

SWIMMING *from the* SHADOWS

Book Two in the *Cracks in
the Floor of Heaven* Series



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Swimming from the Shadows
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DEDICATION

For my grandson, Ryden. Thank you for making life more fun.

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SWIMMING *from the* SHADOWS

Book Two in the *Cracks in
the Floor of Heaven* Series

Michele Renée DeRouin

CHAPTER 1 THE BIG MOVE

Water is one of the most formidable and essential substances in existence. It is a force to be reckoned with, carving stone and literally changing entire landscapes, creating breathtaking canyons and waterways. Countless plants, animals, and marine life rely on water for their very existence. But its power can destroy life as well, leaving unspeakable destruction and loss in its wake.

I have been drawn to water since an incredibly young age. Growing up in Arizona, almost everyone had a swimming pool, and we were no exception. I often found myself falling asleep in my bathing suit so I could jump in the pool first thing in the morning which was very convenient considering summer temperatures that time of day hover around a hundred degrees in the Salt River Valley. On weekends, we would often head up to the mountains to swim in one of the many rivers or haul our ski boat and just enjoy a day on the lake.

Being on the water was great, but being under the water was where I found my sanctuary from the very loud and intrusive aboveground world. The combination of silence and pressure created an atmosphere where my mind and spirit could truly be free. Another world exists below the surface; a peaceful one, void of people, noise, and emotions.

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I was just a little kid the night my mom died; murdered by a homeless man she had spent years helping through her non-profit organization. She and her best friend, Victoria, who later became my stepmom, ran the program together for many years before my mother's untimely death. I have blocked out almost everything about that horrific night except for two things: the endless sounds of gut-wrenching sobs heard from various parts of the house, and the sudden and terrifying appearance of the Shadows. The tragic death of my mom changed me in an instant, and even though it happened a long time ago, I continued to struggle with the pain so intensely that it still feels like it might as well have happened yesterday. So, since then, I've always done everything in my power not to think or talk about it.

The eve of her death, as the other members of my family mourned together downstairs, I laid in my bed, eyes wide with curiosity, watching the first appearance of the Shadow. Its mysterious, black, smoke-like presence entered my bedroom through a crack in the window. I watched the faceless entity make its way up the wall, spreading out until it eventually covered every section of my white and pink wallpaper. Despite the moonlight shining through the window, an ominous cloud covered everything in the bedroom. To this day, beads of sweat develop, and my heart races as I recall the moment my curiosity turned into terror when the dark substance cackled and hissed at me. I remember covering my ears as it spoke both in English and in a language I had not, and still have never, heard before. After what felt like an eternity, the Shadow vanished into thin air, leaving me shaking and unable to sleep through the night for years and years to come.

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I still see Shadows. I see a lot of things. I sense a lot of things, too. People fear what they do not understand, and unfortunately, I found this out the hard way.

Throughout her relatively short life, I learned my mother, Alina, began having vividly realistic dreams of Heaven and spent a lot of them allegedly face to face with Jesus. She recorded the details in notebooks and kept them hidden away from almost everyone. After her passing, they were discovered by my maternal uncle, Gavin, and cousin, Ryan. My father, Rob, who adopted me when he married my mother, gave them to Ryan's wife, Olivia, a literary agent who spearheaded publishing efforts. A few years later, the notebooks hit the market as a memoir, even though I always considered it more of a diary. It was widely read and loved by millions, even topping the best seller list for months. *Cracks in the Floor of Heaven* was published in many languages and distributed all over the world, supposedly changing the lives of countless people.

Its success put our family in a very good financial position to say the least. Much to everyone's dismay, I haven't read it, and I never will. Truth be told, the book and the money made me furious. It was blood money and a constant reminder of what we had lost. I had no interest in visiting the past. The present held enough trouble as it was. Luckily, I had a very supportive family who respected my boundaries and loved me despite my stubbornness.

Before the "big move," I was living with Rob, Victoria, my stepsiblings Patrick and Sally, as well as Grandpa Cameron and Great Grandma Doris. It was a large house full of noise, interesting

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conversations, closeness, and acceptance. Uncle Gavin, Olivia, Ryan and his brother, Richard, lived nearby and came around often. My family was like a vibrant, colorful quilt, sewn together over time with threads made of both love and loss.

My ten-year-old stepbrother, Patrick, had a sweet disposition. He was curious, but quiet, and had followed me everywhere since he could walk. Patrick's inquisitive nature and easy-going personality made him the perfect partner on any expedition. We are not related by blood, but we might as well be. I feared my upcoming departure would impact him the most, and this bothered me enormously. He was my little Patty Pie. I was thirteen when he was born, and I remember thinking and acting like he was my own baby. During that time, my heart had a void the size of the Grand Canyon, and I distinctly remember feeling very lost and alone. Caring for baby Patrick helped a little. Victoria must have sensed as much and allowed me to assist with almost every aspect of infant and toddler care. This awareness of my state of mind and simple acknowledgement of my needs helped form an unbreakable bond between me and my stepmother. Her unwavering patience and kindness have had an everlasting effect on my life, and I love her deeply.

A couple years after Patrick was born, Sally May came along. She was the total opposite of Patty Pie. Independent and strong-willed, Sally May marched to the beat of her own drum. Even though her presence was not always seen, you could be sure she was somewhere in the vicinity. Most of the time you could find her hanging from or climbing up something, hence her nickname, Monkey. However, I

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would say her talent for hiding superseded her ability to climb. It was almost like a superpower. She would patiently hide in a spot for hours, if need be, waiting for the perfect opportunity to jump out and scare you to death. She has always been unapologetically sassy, and my favorite snuggle bug in the world.

I've always considered Victoria to be the most beautiful woman I've ever known, both inside and out. Someday she will leave behind a legacy of humility, elegance, sophistication, kindness, intelligence, and patience. I cannot remember a single time she has ever raised her voice at anyone. I have called her "mom" since the birth of Patty Pie, and she is my mother in every way except for blood. However, as much as I love and adore her, there has not been a single time I have said the word "mom" that my biological mother's face has not flashed through my mind, stinging my heart in the process.

I have also remained very close to my Uncle Gavin, my mom's surviving brother. At that time, he was one of the leading homicide detectives in the area and worked a lot of long, late hours. His office was located near our house, so he often dropped by randomly to grab a cup of coffee and one of Great Grandma Doris' blueberry muffins before heading back to work. Gavin is brilliant, well respected, and quickly moved up the ranks within the police department. But with each promotion came great sacrifice of his time and availability. It was a good thing his wife kept herself just as busy running her own publishing company.

When I was young, unbeknownst to Grandpa Cameron and Uncle Gavin, I would stay up late and hide in the dark somewhere so I could

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eavesdrop on their conversations. I'd listen intently to them discussing the details of unsolved murder cases. I should have been scared, but I found the exchanges fascinating. After all, there were things that frightened me more. Things that would terrify the evilest and the bravest of men.

Rob had married Alina when I was a baby, and I have belonged to him ever since. I never met my biological father. He abandoned my pregnant, teenaged mother before I was born. After marrying Rob, she legally changed my last name to Sheridan-Dunham, combining both her maiden and married last names. When I was eighteen, I dropped Sheridan but kept Dunham, discarding another remnant from a time better forgotten.

Doris and Herman Locke, my adopted great grandparents, have been a part of our family since before I was born. Unfortunately, we lost Herman to cancer a little over two years ago. Doris, whom I affectionately call Granny, moved in with us shortly after his death. Then Cameron moved in so he could help take care of her. Even though she is well into her eighties, her mind is still sharp as a tack.

Ever since I can remember, I have always loved my solitude. But family is my life, and I am most comfortable when I am with them. As an introvert, I have definitely needed space; however, what once was just a personality trait, eventually morphed into something dysfunctional, often leaving me feeling isolated and depressed. Living with the constant presence of the Shadows, and unpredictable other-worldly visions, greatly limited my ability to make and keep friends. I could never control when the visions would happen, and it scared

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people because they thought I was hallucinating from either drugs or some type of mental or medical condition. The pattern that had developed was, when I finally came around, I'd find myself being attended to by paramedics, answering countless questions in an attempt to convince them not to transport me to a hospital. I just gave up trying to meet new people. The pain of rejection cut deep, and I had convinced myself that, besides my family, I was better off alone.

I am naturally a very empathetic person and can often feel peoples' emotions despite their best efforts to conceal them. But because of the walls I had built around myself, I came across as aloof, distant, or uninterested when the opposite was true. I never liked to reveal or talk about my own emotions very often, especially if it had to do with my mother. My family knew this well and they learned not to press me; if I wanted to communicate something serious to them, I would.

I have always been a person of few words. I like to listen and observe more than contribute to a conversation. I found I could learn a lot by remaining silent and just watching body language. Non-verbal cues told me everything I needed to know and spoke much louder than words. Plus, I had learned that most people don't really want to know what you think, or how you feel, even though they might even believe they do. However, what the majority really want, is to express themselves and be validated. Because of all this and much more, I had become an excellent poker player. Unbeatable to everyone in the family, except for Granny.

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I spent a couple years after high school bouncing around between community college classes and random, odd jobs. One day, Grandpa Cameron sat me down to have the “make up your mind already” talk and encouraged me to decide on a career path and apply to a proper university. After weeks of research, I did just that. But unable to settle on just one, I applied to a half a dozen universities around the country and was surprisingly accepted into four of them. I assumed that was more related to my family’s notoriety and success and had less to do with my own academic achievements or entrance exam scores. Finally making my decision, I shared it with those closest to me. Their reactions ranged from excitement to relief that I was finally going to set some goals for my future. They had always been my cheerleaders and want nothing more than for me to find a career and be happy.

When people asked me why I chose Hawai‘i Pacific University, located over two thousand miles away, I always answered their question with one of my own: “Why not Hawai‘i?” With the ability to dodge questions like no other human being on the planet, my family joked that I had a black belt in evasion skills. When pressured to elaborate, I simply explained that I chose the tropical island of paradise because of their Marine Biology department at the university. But in all honesty, there was a deeper reason. One that I had not shared with a single, living soul. Water was the one place the Shadows had never followed me. And it just so happens that Hawai‘i was surrounded by the Pacific Ocean. In addition, the climate and warm water would allow me to swim year-round. No more freezing my butt off in the backyard pool during the much cooler, dry, desert winters.

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I eyed my messy bedroom with a frown. Piles of clothes and half-filled boxes were scattered everywhere, leaving barely enough room on the floor to walk around. Two extra-large, opened, mostly filled suitcases covered my queen-sized bed. I never liked packing for vacations but doing it to move to an island was a million times harder. I had twenty years-worth of collectibles, clothing, photographs, decorations, and memorabilia, and over a hundred books. It was hard to decide what to bring and what to leave behind.

My flight from Arizona to Honolulu was scheduled to leave early the following morning, and I felt totally overwhelmed and unprepared. Luckily, my dad agreed to send some boxes after I found a place as I had decided to live off campus. Traveling light was more my style, so I was not looking forward to lugging two giant suitcases and an over-stuffed backpack with me.

While contemplating what to tackle next, I heard Doris slowly making her way down the hallway toward my bedroom. The wheels of her walker vibrated loudly as they rolled along the wooden floor. My dad had bought her an expensive, state-of-the-art wheelchair, but she refused to use it. Anticipating her arrival, I cleared a pathway and moved a box off my oversized, puffy chair to make a place for her to sit. She emerged in the doorway a minute later and eyeballed my progress.

“Oh, Sweetheart, this must be so hard.” She paused for a second before continuing, “On many levels, I imagine.”

I nodded in solemn agreement, hoping to avoid further discussion on the matter. Doris slowly made her way to the chair I had cleared

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for her. Her upper body was permanently bent over at a sixty-degree angle. It must've caused enormous pain, but she never complained. I noticed how white her hair had become, and the thick-lensed glasses she wore made her blue-grey eyes look abnormally large. I helped lower her down into the comfortable armchair and added a throw pillow behind her in just the right spot. I was missing her already, and almost started to cry, but bit the inside of my cheek instead.

“How you are you feeling this evening, Granny?” I asked softly.

“Oh, you know, honey, I am alive another day. God must not be done with me yet,” she said with a smile, but I could feel her physical pain.

“Will you sit down and talk to me for a few minutes? I need to take my medications soon, and they make me groggy, so I wanted to have a little chat with you before your big day tomorrow.”

“Of course, Granny.” I sat down on the floor, pulled my knees into my chest, and rested my chin on them. I felt like a kid again for some reason; a little scared, maybe even a little lost. I looked up at my granny for guidance, realizing this might be the last time I saw her for quite a while. A feeling of sadness washed over me. It was then I knew that saying goodbye to my family was going to be much harder than I anticipated.

I repositioned my legs to be crisscrossed and stared deep into her eyes. I wanted her to know how much I loved and respected her, but the words would not come out, so I tried to convey it with my eyes. She returned the intensity of my stare. I felt her love pour into me, and I could even see and smell it, too. Some emotions have color and

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fragrance, but not all of them look or smell good. This one, however, smelled like cinnamon and had a pink hue. Bands of it cascaded out from her chest like a waterfall flowing downstream across the carpet, pooling around my legs, and then traveling up my body and straight into my heart. The smell, color, and visualization vanished within seconds, but the feeling inside remained, and I smiled to prevent myself from crying.

“I had a spectacular dream last night.” She paused, her eyes twinkling for a moment. Then she added, “I was with your mother.”

The words drove into my heart like a knife, piercing every chamber. Even though I worked internally to stop the bleeding, I didn’t move a muscle or break eye contact with her. Granny was going to make one last effort to penetrate through my tough armor. No one had ever succeeded up to this point, and it usually annoyed me when they tried because everyone knew this topic was off-limits. But I respected my Granny more than anyone else, and I would not dishonor her the night before my departure. So I played along; however, I was unsure how far she would push the subject matter. I am sure Granny knew I was not happy, but she ignored my non-reaction reaction and continued anyway.

“We were in a beautiful, lush forest. There was every kind of plant and animal imaginable.” She grinned from ear to ear, looking off into the distance as she recalled the dream. “I walked around unassisted and felt so alive, like a child again; full of hope, curiosity, and wonder.” She chuckled, then locked eyes with me. I cracked a grin. Despite the subject matter, it was wonderful watching her face light up.

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“I spoke with your mother.”

I should have known she was not finished. The grin remained, but my forehead wrinkled, and my eyes became narrow, giving away my annoyance. She paused for a moment, as if rehearsing how to deliver the next line, and I could feel her nervousness. I held my breath and leaned into the storm.

“She wanted me to give you a message.”

It took every ounce of energy to keep myself from bolting out of the room, house, and planet. Granny was about to drop a bomb on me, and there was nothing I could do about it. She knew I was flying out in the morning, and there would be zero chance of me leaving on bad terms.

“She told me to tell you to... *have hope.*” Granny emphasized the last two words, then winked at me.

Why is she winking at me?

“Thank you for telling me,” I said with a tiny amount of sarcasm, never once breaking eye contact.

I was getting very tired and was unsure how much longer I could engage in such a deep conversation. A look of satisfaction crossed her face as she continued to search for more cracks in my wall. Clever lady.

“You’re not the only skilled poker player in the family, you know.” She stared at me intensely without blinking. I refused to blink either, determined to win whatever game we were playing. After several moments, her eyelids succumbed to the lack of moisture, and I celebrated my victory by throwing my arms in the air like a champion, sending both of us into fits of laughter, immediately breaking any

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remaining tension. She had decided that was as far as she was going to push me for the night and changed the subject.

“Guess what number I drew today at the meat counter?” The corners of her mouth turned up, showing off her abnormally white, over-sized dentures. I relaxed, leaned back slightly, and chuckled. I knew the answer before she said it.

“Seven!” I called out.

“Yes!” Granny laughed and tossed her arms up in pure delight.

“No way, not again!” I responded, entertaining her excitement.

“I couldn’t believe it either!” She lowered her voice to a whisper and leaned toward me. “Your mom told me about seven too.” She lifted her index finger in front her pursed lips to convey the message’s secrecy and said, “Shh, I’m not supposed to talk about that.” It was in that moment I thought, *Man, she is losing her mind.*

“Let me pray with you before I head off to bed.”

This wasn’t a suggestion. It never was. I snapped to attention, so grateful this bizarre exchange was almost over. Not quite the way I imagined my last conversation with Granny going.

I closed my eyes and bowed my head. I had long since adopted a policy to never disrespect my family’s faith, but I had also chosen not to participate in it. If God could not save my mother, then why should I believe He could save me? I considered it a crutch people use to make the world feel safer. But the world is full of darkness, and I believed there was nothing anyone, including their God, could do about it.

While she was praying, I noticed my red toenail polish was chipping. *I should have gotten a pedicure before leaving. Ugh. I wonder how much*

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more I can fit into my suitcases. They are going to be so heavy. I almost sighed out loud, then remembered Granny was praying.

I tuned back just in time for, “Amen.” After the prayer and a little more chit-chat, I helped her stand up, positioned the walker in front of her, and exchanged hugs, kisses, and wishes for a good night of rest.

When she got to the doorway, without turning, she said, “Oh, I almost forgot, one more thing. Your mother said that the two of you are going to have a nice little visit one of these days soon.” She had purposefully waited until she was facing away from me before delivering the final blow. Even though she couldn’t see my reaction, I was sure she heard the gasp that accidentally escaped from my otherwise well-trained lips.

“Good night,” she said.

“Good night.”

“Everything is going to be alright, Faith.”

I chose not to respond.

“I love you,” she gently added as she began making her way up the hallway to her bedroom, her noisy walker leading the way.

“I love you too, Granny.” I could never stay mad at her. She and I had an impenetrable bond. She wanted me to know who my mother was, and I couldn’t blame her for that.

I collapsed into the chair she had just exited. It was still warm and smelled like her. I buried my face into my hands. Unwanted tears began to form as a multitude of emotions threatened to make an appearance. As if on cue, my stepmother popped her head inside the doorway and

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softly knocked on the wooden molding. I motioned for her to come in and wiped my eyes.

“Sweetie, you, okay?” she asked softly. As she entered my room and began walking toward me, the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I felt them before I saw them. My spine stiffened, and my heart began to race. A sudden chill came over me, and I began to tremble uncontrollably.

Having experienced this with me before, Victoria froze in her tracks. I sensed their presence to my far right and quickly turned my head to pinpoint their exact location.

I identified two Shadows aggressively making their way up my bedroom wall, leaving a disgusting, glistening, snail-like trail behind them. One of the Shadows made it to the ceiling and hung down like a haunted chandelier. The second began moving around the room in a dizzying zig-zag pattern. It was so fast, it left blue and red sparks of electricity in its wake. They hissed and swore at me and my stepmom. I wanted nothing more than to close my eyes and cover my ears, but I didn’t dare move. I couldn’t even if I wanted to. It was like I was paralyzed. Beads of sweat developed on my forehead and began dripping down the side of my face and into my eyes.

I began my routine. *Count to one hundred while slowly breathing in and out. Concentrate on my breathing. Inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth. Repeat.*

Suddenly, without warning, a bright light, with no specific origin, lit up my room, illuminating every dark space. The Shadows made a desperate last-ditch effort to find a hiding place, but they could not

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outrun the light. It overtook them in less than a second and burnt them to a crisp right before my eyes. A tiny puff of gray ash was all that remained, and it quickly disappeared into the air. They were gone, in the blink of an eye; almost as if it had never happened.

I continued to try and slow down my heart rate by closing my eyes. When I finally opened them, the first thing I saw was my beloved stepmother. She had not moved an inch. Focusing on her face had an immediate calming effect. I took another deep breath and motioned for her to come over. She cautiously walked toward me, clearly concerned.

“I’m okay,” I said reassuringly. “I noticed her arms were behind her back. It looked like she was hiding something.

“Are you sure you are alright?” she asked before approaching.

“Yes, I’m sure. What do you have there? Something for me?” I teased, trying to lighten the mood.

Victoria never demanded or expected anyone to express themselves, but she was gracious and patient, always providing a safe place to talk when and if you were ready. Victoria was like the sun, illuminating dark places, drawing people in, everywhere she went. I admired her energetic and adventurous spirit. Plus, she was just loads of fun. I wanted to be like my stepmom, but my disposition was anything but sunny and vibrant. “Well, yes, I do have something for you.” She smiled. Her sincerity and authenticity shone as brightly as the light that had burnt up the Shadows.

Victoria sat down on the floor across from me. I immediately joined her; our knees touching because of the small space. She placed

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a medium-sized gift bag between us, clapped her hands in excitement, and encouraged me to look inside. It was always fun sharing moments like this with her and the genuine, contagious, child-like enthusiasm that accompanied them. Victoria was the type of individual that knew how to make everyone feel like the most special person in the world.

Inside the gift bag was a trendy, two-piece swimsuit, a Hawaiian-print beach towel, and a snorkel set. I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around her neck, taking in the scent of her hair. Besides Granny, Victoria was the only other woman I felt comfortable confiding in. The thoughtfulness of the gift brought tears to my eyes for a second time.

“Am I doing the right thing?” I asked my stepmom, allowing a flash of vulnerability.

“Trust yourself,” she answered softly.

I grabbed her hands. “I wish you could come with me.” Victoria was the type of person that you would want as a travel companion. She loved trying new things and was fearless when it came to adrenaline-pumping adventures. From skydiving to back-country skiing, she was the daredevil of the family, although you would never know by looking at her or by the way she carried herself. I suspected my little sister would follow in her footsteps.

“Sneak me in one of your bags,” she pleaded. “I have been doing yoga lately. I’m very flexible.” I started laughing when she began stretching. I was going to miss her an unbelievable amount. Victoria had taught me so much about generosity, kindness, and humility. She was a treasure, a woman with excellent character and a model wife and

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mother. Thinking about being away from her made my heart physically hurt.

As if reading my thoughts, she said, “Faith, it’s going to be a life-changing experience. It’s going to be amazing. You are going to be amazing. We are all so excited for you.” She paused for a second and tilted her head to one side. Her long blonde hair hung down, almost touching the floor.

“You are going to find yourself in Hawai‘i.” She said it with such confidence that even I dared to believe her. I leaned forward and embraced her again.

“I love you, Mom.” And I meant it with every fiber of my being.

“I love you too, my beautiful daughter.” I could feel her love wrap around me like a heated blanket. The sensation quickly made its way to my limbs, extending all the way to my fingers and toes causing a tingling sensation. It made me feel safe, protected, and intact.

“I wonder what she would think about me moving so far away from everyone,” I said, surprising myself.

I rarely spoke of my mother to anyone, even Victoria. If it surprised her, she did not make a big production of it. She simply answered, “I think she would be really proud of you. You are brave and strong, just like her.”

Thankfully, and just in nick of time, my little brother and sister bounded into my bedroom, each holding their favorite book. Before I could stand up, Sally jumped on my back, and then Patty Pie leaned on top of her, making one giant monkey sandwich.

“Ouch, Patrick!” his sister shouted. “You’re crunching me!”

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“It’s *crushing*, not *crunching*, Monkey May,” he teased after her.

Victoria stood up, attempting to corral the two and settle them down for our story time.

Patrick relented his weight at the correction of his mother. I pulled him down next to me while Sally May bounced off to find a perfect hiding place, no doubt in one of my moving boxes. “Who is ready for a bedtime story?” I asked, finally getting to my feet. I still had so much to do, but I could not forego our routine. It would be the last one for a while. Victoria called out to Sally May who shuffled out of my closet, almost tripping in the process. Then, without skipping beat, she hopped over and around all the obstacles leading to my bed. I giggled at the spectacle. Both snuggled up on each side of me as I began to read Sally May’s book of choice. Victoria watched adoringly from the over-stuffed chair nearby.

After two books, a glass of water, a bathroom break, and a dozen questions about Hawai‘i, Victoria and I finally got them tucked into their own beds for the night. I couldn’t wait to crawl in bed myself. I was physically and emotionally exhausted, but there were a few more things I needed to do before lights out.

“I am going to bed, honey. I will see you in the morning,” my dad said, as he stopped by my room to say goodnight. He would be the one taking me to the airport bright and early in the morning.

“Okay, Dad. Good night.” I sighed and stared at the dozen or more boxes scattered around.

“Don’t worry about all those. I can finish taping them up after you leave. Get some rest. Big day tomorrow.”

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“The biggest,” I admitted, finally looking up at him. His eyes softened as he grinned at me. I could tell he was proud. It made me feel as light as a feather, as if I could float away at any moment. It also filled me with confidence, like I could accomplish anything I set my mind to. Out of everyone in my family, I needed my dad the most. He represented home and stability. He chose me and my mom as a package deal. He did not have to; he wanted to. *How could Hawai‘i ever be home when my dad wouldn’t be there?*

He blew me a kiss and headed off to his room. My heart felt like it was breaking into a million pieces. I had already said goodbye to my Uncle Gavin. He was originally supposed to accompany my dad and I to the airport in the morning, but he had let us know he wouldn’t be able to due to something that had come up at work.

I finished packing the last of my suitcases, washed my face, and crawled into bed. I was just about to switch off the lamp when Grandpa Cameron made a late-night appearance.

“Good evening, my little Rainbow Girl.” I adored his nickname for me.

Grandpa Cameron had been married to my grandmother, Faith, whom I was named after but had never met. She died from cancer when my mom was a teenager, and he never remarried. Instead, he committed himself to helping his family and working on restoring old cars. Herman had taught him everything he knew about auto repair and restoration. The loss of my great grandpa was hardest on Granny and Grandpa Cameron. I’m told my mom was the one who introduced

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Cameron to Doris and Herman in the first place. That's how he met my grandma.

Ever since I could remember, Grandpa Cameron had been a night owl. He typically went to sleep around two or three in the morning. I could relate, even though our sleep issues were for very different reasons. For years, my grandpa and I had utilized those late hours to enjoy each other's company. Most nights around midnight, we would start out by baking something sweet in the kitchen. Then, while eating our desserts, we played a game or two of chess. Eventually, we would make our way down to the basement where he would show me the latest piece of electronic equipment he was tinkering with. Our time together was never spent with a lot of useless chatter. We enjoyed comfortable silences, sometimes only conveying our thoughts with facial expressions or sounds. Ultimately, we would head off to bed, and I would hope for a restful few hours of sleep void of visits from the Shadows.

Grandpa Cameron walked in and sat down at the foot of my bed. I rose to meet him and gave him a very tired smile. He surveyed my room, slowly and thoughtfully. A furrow developed across his forehead, and I immediately knew what he was thinking. My grandpa was very familiar with loss, and I was fully aware my move would be hard on him. He cleared his throat.

“You all packed and ready to go?”

I sighed. “Not really, Grandpa,” I said while yawning. He understood that I was not referring to the unfinished, half-packed boxes.

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“I bet you are questioning your decision right now, but I honestly believe God is leading you to Hawai‘i for a reason.” *Not the God talk again.* As if he could read my mind, he said, “You may not believe in God at the moment, but I suspect that will change. When your mother became pregnant with you in high school, she thought God had forgotten about her and was even punishing her. But God had a plan for your mom all along, and He has one for you as well.” I thought about this statement. *So, God planned for my mom to get murdered? Great! Makes total sense to me! I totally trust His plan for me now!*

Of course, I didn’t say any of these things, I just listened and tried to be respectful. Suddenly, something moved by the door. *Not again!* My heart rate immediately increased, and my breathing became shallow as I tried my best to track the Shadow. Two incidents in one night. That’s not good. It must be the stress of moving.

Grandpa noticed the change in my expression and breathing and began watching me intensely. My family knew that I frequently saw, heard, and experienced things that they themselves could not. I called these things Shadows, but they referred to them as evil spirits or demons. I never believed in spirits or demons, but I believed in Shadows.

Initially, when the Shadows first appeared, my family thought I was having nightmares. Then, when the “visions” began, they got really worried. Minutes would go by where I seemed to “check out.” Then I would tremble uncontrollably until finally coming back to the present. The visualizations were very different than the visits from the Shadows and were absolutely terrifying. They took me somewhere else; a place

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where reality did not exist and where I could not escape on my own accord.

I always struggled with how to explain it to them. Everyone was convinced I had either cancer like my Grandma Faith, or a type of epilepsy. Cue every possible medical and emotional test you can have, and I had it done. They could never find anything wrong with me, so we all learned to cope with it.

Grandpa Cameron bent his head down, closed his eyes, and started praying softly as I watched the Shadow lurk around my door frame, scratching the wooden molding with its hideous, long and pointy nails. The screeching noise was deafening.

“Heavenly Father, I ask for a protection from whatever demonic spirits are making themselves known to my granddaughter. I also ask you give her peace about her decision and joy for this new season in her life. Guide her and give her wisdom in the choices she makes and please help the transition go smoothly. Bring wonderful people into her life that will love and support her. In Jesus name, I pray, Amen.”

By the end of the prayer, the Shadow had entered my room and was making its way above my bed, hissing and scratching as it moved. I instinctively held my breath, hoping to prevent inhalation of its putrid odor. If only prayer worked the way my family believed it was supposed to. I had personally tried this tactic before with no success. Anytime I tried to pray it away, it only made things worse. Grandpa put his hand on my leg reassuringly. I was certain he could feel me quivering.

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“It’s alright, sweetie.” He continued to pray quietly. It took a while, but the Shadow finally exited the same way it entered. I took a deep breath and let it out. After a while, my nerves calmed down, and my eyelids became heavy. I yawned for a second time.

He stood up, stretched, then bent over and gave me a kiss on the forehead, pulling the covers up to tuck me in like he did when I was little. As my eyes closed, I whispered, “I love you, Grandpa.”

“I love you too, my little Rainbow Girl.”

When my alarm went off, I was convinced I had only been asleep five minutes. It was still pitch-black outside. I was going to need a bucket-load of caffeine to function properly. I quietly made my way to the bathroom, trying my best to not to wake anyone up. As I descended the stairs, I noticed several people were already awake and recognized one of the hushed voices coming from the kitchen.

Uncle Gavin leaned against the counter with a cup of coffee in one hand, the other tucked inside his front pocket, exposing a shiny gold badge fastened to his waistband. I had no doubt his gun was safely secured behind him. His face, usually clean-shaven, was now sporting a mustache. He was convinced it made him look older and more respectable.

“I thought you had to work!”

“And miss seeing you off? I don’t think so.”

“Nice mustache, by the way,” I blurted out with a sarcastic sigh.

“Thanks, I’ve been growing it out.”

Uncle Gavin and I had been messing with each other since I could speak, and there weren’t two more competitive people in the world. I

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walked up and gave him a giant hug as Grandpa set a cup of steaming hot coffee on the counter for me.

“Do you like it?” Uncle Gavin asked, lightly touching the new facial hair to egg on the response he already knew was coming.

“No, like I told you before.”

“But it’s a little bit longer right here.” He emphasized this by pinching and twirling the ends, making him look like he should be running a circus or conducting business in the early 1800’s.

“At first it looked bad, but now it looks a lot worse,” I responded with a flat tone, looking him dead in the eyes. It took all my strength to keep a straight face. The tiniest muscle in my right eye began to twitch. He caught it immediately and smiled. *Dang it.*

“How did you sleep, honey?” Granny asked from her seat at the table.

“Good, but I am still *so* tired.” I grabbed my coffee, took a sip, then walked over and kissed her on the forehead. I sat down to enjoy one last early morning chat with my uncle, grandpa and great grandma before everyone else woke up to say goodbye.

After zipping up the last suitcase, I looked around my bedroom one final time. I tried to memorize every detail, knowing most of me would miss this house, but the rest of me wanted to leave and never return. This place held a lot of precious memories, but it held a lot of other things too. Things associated with grief and terror.

A Hello Kitty piggy bank sat on top of an old oak dresser that belonged to my mother. I was overwhelmed by so many emotions at

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one time: sadness, excitement, fear, anxiety, guilt, and doubt. *Am I doing the right thing?*

Then, something strange happened. An unrecognizable, audible voice spoke to me. I looked around to make sure no one had come into my room. For a second, I thought I imagined it. Then I heard it again. The voice said one word, “Go.”

A sudden and slight breeze flowed through my room, ruffling the curtains a little. The warm air flow didn’t just blow past or on me, it blew *through* me. The smell of spring flowers lingered in the air, and I was filled with an overwhelming sense of peace. Every anxious thought and feeling evaporated. The sense of calm only lasted a few seconds, but in that short time, I was convinced that everything was going to be okay.

I stood there feeling especially nostalgic until I spotted a Shadow emerging from a corner. The emotional farewell to my room and belongings ended abruptly. I grabbed the last suitcase quickly and exited the bedroom, slamming the door behind me. I decided I would not miss that room at all.

CHAPTER 2

ALOHA HAWAI‘I

Hugs, kisses, tears, well wishes, and last-minute lectures happened like a whirlwind, and by the time I sat down at the airport gate, I felt exhausted. It had been a lot of work leading up to this day, not only physically and mentally, but emotionally as well. I boarded the plane with a slight headache, hoping it was from stress and not a sign of something to come. A sense of unease crept in like a thief in the night, threatening to rob me of any excitement I felt for my upcoming adventure.

Once I was settled in my seat, I focused on my breathing and fell asleep within minutes of take-off. It was a light, dreamless sleep, but enough rest to help alleviate some of the fatigue I felt. When I woke up, I realized I had slept for over half the flight. Bouts of yawning followed as I tried to shake off the sleep hang-over.

A striking, dark-skinned woman in a colorful Hawaiian shirt and matching skirt stopped at my row and addressed me in a rich native accent. Her black, thick hair was pinned up neatly in a bun, and she had a white and yellow flower behind her left ear. She was one of the most exotic-looking women I had ever seen.

“Aloha, would you like a beverage?”

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“Yes, please. May I have some water?” I asked politely, admiring her remarkable beauty. I had vacationed many places in Asia and Europe, but I’d never been to any of the Hawaiian Islands, so I did a fair amount of research after my acceptance into the university. Besides studying the culture, I also researched the native species of plants and animals that inhabit the islands. I practiced correctly pronouncing Hawaiian words, as well as memorizing their meaning. For example, most people know the word *aloha* is used for both hello and goodbye, but it also has a much richer meaning. When broken down, the word consists of *alo* meaning presence and *hā* meaning breath. Together the word translates to presence of breath. When greeting another person with “aloha,” there is mutual regard, exchange, and affection.

The empty seat next to me provided a little more room in the otherwise cramped conditions. Grandpa Cameron had suggested I fly first class, but I didn’t feel like wasting the money; it was one flight for goodness sakes. For the first time, I noticed the woman sitting just a seat over. She had auburn hair with grey strands that shimmered under the overhead light like tinsel on a Christmas tree. I guessed she was in her mid to late fifties. Both of her arms protectively cradled a polished, silver box. The box and the lady were encircled in a yellow light that became almost white around the outer edges.

A quiet sigh escaped her lips as she glanced down at the small container in her lap. In that moment, I realized she was holding an urn. She turned and caught me staring at her and smiled a little with her mouth, but her eyes told another story. One I have seen before. A story of loss and grief.

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“You are so lucky. I’ve never been able to sleep on airplanes,” she said. “You must be a very relaxed person to fall right to sleep like you did.” I laughed on the inside. If she only knew the exact opposite was true. This had been an anomaly.

“I was just really tired, I guess,” I answered plainly, hoping the exchange would end there. Small talk with strangers was not my forte. I turned and looked out the window, hoping she would take the hint.

“I am going to Hawai‘i to visit some friends and spread my husband’s ashes.” She indicated the package on her lap. “I lost him to cancer.”

I briefly thought about my grandmother, whom I had never known. That was a disappointment I had always carried. Stories about her eccentric personality were often shared around the dinner table. I also thought about my great grandfather, a wonderful man; both taken by cancer. My heart softened for this stranger, and I felt an instant, unexpected connection with her.

“I am so sorry for your loss,” I said genuinely.

“Thank you, dear,” she said and softly sighed again. “I will see him again one of these days.” She stroked the box gently. There was something about this woman that reminded me of Great Grandma Doris.

“Are you from Hawai‘i?” I asked.

“No, but my late husband, Ed, and I have been vacationing there for thirty years. We always dreamt of moving to Hawai‘i together after retirement. We even saved a nice chunk of money.” She paused for a moment. “Then he got sick, and everything changed.”

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I felt her grief and loss as if it were my own. It was devastating. Sometimes other people's emotions hit me like an overwhelming flood, while other times it was just a small trickle. Often, I felt nothing at all. Thankfully, those overwhelming emotions only lasted for a few seconds.

"I am so sorry, honey. I made this all about me and my sad affairs. Are you vacationing or visiting anyone?"

Her welcoming nature made me feel comfortable; like how I felt when I was with my family. It was rare to come across someone who made it more challenging for me to maintain the walls I had so carefully built around my heart.

"I am actually moving there."

"Oh, my goodness! How thrilling! Are you excited?" Before I could even answer that one, a barrage of additional questions came at me like water from a firehose. "Are you nervous? What made you want to move to Hawai'i? Do you have family members who live on the island? What about a job?" I took my time to answer each one, carefully and concisely. Her yellow aura glowed even brighter with her excitement. She smelled like cotton candy and reminded me of the annual visits to the state fair I used to take. My stomach growled, and I realized I hadn't eaten anything all day.

"I was accepted into the marine biology program at Hawai'i Pacific University."

"Well, look at you; your family must be so proud."

"I've never been to Hawai'i," I confessed, "so, this is a huge step for me." She shook her head in disbelief and beamed at me like this

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was the best news she had heard in a long time. She even stopped the stewardess to order us a couple sodas so we could say “cheers” to my new chapter in life. It made me feel special and I smiled as we clanked our plastic cups together. Amid her own grief, this stranger was able to congratulate and even celebrate my move to a place that was now a shattered dream for her. What a kind-hearted, thoughtful, genuine woman.

I always wondered how people like her could be so positive after such a painful and unfair situation. *Didn't she feel angry? Didn't she blame God for taking her husband away?* I thought. The pilot interrupted our conversation by announcing we would be preparing for our descent shortly. I couldn't believe how quickly the time had passed.

“My name is Alma, by the way.”

“I'm Faith. Nice to meet you,” I said and smiled.

“Likewise. What a lovely name.” She subconsciously touched a small crucifix that hung on a delicate, gold chain around her neck.

“Thank you. It was my mother's name,” I said. “She passed away when I was young.” I surprised myself. Talking about my mother with a total stranger was completely out of character for me. When I saw the sad look on her face, I immediately regretted my confession.

“Oh,” she said reverently, “I'm sorry for your loss, too.” Alma reached over and patted my leg affectionately. I could tell she meant what she said.

“It was a long time ago but thank you.” We locked our eyes for a moment and communicated our wounds without words. The language of loss and grief can only be spoken and understood by those who

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have experienced it. The stewardess politely interrupted us in order to gather any remaining trash and ensure we were buckled for landing.

A poetic melody began playing overhead. I could make out the distinct stringing of a ukulele. A deep voice with a thick island accent joined the instrument. It was sung in native Hawaiian, and I impressed myself when I recognized a few of the words.

I gazed out the window as land came into view for the first time. Monstrous, green, jagged cliffs abruptly met sandy, white beaches, dotted by black volcanic rock. The contrast of it all took my breath away. Even from this altitude, I could see the waves crashing onto the craggy shoreline, creating massive white explosions. Far out, the ocean was dark and moody, but as it reached shallower waters, it turned into vibrant colors like aqua-blue and dark turquoise. Excitement bubbled up inside of me as I pictured entering the warm, pristine water for the first time.

“Isn’t it magnificent?” Alma whispered, also enjoying the view out of our window. I nodded emphatically, unable to look away, and continued to stare out the window, mesmerized by the beauty.

The city came into view next and extended off in the distance for miles; houses, hotels, and businesses all competing for property. I noticed the unmistakable, half-moon shape of an extinct volcanic crater I had read about but couldn’t recall its name.

Before I even realized it, we had landed, and everyone was frantically unbuckling and moving around, gathering their stored belongings and forming a line to disembark. The excitement on board

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was palpable. I waited patiently for my turn to exit the airplane when a familiar feeling came over me.

“Oh no,” I whispered under my breath.

Alma, who was standing in front of me must have overheard. She turned around and asked, “What’s wrong? Did you forget something? Oh, honey, you are white as a ghost. Why don’t you sit back down for a minute?” She looked around, clearly searching for a stewardess to assist us, but they were all at the front of the plane saying goodbye to the passengers.

“I’m okay, I just don’t feel well. Can you help me get off the plane? And Alma, please don’t let them take me to the hospital. No matter what. *Please*,” I begged. I barely got the last word out before my speech became slurred and my tongue heavy. I could feel sweat developing on my forehead and on the back of my neck.

Oh, no. Not here and not now.

I could feel Alma grab my arm to steady me. My vision went blurry, and bright spots floated around like when you stare at a light too long. It made me feel nauseated and confused.

“Just a little further now,” I heard her say. It sounded like she was speaking through a long tunnel. I could just barely tell we were off the plane when it happened. Everyone and everything disappeared around me, and I suddenly found myself in another realm.

I was outside. It was dark and hard to see. This world was one filled with destruction and carnage. Abandoned buildings, scarred black from previous fires, were toppled over and lay wasted away in piles of rubbish. Some of them were still smoldering. The only light

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came from the many fires still burning piles of unknown debris. The flames were intense, and the heat emitting from them was almost unbearable. I could smell burnt rubber and diesel fuel. I began coughing uncontrollably, and tears streamed down my face as the thick, black smoke threatened to choke the life out of me.

Hundreds of looming figures crept out of the gloomy, hidden places and began moving toward me. They spoke in a language I did not understand; their tone threatening and menacing. I was paralyzed with fear. Unlike the featureless, fluid Shadows, these creatures had form, and they were both beautiful and terrifying. Add in the apocalyptic surroundings and you had the perfect material for a horror film. Except this was no movie. This was my life.

An intense and blinding light burst out from somewhere on my left, accompanied by a tremendous wind, and a massive army of winged creatures shot in at lightning speed. I had seen these strange-looking beings before. Some of them had hundreds of eyes in front and back with rows of colorful and peculiar-looking wings.

The two opposing sides completely surrounded me. I crouched down, covering my head and closing my eyes, anticipating what was to come. The enormous creatures collided, shaking the ground violently, toppling over many of the remaining walls and structures. I tried to steady myself but fell over to one side. I curled up into a little ball as the deafening sound of metal clanking against metal almost pierced my ear drums. The intense battle created a vicious thunderstorm with torrential wind and rain. I feared I might get washed away in a flash flood and drown.

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I could hear someone begin to call my name, and it got louder and louder. As the episode subsided, I slowly found my way back to reality. I felt disoriented for a few minutes before realizing, *Oh my goodness, I'm in the airport; in Hawai'i.* When my eyes finally focused, the scene before me was one I had become very familiar with.

As usual, a sea of worried onlookers stared at me with concerned expressions. Alma stood just behind two paramedics who were attending to me. One was taking my pulse, and the other was shining a bright light into my eyes. I was in a sitting position against the wall on the floor, just inside the gate. At least I got off the airplane in time.

“Ma'am? Ma'am, can you hear me? We are going to take you to the hospital. Alright?”

I was just barely able to shake my head. *No.*

“I told you, she's fine. My niece has these spells from time to time when she gets too dehydrated. You know, the stewardess really did not provide us with enough water. I might need to write a strongly worded letter to the airlines.” Alma bantered on about it, however, I could see behind the act; she was actually very worried about me. I was so relieved she was here.

“Honey, I told you to drink more water. I always tell her to drink more water.” She turned to the paramedic and shook her head disapprovingly. Even in my disoriented state, I was sort of enjoying her performance.

I answered a gauntlet of questions about my name, the date, if I knew what state I had landed in, etc. After satisfying the paramedics, someone from the airline or airport asked me to sign a waiver releasing

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them from responsibility since I refused further medical care. I had already been through this countless times. I didn't even get annoyed anymore, just embarrassed. Airport management did insist, however, that I use one of their wheelchairs, escorted by an airport employee, to ensure my safe exit from their premises. I was tired; I would take the free ride.

"I have a friend picking us up." Alma chatted with the employee as he wheeled us to the baggage claim. *Aloha, Hawai'i. Nice to meet you*, I thought sarcastically. This is not how I imagined starting my new life. I suddenly realized that I needed to get myself from the airport to a hotel, as I hadn't yet secured permanent housing. I panicked a little and stood up too quickly, immediately getting lightheaded.

"I need to get a taxi!" I said, a little too loudly.

"Slow down, honey." Alma put her hand on my shoulder and gently applied pressure, so I was forced to sit back down in the wheelchair. "I agreed to look after you for twenty-four hours, so you are coming with me." I started to argue, but she put her hand up. "Plus, whatever happened to you back there was concerning, and I want to make sure you are alright. And, I signed a paper saying I would." There was a firmness in her voice that settled it once and for all. Then her voice softened a bit as she asked, "Are you really okay, honey? Should I have let them take you to the hospital?"

"I'm fine. You did the right thing. I can't thank you enough." Instinct told me she would have appreciated a little more information, but lucky for me, we were about to be interrupted. A guy around my age with wavy, bleached-blond hair, walked up to Alma and me. He

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had broad shoulders with defined, tanned biceps sticking out of his surfer style t-shirt. He looked like he belonged on the cover of a magazine featuring an article on surfing the North Shore.

“Auntie Alma!”

Alma turned around and yelped in excitement. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek as he returned the affection.

“Let me look at you.” She held him at arm’s length, and he beamed with pride as Alma showered him with compliments. His smile appeared especially white against his deep tan. He looked just like I imagined a typical surfer would with his trendy, multi-colored swim trunks and sunglasses. He was tall, fit, and very handsome.

“Oh goodness, where are my manners? Scott, this is Faith.” She patted my shoulder, and I realized I was still sitting in a wheelchair like an invalid. “Faith and I met on the airplane and are already fast friends. She’s going to stay the night with us.” Alarm bells went off inside me. *Us, I thought. More people? Oh no. What have I gotten myself into?*

“Scott is the grandson of one of my dearest friends who I met years ago while on vacation.”

“Nice to meet you, Faith.” At this point, I had stood up. I went to shake his hand, but he hugged me instead. “Are you alright?” he asked politely, motioning to the wheelchair.

Before I had a chance to speak, Alma interjected. “She is fine. She was just feeling a little nauseous upon landing.” I appreciated her discretion. It was in that moment I knew that Alma was someone I could trust. This allowed me to relax a little and go with the flow. It didn’t seem like I had a choice anyhow.

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Scott's brow furrowed. "I hope you're feeling better."

"Yes, much better," I replied simply.

We ditched the wheelchair at baggage claim and made our way to his vehicle. I sat in the backseat while Alma rode shotgun so they could catch up. I tuned their conversation in and out, but my main attention was focused on taking in my new surroundings.

As we merged onto a major freeway, cars and trucks with rainbow license plates whizzed past, and the view on both sides was like any big, bustling city. Houses, so close together they almost looked stacked on top of one another, extended out for miles. Hundred-foot-tall coconut palm trees dotted the horizon, and I could make out mountains in the distance. Scott's vehicle made a turn toward them, and it wasn't long before the landscape began to change drastically.

"We are headed to Kāneʻohe on the east side of the island. We are staying in Scott's grandmother's 'Ohana unit," Alma said as she turned around to face me. "You will love it." She must have sensed my hesitation, so she added, "Don't worry. We will get all your matters straightened out tomorrow after a good night's rest." There was no point in protesting at this moment, so I just sat back and enjoyed the ride.

"Auntie, are you kidnapping this poor woman?" Scott asked playfully, smiling at me through the rearview mirror.

"Ha, that's funny," I said, finally piping up. "But actually, Alma has been so kind and helpful. This is my first time in Hawai'i, so I'm excited to meet new people and have the chance to see different parts

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of the island.” I was, without a doubt, not excited to meet new people, but the rest of it was true.

“Well, you are in for a real treat then, because the Windward side is the best.”

As we drove toward the *mauka*, or mountains, houses, apartments, and businesses became less and less prevalent, and the bustling city was replaced by a total overgrowth of vegetation. Scott began to name the different mountain ranges. Some of them sounded familiarly English, but most names were distinctly Hawaiian, which in my limited exposure was one of the most unique and beautiful languages.

Scott pointed out the very fragrant plumeria tree whose flowers were used primarily to make the well-known and aromatic lei. Having seen them often on TV, but never in person, I could not wait to take in their scent for the first time. The Hawaiians have use for almost every plant, and as an aspiring biologist, this fascinated me. The *‘awaʻapubi*, or ginger plant, for example, is used both as an anti-inflammatory and shampoo. The noni fruit has been used for generations to treat viruses, high blood pressure and diabetes; however, I’d read that it’s one of the smelliest fruits that exists.

It surprised me how many trees, bushes, and vines held some type of colorful blossom or fruit. The flowers were so bright and large, I thought they had to be fake. Scott pointed out the invasive African tulip tree. It had gigantic, reddish-orange flowers that looked stunning against the green backdrop.

Both sides of the freeway were quickly transforming into a dense jungle with vegetation so thick and tall that it looked impenetrable.

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Vines attempted to wrap themselves around every tree trunk, branch, telephone pole, electrical line, and in some spots, they even crept onto the pavement. When the sun poked out of the clouds and hit the mountains, the bright and vivid green hues were so intense, it made me squint. I realized I had never seen so many shades and variations of the color green. There were too many to count. I was used to living in Arizona where desert browns and yellows ruled the landscape.

We rapidly approached a tunnel that had been bored into the side of a colossal mountain range, and we entered its dimness for a short time. When we exited through the other side, I let out an audible gasp. Both front seat occupants glanced back at me and grinned.

The majestic view before me was staggering and breathtaking. Not a single photo or description properly prepared me for seeing the Ko‘olau mountain range in real life. It reminded me of massive, green, velvet curtains. I had read that the highest points were just over three thousand feet above sea level in some places, and the mountain range stretched approximately thirty-seven miles, separating the east side of the island from the west. Their varying peaks came to points like sharks’ teeth or the tips of arrows. I turned around to get a better view. Tall, narrow, black, vertical scars ran straight down and disappeared into the dense canopy. It gave the mountain range an accordion-like appearance.

“This area gets over two hundred and fifty inches of rain every year,” Scott stated, causing me to turn back around. “That up there is known as wao akua, loosely translated as ‘realm of the gods,’ and believed to be inhabited only by spirits. During the rainy season, this

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highway is a front row seat to a spectacular waterfall show.” He indicated the long strips of erosion, and I shook my head in disbelief as I tried to visualize adding waterfalls to the scenery. It felt like I was dreaming.

Grey and white, puffy clouds started collecting over the highest summits, threatening to expand their reach to lower elevations and let loose the moisture they contained. Behind us, and beyond the mighty peaks, the sun was just starting to go down. Scott noted that the eastside enjoyed gorgeous sunrises, but the Ko‘olau mountains blocked the sunsets.

When I was finally able to take my eyes off the towering cliffs, I shifted my gaze to the crystalline, aqua waters of the Kāne‘ohe and Kailua bays sparkling in the distance. I’d always imagined the ocean to be one solid color of dark, royal blue, but Hawaiian waters were not like any I had seen, particularly the Pacific on the west coast; the ocean here had a wide range of blues and greens.

From my vantage point, I noticed that the water closest to shore was light turquoise. There were areas of emerald, but further out, as the water deepened, a never-ending sea of cobalt blue emerged. The water was so clear you could see the bottom. White sand, shallow reefs, and black lava formations dotted the ocean floor. Further out to sea, and outside of the bay, white caps formed from waves hitting the reef edges and deep slopes.

I have always been drawn to the water, but the gravitational pull that hit me when I saw the ocean on the Windward side of O‘ahu was

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so strong it was hard to contain. I knew at that very moment I was home.

We descended quickly into the town of Kāneʻohe, exited the highway, and made several lefts and rights through a few neighborhoods before pulling up to our destination. I was drained beyond belief and hoped I could stay awake long enough to be sociable.

The house we arrived at was a white, medium-sized, modest home, nestled within a well-maintained yard with flourishing plants. Two large plumeria trees grew in the front yard. The bunches of white and yellow flowers released a fragrance so strong, I imagined it could be smelled a block away. Scott unloaded our suitcases as I helped Alma out of the car.

“I’ll take your luggage around back; you guys go ahead without me. Tūtū can’t wait to see you.” Alma informed me that *tūtū* meant “grandmother.” I followed behind her as she walked toward the front door, but before she was able to knock, a woman swung the screen door open.

“Aloha! Oh, my goodness!” Alma and the woman exchanged greetings and embraced each other warmly.

“You brought a guest,” she declared excitedly, winking at me.

“Hello, my name is Faith,” I said introducing myself and extending my hand. She ignored it, came right in for a hug, and welcomed me, speaking a mixture of English and Hawaiian.

“E komo mai! Welcome! So nice to meet you. I’m Leilani, but you can also call me Auntie or Tūtū, whatever you like.” She had long,

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straight, black hair that went all the way to her waist. Her accent was thick, and I assumed she had spent most of, if not all her life in Hawai‘i. “I see you met my grandson.” She pointed at Scott who was wheeling our suitcases through the side gate. I nodded as Alma continued the conversation.

“Faith and I met on the plane,” Alma explained as we entered the house. “She moved here all by herself from Phoenix, Arizona; got accepted into HPU. Isn’t that just marvelous? I figured we could show her around the island and help her get her bearings.” I was thankful for Alma’s discretion and thoughtfulness but suddenly very self-conscious as I had no idea if Leilani was comfortable allowing a random stranger to stay in her home. Fortunately, it didn’t take long for that issue to be addressed.

“That is wonderful news. Congratulations, Faith. And just so you know, you are welcome to stay here. It’s not very often that I am blessed with guests. Aloha ke Akua,” she said. “And all the way from the Phoenix. I love Arizona. I’ve visited several times.” She clapped her hands excitedly and hugged me again. “Girls, we are going to have so much fun. Come, let’s get you settled in.” Her friendly and accepting nature eased my fears, and I was able to knock my anxiety down a couple notches. When I departed Phoenix, I would never have imagined myself in this scenario.

Alma and Leilani conversed as I followed them through the house. We walked into a large living room filled with beautiful local art. Three big sea turtles hung on one of the main walls. The intricate details carved into the red-brown wood gave each their own, unique

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features. On another wall, I noticed a colorful acrylic painting. It depicted a canoe of watermen rowing feverishly up a humungous wave while several sea birds flew in the sky above their heads. A variety of tropical fish swam undetected below the surface. Along the bottom of the sea floor were different types of colorful coral reef. I wanted to stop and admire the artistry, but the two women were well ahead of me already.

We exited the main house through a sliding glass door that led to the backyard. It was meticulously landscaped and filled with more plants and trees than I could count. We followed a short pathway next to a little koi pond. Leilani stopped, reached into her front pocket, pulled out a handful of something, and tossed it into the pond. The fish splashed in excitement and raced to devour as much as possible. Just beyond that feature was a small, detached apartment. It was clearly designed to look like a little cottage.

“Wow, you remodeled it,” exclaimed Alma. “It’s so cute.”

“Scott did all the work himself,” Leilani said proudly. Almost as if on cue, he opened the door from inside and greeted us with a smile, making my heart skip a beat.

“Faith, I put extra towels inside the bathroom for you, and there are some sheets and a blanket on the fold-out couch,” he said. Scott was handsome *and* thoughtful. His stormy eyes stared intensely at me, and I immediately felt self-conscious again.

The cottage was tastefully decorated and similar to the main house. A gigantic, white conch shell sat center on the end table, and other beach-themed knickknacks were tastefully placed and positioned

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throughout. It had a tiny kitchen with a small table off to the side, one bedroom, one bathroom, and a living room only large enough for a sofa-bed and armchair.

“Well, we are going to let you settle in and rest before dinner,” Leilani said after ensuring we had everything we needed. It was still light outside, but I couldn’t stop yawning. Once the door was shut behind them, I collapsed onto the couch. Alma sat across from me in the armchair and let out a sigh of relief.

“Well, we made it,” she said, sitting back and closing her eyes.

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me, but you’re very welcome, dear,” she said with her eyes still closed. “There is something about your presence that soothes me. You may not believe this, but you’re helping me, too.”

I thought about the ashes sitting reverently in its container on the dining room table. Little did Alma know, but her presence soothed me as well. Maybe it was because she reminded me of Granny. Alma yawned and announced she was going to take a little nap before dinner. I used that time to call my family and assure them of my safe arrival and temporary accommodations.

After dinner, Alma and I said our goodnights as I turned off the living room light and crawled into my surprisingly comfortable, fold-out sofa bed. My body was drained, but my mind was still processing everything I had been through that day. It was unreal. I still could not wrap my brain around the fact that I lived in Hawai‘i. Actually, and technically, I was presently houseless in Hawai‘i, but I’d figure that out soon enough.

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As I started to finally drift off to sleep, I envisioned myself under the water, swimming with a variety of colorful fish; the same fish I had seen in Leilani's painting. I imagined holding my breath and diving deeper and deeper down, leaving Shadows and visions forever behind.

CHAPTER 3 ISLAND LIFE

It was barely dawn when I woke from a well-rested sleep. I panicked and forgot where I was for a few seconds. I slowly let my eyes adjust, hoping nothing lurked within the dark corners. After scanning the room for Shadows and not finding any, I let out a sigh of relief and took in the unfamiliar, early morning sounds and smells of the Windward side of O‘ahu.

A small fan made a slight buzzing noise as it slowly rotated from side to side, aiding the light ocean breeze that drifted in through the open windows. The salty air was heavy with moisture, and it left my face and exposed arms feeling tacky to the touch. It carried a variety of aromas, most of which I did not recognize. I inhaled through my nose, trying to tease out each individual scent.

Different species of birds were singing their own unique morning songs, welcoming in the rising sun. I was shocked to hear how loud they were becoming with each passing minute. The variety and combination of sounds reminded me of an orchestra warming up before a big performance. Some made short, singular chirps, while others tweeted back and forth as if deep in conversation. One species

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sounded like a car alarm and mimicked this annoying sound repeatedly. Others carried melodies with multiple notes strung together.

I could hear running water from the koi pond in the backyard, and every so often, one of the fish would make a small splash. The sounds were mesmerizing and almost lulled me back to sleep until I heard a very loud noise coming from somewhere close to my head. It was kind of like a clicking sound. I jumped up in a panic.

“Those annoying things,” Alma said sleepily as she headed from her room to the bathroom. “Good morning, Faith. Did you sleep well?”

“Good morning. Yes, I did, thank you. What’s making that noise?” I asked, thinking it was some type of cricket.

“Oh, that’s just a gecko. Cute little guys, but they sure make a racket. And messy as all get out.”

“They are in the house?” Startled, I began thoroughly inspecting my sheets and blankets.

“Yes. They find their way in and out.” She closed the bathroom door and then added, “Come to think of it, I believe it’s bad luck to remove them.”

After my inspection, and not finding any live critters living in my bed, I folded up the sheets and sofa. It was now bright enough to see inside the apartment without turning on the lights. Alma emerged from the bathroom, and I exchanged places with her.

“How did you sleep, Alma?” I asked as we passed.

“Like a rock.”

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“Is there anything poisonous I should know about?” I had done some research, but not nearly enough.

“No, I don’t think so. Well, actually, I take that back,” she responded as I closed the bathroom door, “I think the centipedes here are poisonous, but I believe it’s more like a scorpion sting. Unless, of course, you’re allergic to them.”

When I was ten years old, I got stung on the foot by a scorpion while I was playing in the backyard. My dad was the only one home at the time, and I recall him setting me up on the kitchen counter so he could inspect the site. I worked hard to hold back the tears; I wanted to make him think I was brave. I had been lucky that day and stung by a non-venomous kind.

I remember we went for chocolate chip ice cream afterwards, and he told me all about the different types of scorpions that made Arizona their home. He emphasized the importance of natural order and explained to me that every living creature had a purpose, even ones with painful and sometimes deadly stings. He further explained how entire ecological systems can be thrown off when something went extinct and how there was a delicate balance in nature that we must always try to respect and preserve.

It was that day, sitting in the front seat with my daddy with ice cream running down my hand and face, that I discovered what I wanted to do when I grew up. I was going to protect all the creatures, even the poisonous ones. After that, I spent most of my free time searching for scorpions under rocks or pieces of wood. When finally uncovering one, my heart would nearly beat out of my chest. I would

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jump back and squeal out of fear and excitement. I stayed just far enough away so they couldn't sting me, but close enough to observe and meticulously record their behavior in a little green notebook I titled *Nature*.

"Aloha, kakahiaka nui," Leilani called as she knocked on the screen door and entered simultaneously.

"Good morning to you, too," Alma responded from somewhere in the kitchen. The smell of brewing coffee made its way into the bathroom where I was brushing my teeth and washing my face. My stomach growled loudly.

As Alma and Leilani began discussing plans for the day, I happened to exit the bathroom at the same time Scott walked through the front door holding a small, pink box. He smiled at me, and I felt my face flush a little. I smiled back.

"Good morning, ladies," he said and set the box on the table.

"Oh Scott, you remembered," Alma exclaimed and hugged him. I raised my eyebrows, curious about its contents.

"Come here, Faith. You must try a malasada. It's a Portuguese donut from Leonard's Bakery. They are my favorite." Alma handed me one on a small plate. It was still warm to the touch. When I took my first bite, I immediately understood why she had been so excited. The outside was fried and crispy and had a thin layer of sugar coating. The inside was like a fluffy donut, filled with a white cream that tasted like coconut. I noticed Scott's malasada was filled with chocolate. While I enjoyed my first Hawaiian pastry, Alma, Leilani and Scott discussed the day's itinerary. I could tell I was part of the plan because my name

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came up several times. I couldn't help but wonder if I was going to be a hostage or a willing participant.

"We have to take her to see the lighthouse," Alma said.

"But the beaches on the west side are so much prettier," Leilani added.

"Look, you both know there is nothing better than the North Shore. A swell just came in, so you've got big waves, Waimea Valley, and food trucks," Scott interjected. He had just devoured another malasada and was already thinking about lunch. This reminded me of Uncle Gavin who was always referred to as the "bottomless pit." I giggled a little, causing everyone to look my direction.

"Where would you like to go, Faith?"

All eyes focused on me. I was just getting ready to shove the last piece of pastry in my mouth but abruptly stopped and lowered my hand. What I *wanted* to do was swim in the ocean, but I could tell that was not on the agenda today. What I *needed* to do was find a permanent place to live. That, too, would have to wait until tomorrow.

As if reading my mind, Alma said, "Don't worry, honey. We will help you get settled into a place first thing tomorrow, I promise. But you've got to spend a day seeing some of the sights. And Scott will be driving, so we can sit back and enjoy the ride."

Knowing Scott was coming was definitely a plus. He locked eyes with me, smiled, and mouthed, "Please help me." I grinned. The light and dark contrast in his blue eyes reminded me of the ocean.

"Sure, I'm up for anything. You all choose. I trust your judgement."

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Just as Alma and Leilani turned toward each other to celebrate, I looked at Scott and mouthed, “No, you help me!” He tilted his head back and silently laughed.

“I’m so excited.” Scott cheered and clapped his hands sarcastically, mimicking the women. “I’m driving, so you ladies can talk story until your ears fall right off your heads.” Leilani playfully punched him in the arm, and he pretended like it hurt. I enjoyed Scott’s sense of humor, and with those piercing blue eyes, stunning smile, and dark skin, he wasn’t hard to look at either. A little butterfly took flight in my stomach.

In less than an hour, we had decided on our destination, the route we were going to take to get there, packed, and were ready for departure. I noticed a colorful surfboard securely fastened to a black sports rack on the top of Scott’s Subaru. Everyone insisted I take the co-pilot seat. This made me extremely nervous for some reason. I suddenly felt self-conscious and wondered if I had any food stuck in my teeth. I should have checked them in the bathroom mirror one last time before we left.

Scott turned on the radio, and I immediately recognized the familiar and distinct sounding melody of local island music. He hummed along while the ladies chatted in the backseat. I took this opportunity to relax and enjoy the scenic drive. After exiting the town limits of Kāne‘ohe, we merged onto the Kamehameha Highway and began our hour-long journey to the North Shore of O‘ahu. The two-lane road ran along the coast on the east side of the island. Massive, ancient green cliffs jutted up to the heavens on my left, and I had to

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crank my neck to see the top of them. They were the natural skyscrapers of the island. To my right was the topaz-colored ocean. Piles of coarse, black volcanic rock were the only thing that separated the highway from the water in some spots.

From time to time, Leilani or Alma would point out a favorite beach or park. Scott was relatively quiet but would occasionally chime in and give Alma and his grandmother a hard time. His comments always elicited a small chuckle from me, which I sensed he enjoyed immensely. I couldn't help myself; he was very witty, and his delivery was always on point. Leilani and Alma adored his antics, and I enjoyed laughing. It had been a while.

Scott was harder to read than most people. There was something about him that I couldn't figure out. He was like a mystery or a puzzle, and I very much liked puzzles. Most people were so easy to read, and that's not much fun at all.

"Not a big talker?" Scott asked, interrupting my thoughts.

"Words are overrated," I answered, continuing to stare out the passenger window. I secretly hoped he would find me interesting and mysterious, but there was another part of me that didn't want to get too close.

He laughed in one short and slightly surprised, "Ha!" then added, "You are funny, I knew it." He said it as if it was some big surprise. I smiled but kept my head turned away so he couldn't see my expression.

Our first stop on the way to the North Shore did not disappoint. We enjoyed a guided tour amongst the grand, cathedral walls of Kualoa Ranch. The tour guide explained that Kualoa means "long back" in

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Hawaiian, which refers to the ranch's deep valley and towering mountainous peaks. He also explained that Kualoa has a rich history and is a sacred place to Hawaiians.

When we came around and down into the valley, the view was incredible. The enormous, jagged cliffs rose abruptly, coming to points at an astonishing altitude. Scott informed me that the area averaged almost four inches of rain a month during the wet season, which explained why the entire region was so green and lush, with grass taller than most people.

Black and brown cattle dotted the landscape as well as rows of vegetables and fruit trees. The ranch sold their locally grown produce at various fruit stands located around the ranch. They included many things I had never heard of before like liliko'i, lychee, guava, jackfruit, and dragon fruit.

Before leaving, we stopped by one of the stands. Just as we approached, I picked up a peculiar scent. A woman behind the register was carving into something massive. It was oblong and had a thick, nubby, green, outer shell. The inside was stringy and filled with plump, crunchy, yellow pods. She offered us a sample, and I was excited to try my first jackfruit.

The taste surprised me as much as the smell. No one seemed to agree on the flavor either. Scott claimed it was like a combination of apples and strawberries. Alma swore it reminded her of pineapple, mango, and bananas. Everyone watched and waited expectantly for my opinion. At first, the texture hit me as odd, but the sweet flavor was

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delicious. I understood the conundrum right away though. It was hard to pin down exactly what it tasted like.

“I think it’s more like Juicy Fruit gum,” I finally said after serious consideration. Everyone took another bite and contemplated my comparison.

“I think you’re on to something!” Alma exclaimed. The other two nodded their heads in agreement.

Before resuming our drive, we walked across the highway to Kualoa Beach Park, and I obliged Alma and Leilani by taking several photographs of them. The island of Mokoli‘i, stood proudly in the background. The small islet was located one-third of a mile offshore, and its shape had given it the nickname Chinaman’s Hat. Scott said you could basically walk to it at low tide, and that many people kayak to its shores and hike to the summit.

I fantasized about swimming out to it and scaling to the top. I wondered if there were places you could jump off into the water below. I realized that I had been longing for adventure for quite some time. Thoughts of future explorations stirred my soul and left me feeling excited and hopeful for the first time in years.

I sat down for a moment to take in the heavenly views. Alma and Leilani walked the shoreline, their arms linked together, talking and laughing at each other’s jokes. Scott sat on top of an old, washed-up tree trunk, contently staring off into the horizon. There was something familiar and comfortable about this trio. No one pressured me to engage in conversation or put me on the spot by asking a lot of intimate questions. In addition, they were spending their personal time and

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resources to show me around the island. In many ways, they reminded me of my own family.

As we loaded back into the car, I said, “I just wanted to say thank you all for being so incredibly hospitable. I deeply appreciate it.”

Leilani responded, “You are most welcome, Faith. In Hawai‘i, we like to share our rich culture and history. This is how we honor our ancestors, and this is how we honor God. Aloha is a way of living and treating each other with love and respect.” I could almost hear Scott rolling his eyes, and normally I would join him, but something about the way Leilani spoke moved me. Her rich, Hawaiian accent made the way she articulated her beliefs sound almost poetic, and I could feel the deep connection she had to her culture and land. I felt honored and privileged to be included.

We passed through small beach towns with names like Ka‘a‘awa and Kahuku, making short stops here and there to snap a picture or try another piece of fruit at one of many stands. Leilani taught me the Hawaiian name of each one, and I worked at trying to properly pronounce them. Accurate pronunciation of the words was tricky. Scott was obliged to poke fun at me as needed.

We pulled into a dirt parking lot surrounded by a variety of different food trucks. Scott bolted out of the car and was in line at one of them before I had my seatbelt unbuckled. The truck advertised: *Best Shrimp on the North Shore*. The long line indicated they might actually deliver on this claim. Smothered in garlic and butter with a side of white rice and a slice of lemon, the shrimp was delicious. I now understood Scott’s determination to drive an hour away for lunch, but

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I was convinced he had another reason as well, and it could be found strapped to the top of his car.

Sure enough, not too much further down the road, we pulled into a parking lot with a sign that read: *Sunset Beach*. I immediately recognized the name of the notorious surfing spot as Scott welcomed me to the famous North Shore of O‘ahu.

He hopped out and began unstrapping his surfboard while us ladies grabbed a few beach towels and an umbrella. Sun-kissed surfers loaded and unloaded their own boards which came in all lengths and colors. I was flabbergasted when I finally spotted the waves for the first time. They looked several stories tall and crashed so violently, I could not comprehend how someone could attempt to ride them. When compared to the size of the swells, the surfers looked miniscule. Scott was already entering the water by the time we sat down.

The crashing waves created thunderous rumblings that shook the ground with their enormous power. The wind carried sprays of cool, salty water our way during the hottest part of the day. The lifeguards were on high alert, scoping out the surfers with binoculars. A set of jet skis were ready just in case a rescue attempt needed to be made.

I watched as a colossal wave formed just behind the line of surfers. Several of them began paddling feverishly, then quickly and gracefully popped up. They started their downward descent immediately as the top of the wave rose higher and higher above their heads. After reaching its peak height, the curl began folding forward. The wave’s giant mouth, with jaws wide open, chased after the surfers, ready to devour them at any moment. But the riders, perfectly balanced, seemed

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to skip on top of the water effortlessly. Eventually, the entire thing would totally collapse on top of itself, creating a massive whitewash. The surfers, still on their boards, were unscathed, and before I knew it, they had turned around and were already headed back for another ride. Leilani pointed out Scott in the next line-up. I was eager to observe his abilities but nervous for his safety.

“How big do you think the waves are?” I asked Leilani.

“Scott said fifteen to twenty feet today.”

“Doesn’t it scare you to see him out there when they’re so big?”

“No, honey. Scott was raised on this island and was surfing before he could walk and talk. Besides, nothing scares me anymore,” Leilani said, patting my leg. “God is in control.” I couldn’t imagine letting God control anything, but I kept my opinion to myself. I looked up at the lifeguard tower to make sure they were paying attention.

“There he goes,” Leilani said enthusiastically. I could barely make him out, but I held my breath as the wave climbed to an unbelievable height. Then, down he went like the others, fleeing as fast as he could lest he be swallowed alive. At the end of the ride, he used a smaller wave to launch his board into the air, performing a trick before disappearing behind the whitewash.

“Wow, he is really good,” I said. I imagined myself surfing a big wave traveling at neck-break speed, adrenaline pumping through me like crazy. I wanted to learn everything and anything that had to do with the ocean.

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“Scott can give you lessons if you want to learn how to surf,” Leilani suggested. “He used to make a little money on the side working in Waikīkī.”

“I would love that; I can pay for them.”

“No need, Faith. I’m sure he would enjoy it.” She winked at me. I wasn’t sure if there was a hidden meaning there and smiled as I imagined Scott and I surfing together. A second butterfly took flight in my stomach.

After catching some more waves, Scott joined us on the beach to watch a few sets. I listened intently as he commented on each surfer’s style and techniques, pointing out a few of his buddies that were out there. I asked a variety of questions and could tell it was one of Scott’s favorite subjects.

“I told her you would teach her how to surf,” his grandmother said. I immediately got embarrassed.

“It’s alright,” I quickly added. “I’m sure you’re busy.” I secretly hoped he would protest.

“Sure, I’ll teach you the basics,” he said casually, smiling at me when I made eye contact. My heart did a flip-flop. He chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“You look like a kid in a candy store,” he teased. *He isn’t supposed to be reading me, I’m supposed to be reading him.* Vulnerability was not my strong suit.

“Look who’s talking. You can’t stop smiling,” I teased him in return, and he laughed again.

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After another thirty minutes, we loaded our beach stuff back into the car and were on the road headed toward the botanical garden in Waimea Valley, just outside the town of Hale‘iwa, another “must-see” on the North Shore. The scenery changed from place to place. We had just come from an area with farmland, and the mountains looming further off in the distance. But as we approached Waimea, the mountains almost joined the sea. We turned onto a paved road that ran along the Waimea River, a permanent waterway that drained into the ocean when flooding occurred. The nutrient-rich volcanic soil, combined with the volume of rain, created a lush and tropical environment.

Scott and I helped the ladies out of the backseat and enjoyed a very long, slow stroll up a smooth path through several archaeological sites that ended at a spectacular waterfall. Waimea Falls, also known as Waihi Falls, was stunning but, in my opinion, a bit overcrowded with tourists. I craved to enjoy this view in solitude and promised myself I would find my way to a remote waterfall, sit near the water’s edge, close my eyes, and enjoy the raw sounds emitting from nature.

It was a quick trip overall. The ladies were getting tired, and Scott was obsessing about food again. I was anxious to get back as well; there were a lot of things that I needed to get done before classes started in two weeks. I had to buy a used car, find a place to live, and check out the campus. I suddenly felt very overwhelmed and tried to give myself an internal pep talk.

On the drive home, Alma leaned forward, put her hand on my shoulder, and said, “Faith, I was thinking. Would you like to go on a

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little boat trip tomorrow to the Sandbar in Kāneʻohe? I'm going to be spreading my husband's ashes, and I would really love it if you joined us. It's an unbelievable place, and it would mean so much to me." I was touched but, at the same time, already worried about the things that I needed to get done. But there was no way I could turn her down.

"Of course. I would be honored. Thank you," I replied. Worst case scenario, I could stay in a hotel for a few nights as I initially planned.

"Haleʻiwa here we come!" Scott honked the horn twice out of excitement and looked in his review mirror. The abrupt noise startled his grandmother who proceeded to give him a verbal spanking in native Hawaiian. I'm guessing scaring your grandmother and her friends half to death isn't acceptable behavior in Hawaiʻi. And neither is honking, I learned. I laughed as he blamed a chicken in the road. Scott and his grandmother were funny, and I enjoyed listening to their banter.

The quaint town of Haleʻiwa had dozens of little shops, painted brightly and filled with eateries, surf boards, clothing, and souvenirs. There was also an assortment of fruit stands, coffee shops, and food trucks. We parked near the latter, and I noticed they were advertising a variety of lunches and snacks. BBQ smoke announced the location of Huli-Huli chicken, Kalua pork, and Kalbi short ribs. I followed Alma and Leilani to the fish taco stand while Scott headed straight toward the BBQ, stopping to chat with local surfer friends on the way.

I wasn't sure if it was the humidity or the lifestyle, but people here moved slowly. No one seemed to be in a hurry, and I didn't hear

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anyone complaining about waiting in line. It was a very laid-back environment, not at all like the other places I had been. I guessed “island time” was a real thing.

We stopped by several gift shops, and I purchased a few small items for my siblings. I would need to check in with them soon. My family was always good about giving me plenty of space, but I didn’t want them to worry about me. I missed them so much already and looked forward to spending time with them over the holidays. I grinned at the thought of my brother and sister receiving their gifts in the mail. I got Patty Pie a necklace with a shark’s tooth, and Sally Mae a purse made from a coconut with a bright pink, hand-painted hibiscus on the outside of it. I made a mental note to ask who was reading them bedtime stories since I’d been gone.

The drive back home was quiet. Everyone had a belly full of good food or “ono grinds” as Scott liked to call it. Both women fell asleep ten minutes into the trip and were softly snoring in the backseat. Scott was concentrating on the heavy freeway traffic and seemed deep in thought. I stared out the window, my mind full of all the things I needed to accomplish.

We passed the Dole Plantation and fields of pineapple bushes. Scott took an alternative and quicker route home through the middle of the island instead of the scenic coastal route, but it was still past five o’clock before we got back to the house. I reflected on my first full day in Hawai‘i and couldn’t help but smile. The friendly and welcoming nature of people here was such a pleasant surprise, and the beauty of

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this land was beyond what I had imagined it would be. I guess island life was a good fit for me after all.

I had been closed off to everyone except my family for so long, it felt awkward and scary allowing other people in. Life experiences had taught me to be distrustful of others. People tend to make a big display of affection and connectivity at first, then flip on a dime as soon as you don't meet their expectations. I was especially worried about what Scott would think when he discovered my unusual challenges. *Why can't I just be normal like everyone else?* Scott interrupted my brooding.

“What are you thinking about?”

I kept forgetting how observant he was. “I was just thinking about dinner,” I lied.

“You are my kind of girl,” he said and rubbed his belly. We chuckled quietly so as not to wake the chatter boxes in the back seat. “What do you have planned tonight?”

I thought it was comical he was asking, considering they were the only people I knew so far, and I was staying at his grandmother's house.

“Oh, you know, just meeting up with about a hundred friends for a giant lū'au. We are having a pig roast and everything,” I added sarcastically. He laughed a little too loudly which woke Alma up. She let out a big yawn, then closed her eyes again. I covered my mouth to stifle another outburst.

“Well, if you can get away from your pig roast,” he whispered, adding his own sarcasm, “some friends of mine are having a bonfire at the beach in Waimānalo. I can pick you up if you want.” He tried to

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sound nonchalant, but I detected the anticipation of my answer in his voice.

“Sounds fun,” I said, adding a casual tone and trying to contain the anxiety that always built up surrounding social situations. “Thanks.”

We pulled into the driveway, and I helped Scott unload everything, including two sleepy old ladies.

“Pick you up at eight-thirty.”

The anxious introvert inside me screamed, but I was cool as a cucumber on the outside. “Great, see you then,” I replied as Scott left the apartment.

“I think I will go straight to bed. I’m exhausted,” Alma said wearily and hugged me tight. Leilani had already retired to the main house. “Do you have everything you need?”

“Yes, thank you for such a wonderful day. I really enjoyed it.”

“You are welcome,” Alma said, probably sensing my nervousness. I appreciated their hospitality, but I really needed to get some things done. I still had no car and no living arrangement, and now one day with them had turned into two.

As if reading my mind, Alma added, “Don’t worry, we will help you get settled in before classes start. I promise. I have a plan, just trust me.” She winked at me.

“Okay.” I whispered, feeling a little relieved.

“In the meantime, have some fun while you can.” I knew she was right. She said her final goodnight and retired to bed.

SWIMMING FROM THE SHADOWS

I spent the next couple hours talking to family on the phone while simultaneously getting ready for the big night out. They were beyond thrilled to discover I was already meeting new people and getting the chance to explore the island before diving straight into school. I spent a little time speaking to each one of them. I was happy to hear that Grandpa Cameron was reading my brother and sister their bedtime stories, and Sally May was excited to announce that Grandpa was doing a great job. Patty Pie missed my character voices and was crying by the time he passed the phone to his mom.

After calming him down, Victoria wanted to know every detail of the trip so far. After talking to her, I told Granny about Alma and how we had met. I included the similarities between them. My dad ran down the list of safety precautions again and pressed for details about the landscape and weather while Grandpa Cameron wanted to hear all about the food. By the time we said goodbye, I was close to tears myself.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele grew up in Bakersfield, California before earning a degree in Child Psychology and embarking on a twenty-year career in social services. In 2001, she moved to the mountains of Arizona where she learned to hunt, fish, and rock climb. It was during that time that God first began to speak to her about writing a book. In 2017, she moved to the island of Oahu, Hawai'i, where she retired from social work and began the process of writing her first novel.

Michele has two grown children and one grandchild. She spends her days writing, swimming, and helping others. In addition to the outdoors, Michele enjoys painting with watercolors and digital mediums. She has sold over 200 pieces of art, one of which came in second for being chosen to furnish rooms at a popular hotel in Hawaii.

Michele's strong faith in God has helped her overcome many obstacles. She has endured her fair share of heartache which inspired much of her book *Cracks in the Floor of Heaven*. She has also been blessed with many gifts from God, who has taught her how to have joy despite pain and hope in the midst of hardship. Michele is an optimist, has a heart for helping others, and plans to write many more books that she hopes will bring light into the darkness and healing into the lives of hurting people.

