

Chapter 1

South Pacific island of Alofa, two days sail northeast of Sydney, Australia 1888

Kira's heart leapt to her throat as the blare of the lookout's conch horn shattered the tranquil morning. Startled blue and red lorries sprang, squawking from the palm trees, their wings thrumming the air as they fled. Macaque monkeys jumped limb to limb, screeching and chattering from their jungle perches. Another blast of the trumpet sent even the fiddler crabs on the beach scurrying for the safety of their holes.

She glanced to the cliff overhead, dropped her fishing net, and rushed up the sandy path toward the island's observation post. The rest of the villagers would be taking cover until the men determined the extent of the threat. With her pulse pounding and her feet working to find traction on the steep, winding grade, images of pirates raiding the village flashed through her mind. The horror of women and children screaming while their men fought to protect them with only spears and clubs sent the chill of danger up her spine.

When she reached the large flat rock high above the harbor, she found the stocky form of Kupe, the tribal chief's son, standing with hands on hips, his black Polynesian eyes fixed on the bay. Wearing only a pair of worn, light-colored pants, extending mid-calf and a cloth headband to hold back his wiry dark hair, he remained still.

"What is it, Kupe?"

"Ah big ship is com'n in tee harbor," he answered without turning.

"A large ship is coming into the harbor," she corrected. She squinted into the morning glare of the sun. "Are they pirates?"

She studied the movements of the enormous shiny wood boat with three tall masts. Two wide painted stripes, one cream at the waterline and one black just above, encircled the ship. A complicated system of shroud rigging hung like webbing from the cross spars down to the deck rails.

"I do not think so. Ship is too big," answered Kupe. "Tey have dropped their sails. Tey come in slow. Not hurry."

She lifted her hand to shade her eyes. Men lined the ship's bow, all clothed in the same white bell bottom pants and loose-fitting gray striped shirts. Peering into the clear water, they tried to determine the depth of the harbor.

"They fly the Australian flag and take their time. Pirates not tat careful."

Kira spotted the dark blue fabric flapping in the breeze above the quarterdeck; the British Southern Cross embroidered in the upper left corner. Her heart sank. "If they're who I think they are, they might as well be pirates. In fact, it would probably be better if they were."

Kupe turned his head and gave her his big brother-like stare. She and Kupe were not related, in fact, Kira was originally from Australia. Still they shared the same competitive bond of siblings. "What are you talk'n about, Kira?"

"I'm afraid it's one of those merchant ships from Sydney. They've come to trade."

"Tat would be good news. Tey have come to trade goods for our crops."

She fought the sour feeling in the pit of her stomach. "If we let them, they will take a lot more than we have to give."

Kupe's eyes narrowed. "Our crops are plentiful. There is more than enough to trade."

"You don't understand. We have to be careful. Most of these merchants are selfish and greedy. They'll take advantage of our people."

The corner of his mouth turned up in the hint of a smile. "Tey will not be that bad."

"They will be, if we let them. What's even worse, they think nothing of tramping our fields while they're gathering the fruit, leaving them scarred."

He shook his head. "You always think tee worst."

She glared sideways. "I know what I'm talking about. My parents warned me of these kinds of people. I've seen for myself what they have done. I was young, but I saw the damage they cause."

He turned his gaze back to the ship. "We can take care of ourselves."

Kira grabbed him by the shoulders and turned him forcing him to look her in the eyes. "Listen to me. If this were a ship of raiders, I know our men would protect us. But this is different. Worst of all, the more merchants who find out about us, the more outsiders will come. Our home will never be the same and we have nowhere else to go."

He shrugged free of her grasp. His large flat nostrils flared. "You make no sense. Tradors have come here before. Our people have pleasure in their visits. It has been a long time since tee last merchants came."

She dropped her arms. "It hasn't been long enough."

Glancing down, Kupe held out his hands. "Look at my pants. Tat is how long it has been. I hope tey brought new ones."

Though he had a strong build, his round brownish-tan belly threatened to burst the tattered breeches. Everything about Kupe was big; his head, body, even legs. They matched his huge heart and his consuming desire to provide for his people. Kupe being the future ruler of the tribe, Kira only feared for his overtrusting nature and inability to perceive a disguised threat.

Looking at his worn pants, she would have laughed if she weren't so angry. "You just don't see the danger."

Kupe set his jaw. "Enough, as long as the outsiders show us tey mean no harm, tey will be treated as guests. We will welcome them."

"But--"

"I said enough. We must call off the warning and greet our visitors before I tell Chief Ariki they have come. He will want to prepare to meet their leadors."

She smirked. "Your father is also too trusting of strangers."

Kupe shook his head again. "Our people had visitors long before you came... good and bad. You should have more faith in people." He turned down the path toward the harbor beach, then stopped and looked over his shoulder. "Are you com'n?"

She picked up a stone and with a loud grunt, hurled it over the cliff. "Yes, I'm coming."
