



BLOOD ORCHIDS

A LEI CRIME NOVEL

TOBY NEAL

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Toby Neal

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Proverbs 14:12:

There is a way that seems right to a (wo)man, but in the end it leads to death.

Chapter 1

Drowning isn't pretty, even in paradise. The girl's features were bloated by water and nibbled on by wildlife. She lay half embedded in silty mud, naked as a seal carcass. Long hair that might have been blonde wrapped around her like seaweed, one sparkly hair tie still in place on the side of her head.

Leilani Teixeira grimaced at the sulphurous smell of the mud as she stepped into it, shiny regulation shoes disappearing, and squatted to inspect the body. After three years on the force in Hawaii she'd seen several drowned corpses, and had learned to stay detached as she looked for any signs of violence. Still, she was thankful for the small mercy of the girl's closed eyes.

Her partner Pono's voice was a bass drone interspersed with static as he called in the discovery on the radio. Lei stayed on her haunches, her eyes slowly surveying the entire overgrown area of the small county park. Invasive christmasberry bushes and clumps of tall *pili* grass competed along the unkempt banks. Midmorning sun leached reluctantly from under cloud cover as she spotted what looked like a bobbing coconut a few yards out. Lei glanced around—no palm trees ringed the pond.

She pushed her pant legs up and splashed forward into murky water warm as blood, clots of yellowish algae dotting the surface.

"Hey!" Pono called. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Got another one," Lei said. The water reached her thighs. Any deeper and she'd have to go back and take off her bulky duty belt. She approached the body, floating face down. Female, small build, brown skinned and nude—Lei mentally composed the report. She extended her baton and poked the corpse, wondering if something might fall off if she touched it, but the flesh was hard. Still in rigor. These girls hadn't been dead long.

"Let the crime techs deal with it. You know you're not supposed to touch the body—I don't want you to get in trouble again." She ignored Pono, in the grip of a compulsion she couldn't put words to.

There was something familiar about this body.

She grabbed a handful of trailing black hair and gently pulled. There was bit of give, but the hair held and the body moved sluggishly at her tug. Lei steeled herself and, walking backward, slowly towed the body to shore in a parody of rescue. She backed up into the shallows, bringing the girl up onto the muddy bank, and rolled her

by flipping the shoulder. The brunette landed on her back with a splash next to the blonde.

Lei sucked a breath and bit her lip, bile rising.

The eyes were open this time, and she recognized them.

Haunani Something-or-other—a sixteen year old kid with an attitude. Lei had busted her for possession at the high school a week ago. The girl's once-brown eyes were cloudy. Her open mouth was filled with water. Rigor kept the arms raised at an angle. Haunani looked as if she were waving for help, the motion frozen forever.

Off in the distance Lei heard sirens. She staggered out of the mud up onto the grass to stand beside Pono. Her stomach crawled back down her throat as she breathed in through her nose, out through her mouth and touched the tiny cowrie she kept in her pocket.

"I know her. I mean, I knew her."

"Who she stay?" Pono used pidgin, dialect of the Islands, when he was upset. He rubbed his mustache with a finger and she knew he wanted a cigarette.

"Remember a couple weeks ago? Drug bust at the high school? Her name's Haunani Pohakoa."

The last name came to her along with a memory of the girl's cocked hip and long shiny hair. Haunani had been vain about that hair, tossing it around like a pony flicking flies. Lei wished she could forget the slick feeling of the wet strands as her heart squeezed, remembering the fragile bravado Haunani had worn like armor—an armor they shared. She'd felt an immediate connection to the girl when she met her. Lei rubbed her hands briskly on soaked uniform slacks.

"Wish someone else could have found them," Pono muttered, pushing mirrored Oakleys up onto his buzz-cut head and folding bulky tattooed arms. "Simple patrol for vandalism down here and we gotta find this. Never going be done with the paperwork."

Lei didn't reply. She'd been partners with Pono long enough to know how much he hated dealing with dead bodies, a little superstitious about them since his daughter's birth two years ago. Fortunately they didn't come across many in sleepy Hilo.

Sirens announced the arrival of reinforcements. Lei looked up to see the new detective from L.A., Michael Stevens, striding toward them with a tall man's loose-limbed grace. His wiry Asian partner, Jeremy Ito, trotted in his wake. She'd seen the pair around the station but never worked with them before.

Blue eyes lasered her briefly from under black brows as Stevens scanned the scene and the bodies, hands on jeans-clad hips. Ito imitated Stevens' stance.

"Hey. What do we have?" Stevens was all business.

"We came out on a vandalism call. Someone had trashed the bathroom, done some tagging." Pono gestured to the dreary cinderblock bunker mottled with graffiti beside their parked Crown Victoria. "We did a foot patrol around the pond and found the blonde first. Then Lei spotted the floater and towed her in."

Stevens and Ito both turned to look at Lei, incredulous. She felt a hot blush stain her cheeks, and her dripping slacks and squishy shoes screamed bad judgment. She extended a hand to Stevens.

"Lei Texeira. I've seen you around."

He shook it, a brief hard pump. "Michael Stevens. I assume you know you shouldn't

have moved the body. Supposed to wait for the techs to get here, photograph it, all that.”

“I thought she might be drowning.” Lei’s scalp prickled fiercely at the lie.

“With the other one right here, obviously gone?” Ito’s soft voice had a hard edge as he narrowed eyes at her.

“I’m sorry. It seemed wrong to leave her out there.” Closer to the truth, but still not the compelling need she’d had to bring the girl’s body in, to turn it over and see her face.

“Well, what’s done is done.” Stevens squatted down to get a better look, leaning out over the mud. “The medical examiner’s on his way. Why don’t you two put up the tape before anyone else disturbs the scene.”

“We know who the brunette is,” Pono said. “Lei busted her with weed at school awhile back.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. She’s a Hilo High junior. Haunani Pohakoa.” Lei shut her eyes against a flash of memory of sun on that shiny black hair—but when she closed them, she saw the girls’ drowned faces, and between them her own: tilted almond eyes closed, wide mouth slack, olive skin so pale the cinnamon freckles across her nose stood out like paint splatters.

She recoiled, stepping back, and stumbled a little in the rough grass.

Ito’s brows had come down in a frown as both detectives glanced at her. Pono gave her arm a tug.

“Let’s go get the tape,” he said. She followed him, fleeing toward their parked cruiser, her pant legs rasping and shoes squelching.

“I’ll expect all the details on how you know the victim in your report,” Stevens called after Lei as the M.E.’s van and the Lieutenant’s cruiser pulled up, and the dismal little park filled with the organized chaos that follows death.

After combing over every inch of the banks of the small pond, Lieutenant Ohale ordered all available officers to search the two feeder streams for the original crime scene where the girls had gone into the water. Lei and Pono split from the others, taking the lower stream.

Pono trailed behind her, his eyes scanning the ground, as Lei chugged a bottle of water one of the crime techs had given her. Adrenaline from the initial discovery had worn off, leaving her shaky and exhausted—but the same compulsion that had driven her into the water to retrieve the body drove her on now.

Lei’s damp uniform chafed and her duty belt, loaded with radio, sidearm, cuffs, pepper spray, ammo, evidence bags and more, caught on scratching branches as they moved along slowly, looking for any signs of human presence. Humidity caused her rebellious brown curls to frizz out of the tight ponytail she’d restrained them with. Sweat beaded on her forehead and she swiped it away, glad of physical discomfort that distracted her from drowned faces.

Once outside the immediate area of the park, their progress through underbrush along the creek was slow, impeded by tall christmasberry bushes. The invasive species from Brazil had become an islandwide problem, smothering native growth with its

rapid spread. Dark green, glossy bushes peppered with clusters of red berries blanketed miles of open space, and almost choked the stream.

A real estate sign marked the edge of the park and abandoned cars filled with trash, a rusted Jeep and rotting Pontiac, had been pushed into the undergrowth from the nearby road.

“We might as well tag these abandoned cars for pickup.” Pono, ever conscientious, took out his pad of orange removal stickers.

“I hate the way people dump their cars around here.” Lei picked her way over boggy ground to the first vehicle by stepping on top of grass clumps. “But it doesn’t help we don’t have any recycling facilities on the island. Anyway, you tag ’em, I’m going to keep looking.”

Pono was still writing his description of the Pontiac as she pushed through long grass, hearing the rushing of water beyond the overgrown bushes. She spotted an opening.

“Pono, looks like a break here. I’m gonna check it out.”

“Right behind you.” Pono peered in to look for the VIN number on the Jeep’s dashboard.

Lei edged her way across the boggy ground, pushing through raking branches. On the other side of the wall of shrubbery, a stream flowed beside a clearing marked with a fire ring and a shelter made by tying a tarp to the bushes. A palm tree leaned out over ruffled water, fronds waving in the slight breeze.

Something about the setting oppressed Lei as she walked forward, surveying the area carefully. Perhaps it was the pile of discarded propane cans, soda bottles, and a dirty sleeping bag that testified to someone having camped there not long ago. Rocks made a handy access point to water otherwise choked by thick grass.

A white rag was caught in the vegetation, along with something shiny. Lei squatted on the rocks and fished the objects out of the water: a long strip ripped from a T-shirt and a cluster of iridescent ribbon attached to an elastic hair tie.

“Hey.” Pono crashed through the bushes, muttering as he slipped on the mud. “Anything interesting?”

“These were caught in the stream.” Lei held up the hair bow. “It looks familiar.”

“Looks familiar to me too. That’s a little girl’s hair tie.” Pono squatted beside her, examining the items.

An image burst across Lei’s brain, indelible. Bluish closed eyes, straggling blonde hair on one side, and on the other . . . a pigtail with a sparkly ribbon cluster.

“Oh my God, Pono. I think we just found the primary crime scene.”

Chapter 2

“Shit. We trampled all over the ground,” Pono said. He hooked his radio off his belt and called it in.

Lei let her eyes wander slowly over the lush scene, looking for anything out of place. She pictured a scenario: the girls coming out here, maybe to party, and then drugged and tied up. Raped? Maybe they knew their captor?

“Detectives are on their way. They want us to stay put, secure the scene.”

“Okay,” Lei said, standing at last. It was weird she’d found the crime scene so easily; almost like it was staged. This was one of those times Lei felt an electric tingle that signaled she was onto something, and that inner drive she’d followed hardened into resolve. She had to get assigned to the case—Haunani needed justice.

She turned to look at the shelter. They would have to take everything there into evidence, including the trash in the junked cars. Stevens, Ito and the crime scene techs arrived, groaning at the mud and the amount of garbage that they would have to sort through.

Lei helped empty the junked cars, putting garbage into heavy-duty evidence bags. Her uniform was hopeless by then, the legs of her pants soaked and muddy, mosquito bites peppering her arms. Replacements eventually arrived, sensibly dressed in boots and zip-front canvas overalls, with big portable lights to work into the night.

“Stevens.” Lei addressed the tall detective as he sifted through the grass along the bank, latex gloves on his hands.

“Yeah?” He straightened up. “Funny how you keep finding things, Texeira.”

“Just lucky. That’s why I think I should be on this investigation, Detective. I really want to find whoever killed Haunani Pohako.” She was surprised to feel tears stinging the backs of her eyes and blinked hard.

“No offense, but I need experienced detectives. I’m asking the other districts to send us some of their best people.”

Lei felt slapped. “You’ll find out for yourself how strapped for personnel Hilo District is. We’re always fighting the budget battle.”

“Yeah, well, I gotta try.”

“Let me know if I can help. I feel like this case found me as much as I found it.”

“You take initiative, I’ll give you that.” He made a gesture that took in her filthy uniform and bedraggled appearance. “I’ll try and find something for you.”

“Great. Hope you can use me.” Lei didn’t bother to suppress the sarcasm in her tone as she spun on a muddy heel and pushed back through the bushes to the cruiser.

* * *

Sunset gilded the surface of the creek as a full moon crested above a backdrop of swaying trees. Lush grass lined the bank where a single palm leaned out, leaves fluttering over two girls floating in light-streaked water. The creamy skin of one contrasted with the earth tones of the other as their hair swirled in the stream.

He adjusted the colors in Photoshop and tried black-and-white and sepia tones, eventually rejecting them. The final version enhanced the darkening blue of evening sky, fat pearl of moon and waning sunbeams caressing naked, face-down bodies. Blunt fingers rattled the keys as he titled the photo Orchids, and saved it to an external hard drive in a file filled with flowers.

Not that photos were ever enough—that was why he kept a few reminders.

He took a shiny new metal key ring out of his desk drawer, along with a Ziploc bag. Two long hanks of hair twined together in the bag—one silky blonde, the other a glossy raven-wing black. He eased the hair gently onto the desk, stroking and separating the colors, brushing them with a soft doll’s brush.

Each piece was exactly twelve inches long. He savored the memory of measuring the hair on each sleeping girl’s head, his fingers finding the barely noticeable spot where he cut it, two inches up from the tender dip where the skull joined the neck.

He doubled the blonde hank into a loop and tucked it in through the key ring, inserting the tail and tugging down so the hair hung secured by its own strands, and trimming it with surgical scissors so all the ends were aligned.

He lingered a bit over the black hair, brushing and remembering. It was too bad he’d had to get rid of Haunani, but when she’d showed up to their special spot with her friend, he just had to have them together. The photos brought his art to a whole new level, and he could remember his time with them anytime he wanted. He opened his drawer and looked in at the other key ring, lush with a rainbow of red, blonde, brunette and black hair.

That ring was full and the girls deserved their own—after all they’d given their lives.

He attached Haunani’s hair to the new ring beside the blonde hank and leaned back in his chair, trailing the hair down his arms, across his chest. He stroked it beneath his nose where he could inhale their scent—grass, girl, and sunshine.

That scent took him straight to his afternoon with them faster than jewelry, clothing, or even the photographs. As the criminologists said, he was evolving. He chuckled at the irony of it all, and closed his eyes again.

Chapter 3

Lei pulled into the detached garage of her little cottage. It had been a long day. The single-walled wooden structure built in the 1960's—dark green with white trim—was characteristic of Hawaii plantation homes, right down to the galvanized tin roof that amplified the frequent Hilo rain to a percussion orchestra. Lei particularly loved the deep covered porch and the fenced yard where her Rottweiler could patrol during the day.

Keiki put her massive paws up on the chain-link gate and whuffed with joy. She'd bought the young, police-trained dog for security when she moved to Hilo two years ago, and in that time Keiki had become much more than a guard—she was someone to come home to.

“Hey, baby.” Lei rubbed Keiki's ears. “Go around the back and I'll meet you for drinks.” The big dog peeled off the gate and galloped around the side of the house as Lei unlocked the front door and let herself in, deactivating the alarm with a few keystrokes. Pono had teased her about her security measures since few people in Hilo locked their doors, let alone had an alarm system—but he'd backed off when she told him a little of her story. More than anything, she needed to feel safe in her home.

Keiki burst through the unlocked dog door. She skidded to a stop as Lei held up her hand. The dog plunked her hindquarters on the floor, grinning. Lei squatted in front of her and rubbed her wide chest.

“Good girl. Mama's home.”

Keiki snorted, burying her nose in Lei's armpit.

“Yeah, I know I'm ripe,” she said, getting up and dumping food into Keiki's bowl. “You pour the wine and I'll be out in a minute.”

The dog buried her nose in the bowl. Lei had grabbed a burger on the way home—food was not something she liked to spend time on—just fuel for the body. She went into the linoleum-floored bathroom and took the cowry out of her pocket, setting it on the sink as she stripped the filthy uniform off her lean muscular body, dropping it into the laundry hamper.

She'd picked up the smooth little domed shell with its ridged base at the beach the last time Auntie Rosario visited, and rubbing it was one of the ways she'd learned to manage anxiety. She stepped into the shower, luxuriating in hot water pouring over her petite frame, washing away mud and aches as she mulled over what was being called

the Mohuli`i case.

She'd asked around about Stevens, the lead detective. He had a solid reputation, and as a seasoned big-city cop his experience was going to be important on a double homicide that was looking complicated and inflammatory. His partner, Jeremy Ito, was a local boy whose biggest case prior to the girls was a homeless guy beaten to death in a park.

It was a good thing Stevens was there to take the lead—South Hilo Police Department seldom had homicides, let alone this kind of case.

Lei scrubbed mud off her legs and out from under her short, unpainted nails, trying to keep her mind from wandering back to images of the drowned girls. Her eyes lighted on the note thumbtacked to the peeling drywall above the shower surround: *Well-behaved women rarely make history.* —Laurel Ulrich.

Haunani Pohakoa hadn't been well behaved when Lei met her at the high school.

"I nevah going show you notting." Her dark eyes flashed defiantly as she spoke pidgin English—thick as burnt sugar in the cane fields that spawned it, the language of choice among 'locals' in Hawaii. The dialect had evolved as the many races brought over to work the plantations learned to communicate.

"Open up the backpack," Lei said. "Your principal called me and we already know you're carrying."

"Haunani, no give the officer hard time." The principal, Ms. Hayashi, wore a muumuu over athletic shoes with a jangling bunch of keys on a lanyard around her neck. The older woman shook her head and the keys rattled. Per protocol, Haunani had already been searched in the library conference room by the principal and a teacher before the police were called. No one had answered at the girl's parents' numbers.

"I don't have to," Haunani insisted. Lei rolled her eyes. The girl shoved the backpack over abruptly, refolding her arms across a shapely chest that spelled out **HOTTIE** in rhinestones.

Lei opened the backpack. Inside a rolled up pair of socks were a baggie of pot and a glass pipe.

She pulled a plastic evidence bag out of the snapped pouch on her duty belt and put the marijuana and pipe in, labeling them with a Sharpie marker.

Pono stuck his head in the door. "What's the story?"

"Got some *pakalolo* and a pipe here." Lei held the bag up.

"All right. Let's go." Pono gestured. "We'll try your parents again at the station."

For the first time, a ghost of fear stole across the girl's face. "I going be in so much trouble," she whispered.

Lei took her by an elbow and escorted her past staring and gossiping students to the cruiser and put her in the back. She got in front and waited as Pono finished up paperwork with Ms. Hayashi, glancing in the rearview mirror to see Haunani curled up with her knees beneath her chin and tears tracking down her cheeks through dark makeup.

She felt a pang for the girl. She'd been that miserable once.

"It's not going to be so bad," Lei said. "You're a juvenile so you'll probably get community service or something."

"It's too late now," Haunani whispered. "He's going to be so mad I got busted."

Lei knew what it was like to be abused—by a mother whose drug use ruled her life,

by a father who'd abandoned her when he was incarcerated.

"We can help you."

"No you can't. Not that I want help from cops anyway." More tears belied this statement but Lei couldn't get another word out of her, and in the end no one answered at any of the numbers they called. Pono and Lei would have sent Haunani home with Child Welfare Services, but the worker said there was nowhere to put her.

Lei remembered Haunani's stony stare as the teen walked out of the police station, thumbing her phone to call someone. It had seemed there was no one who cared about the girl—but now, with shower water cooling around her, Lei wondered if someone in Haunani's life had been angry enough to kill her.

Lei rubbed the scars on the inside of her arms with a washcloth—thin silvery threads left from days when she'd been desperate to express her pain. She was glad to have those reminders of how far she'd come, and wished she could have shared them with Haunani somehow. Maybe it would have made a difference.

Later, Lei moved through the house, checking the sturdy hasps on the windows. She locked the dog door and rechecked the locks on the both entrances, arming the alarm. Even without her duty belt, she knew she still walked like a cop, energy coiled, arms away from her sides to keep them from catching on her sidearm.

Lei's bed was a king, with an old-fashioned, curly iron frame and a canopy draped in filmy voile. She dove in, dressed in her usual boxers and tank top, enjoying the silky sheets. She patted the ratty handmade quilt at the foot of her bed, and Keiki leapt up with a graceful lunge, turned in a circle, and stretched herself out with a doggy sigh of content.

But even physically exhausted, with her dog at her feet and the boxy black Glock on the bedstand, Lei didn't sleep well. Long black tendrils of hair tried to wrap around her and pull her under in dreams of clouded eyes.

Chapter 4

Too early the next morning while brushing her teeth, Lei glanced at the mirror where she'd taped a 3x5 card: *Be the change you want to see in the world—Gandhi*. Across from the toilet, precariously stuck to the pebbled-glass shower door: *God has a plan for every living thing*.

The “affirmations” were part of the cognitive behavior therapy she'd done in California while doing her AA degree. They were meant to remind her of positive truths and be replacement thoughts when memories dragged her into a dark place. Still, it was hard to believe *God had a plan* when she'd spent the day looking for the crime scene where two young girls were drowned.

She'd been so tired last night she'd forgotten to get her mail. She put on her rubber slippers and tripped down the cement steps to the aluminum mailbox, listing on its steel pole. She took out the handful of bills and circulars and flipped through them as she headed back to the porch. An envelope caught her eye, **LEI TEXEIRA** printed on it.

She ripped it open and pulled out a piece of plain computer paper. Bold capitals spelled out:

**YOU LOOK PRETTY WHEN YOU SMILE
I'M GOING TO MAKE YOU CRY.**

She looked at the envelope again. No address, no postmark, no stamp. Someone had personally delivered it.

The hairs on her neck rose, along with a surge of adrenaline. Her head flew up as she scanned the empty sidewalk, heart kicking into overdrive. The row of modest homes on her street were deserted except for her neighbor at the end of the block. The guy had no life. He was always either working in his immaculate yard or washing his car. This morning it was washing his car.

She bounced down the steps and ran down the street to talk with him, rubber slippers slapping against her heels.

“Hey. I got this weird message,” she said, waving the envelope. “Seen anybody messing with my mailbox?”

The man straightened, the big sponge in his hand dripping. He was younger than she'd assumed, with an angular, handsome Japanese face. The pale early-morning sun

caught in glossy black hair.

“No. I haven’t seen anyone but the paperboy.”

“Well, it’s a weird note, and someone hand-delivered it. Can you remember anything unusual?”

He stared at her, and she remembered she was in the thin tank top she slept in and tiny boxers. She crossed her arms over her chest, trying to look casual.

“Aren’t you a police officer?” he asked.

“Yeah—maybe that’s why I’m a target. Can you keep an eye out?”

He seemed to relent, tossing the sponge into the bucket and approaching her with his damp hand outstretched.

“Tom Watanabe,” he said. “Water Department Inspector.”

“Lei Teixeira. Police officer,” she said, with an awkward laugh. She shook his hand.

“I’ll certainly keep a look out. When did you check your mail last?”

“Not since day before yesterday. I guess it could have been dropped off any time since then.”

“Well, here’s my number,” he said, opening the car door and reaching inside. It was a new Acura, charcoal with a silver flake. He handed her his card.

“I should be the one giving you my card, but I just rushed over here . . . I was so hoping you had seen something.”

“Nope, sorry. Drop your number by . . . I’ll call you,” he said, smiling.

“Sure will.” She backed up, uncomfortable. Was he hitting on her? “See ya.”

She turned and speed-walked back to her house, conscious of his eyes on her ass. She looked back as she went inside, and sure enough he was still staring, the hose pouring unnoticed from his hand. She gave a little wave and he jerked his chin upward in ‘local style’ acknowledgement.

She slammed the door, whistling for the dog. Keiki came skittering in and she re-alarmed the house. She was rattled by the creepy way Watanabe had checked her out and his anal-retentive habits didn’t help. She stood there for a minute and did some relaxation breaths. Her eyes fell on one of her notes, stuck to the bottom of the living room lamp.

Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace. —Amelia Earheart. She felt calm move up and over her. She could handle this, freaky as it was.

She put the stalker letter in a Ziploc bag in her freezer between the stacks of Hot Pockets, and that seemed to neutralize the threat of it.

She called Pono at home. His phone was off so she left a message, changed into shorts and a ratty old Hilo Police Department t-shirt. This time she put on a shoulder holster and loaded her Glock .40 into it under a thin nylon running jacket, clipped her cell phone onto her shorts. Keiki lunged and bounced ecstatically as they went down the cement steps. Tom Watanabe and his charcoal Acura were gone, she noted with relief.

Her phone rang as they jogged through her neighborhood toward Hilo Bay. She stopped to answer it, stretching her hamstrings.

“Lei, what’s up?” Pono asked.

She told her partner about the note.

“We should check it for prints.”

“I have a feeling he didn’t leave any, but I guess we should anyway when I come

in.”

“Keep your gun close until then.”

“How’d you know?” she asked, patting the Glock.

“I know you. Just don’t shoot anybody you don’t have to.”

“Aw, stealing all my fun. You’re such an old lady.” She shut the phone and slipped it in her pocket.

They picked up some real speed after that as Lei worked off the adrenaline the note had brought on. The sidewalk around the Bay was buckling, pushed upward by huge banyan tree roots. Coconut palms stood sentinel around the park, their arching fronds shimmering in the light breeze. Mynah birds hopped and chattered on the mowed grass. Keiki seemed to enjoy the briny scent of Hilo Bay, tossing her head and snorting.

Lei ran all out, the emptiness of total effort blocking out intrusive images of the dead girls brought up by the smell of the water. Keiki’s ears flattened back as they thundered through the park and made their way through the town back to the cottage. She took Keiki into her small fenced backyard and hosed the dog off, then misted her collection of orchids.

A delicate purple blood orchid, a veined variety of phalaenopsis, was blooming. Raising orchids was a pastime she’d shared with Aunty Rosario, her guardian, and working with the plants never failed to comfort and calm her. She took the orchid inside and set it on the table.

Lei showered and did the beauty routine—a handful of gel in her hair to tame it and a swipe of gloss on her full mouth. She didn’t know what accident of nature had landed her with the sprinkle of cinnamon freckles over her nose—a Portuguese, Hawaiian and Japanese heritage was full of genetic surprises. She buttoned into the stiff navy-blue uniform, buckled on her loaded duty belt, grabbed the stalker note out of the freezer and hurried out the door to her little white Honda Civic.

“Hey, babe,” said Sam, the watch officer behind the front desk, as Lei pushed through the aging glass doors of the South Hilo Police Station.

“Hey babe, yourself.”

Sam chuckled and went back to his crossword puzzle as she passed the second glass door into the bull pen and went straight back into the lab, where Pono waited at one of the workstations. She handed him the note and he sprayed it with ninhydrin.

“Gotta let it set for at least 12 hours, but usually something pops right away.” He slid the paper under the portable arc lamp but nothing fluoresced. “No dice. Let’s come back and check at the end of the day.”

“I expected as much. Damn.”

“Well, let’s open a case for you. In case this isn’t the last we hear from this kook.”

“It better be.”

Lei signed the complaint Pono had filled out under Harrassment/Stalking. They were late for the morning’s briefing and hurried back to the conference room, where Stevens and Ito were clipping pictures of the girls from Mohuli`i Pond onto the whiteboard on the back wall. Lieutenant Ohale had already taken up a stance behind the battered lectern, his broad build dwarfing it. She and Pono slipped into empty

molded plastic chairs, trying to be unobtrusive, but Lei felt Ito's stare-down from the corner of the room. The rest of the current shift officers were already seated.

"Today's priority is the Mohuli` case. We have a few more facts since yesterday." The Lieutenant shuffled through some notes. "The blonde girl is identified as Kelly Andrade, aged fifteen, the brunette is Haunani Pohakoa, aged sixteen. Approximate time of death is sometime late evening on Tuesday; the girls were discovered Wednesday 10:00 a.m. Preliminary tox screens came back positive for Rohypnol. There was sexual activity prior to drowning but little premortem bruising."

He looked up, his deep brown eyes intense, ridiculously tiny reading glasses perched on his wide nose. "I can't stand this sick shit happening in my town. Detectives Stevens and Ito are primary on the case; I'm requesting more backup from Hilo District. Stevens will be asking for additional support from you as it's needed. Detective Stevens?"

Stevens came up and took the lectern. "Our top priority is interviewing the girls' parents. In fact, early this morning we heard from Kelly Andrade's parents who called in to report her missing. Ito and I did a quick trip to the house to inform them. Mother was too upset to talk so we set up an interview for this afternoon." He looked down at his notes. "We haven't talked to Haunani's parents yet and we need a female officer. Teixeira? Can you come do the interview with me?"

Lei went rigid, eagerness warring with apprehension, but her voice was steady as she answered.

"Of course."

Chapter 5

Lei and Stevens got into the unmarked Bronco he drove. Lei's stomach cramped around the granola bar she'd eaten on the way into the station, and with a panicky feeling she realized she'd forgotten the tiny cowrie shell. She'd only been on one death notification before and it honestly wasn't something she'd ever wanted to do again.

"So you wanted a female officer—why?"

Stevens' jaw bunched as he turned the key and the Bronco roared into life. The vehicle smelled of Mohuli`i Pond. Lei glanced into the backseat and saw muddy boots on a pile of plastic evidence bags from yesterday's crime scene.

"Kelly's mom, Stacie, did a lot of screaming, ran into the bathroom and took a big handful of sleeping pills. Not enough to send her to Emergency for stomach pumping, but I'm doubting she's going to make it into the station this afternoon for the interview. The stepdad, James Reynolds, was cool as a cucumber. Blamed us for upsetting her." He shook his head. "Ito's a good partner but he just froze up when it got emotional, left the room. I was thinking if you talked to Haunani's mom, you know, woman to woman, it might help us get a little more out of them."

"Not sure why you thought I'd be any better at this than Ito." Lei gave a short laugh.

"You said you wanted to help. This is all I got right now."

"Yeah, okay. Thanks for giving me a shot."

She looked out the mud-speckled window into morning light that failed to brighten the shabby low-income neighborhood they'd entered. Tiny tin-roofed cottages leaned into each other, draped in flapping laundry, lawns decorated with decrepit cars and scratching chickens.

Stevens peered over at the navigator bolted onto the dash. "This is it."

They pulled onto a scrap of grass in front of a dwelling made of multicolored plywood shaded by a rusting tin roof. A broken Big Wheel leaned against a cement stoop where a thin brown woman sat, wreathed in cigarette smoke that did little to soften the haggard planes of her face. A flagrantly blooming plumeria tree shaded the doorway above her, and as Lei got out, a single pinwheel blossom spiraled down and landed on long black hair that reminded her of Haunani like a punch to the gut.

She hung back as Stevens approached, holding his shield up.

"Hi there. Nani Pohakoa?" His tongue still tripped over the multiple vowels of the musical language.

“I’m Nani. Who you stay?” A smoker’s voice, gravelly and suspicious.

“I’m Detective Stevens and this is Officer Texeira from South Hilo Police Department.”

“What she done? Stupid girl stay gone two days now.”

A long pause. Stevens glanced at Lei, signaling her. She stepped forward, lowered her voice. “We need to speak to you privately, Ms. Pohakoa. Can we come inside?”

Dark eyes peered at her through a rheumy film. The woman’s bony arms gestured to a couple of frayed beach chairs leaning against the wall.

“We talk here. Nowhere for sit inside.”

Lei and Stevens brought the chairs over, sat on them gingerly. The older woman dropped the cigarette butt into a jar of water at her feet, lit another one with hands that fumbled with the red Bic lighter. She took several drags and her eyes skittered away.

“Where’s Haunani’s father?”

Shrug. More drags on the cigarette. “Haven’t seen the fucka in years.”

“Well. I’m sorry fo’ say we get bad news,” Lei said in pidgin. She steadied her voice. “Haunani stay *make*. She’s dead.”

No reaction. Nani looked blankly out into space, took another drag off the the cigarette, but now her hand shook as if with an ague. Lei reached over and captured the one holding the lighter in both of hers. Stevens shot her a quick glance.

“I’m sorry.”

Nani’s hand felt like a bundle of sticks. The woman’s throat worked as she swallowed. “How?”

“She was drowned.”

“I told her a hundred times never go swimming by the rivermouth but she never listen. She always get one hard head, that girl.”

“It wasn’t accidental.” Stevens’ low voice sawed across the tension.

Another long pause.

Moving faster than she could have believed, Nani brought the lit cigarette down on the back of Lei’s hand, spitting into her face. Nani’s black eyes were empty pits of wild as she clawed at Lei, screaming incoherent curses.

Lei recoiled with a cry, flying over backwards in the flimsy beach chair as Stevens surged up and grabbed the woman, spinning her around and putting her against the wall. He cuffed her as she continued to yell incomprehensible abuse.

Lei scrambled up and went to the Bronco, listening with one ear as Stevens tried to calm Nani down. She fumbled in the glove box for the first aid kit, hoping there wasn’t HIV in the spit making its way into her eyes, down her cheek. She ripped open a Bactine-soaked wipe and scrubbed her face with it, rubbed another one on the blistering circular burn on the back of her hand, using the minutiae of attending the small wound to collect herself.

Fucking rookie move, getting close, touching the woman like that. She deserved to get burned.

Nani’s invective had switched to a dry sobbing that sounded like branches rubbing in a high wind. Lei finally turned to face the tableau of Stevens beside the frail, hunched woman on the stoop, her hands cuffed behind her, skeins of black hair trailing.

“Do you want to press charges?” Stevens asked. She could tell by the timbre of his

voice he didn't want her to, and Lei knew that would shut down any further communication they might get out of Nani. Lei shook her head—she couldn't seem to find her voice.

"I'm going to take these restraints off," Stevens said gently. "But I'll put them back on and take you down to the station if you try anything more."

A tiny nod among the terrible sounds coming from the slight form. Stevens took off the cuffs. "Who can we call for you?"

He needn't have asked, as doors had been opening along the row of dwellings and neighbors came out. A tall, wide woman in a muumuu and slippers approached.

"What you wen' do to Nani?"

"Her girl, she drowned," Lei said, coming forward.

"Oh the poor 'ting!" the neighbor exclaimed. It was unclear whether she meant Nani or her daughter, but she wedged her bulk between Stevens and Nani on the stoop, effectively squeezing him off as she looped a hamlike arm over the woman. "I going take care of you."

"Fuck you, Ohia," Nani snarled, trying to get up, but Ohia just hoisted her closer.

"I take you inside, fix you something for eat. Bet you never wen' eat today," the neighbor went on, hauling Nani into the fetid interior. They disappeared, and the door slammed.

"That went well." Stevens gestured Lei over. "You okay?"

"Worried about HIV, but yeah." Lei put her hands in her uniform pockets, missing the cowry.

"Shit." He seemed at a loss, finally went on. "So much for the female officer breaking the news strategy. Let's canvass these neighbors since we're here, maybe she'll be calm enough to answer some questions later."

"Okay." She followed him as they went to the next house and worked their way down the street.

The neighbors were voluble on the subject of Nani, Haunani and the younger brother Alike, a high school freshman. Nani, a known drug addict, had been turned in to Social Services multiple times over the years and the neighbors had given up doing much besides feeding the kids when they came by. One witness alluded to Haunani being picked up and dropped off by someone in a "dark Toyota truck."

Stevens shut his notebook after the fifth house. "We've got some leads here. Let's head back to Nani's and see if she's ready to talk."