

Seasons
of
Change

by
Cheryl Okimoto

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Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings,
because we know that suffering produces perseverance;
perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Romans 5:3-4 (NIV)

With grateful thanks to my wonderful readers: Anne, Annie, Cari, Cheryl, Gloria, Jaime, Lisa, Ray and Vickie, and with special thanks to my husband for all his patience, encouragement and help. I couldn't have done this without you.

This book is set in Hawaii, which has a culture quite different from any other place. That culture comes through in a number of places in this book. For my Mainland readers, I have included a "Notes" section in the back of the book to help you get the most out of the story while still maintaining a good deal of authenticity.

For my kamaaina readers, please understand that I toned down some of the pidgin and culture for my malihini readers. For example, how do I explain Steve's Filipino gardener? When you get there, kamaaina reader, know that Heather and Greg asked about it and had fun with it.

Chapter 1

The sun was warm on Steve Jeremiah's face and the trade winds brought a hint of what Hawaii thinks is winter, the brush of a barely cool breath against the skin. The sky was a deep, aching blue that reminded him of his sister Jenni's eyes. The mist of the blowhole drifted away on the breeze and he heard the surf crash against the rocks below.

He only heard the surf because he didn't hear what he wanted to hear, the rumbling purr of two hundred fifty-five horses under the hood of his BMW Z4 convertible.

"Lord, this is a forty-five thousand dollar automobile," Steve groaned as he listened to the click of his key in the ignition. "It should be roaring to life. What's up?"

He tried again. Click. Click. No response.

"This cannot be happening to me!" Steve laid his head on the steering wheel and groaned again. After seven years of professional football, there had been very few things he had not gotten pretty much as soon as he wanted or needed it. He was spoiled. He admitted it but really, he didn't want that much. He had his house up on Alewa Heights, his convertible and the offseason leisure to enjoy Oahu, this paradise that shouted of God's glory.

This morning he had come out here because he wanted to admire the sunrise and read a book beside the Pacific while occasionally watching for the blowhole to spout off and maybe even catch a whale in the distance, spouting its own blowhole even when the tide was low. Now he was ready to move on to Waimanalo and see if the waves would challenge him in a run on the beach.

As usual, he had been denied the whales and now he would also be denied Waimanalo. Unless perchance she had just been coy before. He turned the key again, firmly depressing the clutch. Not coy, dead.

Steve gripped the steering wheel as he stared into the distance, seeing the dark days of his past rather than the smudge of Molokai rising from the blue waters of the Pacific. A poor boy from the wrong side of the tracks in Abilene, Kansas, the only car he'd ever had to drive was his mom's old Mercury station wagon, held together by baling wire and duct tape. He'd always been too

preoccupied with football to pay any attention to how Uncle Joe fixed it. That preoccupation had paid off with a lucrative pro football contract but it wasn't doing him a bit of good now.

With a groan, Steve popped the hood and climbed from the butter-soft leather seat. "If only" ran through his head as he peered under the hood, clueless about what he was looking for. If only he had paid more attention when Uncle Joe tried to teach him about cars. If only he'd taken Mr. Markel's auto shop instead of hanging out with the girls in Ms. Holland's home-ec. If only he'd already joined a traveler's club. If only he had any clue how to call a tow truck without a phone book or the internet.

Hopefully Pete was at home. Flipping open his cell phone, Steve speed-dialed his best friend who was also his only friend on Oahu.

"Hey Steve," Pete came through loud and clear as usual. "What's happenin'?"

"It's more like what's *not* happenin'," Steve slammed the hood of the car. "This 'marvel of German engineering' that you convinced me was the best thing this side of heaven isn't running."

"It's not? What's wrong?"

"If I knew I wouldn't be calling you, now would I?"

"Guess not," Pete's chuckle was much too happy for Steve's sour mood. "What *are* ya callin' me for?"

"Well, I'm stuck out here at the blowhole by that beach where you tried to get me killed last winter."

"You mean Halona Blowhole by Sandy Beach?"

"That would be the one."

"So whatcha want me to do? I can't fix it, brah."

"Believe me, I'm well aware of that fact," Steve rolled his eyes at the thought of his friend's even greater ineptitude with cars. "But I don't have a number for someone to call. I was hoping you'd get one for me."

"Ah, so ya didn't join —"

"No, I didn't," Steve sighed, "and I don't need your 'I told you so.' Just give me a number for a tow truck and a place for it to be towed to."

"No prob. Hang on a sec and I'll get the number to the garage that keeps my marvel of German engineering running smoothly. They can tow it and fix it."

A short time later, Steve settled down on the rock wall above the blowhole to wait for the tow truck that the receptionist at the garage had guaranteed him would be on its way "soon."

"A car, a car, my kingdom for a car," Steve muttered, paraphrasing Shakespeare's King Richard. "I guess I should thank you, Lord, for reminding me that I'm not in control and I can't have everything I want, but if you don't mind, I don't feel like being thankful right now. I finished my book. There

are no whales out there. There's not even a sea turtle. I can only take so much blowhole at once. There's not even anyone to talk to out here this morning. If you've got a plan in all this, I'm not seeing it."

Steve tried to settle back and enjoy the incredible beauty of the place. The Pacific stretching out before him to the far horizon was that deep, deep blue that caressed with a soothing embrace. The tide was going out and the surf rolled with gentle swells only occasionally breaking with force against the brown-black lava rocks below, sending white foam splashing over the rocks and mist sputtering from the blowhole. The sun was still in the Southern half of its spring journey and it hadn't yet gained the sub-tropical summer strength that it would have in just a few short weeks, so it kissed his cheeks gently. The coastal road perched precariously on the side of Koko Head Crater, but he was too close to the stately mountain to appreciate the full beauty of its leeward crest, windward collapsed lip and peaceful green valley nestled well below the summit. He was nicely set to enjoy watching the action at Sandy Beach, but surprisingly, there wasn't anything interesting there.

He was no longer content to just enjoy the beauty of Hawaii right now. He knew that all across the Mainland, people were still cold on this late February day and most of them would love to trade places with him, busted car and all. Even here on Oahu, where everyone enjoyed beautiful weather almost every day of the year, most of the residents would also take his place instead of being trapped at work on this incredible day that cried for attention. He could give the day the attention that it demanded but he was tired of doing it here at the blowhole with the inactivity of waiting. He wanted to enjoy this day in Waimanalo.

It kind of underscored his life. Since he'd achieved his dream of becoming a Chicago Grizzly, he'd fallen into a waiting pattern. Now his thirtieth birthday was rushing at him like a middle linebacker on a blitz but he was still waiting. He was waiting to find Jenni again sixteen years after she'd run away. He was waiting to find the love who teased his dreams like the rainbows teased the mist at the blowhole. He wasn't just waiting idly, he was actively looking for both, but God wasn't helping any and Steve was getting tired of waiting.

He looked at his watch. Whatever the receptionist had meant by "soon" wasn't even close to what Steve thought it meant. It was almost an hour already. Steve got up to pace the sidewalk. After a few minutes, he realized that pacing was only increasing his frustration. He plopped back down on the wall. He crossed his right leg over his left, propped his elbow up on his knee, and dropped his chin on his hand. He stared at Koko Head, carefully inspecting the foliage growing out of the rocks. Something entered his peripheral vision. Turning his head to the left, he saw the tow truck pulling off the road and into the parking lot. His sigh of relief turned to a groan when the driver stepped out of the cab. No way was this tall gangly kid touching his Beamer!

“Keys in the car?” the youth growled, striding purposefully toward Steve’s midnight blue convertible.

Steve nodded, trying not to glare at the youth. Pete said they were the best on the island. If he was wrong, he would pay!

“What’s the problem?”

“It won’t start.”

“You wanna be a little more specific?” Steve could swear the driver rolled his eyes. “Don’t usually get called when they do start.”

Steve felt the heat rising in his face. “Nothing happens when I turn the key.”

“You depress the clutch?” The youth unzipped the top of his coveralls and whipped out a thin towel, draping it over the leather seat. “All the late models have built in safety measures, ya know. Can’t start ’em without the clutch depressed so they don’t jerk ’cause they’re in gear.”

“I’ve had this car for a year. I know how to start it.” It was Steve’s turn to roll his eyes.

“No need get all huhu, brah, just checkin’.”

“Who who?”

“Hawaiian for grouchy.” He slipped behind the wheel and turned the key. “Yep, it make.”

“Mah-kay?” Steve was beginning to feel a little stupid.

“Hawaiian for dead.” The youth slid off the seat, knelt beside the car and twisted to feel under the clutch with his left hand. The partially unzipped coverall pulled tight over his right shoulder and gapped open over his left side. Steve saw curves under the driver’s black t-shirt. “He” was a she.

“Ah-ha! Spent three days figurin’ it out on Uncle Pena’s car last year, but there she is.” She smiled as she stood and turned, holding something tiny in her hand. “I got good news and bad news.”

Steve stared at the hand holding a small piece of what looked like a rubber plug. It was definitely a woman’s hand. A woman who worked with her hands, but a woman nonetheless. He could now clearly see that what he had thought was a tall gangly teenaged boy was actually a very tall, slender woman with hints of curves in all the right places under her coveralls.

“Hey mister, you in there?” Steve forced his attention back to the matter at hand when she waved a hand in front of his face. “Your car, brah.”

“Yes, my car,” Steve looked at his car rather than at the woman. “You have good news about my car?”

“I’ve got bad news too.” Her smile grew a little as she recognized that look. Most guys were bowled over when they realized they were being rescued by a woman. It was especially gratifying this time because she had recognized the man waiting on the wall and it had taken her breath away.

As far as she was concerned Steve Jeremiah was the hottest thing on the football field. She’d only become a fan because he played for her team but

then she had become a Jeremiah fan just like her family. She admired number ninety-five even if she did resent that he got such a fat paycheck. When she'd seen him needing her to rescue him, the admiration surged and the resentment waned. It had taken every ounce of fortitude she possessed not to gush over him when she climbed out of the truck. Now he was trying not to gush over her. How cool was that?

“So what's the bad news?” He kept his gaze trained on his Beamer.

“First the good news. It's an easy fix. This manini piece of rubber is part of the clutch safety system and it broke.”

Steve decided that manini must mean tiny. He wasn't going to ask because he didn't want to look stupid in front of this intriguing woman. At least not any stupider.

“So then what's the bad news?”

“It'll be at least two or three days before I can get it fixed,” she grimaced and gave a small shrug of her shoulders.

“Two or three days? Why?” Steve glared at her, shocked out of his distraction over her gender.

“Two problems.” She bounced the offending piece of rubber in her hand. “I don't have this particular part in stock because I don't get much call for it, in fact only once before. And surprising as it may seem to you, you aren't number one on my list yet.”

“Excuse me?” Steve thought he detected a bit of sassiness in her tone. Did she know who he was?

“I've already got four cars in my queue.” She quickly decided not to let on yet that she knew he was a superstar defensive end. “You may have a forty thousand dollar automobile, but that doesn't make you more important than the jobs I already have.”

Okay, that wasn't unreasonable but it was darned inconvenient for him.

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“Well, as I see it you've got three options. There's TheBus —”

“Not a chance,” Steve emphatically shook his head.

“Or you can get a friend to chauffeur you —”

“Possible, but not attractive.”

“Or you can rent a car for a few days.”

“That's definitely doable,” Steve nodded, “but how do I get to the car?”

“I don't suppose you joined some kind of preferred driver club?” She used her shapely eyebrows as a question mark.

“Never saw the need for it,” Steve sighed, crossing his arms and leaning back against the car. “Lots of things I should have done that I didn't do yet.”

“Well, plenty time for that later,” she smiled, “but for now, let's get your car towed to the garage. You can call the rental agency and I'll give you a ride down there.”

“You can do that? You won’t get in trouble.”

“I’m the boss,” she grinned. “No one to give me trouble.”

“Not even a husband,” Steve grinned back.

“Nope,” her grin faded quickly and she snatched work gloves out of her pockets. “Let’s get this beast turned around so I can load it on the truck. You steer.”

“I am not sitting in this car while a woman pushes it!” Steve rose to his full height and planted both fists on his hips.

“Didn’t think you would,” she tossed over her shoulder. “You’re gonna push and steer at the same time. It’s a whole lot harder than giving a little shove from the front.”

“Before I push and steer, tell me, you got a name?”

“Heather,” she growled. “Now let’s get this beast moved.”

Steve tried to keep his attention fully on getting his car lined up for the tow truck rather than wondering what was up with this peculiar woman. He couldn’t figure out if she was friendly or not. One minute she smiled like a siren, the next she was growling like a grumpy old man. Was she attracted to him? Did she know who he was?

It didn’t take very long at all before she was tightening up the tow bar around the front tires.

“By the way, I’m Steve –”

“I know who you are,” she grunted and turned away. “Get in the truck.”

Chapter 2

Steve sat in the cab of the tow truck trying to decide if he was supposed to make conversation with his suddenly surly driver. He couldn't figure her out. Heather had worked with efficiency and strength while loading his car on the truck but now there was something about her that cried out with vulnerability. The fingers of her left hand tapped a nervous beat on the steering wheel and she was chewing on her lower lip, paying more attention to the road than he suspected she needed to. Heather had said nothing after ordering him into the truck, but he was pretty sure she wanted to say something. He couldn't decide if he wanted to hear what she had to say. If he did, how would he encourage her?

Lord, I don't know what you're doing here, but I know you, so I'm sure you're up to something. Please give me some wisdom.

Heather wasn't happy with herself. She didn't like being confused and unsure. She needed to be in control. The sudden presence of this man in her life was confusing and therefore a threat to her control. She wasn't sure what to do about it.

When he'd asked if she had a husband, reality slapped her in the face. Heather didn't have, and would never have a husband because she wasn't wife material. That didn't bother her anymore because she had a full life, a life she really liked. But for some reason, when Steve Jeremiah asked if she had a husband she suddenly longed for one, something that hadn't happened in a long time. It must be because Heather kind of had a crush on him and yet he also made her mad. She'd noticed that sometimes her brother Luke had that effect on his wife. Maybe her mind was trying to trick her into thinking she was in love. She certainly felt like she'd known him for years.

Heather had known who Steve Jeremiah was even before he became a Grizzly, while he was still in college in Oklahoma. Her younger brother Greg had dreamt of the Grizzlies picking Jeremiah in the draft, certain he was just what the team needed. Greg had written and told her all the reasons why, and when he'd been right about his pick, he had spent endless hours reading about Jeremiah on the internet, then sharing stats and facts. With number ninety-

five's first pre-season game, Greg had started very carefully reporting every great play that Steve Jeremiah was in on, just in case she missed it.

When Greg's own dreams of playing college football were unrealized and life intruded in his near obsession, the rest of the family was already fired up about Steve Jeremiah. Of course, it hadn't been a hard feat since they were all Grizzly fans anyway.

While she'd been in the Army for the start of the Jeremiah passion, Heather had caught it vicariously through letters, emails, and phone calls. She had also picked up some of it firsthand when she was able to watch Grizzly games. Then she'd come home and seen how old and tired Dad was getting, how hard her family all had to work just barely scraping by. Her teenaged brothers talked about how much Steve Jeremiah was getting on his new contract. A tiny bit of resentment began to creep into her heart, resentment that he made a shocking amount of money for a game while her father couldn't get a steady paycheck for his important prison ministry. Still she couldn't help admiring Jeremiah because he lived well off the field as well as playing well on the field, so she felt guilty for her resentment and then she resented him more for her guilt.

Now he was sitting in her truck and she could see that for all the money, all the hero worship, he was just a regular guy. And she felt like she should apologize, but he couldn't possibly know why. And she was really, really bad at explaining things, so she was afraid she'd mess it up if she tried but she had to say something.

"My father went to bible college right out of high school," Heather kept her eyes on the road as she began to speak. "That's where he met my mom. He was a year ahead of her, so he took a job as an associate pastor close to the college after he graduated. They got married two weeks after she graduated."

Heather paused to drink from the can of diet cola in her drink holder. Steve was intrigued and he hardly breathed in the hope that she wouldn't be diverted from her story.

"They spent two years as itinerant preachers on the Mainland, raising funds for the mission to Africa that they planned to go on. My older brother Luke was six months old when they landed in Africa, I came along not quite three years later, my brother Greg two years after that. Mom was from Hawaii, so they came back here after ten years in the mission field because she was dying. Within four years, Dad was widowed, remarried, had another son and became a prison chaplain. I guess we should have felt neglect, resentment or something but we never did. Dad was so full of God's love that we didn't feel any emotional need but we felt the financial need."

Heather sighed and shook her head. She propped her left elbow up on the window ledge of her door and began to massage the back of her neck. Steve waited quietly for her to continue, knowing that she was sharing something very important but not at all sure why.

“Dad worked in the prison for almost fifteen years. He never was able to make more than just enough to get by. Not because he wasn’t capable but because he was devoted to serving God and others. When he died last year, his health was broken and so was his wallet.”

She sighed again and shook her head. “I admired my dad more than any other man I’ve ever known. That’s why I resented you making all that money just for playing football.”

Steve wanted to sink through the seat and disappear. Heather was bringing up the bane of his existence, the irrationality of the astronomical sum he received to play a game, but she wasn’t done with her story.

“I had a hard time understanding how a man could make that kind of money for a silly game. You play with a graceful power that’s beautiful to behold, but still ... millions of dollars a year? And my dad didn’t even get a salary as a prison chaplain. He had to go out and beg for every dollar of his support. It’s not right.”

She was correct, it wasn’t right. Steve felt guilt rise with every word she spoke. He began to massage his temples with his left hand splayed across his face, hoping she wouldn’t see the effect her words were having on him.

“I was angry that my family so loved to watch you play football, even while we were watching my dad die. I felt bad that *he* loved watching you play football. Then my two youngest brothers came back from the prayer breakfast before the Superstar Game, talking about you. And they kept talking about you.”

Heather glanced over at her passenger who looked like he was trying to shrink his big body into a little ball. She was shocked that her words were having such a powerful effect on this world-renowned athlete.

“Hey man, no shame! I’m so sorry. I am so bad at this!” She slapped the steering wheel. “I should have started with the end. You made a real difference with my brothers. Dad was wasting away from the cancer, and Tim and Robert were starting to act out in school, cutting classes, not doing homework, all that kine stuff. But they came home from that prayer breakfast talking all, ‘Jeremiah told us about his dad being an alcoholic. We sure have been blessed to have our dad.’ And ‘Jeremiah said it’s important to do the right thing and do it well.’ They kept talking about you and I was ticked off because Dad had been saying those kine things for years and they hadn’t listened to *him*.”

Heather gave a little laugh and shook her head. “Dad told me to lighten up, that’s just the way some people are. Even he had to hear ‘fatherly’ advice from someone other than Grandpa before it sunk in. He told me that you were using your God-given talents in a mission field of your own.”

Steve grunted in disbelief, and Heather laughed outright.

“That’s exactly the noise I made when he said that! But he was right. I’ve heard it from other boys and their parents too. And I’ve learned about some of

the other things you do, helping people with your money instead of using it all on yourself.”

Steve stared out his window for a moment, then he harrumphed and turned to face her. “So why don’t you like me?”

“It’s not that I don’t like you,” Heather began to blush. “I just don’t know how to act around you. You confuse me because you aren’t what I’d come to expect when I was angry and yet you aren’t quite the hero far above us all either. You actually seem likeable, but I don’t want to gush all over you like some crazy fan.”

“Gushing isn’t all that bad,” Steve said dryly.

“I’m sure it’s better than being pummeled, huh?” She grinned sheepishly.

“Quite a bit better, actually,” he agreed emphatically.

“Seriously, I’m sorry,” Heather slowed the truck to make the right turn into the garage. “I didn’t mean to make you feel bad. What you do is good, very good. You’re doing God’s work.”

“Thank you,” Steve gave her a small smile. “I appreciate your honesty.”

“Not everyone does,” Heather shrugged, “maybe because I don’t often communicate it kindly.”

“Yeah, you might want to work on that,” Steve said dryly.

“I’ll start today,” Heather laughed. “Why don’t you go in and have Malia help you get your car rental arranged while I drop your car and get it queued up? Then I’ll give you a ride to get your rental.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Steve agreed.

When Heather left the truck, Steve sat for a few moments, taking some deep breaths. That was quite a story. This stranger had waltzed into his life and quickly touched him in a way no one had done since his grandma died.

Lord, am I really doing your work? Am I stewarding your resources wisely? Are you pleased with me?

He didn’t get an answer, but then he hadn’t really expected one. Maybe God was talking to him in another way. Steve sent up another prayer for guidance as he climbed out of the truck.

Chapter 3

I've got good news and bad news," Steve smiled at Heather when she entered the office a short time later.

"Start with the good news," she sighed.

"They can give me a man-sized car."

"Very good. We wouldn't want you crammed into an economy-sized toy car." She gave some papers to Malia and turned to face him. "What's the bad news?"

"It won't be available until after three, so you're stuck with me for four hours."

"Four hours!" Heather frowned. "I can't have you hanging around the shop for four hours. No one will get any work done. What am I going to do with you?"

"Having lunch would be great," Steve sighed. "I'm hungry but I have no wheels, so if you don't want to do lunch I guess I won't be having it until after three."

"You do need to have lunch," Malia suggested helpfully to Heather, "and it won't hurt you to take a few hours off."

"We both need to have lunch," Steve said hopefully.

Heather had to smile a little at his imploring attitude. It reminded her of her young nephews. She studied him for a moment. He really did seem like a nice enough guy. She wouldn't see him again after he picked up his car, so she supposed a few hours with him couldn't hurt.

"Let me wash my hands and get out of these coveralls, and your wish is my command."

Watching her walk toward the back room, Steve began to grin. As if sensing his thoughts, Heather turned and shook her finger at him.

"Within reason," she arched her eyebrows. "I have veto power."

She turned and took two more steps, then turned back again.

"Oh Malia," she said, "feel free to gush and ask for an autograph!"

Steve saw the twinkle in her eye as she turned again and disappeared behind the closed door.

“Oh wow!” Malia, Heather’s cousin and receptionist, did indeed gush. “You’re really here. Steve Jeremiah of the Grizzlies. You touched my desk. I’ll never work anywhere else now that I’ve seen you in this office. Can I have your autograph?”

“I’ll be happy to,” Steve turned his most dazzling smile on the exuberant young woman. “Do you have paper and a pen?”

“Oh, oh! Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Malia fumbled around on her desk, giving a cry of triumph as she came up with a pink sticky pad and a green pen.

“Please tell me you will never show this to anyone else,” Steve held the pink pad rather gingerly.

“Oh! Right!” Malia snatched the pink pad away and thrust a yellow one at him. She sighed. “Sorry about that.”

Steve wrote a quick note and handed the pad back to her. Malia read it aloud with a sigh.

“Malia, your smile warms my heart, Steve Jeremiah, #95.” She sighed a very gushy sigh and clasped the pad to her breast with both hands. “I’ll smile for you any day, Steve!”

“I said you could gush, not drool,” Heather said drolly as she strode into the room.

“She wasn’t—”

Steve’s mind went blank when he turned and saw his mechanic. She did have curves in all the right places!

Without her coveralls, cap and sunglasses, she was obviously feminine. Delightfully so. It was embarrassing to think he’d even for a moment mistaken her for a boy.

Her hair was still pinned up for work, but Steve could now see that it was glossy black, probably long and curly too. She was dressed simply in a black t-shirt and shorts that flattered her figure without being too clingy and revealing. Her legs were very long and well-muscled like a biker or a dancer. Because she wore flip-flops, he could see that she had toe rings. Four of them. Her eyes were hazel, tending a little more toward green and they were suddenly curious under arched brows.

“You have a problem with my slippers?” Heather lifted her shapely right leg and wiggled her foot. “What’s wrong with my prom slippers?”

“Look who’s drooling now,” Malia muttered under her breath, just loud enough for Steve to hear. He tried not to blush.

“Prom slippers? What?” Steve ran his hand through his hair. “No, no. It’s not your flip-flops, it’s your toe rings. I’ve never seen so many. Never seen any, come to think about it.”

“Malihini,” Heather rolled her eyes at her cousin and sighed. “If you’re going to spend the off season in Hawaii, you’re going to have to learn some culture, malihini.”

Malia giggled and nodded vigorously in agreement.

“Mala-whatie?” Steve looked from one grinning woman to the other.

“Mah-lee-hee-nee,” Malia pronounced it distinctly.

“Newcomer.” Steve didn’t miss Heather’s slightly disparaging tone. “If you’ve been driving that BMW on the roads of Oahu for a year, you should know a little something about the place where you’ve been driving it.”

“About that,” Steve ran his hand through his hair again and had the grace to look sheepish at being caught in his exaggeration. “You know I haven’t actually been driving it that much since I was on the Mainland for the last eight months.”

“Oh really?” Heather smiled wickedly, acknowledging that she’d caught him. “Did you hang around with any kamaaina last year?”

“Kama-whata?” Malia giggled again and Heather rolled her eyes.

“Kamaaina. Locals. Obviously not,” Heather shook her head.

“Not really,” Steve looked down at the floor. “I pretty much hung around the house, getting settled in, lounging in my pool and healing up.”

“Oh that’s right!” Malia gasped in sympathy. “You had some ribs cracked in the Championship Game when you got hit with that illegal block.”

Steve smiled at her sympathy.

“And bruised your ego when you lost the game,” Heather smirked.

“Thanks for the reminder,” Steve’s heavy sigh was only partly to make Heather feel guilty for her remark. It did still hurt that he had made it into the Championship Game and lost.

Heather eyed him skeptically, not sure how serious his apparent pain was, but Malia was full of sympathy.

“Heather, that’s so mean,” Malia stood and frowned at her cousin with fists planted firmly on her hips.

Heather caught Steve’s small smile as he snuck a look at her without rising from his dejected pose. She rolled her eyes and stepped forward, grabbing his arm and shushing her cousin.

“First lesson, malihini,” she said as she dragged him out the door, “these are slippers, not flip-flops and not thongs. These particular ones are rubber, hence they are ‘rubber slippers.’ Even the drug store ad says so. This pair happens to be my ‘prom slippers,’ relatively new and gently used. After lunch, we’ll stop and get you a pair.”

“Where are we going for lunch?” Steve was willing to have Hawaiian culture lessons, but first things first.

“You buying?”

“Of course.”

“Good,” Heather smiled as she led him toward a very old BMW. “‘Cause I only have five bucks on me. If I was buying, it was going to be hot dogs and soda at Costco.”

“Are we riding in that?” The car could probably be green but it was badly faded and had countless rust spots so he couldn’t be sure. Steve had serious thoughts about not being caught dead in such a vehicle.

“Relax,” Heather grinned as she opened the driver’s door. “I’m a mechanic. It runs like a dream and the front seats are almost as good as yours.”

“Why does the outside look like the car should be in a junk yard?” Steve glared suspiciously over the roof of the car, crossing his arms over his chest in an obvious refusal to touch the door handle.

“Look, I’ve only had the car a few months,” Heather shook her head. “First things first. Mechanically, it’s better than your car right now.”

“That remains to be seen,” Steve scowled.

“Get in and you’ll see,” Heather followed her own advice and slipped into the car. Steve bent down to glare at her, arms still crossed.

“Where are we going?” He raised his voice to be heard through the closed window.

“I know this great sushi place,” was the muffled reply.

Steve jerked the door open and leaned in with his left arm on the roof of the car.

“You did *not* just say sushi, did you?” He glared at her.

“You don’t like sushi?” She looked at him with innocent eyes.

“I’ve never had sushi and I’m not sure that I’m ready for raw fish.” Thinking about eating a catfish raw, Steve shuddered. Gross.

“Sushi is not raw fish, that’s sashimi,” Heather smiled sweetly, “but we’ll save that for another time. You like shrimp?”

“I love shrimp.”

“Then Bubba Gump it is. Get in and let’s go.” She waved her right arm to encourage him to get into the car.

“What’s Bubba Gump?” Steve asked as he slid into the car.

“Bubba Gump Shrimp Company. It’s Forrest Gump’s restaurant.”

“Really,” Steve paused with his seatbelt halfway across his chest. “That’s a real place, not just something from a movie?”

“Very real, delicious, and fun for a movie buff,” Heather wagged her hand for him to hurry up. “Get your seatbelt on so we can go. My mouth is watering just thinking about it.”

Steve clicked his seatbelt and jerked in surprise.

“You have a dog,” he said, noticing the canine net for the first time.

“Brilliant deduction Sherlock.” Heather rolled her eyes as she turned to look over her shoulder as she backed the car. “What was your first clue?”

“The dog net, of course,” Steve grinned proudly. “What do you have, a Rottweiler?”

“Nope.”

“A pit bull?”

“Wrong again.”

“A bull dog?”

She shook her head.

“German shepherd?”

“Fourth down turnover.”

“You have a Chihuahua!” Steve feigned shock. “What kind of junk yard has a Chihuahua?”

“First off,” Heather frowned. “I don’t have a junk yard. I have an auto repair shop. They are vastly different. I don’t deal with junk.”

“Present car excepted,” Steve snorted.

“Present car *not* excepted,” Heather patted the dashboard. “Don’t you listen to him, sweetie. You aren’t junk, you were just abused.”

“I stand corrected,” Steve tried not to let her lighthearted comment drag him back to a time when he was trying to learn that he wasn’t junk, just abused.

“With a little TLC, she’ll be better than she ever was before.” Heather’s tone was gentle, as if she knew his hidden pain. If her brothers had read all about him and told her what they’d read, maybe she did.

“She’s already come a long way.” Steve knew he was talking about himself as well as the car. “You were right about her running better than my car right now.”

“And she’ll be even better in the coming months,” Heather smiled softly.

And so will I, Steve sent up a silent prayer. *Thank you, Lord, for the reminder that you aren’t done with me yet.*

“But,” Steve took the conversation back into safer territory, “your Chihuahua will still be a Chihuahua!”

“No, he won’t,” Heather raised her chin haughtily, “because my Chihuahua is actually a Golden Retriever.”

“You have a Golden!” Steve was delighted. Grandma’s Golden had given him many great memories in a very sad childhood. “What’s his name?”

“Moose,” Heather laughed. “My nephew was learning his animals when I got Moose. Every furry four-legged animal was ‘moose’ to him, so it kind of stuck.”

“How old is he?”

“My nephew or my dog?” Heather asked.

“Both!” Steve grinned. “Start with the dog, but you may as well tell me what the moose lover’s name is too.”

“Moose just turned three,” Heather did a quick mental calculation, “so that means that Gergy is almost five now.”

“Gergy?” Steve looked horrified. “What kind of parents give a child a name like ‘Gergy’?”

“Microbiologists,” Heather said smugly.

“You’re kidding, right?” Steve was shocked. “Please tell me you aren’t serious!”

“I’m not,” she laughed. “His parents named him Jeremy but his big brother, only two years older, dubbed him Germey.”

“And that stuck too,” Steve sighed with relief.

“Yeah, so I guess Moose was a kind of pay-it-forward thing,” Heather smiled brightly.

“Good thing the dog can’t escalate,” Steve shook his head in wonder. “Seems like you have quite a family.”

“I have a great family,” Heather agreed. “My mom, four brothers, two nephews and a nephew on the way.”

“What’s a nephew? Is that another Hawaiian word?” Steve hadn’t learned so many words in one day since he was in kindergarten.

“No, that’s a mom word,” Heather smiled with the memory. “Back in the dark ages, before it was easy to tell the gender of a baby before it was born, my mom made up the word combining niece and nephew. It was her verbal shorthand.”

“And it stuck too,” Steve grinned. “Lots of sticky things in your family.”

“With two curtain climbers, you better believe it!”

“Your mom sounds cool.” Steve glanced out his window as he struggled with the lump in his throat. “You’re lucky to have her.”

“You have no idea,” Heather said softly, then remembered his orphaned state. “Oh I’m sorry. I guess you do, having lost your own.”

“I keep forgetting that my life is an open book,” Steve was a little embarrassed. “Is there anything you don’t know about my life?”

“Everything Tim and Robert have read about you, they’ve shared with me. So no, I don’t suppose there’s anything I don’t know.”

“Does that mean you’re as big a fan as they are?” Steve asked hopefully.

“I’m a big fan of the Grizzlies,” Heather emphasized. “You’re a side benefit.”

“Ouch! There goes my ego!” Steve scrunched down in his seat and pretended to pout.

“Wow, that’s really studly!” Heather laughed loudly. “If you’re going to act like that, why bother having an ego?”

“Touché,” Steve sat up and stretched his left arm across the back of the seat. He immediately realized that while it was much more comfortable, his hand was only inches from the nape of Heather’s long, elegant neck. The temptation to touch her was great but he couldn’t see a way to withdraw his arm without being obvious about his sudden attraction.

“Since you already know everything there is to know about me, let’s talk about you,” Steve said. “Why do you have a Golden Retriever instead of a junk yard dog?”

“Watch it, mister,” Heather glared. “You’re treading on thin ice.”

“Yes ma’am,” Steve acted properly chastised, “but seriously, why the Golden?”

“Moose is a therapy dog,” Heather said.

“A therapy dog? I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be,” Heather sighed. “I got him for purely selfish reasons.”

“Oh? What are they?”

Heather frowned and shook her head slightly, more to herself than to him. She suddenly became very interested in the traffic, too interested to answer his question.

Steve’s curiosity was really piqued now. There was a real story there but she had just shut down, blocking him like a superstar offensive lineman protecting the quarterback. He’d figure out some way around the block. He always did.