

## 'cowa | nine



"April showers better bring May flowers." Marissa stared out the window after almost three weeks of consecutive rain. May was right around the corner and Marissa hoped the rain would start to lighten up soon. She was actually starting to miss walking around the property, even if it only was a short walk.

Jane had made coffee for her housemates while it was still dark and had already left for Kava Java. Kavena was at the table feeding breakfast to Isaiah and studying the original blueprints of Marissa's house, anxious to start on some of the repairs.

"We've been in a drought for a while," Kavena said. "So rain is good." Even though Kavena lived in the *abana* unit, she was in the main house all of the time, enjoying the company of the other women.

Marissa enjoyed it, too. She had never belonged to a sorority or been in a living situation with other women before. Despite the occasional chaos of having so many X chromo-

some in one place, it was nice. Pansy especially seemed to revel in so much girl energy. Marissa hadn't counted on how a few short weeks of their new living arrangement could have blossomed Pansy from kid to young girl status, but it had. She was more outgoing and engaged, and laughed a lot. Hearing her daughter laugh made Marissa's heart swell, and confirmed that she had done the right thing.

Malia emerged from the bathroom, still pale from the morning sickness that had continued into her second trimester. She began to pack her lunch for work as well as lunch for the kids. "It's no problem," she had assured Marissa and Kavena, both of whom were feeling a bit guilty. "I'm doing mine anyway."

When Kavena wasn't looking, Malia added juice boxes to the kids' lunch boxes. "Marissa, I'm going to tell everyone in the executive office about my pregnancy today. And I'm going to tell Paul that I'm living here, too. It's been almost a month."

Marissa was learning to let go. "Whatever you think is best," she said, but then felt the familiar tightening in her chest whenever Paul's name came up.

When she had seen him last week, he had stared speechless at the driveway and yard that was littered with toys, both Isaiah's and Pansy's. Marissa had cried initially to get the kids to put their things away, but eventually gave up. "What's going on here?" Paul had finally asked.

"Childhood," had been Marissa's guarded response. She had refused to give him details about her new housemates and knew that Pansy had deftly, but lovingly, played dumb whenever Paul tried to pry.

To Marissa's surprise, Paul had turned to look at the oak tree Pansy had climbed their first day in the new house. "I could put up a tire swing," he said slowly. "That branch is low and strong enough."

170

MIA KING

It was so unexpected that Marissa's mouth went completely dry. When she finally found her voice, she simply said, "Pansy would like that."

But there had been no talk after that, and the tire swing never materialized.

Now Malia sat down next to Marissa, staring into a mug of ginger tea Kavena had made for her. The ginger was supposed to help with the nausea.

"I've never shared my personal life with anyone in the office," Malia said. "I'm a little nervous about suddenly having so many people know about what's going on with me."

"Paul will get over it," Marissa said, though she was pretty sure she knew what his first reaction would be.

"I'm not worried about Paul," Malia said. "I'm worried about *her*."

The women rarely talked about Paul and Angela, but when they did, they referred to Angela as *she* or *her*, which suited Marissa just fine. Pansy still had no idea that her father was involved with another woman, and Marissa intended to keep it that way. That was between her and Paul.

"What would she do?" Marissa asked.

"Make my life miserable." Malia looked unhappy.

"Which she does anyway. But I know from experience that it can get worse."

"I've heard that, too," said Kavena.

"She's on her third marketing team." Malia looked grim. "Not a single person under her has lasted more than a year and a half. People say that working for the executive office is the surest way to end a hotel career. I'm sure it's no coincidence that every time I apply for an internal transfer or promotion, I get turned down."

"That sucks," Kavena said.

Malia shrugged. "I know. I wish I had more options open to me, but I probably won't as long as Angela is there. If I

SWEET LIFE

171

go to any other resort, it'll be the same thing—I'm pigeonholed as a secretary. But it helps that I like working for Paul, so that makes it easier."

Marissa frowned. While Marissa could see how Angela could be a formidable person to work for, she couldn't see her yielding that much power. Large organizations usually had checks and balances in place to avoid that kind of abuse. "I'm not understanding how she's able to pull off that kind of intimidation."

"She's best friends with Jackie in HR," Malia said. "How do you think she managed to get all those women before me fired? I think they've had six different executive secretaries in the time that she's been here. Luckily I have the support of enough people in the office that it's difficult for her to get me fired, though I'm sure she would if she could. She acts sweet in public but when it's just her and me?" Malia shook her head. "And the sexual harassment suits? Gone. Mysteriously disappeared. She knows that I know more than anybody at that resort. The only thing that's saved me is that I have wonderful performance reviews. Except from her, of course."

"What sexual harassment suits?" Kavena asked, leaning forward eagerly.

Malia pretended to seal her lips shut. "Nothing. Forget I said anything."

Kavena sat back, disappointed. "I heard they call you 'the vault,'" she said, disgruntled. "Come on, can't you give me a little hint?"

Malia flashed Kavena a mysterious smile before finishing her tea and standing up. "Anyway, I just can't afford for anything to go wrong right now. Not with the baby on the way."

"Tall Paul first, and then HR," Marissa advised after some thought. "He thinks you're great—he'll absorb the

172

MIA KING

hear, if there is any. So long as you have the details of your maternity leave covered, and he knows that there's somebody covering for you while you're out, he'll definitely be on your side." This was the one thing Marissa knew for certain. It was a relief to know that Paul would probably do the right thing by Malia, even if he couldn't do it by Marissa. "Paul just needs to know things will be okay."

Malia nodded. "I noticed that about him." She gave Marissa a grateful smile before gathering her things and waving good-bye.

Marissa knew exactly when Malia told Paul, because just at that moment Marissa's iPhone began to ring. She had replaced Paul's profile picture with an unflattering image of Homer Simpson drooling in his underwear, and it always made her laugh. She decided to ignore Paul's call, and continued to read the newspaper.

Less than a minute later, the house phone rang and, having turned over the last page of the newspaper, Marissa decided to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Marissa, tell me my secretary did not just come in and announce that she's pregnant AND living in my house."

"If you're thinking that I got her pregnant, I can assure you that our relationship is strictly landlord and tenant."

"Very funny. And what about our top masseuse renting the *ohana* unit? You know that's supposed to be my home office."

"Good point. And since this is no longer your home, it is therefore no longer your home office."

"Where are my things?"

"In the garage, growing mildew. So unfortunate, this wet Waimea weather we've been having."

SWEET LIFE

173

"Marissa, that's not funny!"

Having Paul so agitated was putting Marissa in a good mood. "Paul, there's something else you should know," she said solemnly.

"What?" She could hear the dread in his voice.

"Your CFO, Bob, has the room overlooking the front yard."

"*What?*"

Marissa cracked a smile. "Oh, take it easy. A woman named Jane Crisp has that room." No sense in telling him that she owned Kava Java. Marissa still liked her weekly updates on whether or not Paul or Angela were going there, despite Jane's reluctance to tell her. "They're all women, except for Kawena's son, Isaiah. Pansy loves it."

Paul let out a heavy breath. "Marissa, I really don't think it's a good idea."

"What? Oh, you mean having two Kohala Bay employees living here?"

"Exactly! I need to have boundaries between me and the people who work for me."

"Wow, Paul, I couldn't agree more. How's Angela?" Her voice wavered slightly, but she knew Paul couldn't hear it.

There was a stunned silence. "Marissa . . ."

Not wanting to hear his lame excuses, Marissa continued. "And if you must know, I had no idea Malia would be renting the room. I did it as a favor for Tom."

"Tom? Who's Tom?"

"Pansy's riding instructor. Malia's a family friend and she needed a temporary place to stay. Tom's been so great with Pansy that it was the least I could do."

Marissa knew Pansy had raved about Tom to Paul. "I don't know about this guy . . ." Paul said darkly.

"Tom's great," Marissa said resolutely. "Pansy is an amazing rider. In fact, you should come watch her someday. Maybe after you come back from Honolulu?"

"How did you . . . That's what I mean, Marissa! *Boundaries*. Malia shouldn't have told you . . ."

"Told me what?" Marissa asked innocently. "You told Pansy yesterday that you would be gone for a few days to Honolulu."

They both knew she was playing him. "Fine," Paul said flatly. "I can't win. I never can. Why is that, Marissa?"

*Maybe because we're supposed to be on the same team, Marissa thought. I'm not winning either.* Instead she said, "I'm thinking of having a garage sale in a couple of weeks and I'd be happy to put your stuff up for sale. You might even get a whole dollar for everything. Island prices, you know how it goes."

"Just leave it!" Paul ordered, incensed. "Do *not* sell my things for a dollar, Marissa. I mean it!"

He hung up the phone, leaving a smiling Marissa on the other end.

"Try this." Jane handed Marissa a cup carved from a coconut shell.

Marissa sniffed it suspiciously. It definitely wasn't coffee. "Is this what you've been doing for the past week? Stinking up my kitchen with this concoction?"

"First, it doesn't stink. It's just taken me a while to get it right, and I haven't had a chance to throw out the batches that didn't work. Second, you've been under stress and need to relax. This will help."

"And this is . . . ?"

"Kava. The great green hope. It's a medicinal herb that Hawaiians and other islanders have used for thousands of years. I'm working on a couple of proprietary blends but I haven't found a recipe I'm excited about yet." Jane handed a cup to Kavena, who accepted it reverently. "Sorry, Malia. I

don't know if it's contraindicated for pregnancy but I don't want to find out. So it's still ginger tea for you."

"No complaints here," Malia said. She was starting to show more and her morning sickness had finally abated. Ginger had become a staple in her diet.

It was a Sunday, and all the women were off. Pansy and Isaiah were playing in the backyard.

Kavena drank hers in one gulp and handed the empty cup back to Jane with two hands. "Wow," she said. "I think that's probably the best kava I've ever had. And I've had some pretty good kava."

Jane smiled. "Thanks," she said, and downed her cup as well.

The women turned and looked at Marissa. With all eyes on her, she took a tentative sip. The watery liquid was lukewarm and bitter. Marissa made a face. "It's peppery and bitter."

"Bottoms up," Kavena suggested. "Otherwise you won't receive the full benefits."

"What, is this supposed to make me high or something?"

"Spoken like a woman who has never been high," Kavena said dryly. It was true. "And I can only hope that, with each day that passes, you learn to embrace all that this island has to offer. In the meantime, just drink it."

Marissa shook her head. "I'm going to Kona, remember?" She held up the list of supplies Kavena wanted her to get from Home Depot. The house was low on groceries as well so Marissa was going to restock at the large Safeway and Costco. "I don't want to feel dopey on the drive down."

"You won't feel dopey," Jane promised. She took Marissa's cup and began to search through the cabinets. She found a thermos and began pouring the drink inside. "Just take it down with you. I wouldn't give it to you if I thought it was unsafe."

"This is one time when you can drink and drive," Kavena added. She gave a happy sigh. "Oh, it's kicking in. I don't think there's anything you can say now that will upset me, Marissa. Go on, try." Kavena grinned.

Marissa stood up, reaching for her purse. "Sorry, but I'm all out. Maybe later." She glanced at the shopping list. "I'll pick up some things for dinner. What about a roast chicken and a salad? I'll pick up a loaf of garlic bread, too."

"I'll pass on the bread," Malia said.

Marissa crossed garlic bread off her list. "I forgot garlic makes you nauseous. What about sweet potatoes? I saw a recipe on the Food Network for mashed sweet potatoes. . ."

"Keep it simple," Jane advised Marissa. "It's just us."

"Really," Kavena said, smiling sweetly. "Don't overdo it. Besides, I haven't seen you cook since I've moved in."

"I cook!" Marissa responded hotly. "It's just that it's been crazy with everyone moving in and all of you are such good cooks and always offering to make dinner. . ."

Kavena was giggling. "Marissa, I don't think a single knife has been used from that thousand dollar Wüsthof knife block until we came along."

Jane was pouring more kava into the thermos but Marissa could see the familiar shake of her shoulders. She was laughing. Even Malia had a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Marissa fumed. "It was a wedding present!"

Jane handed Marissa the thermos and ushered her out the door. "Give it a few minutes to kick in," she advised. She quickly closed the door but not before Marissa heard the women burst out in laughter.

Okay, so maybe Marissa was still a bit tightly wound these days. She had been working on letting go, and if her housemates knew what she had been like in New York, they'd have to agree that Marissa had come pretty far. She

deserved some credit. After all, it was only April. They had moved to Hawaii last December, Paul had moved out in February, and here she was, only two months later. *What did they expect?* Marissa wondered indignantly as she pulled the Audi out of the driveway.

Black lava rock and dry terrain flashed past as she headed down to Kona on Highway 190. From where she was, Marissa could see the variations in color among the different lava flows that had occurred hundreds of years ago. Despite the large expanse of lava rock, new life had found a way through. Bursts of greenery appeared in the oddest of places. From her vantage point on the highway, Marissa could look down the mountain and see the ocean, shimmering turquoise and aqua blues. The water was so clear Marissa could see the coral reefs just below the surface.

Marissa glanced at the thermos next to her. Maybe she had only been on the Big Island for five months, but Kavena's words rang true. There was still so much about Hawaii that Marissa had yet to discover and appreciate. Last weekend, it was Jane and Malia who finally coaxed Marissa to join them at the beach, taking the kids while Kavena was at work. Marissa had stayed on the blanket, watching everyone from under the shade of the palm tree. It wasn't the resort, that was true, but the aquamarine water was just as beautiful and the sand smooth and white. Two turtles were sunbathing on the beach, oblivious to the people around them who were respectfully keeping their distance.

Her life had turned upside down since her arrival, but in truth she could have been anywhere: New York, San Francisco, Seattle. Anywhere other than Hawaii. She had her blinders on, so absorbed in her own problems that she hadn't taken a moment to look around her. She had pretty much ignored the fact that she was living in one of the most beautiful and breathtaking places in the world.

178

MIA KING

Paradise.

*So Paul had been right, she admitted grudgingly to herself.*

They were living in paradise and Marissa hadn't a clue.

Well, that was going to change.

She spun off the top of the thermos. Taking a deep breath, she took a sip.

Nothing. Just the same bitter aftertaste she'd had at the house. Maybe she needed to drink more.

Keeping one eye on the road, Marissa downed the contents of the thermos and put the lid back on.

Still nothing.

Great, she thought. She felt on the verge of tears. *Of course it wouldn't work for me. In fact, nothing works for me. It's a sign, a sign that I'm not supposed to be here. Everyone else gets to have their big Hawaii experience, everyone except . . .*

Marissa's tongue started to tingle. And then the entire inside of her mouth went numb.

Marissa slowly became aware of the music that had been playing in her car, of her driving, of her environment. She felt her shoulders relax without her having to tell them to relax. A wave of well-being overcame her.

In Kona, Marissa took her time walking the aisles of Home Depot, smiling at everyone she passed and feeling a rush of warmth when people smiled back. People were friendlier here, there was no doubt about that. Why couldn't people be like this everywhere? She lovingly selected the roof cement, shingles, rust-resistant screws, and chalk line per Kavena's list. *All world leaders should drink kava, Marissa thought as she blissfully stood in line, waiting to check out. That would bring about world peace.*

She had so much to be thankful for. Pansy. Even Paul. If it wasn't for him, Marissa wouldn't be experiencing so many new things. Her housemates, for example. If he hadn't moved out, there wouldn't have been a need for her to find

SWEET LIFE

179

tenants. And not just any tenants—these women were amazing and funny, and they put up with Marissa's idiosyncrasies. They all knew she was trying to fix the house so she and Pansy could move back to New York, and they were more than happy to help. With Kavena's do-it-yourself knowledge, Malia's local contacts, and Jane's penchant for negotiation with contractors, the house was transforming before Marissa's very eyes. Jenny wouldn't even recognize the house when she saw it next.

Marissa's next stop was the grocery store in Kona, which was much larger than the one in Waimea. Marissa hummed to herself as she got a shopping cart. She could afford to spend a little extra on dinner tonight. That had been the big eye-opener last night, when she was paying her bills. Now that she was no longer living in New York—no longer living on the mainland, actually—she was away from her normal temptations. In the old days, she had managed stress through retail therapy, but with no place to really shop in Waimea, shopping had no longer been a viable option.

But Marissa found that owning less stuff, as well as spending less, actually worked. Even though she was still doing takeout for some of her and Pansy's meals, it was nothing compared to what she used to spend on a single dinner in the city. She wasn't pulling in the kind of money she had made in New York—far from it!—but she wasn't spending as much either. Marissa found that her anxiety around money had abated—spending less was helping them make the most of the dollars they did have.

*Those self-help gurus were onto something after all, she murmured to herself.*

And then there was Paul. Paul had returned from Honolulu and shown up unexpectedly the next day, catching Pansy in a bear hug and then opening the trunk of his car to reveal a clean but used rubber tire. With the help of Isayah,

the three of them hoisted a rope around a branch and suddenly there was a tire swing. But that wasn't all. Paul had then returned the next day, despite Marissa reminding him that she would appreciate a phone call first. Kavena had vehemently agreed in the background, until Paul revealed a second, smaller tire that he hung up on another branch of the tree.

For Isaiah.

Since then, Kavena had been strangely quiet about voicing her opinions on Paul or Angela, much to Marissa's annoyance. Jane was a diplomat, and also the veteran of a happy marriage, and refused to take sides. Malia was torn, liking Paul but suspicious of Angela, and still feeling bruised from her own recent abandonment.

Which left Marissa alone in her ranting.

And, truthfully, she knew Paul hadn't brought the second tire to butter up Kavena, though that was certainly the result. Marissa knew from the look on his face that it made Paul happy to see Pansy happy, to see Isaiah happy. He probably hadn't given it a second thought.

She had been dragging her feet about calling a lawyer. Surely that meant something. Clearly Marissa didn't want to put the wheels in motion. Maybe, just maybe, she didn't want out. Maybe she still loved Paul.

That single thought made Marissa stop in her tracks.

*She still loved Paul.*

It had to be the kava, she figured. Maybe it had relaxed her to the point that she was able to see things clearly. Marissa had been getting in her own way, letting her stubbornness rule her heart. *I'm going to call him*, she decided. *I'm going to call him and tell him that I still love him.*

She heard Paul's laugh and found herself smiling. She loved the sound of his laugh. She missed it.

*This stuff is good, she thought, and started to push her cart again. It's almost as if he's here with me.*

But when Marissa turned the corner of the canned goods aisle, her sense of peace disappeared and was replaced with disbelief.

It was Paul. With Angela and a boy who was obviously her son.

Marissa jerked her cart back, ducking behind a display of Spam luncheon meat, her heart beating furiously in her chest. They were no more than twenty feet away, but they hadn't seen her.

"What about pasta?" Angela was saying. She was casually dressed, her wavy red hair cascading down her back. Full makeup. "We could go to the refrigerated section and pick up some tortellini."

Paul shook his head. "No, no. Linguine and clams is my specialty. I have that recipe *down*." He began to look through the packages of linguine. Marissa knew he was searching for his favorite brand.

*Barilla*, Marissa thought silently as she watched Paul pull a package of Barilla linguine off the shelf in triumph. It was the only dish he knew how to make, but he was right—he had mastered it, and it was delicious. She couldn't remember the last time Paul had cooked linguine and clams for her. She felt a pang of envy as she watched Paul pull another package off the shelf.

A shopper came up behind Marissa and looked at her impatiently. What happened to birds singing and everyone smiling around her? Marissa began to fill her shopping cart with cans of Spam as she motioned for the shopper to go around her.

"You cook, too?" Angela was teasing. "I thought you were doing the bachelor thing. Pizza and hot dogs for dinner."

182

MIA KING

"That, too," Paul said with a grin. He gave Angela's son a nudge. What was his name? *Chris*. "I'll leave it to you: linguine and clams or pizza and hot dogs?"

"That's easy," Chris said with a grin. "Pizza and hot dogs."

Paul laughed. "My other specialty. Lucky for you, I happen to have all those things at home already."

"What about a bottle of red wine?" Angela asked coquettishly.

Paul put the linguine back on the shelf. "I'm shocked you even have to ask."

"I still want my pasta dinner," Angela poured.

Chris rolled his eyes, embarrassed by his mother. Paul just laughed. "Some other time," he said.

Marissa watched as they headed toward the exit, Angela teasing while Paul and Chris laughed.

Marissa felt panic welling up inside of her. What was this? Paul playing family with somebody else's family?

Not wanting to run into them in the parking lot, Marissa went to the checkout lane farthest away from the exit. There was a hard knot in her stomach. She squeezed her eyes shut, willing herself not to cry.

"What in goddess's name happened here?" Kavena stared dumbstruck at the four brown bags full of the Spam luncheon meat. She started pulling out the rectangular tins, one after another. "Regular Spam, Spam Lite, Turkey Spam, Low-Salt Spam, Spam and Garlic, Spam and Cheese, Spam with Bacon . . ."

Marissa's eyes were scall red from having cried all the way home. "I didn't know what happened until I got to the checkout lane," she sniffed. "And by then it was too late."

Jane peered into the bag. "You didn't get anything else?"

SWEET LIFE

183

Marissa shook her head.

Malia befretted a couple of the rectangular tins in her hands like weights. "My uncle would *love* you," she said.

"Is he single? Because it looks like I'm going to be back on the market soon." Wadded-up tissues were in a pile around Marissa's feet. She lowered her voice so the kids, who were playing in Pansy's room, couldn't hear. "You should have seen how happy he looked! It was like they were . . . a family. So where does that leave Pansy and me?"

Malia was the first one to speak, her voice low and apologetic. "Maybe you should just focus on doing what's best for you and Pansy."

"Why? Do you know something?" Marissa looked at her. Malia looked uncomfortable. Kavena gave her a nudge and Malia said reluctantly, "Well, um, she spends a lot of time in Paul's office, and they go out to lunch pretty regularly."

Jane frowned and quickly added, "But that doesn't necessarily mean anything . . ."

Both Kavena and Malia gave Jane a knowing look. "And he put your picture away," Malia said. She looked uncomfortable, clearly not enjoying this. "The one that he used to keep on his desk? It was there until a couple of weeks ago. It's not there anymore."

Marissa felt faint. He still kept her picture on her desk? She knew the one: it was the black-and-white picture of her from their wedding day. The photographer had snapped it when Marissa was gazing out the window, waiting until it was time to walk down the aisle toward Paul. He always said it was his favorite picture.

*Was.*

Kavena gave Malia another insistent nudge.

"Okay, okay!" Malia looked at Kavena, exasperated. "Stop pushing the pregnant lady!" She turned to Marissa, her



184

MIA KING

voice apologetic. "I did something. I was caught off guard, and I just responded without thinking. It must be from the hormones; I'm not normally like that."

"What?"

"She was hanging around my desk last week, making all sorts of innuendos about how she hoped you were holding up all right, and how it must be hard for you now that Paul has moved on. I just got so mad that I told her that you were doing just fine, and that you had made a lot of new friends . . ." Malia trailed off, looking suddenly nervous.

"Go on," Kavena said impatiently. Jane threw up her hands and turned to put the groceries away.

" . . . a lot of new friends," Malia repeated. "Like Tom." She was instantly apologetic. "I don't get into other people's business, you know that, but I'm pregnant and my hormones are all over the place . . ."

"Nice try," Kavena said, clucking her disapproval. "And, by the way, I *know* you're the one who's been eating all my macadamia nut bars."

"They're not for me, they're for the baby," Malia said. She turned her attention back to Marissa. "Anyway, I could tell it threw her off. I hope this hasn't caused a problem, Marissa." She looked worried.

Marissa looked away, a feeling of helplessness and finality overcoming her. "There was a much bigger problem before you said anything, Malia. And thanks for having my back. I appreciate it. I think at this point I just need to move forward." She gathered all of her used tissues and threw them in the trash.

They could hear Pansy and Isaiah walking down the hall into the living room, probably to play on the GameCube. Not only had Kavena allowed Isaiah to play on occasion, but she had also been caught playing a few rounds of Mario Kart when she thought no one was home.

SWEET LIFE

185

Jane nodded toward the living room. Whenever the kids were within earshot, the women had made it an unspoken policy not to talk about Paul. "Now, we need to start thinking dinner because I'm starving and looking at a helluva lot of Spam and not much else."

Kavena headed toward the back door. "I can't eat this stuff. You'd think by now they'd come up with a vegan Spam or something . . . I'm going to my place and grabbing some granola. I'll be right back."

"Suit yourself," Jane said mildly, choosing a few cans and walking them to the stove. "I know there's leftover rice and pasta, some black beans, tortilla chips, a couple of tomatoes and a bunch of green onions . . . this could be ugly, but I'm willing to give it a try."

"I thought you women were supposed to be gourmet cooks," Malia walked to the stove and held out her hand. "This is Spam 101. Move over and let me show you how it's done."

Jane handed Malia the spatula. "Be my guest." She settled into a chair next to Marissa and put her feet up. "So has anyone heard the latest news? The volcano is on the move again. All the tourists are coming into the Kava Java and talking about it! It's supposedly pretty spectacular. You don't have to hike very far in to see it."

Kavena returned to the kitchen, a large glass container under her arm. "That's what you need!" she exclaimed. She rummaged in the cupboards for bowls. "A trip to see Madame Pele. Obviously she hasn't thrown you back to the mainland yet, so it's probably relatively safe for you to go."

"I don't know . . ." Marissa thought back with a lurching stomach to the helicopter ride. "Maybe. But it's not like she's welcomed me with open arms, either."

Kavena raised an eyebrow. "Pele doesn't play hostess, Marissa. But if she didn't like you, you'd know. Trust me."

186

MIA KING

Half an hour later, Malia placed a steaming platter on the table in front of the women. "Spambalaya. With my compliments."

Jane served herself and Pansy while Isaiah made a face at the bowl of granola in front of him. "Sorry, honey," Jane told him as he looked longingly at the Spambalaya.

"Look, Isaiah, yum!" Kavena took a spoonful of her granola and tried to look gleeful. "Delicious!"

Isaiah wasn't fooled until Pansy momentarily pushed her dinner aside, reached for the granola, and began eating a bowl herself. This seemed to do the trick and Isaiah quickly followed suit.

Marissa took a bite of the Spambalaya and was surprised by how good it tasted. She'd been so upset at seeing Paul with Angela that she hadn't had anything to eat since leaving the house that morning.

Jane was chewing her food thoughtfully "Shoot, I have to admit it, but this stuff's pretty good."

Malia sat down and helped herself to a small serving of Spambalaya. "Oh, I've forgotten how good this is," she murmured with a sigh. She polished it off and then reluctantly reached for the jar of Kavena's granola. "I need the fiber," she said, then added hesitatingly, "It's for the baby."

"That's what we all say," Kavena said, digging her spoon into her granola with a heavy sigh. "Motherhood's a blessing, but the constipation sucks."

A peel of laughter broke out around the table. Marissa looked at the women, her heart swelling in gratitude for her new friends. To have so much friendship and joy under one roof was a blessing—Marissa knew that, and she could actually feel it in her body. For the first time in a long time she felt genuinely happy.

It was time to stop living in the past and start enjoying the present, maybe even start focusing on her future. But

SWEET LIFE

187

moving forward was going to be difficult if she kept putting her energy into fighting with Paul. He had moved on—it was time she did as well. Maybe they would be one of those couples that got along better as friends.

The table erupted in laughter again, and Marissa made a mental note to call the divorce lawyer in the morning. She wanted to get the paperwork going so she could start living again.