



Deck the Palms (An Annabeth Albert Christmas)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Nolan Bell has a very Merry problem this holiday season...

As a native New Yorker, I've always dreamed of my name in lights on Broadway. But when my Army officer brother calls in a favor, I wind up in Hawaii to help his family while he's deployed.

A winter in paradise doesn't sound too bad until I become the substitute choir teacher at a middle school near the base. Wrangling a bunch of tweens while planning the annual school holiday lights festival is a far cry from playing Peter Pan.

Enter Merrick "Merry" Winters, the school's grumpy but hot shop teacher. I can win over any audience, but Merry's a tough sell. And I need his help to make the festival successful.

The more time I spend with Merry, the less grumpy he seems, and the more I like the guy. He's the third generation of a legendary North Shore surfing family. He's committed to raising his twin boys on the island as a single dad. And like me, he doesn't have time for an inconvenient but undeniable attraction.

As disasters pile up, the only holiday magic Merry and I seem to be making is with each other. What starts as a harmless fling becomes the only present I want under my tree.

If I want this romance to last past New Year's, I have to decide which dreams are truly worth chasing.

Can Merry and I catch a wave for a future together before the sun sets on this holiday season?

A brand-new holiday romance from the author of the beloved *The Geek Who Saved Christmas* starring two middle school teachers in over their heads in an opposites-attract, fish-out-of-water romance. *Deck the Palms* features a slightly grumpy single dad and a sunny city slicker navigating family dynamics amid holiday small-town romance vibes with a side of Hawaiian sunshine. Guaranteed low-angst, feel-good, happy ending with a heaping helping of holiday spice!

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One

Welcome to November, ohana! It was lovely to see so many of our middle school family members at our Autumn Festival. Now, the countdown begins for our annual Lights Festival. Mrs. Crenshaw is on a medical leave of absence, but never fear! Our holiday extravaganza is in excellent hands...

NOLAN

I stared down at the colorful newsletter distributed to students during last period and sent to parents via email. As someone who'd enjoyed a rocky relationship with reviewers, I tried to believe any press was good press. However, Principal Alana was testing that belief by way overselling my talents for a job I'd only learned about twenty minutes prior.

"Are you sure you want a substitute in charge of something so important?" I asked Principal Alana. She had arrived at the choir room shortly after the final bell sounded, undoubtedly to prevent my escape with the students and ensure my attendance at the holiday festival planning meeting.

"First, you're not just a sub. You're a Broadway star." The principal was barely over five feet with long dark hair piled on her head. Many of the middle schoolers were bigger, and indeed, she didn't look much older than the eighth graders. However, the principal had a voice worthy of commanding a fleet. "You're exactly the shakeup this festival needs after years of the same script."

"Star might be pushing it," I said demurely. Sure, my resume was full of production

credits, and if we counted Off-Off-Broadway, a few leading roles, but no one in New York would ever mistake me for a star. Perhaps things were different in Hawaii.

“Second, I’ll be honest, we don’t have a ton of other options.” Principal Alana continued her forthright attack on my resistance. Unlike the cushy New York private high schools where I encountered stiff competition for my substitute teaching and voice-lesson gigs, I’d apparently been the only applicant for the role of substitute choir director and drama teacher at this public fine arts magnet middle school. It was a sobering thought.

Impervious to my glum thoughts, Principal Alana plowed ahead. “Merry Winters will help, of course, but Merry lacks your flare. However, you can count on the industrial arts students to deliver whatever decorating vision the two of you arrive at.”

Merry Winters. I immediately visualized the industrial arts teacher as a kind, gray-haired British hippy lady. Probably ever so slightly butch, what with the woodworking classes, but churning out domestic projects like cutting boards and candlestick holders. Good at set construction, but seeking the guidance of a plucky Broadway star for this holiday festival.

And yes, I was exactly vain enough to love that vision.

“Lucky for you, I’m a praise wh—junkie, and all that ego stroking worked.” I winked at Principal Alana, narrowly avoiding calling myself a praise whore in front of my boss for the next two months. “Lead the way to this meeting.”

“How was the first day of classes?” she asked as we navigated the wide hallway lined with lockers, artwork, rules and reminders, and varied club and activity announcements.

“Fine. Loving it here.”

I delivered my lines crisply, with no hint of deceit. In reality, though, public middle school was way different from Upper Eastside high schools. No celebrity kids, no bodyguards lurking at the back of classrooms, no designer bags or gourmet lunch options, and definitely no ten-to-one student-to-teacher ratio to brag to the alums about. Instead, I'd had six periods of thirty to forty loud, rowdy tweens in barely controlled pandemonium. In fact, I'd narrowly avoided being locked out of my classroom by a pair of twin pranksters during first period. "Such spirited students."

"Wonderful. Did Dory leave you good notes?"

"Oh yes." More lies. Dory Crenshaw's notes for a substitute included video recommendations out of the 1950s, suggestions for classes no longer offered, information pertinent to the school's prior building, and very few real resources for the next two months. Naturally, the woman couldn't have predicted emergency hip surgery following a fall doing the Halloween Hula at the school event, but Dory sure could have left more help.

"Feel free to put your own spin on the classes," Principal Alana chirped. "I'm excited for some new material."

From what I understood, Dory Crenshaw had been around since the fine arts-focused middle school achieved charter status in the nineties. Principal Alana was an alumnus of one of those early classes who'd shot up the teaching ranks to become principal of her old school. I liked her fresh ideas and enthusiasm because Dory's musical selections desperately needed to leave the stand-still-and-sing generation behind.

However, not everyone shared Principal Alana's desire to bring in new ideas.

"What do you mean we're not doing Holly Holliday's Holiday Surprise?" Belinda Masters had likely taught math longer than I'd been alive, and from her stony expression, she also hadn't smiled in nearly that long. "Parents look forward to that

every year.”

“Emphasis on every year, Belinda.” Principal Alana released a long-suffering sigh. “Dory created that script thirty years ago, and it’s barely been updated.”

“That’s the charm.” Belinda gave a haughty sniff. With her long gray braid and pressed khaki shorts, she looked ready to lead an excursion for an Oahu bird-watching club, not unruly middle schoolers needing long-division help. “And what’s this I hear about food trucks?”

“The festival needs to grow.” The principal spread her palms wide. “We need the festival to be a big fundraiser for us this year. With budget cuts, we need the Lights Festival to fund spring field trips and cultural speakers. A fresh production, new sets, and, yes, new food options mean more tickets sold. The kids are counting on us.”

“Trying something new isn’t a terrible idea.” Ken Kekoa was a round, affable fellow around fifty who gave off lounge singer vibes but was actually a well-regarded art teacher my nieces adored.

“Thank you, Ken. I appreciate the open mind.” Principal Alana graced him with a wide smile, revealing her perfectly straight teeth. “I know Nolan and Merry?—”

“Sorry, I’m late.” A dude who had possibly wandered in from the nearest beach rushed into the room to take the open chair next to Principal Alana. Sandy-blond hair a good year past a trim, scruffy stubble, faded surfer board shorts, and a paint-stained T-shirt added to his haphazard vibe. “Did I hear my name?”

“You did.” Principal Alana beamed while I inwardly groaned. Like any good actor, though, I schooled my expression as she made introductions. “Merrick Winters, meet Nolan Bell. He’ll be in charge of this year’s holiday production for the Lights Festival. You’ll still handle all the lights and sets, of course.”

“Of course.” Merrick “Merry” Winters was neither British nor elderly nor a lady. And with a voice drier than week-old sand in a bucket, he clearly wasn’t thrilled about working with me.

“Like I was telling Ken, we’ll all need to work together.” Principal Alana either hadn’t picked up on Merry’s hostile glare or had decided to plunge ahead in her usual fearless style. She smiled encouragingly at Merry. “I know you and Nolan will appreciate the help from the students, and you’ll be the perfect right-hand man for Nolan in coordinating everything.”

“Uh-huh.” Merry sounded far from convinced as he leaned back in his ancient plastic chair, which let out an ominous creak.

“Just tell me what you need painted.” Ken motioned at Merry and me. “But I’m going to leave the festival details to you two. I’ve got to run to my second job.”

“Ken works evenings as a host at a popular resort restaurant,” Principal Alana explained. “Budget cuts state-wide and rising housing prices mean more and more of us working second and third jobs. They’ve got two in college and one in high school. It’s hard to make it as a two-teacher family these days.”

“Or as a struggling actor.” My voice was bright, but Merry remained anything but as he glowered at me.

“I’m sure. You’re the Bell sisters’ uncle from New York?” His brown eyes peered sharply into mine. “The famous Broadway dude?”

“You’ve heard about me?” I couldn’t help preening. Maybe I’d oversold the whole star thing to more than Principal Alana.

“Yep.” Merry’s tight nod deflated what was left of my ego. “You’re the fun uncle.

What did they call you? The Funcle?”

Merry made it sound like a rash in a personal area rather than a cute inside joke between me and my favorite sister-in-law.

“I am the fun uncle. And the Guncle.” I adopted a proudly defiant tone. Might as well toss the gay uncle part out there right now. “And the little brother who can’t say no when his big, bad lieutenant colonel bro asks for a favor.”

As much as I liked being an uncle and adored my two nieces and new nephew, I was only in Hawaii because Craig had summoned me. And for all we were total opposites as adults, my heart still remembered him as the big brother who’d scared away all the monsters under my bed and defended me from school bullies.

“Bet you can’t wait to get back to Manhattan.” There was a challenge in Merry’s tone that I had to work to not take personally.

“I sublet my studio through the end of the year. I’m kind of stuck, but I’m not complaining.” More lies. I’d done nothing but complain in texts to my theater friends about the humidity, the sand in strange places, the lack of a social life, the unreliability of the public transit options, and more. But for Merry, I smiled serenely. “I’m happy to help with Craig and Cara’s new baby and the girls.”

“How is the baby?” Principal Alana jumped in before Merry could continue whatever this cross-examination was. “I heard Cara delivered him early.”

“Yes, that’s a big part of why Craig sent for me.” For all my excellent imagination, I didn’t harbor many illusions. Craig was deployed, leading some army mission, and if he’d had any chance of making it home before his wife had their surprise third baby, he wouldn’t have called on his flighty younger brother for help. “The baby came at thirty-four weeks in a dramatic fashion. Takes after his uncle.” Principal Alana

laughed. Merry didn't. Undeterred, I continued, "Noah Craig is out of the NICU now and home. He's still teeny, but he's doing great."

"Wonderful. Love the name," the principal enthused. It wasn't exactly the same as having a namesake, and everyone kept calling Noah Craig "the baby , " but I was awfully proud of the little guy nonetheless. "And I know you will make the whole family proud of you with this task for the school as well."

Way to lay the pressure on a little more . I grimaced, trying to figure out how to tell her to lower her expectations. Luckily, the ill-tempered Belinda saved me from a reply, shuffling her papers and various tote bags on her way out the door.

"I have to head out as well. At least try to have some of the elements our Anuenue community has come to expect." Belinda's glare was almost as poisonous as Merry's. The school was named after the Hawaiian word for rainbow, but there was little sunny about my reception thus far.

"Sorry. Belinda's... passionate about our history. I'm sure whatever you come up with will be perfect." Principal Alana managed to never waver from her chipper tone as she stood up from the table. "And with that, I'm going to leave you and Merry to get to know each other and devise a plan while I make some phone calls."

"More disciplinary issues?" Merry groaned. He stretched, long, lean swimmer's build on full display. He had the sort of broad shoulders and narrow waist combo that made watching the Olympics such a pleasure. However, it didn't matter how hot the guy was if he didn't want to cooperate and work together. "Please tell me I'm not on the naughty list."

"Not this time." She laughed lightly. "Legend and Ryder managed to survive the entire day."

“Legend and Ryder are yours?” I blinked. Those were the identical twin pranksters from first period. I knew I should have sent them to the office, but I hadn’t wanted to make a fuss fifteen minutes into my new job. “You’re a dad?”

Merry seemed way too young and carefree to be a dad, but he nodded. “Yep. I trust they weren’t too much trouble.”

“Perfect angels,” I lied through my best smile. Never let the audience see you sweat. And precisely how I would put together an entire holiday festival performance in six weeks with Merry, who seemed to hate me on sight, remained to be seen.

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Two

As a reminder, ohana, drinking fountains are not water cannons! Additionally, Mr. Can-Do kindly requests any puddles be promptly reported to the school office. Let's keep Anuenue Middle School beautiful!

MERRY

Nolan Bell, Broadway star, was clearly way out of his usual Ivy League territory as a middle school substitute. I already didn't like him. Or rather, I didn't like his type. Nothing personal, but I'd pegged him as a rich city slicker at first glance. Thanks to my ex, I knew far too much about designer brands, and Nolan was decked out in a whole ensemble—leather man bag with a gaudy gold label, loafers way better suited to a boardroom than a beach, high thread count short-sleeve button-up and a suit vest. A vest! As if we might be conducting vital banking business or playing billiards here instead of teaching overcrowded tweens and teens.

“Let's get one thing straight.” I waited until Principal Alana had left to glare at Nolan, who sat with perfect posture and a saintly smile.

“I'm not.” He laughed at his own joke. And he would be way easier to take if he weren't so attractive under his designer wrapping. He had pale skin, stylishly tamed curly dark hair, brown eyes a more golden hue than my own, and a trim, muscular build that spoke to a fair bit of gym time.

“I picked up on that, thanks.” The guncle comment had been pretty damn obvious had my own highly honed gaydar failed me, which it hadn't.

Nolan gave a regal sniff, his smile finally dipping to be replaced with steely determination. “If you have a problem with me being gay, you might as well get it out there now.”

“I’m pan. I couldn’t care less about who you date or whatever.” I waved a hand. Heck. I still had chalk and paint on my palm. Hazards of shop class. “I have a problem with you being a big-city substitute who doesn’t know the island. You’re going to get these kids’ hopes up for something we don’t have the time or budget for.”

“Wow.” Nolan pretended to recoil at my words. “Say what you really feel. Should we go ahead and schedule a repeat performance of Holly Holliday’s Holiday Surprise now?”

“I’m not saying that.” I’d worked as Dory’s assistant last year and would be happy to never hear another whistling holiday standard played on a recorder or sung off-key. “Dory Crenshaw is cranky and outdated, but she understands island culture. She was born on the island and is married to a Hawaiian. She knows it’s too hot for Santa suit costumes, that every kid needs a part, and how families with diverse cultural and spiritual backgrounds want to feel included.” I looked up from my rant to discover Nolan writing on a classy leather notepad. “Wait. What are you doing?”

I had an excellent working relationship with Principal Alana, but I didn’t need Nolan documenting my beef with him or some such in order to tattle.

“Taking notes.” Expression remaining serene, he held up the notepad which contained a sloppy numbered list complete with stars and relevant underlining. “No Santa suits. Every kid needs a role. Include all families. Ask around about family backgrounds and dynamics to better understand them. What else?”

“Oh.” I hadn’t expected him to be nearly so compliant or willing to hear me out.

Alyssa had been gone from the island a good chunk of years, and here I was, still letting my ex drive my bias against rich outsiders. I took a breath and dropped a good chunk of my hostile tone. “The festival is largely outdoors even though this is the rainiest part of the year on Oahu. Prepare for inclement weather. Including winds. We can’t have a lot of lightweight paper items blowing around.”

“I can work with all of this.” Nolan radiated cheery confidence. “And work with you . I’m very familiar with low-budget productions.”

I bristled, unsure whether he was implying I was a low-budget production. My long familiarity with Alyssa’s idea of “bargain” made me wary.

“There’s a huge difference between low-budget Broadway and a public school with a nonexistent budget for extras.”

“We can send out a request to parents for donations?—”

“You could.” I held up a hand. Nolan might be a decent uncle, but he was clearly unfamiliar with the stacks of requests for fees and donations parents received daily. “However, most of these kids are from the base and have enlisted parents on tight budgets, or they’re locals being squeezed out by the base and tourists driving the cost of living up. We can’t pressure parents to give more than they have.”

“Point taken.” Nolan gave a sharp nod, and for the first time, I saw the resemblance to his army officer brother, whom I’d met at parent night last year. Like his brother, Nolan could have a formidable presence and decisive tone. “So we’ll make do.”

“Does nothing phase you?” I narrowed my eyes, impressed and irritated that he’d deftly handled all my complaints and warnings.

“I’m a New Yorker. We thrive on chaos.”

Naturally, at that moment, true chaos descended into the small conference room as Ryder and Legend burst in. My sons were sixth graders. I'd spent my first two years teaching at the school and counting down until the boys would be able to attend. But now that we were a few months into the year, the thrill had worn off, leaving behind a daily struggle to balance my role as a dad with my job as a teacher.

A job we very much needed me to keep. I'd left the boys in my classroom with strict instructions to wait for my meeting to wrap up, but clearly, my orders lacked some key element.

"Dad. Dad. Dad ." Ryder flopped into one of the empty chairs like he'd just run a mile. "The water fountain in the hall is leaking."

"And Mr. Can-Do is gone for the day." Legend followed his brother into the room. The janitor's real last name was Ka'uhane, but generations of students had called him Mr. Can-Do because of his usual response to any request.

"And neither of you had anything to do with this leak?" I tilted my head, already bracing for the answer.

"It was an experiment." Legend offered a toothy grin. The boys looked more like Alyssa—darker eyes than mine, dark-brown hair, less of my ruddy, tanned complexion and more of Alyssa's warm-gold mixed Polynesian looks. Today's outfit was a red T-shirt and black shorts. When they were babies, matching outfits had been an inevitable side effect of having identical twins, but these days, the matching had way more to do with mischief. "I might have pressed the button a little long?—"

"With your elbow," Ryder helpfully added. Despite being identical, there were small tells as to which twin was which. Legend had more of an overbite awaiting braces, while Ryder had a slightly more singsong voice. And unlike his brother, Ryder had zero poker face. His eyes went wide and shifty as he noticed Nolan. " Oh. Hi, Mr.

Bell.”

“Why do you sound so guilty?” I groaned.

“It was just a joke.” Legend sounded confidently dismissive, but I was not so sure.

“What was?”

“Getting Mr. Bell to step into the hall so we could shut the door on him.”

“And lock it.” Nolan had a sharp look for the boys and me.

“Boys. Seriously. No more pranks.” I closed my eyes. I’d counted to ten so many times in the last eleven years, but never more than over the last few months. And year twelve looked to be even more challenging. “I worked so hard to get us into this school. Please. Don’t land me on Principal Alana’s naughty list.”

“We’ll be good.” Ryder’s smile was almost enough to make me a believer. He turned in his chair, peering down at Nolan’s feet. “Are those Armani shoes?”

“Close.” Nolan grinned widely. “I love shoes. A bit too much. Luckily, I’m great at bargain hunting.”

“So is our mom. I’ve got a Gucci shirt.” Ryder had zero filter, as usual. And I hated that Alyssa’s limited influence on the boys was to give Ryder a taste for luxury apparel. “And I like shoes too.”

He kicked a foot up to reveal his canvas sneakers with a sparkly print. Legend, who deferred to Ryder in all matters of fashion, had a similar pair, but Ryder’s love of glitter was another way to tell the twins apart.

“I like them. They give me merfolk vibes.” Nolan’s sunny approval apparently gave Ryder a case of regret because he squirmed in his seat.

“Thanks. I’m sorry we tried to lock you out.”

“It’s okay. Tomorrow is a new day.” Between his seeming inability to get irritated and his penchant for optimistic sayings, Nolan was practically a walking motivational poster.

“If you’ll excuse me for a moment, I’ll go check the leak.” And as for me, I was never this grumpy, but something about Nolan set me off big time. Luckily, the leak ended up being nothing more than a stuck button, and I returned to the conference room a few minutes later to find Nolan and Ryder deep in conversation about music while Legend played on his tablet, taking advantage of the school Wi-Fi. All I needed was Ryder getting too attached to the new teacher, but there was a limit to how rude I was willing to be, especially in front of the twins.

“How’s it going?” I asked, struggling for a friendly tone.

“Mr. Bell will be here through winter break,” Ryder reported.

“Yep,” I said tightly. Seeing the boys getting along so well with Nolan made me even crankier for reasons I wasn’t about to unpack right then. Instead, I turned toward Nolan. “Listen, I have to get these two home and fed before outdoor club tonight. You work up a reasonable plan, and we can discuss it further. You can text me.”

“Excellent.” Nolan handed me his notepad to scribble my number. Something told me Nolan and I would have vastly different definitions of reasonable. “Outdoor club sounds fun.”

Nolan’s pale complexion and soft hands said he didn’t see much outside other than

catching a taxi to his next performance, but I couldn't exactly call him on his undoubtedly fake interest with the boys right there.

"It's a non-affiliated scouting alternative. Keeps them busy."

"You wouldn't like us bored." Legend's ominous tone made us all laugh.

With that, I hurried the boys to my older hatchback and then to our apartment, where we let Barney out onto our small patio. Our scruffy dog, who stumped even experienced vets about his breed, had been waiting patiently since our neighbor let him out around lunchtime. I rotated his water while Legend filled Barney's bowl with chow.

"I like Mr. Bell. Think he's gay?" Ryder, who was supposed to be pulling things for dinner out of the freezer, nearly made me drop the water dish.

"None of your business." Just because Nolan had come out to me easily didn't mean he'd want to be out to the students, and Ryder was something of a gossip at the best of times. Not to mention, he'd spent the last year or so trying to hone his own gaydar, often with disastrous results. Luckily, I was hard to embarrass, but the phase where Ryder had loudly asked whether any two dudes dining together were a couple had been a little uncomfortable.

"He doesn't wear a ring." Ryder beamed as he arranged frozen tacos, potato wedges, and chicken tenders on a baking sheet. All the major food groups. "And I suppose he could be bi or pan like you."

"Ryder..." I groaned. I loved that my kid told me every last thing on his mind, even when it was a bit of a curse.

"Are you trying to matchmake Dad with Mr. Bell? That's creepy." Legend glared at

his brother. Creepy was his current word for everything he didn't like. "And why do we even need a holiday festival?"

"Because a lot of people find it fun. And it raises money." I took the tray from Ryder and slid it into the waiting oven.

"How much money?" Legend narrowed his eyes. The way Ryder felt about music and sparkly things was how Legend felt about making and saving money.

"Enough to cover the field trips in the spring."

"Mr. Kekoa said two years ago they got to go watch canoes being built and help build them." Legend had my love of building things coupled with a deep appreciation for Hawaiian traditions and culture. "That would be cool."

"It would. So we need the festival to be a success." I forced a positive tone. I hated that ensuring enough money for our cash-strapped school meant working closely, too closely, with Nolan.

"Mr. Bell will make sure it's fabulous ." Ryder used another of his favorite words. "I can't wait to see what he comes up with."

"Me too," I lied. If Ryder's hero worship continued, it would be a long, long two months. And whatever Nolan came up with was likely to be expensive and complicated, but I had little choice but to hope Ryder was right. We needed a fabulously profitable festival, and I needed to stop seeing Nolan's movie-star-worthy looks in my brain every time I heard his name. We were both here to do one job.

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Three

As another reminder, please remember not to run in the halls. And speaking of halls, our annual locker decorating contest will start after Thanksgiving. Start thinking of ideas now!

NOLAN

I was many wonderful things, but a morning person wasn't one of them. However, helping Cara and working at the school meant waking up as a peachy hue crept across the Oahu sky. I walked the short distance from the nearby studio-sized guest cottage I was renting. The early morning held a crisp chill, and I had the coffee on and the kids getting ready all at an hour I'd usually be deep asleep back home.

"Do you have everything you need?" I asked Cara. My sister-in-law had arranged her dark curly hair in a haphazard bun and was in her pajamas as she nursed Noah Craig on the couch. She had the TV remote, a mug of tea, a fuzzy lap blanket, and a stack of cloth diapers nearby. While the baby was finally out of the NICU, Cara herself was still healing from a rather traumatic birth, and I hoped she'd spend the whole day right there in her couch nest.

"Yes, Nolan." She gave me a dutiful smile, but knowing her, she'd be up and checking email along with straightening the house as soon as the baby napped.

"You know, I could still pass on this substitute gig?—"

"Too late." Her smile widened. She'd been the one to spy the job opening after Dory

Crenshaw fell at the school's fall festival. Apparently, I'd been hovering a bit much, and Cara was eager for me to find something more to occupy my days other than playing footman for her and the baby. "The kids are counting on you."

"Mom!" Athena barreled down the stairs. At thirteen, she was almost as tall as her mother with a similar dancer's build. Cara was slightly taller than my five foot nine, but Athena might beat both of us with her long limbs. And right then, her giant feet pounded on the wooden staircase as she came in with a head of righteous indignation. "Stella stole my favorite comb and the clip I wanted."

"I can—" Cara started to stand, but I waved her back down.

"Sit right there." I gave Cara my sternest glare. "That's what you can do. Uncle Nolan to the rescue!"

Once I brokered peace in the daily hair war between the sisters, I tried to herd the girls toward the door, grabbing backpacks as we went.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Stella asked as we paused near the door to put on our shoes. The compromise over the hair clip had involved me doing a hasty braid, which Stella flipped over one shoulder as she glared at me. Like me, she wasn't a morning person, and sadly, eleven was too young to offer a coffee for the walk to school.

"Because I have some great ideas for the holiday festival, and I can't wait to show Mr. Winters." That was the God's honest truth, and my eagerness had nothing to do with wanting to see the guy again, even if he did look straight out of a surfer film. No matter how good-looking, he was cranky, and for whatever reason, Merry seemed predisposed to not be a fan of mine.

"Mr. Winters is the best." Athena stood a little taller as we waved goodbye to Cara. "When I get famous, I'm going to hire him to be the carpenter on one of my shows."

“One? How many are you planning?” I teased because we all knew about Athena’s ambition to run a decorating empire similar to her favorite home remodeling shows

“As many as it takes.” She threw her arms wide, making her backpack lurch against its straps. “My decorating line will be in all the big-box stores Mom hates, but I’ll be rich.”

“That will be wonderful for you. Just remember to ask permission before filming reveals and reactions.” I kept my tone bright, but Athena’s tendency to record content for her growing social-media channel without warning had a long history of embarrassing missteps.

Athena made a rude noise. “Hey, I only surprised you that one time?—”

“More like ten times.” Stella interrupted to glare at her sister, pausing in the center of the sidewalk, costing us more precious seconds.

“Walk faster.” Athena gave Stella a push. “I want to hear Uncle Nolan’s big plans.”

“Don’t shove me!” Stella roared back, and thus, we arrived far closer to the first bell than I wanted.

Leaving the girls near their respective lockers, I headed to the industrial arts classroom. I’d dressed with our meeting in mind: red skinny jeans I’d found at one of my favorite New York thrift stores and a gauzy green shirt I’d picked up at a designer sample sale right before leaving for Hawaii. Hopefully, when Merry saw I was serious about making the festival a success, he would tone down his insta-hate. However, I pulled up short by the door when I saw he was already working with a trio of students.

“What do we think?” He held up a turtle-shaped cutting board. Away from the small

chairs of the conference room, Merry seemed even taller with long, lanky arms and legs. I hadn't met that many shop teachers over the years, but Merry was the hottest by far, more so when he smiled at the kids. Glowering at me, he was merely average surfer-boy cute, but when he grinned at the three kids, his appeal reached Hollywood blockbuster levels.

"Mom's going to love it," raved the student in the middle, a short boy with dark hair.

"She's gonna freak," the tallest boy agreed.

"I've got the wrapping paper." The lone girl held up a roll of birthday paper.

"Now, each of you sign the back," Merry instructed. "And we'll add the year."

I was blessed with a large circle of generous friends, yet my chest had never felt quite so full watching an act of kindness. Damn it. Why couldn't Merry be grumpy all the time? Seeing this generous side of him did things to my insides, things I really didn't like. Being attracted to him was bad enough. Liking him was a recipe for disaster.

And behind those three, other students were waiting for a moment of Merry's time and attention. He was clearly a beloved teacher, and his bright and airy classroom was cluttered in a friendly way, where all the stacks of wood and trays of paint seemed inviting rather than oppressive.

"Can I help you?" Finally free of students, Merry looked up to find me lurking. Oops.

"Sorry." I managed a sheepish smile he didn't return. Huh. He'd certainly smiled plenty with his students. Apparently, it was just me he disliked. "I was going to try to talk to you about the holiday festival, but you were?—"

Buzz. The first bell rang, unleashing an avalanche of students streaming in the front

doors, racing to their lockers, and pushing into classrooms.

“Better get to your classroom while you can,” Merry advised. “We can talk about the festival later. I’ll catch you at lunch.”

I raced to the choir room, a weird L-shaped space that had possibly once been a storage room. No windows, mismatched chairs, a makeshift stage with risers, and a single door, which I guarded carefully as my first period students arrived.

However, I wasn’t so distracted by the door that I missed seeing Merry’s twins up to something by the teacher’s desk near the stage. On my way to take attendance, I paused to inspect the desk area. The desk itself had three decent legs and one propped up by ancient music books. All those items had been there yesterday, along with stacks of sheet music and a rolling file cart with handouts and lesson plans. I glanced down at the chair parked by the desk. Unlike the day before, it had a cushion. And under the cushion?—

Yup. I held my discovery aloft.

“A fart pillow? Really?” I shook it at Ryder and Legend and their group of friends seated near the front. Everyone other than Legend was unable to keep their giggles in as I continued my lecture. “I’m disappointed. These were around when dinosaurs roamed the earth, otherwise known as my childhood.”

“Short notice.” Legend shrugged. “Don’t worry. We’ll try harder.”

“Or how about no pranks?” I gave him a pointed look designed to remind him of his dad’s request, but Legend was already turned around in his seat, talking to a spiky-haired friend. I sighed before turning my attention to the whole group of sixth graders. “Okay, class. Let’s get started. Everyone up.”

“You want us to stand?” Ryder sounded like this was a novel idea, and given Mrs. Crenshaw’s file of ancient musical scale exercises, perhaps it was.

“We’re going to warm up, which means more than our voices.” When I’d first started working as a sub after college to earn money between acting gigs, Craig gave me a piece of advice he’d learned at West Point. When in doubt, wear them out. It applied to dogs, kids, students, and unruly cadets equally. And sixth graders might be middle schoolers, but they were definitely not too old to shake their sillies out.

By lunch, however, I was the exhausted one. And Merry continued to have a swarm of students with questions around him, which meant zero opportunity to show him my sketches and ideas.

“Sorry.” Merry finished with his students and approached the metal table in the courtyard where I was dining alone. Well, as alone as one could be in a courtyard filled with a couple hundred middle schoolers and teachers. I’d taken advantage of the relative quiet to add to my plans.

“I have a bunch?—”

He cut me off with a raised hand. Long nimble fingers, wide palms, and I desperately needed to stop noticing small details about the guy. “The bell is about to ring, but I do want to hear your ideas.”

Liar. I forced a smile. “Let’s try and connect after school?”

I shuffled my sketches of dancing surfing Santas, flying fairies, and illuminated palm trees.

“Crap.” He smacked his forehead. “I forgot the boys have dental appointments.”

“Which we can skip.” Legend chose that moment to pop up near my table, lunchbox in hand and an alarming amount of dust in his hair. I had a feeling I didn’t want to know where he’d been or what the next prank was.

“No, we can’t. Not with the current wait times and only a few weeks to use this year’s insurance benefits.” Merry shook his head as he busied himself in dusting off Legend. “Sorry, Mr. Bell. Would tomorrow work? It’s Saturday, so I’m giving a surf lesson in the morning, but then I could meet you at a coffee shop or something.” His all-too-attractive mouth twisted like meeting up with me was a chore only slightly more preferable to trash duty or yard work. “I don’t like to leave the boys alone at home too long though.”

I glanced down at my stack of papers. This might require more than a fifteen-minute meeting. Across the courtyard, Stella’s group of friends were doing some sort of dance where they pantomimed swimming. Perfect.

“I want to be around to help Cara with the kids tomorrow, but why don’t you come over?” Cara and Craig had one of those houses where the doors were never locked, and there were always at least a couple of extra kids over every weekend. “They have a pool, so you can bring the boys, and I can explain my ideas while on uncle duty.”

“That should work.” Merry narrowed his eyes like he was trying to figure out my true motive for the invitation. Which was funny because so was I. I shouldn’t have been searching for ways to spend more time with someone who clearly disliked...

Oh. That was it. I wasn’t used to people disliking me. Merry’s swift judgment had stung. But I was Nolan Bell, king of winning over a room, and surely tomorrow’s meeting would be an excellent chance to make a better second impression.

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Four

Happy weekend! We're all counting down until Thanksgiving break, but remember, homework continues to need to be turned in on our regular schedule. Mr. Bell and Mr. Winters are hard at work on our Lights Festival, and we can't wait to see what they're stringing together.

MERRY

"We need to bring the dog." Legend made this sound like the most reasonable request of all time. However, while Barney did go many places with us, I wasn't sure about taking him to the Bells' house.

"We do not." I tried to sound stern in the presence of three pleading faces lined up near the front door of our apartment.

"He spends all week waiting for us." Ryder stuck his chin out, secure in the knowledge that his pout usually worked on me.

"We're going to be guests at the Bells' house," I countered, sweeping my hands wide. "We don't need to show up with our dog."

"Please." Ryder added a whine that made my teeth grind.

"Fine. I'll text Nolan." Nolan had thoughtfully provided his number yesterday, and I figured a fast no from him would shut the boys up. However, Nolan's lightning-quick response resulted in me groaning.

If he's well-behaved, sure, bring the little guy along.

Barney wasn't all that little and behaved might be pushing it, but I knew when I'd been beaten.

He is probably better behaved than the twins.

Be there in fifteen minutes.

"Okay, he said we can bring the dog. Let's load up, and please remember, I'm supposed to be working on the Lights Festival with Mr. Bell. No pranks, no problems."

The Bells lived in a medium-sized house near the school and the base that I'd expect from an officer's family. It was a two-story with a newer stucco-look in a neighborhood of well-kept homes. The front door had a cutesy sign next to it, similar to ones all over the island, asking for shoes off in the house. The boys were already kicking theirs off when Nolan answered the door with a big smile and a teeny baby strapped to his chest in the sort of contraption I remembered all too well from when the boys were babies.

"Hello! Oh, that is a dog!" His eyes went wide as he took in Barney standing next to the boys. "He's rather...large."

Compared to apartment dogs and the sort of purse-dogs theater people inevitably owned, Barney probably was slightly overgrown and hairy.

"But friendly." I shrugged because the dog was way more enthusiastic about this meeting than I was. Barney was busy sniffing Nolan's bare legs and looking for pets.

"Well, I suppose he can hang out with the kids. The pool area is this way." He led us

straight back from the tiled entryway to a living area with wide sliding glass doors that looked out on a small kidney-shaped pool with various toys and rafts already floating in it. “And Cara is napping, so let’s keep our voices down.”

“Okay!” Ryder bounced along, decidedly not whispering. “I like your pool.”

“Now the dog can stay—” Nolan gestured toward the patio area to the side of the pool only to cut himself off with an alarmed noise as Barney splashed into the pool, headed straight for a purple raft. “It swims?”

“And surfs,” Legend bragged.

“Badly.” I laughed as Barney hauled himself onto the raft, more out of experience than grace, with much splashing. “He loves to swim, but he’s lacking in coordination.”

“Like me.” Nolan gave a humble sort of chuckle. I doubted Nolan swam much. He looked more like the lounging type, what with his designer swim trunks with a crinkly texture and a crisp peach button-down. He looked like he’d searched what to wear to a Hawaiian pool party and then bought exactly that outfit, undoubtedly put together by someone who’d never left the mainland.

As the boys cheered Barney on, Stella arrived in a startlingly orange swimsuit to join them in the pool. Once the kids were settled, Nolan led me to a small patio table. We sat with Nolan bouncing in his seat slightly to keep the sleeping baby happy.

“I remember that dance.” I nodded at the baby. “There were plenty of times I wanted to sit so badly and almost dozed off bouncing one or both in a carrier on an exercise ball.”

“The twins must have been adorable.” Nolan smiled fondly as he glanced at the pool

where the three kids played with pool noodles as swords.

“They’re lucky they were so cute because they were also toddler demons.” I laughed as Nolan opened a Christmas-patterned folder.

“I’ve added to my plan since yesterday.” He shuffled a huge stack of papers, which included drawings, program notes, scripts, and more.

“I see.” I nodded slowly, my brain already whirring with questions of feasibility.

“Don’t say no yet.” Nolan passed over a sheet labeled Master Plan with several bullet points and a table of contents.

“I’m not saying anything.” I was silently thinking it, and likely rather loudly. I thumbed through Nolan’s various sketches. “Are those dancing Santas in board shorts?”

“Yes! It’ll be darling!” Nolan clapped his hands, which made the baby make a fussy noise, so he lowered his voice. “Especially when the flying fairies?—”

“No one is flying.” Holding up a hand, I made my voice stern. “Principal Alana would have a fit over the potential liability issues.”

“Really? It’s a simple pulley system.” Nolan furrowed his forehead in an elegant manner he likely practiced in front of a mirror. “I, myself, flew for a production of Pan. ”

Of course. I blinked but didn’t allow myself to otherwise react. Instead, I drawled, “Well, if you’re willing to trust my rigging, I suppose you can do the flying.”

“I’d trust your rigging.” Nolan’s tone skirted dangerously close to playful flirting

before turning more academic. “But this is about the students. Perhaps my fairies, which are really a nod toward pagan holiday spirits, can dance around instead.”

“Choreography would be a question for Mx. Lennox the dance instructor, but safer than rigging anyone.” I flipped through to a page with an alarming set of calculations. “Now, what’s this math?”

“The number of bulbs for the light extravaganza.” Swaying slightly for the baby, he threw his hands wide. “We’ll have lit-up animals, flowers, palm trees...”

“Uh-huh.” I narrowed my eyes, seeing dollar signs and hours of work. “We usually just outline the courtyard in some basic white lights.”

Nolan made a pouty, disappointed noise that sounded like something Ryder might try. “Think bigger! Better! Amazing!”

“Are you sure you’re an actor?” I tilted my head, considering him. He had the sort of earnest energy that could sell umbrellas to Arizonans. “Because you sound like a Broadway producer. Or a salesman.”

“I did do three different productions of The Music Man .” He preened, delivering this news like I should be very impressed.

“Of course you did.”

“Nolan! You let me sleep way too long.” Cara came out onto the patio, hands outstretched. She was tall with long, curly dark hair and pale, coppery tan skin. “And hi, Mr. Winters.”

Cara was wearing what appeared to be purple pajamas or a lounge set, but having had two newborns myself, I didn’t judge her for wearing pajamas in the middle of the

afternoon. I stood to greet her.

“Please, call me Merry outside of school.”

“Will do.” She took the baby, carrier and all, from Nolan. “I’ve come to relieve you of your uncle duties, so you can discuss more of your fabulous plans.”

“Excellent.” Nolan rubbed his hands together as she retreated and proceeded to show me sketch after sketch of light ideas better suited to a city zoo project than a cash-strapped school production.

“We’re gonna need more lights.” I massaged my temples. “And decorating stuff.”

“Shopping.” Nolan continued to radiate glee. “Let’s make a list!”

“Mr. Bell, watch this!” Legend stood poised at the side of the deep end with Ryder next to him. Legend had long ago perfected the art of the front flip, even without a diving board, and did a nifty somersault into the water.

“Oh no!” Ryder did the fakest gasp in the world. “He’s not coming up!”

Legend had beaten me in many breath-holding contests in the pool at our apartment complex, and I had zero doubt this was another twin prank. Stella, for her part, let out a fake horrified shriek, and Nolan sprang into action.

“We need to do something!” Pen still in hand, Nolan raced to the pool.

“Wait—” I tried to stop him, but Nolan launched himself into the water, sunglasses, pricey shirt, and all.

And then, naturally, Legend surfaced, laughing uproariously, and Nolan didn’t, which

meant I had no choice but to jump in since I had no idea how well Nolan could swim.

I hauled Nolan to the surface and dragged him to the side of the pool. Meanwhile, the three kids, undoubtedly sensing a lecture, raced back into the house.

“We’re getting snacks,” Stella yelled.

“It was a joke?” Nolan looked crushed that his superhero moment had been for nothing.

“Yup.” I nodded, painfully aware of how close our bodies were. Confident he wasn’t about to sink, I released him. Barney had long since abandoned the pool in favor of sunning himself near some low bushes.

“My sunglasses are gone.” He made a mournful noise that did something to my chest I didn’t like one bit.

“I’ll find them.” Why I volunteered, I had no clue, but I ducked under the water, combing the bottom of the pool until I found his pricey shades.

“Thank you.” Nolan fluttered his impossibly long eyelashes at me as I held out his sunglasses. I kept a respectable distance right up until Nolan let go of the pool side and sputtered under the water again.

“Can you seriously not swim?” I glowered at him.

“I can swim. I merely slipped.” Nolan’s tone was haughty, but his eyes were shifty. “I’ve been practicing since I arrived.”

“Yeah?” I had a feeling practicing involved a lot of using the raft and supervising from the side of the pool. “Let me see you float.”

Nolan carefully set his shades on the side of the pool and launched into the worst float in the history of swimming. “Maybe I don’t have enough body fat?”

Like I needed a reminder that he was perfectly lean and toned.

“You’ve got plenty.” I kept my tone curt. “Try again, and this time, I’m gonna help you.”

“I don’t need a lesson!”

“Well, you’re getting one,” I said grimly. However, I’d majorly underestimated the effect of putting my hands on Nolan to help him float and having our bodies so close together. I gave surfing lessons almost every weekend to supplement my teaching salary, and I’d never had the problem of being so aware of the other person. Like most of my surfing students, Nolan smelled like coconut and sunscreen, but something else there teased my senses. His scent, combined with his earnest half-smile as he tried to comply with my suggestions, was enough to have me thawing toward him.

And the last thing we needed was me warming up to him in any way. He was like the ghost of Christmas present, no future in sight, and keeping my heart and awareness in an icy deep freeze was only sensible. But I kept noticing little things. The birthmark on his neck. The definition of his Adam’s apple. The warmth of his damp skin.

“I’m doing it.” Nolan celebrated with a cheer as he finally managed a respectable float to complement his very rudimentary doggie paddle. “I’m really doing it. Look at me swimming.”

Somehow, I couldn’t help but get excited for him. “Yeah, you’re doing awesome.”

I went in for a high-five as he righted himself to standing in the water again, but my

fingers lingered with absolutely no permission from my brain, skimming down his arm.

“Merry.” Nolan exhaled hard. “What are you doing?”

I leaned in, that same force pulling me closer despite my better judgment. Maybe one little?—

“How’s the holiday planning coming?” Athena burst out of the house, phone camera pointed at us. “I need an update for my channel.”

“No update.” I backed away from Nolan in a hurry. No big deal. So we’d almost kissed. So what? It wouldn’t happen again. I’d make sure of it.

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Five

What joyful noises are coming from our music classroom as Mr. Bell continues to fill in for Mrs. Crenshaw. Students are hard at work on holiday surprises in many classes right now, so look for those to head home in December. As a reminder, there are several ongoing fundraisers for various projects, so see the list and give as you are able!

NOLAN

My last class of the day on Thursday was proving as temperamental as a certain EGOT-winning diva I'd had the horror of working with a few years back. Despite minimal feedback from Merry, I was moving along with my prep work and musical selections for the holiday festival.

"Are you really going to let us sing this song in public?" Kaitlyn was a member of the eighth grade choir with short hair and a pinched face that made her look closer to a forty-something sales manager. She had managed to find a way to object to something in every class we'd had thus far. "It has a bad word."

"Literature and music are filled with bad words." I waved a hand. I'd wanted to use more modern music with a secular but upbeat holiday feel, which meant certain lyrical compromises had to be made. "As you'll note, I marked the curse word out."

"I still know what word it says." Liam K., one of three Liams in the class, was always helpful.

“From the top,” I directed, deliberately talking over Liam.

“My parents might complain.” Kaitlyn had to get one last dig in.

“Are they the ones singing?” I snapped, then immediately regretted it. I could sense the warning email from Principal Alana already, so I took a breath. “Let’s try to find the beauty in the song instead of analyzing individual word choices.”

The students began to sing, but then a rogue squawky low note threw everyone off.

“And let’s try that once more.” My gaze landed on the source of the off-note, a gangly boy with a halo of curly hair that added at least four inches in height. “Jaden, I thought we marked you as an alto?”

“That was the other day.” Jaden, like all three Liams, had a raspy, squeaky voice in a constant state of flux. Gotta love hormones.

“Very well, we’ll roll with it.” I pointed to the way-smaller baritone section. “Try singing the low part today.”

The entire group managed to make it through the song, but it felt flat. The vibes were very last period in a long day, and I sympathized, but we had only a few precious weeks until the performance.

“And emote, sopranos, emote.” I fluttered around, trying to demonstrate the required energy.

At last, the final bell rang, and students raced out of our windowless cave into the hall, leaving me to pick up discarded sheet music, gum wrappers, and other trash.

“Hey there.” Merry stood at the entrance to my classroom. “I figured we needed to

talk.”

“Me too.” Finally. I’d only waited all damn week for him to seek me out, either to provide feedback on the plans I’d left with him after our impromptu swim lesson or to discuss that moment. I swore he’d been about to kiss me. Perhaps hopelessly bad at floating was an underrated aphrodisiac? Or maybe he’d been that impressed by how I’d taken charge when I’d thought Legend was in trouble in the water? Whatever the case, he was here now.

“I’ve been scaling back your plans?—”

“You’ve been what?” My squawk was just as off-key as Jaden’s earlier. I’d thought Merry was here to talk .

“To something more manageable.” Merry gestured like my plans were vague things that could be easily dismissed. “But we need to go over the ideas and finalize?—”

“You’ve been dodging me all week.” I shot him a pointed look, and he at least had the grace to blush.

“I’ve been busy.” Huffing, he stuffed his hands in his paint-stained cargo pant pockets. “But I find myself with a kid-free evening after I drop the boys off at an outdoor club event in a little while.”

“I could be equally free after I walk the girls back to Cara.” I brightened considerably at the notion of time alone with Merry, both to sell him on my big ideas and to see if any more... moments erupted.

“Would you like to meet at the food truck pod on the other side of the school? We need to confirm a couple of vendors, and I’m starving.”

“Sure.” It was a distance from Cara’s house, but I routinely walked all over Manhattan. Taxi fares added up, and I preferred to save my pennies for my wardrobe. Also, I wasn’t about to ask Merry for a ride. This wasn’t a date. It was business.

Yet my chest thrummed as I strolled from Cara’s house, where I’d left the girls eating an early supper of mozzarella sticks and chicken fingers, to the haphazard collection of food trucks in a battered old parking lot near an even more ancient baseball field between the pod and the school. I was careful to maintain an easy pace. Not a date, but it wouldn’t do to arrive all sweaty and out of breath.

“Oh, there you are.” Merry waved as I approached the nearest truck.

“You were waiting?” I drew myself up a little taller.

“Nah.” Merry shrugged. “More that I kept watching the parking lot, not the path. I’m surprised you aren’t borrowing your brother’s SUV.”

“First, that thing is a boat.” I made a sour face. Craig loved to drive, to the point that he owned a huge family SUV along with a smaller, more nimble Jeep for off-roading that he’d ordered me not to touch. Typical big brother. I’d made a few halfhearted stabs at learning to drive, but I seldom left New York City, so it simply wasn’t a priority. “Second, I don’t much drive.”

“Similar to how you don’t much swim?” Merry’s skeptical tone said he was on to me.

“Something like that.” My face heated. Merry had likely been surfing by three and driving as soon as it was allowed. “Should we start with getting something to eat or talking to the vendors?”

“Vendors. Get the business part done, then we can eat.”

Merry had brought a clipboard with flyers for the festival as well as a signup sheet. The taco truck and the waffle truck were already on board for the festival, and Merry managed to drum up interest from the Hawaiian shaved-ice stand as well. Despite my irritability over Merry's lack of communication that week, I was impressed by how he knew someone at almost every truck. And not only names—he knew about kids, school, hobbies, and more, bantering his way around the semi-circle of food trucks.

He'd joked I should be a salesman, but he was far better at gaining people's trust and agreement than I'd ever been.

"You really seem to know everyone." I tried to match Merry's longer strides as we headed to the last truck, which offered Polynesian staples like garlic chicken and shrimp, beef fried rice, and more. "Did you grow up around here?"

"More on North Shore, but yes, I've always lived on Oahu. My parents own the surf shop my grandparents started. Dad and Grandpa still surf." Merry delivered this fact off-handedly like it wasn't absolutely fascinating. "And as for knowing everyone at the food trucks, I don't like cooking, but my kids sure enjoy eating."

"I'm the same way." I offered a conspiratorial smile, and for once, Merry returned it. "My fridge back home is mainly takeout containers and coffee creamers."

"Creamers plural?" He raised both eyebrows.

"It pays to have options." I bristled because he undoubtedly lived on alfalfa and carrot juice and never let caffeine touch his perfect lips. However, I had to swallow back my irritability as Merry turned on his charm for the older woman in charge of the Hula Yum truck.

After he'd convinced her the festival patrons would enjoy purchasing spring rolls and potstickers, he plopped down at one of several wooden picnic tables to jot down

notes. Very responsible, which shouldn't have been a turn-on. And I had zero reason to spend the time admiring his toned and tanned forearms, yet I totally did.

"Your...partner doesn't like to cook either?" I asked, keeping my voice casual.

"Oooh, nice fishing expedition, Nolan. So subtle." Okay, so apparently, I'd failed miserably. Merry chuckled as he shook his head. "I'm divorced."

"I guessed you were a single dad." I exhaled hard, mad about being called out. But I really did need to know whether our moment was something he had on the regular while also being partnered or if perhaps I was special. And I was mad at myself for wanting to know that too. "I'm just...curious?"

"Or nosy, but I'll allow it." He chuckled as he finished his note-taking. "Not much to be curious about. I don't date. I'm divorced. The boys' mother lives in Los Angeles. She's a fashion influencer."

"Really? Who?" I perked up at the notion that Merry had been married to a quasi-celebrity. "Maybe I follow her?"

Merry made a rude noise. "You'd certainly get along, that's for sure."

Oops. I'd failed Empathy 101. Again.

"Sorry. That was the wrong response." I offered a sheepish smile. "It sucks that she's not in your lives as much as you and the boys might like."

"Eh." Merry leaned forward on his elbows, propping up his chin like he was settling in for an inquisition, which I supposed this was. "Motherhood wasn't her thing, and we both knew it, even before the shocker of a positive pregnancy test. I was more excited than her about the babies, but of course, I was twenty." Gazing off into the

pale blue horizon, he shook his head. “What did I know about twins? We tried to make it work for a couple of years, but she missed California too much.”

“She was from there?” I was starting to get a feel for Merry’s thing against outsiders and city slickers.

“Yeah. Her mom was a backup dancer to someone famous, and her dad owned a nightclub. She came to Hawaii to learn to surf on a break year from college. Met me, stuck around, but really, she was too glam for the island.”

There was a warning there, a reminder that I also didn’t belong and shouldn’t try too hard. I frowned, unsure whether I wanted to prove him wrong or shake his ex more.

“I’m sorry.”

“Eh. Don’t be.” He waved the pen he was still holding. “The tide has long since been out on that relationship. I feel bad for the boys’ sake mainly.”

“And yours.” I managed a chipper tone. “You deserve?—”

He cut me off with a loud groan. “The school has enough matchmakers. I’m totally happy being on my own. The singlest of singles. Now, let’s get some food before more questions.”

“What’s the best thing here?” I asked boldly. After a lifetime in the city, I considered myself an adventurous eater and was eager for more insights into Merry.

“Hmm.” Merry narrowed his eyes, sizing me up. “How spicy can you go?”

“How spicy can you go?” I countered.

“Well then. There’s a rice-noodle dish at Hula Yum that’s my favorite when I don’t have the boys with me, but my fallback when I do is the carne asada fries from the taco truck.”

“I’ll try the noodles.” I marched over to the truck, Merry trailing behind me. “Can I get your dinner? As a thanks for helping.”

“Nah.” Merry was already pulling out his wallet. “I’m good. And if you’re getting the noodles, I’m getting the beef fried rice because you really should taste that too.”

“Okay.” The prospect of sharing food took the sting out of him not letting me pay. After the woman working the counter handed us a beeper to wait for our food, Merry led the way back to the picnic table.

“How about you? Husband waiting in the penthouse back home?” Merry managed to sound both friendly and not at all interested in my reply.

“No penthouse.” I resolved not to discuss the size of my parents’ place, which, while not a penthouse, was nevertheless large and airy by New York standards. “I have a studio near the theater district that I sublet to a friend of a friend for the winter. No husband, no boyfriend. I date here and there, but no one seems to want to stick around for the role of a lifetime.” That sounded rather mournful, so I added a quick joke. “I might be a bit high-maintenance.”

“A bit.” Merry nodded.

I made an indignant noise. “You’re not supposed to agree.”

“You’re wearing loafers that require actual polish to maintain.” He gestured at my outfit. Up until that moment, I’d thought I looked pretty darn spiffy. Narrow gray dress pants with a subtle sheen to the fabric. Vintage bowling-style shirt with whales

on it. I'd thought the ensemble rather beachy when I packed it.

"My sandals don't go with these pants."

"Sandals go with everything." Merry kicked up his foot to demonstrate right as the beeper went off. "I'll fetch the food."

He returned with giant platters of food along with forks and chopsticks. His was a mound of fragrant fried rice adorned with large chunks of steak and a fried egg. My noodles swam in a spicy brown sauce, the scent of chilis making my nose tingle. The wide, flat rice noodles were chewier and held more flavor than the typical thinner Pad Thai noodles.

"Oh my God, this is amazing." I hadn't been aware of how hungry I was until I started scarfing down my noodles. My eyes watered and my nose ran from the spicy flavors, but I was in foodie heaven.

"This food is pretty good, but there's a truck on the way up to North Shore that I always stop at with the boys that does an even better fried rice." Merry deftly speared a piece of steak along with some of the rice and held out the bite for me. "But here, try this."

I was too eager to try the dish to make eating the outstretched morsel sexy, but the way Merry stared at my mouth, I might as well have.

"I love it." The steak was succulent, well-marinated with notes of ginger and garlic, and the rice was perfection, each grain separate without being overly oily.

"Here." He placed another two pieces of steak on my platter. "Clearly, we need to feed you more."

“It’s because I’m still in vacation mode.” I sighed because leaving vacation mode for audition mode was going to suck. “When I’m in a production, we usually burn off what we eat, but I’m hyperaware of costume sizes and director preferences nonetheless. It sucks not being able to play a teenager anymore.”

“You want to be eighteen again?” Merry scoffed. “Those TV shows with people our age playing teens always creeped me out anyway.”

“I like having options in roles. I’m moving steadily into the father-of-the-lead category, and I hate feeling like my ship has likely already sailed.”

“You’re what? Not even thirty-five?”

“Thirty-three,” I admitted.

“My grandpa will tell you we’re still babies. He’s still surfing occasionally at eighty-three, has a whole flock of would-be girlfriends, and has had his greatest competitive success as a senior citizen surfer.” Merry waved his fork. “I don’t want to hear about too old.”

“Ok, I’ll be quiet.” I pressed my lips shut.

“I didn’t know you had an off switch,” Merry teased, an unexpected fondness to his tone.

“I don’t,” I admitted, snagging another piece of the steak. Again, Merry’s eyes were locked on my lips. This time, slowly, with great deliberation, I flicked my tongue out to lick my lower lip. Color bloomed on Merry’s cheeks. Yep, he was watching, all right.

Our gazes met, and there it was, another of those pesky moments where we could

touch or kiss or something. I had no clue how I'd reached the ancient age of thirty-three without better game, but I simply let the moment stretch awkwardly out. I wasn't going to lunge at him. That much was sure.

But I absolutely would keep on hoping for more moments, and maybe if I hoped hard enough, kissing could get added to our holiday agenda.

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Six

Good morning, ohana! This week's rainy weather has brought lots of puddles, and Mr. Can-Do requests students use the doormats and abstain from puddle jumping. As a break from the gloomy weather, Mr. Bell tells me our Lights Festival is coming right along. Mr. Winters has obtained a record number of food vendors for us!

MERRY

As I awaited the dismissal bell along with a class of antsy seventh graders done with sanding Lazy Susans for the day, I tried yet again to not think about Nolan. I could hear strains from the eighth grade choir filtering through my open classroom door, which didn't help. I wasn't actively avoiding Nolan, but I wasn't going out of my way to seek him out after our little food truck outing. The way I saw it, we could do much of our planning via text, and Nolan was far easier to turn down when he wasn't batting those chocolatey eyes at me or turning all his enthusiasm in my direction.

When he got excited, his pale skin flushed, and he spoke faster and louder, more New York coming out in his accent. He gestured with both hands and bounced around, and hell if I hadn't wanted to kiss him right there in the middle of the food truck pod when he'd acted like beef fried rice was akin to an oyster appetizer at a fancy steakhouse. I shouldn't enjoy his presence as much as I did, which was precisely why I'd spent most of the week avoiding him, sticking to lengthy texts about the program for the festival. Keeping it professional was for the best.

Despite not dating, I wasn't entirely celibate, but it wouldn't do to go snorkeling in school waters. And speaking of shark-infested waters, we had a faculty meeting after

school which meant no more dodging Nolan. And as it turned out, he showed up in my classroom, with the twins in tow, three minutes after the final bell.

Oh crap.

“Hey, there!” I kept my tone bright even as I eyed two very shifty-looking boys who followed Nolan into the room with sorrowful eyes. “Ready for our meeting?”

“I have plans for presenting our plans.” Smiling, Nolan held up a folder bulging with paper-clipped handouts. “But first we need to talk.” Expression turning more serious, he gestured at the boys. “Who would like to explain?”

“Legend...” Groaning, I leaned back in my chair near the front of the room.

“Who says it was my idea?” Legend looked around like there might be a flock of others to take responsibility for whatever the latest prank was.

“What, precisely, was not your idea?” I asked warily.

Legend pursed his lips and didn’t budge, but Ryder approached my desk with a reasonable tone that didn’t fool me for a moment.

“Mr. Bell had a stack of sheet music on the corner of his desk, and someone in first period?—”

“Not you two, naturally.” I gestured at the two of them.

“Of course not.” Ryder chirped like a parrot. “But... someone switched the music for the other classes with alternative Christmas carol lyrics. You know, funny stuff.”

“Funny,” I echoed, having a pretty decent idea of what they would find hilarious.

“Not funny.” Behind the boys, Nolan puffed up like one of the chickens who wandered all over North Shore. “I already have parents complaining about my song choices.”

“Maybe choose less controversial songs?” I suggested, even as I continued eyeing the guilty party.

“This isn’t about my taste.”

“True. This sounds like a case of sabotage.” Rising from my chair, I paced back and forth like a detective in front of my whiteboard. “Hmm. Who in first period might have access to a copy machine before school?”

“It was supposed to be a joke.” Ryder cracked first, as always.

“Hilarious waste of paper resources.” I shook my head, already calculating a trip to the store for a few reams of paper for the staff room. “I see a lot of chores in your future to replenish the supply closet for Principal Alana.”

“Did I hear my name?” The principal herself strolled into the room, and I braced for Nolan to report the twins’ latest transgression.

“Only good things.” Nolan shrugged. He might as well have added a whistle. Nothing to see here. Which I appreciated, but darn it, now I owed him for leaving me to handle the boys instead of another meeting with the principal and a potential write-up.

“Please tell me our resident pranksters aren’t giving you a hard time.” Principal Alana was no match for Nolan’s acting skills.

“Nothing I can’t handle.” Nolan shifted his folder to the other hand and offered her

his elbow like they were in a production of Mary Poppins. “Let’s head to the meeting, shall we?”

“We shall.” Charmed, Principal Alana let Nolan lead her toward the staff room.

“We’ll discuss your little paper swap more after my meeting.” I glared at both boys. “Might I suggest you work on your presents while I’m in the meeting? That wall hanging for Pop-Pop and Nana won’t paint itself.”

The boys were making a miniature surfboard with hooks for my parents for the holidays, and hopefully, arguing about paint colors would keep them busy.

“We’ll be good.” They looked so angelic I almost believed them. Almost.

As I arrived at the meeting, Nolan was already handing out packets of papers. “I brought handouts for everyone.”

Including me, as this was the first I was seeing said papers, but perhaps if I’d been a bit more diligent in opening Nolan’s attachments, I wouldn’t have been caught off-guard.

“What’s this?” Mark Masters, the band director, husband to Belinda the math teacher and twice as high-strung, waved one of the papers. He’d missed the last meeting because we shared him with the local high school. “The choir is opening? The band always goes first.”

“You’ll have more audience attention in this new order, I promise.” Nolan radiated enthusiasm even while under fire from many directions.

“There’s no play at all?” Belinda was also present, regretfully, and had a red pen out, making notes on Nolan’s proposed program.

“There’s a series of unrelated funny skits, but that makes it easier to follow and offers more parts for everyone.” Nolan gave her an encouraging look, but she didn’t look in the least inclined to budge. “I got buy-in from the various language arts teachers.”

That got several nods, but Belinda wasn’t done. “People come for the play.”

“But we’re not doing that play this year.” Principal Alana was the voice of calm control, as always.

“Pity.” Belinda sniffed.

“The band usually gets three numbers.” Mark continued to busily mark up his copy of the program. “Why do we only have two?”

“You left out one of the dance classes.” Mx. Lennox tapped a long nail on the table.

“My apologies.” Nolan whipped out a black marker to scrawl a bold note at the top of his packet. “Easily rectified.”

“What’s this about a color scheme?” Henry Little, who had to be one of the least imaginative people to ever teach language arts, held up a colorful sheet of paper.

“Ah. Yes. If we base all the classes’ offerings around some common elements, we’ll have more cohesion. I provided the mood board?—”

“A what?” Henry squinted at the page.

“It’s inspiration for you.”

“It’s a lot of blue and silver,” Ken Kehoe countered. “My art students tend to be much more free-spirited in color choices.”

Nolan exhaled hard but didn't have a chance to reply before Mark was back with a new set of complaints.

"Where are all the light strands coming from?" He tapped another sheet from the handouts. "This looks like a ton of lights."

And that part was on me. Even scaling back Nolan's big ideas, we would still need some holiday magic to pull off Nolan's vision.

"We'll get some more lights." I finally spoke up, unable to watch Nolan flounder a second longer. This faculty inquisition made me want to wrap an arm around him and shepherd him from the room. He might be a substitute and only in our school temporarily, but he didn't deserve to be caught in the middle of school politics. And for all they were grandiose and unrealistic, his plans had a certain undeniable energy. I'd given him a hard enough time myself. I didn't like watching others pile on. "And we'll obtain the necessary decorating items."

"Oh? With what extra budget?" Belinda gave another haughty sniff.

"Even with our limited funds, we can still do a lot if we shop carefully." Somehow, Nolan managed to keep his usual cheer. It was rather admirable, actually, and something unusually protective unfurled in my chest.

"And when are we shopping?" Mark scoffed, adding to his wife's stream of complaints. "It's almost Thanksgiving break."

"I know." I silenced them with a harsh stare. "Maybe Saturday, Mr. Bell and I could hit the big flea market and some other stops to look for cheap lights and supplies."

"Well, if you think it's feasible." Ken had my back on this, at least.

“It’s feasible,” I said with far more confidence than I felt. “Mr. Bell has worked hard on the plans and the program.”

“Exactly. We should give him a chance.” Principal Alana clapped her hands together. The grateful look Nolan shot me was worth promising away my Saturday. His eyes were wide and soft, and it was difficult to avoid thinking about what else might inspire that expression.

After the meeting, Nolan caught up to me in the hall. “Are we really going shopping on Saturday? Together?”

“We are.” I resisted the urge to clarify that it wasn’t a date. It wasn’t. He knew that. I didn’t need to point it out. However, my pulse kept speeding up like it hadn’t received the memo that this was all about practicality. “The flea market is huge. We wouldn’t want you getting lost in a stack of chocolate-covered macadamia nuts.”

“That sounds kinky.” Nolan laughed, but I didn’t because now I was picturing Nolan shirtless, holding a bottle of chocolate sauce...

And yeah, I really needed to switch off my brain.

“Wear comfortable shoes,” I said instead.

“Are you bringing the boys?”

“Not unless I want to part with all my money.” I laughed, but I was serious. The Honolulu Flea Market was a kid paradise—cheap plastic stuff everywhere, loads of food trucks, and tons of places eager to do business in T-shirts, candy, and more. I’d suggested it because the flea market was an awesome source of cheap Hawaiian-themed decor, but I knew better than to bring the boys. “They have a rock-climbing outing for the outdoor club, and thankfully, this isn’t my week to chaperone.”

“Rock climbing? Like with ropes and stuff?”

“Absolutely. They’ve been rappelling for years now. Swear Legend’s more comfortable in a harness and helmet than in the water, which is saying something.”

“I renew my bid for flying fairies.” Nolan winked at me. “Or maybe elves? Reindeer?”

“No one is flying,” I said firmly, even though my resolve to stay away from Nolan had taken a large flying leap out the window.

“Darn.” Nolan’s wide smile revealed dimples that had otherwise stayed hidden. Damn it. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could hold on to disliking a guy this cute, cheerful, and persistent.

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Seven

The sun! After all this week's rain, I'm sure everyone is delighted by this weekend's sunshine. Don't forget to sign up for parent/teacher conferences during Thanksgiving break.

NOLAN

I usually used Saturdays to recharge from all the sleep I sacrificed while teaching during the week, but Merry had to drop the boys off super early for their van ride up the coast for the climbing outing. Thus, I was up early, walking over to Cara and Craig's house. I started some decaf for Cara, made sure the snack cupboard was full, and promised to return in time to make dinner.

Make meaning order some takeout. Whatever. I'd take care of the meal so Cara didn't have to. Her large Southern family was descending upon us for Thanksgiving week, and I was not looking forward to it. The family was still miffed that she'd run away with a West Point cadet, and that was well over a decade ago. Plus, they hadn't much cared for me at the wedding or any time since. And, of course, Craig was still deployed, so I'd have to play host along with Cara.

At least I had today and the shopping with Merry to look forward to. He pulled into Cara's driveway in an ancient hatchback adorned with dozens of surfing-related stickers and a mount for boards or bikes on top. His large brown-haired shaggy dog sat in the passenger side seat. The dog and I regarded each other warily. His tongue lolled to one side. Clearly, he wasn't about to move.

“Barney.” Merry tapped the dog. “Get in the back.”

The dog moved as lazily as a middle schooler coming back from a restroom break, with zero urgency and much checking to see if Merry was serious about needing to give up his seat.

“Did you have breakfast yet?” Merry asked after the dog was situated in the center of the back seat. I slid into the passenger seat, practically feeling all the dog hair jumping onto my black walking shorts. Merry had demanded comfortable shoes, and I had found the most adorable pair of sensible little hikers to pair with the shorts and a multi-pocketed khaki shirt worthy of any expedition.

“Unless we’re counting half of Stella’s toaster pastry as real food, no.” I smiled hopefully at him.

“Good. Me neither, and I’m desperate for a coffee refill.” Merry put the car in reverse. He kept to a reasonable speed inside the subdivision, but as soon as we were on the larger roads, he zoomed around like any seasoned New York cabbie. “I know a place, and it’s right by this grocery store that may have lights.”

“A grocery store has holiday lights?” I had limited experience with most big-box stores, but in my experience, grocery stores and decorating didn’t usually go together.

“This is a local chain. They carry a little bit of everything.” Merry waved one hand, driving with the other, zigging and zagging between cars. “And today, their holiday section is finally up with a sale this weekend only. I cut the coupon out of the weekly circular, and I’ll stack it with one off the app. I’m hoping we can score some cheap lights.”

“Me too.” I bounced in my seat, both from the speed and my own excitement. As a tireless bargain hunter, I loved Merry’s thriftiness. “Smart by stacking deals. I never

pay full price for anything in my closet. Sample sales, secondhand shops, deep discounts.”

“Maybe you and Alyssa wouldn’t get along after all.” Merry chuckled. “My ex found sales tacky, like they reduced the designer cachet.”

“Tacky.” I snorted at the concept. “What even is the point if you can’t brag about how you scored something eighty percent off?”

“I agree on everything other than surfboards and seafood. You get what you pay for there.”

Merry pulled into an older strip mall with a gray-and-white motif. He clipped Barney to a leash, evidently intending for him to dine with us as well. The aforementioned grocery store took up most of the north end of the shopping center, while a few smaller businesses, including a breakfast spot, occupied the rest. The eatery was a cross between a diner and a food truck. It featured a walk-up window to order, no interior tables or service other than a cooler of drinks to one side of the counter, and barely enough space to turn around. Outside, an assortment of picnic tables jockeyed for space under a canopy.

“What do I order?” I whispered to Merry as we waited in a short line, studying the menu, which was scrawled on a whiteboard and featured descriptive names like The Big Hawaiian with four kinds of meat.

“Do you want sweet or savory?” Merry grabbed a can of the ubiquitous POG juice found everywhere on the island. “Sweet, you pretty much have to try the macadamia chocolate chip pancakes. They cover them in a custard sauce that is crazy good. Savory, you can’t go wrong with fried rice with a side of Portuguese sausage.”

“I can’t decide.” My sweet tooth wanted that custard sauce, but my waistline said I

needed protein. And my inner foodie wanted all of it. “Both, and we can split?”

“Sure.” Merry was as easygoing as always. “Oh, and the coffee here is drip, but it’s hot and good.”

“Are you warning me not to ask for hazelnut salted caramel oat creamer?” I teased.

Merry shuddered. “That such a thing exists is an abomination.”

I laughed lightly, relieved Merry drank coffee instead of running on some wheatgrass concoction like I’d initially assumed upon our first meeting. Merry was turning out to be so much more than that first impression. He might look the part of hot surfer dude, but he was also a compassionate teacher, a good dad, and a decent tour guide.

After we ordered, we took Merry’s can of juice and our coffee cups to one of the picnic tables. I gazed around the parking lot, which was enhanced by a truly gorgeous peach-and-aqua morning sky. A soft breeze whistled through, and there were just enough other patrons to tell me the place was good without it being overcrowded.

“I like this place already.”

“Yeah?” Merry asked with a suspicious tone to his voice. “Not missing your usual A-list spots?”

“I don’t make A-list money,” I admitted. “And any place halfway decent will have a long wait time. That’s just how it is in the city. Here, there are no lines and great weather. What’s not to love?”

“Come on. I know you miss the city.” Merry seemed determined to goad me for reasons that undoubtedly had to do with that ex of his.

“Eh. Not this time of year.” I stretched my neck from side to side. My overly crisp shirt tugged at the collar. “The city is crowded in the fall, gray and gloomy. Lots of rain, but no sun breaks like here. The holiday decorations will be up after Thanksgiving, but it’s cold, and people are more irritable than usual. I’m not a fan of snow either. Wet feet and cold noses. Yuck.”

“Wet feet. Cold nose. You just described Barney.”

“True.” I gingerly extended a hand toward the dog sitting near the end of the table, halfway between Merry’s side and mine. The dog offered a confused expression, undoubtedly sensing I had limited canine experience. I gave him a fast pat before returning my hand to my side. “I love spring in the city. Summer is hot and muggy. Fall is pretty awesome until you hit November. I love being able to get food in the middle of the night after a show.”

“Downtown Honolulu near Waikiki is pretty much twenty-four-seven, but otherwise, things tend to close early,” Merry agreed. “And it also depends on what food you’re looking for.”

“True. I do like New York’s bagels and pizza. But it’s also home and where I grew up.” I stared at the unfamiliar horizon, the pastel sky and palm trees. “I wouldn’t know what to do elsewhere. My first time flying anywhere was to see Craig when he was stationed down south.” I shot Merry a knowing grin. “Let me tell you, Hawaii is so much better than Florida.”

“The lack of alligators is appealing.”

“Very.” We laughed as our number was called. We fetched our food, huge portions of steaming pancakes, meat, and rice. “I may never need to eat again.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll burn it all off.” Merry gave an evil cackle as we arranged the

dishes between us so we could share. Cozy. Merry speared a piece of the dinner-plate-sized pancake drowning in sweet custard sauce. “So, city boy, you were never tempted to go the Hollywood actor route?”

“Never. I was a drama major at NYU, but my love of theater goes way back to my grandpa on my mom’s side.” I paused to savor a bite of the salty fried rice topped with a fried egg. Merry seemed inclined to keep listening, so I continued, “Our other grandfather and our parents are rather sporty types, like Craig, and they were always all about his academic and athletic accomplishments. But Pop-Pop?—”

“Wow.” Merry’s eyes went wide. “That’s what my kids call my dad.”

“Oh, that’s adorable. Anyway, Pop-Pop loved the theater, especially bargain matinees. And after my grandmother passed, he hated going alone, so I was drafted into going along. I loved the magic.”

“Don’t movies have way more special effects?” Merry had a drop of the custard sauce near his bristly chin, and I wanted to lick it off in the worst way.

“Not that kind of magic.” I waved my fork. “Real magic. The ability to transport the audience and help them use their imagination to enter another time and place. Movies often do too much of the work for you. But a good stage production envelops the audience into a shared experience. There’s nothing like it.”

“You certainly make a case for Broadway.” Merry nodded thoughtfully.

“And drama classes in schools.” I launched into my other passion. “I was lucky I had Craig because I was small and scrawny and very clearly not straight from birth onwards. Even in progressive New York schools, the bullies still found me. But they couldn’t touch me on stage. On stage, I could be a general, a president, a band leader, or a dashing aristocrat.”

“Yeah.” Merry’s voice took on a faraway yet gentle cast. “Or a fairy.”

“Or a fairy.” I chuckled along with him. “I did make a great Peter Pan, even if I would have rather played Hook.”

“Because you’re so menacing.” He pointed his butter knife at me.

“On stage, I can be,” I retorted. “That’s my point. On stage, in all the school productions, I got a break from being me. I could be whomever I wanted.” Warming to my subject, my voice rose, and I spoke faster. “I know people—even my own family—who think I do it for the attention. I do love an audience, but I do it for the kids in the audience who also need that escape.”

“I get that.” Merry was surprisingly solemn.

“I found my people in the theater crowd, and I simply wasn’t going to let them go.”

“That’s what I want for Ryder,” Merry said softly, looking down at the food. For once, I was quiet to see if he’d keep going. “I’ve always known I was pansexual, but I admit to a certain amount of het privilege, especially as a single dad. People just assume.”

“Not all of us can pass so easily.” I certainly couldn’t, and I suspected Merry knew that.

“Ryder was in kindergarten when he told me he was going to marry his best friend Troy. In fact, he told everyone who would listen. By third grade, I knew middle school would be a challenge, so I found Anuenue, moved into the one apartment in the district we could afford, and took the job to make doubly sure we’d get a spot. I want him to find his people.”

“He will.” I smiled encouragingly at him. “You’re a good dad. You already had a teaching certificate?”

“Not exactly. I did college when the boys were little, dabbling in various majors while Alyssa and I were still together. However, I worked construction on the side from high school on. I’ve always been handy.”

“I bet.”

“Uh-huh.” Ignoring my flirty tone, Merry continued, “Anuenue needed an industrial arts teacher, and I convinced Principal Alana that I could have a certification by fall. Spent that summer cramming classes in a post-bachelor program designed to get folks teaching licenses quickly to address the teaching shortage, and I got the job.”

“Wow. You really are an amazing dad.” I gazed at him, suddenly seeing the scruffy surfer dude in a warm, golden light, complete with a halo. “And a good teacher. The kids love you.”

“Eh.” He gave a humble shrug. “Turns out, teaching middle school isn’t much different from teaching surfing. Get them to trust you, make them laugh, and hope they learn a little something.”

“Yes,” I agreed, perhaps a little too enthusiastically. I’d already been attracted to Merry for reasons only my libido understood, but now I had an ocean-sized crush on the single dad who’d changed his entire life’s direction for his kid. And we had a whole day in front of us for another of those moments to erupt.

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Eight

As we gather for parent-teacher conferences in the coming days, let us remember the power of positive words and a positive attitude. Along those lines, please remember teachers love praise as well!

MERRY

Nolan illuminated was a thing of beauty. After breakfast, we obtained as many clear lights as the grocery store offered, but it wasn't the hundreds of little bulbs that lit Nolan up. No, it was his inner enthusiasm for absolutely everything. He'd relished the breakfast offerings, exclaimed over every knick-knack in the touristy section of the grocery store, and been his usual charming self at our stop by a fabric warehouse I'd used before for bargain fabrics and things like fake flowers.

Thanks to Nolan's bottomless appetite for all things holiday, we left the fabric store with about double what we'd budgeted for before we ever even reached the flea market. The weekly flea market took place on the grounds of a large football stadium. After we parked, Nolan's joy became a palpable thing, a happy little creature, complete with wiggles as he took in the rows of pop-up tents that wrapped around the outside of the stadium.

"This is unbelievable." His eyes were wider than our pancakes had been and equally sweet.

"You're like one of the kids. Or possibly Barney." I glanced down at Barney, who was also all wiggly, dancing on his leash as he sensed incoming petting, treats, and

other dogs.

“It’s hard not to be excited.” Nolan gestured widely. “Tents as far as the eye can see.” Not waiting for me or Barney, he marched straight ahead. “And the smells!”

“How are you hungry again?” I followed him to the nearest shaved-ice stand.

“Told you. Vacation mode.” He gave me a toothy grin. “When my family took our annual vacation to the Jersey shore, Craig and I always gorged on all the bad-for-us foods we didn’t get the rest of the year.”

“Nice.” I had to chuckle as he ordered a large shaved ice in a rainbow of tropical flavors with condensed milk and ice cream.

“Of course, you pretty much grew up in vacation mode.” Nolan made eating shaved ice into an erotic adventure with each spoonful, and I had to look away from his mouth. “How could you not want to eat Hawaiian shaved ice every day?”

“Now you even sound like one of my kids.”

“They’re onto something.” Continuing to hold his shaved ice, Nolan darted ahead to a huge booth of cheap T-shirts offered in multiples of five. “Oooh, look at these shirts.” He held up a youth-sized shirt with a cartoon of Santa lounging on a beach. “Perfect for our dancing surfer Santas.”

“I’m not sure the budget?—”

“It’s my contribution.” Nolan was already grabbing various sizes of shirts. Undoubtedly realizing he had a big sale on his hands, the booth owner came over to help, and Nolan left with two bags bulging with T-shirts. For a city slicker, he was actually pretty awesome. Listening to him talk about why he was so passionate about

being on stage had given me fresh insight into what made him tick—and it wasn't brands or fame. Rather, I saw an older version of Ryder, who was also a surprisingly vulnerable, complex man.

And the more I understood Nolan, the more appealing he became, which was a big problem. I much preferred when I could dismiss him as another upwardly mobile tourist type. As it turned out, he wasn't nearly so obnoxious. I was glad he had the bags because otherwise, I might have been tempted to do something stupid like hold his hand. Instead, I tightened my grip on Barney's leash as Nolan darted to a coffee stall.

"And coffee! I should get some beans for when my folks come at Christmas. Of course, they are such coffee snobs. They might not appreciate the gift." He twisted his mouth in an adorable display of thinking hard. "And I know better than to get coffee for Cara's family, who's descending upon us for Thanksgiving. They'll bring their preferred brand because they won't trust us to have it."

"You don't get along with Cara's family?" I asked because his expression was as sour as I'd seen it.

"They're affluent Southerners who don't have much patience for me. They'll help with the kids, spoiling them rotten in the process, but they have opinions on everything. And forget pleasant distractions. They'll likely have football on all weekend."

"Poor baby." I made a sympathetic noise, but it did sound like torture for someone like Nolan, who wanted everyone to like him.

"And don't get me started on politics." He gestured with his spoon. "We can discuss the kids and the weather. That's it."

“I’m sorry. I’m heading up to North Shore with the boys, but feel free to text me your complaints.”

“Really?” He brightened at the prospect.

“Yeah. After all your festival texts, my phone might not know what to do without you blowing it up.”

“I like that.” He revealed those rarely-seen dimples before squealing and approaching a booth of nothing but Hawaiian-themed Christmas items. “Oh my gosh, we’ve found the motherlode.”

“That’s certainly a lot of Christmas kitsch.” I agreed, bracing for many more bags to carry.

“And these can be prizes!” He held up bags of keychains and whistles before moving to a display of signs and banners. “Oooh, here’s a banner.”

“The budget?—”

“I have vacation money,” he said archly. “Allow me to spend it.”

“All right.” I’d long since learned not to argue with anyone in vacation mode.

“Smart man. Don’t argue with the husband.” The booth owner, an older woman with a Japanese accent, shook an arthritic finger at me.

“Um...” I wasn’t sure how to gracefully correct her. It had been years since I’d been part of any sort of couple, years since I’d wanted to be. But I could also see Nolan’s appeal for someone who wanted that. He’d said he was a bit much, and I’d teased him back, but really, he was sweet enough to counter his high-maintenance tendencies.

“Honey, he should be so lucky.” Nolan, on the other hand, simply grinned back at her as he continued piling things near the booth’s makeshift register station. Several bags of decor and stops at two more booths later, Nolan started scanning the horizon. “Is there a restroom anywhere here?”

“Yes, closer to the stadium. I’ll show you.” I led the way back from the rows of tents through the maze of parking lots to the restrooms at the entrance to the stadium itself. This area had some trees for shade and was more secluded than the crowds navigating the tents.

Once Nolan returned from the restroom, he settled on an empty bench near an overhang of the stadium roof, apparently in no hurry to return to shopping.

“I want to look at our haul.” He spread all the bags out in front of him, bending forward to riffle through them, clucking over this or that find. I’d been to the flea market dozens of times with friends, family, and the boys, but I’d never quite seen the magic of the place until I tried looking through Nolan’s eyes.

“That is a pretty cool banner.” I gestured at the large holiday banner with pictures of lights wrapped around palm trees on either end. The movement brought me closer to Nolan than I’d intended, especially when he suddenly straightened.

“It is,” he said softly, looking deep into my eyes. His lips parted with a sigh. I did a quick glance around us. We were as alone as two people could be out in the open at a crowded event, blocked from view by some concrete pylons. “Merry?”

That little question, the implied, what are we doing here , got me. It’d been much easier to resist Nolan when all I could see was a stuck-up city slicker. But this Nolan, the quietly vulnerable one who found beauty in booths of odds and ends and delight in shaved ice, was a siren. And I was a ship at sea about to wreck, reckless and helpless in the face of his pull.

I scooted closer. Nolan didn't back away. In fact, he slowly smiled as I leaned in. No shy flower, he leaned in too, meeting me halfway. I brushed my lips across his, a little hello, just to see. And what I found was intoxicating. His lips were supple, a soft landing spot that turned my brief intention into a lingering introduction.

"Wow." Nolan breathed the word against my lips, and I kissed him again, this time with more purpose. And wow, indeed. Kissing him was like diving into my favorite shaved-ice flavor after a decade of not tasting it. I'd forgotten how much I liked this, simply kissing. Nolan was sweet with layers of sensation, and I couldn't get enough.

And he kissed me back, not waiting for me to take charge, but an equal give-and-take that swept me along until there was a hooting sound off in the distance and we sprang apart.

"Fuck." I braced my hands on my knees. "I didn't mean to do that."

"I did." Nolan chuckled before sobering. "Let me guess, you want to pretend it didn't happen?"

"No, it definitely did." I groaned. My phone buzzed with an alarm, warning me about picking up the boys. "And crap. I have to pick up the twins soon."

"To be continued?" Nolan suggested lightly.

"Maybe," I said even as my body said hell, yes. Luckily, I had the upcoming Thanksgiving break to figure out what the hell to do about this Nolan problem.

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Nine

Happy Thanksgiving week break, ohana! Please be safe and return well-rested and ready to work on our holiday festival!

NOLAN

I thought about kissing Merry pretty much nonstop during Thanksgiving week. I remembered his taste while menu planning with Cara. I thought about his husky groans while Cara, I, and all three kids did the biggest shopping trip of my entire life. We had groceries upon groceries, and still, I thought of Merry as I put them all away. I visualized his expression while slicing and dicing under Cara's watchful eye and recalled his touch while we awaited her family. And perhaps not surprisingly, my thoughts slipped from wanting to missing as I walked the tightrope of limited conversation topics with Cara's family. Finally, on Thursday morning, while the kitchen was a disaster of food prep and loud relations, I gave in and texted Merry.

He'd said I could, so I did while hidden in an alcove. I was usually the life of the party, but not today.

I'm in hell, but at least there's mac-n-cheese.

Gratifyingly, his reply was fast.

We've got mac salad. Mom's oven space is at a premium.

Are they watching football at your place? Please say no.

No.

I could almost hear Merry laughing at me.

We surfed this morning. Now Dad's messing with the grill while the shrimp marinates, and the boys are watching old surfing videos with Grandpa.

No turkey?

I asked while picturing Merry surfing. Shirtless. Muscles rippling.

I don't want to tell you what Cara paid for this one here.

I bet. No, we always do shrimp because it's cheaper and mom's favorite, rice, mac salad, pineapple salsa, but the real star is mom's pies.

I almost groaned aloud.

I love pie, but the ones here are all store-bought.

Blasphemy. My mom's lemon meringue made with eggs from their backyard is where it's at.

That sounds divine.

I wanted to add that I wanted to taste the pie on his lips even more, but I wasn't sure where we stood, let alone how flirty I should be.

Are you surviving the relative invasion?

I smiled, happy Merry was trying to keep the conversation going.

Barely. Oh, and tomorrow, I have a choice of an eight-hour tour with Cara's relatives and the girls, shopping with Cara, the baby, and her painfully opinionated mom, or staying home alone.

Merry's reply came quickly again.

If you're that miserable, come up to North Shore. Catch an early bus, and I'll meet you at the bus stop near the Polynesian Center.

Huh. Public transit on the island was slow and unreliable, unlike New York. However, Merry was inviting me. That had to mean something, right? And I really did want to escape. Cara had plenty of help, and I could do more for her after her family left next week.

I could do that...

Good. We'll save you some pie.

I spent a long time staring at that good . Did he truly want me to come? Did this mean he was down with more kissing because I really, really wanted to kiss him again.

If you can stay over, you can ride back with me and the boys.

I glanced heavenward. Lord, please, please, please let there be only one bed available for us both. Not likely, but a guy could dream.

Sounds like a plan.

I grinned widely while thinking it sounded very much like a date.

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Ten

Just a reminder, ohana, that surfing is not a valid excuse for missing class! Catch all those waves on break, and see us back bright and early Monday morning!

NOLAN

The commute to North Shore Oahu was an adventure. I started by taking a bus from the base, then transferring to one heading to the North Shore area. I'd packed a small leather backpack with essentials for an overnight, but what had seemed sporty in New York seemed out of place here, along with myself. Not liking that thought, I let myself indulge in people-watching instead. My fellow passengers heading out of Honolulu included workers bound for the various North Shore resorts, thrifty tourists balancing stacks of luggage, students, and surfers toting boards that took up the aisle on the bus.

As we left Honolulu, the landscape changed rapidly from suburbs and strip malls to lush green scenery and small houses here and there. Then, almost like magic, the ocean appeared on my right, first little glimpses, then more frequent views and public beaches dotted with post-Thanksgiving tourists. And more surfers. Every colorful surfboard made me think of Merry, who was meeting me in one of the little towns along our way north. The weather changed too, windier and chillier, but the sun was out, the sky somehow even bluer than usual, and the day seemed full of possibilities.

The farther north we went, the more rural the surroundings appeared, simpler houses in pastel colors, none of the new construction with manicured yards like around the base. Curiously, there were tons of free-roaming chickens. At first, I thought one

must have escaped from a backyard coop, but no, others kept cropping up, and when I exited the bus, there were several milling about like this was simply an average Friday in chicken land.

“Hey there.” Merry’s smile seemed warmer than usual as he greeted me. Barney sat by his side and also offered a furry greeting. “How was the trip? And are you hungry?”

“The trip was rather enjoyable. And I’m starving.” A particularly bold chicken walked right up to a group of tourists collecting their luggage from the bus. “What’s with the chickens? They’re everywhere.”

“They live here.” Merry shrugged. Barney also seemed disinterested in the barnyard fowl roaming around. “And if you find animals interesting, I have the lunch spot for you.”

“I’m intrigued.” I followed him and Barney to his car, where I stowed my bag next to Barney in the backseat. Merry drove us to a large, colorful collection of food trucks that had taken over an old sugar mill. We wandered a bit with Barney on his leash, checking out the different trucks, including one in an old-school bus, but when it came time to pick, Merry directed me to a burger place that not only had chickens lurking nearby but also several giant pigs. They were huge, way bigger than I’d ever pictured a pig, and surprisingly friendly, wandering between the picnic tables. Barney didn’t so much as bark, staying right at Merry’s heels. “Do the pigs live here too?”

“Yep. Don’t try to pet them.” Merry laughed, pulling me into the line for the burger place. “You want the loaded fries here. Trust me.”

“Carbs...” I studied the menu, not seeing many alternatives that would be virtuous.

“We’ll walk it off.” Merry was in a take-charge mood, and I was here for it, letting

him order for both of us and relishing the results. Crispy fries. Melty cheese. Perfection. In the end, only a couple of fries were left for Merry to hand to Barney.

After we finished our food, Merry asked, “You wanna see the boys surf? Dad took them out earlier this morning.”

“Yes! I haven’t seen the beach much since I arrived.”

“That’s a travesty.” Merry shook his head, and given our present scenery, I was inclined to agree. I really should have been exploring more. He drove us farther north to a wide beach populated with a lot of surfers along with families with kids in wetsuits toting smaller boards.

“Oh my gosh, yes, I should have visited way more beaches if they all look like this.” I gazed off into the vast horizon, taking in the cloudless blue sky, the tawny sand, scrubby trees, and all the colorful people.

“It’s a bit of a hike to where Dad and the boys are, but it will be worth it.” Merry led us away from the bulk of the crowd, walking easily across the sand while I trudged along. Even Barney was faster than me, especially once Merry unclipped him so he could frolic on an open stretch of beach.

“Ugh.” I made an undignified noise.

“Walking on wet sand is easier.” He stepped closer to the ocean’s edge, and I followed, only to leap back as cool water touched my sandals.

“The water’s coming for me,” I yelped.

“Here, hold my hand.” Merry used a patient tone as he held out a hand. “Don’t want you drowning on my watch.”

“I won’t.” I meant that literally, but I instinctively knew he would never intentionally hurt me or let harm come to me.

“Dad! Mr. Bell!” The twins raced across the sand, followed by an older version of Merry with white streaks in his blond hair and more wrinkles on his tanned skin.

“Nolan, this is my dad, Ari.” Merry made the introductions.

“Welcome!” Ari had a big, booming voice. Where Merry was long and lean, his father had more of a barrel chest and broader torso, but they had the same mischievous grins as the twins and the same captivating eyes. “Are we going to get you on a board?”

“I doubt it.” Merry cast a skeptical eye over me. “A boogie board, maybe?”

“I’m happy to just be a spectator,” I said brightly.

“Okay, you watch us. You too, Dad.” The boys dashed after their grandfather, picking up surfboards and paddling out into the ocean farther than I would have thought feasible.

“Wow. This is incredible. Look at them swim.” And if I thought the feat of swimming was remarkable, the boys and their grandfather actually stood up on the boards, catching a wave and riding back toward us. “And surf!”

“You’re almost more fun to watch than the boys.” Merry chuckled.

It hadn’t escaped my notice that despite the fact that we were now seated on the sand, a safe distance from the edge of the ocean, he continued to hold my hand. His hand was warm and solid against mine, giving me a cozy feeling that started in my stomach and radiated outwards.

After the boys did a few more rounds, the twins rushed back toward us, wet, sandy, and happy with broad grins.

“Can we show Mr. Bell Pop-Pop’s house?” Ryder’s chin jutted out like he was prepared to beg.

“That’s the plan.” Merry tussled Ryder’s hair.

“And you can call me Nolan when we’re not at school,” I added.

“Cool.” Ryder’s eyes went wide, evidently liking this privilege. “I’m riding with you and Mr.—Nolan.”

“Okay.” Merry took charge of the boys’ boards as we all made our way back to the parking lot. Merry’s dad and Legend loaded into a battered Jeep while Ryder rode with us and Barney.

Merry’s parents lived right off the main road, behind their Silver Surfer shop. The shop looked older than the house beyond it, perhaps 1960s in origin, but both appeared to have been added onto in random decades in haphazard ways. The property had a certain rustic charm. The side of the surf shop had a huge mural of a grandfather-aged person surfing, while the house was pale blue with white trim. Rather than the vague Mediterranean styling of Cara and Craig’s subdivision, the overall aesthetic could best be described as simple and beachy. Towels and swimsuits hung from a line in the yard that was more sand than plant life. Various yard ornaments in bright colors added to the eclectic vibe.

“Merry! Introduce me to your teacher friend!” A woman with a long gray braid with auburn streaks, wearing a hibiscus print apron over a swimsuit and cutoff shorts, came onto the porch.

“Geez, Mom. Give us a minute to get out of the car.” Merry gave a good-natured laugh before making a fresh round of introductions, complete with hugs from his mother.

“I heard you like pie.” Merry’s mom, Sharon, ushered us into her kitchen. Like the house, it reflected different time periods between mismatched appliances and counters, but there was an overall hominess I dug. And beyond the kitchen was a living room with not one but two indoor hammocks.

“I shouldn’t have told her you love pie because she made more today.” Merry shook his head fondly. “Hope you’re hungry.”

“I could eat,” I said gamely.

“Excellent.” An older man with snow-white hair leaning on a green cane with a parrot on top strode into the room. Despite not looking much older than Merry’s father and having the firm handshake of a much younger man, he was introduced as the grandfather of the family. He had a mischievous grin identical to the one Legend used. “You can call me Grandpa. I could eat too.”

Several pieces of lemon meringue, key lime, and pineapple chiffon later, I was stuffed to the gills. However, the boys dragged me for a long walk through the neighborhood, which was a mix of housing and stores, and down to the beach. The more I saw, the more I liked this little community. It was an entirely different feeling than I was used to, almost like landing on a different planet compared to Manhattan, but I liked it.

When we returned, Merry’s dad grilled us yet more food for dinner while his mother played classic rock and broke out a stack of board games. I liked his family immensely, so much that I almost forgot the question of where I was going to sleep.

“Can Mr. Bell sleep in the bunkroom with us?” Ryder asked after I’d let him and Legend win at a card game with a unicorn theme. Merry’s mother had given me a whirlwind tour of the house earlier. The bunk room was a long, narrow room on the first floor with two sets of built-in bunk beds on either side, enough to house a whole crew of surfers or a couple of rowdy grandkids.

“Nah.” Merry gave another of those easy shrugs of his. “He’s too old for bunk beds. He can share with me. Plenty of room upstairs.”

“Splendid.” Merry’s mother clapped her hands together, and I decided that perhaps I did believe in holiday miracles, especially if Merry’s room came with a door that locked.

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Eleven

Teachers, another reminder that the break room is not a nap room. And that old couch is most decidedly not built for two!

MERRY

I had no idea what possessed me to say Nolan could share my old room. It had precisely one bed and a too-small loveseat, which my mother knew full well and was why she was beaming. She'd said many times since Alyssa left that she just wanted me to be happy. At least she wasn't overtly teasing, though that would come later. I could have joined the boys in the bunk room, taken a hammock, the swing on the porch, or hell, even the bathtub or my car because sharing with Nolan was going to be torture.

Nolan, however, didn't seem in the least put out, happily following me up the stairs after we'd said goodnight to the boys and endured more than one wink from my mother. My parents and Grandpa had ground-floor rooms. Thank goodness for small mercies. Also, Nolan's usual enthusiasm made it hard to stay mad at my impulsiveness.

"Oh, you have your own balcony!" He looked around my room, undoubtedly noticing the single queen-sized bed but focusing on the balcony where I'd spent many a teen hour gazing at the sunset while lying in the hammock.

"And my own bathroom." I gestured at the door to the side of the closet. "Perks of being an only kid."

“It’s an adorable room.” He smiled at the same posters of famous surfers I’d had up since forever, most of which had originally hung in the store as ads for various surf products. My tie-dyed bedspread was ancient, but it had faded to a softness that would be hard to duplicate with something new.

“That’s one way to say my mom hasn’t redecorated the space since I was fourteen.” I chuckled, caught up in Nolan’s excitement as always. “She keeps threatening to turn it into a guest suite or yoga studio, but she never does.”

“Well, seriously, I love it.” He grinned back. “My place in New York is a total hodgepodge of vintage finds and stuff my parents discarded during redecorating flurries at their place.”

Whipping out his phone, he flipped to pictures of a cozy little studio that was nothing like I’d imagined. No designer minimalist space, no leather and chrome. A bed in the corner was made up with more throw pillows than any one person should own, but each pillow was different. No matchy-matchy anywhere in the studio.

“I like it.” My gaze darted around the room as I tried to decide at what point I should address the only-one-bed issue.

“I’m glad.” Nolan peered at me curiously. “You seem nervous. Are you regretting saying we could share your room?”

“No, it’s fine. I’m fine.” I looked down at my feet, shuffling like this was the first time I’d had another person up here.

“We don’t have to do anything,” Nolan said earnestly.

“I know,” I groaned. Nolan took a step toward the loveseat.

“I’m probably short enough for this.” He fluffed a cushion like that might magically make the loveseat longer.

“You are not.” The moon was out and a soft breeze whispered through the night. And then Nolan smiled softly, and I was a total goner. Not allowing myself time to overthink, I pulled him toward me and kissed him in one smooth move. He was as sweet as I remembered, melting into my embrace.

“That felt like something.” Hands on my sides, he pulled back to beam up at me.

“It wasn’t nothing,” I admitted.

“If you kiss me again, I won’t tell anyone.” He winked at me, all playful. There was no way I was resisting him any longer.

“You’ll be my secret Santa?” I teased, holding him close.

“You can stuff my stocking anytime.” He waggled his eyebrows at me.

“Maybe...” I sucked my lower lip in. “Maybe we could do this thing just for December.”

Nolan made an indignant noise. “December is days away. How about we start now?”

“Someone’s impatient.” I gave him a fast kiss. “And just warning you now, the house isn’t soundproof.”

“I can be quiet.” He was all earnest, but I wasn’t buying it.

“You? You’re used to playing to a packed theater.” I faked a scoff as I went and locked my door.

“And I live in a little studio with neighbors,” he countered before sauntering to the bed. “Come on, let’s get in bed.”

“You’re hard to resist, you know that?” I let him pull me over to where he stood at the foot of the bed.

“Well, something’s hard.” Nolan gleefully pointed at my fly.

“Yeah, you tend to have that effect.”

“Do I?” Nolan cooed, all pleased with himself. He pushed at my T-shirt until I shrugged it off. “You don’t have any tats? I thought all surfers were tatted up.”

“Fear of needles.” I pursed my lips, bracing for the inevitable teasing or minimizing. “It’s silly.”

“I can see having that fear.” Nolan stroked a hand down my chest. “It’s not silly. I’m over thirty and still prefer to sleep with a light on somewhere in the apartment.”

“I’ll leave a light on for you.” I kissed him softly, a thank you for understanding.

In keeping with his impatience theme, Nolan shoved the rest of my clothing off, but I took my time with him, unbuttoning his short-sleeve shirt. Despite the dark hair on his head, he had sparse body hair and more freckles than I would have expected. I let my fingers play connect-the-dots on my way past his small pink nipples to the waistband of his shorts.

I made a show of slowly undoing his fly, loving the way he let out a low hiss. His cock was a perfect fit for my hand, and I jacked it a few times before releasing it in favor of launching myself onto the bed.

“Now, let’s see how quiet you can be.” I patted the bed next to me. Despite my teasing, I wasn’t that worried about noise, and I was game for pretty much whatever Nolan might want.

“You know there’s one way to ensure I’m quiet.” Kneeling next to me, he danced his fingers down my chest, following them with a suggestive kiss right in the center of my chest.

“A shovel?” I couldn’t resist joking. “Or a gag?”

“Ha.” He licked his way down my belly, teasing my stripe of hair there. “How about we keep my mouth busy?”

“I like that idea even better.” I stifled a groan as Nolan wasted no time in swallowing my cock. And for a guy who could barely swim, he sure had impressive lung capacity, sinking all the way to my base and staying there until I was panting.

He made a sexy picture as well, kneeling over me, expression one of deep concentration. I pulled both pillows behind my head so I could better watch. Glancing up, he met my gaze with knowing eyes and held it as he retreated up my shaft a millimeter at a time.

“Holy hell,” I moaned as he slid back down, mouth soft and giving, tongue in on the fun. Staying power was usually something I could count on, but not if Nolan was this determined to win a Tony award in cocksucking...

“Now who’s loud?” Nolan raised his eyebrows at me.

“Trying not to be,” I muttered. My efforts were made that much more difficult as he discovered that teasing directly below the cockhead with his tongue got me wriggling against the cotton sheets. “Okay, that’s sexy as fuck.”

“Shush.” Nolan made the sound right against my cock, and a shiver raced up my spine. And then he went deep again, and of course, I moaned softly because he felt so damn good. If he stopped again, I was going to throw something, possibly him.

“That.” I let a desperate sound escape my throat as he found a devastating rhythm. He made eye contact again, letting me see how much he was enjoying himself, how his whole focus was on this and nothing else, and how very much he wanted me to come.

“Gonna...” I whispered.

“I certainly hope so.” Nolan doubled down on going deep and sucking hard while somehow managing extra friction under the head.

“Yeah.” I turned my face into the pillow, biting it as I came in perfect waves, the kind I wanted to surf forever, carrying me high on pleasure and setting me softly back down again.

“What do you want for you?” I asked huskily. I wasn’t sure I could muster enough spit to blow him properly, but I’d sure as hell try.

“What I always want.” Nolan gave an easy laugh. “An audience.”

He swung a leg across my thighs, straddling me. He peered down, evidently pleased at his handiwork of reducing me to a boneless puddle.

“You stay right there, looking blissed out,” he ordered as he started to stroke his cock. A true performer, he used long strokes and let his head fall back, revealing his neck and making one erotic picture.

“Fuck, you’re hot, Nolan.” Ignoring his command to lie back, I reached for his thighs, holding on as he stroked faster and faster.

“Thank you,” he said primly as if he wasn’t jerking off over me after just sucking my every last brain cell out through my cock. He added a little twist at the top of his strokes. “God, this feels good. I like you watching me.”

“I’m watching, all right.” I held his gaze as he had with me, staring deep into his eyes, which was a mistake because damn if I didn’t feel a connection that went much deeper than sex.

“Oh, your eyes,” Nolan gasped, and no way could I look away. “Keep looking at me.”

“That’s it. Get yourself there.” I urged him on by caressing his flexing thighs and giving all the eye contact he craved. “Give me a good show.”

“Oh.” His mouth fell open and his eyes went glassy as he came, painting my abs with his come. A wave of pure delight crossed his face, and he laughed. “Oh wow.”

“Are you always so happy when you come?” I had to ask because the laughter was a first for me, but I liked it. A lot. And I couldn’t wait to inspire it again.

“Pretty much.” He chuckled again as he collapsed next to me.

“Good. I like it. I like you happy.” I dropped a kiss on his head.

“I aim to please,” Nolan said archly before I retrieved a towel from the bathroom to wipe off my stomach. I stretched out next to him, and he flopped his head onto my shoulder like we’d done this a thousand times before.

“Good night, Nolan.” I flipped off the light to sleep and so he wouldn’t see how much I liked this familiarity and cozy cuddles. I inhaled deeply, trying to memorize Nolan’s scent and warmth. If our arrangement was only for the holidays, I wanted to make the

most of this unexpected connection, no matter how much it was likely to hurt in the end.

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Twelve

For those families new to our school and the base community, a suggestion to get out and explore, especially as we head into December. The waves should be epic!

NOLAN

I awoke to a dark room and Merry pushing on my shoulder. True to his word, he'd left the bathroom light on for me, but the outside lighting seemed like the middle of the night.

"Wake up," he whispered.

"It's still dark," I moaned and tried to roll back over, but Merry wouldn't let me. I was all warm and snuggly and sleepy from a middle of the night slow make-out session that had led to grinding off together. Two stupendous orgasms had rendered me near comatose, but Merry was determined.

"It won't be dark much longer, and I want to show you something."

Well, now I was intrigued. If Merry wanted to share something, I wanted to see it, even if it meant leaving the soft bed for a chilly pre-dawn morning. I pulled on fresh clothes and followed him and Barney in tiptoeing down the stairs. He paused in the kitchen to grab Barney's leash, a thermos, and a small bag of food.

"Is that coffee?" I asked hopefully.

“Yep, and banana bread for first breakfast if you hurry.”

“First breakfast? As in, we’re having multiple? I’m in.” And also charmed. So very charmed by this scruffy surfer leading me into the dark yard. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” He headed to his car, Barney close behind, and I followed. We drove farther north, the sky gradually lightening as we zipped along.

“This is pretty.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet.” Chuckling, Merry fiddled with the stereo, putting on a playlist with easy island vibes.

“Should we have brought the boys?” Much as I liked this alone time, I didn’t want to leave them out.

“They’ve seen this spot before.” Merry waved his right hand as he drove on. “Dad’s taking them back out surfing, then we’re all meeting back up in Haleiwa for second breakfast. And maybe I wanted you all to myself for a little while.”

“Okay.” I preened in my seat, liking that declaration far more than I should have. “Thank you.”

“Are you always so willing to try new things, or is that more vacation mode?” he asked carefully.

“Hmm.” I gave the question the attention it deserved. “I’ve always been an optimist. And I’m a creature of habit, but I also enjoy spontaneity. The thing about theater is you give your all to a particular show for months at a time, then take a deep breath and tackle something new. And in the city, I’ll have a beloved takeout spot, but inevitably, a new place opens up, and suddenly, there is a new favorite. Also, living

alone as an extrovert means being willing to try things out of necessity.”

“Well said.” Merry nodded. “I guess I’m more the habit type. Same breakfast foods, same island, same orders at my favorite spots. But I like how you seem to tackle everything with the gusto. Like now, considering you didn’t want to get up early.”

“Oh, I’m up now.” I gestured at the gorgeous dawn enveloping us. “This is more than worth waking early for. And you.”

“And me.” The tips of Merry’s ears turned pink. “I love early morning trips. No traffic and anything feels possible.”

“Indeed.” I looked around us, deep blue ocean, shadows of palm trees, other foliage ruffled by a passing breeze. “And everything feels extra beautiful.”

“Exactly.” Merry kept going past several smaller and smaller and then downright teeny towns, and then?—

“Oh my gosh, we just literally ran out of road.” I stared at the barrier in front of us before Merry turned into a small parking area.

“We did. This is the northernmost tip of the highway. No more road.” He parked the car. “And there’s something about this view in the morning.”

The sky was streaked with blue and pink, the world awakening, and all I could do was nod. The beach below us was rocky and deadly-looking, churning sea and jagged cliffs and all. Merry hopped out of the car, taking Barney and the coffee with him, leaving me to follow. The wind slapped me as soon as I opened my door, and it was so gusty I had to think about each step on the uneven earth.

“I should have brought a jacket. It’s so windy.”

“Here.” Merry fetched a plaid throw from the back of the car. He wrapped it along with himself around me. “I’ll keep you warm.”

“Okay.” I gave a happy wriggle against him. “I see now why you love it so much up on North Shore.”

“Yeah, I’ll never leave Oahu.” There was a warning in his tone not to ask or dream of such a thing.

“I know.” I matched his solemn tone, letting him hold me anyway. I was nothing if not reckless. He dropped a kiss against my neck, and it truly felt like we were the only two people on the island.

I could have stood there gazing at the ocean for hours, but eventually, Merry plied me with coffee and banana bread. We sat in the hatchback, and I couldn’t help my near-orgasmic noises at the sweet bread with a subtle tang.

“Oh, this bread is good,” I moaned.

“Told you it was worth getting up for.” Merry’s voice was smug before turning more thoughtful. “My mom made it fresh last night. She likes you.”

“Moms often do.” I shrugged. “I’ve had several short-term boyfriends whose mothers messaged me long after the guy moved on.”

“That’s both sweet and sad.” Merry pulled me closer. “I can’t take the role forever, but I like the only-for-the-holidays idea. I wanna do last night again.”

“Me too.” I leaned in for a kiss. It started light, almost chaste, but then he deepened it. Or maybe I did. It didn’t matter because we were kissing like the world might end any second. We kissed and kissed and watched the ocean until the sunrise turned into

a bright morning and my heart was as full as I could remember.

“I don’t want to go back,” I said laughingly, but I was also serious. New York seemed like a distant memory and Merry the most important discovery I’d ever made.

“We have to. We’re almost out of coffee.” Merry chuckled along with me. “And I’ll get you real breakfast in Haleiwa, and then we can watch the morning surfers some before your real favorite activity.”

“More sex?” I asked hopefully.

“That too.” His cheeks were pink again. “But I meant shopping. Haleiwa is full of touristy shops. You’ll love all the kitsch, I’m betting.”

“I’m sure I will.” And I was also sure I was falling for him, fast and hard, and the rocks below our fling were even more treacherous than this strip of beach, but heck if I could stop it.

Thirteen

Welcome back, ohana! I trust you all had a good week off, and now comes our big December push to end the year. Yes, our holiday festival is forefront of our minds, but academics are also key as we strive to finish the year strong! No missing work!

MERRY

After the Thanksgiving weekend on North Shore, returning to school on Monday was painfully hard. And okay, that wasn't all that was hard. Every private moment was now filled with flashbacks of Nolan and our time together. Surprisingly, I didn't simply remember the sex, him blowing me or our couple of sneaky make-out sessions, hot as they had been. I also thought about the endless talking, the walking on the beach, the waking up early, the eating my mom's pies, and the snuggling in bed. We'd said this thing was only for the holidays, but I had no idea what our little fling might look like back at work, with real-world responsibilities and deadlines bearing down on us.

Case in point: I was presently supervising eighth grade carpenters in set construction.

"Please watch the hammer."

"Not so fast with the drill."

"Put down the putty." I moved around the room, giving what I hoped were gentle instructions, but this was class four on my harder B day of our A/B alternating schedule, and my patience for impulsive middle schoolers was wearing thin. Two

girls whizzed by, dripping blue paint, and I sighed. “Someone find the rags, please. Monica, watch those brushes.”

“Wouldn’t it be faster to weld the arches?” Liam K. looked way too eager to use fiery blow torches versus the combination of wood and wire I’d designed to meet Nolan’s wish for lighted arches in the courtyard.

“And trust you with a blow torch?” I laughed because the kid usually had a good enough sense of humor and I could get away with some teasing.

“Hey, I’d be careful.” He stuck his tongue out at me, and everyone nearby laughed.

“Keep dreaming.” I shook my head and moved on to the builders assigned to making trees and foliage.

“That palm tree looks like a—” Apparently bored with arch-making, Liam had followed me over and cast a critical eye on one unfortunate outline of a giant tree. At least, it was supposed to be a tree, not a phallus.

“Don’t say it,” I warned him. “We can fix it.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible.” Liam wandered away as I looked over some other palm trees that were, thankfully, less phallic in nature.

“Do we have any more green paint? I don’t care for this shade.” Kaitlyn was as picky as ever.

“Can you go ask Mr. Kekoa?” I gave a tight smile and sent a silent apology to Ken for sending Kaitlyn his way.

Finally, the class ended. My classroom was a disaster, but a quiet one, waiting for me

to put it to rights before tomorrow started all over again. As I worked, I took a breath, an unfamiliar feeling filling my chest. Lonely. No, that wasn't quite it. This was a specific sort of loneliness. I missed Nolan , missed what we'd had at North Shore, and right as I was debating seeking him out, he appeared in the doorway like magic.

"I hoped I'd find you here." He grinned at me as he sauntered in.

"Here I am." I grinned back as he shut my door with a firm click.

"No twins?" He looked around like they might be lurking behind a set piece.

"Nope." I motioned him closer. "They said they wanted to play soccer with some friends before we headed home. Which gives me a chance to clean up."

"I see." Nolan stepped close enough to kiss, so I did. And a second time because once was never enough with Nolan. He tasted like coffee and sugar cookies, and I went right for a three-peat because why not? This one was long and sultry, probably a bit much for on school grounds, but damn, I'd missed him all day. Squinting, Nolan pulled away to stare at the palm trees. "Why does that palm tree look like a?—"

"I know." I groaned. "It's one of several things I have to fix before the boys are done with soccer."

"What else?" Strolling to one of the workbenches, Nolan picked up a cordless drill. "Maybe I can help."

"Do you know how to use that thing?" I tilted my head, considering whether a city boy like him had even seen power tools before.

"Honey, your tools are safe with me." Nolan turned on the charm while deftly switching the drill bit for a screwdriver tip. Marching over to the arch Liam K. had

abandoned, he tightened several screws. And why I found that ridiculously hot, I had no clue. “I was a theater major, remember? And I’ve been in more Off-Off Broadway shows than I can count. Helping build sets is part of theater life.”

“I feel bad putting you to work. You didn’t stop by to get roped into helping.”

“Who says?” Nolan scoffed. “The kisses were a nice bonus, but I’ve got time before helping Cara with dinner. The girls already walked home without me. Also, I’m invested in our festival being a success.”

The our hit me square in the chest, a warm, weighted blanket of cozy pleasure.

“Me too.” I held his gaze a moment too long. Looking away, I fetched a staple gun. “In that case, can you stretch canvas? I need several big ones for backdrops.”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Nolan took on a fake, flirty tone that made me laugh. “And just so we’re clear, I like spending time with you, and I don’t have to be kissing you to do it.”

“Oh.” I paused from fetching a giant roll of canvas. “So we’re friends then?”

“I think we are.” Nolan patted my cheek. “Is that okay, or would you rather go back to hating me?”

“I never hated you,” I admitted. My neck tensed at having made him think that. “I’m not sure such a thing is possible. Misjudged you, yeah, and some inaccurate assumptions, for sure. But now...”

“Now?” Nolan prompted as I trailed off.

“Now we’re friends.” I leaned in for a fast kiss.

“Friends who are going to make this festival a success.”

With far more glee than I would have thought possible, Nolan applied himself to building frames and then stretching the canvas, all sexy and competent with tools in his hands. It took a fair bit of restraint to not pull him into a corner of my supply room and have my way right there.

Working with Nolan was fun, and I lost track of time until the boys appeared sweaty and out of breath.

“We’re starving,” Legend announced.

“I’m making spaghetti with Cara and the girls. There will be plenty if you want to join us.”

“We shouldn’t invite ourselves,” I hedged, not wanting to cook but also not wanting to make Cara entertain with a newborn.

“You’re not. There’s almost always an extra kid or two over, and Cara enjoys the distraction of adult conversation. She texted me exactly that when I asked if it was okay to invite you.” Nolan grinned, likely because he knew he’d won.

Dinner was a loud, chaotic affair, much better than the nights I spent trying to put together something both boys would eat. And while there was little romantic about it, not with four middle schoolers, a newborn, and a watchful sister-in-law, there was something...comforting about the shared meal.

I liked watching Nolan around his family because it was clear how much he enjoyed being an uncle. This extended visit wasn’t a burden to him. I’d meant what I’d said earlier about making a lot of wrong assumptions about him. Being proven wrong was both wonderful and painful. He might be a far better man than I’d given him credit

for, but he was still leaving.

“Here. Let me have a turn with the baby,” I demanded as Nolan tried to juggle a fussy baby and loading the dishwasher. Cara was helping Athena with pre-algebra homework while Stella and the boys watched TV in the family room.

“You?” Nolan looked at me like I’d suggested running off to Vegas.

“I had two babies at the same time,” I reminded him as I scooped up the tiny, angry bundle. “Holding only one is a luxury.”

Instinctually, I did what had worked with the twins, a swaying march while humming low. Miraculously, the little angry man quieted.

“Oh, he likes you.” Nolan’s whole face softened at the calm baby.

“Most babies do,” I said, echoing Nolan’s line about mothers. “They haven’t figured out yet how grumpy I really am.”

“You are not.” Glancing around the empty kitchen, Nolan stepped toward me, expression still soft and open.

Oh. It hadn’t been for the baby after all. It was for me. My skin heated. I was a grumpy, loner surfer at times, but in that moment, Nolan made me feel more accepted than I could remember.

His eyes flickered like he might be thinking about kissing, and I might have risked it, but then Stella barged into the kitchen at top speed and volume.

“Mr. Winters, did you see our Christmas tree?”

“I did.” It had been hard to miss as I’d entered the house, a gaudy, green fake tree with white flocking and dozens of kid-made ornaments.

“Why don’t we have a tree?” Legend followed Stella into the kitchen, swiping a cookie from the platter on the counter.

“Yeah, I want a tree this year.” Ryder’s voice was that sort of near-whine that made my last nerve vibrate. “One of those shiny ones.”

“Oooh, a foil tree! That would be spectacular.” Nolan, apparently, wasn’t nearly so irritated by whining. “What do you usually do?”

“Dunno.” Legend shrugged. “Stockings. Some lights in the window, along with our art from school. A lot of people around here don’t do trees.”

“I have no idea where one would find a foil tree on the island,” I added, not wanting to agree to a hopeless hunt.

“Leave it to me.” Nolan beamed, expression brighter than any lit-up tree. I should have been worried as that was the same look he’d had at the market, but surprisingly, I was reassured. If anyone could make Ryder’s Christmas wish come true, it was Nolan.

Fourteen

I love hearing our students sing as I walk through the halls! Ohana, we can't wait to have you join us at our holiday festival. Mr. Bell has our students tuned up and ready for the festivities!

NOLAN

As December crept closer to the holiday festival, preparations went from flurries to a blizzard of activity, taking over all of my time at school and much of it outside of work as well. Rehearsals were well underway for the choral numbers I'd choreographed with help from Mx. Lennox, the dance instructor. Their classes would also be performing, and I was excited to see the results.

However, at the moment, I was concerned with getting my dancing surfer Santas from the sixth grade choir all headed in the same direction.

"And everyone to your left, to your left," I directed. We'd moved to the courtyard to practice. The school lacked an indoor stage or auditorium, so the performances would take place in the courtyard. After enough days of rehearsals, I was honestly glad there wasn't a stage, as at least I didn't have to worry about kids falling into the orchestra pit.

"Your other left, Marcus," I corrected as one of our Santas headed away from the rest.

"Sorry, Mr. Bell." Marcus apologized, only to make the same mistake the next run-

through.

“Remember you are Santa, jolly and generous!” I directed the students. “No cranky faces!”

“I don’t believe in Santa.” One of Legend’s crew, a spiky-haired kid in a perpetual bad mood, glared at me.

“Yeah, we’re not little kids,” another boy added. Sixth grade was apparently equivalent to all grown up if one listened to the students.

“All you have to do is believe in the magic of the season.” Smiling, I swept my hands wide. Only a few others smiled, and I groaned. “No? Not buying that?” I exhaled, trying to come up with a different angle. “Okay, think about the audience and how much they’ll love this number.”

“Think about how fun surfing is.” Legend sauntered up next to me like he was doing me a favor, clapping me on the back. “Listen to Mr. Bell.”

“Thank you, Legend.” I reached over my shoulder to peel off the Kick Me sign he’d placed on my back. I shook my head, feigning disappointment. “Really? Another tired prank. Try harder.”

The whole class laughed as the bell rang. On his way out of the courtyard, Ryder came up to me.

“See you tonight. Dad said you found a tree?”

“I did.” I smiled. “I’ll drop it off this evening.”

“Drop off?” Ryder frowned. “You’re staying to decorate.”

And with that proclamation, he was off to his next class. I was on to the seventh graders who were doing a multicultural salute to the winter holidays. Unfortunately, like with the sixth grade choir, I'd be better off herding some of the chickens roaming around North Shore.

"Now, drummers—" I directed, only to be cut off by several agitated voices.

"I wanted to drum."

"Me too."

"We can't all drum." I put as much patience as possible into my voice, even though we'd been over this many times.

"Why not?"

"Because." I sounded exactly like my own father. Bah.

The eighth graders and their secular nod to solstice were hardly an improvement from the other choirs, as their dancing was less sprite-like and more that of angry water buffaloes.

"And we're dancing, we're dancing. We're fairies. Light as a feather." I moved among the students, demonstrating with my arms what we were trying to achieve. "And we're singing at the same time. Watch the stomping, Liam."

"I hate this song." Kaitlyn hadn't warmed up to me at all in the weeks I'd been at the school.

"I hate the costumes," one of her friends added.

“And we’re singing anyway.” I waved my hands. “Your parents will love this.”

I hoped, at least. And finally, it was the end of the day, and I was able to head to Merry’s classroom. Despite Ryder’s request, it would undoubtedly be better to simply hand Merry the red foil tree I’d found at long last. It had taken some doing, but I’d stowed my find in the choir room closet and couldn’t wait to deliver it.

In stark contrast to the chaos of the choir classes, Merry’s shop classroom had been transformed into a peaceful winter wonderland. The palm trees now all looked like palm trees, the arches were curved, and the giant hibiscus were bright and cheery. The candy cane and surfboard props also appeared ready to go, and I had to clap my hands at the progress.

“Now, this is a treat after my day of rehearsals. Everything looks great.”

“You wanna do the honors?” Merry handed me a box with a switch on it. “I’ve got the lights all wired, but I haven’t tested them all at once yet.”

“Yes.” I was utterly delighted to flip the switch. All the clear bulbs lit up, dousing the room in the exact type of holiday magic I’d been trying to sell my classes on. “Oh, Merry, it’s beautiful.”

“We still have work to do. And transferring everything to the courtyard?—”

“It’s perfect.” I gave him a fast yet firm kiss. “You’ve worked so hard. I hope you know how much I appreciate it.”

“You’ve worked hard too.”

“Eh.” I waved the praise away. “Your decorations are marvelous. The choir performances... Well, we’ll simply have to see.”

“The parents will love it regardless,” Merry said loyally, earning himself another swift kiss. “And do you want to ride with me back to our place, or were you planning to check on Cara and the kids first?”

“I could ride with you. Cara texted that all is well there. But are you sure it’s okay if I come over tonight?” My mouth twisted. I didn’t like the idea of imposing or creating the wrong expectations. “I could simply give you the tree if you want alone time with the twins.”

“Nah. They both keep asking for you to come.” Merry shrugged. “And you found the tree. You deserve to help. And we have cookies.”

“Definitely coming for cookies.” And for Merry, but that went without saying.

Thus, I ended up riding to Merry’s apartment with him, the twins, and the box with the red foil tree. They lived in a ground-floor unit of a small complex that looked to be from the seventies or eighties with minimal exterior updating. The interior, though, was freshly white, with a more modern kitchen. Merry and the boys had a mix of furniture that reminded me of my own collection of various pieces.

As soon as we walked in, Barney was utterly delighted to see all of us. While the twins walked and fed the dog, Merry and I managed to use our mutually limited cooking skills to whip up some breakfast for dinner with pancakes and scrambled eggs. I had the idea of adding pumpkin spice to make them more festive, and Merry poured them in the shape of gingerbread men. The dining area was in the living room, so we flipped on an animated Christmas movie to watch while we ate.

It was delightfully homey working and eating together, and my chest ached with the sweetness of it all. After dinner, the four of us put together the small tree. It was a little bigger than a tabletop tree, around five feet, perfect for the space between their couch and TV.

“I love it.” Ryder stood back to admire our assembling skills. Or rather, Merry’s skills, as he’d done most of the work.

“It’s pretty cool.” Legend actually seemed impressed for once.

“It needs ornaments.” Ryder pursed his mouth. I was about to suggest my maternal grandmother’s old trick of salt dough when Merry headed to the hall closet.

“I’ve got us covered there.” He hauled out a cardboard box—the kind reams of paper came in with a separate lid. Removing the lid, Merry revealed a treasure trove of kid-made ornaments from preschool through the present.

“It’s all the stuff we’ve made.” Ryder’s eyes got big and round. “You saved them.”

“Of course I did.” Merry’s cheeks were pink, but his expression was pleased as the boys had fun strolling down memory lane. They held up popsicle-stick snowflakes and construction-paper flowers and shared the stories associated with each. Merry pulled out his phone and shared pictures of the twins at various ages to go along with the stories.

If I’d thought my heart was full merely cooking together, now it was Empire State Building huge and lit up like New Year’s Eve to boot. I felt included in something special, almost too special, like I’d intruded where I didn’t belong.

“It’s gorgeous.” My eyes burned as I took in the completed tree.

“Thanks for the help.” Merry smiled at me.

“Next year, I want even more lights too. We can outline the whole patio. And maybe Nolan can find us a wreath to match the tree.” Ryder was full of big plans, and a lump in my throat joined my stinging eyes.

“Nolan will be back in New York next year,” Merry said gently. “Remember? We talked about that. We’re lucky to have him this Christmas though, so let’s enjoy that.”

“Okay.” Ryder frowned and kicked at a stray piece of tissue paper.

“Who has homework?” Merry asked, and the boys disappeared to their shared room, followed by the dog.

“Good.” Merry grinned at me. “That should keep them busy for eleven point three seconds. Long enough to kiss you in front of the tree.”

I kissed him back, the sort of soft, comfortable kiss where we both knew we weren’t getting anywhere near the bedroom. We cuddled on the couch, trading kisses, until I forgot about my bittersweet feelings over the tree, at least temporarily.

“We need some real alone time.” I gave Merry a pointed look.

“Soon.” He let out a low groan. We’d had several of these sneaky make-out sessions, but it had been far too long since we’d had a locked door and some time on our hands. “If nothing else, the twins got invited to an after-festival sleepover.”

“I like the sound of that.” Certain parts of me perked right up at the thought of doing our own sleepover.

“Me too.” Merry snuck another kiss onto my cheek. “Put it on your calendar?”

“It’s a date.” We grinned at each other. I could only hope the upcoming holiday festival was as big a success as our little fling.

Fifteen

It's finally here! Join our school and community as we welcome you to our Lights Festival. Come hungry! Aloha!

MERRY

The Friday of the Lights Festival dawned sunny, which had to be a good omen. No rain in sight, which meant a dry courtyard for the festival. The school day was crammed with last-minute preparations, and by afternoon, the chaos had reached a fever pitch. Each of my classes had some major disaster and the after-school setup quickly became a headache.

"Mr. Winters, the palm trees are falling." Liam helpfully came to inform me. He, not so helpfully, stood by while two tipped over in the stronger-than-usual winds. I righted the trees and weighed down the bases.

"The arch won't light." One of Legend's friends, who had a permanently guilty expression, ran over right as I finished with the trees. I found the culprit of a burned-out bulb, fixed that, and then solved a crisis with missing folding tables for the food vendors.

Mr. Can-Do helped me with the tables, and finally, I could breathe. And go check on Nolan, who'd turned the cafeteria into a staging ground for the choirs and other performers.

"Costumes, everyone." Nolan was standing on top of one of the lunch tables in the

center of the room, directing students. He looked like a benevolent overlord summoning his minions, complete with a wand and clipboard.

“I’m missing a shirt,” a sixth grade boy yelled.

“Over there.” Nolan pointed with his wand, which was likely something a conductor would use, but I preferred to think of it as a magic wand in keeping with Nolan’s larger-than-life presence.

“I have the wrong shorts,” another boy called.

“Spare ones are next to the shirts.” Another flick of the wrist and another problem solved by my magician.

“I think my fairy wings are broken.” An eighth grader with droopy wings approached Nolan, and before I could offer my assistance, Nolan had her wings fixed and in position.

“This shirt itches.” Kaitlyn was in a lovely mood, as always.

“Powder is your friend,” Nolan called cheerily.

“Where’s my drum?” A seventh grade girl looked around the room.

“With the others.” Nolan pointed at the back wall. He was so impressive that I could have watched him for hours, but he caught my eye during a brief lull in kid questions.

“Please tell me the lights are working fine.” Nolan gave me a frazzled look as he wiped his forehead.

“The lights are working fine.” Now. I tried to sound confident, though, because that

was clearly what he needed at the moment.

“Thank goodness something is going according to plan.” He smiled at me, and all was right with my world, if only for a second. The relief in his expression touched a soft spot deep in my chest. I liked that I could be a steadying force for him.

“The rest will go fine too. Promise.” I stared up at him, wishing I could touch him and offer more reassurance. “The parents are going to love the performances, and the lines for the food are already long.”

“Excellent.” Nolan rubbed his hands together, looking even more like a mastermind. “We need people spending money.”

“Exactly. The various games are doing good business too.” Different subject areas were running booths with games like pin-the-antlers, a duck pond with holiday-themed rubber ducks, bowling for cookies, and more. “The festival is a success, Nolan.”

Nolan exhaled hard. “I sure hope so.”

His little smile revealed how much this meant to him, and that soft spot of mine pinched again. This wasn’t merely a job for Nolan. This was his passion and gift, and we were lucky to have him.

“Now, go break a leg.”

“Thanks.”

Nolan held my gaze, something passing between us, more than simply pride at the festival. His eyes revealed a certain connection, gratitude that I understood what he needed, and something else, fragile and new, something I couldn’t let myself think

too much about.

I stayed busy by checking on how the decorations were doing in the wind and visiting the food vendors to ensure everyone had what they needed.

“This is incredible,” Principal Alana said as she balanced a large plate of food. “We’re going to be able to fund so many field trips and special events. You and Mr. Bell are quite the team.”

“We are.” My throat tightened. “And most of the credit goes to Nolan. It was his vision. I’m just the carpenter.”

“Well, my thanks to you both. And it’s almost time for the performances.” She gestured at the area near the cafeteria doors that we’d designated for the show. I’d hung extra lights over the area to illuminate the performers, and we’d placed folding chairs for parents around the edges. I positioned myself near the doors in case my help was needed.

“And places.” Nolan led the sixth graders out to open the show with the surfing Santas. As soon as the lights hit him, he transformed from the jittery guy he’d been backstage into a confident, charismatic performer, complete with a charming smile and well-practiced gestures. A few weeks ago, I might have been frustrated at his ability to transform so easily, but now, I simply felt privileged that I got to see the other Nolan, the nervous and unsure one, the one with unrehearsed joy over little things, and the one who melted at my kisses. Here, though, Nolan the performer stole the show. “I’m Nolan Bell, and it’s been my honor to work with the choirs this fall. First up, we have the sixth grade choir.”

He stepped to the side to allow the kids to take center stage. I sent him an encouraging look, but he was busy cueing the music that would accompany the song. He returned to crouch in front of the performers, directing their singing and dancing.

Their performance was adorable and well-choreographed, even the part where one of the dancers went in the wrong direction. As much fun as watching my kids was, my attention kept getting drawn back to Nolan who had the most animated directorial style I'd ever seen, a far cry from Mrs. Crenshaw's stiff composure. The kids finished with a flourish, and the applause felt genuine and well-earned.

Next came the band, then Mx. Lennox's dance class, then more singing with the overly enthusiastic seventh grade drummers who almost drowned out the singers. The eighth graders featured several squeaky-voiced boys in the wrong key and a couple of sour-faced girls, but the overall song was uplifting and hopeful and a good ending to the performances.

After all the kids were dismissed to join their families, I congratulated Legend and Ryder on a job well done before they went to try their hands at the games.

"I'm winning all the cookies," Legend bragged.

"No, I am." Ryder poked him.

"How about you both win a cookie?" I used a reasonable tone, earning me groans as they raced off to join their friends.

Boys occupied, I fetched a plate of fried rice and a cup of juice and brought them to Nolan sitting on a folding chair near the stereo, looking wiped out.

"You need to eat," I said sternly, holding out the food.

"I think I had something at lunch." Nolan wrinkled his forehead, which likely meant he'd had a granola bar or an equally small snack. He inhaled, and his stomach growled. "Okay, maybe I am hungry. But this is too much for only me. You sit too."

I nabbed another empty chair and dragged it next to Nolan. We'd shared enough food over the last month that we had a certain rhythm. He ate more of the meat while I ate the sautéed onions, and we dueled over who got the pineapples and cashews.

"All the performances were amazing." I smiled at him, but he frowned.

"Well—"

"They were. No nitpicking." I made my voice stern, with no room for Nolan's perfectionist tendencies. "Didn't you hear the applause?"

"I did." He beamed, inner ham coming out.

"And look." I gestured all around us. Families dotted the courtyard, eating food, playing games, and enjoying the decorations the kids had worked so hard on. Over in a far corner, Cara sat with several other mothers with the baby asleep in his carrier, looking as happy as I'd seen her. Smiles abounded along with lots of picture taking, memories being preserved. Athena, as always, was filming content for her channel. The lights sparkled, casting a warm glow over the festival, making everything seem more special. "It's the holiday magic you wanted."

"It really is." Nolan took a deep breath, a contented smile settling on his handsome face. I loved his private smiles most of all, the ones that felt like they were for me and me alone. In another world, I might have been able to hold his hand here in the shadows. Desire for that world, the one where Nolan was a permanent part of the school and my life, swamped me like an unexpectedly too-big wave.

Unable to dwell on those thoughts, I nudged his foot with mine. "Still coming over tonight?"

He winked at me. "With bells on."

Sixteen

A quick note of appreciation from the administration for our wonderful Lights Festival and the hard work of all the students and teachers involved. Come Monday, we'll have many pictures to share!

NOLAN

I had worked with Tony-winning actors and on award-nominated shows. I'd played to packed houses and had some decent reviews. But few accolades lived up to the night the holiday festival came together. I'd been a mess of nerves before we opened the doors to the parents and community members, but as the evening ended, all I felt was a sort of pride I wasn't sure I ever had.

I'd been proud of my fellow performers before, of course, but this was deeper, a pride in the values we were displaying in the school and its mission. I wouldn't call the emotion parental, but my affection for the kids had certainly grown over our time together. I'd always seen substitute teaching as a stopgap, a necessity to pay bills, but for the first time, I understood why longtime educators called teaching a calling.

"Thank you, Mr. Bell!" Family after family came up to offer congratulations and thanks. "That was beautiful!"

"Can't wait until next year!" Liam K.'s mother had the same mischievous smile as her son and was accompanied by a trio of younger siblings. My hands clenched along with my jaw. I wouldn't be here to see next year. Someone else would take the credit, and I wasn't sure how I felt about that. The festival had become my baby, and giving

it up would be difficult.

“Hey, next year, I can be a surfer!” One of Liam’s brothers spoke up, apparently looking forward to middle school.

“Yeah.” I gave a weak smile.

“Mr. Bell is tired.” The mother patted my arm as she led her quartet of kids away. And eventually the courtyard dwindled to only Merry and me. The boys had left with the family hosting the sleepover, and Cara and the girls had walked home with the sleeping baby. Several teachers and parents had helped with trash pickup, but there was still much to do, including moving all the decorations, lights, and the sound system indoors.

“Oh my, this is a lot of cleanup.” I resisted the urge to slump in one of the chairs and not move until Sunday.

“We can do it.” Merry pushed the sleeves of his long-sleeve T-shirt up, revealing toned and tanned forearms. All right, now I was paying attention. “And besides, we’ve got a good incentive to hurry.”

“We do.” I wanted to see a heck of a lot more than those sexy arms, so I put some effort into putting away decorations while singing an old favorite about waiting to be alone together. I danced around with one of the candy canes simply to hear Merry laugh.

“You really do have a nice voice.”

“Thank you.” Somehow, his praise meant more than any reviewer or producer. Showing off a bit, I launched into another song, this one a seasonal tune.

“You must be incredible on stage.” Merry’s smile positively glowed under the lights, warming me from the inside out.

“I’m something.” I basked in his gaze before sobering. “All I ever want is the audience to leave happy.”

“Well, you make me happy.” Merry matched my serious tone, and I melted like a snowman on a beach. Done. Gone. I was his as long as he kept giving me those smiles.

“Me too.” Caught up in the moment, I stepped over to the stereo we still hadn’t brought inside. I linked it to my phone again and hit my Christmas Romance playlist before stretching my arms wide. “Dance with me?”

“Me?” Merry shook his head. “You’re the performer, not me.”

“I’m not asking for a performance.” I took his hands anyway. “I’m asking you to dance with me.”

“Oh.” Merry nodded and let me lead us into a slow dance. Well, he let me lead at first, but after a few bumped feet, we figured out I was better at following. Which was fine because I could rest my head against his neck, sway to the music, and pretend this might become a holiday tradition for us. It was achingly romantic under the archway of lights. I wanted the song to last forever, but like all good things, it ended, and Merry released me.

“I almost don’t want to pull these lights down.” I sighed, and Merry hugged me from behind.

“I get it.” He dropped a kiss on my ear. “But the faster we do it, the sooner we can be in my bed.”

“Well, when you put it that way...” I started scooping up decorations with a bit more purpose.

“And I have cookies for after.” Merry wagged his eyebrows at me.

“Sugar cookies with icing?” My tone was so hopeful Merry laughed again.

“You’re worse than the kids. Yes.”

“Someday, I’ll take you to my favorite bakery,” I said off-handedly like there was a chance Merry would find himself in New York someday, holding my hand and gazing into a bakery shop window. “The black-and-white cookies are to die for.”

“I bet. I wish...” Merry matched my casual tone before quickly changing the subject. “Here, help me wind this strand.”

In short order, we had all the pretty lights wound into coils for easy use next year. The courtyard was back to normal, magic packed away, and I was understandably a bit down on the drive to Merry’s place. I brightened after he parked, and I remembered we had a whole evening in front of us.

Merry quickly dealt with a very excited Barney, who was easily distracted by a chew after his outside time.

“Boy, this place is much quieter without the twins.” The foil tree twinkled in the corner, and Merry hadn’t bothered flipping on the overhead light.

“I know.” He pulled me to him, dropping a soft kiss on my forehead. “Love my kids, but I love adult time too.”

“Mmmm.” I made a purring sound because being in his arms felt that good. “I like

the sound of adult time.”

“Come on, time you met my bed.”

“High time.” I let him lead me to the smaller of the apartment’s two bedrooms, which was just big enough for a queen-size bed, a dresser, and two mismatched nightstands. He tugged at my shirt, but I stepped back. “I...um...it was a long day.”

“Want to meet my shower first?” Merry accurately guessed the reason for my hedging. I knew what I wanted, but fucking wasn’t necessarily compatible with having spent all day directing kids in the muggy courtyard.

“Yes.” I smiled hopefully.

“It’s a tiny tub-shower combo,” he warned. “Definitely not built for two. But I’ll get you a towel.”

“Bless you.” I grabbed the backpack I’d dropped by the door and took a fast but thorough shower. Wearing the towel around my waist, I returned to the bedroom to find Merry stretched out on the bed in his boxers, face and hair damp. “Did you use the kitchen sink to rinse off?”

“Maybe.” He shrugged as Barney and his chew toy wandered into the room and settled in the corner, apparently to watch the action. “It was that or the hose on the patio, but I couldn’t let you be the only semi-clean one.”

“Oh, I’m more than semi-clean.” I stalked to the bed, letting the towel drop once his attention was riveted to me. “I’m squeaky clean enough for all the things.”

“All, huh?” Tone teasing, he patted the bed next to him. “We have the whole night, which is an awesome luxury. What did you have in mind?”

“Any interest in fucking me?”

“Much.” His eyes darkened with fresh heat. “You’d like that?”

“Definitely.” A blush spread up from my chest. “I know it’s a bit cliché, the theater diva loving to bottom, but it’s my favorite thing, especially with someone I care about. Like you.”

Admitting the caring part made my skin feel a little tight, so I had to look away at the sky-blue pillowcase.

“I care about you too.” Sitting up, he pulled me down for a kiss before tumbling me the rest of the way onto the bed. “And I’m more than eager to fuck you. It’s been a long damn two months of wanting you.”

“And like a month of everything but the butt.” I laughed, and he did too.

“Yup.” Looming over me, he kissed me again, slow and perfect. “I might have made a trip down the condom and lube aisle earlier.”

“Bless you.” I’d also brought some, but I appreciated his thoughtfulness and the subtle hint that it had been a while for him.

Supporting himself on his arms, he swept his gaze over me, a slow memorization like some sort of machine. I resisted the urge to squirm and instead preened from the appreciation.

“You look at me like you’ve never seen a naked person before.”

“I haven’t seen you naked enough.” He dipped his head for another kiss. “And even outside of bed, you’re always the impatient one. You want it how you want it right

now.”

“Are you calling me spoiled?” I faked outrage.

“I like spoiling you.” He dropped kisses down my chest, intent rather clear from the way he slithered lower in the bed. “But no, you’re more of a friendly perfectionist.”

I gasped as he licked a stripe up my cock. “Well, if this is what it gets me, I’ll take any label you want to give me.”

“Okay, schmoopy.” Chuckling, he swallowed my cock for real, which would have been delightful enough but turned out to be a prelude to him licking my balls.

“Oh, I like that.” Moaning, I resolved to do the same trick to him as soon as possible. Later. Because right now, Merry apparently thought I was bendier than I looked as he pushed my legs up and back and dropped a kiss right over my rim.

“This good?” he asked, like I might halt the proceedings.

“Very. I’m all-in on all the prep.” I might have been called a pillow princess a time or seven, but as Merry said, I liked what I liked.

“Noted.” He made a motion on my thigh like he was ticking off an imaginary list, and I would have laughed, except he was apparently a rimming expert. He licked and nibbled and swirled, and suddenly, my demand for prep seemed downright silly in light of an overwhelming need to get him inside me as fast as possible.

“Wow.” I moaned and rocked up to meet his talented mouth. “Now. You can fuck me anytime now.”

“Nope.” He chuckled against my rim, lightly teasing it with his stubbly chin. “You

requested all the prep.”

I made an indignant noise. “I lied.”

“Ha.” He got right back to the business of rimming me, adding a teasing finger that wasn’t nearly enough.

“I might die of waiting.”

“I’ll take the risk.” No matter how much I thrashed and moaned, he took his sweet time. Finally, he switched from kissing to slick fingers delving deep. And when he found my spot, I damn near levitated like I was back in Pan, soaring above the stage.

“Merry. Please.”

The infuriatingly wonderful man didn’t listen to me, of course, adding a scissoring motion and taking enough time stretching me that if I’d had brain power, I could have done my taxes. But instead, all my focus, every last neuron, was on how damn good this felt. I’d always liked prep, being taken care of and played with, but Merry took things to a whole new level.

“Okay, now , you might be ready.”

“Might.” I made a snappish noise and rocked shamelessly on his fingers.

“Oooh, impatient and needy. I like it.” Merry took a moment to roll on the condom and slick up his cock.

He slowly pushed in, but honestly, he’d prepped me so well that it didn’t take much effort. My body welcomed him in like this was a dance we’d performed a hundred times before, him leading, me following. Sweet and sexy, just like Merry. His cock

was hard and thick, and Lord, did the man know how to use it, thrusting slow and sure.

“Good?” He looked at me with a question in his eyes, like there could be any doubt.

“So good.” I wrapped my legs around his hips, surprising even myself with my newfound flexibility. “Dying again, but it’s so worth it.”

“Yeah?” Merry’s eyes took on a mischievous glint. “What if I do this?”

With no further preamble than that, he moved, or rather undulated , in such a way that he could bend forward and lick the very tip of my cock, something I’d heretofore thought was special effects sorcery in porn.

“How in the hell did you just manage that?”

Merry kept right on fucking me like he hadn’t done the sex trick equivalent of parting the seas. “Years of stretching for surfing combined with a lot of teen boredom trying to do it to myself.”

“Again.” I needed to watch and experience this another time to properly appreciate it.

“Demanding.” Merry said it so fondly that the word felt like a compliment. And to my delight, he did it several more times before switching to his hand on my cock. He sped up his thrusts with a perfect angle for hitting my spot, so much so that I forgot all about his oral trick and lost myself to how good he felt inside me.

“Merry.”

“Yeah?” He responded to the urgency in my tone by fucking me harder. “You gonna come for me?”

“And how.” Always the dramatic one, but I was like three strokes away, no matter what he did.

“Tell me what you need.” His voice was rough and broken like he was also on the edge.

“This. You. Go hard.” You was possibly the most honest thing I’d ever said. He was all I needed, all I’d ever needed, and in that moment, I never, ever wanted to let him go. He’d made me laugh in the middle of the best sex of my life, and my soul sang with the pleasure he’d created.

“If I go hard, I’m gonna come too.” He slowed down as if to draw this out, and I hooked my legs behind his back again to prevent such a thing.

“Good. Do it.” I urged him on with my heels, and yup, I was right. Three more thrusts and I came all over his fist. And my own stomach, face, and chin. A bit of overkill, but I always did like the big finish.

For his part, Merry didn’t stop when I started to come, instead going harder, milking every last drop out of me as he came with a shout.

“It’s good I don’t have to leave.” I suppressed a groan as I unhooked my legs and he slid out of me. He handled the condom and passed me the towel I’d discarded. I made the world’s weakest effort at mopping up, so he took the towel back and finished the cleanup himself. “I’m not sure I could move.”

“No one’s kicking you out, schmoopy, but you do gotta give me a pillow.” Merry gestured at how I was now in the center of the bed with both pillows behind my head.

“Oh. Oops.”

“No worries.” He settled behind me, tossing a leg over my hips. “I already know you’re a natural bed hog, and I better pin you in place.”

“You better.” I gave a happy wriggle against his strong hold. Ordinarily, I might be up for another round, but I wasn’t sure I had any more come in me after that little demonstration. “Yep. Tired. But some other time, feel free to pin me down for...other reasons.”

“Oh, I will.” Merry lightly bit my ear before whispering, “Night, Nolan. You did good tonight. I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you.” My heart gave a hard twinge. It, and I, might not survive Merry. But as I’d said earlier, if I had to go, this was the way to do it. “For everything.”

“Anytime.” He flipped the light off. The dog was snoring nearby, and I drifted off, secure in Merry’s embrace, all the way through to him shaking me lightly.

“Nolan? You awake?”

“For you?” I mumbled sleepily, trying to rouse myself for whatever he had planned. “Always.”

Seventeen

Did anyone find a missing pink phone at the holiday festival, likely out of battery power? We have also received reports of lost costume pieces, a found wedding ring, and two backpacks. Please contact the office if you lost an item or found something that might belong to someone else!

MERRY

I didn't want my night with Nolan to end. So naturally, I did what any sane person would do and woke him up extra early. In fact, I was showing restraint because I laid awake a good thirty minutes, coming up with a plan, before I gently shook his shoulder.

"Why do you have to be a morning person?" Nolan glared at me in the dim early morning light. My bedroom faced the patio and some bushes, and I'd never bothered figuring out curtains for the small space.

"I'm a surfer, bro." I adopted a fake California accent. "All the best waves are at dawn."

"There's waves all day, every day," Nolan said reasonably. Well, reasonable for someone who'd never surfed. "Please tell me you're not taking me surfing in the middle of the night."

"It's almost morning." I waved a hand before getting out of bed and fetching him a pair of my swim trunks I thought might fit. Sensing an outing might be happening,

Barney hopped around, tail wagging. I flipped on the small light on the dresser before Barney or I whacked something. “And close, but no, not surfing.”

“Those look suspiciously like surfing shorts.” Blinking at the light, Nolan frowned.

“They’re the best I could do, Mr. Fashionista.” I stuck my tongue out at him as I pulled on a pair for myself. “And I did think about sneaking into the hot tub and skinny dipping, but I figured trying for that might be pressing our luck.”

“We’re sneaking into your apartment complex’s hot tub?” Nolan perked up at this thought as he finally roused himself enough to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Yep.” I made myself look away before I gave in to the temptation to drop to my knees in front of him and get the morning started a different way. “The deck for the hot tub has a cool morning view, and then I’m taking you to breakfast before I have to pick up the boys.”

“You generally pick good breakfast spots.” Nolan yawned.

“You’ll like this one. Ken Kekoa always gives me two vouchers for weekend brunch at the resort where he works his second job as a holiday gift. Thought we could use them.”

“Oooh, a fancy brunch.” Nolan put a little pep in his step as he followed me out of the bedroom.

“That’s the spirit.” I stopped by the coat closet to retrieve two hoodies since it was still rather nippy out. Barney, who could be as impatient as Nolan at times, stamped and snorted at the delay.

“Speaking of spirit, how is Christmas less than a week away?” Putting on my hoodie,

Nolan gave another big yawn. And man, I liked him even more in my clothing, all casual and adorable.

“I know. Don’t remind me.” I pointed at the stacks of unopened delivery boxes in the closet. “I’ve got the presents, but I hate wrapping.”

“I love to wrap.” Nolan rubbed his hands together, likely due to the chill and his enthusiasm. “Can I help?”

“Absolutely.” I was down with any activity that got me more time with him before Christmas, but I also wanted the help. “You can wrap all but yours.”

“There’s one for me?” Nolan got all cheerful as I dragged him away from the closet and into the morning air. Barney led the way on his leash, unconcerned by the crisp air.

“It’s a cheesy present,” I warned as we made our way around the building and up a small hill to the spot with the pool and hot tub. There was a fence with a locked gate, but I had a key because I did occasional pool maintenance for my landlord. “Don’t expect much.”

“I’m charmed whatever it is.” He waited for me to open the gate, then followed me to the hot tub, making a show of tiptoeing like we were thieves. Knowing better than to attempt swimming in the hot tub, Barney flopped down on a lounge. Nolan tested the water with a single toe. “Oh, I’m supposed to invite you and the boys to Cara’s annual Christmas Eve open house.” He slipped into the hot tub before adding, “My parents will be in town. You could meet them.”

I switched on the bubbles before joining him in the hot tub. “Is that a please come, Merry? Or is it a this will be awkward, but Cara asked?”

“It’s a please come.” He offered me an earnest smile. “I know we said we’re only...together this month, but the holidays aren’t over yet. Give us Christmas Eve.”

“Okay.” There wasn’t much I could deny him. “Christmas Day, we’re headed to North Shore to my family. You’d be welcome, of course.” I added the invitation all casually, but in actuality, waking up with Nolan on Christmas morning was a sudden addition to my personal bucket list. “But sounds like you’ll be on parent duty.”

“Yes.” Nolan made a face. “And they are boring and stuffy, but they’re mine. And only here a week. Will you be back for New Year’s Eve?”

“Should I be back?” I countered.

“Cara’s neighborhood does this annual party. The girls have been talking about it all month. There’s food and dancing.” Nolan’s face lit up in the early dawn light at the mention of a party. “You and the twins could come.”

“Well, for the chance to dance with you, I’ll be there.” The surfing around New Year’s on North Shore was legendary, but for the chance to dance one more time with Nolan, I could put my grumpy self in an actual shirt with buttons and brave the neighborhood party.

I pulled him to me, his back to my chest so he was using me as a pillow, and we relaxed in the hot tub, watching the world start to wake up.

Inevitably, though, Nolan had to speak. “Do you have a Christmas wish?”

“I’m too old for wishes.” I kissed his neck, pretty sure he was fishing for present ideas, and I wasn’t about to help him out there. “And my only New Year’s resolution is to try to be more optimistic like you.”

“I’m touched.”

“Yeah, you are.” I swept my hands up and down his torso and thighs under the water.

“But I still don’t know what to get you.” Making a mournful noise, Nolan pouted.

“Maybe you’re my present this year?” I suggested, but Nolan’s pout deepened. “And I’m an only kid. I got spoiled enough growing up. I don’t need anything.”

“All right.” Nolan’s tone was all cagey, and his eyes had come alive with sparkles like he’d had some sort of brainstorm.

“You have a terrible poker face.” I tickled him lightly under the water. “Don’t get me anything.”

“I won’t,” he lied, and I let him.

“Is there a role you’ve always wanted to play?” I asked to distract him from thoughts of presents. Also, I was reluctant to leave the warm tub and rejoin the rest of humanity. As long as I had Nolan in my arms, everything else could wait.

“Hmm.” Nolan made a thoughtful noise. “The one that gets me a Tony?” He chuckled, then turned more serious. “I don’t know. I always say I want this leading role or that one, but some of my best experiences have been in a supporting part. And obviously, my first love is musicals.”

“Obviously,” I teased.

“There are certain numbers I’ve always wanted to sing. I guess that’s my answer. Not a specific part, but that sort of once-in-a-lifetime solo that becomes an iconic Broadway moment.”

“Good answer.” I swallowed hard because he wasn’t ever finding that on Oahu, and now, I didn’t know why I’d asked.

“But isn’t that what every actor wants? To be a legend?” Nolan shrugged against me. “Most of us, though, settle for making a living if we’re so lucky. How about you? Did you ever want to be a professional surfer?”

“No.” I huffed out a harsh breath. “Okay, that’s a lie. Before the twins, yes, I dreamed about that all the time. Dad and Grandpa supported me, and I was rising up the amateur ranks. Full-time doesn’t happen for many surfers, but the idea was to make enough at the shop and doing lessons that I could continue to compete.”

“Maybe you’ll return to it someday like your grandpa did?”

“Maybe.” It was my turn for the melancholy shrug. “But I’m happy being a dad. Life gave me a different wave to catch, and I’m okay with that.”

“That’s a great way to put it.” Nolan stretched his head back to give me a kiss, which I turned up the heat on until we were at risk for more than simply sneaking into the hot tub. Nolan straddled me as we made out in the hot tub, but what little common sense I had left spoke up.

“Race you back to my bed before brunch?”

“Absolutely.” Beaming, Nolan hefted himself out of the hot tub. “And if we hurry, there will be enough time for me to do some present-wrapping for you.”

“You sound almost more excited for that than the sex.” I followed him into the still-chilly morning air and collected Barney and his leash in short order.

“Both.” Nolan offered me a quick kiss before taking my hand. “I’m excited for both.

Christmas is coming, and so are we.”

He giggled at his silly joke, and I couldn't help but join in. I lived for his puns and good humor. However, inside, I was secretly dreading Christmas because it meant we were that much closer to the end of the month.

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Eighteen

Welcome to winter break, ohana! I know everyone is so excited to have two weeks away from school, but trust that your teachers and administration are missing your smiling faces!

NOLAN

Save me

I texted Merry for the eleventh time since my parents arrived. Cara's family had been loud and opinionated on subjects I'd rather not discuss during Thanksgiving, but my own parents had more than their fair share of opinions, most of them negative. As New Yorkers who rarely left the East Coast, my parents somehow managed to be even more out of place in Hawaii than me.

Don't murder anyone or take up day-drinking. I'll see you later.

Merry's patient reply gave me a little boost.

"I'm not sure about this weather." My father cast a suspicious glare out the window at the murky sky that threatened midday rain. "I thought it was supposed to be hot and sunny here."

"Darling, you still have jet lag," my mother soothed. They'd arrived two days ago, and she continued to complain hourly about the time difference. "If your head is as muddled as mine, you're not sure about anything."

“Well, other than our tee time on the twenty-sixth.” My father managed a half-smile. “Finally got that handled.”

“Excellent.” I tried to sound enthusiastic for them, but they had every spare moment of their visit tightly scheduled with tennis, golf, hikes, and more tennis. No surprise I was dreaming of sneaking off to North Shore and Merry on the twenty-sixth or twenty-seventh.

“Cara, what can I do to help?” My mother tended to draw Cara’s name out into three or four syllables, and I didn’t blame Cara for her confused look. My mother didn’t look ready for helping with much beyond lunch reservations in her designer holiday sweater set, pressed shorts, French manicure nails, and a hairdo entirely unsuited for humidity.

“You could hold the baby?” Cara suggested. Ostensibly, my parents had come to meet Noah Craig, but they weren’t exactly what I’d call active grandparents. Unlike my grandfather and our outings or Merry’s dad and grandpa and how they took the boys surfing and played board games with them.

“Oh.” My mother made a startled noise as Cara deposited the baby in her lap. And the baby, sensing a tense stranger, let out a loud yodel.

“Here, let Uncle Nolan try.” I scooped the baby up and transferred him to my shoulder, one of his favorite spots for observing the world. I motioned toward the living room. “Mom, why don’t you review the liquor cabinet and see if we want to do a fun cocktail as an option for the adults at the party?”

Cara handed over the key to the cabinet, then patted my shoulder as she passed by on her way to the kitchen. “Bless you.”

Of course cocktail selection only lasted so long before my mother returned as I settled

the sleepy baby into his little portable crib in the corner of the family room.

“You’re a natural with the baby.” My mother’s observation would be a bid for more grandchildren coming from anyone else, but from her, it was a segue into one of her favorite topics: find Nolan a new job. “You know, I could probably find you a well-paying nanny position among my network.”

“I’m happy with my current occupation.” I didn’t bother to hide how bored I was of this conversation.

“Including the degree you’re not using,” my father added from his position on the couch.

“I loved NYU, and I couldn’t teach without the degree.”

“Which you could do full-time.” My mother raised a well-manicured finger.

“I’m an actor first.” I’d said it a thousand times, each time believing it to be true, but this time, I kept hearing the applause at the Lights Festival.

“See, Natalie, he’s happy. He’s an actor.” My father’s blustery tone made me want to take up the day-drinking Merry had warned about. “Who cares if Broadway is dying, and roles dwindle as one approaches forty? He’s happy.”

“You make happy sound like a bad thing.” My brain flashed to the other morning, in the hot tub with Merry, totally content, as happy as I could remember being. I was happy here, in a way I hadn’t expected this far from Broadway.

“I’m just saying, a little ambition never hurt anyone.” My father’s definition of ambition was similar to Craig’s—academic achievement, military or career achievement, accolades and awards, and measured largely by salary or rank.

“I have plenty of ambition.”

“I know you do, darling.” My mother patted my arm. “And your big break is just around the corner.” Her patronizing tone was almost worse than my father’s judgmental one. “Your father and I are just worried for your long-term future.”

“Trust me, I think about my future all the time.” I raked a hand through my hair. I might be bald by Christmas at this rate.

“Nolan did an amazing job with the holiday festival here.” Cara swept back into the family room. “Do you want to watch the video?”

“Well, I suppose we have time.” My mother perched next to my father on the couch, looking ill-at-ease with the amount of unscheduled time this Christmas Eve. The lack of an itinerary was undoubtedly making her itchy.

“I want to see!” Stella wandered into the family room, followed by Athena, both way more interested in the video than my parents. They flopped on the floor in front of the sectional with big pillows.

Cara linked her phone to the TV to show the video she’d made of the performances. Despite holding a baby at the time, her camera skills were admirable, and I found myself caught up in watching from the audience’s angle. In the moment, I’d been so busy conducting each number, I hadn’t had a good sense of how the performance was landing. Merry had accused me of perfectionism, which was easy to lapse into from the director’s chair, but watching as an audience member, I saw fewer areas for improvement and more of the pageant’s inherent charm.

And there was that pride again. Wow, we’d really pulled it off. The songs were fun and touching, and everyone, including the kids, seemed to be having a great time. I’d heard from Principal Alana that we’d more than hit the fundraising goal, which was

awesome, but as the video rolled, my pride was less about the money and more about...

Me .

I was good at this. I was good at keeping the kids on beat, cueing the different parts, directing the dancing. My spine stiffened, waiting for one or both of my parents to remark on how teaching was so much more stable than acting. However, they were frowning.

“A little amateur, dear, don’t you think?”

“Couldn’t you have managed better costumes?”

“A professional accompanist would have sounded far better than taped music.”

And so on, until I saw exactly where I got my nitpicking from.

“No.” I said the word so forcefully everyone in the room turned in my direction. “No, we couldn’t have done better. It was wonderful, and I’m so proud of the students and myself. And Merry, who brought it all together with the decorations.”

My mother blinked at the same time my father said, “What kind of name is Merry?”

“A good one.” I was beyond irked at this point, but weirdly, a newfound peace settled over me. I was never going to impress either of my parents. Not with my acting, not with a different job, not with the perfect boyfriend. I thought I’d let go of that urge to please them years ago. Apparently, it had continued to fester, though, a wound beneath the surface. But now I was finally free. I could decide for myself the worth of something.

“And a good guy,” Cara soothed, ever eager to maintain the peace. “Can I see you for a second, Nolan? I have a job for you and Merry.”

“A job? One that might get me out of the house?” Mood lifting, I followed her into the kitchen, away from the others still watching the video.

“Don’t sound so eager.” Cara made a pained face as she lowered her voice. “This is a Santa disaster. I ordered everything online, and as the packages came, I didn’t bother opening them until last night when I started wrapping.”

“I said I would help?—”

“And I said I like wrapping. When I have time.” Cara pursed her lips. “And, of course, by procrastinating, disaster struck. I’ve looked everywhere all day, but I couldn’t find the professional-quality microphone setup I ordered for Athena in any of the boxes I had stashed. Craig even helped pick out the right one via chat. Finally, I checked my orders, and it never shipped.”

“Oh no.” I managed to keep my moan to a whisper.

“It’s her big present, the one thing she’s been asking for all fall.” Cara let her head fall back against the fridge. “The good news is I actually found the same one for sale on the island, but it’s at an electronics place in downtown Honolulu. They’re holding it for me, but they’re also closing at five.”

“So, you need me to call Merry and ask if he and I can go get it?” I tried hard not to bounce at the prospect of a couple of hours with Merry, away from the house, even if shopping on Christmas Eve was ill-advised at best.

“Yes. Exactly. I need to be here for party prep and early arrivals, and you need a break from your folks. Tell Merry he can drop the boys off here if he can give you a

ride.”

“Absolutely. I’m sure he’ll be willing to play Santa’s helper with me.”

“Is that what you two are calling it?” Cara chuckled. “An elfing good time?”

“Cara.” I narrowed my eyes at her.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding.” She stretched to give me a kiss on the cheek. “And grateful to you for saving Christmas.”

“Let us actually accomplish the mission before you say thank you.”

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Nineteen

As a gentle winter break reminder, growing middle school brains need regular fresh air and sunshine! Don't spend the whole break in front of a screen.

NOLAN

Any hassle in calling Merry for a favor was worth it because I got more time with him and because of the look on my parents' faces when they met Barney and the twins.

"Is that a dog?" My mother somehow managed to sound and look like a Muppet—long neck, googly eyes, dramatic voice.

"No, it's a chicken." I rolled my eyes at her. "Yes, Mother, that's Merry's family's dog."

"Why is it heading to the pool?" She put a hand to her chest as Barney sauntered out to the pool area through a door the kids had left ajar.

"He likes the purple raft." I shrugged. The dog had grown on me substantially since our first meeting. Besides, it was more than worth having the dog over to watch my mother's horror.

"Dear heavens. The hair in the filter. Your poor pool boy."

Cara snorted because they did most of their own maintenance with a service run by

an elderly gentleman for the rest.

Leaning in, I whispered to Merry, “Wanna play pool boy later?”

“Thought we were playing elf right now.” He kept his voice similarly low, but his eyes sparkled.

“Hey, when it comes to you, I’m up for all the roles.” I delivered the line with a chuckle, but there was also a fair bit of truth there. I’d be up for whatever role he wanted to give me, including the ones that weren’t up for audition.

“Good.” Merry looked like he might kiss me, but my parents were right there. They knew I was gay, of course, but there were some things one simply did not do in front of Natalie and Harold Bell.

Once we’d made it safely to Merry’s car, though, I made sure to get that kiss. And a second for good measure.

“So tempted to drag you back to my place.” Merry pulled away with a grin. Despite his tease, he headed toward downtown Honolulu. “So...do your parents always dress like that?”

“Like Central Park West meets a country club?” I had to laugh. “Yes. Always. They’ve been here less than three full days and have already visited two tennis clubs. And they have golf tee times for their other days here. God forbid they take actual downtime or time with the kids.”

“How did you manage to grow up with them and not play either sport?” Merry asked as we zipped down the highway at his usual speed.

“A lot of time alone,” I admitted. “Luckily, I had my grandfather and Craig before he

got older and got his own group of friends. And later I had friends to avoid tee times with. I'm considering escaping to North Shore when they golf."

"Do it." An eager smile swept across his face. I'd been worried he wouldn't like the idea, but his expression and tone said otherwise. "I'm going to try to get some good surfing in before the New Year's Eve party, but you should come. My folks love you, and we can get away with sharing a room there more easily than trying for a sleepover here."

"Truth." I grinned back at him, already loving the idea of some more private time. "And your mom can cook. Mine is where I get my ordering skills from."

"Well, she seemed...efficient?" Merry's forehead wrinkled like he was trying super hard to find something nice to say.

"You can be honest." I barked out a laugh. "They are both stiffer than a cardboard box with about as much personality and warmth. Don't get me wrong. I love them."

"I know you do." Merry's tone was just this side of pity.

"They're not bad people." I exhaled hard. "They provided a good life for me and Craig, but warm fuzzies and tight hugs they are not. And today, I realized I get my perfectionist ways from them, and Lord, I don't want to turn into them when I'm older. I don't want to lose my ability to appreciate little things."

"You? My eternal optimist? Never." Slowing for traffic, Merry reached over to give me a fast pat on the thigh. "You're a perfectionist because you care so deeply, not because you're a hard-to-please grump."

"Oh." I sat with that proclamation for a moment, letting the compliment settle over me. I wasn't sure I'd ever felt quite so seen. I did try hard to be optimistic, and having

that appreciated was sweeter than a sugar cookie.

“What’s with the traffic?” I asked as Merry took the exit for downtown and immediately landed us in a thick jam of cars, buses, and pedestrians. “This is almost New York levels.”

“Welcome to Waikiki on Christmas Eve, baby.” Merry chuckled, but tense lines appeared around his eyes as he navigated the clogged streets. “And shouldn’t you feel right at home with these crowds?”

“Actually...maybe suburbia and base living is growing on me.” I looked out at the sidewalks where shoppers toting designer bags dodged each other and the slow creep of cars forward. “This is a lot of people.”

A large group of jaywalkers darted out between cars as Merry tried to turn into a parking garage. The attendant came out with a Garage Full sign before Merry could complete the turn, and he cursed low under his breath.

“Once we find a parking garage with room, I’ll get you a fancy bubble tea from this place I know down here, and you’ll get your city-slicker legs and holiday spirit back.”

Hmm. Maybe I didn’t want those city-slicker legs back, but I wasn’t sure how to express that. I did miss certain things about New York, but I also appreciated others about Oahu. A group of well-dressed women almost collided with a quartet of hipster young men, and each group continued on like they were in their own bubble, with no interaction. The shops were all luxury brands, same as ones found in most big cities, none of the quaint charm of North Shore or the welcoming feel of Cara’s neighborhood.

“Do you know the name of every kid at the school?” I asked Merry, mulling over the benefits of smaller places.

“Hmm. Good question.” Merry tapped his fingers against the steering wheel. “The ones in my classes, absolutely, and a good chunk of the others. Not on day one, but by the end of the year, I’ll know almost every face.”

“That’s kind of cool.” I continued to watch the sea of people on the sidewalks as we passed several other full parking garages. “I grew up with city anonymity. Some folks in my parents’ building have lived there forty years without knowing each other’s names or families. And as a substitute, I was never in one school long enough to memorize names.”

“Glad we could be a learning experience.” Merry’s voice was drier than sand, missing my point entirely.

“You’re not?—”

“Ah. A spot!” He zipped into an open street parking spot, and the moment for my deeper reflection vanished in favor of figuring out the parking meters.

On our walk to the electronics store, we stopped for the bubble tea Merry had promised, braving a slow-moving line, but we still had fifteen minutes to spare. However, as we arrived at the store, a young female clerk with dark hair streaked with blonde tips dragged the sidewalk sign into the store while another clerk ran a vacuum inside the store.

“Oh no, they’re closing,” I moaned to Merry.

“Hey, wait, we’re here to pick up an item,” Merry called out to the closest clerk as she attempted to close the heavy glass doors. Merry, though, was faster and managed to get a foot in the door.

“Sorry.” The clerk had a bored rather than apologetic tone. “We already shut down

the register.”

“And swept,” the other clerk came up beside the first, glaring at us. “It’s Christmas Eve.”

“I know. And I just need?—”

“Sorry.” The clerk again tried to close the door.

“Do you know who this is?” Merry took on an entitled tone I’d never heard from him before. “This is the Nolan Bell, famous Broadway star and social-media influencer. Rich millennials love him. He’s practically New York royalty. Do you really want to risk a bad review from him ?”

“Well...” At last, the clerk waffled, glancing at her fellow worker.

“The item should have already been set aside.” I seized the opening, talking fast. “And paid for.”

“It’s just a pickup.” Merry’s tone was encouraging but firm. “And we’d so appreciate it.”

“Okay, but we better get five stars for this.” The clerk finally let us into the store, and in short order, we had the bag with Athena’s microphone. I made sure to offer profuse thanks to the clerks.

“That was so brilliant.” I bounced a little as we exited the store, glowing at Merry. He’d defended me, swooping in for the rescue like some sort of white knight surfer dude. “I almost believed you about me being rich and famous.”

“Hey, you’re a star and a prince to me.” He shrugged like he hadn’t pulled off a

Christmas miracle.

“And you’re sweeter than you look. And fiercer.” I bumped shoulders with him as we walked back to the car. “Never knew you had a speak-to-the-manager voice.”

He gave a snort. “I was with Alyssa enough years that I developed one by proxy.”

“Do you still love her?” I blurted out the question before I could think better of it.

“Love? No.” Merry narrowed his eyes at me, shaking his head a little like he was trying to figure out my angle. Which was understandable because I was as well. “I’m working on the bitter part, but I’m always going to have strong feelings that she didn’t want to parent. However, she gave me two amazing kids.”

“Truth. They are pretty awesome. But she certainly soured you on relationships.” I continued to press for reasons I didn’t fully understand.

“I wasn’t exactly all-in on relationships before her either. My parents have a great one, but it’s hard to find that sort of lightning in a bottle. But you make me?—”

Merry cut himself off as he thrust an arm out to keep me from walking into traffic. Damn it, I’d been so wrapped up in talking that I’d missed the walk light changing.

“Whoa.” I took a deep breath to reset. “Thanks. And I make you... What?”

“Crazy. You make me crazy.” Merry harrumphed, with clearly no intention of resuming the previous topic. “You could have been hit.”

“I’m fine.” And I was, but I also wanted to be the thing that made him believe in relationships again. I wanted to hear that those chains around his heart were loosening, but he was already striding toward the car. I hurried to catch up. “And the

present's fine.”

“Let's get you both home in one piece.” Merry unlocked the car. The present was indeed in one piece, but I wasn't sure I could say the same for my heart.

Twenty

This winter break, our lovely lunch leaders remind you to eat a rainbow. And if you're looking for a healthy treat, check out Lunch Leader Aubrey's recipe for puffed rice balls.

MERRY

In my head, Christmas Eve with Nolan would be sweet and perhaps sneakily cuddly. But in reality, the day had been chaotic, highlighted by our run downtown to retrieve Athena's present and the crowded party at Cara's. Nolan and I were together, as in we occupied the same space, but I wasn't getting any of that alone time I so craved.

However, if I was lucky, I might get to see him later in the week on North Shore, a thought that brightened me as I policed the food table from Legend and Ryder. My kids seemed determined to eat their body weight in chocolate-dipped pretzel rods and other treats.

"Do not eat any more pretzels." I gave Legend a stern look.

"Okay." He slyly reached for a chip instead, and when I glared at him, Legend merely moved his hand over to a bowl of some sort of mix with popcorn, nuts, and candy.

"Or chips. Or candy. Try some real food." I'd brought some butterscotch macadamias from a stall at the flea market as a holiday offering for Cara's household, and that dish was almost empty. I hoped she and Nolan's parents had at least been able to taste some of my offering. Meanwhile, the large tray of vegetables and dip was largely

untouched.

“Chocolate is healthy,” Ryder piped up. He at least was using a plate, but his plate was heaped with chocolate crinkle cookies and two kinds of fudge. “They said so in health class.”

“Just eat a carrot. Both of you.” I threw my hands up, almost running into Athena, who was carrying her phone as always.

“Hey, Mr. Winters, can you make a reaction video for me?” she asked.

“A what?” I’d vaguely heard the term from social media-savvy students.

“I’m going to play you part of the concert the other night and film your reaction.”

“Um. Sure.” I played along as Athena hit Start on the video on Cara’s phone while filming me with her own phone. The video clip was from the sixth grade performance, and Athena undoubtedly wanted to see me go aw at Ryder and Legend and their costumes. Which I did appreciate, but my attention was more drawn to the upper left of the screen, where I was standing. I wasn’t sure I’d seen my smile that wide in years. Huh. Despite all the hours of hard work, I looked relaxed and happy. That had to be Nolan’s effect on me.

In my memory, I’d been torn between watching Nolan and the boys, and I’d correctly remembered his pride for the kids. But what I hadn’t seen before was Nolan looking at me as the song ended and the kids took their bows. On the video, Nolan had a soft, vulnerable expression as he glanced over at me. I’d known Nolan cared about me, but Nolan had a big heart and cared about everything. The way he stared at me, like my reaction to the show mattered most in the world, was humbling.

“You’re supposed to say something,” Athena prodded.

“Oh, uh, great performance.”

“That’s hardly quality content.” Shaking her curly head, Athena raced away.

“Do you golf?” Nolan’s father absentmindedly handed me the baby as he approached the food table.

“No, sir.” I moved the baby to my shoulder like I’d seen Nolan do with him many times. The boys had also always preferred the hold where they could look around. I wasn’t sure whether Nolan’s dad wanted conversation or whether he’d merely been looking to pass off the baby.

“Too bad. Too bad.” He filled a plate and wandered back toward his wife in the other room, answering that question.

Nolan’s parents made me more grateful for mine, for growing up in a warm, loving household where we might not have had the most money, but we’d had a lot of fun. I was glad Nolan had had his late grandfather. I could more easily see why he’d been drawn to the theater and the home he’d found there with fellow actors and production folks.

The baby fussed, so I walked around the family room, the sort of heavy stomp that usually helped babies drift off, but this time, he began to wail.

Nolan came rushing in from the kitchen, wearing a ridiculous Christmas apron and carrying a large oven mitt.

“How did you wind up with the baby?” He plucked the baby from my shoulder and transferred him to his own, not that it helped the crying.

“I think there was a game of musical baby, and I won.”

“He sounds hungry. Let me go find Cara.” Taking the baby, Nolan headed for the front of the house, turning at the last moment to add, “And don’t leave yet! I have your present.”

“I’ll be right here.” I meant the promise on multiple levels. I’d be right there, waiting for him, as long as I could. What I’d almost said earlier was that he made me believe in romance again. He made me feel twenty again, giddy and hopeful. But confessing that wouldn’t have served any purpose, not with the end of the month in sight.

I wasn’t leaving the party, but when a herd of kids zoomed back into the family room, I wandered out to the pool area, taking Nolan’s present with me. Some parents I recognized from around the school lounged near the pool, and Barney lay sprawled out on his favorite raft. Overall, though, the area was much less populated than inside the house. I found a cute glider tucked away in the back corner of the yard and claimed it for Nolan and me.

I didn’t have to wait long before he came bouncing in my direction, holding a sprig of fake leaves in one hand and a large box in the other.

“Is that mistletoe?” We were enough out of sight of others that I was totally willing to chance a kiss.

“Maybe I’m just happy to see you?” Nolan held the sprig over my head, bending to give me a fast kiss before settling next to me. “And I have your present.”

“I told you that you didn’t need to get me anything,” I scolded as he set the box in my lap. Like the presents he’d helped wrap for me, the wrapping job was impeccable, with crisp lines and curly ribbon. And...vents? “Uh...why are there airholes? Please tell me it’s not a pet.”

“It’s not a pet. Dry ice made wrapping a challenge. Just open it already.”

“Oh.” I opened to reveal a treasure trove of New York goodies—bagels, cream cheese, and several kinds of the bakery cookies Nolan had waxed poetic about, including black-and-white cookies and Linzer tarts. Getting it all express air shipped to Oahu couldn’t have been easy. “Thank you.”

“Okay, I know it’s a bit of a self-serving gift, but I kept thinking how much I wanted to visit my neighborhood bakery with you. And I know that can’t happen, so I brought the bakery to you.”

“I’m going to share with the boys, and I’m looking forward to trying the cookies.” I tried to make my tone suitably grateful, unsure why I wasn’t more excited about the food. Maybe it was the reminder that we were indeed from different continents, unlikely to meet again. “Should I save a few cookies for when you come to North Shore?”

“Maybe.” Nolan blushed prettily as I handed over his present. Unlike his efforts, my wrapping could use some work, especially given the irregular shape of the item. He tore the paper off, then smiled. “It’s a charcuterie board! In the shape of Oahu.”

“Non-hipster folks would call it a cutting board, but yes, I did the jigsaw outline and wood burning for the details. The boys helped sand and applied a food-grade stain.”

“I love it.” Nolan beamed, but like me, he seemed subdued.

“I wanted you to have a piece of the island to take with you. The wood’s local too, from a tree that fell on my parents’ property.”

“I’m going to treasure it forever.” Holding the board to his chest, Nolan dropped his head to my shoulder. “I don’t want to think about leaving. I don’t want to think about the end of the month.”

“Then we won’t.” I bent to offer him a soft kiss, wishing I could spare us from the coming pain but also not wanting to waste a second of the time we had left.

Twenty-One

Finally! Your faithful principal finally had a few moments to herself, and I got all the wonderful pictures from our holiday festival uploaded. Tag yourselves! And another thank you to Mr. Bell and Mr. Winters for the performances and standout decor.

NOLAN

Only for Merry would I awaken at dawn on the morning of the twenty-seventh and take the earliest possible bus to North Shore to maximize our time together. I'd said my goodbyes to my folks the night before, not that they seemed to have noticed. Like my Thanksgiving week trip, the bus was a crowded mix of locals and tourists. But after two months on the island, I didn't fit in with either group, though for different reasons now.

The morning was nippy, so I wore the hoodie I'd stolen from Merry advertising a surfing company. I'd learned leather and the ocean didn't exactly mix, so I had switched to a nylon bag I'd found in Cara's hall closet. My designer sandals had given up the ghost a week ago, and I'd replaced them with the strappy kind everyone wore everywhere on the island, including to fancy brunches. My skin was still New York-pale thanks to a sunscreen habit, but my fluffy hair hadn't seen a stylist since my arrival, and the waistband of my shorts said I'd enjoyed being in vacation mode and not worrying about being at my ideal size for auditions.

No one was going to mistake me for an actual surfer, but judging by the number of times I was asked for directions, I at least looked more like I knew my way around these days. I watched the ocean on the drive north as much as I could because the

December waves truly were as epic as advertised. Perhaps my newfound appreciation for the ocean was Merry rubbing off on me in more than the fun sense.

And there was Merry waiting for the bus, lounging against his car, looking every inch the blond surf god of my dreams. All mine. He smiled as he caught sight of me, wide and easy, like my mere presence was enough to make his day.

“Nice hoodie. Get in.” He opened the passenger door for me. “Turns out I have one more present for you.”

He plopped a bag from his parents’ surf shop in my lap. I opened it to reveal one of those lightweight wetsuits Merry and the boys had worn last time I’d been up here. It was thick enough to provide more warmth than swim trunks but nowhere near a scuba suit.

“It’s a wetsuit.” I frowned at him. “I don’t want to sound ungrateful, but I think standing up on a surfboard is still beyond my skillset.”

“Agreed.” Chuckling, he leaned over to give me a fast peck on the cheek. “This is so your poor, easily chilled body can enjoy boogie boarding. And it will also protect your knees from the sand. The boys and I are going to teach you. In fact, it was mainly their idea.”

“No fair.” I groaned. “You know I can’t say no to them.”

“Yep.” He grinned at me. “You’re a big softie.”

“Guilty as charged.” I set the bag behind us, next to Barney and near a clipboard with papers from the surf lessons Merry did. “Are you going to make me sign a waiver?”

“You’re not gonna drown. Promise.” Merry gave me one last kiss before starting the

car and heading farther north. “We’ll stick to shallow water.”

“And do I get to watch you actually surf?” I was more willing to attempt this new sport if it meant seeing Merry wet, sandy, and preferably shirtless.

“That would be the plan.” He winked at me.

“And I get brunch?” My stomach rumbled, reminding me what time I’d had to leave Cara’s neighborhood.

“Yes, Nolan, you get a last meal.” He rolled his eyes at me. “Mom packed a picnic for everyone.”

Brightening at the prospect of food, I enjoyed the short drive to a different beach than I’d been to before. This one had more trees and a long, meandering path to the shoreline. Barney followed along, including when we stopped for me to squeeze into the wetsuit at the public restrooms at the trailhead.

Merry’s whole family was already on the beach, set up with low chairs, a beach umbrella, a couple of coolers, and Grandpa looking like he was taking up residence right there. I was sure he had a first name, and I would have happily used it, but he’d told me to call him Grandpa because “everyone does.”

“Looking good, Nolan.” White hair swept back off his forehead, Grandpa gave me a regal nod.

“Thanks.”

“Nolan!” Merry’s mom graced me with a huge hug. She wore a tie-dye print rash guard over faded denim shorts. “Did Merry tell you about our present to you both yet?”

“Not yet.” Merry also gave his mom a tight hug and ruffled her hair. My mother would likely commit a mortal sin if one of us touched her hair. “I figured that would be his reward for trying the boogie board.”

“What present?” I nudged Merry. “Maybe I’ll be more likely to get on the board if you tell me now.”

“Dad, Mom, and Grandpa are taking the kids to a special show at the Polynesian Cultural Center tonight, leaving us on our own for dinner, and Mom made reservations for you and me at the resort. She wants us to have a date night.”

“I love this idea.” I nodded enthusiastically until I caught sight of Ryder wiping out spectacularly on the very thing Merry wanted me to try. “Assuming I live until then.”

“You’ll live.” He dragged me closer to the water and the boys. Merry’s dad had one of the squatty body boards, which he handed to me. Merry pointed at the water. “Watch the others. Do they look miserable?”

“Well, no.” Up and down the beach, people of all ages were trying the boogie boards, dashing out into the surf and hugging the board close to ride it back to shore. “It does look fun.”

“You’ll see.” After a few more demonstrations from the boys, Merry attached the board’s strap to my wrist. “Your turn.”

Grabbing Ryder’s board, Merry waded out with me, and all went well until I launched myself at the board and ended up with a mouthful of saltwater.

“Aack! The water is salty!”

“You’re not supposed to drink it.” Merry chuckled and made me try it again. And

again. And then, the most miraculous thing happened in a season of miraculous things, I actually caught a tiny wave and rode my board in the correct way.

“I did it.” I celebrated by hefting myself out of the water, ready to try again. “I really did it.”

“You did.” Merry pulled me close for a loud kiss on the cheek. We frolicked in the water awhile longer before Merry’s mother summoned us to a feast of mangoes, papayas, nuts, her famous banana bread, and tasty turkey wraps.

A dollop of mayo escaped my wrap, and Merry passed me a napkin.

“Oh. Wait.” I looked down at the wetsuit. I had it, Merry’s hoodie, some pajamas for decency, and a couple of T-shirts and shorts in my bag. Funny how two months ago, I’d planned my every outfit down to the shoes. Maybe Merry’s casual ways were eroding my well-honed style. “I didn’t pack any date-night clothes.”

“Oh dear, you’ll have to shop in Haleiwa. The utter sacrifice.” Merry adopted a dramatic tone that was possibly an imitation of me, but I laughed anyway. He might be influencing my fashion taste these days, but he also knew me well enough to know I wouldn’t turn down a chance to shop.

After food, we played awhile longer in the ocean, and I got to watch Merry swim out with his father on the big boards and ride an impressive wave back, like something out of a movie.

“That was hot.” I teased him when he made it back to me.

“If you think that’s hot, just wait for later.” He gave me a pointed look. “Ready to shop? Better get you the right attire for the resort.”

We went into the small tourist town, which had the most adorable collection of small shops. Every few blocks held a Hawaiian shaved-ice stand, which meant I was already quite happy even before we discovered a menswear shop with what I considered upscale resort wear. Not suit level formal and more prints than most business wear, but high-quality shirts, shorts, and slacks in a small building facing a courtyard with other shops and eateries.

I thumbed through the bulging after-Christmas clearance rack, humming softly to myself.

“Your boyfriend is adorable,” the dark-haired saleswoman said to Merry, and I braced for his rebuttal, but instead, Merry chuckled fondly.

“He really is.”

I had a feeling I lit up brighter than the tree at Rockefeller Center. And maybe it was only for another few days, but I had a boyfriend. One who was happy to claim me in public and offered good suggestions on what prints might suit me. Most dates would have been beyond bored, but Merry joined in my hunt for the best bargains.

“You should try one on too.” I nudged him after I had my picks down to a pinkish-purple button-down with a tapestry pattern and a more whimsical light-blue one with a sea turtle print.

“You suggest matching shirts and date night is off.” He gave me a stern look.

“Never.” I shook my head even if I had been thinking exactly that.

“How about this?” Merry pulled a light-blue cotton sweater off the sales table. It featured a subtle texture and ultra-soft Pima cotton blended with some sort of silk and linen, managing to look as dressy as any button-down shirt in the store.

“Very you. I can’t wait to see it on you, but I already love it.”

“And it’s sixty percent off,” the saleswoman added helpfully.

“You know my mother is going to insist on pictures if we show up in new clothes.” Merry gave a good-natured groan.

“I’m okay with that.” My pulse sped up as my chest struggled to accommodate my heavy heart. I wanted all the pictures. “We need more pictures of us.”

“Here, let me help with that. Give me your phone.” The saleswoman held out her hand for my phone, which I handed over even as Merry sighed. She had us pose, holding up our purchases. “Smile!”

“How’s that?” she asked as she passed the phone back.

“Perfect.” Long after we’d paid and were on our way to Merry’s parents’ house, I stared at the photo. We looked so happy. So right together. Why couldn’t this last?

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Twenty-Two

It's December on Oahu, and that means surf's up! Ohana, some of our own are competing this week on North Shore in the youth division. Let's cheer them on!

MERRY

The warm lighting in the fancy restaurant at the resort made Nolan seem even more glowy than usual. He also seemed infused with extra energy, with more expressive gestures and visible joy. Watching him was my personal joy. I didn't care what we ordered as long as I could keep staring at Nolan.

"I might love your mom." Nolan looked a few bites away from demanding the recipe for the coconut shrimp appetizer.

"It might be mutual." I chuckled and let Nolan have the last shrimp. "Mom said to check the fridge when we get home if you're unhappy with the dessert selection here."

"Pie?" Nolan sat up a little straighter. He grabbed the leather-bound dessert menu from behind the wine list. "Oooh, how about we share a dessert here, then have a midnight pie raid?"

"Deal." I'd let him have three desserts if that was what he wanted. In fact, I let him choose both entrées based on what he wanted to sample. I'd eaten here a handful of times over the years, and the food really was first-class, especially the fish and fresh produce, and Nolan kept making orgasmic noises as he tried everything. After much

deliberation, he'd picked the crusted ahi and the local lobster curry. I let him have more of the lobster while I went straight for the decadent coconut rice. And of course, Nolan had to get pics of the food, another reminder he was still in vacation mode.

Finally, Nolan looked up from his food orgy to notice the last of the winter sun slipping away. His expression softened further, the setting sun making his eyes gleam.

"Wow, this view really is spectacular."

"It is." I meant Nolan, of course, but he was delightfully oblivious to my appreciation.

Shortly after the sunset concluded, a small quartet of local musicians featuring guitar and ukelele started playing instrumental music with a Hawaiian vibe near the restaurant's expansive patio. Some couples left their tables in favor of dancing, including a pair of women with matching wedding rings.

"Oh, there's dancing."

"You don't have to look so wistful." I chuckled, having already resigned myself to being roped into dancing. Nolan upped the ante by adding a deliberate pout and soft eyes. "Or try the puppy-dog eyes."

"No?" Nolan looked down at his food. "I mean, this music is harder to dance to than some of my playlists."

"It is not." I shook my head at him before holding out a hand. "Come on, we can dance."

Once we were on the patio, and I was leading us in something that might resemble

dancing, Nolan made a noise that was a combination of purr and long exhale.

“Did you just happy sigh like a laundry detergent commercial?” I teased him.

“Maybe?” Cheeks turning pink, Nolan shrugged his slim shoulders. “Okay, yeah. But I am happy.”

“I know.” I pulled him closer, savoring our nearness and the way his hand fit so perfectly in mine. “It’s cute. And me too.”

We danced a few songs, then shared a fancy dessert of sponge cake layered with mango and papaya cream fillings. My mom’s generous gift card covered the bill, and we lingered a bit longer, listening to the music and enjoying the breeze rolling in off the ocean.

“What do you say we see if we can beat the boys and my folks home and do a little stargazing from the hammock on my balcony?”

“I love that idea.” Nolan gave another of his patented happy sighs, and we returned to my parents’ place and Barney, who was almost as excited as Nolan. After settling the dog, we headed to the balcony off my upstairs room.

“Alone.” Nolan grinned at me, clearly loving the empty house feel as much as I did. “I feel like I’m eighteen and sneaking someone in, hoping the parents don’t find out.”

“Oh, my mother always found out.” I rolled my eyes at the parade of memories before flipping off the bedroom and balcony lights for privacy and a better chance of seeing stars. “And teased me later.”

“It’s nice how much she cares.” Nolan sucked his lower lip in, eyes turning more distant.

I pulled him to me before he could lose himself in thoughts of his own family.

“It is.” I started undoing his buttons. “And you’re overdressed for stargazing.”

“Am I?” Nolan gave a regal sniff as he glanced over the cotton rope hammock taking up the corner of the balcony. “Does your hammock have a dress code?”

“Yep. No attire at all is requested.” I continued on his buttons until I could push his shirt off before making quick work of his shorts.

“You too,” Nolan commanded, yanking at my new sweater. Once we were naked, he cast a critical eye on the hammock. “How does one get in that without flipping off the balcony?”

“Carefully.” It was actually far easier than it looked, especially since it was a loose weave and double-width, but we didn’t need Nolan launching himself onto the tile floor. “And let me go first. That way, I can catch you.”

“You do keep me grounded.” Nolan gave a smile so fond my chest pinched.

“Are you calling me deadweight?” I teased to avoid getting swamped by emotions.

“More like my anchor.” Nolan patted my cheek. Damn, how I wished I could be that for him all the time, the anchor keeping him steady. Far from wanting to trap him or weigh him down, I wanted to be the sort of belay system I relied upon in climbing, the anchors and ropes Nolan could count on and draw courage from to climb to new heights.

Moving away to hide my complicated feelings, I carefully arranged myself in the hammock, then helped Nolan stretch out next to me. Our bodies pressed together, fuzzy legs rubbing against each other, hands linked, lips more than close enough to

kiss, which we did in a lazy fashion, no hurry to get to anywhere other than right here.

“This is cuddly.” Nolan nestled in even closer with a big yawn. He seemed about to drift off into a little nap, but then he lit up with a fresh wave of that Nolan energy, pointing at the sky. “There are stars! I thought stargazing might be a euphemism, but I do see stars.”

“Better make a wish.” I kissed his cheek. I’d seen these stars a thousand times but never through Nolan’s eyes. And in all honesty, there were any number of better spots to see the stars on the island, but Nolan seemed full of wonder nonetheless. He even screwed up his face like he was thinking hard about his wish. “Gonna tell me what you wished for?”

He shook his head, avoiding my gaze.

“What if I kiss it out of you?” My tone was teasing, but I was curious, especially with him acting all shy about it.

“You could try.”

Pulling him close enough to throw a leg over his, I kissed him with a lot more purpose than our earlier leisurely kisses. I used my tongue, lips, and a little hint of teeth, along with everything else I’d learned Nolan liked. He moaned against my mouth, hand coming to my shoulder, gripping tightly.

Deciding he was plenty pliant, I pulled back to ask, “What did you wish for?”

“No fair.” Nolan noticeably didn’t answer, instead tugging me down for more kisses, which I happily gave. “And no fair turning me on when anything more than kissing could end up with us on the floor or worse.”

“Bet I could get you off without tipping either of us.” I raised my eyebrows to issue a challenge, which Nolan seemed inclined to take.

“You think so?”

“I know so.” I snaked a hand down his torso, easily finding his hard and ready cock. Nolan arched up to meet my grip, already breathing hard. Yep. This would be too easy. “The better question is, do you think you could go again if I get you off once out here?”

“Uh-huh.” He kissed me eagerly. The hammock swayed softly, adding to the sexiness of the moment. “I’d sure like to try.”

I started jacking Nolan’s cock, a slow but steady rhythm. He attempted to rock with the motion of my hand, but he tensed every time the hammock moved.

“Okay, this is dangerous and sexy.” His breath came in nervous little pants.

“I’m not gonna let you fall, promise.” I stroked his neck, shoulders, and side with my free hand. I meant the words for so much more than simply a round of hammock sex. The urge to be his anchor and safety net was almost palpable. I wanted to be a safe place for him. “Just let go, Nolan.”

“Trying...” He tensed again, but this time, I sped up my strokes and kissed his neck, and he gradually melted for me. “Oh. Oh. This is good.”

“Yeah, it is.” I sucked on the skin where his neck and shoulder met, leaving a mark his shirt would cover. I’d know it was there, though, and that turned me on and made my own cock throb.

“Why don’t I get to touch you?” Nolan issued the complaint without any real effort,

making a halfhearted attempt to get a hand on my cock, but I moved his arm away.

“Safety first, remember?” In actuality, I had one foot ready to counterbalance the hammock if needed and undoubtedly could come if I wanted to. However, my need to draw this night out was greater, and I also wanted inside Nolan again.

“Yeah.” Nolan groaned softly. This time, when he tensed, his expression was one of pleasure, not nerves. I knew he liked things a bit slick when stroking off, so I spit in my palm before tightening my grip. He made an approving noise. “Yeah. Merry.”

“That’s it. Come for me,” I urged in a low whisper. Every small groan and gasp from Nolan turned me on that much more.

“Yes.” Nolan came on a long exhale, and I had to clamp down on the urge to do the same without being touched.

“Okay, now you.” He reached for me while continuing to tremble. The hammock lurched, so I steadied it with my foot and dodged his grabby hands.

“Easy there, tiger.” I chuckled and kissed his forehead. “Remember, we’re still in a hammock.”

“Oh.” Nolan’s mouth formed a perfect circle. “Right.”

“Now, carefully get out and make your way to the shower.” I helped him, holding the hammock steady for his exit. “I’ll grab the condoms and lube.”

“I like this plan already.” Nolan gave a little shimmy on his way back into the house.

“Figured you might.” Following, I gave him a friendly pat on the ass before going to rummage in my bag.

When I arrived in the attached bathroom, Nolan had already started the shower and laid out towels for after. And as soon as we were in the shower, which was double the size of my apartment one, Nolan started rubbing up on me and reaching for my cock.

“Someone’s still hard.” He made a happy sound before attempting to sink to his knees.

“Oh no, you don’t.” I hauled him back upright. “You suck me, and this is gonna be over in three seconds.”

“Okay, okay, ruin my fun.” Nolan pretended to pout.

“More like extend it.” I pulled him in for a long kiss, steamier than the shower water, using my tongue to show him exactly what I planned to do to him. Once he was breathing hard, I started squeezing and massaging his ass.

“That’s one way to distract me from my oral mission.” Eyes heavy with pleasure, he grinned.

“Yep.” I pushed lightly on his shoulder. “Spin.”

“Oh yes.” Nolan groaned as I started opening him with lube-slick fingers. He was tight and hot, and it had been far, far too long since my fingers had made the acquaintance of his prostate. And there was no need to guess with Nolan. His low fuck let me know I’d found the right spot.

Hot water streamed over us, and the air was steamy and thick, scents of soap and sex mingling. Nolan hadn’t been kidding about loving any and all prep, and it wasn’t long before he was riding my fingers, cursing and panting. I had fun with him, alternating stretching with deep thrusts and shallow teases, keeping him guessing.

“Now,” he begged. “Come on, Merry, before the hot water gives out.”

“Okay, okay.” I faked being put out by his demand even as I reached for the condom and more lube.

“How do you want me?” Nolan braced his arms against the shower wall, but I had other ideas.

“Trust me?”

“Always,” he chirped as I had him spin so his back was against the shower wall. As soon as I lifted him, though, his expression sobered in a hurry as he clamped his legs around my waist. “Eep. Okay. Trusting. Trusting you.”

I angled us so the water gently misted our shoulders and sides, keeping us from getting too chilly.

“Relax, Nolan.” I kissed him slow and sweet instead of attempting penetration right off. What I was after was deeper and more elusive, and I was willing to put in the time to make him feel safe and secure, even in the precarious position. “I’ve got you.”

“Okay.” He didn’t sound like he believed me, so I kissed him some more, little sips, while I tightened my grip on his thighs, letting him feel my strength. And the position also let my fingers slip over his slick rim. “Oh.”

His eyes drifted shut, neck and face relaxing, hands on my shoulders going from a death grip to something more romantic. Sensing his readiness, I shifted his weight enough to let my cock nudge his rim, slowly, oh so slowly, lowering him.

“That’s it,” I coaxed. “Let me in.”

“Oh, Merry.” Nolan exhaled hard, eyes opening back up as my cock filled him. I started subtle rocks of my hips, and he answered with a moan. “I see stars.”

I chuckled, glancing skyward. “There’s a skylight.”

“Oh.” He seemed far more focused on my thrusts than any lighting arrangement, which was how I liked it. Making sure to brace my feet, I rocked into him, aiming for that spot. Sure enough, he gave a demanding moan. “Do that again.”

“This?” I thrust harder.

“Yes. Oh yes.” Not waiting for me to direct him, he wiggled a hand between us to hold his cock, which had returned to a full erection.

I gave a triumphant laugh. “Yeah, you’re so going to come again.”

“Bragging gets you...” He trailed off on another moan as I pushed him more forcefully against the wall. “Okay, it gets you everywhere. More. Please.”

I loved him like this, delirious with pleasure and demanding. I loved his hair slicked back from the shower and the way droplets of water made his skin look even more edible. It was entirely possible I loved him, but I forced my brain to stay focused on the sex.

“Fuck, you’re hot, Nolan.”

“Harder. Harder.” His commands became more urgent as he stroked himself in short bursts, knuckles dragging against my abs until he stiffened. “Oh God, coming.”

Considering the way come geysered out of his cock, splattering me and the shower door, I didn’t need the warning, but his needy noises put me right on the edge as well.

“Nolan.” There was so much I wanted to say, but I settled for his name, putting all the meaning into those two syllables. I thrust hard and fast, riding out the last of his orgasm and triggering my own. “I’m there.”

My head fell back and my grip on him tightened as my knees wobbled. Nolan pressed a kiss against my neck. He was utterly glowing with his double orgasms, making my heart twinge.

“Now to untangle.” He laughed, far more trusting now. “Carefully.”

That would be the trick on so many levels. I had absolutely no clue how to untangle our hearts.

Long after Nolan had dozed off after our midnight pie raid and quick check on the sleeping boys and the sky had darkened then started to lighten again, that question kept surfing in my brain. The seas were deep and treacherous, and I was beginning to doubt my ability to get either of us to shore.

Twenty-Three

The countdown is on, ohana. And not simply the New Year's Eve countdown. No, we're counting down the days until school is back in session!

NOLAN

I left Merry and a good chunk of my heart behind on North Shore. That had been my wish, the one I'd refused to tell him, that we could keep this thing between us going forever. However, we were already apart. Merry and the boys were staying on North Shore until New Year's Eve morning, which meant a whole two days without seeing him. I'd wanted to get back to Honolulu to help Cara with the bored middle schoolers and a continuous stream of holiday break playdates and activities. On the thirty-first, though, I took my time getting ready for the party. If this was going to be one of my last chances to see Merry, I wanted to look my best.

But maybe I'd gone a bit too formal because Athena greeted me with a whistle, immediately shining her phone in my direction.

"Looking good, Uncle Nolan." Athena did a slow panorama of me using her phone. "That's some first-class drip. Walk us through your ensemble."

"Um." I glanced down at my peach-colored vintage tuxedo shirt, crisp linen Hawaiian-print bow tie, and narrow dress pants. A lifetime ago, when I'd packed for Hawaii, I'd thought this might make the perfect New Year's Eve outfit with its beachy yet dressy tone. However, for the life of me, I couldn't remember any of the designers, the careful thrift store bargain, or the sample sale discoveries. I was far too

distracted by thoughts of Merry.

“He’s too nervous about seeing his boyfriend. ” Stella was teasing, but she wasn’t wrong. I couldn’t care less what Athena’s audience thought of my outfit, but I wanted Merry to like it, to see beyond the city slicker he’d first met to the guy who cared so much for him. And the guy who was going to miss him like crazy.

“Stella Louise.” Cara swept into the room in a silk robe over a red slip dress. “How about no more teasing Uncle Nolan, either of you?”

Cara steered me toward the living room couch. The Christmas tree was already packed away for next year, making the space seem bigger, though more depressing. Cara spread two baby blankets over me and deposited the baby on my well-covered lap. “Here. Hold the angry dragon and tell me I look hot and not like I had a baby three months ago.”

“You did have a baby three months ago.” I kept my tone patient and upbeat, hoping she wouldn’t lob a throw pillow at me. Said baby was wearing a hooded dragon sleeper someone had gifted him for the holiday and a very pissy expression. Cara shrugged off her robe and slipped on a pair of strappy gold heels before making a slow turn for all of us. I clapped. “And you do look amazing.”

“Good.” She smiled, but her eyes stayed worried. “Craig wants to try for a video chat a little after midnight. He said I should dress up for the party. Maybe he’s tired of seeing me in pajamas on chat.”

“Or maybe he wants you to feel good about yourself.” I gave her a pointed look. Craig always liked when Cara dressed up for special occasions and date nights, but he also appreciated all the hard work Cara did solo parenting while he was deployed. “He sent you the spa day for Christmas.”

Yesterday, Cara and the girls left Noah Craig with me and used the gift certificates Craig had sent to get manicures and pedicures, along with a hot-rock massage and therapeutic pool soak for Cara.

“He did.” Cara took on a dreamy expression. “You Bells are pretty great guys.”

“We try.” I helped her pack up the girls, the baby, and all the baby’s gear, including the stroller for him to hopefully snooze in. We made our way to the neighborhood community center decorated in gold, silver, and white twinkling lights. A buffet was set up along the back wall, and a fair number of families were already there when we arrived. Because the neighborhood was made up almost entirely of base families, there were a lot of moms and a few dads solo parenting through a deployment like Cara. They offered each other commiserating hugs on making it through another holiday season without their partners.

I kept scanning the room, but Merry and the boys weren’t there yet, which put me even more on edge.

Beep. Beep. My phone chirped with an incoming message. Thinking it was likely Merry, I pulled out my phone, but the message was from Principal Alana.

Nolan! Mrs. Crenshaw waited until TODAY to inform us she will not be returning to the school. The recovery from the hip surgery has been too difficult, and she was already vested for retirement. Anyway, I’m going to need a sub for the rest of the school year before we open the position permanently. I wanted to offer it to you first, but I know it’s New Year’s Eve. Call me tomorrow either way, and we can discuss.

Oh. I made a small, almost inaudible noise. Now this was news. I needed to tell someone, talk it over with Cara, something. But Stella snagged me before I could make it over to Cara’s table.

“Dance with me, Uncle Nolan.” She tried to drag me in the direction of the dancefloor, which was mainly populated by kids. However, Athena stopped both of us.

“How about a review of the food table?” Athena asked, camera rolling. Food was the last thing on my mind.

“I...promised Stella we’d dance,” I said weakly.

Athena didn’t look ready to take no for an answer, but a group of girls from seventh grade choir swept me up in a huge group hug.

“Mr. Bell!” I was greeted like a long-lost hero, and getting to hear all the kid gossip from the break was a good distraction for a few moments, at least until Kaitlyn and her equally sour-faced mother showed up.

“Mr. Bell, a word.”

“Yes?” I braced myself for the incoming list of complaints.

“Thank you from the bottom of our family’s hearts for such a wonderful job.” Kaitlyn’s mother had the stiffest smile in the world, even as she held out a small envelope. “The festival was magical.”

“No, thank you.” I pocketed the card for later, and buoyed by my reception from the kids and parents, I resumed my trek toward Cara. Stella had run off, and Athena was filming some friends, so it seemed like a good time to seek advice.

Of course that was when Merry and the boys showed up. Ryder wore a spiffy Versace shirt and shorts combo and needed to tell me the whole story of how a package from their mom had arrived with designer duds. Naturally, Merry looked like a storm cloud

at the mention of his ex. Which meant sitting on the news of Principal Alana's text message in favor of herding the boys toward the food table.

"Mr. Winters!"

However, I wasn't even able to properly greet Merry before he was swamped by kids from school reporting in on how their families had liked the various presents they'd crafted in his classes. Simply seeing their excitement and proud faces made my own chest swell. Merry was a spectacular teacher, and the school was lucky to have him.

As was I. Was it even a question whether I'd consider Principal Alana's offer? I might live in a city of millions, but guys like Merry didn't come along every day, no matter how big the dating pool. Amid all the kid chatter, his gaze caught mine, and he offered a tired smile.

"Sorry," he said as the kids and their parents finally gave him some breathing room. "You look great, by the way."

"Thank you." I wasn't sure if he'd be open to a quick kiss on the cheek here, so I settled for an awkward stare of longing instead. "I missed you the last two days."

"Aww." His face softened, and he lowered his voice. "I missed you too. The bed at my folks has never seemed bigger or emptier than after you left. And we found the most amazing new poke bowl food truck. I was sad you won't get to try it."

There it was, my perfect opening. I stepped a little closer. "There's something I need to tell you."

Expression going pained, he held up a hand. "Please, no dramatic confessions tonight."

“It’s not that dramatic.” My tone came out more wounded than I’d intended. The message was big news, however. I felt like Athena, desperate to see Merry’s reaction so I could decide for myself how I felt.

Merry patted my shoulder, already seeming more distant, whatever we’d had slipping away along with the current year. “Let’s enjoy tonight and worry about tomorrow, tomorrow.”

“Are you feeling okay?” What I truly wanted to ask was why he was pulling away so abruptly. It wasn’t like him at all to cut me off.

“I’ve got a headache.” He quirked his lips. “That package from Alyssa was drenched in perfume and scented crap. Sorry. You deserve better than my bad mood.”

“I deserve you.” I gave him a pointed look. “And you deserve to feel better. How about some hydration?” Seizing my chance, I grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the buffet. “And let’s get you some food.”

“Mr. Winters!” Athena popped up out of seemingly nowhere, camera rolling. “You have to try the spicy pepper-bite things. I want your reaction.”

Me too, kid. Me too.

“Sorry.” Merry shook his head, dark-blond hair shaking. He’d made some effort to tame it along with wearing the sweater we’d gotten together on North Shore. “I don’t have much appetite.”

I fetched him some water anyway. “I guess dancing is out. Would you want to find a quiet bench outside, maybe?”

My tone must have revealed I hoped to resume our talk because Merry took a deep

breath.

“No, let’s dance.” Setting aside his water, he strode purposefully toward the dancefloor. “I want to dance.”

His plan of avoidance worked well while the music was fast, kid-friendly tunes. But then the DJ went deep into his throwback playlist for the first slow song of the night. And I swooped in, grabbing Merry’s hands before he could leave the dancefloor, effectively ensuring he had to slow dance with me.

The tune was one from an old movie soundtrack, a sentimental favorite, and several other couples swayed around us. However, for me, there was only Merry, especially once he relaxed against me and took over leading. He exhaled hard and held me that much more tightly.

Sniff. The sound broke through my happy bubble of being in Merry’s embrace, and I glanced up at him. Merry’s eyes were suspiciously shiny.

“Merry? Are you crying?”

“No.” He executed a nimble turn. “Just caught up in a good song.”

And I was caught up in him and desperate to talk to him. The song shifted to the next tune, another slow one, but Merry stepped away.

“No more dancing?” I asked softly.

“No.” He squished his eyes shut, and I rubbed his arm.

“Your head still hurting?” I followed him off the dancefloor toward the table where Cara was sitting with several other mom friends. They were laughing and chatting,

and the last thing I wanted was to join them.

“No.” He gave a pained huff. “My heart. I know I told you to focus on tonight, but I keep thinking too much about tomorrow. And next week.” His voice wavered, and I grabbed his hand and squeezed. “And how much it’s going to suck to walk into school and not see you.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. Principal Alana texted.” I spoke fast before Merry could cut me off again. “She wants me to finish out the year. Mrs. Crenshaw is retiring.”

Merry’s jaw dropped, eyes going wide, the reaction shot I’d been waiting for, but before he could reply, a buzz swept through the whole party room.

“Oh my God!” One of the women at Cara’s table jumped up, and I braced for a medical emergency as more gasps sounded. Merry dropped my hand like hot charcoal. Everyone’s gaze seemed trained on the doors and?—

“Daddy!” Stella crowed louder than anyone else as a line of uniformed army personnel entered the community center. And there was Craig, front and center.

Twenty-Four

Winter break reminder! Don't leave your homework until the last minute on break. If there's something you need to do, do it today!

MERRY

Athena understandably had her phone camera trained on Cara's gobsmacked face, but I was certain my own reaction was equally film-worthy. In the span of three seconds, I'd gone from shocked to a flicker of hope to shocked again to...what I wasn't quite sure, only that the flicker was gone.

Nolan's brother Craig looked like a taller, buffer, older version of Nolan—short dark hair with a few gray strands, pale skin, and light-brown eyes locked on his wife.

"Tell me you're real." Cara bit her lip as she stood up. She looked on the verge of tears, as were most of the onlookers. Around the room, other tearful reunions were taking place, enough camera flashes going off to make the place look like a disco ball had descended.

"I'm real." Craig swept her into a hug. "And you look beautiful."

"I was going for hot." She pretended to be offended for a quick moment, then claimed him for a kiss that had everyone nearby whooping and hollering. All the commotion woke the baby from his nap in the stroller. Nolan swept him up before he could fuss too loudly and passed him to Cara when she and Craig broke for air.

“This is our son.” She started crying all over again as she held out the baby to Craig. “Meet Noah Craig.”

And now Craig was openly weeping. Those Bell brothers did like to wear their hearts on their sleeves.

“Oh my God, Cara, he’s beautiful.” Craig gazed down at the baby with awe-filled eyes. “You did such a good job.”

“We all did.” Cara beamed as she gathered both girls close before pointing at Nolan. “And I couldn’t have done it without Nolan.”

Still holding the baby, Craig gave Nolan an awkward one-armed hug. “Thanks for everything, bro.”

Closure. A blanket of sadness was what had replaced the flicker of hope. The reunion scene unfolding at the community center was nothing short of heartwarming, the sort of military homecoming likely to go viral in a matter of hours. I should be over-the-moon happy for all involved, yet I couldn’t help the giant wave of disappointment washing over me.

I had no business letting it tow me under either. Nothing had changed from a few hours earlier. Nolan was still leaving, along with my heart.

“Nolan, introduce Merry.” Cara pointed at me. “Merry is Nolan’s?—”

“Friend.” I better get used to saying it. I stuck out a hand for Craig to shake while next to me, Nolan looked utterly crushed. Damn it, I hadn’t wanted to hurt him, but we both needed a healthy dose of reality.

“It’s almost midnight!” the DJ bellowed. “Everyone grab a noisemaker, and we better

see some more kisses too!”

“Can I get a friendly New Year’s Eve kiss?” Nolan wore an epic pout as the countdown started.

“Ten, nine…”

“I’m sorry.” I pulled him to me, unable to send him into the new year so upset. “And yes. There’s no one I’d rather kiss.”

“Happy New Year!” Noise exploded all around us as people cheered.

I pulled Nolan in for what my brain knew was one last kiss, but my heart refused to believe it. Mindful we were in public, I pressed my closed lips softly to his, but when he let out a little pleased gasp, all bets were off. I kissed him like I never wanted to stop, like the sun could come up in a few hours and we’d still be kissing. I kissed him so hard there was no way he wouldn’t taste me all the way back to New York.

“You’re tearing up again.” Frowning, Nolan pulled away to swipe at my cheeks. He also looked dangerously close to tears.

“I can’t help it. Sorry.” I seemed to be saying a ton of sorry, but I wasn’t sure how else to express my inner devastation and how much more awful it felt knowing he was in the same boat as me. “What can I say? I’m going to miss you.”

“But you don’t have to.” Nolan grabbed my hand, leading me away from the noise and chaos to one of the benches in the adjacent courtyard. “I told you Principal Alana offered me a chance to stay, or did you miss that piece of news with the troops arriving home?”

“I heard you.” Voice flat, I sank down on the bench, gazing up at him with bleak

eyes. “You can’t take the job, Nolan.”

“Why ever not?” Nolan delivered the line with such sincerity I almost believed him. Almost.

“Craig’s back.” I stated the obvious. “Your main reason for being here is done.”

Crouching in front of me, Nolan glared into my eyes. “I’m staring right at my new main reason for staying to see the school year out.”

“No.” I sighed heavily, knowing these next few moments were likely to weigh on my soul forever, but I had to do the right thing for us both. “I can’t take the risk of you staying and being miserable.”

“ You can’t take the risk?” Nolan sounded not unlike an angry owl as he came to perch next to me. “I’m the one doing the staying. What you mean is you are completely unwilling to risk your heart on someone who might leave.”

“You’re not wrong.” Even now, I couldn’t lie to him.

“Well, that’s rather cowardly.” Nolan’s expression was as earnest as his tone. “Why not give us a chance? We’ve only had a matter of weeks. If I stay for the rest of the school year, we can see if this thing is real. There’s already something worth fighting for here, Merry. And you know it.”

I went silent, clamping my mouth shut. I couldn’t lie to him, but I also couldn’t afford for him to win this argument only to turn bitter come spring. I couldn’t stomach the idea of getting any more attached, him becoming even more enmeshed in our lives and leaving anyway. No, it was better this way.

“That’s it?” Nolan made a rude noise. “You don’t want to see what we could

become?”

“I know what we could become.” We’d be a parody of what we’d been all holiday season. We’d be fighting. Unhappy. Burdened by uneven sacrifices. All of that.

“Well, too bad.” Nolan abruptly stood up. “I’m going to take that job anyway, and you can’t stop me.”

“I won’t date you.” My voice wavered. Hell, even my vision flickered, intensifying my out-of-body sensation. Queue the ominous music because I was trapped in an alternate universe where I got exactly what I wanted yet couldn’t allow myself to have it.

“Fine. Don’t date me.” Nolan glared at me. “I’m still staying.”

“I’m not sure you’ve thought this through. Like at all.”

“Oh, I’ve thought it all through. You’re too worried about things going wrong to let them go right. There’s not a chance in hell you’ll be the one to ask me to stay. And goodness knows you won’t be chasing me back to New York. So I’m simply going to plant my butt in the sand and stay until you come to your senses and give us the chance we deserve.”

“Nolan.” My eyes stung and my throat was as raw as if I’d swallowed broken shells. “Don’t do this. What if the part of a lifetime comes along, and you miss it because you’re here?”

“What if it already has?” he countered, raising a possibility I absolutely refused to consider.

“Dad! Dad! Ryder is throwing up.” Legend came rushing into the courtyard.

“For real throwing up or New Year’s prank throwing up?” Nolan narrowed his eyes.

“For real.” Legend wrinkled his nose. “It’s pretty yuck. Athena got the whole thing on video, though, if you wanna see?”

“That’s quite all right.” Nolan looked decidedly green himself.

“I’m on the way.” I slipped back into the only role I knew, a small-island single dad. Nolan might be destined for the big time, but I was meant to stay a solo act, and that was simply how things were.

Twenty-Five

Welcome back, ohana! We'd like to issue a warm aloha to Mr. Bell, who is joining us again this term! He'll be in charge of the spring concert, and we're so pleased to see his smiling face every day.

NOLAN

Merrick Winters was the most stubborn man on the planet. In the days since New Year's Eve, he'd dodged my calls and seemed to think that if he stuck his head in the sand, he could pretend I hadn't said I was staying. As if I might forget if he played ostrich long enough.

Nope, I'd called Principal Alana at a reasonable hour on New Year's Day and signed up for another five and a half months in paradise. Merry be damned. He was so certain I wouldn't stay, couldn't stick it out, and I was utterly determined to show him otherwise.

However, the first day back at school dawned chilly and rainy. The girls fought on the whole walk to school, which made us late. I'd packed an extra thermos of coffee as a peace offering, but Merry already had a line of kids vying for his attention in his classroom. My classroom had sprung a roof leak during the break, so I now had a large bucket and the plink-plonk of raindrops to contend with.

As if that weren't bad enough, all the schedules had changed with the start of the new semester, and chaos reigned in the halls as students and faculty alike had little clue where to be and when. Further, my classes were filled with cranky, over-sugared,

under-slept students.

“I don’t want to sing that.” Kaitlyn seemed determined to start this term as we’d finished the last, despite her mother’s generous fancy restaurant gift card. A gift I couldn’t wait to use with Merry, and thinking of him made me even more irritable.

“I’ll open a suggestion box for new material tomorrow.” I waved a hand. “But for now, everyone up?—”

“Why do we have to stand?” Liam K. had a brand-new shirt proclaiming him a Gamer 4 Life and bags under his eyes that suggested he’d spent all break nuking zombies. “I’m tired.”

“Have you tried a reasonable bedtime?” I snapped, then took a deep breath. Great teaching moment that wasn’t. I went to the basket of snacks I kept near the door. “Sorry. How about a juice pouch?”

“Um, Mr. Bell?” Kelvin, another eighth grader obsessed with gaming, had a newly squeaky voice. “I don’t think I’m an alto anymore?”

“Mr. Bell, I don’t feel so good.” Suddenly, Kaitlyn went from pissy to ill, undoubtedly the same stomach virus that had claimed Ryder and several of the guests at the New Year’s Eve party.

Speaking of Ryder, he and Legend were back for sixth grade choir class, and someone had the brilliant idea to gift Legend a laser pointer that did nifty tricks like projecting paw prints or big X marks. He, of course, had to try out all the features on my backside.

“A laser pointer? I’m disappointed. The year two thousand called and would like its tricks back.” I shook my head and motioned at his bag. “Also, you could harm

someone's vision. Put it away, please, or I'll have to confiscate it."

After class, though, it was Ryder, not Legend, who came up to me all apologetic and unusually solemn-faced.

"Nol—Mr. Bell, are you mad I got sick?" he asked in a low voice.

"Mad? Of course not." I'd had a few private thoughts about the awful timing, but that wasn't the poor kid's fault. And if his father had used the brief illness as a reason not to see me, well, that was between the stubborn surfer and me.

"You didn't come over after New Year's Eve, so I wondered." Ryder pursed his lips. "And Dad morphed into a giant porcupine, so I can't ask him what happened."

"I'm sorry. You didn't do anything wrong, I promise." I patted his arm before the bell rang a second time, and he dashed off.

Hell. I'd never meant to hurt the boys or for them to get caught up in our rather adult bickering. I'd foolishly assumed Merry would accept my decision to stay and we could resume our growing relationship, but I'd been wrong on both counts.

My foul mood continued through lunch—where Merry was nowhere to be found—to the end of the school day, where all I saw were the taillights of his hatchback speeding away from the school. I marched the girls back to Cara and Craig, surprised literal smoke wasn't billowing from my ears.

"The baby took a three-hour nap." Cara greeted us warmly with leftover cookies. She and Craig were all cozy on the family room couch, looking like they had very much enjoyed their day off and extended nap time.

Craig was also in high spirits as he took the girls with him on a grocery run to refill

the snack cupboard and fridge. Not wanting to escape to my lonely rental, I made myself busy tidying the kitchen while Cara fed the baby in a nearby rocker.

“Okay, spill,” she demanded. “Why the terrible face?”

“Merry still isn’t talking to me.” I had no problems venting to Cara. We’d always enjoyed an easy friendship in addition to being in-laws. “He’s convinced I’m going to leave anyway, so why give us a chance?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, honey.” She set the now-sleepy baby down in his little family room portable crib and returned to give me a big hug.

“It’s okay. I just need to wait him out.” Harrumphing, I scrubbed harder at the already-clean counters. Outside, yet more misty rain fell, and the light was already fading from the overcast sky. “And endure this rainy season as well.”

“Controlling the weather might be the easier of the two tasks.” Chuckling, Cara shook her head before taking a mango from the fridge. “Honestly, I’m about as shocked as Merry that you decided to stay on.”

“Why?” I gave her the same look that had failed to work on Merry on New Year’s Eve.

“Nolan, you’re a New Yorker through and through. No one pines for the city life more than you. You even gifted your boyfriend a bakery box of your New York favorites.”

“ Oh. ” Feeling small and kind of foolish, I put the sponge away. “When you put it like that, it seems selfish. But I just wanted him to be able to share...” I trailed off because I wasn’t helping my case any.

“It was a lovely gesture.” Cara backtracked nimbly, patting my shoulder on her way to get a cutting board and knife. “But I can see why Merry assumes you’ll miss Broadway by March.”

“Don’t we all have to make sacrifices for love?” I launched into the same speech I’d been giving myself for days. I liked Merry more than anyone I’d ever dated. Surely, that had to count for something? “Look at you, for example. Craig has dragged you to any number of places and duty stations you’d rather not go.”

“Is that what you think?” Cara let the knife clatter to the countertop. “That I hate my life but love my husband?”

“Ummm.” I had clearly wandered into shark-infested waters. I stepped away, desperately searching for some other cleaning task.

“Nolan.” Cara tracked me down to wag a finger in my face. “You can’t hate Hawaii and stay for Merry.”

“I don’t hate it here.” I was staying for Merry, so I didn’t bother arguing that point. “Who could hate Hawaii?”

“But you wish you could transplant Merry and the boys to Manhattan.”

“Maybe,” I said softly. I closed my eyes, picturing Merry and me riding the subway together. Shopping in the fashion district, grabbing takeout... Nope. None of the images remotely tracked. That wasn’t Merry. “But if he lived there, he wouldn’t be Merry.”

“Exactly. That’s my point.” Cara gave me a far less deadly-looking smile. “I met your brother when he was on spring break from West Point. I knew what I was getting into as an officer’s wife and happily signed up.”

“And Craig is so lucky you did.” I beamed at her. I might only have one in-law, but she was my favorite even when she was dispensing lectures I could do without.

“No, I’m lucky.” Cara leaned against the fridge, glaring like I was more tiring than her kids. “I’d spent my whole life up until that point in Georgia in a little town I didn’t much like. I wanted to get out, see new places, experience different things. Marrying Craig made that life happen. Do I miss him when he’s deployed? Sure. And yes, there are plenty of sacrifices for us both.”

“So—” I opened my mouth only to shut it quickly again as Cara narrowed her eyes further at me.

“However, overall, I love my life,” Cara continued, warming to the topic, as animated as I’d ever seen her. “The strong friendships I’ve built at each duty station, the chance to show the girls so much of the world, how I’ve been able to prove myself in a way I never could have back home. And Craig wouldn’t be Craig without his years of service.”

“And when he makes general, he damn well better thank you at the ceremony.”

“Oh, Nolan.” Cara groaned and beat her head lightly against the fridge.

“No, no, I get what you’re saying.” I risked stepping close enough to put a hand on her shoulder.

“Do you?” Tone highly suspicious, she peered up at me. “Do you really?”

“I have to stay for my own reasons,” I parroted the answer she was looking for, yet her expression remained unconvinced. Which was understandable. I could deliver the line, but the problem remained that Merry was my reason for staying. And if said reason wasn’t speaking to me, staying got that much harder.

Twenty-Six

The new semester is underway, and it's wonderful to see all the fresh enthusiasm along with some new faces. As the rainy season continues, please remember to keep the water outside where it belongs! Let's try to minimize puddles. We wouldn't want any accidents.

MERRY

I missed Nolan. I wasn't about to give in and do something foolish like go talk to the guy, but I missed him. I missed him when I heard strains of the choir practicing in the halls. I missed him when I saw him across the courtyard at lunch making Ken and Principal Alana crack up with some classic Nolan story. I missed him when Ryder asked when Nolan was coming over, and I missed him when my mom asked when she could next expect to see the four of us.

Over a week into the spring term, I still wasn't used to the new schedule, nor had I made my peace with Nolan staying.

"You have to talk to me sometime."

Crap. Looking more tempting than a giant sugar cookie, Nolan lounged against the wall right outside my classroom, predatory gaze saying he'd been lying in wait since school ended.

"I'm not sure what to say." Well, I could say how I'd thought I'd be in the clear by waiting ten minutes to exit my classroom, but that wouldn't help anything.

“Say dinner.” Nolan smiled far more brightly than I deserved. “Friday night?”

I moved my lips but doubted I managed more than a ghost of a smile.

“I’ve got outdoor club camping with the boys plus a quick stop at my folks afterward on Saturday.” That my mother would be delighted to have Nolan along was another thing best left unsaid. “We’ll be back Sunday night, sorry.”

“Sunday night nightcap...err...Dole Whip?” Nolan still managed an admirable amount of cheer, mentioning the frozen pineapple dessert we both liked but I couldn’t let myself have right then. Couldn’t let my guard down.

“Prep for Monday. Laundry.” My voice was as flat as my hope for getting out of this conversation unscathed. “The mundane parts of teaching and parenting.”

“So, in other words, yes, you are going to keep avoiding me.” Nolan shook his head, disappointment shining in his eyes. “I care about you, Merry. So much.”

“I care about you too,” I whispered. I could dodge him, but I couldn’t outright lie to Nolan, even now.

“Then what are we doing?” He made a frustrated noise. “I miss you. I stayed here, and I’m still missing you.”

“I’m sorry.” The words weighed heavily on my tongue, tasting rusty and bitter.

“Uncle Nolan!” Stella flew down the hall on a wave of righteous indignation. “Athena was so mean.”

“I better be going.” Like the coward I was, I used the interruption to sneak out of the school, collecting Ryder and Legend from the soggy soccer field.

Sunday morning was sunny, and I managed some solo surfing while my dad took the boys to breakfast. After I unloaded my board from the top of my hatchback, I encountered Grandpa soaking up the morning sun in a deck chair on the patio off of my parents' kitchen.

"Decent waves?" Grandpa asked as Barney flopped at his feet. Once a surfer, always a surfer, and although the last thing I wanted was to talk to anyone, I'd always make time for him.

"A few good rides." I plopped down in the chair next to him.

"Ha. You look like the board rode you, not the other way around." Grandpa snorted, making me regret sitting.

"It's been a week."

"Your mother says you turned down a free pie to take back to your friend." His suspicious tone and narrow eyes made it clear he was on a gossip hunt.

"I'm not sure when I'm seeing Nolan next." I gestured vaguely with one hand. Technically, I'd be forced to see him tomorrow at school, but a guy could dream.

"Eh. That's right." Grandpa stroked his thinning white hair. "He's returning to New York soon?"

"Not until June. Apparently." I stretched my neck from side to side, trying to give off all-done vibes without being rude.

"And you two work together? Same school? All that?" Apparently, my attempt at vibes had failed as miserably as everything else I'd tried this January.

“Yep.”

“I’d say it’s just a pie, Merry.” Grandpa gave me a long, pointed stare. “Give the man his pie. And say you’re sorry.”

“What makes you think I need to apologize?”

“You’re a Winters. We can be rather clueless sometimes.” He gave a humble chuckle. “Your grandma used to call them Winters Moments. And she would have liked your fellow.”

“You think?” I regarded him a bit more closely. He was over eighty now, and while he and my grandmother had been legendary free spirits, we had never overtly discussed whether that extended to me being pansexual.

“Anyone that polite who can eat a stack of pies? Of course.” Grandpa gave a hearty laugh before his tone turned meaningful. “And he looks at you like you’re the Big One.”

We both laughed at the surfer-speak before I sobered. “I miss Grandma.”

“Me too.” Sighing, he gazed into the distance.

“You ever think about...?” I thought better of asking the island’s most popular bachelor over seventy-five anything about his love life. “Never mind.”

“Merry. I’m eighty-three. I do nothing other than think.” He pulled off his glasses, making a show out of polishing them. “And I tell you what, if one of my lady friends looked at me like that boy looks at you, I’d tell your folks they could lease my room.”

“Well, okay then.” I blinked. There was a visual I could do without. And I’d always

presumed he hadn't remarried due to a broken heart. I sat for several long moments before blurting out, "He's not from around here."

"Merrick Winters." Grandpa sat forward, voice as stern as I'd ever heard it. "We all sit on borrowed land."

"I know. I just meant—" I tried to apologize, but he talked right over my attempts.

"Sixty-some years ago, I arrived from a big city too."

"I know the story?—"

"Do you though? I fought in a war between wars that they didn't even want to call a war. I came back here after the army let me go. It was the one thing I didn't hate about the army. Did you know that? That the army let me go? Medical discharge." He sucked in a breath between his teeth, regarding me through angry eyes.

"Sorry—" I didn't fully get the word out as he kept right on going.

"Mental health crisis they'd call it these days. I didn't return to Hawaii to surf and open a shop to catch a trend, have fun, or dodge my real life. I came here because it was the only path forward I could see. Are you going to tell me I should have gone back to Los Angeles instead? Told your grandmother to stay put while I worked in a factory like my father and his father before him..." He trailed off, as angry as I'd ever seen him.

"I'm sorry, Grandpa. I didn't mean to upset you."

"What upsets me is that you are here today, and you'll be the third generation to own Silver Surfer someday, and you are only here because people welcomed me. People who didn't have to. People who probably shouldn't have. But they did. And do you

know what would have happened to me back in the city? Nothing good, I'll tell you that."

"Nolan's not like you." I wasn't sure why I was protesting, but I hated upsetting Grandpa and didn't want him to be right that I was being narrow-minded. "You're the original Silver Surfer. Nolan's city through and through. His brain runs on subway time. He'll miss New York before spring even hits. Maybe North Shore life saved you, but it would stifle Nolan in a matter of weeks."

"Perhaps." Grandpa used an indifferent tone. "Do you know why I welcome every single person who walks into that store?" He jerked his thumb in the direction of the store where my mother was minding the counter. "I don't care where our customers are from, the color of their skin, the size of their wallet, or who they take to bed. I welcome them because you never know when your Aloha or Howdy or Hang in there, partner will make a difference."

"Welcoming someone isn't the same as dating them," I said weakly because Grandpa had already clearly won this round, to the point it was a wonder I wasn't reduced to a few cinders sitting on a deck chair.

"Ah, see, there we are, back to the looks that boy gives you." Grandpa sighed like I was a disappointment to every Winters to ever pick up a surfboard. "You want to pass on that wave, that's your own business. But what did I teach you about bailing?"

"Always do it smart. Not scared."

"Good kid." A dash of his usual fondness returned to his tone. "And your fellow has excellent taste in cookies. Just saying, if you're done with him, tell him the next bakery box can come right here."

"Grandpa."

“I tease. I tease. And now, I nap.” He slumped down in the chair, effectively dismissing me. “You think more about taking that pie with you.”

“I will,” I lied as I stood, the weight on my shoulders now twice as heavy. I’d never known Grandpa’s struggles with his mental health had played such a role in him starting the Silver Surfer. And the whole world could learn from his generous spirit. I wanted to follow his example, but I wasn’t sure I could risk my fragile heart on this particular wave.

Twenty-Seven

It's a new week, ohana! And that means a fresh set of requests. With the rainy weather, more parents have been utilizing our car drop-off lines. Let's keep all hugs and last-minute reminders as brief as possible to keep the line moving! We want all our students in their seats and ready to learn on time.

NOLAN

When I impulsively agreed to stay on at the school, I figured Merry's resistance would be measured in hours. Then, okay, yeah, apparently, he needed days. But now we were into double-digit days of his hold-out. One week had turned into two. We weren't fighting per se. But we also weren't dating. He was wasting precious time, and my irritation was reaching epic levels even coffee couldn't touch.

"Ready for another day of teaching?" Craig asked as I helped myself to a second cup of coffee in his kitchen. He was still enjoying some lighter duty days and regular hours coming off his deployment, so he'd been around the house more, making me feel like a third wheel. I was struggling to make myself useful, so I'd arrived with donuts before walking to school with the girls.

"Yeah." I took a long, bracing sip of heavily-sweetened coffee. "I guess so."

"Why the long face?" Holding the baby in the crook of his arm, he leaned against the kitchen island. "The girls say you're one of the most popular teachers at the school. You've got to be loving that."

“Huh.” I guessed it was nice that the girls didn’t have a bad report of me as a teacher, but being popular wasn’t the same as being good at something, as I well knew. And I wasn’t crazy about Craig implying I strove for popularity or validation, even if it was true. But my brother was trying. He didn’t deserve me snapping at him, so I went with the truth. “Boy problems.”

“Ah...uh...not my level of expertise.” Craig swallowed hard and pushed the donut box closer to me, jostling the baby in the process. “But I could try to listen. Or fetch Cara.”

“It’s okay.” I offered him my best fake smile as the baby started fussing again. He’d recently been fed and changed and was fighting the need to nap. I commiserated.

“We might need Cara anyway...” Craig peered down uncertainly at the baby. He’d always been one of those dads who was awesome with slightly older kids. Since returning, he’d been very involved with both girls while remaining slightly clueless with the baby.

“Here, let me.” I plucked the baby from his arms, transferred him to my shoulder, and started humming the baby’s favorite golden-era musical number while marching around the kitchen to help convince the overtired baby to sleep.

“Oh. Look at you marching.” Craig let out a brief whistle. “We could have made a soldier of you, after all.”

“So sorry to disappoint,” I said curtly, continuing to march but with much less gusto now.

“What? No.” Craig leaned forward, eyes uncertain. “Nolan, you don’t think I seriously wanted you to follow me to West Point, do you?”

I shrugged, which made the baby hiccup.

“If ever there was someone less suited for military life, it’s you. I was only joking.”

“I know.” My voice was flat. “I wouldn’t have made a soldier, but you’ve always been firmly on team Nolan Needs a Real Job.”

“Mom and Dad’s tired old argument?” He shook his head, expression seemingly genuinely perplexed. “You have a job.”

“Here, yeah.” I rolled my eyes as the baby finally gave an exhausted huff and closed his eyes. Same, kid. Same.

“No, you have a...what do they call it?” Craig frowned. Vocabulary had always been my strong suit, not his. “A calling? Passion? Avocation? That’s it. The sort of thing where you’re that identity no matter what else you do. You’ve been a performer since you were younger than Stella. You’ll be a performer at ninety. That you’ve found work teaching is awesome, but don’t discount your theater life. I tell people about my brother the actor all the time.”

“You do?” I wasn’t sure I could be more shocked if Craig had started to fly Peter Pan-style around the kitchen or launched into a stirring musical number.

“I tell folks my brother is an amazing uncle. Dropped everything to fly out to Hawaii when he heard my wife had pregnancy complications.” Craig stopped to clear his throat. “I talk about how my little brother can make a whole room laugh. Like at our grandfather’s funeral. You were young then, still in college, and wow, you delivered a showstopper of a eulogy. I’ve always admired that.”

“You?” I made a shocked noise, which startled the baby, starting a fresh round of marching and patting. “You’re on your way to becoming a general. You admire me

?”

“Sure, I’m good at making rank. But have you heard me give a speech? And I’m definitely not the fun uncle in this family. I walk into a room, and people are ready to hup two, but you walk into a room, and everyone lights up. There’s a difference.”

“ Oh. ” I stopped in the exact center of the kitchen, as surely as if someone had placed a mark there, jaw dropping open even as my chest swelled.

“Whatever you do, you do it with your whole heart, and it shows. Being an uncle. Starring in a play. Tutoring. Teaching. So, hell yeah, I’m proud of you.” He gave me a mock salute, and that was it. The waterworks were unleashed.

“Way to make me cry before eight a.m.” I waved a hand helplessly as the girls and Cara streamed into the kitchen.

“Dad broke Uncle Nolan.” Athena came to give me a hug, followed closely by Stella and Cara, who gently relieved me of the baby.

“He didn’t break me. He...helped.” I swallowed hard. For years, I’d assumed acting was my grand rebellion and something the family would never fully understand. And it turned out Craig had seen me this whole time? And not only that, he appreciated me? I felt ready to rush back to Broadway and find the role of a lifetime, buoyed by fresh confidence, and also like I no longer had to. Like proving myself was so last decade.

I let those thoughts rattle around in my head as I walked the girls to school and started my day.

“The room smells.” The seventh grade class was apparently in competition with the eighth grade for who could complain the most, but the kids had a point. After almost

two weeks of living with the leak and a bucket, the windowless room had taken on a rather musty odor to go along with the harsh lighting and poor airflow.

“Yeah, I don’t like it in here.” Another student pretended to be queasy, putting his hands on his skinny neck and pretending to retch. At least, I hoped it was pretend. I’d had enough stomach bug cases to last the remainder of the term.

Ordinarily, I’d ignore all the complaints about the room, but I was already in a cranky mood and the room was only making things worse. On the walk to school, the sun had been shining, no hint of rain, and we were stuck here in mildew land again.

“Everyone up.” Not waiting for the class to comply, I scooped up my portable speaker and teaching notes. “Grab your things. We’re headed to the courtyard.”

“We can sing outside?” The same boy who’d pretended to throw up looked rather dubious about my proposal. Before I could reply, one of his friends thumped him in the back of his head.

“You did for the holiday performance, doofus.”

“Don’t call me?—”

“Follow me.” I interrupted the brewing argument to lead the class to the courtyard, where the sunshine helped lift my mood at least, and the novelty of the setting seemed to brighten the students’ attitudes as well. In fact, it worked so well that I took the eighth grade choir outside right after taking attendance.

However, unlike the seventh graders, the eighth graders were unimpressed by the change of scenery. With the holidays behind us, I’d picked several selections from recent Tony-winning musicals as possible numbers for the spring showcase. In theory, the unit also provided a chance to discuss the rich history of musical theater,

but I might as well be asking them to sing the periodic table.

Heck, that might get more excitement than this sunny ditty the class seemed determined to butcher.

“Let the sunshine inspire you! Upbeat voices, everyone!” I instructed, but barely half the class was actually singing. “Remember, every part counts! Let’s take it again, from the top.”

“I hate this song.” Kaitlyn was always passionately against whatever I was in favor of, but this outburst was loud even by Kaitlyn standards. She stood from her perch on one of the picnic tables to wag a finger at me. “I don’t want to sing happy songs. You’re always happy, happy, happy.”

“Not always.” If anything, this unit had been a struggle for me as well, trying to bring all the fresh new-year energy to the term and stay in a good mood for the students’ sake.

Kaitlyn shook her head. “You are . And my parents are getting a divorce. Not that anyone cares, but I hate everything happy.”

“Oh, Kaitlyn.” Her friend group erupted into sympathetic noises, group hugs, and more than a few tears.

“Kaitlyn. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Mine got divorced last year.” One of the boys spoke up. “It’s been okay.”

“It’s never gonna be okay again.” Kaitlyn looked ready to go on the attack, and I was

in danger of losing the class altogether.

I clapped my hands together.

“Then we’ll sing angry songs. Mad songs. Sad songs.” Reaching for my phone and speaker, I cued up my personal playlist for wallowing in my feels, the one I’d had on repeat since New Year’s Eve. “Let’s get mad.”

“What?” Wrinkling up her face, Kaitlyn stared at me. “We don’t have to sing this sort of stuff. It’s okay. I can try the other song.”

“No, you made an excellent point.” I met her pained eyes before sweeping my gaze over the room. “Music is not simply for when we feel good or to make our audience feel good. It’s to feel , full stop. Sometimes, it feels better to rage in a song or cry or shout than to sit with those big emotions. Some days, you simply need an angry anthem.”

I pushed Play on another song and let one of my personal mad at the world favorites fill the courtyard. A hush descended over the kids as they listened, eyes going wider.

“I know this song. It has a curse word.”

“More like a curse verse.” Liam K. was quick as ever.

“You’d let us sing like that?” Kaitlyn asked quietly, a softness coming over her features.

I considered for a moment all my careful plans for this unit and the buildup to the spring showcase. Then, I mentally lit those plans on fire.

“Yeah. Yes, I would.” For once, my impulsiveness was an asset. “In fact, that’s what

we're going to try." I glanced at my watch. Darn it. The period was about to end. "Tomorrow, come to class mad. We're gonna let it all out."

After the bell rang, Kaitlyn was last to leave the courtyard to join the rush toward the lockers for the end of the school day.

"Thank you, Mr. Bell. You didn't have to be so nice to me." She looked down at her black sneakers with pink laces. "And we don't have to sing something angry tomorrow only for me."

"Oh, I'm going to have fun finding the loudest, angriest songs for all of us." I smiled until she gave me a tiny one in return. "And thank you . You provided an excellent reminder that we don't always need to hide behind a happy mask or cheerful song. Sometimes, we're sad. Sometimes, life sucks. And that's okay."

Kaitlyn exhaled so hard her bangs ruffled. "It's okay to not be okay, like that poster in the hall says."

"Yeah, it is. It's okay to have a bad day or a whole bad month." I bent slightly so I could meet her gaze again. "And I don't know everything that's happening at home, but I know you have a lot of people here who care about you and are ready to listen anytime. Like me."

"Uh-huh." She gave a sharp nod before turning toward the cafeteria entrance to the building. At the last moment, though, she tossed off a hurried, "Thank you."

"Wow." Applauding slowly, Principal Alana made her way to me. She wore a long purple-themed floral dress and her hair was swept into a white clip. She looked crisply elegant, while I was pretty sure I looked like I'd just gone ten rounds with a heavyweight champion.

“Um. You heard that?” I gestured vaguely.

“You’ve taken over the courtyard.” She chuckled, not sounding particularly put out that I’d vacated my assigned classroom. “I like the sound of singing filtering into my office, but I heard the raised voices at the end of your class. I came to see if you needed help. But you had it handled.”

“Did I?” I’d been prepared to say sorry for sharing my playlist with the kids, but she continued to smile up at me. “It’s so hard to know what to say or do.”

“You did perfectly.” The principal touched my arm. “You’re what these kids need, Nolan. You’re authentic and responsive. Can’t ask for more than that.”

“I promised them angry music.” I quirked my lips, offering an apology with my eyes. “It might get loud.”

“Good.” Principal Alana used her firm school-assembly voice. “This is a middle school. A real one, not As Seen on TV . We get messy and loud here, and sometimes, like today, we just might make a difference.”

“Because that’s why we teach.” I sank onto a nearby picnic bench.

“Yep.” She sat next to me. “Look, I know you haven’t had the easiest start this term, but these kids need you. The school needs you. I’ve been worried you’d ask out of your agreement to substitute, but today made me hopeful again. You’re finding your sea legs, so to speak.”

“I’m staying,” I promised with far more enthusiasm than I’d mustered since our initial New Year’s phone conversation. Regardless of Merry, I was needed here in a very real way. And maybe I still wasn’t staying for me precisely, but I’d finally found a few non-Merry-related reasons to get excited about. Naturally, I wanted the Merry

situation to work out, but for the first time, I believed I might be okay either way. Maybe Merry wasn't yet to the point where he could take a leap of faith, but I was, and smiling at Principal Alana, my shoulders lifted, whole body lightening. "This semester is going to rock."

She grinned back. "And roll."

Twenty-Eight

Parents! Please forgive us if the school seems a bit under construction these days. We've had roof issues affecting several classrooms. Also, our lost and found in front of the office is bulging with items. Students, please do your part to keep our school beautiful and welcoming!

MERRY

As a parent and a teacher, I was the lucky recipient of Principal Alana's emails for parents and staff alike, which meant twice as many announcements to scroll through while waiting at the dentist on a Friday afternoon instead of teaching. I'd have to return to the school for the boys, of course, but I was enjoying the brief?—

Scratch that.

I was enjoying nothing these days. Sure, missing my afternoon classes for a teeth cleaning wasn't the most exciting schedule change, but even taking the long way to the dentist and stopping at my favorite food truck for a late lunch hadn't lifted my mood. All I'd thought about the whole time was how much Nolan would like the food truck, how there was no one to fight with over the last few pieces of pineapple or push extra meat toward.

Forcing my thoughts away from Nolan, I resumed playing with my phone. I made the mistake of clicking to social media only to be confronted by Alyssa's heavily made-up smiling face.

Gah. The universe really did hate me. Or perhaps this was a necessary reminder of how well things had gone the last time I'd trusted someone to stay. Grandpa's lecture had stayed with me for days, but Alyssa was proof positive that being welcoming to mainlanders didn't always turn out for good.

Moreover, because I was a glutton for punishment, I scrolled through more of Alyssa's content. There was Alyssa boxing up the name-brand goodies she'd sent the boys, shouting out each brand that paid her in merch and showing pics of her shopping on Rodeo Drive with her besties for other items. There was Alyssa lounging by a pool in Vegas in a metallic bikini that likely couldn't actually get wet, looking nothing like the twenty-year-old I'd taught to surf, both because of the numerous cosmetic procedures she'd had and because she was so carefully posed, no spontaneity or easiness to any of her carefully curated content.

Not at all like Nolan. Nolan, who dove head-first into new things and simple pleasures, whether it was food truck noodles, teaching, boogie boards, or a foil tree for a kid. Of course, Alyssa was ten years removed from her time on the island. I closed my eyes, leaning back in the plastic chair in a waiting room that smelled vaguely of mint.

But in my mind, I was in New York City ten years from now. And there was Nolan discovering some hole-in-the-wall dumpling store. Nolan leading his much-older nieces on adventures and randomly breaking into song because that wasn't an act. That was simply who Nolan was .

"Mr. Winters?" The dental assistant in her pink scrubs with a tooth print broke into my mental time-traveling exercise. "The dentist will see you now."

I arrived back at the school with about twenty minutes until the end of the day. Enough time to knock out some paperwork or grading, so I headed into the school, but I pulled up short at the double doors leading from the main hall into the

courtyard.

“I’m so mad!” Kaitlyn stood on one of the picnic tables, and I was about to intervene in whatever this tantrum was when I realized she was singing. Loud and righteous, a mini diva steeped in rock and roll and blues traditions with a gravelly voice no middle schooler should be able to belt out. And yet, there she was, angry and awesome.

“Shout! Shout!” Around Kaitlyn, the rest of the class danced in agitated clumps, equally upset and compelling.

“More rage!” And in front of them all was Nolan, directing with his eyes closed, looking for all the world like he might be having a religious experience. “That’s it. Now, try stomping hard on that last verse. From the top! Let’s get loud!”

“What on earth?” Belinda Masters came up beside me carrying a stack of math handouts as Nolan’s class started the song over. “Is this appropriate?”

“I think it’s wonderful.” Principal Alana glided over, voice as soothing as ever.

“I simply don’t understand why he’s taken over the courtyard of all places.”

“Because his classroom smells like mildew from the leak we still haven’t found someone to fix. And there’s no denying it was once a storage room with an ambiance to match.”

“Is that Kaitlyn smiling?” Belinda readjusted her papers.

“In a Wicked sort of way, yes.” Principal Alana laughed at her own theater-inspired pun. “I, for one, can’t wait to see the spring showcase.”

“Me too,” I agreed without thinking. But it was the truth. I couldn’t wait to see what Nolan did with the spring concert. And I wanted to be there, to help him, to hear about it, to?—

Oh. Dating or not, here or not, I would always want to see what Nolan Bell did next.

And then the literal bell rang, signaling the end of the school day. Kids streamed out of the courtyard and down the hall. I stepped toward Nolan as if tugged by the invisible thread that linked us, even over the past few weeks.

“Hey. Um.” I sucked my lower lip, then released it. “That song was pretty incredible. What you’re doing with the eighth graders is... It’s amazing. I just wanted to tell you that.”

“Thanks.” His reply was more curt than expected and he was already striding toward the doors.

“I...uh...you doing okay?” I struggled to match his quick steps.

“Making it through.” He shrugged, but his hurt eyes gave him away. The guy couldn’t lie to me any more than I could to him, a thought that made my chest feel warm. But then Nolan added a small shake of his head, and all that warmth evaporated. “I’d stay and stand around awkwardly some more, but I’ve got a meeting with Principal Alana and the guidance counselor about bringing in a music therapist for a visit.”

“You came up with that idea?” Nolan always impressed the hell out of me, but this sort of initiative was full-time teacher energy.

“Trying to figure out how to help kids like Kaitlyn whose parents are getting divorced. Or Liam K., whose dad deployed. Or Ross, the kid with the sick grandma.

They're all going through something. I want—I need to help.”

“I see that.” I let all my wonder fill my voice. “You’re?—”

“Mr. Bell!” Principal Alana chirped from the doorway before I could finish my compliment.

“Gotta run.” And with that, Nolan was gone in a few efficient steps, leaving me dazed. How in the heck was I supposed to get him to listen to me?

Had I waited too long to wake up and accept the good thing in front of me?

Winters Moment . I could hear Grandpa laughing right before saying he'd warned me. However, I was a Winters. We didn't give up so easily. If Nolan didn't want to listen, perhaps I'd have to give him a sign he couldn't refuse.

With a burst of fresh energy, I headed toward my classroom. Ryder and Legend caught up to me near the shop room door.

“Dad!”

“Put your bags over by my desk,” I directed.

“What's up?” Legend cast a skeptical eye around the room. “Aren't we headed home?”

“Nope. We're headed to work .”

Twenty-Nine

Ohana, we truly are one family, and we are so pleased to be able to offer an additional new resource for students. We'll be having some visits, both classroom and one-on-one, with music therapy students from the university. A huge thank you to Mr. Bell for bringing us this opportunity.

NOLAN

As we arrived at school on Monday morning, the girls were unusually glued to my hip instead of immediately scattering to find their friends. I was about to ask what the deal was, but said friends, along with half the school, were loitering around the choir room. Indeed, I'd never seen my section of the hall so crowded.

"Look, Mr. Bell, look!" Liam K. looked ready to climb the row of lockers as he stepped away from my door.

"What the...?" I'd practiced my dramatic voice and head tilt for any number of auditions. In fact, I considered showing surprise one of my better acting talents, but I'd never delivered a more shocked gasp. Gone was Mrs. Crenshaw's nameplate, a beige plastic rectangle with white lettering, undoubtedly a holdover from the prior century. In its place was a gleaming wooden gold star. The sort of large sign seen on the Hollywood Walk of Fame or on an old-school dressing room door. Mr. Bell. My name was in a cheery black font, so large one could likely now read it from the opposite end of the hall.

Wood. Perfectly sanded edges. Blocky letters. A prickle raced up my spine. Could it

be?

“Mrs. Crenshaw is gonna be pissed. ” One of Liam’s friends whistled low. “Replaced her sign with a major upgrade. Ice cold.”

“She’s not coming back, doofus.” Liam gave his friend a good-natured wallop.

“Yeah, Mr. Bell’s here now.” Kaitlyn tugged me to the front of the crowd. “Now, open your door!”

“There’s more?” The nameplate was a spectacular surprise, so I couldn’t imagine what else awaited.

“Oh yeah. Lots more.” Legend sounded like a balloon about to gust around the room, like he’d been waiting for me to arrive. That suspicious prickle returned. And there was Merry, lurking near the twins. My insides quivered.

His mere presence didn’t mean he was ready to move forward with dating, nor did the sign, but as far as gestures went, this was a pretty epic one.

And then I entered my classroom. Gone were the drab putty-colored walls and flickering fluorescent lights and that darn bucket for the leak. The room smelled of cleaning supplies and paint, but no more trace of mildew. The walls were a subtle light gold now and the ceiling fixtures added to the warmth.

“It’s...” I looked around. “How does it glow like there’s a window?”

“Optical illusion.” Merry gave a sheepish shrug, all but admitting he’d had a hand in this. “The right wall color and lighting help, especially since Principal Alana nixed the idea of adding a window.”

“Permits, Merry, permits. I’m just impressed with what you pulled off in a single weekend.” She swept into the room and gestured at the walls, which now featured sound baffles for better acoustics. “And while Mr. Winters was the real magician, can we all admire the soundproofing tiles my wife found at a home construction resale store?”

“I love it.” I was pretty sure I was a scant few breaths away from levitating. Magic indeed. In addition to the sound baffles, the walls were brightened with several large posters, all from musical theater productions.

Wait. I stepped closer to one particular action shot from Pan.

“That’s... me .”

“Yeah.” Merry nodded. “Turns out you weren’t lying. You can fly.”

I hadn’t been lying about way more than my ability to perform in a harness, but we could start there.

“How’d you get that picture?” I asked as I moved on to other posters, and yes, all were from shows I’d either been a part of or particularly beloved favorites of mine and my grandfather’s. “Make that, how did you get all the pictures?”

“I know a guy.” Merry offered a smug smile.

“ Craig. ” Of course he’d remember which productions I’d most enjoyed.

“And Cara helped too.” Merry stepped closer.

“And I picked the gold poster frames,” Ryder added from behind Merry.

“I found the desk.” Legend was not to be outdone as he gestured at my new desk that had all four legs and a fresh coat of seafoam-green paint. “Someone at the apartment complex was gonna throw it out!”

“Well, I helped paint.” A twin war was about to break out.

Merry made a calming noise, and I spoke fast.

“You both did wonderful. I love the whole room.” I turned so I could meet Merry’s hopeful gaze. “Why did you do all this?”

“Because you deserve a proper classroom to teach in.” He made it sound so simple, almost like we hadn’t had a big it’s complicated sign over our friendship for the last few weeks. “You’re doing a lot for these kids and this school, Nolan. You deserve it.”

“So you believe me now that I’m going to finish the school year?” I stepped closer so I could use a more pointed tone. “You don’t think I’ll be on the next plane out or gone by Valentine’s?”

“Kinda hoping you’ll be here on Valentine’s.” Even the tips of his ears flushed dusky pink.

“Are you now?” The classroom transformation was incredible, but I wasn’t inclined to let him off too easily. “Thought you didn’t want to date?”

“I might be in the market for a valentine.” Gaze lowering, he studied the colorful rug under my new desk. “Or, more specifically, in the market for a you .”

“Until I jet back to New York in June?” I surprised myself with how much irritation I felt. He’d done this beautiful thing, but I wasn’t sure anything had truly changed.

“No.” He shook his shaggy head as he fished a piece of paper from his pocket. “Here.”

“What’s this?”

“It’s a link to the school district job listing for the permanent position starting next year. It just went live. I’m hoping...” He trailed off, only to swallow hard and try again. “Maybe you’ll apply?”

“Because...” I prompted.

“Because you’re good at this job. One of the best teachers I’ve ever seen. And even if you don’t want to date me, the kids deserve a teacher who cares like you do. Also, selfishly, I don’t want to plan the next holiday festival without you.”

“We did make a good team,” I said slowly as the bell rang to start the school day.

“We made more than a good team,” Merry countered as the kids scattered for their lockers and correct classrooms. “I need to get to class, but I’d like if we could have dinner sometime.”

“Like as colleagues planning next year’s festival?” I was committed to making him earn that valentine he was apparently seeking.

“Like dating. Like you wear the shirt I didn’t appreciate enough on New Year’s Eve and I take you to a place a little fancy to finish saying sorry.”

“I suppose I could allow that.” I gave a haughty sniff reminiscent of Belinda Masters. Not surprisingly, the math teacher had been nowhere to be seen in the great room reveal. “I might allow it on Friday.”

“Friday. So far from now.” He groaned, then brightened. “But that’s enough time to summon my mother for overnight Grandma duty.”

“Already planning for a sleepover at my place?” Shaking my head, I put a hand to my chest in fake horror. “Bold, Mr. Winters, bold.”

The second bell rang, signaling we were all supposed to be in class by now. And I, for one, was right where I was meant to be. And despite giving Merry a hard time, I was totally counting down to Friday.

Thirty

Our roof is fixed! All hail Mr. Winters and Mr. Can-Do, who partnered with a local crew to make those pesky leaks a thing of the past. Want to help our efforts to beautify our building? There's a list of donations we're looking for outside the office. If you're doing a post-holiday clean, check with us before you throw out that rug or old desk!

MERRY

Friday evening, I picked Nolan up from his place rather than Cara and Craig's house. Nolan was renting a teeny cottage behind a bigger house in the same neighborhood as his family and the school. The cottage's exterior was white with blue trim with an inviting sun-yellow front door. However, Nolan was waiting on a metal garden chair on the small patio adjacent to the door, limiting my options for a hello kiss. Of course Nolan would have to be so inclined and uncaring about an audience. The older couple he rented from were out on their patio as well, avidly watching the proceedings.

"I can't believe I still haven't been inside your little rental." I dropped the heavy hint, but Nolan stood and crossed the patio toward me, away from the door and privacy.

"Later." He gave me a heated glance, then turned all prim. "Maybe."

"I'm going to earn that maybe." Grinning, I gestured at his peach tuxedo shirt, which he'd paired with black slim-cut pants. "Nice shirt."

"You did request it." He finally offered me a return smile as we walked to my car.

“And you wore the sweater we picked out together.”

“I did.” I opened the passenger door for him. Nolan was more than capable of situating himself in the car, but I still hadn’t given up hope of a kiss, hug, or some sort of warmer greeting. “It’s my new favorite top.”

“Good.” Nolan grinned more broadly, but no kiss was forthcoming as he slid into the passenger seat. Luckily, we didn’t have a Barney to contend with. The dog was home with my mother and the boys, who were having a taco night and a scary movie marathon.

As we exited the neighborhood, I took the highway toward Waikiki and all the upscale hotels of Honolulu.

“Oh, we’re going downtown.” Nolan sat up a little straighter.

“I did promise slightly fancy. Waikiki is good for that chichi feel.”

“I would have been happy with a food truck,” Nolan said pointedly.

“I know.” And the fact he was as happy eating a shared plate of garlic shrimp as he was at a fancy brunch spot was a huge part of why I’d decided to trust the idea of a relationship with him. He was adaptable and easygoing, but I had a specific surprise in mind. “But you’ll like this place I found.” A wave of doubts crested in my chest. Maybe this was a silly idea. “I hope, at least. Don’t expect too much from the food.”

“Merry.” Nolan leaned forward as I stopped for a red light at the bottom of the exit. “Are you nervous?”

“A little.” A muscle twinged in my jaw. “I know I hurt you by taking so long to accept your decision to stay and teach. I’d understand if you no longer wanted to give

us a chance.”

“I’m not saying no to that at all.” Nolan sounded cautious but less distant than he had since the room reveal, which was good.

“That’s all I’m asking for right now. A chance.” I found a parking garage near our destination and led the way toward a particular hotel.

“Ooh. It’s a hotel restaurant?” Mr. I’d Be Happy at a Food Truck seemed rather perky at the prospect.

“You’ll see.” We entered the lobby, which gave away the surprise because a giant sign pointed the way to tonight’s showing of *The Deadly Dinner*.

“A murder-mystery dinner theater?” Nolan’s eyes were wide, but I had a hard time telling whether he was truly excited or simply being polite and a darn good actor.

“Is that too silly for a date surprise? I found it online when I was looking for other restaurant ideas.” Now that we were actually here, a fresh, way bigger wave of doubts hit. We were surrounded by older couples making their way through the lobby, mostly tourists. “And I know it’s not Broadway, but it’s an interactive theater troupe with decent reviews.”

“I love it. Sounds delightful.”

“And I was thinking maybe we can stick around after the show, and you could ask some questions, maybe make some local theater friends.” I tried to keep my tone neutral like I’d only had that thought a moment ago.

“You want me to make theater friends?” Nolan sounded both charmed and slightly confused.

“I want to be your friend too. Okay, more than a friend. But you need to find your people here. Community theater, visiting shows...”

“Merry. Are you trying to keep me from getting bored and homesick?” Nolan stopped outside the ballroom housing the performance, stepping to the side.

“Maybe.” My face scrunched as I rethought this whole plan.

“I’m very touched by this date. I am. And you know me well.” Eyes kind, he patted my arm. “Now that I’m staying, I’ll likely try to find friends beyond our fellow teachers. I’m an extrovert, and I do need the occasional theater fix. But I’ve already found my people here. The school. Cara and Craig. You and the boys. You don’t need to give me another reason not to leave.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t realized that was my intent until he pointed it out, and now I felt rather small and foolish, chest tightening. “I’m trying to trust you’ll stay. It’s hard.”

“I get that.” Nolan pulled me behind a fake palm tree, which afforded a small amount of privacy. “And at first, I don’t think I’d really thought staying through. I figured I’d stay for the term, we’d date, it would all be wonderful.”

“I’m sorry?—”

Shaking his head, Nolan continued, “As much as it pains me to admit, the break might have been necessary. Because it wasn’t all wonderful. The rainy season hit in a big way, the stomach bug swept through the school, the roof leaked, the kids were cranky, Cara and Craig needed me less, and you seemed to not need me at all...”

“I’m always going to need you, Nolan. The hard part was admitting it. I don’t want to need anyone.”

“Everyone needs other people, at least some of the time.” Nolan’s tone was reasonable without being a rebuke. “And you also rightfully didn’t want to be my only reason for staying.”

“Yeah.” I studied the garishly green fake palm leaves like they might have the secret code for solving the dinner theater murder. “I’m not sure I’m reason enough for anyone.”

“You know, for someone so smart...” Nolan gazed up at the embossed ceiling. “I spent my whole life in a metro area with millions of men. Cute men, single men, even a few willing to date me, and none, absolutely none, were as wonderful as you. And I’ve never shared this kind of chemistry and connection with anyone. That’s special. You asked me earlier to give you a chance, and that’s a big part of why I’m staying.”

“I feel bad that I can’t offer to go to the city.” A trio of tipsy women tottered down the hall, and I lowered my voice. “My whole life is here, but I’m asking you to make the bigger sacrifice.”

“I want a relationship, not a business arrangement. We’re not going to start out by measuring who does what.” Nolan gave me a stern stare. “And maybe someday, I’ll drag you to New York on a visit. Ryder would love Broadway, but you wouldn’t be Merry if you lived there, or rather, you’d be a very miserable Merry. No one wants that.”

“Yeah.” My voice came out rough because I kind of hated that I couldn’t be something else for Nolan. But the fondness in his eyes and tone both went a long way to making me feel understood.

“And as I was saying, I’ve found other reasons to stay. I’m staying because I want to be the best uncle I can and the kids won’t be little forever. I want to be here when Craig gets put in charge of more of the base because that’s happening. My brother,

the future general.”

“You’re already the best uncle on Oahu.” I smiled at him, but Nolan wasn’t done with his list.

“I’m staying because teaching speaks to something deep inside me. I clung to acting as my primary job for so long because I wanted to show my parents and everyone else I could make it.”

“You did though. You managed to create a life for yourself, and you don’t need a line of Tony awards to make your point.”

“Exactly.” Nolan beamed like we were on a game show and I’d supplied the winning answer. “I’m a performer. And I realized I will always be a performer, whether in the classroom or on stage. I can be a performer in New York or Hawaii. I’m a performer, and a new locale doesn’t change that, but it does provide the opportunity for me to make a difference as a teacher.”

“You already have.” Now, my voice was all husky for a different reason. “You’ve changed so many lives for the better. Including mine.”

Behind us, a low gong sounded.

“Please join us in the ballroom. The show is about to begin.”

And so, I hoped, were we.

Thirty-One

Happy three-day weekend! Our school is blessed with several recent openings for both full and part-time positions, including for next school year. If interested, please apply early! We'd love to have you as part of our ohana.

NOLAN

As Merry and I exited the hotel into the nippy-for-Oahu night air, I bounced on my feet to keep warm and out of leftover excitement from the show.

"That was marvelous." I grinned at him, offering my hand as we made our way to the parking garage.

"The interactive part was pretty fun." Accepting my hand, he gave it a playful swing.

"I can't believe you guessed the murderer before me." I used a scolding tone just to make him laugh more.

"Honestly, I am too." His expression was bashful, but he'd been one of the first to spot each clue. In fact, watching him reason out the mystery had been almost as much fun as watching the play unfold. "I'm not always the most observant."

"You see way more than you give yourself credit for." I meant more than simply clues in a game. He'd seen something in me, and I remained profoundly grateful he'd found me worth caring about. And kissing. I'd mellowed over the course of the evening. Our talk beforehand had also helped, and now I was counting down until we

were truly alone. To distract myself from those arousing thoughts, I pulled out my phone with my free hand and held it up. “And look, I have several new contacts. Potential theater friends.”

“Good.” Merry’s voice came out flat as we reached the parking garage. He dropped my hand.

“You don’t sound happy.” Pocketing my phone, I turned to peer more intently at him. “I thought you were angling for me to make friends tonight?”

“I was.” He quirked his mouth as his forehead creased. “I’m feeling guilty because I was motivated by fear of you leaving. Again. I keep thinking I’m past those doubts, and then they return, like the tide.”

“You’re allowed to be afraid. And doubts are normal.” I didn’t like Merry beating himself up over trust issues that were entirely too common. “My grandfather always said it’s what you do with the fear, and I’m happy you’re willing to give us a chance anyway. And for what it’s worth, I’m scared too.”

“You? You’d never know it.” Merry’s tone mirrored his skeptical expression.

“I’m an actor. Never let the audience see you sweat.” I winked at him in the dim light of the parking garage. “Seriously, though, I’m worried I’ve overhyped the potential of this thing, and maybe you’ll get sick of me by summer. You’re so worried I’ll want to leave, but I’m well aware I’m something of an acquired taste. I’m high-maintenance.”

We reached the car, but instead of unlocking it, Merry grabbed my arm.

“You really aren’t.” He met my gaze, a deep fondness there I hadn’t prepared myself for. “The other day, I doom-scrolled Alyssa’s social media. She’s a true high-

maintenance person. Or like how Cara's relatives have to have everything a certain way. You? You're dramatic and passionate, sure, but you're also flexible and spontaneous."

"Thank you." My skin heated from the unexpected compliments. "I do like to shop, however, and I'll probably never surf beyond the boogie board stuff."

"That's fine. I'm not looking to change you, Nolan. I just want to...I— care for you."

"Same." I pretended I hadn't heard him pull back from using the L-word. Which was fine. Even though patience was not my strong suit, I could wait because, for the first time in weeks, I was willing to trust that we'd get there. "And I don't want to change you into a smooth-talking, city-dwelling, nightlife-loving party boy or anything else. I care about you exactly as you are."

"Thank you." He exhaled in a rush before pulling me to him for a decisive kiss, our first since New Year's Eve. Where that kiss had been bittersweet and full of longing, this one felt more hopeful, emphatic even, like an exclamation point on the evening or a turning point from the purgatory of the last weeks and into something new. His lips were soft and sweet from the coconut dessert cake. Merry pulled back slightly, cheeks damp like on New Year's Eve but eyes far more sparkly. "We probably shouldn't get this sappy while in a parking garage."

"I suggest we move this discussion to a more suitable location and perhaps find better uses for our mouths." I grinned at him and swiped at his cheeks. He might have made us both wait for this moment, but my chest was warm and full at how deeply he felt things and how willing he was to let those emotions be seen.

Nose wrinkling, he glanced at the car. "The backseat is rather cramped."

"As if you didn't already know perfectly well you're coming home with me." I gave a

tsk .

“Well, I had some hopes...”

“And a bag in the backseat.” I’d noticed the backpack earlier.

“Okay, hopes and plans. And a desire to not have to return in the same clothes and get even more teasing from my mom.” He pulled me in for a fast kiss. “But only if you truly want to move forward with the whole dating thing. I want way more than friends with benefits or something casual with you.”

“I’m not sure I’d have the first clue how to do casual with you. My feelings have been involved from day one.”

“Even when I was grumpy?” He finally unlocked the car and ushered me into the passenger seat.

“Maybe especially when you were grumpy.” I winked at him, but it wasn’t a lie. He said he liked my passion, but I liked his as well, his commitment to his students and his island, and his protectiveness for both. “You’re cute cranky.”

“You’d be the first to think so.”

“Their loss. My win,” I said as we zipped through the lighter evening traffic toward my rental cottage.

After we parked, I grabbed his hand. “Come on, let’s hurry in before my landlords stop us for an after-dinner chat.”

“That eager to get me alone?” He waggled his eyebrows at me.

“That eager.” I unlocked the door. I was prepared to show him the small kitchenette, bigger main room, and tiny sleeping nook, but he had me against the wall next to the door in short order. “What are you on about? I thought you’d want the tour.”

“Later.” He nibbled my neck, undid enough buttons to lick my collarbones, and then, apparently on some sort of internal countdown clock, he sank to his knees. He didn’t waste any time in undoing my fly and sending my pants and briefs fluttering to the floor. “I missed you.”

“Missed you too. And not that I’m complaining, but I meant occupying my mouth.” We’d spent far more time together with clothes on than with them off. It wasn’t that Merry was averse to going down on me, but I dearly loved blowing him and was bossy enough that I usually got my way. “Or both our mouths. Or...” I trailed off as he swallowed my cock in a single graceful motion, not unlike a swan dive. His mouth was warm with the exact perfect amount of suction. “Oh, good Lord, if you’re going to do that, please don’t stop.”

“Not planning on stopping.” Merry pulled back long to grin up at me before diving down again. I’d figured surfers must have swimmer-like lung capacity, and I wasn’t wrong. Not only did he have the ability to take all of my cock, but he could stay deep and work the shaft with his tongue for an impressive amount of time. And each pass of his talented, talented mouth got me that much closer to the edge.

“Please tell me you’re in the mood for going for doubles again,” I panted, trying to stave off the inevitable. I was torn between finishing this way and getting fucked, and if I could have both, so much the better. “Because this is gonna be quick...”

“Doubles for you? Absolutely.” Merry winked up at me, idly teasing the underside of my cock with his tongue between words. “Heck, we’ve got all night. Might even make it a triple play.”

“Good.” My voice came out all shaky as he resumed the slide of his mouth up and down my cock, but at a pace slow enough to watch grass grow. I was balanced on the edge. The stimulation wasn’t quite enough to tip me over but more than enough to drive me out of my mind. “No fair. No fair. Oh God, Merry.”

“See?” He grinned up at me. “You’re not so quick after all.”

“Please.”

“Please make it last?” His grin turned downright evil. I loved him like this, sexy and playful. Watching him enjoy himself was its own pleasure, not orgasmic, but a deeper, warmer, richer experience.

“Merry. Please.” I rocked my hips, trying to initiate more contact. “Before I expire.”

“So dramatic,” he chided before finally taking pity on me and getting serious about getting me off with a fast, deep rhythm and more tongue action for the friction I craved.

“Oh God.” After all that teasing, my orgasm crashed into me almost without warning, a dramatic entrance indeed, leaving me shuddering as I came in Merry’s mouth. “Coming.”

His eyes drifted shut, and he moaned around my cock as he swallowed eagerly, and the sight of him on his knees, so supremely satisfied by my orgasm, was enough to trigger another wave of pleasure.

“Bed before I fall over.” After I’d come what felt like gallons, I yanked on his arm, dragging both of us toward the alcove that housed my bed. I fumbled out of the rest of my clothes.

“Better conserve your energy.” Merry raised his eyebrows as I sprawled on the double bed. He stripped off his sweater and jeans, joining me on the bed, but instead of looming over me, he lay beside me and nudged me with his foot. “You on top. I want a show.”

“That can be arranged.” A fresh burst of energy raced through me at his request. I did like showing off for him. “You did work awfully hard just now.”

“Uh-huh. And suffered waiting all week for date night.”

“Me too.” I chuckled because it truly had been torture, not giving in to the urge to have him over sooner. I rose to my knees next to him. “Got any ouchies from my classroom renovation for me to kiss?”

“You should check.” He gave me a cheeky grin as I made of game of checking him for bumps and bruises, kissing the backs of his hands and forearms, trailing my fingers down his sides, nuzzling his neck. I rubbed my cheek against the sparse hair on his chest before fisting his cock, jacking him slowly. “Okay, my turn to beg. Condoms in my bag if you don’t have any here.”

“Do we need them?” I moved so I could meet his gaze. “I’m not planning to sleep with anyone else, and I got tested before I came to Hawaii.”

“You were my first in a long time, but same. I’ve been tested, and I’m not planning on having sex with anyone other than you.” A blush swept up from his chest. “Can’t say I’ve actually had condom-free sex. The twins were a happy accident.”

“I’ve never been with someone long enough to consider forgoing protection, but I’d like to share that with you.” I dropped a soft kiss on his lips before retrieving the lube and a condom from the small box where I kept personal items under the bed. I held up the condom. “Your call.”

“I want to share going bare with you.” He tossed the condom back into my box.
“Now, back to our show.”

“You want to watch, huh?” I grabbed the lube and slicked up my fingers before straddling his midsection.

“You are the one who loves prep. Let me see how you get ready.”

I could have spun and given him a porntastic view, but Merry was the type to appreciate watching my face more. Reaching behind me, I teased my rim, making sure to give Merry all sorts of eye contact. I used my free hand to rub my torso and thrum a nipple. Every so often, I dipped forward to kiss him until he caught on and started anticipating the kisses, stretching his head to meet me.

That made for a fun game of riding down on my fingers and up to kiss him until we were both panting.

“God, you’re hot. And killing me.”

“Only fair, considering you almost did me in earlier.” Wiping my hands on a washcloth I’d grabbed from my box, I rearranged myself so I could sink down on his cock and put us both out of our misery.

But he’d asked for a show, so I lowered myself by millimeters until Merry was groaning and reaching for my thighs. He’d tortured me with drawing the blowjob out, making me wait for that first climax, giving me no qualms about making a warning noise. Two could play those kinds of games.

“No touching the performer.” I wagged a finger at him, continuing my slow slide. But eventually, my own impatience won out as it always did, and I started riding him with more purpose. True to my word, I tried to give him good visuals, arching my back,

stretching my arms, playing to my audience of one.

The more into it Merry became, the less of a performance I gave, and the more I simply wanted to give us both as much pleasure as possible. Then our eyes linked, and the only thing I cared about was the connection we shared.

“Oh, Nolan.” Merry’s whole expression softened. “I could watch you forever.”

“Forever might be pushing it.” I’d found a particularly good angle, and exactly that easily, I catapulted toward orgasm again, especially when Merry smiled fondly at me.

“I can tell.” He reached for my cock, which bobbed hopefully between us. “Gonna come for me again?”

“Like right now?” I groaned because his hand felt so good, firm and familiar, and he knew exactly how to touch me.

“Go for it.” He stroked me hard and fast. “Take me with you.”

“With pleasure.” I rocked harder against him, the pressure on my prostate almost enough to get me there without his hand. I let my head fall back and stopped worrying about what a picture I made. Merry used his free hand to urge me on, pulling me faster and harder until I let go. I wasn’t performing anymore. Heck, I wasn’t even Nolan—I was something greater than myself, something I could only be with Merry.

“Merry.” That was all the warning I got out before my come sprayed his chest and abs. Apparently, he dug that because he bucked underneath me and?—

“I feel that.” Mid-orgasm, I let out an awe-filled gasp. I could feel him come in me, leaving part of himself behind, some sort of primal marking I’d never known I’d be

into. However, from the way one more jet of come arced out of my cock, I loved having him in me, loved sharing this together.

“Oh damn.” Merry pulled me down for a lazy kiss.

“I could sleep like this. You still in me.”

“Okay.” He was agreeable as ever, holding me close. I doubted we’d really drift off this way, but it was nice to cuddle, feeling him soften rather than having to mess with the condom. “Nolan?”

“Yeah?” I yawned and cracked one eye open.

“I’m so glad you stayed.” He stroked my hair. “Thank you.”

“I don’t want thanks. I just want you, Merry. You’re all I’ve ever wanted.”

Eyes wide and emotional, he nodded, pulling me in for another kiss. This one felt like a promise, a promise that there would be many more kisses in our future.

Thirty-Two

Our annual spring music showcase is tonight! Please come even if your child is not performing. Mr. Bell and the choirs have been working particularly hard, and we also welcome our band and dance students. We have an evening filled with fun, surprises, and cookies.

MERRY

My boyfriend was back in sorcerer mode, standing on a table in the cafeteria, directing students into their respective groups, checking costumes, and soothing nerves.

“Places! Five-minute warning!” he called out, sounding calm and upbeat despite or maybe because of the chaos swirling around him. He cast a critical eye on a group of eighth grade boys struggling to pull their costumes on over their existing T-shirts. “Goodness, Liam, that shirt doesn’t fit.”

We were at that part of spring when the eighth graders suddenly looked like baby high schoolers, and everyone seemed to be having epic growth spurts. The twins were running up my grocery budget and exploding out of clothes, not unlike Liam.

“I’ll grab the next size up,” I offered, heading to the table in the back of the room where the various sizes of colorful T-shirts were laid out by class and size.

“Better grab two.” Nolan gestured at Liam’s friend, who also couldn’t make his shirt fit.

“Dad! Dad!” Ryder ran up, followed closely by Legend. “Tell Legend to stop shoving me. He’s messing up my hair.”

Ryder had recently discovered hair products thanks to Nolan, and the two of them had cluttered my small bathroom counter with an assortment of offerings. Ryder was rather proud of his new look, and naturally, brotherly rivalry had ensued.

“No wrestling.” I used a stern tone. It probably wouldn’t work, but it was worth a try.

“Is Nolan coming over after the show?” Legend asked.

“I think so. Is that okay?” Over the last few months, I’d worked hard to juggle one-on-one time with the boys with my growing relationship with Nolan, and I tried to be open to whatever the boys needed on a particular day. For the most part, though, they seemed to love having Nolan around.

“Yeah. Grandma brought pie. He better save me some.” Legend did a decent job mimicking my stern tone. My parents had driven down for tonight’s show, and rather than drive the hour or so back at night, my mom had found a bargain hotel room so we could all go to breakfast in the morning.

“The crowd is huge.” Frowning, Kaitlyn stood near the door to the courtyard, peering out at all the family and friends who had gathered. “I’m gonna be sick.”

Before I could offer reassurance, Nolan hopped down from the table and came to stand next to her.

“You are going to be amazing.” He pitched his voice low, and I moved closer to eavesdrop. “I know it’s scary doing your first big solo, but I’m here to tell you a secret: it won’t be your last.”

“It won’t?” Kaitlyn’s eyes went wide. She’d already earned a spot at the magnet fine arts high school, and I’d seen enough rehearsals to easily agree with Nolan. She had a set of pipes on her, and when she channeled her emotions into a song, it was nothing short of captivating. Further, throughout the difficult spring term, music seemed like the one thing that calmed her, and she’d been far less negative recently. “I’m not sure I want more solos.”

“Well, the solos want you.” Nolan offered a fond laugh. “You’re going places, and I can’t wait to see.”

Kaitlyn made a frustrated noise. “I wish you could come with us to high school.”

“No one wants me back in high school, and I only applied for the Anuenue opening.” The entire eighth grade seemed to share the sentiment of wanting to keep Nolan, but this wasn’t some sitcom, moving the teacher along with the aging-up characters. Besides, Nolan belonged at Anuenue.

Selfishly, I loved seeing him every day. Watching him transform from an unsure substitute in November to an undisputed school leader made my chest swell with a pride I’d never had in another person. We’d spent the last two months trying not to dwell on the status of Nolan’s application for next year. He’d made it through multiple rounds of interviews, and now we waited.

“They better pick you.” Kaitlyn had developed a fierce loyalty to Nolan.

“Thank you. And hush. Now you’re making me nervous.” He crouched so he could look her in the eyes. “I want you to go out there and slay. Don’t worry about the audience or anyone else. Sing from the heart, and the rest will take care of itself.”

“Good advice,” I said to Nolan as Kaitlyn rejoined her friend group.

“Okay, I lied.” Nolan stared out the door at the growing audience. “I’m nervous about more than just the job.”

“The kids are going to do great.” I clapped him on the back. “And so are you.”

“It’s showtime!” Principal Alana called out before heading out to welcome the audience.

As always, watching Nolan in director mode was almost as much fun as watching the performances. The sixth graders did a medley of danceable rock hits, while the seventh graders showed they’d paid attention to the Broadway unit with upbeat selections from a couple of musicals. They were the perfect lead-in for the eighth graders who stole the show with their angsty, angry, deeply emotional numbers from a Tony-winning coming-of-age musical.

All the soloists killed it, but Kaitlyn made a chill race up my arms as she bellowed, promising the audience that they, too, would be found. Nolan mouthed the lyrics along with the choir, cueing the chorus as the courtyard itself seemed to swell with the final verse.

“And a star is born.” Nolan’s eyes filled with tears as he made his way to me after the students took a bow, and I didn’t blame him. Three months of hard work had built to this performance, and each number had hit me square in the feels. Pride, certainly, but I also vibed with the music on a deeper level.

“She couldn’t have done it without you.” My voice came out all rough. Nolan had found me, made me defy gravity, and shown me the other side of being loved. My chest squeezed as my throat tightened to near-painful levels.

“I’m just glad I got to be here to see her—all of them—bloom.”

“I’m glad you stayed, Nolan.” I squeezed his hand, tugging him closer. “I?—”

Principal Alana cut me off as she took the microphone. “We have one more performance.”

My pulse sped up. Yes. Yes.

Next to me, though, Nolan was the picture of confusion. “What?”

“Mr. Bell, can you come here?” Principal Alana summoned him, and I gave him a friendly push forward. Principal Alana had him sit on a folding chair as a mixed group of students sang new lyrics to a classic Disney song.

“Be our teacher?” Kaitlyn took the final line, and adrenaline surged through me as she handed the microphone back to Principal Alana.

“The hiring committee made it official earlier today, but I know I speak for so many of us that we’d been hoping for this outcome. Congrats, Mr. Bell, the job next year is yours.”

“I’m... I’m at a loss for words.” Nolan’s voice was shaky as he accepted the microphone. “Which, if you know me, doesn’t happen very often.”

That caused a surge of laughter from the audience before applause swept through the courtyard. Anyone who’d worked with Nolan over the past few months knew how much this meant to him, our school, and our community. Craig and Cara stood up and whistled, along with several other parents.

“Did you know about that?” Nolan stalked over to me as soon as the show ended.

“Maybe.” I offered a sly smile. “Like Principal Alana said, many of us were hoping

we'd hear in time to use the song. And I had to let the kids rehearse in my classroom, so I knew the song was a possibility. Learning it was official was a big surprise for me too."

"I'm still in shock." Nolan waved a hand in front of his face like he might swoon, so I wrapped a protective arm around his shoulders.

"But happy?" I prompted.

"Relieved." He exhaled hard. "I was going to stay regardless, but I didn't want an argument while job hunting."

"I'm relieved too, but I'd already decided to ask you to stay even if the hiring committee went in a different direction," I admitted. Watching the kids rehearse, I'd had the realization that it didn't matter whether Nolan got the job or not. I was keeping him. "And I'm kinda bummed that Principal Alana couldn't wait twenty seconds because I was going to say I love you, and now, you're going to think it's because of the job."

Nolan gave an adorable squawk. "You were? You do?"

"I love you, Nolan. Honestly, I'd probably be in love with you even if you had gone back to New York. But you stayed, and all winter and now spring, my feelings have only grown." I swallowed hard. I could have said the words weeks earlier, but brains were weird. I hadn't been ready on Valentine's Day, and the longer I'd gone without saying it, the more pressure I'd felt to find the perfect moment to tell him.

"I love you too. But you probably knew that." He gave me a meaningful look. He was so much freer with his affection, something I'd been profoundly grateful for as I'd worked through my own complicated feelings.

“I like hearing it.” Despite the audience still swirling around us in the courtyard, he leaned in for a fast kiss. “And I’m sorry I kept you waiting. Again.”

“I’m always going to wait for you.” He locked gazes with me as he nodded. “Always. Take your time. I’ll be here.”

“Thank you.” I kissed him back, not nearly as fast. “I love you.”

And I wouldn’t keep him waiting forever for a more permanent commitment. I’d simply have to find—or make—the perfect moment because Nolan Bell wasn’t going anywhere.

Thirty-Three

Another successful Lights Festival is in the book, ohana. Our school is so grateful for the talents of Mr. Bell and Mr. Winters, who went above and beyond in organizing this year's program. We raised a record amount of money and had tremendous fun in the process. Enjoy these pictures, and enjoy your break!

NOLAN

"Wake up." A bony elbow nudged me, but I didn't have to fully rouse myself from a cozy sleep to know who it belonged to.

"You have to be kidding me." I let out a quiet groan. Maybe if I was subdued enough, Merry would fall back to sleep, but he poked me again. "It's the first day of winter break," I offered. Merry threw off the covers in reply, so I tried one more time. "Surely the kids aren't up. It's not even dawn."

It was still dark outside, and whatever Merry had planned, it better be good. I shivered as I sat up in bed.

"Come on," Merry urged, tugging me the rest of the way out of bed.

"You are so lucky I love you." I squinted at him as he flipped on a light.

"I am." He hummed as he pulled on pants, the happiest morning person on the island.

"Are pajamas suitable attire for this crack-of-dawn awakening?" I asked right before

he tossed me a sweatshirt and jeans. We'd sold out of the shirts featuring original student artwork at the Lights Festival.

"Nope." He shrugged into his own sweatshirt.

"At least we match." Huffing, I followed him out of the bedroom. The twinkling red foil tree was the only light in the dark apartment. "There is zero sun yet."

"Yep." Merry continued to steer me toward the door.

"We're going outside?" I frowned at him. We'd snuck off to the hot tub more than a few times, but this was early even for that. "Aren't you worried about the boys?"

"Nope." He led me to his car, where I immediately discovered the reason he wasn't worried. The boys were already in the backseat, Barney sitting up tall between them. They looked almost as awake as their father, happily chowing down on some of the bagels my parents had shipped in lieu of coming for the holidays.

"Are we sure I'm not dreaming?" I blinked. Yep. Boys and dog were still there.

"We're sure." Merry opened the passenger door and handed me a thermos. "Get in. And this is your coffee."

"Bless you." I took a long sip as Merry headed out of the apartment parking lot. "I'm confused but grateful."

"Don't be confused—" Ryder was in the running for perkier Winters that morning, but Legend quickly elbowed him.

"Shush. Don't give?—"

"Both of you, quiet for the drive," Merry said sternly, then gentled his voice.

“Nolan’s still waking up.”

“Oh, feel free to enlighten Nolan.” Smiling, I turned toward the backseat, but the boys mimed being unable to speak, which left us all chuckling. And me no closer to figuring out what Merry was after as we headed north.

“I thought your parents were coming down for Christmas Day this year.” I wouldn’t complain about an impromptu trip to North Shore, but we had a pretty tightly scheduled holiday week between his family and mine. After Christmas, we were headed this direction for an amateur surf competition the twins and Merry were all competing in.

“You can keep on guessing.” Merry pulled off almost as soon as we hit the two-lane highway headed to North Shore. He turned toward Kualoa Beach, which was one we hadn’t been to yet.

“A new beach?”

“Best sunrise on Oahu,” Legend loudly bragged. “They’ve even put it in movies.”

“Legend.” Merry used a warning tone. Both boys seemed even bouncier than usual as Merry found a spot to park. Curiously, we weren’t the only vehicle in the parking lot at this insane hour, nor were we the only sleepy people emerging.

Wait. I knew some of those cars, particularly Merry’s parents’ ancient station wagon, covered in bumper stickers.

“Your family is here?” I asked the obvious question as his mom, dad, and grandpa all emerged from the car carrying beach chairs and a cooler. “Please tell me they brought breakfast.”

“And...” Ryder started to share, only to trail off as Legend and Merry glared at him.

“Stuff. They brought stuff.”

“And my family?” I tilted my head as Cara, Craig, and all three kids emerged from their SUV. Luckily, Craig wasn’t deployed for the holidays this year, much to everyone’s relief. He waved a greeting before standing still for Cara to settle Noah Craig in a hiking carrier on Craig’s back.

The baby was one now, full of energy and hollering, “Unca!”

I waved back at him and Craig before turning toward Merry. “What are you on about, Merry Winters?”

I was starting to have something of a guess and champagne bubbles rose in my throat and tickled my sinuses. I might have a clue, but I also wasn’t sure I’d manage to survive what was coming. And, of course, he’d known I’d want an audience whether I lived or not.

“You’ll see.” He winked at me before grabbing my hand. “Now, hurry, the sunrise is about to start.”

“Oh, I’m hurrying.” In fact, I was pretty sure I’d never walked this fast or with this much anticipation.

“Come on, troops.” Craig rounded up the kids, relieved Grandpa of carrying his beach chair, and headed toward the beach as well. “Follow Merry.”

The beach was wide and sandy, with a lush amount of palm trees. The sky had started to lighten, the barest hint of pink emerging, and everyone stood quietly, faces turned to the east.

“Are we waiting for something?” I asked Merry.

“The light,” one of the kids yelled out. “Here comes the sun.”

“Right...now.” Next to me, Merry sank to one knee and revealed a small box, which he opened right as the sunrise hit the metal ring. “Marry me?”

“You planned all this? For me?” I wasn’t entirely shocked as we’d spent much of the fall discussing the future, particularly whether it made sense to keep paying rent on two places. And Merry had become way more comfortable with talking about years down the line, like after the boys were done with high school and when we might want to join his folks on North Shore. He used the word *we* a lot, and I’d dropped more than one hint that when he was ready, I’d be all over making this thing permanent.

“It’s solstice, the shortest day of the year.” Merry turned the ring box so it caught even more of the rising sun. Legend had been right—this truly was the prettiest sunrise I’d seen during all my time in Hawaii. Merry’s voice was surprisingly steady as he continued, “A day when we celebrate the light that breaks through the darkness. And you’ve been the biggest ray of light for all of us over the last year. I’m asking you to bring that sunlight into my life. Will you marry me?”

I hesitated, not out of indecision, but rather to glance at all those who had come to watch. They’d woken up early to celebrate with us. It was more than a little humbling. As a teacher, I’d learned that it took a community to make a thriving school, and this thing between Merry and me had grown so much bigger than simply the two of us.

“Nolan,” Craig called out in a voice worthy of any theater director prompting a line. “Say yes already.”

“Say yes!” both twins shouted.

“Legend? Ryder? You guys are really okay if I say yes?” I teased, knowing full well

Merry wouldn't be asking if he hadn't had a long, serious talk to make certain the boys were on board.

"Say yes!" they yelled louder, then everyone joined in. "Say yes!"

"Unca!" Even the baby had to get in on the fun.

"Yes, yes, I'll marry you." I extended a hand down to haul Merry up next to me.

"Kept me waiting," he grumbled. "Although, really, I guess I kept you waiting. Again."

"Not too long." I thought back to our talks about the future, each one leading us closer to this moment. We'd spent the past year building something solid and real, so much more than a holiday fling. "Not too long at all."

The sun continued its spectacular ascent, truly a sunrise for the ages. I'd found myself on this island, come into my own as a teacher, and found Merry here, but never had I felt as at home as I did right now. Merry too often thanked me for staying, but after a year, I could unequivocally say I'd stayed for me.

"Bubbly for everyone!" Merry's mother opened the cooler to reveal sparkling cider, small plastic champagne flutes, and a cake that proclaimed, Congrats, Merry and Nolan! Yep. There had been no real doubt for anyone as to my yes.

"Does this mean I can give notice at my place?" I asked Merry in between bites of the piece of cake we were sharing. "It's basically clothing storage at this point anyway."

"Yep. And actually, Cara's been helping me look for something a little bigger. More closets."

"I like the sound of that." I preened. Unable to resist, I looked down at my hand again

to study the simple metal band. “And this. I like this a lot.”

“It’s not much?—”

“Hey!” Ryder cut Merry off. “We helped pick.”

“You did an awesome job,” I assured him and Merry. “It’s everything.”

And indeed, it was. More thrilling than a Tony, more inspiring than a packed house, more wonderful than a good review. I’d won the starring role of a lifetime, and I couldn’t wait to make the part my own.

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