

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

VOLUNTARY TERMINATION



I rolled down my window, giving the warm Waikiki air permission to sweep across my lap, wiping away any trace of cigarette smoke from the cab's back seat. As the breeze tickled my face, I riffled through my duffle bag.

Shoes: check. Makeup: check.

My fingers grazed the small of my back.

G-string: check.

We stopped at a light just four blocks from the club, and I took in the view. The sun was already tucked into bed, and the blue ocean lulled. The sky above the horizon was cloaked in hues of lavender and tangerine. The stoplight turned green, and we continued up the street, then turned down a narrow, unpaved driveway and stopped in front of the club.

I could tell the top girls were working. I didn't mind sharing the stage with centerfolds; it made me feel like one in a way. The room was packed, but I made my way up to the bar. I threw down a five and ordered my usual vodka and cranberry.

“Laaaaadies and gentlemen, give it up for Niki, Donna, and Amberrrrrr!”

The crowd was cheering. I opened the dressing room door with one hand, balancing my drink and bag with the other. I managed to find a seat next to the mirror and settled in, trying to tune out the other girls as I pulled out my makeup case.

I squeezed the flesh-colored liquid on my finger, wiping my cheeks slowly. Spackle—to cover every scar. My skin was uneven like melted wax, always haunting me with memories of name-calling and humiliation. After filling every crevice, I let out a sigh of acceptance and validation. I’ll show them.

“All right, all right, all right! Give it up!”

The door opened, and another dancer arrived. She was young. A new girl. Someone I’d never seen before. We surveyed each other, and she made her way past me.

I shut my eyes. I saw Michelle, with her scabbed arms and caked-on makeup, talking about her daughter while taking a drag from a cigarette. I saw Cassandra and the look on her face when I told her, her boyfriend had made a pass at me. I saw the wrinkled pixie dancer who also worked as a fortune teller by day. I heard Kami yelling at a customer who tried to touch her and smelled Loretta, the pot-smoking beauty who came to town twice a year. Then there’s Billie and Billy, the male and female stripper couple who liked to party and swing. Finally, I saw Robert, who used me and my home for sex and a place to crash.

The heavy base of the next song vibrated the walls, and my eyes opened to my reflection in the mirror. I saw myself, a twenty-eight-year-old stripper. Studying my eyes, I discovered that what used to be pools of blue were now dull shades of gray. Nothing scared me more than knowing I was the architect of my own

demise. What was once a fantasy of fame and fortune became a harsh reminder of reputation and endurance.

Toto, I don't think we're in our Dysfunctional Childhood anymore.

Perhaps seeing the new girl made me realize I wasn't nineteen now. Nearly a decade in the making, my career as a stripper felt weathered. I wanted to live a normal life. I didn't know what that meant exactly, but it suddenly hit me: I wouldn't find it on a stage. I spoke softly to the girl in the mirror with the tired, gray eyes: "I think you're done here."

I took another sip from my drink and stood up. I brushed past the new girl. I wanted to tell her to save her money and not get caught up in the nightlife, but instead, I said, "Have a good night," and kept walking.

My head floating in a sea of uncertainty, I made my way through the crowd. I pulled open the red velvet curtains at the front door and saw the sky was now a deep purple.

I always looked at sunsets as beginnings, the beginning of my shift and a night out. But that early evening sky marked the opposite—an end to a life I no longer wanted or needed. Tomorrow would be a new day.