

Chapter One

She dipped her toe into the soft surf of the Pacific, the remnants of a pale-pink nail polish from a pedicure, many weeks old, still evident on her toenails. She sighed, remembering the woman she used to be not that long ago, and then turned her attention back to the sea stretched out before her. The waves lapped, calm and serene, the first serenity in the ocean since she'd arrived here. Raging, angry waves had been the norm over the past two weeks. She didn't mind, though. In fact, she welcomed their angst.

The frothy water pooled around her bare feet, and she sank them as far as she could into the thick sand. She wiggled her toes and pushed harder until she felt locked into sandy chains. Then, she closed her eyes and leaned back, purposely ignoring the spectacular sunset above her and the tinkling laugh of a little boy playing with his father in the distance. She didn't want to see beautiful things. She didn't want to see anything. Do anything. Feel anything. She shut out all those external distractions. She was dead, except in the physical sense.

The brown paper bag around her bottle ripped on the right side, and she nearly spilled her drink. She seized the bottle and took a rapid guzzle of the strong liquid. Its heat warmed and sickened her. She didn't find any pleasure in its contents, but she craved the numbness it provided. It was the only thing she'd wanted over the past few months. Anything to quiet the nonstop voices in her head, and even if she drank until vomit spewed from her, it was better than living with that unending ache in her mind and her heart.

Two more swigs and she emptied the bottle. She'd have to walk into town tomorrow to buy more, but tonight would stay here under the balmy sky among the swaying palms and drift into the same fitful slumber she'd become accustomed to lately. Like the previous mornings, she would awaken in the early dawn, writhing and spewing out all the toxins inside her. Not that it mattered. She followed the same routine every day. And every day she prayed morning would never come. One day it would not because this was true for every person at some point in their life. Some earlier than others.

The girls' voices, argumentative, drifted down the stairs into the kitchen. Mandy flipped the pancakes and turned down the heat on the high-end commercial-grade stove. The sizzle of the batter against the built-in griddle reminded her of her hunger, but first it sounded like she needed to be a referee. She grabbed the ponytail holder lying on the

granite kitchen counter and swept up her newly colored hair, caramel honey, into its grasp.

She traveled up the stairs and paused at the bedroom to the right, her fresh, manicured nails clicking on the bannister. A flower-shaped sign stating *Girls Rule* hung on the partially open door. She willed herself not to laugh at the two little women in an obviously heated battle about school clothing. One had her small hands on her hips and the other was pointing at her sister.

"What's going on here?" Mandy asked, walking into the bedroom.

"I want to wear the pink dress with sparkles!" Libby exclaimed. Her delicate face formed a scowl.

"Libby, you wore that yesterday," Mandy explained. "How about the blue dress instead, or jeans and your pink sweater? You can't have the same dress on every day."

"But it's my favorite!" Libby protested. She now put both hands on her hips. "It has sparkles!"

"I told you so. Ugh, you're such a princess," her twin sister, Lyla, moaned.

"At least I don't wear jeans and sneakers every day," Libby replied, and a deep sigh escaped her.

"Okay, girls, you are in preschool. I can't believe we are having arguments about clothing," Mandy said. "Let's get dressed and go eat breakfast. Otherwise we'll be late for school."

"And we have music class this morning," said Lyla. "I don't want to be late."

"Me neither," said Libby. "Okay, give me the blue dress. At least it has a unicorn on it."

Mandy smiled as her daughters hurried about their bedroom getting dressed for school; every morning there was some sort of argument, but they were three years old, although she expected the disagreements to continue as they got older. She shuddered to imagine the teen years and all the turmoil that would surround them with boys and friends.

"Looks like you need one of these."

Mandy turned. Her husband stood behind her with a steaming mug of coffee. He gave her a grin and a sexy wink.

"Dane, yes, I really do," she said.

"Hey, I'm leaving for the office." He gave her a quick kiss. "I'll be home late tonight. Jena wants to talk about that new deal."

"Okay, sure," Mandy said. She took a sip of the coffee and smiled at him. "Love you."

"Love you, too. Love you, girls," he called into the bedroom.

"Love you, Daddy," the girls said in unison.

She was never much of a drinker. A margarita here and there, maybe some wine at a party. A casual drinker. She never could have imagined a world in which Jack Daniels was her best friend. She groaned looking at the empty bottle, still wrapped in its brown paper bag, lying beside her in the sand. Her head throbbed as she sat up and dug deep into the floral designer backpack next to her. She was sick of feeling like a piece of trash every morning she woke up. After locating the bottle of Tylenol, she swallowed two and choked them down with a few remnants of warm water from a bottle shoved into the bottom of the backpack.

She had to pee, which meant she better get hustling down the beach to the public bathrooms. She grabbed her stuff and hurried as fast as she could in her dazed state to the destination. *What a sight I must be. A hungover degenerate living on the beach. And I stink.* Swimming in the ocean didn't exactly count as showering. A bar of soap from the hotel she stayed at the first night arriving in Maui was somewhere in her backpack. She could wash in the outdoor shower, but then she'd feel better. She didn't want to feel better. *I want to be miserable. What's the point of feeling good for a short time? It won't last, and I'll be back where I am right now.*

A quick trip to the bathroom, a splash of water to her face, and tight ponytail for her long, matted hair, and she was ready to travel into town for supplies. A short fifteen-minute walk to the grocery store would give her everything she needed in paradise.