



Kilauea

By Kori Frazier Morgan

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Karen did not want to go to Hawaii. Their parents made her. She was a nursing student at Kent State, on her way to spend a weekend with her ex-fiancé Steven, who had been in Vietnam for a year, who did not know yet that he was her ex-fiancé. For the last six months, she'd been trying to find the right way to break up with him, though her options were limited—a letter to Binh Phuoc, an abrupt change in subject during his brief, infrequent telephone calls. Just a couple months ago, one of her roommates broke up with her boyfriend, and a few days after he got the letter, he'd stepped on a landmine – tripped over it, really, was what she heard. That was Karen's problem – she was afraid of being one of *those girls*, the ones who sent Dear John letters and made their boyfriends lose their focus, get their brains blown out. She couldn't be with Steven anymore, but she didn't want him dead.

"You two are engaged," her father said when he dropped her off at Cleveland Hopkins Airport. "He's serving his country, signed up of his own accord. And when he asks you to go see him, that's just what you do. You go." Karen's father didn't know she was breaking up with Steven either, and as he pulled her suitcase out of the trunk and set it on the sidewalk, she thought about blurting it all out. *His name is Alex. He's a singer in a rock band.* But the words caught in her mouth like a wad of cotton. She had agreed to do this thing – she would go, and then come right back home. Karen had told Alex she was going to Kentucky with her aunt, a service mission for their church. He'd never even have to know it had happened. She'd figure out the rest later.

She'd known Steven since they were kids. He was tall, with a lean build and a crooked-toothed smile, was always known in high school as kind of a geek who read a lot of nature books and graduated at the top of his class, after which he immediately joined up. His father was a veteran, and he'd grown up believing in the military, always aspired to follow where his father had left off. She and Steven grew up on the same street in Randolph, out in the Ohio countryside, and played together at parties put on by the hardware store where both their fathers worked. They'd dated exclusively each other since junior high, and no matter what happened with her and Alex, or what was about to happen with her and Steven, part of her still felt weak when she thought of him. And it wasn't all that long ago.

After the plane taxied into Hilo International Airport in Big Island, Karen paused at the stairway that led to the tarmac. Below, she could see the crowd of people waiting for arriving passengers. Two Hawaiian girls in violet and magenta muumuus looked up at her, waiting to drape leis around her neck. Somewhere out there was Steven, and she scanned the crowd, wondering if there was more than one man out there wearing an army uniform. She smoothed the long cream-colored skirt she'd chosen to wear and adjusted her sleeveless blouse so the folds of the collar came together. The stewardess shot her an impatient glance, and Karen lowered her foot onto the first step.

Steven barely looked like himself—he was thinner than she remembered, his face gaunt and deeply tanned. There was a bounce in his step as he came to meet her, *that smile*, sort of slanted, one corner bent downward. Before she could catch herself, their past rushed back inside her, warm and wavy. Steven had proposed in a canoe on the lake at Mogadore Reservoir a few months before they graduated and he joined up. He'd smiled that same way in the white

light of the dock when he pulled the ring from his pocket.

They hugged. He kissed her. It was quick and light and she hardly felt it at all, and when he pulled away, he whispered *hey honey* in her ear. As they walked toward the airport, neither of them spoke, except for pointing out the signs leading to baggage claim, the parking lot exit. She kept track of small things, the way he grabbed her suitcase with one rough, quick motion, how every time a voice crackled from the intercom, his body shocked into a tall, straight line. It made Karen wonder what he'd seen since they last spoke, over a month ago across a staticky connection. She pictured the grainy green and yellow images from TV, rice paddies blooming with explosions.

He'd rented a car, a green 1966 Pontiac with a dented bumper. The ride was quiet, awkward. Karen held her breath, afraid that he would ask her even the simplest of questions—what she'd been up to, how life was back in Kent, if things had cooled down since the students got shot several months before. She didn't think she could answer them without Alex's name slipping into the cracks between the words. *It's quiet now. People are still pretty messed up. There's good music at J.B's—a band called The Purple Orange. I know the guitar player*

...

She pictured Alex the night she met him, when her friend Rob tried to break her out of the depression she'd been in after a month without letters from Steven. He invited her to see The Purple Orange play because he had a thing for the lead singer, a petite blonde girl who threw herself around the stage when she sang. The whole show, he kept pointing out the places where her voice gave him chills. But Karen couldn't take her eyes off Alex, his intense gaze on the neck of his guitar, the places where his fingers pressed and plucked the strings. They talked after the show, Karen resting one arm against the edge of the stage, watching him pack up his instrument, and he asked her to go have some pizza and beer across the street at The Loft.

The next night, she went back to see him play, watched him sing to her from the front of the stage. Afterward, he took her to a party the band was having at the old house they shared across town, which she didn't remember much of. What remained clear, though, even through the smoke and vodka, was this: Alex's attic bedroom, his breath on her neck. And weeks, months later—the creeping realization that she loved him, and then seeing the jungles on TV, feeling the guilt of knowing that Steven was down there, somewhere. She remembered Steven's face the morning she drove him to the station to report for duty, blurry in the window, reflected in the pale light as the bus pulled away from the curb.

“Hey.” Steven curled a finger around her hair. She jumped. “Space cadet. We're almost there.” Steven had booked a reservation at Kilauea Military Camp, an army resort near the national park. “This is a nice place,” he informed her with the reassuring tone of a tour guide. “Costs next to nothing if you're in the service.” He hesitated. “Only married couples are allowed to stay together.”

“But—we aren't married.”

“We are now. I got a buddy who forged us a license.” Keeping one hand on the wheel, he opened his wallet and pulled out a cream colored piece of paper. It listed their names, dates of birth, blood types, in neat, rectangular boxes, all in perfect order. Her name on the certificate was Karen Huntington Burke.

The camp was located at the top of a hill, the main lodge a rustic log structure,

visible as they pulled in. It was surrounded by the cluster of cabins, and beyond that, the blackened hills of the volcanoes stretched and sloped across the sky. It was somber. No windy, blue-watered beaches, no orange and pink flowers. Not Hawaii at all.

In the lobby, she sat on a blue plaid sofa near the main entrance while Steven checked them in. He showed the man at the desk the fake license and gestured toward Karen. She waved uncomfortably. The lobby itself was cozy and homey—two recliners that matched the sofa sat on either side of her, in front of a wide fireplace. Across the room was a large picture window divided into panels, the center devoted to a stained glass portrait of the fire goddess Pele, arms raised above a volcano overflowing with a brilliant red that spread through the land below. She watched the embers from the fireplace flicker against the glass, until Steven came up to her with the keys.

The cabin they'd rented was small and box-like – a room with two beds, a living room with a sofa and fireplace. They sat together on the sofa, sinking down into the cushions, and Steven heaved a sigh and stretched his arms over his head and down around her shoulders. "You okay?" he said, and brushed his fingers across her forehead. "You're sweating."

Karen leaned back against the couch, hoping to loosen the strain of her body. "It's nothing. It's just hot is all."

Steven rested against her, his hand folding into hers. "You think this is hot?" he said. "You should feel how hot it is over there. You can taste it in your mouth. You wake up drenched every night. When you sleep, that is." It puzzled Karen how casually he spoke of the war. He seemed normal, relaxed, like they were in his parents' living room back home, like the last year had never happened.

Steven patted her knee. "Come on," he said, and stood. "I've got a surprise for you. We're going to dinner at the Volcano House. It's actually a hotel. Really nice place. If I had more money, we'd stay there." He ran his finger from her forehead down her cheek. "You know. Really give you the royal treatment."

Karen felt his eyes linger on her. Maybe he, too, was wondering if she was the same girl he'd left. She wasn't sure, but she wanted to know. "Okay," she said. "Let's go."

* * *

The Volcano House was just a few miles from the military camp. It didn't look like a hotel at all, but rather a squat, red cabin, straight out of a western movie. When Steven held the car door for her, he put his other hand against her waist, pulling her close for a moment as they walked across the parking lot, before they passed into the lobby. He wore a button up dress shirt and jacket, having shed his uniform for civilian clothes, and it reminded her of all those dates in high school, the homecomings and occasional dinners in Akron. From just inside the entrance, someone was playing guitar, high and light and dreamy.

They were seated at a table next to a glass window that looked out over the caldera, and the depth and the greyness of it frightened her. They looked over the menu, choosing grilled tuna in teriyaki sauce. "How are your folks?" Steven said. "Mine write to me a lot, about your dad and how business is. They seem like they're pretty good."

The mention of her father stung. This was the part she was afraid of – nothing to say, nothing to talk about except for Alex and how she'd gone to J.B.'s every weekend to see the Purple Orange play and spent most of those nights with him. Instead, as he probed her with questions, she talked as much as she could about nursing school, how one of her professors said "uhhhh" after every droning sentence and tapped loudly on the podium with his pen, how she was desperately trying to pass pharmacology. The food came, and she was relieved, chewing the meat longer than necessary, until it was shreds in her teeth.

"Well," Steven said. "You'll make it. You were always the smartest girl in school. Heck, smartest person I know." He reached his hand across the table. "I am so proud of you."

Karen swallowed. "Steven," she began, but he wouldn't stop smiling, like he couldn't hear the heaviness of her voice at all. "Steven, I—" The truth poised itself on her tongue, but she swallowed. "—were there any pretty girls over there?"

Steven raised an eyebrow, then rubbed his ankle against hers beneath the table. "You're not serious," he said.

She heard a clatter of dishes from the kitchen, and a crowd of waiters dressed in red jackets paraded out the door. Someone's birthday, she thought, but then they were at her and Steven's table, circling around them. A Hawaiian girl in a yellow sleeveless dress placed an enormous piece of pineapple cake between them, garnished with loops of golden syrup. "What's this?" Karen said. Steven just grinned.

One of the waiters waved a hand over his head and called for the room's attention. It was abruptly quiet, and Karen felt herself begin to numb. "May we present Mr. and Mrs. Steven Burke, just married this week!" he announced. "*Ho'omaika'i 'Ana!* Congratulations!"

The waiters launched into a song with lyrics she didn't understand, while one of them accompanied them on the ukulele. Steven was beaming at her. He put his arms around her and kissed her on the cheek. Everything was smudged together – the ukulele music, the applause, the faces of the people around them, the feeling of their eyes on her, watching her melt. She stared down at the red napkin in her lap, forcing a humble smile, desperately blinking her eyes.

"Honey," Steven said. He took her chin between his fingers and raised her head. "What the – are you okay?"

Karen thought hard about the time Alex pushed her on a swing at the elementary school playground near his house, and she made herself laugh. "No," she said. "Yes. I'm so happy." They cut the piece of cake together and fed each other, a repeat of the ceremony that no one but them knew had never happened.

They drove home in silence. When they got back to the camp, her legs shook as she climbed the porch steps and went inside. "What was that all about?" she said. "Back at the restaurant. Steven, we're not married yet. Why'd you tell them that?"

"We are." He grinned and helped her sink back against the sofa. "For this weekend, at least."

In the darkened living room, Steven drew his arms around her. It made her tingle and throb, and she hated herself for it. "Come on," he whispered, and let him lead her through the hallway. She didn't know what else to do.

They sat next to each other on the bed. Steven wrapped his arm around her shoulder, walking his fingers across her back in a way that felt like trickles of water. The other arm he laid across her lap, snug against her stomach. "I missed you," he said, and kissed her in the hollow place next to her throat.

"I missed you, too." He trailed his hand from her stomach to her knees, to where the hem of her dress met her thigh. She stiffened.

"What?" He toyed with the fabric, rubbing the floral pattern between his fingers, began to work them between her legs. It sent pleasant quivers down the middle of her body, and she fought them away. When she looked at him, she saw Steven, matched him with vivid memories that had seemed old and chipped ever since he left. He wasn't a stranger.

"I don't want to do this," she said, and slid toward the edge of the bed. "Not yet."

"Why not?"

"It doesn't seem right. It's been so long. And we've hardly even talked—"

"You've had plenty of time to talk," he said. "And you haven't said a damn word. I think I deserve something." She saw him glance away, across the room, like he was embarrassed. "Karen, I've only got two days."

She thought about one time, about two months after she met Alex, when she stayed over at the band's house after they got back from a concert in Cleveland late at night, and immediately felt guilty, with Steven sitting right there, like he could read her thoughts. Alex had a skylight over his bed—it was grimy and streaked with dirt and dead flies, the stars milky and dull. They lay there all night, talking and watching the cloudy darkness overhead. And then she thought of how all of it—even Alex—was outside the closed curtains of the hotel room, and Steven, for the first time in over a year, was safe inside.

"Steven?" she said.

"What?"

Karen closed her eyes and leaned her head toward his, and drew in a breath as she kissed him. She felt him pull her down toward the mattress, the springs needling against her back.

* * *

"You're pretty quiet today," Steven said. He rubbed his hand up and down her arm, his fingers rough and calloused. They were eating breakfast in the lodge. Outside, the air was balmy even at ten in the morning, the sky the deep, cerulean shade of blue that she knew from vacation brochures. He fingered a piece of bacon before putting it in his mouth. He ate slower now, and she remembered him writing home once that the only food in Vietnam came from cans and boxes. "Couldn't you sleep?" he said.

Karen took a long drink of coffee, trying to hear her answer in her head before

she spoke it out loud. She had lain awake for hours. The cabin had seemed strangely grey. It was the shapes on the walls, the ghostliness of herself, of him lying on the other side of the bed. It was different from being with Alex, when the hours afterward felt calm and airy because everything that came before was so forceful and coarse. In her head, Alex and Steven merged together, the strong and the gentle, and she felt ashamed for wanting them both.

Lying there, she had imagined herself telling Steven. Twice. In the first version, he was relieved. He told her he couldn't handle getting married now, not with all he'd been through, and he had been afraid to tell her. In the second, his face tensed, he became angry, and as she tried to explain what had happen—him so far away, Alex right there, ready and waiting—he slapped her and yelled, the way she imagined a soldier would. For the last day, she'd been trying to figure out which Steven was there. Even now, she still didn't know.

"No," she said. "I couldn't. I guess—I guess sleeping with another person after such a long time takes some getting used to."

She studied his reaction, hoping to see some evidence of guilt—some kind of shift of the eyes to signal that he had betrayed her, too. But he only took a forkful of pancakes and "mmm'd" in agreement.

They decided to go hiking on the trails at Kilauea. What she really wanted to do was go to the beach, run through the waves, then stretch out and close her eyes, let the sand warm her back. But the volcano was right next to the camp, and going to the beach would mean a long car ride, a repeat of the day before, of Steven's caresses and nothing for either one to say. They looked at a map they picked up at the volcano visitor's center, its twisting trails around the caldera, descriptions of the easiest and most challenging routes. They chose a paved trail just off the main road to the camp, since Karen, seeing no earthly reason to pack hiking boots for a trip to Hawaii, only wore high heeled sandals.

For the first mile or so, the trail wound through a rainforest, the heat trapped beneath the dark shade of the canopy, so thick she could smell it, feel her hair and skin grow heavy and wet and wrinkled. They entered the dark, grey tunnel of a dormant lava tube, feeling their way through the dim light until they emerged into the sun, the barren landscape stretching before them. "It's the world's most active volcano," Steven explained, looking at the brochure. "Last eruption was 1959—the lava floes nearly destroyed a village." He pointed to a picture of what looked like an enormous pile of dirt spilling into the wall of a building, tinged with flames.

"I thought lava was orange and glowed," Karen said.

"No," Steven said. "It's actually silver. Maybe darker. That's only in the movies."

As they followed the trail, Steven stopped and squinted straight ahead. "Look," he said softly, and took her hand in his and pointed her finger. Several feet ahead was a flicker of green that pierced across the distance of the bare land. Karen stopped, blinking to make sure she hadn't imagined it, but the spot was still there. "Come on," Steven shouted, and dragged her forward, like an insistent, impatient child.

In the middle of a pile of volcanic rock, a bush was growing, but as Karen looked closer, she saw that it was not a bush at all. It was a dwarfed tree, with a tiny trunk and numerous limbs sprouting emerald leaves. Several delicate flowers

blossomed from every branch, made up of hundreds of white and reddish fibers, like little pink porcupines. "It's beautiful," she said.

Steven looked through the guidebook, then placed his finger against a page where the same flower was pictured. "It's called an Ohia tree," he said. "It's the only plant that can grow in lava. There's a whole thing here about it."

He held the book in front of him and put his arm around her shoulder. "It's a legend, about why the tree grows here. The volcano goddess Pele fell in love with Ohia, a young warrior who was already in love with another girl named Lehua. When she found out he didn't love her, Pele was so jealous she turned Ohia into a tree. But the rest of the gods thought it wasn't fair for Lehua to be left alone—so they turned her into those flowers, so they could be together." He closed the book and let his arm slip from her body. "Quite a story, huh?"

Karen took his hand, pressing it between her palms, then enfolded it into her fingers, running them over his skin, the dirt under his nails, a scar across the heel of his hand that she didn't remember. "I'm sorry," she said.

"About what?"

"That I've been so . . . I don't know. Whatever it is that I've been."

"Come here."

Steven opened his arms and drew her up against his chest. His body rose and fell as he breathed, and he smelled like wet cotton. Karen hoped he'd say something—that he was sorry, too, that he shouldn't have expected it to be the same, maybe that he should have wired his mother and told her to back off, that Karen didn't have to come if she didn't want to. But there she went, she thought, thinking about herself. She'd loved him once. She could learn to love him again.

"I think I'd like to go to the beach," Karen said. "I bought a new bikini."

He chuckled, and she felt it in his chest before she pulled away. "Yeah," he said. "That's a good idea."

* * *

Karen leaned against him the whole ride to Black Sand Beach, letting him run one hand up and down her thigh while he steered the car with the other. At the beach, they rented a blow up float from a boy in a red shirt and khaki shorts, and Steven pulled her through the water, until a giant wave rose up, swallowed them, and spit them on the sand, the grit of it in her hair, inside her suit, and Steven kissed her and it tasted like salt. They ate Mahi-Mahi at a beachside restaurant, where a male folk singer with long blonde hair and a mustache sang and played guitar. They drank wine and Steven held her hand, and the way he looked at her, his eyes glowing in the light from the votive candle on their table, made her think of when they were teenagers, watching the flicker of drive-in movies, the light rippling on his face.

After the sun went down, they walked along the ocean, the wispy roll of the waves seeming louder against the empty beach. The sand was not white, as she'd imagined it would be, but black, though it felt the same, cool and seeping between her toes. The breeze smelled like the ocean, like smoke. Karen's foot caught in a large pile of sand, and she started to fall, but Steven reached out to

catch her, and they landed on their backs, laughing. Lying in the sand, they fell silent, watching nearly black sky, the quiet rushing of the waves.

"It's so funny," Steven said.

"Hmmm?" She craned her neck to one side to look at him.

"Being out here with you—I almost forget about everything else. How I have to leave soon. Everything that's happened." She felt him tense, his body shivering. "Karen, there's a lot I can't tell you right now. I want to tell you. But I can't quite say it right, like it's all in my head and too jumbled to come out. It's weird over there – sometimes it's hard for me to tell what was real and what isn't, because you never sleep, don't stop thinking or moving." He pulled her closer. "But someday, I will tell you. I'll come home. We'll get married for real. Then it will all make sense."

She knew he was right. In two days, she'd go back to Ohio, and he'd go back to finish the last year of his tour. And there would be Alex, who thought she was in Kentucky with her aunt teaching kids to read, who didn't know she was in Hawaii, lying on the beach at night with Steven, a man he'd never even met, who he didn't even know existed. Why did she do this? Would it really have been so hard to say no? But then she remembered the letter she would have had to write to Steven, the blow delivered across thousands of miles, how she couldn't, wouldn't, be that kind of girl.

It was two in the morning before they made it back to the camp. Karen slept most of the way, floating through dreams where the hum and bounce of the wheels was ever present, always on the periphery of vague, dancing images. When the car crunched over the gravel at the entrance to the camp, Steven shook her awake and kissed her forehead. "We're back," he said, and helped her out of the backseat, leading her past the lodge toward their cabin.

They lit a fire and sat there watching the flames rise, the way the embers tumbled like waterfalls. She could feel his breath in her hair, the blood moving through his neck. "I needed this bad," he said. "You have no idea."

"No," she said. "I kind of do, actually."

She began a tentative brush of her hand across his leg, resting on his thigh, and he looked down at her with a curious half-grin. Then, she climbed onto his lap and kissed him, reaching around to stroke the stubble of his hair. She lifted her arms so he could slip her shirt over her head, and felt thrilled and light. "We should try it again," she said. "Now that we're more comfortable."

"You want to?" Steven said. She nodded, feeling the need for this beginning to build, no longer afraid, wanting him for the first time since she'd arrived. "Okay then."

They kissed, and that feeling of remorse rose back up, and Karen tried to push it away, push Alex out of her head. This is Steven, she thought, your fiancé, who has been through something he can't even talk about. You need to love him.

She rose up on her knees and pushed him back against the other side of the couch by the shoulders. "Whoa there!" he said, but she didn't answer. She'd already unbuttoned his pants. She climbed onto his legs, leaned over, and ran the tip of her tongue over his lip, lightly bit down. For a moment, his brow

bunched together and a strange expression – part confusion, part pleasure – crept over his face, like he was weighing the two. Karen breathed in deep, enjoying the thick scent of the smoky air on his body, his face in the dim light from the window. It was as though she had never been nervous, afraid of what could happen from meeting him again, and all at once it was high school, and they were in the stands of the livestock pavilion in the fall, the fairgrounds closed for the season. In the back of her mind, Alex began to dim, like something she'd imagined, a dream upon waking.

Neither of them spoke when they finished. Steven lay pressed against her, tracing her ribs with his fingers. She ran her fingers over his neck and lay her head against the his shoulder. And then, his hands went away, and he hoisted himself up, looked down at her. There was a curious slant to his eyebrows, like in math class years ago, when he ran into a problem on a test that he couldn't figure out.

"Karen," Steven said. "Did you – did you cheat on me?"

Karen's body went stiff, and she hoped that Steven didn't feel it. The question caught her off guard. She tried to think of something to say – another lie, another excuse – but nothing came. It didn't sound like an accusation. It sounded like he wanted an honest answer to an honest question.

"Karen?" His voice shook a little, and he rolled over onto his side of the bed in a slow, tentative motion, like he was afraid of her. Karen couldn't speak. She looked away from him and hugged herself, pulled the sheet over her chest. It was too late to say anything else.

Karen braced herself for the explosion, his demands of who the guy was, and why, why, *why* had she done this when she knew he was fighting in the war. But there was only a piercing silence, the sound of Steven lying on his side against the creaking of the mattress, drawing his legs up against his stomach. His shoulders rose and fell, and she wondered if he was crying. She was afraid to look. She'd never seen him cry before.

She brushed her fingers across his arm. He flinched. "Steven?" she said.

"Please leave," he said.

His words left her with one final impulse to fight back, to tell him no, she was just surprised he would even ask that. But she couldn't. Looking at his curled body, she felt the dizziness of the last day fade, and he was a stranger again, the boy she grew up with, that she loved, that she could never really know anymore. She had done when she came here to do, and it was time to walk away. "Okay," she said. She leaned down to kiss his cheek, and his body recoiled as if she'd pricked his skin.

In the dark, Karen slipped on her dress from dinner and went outside, where she began the walk toward the main lodge. Somehow, she welcomed being alone in the night, in spite of thoughts of Steven, lying in bed, which throbbed inside her like something infected. She stopped on the gravel road and looked up at the sky. The night was the blackest she'd ever seen, the stars scattered, even the smallest ones breaking through, blacker than in Ohio, where the brightest lights came from the old streetlamps and diluted the sky. She didn't know what to do next—she couldn't take the car, and there were no cabs, and it was too far to walk, so she picked up her suitcase and headed for the lobby. There was no

one on duty, and the room was dark, even the panes of the stained glass volcano window blurred to a deep maroon. Karen left her suitcase inside – she'd sleep there until morning.

She walked outside onto the porch and looked over her shoulder, at the road they'd taken to begin their hike on Kilauea. It was just that morning, but seemed so long ago. Beyond that was the visitor's center, its guidebooks and route maps; beyond that, the twisting trail, the dried lava and Ohia trees. She thought she smelled fire in the air, and imagined magma bubbling out of the earth, rolling toward the camp, engulfing it in a silver river that she had always thought was red as flames. She dug her feet into the grass, trying to steady herself, her legs still shaking. She wished to become something new, something relentless and beautiful, rising from nothing but ashes and dirt.

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