



GINA SANTORO MYSTERIES

UNKNOWN VICTIM

KAY HADASHI

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Cover design by: Author
Original cover image by: RLSather at selfpubbookcovers.com

Business and certain location names are fictitious, as are all characters in this story. To the author's knowledge, there is no Bunzo's Bar or Pinoy Boy's market, nor is there a Tanizawa Estate or churches mentioned in the story. Place and street names are real, in both Honolulu and Cleveland. That said, this is not a travelogue, but a fictional murder mystery, and should be read and enjoyed as such.

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Prologue

Rookie patrol officer Gina Santoro rubbed her chin for the fourth time since the excitement of their last call. She and her field training officer had an hour to go on their shift, and it had been a wild one. It had started with a DUI arrest of an old high school classmate. That was followed by breaking up a bar fight, where Gina took a right cross to her chin. Then there had been the liquor store holdup. More time had been spent in booking their arrests and on paperwork than they had in patrolling streets. As far as she was concerned, all she had to do was patrol a few miles of Cleveland's Little Italy, issue a traffic citation, and call an end to the frosty night.

Cheerful red and green Christmas lights strung along eaves of older duplexes reflected off the wet pavement as she drove. Turning off the residential street onto a large but quiet boulevard, she couldn't help but notice the same displays she'd seen all her life: frozen snowmen in parking lots, Santa decorations in store windows, and the aging Nativity scene arranged at the park. This year, like in too many recent years, there were a few homeless people at the park in their tents and under tarps, hiding from the early winter cold. Somehow, they'd have to find a way of staying warm, just like Mary, Joseph, and Jesus had to in their tin metal and hay bale manger that shared the park with them. When a yawn came, she let it loose, and then gave her field training officer a glance.

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Sergeant Butch Morrison said. He watched the driver of the car next to them while they waited for the signal to change. "See anything unusual about this character next to us?"

Gina knew better than to look directly at the guy, but had noticed his nervous activity when she brought the squad car to a stop. "Drumming his thumbs on the steering wheel a mile a minute, and there's no music playing."

"Right. Good. Think he's stoned?"

"I think the party started about twenty minutes ago. Want to do a sobriety stop?" Gina asked.

"Let's pace him for a block or two. If he weaves, we'll light him up."

The red traffic signal turned green, and Gina let the driver in the other car go through the intersection first. She noticed him checking his mirrors frequently as she paced behind him for the first block. It was beginning to look like another DUI bust would end their night.

“Haven’t seen you at Smitty’s bar lately, Santoro. I know your father would like to see you there after shift,” Butch said.

Gina couldn’t help but smile at the thought of her field trainer watching over her personal life. As an old friend on the force with her father, she’d known Butch like an uncle all of her life. “When I see him at Mass, he’ll see me at Smitty’s.”

“To a veteran cop like your father, spending an hour after work with the guys is the same as going to Mass.” Butch used their on-board computer to check the driver’s plate for wants and warrants, and waited for results. “Other than Smitty’s, I’ve never known your father to be a religious man.”

“Either have I,” Gina muttered. “Do I look like one of the guys to you?”

He laughed. “In your uniform you do, yeah.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

The wet streets were beginning to freeze into thin sheens of ice, making steering tricky. Gina noticed the nervous driver’s tires kiss the broken line on the pavement for the second time. It was time to pull him over. That’s when a dispatch call came over the radio for a convenience store holdup in another precinct. “Want me to pull this guy over or should we go back up that 211?”

“Stick with this guy. That call was on the other side of town. A couple other squads will be closer.”

“Any wants on his plate?” Gina asked when they got to the third block of following the nervous driver. She closed to within two car lengths behind, just to let the guy know he was being followed.

“This old computer is worthless. Better call it in,” Butch told her.

While calls from dispatchers came across the radio about the robbery across town, she called in the plate. “Wants and warrants for late model silver Lexus, Pennsylvania vanity plate *I-M-R-I-C-H*.”

After a couple of minutes passed, half of which was while both cars waited at red lights, Gina looked across past her partner’s broad chest to see what the other driver was doing. The rapid thumb drumming had stopped, but he was leaning forward and stiffly looking out the windshield. It was

almost as if he was trying to pretend everything was fine. It was the oldest trick in the book, to pretend to look innocent when a cop was right next to you. It never worked.

Even though Gina had graduated from the police academy, and was currently training with her Field Training Officer on the street, half of everything she'd learned about police work had come from the real law and order mentor in her life, her Cleveland Police Detective father. How to guess what someone might be thinking from the expression on their face, what sort of weapon might be hidden in their clothes, reading body language, basic interrogation techniques, and behaviors while driving were all drummed into her and her sister while growing up. In her thinking, she'd already had twenty years of field training, just not in uniform.

"If we follow this guy much farther, we'll have to turn him over to Akron PD," she said, growing tired of their simple pursuit.

"This thing never has worked." Butch poked his finger on the screen of the on-board computer several times. "Dispatch will get back to us before this thing ever comes to life."

Gina tapped the brakes when she was cut off by the other driver making a sudden lane change without using a turn signal.

"Okay, that's a real, live traffic violation," she said.

"Let's light him up." Butch leaned forward and flipped on the lights. Hitting a siren switch, he gave a couple of short whooping blasts. "Offer Christmas Eve greetings from the mayor of our fine town."

One thing that Gina had come to enjoy during her first month of patrolling the streets, it was using the loud speaker to tell a driver to pull over. Grabbing the mike, she hit the switch and prepared to use her commanding tone of voice.

Beating her to it was their radio coming to life with a new call from dispatch. It wasn't about the plates on the Lexus, but announcing another emergency.

"Unit Eight-Seven, Unit Eight-Seven. Be advised. Prowler reported at Saint Benedictine Church, Fairview and Murray Hill Road," the nasally female voice said.

Gina grabbed the dashboard mike to respond. "Ten-four the prowler. Unit Eight-Seven, out." When Butch turned off the lights, she asked him, "Now what should we do?"

“What’s priority? Prowler at a church or a dude that can’t drive in a straight line?”

“Focus on the more serious crime. That said, the stoned dude might cause an accident, but the prowler might be a late-night jogger.”

“Take your pick,” he said.

“Unit Eight-Seven, Unit Eight-Seven. Please respond. Break in at Saint Benedictine Church, rear door. Meet the priest in the parking lot. Break in at Saint Benedictine, Fairview and Murray Hill. Please respond. Code Two.”

“Forget this guy. Let Akron PD deal with him,” Gina said. She made a sudden U-turn with the squad car. Once she had the squad car straightened out and had her foot pressing on the gas pedal, she turned on her collar mike to respond to the emergency call. “Unit Eight-Seven enroute, Code Two. ETA, five minutes.”

While she made the call, Butch had turned on the emergency lights. “Cross traffic coming, hit the horn.”

Gina blared the horn as she sped through intersections. She knew these streets like the back of her hand, having lived her entire life in Cleveland’s Little Italy. As far as her mother was concerned, all routes led to St. Benedictine Catholic Church, Sundays or otherwise. With some clever maneuvering, Gina got to her family church in record time. Instead of going straight to the back parking lot where the priest was waiting for them, they took a slow lap around the block looking for anyone dressed in dark clothes and might be carrying something stolen. While they watched, their flashing emergency lights reflected off surrounding houses and buildings. The wet street in front of them glowed like a light show.

“See anything?” she asked, shining a spotlight between houses as they turned back to the church.

“Nothing,” Butch said. “Not even lights on in windows. These guys go to bed early around here.”

“Careful what you say about my old stomping grounds.” She pulled the squad car into the church parking lot, leaving the lights on. “See Father Romano?”

“Not him, but I see a door hanging open. Call it in. I’ll take a look.”

Butch left Gina in the car to call in the open door at the side of the church and request backup to their location. Once she finished the call, she got her flashlight and unclasped her holster.

When she got out of the squad car, the bitter cold of the winter night air hit her face and heavy steam came with each exhale. She knew from life experience that a frigid front was coming from the lake, bringing its famous 'lake effect' snow with it. For the next few days, crime committed in public would be at a yearly low, but responding to calls would be difficult on icy streets. As much as she had enjoyed snowy days as a kid, she hated going on patrol in hard driving conditions.

In her left hand, Gina held the flashlight over her shoulder aiming it forward, and kept her right hand on her sidearm. Shining the strong beam of light in front of her, she approached the rear door from an angle, remaining in shadows and near cover. It was becoming a habit, to control her breathing in tense situations, but what she couldn't control was her escalating heart rate. She also couldn't control the actions of her partner, who had disappeared.

"Sergeant!"

She got no response. The cloud of vapor that had come from her lungs hung in the air. A few snowflakes began to flutter in the ambient light from the squad car's headlights. Her hands were already getting cold, her fingers stiff, and she wished she'd taken a moment to put on gloves. As it was, there was still a smear of blood on one left over from the earlier bar fight. Fleeting thoughts of getting extra gloves and a knit beanie went through her mind as she approached the open door.

All she could guess was that Butch had either gone into the church through the open door, or had chased after someone. He would've yelled to her if he was in foot pursuit, but maybe she hadn't heard him. It wasn't protocol to enter a building without your partner, so she went to the corner of the building. Flashing her strong beam across the area, she saw nothing. No one running, no shapes, no movement at all, only the twinkle of lights on an outdoor Christmas tree near the door of the priest's residence and fluttering snowflakes. As far as she could tell, she'd been left alone.

Gina wanted to mutter her favorite Italian curse word, but didn't dare while on church grounds.

She knew the church well, having been a member of the small parish since birth. Father Romano had been the priest there all her life, the one who had baptized her twenty-five years before. According to the dispatcher, he'd been the one who had phoned in the break-in at the church. But where was he? Or her mentor, Butch?

Gina returned to the rear of the building where the door still hung open. She shined her light inside the dark building. Neither Butch nor the priest were anywhere to be found. She drew her sidearm. Holding that in one hand, she took a position next to the doorway.

“Sergeant! You in there?”

No one answered, but there was noise inside the church. She heard a few footsteps, followed by more noise.

“Father Romano? Is that you in there?”

Still no answer, but there was more noise, followed by more footsteps. This time, they were rushing.

Gina ducked through the doorway and raised her pistol. Aiming her flashlight in the same direction, she saw a figure running straight for her.

“Halt!” she commanded.

The figure got close, almost running straight into her. “Just me, Santoro,” Butch said as he raced by. “Where’s back up?”

“On their way!” Confused with what was going on, she called after him as he got into the squad car. “What’s going on?”

“Calling bomb squad.”

“What?”

“Found a device.”

“Where?” she asked once she was at the car. Snow was already collecting on the cold metallic surface, and flakes were gluing to the surface of the car. She listened as he made the call for the bomb squad.

“On the altar,” he told her.

“A bomb? How do you know?” she asked.

“I’m not Catholic, so I don’t know how this stuff works. Can you think of any reason for a package wrapped in newspaper and taped together with duct tape to be on an altar in a Catholic Church at this time of night?”

“None at all. How do we handle this?” she asked.

“Perp’s long gone, if he had any sense. We need to find the priest that called this in. Something about him not waiting for us bothers me. What’s his name again?”

“Father Romano.”

“Where does he live?”

“His rectory is on the other side of the parking lot.” She pointed with the beam from her flashlight. “The front door is just past that Christmas tree.”

“I’ll go there. You keep this area secure. No one, and I mean no one goes in the church until bomb squad gets here. Understand?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“And stay away from that door.”

When Gina took a position with their squad car between her and the open door, he nodded and ran off into the dark in the direction of the priest’s residence.

Hearing sirens in the distance, help was coming as Gina continued to scan the area for anyone that might be hiding. When she heard noise come from inside the church again, she had to make a decision. Footsteps meant it was human, and she needed to warn whomever it was to get out.

Staying a few feet back from the door, she listened again to more footsteps. It couldn’t be the perp; why would someone stick around to meddle with a bomb that might go off at any minute?

“Wait,” she whispered. “Maybe he’s still setting it up? Or a second one?”

She ran to the outside of the church. Leaning her head back against the brick wall, Gina had a decision to make. If she could interrupt the perp from arming the bomb, she could save the bomb squad some work, and maybe even save the building. But she could be too late, that the bomb was already armed. Any perpetrator of a crime as serious as bomb placement would surely be armed.

She took a few steps away from the door and got her cell phone out. She called Butch, breaking a rule he had with her.

“Where are you?”

“Searching the house. No one’s here. Why?”

“Someone’s still inside the church. I can hear footsteps,” she said, barely louder than a breath.

“Don’t go in, Santoro. Keep the exterior secure like I told you!”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

Gina took her position behind the squad car again, trying not to care who it was inside the building. But if it was the perp, and he came running out, she’d command him to stop. Her biggest decision right then was if she would leave her post and give chase of him. She looked back toward the street that was turning white with snow.

“Where’s back up?”

Gina took long, slow deep breaths to keep from hyperventilating and to settle her mind. Focusing on the back door of the church, she kept her pistol tight in her grip. Listening to anything she might be able to hear and make sense of inside the church, she heard more footsteps hurrying in her direction. When those steps got close to the door, she took one last deep breath, ready to yell.

When a man dressed in loose black clothing and a hoody ran out, she shouted for him to halt.

“Stop where you are! This is the police!”

When he kept going, she took after him, still shouting for him to stop. Somehow, her flashlight fell from her grip, clattering to the ground.

Two more police cars skidded to stops in the parking lot. Her back up had finally arrived, but she couldn't stop to tell them what was happening, she was that close to tackling the perp.

Just as she was about to lunge, she saw something shiny and gray in his hand. She couldn't risk grappling with an armed man. When he ducked into a dark corner, she took cover behind a telephone pole. That's when she yelled to the responding officers where she was and what was going on.

“Get bomb squad here now!” she yelled. “And stay out of the church! The bomb's on the altar!”

“Santoro, where's your partner?” an officer called back.

“Looking for Father Romano! The priest called this in and we can't find him!”

“What're you doing over there?”

“I've got the perp cornered! But I can't see him. I need a pair of eyes and some light over here!”

While two pairs of footsteps ran in her direction across the church's empty parking lot, Gina spotted the man in the dark. All his clothes were dark, and something was wrapped around his head to hide his face. She raised her pistol and aimed it in his direction.

“This is the police. I can see you! Raise your hands so I can see them!”

The man's hands slowly rose in the air, but he kept the pistol clutched in both hands.

“Drop the gun!” she commanded. “Turn around! Show me your face!”

When he turned, he made the mistake of lowering his hands, a threat if there ever was one.

“Drop your weapon! Drop your weapon or I will shoot!”

There was a flash and a gunshot cracked through the air. In only a split second, she aimed and fired.

It took an hour before things were making sense at the church. The bomb squad had already left the scene, as had the responding units that Gina had called for. It had turned out that they were delayed because a city truck out sanding the streets in one direction and a snowplow going in the other direction blocked their progress. While Butch continued to explain to their field supervisor what had happened, Gina did her best to apologize to the priest.

Already at the scene was a truck from the city, using a cherry picker lift to repair a transformer on the telephone pole,

“You have no idea how sorry I am Father Romano, but you must understand you should’ve stopped running when I commanded you to. Why were you running, anyway?”

“Too cold to walk, so I ran back to the rectory.” He smiled sheepishly in the dim light of the parking lot as he held the small package in his hand. “I wanted to get to my phone and call the police, you let you know you didn’t need to come.”

“But I was yelling at you from just a few feet away, Father.”

He tapped a fingertip on an ear. “Can’t hear a thing without my hearing aids. I’d already taken them out for the night. I didn’t hear anything until that transformer blew. I wish they’d fix that proper, because every time there’s a snow storm, it blows like that.”

Gina figured that was the flash and crack of noise that she responded to, what made her fire her weapon. “Okay, why did you call for the police? Tell me about that again.”

“I came out for one last smoke. Bad habit. Don’t start.”

“Too late,” she said. “Tell me about finding the open door.”

“Seeing it open, I called for the police. I was sure I’d locked everything and double-checked like I always do. When I went to take a look, I saw that it had been jimmied. Going inside, I bumped into a man just leaving.”

“You should’ve waited for the police. Who was the man?”

“Just a homeless fellow that comes for a meal occasionally. Perfectly harmless. He’d come into some money and wanted to repay the church’s hospitality by leaving a gift on the altar.” He held up the small package that

had caused so much trouble. The duct tape on it made it reflect light, and that's what Gina had thought was a gun during her foot chase. "This is supposed to be his Christmas gift to our Lord."

Butch and the field supervisor had joined Gina and the priest.

"We better take a look and see what's inside," Butch said.

The priest tore the simple wrapping and opened a small box. Inside was an old-fashioned bottle opener. The three men chuckled, but Gina was still feeling sick over almost shooting Father Romano.

"I heard something about a damaged statue?" Sergeant Williams, their shift supervisor, said.

Father Romano led the way to the small garden courtyard where a crime scene technician was just finding the bullet that Gina had fired. She barely noticed that, but instead looked at the shattered pieces of a statue on the ground. With barely any warning, her subtle sense of nausea turned into a real life event into the flowerbed that surrounded the marble statue of the Virgin Mary.

Chapter One

Gina compared the sizes of her two suitcases with the mound of stuff that needed to be packed into them, and wondered how it was all going to fit. Beginning with the most important items, clothing, she began to pack.

Her sister Ana sat on the edge of the bed to watch. “Did you talk to Joey?”

“Last night.”

“You really broke up with him?”

“Not much choice. I’ll be gone for a year. I couldn’t bring him with me, and I couldn’t pass on the job offer,” Gina said.

“He didn’t want to go to Hawaii with you?”

Gina considered where to put her tennis racket, on the top or bottom of the suitcase. “He doesn’t want to quit his job.”

“Which job?” Ana giggled. “Weekends at the car wash, or his big construction job? Because nobody’s getting their car washed in Cleveland in December, and I haven’t seen many houses being built lately.”

“As soon as his uncle gets a construction contract, Joey will be on the crew.”

“Oh, yeah,” Ana said sarcastically. “Maldonado Construction. There’s a dynamo of Little Italy business.”

“Lay off Joey, okay? He had a hard time with breaking up.”

“Not like Dad would’ve let you marry him.” Ana continued to watch Gina pack her bags. “I still don’t see why you’re moving so far away, Gigi.”

“Because they were the only place wanting to hire me.”

“Just come back to the force. You know you want to.”

“Really?” Gina began taking things back out of the suitcase again. “You know what I want better than I do?”

“No, I’m just saying you’re not a gardener. You belong on the police force.”

“I’m not a gardener, I’m a fully educated and trained landscape horticulturist, and have the certificate to prove it. It took me two years of study and hard work to get that certificate. I’m putting it to good use, one way or another,” Gina said, packing books at the bottom of her suitcases.

“I’ve been over this a hundred times at least, with you, with Mom, and with Dad. I’m not a cop anymore, and I don’t want to be a cop. The family has you as the next generation of police officer in our family since the birth of God. We don’t need me, on the force or in Cleveland.”

“Don’t talk like that. Of course we need you!”

“You still don’t understand. I need to get out of Cleveland more than you guys need me to stay here.” Gina stopped packing and sat next to her younger sister. Ana was already dressed in her police uniform, ready to go to work that day as a rookie officer in training. “Look, no one wants to hire me here. The name Gina Santoro has a bad rep attached to it these days. I can’t even get jobs mowing lawns, much less working at the arboretum or a nursery.”

“Because it’s December, it’s twenty degrees, and lawns are frozen stiff. Better idea is to buy a snow blower and clean the sidewalks.” Ana’s smile was forced, at best. “Sorry, didn’t mean it to sound that way.”

“In Hawaii, there’s a year-round growing season. They need people like me.”

“Okay, tell me about the job one more time. It’s more than mowing lawns, right?”

Gina got the website brochure she’d printed and handed it over. “The place is known as the Tanizawa Estate. It’s about a hundred years old, but nobody has lived on it in a long time. Now they want to open the old estate to the public as botanical display gardens. It’s close to some of the famous tourist spots in Honolulu and they’re hoping the place becomes an attraction.”

“Tanizawa. That’s Japanese, isn’t it?”

“That’s the name of the family that owns the land. I looked up the word. Apparently it means swampy valley.”

“Trading winter lake effect for a swamp. Not much of an upgrade.” Ana continued to look at the full color pictures in the brochure. “Gigi, what do you know about Japanese gardens?”

“It’s not so much about being a Japanese garden as it is tropical. I might be able to find an expert with the more difficult projects. I don’t have to know everything. I just need to be able to find experts who do. That much I learned in school.”

“When was the last time you were in the tropics? Or saw a Japanese garden?”

Gina snatched the brochure back and returned to packing her suitcase. "You gonna support me or be a toad like everyone else?"

"Support you, of course. I just don't see how an Italian that's lived in Cleveland all her life will cope with Japanese gardens in the tropics."

"Trained and educated, remember? One way or another, I have a year to figure it out."

Ana sat watching for a few minutes. "It wasn't your fault, you know."

Gina knew exactly what her sister had meant, and still didn't want to talk about it. "What wasn't?"

"That night at the church. I've heard all about it from Butch and a couple other cops that were at the scene. All of them say you did everything by the book."

"Except that I didn't completely and thoroughly identify the target I was aiming at before I fired."

Ana chuckled. "Maybe if you were a better shot, you might've hit your target."

"It was cold and my hands were frozen stiff. Because of that, I almost shot Father Romano! I missed him by inches."

"That's what counts, Gigi. Nobody got hurt."

"I shot the Virgin Mary instead!" Gina zip-closed the suitcase. "I still can't believe I blew away the Virgin."

"Nonsense. It was a statue of the Virgin, and you only clipped her in the knee. She's been through worse."

"At least I didn't shoot the Holy Kid," Gina said, crossing herself.

"See how blessed you are? You missed the priest, and the Virgin and Jesus survived. Good news all around. Halleluiah for being a bad shot with your service pistol."

"Yeah, that'll look good on my Holy Resume when I meet St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. I never shot a priest."

"That's why you left the force? You feel guilty about shooting at Father Romano?" Ana asked.

"I screwed up, big time. The shooting review board put me on administrative leave, even while I was still in field training. I'm not trustworthy on the street, or with a gun in my hand."

"They stuck you on leave for a week, just so you'd calm down and have some time to reflect. Mandatory. It's the same for every cop."

Gina stuffed her tennis racket into her suitcase. "I'm not safe on the street."

"Dad has talked to Butch Morrison and the other cops at the church that night a dozen times. Every one of them said you did everything by the book. Sergeant Morrison wants you to come back. Even though it's been three years since then, you'd only need to do a few weeks of refresher training at the academy before starting over in field training."

"Forget it. My mind's made up."

"Just like your mind's made up that you're not coming back to church?" Ana asked.

"Yep. I can pray at home."

Ana shook her head. "Look, forget about your lawn mowing job in the tropics. Come to the range for target practice with Dad and me sometime. That'll settle your nerves and get you back in the saddle better than anything else."

"I'm never touching a gun again for as long as I live."

Ana stood. "And you can't be a cop unless you're packing nine millimeters of heat in your holster."

Gina closed the other suitcase. Turning to face her younger sister, she straightened the police shield on her chest. There were going to be tears but not quite yet. Instead, she tapped a fingertip to her lower eyelid. "Hey, keep an eye on Mom. I don't want her having a nervous breakdown over me leaving town."

"For once, I'm gonna be the number one daughter in the family!" Ana said, giggling.

Gina flicked her fingers under her chin. "I'm ready to go, if you're still taking me to the airport."

"Which makes me the bad guy for sending you on your way, thousands of miles from home to where Mom can't see you."

"To where Mom can't scold me and Dad can't glare, you mean."

"Did you say goodbye to him before he left for work this morning?" Ana asked.

"We had a scene in the driveway, if that's what you mean."

"You need to say goodbye to Mom. She's in the kitchen waiting for a proper goodbye."

"Where else would she be? I thought she was coming with to the airport?"

“She’s decided to make porchetta abruzzese for dinner. That’ll take her all day.”

Gina left her suitcases at the front door. “One last jab at me. Making something good for dinner on the day I leave town.”

“You’re the one leaving town on Christmas Eve. First time in your entire life you won’t be home for Christmas.” Ana chuckled. “Yeah, I think Mom is pretty pissed at you.”

Gina went through the house that three generations of Santoros had lived in to find her mother. It wouldn’t be the furniture or the pictures on the walls, but the scent of food being cooked that she would miss the most. When she saw her mother busy at the kitchen woodblock counter removing the bones from lamb, it was a timeless image that she wouldn’t see for a while. She wasn’t even sure of what to say, of how it would be least painful for both of them.

“Mamma, è ora che me ne vada.”

“Get the roasting pan from the cabinet,” her mother commanded.

Gina obeyed. “I need to go now. Ana’s taking me. You don’t want to come with?”

“To so far away? Who would feed your father?”

Gina traded an eye roll with her sister. “To the airport.”

Their mother slammed the meat cleaver into a bone to snap it in half. “I still don’t understand why you’re being so stubborn.”

“Gigi’s always been stubborn, Mamma,” Ana said. “All of Cleveland knows that.”

Their mother slammed the cleaver again, breaking another bone. “This is between me and Gina. You go find something else to do or you’re next on the chopping block.”

Once Ana was gone from the kitchen, Gina tried to smile at her mother. “Mamma, I need to do this. I have a new career now, and those people in Hawaii were nice enough to hire me. I don’t know why you and Dad can’t see that.”

“I don’t care about your career. Too many police in this family already. You won’t find a nice Italian boy in Hawaii, Gigi.”

“Yes, I know how the story goes. You were already married, barefoot, and pregnant with me years before the age I am now. Maybe in a few more years, I’ll meet someone and catch up. But does it have to be a boy from Little Italy?”

“You want a surfer boy instead? What’s wrong with that Joey from the next street?”

“Nothing. I just don’t want to marry an unemployed car washer. Anyway, he’s kinda needy.”

“All boys that age are.”

“Maybe I can find one in Hawaii that’s not so insecure?” Gina offered. She checked her watch when she heard Ana toot the horn.

“Do surfer boys go to Mass?”

“More to life than going to Mass, Mamma.”

Her mother spun on her heels, the meat cleaver clutched firmly in one hand. “For three years, I was always patient with you when you didn’t come to church. Never once did you attend Mass. Now you say such things?”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it to sound that way.” Gina heard her sister’s car horn honking more insistently. “Mamma, I gotta go.”

The cleaver was slammed into the woodblock and her mother turned around. After washing and drying her hands, she took Gina by the shoulders. “Go be stubborn. Get it out of your system. Then come home to your family where you belong.”

They hugged for a moment, until Ana started honking the horn more insistently.

“Keep an eye out for someone at church for me, Mamma,” Gina whispered in her mother’s ear before breaking free from their hug.

Chapter Two

The flights from Cleveland to Honolulu ended up being an endurance test for Gina. The only places she'd gone outside of Ohio in her life were road trips to Pittsburgh and Washington DC, and a flight to New York City for a long weekend with her mother at the end of high school. Here she was, though, walking through the Honolulu Airport late on Christmas Eve, pulling two suitcases behind her.

Gina stopped to remove her wool overcoat. She wished she could remove another layer in the 75-degree open-air airport, with the steady breeze blowing through. There was a light scent in the air, not of food, but of flowers and living green things. A colorful little bird flew overhead, catching her attention for a moment. Walking along an elevated walkway, she looked down to see a Japanese-style garden at ground level.

"Not in Ohio anymore."

Already having her two suitcases, Gina could bypass baggage claim and went straight to the agreed meeting point at the arrivals curb. A slender Asian lady in her senior citizen years was waiting near a polished sedan. With no one else around that looked like they were waiting for her, Gina went to her.

"Hi. I'm Gina Santoro. Are you from the Tanazawa family?"

"*Ta-ni-zawa*, yes." The woman dressed in shorts and a colorful T-shirt looked at the two suitcases and overcoat. "Is that everything?"

"More than enough," Gina said. She followed the woman to the sedan and put her suitcases in the trunk. Getting in the front seat, she buckled in. "Thank you for picking me up so late in the evening."

"No need for you to stay in a room for one night, or to rent a car. Even if you had, you might have a hard time finding the place you'll be staying. How long have you been away?"

"Been away? I've just come from Cleveland."

"Very long trip. We've been looking forward to meeting you."

"Thanks. I'm excited about being here." Gina watched out the window as her welcome committee drove through the city. In the last week, she'd looked at hundreds of pictures and watched videos online, trying to get an

idea of the city's vibe. That's all the time she'd had in preparation since being hired for the job as landscape manager of the estate gardens. The cars, the freeway, the bridges were nothing new, but the lush tropical foliage and tall palms were as foreign to her eye as the names of streets and buildings. "Definitely not in Little Italy anymore."

"Little Italy?" the woman asked.

"The part of Cleveland I'm from."

"We don't have anything like that in Honolulu. We have a nice Chinatown instead, and plenty of Filipino shops everywhere. What part of the Philippines is your family from?"

"Philippines? We're Italian."

"Oh." The woman steered off the freeway and found a wide boulevard hidden beneath a giant trees. Broad, sturdy limbs spanned the street, making a tunnel-like canopy over them. "When we saw your picture and your name, we assumed you were Filipino."

"Sorry. Just plain, old Italian." That answered the question of why she'd been hired so quickly. The Tanizawas must've assumed Gina was a local girl already familiar with Hawaii, or at least the tropics. She was beginning to wonder how much of a mess she'd made for herself, and would for the garden, by taking the job. She knew the plants and trees would be different from that of anything growing in the Midwest. The only living orchids, tree ferns, and banana plants she'd ever seen had been in hothouses operated by nurseries. "Is that important?"

"Maybe. The crew you'll be working with are Filipino, and I think they're expecting their boss to be the same."

"It's nice that you hire new immigrants," Gina said, hoping to sound diplomatic. That was a chore after such a long and tiring day in transit. Something else that was a chore was listening to the woman's accent. She was definitely speaking English, just not in any way Gina had ever heard before. Some words were dropped, while others were stretched out in peculiar ways.

"Oh, not so new. Just no need to speak much English."

"I'm looking forward to meeting them. Are you Filipino?"

The woman seemed to share a laugh only with herself. "I'm sansei Japanese."

"I see." Gina was as lost in their conversation as much as she was lost on the city streets. "What's sansei?"

“Third generation. My grandparents were the original immigrants to come from Japan to settle in Hawaii.”

“I guess that makes me fourth generation Italian. Which will get you a half-priced cup of coffee in any Little Italy diner, as long as you buy a meal to go with it.” Gina watched as they turned onto a short road between two modern buildings. It was a little too dark to see much else, except that there were no residential houses that she could see. They went over a narrow bridge hidden by trees that spanned a gully. Gina could hear water tumbling over rocks in the darkness. All she could tell was that they were headed into a forest of some sort. “Where are we going?”

“That was the main entrance to the estate. Your house is on the far side of the gardens toward the back.”

Following a gravel driveway, they went through a forest overgrown with vines rather than a botanical garden until they got out in the open. “No, I definitely wouldn’t have found this place.”

When the woman parked, she left the headlights on aimed at a small structure. All Gina saw in the beams of light was something better described as a shack than a house.

“It’s better on the inside than what the outside looks, Miss Santoro,” the woman said as they walked toward the shanty. She dragged one suitcase across the flagstone walkway while Gina managed the other. “The whole place is being rebuilt one project at a time. The first project is to get a proper roof on the house. Maybe you heard of the storm we had a while back? That took off much of the roof. The boys have fixed it as best they can for the time being.”

Gina knew she had to be complimentary, even though the place needed a match more than it needed a roof. “It’s very interesting. I’ve never seen a place like this before.”

“While it was vacant, it was lived in by squatters from time to time. The last of them finally left when the storm hit, and we decided to rebuild the house.”

Gina followed her escort to the front porch that spanned the front of the house. “I’m sure it’ll be nice when it’s done.”

“Watch your step coming up onto the porch. A couple of the boards are tricky and need to be replaced.”

Every time Gina stepped, she found a tricky board from the squeaks they made. Palm fronds acted as an awning for the porch roof, and a few

were falling loose. The railing and uprights that held the porch together were heavy timber bamboo, and everything was fixed together with rope. The exterior of the house was painted a dark green color, where there even was paint. It looked like some of it had been replaced and the entire house needed paint. Every wall had louvered windows, which were smudged and grimy.

“Not in Cleveland anymore,” Gina muttered.

When the woman went in the front door, it hadn’t been locked, or even closed. Only a screen door was keeping the mosquitoes out. The woman hit a light switch to brighten the front room. The first thing Gina noticed was the swirling smoke from mosquito coils. Right after that, she noticed the exterior had been a good advertisement for the inside of the house. Or a warning, she wasn’t sure which.

“Take your shoes off and leave them on the porch.”

Gina wiped her shoes on the rustic old doormat. “My shoes should be clean.”

A blank look crossed the woman’s face. “We don’t wear outdoor shoes inside the house in Hawaii. Anywhere. Ever.”

Gina did as she was told and took off her shoes. She’d forgotten about the hole in a toe of the heavy wool socks she’d put on that morning. She looked sheepishly at the woman who had obviously noticed her big toe protruding. “Sorry. I’m a little behind with my sewing.”

“No matter. I doubt you’ll need wool socks here, or that overcoat.”

“Probably not.”

None of the walls in the house had wallboard, showing the interior of the walls. She could see where fresh wood studs had replaced older ones, and the wiring, switches, outlets, and pipes all looked new. The bare wood floor creaked under her feet as she walked. Other than one bedroom, there was no furniture, and only an old light fixture hung from each ceiling.

“It looks there’ve already been some repairs to the place,” Gina said, her feelings of diplomacy starting to weaken.

“Most of the electrical and plumbing has been replaced, and new support framing everywhere. We still need to put up paneling and do something with the floor. A few of the windows are stuck, but we’re hoping that with the new roof, those will get better.”

“It sounds like you know the house pretty well?”

“This was my grandparents’ home. They bought the land and built a place of their own as soon as they had the money. Over the years, rooms were added on as they got more prosperous.” The woman took a deep breath as she looked around the room they were in. “I spent a lot of my childhood in this old house. And yes, I do realize the place is a dump, but the family hates to let it go. We’re even hoping to get it registered as a historical building. But for the time being, it’s yours to live in.”

That shed new light on the place, and on her escort. “You’re one of the Tanizawas?”

Finally, the woman smiled. “Yes. Everybody around here still knows me as Millie Tanizawa, even though I took my husband’s name when we married. It’s easiest for everybody if you call me Millie.”

“I feel honored you’re letting me live in your family home, especially having never met me before.”

“Never mind,” Millie said with a wave of her hand. “We have a credit card for your use, and there’s an open account at the hardware store for anything you might need. The bed has fresh linen on it and the bathroom is clean. The kitchen is a little rustic, but everything works if you say the right prayer. We weren’t sure of what you liked to eat, but we’ve stocked a few things for you. Is there anything else that you need tonight?”

“I don’t think so. That bed sounds good, though.”

“Tomorrow is Friday, Christmas, and no one will be around. You’ll have the estate to yourself. I suggest getting to know the gardens and learn about the bus system before Monday. Everything you might need is a short bus ride away. My suggestion is to make a list of what needs to be done before taking on too many tasks.” The woman smiled when she put her hand out to shake Gina’s. “Good luck, Miss Santoro.”

Chapter Three

When Gina woke in the morning, it was to the sound of her phone ringing with a call from her sister. She knew it was a Christmas call from the entire family, something she wasn't prepared to face up to. She also knew that if she ignored the call, the phone would continue to ring until she answered, all morning if it took that long.

"Merry Christmas. Did Mom and Dad survive Christmas morning without their Number Two daughter being there?"

"They're bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Dad and I had quiet shifts. Mom has gifts under the tree for you. The call's on speaker and they're right here, by the way."

"Hi Mom! Hi Dad! Merry Christmas!" Gina shouted into her phone so they could hear her. "Did you open the things I left for you?"

"Thank you for the cuff links, Gina," her father said.

"How many pairs is that now?"

"Eighteen. You haven't missed a year since you were ten years old."

"Hopefully Mamma got you a shirt to go with them. Mamma, did you open your gift?"

"I don't need any more cookware, Gigi."

"I know. I bet you can put it to good use, though. How did the porchetta abruzzese turn out?"

"Too much for just the three of us."

Ouch. "Well, you have enough for leftovers. Okay if I talk to Ana alone for a minute?"

"Dad's in the den and Mom's already in the kitchen. Might still be a little miffed. How were the flights?"

"Long. I never knew the Pacific Ocean was so big."

"Like, duh. It's on the map," Ana said.

"Shut up. I have cellular but no data. I guess they don't have Wi-Fi in the forest."

"Forest?" Ana asked.

"You should see this place. The house is in the middle of a forest. Palms trees everywhere around here."

“Ooh, your own little Santoro Witch Project.”

“Don’t say that. I heard things walking around outside during the night.”

“Probably just Hawaiian zombies looking for a new flavor of blood to suck. Nothing to worry about. How’s the house? Pretty nice?” Ana asked.

“More like rustic. It has this weird thatched roof made from palm fronds and there are no walls on the inside.”

Ana laughed. “You wanted something different. I guess you got it. Eat breakfast yet?”

“Not yet. All I’ve seen is the bedroom and the front porch.”

“How’s the bathroom?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been holding it since last night. If it’s anything like the roof, I might find a tree outside.”

“Can’t be that bad, can it?” Ana asked.

“I shouldn’t make fun. It’s free and it’s being remodeled by professionals. Apparently, they have some sort of long-range plan for the estate that includes the house. Not very big, though. It’s about the same size at the Russo’s place.”

“Which Russo? Johnny or Frankie?”

“Frankie.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s small. How about I send Joey to work on it?”

“Funny. Apparently, this place is getting its first upgrade since the Tanizawas came here from Japan. What’s now forest in a giant ravine used to be a big vegetable patch. That’s a part of what they want to get going again, along with display gardens of native plants and trees.”

“That’s a big job,” Ana said. “How do you get started with something like that?”

“I have no idea. It was so dark when we got here last night that I couldn’t much.”

“Well, big sister, you wanted to make a change. Good luck with it.”

“That’s what Millie said last night, right before she left me alone in the woods.” Gina couldn’t put off starting her day any longer, or her first trip to the bathroom. “Hey, be nice to Mom for me, okay? Keep telling her how much I miss her.”

“Tell her yourself. And you’d better make it a long, sappy letter and not just a greeting card.”

“The longest thing I’ve ever written to Mom was in a birthday card.”

“You’ll think of something. Right now, you have your adventure to get started!”

All Gina had unpacked the night before were her flannel pajamas, which she wore to the bathroom. Even though the house had three bedrooms, there was only one bathroom.

“With three bedrooms and only one pot for everybody, they would’ve had contentious mornings,” she mumbled as she sat. “Someone left me a roll of TP anyway.”

She’d brought the in-flight airline magazine with her and studied the advertisements for showy clothes and flashy jewelry available at a mall somewhere in Honolulu. Setting that aside, she checked the fixtures a little more closely. Faucets and tap handles were stainless steel, with rust on some of the edges, and the porcelain had seen shinier days. Still, everything was clean, the water came on, and the mirror wasn’t broken.

The acid test came when she flushed the toilet. It wasn’t so much of a flush as it was a gentle trickle of water. Trying a second time only seemed to fill the pot. When she lifted the tank lid off, she didn’t know what she expected to see inside. Not only did she know nothing about plumbing, but even her father had to call a plumber whenever a faucet dripped. Santoros knew more about handcuffs, night sticks, and pistols than they ever could about pipes, electric wires, or roofing material. What she found were grimy pipes and fittings, and a ball on a stick. Deciding it was best left alone until after she’d had her morning coffee, she fit the lid back in place.

Even though she’d left the light off and the room was dim, she knew she saw something move on the floor. Flicking on the light, she looked more closely at the space behind the toilet. What she saw gave her a shudder.

“Ugh. Were you there the whole time?”

When the cockroach began to scurry away, Gina got the magazine, rolled it into a bat, and took a swing at the little black creature. That only seemed to piss it off, as it scurried ever faster.

Gina saw what it was headed for, a gap between the baseboard and the floor. Taking another swing, she stunned it. Seeing its legs continue to move, she gave it a few more whacks until it burst. Cringing, she used a wad of toilet paper to pick it up.

“What’s with the yellow stuff inside of you guys, anyway?” she said, dropping the tissue in the pot. She tried flushing again, but that made the

water level rise even more. Watching to make sure it didn't overflow onto the dull linoleum floor, she left the scene behind. "Okay, that goes on the list. Bad news in the bathroom."

The condition of the kitchen wasn't much better than the bathroom, but at least everything worked. Water flowed from the tap and drained from the sink. The refrigerator and stove were the same type that her father had replaced in their home when she was a kid. Three out of four of the burners got warm, and the fridge was cold inside. She ignored the groaning noise when the cooling element kicked in.

Just like Millie had promised, there were the basics of food in the fridge: a glass bottle of milk, a cube of butter in a saucer, a bowl of brown eggs, jars of mustard and mayonnaise, and a block of cheese. She read the labels on several unopened jars of condiments. Most were jams of tropical fruit. The last one was nearly black, and was labeled as though it was homemade.

"Pomegranate?" She took the lid off, gave it a sniff, and put it away again. "Whatever."

The last thing she found was a plastic tub with Japanese writing on it. The contents sloshed around inside. Looking closely, she found the English spelling of the contents.

"Tofu?" She put that away next to the pomegranate jam. "Not in Little Italy anymore."

Continuing her tour, Gina found a bowl of fruit, with an orange, two lemons, and some other things that smelled sweet but she only seen in the market back home.

She knew that if there was jam and butter, there must've been bread. Going through a small pantry, she found a loaf of bread and some canned vegetables. None of the brands were familiar, no national brands at all, but had unusual Japanese, Hawaiian, or Filipino brand names. Taking the loaf of bread to the counter, she dropped two slices into a toaster that looked like it was World War II surplus. When she saw the elements inside begin to glow, she was satisfied.

While she waited for the toast, she poked through the fridge again.

"Milk, eggs, butter, and cheese. That means omelet."

It took another search through the kitchen cabinets to find the bowls and utensils she needed to make her breakfast. Picking up an egg ready to crack it open into a bowl, she raised it slightly but hesitated.

Put the egg back down again.

“Not this again.”

While the scent of singeing bread rose from the toaster, she stared at the egg on the counter.

“Can’t make an omelet if I can’t crack that thing open.”

She picked up the egg again and held it in her hand. Brown, it was just like every other egg she’d ever held, solid but inherently fragile. The yolk would be yellow, the white still clear and thick. All she had to do was give the side of the egg a couple of solid whacks on the rim of the bowl and empty the shell. The second egg would be just as easy to deal with. All that was required after that were a few quick whips with a fork.

“What’s wrong with me?” She looked at the egg cradled in her hand. “Why can’t I crack these things open?”

She put both eggs back in the bowl, and put them away in the fridge.

“Forget it. Toast will be good enough.”

While she waited for the bread to turn colors, she looked for coffee. Finding none throughout two searches of the kitchen, she had no other choice than to boil water for the black tea she’d found.

Sitting at the kitchen table with her pad of paper and pen, she continued with her list of things that needed attention.

“Okay, the kitchen isn’t a disaster. At least there’s no wildlife in here to kill. But I need to turn on burners first before getting out food if I want to eat breakfast before it’s time for lunch.”

The butter was soft by the time the toast was done getting its suntan. She ate that while the teakettle whistled, and she poured water into her tea mug. Before she could take a second bite, there was a knock at the front door.

“I thought nobody was supposed to be around today?” she muttered as she went to the door. Then she remembered she was still in her pajamas. With a side trip to the bedroom, she put on a robe. She was just getting to the door when there was a second and more insistent knock.

Instead of opening the door, she spoke through it. “Yes? Who is it?”

“Me!” a man said cheerfully.

Gina cinched her robe belt tighter. “Me who?”

“Felix!”

“Okay, but who’s Felix?”

“Are you Miss Santoro?”

“Yes. You know me but I don’t know Felix,” she said.

“Maybe you can open the door?”

There was no peephole to look through, and the closest window didn’t give her much of a view of the man. Opening the louvers a little more made some noise, which Felix noticed. He smiled at her from his position on the front porch. He looked harmless enough, not any bigger than her and a decade older, so she opened the door. Keeping one foot behind it, she looked out at him. “Good morning. May I help you?”

“Were you expecting a cat?” he asked her with one of the largest smiles she’d ever seen.

“Cat?”

“Like Felix the cat?”

“Who?”

“You know, Felix the cat from the cartoons?” he said.

“I’m sorry, but I have no idea what you’re talking about and my breakfast is getting cold.”

Felix looked hurt as she tried swinging the door closed. He got his own foot in place before he was shut out. His clothes were simple, just an old T-shirt and baggy trousers. She guessed he was one of the Filipino workers Millie had told her about. “I guess no one knows who Felix the cat was anymore.”

“My breakfast?” Gina said insistently to remind him she had better things to do than discuss cartoon cats that may or may not have something to do with the man on her porch.

“Yeah, first of all, you shouldn’t allow homeless dudes to sleep here.”

“What homeless guy?” she asked.

He pointed to a man slowly walking away. Gina wasn’t sure what she expected a homeless man to look like in Hawaii, but he seemed as grubby as any back in Cleveland. A shaggy mop of dark hair, loose trousers, shoes that looked too big for his feet, and a windbreaker were all she could see of him. On the back of the windbreaker were stenciled the words *Oahu Cable*. Gina wondered if that was a local cable TV provider or a manufacturer of wire and cable.

“One’s not so bad, but pretty soon you got a whole village of them camping out here.”

“Where was he?”

“Sleeping here on the front porch. I told him to get lost and not come back.”

She watched as the man crossed the narrow bridge. She felt a little sorry for him, that he'd been woken so early and chased off. “Thanks, I guess.”

“There was a cat hanging around.”

“A real one?” she asked.

He laughed at her joke. “Real one. Black. I chased that off also. Stray cats and homeless people are much different from each other.”

“How so?” she asked.

“If it comes back, don't feed it. Once you get one, others show up.”

“Kind of an impolite attitude, isn't it?”

Felix did an ‘aw shucks’ thing with his foot. “Maybe.”

Being a little superstitious, something she'd learned from her mother, Gina didn't like the idea of a black cat hanging around the house. “I'll be more careful in the future.”

He picked up a shopping bag and held it out to her. What was odd were that his hands were black. “My missus wants you to have something.”

“Okay. Tell her thanks. What is it?”

He held the bag closer to her. “We made more pomegranate jam this morning. Some avocados in there, too.”

Gina opened the door all the way. When she looked inside the bag, there were a half dozen jars of black jam and several avocados. “I've never had pomegranate jam before.”

“Da best kind!” he said enthusiastically. “Save some for later because they have a short season. Not all year, you know.”

“You've already been making jam this morning?”

“Peeled the things last night and cooked the stuff this morning. Feel 'em. Still warm.”

She held a jar in her hand. “But it's Christmas morning. You didn't have anything else better to do?”

“We knew you came from so far away, and we figured you might be a little lonely. We had a bumper crop of pomegranates, so we brought you some.” His cheerful expression wrinkled into worry. “Maybe not so good as a welcome gift. Probably shoulda put a ribbon.”

“No, it's great! I'm just surprised to meet someone so early. Thank you very much.” She stepped back from the door to let him in. “I have tea, if

you'd like some?"

Felix looked at the walls and flicked light switches up and down as they went to the kitchen. When she handed him a mug of tea, he seemed to take up a position against the countertop as though it was his preferred place. Not knowing what to do with him, Gina started on her toast again.

"Do you work here at the estate, Felix?"

"Didn't Millie say anything to you?"

"She dropped me off, told me to learn my way around the estate, and left. Why?"

"I'm the head caretaker of the gardens. Have been for many years. Now you're my boss." He scratched his head in thought. "I've never had a boss before. Come to think of it, I've never had employees."

"Either have I."

"You're so young. How long have you been a landscaper?"

Gina poured both of them more tea water. "It might be time to share some secrets. This is my first real job in landscape, so I might be relying on you for a lot of help."

That didn't seem to faze him. "What other jobs you have before landscape?"

"I was a police officer."

That renewed his smile. "Lady cop! For how long?"

"Not too long."

"Didn't like it?" he asked.

"Not enough to stick with it. I'm hoping I like landscaping and gardens better."

He mimicked shooting a gun with his free hand. "Ever shoot a bad guy?"

Gina took her dishes to the sink. "No, but I almost shot a priest."

"Priest?"

"Yep. The priest for my parish, as a matter of fact. But I missed him and shot the Virgin Mary instead."

The color seemed to go out of Felix's face as he muttered something in Filipino and crossed himself several times.

"It's okay, Felix. As my sister says, it was only a flesh wound. The Virgin survived."

He set his tea mug aside. "Okay, maybe better to talk about something else. What colors do you want for wall paint?"

“I need walls before they can be painted,” Gina said.

“I’ll be putting up the wall paneling this week. What colors do you like?”

“It’s supposed to be historically accurate, so you better talk to Millie about that.”

“I doubt they care. If they don’t like what we pick out, they can repaint the place,” Felix said. “I have brushes and rollers. We just need to get the paint.”

“I know nothing about painting walls. Millie gave me a credit card to use at the store. I just don’t know how to find the neighborhood hardware store.”

“Not too far, but a long trip on the bus.” He smiled again. “I’ll bring everything I have tomorrow.”

Gina found the list of things in the house that weren’t working properly. “Maybe before putting paint on walls, a few other things can be fixed? The toilet doesn’t work so well, and I’ve noticed some of the outlets don’t have electricity to them. Can anything be done about that?”

Felix scratched his head. “We just replaced all the wiring. I’ll double check that. But the toilet has to stay.”

Gina’s hope deflated. “Why?”

“The family wants to get this place listed as a historical site, and they need to keep everything as historical as possible. “That’s why the bathroom and kitchen fixtures are sort of, well...”

“Old?”

He nodded.

“I don’t care what the outside of the toilet looks like, but can all the other stuff that makes it work be replaced with something from the Twenty-First Century? Or at least from the second half of the Twentieth?”

Felix got a little notepad from his pocket and made some notes. “I’ll fix it on Monday.”

It wasn’t much, but having a proper pot to use would make a difference. With that in mind, she showed him her list of what needed to be fixed. At least he was cheerful about it and hadn’t come on to her. In fact, he was like a big brother she’d never had.

“But I thought you were responsible for the garden work crew? Will you have time to work on the house?” she asked.

He nodded again. "Plenty of them to work on the gardens. I'll be helping with the house. Any other problems with the house, and you come straight to me, okay?"

"Only if I can make dinner for you and your wife tomorrow night?"

"No need for that," he said. "She'll probably send something in a basket for you."

Felix seemed ready to leave, now that they had an agreement ironed out. She showed him to the front door.

"Felix, do you know why the stove takes so long to get hot? Do I need to put in a new fuse or something?"

He looked worried. "Don't change the fuses! The stove is 220, but the plug is only 110. Only half the electricity, so it gets only half the hot. To boil water, just use one burner at a time."

"I can't just put in a bigger fuse?"

"Only if you want to burn down the house. That would make the Tanizawa family mad."

"I would think so." She watched as he slipped his feet into old rubber slippers he'd left on the porch. "Do you know when I'm supposed to get a new roof?"

"Before the next time it rains."

Gina was charmed, or maybe amazed, with how easily Felix was able to answer questions without really answering them. "What should I do if it rains?"

"Put out pots and pans to catch the leaks."

Chapter Four

It was noon before Gina had put away her clothes, tried all the windows to see which ones worked, and inspected the house for what needed to be fixed. After a cheese sandwich, she dressed in the coolest clothes she had brought. With sneakers on her feet, her phone in a pocket, and a yellow pad and pencil in her hands, she went on an inspection tour of the estate.

Gina followed an old double track of packed gravel, something that looked like it had been a road, or at least a driveway in the past. It came from the little bridge they'd used the night before, and made something of a circle around the perimeter of the estate grounds. Millie had emailed her a simply-drawn map of the estate, which Gina had printed before she came. The estate had a long triangular shape, about ten acres in size. The border of it along one side was the Manoa Stream, which came down a ravine from the lower slopes of mountains. The other side of the property reached to the crest of a ridge. The bottom end just barely touched on a street, and that had been marked on Millie's map as the 'future entrance'. About six hundred feet north and uphill from there was the upper boundary of the property, a straight line that reached from the stream to the ridgeline.

Soon she was out of the shade of the tall trees and palms that surrounded the house. She was already discovering the grounds were something of a palm display garden, with several different species. Some were short and stout, while others reached high to catch the sunshine, waving in the steady breeze that had started. Standing in an open area where she had a view of most of the property, she tried to take in the size and shape of the estate.

"That's one heck of a big chunk of land," she muttered, scanning the forested uphill slope with her hand shielding her eyes from the sun. "I bet they could get a million bucks for this from a developer."

The sun was high then, directly overhead, and Gina wished she'd worn a hat. A pair of helicopters flew over, dark colored with heavy droning engines. A few bees flew about, looking for flowers in the brush and weeds. The noise of the city not far away was dampened by the sound of the wind

in the trees and the rustle of palm fronds. With the steep mountains in front of her, and the lush green trees all around, it was a scene that she'd never seen before.

She snapped a couple of pictures and sent them to Ana.

The double-track was crowded along both sides with vines and shrubs, not the usual blackberry brambles she was used to seeing at home. It followed the base of the ridge, which had flat-topped trees growing on the slope. Looking at one more closely, she found giant spike-like thorns along the stems. She referred to a plant guide of the tropics.

"Okay, I know what that is. That's called kiawe, a type of mesquite. The ancient Hawaiians used that for firewood. Those thorns look nasty."

Along the other side of the driveway was the occasional fruit tree, with colorful fruits ripening in the sun. Papayas and mangoes were along the way, with orange and lemon trees, and an old avocado tree closer to the house. There were even a few banana plants, long past their bloom or fruiting.

Startling her was something darting across the driveway. Catching only a glimpse before the little brown creature ducked between rocks, she wasn't sure if it had been a long skinny rat, or a squirrel of some sort.

As she hiked uphill, further along were trees with twisting branches that looked like oaks. Seeing a few red bottlebrush flowers on them, she found those on her chart, the ohia tree. Palms were mixed in here and there, some with clumps of dates hanging below, others with green coconuts in them. Still others didn't do much except rattle their fronds in the steady breeze. Keeping an eye on the area below her to the left, the main part of the garden, she decided to follow the trail up the ridge to as far as it went.

After several minutes of climbing up the steep grade, she found a stone cairn, mostly fallen over. Looking at her little map again, she figured that was the top corner property marker. Just beyond and wrapping around the cairn was a heavy wire fence, rusted and partly fallen over as though it were old. Lifting the stones that she could, she stacked the cairn again. Without a gate there, she either had to climb the rickety wire fence to continue following the trail up the ridge or find another way. Looking off into the scrub and weeds, she saw what looked like an old stone wall, and wondered what that had to do with the estate, if anything. While she was there, she used her phone to take pictures of the area again.

"I can look at that stuff some other time."

With the sensation that her skin was burning in the sun, and already getting thirsty, Gina turned around. From that height on the ridge, she'd be able to get a good look at the layout of the property. Instead, something else caught her attention.

"Oh my god."

She got her phone and started snapping pictures, not of the property below her, but of the view in the distance. She sent several to her sister and mother before putting her phone away. She used her hand as a visor to take in the view.

"That is one heck of a big ocean out there."

Gina decided on the spot that she'd eat her lunches there on days off.

Getting started again, she went back downhill to the shade of the ravine. Soon, she found an old bamboo fence, most of it broken and in pieces, strewn about and sections burnt as though they'd been part of campfires. It was there that she found a rock walkway, just flat stones in the ground that followed a meandering course through more weeds and shrubs. Some of the plants looked almost as if they belonged there, and had they been pruned, might've been pretty in the setting with giant boulders here and there. Beyond that were giant shade trees, mounded on top like gentle hills. It was below those that the stream flowed, the property line on that side of the estate. Checking her little hand-drawn map again, she had found what was left of the Japanese garden. According to the map, beyond there were buildings that belonged to the university.

"Okay, that means the koi pond should be just over here," she said, turning in a new direction. She followed the stone path that seemed to be more serendipitous than organized.

Getting waist-deep into weeds and shrubs, she found where the bees were coming from. The ground she was standing on was dry, but if she went any lower, she'd be in muck. Of everything out in the sunshine, that was the greenest area she'd found, and had the most flowers blooming. With a simple outline of boulders in a kidney shape, Gina figured that was the old koi pond. Between the bees and the sunburn that had started, she'd had enough of the afternoon sun for one day. Following the tiny trickle of a stream that connected the old pond to the Manoa Stream, she soon found the luxury of shade. Finding a spot to sit on a smooth rock, she took off her sneakers and soaked her feet in the cool water.

“Definitely not in Cleveland anymore.” She splashed water on her face and arms to cool off. She took a long, deep breath of the fresh air and watched small doves pecking in the dirt. They made a peculiar cooing noise, a lonely *wha-wha- hoo-hooo* sound. “This is Christmas? Soaking my feet, getting sunburnt, and sweating while watching doves? I can live with this.”

Wondering if jetlag was setting in or if she was tired from the hike, she let her eyes close. With something proper to recline on, she could’ve slept. She almost did, except a hammering sound came from across the estate grounds. Trying to figure the direction, she scanned the distance. As far as she knew, there weren’t any construction projects going, certainly not on Christmas day. After watching for a while, she saw the glint of sunlight reflecting off a pickup truck parked near where her house would be. After a few more minutes, someone went to the truck.

“Now what?” Concerned the few things she’d brought were being stolen, she got her shoes back on. “I don’t think that was Felix. He’s supposed to be at home with his wife.”

She hurried along a narrow trail beneath the trees until she got to a wooden bridge over the stream. Figuring it was the same bridge they’d crossed the night before, she followed the driveway to her house.

That’s where she found an older man carrying bundles of roofing material to a ladder that leaned against the side of the house. He seemed to notice her as she walked toward him, but paid her no mind as he climbed the ladder, a bundle of shingles balanced on one shoulder.

Gina stood at the bottom of the ladder watching the man. “May I help you?”

He acted as though she wasn’t there when he came back down for another load of three-tab roofing shingles. The little hair he had on his head was white, and his darkly-tanned face was creviced by decades of age. Asian and not as tall as her, and wearing a tool belt around his waist, he walked bow-legged. She went with him to his truck.

“Hi. My name’s Gina. I just moved into the house last night.” She followed him back to where he started climbing the ladder with another bundle of shingles on one shoulder. “Merry Christmas, by the way.”

When the old man stayed on the roof, Gina figured he either had enough shingles to keep him busy for a while, or had had enough of her.

She hadn't had enough answers yet, though, and when her curious police officer mind kicked in, she climbed the ladder after him.

What she found was that palm fronds had been removed and tossed off the side of the house, exposing decking that was covered with tar paper. Several rows of shingles had already been nailed down, and the man was adding a new row, using a hammer.

"I don't know who you are, but you don't have to work on Christmas, Sir."

That at least got a glance from him, in between nails.

"Did Felix ask you to come work on the roof today?"

He worked quickly, needing only three swings of his hammer to drive nails. Ignoring her questions seemed to help in his progress of covering her roof with a fresh later of shingles.

"Seriously, Sir, it's pretty hot up here on the roof, and you really don't need to work on Christmas. This can wait until Monday."

He almost seemed annoyed when he refilled his tool belt and shirt pocket with more nails from a large box. Taking her the box of nails, he handed over a second hammer. Without speaking a word, he showed her how to line up the bottom edge of a new sheet of three-tab with the previous layer, and pointed with his finger on where to put the nails. He went so far as to put the hammer in her hand the right way. After watching her hammer a few nails, he started working on a different section of the roof.

"If the people at home saw this, I wonder what they'd say?" Gina muttered, as she swung the hammer, giving her own thumbnail a solid whack. "Mom would be wringing her hands, Dad would smile with pride, and Ana would be laughing her butt off."

Chapter Five

On the third time the man went down to his truck for more roofing material, he brought back two bottles of water, handing one over to Gina.

“Thanks. I’m Gina. You haven’t told me your name.”

“The roofer,” he said quietly.

“Okay, good.” Gina wasn’t sure what to say, or do with the man. He seemed harmless enough. Not attacking her with his hammer, anyway. “I wasn’t expecting you. You’re the second visitor I’ve had this morning. Or third, I suppose. Busy place for Christmas morning.”

“Three?”

“A fellow named Felix dropped by with pomegranate preserves. He chased away a homeless man that had used the front porch as his bed for the night.” Gina wanted to try some humor to lighten the mood. “Three wise men visiting the inn on Christmas morning, I suppose.”

When he went back to hammering nails, Gina gave up on making friends and returned to pounding nails, also.

Half the house had been done by then. He emptied his bottle in a hurry, and took off his cap to wipe his brow with a handkerchief. The sun was low in the sky when they finished for the day. Once he had the ladder stowed on the ground the way he wanted, the roofer went to his truck and got in. Gina followed him there.

“Thanks for working on Christmas. Sorry I was so slow. I’ve never done anything like that before. When are you coming back?”

He took her hand and pressed his thumb on the blisters that had come up. He gave her another bottle of water from a cooler.

“Get a hat.”

With that, the man started the engine and drove off toward the little bridge over the stream.

“Okay, I guess I have more things than plants to figure out with this job.”

Remembering Felix’s rule to use only one burner on the stove at a time, Gina made a dinner of beans and Vienna sausage, something she

found stocked in the cabinet. Wishing she had a bottle of wine to rinse away her qualms about her new job, she sent a few text messages back home, mostly to Ana. While waiting for replies, she jabbed a sewing needle into her blisters. When her phone rang with a call, it wasn't from her sister.

"Joey, Merry Christmas. What's up?"

"When are you coming home?" he asked.

"A year from now. You already know that."

"Gina, just come back to me."

"Seriously? I'm supposed to leave a landscaper's dream job in Hawaii and go back home to Cleveland in the middle of winter? Are you nuts?"

"What's wrong with a white Christmas? Kids are playing with sleds, making snowmen, building snow forts. You like that kind of thing, Gina."

"Hey, how's that lake effect working for you? I heard you got a foot of snow just since yesterday, and another foot is on its way."

"There's nothing so special about that place," he said in his whiniest voice yet.

"You haven't been here," she said. "Look, we've been over all this. I didn't break up with you just to come here. We're done, Joey. It was fun for a while, but it's time for both of us to move on."

"You're going to marry one of those island guys?"

"Oh, gawd. You sound like my mother, you know that?"

"I got a lot to offer, Gina! Just come back to me."

It was turning into a replay of a few nights before, the first time she tried breaking up with a guy she barely dated, and liked even less. "I'm not here to find a husband, and I'm not going home to marry you, Joey. Time to move on."

She couldn't end the call fast enough. Wondering if she should turn off the phone or if her sister might still call her, she waited to hear from Ana. When the text came, Gina smiled at the thought of her little sister in a police uniform.

Can't talk. On my first real stakeout.

Realizing it was after midnight back home, Gina set aside her phone in trade for a pictorial book on the trees and shrubs of the Hawaiian Islands. After reviewing that and making notes of the trees she'd found that day, she started drawing a new map of the estate. Using the color pens she'd brought with her, she was just finishing at midnight. Setting aside everything, she went to take a shower.

Turning the handles midway, she kept her hand in the spray while waiting for the water to turn hot. After adjusting the hot to full blast and turning the cold off, she figured she was destined to a cold shower again that night.

“At least the pipes aren’t frozen.”

Gina was woken in the morning with a text message from her sister. Ana was already taking a lunch break at home, mid-way through her shift.

Make any busts? Gina asked in a return message.

Wrote a jaywalking ticket to Mrs. Scapone. She said you’re supposed to call Joey.

Next time you write her up, tell her to tell Joey to quit calling me!

It was warm in the bedroom with the sun coming in through the windows. After opening the louvered windows, she went through the house opening others, along with the back door. Going to the front door last, she opened that to find someone curled up on the porch. He looked like the same man from the day before, with tousled hair, thin blue trousers, scuffed leather shoes, and the same windbreaker.

“Not you again.” She nudged him with her toe to wake him before stepping back. She didn’t want to pick a fight; she just wanted him to go. “Time to go, bro.”

After another nudge from her foot, he rolled over onto his back and looked up at her. His face was as much of a mess as his clothes, with wrinkles too deep for a young man. Other than dark eyes and black hair, she couldn’t tell what sort of heritage he had. At home, he would’ve been pegged as Italian without a second guess. Not saying a single word, he got up, gave her an apologetic bow, and left the porch in silence. Once he got to the little bridge, he turned to give her a wave before crossing.

“I could’ve made the poor guy breakfast. At least given him some tea.”

She went back in to the kitchen and started the process of making toast and boiling water. She added something to her to-do list, and that was buy a microwave oven.

She decided on trying to make an omelet again today and got the bowl of eggs from the fridge. Assembling everything she’d need on the counter, she raised an egg over the edge of the mixing bowl, ready to crack it open.

“Come on, you can do this.”

She lifted her hand and swung it down. But before it got to the rim of the bowl, she stopped.

“Not today,” she said, before quickly putting everything away again. “I clipped the Virgin Mary in the knee with a forty-five caliber slug, but I can’t crack an egg. That’s not weird at all.”

When her meal was finally hot enough, she took it to the small back porch which faced the rising sun.

“I could get used to this.”

Hearing hammering on the roof, Gina went down the porch steps and looked up to where the ladder led.

“Oh, goodie. The roofer is already here...” She checked the time on her phone. “...and it’s not even seven o’clock.” She went farther out to get a better view of what he was doing. His pickup truck was parked in the same spot, not far from his ladder. “Good morning!”

All she got back was a quick wave of the hand before the roofer went back to work. When she turned to go back into the house, she saw a cat trot along the driveway, going off in the direction of the stream.

“I don’t mind having a cat hanging around, but does it have to be black?”

After a cup of tea and a piece of toast with pomegranate jelly, Gina tied her only hat onto her head with a string under her chin and climbed the ladder to join the roofer. He’d already finished a row of shingles at one end of the roof.

“Kinda early to work on a Saturday, isn’t it?”

Once again, he paid her no mind and kept hammering nails into the roof. She found a stack of shingles on the other side from where he was working. With it was the same hammer from the day before, but along with that was a new tool belt, already filled with nails. Next to that was a small pair of leather work gloves. They had the name of a local hardware store stenciled on the back: *Kaimuki Hardware*.

“Are these for me?” she called to him.

He just kept hammering nails.

After putting the tool belt around her waist and cinching it tight, she put on the gloves, grabbed her hammer, lined up a piece of three-tab roofing material, and started hammering nails.

While they worked, Felix came by to drop off several cans of paint and the supplies to go with them. He waved to the roofer as enthusiastically as

he did to Gina when he left again.

“I don’t know why he brought paint. There aren’t walls to paint yet,” she said, wondering if the roofer was paying any attention to her. When he just kept banging his hammer without saying a word, Gina gave up on conversation.

It was barely after twelve noon when they finished and descended the ladder for the last time. Once again, he put the ladder next to house.

“Come,” he said to her. He opened the passenger door of his pickup. “Sit.”

Gina knew better than to ride off in a stranger’s vehicle, even though she trusted him. She still didn’t know his name, and he’d barely said half a dozen words to her that day. Plus, she’d have no idea of where he was taking her.

“Felix brought paint. I should work on that for a while,” she said.

“Nothing to paint.” His eyes seemed to narrow at her over the hood of his pickup. “Sit.”

“Okay.” Gina did as she was told and sat on the front seat of his truck. She did, however, leave the door open for a quick exit. They sat quietly until most of their water was gone.

“You big boss here now?” he asked after a while.

“Right. The Tanizawas just hired me last week, and I got here a couple of nights ago. I still need to...”

Gina shut up when he tapped her thigh.

“Work from sunrise till lunch. No work in the afternoon. Still got work to do? Do it from four o’clock till dinner. Then time to knock it off. Okay?”

The way he said it, it was more of a command than a suggestion.

“Yes, Sir. It’s just that I have so many things to do, and...”

He patted her thigh again.

“No need to make friends with flies.”

“Flies?” she asked.

“Honey and poo attract flies same way, right? But no need to attract flies. Plenty of them around all the time.”

“I guess I don’t understand.”

He looked impatient. “One kind job in kitchen, another kind job in bathroom.”

“Okay.”

“Hard work for morning, easy kind work for afternoon, hanashi banashi for time off, nighttime for sleep.”

She had no idea what he was talking about, let alone what some of the words meant. “I’ll remember that.”

He finished his bottle of water and put the empties back in the cooler. “What time you go to church?”

“Tomorrow? I wasn’t planning to. I don’t know where they are here.”

“You nice Catholic girl, yeah?”

“Catholic, anyway. Why?”

“Ja, mata ashita de.” He started his truck, ready to leave. He seemed to give something some thought before saying, “Grazie mille.”

“Di niente,” she said while getting out of the truck. It was odd hearing Italian come from a Japanese man, but gave it little thought. “When are you coming back for the ladder?”

“Mata ashita,” he said before leaving.

“Sure, whatever.” Gina watched as he went over the little bridge. “Why do I get the idea growing plants in the tropics is going to be the easy part of this job?”

When she went into the house, she found Felix had arranged cans of paint in different rooms, as though it was some sort of hint of what he’d like. Each of the cans were new, and were labeled with the same store name as on her new gloves. Popping the tops of a few, she found they were all white.

“White? Every wall in this place needs to be the same color?” She closed up the cans again. “I wonder when the wall paneler guy shows up? Hopefully he waits until I’m out of bed before he starts banging nails in the bedroom walls.”

After eating a quick lunch and applying a second coat of aloe to her sunburn, Gina got dressed for a trip into town. She found the hardware store listed on the back of her gloves on a map, and set off in search of it.

The same hardware store where the gloves had come from was easy to find, right across the street from a bus stop. It was less a matter of wanting different paint, and more about seeing what the store was like. The paint, work gloves, and work belt all came from this store. Apparently, it was the place to go in that part of town and she assumed she was going to be spending a lot of time and money there in the coming months. When she

went in, she found the paint guy. He wasn't bad looking for someone named Brad.

"Hi. Someone got several cans of paint for me from this store. Unfortunately, it's all white and I was wondering if there was a way to get color added to them?"

"Eight cans? Four primer, and four white?"

"I guess. I don't know much about paint."

He smiled at her. "That was Felix. Is there something wrong with them?"

"He forgot to put colors in them."

"Are you that new boss at the old Tanizawa place?"

"That's me. Are you still able to add some color?" she asked.

"Sure. Did you bring them with you?"

"I had to take the bus. I don't have wheels yet."

Brad led her to the display of cards with paint colors. "I can make any color you want. What did you have in mind?"

Gina had never selected colors for anything in her life, even for the bedroom she had shared with Ana while growing up. The display of paint color choices seemed to dazzle her, and after a moment she grabbed a few that seemed suitable.

"Are these okay for inside a house?"

"Should be. They go in the paint and not in the primer. Just bring the four cans back sometime and I'll mix something up for you. Is there anything else?"

"I wanted to look at the nursery section."

He led her to an outdoor area with rows of plants positioned beneath shade netting. "You're new in town?"

"Not anymore. Been here for almost two whole days now."

"Anymore, that makes you an old-timer in Honolulu. What do you think of the house?"

"A little rustic, but it has a new roof. I have the blisters to prove it."

"Felix said you're staying there?" Brad asked.

Gina let her police officer's eye get a second look at Brad, in case she needed to ID him as a suspect later. He had some sort of tic in one eye and a slight tremor in the hand with scars on it. Otherwise, he was an ordinary white guy with more white than blond hair. "Maybe."

“Don’t worry about being attacked in your sleep. Nobody goes around there late at night.”

“Why not?”

“The place is haunted. Or at least that’s what they say. Anybody that knows the reputation of that old house wants nothing to do with the place after dark.”

“That’s fine, but I’ve found a homeless guy sleeping on the front porch the last couple of mornings.”

“Next time you see him, tell him the place is haunted. That’ll keep him away.” He took her to an area of blooming shrubs. “Anyway, Felix said you were a police officer and had shot a priest. Anybody that shoots a priest is going to be left alone in this town.”

“I didn’t shoot a priest. Who says the house is haunted?” she asked.

Brad whistled and called for someone named Kyle to come over to join them. He wore a store vest, had on heavy glasses, and his hair went in every direction. He was as thick through the waist as he was in the chest. “This is the lady running the show at the old Tanizawa place.”

Kyle was as cheerful as Felix had been the first time they met, and shook Gina’s hand with enthusiasm.

“Isn’t that old house haunted?” Brad asked.

“Oh, yeah. You’re staying in the house?” Kyle asked Gina.

“I’ve been hired by the family to rebuild the gardens, and I’ll be living in the house for the next year. Why?”

“No more hear anything at night?” he asked with what was turning out to be the local accent.

Gina folded her arms over her chest. “Like what?”

“Someone walking on the front porch, knocking on the door, something on the roof.”

“I was just telling Brad that there’s been a homeless guy sleeping on the porch each morning, and a roofer has been redoing the roof the last couple of days. Otherwise, I haven’t heard anything except all those doves in the morning.”

“Lucky, I guess. Not everyone hears it.” Kyle shrugged his shoulders. “What about the water?”

“What about it? The place was just replumbed. The toilet doesn’t work, though.”

“Never has. Is the water too hot?”

“Hot?” she asked. “Not at all. In fact, it’s never hot. Maybe the water heater isn’t working right?”

Kyle scratched his head. “Should be okay. It’s not too old.”

Brad took over in the conversation. “She wants to get the wall paint tinted.”

“What colors do you want?” Kyle asked.

She showed him her selections. “Yellow for the kitchen, green for the bathroom, blue for the two smaller bedrooms, and pink for the big bedroom.”

“Oh, yeah. Good colors. Better than all white like it was before.”

“You’ve been there?” Gina asked.

“Everybody’s been in that place, one time or another. Not lately, though. Tell me, does the kitchen still have those old appliances?”

Gina laughed. “The ice box moans and groans like an old lady, and apparently I can use only one burner on the stove at a time or I’ll burn the house down. Anything I can do about that? Like use a different fuse?”

“Better to leave the wires alone in that place.”

“But Millie said the whole place had just been rewired since the last storm?”

“More to electricity than the wires.”

“I guess. How do you know so much about the house? Have you worked on it?”

“You could say that.”

“Kyle’s one of the Tanizawas,” Brad said.

“Oh, sorry if I said anything.”

“No worries. Did you meet any of the family yet?”

“Just Millie. Otherwise, the only people I’ve met are Felix and the roofer.”

Kyle made himself busy shuffling things on a display rack. “Millie thinks she runs the estate.”

“I got that impression. She doesn’t?” Gina asked.

“Easiest for everybody if we all get along.”

“Speaking of being easy to get along with, my mornings would be a lot better if I could get a microwave. Do you guys sell any that won’t burn the house down?” she asked.

Kyle winced. “The family’s trying to get the house listed on some sort of historical thing. I don’t think a microwave would be acceptable. Aren’t

you there for the gardens?”

“Yeah, that’s what I was hired for.”

“Sticking to that would be smart.” Kyle cheered up over something. “Hey, I’ve got a shipment of hibiscus coming later in the week. Come back and take a look at them.”

“I can put in hibiscus?” she asked.

“Oh, sure! There used to be a lot of them all around the house. All different colors.”

“I’m supposed to make the place historically accurate. Maybe if you remember, could you make a little picture for me of what colors went where?”

“Yeah, sure! I’ll ask around the family so we can get it right.”

“What about the hot water tank?” she asked. “Can the plumber take a look at it? Maybe turn the temperature up a little?”

“I’ll talk to him, but the water temperature has always been a little nutty in that house.”

Gina had gone in for paint colors, and had left with good ideas about shrubs to plant around the house. She’d even made a friend in the Tanizawa family. With that, she was on her way back to the estate. Once again, she was feeling like a stranger in her new home, but at least she had a couple of new friends. And maybe even a haunted hot water tank to deal with.

Chapter Six

In the morning, it wasn't her phone ringing with a call from her sister or hammering on the roof, but a consistent knocking at the front door that woke her. The room not even light yet, she wrapped in her robe and went to the door.

"Felix?"

"No."

Gina peeked out the window to find the roofer standing there.

She opened up and peeked out at him. "Hi. I thought we finished the roof yesterday?"

"You are awake?"

She pinched her fingers together and asked what he wanted as politely as she could.

"Get new hot water tank."

"Now?" Gina rubbed her eyes with knuckles. "A little early for plumbing, isn't it?"

"Sooner started, sooner done."

Gina figured his words were a translation from a handy Japanese expression. Wondering if it was at all possible to simply close the door and go back to bed, she knew the roofer was more stubborn than she was. She also knew that she needed a long hot shower like never before.

"Hardware stores are open this early?"

"Good ones are."

With a second thought about going back to bed, she told him to wait on the porch. She hurried to dress in something appropriate for home repair and a plumbing job, assuming she'd be doing at least some of the labor, and met the roofer at his pickup. The streets were quiet that early in the morning, and the sun was still coming up. He followed the same route as to the hardware store she went to the day before.

He seemed intent on saying something to her, but was keeping quiet about it.

"Is something wrong?"

"Don't let strangers sleep on your lanai. Not a good idea."

“Stranger? Oh was the homeless guy back again this morning?” she asked.

“Yah,” he said.

“Not much I can do about it if he shows up in the middle of the night.”

“Those guys are trouble. Believe me.” He pulled into the parking lot of the same store she’d been to the day before. When he parked, they were angled to face toward the street. Across the street was a large Catholic church with parishioners going in for an early morning Mass, something she hadn’t noticed the day before. That made Gina wonder if there was more to the trip to the hardware store than just a new hot water tank. “Used to be lots of them, all over the gardens in tents, even living inside the house. Not bad guys one at a time, but bring too much trouble with them.” He looked at her quite intently. “Okay?”

“Yeah, sure, no homeless people on the grounds. Got it. Are we getting a new tank or not?”

He led her in but didn’t bother going to the plumbing department, stopping instead at the checkout counter. A boxed tank was already there waiting. He nodded to her to pay with the card she’d gotten from Millie on the first day before wandering off to talk to someone.

Kyle was the clerk there at checkout. “Howzit, Gina?”

“I’ll be better in a couple of hours when I’m awake. Apparently, sunrise on Sundays is a good time for major plumbing projects.”

Kyle laughed cheerfully when he handed her the receipt. “Is Kenzo helping you install the tank?”

“Is that his name? I hope he is. Otherwise, I’ll be back in a couple of hours trying to return it.”

Once Gina and the roofer named Kenzo had the hot water tank loaded and secured in the back of his truck, they got in to leave. He didn’t start the engine right away, though. Instead, he nodded at something in front of them.

“Catholic Church, yah?”

Gina strained her eyes to read the sign. “Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Yep, that would be a Catholic Church.”

“Three services every Sunday,” he said, as though he already knew something about the place.

She gave him a hard look, knowing the subtle meaning of why they had gone out so early. “Too bad I have a plumbing project this morning.”

“Looks like a nice place.”

“I’m sure it is,” she said.

“Been there a long time.” When he left the parking lot, he drove slowly past the church sign. “Three times, three choices.”

Gina eyed the sign more carefully. Two of the services were in English, the early Mass and the afternoon service, while the late morning service was in Filipino. That was the usual time she would go at home with her family, if she were still going to church. She knew from experience that the afternoon services were attended primarily by young adults looking for a social life as much as for spiritual edification.

“I’d at least need to attend a service in a language I understand. If I’m going to get a guilt trip laid on me, I at least want to know what for.”

As usual, silence descended between them, which was beginning to wear on her nerves.

“So, do you do other things besides home repair?”

“Hanashi banashi for after work.”

The foreign words were part of his admonition from the day before, and Gina still had no idea what they meant, and didn’t know how to reply. All she could do was wait to get home and go back to bed. It was Sunday, after all, and nobody expected anyone else to work. Instead, they had a plumbing project waiting for them. “Okay.”

When they got back to the estate, they took the tank to the porch. Waiting there was the same cat as the first two mornings. This time, it simply looked up at her and meowed as though it wanted something.

“I’m not feeding you,” she said, looking down at the cat. Hesitantly, she reached down to rub behind its ears. “If you want a meal, go find one of those funny looking brown rat things that live in the brambles.”

While Gina removed the box from around the tank, Kenzo brought a tool box from his truck. It was turning out to be a bigger project than she anticipated, which required turning off the electricity and water to the house. After handing her a wrench, he showed her how to disconnect the old tank from the pipes that led in and out of it.

“Isn’t it full of water?”

“Hope not. Been broke for a long time. Pretty smelly water if there is some.”

Keeping her mental fingers crossed, Gina detached the last of the connections. When only a tiny dribble came out, it was as smelly as he said

it might be. It also had a thick rusty appearance.

They carried that tank out to the back of the house and left it in the weeds. Kenzo said something in Japanese, which to Gina's ignorant ears, sounded like a curse on the tank. While she cleaned the vacant floor, he brought a few new fittings from his truck. It took another hour before she had been taught how to reconnect the pipes and their new fittings to the replacement tank.

"Okay, acid test," he said. "Go turn on the electricity."

"We're not going to burn down the house with this thing?" she asked.

"Hope not."

With a shrug, Gina hit the main breaker and turned on the electricity to the house again. When she got back to the tank, Kenzo tapped a wrench on a valve.

"Okay, turn on the water."

Gina turned the handle on the valve. The sound of water could be heard as it rushed through the pipe and into the tank. He had her open the kitchen sink faucet to let air out of the system.

"See any drips?" he asked.

"No. That's good, right?"

"Only place water comes out of pipes is from the faucet, and only when you want it to. Know what to do if there's a leak?"

"Turn off the water?"

"Right. Anything else?"

"Call you," she said.

For maybe the first time, she saw him smile. "Try fixing it yourself first. Then call me."

Kenzo packed up his tools and went back to his truck, which meant to Gina the job was finished and he was satisfied. And if he was satisfied, she figured she had nothing to worry about. Still, she kept her fingers crossed while making her breakfast, now two hours overdue.

When she heard a bang on the side of the house, she peeked through louvered windows to see what was going on. She found Kenzo climbing the ladder, once again wearing his tool belt. Bundled under one arm were several old palm fronds.

She went out to see what he was going to do with them.

"I thought the roof was done? What're those for?"

“Over the porch,” he said, looking down at her. “Bring up more fronds.”

She found the giant stack of fronds that had been collected. It would take a dozen trips up and down the ladder to get them up to him. Remembering a length of rope she’d seen in a pile of trash, she tied a large bundle of fronds together. The roofer watched while she tossed the other end of the rope up to him. Palm fronds aren’t heavy, so the bundle was easily pulled up. It took only a couple more hoists to get all the new layer of roofing material up to him, and Gina joined him there.

He was stapling fronds to rafters over the front porch with a heavy stapling gun. The stem end aimed toward the pitch, with the leaves of adjoining fronds overlapping to make a thick matt that would provide shade to the wide porch. She knew better than to start a conversation, but needed to know what was going on.

“Okay, as a learning experience, why are we putting on these instead of plywood and shingles?” she asked, arranging more fronds for him to staple.

“No need for something fancy. These blow off, no problem. Just go get more of them.” Stopping with the nailer, he shrugged. “This way look better.”

Once again, it was as if he timed the job to end at noon. Once they were down, tools put away, and they had bottles of water in their hands, he stood back to admire their handiwork.

“Good roof,” he said with a nod.

“Is it done?”

He nodded. “Done.”

“I have a question. There are these little rats, or squirrels, or whatever that I see running around. They’re not shaped like rats and move a lot faster. What are those?”

“Mongoose.”

“I’ve heard of those. They’re okay? Or do I need to get rid of them?”

He gave her a thumbs-up. “They’re okay. Eat the cockroaches and rats.”

“They’re good, then?” she asked.

“Wild animals. Leave them alone.”

“I saw a green lizard in the kitchen this morning. Was it a gecko?”

He nodded. “Good luck to have in the house. Leave it alone.”

“Anything else I should know about the animals around here?” Gina asked.

“Don’t feed them. Big nuisance if you do. If the pigs and goats get into the vegetable patch, they’ll eat everything.”

“I found the fence at the top of the hill the other day. It needs some repairs.”

“Not my problem,” he said.

“I saw fence posts at the hardware store. Felix can help me with that,” she said to herself, as a mental note to add to her list of things to do that week.

He gave her a new look, one of appraising her. “Good idea to fix that now.”

“On my list, along with about a hundred other things to do. At least I’ll have hot water now.”

Kenzo looked at the blisters on one of Gina’s hands. “Wear gloves.” He looked at her face. “And a hat.”

He left Gina alone to her final afternoon off before starting her real job as estate landscape manager the next morning. She still had no idea of what to expect from one day to the next, and was still in the process of outlining what she thought needed to be done to recreate the old garden areas of the estate. She’d been expecting more oversight from the Tanizawas, but so far all she’d got were a couple of short conversations with the somewhat elusive Millie. But before she could call her, Gina needed to call home.

“Mamma! Guess what I did this morning!”

“Go to the airport?”

“No, not coming home yet. But just as good, I installed a new hot water heater in the house. Okay, I had a lot of help, but I did most of the work.”

“Work on plumbing more important than going to church?”

“I haven’t had a hot shower in a while, Mamma. But I found a church if I go in the future.”

“Which one? They have Catholic churches there?”

“Of course. This one is Blessed Virgin Mary’s. Morning services aren’t in English, though.”

“You go to church by yourself there, but not with your family here at home?”

Gina was disappointed her mother wasn't happier. "I thought you'd be pleased that I learned a new skill."

"Plumbing is for boys to do. How'd you find the church? Who took you?"

"It's across the street from the hardware store. We had to get a new tank to replace the old one."

"We who?" her mother demanded.

"A man that works on the house."

"Do I know him?"

"Mamma, do you know anybody in Hawaii besides me?"

"Already met a man? All your life here and you turn up your nose at every man you meet. Two days there and a man is taking you to church already."

Even more disappointment was descending into the conversation. "Is Ana home?"

"She's on a date with the Rizzoli boy."

"He finally asked her out? Good for her. Have her call me when she gets home. What else is new?"

"I signed up for a new class," her mother said.

"New cooking class? What is it this time? Burmese or Singaporean?"

"A travel class this time."

"Finally talked Dad into taking you on a trip?"

"I can go on my own. I don't need him."

"Love the attitude, Mamma. What's the class about?" Gina asked.

"Everything someone needs to know about visiting Hawaii. I know someone there now, and I can even get a free room."

"Here? Wait a minute!"

"Don't you want me to visit?" her mother asked.

"Of course I do, but maybe in a few months after I've settled into a routine. I don't have an extra bed for you right now, anyway."

"I thought you were in a house?"

"I am, but the only furniture is in the kitchen and one bedroom. I barely have a roof over my head. Give me a while, okay?"

"You need furniture? I can send you a few things. We have a houseful."

"Mamma, you can't send furniture this far. It's not my job to furnish the place, just manage the gardens. Which reminds me I still have a few

things to do this evening. Call me next Sunday?"

"Only one day a week to call my daughter?" her mother insisted.

"Call me Wednesday after your class. And whatever you do, don't make any airline reservations!"

Taking her yellow pad and a flashlight, Gina took one last afternoon tour of the estate grounds before giving up for the day. Most of her inspection was in the area of the forgotten Japanese garden and the old koi pond next to it. Pushing through grass and weeds, she found a few more overgrown shrubs that looked as though they'd been pruned and shaped in the distant past. Now knowing what to look for, she found a few more ornamentals mixed in with the weeds and out of control Morning Glory vines. With each new find, she'd mark the position on her map along with the name of it.

When it got too dark to do any more drawing on her yellow pad, she went to the stream to splash cool water on her face. Rather than walking beneath the trees along the stream, she followed the double track back to the house. Once she was out in the open, she noticed lights at the house. They weren't on inside, but toward the back. Several cars and pickups were there, and she saw people standing around. Maybe because she was too far away, but she hadn't noticed anyone arrive.

"Now what?" she muttered as she hurried along the gravel driveway. She felt her pockets for her phone, but hadn't brought it. With no way of calling either the police or Millie, she'd have to deal with her uninvited guests alone. She also couldn't remember if she'd locked the house doors, or even closed them. "Please tell me the house isn't being invaded by more homeless people."

She was almost running by the time she got back to the house. What she found were a dozen men and women, with several kids running around, and barbecues set up. The coals were already hot and slabs of meat were being put on grills. Camp lanterns were on small tables and several folding patio chairs were arranged in a circle. Several mosquito punks were smoldering.

"If these guys are homeless, they're rather organized about it."

With a sense of safety in mind, Gina went to the closest woman. Filipino, she was pretty and very pregnant.

"Um, hi. What's going on here?"

"Sunday dinner. Are you Gina?"

“Yes. How’d you know that?”

“I’m Clara. We’ve been waiting to meet you.” She looped her arm though Gina’s the chummy way Ana often did and led her to the rest of the group. At first she spoke in a Filipino language, and then laughing, she switched to English. “This is Gina. She’s taking over as our new boss.”

From growing up in the Santoro family, if there was one thing Gina wasn’t it was shy. But she did feel a little intimidated by trying to learn the names of a dozen new people, especially not being able to see their faces well in the dim light. She had a speech to give, one she was planning to give the next morning.

“You’re catching me a little off-guard right now. I wasn’t expecting to meet you until tomorrow.” When she looked around the group, they all seemed to stare back at her. She held up her yellow pad. “I have some ideas and I’m looking forward to getting started on them.”

Still nothing. It got worse when a couple of the men went to their barbecues to tend the meat and vegetables that were grilling.

“It might take me a few days to learn everyone’s name.”

The smoke that wafted through the air was heavy, savory, with a peculiar scent that she couldn’t identify. It made her hungry for more than the minestrone that she was planning for dinner that evening. She still wasn’t getting much of a reaction from them. Scratching the side of her head with a fingertip, she wondered what the problem was.

She clasped her hands together in a prayerful gesture. “Maybe you guys could tell me what your jobs are?”

Finally, someone stepped forward. He was the shortest and roundest of all of them, including some of the women. “I’m Flor, spelled with one O. You’re not Filipino?”

“No, sorry. I’m Italian. Actually, I’m from Cleveland.”

“Cleveland. That’s a cold place, isn’t it?”

“In the winter. The lake effect...never mind that. What do you do here at the estate, Flor?”

“I’ll be taking care of the fruit trees. My wife Florinda will work with me.”

“It’ll be easy to remember your names,” Gina said. “I have friends at home with your names.”

A senior citizen-aged man stepped forward, bringing a young woman with him, along with two small kids. “I’m Gabe...Gabriel. This is my

Reyna, and our kids, Jazlyn and Marisol. They won't be trouble."

"I'm sure they won't be." Gina waved at the two little girls who looked like twins. "Do you help your daddy?"

The kids barely blinked their replies, but Gabe answered for them. "They play, I dig. If you want a hole dug, come to me."

"Well, the old koi pond needs a lot of digging." Gina waved her yellow legal pad with her list of ideas and her simple schedule. "This should be a fun project. I'm looking forward to getting started."

"When will the equipment be delivered?" someone asked after another round of introductions.

"Equipment?" Gina asked.

"I'll need a backhoe," Gabe said.

"Backhoe?"

"And a bulldozer with a plow attachment to dig the fields," someone else said. He was the one responsible for returning the pea patches to their original places, a farmer by trade as he explained it. "The weeds need to be burned to the ground, and the dirt dug and turned over if you want to grow vegetables again."

This was all news to Gina. She'd agreed in her contract that minimal expense would be used on heavy tools or machines that needed to be rented. Scratching her head while wondering what to say, she was saved when a figure came from one of the barbecues. When he got close, Gina recognized Felix's smile. "Dinner's ready."

One of the wives prepared a plate of food for Gina, and she seemed to get the chair of honor between two campground lanterns. Once most of the food had been identified and eaten, Gina knew it was time to go back to work.

"You see, we won't have the money for heavy equipment. Everything we'll do will be with hand tools."

The collective groan was almost palpable.

"Gotta dig with shovels?" Gabe asked.

"Just so you know, I'll be digging with you. And planting, pruning, whatever I can do."

"That's what we figured," Clara, the pregnant girl, said. "We heard about you on the roof this weekend."

Flor was seated next to Gina. He took one of her hands for a close inspection. He smiled when he gave it back, and said something in Filipino

to the others. That got a chuckle from them.

“What?” Gina asked.

“A year from now, your hands won’t be so soft.”

“Probably not.”

“You gotta husband in Chicago?” Clara asked.

“Cleveland, and no. Not here, either.”

That got the women in the group chatting in their language, and Gina wondered how much of a mistake it was to divulge that. It took another hour of chatting about her basic work schedule for the first week, and the overall plan for the estate, before they began to pack up to leave for the night. Even though they were still grumbling over having to use hand tools, they weren’t talking about going on strike or asking for more money.

Felix and Flor, who was emerging as something of an assistant to Felix, found Gina before they left.

“We’ll get here early each day and start work as soon as it’s light. Pau hana is two o’clock.”

“Pau hana?”

“Stop work.”

“What about overtime or a special project to do? Do you guys like to work extra?” she asked.

“We work five days a week, eight hours a day, and never on holidays,” Flor said while walking away. “No more, no less. If we don’t get paid on time, we don’t work. Simple as that.”

Felix stuck around as the others drove off.

“Hey, don’t start asking these guys to work haole kind way or you’ll have trouble.”

“Haole is mainland person, right? Work is the same here as there, isn’t it?”

He shook his head. “Just like pau hana at two o’clock, they only do certain things. Flor only takes care of the trees, Gabriel only works with the dirt. Clara will work in the kitchen to make us lunch. Don’t try to get extra work from them unless you offer a lot of overtime pay, in cash. No one likes to work in the afternoon. These guys, self-starters. They know what to do. Your job is to make a plan, and their job is to make the plan work.”

“Okay, fine. But I don’t have much food in the house for Clara to make lunches for everyone.”

“No matter. She knows what we like and will bring what she needs every day.”

“Do I need to do anything at all?” Gina asked.

“Yeah, supervise!”

Chapter Seven

Gina had set her phone alarm to chime extra early on Monday morning. It had rained for a while during the night and she wondered how that might affect her work schedule for the day. All she really wanted was to finally get a decent start to the Tanizawa estate project.

After heating tea water, she burnt some bread over the electric stove element rather than wait for the toaster. She wasn't going to give the eggs another chance to mock her like they did the day before. Getting everything she needed to work that day situated in a knapsack, gloves, hat, sunscreen, a bottle of water, her pad of notes, and most important, the credit card from Millie, she decided to wait in the dark on the front porch for her crew to show up.

Gina had been learning the lesson of the necessity for cross-flow ventilation in the tropics. She propped the front door open to air the house, and for Clara to go in and out, and probably the kids also, the way they always insisted on running in and out of open doors. But when she pushed the screen door outward, it hit something. With a closer look, she saw someone sleeping on his side.

"Hey! Wake up! Time to go to wherever it is you go every day." She gave the squatter a couple solid whacks with the door. From the way he was dressed, it looked like the same guy as the two previous mornings, except without the windbreaker. Giving him a few more whacks with the door, he still didn't budge. "Really tied one on last night, didn't you?"

The only way she could get out was to shove the screen door against him and push him away enough so she could squeeze out a gap. She had to step over him, and once she had her things set on a chair, she saw the same black cat that had showed up on other mornings. She wondered if the cat was somehow a pet of the homeless guy that had taken up the habit of using her front porch as his personal bedroom. This time, the cat had something in its mouth.

"Look what you've done. You've brought me a rat. Aren't you considerate?" Gina got a tissue from her knapsack, and using that like a glove, she got the dead rat by the tail and carried it out to the weeds near the

stream. The cat tagged along right behind. Once the rat was dropped, the cat went about disassembling its meal. “At least you know how to feed yourself and don’t need me to.”

She went back to the man on her porch. When he still didn’t respond to her voice, her police training kicked in. Knowing better than to kneel down and wake a stranger close up, she gave his hip a nudge with her foot.

“Sleepytime’s over, pal. Time to get lost.” When he still didn’t budge, she knelt down and gave him a thorough shake. She was sure he was the same man as previous mornings, but something was different about him. “Hey, wake up. You need to go. If I can’t sleep in, neither can you.”

That’s when she noticed his breath was worse than bad, and when she pushed, he stiffly rocked back and forth rather than flop around.

“What the…”

When she rolled him onto his back, his arms and legs stayed in the same positions as though they were stiff in the joints. There was the impression of wood grain from the porch deck on his cheek. His eyes were open, but not looking at her.

Or anything else.

Gina took a step back and crossed herself. She knew she had to go back and check for a pulse, part of her old police training. Groping his neck on both sides, and then feeling his wrists, there was nothing that felt like a pulse. She stepped back and crossed herself again.

“Definitely not on today’s schedule,” she said, getting her phone from her pocket. She assumed calling for the police was the same in Hawaii as at home, and she dialed 9-1-1 to get the emergency dispatch operator. “Hi. I need to report a death. I need the police.”

“Death? Are you safe? Is someone there threatening you with a gun or knife?”

Gina scanned the area around the front of the house. “I don’t see anyone else.”

“Has CPR been started?”

“It might be an hour or so too late for that. He’s already kinda stiff,” Gina said, looking down at the body. He had rolled back to his original position that she found him in.

“I’ll send an ambulance. What’s your address?”

“Address?” That was a good question. As far as Gina knew, there was no address for the house. The closest real street was on the other side of the

stream a hundred feet away. “Not sure of the address.”

“What’s your location, Ma’am?”

“Just a little house in the woods. It’s off the East-West Road, wherever that is. I just got here a couple days ago.” Gina felt embarrassed, that she couldn’t give a better description of her location. She’d been on police calls a dozen times while working as an officer, trying to find someone that had given vague reports of where to meet them. “Look, the entrance to the place is a narrow lane that goes over a little bridge across the stream. There’s a gravel driveway to follow after that.”

“Which stream?”

“Manoa Stream, wherever that is.”

“You’re near the university?” the dispatcher asked with a gentle sing-song accent.

“That’s right. On the other side of the estate are a couple of large water tanks on a ridge.”

“Do you mean the old Tanizawa estate?”

“Yeah, you know it?”

“Everybody knows it. Please hold while I send an ambulance and police.”

That’s when a pickup truck drove in. Gina recognized the driver as Felix. She waved for him to stop before he got to the front porch. Then the dispatch operator came back on.

“Okay, police and rescue are on their way. Do you need me to stay in the line?”

“No, I’m okay,” she said, ending the call. She saw Felix staring at the body on the porch. He was dressed for work that day, with long, thin pants and work boots on his feet. “A little bit of a problem this morning, Felix.”

“Looks like it. He won’t leave?”

“More than that. He’s dead.”

He took a couple of steps backward. “Huh?”

“Big surprise, right?” Her police brain kicking in again, she knew she needed to secure the scene to prevent contamination of any evidence. Even though the man was simply a homeless drifter, the police liked to make sure he died of natural causes before moving him or disturbing the scene unnecessarily. Bringing up the camera on her phone, she took photos of the body from multiple angles, including a close-up of his face, hands, and soles of his shoes. Maybe she’d never made it out of field training as a

rookie officer, but she knew those were the parts of the body and clothing that often held the most evidence. That's when she saw something unusual about his shoes.

She noticed Felix taking another step backward. "Maybe you should go to the street and watch for the police. But stay off the driveway. The police might want to look for footprints in the wet dirt."

"He's really dead kind way?"

"Unfortunately. Does he look familiar to you?"

Felix frowned for the first time Gina could remember, and shook his head. "Looks homeless."

"That's what you told me a couple days ago." The first siren came from a distance, followed by another. Gina's trained ear could tell one was a police car and the other an ambulance.

"He's the same guy as the other day?"

Gina nodded. "I've found him sleeping on the porch each morning. He moved a little slow, but he always wandered off toward the bridge."

"Sounds like the police are almost here," Felix said.

"Better go wave them down so they know where to come. And stay off the bridge. There might be footprints there, also."

Felix trotted off to the bridge, but crossed through the stream to the street outside. Once he was gone, she looked at the shoes of the dead man again.

"This isn't the same kind of grass growing as weeds here on the estate. This is lawn grass."

There were several clumps of two-inch bits of grass stuck to the soles of both shoes. All of it was uniform in length, as though it had been mown. She couldn't help herself but pick one off for a closer look.

"One little lawn clipping won't be missed from a dead homeless guy's shoes. Not like there's anything suspicious about him."

Gina hurried into the house with the piece of grass. Getting the little magnifying glass she'd brought to look at insects and pests close up, she examined the blade of grass. One end was brown, while the other end was still green, freshly clipped. The length of it was still green but dry. A big part of her horticulture education had been in ornamental landscape, and that included lawn care. After all the lawns she'd mowed in the last couple of years during her training in landscaping, she was familiar with grass. This particular specimen looked...

Interrupting her were loud police sirens. She tucked the blade of grass in a ziplock bag and left it on the kitchen counter before going out to the porch again.

With one last *whoop whoop* announcing their arrival, the siren was cut when the police car came across the bridge. When it appeared through the trees, it turned to where Gina waved her arms at them. The squad car bounced through puddles in the gravel double-track as it approached a little too fast, and after hitting one bump too hard, it slowed to a stop. Both uniform cops got out and drew their weapons.

"It's okay! The scene is secure!" Gina shouted from her spot on the porch.

Keeping their sidearms in their hands, they walked slowly toward her, scanning the area around them. That's when the ambulance showed up, its lights pointlessly flashing in the dim light. The paramedics got out, got several cases of equipment, and trotted to catch up with the police, who were just getting to where Felix stood like a statue.

"The vic's up here," Gina told them.

"What's going on?" one of the cops asked. "Who are you?"

"I'm Gina Santoro. I'm the one that called this in."

"What's the deal with him?" one of the cops asked. He was dark-skinned and big, and his shirt needed to be a size larger to fit right. His partner was a tall woman, with classic girl-next-door looks of blond hair and blue eyes, and a gym rat body. She looked more like a party stripper than a real cop.

"He's a homeless guy that's been sleeping on the front porch each morning. Today, he's not waking up."

The cops holstered their weapons. The big one sent the paramedics up to evaluate the dead man, while the woman went around to the back of the house to look around. After feeling for pulses, the paramedics opened one case and hooked up the EKG monitor to his chest. After a minute of watching nothing happen, they disconnected it, and shook their heads to the police officer. While one put away their equipment, the other filled out a form.

That's when the big cop came up the steps to the porch, leaving his pretty blond partner to question Felix after she got back to the front of the house.

"You're the home owner?" he asked Gina.

“Not the owner, but I live here.”

“This is the old Tanizawa place, isn’t it? I remember coming here as a school kid for a field trip. Kind of a mess now.”

“I’m getting it back together.”

“You don’t look like a Tanizawa.”

She already had her driver’s license ready to show him. “Gina Santoro.”

He wrote down the information from her license. “You’re from Cleveland?”

“I just got here a few days ago. Getting kinda tired of telling everybody that, though.” She put her license away again. “I tried to preserve the scene for you, just in case.”

“In case of what?”

“Somebody needs to investigate.”

“Investigate what?” he asked.

“His death.”

He took a deep breath, his shirt stretching across his broad chest even more. She noticed the nametag on his shirt said *Iosefa*. “Miss Santoro, we have calls about a dozen homeless deaths every week. Usually it’s a matter of identifying the body and transporting to the morgue. Most of the time they’ve overdosed on the cheap drug of the week and nobody found them until too late. My guess, that’s what happened here.”

“That’s what I was thinking. But maybe we should go through his pockets for paraphernalia?”

“We?”

“Sorry. You.”

“Look, lady. I’m still not sure who you are, and you better believe I’m gonna check you out, but I don’t need you telling me how to investigate a death. Got it?”

“Yeah, sure. Sorry.”

Felix must’ve heard the dressing down, because he turned toward them. “Hey! She used to be a cop.”

Officer Iosefa apprized Gina again. “That true?”

“A long time ago.”

“That’s why you knew to keep the scene secure?”

“Just old training kicking in, I guess.” If there was one thing Gina knew, it was to remain on the good side of the police, if for no other reason

than to stay out of trouble. "I didn't mean to interfere."

When he smiled at her, it was more of a one-sided sneer that punks back home in Little Italy gave to each other when posturing. Hopefully, it had a different meaning here in Honolulu. "That's okay. No worries. You know anything else about this guy?"

"Like why he used my front porch to sleep on?" she asked.

"Or why he picked your porch to die on?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" she snapped.

"Nothing. Only that he's dead on your porch. That raises questions. You'd know that if you really were a police officer in the past."

"Look, I have no idea who he is, where he came from every night, or why he came here. He's just some guy."

"Yeah, just some guy." Officer Iosefa made a few notes on his notepad. "How many times have I heard that from witnesses?"

"Too many," Gina said. "They're always just some guy, until they die. Then when it's too late to care about them, everybody pays attention."

Together, both officers put on gloves before going through the dead man's pockets while Gina watched. All they found were a leather wallet, small pocketknife, and a shiny bottle cap. As much as she wanted to, Gina couldn't pick up any of it for a closer look. She'd already been labeled as 'the gardener', and as such, she would only interfere. As it was, Gina was surprised she was allowed so close to the body and the evidence. But if she couldn't touch, she could at least take pictures with her phone.

Both cops noticed her snapping photos.

"You don't mind, do you? Just a few snapshots."

"What's your stake in this, anyway?" the woman cop asked.

"As we've already determined just a moment ago, he's a dead guy on the front porch of my residence. Plus, I'm the one who found him. We both know that by the end of the morning, a detective will be here asking me questions, and he'll take as much time as he needs. I might even end up in the police station to answer questions as a suspect. That's my stake in this."

"Not like you're from the press," Officer Iosefa said. "But if I find any of those online in social media, I'm busting you for obstructing a police investigation."

"Any ID in the wallet?" Gina asked, ignoring his warnings.

Officer Iosefa opened it. There was only a small black and white snapshot of a dark-haired woman holding the hand of a small child, with

palm trees in the background. No money, no driver's license, nothing. Just the old snapshot.

"I wonder who that is?" the blond cop asked. Her nametag said Davis.

"Maybe Iris?" Gina offered. She took a picture of the photo, trying to get a clear close-up of it.

"Why Iris?"

"Look at his forearm. He's got a tat of the same face, with *Iris* at the bottom."

While Iosefa compared the photo to the tattoo, and Gina took a photo of the tattoo, Davis opened the rickety pocketknife. One blade had been snapped off, and the other had a smear of blood on it. She set it down. Gina got snapshots of that, also. "Been in a fight."

"Better check him for wounds," Iosefa said. The two of them rolled the dead man back and forth with his shirt up looking for fresh wounds, and then checked his legs. All they found was a Band-Aid on his belly. They picked off one side to find a small puncture and only a tiny smear of blood, not at all menacing.

"Insect bite?" Officer Davis, the blond cop, asked.

"Looks like a bite from a cane spider," Iosefa said, sticking the Band-Aid down again.

"What's a cane spider?" Gina asked, while taking another picture.

"Nasty things that rather hide than bite, but when they do, they take a chunk out just like that," Iosefa said, making a few more notes.

"They must be big if they can take a bite that size."

"The body's not so big but the legs are long, and they can move fast when they want to. The real problem is the infection that someone gets later. Nasty stuff."

"It doesn't look puffy or red as though it was getting infected," Gina said.

Officer Iosefa started snapping pictures of his own on his phone. "Probably died before it could. Who knows? Maybe he died from an allergic reaction to it?"

"There's something peculiar about this," Davis said. She looked at the dead man's hands again. "A smear of blood on his pocket knife, and now he's dead, but without any defense wounds. It'll be interesting to see if the blood on the blade matches his own."

Officer Iosefa got out his phone. "Let's call for a CSI team."

The sky was mostly light by then, and a couple of pickup trucks came into the estate from the bridge. Instead of approaching, they remained at a distance with their engines running when Officer Davis went out to wave them down.

“Who’re they?” Officer Iosefa asked Gina. Felix had joined them on the porch by then. “Friends of yours here to see a body?”

“My work crew. They’re supposed to start work this morning.”

“Not today, they aren’t.”

“They’re not working on the house, just out in the fields clearing brush and marking trees and shrubs for pruning,” Gina told him. She knew she was sounding like an impatient witness rather than an officer now, by wanting her day to proceed in spite of the police activities that could easily take hours to complete. “Please?”

Officer Iosefa sent Davis to string yellow crime scene tape in a perimeter around the house.

“CSI will need to check for tire prints and footprints between here and the bridge. After last night’s rain, this soft dirt is perfect for that. They’ll collect fingerprints here at the porch. They’ll need to know everywhere you’ve gone this morning, and everything you’ve touched. They might even need to dust the interior of the house, looking for the dead man’s prints. You’d know all that, Miss Santoro, if you were a cop.”

“That’s what I thought.” Gina sent Felix out to the waiting crew to explain what was going on. A few had come closer to watch, restrained only by the yellow crime scene tape the blond cop was stringing around the area. Flor watched her with intense interest, at least until his wife noticed and put an end to it with a swat to his arm. “What if CSI takes casts of tire treads and shoe prints first? Then I could put my crew to work. I’m sure they’d promise to stay out of the way.”

“Actually, I have a detective coming,” Officer Iosefa said. “He’ll be running the show as soon as he gets here. Until then, nobody goes anywhere. Something isn’t square about this deal.”

Gina knew what was bothering him. It was bothering her also. A smear of blood on a pocketknife was never innocent, especially when found in the possession of a dead man. No money, no ID, only a snapshot in his wallet and a bottle cap found in his pocket made for a curious mystery, even if she was a gardener now and no longer a police officer.

Chapter Eight

Gina went to her work crew to explain what was happening. Felix seemed to be searching for something positive to say, Florinda looked peeved, and Clara looked to be in a panic as she rubbed a hand in circles over her belly.

“Day off with no pay?” Gabe asked, looking disappointed.

“No, not yet. I just need to get the area released by the police so we can get started, but I have to wait for the police investigator to get here for that.”

Gina needed to think fast to find something for her crew to do before they turned into an angry gang. They were only getting paid minimum wage, but they were farmers and unskilled laborers living in an expensive city, and every dollar counted. If they all lost confidence in her or the project and quit, they’d have a hard time finding other work, and she’d have a hard time finding a new crew. Gina was in a tight spot and had some fast thinking to do. She gave Felix her Tanizawa credit card and a list of things she thought they needed to get the work started.

“Go to the hardware store and get whatever you think we need. Shovels, tools, anything.” She went to Florinda and handed over the last of the cash she’d brought from home. “You and Clara go to the grocery store and get a few things. If you don’t mind, I could use something for the kitchen.”

“Better than hanging around here waiting for something to happen,” Florinda said. “What do you need?”

“If you could find me a coffeemaker and some grinds, that would make me a lot more cheerful in the morning.”

“What about him?” Clara asked, still staring at the body on the porch. The strain in her eyes made her look ten years older.

“Hopefully he won’t be here much longer.” Gina and Florinda watched as Clara got in a car. “Hey, she’s not freaking out, is she?”

“Clara? She’s always been superstitious. All of us are. She’s pretty tough, but she just doesn’t want her baby to be around, well, that guy.”

“I don’t blame her. Who’s her husband?”

“No more husband. I mean, Clara’s not married. She’s my sister. That’s why she comes with us.”

A little soap opera was starting.

“When’s her due date?” Gina asked.

“Still three months. Everything’s fine. She can still cook for us.”

“Cook?”

“Yeah. No one told you? We’re a regular group that works together all the time. Clara’s new with us, just since she got hapai. All she does is cook, taking it easy, you know?”

“Cook what?”

Florinda crossed her arms. “That Felix is no good as foreman. He shoulda told you that we work six in the morning till two in the afternoon, with lunch in the middle. Clara makes a few sandwiches and something to drink. It keeps us going and doesn’t take too long. After two o’clock, it gets too hot to work. But rain or shine, you’ll still get eight hours of work from us.”

“I wasn’t worried about that.” Gina leaned in close. “Look, I really don’t want Clara going into labor here. It took a while for the police and ambulance to find where to come. I don’t want this place turning into a maternity ward.”

“Never been around hapai girls, have you?”

“Hapai?”

“Pregnant way.”

“Not too many. Why?”

“Pinay pregnant girls not so fragile as you think, Miss Santoro. Been making babies for a long time.”

“I don’t know what that means, but you don’t have to call me Miss Santoro.”

Florinda smiled. “Okay, Boss.”

“Just call me Gina.”

“But you’re the boss!”

“Look, you can call me anything you want as long as you get me that coffeemaker and a bag of grinds.”

While Florinda and Clara drove out, Gina watched as a sedan came in. It had tinted windows, push bumpers on the front, and the rims were painted to match the blue color of the car.

“Yep, there’s the detective.”

He was tall, and had a muscular body that made him look like a football coach. Curly hair was tied back in a stubby ponytail, something Gina had never liked on men. Instead of the sport coat and slacks she was accustomed to seeing on detectives at home, he was dressed in cargo pants and a Hawaiian print shirt in subdued blues. In his hands were a thick notebook and an electronic tablet. The only thing that made him look like a cop was the sidearm holstered to his belt.

Gina knew better than to interrupt when he went to the two uniformed officers. They were mostly watching the CSI techs that had arrived, busy marking things on the ground, and taking photographs of tire treads and footprints in the soft soil near the front of the house. Officer Iosefa and the detective had a quick conversation, the detective copied a few things from the officers' and CSI techs' notes, and Gina was finally pointed out. Apparently, police posturing was the same everywhere. She watched as the detective came to her, a swagger in his walk. He had his notebook of paper ready when he got to Gina.

"You're Santoro?"

"That's right. First name is Gina. You are?"

"Detective Michael Kona, Honolulu Police. I hear you're Cleveland PD?"

"Was. It's been a while."

He read his notes. "I understand you're here to get the Tanizawa estate going again?"

"The grounds. I was hired by the Tanizawa family to restore the estate as close to historically accurate to the original as I can. I have a crew of a dozen and we were supposed to start today. Now I'm finding busy work for them to do until you release the grounds to us."

He scratched his neck for a moment. "Gotta let my CSI guys do their thing. What I don't get is why you're here as a gardener?"

"Landscape horticulturist. Like I said, I no longer work for the force. I'm doing this now. I can get you the Tanizawa contact number, if you want to talk to them to verify my story?"

"I can find it, and yes, I'll be verifying everything you tell me. Tell me what happened this morning."

"With the body?" Gina retold the story of finding the dead body on her porch, of how she had to shove the screen door to push him aside just to get out of the house.

“Why didn’t you use the back door?” he asked.

“I guess I didn’t think of it. Mostly, I was trying to wake the guy up.”

“You didn’t know he was dead when you first saw him?”

She shook her head. “I thought he was sleeping off a bender.”

“The position he’s in now isn’t the same as when you first found him?”

“His position is the same, but just in a slightly different spot. I pushed him about a foot away so I could get through the door. I also rolled him up a little. That’s when I discovered he was getting stiff, and knew he’d been dead for a while.”

He glanced at the door and jotted a few notes. “Once again, why did you push him with the door instead of go out the back door and come around? What you did was tampering with evidence. You know that, right?”

“Well, yeah, of course. But at first I didn’t know he was dead. I just thought he was sleeping like the other mornings.”

“Other mornings?” he asked.

Gina nodded. “This is the fourth morning he’s been here.”

“Each morning was the same thing? You had to push him away from the door to get out?”

“Not yesterday. He was in the middle of the porch when I found him yesterday. The other two mornings someone else found him.”

“Your roommate?”

“No, I live here alone. The first day it was Felix who had found the man. By the time I got to the door, the man was already walking away.”

“Who’s Felix?” Detective Kona asked.

“The foreman for my work crew.”

“You hired him?”

She shook her head. “The Tanizawas did before I got here. He assembled the rest of the crew.”

“And the second day?” Detective Kona asked.

“The roofer found him and kicked him out.”

Kona made a point of looking up at the roof before jotting a few more notes. “What’s the roofer’s name?”

“Come to think of it, I don’t know. Just some old Japanese guy the Tanizawas sent.”

“He spoke Japanese to you?”

“No, English. Sort of. He never had much to say.”

“How do you know he was Japanese?”

“Look, for some reason I figured him to be Japanese. I can tell you all about Italians, but I don’t know much about Asians. I wouldn’t know Japanese from Chinese, or anything else, if someone spoke it to me.”

“You’re Italian?”

“Right. But American.”

“Isn’t Santoro a Spanish name?” he asked.

“Yes, but my father’s family was from Italy. Somewhere along the way, one of them left Spain to go to Italy. A few generations later, they came to America and brought the name with them. Maybe they had space in a suitcase.”

“For the name?” he asked.

“It’s funny when my dad says it.” She watched as he made copious notes of what she was telling him about her family name. “Look, my family tree is complicated, okay?”

“Wait till you meet a few local Hawaii people,” he said. “Yesterday when you found him, did he say anything to you before he left?”

“No. He just said he was sorry and wandered off in the direction of the bridge.”

“Was he in a hurry?” he asked.

“No. He seemed reluctant to go.”

“What was he sorry about?”

“He didn’t say and I didn’t ask. He just seemed sad, or at least remorseful about something.”

“Sad enough to kill himself?”

“You think he did?” she asked.

“I have to look at all the angles.”

“I’m not a good enough psychologist to know if he might’ve killed himself,” she said. “That Officer Iosefa said he might’ve died from an allergic reaction to a spider bite.”

“Officer Iosefa is a patrol officer in good standing with HPD, not a medical examiner. I’ll remind him of that later.” Detective Kona jotted a few notes. “The man just got up, said he was sorry, and walked away when you woke him?”

“Pretty much. He moved pretty slow, like he wanted to sleep off a bender, but he didn’t give me any trouble.”

“Didn’t ask for money or a meal?”

Gina shook her head. “Nothing. I never saw him again, until this morning. You know the rest.”

“He never told you his name?”

Gina shook her head. “Never asked mine, either. Just apologized for sleeping on the porch and walked away.”

“That’s not very satisfying, Miss Santoro.”

“Not to me, either. When can I get my gardens back?”

“I still have a few more questions. First, what’s your job here again?”

Gina was finding out what it was like to be interviewed, only from the opposite side of the law. Giving a witness statement really was repetitious, and she could see why so many witnesses clammed up after a while.

“I have a certificate in landscape horticulture and I’ve been looking for a good job since graduating from the program last summer. Just on a whim, I sent the Tanizawas my resume when I saw their ad online. I don’t know why, maybe because I was willing to work cheaper than everyone else, or if they were simply desperate, but they hired me. A week later, I climbed on a plane. Here I am.”

Detective Kona made a show of scanning the grounds of the estate. “The old place has gone wild. What’re they expecting you to do with it?”

“They want to return it to the way it looked back in the good old days, whenever those were. All I have to go on are a few black and white photographs and a map drawn by Millie Tanizawa, my contact with the family. Otherwise, I have no idea what they’re expecting and they’re not telling me much. All I know is that I have a year to accomplish it. Then they’ll open it to the public as a display botanical garden and historical estate.”

“You don’t know the history of this place?” he asked.

“Only that it was the Tanizawa estate.”

“Talk your way into the university library to learn some more about it. Or maybe take a tour of the Japanese Cultural Center.”

“I have no idea where anything is. I doubt I could even find the ocean.”

He pointed in the direction of the stream. “The university is right across the street. You can’t miss it.”

“And the cultural center?”

“It’s not far from here. You could walk to it. Just turn left on East-West Road, then right on Dole Street, then left on University, then right on

Beretania.”

“Is that to the cultural center or to the ocean?”

“Cultural center.”

“How do I get to the ocean? I saw it in the distance one day, but I haven’t been there yet,” she said.

“It’s an island.” Detective Kona kept writing. “Walk downhill till your feet get wet.”

“Maybe I should get a map.”

“Might be a good idea.” One of the CSI techs came to Detective Kona and handed over a preliminary report. With that, he sent Iosefa and his partner back on patrol. Then he made a call to the coroner to request a body collection. Done with those tasks, he looked at Gina again.

She clasped her hands in front of her in a begging gesture. “Please can I have my gardens now? Time is money and I’m kinda wasting both on the first day of work.”

“Okay, you can have everything beyond the bridge. Once the coroner has picked up the body, you can have the grounds, but not the porch or the house. My CSI techs will be working for a while.”

“What about inside the house? My guys will need to use the bathroom at some point, and one of them is supposed to make lunch.”

“Is there a back door?” Kona asked.

Gina nodded. “It goes right into the kitchen.”

“Once I check out the inside of the house, the cook can have the kitchen, but only through the back door.”

“She’s kinda freaked out about the body. I doubt she’ll go anywhere near the front porch,” Gina said.

“What’s she look like?”

“Young and pregnant, as in very pregnant.”

“Let me check out the interior first.”

She gave him a thumb’s-up. By then, Felix and Flor had returned from the hardware store, and Florinda and Clara arrived from their trip to the grocery store. Clara carried two bags toward the house before being blocked by Detective Kona. He had a quick chat with her, and she walked to stand in the shade of a tree to wait.

“Why are you picking on her to interrogate first?” Gina asked Detective Kona. “I seriously doubt she knows anything about the body.”

“I’m picking on her first, as you put it, because she stands out in this little crowd.”

Gina looked over at Clara, whose gaze was fixed on the dead man on the porch. “She’s pregnant. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Hopefully, nothing. But she’s also the only one in the group that’s fixed on the body instead of wanting something to do.”

“Because her sister said she’s superstitious.”

“Sister?” Kona asked.

“The one named Florinda is Clara’s sister. At least, that’s what they told me. You’ll have to check with them about that.”

“Thanks. I will. Anything else you want to tell me about superstitious pregnant Clara?”

“She was friendly to me last night, but today, since seeing the body, she hasn’t said two words all morning.”

“What happened last night?” he asked.

“Right about sundown, the entire crew arrived with barbecues and food. It was their way of meeting me for the first time. I tried learning their names, we ate a goat, and I told them the basic plans for the estate gardens. Then they told me about their work routine, and how they all knew each other from other jobs. That was about it.” She watched as his pen raced across his legal pad taking notes. “I have a question, if you don’t mind?”

“Yes?”

“You guys eat a lot of goats here in Hawaii?” she asked.

“I don’t, but I know the Filipinos like to celebrate special events by killing and cooking a goat. Why?”

Gina made an expression as though something were distasteful. “They need a better recipe for cooking a goat.”

“And that, Miss Santoro, is why I don’t eat goats.” Detective Kona flipped to a fresh sheet of paper on his pad. “Did they have lumpia?”

“Deep fried spring rolls? I think that’s what they were called. Some of them had banana inside. Those were more like dessert than an appetizer.”

Detective Kona smiled. “And those are why I like going to Filipino parties. Give me a call the next time they bring them.”

He left Gina to go talk with Clara. Putting her crews to work, Gina gave them as much of a pep talk as she did assignments. She went first with Flor to the row of fruit trees that lined the double-track at the base of the hill. He was looking at the large roll of surveyor’s tape she’d given him.

“What’s this for?” he asked.

“I want to label the branches before we prune, so we can stand back and see what they might look like when we’re done.” She showed him one of the black and white pictures she’d got from Millie of the row of trees from decades before. It was a long orchard only one row wide that lined the double track road that went along that side of the property. In a way, it was a smart design for an orchard. All the trees were in full sun, and all pickers would have to do is go from one tree to the next, from one end of the line to the other. They also did a good job of hiding the lower portion of the ridge at that side. Even the double track road looked purposefully placed at the base of the hill that went up to the ridgeline, and Gina wondered if it was meant as a simple firebreak. The more she got to know about the old estate, the more sense the original layout of it made. “This is the shape the family wants them to be.”

Flor looked, but obviously wasn’t happy about what he saw. He held the picture up to compare it with the natural view. “A lot bigger these days. They won’t look like much for a year or two if we prune them too hard. Won’t be so easy to make them look like that again. Is it so important?”

“That’s what we’re being paid to do. What’s wrong with them?”

“That’s not how these kinds of trees should be pruned to get good fruit. The avocado behind the house shouldn’t be pruned at all. It’s a great shade tree, and it makes plenty of fruit that can be sold at neighborhood farmers’ markets. I can get the mangoes and papayas in shape, but it’ll be a couple of years before they start producing again.”

She picked up an old mango at their feet. “They’re still making fruit.”

“Not much. They could make a lot more, if they were pruned right. The question to ask is if you want fruit or something that matches the picture?”

Gina got out her phone. “I should ask Millie.”

Flor waved at her not to. “You’re the boss, right? That makes it your decision.”

“Yeah, I’m the boss.” She put the phone away. “Okay, do we try to make the trees look exactly the same in the pictures? Or do we make them produce fruit again?”

“People can eat the fruit, and if there’s enough, it can be sold at farmers’ markets,” he said. “But the only people who get to see a pretty tree are the ones who come here to visit. Anyway, mangoes and papayas aren’t

pretty to look at. They're meant for producing fruit and making shade. That's what this estate was for, for growing produce."

"Right. But just to humor me, tag the trees with the tape anyway. We can re-evaluate later."

"Sure." He took the spool of tape from her. "We should get a chipper for the branches I remove."

"How much are they?"

"Couple grand for a good one. Five hundred for a wimpy one."

"How much to rent one for a day?"

"A hundred."

"Just make a giant brush pile and we'll chip everything in one day with a rental," Gina said.

"Brush pile where?" Flor asked.

"Anywhere it makes sense." She noticed her work crew standing around looking anxious while they watched the police investigation activities at the house. "Hey, are these guys okay? Nobody's freaking out, right?"

Flor didn't even bother to look at his workmates. "They're okay. It's not like we're wimps."

"That's not what I meant. It's just that nobody expects to have something like this happen, especially on the first day of a new job."

"How long you been doing this kind of work, Boss?" Flor asked her.

That was hard to answer. If she told him the truth, he and the crew might lose faith in her. She also didn't like the idea of lying to him. "This is my first big job."

"This is a big job?" he asked.

"Isn't it? It seems like it to me."

"When did the Tanizawas hire you?"

"Only about a week ago," she said. "I didn't have much time to prepare."

"Oh, I get it. That's why you don't know what to do around here."

"Is that what you guys think of me already? That I don't know what I'm doing?" she asked.

"Just getting a slow start. We're wasting time standing around waiting for something to happen."

"Look, it's not my fault someone died on my front porch this morning. Sorry, but I didn't anticipate that happening." Gina looked back at the house

a couple hundred feet away, wondering what was going on with the body. From what she could see, the dead man was still on her porch. Seeing the coroner's wagon there and someone in a white Tyvek jump suit walking around, she remembered something to tell Detective Kona. She took off at a trot across the broad estate before the detective could leave. "Detective, I thought of something you might need to know!"

"What is it, Miss Santoro? I have another scene to go to."

"Sorry to delay you. I just remembered the man was wearing a windbreaker on the first three days, but obviously he isn't today. I thought you should know that."

"Anything else?"

"I'm not sure how important it is, but a cat showed up today with a dead rat and was sitting on the porch not too far from the man."

"I hate rats. What happened to it?" Detective Kona asked.

"I took it by the tail and dropped it in the brush over by the stream. Then I went back to the man and figured out he was dead."

"Dead rat, dead man. Sorry, but I'm not making any connections." He gave her one of his business cards. "If you think of anything useful, give me a call."

After he left, she went to the porch. "If you think of anything useful, give me a call," she mumbled sarcastically.

She watched as the body was collected in a zippered bag and put on a transport stretcher by two Tyvek-clad morgue techs. Crossing herself, she watched as the body went past her and loaded into the back of the wagon. With that, the house and estate grounds were returned to her.

Chapter Nine

By the time the body had been removed by the coroner's team, it was time for the mid-morning break. From what Gina had noticed, Felix had been honest about the work crew working hard, once they had the chance and were left alone to their tasks. A small crew dug damp dirt from the area of the old pond, while another crew marked plants and shrubs that were to be preserved in the old Japanese garden. Instead of making an inspection tour, she left them to their chores and went into the house. Clara should be in the kitchen preparing their morning snack and Gina wanted to see what it was.

Not finding Clara anywhere in the house, Gina started a search outside. On her second lap around the house, she found her at the picnic table. She was no expert on Filipina behaviors, but there was no hiding the fact that the pregnant girl was upset about something. What she didn't need that day was getting involved in someone else's soap opera, especially a pregnant stranger. When Clara spotted her, she waved Gina over to sit with her.

Unable to escape, Gina took a seat across the table from the crew's unofficial chef. Getting a close look at her face in the daylight for the first time, Clara looked as though she was still a teenager. "Everything okay?"

Clara started with Filipino, but changed to English. "What happened to that man?"

So that's what the girl was so heartbroken about. There had been a couple of times when Gina had had to break bad news to families as a police officer, and had never been comfortable with it. "Unfortunately, he died this morning."

"How?"

"I'm not sure, but maybe he'd been homeless for too long and his body just gave out on him. That happens sometimes."

"How do you know he was homeless?" Clara asked.

"The way he was dressed, kinda grubby, his breath, nothing of value in his pockets."

"He didn't have any money?"

“There was nothing in his wallet other than an old picture of someone. Honestly, I’m not sure why he kept the wallet.”

“Who was the picture of?” Clara asked.

Gina shrugged. “A lady and her kid.”

Clara looked away for a moment, seeming to think about something. “What did you mean his body looked like it gave out on him? Not enough to eat?”

“Maybe. Or just not enough nutritious food to eat. Have you seen a body before?”

Clara nodded her head. “Once.”

Gina saw the tension on the girl’s face. If she went any further in asking questions, she’d need to proceed carefully. “Who was that?”

“My mother.”

“Oh. Sorry to bring it up.”

Clara shook her head slightly. “It was a long time ago. I was just a kid then.”

“Pretty tough thing to see, for any of us.” Gina was curious about the details of Clara’s mother’s death, but didn’t want to open that can of worms. “I’ll never forget the first time I saw one. My sister and I were visiting relatives in New York with our mother. I was in high school, and Ana was still in junior high. We went for a walk one day, and there was a big commotion at the far end of the block. While we walked there to see what was going on, a car went speeding past us in the other direction, at least until some taxis got in its way.”

“What happened?” Clara asked.

“A crowd was already there, people were talking about someone getting shot, and Ana and I pushed through to see a dead guy on the ground with blood on his shirt. All we could figure was that the guy in the car had shot the guy on the sidewalk. When the police showed up, the guy in the car was long gone, and they told us to get lost.”

“That must’ve been terrible.”

“It was. But that was the day when both Ana and I decided...well, Ana knew she wanted to be a cop just like our dad when she grew up. But you know what we also learned that day?”

Clara shook her head.

“I think we were blessed to learn one of life’s biggest secrets. Even though that poor fellow didn’t survive, we did. We were given another day,

and another, and another after that. That's always been the important thing to remember, that we're lucky enough to have all these days, and that we need to do something with them."

"Like, what can I do? I'm pregnant."

"Pretty soon, you'll be a mother, and from what I've seen, that's one of the biggest jobs someone can have. Anyway, aren't you the one responsible for fixing us a lunch right about now?"

"Oh, yeah! I completely forgot!"

Gina stood and helped Clara up to her feet. "Come on. I'll give you a hand. Let's get these guys fed before they start a hunger riot."

After a lunch of cheese sandwiches and lemonade, Gina took over the job of labeling plants that needed to be salvaged with green tape, and labeling plants that could be removed with orange tape in the area of the pond and Japanese garden. Once that was done, she had Felix go through and double check what she had labeled, that she wasn't getting rid of a family heirloom plants or a precious bonsai that had become overgrown.

"Okay, I've never worked with a Japanese garden before," she told Felix. He'd been working in the house most of the day, nailing up wood paneling on walls. "I'm not exactly sure what's supposed to be an ornamental tree and which are just overgrown weeds."

"I don't know nothing about them, either," he said, while swigging water from a bottle.

"Doesn't help me much, Felix."

"Maybe you should label everything that isn't a weed, and figure out the rest later. Once everything has been cleared to the ground, it'll be easier to see what's left."

"Are there any Japanese gardens in town I can visit?"

"In Honolulu? Lots of them!" He pointed off at the far corner of the property next to the stream. "One right over there. I think that one and the old estate one used to be all one big garden. But the university gardeners maintain theirs."

"Should I match what they've done?"

"Might be a good idea. I wouldn't put Flor on that job, though."

"Why?" she asked.

"He's a farmer. Everything needs to be pruned to make fruit. If it doesn't make fruit, it's a weed and gets chopped out."

“Thanks for the heads-up. Is there anybody else that might be able to help me with the Japanese garden?”

Felix shook his head. “They’re farmers. If it doesn’t make food...”

“It gets pulled out like a weed?” she asked, finishing his sentence.

“You’re a fast learner, Boss.”

“I hope so. Hey, is there any way that you guys could call me Gina instead of Boss?”

He smiled again. “No.”

Eventually, one by one, her crew returned to the trucks and cars, stowing their tools in the back. Clara left the house and met with Flor and Florinda, her ride home. Gina waved as the last of them left across the bridge.

One of the tools Felix and Flor had brought back from their buying spree at the hardware store was a gas-powered industrial-sized weed whacker, and with it a can of fuel. Using a weed whacker had been one of Gina’s favorite things to learn in the last year or so. Firing it up, she went to one side of the house and started chopping down weeds.

Half an hour later, she got from the back door to near the front porch. Taking her finger off the trigger, she looked at her progress. Already the place was looking more lived in.

“Gonna have to figure out what to do with all those weeds.”

It was late afternoon by the time she was done with the one side of the house, and she went in for a drink of water. Going through the living room, she saw something on the folded painter’s tarp in the corner of the room.

“What are you doing in here?” Gina stomped her feet on the floor as she walked toward the cat that had been licking its fur. Clapping her hands finally got the cat up and on its feet. Gina pointed toward the front door. “Go on, git!”

Gina stepped back quickly while watching the black cat trot out of the house. Once it was gone, she latched the front screen door.

“Just what I need, a black cat as a roommate.”

After her water, Gina finished weed whacking the other side of the house, right up to the front porch. In a way, it felt good to chop down the grass. It was almost as if she was cleaning up the mess of the dead body she’d found earlier that day. But the second half of her project still needed to be handled. That meant a lot of shoulder work in the sun raking grass and weeds into piles.

Gina made small mounds here and there, just big enough to heap into a rickety old wheelbarrow she found in a shed at the back of the house. She took that out to the middle of the field where the old vegetable garden had been and made one large haystack.

Flinging the last few handfuls of grass into the wheelbarrow, her hand found something hard. It wasn't a rock, but something shiny and metallic that fell through and clunked to the bottom of the pan. Picking it from the grass, she found a wristwatch.

"This is new," she said, picking away bits of chopped grass. She looked at the brand on the face. "Rolex?"

She looked more closely, and sure enough, the letters spelled out the famous brand of expensive watches. There were no scratches on it, not even dirt or grime. The clasp, however, didn't seem to latch properly.

"This would've been right next to the porch, but I never noticed it before."

The weight of it was heavy in her hand. The second hand continued to tick around in a circle. She looked at the back of it for any sort of markings or engraving. There was none, except for the usual corporate logo and serial number.

"Who drops a Rolex and doesn't bother to look for it?"

She tried to remember seeing watches on the wrists of any of her crew that day, someone that might've snagged the watch on a tool, breaking the clasp, and not noticing when it slipped from their wrist and dropped to the ground.

"Except that minimum wage workers don't wear Rolexes."

She looked at the steps up to the porch and then back toward the bridge. She found it right where someone would've walked from the bridge to the house, but not near where her crew parked their cars and pickups. The only other people around there had been the CSI technicians who'd come to search the area, and the morgue drivers that collected the body.

"I doubt CSI techs wear Rolexes. Not on the job, anyway."

She rubbed her thumb over the crystal, bringing up the shine. The more she looked at it, the more questions it gave her than answers.

"Something funny about this thing."

She put it on her wrist and tried clasping the band. Even though it didn't work quite right, it was obvious the watch had fit a man's wrist, not a woman's.

After slipping the watch into a pocket, Gina dug into the grass she'd already picked up, searching for anything else that might be hidden or overlooked. Once it had been pawed through, she figured only the Rolex had been lost.

As much as she didn't like the idea, she got out the business card Detective Kona had given her and called.

"A Rolex?" he asked, once she'd explained twice why she'd called.

"Very nice looking one, also."

"You think it has something to do with the body you found this morning?"

"It's so clean, it obviously hasn't been out in the weather or in the dirt for very long, if at all. And I found it right near the porch. What should I do with it?"

"Hock it at the nearest pawn shop. Whatever you do, don't tell them your real name. Grab whatever money they offer and run."

"You're kidding, right?" she asked.

"Not entirely. I tell you what I'll do. I'm almost off work. I'll drop buy in a few minutes and take a look at what you got. Okay?"

While she waited, she took a few pictures of the watch from various angles. Half an hour later, a vehicle came across the bridge. It was Detective Kona's blue sedan. He parked next to the house and Gina met him there.

"Detective Kona, I wasn't expecting to see you again. Thanks for coming by."

"I was hoping not to come back, Miss Santoro. Show me what you have."

She held out the wristwatch to him. Using his pencil, he hooked it and took a close look without handling it. "Men's Rolex. Like you said, it looks new. It's not dirty or scuffed. Where'd you find it?"

"Here." Gina pointed to the spot where she'd stopped raking grass. The rake was there, leaning against the bamboo porch railing. "You can see where I stopped raking. That's where the watch was. At first, I didn't recognize it as a watch, but just some shiny piece of metal. I picked it up to toss out of the way, but once I had it in my hand, I noticed it was a watch."

"You've handled it?"

"Yes."

"Then what did you do with it after you picked it up?" he asked.

“Sorry, but I wiped off grass clippings and dirt. I doubt you’ll find any fingerprints on it other than mine.”

“Why is that important?” he asked.

“I don’t know. To see if it belonged to the dead man?”

“If his prints were on it, that would mean it belonged to him?” Detective Kona asked.

“Wouldn’t it?”

“Unless he stole it from someone else. Tell me again about finding it.”

Gina went through her weed whacker and raking story again. “When I saw it was a watch, and that it looked new, I was surprised. I figured one of my crew might’ve lost it while working. Then I noticed it the brand, and figured it couldn’t be from one of them. Then I wondered if it had belonged to one of your CSI techs. Crossing them off the list, I figured it might’ve been the dead man’s.”

“Why not one of your crew?” he asked.

“They’re laborers that work for minimum wage. That watch probably costs more than what any one of them might earn in a year.”

“Not like the county pays CSI techs enough to afford Rolexes,” Detective Kona said.

“That’s why I crossed them off my list of possible owners. Not many ordinary working joes can afford a Rolex.”

“If it’s authentic. Even the fakes are expensive.”

“That’s something else I’ve been wondering,” Gina said. “If someone lost a real Rolex, they’d be in a panic, right? So, why hasn’t someone been around looking for it? If it belonged to one of my workers, or one of your CSI techs, they’d be back here looking for it, right? But they’re not. That’s what makes me think it came from the dead man.”

“You’re an honest woman, Miss Santoro.”

“Why do you say that?”

“If someone else had found this under similar circumstances, it would’ve been listed at eBay by now.”

“Maybe. But I just don’t feel right about keeping something that belongs to someone else, even if he’s dead.”

Detective Kona dropped the watch into a small evidence bag. “Just to verify, none of your crew said anything about losing their watch?”

Here came the redundant questions of a police interview, she thought. “I would think that if they had, they would’ve freaked out and the entire

crew would've looked for it. I'm pretty convinced it didn't belong to one of them. Anyway, who would wear a Rolex to work in a garden?"

"Reasonable conclusion." Detective Kona made a call summoning a CSI team to come to the estate.

"Why are they coming back?" Gina asked.

"First, to ask if they lost a watch when they were here earlier. Then to search for anything else that might've been dropped or lost."

"It's almost dark. You don't want to wait until tomorrow morning?"

"I think you know from your training that the sooner a scene is investigated, the more reliable the evidence. Mostly, I just want them to sweep the area with metal detectors. It shouldn't be long."

"Okay if I go in and make my dinner?" she asked.

"Not yet. I have a few more questions for you."

"I've told you everything I know about the watch, Detective."

"My questions aren't about the watch. When I had a few minutes, I checked into your background. Apparently, when you were with Cleveland PD, you never completed your field training before quitting the force? What's that about?"

Gina felt embarrassed, especially since she'd been acting like an expert with the investigation into the dead body. Her little secret that she'd hoped she had left behind had been exposed. She kicked a pebble.

"Yeah, I'm a quitter."

"I'm not looking for self-judgment. I'm just interested in what happened."

"Why?"

"You're my prime witness in the investigation into the discovery of a dead body. I need to know if you're going to remain a witness or go onto my suspect list. And I need to tell you that list still has no names on it."

"Why are you growing a suspect list? Do you think foul play was involved in his death?"

"Nice try, but I'm not going to let you sidetrack my earlier question. Mind telling me why you never made it out of field training? Or should I request your service record from Cleveland PD?"

Gina wondered for a moment if he was actually able to do that. She took a deep breath and started.

"I was involved in a shooting. No one was hurt, and the shooting review board found no blame, but while I had the mandatory administrative

week off, I gave my career a lot of thought. There wasn't much of a decision to make, which was to walk away and find something else to do for a living. That's when I went back to school in landscape horticulture. That happened three years ago, and now here I am, starting my new occupation with a dead body on the first day of work."

"That happens sometimes. Why not complete your field training and ease your way back into work? Or simply make an adjustment in your career and become a CSI technician? The pay is about the same and you wouldn't have to deal with perps nearly as much."

"I also decided to never pick up a gun again. I wanted nothing to do with police work. I'd learned the hard way how easy it is to get in trouble with a sidearm."

"Who was almost shot?" Detective Kona asked.

Gina wanted a cigarette to calm her nerves, a habit that wasn't necessarily broken yet. "Father Romano. He'd been our parish priest since before I was born. I almost shot the priest that baptized me. As it was, I crippled the Virgin Mary."

"Wait. How..."

"When I missed Father Romano, the bullet hit a statue of the Virgin. Perfect shot through her knee. He had the statue repaired with the chips of marble that still remained, but a nine millimeter slug pretty much obliterates a knee, even one made of marble." She took another deep breath, wishing it was tobacco-flavored. "I still can't believe I blew away the Virgin Mary."

"And you're a devout Catholic?" he asked.

"Not anymore. I haven't been to church since then."

"Pretty harsh self-punishment, isn't it?"

"Maybe, but I just can't shake the feeling I'm no longer welcome," she said quietly.

The CSI van came across the bridge and parked. Detective Kona told them what the situation was and what he wanted done. Both technicians got out high-tech metal detectors, and while wearing headphones wired to the detectors, one of them swept the area in front of the house in a gridwork pattern. While he did that, the other swept the haystack of grass clippings that Gina had made that afternoon.

"That wasn't the only thing I found on your service record. You also received a commendation for above and beyond the call of duty, recommended by your field training officer. Pretty unusual for a rookie to

get something like that. What happened that time?" Kona asked while they watched the others work.

Gina crossed her arms. It seemed nothing was private about her previous career. "It was nothing."

"They don't hand out commendations for nothing, Miss Santoro."

"I think it was more of an over-reaction by Butch, Sergeant Morrison, than anything real. It was mostly a way of diverting my attention from the shooting onto something positive."

Detective Kona simply looked at her, waiting for an answer.

"Earlier on that same shift as the shooting at the church, we got a call that a robbery was in progress at a liquor store. By the time we got there, the perp was long gone. But before he left, he'd taken a couple of potshots at the store clerk on his way out."

"The clerk was hit?"

She shook her head. "Thankfully not. It was a young pregnant woman working the counter while the owner of the place, her husband, was stocking shelves. She'd done everything we tell them to do, give the perp whatever he wanted and keep their hands up. When the perp shot, the bullets hit bottles behind her, which splashed booze all over the place. It really scared the daylights out of her."

"I still don't understand the point of the commendation. I can see you providing comfort to the woman, and helping her decompress after a traumatic situation, but why the comm?" he asked.

"Like I said, she was pregnant. Her water broke and the shock put her into labor. I gotta tell you, that kid came fast. The paramedics barely got there in time. As it was, she delivered the baby right there on the floor behind the cash register in a puddle of booze and broken glass."

"And you stayed with her and talked her through it?"

"Unfortunately, she was stuck with me as her coach. There's something I don't ever want to do again."

"Why not?" he asked.

Gina scratched her head. "Just something about hysterical women."

"Where was the husband?" Kona asked, chuckling. "Why wasn't he helping her?"

"That's what we wondered. Apparently, he wasn't supposed to be her coach anyway, that her sister was going to help her at the hospital when the

time came. Butch was busy just keeping the husband under control outside. Honestly, I wanted to be out there with him.”

Detective Kona chuckled. “Not big on babies?”

“I like them just fine, as long as they go home to someone else’s house at the end of the day. Otherwise, let me know when they turn eighteen so I can have a conversation with them.”

Detective Kona put the small evidence bag containing the watch in a pocket and tucked his yellow pad under an arm. He looked finished except that he wasn’t leaving. “Need to have a little talk with you, Miss Santoro.”

“Uh oh. This doesn’t sound good. But whatever you’re thinking about me having something to do with that guy’s death, forget it. I had nothing to do with that, except finding him on my front porch.”

“Which is a lot. Let me explain,” Kona said. “You used to work as a police officer, and weren’t even out of training before you walked away. That makes you a junior investigator at best.”

“I know.”

“Let me finish.”

“Sorry.”

Kona seemed to reload his lecture. “There’s something suspect about the man’s death, and I can’t put my finger on what that is. But right from the very moment I got here this morning, you’ve been involved with the investigation. Now, here I am, back again on the same day, collecting what might be evidence that you seemed to have found, even trying to direct my thinking into it belonged to the body you found a few hours before. At that time, the man had nothing of value in his pockets, but now suddenly a Rolex shows up. Miss Santoro, what should be a simple case of a homeless man dying of natural causes has become an investigation that I don’t have time for, and you’re right in the middle of it.”

Gina was wondering how far she needed to walk to find a store that sold cigarettes. “Sorry.”

Detective Kona stood up straight with his chest out. “Even though it seems no crime has been committed, I feel compelled to put your name on a suspect list, and there are no other names.”

Gina was numb as she watched him get into his car and leave.

“He’s right. I should’ve listed that stupid watch on eBay.”

Chapter Ten

For an old estate that was lost in the woods, the place was looking like Cleveland's main transit station near the stadium on game day, with all the people coming and going. No sooner had Detective Kona and the CSI van left, when another vehicle came across the little bridge, a small pickup truck. It was mid-evening by then, and in the dim ambient light that the moon offered, she couldn't tell if she'd seen the vehicle there that day, if someone from her work crew was coming back for some reason.

"Maybe someone discovered they lost their watch," she muttered, waiting for someone to get out. She walked slowly to where they parked at the side of the house, reluctant to get too close. When she saw a woman get out of the little pickup, she forced a smile she didn't feel. "Hi, Millie. You're out late this evening. Is there something I can do for you?"

"I'd like to talk with you for a while. Have you had dinner?"

Millie must've heard about the dead man found on the porch and Gina steeled for yet another lecture. "I was just about to make minestrone. It'll take me an hour or so, but you're welcome to join me."

"Must be easier now to cook?"

That was an odd question. "Why?"

"With the new hot water tank, you have plenty of hot water now, right?"

"Oh, you heard about that? Yes, I can do the dishes and shower with hot water. Now I just need to get the stove to work right so I can cook a few things."

"There's nothing on the stove right now?" Millie asked.

"I haven't started anything, no. Why?"

"Let's go somewhere." Millie handed over the keys for the pickup to Gina. "You can drive."

Gina reluctantly took the keys. As much as she'd been looking forward to making a pot of minestrone, the idea of restaurant food sounded better. She was also hesitant about driving someone else's vehicle. "Me?"

"There are a few tricky things about this little pickup that you need to know," Millie said as they got into the truck.

“I’m not sure why you’re telling me about your truck.”

“It’s yours now, or at least yours to use for as long as you stay here.” The woman pointed to the ignition switch. “Key goes here. Before you turn it, pull the throttle on the left side of the dashboard halfway out. Then pump your toe on the gas pedal three times before turning the key. That’s the only way this thing will start.”

Gina searched for something to pull. The interior was clean, but old and basic. Instead of buttons and touchscreens in modern cars, there were knobs to turn and levers that needed to be pushed back and forth. There was a vacancy in the dashboard where a radio must’ve been in years past. “Throttle?”

“Old kind Japanese cars had throttles, including this Datsun. Once the engine starts, push the throttle back in. Otherwise, you won’t go anywhere, and waste a lot of gas not getting there.”

Gina followed the sequence and got the truck started. “What’s a Datsun?”

Millie reached across and pushed in the throttle knob. “You’ve never heard of Datsun?”

Gina shook her head. Now she needed to deal with a stick shift, something she knew how to drive, but preferred automatics like every other sensible person. “It sounds Japanese?”

“Datsun became known as Nissan in the Eighties.”

“Before I was born, I guess,” Gina said. She carefully backed up in an arc, then after struggling to find first gear, she drove toward the little bridge. Basically, the thing had four tires, a steering wheel, and a gas pedal, which qualified it as a vehicle. “Why are you giving me this?”

“You’ll need something for errands, to go to garden nurseries, take things to the transfer station. We had this thing parked in a shed, so we got it tuned up and washed off. It’s ugly, but it runs okay.” They got to the street outside and Millie pointed to the left, toward town. “Go down there and turn right on Dole Street.”

Driving a strange car that belonged to someone else, Gina drove slowly and carefully.

“Sometimes we’re in a hurry, Gina, especially on busy streets when there’s no one in front of us.”

Gina gave it a little more gas, and the pickup’s little engine eventually responded. Nothing looked even vaguely familiar about the street. “Where

are we going?"

"To a restaurant." Millie pointed for Gina to turn left onto another busy street.

"Which direction am I going?" Gina asked.

"Just keep going makai down this street."

"Okay. Makai?"

"Toward the ocean. Mauka is toward the mountains." When they stopped at a red light, she pointed to a building. "This is the Japanese Cultural Center."

Gina gave it a good look. "I've heard about it."

"Maybe you can visit there on a day off sometime."

After a few more blocks, there was another right turn, followed by a left, then crossed a bridge over a wide canal, and followed by another quick left turn. That put them on a broad boulevard through a classy part of town, with a large park with pampered green lawns and swaying palm trees, hotels and apartment buildings, and convenience stores. It also left Gina disoriented.

She also wanted to be home to think about what the detective said to her about being on his suspect list. 'Suspect list for what?' had consumed her thoughts ever since he'd said it. Something didn't make sense about the dead man. A lot of things, in fact. But here she was, entertaining her boss with a drive through town.

"I have absolutely no idea where I am."

"We're on Kalakaua Avenue in Waikiki."

"This is Waikiki? I thought there was a beach here?"

"There is." Millie pointed. "Just over there. Can't see it right now because the buildings are in the way."

With the window down, Gina was picking up a scent. The only time she'd ever smelled the ocean before was on a trip to New York City. What she smelled today was similar but somehow different. They were getting to a busy commercial area, with high-end shops for clothes, jewelry, even luxury automobiles. Sidewalks were filled with people going in every direction, some carrying shopping bags, others holding hands.

"Wow. I didn't know it was like this here. Do you live in this part of town?"

"Not many local people can afford this part of town. The real estate is even more expensive than it looks."

“Too rich for my blood, or any Santoro blood. It looks like most people live in condos here?”

Millie nodded. “If someone has an ocean view, the price is twice that of a mountains view. And if the view is unobstructed by other buildings, the price doubles again. Funny thing about Waikiki that even after World War Two, most of this was still rice paddies.”

After a couple of minutes, they were driving alongside a palm-lined beach. She could hear the waves break on the sand, but couldn’t quite see them as she drove. There were as many people walking on the beach as on the sidewalk, some still in bikinis and swimsuits.

“When does it get cold here?” Gina finally asked, hardly believing it was still December.

“Cold? So far, this is the coldest day of the year. We’re going to turn left at the next big intersection. The place we’re going to will be on the right after a couple of blocks.”

Gina followed her directions, made the turn, and parked in the lot where Millie pointed her. They’d left the luxury area behind when they made the turn, and were now in an ordinary commercial district, even though they’d barely gone a half mile. It was an older building, not glitzy at all, but had a fresh coat of paint on the outside. She tried making sense of the sign over the door.

“Mahalo Kaitenzushi,” she said slowly as she read it a second time. “What’s that?”

“A sushi bar. It’s fun. You’ll like it.”

What Gina didn’t need right then was something else new to try. She tried locking the doors of the pickup, but turning the key in the lock only made the tumblers spin, accomplishing nothing.

“Don’t bother with the locks. Those haven’t work in years and nobody would want to steal that thing anyway.”

The interior of the restaurant was nothing like the drab exterior. Everything was painted white, and the linoleum floor was pristine. There were no tables to sit at, only a long counter in a horseshoe shape, with chairs filling the length of it. Most of the chairs were filled with people with black hair. The sound of voices was a mixture of English and something else, she wasn’t quite sure what. Mixed with that was lively but quiet foreign pop music with a high-pitched female singing. The strange thing, however, was that a conveyor belt ran along the length of the counter before

turning and going back again in a circular pattern. Small single-serving plates of food under transparent lids were carried along the conveyor, traveling through the restaurant as though they were on a road trip. Millie led Gina to a pair of chairs at a narrow bar.

“This kind of sushi place is called a Kaiten, or conveyor belt. They’re popular in Hawaii and Japan. Do you have one in Cleveland?”

Gina watched as plates passed her by, wondering what was on them. She recognized a few as sushi, but others were too elaborately arranged to guess. “Not in Little Italy.”

A waitress brought them mismatched cups of tea. Gina sneaked a sniff of hers before taking a sip. She did her best not to shudder at the bitterness of some sort of tea.

“Green tea. Not everybody likes it at first,” Millie said. She took a plate and set the lid aside, exposing a small ball of rice with a red piece of meat on it. “Do you eat fish?”

“Not until after it’s been cooked. What is it?”

“Ahi. That’s yellowfin tuna. Most people consider it the tuna with the best flavor.”

“Okay, so, I know this sushi stuff is really popular, but I’ve never had it. Honestly, I don’t understand why it isn’t cooked, and even what’s happening with food going by on a conveyor belt.”

“I guess it does seem strange to be served like this. It’s a fad that started about twenty years or so ago. The idea is that you take a plate of what you like, and have as many or as few as you want. The different colors of plates are different prices, so you have to watch out for that. It can get expensive in a hurry. You keep all your plates until it’s time to pay, and the waitress tallies up the total.”

“You eat here a lot?”

“Not often. It’s more of a special occasion place, or when I need to meet with someone. It’s a little out of the way for me to come here.”

Gina watched something go by on a plate. “How do I know what I might like?”

Millie took a plate off the belt and set it in front of Gina. “This is called *inari*. There’s no fish, just rice and a miso flavoring inside that wrapper.”

Gina inspected the chopsticks in front of her before setting them down again. “Are there forks?”

“Only for the haoles.” Millie showed Gina how to hold the sticks in her hand. “Just think of them as extensions of your fingers to pick something up. It’s more of a finesse thing than strength. The harder you squeeze with them, the more something can go wrong.”

On first try, Gina was able to grab the peculiar lump of wrapped rice and take a bite of it. She inspected the inside of it as she chewed.

“Not just rice. There’s another flavor.”

“That’s the miso and the wrapper.”

“This is something real? I’m eating real sushi?”

“Very real and very popular.” Millie put another plate of something in front of Gina, this one with a piece of raw fish held down to a ball of rice with a belt of something green. “I wanted to meet with you this evening, Gina, not just for dinner.”

“Uh oh. Am I fired already?”

“Why would you be fired?”

“I don’t know. My crew barely got any work done today, the house still isn’t finished inside, and Felix said the outside needs to be painted pretty soon. And then there was a problem this morning.”

“First of all, whatever happens with the house is none of your problem. You’ve been hired to manage the gardens. Don’t let anybody talk you into something else.”

“The roofer, Kenzo, seems to have my number. He’s had me up on the roof helping, and with the new hot water tank. At least Felix is satisfied working alone in the house putting up wall board.”

“If Kenzo asks for your help, it means he needs it,” Millie said. “I heard about the man on the porch. That’s not your fault.”

“Sure feels like it. It held up my crew for a while, until I sent a couple of them to the hardware store to get a few things, more as a way of finding something productive for them to do. A full day spent, and there’s not much to show for it. Who told you about the man on the porch?”

“Things like that get around in a hurry. We call it the coconut wireless,” Millie said.

“My mother has a word for that in Italian, but it’s not very polite.”

“You speak Italian?”

“Not as well as my mother would like me to. She came from Italy to marry my father and always wanted my sister and me to learn fluent Italian.”

“She came as a picture bride?” Millie asked.

“The first time she was in Cleveland, it was as a study abroad student in high school. That’s when she met my dad. At the end of the year, she went home. I guess they wrote letters back and forth for a couple of years, until he splurged and went to Italy to visit her for a few weeks.”

“It’s a sweet story. When did they get married?”

“Not for a while. After coming home from Italy, Dad went to the police academy. Once his training was done and he had a full-time job, he went back to Italy on vacation and proposed. From the stories I’ve heard about it, he even asked her parents’ permission first, the old-fashioned way.”

“Nothing wrong with some of the old-fashioned ways,” Millie said. She fixed a small bowl of soy sauce for Gina to dunk her sushi ball. “Where was the wedding?”

“The big, white wedding was in Cleveland. But they had a secret wedding in Italy before she came to America. They never said anything to anybody in Cleveland about that. The only reason I know is that I found the registration paper for it once and asked my mother what it was. I had to make a lot of promises to keep my mouth shut about it, too.”

“You’ve just told me.”

“Yeah, well, I doubt the coconut wireless reaches all the way to Cleveland.”

“Not usually. Go ahead and try the tuna.”

“Now?”

“It has a mild flavor. You can tell it’s fresh by how red the color is. It’s okay.”

Gina took a bite and chewed carefully.

“Is it okay?”

“Actually, it’s pretty good. Not at all what I was expecting.”

That seemed to please Millie. “Do the police know anything about the man that was found at the house?”

“Not much. They’re thinking he was just a homeless guy that was using the front porch to sleep on, and that maybe he’d been living inside while the house was empty.”

“It was hard to keep them out, and we finally had to hire a night watchman. Once the house remodel started, we decided to have someone live there full-time.”

“That’s when you hired me?” Gina asked. She took another plate of the tuna.

“Right.”

“Okay, tell me the truth. Are you really trying to return the estate to its former state, or am I just being a glorified house sitter?”

“We’ve been wondering when you might ask that. Yes, we really do want to get the estate back in shape again. Maybe calling it an estate isn’t right, that calling it a farm would be better. But years ago, the media labeled it as the Tanizawa Estate, and it stuck. That’s what everybody calls it now.”

“It really is a beautiful piece of land. I guess I don’t understand why you hired me to lead the project? It’s not like I have much experience, especially anything to do with the tropics.”

“We’re hoping there’s more to you than meets the eye on your resume. Everything indicates that you’re a hard worker, and that you’re responsible.” Millie stacked their plates now that they were done with their meal. “You also underbid the other applicants for the amount you’d work for. Vastly underbid.”

“I didn’t know what to ask for.”

“You were probably thinking in Cleveland terms, rather than Honolulu terms.”

“I’m glad we’re having this talk, Millie. I’ve been meaning to tell you I’m going to work hard on the project. I’d really like to see it turn into something your family can be proud of again. I don’t know if it’ll be exactly the same, but every time I walk around the fields, I get a better idea of what it might’ve looked like a long time ago.”

“Which is exactly what you put on your original proposal. Frankly, we got better, more professional proposals from local landscapers, but most of them wanted to turn the place either into a theme park, or tear everything down and make something entirely different. You were the only one who made it sound like you cared enough to respect the family’s ideas and history. You were hired as much for that as you were for what we’re paying you.”

“Since I’m working so cheap, I get the pickup to use?”

“And such a large crew.”

“That’s why I have so many?” Gina asked.

The waitress tallied the amount to be paid and Millie handed over some bills. “They’ve all worked for us, some of them for quite a few years.

Except one. We know they're good workers, so we had Felix arrange for them to work at the estate instead of at one of our farms. One way or another, we'd be paying them to work for us."

They went out to the parking lot. "Oh, you have other farms?"

"Sometimes it seems like too many. I'll tell you about them some other time. Right now, you need to take me home. Know how to get to Saint Louis Heights?"

Gina started the pickup's engine. "I don't even know how to get back to the estate."

"It's not far from the estate, as the crow flies." Millie pointed the way to her house, up a long, winding road. Not much of the house showed to the street, as most of it was below the ridge that it sat on.

"How do I get home from here?" Gina asked when she let Millie out.

"Follow this same street downhill until you get to Dole Street and turn right. Follow that until you get to East-West Road and turn right again. You'll see the bridge from there." Millie bit her lip for a moment. "Gina, our family has put a lot of trust and faith in you with the old Tanizawa farm. Gambatte, ne."

"Gam...what?"

"Do your best."

Chapter Eleven

On Tuesday morning, while her new coffeemaker brewed, Gina peeked out the front window wondering what to expect of the day. She was almost disappointed not to see someone sleeping on the porch.

Just as she was finishing her second mug of coffee, the first of her work crew showed up, that of Felix. She went out to meet him. Today, his smile wasn't as broad as usual, and he stayed near his truck.

"Everything okay?" he asked as she walked up to him.

"Fine, why?"

He nodded toward the house thirty feet away. "Anybody..."

"Glad to announce that there are no dead bodies on the front doorstep today."

He looked relieved and his usual smile returned.

One by one, the crew arrived, Clara once again coming with Flor and Florinda. Carrying two shopping bags in her hands, she went toward the house but stopped at the steps to the porch. After looking at the porch for a moment, Clara went around the house to the backdoor to go in. In a way, it was charming to see the girl's superstitious reaction. In another way, Gina just wanted everybody to forget about what had dominated the day before and move on. She also knew that would take a while for herself.

When pau hana time came, her crew packed up and left, promising to come back in the morning. While Flor and Florinda waited for Clara to come out from the house to go home with them, a blue sedan drove in.

"There's trouble," Flor said.

"Why?" Gina asked. She watched Detective Kona come to a stop at the front of the house.

"Any time a cop shows up when he hasn't been called, it's trouble."

Gina chuckled. As far as she knew, most of her work crew still didn't know she'd worn a shield in the past. "Maybe."

Detective Kona came straight for Gina, only nodding to Flor and Florinda. "Miss Santoro, howzit?"

"Pardon?"

“How are you?”

“Fine, thanks. Did someone call you?” she asked.

“No.” He made a show of looking around the area. “Am I in the way?”

“No, not at all. Is there something I can help you with?”

“I have a few questions, and an update in the case, if you have time?”

“Of course. I’d like to hear what you’ve learned since yesterday,” she said.

Instead of answering her, Kona looked off toward the house. Clara was coming from the back, carrying a bag of leftovers from their mid-morning meal. When she noticed the rest of them, she looked at Detective Kona the longest. With a wary eye, she took a wide berth of travel around him to get to where Florinda was waiting next to the truck.

Gina noticed that as much as Clara tried to avoid them, Detective Kona watched her go by. He continued to watch as the trio drove out and were across the little bridge.

“Everything okay?” Gina asked.

“Yeah, fine.”

“You seemed particularly curious about Clara.”

“No more than anyone else in your team. You know her last name?”

“I don’t know any of their last names. I’m still trying to learn some of their first names,” Gina said. “What did you have to ask me?”

“Let’s see...” He flipped from one page to another and back again on his yellow legal pad. “First, I need to take a look at all of your shoes, something the CSI techs neglected to do yesterday.”

“Fine with me.” Gina knew it was to compare her shoe prints with the prints they found in the soft dirt the morning before. In fact, she and her crew had to wait until all the prints had plaster casts taken of them by the techs, and then have their shoes photographed for comparison later. Shoes prints were much like tire tread prints, almost as reliable as fingerprints for identifying people who have entered a crime scene. She led him to the front door, and after stepping into the house, she went back out to take off her shoes. “We’re supposed to leave our shoes on the front porch.”

Kona took a pair of paper shoe covers from a pocket and slipped them over his shoes. “These’ll be good enough.”

He followed her to the bedroom, and after nudging her out of the way, took photos of all of her shoes from several angles, including the soles, and took copious notes for each.

“Do they match any of the print impressions your team got yesterday, Detective?”

“Not even close. Wrong size, different tread patterns.”

“Sorry to disappoint you. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“Find anything else in the weeds?” he asked.

“Like another Rolex?” Gina shook her head. “A couple of rusty tin cans half-buried in the dirt, the blade from an old scythe, a rusty nail.”

“Still got it?”

“Yeah, out on the picnic table. I thought you might want to see them if you ever came back.” She took him outside to the back of the house where the picnic table sat in the shade of a large avocado tree. “You can see how the cans were opened with one of those old-fashioned pointy openers. I guess they were beer cans. The scythe doesn’t even have its handle, and the blade is bent over and covered with rust. When I found it, it was half-buried in the dirt.”

Kona seemed most interested in the nail. “Did you clean this?”

“No, but I think it’s old. See how it was square rather than round? I think that’s how they made nails a long time ago.”

He looked at the length of it with a tiny magnifying glass, one that he clutched to his eye socket by squinting, similar to a jeweler’s loupe. “You haven’t cleaned this?”

“No, why?”

“Where’d you find it exactly?”

“Along one side of the gravel driveway halfway to the bridge.”

Putting the lens away, he got a small kit from his pocket. In the kit were a couple of small squirt bottles of fluid, and several small cards. He scraped some of the rust from the tip of the nail onto a card and dribbled a few drops of fluid on it.

“Hemoglobin test kit?” Gina asked, watching for a reaction.

“Right. Doesn’t always work so well when there’s rust involved.”

Even after waiting a full minute, they didn’t get the reaction they would expect if blood had been present on the nail.

“Nothing,” he said.

“You thought it might’ve had the dead man’s blood on it?” she asked.

“Someone’s blood, anyway.”

“Does that mean you’re classifying the death as a murder?” she asked.

“The medical examiner did the autopsy today. Most of the blood and body fluid test results are still outstanding, but he was able to determine that cause of death was a stab wound to the abdomen.”

“Stab wound?” Gina shook her head. “I was there when the responding officer lifted his shirt to look at his abdomen and back. He had no wounds.”

“Did you notice a Band-Aid on his belly?” Kona asked.

“Yes. The big cop named Iosefa lifted one side and said it looked like a cane spider bite, and stuck it down again.”

“Officer Iosefa is not a coroner, nor a trained CSI tech, and you can be sure I’ll remind him of that the next time I see him. The mark that you saw, the one that Iosefa said was a spider bite, was in fact a stab wound, likely made by an ice pick or similar weapon. Upon close examination by the coroner, the wound track was square in cross section, not round. That’s why I was interested in running that test on the nail.”

“I’ve seen jabs and slashes that had been made by ice picks, but can one do enough damage to kill someone?” she asked.

“The shafts of those are five to six inches in length, plenty long enough to reach deep into the liver, especially for someone as slender as the victim. According to the coroner, whoever stabbed him, knew what he was doing. He swept the weapon back and forth, and up and down through the liver, shredding it. That was as much of an injury as if he, or she, had used a knife, but left only a small puncture wound on the surface of the skin. The ensuing bleeding would’ve remained internal.”

“That’s nasty. And because the external wound was so small, there was little external blood loss?”

“Exactly. At first, he probably thought he was fine, that all he needed was a Band-Aid. The internal bleeding was slow enough that he lived for a while. According to the ME, his only pain would’ve been from where the skin and muscle had been pierced, and not from internal injuries. That’s why I’m back here today. Both the ME and I are seriously considering his death a murder.”

Gina gave the scene and the evidence some thought. “Why not a suicide?”

“It doesn’t seem like he would’ve killed himself on your porch. That doesn’t make sense to me. There was no weapon on him that matches the description the ME provided, and why would the man put a Band-Aid on a self-inflicted wound?”

“He could’ve flung the weapon away,” Gina said. “Like the nail I found in the dirt. Now I see why it was so important to you.”

Detective Kona continued to take notes. “It still doesn’t explain the Band-Aid.”

“There are a lot of unexplained things,” she muttered. “Is that why you had the CSI techs come back yesterday with metal detectors?”

“At that time I was still interested if anything unusual might be found. Even when a situation seems benign, we still need to investigate, just in case we find evidence later that indicates foul play. That happened today when the ME discovered the vic’s liver had been shredded.”

“Okay, let’s say he was stabbed with something long and slender by someone else,” Gina said. “Wouldn’t the perp have tossed the murder weapon into the stream instead of leaving it near the body or the scene of the crime?”

“That’s what I would do. But I’d also come back to look for my Rolex if I lost it. Because of that, I’m beginning to think the Rolex was being worn by the assailant, rather than by someone on your crew.”

“Why not by the dead man?” she asked.

“A man with nothing to his name other than a bottle cap and a broken pocket knife wouldn’t be wearing a Rolex.”

“I guess not. But would someone who can afford a Rolex have anything to do with someone like the dead man? He seemed homeless. Those are two different worlds that just don’t seem to collide in ordinary circumstances,” Gina said.

“I think collide is the operative word, Miss Santoro, and there’s nothing ordinary about stabbing someone in the liver. You’ve also forgotten one important fact.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“He might not have been stabbed on your porch. It almost seems more likely that he was stabbed elsewhere and either came or was brought here later. Did you hear anything during the night? Any noise come from outside at all?”

“There’s all kinds of creepy noises here every night. Someone at the hardware store said the place might be haunted.”

That seemed interesting to the detective and he made a note about it. “I wasn’t aware hardware store employees were experts in things that go bump in the night.”

“What about footprints in the dirt?” Gina asked. “Any of those match his shoes?”

“Once again, not even close. Another dead end.”

“What if he crossed through the stream and walked through the grass, avoiding the soft dirt? Or maybe he arrived before the rain made the dirt soft enough to leave imprints?”

“You’re thinking like an investigator, Miss Santoro.”

Gina exhaled. “Sorry. Just yesterday you warned me not to allow my police training to interfere, and to stick to being the gardener.”

“Fuggitaboutit,” he said. “Do Italian people really say that?”

“Maybe in New York. I’m from Cleveland. Could he have crossed the stream instead of take the bridge?”

“Not likely. His shoes were dry.”

“They could’ve dried during the night.”

“It was a rainy night, which makes that pretty unlikely. Plus, there was no sand in his shoes, as if he’d waded through moving water.”

“And he had that grass stuck to the soles of his shoes, too,” Gina said. “That would’ve washed off if he’d walked through the stream.”

“What do you know about that?” he asked.

“Nothing. I just happened to notice grass clippings stuck to his shoes this morning.”

He checked some notes again. “All I can make out is that he might’ve been killed elsewhere, and brought here by someone, and left on your front porch for whatever odd reason. You have no idea why any of that might’ve happened?”

Gina frowned and shook her head. “No idea. I’d like to know who he was so I could at least say a prayer for him, or light a candle at a church. What about the other shoe prints in the dirt? I noticed your CSI techs taking snapshots of my crew’s shoes. Any matches there?”

“To three, yes. And they all have solid alibis for their where-abouts at the approximate time of the murder.”

“Which was when?” Gina asked.

“The stabbing took place four to six hours before you found him, which was just before six AM. Time of death was probably one to two hours before you found him.”

“Okay, my investigative abilities aren’t very good. How do you determine if he was brought to my porch before or after the time of death?”

“That’s something else I’d like to know,” Detective Kona said. “If he didn’t walk in, he had to be carried. But by whom, from where, and when are the main questions.” He scratched his head while flipping from one page to the next, scanning notes with a fingertip. “What makes no sense at all is why the man was left on your doorstep?”

“Well...” Gina said, sighing. “You know my background, which means you know my training and experience is nothing like yours. But I have to tell you, nothing makes sense about this to me at all.”

Gina watched as he flipped through several pages in his notepad. He found the pages he wanted, and made notes on them. To Gina’s eye, it looked like he was cross-referencing details. He even had a couple of diagrams, drawings of interlocking circles, with related notes jotted inside each.

“What’s with the Venn diagrams?” she asked, still trying to make sense of his doodles.

He shared his pad with her. “It sounds like you’re familiar with them?”

“My understanding is that they’re a way of showing how different sets of data can be related. Each circle gets a list of data, and where they overlap is the shared information, which should answer the question being asked.”

“Very good.”

“You use diagrams to solve cases?” she asked.

“I use them to organize ideas, clues being the data, and the question being asked is the identity of the perpetrator. Once I get clues that are related, it helps focus the investigation.”

“Is this something other investigators do?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not that I’m aware of. I’m still trying to develop it as a tool. I doubt it’ll become the be all or end all of crime investigation, but it’s an organizational tool that’s proving to be helpful.”

“Whatever works, I guess.” Gina hadn’t noticed that the sky had gone dark with rain clouds. “What happens now?”

“With?”

“The investigation.”

“Nothing that involves you, Miss Santoro. I’ve probably already told you too much about what I’ve found as it is.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be curious, but I can’t help it, you know?”

“Tell me what’s going on with the estate?” he asked. “Something about rebuilding it?”

Gina explained how she'd been hired on a one-year contract to get the old family farm back to its original condition, so the Tanizawa family could open it as a botanical garden that included historical displays. "They want to keep it authentic to the period of time of the first generation of Japanese that came to Hawaii. The problem is, I know nothing about that."

"Is that a part of your job? To include that history into your work in the gardens?"

"No, not specifically. My part is to get the vegetable plots and fruit trees growing again, and reconstruct the Japanese garden and koi pond. Pea patches and fruit trees I can deal with. The koi pond and garden will be trickier."

"Why?" he asked.

"I'm not so familiar with them. I've been reading about koi, and I even had a goldfish in a bowl as a kid, but that's a long way from knowing what needs to be done with a landscape pond."

"Dig a hole, fill it with water, toss in some fish, and you've got a pond. What's so hard about that?" he asked.

"That's my feeling. The family wants it brought back to the original size and shape. That means I have to do something of an archeological dig to find the shape and then dig from there. Plus, I have to keep my crew convinced that it's a good idea to dig a giant hole in the ground using only shovels on sunny days in the tropics."

Kona chuckled. "Don't feel too sorry for them. Those guys are used to it. From what I've seen, those guys are living the life of Riley on this job rather than doing stoop labor on a farm."

"They're doing manual labor, anyway. I'm not sure of the difference between what they're doing here and stoop labor on a farm might be."

"Stoop labor is exactly that; bending over to pull weeds, plant seedlings, stake plants. They spend the day bent over, and for the entire day, sunrise to sunset. Here on this project, they're working in morning hours, and you give them a break in the middle."

"Felix told me that's the way it's done here."

"Felix Reyes told you that?"

Gina nodded. "You know him?"

"We went to high school together."

"You make it sound like you have a problem with him," she said.

“No problem. He’s a good guy to have around. Who else is helping you out?”

“A guy named Gabe. He’s the digger. He was also disappointed that all the digging would be done by hand, instead of with a backhoe or bulldozer. That seemed to be a surprise to him.”

“Who hired him?”

“I think Felix. The crew had already been assembled before I got here. I get the impression the whole group sticks together.”

“Who else is there?” Kona asked.

“A married couple named Flor and Florinda. They’re responsible for getting the fruit trees back in shape and producing fruit again. I thought you talked to the crew yesterday?”

“Only briefly. You know their last name?”

“I have no idea. I don’t know any of their last names, until now when you mentioned Felix Reyes. I still don’t know the first names of a few of them.”

“Who hands out the pay checks?”

“Millie Tanizawa, I guess. That’s something else I’m not involved in. I got the first half of my contract direct deposited in the bank, and when the project is done, I get the second half.”

“You’re not involved in budgeting?”

“Only with the capital budget related to the garden. Tools, plants, those sorts of things. Mille gave me a credit card for that.”

“What about the house?” he asked.

“I’m not responsible for that, other than keeping it clean. There’s a handyman named Kenzo that comes around to work on the house, and Felix is putting up the wallboard inside while his crew works on the farm.”

“By the way, what they’re doing is called fieldwork. Felix is the foreman, and you’d be the project manager. The owner of the place is known as the farmer.”

“Thanks. I’ve never worked on a farm,” she said. “How do you know so much about farming?”

“Felix and I did fieldwork on a farm as teenagers after school to earn a little money. He made a career of it, but after a few summers of stoop labor, I knew I wanted something else in life.”

“And that was to become a police detective?” she asked. She knew her father’s life story of how he became a police detective, and a few other

family friends that were on the force back home, but it was interesting to hear about Kona's life in Hawaii.

"Among some other ideas. After college, I tossed my name onto several waiting lists for career training."

"How'd you decide on police work?" she asked.

"Easy. Process of elimination. The police academy was the first place to offer me training, with a job at the end." He pretended to look at his notes again. "Tell me about living in the house. Why here before it's even been rebuilt and not in an apartment somewhere?"

"More money in my pocket. I get to live in rent-free in the house for the duration of the contract. Plus, just last night, I got a pickup truck from Millie Tanizawa to use. With each passing day, things get a little better." She chuckled. "Except for finding a dead body on the front porch."

He jammed his thumb in the direction of the old Datsun. "She gave you that thing?"

"Yeah. I think it's as old...historical as everything else around here."

"You have a Hawaii state driver's license?" he asked.

"Not yet. The only place I've been is the hardware store."

"As a resident, you have three months, and then you get a ticket. Are the vehicle's license tabs current?"

"I..." Gina felt her face flush red with embarrassment. It was an easy ticket to write to a driver with expired tabs, and she'd already been driving it without checking. "I'm not sure."

Detective Kona went to the old pickup and looked closely at the tab on the rear plate. "Good for six months. Don't let it expire."

Gina wanted to make a wise crack about being an adult, and how the vehicle was a loaner, but she kept quiet about it.

Kona seemed to switch gears with his thoughts. "About Flor and Florinda. They're a married couple?"

"That's the impression I got."

"Do they wear wedding rings?" he asked.

"I haven't noticed. I guess my investigative skills are a little rusty."

"More like your skills as a gossip need some fine tuning. They never mentioned their last name?"

"Not that I've heard. Why? This is starting to sound like a formal interview."

Kona took a deep breath through his nose, shook his head, and looked out at the farm again. “No, just curious.”

“There’s something I’m still curious about. Did you ever ID the body?” Gina asked.

“His fingerprints aren’t in the local or FBI data bases.”

“Which makes him a law abiding citizen,” Gina said.

“And never had a federal job that required a background check.”

“What about the smear of blood on the pocketknife that we found in his pocket?” Gina asked.

“We?”

“Officer Iosefa and that blonde?”

“That blonde’s name is Officer Davis.”

“Good for her. What about the blood?” she asked.

“Not a match to his. I’m having an officer check the emergency rooms for anyone that might’ve come in with a knife wound consistent with what that pocketknife might inflict. You got a problem with blondes?”

“Only with the pretty ones. She has an accent like she’s not from Hawaii originally?”

“She’s from LA. That’s where she did her academy training. Why?” he asked.

“No reason. Just curious.”

Kona grinned at her. “It sounds like there’s more to it than that?”

“Kinda got under my skin.”

“Her specifically or blondes in general?” he asked.

“Both.”

“Anything else you want to know about her?”

“No, I think I’ve pushed my luck far enough for one day.”

Detective Kona chuckled and shook his head as he went to his car.

Chapter Twelve

By Wednesday morning, the dead body on the front porch had been forgotten, at least by most of Gina's work crew. Once again, Clara made a wide berth around the front porch on her way to the back door of the house. She seemed especially upset about something, and Gina needed to know if it had to do with the job.

"Everything okay, Clara?" Gina asked, cornering the girl in the kitchen.

Clara slammed closed a cabinet door. "Everything's fine."

"Are you sure? You seem upset about something. Is everything okay with your job?"

"It's fine, okay?"

Gina took a step back when Clara got a kitchen knife and began slicing vegetables with a butcher knife. She thought that as long as she had someone's attention, or at least a private audience without too many other people asking questions, she got out her phone and found a picture.

"Clara, we found this bottle cap the other day. Someone thought it might be a Philippine brand. Is that brand name familiar to you?"

Clara looked surprised with only a glance at the picture. "Why are you asking me?"

"Well, the others are sort of busy."

Clara stopped with the knife and glared at Gina. "I'm not busy?"

"Of course you are. I keep forgetting to ask Flor and his wife. Do you know if it's a Philippine brand?"

"Yeah, from the Philippines."

"Is it a soda?"

"Tuyo Beer. Where'd you find it?"

"It was in the pocket of that man the other day," Gina said. It was more of a test than to answer the question.

Clara visibly shuddered, and missed the celery stick altogether when she took a swing at it.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Clara said, going back to work at the cutting board.

“You seem nervous. Is there something about that brand of beer?”

“Unusual here in Hawaii to find that beer. Not very good at all. Very cheap. Nobody drinks it.”

Gina decided to push for an answer. “If it’s cheap, it seems like a lot of people would drink it. Anyway, that man had a bottle cap for it in his pocket. Somebody had to have drunk one.”

Clara slammed the edge of the butcher knife into the cutting board, wedging it in place. “Okay, one loser drank one. So what?”

“Is it something served in bars, or sold in grocery stores?”

“All kinds of beer in stores around here,” Clara said, while prying the butcher knife from the cutting board. “There’s Budweiser, Coors, Pabst, all kinds. Just buy one of those if you want to drink beer.”

“I’m not looking for beer. I want to know about that particular brand of beer. Can you tell me where I can find it?”

Clara turned around. Her eyes were wet. “Does it matter? That guy is dead. Why don’t you leave him alone?”

“Yeah, sure, I’m sorry,” Gina said, backing away. What should’ve been a simple conversation had turned into an angry pregnant woman holding a knife. “Didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I’m not upset!”

Even if her crew worked only eight hours a day, Gina worked through to dinner. Her original idea for the estate upon first seeing it was to cut everything down to the ground and start over. When she and her crew found useful ornamental plants that had been in the old garden, and they were still healthy, she decided to do a more thorough search of the estate. That meant she needed to run a project that was almost an archeological dig, looking for things left over from the past. She was also able to put her investigative minds and abilities to work.

She’d learned not to do manual labor in the heat of the afternoon, instead spending her time searching through grass and weeds for plants in the Japanese garden that needed preservation. That afternoon had been spent finding and tagging plants with bright pink surveyor’s tape. Her back tired and her arms sunburnt all over again, she gave up with her project for the day and retreated to the kitchen to make dinner.

To say Gina’s mother spent a lot of time in the kitchen was an understatement. If her father taught her about investigative police work, her

mother spent just as much time teaching Gina how to cook. She'd never developed the same skill in the kitchen as her mother, but there was one dish she was proud of, and that was minestrone.

Whenever a family gathering or potluck rolled around, Gina was expected to bring her style of minestrone. When she arrived in Hawaii, she knew that her usual recipe wouldn't be right for the climate, that a summer style was more appropriate.

Searching her refrigerator, she had almost none of the ingredients she needed to make a pot of the famous Italian soup. After taking a shower, she coated her sunburnt arms and face with aloe, dressed in loose clothes, grabbed her wallet, and set off in the pickup truck in search of a grocery store.

She needed to drive out of the university area to find a real supermarket. It felt good to perform the simple task of pushing a shopping cart through a store, finally doing something familiar. Going to the produce section was another matter. Everything seemed upside-down with prices. The most common foods, tomatoes, onions, celery, beans and carrots, were some of the most expensive produce, while citrus, bananas, and unusual fruits were cheap. The only things she found that seemed ordinary to her and that was affordable were cucumbers. Picking through the best produce, she got what she needed for her evening pot of soup before taking a lap through the rest of the store.

Along with finding the usual American and European brands she was accustomed to finding at home, she found Asian and Philippine brands. Taking a risk on a couple of them, she continued on until she found pasta noodles.

"At least they have Barilla pasta," she muttered, taking two packages off the shelf. "Look at those prices, though."

It wasn't Friday yet, the one evening of the week when her parents drank wine. She'd developed the same habit, having a glass or two at the end of a workweek. Knowing she'd need some to celebrate the end of her first week of working a new job, she went to the wine and beer section.

"Okay, so, Italian wines are priced for millionaires, and California wines aren't much cheaper." She set a bottle of her favorite wine back on the shelf. "I wonder what the local wines are like?"

Scanning the names on the shelves, there weren't many offerings that were made in Hawaii, and those had unpronounceable names. Wondering

how far she wanted to stretch her weekly food budget just for a bottle of wine, she grabbed the closest bottle of red.

“Looking for anything in particular?” a man asked. He’d been stocking shelves.

“Something I don’t need to get a loan to buy.”

He came over, bringing something of a limp with him. Like every other employee in the store, he was dark-skinned and black haired. Maybe because he worked in customer service, he had an easy smile. Not bad looking, he had a job, and he wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. “Red or white?”

“Red. Italian, if there’s something ordinary people can afford.”

“Italy’s a long way from here.” He handed her a bottle of a brand she was familiar with, and turned her nose up to at home. “This is our cheapest red Italian.”

“Why is it so expensive? This is wine, not jewelry.”

“You’re not from around here?” he asked.

“Cleveland.”

“Everything is cheaper on the mainland. The last time I looked at a map, Cleveland’s closer to Italy than Hawaii. Anything that has to be shipped here costs a lot more, just because of that. We don’t get so many brands here as on the mainland, either.”

Gina put the bottle back where it belonged. “What else do you have?”

“Local people like to buy local. It’s cheaper, and helps local businesses. We do whatever we can to keep our money in Hawaii rather than send it to some bank on the mainland.” He took a bottle of red wine off a shelf. “Not too many vineyards or wineries in Hawaii, but there’s a good one on Maui. This is their red table wine.”

Gina tried reading the name on the label. “Kula...huh?”

“Kulakeokea. It’s the part of upcountry Maui where it’s made. The Rossini family has a little vineyard up there.”

“This is made by Italians?”

“Big family on Maui. I think they’ve been here for a long time.”

“Good enough for me,” she said, putting the bottle in her cart.

“Anything else I can help you with?” he asked. “There are a lot of good beers made in Hawaii these days.”

“Not much of a beer drinker.” Thinking of beer reminded Gina of her quick chat with Clara that afternoon. She got out her phone and found the

picture of the bottle cap that Clara had balked at. “Do you sell this brand of beer?”

He looked quickly. “Tuyo? Never heard of it. Which is strange, because I’ve been vending beer, wine, and liquor for a long time. Where’s it from?”

“Somebody said the Philippines.”

“It’s not familiar to you?” he asked.

“Why should it be?”

“Because you’re Filipino.”

“I’m Italian,” she said.

“That’s why you were looking for the Italian wine?”

“Right. Any idea where I can find Tuyo beer?”

“At a Filipino store. We have a lot of other beers. None of them are from Cleveland, though.”

“Probably a good reason why.”

He handed her a six-pack of bottles. “Peroni is Italian, isn’t it?”

“Even my dad doesn’t splurge for it. Thanks for your help.” She put it back on the shelf. She started toward the checkout, but stopped. “Where would I find a Filipino store?”

“You really are new in town. They’re all over the place.”

“Maybe there’s a street name or part of town?” she asked.

“Try Kapalama.”

“Where’s that?”

“They sell maps at the checkout counter.”

Gina pushed her cart toward the front of the store. “They sell maps at the checkout counter,” she mumbled sarcastically.

When she got her bags of groceries, Gina stalled for a minute.

“Do you know where Kapalama is?” she asked the clerk.

“Kalamapa what?”

“I don’t know. I was told to go to Kapalama.”

The clerk began counting on fingers. “There’s Kapalama Mall, Kapalama Hospital, Kapalama Clothing Store, Kapalama Market, Kapalama Park. All kinds of places called Kapalama in Kapalama.”

“Just the part of town called Kapalama.”

“You want to snap it up, lady?” someone in line said. He was two customers back and had a case of beer balanced on one shoulder.

“Sorry, just asking for directions.”

“The exit door is over there,” he said with a swing of his head. That jostled his beer, which he had to steady.

“You’ll get your beer soon enough,” Gina said. She looked back at the clerk, who seemed completely unconcerned if she had merchandise to scan or not. “Kapalama?”

The clerk vaguely pointed a polished fingernail. “Go evah on Beretania and turn right on Nuuanu. Go over the freeway. That’s Kapalama.”

“Thanks. What’s evah?”

“Come on lady, will ya?” the man griped again.

“That way.” The clerk pointed her finger again. “Not like you’re going to Heaven.”

“Thanks for the help.” That’s when Gina noticed the little girl standing right next to her, clutching a packet of dried fruit to her chest with both hands. Not much more than five or six years old, the girl gave Gina’s hip a nudge to get her moving.

Getting out of the way, Gina looked for an adult that might be with her, but there wasn’t anyone except the man with the case of beer. She watched as the clerk scanned the packet and handed it back to the girl as if she were just another customer.

“Dollar fifty-nine, sweetie.”

The girl reached into a pocket and brought out a handful of coins. She had to reach up and over the edge of the counter to drop them. The clerk counted them.

“Got any more in there? Still ten cents short.”

The girl silently shook her head once.

“No can let you have the sweets unless you have all the money for them.”

“Hey, is this place for customers wantin’ to buy stuff, or a kindygarden?” the man with the beer asked.

He went ignored when the clerk asked the girl, “Is your mommy around? Maybe she has the other dime?”

The girl simply looked back at her.

The man dropped his case of beer on the counter. “My beer’s getting warm standing here so long!”

Gina finally got involved in the little soap opera that was unfolding. Much ado over a dime. She crouched down to be eye level with the girl. “Is your mother waiting outside?”

The girl looked at her with large eyes, said nothing, and then looked back at the clerk. She was clutching the packet of dried fruit tighter to her chest than ever.

Gina stood. Digging through her wallet, she found a dime for the clerk. With that, the girl pushed her way past Gina.

“Salamat po,” the girl mewed quietly as she scurried away with oversized rubber slippers on her feet.

Gina tried following the little girl, and by the time she got outside, she was gone.

“Where’d she go? I was right behind her.”

Gina looked around the parking lot for the kid. She was nowhere to be found.

“Could at least have said thanks.”

Chapter Thirteen

Thursday morning started a little too early for Gina. Her saving grace was the new coffeemaker that Florinda and Clara had bought her, and the potent grounds that came with it. She'd been in Hawaii for nearly a week, jetlag was long gone, and her appetite had returned. She wanted a big breakfast since the day's planned work would be long and tiresome, and she wanted the fuel on board to get her through. Burnt toast just wasn't going to be enough.

Getting two eggs, butter, milk, and cheese from the fridge, she was going to make that omelet she'd been wanting all week.

A bowl and a fork sat on the counter in front of her, ready to catch and whip egg yolks and whites. Picking up a brown egg, she raised it over the bowl, her mind aiming it at the rim.

Gina lowered her hand again. She looked at the egg cradled in the palm of her hand. It was the same as any other brown egg, cool to her skin, slightly heavy for its size, the surface somewhat course. It had an odd color, somewhere between brown and green. She knew the yolk inside would be bright, a deep yellow if not orange, and stand up from the runny whites. All she had to do was give it a whack on the rim, and plop it into the bowl.

She put the egg down and picked field work dirt from under a fingernail. She gathered the egg again, knowing she was stalling for time.

"Gotta crack it open, Gina, gotta crack it open," she muttered, staring at the egg nestled on the palm of her hand.

She raised it, looked at her target on the rim of the bowl, and prepared to swing.

"Oh, come on. Just crack the stupid thing already."

She began to swing, but stopped.

Not today.

She put the eggs away and made a cheese sandwich for breakfast instead. Taking that and a mug of coffee, she went to the front porch, her newly chosen place to eat breakfast, taking enjoyment in watching the sky lighten at dawn. She had company when she got there.

“Oh, you’re back, and you’ve brought your own breakfast again, I see.”

Leaving her coffee and breakfast on the seat of the patio chair, she went back inside for a tissue. By the time she got back to the porch again, the black cat had dropped the rat. This one was still alive, though. Wounded, its little legs were working overtime trying to get away.

“You’re kinda mean, you know that?” she said to the cat, as she picked the rat up by the tail and carried it off toward the stream. The cat trotted along behind, watching carefully. Gina dropped the rat in the deep grass and stepped back. “You don’t need to bring me these. Just eat them out here where I can’t watch, okay?”

Gina had decided to get things organized with her work crew. She had too many little jobs going here and there, and wanted to focus their efforts. She decided the priority would be on Flor and one team pruning the fruit trees, while another team continued to dig the pond, leaving the search for ornamentals in the old Japanese garden for later. Most of all, she wanted to see real progress on something. But both teams needed more tools and better wheelbarrows than the rickety old thing they’d been trying to use, so when Felix showed up for work, she gave him the credit card.

“I should’ve gone in yesterday afternoon so we wouldn’t waste time waiting for a store to open this morning.”

“Hardware stores will be open pretty soon,” Felix said.

“Just figure out with Flor what he needs, and if the diggers need more shovels. When you’re there, see if you can price chippers. I want something that’ll chip the branches but also shred all the weeds into smaller stuff that’ll compost faster.”

“Wood chips don’t decompose so fast,” Felix said.

“I know. I want to use those to cover walkways.”

He looked out at the farm. “There’re walkways?”

“Someday. I need to mark where I want the paths, and someone needs to go through with the weed whacker to chop down the weeds to the ground.”

“Need a better whacker for that.”

“Okay, fine. One, and I want it industrial sized, something that will chop down anything that gets in its way. I want to get to bare dirt. Get extra string for it, too.”

“Good idea.”

“Really?” she asked.

Felix flashed his usual smile. “You have a lot of good ideas.”

Gina chuckled. “Yeah, like taking on a project I know nothing about in a place I’ve never lived.”

“Why don’t you come to the hardware store with me?” he asked.

“Maybe I should. It would be nice to see where the money is going.”

As the rest of the crew slowly arrived one vehicle at a time, she got out her phone and found the images of the bottle cap. “Have you ever heard of Tuyo beer?”

“Where’d you find that?”

She wasn’t going to tell him it was something found in the dead man’s pocket the day before. “Just around.”

“You haven’t been drinking it, have you?”

“No. Why?”

“Pretty nasty stuff. I’ve been here for a long time, but I still remember seeing guys drink that stuff when I was a kid. The ones that drank it all the time got pretty sick.”

“Sick how?” she asked. Gina wondered if that might have something to do with how the man died. He’d been stabbed in the liver, and the liver was what processed alcohol. Maybe Tuyo was made with the wrong kind of alcohol, something his liver couldn’t deal with. Gina still couldn’t understand how being stabbed with only an ice pick could kill a guy, but maybe that coupled with bad beer did him in?

“Really bad quality control in making that stuff,” Felix said. “You know anything about beer?”

“Only that it doesn’t taste good. I thought it was pretty easy to make beer?”

“You’d think so. From what I’ve heard, there’s two different ways of making it. One is pasteurized. That’s when they go through the entire brewing process until they get the alcohol content to the level they want, and then they boil it to kill the active yeast. The other way is cold filtered. That’s when they put formaldehyde in the beer to kill the yeast to stop the fermentation process.”

“Formaldehyde? Isn’t that poisonous?”

Felix nodded. “That’s why they put it through a filtration process to neutralize the formaldehyde and draw it off, leaving only pure beer behind.

Those beer makers say it tastes better, and that the pasteurized beer isn't as flavorful after it's been boiled."

"So, what's the problem with Tuyo then?" she asked.

"Tuyo cold filters their beer because it's a faster and cheaper process in the long run, at least for them. Their problem is that they don't always filter the beer through fresh filters, or filter it at all. Kill the yeast, run it through a sieve to get the big stuff out, and pour it into bottles. The formaldehyde doesn't get drawn off."

"How can they do that?" Gina asked.

"Inspectors get paid off to turn a blind eye. Cheaper to pay them than to replace old filters, I guess. But the people who drink that stuff all the time get pretty sick with bad livers. I'm surprised it can even get imported here."

"Do you know where I can find it?" Gina asked.

"Just drink Budweiser."

"I'm not going to drink any. I just want to see the stuff for myself."

"Why's it so important?" he asked.

"It just is."

"I've never seen it on shelves here." Felix called Gabe over and asked if he'd ever seen Tuyo in a market.

Gabe turned up his nose. "Tuyo? Only place I seen it is at Pinoy Boy Market in Kapalama."

"I've heard of Kapalama," Gina said. "It's a part of town in Honolulu, right?"

"Nice there," Felix said. "Flor and Florinda live there. But you stay out of Pinoy Boy. Too much trouble in that place."

"Whatever." That reminded Gina of something. "Someone said something to me yesterday. It was salamat or something like that. What's that mean?"

"Salamat po means thank you very much. Or just salamat for a quick thanks."

"It's a Filipino language?" she asked.

"Every Filipino says it, no matter what language they use."

By then, her crew was assembled and Clara had taken the long way around the house to the backdoor, taking grocery bags with her. Gina explained her new schedule of getting the trees pruned and branches chipped by the end of Friday, the next day, and wanted the pond dug out by

the next week. She and Felix left them to work while they went to the hardware store.

“How much longer until the walls are put up in the house and get painted?” she asked as they drove.

“One room a day is about as fast as I can manage by myself, maybe a little longer. Then about one or two weeks to paint them.”

“Why so long to paint?”

“I have to put down a coat of primer over everything, and wait for that to dry. Then a coat of regular paint, and wait for that to dry, followed by another coat of paint. In higher humidity, it takes a little longer for paint to dry. Just like that old saying.”

“What old saying?” she asked.

“Sitting around watching paint dry is really boring, so I’ll help in the gardens in between coats of paint.”

After picking out the chipper/shredder that would suit her needs at the farm, she went down the sporting goods aisle to look at a few things. She found a badminton set.

“Taking up a new sport in your spare time?” Felix asked.

“I’ve noticed the kids looking bored lately. Is this something they’d like to do?”

“They’d love it. They could play beneath the trees at the back of the house.”

“That’s what I was thinking. What else do they like to do? Do they read?”

“Read?” he asked.

“Yeah, like comic books?”

“Not old enough to go to school, so they haven’t learned yet.”

“I forgot kids are in school. It seems like summer vacation.” Leaning in one corner at the end of the display of sporting goods was a metal detector. “Ever use one of these?”

“I got a cuz that uses it at the beach early in the morning after a high tide. He finds pocket change, occasionally a ring or watch. He makes a few bucks. Why? You lose something?”

“The estate is supposed to be one part botanical garden and one part historical site at the end, right? I thought it might be fun to look for whatever might’ve been lost a long time ago.”

“Like that old scythe we found the other day?” he asked.

“Exactly like that. It doesn’t have to be anything fancy. Just something to put on display for visitors to see.”

Felix gave her a thumbs-up and a broad smile. “Good idea, as long as I get to be the one using it!”

That evening, Gina convinced herself she was going supermarket shopping for the second evening in a row because she needed to stock the cabinets and fridge. With the part of town she wanted marked on her new map, and the name and address of the store on her phone, she set off in the Datsun.

When she drove past Pinoy Boy Grocery Emporium, it was anything but. It was more of a corner grocery than an emporium. None of the signs were in English. If the place was back in Cleveland’s Little Italy, it would’ve been named Frankie’s Fine Meats, Smokes, and Liquor, the ‘fine meat’ being the hookers that hung around in the evening plying their wares. The pair of characters hanging around the front door that evening weren’t literature readers, and one even had his shirt open exposing a gold chain and a pumped chest.

“I wonder what they call Filipino guidos?” Gina asked herself as she drove by. “Joey Scapone would fit in pretty good with these guys.”

She went around the block the same as she would’ve if she’d been on patrol. She made note of the one alley that didn’t seem to have an outlet, and where the nearest intersection with a traffic signal was located. When she parked behind the store, there was only one way in or out. She made sure she had enough space to back out and around if she needed to get away in a hurry.

She felt naked walking to the front door of the place without a shield on her chest, a sidearm, or nightstick through a belt loop. All she could take was her coin purse, which she stuffed to the bottom of her front pocket. When she went past the two men that needed something better to do with their lives that lean against a wall, one made a kissy sound while the other said something in a language that she thankfully couldn’t understand.

When Gina got inside the store, she exhaled, letting some of the tension escape. The place was just like any other corner convenience store, with a checkout counter near the door, aisles down the middle, and coolers all around the walls. Only half the lights were on, and the air was a little too

stuffy for Gina's tastes. There was a smell like the kitchen trash needing to be taken out.

The man at the counter had an oscillating fan aimed right at him. He said something to her.

She raised her chin and gave him a lip sneer. It was the same tough look she gave to someone right before she slapped cuffs on them in the past. Facial posturing in Little Italy. "Sorry. Didn't understand."

"Help you find something?"

She grabbed a hand basket. "I can find it."

As she went up and down every row, she noticed the shoplifter mirrors. From what she saw, every corner and aisle in the place could be seen from the front counter. The man never did leave his position at the cash register, but she did notice him watch her in the mirrors. Tossing a few things into her basket that she didn't really need, she saved the beer cooler for last. That was on the back wall, the furthest from the door, and had the most mirrors aimed at it.

All the usual brands were there, along with Japanese and Korean brands. If nothing else, whoever Pinoy Boy was had a full selection of beer. What he didn't have was Tuyo brand beer. Grabbing a cheap bottle of chablis, she went back to the front counter with her purchases. No scanning was done, just numbers chosen randomly out of the heavy air, and a final cost was determined with a single touch to the cash register.

She handed over her credit card.

"Cash only."

Gina dug out a twenty that she'd got from an ATM earlier in the day. Maybe because of the stuffy interior, or maybe because she didn't like being in the store alone, Gina had broken into a sweat.

"You stay around here?" he asked after snatching the twenty from her hand.

"Not too far."

"Never seen you before. What family you with?"

"Santoros." Gina silently scolded herself for handing over her real name.

"Don't know them."

"We're around." She wiped her sweaty hand on her hip right where her sidearm had been while in the police force. "What about my change?"

He was sweating as much as she was, with a bead rolling down the crease between his nose and cheek. He didn't wipe it away. "Some kind of big hurry?"

"Just reminding you."

He turned slightly to the cash register and hit a button. That popped the drawer open. She watched his hand as he put the twenty in. There weren't the usual slots and compartments for coins and bills. Instead, there were a couple of bundles of cash rubber-banded together. The only other thing in the drawer was a revolver. Seeing that, she looked back at his eyes. He was still looking at her.

"You find everything you need?" he asked.

"Mostly."

His hand went to the bundle next to the gun and included her twenty there.

The door opened, the bell above it chirping. The two guidos that had been outside came in. Again, they made wise-guy remarks about her in a Filipino language. The man at the register slammed the drawer shut. He watched them intently as they went down two separate aisles.

"You need something else?" he asked Gina, while watching the men in the mirrors.

"I was looking for Tuyo beer."

He looked at her. "Don't got it. Why a nice girl like you want that stuff?"

"You know where I can find it? Another store near here?"

"Be smart and drink something else. Big sale on Bud right now."

"Doesn't answer my question."

He went back to watching the mirrors. "Pretty sure it's not sold in stores. Just in bars."

"Which ones?" she asked.

"The kind you don't go to."

Gina felt a bead of sweat run down her neck. "Got a name of one?"

"Nope."

"I'm not leaving without a name."

"Suit yourself. I'm open all night. You can stand there till the sun shines in Alaska for all I care."

"I could do that." Gina lowered her voice. "Or I could ask for the change from my twenty right about the time those two punks come back

here. I doubt you want them to see those two rolls you got in the till.”

He seemed to do a subtle posture with his head and shoulders. “You a cop?”

“Do I look like a cop?”

As a bead of sweat went down his face, one broke free from Gina’s hairline and went past an ear.

“What’re you lookin’ for again?”

“Tuyo beer.”

“Ask your two boyfriends. They’re the kind to drink that.”

Gina noticed the two guys walk up to her. One had a pony-pack of Schlitz, the other a bag of beef jerky. Gina gave them a guido grin of her own. “Looking for Tuyo. Either one of you knuckleheads know where I can find it?”

“Why’s a fine lookin’ lady like you want Tuyo?”

“You got an answer for me, or are we wasting each other’s time?” she asked.

“If you want answers, maybe the three of us can waste some time back at my place?” the one with the gold chain said.

“Maybe another time. What about the Tuyo?”

The two punks looked at each other. “Only Tuyo I ever seen is at Bunzo’s Bar.”

“Where’s that?”

“Everybody knows Bunzo’s.”

“I guess I forgot. Where is it?” she asked.

“Three blocks down,” the man behind the register said. “Best you don’t go by yourself.”

The punk with the chain grinned at her. “Not gonna find someone there better than me.”

“Probably not. I’m more interested in the Tuyo.”

Gina knew she’d pushed her luck with the punks, and also knew better than to ask for the change from her twenty. Almost forgetting to take her bag with her, she made haste for the Datsun.

“Yeah, that was fun.” Gina wiped the sweat from her face and neck as she went through the starting procedure for the pickup. “I should do that again sometime.”

Chapter Fourteen

When the workweek tumbled to an end on Friday, Gina checked on the progress with the long row of trees that had been trimmed by Flor. He'd been conservative with his pruning, and so far, it looked okay. While the pruning took place, some fruit had been harvested, which was packed in crates and set aside to be sold at a farmers' market the next day.

"Not that I know what tropical fruit trees are supposed to look like," she muttered as she went to the hole in the ground that would eventually become the koi pond.

One of the field workers dutifully went through each wheelbarrow of dirt after it had been dumped in a pile with the metal detector. He had a small pile of rusted metal scraps off to one side.

"Fine anything good?" she asked.

"Rust."

"Looks like it. Anything interesting?"

"I think someone used the pond as a trash dump after the Tanizawas left the farm. Just cans, nails, part of a bike."

Gina saw that most of the bike was there, and was barely rusted or even dirty. One of the kids was playing a game with it, seeing what kind of noise the chain could make. "Maybe you'll find the wheels."

She walked Felix back to his pickup after work.

"How are the walls inside the house coming?" she asked.

"I'll be done with them by the end of next week. Is there a hurry?"

"Just curious. You'll paint them after that?"

Felix nodded. "Decide on colors yet?"

"Not up to me. I'm out of the decision making process when it comes to walls and roofs, or anything else to do with living indoors. I'm just glad you're not asking me to help with putting up wall paneling."

He chuckled. "Just like everything else in life. If you want it done in a hurry, it'll turn out not so good. If you want it done right, it takes a while."

"So I'm learning," she said. "Might be a dumb question, but do you know of any tennis courts around here?"

"The university has a lot of them. Good team, too."

“I was thinking of municipal league.”

“You’re a tennis player, too?”

“I try. I need to do something else other than think about this estate.”

Florinda came over, with Clara right next to her. “City courts at the park right down the street. Might be able to take a lesson. Meet a few people other than us.”

“What’s wrong with you guys?” Gina asked.

“You’re a city girl. It might be more fun to meet someone other than a bunch of farmers.”

“I don’t know what farmers are supposed to be like, but you guys are fun.”

Maybe she’d stumbled into a moment of diplomacy, but that seemed to make them happy.

It was Friday evening and Gina wanted something more to do than sit at home making minestrone. She was in a new city, one that people came from around the world to visit. She’d seen very little of it so far, only a couple of trips to the hardware store, a quick drive through Waikiki in the dark of evening, and peculiar trips to grocery stores. In spite of finding a dead body on her doorstep at the beginning of the week, she had been enjoying working on the estate. Now that it was Friday evening, it was time to have some fun.

“I wonder what people do in the tropics to ring in the New Year?” she asked herself while looking through clothes in her closet. “Same thing at home, I suppose. Have a drink, flirt with guys, give out my number to someone that’ll never call me. At least I won’t be sitting at home with Mom like I did last year.”

No one was going to call her for a date. The only men she knew in town were the guys on her work crew, and they were either not interested or married. There was the police detective that had come around to interview her a couple of times, but he’d shown no interest in her personal life beyond that of snooping into her old duty record from when she’d been on the police force in Cleveland. That said, she wouldn’t mind seeing his thick arms and broad chest in something other than an Izod pullover and a sports jacket.

“I need to check him out on social media, if he’s even on any,” she muttered while searching for an outfit that would make her fit in with the

Honolulu crowd.

Then there was Joey Scapone. He'd already called once that day, moaning over the fact the Gina was so far away, and when was she finally going to come to her senses and come home to him. She didn't consider herself a feminist, but she also didn't like his sense of ownership of her.

"Joey, we went out only a few times, and some of those times could barely be considered dates."

"Why not?" he whined.

"Dude, shopping at Walmart is not a date. Neither is a Tupperware party at your mom's house."

"What, all of a sudden, you're a snob?"

"No, but having something to eat other than carrot sticks and dip would've been nice." She hated to hurt the guy's feelings, but she was done with him, and he needed to transfer his obsession to some other poor girl. "Look, get a real job and a place of your own. Then brush your teeth, shave your face, take a shower, and put on a clean shirt before you ask a nice girl out on a date."

"Where am I supposed to find these nice girls?" he demanded.

"Try going to church."

"From what I've heard, you don't go anymore. Does that mean you're not a nice girl?"

So, he'd found a way of hurting her feelings in return. She left him with two words of parting, hoping she wouldn't hear from him again.

Since it was New Year's Eve, Gina decided to dress nicely to go out. She had no idea of what to expect of a Filipino bar in Honolulu, if it might be a tiki bar like the one she knew at home, or if it was a classier place. She suspected it might be on the lower end of things, if it served Tuyo beer, which was turning out to have a bad reputation, even with the Filipinos she'd asked about it.

She felt a little over-dressed in a silk blouse and a skirt as she drove the old Datsun across town. She had to remind herself that the real reason she was going to Bunzo's Bar in particular was to see if they served Tuyo beer, and if not, where she could find it. She also had to admit that simply investigating something was giving her a minor thrill, once again allowing use of her old hard-earned police training, even if it was just for an hour or two. If someone happened to flirt with her, that would be icing on the cake.

“Can’t get stupid with this, Gina,” she told herself as she drove. She needed to peek at the map she had marked for where she needed to go. She was headed back to the same part of town she’d gone to the day before to check out Pinoy Boy’s Emporium, even the same street, only a few blocks away. “Not a cop, nor an investigator. I just want to get to the bottom of where that bottle cap came from. That’s it. Once I get my answer, I finish my drink and get out.”

Waiting for a traffic light to change, she checked her face and teeth in the rearview mirror. She was already getting more suntanned than she’d ever been in her life, even at the end of long Cleveland summers. The humidity was playing tricks with her wavy hair, and if it had been shorter, she figured she could tease it into an afro.

“Not trying to solve a possible murder, which is the direction Detective Kona is leaning with the dead man’s death. I just want to know who the guy was, and why he was sleeping on my front porch every day.” Giving the little truck some gas, she got going through the intersection. “The Tanizawa’s front porch. Somebody’s front porch.”

She drove past Pinoy Boy’s. Instead of a couple of punks hanging around out front, there were two young ladies that were trying a little too hard to ply their wares. They were just far enough from the lights of the store that Gina couldn’t get a good look at them, but their profession was unmistakable.

“It’s the same thing everywhere, I guess. A couple of streetwalkers waving to horny guys in cars are gonna be ignored by the police on New Year’s Eve.”

In a few more blocks, she found Bunzo’s Bar. The only tiki thing about it were the palm trees painted on the dingy windows. At least the windows hadn’t been boarded over, meaning it was still a bar and not an XXX dance hall. Otherwise, it was a simple wood frame building in need of a coat of paint.

If the sidewalk in front of Pinoy Boy’s was light in action, Bunzo’s was busy. Half a dozen young men of various races—apparently Honolulu’s version of Little Italy guidos—were hanging around chatting up young women. What Gina couldn’t tell was if they were on dates, or if the women were looking for dates. Whatever was going on, they were working hard to find some companionship.

Gina parked in one of the last spaces available in the lot. This time, she backed in, and as always with the old Datsun, left the door unlocked. As she walked to the front door of the bar, she scanned the other cars looking for unmarked police cars. There weren't any, but she did notice more crappy cars than nice ones. That right there would've put off her sister Ana from going in.

Maybe because she was a new competitor in the game, Gina turned heads as she went past the guys hanging around the front door. A couple of them made what sounded like wise-guy remarks, but one at least opened the door for her. She could also tell she was being watched by the women, as though she was fresh competition for them.

1980s MTV generation music was being played a little too loudly on a sound system that needed new speakers. There was something that looked like a dance floor in one corner and was being ignored. Every chair at every table was filled by women, and men stood over them trying their best at projecting the machismo image. Almost all of them were dark-haired, just like she'd expect to find in a Little Italy bar back home, except this crowd was speaking a Filipino language, mixing in English from time to time.

The only places to sit were at the bar. She took a stool at the far end near the narrow hallway that led to the back somewhere. With any luck, it would lead to the restrooms and wherever Bunzo kept his stock of booze. She was hoping that if she were sneaky enough, she'd be able to take a quick look at his stock to see if he had Tuyo.

A middle-aged bartender with tidy hair and a comically large nose tossed a napkin on the counter in front of Gina. He was the only white guy in there.

"White wine," she told him.

"House or the good stuff?"

"What's the difference?"

"Dollar a glass."

"It's New Year's Eve. I feel like splurging."

Gina knew there'd be no difference, that cheap 'Box-of-Wine' stuff would've been decanted into an old bottle with a classy label. She watched as he made a show of pouring it anyway.

"Tab?" he asked when he set it in front of her.

"Why not?"

He made a note on a card and stuck that on his side of the bar where she couldn't see. "Haven't seen you in here before."

"First time."

"Meeting someone?"

"I hope not. Not tonight, anyway."

He leaned across the bar. "Don't hold your breath waiting for something better to come along. This is about as good as it gets in here."

"I'll remember that." She took a sip of her wine. It was worse than she had expected. "Are you Bunzo?"

He pointed to himself with a surprised look on his face. "He's long gone. Sold the place to the current owner a few years ago. They decided to keep the name, even after the clientele changed. Why are you asking about him?"

"No reason. Just an odd name."

"This place used to be famous, after the war. Bunzo, too. That's how he got all his customers."

"What war?" she asked, when he came back from pouring drinks for patrons at the far end of the bar.

"World War Two. You're new on the island, aren't you?"

"Why do people keep asking me that?"

"You'll learn that everything here is either before the war or after the war."

"Why was that so important?" she asked.

"Maybe because Pearl Harbor is only a few miles from here? Or that all the belongings and property of the Japanese population here were confiscated at the beginning of the war, and very little of it was ever returned? Or that many of the young Japanese American men enlisted in the US Army as soon as they could to show their loyalty, and all of them were sent to Europe to fight the Nazi Germans and fascist Italians?"

Gina was feeling uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was going. All she'd wanted to do was break the ice so she could ask about Tuyo beer. Here she was, getting a history lecture about a war that happened before her parents were even born.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to irritate you."

"No problem. It's just that my ex comes from one of those Japanese families. I've heard all about what they lost back then, and how hard they worked after the war to rebuild their lives. They're pretty proud of that."

“They should be.”

He went off to help the other bartender on duty by pouring a few more drinks, and eventually came back to her.

“My name’s Chuck,” he said, wiping the bar with a towel.

“Gina. Nice to meet you.”

“You didn’t come in here for a history lesson, or to drink our fine wine. You mind telling me why you’re here, or do you need to pay up and clear out?” he asked.

“Just wanted to ask a couple of questions.”

“About?”

“The kind of merchandise you sell here.” As soon as she said it, Gina knew her choice of words were bad.

“You a cop?”

“Do I look like one?”

“A little.” He refilled her glass before she’d been able to empty it. “Look, this place is legit. Maybe some of the patrons are looking for half-hour dates, but you’ll have to take that up with them out in the parking lot. We don’t push any drugs here, okay?”

“I’m not asking about drugs, but that’s good to know.” It was time to get out her phone and find the picture of the Tuyo bottle cap. “Do you serve this brand here?”

“Tuyo? I think we have a case of it in back. Why?”

“Hard to find the stuff,” Gina said. “I’ve heard that not many places sell it?”

“It’s less about selling the stuff and more about finding someone willing to drink it.”

“Pretty bad?”

“I tried it once. Couldn’t finish it. Only way to categorize the stuff is as gut rot.”

“Okay if I try one?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Won’t be cold.”

“That’s alright. I just want to see how bad it really is.”

“Suit yourself.”

He went down the narrow hallway to the back for a couple of minutes and returned with a single bottle. She watched as he held the bottle in one hand and flipped the cap off with an opener. The cap fell and bounced on the par a few times, mostly ignored. He set the bottle on the bar without a

glass and took her glass of wine away. Before he could toss the cap away, Gina snagged it.

“Enjoy your Tuyo,” he said before walking away.

“Enjoy your Tuyo,” she mumbled sarcastically once he was out of earshot. She carefully grabbed the bottle only at the top of the neck where he hadn’t touched and had a taste. “Oh my god.”

Keeping the beer close so it wouldn’t be taken, she watched the patrons in the bar. It was mostly a pickup joint, not even a meat market. If the girls weren’t hookers, they were trying really hard to be one night stands. With the guys, there seemed to be some sort of epidemic that only blond hair dye could treat. If gold chains on guidos back home kept the evil spirits away, blond hair on Asian men seemed to accomplish the same in a Honolulu dive bar.

At first, she didn’t notice the man walking toward her through the crowd. Once he got clear of the others, she got a better look at him. With tattered jeans and an orange Hawaiian print shirt, and a fedora on his head, she almost didn’t recognize him.

His shoulder grazed Gina’s as he sat on the stool next to hers. He said nothing to her, but ordered a drink from the bartender, an ‘old fashioned’, not at all similar to the neon-colored drinks everyone else was consuming. He leaned his elbows on the bar until his drink came. He gave it one swirl with the swizzle stick before taking a drink. When he set it down on its napkin again, he jabbed at the orange twist as if it were a practiced habit. Still ignoring Gina, Detective Kona took a second sip.

Gina took another swig of her beer, now not noticing so much how bad it was. She had other things to think about right then.

His shirt was too loose to notice if he had a piece in a shoulder holster. Maybe all he had was a .22 under a cuff of his pants. He was big enough to keep anyone back, though, probably the biggest man in the bar right then.

When she leaned close to him, simply to cross her legs in the other direction, she caught his scent. He’d put on cologne to cover his body odor. A small feather was tucked into the ribbon that circled his hat. The loose sleeves of his shirt hid his upper arms, something Gina still wanted to see.

After a third sip of his old fashioned, he gave her a glance, barely turning his head. “Howzit.”

“Hi.” She took a sip from her bottle, not even noticing it was beer.

“Never seen you here before.”

“First time I’ve been here.”

“The bar should be honored for it.”

Feeling a bead of sweat break loose from her hair on the back of her neck, she ignored it. When she reached for her bottle, she almost knocked it over. She’d swallowed two gulps before the tang of the bitter taste brought her back to her barstool.

Chuck the bartender made a show of wiping the bar in front of them, probably waiting for drink orders. When he didn’t get them, he wandered off again.

“What are you doing here, Santoro?” Kona asked quietly.

The conversation had suddenly changed from crappy pickup lines to something else, she didn’t know what. “Ringin’ in the New Year with a drink.”

“Some new year you’re expecting to have, if it’s starting in this dump.” His lips barely moved when he spoke.

“It’s my year, and no one else’s to tell me what to do with it.”

“Touché. How’s the Tuyó?”

“I’m looking forward to pregnancy morning sickness more than I want to finish this.”

“Personally, I’ve never wanted either.”

When the bartender made a sweep of glasses and bottles on the bar, Gina kept her Tuyó tight between her fingers. Kona asked for a glass of water.

The bartender nodded at the bottle Gina clung to. “Looks empty.”

She smiled at him. “I guess I’m a little odd. I collect these things.”

“Beer bottles?”

Her answer even drew Kona’s attention.

“Yeah. You know how women like to scrapbook things? I take the label off all the beers I’ve ever had.”

The bartender gave her a shrug and poured a water on the rocks for Kona.

“Nice comeback,” Detective Kona said once they were alone again. “What’s the bottle for?”

“Prints.”

“Of?”

“Him,” she said. “To see if they’re a match to anything you collected from the vic.”

“And that’ll prove?”

“That maybe the vic had been in here.”

“Which means what?” he asked.

“Maybe nothing, but at least you’d have someone to lean on for finding out who he was.”

Kona played with his glass of water, clinking the ice on the sides. “I thought you were a gardener?”

“A gardener that found a dead body on the front porch. There’s more to that guy than meets the eye, and you know it. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be in a dive that serves Tuyo on New Year’s Eve dressed like that.”

“What’s wrong with the way I’m dressed?” he asked, looking insulted by her comment.

“Nothing, if you’re planning on going home alone.”

“Pretty harsh, Santoro,” he mumbled. “I suppose you have a fingerprint set at your house, and a way of running it through law enforcement data bases?”

“No, but I know a police detective who does. I was planning on turning it over to him next time I saw him.”

“Without chain of custody, it wouldn’t be evidence of anything except that you have bad taste in beers.”

“Too bad for me.” When Chuck strolled back, Gina asked for the ladies’ room. He pointed her down the narrow hall. While she was down there, she made quick work of looking for the stock of beers, just to see how much Tuyo they might have on hand. There was a single case stacked on top of more expensive stuff. Flipping the flap up, she found that only two bottles were missing.

By the time she got back to the bar, Detective Kona was gone, and so was her bottle. Their stools had been filled by two young women with fluorescent-colored drinks.

When the bartender looked at her, Gina pointed at the counter where she’d left her bottle.

He shrugged. “I don’t have it. Your boyfriend paid your tab, though.”

Going out to the parking lot, she didn’t see Kona or his sedan anywhere. She did see someone having a smoke near the back door of the building, not far from the garbage dumpsters. She went there to talk with the other bartender that was on his break. He was a suntanned Asian guy

with spiked hair and chubby cheeks. He had a couple of tattoos on his arms and neck.

He did the chin lift-reverse head nod thing that everybody seemed to do in Hawaii. “You’re the one who had the Tuyo. What’d you think of it?”

“It’s giving my liver something to do.” She got to the point of talking to him by showing him the picture of the dead man on her phone. “This dude look familiar to you?”

He looked for a moment. “Chuck thinks you’re a cop.”

“Good for him. I’m not. What about the guy in the picture?”

“What’s so important about him?”

“He’s dead and I’d like to know who he was.”

He flicked his cigarette away and looked at the image on her phone again. “Why are you asking around here about him?”

She brought up the image of the Tuyo bottle cap. “This was found in his pocket.”

“A man with discerning taste. So?”

“Bunzo’s is the only place I’ve found that serves the stuff. I also noticed only two bottles were missing from the case of Tuyo in the hallway near the restrooms, maybe the one I had, and this one.” She tapped her fingernail on the image of the bottle cap.

When he stood, he wasn’t much taller than Gina, and his waist was as chubby as his cheeks. “The only reason I believe you’re not a cop is that you’re not from around here. But you’re investigating his death, and that makes you no more popular than the cops.”

“Look, when I found the guy, he was dead on my front porch. When the cops came to get the body, there were no matches for his fingerprints in their system. That made me curious of why some no-name homeless dude decided to die on my doorstep, okay? You know him or not?”

“I’ve never seen that guy before. I’m only here in the mornings.”

“Seems like nighttime right now to me,” she said.

“Filling in because it’s New Years. Busy night. I’ll be back in the morning to open the place, not that it’s any of your business.”

“Who’s the owner?” she asked. “Maybe he knows the guy?”

“I’m the owner.”

“You’re Bunzo?”

“I bought it from him but kept the original name. Anything else?”

“Sounds good, thanks,” she said, backing away from him. She gave up on her interview when the stink of the nearby dumpster got too strong. Getting in her Datsun, she left. She kept an eye on the rearview mirror as much as she did the road ahead.

Chapter Fifteen

As far as Gina was concerned, she still had another hour to sleep when her phone rang with a call from Ana on Saturday morning.

“If it wasn’t illegal, I’d kill you for calling so early,” she told her sister.

“Too much to drink last night?”

“Barely had anything. You do realize there are five time zones between us, right?”

“Wasn’t my idea for you to move to the other side of the world. Mom’s miffed at you again, by the way.”

“Again or still?”

“A little of both. Why didn’t you call her yesterday?”

“I’ve called her every day since coming here. I don’t get a day off?” Gina asked.

“It was New Year’s Eve. She didn’t hear from her second favorite daughter.”

“She’ll live. How’s Dad?”

“Same ol’. Talking about retiring again.”

“He never will. Maybe on paper, but not from driving beats. Put him on.”

She waited while Ana went to the basement, following her footsteps in the family home by listening to squeaks in floorboards and doors shutting here and there.

“Hey Dad.” Gina caught up with her father’s news, which wasn’t much more than busting the oldest Russo son for drunk driving. “Know anything about Rolexes?”

“You’re earning so much with that job that you can afford a Rolex?”

“Not hardly. I came across one the other day. I’m still trying to figure out why someone loses a nice watch and not come back to look for it.”

“Because it didn’t belong to whoever lost it. Where was it?”

“In the grass by the front porch steps. It seemed like it had been sitting up in the grass and not down by the dirt. It wasn’t dirty or damaged at all, more like it had just fallen off someone’s wrist.”

“What kind of band?” he asked.

“Gold-colored metal, with a fold-over style clasp.”

“Was the clasp open or closed?”

“Open, but not working right. That’s what gives me the idea it fell off someone’s wrist.”

“Gina, a watchmaker wouldn’t put a cheap band on an expensive watch, one that would pop open accidentally. Take a look at the brand name of the band. Is it Rolex branded?”

“I don’t have it. I turned it over to the police.”

“You called the police to report a found watch?” he asked.

Gina still hadn’t let on to her family about finding a dead body on her porch earlier in the week. “They were already here about something else. I got pictures of it, though. I’ll try to read whatever is on it later. Anything else I can do?”

“I’d act it out. If you still had it, you could wear it on a wrist and walk around the front porch to see if it snagged on anything. Try to figure out what someone had been doing when they lost it. Maybe that could give you some insight of who the owner might be.”

She made a mental note of his suggestion. “How’s Mom? Ana keeps saying stuff about Mom being pissed at me.”

“Not so much now. You could’ve given her a little more lead time that you were leaving town.”

“I told her the same day I took the job, which was the day after I was offered it.”

“Just don’t forget her birthday, which is next month, or you won’t be allowed back home.”

Gina laughed. “Probably not. Dad, let me ask one more question. What do a Rolex, an old windbreaker, a bottle cap from crappy brand of beer, and a cat with a dead rat have in common?”

“What’re you into, Gina?”

“I don’t know,” she said, pouring a cup of coffee. “Can you keep something quiet?”

“As long as it’s legal.”

“Look, I found a body on my front porch on Monday morning.” She told her father what she knew about the case. “Just a no-name homeless man that had been sleeping there the previous couple of nights. All he had in his pockets were the bottle cap, a bloody pocketknife, and a wallet with

nothing in it but an old snapshot. But I found the Rolex in the grass just a few feet from where the body had been.”

“He was stabbed in the liver with an ice pick and had no other injuries?” he asked.

“That’s right. No other injuries that I’ve heard about.”

“And the investigator thinks he was killed elsewhere and his body was dumped there?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

“Any other evidence on his body?” her father asked.

“Freshly mown grass clippings on his shoes, the type of grass doesn’t match anything on the estate. To me, that means he had to have walked across a newly mown lawn not long before he was killed, and have walked nowhere else after.”

“Why nowhere else?” he asked.

“It seems to me most of the clippings would’ve fallen off if he’d gone anywhere after walking through the clippings, right?”

“That would depend on the amount of moisture on his shoes and the grass, and if he had anything else on the soles of his shoes that might make the grass adhere better than water.”

“I don’t know anything about that.” Gina put that on the list she was making of things to ask Detective Kona the next time she saw him. She figured it wouldn’t be long before she got another lecture from him about interfering in his investigation.

“Are you trying to solve his murder? Because you need to remember you’re no longer on the force, not here or there. You can’t interfere with an official investigation.”

“I’m not trying to solve the murder. I’m just trying to figure out who the guy was.”

“Why?” he asked. “Not really your business, is it?”

“Because there’s more to him being on my front porch than just a place to sleep.”

“My suggestion is to stick to what you know best, and right now, that’s being a gardener.”

“I know. I will.”

“Did you hear what I said, Gina?”

“I heard.” That got her attention. It was more than a simple scolding. It was something he wouldn’t ordinarily say. There had to be more of a

message to it than telling her to keep her nose out of the police investigation. It was important enough that she wrote the warning verbatim on her list. “You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“I’m being yelled at to come eat lunch. Call your mother later. She needs to hear from you.”

Gina assumed the headache she had that morning was from the Tuyo she’d drank the night before, along with the cheap wine. She tried chasing it away with aspirin and coffee. While waiting for her head to stop pounding, she gave her conversation with her father some thought. One thing that was certain was the fact she was as interested in solving the man’s murder as she was in discovering his name, in spite of the little white lie she’d told her father.

“Why did he tell me to stick to being a gardener? He made a point of it. That was weird. Why’d he say that?”

She flipped to a new page on her yellow pad. She already had a list of facts and evidence, things she knew about the dead man, and things she still wanted to know. With a few small boxes and arrows that pointed here and there, she tried organizing it. That’s when she thought of Detective Kona’s use of a Venn diagram.

Gina drew three circles on a fresh page to make a simple but vacant Venn diagram. She began filling in each circle with what she’d learned in the last few days. When she got to the grass clipping circle, there was nothing new to add.

“What did Dad say to me? Stick to what I know best, and that’s being a gardener.”

Gina poured another cup of coffee and sat with the yellow pad in front of her. Trying to sort through her thoughts, and ignore the desire for a cigarette, she began to doodle. That led to a small drawing of a watch next to the Rolex circle, followed by a bottle cap, jacket, and cat near those circles. When she tried to think of how to doodle a lawn clipping other than a single line, she drew a side view of grass growing in dirt. She added a stickman pushing a mower across the top.

“Is it that simple? Did he mean I should focus on the grass clipping I got off the guy’s shoe? I know more about lawn grass than I do about Rolexes or beer. I still need to figure out why he wasn’t wearing the windbreaker on the day I found him, and decide if that means anything.

And what a black cat with a dead rat might have to do with a dead man on my porch.”

It was time to cut into some of the fruit that had been sitting in the fridge all week. Cutting two in half that looked suspiciously similar, she found small black seeds that looked like fish eggs in one, and a hard pit in the other. Taking one half of each to the kitchen table with a fresh cup of coffee, she scanned her notes while she ate the fruit.

“What did Dad say about the Rolex? Something about whoever lost the Rolex never came back to look for it because it didn’t belong to them. They didn’t care if it was found again. But it was a Rolex. If I’d lost one, even one I’d stolen, I’d sure look for it. Somebody somewhere has got to want it back.”

After finishing half of one fruit, she started in on the other, allowing her tongue to decide which it liked better. While she ate, she drew lines to connect clues in the circles of her Venn diagram.

“Okay, that’s a big keyword, stolen. Why did I just say that? Because there’s no way a homeless guy should have an expensive Rolex? Or do I have some preconceived idea that all homeless people are somehow crooked?”

She ended up with too many circles, too many clues, and too many lines connecting them. Giving up on her diagram at least for a while, she collected her fruit peelings and took them outside to toss into the brush pile. The last thing she wanted to do was attract rats and flies into the house looking for something sweet to eat.

“Oh, you’re back,” she said to the black cat that seemed to be waiting for her on the porch. “Sorry. All I got is fruit. You’ll have to find your own rat for breakfast.”

The cat followed Gina to the brush pile that had been assembled during the week. When she tossed the rinds into the pile, something deep inside moved before darting out one side. It wasn’t a rat, but something else that looked like a squirrel. As the cat gave chase, the little critter ran faster until it got to some rocks near the stream. It ducked into a gap just before it became breakfast for the animal one notch higher in the food chain.

The cat seemed particularly enamored with Gina that morning and followed her around the estate grounds. Without anyone else around, Gina wanted to see what had been accomplished during her first week there. It was turning out that Felix was something of a politician, and that even

though he spent most of his time working on the interior of the house, he was sure to point out the progress that had been made each day in the gardens to Gina. That was mostly a few branches had been pruned from the fruit trees, and a shallow hole had been dug in the ground in search of the old koi pond. Other than the weeds being knocked down on the double track that circled the estate, and a brush pile started, not much looked different. Because of that, her mind wandered from her project to her investigation.

“Dad said to stick to what I know best, and that’s being a gardener. What’d he mean by that, anyway?”

She sat in the shade under the broad avocado tree behind the house. That seemed to be the cat’s hunting ground, as it went off in search of a meal in the deep grass.

“Okay, people at home keep calling me a gardener, including Dad. What’s that mean to them?”

She watched as the cat’s tail twitched over its back, one paw rising and lowering at a time as it stalked something.

“It means I mow lawns and prune shrubs like Mister Mancuso does back home. There’s more to this project than mowing the lawn, though.”

Gina grabbed a handful of long grass and pulled it free from its roots. The cat took another careful step.

“Maybe that’s all I am, a glorified lawnmower, with other people doing most of the work for me.”

The cat leapt like a spring being let loose, pouncing on something hidden in the grass beneath a tree. Gina couldn’t see what was being consumed, but it hadn’t been big. Whatever it was had apparently got away, because the cat chased after it in a zigzagging pattern.

“This job makes me responsible for several different gardens on the estate, not just mowing grass.”

When she tossed away the blades of grass in her hand, one blade stuck to a finger. Pulling it free from the sticky spot left over from holding the fruit rinds, she remembered something her father had mentioned about the dead man’s shoes.

“The grass clippings had stuck to his shoes not because they’d been wet. Most of it would’ve fallen off once it had dried, and it had. There were only a few clippings on each shoe, not a lot. But the one blade that I pulled

off had been stuck down as though adhesive was holding it in place. It wasn't water, but something stickier."

She pulled free a few more blades of grass, this time looking at them a little more closely. She tried imagining what would be on someone's shoes that could make grass stick so well.

"Not like that guy had been walking through a glue factory. What else could he have walked in before walking on the grass? Where was the lawn that he walked across? If I can figure that out..."

Gina realized that she really was trying to solve his murder, not just learn his identity.

"That's Detective Kona's problem, not mine."

After allowing herself a quick fantasy of Kona, she shook herself free from it just as the fun stuff was starting. When she got back to the house, she got her city map.

"Okay, I have a good idea the man got his Tuyo beer at Bunzo's Bar because of the bottle cap in his pocket, and the two missing bottles from the case in the back hallway. I just don't know how long he'd been carrying it around in his pocket, or why. Why save a bottle cap from a crappy brand of beer? Just so he knows what not to get a second time?"

She found the location of Bunzo's on the map, and traced her finger to Pinoy Boy's Emporium a few blocks away. What she hadn't noticed while driving around there a couple of days before was a city park. It was roughly triangular in shape and looked like it took up the space between a busy boulevard, the freeway, and a botanical park with a stream that went through the middle of it.

"Kapalama Park. That's the name of that part of town."

She got her phone and brought up cellular data. Searching for Kapalama Park, she looked at a few pictures of the place. It was flat, had a few small pavilions and picnic tables, and the lawns appeared threadbare. Orienting a couple of the pictures in her mind with the map on the kitchen table, she wondered if the trees in the background were a part of the botanical gardens. She looked at pictures of the elegant gardens for a moment, and was instantly jealous of them.

"Queen Lili...Lili'uo...what?" She tried pronouncing the long name of past royalty. "Whoever she was, I hope she was important for having a name like that."

She looked at more pictures of the gardens and the stream that ran through it. While she looked at those, her mind began assembling images for the Tanizawa Estate, and if she'd be able to accomplish the same thing as what the Queen's gardeners had.

"Forget the gardens. I need to know more about that Kapalama Park."

She read a few things about it, about how it had originally been part of the botanical gardens next door, but had become a city park in recent years so there could be a place for picnicking and some playground equipment. In even more recent years, however, it had become a place for homeless to live. The park was still maintained by the city, with 'emptying the garbage cans and cleaning the public restrooms daily, and the occasional landscaping', the city's website said.

"Mowing the grass at a park used by homeless people only a couple of blocks from Pinoy Boy's store and Bunzo's Bar," she said. "He had lawn grass clippings on his shoes, and a cap from a bottle of beer that can be found only in one place."

Gina dressed quickly to get out early before the day got hot. If there was one thing she'd learned from her work crew, it was that Honolulu's climate was best enjoyed from sunrise to noon, and again in the evening. Putting on a hat, she left the house in her little Datsun.

It was easier finding Kapalama that day, since she'd already been there a couple of times. Driving around a few of the surface streets, she discovered why she hadn't noticed the park on earlier trips. It was nearly hidden from view by the freeway on one side, and was barely discernible from the botanical gardens. There was little parking, only a few spots along one side. No other cars were there when she parked.

Unlike back home in Cleveland, there were no tents pitched in the park. Instead, cardboard boxes were being used as structures, and tarps were spread over picnic tables and shopping carts. While Cleveland's homeless camps looked like shabby campgrounds, Kapalama Park was even more ramshackle and disorganized.

Only a couple of men were up, mostly sitting on benches next to their little homes, smoking cigarettes for breakfast. Gina wondered how someone could afford cigarettes but not a proper tent in which to live.

She walked through the park, checking out what there was to it. The pictures of it she'd seen online projected a different image, that of a neighborhood park that could be enjoyed by all. What she found was

playground equipment being used as props for tarps, and a subtle sense of desperation.

But the grass had been mowed recently, which was why she made the trip. Picking up a few blades, they were still soft and mostly green. She put some in a ziplock bag she'd brought for closer examination later.

Gina didn't notice him until the man had walked right up to her. He was wearing an old team shirt of some sort, with a number on the front, and *Islanders* stenciled above it.

"Can't smoke that stuff," he said.

"I suppose not." She looked around to see if anyone else was approaching. She noticed the restroom not far away, maybe where the man was headed.

"You could, but it wouldn't accomplish much."

She wiped her hands together to rid them of dirt and grass. "Just taking a look around."

"You a cop?" the man asked.

"What makes you think that?"

"You look like a cop."

"I'm not sure if I should feel insulted or flattered."

He stuck his hands in the pockets of his baggy shorts for a second, and she took half a step backward. He must've noticed her subtle protective stance, because he took his hands out again. "Haven't had any cops around here in a couple of days. It's about time one of you showed up."

"If I were a police officer, why would I be looking at grass clippings?"

He gave it some thought. "I don't know. If you're not a cop, why are you here so early in the morning? Most of us are still sleeping. No reason to roust us out so early."

"Seems like I'd have a partner with me if I were going to roust people around, wouldn't I?"

"You still look like a cop," he said, walking toward the restroom.

One thing was for sure, Gina felt like a cop right then. She checked out the women's restroom and found nothing terribly remarkable except that it was overdue for some scouring powder.

"Or at least hosed down," she muttered, going back out into the bright sunshine. "I wonder if anyone comes by on holidays?"

She saw the man in the *Islanders* shirt leave the restroom and went in his direction. Maybe he could be useful to her.

“Hey, you seem like you know what’s going on around here.”

“More than you do.”

“Thanks. That I’ll take as a compliment,” she said, closing the distance between them. “I’ll tell you a secret about something if you answer a couple of questions.”

“About what?” he asked.

“First, how often do they mow here?”

“The grass? What kind of stupid question is that?”

“I thought you were going to cooperate?”

“Once a week, except in the summer,” he said.

That answered her question for how long he’d been living there. “What day of the week do they mow?”

“You ask a lot of questions,” he said.

“You seem to have a lot of answers. What day do they mow?”

“Fridays. Except the last couple of weeks. Friday been holidays, right? The city don’t mow on holidays.” He sniffed derisively. “City don’t do nothing on holidays.”

“Maybe because the workers want days off. When was the last time they mowed?”

“Sunday.”

“They mowed on a Sunday?” she asked.

“Law against mowing the lawn on a Sunday?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Might be a union rule or two, though.” Since the guy was convinced she was a cop, she figured she could push that impression in the direction of a little white lie. She got out her phone and brought up the picture of the dead man. “This guy look familiar to you?”

When he looked, he inadvertently touched the screen, which sent it to the next picture. That was of the bloody knife that had been found in the dead man’s pocket. Gina swiped her finger across the screen to bring back the picture of his face.

“Look hard. Does he live here at the park?” she asked.

“He your old man?”

“No. Have you seen him here?”

“He looks like a lot of people who live here.”

“He looks like them or they look like him?” she asked, purposefully trying to confuse him. With that, she was trying to restart his memory. “Maybe he wears a white T-shirt and dark trousers, with old leather shoes.”

“Maybe he hangs around sometimes.”

“He doesn’t live here?”

He shook his head. “Just hangs around.”

“Ever talk to him?”

“Everybody talks to somebody sometimes.”

“Did he tell you his name?”

“We don’t know names here. Too many coming and going. All the time, coming and going.”

“Thanks.” Gina wanted to reward the guy, but her purse was back in the Datsun. She had an old pack of cigarettes hidden at the bottom of it, both as a challenge as an ex-smoker, and to hand out a couple to cooperative witnesses. They weren’t doing her any good right then, though.

“You said something about telling me a secret?”

“Yeah. I’m not a cop. But don’t tell anyone else that.”

She saw another man walking across the park in the direction of the restroom. Even though the morning was already warm, he had on a windbreaker.

“Yellow with green stripes on the sleeves,” she muttered. She watched as he went by, waiting to see the back of it. “Oahu Cable. That’s the same windbreaker.”

Gina hung around outside the restroom waiting for the man to emerge. She never heard the toilet flush or the water run before he came out. He stalled when he saw her and took a corrective step before he got started again. He gave Gina a clumsy but polite salute, before struggling to walk in a straight line.

Gina went after him. “Hey, bud, I want to talk to you.”

He kept walking when she caught up with him. He gave her another smile that was more related to what he’d just inhaled, consumed, or smoked in the restroom.

“How long have you lived here at the park?” she asked him.

“You another one of them homeless...what’re they called?”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“They come here sayin’ they’re on our side. Wanna protect us.”

“Church people?” she asked, trying to make sense of what he was going on about.

“Nah. Wanna be our voice. Young people, most of the time women. They wanna find a better place for us to live. That kind of people.”

“Advocates?”

He snapped his fingers but without creating a snapping sound. “That’s right.”

“That’s not why I’m here.” When he caught his toe on something, she steadied him. It took a little effort but she had him stop walking aimlessly. “You alright?”

He waved a hand in the air. “Fine’n dandy.”

“Looks like it.” Gina knew anything he had to say to an official investigator wouldn’t hold up in court, simply because he was high. He also might be high enough to let loose some information that could be useful to her. Since rules didn’t apply to her because she wasn’t an official investigator, Gina proceeded with her interview. She got out her phone and brought up the image of the dead man. “This guy look familiar to you?”

“Danny boy.”

“You know him? His name’s Danny?”

“Danny boy no more here.”

“Where is he?” When the man began to drift away, she patted his cheeks, maybe a little too hard if she’d still been a cop. “Where’d Danny boy go?”

“Danny boy gone dead.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Maybe she was getting somewhere with the guy. She still had more questions, but he was almost gone to his alternate lonely world by then. “Where’d you get this jacket?”

“Danny boy...”

“Hey, I asked you a question. Where’d you get the windbreaker?”

“Danny boy...”

When he looked close to collapsing, Gina helped him to a picnic table and sat him down. Watching his head drift down until his chin rested on his chest, she knew her interview was done. Wondering what he was high from, she slid the sleeves of his thin nylon jacket up to his elbows. Sure enough, he had a pinprick in one forearm.

Someone crawled out from under the tarp that was attached to the other side of the picnic table with thumbtacks. With only a glance at the woman who came out, Gina discovered how the tropics were unkind to freckled complexions. A bad perm and dye job mostly grown out sat on the top of the woman’s head, and the few pieces of clothing she wore needed discard more than laundering.

“What’re you doin’ to Jon-Jon?”

Gina slid the man’s sleeves down again. “Nothing. Just making sure he’s okay.”

“He didn’t do nothing wrong.”

“Except inject himself with heroine.”

“You the new social worker the city sent?” the woman asked.

“No. Just asking a few questions.”

“You’re a cop?”

Gina positioned the man so he wouldn’t fall over. “You guys don’t like cops here, do you?”

“Every day, they come around and bust someone for doing nothing. Nothing, you know? Then just as soon as we get settled, they come with trucks and move us out to somewhere else, saying stuff like Honolulu gets a lot of visitors and the place has to look nice for them. What’s wrong with us? We don’t look nice?”

“Maybe they want a place for families to come, a safe place for their kids to run around and play?”

The redhead curled a lip. “We got kids around here. They play. Our kids can’t play in the park?”

Gina needed to change the direction her new interview was going back to her agenda. “Know anything about Jon-Jon’s windbreaker?”

“Why? Are you taking it away from him?”

“No. I’m just wondering how long he’s had it and where he might’ve got it.”

“Girlie, get your own windbreaker.”

“I would, if I knew where to find one just like Jon-Jon’s,” Gina said.

The redhead lit the stub of an old cigarette. “What’s so special about his?”

“I like the colors. You know where Jon-Jon got his or not?”

The redhead burned the stub down to the filter in one long drag. “I don’t care about that stuff.”

Gina didn’t bother thanking the woman. Instead, she walked a few steps away and made a phone call. She positioned herself so she could keep an eye on stoned Jon-Jon while she waited for the call to be answered.

“Detective Kona, this is Gina Santoro. Sorry to call on a weekend.”

“Miss Santoro, good to hear your voice.”

She chuckled. “Why?”

“It means you made it home safe and sound last night. Please don’t tell me you’ve found another body?”

She watched Jon-Jon on a tour in his personal netherworld. “Not yet. Tell me, what happens in Honolulu if someone is found stoned on heroine? Does anyone care?”

“I’m not going to ask why you’re asking me that. Is there a problem?”

“I’m at Kapalama Park and have come across someone that looks more stoned than necessary.”

“Why are you there? When I suggested that you visit some of the tourist sites, looking for addicts wasn’t what I had in mind. There are nicer parks in Honolulu to visit.”

“Just learning my way around the city. What should I do with this guy?”

“Is he breathing?” Kona asked.

“Yeah.”

“Leave him alone. How do you know he’s high on heroine?”

“Needle mark on his forearm, slurred speech, staggering gait. I had to sit him down before he fell down.”

“You didn’t go through his pockets, did you?”

“I know better than that. I’m not getting stuck by a needle. The interesting thing is that he’s wearing the same type of windbreaker as the dead man I found on my porch. In fact, I think it might be the same exact one.”

“What makes you think that?” he asked.

“The lawn clippings here at Kapalama are similar to what was on the dead man’s shoes. This park is within easy walking distance of both Bunzo’s and Pinoy Boy’s. One of the guys I talked to earlier said the picture of him looked familiar. And Jon-Jon ID’d him as Danny boy. Does that sound familiar?”

“Who’s Jon-Jon?”

“The stoned guy, who just happens to be falling over.” Gina hurried to grab him before he ended up on the ground. She spread him out on the picnic table bench. “He’s not doing so good.”

“I have a car rolling there right now. Tell me again why you’re hanging around Kapalama so early in the morning?”

“Nothing else better to do,” she said.

“Than hang around with homeless stoners?”

“Do you know anyone named Danny boy or not?”

“Miss Santoro, it’s the first day of the year. Why not start it memorably with a walk along Waikiki Beach? Get some salt water on your shins and sand between your toes.”

“Maybe later. Thanks for taking my call.”

A police squad car was just parking in the small lot near her Datsun. There was a difference between conducting her own little investigation into the dead man’s identity, and getting involved with whatever drama was going to play out at the picnic table between the cops, Jon-Jon, and a cranky redhead. As they searched the area for someone that was reported stoned, she watched from the corner of the restroom until they found him. They went through the usual routine she’d learned in training, of how to identify if someone is breathing, or possibly dead. When Jon-Jon didn’t come around, one of them got on his phone and made a call, Gina guessing for a paramedic. Through it all, the redhead stood and badgered the patrol officers about bothering Jon-Jon, the cops doing their best to ignore her.

All in all, Gina had got more than what she had expected at the park. As long as she was out, and now that it was mid-morning, she wanted to make another stop in Kapalama. After going through the start sequence in the old Datsun, she got it going in the direction of Bunzo’s. There was something about the place that didn’t add up the night before. The bartenders had too many handy explanations to her questions.

When she drove past Bunzo’s, the front door was open and a car was parked in the lot. Instead of parking, she took a few laps through the neighborhood to get a feel for morning life in Kapalama. It was quiet for being in the middle of a big city. Passing by Bunzo’s again, she parked a block away where someone wouldn’t see the Datsun if they watched her leave. She hadn’t been on many stakeouts, but she knew enough to have a better view of the person being watched than they had of her, and that included her vehicle.

Getting back to the bar, a man was in the corner of the parking lot collapsing cardboard shipping boxes and stuffing them into a recycling bin one by one. He was wearing cargo shorts and a long sleeved T-shirt, the kind she’d seen on surfers in the last few days. Instead of going into the bar, she went to him. He wasn’t the same guy that she’d met the night before, the one that identified as being the daytime bartender and owner of the

place. She did recognize him as being one of the bartenders there the night before, mostly involved with making blender drinks.

“Hey. Do you work here?”

“No, I like playing with boxes.” He used a box cutter to slice the tape that held a liquor shipping box together. “Why?”

Gina was already getting tired of everybody in Kapalama being a wise guy. She showed him the picture of the dead guy on her phone. “I’m trying to identify a guy that might’ve been a patron of your fine establishment.”

After a quick glance at her phone, he turned away to stuff flattened boxes into the bin. “What’s so special about him?”

“He’s dead.”

“Weren’t you here last night asking questions?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Why are you back so soon?”

“I’m still looking for answers that make sense,” she said.

“Why’re you looking for a dead guy?”

“I’ve already found him. I just need to know his name.”

“And you think I know the name of every patron that comes to my fine establishment?”

What Gina didn’t understand was why he wasn’t asking if she were a cop, like everyone else she met. “I think you’re a smart guy that knows more about running a bar than busting up cardboard boxes.”

“Maybe I do.” He stomped on a box to flatten it rather than slice it open with his box cutter. “Let me see the picture again.”

Keeping one eye on the box cutter in his hand, Gina held out her phone at arm’s length.

“Looks like a guy that used to hang around occasionally.”

“His name?”

“Might’ve been Danny.”

“He hung around to drink?” she asked.

“Isn’t that what fine establishments like mine are for?”

“Usually. What’d he drink?”

The man stomped on another box. “When he had money, he’d have a beer.”

“What if he didn’t have money?”

“Maybe a cup of coffee, maybe some water. He always came in during morning hours. I didn’t mind so much if he sat at the bar and behaved

himself, as long as no other patrons were in my fine establishment at the time.”

Gina knew someone was lying to her. This guy was making it sound like he was the daytime bartender, while the one she talked to the night before reported he worked there during the daytime. One of them was lying to her, and maybe both.

“You booted him out if a customer came in?”

“After a while, he knew to leave, that his morning wouldn’t end well if he tried sticking around where he wasn’t welcome.”

“He made trouble for you?” Gina asked.

“More like I made trouble for him.” Finishing his job of breaking down boxes, the man shoved his sleeves up, got the broom that was leaning against the dumpster, and began sweeping cigarette butts into a pile. “After a while, he wised up.”

Just the act of exposing his arms brought a new world of information to Gina. On his right forearm was a long, skinny scab that was flaking off in places. Looking at his hands again, she wondered where the box cutter went.

“I bet he did. When was the last time you saw him here?”

“Couple weeks ago. Why’s a dead homeless drunk so interesting to the police?”

“The police have been here asking about him?” she asked.

“They are right now, aren’t they?”

“Just me here right now. I don’t see anybody that looks like the police.”

He chuckled. “I guess not.”

“What makes you think he was homeless?” she asked.

“Wasn’t he?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

The man flicked his pile of debris under the dumpster, ending his chore. “Anything else you want to know?”

“Yeah. I want to know how your margaritas are.”

“Best in town.”

“Prove it.” He led Gina into the building, where she took a stool at the bar, the one Detective Kona had used the night before. She watched as he washed his hands at the bar sink, carefully avoiding the long scab on his

forearm. He assembled the bottles and blender on the counter. "You know what? Make it a virgin margarita. Still a little early in the morning."

He nodded. When he flipped open the lid to the ice cabinet, he frowned at what he found. Grabbing a tool from a slot on his side of the counter, he began jabbing at the ice to break it apart. "If you're not a cop, who are you?"

"You said his name was Danny?" she asked, deflecting his question.

"Yeah, Danny. He'd show up here about this time in the morning."

The bartender continued to bust up the chunk of ice into smaller bits. Once he got what he needed, he tossed down the ice pick and scooped ice into the blender. Gina didn't care about the ice, but took a long look at the pick. It was sturdy, with a heavy handle and long, thick stem. She wasn't sure, and maybe it was her imagination kicking into overdrive, but it looked like it had a square cross section.

Once the blender was whirring with her drink, the bartender began to tidy up his counter, putting bottles back where they belonged. The last thing he did was rinse the ice pick in water before storing it in its slot again.

The margarita he served her was nothing to write home about. Even the salt around the rim was scant, in her worldview of margaritas. It wasn't the coarser rock salt she liked, but granulated stuff that would be found in a shaker.

"Did Danny have a last name?" she asked.

"Does it matter?"

"I suppose not. What kind of beer did he drink?"

"Whatever was cheapest that day."

"What's considered a cheap beer in a fine establishment like this?" she asked. "American or foreign?"

"Bud, Miller, Pabst."

"Nothing foreign?"

"We have some junk in back nobody likes. Can't give the stuff away. How's the margarita?" he asked.

"Good, for not having booze in it. Did he ever drink Tuyo beer?"

"Oh yeah, that's why I remember you. You're the one that had the Tuyo last night."

"I'm asking about Danny drinking the Tuyo, not me."

"Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. I'm not the only bartender in this fine establishment."

Gina was going to press her luck one last time that morning before going home to the weed patch called an estate. She got her phone again and found the picture she'd taken of the snapshot that had been in Danny's wallet. "You recognize this lady and kid?"

"Can't see nothing in that picture. Who are they?"

"Maybe somebody Danny used to know." Gina had run out of things to ask him about, other than the scab on his arm. She'd also run out of interest in her drink. "How much for the drink?"

"Seven, if you're paying cash. Ten if you're sticking me with a credit card."

"Seven dollars for a virgin margarita?"

"Would've been five if you'd got the tequila in it."

"Keep the change. You answered questions without throwing me out." Gina left him a ten, wondering why a real drink should cost less than a fake one. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Why? You think I'm gonna die pretty soon?"

"I hope not."

Just as she was leaving through the door, he shouted out to her. "Hughes. I get off at five, if you want to have some fun."

Gina went up the sidewalk to the Datsun.

"Yeah, fun. I wonder what fun is in that guy's world?"

Chapter Sixteen

One thing Gina had learned during her landscape training was how to sketch. What she did that afternoon was sketch what she saw of the estate from the porch, and then sketch what she thought it could look like in a year's time. It ended up looking not nearly as grand as the gardens at Kapalama.

She also had her yellow legal pad with all of her notes and timeline of what she wanted done with the various gardens. It was in the back of that pad of paper where she had her notes about her personal investigation, and the Venn diagrams she'd been drawing. That's where she gravitated to.

In the middle of the page she wrote *Danny*. She drew a new diagram with all new circles. This time they overlapped with Danny's name. One circle represented the Tuyo bottle cap. Along with that, she wrote Bunzo's, the one place she knew Tuyo beer could be found. In the grass clippings circle, she wrote Kapalama Park, and noted the day of the week the grass had been mown was the day before Danny showed up on her porch with clippings stuck to his shoes, and how the clippings she'd collected that day were a very similar length to what she'd collected from his shoes. That meant the same mower might've been used both times. Plus, as far as she could tell, they were the same types of grass, what she was discovering were common lawn grasses in Honolulu parks.

The windbreaker played out the same way. She'd seen one being worn by a homeless man at the same park that Danny had apparently frequented. When she had searched online for Oahu Cable, the name of the company that was stenciled on the windbreaker, she found the company had gone out of business almost twenty years before. Apparently, the jacket that was being handed around the park had been the official article of clothing worn by field reps that worked for the company when installing cable systems. Other than the jackets, there had been baseball caps, and if the things were new, they were considered collectible and fetched prices close to a hundred dollars in online auctions.

Then there was the Rolex watch. The only connection that was even remote between Danny and the wristwatch was that it had been found a few

feet from where his body had been found, and not even on the same day. There was no way she could imagine how a homeless man might've had a Rolex. Broken pocketknife, empty wallet, and a bottle cap, yes. But not a Rolex. That circle didn't overlap with the others on the page.

The last circle was for the black cat that had been hanging around each day. It had brought a rat with it on the day of Danny's death, plus one other time, so the cat couldn't have had anything to do with his death.

"Unless the cat was Danny's pet? Is the cat still hanging around, waiting for Danny to come back to it?" She drew a large X through the cat's circle. "Don't be absurd. It's just a stray."

Gina was just going back to her garden sketches when a sedan came across the bridge and parked at the side of the house. She wasn't sure if she should smile at Detective Kona, or if he was about to give her a lecture about sticking her nose in his investigation.

"Detective Kona, what brings you to the Tanizawa estate? Do you normally work on weekends?"

"I try not to, but I feel compelled to follow up on a couple of leads in an investigation." He sat on the top step of the front porch next to her. "You and I need to have a talk."

"I was half expecting you to drop by sometime."

"First, let me remind you that you're no longer a police officer, not back in Ohio, and especially not here in Honolulu."

"Yes. I..."

He put a hand up to quiet her. "You have no shield, not private investigator's license, and no reason to run any sort of investigation of your own, other than what to grow in this ten acre plot of dirt. Is that fully understood?"

He had a great way of sounding like a father handing out a lecture to a teenager. She doubted she'd get any further with him than she would've with her father fifteen years before. "Yes, Sir. I apologize for interfering in your investigation."

"It's less a matter of you interfering, and more a deal of making sure the public doesn't get hurt, and that includes you."

"I know. But I've been safe whenever I've interviewed...asked someone questions."

"Safe how? Are you carrying a weapon that I don't know about? Because I've checked, and you have no concealed carry permits for either

here or in Ohio.”

“I don’t have a gun. I haven’t touched one since, well, I’ve told you about that already.”

“I’d also prefer you didn’t carry a knife with you. Our laws concerning those are just as strict as firearms.”

Gina was getting cornered by him, and felt a little embarrassed by what she had to admit. “I don’t take weapons, knives or anything else, with me when I go out.”

“You were at Bunzo’s alone last night without any sort of protection?”

“I wasn’t planning on getting picked up,” she said.

“Not what I meant, and you know it.”

She set aside her drawings. “I know. Everywhere I’ve gone, I wish I’d had a partner with me watching my back. When you showed up last night, I actually felt a sense of relief, even though I knew I’d get this lecture eventually.”

“You felt safe at Kapalama Park this morning?”

“Mostly. There were only two men awake at the time and neither were armed that I could tell.”

“What about the woman at the park?” he asked.

“Oh, you know about her? Kinda loud and obnoxious, but not terribly threatening.”

“Maybe not to you when she was still waking up, but someone’s in the hospital because of her.”

“Oh no! What happened?” she asked.

“Paramedics were attending to the OD you called me about, when she took it upon herself to try and protect him. The officers that had responded pulled her back. That’s when she pulled a knife on them.”

“That guy OD’d?” she asked.

Kona nodded. “They gave that Narcan stuff while they got him ready to transport.”

“What about the woman? Did she knife one of the officers?” Gina asked.

“Never had the chance. While she aimed her little pinpricker at one of them, the other subdued her.”

“What was the problem then?”

“She bit the officer that subdued her, hard enough to raise blood. That meant he needed to be admitted and is getting antibiotics to fight whatever

infection that might start. Human teeth aren't exactly clean, Miss Santoro."

"That's what I've heard. What about the OD?"

"He should be fine. Apparently, he walked away from his halfway house where he'd been living for a while and fell into some trouble. Once he's done in detox, he'll go back to the halfway house. But thanks to you, he's alive."

"There's that, anyway. I have a question about him, if you don't mind?"

Kona sighed heavily. "Yes?"

"Did he have any old scars that might've been knife wounds on his body?"

"You're trying to link him to the dried blood that was found on the pocket knife in Danny's pocket?"

"Right."

"Even though you're being a pain in the butt running your own investigation, you have good ideas. I had a CSI tech collect a tube of blood from Jon-Jon and compare it to what we found on the dead man's knife. No match. Sorry."

"Rats," Gina mumbled. "Wait a minute..."

"To answer that question, yes, the blood on the knife was human, and from a male. Not from your pet cat or rats, mongooses, or any other little beasts hanging around the estate."

"It was a thought."

"Okay, that's the official lecture," Kona said. "Now that that's out of the way, tell me what you have on the dead man."

Gina was surprised by his request and wondered if there was a ploy behind it. "You want to know what I've found?"

"Unofficially, you're a trained professional and you've been investigating. From what I've heard, you're a step ahead of me."

"I'm a professional landscaper and horticulturist, a lawnmower as my family puts it."

Detective Kona nodded in the direction of the yellow pad. "Are you going to share with me what you've found or not?"

Gina got her pad of notes and assembled her various Venn diagrams at the top.

"Don't laugh."

“You’ve worked hard on this.” Kona sorted through the pages and sheets until he got to her list of evidence. “Were you planning on coming to me with any of this?”

“Please understand it all started with simply wanting to know who the guy was, that’s it.”

“Did you find out?”

“Danny, or maybe Danny boy. That’s what the stoned guy told me before he passed out.”

He looked up from the notes. “You’re sure he said Danny?”

“Danny boy, but I wasn’t sure if he said that because he recognized the face or if he was simply high and his mind was making things up. Why?”

“There used to be a pimp known as Danny boy that worked the Kapalama area.”

“Used to be?” Gina asked.

“We picked him up after a particularly bad night a year or so ago. A couple of his girls got roughed up pretty bad. Because of that, there’d been two shootings in Kapalama that night, leaving one dead. When we picked him up a few days later, he still had the gun. Bad move on his part, because that was the only solid evidence we had on him. Got a life sentence out of it.”

“If he’s in prison, who’s the guy that I found on my porch?”

“Could actually be Danny.”

“I don’t understand,” Gina said.

“The guy we sent away got shivved not long after he got to prison. When the warden tried to figure out who did it, several inmates said he wasn’t the real Danny boy. He looked like him, but he had a small scar on his cheek that the real Danny didn’t.”

“But what about fingerprints?” Gina asked. “The police didn’t get a positive ID during booking after the original crime?”

“We took his prints, but neither he nor the real Danny had ever been printed before. We had nothing to compare to. The fingerprints from guy who was shivved in prison were the ones we entered into the database as Danny.”

“What was his last name?” Gina asked, finally getting an answer to that question.

“He refused to give it, so he was tried and convicted as Danny Doe.”

And her frustration continued.

“You had no one that could identify him in a lineup? None of his girls from his days as a pimp?”

“After his body was transferred to the county morgue, we brought in a few of his old girls. They refused to look at him, except one. She was still just a kid, and was shaking in her shoes during a lineup. All we got out of her was a shake of her head. The investigator barely noticed, and the ADA wasn’t present at the time. When the investigator pressed for a verbal answer, the girl clammed up. As you know, we need a verbal commitment from a witness, not just a nod or shake of the head.”

“That’s pretty typical of hookers, isn’t it?” Gina asked.

“Very. They clam up tight as soon as police come around. Their lives are tough, and they know who protects them. They’re going to do nothing to screw that up.”

“Let me see if I got this right. A known pimp named Danny boy had a couple of his girls roughed up one night, and went after the dudes that did it in revenge? When he ended up killing one of them, he was arrested a few days later with the gun still in his possession. He was convicted of murder and sent away, where he was stabbed to death by another inmate. But the inmates said the guy that got stabbed in prison wasn’t actually Danny, but someone else that looked a little like him. The only one of his girls that had been willing to look at the body shook her head that it wasn’t Danny’s body, but the investigator couldn’t get a verbal affirmation from her. Right?”

“Right,” he said.

“Pretty shady ADA, to go after a guy that couldn’t be identified. What was the evidence?”

“His prints on the gun, and on the shell casing that had been found at the scene. He had no alibi for his whereabouts during the time of the crime. He got five to ten for manslaughter, since he’d been defending himself at the time. He’d been lucky enough to get knifed before he shot back. He would’ve been out in a couple of years for good behavior.”

“If he hadn’t been shanked first,” Gina said. “It sounds like he took a fall for the real Danny boy. Go do some dirty work for his friend the pimp, and when real trouble found him, he took the blame and went to prison, thinking he’d be out in a couple of years.”

“That’s what the investigator always thought.”

“Some investigator, to allow something like that to go to court without positively ID’ing the perp on trial.”

“I was that investigator, Miss Santoro.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. That’s been bothering me ever since.”

“Why did you let it go forward?” she asked.

“I didn’t. The ADA took it and ran with it. She needed a conviction of anything big.”

“Oh, I get it. Somehow it became political?” Gina asked.

“In a way. She’d been losing too many cases and needed a conviction to keep her out of the doghouse.”

“We have a couple like that back home in Cleveland.”

Kona shuffled papers again. “Tell me what’s going on with your diagrams.”

“Probably a mess. Ever since you told me how you use them to organize evidence, I thought I’d give them a try. That one you’re looking at is today’s.”

“Bottle cap, windbreaker, Rolex. Looks good. What’s with the cat with a mouse?”

“On the day the dead man was found, the cat had a rat. Ever since, I’ve been trying to make sense of that, of how the dead rat might have something to do with a dead body. Other than both of them being dead, I can’t find any connection.”

“I still doubt there’s anything to the rat. What’s this circle labeled as grass clippings?” Detective Kona asked.

“This might be the part of my investigation that irritates you the most.” She tried smiling, but it didn’t seem to matter to him. He was waiting for an answer. “One blade of grass might’ve come loose from the sole of a shoe when no one was looking.”

“And you might’ve saved it?”

“It might be in a ziplock bag in the kitchen.”

“You don’t consider that tampering with evidence?” he asked.

“Maybe according to the letter of the law, it might in a way be considered not entirely honest. But in my defense, there were at least a dozen other blades of grass still stuck to his shoes for your CSI techs to look at.”

“Fortunately for you, they were all the same type of grass. Did you determine the location of the lawn he’d walked on?”

“I collected more lawn clippings from Kapalama Park this morning while I was there. They match. But I looked at the grass at a couple of other municipal parks, and those are a match, also.”

“That’s what my CSI guys determined.”

“But there’s more. I found out from interviewing...talking to one of the guys at the park this morning that the city mows Kapalama Park once a week, on Fridays. But because these last two weekends were holidays, they mowed on Sunday.”

“Big deal,” Kona said. “I mow on Sundays, also.”

“Except that the body was discovered early on a Monday morning, and the clippings stuck to his shoes were still fresh and supple. They hadn’t dried out yet. That means to me that he would’ve had to walk through lawn grass that had been mown only a few hours before, and at a city park that was on a Friday mow schedule, but was actually mowed on a Sunday. Kapalama Park is one of them.”

“There are quite a few parks in Honolulu, along with planting strips along streets, that need mowing. Kapalama can’t be the only one that got mown last Sunday.”

“It’s the only one within walking distance of Bunzo’s.”

“And because Bunzo’s serves Tuyo beer, you’re connecting those circles on your diagram?”

“Right. I have more.” She watched as Kona tore a sheet from her pad to write on. “After I left the park this morning, I went back to Bunzo’s.”

“Find anything?” he asked.

“Yeah. They make crappy virgin margaritas.”

Kona snickered. “Anything useful to the investigation?”

“I talked to the daytime bartender when he was outside getting rid of trash. At one point, he pushed his sleeves up. On his right forearm was a long scab, kind of crusty as though it was healing and starting to peel off.”

“What was his name?”

“Hughes. He gets off at five. He wants me to join him when he does.”

“I’m sure he does,” Detective Kona said.

“I have more. When I first started talking to him, he was using a box cutter to flatten cardboard boxes, but after I showed him the picture of the victim, his demeanor changed.”

“How?”

“He quit cutting them apart and began stomping them flat, even the larger ones. The more I talked to him about the vic, the harder he stomped.”

“That might’ve been a good time for you to leave, but I get the idea you didn’t?”

Gina shook her head. “When he finished sweeping the area around the dumpsters, he asked if there was anything else I wanted. I took him up on the offer and had him make me a margarita.”

“That wasn’t a good idea, to go inside with him, Miss Santoro. Were there any other customers there at the time?”

“Completely empty. Once he started making the drink, I was regretting it. He was still kinda angry, his hands shaking, that sort of thing. But I did notice something else that might be interesting. Might not be evidence of anything, but interesting.”

“A cat with lawn clippings on its paws while wearing a windbreaker and Rolex watch with a rat in its mouth came in and asked for a Tuyo?”

Gina started to flick her fingers under her chin, but thought better of it. “He used an ice pick to break up ice in the bar’s ice tub to put into the blender.”

“And that means?”

“Didn’t you say the murder weapon was something similar to an ice pick?”

“By any chance, did you see any blood smears on it?” he asked.

“No, but it was fairly long and seemed to have a square cross section. At least it looked that way from where I was sitting on the other side of the bar.”

“Pretty circumstantial, Miss Santoro. Every bar will have an ice pick next to its ice tub. Every supermarket with a fish counter, every fishing boat, anyone who deals with ice on a daily basis will have an ice pick somewhere nearby.”

“What about the healing scab on his forearm?”

“Again, circumstantial. He could’ve scratched himself a few days before with the box cutter you said you saw him use.”

“A nervous bartender with a scratch on his arm using an ice pick at a bar that serves Tuyo beer near a park that we think the victim frequented? That seems more than circumstantial to me, Detective.”

“A bartender in a hurry to get an unpleasant morning chore done happened to scratch his arm with a box cutter a few days before, working at

a bar with an ice pick next to the ice tub, near a park you think the victim frequented, is how a defense attorney would frame that. Everything you've given me is circumstantial, Miss Santoro. I need hard evidence, fingerprints, bloodstains, something like that. Even an eyewitness with corroborating photographs or video. And that evidence needs to be collected by police officials to be admissible in court. You know that."

"Sometimes I wish I didn't."

Chapter Seventeen

“Detective, if it’s okay to tell me, what did the victim’s autopsy show?” Gina asked Detective Kona as she walked him to his car.

“I’ve been wondering when you’d get around to asking me that. His only injury was the stab wound to the liver, like I already mentioned. No drugs or alcohol in his blood system, and his stomach and upper intestines contained only what had looked like a cheese sandwich. Other than being in a state of malnourishment as the coroner put it, which many homeless people are, he wasn’t in too bad of shape.”

“Cheese sandwich? I was hoping there’d be Tuyo beer in his stomach.”

“American cheese on white bread, with mustard and mayonnaise. No pickles or lettuce. Just orange-colored cheese. College co-ed diet.”

“It still amazes me a coroner can determine what someone has eaten, even several hours later.”

“His stomach contents were still mostly undigested and he’d had nothing to wash it down. The coroner put the time of the last meal within two hours of time of death.”

“What was his time of death?” Gina asked.

“You reported finding his body between five-thirty-five, and five-forty. According to body temperature and lividity, time of death was between two AM and three.”

“Didn’t you tell me once that the coroner thought he didn’t die right away, but it might’ve taken a couple of hours for him to slowly bleed to death internally?”

“He said that’s typical in an ice pick injury to the liver.” He stopped before getting into his car. “Miss Santoro, you have a knack for investigation. It’s a shame you didn’t stick with law enforcement.”

“So I’ve been told. But like my sister says, I’d need to pack nine millimeters of heat on my hip if I wanted to make it a career, which is something I’m not willing to do.”

“You’ve sworn off firearms altogether?” Kona asked while climbing in his car.

“I’ll never touch one again in my life.” When Kona started his engine, Gina stepped back. “Thanks for answering my questions. What happens next?”

“Nothing with you, Miss Santoro. Now that the autopsy is done, and my CSI team has collected all the evidence they can from the body, there’s no reason to keep him in the morgue.”

“You’re already sending him to the funeral home without knowing his full identity?” she asked.

“Not much choice. If no one steps forward to claim his body, he’ll get a pauper’s funeral.”

“Where would he be buried? I’d like to attend. I think someone should be there, even if it’s just me.”

Detective Kona shook his head. “In this state, unclaimed bodies are cremated and buried by the cemetery groundskeeper at his convenience. We live on an island. We don’t have the luxury of burials, unless someone is willing to pay for a plot.”

He gave her a nod before backing out and turning for the little bridge to leave. Gina turned back for the porch, which was becoming her lounge area and living room.

“He said it himself, that the vic’s injury was consistent with an ice pick. He also thought there was something to my evidence diagrams. He didn’t laugh, anyway.”

Trying her best to ignore her notes on the case, she went back to drawing her visions of the future of the estate gardens. It wasn’t long before a pickup truck arrived, one she recognized. She smiled and stood when Kenzo the handyman got out and came to the porch.

“Nice day and you sit here alone?” he asked her.

“I’m working on some ideas for the estate.” She flashed her sketchpad. “Is this a social visit or did you come to check on the water heater?”

“Little bit of both.” He took the sketchpad and looked at her drawings. She had as many smudges and erasures as drawings. He tapped a bent finger on the rough drawing of the Japanese garden that she’d copied from the few old photos she’d been given by Millie. “Looks good.”

“I’ll have to find someone to help me with that. Don’t tell the Tanizawas, but I don’t know much about Japanese gardens.”

“So far, so good,” he said, handing back the sketchpad.

Gina still hadn't got an answer about why he was there on a Saturday afternoon. According to his code of rules, it would be too late in the day to work outside. He didn't seem the type to drop in on people, just for a chat. "I have a pitcher of lemonade in the fridge. Would you like some?"

That almost got a smile from him. He followed her into the house to the kitchen. "Sounds good."

She poured two glasses. Handing him one, she noticed that if he hadn't been slightly bow-legged, he'd be taller than her. Instead of sitting at the kitchen table, he walked around the room, inspecting the walls.

"No walls yet?" he asked.

"Not yet. I'm looking forward to seeing it painted."

"Pick out a color yet?"

"I'm thinking yellow. From the pictures I've seen of the house, it looks like everything was white. I thought a pale yellow might make it more cheerful. Maybe it's not historically accurate, but do you think the Tanizawas will mind much?"

He shrugged and finished his lemonade. "Should be okay."

"I've been hoping the outlet to the stove could be rewired so the stove worked right. Apparently, that would burn the house down, though," she said.

"We could do it today."

"Oh, you're an electrician, also?" She looked at the handyman. "Because I don't want to burn down the Tanizawa's house."

"Any problem with the roof?" he asked. "Is the hot water tank working okay?"

"Neither of them leak, if that's what you're asking."

Kenzo gave her a shrug. "House won't burn down if we do it right."

"We?" The last thing Gina wanted to do on a day off was rewire the kitchen. She wasn't responsible for the house, only the gardens. She'd also discovered a place with perfect weather nearly every day and wanted to use it for something other than being the handyman's apprentice. She had a tennis racket, and there was a park nearby with courts. With a little luck, she might find someone needing a partner. "I guess I should help. I don't know if we have everything we need, though."

"Your day off. Don't have to help."

"How long will it take?"

He gave her another shrug, this time with a little smile. "Hour, if it goes well."

"How long if it doesn't go well?"

He smiled even bigger. "Depends on how long the fire department is here."

Gina shook her head but laughed. "Okay, let's do it. I suppose you have what we need in your tool box?"

He waved for her to follow her to his truck, where he already had a length of heavy wire cut, and a toolbox to go with it. The first task was to remove the under-sized wire already in place from the fuse box to the stove, and then pull the new wire through the same holes in the walls. Then a new fuse was put in, and the proper outlet installed. Almost all of it was done in silence, as usual with Kenzo the handyman, and within an hour, Gina was plugging her stove into the outlet.

"Try it," Kenzo said.

Gina turned on one burner after another. After a moment, she held her hand over each burner to test them.

"Hot?" he asked.

"It's great! Thanks."

He began putting his tools away. "Now you know how."

She turned off the stove again. "I guess it's true. We learn something new every day."

"Whether we want to or not," he muttered.

"Ha! And no fire department, either!"

With that, he was gone, the job done, leaving Gina to the rest of her day.

The tennis courts at the nearby community park were deserted. All Gina could do was practice serves using the six balls that she had. Once those were knocked to the opposite side of the court, she'd run to collect them and knock them back again. After an hour of that, she was in a heavy sweat and her water was gone. She collected her balls one last and put them away in their canister. It had felt good to practice during the heat of the afternoon, and she figured she was a pound lighter because of perspiration. With a bottle of Gatorade from a vending machine, she continued mopping sweat from her face as she drove through town, taking herself on a sightseeing tour.

With no real idea of where she was going, Gina would turn the little Datsun in the direction of something that looked interesting. After a while, she had no idea of what part of town she was in, but she was finding as many Buddhist temples and schools as there were churches, or even supermarkets for that matter. Palm trees were everywhere, and she tried snapping pictures of the various types. There were quite a few palms on the estate that still needed to be identified, and images of a new palm-lined entrance were forming in her mind.

She was beginning to recognize a few landmarks, and before she knew it, she was back at the Kapalama Park. To her surprise, every single one of the homeless shelters had disappeared just since that morning. Parking in the same little lot at one side, she walked through the park.

“Where’d everybody go?”

She found patches of flattened grass where mini cardboard homes had been or someone had slept, burned spots where someone had a campfire, and other places that needed mowing. She figured that the city mowers would be there the next day, and wondered if that’s why they’d all left, just to stay out of the way. Finishing her quick little tour of the park, she stopped in the restroom. Even that had been cleaned since the morning.

“They’re a lot more organized than I ever guessed, that’s for sure.”

To get to the freeway, she had to pass Bunzo’s Bar. The parking lot was half full, mostly of pickup trucks. It was good ol’ boys time at the bar.

There was still something strange about the bar that unsettled Gina’s mind whenever she thought of the place.

“Three bartenders, all of them kinda sneaky about things, all of them entirely different from each other. One of them owns the place, but he works in the evening rather than during the day, which is something he lied to me about the first time we met. That doesn’t make sense. Why wouldn’t he want to work when the bar wasn’t so busy, and have the other guy work at night? What was his name again?”

The Datsun’s little engine struggled to get up to freeway speed as she merged into traffic.

“Hughes. What was his deal? A healing scab on his arm that looked suspiciously like a knife wound, and a suspicion of cops, just like the other two bartenders.”

She noticed the time on the dashboard clock, one of the few things that still worked in the old Datsun.

“He said he gets off at five, and made it sound like an invitation. If I hurry, I could shower and be back at Bunzo’s in time to meet him.” She chuckled. “Don’t even have to shower before going to that place.”

Even though her toe was pressing on the gas pedal, she wasn’t convinced it was a good idea to meet Hughes that evening. Even if the scab on his arm had come about as innocently as Detective Kona had implied, there was something about Hughes that didn’t fit, even more so than the other bartenders.

“All I have to do is have him take me to a bar, take the beer bottle or plastic cup he drinks from, and then turn that over to Kona for fingerprints. He said he wasn’t getting any matches from the pocketknife or wallet. Maybe it’s time to collect a few more for comparison. He never did tell me what he found on my beer bottle from last night.”

She got off the freeway and angled for East-West Road to take her home.

“Something stinks about Bunzo’s and it’s not just the dumpster.”

When she got back to the estate, the roofer/plumber/electrician/handyman was on the front porch having a cigarette.

“You came back,” she said. “Did we forget something with the wiring?”

“No matter. Nothing else better to do. Got living room painted with primer.” He stood to leave. “I’ll be back on Monday to help finish the walls.”

“Okay, well, thanks.” Once he was gone, Gina made a quick inventory of the few things she had, just in case something might’ve found its way into his truck while she was away. Everything was there and in the same places as she’d left them. “Who does that? Who just drops by to paint a room, only because he had nothing else better to do with his day? How’d he get in, anyway?”

While she showered, she couldn’t help but think people were keeping an eye on her. Being naked right then, she got a start, and quickly finished.

“Okay, the bartender that owns Bunzo’s is Japanese, or Asian, or something. I don’t know. So is the roofer. Is the owner of Bunzo’s sending the roofer by to keep an eye on me? Are they somehow related? But I met the roofer before I found the body of the dead man, and I didn’t meet the

owner of Bunzo's until after I found the dead man. Everything is upside-down with that guy's death."

She dressed in the only blouse she had that was clean and had a floral print. That matched the loose skirt she selected, the only one she'd brought that wasn't wool. After plucking a few brow hairs, she combed and fluffed her wavy hair. By the time she was done dressing, she looked ready for a date.

"Catch more flies with honey than vinegar, as they say."

Chapter Eighteen

When Gina got to Bunzo's, the parking lot was full.

"Only five o'clock and the place is already jammed."

She'd need to park in the street somewhere before going in to meet Hughes. Her only plan was to get picked up by him and go out for a drink, or even a meal, and conduct an interview trying to determine what he knew about the darker operations at Bunzo's Bar. There was more to the bar than crappy booze and bad pickup lines. Drugs, prostitutes, maybe even murder were on the daily happy hour specials. All Gina wanted was to know the real name of the dead man found on her porch that week before putting him to rest in a pauper's grave. If she could learn why he died on her porch, it would be icing on the weird welcome cake that she'd been presented with upon arrival in Hawaii.

When she saw a couple come out hand in hand, she waited while they went to their car to take their parking spot. Maybe it was because they walked past the dumpsters that she thought she recognized the daytime bartender. She backed out again and into a small space at the curb. Cutting her lights, she sat stock still when Hughes drove out, taking his date with him.

"Jerk. He didn't wait for me?" she muttered, watching his car go down the street in her rearview mirror. "I feel so insulted."

It caught her eye when someone else came out the back door of the place, carrying a bag of trash with him. It seemed odd to Gina that he'd have to take out the trash left over from the previous shift. He didn't seem happy about it, as he jammed the bag into the dumpster and slammed the lid shut. Instead of going back in, big-nosed Chuck lit a cigarette.

"He's barely starting his shift and he's already taking a break?"

Gina checked the rearview mirror again, trying to decide if she wanted to follow Hughes on his date, or to surveil Bunzo's for a while. If she went in for a drink, she'd have to mingle. She wouldn't be able to warm a barstool for the second evening in a row. She had nothing to ask Chuck, and hadn't exactly endeared herself to the Asian guy that owned the place, whatever his name was. Sticking the transmission in gear, she made a quick

U-turn in the middle of the street and set off in the direction Hughes had gone.

Doing a rolling stakeout was pointless with the vehicle she had at her disposal. The oxidized yellow Datsun with old-fashioned round headlights made her stick out like a sore thumb, and the engine would be uselessly underpowered in a chase. For that reason, she kept almost a full block behind Hughes's car while following him in the hope he wouldn't notice her. Traffic was busy on the surface streets, and whenever he made a turn, she lost him for a moment. The sky was getting dark, the sun getting low in the sky, and drivers were turning on headlights. Trying to remain hidden behind other cars, she closed the distance between her and Hughes so she wouldn't lose him.

He was acting as though he knew he was being followed by making turns every block or two, going left and then right, in no direction in particular. He never left the part of town she'd come to know as Kapalama, though.

At one point, he parked in front of Pinoy Boy's Emporium and went in, leaving his date to wait in the car. Gina rolled past to get a look at the woman he'd picked up. She was looking out her window, so Gina couldn't get a good look at her. All she could tell was that she was blond.

"Maybe it's true, that blondes have more fun? She's on a date, while I'm following them around. How pathetic is that?"

Gina made a turn. While she waited at a traffic light, she wondered what the point was to be out at all that evening.

"So what if a dead man gets a pauper's grave? What is it to me? Why do I care so much about his name?"

Deciding to go home, she went around the block headed for the nearest freeway on-ramp. As she approached Pinoy Boy's for the second time, Hughes was just coming out. He had something clutched in one fist, and a six-pack of beer in the other. She was able to duck into a driveway, hopefully without being seen by him. When he pulled out into traffic, she followed, now much more closely.

"Maybe it's good I didn't get picked up by him, if all he does is drive a girl around and drink beer."

Hughes made one turn, and Gina wondered if her suspicions were right. After a couple of blocks, he parked in the small lot at Kapalama Park. She had some tricky maneuvering getting the Datsun into an alley without

being noticed. After backing into an apartment building carport, she crept back down the alley until she got a view of Hughes's car. He'd backed into the space, the only car there.

It was nearly dark by then, and parked next to a wall kept her hidden. She could see their faces through the windshield of his car. His dome light came on. She noticed something being handed back and forth, and figured it was a can of beer.

"At least they parked before drinking."

She watched as it looked like he opened a second can.

"Yeah, babe. Let's go get some brewskis and party in my car," she said in a false baritone. "Classy."

Only the occasional car went by on the street that separated them. She couldn't see much of the park, just one corner of the restrooms and a small patch of grass. No one else was around; the homeless people that had been there earlier that morning were still staying away.

"Good place to party. No one else around, quiet neighborhood, no streetlights."

Gina rolled her window down. Trying to listen to them, all she could hear was the music coming from his car.

"Lucky her. She gets music with her beer."

She still couldn't get a good look at the girl's face. She could've been a teenager, or a thirty year old. She drank her beer fast, though, as though a clock was ticking. Setting her can on the dashboard, she shook her head about something, her blond mane barely moving.

Hughes got active about something hidden by the dashboard. He was still in the front seat with his date, so they hadn't progressed to back seat activities quite yet. Or maybe what happened in the back seat of a car in Cleveland happened in the front seat in Honolulu, Gina didn't know. Maybe all he was doing was counting money to pay her ahead of whatever act that was being planned.

Then Gina saw what it was that he'd been doing. He had a crude pipe with a foil ball at one end. When he tried handing it to his date, she waved it off. With a second more insistent attempt to get her to take it, she pushed his hand away. He seemed to accept that, and holding a lighter to the foil ball, he took a puff.

"Smoking meth is illegal anywhere," Gina muttered. She got out her phone to call the police. "Even in a parked car."

That's when the girl opened her door. White smoke came out. While stepping out, she shouted a profanity at him.

That didn't accomplish much except to get him more excited. While he took another puff from the foil pipe, he grabbed a hold of her and pulled back. The girl fired off a few more curse words, which only seemed to piss Hughes off. He had both hands on her by then, one pulling her arm, the other pulling her hair.

Gina waited for the 9-1-1 operator to come on the line while anxiously watching the girl get abused by Hughes. She was impressed with the fight the girl was putting up to keep Hughes off her.

"Come on...come on...answer my call..."

Then the horrible thing happened. Gina saw a fist slam into the girl's face. She fell back against the car door on her side and didn't move. With no more resistance, Hughes grabbed the girl's blouse and tore it open.

"Oh, no you don't!"

Gina tossed her phone with the unanswered call aside and swung the Datsun's door open. She was running before her feet touched the ground.

No longer a police officer, she had little she could shout. The words, 'Stop! Police! Put your hands up!' by law had to fail her.

She was across the street in seconds. With no real plan in mind other than getting him off his date, she pulled his car door open. When she saw his pants halfway to his knees, she hoped she wasn't too late. Gina grabbed his ankles and pulled.

It was too much of a surprise for him, and he barely had time to grab the dashboard. With a second yank on his legs, she pulled him out of the car. When his chest landed on the ground, his face bounced off the pavement. He rolled onto his back. With one hand reaching for his nose, he tried kicking at Gina.

"Stop! The police are on their way!" was all Gina could think to shout. She looked past him into the car. The girl was out cold, her head leaning off to one side. Somehow, she needed to control a man high on meth, and call for an ambulance for the girl. Patting her pocket, she remembered leaving her phone behind. When Hughes began to push up from the ground, Gina pushed him back down again with a foot. Once he was down, she stood on one of his arms to keep him there. "Lay still! The police are almost here!"

It was a little white lie, one she hoped was believable. She prayed for the sound of a siren, any siren. She had no idea if her call had ever been

answered by the 9-1-1 dispatcher, and if it had, if help was on its way. It could take some time locating her using the GPS chip in her phone, and she had a struggling maniac and an unconscious girl to contend with. At least she hoped the girl was only unconscious, and not...

In the next moment, it didn't really matter. When she felt the hard edge of something club her in the back of the head, the moment went dark.

Chapter Nineteen

When Gina came to, she was on her back. She had no idea of where she was or why her head hurt so much. Holding her head with both hands, she felt a goose egg at the back, and a smudge of blood on her cheek.

“What happened?”

She put her hands on the ground to push herself up. She was on asphalt and didn’t know why. Getting to a sitting position, she felt dizzy. She held her head again, trying to figure out what happened and where she was. There were a few flashes in her mind, of sitting in the Datsun, and a fight of some sort. She reached for her hip, but her sidearm wasn’t there.

Groping at her clothes, she looked down. Not even her holster was there. No belt, no uniform, no Kevlar vest, nothing but a skirt and blouse.

Still trying to figure out this new world she was in, she heard a woman crying. She looked to a few feet away and saw a girl on her side. Her clothes were torn. She seemed familiar.

“Are you okay?” Gina asked, still groping the goose egg at the back of her head.

The girl cursed Gina.

“Same to you. Any idea what happened?”

“Don’t you know?” the girl nearly screamed.

“I’m kinda woozy over here, so you might want to lay off the attitude, okay?”

“I’m hurt,” the girl said, before starting to cry again.

Gina got up and after getting her legs working right, went to sit with the crying girl. There were no cars in the parking lot they were in, not even her squad car. Or did she have a crappy pickup truck? Things still weren’t making much sense. “Where are you hurt?”

“My face,” she whimpered. “He tore my clothes.”

Gina tried covering the girl’s chest with pieces of torn blouse. “Who did?”

“That bartender. He said we were going for a drive and stop at the beach.”

Another flash of information hit Gina's mind, something about a bartender. "Did he touch you anywhere else?"

"I think I was out cold for a while." The girl felt her clothes. "I don't think he did anything else. Are the police coming?"

"I don't know," Gina said. "I'm not even sure why we're here or how I got hurt. Or even who you are."

"Holly," the girl said quietly. She was beginning to settle now that Gina had her arm around her shoulders. "I knew better than to go back to that bar."

With the mention of a bar, fragmented memories were beginning to fit together. Gina remembered going to the bar but not going in, instead following Hughes and a girl around in his car for a while. The girl she was comforting must've been that same girl. She still couldn't figure out why they were battered and sitting in a parking lot, or even why she followed them.

"Holly, do you have a phone?"

"It was in my bag."

"Where's that?"

"In that guy's car."

More clarity. Gina recalled sitting in her Datsun watching the 'date' unfold in Hughes's car, drugs being inhaled, and a punch being thrown. When the last piece of memory came back, albeit hazy, it was of her standing over Hughes, while looking at the unconscious girl in the front seat of his car. Now here they were, sitting alone in the parking lot with no cars anywhere nearby.

"Okay, we can't stay here," Gina said. She stood and tried pulling the girl up by the arm.

"Where'd we going?"

"For starters, the hospital would be a good idea."

"No! I can't go there!"

"I saw you get punched pretty hard, Holly. It knocked you out. You should get checked out by a doctor. They should check for other injuries, too."

"I can't go back there," Holly said.

Gina wanted to go to some place to get her head checked as much as she wanted the girl to get examined. But in the girl's present state of mind,

that apparently wasn't happening. When she looked across the street, she saw the Datsun still parked there.

"We're not staying here," she said, forcing the girl to stand. "It's not safe."

"Where are we going?"

"My house. You can stay there tonight. It'll be safe."

"Where do you live?"

"Near the university. You'll be safe."

Gina found her phone on the front seat where she'd left it. A call was live, but no one was there for a moment when she spoke. Just as she was about to end the call, she heard a voice on the phone.

"Hello?"

"This is 9-1-1 dispatch. Are you in need of assistance? Are you safe?"

Gina looked at her companion. Holly nodded back.

"I'm fine. I guess I mis-dialed."

"I've sent a squad car to your location. You're across from Kapalama Park, right?"

"I'm not sure where I am right now, but I don't need the police."

Getting off the call with dispatch was harder than she expected, suffering the third degree on why she called and if she was safe. After the call, Gina gave Holly her blouse to wear since she was wearing a tank top beneath hers. Once Gina got the Datsun started, she drove to the end of the alley. Just then, a squad car drove by, its lights flashing but no siren. Acting as nonchalant as she could, she pulled out into the quiet street and drove in the opposite direction.

"You really do need to get checked over by a doctor, Holly." Gina touched her cheekbone, which was beginning to throb. "I wouldn't mind having someone look at me, too."

"Okay, but can we get something to eat first?"

"Yeah. We'll find a place." The last thing Gina wanted was a meal. She wanted information instead. She knew Hughes was dirty for at least trying to have his way with Holly, who looked a little too young to be served alcohol. "Maybe we should call your parents so they can come pick you up?"

"They're back home on Kauai."

"Who do you live with here?"

Holly waited a moment before answering. "I got a roommate. I'm a student at the university and live in a dorm."

"It might be better if you stay with me tonight so we can keep an eye on each other." Gina pulled into the lot of a family restaurant. When the waitress tried showing them to a booth at a window, Gina asked for something in a corner away from the street. Even though she'd skipped dinner, Gina wasn't hungry and ordered only coffee. Holly ordered a breakfast omelet.

Holly was pretty, in a pick-up bar sort of way. Her face had delicate Asian features, but large occidental eyes. She had too many facial piercings for Gina's taste, and one had a spot of blood around it left over from when she'd been hit by Hughes. What had been a large blonde mane glued together with hair spray was a topsy-turvy wreck.

"Tell me what happened in the car with Hughes," Gina said to her companion. She held her glass of ice water to her cheek to cool what surely going to be a bruise in the morning. "That was his name, right? The dayshift bartender at Bunzo's?"

"I knew you were going to ask a bunch of questions. You're a cop, aren't you?"

"You're not in trouble, Holly. I'm just trying to figure out what happened, more for my sake than anything else."

"Can I go to the bathroom first? I want to clean up a little."

"Sounds like a good idea."

While she waited for Holly to return, Gina made a few notes on a napkin with a pen she borrowed from the waitress. She had a rudimentary timeline of what happened, and a description of Hughes's car. When the omelet was brought to the table, Holly still hadn't come back.

"Have you seen the girl I came in with?" Gina asked.

"Not since she ordered," the waitress said. She looked a lot like many of the people Gina had been meeting, with dark skin, Asian eyes, prominent cheekbones, and black hair ironed straight. Most noticeable was the overdone makeup and false eyelashes that looked more like window awnings. If she'd been wearing a miniskirt while standing on a street corner in Little Italy, Gina would've roused her out of the neighborhood. "Why'd you come in here with her?"

"What do you mean?"

“You look like a decent gal. Not like her type, anyway,” the waitress said as she walked away.

Wondering if she was being played for a fool, Gina went to the restroom in search of Holly. When she found it empty, she had a couple of choice curse words of her own. Back at her table, the omelet was waiting, along with a refill of her coffee.

She pulled the plate to her side of the table. “I’m finally getting that omelet I’ve been wanting all week.”

When the waitress brought the check, Gina was pressing the glass of ice water to her cheek again. “Can I get some more ice, please?”

The waitress came right back with some. “Every time that girl comes in here, she’s a mess.”

“Who? Holly?”

“Is that her name this week? Last time it was Ivy. One other time it was Rose.”

“I sense a trend. What do you mean by being a mess?” Gina asked. She finally looked at the waitress’s nametag: *Angela*.

“Crying all over the place, clothes torn, hair in tangles. Real mess, I tell ya.”

“She’s here a lot?”

“Every Saturday evening. Anything else? You want some dessert? We have plenty of pie.”

“Pie after an omelet?”

“People like our pie,” Angela said, walking away again, taking her pen and sense of style with her.

Gina left money on the table to pay the bill and left. She went through the complicated routine of starting the Datsun’s engine. While letting it idle for a moment, she rubbed the goose egg on the back of her head. “So, this is what people do for fun in Honolulu on a Saturday evening. Not much different from home.”

Chapter Twenty

When Gina woke on Sunday morning, it was to a bulldozer rolling over her head. Without lifting her head, she felt the goose egg at the back. It was still large, and that wasn't making her head feel any better. Touching her cheekbone brought her the same results, of being puffy and tender.

She didn't want to see how big of a shiner she had, so she avoided the mirror in the bathroom on the way to the kitchen. The omelet she'd had the evening before at Jack's Restaurant had sat heavily, and she was hungry only for coffee that morning. Sitting at the kitchen table with the first mug, she let the steam rise to her face.

She was just deciding to go back to bed when there was a knock at her front door.

"This is Sunday morning. No reason to bother people so early on a day off." She went to the door but didn't open it. "Who is it?"

"Me." It was a low voice that she recognized. It was the roofer, or electrician, whatever he was this week.

"Not doing any plumbing today. Thanks, though."

"Not here for water. Here for walls."

There was as much banging going on inside her head as she figured there would be with nails and his hammer on wall paneling.

"So early?"

"Sooner started, sooner done."

Gina muttered the same answer to herself, only with a sense of sarcasm. "It's Sunday. You can't give it a rest? I mean, take a day off from working on the house?"

"You want walls or not?" he said through the gap in the door.

"Let me put something on." Giving up on having a quiet morning to herself, Gina swapped her pajamas for a T-shirt and shorts before letting him in. "I have coffee, if you'd like some."

In the kitchen, he pointed to his own face in the same spots as her injured cheek. "What happened?"

Gina had to think fast because she hadn't thought of any explanations. As far as she knew, she'd taken a whack from behind, leaving her with the

goose egg, and got the bruised face when she fell forward and hit the asphalt. "I had some trouble with the ladder yesterday."

"Not boyfriend?"

"I don't have one."

"Looks like fight with boyfriend."

"Fight with the ladder."

"You want me to do something?"

"I can take myself to the doctor, but I think I'm okay."

He shook his head. "No need for doctor. I can open it."

"Open? What do you mean?"

"Bad shiner, like a boxer gets. I can open."

Gina went to the bathroom to look in the mirror. That's when she saw how big the bruise was, so big that her eyelid was sagging with the weight of extra blood in it. It really did look like something her boxer cousin would have after a bout. She'd even seen it get opened once. The way it looked on her, it would take a week, maybe two, before it ever went away.

"You know how?" she asked, tapping her fingertip on the lump of bruised eyelid.

"All of us in the family are boxers. Do this all the time. Maybe hurt a little, but better faster later."

"Faster later?"

"You want it better or not?"

Kenzo looked the part of roofer, electrician, and plumber, but not that of a plastic surgeon. For as rough and tumble as her life had been growing up, Gina still didn't have any scars on her face, and wanted to keep it that way. Having the roofer cut her eyelid the way a ringside doctor would with a boxer gave her a strong sense of alarm. But tapping a fingertip on her eyelid again, she didn't want to spend the week looking like a boxer who got knocked out in the tenth round. "You go wait in the kitchen. I need to think about this."

While she sat in the bathroom, Gina tapped her finger on her eyelid again. That wasn't going to accomplish much at making her eyelid go down. After washing her face, she wiped alcohol on her eyelid and cheek, doing the same thing she'd seen her uncle do to her cousin the one time. That stung her eyes while it dried. Taking apart a safety razor, she took that into the kitchen with more rubbing alcohol. He already had paper towels out and a chair arranged for her.

“You have a lighter?” she asked.

She watched carefully as he waved the razor blade through the flame on his lighter.

“You really know what you’re doing?”

“It’s okay. I’ve done this lotsa times.”

“I’ve heard that before.” Gina settled into the kitchen chair. “Okay, look. Just a tiny pinprick, right? Just big enough to let the blood out. I don’t want a scar.”

“No more scar.” With that, he pushed her head back and pricked her eyelid. Gina dabbed the mini-flood of thick blood that came out. She pressed a fingertip on the lid, hoping to get as much out as she could. “Okay?”

“I guess. Never expected to do this on a Sunday morning.” She snorted a laugh through her nose. “Would’ve been more fun to go to church.”

He told her he was going to finish putting up paneling on the walls that day, and that she could do whatever she wanted, she wouldn’t be in his way.

“Hey, before you throw that razor away, I have something else.”

She pointed to the hard knot on the back of her head. He wiped some alcohol on her scalp, and even before it was dry, he pricked the goose egg in a couple of spots.

“Go take shower. Wash it out good.”

The cold water felt good that morning as she pressed as hard as she could on the goose egg, forcing the blood out of the bruise. She still wondered about the wisdom of letting a handyman cut her, but he’d done exactly as he promised, of making only a prick with the corner of the blade.

“Glad to know I have a good cut man in my corner,” she said while drying. She put some ointment on her scalp and a small Band-Aid on her eyelid. Both were already feeling better now that the blood had been let out, and the pressure was off. When she went out, he was already on a ladder hammering nails into a wall as if nothing had happened in the kitchen. “Thanks for doing that. It feels better already.”

When he gave her the usual wave, she knew he’d already moved on to his primary task of the day. Taking her garden sketchpads out to the front porch, she found a place where the morning sun could shine on her face. She began with drawing a new map of the estate, putting in a few of the landmarks there, the double-track driveway that circled through, the long row of fruit trees along one side, and the stream with its bridge on the other.

With this map, she wanted to outline the basic entrance that she planned for the front. While she doodled a ground-level picture of what it could look like, a car came across the bridge.

“What does he want?”

Gina ignored Detective Kona as he parked his sedan in what was becoming his personal spot at the side of the house. She continued to sketch on her pad, even as he came up the steps.

“Miss Santoro, good morning. Who’s here?” he asked, nodding at the truck at the front of the house.

“The handyman. He’s hammering nails in the walls. What brings you to the estate so early on a Sunday morning, Detective Kona?”

“The same thing that got you that shiner.”

“I fell off a ladder. No reason for you to investigate that.”

“If you had, you’d have a cast on an arm.” He sat next to her on the porch step. “An old yellow Datsun pickup truck was reported to the police as being improperly parked in an alley last evening, right about the same time as a 9-1-1 call was made from the same location. That call is suspiciously similar to your number.”

“Only similar?” she asked.

“What happened at the park last night?”

“There’s coffee in the kitchen, if you’d like some.”

“Would you rather go downtown to be interrogated, or interviewed here?”

Gina set aside her sketchpad. “A young woman was being attacked in the front seat of a car.”

“With the way you face looks this morning, that woman was evidently you?”

“No.” For the tenth time that morning, Gina wondered where Holly might be, if she’d changed into a new person by then. “A teenager named Holly.”

“How did you get involved?” Kona asked.

“I’d followed them to the park. When I saw her get knocked out and then attacked, I called 9-1-1. But the call took so long to get answered, I ran to the car to stop what the man was doing to her.”

“Which was?” he asked.

“He already had his pants down.”

“Did you witness the act?”

“I witnessed something I’d rather not see again. But no, the act was not yet being undertaken.”

“Then what happened?”

“I pulled him off of her and out of the car. When he tried getting away, I stood on his arm.”

“Nice technique. I’ll have to remember that. Then what?”

“I was concerned about the girl, who looked unconscious on the front seat of the car. But I’d left my phone in the truck. I needed police for the man and an ambulance for the girl. I was just trying to figure out what to do when I got whacked in the back of the head. What happened during the next hour or two is still rather blurry.”

“That’s what happens when you run a stakeout without back-up.”

“It wasn’t a stakeout.”

“What was it then?” he asked.

“Look, the guy had said he was getting off work from Bunzo’s at five, and made it sound like an invitation. So, I went back.”

“Who was the guy?”

“The daytime bartender. It should be pretty easy to find him.”

“I’m confused. He asked you out on a date, but ended up with a teenager instead?” Kona asked. “How did he meet her?”

“I think she was working the bar. Somehow, she ended up with him as her date.”

“She’s a prostitute and she got into that kind of trouble? That doesn’t add up,” Kona said.

“She’s still pretty young. Maybe she’s new? She made it sound like she does that for pocket money rather than a living.”

“Part-time hooker?”

“She also said she’s a student at the university, and that her hometown is on Kauai. Maybe you can find her that way?” Gina said. “Honestly, I was a little insulted when I saw them leave together. I guess to satisfy my curiosity, I followed them.”

“Who was the guy again?”

“The dayshift bartender at Bunzo’s. His name is Hughes. White guy in his thirties, blue eyes, mousey hair.”

“Why did you want to be picked up by one of Bunzo’s bartenders? There are better places for that than Bunzo’s.”

“I wasn’t trying to be picked up. I just wanted to have a drink somewhere with him so I could ask a few questions about Bunzo’s, and find out what he might know about Danny. But by the time I got there, he was leaving with someone else.”

Detective Kona looked at his notes. “Holly?”

Gina nodded. “That’s the name she gave me. How’d you know that?”

“I have my sources. Why didn’t you report the assault?”

“Holly started freaking out when I said I was going to. She wouldn’t even go to the ER to get checked out by a doctor. At one point, I thought she was going to jump out of the pickup. I’m still a little worried about her.”

“Don’t. You said you got whacked in the head?”

Gina showed him the small prick that Kenzo the handyman had made on the back of her head. “This was a big goose egg a couple hours ago. I was out cold for at least a few minutes. By the time I came to, Hughes was gone, as was his car. It was just me and Holly, and she was crying her eyes out. It took me a while to figure out what happened. By the time I talked her into going to an ER, she talked me into getting a meal first. That’s when she ducked out on a visit to the restroom, after giving me some big song and dance about being a college coed that lived in a dorm on campus. She duped me every step of the way.”

Kona chuckled. “She’s good at it.”

“You know her?”

“Frequent flyer in the downtown lockup. I didn’t know she was going by Holly these days.”

“How do you know it’s the same person I was with last night?” Gina asked.

“Dark-skinned Asian with large eyes, piercings, and blond hair?”

Gina nodded. “How’d you know?”

“Her bag was found in a park dumpster. No ID, but the phone number of the cell phone is on file with the police department. She came in this morning to claim it from lost and found.”

“How’d she know to look for it with you guys?” Gina asked.

“Not the first time she’s lost her bag. She was able to identify it by the number. Did she give you a last name?” Kona asked.

Gina shook her head. “Only Holly. The waitress said she has a different name whenever she goes in.”

“Don’t tell me. She wanted to go to Jack’s Restaurant?”

Gina laughed at herself. "Boy, am I ever a sucker."

"Not really. Maybe a little. You're sure the man who did that to her was named Hughes?"

"Eighty percent. I never got a good look at him until I was pulling him from the car, and it was dark by then. I got a better look at his hind end with his pants down than I did with his face. He was fighting back, so I didn't get a clear look at either end. But if you go pick him up, I might be able to pick him out in a lineup."

"Before we talk about that, I want to know what you wanted to talk to him about?" Kona asked.

"There's something going on at that bar, I know it. I just can't put my finger on what. I thought they were running a prostitution ring from behind the bar, but since I saw him smoking some meth in the car last night, it might be drugs." Gina gave something some thought. "Actually, while driving Holly around, he stopped at Pinoy Boy's for beer and something else. Maybe he got the meth there? I don't know."

"You're sure it was meth?" he asked.

"Yeah, the usual foil pipe and white cloud. He only git a couple of puffs before he tried forcing himself on Holly. When she fought him off, he belted her but good." She watched him make notes in some sort of special shorthand on his pad. "Honestly, Detective, I only wanted to have a quick drink with him, asked a few leading questions, and then get out."

"I'm glad you didn't," he said.

"Yeah, I know, I'm interfering in your investigation to the point of being obstructive."

"No, you're not interfering. You've been helpful, actually. The problem is with Hughes."

"What about him? Hopefully Holly filed a complaint and you picked him up?"

"We picked him up, but not because of a complaint. Hughes was found floating face down in the Ala Wai Marina early this morning. He'd been in the water for several hours."

"There goes that lead," she said. "How'd he get it?"

"Bullet to the forehead. That's why I'm glad someone else got in his car instead of you."

"Me, too. Where's this marina? What's it called again?"

“Ala Wai. It’s at one end of Waikiki. Don’t you go anywhere else besides bars?”

“Hardware stores. Kinda wished I’d gone to church this morning. Do I need to make some sort of formal statement for my alibi for last night? Because I don’t have one.”

“Where were you between ten PM and four AM?”

“Here, and no, I don’t have anyone for you to call to verify that.”

“I seriously doubt you offed Hughes,” he said.

“Why?”

“You’ve told me a couple of times that you’d never touch a gun again. Otherwise, you’re not the type to off some dude.”

“You sure about that?” she asked.

“I can see you roughing up a perp in an alley, but not wasting him.”

“Maybe, as long as my dad never heard about it.” All Gina wanted to do was go back to her sketchpad. “Did Hughes have anything to do with Danny?”

“Directly? I’m not sure. But once I started to follow the leads you’ve given me about Bunzo’s, my investigation took a new direction. Danny had something to do with Bunzo’s, or vice-versa, that much I’m convinced about.”

“Well, count me out. I’m sticking to being a gardener.”

“I thought you were a landscape horticulture something or other?” he asked.

“I might not be any better at that than I was as a cop.”

“Why?”

She waved her arm in a grand gesture in the direction of the estate in front of them. “My job is to turn Hawaii’s biggest weed patch into a beautiful horticultural garden that residents would be proud to pay their hard-earned money to visit.”

“So?”

“I’m utterly clueless of what to do. I have a crew of a dozen that comes to work five days a week, and all they’ve done is prune a few branches and dig a hole in the ground.”

“It looks different now than it did on Monday. What are those sketches?” he asked.

Gina handed them to him. “This is what it’s supposed to look like when I’m done.”

“What are these places?”

She explained the drawings of the individual gardens on her map. “This area is the Japanese garden, and here’s the koi pond that goes with it. In the middle of the grounds will be the vegetable gardens. Through our digging this week, we’ve discovered an old diversion ditch from the pond to the pea patch for irrigation. I’ll need to talk to the Tanizawas to see if they want that included in the final development. Honestly, this is turning into an archeological dig more than it is a garden restoration.”

“Walk me around the place. I’d like to see it again.”

“Again?”

“My school had field trips here when I was a kid. I think I’ve seen it only once since then.”

Instead of pushing through weeds and vines, she took Kona along the double track. Gina felt quite satisfied with herself, knowing the differences between the various fruit trees that had been pruned. She picked up a papaya that had fallen since the day before.

“All this fruit, and nobody is eating it except for the rats. I have plenty of them around here.”

“So I’ve heard. But nobody eats fruit from off the ground. It has to be harvested. Once it falls, it’s bruised on one side, and then like you said, the rats get to it.”

“I still haven’t learned how to know if something is ripe. The crew picked a few things the other day, but I didn’t get the chance to see what.”

“Have someone show you how to determine if fruit is ripe for picking. Tropical fruit is a little different from fruit you grow on the mainland.”

“I don’t know much about those, either. Not much of a farmer, I guess.”

“You will be soon enough, if you ask the right questions.”

“I’m not sure of what to do with all these different things. Seriously, what’s the difference between a papaya and a mango?”

“Not much, if you’re eating it fresh for breakfast.” He took the papaya from her hand and set it on a rock. Using a knife he got from his pocket, he sliced it in half lengthwise. “Papaya have all these little seeds. Just scoop those out and replace with crushed pineapple. Then squeeze a quarter lime over that and eat with a spoon. Very ono way to eat, perfect for breakfast.”

“Ono?”

“Delicious. The Japanese say oishi. The Filipinos have a lot of words for it and usually say masarap.” He finished cutting cubes of the juicy flesh and offered her a taste. “We learn something new every day, whether we want to or not, Miss Santoro.”

“I’ve learned about a hundred new things every day since I arrived.” Gina tasted the sweet, pulpy fruit. “This is ripe? This is what it’s supposed to taste like?”

“It might be a day or two over-ripe. You can turn it into dessert with a scoop of ice cream. Make friends with the Filipinos. They have tons of recipes for cooking with all these different kinds of fruit.”

“So far, the only Filipino food I’ve had are the sandwiches Clara makes for us each day.”

“She’s not much of a cook?” he asked. They’d made their way to the large brush pile in the middle of the grounds to toss away the fruit rind.

“I think she’s distracted with the idea that a man was found dead here last week. She avoids the front porch at all costs.”

“People in the islands are pretty superstitious,” he said. “The Filipinos are Catholic, but mix a lot of old-fashioned beliefs and superstitions with it.”

“Such as?” Gina asked. She had a few superstitions of her own.

“Ghosts. But everyone in the islands believes in them.”

“Felix said once that the house is haunted. I chalked that up to not wanting to work by himself every day.”

“Don’t try to convince him otherwise. There are too many layers of myths and folklore that all these different groups of people brought with them. Do yourself a favor, Miss Santoro, and don’t try to change people from a culture you’re not familiar with. It won’t end well.”

“So I’m discovering. Between me being indecisive and the work crew being superstitious, I’m surprised anything gets done at all.”

She pointed out the small trees and shrubs they’d found and marked in the old Japanese garden, and they looked at the mound of dirt that was growing next to the hole that was being dug for the pond.

“I guess we’re keeping the old bridge once the new main entrance is built,” she said. “Nostalgia, or some such thing.”

“That bridge has been there for a long time. I’m surprised it can still take the weight of a car driving across.”

“Maybe that’s why the Tanizawas don’t want me to bring in heavy equipment to work on this project. If I could, I could get the pond dug, and the fields plowed in only a few days. And scrape out a new driveway that goes through the place.”

“Maybe,” he said. They were back to his car by then. “Do you have big plans for today?”

“I was thinking of going for a drive, see a few more places. I might even risk putting on a swimsuit and go to the beach. Any suggestion on where I can go?”

“A Waikiki suntan is the envy of the world. Just wear sunscreen and a hat, and take water. Park near the Ala Wai Marina and walk to any beach you find.”

“Ala Wai Marina. Isn’t that where...”

“Hughes was found, yes. You can walk around there to look at the yachts. I find that entertaining from time to time.”

“Like I know something about yachts.”

“On the other side of the marina is a popular mall. Everything from cheap tourist stuff to expensive clothing and jewelry. Good food court, too.”

Something he said perked her interest. “How expensive is expensive in Honolulu?”

He chuckled when he started his engine. “Our salaries put together wouldn’t be enough to buy pretty little bobbles in some of the stores at that mall, or along Waikiki. Pretty to look at, but leave your credit card at home!”

Chapter Twenty-One

The Rolex wristwatch was burning a hole in Gina's curiosity ever since Detective Kona returned it to her, with the message that it was useless in his investigation. Even though she was piecing together some of the clues in Danny's death, the Rolex wasn't fitting in. Nobody was owning up to knowing anything about it, and quite oddly, no one wanted the thing that was worth thousands of dollars. But it had something to do with Danny, she knew it. There was no way a Rolex found in the grass only steps from where Danny's body was found, and within only twenty-four hours, that it could have nothing to do with him.

Gina dressed in the bikini she'd brought from home. It was a gift from her sister right before coming to Hawaii, and for as much as it revealed, it was more of a gag gift. Putting on her last clean blouse and a pair of shorts, and gathering a towel, water, and a paperback book in her bag, she left home with the Rolex in her pocket.

After a couple of wrong turns in town, she found the mall Detective Kona had suggested. Leaving her beach bag in the Datsun, she left that behind.

"Hey!" a guy said coming in her direction. "Nice truck. Where'd you get it? Toys 'r Us?"

"Yeah, funny." Gina kept walking toward the mall entrance, but peeked over her shoulder a couple of times to see what guy was doing. The last thing she wanted was for some wise guy to vandalize her borrowed truck. When she saw him climb into his own giant pickup truck, she figured it was just testosterone speaking for him.

She was almost in the mall when she heard a terrible scraping sound of metal on concrete, followed by a string of profanities. When she looked back, the wise guy was out of his truck, examining the shiny paint on one side. When he looked at the concrete pillar next to his truck, she knew what had happened.

"Oh well, that's what you get from driving a pointlessly big truck to the mall parking garage."

Gina took a lap through the food court, where she recognized a few of the fast food places. Most of the food served there represented cultures of the Pacific Rim. After touring the lower floors, she went up the escalator to the top level. Just like Detective Kona had said, it was an entirely different world, with expensive clothing stores, jewelers, and handbags that cost as much as a new car. Avoiding the glitz and glimmer of stores she'd never even heard of, she went to one of the jewelry stores.

The air-conditioning hit hard when she entered the jewelry store. Walking a slow lap through the store, she looked through glass cases, figuring the stock in that one little shop could buy all of Little Italy at home. But she found a cabinet of Rolex watches, the reason she went in. She lingered at the case, trying to match her watch with the others.

"May I help you, Miss?" a man in a stiff white shirt, necktie, and expensive suit asked. Even his eyeglasses looked too rich for ordinary use.

Gina took half a step back, wondering what sort of white-collar hell she'd fallen into. "I, well, hope so."

"Interested in a Rolex specifically?"

"I'm interested in some information." She dug the Rolex from her pocket and held it out to him. "I need to learn something about this particular watch. Is there a consumer database that can be accessed to identify the owner of it?"

He barely glanced at it. "It's not yours?"

"I found it a few days ago. I've been asking around if anyone has lost it, but no one knows anything about it. I'm figuring Rolex might have a customer database that identifies the owner. If so, I can return it once I know the owner's name."

He flicked his fingers for her to hand it over. Touching it with as few fingers as possible, he took a close look. He didn't seem satisfied with something, and used a single ocular loupe for a closer inspection.

"It's not stolen, at least not that I know of," she added.

"I'm sure that it's not, Miss." He opened the clasp and looked at the back of the watch, again with the magnifying loupe. Popping the loupe from his eye to put away, he returned the watch to Gina. "I am also sure that the owner probably isn't missing it."

"Why not? I sure would be if it were mine."

"It is not an authentic Rolex timepiece."

“Oh.” Gina looked at it, wondering how he knew that. She wasn’t sure if she should be disappointed or happy.

“Maybe I should explain,” he said. “There are two things not quite right about it. First, the color of that face is one of the current colors they use, but the lettering and numerals are from a few years ago. That color and those numerals were never found on any of their timepieces at the same time. Also, if you look at the reverse, you’ll find incorrect serial numbering.”

“Incorrect?”

“That serial number would not be found in the Rolex database, except under one circumstance.”

Gina tried reading the tiny numbers on the back. “Which is?”

“It would be listed as not authentic.”

“It’s a fake number?”

The man seemed to stiffen at her choice of words. “You could say that, yes.”

“I don’t understand. Doesn’t every watch have a unique serial number? How could you possibly know this one is fake without looking it up?” she asked.

“Every jeweler and seller of fine Rolex timepieces has that serial number memorized.” When a customer came into the store, he leaned closer to the counter to speak with Gina privately. “Somebody somewhere is making imitation watches, not just this brand, but of other fine brands. They are all of very nice craftsmanship, extremely well made, but they are copies. The first few times these came onto the market, jewelers were fooled by the quality. But when they started showing up in large numbers, the serial numbers were shared. That’s when we discovered they all had the same identifying number, one that is not listed in the Rolex database as authentic. In fact, their database mentions that specific number as being, how did you put it? Fake.”

For some reason, Gina felt disappointed, even though it was a found item. “It’s not worth anything?”

He took the watch from her again for another close examination. “What you have here is a very nice watch of high quality movement and construction. If the maker of these watches would’ve branded them in some other way, even with his own name instead of trying to dupe people, he could have had a very profitable career as a watchmaker. But with that

brand name on the face and the inauthentic serial number on the reverse, I'm afraid it's entirely worthless. No proper jeweler even wants it in their shop, as you can imagine." He gave the watch back to her.

"I guess that's why nobody is looking for it?"

"Probably. It is a very nice watch, though. Maybe it could be a gift to a boyfriend or your father, as long as you told them it was not an authentic Rolex, of course."

"Of course." She put the watch back in her pocket. She had to save face somehow, and not simply run from the store. Even though it wasn't her watch and she'd had no way of knowing it was fake, she still felt embarrassed by bringing it into the nicest jewelry store she'd ever been in. "Mind if I look around for a moment?"

"Please," he said, smiling.

While he chatted with someone that seemed to be a regular customer, Gina took another lap through the store, looking in cases of wedding rings and bracelets.

"Yeah, like I'll ever get a ring from a place like this," she mumbled.

The same man came back. "Would you like to try one on?"

"A ring? Me?"

He unlocked a case and brought out a velvet tray of diamond rings. They flickered and flashed in the lighting, exactly the way they were supposed to. He took out one of the smaller ones and slipped it on her finger. She assumed that since it did not have a tag on it, the price was in the home mortgage range.

"What do you think?" he asked.

She held her hand up and waved it in the light. "I think any man that could afford something like this would give it to someone besides me." Gina took it off and handed it back.

He got another ring, the largest and flashiest in the tray. "This would be lovely on your hand."

She slipped it on her ring finger, took one look, and slipped it off again. "Yes, lovely on a hand with dirty nails. I'd look fabulous digging in the garden wearing that."

He smiled politely while putting away the tray.

"Thanks for letting me fantasize," she said. "And for the information about the watch."

"It's been my pleasure. What is your name?"

“Gina.”

“I’m Grayson. I hope to see you here again.”

“Thanks. I think the stores downstairs are a little more my speed.”

He got her attention again with a polite flick of his hand. “We’re having an unadvertised sale next month, if you’d like to participate.”

Gina couldn’t get out of the store fast enough. Too many shiny baubles, and the mention of a sale, were bad news for someone from Little Italy with a few bucks in the bank. It wouldn’t be hard at all to...

Grayson had followed her out. “Miss?”

She turned back to him. “Yes?”

He let the shop door close behind him and looked up and down the mall walkway. “Even though I just made a point of the inauthenticity of your timepiece, I know someone who might be interested in owning it.” He smiled, but nervously this time. “As a way of getting it out of the fine jewelry marketplace, of course.”

“Of course. How would I find this collector?”

“Through me, naturally.”

“Naturally. What would it be worth to your friend the collector?”

“A hundred.”

If there was one thing Gina could do, it was horse-trading, and it couldn’t be that much different in Hawaii than in Cleveland. “You just got through telling me how well made it is. I’d expect more than that,” she said.

“Are you interested or not?”

“I’d be much more interested in a much higher price.”

“I...my friend couldn’t go much higher.”

“For the price being offered, the free info about it was worth more to me.” Knowing she could always go back at a later date, she gave him a smile as though she’d won the trade, even if no horses had been swapped. “I might see what others have to say about it. I can always use it as a gift, like you said.”

He seemed frustrated, even angry as he returned to his shop.

“I can never go back in there,” she said, hurrying to the steps down to the lower levels. “What I’d like to know is what do I do with a fine quality fake Rolex?”

She found a juice shop, and when paying, the cost of the drink seemed like nothing after the store she was just been daydreaming in. She found a

table near lush tropical plantings to sit for a while, and to think about what she'd learned from the jeweler.

"Just because it's fake, that doesn't mean it had nothing to do with Danny's death."

Little doves pecked at the ground around her shoes, the same kind that cooed in the mornings at the estate.

"Okay, what do I know about dead man Danny? He died within a few hours of being dumped on my front porch two days after Christmas. He had very little in his stomach, only a partly digested cheese sandwich. All he had in his pockets were a broken pocketknife, an empty wallet except for one black and white picture of a lady and kid, and a Tuyu beer bottle cap. He had freshly mown park grass on his shoes, and his white T-shirt and dark trousers had seen better days. On the day he died, he wasn't wearing the windbreaker that I saw him wearing on previous mornings.

"He died when someone stabbed him in the liver with an ice pick, an injury that took a couple of hours to kill him. He drank at Bunzo's Bar, or at least had his last beer there, apparently a Tuyu, but not within a day or two of his death, because he had a zero blood alcohol level and no beer in his stomach, according to the coroner. The only place I've been able to find Tuyu is at Bunzo's, and they had exactly two bottles missing from a case, the one I drank, and maybe the one Danny had. But I don't know if Danny actually drank a Tuyu, or if he just happened to find a bottle cap and kept it for some reason. But why would he do that? There's no reason for anybody to keep a bottle cap from what is possibly the worst beer on the planet.

"Did he keep it, just so he knew what to avoid drinking in the future? That doesn't make sense, either. I know the name of Tuyu beer is burned into my taste buds forever more. No reason to keep a bottle cap to remember that stuff."

She was interrupted from taking notes on a napkin when her phone rang. It was a call from Millie.

"Now what have I done?" she muttered, wondering if she should answer it. "Probably fired. I can pack my stuff and move into a cardboard box at the park where I belong."

"Gina? This is Millie Tanizawa. I'm wondering if you have time to meet this afternoon?"

"Yes, I suppose we should. I've been meaning to explain about the delays at the estate."

“What delays?”

“The fish pond hasn’t been dug, and I’m nowhere near ready to do something with the Japanese garden.”

“I was just there a few minutes ago and everything looked fine. There’s another reason we’d like to meet with you.”

“We?”

“The rest of my family. We have a few ideas to share about the work you’re doing.”

It almost felt like she was being taken home by her boyfriend to meet his family for the first time. “The whole family?”

“It’s not a big deal. We’re just having a barbecue and were wondering if you’d like to join us?”

“Today?”

“If you have the time, yes. It’s not far from the estate.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Gina was glad for the barbecue invite, because it gave her a reprieve from displaying her bikini-clad body at a public beach. The only place she'd worn it without a layer of clothes over it was in her bedroom. She got the directions for where to go, yet another part of town she hadn't yet been. It sounded as though she could just drop in whenever she wanted, and after buying a bouquet of flowers and a bottle of red wine at the market, she found the street on the map she kept in the Datsun.

St. Louis Heights turned out to be very close to the estate, a long narrow residential area that followed the ridge above the estate. Looking up from the gardens at the bottom of the valley, she'd noticed a few of the houses. On the opposite side of that ridge was yet another valley with its own stream. What she had to do was find the street that wound its way up through the neighborhood that clung to the ridgeline.

"Wouldn't be able to drive these streets in the snow and ice," she muttered, following a zigzagging street. "Be great for sledding, though."

Gina wasn't sure of what to expect of the house that her employers lived in, or exactly who lived there. All she really knew about the Tanizawas were the estate gardens that she was recreating, and that they had farms on the island. She'd even seen Tanizawa produce in the supermarket, mostly specialty stuff for Asian cooking. What she didn't know was if the farms were giant impersonal places like in the Midwest, or smaller family-run operations.

When she found the address, it was for a house hidden from street view. All that showed in front were the glazed-tile roof and lush tropical plantings. It was positioned near the top of the ridge, and considering its location, it would have a view down into the same valley as the estate, and the city beyond. It was older, but well-tended and stretched out to the sides instead of up. Large trees provided shade at each side and along the front.

Several cars were parked along the curb on both sides of the street, and she wondered if they were all for the afternoon barbecue. Parking half a block away, she took her wine and bouquet to the house. It was a matter of walking down a set of steps to get to the shaded main entrance that had a

cool and inviting feel. She didn't need to knock before the door opened. Millie was there smiling.

"Any problems finding us?"

"Almost got car sick driving around in circles, but no," Gina said. She handed the flowers to Millie when she went in. "I guess it's a little lame bringing flowers to someone with a yard full of them."

Millie smiled politely. "Not at all. We don't have this kind here at the house."

A man about the same age as Millie joined them in the front hall. He had the same face with narrow eyes and dark skin, and one leg was bowed. Like everyone else in Hawaii, he was dressed in shorts and a T-shirt. He smiled to Gina.

"You must be Miss Santoro?" he asked, extending his hand to shake hers.

"I hope so. Otherwise, I'm in big trouble."

The smile on his face froze before it started to drift away. Millie abandoned her then, taking the flowers with her.

"I'm sorry, yes, I'm Gina. I shouldn't say things like that. Nobody ever gets my sense of humor."

He smiled again. "It was funny. I'm Dwight, by the way. You already know my sister, Millie. Come out to the patio and meet the rest of the gang."

Gina followed him through the middle of the house. With only the quick glance she got, it looked like the bedrooms were off to the left, and the living room and kitchen were to the right. Going out a large sliding glass door to a long narrow patio, Gina froze in her tracks. There had to be two dozen people there, including a few kids, all smiling at her. Most were Asians, a couple of them white, and a couple others were Polynesian. Behind them was open sky with a view of the next ridge in the distance, and the valley below. White clouds were coming from over the mountain range. Feeling as though she were an actor thrust on stage before she knew her lines, all she could do was smile back.

Dwight did the introductions, and all Gina could do was smile and nod at each of them in turn. Some had Japanese names, others the same as old friends. Kyle from the hardware store was there with his wife, as was Brad, the other hardware store employee she'd met a few days before. Looking at the two couples, she was struck by how odd they seemed. Japanese Kyle

was married to a blond-haired and blue-eyed woman named Koni, and white as snow Brad was married to a Japanese woman named Reiko. Her next surprise came when she was introduced to the handyman that had been at the house so many times, Kenzo.

“Kenzo is the oldest brother,” Dwight said. “This is his house, our meeting place whenever the family has something to discuss.”

Gina made a point of shaking his hand. “You never said a thing to me about who you are. I thought you were a handyman the family hired to work on the house.”

Kenzo smiled as though he was enjoying the trick he’d played on her. “I wanted to get to know the person staying in our house.”

“You never asked me any questions. You put me to work instead.”

“Never asked you to work on the roof, but you volunteered, just like with the hot water tank and the electrical wiring.” He gave her a thumbs-up. “Good enough for me.”

Gina scratched her head. “Okay, I’m a little bad with remembering names. I’m already lost with who’s a Tanizawa and who’s here to make me even more nervous?”

They all laughed. One young woman came over to her, introduced herself as Dwight’s wife, and took the bottle from Gina. “I’m nobody you have to remember for now, but I know how a corkscrew works. It won’t help you remember our names, but it won’t matter so much after a glass of wine.”

Dwight took over again. “Kenzo is the oldest son, followed by me, then Millie, then Kyle, and Harry is the youngest. He’ll get here a little later. All the others are either in-laws or cousins here for the burgers and dogs. Don’t worry about them.”

“I guess I should’ve brought more wine,” Gina said, still wondering exactly why she was there. Just then, a glass was put in her hand by Koni, Kyle’s wife.

“There’s no shortage of this. The wives bring their own to drink, and the husbands bring beer. Which is a waste, because most of us are a bunch of boring teetotalers.”

“She hasn’t met Harry yet,” one of the women said. “Or his latest girlfriend. What’s her name again?”

“Need a Rolodex to keep track of them,” Koni said.

Gina was beginning to enjoy her visit. This crowd wasn't all that much different from her family back in Cleveland. "To keep track of his girlfriends?"

"To keep track of the latest one's names." Koni forced an insincere and slightly tipsy smile. "That seems to change as often as her hair."

"I never have seen her roots," someone said. "Anyone know her natural color?"

"Yes. Clairol," Koni said, laughing.

The crowd broke up, with the kids there going off to explore a trail of some sort, a couple of the men starting barbecues, and most of the women retreating to the shade of the house. Like always, Kenzo disappeared. Dwight stuck with her, though, when she went to a low rock wall with a view of the valley.

"This is a beautiful view. The mountains in the background on one side, the ocean in the other direction, and the city below."

"See anything familiar?" he asked.

"I haven't been here long enough to be able to recognize landmarks."

"The tall buildings are Waikiki, of course. And the Ala Wai Canal and golf course next to it. Just a mile away on the other side of this valley below us is the university. Notice anything about what's directly below us?"

She wouldn't have recognized the estate except for the two large water tanks nearby. She saw the new roof of the house lost in the trees, and the circular driveway that roamed past the various gardens of the estate, and the shallow hole that would eventually become the koi pond. She could just spot one side of the little bridge, most of it hidden in the trees that covered the stream.

"Wow, seeing the estate from up here, it looks like I've done nothing at all."

"That's actually good for us, Gina."

"Why? I've barely scratched the surface. Which is something I need to talk to you about. Or Millie, whoever is running the project in the background."

"We don't want to be in a hurry with this project. We want it to be done right. Initially, we talked to several local landscape architects who wanted to bring in heavy equipment and level the place before starting all over with something new. Then we got your proposal."

“Yeah, my proposal from Hades. I had no reason to send you that proposal. I’m from Cleveland. What do I know about the tropics? I barely have any experience in landscape as it is.”

“That’s why we wanted you. We’re hoping you go about the job thoughtfully, even hesitantly. We figure you’ll be careful trying to preserve whatever is already there.”

“That’s how I’m trying to approach it, but I don’t know if I’m being successful or not. Really, I’ve been meaning to talk to Millie about dropping out of the project so someone more qualified can take over. Even Felix, the foreman, would do a better job of understanding what you want and then rebuild your old gardens.”

“You might not entirely understand our situation, Gina.” Dwight seemed concerned about something. “Your family name is Santoro, right?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re Italian?”

“By heritage, yes. On my father’s side, we’ve been in America for four generations. My mother came to America from Italy to marry my father.” She explained how Santoro is more of a Spanish name, but had become fairly common in the Po Valley region of Italy in the last couple hundred years. My sister likes to tease me that I’m more Italian than our mother, while Ana’s very American like our father. I don’t see it, though.”

That brought some worry to Dwight’s face, until Millie came out and nodded to him.

“We have one more Tanizawa for you to meet.”

“You have one more brother, the youngest, right?” Gina asked. “I think I heard the name Harry?”

“Eventually, but he’s not here yet.”

Dwight led Gina back into the house to one wall in particular in the living room. There were several pictures on the wall of the same people she’d just met but in younger days, along with that of a woman. There was also a small shrine of some sort on a sideboard, with several sticks of incense smoldering. Inside the shrine were another picture of the woman, and an old black and white picture of a couple in Japanese kimono. There was also a plate with a pyramid of oranges, a bowl with rice, and a small plate with wrapped candies. In the middle of everything was a ceramic cup with a clear fluid in it.

“You’ve probably figured out we’re Buddhists. This is our family shrine where we burn incense and make little offerings to remember our ancestors.”

“It’s lovely. I’ve never seen anything like it. Is the lady your mother?”

“Yes. She passed quite a few years ago.” He got the small framed snapshot of the couple in kimono. “These are our grandparents. This was taken when they were still in Japan, right before they came to Hawaii. They’re the ones who first started the farm.”

“The estate where I’m working?” she asked.

“That’s right. O-jii-san—Grandfather—built that house with the help of the new friends he made during the journey on the ship coming here. My father grew up in that house, and my brothers and Millie and I spent a lot of time there as kids. Once our dad was old enough, he built this house, which is where my brothers and Millie grew up. After our mother passed, Dad moved back into the old house, but he eventually couldn’t take care of the place or himself. That’s when he moved in here.”

“I thought this was Kenzo’s house?” Gina asked.

“It is, now. This place has almost as much history as the house down in the valley. Eventually our father got remarried and had another son. That’s Harry. He grew up in this house long after me and the others had left.”

“Oh, he’s a half-brother.”

Dwight nodded. “To us, he’s more of a distant cousin, almost a full generation younger than us. We really don’t have much to do with each other, other than when he blesses us with his presence at a family barbecue.”

“Who’s Reiko? I thought she was a relative?”

“Another half-sister, to us and to Harry. Even though she’s a lot younger than even Harry, and we never got to know her mother even while she was married to our Dad, she’s closer than Harry. Much more of a sister than he could ever be a brother.”

Every family has its secrets, was all Gina could think.

She wondered about Harry’s mother, where she might be, but saved that piece of gossip for another time. She was on overload already. “That’s why you don’t want the house in the valley torn down and something modern built in its place? Too much family history there?”

“Dad can’t seem to let go of the place. All he talks about is the registered historical status he hopes to get for the estate.”

“I still don’t understand why you hired me? Wouldn’t someone more familiar with Hawaii and Japanese history be better qualified to do that project?” she asked.

Dwight ignored her question when he stepped over to another display on the wall. This one had a picture of a young man in a military uniform in one frame, and several medals in another frame. One other frame held a commendation. “This is our father.”

She quickly read the commendation from World War Two, and found the name of Tanizawa. The face in the old picture was similar enough to Dwight and his siblings that she’d be able to pick him out in a police lineup.

“His unit was made up of all Nisei Japanese from Hawaii and the mainland. Very brave group of men. Not many of them left.”

Gina wasn’t sure of what to say. “So, he’s...”

“Dad’s in the other room. He’d like to meet you.”

“Oh.” She did some quick calculations to figure the man’s age. He had to be close to a hundred years old if her math was right.

“He’s been watching you this week from the patio with great interest. Oh, not spying on you, just to see what you’re doing down there. He doesn’t get out of his bedroom much anymore, mostly in the mornings when it’s still cool and the patio is in shade.” Dwight took Gina to a large bedroom. Inside was an old man in a wheelchair, his lap covered with a small blanket. “This is my father, Bunzo Tanizawa.”

Gina shook the man’s hand bent with time and arthritis. She had to lift it and set it back down again. “Hi, Mister Tanizawa. My name is Gina. It’s very nice to meet you.”

He nodded for her to sit in the chair next to his.

“Santoro-san, yes?” he said in a deep but quiet voice.

“That’s my family name. Please call me Gina.”

He took a long look at her face. She still had a Band-Aid on her cheek where Kenzo had cut her lid. “Been in a fight?”

“You might say that.”

“Win?”

“Not this time.”

“Keep your fist away from your face. No need to punch yourself.”

Gina chuckled, realizing he was a lot more right about that than he realized.

“The others say you’re from Italy.”

“I was born in Cleveland. My mother is from Italy, though.”

“What part?” he asked.

“Abruzzo. It’s on the Adriatic Coast of Italy, straight across the country from Rome.”

The old man didn’t seem happy with her answer. “Where are Santoros from?”

“My father’s family is from northern Italy, just south of the Alps.”

He made eye contact again. “You been there?”

“Not yet. I want to visit the family village someday.”

“In Po Valley?”

“Yes. How did you know that?”

“Lucky guess.”

Dwight took over again. “When my dad was in the US military during World War Two, his unit fought the Germans in the Po Valley. There’s a small town there that’s very personal to him for some reason.”

The old man spoke with Dwight in Japanese for moment, allowing Gina a moment to process what she was hearing. It dawned on her then that she was there that day to apologize for whatever the Italians had done to the old man during the war so many decades before. It was a terribly unfair thing to ask of her, but her pay was coming out of his family’s pocket.

“My dad wants to talk with you alone for a while.”

Gina watched as Dwight left her alone with the old man in a wheelchair, the bedroom door closing behind him. She didn’t know what to say once they were alone.

“You know a town named Fabbiano?” he asked. He handed over a yellowed slip of paper.

She looked at the name that had been handwritten many years before. “I’m afraid not.”

“In the mountains. Steep, I tell you. Never seen mountains like them before. Everything there built from stone. Walls, houses, pigsties. Everything.” He took a drink of water, his hand unsteady while setting the cup down again. “Already been marching for weeks, fighting almost every day. The Nazis, dirty bastards, were dug in everywhere. Had to push them back into Germany, wherever that was.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Not your fault.” He waved for her to be quiet. “One day in May, really bad day for us, almost end of the war. Advance twenty feet, fall back

ten. All day like that. Just about sunset, we fought our way to Fabbiano. No one knew what to expect from that place. Just a little village. Maybe people still there, maybe not. Maybe all dead already. We didn't know. But the place made from stone, solid rock. Good place to hole up for the night."

He picked at his lap blanket before taking it off his lap and setting it on the bed. Every movement he made was deliberate, slow, as though it took all his energy to perform. Watching him cope with being in a wheelchair, Gina still didn't know if she was expected to offer an apology for being Italian.

"Most of those houses were empty. Some had a few people hiding. Two buddies, Yoshi, Fuji, and I went into one place that was dark. I'd been shot, not so bad, but needed first aid." He lifted his sleeve to display a long scar on his arm. "No more lights in those places, but it was warm. We could smell cooked food. Fuji lit a match. That's when we saw several faces look back at us." He smiled a lop-sided grin. "Fuji lit another match, and we aimed our rifles at them, ready to shoot. Didn't know if they were Germans or who they might be. One of them lit a lantern. Got a big laugh when we saw a father and mother with their two kids. A family had stayed behind. We'd walked in right in the middle of their dinner."

"I'm glad they weren't Germans."

"Us, too. When they sat down to eat, we decided to stay there. Yoshi took first watch at the door, guard duty, while Fuji started to wrap the wound on my arm. The wife said something to the daughter, who came over and did it right. The whole time she worked on my arm, she whispered things and smiled. I hadn't seen many Italians up close, not live ones, but she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. I thought a few things, and hoped she was old enough for me to think those things. Maybe it was because I was so tired, and that she looked a heck of a lot prettier than our medic, but I think my heart fell in love right then."

Gina couldn't help but hold the old man's hand. "What a sweet story."

"We got out the last of our rations to eat. Wasn't much. Then the man said something to us in Italian. We didn't know what he wanted, but he wasn't getting our rations, that was for sure. But he raised his hands like he wanted to surrender and went to Fuji. Very careful like, he put Fuji's rations back in their container and set them aside.

"I gotta tell you, all three of us had itchy trigger fingers then, and didn't like the idea of someone messing with our food like that. We were

hungry and needed to eat. But his wife brought bowls of food for Yoshi and Fuji, the same stuff they'd been eating. The daughter brought me a bowl of food. They even gave us little cups of wine. When the daughter brought mine, she sat with me. I didn't understand a thing she whispered to me, but it sure sounded nice. Never been much of a wine drinker, but it tasted good that night, with her there with me. They were sharing their dinner with us, by golly."

"It was very kind of them," was all Gina could think to say. "Did the girl tell you her name?"

He nodded his head slightly. "Sofia. Nobody else said a word all evening. We ate, the father played with their son, the mother cleaned the dishes, their daughter swept the floor. Maybe there wasn't much of a difference between friends and enemies that evening, but we got the idea they liked us more than they did the Nazis. When it came time for them to go to bed, they gave us blankets to use, one for each of us, even taking one off their bed. The mother, she was strict with the kids praying to the cross on the wall. They didn't have much, but they had blankets and food, and that cross on the wall."

He reached for his cup of water, but it was empty. Gina poured more for him.

"They say to be a good Christian, someone needs to live the life of one, not just pretend on Sundays. I never been in a Christian church in my life, but those guys lived like good Christians. They showed us kindness, shared their food, and gave us shelter for the night."

"I'm glad you were safe in their home." Apparently, she was there to hear his story, not to give an apology. "You have a very nice memory of the daughter."

He smirked and nodded his head toward the window to the patio. "The rest of them don't know about her."

Gina made a crossing gesture with her finger on the palm of her hand. "My secret."

He looked at Gina with wet eyes. "Next morning, not long before light, we had to leave. New assault on the same hill as the day before. We didn't know how to say thank you in Italian, so we gave the mother a little bow and shook the father's hand. We told him our names, and he told us theirs. Then at the end, he told us their family name."

"Do you remember it?" Gina asked.

He nodded. "Santoro."

"Oh." Now she understood why he wanted her to work on their project. Even if she was no relation to them at all, she represented the family that had taken him and his buddies into their home and fed them one night many years before. No conditions, no questions asked, just a safe haven from war for a few hours.

"Most days, I try to forget the war, but I do my best to remember them."

"I know my family is from that part of Italy, but I doubt we're the same family, Mister Tanizawa. It would be a pretty big coincidence if we were."

That didn't seem to matter to him. He only held her arm for a moment. "Doesn't matter so much. But there's something about your job they haven't told you."

"Oh, what's that?" she asked.

"Their big idea is to sell the place, build condos, get rich quick."

Now Gina was getting even more family gossip; unfortunately, she was stuck right in the middle of this batch. "I'm sure it's a valuable piece of property. Who exactly owns it? You or the entire family?"

He pointed to his face. "I do. As long as I'm alive, they can't sell it."

"But..."

"I'll be dead someday. But once the place goes back to the same way as long time ago, it can get registered as historical landmark. When it gets that, they can never sell the place to make condos."

"I see. You need me to hurry up and get the registration before, well..."

"I die, yes."

"I'm sorry to bring it up like that," she said.

"No one else around here has the guts to. Anyway, you're polite."

Gina had some thinking to do. If she hurried and got the job done before the old man died, she'd make him happy. If she dragged her heels long enough for him to die first, and the family was able to sell the property to a developer, the family would have a massive payday. That must've been the bonus Millie had implied once.

"They all want to sell the property?" she asked.

"Kenzo and I are against all of them. We're a couple of sentimental old fools. He's not as old as I am, but just as foolish." He chewed but without

anything in his mouth. “Maybe one more ally.”

“Who’s that?” she asked. She needed all the allies she could get if she were to join his side of the scheme.

“Reiko. Don’t say anything to the others.”

“I won’t. You’re not foolish, Mister Tanizawa. But you have to realize, my hands are tied with the project. I can’t really manipulate things too much.”

“Miss Santoro, we have a saying in Japanese. We tell people ‘Gambatte!’ when they start something new.”

“Gambatte,” she said to herself to learn the word. “What does that mean?”

“Do your best.” He took a small lapel pin from his pocket and handed it to her. It was diamond shaped, with white and red bands around the edges, and a blue background. In the middle was a hand holding a torch.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Go for Broke emblem. The patch we wore on our uniforms back then.”

“Do you want me to wear it?”

“When you finish the job and get the historical registration, you wear that.”

“Why give it to me now?” she asked.

“I might not be here later.”

Gina could barely keep from crying. He was putting his trust of his little empire into her hands. “Thank you. I’ll do my best. Gambatte!”

“If nothing else, go for broke.” He smiled at her as if the lecture were done. “Will you do something for me?”

She couldn’t imagine what else he might want, maybe for her to trace her family roots to see if she was in some way related to the Santoros of Fabbiano that had showed him that moment of kindness years before. She figured that would be nearly impossible, unless her father knew more about their family history than he’d ever let on. “Of course.”

“Bring me a hot dog. Only catsup on it.”

When Gina went back out to the patio, she was mentally exhausted after hearing Mr. Tanizawa’s wartime story, and his explanation of why the estate needed to be returned to its original condition. She’d never before heard a real war story from the lips of the soldier that had lived it, only

reading about battles in school history books. The least she could do was take him a hot dog with catsup.

“Is that for my father?” Millie asked as she watched Gina fix the hot dog.

“It’s okay if he has one, right? He almost made it sound like I had to sneak it to him.”

Mille laughed. “He shouldn’t have the salt, but he’d find a way of getting one eventually. Put plenty of catsup on it, something else that’s taboo. I think the best part for him is finding people to help him break the rules. What did the two of you talk about for so long?”

“Oh, just a story from the good old days.”

“About the estate?”

“Mostly about the war.”

“That’s odd. He never talks about it with us.”

“It was kind of a personal story.” Gina noticed there was still a little wine left in the bottle she’d brought. “Is he allowed to have wine?”

“He has a cup of sake every day. No reason why he can’t have a little wine with his hot dog.”

Gina went back to Mr. Tanizawa’s room with his meal. She found he had two new visitors when she got there. One of them surprised her.

Mr. Tanizawa listened as his youngest son introduced himself as if he and Gina had never met. He was at least a dozen years younger than any of his siblings. The bigger surprise was that he was the owner of Bunzo’s Bar. It was his girlfriend that got most of Gina’s attention, though.

“Mom and Dad wanted to give me a Japanese name, so they settled on Haruki, my grandfather’s name. Most people call me Harry. This is my friend, Holly.”

Holly’s face barely changed, but Gina could easily see the piercing glare coming from her eyes. She’d cleaned up since the night before, with a change of clothes and shower. What had been big blond hair a day earlier was today a soft brown, and styled straight. Even with the change, Gina knew it was the same girl.

“Nice to meet you, Holly.” Gina couldn’t help but grin. “You seem familiar. Have we met?”

“Not likely,” Holly said to Gina. She put her hand out to shake. Gina hesitated, wondering if she could catch a disease from shaking her hand.

“Maybe I saw you at the park, or in a restaurant?”

Holly's glare turned deadly. "I don't go to parks."

"I suppose not."

Gina figured that few Tanizawa family members knew Holly was a working girl, maybe not even Harry, even though she worked out of his own bar. While they talked around the truth, Mr. Tanizawa took a sip of the wine he'd been brought.

Gina smiled at him, and he smiled back. "How is it?"

"Exactly like I remember," he said.

"Remember what?" Harry asked. "Dad, you don't drink wine."

The old man glared at his youngest son. "I'm old enough."

Gina left Mr. Tanizawa to his hot dog and wine, and Harry to tell his elderly father about the bar. When Gina left the bedroom, Holly went right after her, grabbing her arm from behind.

"You say one word to anybody and you're dead, understand?"

Gina yanked her arm away from the surprisingly strong grip. "Look, what you do to earn a living is your problem. But these people seem decent to me, so why don't you just walk away before you embarrass yourself?"

Holly had two words for Gina, the same two she'd used the night before while they were in the parking lot at the park.

"Same to you, charm school dropout."

Once she was back on the patio, Gina had a hot dog of her own, tried milling around to chat with strangers, had a soda, and said her goodbyes to the people with names she could remember.

"Well, I'm learning all kinds of secrets today," Gina said, going back to the Datsun. "I wonder what's next?"

Chapter Twenty-Three

Gina was up early the next morning, ready to work. After reading online about the battle Mr. Tanizawa had told her about, and thinking about the family he'd met in Italy, and hearing why he was in a hurry but the family was dragging their feet over the completion of the project, she had a renewed interest in getting back to the project.

What she couldn't figure was why the family seemed so divided about the property. She could understand the interest in the money from the sale to a developer, but it was also a part of their heritage on the island. Much of the family had grown up in the house, and worked on the little farm in their spare time. It was a beautiful parcel of land, with trees all around the edges, and the stream along one side. The old house wasn't anything to brag about, even after it was rebuilt. But it seemed like a shame to let it go simply for the money.

"About the only one without a connection to the old house is Harry," she muttered while getting dressed. "I bet that little thing he hangs out with has more to do with wanting to sell the property than anything else."

The agenda for that day was to continue digging the old fishpond. While half the crew worked on that, Gina worked with others to rebuild the pig fence that went around the property along the ridge. She'd seen a wild goat munching on the fruit that was being tossed into the giant compost pile that morning, and the time had come to keep some of the bigger critters out. When she saw Florinda and Clara return from a trip to the supermarket, she decided to join them in the house. Gina had a few questions for them, mostly for Clara.

Florinda went to the fence work party, leaving Gina alone in the kitchen with Clara.

"How's the pregnancy coming?"

"Good enough. Two more months."

Now came the delicate part. "Is your husband one of the work crew?"

"I think I told you last week that I'm not married," Clara said.

"I remember now. You're raising the baby on your own?"

"Florinda will help me."

“That’s what sisters are for. You’re sisters, right?”

Clara nodded. She was busy swiping mayonnaise on slices of white bread. “I’d be lost without her.”

“I have a sister, too. I can’t think of having a life without her.”

“You must miss her a lot.”

“Yep, sure do.” Gina had taken up the task of wiping mustard on slices of bread, the other side of the sandwiches that were being made. “Do you know much about the Tanizawas?”

“Like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know. What kinds of farms they have?”

“They have more than farms. They have a grocery store, restaurant, a shop at a little mall, rental houses, some other places.”

“I’m more interested in hearing about the farms. Haven’t most of the crew working here worked for them elsewhere?”

Clara nodded. Now that the slices of bread had been coated, she went to work slicing cheese. “One place is a produce farm, another fruit. They grow flowers somewhere else. And a chicken farm. I’ve never been there.”

“There’s a place called Bunzo’s in Kapalama. I think the youngest son owns it.” Gina scratched her head, pretending to give something some thought. “What’s his name again?”

Clara’s hand slipped with the cheese cutter, slamming into the cutting block. “Harry.”

“Yes, that’s right. Are you familiar with that bar?”

Clara fired darts at Gina as deadly as what Holly had glared. “Why should I? Why should I care about some dumb old bar? Why do you keep asking me about that place?”

“Sorry. I guess it was a dumb question.” Gina needed to try again. “Do you know his girlfriend? Her name is Holly.”

Clara slammed the cheese slicer down on the cutting board. “I don’t know anybody, okay?”

Gina watched as Clara assembled sandwiches. Sliced Velveeta on white bread with mayonnaise and mustard. The same thing as the previous week. Gina tried to recall if Clara had even made a joke one day, about that being the only kind of sandwich she knew how to make. Then something else occurred to her, something Detective Kona had said to her a few days before. It was what the coroner had found during Danny’s autopsy.

Cheese, mustard, and mayo on white bread made by Clara every day for the crew. The same thing found in Danny's stomach during his autopsy. Danny found dead on her porch. Clara making a wide berth around the porch to go in the back door.

It wasn't superstition or fear of ghosts that made Clara nervous at the house.

"Clara, you knew Danny, didn't you?" Gina asked quietly.

"Maybe."

"Was he the father of your baby?"

"Why do you care?"

"I care because Danny was found on my front porch, and I have the police coming out here every day to question me about him. Nobody seems to know who he was, or at least they don't confess to knowing him. But you do."

"So what if I do? I didn't kill him!" Clara said. She had a knife in her hand, ready to cut the sandwiches in half, or anything else that got in her way.

Gina stepped back to lean against the counter, keeping a wary eye on Clara's knife. "Nobody said you did. But the police are still trying to figure out who did. Do you know?"

"Why should I help the cops?"

"To bring Danny some justice. He deserves that much."

"Just a homeless guy. Who cares about them?" Clara said.

"You must've, enough to sleep with him. The coroner found a partially digested cheese sandwich in his stomach, just like the kind you make every day. Did you give it to him?"

"Maybe." Clara lopped a sandwich in half using the knife as a guillotine. "He wasn't getting anything else to eat. I took him the leftovers from our lunches. What's wrong with my sandwiches, anyway?"

"Nothing. How long had he been homeless?"

"I dunno."

"Were you homeless, too? Did you live at Kapalama Park with him?"

"No!"

Gina knew she was straying into female battlefield territory, and landmines were everywhere when it came to pregnant women. But Clara was turning out to be the best lead either she or Detective Kona had so far.

"What kind of relationship did you have with him?"

“Different. We weren’t in love or nothin’.”

Gina had a ‘wait a moment’ situation. Getting a drink of water, she leaned back against the counter and watched Clara work. Ignoring the belly, she took in the girl’s appearance with a new eye. She had grown-out highlights in her hair, and a few waves that were turning to split ends. She was the only one in the work crew that wore makeup, and Gina had figured it was because she worked indoors and didn’t need to worry about sweat messing it up. She was just a little too sultry looking to be part of a crew that did farm work.

“He was a john, wasn’t he?” Gina asked as gently as possible. Even with that, she steeled herself for an explosion from Clara.

“Not a john. I owed him some money and I had to work it off.” Clara stacked the sandwiches on plates. “He wasn’t homeless then. He was still a...my manager.”

“Manager as in pimp?”

Clara nodded. “I didn’t get paid by someone, and I had to work it off.”

“How many times did he make you work it off?”

“Just the once. But I know it was him that did this.”

“How long did you work for him?” Gina asked.

“Just a few months. I wasn’t very good at it. Pretty bad, actually. That’s why I didn’t always get paid.”

“Where did he have you work? The streets or did customers call for you?”

“I worked out of Bunzo’s. He had only a few girls, and we all worked out of Bunzo’s.”

Gina snapped her fingers. “I knew something was going on there. I just thought it was Harry behind it.”

For the first time, Clara made eye contact. “It wasn’t Harry. That guy’s too dumb.”

“He didn’t impress me as a scholarship winner. It was only Danny that had girls at Bunzo’s?” Gina asked.

“Someone else did. He was better at business than Danny, though.”

“And that caused trouble?”

Clara nodded.

“Was Holly one of Danny’s girls, too?” Gina asked.

“She works for someone else. Can’t trust her. She’s bad, like rotten bad. Stay away from her.”

“I plan to. Who was the other pimp that had girls at Bunzo’s?”

“That bartender named Chuck. He was new, but he brought his girls with him from another bar that closed. He even paid Harry a small commission, just to look the other way and to lie to the police whenever they came around.”

“And Danny didn’t pay?”

Clara shook her head. “Too cheap.”

“It seems to me that Harry would’ve forced Danny to pay something, just for the protection, if nothing else.”

“No, I mean we were too cheap. The girls didn’t earn much. We were the cheap alternative to Chuck’s girls. Danny couldn’t afford to pay anything to Harry, for as little as we earned for him. Some nights we didn’t work at all. We just sat there and drank watered-down drinks that Danny had to pay for. So humiliating to sit there and smile at jerks who walked right past us, only to hook up with someone more expensive. Like we weren’t good enough. But whenever Danny wasn’t around, Chuck would steer johns to his girls, and talk crap about us, about Danny’s girls having the clap or whatever.” Clara sighed. “Eventually, the other girls started working for Chuck. I was Danny’s last one.”

The whole thing sickened Gina. In her brief time as a police officer, she arrested plenty of hookers and a few of their pimps, but had never learned much about the inner workings of the trade. Now, here was a girl who had somehow fallen into that life, and came away pregnant by her pimp, who was now dead.

“The police are trying to figure out Danny’s last name. Do you know it?” Gina asked.

Clara shrugged. “I’m not so sure Danny was his real first name.”

Now it was becoming heartbreaking, that Clara didn’t know the real name of the father of her baby.

“Do you know who killed him?”

Clara hung her head again. “No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Promise.”

“Any guesses?” Gina asked.

“If I had to guess...”

Just then, they were interrupted by Felix and Flor coming in for the sandwiches and lemonade that had been made.

At the end of the workday, Gina already had her phone out and Detective Kona's number dialed before the last of her crew was even gone.

"I have something for you, Detective, and it's big."

"About Danny?"

"Yeah. I have a good lead for you to follow, solid."

"Too little, too late, Miss Santoro."

"Why?" she asked.

"I have to file it as a cold case. I might be able to get back to it, but not right now."

"What's that supposed to mean? The poor guy was homeless and you're filing it as cold? What kind of bunk is that?"

"Not bunk at all. I have two other murders to investigate, just in the last twenty-four hours. Now, if you really do have something useful, I can come by and listen, but I don't want to hear about bottle caps. Understand?"

"You don't have to come by. I heard on very good authority that Danny was a pimp running his business out of Bunzo's."

"Already knew that. Anything else?"

"Yeah. He very well may have been killed by a rival pimp, also working that bar."

"This is solid? Reliable?"

"Directly from the mouth of one of his girls."

"Where are you right now?" he asked.

"At the estate."

"I'll be there in a few. Don't go anywhere."

Gina barely had time to eat the last of the sandwiches and some lemonade before Detective Kona got there. He parked in the same place as always, at the side of the house. She finally figured out why, which was that it was hidden from view by the Tanizawa house on the ridge above.

"Who's your source?" was the first thing he asked Gina.

"One of the girls that worked for him. And before you ask, she didn't know his last name, and wasn't even sure if Danny was his real first name."

"That's why I'm not getting anything on him when I show his picture around. All I ever heard was that he was a two-bit pimp that ran cheap girls out of Bunzo's. Are you able to tell me the hooker's name?"

"Kinda implied that I wouldn't. I get the idea she's squared up, and won't work the streets anymore."

"I already have a pretty good idea of who it is." Kona took a deep breath and sighed. "Okay, what did she tell you about him?"

"She'd been working for him for only a few months. He didn't have many girls, and they worked cheap. When another pimp moved his girls to Bunzo's, he paid protection money, and Danny didn't. That's what led to Danny's downfall."

"Protection money to who?"

"Harry Tanizawa, the bar owner."

"Who was the other pimp?"

"Chuck, the evening bartender at Bunzo's."

"Perfect set-up for him. Pays for protection, and gets it back in pay for tending bar."

"Everything I've heard is that Harry knows nothing about the prostitution ring in his bar, but he really does after all." Gina clenched a fist and punched her other hand with it. "And the real money comes from the girls Chuck pimps out every night."

"Miss Santoro, how much undercover work did you do back in Cleveland?"

"A couple streetwalker stings. Why?"

"Are you busy this evening?"

"You want me to do a sting at Bunzo's with you? Forget it. I'm not a cop anymore, remember?"

"Might be a few bucks in it for you."

"Why not just use a cop from the precinct?"

"A little short staffed these days."

"Is that why you work alone?"

He nodded. "I'm the only homicide detective in Kahala Precinct."

"I don't know how big that is."

"From here to Hawaii Kai. That's seventy square miles and a hundred thousand people with only one homicide detective to cover it. In fact, everything on the other side of East-West Road is someone else's problem."

"Sorry he didn't die on the other side of the street. Had I known he'd be so much trouble, I would've dragged him across the street and dumped the body there."

"You want to help get the dude, or am I wasting my time?"

"One night, that's it. Don't push your luck asking for more." She aimed an accusatorial finger at him. "If you get me killed, you'll have my

mother to deal with, and she ain't so forgiving.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

If there was one thing Gina knew how to do, it was look slutty. All she had to do was channel her inner high school prom date appearance. After too much makeup needed to hide the slight shiner she still had on one eye, even extending the cateye effect a little too much, she put on her pushup bra and tightest T-shirt. Finishing her outfit was her bright green tennis skirt that showed more leg than any of her others, and sat low on her hips. She finished her hooker appearance by wearing every piece of jewelry she'd brought to Hawaii. With one last application of bright red lipstick, she hoped she might not be too recognizable at Bunzo's.

The only heeled shoes she had were two-inch wedges, which she carried with her when she left the house. When she got to the sidewalk out on East-West Road, she crossed the dark street to where she had arranged to meet Detective Kona that evening.

Mid-evening and classes were long done for the day, and most buildings were closed. The wide boulevard was mostly quiet. Having not brought an umbrella, Gina had to stand under the awning of a doorway to keep a rain shower off. It was the light over top of her that made her stand out, and after a couple of cars slowed down to take a long look at her, she got impatient waiting for Kona. She checked her phone for missed calls or messages repeatedly, and just as she was being honked at by a car full of horny co-eds, an SUV pulled to the curb in front of her.

She'd been expecting to see Kona in his usual sedan, so she didn't recognize him right away. Maybe because she'd suffered some humiliation by having to wait for him for so long, or maybe she just wanted to see if she could get his face to crack a smile for a change, she pretended she really was a hooker when she walked to his car.

Instead of getting in, she leaned her elbows on the door and looked in at him. "Looking for a date?"

He checked his mirrors. "Get in the car, Santoro."

"Not till I get my price."

He glared at her and then let his foot off the brake for a moment, allowing the car to lurch forward. Gina flicked her fingers under her chin at

him.

He pushed the car door open. "Get in the car."

She got in and slammed the door closed. "Alright, already. Just selling my new look."

"You don't have to sell it so well. Not yet, anyway."

Gina checked her face in the vanity mirror on the flipside of the sun visor, still wondering if she had on too much eye shadow. "I look good, though, right?"

Kona got out into traffic. "Yeah, at least fifty dollars' worth."

She flipped the visor up again. "That's it? That's all a half hour with me is worth? Fifty bucks?"

"That's more than what most of them get. And who said anything about half an hour? Fifteen minutes in the backseat of the guy's car, and don't expect a lot of personal hygiene."

"Eww."

"Makes being a gardener a lot more attractive, doesn't it?" he asked.

"Landscape horticulturist."

"Someday, you'll have to explain the difference," he said. "You got it straight what we're trying to accomplish at Bunzo's tonight?"

"Yeah. I go in and find a place at Chuck's end of the bar. I make sure he understands I ain't got no daddy and I'm tired of strolling downtown. I'm lookin' to choose up to a new family. Hopefully, he'll ask if I want to be in his stable."

"You have the terminology right. Just don't overuse it. If any of the bar customers approach, call them 'Sugar' and tell them you're taking a break. Don't make eye contact with Chuck until he strikes up a conversation about you working in the bar. That's important."

"What do I call him?" she asked.

"Nothing. Play hard to get, if anything. But not too hard."

"Hard to get hooker? That doesn't make sense at all."

"You want him to be your pimp, not a john. You need to convince him you're worth taking on. But the point of this evening is to catch Chuck in a mistake."

"You mean entrap?"

"You have the luxury of using that word, but I don't," Detective Kona said. "He needs to say out loud that he had something to do with Danny's death."

“How do I do that?” she asked.

“Tell him you were sent in looking for a pimp named Danny. Be sure to refer to Danny in the present tense. Once Chuck refers to him in the past tense, that means he knows Danny is dead, and that leads you closer to what he knows about it.”

“Sounds like entrapment to me.”

“Which is why you have to make it sound like a job interview to him. Once you pretend to discover the news that Danny is dead, you need to find out what happened to him.”

“Chuck’ll see right through that, won’t he?” Gina asked.

“Not if you lead him along slowly. Things like, ‘Gee, that’s too bad. I was really looking forward to having a new daddy. I wonder what happened to him? It’s too bad the way people treat each other anymore,’ will lead him along. Remember, always go with leading questions, but give only yes or no answers.”

“Then as soon as Chuck says something like ‘Danny got shivved,’ we’ll know he knows something about it?” she asked.

“Right. If he knows what day of the week, or where his body was found, any details of the circumstances is helpful.”

“Then it’s my word against his as a witness,” Gina said. “There’s no way I can wear a wire with this blouse. Not just the mike would show, but the wire would also.”

Kona parked up the street from Bunzo’s and shut off the headlights and windshield wipers, nowhere near a streetlight. A woman using an umbrella came down the sidewalk in their direction, doing a hooker-style runway walk. In the dark car with the steady rain pattering off the car windows, Gina got a shiver thinking about what it would be like to work a street corner in bad weather.

He opened a small box and handed it to her. A tiny device the size of a bean was inside. “Goes in your ear. With that, we can hear everything you hear, and pick up your voice from internally.”

“Something this small can broadcast to wherever you’re listening?”

“It has a limited range, and can’t be picked up through walls.”

“How are you going to hear the conversation?” she asked.

Startling Gina was a rapid knocking on the window next to her. She looked out to see the woman with the umbrella, gesturing to Kona. He unlocked the rear passenger door to let her in.

“This is Candy. She’ll be in Bunzo’s with you, only at a table a few feet away.”

“She’s the one wearing a wire?” Gina asked.

“Right, one that can pick up your signal and is strong enough to relay it to us. Both of you need to remember to stay away from any electronic equipment, and anything making a lot of noise. That includes blenders at the bar and the flatscreen on the wall. Make sure you work your conversation around the use of the blender, and while Chuck is within a few feet of you. The closer, the better.”

Detective Kona went to the back seat of the car and began taping down the wire and tiny transmitter to Candy’s chest.

“What if Chuck wants to, you know, give me a whirl before deciding to take me on?” Gina asked.

“I suppose you’d have a problem with going to the back room with him?”

“Uh, yeah!”

“Y’all ain’t missin’ much with Chuck,” Candy said, buttoning her blouse again. Her accent betrayed her southern upbringing. Or maybe it was a good act, Gina wasn’t sure.

Gina looked at her new workmate again. “Oh, you’re...”

“Like, duh, Princess.”

“Hey!”

“Best you keep your mouth shut if you want to look like a workin’ girl,” Candy said, with a sniff at the end. “Not a playground for little girls in there.”

Gina turned around in her seat to glare. “Yeah, and you know what?”

“Relax, Santoro,” Kona said.

“Where’s my money?” Candy said to no one in particular. “I ain’t goin’ nowhere or doin’ nothin’ till I get paid.”

Gina watched as Kona handed over a Philly roll. Candy quickly counted by flipping through the corners of each bill. Unzipping her hot pants, she opened a hidden pocket on the inside of them. When she looked up, she returned Gina’s earlier glare. “Whatchu lookin’ at?”

“Nothing.”

“Bitch, you callin’ me nothin’?”

“No. Look, I’m sorry, okay?”

“Yo’ sorry ass better not get me in trouble.” Candy slid down in her seat and crossed her arms, looking at the rain patter on the window. “Punk, I’ll cut you from one end to the other.”

Gina couldn’t believe what she was hearing, and looked at Detective Kona for reassurance. He was grinning back at her.

“Having a good time, Santoro?” he asked.

“Yeah, swell.”

“Candy will go in first,” he said. “Both of you need to make sure you stay inside the same room together. Candy, try to face the bar. Santoro, try to keep your ear pointed in the direction of Chuck and Candy at the same time, if at all possible. Try to position yourselves so there are as few people as possible between the two of you.”

With that, Candy left the car, walking toward Bunzo’s, her umbrella over her head, taking her attitude with her.

“What debutante training center did you find her at?” Gina asked, watching a cloud of cigarette smoke swirl into the rain.

“She found me.”

“She’s an informant?”

“Candy works jobs like this for me from time to time. How old do you think she is?”

“I didn’t get a good look at her face. Maybe close to thirty?” Gina said.

“Just turned nineteen, and she already knows more about what happens on Honolulu streets after dark than I ever could.”

“I’m sure her parents are proud.”

“Not sure she has any. You might want to tread carefully around her, though. She doesn’t take much crap off anyone.”

“I got that impression when she said she’d cut me right after I apologized.” Candy went into Bunzo’s, leaving her umbrella outside under the awning. “Do I get a clever name?”

“Yeah. Misty.”

“Misty? Whose idea was that?”

“Candy’s.”

“Isn’t she going to have trouble if she’s at a table working renegade?” Gina asked. She meant working without being in a pimp’s stable.

“She’s in Chuck’s stable.”

“If she’s turning tricks for him, why is she helping the police with a sting against him?”

“See the bruises on her chest when I wired her? And the scar on her arm? Chuck gave those to her.”

“There’s no way she can buy her way out of his stable?”

“She’s already tried convincing him she didn’t want to work for him.”

“How’d she do that?”

“Remember the scar on Chuck’s cheek? She gave it to him.”

“That’s some pretty messed up family dynamics. Do all his girls think the same about him?”

“As far as they’re concerned, the wrong pimp got stuck last week.”

Gina scratched her head. “If they don’t like Chuck, why’d they leave Danny and join his family?”

“Whoever your informant is didn’t get it quite right. The only reason they left Danny for Chuck is that they knew Danny wasn’t long for the world. Believe me, every girl in Bunzo’s tonight would love the chance to stick him with a rusty ice pick.”

“What do you mean, Danny wasn’t long for the world?” Gina asked.

“The medical examiner found cancer in his liver and a few other parts during the autopsy.”

“Oh. Do you suppose Danny knew?”

“Maybe, maybe not. The medical examiner tried searching hospital records for cancer treatment for anyone named Danny in the last few months, but found nothing.”

“Maybe without a real job or health insurance, he had no way of paying for cancer treatment?”

“That’s probably what he thought, but hospitals always have funding for people like him. Otherwise, it was another dead end in finding out his last name.”

“What about Chuck? It sounds like busting him for murder and getting him off the streets would be doing his girls and Harry a favor,” Gina said.

“Hell hath no fury like a hooker cheated,” Kona said. “By the way, who’s your informant?”

“Nice try, but I’m keeping that to myself.” Gina shoved the tiny electronic device into her ear until it was snug. It was no different from the latest model of ‘invisible’ hearing aid one of her uncles used, and really was invisible once she fluffed hair over that ear. “Showtime?”

“Break a leg, Misty.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Gina used an umbrella borrowed from Detective Kona to walk to Bunzo's. While she did that, she watched from the corner of her eye how he positioned his SUV closer to the bar for a better view of the front entrance, and maybe to shorten the distance the transmitter Candy was wearing had to broadcast. She left her umbrella next to Candy's and several others outside the door when she went in.

It wasn't nearly as busy as it had been on New Year's Eve. Candy had found a table for herself not far from the bar. She was already set up with something brightly colored to drink, and was playing with the tiny umbrella that had come with it.

Gina took a stool at the bar and positioned her body so her working ear was aimed a little at the bar and a little in Candy's direction, geometrically not an easy task. Like a few nights before, one bartender worked the far end of the bar, while Chuck worked her end. It looked a little like Chuck was responsible to the bar patrons, while the other tender made drinks for table patrons. Maybe they were in luck, because the loud music that had been played on New Year's was more like Muzak that night.

Chuck came down to her after ignoring her for a few minutes. Unlike the first time she was there, he didn't toss down a cocktail napkin.

"You might want to go," he said quietly.

Gina was careful not to make eye contact. "Why?"

"Could be trouble if you're seen in here."

"Nothing for you to worry about. It's my night off and I just want a real drink for a change."

He tossed down a paper coaster. "Who're you working for? Because I don't want any trouble."

As far as Gina could tell, it seemed like he didn't recognize her from several nights before. "There won't be trouble. Double whisky, on the rocks."

He put the poured drink on her coaster. "Ten, cash."

She gave him a twenty. "Keep it."

He left it sit on the bar next to her glass. "How'd you find your way in here? Plenty of other bars for you to go to."

"Looking for a new family," she said, taking a sip of her whisky.

"Who says you'll find one here?"

"I heard something about a guy named Danny boy who runs his operation out of this place. Is that you?"

"Not me."

"Is he here tonight or are you wasting my time?" she asked.

"Pretty sure he's not running a stable these days."

Gina took another sip. "Strange. I didn't know they retired."

"From what I've heard, he got himself retired."

Gina played with her drink glass, swirling the cubes in circles to hear them clink. "Bad timing for me, I guess."

"Even worse for him."

"What happened to him?"

"Rumor has it that one of his girls stuck him."

"Probably pushed her around one time too many. When did that happen?"

He finally took Gina's twenty-dollar bill. "Week or so ago. He was a chump, anyway. All his girls had left him months ago. I heard he got one of them knocked up. My money is on her for sticking him."

"Probably so. Too bad. I'm looking for a daddy and this place seems okay."

"It's a little slow tonight. Why don't you come back tomorrow night?"

She finally looked at him, hoping he took it as a cue that she was interested. "Maybe I will. Get much rough stuff in here?"

"Not with the girls. I make sure of it."

"How?"

He pulled a billy club from a hiding spot behind the bar and slapped his hand with it a few times. "I call it my persuader."

"Good name for it."

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Misty." When she saw Candy leave the bar with a customer, Gina finished her drink in one last gulp. She didn't like being in there alone, and since no more of the conversation could be transmitted to Detective Kona in his car, or anyone else that might've been listening right then, she had no reason to be there. "Thanks."

To play it cool, she figured she had better not rush away. Instead, she watched a few of the bar patrons flirt with each other. That only reaffirmed her belief that it was a lot more fun to do the flirting than it was to watch someone else do it.

She'd gulped her drink a little too fast, and when she slid down off the stool, she was a little dizzy. It took a moment to get her sea legs right, but Chuck never noticed. When one of the women in the bar, someone Gina guessed was working in his stable, went to the restroom, he took off after her down the narrow hall. By then, Gina's head was back from swirling. When she heard loud voices come from the back of the bar, she peeked down the hallway to see what was going on.

Chuck had the girl pinned up against the wall outside the ladies' room, one hand on her neck, her arm locked behind her back. Tears were coming down her face, even while she was spitting profanities at him.

"Start hustlin' before you get busted up, understand?" Chuck told the girl.

"I hustle as best I can! Not my fault this dump is full of losers."

Someone came up to Gina's side. It was Candy, and she had an angry look on her face that Gina knew better than to cross.

"What's happening with them?" Candy asked.

"Motivational pep talk."

Just then, Chuck let the girl have it in the chops with the back of his hand.

"Hey! You can't do that!" Candy shouted as she stormed down the hall. Gina didn't know what to do. Her moment of pretending to be a hooker was done, and whatever was happening in the hall right then was someone else's fight. She also wasn't going to let a girl get beat up by her pimp. She went down the hall right after Candy, but let the pro do the talking.

That only led to Chuck being manhandled by two hookers, with Gina standing back slightly. When the first girl was knocked to the floor, Candy pulled a knife and waved it back and forth in front of his face. Gina took a step back. Knocking each other around was one thing; knifeplay took things to a whole new level of hospital care.

While Candy and Chuck swapped curses and insults, the hooker on the floor cried. Gina couldn't see any blood on her, and her way was blocked by the feud even if she tried to help.

“Hey, why don’t you guys calm down?” Gina said. “No reason to bleed over a slow night of work.”

“Get outta here, Misty. This isn’t your fight,” shouted Candy.

“How do you know Misty?” Chuck asked with derision. “Are you working for someone else behind my back?”

“You don’t know what’s going on right in front of you,” Candy said.

“Put the knife away, Candy,” Gina said. By then, the girl that had been knocked to the floor had fled to the bathroom. “He’s not worth it.”

“I’ll decide that.”

“Misty, or whatever your name is, you better get lost,” Chuck said. “And don’t bother coming back tomorrow. You’ll be as welcome here as...”

“As what? Clap in a whorehouse?” Gina said. When she saw Candy start to back off from Chuck, she figured there was nothing else she could do, and abandoned their little maniacal soap opera.

Gina almost forgot the umbrella she’d left outside the door. She did her best not to hurry as she went down the sidewalk to where she’d last seen Detective Kona park. When she got there, he was nowhere around, nor was his SUV. She walked around the block, watching for him in alleys or driveways. When she heard a siren come down the street in the direction of Bunzo’s, it wasn’t Kona’s SUV, but his sedan with a flashing blue light on the top. He was driving.

“What the heck? How’d he swap cars so fast? Did he even listen to what I got from Chuck?”

Just as he skidded to a stop on the wet street in front of Bunzo’s, a squad car arrived. Kona and the two officers exchanged a few words and ducked into the front door of the bar, their weapons drawn.

Gina backed into the shadow of a nearby doorway to watch the bar. Even if she was stuck outside, she wanted dearly to be inside to witness what went down in Honolulu bars when there was a bust. She still wasn’t sure if it was a raid, or if police had been called to manage the fight in the back hallway. If it had come to a bartender with a billy club facing off against a pissed off hooker with a knife, her money was on Candy.

Ten minutes later, Kona came out with Candy in handcuffs, put her in the backseat of his sedan, and drove off. That meant either Candy had got into Chuck and he was dead on the floor waiting for a trip to the morgue, or the two uniformed officers were giving him a lecture. So far, paramedics

hadn't shown up. With nothing else better to do, she watched until the officers came out, got in their squad car, and left.

"Just another evening at Bunzo's," she said while walking away. "Now I just need to find a taxi."

The taxi driver refused to take Gina across the little bridge onto the estate, and insisted on being paid in cash. Doing her best with two inch wedges on the gravel driveway, and a belt of whisky in her stomach, she went back to her house. She stopped when she saw Detective Kona's sedan parked at the side in its usual place. She had to go around back to find him at the picnic table. The rain had stopped falling by then, leaving the air fresh and crisp.

"What happened at the bar?" Gina asked.

"That's what I'm still trying to figure out."

"Why did you arrest Candy? It was Chuck that was causing the trouble, pushing his girls around."

"Didn't arrest her."

"I saw you take her out in cuffs. That sure looked like an arrest."

"I just needed to get her out of there before Chuck found the wire on her," he said. "Where'd you go?"

"Once the face-off between a dirty pimp and his girls started to break up, I came looking for you, but you were long gone."

"Probably best, in the long run."

"Where is she now?" Gina asked.

"I dropped her off downtown. The rest of the night is hers."

"What about Chuck?"

"He didn't want to file a complaint, and nobody got hurt."

"Nobody got hurt? He gave one of them a smack across her face hard enough to knock her to the floor! That's not getting hurt?"

"She never came forward to file a complaint. By the time I got there, it was only Candy flashing a knife in the general direction of Chuck."

"What about the sting? Did you get anything from that?" she asked.

"You did good on that, Santoro. He admitted that he knew the approximate date and manner of death, and tried to shift the blame onto someone else, a common trick made by perps. As hard as they try to cover and dream up an alibi, they always slip up on pointing a finger at someone

else. The more people they point at, the more they're guilty. That's how I see it, anyway."

"What you got was good? It was solid?"

"Not admissible, but good enough to get him into an interrogation room tomorrow."

"Why not tonight?"

"He needs to think about what happened in the bar this evening. I planted a few ideas in his mind, something for him to think about all night."

"Crafty," she muttered. "What if he tries to run?"

"To where? We're on an island."

"Yeah, I forgot. Either way, I'd love to be in that room tomorrow."

"Forget it, Santoro. Your part of this deal is done. Stakeout complete, got it?"

"Got it. You think he had something to do with Danny's death?"

"I'll know tomorrow. Still don't want to divulge your informant?"

"Sorry." Gina smiled. "What I want to know is how you got your sedan so quickly after you dropped me at the bar in an SUV?"

"Trick of the trade. You'll figure it out."

Chapter Twenty-Six

In the morning, Gina wanted to work off some anxiety left over from her little sting operation the night before, so she joined the team that was digging out the old pond. They worked in half hour stretches, trading shovels back and forth for bottles of water. She was just wiping sweat and dirt from her face when she saw Detective Kona's sedan drive onto the estate. He didn't wait for her to come to him, walking directly to her instead.

"We need to talk," he said, leading her off to the side to talk privately.

"I'm not giving up my informant, if that's why you're here."

"I'm not here about that, but I'd still like to know, even more since last night."

"Why since last night?"

"My investigation was turned upside down."

Gina scratched her head. "Detective, you're usually more to the point than this. What happened?"

"Your new boss, Chuck the bartender, died last night."

"What?"

He nodded. "His body was found in the bar this morning by the dayshift bartender that opened the place."

"Hughes was the day shift bartender, and he was found floating in the marina," she said, trying to figure out what was happening at the bar.

"They've hired a new bartender to open in the morning. Harry, the owner of the place wasn't there yet when the new guy found Chuck."

Gina gulped, wondering if she knew what happened. The scene in the hallway at the bar from the night before was still fresh in her mind. "Was he stabbed?"

"Why do you ask that?" he asked.

Gina didn't answer, only kicking away a stone.

"Miss Santoro, if you have evidence to share, do it now. Otherwise, if I find out later you withheld evidence from a police officer during an official investigation, you could face jail time and fines."

“Okay, look. That Candy you sent in with me last night is a real piece of work. Spending a day chilling out at the spa wouldn’t be enough to get her over whatever it is that’s got her tied up in knots.”

Kona chuckled. “Probably not. What happened in the bar last night?”

“You only heard what was said in the back hallway through Candy’s wire and my ear bud. There was a lot more to that tussle than that, though.”

“Such as?”

“Such as, when Candy saw Chuck muscling one of his girls, she just sorta flipped out. At first, she tried getting him off the girl, and when he pushed back, she drew a knife on him. She was quick, too, with this scary mean look on her face that was all business. That part you already know, but it was the look on her face that made me back off, not what Chuck was threatening.”

“Did she threaten or actually try to injure him?”

“Mostly she flashed it back and forth in front of his face.”

“When I got there, she was just holding it in her hand. Did you see her making slashing or stabbing motions?” he asked, once again taking notes on his legal pad.

“More slashing. That’s probably how he got the scar on his face, when she took a swing at him one other time.”

“What you saw in her hand was definitely a knife and not an ice pick?”

“Switchblade, with a blade about five inches long.” Gina gave it some thought. “I get now why you’re asking about that. You’re wondering if she might’ve been the one who killed Danny?”

“That’s one idea, yes. But by virtue of her being a slasher rather than a stabber, and having a knife rather than an ice pick for personal protection, it lets her off the hook for his murder, at least to a certain extent. That’s why I hustled her out the door last night in cuffs. I doubt she had anything to do with Danny’s murder.”

“Back to my original question, was Chuck knifed?” Gina asked.

Kona shook his head. “Apparently, while cleaning the bar after closing, he slipped on the floor, fell backward, and hit this head on the edge of the bar counter.”

“Front or back of his head?”

“I’m glad you asked that, Miss Santoro.”

“Why?”

“It’s the second piece of evidence that, to a small extent, lets you off the hook for taking a swing at him,” Kona said.

She crossed her arms. “I have an alibi for the time of his death. I was at home.”

“Alone?”

“Unfortunately. But I had to take a taxi home, because I was abandoned in Kapalama by the cop leading the stakeout at the bar. I do have a receipt for the taxi fare, though.”

“You could’ve gone back later in your own vehicle.”

She shrugged. “There should be plenty of video surveillance at businesses, both along East-West Road and near the bar in Kapalama. Even Pinoy Boy’s market has video of the sidewalk out front. I’d have to drive right past there to get to Bunzo’s, right? Check for CC video in the area, if you don’t believe me.”

“I plan to, once I have the time.”

“No signs of foul play in the bar?” she asked.

“Before we get to that, I have a few more questions for you.”

“Okay.” When Gina swallowed, her throat was dry. “Is this a formal interview or are we just chatting?”

“I hate talking to cops.” Kona got out his yellow pad, ready to take notes. “As far as you know, is Candy here on the estate at this time?”

“No.”

“Did she shelter here during the night?”

“As far as I know, no. Not in the house, anyway.”

“Do you know her current whereabouts?”

Gina shrugged. “Not at all. The last time I saw her, you were loading her in the back of your sedan.”

“She hasn’t called or contacted you in any way whatsoever?”

“Nope. We never exchanged numbers. Why?”

“It’s still my turn to ask questions. Did the two of you communicate in any way while in the bar last night?”

“Only after she’d broken up the fight between Chuck and the girl he was muscling.”

“What did she say to you at the time?” Kona asked.

“Something about me leaving, that I had no reason to be there, it wasn’t my fight. It was as if she almost outted me, or outted the stakeout.”

“Did you hear her make any threats toward Chuck?”

“Nothing specific, but with the way she was waving that knife around, and the look on her face, she wanted to give him another scar.”

“What exactly were they doing while she held the knife?” he asked.

“I told you a lot of this just a minute ago.”

“Tell me again.”

Gina gave it some thought. “They were about three or four feet apart, close enough for her to swipe him. Mostly, they threw insults and curses back and forth, along with a lot of posturing, but with a knife.”

“No punches were thrown, no pushing or shoving?”

“Not that I saw, not after the knife came out.”

“Candy never shoved him or hit him in the head?”

“Like I said, not that I saw. What’s this all about, anyway?”

“Chuck the bartender, also known as Charles Andover, died from blunt force trauma to the back of his head, just above the point where his neck meets his head. If it wasn’t enough that he had a brain injury, his neck was broken, also.”

“Just from slipping on a wet floor and hitting his head on the edge of the counter? I’m no expert on injuries, but it seems to me it would take more than a slip to get that much of an injury.”

“That’s what the coroner said.”

“He’s sure the pattern of the injury matched that of the shape of the edge of the counter?” she asked.

“Excellent match. There’s also a match to something else in the bar, and right next to where his body was found.”

“What’s that?”

“The billy club he mentioned to you. That was one thing that transmitted loud and clear while you were sitting at the bar with your double whisky. Apparently, he showed it to you?”

“Yeah. He called it his persuader. He kept it somewhere out of sight below the counter. He took it out, slapped his hand a few times, made a threatening face, before putting it away again. It seemed like he had easy access to it.”

“You never saw exactly where he kept it?” Kona asked.

Gina shook her head. “I couldn’t see his side of the bar.”

“My problem is that the size and shape of the billy club is also a perfect match for the injury pattern on the back of his head.”

“What other evidence is there? Any transfer of hair or skin cells on either the club or the counter?”

“That’s my other big problem. The club had been wiped clean, with no hairs at all. Nor were there any fingerprints, as in none at all.”

“What about on the counter?”

“Also wiped clean. But the bartender I talked to explained that away as the counter being wiped down frequently during every shift, and again at the end of the night.”

“That was Harry Tanizawa?” she asked.

“Right. He looked pretty shaken up about it, too.”

“Did you take him in and sit him down in an interrogation room? Because I bet he knows more about this than he’s letting on.”

“I spent two hours with him this morning, and got a big, fat nothing. Honestly, I felt like he was in the dark. He had a pretty good idea girls were using his bar to meet johns and turn tricks in the parking lot, but never knew Chuck was behind it.”

“Dope of the Year Award.” Gina swung her finger around the side of her head. “How could someone not see that going on?”

“Because he didn’t want to. Chuck manipulated his way onto evening shift, leaving Harry to open the place in the morning whenever Hughes wasn’t around. When Harry worked in the evenings, Chuck kept him busy with the blender making fancy drinks. He never had the chance to see anything.”

“Jeesh. It’s Harry’s bar, not Chuck’s.”

“Not much of a businessman, if you ask me,” Kona said.

“You have other ideas about the perp, right? You think Candy went back and gave him a whack with the billy club?”

“We both heard her threaten to cut you and over nothing, and she threatened him in front of witnesses, one of whom was you.”

Gina shook her head. “She was pissed about something, more than just about one of the other girls getting pushed around. Otherwise, she threatened him with a knife, not a club. If she did go back, why would she look for a club instead of using her knife? That doesn’t make sense to me.”

“Me either. But I’ve got two dead pimps, plus a dead bartender, and a pissed off prostitute that knew all of them.”

“Two pissed off prostitutes.”

“How so?”

“Clara is my informant.”

“What could she possibly know about them?” he asked.

“She worked for Danny, at least until he got her pregnant. She was his last girl before he shut down his stable. All his other girls had gone to Chuck, and that’s when the trouble really started.”

Detective Kona was writing quickly now. “How?”

“According to Clara, after all his other girls left him, Danny ran out of money and started living at Kapalama Park. She was taking him cheese sandwiches, maybe the only food he was getting for months.”

“That’s taking her word for it.”

“Think about it, Detective. The cheese sandwiches she makes here are on white bread, with mustard on one side and mayo on the other, and only Velveeta. Isn’t that exactly what the coroner found in Danny’s stomach?”

He flipped through his notepad to find something. “Yep. Yellow cheese on white with mayo and mustard. That’s what my mother made for me as a kid. It sounds like Clara had some genuine affection for him.”

“So did the other girls,” Gina said. “Clara said something about even after they were earning more money working for Chuck, the other girls hated him.”

“Because?”

“Chuck was generally mean and nasty to his corral from the sound of it.”

Kona sighed with exasperation when he looked up at the sky. “That means Candy isn’t the only angry prostitute that was pissed at Chuck.”

“Actually, I know of a third pissed off hooker.”

“Criminy,” he said, flipping to a fresh page on his yellow pad. “You have a name to give me, or just a description?”

“Both. Remember my new friend, Holly? She probably works for Chuck. Or did, anyway.”

“I’d still like to have a long chat in an interrogation room with her. Has she contacted you since the other night?”

“No, but I know how you can find her,” Gina said.

“I’m waiting, Miss Santoro.”

“Talk to Harry. They’re dating. Or at least last weekend they were.”

Detective Kona wrote quickly in his special shorthand. “Candy, Clara, and Holly. Anyone else?”

“Not that I know of, but Holly might have a new name by now, and a new hair color. From what I heard, she changes both rather whimsically.” Gina wiped more sweat from her face and neck. “It could’ve been any of them that went back in the middle of the night.”

“Who was the girl he was pushing around in the hallway, the one that drew Candy into the fight?”

“Just a very pretty girl with a seductive way about her.”

“No idea of her name?” he asked.

Gina looked off into the distance to avoid answering.

“Miss Santoro, are you withholding something?”

She looked at him with narrowed eyes, but didn’t give up a name.

“You know her name, don’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“You knew her previous to last night?”

“Yes.”

“From?”

“This is difficult, Detective.”

“Just answer the question.”

“I don’t want unnecessary trouble for someone. These girls have enough trouble just turning tricks. They don’t need to be accused of murder, just because someone offed their pimp.”

Detective Kona looked off in the direction of where Gina’s crew was working. “Is it someone in your crew?”

She chuckled. “Definitely not.”

“Did you somehow meet her in the bar on one of your visits there?” he asked.

Gina shook her head. “I met her at the Tanizawa house last Sunday.”

“Was she with someone?”

“Harry.”

“Harry as in Harry Tanizawa?” he asked.

“It was Holly that Chuck was pushing around last night, the one that started the fight between him and Candy.” Gina already felt regret for ratting on a woman that didn’t have the arm strength to club someone to death with a single swing. “Look, I don’t want to make trouble for them, okay? They’re my employers, and for the most part, good people.”

“I want to get this straight,” Kona said. “Holly was in the bar last night, the one Harry owns, dressed like a hooker and got smacked around

by a known pimp named Chuck, who by the way is now dead?”

“Right.”

“And Holly is in some way involved in a personal relationship with Harry?”

“They sure looked chummy on Sunday.”

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Kona said while taking a few more notes. “Interesting how she’s turning tricks in Harry’s bar in the evenings when he’s not around, and being friendly with him on weekends.”

“Do you think he knows about that?” Gina asked.

He shook his head. “I doubt it.”

“Maybe I’m trying to be protective of those girls in Chuck’s stable, but I’m wondering if he might’ve just spilled some ice on the floor and slipped on that?”

“I asked Harry about ice in the bin, and he said they emptied and drained it every night, and either he or the other morning bartender filled it again in the morning. Some sort of health code.”

“Maybe he spilled ice when he emptied it, and slipped later?” she asked.

“The floor was dry, no puddles anywhere in the bar area in the morning. According to Harry, the floor would still be wet in the morning after nights when it rained. Humidity, I guess. Not enough time to evaporate.”

“According to Harry? He doesn’t know his girlfriend is turning tricks behind his back, in his own bar. What good is he as a witness?”

Gina’s crew had quit for the day and were slowly leaving, each of them waving goodbye to her. Before she could get in Flor’s car, Detective went to Clara and pulled her aside.

“Just a few questions about something. I can give her a ride home later,” he told Flor.

Florinda tried to argue from the passenger seat, but Flor put the window up and drove off. To Gina’s eye, it looked like a spat started before they were even on the bridge.

The three of them went back to the house to sit in the shade and have something cold to drink. Gina decided to sit on the side of the table with Clara.

“Clara, I’m Police Detective Michael Kona. I’m sure you’ve seen me here at the house in the last few days?”

“What do you want me for? I didn’t do nothing.”

“I know you didn’t. I’m just trying to fill in some blanks with an investigation. Do you mind helping me?”

Clara looked at Gina for a second, who nodded back to her. “I guess it’s okay.”

“I won’t beat around the bush. Miss Santoro has told me about how you used to work for Danny. He was the man that was found on her front porch last week, right?”

“I guess so.”

“You recognized him as Danny? You got a good enough view at him?”

Clara took a lock of her hair and wound an old curl around her finger. “Yeah, it was him.”

“Do you know his last name?”

“Nobody knows anybody’s last name in that business. We hardly know each other’s real name. We all used each other’s street name.”

“What was your street name?” he asked.

“Do I have to tell you?”

“Why wouldn’t you want to? You don’t do that for a living anymore, right?”

“No, but it was a stupid name.”

“Okay, enough of that,” Kona said, turning to a fresh sheet on his pad. “For the record, did you kill Danny?”

“What? No!” Clara ripped off what sounded like verbally abusive language aimed at Kona in Filipino. She didn’t stop until Gina patted her hand. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to say that. No, I didn’t kill him.”

“Do you know who did?”

“Someone at the park?”

“At Kapalama Park? You can verify he was living there recently?”

She nodded. “For the last couple of months.”

“And you’ve been taking him cheese sandwiches?” he asked.

“I wish it could’ve been more. He didn’t deserve to live that way. He wasn’t a bad guy. He just wasn’t any good at being a businessman.”

“Just to verify, he’s the father of your baby?”

Clara nodded. “He came to Flor’s house one day when they were at work. He’d just quit being a pimp. He was still healthy and strong then. He was pretty good looking, before he got sick.” She looked at both Gina and

Kona with pleading eyes. "Please don't tell Flor or Florinda about him. They don't know nothing about the father."

"I don't have any reason to," Detective Kona said. "But you're sure neither of them knows?"

"You think Flor might've killed Danny?"

"He's your brother-in-law, right? And Florinda is your sister?"

Clara started a new tirade in Filipino, then switched back to English. "Are you accusing my sister of something?"

"Wouldn't it seem reasonable that an older sister would defend her little sister in a situation like this?" he asked. His tone was a little too smug for Gina's tastes.

"Detective Kona, I'm an older sister to a younger sister, and I can assure you that no matter what happened to her, or how pissed I was about it, I wouldn't resort to murder. I seriously doubt Florinda would, either."

"Why not?"

"We both have too much to lose to do something as stupid as kill someone." Gina crossed her arms. "Anyway, there are better ways of getting back at a man than killing him."

Kona set his attention on Clara again. "Almost done, Miss. Other than someone at the park, who else might've been mad enough at Danny to want him dead? Any of the other girls that worked for him?"

"We all liked him. He was pretty nice to us, not so demanding, you know? I can't think of any of them that wanted to kill him."

"Anybody else come to mind?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I don't want to think about it."

"We found a bottle cap for Tuyo beer in his pocket, a Filipino brand. Was that his favorite brand of beer?"

She shook her head again. "He didn't drink beer, at least not that I ever saw. Or anything else. Sure, he hung around that bar, but he'd drink sodas or whatever. He didn't want us drinking booze, either."

"Why not? Too expensive?"

"He had to pay for our drinks, and soda cost him the same as booze. He just didn't want any of us drunk. He really was protective of his girls."

Detective Kona took a black and photo from his notepad and showed it to Clara. Gina recognized it as the one that had been in Danny's wallet the day she found him. She watched Clara's face for a reaction.

"Do these people look familiar to you?"

Clara looked for a full minute. “You think she’s his wife?”

“I don’t know who they are.”

She handed the picture back. “Either do I.”

He made her look again. “Is the little girl in the picture you?”

“Why should I be in a picture?”

“Is the lady holding the girl’s hand your mother?” he asked.

“I told you...” She tossed the snapshot down on the table. “...I don’t know them.”

That wrapped up Detective Kona’s interview of Clara, who excused herself to the bathroom.

“Any ideas of who killed Danny?” Gina asked, once they were alone.

“I have footprints all over the scene, but no shoes that match them. I have fingerprints with no matches in the system. I have a dead man’s fingerprints, but have no match in the system. I have a bottle cap to beer that the dead man apparently didn’t drink. I have a photograph of people nobody knows. I have a knife with blood on it that doesn’t match anyone’s DNA in the database. And I have a troop of hookers that are more familiar with quantum physics than they were with their daddy. What I don’t have is suspects in three death, and all three of those deaths revolve one specific bar, and at least tow of them have been classified as murder.”

“What about Chuck? Your money is on someone using the billy club on him?” Gina asked.

“That’s what makes sense to me. No prints at all on the bat, and we know he’d handled it only a few hours before when she displayed it to you. I can’t imagine why he would clean the bat along with the rest of the bar at the end of the shift. It wasn’t used for food service, just on the occasion when he needed to persuade someone to behave themself.”

Gina handed him a glass of lemonade. “Well, Detective, I’m glad these are your cases and not mine.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Gina didn't hear from Detective Kona for the rest of the week, and that was just fine with her. As far as she was concerned, Chuck as at least responsible for Danny's death, if not the one who plunged the ice pick into his liver. It took more guesswork to decide on Chuck's killer. Maybe it was Candy, or one of his other prostitutes exacting revenge for him being mean to them. Maybe even Clara had gone there late that night and given him a whack, for no other reason than taking the father of her baby away from her. Or Flor or Florinda. That was something Gina didn't want to consider, since Clara was beginning to relax around her and the house, and cheering up a little. It seemed like the entire crew was moving on from the nerves of death, and settling into a work rhythm.

Eventually, working together, Felix and Kenzo got the last of the wall paneling put up in the house. Next came coats of paint, and while Felix decided on which room to start with, Kenzo checked the weather for the next few days, planning on dry days for painting. Since the house was still none of her concern, Gina let them bicker over wall paint while she replaced blisters for callouses on her hands.

After getting the umpteenth lecture from her mother about going to church, at least to meet a few more people, Gina went to early Mass Sunday morning. After that, she planned on making an extra-large kettle of summer minestrone, with the ulterior motive of taking half of it to Mr. Tanizawa as a surprise. With the way he had talked about it the time she met him, it seemed to bring a good memory to his tired soul. She'd spent most of the church service daydreaming about how to make that day's version of the soup.

She was just getting everything mentally assembled when she drove over the little bridge to home. Now that she'd been there for a few weeks, and had even received a snail mail letter from her mother delivered to the doorstep, she was beginning to feel like the old house was home. Even her estate project was starting to feel like a chosen profession, rather than just having a lawn-mowing job. Everything was beginning to fall into place.

Then she saw Detective Kona's sedan parked at the side of the house. He'd already seen her come in, or she would've backed around and left again.

"Detective Kona, what's taken you so long to come back? It's been five whole days since you've been here."

He looked at her face, giving her a close scrutiny. "Your face looks good."

"As compared to?"

"The last time I saw you when you were hiding a shiner with makeup."

She touched her eyelid. "Back to normal. Is that why you came here today?"

"I have a few updates on the recent murders."

She led him into the kitchen, and after giving him something to drink, started chopping vegetables for the minestrone. "Danny and Chuck? Have they officially been classified as murders?"

He nodded. "The evidence is solid that Chuck was the one who killed Danny. That comes from a witness that came forward during the week, telling me how Chuck had mentioned on at least two occasions that he was going to kill Danny."

"What was his motive?" Gina asked.

"Simply to shut him up. Danny had been threatening to come to the police about Chuck's operation at Bunzo's, and was trying to pry hush money out of him to keep quiet. But Chuck never paid, and when Danny kept threatening, Chuck took care of him once and for all."

"Okay, I can see that. But who dumped his body on my front porch?"

"Chuck did, or at least someone wearing his shoes. We found a pair of sneakers in his home that matched perfectly with the shoe prints found in the soft dirt, all the way from the bridge to the porch, and then back again. The shoes even had remnants of the same dirt in the treads as what's found here. We also found the empty bottle of Tuyo beer in the recycling bin at his home, with both his and Danny's fingerprints on it."

"And you think Danny kept the bottle cap, simply as a clue to someone if he was found dead?" Gina asked.

"Maybe Danny thought his days were limited, not because of his cancer, but because he was afraid someone was out to get him dead first."

"It sounds like Chuck was trying to hide evidence by tossing the bottle away at home," Gina said. "Is there a way of matching the bottle cap from

Danny's pocket to the bottle found at Chuck's place?"

"I asked a technician to look into that, but even microscopically, there was nothing definitive." Kona flipped to a new page on his yellow pad. "We did find Danny's prints inside Chuck's home, along with a small spot of blood on the carpeting that matches Danny's. Oddly, the furniture had been rearranged in the living room, and a couch had been placed over the blood stain."

"How do you know the furniture had been moved recently?" she asked.

"There were still the old dents in the carpeting from the original placement."

"Good enough for me," Gina said.

"One more thing. Since some of the homeless people have been moving back into Kapalama Park, I was able to talk to a few of them. One woman in particular remembered Danny having a heated argument with a man that matches Chuck's description in the last couple of days before he was killed."

"Would it have been good enough to take to the DA if Chuck were still alive?" she asked.

"Should've been. Means, motive, and opportunity. Physical evidence of Danny having some sort of injury in Chuck's home, Chuck's shoeprints in the dirt at the scene of the crime, and eyewitnesses to the vic and the perp arguing just before the crime was committed."

"Was there an ice pick in Chuck's home?" Gina asked.

"Yes, but it had a round cross section rather than square. That would've been the last piece of evidence to wrap up that investigation. Unfortunately, it'll remain open for a while yet."

"What about Chuck's murder?"

"That's going to be tough. There're probably a dozen women just at Bunzo's that wanted to stick him with a knife or swing a barstool at his head. I spent a few evenings there this week, asking around. Every girl I talked to was able to point to a scar on her body they attributed to Chuck."

"What about alibis?" Gina asked.

"All of them had an alibi for the night he got whacked, that they were on dates, or in another bar with each other. I ran down some of the alibis, and for what I could find, they checked out, at least as well as any other alibi that a prostitute has even given me."

“What about Harry?”

“At home watching on-demand pornos for most of the night, and I was able to verify that with his cable provider.”

“More believable story than saying he was watching Disney videos.” Gina put everything into the kettle and added the chicken stock to simmer. “Just so you know, I had a couple of long heart to heart talks with Clara this week. I learned a few interesting tidbits that’ll help your investigation.”

While Gina continued to prepare the minestrone, she filled in Detective Kona with what she’d learned from Clara, who it turned out still had a few friends in her old workplace.

“That settles it,” he said, putting away his yellow pad. “Time for an arrest. I just need to find our perp.”

“I have an idea about that, too,” Gina said before filling him in on her idea.

“Is that something you’re making for your dinner?” he asked once he agreed to her plan. He’d gone to the counter to watch what she was doing.

She was preparing dried pasta for boiling, to add to the soup later. “I’m working on a summer minestrone recipe. Every Sunday, I try something a little different. This week, I’m taking some to a friend.”

“Oh.” Kona sat down again. “Someone from church?”

“No.” With her back turned to him, Gina smiled to herself, wondering if her little suspicion was right about him visiting that day. “For Mister Tanizawa.”

“Which one?”

“Actually, for both Bunzo and for Kenzo. I get the idea they don’t get much home cooking unless someone brings it to them.”

Detective Kona stood. “There’s a background story in there that I’d love to hear some time.”

“It’s a great story, and involves minestrone. I have time to tell you about this evening, if you like? Or maybe you’d rather run down some evidence instead?”

He shifted his weight from one leg to the other. “Tonight?”

“Yeah, tonight.”

“Yes, we could, um...”

Gina decided to save him from the chore all men went through. “I haven’t been to Waikiki yet. I’ve only driven past it once. Is that something people do here? Go for a walk on the beach in the evening?”

“Sounds good.”

“I just need to let this simmer for a while and then take it to the Tanizawas,” Gina said. “Then I have a tennis date later this afternoon. You don’t happen to play tennis, do you?”

“I tried once,” Detective Kona said. “I either hit the ball into the net, or it was a grand slam over the fence. I spent more time chasing balls than hitting them.”

There was one thing that had been bothering Gina about Harry, Chuck, and Danny. Maybe it meant something, maybe it was nothing, but Gina had to follow it through. She got her phone and called the Tanizawa house where Bunzo lived with his son, Kenzo. She gave Kona the job of stirring the noodles into the soup while she made a call to Kenzo.

“Hullo?”

“Kenzo, this is Gina.” She told him her made-up story of making too much minestrone and wanted to bring them some. “Would in an hour be okay?”

“Almost time for lunch. We’ll wait for you.”

“One other thing. Maybe you could have Harry come? He said something last week about wanting to try it.”

“His day off. I’ll call him.”

Gina had to be sneaky now. “Have him bring Holly with him.”

“Why?”

“She was interesting. I’d like to talk with her again.”

“Not interesting to us.”

“I think she will be today,” Gina said, before ending the call.

“What’s this about Holly?” Detective Kona asked.

“You’ll see.” Gina put most of her minestrone in a Tupperware and sealed it up. She decided to keep on her church clothes for the visit to the Tanizawa’s house. “You’re taking me there, by the way.”

“What are you up to, Miss Santoro?”

“You’ll see.” She buckled into the front seat of his sedan, holding the container of soup on her lap. “Is there any way at all possible that you could call me Gina?”

“Once the investigation is done, yes. But only if you call me Michael.”

Kenzo was waiting at the front door for them when Gina and Detective Kona arrived. When they went inside, Harry was waiting impatiently, with

Holly by his side. She wasn't any happier about being there than he was, and made the point by flashing a scowl at Gina.

After visiting with Bunzo in his bedroom for a few minutes, Gina instructed Kenzo on how to reheat the soup. While he was distracted with that in the kitchen, and Bunzo waited in his bedroom, Gina maneuvered Harry, Holly, and Detective Kona to the patio. She shut the door behind them so the others couldn't hear.

Gina set her eyes on Harry. "Roll up your sleeves."

"What? Why?"

"I want to see your forearms."

"I'm no user!"

"Miss Santoro, why are we doing this?" Kona asked.

"Just bear with me for a moment. Harry, show us your arms."

He slid up the sleeves of his long-sleeved T-shirt. The scabbed-over injury she'd seen on him the week before was nearly gone, replaced by a long, pink scar.

"How'd you get that scar?" Gina demanded.

"It's nothing. Just something that happened at work. It's all healed up."

Holly made a move toward the patio door into the house, but Kona blocked her departure.

"Baloney. You got that from Danny, didn't you?"

"Danny who? I know half a dozen Dannies."

"Don't try and bluff me, Harry. You know which Danny I mean. He tried to knife you, but his crappy little pocketknife couldn't do much more than gouge your arm. Is that when you stabbed him with the ice pick?"

"That wasn't me. You have to believe me."

"I'm the one that needs to believe you, Harry," Detective Kona said. He now had Holly's arm locked in his grip.

"Okay, we had a fight, more of an argument, and he got me with that stupid knife he carried around. I was more worried about getting tetanus from that than bleeding to death. But I didn't spike him."

"Do you know who did?" Kona asked.

Harry's eyes shifted back and forth, looking from one person to another. "I dunno."

"What did you argue about?" Gina asked.

"He came to me one day with this story about how the nighttime bartenders were running a prostitution ring out of my bar in the evenings. I

called him a liar, he said I was stupid, and I told him to get lost and not come back. Maybe there was some pushing and shoving to get him out the door of my bar, and that's when he gouged me. He left, and I never saw him again."

"What day was that?" Kona asked.

"Saturday, two weeks ago yesterday. But I'm telling you, I didn't spike him."

"What he told you about the bar was true, Harry," Gina said. "Chuck had been running a prostitution ring out of there for months. Danny had been also, until Chuck stole his girls and shut down his business. That's why Danny had been hanging around the bar. He'd been trying to get hush money out of Chuck, to not to go to the police."

"I knew there were girls getting picked up. I never knew it had gotten so big."

"There's something else you need to know." Gina looked at Holly, who was wearing the face of anger by now. "Holly, you want to tell him or should I?"

"Tell me what?"

"She's been working for Chuck, and before him, Danny."

"Say what?"

"Surprise!" Gina said with a chuckle. "Holly, where were you last Sunday night, after closing time at Harry's bar?"

"Me?"

"You've been on my radar for several days," Detective Kona told her.

Holly tried pulling her arm away from his grip. "Shove your radar!"

"Thanks, but not today. My CSI teams have collected several of your prints from Chuck's apartment, and from the seat of a barstool at Bunzo's. From that same stool, we found DNA and hair that match Chuck's. From near as I can tell, you talked your way back into the bar after closing to have some sort of meeting with Chuck. He would've let you in because you were one of his girls. Maybe the meeting got heated, or maybe you just cold-cocked him with the stool, I don't know. The evidence I have now has a barstool in your hands, with DNA and hair from the victim on that stool, and a dent in the back of his head that matches that of the stool leg."

Holly tried wrestling away from his grip again. "Let me go!"

"Holly, what's your real name?" Gina asked the girl, now writhing in Detective Kona's grip like a snake.

Once again, she got the same two-word reply she always got from Holly.

“It’s Lisa, isn’t it?”

“How do you know that?” Holly hissed.

“You know all those other girls in Chuck’s corral, all your old workmates? Guess what? Not a single one of them likes you. In fact, they all ratted you out this week.”

“Rat on me for what?”

“It seems you’ve been bragging to the other girls about how you got rid of Chuck, once and for all. News like that makes it way through the neighborhood pretty fast, Lisa.”

This time, the curses placed on Gina were conjugated in peculiar, and personal, ways.

“Not today, thanks. You’re not my type,” Gina said, smiling at the girl. She looked at Harry, who looked like he was turning inside-out over the revelations about his girlfriend. “You were the one who whacked me in the head that night at the park, weren’t you?”

“It wasn’t me, honest. But I think I know who it was.”

“Why didn’t you come forward earlier?” Kona asked him.

“There’s been so much trouble at the bar lately. I’m about to lose my liquor license. I can’t afford any more police reports going through the system.”

“Who was it?” Gina demanded.

“Just some bar patron that knew Hughes. Chuck didn’t trust Hughes, and sent the other guy out to keep an eye on Holly, to make sure she got back to the bar.”

“But he found me already there helping Holly, right?” Gina asked.

Harry nodded with sadness on his face.

“Was he the one who put a bullet in Hughes’s head?” Detective Kona asked.

Harry nodded again. “That’s what I heard. By then, Hughes was high as a kite, and the guy took him for a ride and got rid of him.”

“A ride to the Ala Wai Marina?” Kona asked.

“I don’t know where, just that Hughes got a bullet put in his head. Good riddance, if you ask me.”

“Why?” Gina asked.

“Worst bartender ever. Clueless when it came to blender drinks, and those are the ones with the highest profit margin.”

“Are you willingly coming downtown to make a witness statement, or do I need to haul you in?” Kona asked Harry.

“I’ll come.”

“What about her?” Gina asked, nodding at Holly.

Detective Kona reached behind his back for a set of handcuffs. “Lisa Oshima, you’re under arrest for the murder of Charles Andover. There may be further charges in the murder of a man named Danny.”

When Kona took Holly, Ivy, Rose, or Lisa to his car for the trip downtown, Harry followed in his car. Once they were gone, Gina tried to smile apologetically to Kenzo, who had been watching from the patio door.

“Sorry you had to see that, and in your home.”

“Glad to see her go,” Kenzo said quietly. “Should’ve taken that guy to jail with her.”

“Why? He’s your brother.”

“Half-brother. Other half is no good, I tell you.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Gina followed her nose to the kitchen and spooned minestrone into three bowls. “I have a question, Kenzo. Who watches over your father when you’re working on the house?”

“You met Reiko earlier, yah?”

“The pretty one? I think she’s married to Brad, right?”

Kenzo nodded. “Another half-sister. She’s a nurse. Works night shift at the hospital, and stops in to stay with him while I’m at the house.”

“She’s Harry’s sister? They don’t look like each other at all,” Gina said.

“Another mother.”

“Wow. Your father really...never mind. Sorry.”

Kenzo shrugged. “No matter. He likes women.”

“I have the idea women like him, too.”

She took two bowls of minestrone with her into Bunzo’s bedroom, with Kenzo remaining behind in the kitchen to eat his.

“Fresh summer minestrone for you, Mister Tanizawa!” she said, setting the bowl in front of Bunzo.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

“My pleasure. I enjoyed cooking it.”

“No. Thank you for taking her away.”

“You heard us talking?” she asked.

He nodded in the direction of the wall. “Window was open.”

Gina chuckled. “Again, my pleasure. Now, it’s time for hanashi-banashi. Did I say it right?”

He gave her a thumbs-up.

Gina smiled, happy her little plan was working out so well. “Tell me about the girl in Italy again. I want to hear all about her.”

About The Author

Kay Hadashi

Kay Hadashi is the author of more than forty mystery, suspense, and adventure books, with women as main characters. Most stories are set in the Hawaiian Islands, and include Hawaiian and Japanese themes and characters. Please visit her website at kayhadashi.com.

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