had steadied her, reassured her, chased away the chill of her dream's nightmarish ending, and given her the strength to remember that she was here on business. Work came first, before childish fears.

And maybe, just maybe, if she stayed busy enough, she could put off possible revelations that her dreams might be true.

Chapter Two

To Do: Remember, job on this trip is to act as a tour director. Bring this diverse group together in congenial harmony.

Bella took a steadying breath and blew it out. Sure, the Ho'omalū family had gifts that stemmed from the island, but that was different. That was them, not her. She was just ordinary Bella Moran, *hapa-haole*, half-Caucasian mainlander.

And right now she was in charge of making sure all her charges

worked well together.

If she was lucky, she wouldn't actually have that much to do with the television hero. She would mainly work with the woman climbing onto the boat, laden with camera bags and followed by another man. The photographer could direct the models to showcase the products in the best way. That was her expertise and why she'd been hired.

Bella shook off her troubled thoughts and smiled as the slender woman stopped to sit on the bench seat near her, setting her bags carefully at her feet.

“Aloha, I’m Bella Moran. You must be Nelda Smith.”

The other woman leaned forward, her eyes twinkling slyly over her narrow sunglasses. “No, I got rid of her so I could have the assignment.” She laughed, and Bella couldn’t help chuckling at the mischief in her husky voice.

“I’m Camille Barrett,” the woman added. “They called me when your other photographer was injured in an accident. Walked out in front of a tourist’s car in Hilo, poor thing.”

“How awful. I didn’t hear about that. Thank you for filling in on

such short notice.” Bella made a mental note to send flowers and fruit to the unfortunate Nelda Smith. She could imagine few things worse than being trapped in a hospital room in paradise.

She looked at the young Asian man slouched back on the seat next to the photographer. He was lean and fit, clad in trendy sportswear. His taut face would’ve been handsome if it had held a little more animation under his striking hair, pale against his sallow skin. He was chewing gum, his jaw flexing rhythmically.

“This is Li,” the other woman

said. "My right-hand man."

Something in her voice, or in her sidelong look made Bella glance between the two. Li nodded at Bella, but his expression remained bored as he flipped a folding knife forward over his thumb and then back again. Bella shrugged mentally. They worked together, so of course they knew each other well. Anything more was none of her business.

"Aloha," called Frank Lelua from the bridge. Bella turned to see him smiling, white teeth flashing in his lined, dark face. He looked down at them all, one hand resting on the

wheel as his two deckhands unfastened the mooring lines and pushed the boat off from the dock. "Ready to go, folks?"

"Ready." Bella smiled back at him. Frank was a good guy, a retired cop who seemed to take every day as it came and enjoy the simple life he'd fashioned with his Hawaiian Dive business, taking paying customers out for dive trips along the Kona Coast, and helping out at Naweia Bay.

"More than ready," called a deep voice just behind her. The muscles on the back of Bella's shoulders tightened in a familiar warning,

and she rolled her head against the threatening headache, her smile gone.

It was going to be a long four days, unless she relaxed.

As the big cat motored out of the yacht basin and into the surf, Joel took his ball cap off and lay back against the railing, enjoying the scenery of South Kona in the golden sunlight of the early evening and the wind rippling through his sweat-damp hair and clothing, cooling his skin as it evaporated the moisture. The sun was still bright, but he left his

sunglasses on the back of his neck. He took a deep breath of the damp, fresh air full of the scent of the sea and the vegetation. He caught a hint of flowers, but then there always was here.

Man, he loved the Big Island. Of the Hawaiian archipelago, this was his favorite island. Rough and raw around the edges, with more Hawaiians than *haoles*, Caucasians, and plenty of wild forest. Room to move, to hike, bike, swim, dive and whatever else he wanted to do, all in a temperate climate.

On the shore, houses and condos slipped by, and a big wave broke on

the point in front of a high-rise resort. Yeah, if he had his way, if this whole thing gave him the clout he needed and he got to keep his job for another year, he'd have enough money in the bank to let go of his Oregon condo and make one of these islands his base. Rent a house on a quiet road with a view of the ocean, maybe share it with a pretty wahine. One who had a life and career of her own and no more desire than he to settle down.

He was a simple guy, and he wanted an easygoing woman who'd be content to do her own thing while he was gone and be

really glad to see him when he was around.

He found his gaze resting on a pretty pair of golden, bare legs, and jerked it away. Oh, hell no. Not some high-upkeep city girl like Ms. Hawaii. There was no way even the most exciting sex was worth that amount of trouble.

He shifted on the bench seat, making sure his loose shirt covered his lap, because his body seemed positive she *was* worth the trouble. It had been a while — three, no four months since he'd been with a woman. If things worked out with one of these pretty wahines, he

wouldn't mind a little *hana ai* in the wild. There were perks to being a guy with a half-decent physique and looks, and he enjoyed the hell out of that once in a while.

The princess was looking at him too. Those knockout dark eyes of hers, like exotic black flowers, were hidden behind her shades, but her soft mouth was tight as if she was still irritated. That made two of them, but damned if he was going to let her know she got to him. Why did she have to be the one to turn him on, and not one of the other gorgeous women sitting near him?

His cock was definitely his *little*

brain — and if stupidity had anything to do with it, it would be the size of a peapod. But he'd never had a single complaint about size or action. Slouching against the railing, swaying with the motion of the boat, he smirked at her.

“So, Mr. Gerund,” she asked, raising her voice over the sound of the motor. “Have you been to this area before?”

He held on to his smile with an effort, merely raising an eyebrow at her. “Kona? Yeah, lots of times. And my name isn't *Jeh-rund*, like the verb, it's *Gah-rand*. Like Grand, only with an extra syllable.”

Obviously she was not a fan of outdoor-adventure reality and hadn't watched his show.

Whatever, millions of other viewers liked him and his show just fine.

Only in their second year and fighting hard to gain ratings against a similar British show with several years' head start, but his producer thought they'd get another contract from the network. Joel hoped to hell he was right — that last meeting with the money men had left him uneasy. They'd analyzed page after page of viewer statistics until he'd been ready to jump out of his skin.

She rolled her head as if to ease

tension. Yeah, she was an uptight little executive, all right. The opposite of his kind of woman.

“I meant Kau Forest Preserve,” she said. “Na’alele.”

He shook his head, something in her tone catching his interest.

“You?”

“I’ve spent some time in Kau Forest. I haven’t been down to Na’alele.”

The photographer leaned forward. “What is this Na’alele?”

“An old lava flow, really.” Ms. Hawaii’s tone warmed as she answered the other woman. “The ocean has hollowed it out over the

centuries, so there are some fascinating formations. The waters have carved streambeds down through the forest, and there are pools, lovely grottos, farther up. Even some caves near the shore. Perfect for our photographs.”

“I hear there are underwater caves off-shore, as well,” Joel put in. “Might do some skin diving while we’re out here.”

Bella Moran shook her head vehemently, her long hair slipping forward to spill across her breasts. “The Na’alele sea caves are extremely dangerous. Recently — well, a group of divers perished

trying to explore the caves.”

“I heard about that.” Camille Barrett looked out to sea. “Those poor, poor men.”

“Tough,” Joel agreed, looking out at the deceptively smooth, lovely surface of the sea around them.

“Hell of a way to go.”

“I heard sharks got ‘em,” Li said idly. He popped his gum and sucked it back in, his jaws flexing as he chewed.

Camille moved sharply, and Joel watched as she eyed her assistant, her face tight. No doubt upset by the mention of Hawaii’s top predators, like many visitors, which

was why Joel hadn't bothered to correct Bella.

From what he'd heard, the divers had been wealthy Californians, from a fairly notorious family — Hellbent, or some name like that. Reputed to have their hands in some bad business. No loss to society, and anyway, the divers had probably ignored warnings from the local dive guides not to spearfish there. Hawaii tourism officials hated it when haole visitors died — made Hawaii look bad. But the local government couldn't babysit every fool who visited.

Anyway, he'd only been needling Ms. Hawaii with his mention of cave diving. He'd taken more than his share of risks, but he wasn't stupid. He always made it really clear on his show that his adventures were not to be replicated by the inexperienced.

The island was a cloud-capped green bulk off the port side as they headed south, past the ragged string of South Kona condos. The surf was a gentle surge of white against the rocky shore, the palm trees leaning over the shore like quiet sentinels, their fronds stirring gently in the evening breeze.

“So just to make sure we all understand,” his nemesis went on. “There will be no swimming or diving anywhere around those sea caves, is that understood?”

“Worried about your company’s indemnity clause, Ms. Moroney?”

Twin patches of color stained her golden cheeks. “It’s *Mo-ran*. And yes, I am. Given your career, I understand caution may not be in your personal vocabulary, but it’s my job to see that you don’t take chances while you’re on DelRay time.”

Her sharp words hung between them. The others listened avidly,

watching Joel to see how he'd handle her warning.

"Maybe you can make a list and send it to my phone," he offered.

"So I know exactly what I'm allowed to do and not do on DelRay time."

Her brows scrunched together over her shades. Joel swore he heard a drum playing, as when two gunfighters stepped into the street in one of those old Westerns. But of course that was only the throb of the big boat engine as their captain sped up through the waves.

The male model grinned, his teeth impossibly white against his

golden skin. "Good times can still be had, though. Right, ladies?"

The lovelies seated on either side of him nodded, but the blonde looked doubtful. "I'll have to stay out of the sun as much as I can. Wrinkles." She shuddered, and the guy patted her pale, perfect leg.

Joel gazed at her, forgetting his irritation. Why the hell had DelRay hired a sun-phobic for a tropical, back-country gig? His gaze flicked to Bella Moran in time to see her tilt her head again, as if this were just one more distressing detail she must deal with. Man, she was uptight. She'd never last in the

business world if she didn't relax. End up chewing antacids all day, or hitting the booze, like his show's last producer.

Well, she'd figure it out, or not. Not his problem. Meanwhile they were passing Kealakekua Bay, one of his favorite spots. Captain Cook's memorial spire gleamed white against the lush vegetation that surrounded the pristine little bay. Great snorkeling — Joel had spent a memorable afternoon there with a pretty local wahine, no one else around. Nearly drowned going at it between their kayaks like a couple of dolphins. Damn, that had been a

day.

Now, here he was with this odd bunch. Ah, well, he was used to dealing with whatever camera and support crew his network patched together. He'd learned to get along with anyone and everyone. His crew could jolly along suspicious locals and nervous officials, soothe them into doing what they needed to do while he did his thing, explaining outdoor survival in some of the world's most exotic locales to an audience that would, for the most part, only explore the wilds vicariously.

Joel was also used to his share of

feminine admiration and curiosity. The blonde model was watching him closely, and he had an idea what was coming next.

“You have a television show, don’t you?” the blonde asked. “You’re that guy.” She had a clear, slightly nasal voice, giving her speech a childish tone.

“What guy?” The redhead cocked her head, sliding her sunglasses up into her hair. Her green gaze assessed him avidly.

Joel grinned at them.

“What guy?” The male model gave Joel a blank look.

“You know,” the blonde said as if

the guy were dense. "Joel, from *The Wild Zone*. The new outdoor adventure show, where he sleeps in trees, and parachutes off of waterfalls, and stuff."

"That's me," Joel agreed.

"It's so cool to meet you. I'm Cassie," the blonde said. "This is Matt and Tanah."

"Nice to meet you too."

"Hey, Joel." Matt smiled.

Obviously not threatened by his girlfriend's interest, but then, with his looks, he probably didn't have a jealous bone. Maybe he'd ordered that face the way the blonde had ordered her breasts: *give me a*

handsome one.

“Very nice to meet you, Joel,” the redhead said, smiling. She whipped her phone up and snapped a picture of him. Used to it, he ignored the gesture.

“I watched you eat a bug once.” Cassie wrinkled her perfect nose. “How’d you *do* that? I’d throw *up*.”

Joel had, on more than one occasion, but that was a professional secret. “You do what you have to do in a survival situation.”

Tanah tossed her auburn curls in the breeze. “Maybe you could show me how,” she offered, not

specifying what she wanted to be shown. He assumed she didn't mean eat bugs. The tip of her tongue traced her parted lips as she looked at him.

"Maybe I could." He grinned at her, appreciating the sheer pleasure of a come-on from a pretty woman, even if he didn't intend to take her up on it.

Bella Moran's soft mouth twisted with distaste. He considered describing in detail what it felt like to chew up a big, juicy grub pulled from the core of a plant and decided regretfully against it. He didn't want to gross everyone out,

just Ms. Hawaii.

Jesus, he was reverting to junior high school here. Next he'd be putting gum in her hair. He moved restlessly, straightening from his slouch against the railing. Too bad that stellar ass was wasted on such an uptight wahine.

He'd wait 'til they were off the boat, and chat up the redheaded Tanah or the blonde. Calla, Cassie... or something. For now, he needed to move a little.

"Excuse me, folks." Joel stood up, balancing on the gently rolling deck. "I have a few questions for our captain." Wide-legged to

balance against the rolling of the waves, he walked back across the deck to where Frank Lelua sat at the wheel, sheltered behind a windscreen.

They motored around the point off Kau forest just as the sun sank below the soft clouds rimming the western horizon. A few miles to the southeast, a forested promontory caught the last rays of golden sun, the final outcrop before the island curved around to the south.

Beyond it, Bella knew, lay the southern coast of the island, a broad

sweep of open grassland ending abruptly in rugged cliffs and interspersed with recent lava flows that spilled in wide swaths down into the ocean, in many places covering the single paved road. There was little to interrupt the trade winds, which swept along the southern coast, carrying the surf with them, huge waves smashing against the rocky shore. She was glad to be here instead of there.

Bella opened her duffel, pulled out the pair of shorts and long-sleeved T-shirt she'd packed on top, and tugged them on over her tankini. The shorts were cocoa

brown, from DelRay's summer line, the T-shirt her favorite red, with Hawaii and a hyacinth, the state flower, stamped on the front. The temperature was still around eighty degrees, but it would drop now that the sun had gone down, and she'd be glad of the long sleeves.

She'd love to go for a run up into the forest, then a swim to cool off, but she had things to do, like making sure camp was set up properly. Frank could easily take charge, but he wasn't getting paid for it; she was.

Unzipping a side pocket on the duffel, she pulled out sturdy

sandals of dark brown, suitable for hiking or splashing in the water. She wriggled her feet into them as Frank slowed the big catamaran. As they slid closer to the shore, the rocky point slowly revealed a small bay, hidden by the hook of the lava formation.

Bella stood watching as they motored into the little bay. The forest seemed to reach out to her, fig trees rising from their braided silver roots, clusters of coconut palms leaning out over the water, fronds rustling as if in welcome. Behind them lay a lush tangle of green, with hints of color blooming

here and there. The mountain rolled up behind in verdant layers, looming like a native fortress.

She took a deep breath of the damp air, laden with the rich, fecund scent of the forest. Something inside her, closed tight and guarded against the strictures of office buildings, airplanes and busy highways, began to unfurl like the opening petals of a tropical bloom.

This was where she belonged. Soon she'd explore, hike up into the woods, take in the sights, sounds and smells, the textures of this forest. It called to all of her senses.

Bella frowned in consternation. Someone *was* calling to her...but how could that be? Yes, there it was — the softest of murmurs in her ear. She turned her head sharply, expecting one of her fellow passengers in a playful mood, but no one was within an arm's length of her.

Joel Girand was nearest, standing relaxed with his feet spread, hands on his hips. He raised a quizzical brow at her, and she turned away, her cheeks hot.

The voice murmured louder, still just a whisper but so close that goose bumps sprang up on her skin,

and a shiver ran through her, tightening every muscle in her body, ready for fight or flight.

"Aloha, kaikuahine. E hele mai," the voice sighed in her ear, light as a feather, deep as the mountain, reverberating through her very being. *"Welcome, little sister. Come."*

Frozen at the boat rail, Bella gazed at the mountain towering over her. She began to shake, a visceral chill arrowing deep inside her. Her pleasure vanished like petals before the wind.

To dream had been one thing. But now she had voices in her head even while she was awake,

speaking Hawaiian.

And she understood every word.

Chapter Three

To Do: A proficient tour director can supervise setup of camp, even in the wildest of areas and with a small crew and finicky clients, while setting aside her own minor concerns.

“We’re here,” cried Cassie.

The excited voice broke Bella’s introspection like a stick swatted through hanging vines. She focused, relieved to have her attention brought back to reality. The others were all crowding against the rails, gazing at their

landing place.

Lava smoothed by eons of wind and waves curved out in a hook shape, forming a tiny bay. The surf washed against the outer rim, but inside, the turquoise water was calm. Bella could see the bottom, clear and sandy except for a few lava boulders. Eddy stood outside the front rail on lookout while Frank brought the catamaran into the bay.

He nudged it up at the western end of the semicircle of sand. Eddy jumped off to man the mooring lines while Kobe opened the gate in the railing and dropped a portable

gangplank for the passengers to alight.

“Aloha,” Frank called in what Bella had learned was his trademark landing. “Welcome to Na’alele, everybody.”

“Do we carry our own things?” Tanah asked, eyeing the gangplank like a skittish racehorse.

“Nah, we’ll get it for you,” Frank assured her. She smiled at him and then turned to Joel, her eyes wide in a silent plea for assistance.

Joel had his own duffel over one broad shoulder, towing Tanah with the other hand. Camille clutched one of her black camera bags, and

Li had an armload.

Bella decided to let Frank's crew carry her duffel. She wasn't all that comfortable around boats even when she was calm — which she wasn't now, thanks to her mind playing tricks on her. She didn't want to begin her stay by falling overboard and soaking all her gear in salt water. She followed the others down the gangplank, only her slender briefcase clutched to her chest.

The little bay had a flat shore of dark lava rock, worn smooth by wind, waves and sun. Behind this rose a tangle of fig trees, their roots

braided silver, rising from a variety of shrubs. Through their midst, a ribbon of lava ran back into the forest like a trail, a tunnel of dark shadows as the sun sank low. The whole scene was bathed in soft, golden light. The rhythmic surge of waves against the rim of the bay was like a slow heartbeat, deep and sure.

Her feet on the shore, Bella relaxed, the forest before her as welcoming as a pair of great arms enfolding her.

The scent of the earth, damp vegetation heavy with bloom, mingled with that of the sea in a

heady mix. Overlaid with...male. She turned her head warily. Joel Girand stood a few feet from her, upwind. Darn, he smelled better than a pan of macadamia nut cookies, fresh from the oven. Warm healthy male, clean but a little sweaty, with just a hint of soap or cologne. Pheromones—dangerous and compelling. Of course he *would* be loaded with them.

“Nice,” he said, his deep voice laden with appreciation.

She started guiltily, but he was still looking at their surroundings. He'd hung his sunglasses on the back of his neck, the bows curving

on the smooth cords of his neck under the curled up ends of his hair.

This close, she could see that his eyes were brown, laced with flecks of gold, like turning leaves. His heavy, arching brows were darker than his hair, as were his lashes. He had a square face with a determined jaw, a firm set to his wide mouth, and a nose that would have been classically chiseled if not for the bump across the bridge, as if it had been broken once. It didn't detract from his looks at all — if anything, it matched the glint in his eyes, as if he'd dare anything.

Probably would too.

He was even better looking in person than in the posters the ad department had used to pitch him as the new product spokesperson. His big body fairly hummed with leashed intensity, as if he couldn't wait to explore his new surroundings.

He was attractive, all right. And she wasn't the only one who thought so. She'd seen the way the other women looked at him.

Good grief, she had to get her head back to business. She didn't even like him — she definitely did not want to think about how long it

would take him to get lucky.
Although probably not long, if
Tanah had anything to say about it.

Shaking her head to rid her mind
of that image, Bella turned to
Frank, who had just negotiated the
gangplank to offload another bag of
equipment. "Where do you think
we should set up the tents?"

Frank pointed at the area up
behind the little beach. "Here's a
fire pit, been used before. We can
set the tents back from that, a
couple on either side." To Bella's
irritation, he looked at Joel as if
seeking confirmation.

Joel nodded. "Sounds good."

The soft breeze blew Bella's hair across her face, and she brushed it behind her shoulder as she looked around. "We'll have to take Joel's tent down tomorrow and have him set it up again while Camille photographs," she pointed out. "Let's set up his tent over here, closer to the point."

"Yes, ma'am," Joel drawled. Bella pushed her sunglasses up onto the top of her head, and gave him back look for look.

"Save it for someone who believes it," she advised. He smirked at her as if he'd scored a point by goading her into a retort.

Then he followed Frank back onto the boat.

The first thing the stocky Kobe did was set a boom box on a nearby rock. Bella winced as the first music that poured forth was a heavy drumbeat followed by a clashing bass guitar. The very trees seemed to her to shudder as the noise bounced off the lava rock.

She steeled herself to tell the Hawaiian to turn his music off, but Frank was ahead of her. He gestured sharply at Kobe, who shrugged and fiddled with the device.

Bella's shoulders relaxed as Iz

Kamakawiwo'ole's lilting voice twined through the little clearing, singing about stars shining on his sandy beaches. She found herself humming along as she unfastened the bag that held her single tent.

Unfortunately, they'd placed it next to Joel's. She debated moving it, but she would only be in it to sleep, so unless he snored, she wouldn't even know he was near.

"Now how did I know this one would be yours?" Frank joked as he came to help her.

She grinned at him. Bright red was her favorite color, and she had to admit she wore it a lot. She'd

been thrilled to find it was one of DelRay's signature hues for the summer line, both in equipment and clothing.

She scanned the pamphlet of instructions that had been folded into the bag with the tent. "Oh, good, an extra flap of netting. This whole side of the tent lifts up."

"These are nice tents," Frank agreed. "Don't use one, myself. No mosquitoes out here."

"I just wanted something overhead in case it rains," Bella said. She would leave the tent side down to change into her pajamas and then lift it after she turned off

her small battery-powered lantern. She'd sleep with the breeze on her face and the surf and rustle of the trees to lull her to sleep.

Now if she could just get through a night without dreaming. She gave a sidelong look at the forest, her shoulders tightening again, a dull throb in the base of her skull. With voices already whispering to her, a dreamless night wasn't likely. What if she woke the others? She was pretty sure she'd screamed the night before, when she dreamed of her cliff dive. Lucky no one had heard her and called hotel management.

“If it rains, we can always move up into the caves,” Frank said.

“There are caves above water?” Bella turned to peer into the shadows of the trees.

“Yeah, right back behind those fig trees.” Frank gestured at the tangle of silvered roots and glossy leaves a few yards up the bank.

“I’m not sure I’d want to sleep in a cave.”

“Ah, they’re not bad — dry and open. Even some sand on the floor from high surf in winter. Good shelter if we need it.”

Bella hoped they wouldn’t need it. The weather report had been for

good weather for the next few days. There were storm systems on the move, but there always were out here in the Pacific.

“You need a *pua’aloalo*, a hibiscus blossom in your hair,” Frank teased her. “You always wear one at Naweia.”

She nodded, relaxing with an effort. “My favorite. Let me know if you spot any.”

“Some right up there.” He nodded toward the steep cliff that reared behind the camp to the east.

“Naweia, that the bay with the yellow house we passed?” Joel asked from behind her. His deep

voice was pitched quietly, but sound carried in the soft evening air, even over the music and the voices of the others across the campground.

Bella busied herself tying off a cord on her tent. Frank answered. "Yeah, da Ho'omalua place. You spent much time here on our Big Island, Joel?"

"Some," her nemesis answered. "Like to spend more."

"Nowhere better," Frank agreed. "You could buy a house cheap. Market is down."

"Nah," Joel said. "I'm not the homeowner type. Wouldn't mind

renting a place here, though.”

“A condo, yeah?”

Bella turned her head, curious to hear Joel’s reply. He was tying off the last cord on his tent, working with the ease of familiarity.

He shook his head. “Don’t want to live in town; too much noise and chatter. House up on the mountain, maybe, where it’s quiet. Where a person can go out in the backyard and not see anyone else unless they want to.”

Bella caught herself nodding in agreement and tossed her hair back instead. She didn’t want to have even this small commonality with

him. Anyway, she wanted to be a homeowner — her own place, that no one could make her leave. And with this job, she'd have the money to ensure she never lost it. No moving from apartment to apartment as she and her mother had when Bella was a child. True, each successive place had been nicer, but she'd still had to get used to a new neighborhood each time, make new friends.

“Cooler up there too,” Frank agreed. “Clouds gentle the sun.”

He looked across the tent at Joel. “You got time after this, come fishing with me one morning. I

keep a fishing boat at Nawea.”

“Joel, can you help us with this?” Tanah called from across the campsite. She was frowning down at a turquoise jumble of fabric, hands on her rounded hips, while Cassie watched.

Bella watched as Joel scanned the area first for Kobe and Eddy. They were busy wrestling a brown tent for Camille and Li. “Sure.”

Tanah smiled sweetly at him, and Bella chalked up another point for the redhead. From the way he’d been looking at Cassie on the boat, she’d thought the blonde model would get him, but her friend

might trip her and step over her prone body.

None of her business, Bella reminded herself. He was just a typical celebrity, full of himself.

She looked around. Kobe and Eddy were now setting up an open-air shower, rigged with curtains to screen the occupant from view, and a solar tank to heat water with the sun. The portable latrine would be set up farther into the woods, behind a folding screen.

On the far side of the fire pit, Cassie and Tanah's turquoise tent was being set up next to a smaller green one with Matt's duffel before

it. The photographers' brown tent stood farthest to the east, near a large boulder.

In the center, behind the fire pit, Frank and his crew placed a long folding table, leveling each leg until Frank was satisfied the table was stable and would not rock.

"You wanna decorate this?" he asked Bella, gesturing at the table. "Leilani sent along a couple of tablecloths."

"Sure," Bella said. She took the sturdy epergne Frank held and set about gathering some interesting fronds and blooms for a centerpiece, humming along as the

duo Hapa sang of Hawaiian memories. As usual, the process absorbed her, soothed her, allowing her to forget the myriad details awaiting her. Finished, she poured water in to soak the florist's foam holding the arrangement and set the epergne on the table, stepping back to view it with satisfaction.

“Pretty,” Camille approved, cocking her head elegantly to admire the table, the green centerpiece with spikes of tall purple blossoms and sprays of shiny green pods set on a vintage cotton tablecloth adorned with hibiscus in faded reds. “My, you’ve

many talents.”

“Thank you.” Bella smiled. She’d always had a knack with plants and flowers. Her apartment was full of beautiful houseplants, many of them cast-offs. She was also the one friends called on to “do something” with flowers at parties.

Frank brought out hot and cold carriers containing a delicious fish-and-rice casserole and salads that Leilani had prepared, with sweet island pineapple. Bella’s stomach growled in anticipation – she felt as if she couldn’t get enough of the golden fruit when she was here.

“I see DelRay packed one of their

new camp stoves,” Frank commented, looking dubiously at a silver case amongst the mess gear. “‘Fraid I don’t know how to use it, though. Dinner is already hot, but if anyone wants hot tea or coffee, we’re gonna have to use this.”

“Got it,” Joel said. He snagged a piece of pineapple from the tray and then squatted to fiddle with the small, sleek propane stove.

“Mahalo.” Frank moved on to the folding table he’d set up nearby.

The stove burning satisfactorily, Joel walked over to look as Frank opened a cooler full of ice, in which

nestled a variety of sodas and local beers. Frank handed him a can sweating in the humidity.

“I’ll have what you’re having,” Tanah said, materializing at Joel’s side and accepting a can of beer with a smile.

Why didn’t she just skip the preliminaries and say she’d have *him*, Bella wondered waspishly, waiting until the two had moved on to select her own drink from the cooler. She pulled out a Koko Brown Ale from Kona Brewing, took a drink, savoring the rich taste of the cold, prickly brew and then carried her drink over to help set

the table.

They ate around the table, Joel at one end with Tanah and Cassie, Frank opposite him, the others dispersed between. Kobe and Eddy had carried their plates and cans of beer down to rocks by the shore.

“Great dinner,” Joel commented, working his way through a big plate of food.

Frank nodded. “My sister Leilani does the cooking for us.”

Joel glanced appreciatively at the large coolers stowed at the rear of the campsite. “Looks like you

brought plenty.”

“Yes, it’s good to know we have enough provisions. This place is so isolated,” Camille mused, looking out at the wild shore. “Why, anything could happen out here, and who would know?”

“No worries,” Frank said. “Got da boat and great cell service. We’d get help right away.”

“Oh, good.” Tanah made a face. “Camille, you scared me there for a minute.”

“But isn’t that what we’re to portray here?” the photographer went on, arching her brows. “The sense of venturing into the

primordial wild, pitting ourselves against nature, lovely and placid on the surface but created in such incredible violence?"

Bella nodded. "You're right. My best friend Melia was terrified of the volcanoes when she first visited. David had to convince her Hawaiians have been living with Pele's fire for thousands of years."

"And it's not just volcanic eruptions," Camille went on dreamily, chin in hand. "The sea is lapping so peacefully at our feet now, but that can change very quickly, no? A tropical storm, and waves will crash up over that little

reef and over our camp, as well."

Bella glanced at the others and wished the woman would stop. Cassie, Tanah and Matt had all stopped eating, looking as uneasy as racehorses shying at the gate.

"In that case, we'd just head up into the forest," Joel said calmly. "Hunker down and wait for help. Wouldn't take long, and we have food, clean water, and it's plenty warm."

"If we run out of food, Joel can forage for us, right?" Bella added, unable to resist the dig.

Joel took a drink of his beer and shrugged. "Look for fruit, catch fish

for our supper. We'd actually do all right."

As long as she didn't have to eat bugs, Bella found the idea of foraging in the forest for food intriguing. As the soft evening breeze tugged gently at her hair, she gazed longingly at the shadowed forest above them. If only she were just here to explore, hike up into the inviting green towering over her and forget DelRay and all its concerns.

"You could hunt for wild pineapple," Cassie added.

Everyone looked at her, and she giggled. "Snap! You should see

your faces. I know pineapples grow in fields.” Bella smiled at her, glad the model had lost her frightened look.

“Hawaii has plenty of native fruit,” Tanah said. “Bananas and mangoes.”

“Macadamia nuts,” Matt added triumphantly.

“Guava,” Tanah said. “That grows wild. We picked some on a hike last week.”

“Every one of those was brought by settlers,” Frank said. “Like our ancestors. In their long canoes, they brought with them many plants that grow wild today. Our noni,

used for medicine. Ti, used to wrap fish for cooking. Yams and taro."

"The more common fruits were brought later," Bella added.

"Guava, banana, mango, macadamias, avocados, all brought in the 1800s."

"Cash crops," Joel said. "Some go wild. Happens all over the tropics, sometimes creating some real pests."

"There's other cash crops grown in the islands too," Matt added, his eyes twinkling.

"Oh, Kona Gold." Cassie giggled. "Definitely a lot of that around here."

“Marijuana.” Camille shook her head. “A harmless part of the island lifestyle, surely.”

“Maybe,” Frank put in. “It’ll make you *hūpō*, foolish. Dere’s plenty other drugs coming on our islands dat are pure poison.”

“Kona Kula,” Joel said. “I heard about that on the news. That’s bad stuff, all right.” He shook his head.

Bella and Frank nodded somberly. Sold to the naïve and credulous as an herbal concoction similar to hashish, the new drug was actually a powerful hallucinogen that was even more addictive than meth, if that were

possible. Several people had already died on the islands from ingesting what they believed to be harmless amounts.

Bella was the only one here who knew that two of her cousins had nearly died preventing huge shipments from being distributed throughout Hawaii.

Tanah made a face of distaste. "Oh, I hate talking about depressing things like that. Let's cheer up, people."

Bella reached out to touch one of the sprays of purple blossoms nodding over the table. "There are native plants that can be eaten, but

only by those who know how to prepare them properly. This is vervain, also known as rat's tail. Tastes like shiitake mushrooms. Of course, eat too much and it's a sedative."

"Really." Her gaze sharp, Camille took a frond from the bouquet and studied it, rolling it in her hands. Bella reached out to tuck in another flower Camille had knocked loose, suppressing a surge of irritation at the woman's disrespect for the plants.

"Wow, you know a lot about plants," Matt said to Bella.

Frank nodded. "'Ae, you've been

studying up, Nani. But you forgot da lilikoi.”

Bella gave him a look, hoping no one would take up his conversational cue. But Joel cocked his head, eyeing her through the fronds of the centerpiece. “Lilikoi,” he repeated. “I know I’ve eaten that somewhere. Southeast Asia, I think. What is it again?”

“Just a fruit that grows on a vine,” she said. Frank’s eyes danced.

Joel snapped his fingers. “Got it. Lilikoi, also known as passion fruit. Delicious. Wonder if there’s any ripe around here?”

Bella shot him a look of dislike until she realized his question had been for Cassie and Tanah, who were both smiling. Well, good. She certainly didn't want him aiming that glinting look at her.

"I'd like to see some passion fruit," Tanah drawled, tracing her fingertip down Joel's brawny forearm.

"Oh, it's easy to find," Bella told her. "But it can be disappointing. Just round yellow balls on a skinny little twig."

Frank choked on a mouthful of beer, and Joel's eyes narrowed dangerously behind the

centerpiece.

“I think you’re thinking of that chilly mainland passion fruit,” he retorted. “Around here it grows on great *big* vines.”

Tanah and Cassie giggled, and even Camille chuckled. Matt tapped fists with Joel.

Avoiding Joel’s smug grin, Bella looked down at her plate. Leilani’s cooking was delicious as usual, but she was no longer hungry.

She pushed out of her chair, plate in hand. “I should go and make a couple of phone calls. Excuse me.”

Behind her, Tanah spoke. “Oh,

phone! Here, Matt, take my picture with Joel.”

“Me too,” Cassie agreed.

Chapter Four

To Do: To bring a difficult tour member in line, first learn as much as possible about his or her background to establish common ground.

Bella escaped with relief. Not eating was unusual for her, but then so was camping with a bunch of strangers—one of whom was totally obnoxious, and one who didn't seem to realize she'd frightened three of her fellow campers. Add being the one in charge of making sure everything

went well – not to mention hearing voices urging her to leave it all behind and run away to join them – and Bella was ready to jump out of her skin.

She'd managed to tune them out when she was busy helping direct the set-up of camp, but now that that was done, her mind free, the warm whispers began again.

“'Ai kā māua kua 'ai, kaikuahine. Come and eat our fruit, little sister.”

Bella swallowed hard, her mouth watering, her stomach rumbling again as if hungry for some sweet, wild fruit she could find only in the forest.

On her earlier visit to Naweia, she'd spent as much time as possible up in the forest, hiking the trails north of here with her cousin Zane, exploring, learning the trees and plants. She'd been full of curiosity and energy and consumed with the need to learn, to know, to experience. She'd raced up and down the trails, outpacing even her long-legged surfer cousin. He'd called her a *pupule wahine*, crazy woman, but she'd only laughed, exhilarated by a sense that she couldn't slip, wouldn't fall.

Now she felt conversely as if she dared not venture into the wild

tangle of trees and plants above her for fear she could not bring herself to return even to this vestige of civilization.

This might be paradise, but she was poised over it, balanced on a cliff's edge between normality and an enthralling, frightening fantasy of...belonging. She needed to stay centered. She belonged to the world she'd established for herself — her condo in Portland, her friends, her job and her mother.

But now she had a father too, and both he and her two best friends were here. Hawaii's pull was more powerful than ever.

Oregon, even DelRay's Maui offices, seemed very distant.

She made her way around the tents and walked a little way along the shore to sit on a rock at the edge of the surf. Around her, twilight was falling, the light dimming to a soft purple, the sea a sheet of molten pewter, the surf quieting with the ebb of the tide.

Pulling out her phone, she punched the second number. Her mother's was the first listed, but she'd call Grace tomorrow. Tonight she wanted to talk to someone here in the islands—someone who would understand.

Daro answered on the third ring. “Nani, how are you? Are you at your camp?”

Bella found herself unwilling to share all her concerns, which seemed petty now that she was speaking with someone unconnected to this group. “We’re here, camp is all set up, and dinner is over. Everything is fine — really.”

He gave a hmm of concern. “You weren’t fine when you called last night. I don’t want to scare you, but...you seem to be tuning in to the island — big-time. Through me, you are ho’omalua, one of the *ohana* of the guardians. We can’t predict

how the powers will show themselves.”

Great. This call was supposed to reassure her, not give her more to worry about. The Ho’omalus, she had learned after Claire and Daniel nearly died in an undersea confrontation off Na’alele, had strange powers given by Hawaii’s patroness, Pele herself.

The divers Bella had mentioned to Joel were actually drug runners, working for a crime family from LA. Daniel Ho’omalus had foiled their attempt to move their new designer drug onto the islands.

Melia and David had been

involved in an earlier battle high on the side of the volcano, with the same cartel. After Claire survived a horrific experience similar to her own, Melia realized that Claire and Bella, who was now a Ho'omalua, needed to understand what was happening around them.

Long ago, Pele had tasked the Ho'omalua's island forefather, Kalo, with protecting her island, promising him long life and success if he would watch over her Hawaii while she slumbered far beneath. With her patronage, Kalo became an even fiercer warrior, invincible in battle. His sons took up the war

club after him. His descendants continued to fight for Pele's islands, growing in wealth and stature and hiding their true nature from the world.

It had taken Bella weeks to process this awe-inspiring information about her new family. Although a tiny part of her had whispered that she'd always known there was more than her appearance that was...different.

Just a little, though, surely. Her father had no special powers, unless one counted his musical talent, which was pretty awesome.

Her hand tightened on the

phone, and she stared at the palms leaning over the shore, their fronds rustling in the evening breeze as if they whispered to her. The forest crouched behind her like a huge presence, overwhelming her other concerns. Perilous in its seductive power.

She took a deep breath and let it out, rolling her head to release tension.

“There is...something going on,” she admitted. “But I thought the — the powers manifest in the male line.”

“That has been so, with no way of knowing who will inherit which

powers. I think the Ho'omalus are as surprised as you are, Nani. But nevertheless, you are manifesting. There is much for you to understand. I believe Homu can help you. He is also, ah...good with plants."

"Oh," she said faintly. David and Daniel's good-natured, silver-haired father shared her strange connection with plants and trees? With the forest? She'd always been able to coax beauty from plants that none of her friends could match, but this was way beyond that. None of her houseplants had ever spoken to her, for heaven's sake.

And did this mean that the voices were real? That she could actually manifest powers herself? Maybe she did want her mother.

She sighed, rubbing her neck. “There’s so much I don’t understand — but I don’t have time to try and sort it out right now. I’m in charge here.”

Daro was silent for a moment. “All right,” he said finally. “I won’t pester you about it now, Nani. I hope your photo shoot goes well. But if you need anything, anything at all, you call me. And your cousins. They’ll be there right away if you need them.”

Bella smiled, comforted by the thought of the big, solid Ho'omalumu men, just miles away up the coast. "Nothing's going to happen," she said, reassuring herself as well as her father. "Frank's here with the boat, and we've all got cell phones. If we need help, we can call emergency services."

"I guess that's right," her father said. His voice softened. "Jason says aloha."

"Aloha to him too." Along with the shock of learning she had a father here had been the news that he was gay. His partner in life and music was Jason Mamaloa, one of

Hawaii's most successful musicians. His smooth, lilting voice was heard all over the world, backed up by her father's harmonies.

She pictured the two men relaxing barefoot on the lanai of their big beach house, Jason, small and silver-haired, her father taller, his hair the same coffee hue as her own.

She was unused to having two middle-aged men fussing over her, but she liked it very much. She almost felt as if she'd gotten not one but two fathers. Or maybe uncles, because she still didn't really know Daro very well, and it

was hard to completely trust someone who'd left her alone her whole life until she showed up on his home island.

Because her mother had wanted him to. Grace had not dealt well with the news that the father of her child had used a weekend with her to try and deny his true sexuality, and had cut him out of her and her daughter's lives. Bella swallowed those thoughts and the sour taste they left in her mouth. She couldn't think about that now. Or the fact that if she did have powers, at some point she was going to have to explain them to Grace.

“Just promise me,” Daro said, “that when you’re back at Naweia you’ll tell the Ho’omalua about these dreams. They can counsel you.”

“I promise.”

“All right. *Pō maika`i*, good night, Nani. Aloha.”

“Aloha.” She clicked her phone off and pressed it to her heart, a painful pleasure swelling inside her. After a lifetime without a father to tuck her in, to hold and tease her as her friends’ fathers had, Daro’s presence and concern slipped through the cracks in the protective shell she’d built around

her heart.

Bella turned back toward camp, but her footsteps lagged as a scent tantalized her again. Fruit, wild and sweet. It would satisfy her as the prepared food had not.

But where was it? She clambered up over the rocks toward the lava band that rose steeply above her. Shrubs and vines clung to the surface, and she could hear a stream trickling down through the rocks. It would pour out into the bay somewhere below, mixing with the salt water.

Then she saw them, high over her head. Round, golden balls

glowing nearly fluorescent in the soft dusk against their sparse twigs and green leaves. A guava tree. Bella blinked. Wild birds must have dropped seeds here.

She looked up at the fruit and swallowed. She could almost taste the sweet, tangy inner pulp. But there was no way she could climb up the steep, wet rocks. She gazed longingly, her stomach growling again.

"E nonoi, kaikuahine. Ask, little sister."

Slowly, feeling a little foolish, Bella held up her hands, palms up. A strange sensation flowed through

her fingers, and she looked at them, startled, half expecting to see a visible current. But the tree overhead rustled as if it were chuckling at her, and one, two, three plump yellow fruits plopped into her cupped hands.

Bella let out a startled squeak, and one of the fruits fell from her hands to land at her feet, split open to reveal its pink, juicy pulp. She looked down at it, her hands shaking, and then back up at the tree. Two more yellow globes fell into her hands, and another hit her on the head.

“Au’e!” She ducked, and glared

upward. The little tree's leaves gave one last rustle, the ghost of a chuckle.

Setting the fruit neatly on a rock at her feet, Bella split one open with her thumbnails the way Zane had shown her and sucked greedily at the tasty pink pulp inside.

She devoured the tasty fruit, tossing the empty rind aside before opening another and eating it. With a sigh of satisfaction, she wiped her sticky mouth on her sleeve and smiled up at the little guava tree.

"Mahalo."

Several more fruits plopped down around her. Laughing, Bella

bent to pick them up, stuffing them into the upturned hem of her T-shirt.

When she arrived back at the campsite, the table had been cleared. Kobe and Eddy were putting things away, and Frank was setting out coffee service and drinks. The others were standing around, Tanah talking animatedly with Joel, Cassie and Matt peering at photos on one of their smart phones, while Camille and Li sat by the fire pit.

Bella slid her bounty onto an

empty plate on the table.

Watching her, Joel raised an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth quirking up. "Is that what I think it is?"

She tossed him one of the fruits. "No. Have a guava."

He snagged it in midair, his gaze never leaving hers. "Mahalo."

"So this area is called Na'alele, hmm?" Camille asked. "Lovely name." The photographer relaxed in a camp chair, her legs crossed. She'd taken off her hat, revealing dark auburn hair in a fashionably tousled cut that framed her narrow, oval face and emphasized her

clever eyes.

“There’s a story behind the name,” Bella answered. “Frank, will you tell it?” She perched on chair, trying not to watch Joel suck the pulp from the guava she’d given him. He ate with relish, the same way he did everything. The same way he would make love. Whoa, no. She was not going there.

Frank nodded in appreciation at her compliment. “Let me get a fire going first. Easier to talk story by a fire, yeah?”

“More fun to listen too.” Joel rose to help, and in a few moments, the two men had made a small,

cheerful fire of dry driftwood.

Frank settled down again on his log, his dark eyes gleaming in the firelight. The others all quieted and turned to him as he began to speak, his island accent stronger than usual.

“Long ago,” he said, “back in the time when only Hawaiians lived on these islands, Na’alele was a young wahine, ka nani, who liked to come down to swim in the sea here. One day, she saw a stranger coming out of the surf. He was handsome and strong, *no ka oi*, without equal. She knew this stranger was *kapu*, forbidden, because he might be a

spy for the rival chief of another island. But when he smiled at her, she forgot her duty to her ohana and she went with him.

“The stranger was Kanaloa, guardian of our seas. He has long been known by Hawaiians to lure nani, pretty young kane and wahine into his home far beneath the sea. This he planned to do with Na’alele.

“But she was promised to Pokoa, chief of another village. Appearing to court his *ku’u ipo*, his sweetheart, this brave warrior was *huhū*, so angry when he saw her with another man. He wielded his shark-tooth

club and tried to slay his rival. But Kanaloa lured him into the water, and quick as a flash, he took the form of *mano*, a tiger shark. He killed Pokoa, turning the sea red with his blood.

“Watching from shore, Na’alele screamed in fear and horror. Her cries awoke the goddess Pele, Kanaloa’s older sister and guardian of this island. Enraged at Kanaloa and the trouble he caused, Pele strode *a mauna*, down the mountain in her skirts of flaming a’a. She swept over the foolish Na’alele and her dead suitor and chased Kanaloa back down into the sea.

"They say Pele walked up out of the mountain through the big cave behind us, and the underwater caves are where Na'alele and Pokoa came to rest. Side by side in death."

It was quiet for a moment, only the mellow notes of slack key guitar lingering in the quiet dusk. Bella's sympathies had always been more with the spurned suitor than with Na'alele, who seemed a bit silly. Why fool around with a stranger when she had a strong Hawaiian warrior ready to marry her? Unless maybe Pokoa was a macho jerk, and poor Na'alele had no way out of their betrothal.

Tanah made a face. “So Pele burned the girl to death, just for choosing the wrong man? Pretty harsh.”

Frank shrugged. “If she’d lived, she might’ve been put to death for breaking kapu. Doesn’t pay for humans to mess with da gods, yeah?”

“That’s true in mythology through the ages,” Joel mused, gazing out at the silver sea. “The ancient Greeks, the Romans—even the first story recorded, *Beowulf*, told of trials sent by vengeful gods.”

Evidently, the action hero did

some reading when he wasn't smiling for the camera. Bella wondered if he'd gone to college. Did they give degrees in hanging off cliffs? Of course he might have a sensible degree in some unrelated field. She'd gotten a business degree herself, although she could've minored in botany with all the electives she'd squeezed into her schedule.

"Your Pele is a stern goddess," Camille put in. "Sending her lava down through villages and homes, even today. Scarcely giving people time to escape."

"Pele kia'i o kāna po' ," Bella shot

back and then closed her mouth, astonished not only by the rush of defensive anger fueling her words but that they had emerged in Hawaiian

“‘Ae, yeah,” Frank agreed calmly. “Pele looks after her own.”

But Camille was looking at Bella. “You speak Hawaiian?”

“A little.”

“She should, she’s half Hawaiian,” Frank said proudly. “A Ho’omalua, yeah?”

“Ho’omalua,” Camille repeated. “Really? Hmm, I know I’ve heard that name.”

“Big Hawaiian ohana,” Frank

said. “Nawea Bay, back toward Kona, is theirs.”

“And you’re a member of that family. How lovely.” Camille smiled at Bella and swung her foot idly, gazing into the fire.

The others were quiet for a moment. Bella took another drink of hot coffee and then lowered her cup, glancing around at the circle of fire-lit faces. Awareness prickled under her skin like the brush of a stinging vine. Someone in this group was projecting anger and malice — at her. Not overtly, but it was there, just the same. She could feel it.

But who? Her gaze skipped over Frank, not only an ex-cop, but a longtime friend and employee of the Ho'omalus. The two models, the makeup artist — no, that was just ridiculous. And Camille was smiling as she murmured something to her assistant, his head bent close to hers.

As Bella watched, he nodded and then looked up at Bella across the fire. His face was expressionless, his eyes black in the firelight. She blinked and looked back into her cup, her skin prickling again.

The Asian-American didn't like her; that seemed clear. But why

not? Should she speak with Camille? And tell the woman what? That Bella was sure Li disliked her? That was juvenile. He didn't have to like her, just do his job. And it was her job to make sure all went well here.

"That was a great dinner," Joel said. "My compliments to your sister, Frank."

Bella looked at Joel, his face limned in firelight, highlighting the strong angle of his jaw and the creases in his face when he smiled. He looked so natural here, in his milieu.

She blinked, realizing she'd

forgotten to include him in her inventory of people who might be angry with her. He was an obvious choice. He'd made his derision clear on the boat. She narrowed her eyes at him. She'd fed him fruit from her forest, so he'd better not toy with her.

Suddenly, she really wanted to talk to Melia or Claire. Her best friends would understand some of her turmoil, both being recent transplants to the island. And if they didn't understand, they would sympathize. With a murmured apology, she slipped away again, walking down beside the shore.

Melia didn't answer her phone, and Bella assumed her friend was asleep. Two months pregnant, the new bride napped every afternoon and still went to bed early. Of course her early bedtime might also have something to do with her husband, the handsome, virile David Ho'omalū.

She tried Claire next, but she wasn't answering either. Bella scowled at her phone and then shoved it in her pocket. She knew Claire was at Nawea with Daniel Ho'omalū, her husband-to-be. Another intensely virile man, with whom Claire was obviously doing

something that precluded answering her phone.

Was everyone having sex but her?

Bella stopped in her tracks. *Au'e*, wow, where had that come from? It wasn't as if she was *looking* for sex here on the island. Claire, one of her two best friends, had admitted when they came for Melia's wedding to David Ho'omalulu only a month ago that she intended to find a handsome man and seduce him. She'd done it too. And now she and David's brother Daniel were getting married in a few months. Bella sighed wistfully. The

Ho'omalua men were pretty spectacular.

Although Daniel and Claire's sexual relationship was a little too strong for Bella's taste. When Claire donned a bikini after she and Daniel became lovers, Bella had seen bruises on her friend's thighs and one on her back. But then she'd seen the two in an embrace when they thought no one was looking, and been struck with the sensual heat between them. Whatever was going on, it was not abuse.

As for her, she'd been with a couple of guys, the last one at Christmas. The celebratory spirit of

the company Christmas party enveloped her in such a glow she'd ended up in his bed. She'd enjoyed it very much, and they'd repeated the experience a few times, but then he'd fallen in love with someone he met at his gym. And while Bella missed the sex, with her travel schedule it wasn't as if she had time or energy to look for a replacement.

Until now. She looked around. Here she was in paradise, warm and flower-scented twilight with an ocean lapping at her feet on one side and a forest beckoning her into its shadows on the other. Who

wouldn't think of *hana ai*? This place was made for sex.

Unbidden, the image of Joel Girand watching her strip down to her tankini filled her mind's eye. She bit her lip, a thrill of remembered pleasure running through her. He'd been as riveted as a man watching a striptease. And she was pretty sure — no, she knew he'd wanted her.

The crazy part was that she'd bet he knew how to make sex into a volcanic experience — the kind that left a sleepy, satisfied smile in a woman's eyes. The look that Melia and Claire both wore when they

were around the Ho'omalu brothers.

Au'e! She had to stop thinking about sex. She needed to go for a run and burn off some nervous energy. But she knew it was foolhardy to try to explore a strange forest in the dark, no matter how strong its magnetic pull, and even if it had given her gifts of food. Camille was right. They were in the wilderness, and it didn't pay to trifle with natural dangers. Bella wrapped her arms around her middle and stood for a moment, feeling stuck.

The sun had long since set, the

western sky only faintly rimmed with light, stars beginning to twinkle on above her. To her left, the campfire flickered in the cove, and she could see most of the group still seated there, those on the near side dark silhouettes, the others bathed in the soft, reddish firelight.

Joel Girand was telling a story now, raising his big hands to make a point while the others listened raptly. Probably bragging about his exploits. She hesitated and then found her feet moving toward the fire, unwillingly drawn to hear his tale.

“So there we were, up the river

about as far as you can go, with no other way out through the jungle and no boat.” Someone groaned sympathetically. Bella perched on the edge of a rock near Camille, who smiled at her.

“What did you do?” Matt asked. He sat in a camp chair with Cassie curled on his lap. Tanah sat beside Joel on the log. The pretty makeup artist wasn’t missing a chance to be near him.

Joel sobered, gazing into the fire. “Well, we had fifty pounds of camera equipment and another twenty of camping gear, plus our guides, one of whom was injured

when the boat went down. We couldn't hike out, and the radio had gone with the boat. The locals knew we were up there, but we figured it would take them a few more days before they worried about any of us enough to bring a boat up through the rapids.

“The rest of us would have been okay — not real comfortable, because it was hot as hell, and the bugs were trying to eat us alive. But the injured man was in a lot of pain, with fever setting in.”

He looked around at them. “So we built a raft.”

Matt nodded happily, but Frank

raised his eyebrows in respect.

“With what, an axe? How long did that take you?”

“No axe. Had my knife and a hatchet in my gear. Didn’t really expect to need the hatchet, but I was damn glad to have it,” Joel told him.

“Lashed the raft together with vines?” Frank guessed.

Joel nodded, pausing to take a drink of his beer. “Fastened everything on the same way, along with our injured man. Tied some handholds, cut some poles to steer with, made a rudder out of a plastic supply bin lid lashed to a pole, and

off down the river we went.”

Bella eyed him with reluctant respect. Creating a floatable raft from live tropical wood, most of which was hardwood, with no power tools? The fact that Joel was here now demonstrated his success, but it must have been incredibly difficult. Then she frowned to herself. Why was she assuming he'd been the one to do the work? He might have sat on the bank and whined while the natives did all the work, for all she knew.

“First thing we found,” Joel said wryly, “is that you don't steer a raft so much as you bounce off obstacles

with it. I fell off at least five times myself, and we lost everything except the camera gear. My photographer had that tied on so tight it wasn't coming loose for anything less than an explosion."

"The Amidauro River?" Camille said. "Aren't there crocodiles there?"

Joel's face tightened. "Yup. There are crocs." He kicked off one of his sandals and crooked his leg, holding up his right foot. "Got that as a souvenir from that trip."

Bella gazed in horror at the ugly gouge on the arch of his large, well-shaped foot, marring the white

strip of skin left by wearing sandals in the sun. Her stomach lurched as she imagined a huge mouth full of sharp teeth snapping at him, nearly dragging him into the water and under it.

“Holy crap,” Matt said. “I heard they pull you under and drown you.”

Joel nodded. “Wedge their prey under a log and let it, uh, tenderize for a few days before they eat it. Luckily, this one didn’t get a good grip on me, and I was able to climb back onto the raft. But if Al, my photographer, had let go of me...” He shrugged, taking a pull on his

beer.

Tanah shuddered, and Cassie's eyes went wide.

"You're so brave," she breathed. Bella snapped out of her own vicarious fear for him. The TV star didn't need any more female fans oohing and ahhing over him.

"How long did it take you to reach the nearest village?" Frank asked.

"Ten hours. Five times as long as it took us to go up in the jet boat. We reached the main river by dark, and it was a damn good thing. Crocs are more active at night, so they would've taken me on one of

my little dips instead of just trying to nibble.”

Bella felt a grudging respect for his self-deprecating humor. He hadn't tried to make himself the hero of the story, anyway.

“Of course, there are tiger sharks here,” Li said. “One of the fiercest predators on the planet. I hear they cruise the shorelines at night, searching for prey.”

Bella stared at him in the firelight, her unease about him morphing into dislike. She had to bite back the urge to snap at him to shut up.

“Not gonna bother us,” Frank

soothed. "Nobody go swimming at night, yeah?"

"Not me," Tanah agreed fervently, and the others laughed.

Joel yawned and shoved himself out of his chair. "Well, if I have to smile for the camera bright and early, I'd better get my beauty sleep."

"Matt and I had better do the same," Cassie agreed with complete seriousness.

Joel grinned at her. "Nah, you could stay up all night and still outshine the rest of us."

She'd better go to bed too, Bella realized. Not for beauty, because

she wouldn't be in front of any cameras, but because she was in charge.

She just hoped she could sleep.

An hour later, the camp was dark and quiet, the only sounds the rhythmic hiss of the surf and faint rattle of palm fronds in the night breeze. As a crescent moon shone from a star-filled sky, Bella grumpily conceded that she wasn't going to sleep anytime soon. Every time she closed her eyes, she remembered something else she must do, or she visualized last

night's dream and worried she would wake to find herself screaming rousing the whole camp. How humiliating would that be?

Then she remembered her "conversation" with the guava tree and was even wider awake.

Apparently, she had at least a little of the Ho'omalū gift. She didn't want to sleep and wake up to work; she wanted to go into the forest and explore it and her strange ability. How much could she do? Was this gift limited to survival, or was there more to it? And would it continue once she left Hawaii?

This thought filled her with such

darkness that she shied away. She'd only just gotten here. Time enough later to remember that her home was on the mainland.

Kicking back the light cover of her sleeping bag, she pushed her tousled hair off her face. Maybe watching a video would help her relax. Feeling under her pillow for her flashlight and finding it, she snapped it on. She played the narrow beam around to find her notebook case, unzipped it and powered up the little computer.

She searched through the short list of videos she'd saved. A new romantic comedy, a segment of a

Hawaiian nature program, and a few old favorites. Bella hesitated and then, feeling equal parts curious and resentful, plugged in her headphones and clicked on the last title in the list. “The Wild Zone: Cliff-Diving at Panadama”. She wanted to learn more about their star, that was all. Better to know the enemy.

The show’s title filled the screen, followed by a close-up shot of a lean man in a form-fitting bodysuit belting himself into a complicated harness. As the camera panned up over capable, tanned hands working buckles and carabiners,

then over washboard abs and a broad, hard chest, Bella twirled a strand of hair between her fingers, watching avidly.

The camera reached his face, framed with the straps of a snug helmet and a pair of colored safety glasses. Joel Girand looked into the camera and smiled, his cheeks creasing. His teeth weren't perfectly straight — his eyeteeth overlapped the next teeth slightly. Along with the bump on his nose, it gave him the look of a roguish vagabond. Of course, maybe that was partly the glint in those eyes, as if he couldn't wait to lead her — that

was, the viewer — straight into trouble with him.

“Hello,” his deep voice said in her ears. “I’m Joel Girand. As you can see, I’m standing on top of a cliff.” The camera angle dropped down his body to his feet, encased in black boots and nearly protruding over the edge of a rock ledge. Bella’s stomach plummeted as the camera moved out over the edge. Far below, white surf licked at a sandy beach.

The camera flicked back to Joel’s face. “I’ve got to get down to that beach. Now I *could* go around by the path. That would get me there

in a couple of hours, give or take. But you're in *The Wild Zone*, so we're going down...the fast way."

He smiled, and then he stepped out over the edge.

Bella nearly dropped the tablet. She gasped and pressed her hand to her bare chest over her skimpy tank. Her heart was beating like the wings of a trapped bird. His move mirrored her own in the dream—that was all. It wasn't that she'd been worried about him. Why should she be?

But not until he stood safe on the beach, unhooking the ropes that had supported his plummeting

descent, did her gaze leave the screen.

Joel jerked awake, his eyes flying open. Something had awakened him. He was comfortable, sprawled on a new mattress and sleeping bag with a cool breeze playing over him and the slow surge of the surf playing a lullaby, so that wasn't it.

He squinted. Yes, there it was again: a flicker of red light. That didn't make sense until he remembered Bella Moran's red tent next to his.

He stared at her tent, yawning

deeply and stretching. She shouldn't be awake at — he peered at his phone, set handily on top of his bag — after midnight. And a beautiful night it was. The stars were out, diamonds twinkling in the black velvet of the tropical sky. As he sat up, he could see the faint silver foam line of the surf, surging rhythmically against the shore.

He wasn't sure why he was awake, other than that he was surrounded by strangers, not his usual crew. Despite their photographer's lurid imaginings, this wasn't a dangerous location — no unfriendly natives or large

predators lurking in the brush. Although there was some undercurrent he didn't like. He frowned thoughtfully, trying to pinpoint the feeling, and then shrugged it off. Probably nothing more than the nerves Cassie, Tanah and Matt had exhibited, and anyway, he wasn't in charge of everyone being happy, just getting his job done. Which he would do, no matter what.

The light flickered again, a familiar pattern. Sitting up, he leaned to one side and peered around Bella Moran's silhouette. Even through her tent flap, he

could tell she was watching a video on her computer.

Impelled by irritation and curiosity, he jackknifed silently out of his bag and crouched on all fours to cross the still-warm shelf of lava rock between their tents, wincing as he knelt on a rough pebble.

He peered around the side of her tent. She sat cross-legged, her head bent to the small computer in her hands. His breath froze in his throat. Damn, she was naked, the light from the screen gleaming off bare, smooth arms and legs. Then she moved, her tumbled hair sliding aside to reveal a white tank,

molded to her small, lovely breasts. And there, little boxers that rode up into the crease of her hips. Well, hell, that settled his heart rate a little.

She caught her breath, her eyes wide, and then relaxed, one hand pressed in the valley between her breasts.

Stretching a little farther, he angled his head. Surprise and then amused satisfaction warmed his insides in a heady mix. He grinned to himself.

She was watching *Zone* — the episode filmed on Panadama Island. The small group of islands

off the southern coast of Australia was famous for its wild beauty and inaccessibility. The combination attracted wealthy Aussie yacht owners and tourists willing to spend the night on a boat to visit, swim, soak up the sun and take pictures to prove they'd been there. A few packed their climbing gear for the difficult and dangerous trip to the top and back.

His mother had phoned him after the episode aired to protest that he might have warned her he was going to jump off that cliff. She'd nearly had a heart attack, she accused. She now lived with her

sister in Spokane, and they never missed an episode of *The Wild Zone*. They never missed reaming him out over his latest stunt either. Joel suspected his Aunt Vicky loved the show but that his mother watched it only because he was in it and because she was half afraid if she didn't, something would happen to him. His only worry was that his stunts weren't enough to hold viewers' attention.

He snuck another look to see how Ms. Hawaii was enjoying his leap. She was ignoring his on-screen chat about the descent, staring out into the night, her full

lower lip caught between her teeth, her face bathed in the eerie light of the film.

“Boring you?” he asked.

She started violently, her eyes wide as black pools as she whirled to stare at him. She let out her breath with a whoosh, then seemed to recall what she’d been doing and clutched the tablet to her breasts, the light extinguished.

“What are you doing awake?” She reached up and yanked the light headphones off, tilting her head as they tangled in her long hair. “You’re supposed to be asleep.”

He shifted to a more comfortable position, which brought him farther around the side of her tent. In the starlight, she was a shadowed figure under the red awning, still shaking her head to dislodge the light headphones.

“So are you,” he pointed out, grinning to himself. She was clearly embarrassed to have been caught watching him.

“I was just...just researching to see if your show has any...any, signature shots that we can use tomorrow,” she said stiffly. She finally got the headphones loose and dropped them into her lap, still

clutching the little computer.

He didn't believe her. "Want some photos of me hanging off these cliffs?" he offered.

"Actually, I was thinking we could photograph you jumping off of one — without a rope."

He made a low "mr-rrow" sound in his throat, imitating an angry cat. "That was just mean, Ms. Moran. But I'll do it, if you'll hold my hand and jump with me. That way, one of us would have a nice, soft landing."

Palm fronds clattered in a sudden swirl of breeze. Awareness arced through the warm, humid

night between him and the dark-haired wahine seated so gracefully in her bed.

Her eyes were pools of shadow, her mouth a soft curve. Only a few feet separated them. In one swift move, he could be in that bed, her tantalizing scent — warm woman and flowers — wrapped around him, mingling with the scent of sex as he laid her back and got his hands and mouth on her — and more.

“Only in your dreams, big shot,” she retorted. “Better get back to them — and back to your own tent.”

Her tart words were just the tonic he needed to jolt him out of

the invisible net of heat and longing that had enmeshed him. Didn't matter if she watched his show all night. She was still the same uptight little manager.

He levered himself to his feet, wincing as his partial erection snagged on his shorts.

The tablet tipped down across her lap, its light shining into her face. She gazed up at him, wary and lovely. He shook his head at his own imaginings. She was about as vulnerable as a reef fish with a razor-sharp tail spur.

With a slither of fabric, Bella popped out of her tent, startling

him as she emerged to stand before him, a lithe shadow. "Did you hear that?" she asked, still in a hushed voice.

He listened. "What?"

Then, over the surge of the surf, he heard a sharp smack and a moan. Adrenaline surged as he fumbled hastily for his sandals and stepped into them. He couldn't help anyone if he was tiptoeing on lava rubble. He wondered briefly if he should grab his knife but decided against it because Bella was already in motion, gliding up into the shadows of the trees.

Joel had excellent night vision,

but hers must be even better, for by the time he reached the trail worn in the lava flow and followed past where the lava wall met fig-tree roots in a tangle, she was already there, hovering in the path like a pale wraith.

Joel peered past her into the glow of a small lantern. He stared for a moment, struggling to take in what he saw. Several feet away, between the roots of the clustered figs, Li knelt nude before Camille, his lean body gilded by the lantern light. She stood over him, also nude, her back three-quarters turned to them.

She had a tight ass, Joel noted absently. Must be a runner. The Asian's eyes were fastened on her face, and as Joel watched, his hands slid slowly up the backs of Camille's bare legs. Joel winced as Camille slapped the guy again, but Li took it, clearly willing to be treated this way.

Bella flinched at the blow, backing into Joel, her warm, lush ass against his thigh, her back moving against his abdomen with her quick breaths. He eased back, steadying her with a hand on her arm, ready to move, wondering how long it would take her to break

and run.

Didn't matter to him if the photog and her boy toy were into a little kink, but damned if he got the attraction. Himself, he'd definitely drop to his knees for a pretty woman, but not for a smack upside the head.

Camille spoke sharply, and Li leaned forward to press his face between her thighs. As he did so, Camille lifted one of his hands. She turned her head toward Joel and Bella, and sank her teeth into the base of Li's thumb. He moaned, a muffled sound.

Okay, enough. Joel stepped back,

intending to pull Bella with him. But she was already moving with him, her head turning aside.

“Get out of my way,” she whispered desperately, shoving at him.

“Shh.” He drew her with him back around the lava wall, then kept her at his side by the simple expedient of sliding his arm around her. “It’s okay, Princess. Just forget about it.”

“Oh, right.” Her fingers dug into his forearm, her nails sharp little pricks of pain. “That’ll be easy.”

He snickered even as he peeled her hand from his arm. Taking her

hand in his, he held it as they made their way back down the lava shelves toward camp. “Didn’t know about that particular kink, huh?”

“Of course I did, but – but, only in the abstract. Ugh! How will I look either of them in the eye after this?”

Joel shrugged. “Well, if you get mad at either one of them, you know what to say. ‘Bite me’.”

She snickered and then clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle it. He grinned to himself.

“Or how about ‘slap my ass and call me Sally’?” he added.

She shook her head, her hair

brushing his bare shoulder. "That one's just dumb."

He shrugged, encouraged by the smile in her voice. "How about, you're really pretty when you smile?"

She stopped in her tracks, and looked up at him, wary as a doe. "Mahalo. If you behave yourself, I might do it more often."

"Aw, now what fun would that be?" He shook his head in mock regret. "Guess I'll have to do without the smile."

They were standing very close. He tugged slightly on her hand, and she moved one foot to keep her

balance, stepping even closer. Her arm brushed his, her skin like satin. He could feel the heat of her body, and she smelled like temptation.

Something about witnessing the raw sexuality of Camille and Li's encounter had him feeling reckless. And, what the hell, he'd wanted this wahine since the first moment he saw her. Had that only been a few hours before?

Even more since she'd brought him that guava. She'd watched him eat with a covert intensity that had been as arousing as it was surprising. She was a study in contrasts, from prim executive

director to alluring, feisty Hawaiian wahine.

He bent his head very slowly, watching to see what she'd do. She stood very still, but her arm trembled a little against his, her fingers tightening on his.

"A night like this sort of calls for a kiss, don't you think?" he asked.

"Maybe." Her whisper was a breathy tease. In the moonlight, her lips parted, soft and luscious.

Damn. So luscious he'd never be content with just a kiss. He already wanted to haul her against him, feel those little breasts pressed against his bare chest and grind his

erection into the vee of her thighs, get his hands on that ass of hers. If he kissed her, he wouldn't be able to resist doing the rest. And then she'd probably raise all kinds of hell, slap him with her capable little hand and a lawsuit.

He let her wait, drawing the moment out while the surf shushed against the shore and a night bird called softly from the trees overhead. "Nah, better not."

Straightening, acting as if he'd never intended to kiss her, was one of the hardest things he'd done in... a long time. Taking a fortifying breath of the warm night air, Joel

pulled her after him, toward the camp.

“Too bad,” she murmured. “I was gonna use my trademark move.”

His pulse leapt, his hand tightening on hers. “Is that a twisted, kinky move like we just saw, or a friendly kind of move?” he asked, as if he could’ve cared less.

She wriggled her hand from his grip. “Guess you’ll never know.”

Joel adjusted himself surreptitiously in his shorts, groaning silently. He’d known she was trouble from those first few

moments. Now, instead of going peacefully to sleep, he was going to lie in his sleeping bag and imagine her offering him not guava but passion fruit.

As they reached the camp, another shadow moved out to meet them. It was Frank.

“What’s up?” he asked. He might be a lot smaller than Joel, but there was an edge in his voice. The older man had obviously caught on that he was attracted to Bella and was feeling protective.

“Bella heard something and

wanted to make sure everyone's all right," Joel said quietly. "I heard her and followed."

"It was, um, just Camille and Li," Bella muttered. "Being...private."

Frank grunted in acknowledgement, obviously uninterested in the photographers' midnight wanderings. "Well, I can't sleep. Want to sit?"

"Sure," Joel agreed. He was wide awake now, and conversation was a lot better idea than trying to get in Bella's pants.

The three of them settled into camp chairs by the dark fire pit.

"Look at those stars," Joel said,

tipping back his head to admire the brilliant panoply above. "There's Orion, with his bow and arrow." He smiled at the familiar group of stars. The Hunter had always been his favorite constellation, a beacon calling him to adventure since he'd been a boy in the forests of northern Idaho. He'd posed with his first bow and arrow, imagining he was the legendary hunter.

"Our people have been navigating by those stars for a thousand years," Frank mused. "Imagine being out there *a moana*, on da sea on a night like this, riding the huge waves in an outrigger,

food and water dwindling,
wondering if you're gonna make it
to a place you can make a good life,
or if Kanaloa will take you down to
your death in his kingdom below."

"It must have been something,"
Joel agreed.

"You've been lot of places,"
Frank commented. "Where you like
da most?"

Joel shrugged. "I don't know. Lot
of places I haven't been yet."

"You journey as the Hawaiians
once did," Bella said. "Are you
looking for a home, as they were?"

Her soft voice was like a chill
breeze of accusation down Joel's

back. He moved his shoulders restlessly, old anger stirring in his gut. “Not me, Princess. I’m a rolling stone.”

No hanging on to a building and a piece of ground for him while the money ran out and the town died around him, the other residents either moving away or huddling down to subsist on a monthly assistance check and what they could hunt or fish. That had been his parents’ life in a north Idaho timber town, but it would damn sure never be his. Unless – no, he wasn’t going to let worry sap his strength. He’d get through this

rough patch and the show would be picked up for another year. Had to be. He wasn't the only one depending on it. Jorge and Al and all the studio production crew had to make a living too.

To throw off the dark mood that threatened, he lay back in his chair, stretching his arms up and then lacing his fingers behind his head, gazing at the stars. "We've been talking about filming an episode of *The Zone* in the Arctic. Now that would be something. Take kayaks up among the ice floes."

"Enjoyed da show up in Alaska," Frank said. "You hiked right

through those big Kodiak bears.
Au'e! Never seen anything li'dat."

Joel grinned at him. "Yeah, you have. Tiger sharks here — now, those are impressive."

"I suppose you're going to swim with them next," Bella muttered. Then she yawned, covering her mouth with one hand.

"You betta get to bed, Nani," Frank said. "You gotta whip us all into shape in da morning."

Her head moved as she glanced at Joel. "Um, good night." She shot out of her chair and scurried off across the rocks to her tent.

Joel watched her go, grinning to

himself at Frank's choice of words. The older man's voice brought him back in a hurry.

"We think a lot of Bella around here. Her uncles, cousins and I. And her father, of course."

Joel stood with him. "I'm glad to hear it. And I would never do anything to hurt or disrespect her."

Frank nodded. "I thought so. *Pō maika`i*, 'night."

Chapter Five

To Do: Leading tour guests in vigorous physical exercise will relax them and create camaraderie.

She dreamed that she walked barefoot through the night forest, clad again in the kapa-cloth skirt, a lei hanging cool and soft over her bare breasts, a crown of flowers on her head. She carried no light, needed none, for around her the forest was alive with a soft iridescence, each shrub limned with silver, blossoms glowing like miniature lanterns. The trees

whispered overhead, and vines rustled as they swayed invitingly.

She stepped into a clearing. Before her lay a pool of clear water, a waterfall rushing down the lava wall at the far side. For her – it was all for her.

And so was the man who waited, lounging by the pool. He wore only a kapa cloth around his lean hips, his dark red hair combed back sleekly from his square, handsome face. Joel Girand popped a bite of something in his mouth, then smiled lazily at her and held out his hand, palm up. “You wanted a big one.”

Instead of a fruit, a large, black centipede squirmed in his palm.

She drew back with a gasp, and he chuckled, amusement rich in his voice. Anger surged through her. How dare he mock her? Did he not realize who she was?

Reaching out, she commanded a fallen branch to fly into her grasp. Glaring down at him, she drew it back to strike him.

He smirked up at her. "You won't do it."

"Ae," she replied. "Yes, I will." Her voice filled the quiet glade like soft thunder. She reveled in her authority.

He put a hand to the ground and levered himself to his feet, loose pebbles rattling under his bare feet.

Straightening, he set his jaw and narrowed his eyes at her.

"You have no power over me, wahine."

The power roiled inside her, and suddenly she was not sure of which she was more afraid – that he was right, or that he was wrong.

Bella woke to the snick of pebbles under someone's foot. She started awake, and gazed blankly at the wall before her, bright red and full of light. Realizing that she was in her tent at Na'alele, she sat up quickly and shoved back the light summer sleeping bag. Pushing her

hair out of her eyes, she stretched, arching her back, and then sat for a moment, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

Looking out from under her awning, Bella squinted at the sunlit sea dancing a few yards away. Her mind felt fuzzy, as if it were full of the same flexible foam as the mattress. Good thing she wasn't the one before the cameras this morning. She was certain she wouldn't be looking her best after the short, broken night's sleep she'd had.

She hated that she'd lain awake thinking of Camille and Li and

their twisted sexual relationship. The only way she'd been able to stop had been to focus on Joel Girand. Even on the show in which he starred, he didn't strut or preen himself. He grinned at the camera as if inviting the viewer to share the mischief and fun of the stunt they were about to try. Yes, and then he leapt off a cliff into thin air, supported only by slender ropes. She shuddered, but there was a wistful tinge to it. He'd done it with utter trust in his equipment and the people who were behind the scenes. And it had looked...fun.

He was very good at what he

did. Too bad he was such a tease. She cringed as she remembered his smirk at Frank's remark about her whipping them all into shape. They'd both been thinking the same thing, but Joel was the only one who'd found it amusing. And as for his other tease, when she'd been certain he was going to kiss her, that had been simply diabolical. And what had she done? She'd just stood there, waiting for that mouth of his to touch hers.

She needed vigorous exercise to help her forget. Rising onto her knees, she lowered the side of her tent for privacy. She found the red

tankini where she'd dropped it beside her duffel. Pulling off the white tank and boxers she'd slept in, she wriggled into the suit. Grabbing her sandals, she unfastened her tent and crawled out.

Clear, pure light poured over the flank of the mountain, revealing a still-quiet campsite. Looking toward the sea, she saw an arm rise from the water, wet skin gleaming in the sun. One of the men was swimming. That explained the footsteps.

She looked around, but the other tents were all quiet and the

Hawaiians' bedrolls static humps under their awnings. The swimmer could be any of the men.

She looked up at the forest behind her and took a step in that direction. But then she stopped, locking her knees as she frowned up at the inviting tangle of green. This was the first and most crucial day of the shoot. They were limited on time — everything had to be just right today. Later, she'd follow the urge tugging at her. But now she'd choose the safer form of exercise — the one that didn't call to her to lose herself in it and not return.

As she turned back toward the

ocean, a bright spot of color caught her eye. A red hibiscus blossom lay near her tent like an offering, delicate petals fresh as if just picked. She smiled, touched by the gift. Frank must be the one who was up early. He was surely the only one who'd think of leaving her a flower. She tucked the stem behind her ear, stroking the flower with her fingertips.

When she toed off her sandals by the water and waded in, the swimmer was gone, out of sight around the lava rim of the bay. Bella sank into the water, shivering as the cool wetness enveloped her

sleep-warmed skin, and then dove under, rising with her head back to sleek her hair from her face.

Remembering the flower, she reached up. Amazingly, it clung to its perch. The stem must be tangled in her hair.

After a moment, the water felt wonderful, the nearly eighty-degree temperature comfortable, the salt adding extra buoyancy.

Bella leveled out into a crawl, crossing the little bay and swimming out into the gentle morning surf. The waves sparkled clear turquoise in the morning sun, which was already warm on her

head. She headed west, along the shore. The water was fairly shallow, and sand had washed into the hollows in the lava, the sun's reflection off the white grains making the water bright and clear. She loved to swim, but the ocean was not her milieu as it was Daniel and Zane's, and even their uncle Hilo's. She respected the sea and feared it enough that she liked to stay where she could see the bottom underneath her.

But snorkeling at Nawea she'd learned that the Hawaiian reefs held an astonishing array of lovely fish and other creatures. As she

swam over a dark ribbon of lava, she took a deep breath and dove, her eyes open. Without a snorkel mask, she couldn't see perfectly but well enough. Below her, the ancient lava flow had been built on by a colony of coral and was now a reef teeming with life.

A school of brilliant yellow tangs eddied beneath her, followed by another of black-and-white-striped convict tangs. A pair of striped Moorish idols chased each other in circles, their delicate tassels fluttering. Black spiny and red pencil sea urchins punctuated the pale pink, gray and cream of the

coral. A small *honu*, sea turtle, swam past on the far side of the reef, and she watched it paddle seaward, her hair swirling around her face as she turned her head.

The Na'alele sea caves lay out there in deeper water. Two were still open, but the biggest had been plugged forever by a recent lava flow. Pele's a'a had been called forth by one of the Ho'omalū cousins to stop a terrible crime.

Now the treacherous cave was only another underwater hump of charcoal-hued lava, the far end fading into deeper blue. Shuddering at the memory of

Claire, Zane and Daniel's horrific experience there, Bella rose to the surface and turned back toward the bay. She squinted into the bright light dancing off the waves.

With a swoosh, a glistening shape rose out of the water before her. Her gasp of fright earned her a huge mouthful of salt water.

She coughed, choking as she splashed backward, away from the intruder. A familiar chuckle grated on her ears at the same instant she realized it was a man. Joel Girand, his hair sleeked back on his head, his white teeth flashing in his wet face. The sun glinted off his broad

shoulders as he treaded water in front of her, and this close she could see tiny crinkles around his eyes, as if he smiled often.

“Sorry,” he said. He didn’t sound it. “Saw you down there and wondered what you were looking at.”

Bella glared at him, swiping water from her eyes. The big bully — he’d done it deliberately.

“Pretty flower.” He was looking at the side of her face.

She reached up, surprised the flower still clung to her hair.

“Mahalo.”

Then she stared at him, moving

her arms to stay afloat as she suddenly remembered seeing that same taunting grin in last night's dream.

"What?" he asked, one heavy brow arching upward in that quizzical way, as if he were wondering about her intelligence.

"Ugh." She shuddered, remembering, and kicked past him. "I dreamed about you."

He swam alongside her, easily keeping up with his long, muscular arms. "Yeah? Why do I get the feeling it wasn't a hot, sexy dream? Did I fall off that cliff instead of landing safely?"

Bella tried to ignore the leap of her pulse at his mention of sex.

“Unfortunately, no. You ate a huge bug.”

“Huh.”

They swam back toward the bay in silence, the only sounds the slap of the waves. Bella had to work to keep her breathing easy — swimming was a lot harder work than it appeared. She jogged and rode her bike, but this was definitely an all-body exercise.

With his build, Joel could easily outdistance her, and she wished he would and let her finish her swim in peace. But instead, he swam with

her and waited for her when she stopped to rest on a shelf of submerged lava just outside the bay. He even paused beside her, holding out a hand to help her up to the next of the natural steps in the rock.

“‘Ae, kaikuahine,” whispered the voices in her ear. “*E lawi mai kā ‘olua kane koa. Yes, little sister. Bring your warrior to us.*”

Now the flower was whispering to her. With a sense of desperation, Bella shook her head, ignoring the voices and his gesture, clinging to the wet rock. Oh, Pele, did she really hear the voice, or was her subconscious trying to get her mixed up with him?

No, her visceral attraction to him was too powerful, and she was too unsettled here. She daren't touch him, not even for this smallest of courtesies. Especially after he'd teased her last night, pretending he was going to kiss her, standing so close her senses were full of his heat and strength and male scent.

And she really didn't want to watch as he shrugged and pulled himself up out of the sea, water streaming from his rangy, muscular body, delineating every ridge and hollow of the long muscles in his back and legs, running in sparkling rivulets down his shoulders arms,

causing his olive swim shorts to cling lovingly to his round, tight ass.

He turned, setting his hands on his narrow hips, fingers pointing to where his wet shorts cupped a package that was as impressive as the rest of him. She'd felt that brushing against her midriff last night too. Only she was sure it had been a lot stiffer than it was now.

He spoke, and her gaze flew guiltily to his face to find him scowling down at her.

"You know, I may have eaten a bug or two in my time," he said, "but at least I don't have one up my

ass, like you. Can't you relax a little, for chrissakes?"

Bella flinched, shocked as if he'd slapped her. She opened her mouth to explain that she had no energy left for friendly banter or flirtation, that she was hanging on to normality by her fingernails. That she was besieged, and he was part of it.

But she swallowed the words, for what could she say that would even make sense? It had been embarrassing enough that he'd caught her watching his show like a closet fan-girl. Opening up her tangle of private emotions to him?

Never going to happen.

And besides, now he was just pissing her off. How dare he look down at her in that smug way, as if she was an uptight pencil pusher?

He moved, leaning back against the sun-warmed rock behind him as he watched her, as relaxed as she was tense, with the corner of that mouth kicking up in his trademark half smile, only to her it looked like a smirk.

That did it. A creature she didn't know rose up in her, a haze of heat and power and anger fogging her brain. This was her forest, her island. She was in control, not some

male interloper.

Bella surged up out of the water to stand before him. She took one step closer, all there was room for on the narrow shelf. Toe to toe with him, she grasped his thick biceps, wet and cool on the surface, hard and hot beneath. The way he was going to be when she got through with him.

Looking up into his gaze, she pulled herself up onto her tiptoes and kissed him. Like his arms, his lips tasted cool and wet, but they warmed up so fast she thought she felt steam waft between their faces.

Quickly, giving him no chance to

take over, Bella cocked her head, parting her lips to deepen the kiss. She pressed closer, using her lips to explore the heat of his, the sleekness of his inner lip, the hard edge of his teeth. She touched the tip of her tongue to his and thrust her own delicately into his mouth, tasting him while her lips fastened seamlessly over his until she was drinking him in, his heat and taste and male essence.

She made it a long kiss, and a thorough one. Which was not difficult, as he bent his head, kissing her back, his tongue tangling with hers. A thrill of

pleasure streamed through her, and need unlike any she'd ever felt. He tasted better than anything, his mouth enticing and fulfilling at the same time.

She wanted to kiss him all day, wanted to slide her mouth down his throat, down over the broad, smooth shoulders under her hands, wanted to wrap herself around his tall, nearly naked body like a vine, and devour him.

Wait. *Where* were her hands? For that matter, where was she? Her eyes flew open as she realized that she was leaning against him, sliding her hands greedily up across the

broad slope of his shoulders toward the back of his neck.

With a gasp, she stepped back. She lifted a hand to her mouth, which felt bereft, and stared up at him. What had just happened?

He was gazing down at her as if he wondered the same thing. His mouth was soft, his lips parted, his chest working as he breathed hard.

“Relaxed enough for you, *kāne*?” Oh, Pele, her voice sounded breathy, seductive again, the way it had last night.

He opened his mouth, then cleared his throat and tried again. “Works for me, wahine.” He

reached for her, his big hands coming up to her waist.

She couldn't let him kiss her again. Bella took another hasty step away and stepped off into nothing but water. She fell back, and it swallowed her, closing over her head and washing the taste of him from her mouth. If only it could erase the way she felt when she kissed him.

Bella surfaced, embarrassed by her second dunking of the morning, yet grateful this time for the wet slap of reality. She had no business kissing Joel Girand. He was a celebrity, a wanderer, a serial lover,

if what she'd seen on social media was accurate, and furthermore, in today's business climate, he could now sue her for sexual harassment if he chose.

Joel slid into the water with her, his eyes full of heat and speculation as he watched her push her wet hair back.

"There's a wild Hawaiian wahine inside you, ready to break free," he said. "Glad I was around to meet her."

"Just don't piss her off," she warned him breathlessly, speaking to herself as much as him. Her heart pounded, and she felt more

alive than she had in weeks, months. She shouldn't dare anything more with him, but oh, she yearned. "There's no telling what she'll do next."

He grinned, his teeth flashing white in his wet, tanned face. "I can't wait."

Best if he waited forever, Bella reminded herself sternly as they swam back to the camp. This was not the kind of behavior DelRay wanted in their junior executives, and she had every intention of becoming much more.

On the beach, she sat down on a rock to put on her sandals and

collect her thoughts. She waited for embarrassment, even penitence to arise. To her shock, she felt none. Kissing him had been so...freeing. And so good. She wanted to do it again.

And maybe, she thought, touching the flower in her hair, she would.

Joel strode on up to the camp, where Frank was making coffee, the smell already drifting on the quiet morning air. He slicked back his wet hair and said something, and the two men laughed.

Bella went the other way, to her tent. She had things to do — important things. First a quick shower to rinse off the salt, then breakfast, and finally she'd get everyone nudged into their places in the day's agenda.

But of course it wasn't that simple. Cassie was already in the shower, while Tanah perched on a camp chair outside, wearing a short kimono and clutching a flowered bag. The redhead yawned sleepily at Bella, combing her fingers through her sleep-mussed curls. "Hurry up, Cass," she called over her shoulder. "Others are waiting,

and you're going to use up all the warm water."

"I am hurrying," Cassie said in injured tones from the other side of the bright green nylon curtain.

"And the water isn't that warm. I can't get the crème rinse out of my hair."

"You two take your time," Bella said, already stepping back. "I'll go have some coffee."

"Oh, could you bring me a cup?" Tanah begged, stretching sensuously. "I don't want to lose my place in line to Matt. He's as slow as she is."

"Um — sure," Bella agreed. She

set her wash bag and dry clothing down on a rock and walked over to the mess area, picking her way across the lava on her bare feet. Most of it was worn smooth, but there were pebbles in the crevices of the black rock. She brushed at a rivulet of salt water trickling from under her hair. The sun was already quite warm, evaporating the moisture on her skin.

As she reached the mess table, still deep in the shade under a huge tree, Frank handed her a mug of steaming coffee. Joel sat perched on a gnarl of the giant tree's roots, sipping his coffee and eating a

banana.

“Mahalo,” she said gratefully, taking a sip. Her eyes widened at the bitter strength of the brew.

Frank chuckled. “Too strong for you?” When she nodded, he motioned to an open container of cream, and Bella took it, pouring a large dollop into her cup.

“Could you pour another cup for Tanah?” Her next drink tasted much better, the bold flavor of the local coffee mellowed by the cream. “I’ll go get back in line for the shower.”

“It just got longer,” Joel pointed out helpfully.

Bella looked over to find that Matt had joined Tanah outside the shower. She sighed. The models needed to look their best. She didn't.

"Matt," she called across the clearing. "Can I bring you a cup of coffee?"

After delivering their coffee, Bella went back to grab a banana and piece of papaya bread to eat while she drank her own coffee.

"You betta have some of Leilani's egg dish," Frank urged. "Good warm or cold."

Bella shook her head, draining her coffee cup. "No, thanks. Got to

get dressed.”

“I’ll have some of those eggs,
“Joel said. “Don’t want to miss any
of Leilani’s great cooking.”

Bella hesitated. Neither did she —
she was hungry after eating so
lightly at dinner. But she had things
to do, and besides, she didn’t want
to have to sit and watch Joel eat
and try to ignore the heat between
them. Which might be mostly on
her end. Maybe he’d responded
simply because she was a
reasonably attractive woman.
Maybe that kiss hadn’t been as
earth-shaking for him. Au’e, maybe
she needed to get her head back to

her job.

She grabbed a bottle of water from the large case open by the cooler and took it into her tent with a washcloth and towel. She rinsed the salt water from her skin the best she could before wriggling into clean red-and-white-flowered shorts and a white sun-block shirt.

She'd have to rinse her hair later to get the salt out, but for now she rubbed some conditioner into the damp locks, wound them into a ponytail and pulled on a white bucket hat. On an impulse, she tucked her flower, which had survived her swim intact, back

behind her ear. Gathering up her tablet computer and phone, she was ready to go — she hoped. She cast a quick prayer upward to God and Pele, if she was listening. She could use all the help she could get.

When she emerged from her tent, Camille was already up and dressed, eating breakfast with Li and Frank. Bella looked quickly away from them. Cassie sat nearby, wearing a simple blue tank dress, finger-combing her damp hair while she nibbled on a bowl of fruit. Joel was nowhere to be seen.

Tanah emerged from her tent in a simple olive-green shorts

ensemble, her auburn hair caught up in a messy updo that framed her pretty face. She scanned Bella from head to toe with a critical eye. Bella had to stifle the urge to check her appearance in a mirror. But hers was somewhere in her duffel, and her efficiency was a lot more important than her looks right now.

“You were smart not to wait,” Tanah said. “Matt’s still in the shower.”

“You’re such a whiner,” Cassie said loftily.

“Careful.” Tanah pointed a warning finger at the blonde. “I can make you look good in your photos,

or terrible.”

Cassie tossed her head and laughed. Looking at her perfect face and flawless skin, glowing in the morning light, Bella could see why the blonde wasn't worried by the threat.

Bella pasted a smile on her face and turned to Camille. “Good morning. Ready to start shooting?”

Camille gave her an odd look, and Bella groaned inwardly, feeling her cheeks flush. She had sounded insanely chirpy. “Big day ahead,” she added.

“Of course,” Camille said with a wry smile. “After I have my

coffee.”

“Oh, good.” Bella tapped her computer screen “I have a list of the shots the ad department wants. I’ll give you a copy, or I can just feed you the sequence as you go, whichever you prefer.”

“Oh, I’ll let you be in charge of that.” Camille lifted one hand to the heavy pendant she wore over her simple white top. Fashioned of platinum, it was an odd shape, almost like a modified Z hanging askew on its chain, with a rift of diamonds in the center. It looked like an expensive designer piece.

Bella nodded. “We’ll start with

some shots of Joel putting up his tent. We want the morning light for that."

Looking around, she saw no sign of the irritating man. She hoped he hadn't wandered off. If he was gone too long, they'd have to shoot the tent scenes tomorrow morning. She looked back at her list.

"Then we'll want some scenes with him and Matt and Cassie, as if they're having a meal. We'll shoot some scenes on the beach this afternoon. This evening, we'll shoot the campfire, if it doesn't rain."

"Sounds like a long day," Frank commented behind her, rattling

pans. "You betta have more coffee, Bella."

As he handed her a second cup, however, Joel sauntered out of the forest. He looked fresh and clean, his damp hair combed back from his face. He wore a pair of clean khaki shorts and white T-shirt, and carried a damp towel and a small bag in his hand. He looked as if he'd just come from a bath.

Of course — he must have hiked up to one of the pools above them. She should begin listening to the voices, because Joel certainly looked refreshed. Bella wriggled slightly in her shorts. She hadn't

done a thorough enough job of getting the salt off her skin, and she felt like a Maui-style potato chip, salty around the edges.

“I’m ready when you all are,” Joel said, smiling genially at everyone. Everyone but her, that was. “Frank, any more of that great coffee?”

Bella rose, carrying her cup and her tablet computer. “I’ll have Frank’s crew help me break down the tents,” she said crisply.

“Camille, if you and Joel can be ready to shoot in thirty minutes?” Leaving the question floating behind her, she strode across the

sun-warmed rocks to the beach where the two Hawaiians sat in the sun, drinking sodas.

“Can you guys take down the two tents over here on the left?” she asked Kobe, since he was the one who looked up when she approached.

“Sure.” He smiled at her, revealing bad teeth. “Where you want ‘em?”

“Just tuck the bags over behind the mess gear,” she said absently, looking at the next item on her list.

“You got it, boss lady.” Kobe walked behind her, close enough that she felt some part of him brush

against her shorts, and she could feel the heat of his body. She started and glared after him indignantly, but he sauntered on toward the tents, Eddy close behind him. Eddy smiled nervously at her, his dark eyes darting away.

Great. Like she needed that fool putting moves on her, on top of everything else.

Behind her, the trees rustled as if a sudden breeze had sprung up. Bella clenched her hand on her tablet, letting herself experience the energy surging between her and the forest. Something unfurled a little more inside her, and the

voices whispered with a vengeful edge, "*Send him to us, little sister.*"

She swallowed hard. Frank would shut the Hawaiian down in a minute if she complained, but maybe...maybe she didn't need him to help. Maybe, more than just handing her gifts of fruit, the forest really was speaking to her, as a Ho'omalū. If the stocky Kobe tried anything else, perhaps he'd find himself wearing part of a tree.

Her heart thumped and began to beat double-time.

Au'e—just like in her dream. What was she going to do?

Chapter Six

To Do: A skilled tour director keeps the group organized and moving toward their next goal without appearing to manage or fuss.

Joel was used to having a camera of one kind or another trained on him while he worked, so having Camille crouched nearby with her camera didn't bother him. What did was the fact that he had to continually stop what he was doing while acting as if he was still doing it. He wasn't used to posing for

stills.

After an hour, he had a headache going. Li had a succession of silver reflector screens that he'd popped out of a duffel and set up in the background of every shot, sending light glinting into Joel's eyes, so that after a while he felt half blind. He kept reaching for his shades and then remembering he wasn't allowed to wear them.

Joel wasn't used to wearing makeup either. He'd done so for a couple of magazine spreads, and one episode of his show, but after that he'd convinced them that he photographed well without it, and

they'd let him go au naturel.

For this shoot, Tanah looked him over critically and then ordered him to sit in her chair and submit to having a light foundation smoothed over his face, along with concealer over his right temple, where a branch had done its best to impale his eye. But since her full breasts were a few inches from his face while she worked, he managed to keep himself occupied.

Having Ms. Hawaii walk by and give him a sidelong glare from under her silly little hat just added to the fun. Damned if he didn't think she was jealous. Nah,

probably just her controlling nature. Was she that bossy everywhere? He imagined her on a bed, ordering him to do things a certain way. The thought made him want to laugh, but it also sent a surge of arousal arrowing to his groin. If he wasn't careful, he'd be sporting a woody.

Especially if he thought about that kiss. When she surged up onto the rocks with him, her lithe body clothed in nothing but a thin scrap of red swimsuit, she'd looked very fine, *ono*, as they said here. And that red flower emphasizing her wet hair sleeked back from that

lovely face, those dark eyes
drenched, her lashes spangled with
water and rivulets running down
into the shadow between her
breasts, and down her rounded,
toned legs, oh man.

When she gave him that siren
look, the hair on the back of his
neck had stood up. He'd known he
was in for it.

And holy aloha, when she'd
stood on tiptoe and cocked her
head and kissed him, her soft, wet
lips brushing his, his brain had
gone up in smoke like a Hawaiian
imu, underground oven. She tasted
of the sea and wild Hawaiian

honey, and all he could think was *more* and *now*.

When she stepped away, he'd reached for her instinctively. He grinned to himself at the surprise on her face when she'd fallen in. Probably a good thing, or he would've ended up trying to fuck her right there on the rocks.

Which would've been fantastic, if not for the fact that a) he hadn't been carrying a condom, b) he wasn't even sure how he felt about her and c) anyone from the group could swim out of the bay and find them.

Okay, all three of those thoughts

were arousing as hell, which was just crazy.

Time to get his mind out of his shorts and back on business.

He let Tanah comb his hair and put a little waxy stuff into it with her fingertips to train his natural wave just where she wanted it. He had nothing against a woman's fingers in his hair, but right now he wished she'd hurry up and finish. The makeup itched, especially with the hot sun shining on his face, and he wanted nothing more than to dive into the ocean sparkling so invitingly a few feet away and wash off the gunk and the sweat.

He walked over and pulled another bottle of water from the small cooler Frank had placed near the photo area. After unscrewing the lid, Joel tipped back his head and drained the bottle in one long thirsty drink. It was amazing how the tropical heat dried a person out, no matter how moist Hawaiian air felt on the skin.

Camille spent a lot of time setting up the photos. She positioned Joel first in each shot and then moved the rest of them into position before she began clicking away with her camera. Bella hovered, of course.

Joel put up with it all because this was work, and it was one hell of a kick to have a sporting goods company like DelRay choose him as their “celebrity” spokesman. But every time Camille asked him to smile, damn if he didn’t look up and see Ms. Hawaii watching him across that little computer of hers, as if suspicious that he would screw up her precious shoot somehow.

He entertained himself by imagining her wearing something more traditional to suit her Hawaiian looks, like a little sarong and a lei — and not a damn thing else. Well, maybe that sultry look

again, instead of the tight frown on her face now.

When that notion sent blood surging to his ever-hopeful cock, Joel forced himself to focus on the other two women.

Tanah was a luscious armful, with her curves and hair that looked like it would slither down if a man ran his fingers into it. But oddly, while Joel could appreciate her from the male point of view, he didn't really want to do those things.

Cassie was fun to tease. He didn't know how old she was, but she reminded him of the girls he'd

gone to high school with, giggling and flirtatious, testing their feminine powers on the male of the species.

She was as pretty a blonde as he'd seen, with her fine skin and silky blonde locks. She made him smile, but again, she didn't really do much for his libido. Odd, but he didn't have time to consider the ramifications of being physically attracted to the most tightly wound of all the women present.

Camille was a bit odd too, when he thought about her. She actually made him uncomfortable, with the intense way she looked at him

while she was setting up his poses. But he reminded himself she was an artist in her own way, and to her, he was part of her work.

Tanah was the clothing stylist as well as makeup artist, and she had the three of them changing from one DelRay summer outdoor outfit to another. Joel set up a tent by the water, smiling all the while. He and Cassie set up a tent, smiling. He and Matt and Cassie “ate lunch” in the middle of the morning, still smiling.

As the morning heated up, the sun burning down from a cloudless sky, Joel watched Bella hover

behind the photographer, frown, and then finally say something to the other woman, who stopped what she was doing and turned regally at the interruption. Bella persisted, and Joel wondered what the hell her problem was.

Whatever, he'd had it. He didn't want to be watching her, and he sure as hell didn't want her slowing down this damn shoot.

His irritation coalescing, he surged to his feet. "Listen, Bella," he said. "I appreciate your professionalism. But we're all hot, tired and ready for a swim. You hired Camille to do her job; now

can you please back off and let her do it? Otherwise, we're going to melt into little puddles of makeup here."

The others stared at him and then turned as one to look at Bella. Under her white hat, her pretty mouth flattened, her cheeks flushing a dusky pink. She clutched her computer so tightly her knuckles were white.

"Thank you, Joel," Camille said. "I appreciate your support. You're doing a fabulous job, of course."

A sudden draft of air rattled through the palm fronds, even stirring the one leaning over them

so that the limber trunk swayed. For a nanosecond, Joel had the crazy impression that Bella Moran was causing some kind of disturbance. Then a coconut fell to the hard ground behind him with a solid crack, and everyone jumped a little, Bella Moran the hardest of all. She looked up into the palm before glaring at him again.

“Oh,” cried Cassie. “Can we just get the rest of the photos and get away from these coconut palms?”

Joel stared at Bella, willing her to back off and to stop looking at him as if he'd slapped her with an insult. The gunfighter music rolled

in his head again, this time with a Hawaiian flair. Damn it, he was right, and she was wrong. On a production like this, sure someone had to be in charge, but everyone had to have leeway to do their job, not be micromanaged by an uptight executive.

She looked away first, her black lashes sweeping down over her accusing eyes.

“Sorry,” she murmured. “Go ahead, please.”

She retreated to stand by Frank, watching from the shade of the next cluster of palms.

Joel sat down, satisfaction

widening his smile. "Ready when you are," he said to Camille. Matt and Cassie laughed a little.

They resumed posing and smiling under the hot sun. As they worked, Joel gained a new respect for the two young models. Although they had to be as hot as he, neither Matt nor Cassie complained, even when Tanah had to dab sweat from their faces and fix their makeup again and again. Cassie moved into the shade the moment each shot finished, and once Joel saw her blink as if her eyes stung.

"Sun-block in my eye." She

grimaced. Joel nodded. He was wearing sunscreen himself, and it did sting when perspiration melted it into the eyes.

Over under the shade of the palms, Frank said something to Bella, and from the corner of his eye, Joel watched as she nodded. Frank patted her hand and then went down to work on his boat, and the stocky Kobe wandered over to take his place beside Bella.

“What a horrible scowl, Joel,” Camille called. “Let’s have that smile back.”

Kobe said something to Bella. Joel smiled for the camera even as

he tensed, his hackles rising unaccountably.

Then two things happened — Bella snapped her head around to scowl at the Hawaiian, and the palm tree over their heads rustled. As Joel opened his mouth to call a warning, a coconut sailed down, striking Kobe directly on his shaggy head, and then bouncing off his shoulder to land in the sand. The stocky crewman stumbled back, one hand to his head. With a foul look at Bella, he stalked away.

Joel winced in sympathy. The guy must have one hell of a hard head. He could've been seriously

injured. But then he looked back at Bella, and his eyes narrowed. He expected anything but what he saw. On her face, as she gazed after the retreating Kobe, was a look of mingled triumph and fear.

Camille was watching with an avid gaze. She raised her camera and snapped off a few shots of Bella. She almost seemed to be enjoying Bella's discomfiture.

Maybe she'd been ticked off by Bella's hovering. Or maybe it was related to the warm look Camille had given him when he'd defended her. He hoped to hell she hadn't read more into his words than a

desire to finish their task.

Finally, it was time to break for lunch, and it was a damn good thing, as Joel was about ready to burst out of his skin. He needed to move, and quiet the odd, half-formed questions and speculation in his mind.

He changed back into a soft pair of his own swim shorts, and his trail-running shoes. "I'm heading up into the woods," he told Frank, who was setting out lunch. "Don't hold food for me. I'll rummage when I get back."

“Okay,” Frank agreed. “Keep an eye out for Bella, yeah? She went up right ahead of you.”

Joel finished knotting a bandanna around his head to catch perspiration. She had disappeared a few moments ago, come to think of it. Right after that second coconut had fallen.

“Yeah,” he agreed automatically. “Sure thing.” As he headed up into the damp shadows of the forest, he scanned the forest ahead with anticipation. He’d catch up with her in a few moments. That was good, because he had a few things to say to her.

Bella dashed into the forest, as if she could outrace the tumult of emotion warring inside her. She'd dropped that coconut on Kobe. She knew she had, even with no proof and no experience prior to today. She'd done it as surely as if she'd climbed the tree and cut it loose.

Or had she? Her civilized side was reeling from the implications that she was capable of loosing such anger on another person *and* that she had been able to free the coconut.

But from deep in her middle,

sheer, naughty triumph bubbled up and burst free. She let it out, her husky, breathless laughter echoing along the trail of dark lava she followed. Oh, Pele, it had felt good to watch that fool get thumped right on the head. The Hawaiian evidently thought he was some kind of great catch. Let him go chase another wahine.

She had enough problems, such as the new one with the photographer.

Looking over Camille's shoulder at her camera earlier, Bella had been startled and then disturbed to notice that several of the shots

seemed out of focus, or not centered well.

And then Joel Girand had to butt in and accuse her of meddling, when she'd only been trying to do her job. One for which she felt more ill-equipped as the day wore on. She liked people, but she had been shaken by the events of last night, and now this. She hated having to question another professional's work, but the whole expedition, and possibly her job, depended on Camille's skill as a photographer. And the forest couldn't help with that, she thought wryly.

She'd phoned her boss from the shade of the palms by the shore.

Regina Rayburn was the daughter of the owner, and not much older than Bella. She was generally fairly easy to work for, as long as one understood her need to prove herself to her father and the way that colored all her business decisions. Since Bella was driven by similar needs, although to whom she had to prove herself, she wasn't sure, she felt a sense of kinship with the other woman

"How's it going out there?" Regina asked, her voice relaxed. Bella sighed inwardly, knowing

that since it was the weekend, the other woman was probably sitting by the beachside pool of the family home on Maui.

“Fine,” Bella said. “Everyone’s working very hard. The models we hired are great.”

“Fabulous. Any problems?”

“There is one thing.” Bella turned her back on the group in the center of camp. “Did someone check the credentials of our substitute photographer?”

“Oh, that’s right. The photographer from Hilo was injured, wasn’t she?” Regina’s tone was regretful. “Just let me look...oh

yes. This, um, Camille has stellar credentials. List of references a mile long—mostly California companies. And Bob checked her portfolio. He's thorough. Why, is there a problem?"

Bella looked over her shoulder at the slender woman laughing with Joel as he stood, stretching mightily. She wished she hadn't waited so long to voice her worries, but Mr. Big Shot had been so adamant that she leave the photographer alone to work. Camille looked back at Bella, still smiling, and Bella turned away again, looking out at the sea

sparkling in the sun.

“I think there may be. I watched her take some of the shots, and they looked out of focus, not centered, that kind of thing.”

“Ask her to show you the work she’s done so far,” Regina said decisively. “I hope you’re simply mistaken, but report right back to me. This is crucial, Bella.”

“I will.” Bella hung up the phone and sighed again, knowing she faced a further confrontation with Camille, one of the people she really liked on the trip. Well, maybe she could keep it light, just ask to go over the day’s shots. Her

stomach knotted at the thought of beginning again with a new photographer. They'd have to send Frank back to ferry him or her out.

She'd speak with Camille as soon as she got back to camp. But, oh, if only she could keep running and forget it.

Bella picked up her pace, arms and legs pumping smoothly, racing deeper into the forest. Her feet flew along the ribbon of lava, worn by countless years of rain and footsteps. How many of her ancestors had walked this way? Her eyes wide, she scanned the forest as she ran, seeing what they had seen.

To her left, a solid embankment rose steeply, the rosy pewter of a now entwined with vines and shrubs that had found footholds in crevices. To her right, the forest had taken hold, growing up through and among the ribbons of lava. The trail led up a gradual slope through a tunnel of living green.

She was breathing hard, but she felt good — wonderful, in fact. Her breath was quick and hard, her body exulting in the chance to cut loose from the chains of civilization and run free through her forest.

But wait. *Her* forest? She paused for a moment on the brink of a

sharp turn in the trail, jogging in place, her eyes wide as she explored the powerful feelings coursing through her. Yes, hers. It felt right and good that she should think of this place as her own. All around her the deep heartbeat of the island and the steady, hushed murmur that was life, flowed through the trees, the plants. And just ahead, water, like a silken whisper, beckoned her to come and drink.

A steady thud intruded in her newfound idyll. She whirled. Footsteps pounded up the trail after her. Her heart leapt, and on impulse, she reached up, grasped a

vine and used it to scramble up the steep bank beside her, over the small ridge and into the shadows of the trees growing on top.

From her hiding place, she could see the trail below. A shaft of sunlight streamed down onto the trail, and into its beam ran the only man she wanted to see even less than the amorous Kobe. Joel Girand. He paused for a moment, and she tensed instinctively, poised to run away.

But she stayed, caught by the sheer masculine power and grace of his near-naked body in the sunlight. The warm light poured

over his damp hair and the tanned skin on his powerful, athlete's frame, highlighting the dew of perspiration.

His broad chest heaved with his hard breaths, the swell of his pectorals dusted with only the faintest tracing of reddish-gold hair. But that appeared again, a darker trail that headed south across his washboard-abdomen and into his low-riding shorts. His happy trail, as Claire would say. Bella had been close enough to caress that intriguing line. Her fingertips twitched. She could almost feel the crisp, silky texture

of that hair, and the heated plush of his skin underneath.

Au'e! On her last trip to Naweia, she and her cousin Zane had spent time every day running and hiking the trails above Naweia, he in brief shorts, but she'd felt companionship, liking — not this heated, unwilling awareness.

Joel stood for an instant, his breath audible in the quiet air. She could see his gaze flick up the trail, and then he turned his head, zeroing in on the vine she'd used — still swinging. And there was no breeze, not a breath of one.

Bella's heart leapt, and she

clenched her hands, willing the vine to be still. With mingled elation and fear, she felt it cease all movement.

Too late. Something made him follow it with his gaze, up the rock face – simple deduction or a hunter's intuition.

His gaze, piercing golden-brown under his heavy brows, met hers. The bandanna tied across his forehead only enhanced the masculinity of his face, like a *kalaunu*, crown of her ancestors. Electricity arced through the still air between them – awareness and something else.

Something that made her body contract, every muscle poised to retreat from his threat. Not sleazy, as Kobe's had been, but sheer masculine power against a smaller, slighter feminine creature. It caused other changes too, deep in the pit of her belly. Changes she was unused to and certainly was not going to suffer for this arrogant alpha male.

She raised one eyebrow, staring down at him. She might have kissed him on the rocks, but she wouldn't allow him to become the aggressor, to take the lead in their sensual duel. He might have routed her during the photography

session, but he would not do so here, in her forest.

His eyes narrowed, his broad jaw hardening subtly.

“Go away.” Her voice was soft, breathless in her own ears. Her heart thundered in her breast, and she clenched her hands into fists in a desperate denial of the other voices that whispered in her ears, in her blood. *“Take him, little sister. Keep him here with you.”*

He stared up at her, and then gave her a quizzical look. He shook his head once.

“You really do have some control issues, don’t you? Relax, Princess.

Frank asked me to keep an eye out for you, that's all."

Bella stood where she was as he jogged easily on up the trail.

She took a deep, shaky breath, willing away the urge to leap after him, to make him listen, make him understand she was just trying to stay in control of this expedition, and of herself...and of something else so powerful she had the terrifying notion she'd only begun to explore the edges of what she was capable of doing.

She swallowed hard and closed her eyes, letting the comfort of the forest close around her once again.

A *kamāli'i wahine*, a princess? Indeed, here she felt like a beloved one returned to a place she should never have left.

Which was crazy, as she'd never been here before, but it didn't matter. She was going to revel in her freedom for as long as she could. Which was only — she pulled her phone from the waistband of her shorts and checked it — another hour. Time for a long run and a stop on the way back for a swim.

Using the vine, she slipped back down the embankment. Once on the trail, she paused long enough to smile with dawning delight at how

easy and smooth it had been to climb up and then back down, as if the vine had helped her, pulled her. She'd always been active, but here she felt as if she were a little more powerful somehow.

Joel Girand's footsteps had long since faded, so she jogged around the bend in the trail, confident he was gone.

After a few moments, the trees thinned on the right. Through them she could see a sunlit grotto with a pool of fresh water surrounded by greenery. A waterfall poured into the pool from the mountainside above, and lava rimmed the bank.

It was a beautiful spot, but it was too close to camp. Any of the others might come here, and she didn't want to be caught naked. She looked up at the waterfall. It was large enough it had to be coming from another pool above.

She ran up the steep trail and then on instinct slipped from the path into the forest. She had to scramble over downed logs to get there, but there was indeed a second, smaller pool. A narrower waterfall splashed down over the wet black rock into the pool, spray wafting in the still air, a rainbow arching in the sunshine. Red

flowers hung heavy over the water, and birds called in the trees, a poignant cry of welcome.

Best of all, the small bowl of rock commanded a view of the shore, the sea and the camp below, and yet no one in the pool below or on the trail would even know she was here.

Bella stopped and let her small backpack slip to the ground beside the pool. She took a deep breath of the damp, perfumed air. It was one of the most beautiful places she'd ever seen. She would be back soon to bathe, after she finished her run.

The lava trail she'd been

following headed up the mountainside, where the lava had flowed down in ribbons around obstacles. Bella followed it up into the hushed green damp, along the rivulet that flowed clear and bright, splashing down over the rock. She followed first one ribbon of lava, then another, until she was tired, her legs shaking, breath coming hard, not quite enough to relieve the weariness in her muscles. Sweat dewed her skin, and dirt streaked her arms and legs where she'd scrambled over obstacles and through the foliage.

She perched on a rock and

looked around her, squinting in the bright sun. She was high on the mountain, above the camp and all the people and annoyances, large and small, that awaited her there.

Out below her stretched the green roof of the forest, swaying slightly in the breeze now picking up. Flashes of red lehua blossoms, yellow orchids, and the dart of a flock of bright scarlet 'I'iwi birds colored the canopy. She straightened, head high as she surveyed the green paradise. Every motion of the living forest called to her. *"Stay with us, little sister. Immerse yourself in our beauty, be one*

with us."

Bella drew in a deep breath, pulling in the scents of the tropical wild. The damp perfume heated as it swirled deep inside her, twining down through her middle and out into her extremities, as if to draw her into movement, into dance. A dance of offering to the wild fertility of this place.

As much as she was coming to love all things Hawaiian, she really should learn hula. Yes, as soon as she got back to Nawea, she'd ask the Ho'omalus to teach her or direct her to a private dance class somewhere on the island.

The decision satisfied her, but it also left her restless. She shifted on her perch, arching her back, as her yearning for graceful, rhythmic movement morphed into something deeper, hotter, more intense.

She wanted...she wanted sex. She wanted a man, tall and strong and virile, moving with her in the oldest dance of all.

A face and form appeared in her mind. Joel, as clear as if he stood before her, his mouth soft from their kiss, eyes full of heat, hands reaching for her. And the male package she'd seen in his wet swim

trunks now rigid, erect, waiting for her to take it, take him.

A wave of sheer, wanton desire seized her, and Bella bent over with a moan, her hands fisted on her knees. Her breasts felt swollen, her nipples hard and needy against the fabric of her sports bra. She squeezed her thighs tight, trying to quell the tortuous ache that was spreading through her pussy, at once sweet and agonizing as her body readied itself for the man it wanted.

What was happening to her? She felt half out of control. She had enjoyed sex with her few partners,

but she'd never felt as if her body were taking over, leaving her at the mercy of her sexuality.

One fact was utterly clear — she couldn't go back to camp this way. She was just carried away by nerves, tension and...and this place, that was all. She'd take care of her problem the way all single women did, by herself. Then she'd carry on with her day.

She was in the open here, though. Below stretched the sea, turquoise and clear near the shore, deepening to blue out in the deep. White-capped waves rode the surface, the white lace of the surf

splashing on the point. She could see camp, a glimpse of yellow through the trees. Joel's tent.

Out on the western and southern horizons, heavy clouds massed, belying the blue sky overhead. Below them, the air was dark and misty, as if it was raining at sea. Perhaps they would get a thunderstorm.

She must remember to check the weather, as well as figure out how to deal with Camille, Joel and Kobe. Au'e, she just wanted to hide away from them all.

The grotto waited for her. She dashed down the trail, leaping from

rock to rock, grabbing a vine here, an overhanging branch there.

In a few moments, she'd reached the upper pool. The air was heavy and damp. The branches of the trees and shrubbery hung still, in an expectant hush. Bella listened for a moment, looking around her for any sign of life. But there was only the sound of her heavy breathing and the water spilling over the waterfall.

And the voices, calling her, urging her. *"Come little sister. Give yourself up to us, and drink of our pleasure."*

Bella pulled her sports bra off

over her head and dropped it to the ground, then wriggled out of her shorts and toed off her shoes. She stepped out of the pile of discarded clothing, feeling at once naughty and deliciously free, as if she were casting off the annoying bonds of civilization.

For an instant, she thought she heard the pound of footsteps on the trail, and she froze, her arms covering her breasts and mons. But there was no further sound, and she knew that even if someone, like Joel, passed, they couldn't see this grotto from the trail. And the voices were still urging her on, not

warning her, so she guessed the person was gone. She relaxed again.

The air was a soft kiss on her bare skin, and as she stepped into the pool, the petals of the overhanging blooms caressed her skin. She shivered with pleasure, raising her hands to cup her breasts, pinching her nipples. It felt so good, as did the brush of leaves against her bare bottom, the tickle of a vine down her back, the cool water rising up around her.

Stepping into the water, she sank back, letting it envelope her. Then she rose up again, tipping her head back to let the water stream from

her hot face, her hair a sleek fall down her back. She slid her palms down over her ribcage, the flat plain of her belly, and cupped her mons, moaning at the relief of touching herself where she was swollen and needy.

The sun streamed down through the trees, hot on her bare skin, while the water was cool around her legs. The blossoms hanging around her face and shoulders spilled their perfume in a heady aphrodisiac. It intensified when the blossoms nodded in a warm breeze, brushing the skin of her face, her shoulders and her breasts with

caresses as delicate as silk.

She stroked her fingers into her swollen, wet labia and found her clitoris, a hard, rigid bud. Once she touched herself there, Bella could no more have stopped than she could have stopped the passage of the sun. She stroked herself in time with her pulse, with the subtle throb that was the heart of the forest, beating in time with her own, encouraging her, praising her, driving her on.

Her need intensified into a hard clench of inner muscles, and she came, her pussy quaking, her body trembling with pleasure.

Only when her soft cry mingled with the rush of the waterfall did Bella realize she had called out. She couldn't bring herself to care. As her orgasm calmed, she opened her eyes, more relaxed than she'd been in days.

“Ae, little sister. Find your pleasure here, with us.”

She slipped into the water and swam across the small pool and back, wading out to retrieve the small bottle of biodegradable shampoo and body wash from her pack. Then she soaped herself, enjoying the slippery caress of her hands on her body. Humming to

herself, she rinsed off and then soaped her hair, rinsing it under the waterfall.

She left the pool reluctantly, dried off and pulled on cotton panties and a T-shirt dress. She combed her wet hair down her back. After stepping into her sandals, she bundled her running shorts and bra into her bag, and set off down the trail to camp.

"Return to us soon, little sister."

"Mahalo," she murmured. "I will be back."

A little while later, Bella stepped

out of the forest into the camp area, reluctant to end her forest idyll. She paused for a moment in the shade. Even as she contemplated the tasks ahead, she felt loose and relaxed. She looked around. Joel was still gone, but the others were lounging in the shade, drinks in hand, while Frank worked aboard his boat.

Out to sea, the dark clouds loomed, closer than when she'd looked at them from up on the mountain. She pulled out her phone and opened it to click the NOAA weather app.

She frowned as she read the small screen. A weather alert had

been issued for the north Kona coast; late afternoon thunderstorms, with possible heavy rain. A small craft advisory had been issued for the coastal waters.

She tapped her phone against her chin. Frank was supposed to go back to Kona and return to get them the next day. But perhaps they should go back early, while the sea was calm enough to be safe. She walked down the shore to the boat. He looked over the side to nod at her.

“What’s up?”

“I just checked the weather report,” she said, raising a hand to

shade her eyes against the intense glare of the sun. "Have you been watching that storm?"

"Can't miss it. It's supposed to head off to the north, though. Shouldn't be anything for us to worry about."

"Do you think it's safe for us to stay here? Maybe we should get back before it gets rough."

"Nah," he said easily.

"Rainstorms go through the channel all the time, Nani."

"If you're sure." She wasn't worried for herself, but she really didn't want to be stuck here with this group if they couldn't work.

Bella went up to eat lunch, reassured that Frank knew the sea here as well as anyone. If he said the storm would pass by, then most likely it would.

Camille and Li sat by in the shade near the lunch table, cold drinks in hand. Bella looked at the lunch table and then walked over to sit by Camille, her shoulders tightening in a familiar knot.

“Do you mind if I look at the photos you’ve taken so far?” she asked. “I’ll check them against my list and see which shots we still have left.”

The other woman took a drink

and looked at Bella over her glass.
“Certainly. Li, get the camera.”

The Asian handed Bella the camera with his usual flat stare, bordering on rude, and popped his gum. She glanced away, resisting the urge to pull a branch down and swat him with it. She'd about had it with hostile males.

She held the big camera carefully and clicked through several of the shots Camille had taken that morning. Joel smiled up at her from the small screen. He certainly photographed well.

Of course, she'd known that from the blow-ups the ad

department had shown them. The other women had stared at his image, their eyes dreamy. Bella's face heated as she recalled she'd been smitten with that warm, brown gaze, herself. Now she knew the true power of his personality. The man should come with a warning label.

She clicked hastily to the next photograph and frowned. It was out of focus, blurry. So were the next several. Leaning over, she held the camera out to Camille.

"Do you need to redo this sequence, where they're setting up the tents?" she asked. She watched

Camille.

The other woman laughed, that attractive low chuckle. "Oh, you really don't know anything about photography, do you? Those are backgrounds. You know, soft shots for title pages and that kind of thing."

"Oh." Bella nodded, not sure she got the concept. The other woman seemed very sure of herself. "I didn't see a request for that in the list I was given, though."

Camille shrugged, still amused. "They're on me. A gift."

Bella met the other woman's confident gaze, bemused. Finally

she nodded and went back to clicking through the sequence of photos. The next set, of Joel and Cassie eating lunch around the small fire-pit, were much better.

“What about these?” Bella asked of a set of shots by the water that seemed off center.

Camille sighed patiently.

“They’re fine. It’s all about how we crop the shots.” She raised her carefully groomed brows at Bella.

“You need to relax, dear.”

Since Joel chose that moment to saunter out of the forest, wearing nothing but wet trunks and a smile, Bella decided it was time to follow

Camille's advice. She rose, handing the camera back to the photographer. "Thanks for your time. I'm sure you're right."

Her stomach growled, and she realized that she was starving.

She and Joel reached the food preparation table at the same time. Joel looked down at her, secret amusement gleaming in his brown eyes. Leftover from their kiss, or some new amusement at her expense. She eyed him uncertainly, feeling her cheeks heat in spite of her certainty that he couldn't possibly have seen her at the pool — could he? She flushed more hotly at

the thought of anyone, especially him, watching her touch herself.

She jerked her gaze away from his, and then regretted it as her gaze landed on the bulge of his biceps and the crease of his underarm where it swelled into one broad pectoral. His skin was smooth, a hint of auburn hair visible in his armpit. He exuded the now familiar scent of warm, healthy, virile male. Au'e, she wanted to lean forward and press her face against him, breathe him in.

His arm moved, and she realized he was holding out one hand,

courteously indicating she should go first.

Her stomach growled again, and she managed to nod her thanks. Food — that was what she wanted in her mouth, not him. She grabbed two plates, sliding one toward him without looking at him again.

“Thanks. You want some of this?” He held up a plastic dish of potato-macaroni salad, an island favorite.

Bella nodded, forcing her gaze away from that large, capable hand. “Are you — do you want a sandwich?”

He leaned closer, peering into

the container of Leilani's pulled pork, laden with barbecue sauce, and giving her a whiff of his clean, spicy scent. "Oh yeah. Definitely some of that."

They worked together and in a short time had plates laden with salad, fresh vegetables and fruit, and sandwiches. Joel's mound of food was twice the size of Bella's, but then he outweighed her by at least fifty pounds of solid muscle.

They turned toward the dining table at the same time, and a half smile lifted the corner of his mouth as he paused, waiting for her to go first.

Bella smiled back at him, drawn by the pleasure in his gaze as it flicked down the fall of her hair and back to her face.

“Helloo-o,” called a voice from the shore. “Aren’t you coming for a swim, Joel?”

Tanah posed on the shore, wearing an emerald bikini and a smile. She was wet, her generous curves nearly bursting from their tiny wet covering. The sun glinted on her silky, tanned skin.

Joel sat down beside Bella. “Already took one, thanks,” he called back. “Gotta eat.”

“Okay, maybe later.” The

redhead turned and sauntered back into the surf, and Bella choked on her iced tea. The green bikini bottom was a thong, leaving Tanah's lush bottom completely bare.

She peered at Joel from the corner of her eye. He was chewing a big mouthful of sandwich, but he was watching Tanah. Of course, so were the other men.

Bella bit hard into her own sandwich, and the cluster of palms near the shore rustled. She took a calming breath. No, none of that. She was not jealous.

Well, maybe a little. Oh, all right,

a lot.

She chomped down on another bite of sandwich, and the palm trees shivered harder. A coconut hit the sand where Tanah had been standing.

Knee-deep in the water, the redhead whirled, her eyes wide. She teetered, threw her arms out for balance, and then fell back in the water with a big splash.

Joel watched, a forkful of potato-mac salad frozen halfway to his mouth. "Never really realized how dangerous coconut palms are," he said.

Bella slid her fork into her own

salad, the creamy filling glistening as she lifted it to her lips. "Neither did I."

She chewed with relish.

"You'd look better in that suit," he added as he scooped up another bite. He looked at her, his gaze sweeping lazily down over her, full of heat.

Bella froze and then swallowed with difficulty. She reached for her glass of iced tea and took a hasty drink. "Um — mahalo. I think."

She gave him an uncertain look, her face burning again and heat spiraling lower down. He'd imagined her in a thong? Oh, Pele.

Chapter Seven

To Do: The tour director must manage any problems with support staff without disturbing the comfort and well-being of the guests.

The afternoon photo session began well, if Joel left out the heat and closeness of the air, and the way Camille had to remind him to smile on every shot. His attention span was shorter than the skirt of Ms. Hawaii's little dress. And now that he knew exactly what lay beneath, he could no more help

watching her than he could stop breathing for more than a moment.

He still wasn't sure what had made him pause on his way back down the mountain. He'd been running easily, relaxed from the hard run up to where the trees ended in a rough flow of lava. He'd enjoyed the view, drained the bottle of water stuffed in his waistband and headed back down.

Down in the green tunnel of forest above the pool where he planned to wash and swim again, a branch had overhung the trail, its fronds brushing the path. At first, Joel thought it had fallen, but when

he grasped the end to move it out of the way, it swayed back up along with the others on the tree. He shook his head at the oddity.

He would have continued on, except for the sound he heard. A soft cry that riveted him in his tracks—the sound of a woman finding pleasure. Sure that he recognized that voice, he quietly left the trail, following the faint sign that someone else had passed this way.

Peering through the foliage of a large tree, he saw the second, smaller grotto, with its pool and narrow waterfall. And standing

before it, her sleek head tipped back, her lovely golden skin bared to the sun, was Bella.

His heart froze and then thumped, hard, as every cell in his body leapt to urgent, lustful attention.

Standing before the little waterfall, her eyes closed, one hand trailing in the hip-deep water and the other still cupped between her thighs, flowers dangling around her as if they vied to ornament her nude beauty, she was sensuality incarnate. Beyond a Hawaiian beauty contestant, now she looked like a photo from a men's

magazine. Her little breasts were as lovely as he'd suspected, round and plump, with small nipples like beige berries that made his hands twitch, his mouth water.

Joel stared, riveted as she sank bonelessly into the water and then swam toward the bank, her dark eyes sleepy and soft. For one halcyon moment, in which his cock tried its best to leap out of his jock strap, he thought she was swimming to him, but then realized her destination was the small red pack sitting on the bank beside a pile of clothing.

Two things happened. She rose

from the shallow water, rivulets streaming down over her sleek curves, and just as he was about to get a world-class view of the sweet secrets that had been hidden in her hand, the branches in front of him suddenly sank down with a quiet swish.

They'd been hung up somehow; otherwise, he wouldn't have seen her. Joel had shaken his head, bemused and horny as hell. God above, she was the hottest wahine he'd ever seen in these islands. It was all he could do to keep his feet planted where they were and not moving forward to do what his

cock demanded — claim her.

He'd groaned silently, palming his erection through his shorts. Was he going completely crazy, or was something a little freaky going on? First the coconuts, then the vine that had practically waved at him, making him look up and spot her standing on that rock like a diminutive Hawaiian warrior maiden, and finally this — tree branches stopping him on the trail and giving him a peep of her, but no more.

Well, nature might have conspired to point his way to her, but she sure as hell wouldn't see

the humor in that, and she wouldn't thank him for spying on her either.

He'd forced his feet into motion again, turning back to the trail. He'd been so aroused that the short walk to the lower pool was torture. In fact, when he'd slid into the pool, his cock jerked as if it were in the grasp of a lover's hand. He'd looked down at himself ruefully, at his cock straining up, his balls drawn up tight, ready to give her everything he had. He sure as hell couldn't go back to camp this way.

Lying back in the water, letting it support him, Joel closed his hand

around his cock, handling himself with long, firm strokes. His orgasm rocketed up out of his toes, and as he climaxed, clenching his jaw to hold back his hoarse shout of completion, her face was before him.

He'd had her in his arms this morning, and she'd kissed him. He wanted more. He'd have her, if it meant spending the rest of this trip convincing her he was not just a cardboard cutout of a celebrity. Even if it meant staying on the island as long as she was here. Hell, he'd even fly back to Maui.

It was at this point he'd shaken

his head, spraying water around him like a dog. He tipped back his head and took a deep breath of the hot, still air. *Down, boy.* He was thinking crazy. No woman was worth chasing like that. He didn't even really know her. They hadn't had a real conversation, just sniping back and forth.

He'd had a few crushes in his time, even thought himself in love once with a girl in college. They'd done all kinds of outdoor activities together — rock-climbing, white-water rafting, skiing in the winter. They'd had sex in some pretty crazy places, like the back of her

Volkswagen van in a ski resort parking lot, and a hot springs right off a highway in North Idaho. But she'd gone off to graduate school, and he'd headed for California to work at a wilderness camp. She'd called and asked him to come and visit her back East at school, maybe move back there. But by then, time and distance had cooled his ardor, and he'd discovered that he had an endless thirst for exploration and adventure.

At least in his twenties, his thirst had seemed endless. Lately, gigs like this looked more attractive. Put some solid money in the bank just

by having his name on their product, and then kick back for a while. Now, with the uncertainty about his show's longevity, this simple assignment had taken on new importance. DelRay's sponsorship would make him attractive to other sporting goods companies. If it turned out he could sell tents and backpacks, he'd have an easier time selling *The Zone*.

The show was on summer hiatus, so he needn't report back for a month or more. He had plenty of time to hang around the islands while other sponsors looked at the DelRay ad campaign, if that was

what he decided. He just hated to stay here because of an uptight city girl.

However, his body didn't know the difference. It was all he could do to keep his hands off of Bella while they worked together to make their lunch. He wanted to pull her back against him and bury his nose in her hair, get a big hit of her faint, flowery scent while he cupped her breasts with one hand and probed between her thighs with the other. They could talk later.

When she asked him if he wanted some, he fought the urge to

pretend she meant more than lunch.

Having Tanah shake her bodacious booty in front of him had been fun but in a kind of abstract way. Just part of the pretty scenery. All he could think was that he'd so much rather have another, very close look at the woman seated beside him at the picnic table.

He was aware of his Hawaiian princess all afternoon, as if she gave off little stringers like the feathery tendrils of a hibiscus blossom that brushed against his awareness no matter where she was, even when he wasn't looking at her.

At least she stayed back out of Camille's way, clutching her computer in the shade of the palms instead of hovering behind the photographer as she had that morning.

Bella looked fresh and relaxed, in a little red-and-white T-shirt dress that ended high above her knees. Under her big straw hat, her hair was loose down her back, drying in a swath that shone in the sun when she bent her head.

In fact, she looked really relaxed. Joel watched the smile hovering at the corners of her soft mouth and smiled to himself as he

remembered how it had gotten there.

He'd bet he could put a bigger one on her face. Despite his run and his own very relaxing swim, as the afternoon wore on he grew increasingly distracted and edgy. What the hell was it with this wahine? Despite her controlling ways, he couldn't wait to get his hands on her.

"Joel? Joel. We're ready for the next shot."

"What?" Joel pulled his attention back to the shoot. His already hot face reddened as he realized that the others were staring at him.

Actually, Tanah was scowling, and Cassie was rolling her eyes while fanning herself with one of the leaf fans Frank had woven for the women.

Matt just looked hot. “Hey, moke, stay with us. If I don’t get in the water pretty soon, I’m gonna melt.”

“Sorry,” Joel said. “I’m ready for a swim, myself. Guess my head’s already out there.”

“Oh, is that where it is?” Tanah shot him a dark look from under her huge straw hat. But she managed to thrust her breasts in his face as she fixed his makeup for the

next shot, so he guessed that even catching him watching another woman hadn't quelled her determination to get his name on a notch on her bedpost.

This was borne out in startling detail when she leaned even closer to him, pressing her mons against his knee as she worked, dabbing pancake makeup on his chin. Speechless at her bold move, Joel sat very still. She smiled at him, her full lips parting to allow the tip of her tongue to peep out.

"I can make you feel as good as you look, big guy," she whispered. "Anything you want, any way you

want it.”

“Huh...,” he managed as her hot, damp thighs nestled around his bare knee. “I, uh—”

“Tanah,” whined Cassie. “Come on! I’m melting over here.”

“Coming.” Tanah winked at Joel. Then she sauntered over to the blonde, her hips swaying.

Joel jerked his gaze away and looked straight into a pair of stormy, dark eyes. Bella arched one brow at him and then turned away. His spirits lifted, for some reason. He’d been right earlier. Ms. Hawaii was jealous.

Between photos, Joel pulled his phone out and sat back in a camp chair to check his messages. His pulse leapt with excitement. His producer wanted to know when he was going to be back in Kona, as he had tentative specs for the trip to the Arctic. Joel quickly texted that he'd be back in two days and ready to join an online discussion with maps and charts.

His producer responded that there was no hurry, and Joel grimaced, realizing that things must still be uncertain.

He texted his mother, ignored

two emails from a woman he'd met in Honolulu who seemed to think he should follow up their casual dinner with much more, and then checked his Twitter stream. What he saw made him scowl. Tanah had posted the photo of her cozying up to him at supper the night before. Hell, with her hanging on him that way, it looked like they were intimate. Especially with the caption "Whoz in *The Wild Zone* now? Hang'n with Joel Girand in Hawaii".

He sighed. He'd handle it the way he did all the Tweets and posts about him he didn't much care for

—ignore it. He wasn't a big enough celebrity to make magazine covers, but people still liked to be photographed with him. Harmless for the most part. Hell, when he was a kid, he'd have given anything to have his picture taken with Joe Sharpe, an outdoor enthusiast from Idaho who adventured all over the globe and wrote about it in outdoor magazines.

Frank worked around the camp, evidently making sure everything was ready for his departure. Joel didn't really notice that the other two Hawaiians weren't around, until midafternoon, when Camille

was taking her last few shots.

Frank strode up the beach to where Bella stood, a bright figure against the looming dark clouds building out at sea. In the hot, humid hush, Joel could hear a few of his words.

“...Eddy and Kobe lately?” he asked Bella, an unaccustomed scowl darkening his face.

Joel couldn't hear her answer, but she shook her head.

Frank set his hands on his narrow hips with a curse. “Dammit! I shoulda known...”

Bella replied, urging Frank to do something, gesturing toward the

boat.

Frank shook his head in a clear refusal.

All of Joel's antennae were up now. He rose from his camp chair, ignoring the startled silence he left behind him, and skirted the tents to where Frank and Bella stood.

"What's up?" he asked baldly. He didn't stop to consider whether they needed his counsel or why he felt compelled to give it.

Bella stiffened, but Frank turned to him. "My crew took off."

Joel looked at the trail heading up into the trees. "Where would they've gone?"

Frank shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe after some local weed, maybe to meet up with some kanakas on four-wheelers. Whatever, they've left us flat."

"You don't think they'll be back?" Bella asked him.

"Been gone a couple of hours," Frank said. "Only worked for me a few weeks, but they gotta know I won't stand for that, not on this trip. I told them their free time is evening. Sun goes down, they're off da clock."

"I'm surprised you'd want them to come back," Joel said to Bella. She looked away, her cheeks

flushing.

Frank scowled. "What happened?"

"Kobe made an inappropriate remark to me," she admitted.

"He *what*? That po'ino comes back, he'll have to deal with me."

Joel nodded approvingly. Frank thought a lot of her, and she should have shared her concerns with the older man.

Bella glared at Joel. "Well, he's gone now. And you should go back to Kailua Harbor if you're going, Frank."

Frank shook his head. "Change of plans. I'll go back Kailua Harbor

in da morning. I'll have to cancel the evening dive trip anyway, with that storm threatening. Tourists don't wanna go out with weather so close."

Joel watched Bella open her mouth to argue. He shifted and gave her a chiding look from behind Frank's shoulder. She paused, her mouth open, staring at him.

Then her soft mouth snapped shut, and she nodded at Frank.

Joel felt a surge of amusement. She did know when to shut up — occasionally.

Chapter Eight

To Do: The tour director will show only patience and a sunny demeanor. This will bring even the most challenging guest around.

Bella called Regina back, as requested. "How are the photos?" her boss asked.

"Well, Camille seems to know what she's doing," Bella admitted. "I guess I was wrong."

Regina laughed. "Well, that's a relief, hmm? And how is everything else? How is our

celebrity doing? Giving us our money's worth?"

Bella rolled her eyes. "Yes, but he's a monumental pain in the ass."

"Well," said Regina. Her tone had changed, serious now. "I'm sorry to hear that, Bella. Because you're going to have be very careful here. Joel Girand is big—very big. DelRay needs him to front this campaign. I'm sure you'll do everything in your power to make him comfortable. Do you understand what I mean?"

Bella's stomach tightened into a knot that matched the one gripping her shoulders and neck. She closed

her eyes, swallowing. "I think I do, Regina. I assure you, I'll...do my best to make Mr. Girand happy with his experience on the shoot."

"Good. Thank you. Is there anything else?"

Bella shifted her shoulders, trying to ease the tension. "No, everything will be — everything is fine."

"All right, good. Call me tomorrow, won't you?" There was a clear note of command in the question.

"Certainly."

Bella clicked her phone off and squeezed it in her hand, wishing it

was a sturdy branch that she could use to swat something, or someone.

And with the timing of a sit-com, a familiar voice spoke behind her. "Keeping the world running the way it should, Ms. Moran?"

She swallowed a fiery retort and willed her expression to calm. Then she turned to face Joel. "It seems to be fine without me for now. Was there anything you needed?"

One of his brows arched quizzically, his gaze teasing. "Not a thing, unless you want to help me change for my swim."

Her hand tightened on her phone until she felt the case bow, in

imminent danger of snapping. Loosening her grip with an effort, she managed to laugh as if he'd made a funny joke. "No, thanks. Have a nice swim."

Then she turned her back on him.

Joel stared after her, puzzled. She was taking his crap and not fighting back anymore. And she seemed to have lost interest in their flirtation.

In fact, that look on her pretty face had been completely unlike what he'd seen of her. It had been closed off, no irritation or other emotion at all. Her corporate face,

he'd bet.

That was it. She was on that red phone of hers several times a day. He could tell when she was talking to someone she loved — family or friends. Her posture was relaxed, her face alight, and she gestured and laughed as if the other person could see her. But when the calls were business, she was different. Stiff and careful. The good little corporate cog. And she did that thing with her shoulders, rolling them to ease tension.

That was how she'd looked during her phone conversation. *Bingo.*

“Hey,” he called. He followed her past the fire pit and into the trees. She ignored him. “Bella,” he said, putting some authority into his voice.

She stopped in her tracks, and he could see her take a deep breath before she turned, looking back at him over her shoulder. “Yes? Is there something you need?”

He caught up with her. This close, he could see every one of her lashes and the smoothness of her golden skin. “No, but there’s something I want.”

She looked wary.

He shook his head. “Listen. I

don't know quite how to put this, but...you don't have to be polite to me," he said. To his chagrin, he could feel his cheeks burn. Dammit, there was just no way to say this without revealing his awareness of his status as "star" of this deal.

"Like I'm some big hotshot. I don't need that, and I don't want it."

She raised one of her winged brows. "Really. Well, according to DelRay, you do, and you get it. And they're my employer."

"That's bullshit," he snapped, the heat in his face arrowing into his midriff and tightening his shoulders and arms. "Not to

mention boring as hell.”

She cocked her head and smiled like a mannequin in a store window. “Then prepare to be bored, Mr. Girand.”

He shook his head and took a step back. Because if he didn’t, he was going to grab her and...do something he’d probably regret. To deny the impulse, he hid behind derision.

“Well, for the record, I liked the real Bella a lot better. Let me know when she’s back.”

Turning, he stalked back to his tent to change.

Tanah lounged by the water

under an umbrella. She gave him a slow, triumphant smile as she approached.

“Ready for a swim?” she invited.

“You bet.” His ego still stinging, he held out one hand and helped her up. She clung to his hand as they walked into the water.

Joel eyed the approaching rainclouds and the curtains of rain hanging underneath. They had at most another half hour of sunshine. Might as well enjoy it. If that storm kept coming this way, they’d all be heading for cover in the caves Frank had mentioned.

Once they were hip-deep, Joel

freed his hand from Tanah's and dove under. He splashed about, scrubbing salt water over his face and hair, rinsing away makeup and hair cream, and then lay back in the water, enjoying the cool buoyancy and the hot sun.

Tanah paddled toward him, and he splashed water her way. She retaliated, and they played for a little while, laughing. He liked her a lot better when she wasn't trying to seduce him.

Cassie waded daintily in as well, in a tiny blue bikini, and swam out to them. "Oh, this is nice. Aren't you glad to be done modeling,

Joel?"

"Sure am. Don't know how you put up with it."

She shrugged. "I've only got a few more years before I'm too old. Until then, the money's too good to quit."

"Ah, if you don't mind my asking, how old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

Joel stared at her lovely, youthful face. In a few years, she'd just be getting interesting, mature enough to know what she wanted and have some experiences, things to talk about, and from a man's point of view, she'd still be plenty pretty.

What a crazy industry. He was damned glad he was only a visitor.

“Why aren’t you modeling?” he asked Tanah. He knew there were plenty of jobs for women with her build. Most of them might be pretty racy stuff, but with her seductive nature, he didn’t think that would put her off. She’d look fine posing in front of a race car in one of her little bitty outfits.

The redhead made a face. “I used to model. I got out of it a few years ago, when the photographers started complaining about having to airbrush my photos too much.”

He shook his head in

incomprehension, and she laughed. "Oh, Joel, you're sweet. Sagging skin, honey. I'm almost thirty, and it shows."

"You could have some work done," Cassie pointed out.

"Yeah, and spend my whole paycheck on nips and tucks?" Tanah made a rude noise. "No, thanks. Rather have it in the bank."

"Well, if thirty is too old," Joel said, "I'm over the hill and sliding down fast."

Now Bella Moran would be beautiful even when she was old, with that bone structure. He scanned the camp and found her,

still standing in the shadows of the trees, watching them.

“Yes, but you’re a man,” Tanah said. “It’s different for you.”

“Yes, I am.” He swam toward Tanah, waggling his eyebrows at her.

She shrieked with pretend fear and let him catch her, bracing her hands on his shoulders as he lifted her out of the water. Then, as he let her go, she hung on and slid down his body, locking her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck.

“Now you caught me, what are you gonna do with me?” she

purred.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Bella turn and dash into the forest, and the fun went out of his little game, just as the clouds edged over the sun and the air around them darkened.

He gave Tanah a friendly pat on her ass and tried to ignore her clamped over his groin like a limpet. "I'm going for a swim. You ladies want to come?"

"Depends on what we're going to do once we get there." Tanah pouted, and behind him, Cassie giggled.

Joel glanced from one to the

other, realization jolting through him. The two were not only friends, it seemed they weren't averse to being playmates. Whoa, he needed an out, and he needed one fast.

"Oh, it's great out there past the reef," he said. "Big waves rocking you around and turtles swimming by. If you're lucky, you might even see a shark. They're all along this coast, you know. Come on, it's great."

The two looked at him with identical expressions, brows crinkled, mouths open.

"No, thanks," Cassie said, paddling backward toward the

shore. "Anyway, haven't you been watching those clouds? It's going to rain."

"I don't think you should go out there," Tanah added, eyeing the mouth of the little lagoon as if scanning for large shapes under the water.

"I'll be fine, thanks. See you in a few." Joel swam out of across the reef, smiling to himself.

He swam north along the lava shelf, diving a few times to view the fish along the reef. With the looming clouds, the water was dim and the colors muted, so he settled into a swim, stroking through the

waves, enjoying the burn of working his muscles and his lungs. What he had told the women was true — there were sharks all along the coastline, but he knew they mainly hunted from dusk 'til dawn, and he wasn't spearfishing, so there was no blood to attract them.

As he swam, Joel had plenty of time to think past his initial irritation with Bella. If her DelRay bosses were telling her to give him the star treatment, that was a very good sign. It meant they considered him a real asset.

He grinned to himself as he stroked through the gentle waves.

Hot damn, this was good news.

He allowed himself half an hour, but when he heard thunder rumble over the sound of the surf, he headed back to the bay. He had a feeling they were going to have to break camp and move into those caves of Frank's.

Bella could not walk away from the unwelcome emotion burning in her chest. She was sickeningly aware that she was an absolute fool, because she was, in a word—jealous. Old-fashioned, green-eyed, cat-scratch jealous. Of playful,

seductive Tanah, who seemed to be just the kind of woman Joel wanted.

And why she cared, she could not understand. "He's not nice to you, Bella," she muttered to herself as she stalked up into the trees behind camp. "And he's a man slut. So forget him."

Maybe later she could drop a coconut on him. Yeah, right. She shook her head at her own wild imagination. She might as well go all the way and wrap him up with a vine and tickle him with flowers until he was crazy with desire for her, and then...she'd decided

whether to use him or walk away. This last image was hot but also silly enough she had to snicker at herself. She wasn't exactly the femme fatale type.

Focusing on her surroundings, she peered into the shadows under the fig trees. Behind them, just as Frank had said, was a dark opening.

She walked under the trees. The cave yawned before her, cloaked in shadows. The open mouth soared over her head, nearly ten feet high and wider than that by several feet.

She stepped cautiously inside, around a massive chunk of log that lay just inside the entrance as if the

surf had rolled it there long ago. The cave's roof curved down toward the back wall with only one break, a narrow tunnel that disappeared in inky blackness. The main cave seemed dry, and the floor was indeed sandy, with a sort of flat shelf at the back. There were a few dried palm fronds and a scattering of dried fig leaves that crinkled under her feet, but Bella saw no insects or other life.

Light shone through another opening in the cave wall, and peering through, she saw that there was another, smaller cave adjacent. It too was dry and habitable.

“Stay, little sister,” rustled the figs, their branches swaying gracefully at the mouth of the cave. *“Shelter here with us.”*

“Ae,” she murmured aloud. “I will take shelter.” But first, she wanted to make sure that tunnel wasn’t crawling with centipedes or other insects that would appear when the sun set. The rainforest had plenty of insects, large and small.

Warily, she pulled her small flashlight from her pocket and shined it into the narrow tunnel. The walls were of ebony lava, pocked with released air pockets.

The floor was covered with a dusting of sand and broken bits of lava.

Not seeing any movement on the floor or walls, Bella stepped cautiously around a bend in the tunnel, flicking her light ahead, past a heap of fallen rubble. She edged past it and then froze as her light flashed over a long, angular shape leaning against the wall. The beam of her flashlight zipped back and hovered. She stared, her mind blank with shock.

Like a huge, ugly insect, a weapon crouched against the wall, stubby, lethal looking. Some kind of

gun. She whipped her light past it, probing the next turn in the passage, but no movement stirred the shadows, and the only sounds were her breathing, swift and unsteady, and the surf outside, muffled by the walls of the tunnel.

Cautiously, her heart pounding, her instincts urging her to run the other way, Bella walked closer. Why had the weapon been left here? For protection or because someone intended harm? And who would want such a weapon here? It certainly wasn't a hunting rifle. She knew smugglers brought drugs onto the islands all the time. There

were too many ports and landing spots for Hawaiian law enforcement to patrol.

Anger curled in her belly. Someone had brought this instrument of death to her forest. She wanted it, and them, gone. But what to do with it? She couldn't very well appear in camp with it.

Frank would know what to do. She'd go and tell him. She started to turn away and then stopped. What if the weapon's owner was nearby? What if her group had landed where drug runners planned to meet, and they returned? She didn't want them

armed.

She set her jaw. She didn't need Frank. There was another way to handle this.

Reaching down, wincing at having to hold such a lethal object, she picked up the weapon by the stock and carried it back along the passage, pointing the barrel carefully away from herself. She peeped cautiously out into the main cave. Seeing no one, she tiptoed across the cave to the entrance.

Outside, thunder rumbled, long and deep, and the rising wind clattered through the palms.

Someone shouted something from the camp, and another voice called in answer. The storm was brushing the coast.

The commotion was the perfect cover. Sidling between two old fig trees, their roots tangled together in a series of looping knots, she climbed up from one twist of roots to another, grasping branches with her free hand, until she was hidden high in the thick clusters of shiny green leaves. Then she shoved the weapon up into a notch of the tree and stood for a moment, hanging on to the branches and breathing hard from her climb.

“Keep it for me,” she mumbled breathlessly. The trees swayed slightly, creaking around her, as if grasping hold of the weapon.

Whoever had left the gun would never find it up here. And if they did, she wasn't so sure the trees would let them have it back. Patting the smooth silver bark, Bella slipped down to the ground and into the storm.

The storm was not just brushing the coast, it was slamming down on it like an overturned bucket, a tropical downpour sheeting before the wind. The next half hour was a

blur of action, but in the end, camp had been broken. The gear had been hauled into the caves and the lunch table set up near the coolers. Bella's centerpiece sat askew in the center, and she spared a thought to wonder wryly who had decided to rescue that.

Everyone was inside, and they were all dripping wet. Frank was the last in, and he shoved a hand through his dripping hair. "Guess I was wrong about da storm," he said to Bella. "Sorry."

"No worries," she replied, swiping water from her own face. "If NOAA can be wrong, I guess

you can too.”

His face relaxed into a half smile. Bella was glad to see it. She knew from scraps of conversation overheard at Nawea that Frank had been a cop here in Hawaii for many years. He deserved to enjoy his second career, and if she had anything to say about it, he would take no blame for anything that went wrong on this expedition.

She needed to tell him about the weapon, but now was not the time, with everyone huddled nearby, shivering in their wet clothing and peering out at the storm.

Wind and rain lashed at the

shore, the palms bowing before the wind, rain pelting down in sheets that nearly obscured the sight of the surf splashing high over the rocks on the point. Fortunately, the cave mouth was protected by the fig and palm trees, so only the tattered edges of the storm flicked at the people huddled inside.

It had been a scramble, but they'd gotten the camp chairs, everyone's gear and sleeping bags, and the coolers. The small stove had been rescued too, and Frank and Joel had already made a place for it on the flat rock at the side of the cave.

The tents had been abandoned, as had the silver photography screens, which had already blown away, flashes of silver tumbling on the wind.

“Oh! There goes one of the tents,” Matt yelled over the storm. “And another.”

A yellow shape tumbled by, then a red. Bella winced. Those were expensive tents. After being used here, they would have been sold at a discount anyway, but she hated to lose them. Some boater would find hers floating at sea, she supposed.

“Our tent is stuck in the trees on the other end of camp,” Cassie

cried, peering around Matt's shoulder. "And I just remembered I left my new jacket in there."

They watched the storm until after a little while it abated, the wind dying down. But the rain continued, splatting down on rocks, trees and grass. By then, Bella was shivering as the temperature dropped, but riveted to the display of nature's fury like all the others.

Joel leaned against one side of the cave mouth, a little smile on his face, the wind tugging at his dripping T-shirt and shorts. He was actually enjoying it. So was she, she admitted guiltily. She wasn't a bit

sorry the camp had been blown apart, even if they did have to spend the night in this cave. She was tired of trying to be calm and cheerful while passion and temptation swirled around her in currents so strong they were nearly visible.

“Thank God we got the photos,” she muttered.

“Mm, good thing,” Camille agreed beside her. “Although I hope the cameras didn’t get too wet. They can be damaged so easily by water.”

Bella stared at her, dismay settling in her middle like a cold

stone. She thought newer cameras were water-resistant, but perhaps Camille's were older. In any case, if the photos were water-damaged, that meant they'd have to do this whole trip over again. She curled her hands into fists, her nails biting into her palms. Oh, Pele, what else could go wrong?

"I'm going to go change in the other cave," she said, turning to look for her duffel. "Ladies first, guys. Then you can have a turn."

She found her duffel at the back of the cave, underneath another bag. Pulling hers out, she lugged it into the other cave and set it back

around the natural corner of the cave wall. She stripped out of her wet dress and panties and tugged on a pair of red shorts, a brown T-shirt and her hooded sweatshirt.

Cassie and Tanah appeared, lugging their bags. "At least there aren't any bugs," Cassie said with a shudder as she set her bag down. She was shivering, her soaked clothing clinging to her slender form.

"Didn't see any." Bella finger-combed her hair and bundled her wet things into a neat pile beside her bag.

"God, I want to go home right

now,” Tanah said, a vicious edge to her voice as she yanked at her wet top. “I hate this.”

“I know,” Cassie agreed, pulling her wet clothing off. “It sucks the big one. Give me an outdoor shoot at an estate anytime.”

Bella glanced at Tanah’s lush, naked body. The woman certainly didn’t look like she enjoyed vigorous exercise. Here for the first time after Melia’s wedding, Bella had spent much of the time up in the forest with her cousin Zane, running trails and exploring. During an afternoon rainstorm, they’d raced down the rain-slick

trail, whooping with joy.

She stepped over bags and walked back into the other cave. Camille was rummaging in her bag. Matt stood watching the storm, while Frank stood outside the tunnel, drying himself off with his shirt. He jerked his head toward the tunnel. "Joel's in there, seeing where it goes."

"Let's go," Bella said. "Lava tubes are so fascinating."

Frank gave her an odd look, but he nodded. "Sure are."

Bella switched her flashlight on, and Frank's footsteps crunched behind her as she walked into the

tunnel. She expected to see Joel around every twist, but when they reached the spot where she'd found the gun, Bella stopped, turning to Frank.

"I was in here earlier," she said in a low voice. "And I found a big gun, right here."

"What?" Frank's voice sharpened. "Where? What'd you do with it?"

"I—" She bit back her words as footsteps crunched behind them. Whirling, she squinted as the beam of a flashlight hit her in the eyes.

"Yeah, Ms. Moran. What did you do with it?"

She scowled, her heart pounding. The low, mocking voice was Joel's. "Get that light out of my eyes," she hissed.

He did so but moved so close she could feel the heat of his body. "You two might want to keep your voices down a little more," he breathed. "Sound really echoes along this tunnel."

Frank stepped closer as well. "Nani?"

"It was some kind of automatic weapon—I think," she whispered. "Leaning against the side of the tunnel, as if someone had left it there purposely."

“Automatic what?” Joel managed to convey skepticism even in a whisper.

“I don’t know.” She wanted to whack him in the ribs with her elbow. “I’ve only seen them in the movies. But it was the kind the bad guys always have.”

“Oh, that’s helpful,” he muttered.

Frank lifted a hand for silence, listened for a moment and then bent close to Bella’s ear. “What’d you do with it, Nani?”

“It’s up in those fig trees outside the cave.” She felt Joel lean close to hear her answer as well.

“I’d better go put it up higher,” he said instantly.

She pressed a staying palm on his broad chest, warm and hard under his wet shirt. “No one will find it, believe me. I climbed way up. You can’t see it from the ground.”

Frank moved restively. “Okay, good. But as soon as this storm lets up, we’re out of here.” He placed a hand on Bella’s shoulder. “And listen, you stay close, you hear me? I don’t want anyone wandering off. If this has anything to do with those two po’ino fools I hired, there’s no telling what they’re up to, or what low-life friends of theirs

are out there waiting. This could be about drugs.”

Bella opened her mouth to tell him that she would know if strangers approached, and then closed it, uncertainty knotting in her middle. Would she? Maybe she was completely off her rocker for thinking the forest spoke to her. Her shoulders knotted as she remembered hearing that mentally ill people often thought they were perfectly sane.

“I won’t let her out of my sight,” Joel promised. Bella jumped as he patted her on the ass, his big hand lingering in the darkness. She did

elbow him this time, hard, but he merely chuckled.

When they emerged from the passageway, Camille turned to eye them. "What were the three of you doing in there? We could hear you whispering."

Li had come in and stood near her, arms crossed over his chest. He was dripping wet and breathing hard, but his jaws worked as he chewed his ever-present gum.

"That passage goes back a long ways," Frank explained. "Joel wanted to explore it, but I think it's best we all stay out of it. Could be a

rock fall at any time.”

“Yeah, there’s one small rock fall in there already,” Joel added.

“You’re probably right, Frank. I’d love to have a look, but I’d definitely wear a helmet.”

“Are there insects in there that might crawl out here after dark?” Cassie asked nervously. “Cause if there are, I’m sleeping on the table.”

Li laughed, a nearly silent shiver of sound. Cassie gave him a look of distaste.

“I didn’t see any,” Bella assured her. “And believe me, I looked.”

“I need some dry clothes and

then a beer," Joel said, already heading across the cave. "Anyone else?"

"I'll have a beer," Matt agreed, following him back to the coolers. "Matter of fact, I'll have two."

"Pace yourself," Joel advised drily. "You're in the wild, surrounded by gorgeous women."

Matt snorted, grabbing a cold, sweating can from the cooler. "Dude, I'm always surrounded by beautiful women. I'm ready to get home to my dog. She'll lick my hand and then curl up at my feet, and if she whines, I just put her out in the backyard."

Joel choked on his mouthful of beer. He stared after the model as he moved away to slouch in a camp chair. Now that was one jaded guy.

He shook his head. Himself, he wanted an easygoing wahine, one who liked sex as much as he did, but with some pepper to her. He'd recently realized sparring with the right woman was just fun. Like verbal foreplay.

He turned, looking for Bella. She sat with her head bent over her little computer, her long hair falling in a damp curtain, coiling in the folds of her bright red sweatshirt. Her slender, bare legs were crossed,

one swinging idly, arched daintily in its brown sandal. She looked comfortable in her surroundings, taking it as it came. She was definitely not a whiner.

He took a swig of cold beer, shivered as it prickled down his throat, and remembered he was standing around in wet clothes.

As he turned to head into the next cave, his sandal stuck to the flat lava under his feet.

He lifted his foot, angling his leg to peer at the bottom of his shoe. Damn, he'd stepped in some chewing gum. Out here? What were the odds of that?

He grimaced. He had some cleansing wipes in his bag. Maybe one of them would take the sticky goo off his sole.

Chapter Nine

To Do: In an emergency, the tour director sees to the care and comfort of her patrons first.

In the adjacent cave, Joel stripped off his wet shirt and shorts and dropped them beside his duffel, grabbing a cotton T-shirt to dry off with. It was looking like they'd be headed back tomorrow morning, so he didn't have to ration clothing.

Hearing a soft noise behind him, he looked over, expecting one of

the other guys. Instead, to his chagrin, Tanah slipped through the opening. Her face lit up with a smile, her gaze all over his bare body. “Well, hello there. Looks like you’re all ready for me.”

“Ah, yeah, I mean — *no*.” Joel didn’t think he’d ever put on a pair of shorts that fast in his life. He was pulled up and fastened by the time she reached him, her hands already reaching for him. He laughed, even as he grabbed her hands in his, holding her away. “Whoa, there, darlin’. People just a few feet away, and the door’s open.”

As he held her soft hands in his,

realization thumped him solidly in the groin. A decision of sorts had already been made when he wasn't looking. Although he'd bet this woman would be willing to follow up on her earlier promise to do anything he wanted, and do a damn fine job of it, he didn't want to just get laid.

He shivered theatrically and bent over to grab a sweatshirt from his duffel. "Just let me get my hoodie on here. I'm cold. Aren't you cold?" She was wearing another of her tiny shorts outfits, in contrast to Bella and Cassie, who'd both pulled on sweatshirts.

“Am I interrupting?” an amused voice asked. Over Tanah’s head, Joel saw Camille standing in the opening, bag in hand. Somehow, even soaking wet, she managed to maintain her air of aloof elegance.

“No, not at all,” Joel assured her. “I was just, ah, showing Tanah here my University of Idaho gear.” He yanked his black sweatshirt over his head, and smoothed the gold emblem on his chest. “Go, Vandals.”

He stepped over his duffel and around Tanah toward the door. “I’ll just get out of here and let you ladies change. Oh, almost forgot my

rain slicker.” Backtracking nimbly, he grabbed the slicker and then made his escape. Even with thunder booming overhead and lightning flickering offshore, right now he’d take the dangers of the storm over those in the crowded cave.

He was outside before he remembered his half-full beer. Damned if he was going back in for it, though. Not with Tanah on the prowl. At least she hadn’t whipped out her phone and gotten a picture of him in the raw. He’d have had to wrestle her for it, because he wouldn’t put it past her to Tweet

that too.

Joel spent the next hour outside in the rain, helping Frank gather what supplies they could from the storm. After breaking into a sweat under the rain slicker, he stopped to pull it and the sweatshirt off and toss them inside the cave. The rain had dropped the temperature about ten degrees, but it was still around seventy and too warm to work in a jacket, especially in this humidity. They broke down the two tents still in camp. They'd have to be dried out later, but at least they could go back on the boat.

Frank stopped once to pull his

phone out, turning his back to the wind. He scowled at the small screen and then shoved it in his pocket. "No signal. Must be the storm."

"Let me try mine," Joel offered. "Different carrier may get through." He pulled his phone out of his shorts pocket.

"Huh. That's weird." He put his phone away and squinted out to sea, into the steady rain. "The worst of the storm seems to have passed, but I can't get a signal either."

"Batteries charged?" Frank asked.

"Yeah, last night," Joel said. "I

always travel with a portable charger.”

Frank scowled. “Something’s jamming the signal. I wonder if lightning hit a cell tower up on the mountain.”

Joel shook his head. “I should still be getting a satellite signal. Well, I guess we’re okay tonight, huh? We can head back in the morning.”

Frank nodded. “We’ll leave as soon as it’s light. Our luck is going to hell in a hurry, and I don’t like it.”

Joel nodded, looking around him. The forest was so beautiful,

but now that Bella had found the weapon, he realized that the thick brush could hide a battalion of armed men.

“You think she really found an automatic weapon or just someone’s old hunting rifle? Can’t you hunt wild pigs here?”

Frank gave him a quizzical look. “Yeah, the feral ones are a real nuisance, killing the vegetation. But if Nani says it was an automatic, I believe her. She’s a smart girl.”

“Yeah, but she’s a city girl.”

Frank’s weathered face creased in a grin. “Not on da island, she’s not. She and her cousin Zane were

up at Naweia just weeks ago for a wedding, and those two spent most of the time up in da forest, tearing up and down da trails like Pele's wild creatures."

"I think we should all stay close to the caves this evening," Joel said stubbornly. He felt an unwelcome shaft of jealousy for this Zane, whoever he was. Did Bella smile at him?

Frank nodded. "We've just got to get the others to do that without telling them too much. I don't want dese wahines upset."

"No, because we'd have to listen to two of them bitch," Joel

muttered. "Bella doesn't seem to rattle too easily."

"Nah. She's a real tita, tough girl," Frank said affectionately. "But, I'd feel better if we had that weapon. After everyone's asleep, I'll climb up and get it, put it where we can reach it if we need it."

"I'll do it," Joel offered. "No offense, but I can give you a few years."

Frank shrugged. "Whatever. Long as we get it."

The two men headed back into the cave, pausing at the entrance to hang their wet jackets over camp chairs.

Bella was waiting as they turned.
“Frank, can I use your phone?”

Frank shook his head. “Sorry, Nani. Joel’s and mine won’t work either. Maybe in the morning, when the weather clears up.”

She nodded, but her ebony eyes held worry. “We’re okay,” Joel said quietly. “We’ve got food, water and the boat. We can head back in the morning.”

She tried to smile. “You’re right. I’m just a little nervous.”

“Cause you’ve got a responsibility bump that’s as big as this camp.”

“Oh, I thought it was called

being an adult.”

He grinned. She was back in form, a lot more fun than her brief stint as a polite person. And they'd gotten what they came for, so this storm was just a bump, not a crash on his career road. As he'd told Matt, there were worse things than being marooned in paradise with beautiful women.

They ate cold chicken, homemade bread and salads, and drank hot cocoa and coffee brewed on the little stove, and then Joel built a campfire in the mouth of the

cave, and Frank pulled out his ukulele. Everyone settled down around the fire to listen, bundled in sweatshirts or jackets. The rain had indeed cooled the air several degrees, into the low seventies by Joel's keychain thermometer.

Spotting Tanah waiting for him, he cast a hunted glance around. Bella sat on the big log, listening to Frank play a soft, slow tune. Making a lightning-swift decision, Joel swung his leg over the back of the log beside Bella. Wrapping one arm around her waist, he pulled her sideways into the vee of his legs.

He groaned silently as he gathered her close. She was slender and lissome in his grasp, and her scent, warm woman laced with that faint, tantalizing hint of flowers and sex, wrapped around him. Her firm, soft ass snuggled right against his balls, cradling his cock in feminine temptation.

Bella didn't protest, clearly caught off guard. She tilted her head back and to the side to look up into his face. Joel smiled into her startled dark eyes.

"Follow my lead," he murmured.

Her gaze, still bemused, dropped to his mouth, and for one wild

moment, he wanted to kiss her again, right here, just plant one on those soft, curving lips. They'd be warm, and she'd taste like wild honey.

Then she blinked, and her brows started to slide together in a frown.

"Bella, do not scowl at me." He reached up with his free hand to push her hair away from her face, brushing his fingers over her cheek. Her skin was as warm and satiny as he'd remembered. "You can ream me out later to your controlling little heart's content, but I need your help here."

She pasted on the fake smile that

made him want to snicker. "I don't know what you're up to now, big shot. But go try it on someone you haven't insulted multiple times in the last two days." She tried to wriggle away.

"Oh no," he whispered, wrapping his other arm around her. "I'm not letting you go until you listen to me."

Tanah scowled at them across the fire, and the others stared. Camille watched the two of them with a little smile playing on her face. Frank gave the two of them a searching look and continued to play.

“Quit squeezing my waist so hard,” Bella said through her freaky smile. “You’re going to leave bruises, and then I’ll have to grab your lilikoi and twist.”

His grip gentled instantly, although he kept his arm around her little waist. She could move fast, and she’d fly off the log in a Honolulu minute if he let go, he was sure of it.

“Try it,” he warned softly, inhaling the warm scent of her hair, “and I’ll throw you over my shoulder and take you somewhere I can spank your ass. That will be embarrassing for a corporate drone

like yourself, yeah?"

She cast him one swift, fulminating look, her smile flat-lining. "Yeah, you're a real sweet-talker, aren't you, Girand? No wonder you have to beat the women off with a stick."

"Aww, I'm sorry, Princess." He stroked his thumb soothingly on her ribs. "You're right. That was uncalled for."

She shrugged, folding her arms across her middle and pushing at his hand under her other arm where the others couldn't see.

"Fine, what is the point of all this?"

"Oh, I've got one," he crooned,

turning his face so his mouth was close to her ear. "You know how your boss told you to keep me happy? Well, I've found the way, baby."

She froze, and in a nanosecond, Joel realized how that had sounded. He chuckled, unable to help the deep sound of amusement. "Not *that*. Jesus, Bella, I can get women without threatening them."

"I'll believe that when I see it," she muttered.

"Take a look across the fire," he said drily. Tanah was pouting now, curled in a camp chair by Matt, her arms and legs crossed. Beside her,

Cassie held up her phone and snapped a picture of Joel and Bella, and then winked at him.

“Well, why don’t you just take her up on it?” she asked, sounding genuinely perplexed and grouchy at the same time, but she relaxed, her back curving to match the hollow of his groin and belly.

“I don’t appreciate the feeling that I’m in danger of being molested any more than you did with your buddy Kobe.”

She snorted. “She’s a lot smaller than you, Girand.”

““The female of the species,”” he quoted under his breath.

The soft notes of the ukulele filled the dusk as she considered. He shifted, enjoying the warm weight of her in his arms.

“So you want me to pretend that we’re...we’re —”

“That we’re hot for each other,” he finished for her, grinning against her hair. “That we’re banging bones every chance we get. Exclusively.”

“Eww,” she muttered. “So romantic. And what on earth do you mean ‘exclusively’? Does she think you’d...go back and forth?”

“Ah — not what I meant. Those two girls are a bit more sophisticated than you may think.

Seems they aren't averse to a threesome now and then."

She gasped, and Joel chuckled again, giving her a little squeeze of amused affection. Damn, Ms. Hawaii had led a sheltered existence. She was getting a fast education with this bunch. Kink and ménage.

He stilled for a moment, wondering suddenly if she could possibly still be a virgin. The deep, visceral thrill that flamed in his groin caught him off guard as he imagined being her first, her only.

Just like that, he was hard. And from the peculiar stillness that took

her, he knew she felt it. Joel gritted his teeth, fighting the urge to flex his hips, and drive himself hard into the softness of her warm, feminine ass. He'd started this, to avoid a catfight, but he also wanted Bella. To get her, he had to go a little slower. She might have kissed him on impulse, but she was nowhere near as sophisticated as Tanah, or the much younger Cassie.

“Does that turn you on, hotshot?” she asked. She didn't look at him, but her fingers tugged at his agitatedly, pulling them up, then pushing them flat on her waist. He wondered if she even

knew she was doing it. "The idea of women crawling all over you?"

He cleared his throat of the sudden huskiness in his throat.

"Not me, Princess," he said, his lips brushing the tender shell of her ear. He had to clench his jaw against the urge to put out his tongue and trace the shell of her ear, taste her. "I'm more of a one-wahine kind of guy."

In truth, he'd tried a threesome once. He'd felt a hell of a man at first, but once they got to it, he had a hell of a time concentrating, and the two girls turned out to be more interested in each other than him.

But he wasn't about to try to

explain that to Bella. He didn't want to use Bella as a shield from the rapacious Tanah. He wanted this wahine just for herself. Her incredibly buttoned-up, molten-hot-centered self. The next time she had that look of sleepy satisfaction on her face, he wanted to be the one who put it there.

Bella spent nearly an hour of prickly, delicious torment in Joel's embrace. Being held by him was every bit as good as she'd imagined. His body was so much bigger than hers that leaning against him meant being surrounded by strength and

heat. His heavy arm rested around her waist, his hand a warm weight on her hip, while he used his other hand to torment her.

It was all publicly acceptable. He merely enveloped her hand with his, much bigger and stronger. His were lightly calloused, the tendons and muscles firmly delineated, the mark of a man who used his hands constantly. But as they listened to Frank play, he somehow found every sensitive spot on hers. She had never realized that having another person rub her fingertips or the center of her palm could send pleasure arcing through her,

tightening her nipples and making her clench her thighs together, or that when he tickled the inside her wrist with the pad of his thumb, she would want to press back against him, rubbing herself on him like a cat.

Only the sharp hiss of his breath in her ear made her realize finally that she was doing just that.

He bent his head forward over her shoulder, his low, deep voice following his warm breath into her ear. "You wanna take this into the other cave, Princess? 'Cause I'd like nothing better."

Bella's face burned, and she was

relieved that the fire had burned down to glowing embers so that everyone's faces were visible only as shifting patterns of red and gold.

To cover her embarrassment at being caught, she cast him a slumberous look. "Payback's a bitch, yeah?"

But instead of being angry, he chuckled. "Damn, you've got a mean streak. I like that about you."

He rested his chin on the top of her head. "So, you're a Ho'omalū, huh?" he asked. "And Frank's a friend of these folks too?"

She nodded, feeling the roughness of his five-o'clock

shadow catch in her hair. "My — my father is one of the family."

"Oh, so you've spent a lot of time over here with him, huh?"

"No," Bella found herself admitting. "I just met him, um, last month. When I came over for my best friend Melia's wedding to David Ho'omalū."

"Whoa." He gave her a little squeeze. "You just met him? Did he, ah, not know about you?"

"He knew, but I didn't." Her heart pinched with the remembered hurt of learning that her mother had kept them apart Bella's whole life. "He and my

mom had a vacation fling here, and I was the result. But then he admitted that he's, um, gay. So she..." She stared into the fire, her hand tightening on his fingers. "She cut him out of our lives."

"Damn," Joel breathed. "That was tough on you."

She nodded, blinking back tears.

"So, now you have beaucoup Hawaiian relatives, huh?" he asked. "You like them?"

She nodded. "They're the best. In fact, my other best friend, Claire, is marrying Daniel Ho'omalua soon."

He whistled softly. "That's a wedding epidemic. You're not

gonna marry one of 'em, are you?"

The pugnacious edge to his question surprised a giggle out of her. "No. They're my cousins."

Frank ended his song on a flourish. Joel let Bella go, arcing into a stretch behind her.

"That was great, Frank," Joel said. "Well, I'm gonna lay out my bedroll." He patted Bella on the hip. "I'll get yours for you, Nani."

Bella slipped off the log, turning to look down at him.

He looked at her from under his brows, his face edged in faint firelight, waiting for her to answer. And she knew with a sudden

breathless surge of longing that if she so much as nodded, she'd find herself slipping into his sleeping bag instead of her own. They were in a cave full of other people, she reminded herself.

"I can do it, thanks."

With a shrug, Joel flipped his leg over the log and stood up behind it. The mustachioed Vandal leered cheerfully at her from his broad chest.

By the time everyone was yawning, Bella's small watch read ten o'clock. She used the latrine,

took a cup of water outside to brush her teeth and wash her face. Rain still misted down through the trees, pattering on the lava shelf before the caves.

She thought longingly of bathing in the pool. With the intense humidity, her skin felt sticky. But she knew leaving the camp was a really bad idea, so she settled for washing off her face, throat and arms and brushing out her hair.

Camille and Li opted to sleep in the smaller cave. The rest of them laid out their beds in the big cave. Cassie and Tanah nabbed the flat areas of the natural shelf in the

rear, and Matt unrolled his mattress on the cave floor below them.

Frank chose the flat area near the cave mouth, which left a large open area along the far wall. Bella unrolled her mattress next to the wall, and laid out her sleeping bag on top. She made sure her boxers and clean tank were where she could find them in the dark. Then she sat cross-legged on her bed, and waited for the others to settle down and turn off their lights so she could change into her sleepwear.

Joel was the last one into the cave. In the light of the lanterns, his hair was damp with rain. He spoke

quietly with Frank and then walked purposefully back toward Bella.

Her heart thumped, matching the rhythm of the surf pounding on the shore, as he paused beside her bedroll and bent to pick up his own. Out of his sphere, away from that dangerous field of magnetism he seemed to wear like an aura, she'd had time to remember why lying down next to him was a bad idea.

"Oh no." She shook her head.

"You're not —"

He cast her a darkling look before tossing his sleeping bag out on his unfurled mattress. "Oh yes, I

am.” He dropped to one knee and leaned over to her. “Bella, I’m afraid of redheads that go bump in the night. I need you to protect me.”

She bit her lips against the snicker that wanted to erupt. Just when she was irritated with him, he made her want to laugh.

Although her smile was quickly followed by a frown. She was more than a smokescreen, and he’d better not forget it.

She glared at him as he sat down to kick off his sandals.

“Ready for lights out?” Frank asked, kneeling before the big

lantern.

“Ready,” Joel answered. The two men exchanged a look, and the cave went black.

“Wow, that’s really dark,” Matt said over the surf.

“No starlight,” Frank called back. “Maybe get some later. Moon should be about half full too.”

Cassie let out a yelp. “Ouch. Tanah, you kicked me.”

Tanah mumbled something, and Matt answered; then the three of them laughed.

Bella waited for a moment to let her eyes adjust. Satisfied that it was truly dark and no one could see her,

she patted her hand over her pillow for her tank and boxers. Finding them, she tugged her tank off over her head and pulled on the clean one. Her panties felt damp, so she wriggled out of them along with her shorts and tugged on the boxers.

She could sense Joel tugging off his sweatshirt beside her, and the waft of air as he dropped it beside his bedroll. Then she heard the tug of a zipper and felt him shift as he pulled his shorts off. The thought of him naked so close to her sent heat throbbing in her pussy. She clenched her hands into fists to

keep from reaching for him.

“Damn, wet undies,” he muttered.

“Me too,” she blurted, then felt her face burn.

He was still for a moment. “Does that mean you’re not wearing any?” he asked.

“Maybe.” Let him wonder.

He groaned softly, and she was smiling as she lay down. She pulled the light cover of her bag over herself, propped one arm behind her head, and gazed out into the night.

Strangely, even though it was still raining, the trees outside the

cave seemed to glow with a soft phosphorescence, their leaves glimmering in the rain.

Bella leaned up on her elbow, watching. It was beautiful, and bewildering. "Joel?" she whispered.

"Yeah?"

"Can you see that?"

"See what?"

"Out there."

She heard the swish of fabric as he sat up. "Can't see a thing." He slid down in his sleeping bag, and when he spoke again, his voice was much nearer. "You're safe, Princess. I'm here, and so is Frank."

A cloak of inevitability settled

over her, feather-light. He couldn't see what she saw — the trees glowing with their mist of raindrops, as if they were bejeweled. It was just for her. A gift in the wake of the storm.

“I know,” she murmured. “I’m not worried.”

He moved again, and she felt his heat as he leaned up over her, a dark shape that blocked out the gentle light of the trees. Another thrill took her, this one a purely feminine one.

“Nani,” he murmured, the nickname a caress in his deep voice.

“Mm-hmm?” She waited,

pleasure already melting through her as his arms bracketed her, the hot skin of his inner forearms against her bare shoulders. She wanted it, and more. Wanted the heavy weight of his big, muscular body pressing hers into her mattress, wanted his hardness between her thighs.

“I really liked that kiss you gave me, out on the rocks.”

“Did you?”

“Oh yeah. If I kiss you good night, you gonna sucker punch me?”

“Maybe.” Her lips parted, waiting for that blissful moment

when that warm, wicked mouth would settle on hers. “Aren’t you supposed to be brave and tough, ready for any challenge?”

He sighed, his breath gusting across her lips. “You’re right. Better live up to my rep, huh?”

His warm lips brushed hers, a soft touch that zinged through her entire body. “Besides, I wanna know that trademark move you told me about.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” she advised. “I save it for guys who deserve it.”

He was smiling as he kissed her. And Bella discovered that, as

exhilarating as it had been to kiss him on the rocks, having him kiss her now, when he leaned over her in the dark, was much, much better. Or maybe it was simply better because it was now.

Whichever, the man didn't just kiss; he made love to her mouth. He sipped and tasted and explored with those lips, and then did the same with his tongue, before rearing up farther over her and cocking his head to seal their mouths together in a deep, seamless kiss that made Bella writhe under him. Her arms slid up around his neck, holding him to her

as she kissed him back.

He pushed her sleeping bag down, his palm sliding hot and slow down across her shoulder and back up to settle over her breast, scantily covered by her light tank. Still devouring her mouth with his, he palmed her breast, cupping it and then squeezing her nipple gently between the edge of his thumb and forefinger.

Bella moaned into his mouth, arching up against him as sensation shot through her, sweet and yet painful, arrowing straight down to her pussy.

Joel lifted his head, his hand still

busy. "Shh-sh, quiet, baby."

Bella wanted to bite him. She wanted him to bite her, or at least use that mouth on her, all over. But they were surrounded by others and although the rain and surf were loud, she wasn't about to have sex here. Darn him for having tempted her this far.

"Let me go," she hissed.

He groaned silently, his chest vibrating against her through her sleeping bag. Or maybe he was laughing. "Okay. As soon as you let go of me."

Which was when Bella realized she was hanging on to him like a

vine, her arms around his neck, her fingers digging into the firm silk of his back, feeling the muscles flex beneath his skin.

She pulled her arms back, her cheeks hot.

“We could take this outside,” he offered softly, his hand still on her breast. He pinched her beaded nipple, and she grabbed his thick wrist, wanting to hold him there but pushing him away instead.

“No way. Frank is right by the entrance.”

He sighed. “All right. Wanna come over here and snuggle instead?”

She rolled her eyes at the grin in his voice. "No. I'd have to use that move on you."

"Oh, I think you already did, baby."

And just like that, he was gone, dropping back onto his own bedroll, and leaving her there, alone and wanting. And she suspected he knew it all too well, damn his arrogant hide.

Chapter Ten

To Do: In the event of an accident, the tour director works smoothly with those in authority.

Joel was having a really great dream – the best of his entire life. He knew it was a dream, but he went with it, enjoying it for what it was...tropical bliss.

He lay in a soft bed of leaves and flowers on the bank of the grotto pool, naked. Her shoulders back, head high, Bella paced toward him like a young queen. Her crown was red hyacinth, a

lei of creamy yellow plumeria hung around her neck, and her breasts were bare, as was her torso and her slender waist, the flat plain of her belly. She wore only a tiny kapa-cloth skirt around her lush hips, baring most of her strong, curving legs.

She stopped beside the bed he had made for them, surveying him as if deciding whether he was what she wanted. But he knew he could make her want him – knew it as surely as he knew that if he didn't have her here, now, he would go crazy, wild with rage and desire.

Smiling up at her, he held out his hand to her.

"Come to me, Princess."

She cocked her head, those ebony eyes heavy with desire and a teasing light. Her soft mouth curved up in a mysterious little smile. "Malia paha. Maybe."

He palmed his turgid cock, enjoying the pull of his hand on the exquisitely sensitive shaft, watching her watch him. "This is yours. All for your pleasure. Let me fill you, make you feel the way you deserve."

With a sigh of surrender, she pulled the tie of her skirt, and it slipped to the ground around her feet, leaving her bared to him. He groaned aloud at the sight of the sweet little triangle of black

curls at the apex of her thighs. "Ah, Princess. No ka oi, ka nani."

Sitting up, he took her hands and brought her down into his arms.

She rolled away from him, onto her side, and he moved behind her, spooning his body tightly to hers, wrapping one arm over her waist to slide his hand down and cup her sweet mons and driving his cock into the crevice of her lush ass. She was all silk and heat in his arms, the perfect package of feminine dynamite, primed to blow and take him with her.

Joel woke with a start, his eyes flying open. For a short, charged

moment, he lay there in the darkness of the cave, unable to separate the dream from reality.

He held Bella in his arms, just as in the dream. Warm and lissome and alive. He was spooned around her, had his cock in the crevice of her ass, her sweet mons filling his hand. He could feel the heat of her pussy through her thin cotton boxers, and his fingers were damp with her arousal, which had soaked her little shorts.

She moved sinuously in his grasp, a soft whimper of need and want in her throat, and he realized that she was still asleep, and as

turned-on as he was. Joel groaned silently. If he were the gentleman his mother had raised him to be, and the one Frank had reminded him he'd damn well better be, he'd get the hell back onto his own sleeping bag. But he couldn't make himself let go of her — not when she was primed and ready and his own balls were so tight they ached, his cock quivering with the absolute need to get inside her.

Closing his eyes, he moved his hand, enjoying the feel of her in his palm, the satiny heat of her thighs clenching around his hand as he stroked her through the thin shorts.

She made that little whimpering sound in her throat again, and he reached farther, finding the edge of her knit boxers and thrusting his fingers underneath.

“Bella,” he whispered urgently, rubbing his face on the rumpled satin of her hair. His whiskers caught in the strands. “Baby, wake up.”

Heat roared through him as his fingertips found the slick, swollen petals of her labia. Rigid with desire, unreasoning now, he thrust his longest finger slowly, slowly into the tight sleekness of her pussy.

She gasped, and her arm fumbled over his. He froze, thinking she wanted to push him away, but then realized she was awake, and pushing at her little shorts. Oh, hell yeah. She was as primed as he was by that kiss.

Easing his fingers out of her, he grasped her waistband, pulling the shorts down over her ass and letting her push them farther, then pedal her legs to kick them off. Ah, all that firm, luscious roundness in his lap. He gave her a quick fondle, and then thrust his hand back where they both wanted it.

Her delicate, springy curls filled

his palm, and the slick heat beneath welcomed him in, her pelvis tilting up to make it easier for him to slide one, then two fingers deep into her tight little channel.

She made that sound in her throat again, and he played her, sliding his fingers in and out, making her quiver and buck in his grasp.

Joel felt the exact moment when she really woke. The soft hiccup of shock, and the sudden stilling of her sinuous movements. Ah, hell, was she going to think he'd been molesting her?

"It's all right, Princess," he

soothed, just loud enough for her to hear him over the surf. "Just let yourself go. I've got you."

She was still for a moment, and then, oh glory, yes, he felt her small hand cover his and press, urging him on. He lifted his head far enough to press a kiss to her bare shoulder, and then he hooked his fingers inside her pussy, pressing them up against the spongy pad of her g-spot, and swirled his thumb over the slick little knot of flesh hiding in her curls.

She sucked in a long, shaken breath, and he felt her begin to quake around his hand.

“Shh-shh,” he breathed. “Not a sound, baby. Come real quiet.”

His voice seemed to send her over the edge, and she bucked in his arms, her breath shuddering in and out, her pussy squeezing his fingers rhythmically as she orgasmed. Ah, so sweet, and damn near as good as coming himself.

But not quite. If he didn't get to soon, he was a dead man.

He held her until she relaxed against him, and then he let her go, just long enough to yank his own shorts down and free his cock. It slapped her on the ass, her satin skin a caress, a tease.

Hooking his hand under her upper thigh, he lifted it enough to let his cock slide into the soft crevice between her thighs and then let her leg drop back, enclosing him in the furrow of her body.

“Okay?” he gasped, his teeth clenched. He was about to blow, and even if he didn’t dare get inside her without a condom, goddamn it, he had to at least have a touch of her.

“Wait,” she whispered, turning her head. “Are you—I mean, have you been tested?”

“Yes. I’m clean, I swear,” he

managed.

For one agonizing moment, he waited. Then she moved, arching her back so that he slid along that wet, slick crevice.

He filled his hand with her again and began to work her clitoris in a fast, hard cadence, caressing her and his cock, pretending it was deep inside her, instead of sliding back and forth in the almost, nearly, so-close torture of her labia.

He hadn't had to make do this way since high school. But with her, it was enough. And as release roared up through him, his come jetting in long, sweet pulses onto

her thighs, he felt her tense and shudder again as well. Then both of them collapsed, wet with perspiration and his come.

Joel buried his face in her hair, a tumbled silky swath under his cheek. Had he made any noise? He didn't think so, but he was breathing as hard as if he'd been running a marathon, his heart pounding, bursting with the urge to laugh

"Ah, Princess," he whispered when he could speak. "You are one naughty wahine."

She stiffened in his arms, just as he'd known she would, and

grabbed his wrist, trying to yank his hand from between her thighs. He let her go, slowly, because she felt so damn good. Then, grinning like a fool, he sat up and pulled his T-shirt off over his head and gave it to her, patting her bare hip.

Bella took the bundle of soft cotton Joel handed her and used it to wipe the warm, sticky fluid of his semen from her thighs, belly, and then her sleeping bag. She touched the damp spot on her bag, left after she tossed the shirt aside, and then yawned, a huge, toe-curling yawn that consumed her just as her two

orgasms had only moments before.

Shock and pleasure and resentment tumbled inside her, warring with sheer cringing embarrassment. What had she done, and right in the cave with everyone else? And with *him*. What if someone had heard them? Heard her? Had she made a noise? And was she a total slut because knowing others were sleeping only feet away had been all twisted up in her incredible arousal and two orgasms?

She wanted to blame it all on Joel, absolve herself of responsibility for her wanton

behavior. That she couldn't just pissed her off.

"Can't believe I let you do that," she muttered as his arm brushed hers, his skin still hot and damp.

Her body felt wonderful, still soft and pulsing with pleasure, her clitoris tender where he'd massaged it with his calloused thumb. And yet needy, somehow. Face it, she wanted much more than his fingers inside her.

"Yeah, well, you can hate me in the morning. Go to sleep."

"Oh, right. There's a wet spot on my sleeping bag." She blushed in the darkness. This was the kind of

conversation one had with a boyfriend, a lover, not a casual acquaintance on a camping trip. Although there hadn't been anything casual about the feelings he stirred in her from the first moment they met.

"All right, here." He moved away and came back with another T-shirt, which he smoothed out on her bag, managing to get his hands on her several times while he did it.

She shoved his hand away from her ass. "Mahalo, now go away."

"Can't help it, Nani. You feel as pretty as you look." But he moved away and lay back down on his

own sleeping bag with a long sigh.
“Night.”

And that, she supposed, was that. Bella lay down, gazing sleepily into the night.

The trees swayed quietly outside the cave, their leaves whispering as if they were laughing. Of course they approved of what she'd done. They wanted her to take it even further. They wanted...

With the thought half finished, she fell asleep.

The first thing she saw when she opened her eyes at dawn was Joel.

He sat on his sleeping bag, wearing only a pair of shorts and looking out into the morning. He looked big and tough and dangerous, with his muscled arms locked loosely around his knees. In the morning light, she noticed that his arms and legs were lightly dusted with reddish hair, and he had an old scar above his near elbow, a streak of white across his smooth, tanned skin.

She imagined slithering across the short space between them and nuzzling her face against the long line of his spine, following it up with a trail of kisses, inhaling his

scent while she smoothed her palms over the broad curve of his back, learning those long muscles. Her hands clenched on her sleeping bag.

As if he felt her gaze, he turned his head and looked down at her. His hair was flat on one side, his cheek creased from his pillow, and he had a morning beard shadow on his wide jaw. But he still looked good enough to eat, and his eyes were full of a look that made her insides melt and the modern woman in her bristle. It said very clearly — *mine*.

One corner of his mouth kicked

up. "Too late for second thoughts, Princess," he murmured. "The deed's been done."

Rebellion flared inside her.

"Huh. Wasn't much of a deed."

He raised a brow at her. "You came twice, so I'm not sure what you're complaining about. And you know damn well the rest is gonna happen, sooner or later."

She sat up, tossing her hair back.

"*Malia paha*, hotshot. Maybe — if I say it will."

His eyes narrowed. He braced his near hand on her bag and leaned toward her, close enough that her body reacted, swaying forward to

meet him.

A shadow fell across their faces. They jerked apart to see Frank standing in the mouth of the cave, the dawn gilding his outline. He wore shorts and a T-shirt, and a fearsome scowl on his face. He held up a finger for silence and beckoned sharply to them.

Joel was off his bedroll in one smooth motion, gliding out into the morning after Frank. Her good mood dissipated like a popped bubble, Bella hastily grabbed her shorts from on top of her bag, stepped into them and yanked them up, the sibilant hiss of fabric

loud in the quiet cave. One swift look around showed three still humps in the sleeping bags at the back of the cave. She grabbed her shoes and tiptoed out after the men, pushing her hair back out of her eyes.

It was a lovely morning, the air washed clear by the storm, a few clouds of misty lavender and peach clustered high on the mountain, the sun already rimming their tops with gold. The sea was a sheet of calm silver, the surf a quiet wash of low tide.

The two men stood a short distance away, past the fig trees.

Frank gestured down at the shore. "Look at it," he hissed. "Look at my boat."

Bella stepped past Joel, wincing as she stepped on a pebble. He caught her arm to steady her. "Oh, hell, Frank. What happened to her?"

Premonition filled Bella. The catamaran was listing heavily to one side, and, instead of bobbing on the surface, washed dully in the surf, bumping against the sandy bottom.

"Somebody wrecked my boat." Frank's jaw was so tight he gritted the words out, and he clenched his

fists as if he could wrest vengeance out of the morning air. "Holes in two of the pontoons."

"Oh, Frank." Bella pressed her hands to her face, horrified.

Joel let out a long breath. "Holy hell. I'm sorry, man. So sorry."

His big hand closed on Bella's shoulder and squeezed lightly.

"Nani, go get our phones, would you? Mine's in the outside pocket of my bag."

Of course they would have to call for help, for rescue. Their phones would be working now that the storm was past. Bella hurried back into the cave. She grabbed her

phone, rummaged for Joel's and tiptoed back outside.

The men were already halfway down the shore toward the bay. She followed them across the strip of sandy beach, stopping at the water's edge. She didn't want to compound their problems by dropping phones in the water. Shoving Joel's phone into her pocket, she opened hers and pressed the On button.

Frank waded in thigh-deep and laid his hand on the curve of one gleaming white pontoon, as one would the flank of a horse. He pointed down with his other hand,

indicating an ugly, splintered hole just under the water line. "Right here, and back there, and there." He shook his head, his face set in tight, angry lines.

"How'd they do it?" Joel asked, bending over to peer at the hole. He explored the edges of the hole with his fingertips.

"Looks like bullet holes to me," Frank said.

"Someone shot holes in it? How could we not have heard that?" Joel demanded, shoving one hand through his hair.

"Silencer. All we would have heard is the crack of the fiberglass

hull, and with the storm —” Frank shrugged. “I probably heard it, thought it was *ku’i ka hekili*, da roar of thunder.”

“Can we make it back to Kailua Harbor with two pontoons?”

“Dey shot up the middle one too.”

“You have any patch material?”

Frank shook his head. “You can’t patch up something like that, not in the water. Anyway, the pontoons are half full of water.”

Joel turned to Bella. “You get a signal yet?”

“Just a sec.” She peered at her phone. The small symbol at the top

flickered, indicating that the phone was searching for a signal. She scowled at it, frustrated. She shook her head. "Nothing."

"Hell." Joel splashed out of the water to take his phone from her. She and Frank waited, watching as he worked the buttons. After a moment, he shook his head, that hard look intensifying. "Nope. Nada."

Frank slapped his hand on the pontoon and then waded up out of the water. "Sorry to say it, but I think we are hip deep in *ka'eka'e*. We got no transportation, no way to call for help."

“You want me to hike up the mountain and see if I can find a road or a house?” Joel asked.

Frank thought for a moment, then shook his head. “We’ve got bigger problems than no phone service, no boat.” He looked both of them in the eye. “Whoever did this, came outta da cave.”

Bella gasped. “What? It was one of our group?”

Joel grunted, looking down at the sand, still damp from the rain. “Of course. Hell, I should have thought — footprints.”

Frank nodded and pointed at two indentations near the water’s

edge. They were just above the line where the surf lapped, and blurred by rain but deep, as if the owner had stood there for several moments. "Saw dese when I came down da first time. And see there, they come down the way we did but closer to da water. It woulda been low tide then."

"They're smaller than mine," Joel said. "Way bigger than Bella's. One of the guys?"

"Could be. But some wahine have big feet."

"When could it have been?" Bella asked.

"Must have been early this

morning,” Joel said. “Or the rain would’ve washed these prints away. You hear anyone?”

“I heard someone stumble outside,” Frank said. “Woke me up about three dis morning. But they just walked to the latrine and back — I could tell the direction of their footsteps.”

“But everyone slept in the cave,” Bella said. “So if they’d gone down to the boats, they would have had to come right past you.”

Frank and Joel looked at each other. “Everyone except the photographers. From that cave, they could have walked around the

trees the other way, climbed across the rocks."

Bella was shocked. Camille was so...so elegant, so friendly. Although she had seemed to relish planting fear in the minds of anyone she could. But surely she couldn't be involved in anything as ugly as this.

"I bet I know who it was." She hugged her arms around herself. "Li."

Joel moved closer, his arm around her waist, pulling her against the heat of his hard body.

"Why, Nani?" Frank asked.

She shrugged, her bare shoulder

sliding against Joel's warm chest. "I don't know. Something about that guy — he looks at us like he hates us. It could've been him — must have been."

"Hey," Joel said, snapping his fingers. "Gum."

Bella and Frank looked at him blankly.

"I had gum on my shoe yesterday," he explained. "Noticed it right after we came out of the tunnel."

"He always has a piece in his mouth," Bella added.

"I'll search his bags," Frank said. Joel nodded. "I'm with you."

“We’ll have to time it right. We go in there, and he has a gun, he’ll grab it.”

“But how did that automatic weapon get into the cave?” Bella asked. “Is that his too?”

“He could have had it broken down in his bag,” Frank said.

“These new ones come all apart, make it easier to carry without anyone knowing.”

“Should we go back in?” Bella whispered nervously, eyeing the cave opening. “Maybe he’s waiting for us.”

“I’ll go up first,” Joel said. “If I don’t come right back out and nod,

don't come in. Head up into the forest and hide."

Bella looked at Frank, who nodded slowly. Joel's hand tightened on Bella's hip, and he pinned her with a stern look. "You do exactly what Frank tells you."

Before she could open her mouth to protest, he turned away, striding back up to the cave.

"Come on, let's move up toward the trees," Frank said. Bella followed him up the beach and across the lava shelf where their camp had been. A turquoise plastic bowl from their camp set lay canted on the rock, full of rainwater, and

the models' tent still rested in the branches of a cluster of figs, like some kind of haphazard tree house.

Bella's empty stomach clenched ominously, but a moment later, Joel appeared between the cave mouth and the fig trees and nodded casually, then turned back into the cave. With a deep breath, Bella followed Frank across the camp.

Chapter Eleven

To Do: In a crisis, the tour director assumes charge of the situation, making sure everyone follows instructions to remain safe and calm

Inside, Joel scanned the main cave. In the rear, the models were stirring in their sleeping bags like colorful caterpillars.

“We want everything to look normal,” Frank breathed at his shoulder. “Gotta draw those other two in here.”

“Morning,” Joel said in a

carrying voice. "Who's making the coffee?" He gave Bella a nudge toward the food table.

"You," she answered drily, already moving away. "I don't know how to work the stove. I'll get some juice and muffins."

Joel's stomach rumbled, reminding him that it had been a long time since dinner. He wasn't interested in food right now, but some juice would be good. He crossed the cave to pour water from a jug into the small coffeepot.

"Make that coffee strong," Tanah grumbled in a sleep-husky voice, poking her head out of her sleeping

bag. "I'd like to complain about these hotel beds. They're hard as rock."

Joel managed a smile for her humor. "Maybe you can get a refund."

She sat up and combed her tumbled hair back with her fingers. "I was thinking more of hardship pay. Think DelRay will cough it up, Bella?"

"What? Oh, I'll ask them for you."

"Good," said the redhead as she flipped her bare legs out of her sleeping bag and knelt upon it, clad only in a tiny tank and panties. She

gave Joel a pointed look as she reached up to twist her hair up on her head. "Because this trip has been a bust from start to finish, if you know what I mean."

Avoiding her gaze, Joel placed a filter pack of Kona coffee in the pot and lit the stove to heat the water.

"At least we got our photos," he said.

"I hope so." Bella handed him a glass of juice.

He took it. "Thanks. What do you mean, you hope so?"

She shrugged uneasily. "Camille mentioned that her cameras might be susceptible to water."

Joel's gut tightened. On top of Frank's boat being damaged, loss of two days of hard work would make the trip "a bust", as Tanah had so succinctly put it.

Then he shook his head. "Nah, cameras aren't that fragile, not new ones like hers. She uses one of the top brands." Relaxing with a conscious effort, he took a drink and then drained the cup, the sweet tartness of orange and some tropical fruit exploding on his tongue.

Bella held up the carton, and he shook his head reluctantly. "Better ration it," he murmured. "In case

we're here for a few days."

Her eyes darkened with worry, but then she shook her head, her expression clearing. "We're supposed to be stopping by Nawea Bay this afternoon. The Ho'omalus will come looking for us by this evening, at the latest."

"Why should anyone come looking for us?" Camille asked behind them. "What's happened?"

Bella and Joel turned in unison to see her standing in the cleared area in the center of the cave. Her hair was pulled back smoothly from her narrow face, and she wore a sleek gray knit yoga outfit. Her gaze was

sharp.

Wondering how much to say, Joel looked at Frank, who was crouched near the mouth of the cave, slowly rolling up his sleeping bag and then his mattress. Frank nodded slightly.

“Can you call Li in here?” Joel asked. He looked around at Tanah, Cassie and Matt, all three watching from near their sleeping bags. “We’ve got a problem.”

As if called, Li appeared in the opening to the other cave. He wore a dark singlet and baggy pants, his feet bare. He ignored Joel, walking over to stand near Camille. He had

a bruise on one cheek, Joel saw with distaste.

Joel moved, widening his stance, using his body language to focus everyone's attention on him. "Last night, unknown intruders sabotaged Frank's catamaran," he told them.

Behind Camille and Li, Frank slipped soundlessly out of the cave.

"Until we can call for help, we're stuck here," Joel added. Jesus, he sounded self-important. Hamming it up for the cause.

Right on cue, Cassie gasped, and Tanah groaned with disgust. "Oh my God. This just keeps getting

worse.”

“What happened to the boat?” Matt asked, patting Cassie on the shoulder.

Camille listened silently, her arms crossed, Li hovering behind her.

“Someone shot holes in the hull,” Joel said. “Used a silencer, probably, so we wouldn’t hear them.”

“Who would do that?” Tanah demanded, her face screwed up in a bewildered scowl. “I mean, we’re just taking pictures, for crap’s sake.”

Li moved backward, and Joel

tensed protectively as Bella stepped away from the food table, right into his path. "We think it might be drug runners," she said. "But I don't want anyone to worry. My family is expecting Frank and me at Naweia this afternoon. When we don't show up, they'll come after us."

"Well," Camille drawled. "Isn't that reassuring." She looked at Bella, her face taut. Then she turned to Joel, raising her brows. "Since it seems our Ms. Ho'omalua's company can't help us here, how do you suggest we remain safe while we wait for help?"

Behind her and Li, Frank appeared in the opening to the other cave. He nodded to Joel, his face hard—the veteran cop coming to the fore. “Dis got nothing to do with Bella or her company.”

The others whirled to look at him. Li crouched like a wild animal, ready to spring, as Frank held up a dull black pistol with a long silencer fastened to the muzzle. He stared at Li. “Found this in your bag. You little po’ino, *you shot my boat.*”

At that moment, the sun streamed in through a break in the clouds, illuminating Li, his hair a

platinum glow against his golden skin. And the trees outside the cave shivered, their branches creaking as if in a rising breeze.

Camille moved sharply, turning on her assistant and lover. “You did this?” she demanded. Her arm swung, her palm striking his face with a sharp crack. His head rocked to the side, and then he straightened, his onyx gaze fastened on her face. Slowly, even as his face reddened from the blow, he smirked at her.

She stepped back, away from him, shuddering, one hand to her throat. “Oh, how could you do such

a thing? And why?"

The trio behind Joel moved back, huddling together, staring at Li as they would a wild animal in their midst. Joel motioned Bella back as Frank swung the pistol up, aiming at Li.

"We'll ask him," he promised. "You got some rope in your bag, don't you, Joel?"

"I do," Joel answered. "Bella, would you get it?" He moved closer to Li, daring him silently to try something. He checked when the Asian flicked his hand and a shining blade appeared.

"I can plow a bullet in your sorry

hide before you can throw dat,” Frank said coldly. “You cut anyone, I’ll make sure you die right here. Self-defense, they’ll call it.”

Li laughed silently, his ropy chest quivering under his snug tank. But then the Asian clicked the knife shut, held out his hand and let go of the knife. It hit the sand, spinning a little before coming to rest.

On her way back from rummaging in Joel’s bag, Bella reached out her foot and kicked it over to Joel. He crouched to pick it up, never taking his eyes off of Li. The Asian’s eyes followed as Joel shoved the knife into his pocket.

He looked at Joel under his brows, and Joel's skin crawled the way it had when he'd looked into the eyes of a crazed shaman in a tiny village halfway round the world. The villagers had been terrified of the shaman, and even *The Zone's* local guides had given the man a wide berth. A stone-cold killer. Bella was right; the Asian did look as if he hated everyone. He also looked as if he'd enjoy doing them harm with the knife Joel now had.

Joel took the neat bundle of synthetic rope from Bella. This was no revered local magician, just a

small-time punk. And Joel was going to enjoy hog-tying him.

“Make sure you look for more knives,” Frank ordered as Joel approached Li. “Dat kind always has more dan one.”

A short time later, the Asian sat on the back shelf of the cave, hands and feet bound securely, his face stony. The larger knife that had been strapped to his calf was in Frank's possession, as was the smaller one that had been in one of the pockets of his baggy pants.

The others were dressed. The trio, as Joel had come to think of

them, sat drinking coffee and soda and nibbling muffins while they stared at Li. Bella had shaken her head at the food, but Joel held one of Leilani's plump fruit-and-nut muffins before her until she took it.

"You have to eat," he said, settling down with his own plate of leftover cold egg dish and muffins.

"*Ae, kahuna,*" she muttered, taking a bite.

Joel grinned at her and took a big bite.

"You're enjoying yourself, aren't you?" she breathed, wrinkling her nose at him.

He shrugged, chewing. They had

their perp tied up, and even if he'd been in cahoots with Frank's missing crew, Eddy and Kobe couldn't do much if everyone stayed here in the cave until Bella's cousins showed up.

Frank was armed, and he himself could climb up and retrieve the automatic weapon if they needed it. Joel wasn't enjoying himself, precisely. He wasn't that big of a poser, but he and Frank had handled a dangerous situation, and he had a gorgeous wahine by his side, so things could be worse.

"I'm sorry your photo shoot came to such a tough ending," he

told Bella. "And I'm damn sorry about Frank's boat." There had been sorrow mixed with the Hawaiian's rage.

"DelRay's insurance had better pay for that boat," she said fiercely. "Or I'll know the reason why."

She swallowed a bite of her muffin and looked up at Joel, licking a crumb off her full lower lip. He stopped chewing for a moment, pointing at the spot on his own lip. Damn, he wanted to lean over and catch it himself.

But Frank sat on his other side, eating as well, gun propped on his lap. And Bella's mind was clearly

on other things. She brushed at the crumb absently.

“I don’t get why Li wanted us trapped here,” she said, speaking in a hushed voice so only he and Frank could hear. “If he and Kobe and Eddy are running drugs, why wouldn’t they want us out of here and gone?”

“Good question,” Frank said, his brooding gaze on Li. “And one I’m gonna ask him real soon. ‘Cause you’re right, Nani. Makes no sense. If it was revenge, I’m the only one here with any connection to drug runners, and that’s a while ago. He was sucking at his mama’s tit when

I retired.”

“Maybe they had another boat come in last night,” Joel thought aloud as he took another bite. “One of them did it just did it for spite.”

Frank nodded. “Could be. But there was only that one set of footprints.”

His plate empty, Joel looked at Bella, who was watching Li, her face troubled. “Finish your muffin,” he reminded her. She took a bite, and Joel rose to put his plate away and refill his coffee cup.

“Are we going to get out of here, Joel?” Tanah asked him, rising to join him. For once, her green eyes

were free of artifice.

“We’ll be fine,” he assured her. “Bella’s cousins will be here by this evening, and we’ll all be back in Kona by sunset.”

She nodded, looking relieved. “God, I can’t wait.”

“I’m hot,” Cassie complained, lifting her T-shirt away from her body.

The cave was heating up as the morning sun streamed over the southern flank of the island and through the trees outside.

“Can we at least go swimming?” Matt asked, shoving back his tousled dark hair.

Joel looked at Frank, who shrugged. "Long as you stay near the caves, I don't see the harm. Nobody wander off, though."

"Oh, good." Tanah, Cassie and Matt dug in their bags for swimsuits, and headed into the other cave to change. Joel caught Bella's eye.

"You should go too," he told her, moving to help her put the remains of the muffins back in their snug container and back in the cooler. He drained his coffee cup, looked around and set it on the table. They had no place to wash dishes in here.

She looked over at Frank, who

still sat in his chair, staring at Li. “I don’t know. I don’t think we should leave Frank alone with *him*.”

The older man shook his head. “I’ll be fine, Nani.”

When Bella turned to her, Camille shook her head as well. “No, thank you. I just want to be still.”

“A swim will cool you off,” Bella urged. That was his princess, feeling responsible for everyone.

The older woman gave Bella a somber look. “No, I—I feel so culpable. I should have seen he was not a good person.”

Laying it on a little thick, Joel

thought cynically. A guy who let a woman slap him around like that was maybe not the most stable character. She seemed like an intelligent woman, but maybe her kinks had led her to ignore the signs.

Whatever, Frank was in charge here, and he was the experienced cop. Joel was going to back him up while he tried to get some answers out of Li.

“You go ahead,” Joel told Bella. “I’ll stay here.”

She hesitated, and then nodded. She turned away to rummage in her bag for her swim things.

As soon as the others were gone, their voices fading into the sound of the surf, Frank stood and turned to Camille. "You wanna go outside for a while," he suggested.

She looked at him, then at Li, who curled his lip at her, his dark eyes gleaming. "All right."

She disappeared out into the sunshine, and Frank looked at Joel. "You got any objections to me getting rough, leave now."

Joel snorted. "After what he did to your boat? Hell, no."

Frank walked over to Li and looked down at him. "Why you wreck my boat?"

The Asian sneered up at him. "Because it's ugly, old man. Like you."

"Oh, smart boy, yeah?" Frank asked, unmoved by the insult.

"Well, smart boy, I been a cop longer than you been alive. I know how to get the toughest little po'inos to talk."

Joel moved to stand closer. "One thing you should know, Frank, this one's into pain. He likes it."

The Asian smiled, his gemmed front tooth glittering. "Yeah, I like it. And I like to be watched too, so if you think you're gonna humiliate me, think again. I can outwait you

both.”

Frank raised his eyebrows at Joel.

“Saw him with Camille the first night,” Joel told him. “She was slapping him around. They both seemed to be enjoying themselves.”

Frank nodded. “Well, damn, there goes my plan to beat the shit out of you,” he said to Li. “Have to go with da next plan. Joel, help me get him out to the shore.”

“Oh, are we going to drown him?” Joel asked. He winked at Li.

“Nah, just make him wish he was nice and wet and cool,” Frank said. “He looks kinda pale to me. We’re gonna set him out in the sunshine

for a couple hours, while we wait for da Ho'omalus. Time dey get here, he'll be shark bait, nice and burnt."

"That's pretty harsh," Joel said over the Asian's head as he and Frank each took an arm and carried Li out into the sun. "This tropical sun is brutal. He's probably pretty thirsty already."

"All he has to do to get some shade and a drink is start talking." They sat Li down just outside the cave, where the noon sun beat down on the flat rocks.

Then Frank dragged one of the camp chairs to the shady cave

entrance and opened the cooler for a bottle of cold water. "You go swimming with Bella," he assured Joel. "I'm just gonna sit here in the shade and enjoy the breeze."

He sat in the camp chair, the gun across his lap. Then he lifted the big knife he had taken from Li and examined the blade. "'Course, if I get bored, I might decide to speed things up a bit. You never know."

Joel could see no way the Asian, bound hand and foot, could cause a problem for Frank. And Camille had clearly been disgusted with her lover.

"What about Eddy and Kobe?"

he asked quietly. "Think they're around, waiting for a chance to meet up with him?"

"Y'know, I kinda hope dey are," Frank said. "Wouldn't mind da chance to beef dere asses, yeah?"

Joel raised his eyebrows respectfully. The older man seemed up for whatever came.

"I'll be back shortly," he promised. "Just want to cool off and check on Bella."

But when he came out of the cave, Cassie, Tanah and Matt were swimming around the small bay. Bella was gone.

Chapter Twelve

To Do: The professional tour director makes certain that her personal activities, especially while on tour, do not reflect badly on her company's good name.

Bella knew it was crazy to head into the forest instead of remaining with the others in the cove. Or so it would surely seem to Joel and Frank.

But the truth was that the moment she stepped out of the cave, she *knew* there was no danger

— at least from the forest. Because the voices were calling her, beckoning her. And if she wasn't crazy, if she was a true Ho'omalua, then she could trust them. And the final truth was, she was sick and tired of following the rules.

Clutching her wash kit and towel, she looked back at the cove, where the trio was splashing in the water. Then she looked up into the green, inviting shadows of the trail.

"Come, little sister. Come and drink. We will watch over you."

The first step was the hardest. For one stomach-dropping instant, it felt as if she were walking away

from the safe, ordered, logical world she knew. And into the mystery of the real Hawaii. Her Hawaii.

But as the voices filled her ears, she forgot her fears, forgot Joel and the others. As she walked slowly up the path, her pace turned to a saunter as that feeling of wild, verdant aliveness swirled through her. A heady rush of arousal twined through her body, her mind, tingling on her skin, clenching in her pussy, tightening her nipples so they could no longer bear even the soft slide of her swimsuit.

She stepped into the grotto and

dropped her towel and bag. Next her red and white flowered bikini top came off, and then, with a swift wriggle, the bottoms dropped to her feet.

She stepped out of them and stretched her arms up high, tipping her head back to revel in the soft kiss of the hot, damp air on her bare body. The rush of arousal was so strong it nearly brought her to her knees. Wavering on her weak legs, she grasped the trunk of a young tree arched out over the water.

With a moan, she leaned back against the tree, nearly reclining on the trunk as it leaned out over the

pool of clear, shimmering water. She let her head fall back, her hair drifting down behind her. Her eyes slipped shut, her lips parted and her legs splayed open, while she felt with one bare foot for a place to prop it on the lower trunk of the tree.

Her hands moved of their own volition. She cupped one of her breasts, her fingers twirling the aching, needy nipple, while the other cupped over her mons. She moaned as she touched herself, her fingers slipping into the folds of her wet, swollen labia.

And that was when she suddenly

realized she was no longer alone.

She gasped, her eyes flew open, and she stared at the man standing only a few feet away.

Joel's face was set in hard lines, that square jaw clenched, his brows drawn together over his narrowed eyes. His big shoulders were taut, hands half-clawed at his sides, legs planted apart like a man ready for battle.

He'd found her — and this time, he really had caught her touching herself. Her face, her throat, even her breasts flushed in a scalding blush. She cupped her hand over her mons, hiding from him. For a

long, agonizing moment, she gazed at him. She could not for the life of her force a word past her lips, could only wait. Her breasts quivered with the force of her agitated breath.

His eyes fell to her breasts, feasting on every quiver, and then down her taut abdomen, over her belly to the hand cupped protectively over her mound.

And as she watched, his face changed, still set in those hard lines, but his eyelids drooped in a heavy, sensual promise.

“You’re in big trouble, wahine,” he said in a voice that shivered

through her like a drum. "You shouldn't have taken off up here alone, and you and I are going to have it out for that. But first...oh yeah...first."

She shook her head at him, her gaze never leaving his. Her breasts quivered with her agitated breaths. "Don't...say a single word," she choked out. "Just go!"

He finally raised his gaze to hers again, and his mouth kicked up at one corner. "I only have this to say. *Ka nani, ku'u ipo,*" he said. "You're so lovely, sweetheart."

Oh no, he'd been learning Hawaiian. She hated that those

deep, husky words reached deep inside her and tugged like an invisible rope. And then he undid the rest of her defenses. Stepping close enough to touch her, so that she felt the heat of his body, he slowly dropped to his knees before her, and waited for her to decide if she wanted him to touch her.

"E kipa mai," he urged. "Come to me."

She let out her breath on a soft sob of need. *"'Ae. Nu no ka i'ini.* I need you."

"I'll take good care of you, Nani." He leaned forward and pressed his lips like a gentle brand

on the back of her hand. Then, very slowly, he nudged it aside with his face and inhaled deeply. His breath ruffled the curls on her mons, a rumble of pleasure deep in his chest. "Ah...you smell like paradise. I've been waiting for this."

He reared back a little to admire her. "Such delicate black curls, so pretty on your golden skin, and that shy, pink pussy."

He looked up into her eyes and put out his tongue. Then he licked her, a wet, butterfly caress. "I smelled you on my hand last night. Didn't want to wash those fingers."

Bella whimpered, a high, breathy

sound that the trees echoed back to her with sibilant whispers of praise.

“Yeah,” he murmured, lifting his hands to her hips, sliding them around to cup her ass and lift her slightly, urging her to open herself to him. “Watch me, Princess. Watch me make you happy. I’m gonna make you come so hard.”

He licked her again, thrusting his tongue deep into her labia and then licking up, his eyes slitting as he watched what he was doing.

Bella had never felt anything like this. He knew what he was doing, had obviously practiced—a lot. Later she’d be jealous of those other

women, but for right now, all she could do was feel. The slender, springy tree supporting her. The smooth bark of the branch she reached up to grasp with one hand for support. His hands, hot and hard, holding her in place. And his tongue, swirling around her clitoris in a wanton, slippery caress that made need coalesce under his touch, made her pussy clench harder and harder.

The silken brush of blossoms, nodding down to stroke her bare breasts, her nipples, her face. She turned her face into them and felt the soft kiss of their petals on her

lips, her nipples.

It was incredibly erotic, knowing that the forest was watching her, caressing her in the most delicate way while Joel worked his magic below.

She slid her fingers into his hair, clutching him to her, desperate that he should continue. Because her world narrowed down and down and down until the knot of flesh under his tongue was the focal point, and she was bathed in pleasure. It burst, imploding through her, and she cried out to him, a high, breathy paean of praise.

“Oh yeah,” he approved. “Oh, that’s pretty. Again, baby. Let me hear that again.”

He let go of her ass with one hand and thrust two big fingers carefully up into her pussy, groaning deeply as he plumbed her still-pulsating depths. Then he hooked them, finding that magic place behind her pubic bone and pressing while he bent to kiss her again, bathing her clitoris with the flat of his tongue.

“Joel,” she heard herself plead. “Joel...yes, oh, please.”

She’d never begged before, but if he stopped she’d die. He laughed,

deep in his throat, a knowing male sound, as if he knew just how good he was, but he didn't stop until the pleasure imploded again, even harder, her pussy squeezing his fingers for long moments.

When it was over, he pressed a last kiss to her bare hip and then stood before her. She opened her pleasure-drugged eyes reluctantly, shyly, to find him gazing down at her with a strange expression.

He brushed his thumb over her cheek and touched one of the blossoms hanging around her face. "I've never seen anything like that. I swear these flowers are petting

you. Your face, your breasts.” He looked down at her bare, pollen-dusted breasts and then cupped his hands over them, his eyes nearly closing as he fondled her with his calloused fingers and his palms, rubbing over her tight nipples, lifting her in his hands, squeezing.

“Been waiting to do this. You have the prettiest little breasts. You should go topless all the time.”

His touch was so good she didn’t want him to stop, but she also wanted to escape into the water.

“Come have a bath,” she invited, slipping away from his hands. She stepped into the water, looking

back over her shoulder to see if he was following.

Without a word, he pushed his trunks off and followed her into the water, his erect penis bobbing before him like a war club. Sinking into the water, Bella stared at it, rapt. It rose from the auburn curls of his groin, flushed a deep rose, the broad head oozing a clear drop of his arousal.

It disappeared as he sank down to her level, his face appearing before her. He held up one hand with her bottle of body wash and shampoo. "I need to wash off," he said. "And then...you're welcome

to reciprocate, Princess.”

Bella stared at him, shocked and intrigued. “I’ve never...” she began, and then flushed as he grinned crookedly at her, already swiping soap across his chest.

“That’s okay with me. I’m more than happy to be your first.”

Bella accepted the soap from him and then ducked her head under the surface to wet her hair. The water closed over her head, cool and wet, but inside, she was hot all over again. Because the idea of taking him in her mouth, of driving him crazy as he had her...excited her. A lot.

She emerged to find him washing his own hair, eyes closed, powerful arms raised and muscles flexing. He had auburn curls in his armpits, and the skin of his underarms was paler. Oh, he was gorgeous when he was wet. This view of him was strangely intimate, as was watching him wade out far enough to pour body wash into his palm and wash his groin and between his powerful thighs. He sank back into the water, clean, and then observed as she washed herself. Bella's hands slowed as she soaped her breasts.

“Does that feel good?” he asked.

She nodded, and watched his gaze follow her hand as she slipped between her thighs to soap herself there.

“Turn around,” he ordered hoarsely. She did so and then stroked her hand into the crevice of her ass, slicking the soap everywhere, very thoroughly. She could feel his gaze on her like a touch. Finished, she dropped into the water to rinse and then turned and swam toward him.

He backed up, making her chase him until he reached shallower water, and then he stood up. His penis jutted just above the water

line. He palmed it, looking down at her as she knelt before him, in water up to her shoulders.

“Do you want it in your mouth, baby?”

In answer, Bella moved closer to him. She opened her mouth and put out her tongue, delicately tasting the head protruding from his fist. He was hot and satiny, spangled with cool water. His flesh jumped as she touched him, and she put up her own hand, pushing his away to grasp his hot shaft.

Curiously, she opened her mouth and encircled him with her lips. How much of him could she take?

He felt strange and exciting in her mouth. Her pussy clenched in response. She wanted this big, hard shaft inside her, thrusting. But not this time. Now she wanted to push him over the edge, make him cry out as he surrendered to her.

Sliding her hand down, she delicately cupped his sac in her hand. He was hot there too, the fleshy globes drawn up tight against his body. She combed her fingers through the wet curls on his groin, all the while sucking gently on the head of his penis.

He groaned sliding his big hand around the back of her head.

“You’re going to drive me crazy, aren’t you?” he muttered. “Little forest witch.”

She tipped her head back and looked up at him. He was looking down at her, his nostrils flared, his eyes molten gold.

“Watch me,” she murmured daringly, repeating his words. “Watch me make you come.”

“Oh, believe me,” he gasped. “I can’t — can’t take my eyes off of you, Princess.”

She sucked him into her mouth, and he cupped her cheek with one big hand to show her the slide, the pull, how to use her tongue and just

the graze of her teeth.

Bella held on to him with one hand and slipped the other around the back of his thigh, holding him steady. He thrust harder, breathing like a runner, his powerful thigh muscles bunched.

“Ah, Nani,” he muttered. “So good. So damned good.”

He went rigid in her grasp and then shuddered, and warm fluid pulsed into her mouth. She swallowed again and again until he was still, quivering in her grasp. Then she let him go and slipped away, moving backward in the water.

Joel dropped into the water like a felled tree and came up with his eyes closed, floating on his back. Bella watched him warily, not quite able to believe what had just happened. It was this place, she told herself. Even now, laughter, warm and gentle, echoed in the rustle of the foliage, the lap of the water on her skin.

After a moment, he lifted his head and swam toward her. Reaching out one long arm, he caught her hand and pulled her into his hard heat, wrapping his arms around her. His face was relaxed, his eyes still heavy, bright

gold in his wet face. His mouth curved up in a smile, teeth flashing.

“That was amazing. But I just remembered something. How much I love kissing you.”

He cocked his head, and panic welled inside her, nearly suffocating her. No, that was too intimate, too much. If he kissed her mouth now, set those wide, firm, sensitive lips on hers here where she could see him, she might never be able to let him go. And he would go; he'd already said so. He was a rolling stone, not a solid rock on which to build the security she needed.

Bella recoiled, shaking her head, pushing at him until he released her, his brows shooting together, his smile gone.

“No,” she said fiercely. “No more.”

Flipping around, she dove under the water, swimming away from him as fast as she could.

Joel stood there, staring after her. What the hell? She'd already done the most intimate thing a woman could do for him, so what was the big deal about a simple kiss? Was she already regretting what they'd done, what she'd done for him?

He took a step and nearly tripped as his feet tangled in his shorts, draped around his ankles. Reaching down into the water, he grabbed his shorts and yanked them up over his relaxed and very happy cock. As he fastened them, he shot a quick, wary look around. But the clearing and the pool were still quiet.

He waded out onto the bank, waiting for Bella to come out of the water. Damn, he'd never understand women. But for the first time, he wanted to. Because whatever was in her head and her heart was burning her up from the

inside. And damned if immolation wasn't looking like a great way to go.

Finally, she swam across the pond to him, and he held out her towel. She rose from the water as proudly as a queen from her bath and reached for the towel. He had to fight the urge to hang on to it, wrap it around her and dry her off himself, every satiny inch of her.

But instead he waited as she turned her back on him and dried herself off quickly. At least that way he got to look at her sweet ass.

She pulled on her little red-and-white bikini bottoms and then the

top, reaching behind her back to fasten the catch. Joel moved behind her, fastened it for her, and then leaned down to feather a kiss on her bare shoulder.

“Come on, wahine. Time’s wasting.” He turned toward the trail. “I want to get back and spell Frank for a while.”

“We shouldn’t have left him there alone for so long,” she murmured as she hurried after him.

“Hasn’t been that long. I just made you come really fast.”

She gave a huff of disgust, and he chuckled.

But as they walked out of the trees, Joel stopped, and Bella did as well. On the sun-dappled sea off the point was something new. A large sleek yacht rode at anchor. She was black, with a broad gold stripe and gleaming white superstructure.

“I’ll be damned,” Joel said. “That your cousins’ yacht?”

“No,” she said. “They certainly don’t have anything that ostentatious. There’s a name on the side. Can you read it?”

He squinted in the bright sun, but the craft was at too sharp an angle to the shore. “Nope. Think it

starts with an H. But I see they've already landed their dinghy."

Beyond the palm trees on the beach, he could see the trio waving as a motorized raft nosed into the bay, manned by three men. "Come on. Let's go tell Frank."

He jogged down across the rocks toward the cave, Bella behind him. As they neared the cave mouth, Camille stepped out from under the fig trees. The trees shivered, an odd rattling sound coming from their branches. Bella touched his arm. A lightning glance revealed a frown on her face.

Joel stopped, alarm pinging at his

nerves. “Hey, where’s Frank? We’ve got transportation.”

Camille smiled. “Yes, you do. But Frank won’t be needing it. Just you.”

Then Li stepped out of the cave to stand at her side. His knife gleamed as he flipped it, end over end. He smiled at Joel, and rage burned in Joel’s middle. His hands curled, ready to drop the little bastard with a kick and chop.

Bella’s hand tightened. “What’s *he* doing loose? Where’s Frank?”

“I’m afraid Frank’s had a little accident,” Camille explained with a regretful shrug. “A rock hit him on

the head.”

Joel started forward menacingly, and Li stepped back, eyes narrowed, knife at the ready, blade flashing. Joel stepped into the cave, and Bella rushed past him.

Rage fired in Joel’s chest at what he saw. Frank lay sprawled on the cave floor, eyes closed. As Bella dropped to her knees, turning his lolling head in her hands, Joel saw blood in his silver hair and more splotted on the sand under his head. A large chunk of lava lay nearby as if it had been dropped there.

“What did you do?” Joel

demanded contemptuously, turning on Camille. "Hit him over the head to free your little whipping boy?"

Camille's eyes flashed, but then she shrugged elegantly. "Mmm, I may have been holding the rock at the time. But not to worry; he's not dead."

And where was the pistol Frank had taken from Li's bag? Eyeing Camille's stance, one hand behind her back, Joel suddenly had a pretty good idea.

"You bitch! You didn't have to do this," Bella accused, her face pale as she glared up at Camille and

Li. "Frank's twice the man your boy toy will ever be."

"Maybe," Camille purred. "But Li's so much more fun. Anyway, give your old cop a kiss good-bye, because you're coming on a little sea voyage — with me."

"You know the owners of the yacht out there?" Joel demanded. "Who the hell are you?"

"Yes, who are you?" Bella echoed. "Because you're not a photographer, that's for sure."

Camille smirked at her. "It took you long enough to realize that, you naïve little fool. You were too busy being *nice*, weren't you, Miss

Ho'omalulu?"

The hair on the back of Joel's neck stood up, but he ignored her for the moment. He pressed two fingers to Frank's neck. The other man's pulse beat slow but steady.

As Bella folded her towel and tucked it carefully under his head, Frank groaned, a faint sound in his throat. He was pale under his dark tan, but he didn't have the grayish hue that Joel had seen on a fellow rock climber after a fall that would later kill him. Joel prayed that Frank would wake up with only one hell of a headache and not much more damage.

“Get one of the sleeping bags,” Joel advised Bella quietly. “We’ll wrap him in that so he doesn’t get chilled.”

“Leave him,” Camille said impatiently. “I haven’t time for this.”

Bella ignored her, turning to grab one of the sleeping bags from the back of the cave. Li stalked forward, his eyes wide with febrile eagerness.

Joel scooped the chunk of lava from the floor, hefting it in his right hand as he moved between the Asian and Bella.

“Don’t try it,” he warned the

smaller man. "You might hit me with your knife, but I'll smash this in your face, and you'll be looking out of one eye for the rest of your sorry life, make no mistake."

Camille sighed, and Joel looked over to see her training the pistol on him, silencer still attached. She looked all too comfortable with the weapon in her hand.

"Don't waste time, boys," she warned, her eyes as pale as ice. "I start shooting in precisely" — she consulted a slender watch on her wrist — "two minutes."

This new incarnation of the photographer was just stone cold

enough to do it too. Joel felt as if he and Bella had been plunged into an alternate version of reality. Camille Whoever-she-was had sure as hell played them all, convincing them she was an amiable professional.

Ignoring Li, who laughed soundlessly, Joel tossed the rock aside and took the sleeping bag from Bella. "Get a water bottle, and put it here beside him, where he can reach it if he comes to," he told her. Dropping to one knee again, he carefully snugged the light sleeping bag around Frank, moving him just enough to get the bag underneath him and then flapping it over his

body.

Figuring he'd done all he could for the Hawaiian, he rose, calling Camille's attention to himself. "Is this about money?" he asked her. "Because you have to know, my network has plenty. Let the others go, and take me."

Camille stared at him over the barrel of her gun. "Now isn't that sweet. Playing the hero. Such a noble type, aren't you, Joel? But you're not really, are you?" She smiled tauntingly. "Did you tell little Miss Perfect you're just a hick from a logging town? And that you're busy fucking your way

around the world, with a woman or two in every port?"

Bella rose to stand at Joel's side.

"Guess you've outed me good," Joel said, trying to look embarrassed.

"Oh, it gets better," Camille promised, waving the gun. "Now come along. We don't want to be late for cocktails aboard the yacht."

"Cocktails?" Bella echoed disbelievingly. But she rallied quickly. "We're going to need some clothes, if we're going for drinks."

The barrel of the gun turned toward her. "No, no," Camille said. "No more delays. I've a lovely

outfit for you on board. I chose it myself.”

Joel urged Bella to his other side, away from Li, who watched them like a shark as they walked silently from the cave, ahead of him and Camille.

“Why do you think she’s doing this?” Bella whispered as they walked out beneath the trees into the sunshine.

“Don’t know,” Joel whispered back. “I’m assuming crazed fan. Just try to keep quiet — let me draw her attention.”

Something flew past Joel’s ear, stirring the drifting strands of

Bella's hair, and smacked into a palm several feet in front of them.

"No talking," Camille chided. "I might not miss next time."

Joel's hand closed on Bella's like a vise, icy fear slithering down his spine. The woman had just shot at them. She could have hit Bella. Her eyes wide with fear, Bella stumbled.

Joel held her up, trying to reassure her with a look. Damn, he was going to do whatever it took to keep her safe. If he could take either Camille or Li out, that would leave only one of them. Odds he could live with. He might not be a

professional fighter, but he trained regularly, and he was used to using his body and his mind to get through tough situations.

His heart sank like a stone as they reached the little beach. Suddenly this was looking like something much more sinister than a wealthy nutcase who wanted a celebrity guest no matter what it took to get him.

Three toughs in Hawaiian shirts, shorts and sunglasses stood spraddle-legged, holding automatic weapons. The Trio, as Joel had come to think of the models and make-up artist, huddled on the

sand, still wet from their swim. Cassie was crying, her face swollen and tearstained. Tanah sat stiffly by her side, looking scared and furious, and Matt sat nearby, his face pale under his golden tan.

As soon as they saw Camille, the men moved, two of them going to man the rubber-sided dinghy, the other moving back, his weapon ready. They were her enforcers, all right. Who the hell was she?

“You’re here.” Tanah looked up at Joel as if he might save them all. “We saw the yacht, and we thought we were safe. We waved it down, and they came, but they had guns.”

She waved one hand helplessly.

“They’re going to kill us,” Cassie mumbled tearfully. “I just know it.”

“No one’s going to kill you,” Bella soothed, but the look she gave Joel revealed what they both knew — they were in the hands of a mad woman, and they might very well not survive the experience. How could Camille let them go when they could all identify her and now her yacht?

The *Hypnautique*, read the name lettered on the side of the raft.

“Where’s Frank?” Matt asked.

“He’s alive,” Joel murmured, his eyes on Camille. “But injured. She

hit him over the head with a rock. Keep it quiet, okay? Conversation makes Camille a little trigger-happy.”

“She’s the one who’s doing this?” Tanah whispered, her eyes round with horror. “I can’t believe it. She’s so...”

“She seemed so nice,” Cassie finished for her.

Matt snorted. “Yeah, when she wasn’t watching Joel. I think she’s a collector.”

“A what?” Bella asked.

He shrugged, his eyes on Camille. “Some rich old women get their kicks having hot guys around.

She's just more rabid than most."

Bella shuddered, and Joel started to slide a reassuring arm around her. He stopped himself. If Camille was after him, watching him with Bella might push her over the edge. She might hurt his nani wahine.

Bella sucked in a sharp breath. She stared at the name on the raft, and then at the yacht, her eyes wide. "Oh my God," she muttered, her words barely audible over the surf. "I know who she is."

He bent to hear what she said, but the muscleman with the shaved head waved his semiauto at Joel. "You — get in the boat first," he

commanded in a gravelly voice.
“Come on, move it.”

Chapter Thirteen

To Do: In the event that the party must change lodgings or transportation suddenly, the tour director will ensure the change adds to the enjoyment of the tour, instead of detracting from it.

Bella had never been aboard a big yacht. She'd always thought it would be fun, she remembered, with a half sob, half laugh. But only in her worst nightmares would she have imagined boarding this one.

As she clambered out of the

dinghy after Joel, assisted by the sweaty grip of one of Camille's musclemen, she wished desperately that she could turn back time, still be alone in the grotto with Joel. They'd return to the camp and find Frank waiting for them, Li still tied up. Then the Ho'omalus would arrive in Daniel's powerful boat, and in a short time, they'd all be back at Naweia, safe.

She slipped and fell to one knee on the wet boarding platform at Joel's feet. She looked up, squinting in the sun, reaching for his hand to help her up. But he ignored her, his eyes narrowed against the sun as he

stood, tall and broad against the gleaming white and gold of the steps and rail. Hurt bloomed inside her, joining fear and anger in a thorny, poisonous thicket. So all his pretty words had been just to get sex. She was on her own.

“Come along, everyone,” Camille called from above. “You must all have a nice shower, and change.”

Bella followed Joel up the stairs to the main deck of the yacht. It was a broad, elegant space, with comfortable divans and chairs grouped under a white awning that rippled in the ocean breeze. Beyond lay the island on one side, the surf

splashing on the point, and on the other side, the ocean stretched in a sparkling expanse of blue.

Overhead, the sun poured down, the remains of the storm only puffy clouds on the horizon.

They trooped across the deck, and through an open doorway. The main cabin was just as elegant, carpeted in cream, appointed with dark, gleaming wood and swooping metal sculptures. Camille didn't stop there, instead leading them into a passageway with several doors. The trio was directed into one room.

Bella started to follow them, but

Camille turned on her. “No, no, Miss Ho’omaluu. Your room is this way.”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” Bella asked, stopping in the passageway. Her toes sank into the soft carpet runner placed over the gleaming wood floor. Joel stopped and turned, ignoring Li, who was holding another door open for him.

“Because you are a Ho’omaluu,” Camille replied, satisfaction gleaming in her eyes, as if she had been waiting for the question. “The first one, anyway.”

“The *first* one?” Through the open door, Bella saw the trio,

staring at her. The looks on their faces mirrored what she felt — a deepening horror. “But, who are you?”

“I?” Camille’s eyes fairly glowed, as if she’d been waiting for the question, and relished the chance to answer it. “I am Camille. But not Camille Barrett. I made her up. I am Camille Helman.”

The woman was one of the Helmans.

On the beach, once she’d gotten a clear look at the yacht, Bella had recognized its name. The *Hypnautique* belonged to the crime family who had almost succeeded

in murdering both David and Daniel – the Helmans. David had told her that with both Helman brothers dead, the authorities were sure their syndicate would crumble, and the Ho’omalus could return to guarding Hawaii from other dangers.

They’d obviously been wrong.

Joel turned, and Bella fought the urge to dash into his arms. He’d demonstrated that he didn’t want her depending on him anymore.

“You mean this is all about Bella?” he demanded incredulously. “This whole scheme of yours has been to get her aboard

your boat?"

Camille laughed, the husky chuckle of amusement that had so charmed Bella at first.

"Disappointed, Mr. Girand? Poor man, you thought I was after you, didn't you?" She shrugged. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"I don't care who you are. You don't want trouble with the Ho'omalus," Bella warned Camille, although her voice trembled. "Let us go now, and you'll be much better off."

Joel shook his head once, a silent warning, but Camille merely sneered elegantly. "Enough of this.

You're boring me. Get in here and clean up. And don't forget to dress in the lovely ensemble I've chosen for you."

Smiling maliciously, she indicated the open door of a stateroom.

Bella obeyed, crossing the hall. She walked inside, and the door shut behind her with a soft snick. The room was elegantly appointed in gleaming wood and cream carpet, with a huge bouquet of fresh bird of paradise and ginger flowers on the bedside table. She hardly noticed any of it, staring at the things laid out on the bed.

A lei and crown of creamy plumeria with crimson centers lay arranged gracefully next to a beige grass hula skirt, the kind the Tahitian dancers wore in hotel luaus.

The door opened behind her. “You have twenty minutes,” a voice said behind her. “Or I come in to help you.” Bella’s skin crawled. It was Li.

“I won’t need your help.”

He laughed that silent, eerie laugh, chomping on his gum, and closed the door. She reached for it. Maybe if they all locked themselves in until the Ho’omalus came — but

there was no lock. Somehow that didn't surprise her. How many of the "guests" that had boarded this yacht had been like her, here unwillingly? How many of them had not made it back to shore alive?

The soaps and hair products in the small shower were expensive, smelling faintly of tropical flowers. Bella ignored them, knowing that they'd been chosen by Camille Helman. What she wanted was something sharp — even a disposable razor. But there was no such implement in the shower or

cabinet. She certainly didn't need a shower, having just bathed in the grotto with Joel. Her hair was only just dry.

She wished desperately that he were here with her, waiting outside the door.

She stayed in the bathroom for several moments, trying to come up with an idea for escape, but although she racked her brain, she had no ideas. If only she had a coconut tree, she thought miserably.

Finally, Bella opened the door of the tiny bathroom and peeped out. Seeing no one, she emerged into

the stateroom. She looked at the grass skirt with revulsion and picked up the lei. It fell around her bare neck and shoulders, soft and cool, the petals a reassuring caress, their perfume filling her nostrils. Turning to the mirror, she set the crown on her head. As she did so, a strange sensation filled her. With her dark hair streaming around her shoulders, and the crown and lei of flowers setting off her golden skin and black eyes, she looked like the Hawaiian princess Joel had called her.

And a Ho'omalū, she reminded herself fiercely. From a family who

had been called by Pele. She might be just a half-haole newcomer, but she would get through this. And when the Ho'omalus came to see where the group was and why they hadn't shown up at Naweia, they'd see the yacht. Bella just hoped everyone would be alive when her cousins and uncles arrived.

Resolve firming her steps, she turned to pick up the grass skirt and tie it around her hips. It didn't feel so bad once it was on, the dried grasses swishing softly about her bare legs. She even thought she heard the faint echo of her forest voices whispering to her. She

closed her eyes, biting back a sob. The forest couldn't help her now.

The door opened. Li stood there again, now dressed in a sleek black jacket and slacks, his pale hair gleaming with pomade. He looked her over insolently and smirked.

"Nice. Now gimme your top." He held out his hand.

Bella recoiled in horror and distaste. "No!"

His knife snicked open in his other hand. He wagged the fingers of his outstretched hand.

Was this part of Camille's plan, to humiliate and demoralize her? Or was this just a whim of this

knife-wielding creep? Either way, she couldn't afford to argue.

Fuming silently, Bella glared at him. The flowers on the bedside table quivered as if a breeze had passed through the cabin. Reaching up, she unfastened the ties of her top at the back of her neck, and then unhooked it behind her back. She shook her hair forward over her breasts and then threw the top on the floor at his feet.

He ignored it, his eyes on the hair streaming over her breasts. "Push your hair back," he rasped. "No fair hiding," he added in a sing-song voice.

She glared at him, her hands fisting at her sides, and the bedside bouquet trembled. She glanced over at it, suddenly remembering the sharp florist wire she'd often used to brace long stems in a bouquet. If she could make it to the bedside table...

"Now," he ordered, stepping closer, his knife flashing threateningly between them. "Or I give you a haircut you won't forget."

Glaring at him defiantly, Bella did as he ordered, pushing her hair back, baring her breasts to him.

He stared at them for a full

moment while her skin crawled, and she fought tears of impotent rage. Somehow she found the courage to stare back at him while he looked her over. She could not control the hot blush of humiliation that covered her face and chest, however.

She held her chin high, her teeth clenched. She would not let them use this to intimidate her. It was only a little more skin than she usually bared, and she was more than the sum of her female parts. She was herself.

The others were all gathered on the outer deck. They did indeed look as if they'd gathered for an onboard cocktail party. Cassie and Tanah, huddled on a divan, wore flowered sarongs tied about their necks halter-fashion. Joel and Matt still wore their swim trunks. The four still had bare feet, as Bella did.

Camille wore a silver silk-tissue pantsuit, and her hair was styled elegantly, her face made up.

A new man had joined her. Tanned and beefy, like a once-fit athlete gone to fat, pouches under his cold eyes, he wore a dark Hawaiian shirt and slacks, his gray

hair expensively styled. He lounged on the divan beside Camille, a highball glass in his hand.

Everyone stared at Bella as she stepped out onto the deck, followed by Li, who melted away to the fringes of the group. The other girls' eyes widened with horror, and Matt shook his head once, his handsome face tight.

The stranger stared avidly, his mouth curving up in amusement. "So this is your new toy, Camille."

Camille looked Bella over, her face lighting up with satisfaction. "Yes," she purred. "Isn't she amusing? Rather like one of those

little dolls one sees glued to dashboards, swaying back and forth.”

Fighting the urge to wrap her arms over her bare breasts and shrink into a small huddle of flowers, curl into herself in the L where the wall met the door, Bella found Joel. She focused on his face like a lifeline, because despite his coolness earlier, somehow he was the one man, the one person she didn't mind seeing her like this. Just looking at him steadied her, cut through the bitter haze of humiliation.

Joel was lean and handsome in

his damp shorts, the awning overhead setting off his tanned skin. His wet hair was combed back sleekly from his face, setting off the jewel brightness of his golden-brown eyes.

But his stance and the look in his eyes were at odds with his casual appearance. He was furious, his face as hard as a carving, white lines pressed at both sides of his mouth. He looked into her eyes, and then slowly lowered one eyelid in a partial wink, as if they were the only two who mattered. Her heart swelled with the tenderness of his gesture, and tears filled her eyes.

She blinked them away.

Joel turned on Camille. "So now that you have us all here," he said, "mind telling us what this is about?"

"Oh, drinks first," Camille chided, clapping her hands. "Then we'll have story-time."

A slim blond man came out of the cabin and walked behind the bar at one side of the deck. Without a word, he pulled out a bottle of champagne and began to uncork it.

Bella took a step toward Joel, and Camille gestured sharply, like an irritable director on a set. "No, stay there. You don't move. You're the

entertainment, after all," she added roguishly.

The cork popped, and champagne bubbled into flutes, which the bartender passed out. Everyone took a glass and held it, except Joel, who shook his head. They looked like an ad for luxury yachting, Bella thought, if they weren't so stiff.

Only Camille and her friend were relaxed, sipping their champagne. Bella could feel the man's gaze crawling over her like a touch. Camille's gaze flicked from Bella to Joel and back again.

The bartender did not offer Bella

champagne, which was a good thing, as she would have thrown it in someone's face. She'd drunk two glasses of water in the bathroom, so she wasn't thirsty.

She focused on Camille, now a different person than she had appeared on the photo shoot. Gone was the wry, humorous smile, the twinkling eyes. In their place was a hard edge of triumph, as brittle as the edge of the crystal flute she sipped from.

Never again, Bella vowed through the humiliation that gripped her, would she ignore her instincts about someone. If she had

insisted that DelRay replace Camille that first day, none of this would have happened. Of course, perhaps Li would have pulled out that automatic weapon then and there. If Camille had this kind of money and power, she would have made sure her plan went into action one way or the other.

And who was the man? Was he one of the Helmans? Had the Ho'omalus been mistaken to think them all dead? Was Camille his wife or mistress?

"Now then," Camille said grandly, waving her flute of champagne. "As our action hero so

cleverly guessed, this is about Miss Ho'omalū." She glared at Bella, and her face changed, an ugly scowl behind the careful cosmetics.

"Yes, it's about her," Camille hissed. "Look at you. Such a fresh young thing, on the cusp of your life. You've just discovered that you're a member of a large, wealthy family, so you can come here and live like a Hawaiian princess. Choose your groom from one of the wealthy elite here and live out your dreams in paradise."

Her acquaintance stirred, frowning uneasily. "Now, Camille, take it easy. You said—"

She turned on him like a snake. “I said you’d get what you wanted, Decker. That was our deal, and this is my part of it. Stefan and Denas are gone, but I’m here — and I will have my revenge.”

“Because you’re a Helman,” Bella said.

Camille swung her gaze toward Bella. Her skin crawled. This was a dangerous woman, as well as an unbalanced one. Was dressing Bella in such a sexual fashion merely to humiliate her, or did Camille plan to give her to the man as some kind of horrid gift?

“Yes, I am a Helman,” Camille

agreed proudly, rising from the divan. She touched her heavy pendant, stroking the shape. An H, Bella realized. Not the Z she had first thought it. The clue had been right in front of her nose the entire time, and she hadn't recognized it.

“And thanks to your dear family — so noble, so true to their Hawaii — I am the last of my line.”

Camille's voice sank to a sibilant hiss, and icy fear slithered through Bella's middle.

“How do you figure that?” Joel asked, shifting. He shoved one hand in the pocket of his swim trunks. “The news reports said their

deaths were accidents. Stefan fell into an unstable volcano vent, and Denas died in a diving accident. Near here," he added, turning to look back at the shore yards away.

Only now it was farther away than it had been, Bella realized with horror. They were underway. The big engines had been idling when they boarded, and she had not realized until now that they were moving. Away from the shore, away from safety.

"You may be gullible enough to believe the news reports," Camille said. "But I'm certainly not. No, I was there when Stefan reported to

Denas that he was having a problem with some local landowner who'd had one of his men thrown in jail. 'Ho'omalū', he said. Then Stefan and five men died on the mountain, very near Ho'omalū land."

She whirled and paced across the deck and back again like an actress enjoying the spotlight, Bella thought spitefully. But she was an actress who knew her lines all too well.

"Then we lost another man," Camille continued. "In a mysterious explosion aboard his boat. And I was with Denas in

Kailua when a tattooed local caused trouble with men we'd hired. He threw them off the public dock and then insulted my brother. His name? Ho'omalua. The same man who we were told had miraculously escaped injury when that boat went down."

She drained her champagne flute and held it at her side. "Then Denas died, supposedly in a diving accident. With all his men? I didn't believe it, any more than I believed that Stefan's and his men's deaths were accidental." She turned and pointed her glass at Bella. "No, it was your family who killed my last

two brothers. And now..."

"And now what?" Joel demanded contemptuously.

"You're going to kill all of us?"

Tanah gasped, and Cassie whimpered quietly. Joel ignored them, striding across the deck to Bella. He lifted his hands, pulling her hair forward over her breasts, and stood at her side. "You'll never get away with it," he said to Camille. "Too many people know where we are. And we were due back in Kailua Harbor about now. When we don't show up, they're going to come looking for us."

Bella moved closer to him,

feeling warmed and protected despite the continued peril of their situation.

“He’s right, Camille.” Camille’s friend, or compatriot, whoever he was, levered himself off his seat, and stood, shaking his head chidingly at Camille. “I won’t be a party to any kind of physical violence. You never said anything about that.”

“Then perhaps you should leave now,” Camille said, her nostrils flaring with displeasure.

“I thought we were going to have dinner?” he protested. “I just got here. I didn’t fly over from

Honolulu just to head right back.”

She cocked her head at him.

“Choose, Decker.”

He shook his head again. “I’m going, then. But don’t do anything stupid. You mess up this land deal, and it’ll be billions down the drain. Neither of us can afford that.”

He turned away, waving his hands in gesture that dismissed the situation and everything that happened here.

“Yeah, don’t forget to call the police when you get there,” Joel suggested sarcastically.

Tanah erupted off the divan, stepping into the big man’s path.

“Take me with you,” she begged, her hands clasped in entreaty. “I want to go to Honolulu.”

“So do I,” protested Cassie. “And Matt.”

“Oh no, no.” Camille waved her empty glass. “That would ruin my party. Besides, you three are my insurance policy.” She winked at Joel, and Bella felt rather than heard his soundless growl of rage and disgust.

The beefy Decker pushed Tanah away with what looked like regret and strode away across the deck and out of sight down the steps leading to the back of the yacht.

They heard a boat motor start up,
and a moment later, a sleek
motorboat sped away, headed west
toward Kona.

Chapter Fourteen

To do: Faced with hostile persons in a foreign setting, the tour director will remain calm, while attempting to contact proper authorities.

“So,” Joel said through his teeth. “You’re Camille Helman. Would that be the LA Helmans, who sell drugs, illegal weapons and people when they can get them? I believe I’ve heard about your family on the news.”

Camille perched again on the empty divan, waving her glass at

the silent bartender for a refill. The trio sank onto their divan like deflated balloons, watching her.

“But you never saw any arrests,” Camille reminded Joel. “Merely annoying trials and speculations. No, the poor police and FBI just can’t seem to get enough evidence to pin anything on us. Besides, one must make a living. If there weren’t idiots lining up to buy what we sell, then we wouldn’t be so successful, would we?”

“LA’s pretty rich pickings,” Joel said. “What are you doing here? These are just islands, when all’s said and done. Just little dots on the

map.”

She gave him a chiding look, swinging her slender foot, shod in a silver ballet flat. “Hawaii is not just ‘islands’. It’s the American paradise. And I” — she took a drink of champagne — “am going to own a very large chunk of it before I’m through.”

“Using your drugs,” Bella guessed. She looked up at Joel. “That’s why she’s here, to sell the drugs her brothers’ chemists dreamed up in their labs and get Hawaiians hooked on them. Kona Kula — Kona Diamonds, a sick play on the Kona Gold nickname for the

marijuana grown here.”

Camille raised her glass in a mocking toast and drank again. “Good, good. You’re so clever. But not clever enough, because I’ve got you, haven’t I, Miss Ho’omalū.”

Bella shivered. This woman changed moods with such mercurial swiftness, perhaps she used drugs herself.

“Yes, you’ve got it all,” Camille murmured, almost to herself. “Your family is wealthy, *and* they’re respected, even revered here. Artists, landowners, philanthropists. They look after their island as if they were

patrons.”

The polar opposite of her own family in every way but one, Bella realized with sickening clarity.

“You hate me because even with all your money, you’ve never been looked up to, admired. People in LA must be afraid of your family. Hurting me won’t change your life,” Bella said, her voice shaking. “It will only make it worse. If you sink to your brothers’ level, you’ll destroy yourself.”

“Sink to their level?” Camille erupted from the divan, throwing her champagne aside. It landed in Cassie’s lap, and she gave a little

shriek of fear.

Joel moved, his arm outstretched like a protective barrier before Bella, but Bella's gaze was locked with Camille's. She felt as if she had loosed a spitting serpent from its cage.

"My brothers would have chewed you to a bloody pulp and spit you out in the streets, you stupid little piece of Hawaiian twat," Camille hissed. "They were my heroes. All my life I watched them and emulated them. My mother was a weak fool, addicted to her prescription drugs and her booze, but I watched, and I

listened, and I learned. Oh yes, I fooled everyone. Chameleon – that was the nickname my brothers gave me, because I could always make people believe anything I wanted them to.

“Camille is such a society girl, but so useless,” she mimicked. “Good thing they kept her out of the family business. A woman could never run an empire like that. She’ll have to marry someone who can take over, now that her brothers are gone.

“But no more hiding, no more Chameleon. I’ll show them all my true colors. Beginning here. I’ll sell my Kula to your natives. They’ll

fight to get it, believing it will aid them in their traditional worship—the fools!

“When I’ve finished with the Ho’omalus and all your ‘people’, not to mention all those who’ve looked down at me and are trying to horn in on my family’s business...well, let’s just say they’ll change their tune.”

Tossing her head, she sat down again and snapped her fingers at the bartender. “Now, let’s have some Hawaiian music. And our little doll can dance a hula for us.”

Taken aback by the flood of bitter revelation, followed by this

lightning change of mood, Bella gaped at her. Then she shook her head. "Sorry. I don't know how to hula."

As the rich strains of Hawaiian guitar and ukulele filled the air, Camille waved her hand. "Well, I'm not particular. Make something up."

Bella looked her in the eye. "No." No matter what, she would not dance like a puppet on a string for this woman.

"Oh." Rather than looking angry or disappointed, Camille merely pursed her lips, as if biting back a smile. Then she beckoned, and Li

came sauntering forward. Bella tensed — she'd forgotten the little snake.

“Then off you go,” Camille said like a parent to a naughty child. “If you're not going to dance, you can go to your room.”

But the sly laughter in her eyes promised much worse. Bella realized that Camille had known she would refuse to dance. She had something else in mind — something that involved Li.

Li grasped Bella's arm and yanked at her. Joel held on to her

other arm, reaching for Li, and the nearest of Camille's men, the big, bald one, strode forward from the boat rail.

"Joel!" Bella screamed as the man raised his weapon. Joel turned, and Baldy struck him across the side of his face with the butt of the weapon. Joel fell back against the wall of the cabin with a thump.

Li yanked Bella away from him. She dug her heels in, straining to see over her shoulder. "No, no. Joel!"

Had the blow killed him? Was the thug even now beating him down with the weapon?

Li pulled her through the main cabin, down the passageway, and pushed her into the small stateroom.

When he let her go, she scrambled away from him, back across the bed, to crouch in the plush pillows at the head. She was trembling, her heart pounding.

He put his knee on the foot of the bed and leaned over toward her, his eyes alight with malicious glee.

“Get away from me,” she cried.

“Too bad you didn’t stay to dance. ’Cause now you’re mine,” he crooned, crawling onto the bed.

“I’m gonna have fun with you, little hula girl.”

“No!” Bella screamed as he leapt across the bed at her. She kicked at him, but he grabbed her skirt and held on, holding her there as he levered himself up and over her, pinning her to the bed.

“I’m gonna fuck you,” he hissed, his breath hot on her face, his eyes bright and fierce. “And then maybe I’ll cut you. I like to cut pretty girls. The prettier, the better.”

“No,” she gritted, jabbing at his eyes with her outstretched fingers. “You’re not!”

He yelled as she dug her nails

into his sockets, narrowly missing his eyeballs, and then yanked her head back with a handful of her hair, glaring at her from his reddened, swelling eyes. "No more Mr. Nice Guy," he hissed. "For that, I'm gonna cut you first and then fuck you while you bleed."

She struggled wildly, but he held her fast, and his knife appeared before her face, the blade shining as he held it before her eyes, waving it teasingly, his chest shaking with that silent laughter.

Bella strained away from him, watching the blade come closer. Then she heard a crash, and water

splashed over her bare shoulder. She peered to the side. The bouquet had fallen, and the flowers were littered on the bed, their wet stems glistening.

“How about if I start right here?” Li asked, touching the knife blade to her throat. “Maybe you’ll bleed out while I’m fucking you. That would be fun.”

The blade pricked her skin, an ice-cold slice of pain, and Bella screamed again, thrashing. She stretched out her hand, reaching, reaching, and just as he sliced deeper, one of the long stems slipped across the coverlet and into

her hand.

Her fingers closed around it, and with a growl, Bella swung her arm and stabbed, aiming for her captor's throat. The wire imbedded in the stem sank deep into his flesh.

He froze, his eyes going wide, and then reared back, choking and clawing at the bird-of-paradise stem protruding from his throat.

Bella shoved him, and he fell off her, gasping hoarsely, his eyes wild, the whites rolling. Blood spouted over the pristine whiteness of the coverlet.

She scrambled off the bed, stopping only to grab his knife.

Shaking like a leaf, she stared down at him as he struggled to pull the wire free with shaking hands.

“That’ll teach you to cut women, you bastard,” she spat.

Behind her, the door slammed open, and she whirled, holding the knife out before her. Her heart leapt with joy. “Joel!”

Her hero filled the doorway, one of his eyes swollen half shut, a huge bruise purpling across his temple and cheekbone. He looked ready to kill someone — for her?

He looked at Li shaking on the bed, at the knife in her hand, and his good eye narrowed.

“You’re bleeding!” His deep voice was a growl of rage.

She shook her head, so glad to see him, tears filled her eyes. “J-just a scratch.”

He glanced at Li again, who had yanked the wire free but was still choking on his own blood. “I’m not even gonna ask. Come on!”

Joel grabbed her hand in his, big and warm and strong, and she ran after him, out of the room and down the passageway away from the main cabin. She flinched as she heard Camille shriek something out on the main deck, and a man yelled in response.

Joel stopped abruptly at the end of the passageway, and Bella jerked her mind back to their surroundings. "Do you know where this goes?" she asked breathlessly.

"It's a boat," he replied, peering out of a narrow doorway to the left. "It all leads to water."

She couldn't argue with that.

"Here." He reached back, his hand open. "Give me the knife."

"Is there someone out there?" She complied and looked fearfully back the way they'd come. How would they ever escape all those armed thugs? How had Joel even gotten this far?

“No, but there’s rope. Always handy.” Was he joking? She scowled at his broad back.

A large shape appeared in the open doorway to the main cabin — one of Camille’s thugs. He had his back to the passageway, but he was turning their way, semiauto at the ready.

“Go!” she squeaked, shoving at Joel.

He moved, yanking her out onto a narrow deck covered by the superstructure. Bella landed, belly against the railing. She looked down and let out a small whimper of dismay. The water was a long

way down. She turned to Joel, but he was busy pulling the hatch shut. "Good," he muttered. "This thing locks on the outside. Don't need the rope to tie it shut."

"Of course it locks on the outside," she snapped. "Other people worry about break-ins. These creeps don't want anyone to break out."

He grinned crookedly at her. "You really think they use a luxury yacht to hold prisoners?"

"Well, they are now."

He shrugged. "Can't argue with that."

"Where are Cassie and Tanah

and Matt?" she asked, peering along the side of the yacht. "We can't leave without them."

"We're not. They'll meet us."

"Meet us where?"

"In the damn water! Now come here. Time to jump."

She looked at him and then at the water below. "I'm not jumping. You said there was rope."

He scowled at her, but he was already pulling Li's knife from the pocket of his shorts. He clicked it open. "It's not that far down. Jumping is quicker."

"Just get the rope."

He cut a long section of the rope

and then tied it to the railing, yanking the knot. He shook his head at it but turned back to Bella. She started to swing her leg over the railing and stopped, the grass skirt tangling around her legs.

She pulled at the tie, but Joel pushed her hand aside, slipped the knife under the string that held up the skirt and cut it. Free of the clinging strands, Bella let him help her over the railing.

“Don’t look down,” he whispered, pressing a quick kiss to the side of her mouth. “Look at me, and think about how I’m gonna make love to you when we get to a

nice, quiet bed.”

“Okay,” she agreed breathlessly. He handed her the rope, his eyes on the knot. He seemed to be enjoying himself, she thought resentfully.

“Let the rope slide through your hands,” he instructed. “And face the boat so you can push off with your feet. And I’ll be right beside you.”

She nodded and stepped off. She slid a little way, grabbed the rope and swung toward the hull of the yacht, banging her shoulder painfully on the hot metal. Gritting her teeth, she stretched out her leg and pushed off. She forced herself

to unclench her hands from the rope, ready to slide again, but suddenly she was falling through the bright air. She just had time to close her eyes, and the water hit her in a hard swoosh, tearing at her hair, filling her nose and mouth with salty brine. The ocean swallowed her, sucking her down.

She felt the concussion of a splash beside her, and a warm hand grasped hers and tugged. Bella kicked hard, rising with Joel up into the warm sunlight. The crown was gone, a small cream shape twirling in the water nearby, but the lei was plastered across her face, along

with her hair. She choked, coughing salt water, and trying to breathe through the burning in her sinuses and throat. Ack, that was the third time on this trip she'd inhaled salt water. She was never swimming in the ocean again.

Joel yanked her under the curve of the hull, treading water beside her as she caught her breath. She glared at him through her hair, swiping it from her face. He looked fine.

"Sorry," he said. "Rope slipped. Come on, we have to move."

"Are we going to swim all that way?" she asked, gazing in horror

at the broad expanse of rolling sea between them and the island. From down here, the waves were a lot bigger.

Joel shook his head, already stroking away from her. "They'd catch us in a minute. We need transportation."

He turned and swam toward the rear of the boat, and Bella followed, trying not to think of the depths underneath her and all the creatures lurking there. Those on the yacht were much worse, she reminded herself. "How are we going to get transportation?" she panted.

“Personal watercraft — Jet Ski. There are three on the back of the yacht.”

“They’re not — just going — to let us — take them,” she gasped, stroking hard to keep up with him.

He paused and pulled her close to the hull. “Nope. We need a diversion.”

Above them, a woman screamed, a man shouted, and then gunfire rattled. Bella ducked with a squeak, clinging to Joel, but he pulled away. “That’s our diversion — Matt. Come on.”

Bella swam as quietly as she could around the back of the big

yacht, her heart pounding as she peered at the railing above. But no armed gunmen appeared as Joel clambered out onto the boarding platform beside three shiny black-and-white Jet Skis. Each had an H emblazoned on the side.

Joel unfastened the first craft from its mooring cables and then pushed it into the water. As he did so, Tanah paddled around the back of the yacht, her wet hair hanging in her eyes. Cassie was behind her, eyes wide as saucers.

“Tanah,” Joel ordered. “Take this Jet Ski.”

The redhead nodded and

scrambled awkwardly up onto the craft, then reached back for Cassie. The two had discarded their sarongs, and wore their bikinis.

“Oh, hurry,” Cassie pleaded.

Joel loosed another Jet Ski, and then the third. Pulling himself up over the back, he leaned over the ignition and then grasped the throttle and controls on the handles.

“Come on,” he said urgently, looking up at the boat as a man shouted something and more gunfire erupted.

Bella scrambled up out of the water, banging her knee, but made

it onto the back of the padded vinyl seat. She threw her arms around Joel's middle and hung on. The instant she did so, he hit the throttle, and the motor revved up in a loud snarl.

At that moment, Matt appeared over the back of the yacht, arcing into a flying dive, silhouetted against the sky for an instant. He landed in an awkward belly flop, and Cassie leapt from the back of Tanah's Jet Ski onto the third craft, grabbing the throttles, her lovely face pale but determined.

"Get on," she shrieked at Matt, who grasped the back of the craft

and clambered aboard, hunched over as if he were hurt.

A burly silhouette appeared above them. Baldy, with his weapon aimed and ready.

“Go!” Bella screamed.

They sped off across the blue water toward the island, the little craft rocketing through the waves in a series of dizzying lifts and bumps. Bella held on tightly to Joel and tried not to watch the water zipping by at a horrific speed.

They had just started out when he suddenly cranked the wheel to the left, and then the right, zigzagging through the waves.

“What are you doing?” She fought to maintain her balance on the wet seat and her grip on his wet torso.

“They’re shooting at us,” he yelled back. “Just hang on.”

Bella looked back and saw the outline of the yacht shining in the sun. Foam spurted up from the water, a line of sharp bursts that followed them across the water, then disappeared as Joel took the craft in another swooping turn.

Her body rigid, waiting for the bullet that would strike her back, Bella hung on.

Joel slowed as they approached

land and turned toward the west, and into the cove at Na'alele.

Bella opened her mouth to ask him why they didn't keep going to Naweia, and remembered Frank. They had to go back and rescue him. She looked back to see the other two Jet Skis close behind as they slowed in the little bay and slid up to the beach.

"We can c-carry Frank up into the forest," she said, her teeth chattering as Joel switched off the motor, "and h-hide him there. My cousins should be here any time now."

"Hope so. Let's go. Because for

sure that crazy bitch will send her men after us any minute now."

Bella scooted back on the seat and let him stand up and hop off the craft. He turned to hold out his hand to her, holding the Jet Ski steady with the other, and she smiled shakily at him.

"You l-look pretty good even with a black eye, hotshot." And he did. He looked dashing and dangerous, with one eye swollen half shut and a livid bruise across his temple.

"You look damn hot in nothing but a pair of bikini bottoms and a lei," he said. "What's left of one,

anyway.”

She yanked the lei over her head, tossing it into the water, and then stepped off into his arms. He pulled her close to him, her bare breasts against his chest. “I’ll buy you a lei when we get back,” he promised. “One that really means aloha.”

She kissed him. And as his mouth met hers at last, warm and firm and soft, opening to sup at her lips, tasting the wetness of her inner lip, then pressing hard, his breath mingling with hers, she believed they would make it happen.

“For God’s sake come on,”

demanded Tanah from the beach.
“We’ve got a crazy woman after us,
in case you two have forgotten.”

“Coming.” Joel stepped back, but
he kept Bella’s hand in his as they
hurried up to the cave.

Chapter Fifteen

To Do: A skilled tour director will use advance knowledge to make sure her clients see the best each site along the tour has to offer.

Frank was not in the cave, nor did he answer Joel's calls as they trekked up across the camp.

Bella pulled on a brown tank top, and everyone rifled their bags for shoes. Then Bella climbed the fig trees, Joel close behind her. The weapon was gone. Joel only hoped Frank had it and not Kobe and

Eddy, or whoever the hell else Camille had crawling through the forest.

“I’m trying my cell phone again,” Tanah said as soon as she’d pulled a T-shirt over her wet bikini. She plopped down on a camp chair.

“Good. Try mine too.” Joel handed her his phone.

Bella and Joel searched the tunnel and even called Frank’s name into the echoing black depths but heard no answer.

“All right,” Joel said as they walked back out into the main cave. “He’s gone – somewhere. We have to go too.”

“We have to find him,” Bella said.

“We can’t help him if we’re dead,” Matt said, already headed outside. “Let’s get the Jet Skis, and get out of here.”

“Anything on either of our phones?” Joel asked Tanah.

She shook her head, her shoulders slumping. “What are we going to do, Joel?”

“We’re going to find Frank,” Bella said. “And then we’ll—”

“Nani,” Joel said firmly, fixing her with a look from his good eye. “We have to get everyone safe. Camille’s men will be back. She’s a

psycho bitch, and she's not going to give up this easily. Come on, we're leaving."

"I'm ready," Cassie was already at the cave door, huddled in a cover-up and broad-brimmed hat. Her pale hair straggled around her sunburned face.

Bella opened her mouth to protest and cocked her head, almost as if she were listening to something only she could hear in the rustling of the fig trees outside the cave. The hair stood up on the back of his neck.

"What?"

"They're coming," Bella said.

Matt burst back into the cave, breathing heavily. He was pale and pressed one hand to his side. "I don't think...we can make it to... the Jet Skis. They're...coming back...in the raft."

"Hell. We'll head up into the forest," Joel decided quickly.

"Okay, everyone, move. Get your bags, and get to the trail."

Bella and Joel grabbed two extra provision bags and dumped them out.

Bella opened the nearest cooler and quickly chose a few Tupperware containers. Barbecued pork, bread and something that

looked like rice. Joel reached into the other cooler for bottles of water and juice. He threw in a few cans of soda and beer into each bag too. It was all liquid.

Shouldering the bags, he strode over and grabbed his duffel and went to stand in the mouth of the cave. "Come on," he ordered, peering out at the sea. "I can see them, about halfway here from the yacht."

Bella grabbed her bag and followed him out of the cave. "Wait — a sleeping bag."

Joel turned on her. "Damn it, woman, *come on.*"

She trotted back out in a second, sleeping bag under one arm, her duffel over the other.

“Bella, you lead the way. Matt, you three go next,” Joel said grimly. “That way I won’t outdistance you, and I can watch our back trail.” And he could grab Bella if she got another great idea about something they “needed”, like the tent hanging in the trees on the other side of camp. She’d sure gotten her confidence back the moment they stepped onto land. Oh, well, preferable to the humiliation and fear he’d seen in those black velvet eyes on the yacht.

Despite their loads, Bella set a swift pace up into the trees, not even slowing at the lower grotto.

“We can probably stop here,” Joel said.

“Yeah,” panted Tanah. “I have to rest.”

“Matt needs to stop,” Cassie said urgently. “What’s wrong?”

Joel turned to see the young Hawaiian bent over, an arm clamped to his midriff. “I think I cracked a rib when I dove off that yacht,” he groaned. “I gotta lie down.”

“Are you sure you want to stop here?” Bella asked, looking down

on them from the shadowed trail.

“Look at him,” Cassie said, her face crumpling. “He can hardly walk.”

“We’ll hide,” Tanah added, moving over to take Matt’s arm. “Come on.”

“Walk around the pool, and stay hidden among the rocks,” Bella advised. “No one will find you there.”

Joel looked at her. “Aren’t you stopping here?”

She shook her head. “No, we have to keep going. Up to the top of the waterfall. We can keep watch from there.”

She had an excellent point. Joel handed Cassie one of the bags of food and water, patted her shoulder and followed Bella up the steep trail. His head was beginning to throb like a son of a bitch, and his bag of food, water and beer seemed heavier with every yard they climbed.

He reminded himself that it wasn't as heavy as the packs he'd toted on week-long treks into the wilds on other continents. And that Bella was safe from that crazy woman, and he meant to see that she stayed that way.

Bella ventured off the trail at the

top of the steep climb, and Joel followed her through the thick underbrush. He ducked to step in under the heavy branches of a fig. Straightening, he looked around in amazement. He'd peered through the branches at her, but he hadn't seen all this little place had to offer.

"I'll be damned," he said, letting the bags slide to the ground. They stood in a small lava bowl of sorts, open on one side to the sea. It lay mostly in the sun, but their side was shaded by the trees hanging over the pool of water dammed by the lip of the bowl. Joel could see that it would all be in shadow as

the afternoon went on. Good, because the air was heating up with the sun, around eighty, by his estimate.

The clear stream trickled over the edge of the bowl. They'd have to stay away from that edge, but they could take a quick bath if they wanted and not be in any danger of floating over.

Peering cautiously through the branches of another shrub, Joel saw that a cliff dropped away below them. They'd followed the curve of the lava flow and were right over the camp. This was the smaller waterfall he'd seen from the boat,

he realized.

“Huh. Nice view,” he murmured. “And there are Camille’s men. Now what are they up to?”

The motorized dinghy rocked on the surf outside the little bay. Bending to his duffel, Joel pulled out his little binoculars. He adjusted them and trained them on the craft, making sure to stay behind the cover of the foliage.

“Three men,” he told Bella. “They’re pointing at the Jet Skis we borrowed. They’re consulting. Now, they’re riding two, hauling the other one, headed back to the

yacht. Not coming after us yet.” He’d much rather they hadn’t taken the only transportation either, but at least it gave him a little time to figure out how he was getting her and the trio out of here.

He swung the binoculars until he found the yacht and adjusted them, searching the portholes.

“Did you see Camille?” Bella asked.

“No, and I don’t want to. Come on, let’s try our phones again. They should work.” But the same “out of service area” symbol blinked at them from both phones. “Damn it!” Joel flung his phone onto his duffel

and lifted his hands to shove back his tousled hair. "I just don't get it. What the hell is jamming the signals?"

"Maybe Camille is doing that too," Bella said wryly.

Joel looked at her. "You know," he said, "you may have a point there. You can buy all kinds of tech gear now online, and if she's wealthy enough to own that yacht... Maybe she's got some kind of jammer operating from on board, or hidden in the woods here somewhere."

She nodded. "She certainly has hired some scary enforcers. How on

earth did you and the others get away from Camille's armed men?"

Joel's stomach growled loudly. "I'll tell you over lunch. I'm starving, and you must be too."

She shook her head. She sat down on the rolled-up sleeping bag, looking suddenly exhausted. "I thought — we were going to die out there," she said. "And I—I thought he was going to...rape me."

She looked at Joel, her mouth quivering. "And you acted as if you didn't even know me."

He winced, making his head throb worse. "I thought Matt was right, and that Camille was after

me, or him *and* me. I figured if I paid attention to you, she'd get even more irrational and jealous."

She accepted this with a nod and sniffled. "But then you protected me. Mahalo. That was really sweet."

"The bitch wanted to humiliate you." He looked her in the eye. "But she didn't succeed, because you're a tough tita."

She smiled, or tried to. "Li said he was going to c-cut me. I've never been so frightened, Joel."

He ached to take her in his arms, but something told him to hold off. He needed to feed her first. She

was a little shocky and needed energy. "Of course you were," he said. "Guy's a slime ball. Bet he isn't feeling too chipper now. Explain to me what the hell you did to him?"

He dug in his bag and pulled out a couple of sugared colas and handed one to her. "Drink this."

She sipped hers while he slapped together a quick meal. Between bites of a barbecued pork sandwich and the macaroni salad he fed her from his own fork, Bella recounted her quick thinking with the flowers in the bouquet. By the time she was finished, the sparkle was back in

her eyes and she was eating with more energy, if not enjoyment.

“That’s one to tell your grandkids around the campfire,” he said. “I can’t believe you knew to do that. Not too many people would.”

She shrugged. “They would if they were florists.”

He raised his eyebrows at that. “I guess. But it was damn lucky that bouquet fell over in your struggle with him.”

She stopped with her sandwich in her hand, gazing at something only she could see in the clear pool. Then she looked over at him. “Yes,”

she said. "Lucky."

A small shiver rippled across his skin. Sometimes, she could be a little eerie. He shook his head at his own imagination. He'd met natives of lands far away who spent their entire existence in the shadows of the jungle, and some of them had a kind of knowing that was mysterious to his Western mind, but this was no native woman. It was Bella.

Joel took her empty plate and soda can and set it with his.

"What happened after I...after Li dragged me away?" she asked. "I saw that thug hit you. And that

reminds me, I want to put something on your bruise. I have a first aid kit in my bag. DelRay's mini-special," she joked.

Joel nodded and then winced as the motion made his head throb. "I wouldn't say no to a painkiller."

As she fished in her bag, he began to talk. "When an opponent gets close enough to hit you, that means they're within your reach too. I went a little crazy, I guess, worrying what Li would do to you. I managed to grab the big guy's legs in a scissor hold and knock him down. At that point, Matt leapt into action and wrestled the weapon

away from him.”

Bella handed him two painkiller tablets, and he swallowed them with a last drink of soda. “Never would have expected it of the kid,” he went on. “Or that Tanah and Cassie would manage to drop that awning on Camille.”

She grinned. “They dropped the awning on her?”

“Damnedest thing,” he agreed. “Don’t think it hurt her, but it gave us time to come up with a plan. I’d go after you, and we’d meet at the back and try to grab either the raft or the Jet Skis. They’d follow if they could, but if that didn’t work,

barricade themselves in one of the cabins with the weapon and wait for us to bring back help – and the law.”

“Wow,” Bella said, stunned.
“You were all so tough.”

He gave her a look. “You were the toughest of all, tita. That little creep is scary, but you faced him down and got away with only a scratch.”

He indicated a spot on his throat, looking at hers, and she touched the spot, wincing at the sore, puffy place where Li had pricked her with his knife.

Joel moved to kneel before her,

the tube of antibiotic ointment from the first aid kit in his hand. He squeezed out a blob and gently smoothed it over the scratch. "There. All better." At least it would be when he got a few moments alone with that little scumbag. He was going to turn the dude's smirking face into mincemeat.

"Mahalo."

He looked up into her eyes, as pretty as sooty blooms, and he wanted to sweep her into his arms and promise that no one would ever be able to hurt her again. But he couldn't promise that, and what

the hell was he doing, even thinking it? So instead he rose and walked to the edge of the pool.

“How about a quick bath?” he suggested and dropped his shorts on the bank and walked into the water. The pool was hip-deep in the middle, the water chilly at the bottom but warmed by the sun at the surface. “I want the blood off of you and the salt water off of both of us.”

He turned to Bella and found her watching him. The look on her face sent arousal shooting straight to his groin. His cock stiffened even as the cool water washed at his sac,

tightening it up. The contrast of heat and chill was erotic as hell, as was the idea of her heat surrounding him.

He smiled at her, wincing as the motion pulled at his swollen cheek.

“Come on in, nani girl,” he suggested, his voice deep in the sudden hush that seemed to grip the surrounding forest.

“Shouldn’t we be doing something?”

“The most important thing we can do right now is keep you safe,” he said. “And happy. Why don’t you come on in here and let me make you real happy?”

She gave him that disgusted look he guessed women had been giving men since the beginning of time, the one that said he had a one-track mind. But it changed to speculation, and as he watched, fascinated, a rosy blush chased the last of the paleness from her cheeks, and she bit her lower lip, letting it slide through her white teeth, wet and pink in the sunshine pouring over her.

“How about if I make you even happier?” she replied in that way she had, like it was a contest between them. That was okay with him. They’d both win.

When she pulled her tank over her head and let it fall aside, Joel forgot the question. And when she reached down and hitched her thumbs in the strings of her little bikini bottoms and shoved them down her pretty legs, revealing her small triangle of sooty curls, he forgot everything except the heat roaring through him.

As she walked daintily into the water, he was surprised the water of the pool didn't begin to boil. She was the prettiest, hottest wahine he'd ever seen.

He told her so, his voice hoarse. She waded into his arms, one

eyebrow lifting in a feminine challenge. "Prove it, hotshot."

His brain went up in smoke. Like a man in an erotic dream, Joel lifted her up in his arms, one arm around her back and the other under her sweet ass, warm and round in his hand. Her hot center landed against his cock, pressing her wet heat directly along the length of his shaft as she wrapped her slender arms around him and held on.

With a deep groan of the most intense desire he'd ever felt, Joel cocked his head and kissed her, pressing his mouth to hers, soft and damp. Her lips parted, and he

slipped his tongue into her mouth, finding hers and tangling with it in a sweet battle. She tasted like barbecue and the sweetest of nectars. But he recognized the taste as if he'd been waiting for it all his life — her special taste.

She moved, tightening her legs around him, and he groaned into her mouth as she caressed his cock in sweet, wet torture. Damn, he loved foreplay, but right now all he could focus on was getting inside her.

He dragged his mouth from hers. "Condom," he gasped, already heading for the bank.

“Hurry,” she pleaded, kissing him again as he carried her out of the pool. He had to stop walking for a moment or kill both of them on the wet rocks.

He managed to lift his head one more time. Holding her, he waded out onto the bank and knelt to lay her down in the soft greenery, reaching out to yank open the side pocket of his bag with one hand.

He found a condom packet, ripped it open with his teeth and then reared back on his haunches just long enough to roll it on. Hard to concentrate when his hands were shaking and she was

displayed temptingly against a bed of green, with blossoms nodding all around her. She leaned back on her elbows, watching him sheathe himself.

Joel groaned. "You look at me like that, and I'm gonna come right now," he warned.

She growled, her brows shooting together in a fierce command. "You come before you get inside me, and I'll strangle you with a vine."

He crouched over her, holding her thighs apart with his hands and inhaling her heady scent. "Then let's get you ready, Princess. Cause I need you primed to blow when I

slide inside you.”

Since he followed his words with a swift, ruthless lick, her only response was a cry, soft and high. He shivered with pleasure. Ah, he loved that sound. He'd do anything to hear her voicing it, again and again. He craned his neck, watching her. Oh, man, she was writhing in his grasp, and she'd pulled a big spray of those red blooms down, or they'd fallen. They lay across her chest like a sash. The stamens of the blooms must have felt good tickling her nipples, because she moved again, her pretty breasts quivering.

Then she grabbed his hair and yanked. “Joel. Come here. I need you inside me — *now*.”

He allowed her to pull him up over her, her hands tugging at his shoulders. He looked down at her, lying open beneath him, her eyes slumberous with passion, her hair flowing around her head in an ebony tumble that matched the curls on her mons. Her pretty breasts, nipples tight — ah, he hadn’t even had those in his mouth yet. The tracing of pollen made his mouth water.

And waiting just for him, the delicate, feminine place that

opened to welcome him inside, straight to paradise, decorated with another blossom, fallen on her flat little belly.

He froze for a moment, staring down at her. He was already in paradise. Even with Camille's thugs down below and God only knew who on the mountain around them, he'd never felt so alive. Because he was with Bella, and she was safe here in the flowers, not maimed or dead on that bitch's boat.

The raw joy bursting in his chest was enough to scare the hell right out of him.

Until, with another one of those

fierce little growls, his wahine grabbed his cock in a grip that meant business and pulled, the nails of her other hand digging into his bare ass. He was just glad she wasn't using her nails on his cock.

“Joel Girand — *now*.”

“Ae, wahine.”

He settled down into her arms, letting her guide him into her soft, hot opening, because she seemed determined to take the lead, and he was more than happy to let her bring him home.

He leaned on one elbow, reaching down to cup her ass with the other, and then thrust carefully,

almost prayerfully into her. He shuddered as pleasure streaked from the tip of his cock through his entire body.

“Ah, Princess,” he murmured, tipping his forehead against hers. “You feel — I can’t believe — ah, Jesus.” Giving up his poor attempt at speech, he thrust again, shuddering with pleasure and need as her tight, hot little passage sucked and caressed his shaft.

She clutched at him, her hands holding him as if she was afraid he would get away, and began to move under him, arching up to meet his thrusts until he was deep

inside her, so deep and tight he didn't care if he ever got free. He must not be hurting her, he thought hazily.

And he didn't know how the hell she was doing it — must be holding a blossom in her toes, he thought hazily, his eyes crossing — she was tickling his balls and the crevice of his ass with what felt like a handful of blossoms. The delicate sensation in contrast with her tight heat around his cock drove him wild.

He groaned, pressed another quick kiss on her soft mouth, put his head down and began to thrust, hard and fast.

Chapter Sixteen

To Do: The most sought-after tour directors will use all their skills to enhance their clients' tour experience.

Bella hung on to Joel as tightly as she could, clutching at his broad back and digging her heels into his flexing ass cheeks as she met him, thrust for hard, delicious thrust.

She couldn't believe how good it felt to have him inside her. He filled her completely, her sensitive channel squeezing him tightly as he drove into her again and again.

His spicy, musky scent filled her nostrils, faintly overlaid with the perfume of the flowers hanging heavy around them. He kissed her and then lifted his head, his eyes slitted, face taut with passion as he moved.

“Ah, yeah,” he groaned. “That... do that, right — there.”

She didn't know what he was talking about, but as he spread his knees, lifting her on the powerful muscles of his thighs, spreading her farther open to him so that he was taking her even deeper and harder than before, her pleasure coalesced into sheer ecstasy, and she cried out

to him, a high paeon of praise and entreaty, begging him not to stop.

He let out a deep, poignant groan that rumbled in his chest, and thrust even harder, sweat breaking out over his skin.

She rode with him through the storm of pleasure and sank down the other slope, little aftershocks pulsing through her as he moved slower and slower, finally collapsing on her, a hot, heavy, damp weight.

She was crushed under his heavy weight, could barely breathe, but she didn't care. She'd never been so smugly satisfied in her life.

They lay entwined for several moments, until finally Joel lifted his head and propped himself up onto his elbows, looking down into her face. His cheeks were stained with color, his eyes soft, hair damp with sweat. Their joining was slick with sweat, as well, and he was still inside her, although he felt a bit smaller.

“You okay?” he asked, with a swift, sipping kiss.

“Mm-hmm. Are you?”

He smiled wickedly. “Are you kidding? I don’t think I’ve ever come so hard in my life.”

He nudged her nose with his and

chuckled. "Where the hell did you learn to do that? With the flowers, I mean?"

She eyed him, uncertainty penetrating her sensual haze. "What thing?"

He nibbled her ear and nuzzled her neck, making her hunch her shoulder against the sweet tickle. "Tickling my ass and balls, you little tease. That was...amazing."

"Oh, that." She gazed up at the branches heavy with blossom, nodding over them. "Just sort of... came to me." Oh, Pele, she hadn't been imagining it. The forest was even participating in his seduction.

He lifted his head and smiled slowly down at her. "I would never have taken you for the inventive type. Thought it would take me months to get this far."

Bella stiffened. He'd been planning how to seduce her?

Joel's expression changed, his eyes softening. He cupped her cheek with his hand. "Hey, don't look like that, baby. Of course I thought about this—with you. The first minute I saw you, bam!" He rocked back as if from a blow.

She glowered up at him, remembering. "You hid it well. You flirted with Tanah all the time."

He shook his head. "That was just chitchat. You were the one I imagined being with."

He kissed her and then cocked his head, taking it deeper, his tongue curling into her mouth to tease her own.

Still kissing her, he moved, rolling onto his back and carrying her with him so that she lay draped across him, her thighs open over his and his cock still inside her. The new position reinforced the intimacy of their embrace.

Bella kissed him back. She couldn't seem to get enough of his mouth — those wide, soft lips, that

clever tongue of his. She remembered it caressing her pussy and shivered. She rubbed her breasts against his chest, enjoying the damp pull of his skin on her nipples.

He groaned and pulled away, pulling her up off him with his hands on her waist.

“You’re getting me hot again,” he warned, reaching between her thighs to fumble with the condom.

She knelt over him on her hands and knees. Power sizzled through her in a sweet rush. “Good. I want...” She hesitated, blushing at the look in his eyes.

“What,” he demanded softly.
“Tell me. In so many words.”

She moved up over him, her breasts close to his face. “I want your mouth on me — on my breasts. I want you to suck them and lick them.”

He reached up and cupped his hands over her breasts, squeezing them carefully, and then opening his hands to squeeze her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, watching what he was doing. “Hard or softly?” he rasped.

Bella swallowed, her nipples tightening needily. “Hard.”

He pulled her down a little

farther and nuzzled at her breasts with his face, finally turning his attention to one. He flicked it with his tongue, then swirled the wet tip around her diamond-hard tip, and then, when she was about to whimper, licked the nipple into the wet heat of his mouth and suckled her, hard.

He enjoyed both her breasts at length and then fumbled between her legs again. Bella didn't realize that he was donning another condom until he grasped her hips and pulled her down onto his rigid cock.

She planted her hands on his

chest and arched her back, letting him take her, until she sat on his groin, filled with him. It hurt a little – he was big, and their first joining had been fast and rough.

She looked down at him, shy and yet triumphant. He stroked his hands up over her ribs, his thumbs supporting the pillow of her breasts, his fingers delving into the tender, damp hollow of her armpits.

“You’re so fucking pretty,” he approved, his gaze hot, face going taut in that look she recognized now as sheer lust. “Lift your arms and push back your hair. Yeah, like

that. Leave your arms up, baby. Ah, yeah. Now ride me."

She did, while he played with her nearly too-sensitive breasts. "Touch yourself," he urged. "Let me see you pet your pretty pussy while you ride me."

Bella turned her head, eyeing him from the cover of her tousled hair while she considered. He was so open, so comfortable doing exactly what he wanted and voicing what he wanted her to do. Did she dare to be as open? With him, she wanted to.

Daringly, she reached down to cup one hand over her mons,

stroking her damp curls and into them to find her clitoris.

“Come for me,” he commanded, his voice full of certainty. “Ah, yeah, you like me watching you do that, don’t you. Yeah, ride me harder. Bring yourself off, and take me with you.”

Bella tried to answer, but all that emerged from her lips was his name as she drove both of them up and over the peak again.

Afterward, she collapsed on his chest, and he held her there, his heart thundering in his chest, his arms around her. He was too hot and sweaty, and she was going to

be too sore to walk, but Bella had never been so happy.

After several moments, he lifted her off him and disposed of the condom, then pulled her back against his side, his arm around her so that she was draped against his side. They lay in the soft bed of leaves, the air musky with the scent of their sex mingled with flowers and damp earth.

“I think you should go for help,” Bella told him. “You could hike up the mountain and find a road, while I go back down and look for Frank.”

“No,” he said unequivocally.

“I’m not leaving you. And if Frank is still down there, he’s well hidden. You said your family will show up soon, and when they do, we’ll leave no stone unturned to find him.”

Bella scowled against his shoulder. She wanted to find Frank, and she wanted Joel safe. If Camille came after her, Bella thought she could stay hidden in the forest, that she could use her strange affinity with the trees and plants to stay concealed.

And even if Camille found her, maybe, just maybe Bella could frighten her by making the trees

shake and vines coil.

But Joel leaned up on one elbow, rolling her onto her back once more.

“Listen to me.” He gripped her jaw in the vise of his thumb and forefinger. His gaze bored into hers. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that in the wild, you have to be a team. Otherwise, there’s no one there to catch you if — *when* you fall.”

She snorted. “You mean like when I fell off your rope into the water?”

“That was not my rope,” he corrected. “I never use that kind.

Won't hold a knot worth spit."

She smiled but then fell serious again, searching his gaze. "Will you?" she asked, the question dragged out of her. "Will you catch me, Joel?"

A golden flame ignited in his eyes. "Oh yeah," he promised. "Believe it, Princess."

"I'll catch you too," she promised. "I will." *I will*, she repeated silently, fiercely as he kissed her again, a hard, tender kiss that warmed her very soul.

She would kill to protect him if necessary. The thought shocked her to her very core. But then, as he

pulled back to look down at her once more, her wounded warrior, set on protecting her, she realized something.

Something more terrifying than Camille Helman and all her knife-and gun-toting henchmen.

This feeling of fierce, tender protectiveness that she felt toward him, combined with the melting in her knees when he looked at her, and the constant urge to be near him? It was love. The Big One. She was in love with Joel Girand, and he was a celebrity hooked on his life of travel and adventure.

“Hey,” he said, cupping the side

of her face with his big hand.
“What is it? You’re giving me a
freaky look there.”

“N-nothing,” she said. But then
she hiccupped as her new
realization, combined with the
horrific events of the day, coalesced
in a firestorm of emotion. In
response, a hot, suffocating geyser
welled up inside her and broke
forth. She burst into tears—and not
the quiet, delicate kind. The hot,
noisy and consuming kind that
shook her body and made her nose
run.

Joel gathered her into his arms.
“Ah, shh-shh, baby. It’s all right.

I've got you." He held her, rocking her a little and murmuring nonsense to her while he stroked her back. It felt wonderful to be held and petted.

Then he took her into the pond and helped her bathe and let her bathe him in return. Bella was deeply grateful to submerge her hot face in the cool water and busy herself with the sensory pleasures of washing away the sweat and salt and tears.

When she emerged from rinsing her hair, he smiled at her. Her heart flipped in her chest at the tender teasing in his eyes. "Damn, you

even look good when you cry," he said. "Haole girls get all red and splotchy."

"Liar. I know my nose and eyes are all red. Sorry —"

He shook his head. "Don't you apologize for crying, Nani. You've been through a hell of a lot today. You've held up better than most women would, and I'm proud of you."

Her heart did that funny swelling thing again as she gazed up into his eyes. "Mahalo. I'm kinda proud of you too, hotshot."

He grinned. "Shucks, it was nothin', ma'am. Just part of the

service in *The Zone*."

The reminder of his career sobered her. Then she realized how ridiculous it was to worry about losing him to his job when they still had to live through the next hours here.

She waded with him from the pool and dried off while he took another look at the yacht and bay below. Then she unrolled the sleeping bag and sat on it to comb her hair. She should probably put some clothes on, but she was enjoying the sensation of the soft air on her skin too much.

Joel turned from his examination

with the binoculars and looked down at her. She returned his gaze, enjoying the hard lines of his nude body, from the broad, tanned expanse of his chest and shoulders, to the pale leanness of his hips and thighs, and his sculpted arms and legs. Even his feet were sexy, high-arched, with tan lines from wearing sandals.

He dropped onto the bag beside her and took the wide-tooth comb from her, urging her to sit between his open thighs while he drew the comb gently through her wet hair. Bella smiled to herself, enjoying the intimacy of the moment, the

tugging of the comb, the brush of his warm fingers on her back. No one except a hairdresser had combed her hair for years.

“What did you do? Before you started with your show, I mean?” she asked him, suddenly ravenous with curiosity about him.

“The usual stuff,” he said. “Went to college, got a degree in forestry, of all things. Graduated and wondered what the hell to do with myself. Went down to work at an outdoor adventure camp in California and found out I was good at doing stupid outdoor tricks.”

“They’re not stupid,” she protested, then smiled to herself. “Well, not all of them.”

“Thanks.” She heard the smile in his voice. He worked at a knot in her wet hair.

“Do you think you’ll want to keep doing the show?” she asked.

“Yeah, for a few years, anyway. You never know, with television. Ratings tank, networks get bought by bigger ones, some executive in an office somewhere decides the show doesn’t fit the company profile. But I have a contract for another year. At least, I think so.”

“What do you mean, you think

so?"

He grunted. "I mean *The Zone's* future is a little iffy right now. I'm hoping DelRay's sponsorship will boost my status with the network. Or at least I was, before this whole trip went to hell."

Bella bit her lip. He had a point. Would DelRay consider the trip worth a redo? "I'll fix it, somehow," she said as he drew the comb carefully through her hair. "It was working, I know it was. You looked great with the equipment."

He leaned forward to kiss the point of her bare shoulder. "Mahalo."

“What do you want to do with the rest of your life?” he asked, before she could reply. “When we get back, I mean, because we are getting back.”

She was startled by his question. “Well, continue on with DelRay, of course. If they’ll have me after the debacle this trip has turned into. If not, I’ll have to look for another job.” She wasn’t looking forward to that at all. In fact, the thought made her shudder.

But instead of kissing her shoulder comfortingly, her lover was silent for a moment. He stopped combing. “Are you *nuts*?”

he demanded, his huff of laughter more derisive than humorous.

Bella turned on him, the last remnants of her warm glow of pleasure dissipating. "What?" she said defensively.

He closed his eyes for a moment as if asking for patience, the red plastic comb hanging lax in his hand. "Bella, you don't want another job like that."

"Oh, and why not?" She turned her back on him, scowling and he resumed combing her hair, tugging a little harder.

"Because, you're not a suit. You don't belong locked up in a

goddamn office all day. You belong out here, with the trees, and the plants — and freedom.”

She rolled onto her knees and turned to face him, anger so sudden it came out of nowhere blazing in her. She might be in love with him, but he could still be as dense as a lava boulder. “We can’t all play for a living, you know.”

He pulled his head back as if she’d slapped him, his cheekbones staining with red. “Oh, so I play for a living, huh? And I suppose hawking swimsuits and hiking shoes is more important?”

He tossed the comb aside,

levered himself to his feet, and stood there, shaking his head. “At least I’ve found a job I love.”

She glared at his gorgeous ass as he turned his back on her and bent over to fish a pair of shorts from his bag. His sac hung heavy between his muscular thighs, and part of her wanted to reach out and touch him there, pull him back down with her. Part of her wanted to smack him on that ass—hard.

“Well, at least I’m not afraid to put down some roots,” she snapped. Blinking hard against a sudden blur in her eyes, she groped in her own bag and found her last

clean bikini. She thrust her feet into the brown-and-white-flowered bottoms, then had to yank them off again and untwist them before wriggling into them.

She let out a squeak of surprise as Joel reached down and pulled her to her feet, his big hands holding her upper arms. He scowled down at her. "Yeah, you're right. I don't want to be tied to one spot, held down and strangled by a place that I can't get free of. But I'll tell you something. You've got roots, but they're in a big cement pot. And they're gonna strangle you, sooner or later."

They glared at each other for a moment. Bewilderment and anger tumbled inside her. How had their idyll become this mutual attack?

“You’ve only known me for a few days,” she said quietly. As she had him. Was she really in love with him, or were these powerful emotions just the heat of the moment?

“I could say the same,” Joel said, echoing her thoughts. He shook his head. “Look, I don’t mean to psychoanalyze you. It’s just that...” His gaze softened, and he lifted one big hand to cup the side of her face, stroking across her cheek with his

thumb. "You're so beautiful out here. Like you're part of this forest — a young queen, and all of these" — he waved his hand at the trees around them — "are your subjects."

Bella gazed up at him, her heart swelling so much at his praise that it hurt. "Mahalo," she whispered. "I'm... Is that really how you see me?"

His eyes heated, and he stepped closer and squatted to grasp her around the hips and lift her high in his arms, looking up at her. "Oh yeah," he murmured. "Now, about that thing with the flowers. Think

you could do that again?"

She slid her arms around his shoulders and bent her head to brush her lips over his. "I can do better than that, *kāne nohea*."

He groaned. "I may not survive, but I'll die a happy man."

Bella bent to kiss him again, but as their lips met, she froze. The trees were whispering, but now it was harsh and sibilant—a warning. She lifted her head.

"Take care, little sister. Take your kāne nohea and go, high onto our mountain. Conceal yourselves."

"What is it?" Joel asked. "Do you hear something? Other than the

wind in the trees?"

She looked up into the trees.
"Something's wrong."

He frowned quizzically. "How do you figure that? Did you hear something?"

Bella searched for an excuse, not quite ready to share the fact that she heard voices. Might be a bit much for a post-coital chat, even for this world adventurer. "The birds—they're quiet."

"A little too quiet," he murmured, but his eyes were serious. He let her slide to the ground and turned toward the cliff's edge.

“They’re coming,” she told him. Picking up her bikini top, she fastened it with quick efficiency. Then she walked over to the edge of the bowl, into the shadows of the trees, and looked down.

“Watch out, they’ll see you,” he said urgently, moving up beside her. He pulled her farther into the shadows of the tree.

“It doesn’t matter. She knows we’re here.”

Chapter Seventeen

To Do: When negotiations are called for in dealing with pugnacious locals, the tour director will step forward, using her expertise.

“Hello,” called an amplified voice from below, echoing off the mountain, rising over the sound of the surf and the rustle of the trees.

A pale figure moved away from the cluster of people standing on the beach below. Camille Helman, dressed in immaculate white. She carried a megaphone, and she

waved at them from the beach, as cheerily as if she were an invited guest. "Aloha, Bella Ho'omalua. I know you're up there somewhere. You'd better come down, or the party will begin without you."

"Don't let her see you," Joel gritted. "She can't be sure you're here."

"She has Cassie," Bella realized, her stomach sinking as a slender blonde figure was hauled forward by a much larger male.

"What the hell?" Joel swore. "How did she find her?"

"Cassie must have panicked," Bella said. "I shouldn't have let

them stop down below. I should have made them come up farther.”

“Hell,” he muttered again. “Well, she doesn’t know for sure you’re here, so —”

“Better come out,” Camille called. “Or my boys start shooting.”

“She knows,” Bella said as another figure walked forward. It was Li, his pale hair recognizable even from here. He had a bandage on his neck, and he walked stiffly, but he took Cassie from her captor. The model’s struggles were plainly visible.

“I have to go,” Bella said.

“The hell you do,” Joel said

harshly. "Camille's a sociopath, Bella. Giving her another hostage won't solve anything."

But Bella shook her head. She looked up at him, knowing her heart was in her eyes and not caring.

"I love you," she admitted. She stood on tiptoe and kissed him on his warm mouth. But when his hands came up to hold her, a bough heavy with flowers dipped into his way. Bella slipped away, stepping up to stand on the very lip of the lava bowl. "*Carry me, o my forest. Bear me safely down to do what I must.*"

Joel batted the vine away, his face going white. "*Bella*. What are you doing? Don't—" he bit the word back and froze as if afraid his voice would push her over, his hands outstretched.

Bella reached for one of the long vines draping down from the trees that grew from the lava wall, their roots imbedded deep in the lava. She smiled wistfully at him. "I'm more than a hostage, Joel. I'm a ho'omalua, a guardian. I'm sorry I didn't explain to you before. I've been having trouble believing it myself. But I am one, and now I have to go."

She looked down, and the scene below was so like the Maui nightmare that she shook with terror. The Jet Ski motors in the little bay rumbled, echoing through the forest like that of the SUV in the dream, and there — a flash of scarlet caught her eye, and she saw a red bird soaring through the still air, wings outstretched, its clear cry floating up to her.

“This is no dream, little sister. Come, we will carry you. Fight for us, with us.”

She caught her breath in a sob. Clearly, the forest believed in her. Now if only she could.

“God damn it,” Joel swore fiercely, his eyes blazing at her, his face pale under his tan. “A *fricking* vine? Even I don’t do that, Bella.”

“I do,” she told him, and then she wrapped her arms and one leg through the thick, ropy vine and jumped.

She heard him roar something after her, but the wind rushing in her ears drowned it out, and she was swooping down through the trees, the passing forest a blur of green.

She swung so close to the earth that it seemed to rush up to meet her. Bella steeled herself to let go

and fall. But instead, the vine swung her up and then back, like a pendulum. On the third swing, Bella let go and landed on her feet in the sand and dried palm fronds. She stumbled, went to one knee and then pushed herself upright again. She paused a few seconds, letting her equilibrium catch up with her balance, and then looked around her. Oh God. She'd made it — swung down without killing herself.

Now to make it worthwhile. She swallowed hard as her lunch threatened to come back up her throat, and locked her wobbly

knees.

"Nani." Bella looked around her. That had not been the forest voices but a real one.

She stood among the palms clustered on the east end of the camp. She could see Camille and the others through the trees. They'd obviously seen her land too, because two of the thugs were walking this way, guns at the ready.

"Nani. Here."

Bella turned, peering into the shadows behind a cluster of palms. Her heart lifted. *"Frank!"*

He was crouched behind the

palms, the automatic weapon across his thighs. He had a bloodstained bandanna tied around his head, and his once-white Hawaiian Dive T-shirt was stained with blood and dirt, but he managed a crooked smile as she scurried toward him.

Bella took his outstretched hand, squeezing it with both of hers. "Oh, you're alive. I hoped you were when we saw the cave was empty."

"Yeah, but no time for that. Where's Joel?"

"He's up there." She pointed up the mountain. "Probably cussing me out right now."

“Get down,” Frank hissed.

“They’re coming. You get behind me. There’s a full magazine in this thing. We can hold them off ’til the Ho’omalus get here.”

Bella dropped to her knees, but then Camille’s voice echoed through the trees again.

“I saw you come down, Miss Ho’omalu. Come out, come out. If you make my men look for you, your little friend won’t like it.”

The next sound through the megaphone was a muffled cry of pain. Cassie.

Bella scrambled to her feet. “I have to go out there.”

“No.” Frank reached for her. But he wavered and sank back to his haunches, his face pale.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Be safe, Frank.”

The two armed musclemen, Baldy and an equally burly man with skin so dark it nearly matched his black Hawaiian shirt, were waiting for her when she stepped out between the trees. The dark-skinned man stepped forward, but Baldy stopped him.

“She said not to touch the girl.” Baldy gestured with his weapon,

indicating that Bella should walk before him to the open area before the beach.

Bella had nearly reached the edge of the trees when she heard a rattle of palm fronds behind her, and then a thud of impact, followed by a grunt.

She whirled to see Joel crouched atop the black man, a thick vine dangling behind him. Joel lifted one arm and punched the man on the side of his head with a solid thunk. As Baldy turned to look, Joel sat back on his haunches, his victim's gun in his grasp, aimed at Baldy.

“Bella, get over here,” Joel ordered.

“Move, and I shoot her,” Baldy said. Bella saw that his weapon was now trained on her. He smiled at Joel, revealing a metal tooth with a large gem that glinted in the sun. “Yeah, even if you get me, your girlfriend still gets it. Tough choice, huh, Action Boy?”

“Shit!” Joel dropped the weapon and stood up.

Baldy nodded. “Good choice. Now move it, over there with your friends. Not you,” he warned Bella. “You go where she tells you.”

As Bella watched Joel walk out

into the sunshine to join Camille and her crew, fury filled her, nearly burning through her fear. And over her head, the palm trees began to sway, their fronds rattling like sabers.

Ignoring the armed men, she stalked toward the woman in white who waited arrogantly on the lava shelf before the trees, hands on her hips. Li hovered close behind her, one arm around Cassie, his shining knife blade at her throat. A thin rivulet of bright blood trickled down her slender, pale throat, and she was crying silently, her sunburned face hopeless.

“Let her go,” Bella demanded, her voice shaking with anger.

“Your quarrel is with me. Very well, I’m here. Let her go.”

Camille tipped her head, her face shaded by a wide-brimmed purple hat. “Oh, so dramatic. Well, little Miss Ho’omalua,” she spat. “Make me.”

Bella stared back at her, and for the first time, she let her rage flow through her, let it go. The trees around the camp began to sway, their trunks creaking and groaning. The fig and ohia trees waved their branches, and the palms rattled harder, drowning out the surf.

Camille held up one hand before her face as a palm branch sailed by, narrowly missing her, and the brim of her hat lifted in the wind.

“Well?” she demanded. “I’m waiting.”

The woman didn’t know, Bella realized. She couldn’t see that this was not an ocean wind; it was Bella herself causing this commotion. Turning toward the cliff, Bella fixed her gaze on one of the dangling vines and beckoned with all her might. She had to do more, make a big enough commotion that Camille and her men would be distracted.

To Bella's shock, the vine tore free of the cliff and writhed down the dark rock. Full of triumph, hardly daring to hope for more, Bella turned and pointed her arm at Li. "*Take him.*"

The vine sailed through the air, between the lashing trees, and smacked the Asian across the face. He flew backward, eyes wide with terror. Cassie slumped to the ground, hand to her throat, but Bella hardly noticed as the vine writhed around Li's body. It fell across him in heavy lengths.

Vengefully, Bella snapped her fingers at the palm over his head. A

huge coconut fell from the tree, striking him directly on the face. He jerked once and was still.

Camille turned on Bella, white with fury, her eyes wild. "You—" she growled. "Denas was right. I didn't believe him when he told me there was something weird about your family...that they used some supernatural power to take Stefan. But *you're* doing this. I know you are."

She gestured at her men, beckoning them forward.

"Get her," Camille shouted at her men. "No, better yet, get him!" She pointed one thin arm at Joel, and

Baldy leapt forward behind Joel, pressing the barrel of his weapon into Joel's back.

"Leave him alone," Bella warned. "Or I will do much worse." What that might be, she had no idea.

Camille turned on her. Then her face relaxed, and she actually smiled. Mimicking Bella's snap of her fingers, she held out her hand. The nearest thug handed her a small insulated carafe.

"But you see," Camille said to her. "Soon you won't be a problem, because you're going to drink what I give you, or Chase will shoot your lover. He won't survive at that

range, dear.”

“No,” Joel said sharply. He grunted, jerking forward as Baldy shoved him with the barrel of the weapon. The man he’d punched grabbed Joel by the arm, his face twisted with the promise of vengeance. Joel ignored him.

“Don’t, Bella.”

“What is it?” Bella asked, staring at the thermos. Sickening dread spread inside her, because she was sure she already knew.

“Oh, just a little something my chemists made up especially for Hawaii,” Camille gloated. “You remember. We call it Kona Kula,

Kona Diamonds. Very appropriate, I think, as its worth is that of diamonds."

She watched Bella, her light eyes shaded under her fashionably tilted straw hat. "What a choice, hmm? Watch your lover die, his blood spewing over this beach, or sacrifice yourself. Die, or perhaps live, irreparably damaged from the very drug that the Ho'omalus killed my brothers over."

"Bella! No!" Joel roared, struggling to break free of the men who held him. A third man grabbed him, and they held him, though not without a struggle.

“Oh, she’s going to drink it,” Camille crooned. “And do you know why? Because, as I’ve watched her, I’ve learned all about little Miss Ho’omalua. She’s a good girl and always tries her best to please. Please her mama, please her new daddy and his family.”

Bella struggled to stand straight and tall, to show no emotion, no vulnerability. God, the woman had actually had people spying on her. She knew all the painful points to zing her arrows in, knew how to jab, as if she held Li’s knife in her hands. But let her talk; let her fling her sharp blades. Let her try to

finish the grinding humiliation she'd begun on the *Hypnautique*. Every moment counted.

"Doesn't want to displease anyone," Camille went on. "Or lose her job. Please her employers at their stupid little sporting goods company. Well, do what I tell you, good girl, and your friends will live. And you might too, who knows."

"No," Joel pleaded hoarsely. "No, Bella. Give it to me, you bitch. I'll drink it. Not her."

Camille ignored him, and so did Bella, their gazes locked.

The woman was right.

Bella was going to drink it. But

not for the reason Camille gave. But because if she obeyed Camille, the drug would take at least a little while to take effect, and watching her would delay Camille, keep her from killing the others. And by the time Bella was unconscious, or dead, her ohana would be there. She could feel them coming, a deep knowing in her very bones.

Yes, the Ho'omalus were coming as fast as they could. And they would save Joel and Frank and the others.

Not her, but that didn't matter. Sometimes a person, even a good girl, got the chance to do something

heroic, and this was hers. And even though she was shaking in her sandals, ready to pee her bikini bottoms, she was going to do something much more worthwhile than hawking swimsuits and shoes.

“No, Bella,” Joel shouted, struggling again. “She lies. Don’t do it. It’s poison.”

Bella smiled at him, with her mouth, with her eyes, her heart. “It will be all right,” she said.

And then she held out her hand and accepted the cup. It looked like some kind of herbal tea, smelled of some dank garden weed.

She took one drink and nearly

choked on the bitter brew. Another and then gagged, finally swallowing. The cup fell from her hand, splashing the rest of its contents on her legs and bare feet.

Lifting her head, Bella gazed at her captor. Camille watched her avidly, her eyes wide and greedy, lips parted, her teeth showing like those of a shark closing in on her prey.

And then the world began to spin in great dizzying sweeps. Bella staggered and, no longer in control of her limbs, tried to right herself. As a dull roar sounded in her ears, the ground swept up and hit her

hard, her face smacking into the rock.

Shouting echoed, from a long way away. The earth shook under her — no, that was her body shaking, her teeth chattering, heart pounding so hard she opened her mouth to scream as terror swallowed her whole.

A woman composed of dark fire, edged in the dark red glitter of flame, rose from the ground before her, her terrible eyes burning into Bella's and her mouth opening to devour her whole. She spoke, and her words were like thunder, rattling Bella's bones and the

foundations of the islands. “*E ala mai, ho’omalulu!* Rise, warrior. Rise... or die.”

And around her, the trees approached, reaching out with their sharp limbs and razor-tipped leaves, ready to devour whatever the goddess left of her. No longer her friends, they waited, horrid predators.

Bella jerked onto her back, straining, choking, as her heart tried to burst and her brain spun and burned until she was exhausted, and fell back, her head flopping dully to one side.

Someone kicked her, a sharp toe

in her ribs. That hated voice echoed over her, through her.

“Look at you now, Miss Ho’omalū. Not so pretty now, are you? Rolling in the dirt like a common addict.”

But Bella ignored her as, through her lashes, she saw more strange things. The forest around her was moving. Murmurs drowned out Camille’s voice.

“Rise, little sister. E ala mai, ho’omalū. Rise, warrior wahine.”

Her eyes widened. The fiery woman beckoned, her burning eyes fastened on Bella, no longer threatening but commanding. And

yes, those were people stepping out of the threatening trees, emerging from them like shadows.

Hawaiians, shimmering out of the hard-edged brilliance that now illuminated the forest, large and dark, dressed in simple kapa-cloth skirts, their long, dark hair caught back with plaited crowns. Their liquid eyes, her eyes, were fastened on her, and they too beckoned to her, urging her to her feet.

Bella rolled over, moving drunkenly, escaping another kick from those sharp toes, and wobbled to her hands and knees, her wondering eyes fastened on the old

ones, who waited.

“I see you,” she mumbled. “I hear you.”

“*E ala mai, ho’omalū*,” they called, more sternly now. “*You must call your forest.*”

Bella closed her eyes and sucked in a deep, shuddering breath.

As she did so, something wondrous happened. Power flowed into her. She opened her eyes and took another breath, watching as golden streamers flew through the air like pollen on the wind, into her mouth and nose. Yes, the power of her forest was coming into her.

““*Oe mākaūkau*,” the forest people

told her. *"You are ready. Take the kupua and use it, wahine. Use it to save us all."*

Save them all. Bella focused her gaze and saw Joel staring at her, his beloved face contorted with fear for her. She smiled at him, her love and reassurance in her eyes.

And then she pushed herself to her feet, wavering a little as she found her feet. The power was almost more than she could contain. She gazed down wonderingly at her hands, watching the strands that swayed from her fingertips as she moved them, almost more than she could

resist. She wanted to cast them indiscriminately, play with them, create havoc, chaos.

Camille Helman smiled her shark's smile, and sauntered closer. "My, you're tougher than I thought. Having a nice trip, Bella?"

Bella focused on her, frowning as she remembered. Yes, this puny haole woman was at the epicenter of this foul storm. How best to deal with her.

Bella turned and mirrored Camille's movements, prowling gracefully, so that they moved in a circle. Only Bella was now stalking the other woman, her confidence

growing as the other Hawaiians faded, and she felt their power come into her with each breath she took.

“I? I am fine,” she said, her voice at once deeper and softer than her usual tones. It echoed around the clearing, and she watched with satisfaction as the men clustered around the edges stared at her. “But *you* – you are going to be very sorry, haole spider. Sorry that you brought your drugs and your foul web to my island.”

Camille laughed, and Baldy laughed with her.

Bella laughed too, a soft, terrible

sound. She reached up with the golden strands of power, found another vine, a young green one, and brought it flying down through the air with a sharp gesture.

Crouching, Baldy stepped back, the barrel of his gun rising.

Camille turned, her laughter dying in her throat as the vine slashed around Li's feet and dragged the unconscious man high into the air, dangling him like a fly in a spider's web from the tallest tree in the small area.

As he swung through the air, he woke and struggled wildly, screaming in a horrible, choked

voice. His face was suffused with blood, his eyes wild.

Bella's laughter rippled through the hot, still air like leaves rippling in the wind. Turning back to the group now watching in various stages of horror, she focused on the nearest gunman. "You," she said. "You are next."

He stumbled backward, shaking his head, his mouth working.

Bella held up her hands before her, dreamily watching the gold streamers pour from them. "You sought to kill me," she said to Camille. "To maim me. But you have given me a gift. Your drug has

made me stronger, brought my powers from behind my inhibitions and fears.”

She held up her arms, and with a rushing murmur of sound, blossoms began to fly down from the forest, filling the air with drifts of color and bloom. As Camille and her men gaped, and even Cassie lifted her head from the sand to squint, the flowers settled around Bella, wreathing her head with a bouffant crown of blossom and her neck with a lei, her wrists with bracelets of blooms.

“You see?” She tipped back her head, the wonder of it pouring

through her. "I am Ho'omalua. And I reign here. You do not."

"Kill her!" Camille shrieked.

"Enough. Kill her."

A sharp burst of gunfire blasted through the clearing. Icy-hot pain shot through Bella's right arm, but she shook it off like the sting of a wasp. She must get the innocent ones out of the way.

Bella waved her hand, and the palm fronds under Cassie tugged her down the beach, out of the way.

Then she turned toward Joel, ready to sweep him to safety. But Baldy's weapon swept away from Joel, the black mouth appearing

over Joel's shoulder, pointed at her. Joel moved like lightning. With a roar, he knocked the gun aside just as it went off, bullets spraying from the short barrel. Ice bit through Bella again, this time her thigh. She swayed, sucking in a deep breath to draw the power in and fight off the pain that burned now, tearing at her with gnashing teeth.

The black man leapt, and Joel went down, his long legs flying out from under him.

Bella hit Baldy with a blinding gust of blossoms and branches, making him stumble backward, weapon silent.

Gunfire rang out again, this time from behind Bella. A hole in the center of his forehead, Baldy sprawled backward, falling over Joel and his struggling opponent, and Bella struck him with another blast of branches, this time knocking him into the water.

Rolling over, Joel punched his opponent, and the man went limp, arms and legs sprawled on the sand.

“Bella! You’re hit.” Joel leapt to his feet, his gaze on Bella. But a fifth burst of gunfire rattled through the clearing. Joel jerked, and then fell to one knee, his eyes

wide with shock, mouth opening as he lifted a hand to his side.

“No.” Bella’s voice thundered through the air. She slashed her hands toward the gunman who had just emerged from the raft, the slender bartender from the yacht. He screamed as two vines slashed down and wrapped around him, dragging him up into the trees with Li.

“You!” Bella turned on Camille, who crouched in the center of it all, watching in panic as her men fell. “You dare to touch my *kane nohea*. Now you’ll die.”

“No — no, I’m not done here,”

Camille cried. She turned, searching wildly for her men.

Another burst of gunfire blasted from behind Bella, and Camille screamed, clutching her arm. Blood seeped from her fingers. "Kill her," Camille shrieked again.

She turned toward the trees as two Hawaiians emerged from the trail, weapons at the ready. Eddy and Kobe eyed Bella and the destruction around her with wide eyes.

"You see," Camille to Bella cried over the wind. "You'll die here and take your powers with you. And then I'll go after the rest of your

family. Kill her!"

Kobe raised his weapon, but Eddy backed away, shaking his head.

Bella ignored the gun pointed at her. She cast one look of grief back at Joel, who lay on the lava, his face white, bright blood staining his shirt and the ground underneath him. He was gone, gone.

"So, it shall be as you wish. But you..." she told Camille. "You will share my fate, as Na'alele shared the fate of her betrothed."

And then she stretched up her arms to bring the forest down around her. "Arise, Pele," she

called, her voice soaring above the forest and into the mountain waiting above. "Arise, mother of Hawaii, and destroy your enemies!"

A great roar of sound built around them as the forest came to life. The trees and foliage strained at their foundations to free themselves and come to her.

The ground shook. A great fig toppled, crashing to the earth and burying Eddy under it. Vines lashed through the air.

Gunfire rattled again. Kobe jerked backward, hit, but his weapon fired as he fell. Icy-hot

projectiles slapped at Bella, striking her in the side. She wavered and then kept her feet, bringing up her hand to point at Camille, who shrank back in fear, finally recognizing Bella's power as the forest shuddered up from its foundations.

"Die," Bella said. "Die, and all your schemes for my Hawaii with you."

Camille opened her mouth, but red blossoms sprouted on her white jacket. She wavered and then fell to the rocks, her eyes going blank. Leaves and branches, bits of dead blossoms showered down on her

body.

Bella turned to find another man behind her, weapon in his hands. But she knew this one. Through the streamers of gold whipping around her, from her, she focused what was left of her concentration on him.

Frank threw down his weapon. His face was white with shock, but he faced Bella, his hands outstretched in entreaty. “*U’oki*,” he shouted. “Stop this, Bella.”

Bella shook her head, tears spilling from her eyes as she looked over at Joel’s prone form on the beach. “*Nō ho’i lohi*,” she mumbled.

“Too late.”

As hot blood pulsed from her wounds, she turned and staggered through the storm to her lover's body. Her grief howled, and with it the furor of flying vegetation around her. Dropping to her knees beside Joel, she pulled him into her arms and bent her head to lay her cheek on his. She pressed her cheek to the ugly wound in his side and wept, her grief feeding the storm.

Until slowly, the rhythmic chanting of voices that she knew and recognized edged out the chaos from her fevered consciousness, and she fell into blessed darkness.

Chapter Eighteen

To Do: In the event of the tour guide's illness or indisposition, she must rely on her employers to take charge.

Homu Ho'omalulu leaned forward, staring through the helicopter's windshield at Na'alele, rapidly approaching below.

"Hurry," he urged his son. "Ah, Pele, *pōpilikia weliweli*. Something terrible has happened."

They'd realized something was wrong when the phone silence

from Na'alele outlasted the storm, but all of them had been in Honolulu for the presentation of one of Daniel's sculptures to the state of Hawaii. They'd been at the airport when Daro had called, worried about Bella, who hadn't called back and apparently had turned her phone off.

Claire and Melia had both checked their messages and found Bella had texted them, as well, and they couldn't reply. Frank wasn't answering calls either.

The party wasn't due back until late afternoon, but Homu, David and Daniel had all felt the same

gathering unease, and the decision was made to return to Naweia. They found Hilo waiting for them at the Kona airport, his usually merry face somber, sharing their premonition.

The Ho'omalua knew Bella as the best friend of their sons' bride and bride-to-be. They had welcomed her but only discovered she was one of them when her mother confessed as much while here on the island. Now, she was their cousin Daro's daughter, and a Ho'omalua. And she was in some kind of trouble; Homu could feel it, as could his sons.

The closer they got to home, the

more restless David and Daniel became, and Claire, Melia and Tina picked up on it. Melia, her emotions turbulent with her pregnancy, dissolved into tears. Claire clutched Daniel's arm and demanded to be allowed to come with him to rescue her friend.

With a scowl, he refused. "No, tita. I told you there would be times when I'd have to go, and you'd have to wait. This is one of them."

"Bring Bella back to us," Melia pleaded.

David bent to kiss her, but his face was grave. "I'll do my best, *ku'u ipo*, sweetheart."

Tina stood beside Homu. "I am coming with you this time," she told him. "To chant with you, and to be there for her."

He nodded, knowing that it was the right thing for her to do.

And now they rode together to save one of their own.

"What is it?" Daro leaned forward from the back seat, his face lined with worry. "Do you see her?"

"Hold on, we're almost in sight," David said calmly, though his handsome face was pale under his golden tan. "Au'e," he breathed as the chopper banked around the last

turn, and they saw the hurricane of vegetation below.

“Land somewhere,” Homu demanded.

“I can’t.” David shook his head. “If I try to get close, the branches and plants flying around will tangle in the rotors. If I land too far away, we’ll never make it.”

“There’s David and Hilo,” Tina called from the seat behind her husband.

Below, a large turquoise cigarette boat roared through the waves toward Na’alele, flying across the water, white spray flying out behind it.

“Look at that.” David pointed, and they all looked down to see the large yacht just off shore. “It’s the Helmans’ yacht.”

Tina gasped. “What are those *kepolos*, devils doing here? I thought they were all dead.”

Homu stared at the sleek craft, dread tightening in his chest. They’d all thought so. But now it seemed at least one of their enemy was still alive.

“Very well,” he said. “We must begin the chant from here.” He looked over at David as the small helicopter bucked and slid sideways. “Can you hold it?”

David nodded grimly. “But we’ve got to hold *her*.”

“My Nani,” Daro groaned, his voice shaking. “Oh, what have they done to her?”

“I don’t know,” Homu admitted. “I can feel her power, stronger than I would have believed possible.”

“She is very strong,” Tina agreed. “Unnaturally so.”

“David? Pop?” Daniel’s deep, rough voice crackled through their headphones. “What in hell is going on? Looks like a storm going on down here — all on land. And that’s the Helman yacht out there.”

“We’ve seen it. I don’t know

what is happening. Bella has obviously inherited our powers—my powers,” Homu said grimly. “And she is out of control.”

“What can we do?” Daro demanded.

“Chant — *now!*” roared a new voice through the radio. Hilo, Homu’s brother, rode in the boat with Daniel. “We must summon the old ones and raise Pele herself if we need to.”

“And fast,” David added. “The winds are getting worse.” The helicopter bucked sideways again, and he held on to the controls, bringing the craft around in a

sliding circle above the boat, while the storm raged on shore, trees beginning to slide down the mountain.

Homu held up his hands, and then in a strong voice, he called out in Hawaiian. His wife, his sons and his brother joined in, and together, Pele's guardians began to chant.

Over the throb of the helicopter rotors, over the roar of Daniel's boat, over the pound of the surf, and the crashing of trees and lash of vines below, their voices rang out, strong and true, in the ancient rhythms they had learned from their ancestors.

Homu felt rather than heard the voices of the old ones joining them, echoing in a low murmur that was the heartbeat of Pele's island.

Together, his ohana circled the erratic pulse of power flaring from Na'alele and soothed it, surrounding it with steady reassurance.

And slowly, slowly the storm that one small woman had raised began to subside. Trees slid back to the earth, groaning as they fell on the lava rent by their roots being ripped away. Vines draped, foliage and plants settled, leaves fell and blossoms drifted slowly down,

scattered like a benediction on the bodies of those who had fallen at Na'alele.

“Here comes the Coast Guard,” Daro said, his voice shaking. “And a police chopper.” He turned to Tina, who sat on the shore side of the cabin. “My Nani – can you see her?”

“I see her,” Tina said. “She is there – in the clearing.”

“Is that Frank she’s holding?” David asked.

Homu shook his head. “Don’t think so.” Rage and sorrow gripped him. His old friend was down there somewhere and might be dead,

another victim of the Helmans.
And the red staining Bella's slight
body and that of the man she held
could only be one thing—blood.

David held the chopper steady.
They all gazed down at the little
bay and the devastation there. He
waved at the pilot of the police
chopper, who nodded back and
then gestured.

"He's ordering us to back off,"
David said, already turning away
from the island.

"We can't leave," Daro groaned.

"We're not," David said. "We're
headed down—right there."

Homu stared at the huge, empty

barge that was nosing westward around the curve of the island, pushed by a tugboat, smokestacks steaming. "Is that one of Billy Eyke's barges?"

"Ae," David returned laconically, but as Homu turned to stare at him, his son allowed himself a small smile.

Homu patted David on the arm. "Not even gonna ask."

"Oh, my," Tina said faintly. "We're going to land on that?"

"Okay, Mama?" David asked.

"Ae," his mother answered stoutly. "We must get down there to Daro's daughter. Just tell me

when we've landed, because I'm going to shut my eyes now."

Daniel Ho'omalulu nosed his long boat carefully into the small bay, grimacing as the side scraped on the reef. "Gonna play hell getting out of here," he muttered to his uncle Hilo, who stood beside him, scanning the beach with narrowed eyes.

"Ae. Look at Frank's boat. Something wrong with her."

Daniel looked at the catamaran bumping listlessly against the shore. "She's swamped. See Frank

anywhere?"

"No. Don't see any sign of life. "

Hilo levered himself over the side of the boat and waded in the hip-deep water to the narrow prow, grabbing the ring and pulling the boat up alongside the catamaran as Daniel pushed the control to raise the prop safely away from the bottom.

He glowered at the rubberized dinghy pulled up on the shore. He knew it all too well. It was from the Helman yacht, and Daniel had seen it in Kailua Harbor only last month.

As his boat bumped onto the sand, he quickly turned off the

ignition and then reached into the side compartment, taking out a snub-nose Ruger, which he held in his hand as he levered himself over the side of the boat. Even from down here, he could see bodies — lots of them.

The throb of a new chopper grew louder, and he looked back to see a police helicopter coming low and fast from the west. A Coast Guard cutter appeared at the same moment, already slowing outside the reef.

Daniel waved at them — everyone knew his boat on this side of the island. Then he turned and waded

out onto the beach, scanning with a warrior's eye for movement from any of the strangers littering the beach and the lava shelves of the small area. A slender blonde wahine lay on the beach, but as Daniel bent to find a pulse on the side of her throat, he found she was breathing, merely unconscious. The only wound on her was a shallow cut on her throat.

He straightened. It looked as if a tropical storm had come through, uprooting trees, ripping bushes and vines free and flinging them *kāpulu*, all about. The stench of death lay over the scene like a foul miasma.

Daniel grimaced in horror and pity.

“There she is.” Hilo strode up onto the shore, clambered over a fallen fig tree and disappeared. His pistol at the ready, Daniel followed.

Garbed in full native finery of blooms over a brief bikini, an unconscious Bella lay draped over a tall, tanned man in dirty shorts. At first, Daniel thought she was dead. There was blood everywhere.

When Hilo turned her gently onto her back, Daniel gave a grunt of dismay at the ugly holes in her side, one bare thigh, and one slender arm.

He was already shoving the

Ruger in the back of his waistband. He knelt beside Bella, checking for a pulse. He found one, thank God.

“Blood still flows,” Hilo said.

“This means her heart still beats. She’s alive!”

“I’ve got her,” Daniel said fiercely, already laying his huge hands on the worst of the wounds in her side. He closed his eyes, her white face burned in his mind.

“Chant with me, my ohana, my ancestors,” he demanded. “Heal our little sister.”

He clenched his teeth against the burn as power arced through him into her still body, but to his shock,

it zinged back to him from her. He sucked in a breath. "The power is still strong in her."

"I will help you," Hilo said urgently. "We can't let them take her to a hospital. They'll notice something strange. '*Olu'olu*, quickly now." He laid his big paws on her wounded thigh, and Daniel closed his hand around her arm.

The power arced again, burning Daniel's palm as if he'd grabbed a live wire. But he held on until Homu nodded, and sank back on his heels, his dark face wet with sweat.

Daniel gathered Bella into his

arms, her head lolling into the crook of his neck, her face pale beneath her golden tan and the smears of blood. Claire's friend, his cousin, a Ho'omalū.

She seemed too light and her skin too pale for mere unconsciousness. He sniffed, and his blood ran cold and then hot with fury at the bitter herbal scent that clung to her.

"They dosed her with something," he ground out. "Drugs." He and Hilo stared at each other.

"Au'e, this is why she raised such a storm," Hilo breathed.

If so, they would need to chant much more to heal her. "She's somewhere else, outside her body."
"With Pele."

Daniel hoped so, because his little cousin needed more help than he could give her. She needed their patroness and the power of the Creator who watched over them all.

The blood smeared on her face, her hands and flowers was not all hers; some came from a bullet wound in the man's side.

Hilo grunted in sympathy. "Hey, this da celebrity they hired, Joe something." One of the good guys,

then, and from the way Bella was draped over him, she'd been trying to protect him.

"Joel Girand. Have time to help him out before they get here?"

Daniel asked, glancing over his shoulder at the Coast Guard boat nosing into the small harbor.

"I'll do what I can." His uncle laid his big, calloused brown hand on Girand's side, slipped the other underneath him and grimaced.

"Bad exit wound."

He closed his eyes, and his wide jaw clenched. Daniel could feel the power arc through him and into the wounded man.

“‘Bout time you showed up,” said a hoarse voice from the other side of a clump of fallen palms.

Daniel looked up, joy and relief breaking out in a smile. “Frank!”

Their friend walked slowly around the root wads of the palms. He was leaning on a stick, and he looked like hell. But he was alive and apparently uninjured, except for the filthy bandanna wrapped around his head.

Frank sat heavily down on a rock beside Hilo and his patient.

“Something terrible happened here,” he said, looking at Bella and then at Daniel. “Maybe it’s time

you folks explained a few things to me.”

Daniel nodded solemnly. “Ae,” he promised.

“She gonna be okay?” Frank asked. “That woman forced her to drink her drugs, or watch Joel murdered, right in front of her.”

“We’ll heal her,” Daniel swore. They had to, or break the hearts of so many people – Daro, Melia, Bella’s mother Grace, and Daniel’s own sweetheart, Claire.

Frank nodded and then looked down at the man lying beside Hilo. “He gonna live? He’s a good guy. And he and Bella –”

“Ho’omalū,” said a new voice from behind Daniel. “Can one of you mokes explain what the hell happened here?”

The three of them looked around. The captain of the Coast Guard cutter, a friendly acquaintance of Hilo and Daniel, stood on the sand, two of his crew behind him. They were all looking around the camp with their eyes wide under their regulation ball caps.

Frank cleared his throat. “I was here,” he said. “I can tell you exactly what happened. That woman over there...” He pointed to

a slender, white-clad form lying in the sand, one arm out-flung, eyes staring sightlessly. A litter of dead leaves and blossoms nearly covered her blood-stained body. "...tried to murder all of us. Her name is Camille Helman, and she's from da Helman ohana, out of California."

Daniel rose, cradling Bella as he turned to glare at the body of one of his family's worst enemies. He hoped she was the last of them, or he would personally mount a hunt for the others and cast them into the sea to be devoured as they'd intended to devour his island.

"Those are all her men, dead,"

Frank went on in his cracked voice. "The little blonde passed out over dere is a model, and somewhere around here, probably hiding in the deepest hole they could find, are two more kids who came along with Bella and Joel here, to take some pictures."

The captain nodded, still obviously bewildered. "And then what happened? Freak storm?"

"A microburst," Frank agreed hoarsely. "Never seen anything like it. Now, anybody got a drink of water?"

Chapter Nineteen

Joel was dreaming. It was kind of a freaky one, because he was lying in a helicopter, being flown into the Hawaiian sunset. But it was good, because Bella lay by his side. Safe and alive. He turned his head and watched her sleep, smiling to himself. She was so pretty with flowers still clinging to her face, throat and wrists.

She'd scared the hell out of him back there at Na'alele. First jumping off that cliff with only a vine to hold her, and then drinking that stuff to save his sorry ass, and falling down in a drug-

induced stupor. And when she'd come out of it – man, he'd never experienced anything like that. It was as if she'd awakened with another woman in her skin, one with a voice like thunder and freaky gold sort of trailing from her as she moved. Pixie dust, only hard edged, dangerous. He guessed if the island goddess Pele ever awoke, she'd have that same glittering aura.

Part of him knew that if he were awake, he'd be terrified by what he'd seen her go through and by the things she'd done, the way he had been when he was awake. Watching a girl – one with whom he'd just had hot, intimate sex, the kind that made him forget

there were other women – bring down a tropical forest on a bunch of big thugs toting automatics, had just about blown his mind.

Good thing he was tougher than the average dude, because even knowing she could bring him to his knees with a houseplant if she chose, he had no intention of letting her go. He'd take her with him, everywhere. He was well and truly caught, as surely as if she'd wrapped him up in one of those vines, as she had Li. Huh, he wondered if the little slime ball was still hanging from that tree? He kind of hoped so.

He smiled at his wahine again. But now fear clawed through Joel's sleepy

haze. Bella was too pale. He struggled to lift his hand and touch her, make sure she was warm, but he couldn't move his arms. Damn, they had him strapped in to the stretcher.

He opened his mouth to call for help. The words died in his throat as the pilot of the chopper turned and rose, filling the cockpit with her terrible beauty. He stared at her beautiful face, dark golden skin, and her crown of flame, and the long black hair that crackled around her, her skirts of smoke.

"You're her, aren't you?" he whispered. "Pele."

She inclined her head, one of her

hands resting on Bella's blanket-covered body.

"Help her," he begged, struggling at his restraints again. "She's – too pale. She's supposed to be smiling, happy, alive." He fought for words to describe what he'd seen, what had happened.

Pele raised her hand, and he fell back, wincing at the agony of ice that gripped his side.

"I know what has happened," she told him. "It is why I am here. To take her."

She bent to gather Bella into her arms, and Joel stared, grief driving the pain from his mind. "No," he choked. "No, don't take her. I-I need her."

She looked down at him, the secrets of the ages in her burning, ebony eyes. "But is your need enough?"

"Enough for what?" he gasped.

But she disappeared in a hiss of smoke and steam, taking Bella with her.

She was replaced with the faces of strangers, leaning over Joel. They wore flight uniforms and headsets. "He's waking up," one of them said. "Joel, can you hear me? You're in a Coast Guard chopper. You've been shot. Stay with us, man. We'll get you to the hospital. You're gonna be fine."

Joel looked blearily for Bella but saw only an IV bottle rocking on a portable

stand, and an empty space. Letting his eyes drift shut, he slid back into the darkness.

Bella felt as if she had been pulled from her body like a giant rubber band, stretched as far as she could go, and then released to slam back inside her battered, bruised and burning psyche.

She lifted her head slightly and then let it fall back to the hard, hot floor under her head. Sick, so sick.

Had she been drinking? She'd never had a hangover like this, not even when she and Claire helped Melia drown the sorrow of being dumped by her

boyfriend and ended up finishing three bottles of wine.

She had the flu; that was it. Or cancer. With a sob of misery, she closed her eyes again and gave in to the cold shivers that racked her, even here in this heated space.

Finally, the slow pulsing beat that throbbed through the floor carried her with it, soothing, healing, and reenergizing. She drifted, breathing in and out, reassured by the voices that chanted for her. Her voices.

“‘Ae, little sister. All is well. You have saved us, and we in turn saved you.”

“Now rise,” commanded a new

voice. Feminine, yet resonant with power, the voice reverberated through Bella's being. Like her voices, the owner spoke Hawaiian, liquid and lovely.

Lifting her head, Bella was astonished to realize that she now felt well, if a little weak. As if she'd awakened from healing sleep after being ill. She clambered to her feet, realized fleetingly that she was naked, only her hair falling around her. But it didn't seem to matter here. She turned to face the owner of the voice.

At once she knew in whose presence she stood. She gazed in awe at the woman who sat at ease on the throne of hardened lava at the end of the cave.

"Pele."

The woman nodded regally. "And you are one of mine, yes? My young ho'omalū."

Bella's nerveless legs gave out, and she dropped to her knees, staring in awe at the goddess of Hawaiian volcanoes. "I – I am? I mean, yes. I am a Ho'omalū. I just found out that my father..." Her voice faltered to a stop, and she blushed hotly as the goddess smiled, amusement clear in her obsidian gaze. Of course the patroness of the island knew all that.

"I mean that you are a true ho'omalū guardian now," Pele corrected. "You have served me well,

young Bella."

"I have?" Bella reeled as memory crashed through her – Na'alele, and the maelstrom of violence that had erupted.

She lifted her hands and stared at them. They looked so normal, just slender and tanned, with short nails and the little scars where she'd cut herself with florist wire. But at Na'alele, she'd watched golden power stream from them, and she'd nearly used it to bring down the mountain.

She curled her hands in her lap, shame burning in her cheeks. "I – I killed those men. They were going to kill us, but – but I nearly destroyed innocent people as well," she choked.

Pele rose in one swift motion and glided to stand before Bella. She held out an imperious hand, and without thinking, Bella placed her own in Pele's, warm and powerful, and rose to stand before her.

"She gave you a terrible poison," the goddess told her. "Distilled from my good earth, but made to enslave your human kind, weak and trusting. She wished to destroy your mind. Instead, her drug swept away all your inhibitions, your ability to control your power. She would have used it to bring down my people and take my island for her own use."

Her face glimmered, her eyes

burning, so that Bella felt as if she gazed into the heart of a volcano.

"You did not act alone," Pele told her. "I worked through you, as patroness of these islands, given to my keeping by our Creator. Now let the weight of those deaths rest on me, not you." Lifting her hand, she rested it on Bella's head, hot and infinitely comforting, a blessing.

"Mahalo," Bella whispered.

She just had one more question for the patroness. "Joel?" she asked, looking up into Pele's face. "Is he okay? They shot him."

Pele searched her face and then smiled a little. "He is what you want,

hmm? Then you must go and see for yourself. Now sleep."

She waved one hand, and Bella knew no more.

Bella woke in the room at Na'alele that she had come to think of as hers. She opened her eyes and lay still for a moment, looking at the room around her. It was airy and full of the silvery light of dawn, the curtains lifting in the breeze that blew through the open window. She could see the red hibiscus that bloomed outside, the blossoms nodding in the breeze.

On the wall beside the bed hung

one of David's paintings, a study of monstera leaves, thick strokes of paint layered to capture their rich green. She smiled a little. She'd been so afraid she'd never see this place again, or the man who slept in the chair in the corner.

Head tipped back against the cushions, mouth open slightly as he slept, his black ponytail drifting over the shoulder of his flowered shirt, was her father. Her heart swelled. He'd sworn to her that though he had missed the first twenty-five years of her life, he'd be there for the rest of his. It seemed he meant it.

A shadow fell across the partly open door, and a slender, silver-haired man peeked in. Jason smiled when he saw Bella awake, his famous smile flashing. He stepped quietly into the room, putting his hand on her father's shoulder.

"Daro," he said. "Your Nani is awake."

Daro started awake, lifted a hand to swipe across his face, and then stared at her. A huge smile dawning, he rose to hurry across the room. He reached for her and then hesitated uncertainly.

Bella reached out her arms to him.

“You’re here,” she said.

“I am here, Nani.” Sitting on the edge of the bed, Daro gathered her close in his arms. Jason Mamaloa hovered over them, one hand on his partner’s shoulder, the other on Bella’s head. “I’m here. And so is Jason.”

Bella smiled at her father. It was a pitiful effort. “I’ve been waiting my whole life to hear that.”

Daro nodded, his face crumpling. “I’ve been waiting your whole life to say it.” He laid his cheek on her hair for a moment.

“Are you well?” he asked anxiously, sitting back on the bed to

peer into her face.

“I’m fine,” she assured him and lifted her arms to hug Jason as well.

“You had us worried,” he told her.

“Do you want anything? Some breakfast?” Daro asked. “Do you think she can eat?” he asked Jason. “Maybe she should just have fluids.”

“I’m fine,” she repeated. And she was, except — she frowned. Someone was missing.

“Joel. Is he...?”

Her heart stopped as Daro and Jason exchanged a look.

“Whoa, now. He’s in the hospital

in Kona,” Jason told her, reaching out to lay a hand on her arm. “They say he’ll be okay, Nani. He’s healing well.”

Bella closed her eyes, relief swamping her for a moment. “Oh. Oh. I thought —” She covered her eyes, her face crumpling as tears fell.

Daro smoothed her hair. “Ah, I know, baby. But he’s a tough moke, the nurses say. Won’t be doing any mountain climbing for a few months, maybe, but he’ll make a full recovery.”

“Okay. What about Frank?” she asked, sniffing.

“He’s fine. Here at Nawea. They took him to the hospital, but he wouldn’t stay.”

Bella nodded. “And the others?”

The two men exchanged another look. “The younger ones—the models, they’re fine. I guess two of them hid safely when the, ah, storm blew through there,” Daro said.

“And the other one is recovering, although she doesn’t remember anything. They’ve all been released from care.”

“Well, I think that’s enough news for one morning,” Jason told him. “I’ll go down and get you one of Leilani’s famous smoothies,

Nani.”

He left the room, and Daro sat, holding her hand. “I called your mother,” he said. “The news crews are all over Na’alele. Big drug shipment gone bad, the police are calling it. With a group of innocent campers caught in the middle. With the, ah, storm, it’s the Hawaii news story of the decade.”

Bella squeezed his hand. “It’s okay, Dad. I know I caused a lot of it. I was strung out on Kona Kula. Turns out you really did pass on ho’omalua powers to me.”

They shared a snort of laughter and then both sobered. Bella

supposed she wore a guilty look identical to his. But they were survivors. She hadn't been the cause of the whole incident, just the unwitting conduit, and she was glad to be alive. She was even more grateful that Joel and Frank were okay.

"I have to go to Joel," she said. "And see for myself that he's all right."

Daro looked disconcerted. "Ah, you may want to wait a few days."

"Bella!" The happy cry cut through the quiet room, and Bella turned to see Melia in the doorway, her pretty, freckled face alight

with joy. "Oh, sweetie, we've been so worried."

Footsteps thudded in the hallway, and Claire looked over Melia's shoulder, their blonde hair mingling. "Bells! You're awake."

Daro rose courteously. "Come in. I'll go see if your smoothie is ready, Nani."

Bella's best friends stepped in to let him go by and then hurried to climb on the bed with Bella, hug her and exclaim over her, and cry a little. Melia settled on the other pillow, and Claire sat cross-legged on the end of the bed.

"You look...stunning," Claire

said wonderingly, wiping away her tears. "Different."

Melia nodded, sniffing. "You do look different." Her expression turned solemn. "Passing through Pele's chamber has that effect on you, hmm?"

Bella nodded, and Claire echoed her agreement. The three of them clasped hands.

"Who would ever have thought," Claire murmured. "The three of us, here...and all that's happened to us."

"Did you know before you left for Na'alele, about your powers, I mean?" Melia asked reproachfully.

“You never said anything.”

Melia did not like people to keep secrets from her. In fact, after returning from her honeymoon to find Bella was a Ho’omalua, she’d made her two best friends promised they would share all important details of their lives with each other.

Bella shook her head. “No, honestly I didn’t. When I was here for your wedding I felt...I don’t know, happy, alive in the forest, as if I couldn’t spend enough time there, but nothing like what happened this time.”

“We want to hear everything,”

Melia told her. "But not right now. My gosh, you haven't even had breakfast. Or coffee," she added longingly, stroking her still-flat belly, where David's baby grew.

"More importantly," Bella said, as another need became apparent, "I haven't been to the bathroom. Be right back."

She slipped out of bed and reached for the red shorty robe hanging nearby. Someone had dressed her in her usual tank and boxers, she noted. The last thing she recalled wearing was nothing—but that had been in Pele's cave.

Claire gasped, and Bella turned

to find both of her friends staring at her, their faces shocked. "What?"

"You—you have tattoos," Claire managed. "Like the Ho'omalū men, where they've been wounded."

"I do?" Bella looked down at herself.

"Your arm," Melia whispered. "And your leg. And, I'm pretty sure I saw some ink between your shorts and top. Oh, honey, what happened to you out there?"

"Close the door," Bella said.

Claire leapt off the bed in a flurry of long limbs. As soon as the bedroom door closed, Bella ripped off the robe and then yanked off

her tank and boxers. She stared at herself in the mirror hanging by the bathroom door.

Delicate tattoos marked her left thigh, her right forearm and the slope of her right hip.

David had several tattoos, and Daniel even sported tattoos on his bearded face. Homu and Hilo had many as well.

Hers were intricate, swirling designs, tribal yet feminine. Very different from those her male cousins bore but tying her to them with invisible strands of shared victory.

“That’s where she shot me,” she

remembered, stroking her fingertips over the tattoos. Now that she knew they were there, she realized that the skin there itched and even burned a little.

“Aloe cream works great on the irritation,” Claire said, touching her own arm. She’d had a small, pretty wave inked on her upper arm to cover the scar of a wound received beside Daniel in battle.

“Yours are prettier than mine,” she added, moving to stand behind Bella at the mirror. She shook her blonde head and smiled ruefully. “Pele’s magic does excellent ink.”

“And you look fabulous,” Melia

added.

“Mahalo.” Her friends were right, Bella realized. She did look different. She looked...great, like a woman who was sure of herself and her place in the world. Sure of what she felt and what she wanted. She looked damn good, and she was going to use that to go after the man she loved.

“I’m quitting my job,” she told the two faces reflected in the mirror behind hers. “And I’m going to stay here. In Hawaii.”

Smiling at their identical looks of shock, she caught up her discarded things and sauntered into the

bathroom.

Supper that evening at Naweia was an occasion. Homu and Tina were there, as was Hilo. David and Melia, Daniel and Claire, Daro and Jason, and even Zane had appeared, on a quick visit from school at the U of H.

Frank was waiting to hug Bella as she descended the stairs, and his sister Leilani came out of the kitchen to say hello.

Everyone carried dinner down to the patio table. Naweia was a lovely sight in the lavender dusk,

surrounded by flickering light of tiki torches and the banks of blooming shrubbery, the sea an expanse of dark silver stretching to the horizon, and the dark bulk of the mountain crouched protectively behind them.

Homu stood at the end of the long table, holding his glass high. "I propose a toast. To our own brave wahine, Bella Moran-Ho'omalua, who, through the worst the enemies of Hawaii could throw at her, persevered and fought bravely and well. To Bella."

The others raised their glasses high and looked at Bella, seated

between her father and Zane. "To Bella. You're a real ho'omalua now," Hilo added. "You have faced the same family that David and Daniel battled and won, as they did."

"I knew we'd get those Helmans in the end," Daniel added, with a glinting smile. "But I never thought my little slip of a wahine cousin would bring down the last of them."

Bella smiled mistily at them all. "Mahalo, my ohana. You kept me strong, and you saved me."

"And you got some great ink," Zane added enviously. The others laughed as she swatted him

playfully.

“And I have a toast,” Bella added, rising. She looked at Frank, sitting across the table from her. “To the toughest, bravest kanaka I’ve ever met. He stayed cool through — well, a nightmare. And he saved my life. Mahalo, Frank.”

As one, the Ho’omalus rose to their feet and saluted their friend, who looked a little stunned. He smiled at Bella and nodded his thanks, his eyes bright. “I’m just glad I finally understand you Ho’omalus.”

Claire leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

“Hey,” Daniel grumbled. “How about me? I scratched my boat getting out of that harbor.”

His fiancée rolled her eyes. “His other love. I’m jealous of a boat.”

“I had to land the chopper on a rocking barge,” David chimed in. “And listen to Mama while I did it.”

Tina Ho’omalua drew herself up magnificently. “I never said a word, David.”

He grinned at her. “I could hear what you were thinking. ‘He’s going to crash this thing, I know it! We’re all going to die because they let my baby boy touch the controls

of an aircraft!”

She shook her napkin at him.

“Yes, and I diapered your bottom, so you will always be my baby too.”

By this time everyone was laughing. Bella looked around the table and felt at once happy, and yet as if there was a hole in her heart. Because her joy wouldn't be complete until Joel was beside her.

If he'd stay. She took another drink of her mai tai, cool and fruity, and set it down.

Daro patted her hand. “Your mama will be here tomorrow,” he said. “She'll be glad to see you in one piece.”

Melia gave Bella a sly look across the table. "I don't think that's who she's missing."

David smiled at Bella. "I hear the hospital in Kona is mobbed with news crews and tourists," he said, sympathy in his gorgeous eyes. "A certain television celebrity with gunshot wounds."

"They're not letting anyone near him," Zane agreed.

Bella's heart sank. There went her plans to visit him in the morning. She'd tried to call his hospital room that morning, only to be informed Mr. Girand was not receiving calls. Trying his cell

phone, she'd gotten an automated message asking her to leave a number.

"I know one of the doctors there," Daniel said. Bella shook her head uncomprehending. Her big, scary cousin winked solemnly at her. "He may just have hospital rounds tomorrow. Drives a big SUV with shaded windows."

"The doctor's entrance." David nodded. "She can slide right in, take the medical elevator up."

Bella's spirits took wing. She smiled at the brothers. "Mahalo, guys."

Chapter Twenty

To Do: In the event a member of the tour is forced to seek local care, the tour director will oversee his care, making sure he has the best of everything.

Joel hated hospitals. He'd been in them numerous times. There'd been the rock slide in western Montana, the skiing accident in Canada, and the snake bite in Africa. Now that had been a scary place — he'd begged his crew not to leave him in the small hellhole of a hospital they found after hours of

driving. Thank God they'd listened and hired a plane to spirit him across a border into a wealthier area, where the doctors washed their hands and didn't offer to amputate his leg "very cheap, very little money".

The Kona hospital was cheery, spotless, and everyone from nurses to orderlies radiated the laid-back aloha spirit of the Big Island. But Joel was still stuck flat on his back, with machines beeping and people waking him up the moment he dropped off to sleep to take his blood pressure.

And the media had found him.

Evidently, he was big freaking news. The Ho'omalus had contacted his producer, who contacted his mother and aunt. And somebody had sure as hell alerted the news hounds. He'd awakened this morning to the sight of a perky young thing with a volunteer badge taking his picture with her phone. She'd giggled and scurried out when he protested, but when someone had brought him his phone, there he was, all over Twitter and the goddamn Internet. He was the third most viral video on YouTube.

His mother had phoned and

wanted to know if she should fly out to make sure the doctors didn't kill him. He'd thanked her and told her he'd likely be home to convalesce for a while, so she could baby him then, and no, he was not at death's door. He was pretty sure he had been on the threshold for a little while, but no need to burden her with that.

And just this morning, his producer had called with the news that the network was thrilled at the publicity of his brush with death at the hands of drug smugglers and a freak storm. Evidently, his fans were besieging the network for

news of his recovery and wanted to know when he'd be back on the air, as well. It seemed folks had somehow gotten the idea he and Frank had fought the smugglers off together.

The network would be flying someone out with a contract for next year. Weird.

In fact, everyone had called except the one person he wanted to talk to — Bella. And with all the other calls, he sure as hell knew his cell phone was working.

The polite Hawaiian cops who'd questioned him had told him they'd found a cell phone jamming

device in one of the bags of photography equipment abandoned in the caves. Camille had wanted them incommunicado for her little drama to play out, and it had worked.

If it had been only him and Bella, he would have insisted they hike out to escape. But with Frank missing and hurt and the other three nearby, they'd been forced to stay.

Joel's memories of the culminating battle on the beach were a blur of intense emotions—terror for Bella, helpless rage at Camille and her henchmen,

although that might be too fine a word for the scumbags she'd gathered as her bully boys. And sheer, disbelieving horror and wonder at what Bella Moran-Ho'omalulu had done.

There was no doubt in his mind that she'd done it. He knew he was as sane as the next guy, and he had seen her, a lovely, sexy slip of a woman wave her arms and literally bring down the Hawaiian forest on a crime boss and her men. Had seen her cripple and kill, with plants as her weapons.

Couldn't very well tell that to the cops, so he went along with the

version of the story they already seemed to have gleaned from Frank, one of their own.

Joel had a vague memory of Bella weeping over him on the beach. And now she didn't even come and see him in the goddamn hospital. This was the second morning of his captivity — at least that he'd been awake — and he wanted her here.

They'd told him she hadn't been admitted to the hospital as a patient, and he'd smiled at one of his nurses and inveigled her into calling a friend who knew one of the Ho'omalus and checking on Bella. She was in seclusion with her

family; that was all the nurse could find out.

His phone rang, and he grabbed it. It was his producer. Scowling, Joel took the call. "Hey, Randall."

"Joel, how are you? Any better?"

"I'm lying in a hospital bed in the middle of paradise," Joel said.

"How the hell do you think I am?"

"Ah, grouchy?" the other man quipped. "But I guess that means you're feeling better, right?"

"No, it means I'm grouchy," Joel shot back, but he chuckled, and then winced as his wound pulled painfully.

"Well, let me know when that

contract gets there, because I want this deal signed and delivered.”

A woman with wavy black hair backed into the room, wearing a short red dress and carrying a box and a big bunch of flowers. She peered down the hall and then stopped to pull the privacy curtain over the doorway.

Joel glanced at her curiously and let his gaze wander down over her heart-shaped ass and pretty legs. Then he froze. “I’ll call you back, Randall.” Clicking the phone shut in the middle of his producer’s squawk of protest, Joel dropped the phone. Finally. Pleasure spreading

in a warm glow through his chest, he leaned back in the bed and waited.

She turned to face him, clutching the box. It was white, with a big red ribbon. The flowers were mostly red, tropical blooms like the one tucked behind her ear. Like her.

Bella wore sunglasses that hid her eyes, and her mouth was lipsticked in red. She looked like a Hawaiian femme fatale.

“Go ahead and get started,” he invited, lifting an eyebrow at her.

Her eyebrows shot together over the big sunglasses. “Start what?”

“Stripping,” he drawled. “It’s

what you did the first time I met you. Do it again now, and we've got us a tradition."

She pursed her lips at him and shook her head, those glossy curls sliding back and forth on the upper slopes of her breasts and catching on the red straps of her halter dress and the tiny little sweater she wore over it. "In your dreams, Girand."

He nodded. "Oh yeah. Definitely, Princess."

She smiled and reached up to push her sunglasses up onto her head. Meeting her black velvet gaze, Joel rubbed a hand over his heart, which felt oddly swollen and

tender.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, hurrying to his bedside, her eyes full of worry. She dropped the flowers on the foot of his bed. He could smell them, or maybe that was her, that heady combination of sweet and sultry.

“Not a thing,” he assured her, grabbing her hand in his so she couldn’t get away. “You’re just so damn pretty. Even prettier than I remembered, and that was with your clothes off.”

He tugged at her hand, pulling her closer. She shook her head at him. “You look pretty good too,

hotshot. Even with that huge bruise on your face, and – and all this stuff.” She indicated the hospital gown and the stiff bandages visible under the thin fabric.

“I look like hell.” He grinned. “They haven’t even let me wash my hair. And I smell like those damn cleansing cloths. But do you think I could have a little kiss anyway?”

She nodded. Then she leaned over and laid a sweet, soft kiss on him that quickly turned hot and wet and deep. She smelled like flowers and sex, and she was warm and silky in his hands, her hair brushing his face as she kissed him,

her hands cupping his face and his forearm. She didn't even seem to mind his smell.

He groaned when she finally pulled away, and closed his eyes. "Oh God, please don't let me get a hard-on in this little tiny gown," he muttered.

She snickered, and he opened his eyes, content to smile at her for a moment.

"How you doing, Princess?"

Her gaze turned ebony with intent, her face solemn. "I'm okay. How much do you remember?"

He lifted her hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss in her palm. "I

remember a lot," he told her.

She looked down at their hands, her voice dropping to a near whisper. "We can...talk more about that later, if you like. I don't want to tire you out too much today." Pain tinged her gaze. "You...you almost died, Joel."

"So did you," he reminded her, his voice equally quiet. "If I'd died, it wouldn't have been that bullet, baby. Would've been because you scared me to death. Taking on a bunch of armed men in a crown of flowers."

She drew her lower lip under her white teeth, leaving it wet. "Yeah.

Kinda surprised myself too.”

“Did you know?” he asked, almost afraid of the answer. “Before that, I mean.”

Bella shook her head. “Not really. I began to wonder, when we landed at Na’alele.” She gave him a quick glance, and her cheeks flushed. “The...the forest speaks to me.”

Joel blinked. Then he rallied, realizing that it had been really difficult for her to share that bit of information with him. “I wondered about that,” he said as calmly as he could. “You can tell me more later. This damn place is too public.”

She nodded, looking relieved. She fussed with his hair, combing it with her fingers, and then pressed another kiss to his cheek, above his four-day beard, and rubbed her fingertips over the bristles.

“Carrotty orange. Just like I remembered.”

He grimaced. “I’ll never grow a beard, for sure.” He sighed and felt the hard, light box sitting on his thigh. “You brought me a present?”

She smiled, showing all her teeth. “Yes, I did. Here, open it.”

Joel pulled off the bow, and then opened the box. He peered inside and then gave a hoot of laughter

that instantly morphed into a groan of pain. She'd given him a coil of new climbing rope, in her favorite color — red.

“Oh, I'm sorry,” she crooned, fluttering over him as he lay back on the bed, wincing. “I'm sorry, Joel. Oh, I should have thought about how laughing would hurt.”

He caught her hand in his.

“Bella. Nani — it's okay. I love the way you make me laugh.”

She bit her lip, still worried. Still his princess, trying to be in charge of everyone's well-being. “Forgive me?”

“Maybe.”

Her eyes heated, and she leaned closer. “How can I turn that into a yes?”

“Hmm.” He considered. “You could slip that little dress off and let me see what you’re wearing underneath.”

She kissed him, a quick little peck that had him lifting his head for more. “Nope. Like you said, too public here...and I’m not wearing anything but little red panties.”

“Oh, please,” he moaned.
“Please, please. Just a peek.”

“Nope.” She kissed him again. “But I will show you my tattoo—one of them, anyway.”

“You got a tattoo?” He stared at her blankly. “That’s what you’ve been doing while I was laid up in here?”

She sobered and chewed her lower lip, her eyes falling to their clasped hands. “No. It’s another... Ho’omalua thing. A gift, from Pele.”

“Ah. From Pele. Like your, ah... specialty.”

“You’re not crazy,” she whispered, evidently seeing something in his eyes that worried her. “You really saw...what you saw.”

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. “I know, Princess. It’s

okay. I'm not gonna freak on you. I get that your family is...pretty amazing. Being a Ho'omalua means a little more than just having a big family."

She nodded. "Yes. They are, and yes, it does."

"Got it. I can wait. But I want to hear it all."

She smiled. "Okay."

He smiled back, relieved to see her happy again. "Now can I see your tattoos?"

"Just one." With a wicked little smile, she lifted one knee onto the bed and pulled her dress up, baring her thigh clear to the crease.

Joel forgot to breathe. The delicate tattoo on her satiny, curving thigh was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"Hahhhh..." he managed.

She giggled and then whipped her leg off the bed with a little squeak as the curtain slid open behind her.

"Time for your blood-pressure check, Mr. Girand," chirped the plump Hawaiian nurse. She smiled at Bella and bustled forward.

"You could've waited ten minutes," he told her. "I was just about to get lucky."

“You were not!” Bella huffed. Joel laughed again and then winced at the pain.

“Ten minutes,” the nurse said sympathetically to Bella. “Is that all? Poor girl.”

The two of them chortled together like best friends while Joel tried to look put out. He was pretty sure he failed, though, because the nurse patted his arm, her eyes twinkling. “Doctor will be around in five minutes. Maybe you can go home tomorrow. Then you get lucky, yeah?”

He certainly hoped so. He watched Bella wander over to the

window, enjoying the compact, toned and yet utterly feminine look of her. Maybe he could talk her into riding him, if he promised to lie real still.

“Here, let’s put these in some water.” The nurse picked up the sheaf of flowers and carried them off.

“You could come out to Nawea,” his wahine suggested, turning back to him when the nurse was gone. “And lie around in the shade. Frank would love to see you, and all the Ho’omalus want to meet you.”

“Ah, all of them?” He envisioned a phalanx of tree-size Hawaiian

males scowling at him for daring to touch their precious wahine.

“Well, not all,” she said, frowning uncertainly. “My dad and Jason. Jason Mamaloa, his partner.”

“Jason Mamaloa?” Joel whistled. “Wow. I just heard him on the radio. He’s good.”

She smiled as proudly as if he’d praised her. “Isn’t he wonderful? And he’s so nice. I have two dads instead of one.”

He smiled at her. “That’s great. You deserve two.”

“What happened to your father?” she asked, coming back to perch on the side of his bed. He

captured her hand again and felt better.

“He died several years ago. He was an alcoholic, finally drank himself to death.”

Her hand gripped his, pressing reassurance in right through his skin. “Oh, I’m sorry, Joel.”

He shrugged. “He was an unhappy, bitter guy. Watched his hardware store go down with the little timber town we lived in. Pine Shadow, Idaho. After the timber industry started to go downhill twenty years ago, with regulation after regulation and cheap foreign lumber, the mill closed. People

started to move away for a new start. Not my dad. He was determined to stay and go down with his boots under his favorite barstool, down at the Pine Away. Yes," he agreed wryly when she blinked. "The real name. Can't make that shit up."

He shrugged. "Anyway, he died about the time I graduated high school. I got a scholarship to the U of I, and Mom moved to Spokane to live with her sister. She's happier than she's been since I was a little kid."

Bella nodded. "How about you? Are you happy?"

He shrugged, wincing again. "I will be, when I get out of here and get back on my feet. As it is, I'm gonna miss that trip to the Arctic. I was really looking forward to that."

He looked at her. She was still solemn, her mouth curved down in a sexy pout. He tugged at her hand, and she bent over and kissed him. It was a great kiss, until the curtain jerked open again, and his doctor walked in.

Bella flew off the bed again, and Joel sighed. "Yes, please take me home with you," he said. "Please."

Then he let her go and turned to the doctor, who waited at the foot

of his bed, clipboard in hand.

Bella rode back to Naweia in Claire's new little SUV with a smile on her face. Claire gave up trying to converse with her after the third try and turned her stereo up.

Bella texted Joel that his rope was safe with her, and he texted back that he was going to tie her up and look at all her tattoos at his leisure. She texted back, wishing him good luck with that. He replied that his luck was getting better all the time.

Homu and Tina were at supper

that evening, along with their sons, Claire and Bella, and Hilo. As they sat back in their chairs, finishing their drinks, Homu looked at David and Daniel and received a nod from each of them. Then he turned to Bella.

“Nani,” he said, using her father’s pet name for her. “I have an offer to make you. You don’t need to answer now, just think about it.”

Bella nodded, mystified. She’d told the family that she wouldn’t be going back to her job at DelRay and confided to Tina that she might look for a job at one of the garden

nurseries on the island, if she could find a place to live inexpensively. Tina had listened carefully and agreed that it was obvious now that Bella belonged on Hawaii.

“As you know,” Homu said now, “Tina and I own a farm up on Mamaloa Highway. We wish to retire from the life — getting too old for all the hard work. It’s a simple place, some coffee plants, some nursery plants, truck garden. There’s room for animals, but we haven’t kept them for years.”

He smiled at Bella. “We all want to offer the farm to you, Nani. You could live there, rent-free for say,

five years. Then, when you begin to earn a profit, you could begin making payments to the family corporation. Reasonable payments, at a very low interest rate.”

Bella stared at him and then Tina. Tears blinding her, she tried to smile at the two. “Mahalo,” she managed. “I—that’s so generous. I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes, dummy.” Claire poked her. “You can grow that organic produce you were going on and on about last winter. And coffee. Oooh, you could bring me free coffee.”

Bella laughed, but then she

looked down, fiddling with her spoon.

“What is it?” Daro asked gently.

“Well, farming sounds so wonderful,” she murmured. “But it’s so risky, isn’t it? I mean, sometimes farmers lose everything.”

He thought for a moment.

“That’s true, Nani. But what does a person really lose if they lose a piece of land? Have they lost their ohana, their loved ones? Have they lost themselves?”

“Or were they willing to risk it all to follow their dreams?” Jason added, smiling at her. “Ask

yourself, Nani. What is your dream?"

Bella looked at the people around the table. Oddly, she was not embarrassed to be having this conversation in front of all of them. Other than Joel and her mother and Zane, everyone she cared about the most was right here.

Jason and her father were right, she realized with dawning wonder. She would never lose them. Or herself. Or this island. If farming didn't work, she would go to work in a nursery or as an arborist. As long as she was working outside with plants, she'd be fine.

And if she could have Joel too, she'd be ecstatically happy.

Smiling, Bella reached over and hugged her friend, who returned it with interest. Then she sat up and looked at Homu and Tina. "Claire and Dad and Jason are right. What am I waiting for? Yes, mahalo and yes!"

Later, as she lay in bed, Bella texted Joel. *R U asleep?*

No.

Good. How U feel about dating a farmer?

A pause, and then the reply *Not*

good. He'd always win at arm wrestling.

She giggled, which turned into a yawn. Miss U. Pick U up tomorrow?

Yes! But leave farmer @ home.

XOXO

Fine, he replied. But I expect more than that when I get U alone.

Chapter Twenty-One

To Do: In the event of an injury or illness, the tour director will ensure that her client receives the very best of care.

David took Bella in to pick up Joel in his big SUV. They slid in under the passenger pickup awning, and a tall, burly orderly wheeled Joel out in a chair. He wore sunglasses, a baseball cap pulled down over his freshly washed hair, shorts and a collared plaid shirt turned up around his

jaw.

David and the orderly helped him into the backseat beside Bella, Joel's seat tipped back as far as it would go, with a soft neck rest tucked behind his head. David tossed Joel's duffel in the back, stepped in, and they rolled away.

His eyes closed, Joel reached for Bella's hand. He looked pale, and his jaw clenched when David hit a bump, but he held on to her hand, stroking it with his thumb as they rolled through Kona town and up onto the Mamaloa Highway, headed for Naweia.

"Missed you," she whispered,

feathering a kiss on his newly shaven cheek.

“Whatcha doing, kissing strangers?” he asked without opening his eyes.

“I saw right through your cheap disguise,” she told him, inhaling his scent. “Mm, love what you do with a cleansing wipe.”

“Made them let me shower and shave.” He turned his face into her hair. “Damn near knocked me out too.”

“I know. You’re going straight to bed when we get there.”

“Am not. Lounge chair by the beach. Can’t stand to be inside

anymore, baby."

Her heart melted. "All right. If you promise not to show off and stay up too long."

"Promise."

Bella turned her head and met her cousin's gaze in the rearview mirror. He winked at her and turned up his Hawaiian music a little.

She smiled back. She was bringing her lover home to her ohana, and her heart was full. Now if she could only figure out a way to persuade him to stay.

David and Daniel helped Joel out of the SUV at Naweia and onto a lounge on the shady lanai. He settled into the soft cushions with a groan, his eyes already closing.

"Thanks," he murmured drowsily.
"Damn, weak as a baby."

"Rest, man," David answered, his deep voice soothing. "We'll have you up in no time."

Joel opened one eye. "Is that a threat? 'Cause if it is, my wahine can take you."

Daniel cocked an eyebrow at her, his expression asking if she was sure about this guy. Bella rolled her eyes. "Funny, hotshot. I think that's

the painkillers talking. Go to sleep.
'Cause I *can* take *you*."

His eyes closed, a faint smile curved his lips. "Yes, you can."

Daniel shook his head and strode away. David patted her on the shoulder, grinning, and then followed his brother.

"Wasn't Daniel supposed to pick up my mother?" Bella called after him.

"Hilo offered," he called back. "He'll take good care of her."

That would be Homu's brother Hilo, who operated a small boat shop at Honokohau, west of Kona on the broad plain near the airport.

He was one of Bella's favorite people in the family, with his quick wit and good humor. There was another Hilo, married to Tina's sister Noelani, but they lived on Kauai.

There were two Zoe's in the extended family too. A teenager and a young wife. Probably more doubles in a family that size too. Bella guessed she'd learn them all eventually.

Her ohana, her family. After a lifetime with just her mother, whose parents had passed away while Bella was in elementary school, Bella had a hard time

believing that she was now part of a large, vibrant family who showed their emotions with unashamed fervor. And threw great parties, luaus as celebrations.

Bella sat beside Joel for a while as he slept, a book by a noted Hawaiian gardener open on her lap. She tried to read, but her eyes kept straying to his face. He looked younger asleep. Her fingers twitched to brush back a lock of his hair that fell across his forehead in an S-curve, but she didn't want to wake him.

He was to rest for at least another week, and then take it easy

for another month, the doctors had told them. The trip to the Arctic was out until at least next summer. And he'd have to come back for a complete checkup before returning to work.

That suited Bella. It gave her time to take care of him. And to convince him that island living was ono, the best. She chewed her lower lip uncertainly. Could she do it?

Then she looked up at the forest rising green and lush behind the house, and narrowed her eyes. She was ho'omalū, a wahine of strength. She'd use any power she

could draw from the island to claim him and get him to stay with her.

Her mother arrived soon after they did, delivered by Hilo in his big silver truck. Bella was relieved to see that Grace was smiling as she walked down the lanai from the driveway. Hilo was smiling too, his broad, dark face in his habitual merry lines, black Ho'omalua eyes twinkling. They made a nice couple, Grace, auburn-haired and graceful in her favorite pastel lavender linen, Hilo in a flowered shirt and slacks. Bella realized with a shock that her mother was only in

her late forties, and Hilo probably wasn't too much older.

She shelved that weird thought for later and went to hug her mother.

Grace held her tight, enveloping Bella in her soft arms, expensive perfume and a murmur of satisfaction.

Then Grace drew back and looked at Bella, her green eyes searching, her soft mouth pursed. "Well, you look wonderful, considering what you've been through." She sounded surprised but relieved. "I guess your father and his family have been taking

good care of you.”

“They have,” Bella agreed. “But I’m glad you’re here, Mama.”

Grace pulled her close for another long hug. “I want to hear the whole story, when you’re ready to tell me. Those horrible drug runners.” She shuddered, her arms tightening. “I nearly died when Tina called me, and then I saw the news story. That storm – all the bodies, oh-hh! I can’t believe you survived, sweetie.”

Bella clung to her mother, meeting Hilo’s gaze over Grace’s shoulder. Wait until her mother heard the rest of it.

He nodded silently at her. It was time to tell her mother about the ho'omalū. But that was for later.

“Come into the house,” Bella urged. “Claire and Melia can't wait to see you.”

Grace turned to walk into the house with her, her arm still around Bella. Then she stopped as she saw Joel, lying on a lounge on the corner of the lanai, where he could see the shore when he woke from his nap. He wore shorts and his plaid shirt, a soft russet that emphasized the auburn highlights in his hair, which was wavy in the humidity.

“Is that who I think it is?” Grace asked.

“Joel Girand,” Bella said. “He’s recuperating here.”

She turned to see Grace watching her with an arrested look. “Oh, I see.”

Bella blushed. “Come on in, Mama.”

Joel woke to hear voices eddying quietly around him. Opening his eyes, he saw a glass of water on the table beside him, sweating in the humidity. He reached for it and drank thirstily. Setting the empty

glass back with a sigh, he rubbed his eyes and then looked around him, squinting in the bright afternoon sunlight.

He sat in deep shade, but down across the lawn was a little bay, waves spilling over the reef at its outer edge, the water inside a bright, clear turquoise. Waves lapped gently at a small golden-sand beach, palms clustered along the edge. A cement dock jutted out along the west side, with one of the most spectacular cigarette boats Joel had ever seen tied up to it. Long and sleek, it shaded from turquoise to blue, with native

emblems swirled on the sides in long ribbons of metallic paint. A tiny fishing boat rode jauntily next to it.

Bella and her friends lounged on beach chairs in their swimsuits. They were all wet, as if they'd just come out of the water, and he lay there for a moment, admiring the tableau of two pretty blondes and one Hawaiian beauty in bikinis. He was looking forward to meeting the two other women who'd forged such a tight bond with Bella.

They didn't look like prim and proper little corporate types, so outside of DelRay time, she

obviously allowed the real Bella to come through. Reinforced his decision to get her to quit. Of course he'd win, because anyone could see she didn't belong in an office. And now that his future was assured, he could take care of her.

Another woman sat with them, a big straw hat shading her face, her swimsuit much more conservative.

She said something, and all of them laughed. Their happiness tugged at him. Carefully, he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the chair. Then he pulled himself to the edge and prepared to stand up.

"Need some help there?" It was

Frank, materializing from the shadows of the house.

“You look a hell of a lot better than last time I saw you,” Joel said, attempting a smile. He was really glad to see the older man safe and well.

“So do you – kinda.” Frank bent to put his arm under Joel’s and helped hoist him to his feet. It hurt like hell, but he was glad to be upright. “You look like hell now, but den you were nearly dead. Where to?”

“Toilet.”

Frank walked him into the house, across a sitting room and

into a bathroom tiled in cool beige. "I'm gonna be right outside," he told Joel. "Bella'll be mad as hell if you fall and reopen your wounds."

"Thanks."

Joel relieved himself, sighing as the pressure on his aching bladder eased. He fastened his shorts one-handed and then turned, holding on to the counter around the sink. He peered in the mirror. He didn't care how he looked, but Bella might. He grimaced at his reflection, pale from lying around inside and dark smudges under his eyes, as if he was recovering from the flu. He'd lost weight from

several days of no appetite too. He swiped his face off with cool water, ran his wet fingers through his hair and dried his hands. Best he could do.

Frank walked him back outside. Joel looked longingly at the beach, where the big Hawaiian moke who'd brought him out now stood with the scary-looking dude with the long hair. Man, he'd hate to tangle with either of them.

"Wanna join dem?" Frank asked.

Joel nodded. "You have a cane around here or a walking stick?"

"Maybe, I'll take a look. Fo' now, I got Ho'omalus. Hey, boys," he

called. "C'mon and give us a hand, yeah?"

To Joel's embarrassment, the whole beach erupted in activity. The two men loped up the lawn to take his arms, and the women scurried around, fixing a lounge for him in the best shade of the palms that leaned over the little beach lanai, bringing a table and a cold drink from the big cooler nearby.

Bella hovered, admonishing her cousins to be careful. When he was settled, exhausted and hurting again, she perched at the foot, frowning at him. He held out his

hand, and she put hers in it and let him hold it on his thigh, without even realizing what she was doing, he'd bet. But he knew. He was staking his claim in front of her family and friends.

"You really should be in bed," she fretted aloud.

"This is great," he assured her, squeezing her hand. He'd take a painkiller in a little while, but for now he wanted to be alert. "You gonna introduce me?"

"Oh." Her cheeks flushed with pretty color, and she looked around. "Well, everyone, this is Joel. Joel Girand. Joel, this is my

mother, Grace.”

The woman in the hat, who he now saw was an attractive, older redhead with pale skin, green eyes and Bella’s mouth, murmured a greeting and smiled, but her gaze was cautious, measuring. That was okay; he understood that. Hell, he’d only known her daughter a week, and in that time they’d been through a cataclysm of violent danger. For all this woman knew, he’d been the catalyst, not Bella.

David Ho’omalua and his wife smiled at him, seeming genuinely glad to meet him. The taller blonde, Claire, and her Hawaiian hulk of a

husband were more conservative, both examining him as if letting him know they'd measure him and decide later if he was worthy of their Bella. But they were polite, and Claire asked about his wound and how it was healing.

"It's good," he said. "The doctors were surprised there wasn't more internal damage."

An odd look was exchanged amongst the younger Ho'omalus. "Hilo," said David cryptically. He winked at Bella, and her eyes widened. She smiled brilliantly at Joel, squeezing his hand. "David, Daniel, and their father and uncle

were there that day," she said quietly. "They arrived even before the police and the Coast Guard."

He nodded. "Excellent triage, huh? Thanks, guys."

The brothers nodded, and for an instant, Joel had the odd notion they looked like kings, conferring their grace on an ally.

"I'll go see if lunch is ready," Melia said, rising from her lounge. "David, come help me carry things?"

The voluptuous Claire swatted her husband's huge biceps. "We'll come too."

The four trooped off, leaving Joel

with Bella and her mother.

“You must have been pretty scared when you saw those news reports,” Joel commented to Grace.

“Good Lord, yes,” she exclaimed. “The devastation that storm wrought was incredible in itself. And then to see the lineup of faces, of those criminals, drug runners that died in their gun battle... I’ve never been so horrified. And you kids, landing innocently in the middle of their — turf war or whatever it was.” She put a hand to her face, her mouth quivering.

Joel met Bella’s gaze. Her mother didn’t know, then. Bella shook her

head slightly, her eyes haunted.

Joel squeezed her hand. *Time enough to break it to her*, he tried to say with his eyes. *It will be all right, baby.*

She squeezed back and tried to smile. "We were lucky the Ho'omalus came so quickly," she said. "And Dad was there too."

"Where is Daro?" Grace asked, looking around as if he might materialize. "I thought he and Jason were here?"

"They're over at Daniel's," Bella said. "Working on a new song, I guess."

Grace nodded and then smiled as

Bella's big, silver-haired uncle ambled down the lawn toward them. He smiled at her and Bella and bent to hold out his hand to Joel. "I'm Hilo."

Joel took his big paw. "Thanks," he said. "You'll have to explain to me sometime just how you saved my sorry ass."

Hilo nodded. "It was my pleasure, son. Anything for our Nani."

Grace beamed, and Bella smiled shyly at the big man.

During lunch, which Joel pretended to eat to please Bella, he and Bella gave a heavily edited

version of their adventure. With Grace there, they left out the paranormal aspects of the event. And they sure as hell left out their sexual adventures. But from the little smiles on the faces of Bella's girlfriends, they had that part figured out.

"How are the models and the stylist that were with you?" asked Melia.

"They're fine," Bella said, a smile of relief lighting up her face. "Matt has some bruised ribs, and Cassie won't be modeling for a month or so, until her sunburn and knife wound on the side of her throat

heal. She was pretty, um, frightened by the storm too. Tanah is trying to find a lawyer to help her sue the Helmans' CalTrend Corporation. But DelRay is paying all their medical costs, as well as a bonus for each of them."

"They paying for Frank's boat?" Joel asked.

Hilo nodded. "It's in dry dock right now, getting new pontoons. I had 'em add some fancy new tech equipment and plush seating too." His eyes twinkled.

As they came to the end of the recitation, Daniel Ho'omalua took a last drink from his glass and then

rattled the ice in it, an angry sound. "The law is gonna have to dismantle that family's corporation to the ground this time," he said, his voice a deep rumble.

"We'll help," David added with a look at his uncle.

Joel frowned. "That guy, Decker, who was on her boat. He said something to her before he left. 'If this deal doesn't go through, we stand to lose billions'. Something like that. You guys think he meant drug money?"

Daniel shook his head, his scowl even more fearsome. "No way. Money of that kind, to do with

Hawaii? That's land."

"Oh no," Melia said, her blue eyes wide. "A real estate deal of some kind. David, we have to tell someone."

"Already took care of it," Joel said. "Talked to the police at the hospital and a couple of suits. FBI, I think. They were real interested in his name."

The Ho'omalus shared a look, and Joel realized with a shock that whatever deal the Helmans had been trying to broker, it would probably not be left only to the state of Hawaii to bring it down.

Well, this was, after all, a pretty

special family.

Chapter Twenty-Two

To Do: A good tour director knows when to hang it up, and do whatever the heck she wants with the rest of her life.

Bella was delighted that evening, when Daro and Jason got out their guitar and ukulele after dinner and announced that they had a new song to share.

“It’s called ‘Ka Nani Girl’,” Jason said with a glinting smile at Bella. “Daro wrote the words, I wrote the music.”

Everyone turned to look at Bella, and she pressed a hand to her heart, a nearly painful pleasure swelling inside her. It was about her?

Then they began to play, the soft liquid notes lilting through the evening. Jason closed his eyes, and sang, his voice flowing like Hawaiian honey.

“My ka nani girl, every night she comes to me,

Dancing through my dreams, to climb upon my knee.

Smiling that sweet smile, her laugh a melody.

She calls me her papa, and gives

her love so free.

“My ka nani girl, as I look at her
now,

I’m hungry for the years that she
was far away from me.

But I know she’ll be here, for the
rest of my days,

Here in my Hawaii, and that’s
enough for me.

“My ka nani girl, every night she
comes to me,

Dancing through my dreams, to
climb upon my knee.

Smiling that sweet smile, her
laugh a melody.

She calls me her papa, and gives
her love so free.

“And someday she will have a
daughter of her own,
I’ll hold that little girl, and the
years will fall away.

It will be the way I dreamed, but
even better still,
For my ka nani girl will be
sharing her with me.”

As the two men began the
chorus, their voices softer, Bella
heard an odd noise beside her. She
looked over to see that her mother
was weeping, one hand over her

face as she tried to be quiet.

Bella leaned over, and gave her mother a fierce hug. "Shh-shh, Mama. It's okay." And it was, she knew now. She was a part of her new family and of this island, with no more room for resentment or anger.

"I'm sorry," Grace choked. "So sorry, for both of you."

"There's one more verse, Grace," Daro said, looking up and continuing to play his ukulele. "This part's for you."

Jason smiled at Grace, and began to sing again.

“My ka nani girl, you raised her
fine and true,

And when I look at her, I see the
best of you.

She’s finer than I ever was, more
than I could hope,

Mahalo from my heart, I’ll share
the rest with you.”

As the last notes of the chorus
died away, Grace rose from her
chair, and Daro did the same.

“I did do the best I could,” she
said to him, her voice trembling.
“But if I-I could go back and change
that, oh, I would.”

“I could have been a braver man

too, Grace,” he said. “I accepted my family’s shame for my own, for several years. It took me a long time, with Jason’s help, to see that I can be a father too.”

“Well, thank God for Jason, then,” she said and reached out to hug Daro. He hugged her back, patting her back and smiling at Bella with tears in his eyes.

“That song is going to be your next big hit,” David said appreciatively. “You going to share it with the world?”

“If it’s okay with Bella and Grace,” Jason said.

Bella nodded, wiping her own

tears away. "It's a beautiful gift. Thank you."

Joel held her that night as she cried again, carefully, and on his uninjured side.

"I'm sorry," she sniffled. "I guess I just have a lot of years of missing out on being part of a family."

"You've got a great mom," he said. "Little overprotective, maybe."

She snorted. "Ya think? You know, she's the reason I was so set on being a 'corporate drone', as you so nicely put it. I remember eating

tuna and crackers for supper when I was a little girl, and watching her write and write on her old computer. She's successful now, but it wasn't easy. I guess I decided I wasn't going to live a risky life."

"That sounds like past tense. Does this mean I don't have to talk you out of going back to DelRay?" he asked, amazed. "When did that happen?"

She shrugged. "Just something about dying and coming back to life to find a goddess glaring at you, I guess. Made me rethink my priorities."

He yawned. "Well, I'm damned

glad.”

They spent the next several days at Naweia. Joel looked better every day, and when Bella drove him to the doctor for his next checkup, the specialist shook his head as he stepped back to allow Joel to pull his shirt down.

“I’ve never seen anyone heal this quickly from a gun-shot wound,” he said. “Point-blank range with a bullet that size — you should be dead. You’re a fortunate man, Joel.”

Joel exchanged a look with Bella. “Yes, I am,” he agreed.

Bella told Joel about the farm that Hilo and Tina had offered her. She was surprised when he laughed. "Is this what that cryptic text message about dating a farmer was all about?" he asked.

She blushed. "Oh. Yes."

"Well, I've got a little surprise for you too," he told her. "My contract's been renewed, for *The Wild Zone*. Got another year out of them."

She smiled and congratulated him, but he frowned into her hair. Something was off. Oh well, time enough to show her everything

would work out.

Joel put up with Bella's cosseting for four days, and then he'd had it. One night, Bella stepped out of her bathroom, rubbing lotion into her hands, to find Joel lying in her bed, naked. He smiled at her and reached down to stroke his penis, palming its turgid length. He was aroused, and the sight of him, filling her bed with his heavy muscles and all that bare, smooth skin made her mouth water.

The stark white bandage low on his ribs made her heart hurt, though. She had almost lost him. Would have, if Hilo had not laid

hands on him, and used his kupua to stop the bleeding.

“We can’t.” She scowled at him. “Stop teasing me.”

“I can’t,” Joel said. “But you can.”

Bella stared at him, at his position on the bed, and at his penis, which jerked under her gaze as if she’d stroked it. Her mouth watered. “You mean you want me to...suck you?”

“Nah,” he said. “I want you to hop up here and ride me like a cowgirl.”

Her pussy clenched, and she took a step toward the bed, drawn to

him. "Only if you promise to lie still."

"Scout's honor."

She sighed and shook her head doubtfully at him as she caught the bottom of her tank to draw it over her head.

He held up his free hand. "Hey, could you do that a little slower?"

She looked at him. "Oh, you mean like a striptease?"

His eyes lit up, and he nodded, stroking himself again. "Exactly like a striptease."

He watched every move as she began to sway in place, and then slowly pulled her tank up just

beneath her breasts. Then she turned her back on him, and pulled it the rest of the way off and looked at him over her shoulder. He was riveted, a little smile playing about his mouth.

Tossing her tank over her shoulder at him, Bella swayed a little more and then did a bump and grind. She hooked her fingers in her panties, and began to push them slowly down. Then she changed her mind, and pulled them up tight into the crevice of her ass, and wagged it at him, arching her back to push it out at him.

Joel groaned. “Oh, Jesus, that’s

hot. If I buy you a thong, will you wear it for me?"

She turned to face him, triumph sizzling in her veins, and pulled her panties tighter, into the folds of her labia. Then she parted her legs and rolled her hips, giving him a glimpse of her pussy. "Yes," she agreed in a husky voice.

Then she wriggled out of the panties and crawled up onto the bed. "Come here," he urged, but she evaded him.

"Not yet. Want a taste of you."

She let her hair fall across his thighs, and pressed her face to his belly, inhaling his musky scent and

pressing a trail of kisses across the hard plain of his abdomen toward his penis. It bumped her in the chin, and she rubbed her cheek against him, reveling in the satiny heat of his skin, the way he quivered when she touched her tongue to him.

“Oh God, that’s good,” he groaned. “Yeah, like that, baby.” His big hand slid into her hair, cupping her head as she closed her mouth around the broad head of his penis, swirling her tongue over the slit and tasting the saltiness of the glistening drop there.

She pulled him deep into her

mouth, reveling in the freedom to do what she wanted, stroking her palms over his lean flanks while she sucked him.

Her fingertips struck the edge of the bandage, and they both flinched. Bella raised her head, stricken, but Joel grasped her hand and pulled her up over him.

“‘S okay, Nani,” he said. “Or it will be, as soon as I’m inside you.”

“I don’t know,” she fretted, even as her arousal grew at the sight of his cock, glistening from her mouth.

“I do. Come here, wahine. You can do all the work, and I’ll just lie

here. Here.”

He reached over to the bedside table, picked up a small square package and handed it to her.

Carefully, Bella swung her leg over him, making sure her knee did not contact his wounded side. He was breathing hard, but he lay still as she fitted the condom over him, and then rose up over him and wrapped her fingers around him, placing him at the entrance to her body.

She watched him watching her as she slid back and forth, wetting him with her arousal. Then she moved her hips, working her way

down around him, taking him into her. She moaned as he filled her, stroking sensitive nerves that knew his touch, and waited greedily for more.

He held up his hands and she laid her own in them, their fingers interlocking. Her hands clasped in his, Bella began to move.

It was all her this time, and in a way, it was incredibly erotic, as if she were using this strong, vital male for her own enjoyment. Her pleasure grew and grew, until all she could do was move, faster and faster on his perfect shaft. The heady scent of clean sweat and

their arousal rose around her in the damp air, and the succulent sounds of her pussy clasp at him combined with their breathing.

His skin gleamed with a dew of sweat in the lamplight, his face hard with lust, his eyes gleaming like amber in his face, but he held himself quiet, letting her pleasure him.

“Oh,” she moaned. “I can’t—”

He let go of her hand and reached between her legs, the calloused pad of his thumb finding her swollen clitoris and circling it, hard. “Yes, you can,” he urged. “Ah, you’re so gorgeous, baby.”

Your face, those little papaya breasts, nipples hard, your tight, hot pussy, swallowing me up."

His graphic praise and his caress sent her over the edge, and she came, the pleasure imploding inside her, around him, and then outward, through her body, quaking and shivering in waves of intense pleasure.

"Bella," he groaned, stiffening like a living board under her. "Ah, yeah. God, I love you. Love...you."

She moved sinuously, riding him more slowly, until at last his eyes opened, and he gave a last, shuddering sigh, his hands lax on

her thighs.

He smiled slowly at her, teeth gleaming. "That was almost worth getting shot for. C'mere."

She leaned over, careful not to touch his midsection, and kissed him. Her hair fell down around their faces in a black curtain. "I love you too," she whispered, so happy she could scarcely contain it. He'd said the words. That meant something, didn't it?

He slid his hands up to cup her breasts and kissed her back. "That makes me the luckiest moke on da island, wahine."

She giggled at his bad accent. "Is

dat Idaho Pidgin, moke?"

"Mm-hmm." He kissed her again, and then yawned, wincing as the movement stretched his side.

Bella moved off of him, contrite. "Oh, you need to rest. Here." She handed him a tissue, and he dealt with the condom, and she dropped the wad of damp tissue into the wastebasket.

"You should get back to your own bed. Or I can sleep there, and you can have my bed."

He scowled. "Or both of us can sleep here."

They argued for a moment, but Bella realized that if she wanted

him to relax, she'd better give in. She helped him scoot over so that she could climb into bed on his uninjured side, made sure he was covered with the sheet and turned off the light.

Joel turned his face toward her, gave an exhausted sigh and fell instantly asleep.

She lay in the darkness, listening to him breathe, enjoying his closeness, and imagining sleeping with him, like this, in a home of their own.

He'd said he loved her, and he definitely wanted her. In fact, he couldn't keep his hands off her, and

the look in his eyes when he looked at her — she could live off that alone.

But would he stay? If she took him up to the farm, would he fall in love with it as she had a few days before, when Homu and David drove her there to see it?

She was going to find out, she decided. As soon as he felt better.

It took days of getting better acquainted, of sharing past experiences, favorites and pet peeves, for Bella to work up her courage. She and Joel spent a week

at Naweia as he got acquainted with her family and her. The two of them talked and talked while they swam, strolled the grounds, and while they lay in bed after making love.

As soon as Grace left for home, Bella moved Joel into her room. She slept beside him, ate with him and fell deeper in love every moment.

She tried not to gush over him, restraining herself. He told her he loved her again, several times, but usually right after he came, so she was just a teensy bit cautious of his pronouncement.

Finally, on a warm, humid

evening, she drove him up the mountain and up the winding road to the meadows above South Kona. Melia's little SUV nosed into the plumeria-bordered lane and rolled into the open area by the small, sun-faded house.

Bella hopped out of the vehicle and walked around to join Joel as he stepped out. She looked around, trying to see with his eyes. The house was small, painted white, the roof and window trim a dark green. A deep lanai ran around the house, with a few empty plant pots and an old table and chairs.

The farmyard was graveled, with

outbuildings set around it. And beyond lay the gardens and fields, small ornamental trees in one field, and fruit trees in others.

And down to the west and south lay the sea, stretching to the horizon in an expanse of pewter under the soft rain clouds blowing in.

Behind them, the forest covered the upper flanks of the mountain, and to the west ran a black ribbon of lava that widened as it approached the sea.

“It’s great,” Joel said at last, a smile on his face. “Wow, I can see why you want it, Nani.”

“Oh, I’m so glad you like it,” she said. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

They walked around the farmyard, poking into buildings and admiring the ripe avocados hanging from the trees around the lawn.

Joel took her hand, moving along, but Bella stopped in the middle of the quiet clearing.

Joel turned to her. “What? Want another kiss?”

She tipped back her head and, as always when he kissed her, nearly forgot what she wanted to say. Sometimes when he kissed her, she

forgot where they were and nearly forgot her own name.

But this time, she pushed him away, just a little, because she loved nothing better than having his big body against hers. She looked up at him.

“Joel? Do you think you could... you know —”

“No, I don’t know,” he murmured, dipping in for another kiss.

She ducked away. She’d screwed her courage up, and she was going to do this. “Do you think you could stay here?”

He froze, his mouth poised over

hers. Then he slowly straightened.
“Stay here? As in...?”

“With me. Stay with me.” She waited, her heart pounding in her throat, for his answer. She felt dizzy, nearly sick with fear.

“Stay with you,” he repeated.
“Are you asking me to marry you, Princess?”

She huffed indignantly and turned away. “Oh, that’s just like you, turn everything into a joke. I just—I want to—yes, damn it!” She turned on him and nearly bumped her nose on his chest, because he’d followed her, crowding her, looming over her. “I am,” she

finished in a small voice.

His big hands lifted, cupped gently around her face and tipped her head back. She saw the light of laughter in his eyes, and lambent heat.

“That’s my princess,” he said tenderly. “Making it all work out for everyone she loves.”

She blinked. That wasn’t a yes, but it wasn’t a no... Was it?

He kissed her and then rested his forehead against hers and chuckled.

“You know, you asked me in the hospital if I was happy. I thought I was. But a couple of weeks ago, everything I thought I knew just

kind of...went *poof*. Like one of your pretty red hibiscus blossoms blowing in the wind.

“I love you, Bella Moran-Ho’omaluu. I realized it when you nearly died, trying to save everyone else. No, I realized it when I first made love to you, by that pool. No, it was when you looked down at me from that rock, up above the trail, and ordered me to go away. No, it was before that.”

Now he was really laughing, his chest quivering, breath huffing softly on her face. “It was when you did that damn striptease on a public dock, and I knew I’d follow you

anywhere."

"You love me?"

"Nani, I've been telling you I do."

"Yes, but I thought...you were just saying that because I rode you like a *paniola*, a cowgirl."

He laughed again. "That made me very, very happy, but I already loved you, sweetheart. You are the most fearless, aggravating, managing wahine I've ever met, and you've spoiled me for other women. I have to have you. Yes, I'll marry you."

"Even though..." She gathered herself for the final hurdle. "Even

though I'm a ho'omalū? One of Pele's guardians?"

"Even though," he said solemnly. "Or maybe because of, I don't know. That's part of you, Princess, and I want the whole package. I'll catch you, remember? Aww, Nani, don't cry."

"I remember," she said, smiling through her tears. "I'll catch you too. Always."

After he kissed her for a long time, because neither one of them wanted to stop, they wandered back toward the house.

"There's just one more thing," she said, as he swung her hand in

his.

“Uh-huh. I figured.”

“Well, I—I want children. I hope you do too.” She looked up at him.

He grinned. “Yup. Anything else?”

“Four?”

“Ouch! How about two, maybe three?”

She smiled glowingly. “Three’s good.” She’d talk him into the fourth one after keiki number three was toddling.

He slipped his arm around her, pulling her close to his side.

“You can travel all you need to,” she told him, her head on his

shoulder. "As long as you come back to me."

He kissed the top of her head. "Thank you, but you know, a guy has plenty of time to think, lying around convalescing. And I realized that as much as I've enjoyed the *Zone*, another year may be plenty for me. I've got a lot of money in the bank, and investments. How much more do I need? And I got to thinking, what about a Hawaiian version of the show? You know, a year's worth of outdoor specials, all around the islands."

She listened happily as they

walked side by side through the verdant Hawaiian landscape, to his words and to the delighted murmur of the trees and plants around her.

She was home.

No, they were home. Home in Hawaii.

About the Author

Cathryn Cade lives in the Big Sky Country of Montana. She and her family share their property with a golden retriever, and the various deer, antelope and elk that wander through their hay fields. From her computer, Cathryn looks out across the prairie at the rugged Rocky Mountains. Without much effort, she can visualize the cowboys, Indians and vigilantes who once rode the range – some from her own family.

When she's not inhabiting her

fantasy world—um, when she's not writing—she is usually reading, quilting or trying a new recipe. She also enjoys boating with her husband, hiking and exploring their home state's colorful history in museums and ghost towns.

She and her husband love Hawaii, and on their yearly visits like to snorkel, stroll on the beach and fantasize over mai tais about how to make the Big Island their second home.

Cathryn spends way too much time on the Internet and can often be found chatting on Facebook, Twitter, or via email. She loves to

hear from readers.

Stop by her website to join her contests, sign up for her newsletter, read reviews of her books, and enjoy her Free Reads.

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*Born to defend his people, he will
sacrifice everything...for her.*

Walking in Fire

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Hawaiian Heroes, Book 1

Nawea Bay, a remote Hawaiian paradise, is just the haven Melia Carson needs to escape the chill of heartache. Instead, she finds herself swept up in a tropical heat wave, fueled by her unexpected attraction to a handsome native she meets on a snorkel tour.

He's big, powerful, hot enough to melt her defenses — and he's not

all he seems. How else could he survive an injury that should have killed him...and why does she dream of him garbed in ancient native dress and wreathed in flames?

David “Malu” Ho’omalulu is on the Big Island to find and destroy a cache of dangerous designer drugs before they can be sold to his people. Fending off amorous female tourists is part of the job, but one look in Melia’s blue eyes, and his instincts scream that she is his.

As Melia surrenders to the desire burning between them, she discovers more than a fiery heritage

that defies modern logic. She discovers a man who would descend into the molten heart of the volcano to protect his island. And her...if she can find the strength to trust her heart to him.

Warning: Hot, hot Hawaiian hero with volcanic passion on his mind. Better pack a heat-proof bikini for this island paradise.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Walking in Fire:

Malu set the cooler down and leaned back on the counter, crossing his arms over his chest. His biceps bulged. Melia realized she

was staring again and looked quickly away. Darn it, she had to quit that. She had the mad urge to race out of the house and dive into the water again, to quell the flush of heat under her skin — equal parts arousal and embarrassment. She always seemed to be flushed around him, as if heat emanated from his very persona.

“You just saying dat because I have to cook so much when you’re here,” Leilani said to Malu, but she was smiling. “Dis man eat for days.”

“Hmm,” Melia answered. Hard not to notice when he sat across

from her eating two helpings to the others' one — he obviously had to fuel that physique.

“Maybe Melia cook for us, yeah?” He was laughing at her again, darn him. Not out loud, but that sensual mouth was tilted up at the corners, and his dark eyes held a suspicious gleam. She'd like to cook for him all right — a nice serving of ipecac. “*Melia paha.*”

Leilani laughed easily, then looked quickly at Melia. “Sorry, not laughing at you. *Malia paha* mean ‘maybe’. Close to your name.”

“Meh-lee-ah,” Malu said, rolling her name on his tongue. “You have

a Hawaiian name."

"Yes. It means plumeria. My parents spent their honeymoon here," she said. "They liked the name."

"So, you cook Hawaiian?" he went on, still with that gleam in his eyes. "Know any good Spam recipes?"

Melia frowned, wary of a trap. She knew the canned ground ham product was an island favorite, but she'd never actually eaten it. Malu grinned, and she narrowed her eyes at him. "I'm sure I could come up with some recipes, just for you."

Leilani shook her head at him.

“She cook fresh, not canned.

Anyway, dis girl here on vacation.”

“Yes, I am. Nice talking to you, Leilani.” Without looking at Malu, Melia turned and sauntered out the nearest door, which turned out to be the one to the rear lanai.

Behind her, she heard Malu say something to Leilani. Both of them laughed. She wondered if they were laughing at her, and then rolled her eyes at herself. That was so junior high. And Leilani was nice, even if Malu was a big recipe gone bad.

It was dark on the back lawn, just the light shining from the

windows. The only sounds were the rustling of foliage and a few frogs piping in the forest.

Melia flipped her hair off her shoulders and blew out a long breath. Good grief, why did she let him fluster her this way? She wandered slowly along the lanai. The soft caress of the humid air and the sweet scents wafting on it soothed her. Walking on, she stopped to sniff a familiar acrid odor, then wrinkled her nose. Eww, some of the group were smoking pot, right up in the trees. She heard Clay or Jimmer laugh, and shook her head. What a useless waste of

time, not to mention illegal.

She followed the faint sounds of island music around the corner. Frank was perched on the porch railing, playing a small ukulele. He smiled at her as she walked into the light of the tiki torches stuck in the garden. Curling up on one of the rattan loungers, she listened to the soft melody and let her mind drift.

She was bothered and bewildered by her attraction to Malu. She'd better handle it before she was bewitched. The Big Island was exerting its magic on her. That was it—he was part of the tropical ambience, like the lava flows, jet

black against the green-and-gold mountainsides, like the turquoise water in the bay, the surf curling into frothy white on the golden, sandy beach.

Just another Hawaiian native, as beautiful as the fish eddy over the reef, the sea turtles paddling slowly along or the dolphins leaping joyously from the waves, as full of quiet power as the mountain that towered behind them. Hopefully without the menace.

Realizing the poetic nature of her thoughts, she blushed, glad no one else could see in the dim, flickering light of the torches. Good grief,

next she'd be putting it to music and playing the ukulele in the moonlight.

She opened the nearest door into a quiet sitting room now in shadows. She bumped an end table, and something fell with a rustle to the woven floor mat. Melia fumbled for the nearest lamp and snapped it on. A sketchbook lay on the floor, a page poking out as if torn.

Bending, she picked it up and opened it, then blinked in surprise as she gazed at a pencil sketch of the bay, obviously done by someone on the front lanai. The

sketch was rough, as if it had been done quickly, but even to her untutored eye, it was very good.

She sank onto the rattan settee next to the lamp and turned the page. Another sketch of the bay, like the first, only a little more refined, the black lava rocks shaded in, the palm trees textured. Were these by the same artist whose work hung on the walls?

She flipped to the next page and the next. To her disappointment, all were bare, except the loose one. As she pulled the page carefully from the sketchbook, she caught her breath. This sketch was of a

woman. She was seated on a rock, foliage behind her, her head bent. She held a single flower in her hands, and she looked down at it with dreamy concentration. Her shoulders were bare, a few vague lines suggesting she was nude.

Melia narrowed her eyes. The woman's hair was undefined, her features only a few tender lines. And yet she looked somehow familiar.

The edge of the paper was crumpled, as if the artist had begun to discard it and then changed his or her mind. A little guiltily, Melia set the sketchbook back on the end

table, the sketch of the woman still in her hand.

The artist had nearly thrown it away. Surely he or she wouldn't miss it if she just enjoyed it while she was here. She'd return it before she left.

She went to her room. After setting the sketch carefully on her bedside table, she readied herself for bed, her mind full of the activities and tensions of the day. When she closed her eyes, she felt as if she were still in the water, being rocked gently by the waves. She turned onto her side and hugged the extra pillow to her.

She dreamed of Malu.

He lounged in the shade of the beach palms, smiling lazily at her, even though Cherie and Jacquie snuggled close at his sides in their bikinis.

Melia walked toward him, drawn by a force beyond her control. His dark eyes slid down over her in a caress as strong as if he had stroked her with his hand. Heady triumph filled her – he wanted her, even with the other women available.

He beckoned her with one finger.

Her heart beat in slow, heavy strokes. She knew what he wanted. Slowly, she lifted her hands to the ties

of her bikini top and unfastened them. The top dangled from her fingertips, then fell to the sand, leaving her breasts bare to his gaze. Her nipples hardened, thrusting toward him, feeling his gaze like a caress as soft as the fresh flower lei she wore.

He gestured again, and, naughty excitement flooding her, she hooked her fingers in her bikini bottoms and slowly pushed them down until they fell in a soft puddle around her bare feet. As his hot gaze fell to her mons, she caught her breath, trembling with the force of her excitement and arousal. She felt daring, free, and so turned on her legs were weak.

In the perverse way of dreams, she suddenly realized that Dane sat nearby, watching her with an enigmatic look on his tanned face. Clay and Jimmer were there too, smiling avidly.

Uncertainty filled her. She looked back at Malu, and he smiled as Cherie and Jacquie pressed close to him, their hands all over him.

With a whimper of sheer humiliation, Melia turned to run.

*He's found the woman of his dreams –
in the midst of his worst nightmare.*

Lucidity

© 2012 Raine Weaver

Carlotta Phelps never considered herself special, except for a peculiar ability to control the course of her dreams. Other than being a handy cure for nightmares, it's a pretty worthless talent. Until she's recruited for the One Hundred, a team of lucid dreamers whose combined visualizations have been proven to affect reality.

With a giant asteroid hurtling

straight toward Earth and the scientific technology to avert it iffy, the dreamers are the fallback—the last line of defense. And the man who's been assigned as her bodyguard is messing with her focus, big time.

Ex-Special Ops soldier Parker Munroe has no idea why he's been assigned to protect the luscious, gentled-eyed Carly. She's a frustrating temptation, but he's a hard-core realist. The only power he believes in is brute force.

Then he learns that his charge, who practically lives in lacy negligees, wields an awesome

power — and an even bigger responsibility. She and her kind are being hunted by an enemy he can't even identify, against which all his skill with weaponry is useless. If he can't find a way to protect her, the world is as doomed as the heart he's already lost.

Warning: This title contains a hero who packs a really big gun, government conspiracies, hot-battered murder, witch hunting, and drop-your-drawers-there's-a-new-sheriff-in-town-and-she's-carryin'-cuffs kinda sex.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for
Lucidity:*

He touched me.

Not in a protective way or to chastise her, and not to get her into motion as he did when a threat was imminent. He'd actually touched her as a man intrigued by a woman might.

Carly licked her lips, trying to calm the nervous fluttering of her stomach. Such silliness. She couldn't let such a simple gesture affect her. He was probably horny, and she was feeling vulnerable. Loneliness and isolation were the only things drawing them together.

She could only be so honest with him, after all. Against orders, she

would talk about the experiment, the One Hundred, and the worldwide danger to them all. But to tell him how much more she really wanted from him, that she could barely sit this close without wanting to jump his bones, was courting complications. And they had enough to deal with already.

Besides, she'd never agreed with her superiors about keeping this secret from the populace. And this man who regularly risked his life for her certainly deserved the truth.

"I am what's called a lucid dreamer. That is, a person who, while dreaming, is not only aware

that they are, but they're often able to control the dream itself."

He gave her a long, blank stare, as if waiting for her to get to the real point. Okay, this was not going to be easy if he couldn't believe this *was* the point. "The gift wasn't produced in a laboratory. It's not unnatural, not even all that unusual. A significant percentage of the general population has the ability."

"Do they?"

"Yes. Haven't you ever found yourself in the middle of a dream and—"

"I don't dream."

“Of course you do. Everyone does.”

“Then I guess I don’t remember them.”

She blinked, at a loss for what to say. Most people experienced dreams for at least two out of every eight hours of sleep, three to five per night. She couldn’t imagine what it would be like to be totally unaware of such a huge part of one’s existence. “I’m sorry. How very sad for you.”

“Sleep is for resting. Anything else just disturbs the process.”

“Dreams are part of the process, whether we like it or not. They give

us a chance to let our imaginations soar, to live in different worlds, learn the secret language of our minds, our spirits.” She paused, feeling his detachment as dead space between them. Lord, she didn’t want to start lecturing the man. But how was she supposed to reach someone who’d so firmly grounded himself in denial? “I could teach you. It would be fun! Remembering and understanding them just takes a bit of practice. Honestly, Parker, with a little instruction and some relaxation techniques, I think you’d love it, lucid or not. Once this is all over

and everything's returned to..." Her voice dissipated, and she swallowed hard.

What made her think anything was ever going to be normal again?

"My nocturnal fantasies are probably best left forgotten," he muttered. The gruff tone of his voice and his sharpened gaze made her think he was probably right. "Go on with your story."

Not an easy request to grant when he was so much a part of her dreams. "Five years ago, I took part in a research project. It was at Stanford University, right here in the USA. I couldn't afford to go to

college on a cashier's salary, so it seemed interesting to have them pay *me*. The researchers advertised for 'lucid' volunteers. Just average, everyday folks with a weird little gift, a common interest. You know, sort of like a gathering of those people who go to comic book conventions, or the ones who collect Pez dispensers."

"Pez?" His eyebrows beetled in confusion. "Are you fucking with me?"

Sadly, no. But wouldn't he be stunned to know how often she thought of doing just that. Too much, in fact, when her energy

should be focused on her duties — and surviving. “Seriously. It was a sort of ‘dream tank’, manned by idealistic scientists and students genuinely interested in exploring the creative mind. It was *glorious*. I made so many friends there. People who didn’t believe in boundaries, just learning. Pure magic, Parker, a Disneyland for dreamers. But, after a few weeks, things got more serious.

“From the original group, the researchers culled one hundred test subjects. Those they considered gifted. The ones who could imagine most vividly, maintain the

strongest control over images and outcomes. Months of follow-up studies showed each of them not only had the ability to direct the course of their dreams, but, when given a real-life situation to focus on, they actually seemed to affect *that* as well."

"Okay, freeze."

"What?"

Parker glared at her, shaking his head. "Such wide-eyed innocence. You know goddamn well you're freaking me out. You just took a giant leap from 'hey, that sounds interesting' to 'nice buzz, what's the street value of your drugs?'

You're telling me you honestly think someone can suggest a scenario to you, and when you dream about it, that thing becomes reality?"

"I'm afraid so."

He laughed softly, stretching his long frame in the little chair as if someone had just pulled his leg. It was a lovely rumbling sound from deep in his diaphragm that made her want to tickle his abs. With her tongue. And work her way down.

"You think I'm joking."

"I *hope* you're joking."

"I'm afraid this is as serious as it gets."

His eyes narrowed to slashes of steel. “You do realize how that sounds?”

“I realize what most people choose to ignore. That there is so much more to us than some animated bit of clay suspended on a frame of fragile bones.”

She was so excited to finally be able to tell him the truth—to tell *someone*—that she reached across the table to pinch his arm to illustrate her point. And couldn’t grab hold. Jesus, the man had biceps the size of canned hams and twice as firm.

“Not that all bodies are fragile,”

she continued distractedly, watching the triangular tattoo ripple as he reached for his mug. She could imagine her name inked possessively across that hard muscle as it did push-ups over her bucking body... "But the creative mind is capable of amazing things."

"That's crazy talk." Parker tossed back his coffee and grimaced.

"There are those who'd say genetically altered coochie would be more believable."

"Yes, I know how it sounds, but it is the truth. The evidence was undeniable. As individuals, on a small scale, it was little more than

an oddity. Penny-ante stuff that didn't amount to much in the grand scheme of things. But the old adage is right. There's strength in numbers. We kicked ass when we worked as a unit. So, the researchers began to wonder...what if all of us focused, concentrated—dreamed the same dream at the same time?”

“And so was born the infamous, elusive One Hundred.”

“Exactly.”

He chewed his bottom lip, eyeing her skeptically. “You’re telling me you people actually believe you can dream away the

catastrophe?"

"Yes." From the moment they first worked together, she'd believed it to be true. But now, facing the doubt of this man she respected so much, there was a quaver of uncertainty in her voice. "So? What d'ya say, big guy? Do you believe me? Want to help me save the world?"

Blooming in the Wild

Cathryn Cade

Dangers in paradise...

Hawaiian Heroes, Book 3

On Hawaii's Big Island to supervise a photo shoot for her sporting goods company, Bella Moran is looking forward to relaxing with her newfound family. As the island works its magic on her Ho'omalua blood, though, something strange begins to happen.

In her dreams, she is at one with the untamed rainforest, able to command the trees and flowers with a terrifying power. Unfortunately, she finds no rest in her waking hours, dealing with the sexy, boy-in-a-man-suit star of the shoot.

Joel Girand, star of his own TV adventure show, signed on for a relaxing weekend showcasing tropical camping gear. He never expected to fall for an uptight executive type like Bella, but there's something about her lush native beauty that excites the wild places in his soul.

In Joel's arms, Bella feels her civilized veneer peeling away. But when it becomes clear someone with a grudge against her family is using deadly force to sabotage the shoot, Bella's frightening dream power manifests in the very clear light of day. And Joel must decide

if his heart will let him stand back and let her sacrifice everything—even her life—for her native home.

Warning: A wahine who'll stop at nothing to claim her man. Steamy interlude in the tropical forest, including illicit use of flowers.

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