

Locked In
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"Ma'am," the nurse repeated, her frame silhouetted in the corner of Alani's vision against the harsh hospital lights. "Ma'am, I need you to look at me."

Her eyes remained fixated on the table's leg on the other side of the room. Her fingers must have been folded for her while she slept, resting in the soft blue blanket she had woken up wrapped in. Alani didn't feel sore, not yet anyway, but a subtle aching in her bones began to ebb into awareness.

"Ma'am? Do you understand me?"

Alani breathed slowly. Calmly. Deeply. Small strands of flyaway hair tickled her nose and skin, the feeling of flyaways a nostalgic reminder of long runs through the dunes and motorcycle rides. She hadn't been awake for long, a few seconds at the least, and the stability of the table leg held her gaze comfortably. Fixating on a single object had always kept her grounded, and she had grown fond of this tactic. Her neck against the firm pillow, the slump of her shoulders against the angled mattress. She couldn't be bothered to divert her gaze.

"Ma'am?"

Alani hadn't been called "ma'am" since the funeral. With a sudden pang, she realized that this must be the same hospital she had watched the woman wither away in; the island didn't have many. Itchiness from underneath her skin faded into her awareness at the thought of the woman's sunken eyes, staring without seeing. The empty rattle in her chest. The last sound she had made before Alani had sprinted from the room, retching and sobbing, leaving her father alone with the

corpse of the woman who had once been his wife. She never saw the woman move again. And in some ways, she hadn't seen her father since either.

"Ma'am, can you hear me?"

Alani knew she should answer, and she reluctantly opened her mouth to do so. But it wouldn't. And she couldn't. Her lips were relaxed. Relaxed and numb. She tried again to pry them open, pushing with all of her might. Words to reply jumbled on the tip of her lethargic tongue, adding pressure to her mind as the sentences fought to break free. A wave of discomfort washed over her, seeping into every pore like sand carried on a sickly wave.

Her eyes remained fixated on the leg of the table, but now they looked without seeing. Just like the woman's had. They itch, straining to be free of the invisible bonds that hold them stationary. The faint breeze from the window sets a gentle fire to her frozen hands. Her mind willed them to move, to lift her from the hospital bed and away from the cold, pleading for even the twitch of a finger. The aroma of grass and sea wafts in from the open window, almost strong enough to mask the smell of disinfectant and sickness and death.

Almost.

She breathed calmly. In and out. Steady and slow. Her expression neutral and relaxed. She could hear the rustle of cheap paper and a puff of air.

"Alani Kekoa? Can you hear me?"

And just like that her skin was on fire from the inside, her lungs containing a scream that would never be released. She chanted her name in her mind, crying that she was here! She was not lost!

Every nerve was bombarded with the static of trillions of unreceived electric signals. The electricity coursed through her blood. There was nowhere for it to escape to.

The nurse came into view. She stood in front of the leg of the table, breaking Alani's connection to it. Her eyes unfocused, then focused again on the front pocket of the nurse's scrubs. The nurse bent to wave a latex-gloved hand in front of Alani's eyes. Alani couldn't even twitch an eyelid.

"Ma'am?" Annoyance spiked the nurse's tone, the creases in her forehead deepening as she frowned. She straightened and clutched her plastic clipboard closer to her chest. "Well, ma'am, if we aren't feeling particularly chatty today, then I'll leave you be. Press the button by your hands, dear, if you need anything. It's right on your lap. I'll have the doctor look in soon."

Alani's screams for help were silent. She reached desperately for the button, sweating from the exertion of staying still.

The nurse closed the door on her way out.

The warm afternoon light from the windows had faded by the time Alani heard a gentle knock on the door. At least an hour had passed from the departure of the nurse, but it had felt like eons.

Although Alani had calmed herself down slightly, the electricity just under her skin had sent shivers down her spine.

Well. At least she could still do that. With her eyes shut, she could almost convince herself she was taking a nap. That everything was just a horrible dream. That Daddy would burst through the

door, whip out his checkbook, and make all of her troubles disappear, the way he always did. Not that he liked doing it. Or even seemed to like her all that much anymore, either. He always threatened that one of these days, he wouldn't raise a finger to help her. He would rage and throw things. Crash a car or two. But it's not like it was her own fault for getting into so much trouble; she had grown up with unlimited credit cards and minimum parental supervision on the most beautiful island in the world. Laws were to keep commoners in check, not the daughters of rich business men. So of course her father would come for her. Probably. But in the meantime, she could almost convince herself she was back in her own home, surrounded by her comfort items, drifting to sleep after a long day of shopping and surfing.

Almost.

Judging by the sound of a tacky radio talk show drifting down the halls, it was Tuesday morning. Strange. Alani couldn't remember past Thursday afternoon. Five days, gone from memory. What on earth had happened? The last thing she could remember was sneaking out of her bedroom window and jumping into that ugly green jeep Tanner had spent so much of his father's money on. Not that she blamed him. One of the many perks of being rich was that you could choose any color car you wanted, and nobody could say anything about it. It's not like they could afford to, anyway.

Focusing on the last clear memory she had of squeezing herself into the crowded cruiser, surrounded by her half-drunk friends, she had urged her memory forward. To follow any sort of timeline that would make sense of what had happened to her. But the further she pushed her brain to go, the more it began to throb, the louder the static in her skin seemed to thrum. Exhausted, she let her mind drift instead. Her breaths were deep and long, breathing in the fresh

air that drifted in through the windows. If she concentrated hard enough, she could almost smell the ocean and volcanic rock just outside the window over the stifling smell of chemicals.

The scent of the island had always brought Alani tranquility. A sense of wholeness. It was less a part of the outside world than a part of her very being. The aroma reminded her of sunrise runs on the beach, the tension in her mind and limbs being relaxed and focused as she tore across the sand. Reminded her of surfing in Waikiki, slicing through the clear blue water, tasting salt on her lips, the burn in calves and thighs after hours on the water. The island was her home, the ocean her sanctuary. Although comfortable, her house felt more like a museum. Impersonal and formal, with heavy doors locking the pain and resentment inside. Plain, white walls kept the ghosts away, she had heard her father say to himself as he had taken down every picture in the house on the day the woman died. The day the woman had abandoned her family for the second and final time.

No, Alani. You will not cry. Her father had gripped her arms so tightly that day, his fingers left imprints for two days. Even her eleven-year-old self could see the pain and resentment in his eyes as he crouched at her eye-level. *Your mother... that woman has abandoned us for the final time. Do you think she cried when she left us last year? Disappeared and left only a note, saying she was done with us and moving to the mainland? Or when she finally returned, knowing she was sick, just to die a month later? No, child. She has been dead to us for a long time. Wipe your tears. I will not speak of this again.*

And he hadn't. For more than seven years.

Her father had always been intense. She knew what her father's business partners had said about him. She had heard their remarks many times as they had stumbled, usually drunk, from her

father's personal business parlor. In good times, they called him ambitious. A real estate visionary. In bad times, a power-hungry narcissist. A cruel and inhumane machine. Alani knew both were true. She loved her father; of course she did. But even she was not blind to the rage, the hatred, and the overwhelming ego he fostered, deep in his heart and mind, even before the woman had abandoned them.

Still. He was the only family she had left. And she was all he had left, too. He would not abandon her.

Alani took a few deep breaths. Although every last instinct hardwired into her over the last nineteen years told her to shun her fears and wait for the problem to be resolved for her, she knew she should open her eyes. She decided she would open them on ten. She counted the seconds in her mind. The first digits were counted quickly, but the last few were counted slowly. At ten, her mind seemed to stall. A surge of bile rose in her throat. She swallowed it down, and counted to ten again. Then again. And again.

Only after the subtle knock came at the door did she stop counting, her heart dropping and her eyes flying open to see what surely would be her father. Instead, she was greeted by kind eyes and a receding hairline. The doctor stepped through the room, dressed in casual scrubs and a white coat, a clipboard pressed under his arm as he rubbed hand sanitizer on his hands. Alani would have flinched if she could; the smell contaminated the air and burned her nostrils. But she couldn't. So she lay motionless and tried staggering her breathing.

It was then she noticed the tubes.

They protruded from her nose and wound down the side of her hospital bed to a small machine she couldn't name. She tried to panic, but the machine wouldn't let her hyperventilate. The sickly wave of discomfort washed over her again as the doctor raised his hands in greeting.

“Hello, Alani! It's good to see you awake! How are you feeling this morning?” He smiled as if waiting for a response. When he got none, he pressed forward, his sense of optimism both calming and infuriating to Alani. How could anyone be so cheerful when the entire world seemed to be broken? “If it's okay with you, I'm going to ask you a few questions. Is that alright?” This time, he didn't wait as long for a response. As he walked around the hospital bed to talk to her, Alani tried to follow with her eyes. She found she couldn't move them to the left or right at all. Only up and down. The doctor seemed to notice this, but didn't remark on it. He stood to her right side. A nurse, different from the one before, silently entered the room and closed the door. Fantastic. Just what Alani needed. An audience.

The doctor pulled up a stool and settled down by the hospital bed. He was out of Alani's range of sight, and she couldn't convince her eyes to find him. Instead, she fixed her eyes back on the leg of the table. “Alani,” he started, but hesitated when she didn't turn to look him in the eye. He scooted the chair further around the bed, until she could fixate on his eyes. He continued. “Alani, do you know how you got here? Do you remember what happened last Friday night?”

Even if she could have answered, the answer would have been that she couldn't remember anything past the jeep.

The doctor exhaled deeply. He stood, staying in her field of vision. “Alani, I'm going to put my hand on your leg. I'm going to apply a little bit of pressure. This won't hurt, but it will help us understand better how to help you. Okay?” He politely waited, then took her silence as her

response. He placed his left hand on her right shin, covered by the blue blanket. “Can you feel this?” He placed a bit of weight over the hand, and pressed down gently. “And this?”

Although she couldn’t respond, she *could* feel it. She felt the pressure on her tender skin as he moved around the bed, pressing gently on her limbs, the warmth emanating from his hand. She even felt the small prick of pain when he pressed too close to a bruise. She felt all these things. But she couldn’t move. She lay, trapped, overwhelmed, angry at this man for touching her, anxious and angry at her father for not coming to her rescue already, angry at her body for being broken.

The nurse still stood by the door, scribbling on a clipboard. The doctor rose and joined her. They murmured a few words to each other, careful to keep their voices down, before the doctor abruptly turned his attention back to the girl on the bed with a surprised look on his face.

“Oh my goodness, I’ve forgotten to introduce myself!” He shook his head and smiled softly. “My name is Doctor Kham. This, here, is Nurse Hogan.”

Nurse Hogan grinned politely. She wore her pretty brown hair in a bun that hung at the nape of her neck, just above the collar of her scrubs. Her voice was calming, with a slightly raspy undertone, as if she hadn’t taken a good sip of water all day. “Good morning, Alani. It’s nice to meet you. We’re going to run a few tests, and I promise we’ll explain everything along the way. Is that okay with you?”

Alani had grown quite sick of this question. Of course it wasn’t okay with her, none of this was okay with her! She had half a mind to march out of the room with her nose in the air. As soon as she could figure out how to make her limbs obey her, of course.

“Great! Then we’ll get started right away.”

Doctor Kham explained the procedure of transferring Alani to a wheelchair as Nurse Hogan opened the door and leaned through, called a few names, and retrieved a wheelchair from the corner of the room. Three young adults entered, all wearing scrubs and looking about Alani's age. They were quickly introduced as intern nurses. She recognized one of them from high school. He had been a scrawny loser back then. She remembered laughing at him with her friends when he was rejected for a date to their senior prom. She prayed he wouldn't recognize her, but when he wouldn't meet her eyes, she knew he did. A hot wave of emotion crashed over her. It took her a minute to realize it was shameful. She had been cruel to him all through their teenage years, and here he was. Helping her. She couldn't even remember his name. Humiliation clenched her insides as she was rolled, lifted, pivoted, and settled into the wheelchair. A small buckle and the hands of the aids held her in place. Alani wished she could have hidden her face as they pushed her slowly out of the room and into the blinding fluorescent light of the hallway.

The next few hours were spent being pushed from room to room, machine to machine. Blood was drawn, x-rays taken, and every inch of her body pinched and prodded. She didn't know what each machine did, much less know what they were called. The air around her grew thick with medical terms and the reek of antiseptic hand sanitizer. Her head had begun to ache and her skin felt clammy, but what could she do? It's not like she could tell anybody.

Alani had felt particularly hopeless as she was pushed from the last room. The cranky old nurse from that morning had regarded her with disdain, looking as if she smelled something horribly offensive. After a few loudly grumbled comments on the social skills of the younger generation, Alani was on the verge of tears. How dare anyone speak to her that way? Did that woman even *know* who her father was?

Her sense of humiliation still hadn't faded as her little entourage loaded her into the wheelchair. She couldn't help noticing the gentleness in which the familiar intern handled her with. Although his dark hair and tan skin didn't do much to distinguish him from many of the other guys she spent her time with, there was something about the way he carried himself that drew her attention. He seemed more confident than he had when she knew him. More sure of himself. Still, she still found herself cringing internally any time he was near.

Alani was overwhelmed with exhaustion as she was pushed down the hall. Nurse Hogan and Doctor Kham walked a few steps behind, talking too fast and with too many technical terms for Alani to understand. Alani knew her father would step in any minute and demand the best treatment money could buy, and she would get her control back.

She was just daydreaming about her bed back at home when she felt the brace that had held her head straight come undone. Her neck rolled to the left, and her head lolled with it. The nurse pushing the chair immediately stopped and gently lifted her head, but in the couple of seconds between, she had caught a full glimpse of herself in the reflective surface of the glass doors in the hallway. Doctor Kham and Nurse Hogan hurried to assist the nurses in fixing the brace, but the damage was done.

Alani could barely recognize the figure staring back at her. Her dark waves of hair had been hidden under a surgical cap, and her head looked too small without it. Her skin, usually clear and contoured to perfection, was scarred and bruised and free of any concealer whatsoever. Her cheeks were gaunt, as if she hadn't eaten in days, and her mouth hung open slightly. Her eyes were sunken into her skull, giving the ghastly appearance of a corpse raised from the dead. Like a corpse raised from the dead. There she was. In her very own reflection.

The woman seemed to stare back at her.

Alani shrunk into herself, her heart pounding.

She looked like the woman. She knew she did.

That was when her hope in her father's rescue went out like a match.

It took only seconds for her neck to be re-secured by the interns, who groaned their apologies.

Alani barely heard the interns being reprimanded. Silent tears pricked her eyes just before they fell, stinging her dry eyes as the lump in her throat threatened to choke her. Alani withdrew into herself as the wheelchair moved again. She hardly noticed when she was lifted back into her own bed, tucked in tightly, and left alone in the room. The doctor returned minutes later and spoke briefly. Something about studying the tests, and how he'd be back soon.

Alani tried to calm herself as he closed the door behind him. The sun had begun to set through the window, casting long shadows through the room. Panic coursed through her like rivers of ice, sending chills through her very bones. The reality of her situation settled into her mind, wrapping any rational thought in horror. Here she lay, unable to move or speak or communicate, looking exactly how the woman had looked on that awful, awful day fifteen years ago. The day the woman had stared straight into Alani's soul and abandoned her again.

Suddenly, Alani heard a loud voice in the hall. One she recognized immediately. The deep thundering of a wealthy man who had just been denied what he wanted. Usually that tone of voice brought a sense of sick satisfaction; someone's career was about to be over, and it would serve them right. But today, it sent a fresh wave of icy horror down her spine. Today, that anger would be directed at her.

She couldn't hide. She couldn't run. She couldn't even raise her arms, or speak to him. All she could do was lay on the bed, her eyes fixated on the leg of the table across from her, as the steps outside grew louder and closer.

The footsteps had just reached the door when a new voice sounded in objection. There was shouting, and Alani's father burst into the room. He rounded on the bed immediately, his eyes blazing with a fire that only burned when he was at least three bottles in. His face crinkled in the way it only did when he was worried, and for a half a second, Alani thought she was saved. Her father would take her home and find a way to fix her, give her back her life.

For a moment he stared at his daughter on the bed, her body broken and frail. Her eyes gaunt and dull. Her skin pale and bruised. His eyes darkened, and his jaw set, the anguish in his eyes making way for undiluted fury.

At that moment, Alani knew. Rivers of ice filled her veins, and she knew that he no longer saw his daughter on the hospital bed.

All he saw was *the woman*.

Horror and rage clenched his face and body as he advanced on the bed. Alani's heart spiked with terror, when a male nurse slid into the room half a second later, with Doctor Kham on his heels.

"Sir, you can't be in here!" The nurse said forcefully. Alani's father rounded on him, immediately sizing him up. He grabbed the collar of the man's scruff and shook him slightly.

"What's wrong with her?" Waves of rage seemed to emit from his purple face. His hair, usually styled to business-casual perfection, was greasy and wild, as if he hadn't showered for days. Even from her place on the bed Alani could smell the alcohol radiating off of him.

Doctor Kham stepped forward, his eyes stern. “Mr. Kekoa, we haven’t gotten the results back from the tests. She only just regained consciousness this morning-”

“I’ve let you people take care of her for FOUR DAYS,” the drunk man bellowed. He released the nurse and turned to the doctor, his forehead glistening with sweat, “And when I come back, she looks like- like a corpse!”

Doctor Kham made an angry remark, but Alani didn’t hear. Alani and her father’s eyes had met. She poured as much emotion as she could into her stare, silently begging him to see that she was still there. That his daughter, while trapped, was still present.

Her father’s eyes widened, as if he had been hit suddenly with a very disturbing thought. He blinked once, and the confusion and horror in his eyes hardened, giving way for a cold and calculating glare. Alani knew that expression. She had seen it at the funeral. Nobody had been allowed to speak. Nobody had been allowed to place leis or gifts as the corpse of the woman was lowered into the ground in a cheap wooden box, in a plot as far from the ocean as her father could find. The final, most devastating blow he could deliver to the woman who had damaged his ego.

It was as if his entire persona had changed in that moment. It often did. One as skilled at manipulation as he was never found it difficult to make the switch. He turned to the doctor and regarded him coolly.

“Can she walk.”

“Sir, I really must ask you to leave if-”

“Can. She. Walk.” Her father’s words were clipped.

Doctor Kham stared. After a long pause, he finally answered, “No.”

“Can she talk.”

“No.”

“Can she hear me? Can she think?”

“... We can’t be sure just yet.”

Alani’s father straightened. He ran a hand through his greasy hair and straightened his jacket sleeves, popping the cuffs haughtily.

“Well, then. I no longer see why I must be involved.”

Without another word, Alani’s father, her last hope, strode from the room.

The doctor rushed after him. The nurse hurried toward Alani on the bed and spoke to her, probably to reassure her. Although his tone was soothing and firm, he sounded far away. Muted. As if Alani was trying to hear him from underwater.

She didn’t hear a word he said. Instead, her eyes fixated on the table’s leg on the other side of the room. Blood roared in her ears. Her fingers lay still on the blue blanket draped across her lap. Her bones ached, and now, her heart did too. A thin, salty tear fell, and others followed. They burned paths down her face, wetting her lips and neck.

Alani’s breaths came slowly. In and out, in and out. Her expression neutral and relaxed.

Her screams were silent.