

# **The First Breath You Take**

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**~\*Dedication\*~**

This short story is dedicated to all my readers and fans. I thank you for your continued purchase(s) of my work and wish to offer you this as a gift to let you know how grateful I am.

Thank You,

Tiana Laveen

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**~BLURB~**

This is the story of a young half Hawaiian, half Croatian man who has awoken to a nightmare. Tanner's life was turned upside down once Volcano Haleakala erupted and took away his family, and destroyed the place he called home, a sleepy town in Maui. His days become endlessly depressing as well as a continuous fight for survival until he accidentally runs across another survivor, Summer, a shop owner's daughter who is hanging onto sanity by an ash covered thread. Little do either of them know that nothing short of fate could have brought the pair together. They quickly form a friendship, built on common recent occurrences, and a secret from their mutual pasts. Will Tanner and Summer be able to survive yet another obstacle in their way to claim the life they so deserve? Read, 'The First Breath You Take' to find out.

**~\*Warning\*~**

This short story is not considered erotica, however, it involves adult themes as well as an intimate scene between two consensual adults in this text. It is not recommended for anyone under the age of eighteen.

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**Note to the Reader:**

My name is Tiana Laveen and I'm an author of multicultural and interracial fiction. I write stories where most times two people fall in love with one another. I rarely write short stories, it is seldom to receive a book from me under three hundred pages, however, this story was originally intended for another project. That endeavor didn't materialize, but I held on to this story, and felt it was worth sharing. For those of you not familiar with my work, this could be an introduction for you. For those of you that are readers and fans of my previous work, then this can be considered a 'Thank You', for your readership and support.

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Volcano Haleakala had been dormant since 1790 at La Perouse Bay. The overzealous tourists would go right past the quiet town of Makawao, Maui, on the rural northwest slope in East Maui. This was known as Upcountry, a listless country town, half asleep in a bed of tranquility and sweet potatoes. And for that reason, Tanner had planned his great escape. The six ft. three inch tall half Hawaiian, half Croatian native was on his way to bigger and better things—at least that was the plan before the volcano had erupted, wiping out over half the town. He had no idea that the worst was yet to come...

Tanner walked nervously around his small home, the floor still warm under his bare feet covered in ash. The wall-papered walls were now buckled and appeared partially liquefied. He bet they'd feel sticky to the touch. He dared himself and reached out a hand. No trace of gunk, but dry as the hot air. He gulped down a kernel of angst as he picked up the melted photograph of himself, his father, mother and older brother. Gone. Everything. All that remained was himself, and the half standing structure he'd once called home. His luggage lay still neatly packed on his soiled bed. Part of the house

looked undisturbed, as if it had been cut in half for a movie set, while the other seemed to have been set ablaze. People moved about like automata, searching for missing relatives and shattered pieces of their not so long-ago past. A scavenger hunt for sanity, for something to remember who the hell they once were.

The president had sent aid, but nothing could make the pain go away, nor the nightmares of memories and bodies covered in hot, molten lava. Burning at the forefront was this horrible disaster, destroying the possibility of life ever going back to normal. More and more people were suddenly being taken to the hospital, complaining of a burning sensation in their throats. This wasn't unheard of for the survivors of volcanoes; all sorts of respiratory symptoms arose, but there was one problem. No one was getting better. Those that had survived the damned thing and lived to tell the tale were now stuck with tubes going in and out of their bodies in sterile, quarantined hospital environments, and as their conditions worsened, so did hope. The sickness was possibly airborne, transmitted through a mere cough, or maybe it was something in the soil, in the water, or simply carried with a gentle gesture, such as an innocent kiss.

Now weeks had turned into two and a half months, and he could no longer sit around in his house. The population dwindled from an already small 7,202 down to less than a thousand. He could no longer find one friend, and guilt set in.

*Why am I still alive?*

And worse yet, he was healthy as a horse. The strange weather, dawning hot, gray days in stagnant, dry air, seemed to have little effect on him. He couldn't for the life of

him figure it all out, especially since, as a baby, his immune system was so impaired, he'd spent more days in the hospital for asthma, than out. Now, he spent his time watching a cracked television and sleeping on a sullied pillow. Strange odors began to grow in the house, ones that he couldn't identify but left him feeling queasy to the point he fought vomiting. He had to leave...

He became a nomad in his own town, the only place he'd ever known. Drifting from one end of the damned place to the other, everything that he'd seen a million times looked strangely different and out of place, as if ghosts had inhabited each and every rock, brick, and still standing structure. He stayed in hotel rooms, lavish with clean sheets that were never changed. Jumping from room to room in the abandoned place, he'd pretend to call for room service and laugh, nearly losing his mind. Now, only one television station was available. He loathed the damn thing yet it was his only companion. Tanner had grown tired of listening to the newscasters declare over and over that all residents leave.

Supposedly, the hunt was on for his family as well as others, but it had now been over three months and even if he did just up and leave, it was too late...leave to *what?* His family was never well to do and he'd spent the bit of money he'd collected from his job at the computer repair store to fly out to L.A. He refused to step one foot out of Makawao until he found out where his family was...their bodies, so he could bury them properly.

He'd scoured the area, was prevented from entering the hospitals but told repeatedly his family wasn't there. People kept dying all around him, scratching at their necks and gasping for air. Once the news hit that voluntary evacuations were over as the

epidemic spread, the place had been quarantined and no one, with the exception of military and governmental personnel, was allowed to enter or leave anymore. The population numbered at less than three hundred...

Worse yet, it felt like a population of one. No one was talking; people were riddled with self-reproach, depression, rage and a new form of insanity brought on by the tragedy. He couldn't get anyone to talk to him, people he'd known for years—everyone was afraid, afraid they may catch the sickness, but even more afraid of what may lie away from the only town they'd ever known. Some drifted to other parts of the island, but they, too, were becoming ill, as if the virus had followed them, invisible, brought on by the volcano that continued to wreak havoc on the innocent. After stuffing his backpack with vending machine snacks and raiding the hotel kitchen from the vast one and only Holiday Inn, he made his way down a narrow trek toward an area he seldom frequented, a sightseer attraction, a long street called Jamesfield. Surely there he could find new places to explore, possibly find his brother who was known to frequent the touristy area. Tanner didn't care for tourists all that much. They disrupted the flow, and looked at him and his family as mere trinkets, wanting them to perform as if they were unpaid actors in some oddly disturbing circus show. He and his brother had a different look, unique, that caused eyes to turn their way. The locals never treated them like that, they were accustomed to it, but he was tired of explaining that he was only half Hawaiian, and answering the questions...

*“I’ve never seen a Hawaiian like you before! How’d you get those bright blue eyes?”*

*“Your skin is awfully dark to have eyes that light. Are they contacts?”*

*“You have one of the raddest tans I’ve ever seen, Bro! Give me the name and number of the place you go to get it!”*

*“What are you?”*

Tanner had the coloring of a slightly overcooked buttermilk biscuit, which only made his odd shade of light blue eyes glow even more against light honey complexioned skin. His hair was jet black, thick, and styled into a fauxhawk with perfectly shaped sideburns only as of late, it had grown out to right below his shoulders, and naturally feathered on the sides. He made a mental note to cut it once he got the chance, and not because he gave a damn about his appearance. The days were simply too hot as the igneous ash radiated from the crawling Earth. The most he did was shower and shave—his mane and everything else received no personal grooming attention beyond that, but it was long overdue. All he cared about was keeping his own self on suicide watch. Instead of getting easier with time, things grew increasingly worse. He’d head out every morning, right after the sun rose, and search for his family. All he knew was that, when the volcano erupted, he’d been clear across town, picking up fancy maps from the AAA office so that he could leave for L.A. and travel to Croatia to visit his mother’s people, the family he’d never gotten the chance to meet. He had it all mapped out after he’d been accepted into California State University. He wasn’t fresh out of high school, but it was better late than never. He was going to get his degree in Computer Science and tour the world. Everything had started to fall into place. Now, everything was simply falling apart...

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*Two weeks later...*

Tanner threw down the newspaper and fought the urge to stomp it into pulp. The population was now down to under one hundred. Some had died from illness; others had disappeared as if in thin air. Jamesfield was proving to be a drag after a while. He'd spent the prior evening barricading the house he'd broken into to get a little shuteye, with half melted, rubber truck tires that seemed to weigh a ton a piece. It was simply something to do, to pass the time. The weight of those wheels were nothing in comparison to the weight on his tattooed shoulders as he struggled to find a place within his heart to accept the inevitable. He knew damn well no one was looking for him, searching, caring if he took one more damn breath... That didn't stop him from looking for his loved ones, regardless. His brother's body hadn't shown up, but he did manage to find two others...the skin wrapped so tightly around the corpses, as if they'd been freeze dried. He no longer cringed at such a sight that had become commonplace. Since the evacuation, efforts had ceased, medical care practically non-existent. The small hospital was littered with rotting corpses, and the streets and river as well. On the news, he heard empty promises and lies. He now faced regret.

Instead of being his typical bullheaded self, he wished he would have left when he had the chance, but then again, he knew he'd never forgive himself if he hadn't tried to find his family first. His family would never leave him like that; they'd have done the same, search under every rock, until his remains were discovered and given their fair due. Tanner had an unconventional attachment to such things, tradition and mores. His mother

remarked that he was an old soul in that regard. He revered life, lived it with gusto, yet he struggled with his own contradictions. On one hand, he felt the desire to protect and stay with his family. On the other, he hated Makawao so badly, certain he'd been born there by mistake. Nothing about it fit how he felt, what he desired, or what he wanted.

A place known for sweet potatoes and cowboy ways—he was the polar opposite. He indulged in heavy metal and dub step music, dined on sushi and pickled shark fin, and beat to his own drum. Even after being all over Hawaii a time or two, he'd never found a spot that called to him, made him feel more alive. After all, he was searching for a reason to wake up in the morning. Makawao was quaint, nice, charming...Tanner was none of those things. He smoked a joint or two with his brother up high on a mountain doing drunken wolf calls for entertainment. Or skinny dipped with girls from the local college that had taken a liking to him. He behaved much like any other twenty-three year old. The only problem—the stage was all wrong. This wasn't where he wanted to perform. The pot smoking stopped, replaced by a love for meaningful tattoos he'd had done all over his body.

Now that the smoke was clearing, the grey sky opened up and spewed out the sun, giving her permission, like a prisoner on furlough, to do a dance and smile for an hour or two each day. He relished those times when she shined brightly. After a while, the world had forgotten about Makawao. The news coverage lessened, and he had no idea who lived there and who didn't. Time stood still, with him living one long, continuous day with no beginning and no end.

After tearing into his last box of crackers, he started on a new food scavenger hunt. He'd been staying in a tiny sunglasses store, the only store nearby that seemed to have an undisturbed electricity supply.

*I'm leaving Jamesfield...Nathan's not here.*

He finally had to concede that his brother's body was nowhere to be found.

*Time to move on.*

Mentally, he prepared himself for the realization he'd never find them at all. The day turned into night as he made his way up the now all too familiar sidewalks. He peeped inside some of the stores, jiggling the front door, hoping he might be able to gain admittance. Some were open, but only showcased overturned shelves and needless trinkets. Others were locked and taunted him with bags of stale chips, jars of pickles and flat soda. Soon, he passed a store filled with candies and cheap surfing and glass bottom boat fishing gear. He jiggled the knob and let out a grin when the thing squeaked open, a puff of dust escaping as he stood in the entranceway, rubbing his hands together for the pending feast...

Tanner raced from one side of the place to the other. Half hung signs from the ceiling swung above him, threatening to clonk him right on the head. But he didn't care. He opened his backpack, stuffed it with stale pretzels, beef jerky and batteries. Tanner actually hated junk food, but it had staying power and helped keep him amped up during his quest. He told himself repeatedly, *I just need to find them...* and then went on his way.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a small refrigerated area, the light blinking sporadically, inviting him closer for a look. He looked inside and noted the spoiled milk and melted ice-cream, wrinkling his nose at the stench after he opened the door in search for anything that had managed to survive, such as a package of cheese or two. His lips curved upward when his gaze settled on a block of Hot pepper cheese, still wrapped and appearing to be in ‘good working order’. He immediately reached beyond the runny, stinking mess and latched onto it—planning in his mind to have it with the bottle of warm beer he’d found days earlier. Clutching the hunk of dairy delight, he kept it in his grasp, until he heard the click of a shotgun...

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“What are you doing?!” came the steely voice, feminine yet strong.

Tanner stayed still, the cheese in his left hand and his stuffed, dirty red book bag in his other.

“Just getting a bite to eat.” He stared straight ahead not daring to face her as he swallowed a lump in his throat. As the seconds passed however, he couldn’t resist. He strained to see where the voice had come from.

“The cash register is right up here and the military drops off food every week. You’re stealing from my store!” she barked.

He looked toward the front, and there she stood, the barrel aimed directly at his head and both hands on the thing. Her voice matched her stance—confident. One false

move, and she'd blow him to kingdom come. A part of him rejoiced; someone was *finally* speaking to him. The other part of him was afraid he may lose control on himself, leave a puddle right there in the aisle.

“Look.” He sighed, his arms still up. “I don’t want the military food, it tastes horrible and I don’t know what’s in it. I didn’t know anyone was here. I thought this store was like all the others...” He looked over his shoulder at her, suddenly becoming aware of how hot he felt. The temperature in his blood kept rising.

“Turn around!” He heard her walking and closed his eyes.

*This could be the end. I survived the volcano. I survived this plague, whatever the hell it is, and now, I am going to die...over some damn cheese!*

He dropped the cheese and his bag, put his hands on his head and slowly turned around to face the woman, standing there with the barrel now pointed squarely at his nose.

She stared at the fallen items.

“Throw me that bag.”

He exhaled and did as instructed, handing her his book bag. Keeping the gun on him, she set the bag beside her and filtered through it—rolled socks, underwear, a flashlight, etc. Appearing satisfied, she tossed the bag on the floor.

“Are you sick?” she asked, a bit less irritation in her tone.

“No.”

“Neither am I..Where are you from?” She lowered her gun, but kept it at her side.

“Parksdale. I was born and raised here.”

“You live only ten minutes away. You look familiar, too. I just can’t place it.”

“I think I’d remember you,” he semi-joked, trying to soften the mood.

“Well,” she looked him up and down, “if you’re hungry, and want some *real* food, I have some in the back. What’s your name?” she asked as she wiped sweat from her brow.

“Tanner...”

He was getting an eyeful. Taking in her tawny, heaving breasts that she’d stuffed in her compact black T-shirt, he sighed in approval. He slumped low in the sensual sewers, enjoying the show, swimming waist deep in the swampy thoughts now coated with awkward transparencies and perversions he couldn’t deny. For some reason, this women did it for him. Made him feel alive in a dead place.

“Stop lookin’ at my rack. Jesus, you guys are all the same,” she said nonchalantly as she brushed past him toward the back of the store.

His eyes immediately dropped to her blue jeans covered rear-end—tight, gripping, each cheek taking their turn on the denim seesaw as she sashayed effortlessly past rows of canned goods and dust covered packages of diapers. Her corn-rowed, braided dark

brown hair swung behind her. He followed suit, marching in step until they'd reached a small room with a metal table, two chairs, a television, a timeworn stove and an old fashioned white refrigerator with tattered, football scores taped to it. The low drone of the television played an episode of the Antique Road Show.

“Have a seat,” she finally said as she placed a wooden spoon in a large black pot. Her back toward him, she stirred frantically, sprinkling salt and pepper and other seasonings into the simmering concoction. Whatever the dish was, it sure smelled good.

Grabbing a bowl, she spooned some in and dug her hand into a pan of cornbread for a pre-cut slice, placing it atop the bubbling contents. Rising on her tippy toes, she snatched a box of Ritz crackers and set that down on the table. Next, she set the bowl down in front of him, licked her thumb, then handed him a spoon and sat across from him. Her chair scraped across the floor as she made herself comfortable, and clasped her hands. He dug his spoon in the brew, pleasantly surprised to discover she'd given him chili. He chomped it down, going full gusto as if his life depended upon it. Occasionally, he looked up at her, noticing the smirk on her smooth, brown face.

Coming up for air, he managed to ask a question before refocusing on his meal.

“What's your name?”

“Summer.”

“You look like a Summer. I mean, the name fits you,” he flirted.

“How so?” she questioned, leaning back in her chair and kicking a leg up. Her tomboyish ways, however, didn’t smother her femininity. He took notice of the tattoo on her hand—a heart with a star in the middle.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged, “the name just suits you. So, is this your store? You look awfully young to have your own spot.”

“It’s mine *now*. My mother died right after the volcano and my father and brothers got sick and died soon after.”

“I’m sorry...mine are dead, too, but I can’t find them. I’ve been trying...”

“What for? They’re dead now,” she said coldly, her eyes black as coal.

Tanner ignored his gut-wrenching impulse to verbally attack her, get on the defensive. Instead, he steadied himself and placed his spoon down, suddenly losing his appetite.

“I’m not leaving here without giving them a proper funeral. I need to find them before I go anywhere.”

“They could be wherever now, ten feet under. The Earth moved. If you had a chance to leave and you blew it, then you’re just plain stupid!” she said snidely, shaking her head, getting under his skin.

“I’m not here to explain myself to you—”

“I know. You’re here to steal food.”

“The hell with this!” Tanner stood up, almost toppling the bowl over as he got to his feet. “Thanks for not blowing my head off and thanks for the chili. I’ll be on my way now.”

“Why are you leaving?” she asked, her tone subdued as opposed to moments before.

“Your hospitality was so great that I am just overwhelmed and have to retreat back into the night! Jesus Christ, are you serious?! Did you *really* just ask me that? Have a good night, Summer...stay safe.” Throwing his bag over his shoulder, he marched out of the small, dark depressing room with Summer hot on his heels.

“Wait!” she called out. He hesitated, wanting to move on ahead, to get the hell out of there, but...she was company, and he hated her for making him want to stay, yet run away at the same time.

“What is it?” He turned on his heels, glaring back at her.

“I can be,” she looked around, as if she were searching for the right words, “a bit blunt at times, my mother always told me it would be my downfall. I’m sorry if I offended you; it’s just that...I’m a realist, and I didn’t want you to suffer, stickin’ around to find them, to be hurt all over again. I just figured you were looking for closure, but when you see your parents dead, the pain really has just begun...”

Her words hit him hard. Her expression softened, showing him that she truly meant well, despite the crude method of delivery. And he recognized something else in her, something he knew all too well. Just like him, she was lonely and mad at the world.

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Summer threw down another yellowed card, a nine of spades. It was three in the morning, and Tanner sat across the table from her, his blue eyes hooding every now and again. The poor guy had fallen asleep two times, then woke abruptly and tossed down another card. She found the show a bit entertaining, the most she'd seen in weeks. For months, she's scoured the area, only to be told she had to stay put. Military men in full body quarantine gear guarded the perimeter; she was trapped. She hated Makawao more than ever now. It went from being a pimple on a map to a hot button pulsating leper of a country. Something moved in the soil, something rising up like invisible vapors and snatching the breath out of people. It seeped out into neighboring areas too, but Makawao was hit the hardest. When people left, she wanted to go, too, but her father begged her to stay, saying things would improve and he needed help from her and her brothers to repair the store. At that time, people were still holding onto a dream—that this would all blow over. Weeks later, after it was far too late, Summer found him face down, his hand gripped around his throat and his eyes looking up at the ceiling, as if to ask, "*God, why?*"

As soon as she called the authorities to report the heinous event, she was informed that her brothers, Ricky and Taego, had perished at the hospital.

She cursed God and everything holy. In less than two months, she'd lost her entire family, and inherited a dilapidated store and a mortgage she couldn't pay for a house that no longer existed. At her tender age of twenty-one, she also nursed a raging headache she couldn't shake. The kind stress is made of—brick by brick, it built inside of her skull until it pounded out nightmares and made her gnash her teeth, rarely getting a moment of rest. She went from being a sarcastic, yet sincere young lady full of vivacity and opportunity to a disgruntled employee with an appetite to kill anything that threatened to make her life any harder than it was. She daydreamed of marching up to that military line and popping caps in their heads before they'd mow her down, riddle her body with bullets. But she knew to never do such a thing, though the fantasy was quite real; she could almost stick her tongue out and taste it, let it sit there and burn like the acid rain that fell on this cursed island.

She looked at him slumped to the side, snoring.

*I wonder what he is dreaming of?*

She'd had dreams...

Now they were smashed and burned under volcanic ashes and hot debris. Now, she drank warm orange sodas, filled out crossword puzzles and took cold baths with scratched CDs playing in the background. Sometimes the power worked, sometimes it didn't. When it did, she'd quickly charge up her iPod and the generator, never mind her phone—who would she call? No one would speak to her anyway. She'd wandered out into the streets when the madness first began, and it was as if people were too afraid to

even open their mouths. No one knew who had it, and how it spread...but they didn't want to catch it, because it was a sure death sentence. This was how it got after the quarantine. Everyone had been trapped inside, trying to survive, but no one was active. The living were already dead...

“Tanner,” she called out, standing and tapping him on his shoulder. “Tanner!” she said louder, her jagged, dirty nails gripping his T-shirt. He quickly opened his eyes, startled, and looked around as if lost.

“Whu? What?”

*He's cute when he's confused.*

“Look, there is an apartment upstairs that I am staying in. Why don't you come on up there? Besides, the air is fresher there.”

“Yeah, okay...” He got to his feet, stumbling as he grabbed his bag and followed close behind her. She showed him the way, going up a narrow stairwell. Their steps echoed, loud, as if they were climbing the inside of a tower, until they reached a door at the top floor. She opened it and a warm yellow light beamed forward, surrounding their bodies. Moving quickly across the sloped enclosure, she pointed to one of the twin beds.

“Make yourself comfortable. Are you thirsty? Want something to drink before you nod off again?”

“Uh, yeah, that would be good. Thanks,” he grunted as he slumped down on one of the beds, removing his shoes. She crossed her arms and stood there for a moment,

staring at his long feet, like those of Roman gladiator statues she'd seen in her world history books.

*Strong bones...*

She smirked and ran the tip of her index finger along her lower lip. Drowning in her attraction, she didn't immediately take notice of his glare on her. Their eyes locked. Her heart stopped and her body surged with heat.

"I'll be right back." Flustered, she dashed down the steps and soon returned with a frosty bottle of water.

"It's frozen, but that's good; it will stay cold all night. The top is melted, take a gulp and then you can be refreshed all through the night," she instructed as she handed it to him. He nodded, removed the cap, took the stingy swallow and lay on his side, tucking his knees toward his chest.

She found the position heartbreaking. Here, a grown man, lying in a fetal position. A beautiful man—skin that looked as if the sun had made her bed on it; hair so black, it reflected shimmers of blue, lips plush and full; and now that his eyes were closed, he'd stolen the best part of himself away from her view...those eyes. Incredible, blue eyes that looked as if Crayola was responsible for the whole gorgeous mess. His dark lashes drew even more attention to his magnificence, and now that his shirt was off, she could see various tattoos covered his strong, taut body, beautifully drawn, just like the canvas—something she could appreciate.

Summer made her way over to the other bed; it slumped a bit in the middle, making slumber rather uncomfortable. Since sleep evaded her anyway, she had not much use for the whole thing in the first place, but she did need to lie down; she'd grown suddenly exhausted. Maybe tonight, now that someone else was close by, she could get some shut eye, obtain some peace. Sliding her shoes and jeans off, she slipped under the sheets that still smelled of fabric softener. Pushing her hands under her pillow, she stared at him, and found herself drawing her knees up as well, mimicking his stance. She felt closer to him already...

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“Hand me that screw driver.” Summer asked as she strained and twisted beneath the water dripping pipes, some covered with silver electric tape.

Tanner's brow shot up as he rummaged through the rusty tool box setting on the table and retrieved a yellow and black Philips screwdriver. He placed it in her palm, and she disappeared back under the dirty white basin, twisting and turning the nuts and bolts, grunting a bit as her body moved around on the filthy floor.

“I can help,” he offered, elevating his voice just in case she didn't hear him.

“No, it's fine. I'd been meaning to get this a long time ago,” she called out, her elbow moving back and forth, followed by another grunt. He couldn't help but notice her thighs squeezing together as she laid on her back, looking up at the drippy, dirty mess. Soon, her thighs fell apart and he turned away, no longer comfortable with making a meal

of her image in his own dirty mind. He smirked, realizing it wasn't that at all...he simply didn't want to be caught again.

“Okay, do me a favor, Tanner. Turn the water back on.”

He turned and walked to the dark and dank area in the back, by the standing water stagnant with stink and bits of debris. Stepping in the muck, he turned the water pressure valve back on and returned to her. She placed the last bolt back on and stood to her feet, brushing her jeans off with her palms. Leaning over the sink, her shirt rose up, exposing her abdominal muscles—taut—and he was right back where he started, ogling her. A compulsion he couldn't help. Summer was beautiful because she didn't even know it. Not a trace of make-up, she was just a natural. About 5'7 and a size 6, with curves in all the right places, she had his complete attention. Her eyes in particular were what drew him the most though. So black, like ink wells. Almond shaped with perfectly arched eyebrows, most likely not due to any work of her own, her face embraced loveliness, while she seemed to fight against her nature, as if it were an affliction. She was sexy without even trying, and her collection of football articles and geeky technology magazines hadn't gone unnoticed.

That morning, when he'd woken up, his bare feet had hit the floor, and he'd almost slipped on one of the damned things. Looking down, he pulled the partially folded periodical out from under the bed, then another, and another. She was fast asleep then, in a state of total tranquility, so he kept as quiet as possible. He'd considered throwing his shoes on and hightailing it out of there after he perused her magazines, not sure if he could trust her, but then he looked at her again, her face softened with a slight smile. That

sight hooked him. He felt thankful for her kindness, despite the rough delivery, and he realized, he *wanted* to be there.

A burst of water thrust him out of his thoughts.

The sink sputtered and spit, dirty, rust colored liquid flung in all directions, screaming out as if it were angry to be alive.

“Damn it!” She stepped back, but before she dropped to her knees to go back to her repairs, the water settled down, and ran clean.

“Wait! It’s working now.” Tanner grinned as he pointed to the clear, cold liquid. He raced over to it, put his hand under the stream and ran it across his face. “Great job.” He smiled at her as she leaned against the wall, looking coolly away, only offering a nod.

“So,” he turned the water off and put his hands on his waist, “what else do you have planned today?”

“I really need to clean up the store, it’s a mess. I keep saying I will tackle it and never do, but today is as good a day as any.” She turned and walked out of the small back room into the front area of the store. Tanner followed her, watching as she went behind the counter and pulled out various cleaning supplies. He took a glance at the place and grimaced. It looked as if it had been dumped with dirt and muck. The volcanic ash had no doubt come through the pipes, and when some of the waterlines burst, it created a muddy sludge that would require serious elbow grease to remove. He walked to the counter and leaned across it, looking up at her.

“I know you might be thinking what’s the purpose of cleaning the store...we have no customers. Well, my parents always kept it really nice, and this is home for me now, so...” She shrugged. “I need to do something about it.”

Tanner nodded in understanding. He went around the counter, without her permission. Out the corner of his eye, he noticed her mouth open in shock at his boldness when he dropped low and pulled out sponges, rags, window cleaner, paper towels and dusting spray.

“Do you have a working hose? We’ll need it for the floor...and how about a ladder? I’ll need it for the walls and light fixtures. Two of them are coated in dirt.” He pointed toward the ceiling. “I’ll need to change the light bulbs and we need to wash everything down with hot water and bleach.”

“Look, I can handle it. Yeah, it will take me longer but...”

“Why are you acting like you’re still alone? You’re not; I’m here now, Summer. Now, give me the hose and let’s get some more boxes and bags. All the shit we need to throw out, let’s toss it, and anything you can keep or save, we’ll put it in a separate area. Let’s get to work!” He winked at her and went to the shelves in the center of the store, pulled various items and tossed them into a large, black garbage bag. The clanking of dented tin cans filled with stewed tomatoes and expired pineapple chunks got more pronounced as he worked. He could see her leaning against the counter out of the corner of his eye, her arms crossed over her partially exposed stomach and her ballcap pulled

slightly downward, covering one eye. Soon, she disappeared and returned with two boxes full of plastic bags and a ladder.

“Do you do clean windows, too?” she asked with a smirk.

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Tanner glanced at the clock and ran his hand down his wet chest. His fingers felt like rubber as he sat outside the store on a small stoop, gripping a bottle of half frozen water. The full moon gleamed down on the desolate land, once bustling with townsfolk and tourists searching for the closest luau. Those days seemed so long ago. He was at the death bed of exhaustion, begging for leniency. Not wanting to sleep and not wanting to stay awake, he drifted into sporadic thoughts, mostly about his family, dead and buried under a makeshift grave of crumbly, black asphalt, white ash and the breath of the devil within the soil. He kept the pain and anger close to his heart, and used it as fuel to push himself forward, to keep searching and looking. Beyond the horizon stood a fort full of men in army garb with gasmasks on and guns slung over their shoulders. In that area used to be palm trees, coconut juice stands and cowboy hat apparel. He rested his arms over his knees and looked down at his blackened shoes. Just then, he heard the screen door opening. Without looking behind him, he knew she was near, and he was in a funk. The last thing he wanted was to take it out on her.

“Hey Tanner.” She sat beside him, placed a cup to her lips and gulped the contents. “Thanks for your help today. I can’t believe we’re almost finished. Looks like a

grand opening in there.” She laughed weakly as she looked over her shoulder back into the store then back at him.

He forced a faint smile, then let it disappear if it had never been born, nor written in the history of smiles.

“You’re welcome,” he offered before settling on his back, crossing his arms behind his head. There was that odor again...the one of death mixed with burnt cinders. It never went away, only loomed in the air, coming and going as it wished, its airy coat swinging behind it like royalty amongst diseased peons. He flicked his nostril as it flared, wishing he could clean the air as well as he’d cleaned that store.

“Summer,” he said after a few quiet moments. “Tell me more about you. I want to know who you are.”

She stared at him as if trying to figure out if he was a salesman of lies. Then, she turned away and looked out into the dusky sky. “Well, what do ya wanna know?” She tapped her foot nervously.

“Like, everything... What do you like to do? Did you have any plans before all this happened? Did you have...a boyfriend?”

The words came out of his mouth before he could lasso them back in. He quickly regretted them, but that did no good for she’d already heard what he was never supposed to ask.

“Hmmm.” She smirked and looked toward the ground, rubbing her knee and tapping her foot again. “What do I like to do?” Her gaze drifted to him.

“Yeah...”

“I like to play Xbox 360, the NCAA Football game...”

“Is that it?” He arched his eyebrow and offered a wider smile than the one before.

“I like to plant vegetables and fruit...not too much of that going on right now. I like to work with my hands.” She looked down at her palms, as if they held great mysteries. Perhaps they did.

“That’s cool. What else do you like?” He sat up, slumped over and looked her squarely in the face.

“Am I on trial here?” she teased, a wispy laugh swirling from between her full lips. She licked her tongue over her bottom lip, unknowingly enticing him.

“Nah. Just trying to get to know you is all.”

Silence reigned for a moment.

“I like *you*,” he said, his eyes on an overturned trashcan across the street. Then, he causally looked back at her.

“I like you, too...”

Summer cleared her throat and took another gulp from her cup. “Oh, um, you asked me about my plans before the volcano. Well,” she kicked a pebble from underneath her sneaker, “I was thinking of moving away. I hadn’t made it official or anything,” she shrugged, “but I’ve been helping out at the store and didn’t even apply to college right after high school. I knew what was expected of me. Plus, my dad said he was leaving it to me, told me my brothers were too irresponsible... Better late than never though, so, I was going to apply to some colleges.” She gave a slight nod, her face sullen.

“And major in what?” He slid a bit closer to her, distinctly picking up the scent of motor oil and something sweet, possibly jasmine perfume.

She bit her lip and grinned. “Computer engineering. I like putting things together and taking them apart. Computers intrigue me.”

This time, he couldn’t help but laugh. He covered his face with his dirty palms, muffling the noise that crept from the center of his gut, up his esophagus and burst out of his mouth like music he’d never heard.

“Me too. I like that, too,” he said. He noticed that she, too, had slid slightly closer. “So, I asked you if you had a boyfriend?”

“What does that matter now? He’d be dead, right?” Her tone was a mixture of sarcasm and something he couldn’t put his finger on.

“Not necessarily... You only date people in this town? Hawaii is a big island, he could even be from out of state.” He sat a bit higher and surveyed her from head to toe.

“Yeah, that’s true,” she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

He looked at her for a moment as he gripped the edge of the step they sat on.

“Well?”

She laughed lightly and turned away. “I don’t have a boyfriend right now. I have in the past, but, I dunno, I guess I’m hard for some guys to understand.” She looked down at her jeans, running her hands over them, as if to iron them from the heat of her grinding palms.

“I think we have a lot in common. And, I think I get you.” He sighed. “You’re beautiful, Summer.” Suddenly, he felt her hand glide over his. He grasped at her fingers, linking them with his. She gripped a bit harder and a yet harder after that.

He felt her pain.

The tears she wouldn’t cry, the complaints she wouldn’t share, that was where it was...in her hands. The same hands that toiled fresh earth and now scavenged through heated, evil dirt. The same hands that made him a delicious bowl of turkey chili with care and spiritual kisses, the same hands that he felt wipe his forehead as he slept, removing sweat from his brow, and the same hands that held a shotgun directed at the back of his head—those hands, those beautiful, magnificent, hands...

“It’s okay,” he whispered as he leaned closer to her, feeling her tremble. He slowly raised his hand and removed her hat, causing her fuzzy, long braids to fall along her face, cloaking part of it. He ushered the curtain of braids open, and gently cupped the

back of her neck, bringing her closer before landing a soft kiss against her lips, tasting saltiness. He closed his eyes, and did it again, this time feeling her push against him, drawing him closer into the embrace. Then he ended the kiss, gulped, and opened his eyes to stare into hers. He dropped lower, kissed the side of her neck. Feeling the heat from her breath along his ear, he brought her even closer, needing to feel her heartbeat next to his as he wrapped his arms tightly around her, wanting nothing more than to be frozen in that position for eternity. This was a tiny gift of peace presented to them, through the cracked foundation of their mutual pain and loss, something beautiful formed within their cores.

They sat, embracing, their worn hearts beating against each other until the dawn came over the horizon, dragging its veil of wispy clouds and strawberry streaks through the muddy sky cinders that still rose like puffs of stagnant cigar smoke.

They stayed that way until they could no longer...until their tired bodies matched their tired souls, and they left the stoop, hand in hand, closing the squeaky screen door behind them.

~\*\*\*~

All he could hear was her accelerated breathing close to his ear, warming it, soothing his soul. They stood there as the music of silence covered their bodies like an embrace from above. Tanner gently ran his index finger along her chin, then lifted it ever so slightly, bringing her lips closer to his. He pushed his lips into her's, bringing fourth a sweet, feminine moan that was only squelched by his tongue exploring within her mouth.

They stood there, their bodies pressed firmly into one another. Her soft breasts pushed into his stomach and her attempt to lessen their height differential by rising on her tippy toes caused a smirk to crease his face during mid-kiss. He ran his hand over the back of her head, feeling the soft braids against his fingertips. Slowly but surely, he began to march, taking her in tow as they continued to kiss and hold on to one another, never slowing or letting go. She fell back onto the small, twin bed, and looked up at him, her dark eyes full of mystery and wonder. He fell upon her, causing her to lightly laugh as he wrapped his arms around her soft, yet toned body. It had been so long... It felt like a second birth to once again be next to a woman, and one that was as intelligent and beautiful as Summer, was only an added bonus. She moaned beneath him as he pushed her thighs apart, nestling between her legs as if he were meant to be there, and no where else in the entire world. Soon enough, their movements had no beginning nor ending as they ran their fingers along one another, exploring, kissing, embracing tighter and tighter needing one another in the worse possible way.

“Mmmmm...” She groaned as he lifted her shirt and wasted no time plucking her breasts from her bra. They sprung forward, the dark nipples hard, causing him to salivate immediately on sight. He locked one arm behind her back as he took one into his mouth, his eyes partially opened as he drew it further in, getting off on her squirming and sighing as he lavished her breasts with the attention they so deserved. His scalp heated as she ran her fingers through his hair while he grinded against her and switched to the other breasts, lavishing it with the same, heated oral courtesy. Seconds grew to minutes but time had stood still. He wanted to seize the moment, never let it mature. He licked up and down in between her breasts, smiling up at her, and she returned the same grin. Before he

knew it, the woman's fingers were upon his zipper, tugging and pulling, a clear hunger in her eyes. He reached for the top of her jeans and yanked the button loose, gripped both sides and shoved them down her legs as he plunged his tongue back inside of her mouth.

“Ahhhh,” he released her and rose upward, giving her room to remove her panties while he tossed his boxer briefs across the room. Her eyes lowered to his exposed penis as he gripped it, the length and width matching his excitement and lust for her at that very moment. Securing himself between her thighs, he lavished the side of her face with soft pecks, taking special notice of her accelerated heartbeat. He continued to kiss Summer with all that was in him, while his fingers migrated past her breast, across her stomach and down to her pubic bone. She clenched ever up as he reached his destination. Softly and gently, he ran his finger up and down between her lower lips, ushering more womanly moans and increased wetness. He stared down at her, as beautiful as she was, writhing about as his fingers danced playfully between her thighs, warming her up just the way he desired. She suddenly opened her eyes as her back arched a bit off the bed, and her hips moved to the same rhythm of his pivoting hand.

“Mmmmm!”

Her loud moan was music to his ears as he increased the pace, paying special attention to her clit.

“You like that?” He smiled down at her as he pushed one finger inside of her, and continued stroking her bud with his thumb.

“Yeeessss...” her eyes closed once again, and now, he knew she was close. He anxiously waited, wanting to see her expressions as she exploded. His wish was soon granted as she screamed out, bucking harshly against his wrist and fingers, coating him with wetness as he took her there.

“Mmmm, baby...” he cooed as he immediately mounted her, pressing his lips harshly into her’s as he guided himself inside.

“Uh...” her eyes rolled as he pushed within her, slowly, so slowly, until he was completely inside of her wet, warm confines. He hooked his hands above her shoulders, bringing her even further into him, making her shake and writhe about as he thrust in and out of her body.

“Oh God...” his head dropped in the middle of her rising breasts, the feeling too good to utter, express or believe.

*She’s so wet, warm...Her pussy is so soft...*

He kept right on until their eyes were locked into one another, neither one of them daring to blink. His mouth hung partially opened as he went a bit faster. He swallowed, suddenly aware that he wouldn’t last much longer. Summer wrapped her arms around his back and her legs locked around his hips, giving him permission to fall apart within her. He wanted to say something to her as his damn body weakened a bit more after each plunge. He wanted to tell her how special she was, that this meant something to him, but nothing would come out. He was rendered speechless until a loud, earthly groan emanated from deep within him as he came hard within her.

“Oh God! Ahhhh...” he kept pumping, believing it would never end as his body jerked uncontrollably until he was completely spent, and a wet, sweat covered mess fallen atop her beautiful form. After a few moments, he felt her embrace him a bit tighter, and he returned the favor with a soft kiss across her cheek. They looked into each other’s eyes, and smiled at one another, as if sharing a secret they vowed to never tell. He soon found himself asleep, but his body wouldn’t allow it for long. Soon, he was inside of her again, making love to the woman – pouring all of his pain and desires inside of her. And she took it, willingly, with a smile. They climaxed together, giving each other a place to mourn, be angry and be grateful...

He buried his head in the crevice of her neck, certain the sun would be rising soon. He never wanted to leave her, or feel a shred of pain again, though he knew that was impossible. He decided to marry the moment, to call it his own.

*I’m not alone anymore, Summer is with me...and I am with her...*

~\*\*\*~

Summer awoke in a daze. She gasped in shock, her nude body wrapped in the threadbare sheets, and Tanner, also naked, lying close to her, still fast asleep. She’d thought it all a hallucination, but it was true. There he was, floating in a dream. His pupils danced underneath the closed lids; something magical was going on—a play, symphony, pleasant retreat and mental vacation from the actual reality of their existence. In that instant, she envied him. She hadn’t dreamed in months. No, she could only gnash on the pitch black or occasional nightmare, chock full with her mother’s screams and father’s

wails. Human limbs, here, there and everywhere, and the loud, muffled sounds of a man dressed in camouflage, telling her to stay back or he'd shoot. She looked at him from various angles, studying him, sketching him in her mind. Mother Nature cut the fantasizing thoughts short. She slipped out of bed, quickly covered herself with a fresh, over-sized white T-shirt and shorts, and went to the nearby bathroom.

She returned armed with a large yellow sketch pad and two ebony pencils. Sitting in the worn brown rocking chair across from the man, she flipped the 16'20 booklet open until she came across a clean page devoid of angry sketches, plans, and inconsequential doodles. Her right hand moved fast and furious as she began to sketch the object of her new found desires. She studied his peaceful face, drawing his nose, long and straight, his cheekbones, high, and his slightly messy eyebrows. He moved a bit, grunted, and drifted back to sleep.

The sound of her pencil making mad dashes across the paper awoke something inside of her. Finally, she felt alive again as she drew her lover, bringing to life on paper the look of satisfaction on his face. Her fingers grew grimy as she purposely let them smear his profile on the paper, for added contrast. Finding her artistic zone, she immortalized him. Sure, she could have used a camera, but this was so much better...yes, she could get her hands dirty...

Deciding she needed a bit of mood music to finish the rendition, she set the pad down and sauntered over to her CD player. The power was out again, so she relied on the batteries. Pushing play, she bobbed her head and made her way back to the rocking chair, picking up from where she left off...

She hummed the lyrics to the song, 'Suffocate', by J. Holiday, "*'Cause I can't breathe when you talk to meeee, I can't breathe when you're touching me... I suffocate when you're away from me...*"

Suddenly, she dropped the pad of paper; the pencil abruptly rolled on the sloped, warped, wooden floor, wedging into a crease of a panel.

"Oh my God!" she screamed. Her hands trembled as she covered her lips. It was all coming together, in flashes, right before her eyes. "That's where I've seen him before! The hospital!"

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The sun came in spurts, as if stepping away to clear her throat before she filtered her harsh rays in the room. The dawn had been getting stronger, and the murky haze, weaker. Nevertheless, the sun was partially blocked by a twitching, feminine silhouette. He knew that body, that form. His hands had roamed up and down that body all through the early hours of the morning, trying to bury his troubles in each and every inch of her silken flesh. This time, however, she wasn't languid in his arms, letting him go against her body like a slow tide. The lovemaking was magical, but the current scene brimmed with worry. She was nerved up, antsy, prowling. Tanner put his hand up to his eyes to block the damned sun, but it was of little use. He heard her breathing harshly as she moved to and fro and she adjusted her weight from one foot to the other, fisting and unfisting her hand, staring at him, as if he were some anomaly.

“Why...why are you looking at me like that?” he said as he drew the threadbare sheet over his legs in a rugged breath. “What’s going on?”

“I’ve been up, thinking...for hours!” she blurted.

“About what?” He yawned, afraid she may take that for disinterest. He was dead beat tired, but he wanted to hear what she had to say. “Come on, tell me,” he encouraged as he sat back further on the bed, squinting, his eye on her.

“About where I’d seen you from. Remember I told you that you looked familiar?”

“Yeah...not a surprise.” He shrugged. “It’s not like this place in New York City. I could throw a rock and hit my front door. Well, what’s left of it.”

“Well, that may be true.” She shook his finger at him and began to pace back and forth as she chewed her bottom lip. “But I think it’s more than that. You know how you and I are not sick? How we never got sick, but everyone around us did?”

“Yeah, I guess we’ve been lucky.”

“No such thing as luck,” she corrected, her voice low, her look stern as she stood still, her chest heaving up and down. “We’ve been outside countless times, in the air...in this horrible, filthy air. I even put my hand on the ground, and could feel the earth. It feels alive, like the damned thing has a pulse! It crawls like it has worms for skin.”

“Yeah, I know. I felt it under my feet...”

“You walked on it in your bare feet?” she questioned, seemingly amused by his bravery laced with a droplet of stupidity.

“I did, but you gotta understand,” he shrugged, “I didn’t want to live anymore; I didn’t care what happened to me. But, I didn’t get sick; *nothing* happened. More importantly, where do you think you know me from? I mean, we’ve had to have seen each other if we both grew up here but I don’t recall you. I tried, believe me. I would *definitely* remember someone like you...” He yawned again.

“Because you were too sick.”

He looked at her, confused.

“Did you go to Kula Hospital for asthma treatment?”

Tanner swallowed and bolted upward from the bed, grabbing his jeans and sliding them on, his interest now fully piqued. “Yeah, how’d you know that?”

“Ha!” Summer leapt around. “I knew it!” She pointed to him accusingly, a twisted grin on her face.

“I did, too. There are four other people alive, to my knowledge, who haven’t gotten ill yet, but I don’t know who they are exactly. I’d probably remember them, too, if I saw their faces. I heard about the survivors, us, from the military radios.”

“Military radios?”

“Yeah.” Summer dashed across the room and grabbed archaic, blocky apparatuses, the wires tangled together, and tossed them on the second twin bed. “I listen through *these*. They don’t tell us anything, just treat us like lab rats. You see, I can hear what they are discussing, and I know that there are four others, like you and I, who have shown no symptoms, who are still alive. I also know that I was born with asthma, and I had been in the hospital for special medications and testing, on and off, up until the age of seventeen.”

“Me too...I stopped at age sixteen. I had my last big attack then, ended up in the hospital for three months until I got this new medicine for a trial testing. It wasn’t FDA approved but it must’ve worked. It had pretty much gone away after that.”

“Yes.” She smiled, a beautiful wide smile. “Me, too. I practically died in my sleep so many times. My mother kept me with her to make sure I didn’t. My parents were desperate, so they agreed to try the new medicine. I haven’t had an attack since. It’s all coming back now, Tanner.”

He racked his brain, wishing so badly that he could remember her as clearly as she recalled him.

“I wouldn’t forget those eyes...” Her own watered as she stared at him. A feeling of peace engulfed his heart, and then the memories all came flooding back, one by one, like falling shards of glass into a pond. He had been so sick, asthma attack after asthma attack that left him breathless, time and time again. So aggressive, it stole his childhood away, but after a while, it subsided, and he could finally breathe again. Two shots in the

side of the neck, and days later, he could smell the air, and not feel as if his chest were going to cave in.

“I can’t believe this...” he uttered as he slumped down on the bed. He waited as she sat down beside him. They were quiet for a few moments, absorbing the information, their fingertips gently touching one another’s.

“What medicines did you take?” she finally asked, breaking the silence as the sun continued to blind him.

“I...don’t recall all the names, and there were so many...”

“They had me take a lot, too. I know that this might sound crazy, but, what if our asthma, in some way, saved our lives?” She studied him closely.

“We need to find those other people, Summer. We have to find them, *now*. If anyone is still in the hospital, hanging on, this could be their only hope.” She gripped him, hugging him, surely relieved he didn’t color her crazy. She was on to something, she had to be. How else could they still be here, moving about as if nothing had changed? But everything had, nothing was the same, yet a piece of the key to freedom lay within their grasp.

~\*\*\*~

“This is it.” Summer said as she caught her breath and looked over the horizon. Tanner grabbed his canteen with the price tag from her store still on it, and gulped down the warm water.

“I hope someone is in there. Even if they see us, they might take off running, thinking we are infected or after them,” he warned. He’d managed to re-wire her crafty contraption, making it into a GPS of sorts to pick up local radio signals. Someone had their radio on inside the restaurant, and was turning stations. The two made it over a small hill with sparse grass, the ground heated beneath their gym shoes. They neared the restaurant; a dim light shone from one small room, a muted blue color, like that of a bug buzzer.

“They’ve got to be in here...” Summer tugged on the locked door. Tanner went around the side, peering into the windows.

“Yeah, I see glasses of water and a plate with a piece of bread on it. Doesn’t look old, either. Maybe they saw us and ran off. They couldn’t have gotten far. Let me see that thing.” He took the radio from Summer and moved the wires around, placing the headset on. Loud static threatened to tear his eardrum, but just then, the restaurant door slowly opened, a crease of light appeared, and a head popped out from around the side, then another...

A thin man stood there in a crisp, clean white shirt, holding a little girl tightly around her shoulder. His eyes were glassy, full of pain and confusion.

“We saw you through the window...didn’t know anyone else was around. Who are you? What do you want?” he asked, partially blocking his body with the large, heavy door.

“We’re not sick,” Summer assured. “And we just have one question, Sir. Did you and this little girl here, receive asthma treatment at Kula Hospital?”

He looked at her in a state of confusion, his dark eyes going between her and Tanner.

“Yes, a couple years ago my daughter and I got treatment there for asthma...”

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Tanner took another bite of the piece of soft bread. It was just a regular piece of bleached white loaf, but it tasted like heaven. The man had made it himself, living in the restaurant with his daughter while the world fell apart around them. He’d lost his wife and couldn’t find his mother-in-law, and before long, he, too, was stuck. He said he’d scoured the town over and over in his car until he’d run out of gas. The rest of the gas he could find, he’d used for generators, for electricity. The rest was turning skunk.

He clasped his long fingers together. “So that’s what happened. What do we do now?” he asked as his daughter looked at Tanner and Summer suspiciously, her dull brown hair covering parts of her piercing green eyes.

“We need to tell the military that we know why we aren’t sick. We need to get the message out before they leave us here to die,” Tanner explained.

“You know that’s what’s going on, right?” Summer said sternly. “They have no plans on helping us. Soon, the food drops will stop. The other two patients must’ve evacuated, or worse yet, they have them in quarantine someplace else.”

“I know the name of the medicine,” the man offered, gulping as he ran his hands over his five o’clock shadow. “It was called Providol. We signed a waiver. Well, your parents probably signed it on your behalf.”

Tanner looked at everyone and mulled over his thoughts. “I am going up to the military...”

“They’ll kill you,” the man warned as he stood from his seat, grasping his daughter close to him.

“It’s the chance we’ll have to take. We can’t sit here and die and we can’t let others continue to suffer.” Tanner grabbed his canteen and marched out of the restaurant, Summer hot on his heels. He didn’t want to look at her, didn’t want to see her face. He could feel her energy, and he knew if he heard one thing from her, it would unravel him. Too late. She grasped his arm and he stared at her, melted in the tears forming in her eyes.

“Tanner, they’ll shoot you before you can even explain yourself! Don’t! We have to come up with something else!”

“Come up with what, Summer?” he screamed in exasperation. “Look what has happened to us, look at our families! We can’t talk on these damn radios, we can only listen in. How long is this supposed to continue, huh?! Our families are dead, but we can still save others. What if this happens all over again someplace else?! Will others suffer the same, horrible fate?” He turned from her and raced farther up the hill, marching...marching...marching...

“Tanner!” she screamed out, her voice so shrill, so full of pain and fury.

He turned around and pointed his finger in her direction. “Summer, I love you...”

Then, he wiped the moisture from his eyes and turned back around, marching...marching...marching until an hour later, he was less than a half a mile away from the military line. Summer stayed behind, several feet away, watching over him, like some angel—an angry angel, but one nevertheless.

“Stay back,” he offered softly as he made the rest of the trek on his own, not wanting her to be hurt. Off he went, going, going, going. Until he heard the familiar sound—clicking guns, warnings, brute, rough voices yelling, “Stop! Stand back or we’ll shoot!”

Tanner stopped in his tracks and put his hands up. He screamed out at the top of his lungs, hoping they could hear him over all the commotion as men raced back and forth, talking on radios, reporting him, making him into a monster that had brought them genocide with a mere wave of his hand.

“We know why we’re still alive! Please! Let me tell you!”

His eyes widened and his heart pounded harshly within him as he witnessed one of the men raise his gun and aim it directly at him. Gunshots rang out and he fell to the ground, screaming, pleading as loudly as he could, until he could no longer hear his own voice....

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“You could’ve killed him!” one of the sergeants said as he patted Tanner’s hand, while another placed a cool cloth over his forehead.

“It was a warning shot! Hell, we didn’t know what the guy was gonna do!”

The man sulked as he walked outside the hospital room.

Tanner looked around, then down at the bloody bandage on his shoulder, and fresh pain made him grimace. He groaned as he tried to turn to his side, and then she clutched his hand, squeezing tight, then a bit tighter...

“Tanner.” She scooted her chair closer, one of her amazing smiles on her face. She was all cleaned up; he had no idea how someone so beautiful could look even better, but she did. Her face had a glow, and her hair was loose in thick, coarse waves going down her back.

“Summer...” He traced her face with his fingertips and peered down at the light yellow sundress that caressed her body in just the right way.

“Tanner, you’re a hero.” Happy tears welled in her eyes. “It’s all over the news! That drug is now being used to help the sick, it’s reversing the affects of the airborne virus. You did it, you really did it!”

“No, Summer, it was your idea. You figured it out. You’re the hero.”

She smiled and turned away.

“Damn, I thought I was dead. First you, then them. I’m tired of guns being drawn on me.” He laughed, sorry he had once he felt the surge of pain return. Summer laughed and stroked his hair. They sat together, their hands gripped as nurses and doctors moved about.

“Um, Tanner,” she said, the light in her eyes slightly dimmed.

“Yeah?” he responded wearily.

“There are, like, two thousand unclaimed bodies downstairs here, in the lower level of the hospital. There’s a catalog...of the deceased. I overheard someone talking about it. I’m sure you’re not up to it...but, you could...”

“Yeah.” He closed his eyes and ran his hand over his chest. “I’ll go see...”

“We can bring it to you when you’re ready,” the sergeant announced, overhearing their conversation as he spoke to someone else on a radio.

“...You can show me now.”

“We have a list of names here, the ones that we could identify by dental records at least.” He took a clipboard from the top of a counter and handed it to Tanner. He cautiously took it, looking into Summer’s eyes. He needed to see those names on there, because...he wanted to remember them just as they were...

Moments later, he handed the clipboard back, quickly wiping a tear from his face.

“They were there?” Summer whispered as she gently stroked his wrist.

He nodded. “Yes.”

After several minutes, he got the heart to speak again.

“When I get outta here, out this hospital, I’m leaving this place,” he announced, wincing through the pain as he sat up straighter. “I’ve had enough...”

She smiled at him and nodded in understanding, not asking where, not asking why. He looked at her dress again, and smiled.

“What made you put that on? It’s pretty, don’t get me wrong, but—”

“It’s all they had. I had dirt and your blood all over me, needed to clean up and wear something else.” She smiled through the pain that hovered over them. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

“You’re coming with me. I’m not asking, I’m *telling* you.”

The smile on her face lit the room. He leaned over and kissed her forehead.

“Where are we going?” she asked enthusiastically.

“California...L.A. You can apply for schools out there, go to school just like you wanted to and we can get a little place together...just the two of us. I have a cousin out there, he can help us get settled. I’ll get a job, and enroll in school, too, just like I said I was. That’s what we’re going to do...just me and you.”

Summer leapt into his arms, making him groan louder.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” she sighed, the grin still on her face.

“It’s...okay.” He winced and fell back into the hospital bed, holding his chest and rubbing his shoulder as it pounded with pain.

“Just me and you, huh? Starting over?” she asked, softly caressing his chin.

“Yeah, just me and you...because I *need* you. I can’t breathe without you now...”

Summer rested her head across his lap, and closed her eyes. He ran his fingers through her hair as he stared out the window. In some ways, they’d lost everything they’d known and everything they had. But in many ways, they’d gained so much, and made a difference, one breath at a time...”

~THE END~

## ~\*Author Biography\*~

Tiana Laveen was born in Cincinnati, Ohio and resides in the Midwest with her husband, two children, and twisted imagination. She enjoys a fulfilling and enriching life that includes writing books, public speaking, drawing, painting, listening to music, cooking, and spending time with loved ones.

Tiana Laveen is a uniquely creative and innovative author whose romance fiction is geared towards those who not only want to temporarily escape from the daily routines of life, but also delve into social taboo as it pertains to interracial relationships. Tiana creates a painting with words as she guides her reader into the lives of each and every main character.

Her works include "Cross Climax I," "Cross Climax II," "The Slave Master's Son," "The Naughty Sins of a Saint," "I Want Candy," "When Saint Goes Marching In," "Swirled Satin Sheets I," "In My Sister's Shadow," "Swirled Satin Sheets II," "Saved and SAINTified," "Addicted In Cold Blood," "Forgive Me Father For I Have Loved," "Saint's Sacrament - Sins of the Father," "The Tale of the Blood Diamond," and "The Unearthing of Blackstone."