

GEMMA HALLIDAY PUBLISHING

HULA HOMICIDE

NOT CROSS

CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS

Aloha

Lagoon

B.a.
Trimmer

* * * * *

FREE EBOOK OFFER

Sign up for our newsletter to be the first to know about our new releases, special bargains, and giveaways, and as a bonus receive a FREE ebook!

[Sign up for the Gemma Halliday newsletter!](#)

* * * * *

OceanofPDF.com

* * * * *

HULA HOMICIDE **an Aloha Lagoon Mystery**

by

B.A. TRIMMER

* * * * *

Copyright © 2022 by B.A. Trimmer
Gemma Halliday Publishing
<http://www.gemmahallidaypublishing.com>

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The

publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized,
associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

OceanofPDF.com

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[FREE BOOK OFFER](#)

[ALOHA LAGOON BOOKS](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[SNEAK PEEK](#)

OceanofPDF.com

Thanks, Gemma and Susie!

*Thanks to:
Andi Anderson,
Katie Hilbert, and
Kimberly Mathews*

*Also, thanks to my beta readers:
Cat Bertoldi, Bonnie Costilow,
Jeanette Ellmer, Barbara Hackel,
Diana Hepner, Kandy King, Millie Knight,
Judith Rogow, Gail Shillito, and
Tony Tumminello*

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

"Kristy, my necklace is missing," Aunt Audrey moaned as she dropped into one of the chairs at our table. "I'm sure it's been stolen."

"Stolen?" I asked, my voice rising. "Are you talking about that gorgeous diamond and ruby necklace you wore last night?"

As the wedding planner for the Aloha Lagoon Resort, I was responsible for the wedding party's happiness as well as ensuring everything went smoothly. Hearing somebody stole a necklace that must have been worth two hundred thousand dollars was a lousy way to start the week.

"I'm afraid so," Aunt Audrey said, anger and disappointment etched on her face.

Audrey Wentworth was a spry-looking seventy-five-year-old with a kind disposition and dark hair pulled back in a neat bun. She was the aunt of the bride, Carly Clarkson, who would marry Justin Cooper on Saturday, four days from now.

Due to Aunt Audrey's generosity, the ten members of the wedding party were spending the week at the resort. From what I'd been able to gather, she was a wealthy, childless widow who'd always had a soft spot for Carly, her only niece.

"Well, you definitely had it last night at the reception," I said. "When did you discover it was missing?"

Even though the Aloha reception had been for Carly and Justin, the star of the show had been Aunt Audrey. Hanging around her neck had been a stunning diamond and ruby festoon necklace on a shiny gold chain. The pear-shaped center diamond must have been four or five carats, and the dozen side diamonds and rubies appeared to be over two carats each.

I'd been immediately impressed and completely jealous. Several resort guests in the reception lounge had commented on how beautiful it was.

"I think it was taken while we were at breakfast today," Aunt Audrey said, her voice tinged with disgust. "When I was dressing to go down to the beach, I thought to check on my necklace, but it wasn't in the jewelry case I always keep in my suitcase."

"Didn't you have it in the room safe?" I asked, slightly confused. "I'm pretty sure all the Huts have them."

"It's obvious now that I should have. But I've always heard they're easy to break into and are the first place a thief would look."

"Have you alerted the resort?" I asked, although I knew there usually wasn't a lot they could do with a theft.

"I just spent an hour with Jimmy Toki, the head of resort security," Aunt Audrey said, looking depressed. "I showed him my room and the luggage where I kept the necklace. My next stop is the police station to file a report."

"Would you like some company while you do that?" I asked. Taking an Uber to the police station didn't sound like much fun.

Aunt Audrey's eyes softened with gratitude as she looked at me. "No, I'll be fine. Jimmy's arranged everything. It's just that the piece has a lot of sentimental value for both Carly and me. I'd planned on giving it to her as a wedding present."

After again assuring me that she didn't need me to accompany her, Aunt Audrey left the table.

I looked over at my assistant, Leilani Alana. She'd silently followed the entire exchange.

"Wow," Leilani said. "That really sucks."

Leilani was not only my assistant at work—she was also my best friend. I'd met her the day after I'd arrived in Kauai, almost six months ago, and we'd been inseparable ever since.

Although people had told us we were nearly identical in personality and attitude, Leilani and I looked nothing alike. I was twenty-nine and tall, with long, mostly natural blonde hair. My eyes were green with flecks of gold and blue that seemed to change colors, depending on the day and my mood.

Leilani was twenty-seven and wasn't quite as tall as me. She was graced with the long, luxuriant, dark hair of a native Hawaiian. She had huge brown eyes, a broad smile, and a gorgeous, expressive face. She was as close as I'd ever come to having a little sister.

Our table was one of many scattered around the outside patio of The Lava Pot, the resort's beachside tiki bar. As required by management, we both wore khaki shorts and our official Aloha Lagoon blue polo shirts.

This was our favorite spot to hang out whenever we scheduled a beach day. The location allowed us to keep an eye on the wedding party, and the big table umbrella gave us plenty of shade.

As always, it was a beautiful day in paradise. The temperature was perfect, delightfully warm with a gentle touch of humidity.

A light breeze ruffled the fronds of the coconut palms along the beach. Fluffy white clouds dotted the sky over the sapphire blue of the ocean, signaling fantastic weather for the foreseeable future.

Per the bride's request, the first full day of the week was spent on the beach. Leilani and I watched as the members of the wedding party played a friendly game of three-on-three beach volleyball in one of the sandpits next to the tiki bar.

Typical for the middle of the afternoon, The Lava Pot was doing a brisk business. People were wandering up in a steady stream from the beach to order a beer, a Shark Bite, a Mai Tai, or the house's signature cocktail, the Lava Flow.

People on the deck were bobbing their heads to the upbeat classic rock pumping out from inside the bar.

We'd barely begun discussing the disappearance of the necklace when we heard a high-pitched scream from a woman on the beach.

"Geez," Leilani moaned. "What now?"

As we looked toward the noise, we saw one of the bridesmaids, Roxanne Grant, kicking and screaming as she was hauled down the beach over the shoulder of Alex Adair. It appeared that the good-looking groomsman was intent upon tossing her into the Pacific.

Somehow, I wasn't surprised. I'd already pegged Roxanne as the troublemaker of the group. Since arriving the previous afternoon, she'd openly flirted with every guy she'd come across, whether they were married or not. It had been only a matter of time before something happened with Roxanne as the center of attention.

Since I meet so many people at these weddings and names are always hard for me to remember, especially during the first few days, I typically give everyone a private nickname. For these two, it had been easy; he was Movie Star Alex, and she was Flirty Roxanne.

Judging by their body language, Roxanne had apparently said something snarky to Alex as they'd stood together on the beach, watching the group volleyball game. In retaliation, he'd snatched her up and was carrying her down the sand to the surf, her long red hair swishing against the back of Alex's legs.

The way she was twisting and struggling had me worried. Her neon-strawberry bikini top was already a size too small, barely covering her oversized, perfectly tanned boobs. It appeared we were about to have a severe wardrobe malfunction.

Some of the other guys in the wedding party, and a few tourists walking along the boardwalk, must have been

thinking along the same lines. Many of them were watching the scene with blatant interest.

"Kristy?" Leilani asked nervously as her eyes followed the spectacle on the beach. "He's not really going to toss her in. Is he?"

By now, the rest of the wedding party had paused their volleyball game to watch the scene unfolding on the beach. There was some laughing and a few good-natured shouts of "Do it!"

One of the groomsmen lifted his beer and called out, "Roxanne, you're going to sleep with the fishes." Even a couple of the bridesmaids were smiling at the exhibition, no doubt thinking it was karma for the shameless way she'd been teasing the men.

"Damn," I groaned. "I think he might actually throw her in."

Instead of smiling and laughing as I would have expected if it had been part of a joke, Alex's jaw was clenched, and he looked like he was fuming. What had Flirty Roxanne said to him? Had she insulted his mother? His manhood?

The bridesmaid twisted and struggled to free herself. Unfortunately, Roxanne's arms were pinned to her sides, and she couldn't do more than kick her legs and shout what I had to assume were vile insults.

As Alex marched with his helpless captive down to the waterline, several sunbathing tourists swiveled their heads to see what the commotion was about.

Although I was appalled by his actions, I had to acknowledge that Alex was classically handsome with his boyish face and medium-length blond hair, as well as a decent body. He'd even arrived in Hawaii with a golden tan.

Once Alex was up to his ankles in the water, he paused. Roxanne stopped struggling, likely thinking he'd changed his mind. But it was clear that Alex was only waiting for the next wave to roll up to the beach.

When it did, he easily tossed the bridesmaid a good six feet out into the ocean. With arms waving and another frantic scream, Roxanne landed with a splash we heard all the way up at The Lava Pot.

Although most of the wedding party clapped and thought it was hilarious, the bride and a couple of the other bridesmaids looked at each other, shock and worry on their faces, before rushing down to the surf as a group to help a soggy Roxanne out of the water.

"Should you go down and referee?" Leilani asked, her head tilted and her eyebrows raised.

"Hmm, not yet. Her hair didn't get too wet, and she's got plenty of people there to help her out. When's our new photographer supposed to arrive? A photo of Roxanne screaming as she flew through the air would've made some fun wedding memories."

I was finding it hard to be sympathetic to Roxanne's plight. It wasn't something I was proud of, but women like that rubbed me the wrong way.

"Jake should've been here already," Leilani said with a deep sigh. "I told him the wedding party would have their first group get-together at noon, here at The Lava Pot."

I gave her a look to show what I thought of the friend of her brother we'd hired to shoot photos of the wedding. I tried to make the look somewhere between irritated and thoroughly annoyed.

"I don't know why he's late," Leilani said as she raised her palms and shrugged her shoulders. "Don't give me that look. I'll give him a call."

She pulled out her phone and scrolled through her contacts. "Maybe he's just on island time?"

I shook my head. When you're a wedding planner and have events timed to the minute, *island time* isn't a term you ever want to hear, especially in connection with someone you'd just hired.

Finding a wedding photographer had turned out to be a lot harder than I'd expected. The good ones tended to be artistic souls who'd go wherever the spirit took them. Hawaii has too many beautiful locations to keep any of them tied down in one spot for more than a month or two.

Leilani's older brother, Kai, had recommended his friend, Jake Hunter, insisting he was an incredible artist who had his own photography business. Of course, I'd met Kai several months ago. My impression had been that the only things he seemed to be interested in were girls and surfing. I wasn't sure if his judgment of what made a good wedding photographer would be all that reliable.

I sighed. Truthfully, I was beginning to get desperate. If this new guy didn't work out, I'd have to pull out the ancient digital SLR camera we kept in the office for emergencies and start taking the pictures myself.

* * *

Twenty minutes after the incident on the beach, the ten people who made up the Clarkson-Cooper wedding party seemed to be in a festive mood again, and the celebration itinerary was back on track. The volleyball game had settled into a steady rhythm with plenty of good-natured laughing and gentle teasing.

Members of the group who weren't actively playing were clustered around the sandpits, chatting and sipping colorful drinks. Almost everyone was smiling, laughing, and seeming to be enjoying themselves. For a wedding planner, that was the best possible outcome.

Clearly, Roxanne had recovered from being tossed into the ocean as she was back to chatting with the groomsmen. Her target was now Angry Eddy Martin.

I'd only briefly met Eddy the night before, and I didn't know a lot about him. I found him to be more rugged than handsome, with a square face, short dark hair, and a thick

mustache. He was a barrel-chested man with hairy arms that were covered with tattoos. He was a little shorter than the other men in the group, but he appeared to be powerfully built.

From what I could tell, he wasn't a man who liked to smile a lot. In fact, every time I'd seen him, he'd struck me as being aggravated and spoiling for a fight.

Carly Clarkson, the bride, had mentioned that Eddy worked in trucking and warehousing. However, she hadn't known exactly how he was involved in either.

Like the rest of the wedding party, Eddy had been friends with the bride and groom since college. From what I could tell, everyone in the group still lived scattered throughout the San Francisco Bay Area.

Flirty Roxanne held a Mai Tai in one hand while her other hand rested on Eddy's shoulder. As she talked, she leaned in and rubbed up against him. I watched her "accidentally" press herself against him three or four more times before he narrowed his eyes, cocked his head to the side, and gave her a questioning look.

She flashed a shy little half-smile and shrugged her shoulders to acknowledge he'd caught her. The muscles in his jaw tensed as his gaze quickly flicked over to Alex and the best man, Wealthy Derek Williams. They were both talking near the patio of The Lava Pot, slightly apart from the rest of the group.

Eddy turned his attention back to Roxanne, and they spoke to each other quietly for a moment. Eddy then relaxed, now looking much less irritated, and nodded his head.

Her mission accomplished, Flirty Roxanne sauntered off to talk to other people in the group with a smug smile on her face. Meanwhile, Eddy took a long, thoughtful sip of his drink as he watched her backside sway seductively as she walked away.

I glanced down at my watch, then raised an eyebrow at Leilani. "Well?" I asked. "Where's our photographer?"

"He just sent me a text," she said, breathing a sigh of relief. "He's on his way." Her look implied that none of what happened was her fault.

"Well, he's almost missed group beach day," I said with a disappointed shake of my head. "Not having beach pictures on top of a missing necklace isn't how I wanted today to go."

* * *

Once the volleyball game finished, everybody took a break to head back into The Lava Pot for drink refills. The best man, Wealthy Derek Williams, detoured by where Leilani and I were sitting.

I'd met Derek the night before at the Aloha reception. He was about the same age as the rest of the group. After college, he'd started a network technology company in Silicon Valley that had made him rich.

With a slightly soft body and short dark hair sticking out at all angles, I got the impression that Derek wasn't the type to take care of himself. Most of the time, there was a hint of a smile on his face, as if the idea of hanging out with his old college friends was mildly amusing.

The Dolce & Gabbana camouflage cargo shorts and Valentino print shirt he wore matched well with his diamond-studded Rolex watch but were a bit over-the-top. After so many years of drooling over luxury fashion on the internet, it was always entertaining to see someone wearing it.

"Hi, Derek," I said. "How's everything going?"

"Kristy," he said in the clipped tones of an employer addressing a subordinate. "I want to talk with you about my bungalow. According to what I was told, I'd have an ocean view."

Everyone in the group was staying in one of several high-end guest villas scattered between the main building and the beach. The resort had labeled these as *The Huts*, but the name really didn't do justice to the beautiful two-story private cottages.

"Oh no," I said. "Did you not get one?"

"Well, technically. If I stand on the corner of the second-story balcony, I can see the ocean. But it's hardly what I'd call a great ocean view. I'd like to have it changed to something more reasonable."

These types of problems and requests frequently came up throughout a typical wedding week. As a result, I always encourage the guests to use me as their personal concierge, travel agent, party host, and all-around problem solver. If I could tell jokes or juggle flaming bowling pins, I'd probably be asked to do that as well.

"No worries," I said. "Check back in a few minutes. We'll make sure to get it changed around."

It was clear Derek had been building up for an argument and seemed to deflate slightly when he realized there wouldn't be one. "Oh," he said. "Very well. Thanks for getting that done."

When Derek took off to rejoin the game, Leilani called Summer at the front desk to make the updated arrangements. I then noted the room change on my tablet.

"There he is," Leilani said with relief as she looked toward the entrance to the bar. She stood up and waved to get his attention.

I turned to get a look at my new photographer, prepared to give him a proper chewing out for being so late.

Oh my.

The person standing at the entrance of The Lava Pot turned out to be not what I had been expecting. For one thing, he was incredibly handsome in that tall, broad-shouldered kind of way, and for another, he was somewhere

in his early to mid-thirties. I don't know why, but I'd been expecting someone a lot younger.

A tight black and green University of Hawaii Rainbow Warriors T-shirt showcased the muscles of his chest and arms, while a pair of casual khaki cargo shorts showed off his well-defined legs. Even the man's feet were attractive in his leather sandals, and I usually am not the kind of person to check out a guy's feet.

He had the kind of deep tan that a mainlander gained by living on the island full time. But what really struck me were his curly dark hair and piercing blue eyes. The man was serious eye-candy.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, flashing me a brilliant smile as he walked up and extended his hand. "I'm Jake Hunter."

"Look, Jake," I started after we shook, prepared to lay into him. "If you're going to do this, I can't have you stroll in late to..."

"How much longer will everyone be out here?" he interrupted, pulling a high-end Nikon camera out of his bag and removing the lens cap. From the gold band next to the focus ring, I could see the lens was a professional model.

"About forty-five minutes," I said as I glanced down at my watch. "Maybe a little less. But listen, I can't have you..."

"Plenty of time," he interrupted *again*, even as he smiled at me with a lopsided grin. "By now, they've all had a drink or two, and no one will be shy about getting their picture taken."

Turning, he hopped onto the sand and made his way to the volleyball pits. Frustrated that I didn't get a chance to vent, I mentally crossed my fingers and hoped he at least knew what he was doing. A lousy photographer could leave a bride in tears and cause lasting problems for the wedding planner.

For the next twenty minutes, I watched as Jake wove in and out of the group, easily inserting himself into the moment. Judging by his cocky attitude, I figured he'd be

completely lame when it came to taking photos. Honestly, I'd dreaded the worst, like a puppy who's adorable but still destroys your house.

Instead, I was pleasantly surprised by how effortless he made it seem. His photography style appeared to be a combination of casually chatting with people and taking pictures.

Jake quickly worked his way through the entire group, making sure to get shots of everyone. Unlike some photographers I'd worked with who were intrusive, everyone seemed to be relaxed with Jake.

When he got to Flirty Roxanne, I couldn't help but notice she spent several moments positioning herself in some rather suggestive poses. Although she'd obviously tried to entice him, he'd waited until she relaxed into something more presentable before taking the photos.

Jake then gathered everyone together for a group picture as the players were switching sides. It didn't take him more than a minute or so to correctly stage everyone, complete with a breathtaking backdrop of palm trees and the beach.

I heard the rapid *ping-ping-ping* as he took a burst of eight or ten shots. He glanced at the back of his camera, then looked up with a dazzling smile. "Perfect. Thanks, everybody."

The group quickly scattered, everyone going back to the game. I was utterly amazed. Jake had done in two minutes what I'd seen other photographers struggle with for ten minutes or more.

As I watched Jake work, I noticed the way the light breeze coming off the ocean ruffled his hair. It looked so soft that I started to wonder what it would feel like to run my fingers through it.

Clearly, my lack of male companionship over the last six months had affected how I looked at men. I was starting to get hungry. I hated to admit that I hadn't been on more

than two dates in a row with anyone since I'd arrived at Aloha Lagoon.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWO

Carly-the-bride wandered over to join Leilani and me at our table. In her early thirties, she was a pleasant-looking, somewhat curvy woman who seemed to be one of those people totally happy in her own skin.

Her smile was sweet, her brown eyes crinkling at the corners. I loved how the shag cut with curtain bangs and subtle highlights flattered her.

I'd met her in person the day before when she'd flown in with Justin Cooper, her husband-to-be. Fortunately, she'd been my favorite kind of bride to work with, realistic and organized.

Carly was decked out in full bride-to-be gear. She sported a white one-piece swimsuit that flattered her curves. Gold cursive lettering proclaiming *The Bride* was splashed across her chest. And a sparkly silver tiara graced the top of her head.

From her happy laughter, it was apparent she hadn't yet heard about the missing necklace. I briefly considered telling her, but the news would ruin her afternoon, and I didn't want to be the one to do that. I was confident her aunt would tell her soon enough.

"Kristy"—she beamed at me—"you were right about everything. The beach is fantastic. How are we doing on time? I have the schedule on my phone, but I left it in the bungalow."

So much for being organized.

I pulled my tablet from my bag and flipped it open. "We'll wrap up here in about fifteen minutes," I said. "That'll give everyone plenty of time to clean up, get dressed, and make it to the Ramada Pier for the luau by six-thirty. They'll serve dinner and start the show at seven. Tomorrow

morning is sightseeing. We'll meet at the entrance to the lobby and leave at nine."

Suddenly, we heard a frantic scream. We looked up to see that Movie Star Alex had grabbed another bridesmaid. His latest victim was the maid of honor, Lauren Maxwell.

"Geez," Leilani grumbled. "What's up with that guy?"

"Kristy?" Carly moaned, looking at me like his actions were something I had control over.

Again, Alex had his victim slung over his shoulder and was effortlessly holding her with one arm, her slim frame making his job easier. His other hand held the remains of a Lava Flow.

He took a few steps towards the surf but then turned to smile back at the group. They all shouted out "boo" and "you suck!"

Somewhere along the way, Lauren had lost her oversized black plastic-framed glasses. She pounded on his back and kicked her legs in front of his face.

When I'd met Lauren the day before, she'd struck me as painfully shy. Now she was loudly shouting a string of profanities at Alex, something that surprised me.

The night before, I'd been amused to see her dressed in an aloha shirt decorated with colorful Pokémon characters. Today, her pink one-piece swimsuit sported a picture of the anime cartoon character Sailor Moon. I was starting to think of her as Anime Lauren. The cobalt-blue tips and highlights in her shoulder-length brunette hair coordinated well with her suit.

Unlike earlier, when Alex had snatched up Roxanne, it seemed like he'd grabbed Lauren simply for the fun of it. There was a wide goofy smile on his face before he laughed and tossed back the rest of his drink, flinging the plastic cup on the beach. He then turned and started walking towards the surf.

"Loser!" one of the bridesmaids yelled out to Alex.

I sighed and stood up, knowing that as the wedding planner, I needed to go out and have a heart-to-heart with Alex. I'd have to remind him he was here because of Carly and Justin, the happy couple, and he shouldn't do anything to spoil the occasion.

I'd just stepped onto the sand, and Alex hadn't made it more than five or six steps toward the ocean, when Jake stepped in front of him. Alex tried to go around, but Jake again blocked his path.

Alex absentmindedly let go of Lauren, and she landed on the beach with a thud. He casually stepped over her to get in my photographer's face. I was still too far away to hear what the men were saying, but after several moments, Alex got an icy look on his face and gave Jake a hard shove.

Surprisingly, Jake didn't budge. Instead, he returned the shove, and Alex was knocked back several steps before toppling to the sand.

No, Jake, you can't do that to a guest.

Alex quickly jumped up, rage on his face. His fists were tightly clenched as he readied himself for a fight.

The groomsman stared at Jake for a moment, breathing hard, before seeming to think better of it. He then turned to go back up the beach and almost ran into Lauren, who had climbed to her feet.

She stood, hands-on-hips, directly in front of Alex. She was also breathing hard, her face red from anger and embarrassment.

Without warning, she swung her arm and, with a resounding *crack*, connected with a solid slap to his face. It appeared he hadn't been expecting it and didn't have time to avoid it.

"Ka-Pow!" somebody shouted from the volleyball pit. Most of the men, and a few of the women, started to clap—some were also laughing.

The blow was loud enough to be heard over the pounding of the waves, like a branch that had broken off the

side of a tree. It staggered Alex, and he fell back onto the sand again.

"Slimebag!" Lauren shouted at Alex before turning and stomping up the beach in the direction of the bar.

Alex climbed unsteadily to his feet, angry and apparently looking to continue the confrontation with Lauren. Jake again stepped in front of him and shook his head.

By now, the entertainment value had drained from the encounter, as Alex wisely chose to slink back to the volleyball game. I noticed everyone in the group avoided making eye contact with him.

"I'm starting to regret inviting Alex," Carly said with a deep sigh and a shake of her head when I returned to the table. "Lauren's right. He's acting like a jerk. I suppose he hasn't changed a lot since college."

"If you knew he was a bully, why'd you invite him?" I asked.

"Oh, he was Justin's roommate all through school. I couldn't invite everyone else and not ask him. I'm glad your photographer was there to stop him. He seems like a handy guy to have around."

I was starting to think I agreed with her.

Carly got up to retrieve Lauren's glasses, which had fallen on the beach. Then she followed the maid of honor, who'd stomped into the bar, obviously upset and wanting another drink.

I let everyone know they had time to relax for a bit and get ready for the luau. Several people seemed relieved as they packed up and headed back to their rooms. After what had just happened, many appeared to welcome the chance for a change of scenery.

* * *

The Ohana Luau was always one of the highlights of any wedding week. Ohana means family, and people of all ages would attend the event. It was held at the Ramada Pier, an area of the resort on the beach set aside for larger events.

As I arrived, traditional Hawaiian music was being played on the main stage by a three-piece group featuring a steel guitar. The music was upbeat and foretold of a fun evening ahead.

Guests dressed in colorful aloha shirts and muumuus filtered onto the pier from the central part of the resort. They gathered around the bar and gradually filled the tables.

Several guests, most holding a complimentary beer or rum punch, had collected around the *imu*, the in-ground barbeque pit where a whole pig had been slowly roasting all day. With a great deal of ceremony, two shirtless native Hawaiian men in colorful skirts removed the pig from the pit. They then carried it to an open-air kitchen along the side of the venue, where men in white coats and chef's hats prepared the pork in a style known as *pua'a kālua*.

I walked into the seating area and saw one of the groomsmen, Orson Cross, standing at the bar with two rum punch cocktails in front of him.

Orson was tall and thin, almost to the point of being skinny. As with most of the wedding party, he was in his early thirties. His skin was pasty white, and his long brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail, emphasizing his skeleton-thin face and oversized nose.

Orson's eyes were riveted on a video game he was playing on a handheld gaming console.

"Hi, Orson," I said as I walked up to him. "Can I take your drinks to the table?"

He briefly looked up and smiled. "Hi, Kristy," he said. "Hold on. I'm almost done with the level."

With a final flourish, his fingers danced over the buttons. The video game played a happy fanfare, and Orson relaxed.

"We issued an update to this game today," he said as he shoved the device into his pocket. "I was making sure it was uploading correctly."

"Carly said you design computer games. Was that one of yours?"

He blushed pink and looked down at his feet. "Yeah, um, I'm the lead developer at the company. We're about to launch volume seven in the *Orc's Apprentice* series. The last release won Fantasy Game of the Year, so we're hoping for some decent sales."

"Wow," I said, thoroughly impressed. "I had no idea."

"Are you a gamer?" he asked.

"Um, no. I haven't played video games since I was a kid."

"You should try it," he said with a knowing grin. "The graphics and gameplay have come a long way since the old Nintendo Game Cubes and PlayStations."

I walked with Orson over to our table. Alex was off to the side, talking with Wealthy Derek. I noticed Orson went out of his way to avoid them.

Alex didn't look so much like a movie star anymore. The side of his face was red, and there was the start of a nasty bruise under his left eye.

When we reached our table, Orson delivered one of the rum punches to Anime Lauren, who also seemed to be actively avoiding Alex.

She'd changed into a short yellow dress with the Pokémon character Pikachu across her chest. I was glad to see she wasn't showing any ill effects from the earlier encounter on the beach.

"I'm here, on time," a voice behind me said. I turned to see Jake standing three feet away. He had a grin on his face, as if he'd pulled something over on me.

That man has the most dangerous smile.

He'd changed into a tight black T-shirt and was wearing some kind of sensual cologne. I caught traces of wood, musk, and leather. I could picture Jake as a cowboy, sitting in front of an open fire with a soft drift of smoke.

There were parts of me that were slowly starting to wake up, parts that hadn't been awake in a long time, maybe not since my divorce, now almost seven months ago.

"I'm glad you made it," I said, doing my best to keep my voice even. "We have maybe thirty minutes until the buffet opens and the show starts."

"No worries," he said with his lopsided grin. "Let me know if there're any specific shots you want."

"Tonight should be simple. Take some general memory photos of the luau and the show. I'll also need candid photos of everyone and some small group pictures. We have permission to use the luau stage for a group shot if you can get everyone up there, but don't force it."

"Okay, I'll see if they're in the mood for it."

"During dinner, they do the quieter part of the show," I said. "Nani Johnson does her ukulele numbers, and she sometimes has a singer with her."

"That should be easy. What else?"

"After that, the Aloha Lagoon Hula Wahines do some dance numbers with the guests. They already know about our wedding party. They'll pull Justin, our groom, up to hula in front of everyone, so make sure to get that."

"I'll shoot that in video," Jake said slowly as though he was mentally planning the shot. "If I stand behind the stage, I can rack focus to get some reaction pictures of Carly as he dances."

"Great idea. I can already imagine how well that'll work out."

"How late should I stay tonight?"

"Well, after the Hula Wahines, the Ahi Fire Knife Dancers come on stage. The house lights are then basically

off for the rest of the show. You might as well take off after they start up."

"Perfect," he said as he nodded and gave me a wink. "I should have all the time I need."

Oh my god. He winked at me. I liked it, but who does that anymore?

"Don't forget," I reminded him. "We're meeting in the lobby tomorrow morning at nine o'clock for a group visit to the Fern Grotto. Make sure to get there a little early. The grotto's a beautiful place. It'll be a great setting to get candids and small groups."

"I'll be there," he said. "I looked at the raw images from this afternoon. Some of them are pretty good. I'll clean them up, and we can review them tomorrow whenever you have some time."

His cologne was starting to trigger thoughts that were definitely inappropriate for the workplace. I wondered if I could find out what it was so I could sprinkle a little on my pillow.

Jake started to circulate through the crowd. He worked the wedding party, chatting with people and shooting pictures. His muscles flexed and bunched as he turned the camera to capture different angles.

Geez, I really need to find a boyfriend.

While I was mesmerized by Jake's physique, Aunt Audrey walked up to the table. Rather than one of the complimentary drinks, she held a glass of the resort's high-end reserve pinot grigio.

Reluctantly pulling my attention away from the view, I asked, "How'd it go with the police? Is there anything they can do about your necklace?"

"It doesn't appear so," she said, clearly disappointed. "I'd place more faith in Jimmy Toki. He seems a little more on the ball. The detective I talked to, Ray something, says there isn't a lot he can do."

"I'll work with Jimmy to see if he's learned anything yet."

"Thank you, dear. That necklace has always been Carly's favorite piece of jewelry. As a child, I'd let her wear it, and she'd pretend she was a princess."

On the stage, a shirtless native Hawaiian man wearing a colorful lavalava skirt blew a loud musical note on a conch shell. The sound signaled the start of the feast.

* * *

In the relative calm between dinner and the main part of the show, I spent a few minutes chatting with bridesmaids Madeline and Victoria Trapp, a pair of identical twins. They were both tall and athletic, with similar hourglass figures.

Physically, the only thing that set them apart was their hair. Although both women had the same honey-blond color, Victoria had long flowing tresses, while Madeline's locks were cut shoulder length.

"Hello, ladies," I said as I took an empty seat next to them. "You were both fantastic in the volleyball pit today."

"Thanks," Victoria said with a shrug. It was hard not to think of her as the sister with the long hair. "I thought we were terrible. We haven't played together since college. We were pretty good back then."

"Well, we *were*," Madeline said absentmindedly as she looked out at the rest of the wedding party. "But that was a long time ago. My serve is terrible, and I can barely set the ball anymore."

I caught a distracted tone from both women. I wanted to help if I could. "Is everything okay?" I asked. "Is there anything I can do for you while you're staying at the resort?"

"If you could turn back time about ten years, that would solve a lot of problems," Short-haired Madeline said in a wistful tone. There was a somewhat distant look in her

eyes as her gaze lingered on Movie Star Alex and Wealthy Derek, who were now chatting with Carly and Justin, the bride and groom.

She turned and saw my puzzled look. She then gave a small laugh and shook her head. "It's okay," she said. "We're good."

"It's sweet of you to keep asking," Long-haired Victoria said as she flashed me a beautiful smile. "But we're fine."

"Okay," I said, a little discouraged. "Let Leilani or me know if anything comes up. We'll take care of it."

I didn't want to be overly pushy, so I let it go. As long as nothing spilled over to the rest of the wedding party, I'd gladly let them keep their secrets and work out their problems on their own.

By now, nearly everyone in the group was smiling and laughing. The lone exception was Angry Eddy Martin. He stood near the bar, looking out at the ocean, so I went over to talk with him.

He didn't look as grumpy and intimidating as he had earlier in the day, but he still didn't look all that friendly. He now seemed annoyed and frustrated, as if something was gnawing at him.

"Hi, Eddy," I said. "How's everything going?"

"It's alright," he said in a quiet, steady voice. "The resort is gorgeous. Carly and Justin chose a great place to get married."

"Have you known them both a long time?" I asked.

"We all started out as freshmen together in the same dorm. Justin started dating Carly our sophomore year."

"That's a long time to know a group of people."

"Yeah," he said as he glanced over at Flirty Roxanne. "It's interesting seeing everybody again. I'd lost track of most of these people over the years."

"Do you know why Carly only invited people from college to be in the wedding party? I'm sure our bride and groom have family and friends they could have asked."

Eddy snorted out a laugh and nodded his head. "I hear it happened because Carly and Derek the billionaire have apparently stayed pen-pals for all these years. The rumor is that Derek said he'd come to the wedding and even be the best man, but only if Victoria and Madeline Trapp were bridesmaids."

"Why those two?" I asked.

"He used to date Victoria. I think he even dated Madeline for a while before that. So, since the first three people in the wedding party were part of the old circle from college, it snowballed from there. Carly has several sisters, and she used Derek as the excuse why they all couldn't be in the wedding party. I suppose it saved her from hurting anyone's feelings. As I understand it, the rest of the friends and family will show up later in the week."

"Deciding who to exclude from the wedding party is never easy," I agreed. "What did you think about how it happened?"

"Hey, we get to come out to paradise a week early, courtesy of Carly's aunt. I was all for it." He grunted and held up his beer. "One last time to get the old gang together."

* * *

When the Ahi Fire Knife Dancers took the stage, I was entranced, like the rest of the audience. The unique event combined athletic skill, unflinching bravery, and ever-present danger.

Jake spent a few minutes shooting the fire dancers then returned to the table. Since he was done taking pictures for the night, I expected him to take off. Instead, he pulled out an empty chair and sat next to me.

A whiff of his cologne drifted past, and his presence pressed in on me. As the fire dancers transitioned from one

scene to the next, Jake leaned in closer, his mouth brushing my ear, sending tingles along every nerve ending.

"Those guys are pretty good. Do they ever miss as they're tossing around those flaming knives?"

I turned so I could talk to him without having to raise my voice, which brought our faces to within a few inches of each other. As soon as I realized what had happened, my heart sped up a notch.

"In the six months I've been here, they've only missed a couple of times," I said. "Haven't you ever seen the show before?"

"I haven't been to a luau in years. But we were always going to them when I was a kid. Whenever family would come over from the mainland, my parents would take us to one of the luaus. I've always loved them."

"Same for me," I sighed. "The first time I went to one was on my honeymoon, seven years ago. The marriage didn't work out so well, but I'll never forget the fun I had at the luau."

"How long ago was the divorce?" he asked. His deep blue eyes met mine, and I could sense he was genuinely interested in my answer.

"It was final about six months ago," I said with a shrug. "There weren't any kids, and he wanted to move on with his life, so it was a simple process."

He looked at me for a moment, then nodded. He reached out and lightly rested his fingertips on my arm. His touch felt both exciting and comforting.

"I understand what you must have gone through," he said quietly, a somewhat distant look in his eyes. "It's not easy when someone you care about no longer wants you."

He seemed to realize he'd brought down the mood, and he pulled his fingers away. I was a little sorry to feel them go.

He again gave me that lopsided smile and spread out his arms. "But it's hard to be sad when you live in paradise,

huh?"

"It certainly helps," I said with a laugh. "Not living in the same city as before helps as well. Too many things there reminded me of my ex-husband."

"How did you end up at Aloha Lagoon?"

"I was lucky. I found out about the job through an ad the resort put in a wedding planner's magazine. The interview process was quick, and I've been working here ever since."

He looked like he was gearing up to say something else when he seemed to change his mind. "Okay," he said. "I'd better take off and start to clean up the pictures from tonight. I'll meet you down in the lobby a few minutes before nine tomorrow morning."

He got up, and my eyes followed him as he left the Ramada Pier. I knew I'd be thinking about him tonight.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

I made it to the Aloha Lagoon Wedding Center a little before eight the following day. The office was just off the cavernous main lobby, past the concierge desk, between the gift shop and Gabby's Island Adventures.

As I walked in, the bell above the door jingled. It was a pleasant and happy sound that always made brides smile.

Dorothy Campbell sat at her white desk concentrating on a document while Leilani was standing next to the coffee pot, pouring herself a cup of Dorothy's custom roast Kona blend.

Dorothy had been the office manager at the Wedding Center for the last thirty-five years. Her parents had come to Kauai from Jamaica when she was a small girl. She pretty much considered herself a Hawaiian native, even though she'd managed to retain a slight Jamaican accent.

As always, Dorothy's clothes were neat as a pin, and her curly black and gray hair hung down to her shoulders. Her signature double-strand Mikimoto pearl necklace was draped around her neck, making the regulation resort polo look somewhat fashionable.

Dorothy's eyes were bright, her mind was sharp, and not a lot got past her scrutiny. She was one of the most organized people I'd ever known, and I was grateful to have her. She effortlessly took care of the hundreds of details that went into planning a destination event and could mentally keep track of twenty weddings at once.

I grabbed a mug of coffee and plopped down on the chair behind my desk. Unlike Dorothy's spotlessly clean workspace, mine always seemed to have several stacks of catalogs, magazines, and notebooks on it.

"How did it go yesterday?" Dorothy asked, her eyes shifting to Leilani. "How'd Jake do? I was a little surprised

when you said he was a photographer. I didn't think he had any interests outside of computers and surfing."

"He seemed to do alright," Leilani said, maybe a bit annoyed that Dorothy would question her friend's abilities.

Dorothy didn't have a mean bone in her body. But since it was Leilani who had recommended Jake, Dorothy would be pinning his results on her.

"Jake did fine," I echoed. "But yesterday was a mixed bag. There was a little friction on the beach in the afternoon. And I suppose you heard about Aunt Audrey's necklace possibly being stolen?"

"Leilani was telling me about it," Dorothy said. "It seems to be quite valuable."

"The center diamond alone must have been four or five carats," I said, a touch of envy in my voice. "There were another dozen diamonds and rubies besides that."

"Oh, really?" Dorothy asked. Her eyes sparkled at the thought.

"It totally bites that some jackwagon stole it," Leilani said.

"Why didn't she have it in the room safe?" Dorothy asked.

"When I asked her about it, she said she didn't think the room safes were all that secure," I replied. "She also mentioned that she'd planned on giving it to Carly to wear at the ceremony with her gown."

"Geez, that would've made a nice present," Leilani moaned enviously. "I should've been born to a wealthy family." She then shrugged it off. "What's the schedule for today?"

"The group had breakfast on their own," I said as I pulled out my tablet. "I imagine most of them went to the Rainbow Buffet or the Loco Moco. We have about half an hour before we need to go to the lobby and gather everyone up for Gabby's shuttle to the boat for the Fern Grotto."

"I always like it there," Leilani said as she nodded her head. "Standing on the grotto overlook is an excellent place for selfies."

"After that is a group lunch back here on the Ono Terrace at noon," I said as I flipped through the schedule. "They have the afternoon off, and I imagine most of them will head back to the beach. Tonight will be dinner and karaoke at the Loco Moco, starting at six."

With a thrill of anticipation, I knew I'd be working with Jake again. Hopefully, he'd be on time today. I didn't want to give Dorothy any reasons to be disappointed with him.

As I thought about my photographer and how good he'd smelled the night before, I realized I was beginning to develop a bit of a crush on the man.

"Maybe it's time to start dating again," I mumbled to myself.

"What?" Leilani asked, surprise in her eyes. "I thought you said you were through with men. I remember about a month ago, you said they were all scum, and the world would be better off without them."

"Well..." I admitted, "Maybe I did. But I'm starting to rethink that position."

"Really?" she asked, confused. "With whom? Are you talking about Alex Adair? He doesn't seem like your type."

"No," I confessed with a guilty grimace. "Jake Hunter."

Leilani laughed and wrinkled her nose. "Really?"

"Why would you say that? He likes girls, doesn't he?"

"Oh sure, he dated a woman named Michelle for about three years. I figured they'd get married, but four or five months ago, she dumped him for a condominium developer from Oahu. I guess she had some daddy issues. The guy was close to fifty years old."

"So, what's wrong with Jake?" I pressed.

"Nothing's wrong with him. But I've known him since I could walk. It's hard for me to think of him as dating material."

"It won't creep you out if I talk about it, will it?"

"Go ahead," she laughed. "Knock yourself out. Jake's always been nice to me, and he seems like a decent guy. So, go for it. Drag him behind a coconut palm if you want to."

Dorothy shook her head and gave us an eye roll. Fortunately, she had a pretty high tolerance for the things Leilani and I discussed.

We started going over the week's events when something caught Leilani's eye, and she stared into the lobby. "Uh-oh"—she groaned—"management doesn't look so happy today."

I sighed, knowing what was coming after the problems we'd had the day before. Actually, I'd sort of been expecting it.

The door to the Wedding Center opened with a friendly jingle, and David Mahelona walked in.

David headed the resort's human resources department. He was a large man with islander heritage. Even after working at the resort for six months, I hadn't learned anything about him other than he was in a continuously lousy mood.

As he walked into the room, I could feel him occupying much of the office space. His shoulders were broad, his long dark hair was pulled back, and his expression was downright intimidating.

"Hello, David," Dorothy said, using her most soothing *dealing-with-a-client* voice. "What can we do for you today?"

"Good morning, ladies," he said to Dorothy and Leilani. He then turned to look at me. His smile was stiff and didn't make it up to his emotionless eyes.

"Kristy, we received a complaint yesterday afternoon from someone in your wedding party, a Mr. Alex Adair. He said he was on the beach when he was attacked by your photographer, Jake Hunter."

Leilani rolled her eyes and barked out a quick laugh. She quickly quieted when David glared at her. I sighed and

shook my head.

"That's not what happened," I said. I knew I sounded annoyed, but I couldn't help it. David just rubbed me the wrong way.

"Alex had grabbed one of the bridesmaids and had thrown her over his shoulder. She wasn't happy about it and was screaming to be let down. Alex was walking down the beach, seemingly intent on tossing her into the ocean, when Jake stepped in front of him. Alex got annoyed and gave Jake a shove. Jake pushed him back. That was it. Jake actually resolved what could have turned into an ugly situation."

David stood impassively, but it was apparent he wasn't going to listen to anything I had to say.

"I do understand how guests can be, especially when there's alcohol involved," he said, trying to sound reasonable but completely failing. "Still, we can't have anyone associated with the resort involved with assaulting a guest. Next time something like that happens, he's out. If you're not able to control your employees better, you'll find yourself out as well."

David turned and left the office. The bell over the door jingled as he went.

"Well, he was more cheerful than usual," Leilani said.

"I don't know," Dorothy said, sounding worried. "He seemed pretty serious this time. You better keep Jake on a tight leash. I don't want to see anyone getting into trouble over something like that."

"Come on," I said to Leilani as I looked down at my watch. "Let's go find our group and our naughty photographer."

* * *

Leilani and I arrived at the front of the massive lobby, where we started to gather the wedding party. I imagine

preschool teachers go through much the same process before beginning class.

The space was a hive of activity, as it always is in the morning. Bellhops were pushing carts full of luggage while people stood in line waiting to check out.

Flirty Roxanne and Gamer Orson had already arrived and were chatting near the lobby entrance. Leilani and I walked over to greet them as Orson noisily sipped on the remains of a Bloody Mary. Roxanne's long red hair looked especially fluffy today.

A few minutes later, we were joined by Victoria and Madeline, the blonde twins, as they entered the lobby from the direction of the conference center. They both wore matching outfits that showed off their long legs.

After saying hello to everyone, I stuck my head out to check the parking lot. I confirmed that Koma had the van from Gabby's Island Adventures waiting to take everyone down to the Wailua River to start the morning's excursion.

I've always liked Koma. At twenty-three, he and his twin sister Lana were full-blooded Hawaiians who worked for Gabby. He was handsome, muscular, and good-natured. All the ladies loved him.

I looked around, but Jake hadn't arrived yet. I hoped he wouldn't be late again. No matter how great he looked or smelled, I couldn't work with someone who didn't show up on time.

Aunt Audrey strolled into the lobby wearing a pair of white plastic sunglasses and an oversized sun hat. Walking behind her were the bride and groom, Carly and Justin.

Carly was wearing a sundress that flattered her curves, the sparkly silver tiara, and *The Bride* white sash. With his medium-length brown hair, medium height, round face, and slightly soft body, I was once again struck by how completely average Justin looked.

Angry Eddy came in and stood with the others. Looking at his solid build and the many tattoos covering his

arms, he seemed somewhat intimidating. I noticed he surreptitiously eyed everyone and glanced around the lobby before joining the group.

At nine o'clock, Wealthy Derek and Anime Lauren wandered into the lobby. Derek's hair again looked like he'd towel-dried it and then forgot to comb it. Lauren had a nice outfit that showed off her fantastic figure and blue-tipped hair, but she also had a headband with pink cat ears. It looked like she'd even used makeup to place a large black dot on the end of her nose and had drawn cat whiskers on her cheeks.

I did a final headcount and noticed we were one short. "Does anyone know if Alex is coming today?" I asked.

Victoria Trapp, the sister with the long hair, gave a little snort to show she didn't care if Alex came or not. She was joined by some additional snickers and murmurs of agreement. *Loser* and *jackhole* were the two terms I heard most clearly.

"If we're voting, I'd say leave him here," Lauren said with a wicked grin.

"Or, why don't we take him but then not bring him back?" Roxanne suggested.

"I saw him earlier when I went to the gift shop," Derek volunteered. "But that was probably a half-hour or forty-five minutes ago. I think he was walking toward the meeting rooms," he said as he pointed down the hallway that led to the conference center.

"Alright," I said. "I'll give him another few minutes, then track him down. Has anyone seen Jake Hunter, our photographer?"

There were some blank looks along with a few mutters and shaking of heads. Roxanne's eyes sparkled, and she bit her lower lip, apparently in appreciation of Jake.

I looked over at Leilani. She gave me two palms up and a slight shoulder shrug.

I felt a surge of irritation. Although Jake was utterly adorable, he was starting to become more trouble than he was worth.

Geez, it's always one more thing.

We waited another five minutes while the wedding party milled about the lobby entrance. I walked over to Leilani. She had a slightly guilty expression.

"Um, I'm sorry," she said as she scrunched up her face. "I don't know where Jake is. I tried calling, but he didn't answer. Maybe he wasn't such a good choice for a photographer after all."

I sighed and shook my head. "Let's not worry about him now. Run back to the office and grab the old camera. I'll get everyone to the shuttle. Go out with the group and take as many pictures as you can. I'll find Alex and drive him to the boat, assuming he still wants to go."

"Okay," she said as she beamed at me with her bright smile, eager to make up for Jake's tardiness. "I can do that."

As she turned to scamper back to the office, I led the group out to the van. I heard Carly telling Justin that the trip would probably be a lot quieter without Alex there to cause trouble.

Once everyone was settled, Leilani ran out of the lobby, holding the office camera bag. She climbed into the van, and I wished her luck with the excursion. As I headed back to the resort to start my search for Alex, I briefly paused to watch Koma maneuver the big vehicle out of the parking lot.

I sighed and shook my head. The wedding week had started out on a sour note. I only hoped it got better from here.

As I headed down the hallway that wound toward the conference and events center, I knew I only had about ten minutes to find my lost guest. If I couldn't track him down by then, the excursion boat to the Fern Grotto would leave with the wedding party, and Alex would miss the outing.

I passed the Kealia and the Alaka'i conference rooms within the conference center, and both appeared to be locked. I knew a door at the end of the hallway, next to the bathrooms, led out to the main pool, so I headed that way.

Traditional instrumental music played softly through overhead speakers as I quickly walked to the end of the hallway. I'd almost made it to the exit when I passed the Halelea conference room. Its door was slightly ajar, and the lights were on.

With a bad feeling, I stepped in and quickly glanced around, hoping to find a meeting in progress. Instead, I saw something on the floor and froze.

Jake lay crumpled against the back wall. He held his hand to the side of his head, and his leg was kicking out weakly. As I approached, I could hear him moaning, almost inaudibly.

Oh my God.

A colorful tiki statue lay on the floor near him. It appeared to be one of the cheap versions you can pick up in any souvenir shop on the island. It was about two feet tall and looked to be made of wood or maybe hard plastic.

I hurried over to him and bent down. My mind was racing, and my questions tumbled out all at once. "Jake, what happened? Are you alright? Who did this to you?"

Jake kept blinking, as though his eyes weren't focusing very well. He didn't seem to recognize me. I knew he was injured, possibly severely.

"Alex," he mumbled weakly.

"What about Alex?" I asked with a sinking feeling.

Jake pointed across the room before his arm dropped back to the floor with a thud.

I glanced in the direction Jake had indicated. There was a table with a white cloth sitting in the center of the room. Sticking out from behind it, I could see a pair of men's legs, ending at a pair of brown leather sandals on the feet.

Oh no.

Fearing the worst, I hurried over and looked down at the man on the floor. As I suspected and feared, it was Alex Adair.

He was lying on his back, and I couldn't see any obvious injuries, which was a relief. I'm not sure how well I could have handled the sight of blood.

My relief was short-lived when I saw his eyes. They were open but were milky and lifeless.

The world started to spin, and tiny black spots danced in front of my eyes. I dropped down to my knees and tried not to pass out.

Keeping my eyes averted from the body, I kneeled there, breathing deeply and trying to regain my composure. Honestly, I would have been glad to have stayed like that all morning, but I knew Jake needed help, and I was the only one who could do anything.

Although I was starting to go numb with shock, I somehow managed to stand up, pull out my phone, and call 9-1-1. I let them know there was a severe injury in the conference center at the Aloha Lagoon Resort, then asked them to send both an ambulance and the police.

I hated to leave Jake, but he didn't appear to be in any immediate danger. I needed to let resort management know what was going on right away. Maybe I should have tried to use the phone, but I decided that going back to reception would be the quickest way to find someone in authority.

I hurried out to the lobby and spotted Rachel Wein, the Assistant Resort Manager. She was behind the front reception desk talking to Summer and Anela, two of the daytime clerks.

Rachel glanced up and saw me as I got closer. She must have seen the look in my eyes because she hurried over to meet me. Her five-inch heels clicked loudly on the polished marble floor, and even in my confused state, I noticed her long chestnut hair swaying as she walked.

"There's been some trouble in the Halelea conference room," I said quietly so none of the guests in the lobby could overhear.

"Is anyone hurt?" she asked, concern on her face.

"Yeah," I nodded. "I've called for police and an ambulance. We'll need somebody to direct them when they get here. We'll also need to send security back to the conference center to keep everyone out."

Rachel's eyes grew so big they almost fell out of her head. She then took a deep breath, nodded, and got on her radio to call security.

I hurried back to the conference room. Jake had managed to sit up with his back against the wall. He'd stopped moaning, but his eyes still weren't focusing very well.

"Jake," I said as I bent over him. "It's Kristy Piper. Talk to me. How are you feeling? What happened?"

"Kristy?" he asked weakly, his words coming out in a drunken mumble. "I feel like crap. Alex is hurt. Somebody hit me."

"Don't worry about Alex," I said, trying to sound upbeat. "I've already called for an ambulance. Sit tight for a few more minutes."

"Ohhh, what happened in here?" I heard a deep male voice ask.

Whirling, I looked up to find Jimmy Toki standing in the doorway, taking in the scene. Standing six foot five and weighing in at around 250 pounds of pure muscle, being head of resort security was the perfect job for him.

"There's a man down over there," I said, pointing toward Alex. "There's an injury here. A blow to the head, I think. I've already called for police and an ambulance."

Jimmy went over to look at the body, then returned a few moments later. I could tell from his face that he was severely shaken. He then bent down to talk to my photographer.

"Jake," Jimmy said in a quiet, concerned voice. "What are you doing here? Man, what happened?"

Jake looked up at the head of security, and there seemed to be some recognition. "Jimmy," was all Jake said. Then his eyes drifted shut, and he passed out.

* * *

Two EMTs, a man and a woman, arrived a few minutes later. The man started on Jake while the woman went to check on Alex.

After an examination of the body, she returned to us. "The one over there appears to be deceased," she said. "How's this one?"

"Looks like head trauma," her partner said as he lifted Jake's eyelids to check his pupils with a flashlight. "Vitals are weak. We'll need to get him in right away."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOUR

The police arrived as Jake was being lifted onto a gurney. After a quick discussion with the EMTs, the cop looked at Alex and then called in the situation over his radio.

I followed along as a still unconscious Jake was wheeled out to the parking lot. Now that the initial shock was starting to wear off, I was becoming increasingly worried about him.

Jake looked so utterly helpless as they loaded him into the ambulance. My heart went out to him.

The EMTs said they'd take Jake to the Wilcox Medical Clinic in Lihue. They also said he could probably have visitors later in the day, maybe around dinnertime. Of course, there was the unspoken message that he'd be able to have visitors only if he didn't take a turn for the worse in the meantime.

As I stood there feeling helpless, things were starting to get busy in the parking lot. Several police cars and another ambulance arrived. Official-looking people were coming and going.

I spent several minutes out by the fishpond lagoon, attempting to compose myself. Harold, the turtle, looked up at me as though he could tell I was in distress. Unfortunately, Harold couldn't do anything to ease my fears. So, I went back to the wedding center and was immediately met by a questioning stare from Dorothy, the office manager. As always, I was impressed at how her pearls classed up the resort polo.

"What are you doing back here?" she asked as she looked at me over the top of her reading glasses. "Shouldn't you still be with the Clarkson party out at the Fern Grotto? I hear Jake Hunter didn't show up again."

"Dorothy," I said, my voice catching. "There's been some trouble."

"I heard we had an ambulance and the police over here. It didn't have anything to do with our group, did it?"

"Alex Adair is dead. He was sprawled out on the floor in one of the conference rooms. Jake is hurt, maybe badly. I found him crumpled near the back wall in the same room."

"Oh no," Dorothy groaned. "What happened?"

"I don't know yet." I sighed and shook my head slowly.

"Dear Lord. Jake didn't kill Alex, did he?"

"No, of course not," I said, a little offended. "I think the same person attacked both of them. Jake's over at Wilcox Medical."

Dorothy looked at her watch. "Well, the group should be back from the Fern Grotto in about an hour. They'll head to lunch on the Ono Terrace."

"I know," I said. "I'll have to make an announcement before they hear it through the grapevine."

Dorothy and I spent the next twenty minutes talking over how Alex's death would affect the wedding. We decided it would be up to Carly, but neither of us could see why we had to cancel it.

My cell phone rang, showing Rachel's number. I took a deep breath before answering, knowing it couldn't be good news.

"Kristy, I need you to come to the front desk," she said in a tense voice.

"I'll be right there," I said, a knot forming in my stomach.

* * *

When I arrived in the lobby, I saw Rachel sitting off to the side on one of the couches with a pleasant-looking, middle-aged man. They appeared to be in the middle of a quiet discussion.

The man's Polynesian heritage was evident in his round face and dark hair, despite the streaks of gray starting to show and the lines at the corners of his eyes.

He looked to be somewhere in his late forties. His body had started to turn soft, with several inches of belly poking over the top of his khaki slacks. He wore a brightly colored Hawaiian aloha shirt decorated with palm trees and surfers.

As they finished their conversation, I heard the man say he'd contact Rachel if he had any further questions. Then they stood and turned to me.

"Detective Ray," Rachel said. "This is Kristy Piper. She's our resort's wedding director."

The man stuck out a slightly pudgy hand. "Miss Piper," he said in a quiet, monotone voice. "I'm Ray Kahoalani. But please, call me Detective Ray."

"Sure," I said as we shook. "How can I help you, Detective Ray?"

Introductions complete, Rachel excused herself and quickly walked back to the offices behind the reception desk. Judging by the look on her face, the interview had taken a lot out of her.

I briefly noted David Mahelona standing behind the front desk, next to Summer. His jaw muscles worked as he stared at the detective and me. As usual, he didn't seem happy.

"Please have a seat, Miss Piper," Detective Ray said. "Was Alex Adair a member of your wedding group?"

"Yes," I said as I positioned myself on the couch. "It's the Clarkson-Cooper party, and there are currently eleven people here. Well, that's counting Alex."

"I understand you were the one who found Jake Hunter and the body of Alex Adair?" he asked, his expressionless eyes assessing me.

"That's right," I said. It felt a little unnerving talking about what had happened.

"When you walked into the room, what did you see?"

"Um, I first saw Jake. He was on the floor and moaning. He was holding the side of his head as if someone had hit him. Alex was lying behind a table. I could only see his feet at first."

An Aloha Lagoon canvas tote bag was sitting on the floor in front of the detective. He pulled out a clear plastic bag from the tote that was covered in police-evidence stickers. Inside the bag was the colorful tiki statue that I had seen in the conference room.

"Does this look familiar?" he asked.

"It looks like the statue that was on the floor next to Jake."

"About how far from Jake Hunter was the tiki?"

"Four or five feet."

"Did you happen to see if Mr. Hunter had any blood on his hands or on his clothes?"

I was a little shocked at the inference he was making. "No, nothing like that," I said, a little upset that the detective wasn't seeing what had obviously happened. "It looked to me like Jake and Alex were attacked by the same person."

Detective Ray nodded absentmindedly and made some scribbles in a small, battered notebook.

"Were Jake and Alex involved in any sort of fight yesterday?"

I glanced over at David behind the front desk. He was still closely watching the detective and me.

"Well, they traded shoves on the beach," I said, "but it wasn't any sort of fight. Alex was drinking and acting like a jerk. He'd grabbed one of the bridesmaids and was going to throw her into the ocean. Jake intervened, and it upset Alex."

"Doctor Yoshida, our coroner, is back with the body right now. She said that in addition to a severe head wound, Alex has a black eye and a bruise on his left cheek. She

thought the injuries looked to be about a day old. Did that happen during the altercation?"

I briefly smiled at the memory. "Yes, but the black eye wasn't from Jake. That was from Lauren Maxwell, the maid of honor. She was the woman Alex had planned on tossing into the Pacific. She wasn't happy about it, and she slapped him."

"Huh," the detective said, seemingly impressed. "It must have been a pretty hard slap."

"She was embarrassed and angry at what Alex had tried to do to her." I chuckled softly. "And yeah, it was a hard slap."

Detective Ray nodded and made some additional notations in his book. "It appears robbery wasn't a motive," he said. "Alex had forty dollars in his wallet. Do you know anyone in the group who had a grudge against him?"

"No, but other than the bride and her aunt, I don't know much about any of them. I only met everyone the day before yesterday."

"Where's your wedding group now?" he asked.

"They're at the Fern Grotto. They left a little after nine." I looked down and checked my watch. "They'll be back in a few minutes, then they'll head to lunch on the Ono Terrace."

"Okay," he said. "I'd like to be there when they're told the news about Mr. Adair. When's the wedding?"

"The ceremony's scheduled for Saturday at sunset. The remaining wedding guests will arrive tomorrow and Friday."

"And when is everyone scheduled to leave?"

"Most of the group will be taking off on Sunday. Some are going home, and some plan on island hopping for a week or two."

"Okay," he said as he continued to write.

"Is there anything else you need, Detective?"

"If it's not too much trouble, I'd like to get a list of everyone in the wedding party and their room numbers. I'll probably end up talking with all of them."

* * *

Detective Ray followed me to the office to get the information about the wedding party members. I wasn't surprised when it turned out that Dorothy knew Detective Ray. From my experience, Dorothy seemed to know most of the people in Aloha Lagoon.

I then led the detective out to the Ono Terrace. I've been told *ono* is a Hawaiian word meaning delicious. It was a relatively small patio that the resort used to host lunches, dinners, and receptions.

It's attached to the same building that houses the Rainbow Buffet. Half a dozen tables are on it, each shaded by a colorful umbrella. The terrace is tastefully screened by tropical foliage and has a lovely ocean view.

We arrived as the last of the group was being served, and everyone else had started in on lunch. A waitress circulated around the tables, topping up everyone's iced tea and water.

Leilani was at the front of the patio. She'd switched the camera to movie mode and was taking a video of the group as they started to eat.

The wind had started to pick up, and she'd put her long dark hair into a ponytail. I pulled off the black scrunchie I usually kept on my wrist and used it to tie back my blonde locks.

The detective and I went to the front of the terrace and moved to stand next to her. Everyone quieted down and looked at us expectantly. I was about to speak when Detective Ray held up his hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the detective said in his monotone voice. "I'm Detective Ray Kahoalani. I have an

announcement to make."

The detective paused while he scanned the group. "The body of Alex Adair was found this morning in the conference center here at the resort. It appears he was murdered."

There were several stares and shocked gasps from the group. Even though I knew what had happened, the way the detective had so bluntly announced the news took me by surprise as well.

Detective Ray then stood quietly, watching the members of the wedding party. I looked at the group as well, noting everyone's expressions.

Carly, the bride, narrowed her eyes, looking somewhere between upset and livid. I could almost read her thoughts. *How could Alex be so thoughtless as to get himself killed at my wedding?*

Justin looked over at his bride-to-be. I knew he could read her expression as well. He immediately paled, likely thinking about what the murder would mean for Carly's big day.

"That's so gross," one of the Trapp sisters muttered.

Aunt Audrey opened her mouth, perhaps to say something, but took a deep breath instead. She then took off her sun hat and started fanning herself.

Each person had a unique reaction to the news: shock, horror, sadness, and even mild amusement. Next to me, I heard Detective Ray let out a small snort that told me he'd seen what he'd been hoping to see.

I glanced over at Leilani as she slowly lowered the camera. Her eyes were wide, and there was surprise and sadness on her face.

"I understand this is a shock to everybody," the detective said. His monotone voice was starting to get on my nerves. "Over the next day or two, I'll want to talk with everyone here. Kristy's told me that the wedding isn't going

to be for some days, but until we get this straightened out, I ask that no one here leave the island."

* * *

Detective Ray took off, and everyone started talking at once. The initial shock had given way to a general desire to know what had happened.

I told everyone what little I knew. I talked about finding Alex lying on a conference room floor, dead from an apparent head wound. I said Jake had also been injured with a head wound and had pointed to Alex, seemingly indicating that he needed help. But after that, there wasn't a lot more I could offer.

Stopping by Carly's table to check on her, I saw Justin holding her hand and trying to get her to drink some of the iced tea. It was apparent she hadn't yet gotten over the shock and anger at hearing the news.

I asked if she could stop by the wedding office after lunch to discuss the ramifications of the morning's events. She nodded her head slightly and said she'd be there.

As lunch was winding down, I reminded the group that the next scheduled event was dinner and karaoke at the Loco Moco Café, starting at six. Everyone then got up, in ones and twos, and filtered off the terrace, going their separate ways.

* * *

Leilani and I went back to the office. When we arrived, Dorothy immediately started quizzing us about what had happened at lunch.

"It was disturbing," Leilani said. "That detective just walked up to the group and blurted out that Alex had been murdered. I think he did it just to see if anyone would look guilty, or maybe even confess."

"Well?" Dorothy asked, eyebrows raised. "Did anyone confess?"

"No," I said as I shook my head. "But everyone reacted to the news. And if you want to talk about disturbing, I think some of the people were glad Alex was dead."

"I got that feeling too," Leilani said. "How messed up is that?"

"Alex certainly wasn't endearing himself to the group," Dorothy said. Her long curly black and gray hair gently swayed as she shook her head. "Still, it's a long way from upsetting someone to being murdered."

The bell on the front door jingled, and Carly walked in. She'd taken off the tiara, and her Brunette hair had become a windblown mess.

Trailing behind her were Justin and her aunt. The groom's shoulders were slumped in defeat as he shuffled in. The wind had blown some long dark strands out from Aunt Audrey's usually perfect bun, but her eyes were bright.

I directed everyone to take one of the white wicker chairs at the glass-topped rattan conference table. Leilani and I also took a seat while Dorothy stayed at her desk. I knew she'd chime in if she had something to say.

Carly still looked terrible, but she seemed to have gotten over the initial shock. She now looked sad, more than anything else.

Justin's usually placid face had taken on a look of quiet panic. He was holding Carly's hand in an attempt to comfort her. But I could see from her expression that it wasn't working.

Aunt Audrey held a look of resolve. I was glad to see it. Carly would need to be surrounded by strong people for the rest of the week.

"I'm so sorry this occurred during your wedding," I stated, and I sincerely meant it. Although I was horrified at

what had happened to Alex and Jake, I also knew what it would mean for Carly and Justin.

They had been carefully planning the wedding and the week leading up to it for almost two years. Having somebody in the wedding party murdered risked derailing the entire thing.

"Kristy, can we even still have the wedding?" Carly asked, doubt in her voice.

"Oh sure," Dorothy said as she stood up from behind her desk and walked over to the back bookshelf, which contained dozens of catalogs for everything associated with a tropical destination wedding. Dorothy pulled a red leather-bound binder from the shelf and brought it to the conference table.

We all looked from the binder to Dorothy. "This is what I call the Aloha Lagoon Wedding Center Hall of Fame," she proudly stated.

Leilani's eyes widened in surprise. This was news to me as well.

"We've had to deal with a lot of things like this over the years," Dorothy continued as she opened the book.

There appeared to be about two dozen eight-by-ten-inch photos. "We've had hang-gliding accidents, heart attacks, and once, we even had a bridesmaid poison the groom."

"Seriously?" Carly asked, her eyebrows raised.

"I can't tell you the number of times we've had to hold the ceremony in a hospital room," Dorothy continued in her matter-of-fact voice. She then started flipping through the photos.

Sure enough, several pictures were of an entire wedding party gathered around either the bride or the groom lying in a hospital bed. Next, she turned the page to a bridal party gathered in a hallway next to a jail cell.

"We once had the ceremony over at the police station," Dorothy said, pointing to the photo, a touch of

nostalgia in her voice.

Carly stared at Dorothy with a look of mild disbelief.

"The groom had gotten a little too rowdy at Beachcomber's Bar after the rehearsal dinner," Dorothy said. "There was a bit of a scene, and he got himself booked for being drunk and disorderly. Unfortunately, Judge Mathews had traveled to Oahu for the weekend. There wasn't a way to get our groom out on bail before the ceremony."

"Well, I doubt it will come to that," Aunt Audrey said.

Dorothy turned the page, and the group in the photo looked completely normal.

"What happened at this one?" Carly asked. She'd apparently grown interested in the unusual weddings.

"The groom took off with the maid of honor about an hour before the ceremony," Dorothy said with a smile and a chuckle. "It was total chaos. Then the best man confessed his love for the bride, and it turned out she also loved him. Since everything was ready to go, we went ahead and had the wedding, only with a different couple."

After looking at Dorothy's pictures, both Carly and Aunt Audrey visibly relaxed. Carly nodded her head slowly in approval. Unfortunately, I could see that Justin was still uncomfortable.

"I propose we continue on as planned," I said. "Unless Detective Ray tells us differently, I don't see why you two can't be married as scheduled."

"I don't know about this," Justin started. "It seems sort of heartless going ahead with the wedding after Alex has been murdered. We should show the man some respect. I mean, he was my roommate for four years."

The five of us turned to look at the groom. Carly's mouth had drawn down to a scowl, and she was staring daggers through him. If her eyes had been laser beams, Justin would have quickly gone up in flames.

"Or, um, maybe not," Justin sputtered out, his face turning crimson. "I suppose we could still go on with it."

"From the rumors we've heard," Aunt Audrey said, ignoring the groom, "the police suspect that the photographer was the one who did it. I don't believe that to be the case. But if he's arrested, I hope you'll be able to find us a worthy substitute."

I felt a surge of anger at hearing the accusation, even though I could see how people could come to that conclusion. However, I did my best to hold my emotions in check in front of the client. "I don't think Jake had anything to do with it either," I said.

"Well, even if that's the case," Aunt Audrey said, "I understand he's currently in the hospital. If he can't do it, for whatever reason, we'll need to make sure we have someone available to take the pictures."

"Of course," I said through gritted teeth. "If nothing else, Leilani's an outstanding wedding photographer. We'll make sure it's covered."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Why'd you tell Aunt Audrey I was an outstanding wedding photographer?" Leilani asked after Carly and company took off. "You know I always do the video. I'm all thumbs when it comes to taking pictures of anything more complicated than a few people standing around in a group."

"Leilani, you'll do great," Dorothy said supportively. "You've watched the professionals do it dozens of times. All you have to do is take three times as many pictures as you think you should. That way, at least some of them will come out."

"Well, I'll do my best," Leilani grumbled. "But don't judge me if they look like they were taken by a fifth-grader."

"Hopefully, it won't come to that," I said. "If you end up taking the photos, I'll have to shoot the video. Then I won't be available to sort out the problems that come up. In case everything goes sideways, I'll see if Autumn is free for the ceremony and the reception."

Dorothy gave a slight shake of her head, and I knew what she was likely thinking. The resort's staff photographer, Autumn Season, was typically booked up months in advance. It was unlikely she'd be available on short notice to shoot a wedding and a reception.

"Did either of you hear anything about Jake?" I asked. During our meeting with Carly, I'd seen both Dorothy and Leilani texting.

Dorothy shook her head. "I've asked my friend at Wilcox Medical, but no one knows anything yet."

"I haven't heard anything either," Leilani said. "I texted Kai and told him what happened. He said he'd head over to the hospital after he gets off work from the nursing home."

"It's nice that your brother's doing that," I said. "I'm going over there in a few minutes. The EMTs didn't think he could have visitors for a while, but I'd like to see how he's doing."

"I'll go with you," Leilani said with a happy grin. "Jake's pretty much family."

* * *

When Leilani and I got to the clinic, we were directed to a room in one of the wards. Walking in, I was surprised to see Jake sitting up in his bed, sipping on a box of apple juice.

A large white bandage was wrapped around his head, hiding some of his dark curly hair. Fortunately, his deep blue eyes showed he was alert. I let out a breath, glad to know he was okay.

"Jake," Leilani called out. "I'm glad you're awake. We figured you'd still be passed out in the ICU, hooked up to a dozen machines."

"Sorry to disappoint you," he said with a small laugh and a hint of his lopsided smile. "They're telling me I have a concussion, but it isn't too bad. They were worried about an epidural hematoma for a while, so they ran a bunch of tests. But once they found out it was only a bump on the head, the doctors all lost interest."

As Jake talked, I noticed he was looking at me. Well, staring at me was more like it. I started feeling a little self-conscious. I even glanced down at my outfit to make sure I hadn't spilled anything on it.

"Can you tell us what happened this morning?" I asked.

"A detective was in here a few minutes ago," Jake said as he shook his head slowly. "He asked me the same thing. He also let me know that Alex was dead. I'd already assumed that from seeing him laid out on the floor, but it

was still hard to hear it. Unfortunately, I don't have a very good answer."

"What do you remember?" I asked.

"Well, I got to the resort right as the eight o'clock news started on the radio. It had been a while since I'd been there, so I wanted to scout out some picture locations near the Overlook Chapel. I went to look for a bathroom, but they were cleaning the one in the lobby. I figured there must be one in the conference center somewhere."

"What happened when you went back there?" Leilani asked.

"I heard Alex arguing with someone in one of the conference rooms. As I got closer, I heard him cry out. I went into the room to see what was happening and saw him on the floor. The next thing I knew, I woke up in the ER, and a doctor was shining a light in my eye."

He looked at me again. "This might sound crazy," he said, "but I sort of remember that you were with me and that I was talking with you. I think you helped me. Um, were you really there, or did I dream it?"

Okay, I guess that explains why he was looking at me.

"Yeah, I was the one who found you. I went back there looking for Alex. I was completely surprised when I saw you sprawled out on the floor."

"Well, I appreciate it," he said, giving me a sweet smile. "According to what the doctors told me, my injury could have been life-threatening. They said getting me in here quickly was the best thing that could have happened."

"Did you hear who Alex was arguing with?" I asked.

"No. The only voice I heard was Alex's. But it wasn't like he was frightened. It sounded more like he was pissed off. Like yesterday on the beach."

"Do you think he knew the other person?"

"Definitely. From the way he was going on, I'd say Alex and the other person knew each other well."

"Do you remember what he said?" I asked. I didn't want to pepper him with too many questions, but I wanted to understand what was going on.

"I don't remember the exact words. It was more the tone. Alex said something sarcastic, then he cried out. That's when I ran in, and somebody hit me."

"Good thing you have such a hard head," Leilani said. "Otherwise, they could've done some damage."

"Do you know who hit me or what they used?" he asked as he reached up and delicately felt the lump under the bandage. "I've got a knot the size of an unshelled macadamia nut on the side of my head."

"Nobody knows who hit you," I said, "But I'm pretty sure they used a big souvenir tiki. It was on the floor next to you, and Detective Ray has it bagged up as evidence."

"A tiki?" he asked, eyebrows raised. "Seriously? Who hits someone with a tiki?"

"Well, someone hit *you*," Leilani said, flipping her long black hair for emphasis. "They almost took you out with it."

"Do you know when they're releasing you?" I asked.

"They haven't told me," he said, brushing a lock of curly dark hair off his forehead. "I imagine they'll keep me in here. Probably for a day or two."

"Oh, I'm sure they will," Leilani said. "You can never be too careful with a brain injury."

"Are you ready to go home?" a nurse asked in a bright and cheery voice as she pushed a wheelchair into the room. "Are these the people who'll give you a ride?"

Leilani and I looked at the nurse, then back at Jake. I shrugged my shoulders.

"Um," Leilani said. "Then again. Maybe you don't need to stay here overnight after all."

Jake raised his eyes, cocked his head to the side, and gave me a questioning look.

"Sure," I said. "I'll be glad to give you a ride."

* * *

After a quick discussion, we decided it would probably be best if I drove straight to Jake's house. I could then pick him up the following day so he could get his car from the resort.

With Leilani in the back seat giving directions and Jake in the passenger seat, I drove my red Jeep Wrangler Unlimited away from the hospital towards Jake's place. It was a couple of miles inland from the resort, off the main highway, and up a winding but well-maintained road.

As we made it to a cleared-out section of the hill, we pulled into a circular driveway at the back of a lovely home. It was one of the larger houses I'd seen in the area and looked like it had five or six bedrooms. I could see a massive wraparound lanai from where we were parked and glimpsed a breathtaking view of the Pacific through the trees.

"Wow," I said. "Is this really your house? It's gorgeous."

"Thanks," Jake said a little absentmindedly. "It was my parents', and I grew up here. They moved to Lahaina a few years ago, and now it's mine."

"Don't worry about shooting the dinner tonight," I said. "I'll cover that. I'll call you tomorrow morning and see if you're feeling up for snorkeling with the group. In either case, I'll come back and drive you down to the resort tomorrow so you can get your vehicle."

"Thanks," he said as he unbuckled himself. "I'm planning on sleeping the rest of the afternoon, but I'm sure I'll be okay in the morning. Why don't you come over about seven o'clock? I'll make you a coffee—then we can drive down to Aloha Lagoon. My equipment's still in the car, but I'm sure it'll be okay for tonight."

In the mirror, I could see Leilani's eyes grow big as she looked back and forth between Jake and me, a slight smile forming on her lips.

"Um, sure," I said, feeling my face grow warm. My heart was beating a little faster, and I couldn't stop myself from smiling. "Coffee would be great. I'd like that."

"I'll call Kai and let my brother know you're at home," Leilani said. "You can probably convince him to bring you a pizza or something later if you offer him a few beers."

* * *

Leilani climbed into the front seat, and we took off toward the resort. As we wound back down the hill, Leilani kept looking over at me and smiling.

"What?" I asked after she'd looked at me for the third or fourth time.

"What do you mean, what?" she asked, even as she smiled at me again.

"What's so funny?"

"You and Jake," she said. "I've never heard him talk like that before. I think he likes you."

"Talk like what? You're imagining things. He doesn't even know me."

"Maybe, but I've known him a long time. I can tell when something's up."

* * *

When we got back to the Wedding Center, Aunt Audrey was sitting in one of the big white rattan chairs in front of Dorothy's desk. She'd fixed her dark hair, and it was back in the perfect bun. Both she and Dorothy held a tall glass of iced tea and were chatting and laughing like they were old friends.

As soon as we walked in the door, both women turned to me. From the way they were smirking, it felt a little like an ambush.

"I was interviewed by that detective we met earlier in the day," Aunt Audrey said. "He was the same one I talked with about my necklace. I hate to say it, but he seems somewhat out of his depth. Dorothy tells me he's successfully solved murders in the past. But I honestly don't see how that can be possible."

"There've been other murders in Aloha Lagoon?" I asked Dorothy. I'd heard some rumors, but never anything specific.

"Oh, you'd be surprised," Dorothy said, looking over her reading glasses with a knowing nod, her long black and gray hair bouncing. "I know this seems like a quiet backwater in paradise, but underneath the surface, it sometimes gets a little crazy."

"I don't want a murder hanging over the wedding," Aunt Audrey said, now looking at me intently. There was a great deal of force and determination behind her words. "We've put too much time and effort into this event to have it spoiled by something foolish. You'll need to find out who did it, and we'll need to get this wrapped up quickly. Preferably before the other guests start to arrive, but definitely before the ceremony."

"That's only three days away," I said, shaking my head. Then I realized what Aunt Audrey had said. "Wait! What? You want *me* to investigate? I'm a wedding planner, not a detective!"

I looked over at Leilani. Her eyes had grown big as she held her hands up and shook her head to show that this hadn't been her idea.

"Look," I said, "I really don't know anything about solving murders. Besides, I don't think Detective Ray would be too thrilled if I start investigating this on my own."

"Probably not," Aunt Audrey said with a small snort of disgust. "He seems like the type who wants to be in charge of everything. Unfortunately, based on the questions he's asked me, he's building a case against your photographer."

I was about to say she must have misunderstood his intent, but then I thought about it. When Detective Ray had talked to me earlier in the day, he seemed to be going in that direction then as well.

I'd ignored him since the idea of Jake being anything other than a victim was clearly ridiculous. Now, I wasn't so sure if the detective could see the obvious or not.

"Jake didn't have anything to do with the murder," I said, sounding angrier than I'd meant to.

"No, of course not," Aunt Audrey agreed. "I don't believe for a minute he had anything to do with it. Besides, I've seen him work, and he knows what he's doing. I'd like him to be there at the wedding to take the pictures."

"That's going to be difficult if Detective Ray has him arrested," Leilani mused.

"That's another reason to end this as quickly as possible," Aunt Audrey said. Her normally kind face was now scrunched up in frustration. "Plus, we apparently can't leave the island until Ray solves the murder. I'd like to go back home after the wedding. But from what I've seen of the detective's work so far, that might not happen for several weeks, if not months."

* * *

"How do we go about solving a murder?" Leilani asked after Aunt Audrey had left. "None of us are exactly Miss Marple or Nancy Drew."

I was feeling the same way and let out a deep sigh. On top of the wedding being thrown into chaos and my dreamy new photographer being the prime suspect, I'd been asked to solve the murder. That wasn't something that was covered in any of the wedding planning courses I'd attended over the years.

"Let's take this one step at a time," Dorothy said. "What do we know about the murder so far?" She'd pulled

out a legal pad and was preparing to take notes.

"About all we know is Alex was killed a little after eight o'clock this morning by someone who wasn't Jake," I said.

"And I'm pretty sure Jake didn't hit himself over the head with that tiki."

"So, let's take it from there," Dorothy said, jotting down a note.

"From what Jake told us," Leilani said. "It sounds like Alex knew the person who killed him."

"That makes sense," I said. "Detective Ray said robbery wasn't a motive, and I can't see someone as big and mean as Alex going somewhere with a stranger against his will. At least not without a fight."

"So," Dorothy said thoughtfully, "unless we discover something different, I'd say it's likely that the only people Alex knew in Kauai were his friends from California."

Leilani looked alarmed, and I'm sure I did too. Until Dorothy said it out loud, I hadn't associated the murder with anyone in the wedding party. It was a creepy feeling.

"Wow," Leilani said. "That's horrible, but I think you're right. I guess we already know the killer, but which one is it? There are ten people left in the group. How are we going to start to narrow it down?"

"From what Jake told us, we're pretty sure Alex was killed sometime between eight and eight-fifteen," I said. "If we could somehow figure out where everyone was, maybe we can eliminate some of them right away."

"A few of them might have gone to the Loco Moco," Dorothy said, "but I imagine most of the wedding party had breakfast at the Rainbow Buffet. You have to check out with the cashier there as you leave. You'd probably be able to tell what time someone left the restaurant by the timestamp on their bill."

Leilani nodded her head in agreement. Dorothy's reasoning sounded sensible to me as well.

I knew the Loco Moco did their own accounting, and I'd need to ask them directly. Fortunately, we had a quick way of tracking down charges at the Rainbow Buffet. I picked up the desk phone and called the front desk.

"Hi, Summer," I said when she answered. "It's Kristy. I'm trying to track down some charges for the members of the Clarkson-Cooper wedding party from this morning. Would you be able to let me know what time everyone was billed for breakfast at the Rainbow Buffet?"

"Oh sure," she said, cheerful as always. "I'll pull up the records and send them over. But it's kinda crazy at the desk right now. Would you mind if I got that to you in a few minutes?"

"No problem," I said. "Thanks, Summer. I owe you."

"That's one thing done," Dorothy said when I hung up. She made another note on her pad. "Now, we'll need to work on why the boy was killed."

"Alex seemed like he was pretty much a jerk," Leilani said. "I imagine most everyone who knew him would have at least some reason to want him dead."

"When Detective Ray revealed that Alex was murdered, everyone in the group reacted, at least a little bit," I said. "I think that's why he announced it like that."

"Yeah," Leilani said with a shudder. "I remember how weird it was when some of them seemed almost happy about it."

"You were taking a video when Detective Ray made his speech," I said. "Do you have it? Maybe we can spot something?"

"It's still in the camera," Leilani said as she grabbed the office digital and pulled out the memory card.

She gave it to me, and I slid it into my computer. I then switched the computer to display the video on the big television we have mounted up on the wall next to the conference table.

As we watched, the Ono Terrace from earlier in the day filled the screen. The sun was shining, the wind had picked up, and fluffy white clouds dotted the sky. Everyone was eating, talking, and laughing.

As the camera panned over the group, I didn't see anything unusual. No one seemed the least bit troubled by anything.

When Detective Ray moved to stand before the group and then held up his hand, we saw all conversation grind to a halt, and everyone turned to look at him curiously. He then announced the murder in his annoying monotone.

Everyone reacted exactly as I remembered.

We focused first on Flirty Roxanne. Her long red hair was being blown around her face by the wind. When she heard the news, there was a small, satisfied smile on her face as she nodded her head.

It was hard to believe she was happy about the murder, but maybe she was, especially after what had happened the day before on the beach. She kept smiling and nodding, but right before the video ran out, her smile faded into a frown.

"See," Leilani said, pointing at the screen, "That's creepy. How can you hear that someone you know has been murdered and smile about it?"

"I hate to judge," Dorothy said. "But I'd say that girl had a history with the dead man."

We then backed up the video and focused on Gamer Orson. His large nose and thin pale frame made him stand out from the rest of the group.

He looked puzzled when he heard the news. His eyes lost focus, and I could see the gears turning. I wasn't sure if he was thinking about something profound or if he was simply spaced out.

"Nope," Leilani said as she shook her head. "His lights are on, but nobody's home."

"I'm not so sure," I said. "Orson designs computer games for a living. I can't see him ignoring a challenge as tempting as an unknown killer among their ranks. He'd probably see it as some sort of logical puzzle to solve."

"Well," Leilani said with a shrug. "You draw your conclusions about Orson, and I'll draw mine."

Dorothy just jotted down some notes on her pad without offering a comment either way.

Anime Lauren, who was seated next to the twins, was next on the list. She was also easy to spot with her big black glasses, slim build, and blue-tipped brunette hair. Upon hearing the news about Alex, her face immediately scrunched up. Her shoulders began to shake, and she started crying silently.

"You know," Leilani said. "With that makeup and the headband with the ears, she sort of looks like a crying cat."

Dorothy shook her head and gave Leilani the stink eye but didn't say anything.

"What about the rich guy—Derek?" I asked, mostly to change the subject. "What's up with him?"

Again, I restarted the video, and Detective Ray again gave his speech. We watched as Derek's eyes opened slightly wider, and he shook his head in disbelief. But then he let out a small chuckle, and the condescending smirk had returned to his face.

"He doesn't seem to care about the murder one way or the other," Leilani said.

"Oh, I think he cares more than he's letting on," Dorothy said. "Did you see how his eyes widened and his nostrils flared? It wasn't much, but something about Detective Ray's speech threw him off for a second."

"I don't get that," I said, as I failed to track what Dorothy saw. "I get the feeling that the murder is only one more thing that amuses him about being here with his friends from college."

"You may be right," Dorothy said with a shrug. "What about the rest of the group?"

"Yeah," Leilani said. "Look at Eddy, the big mean-looking guy with the hairy arms and tattoos. He doesn't look so happy."

As we restarted the video and concentrated on Angry Eddy, we saw a look of shock, and then worry, quickly pass over his square face as he heard the news.

He rapidly composed himself and quickly glanced around at the other members of the wedding party. His eyes narrowed, as if assessing each of them as potential murderers.

"I still don't like his looks," Leilani said. "He looks pissed, and now he knows one of his friends is a violent killer."

"Unless he's the one who did it," I said.

"Well, yeah," Leilani said thoughtfully. "There's always that."

"Look at the twin girls," Dorothy said. "Have you ever seen a response like that?"

As we looked back at the screen, we realized Dorothy was right. The weirdest reactions came from Madeline and Victoria Trapp, the two tall, athletic blondes.

Short-haired Madeline muttered that the murder was "gross" and looked devastated. At the same time, Long-haired Victoria merely seemed surprised.

The two women then looked at each other, and both let out similar snorts of disgust. The video ended with the two sisters staring daggers at each other.

"Huh," Leilani said. "They seem more upset with each other than they are about Alex."

CHAPTER SIX

The computer on my desk beeped to let me know I had a new email. I saw it was from Summer at the front desk.

"Hey," I said, "it looks like we've got the breakfast information from the Rainbow Buffet."

I opened the email and displayed it on the big wall-mounted TV. It was a printout of all the charges made that morning at the Rainbow Buffet and, more importantly, the times they were made.

The three of us stared at the screen. There was page after page of restaurant charges from hundreds of resort guests.

"Wow," Leilani said. "I didn't know so many people had breakfast there."

"Let's narrow it down to the charges made after eight and before about eight twenty or so," I said, scrolling through the printout until I found the page from the appropriate time frame.

"Aunt Audrey, Carly, and Justin all left the Rainbow Buffet at twelve minutes after eight," Dorothy said slowly as she studied the email. "Even if they walked straight to the conference center, it would take them four or five minutes. I'd say they're in the clear."

"That's a relief," I said, and I sincerely meant it. I'd hate to think that either the bride or groom could be involved in a murder. Talk about a wedding planner's worst nightmare. I continued to scroll down the page to see if we could spot anyone else.

"It looks like your billionaire left at eight-fourteen," Dorothy said as she studied the list over the top of her reading glasses. "If you're thinking the murder happened a little before then, I'd say he also has an alibi."

"Our game designer, Orson, left the restaurant at eight thirty-three," Leilani said as she pointed to the screen.

"I don't think that completely clears him," I said. "He would still have had time to kill Alex, then go to the buffet for a quick breakfast."

"Wow, could you imagine doing that?" Leilani asked, a haunted look on her face. "Kill someone you know, then have a nice breakfast?"

We couldn't find anyone else who left the Rainbow Buffet after Orson, so I scrolled back to when the restaurant opened at six.

"The Trapp twins left at seven-forty," Dorothy said as we examined the list. "So that's no help."

"Yup," I said. "Either one would have had plenty of time to kill Alex."

"They're both tall and athletic," Leilani mused. "Jake couldn't tell who Alex had been arguing with. Maybe the sisters tag-team murdered him?"

"Is there information on anyone else?" I asked, ignoring my best friend.

"Nope, that's all I see," Leilani said as she stared at the screen.

"It's possible the others had breakfast at the Loco Moco," Dorothy stated. "That restaurant has a separate billing system from the rest of the resort. Or they might have skipped breakfast altogether."

"Yeah," Leilani said. "Gearing up for a murder probably kills your appetite."

"I'll be with the group at the Loco Moco later tonight for dinner and karaoke," I said. "I'll ask around. Maybe we'll get lucky, and someone will confess."

"It's a bummer I have a class tonight," Leilani said. "Otherwise, I'd be glad to help you interrogate everyone. Plus, you know how much I love the mahi-mahi there."

"Well," Dorothy said as she smiled. "We've narrowed down our suspect list to the six most likely people. That

should help."

* * *

The Loco Moco Café was situated off the resort's main lobby. The place was always busy, both from resort guests and as a brisk local take-out business.

I'd arrived a little after five-thirty and made sure we had reserved seating ready on the outside patio. A row of wicker tables was lined up near the small stage they'd set up for karaoke. Everything looked perfect.

Lively music played from overhead speakers, putting me in a great mood. I stood at the railing at the edge of the deck for a few moments, watching the sun as it started to dip toward the horizon of the sapphire blue Pacific.

The light breeze coming up from the beach was pleasantly warm with a soft touch of humidity. I could even smell the delicate fragrance of a nearby plumeria bush.

Even after living here for six months, I still hadn't grown accustomed to the beauty of the place. I doubted I ever would.

I'd been thinking about Jake and again wondered how he was doing. I didn't want to call in case he was still sleeping. Instead, I pulled out my phone and sent him a text: *Hey, I hope you're feeling better.*

I was a little surprised when I got a text back a few seconds later: *Hi, Kristy. Feeling much better. Kai brought over some Thai food. I'm looking forward to our coffee tomorrow morning.*

I grinned like a fool, and my heart sped up a notch. Feeling like a giddy teenager, I tried to think about how to answer without looking overeager.

I ended up typing: *Glad you're doing better. See you tomorrow.* Somehow that didn't seem friendly enough, so I added a smiley face and hit the send button.

* * *

Carly and Justin walked onto the deck a little before six. She was still wearing the white sash with *The Bride* splashed across it in gold lettering, but tonight it was twisted and hanging at a weird angle.

"Carly, how are you doing?" I asked as I took the liberty to straighten her sash.

She nodded her head and let out a long sigh. "We're alright, but it's been such a crappy day. I'm crossing my fingers that nothing else goes wrong."

"Is Aunt Audrey coming tonight?"

"She's still in the room. That detective came by a few minutes ago and said he wanted to know more about her stolen necklace. She'd already reported it to him on Monday, but he said he wanted to see the room and where she had kept it."

"And the robber took it out of her luggage?"

"I really don't know. My aunt swears she put it in the little jewelry case she uses when she travels. But if it was a burglary, I'd think the thief would have taken the entire box. In addition to the necklace, my aunt brought several other lovely and valuable pieces."

"I'm a little surprised she'd leave something that expensive in the room."

Carly sighed and rolled her eyes. "I know. She didn't trust the room safe, but the hotel also has a safe behind the front desk that she could have used. I told her she should have kept it there, but she wanted to keep it with her."

"I'm so sorry it happened," I said. "I talked with your aunt about the necklace. I know how much it meant to both of you."

She nodded. "I'm sure my aunt has it insured, she's big on things like that, but that's not the point. I have pictures of me wearing that necklace back to when I was a little girl. Of all of my aunt's pieces, it was the one I loved

best. I always felt like a princess whenever she'd let me wear it."

* * *

The rest of the wedding party slowly ambled into the restaurant, everyone looking a little worn out. Between the wedding activities and the murder earlier in the day, it was understandable. Several people were also sporting fresh sunburns from afternoons spent on the beach.

Most of the group had dressed casually for dinner, with all the women wearing matching *Team Bride* sashes. The only person who'd made any kind of effort was Victoria. She'd obviously spent some time with her makeup and long hair.

She wore three shades of blended eye shadow and a shiny fire-engine red lipstick. It would have appeared clownish on anyone else, but it somehow suited her.

Her golden locks flowed halfway down her back in a cascade of big soft curls. She'd also unfastened the next button down on her bright blue aloha shirt to reveal some deep cleavage.

I wasn't sure if she was trying to impress the men or simply wanted to take some of the attention away from Roxanne. Either way, it seemed to be working. I couldn't help but notice the glances the guys were giving her.

Although the sisters had dressed alike again, Short-haired Madeline had gone with more subtle makeup. Her identical aloha shirt was buttoned a little more modestly than her flamboyant twin.

Judging by the looks the sisters were giving each other, whatever was bugging them was still going on. I only hoped it didn't bubble over to the rest of the group.

When Roxanne arrived, she was casually dressed in a black scoop-neck Aloha Lagoon T-shirt, knotted at the waist.

Her long red hair was in a ponytail, and she wasn't wearing a lot of makeup.

The change was nice. It gave her a softer and more approachable look.

"Hey," I said as I walked over to her. "How are you doing? I know it's been stressful for everyone."

She snorted out a small laugh and nodded. "Yeah, it's not every day someone you know is murdered."

"You knew Alex all the way back to college?"

"That's right. We were pretty tight. But I guess I was close to everyone in our group back then." She blew out a breath. "Look, I know how Alex acted yesterday, but I think you've probably gotten the wrong idea about him. He wasn't always such a jerk."

"What do you mean?"

"Back in college, Alex was more or less the leader of our group. He was tall, handsome, and had a natural charisma. Everyone figured he'd do well in life."

"That wasn't the case?" I asked.

"Oh geez, no. From what I hear, Alex didn't have two quarters to rub together." She then shook her head and again snorted out a laugh.

"What?"

"Sorry, I was just thinking that it's funny that Derek's turned out to be the successful one."

"Why's that funny?"

"Oh, Derek was never the brightest or the one who studied hardest. Orson and Lauren were always the brains of our group. Derek always struck me as someone who was simply floating through life. You know, the kind of guy who cheated on tests because he couldn't be bothered to study."

I loved that she was opening up with me, so I decided to probe a little bit further. "If you don't mind me asking, what happened yesterday on the beach between you and Alex?"

At that, Roxanne did laugh. "Oh, he was acting like a jerk. He was a little drunk and made a not-so-subtle proposition. I suppose it was my fault. I had been teasing him, a little bit. When I turned him down and reminded him that he probably shouldn't be asking me things like that in front of, um, well everybody, Alex got pissed. He said I'd never been anything more to him than cheap trash. We traded a few insults, and he grabbed me."

"And then he tossed you into the ocean."

"Yeah," she said with a sigh. "I think me turning him down hurt him more than he let on. But I really didn't mean to do anything more than tease him a little. I was kinda buzzed from the drinks on the beach and wasn't thinking. Of course, I feel horrible about it now that he's dead."

I was getting some good background, perhaps not enough to establish an actual motive, but every little bit would help. I prodded her again, hoping to get more information. "Did you keep in contact with Alex after you graduated?"

She shook her head. "We were close for a while, and then I lost track of him. But it's the same with most of the people in our college group. Everyone drifted off in separate directions. This trip was the first time I'd seen Alex in years."

"Did you keep in contact with anyone in the group?"

"Not really. Well, except for Eddy, of course."

"Why Eddy?" I asked, confused.

"Oh, I thought you knew. We were married for a little over two years after we graduated."

"Wow," I said, a little taken aback. "No, I hadn't heard. I assumed you weren't that close from watching you two on the beach yesterday. Can I ask, what happened?"

"No, it's okay," she said with a small laugh as her face turned scarlet. "I guess you could say that sometimes weird things happen to show a relationship isn't meant to be."

I waited for her to go on, but it was clear the subject was making her uncomfortable. She gave me a weak smile

and held up her empty Mai Tai cup.

"I think I need a refill," she said. "This seems like a good night for getting drunk in paradise." She then got up to look for Carrie, our waitress, to order another one.

* * *

Once everyone had a drink or three, I pulled out the office digital to take pictures. The sunset was spectacular, with the clouds on the western horizon nearly exploding with iridescent light.

I knew I only had about ten or fifteen minutes before the sunset would start to fade, so I used the glowing clouds and the coconut palms on the beach as the background for thirty or forty pictures on the patio's edge.

After a few test shots, I used a fill-flash to ensure everyone's face was lit correctly. I then took individual pictures of everyone and several small group photos.

Although most of the people were pleasant enough with each other, I could sense that some of the friendliness seemed to be forced. The emotions were particularly noticeable during some of the group shots. It was like they weren't thrilled to be part of the group but were maintaining a happy cover to avoid a scene.

When I lost my sunset background, I noticed a man with a handlebar mustache was sitting alone at a table on the far side of the patio. I wouldn't have thought twice about it, but I recognized him as one of the guests who had commented on Aunt Audrey's necklace during the Aloha reception. As I watched him, he stole three or four quick glances at our group.

As I tried to figure out who he was looking at, I noticed that Gamer Orson was by himself, leaning against a planter on the edge of the deck. He was sipping on his third or fourth Blue Hawaiian as he intently watched the colors fade on the horizon.

"Hi, Orson," I said as I walked up and stood next to him. He was a little glassy-eyed but seemed alert enough. "What did you think about the sunset tonight?"

"The colors were amazing," he said as he took a long sip of his latest cocktail. "The sunlight bouncing off the ocean caused some dramatic god-ray scattering effects through the clouds. I've tried to get that sort of visual intensity into my games for both sunsets and fire effects. But the colors never come across quite as vivid as they do in real life."

"Are you doing okay after everything that's happened today?"

"What?" he looked at me, a little confused. "Do you mean Alex?"

I nodded my head. "I know it's been hard for everyone."

Orson shook his head and looked at me. "Honestly, I hated Alex. I'm just as happy to see him dead."

I was a little shocked at that bit of honesty. "Wow, really? Why? What happened between you two?"

Orson barked out a short laugh. "It was a lot of things. All through college, Alex thought he was hot. He dated whoever he felt like going out with, even if the girl was already dating someone else. He was an academic moron, and he always asked me for help with his homework. It got to the point where I hated even being in the same room as him."

"So why would you still associate with him?"

Orson shrugged and looked uneasy. "I liked hanging out with both Justin and Carly. Alex was Justin's roommate all through school. He'd show up whenever we did anything with Justin, especially if he thought he could get some free food or there'd be women there."

"That must have been frustrating," I said with a shake of my head.

"The thing that sealed it happened a few months after we graduated. I was thrilled that I'd never see Alex again. But then he came over to my house one night, and we ended up getting into a fight."

"You're serious?"

"Yeah, that inbred sociopath hit me in the face. I went to the police and filed a complaint, but it never amounted to anything more than a slap on the wrist for him."

"Why would he do that?"

"Oh, I had my guesses, but maybe he was just an arrogant jerk."

"And you knew he'd be here, in Hawaii?"

"Yeah, I was pretty sure Justin would invite him."

Orson took another long sip of his Blue Hawaiian, draining it.

"But it'd been almost ten years since I'd seen Alex. I was hoping we could simply ignore each other and be polite, you know, for Justin and Carly's sake."

"Did you happen to mention any of that to Detective Ray when he talked with you?"

"Sure, I told him the entire story. The fight's a public record, so it's not like I can hide it."

"What'd he think of it?"

"Well, he made some notes, but he seems pretty clueless. Honestly, I think he's set on your photographer as the murderer."

"Jake didn't have anything to do with it," I said, feeling frustrated. "I think he interrupted whoever killed Alex and was almost killed himself."

"I don't think he was involved either. I've actually been trying to work out who could have done it."

"And? Who do you think killed him?"

Orson shook his head. "I don't know yet. Pretty much everyone here had some reason to hate Alex. It's going to take a day or two until I can find out who hated him enough to kill him."

"If you get any ideas, would you let me know? I don't want to see Jake arrested, and I especially don't want this to ruin Carly's wedding."

"No," he agreed. "It's been hard enough on her already."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVEN

The group settled in at the tables and started ordering appetizers and dinner. This seemed to lighten everyone's spirits, and some of the loud talking and good-natured laughter started again.

Most of the people ordered the laulau shredded pork, which seemed to be the specialty of the house. But I noticed a few also had the barbecued chicken, the mahi-mahi with pineapple mango salsa, and the Hale Hamburger Platter.

Aunt Audrey arrived at the restaurant a little after the appetizers were served. She sat next to Carly and immediately ordered a Mai Tai.

She was looking annoyed, angry even. But surprisingly, she wasn't as distraught as I would have expected. I know if I owned a valuable necklace that was missing, I would've been completely devastated.

* * *

By the time dinner was winding down and the karaoke was about to begin, everyone was in an alcohol-fueled good mood. The celebration itinerary was back in full swing.

I was somewhat ashamed to think it, but the group was getting along much better without Alex around to cause problems. I hadn't realized how much of a harmful distraction he'd been to the group.

When the karaoke portion of the evening started, I was somewhat surprised when long-haired Victoria bounced up to the stage and began to sing. I was even more surprised when I heard how good she was.

Hurriedly, I got up and snapped several pictures. Once Victoria realized she was being photographed, she posed for me as she sang.

When I returned to the table, Aunt Audrey was by herself, watching the action on stage. I'd wanted to talk with her about the necklace and now seemed to be my chance. However, based on the stack of empty Mai Tai cups in front of her, she was probably past tipsy and well on her way to being drunk.

"Hi, Audrey," I said as I took the seat next to her. "Carly told me Detective Ray came to your room to investigate the missing necklace. How'd that go?"

"Honestly?" Aunt Audrey asked with a shake of her head. "I think the detective is only going through the motions. He looked at the sliding glass door on the balcony. He then looked for scratches on my luggage. This was after I'd already told him I hadn't locked it. It's painfully obvious he's not going to do anything about it."

"Has the resort said anything yet?"

"Not yet. But Jimmy Toki was there when the detective came to my room. I'm hoping he can find out something."

"You'd think they'd be exploring different ways to find it," I said, feeling horrible about what had happened. "I know how valuable your necklace is."

"Nooo," she said with an exaggerated shake of her head that shook loose a few strands of her long dark hair.

"That doesn't matter. It's like I told you yesterday. That necklace has a lot of sentimental value for both Carly and me. It's always been sort of a good-luck piece."

"Really?" I asked, wanting to know more. "Tell me about it."

Aunt Audrey's eyes softened, and she rested her fingertips on my arm. "Well, originally it was a present from my late husband for our tenth wedding anniversary. We'd started to do quite well financially, so it wasn't too much of an extravagance."

"I've never seen anything quite like it. Was it a custom design?"

She shook her head and smiled. "The festoon style was actually relatively common back in the eighties. Meryl Streep wore one in some movie or another. After that, all the high-end jewelry stores carried replicas, and many department stores did as well. It wasn't unusual to see a woman wearing a similar one whenever we went to a charity event." Her smile turned wistful at the memory of good times past.

I hated to disturb her reverie, but I had a wedding to plan and a murder to solve. "I know things have been a little crazy today. But we'll do our best to make sure the rest of the week goes as smoothly as possible."

"Oh, I know you will, dear," she said, patting my arm again. Her eyes were getting glassy, and she slightly slurred her words. She then leaned over as if to tell me a secret, and I could smell the alcohol on her breath.

"It probably doesn't matter in the long run. I'm sure the marriage is doomed in any case."

What?

"Um, why would you say that?" I asked, my wedding planner alarm bells going off.

"Justin's only marrying Carly to make her happy," Aunt Audrey continued, thankfully unaware of my distress. "A long-term commitment to Carly was the last thing on his mind. Did you know she had to ask him to marry her?"

"Really?" I asked, a little surprised. "They seem like a great couple."

"Oh, Justin's alright. He may even make a good father. But I think the only reason he was open to marrying Carly was the inheritance she'll get after I go. But I nipped that in the bud."

As she talked, she waved her finger in front of me. "I insisted they sign a prenup as a condition of me paying for the wedding. If Justin misbehaves or ever divorces Carly, he gets nothing."

Wow, I think I'd be happier not knowing any of that.

"But I did want Carly to have a white wedding," Aunt Audrey continued as her eyes again softened, and she looked across the patio at her niece. "She's dreamed of this since she was a little girl."

"The rest of the wedding party's getting along reasonably well tonight," I said, anxious to change the subject. "I'm surprised Carly and Justin were able to get someone like Derek to be the best man. He's become very famous."

"Oh, don't let his money fool you," she said as she shook her head and took another long sip of her latest Mai Tai. "Derek may be famous now, but he was just another kid from Justin's dorm when I first met him. Did you know I threw a party at my house every spring for Carly and her friends from Stanford? You see, I live in Palo Alto, so it was easy. I've known everyone here for over ten years."

Aunt Audrey lifted her Mai Tai and drained it. She then waved down a passing waitress named Vivian and ordered another one.

"Besides, I have a pretty good idea why Derek agreed to be the best man," she continued. "I'm sure he's still carrying a flame for Victoria Trapp. They dated for over two years in college, and I don't believe he's ever gotten over her. I mean, just look at him."

As Aunt Audrey made her revelation about Derek, I glanced over at the best man as he watched Victoria, who was again on the stage. As usual, his short dark hair was sticking out at all angles.

Sure enough, he seemed almost hypnotized by her voice and the way her long honey-blonde hair swung to the beat. Looking closer, there was a look of unmistakable longing on his face.

As Victoria went through her song, it was apparent she was singing to him. Her eyes never left him as she sang out a highly sensual version of the Paula Cole song "Feelin' Love."

"Derek was the one who insisted that the Trapp sisters be bridesmaids," Aunt Audrey continued, echoing what I'd heard earlier from Angry Eddy. "It was his condition to be the best man. It honestly wouldn't surprise me if he only wanted them here to have one last go at Victoria."

I looked over the rest of the group to see if anyone else had caught on to the situation. What surprised me most was the dark look that Madeline was giving both Derek and her sister. It was a look that spoke of smoldering anger as her eyes darted back and forth between them.

As I continued talking with Aunt Audrey, I kept feeling the gaze of the guy with the mustache. He hadn't moved from where he'd been sitting earlier, and he seemed harmless. But it was a weird coincidence how I kept seeing him.

"Aunt Audrey," I spoke in a low tone. "There's a guy at a table behind me with a handlebar mustache. Do you know him?"

"Humm," Aunt Audrey said, glancing over my shoulder. "Well, I've seen him around the past few days, but I don't know who he is. Just another resort guest, I'd assume." Her eyes suddenly opened wide. "Do you think he has something to do with the murder?"

"No, nothing like that. I was only wondering if you knew who he was."

She looked back at me with a concerned look as she patted my arm. "Dear, I don't really think he's your type. You stick to that nice young photographer of yours. He's much more of a hottie." Then she did the most unexpected thing and started to giggle.

* * *

Everyone from the group went up to the stage for at least one song, allowing me to take some fun pictures to document the event. Most of them sang in a slightly

drunken slur that was almost painful to listen to. The exception, not surprisingly, was Short-haired Madeleine Trapp.

A few minutes after her sister left the stage and went over to stand on the side of the patio next to Wealthy Derek, Madeline marched up to the platform. She sang an angry version of a Nancy Sinatra song from the sixties called "These Boots are Made for Walkin'."

Maybe it was only me, but I could feel some genuine emotion as she almost spat out the words, which seemed to be directed at her sister. Victoria, for her part, didn't seem to be listening as she stood close to Derek, laughing at whatever joke he'd told her.

I kept an eye on the man with the handlebar mustache all through karaoke. He sat for over an hour but didn't do anything more suspicious than watch the group sing. After a while, I decided I was getting jumpy and simply ignored him.

* * *

As the evening progressed, I found an opportunity to sit next to Justin, the groom-to-be. I'd never really gotten a chance to know him since he was always with Carly, and she usually did the talking for both of them.

A waitress stopped by and brought him another Rum Punch. It must have been his fourth or fifth of the night, and I could see him starting to get glassy-eyed. I thought maybe it would be a good time to find out more about his friends.

"How are you holding up?" I asked. "It's been a tough week."

He sighed, and the look on his face was something horrible. "Don't get me wrong," he said. "It's beautiful here, and you've been great. But Alex was my roommate all through college. It's been difficult dealing with what happened to him."

"It seems like some of the people here had issues with him," I said diplomatically.

"I know," he said with a dismissive laugh. "Alex could rub people the wrong way, but that was only his outer personality. He was actually a good guy once you got to know him."

"Hopefully, they'll find out who did it," I said. "It would be terrible having something like that hanging over the ceremony."

"That detective thinks it was your photographer. But I'm not so sure it was him. Alex has a history with everyone in the group. It really could have been any of them."

"Any guesses?" I prompted.

"No," he said with a shake of his head. "In fact, it's kind of funny. If anyone was going to be killed on this trip, I would've guessed Orson would have taken out Derek."

"What do you mean?" I was now confused. "Why would Orson have anything against Derek?"

Justin looked around to make sure we weren't overheard, then motioned me closer.

"All through college, Orson was working on a side project. It was a bunch of computer programs, and he was completely proud of them."

"Really?" I asked. "What did they do?"

"I honestly have no idea. Orson tried to explain it to us a couple of times, but it went over my head. Something about using artificial intelligence to control how computer servers communicate with each other. I never understood any of it, but he kept telling us it would revolutionize the industry."

"Okay. So where does Derek come in?"

"Orson spent a lot of time shopping his software to the tech giants in Silicon Valley, but nobody wanted it. The only person Orson could convince that the software was worth anything was Derek. Once Orson laid out what the software could do, Derek said he'd start up a company and develop

it. I guess Derek had some sort of family trust fund, and after college, he started an actual company."

"Is that how Derek made his billions?"

Justin nodded. "Yup. Derek became filthy rich off of Orson's ideas."

"So, what happened? Why isn't Orson still at the company making billions as well?"

"I don't know for sure," Justin said with a shake of his head. "I've often wondered that myself."

* * *

Keanu Church, the young, good-looking manager of the café, came out to the patio to check on the group. Over the past six months, we've developed a friendly working relationship. Because of that, I always tried to schedule a karaoke night at the Loco Moco whenever I had a wedding week.

"Hi, Kristy," he said with a warm smile as he joined our group. "How's everything going?"

"Hey, Keanu," I said, blowing out a sigh. "It's been a long day."

"Yeah," he said, nodding his head. "I heard about the murder. Let me know if there's anything I can do."

"Actually," I said, "there is one thing. I'm trying to figure out where everyone in my group was between eight and about eight-fifteen this morning."

"It sounds like you're looking for who had an alibi," he said as he raised an eyebrow. "Are you trying to figure out who did it?"

"Yeah," I confessed. "I'm dealing with a cop called Detective Ray, and I don't have a lot of confidence in him. He seems to be focusing on Jake Hunter, my new photographer, as the murderer. But I know it can't be him."

Keanu nodded and gave me a knowing grin. "Sure, I completely understand what you're going through. How can

I help?"

"Anyone in my group who had breakfast here this morning should have charged it, since the Wedding Center was paying for it. Would you have records of when the charges were made? I'm looking for the time between eight and eight-fifteen, maybe eight-twenty."

"That should be easy," he said. "If you want to come up to the office, we could look through today's receipts."

I looked over at Orson, who was currently on the stage. He was singing a slightly off-key version of "Uptown Funk." I then looked out over the group and couldn't help but notice the doe-eyed stare Lauren was giving him.

"That would be great," I said. "I think they can do without me for a few minutes."

I followed Keanu into the café and then up the stairs to the office. He went over to his computer and started typing. A printer sprang to life, and four pages spit out.

"Here you go," he said. "These are all the charges I'm passing over to the resort from this morning. There'd be a record of it if anyone in your group was here."

I was tempted to start studying the list immediately, but I'd already taken up enough of his time.

"Thanks," I said as I folded the papers and slipped them into my bag. "This should help."

"If you find anything useful, feel free to send Detective Ray over. I'll be glad to give him a copy."

* * *

The following day, I woke up early with a little thrill of adrenaline at the thought of seeing Jake. I reminded myself that it was only for coffee. But honestly, it had been so long since I'd been attracted to a man that it seemed like a big deal.

Since my clothing choices were limited to a resort polo and khaki shorts, I spent extra time on my hair and makeup.

I even gave myself a soft spritz of Coco Mademoiselle, my perfume for special occasions. After spending several more minutes in front of the mirror, I was ready.

* * *

I parked in the courtyard at the back of his house and looked around. Although I knew there were dozens of other homes on the hill, the lush tropical vegetation surrounding the property gave it the feeling of being completely isolated.

As I got out of my car and walked up to the house, I again reminded myself that it was only for coffee. Jake was probably only being polite in asking me over before I drove him back to the resort. Still, my heart beat a little faster as I knocked.

After a moment, Jake opened the polished wooden door, and my breath caught a little in my throat. I tried to be subtle as I looked him up and down, but I don't think I was entirely successful.

The man is gorgeous.

He smiled and chuckled at my awkwardness. However, I noticed his eyes flick over me as well, quickly giving me the once-over.

Jake was wearing khaki board shorts and a well-fitting resort polo that he must have gotten from Dorothy or Leilani. As on the beach two days before, I enjoyed how the shirt showed off his arms and chest.

I also caught the scent of his cologne. It made me think of being kissed and held by a passionate man.

I really need to find out what that is.

He led me through a spotless living room and ushered me out to the broad lanai. As I suspected from seeing the house the day before, the view was breathtaking.

The black and red colors of the lava rock that made up the island mingled with the bright green of the tropical foliage. That was contrasted by the light tan sand of the

beach and the deep sapphire blue of the ocean. In a word, paradise.

Several fluffy white clouds hung over the Pacific. They floated slowly over the water, providing a relaxing sense of movement to the scene.

On a table on the lanai, Jake had a pot of coffee ready, along with containers of cream and sugar. Next to the coffee sat a vase of freshly cut pink and yellow plumeria. The delicate scent of the flowers added to the relaxing environment, and I was impressed by the trouble he'd gone to for me.

Jake asked how I liked my coffee and directed me to sit on one of the oversized white wicker chairs scattered across the lanai. They each had a thick orange cushion and turned out to be amazingly comfortable.

As I watched Jake prepare the coffees, I couldn't help but notice how well his board shorts hugged his body. I was also happy to see he didn't seem to be suffering any ill effects from the attack of the day before.

I heard a sound and looked down to see a black cat looking up at me. I reached down and began scratching it behind its ear. The cat started to purr and hopped into my lap, seemingly thrilled at the attention.

Jake handed me a steaming mug, and I took a sip of the delicious coffee. "Huh?" he grunted out when he saw the cat, who had curled into a ball on my lap.

"What?" I asked, confused.

"It's nothing. I'm only surprised to see Chester out here. He's usually scared to death of new people."

"Maybe he knows I'm a cat person," I said as I continued scratching him with my free hand.

As the cat purred in my lap, I relaxed in the high-backed chair, sipping the coffee and taking in the peaceful view.

"You know," I said, "I've lived here for six months, and I still find myself shocked at how beautiful Kauai is."

"According to family lore," he said as he sat in the chair next to me and took a sip of his coffee, "my mom picked this spot on the hill specifically for this view of the ocean. She liked how it showed off the beach on its way down the coast."

"I can understand that," I said. "It's like a postcard or something from a travel brochure. Were your parents native to Hawaii?"

Jake shook his head. "Both my grandfather and my dad were in real estate in California. They were part of a group that thought it would be a good idea to buy up some of the farms around San Jose and Santa Clara."

"Was that before everything started up out there?"

Jake nodded. "My granddad started buying land back in the seventies, before anyone had ever heard the term Silicon Valley. My dad joined his business after he graduated from college. Once things started booming out there, they sold to the highest bidders, and everyone became embarrassingly wealthy."

"It sounds like they had great timing."

"My grandparents eventually retired to the Oregon coast. Mom and Dad used their share to start buying real estate in Hawaii. After purchasing this property, they worked with a friend who was a general contractor to design and build the house."

"What do you do when you aren't taking pictures?"

"I have an online marketing company. I mainly do website design, advertising, and company branding."

I couldn't help but let out a small laugh.

"What?" he asked, looking at me like I was odd.

"I'm sorry," I said, now embarrassed. "I thought you were going to say surf." I knew my face was probably turning red.

He smiled and shook his head. "I still do a fair bit of that, although not as much as I used to. Leilani's brother Kai and I skipped most of our junior and senior years in high

school to be at the beach. I didn't get serious about my education until I went to the university."

"How long have you been taking photos? Leilani says you've turned it into a business."

"A lot of what I do for the marketing side involves product and company pictures. It evolved into a separate photography business about five years ago. It's something different, and I enjoy it."

"How's your head feeling?" I asked. "That was quite a blow you took yesterday. Will you be okay to go out on the boat for snorkeling?"

"I'm pretty much over it," he said as he took another sip of the steaming coffee. "The lump went down, and some Advils took care of the headache. It's only a little sore right where they hit me. You said they used a tiki statue?"

"Yeah," I said with a slight chuckle as I gave a little nod. "It looked like wood but was probably made out of plastic."

He smiled and shook his head. No doubt thinking how crazy the whole thing was.

"What about you?" he asked. "How'd you end up in Aloha Lagoon? It's not where most people would think of first when they come to Hawaii."

"When I was going through my divorce, I wanted to make a fresh start," I confessed. "I had a wedding business back in Arizona, but it wasn't growing as fast as I'd hoped. I heard about the wedding planner position here and interviewed for it. Once I got the job, I used my engagement ring and some savings I'd managed to stash away as a down payment on a small place in the hills right outside of the resort. I didn't have enough to afford a view like this, but it suits my needs."

"It sounds like things are going well. Have you gotten over the shock of the divorce yet?"

"What?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. "Like, do I trust men again?" I shook my head. "No, I think it'll be a while

until I can be involved in a serious relationship."

"Well," he said with a smile. "I can't blame you there. We're all scoundrels at heart. But what about dating?"

"I'm probably up for that," I said as I snorted out a small laugh. "But probably not much more than dating, at least not now."

"I understand how you feel," he said as his face turned a slightly adorable shade of pink. "I don't know what Leilani told you, but I was with somebody recently who let me down as well. It might be some time before I can let someone in like that again."

"But you're also open to dating?" I asked. For some reason, my breath caught as I waited for his reply.

Jake looked out over the ocean and sipped his coffee before answering. "I think so," he finally said. "As long as the woman knows where I'm at and doesn't start pushing marriage and kids at me after the first two or three dates."

"That seems reasonable," I said as casually as I could. However, mentally I jumped up and down, clapped my hands, and made loud *woo-hoo* noises.

"The detective told me not to leave the island," Jake said. "It's not like I had any plans to, but it's a sinister feeling knowing I can't."

"He's told the entire wedding party they can't leave. Aunt Audrey's not happy about the whole situation. In fact, she's asked me to look into it."

"Look into what?" Jake asked, a little shocked. "You mean the murder?"

"Yeah. I know what you're going to say, and I probably should leave this to the police. But from what everyone's telling me, Detective Ray seems to be building a case around you."

"Yeah," he said quietly, looking down at his lap. "After thinking about it last night, I'm pretty sure that's true."

"But we all know you didn't do it. You were only in the room with Alex because you heard someone was in trouble."

And it's not as though you hit yourself on the head."

"Well," he said, now lifting his eyes to look directly at me. "I don't think the detective will like your snooping around his case, but I do appreciate it. What have you found out so far?"

"Not a lot," I said, feeling like I was already letting him down. "We're pretty sure Alex was killed by someone in the wedding party. You said it sounded like he knew the person, and the detective said robbery wasn't a motive."

"That makes sense," Jake said, looking impressed. "What else have you found?"

"From what you said, the murder occurred sometime between eight and about eight-fifteen or eight-twenty. Out of the ten people left in the wedding party, four seem to have solid alibis. The bride, the groom, Aunt Audrey, and Derek, the billionaire."

"Huh," Jake grunted out. "It sounds like you know more about what's going on than Detective Ray."

"I also got a printout from Keanu Church at the Loco Moco last night. I haven't gone over it yet, but I'm hoping to eliminate at least one or two more."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jake and I sipped coffee and chatted for another twenty minutes on the lanai. Talking with him was fun and effortless as we quickly bounced from one subject to the next. When I glanced down at my watch, I was disappointed to see it was time to leave.

As we stood up to go, Jake grabbed a beach bag containing fins and a high-end snorkel. He also picked up an oversized black and orange waterproof camera housing from the kitchen table.

"You're taking your camera into the ocean?" I asked.

I'd seen that type of case before. They were expensive, but I knew he could securely place his big Nikon in it without worrying about water damaging the lens.

"Sure," he said. "I'm assuming we're going to the reef off Lawai Beach? It's about the best snorkeling spot on this side of the island. The water there is crystal clear, and there're tons of fish. It's a great place for taking underwater shots."

After a brief stop at Jake's car to retrieve his camera equipment, we headed to the Wedding Center. As we entered, Dorothy and Leilani were drinking coffee and chatting. Each of them munched on a donut, and a half-full box sat on the conference table.

Upon seeing Jake, Leilani popped up and gave him a quick hug. "I'm glad to see you're up and around," she said. "You didn't look so good yesterday."

"I didn't feel so good yesterday," he said with a slight chuckle.

Dorothy had been staring at Jake over the top of her reading glasses as he came in. "Hello, Jake," she said. "I'm glad to see you weren't seriously injured."

"Thanks, Miss Campbell," Jake said. From his tone, it wasn't the first time they'd met.

Dorothy shook her head. "Well, since it looks like you're going to be hanging around here for a while, you'd better start calling me Dorothy."

Jake broke out in a wide grin. "Okay. Thanks, Dorothy."

Dorothy sighed and shook her head. "What did you learn last night at the Loco Moco?" she asked, turning to me.

"Yeah, did anyone confess?" Leilani mumbled, her mouth half-full of donut. "You know, like did they whisper it to you confidentially?"

"No one confessed," I said, reaching into the box to grab a chocolate donut with rainbow sprinkles. Jake poured out two coffees and handed one to me. I saw he'd already added the cream and sugar. Leilani watched him do it and flashed me a knowing smile.

"But I did learn a lot," I continued. "Roxanne was married to Eddy for two years after college. She didn't say why it ended, but it sounded sudden and perhaps not all that friendly."

"Oh, really?" Dorothy asked as she made a note in her book.

"Ouch," Jake said as he pointed his donut at us for emphasis. "You know, this is probably the first time they've been together since the divorce."

"Gathering a group of people who haven't been together for years often raises tensions," Dorothy said to Jake. "We see it all the time. But most people know to be polite to each other, for the sake of the bride."

"That's not all I found out," I said. "According to Aunt Audrey, the only reason Derek agreed to be the best man is that he still has the hots for Victoria Trapp. They dated for a couple of years during college."

"Which one's Victoria?" Jake asked. "Long hair or short?"

"Long," I said.

"But that was like eight or ten years ago," Leilani said. "Why would he still care about her now? He's so rich that he could afford to have anyone he wants. I bet he could date almost any actress or supermodel out in California."

"It's not always like that," Jake said with a slow shake of his head. "Maybe he did something stupid to end the relationship, and he's never gotten over it. It happens sometimes."

Jake had tossed it off as a casual comment, but I still felt a quick pang of jealousy. I wondered if he was talking about his former girlfriend, Michelle and if he still wanted her back. I then reminded myself it was stupid to feel that way since Jake and I weren't even dating. At least not yet.

"I also learned a little more about Orson," I said. "He was apparently the one who originally came up with the new type of computer program that Derek used to start his company."

"If it was Orson's idea, why isn't he as rich as Derek?" Leilani asked.

"I don't know," I said. "But if we can find out, it might help us understand things better."

"Have you heard anything new on the stolen necklace?" Dorothy asked.

"Not a lot," I admitted. "Detective Ray and Jimmy Toki were in Aunt Audrey's room yesterday afternoon looking for evidence. I don't think she has a prayer of getting it back. I also can't see it tying into the murder, but maybe they can find a connection."

"You said she wore it to the Aloha reception?" Dorothy asked. "That means everyone at the resort knew she had it with her. We're talking both guests and staff."

"That only narrows down who took it to about five hundred people," Leilani grumbled.

"She doesn't seem all that stressed about losing it," Dorothy observed. "If I had an expensive necklace, and somebody stole it, I'd be going nuts."

"She doesn't like talking about how much it's worth," I said. "But I'm thinking it has to be at least two hundred thousand dollars, maybe more. Carly thinks her aunt has it insured, but you're right. She seems more annoyed than anything."

"What about Keanu?" Dorothy asked. "Did he have anything for us?"

"He gave me a printout of the restaurant charges made yesterday morning," I said, pulling the folded sheets of paper from my oversized shoulder bag. "I haven't looked at them yet."

Everyone took a page and started going over the list. We ended up going through the names three or four times, but we only found two people from the wedding party.

The first was Angry Eddy, who had left the restaurant at six forty-five, so that wasn't any help. But there was also a record of Roxanne leaving the café at eight fourteen. I breathed out a sigh as that seemed to eliminate another suspect.

"Well," Dorothy said with a sense of satisfaction. "Having a name on a printout isn't a guarantee that someone didn't commit a murder. Still, it looks like we're down to five likely suspects."

Jake looked at me. "So? Who's left?"

"There's Orson and Eddy from the guys," I said.

"And there's Lauren and the twins, Victoria and Madeline from the ladies," Leilani said.

"So? Who do you think did it?" Jake asked. "The only one I'm certain of is me, and I know I didn't do it."

Dorothy, Leilani, and I all looked at each other. After a moment, it was clear that none of us had a clue.

* * *

We talked for another twenty minutes without coming to any new conclusions. As we debated, Jake sealed his

camera in the waterproof case.

When it was time to go, Leilani took off to her class. Jake and I then walked out to the lobby to gather up the group.

The lobby of the Aloha Lagoon Resort was its usual swirl of morning activity. I noticed many of the people in line to check out looked a little sad. I know I'd probably look much the same if I had to go back to the cold after spending a week or two in paradise.

I stuck my head outside the main entrance. As I knew he would be, Koma was already parked and waiting in the front circle of the resort. Covered in colorful stickers, Gabby's van, Brute, was pretty easy to spot.

I was glad when everyone in the wedding party showed up on time. The only two who seemed like they might be late were Gamer Orson and Anime Lauren, but they walked in together as the clock struck nine.

Aunt Audrey arrived with Justin and Carly, but she only wanted to see everyone off. She said she wasn't all that interested in snorkeling and that sitting for a couple of hours on a boat would only make her seasick. She also wanted to stick close to the resort in case there was any word on her necklace.

I led the group out to the van, and everybody climbed on board. I could tell everyone was becoming reacclimated with one another. There was a general sense of laughing and talking as they passed around bottles of sunblock.

Carly was again wearing the white one-piece swimsuit with *The Bride* stenciled in shiny gold letters and had covered it with a pink-mesh wrap. She'd braided her hair, as had Victoria, for the day of snorkeling.

Over Justin's mild objection, Carly had attached a black bow tie around his neck. I thought it looked cute, and Justin was a sweetheart to go along with it.

Many of the other people seemed to have paired themselves off as well. Lauren was sitting next to Orson,

and Long-haired Victoria had slid onto the seat with Wealthy Derek.

Angry Eddy attempted to sit with Flirty Roxanne, but she was sprawled across the bench, smearing lotion on her legs and completely ignoring him. After a moment of hesitation, he moved back to an empty seat.

Short-haired Madeline climbed into the van, last of all. She stared daggers at her sister, who was already having a lively conversation with Derek, before she moved to the back to sit with Eddy.

At first, he seemed annoyed at the intrusion. But he became far more interested when she pulled off her shirt to reveal a tiny bikini top. He positively smiled when she asked him to rub sunblock on her back.

I took my usual seat behind Koma and got a warm feeling when Jake asked if I minded sharing the bench. I got another thrill when our legs touched as he slid in.

Once everyone had settled into position, Koma closed the door and pulled the van out of the lot. Traffic around the resort wasn't bad, and it only took us a few minutes to get to the water.

* * *

The docks at the Aloha Lagoon Marina were lined with dozens of boats, ranging from luxury cabin cruisers to powerful speedboats. There was even an area set aside for the sleek personal sailboats that were gaining in popularity.

I looked, but the *Mahina*, the boat from the Aloha Lagoon Dive Shop, wasn't in its berth. Kahiau, Dex, and Kiki must have already taken their group out for the day.

Jamie Parker, the resort's scuba and snorkeling instructor, was standing on the far end of the dock in eye-catching white shorts and a lavender *Little Mermaid* T-shirt. She waved when she saw us arrive.

I've always liked Jamie. She was tall and slender with short strawberry-blonde hair, blue-green eyes, and tons of sun freckles. Her accent was from somewhere in the Southeast US. She was one of those happy women who always seemed upbeat and positive.

Jamie led us out onto the neat wooden dock, eventually stopping at a thirty-five-foot pontoon boat with *Ariel* written on the side in bright red cursive letters. The big double-decker party boat was designed to hold over twenty people, so there was plenty of room for the group, even with all the snorkeling gear.

Everyone climbed on board, and Jamie showed the group where the drinks were kept and how to put on the lifejackets. One of the workers on the dock cast off the lines, and she smoothly led us out to the Pacific.

Jamie hit a button, and upbeat classic rock gently surrounded us from several hidden speakers. Orson opened the nearest cooler and pulled out a Longboard Island Lager. Following his lead, several others dug out their beverages of choice. And just that quickly, it felt like a party.

* * *

Lawai Beach was only a few miles west of the resort. Jamie didn't push it, and we arrived after a scenic journey of about twenty-five minutes. We dropped the anchor about three hundred yards off the beach, just past the reef.

With the boat gently rising and falling on the low waves, everyone stripped off their outer layers. Jamie popped open a locker and passed out the snorkeling masks and fins. Everyone took the gear and listened as Jamie gave some quick safety pointers.

Other than Jake, the only two who didn't take any equipment were Justin and Carly, and that was because they'd brought their own. I noticed their masks had optical plastic, likely with the same prescription as their contact

lenses. These snorkeling masks were somewhat expensive, but they would let them see perfectly underwater.

I made sure to pay attention as Jake stripped off his shirt to reveal his lean muscular body. I was fascinated and slightly amused that he had a brightly colored tattoo of a sea turtle on his upper left bicep.

I watched as he put on his equipment and was impressed at how smoothly he slipped into the ocean. I made a mental note to go snorkeling with him sometime. Maybe at night, during a full moon.

By ones and twos, everyone splashed into the Pacific. The group then slowly floated in the direction of the reef. Orson and Lauren went last, and the boat became quiet.

Jamie went to one of the coolers and pulled out two bottles of water. "Kristy, how are you holding up?" she asked in her delightful Southern drawl as she handed me a water. "I heard about the murder."

"It was quite a shock," I admitted with a nod. "But everyone seems to be handling it as well as can be expected."

"How's your bride doing? I can't imagine how hard this must be for her."

"She's devastated, of course. But she's focused on the wedding, and I think she'll do okay."

"Are they any closer to finding out who did it?"

I shook my head and let out a snort of frustration.

"Not really. Detective Ray seems to be focusing on Jake, but I know he had nothing to do with it."

Jamie stared off into the distance for several moments. "Detective Ray might seem a little slow, and he sometimes bumbles around pretty badly," she finally said. "But he eventually sorts things out."

"I hope so. I don't want to see Jake get arrested for something he didn't do. But, honestly, that's not the worst of it."

"Really?" she asked, surprise on her face. "What could possibly be worse?"

"Um, the murderer is probably someone in the wedding party."

"You mean, one of *them*?" Jamie asked as her eyes scanned the ten people floating over the reef.

"From what we can tell, Alex knew his killer. As far as we know, these are the only people he knew in Aloha Lagoon."

"Okay, that's a little disturbing," she said slowly, her eyes still fixed on the wedding party.

"I know. But I don't think we'll have any trouble today. Whoever it is knows to lie low. Especially since Detective Ray is focusing his investigation elsewhere."

"I hope so," Jamie said as her eyes moved to a spot on the deck. "I don't want to see anyone else getting hurt."

* * *

It was a beautiful day on the water. The breeze was light, and the waves were gentle. Most of the wedding party was floating in a loose group over the reef, thirty or forty yards from the boat.

Jake was progressing from one person to the next, taking pictures. At one point, he had individual people and small groups dive down in a particular spot in front of the reef so he could get some underwater shots of them.

From what I could see, there were schools of colorful fish where he was. I also had to admire Jake's creativity in the way he used the reef to frame his subjects. I was looking forward to seeing the final photos.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE

After about half an hour, people started to return for a rest break. Most of them grabbed a bottle of water or a pop. Of course, I wasn't surprised when Orson climbed aboard and downed another beer. After relaxing for ten or fifteen minutes, they'd put their gear back on and head out again.

Everyone had been in the water for about an hour when Short-haired Madeline returned to the boat. She grabbed a bottle of water and walked to the bow, watching the fluffy clouds float over the Pacific.

I looked back at the reef and saw that Victoria and Derek were together, floating about fifty yards away. It was unusual that the two sisters weren't together, and I thought it would be a good time to talk with her.

"Don't you love the view?" I asked as I walked up.

"It's gorgeous," Madeline said. "We live in San Jose, where the beaches are crowded, and the water is always cold. The ocean is so perfect and beautiful here. You're lucky to live in Aloha Lagoon."

"I've only been here for about six months," I said. "I grew up in Denver. That's about as far as you can get from a blue ocean and coconut palms."

"Really?" she asked. "How'd you end up here?"

"My dad and I used to watch old Hawaii Five-O reruns when I was a kid. I'm talking the ones from the seventies with Jack Lord."

"I've seen some of those," Madeline said as she wrinkled her nose. "The acting was a little over the top."

"You're right about that," I said with a laugh. "But I mainly liked watching for the scenery. They seemed to go out of their way to include as many panorama shots of the islands as possible. When there was nothing outside my

bedroom window but snow and ice, Hawaii seemed like the perfect place to live. I've been trying to get here ever since."

There was a pause where we both stood in silence. I thought I'd use it as an opportunity to see if she'd open up to me.

"What's going on with you and your sister?" I asked. "I got the feeling you two were annoyed with each other, even before what happened to Alex."

At first, I didn't think she was going to say anything. But then she looked back at the reef where Victoria was snorkeling with Derek. Suddenly, as though she was just waiting for someone to talk to, she started to open up about the past.

"You can't tell from the way she acts now, but in college, my sister was painfully shy. She never figured out how to meet boys on her own. She always preferred to steal them from me. It happened three times while we were in school. Being here again with everyone is bringing up a lot of memories, and not many of them are good."

"Do you want to tell me about it?" I asked. I didn't want to pry into her personal life, but I needed to find out if it had anything to do with the murder.

She let out a small laugh. "Sure, it's not like it's a secret, at least within the group. All through college, Victoria would pretend to be me and seduce my boyfriends."

"Really?" I gasped. "That's horrible! Your own sister. Wow." I was genuinely shocked. I didn't have a sister, but I couldn't even imagine doing that if I did.

"The first time was with Eddy. We were freshmen, and it wasn't like the relationship I had with him was all that great to start with. But once he hooked up with Victoria, it was pretty much over with me. The second time, I'd just started to date Alex. We'd only been out three or four times when she pretended to be me and spent the night with him."

"Was she really able to fool the men so easily? Even though you're identical twins, there must be some differences. A mole or something."

"I always thought we were pretty easy to tell apart, but I guess the guys I dated weren't very observant. Victoria would wait until I was busy for an evening, then call the boy over and pretend she was me."

Seriously? How could one sister do that to another?

"Wow," I said. I'm sure the shock showed on my face. "That must have been terrible."

"Yeah, it took me a while to get over it. But with those two, it was the idea that she stole them that upset me more. The one I had a real problem with was Derek."

"You dated Derek?"

"We were together for almost seven months. He once even told me he loved me."

"Sounds like things were going great. What happened?"

"My mom needed help with something, and I went home for the weekend. When I came back, Derek had changed. I could tell Victoria had pretended to be me and had been with him."

"Really? How did you know they'd been together?"

"Victoria's always been into some kinky things. I guess she'd let the boys do things that I wouldn't do. Derek figured things out pretty quickly as soon as we were together again. He might have even known it was her all along—I don't know. But it didn't take him long to dump me and start dating her."

"That must have been difficult," I said, shaking my head. "Especially since she's your sister."

"With Alex and Eddy, it wasn't so bad. I wasn't all that serious about either of them. But I loved Derek. I thought we could've been happy together. I could've been the wife of someone who was going places. We could've had kids," she said as her voice dropped to almost a whisper. "Instead, it's

ten years later. I'm still single, drive a crappy car, and work at a job I hate."

"You said Victoria stole your boyfriends three times. What made her stop?"

At that, Madeline looked at me and flashed a wicked little half-smile. Honestly, it was a little creepy.

"The only way she could impersonate me was because we looked exactly alike. We both had the same long hair, so I chopped most of mine off. I told Victoria if she wanted to keep stealing my boyfriends, I couldn't stop her, but she'd need to lose the hair."

"Wow," I said, a little stunned. "That's a pretty big step."

"Not really," she said with a dismissive laugh. "I never cared all that much about my hair. It was actually a pain to take care of. But Victoria's always been vain about the way she looks. She loves her long hair and wouldn't lose it for something as meaningless as seducing my boyfriends."

"I'm sure you've noticed the looks Derek's been giving your sister over the past day or two."

Madeline's face flushed with anger, but she quickly regained her composure. "Yeah, at first, I was actually thrilled when Carly called us and said the old group would get back together for the wedding. I was looking forward to seeing Derek again. But I guess Victoria was thinking the same thing."

"Well? What do you think after seeing him again?"

"Honestly, it's not the same," she said as she laughed slightly, her gaze dropping down to the water. "I don't know if he's changed or if it's me. But when I saw him after all these years, I realized the old feelings weren't there anymore. I'm actually a little glad. I now know it wouldn't have ever worked out between us. So sure, Victoria can throw herself at him, like the tramp she's always been. I honestly don't care anymore."

She sounded sincere, but I wasn't sure I entirely believed her after seeing some of the nasty looks she'd given her sister and Derek.

I watched as she stared out at the group in the ocean. Her sister and Derek were still together, floating over the reef, maybe thirty yards from the boat.

"I have a random question," she asked me suddenly, a dreamy tone to her voice. "Do you happen to know what phase the moon is in?"

"Um, it's nearly full," I said, remembering where it was in the sky the night before. "Thinking about a beach stroll in the moonlight?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No, nothing like that. My body's as regular as a clock, so I always like to know where the moon is. It saves me surprises."

"Sure, that makes sense. Let me know if you need anything else."

"Well," she said, now sounding distracted. "Speaking of hair, does the resort have a beauty salon? Before we do the formal pictures, I'd like to get my ends trimmed. I meant to do it before I flew out here."

"Sure," I said, glad to be back in familiar wedding planner territory. "The salon's called the Hair Affair, and it's next to the spa. Let me know when you'd like to go. Leilani or I can set it up."

I kept Madeline company as she pulled on her fins and splashed into the water. A few minutes later, Flirty Roxanne came back onboard.

"Kristy, that was great," she said with a broad smile. "But I've had enough fun for a while. It's such a lovely day. I think I'm going to lie out for a bit."

She then grabbed a water bottle, slid on a pair of oversized black plastic sunglasses, and went up to the bow.

A few minutes later, Angry Eddy climbed on board. He eyed Roxanne and her fitness-instructor body as she reclined in the sunshine on one of the couches.

As he grabbed a beer from a cooler, it looked like he was having an internal debate about whether to go up and join her or not. Finally, he decided to keep to the stern, under the sunshade.

"Hi, Eddy," I said as I walked over to him, noticing his many tattoos, including some on his hairy chest. "How's the snorkeling?"

"It's good," he said a little stiffly. "I haven't been in the ocean like this since college. I'm a little surprised at all of the fish that are here."

"From what I've been told, this reef is one of the best places on the island to spot them. Carly mentioned the other day that you're in the trucking business?"

Eddy gave me a slightly puzzled look, then relaxed. "Sure, I guess you could say I'm in trucking. We own several warehouses on the east side of the bay, mainly in Oakland and Alameda. We're also involved with importing and exporting."

For some reason, it seemed like he was being purposefully vague, so I didn't push it. "I heard you and Roxanne were married for a couple of years after college. I didn't know that until yesterday."

"Yeah," he said, sounding annoyed. "I saw you talking with her last night. I figured she was giving you her life's story. Did she tell you why the marriage ended? About how I came home early from work one day and found her with another man?"

"Um, no," I said, regretting I'd brought up the subject. "We didn't get that far into it."

"Well, I thought everything was going great until that happened," he said as he glanced up at Roxanne, a sad expression on his face. She had sat up on the couch and was slowly pouring a bottle of water over her chest and stomach.

He gave a slight disgusted shake of his head and drained his beer. "It only goes to show. You can never tell

about someone."

Eddy tossed his beer can in the trash, quickly put his fins back on, and jumped into the water. I wasn't sure if he was more anxious to get away from his ex-wife or from me.

* * *

As Roxanne lay in the sun and the rest of the group splashed and played in the ocean, Jamie and I stood at the stern and chatted. She was always a fun person to hang out with.

As we gossiped about people we knew at the resort, she caught me looking at Jake. She gave me a sly smile and immediately wanted to know all about him.

Unfortunately, other than he was a friend of Leilani's brother and had a marketing business, there wasn't a lot I could tell her. We talked about his house and how I'd had coffee there on the lanai with the beautiful view. We spent the rest of the time talking about her latest boyfriend, Javi, and all of the crazy things they'd been doing lately.

As Jamie talked about her budding romance, I kept an eye on Jake as he floated on the waves and took pictures of everyone in the party. He'd been out over an hour, and I'd been eagerly waiting for him to return to the boat.

* * *

About fifteen minutes after Eddy had returned to the water, Jake made his way back to the boat. As he reached the platform at the stern, he handed me his camera and quickly climbed on board.

He walked to a cooler near the bow and pulled out a water bottle. As he opened it and had a few swallows, I could see Roxanne eyeing him over the top of her sunglasses.

I honestly couldn't say I blamed her. Standing on the deck, wearing only a pair of board shorts, with the water glistening on him, the man was total eye candy.

"I see you've been busy out there," I said, trying not to sound too flirty as he joined me near the stern. "How's it going so far?"

"I've got a ton of photos to sort through tonight, and I think you'll like some of them. There're about forty or fifty shots left on the battery, so I'll go back in and see if I can get creative for the last few pictures."

"I saw you were able to take some underwater poses of everyone. I'm looking forward to seeing the photos you took of the bride and groom."

"Justin and Carly seem to be comfortable in the gear, and I was able to get some fun shots with them in front of the coral. The light is great down there this time of day. The colors on the fish are really popping."

"You're right about them being experienced. According to Dorothy, snorkeling was one of the reasons Carly chose Aloha Lagoon."

"Well, it's a perfect day for it. The fish are thick on the reef. It's a little like *Finding Nemo* down there."

"I like your tattoo," I said as I eyed his muscular upper arm. "Why a sea turtle?"

"In Hawaii, they're called honu. I've always been taught that a honu symbolizes good luck, peacefulness, and spiritual energy. Plus, they're my favorite animal. Seeing one always puts me in a good mood."

We stood next to each other while he worked on his water bottle, and we watched the group in the water. It was pleasant having this moment to just stand so close to him.

"I saw you talking with everyone as they took a break on the boat," he said. "Have you found out anything new?"

At his question, I motioned him closer. Even then, I made sure to keep my voice quiet so Roxanne and Jamie couldn't hear.

"Get this, all through college, Victoria would steal Madeline's boyfriends," I said. "Back then, they had the same long hair, and Victoria would pretend to be Madeline and seduce the men. Apparently, Victoria is a little more adventurous in the bedroom, so when the guys had to choose, they chose her."

"I wonder what Victoria would do with the men that was so much better than her sister," he mused. "But does it tie in with our current problem?"

"Actually, it does. The three guys Victoria stole were Eddy, Alex, and Derek."

"Really? Madeline was in the middle of a romantic relationship with the murder victim, and her sister broke it up?"

"Yeah, Madeline said they'd only dated a few times before it ended, but you never know. Kinda twisted, huh?"

"That's for sure, but I'm not sure how much that helps us," Jake said with a shake of his head. "You'd think Madeline would be more upset with Victoria, not with Alex."

"Maybe Madeline was still angry that Alex was stupid enough to choose the wrong sister? She's clearly still mad about Victoria and Derek, even though she says she isn't."

"It's possible. We should probably keep an eye on both of them. What else did you find out?"

"Eddy caught Roxanne with another man. That's what ended the marriage. This may sound strange, but from the way he acts, I think he still cares about her."

"It doesn't sound that strange. It's hard to stop your feelings about someone, even if they did something horrible to you."

Once again, I couldn't help but wonder if he was talking about his old girlfriend and what emotions he might still have for her. This thought led to an awkward silence.

"I know you're getting some good background information," Jake said. "But maybe we should be more direct?"

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe we should ask everyone who they think did it? I bet we'd get some interesting theories. Everyone loves to be an armchair detective."

I thought about it and realized he was right. The people in the wedding party knew each other better than we ever would. Someone in the group had to be angry enough with Alex to kill him. I needed to find out who it was.

* * *

By eleven-thirty, we had to start gathering everyone up for the return trip. Koma was scheduled to meet the wedding party at the marina at noon, and I liked to keep to a tight schedule.

Derek climbed on board as Jamie was about to turn up the volume on the old Oingo Boingo song, "Goodbye Goodbye," the group's signal to return to the boat. I'd assumed he'd still be with Victoria. Instead, she was now floating over the reef with Orson and Lauren, fifty or sixty yards away.

I thought it would likely be my best chance to talk with Derek without anyone else listening, so I signaled Jamie to hold off on the music for a minute.

"How was it?" I asked, handing him a towel.

"That was a remarkable experience," he said with a wide smile as he started drying his hair. "The colors of the fish are amazing. I felt like I was swimming in a giant aquarium. I'll definitely need to find the time to do this more often."

"Before everyone comes back, let me ask you a question. What are your thoughts on the murder? Who do you think killed Alex?"

The look on Derek's face was hard to read. At first, he seemed surprised that I'd asked such a direct question, but

that was gradually replaced with something that could have been sadness.

"I honestly don't know," he finally said. "But if you force me to guess, I'd say it was probably Orson."

I was a little shocked by his revelation. "Really? Why Orson?"

"I suppose you wouldn't know. Alex nearly got Orson kicked out of the university for cheating. I know that was almost ten years ago, but I'm sure Orson's still upset about it."

"Seriously? What happened?"

Derek let out a slight chuckle and shook his head.

"Alex was big and handsome. The ladies all loved him. But he was never the smartest one in our group. I think he only got in because his family were such big donors. He usually had Orson or Lauren do his homework for him. During our senior year, one of the English professors noticed that Orson and Alex had turned in the exact same paper on an assignment. It was word for word."

"Wow, I'm surprised Alex didn't change it around, at least a little bit."

"Like I said, Alex was never too bright."

"So, what happened?"

"The university launched a formal investigation. Alex swore he'd only lent his finished paper to Orson. He contended that Orson must have copied it. Of course, Orson told the truth about what had occurred. And let's face it, Orson's academic record was far better than Alex's, so it's pretty obvious he wouldn't need to cheat."

"I could see that ending up badly for everyone," I said as I shook my head, a little shocked. "What did the university do?"

"In the end, they were both nearly expelled over it. I think the only reason they weren't was the donations Alex's family had made to the university. Even then, the incident became part of their academic records."

"Okay, but as punishments go, is that really all that bad?"

"Well, Alex was never going to amount to much, so in his case, no. But Orson had designs on getting his PhD and teaching. A documented accusation of cheating meant he'd never be accepted into a quality university. I think that's why he went into a private-sector position after he graduated."

* * *

Jamie turned up the music, and the group slowly splashed their way back to the boat. Once everyone had a drink in their hands, Jamie took off for the marina.

We were still good on time, so we cruised back at a leisurely pace. The music was fun, and it seemed to put everyone in a good mood.

Carly walked over to where I was standing at the rail, a water bottle in her hand. "Kristy, that was some of the best snorkeling I've ever done," she said with a broad smile. "There were so many incredible fish, and the reef was fantastic. Thank you for setting it up."

"I'm glad you liked it. We've always had good luck here."

"I'm thrilled your photographer was able to come today after, well, what happened to him yesterday. I'm really looking forward to seeing the pictures he took of everyone."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TEN

Koma was waiting for us when we got back to the marina, and everyone piled on board the van. Traffic around the resort was light, and we soon found ourselves back in the main lobby.

"Thanks, everybody," I said before people started to scatter. "Remember, you're on your own for lunch and the afternoon. The resort has some fun little stores for shopping, or you can Uber into Lihue or Waimea."

"Where is dinner again?" Orson asked, turning slightly red as everyone looked at him. "Sorry, I spaced out on the details."

"No worries," I said. "We'll meet at the Rainbow Lounge at six o'clock for drinks. Dress is island casual."

People started to drift away. Some said they would head straight to lunch. Others said they'd go to their rooms for a quick shower and change. Roxanne declared she was heading down to the beach.

"Hey," I said to Jake after everyone had left. "Do you want to go have lunch somewhere?"

"I won't be able to today. I have a video call scheduled for my marketing business, and I'd like to get the pictures from this morning cleaned up first. If the cocktail hour is at six, will you be in the office beforehand?"

"I hadn't planned on it, but I could be."

"Great. Why don't I stop by around five?"

"That sounds perfect," I said as I broke out in a smile. "Then you can show me everything you've got."

That came out slightly wrong, and I knew my face turned a little red. Jake gave me a surprised look and a flirty smile, then took off.

After watching Jake walk towards the parking lot, I went to the office, hoping to catch Dorothy. Unfortunately,

she was already out for lunch. So, I decided to make my way out to The Lava Pot.

The interior of the tiki bar was crowded with happy tourists, so I drifted out to the deck, hoping for a little less of a crowd. The outside was packed as well, but I spotted Anime Lauren sitting alone at a table. Her dark hair and blue highlights making her stand out in the crowd. She caught my eye, smiled, and waved me over.

A menu and a brightly colored cocktail with an umbrella and a pineapple slice were sitting in front of her. From the color of the drink, I was guessing it was a Blue Hawaiian.

Lauren had pulled on a pink dress that covered her one piece. As I've come to expect, the dress had a picture of a female anime character splashed across the front.

The cartoon woman had purple hair and wore a sexy yellow outfit, complete with hot pants and white boots. From the look on her face, the character seemed to be upset about something.

"Hi, Lauren," I said as I walked up. "Would you mind some company?"

"Not at all," she said with a laugh. "I was just thinking how pathetic I looked, eating alone at a resort."

"Who's on your dress today? I know Pikachu and Sailor Moon, but that's about as far as my knowledge of anime goes."

"Oh," Lauren said as she looked down at her chest. "That's Faye Valentine from an anime called *Cowboy Bebop*. I like her because she doesn't take a lot of lip from anyone."

"Have you always been into anime?"

"Pretty much. I started with Pokémon back when I was a little girl, and my brothers began collecting the cards. I eventually branched out to Sailor Moon and then to one called Fruits Basket. I pretty much try to keep up with all the new series, and I'll go to an anime convention two or three

times a year. It's fun to dress up and pretend to be a secret agent or a powerful warrior princess."

"What are you going to order?" I asked. I'd been here so many times that I had the menu memorized.

"I think I'll have the mahi-mahi tacos with mango salsa. I'm not much of a fish person, but that sounds totally Hawaiian."

"Those are really good," I said. "I usually either have the fish tacos or the Kalua pulled pork sandwiches."

The server, Carrie, stopped by, and we ordered our lunches. When she left, I was grateful to have Lauren alone for a few minutes.

"How was snorkeling?" I asked. "You were in the water almost the entire time we were out there."

"Oh, I loved it. I haven't done anything like that since high school. When Carly said her aunt was taking everyone to Hawaii for the wedding, I was hoping we'd get a chance to be out in the ocean."

"How long have you known Carly? Did you meet her in school?"

"The university assigned us to the same dorm room the first year, and we ended up living together all through college. Carly was the social type, and she was very popular. Since I was always there, I became part of her group of friends."

"It looks like you and Orson are spending a lot of time with each other. It's nice to see you've made a connection."

At that, her face turned red, and she looked down at her drink.

"Um, yeah. I didn't realize how much I've missed him."

"Were you both close in college?"

"We dated for almost two years. We even talked about moving in together after we graduated."

"That sounds pretty serious. What happened?"

"It ended rather badly when I did something stupid," she said quietly. Between the sounds of the ocean and the

laughing of the people around us, I had to strain to hear her.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I didn't want to pry into her personal life, but it sounded like something that could have a bearing on the murder.

She picked up her Blue Hawaiian and took a long sip through the straw. "I was never the prettiest girl growing up," she began. "I was overweight and had a face full of acne. I even wore braces until my sophomore year in college. I didn't date, so I studied all the time to give me something to do."

"But you ended up dating Orson. He must have seen something in you."

She nodded her head and chuckled. "Yeah, Orson and I started out as study partners in a chemistry class we were taking together. It wasn't supposed to be anything romantic. But we gradually grew close. He seemed to like me for the person I was, not for what I looked like."

"You said you did something stupid? What happened?"

"Near the end of our senior year, completely out of the blue, Alex asked me out."

"He was in your group, so you must have already been friends with him."

"Oh sure, he was Justin's roommate. I'd known him for almost four years by that point. But I always knew he was completely out of my league. He was tall, strong, and handsome. He could have any woman on campus he wanted."

"What happened when he asked you out?"

"Honestly? I was in complete shock. I told him I wanted to say yes, but I had a boyfriend already."

"What did he say?" I asked, although I could already guess where it was going.

"Alex was persistent. He said he'd always been attracted to me. He also told me how smart, nerdy girls turned him on. He even said we could date on the side, and Orson didn't need to know."

"That doesn't sound like the best way to start a relationship."

"I know," she said, letting out a sigh. "You can probably guess what happened. I knew there'd been a big blow-up between Orson and Alex over an English paper earlier in the year. But at the time, I didn't connect the two. All I could focus on was an incredibly handsome and popular man telling me how sexy I was and how much he wanted me."

"So, you started going out with Alex?" I prompted.

"Yes, we went out behind Orson's back a few times. Then we became more open about it. It got to the point where everyone in the group knew about it except Orson. Maybe he'd heard the rumors but chose to ignore them. I don't know."

"What happened? Did Orson find out?"

She nodded. "After a few weeks, Orson caught us together when Alex was at my place. I'll never forget the look of pain on his face."

"That must have been hard for both of you. Having it simply end like that."

"Actually, at the time, it didn't bother me as much as it probably should have. I was falling in love with Alex, and I thought he was doing the same with me."

"What happened between you and Alex?"

"Well," she said with a small laugh. "We spent most of the following weekend together, and then he dumped me."

"And you think the whole thing was only an act to get between you and Orson?"

Lauren nodded her head, but she didn't say anything.

"That's horrible," I said. "Did he even try to justify what he did?"

Lauren suddenly transformed and became livid. It reminded me of how she had acted on the beach earlier in the week, and it was a little frightening.

"That pie-eating clown had the gall to say I didn't know how to kiss. He then said I was lousy in the sack. He even told me I was lucky to have had him at all. He said he hoped I enjoyed it because it would be the only time in my life I was ever going to have a real man."

Ouch.

"You knew about the history between Alex and Orson. When did you put it all together?"

"Oh, I think I knew it all along, but I'd been ignoring it. I thought Alex cared about me, and our dating didn't have anything to do with what had happened before. But when it became obvious that he was only using me, I asked him if this was about Orson."

"What did he say?"

"He looked at me like I was something nasty he'd stepped in. He smirked and barked out a laugh, as if I wasn't even worth talking to. Then he walked away. If I'd had a gun, I swear I would have spun him around and shot him right in his pretty mouth."

Wow.

"Did you ever try to patch things up with Orson?"

"Sure, I tried, but he wouldn't talk to me. I can't say that I blamed him. I was stupid and caused us both so much pain. I've spent almost ten years regretting what happened. This is the first time I've seen him since college."

I saw Lauren looking down at the volleyball pit. From the slightly distant look on her face, I could tell she was reliving the events of the previous two days.

"I'm glad Alex is dead," she said quietly. "I only hope he suffered before he went out."

That woman has some serious anger issues.

"Who do you think did it?" I asked. After her story, I wasn't going to be surprised if she said the murderer was Orson.

My question seemed to pull her out of her memories, and she acted genuinely surprised. "Oh, I think it's pretty

obvious who did it."

"Really? Who are you thinking of?"

Lauren motioned me closer, so no one could hear. "I'm sure it was Eddy. I can't see why anyone else would want to hurt Alex."

Really? What about the story you just told about Orson?

"Um, why Eddy?"

"I may have been the first woman Alex fooled around with, but I wasn't the last. Eddy caught Alex with Roxanne back when they were married. They had a huge fight in Roxanne's bedroom, and Alex was in the hospital for three days."

"My God. Are you serious?"

"I know. Alex is bigger, and you wouldn't think Eddy could take him in a fight. But I guess Eddy was pretty upset about what he had seen. Eddy ended up on probation for a couple of years, and he divorced Roxanne over it."

"But that was years ago. Why would Eddy act now?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure this is the first time Alex and Eddy have been together since the fight. Plus, there was the way Alex acted on the beach the other day."

"What do you mean?"

"You were there. Alex picked up Eddy's nearly naked ex-wife and carried her around like she was a trophy. I was waiting for Eddy to blow up and attack Alex right there on the beach."

"I wonder if Detective Ray knows about all of this."

"I imagine he does," she said with a shrug. "The fight and everything else that happened aren't secrets. Although, if you want to know the truth, I'm a little surprised Eddy didn't take out Alex years ago."

"What do you mean?" I asked, confused.

She looked around to make sure we weren't overheard, then again leaned forward and spoke quietly. "I'm pretty sure Eddy is connected with organized crime. It's

only a rumor, and I don't know anything for sure. But I've been hearing it for several years."

"Wow," I said, a little stunned. "Any idea what they're involved in?"

"From what I hear, they're a big drug importer. It used to be cannabis, but since that's pretty much legal everywhere now, they've switched to harder stuff, like heroin and fentanyl. At least, that's what the rumor is."

* * *

After lunch, I returned to the Wedding Center. Dorothy was behind her desk, busily typing into her computer. As always, she looked composed and untroubled by the current crisis.

"Well?" she asked, looking over the top of her reading glasses. "How'd the morning go?"

"Snorkeling went well, and the friction between everyone was kept to a minimum. We'll find out later today, but I think Jake got some great pictures. He'll be over here at five to go over what he has so far."

"I hope his photos are good," Dorothy said. "I'd love it if we could settle down with one photographer."

The bell above the door jingled, and Leilani walked in.

"Hello, ladies," she said as she beamed her joyful smile over us.

"What are you doing here already?" Dorothy asked, looking at her watch. "The next event isn't until six o'clock."

"I know," Leilani said as she collapsed on one of the chairs. "I wanted to see if anybody's learned anything new about the murder. People in my class were talking about it this morning."

Dorothy shook her head. "I wasn't able to find out a thing, and it wasn't because I didn't try. I grilled Jimmy Toki about the security videos. All he told me was they didn't have anything that showed who else was in the conference

room with Alex and Jake. I then asked him about the necklace, and that also got me a whole lot of nothing. What about you?" she asked, looking at me. "Did you find out anything during snorkeling?"

"As a matter of fact," I said, "I've got a ton of new information. Although, honestly, I'm not sure if any of it has anything to do with the murder."

"It sounds like you've been able to dig up some fresh dirt on the wedding party," Dorothy said, her eyebrows raised with interest.

"Oh, good," Leilani said as she leaned forward. "I love hearing everyone's awkward stories and rumors. The more embarrassing, the better. It makes hanging out with everyone at the reception a lot more entertaining. What'd you find out?"

"First of all," I said, "Alex was caught plagiarizing Orson's homework back in college. They both almost got expelled over it. It ruined any plans Orson had of getting his PhD and teaching at a university."

"Are you thinking that could be the motive for Orson to commit murder?" Dorothy asked as she started writing in her notebook.

"Maybe," I said, "but that's not all. Orson and Lauren dated for a couple of years in college, and they were pretty serious. But in their senior year, Alex started to date Lauren. He kept seeing Lauren on the side until Orson found out."

"Geez," Leilani said. "I always hate it when a relationship ends like that."

"Once Orson broke up with Lauren, Alex dumped her," I said. "She'd been growing attached to Alex, and the sudden loss of both her old and new boyfriends devastated her."

"Okay," Leilani said. "I can see how upset both Orson and Lauren would be over everything Alex did to them. But would that be enough motive to kill someone?"

"I'm not sure either," Dorothy said, a trace of doubt in her voice. "Besides, all that was ten years ago. Do you think someone could hold a grudge for that long?"

"Still, I remember what Alex did to Lauren on the beach that first day," Leilani pondered. "She was pretty annoyed at Alex and didn't hesitate to slap the snot out of him. It makes you think."

"I see your points," I said. "But that's not the half of what I found out. Remember that Eddy was married to Roxanne for almost two years after college? Well, I found out how it ended. Eddy walked into his house and caught Roxanne with Alex."

"Wow," Leilani said. "That sounds like an even better motive for murder, but we still have the problem that everything happened a long time ago."

"When Eddy walked in on them, he had a big brawl with Alex," I said. "Alex ended up in the hospital, and Eddy ended up on probation."

After thinking about it for a moment, realization washed over Leilani's face. "That explains why Eddy looked so mad on the beach the other day," she exclaimed. "He had to watch as Alex and his ex-wife frolicked in front of him."

"Yup," I said. "Alex was carrying Roxanne around like she was his prize turkey, and he even tossed her into the ocean."

"So," Dorothy mused as she continued to make notes in her notebook. "If what you heard about the marriage breakup was true, the last time Eddy saw Alex and Roxanne together, they were in the middle of a romp in his own home. I'm sure the incident on the beach stirred up some unpleasant memories."

"I wonder if Alex pulled that stunt on the beach simply to rub it in Eddy's face?" I asked. "He knew Eddy couldn't do anything about it because it would upset Carly."

"I'm starting to think if anybody had a reason to kill Alex, it was Eddy," Leilani mused.

"Oh," Dorothy groaned as she shook her head. "That Alex boy was a nasty piece of work. I'm surprised somebody didn't kill him sooner."

"There's more," I said. "There's also a rumor going around the group that Eddy's involved in organized crime."

"Really?" Leilani asked, eyebrows raised. "Well, if that's true, maybe he wouldn't be as hesitant to kill someone?"

"That thought had crossed my mind," I said.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ELEVEN

We spent the next twenty minutes reviewing the facts of the case as we knew them without coming to any firm conclusions. We all agreed Eddy probably had the best motive for killing Alex. But we still needed more information before we would know anything for sure.

The bell above the door jingled, and Aunt Audrey walked in, a wide grin on her face. She wore a burgundy scoop-neck dress held up with wide shoulder straps.

Hanging around her neck was the diamond and ruby necklace. Even under the indirect lights of the office, the diamonds gave off a fiery sparkling glow.

"Oh, my goodness," Dorothy exclaimed. "You've got your necklace back!"

"Jimmy Toki brought it to my room about ten minutes ago," Aunt Audrey said. "I had to come out and show you."

"Did he say where he got it?" I asked.

"Yeah," Leilani added. "Who took it?"

"Jimmy didn't say, and I don't think he knows. He said somebody brought it up to the front desk. They recognized what it was and gave it to him."

"I suppose it doesn't matter who took it, now that you have it back," I said.

"That's true," Aunt Audrey said slowly. "And I suppose I should be grateful the thieves had a change of heart. They even had it cleaned. My necklace hasn't looked this good in years."

"So, what's wrong?" Dorothy asked as she looked at Aunt Audrey. "You seem troubled."

Aunt Audrey sighed and nodded her head. "Something about this seems off. Why would someone go through all the trouble to steal the necklace, only to give it back? It doesn't make any sense."

* * *

Aunt Audrey took off a few minutes later, saying she had to show everyone that her necklace had been returned. Dorothy looked at us and shook her head, apparently at how crazy the world was.

Leilani grabbed three sodas from the small refrigerator we have stashed in the back of the office. "I wonder who returned the necklace to the front desk?" she asked as she passed out the drinks.

"There's one way to find out," I said as I punched the speakerphone button on my desk phone and called the front desk.

"Hi, Summer," I said when she answered. "It's Kristy."

"Hey, Kristy," she said in her always cheerful voice. "What can I do for you?"

"We heard the stolen diamond and ruby necklace was returned to the front desk. Do you happen to know who brought it up?"

"Jimmy Toki was here asking us the same thing," she said with a laugh. "The necklace was in a big manila envelope. I was in the back office at the time, but I heard a teenager had dropped it off. According to Rachel, the kid had a towel draped over his shoulders, and it looked like he'd just come in from the beach."

"Did the envelope have anything written on it?" Dorothy asked.

"All it said was *Return to the front desk*. Jimmy has it now. You can ask him if you want to know more about it. Anything else I can help you with?"

Dorothy, Leilani, and I looked at each other. Leilani shrugged.

"Thanks, Summer," I said. "I owe you, again."

"Well, that doesn't help us a lot," Leilani said with a scrunched-up face after I hung up with Summer.

"I can't help but think the stolen necklace somehow ties in with everything else," I said. "But I don't see how it could."

"That's true," Dorothy said. "But did you hear Audrey's voice? She thinks something's off with the theft as well."

"Well, she has a point," Leilani said. "Who steals a valuable necklace and then hands it back?"

"Dorothy," I asked, wanting to talk about something other than the murder, "how long have you been keeping that scrapbook with all of the crazy weddings?"

"Yeah," Leilani added. "I didn't know you had anything like that."

"You mean my Hall of Fame?" Dorothy asked with a slight chuckle. "I started it after the first time we were forced to hold the ceremony in the hospital."

"How long ago was that?" Leilani asked. "The hairstyles in the first picture look like they're from an episode of *Friends*."

"Oh, that must have been twenty-five or thirty years ago," Dorothy said as she smiled. "A few weeks after the ceremony, the bride sent me an eight by ten of the wedding party gathered around the hospital bed."

"What happened to the groom?" I asked. "In the picture, he looked pretty messed up."

"He broke his leg in a hang-gliding accident," Dorothy said with a smile and a shake of her head. "The bride had warned him to not jump off a cliff so close to the ceremony, but he did it anyway. You should have heard her yell at him as they applied the cast to his leg. I've always kept the picture of that ceremony as the first page in the book."

"What about the other pictures?" I asked.

"Whenever something crazy happens at a wedding, I'll show the bride the photos and ask her to send me a picture of her ceremony for the book. Most of them do, knowing their wedding will be forever enshrined in the Aloha Lagoon Wedding Hall of Fame."

"How often do you have to use the book?" I asked. "I didn't know you had it, and I've been here almost six months."

"I only bring out the Hall of Fame in an emergency," Dorothy said. "I've found that whenever a bride goes into a panic because of a problem, it helps when they see crazy things often happen at a wedding. It usually works to calm them down. I figured that having a groomsman murdered counted as a bridal emergency."

"Well, it worked with Carly and her aunt," Leilani said. "It was like you fed each of them a Valium."

My cell phone started ringing. I pulled it out and saw it was a local number, but one I didn't recognize. Dorothy and Leilani were both eyeing me as I answered it.

"Hello, Kristy, this is Detective Ray." His voice was the same deep monotone I remembered so clearly from our previous meetings.

"Um, yes, Detective," I said. "What can I do for you?"

Dorothy and Leilani exchanged a glance and leaned forward to listen. I waved them away and concentrated on trying to hear the detective.

"I'd like you to come down to the station," Ray said. "Something interesting's come up, and I'd like to get your thoughts on it."

"Sure," I said. "When would you like me to come in?"

"Right away, if you don't mind."

* * *

I drove down to the police station. It was a single-story stucco structure in the middle of town, across from the Blue Manu Coffee House. I'd been to the coffee shop before, but a visit to the police station was a first for me.

I parked in a visitor's space and checked in with the desk sergeant. He indicated I should have a seat in the sparse waiting area until Ray came out to get me.

I didn't have long to wait before the detective arrived to lead me down a long hallway to his office. He cleared a mound of magazines from a visitor's chair and offered me a seat.

As I made myself comfortable, I looked around the office. It was a disaster.

Styrofoam coffee cups and empty soda cans littered his desk, along with several stained fast-food containers. The trash can was overflowing, and the place had the vaguely unpleasant smell of a college dorm room.

"Miss Piper," Detective Ray said. "Thank you for coming down. How's your wedding party holding up?"

"The group's doing pretty well, all things considered," I said. "The rest of the guests will arrive later today and tomorrow. We're still going ahead with the wedding as planned."

Ray nodded with understanding, then reached under his desk and pulled out a clear plastic bag that contained the souvenir tiki statue. I shuddered at the sight of the murder weapon.

"This has been run through the lab, and they confirmed the presence of blood and hair from Alex Adair. We didn't detect the presence of any unknown DNA, and there weren't any latent prints. But they did conclude this was the murder weapon."

"What about Jake? He was hit as well. Wasn't there any of his hair or blood on the statue?"

"The injury Jake Hunter received to the side of his head didn't even break the skin. I would have been surprised to have any of his blood on the tiki. But the reason I called you down was this."

Ray held up the plastic bag containing the figurine. "See, just a normal souvenir tiki, like you can get at any tourist shop on the island. But the lab found something unusual."

The detective pushed on one of the tiki's knees through the plastic. The side of the statue popped open to reveal a secret compartment.

"Over the years," Ray said in his flat voice, "I've come across a lot of items with hidden compartments, but this is about the best I've ever seen."

"Do you think it's for drugs?"

"I don't know," Ray said as he ran his hand through his hair. "It seems kinda small for drugs. I was hoping you may have overheard something that could tell me what this was going to be used for?"

I mentally searched through my conversations of the last few days but came up empty. "Sorry, Detective. I don't know anything about the tiki, and I can't even guess at what was going into the compartment."

"Okay," he said, his voice now sounding tired. "If you hear of anything, let me know."

"I'll keep my ears open. I should also let you know. I've been asking around, and I think we can eliminate all but five of the people in the wedding party as suspects."

"You've been asking around?" the detective asked, suddenly looking unhappy.

"Yes," I said, knowing he would want the information. "It turns out that when Alex was killed, Aunt Audrey, Justin, Carly, and Derek, were at the Rainbow Buffet having breakfast. Roxanne was at the Loco Moco."

Ray sighed, pulled out his battered notebook, and picked up a pen from his desk. He flipped over several pages and looked at me.

"And how do you know they were all at breakfast when the murder was committed?"

"From the timestamps on their bills. When someone leaves a restaurant, the system registers the time. Since everyone is charging their food to the wedding account, nobody paid in cash or used a separate credit card."

Ray scribbled a few notes and looked up at me. He didn't say anything, so I continued.

"We've also learned a lot about why people hated Alex so much. It turns out he was a cheat, a bully, and a jerk. He had a lot of enemies within the wedding party."

I looked at Detective Ray, waiting for him to respond, but he only looked at me.

I rushed in to fill the silence. "In college, Alex pretended to care about Lauren and started dating her, simply to get back at Orson over a cheating scandal they'd had earlier in their senior year. Then, on the beach the other day, Alex picked up Lauren and was going to throw her into the ocean. She ended up slapping him pretty hard. I've talked with her, and I know how much she hated Alex."

"Are you saying Lauren Maxwell took out both Alex Adair and Jake Hunter in that conference room with the tiki? She's a healthy-looking woman, but I wouldn't place a bet on her in a fight to the death with those two."

"No, I'm not saying it was Lauren. There's also Orson. He almost got kicked out of school because Alex cheated off his English paper. It shattered Orson's dreams about being a university professor. When Orson discovered Alex was intimate with Lauren, who was Orson's girlfriend at the time, it broke his heart."

"So, you think Orson Cross did it?" Detective Ray asked, skepticism in his voice.

"No, because it gets worse. Eddy and Roxanne were married right after college. Two years later, Eddy found Alex with his wife, and there was a fight in the bedroom. Alex ended up in the hospital, and Eddy served two years of probation over it."

"Anything else?" Ray asked. I caught some snark in his voice.

"Alex picked up Roxanne on the beach the other day, spent several minutes carrying her around, and then threw

her into the Pacific. It was as if Alex was purposefully taunting Eddy. I could tell it really upset him."

"Okay, you now think Eddy Martin did it?"

"I can't say for sure yet. But at the moment, he's definitely the one I'd be looking at."

"But you don't have any information that Jake Hunter was the killer? Even though he'd gotten into a fight with the victim the day before and apparently was in the middle of another fight with him at the time of the murder?"

"No, of course not. Jake didn't kill anyone. He heard someone in trouble and was only trying to help. Besides, I'm pretty sure he didn't hit himself over the head hard enough to be knocked unconscious. And what exactly was his motive?"

I noticed Detective Ray had stopped making notes. It was sort of hard to tell, but the look he was giving me didn't seem all that friendly.

"Miss Piper," he said, his tone clearly unhappy now. "I know you're only trying to be helpful. But I don't need you to interview the witnesses for me, and I don't need you to establish their motives or alibis."

"But I thought you'd want to know," I said, feeling frustrated. "I mean, I'm right there, and these people are talking with me. Some of them have really opened up."

"Or it's possible they're simply using you to help establish their alibis. Please, leave this to the professionals. All you're doing is muddying the waters."

"Fine," I said, now feeling slightly hostile toward the detective. "Then I suppose you also don't want to know that Aunt Audrey has her diamond and ruby necklace back."

"Yes, I heard about that. Jimmy Toki called about fifteen minutes ago. My next stop is to return to the resort to talk with both Jimmy and Ms. Audrey Wentworth."

"To save you some time, the necklace was sent to the front desk in a manila envelope. They think the person who

brought it up was a teenager who'd come in from the beach. The envelope had *Return to the front desk* written on it."

The detective raised an eyebrow. "And how did you learn this information?" he asked in a tired voice.

Geez, this guy is suspicious of everything.

"Um, I called the front desk and asked."

Duh.

"You can go, Miss Piper," he said with a sigh. "But please stop playing detective and let me get on with my investigation."

* * *

I drove back to the resort and parked in the employee's lot. I still had some time before Jake was due to arrive. I wasn't yet ready for Dorothy to grill me about my visit with the detective, so I took my time walking back to the main building.

I ended up strolling through a grouping of *The Huts*, the high-end bungalows that were scattered between the main building and the beach. These were the cottages where the members of the wedding party were staying.

I had just turned to go back up by the central pool when I saw someone hiding against a wall, behind a small plumeria tree. As I looked closer, I saw a pair of pasty white legs wearing bright orange flip-flops.

Orson?

What was Gamer Orson doing that had him skulking around the grounds? I was about to walk over to him, but then my curiosity overcame me.

I carefully angled myself behind him to see what he was looking at. When I was more or less seeing what Orson was seeing, I watched as Angry Eddy and Flirty Roxanne came into view.

They were standing in a wide spot along one of the paths that wound through the resort. Tropical foliage lined

the walkway, shielding them from the prying eyes of the rest of the resort. But not from Orson and me.

As I watched, they appeared to be simply talking. But judging by their body language, it was apparent their conversation was of an intimate nature.

They were both smiling and standing close to one another. At one point, Eddy placed his hand on her arm, and she took the opportunity to step closer to him.

Although I was somewhat concerned about Roxanne hooking up with a possible murderer, what was happening between the two wasn't anything unusual. When former lovers reunited after being separated for years, it often led to rekindled romances.

My larger concern was for Orson. It was obvious he was spying on the couple, and I suspected it would end badly. If I didn't intercede, someone would likely report him. He'd then find himself talking to resort security or maybe even the police.

I moved closer to where he was standing and greeted the legs I saw behind the tree. "Hi, Orson," I said in my most friendly, non-judgmental tone. "Don't you love the way the blossoms smell? Some people call it a frangipani tree, but I always prefer plumeria."

"Oh, um, yes," Orson's voice stammered out from behind the branches. "They're lovely."

"Just to let you know," I said in a confidential tone, "I wouldn't pick too many of the flowers. The head groundskeeper here, Nick Woodfield, tends to get cranky whenever he sees a plumeria tree with no blossoms."

"Oh, of course," he said with a forced laugh as he stepped out from behind the leafy tree. "Um, I figured nobody would notice if I only took a few from the back."

"Good thinking," I said. "Here, I'll keep a lookout while you nab a few."

Orson glanced in the direction of Eddy and Roxanne, then absentmindedly pulled off two blossoms from the back

of the tree and showed them to me.

"Perfect," I said. "You know, if you float the blossoms in a bowl, they'll last longer."

"Thanks," he said as we started walking back to the main building. "I'll grab something to put the water in."

We were passing the central pool when Orson stopped me. He paused as if organizing his thoughts, then he spoke.

"Kristy, what do you think about what's going on here?" He seemed remarkably focused for someone who'd been caught spying on his fellow wedding party members.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Alex's murder," he said as if it was obvious. "Can't you see? We're missing something. None of this makes any sense."

"Do murders have to make sense?" I asked. "I know Alex had his share of enemies."

"I design a lot of games, and all of them have a mystery element. But this murder came out of the blue. Sure, a lot of people hated Alex, but enough to murder him? I don't think so. Plus, Aunt Audrey's had her necklace returned. That's huge. There's a motive here we aren't seeing."

"Well, who do you think did it?" I was curious as to what he thought.

He paused and stared into the distance for several seconds. Again, I couldn't tell if he was thinking some deep thoughts or simply spacing out. Maybe it was a bit of both.

"So far, Eddy's the one with the clearest motive," he finally said. "His hatred of Alex has been building up for years. But if it was Eddy, I can't figure out how he did it."

"What's to figure out?" I asked. "Alex was hit on the head with a tiki."

Orson shook his head and waved his hand dismissively. "That's not what I'm saying."

"Well?" I asked. "Then what?"

"I'm pretty sure I saw Eddy walking on the beach about the time Alex was being murdered. I can't say for sure since I wasn't paying close attention. I mean, who knew we'd need an alibi for that morning. But I think it was him. If so, there's no way he could have been in two places at once."

"You were also on the beach when Alex was killed?"

"That's right, he said. "And as I've already told the detective, I don't think anyone can confirm that."

"So, let me get this straight. Now you *don't* think Eddy killed Alex?" Orson seemed to be in a talkative mood, and I wanted all I could get out of him.

"I have several plausible story threads going on this. Eddy's motive is simply the most likely. Like I said, a lot of people didn't like Alex, but most of them didn't hate him enough to murder him."

"Any idea who *did* hate him enough?" I asked.

"Well," he said as he rubbed the back of his head. "I have my suspicions, but I'd rather not say. At least not until I can come up with some proof. You know, I don't want to say someone's a murderer unless I can back it up."

"I guess I can understand that," I said, a little disappointed. "Um, if it's not too delicate of a subject, I heard Derek originally started his company with your idea. Do you want to tell me about it?"

At the mention of Derek, Orson became angry. I'd obviously hit on a sensitive subject.

"I came up with a new way for computer networks to communicate with each other," Orson fumed. "The idea was completely brilliant. Unfortunately, no one but Derek thought it would work. He started a company after we graduated to develop my ideas. I thought he was doing me a favor by signing me up as employee number one."

"Well, that sounds great," I said. "What happened?"

"Unfortunately, when I signed up as an employee, it seems I also signed away all the rights I had to my ideas."

They became the property of Derek's company. When I said I deserved a share of the profits generated from my ideas, the jackhole fired me."

"That doesn't seem right. Couldn't you take him to court?"

Orson's face softened, and he became somewhat melancholy.

"Oh, sure. I talked to a lawyer, several actually. Unfortunately, the paperwork I'd signed was ironclad and apparently pretty standard in the tech industry. Derek legally stole my idea, and there wasn't a lot I could do about it. Basically, chalk it up to being young and stupid."

We both stood for a moment in an awkward silence. Neither one of us knew what to say next.

"Okay, I finally said, "let me know if you come up with anything new with the murder investigation. Also, don't forget, dinner is tonight at six o'clock, starting with drinks in the Rainbow Lounge. They'll have us set up for dinner in a room in the back. Dress is island casual."

Orson looked down at his aloha shirt, white pants, and orange flip-flops, then back up at me.

"You're perfect," I said.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE

I made my way back to the Wedding Center and wasn't surprised that Jake was already there, talking with Leilani and Dorothy. What did surprise me was how happy everyone seemed to be.

"What's going on?" I asked as I looked at the group. I then focused on Jake. "It looks like you've been here for a while."

"My meeting wrapped up early," he said as he smiled at me. "So, I thought I'd come over early and show everyone what I had."

"Jake was showing us the photos," Dorothy said. "We've been sorting through them."

"Yeah," Leilani added as she looked at Jake. "Show her our top five."

Jake obliged and started moving the mouse around on his notebook computer. On the big wall-mounted TV, an image of the twin sisters, Victoria and Madeline, came up.

It was a wonderful photo. There was no trace of animosity between them. In fact, they looked beautiful together. You could feel the affection they felt toward each other, even if it was buried deep down.

The next photo was of Lauren and Orson. They had the orange glow of the sunset behind them, and you could feel the chemistry between them.

The third picture was of Roxanne and Eddy. They were giving each other a look that expressed mutual tension, but also a subtle affection.

"Nice," I said. "Those came out really well."

"There's more," Dorothy said. "These next two are my favorites."

Jake pulled up the group shot he had done on the beach the first afternoon. With the green of the coconut

palms and the blue ocean as a backdrop, it was a captured moment in time. Everyone in the group had a joyful expression, even Alex.

I looked at the image on the screen for several moments. Not only did it get everyone at their best, but technically it was a great shot. The lighting and focus were spot-on. "You got everyone at the perfect moment," I said. "Nobody's blinking, and everyone's looking at the camera."

"I did a burst of eight frames, and it was the last one," Jake said. "I got lucky."

"Show her our number one," Leilani said, excitement in her voice.

Jake pulled up an image of Carly and Justin, under the water, in front of a colorful coral reef. Dozens of brilliantly colored tropical fish swam around them. Again, the lighting was ideal, and the photo was well framed.

The Bride was clearly visible across Carly's suit, and the bow tie around Justin's neck was straight. They held each other in a loose but tender embrace, bubbles drifting up around them. It was the perfect tropical destination wedding photo.

"That's amazing," I exclaimed. "What a great image."

"It's going on the wall," Dorothy said as she pointed to a dated wedding poster hanging in a frame. "I've wanted something to replace that old picture for years. I'm also thinking about asking Carly if we can use it on our website."

"Oh, what about the other picture?" Leilani asked Jake. He must have known which one she was talking about, because he pulled up a new photo.

The image was a close-up profile of Alex. He wasn't being a bully or acting like a jerk. Instead, he was calmly looking out at the ocean, a wise and peaceful look on his handsome face. The beach and a few blurred coconut palms were visible in the background.

"Wow," I exclaimed. "Did you mean to take this shot?"

"No," Jake said with a snorted-out laugh. "He was standing next to Derek at the time. I guess Derek was talking, so Alex looked out over the Pacific as he listened. I cropped Derek out and came up with this."

"We were going to send it to Carly right away," Dorothy said. "Then she could send it to Alex's family."

We sat for a moment, each of us lost in our thoughts of what had happened.

"These pictures are great," I said as I looked at Jake's handsome face. "I know Carly will love them."

Leilani started to giggle, and we all looked at her.

"What?" I asked.

"Show her the one you showed us," she said to Jake, then her giggles evolved to complete laughter.

Jake looked a little uncomfortable, but he moved the mouse around on his computer, and a new picture popped up.

"I only kept this image because I thought it might have something to do with the murder," he said. "Normally, I delete these."

"Oh my," I exclaimed as I saw the picture.

The photo was of Derek and Victoria. They were floating on the surface with their legs dangling down in the water. Both were facing away from the camera and weren't aware they were being photographed from behind. The thing that shocked me was Victoria. She had her hand on Derek's tush and was giving it a firm squeeze.

"I don't know if that has anything to do with the murder or not," Dorothy said in her flat voice. "But I'd say someone's going to get lucky soon."

"I'll say," Leilani laughed. "I wonder if billionaire tushie feels any different than a regular butt. I'll have to try that sometime. Well, as soon as I can find a billionaire."

"That matches with what Madeline told you," Jake said. "She thought her sister would be going after Derek sometime before the wedding."

"From the way they've been acting," I said, "it wouldn't surprise me if it's soon, maybe even tonight."

"What did Detective Ray want?" Dorothy asked, gently steering the subject to less sordid waters. "Was it about the murder or the necklace?"

"It was the murder," I said, somewhat annoyed. "He found a secret compartment in the tiki that was used as the murder weapon."

"A secret compartment?" Leilani asked. "What about it?"

"That was it. Honestly, it was nothing. He didn't know what to make of it, and neither did I. Although, you were right about him not being happy about us looking into the murder. He thinks we'll muddy the waters by trying to find out what really happened."

"Well, we aren't going to stop, are we?" Leilani asked.

"Of course not," I said. "From the way Detective Ray talked, he's not trying very hard to find the actual killer. He already has someone convenient to pin the murder on, and he seems satisfied with that."

"What about the necklace?" Jake asked, apparently wanting to change the subject.

"Somebody returned the stolen necklace to Aunt Audrey," Dorothy said. "Why the thief would want to do that, we haven't a clue."

"That is strange," Jake agreed.

"Speaking of strange," I said. "I caught Orson spying on Eddy and Roxanne a few minutes ago. I get the feeling he's been following them around since we got back today."

"Why would he be doing that?" Dorothy asked. "That boy seems rather odd."

"I think he's trying to figure out who the murderer is," I said. "He's almost making it sound like he's doing research for a new video game."

"Either that or he's a wacko stalker," Leilani said, now looking at Jake. "He could be the one who took out Alex and

tried to take you out as well."

"What?" Jake asked. "Are you suggesting Orson could be the killer, and he's stalking his next victim?"

"We already know Alex ruined his dreams of teaching and stole his girlfriend," she said. "I think Orson had ample reason to want to see him dead."

"You may be right," Dorothy chimed in. "We don't know his whereabouts during the murder. Unless he has an alibi, he could be the one."

"When I talked to Orson earlier, he said he was walking on the beach when Alex was killed," I said. "He didn't think anyone could vouch for him. Orson also said he'd told all of this to Detective Ray already. But he then said another strange thing."

"What was that?" Dorothy asked.

"Orson said he thought he saw Eddy on the beach during the time Alex was murdered."

"If Orson really was the killer, you wouldn't think he'd try to invent an alibi for the obvious suspect," Jake observed.

"Well, unless Orson really did kill Alex," Leilani said. "In that case, he's only making up stuff to throw us off the scent."

* * *

At a quarter to six, Dorothy took off for the day. Jake went to his car to drop off his computer and get his camera equipment. Leilani grabbed her video camera, and we walked over to the Rainbow Buffet.

The restaurant was housed in its own building on the far side of the main pool. The inside was decorated in a light tropical theme with native plants in clusters of planters along the sides of the cavernous main room. In the open rafters of the restaurant, huge rattan fans slowly turned, circulating the air.

The building also featured the Rainbow Lounge, a large bar on the lanai where we'd had the Aloha reception earlier in the week. It was a great place to watch the sun go down, making the venue popular for drinks before dinner.

We went in and walked to one of the smaller banquet rooms in the back. As we'd previously arranged, a long table had been set up for the wedding party. A quick glance showed me that everything was perfect.

As the group arrived, I let them know we'd be having drinks and appetizers in the lounge. After the cocktail hour, they'd go through the food line, and everyone would meet in the banquet room.

Tonight would be the last formal event before the rehearsal dinner the following day. A few of the guests from the mainland had already started to arrive, including the bride's parents.

I was expecting a total of about fifteen for the evening. The remaining twenty guests were scheduled to arrive either later in the evening or the following afternoon.

* * *

By six-fifteen, everyone had a drink and had gathered on the lanai. A three-piece Hawaiian band featuring Nani Johnson on ukulele had set up on a small stage in the corner of the veranda. They were softly playing traditional melodies, which added a relaxing feeling to the night.

Jake had joined us and was busy taking candid. Leilani walked through the group, chatting and recording videos. The few clouds in the west were beginning to glow orange and red with the sunset, making a colorful background for Jake and Leilani to work with.

As people gathered and talked, I noticed how everybody seemed inclined to split into groups. The two sisters, Victoria and Madeline, mainly chatted in a circle with Lauren, Orson, and the bride's parents. Tonight, Madeline

wore her hair up and had on a floppy sun hat with a yellow daisy on the side. It looked cute on her.

Eddy, Derek, and Roxanne had also formed a loose group with some of the other new arrivals. Carly and Justin flitted between the two groups, making sure everyone felt included.

Aunt Audrey arrived a few minutes later and went directly to the bar. She ordered a Mai Tai and drained it in a couple of minutes. When she returned for a refill, I drifted over to her.

"Hey," I said. "How are you feeling tonight?"

"I'll be honest," she confided as she picked up her latest drink and took a long sip. "Between the murder, having my necklace stolen, then having it returned, the last few days have really drained me."

"You aren't wearing your necklace tonight? I figured after everything, you'd want to show it off."

She shook her head and took another long sip. "Detective Ray came over this afternoon to ask me about it."

"I heard he was planning on doing that. Did he have any more information on who took it? I talked with him earlier in the day, and he didn't seem to know anything."

Aunt Audrey shook her head in disgust. "I don't think he even has a suspect. My necklace was apparently returned anonymously. He says he has no way of tracing it back to the thief."

"Well, on the bright side, at least you got it back."

"Yes, but I still think there's something off with it. I also explained that to the detective. He took the necklace to have it looked at by an expert."

"Do you think someone might have switched out some of the diamonds with imitations?"

"Oh, no," Aunt Audrey smiled and shook her head. "Nothing like that. But something about it doesn't feel right."

The only odd thing about the cocktail hour was that the man with the handlebar mustache had appeared again at the lounge. He didn't approach anyone, but I observed him watching the group several times.

I took out my phone and took a picture of him when he wasn't looking. I then sent it to Jimmy Toki, along with a note asking if he knew anything about him.

Still not knowing what to make of the man, I asked Carly if she knew who he was.

We glanced over, and the man was currently alone at a table working on a Shark Bite. "He's no one I know," she replied after taking a moment to look him over. "But I've seen him around several times this week."

* * *

At seven, I let the group know it was time for dinner. There was a murmur of agreement, and several people, led by Gamer Orson and Aunt Audrey, went up to the bar to get a final refill.

I'd decided that if the Mustache Man continued to follow us, I would either confront him directly or have Jimmy do it. It wasn't like he was bothering anyone, but it was a little disconcerting to have him hanging around the group.

"Did you want to stick around for dinner?" I asked Jake as the group filtered over to the buffet line. "Since you're the new Wedding Center photographer, you'll get a great employee discount."

"Not tonight," he said as he started packing away his camera. "I need to send out some things on the marketing side tonight."

"Oh, okay," I said, feeling a little disappointed. "Maybe next time?"

Jake looked at me and seemed to make his mind up about something. "You know, I could grab my computer from

the car and find a place to do it over here. Would you like to meet up somewhere after the group's done with dinner?"

A warm feeling swept over me, and I couldn't help myself. I broke out in a wide smile. "That sounds perfect. Dinner won't last a lot past eight-fifteen or eight-thirty. After it's over, why don't we meet at The Lava Pot? Say, nine o'clock? We could hang out and chat for a while."

"I'd love that," he said as he gave me his adorable lopsided smile. "Two hours should give me plenty of time. I'll finish up my client proposal, then meet you there."

I ended up sitting next to Flirty Roxanne for dinner. With the murder of Alex and all the time she was spending with her ex-husband, Angry Eddy, she'd turned down the overt sexiness a little.

After seeing how Orson had avoided Derek all week, I decided to ask her about it. "Do you know any of the history between Derek and Orson?"

"Are you talking about the company Derek started?" she asked as she took a sip of her Rum Punch.

"I'm just curious how Derek ended up rich, and Orson got nothing."

"I don't know all the details of it," she said. "You may have heard that Orson wanted to get his PhD and go into teaching, but Alex was caught copying off his paper."

"I heard about that. It would have prevented him from being hired by any decent school."

"That's right. I heard a rumor that Derek was the one who told Alex to copy the paper and turn it in like that. Someone said Derek paid him a thousand dollars to do it."

"Why would Derek do that?"

"It was because of Orson's ideas. Derek wanted Orson to work with him after graduation to develop the idea, so he made it impossible for Orson to continue with his schooling."

"Wow. If that's true, it seems a little slimy."

Roxanne rolled her eyes and nodded. She then took a long sip of her drink. "Anyway, after about a year, Orson and

Derek turned the idea into a real product. But once they got a few big orders, Derek pulled some shady legal maneuvers to screw Orson out of the money."

"I heard about that. Orson signed some paperwork that said his ideas belonged to Derek's company."

"That's what I heard as well," Roxanne said. "When Orson threatened to take Derek to court, Alex went over to Orson's house and hit him in the face."

"Wow," I said, a little shocked. "I had no idea that's what caused the fight."

"I know, right? It was pretty much assumed by everyone that Derek was the one who'd sent Alex after Orson. Again, Alex likely got a lot of money to do it."

"So, it sounds like Orson had a motive to go after both Alex and Derek?"

"Yeah, they were both terrible to him. That's the sort of thing that has to burn in your gut for years. I bet Orson's still upset about it."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The group finished up dinner with a round of coffee and desserts, then they started to drift away. Leilani also got ready to take off for the night.

"I'm out of here," she said. "I have a date later on, but first, I want to go home and do a quick edit on the videos. I'll bring over what I have in the morning. What are you doing tonight?"

"Um, I'm meeting Jake at The Lava Pot for drinks," I said, feeling my face turn red.

Leilani smiled and started to laugh. "Really? It sounds like you two are hitting it off."

"It's too soon to tell for sure. But this will sort of be our second date of the day. I think it's a good sign."

"Well, you know I'll want a full report. It'd be great if you could find someone special. I know you've been looking for a while. Maybe we could double date sometime?"

"Are you still going out with that surfing instructor, Brad?"

"Nah, he turned out to be a total loser. He's handsome and has a great body, but he knows it. I'm back to one of my awkward nerds. He kisses better and always seems grateful to get a date."

Leilani took off, and I changed out of my resort polo. I then strolled over to The Lava Pot, finding an open table on the deck, three places down from where Roxanne and Eddy were sitting.

Eddy looked somewhat tentative, but Roxanne was leaning in and smiling, her fingers resting lightly on his arm. I didn't want to interfere with their evening, so I purposely ignored them. I pulled out my tablet, ordered a ginger ale, and waited for Jake.

After I'd had my second refill, I glanced at my watch and saw it was already a few minutes after nine. I sighed a little.

It seemed like Jake was the type of person who always ran late. Not ideal for me, since I was always early, but it was something I could possibly work with.

Benny Hoku and his Ukulele Wahines played traditional Hawaiian music inside the tiki bar. Fortunately, the big doors were open to the deck, and I could hear them clearly, even over the sound of the waves crashing on the beach. It gave the place a peaceful and romantic feeling.

My phone started ringing, and I pulled it out of my bag. I smiled when I saw it was Jake.

"Hey," I said. "I'm out on the deck. I've saved you a seat."

"Um, thanks," he said. His voice sounded a little strained.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," he said, his voice still sounding weird. "The proposal ended up being a lot more challenging than I thought it would be. But I have everything straightened out now. I'll be right over."

* * *

Jake showed up at The Lava Pot ten minutes later. He seemed to be in a better mood, and we both ordered a Lava Flow. It had been a long day, and I knew a drink would hit the spot.

As he sat next to me, I caught a trace of his cologne. As always, it evoked an almost unconscious physical response.

Jake began talking about his proposal and how the client wanted a lot of contradictory things. I followed along the best I could, but the subtleties of designing a corporate marketing strategy were lost on me.

The waitress dropped off another round, and I ended up telling Jake more about my time growing up in Denver and my wedding planning business in Arizona. Jake was a great listener and seemed interested in what I had to say. He said he'd been to the mainland several times and was always impressed by how big everything seemed to be.

When the waitress came by and asked us if we wanted a third round, I declined and handed her a few bills.

"Thank you," Jake said, impressed that I'd paid but sounding a little disappointed that our date was over. "Do you need to take off?"

"Actually, the moon will be beautiful tonight. I was thinking about taking a walk along the beach."

"The beach?" he asked, seemingly confused. Then his face brightened as he caught my meaning, "Would you like some company?"

"I'd love that," I said, giving him my best smile.

We stood and stepped off the deck, onto the sand. I slipped off my shoes and found room for them in my bag. Jake was wearing his beach sandals and just left them on.

We took a few steps toward the water, and Jake started veering towards the left.

"Would you mind if we went the other way?" I asked, eyeing a loud party going on about a quarter of a mile away. "They built a bonfire on the beach. I don't want to be near it when the cops shut them down."

"Um, okay," he said, and we turned to the right to angle down to the Pacific.

We reached the waterline and slowly walked down the beach. The waves were gentle, and the warm water splashed over our feet. The moon was nearly full and had already come over the horizon, giving us plenty of light to see.

We spent the next few minutes talking about some of the crazy things that happened to me as a wedding planner, and he spoke of his adventures in photography. As we

chatted, I felt Jake's arm slip over my shoulder. With my heart pounding, I responded by putting my arm around his waist.

As we continued to stroll, a group of seven or eight noisy teenagers came up from behind us, and we stopped to let them pass us by. Rather than continuing our walk, we stood and watched as they went farther down the beach.

Feeling the moment was right, I slowly turned and found myself looking up at Jake's handsome face. He looked down at me, and he knew what I was about to do.

We were so close to each other that my lips seemed to move on their own. I closed my eyes and waited for our first kiss.

From up the beach, one of the teenagers screamed. It wasn't the good-natured squealing the girls had been doing. Something had frightened her. That was followed by the group talking loudly all at once.

I opened my eyes. Jake was looking over at the commotion. Several of the teenagers were using their cell phone flashlights to light up something on the beach at the high-water line.

"Come on," he said. "Let's make sure it's not a sea turtle."

We hurried down the beach toward the group. They were clustered below the big lava rock that marked the end of the resort property.

As we walked, I slipped my hand into Jake's. He didn't seem to mind.

That's nice. But I'll still need to kiss him soon.

I squeezed his hand tightly, but not from affection. As we got closer, the thing on the sand slowly became visible.

It was the body of a man. From the angle of the limbs, it was obvious he was dead. When we were ten feet away, I saw a distinctive handlebar mustache.

Oh no.

The world went fuzzy, and I dropped to my knees. Tiny black spots started dancing in front of my eyes, and I began to hyperventilate. It then took several moments to get myself under control.

For some reason, this new body affected me a lot more than when I'd found Alex. Jake had his hands on my shoulders, looking down at me with concern. He really did have a handsome face.

"I'm alright," I said as he helped me up.

"Did anyone call this in?" Jake asked the teenagers.

"I'm live-streaming it," one of the boys announced proudly as he kept his cell phone pointed toward his face, the dead body visible in the background.

"The body behind me appears to be a white or Hispanic male, approximately fifty years old," the boy narrated to his internet audience. *"Although we made sure not to touch the body, it doesn't appear the victim has been here for more than an hour or two."*

"I'll call Detective Ray," I said to Jake. "I have his number."

I pulled out my phone and scrolled down until I found the listing for the detective. It troubled me that I needed to have that kind of information now.

The phone rang three times before Detective Ray answered. "Yes, Miss Piper," he said in his tired, monotone voice. Apparently, the detective had my number in his contact list as well. "What can I do for you tonight?"

"I'm out on the beach below the big rock at the end of the resort property. We just found the body of a man on the beach."

"Do you know who it is?"

"No, but he's been at the resort all week. I think he's a guest, and I think he's been following the wedding party."

I heard the detective groan in frustration. "Fine. I want you to keep everyone away from the body. Make sure no one touches it or disturbs the sand around it. Tell everyone

it's an official police crime scene. I'll be there as soon as I can."

I disconnected and then called out to the teenagers. "The police have made the area around the body a crime scene. Everyone will need to back away. The police will be here in a few minutes."

The teenagers moaned about being told to do something by an adult, then backed off eight or nine paces. The live streamer made sure to get in one more shot of his face with the dead body sprawled out behind him.

I then scrolled down my contact list and called Jimmy Toki.

Yet another person I never expected to call tonight.

"Hey, Kristy," Jimmy said in his bright voice. "You're calling kinda late tonight. What's going on?"

"Jimmy," I said. "It looks like there's been another murder. It's the guy in the picture I sent to you earlier. I think he's a guest of the resort. He's been following us around all week."

I heard him let out a long breath. "Man, I'm starting to think you're bad luck. Where are you?"

"Jake and I are on the beach, by the big rock. I've already called Detective Ray."

"Okay, keep everybody away. I'll need to make a couple of phone calls. Then I'll be out there."

* * *

I was still holding Jake's arm for support when I spotted the lights of one of the resort's beach buggies coming toward us. When it stopped, Jimmy Toki and Detective Ray climbed out.

Both men walked up slowly to stand next to Jake and me. We all looked down at the body, now brightly lit by the vehicle's headlights.

"The sand around the body has been disturbed," Detective Ray grumbled, looking at me like it was my fault.

"We weren't the first ones here," I exclaimed as I motioned to the teenagers, now clustered twenty feet away. The one boy still had his phone out, narrating the scene to his live-stream audience.

"It appears that a detective from the Aloha Lagoon police department has arrived at the murder scene," he spoke in the flat but urgent tones of a news reporter. *"We'll see if we can learn what he finds out about the dead man."*

Jimmy pulled out a flashlight and spent several moments scanning the area. He must have seen something of interest because he began to drift up the slope of the beach to where the sand ended at a cluster of coconut palms and tropical foliage.

The three of us watched as Jimmy spent several minutes examining the area. He then returned to where we were standing and reported to Ray. "It looks like two people came from the resort. They stayed close to the trees rather than near the water."

The detective nodded and scribbled a few lines in his notebook.

"The sand is messed up next to those coconut palms," Jimmy continued as he pointed his flashlight to the tree line. "I'd say they had a scuffle. It looks like the victim then staggered towards the water and collapsed on this pile of kelp at the high tide line. The perp returned to the resort."

"When the murderer went back, was he walking or running?" Detective Ray asked.

"His strides were consistent with walking, both coming and going. To anyone looking up from the beach, he'd look like a guest out on a stroll. That close to the tree line, he'd be in the shadows pretty much the entire time, even with the bright moonlight. I doubt if we'll get any witnesses."

"Did you see anything else?" the detective asked.

"Yeah, I want you to look at a couple of things I found," Jimmy said, while making hand motions for us to stay put.

Jimmy and Detective Ray marched up to the trees. By now, Detective Ray had his flashlight out as well. They spent several minutes discussing what they were looking at and pointing their lights at the sand.

When they returned to the body, Detective Ray pulled out his phone and made a call. Jimmy walked over to Jake and me.

"It looks like we found the murder weapon," he said, lowering his voice while eyeing the teenagers. "There's a chunk of driftwood up by the trees with blood on it. The killer must have bashed him in the head, just like the last time."

Ray got off the phone and walked over to us. I couldn't help but notice the glare he was giving Jake. "Mr. Hunter," he said. "I'd like to speak with Miss Piper for a moment."

"Sure," Jake said as he drifted over to the teenagers. The one boy who was live-streaming began to interview him.

"Excuse me, sir," I heard the boy ask. "You just spent several minutes with the police as they began their investigation. What can you tell us about the dead body on the beach? Have they definitely concluded it was a murder?"

"Miss Piper," Ray said as we stepped away from the body. "Do you know who that man is?"

"No, but he's been following us around all week. I sent a picture of him to Jimmy earlier tonight," I said, feeling a little numb.

"When was the last time you saw him alive?"

"He was watching us when we were having drinks at the Rainbow Lounge. That ended three hours ago, maybe a little longer."

"The detective looked at his watch. "So, a little after seven, something like that?"

"About then. I don't know the exact time."

"Did he argue with anyone while your group was there, or did you see anyone follow him as he left?"

"Nothing like that. Things were peaceful all day. People in the group seemed to be getting along well with everyone. I can't say I noticed when he left, only when he was there."

"Were you with Jake Hunter the entire time?"

What? Are you kidding me? He can't be serious.

"Well, no. Not the entire time. Jake was with us, taking pictures when the group had drinks and appetizers at the Rainbow Lounge. After that, he worked on a marketing proposal for his business somewhere at the resort. We met at The Lava Pot for drinks a little after nine."

"So, you can't account for Mr. Hunter's whereabouts for a little over two hours?"

"Um, no. But I'm sure someone at the resort saw him working."

"You and Mr. Hunter found the body?"

I shook my head. "The teenagers over there found it," I said, motioning to the group that was still huddled on the beach. "We were about forty or fifty yards behind them. One of the girls screamed, and we came up to see what had startled them."

"One more thing. What brand of camera does Mr. Hunter use?"

"Nikon," I said. Now more confused than ever. "Is that important?"

"Thank you, Miss Piper," he said in his monotone voice. "I'll next need to speak with Mr. Hunter, but I'll let you know if I have any other questions."

* * *

Detective Ray talked with Jake for about ten minutes. Then they both got in the beach buggy and took off in the direction of the main building. Not knowing how long they'd be gone, I walked back to the central part of the resort.

I found Jake after searching for about fifteen minutes. He looked a little shaken. "What did Detective Ray want?" I asked.

"Not a lot. He mainly wanted to know where I was while I worked on my marketing presentation. I showed him, but it was kind of out of the way, and I don't think anyone else saw me there."

"That's not good, but you had no reason to kill that guy. We don't even know who he is."

"There was one more thing," Jake said. "He asked me about my camera and wanted me to show it to him. We went out to my car, and I let him look at it. He then wanted to know about my lens and wanted to see the lens cap."

"That's a little weird," I said.

"Yeah, but when I went to show it to him, the cap wasn't on the lens. I looked, but it also wasn't in my pocket. I must have put it down somewhere in the Rainbow Lounge while I was shooting the group tonight."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I had a restless night and woke up early. We'd made it to Friday, the day of the rehearsal dinner. After last night's tragedy, I only hoped nothing else horrible happened to derail the wedding.

I made it to the office a little before seven but wasn't all that surprised when no one else was there. Feeling restless and a little bit hungry, I walked out through the resort grounds and ended up at the Rainbow Buffet.

As always, the place was buzzing with activity as crowds of hotel guests filed through for breakfast. I went through the à la carte line and grabbed an orange juice and a warm scone.

I was about to return to the office when I saw Derek sitting alone at a table, thoughtfully sipping on a coffee, several empty dishes in front of him. I knew I had to let everyone know what had happened, so I thought I'd start with him.

"Hi, Derek," I said as I strolled to his table.

"Kristy," he said as he gestured to a chair. "Please, have a seat. I heard about what happened on the beach last night. Terrible news."

I lowered myself onto one of the comfortable chairs and looked at him. His eyes were bloodshot, and he looked like he hadn't gotten a lot of sleep.

"How did you find out already?"

"I got a call from Victoria about eleven last night. She didn't say where she'd heard the news, only that a bunch of teenagers had found a man on the beach who'd been murdered."

A server stopped by and dropped off Derek's check. He scratched out his name and room number, then pulled out a ten-dollar bill to toss on top of it.

"With all of this mayhem going on, is there still going to be a wedding?" he asked. Based on his tone, he didn't seem to care one way or the other.

"Nothing's changed," I said. "It'll be up to Carly, but I don't think anything's stopping us from going through with it."

"Well," he said as he stood up. "Let me know if anything different happens. I'm going to do some shopping and sightseeing today, but I'll be at the rehearsal at five. It's at the Overlook Chapel?"

"That's right. After that is dinner at Starlight on the Lagoon. It's the nicest restaurant at the resort. The dress code is island-formal. Aloha shirts are fine, but make sure to wear slacks and avoid flip-flops."

Derek got up and headed to one of the side exits leading out to the bungalows. I finished the last bite of my scone and got up to leave when I spotted Madeline and Victoria sitting at a table outside on the lanai. They were still in the middle of breakfast, and I walked over to them.

Once again, they wore identical aloha shirts, this time with a bright floral pattern. Victoria's was partially unbuttoned, revealing her deep cleavage. She also had on substantially more makeup, especially around her eyes.

Madeline looked slightly plain sitting next to her more flamboyant sister. Her makeup was lighter, and she was again wearing the big floppy sun hat with the daisy.

"Good morning, ladies," I said in a subdued voice. They both looked up, somber expressions on their faces.

"It's so terrible about the dead guy on the beach," Madeline said. "We heard he was the same man at the bar last night, the one with the curly mustache who kept looking at us. It's disturbing how we saw him during drinks—then he was murdered. Who would do such a thing?"

"No idea," I said. "Do either of you happen to know who he was?"

They both shook their heads. "I'd been seeing him off and on all week," Madeline said. "Derek's so famous, I've heard reporters sometimes follow him around. I thought maybe the guy was shadowing Derek for a story."

"This won't affect the schedule for the rehearsal tonight, will it?" Victoria asked.

"As of now, nothing's changed. Detective Ray is still good with everything going on as planned. Besides, if we don't have the wedding, it will make the week even more tragic."

They both nodded and looked somewhat relieved. I thought it might be best to change the subject. "Do you two have any plans for the day?"

Madeline got a weird look on her face that seemed to be a combination of agitation and excitement, but Victoria spoke first. "I think I'm going to go for a hike. I've heard the Sleeping Giant Trail is easy but has a lot of great views."

"Oh, you'll love that. And you're right about the beautiful views. Make sure to bring a camera or at least your phone. What about you?" I asked Madeline. "Are you going on the hike as well?"

"Hiking's never been my thing," she said as she eyed her sister. "I'll probably stick around here. Maybe I'll go back to the beach and work on my tan. I never seem to have the time to do that back home."

"Don't forget," I reminded them. "The rehearsal will be at the Overlook Chapel at five. Then we're going to Starlight on the Lagoon for dinner. Dress is island-formal."

"I've already got our outfits picked out," Victoria beamed.

"That's right," Madeline said, somewhat annoyed. "My sister picked out our rehearsal dinner outfits almost two years ago, back when we first learned about this."

* * *

I went back to the office and turned on my computer. At around eight o'clock, Dorothy came in, looking anxious.

"It looks like there was some excitement here last night," she said. "There're three police cars at the main entrance. You wouldn't happen to know anything about what's going on, would you?"

I sighed, feeling guilt wash over me. "I should have called you and Leilani. A man was murdered last night. It happened out on the beach by the big rock."

"Oh, dear Lord," Dorothy moaned. "What happened? Will the police try to connect Jake with what happened?"

Leilani came into the office, her backpack casually slung over her shoulder and a look of apprehension on her face.

"Did you hear about what happened?" I asked.

Leilani gave me a puzzled look. "You mean the murder of the guy on the beach? Yeah, I watched the live stream until almost midnight."

"Seriously?" I asked. "You watched the investigation?"

"Sure, after you and Jake took off, the police strung crime scene tape around both the body and the murder site. Then they bundled up a couple of things on the sand by the coconut palms. Franky speculated that one of the things might have been the murder weapon."

"It was a piece of driftwood, and it had blood on it," I said. "But who's Franky?"

"Fabulous Franky? He was live-streaming the investigation last night. You must have seen him. He even spent a few minutes interviewing Jake about what had happened while you were off talking to Detective Ray."

"Yeah, I saw the kid taking videos, but how did you know to watch?"

"Oh, I got an alert on my phone. Fabulous Franky's a local blogger I follow. I'm pretty sure he goes to Aloha Lagoon High School. His stuff is usually interesting."

"Really?" I asked. "How often does Franky send out alerts?"

"Not too often. The last time was when he live-streamed a police bust of some drug traffickers. That was when the resort held that big surfing championship a few weeks ago."

"You're avoiding my question," Dorothy scolded. "Is Detective Ray looking at Jake as a suspect? Ray already seems to have made up his mind that Jake committed the first murder."

"Yeah," Leilani echoed. "I was wondering about that as well. I know you were going to have a date with Jake after dinner. Was he with you when the man was murdered?"

"Not exactly," I said, suddenly feeling defensive.

"Well?" Dorothy asked, a somewhat skeptical tone in her voice. "What do you mean by, not exactly?"

"He was somewhere at the resort working on a marketing presentation. He met me at The Lava Pot when he was finished, a little after nine."

"Do you know where he was working?" Dorothy asked. "Maybe we could get someone to vouch for his whereabouts."

"He said it was secluded, and he didn't think anyone saw him," I said. "Besides, for Jake to have an alibi, we'd need to know when the Mustache Man was murdered. He was in the bar with us until seven, and the teenagers found him on the beach at around ten. That gives us a three-hour window to try to track his movements."

"I suppose you're right," Dorothy said thoughtfully.

"Oh, he was killed at eight forty-five," Leilani said.

Dorothy and I both turned to her. She must have seen the skeptical looks on our faces.

"What?" she asked, sounding a little annoyed at us. "The coroner lady, Doctor Yoshida, told that to Detective Ray. The cause of death appeared to be blunt force trauma to the head at around eight forty-five. They weren't even

trying to be quiet about it. I heard her clear as day when they were talking. I think Franky has a special microphone that picks up sound from a distance."

"I wonder if that's even legal." I mused. "Is that all you found out?"

"Well, no," Leilani said, a little hesitantly. "Detective Ray also talked about a lens cap from a Nikon camera. I think Jimmy Toki found it in the sand near the coconut palms where the murder occurred."

I got a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Jake uses a Nikon, doesn't he?" Dorothy asked, a doubtful tone creeping into her voice. "I hope he hasn't lost any lens caps lately."

Actually, he did lose a lens cap last night.

"Lots of people use Nikons," I said defensively. "Jake didn't have anything to do with either murder." I was feeling frustrated because it seemed like I was the only one who still had faith in Jake.

We sat for a few moments while nobody said anything. Finally, Leilani got up to make a pot of coffee while Dorothy turned on her computer.

"What's this going to do to our schedule?" I asked Dorothy. "There've been two murders, and the killer might be someone in the wedding party. Should we even try to go through with this?"

"Of course, we'll have the wedding," Dorothy said in a tone my mother always used when trying to explain something simple to me. "Sure, this one's a little crazier than most, but our weddings always need to happen."

I next called Carly and set up a meeting with her to go over the situation. As I suspected would be the case, she'd already heard the news about the latest murder and was in full bridal-meltdown mode.

"Carly's starting to lose it," I said after disconnecting. "We're going to have to work with her this morning."

Leilani poured out three mugs of coffee and handed one to each of us. "Well," she said. "We have another dead body, and if Jake didn't kill him, who did?"

"We don't even know who the dead guy is," Dorothy observed. "Without knowing that, it's going to make finding the killer more of a challenge."

"Detective Ray probably won't tell us his name," I said. "But maybe Jimmy will."

Knowing that Dorothy and Leilani would want to listen, I put my phone on speaker mode and then called the head of resort security. When he answered, he sounded tired.

"Hey, Jimmy," I said. "I'm glad you were there with Detective Ray. It helped to have a friendly face."

"Yeah," he said. "It was pretty crazy here last night. I didn't get a lot of sleep, and I already have a full day planned."

"Did you ever get a name for the dead guy?" I asked in my best non-snooping matter-of-fact voice.

"Sure," Jimmy said. "His name was Eduardo Castellani, and he was staying here at the resort."

"Do you know anything about him yet?"

"Not really. According to what we have on file, he was from San Francisco. Hey, did Detective Ray ask Jake about a lens cap?"

"Yes, it turns out it might have been from his camera. Where'd you find it?"

Dorothy and Leilani both looked at me. I waved them away, trying to concentrate on Jimmy.

"I hate to tell you," he said, "but it was in the sand, a few feet from the murder weapon. Like there was a struggle, and it fell out of someone's pocket."

"Alright," I said quietly. "Thanks, Jimmy. Let us know if you find out anything else."

I disconnected and could feel Leilani and Dorothy still looking at me. "Okay," I said. I was doing my best to be

brave about the whole thing. "What about the dead guy on the beach, Eduardo Castellani? How does he fit in?"

Fortunately, Dorothy didn't ask any questions, even though I knew she wanted to. Leilani had taken out her laptop and was typing furiously. I was grateful that neither one asked me the obvious questions about Jake.

"We have Mustache Man narrowed down to San Francisco," Leilani said as she typed. "And with a name like Eduardo Castellani, I don't think he'll be all that hard to find."

She typed for another thirty seconds, then clicked her mouse. "I've got him," she said. Her screen image then popped up on the big wall-mounted TV.

It showed one of Eduardo Castellani's social media pages. Sure enough, it was the same guy who'd been watching us all week. The information on the screen listed him as forty-eight, single, and said he worked as a jeweler in San Francisco. From the pictures on his page, he'd created some beautiful pieces over the years.

"Does it seem strange that we have a dead jeweler right after there's a week's worth of shenanigans over an expensive necklace?" Dorothy asked.

"And what about Eddy?" Leilani asked. "We think he's probably the one who murdered Alex. Maybe he took out Mustache Man as well?"

"Unfortunately, Eddy was with Roxanne on the patio of The Lava Pot last night," I said. "They were there when I arrived, around eight-forty. It looked like they'd been there for some time."

"Well, that bites," Leilani grumbled.

"So now that our prime suspect has an alibi for last night's murder," Dorothy commented, "who's the killer? That is, if we're still assuming both homicides were committed by the same person."

"Geez," Leilani moaned. "I really hope we only have one maniac running around Aloha Lagoon."

"I'm starting to think we've had this all wrong from the beginning," I said. "We've been dancing around it, but Orson's the one who had the most motivation to kill Alex."

"Really?" Leilani asked. "How do you figure that?"

"Think about it. Right after college, Orson handed his software ideas over to Derek's company. Derek made a fortune while Orson got cut out."

"Okay," Leilani said. "I see why Orson hates Derek, but how does Alex fit in?"

"When Orson talked about taking Derek to court over stealing his idea, Derek sent Alex over to Orson's house to punch him in the face as a warning. According to Roxanne, Derek likely paid Alex a ton to do it."

"Oh yeah," Leilani said excitedly, "I remember that one. Do you think our game designer murdered Alex because of it?"

"Don't forget," Dorothy said as she flipped through her notepad. "Alex was also responsible for breaking up Orson's relationship with Lauren back in college. That's a point against the boy."

"And there was the cheating scandal," I added. "That messed up Orson's career path. He wanted to be a university professor and instead ended up working in the private sector for Derek. From what Roxanne said, Derek was the one who set the whole thing up."

"That makes sense," Leilani said as she nodded in agreement. "But what about the new dead guy? How does he fit in? Orson doesn't strike me as the type who'd go around randomly bashing people in the head."

"I don't know yet," I admitted with a shake of my head. "But in light of everything, I'm thinking Orson is the person who had the best reason to kill Alex."

"If Orson really is finishing up old business," Dorothy mused, "the person I'd worry about next is Derek. He's the only one left that Orson has an obvious motivation to kill."

We spent the next twenty minutes talking over the murders and how they would affect our schedule. I thought we'd discussed everything that could possibly go wrong when Dorothy looked up and scowled.

"Uh-oh," she said, sounding worried. "Looks like we've got to add one more problem to the list. I figured he'd show up, sooner or later."

Leilani and I turned to see David Mahelona, the head of HR, briskly walking across the lobby, directly toward the Wedding Center. From the set of his jaw and the frown on his face, he looked even more unhappy than usual.

"Fucking dipsicle," Leilani muttered to no one in particular.

The door opened, and David stepped in. He walked to the open space in front of my desk and stared down at me.

He was breathing heavily, as if merely walking to the office had winded him. Who knows—maybe it had?

With David's bulk filling the room, the office suddenly felt very cramped and claustrophobic. I braced myself for another round of bad news.

"Good morning, David," Dorothy said in her most pleasant *dealing-with-an-upset-bride* voice. "What can we do for you today?"

"Dorothy, Kristy, Leilani," he said, looking at each of us in turn as a way of greeting. "I got a phone call from Detective Ray this morning. Based on the questions he asked and his explanation of the situation, it's apparent that he believes Jake was also involved in the murder we had on the beach last night. Until this is straightened out, Jake is suspended. I don't want to even see him at the resort."

"But Jake's going to shoot the wedding," I blurted out. "It's tomorrow. I can't find anyone to replace him that quickly."

"The resort does have a photographer on staff," David declared. "Have you tried contacting her?" His tone implied I was an idiot for not coming up with that myself.

"Of course, we asked Autumn," Dorothy said, again in her smooth, motherly voice. "But you know how busy she is. She's already scheduled tomorrow for a corporate event during both the ceremony and the reception."

"Then I'm sorry, but it can't be helped," David said in a tone that implied he wasn't sorry at all. "If I see Jake over here before Detective Ray clears him of the murders, I'll have him arrested for criminal trespassing."

"Have you already told him, or should we?" I asked quietly, feeling like things couldn't get any worse.

"No need," he said, now sounding a little smug. "I called him right before I came here. He's not happy about it, but he understands the situation. I'm sorry it's come to this, but you'll have to make do with what you've got."

After David took off, I felt the knot in my stomach grow even tighter. All of the people we'd previously used as photographers had moved away. That's what had led us to hiring Jake in the first place.

"I hate to do it," I said to Leilani. "But you stay on the video, and I'll take the pictures. If a problem comes up, we'll have to figure out how to handle it."

"Oh, I'll show up as well," Dorothy said. "You know how much I dislike attending the ceremonies and receptions, but I can see we're stuck with this one. I can at least direct traffic and take care of the unexpected issues that come up."

Leilani's phone buzzed with a text, and she glanced down at it. Her eyes grew big, and she gasped.

"What is it?" I asked, concerned. From the look of shock on her face, I could tell we were about to have another problem.

"That was from my brother, Kai," Leilani said, her voice trembling. "Jake's been arrested, for both murders."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Leilani and I drove to the police station, but the desk sergeant told us Jake wouldn't be able to have visitors for at least the next several hours. I gave him my number, and he said he'd call as soon as Jake was available.

"What next?" Leilani asked as we walked across the parking lot to my Jeep. Her face was scrunched up with worry. "I hate the idea of not even being able to talk with him."

"There isn't anything we can do here," I said. I knew my voice was beginning to shake, but things were starting to fall apart around me. "Let's go back to the office and work with Carly. She'll be getting there soon. I know Dorothy's the best at calming down a panicking bride, but maybe we can lend her a hand."

When we arrived back at the Wedding Center, Carly, Justin, and Aunt Audrey were at the conference table with Dorothy. Carly's face was puffy, and her eyes were bloodshot, but at least she'd stopped her apparent crying. All things considered, everyone seemed to be in a relatively good mood.

"Kristy," Aunt Audrey said, determination in her voice. "We've been chatting with Dorothy. She's been helping us put things into perspective. We can't change the horrible things that have happened this week, but now we're more determined than ever to see this wedding through."

I looked over at Carly. "Are you okay with everything?"

She nodded her head. "Yes," she said quietly. "Aunt Audrey's right. We need to do it, just like we've been planning."

I felt a wave of relief, knowing we'd dodged yet another bridal bullet. "Perfect," I said, mentally switching back into wedding planner mode. "The next event is the

rehearsal tonight. We'll meet at five o'clock at the Overlook Chapel. We've scheduled an hour for that, and then we'll head over to Starlight on the Lagoon for cocktails and dinner. They're expecting us at six-fifteen."

"And tomorrow?" Carly asked. "I'm sorry, I didn't bring my schedule, and I honestly can't think right now."

"No worries," I said as I opened my tablet. "The ladies will meet for hair and makeup at the Hair Affair at noon. Everyone will get dressed here in the main building at three-thirty. There're separate lounges for the men and the women."

"What is the schedule for the ceremony?" Aunt Audrey asked. I could tell she was putting on a brave face for Carly.

"We'll meet at the Overlook Chapel for the first look ceremony at four-thirty." I then looked at Justin. "After you see your bride in her wedding dress for the first time, we'll start the formal group pictures. We'll start seating guests at five-thirty, and then we'll begin the procession at six-fifteen. We've timed the ceremony to coincide with the sunset."

"What about the weather tomorrow?" Carly asked nervously. "Will it rain?"

I gave her my best wedding-planner smile. "I've already checked the forecast," I said. "No rain, but there should be enough clouds to give us a spectacular sunset."

* * *

Once the bride, the groom, and Aunt Audrey had left, Leilani also took off to go to a class. I pulled out my tablet and busied myself by going through my standard pre-wedding checklists.

I checked on the flowers, the stationery, the DJ, the officiant, and everything else associated with the ceremony and the reception. After visiting our storage area and making several phone calls, everything seemed to be ready.

Then I stopped by the office of the resort's activities director, Juls Kekoa. I checked with her to make sure there weren't any last-minute issues with the venues or the catering. When she assured me everything was on track, I started to feel a little better.

The next stop on my list was the Overlook Chapel, a beautiful garden space on the far side of the resort where we'd be holding the ceremony. It sat on top of a small cliff that stood above the beach. With stunning views of the Pacific Ocean, it was the perfect place for an outdoor wedding.

Over the last few months, Nick Woodfield and the landscaping crew had worked to make the space more practical for weddings. They'd added an arbor-like alter and an overhead trellis, which was covered in bougainvillea and flowering clematis for shade.

As I passed the entrance to the main pool, on my way to the chapel, I heard someone calling my name. I looked over to see Victoria sitting on a barstool at the Hula Hut, the fun and always busy poolside bar with the palm-frond thatch roof. Once we made eye contact, she waved me over.

Victoria didn't look like she was dressed for a hike. Instead, she'd freshened her makeup, combed out her long blonde hair, and was wearing four-inch cobalt blue heels. She had the remains of a Shark Bite sitting on the bar in front of her.

"Kristy," she said, sounding a little frustrated. "Have you seen Derek?"

"The last time I saw him was at breakfast. He said he was going to do some sightseeing and shopping today." I again eyed her up and down. "Are you still going on a hike?"

"Oh, no," she said, now sounding evasive. "I decided I wasn't up for hiking today. I was supposed to go, um, shopping with Derek instead. He asked me to meet him here at the Hula Hut. But he should have been here like forty-five minutes ago."

Something about the anxious tone in her voice made it clear she thought something was wrong. I only hoped it wasn't more trouble, especially after the things we'd been learning about Orson and how much he hated Derek.

While Victoria was speaking, I noticed that Timo, the daytime bartender, was listening to our conversation. Knowing he was the biggest gossip at the resort, I stared at him, letting him know I could see what he was doing. He gave me his best innocent look, then wandered to the far side of the bar and started cleaning glassware.

"Have you tried his cell?" I asked, knowing she probably had, but trying to be helpful anyway.

"Several times," she said with a frown. "It seems to be turned off."

She was clearly agitated, and I wanted to calm her down, if I could. "Are you looking to buy anything in particular?" I asked. "There's a shop for almost anything you could want around here."

Victoria didn't respond. She simply stared into space, as if she was thinking about something else. Finally, she seemed to get a spark of an idea and turned to me.

"Have you seen Madeline lately?" she asked, confusion and suspicion in her voice.

I thought about it, then shook my head. "I haven't seen her since this morning when she was with you at breakfast. I thought she said she was going down to the beach today."

"That's what I understood as well," she said slowly.

As Victoria continued to think, she looked out over the swimmers in the pool and began to mutter to herself. "*No, there's no way. How could she do it? It would be obvious. He'd have to know.*"

Suddenly her eyes opened wide. "*Oh my god,*" Victoria wailed, like a kid who'd had her candy stolen. "She's been wearing a freaking hat since she came back from the salon yesterday afternoon."

"Okay," I said, now even more confused. "I remember the hat, the one with the daisy. It was cute."

"That witch!" Victoria exclaimed as she stood up and stomped out of the pool area. I could see she was making a beeline for the bungalows.

My cell phone rang with a number I now recognized as Aunt Audrey's. "Hello," I said as I answered it. From the sound of the waves in the background, I could hear she was somewhere near the beach.

"Kristy," she said. "Something rather strange has happened. I need to talk with you about it, right away."

Her voice sounded off, but fortunately, it didn't seem panicky. Still, I mentally sighed. I didn't know how many more problems I could cope with today.

"Of course," I said in my best wedding planner's voice. "Where can I meet you?"

"I'm at The Lava Pot," she said, still with the strange tone. "I'll wait for you."

As I started over to The Lava Pot, I noticed Detective Ray walking into the resort from the direction of the beach. He stopped at one of the showers to wash sand and bits of kelp off his sandals. I guessed he must have been at the murder scene.

When he saw me walking toward him, he let out a deep sigh. He then stopped under the shade of a cluster of coconut palms. I hurried up to him as he patiently waited for me.

"Detective Ray," I said, trying to keep the desperation from my voice. "I heard you arrested Jake for the murders. You must know he didn't have anything to do with either one."

"Kristy, I didn't arrest him for the murders," he said in his annoyingly flat, monotone voice. "I'm holding him for questioning. He hasn't been charged with anything, yet. Your wedding is tomorrow evening, correct?"

"That's right, six-fifteen at the Overlook Chapel."

"Whatever's going on here seems to have something to do with your group from California. If there's going to be more trouble, things will likely come to a head before then."

"But, I'm confused. If you think it might be someone in the wedding party, why arrest Jake?"

"It's for his protection, as well as everyone else's. Plus, if there's any more mischief, I'll at least know where Jake was."

I nodded my head to let him know I understood. Unfortunately, knowing Jake hadn't been charged didn't make me feel any better about the situation.

"Detective, let me tell you what I've found out since yesterday," I said. "It might help you figure out who actually committed the murders."

"Miss Piper," he said, sounding tired. "I've already asked you once not to meddle with my investigation."

"I'm not interfering," I protested. "But I am keeping my eyes open. Don't you want to know what I've learned?"

"Fine," he said as he pulled out his notebook and a pen. "The last time we talked, you believed Eddy Martin was the likely killer of Alex Adair. Is that still the case?"

"Well, no. Eddy and Roxanne both have alibis for last night. They were at The Lava Pot when the murder occurred. If the same person killed both men, it couldn't have been Eddy."

"How can you be sure Eddy Martin wasn't involved? Do you know when the man on the beach was killed?"

"I was also at the bar, a couple of tables away from them. And wasn't the time of death eight forty-five?"

Detective Ray's eyes opened wide. It was the first time I'd ever gotten some emotion from him.

"Huh, it seems that the time of the murder has become common knowledge," he said with a shake of his head.

I decided it was probably best not to tell him that he was the one who'd let out the time of the murder by talking

in front of a teenager who was live-streaming the investigation.

"I'm now pretty sure Orson Cross is the person with the most motive to have killed Alex," I stated.

"And how do you figure that?"

"We already talked about how Orson almost got kicked out of school because Alex cheated off his English paper. I also told you how Alex was intimate with Lauren, who was Orson's girlfriend at the time."

"I remember," Detective Ray said, looking like he'd rather be anywhere other than standing here discussing the case with me. He flipped back two or three pages in his notebook. "When Orson Cross found out about the affair, you said it broke his heart."

"Well, that's not all. After college, Orson handed a brilliant idea over to a company Derek created. When Orson said he wanted some of the profits his idea was generating, Derek fired him, and Orson got nothing."

"So exactly how does that lead to Orson Cross murdering Alex Adair?"

"When Orson started seeing lawyers to take Derek to court over stealing his idea, Derek sent Alex over to Orson's house. Alex hit him in the face as a warning."

"Do you have any proof that Derek sent Alex to assault Orson?"

"No, it's speculation, but it seems to be common knowledge within the wedding party."

"And do you have a motive for Orson killing the man on the beach last night?"

"Eduardo Castellani? No, I haven't heard anything about that one yet."

"Miss Piper," Detective Ray said, sounding tired and frustrated. "Please stop interfering with my investigation. All you're doing is giving everyone practice at answering the questions I might want to ask them later on. That doesn't help anyone but the murderer."

* * *

I made my way over to The Lava Pot, where I found Aunt Audrey perched on one of the barstools, holding the remains of a Lava Flow. She had the haunted and drawn face I've come to associate with someone who's heard some bad news. With everything else that had happened over the last few days, I felt a fresh sense of dread creep over me.

"Hi," I said as I sat on an empty barstool next to her.

Casey Dalton, the cute English bartender, slid another Lava Flow across the counter to Aunt Audrey.

"Kristy? Your usual?" he asked with his beautiful accent. I shook my head, and he shrugged as if to say, *suit yourself*. He then walked to the end of the bar and started chatting with his wife, Samantha.

"How are you doing?" I asked as Aunt Audrey picked up her fresh drink and started sucking it down through the straw.

She looked at me, but it took a second for her eyes to focus. The Lava Flow I'd seen in her hands when I'd walked in must not have been her first.

"Oh, Kristy," she said, her words slurring slightly. "I just talked with Detective Ray. He gave me the most remarkable news."

"Really?" I asked.

As far as I knew, Detective Ray's news was usually bad. I'd never heard him share any information that was remarkable. I had a sudden, horrible thought. "Oh, no. Was it something about your necklace?"

Aunt Audrey nodded her head. "The appraisal came back, and he showed it to me."

"What did he find out? Did somebody switch out the diamonds with fakes?"

"Not exactly," she said with a slow shake of her head. "The detective received an appraisal from a place called

Liko's Jewelry. All of the diamonds and rubies are genuine and of excellent quality. The total value of the necklace was estimated to be two hundred and ninety-five thousand dollars."

"Wow, that's a lot of money. But why the surprise? Were you expecting it to be higher?"

Aunt Audrey glanced around the bar to make sure no one she knew was there, then she leaned toward me and spoke in a low tone.

"The necklace I brought to Hawaii was a fake. The last time it was appraised, it came in at a little under two thousand dollars, and most of that was simply from the gold."

"Okay, would you like to tell me about it?"

"There isn't a lot to tell. When my husband first bought the necklace, it was appraised for fifty-two thousand dollars, which was a little over what we'd paid for it. But about ten years ago, I noticed my necklace had changed."

"Really? What changed? The necklace I saw you wearing the other night looked gorgeous."

"Oh, it was still beautiful, but I'd been wearing it for thirty years by that time, and it simply felt wrong. I also noticed the color of some of the rubies seemed to be slightly off."

"That must have spooked you. What did you do?"

"I had it re-appraised by the same jeweler who'd performed the original assessment. He informed me that every stone in the necklace was now nothing more than a high-quality imitation."

"Do you have any idea who took it or when it happened?"

She nodded and took a long sip of her latest Lava Flow.

"I'm sure it was switched during a party I had for Carly and her friends from the university during their senior year. I

think I once told you I held a party for them every spring. I ended up filing a claim with the insurance company."

"And they paid off the claim?"

"They did. Every penny of the most current appraisal, which at the time was a little under two hundred thousand dollars. I put that money into a managed brokerage account for Carly. It's what paid for this week in Hawaii, and the rest will go toward the down payment of her house."

"Did the police investigate Carly's friends?"

Aunt Audrey's face softened. "Well, I'm afraid I might have been a little vague with the detectives in Palo Alto about when I thought the necklace was stolen. I didn't want to ruin Carly's life by accusing her closest friends of being thieves."

"But still, you're talking about the people here, in the wedding party?"

Aunt Carly nodded her head. "I'm pretty sure that someone Carly invited to the wedding took it."

"But if it was ten years ago, why would someone go through the trouble of stealing the fake and returning the real one?"

"I've been trying to figure that out myself. Maybe they've felt guilty for all these years and decided to return it."

I voiced another thought. "Does Carly know the necklace you brought to Hawaii was a fake?"

Aunt Audrey shook her head slowly. "I'd planned on telling her after she'd worn it down the aisle at the ceremony. As I've told you before, the piece holds many fond memories for Carly and me. I knew she'd get a good laugh when she found out the necklace had paid for both the wedding and her house."

"But now that it's real?"

"It doesn't matter. Carly will get all my jewelry after I pass, so it doesn't worry me if she gets the nicest piece first."

I can live with that. But I'll show her the new appraisal so she can properly take care of it."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

After hearing Aunt Audrey's news, I didn't make it to the Overlook Chapel. Instead, I walked back to the Wedding Center and mentally tried to sort out everything that had happened.

I called the police station and talked to the same desk sergeant. I was disappointed but not too surprised when they said Jake wouldn't be able to have visitors for the rest of the day.

I knew Jake's parents lived on Maui. I hoped they'd heard about what had happened and were working on getting him a lawyer.

Since it was Friday, Dorothy had left at three o'clock. I knew she'd be doing happy hour with her friends at Beachcomber's, a local dive bar on the other side of town. Actually, I was a little relieved I didn't have to answer any more of her questions about Jake.

Leilani came into the office and shrugged off her backpack, letting it fall with a plop on the conference table. "Well," she asked, "what'd I miss today?"

I sighed and shook my head. "Plenty. I'll have to tell you about it on the way to the Overlook Chapel. I'd planned on checking on it during the afternoon, but I didn't make it. I'd like to go over early and make sure it's set up for the rehearsal."

"Okay, let's go now," she said as she grabbed the video camera and the tripod. "Don't forget to take the office digital. We'll get everything set up at the chapel, and then you can tell me what's been happening while we wait for everyone to show up."

* * *

As Leilani and I were winding our way through the resort, we saw Wealthy Derek and Long-haired Victoria. They were strolling down one of the walkways leading from the bungalows to the beach. Victoria was smiling and holding his arm, appearing to have dropped all pretense of only being friends.

After hearing that Derek had been missing, I was thrilled when I saw he was alright. I'd been having visions all afternoon of yet another dead body.

As we watched the couple coming towards us, it looked like Derek had been doing better than simply okay. When he spotted us, his face flushed red with annoyance and maybe a touch of embarrassment. We often see the look, and we know exactly what it means.

"Aww," Leilani said, "That's sweet. Derek's doing the walk of shame. It's our first confirmed hook-up of the week."

"It seems like it," I said. "I only hope it doesn't lead to more problems between the sisters."

As Victoria and Derek strolled past the entrance to the main pool, we heard a high-pitched shriek and watched as a woman ran up to the couple.

What the ...?

The new woman also appeared to be Victoria. Both versions of Victoria had on the same vibrant makeup and colorful floral aloha shirt. They both wore the same white denim shorts and had the same long honey-blond hair.

"What did you do?" the new woman bellowed out at the Victoria who'd now let go of Derek's arm. "How could you do that to me?" she yelled. There was a lot of pain and anger in her voice.

"You stupid freaking cow," the first Victoria shouted at the new one. "Derek's mine. You know he's always been mine."

For his part, Derek's eyes shifted back and forth between the two identical women, confusion etched on his face.

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" Leilani asked. "Why are there two Victorias arguing over Derek?"

"Geez," I moaned as I took in the situation. "One of them must be Madeline."

"Yeah, okay, I get that. But which one is which?"

I studied both women as they shouted at each other, hands-on-hips.

"Look at the shoes," I said. "The new woman who just ran up is wearing cobalt heels. That's the real Victoria. I talked with her a couple of hours ago. I wonder if she's been at the Hula Hut the entire time?"

The Victoria in the cobalt heels turned to Derek. "And you," she said as she shoved him hard in the chest. "You can't even tell the difference between my sister and me? Are you a complete idiot?"

"Don't call him an idiot, you stinky little turd," Madeline yelled back at her sister.

Victoria reached out and grabbed a handful of Madeline's long hair. As she pulled, a fistful of blonde strands came free.

"Extensions?" Leilani asked. Then understanding came into her eyes. "Oh, she must have had them put in yesterday. She had me set up a long appointment for her at the Hair Affair."

"I guess that explains the hat she's been wearing," I said.

Victoria then gave Madeline a hard shove, causing her to topple backward, landing on the grass with a *thud*. Victoria quickly scrambled on top and sat on her chest, straddling her. I could imagine them doing the exact same thing as girls growing up.

"How could you do that to me?" Victoria moaned as she looked down at her sister while trying to hit her in the face. Madeline easily blocked the punches. Her sister was crying so hard she couldn't land an accurate blow.

Leilani and I hurried over to try to calm the situation. To his credit, Derek quickly stepped in and pulled Victoria off her sister, even as she tried to get in one last punch and kick. Both sisters then stood and glared at each other, panting for breath.

Madeline glanced at Derek, then back to her sister. Suddenly, she relaxed and flashed Victoria a wicked smile. It was a grin that said she'd gotten what she'd wanted, and now her sister could do with Derek as she pleased.

Victoria caught the meaning behind the looks and the smile. She burst into fresh sobs, turned, and hurried down the path in the direction of The Lava Pot.

Madeline looked down at her aloha shirt. "Huh, my stupid sister ripped off one of the buttons," she said with a tone that implied she couldn't care less about her shirt. "I'd better go back to my room and change."

She then lightly placed her fingertips on Derek's cheek. "See you at the rehearsal, tiger."

With that, Madeline turned and sauntered back in the direction of her bungalow, presumably to get dressed for the evening.

For his part, Derek still seemed a little stunned. "Uh, I guess I'd also better go and, um, get ready for the run-through tonight," he said, clearly at a loss for words.

"It's a crazy world, isn't it?" Leilani asked the billionaire, a smile on her face and a twinkle in her eye.

As Derek disappeared down the path to his bungalow, I looked at my best friend. "You really love the drama, don't you?"

"Are you kidding?" she asked. "It's the best part about this job. I can't wait to see what happens at the reception."

* * *

The group met at the Overlook Chapel a few minutes before five for the rehearsal. I introduced everyone to

Reverend Blake, the short, heavyset minister who'd worked with me many times before.

During the afternoon, Carly had recruited Deshawn, another friend from college who'd arrived at Aloha Lagoon the night before. She'd explained what had happened, and he'd agreed to stand in for Alex.

The parents of both the bride and groom had arrived and were sitting with Aunt Audrey on some white wooden chairs we'd placed on the lawn. The rest of the wedding guests would be arriving on the late flight into Lihue.

Justin, the groom, introduced me to his two brothers, who would act as the ushers. They both seemed competent and friendly, two good qualities for attendants.

Except for Derek, Madeline, and Victoria, the group was in a relatively good mood, all things considered. The two sisters spent the entire rehearsal staring daggers at each other while Derek looked mildly amused at the turmoil he'd helped cause.

I quickly discovered I needed to juggle my original grouping of groomsmen and bridesmaids. I'd already mentally placed everyone by height, but that would have put Madeline and Victoria next to each other.

Clearly, that wasn't going to work anymore. I was surprised they'd both shown up, and I wasn't going to risk another fight by having them stand next to each other.

The rehearsal went as well as I could have expected. Carly started to cry as her father escorted her down the aisle and then again as she took Justin's hand. I always take that as a good sign.

Reverend Blake smoothly went along with all the last-minute changes. He'd told me previously he'd had more than his share of difficult weddings over the years, and he seemed to take everything in stride.

After the rehearsal, I'd arranged for two of the resort's big ten-person golf carts to drive everyone over to Starlight

on the Lagoon. As I'd come to expect, the restaurant was truly spectacular.

With colors inspired by the ocean, the décor was simple and clean. The waitstaff was efficient and mild-mannered, and, of course, the food was fresh and flawless. Even the smiling man playing the piano seemed to do so effortlessly.

As the best man, Derek was in charge of the toasts. He turned out to be quite adept at telling funny stories about the bride and groom from their days back in college.

Although Victoria and Madeline didn't openly misbehave, I caught several sideways glances and whispered conversations as the rest of the group learned what had happened. The fact that Madeline now had the same long hair as her sister filled in some of the missing details for those who already knew about the siblings' dating history.

The ongoing drama seemed to amuse everyone, and the sisters' situation only added to the festive mood. I even overheard Justin telling Carly that having Victoria and Madeline fight over a man brought back some fun memories of their time together in college.

After dinner, the men and women split into groups for the bachelor and bachelorette parties. The women were going down to a local bar called The Lanai Lounge, where an assortment of male strippers would be performing.

The men planned to start out at Beachcomber's, the dive bar where Dorothy had gone for happy hour. After nine o'clock on Fridays, the men could cheer on some of Aloha Lagoon's finest ladies as they danced.

Although I'm often asked, I never attend these parties. As the wedding planner, I don't want to know what happens when the bride and her maids go out for an evening of drinking.

* * *

I had a restless night, and when my alarm went off, I felt more tired than when I'd gone to bed. Feeling anxious and fidgety, I quickly dressed and drove to the office.

Since Jake was still being held by Detective Ray, and there was a killer on the loose at the resort, I knew I had to keep alert to ensure things went perfectly with the wedding. Even though the first event wasn't going to be until noon, I planned to spend the morning going over every little detail.

Opening my tablet, I started my ritual of setting up for the day's festivities. I'd been a wedding planner for almost ten years by this point. Going through the checklist always calmed me and filled me with the confidence that everything was covered.

Since the weather was forecast to be perfect, with no rain and only a light breeze, the reception would be held outside on the Maluhia Patio. It was a cozy spot between two buildings with an area for a DJ and a good-sized dance floor.

The patio was one of my favorite reception areas at the resort. Thousands of tiny white Christmas lights were strung overhead and in the coconut palms. When turned on, they looked like a sky full of stars. They gave the space a warm, soft glow at night.

I went out to the patio and was happy to see the tables and bar already being arranged into their proper places. Tonight's music would be provided by one of my regulars, DJ Ocean Motion. I knew he'd arrive about an hour before the reception and get set up.

I then delivered the stationery box, which included the place cards, napkins, and menu cards, along with the bride's custom decorations to Juls in her office. She'd apparently just arrived for the day. Like me, she was working off a checklist as we reviewed the final arrangement details.

After ensuring everything at the main building was on track and going smoothly, I decided to go out and see how

things were coming along with the setup of the Overlook Chapel.

As always, the morning was peaceful and quiet. Other than a few guests going to breakfast or returning to their rooms, there wasn't a lot of activity as the resort slowly came to life.

I walked by the main pool, where a maintenance man was hosing down the deck. Another man rearranged the poolside chairs and umbrellas to prepare for the crowds that would soon be arriving.

As I passed by The Huts, I saw Orson sneaking down a path leading to one of the bungalows. Rather than the happy expression he usually wore, he seemed focused and perhaps even angry. His jaw was clenched, and his eyes were staring straight ahead.

What is he doing?

I purposely hung back to see what he was up to, although a deep sense of dread had started to creep over me. There was only one of The Huts down that path, and I knew it was the one we'd reassigned to Derek earlier in the week.

My mind started to race. Orson had the strongest motive to have committed the first murder, and his hatred of Derek was well known. Now he was creeping towards Derek's cottage. I foresaw a series of horrible events playing out in my head.

Keeping close to the bamboo foliage lining the path, I watched as Orson went up to Derek's door. He then searched the ground around the hut, as if looking for something specific. He finally picked up a short but stout branch that had fallen off a nearby kauwila tree.

Orson tested the branch's weight—it was apparent he'd chosen it as a makeshift club. He then went to the bungalow's entrance, pulled a small black box from his pocket, and used it to open the door.

As Orson disappeared inside the cottage, I pulled out my phone and called Jimmy Toki. Even without my prior suspicions about the groomsman, breaking into another guest's room was definitely crossing a line, even for someone else in the wedding party.

I stood impatiently on the path while the phone rang several times, then rolled into voice mail.

"Jimmy, this is Kristy," I said, trying not to let the panic I felt creep into my voice. "Something's going on in Derek Williams' hut. It's 1207. Orson Cross just used a keycard and went inside. Come over right away."

I disconnected and sighed in frustration. Sure, Jimmy could check his messages right away, but he could also do so in an hour.

I waited about a minute, then decided to call Jimmy one more time. Maybe he'd simply ignored my first attempt and would answer when he saw I was calling him back. If not, I'd need to call Detective Ray directly.

The phone had rung once when a voice whispered into my ear: "What are you doing?"

I squealed and dropped the phone. Derek calmly reached down and picked it up. "Sorry, Kristy," he said, handing the phone back. "I didn't mean to startle you. Why are you sneaking down the path to my place?"

"Orson's in your hut," I said quietly. "I was calling security to come over and straighten things out."

"Well, now there's no need," he said. The wide sarcastic smile from earlier in the week was back. "We can go together and figure out what he's up to."

I was about to tell him to wait for security, but Derek was already striding down the path to his bungalow. When we were almost at the door, he paused and pulled a small semi-automatic pistol out of his pocket.

"What are you doing with that?" I whispered frantically. Seeing the gun caused my anxiety level to rise several notches.

"Are you kidding?" he whispered back. "After everything that's happened here this week, I thought I might need it."

Derek took out a keycard and pressed it against the lock in his door. It opened, and he slipped into the room.

I looked around for Jimmy, hoping he would magically appear. When he didn't, I waited for a few extra heartbeats, then followed Derek inside.

We crept through the lower story, which consisted of a living room, a bathroom, and a kitchen. Fortunately, a TV was on in the living room, and I knew it would help hide the noise we were making. We didn't see Orson, but we heard some movement on the second floor.

Derek didn't hesitate. Still holding the pistol, he crept up the stairs.

I'd decided to stay on the first floor when Derek turned and looked at me. He urgently motioned me to come along with him. Foolishly, I followed him up to the second floor.

When we reached the top of the landing, Orson was clearly visible in the bedroom, going through Derek's luggage. His back was turned toward us, and he was too intent on what he was doing to notice we were there.

"Here it is," Orson said to himself as he pulled out something from the suitcase.

I felt a deep wave of disappointment roll over me. I'd genuinely started to like Orson. Even after everything I'd discovered about his grudge against Alex, it had been hard for me to think of him as a murderer and a thief. Still, I couldn't dispute what I was seeing.

"Don't move," Derek said in a quiet yet firm voice as we walked into the bedroom. "I have a gun. You'll need to explain yourself."

Orson's head jerked up. It seemed he'd been so intent on what he was doing in the suitcase that he didn't hear us come in. He made a move to grab the club lying on the bed,

but Derek brought up the pistol and pointed it at Orson's chest.

"Don't even try," Derek said. "I don't want to shoot you, but I will."

Orson stared at the gun, and he knew the game was up. His face went pale, and he took a couple of slow steps backward, his hands raised in front of him.

"Have a seat," Derek commanded, gesturing with his pistol to the side of the bed. He then used his free hand to pick up the club.

As Orson carefully lowered himself on the edge of the mattress, I saw what he'd been holding in his hand.

"What are you doing with Aunt Audrey's necklace?" I asked.

"You better ask him that," Orson said, looking at Derek. "It was in his luggage. I just pulled it out. Everything makes sense now."

Derek slowly shook his head. "So, you found the necklace? That's a shame."

With a smooth, swift motion, Derek swung the club. It made contact with the side of Orson's head with a thud.

The game designer's eyes rolled up into his head, and he let out a soft moan. He then slumped over on the bed, and the room became quiet.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I simply stood there for a moment, too stunned to even speak. "Why did you do that?" I finally stammered out. "Orson wasn't going to attack you."

"He found the necklace," Derek said in a matter-of-fact voice.

He then calmly stepped in front of the bedroom door, blocking my escape. I couldn't help but notice the gun was now pointed at me.

"That necklace has been causing me nothing but trouble for almost ten years," he said, shaking his head.

"I don't understand. Are you saying you're the one who switched the necklaces, both in college and here this week?"

"You're a clever girl," he said. The mocking sneer was back. "I thought you would have figured it out by now. Yes, I took the original necklace from Carly's aunt and replaced it with an imitation back when we were still in school."

"But why? If you simply needed money, there must have been better ways to get it."

"Oh, I wish there had been. Back in college, Orson had a great idea, and I knew I could get rich from it. Unfortunately, I needed a hundred thousand dollars to develop his idea into a real product. I went to every bank and venture capitalist in Silicon Valley, but they all turned me down."

"But why steal the necklace and leave a fake? That must have cost you a couple of thousand dollars. If you were going to do something illegal, why not sell drugs or something?"

"Aunt Audrey wore the necklace at a party she held for us during our junior year. She kept going on about how valuable it was. Carly was drunk at the time and let it slip

that her aunt didn't use a safe. She said her aunt merely kept the necklace in a jewelry box in her bedroom."

"Is that when you decided to steal it?"

"That's right. During the party, I took pictures of the necklace from every angle I could. I then spent all the money I'd been saving to start my business to instead pay Castellani to make a near-perfect imitation. During the gathering we had our senior year, I slipped into Aunt Audrey's bedroom and switched it out. It was actually rather easy."

"Okay, but that was almost ten years ago. Why would you want to return it now?"

"When I was discussing the week's wedding plans with Justin and Carly, she mentioned that her aunt would be giving her the necklace as a present. I knew it would eventually be appraised, and the entire story would come out. I had Castellani create a genuine diamond and ruby version from the original drawings he'd made. I then brought that necklace to Hawaii, hidden in the base of a very special tiki."

"I saw the hidden compartment in the statue. But why go through all that trouble?"

"I brought the tiki to hide the necklace when I flew it back. I wanted to keep it hidden in case someone nosey opened the luggage."

"You were going to switch the necklaces out on Tuesday, the day before Alex was murdered. But Aunt Audrey discovered her necklace was missing right away. What happened?"

"It was that idiot, Alex," Derek said with an exaggerated sigh. "I'd already paid one of the maids a thousand dollars for a passkey but needed someone to break into Aunt Audrey's room and switch necklaces. I figured I could get Alex to do it."

"Why Alex?" I asked.

Derek barked out a quick laugh. "Alex has always been happy to do my dirty work, and he seemed to be especially hard up for money now. I'd mentioned it to him before the trip, and he'd seemed eager enough. On Tuesday morning, right before everyone went to breakfast, I gave him the genuine necklace and the passkey to Aunt Audrey's bungalow.

"Okay, so what went wrong?"

"All day Tuesday, Aunt Audrey kept going on about how her necklace had been stolen, so it was clear that Alex hadn't left the real one. On Wednesday morning, when I met with Alex in the conference room, he gave me the fake, but he also showed me he still had the genuine one. The jerk then demanded more money to complete the job. Alex said if I didn't come up with the cash, he'd go to the police with the story. I became somewhat angry and beat him with the tiki."

"And when Jake came in?"

"When your photographer entered the room, my only thought was escape. Jake was bending over Alex's body, so I used the statue to take him out as well. Unfortunately, the blood-covered tiki was now a murder weapon. I wiped off my fingerprints and left it on the floor next to Jake. I hadn't planned it this way, but the police thought that your photographer had been the one to kill Alex."

Even though I was panicking inside, I tried my best to remain calm and keep Derek talking until rescue showed up. I knew it would be my only chance to come through this in one piece.

"There's an electronic record of you being in the Rainbow Buffet when Alex was killed," I said. "How did you fake the time stamp for when you paid your bill?"

Derek looked confused. "I didn't fake anything. I left the check on the table, same as always. I went from the restaurant directly to the conference room. I guess it took them a while to process my bill and put a time stamp on it."

"Okay, so what about Eduardo Castellani? Why did you need to murder him?"

"That slimy jerk," Derek snorted with contempt. "I apparently wasn't as careful as I should have been when I traveled here. Castellani followed me and found out what I'd done with the necklace. He also demanded money to keep his mouth shut."

"So, what did you do?"

"I pretended to go along with it, and I promised to give him his first payment the other night on the beach. He was pretty gullible, and it was easy to take him out."

"Is that when you planted Jake's lens cap?"

"That's right," Derek said with a hollow laugh. "I knew that dim-witted detective was already trying to finger your photographer for Alex's murder. When I found the lens cap on the floor of the Rainbow Lounge, it was too good of an opportunity to waste. After I killed Castellani, I tossed the lens cap on the beach. Pretty smart, huh?"

I glanced at the necklace, now lying on the bed next to Orson's slowly moving body. "Why would you want to keep a fake necklace? Wouldn't it have been safer to throw it into the ocean?"

"No, I couldn't take the chance that someone would see me do it," he declared. He was panting with what looked like excitement, and his eyes had gone a little crazy.

"Besides, that necklace represented the start of my company. I'd planned on keeping it as a souvenir."

"I hate to tell you, but Aunt Audrey discovered the switch almost ten years ago. The police investigated, and the insurance company had already paid her off. You didn't need to do any of this."

Derek briefly looked confused as he absorbed this new information. "Oh well," he said cheerfully with a slightly insane laugh. "Maybe it would have been better if I'd left it alone. But it's a little too late to worry about that now."

Derek then let out a long sigh. "It's a shame, but I'm afraid I'll have to take you out as well."

"You don't have to kill me," I said as my panic rose another notch. "I promise I won't say anything, to anybody." I knew my argument was utterly lame, but I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Oh, don't worry about me," Derek said with a wide grin. "After I shoot you, I'll hit Orson in the head again to finish him off. I'll then put the gun in his hand and shoot you once or twice more. I'll drop the club on the floor next to your body, and it will look like you took each other out. Tomorrow, I'll be on a plane back to San Francisco."

There was a creaking sound on the stairs outside of the bedroom. We both heard it at the same time, and Derek swung his gun around to meet the new threat.

With a movement almost too fast for me to recognize, Jimmy Toki flew through the air and tackled Derek. Both men went sprawling on the floor, with Jimmy quickly coming out on top.

The pistol had gone skittering across the room, coming to a stop at my feet. As I picked it up, I heard a monotone voice calmly say, "I'll take the gun, Miss Piper."

Detective Ray was standing at the doorway to the bedroom, his hand outstretched. "We got your message," he said. "I'm only sorry we couldn't get here sooner. It looks like Orson Cross has been injured."

"Did you hear Derek's confession?" I asked.

"We heard enough. You can fill in the missing details when we talk."

I felt a sudden jolt of panic as I wondered what the time was. Detective Ray must have seen the look on my face.

"Don't worry," he said with a genuine smile. "Give me the short version now, and we can go over it in detail tomorrow, after the wedding."

After about ten minutes, the same two EMTs came into the room and examined Orson. They said they'd need to transport him to the clinic to have him checked out, but the injury didn't seem life-threatening.

As they were about to load him onto a gurney, Orson regained consciousness. He said he felt fine, except for a headache, but we convinced him to go to the clinic anyway.

* * *

By the time they'd loaded Orson into the ambulance and Detective Ray released me, it was almost noon. I called Justin and asked him to gather Eddy and the substitute groomsman, Deshawn, and have everyone meet me at the Hair Affair.

When I arrived at the salon, Leilani had already gathered with Aunt Audrey, the mothers of the bride and groom, and the ladies of the wedding party. They'd settled in and started on hair and makeup.

The ladies were chatting and seemed to be in a good mood. Even Victoria and Madeline were talking, although not to each other. When Justin, Deshawn, and Eddy arrived, I gathered the group together for a meeting.

"Everything's on schedule, and I'm expecting a beautiful wedding today," I said as the people eyed me suspiciously. "But before we get too far into today's festivities, I have some news I need to share. It turns out that Derek was responsible for the deaths of both Alex and the man on the beach the other night. Detective Ray has taken him into custody for both murders."

"Are you freaking serious?" Carly wailed.

"Before he was arrested, Derek managed to injure Orson," I continued. "But I spoke with the EMTs a few minutes ago, and they've assured me he'll be okay."

"You've got to be kidding me." Carly was on the verge of hysterics. "I mean, what else can go wrong this week?"

"Ha, I knew it," Eddy barked out a laugh and pointed to Justin. "See, I told you that slimeball was the murderer. Pay up."

Shaking his head in defeat, the groom pulled out his wallet and handed Eddy a ten-dollar bill.

Lauren expressed concerns over Orson's injury. The mothers of the bride and groom looked worried, and Roxanne looked shocked.

I was peppered with questions, and I did my best to explain what had happened earlier in the day, only leaving out the part where Orson had broken into Derek's room. All things considered, they took the news better than I would have expected.

Carly's main concern was if Orson would make it to the ceremony or not. Justin kept eyeing his fiancée. He seemingly wanted to make sure she didn't go into a complete bridal meltdown.

The most surprising reactions came from the twins. Victoria actually seemed pleased that Derek was getting his due for how he'd treated her the day before. She then looked at her sister with a nasty sneer, perhaps hoping she would suffer at hearing the news.

For her part, Madeline took it in stride. It was strange, but I got the feeling she'd been expecting it.

Aunt Audrey also seemed pleased by the news. "Well," she said happily. "I'm glad that's finally over. Now we can get on with the wedding without wondering who's going to be murdered next."

The men took off to get ready. Hair and makeup went smoothly, and the festive mood gradually returned to the group. I took a lot of pictures, and Leilani captured a complete video record of the event.

* * *

A few minutes before we were scheduled for the first look ceremony, I arrived at the Overlook Chapel with Justin, Eddy, and Deshawn. As we waited for Leilani to arrive with the ladies, Jake strolled into the chapel.

His camera bag was slung over his shoulder, and the most beautiful smile was on his face. I was a little stunned but definitely thrilled to see him.

"What are you doing here?" I asked as I walked over to him.

"I'm here to shoot the wedding," he said with a knowing smile. "You hired me to be your photographer, remember?"

"That's not at all what I mean," I said. "I thought you were in jail."

"Detective Ray let me out about an hour ago. He even gave me an outline of what happened over here this morning. Although, I think he left out a lot of the parts about how you helped capture Derek. He actually seemed pretty annoyed about that. I went back to my place for a quick shower and change. Now, I'm here."

A sense of relief washed over me. I looked down at my hand and saw I was still holding the old office digital camera. I hated being both the wedding coordinator and the photographer.

"You have no idea how thrilled I am you're here," I said, mentally rearranging my schedule. "Justin's here already, and Leilani will be bringing Carly for the first look in a few minutes."

"Perfect," he said as he pulled his camera out of the bag. "I'll take care of it."

While Jake was setting up, I called Dorothy to let her know Derek had been arrested, our photographer was back, and she didn't need to come over.

"Are you kidding?" she'd asked me. "I heard about what happened this morning, and I'm already on my way to

the resort. I wouldn't miss this ceremony for anything. I want to be there to see what kind of disaster happens next."

* * *

By four-thirty, everyone had made it to the Overlook Chapel. Carly looked stunning, the bridesmaids were beautiful, and the men cleaned up well.

Carly's dress was a lovely, lightweight A-line with a mini-train. After starving herself for the last month, the dress fit her perfectly.

For the bridesmaids, Carly had chosen indigo and cayenne floral princess dresses. They looked great and also seemed like they'd be comfortable.

Deshawn's white linen shirt didn't exactly match the other groomsmen, since we'd picked it up the day before. Still, you'd have to look closely to notice the difference.

We passed out the leis, and it was the perfect finishing touch. It now looked like we were having a Hawaiian wedding.

* * *

The first look ceremony went perfectly. Justin was positioned with Jake in one of the quiet grottos near the Overlook Chapel when Sophie and Carly arrived. The bride was radiant in her gown and veil.

Jake took plenty of pictures as both Carly and Justin immediately teared up. Jake had the couples nicely framed with palms and the ocean as a backdrop. At the same time, Leilani captured the entire event in her video.

Orson was driven to the chapel in a resort golf cart by Jimmy Toki. The groomsman insisted that he felt fine except for a lump on the side of his head and a slight headache. It was rather sweet when Lauren volunteered to stay with him and ensure he was okay.

I was thrilled the groomsman was able to make the ceremony and was relieved he didn't have a big bandage wrapped around his head. Things like that tend to stand out in photographs.

I rearranged the wedding party again and asked Eddy to take over as best man, followed by Orson and Deshawn. That left me one groomsman short, but after everything that had happened, I was willing to roll with it.

Jake was great with everyone as he took the formal photos of the wedding party. As he had the other day on the beach, he made it look smooth and effortless.

When Carly had put on her wedding dress earlier in the day, Aunt Audrey had fastened the diamond and ruby necklace around her niece's neck. Although the gems had been beautiful when we'd been inside, they sparkled and glowed like fire when exposed to the sun's light.

Reverend Blake again went along with all of my last-minute changes. I'm not sure, but I think he'd come to expect things like that from me.

The rest of the family and guests arrived more or less on time, and the seating went well. When the little details like this go well, I take it as a good sign for the rest of the evening.

After all of the craziness that had happened during the week, I expected some sort of additional disaster to happen during the ceremony. I could see that Dorothy also anticipated some kind of problem.

She sat off to the side and kept craning her neck, looking around for the next misfortune to occur. Fortunately, the ceremony went off without a hitch.

Although I seldom cry at my weddings, I did feel myself starting to get emotional over this one. Between the murders and the drama, I felt a real sense of accomplishment when Carly and Justin completed their vows.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jake took several additional formal photos of the families and friends with the bride and groom. Then Justin and Carly went off to sign the marriage license with Reverend Blake.

I took a golf cart to the Maluhia Patio. I wanted to make sure everything was perfect before Carly arrived.

Juls and her staff had done an outstanding job. The area was beautifully decorated in the bride's colors of indigo and cayenne. The guests were already starting to arrive, many of them carrying flowers from the Overlook Chapel to act as additional accent pieces.

I went up to the bride's table and confirmed everything was perfect. I then checked the place cards to ensure Victoria and Madeline weren't next to each other.

Next, I made a few last-minute switches to move Eddy next to Roxanne and Orson next to Lauren. The two couples seemed to be getting along well, and I thought they'd appreciate having a chance to be together during the reception.

I can't help it. It's the matchmaker in me.

DJ Ocean Motion, whose real name was Kainalu Aukai, had already finished his setup and watched me as I checked the venue. With his long curly hair, thick gold necklaces, and a great smile, the huge native Hawaiian was my favorite DJ. I always tried to schedule him whenever I had an event.

"Hey, sista Kristy," he said as I walked over. "I heard you had a crazy week over here. No worries. We'll have a beautiful night of peace and love. It'll shake loose all that bad karma."

"Thanks, Kainalu," I said. "After the lousy time we've had over the past few days, we can certainly use it."

I kept looking for problems, but everything went off without a hitch. The appetizers and dinner were served, and the drinks flowed from the bar.

Eddy did a great job as the substitute best man. He even led an emotional and personal toast for the bride and groom.

DJ Ocean Motion was excellent, as always. The dinner music was upbeat and pleasant, and everyone was laughing, smiling, and having a great time. The festivities were stopped every few minutes while someone offered a toast of congratulations to the happy couple.

The bride and groom had their first dance as man and wife. Justin had a huge grin, and Carly cried the entire time.

When they were through, everybody clapped and congratulated them. This was followed by the formal family dances.

As we got ready to cut the cake, I finally had a moment alone with Carly and Justin. The bride looked beautiful, and the sparkling jewels around her neck certainly added a nice touch of elegance.

"How do you both feel it's going so far?" I asked.

"Oh, Kristy," Carly cooed with happiness. "Everything tonight's been so perfect. After all the garbage that's happened this week with Alex and Derek, I was afraid we wouldn't be able to get married at all."

"From what we hear," Justin said, "you were the one who helped Detective Ray find out about Derek. I'm glad you discovered the truth before he could murder anyone else."

"Yeah," Carly said with a touch of melancholy. "I thought it would be a lot of fun to reconnect with Derek after all these years. I mean, he's so famous now and everything. I guess it didn't turn out so well."

After the cake, we did the specialty dances, including the electric slide and the chicken dance. Jake circulated through the crowd and got in a lot of fun candids and small

group pictures. As with the formal photos, he made it look effortless.

Leilani also circulated with her video camera. One of the things she loved to do was wait until everyone had a few drinks, then she'd convince family and friends to tell a personal story about the bride or the groom.

Weddings are emotional events, and many of the guests would have remarkably funny or touching stories to tell. Although Leilani usually had to edit some of them out, because they were too embarrassing or raunchy, these personal accounts were always some of the highlights of the wedding video.

I saw Eddy Martin standing next to the bar, a beer in his hand. Although I'd pegged him as "angry" earlier in the week, he now seemed more thoughtful as he scanned the crowd on the dance floor.

"Hi, Eddy," I said as I walked up to him. "Thanks for taking over as best man. The toast you made for Justin and Carly was very moving."

"I was honored to be able to help," he replied in a somber tone.

"I see you've been spending a lot of time with Roxanne this week," I observed. "Do you think anything might come of that?"

He shook his head and seemed to be rather sad. "No, I'm afraid that ship has sailed. But I've been able to come to peace with Roxie and how our marriage ended. I suppose it didn't hurt that the guy I caught her with was brutally murdered. That brought with it a certain level of satisfaction."

Yikes.

"There's something that's bugging me," I said. "How did you know that Derek was the murderer?"

"I overheard Derek demanding to meet with Alex and telling him to bring both necklaces. This was at the luau on

Tuesday, the night before the murder. I put two and two together."

"Why didn't you tell somebody about it?"

"I didn't know. I only suspected," he said, again in a thoughtful tone. "Derek isn't the kind of guy I wanted to snitch out, at least not without some verifiable proof."

I paused to think about it. Considering what happened to Alex and Castellani, Eddy had a good point.

As the evening progressed, the crowd really got into the festivities. There was a steady stream of laughing and talking, and everyone had taken at least one turn on the dance floor.

I could tell Aunt Audrey had been having an emotional time at the reception. She came up to me, holding what must have been her fifth or sixth glass of pinot grigio. Her usually immaculate clothing was slightly twisted and wrinkled.

"Oh, Kristy," she said in a slightly drunken slur. "This week has been so remarkable. Thank you for keeping everything on track. If it hadn't been for you and Dorothy, I don't think the wedding would have happened at all."

"Did you tell Carly about the necklace yet?"

Aunt Audrey blushed, and she looked down at her feet. "I showed her the appraisal this morning. I think it honestly shocked her. She had no idea it was worth that much."

"Did you tell her anything about what happened back when she was in college?"

Aunt Audrey shook her head. "I've decided not to tell her anything more about the history of the piece unless I'm forced to. I got a call from Detective Ray a little while ago. From what I now understand, Derek was the one who stole the original all those years ago. Derek apparently also sent me back the genuine copy earlier this week."

"That's what I understand," I said, not wanting to get into how I knew.

Aunt Audrey gave me a nod and an exaggerated wink. She then took off to talk with some of the wedding guests.

The sisters continued to avoid each other for most of the evening. Fortunately, Madeline had reverted back to her subtle makeup for the ceremony. Otherwise, it would have made them difficult to tell apart.

I sought out Victoria to see how she was doing. I found her sitting alone at a table with both an empty and a full Mai Tai in front of her. From the look on her face, she was still pretty upset.

"Hi, Victoria," I said as I sat next to her. "It's been an emotional week. How are you holding up?"

"Emotional doesn't begin to describe this week," she said as she took a gulp of her fresh drink, draining about half of it. "First Alex is killed, then everything that happened with my twerp of a sister, and then Derek was arrested as a murderer. It's all a little overwhelming."

"Are you still heading back to the mainland tomorrow?"

"I think so," she said with a quiet nod. "Honestly, I'd been hoping to spend a few extra days here with Derek, but that obviously isn't going to happen now. I can't understand why he would throw his life away by killing Alex and the man on the beach. It makes no sense."

"From what I understand, Derek was worried that if it became known that he'd stolen Aunt Audrey's necklace back in college, it would hurt his business and maybe send him to jail. But I agree with you. It all seems pretty senseless."

"I'd been fantasizing about starting things up with Derek again," Victoria said with a small laugh as she drained the rest of her Mai Tai. "It looks like I'll need to shift my priorities around."

"Are you going to be okay?" I asked.

She barked out a small laugh and nodded her head.

"Don't worry about me. I always come out on top, eventually

anyway."

Flirty Roxanne and Substitute Groomsman Deshawn had returned to the table from the dance floor when I caught up with them. Deshawn took off to the bar to get them fresh drinks, leaving me alone with Roxanne.

"How have you been doing?" I asked. "It's been a rough week."

"I'm doing okay," she said. "Over the past few days, I realized I've been harboring a lot of regret about how my marriage to Eddy ended. And honestly, I was a little worried about what would happen this week when everyone got together after all these years."

"Apparently, your instincts were pretty good."

"After Alex was killed, I was afraid that Eddy did it. I knew he was still pretty mad over what Alex and I did all those years ago. But when I talked to Eddy, he said he didn't have anything to do with it. In fact, he suspected Derek."

"And you believed him," I said. It was more of a statement than a question.

"Eddy's never lied to me. I knew he wasn't lying then either."

"What's next for you?" I asked. Roxanne was an interesting person, and I really wanted to know.

"Over the last few days, I've been able to turn the page on a lot of things that happened in the past. I think I'll start to focus on being a better person and moving on with my life."

"Do you have any idea where you'll start?"

"I think so," she said, now with a wicked smile.

"There's a guy back home who wants me, even though I've had him in the friend zone for the last couple of years. I think I'll give him a chance and maybe get serious with him."

"Do you think it could work out?"

"Honestly, I don't know. I have a lot of pent-up needs and desires. He might not be able to handle everything I'll

end up doing to him."

Oh my.

As the evening went on, I kept an eye on Orson in case he started to suffer any ill effects from the knock on the head he took earlier in the day. I noticed he spent most of the night at the table rather than dancing, but I supposed that was understandable.

I also noticed that Lauren had spent almost the entire evening sitting next to him. About halfway through the reception, I saw they were both wearing matching puka shell necklaces and were holding hands.

"Hi, guys," I said as I sat across from the pair. "How are you feeling, Orson?"

"I still have a touch of a headache," he said with a shrug, "but I'll be alright. The doctors checked to make sure I didn't have anything serious going on. They said it's just a bump on the head."

"I love your puka shells," I said to Lauren. "They look great on both of you. Did you get them at the Happy Hula?"

Lauren blushed a deep pink. "Um, yeah. After I found out about Orson getting hurt, I wanted to get him a get-well-soon present. I thought the necklaces there looked nice, so I got one as well. They're just so Hawaiian."

"It looks like you two are getting along well," I observed.

"I know this week's been insane," Orson said. "But it's helped put things into perspective. Alex is dead, and Derek's going to prison, maybe for the rest of his life." He then looked into Lauren's eyes. "I'm not going to let what happened in the past ruin our futures."

"How did you know it was Derek and Alex who'd stolen the necklace from Aunt Audrey?" I asked.

"It was when the necklace was returned," Orson said. "That part made no sense unless it was someone in the group who had taken it and feared exposure. I went through

all the possible scenarios. Eddy and Derek were the only ones who made sense.

"But you said you saw Eddy on the beach when Alex was murdered."

"Yes, and that only left Derek. Of course, he'd already gotten rich off of my ideas, so he wouldn't have taken it for the money. I simply had to work backward and deduce he'd brought a real necklace to Hawaii to switch out for a fake, again to prevent exposure. Once I figured that out, the source for the initial funding for his company became obvious. I knew if I was right, Derek would be hiding the fake necklace, probably somewhere in his bungalow."

"How did you get into his room?" I asked. "I've always heard the resort's locks are pretty secure."

"Oh, most hotels use a basic radio-frequency identification room key system. I ordered a device that can read RFID cards, and it arrived yesterday morning. When housekeeping was in my room yesterday afternoon, I simply read her passkey, and I could then emulate it."

Orson then looked at me, a questioning look on his face. "Something's been puzzling me. Do you know how Derek and Alex were able to get into Aunt Audrey's room to steal the necklace?"

"Derek paid somebody from housekeeping a thousand dollars for her passkey."

"I suppose that way works too," he chuckled.

"Well, you were the one who figured everything out," I said. "If you hadn't, Derek would have gotten away with murder, and Jake would still be in jail."

At hearing the praise, Orson blushed, and he looked down at his hand, still entwined in Lauren's. "Oh, it was no problem," he muttered.

"Kristy," Lauren said. "Before we leave tonight, could I get one of your cards? Who knows, we may want to come back here someday."

* * *

After Carly tossed her bouquet and Justin tossed the garter, Leilani and I circulated through the group, ensuring no one had any last-minute needs or concerns.

As we walked up to Madeline, who'd gotten what looked like a ginger ale from the bar, I couldn't help but notice she was grinning with an ironic smile that reminded me a lot of Derek's.

"Hi, Madeline," I said. "I see you went back and had them fix your extensions."

"Yeah," Leilani echoed. "They look great."

"Thanks," she said, slightly blushing. "I went to the salon this morning before the rest of the group arrived. They reattached the strands my dork of a sister pulled out yesterday. I'm starting to get used to the idea of having long hair again. I think I'll grow it out. I know how much Derek likes the look."

"Derek?" I asked, now feeling a little confused. "I get the feeling he'll be going away for quite a while. Do you think you'll ever see him again?"

She nodded her head and again gave us the grin. "I think so. You see, yesterday was the full moon."

"What does the full moon have to do with seeing Derek again?" I asked.

"Oh, it's like I told you the other day. I'm as regular as a clock." She looked down at her belly, then back up at us. I couldn't help but notice her face had taken on a happy glow. "He may be going to prison, but from now on, I think Derek and I will be keeping in close contact."

I just looked at her, my mind going numb. Madeline had misled and seduced Derek, and now she believed she was carrying his child?

"Yes," Leilani squealed with happiness as she pumped her fist at this juicy bit of news.

Madeline and I both turned to look at her. "Um, sorry," Leilani said, giving us her great smile. "I mean, congratulations."

By eleven o'clock, we'd reached that blissful point of the wedding planner's night when all of the official activities were over. We were down to a half-dozen slightly drunk guests on the dance floor and another half-dozen chatting at the tables.

Jake was still circulating through the crowd, getting in a few last-minute candids. Dorothy, Leilani, and I had taken a seat at one of the empty tables off to the side.

One of the servers stopped by with three full flutes of champagne. "We're emptying the last few bottles," she told us. "You may as well have a glass or two."

We looked at each other—then Dorothy held up her champagne. "This one's definitely going into the Wedding Center Hall of Fame." She was smiling, and I got the feeling she was thoroughly enjoying herself.

Leilani and I lifted our glasses, and we all clinked our flutes together. "It's been a difficult wedding," I admitted as I took a sip of the delicious bubbly wine.

Leilani drained half of her glass in a gulp. "Difficult?" she asked with a laugh. "This wedding has been a complete dumpster fire. We've never had one even close to being this bad."

"You're right about that," Dorothy said as she flashed us her wonderful smile. "I might even put this wedding in as the new front page of my book. I doubt we'll ever get another one to top this."

"Geez," I moaned. "I hope not."

Twenty minutes later, as DJ Ocean Motion began to put away his equipment and the remaining guests gathered up the last of the centerpieces, Jake motioned me over to a secluded corner of the patio. As I stood next to him, the soft scent of his cologne surrounded me.

"I haven't gotten a chance to properly thank you for everything you did for me," he said in his low sexy voice. "Everyone here said you were steadfast in believing my innocence."

"It's not that big a deal," I said, knowing I was blushing at his praise. "It was obvious from the start you didn't have anything to do with either murder. I'm just glad everyone else now realizes it as well."

"I'd like to help make up for it," he said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "Why don't you come back to my place tonight? I'll make you some of my famous pancakes for breakfast, and we can sip coffee on the lanai while the sun comes up."

Rather than answering him directly, I wrapped my arms around his neck and drew him down for a kiss. A warm feeling of pleasure and excitement slowly washed over me as our lips touched.

The kiss was beautiful, as I knew it would be. I also got the feeling that it would only be the first kiss of many, many more to come.

Yes!

* * * * *

OceanofPDF.com

FREE BOOK OFFER

Want to get an email alert when the next Aloha Lagoon
Mystery is available?

[Sign up for our newsletter today](#)
and as a bonus receive a FREE ebook!

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

ALOHA LAGOON BOOKS

Ukulele Murder
Murder on the Aloha Express
Deadly Wipeout
Deadly Bubbles in the Wine
Mele Kalikimaka Murder
Death of the Big Kahuna
Ukulele Deadly
Bikinis & Bloodshed
Death of the Kona Man
Lethal Tide
Beachboy Murder
Handbags & Homicide
Tiaras & Terror
Photo Finished
Fatal Break
Death Under the Sea
Tidal Wave
Death on a Cliff
Hula Homicide

* * * * *

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Halfway through a successful career in technical writing, marketing, and sales, along with having four beautiful children, B.A. Trimmer veered into fiction. Now residing in an old farmhouse, with a dozen cats living in the barn, B.A. has quickly found that the most enjoyable stories to write are fun romantic mysteries set in beautiful places around the world. We hope you enjoy them!

To learn more about B.A. Trimmer, visit us online at:
<https://www.gemmahallidaypublishing.com/b-a-trimmer>

* * * * *

OceanofPDF.com

SNEAK PEEK

of the first Danger Cove Mystery

SECRET OF THE PAINTED LADY

by

CHRISTINA A. BURKE

&

ELIZABETH ASHBY

CHAPTER ONE

"Sold!" yelled the auctioneer. "To the little lady in the ball cap. Hold up your number, please."

I groaned inwardly. I'd just paid a small fortune for a Victorian over a century old. Would a little respect be too much to ask?

"Name?" asked the auctioneer.

"Alex Jordan, Finials and Facades Renovation and Restoration Services," I replied with a glance around. The courthouse steps had cleared out, and only a few die-hard flippers were there for the last sale of the day. Aging Victorians (I preferred to think of them as Painted Ladies) registered with the exacting Washington State Historic Society were not sought-after properties with this crowd. Most of these guys were looking to make a quick buck.

Not that I wasn't in need of a payday, but I wasn't your run-of-the-mill flipper. Over the past two years, I had purchased three dilapidated Painted Ladies in my home

town of Danger Cove, Washington, and painstakingly restored them to their former glory. I'd also sold them for a tidy profit. Two were now B&Bs, and one was owned by a wealthy antique dealer. Not too shabby for a little lady.

Danger Cove was the perfect place to find bargains in the Victorian market. It was a quaint little coastal town just enough off the beaten path to make it interesting but close enough to Seattle to keep the tourists coming. Main Street, lined with shops and restaurants, fairly hummed with shoppers during the fall and spring. The town had its roots in the fishing industry, and many a fortune had been made at the turn of the last century, spawning the large estates of the wealthy families. Over time, ups and downs in the town's economy had eroded much of the old money, leaving the estates in disrepair. Opportunities abounded as long as there was money to invest.

A black Cadillac roared up to the steps of the courthouse. The remaining buyers and the auctioneer gave a collective groan. Local real estate developer and Texas transplant, Jack Condor, liked big talk and big hats. He was wearing a glaring white ten-gallon number today.

Jack stepped out of his car and waved a beefy arm at the auctioneer. "Current bid plus ten percent, Phil."

Phil didn't seem to appreciate the familiar use of his name. "Bidding's closed, *Mr.* Condor."

"Why, I say, Phil, that just can't be." Jack made a big show of looking at the time on his Rolex.

"Oh, it be," replied Phil stubbornly. This wasn't his first run-in with Jack Condor. "And Miss Jordan's the new owner."

Jack's face went red above his loud, checkered sport jacket.

The man beside me tipped his *I Brake for Brunettes* trucker hat to one side and said to his partner, "Don't he remind you of someone? A cartoon character?"

His partner cocked his head. "Nope, just looks like a big blowhard to me. Got his feathers all in a bunch."

The man snapped his fingers. "That's it! He's like that big chicken from the *Looney Tunes*. What's his name?"

I giggled and looked over at them. "Foghorn Leghorn?"

"That's it! Big stupid rooster crowin' around the henhouse." Both men guffawed.

Jack Condor scowled in our direction. I was able to remain straight faced, until the guy in the hat said loudly, "Bawk, bawk."

I laughed out loud and sucked in air with a snort.

Condor walked up the steps, saying, "I don't see what's so funny, Miss Jordan, about being party to an illegal sale. The auction was supposed to be conducted from four to five p.m. My watch shows 4:55."

"I've been runnin' these auctions since long before you came to town," Phil cut in angrily. "I follow the letter of the law. Auction begins at four and continues until all properties are disposed of or five o'clock. Whichever comes first. Period." Phil gathered up his papers and stalked back into the courthouse.

Condor turned to me, changing tactics with a sweep of his white hat. "Forgive me, Miss Jordan. I have a client who expressed a sudden interest in the property. A very wealthy client. I'm sure we can come to some agreement." He smiled winningly. He had the sparkling white teeth of a TV star.

I tamped down another giggle. I just couldn't get that big rooster out of my head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Condor, but I've been waiting to buy Marlton House for months. It'll be my biggest restoration to date, and frankly, I stand to make a lot more than ten percent. Bring your client by when it's finished, and I'll consider an offer then."

His smile faltered a little. "Twenty percent. Final offer." He stuck out his hand for me to shake.

I shook my head.

Condor withdrew his hand and pointed a long finger at me. "You've gotten lucky on a few junked-up old houses.

That's not going to keep the wolf away from Grandma's door for long, missy. The whole town knows you're just one flop away from the poorhouse. This game's for the big boys."

I could feel steam coming from my ears. "That so? Well, I'd put any one of my restored Vics against all your two-bit cardboard condos. This is what actual work looks like." I wiggled my calloused hands in his face. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you? Too busy strutting around town, crowing about yourself, and suckering people into houses they can't afford."

The two guys behind me stepped up. The guy with the hat said, "You heard the lady. Now quit squawkin' and get walkin'. Make it quick, 'cause I'm getting a taste for fried chicken all of a sudden."

Condor puffed himself up and turned on his heel. As he opened the car door, he spun toward me. "You'll regret this, Miss Jordan. I promise you."

His threat hung heavy as the Cadillac roared away. The man in the hat patted my shoulder, saying, "Don't you worry about that fella, sweetie. Those outta-towners are all the same. Come in here actin' like big shots for a couple of years, and then the cove takes the wind out of their sails. We'll send that one packin' one day—mark my word." He nodded sagely.

His partner added, "Yep. An' if not, my wife makes a mean chicken pot pie."

They laughed all the way back to their pickup trucks. I mounted the steps of the courthouse and wondered if I'd bitten off more than I could chew.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, after what seemed like reams of paperwork, I had the keys to Marlton House in hand. The weather was still cool despite spring's official arrival last week. I was glad I'd worn a thermal shirt under my heavy

corduroy jacket. So I wasn't a fashion plate. Not even close. My standard uniform consisted of a ponytail under a baseball cap, work shirt, jeans, and steel-toed boots. I'd been accused by my more mod friends of hiding behind my work clothes.

They didn't understand that I was already working handicapped by my small stature in the good ole boy world of construction. No need to draw more attention to myself. And my generous curves had a way of attracting trouble all on their own. The few times I'd ventured around town in anything but my work clothes had been a disaster. Case in point: the tube-top incident.

To be fair to myself, my understanding of tube-top design had been limited to pictures of waif-like models in magazines. I now had an up-close-and-personal understanding of the less than supportive nature of the garment. Unfortunately, so did the checkout clerk at the grocery store.

My phone vibrated. A glance at the screen confirmed it was my grandmother, reminding me to pick up the flowers. Despite being ninety-two, Janiece Jordan (don't ever call her *Janice*) had embraced technology. Gram hadn't married until she was almost thirty, and said she'd relented and married my grandfather because he could beat her at gin rummy and knew how to hold his liquor and his tongue. My father had been a late-in-life baby. But sadly, my grandfather had died of a heart attack before my father was out of diapers, and Gram had been left to raise him alone. Gram kept with the old ways, as in back when there was plenty of money and there were servants at the family estate of Rockgrove. She didn't feel our deteriorating financial situation should change her high standards, and she continued to run the household with the clockwork accuracy and attention to detail of a first-class hotel. Fresh flowers on Friday were a must. And not just any old flowers would do. They had to be from a specific local florist. Sigh.

I didn't mind picking up flowers for Gram. In fact when Millie Mason was the owner of Some Enchanted Florist, I looked forward to it. Millie had been the town gossip, always having a little nugget of interesting information for her clients. I'd bought two of my houses because of tips from Millie. The new owner, however, was no Millie.

I rounded the corner and nodded to two elderly women from Gram's quilting group. I crossed the street and glanced up at the sign for Some Enchanted Florist. I had to admit, grudgingly, that the lighted, professionally designed sign was an improvement on Millie's old hand-painted one. I also liked the display of grab-and-go bouquets on the sidewalk and the hanging plants beside the glass door. It made you feel like you were walking through a garden as you entered the store.

No, there was nothing wrong with the shop. It was the new owner, George Fontaine, who grated on my nerves. His foreign mannerisms bordered on affectation. His glossy, perfectly coifed black hair. His ridiculous wardrobe. The man wore tailored suits to work in a flower shop! And he called me Alexandra. Nobody called me Alexandra except Gram. Yep, the man was a kook with a capital K.

His mysterious appearance a year ago as the new owner of the shop had been a source of town gossip for months. Anyone new to Danger Cove drew notice, but George's cultured personality and upscale wardrobe had townspeople calling him "highfalutin." Not to mention, he didn't seem to know a whole lot about being a florist. Millie had agreed to stay on and help with the transition for a couple of months. And while Millie complimented his design ideas, she shook her head at his technique. He clearly had not been a florist by trade but offered no hints about his life before Danger Cove. Eventually, Millie's stamp of approval and his unfailing good manners and hospitality had been enough to win over the town. Unfortunately for me, once George had passed the town sniff-test, he was Bachelor

Number One on Gram's list of eligible men. Gram's matchmaking was reaching epic proportions with the passing of each year. She just couldn't understand why I'd prefer digging around old houses to having a husband and a family.

The tinkling of bells sounded as I opened the door. I was in olfactory overload as the scent of dozens of varieties of flowers hit my nose. George looked up. A beaming smile lit his face as he came out from behind the old-fashioned glass case with a wide Formica countertop.

"I have something special for Janiece this week," he said without preamble. He walked over to the cooler and pulled out a large bundle of flowers. "Velvet pink dendrobium orchids mixed with all the usual suspects, of course."

The flowers were beautiful as always, but I couldn't tell the difference between orchids and okra. Instead, I took the opportunity to look for flaws in his perfectly groomed figure. No dandruff on his wide shoulders. No gray hairs in his ebony locks. No smudge of yellow on his starched white collar. Not even a crease at the back of the knee on his linen slacks. How was that even possible? Unless maybe he kept his pants on a hanger and stood around in his underwear when there weren't any customers.

I smiled at that. He turned around and caught me grinning. "She can smile," he said with just a hint of sarcasm.

"Of course I can," I replied.

"Just not around me," he said with a raised brow. Was that a shadow under his eyes?

I glared at him. "I don't usually have a lot to smile about when I come in here." It came out a little defensively, so I added, "But today I do. I just settled on Marlton House."

"My congratulations. Where is the house located?" he asked politely, but there was a weary note in his voice. Maybe business wasn't quite measuring up to his

expectations. He didn't seem quite so lively today. "Forty-Two South Main Street. Just around the corner from here."

George whistled softly. "That's some house. I'd love to get a look inside." He had stepped closer when he handed me the flowers, and I could smell his clean yet exotic cologne. I looked up and realized I'd have to crane my neck to make eye contact at this proximity.

I took a step back, saying, "Yeah, you and Jack Condor both."

He gave me an odd look. "How so?" His voice was casual, but there was an undertone of interest.

I shrugged as I handed him my credit card. "He tried to swoop in and buy it out from under me at the courthouse. Luckily, he was too late. He even made an offer to buy it from me at a premium, but I'm not sure I'd have sold it to him at any price."

George rang up my card and handed me the receipt. "Can't say I blame you. Never trust a man who buys his flowers at the Stop 'n Shop."

Jack Condor didn't strike me as the flower-buying type. But I didn't have time to discuss the point if I wanted to do a walk-through of Marlton House. It was almost dusk, and the house didn't have the electricity on yet.

"Thanks for these." I held up the flowers, turning toward the door. "Gram's going to love them."

"Say, how about I accompany you to Marlton House?" George said smoothly. "I'd love to see inside, and I could hold the flowers." He smiled at me, and his eyes twinkled. I noticed a faint dimple in his right cheek.

I glanced pointedly at his attire. "No offense, but you're not exactly dressed for the occasion. And don't you have to stay here until closing?"

"These old things?" He waved a hand and stepped in front of me, flipping the sign over to *Closed*.

"After you, Alexandra," he said, holding the door open and taking the flowers from my arms.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWO

Although there was a chill in the air, the outdoor cafes downtown were filled near to capacity with tourists enjoying the last few moments of sunshine. My stomach grumbled as we passed the Cinnamon Sugar Bakery; I looked in longingly. I was starving, and a nice hot croissant would pick me right up. But time was wasting, and I had no intention of having a tête-à-tête with George.

The wind picked up as we turned the corner, and Marlton House came into view. It was a true Painted Lady. The steep roof, circular tower, and porch with decorative gables defined it as a classic Queen Anne. The style was one of the more recognizable Victorian designs that blended a cottage feel with the unabashed adornment of the Victorian era. Right now, though, the Painted Lady was showing her age. Peeling paint, sagging roof, shingles hanging askew at odd angles. She needed a full facelift.

"So what's your interest in Marlton House?" I asked. Aside from the occasional comment about a passerby, George had been silent on the walk over.

"I'm from Boston originally, but my family moved around a lot. I grew up in Europe, London mostly, and I've lived in similar houses. Examples of European architecture of the period. It's interesting to see the American versions. Besides," he said, turning toward me, "these houses have character, and I'm a sucker for anything with character."

He flashed a dimple at me. I wondered briefly if he was flirting with me. "Well that explains your accent," I said to cover my flash of embarrassment.

"What accent?" he asked. "I'm as American as apple pie." He held out his arms.

I made a face. "Yeah, an apple pie wrapped in upper crust."

He laughed at my joke. It was warm and throaty and left me even more uncomfortable.

I was glad when we reached Marlton House. The overgrown shrubbery obscured the large plate glass windows that graced the front of the house. Only the heavy, weathered double door was visible as we wound our way around the brick walkway and up the dilapidated stairs onto the porch.

George's Italian loafer crunched through a stair, and he stumbled. I glanced down at the scuffed shoe and dirty cuff of his linen pants. "This place's got character, all right. Could you try not to bust it up anymore than necessary? I own it now, remember?"

George smiled sheepishly. "Will do." He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dusted his pants off.

I rolled my eyes. Who carried a handkerchief around anymore? Jeez. I fumbled in my pocket for the old-fashioned iron key. At the top of my to-do list was having the locksmith in to change the locks. The original ones provided almost no security. I noticed with surprise that a real estate agent's lockbox was attached to the front door. The house hadn't been available for viewings once it went to sheriff's sale last month. I hadn't been able to do more than peek in the windows and survey the grounds. Which made this flip riskier than most.

The lock gave a squeal as I turned the key. I shoved hard against the warped door. Nothing happened. I put my shoulder into it and gave it another go. The door didn't budge.

"Allow me," George said, stepping in front of me.

Sure, why not. "Be my guest." I stepped aside.

George looked at the door, running his hand along the edge near the top. He banged hard with his fist and then turned the knob and pushed. The door gave a groan as it swung inward. *Creak. Creak. Creeeak.* It got louder the wider George pushed it open.

"I don't suppose you brought a flashlight?" he asked, peering into the shadowy gloom.

I reached into my jacket and pulled out a small but powerful flashlight. "Wouldn't make me much of a contractor if I didn't."

I flipped the light on and walked through the front door. The air was stuffy and smelled of old wood, mold, rotting linens, and something else I couldn't quite put my finger on at the moment. I shined my light around the large foyer. It was amazing.

"Is that marble?" George asked, peering down at the floor.

I crouched down and ran my hand over the dirty floor. It was cool and smooth. I used my jacket sleeve to rub a clean circle and shined the light on it. "Yep. Wow—this is a lot of marble." I followed the floor all the way to the sweeping staircase. These types of features, original high-end finishes, could up the value through the roof.

"Beautiful," he said sincerely. I shined the light over at him.

"Thanks." My flashlight caught on the intricate mahogany paneling coated with dust and grime, but salvageable. There were two large stained glass windows that followed the rise of the stairs up to a magnificent landing and then on up to the second floor.

There was a receiving room or parlor off one side of the foyer. This room had an oversized fireplace, boarded up windows, and rotting green shag carpet over the hardwood floors.

"Looks like this place had a 1970's update," George observed.

I pointed my light at the ceiling. "Crap. Looks like we've got water damage up there."

George walked over to the heavy orange-and-green curtains and gave them a tug. "I'll let some light in so you can get a closer look."

I saw the curtain rod buckle and let out a yell. Too late. I rushed over to George, now covered in yards of musty old fabric. I dug through the layers and helped him sit up.

"Are you okay?" I shined the light on him as he got to his feet. His hair stuck up in several places, and a fine coating of dust gave him a spectral-like quality. His linen pants were wrinkled, his jacket stained, and his white cotton shirt was a sickly shade of gray.

He coughed and sputtered. "I'm fine...I'm fine." Then he gave me a wry look. "Twenty minutes with you and look at me. I'll be lucky not to get picked up for vagrancy on my way home."

"Yeah, you don't look so hot. I'm not sure you're cut out for the rehab business."

He pulled out his handkerchief and dabbed at his face. I shook my head. What a dandy. "Nonsense. A little dirt isn't going to slow me down. Lead on." He pointed toward the foyer.

I shrugged. "You're a glutton for punishment."

"So I've been told," he replied cryptically.

* * *

The kitchen had also been redone in the 1970s and sported matching avocado-green appliances, brown laminate cabinets, electric-orange countertops, and a hole in the ceiling that was large enough to see the waning sunlight through. Nothing I couldn't fix, of course. But the dollars were adding up faster than a New York taxi meter in rush-hour traffic. The kitchen's gleaming tin ceiling was its only redeeming feature, and it would need intricate repair work once the hole was patched.

"Whoa," George said, "you've got your work cut out for you in here."

"Yeah, I knew it would be a gut job. All these old places are, but I'll probably use that soapstone sink and

some of the fixtures. And just look at the beautiful tin ceiling." My mind was suddenly racing with all the possibilities of the room. Move the sink over to the window. Put an island down the middle.

"You really do love your job, don't you?" He was looking at me with admiration in his eyes.

"Don't you?" I asked curiously.

He thought about it. "I'm satisfied with my job. But it's not quite the same." Our eyes held for a moment too long.

I fidgeted and turned away, heading back toward the hall. There was a powder room under the stairs, sans toilet. "That's a little odd," George commented.

I glanced in. "Happens more often than you'd think."

"A secondary toilet market?" he asked quizzically.

"Couldn't say, but these houses are always missing a toilet or two," I replied.

We found an enormous ballroom divided by massive pocket doors. The floors were badly scarred, but the rest of the room was in good order. Unfortunately, the solarium off the back of the ballroom was not in as good of shape. Most of the windows were broken. I wasn't sure I'd be able to afford to repair them. I might end up tearing that down. Something I hated to do.

"Well, this is a real shame," George murmured looking around. "We had a solarium in our home in London. The things you could grow there in the dead of winter. Truly extraordinary."

His serious, articulate voice contrasted sharply with his grimy, disheveled appearance. I giggled. "You look ridiculous."

He pursed his lips. "Kicking a man when he's down? What would Janiece say?"

I narrowed my eyes. "She'd say, and I quote, 'You play with fire, don't whine about getting burned.'"

He laughed. "I can hear her saying that. And that horrible bird of hers squawking in agreement. Every time

she calls me to change her order, all I can hear is that bird haranguing her in the background."

"Smitty takes some getting used to," I agreed. Gram's sixty-year-old parrot was a bit eccentric, to say the least. She'd acquired him when she'd married my grandfather. Gram said he went with the house. So I suppose if anything happened to Gram, I was next in the bird inheritance line. Oh joy.

"That," George said, returning my smile, "is an understatement. I know he's had a long life, but he looks to be at death's door. I wouldn't think living at Rockgrove would've been so taxing on the poor thing."

"According to Gram, he was never much to look at, and he's a bit more bedraggled lately," I admitted. "But he's got personality." Although I didn't exactly love the bird, I didn't like to hear strangers talking trash about the family mascot.

"Touché," George said with a wave of his hand. "Throwing my words back at me. What's that look for?"

I couldn't contain myself another moment. "Who says things like 'touché'? It's like you walked out of a Monty Python skit. Who are you?"

George stared at me for a long minute. "That's an interesting question." He nodded and left the room. I hurried behind him with the flashlight.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I caught him as he started to climb the stairs. "It means it's nearly dark, and we've still got the second story to look over. However, I'd love to have a more detailed discussion over dinner sometime."

The invitation caught me off guard. "Are you asking me out?"

"If I did," he said looking down at me, "what would you say?"

"Probably no," I answered honestly.

"Then I won't ask you now." He turned and started up the stairs.

"Hey," I yelled, following him, "you can't do that. You have to ask and take your chances."

"You'll have to show me that one in the dating rule book," he said, not breaking his stride.

I grumbled all the way up the staircase, forgetting to check for damage. Who did he think he was? Mr. Preppy was going to teach me about dating? No way.

We made our way through the five bedrooms. Two had been part of the 1970's renovation. Thankfully, the other three just needed new windows and a fresh coat of paint. Unfortunately, the master bathroom *had* been part of the renovation.

"They had a penchant for avocado, didn't they?" George said, peering over my shoulder.

"Yeah, a real penchant," I said with an eye roll. This guy.

We left the master bedroom and headed down the hallway. "What's that smell? I don't recognize it."

George sniffed delicately. "That's strange." He sniffed again.

"What's strange?" I asked.

"It smells like lime."

"Lime? Like the citrus fruit?"

George shook his head. "No, like the lime farmers spread on fields."

I sniffed again. "It smells weird. Like sickly sweet."

We reached the hallway bathroom, and I turned the crystal knob. The door creaked and swung open. The smell was stronger in here. The bathroom was tiled in black and white subway tiles from ceiling to floor. A toilet and sink sat in one corner, and a huge claw-foot tub stood in the other, with an old shower curtain drawn across it.

"Score!" I cried. "Original tub." These tubs were big, beautiful, and indestructible. Buyers loved them. My light

caught something on the floor. A man's flip-flop.

We both stared at the incongruous object. Why would there be a flip-flop in the bathroom? "Looks like we might have squatters." Great, just great. Freeloaders who were nearly impossible to get out through the court system. "What's all that white powder?" I pointed my flashlight at the floor. There were also small drops of something darker peppering the white powder.

George walked into the room and leaned over the bathtub. He didn't say anything for ten seconds. Then, "It's definitely lime."

"Why would there be lime in the bathtub?" I asked, walking toward him.

He held up a hand to ward me off. "To cover up the smell of the dead guy," he said, pointing at the tub.

SECRET OF THE PAINTED LADY

available now!

-

A
DANGER COVE MYSTERY

SECRET OF THE
PAINTED LADY



CHRISTINA A. BURKE &
ELIZABETH ASHBY

OceanofPDF.com