

Excerpt from Beyond The Beach 5

Danger On The Big Island

Chance Matthews and Caren Michaelson were having a great Hawaiian trip together—until they weren't. From the minute they met, sparks flew fast and furious—until they didn't. How could they when they weren't even in the same place geographically let alone on the same page of their relationship? Caren told him she needed some *down time* to think their relationship through. *What's with that? Another way of saying I need space? Why the hell did I agree to this?*

Chance wondered what the heck he was doing. Would there be no end to the largest ranch in America—on Hawaii no less? He wished he had not been so quick to give Caren time. Time could be a gift or a problem. He was no more interested in the rodeo they were driving toward than he was in the man on the moon. He cursed his choice. He wanted to be with Caren not cattle. *Give me sand between my toes; enough of this grassy rolling landscape and cows. I don't give a friggin' fig about this stupid ranch trip. I want to be with her. Spend the rest of my life with her. See the island together. If I were a smoker, I'd light up right about now and see if that would ease my impatience.*

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On the other side of the island, Mark Wheaton, owner of World Travel and Tour, shook hands with the mortgage broker and closed on the deed to his ultra-luxurious beach detached condo. The setting was a tropical paradise. Now, he could entertain Caren in the surroundings she professed to prefer. A smile of anticipation spread across his face. Maybe this setting would be the one that awoke Sleeping Beauty to the possibilities that he could bring her way. With a confident stride, he set out to find her.

Caren was ready and waiting to leave when Mark found her on the terrace next to the waterfall. *Is there something different about her? Could she be returning his interest?* Undeniably something was different. He hoped it had something to do with him. The sparkle he detected in her eyes might be on account of him. It hadn't been evident this morning. She looked more relaxed than she was earlier, more confident, more sure. *Sure of what?*

"Hello, Bright Eyes." He greeted her by kissing her lightly on the cheek. "Sorry, I was longer than I thought but we can still see my new place if you're game."

Donning her hat, Caren rose to her feet. "Is it that important to you to see it now?" she asked answering his question with her own.

"Of course not," he answered his shoulders slumped. "If you're not in the mood, just say so and we'll be off."

"I'd like to get back."

"*C'est la vie* tomorrow is another day."

Caren gathered her things and they retraced their steps to the heliport and boarded. Once they were airborne Mark said, "Suppose you fill me in on what happened back there. You owe me that much at least."

"It was not my intention to lead you on, Mark, had I met you first..."

"You did meet me first," he cut in drily. "Remember?"

"I mean way back when, before Chance..."

"Chance? That's what this is about?"

"Look, you're not about *forever* and I am not about *now*. I met Chance on this trip and he reminded me of all I've lost in the divorce. My family is fractured. I want it fixed. You're not the one to do that."

"You got that right, sweetheart. But somehow Chance is?"

"I think so."

"Listen, Hawaii does strange things to people. The drinks, the sun..."

"Yes, I agree, but this isn't moonlight and roses or shall I say, sunlight and Vanda orchids, it's as if I am alive again and when Chance asked me to marry him..."

“What? You've known each other ten days!”

“I know that. It's why I needed this break. Chance is a widower. He knows what he wants and it's me and my family.”

“What? He hasn't even laid eyes on your kids. At least I have.”

“Mark, you *so* do not want to marry me.”

Grinning he said, “True, but stranger things have happened.” They laughed and the air between them cleared and they flew on in complete accord. He frowned and his expression darkened.

“What's wrong?”

“There are radio reports that Pele blew her top. The volcano is no longer *threatening* to erupt, it has erupted and we are heading right smack into it.”

Caren nodded. The sky was hazy, dark even murky. Steam rose in plumes from the ground. It made him nervous. All it would take is one volcanic outburst and they'd be finished. The ride was nerve-wracking and the tension grew with each and every mile they navigated. They grimaced and looked at each other in relief once their feet touched ground even if that ground lay smoldering now. Caren said her goodbyes and hurried inside.

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I'll feel better once I see Chance. I can't wait to tell him I'll marry him. He was nowhere in sight though. The group was just returning from their day trip to the ranch. Chance must be getting his things off the tour van.

“How the hell was I supposed to know that old bag was important,” Herb, one of the tourists in the group, grumbled. “The experts tell you to ignore bag ladies and beggars, don't they? Ignoring the homeless never made sense to me but that's what they said, so I did, and now look what's happening.”

“There, there,” Pricilla, his wife, soothed. “It's just a myth.” But he didn't look convinced. Gesturing toward the window, the ash, and the smoke he said, “Then how do you explain all that?” He looked worried. They all did. Even Kekoa was concerned. He cracked a few jokes hoping to distract them.

“What's going on?” Caren asked. “Is everything ok?”

“Yes and no,” Chris, the teacher in the group, said. “There's this myth, see? When Pele, goddess of fire, is about to explode she appears and asks for a cigarette. If she gets one, fine. She's appeased. If not, she ignites.”

“I don't understand.”

“This old bag shows up with her pooch and asks me for a cigarette,” Herb explained. “I said *nobody smokes nowadays—was she crazy? The whole place's a cauldron. We don't need any more smoke*, how was I supposed to know about a crazy old story?”

“Hmm, how about because Kekoa told us?” Chris said. “Ever since then, things have been bad. Not that it's your fault, Herb,” she added. “There's talk that they will evacuate us.”

“You can't be serious,” Caren exclaimed.

“Deadly serious,” Chance said as he walked in and zeroed in on her as if he were a heat-seeking missile. “Where the hell have you been?” Surprised by his tone and approach, Caren was momentarily speechless. *Why was he so angry?*

“I've been out of my mind with worry. You were nowhere to be found,” Chance grouched.

“I'm sorry. Mark offered to fly me to the beach to think... we just got back here... I had no idea you were even ...”

“And so you went? Just like that? To the beach? With another man?” Chance fumed.

“You are making a spectacle of yourself and I don't like it one little bit. Come to think of it, I don't like your attitude, your tone, or your insinuations,” Caren returned, hot herself now.

“Pardon me, you left me under an entirely different impression. *Staying behind to think* is what you said.”

“Things changed. You weren't here to tell. Besides, I don't owe you anything. You don't own me.”

“Before you say anymore,” he said angrily, “I'll just take myself off” —he paused—*to think.*”

“So, this is how you settle things that *you* start, is it?” Furious as much with herself as with him she continued. “Go. For all I care, you can go to hell while you're at it.” Caren moved to her left, looked over her shoulder and saw him take the wooden boardwalk to the right down Devastation Trail. *Why does this always happen? Just as I decide to marry him?* She just didn't put Mark in the *other man* category. That was a mistake. She knew if the tables were turned she would have protested, too. But did he have to be so bullheaded and possessive about it? *Why didn't I think he could take that side trip with Mark the wrong way? I know he has a jealous streak. Damn the man! Stupid me!*

She didn't enjoy her own company or her thoughts. She went to her room and walked straight to the window. The view was disquieting. The sky was darkening ominously and the Crater Lake was filling. The pressure beneath the lava was building. Steam poured from new vents along the rift lines filling the air with dust and debris. Jagged lightning creased the yellowed sky. After more than seventeen years, Pele was awake and active.

Kekoa had mentioned that elders and kahunas were trying to placate Pele with chants and offerings. The scientists were using their instruments to try to determine the magnitude of the impending eruptions. Plumes of lava had already broken through shooting fifteen feet into the air. It was reported that they could reach heights of hundreds of feet. Caren hoped they all knew what they were doing. Finding her room too confining and the view less than reassuring, she left it to rejoin the others in the lodge Great Room. She did not see Chance. Mimosa, the hotel hostess, came and offered Caren a drink. She mentioned that she had seen Chance heading down Devastation Trail. Mimosa cautioned him not to venture too far only to have Chance say that his *walk was the closest to hell that I could get*. Caren cringed when she heard her own words repeated wishing she had selected her words more carefully. Now stricken with guilt and regret, she held back tears. Suddenly a great roar shattered their peace! It sounded like a jet had broken the sound barrier. She turned toward the sound to see a huge mushroom cloud rise above the crater. It was quickly followed by a plume of red hot molten lava shooting skyward. The volcano had erupted!