

1

*Makaha Valley
Waianae,
Oahu, Hawaii*

“Silence hurts. Just a touch of silence is ambivalence. It hurts the worst.”

The woman’s words rise just above her breath as she watches him sleeping. There’s a rhythm to his rest, breathing - a synchronized action, a subtle expanding and contracting, rising and falling shoulders timed to the sound of consistent breaths.

Last night was not their first, but Kailani felt something different, different from yesterday and different from the day before. He was right there, sleeping on the bed, and he couldn’t have been further away.

His name is Tey.

They work together, and both have other lovers. They agreed the relationship was supposed to be casual, and they agreed to keep it discrete. And she was surprised at how much she enjoyed it. But like the Bougainvillea, whose sprawling tendrils were generous with colorful and delicate flowers, they came with thorns that could draw blood.

It gave Kailani pause. She longed to kick-start change, drag her feet, and slow time to negative numbers. Reverse the flow of minutes, seconds, and hours, relocate events to a time of her making. To be a girl again, reliving the anticipation of her first love.

But there are barriers.

Shadows outside the tall windows fall across the distant ridge like a thick syrup, quietly descending and spreading across the valley floor. And Kailani could feel the solar heat on her bare skin. Tey was on the edge of sleep, and her words were a blurry rhythm in his ear.

“What?” Eyes closed and still within the fog of sleep, he struggles to push the words past his lips.

She moves closer and lowers to the bed, and Tey could feel her warm breath on his skin.

“Taiani knew you weren’t happy with the relationship. You told her, right?” she says.

He stirs, reaching under his pillow, fingers probing and finding his cell. “It’s early, Kai.”

“You told me last week you would end it, ya know? Taiani said that your silence was crushing her.”

It's a rhetorical appeal disguised as a simple inquiry. She wants him to say the words. She wants him to see her in a different light. Not just a coworker, not just a friend. Kailani is searching for the right feelings - emotions, her feelings. She is searching, and all she can find are barriers.

"I told her yesterday. We had coffee at the Beach Bum in Ma'alaea. Geez Kai." He sat up and rubbed his eyes. "This is not the discussion I wanted to have first-thing this morning."

"Sorry. I wanted your attention on this. Just trying to help, ya know. I knew Taiani wasn't the girl for you from the start."

Kailani hovered over him, ringlets of hair falling over his face, long strands of loose curls the color of dark cocoa stirred into a dash of milk. She moved her head from side to side, dragging the strands across his chest. And then lowering, her skin to his skin.

"It's just that you aren't well-matched. She likes going to the mall, and you like going on long hikes."

"There's more to it than that," Tey noted.

"The road starts there. She goes left, and you go right. I saw it coming," Kailani insisted. "I knew you walked different paths."

"I thought you were friends. Don't girls talk about everything?" he asked.

"Not this - not us. Taiani has a very private side," she laughs. "Come on, I need details, ya know. I'll see her this afternoon when I get to Maui. She's going to ask me a lot of questions."

Tey shifts, pulling the pillows under his head, and Kailani runs her fingers through his hair, giggling like a young girl. "She knows about us," she giggles again and lowers her full weight against him.

"She made that clear yesterday," he laughs, and then slips his fingers under her chin, pushing gently until their eyes are inches apart. He studied her like a photograph. He was taken with her Polynesian beauty, and he knew Kailani was well-versed in how to use her comeliness. It was her version of gentle persuasion. A flip of her hair, eyes pushed to one side, pursed lips, coated with a layer of red lipstick. It worked for her when she wanted more. She made a game of it, but Tey was curious about her actions this morning. Sex was always like diving below the waves, holding his breath, and never knowing if there was another until he reached the surface. He knew she was looking for more than just gossip. But there was something else.

"You're not going to give me more dirt?" she asks.

"There's nothing more to tell, Kai."

"Guys don't pay attention to details. You all just push your way through life like Neanderthals. It's more subtle. Women are more subtle."

"What does that mean?" he asks.

"There's a necklace in the bathroom. A cheap trinket, just puka shells. But I don't wear tourist-grade jewelry," she smirked. "Who else have you brought up here?"

"I didn't see it. Maybe she just forgot. Taiani does that sometimes."

"No." Kailani waved her finger in front of his eyes. "Not Taiani, I know the girl. She was unsure about the relationship. It was a message for the next pair of curious eyes." Kailani ran

her fingers through his dark curls again, pushing the strands behind his ear. "Has Susanna or that other girl been up here?"

"What other girl?"

She can tell it's a façade, a diversion away from something he has stored within a vault deep inside his brain. Kailani pushes upward, slightly moving forward, letting her nipples graze the skin of his chest. Another con, one of many in her arsenal.

"I know about her. What's her name?" she entices with her little-girl voice.

"I don't know who you're talking about." He shifts again, running his palms along the skin of her torso.

"Come on," she laughs. "That meet-cute you've been lusting after. I know what you're up to."

It would be fun to play dodgeball with words, dancing around the issue. But he knows she'll find out. He's in the presence of a master of deception.

He surrenders.

"Kalana. And no, I haven't asked either to come up."

"See. That wasn't so hard." Kailani smirks. "Who left the puka shell necklace?"

"I think it was you. It's not like a parade of women are coming through here." Tey's words were chased by a quiet laugh.

"Just checkin'. I know you flyboys attract all the young beauties."

Kailani Soto was the youngest of five. Born and raised on the island of Oahu, and the blood that filled her veins was Hawaiian. She is an alluring purebred of Polynesian ancestry, and Tey was aware she used her looks, the trademark of minority, and the intrigue of Polynesia to her advantage.

They both were employed by Cano Air, an air transport business that delivered mostly cargo between Hawaii and Australia. Tey is a captain on long-range flights to Australia and Polynesia, and Kailani is the personal assistant to the owner, João Cano. Her position gave her access to many people throughout the islands. A social butterfly in the Hawaii community, she had many friends, a few well chosen lovers, and she knew everyone's business.

Like a lawyer, Kailani never asked a question without knowing the answer. She never entered a room without hair, makeup, the right dress, and knowing her lines. And she was adept at shifting gears, depending on the motive for the occasion.

"Did Taiani cry when you told her?"

"Taiani cry," he laughs. "That's the problem with the girl, she has no emotions."

"Sometimes you don't want to open that door. I've seen her get emotional, and it's not pretty."

"We were talking about the breakup, okay," Tey began. "I thought she took it pretty well. Sure, there were some harsh words, but she recovered. And then she got up and walked away. I was mid-sentence, and I thought that was the end of it."

"So that was the end?" she asks.

"No. She came back. She was calmer, and we finished. We agreed the worst was the best."

"She probably went into the wahine's room and tore a door off a stall." Kailani rolled off him and opened the glass door. The air is warm, laced with the fragrance of plumeria blossoms

and ocean air, rushing into the small studio. "Are you sure nothing is going on between you and Susanna Cano?" Would you tell me if there was?"

"Are you jealous?" he smirks.

"Of Susanna?" she laughs. "Get real. Susanna is an entitled brat with long legs and no boobs," she laughs again. "I would know if something was going on."

"Boobs don't make the woman, Kai."

"I know the two of you went to Pokai Bay and sat in the sun. I was just wondering if you got her up here to see what was under her top."

Kailani steps onto the lanai without pulling something over skin and a silk bikini bottom. Unconcerned about an audience, she raises her arms, pulling her long hair off her shoulders, holding it off her neck, and turning to face the sun.

"I'm not so sure I want to get that close. She is the boss' daughter."

Tey joins her at the railing, his hands on her skin, tracing the curved edge from her waist to thigh, and she leans into him.

"What's going on with Kalana? Have you made a move yet?"

"Yeah."

"So, what was the move?" she asks. "I'm curious how you go about it."

"She agreed to get some takeout and come up to watch a sunset."

"Yeah, this eighteenth-floor balcony is a chic magnet," Kailani laughs. "Why are you more interested in Kalana than Susanna?"

"She's not Calista Cano's daughter," Tey said.

"You mean the queen of diamonds," Kailani laughs.

"Yeah."

"Where did you and Kalana..."

"How do you know about her?" He didn't want an interrogation and he wasn't ready to reveal any details. He decided to stall by taunting her.

"That's privileged info. I'm not about to tell you how I operate."

"Yeah. Aren't you just the Mata Hari of Hawaii."

"A whore? You're calling me a whore?" Kailani pushed away and walked across the balcony.

"Mata Hari wasn't just a whore. She was a spy for Germany in World War I. It was a compliment," he laughed.

"Not just a whore?"

What he thought was a good direction turned into a slip, a thin ledge on a tall cliff. Tey pulls her closer, but he knows she is the mistress of deception. And he knows she can have the bite of a viper.

"A spy? You call that a compliment?"

"Yeah," Tey laughs. "She was very beautiful, like you," his laugh is guarded.

"Flattery isn't going to get what you're looking for mister," she gently swats the top of his head.

"Yeah. I already got it."

Kailani could have protested and could have used her feminine and cultural advantage to equalize the dispute. But he was playing with her, so she smiles, feigns defeat, and she is tired of playing his game. But she can't let him evade a return volley.

"Getting back to Kalana. Did you know she and Susanna were roommates at UH?" Kailani asks.

Tey's fingers pinched the skin at her waist. "No, should I?"

"They've likely talked about you," she laughs. "Now that's a conversation I would love to overhear."

"I'll bet."

"Your name came up when I was talking to Susanna's mother," Kailani says.

Tey's eyes stayed on her, watching her eyes.

Why is Calista a part of this conversation? he thought.

He knew it was a diversion. He knew she was leading to something, and he knew there were no paltry maneuvers coming from the woman.

"When was this?" he asked.

"Yesterday. She asked if I'd heard anything. I lied and said that I only heard rumors. Nothing directly from you."

"So you admit to lying?"

"I do. Sometimes it's convenient." Kailani's laugh is guarded. Yes, she's taunting him, stirring the pot, having a little fun at his expense. And then she thought of the incident with Malcomb Cunha. It came at a time when her stock in Honolulu society was rising. A young woman in her late twenties, she had access. She took advantage. And her hubris deprived her of emotions. But it didn't deprive her of her humanity, of her compassion, of her Polynesian modesty. It was time to come back. Become that girl who started down the path. Readjust her route and leave a wake.

"But I would never lie to deceive you, Tey," she adds, and there is a tacet, like a full-stop in a Beethoven symphony. Their eyes lock, and then she breaks the ice - a smile, starting small and growing wider. He returns the smile, and she knows they cleared the hurdle.

"I brought Kalana here last week. We laid out on Makaha beach."

Kailani smiles. "You've been holding out on me. What else?"

"No, we didn't. We had dinner on the lanai, talked for about an hour, and enjoyed the sunset."

"That's it?" Kailani asks.

"Yeah. I didn't even touch her," he laughs. "Well, we kissed a little."

"You have to work on your lies."

"I wasn't getting the vibe. You know that vibe?" he asks.

"It means she's interested," Kailani laughs again. "She was just checking out the habitat." Wrapping her arms around his waist, Kailani pushed her brown skin against him. "She'll allow it to happen if the conditions are right. I think she's more of a traditional girl."

"I like her," he says.

"You should give Susanna a chance. Under the sarcasm and aloof attitude is a nice girl."

"I only date one woman at a time. Keeping track of two women can be dangerous."

"Especially when you know they talk." She nudged his shoulder. "Be careful."

"She and Susanna are going to Tahiti for the Teahupo'o Billabong Pro Surf," Tey added.

"Ooo, Tahiti. And you're not flying the plane?" Kailani asked.

"João wanted Keoni for that flight," Tey started. "I thought you knew."

"I did," she laughs. "It's because he's married, ya know. João wants a chaperone. He thinks he's protecting his daughter."

"I need to take a shower and start getting ready. I've got a morning run and the two-fifteen to Maui." Tey wound strands of her hair into curls around his finger. "Where are you going today?"

"Kona and then back to Maui. João wants me to check on the new office girl down there."

"That's a long day. What time do you get back to Maui?" he asked.

"About four."

"I'm in at four-forty, which will likely be more like five. Why don't you hang out and we can go to Ma'alaea and have dinner while the sun sets."

"Maybe I should put up a fight," she started. "I'm feeling a little jealous about Kalana."

"But not about Susanna?" he asked.

"No."

Placing his lips below her ear, Tey's hands moved downward. "I thought we agreed to be friends," he said.

Kailani laughs. "Just a touch, lover boy. You're looking for someone permanent. Not my style, ya know."

"You're a hele kāua girl," Tey laughs. "I've heard about you."

"I like my fun. And I don't like the complications a relationship brings."

"What's this called?" he asks.

She pushes him into the room. "It's what it is," she smirks. "We need to get back to Honolulu. How 'bout one more round?" She pulled him onto the bed. "Just a quickie."