

## CHAPTER 1

### December, Present Day

I charged into the Outreach Hostel, my adrenaline jacked up from the hectic ride after the sit-in at the university. My cell phone buzzed in my pocket. It had to be Reggie, ready to chew me out. I shrugged out of my wet raincoat and scanned the foyer for her. She wasn't waiting with a sledgehammer. Lucky me. *The guys in the art therapy class need normalcy, Chase*, she had said on more than one occasion. Like I didn't know. Like I hadn't been the poster boy for post-traumatic stress disorder once upon a time, not that it was ever documented. *You're their art teacher, the adult*. Did she care that I wasn't a trained therapist? Not on a bet. Because art therapy had helped me, she believed that I, a history professor and former Navy lieutenant, was gifted enough to teach the veterans at the hostel how to conquer what ate them up inside. I do my darnedest every Saturday, but face it, I am adequate at best. No one at the de Young Museum is pining for my artwork.

My cell phone rang again. *Pleading*. I ignored it while racing down the hall to the art therapy room, catching my reflection in a window as I passed. Yes, I looked ragtag. Yes, I had bags under my eyes thanks to an all-nighter grading term papers. Yes, my forehead was pinched. But at least my hair was finger-combed and my tie was straight. Reggie would have to take me as I am. If I hadn't had yet another run-in with the dean of students this afternoon, maybe I would look decent. How was the guy always able to track me down as I was leaving campus? Did he have built-in sonar? What was it about my political views that irked him? Okay, sure, I was a left of his right, but c'mon.

I darted into the art therapy room and drew to a halt, shoulders squared, chin up. The space was a hollowed-out hull. No amenities; all white and sparse. Reggie claimed that in order to clear out the mind, the environment needed to be clutter-free. She hadn't earned a therapist's license, but long story short, she would give her life for veterans. A board spanned the wall on the far side of the room—the *teaching wall*. Sheets of white paper were pinned to the board. Easels were set with brushes, paints, and a tin can filled with water.

Eight veterans, wearing white smocks over various stages of dress, were sitting on chairs set in a semi-circle. If they didn't stay seated, Reggie Ramirez—Regina the Queen—a Latina to the vets—wouldn't let them paint.

A thickset guy who sneaked sweets from the hostel's kitchen spotted me and raised his hand. He eyed Reggie, who was leaning against the rear wall, cascades of brown curly hair pulled forward over her shoulders, muscular arms folded across her ample chest. She nodded. The guy proceeded. "Why are you late, Blue Eyes?"

"A day late and a dollar short," a longhaired veteran joked. "Get it? His last name is Day. He's a *day* late."

The other vets sniggered. I grinned. I had been working with them for nearly three years. They were on the mend, which did my heart proud.

"Ahem," Reggie said, her mouth twitching at the corners as she tried to maintain her stern demeanor. "Welcome, Chase. Let's get started." No mention of my tardiness. No ribbing about my thirty-six-year-old body looking worse for wear. She would get me alone later and trash me. Gee, I couldn't wait.

I hung my coat on a rack and set my briefcase on the floor. At the same time, my cell phone pinged. Whoever had been hounding me before had left a voicemail. Reggie gave me the

evil eye. I ignored the call. “Where’s Kimo?” I donned a smock. The scent of bleach clung to the fabric. “He left the campus before I did.”

Reggie smirked. “Lost, no doubt.”

“He doesn’t get lost.”

“I’m here, bro.” Kimo Cho strode in and hung his umbrella on the rack. Then he set his briefcase on an empty chair and loosened his tie. He stood a little over six feet, same as me, but there the comparison ended. He was as brawny as a Hawaiian warrior god; I had a leaner athletic build. His hair was black; mine, a dusty brown. “A student consultation ran long.”

“A likely story,” Reggie said.

“Can it, beautiful. I’m here out of the goodness of my heart.” *Translation*—my best friend had a thing for Reggie something fierce, and he had come to class to try, yet again, to woo her with his magnanimous spirit. Not every volunteer is altruistic. He took up the duty of handing out paintbrushes. “Hey, Chase, Christmas Eve dinner. You up for it? My pretty cousin will be there.”

“No.”

“Are you going to spend it alone again?”

“Let’s talk later.” Now wasn’t the time. Never was better. Ever since I was five, when my mom died on Christmas, I’d hated everything about the holiday. People laughing in the malls. Carolers. TV specials. My nightmares were plagued with creepy animated reindeer and exploding ornaments. Art therapy—it helps.

“You’ve been date-less how long, Chase?” a vet asked.

“Long,” Kimo said, answering for me while stretching out his arms to demonstrate. He knew me better than anyone. We went to high school and college together. We even joined the Navy via Naval Reserves Officer Training Corps, aka NROTC, at the same time. Neither of us considered the Navy a calling—we wanted to *see the world*—but our *lead or be led* attitudes took us far. Both of us went on to become officers. My stint in the Navy made me take war seriously. I needed to understand who and why. Subsequently, I became an expert in the field. Kimo liked what I had become, so after he was asked to leave the Navy—career would have been in his cards if he could’ve reigned in his temper—he went to grad school, became a history professor, and lo and behold, wound up at Weyford University, like me.

My cell phone pinged again. I picked up a paintbrush and dipped it in red paint. “Okay, fellas, let’s get that junk inside our damaged skulls on the canvas today.” I made a bold diagonal swoosh on the white paper taped to the teaching board.

The veteran students copied the move.

“Paint your heart,” I said. “If it’s family you’re thinking about, put them on the paper. If you’re feeling like you can’t talk to someone, paint his mouth closed. Remember, as Napoleon Hill said, ‘Man alone has the power to transform his thoughts into physical reality.’” During high school, at my grandmother’s insistence, I had taken therapeutic art classes designed for orphaned kids. The therapist, like my grandmother, had loved spouting inspirational quotes. Hundreds of them were emblazoned in my brain. Do they help? Sometimes.

A frail veteran raised his hand. “My father doesn’t recognize me, Chase. How do I paint that?”

“Make him blind,” a buddy shouted.

I made another swipe on my canvas and thought of my own father. I had never met him. Would I recognize him if I ran into him? Did I care? I used to.

Kimo joined me and glanced over his shoulder to see if Reggie was gazing at his Grade A rear end. She wasn't; she had left the room. I mouthed: *Loser*. He smirked then said, "How are you doing since the run-in with the dean?"

"Don't get me started." Weyford, which wasn't far from Stanford University, used to pride itself on offering a cutting-edge education. The dean's policies were: *Restrict fun* and *Enforce regimen*.

"I heard he had a heart attack as he was dressing you down. I also heard you saved him by using good old mouth-to-mouth."

"Nasty rumors. No heart attack. No mouth-to-mouth. Just a spirited faceoff. Though if I'd had to revive him, I would have." At least I'd like to believe I would have.

"Ooh-rah." Kimo toured the room, freshening paint water and switching out paintbrushes.

When the art therapy class ended, and before Kimo left in search of Reggie, he and I made plans for the weekend. If he didn't score with her—and he wouldn't—we would hang out, drink beer, and play basketball or video games. In the past, both of us had roamed bars; both had engaged in mindless sex with faceless beauties. We didn't choose to any longer. When the time was right, we would find the women of our dreams. Maybe. I had demons; he was picky.

On the drive home, my cell phone rang again. I hadn't listened to the voicemail left earlier. I inspected the readout: Blocked. Not Reggie or Kimo or the dean of students. I answered anyway. "Hello."

"Choochie?" a woman whispered.

My lungs constricted. The air around me turned thick. She was dead. She had died in the fire. And yet I knew the distinctive rasp of my mother's voice as well as my own. She was the only person who had ever called me *Choochie*—her little choo choo train.

"Come to the trailer. Quick. I need—"

The connection clicked off.

I stabbed Redial. No answer.

