

Ace

HANALEI MOON

A. J.
Llewellyn

Swords

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Hanalei Moon: Tarot - Ace of Swords

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Author's Note:

The suit of swords in the *Mythic Tarot Deck* deals specifically with the Curse of the House of Atreus. Its patriarch, King Tantalos of Lydia, was a man who was a powerful, often menacing, ruler. Through ignorance and arrogance, he mocked the gods, who in turn cursed him.

The Ace of Swords card traditionally depicts a woman wielding a double-edged sword, representing the dual gifts of being human. Though man is raised above beasts in intellect, the other side of the gift is the power, the ego, to destroy the very things we love. The Ace of Swords reminds us that despite conflict arising in relationships, peaceful resolution can be achieved.

Hanalei Moon: The Ace of Swords is based upon this interpretation...

- A.J. Llewellyn

*Hanalei Moon: Tarot-Ace of
Swords*

By

A.J. Llewellyn

Dedication

To Heavenly Hina, Hawaiian Goddess of the Moon.

Chapter One

February 5, 1997

Sunset had not yet come to *Hanaelei Bay* and I resisted looking back over my shoulder at the beckoning red-gold hues of the last, vibrant rays kissing the ocean. This was the most magnificent place on earth. *Hanalei Bay* managed to pack a lot of beauty into a tiny parcel of land. Pristine beaches, cascading waterfalls from the emerald green mountains fringing our side of the islands and, dammit, the best sunsets in the world...and I have seen a lot of sunsets, being a professional surfer.

I hesitated outside the house. I could tell the ceremony had already begun, judging by the incessant chanting coming from inside. It was common in Buddhist households to let yourself in during times of prayer and, although I knew the backdoor was unlocked, I couldn't do it. Not with Ntino's family. Not *ever*.

I sensed a fight with Ntino would come the

moment we were alone. I was damned if I went in, damned if I didn't. Kicking off my shoes outside the house, I made sure they were lined up correctly, toes facing outward to bring money to the dwelling, not send it away. I brushed the salt off my arms, still feeling as if I was in water. I'd had a good day of surfing and sure, I'd lost track of time, but I had a world championship to defend in two days.

Besides...Ntino's family *hated* me. Knocking on the weathered wooden screen doorframe, I pasted a pleasant look on my face and forced myself to smile when his mother opened the door.

"Gaby, we've already started." Ntino's mother, a small, birdlike Laotian woman, let me in, her demeanor sour, the open door a grudging action.

"Good evening, Nani. I'm sorry I'm late."

"You're always late."

I tried so hard with Ntino's family, really I did. I felt her gaze sweep over my brown skin and my clothes. I was in my Sunday best. Ntino had screamed at me not to wear shorts and now I felt uncomfortably hot in my Dockers and plaid shirt. Between Nani's seething anger behind those small, hard pebble eyes and the warmth of the enclosed kitchen, all in all, I should have settled for being damned for not coming to the Promise Ceremony.

Nani did not approve of our relationship.

Inside the stuffy kitchen, a mountain of food lay in wait on every available surface. She led me into the living room, through the long, long hallway, one finger crooked behind her as if hooking me like a great, giant carp. Or maybe she just thought I'd get lost on the way.

I wanted to scream, *I'm gay, not stupid*. Not that she really knew I was gay. She only knew her beloved son, Ntino, had done the unthinkable and left home before marriage to move in with me, Gabriel *Gaby* Loe, *Hawaiian* state surfing champion and, I hoped, soon to be the world champion third year in a row. Officially, Ntino—say Tee-no—and I were roommates, but after two years, I think she'd started to suspect something else was going on. She and her husband, Leng, desperately wanted to get me away from their son.

The sickly-sweet cloud of incense wafted over me as I entered the living room. The massive and ornate *butsadan*, a three hundred year old Buddhist altar, took up an entire wall and was the family's pride and joy. All eyes were turned to the *gohanzon* in the center of it, the long, narrow scroll that contained the prayer of life.

Ntino glanced up at me and lost his rhythm. One look at him and I was seduced anew. I'd never been with a Laoatian man before. For him, breaking from his tight community and being with a *Hawaiian* man's family was too much for his own

family to handle. Of all the people he could have aligned himself with, I knew this much. Nani disliked the Vietnamese family across the road even more than me and she was grateful he hadn't moved in there. I didn't quite understand the long simmering tensions between the Vietnamese and Laotians from the old country, but it was like hanging onto anger toward Japanese people because of Pearl Harbor. It was time to forgive...not that I would say this to Nani.

Nam myoho rengo kyo... Ntino's father led and controlled the pace and volume of the chant. I pulled my sandalwood prayer beads out of my pocket and wished I could have kissed the man I loved. He always gave me a lift. At twenty-five, he topped five foot seven, slim, with short black hair and an easy laugh. I was two years older and towered over him with my six foot two frame and husky *Hawaiian* build. We fit one another. We just clicked.

"Hi, Gaby." Ntino's smile was not unfriendly, but not entirely authentic either. He was sitting on the sofa beside his sister, Aleka, and her intended husband, Leono. Ntino's father turned from the *butsadan* and gave me one of his blank looks. I was the invisible man to Leng I had a sneaking suspicion he was a closet gay. I wondered if he'd ever had a decent blow job in his life and my gaze shifted back to my own man, who was glowering

at me.

I perched on a chair that must have been occupied by Nani until I'd arrived. It was still warm. I found myself sitting next to Ntino's fifteen-year-old sister, Kiana, who adored me and whom, I in turn, loved deeply. I put my arm around her and she snuggled into me. She was still kitten-like in demeanor and clearly didn't follow the rules. She was a kid after my own heart.

Aware of Ntino's mounting hostility, I took my arm from her, wound the beads through my fingers and joined in the chanting. For fifteen minutes, it continued, then Leng banged the gong for a swift recitation of the *sutra* prayer.

Despite the speed and monotony of tone, there was always a joyful feeling in this otherwise Spartan home when *sutra* was being said. I am not a religious man, but for Ntino, I had embraced Buddhism. I was aware of Leono's family sitting to my left. This was a marriage between their eighteen-year-old son and Ntino's seventeen-year-old sister that both families wanted very much.

Leng banged the gong three times again and, on the third and final *Nam myoho renge kyo*, everybody turned and faced the couple sitting on the sofa. Boy, were the foldout chairs, brought out especially for the occasion, uncomfortable.

"Aleka and Leono, you make your families very proud on this day." Leng smiled for the first time

since I'd known him and he had quite nice teeth, now that I got a close look at them.

"Thank you, father." My, Aleka was being very formal. She proceeded to thank her parents for the wonderful life full of riches and blessings they had given her.

Riches and blessings? None of their furniture matched and she and her sister still shared a small bedroom, despite the fact there was a huge bedroom sitting empty right across the hall. It was Ntino's old bedroom, kept as a hopeful shrine, just in case he came to his senses and reclaimed it. Aleka once told me her mother cleaned and vacuumed that room, changing the sheets every week, hoping her son would return home.

Return? We saw them frequently despite the constant tensions between us.

There was a pause and Ntino's father began his words of encouragement to his soon to be lawfully wedded daughter.

"Aleka, Leono, to live is to suffer. To cease to suffer, one must cease to desire..."

Was this supposed to be a marital pep talk? Was he telling his daughter not to bonk her husband? Or was he warning his future son-in-law not to even *think* about bonking his cherished daughter? Or was he telling them, *yes, you're getting married, but life is hard and then you die?*

I traded glances with Ntino, who was trying

hard not to laugh. His father really was a clueless man.

Even Nani eventually had enough of this maudlin monologue and clapped her hands together.

“Now we have the *baci* ceremony!”

Leng was still midsentence, but everybody flew into instant activity and he had no room to argue. There wasn't much room for anything after we pushed back the chairs. A triangle was made on the floor of *ti* leaves and flowers and the happy couple stepped into it. A visiting monk, who was staying at a local bed and breakfast until the wedding the following day, chanted a prayer and tied white string around the couple, then left small strings tied on their wrists.

“With the *baci* ceremony, we symbolically invite this couple's wandering spirits to return and enhance their future lives together.” The old monk beamed. I wish he'd been allowed to give the pep talk, at least he spoke of a future and not a bunch of depressing foreboding.

“The strings must be left on your arms until they fall off,” the old man instructed them. Everybody was given a piece of string tied around their wrists and then a whole chicken was placed into the triangle, a symbol of good fortune, and Leono and Aleka stepped out of the ring. I was glad I'd left my dog, Ginger at home or she would

have embarrassed me running off with that chicken.

Everybody drifted toward the dining room and kitchen for the pre-wedding feast.

“You embarrassed me,” Ntino hissed.

“No, I didn’t. How did I embarrass you?”

“You’re always late!” He was winding himself into a real tirade now.

“Don’t you know any other songs?” I asked and immediately regretted it. Ntino’s eyes turned hard. Boy, was he ever Nani’s progeny.

“I can’t believe you could be so rude.”

“Ntino...” I lowered my voice. “I love you. I’m here. I am getting ready for a world championship in two days, you know.”

“Don’t you *ever* think about anyone except yourself?”

I opened my mouth to protest, but Kiana was pressing a plate of food into my hands. It was crammed with generous portions of the feast Nani had been preparing for two days. There was Laap, the staple of all Laotian festive occasions. Laap was ground up chicken tossed with lime juice, garlic, Khao Khua—roasted, powdered rice—green onions, three kinds of mint and chili peppers. I knew from experience it would be peppery hot or *broke da mouth* as we say on the islands. There was also fresh caught red snapper drizzled with Pan Daek—chunks of freshwater

fish, rice husks and rice dust. There was a scoop of carrots cooked in coconut milk and topped with ground peanuts.

My mouth watered at the sight of Khao Pun, flour noodles topped with a sweet-spicy sauce. It was known as Lao Spaghetti and I lived for that stuff. There was also a big mound of sticky rice. I took my plate to the backyard, sitting on the cool stone steps with Kiana.

“Get out of the way,” Ntino snapped from behind me.

Kiana and I moved beneath the *plumeria* tree, watching a pair of luminous dragonflies lazily circling the air, drunk with the pungent scent of all that good food, coupled with the heady ginger and guava growing in the garden. I stared out beyond the garden to the dramatic emerald backdrop of the *Na Pali* Mountain range. A huge bank of clouds hovered. We’d get a heavy rainfall tonight. The waterfalls feeding all the wells in the foothills provided a soothing soundscape in the midst of lowing cattle from the ranch opposite us and all the family drama right here.

Ntino was sitting beside Aleka and Leono on the back steps. They listened as he talked, deftly shoveling food into his mouth with his fingers. He was the only man I knew who could make that singular act look graceful. Aleka and Leono glanced at one another. Even now the couple was

not allowed a moment of solitude.

Kiana put her head on my shoulder. "Gaby, is he always mad at you?"

"No, not always."

"Looks like it to me. He's always yelling at you."

"Maybe I deserve it." I didn't think so, but things always had a way of getting back and I was in enough trouble as it was. We all ate with our fingers, which was the Laotian way and frankly, the way of *me*. I approved of anything that saved time and got good food into my belly as fast as possible.

"When are you going to teach me to surf?" Kiana was being extra snuggly now.

This had been an ongoing battle between me and Kiana's parents. I wanted to teach her, the sooner the better. They were afraid she'd get eaten by sharks.

"Let me talk to them. I promise you, after the wedding, I'll bring it up to them."

She smiled, knowing I was a man of my word. I had given her a couple of lessons, finding her to be a natural. Then her family found out and an innocent, island pastime suddenly took on sinister overtones. There was a strong...*suggestion* that I was after their daughter's maidenhood. No, I wasn't. But I sure coveted their son's cock. I was too busy babysitting it to think of anything else,

except surfing. *Ntino* called it *the other man*, but it had been good to me. I had not only carved out a lucrative career as a professional surfer, following the big waves all over the world, but I was in line now for some big money. *Ntino* could have everything he wanted. Including the babies he kept saying that he wanted to adopt from Laos.

Just not yet. One more year. In one more year, I would have the endorsements people were starting to talk about and my own line of surfboards would be out.

I picked up our plates and ferried them back to the kitchen, sidestepping *Ntino*.

Nani eyed my empty plate and gave me a withering look. "You always eat and run."

"I wasn't going to run." I was stung now. I'd really had enough of this. I made a point of picking up one of the tall glasses of hot lemongrass tea waiting on a metal tray. It was an old one from the fifties, a tourist kind of souvenir tray with *hula* dancers and a map of the islands. The tea itself was really boiling hot water with a slice of lemon and a stick of lemongrass. It always amazed me that Nani was stingy with small things like lemongrass.

She watched me take the tea, but within seconds, other people were leaving, *Leono* and *Aleka* hightailing it to the beach. Nani snatched the glass from me like it was all my fault.

“Thank you, Nani. It was a wonderful meal.” I held my hands in *Wai*, hands together, fingertips pointing upward, as if in prayer. I remembered to keep my hands away from my chest, held up high, but not higher than my nose, to show gratitude and respect.

She made a dismissive sound with her tongue against the roof of her mouth and switched on the small black and white TV in her kitchen. Britain’s Princess Diana was making a speech about the need to ban land mines forever. Nani watched with the deliberate intent of ignoring me. I could take a hint. After saying goodbye to the rest of the family, I made my escape. It felt good to be out in the fresh air, away from where I was judged and mocked, tested and taunted...the sun was starting to set and I debated taking Ginger for a walk on the beach.

“Hey, Gaby, thank you for embarrassing me.”

I stopped and turned. Ntino was striding behind me, trying to catch up, ready to wage war.

“You are so selfish! My sister is getting married. I asked you to do one thing and you couldn’t even do it.”

It had been on the tip of my tongue to apologize, but I was angry now, angry with all of them. Our battle raged until we got to the house, two blocks away, right on the oceanfront on the half moon curve of *Hanalei Bay*. As always, the

moment we were inside the door, I was all over him. I never knew how to respond to his emotional outbursts other than to make love to him. There was nothing we couldn't sort out in bed, he and I.

He resisted at first, he always took a moment to calm down from one of his flare-ups, but then his mouth met mine and we exchanged a long, heated kiss. I heard Ginger whining. She knew already that her daddies were settling in for a long, solid night of fucking and that a sunset walk probably wasn't in her immediate future.

I kept my mouth on Ntino, loving the feel of his slim, toned body. He pressed into me, but I knew he was still angry. Lord, I loved to fuck him when he was mad. It made things even more passionate between us, if that was even possible. I kicked the front door shut and took him down to the floor, trying to get between his legs. He twisted and turned underneath me as if fighting me, even as his hands held my head to his. Our cocks connected. Mine was rock hard, his was not.

It surprised me. Usually the second we touched one another, Ntino had a raging hard on. I ground myself against him and his breath quickened. I pulled his shirt up and over his head, a couple of buttons popping off against the floor. I took hold of his left hand, licking and kissing the palm as his fingers flexed in pleasure. I stole a glance at his

face as I sucked fingertips, one by one. There was a look of disbelief as well as furious lust. I bent forward to lick his face and neck.

He moaned as I moved down to his torso. As my tongue traced his ribs, I held his hands up over his head and heard his deep, contented sigh. My knee kept rubbing, dry humping his crotch, and I felt him harden.

I reached up with another kiss for his mouth, one hand going to his swollen cock. I couldn't help myself. I needed to touch that sweet, thick, uncut piece of manhood. He had the juiciest one I'd ever seen, his balls heavy in my hands. I ran the cock head against my face and he was squirming for entry into my mouth, but I had to make him wait. I tightened my grip on his cock, running it down my throat and to my chest. The second the head touched my nipple, we both groaned. I took his pants all the way down past his feet. His fingers made quick work of my zippered fly, and as he inched my jeans past my ass, I knew in seconds I was going to be inside him, my man panting for a hard pounding, his legs wrapped around my waist.

No, I wanted this to last.

I kept rubbing his cock over my arms and face, licking my way down his thighs. His legs opened up. His body implored me, *fuck me*. But I kept at it, licking him, teasing him, tasting him. Oh, yeah.

His cock was in my mouth now and Ntino's gorgeous ass came off the floor. He flailed around as I sucked him thirstily. His cock adored me, his cock loved me and I kept a hold on him as he started to come.

As soon as he was finished, his body still tensing, his pulse racing, I went straight down on his ass. His feet rested on my shoulders. I wouldn't call myself brawny, but he would. I weighed a good seventy pounds more than he did. His fingers grappled for me and, as I prepared his ass to take me, he touched my cock with his fingertips.

"I want it, I want it, I want it."

His wish was my command. I plunged it into him, loving how tight he always was, how good it always felt to fuck him. I kept my mouth on his, sensed his emotions wavering...he felt such guilt loving another man, even as he adored what it did for him.

"I love you, Ntino."

"Gaby, I love you, too." He sobbed when we came together. It was the perfect wave.

Chapter Two

It was raining when my pager went off at four fifty five in the morning. I was wrapped around Ntino as I fumbled for the device, opening an eye to check the read-out. This was it. The moment we had been waiting for. The storm was in, surf swells fifteen feet at *Kauapea*, or as everybody on the island called it, Secret Beach. *Fifteen feet!* Ntino groaned beside me, nestling in closer to my belly. When he sensed my resistance, his hand snaked around his waist. Before he could touch me in the one place guaranteed to keep me in bed all morning, I was out of the sheets, grabbing a thick sweat suit before he could even react.

"You always do this."

Oh, Buddha. Here we go again.

"Gaby, would it kill you to kiss me, make love to me, exchange a few pleasantries before you go rushing off to the beach?"

"I've been exchanging pleasantries with you all

night." I grinned, trying to keep things in good humor.

Ntino was having none of it. He reached across Ginger's prone body and his tongue tip touched my cock. *Oh, no. Not that.* The dog yawned, stretched and got down from the bed. I heard her toe nails click-clacking on the hardwood floors. She took herself off to guard the front door just in case, for the first time in ten years, I forgot to take her with me.

It was freezing. I squinted at the wall thermostat. It read forty degrees. That couldn't be right. But the talented tongue on my body was making me feel nice and warm. Yeah, Ntino was right. A hot roll in the hay with my delicious Asian man shouldn't be put on hold...except now he was pushing me away.

"Didn't you fix that thermostat?"

"I did, but the fuses must have blown again." I tried switching on the heat, remembering too late that I was supposed to replace the fuse box around the side of the house yesterday. Too dark to do it now. Later, when I came back. I went to the kitchen, turning the gas oven on to 400 degrees and opened the door. The poor folk's method of heating.

I could hear Ntino stomping around in the kitchen. If I made love to him, he'd be in a better mood. He'd be happy, but I'd be late. He was

shoving innocent pots and pans around. Lovemaking was never quick with Ntino. The man had never heard of a quickie. The horny phase of our relationship had never abated, not that I was complaining, except for moments like this. I'd promised my conditioning coach I'd lay off the sex until after the world championship qualifying heats that started tomorrow. I had not been able to keep my promise.

In the kitchen, I put my arms around him.

"Don't."

"Please...I don't want to leave the house on an argument."

"You can't always manipulate me with that cock you know, Gaby."

"Really? Then how does this work for you?" I got down on my knees and rubbed my face across his naked thighs, my tongue reaching straight for his hardening shaft that loved me, even when the rest of Ntino didn't.

He sighed. "I would be a lot more turned on if you'd fix the thermostat."

Talk about passion killer.

"When I get back. The oven works great." I moved to the kitchen wall, tapping the thermostat, I hoped in a reassuring way. "See, it's moved up a bit."

He stood, fists on hips, glaring at me until my hands did a little happy dance on his cock. He was

a softie, my Ntino. He shook his head. "Honestly..."

I lifted him up to the kitchen sink, knowing he could not resist a blow job. Until he'd met me, he'd never even had one. Mind you, his experiences had consisted of a couple of shy island girls and some random guy in the back room of a club. And then he met me at a Save-the-Bay rally. Hundreds of locals came to protest developers turning our piece of paradise into a resort. After a rigorous day of pep talks and even a beach cleanup, we'd played volleyball with a few of the others afterward. And after that...after that, I showed him what was what when a man craves another man.

We had been hot and heavy, *very* heavy, ever since. I wasn't out of the closet by any means when I met him, but wasn't lurking too deeply in it either. I would have come out happily for Ntino, except that he had his family to think about. I longed to have our relationship out in the open. Even now, nobody but our closest friends knew about us. We had a good life, but I wanted Ntino to be ready to let it all hang out...oops...it was hanging out. Right over the edge of the kitchen sink and just begging for my mouth.

He writhed around as my tongue lapped at his balls and perineum.

"Move closer to the edge," I murmured, putting

my mouth straight back on him. I held his cock, stroking it rhythmically. I loved how responsive he was. I moved my greedy mouth to his ass, Ntino yelping as I licked his thighs and balls, my tongue zeroing on his ass hole. I could taste myself on him and it drove me into a frenzy.

“Fuck me, fuck me!” he shrieked. As I stood up, Ntino grabbed my ass. “Take it. Gaby, *just take it.*” I bent forward, able to get more momentum standing and drove two fingers into his grasping ass as I mercilessly sucked that raging cock into my mouth. He juddered around on my hand as my thumb stroked his perineum. He came in a flash flood, holding my head close, and my fingers moved in and out of him, his ass clamping down on me. He shook when he came and I reached up to kiss him.

“Oh...Gaby...”

I waited, holding him until he stopped spasming.

“Don’t go...don’t leave me...”

“I have to...” I looked him right in the eye. “I’m not leaving you. I can’t live a day without you.” I gave him another kiss and lifted him off the sink.

“You *are* going to be back here by noon.” It wasn’t a question, it was a statement.

“Sooner than that, sweets. But noon at the latest. I promise.” I took a few minutes to call my friends who didn’t have a *Surfwatch* subscription. I

loved the midnight blue pager that alerted me to surf swells, changing tides...even alerting me to certain *hidden* surf breaks I could usually reach before the big waves disappeared. It had been Ntino's Christmas gift to me, and every couple of days, he threatened to smash it or drop it down the toilet.

I called my neighbor, Mickey True, and got his answering machine. "Wake up, sleepyhead, swell's here." I checked my watch. Five thirty, plenty of time. "I'm leaving in a few minutes." Ginger ambled over to me as I ran a toothbrush across my teeth. She trotted off to the kitchen, knowing Ntino was a sucker for the cow-eyed routine.

"You want a cookie, baby girl?" he crooned, and she came back to the bathroom with her Milkbone, which she crunched happily as I picked out a nine-foot Pintail for the morning's surf. I could smell warm coconut milk, lime and....mmmm...bananas simmering on the stove.

"I love you being in the kitchen, baking. It makes me want to put you on your back and fuck you until—"

"Should I turn everything off?"

"No," I laughed. "Is that baked coconut pudding you're making?"

He nodded. "For the wedding. I've also got your favorite over there. Bananas in coconut

cream." Laotians were big on three things, sticky rice for every occasion, bananas and coconut.

Ntino's black hair gleamed under the harsh kitchen light.

"Don't go."

"I won't be long." I watched his nimble fingers as he sliced more bananas and worked on the star anise. I was itching to go and he knew it, but Ntino was as important to me as water and air. I waited until he finished dotting the two huge baking dishes with butter.

"I wish you didn't have to do this."

Taking him in my arms, I kissed him. "Isn't this better than say...another man?"

"What, are you kidding me? If it was another man, I'd just murder him. How do I murder a huge ocean?"

"I'll come back and make love to you," I whispered, my hands roaming his belly. I couldn't keep away from him and he knew it. I kissed his upturned mouth. He was so petite, so delicious.

Checking the thermostat again, I was pleased to see it had moved up another titch, forty-five degrees. "It's warming up fast, sweets."

I rifled through drawers, hefting Ntino's endless piles of design projects, looking for my keys. My eyes picked out the stack of red bills, all the final notices I'd hidden under the sofa. Damn. Ginger must have wedged them loose jumping on

and off it. Nudging the bills back under with my foot, I promised myself they would all be paid as soon as I got my championship purse winnings. It was always like this for us. By the skin of our teeth...I'd deal with everything...once I found my checkbook.

"Looking for these, champ?" Ntino tossed me the keys to my Woody. I whistled to Ginger, who bounded outside while I wrestled with the old front door that had warped with all the rain. I'd have to fix that when I got home as well. Outside, I finally called my ex-lover, *Pono*, a wonderful guy who was almost as much of a thorn to Ntino as the ocean.

Leaving him a message on his answering machine, I told *Pono* the surf was up. "I miss you, buddy. Come surf with me." I opened the passenger door for my trusty golden retriever, who sat beside me and panted as I coaxed the cold engine into life. There were times when I wondered whether *Pono* and I shouldn't have given it more effort. We'd had a great time together, and come to think of it, we'd never had an argument. I'd gone for the bottle rocket...maybe I'd made a huge mistake.

Clearing the thought from my mind, I was about to reverse out of his driveway when Mickey True's garage door opened.

"Hey, I got something for you." Mickey

beckoned me and Ginger hurled herself into the backseat in with a dramatic leap. She was an adorable showoff.

Afraid I wouldn't get the Woody started again, I left the old station wagon running and went into Mickey's garage. It was strange that we were so close. Mickey was forty-five—eighteen years older than me—and he'd been settled into domestic life with his wife, Marcie for two decades. I was awed by the couple's mutual devotion and they made fun of my hopeless business acumen.

It was Marcie whom I had befriended first, on the circuit. She was one of the pioneers of women's big wave surfing and we'd traveled the world together with a small band of other professionals for competitions. And then she met Mickey. I'd found an instant father-figure in Mickey, a rocket scientist who was in the process of creating a double-fin, six foot surfboard that we both felt would revolutionize short board surfing, especially on crappy days with no swell.

"She's ready." Mickey threw a towel off a custom-made, red fiberglass board with our brand new Gaby Loe logo of a great white shark on the nose.

"That was fast." I was impressed. "You only started her last week."

Mickey grinned. "I call her Fish Lips. See, the fins move. This is like feeling the ocean. Couple

the low entry nose and fin configuration, you got yourself a helluva great ride.” He ran his thick, sausage like fingers down the board’s rails. He looked like a hippy with his beard, scraggly hair and tie-dyed T-shirt, but he earned a seven-figure salary and knew a little about everything as far as I could tell.

There were photos of me surfing on all the walls of the garage. Marcie always joked that she was starting to feel jealous. I always said I was embarrassed by the *trophy room*. The truth was that Mickey’s support of my surfing career meant a lot. With two world championships under my belt, I’d lost it two years ago to a young upstart named Kelly Slater.

An injury had sidelined Slater last year and I cruised to victory. Now, everybody was talking endorsements, a TV ad campaign and Mickey was the one who came up with the idea of the board-making business. The board was still untested and would be dangerous to use against Slater. He was the real deal, the only real threat to my title and everything that went with it.

Mickey’s voice cut into my thoughts. “Wanna try her out?”

“Not on these swells. Waves are supposed to be up to eighteen feet in ten minutes. Let’s take her out later.”

Mickey’s disappointment was swift.

“Wanna come down to Secret Beach with me?” I didn’t *really* want Mickey coming with me. He talked and *talked* out on the ocean. If I wanted to listen to some nagging, I’d have stayed home with my husband.

Mickey was thrilled. “Sure. I’ll meet you there. I’ll pack this baby into the truck bed.” As I took off, Mickey shouted, “Have fun out there. Rip it up!”

Driving down my street, I glanced up the hill. Gas at the Shell station was now a buck twenty-two a gallon. Talk about galloping inflation. I loved the way the coast dripped and curved to my right. I knew and loved every house in the close-knit community. Even my mother lived three blocks from me. I felt a flash of guilt for not having called her in a couple of days, but she was on *Molokai*, visiting my Aunt.

Ginger’s head hung out the window. She, like me, was eager to get her feet wet. I watched the steel-wool clouds battle a surge of the rising sun’s burnt orange glow. It’d be a beautiful day if Mother Nature allowed the tropical storm to pass. I prayed she wouldn’t. I prayed for surf.

On the radio, a band called Ace of Base was singing about *All That She Wants*. I would have switched to a classic rock station, but Ginger seemed to like it so I let the Swedish band have its say. Ginger turned to look at me and, for the first

time, I saw the gray around her muzzle and scatter-shot through her golden fur. I realized with sickening reality that she was getting old.

At the unmarked turn-off point, I pulled in just past the small sandy beach where some of the more risqué locals liked to sunbathe nude, and parked. Secret Beach was a mile away from *Hanalei Bay* but it might have been ten miles for all the attention it attracted. It was the best kept secret in *Kauai*. It was a terrific surf break, but a dangerous one owing to hidden, jagged rocks on the ocean floor. You had to take off from the rocks to catch the swells. Not something an amateur wanted to try.

Ginger and I had been coming for years with a handful of buddies. She was well trained to keep a safe distance. One word, *Stay*, and Ginger would not move a muscle toward the water's edge until I gave her permission. Ginger whined a little, the wind was unsettling, but she sat down to watch me do my thing. I was still the only surfer here. I didn't want to wait. Leaving Ginger on the rocks with a fluffy towel, a bowl of water and my keys hidden underneath my flip-flops, I took off into the water, the cold piercing the shell of man-made skin. I checked my waterproof watch. Where were the others?

For one split second I regretted my haste in leaving my wonderful, warm man all alone, then I

paddled out to the choppy waters. In the distance, I saw a shark's fin. I wasn't afraid of sharks. In fact, I loved them. They were my *aumakua*, my personal family guardians. I smiled at the fin dipping beneath the wave and got ready to take my first ride. I took off on a wave about fifteen feet high, finding my *sweet spot* on the board fast. I didn't realize how big the break was until it washed over me. For long moments, the wave swept over me, keeping me down. I twisted and rolled with my board, finally coming up for air.

I tasted blood in my mouth, but I was exhilarated. Man, I'd never surfed waves this high on this beach. I would have screamed for joy at the sheer effort, but the next wave, even bigger than the first, was already crashing down on me. I knew instantly that I wasn't ready, wasn't in position, and it hit me full in the face with such ferocity it felt like the time I'd slammed my car into a cement wall. As I hit the bottom, I slipped and fell on my board, the whole wave crashing on me.

Down I tumbled, deeper, further...I tried to hold onto my board, but it slipped from my grasp and was taken away by another wave. It was only when I saw the board leave my fingers that I realized how far I'd fallen. The sound I heard next actually scared me. It was like a lion's roar. An angry lion, disturbed in its den. I tried to swim

upward, desperate for air. The wall of water that dumped on me now sent me spiraling down. I hit my head on one of the craggy rocks well below the surface.

It was beautiful, because nobody panics in surfing. Except that I started to panic. I knew it was time to get up again, but I couldn't.

I'm drowning, I thought. *I'm out here alone and I'm drowning*.

I was falling backward, the pain in my ears tremendous. Then I felt my right eardrum break. It was like being hit by the giant, golden glove of Muhammad Ali. I reached for the surface, my life flashing by in cartoon form. *Weird*. I was not a cartoon fan. I clawed and scraped at the water, but then accepted dying. In that moment, there was an actual acceptance, but then, miraculously, I was up above the surface again. My lungs drew in air...air...air.

As I waded out of the water, my right ear seemed okay.

"Ginger!" I shouted to my dog, my best, most loyal friend, my cheerleader. "That was the most fantastic experience of my life!"

But my dog wasn't there. She, along with all my belongings, was gone.

Chapter Three

My board was gone, but I expected that. I clambered up to shore, hitting the rocks hidden beneath the foaming tide. I wasn't immediately concerned that Ginger wasn't there until I realized my keys were gone. Not that I'd need my keys...a quick scan of the makeshift parking lot told me that my car was gone, too.

I picked my way up and down the rocks, screaming for Ginger, panicked that maybe the waves had taken her. Where was everybody? Hadn't anyone turned up for a surf?

Think, Gaby. My scrambled brain refused to cooperate. *Think.* I'd left my pager in the car. No way to contact anybody out here without it. I went back to the parking lot. My clothes, everything...it was all gone. The heavens opened up with a violent downpour, the way it happened in *Kauai*, and I walked out onto the soft, soaked shoulder of Weke Road, whistling for my dog. I was beyond panic and swerving head on into grief. She would

never willingly leave my side. I hadn't noticed anyone at the beach, but then I had been too busy fighting for my life.

She was nowhere to be found. She had never seen me take a bad wipeout before. Maybe she freaked and ran home? Bracing myself for the worst, I scanned the road for her body. Nothing. A couple of cars passed me as I ran across the road. One car honked its horn as it approached, the driver hunched over the steering wheel looking shocked, for some reason. I made it over, scanning the other side. Still no Ginger. Thank God.

What to do? Home. I had to get home. I pointed my bare feet back toward home, walking against traffic, heading to my lover...what would Ntino say when I told him I'd lost Ginger?

How could somebody steal my car? Who would have been out here at six a.m., except another surfer? My ear was bothering me now, throbbing with precise, increasingly painful drumbeats, the faster I moved. It felt tender to the touch.

I didn't want to think what it would mean to the surf meet tomorrow. I couldn't let it interfere with winning. I had to win. Time was crucial now. I kept walking, aware of how strange I must look in my wetsuit in a tropical storm, aware that cars were zooming close, a couple drivers honking me again, but I had no choice. There was no other

way to get home.

A police car flashed its lights and bipped its siren briefly, slowing beside me. I liked the blue striping on the side, patterned like a wave. I'd never noticed that before. Maybe it was a new design.

"What are you doing, sir?" the officer shouted through the half-open window at me as rain bucketed down on us both.

"I've been surfing at Secret Beach. Somebody stole my dog. And my car."

"Get in."

The officer pulled up ahead and I tried to run, but my body refused to obey. It felt like I'd been hit by a Mack truck. I walked to the car and got in, my ribs sending distress signals to my brain, my wetsuit squelching as my butt hit the upholstery. The officer took the details of my name, car, even the dog's description and radioed in the report.

I was glad the rain stopped almost as quickly as it started. I frantically checked both sides of the road. Ginger wasn't lying there dead, which was something. Now I worried that the car thief really had taken my dog. What kind of person took a dog?

About a mile out, cars were edging around something lying across the lanes.

Oh, no.

My heart pounded until I saw that it was a

chest of drawers. Must have fallen off the back of a truck. I'd never seen that on the road before, but then the weather was pretty rough.

The officer, whose nametag read Cole, was looking over at me now as unintelligible babble sputtered from the radio. "Sir, I need to take you to the station."

"Cool. I can call my boyfriend from there. He's gonna be pissed if I'm late for his sister's wedding." I paused. "Maybe Ginger walked home, not that she's ever done that before."

The officer gave me an odd look, taking the next turnoff for *Kuhio* Highway, toward the old *Hanalei* Plantation Road, which was next on our preservation committee's scheduled demonstration rallies. What the...

"When did they start building condos here?" I just about exploded. I'd been out here a few weeks ago and things weren't even in the planning stage yet and now they were almost finished?

The cop looked at me and I could swear he picked up speed as he veered into the small center that housed the *Hanalei* Fire and Police Station. The cop kept staring and I wondered why. I heard radio static, then a voice sputtered, "Officer Cole, you really got Gabriel Loe, the surfer, in your vehicle?"

The radio voice pronounced it like vee-hickle.

"Yeah, so he says."

I glanced over at the cop, whose eyes flicked back to the road.

“Is there a problem?” I asked, realizing for the first time that he seemed very nervous. He kept edging away from me as if he was afraid I’d bite. Officer Cole swung his car into the police station, parking in a row of newly marked spaces and I climbed out, too, wondering when the station had gotten that fresh lick of paint.

Inside the station, the place was jamming. I knew a few cops from the beach, but a quick glance showed that none of my buddies were on duty. A female officer at the front desk was sitting in front of a very fancy-looking computer. She stared at me over the tops of her glasses as I walked by.

The clock on the wall said noon. Oh man. Ntino must be freaking. I had to call him. Other cops turned to look at me now and the energy in the place was weird. It had to be the wetsuit, but sheesh, this was a beach town. Not like I was in New York or something.

Officer Cole put me in an interview room. “Would you like some coffee, sir?”

Why was he being so polite? There must only be a few years between us. Twenty-seven wasn’t old, but this kid was making me feel like an antique.

“Yeah, coffee would be nice.” I stared at my

mangled fingernails now. They were bloodied and torn, some past the quick. Oddly, they didn't hurt. Adrenaline, I realized. I was still on a rush. What a high! I'd fought for my life in that ocean. "Um...two sugars and cream, if you've got it."

Cole nodded and took off. Another man quickly replaced him. He walked in carrying a police file. A police file! What was this about?

"I'm Lieutenant Garcia, also known as the District Commander." He was a middle-aged, solid block of Latino muscle. Garcia looked like he could see right through you. I started to shiver. I was coming off that surfing high, fast.

"Is something wrong?" Garcia asked.

"A lot's wrong. My dog and my car were stolen. My boyfriend's sister's getting married. He's gonna be worried. Any chance I can call him?"

Garcia threw the file to the table. It made me jump. He folded his arms and just stared at me. I knew know something was wrong. Something bad had happened.

"Look, has something happened to *Ntino*?"

Garcia's gaze remained locked on mine. "How'd you get all those...wounds?"

I looked down at my hands, my gaze traveling up my arms. "Surfing. I just went out to Secret Beach this morning. Like I told Officer..."

"Cole."

“Right, Cole. Anyway, I almost drowned. It was amazing and terrible all at the same time, but then when I came up to the surface, like I told you, my dog was gone and my car keys and my car. I started walking home when Officer Cole picked me up...oh, God. Nothing’s happened to my boyfriend, has it?”

I started to shake. It hadn’t occurred to me before now that whoever had taken my keys would have gone to my house and...hurt Ntino. “He’s all right, isn’t he?” There were cuts and scrapes all over my arms and legs. My wetsuit was a torn mess. I hadn’t noticed it before because I’d been too busy worrying about Ginger. And now I realized the string from the *Baci* ceremony was gone from my wrist.

“Let’s take this from the top.” Garcia’s voice sounded gruff now. “Tell me what happened from the moment you woke up this morning.”

“It’s my boyfriend, isn’t it? Please...please tell me he’s okay. Please...his family already hates me...*please*, tell me he’s okay.”

Garcia rubbed his hand over his face. “Indulge me, okay?”

I ran over the morning’s events. Then again. Then a third time. I was shaking badly from the cold now and Officer Cole arrived with a blanket and the coffee that I was certain had been offered to me hours ago. What was going on?

I subjected myself to photographs, fingerprints and some weird, bodily fluids testing.

“What’s that?” I asked as a woman came in and swabbed my mouth with a large Q-tip.

She looked at me strangely. “DNA.”

I had no idea what she was talking about.

Garcia excused himself and I could hear voices outside the door. I was sure I heard Mickey’s voice, but was unable to move. Pain and physical exhaustion came in waves. That had been one hell of a wipeout. I kept my hands clamped around the coffee cup. That feeling of dread washed over me again. *Ntino. Ntino...*

The door opened and Garcia came in.

“Why won’t you let me call my boyfriend?” I asked. “Please. I’m really worried about him.”

Garcia held up a hand. “Could you look toward the window over there, please?” My gaze followed his hand. What was it, a one-way mirror? A phone mounted on the wall started to ring. Garcia reached over and tossed the receiver off its hook, cradling it against his shoulder.

“You’re sure? Okay.” He hung up. Garcia looked at me again, a very strange expression on his face. “Just for the record, you’re Gabriel Loe and you claim that you went out surfing this morning.”

“Yes, yes. Absolutely. What’s going on?”

“You’re Gabriel Loe, the world surfing

champion?"

He pronounced it incorrectly and I had to set him straight.

"It's Lo-way. And yes, I am. Well, yeah...until the international meet tomorrow..."

"See, Gabriel, I've been a Homicide detective for fifteen years. I transferred here from Miami Dade, couple months ago. I'm not much for surfing and I never heard of you until this morning."

"*Homicide*. Oh God, he's dead. Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"No, sir, I am not."

"He's okay then? Is he hurt?"

"See, Gabriel...I've got a problem here and I don't know how to tell you this, but I had one of your neighbors, Mickey True—"

"I thought I heard Mickey out there."

"Well, he verifies your story. There's a problem though, Gaby, and I want you to brace yourself."

I looked at him. Gaby. Only my friends called me Gaby. Only people who knew me really well called me Gaby. Or people about to give me really, really bad news.

"Son, I don't know how to tell you this, but you didn't go surfing this morning. You went surfing at Secret Beach some time ago."

"What are you talking about? How long ago? I mean the clock out there said twelve..."

“Gaby, you disappeared without a trace off Secret Beach twelve years ago.”

Chapter Four

Garcia was joking. Or I was cracking up. *Twelve years ago?*

"I want to see Ntino right now." I got up from the chair. I tried the door. Locked.

I traded glances with Garcia and started pounding my fists on the door.

"HEEEELLP!"

The detective came over, putting his arm around me, leading me back to the chair. He looked at me with such a mixture of caring compassion and disbelief that I couldn't respond. Shock, fear and...something else, took hold of me.

"I know this is hard Gabriel, but –"

"This is a joke, right?"

"I'm afraid not. Right now, you appear to me to be the person I see in these file photos, give or take some damage and the white hair."

"White hair?"

"You haven't had a good look at yourself, but there's...ah...some white hair. A lot of it. And

there's a problem with your right eye. Pupil's dilated. Looks like concussion to me."

"My right eye isn't bothering me. It's my ear."

Garcia nodded. "You might still be in shock. We'll get you to the hospital."

"I want to see my boyfriend."

Garcia's eyes cut to the window, the one-way mirror window.

"Is he in that room?"

"No. He's not here. He no longer lives at your address. Your house got sold a long time ago. The only number still active in your missing person's report was Mickey True. We called him and he came straight down here."

I looked across the desk at the file. "Can I see the report?"

Garcia hesitated, looked back at the window and nodded. From the file, he extracted a piece of paper and slid it over to me.

With increasing astonishment, I realized I was only able to read with one eye, the left. I closed my right eye, the pain excruciating, like I had shards of glass beneath the eyelid. Even the vision in my left eye was pretty blurred. My heart sank when I saw that it was Mickey who had reported me missing, seven hours after I had first left the house. Ginger had been found running loose along the beach. She'd been picked up by a lifeguard.

This was a scant indictment for what was fast becoming an all-consuming, horrifying truth—on February seventh, 2004, seven years after I vanished, I, Gabriel Loe had been declared dead.

“I’ve never heard of anything like this.” My hands shook putting the paper back down.

“Neither have I, and after twelve years in Homicide, I thought I’d seen it all.” Garcia just kept staring at me. “If it makes you feel any better, the coast guard looked for you for days. There were volunteer search and rescue teams. They finally decided you’d been attacked by a shark. One surfer said he saw a shark out there that day.”

Tears flowed down my face. Garcia touched my hand. “People tried. I promise you. They didn’t give up searching for you. Not for a long time.”

There was a knock at the door and an officer I had no idea had been standing behind me, opened it. There stood a deeply-lined older man. I blinked and looked again. Christ, it was Mickey and he looked terrible. How had he aged in the short time I had gone for a surf?

“Mickey? Geez, is that really you?”

The older man nodded, tears in his eyes, and I collapsed in his arms.

“I think we need to get him to the hospital.” Garcia’s voice was urgent. “The paramedics are here.”

Mickey walked out with me into the harsh

sunlight that killed my right eye.

“What happened to my eye?” I cupped a hand over it.

Mickey kept a protective arm around me as we walked outside. TV camera crews and photographers were jostling each other, jostling me, snapping pictures of me.

“What’s happening?” I was in a daze.

“Gabriel! Gabriel! Over here! Where have you been! Is it true you’re an enemy spy?”

What? *An enemy spy*? I looked around and all I saw was cameras and microphones.

“Did you get abducted by Aliens?” asked one guy, thrusting a microphone in my face. “Did they subject you to an anal probe?”

“Any news from Elvis?” another one yelled.

“Are you making fun of me?” My voice was raspy. My life was falling apart and this guy wanted to ridicule me?

“Shove off.” Mickey blocked the idiot with his shoulder, helping me into the ambulance.

“Lie down,” he instructed. Gratefully, I put my broken, weary body down on a gurney. Mickey held my hand, staring down at me as if I were a ghost.

The paramedic was working on getting a tube into my arm. I felt the brief jab of pain. My eyes kept leaking hot tears.

“Is it true?” I asked, breaking the silence as the

ambulance rumbled away from the screaming outside. "Did I lose twelve years?"

"You did." Mickey swiped at a tear on his own wrinkled face.

"Where are they taking me?" I asked. I hated hospitals, I hated needles. My whole life had been about getting in one more wave than my friends. Not...*this*.

"Wilcox Memorial Hospital in *Lihue*," came the paramedic's response. He was tapping a bag of clear fluids.

"But that's a place for sick people. I'm not sick, am I, Mickey?" I tried to turn and look at him, but realized I was immobilized by some sort of traction device. Oh man, was I in trouble.

"Well, you do sorta look like shit, partner." Mickey grinned, but I knew he was very upset.

"And what about Ntino. Is he okay?"

"Yes. He's fine."

"Where is he?"

"We'll call him later, after you get checked out."

I stared at him. "He doesn't know I'm alive?"

"We left messages. Look, I hardly see them anymore."

"Them." Of course...he would be with somebody else.

Mickey bit his lip and I realized he was traumatized. There was something he wasn't telling me and maybe I wasn't up to hearing it. I

lay with his thoughts a moment.

“What...what’s his name?”

Mickey looked startled. “Who’s name?”

“The guy he’s with.”

“He’s not...I think I’ll let him break that news to you, when he comes to see you.”

“But I want to know now.”

Mickey just patted my hand.

“Geez, Mickey, what the hell happened to me?”

“I’ve got no idea, kid.”

“You’re the rocket scientist. Explain how something like this could happen.”

“In quantum physics, people can lose hours, days...this is something that defies all the laws of the quantum field. Trust you to do it.”

“Ginger’s dead, isn’t she?”

“A long time ago, kid. She didn’t want to live without you. When I turned up at Secret and found you gone...the lifeguard who found her gave her back to me...I took her home to Ntino. That poor dog was heartbroken. She was never the same. She died about six months later.”

“My little Ginger...”

“We’re gonna get through this, Gaby. Together. Me and you. It’s going to be okay.”

“Is it true, what the cop said about my hair? That it’s white?”

Mickey wouldn’t look at me. “All of it. Long and straggly...you look like freakin’ Robinson

Crusoe.”

“What date is it?” I asked, my thoughts racing.

Mickey looked at me. “It’s February sixth, 2009.”

“*Ntino*...he’s in love with another man, isn’t he?”

Mickey burst into tears, shocking me. “Please don’t make me tell you.”

“How bad can it be? I mean...Mickey, *please*...”

“All right! He’s not with a man. He’s with a woman. He married a woman a few months after you disappeared. They have two kids. And as far as I know, he’s a happily married man...”

Chapter Five

He had to be kidding. *Ntino*. No...not my *Ntino*. He was gay. He loved sex with men. But I'd broken his heart...I'd disappeared without a trace. He thought I was dead. But why would he go to a woman and not another man? I already knew the answer to that. He thought God was punishing him for loving another man. Maybe I should be grateful he was with a woman instead of another man. I could still taste his come in my mouth...or so I was certain.

Twelve years! This had to be a colossal mistake.

We arrived at the hospital on *Kuhio* Highway and the gurney carried me past mobile TV crews, into the front entrance. The paramedic who'd witnessed my meltdown wished me good luck and I was taken to a private room in a ward labeled *Trauma II*.

I insisted on walking to the bathroom unassisted. "There's just some things a man's gotta do in private," I muttered.

"Kid." Mickey shook his head. "I know you want to look in the mirror. Don't. Wait 'til we talk to the doctors."

"I gotta take a leak. I've been holding it for twelve years, you know."

"Not so fast, champ." A nurse walked in, handing me two specimen jars. "You can get me some samples while you're in the can."

"Why two?" I asked.

"One is for us. One is for the FBI. You're the talk of the Internet, you know. There's hundreds of fans that have web pages dedicated to you. Myspace is gonna be goin' crazy by the afternoon. I hear they've already got you on Youtube."

"My...tube?"

"I'll explain when I get back." Mickey hurried out. "I'll go deal with getting you admitted."

In the tiny cubicle, I switched on the single light and almost fell over. My face looked gaunt. I'd lost a hell of a lot of weight, but the biggest shock was my hair. Long, straggly and...almost all white, save for a patch of gray in back. Nope...dirt. My hair was dirty.

Mickey was knocking at the door. "You looked, didn't you?"

Nurses and doctors came in and out to see me. I was Freak of the Week. Who needed bearded ladies or snake boys when Gaby Loe was back from the dead? I lay in bed answering questions,

responding to taps, prods, pokes and then more questions. Mickey stayed as I went through a battery of tests.

Everybody was baffled, but enthralled. I had the body of a twenty seven year old, but officially, I was thirty-nine.

Thirty-nine!

"You don't have an ounce of body fat." One doctor, the nicest of the ones who'd interrogated me, was impressed.

"Well, I've been in training, but I don't know about zero percent..."

"Zero percent," he confirmed. "I'd like to get some X-rays and an MRI." He smiled at me. "You'll feel better after you get back on your surfboard again."

"It's the furthest thing from my mind," I snapped, still trying to process everything that had happened to me.

"Has *Ntino* called yet?" I asked Mickey, who kept answering the phone in the room. He shook his head as I was wheeled out for an MRI and it was a miserable experience. The clanging noises in the cylinder jarred my already slim hold on calm. I was ready to have a breakdown. *Why hasn't Ntino called?*

Alone in the MRI chamber, I wrestled with the strange, disturbing noises of the machine as tears rolled down my cheeks. The nurse had told me

not to move a muscle, which was difficult, with the tears pooling into my ears. I had lost everything. My whole life...gone. In an instant. A flash. And I couldn't find the resources to cope with the magnitude of it.

"You're doing great," a voice announced from far away on the other side. I had an odd sensation of being underwater and I concentrated on deep breathing, imagining the machine's sounds were schools of fish talking to me. I was aware of a whale, huge and wide, crowding me... My fingers touched barnacles on its thick underbelly.

The noises stopped and I found myself being pulled out of the long metal casing. A pretty, young nurse smiled at me. "Please don't move. I am going to inject dye into your arm. Doctor Corliss wants to see an MRI of your brain with contrast."

Whatever that meant. "Does that mean I have to go back in there?" I asked as she poked around, trying to find a vein. I'd had enough of these tests. "Ow! Man, that hurts."

"I know it's not pleasant, but it's a pediatric needle. All done in a moment." But it didn't take a moment. It took several minutes, long minutes in which I once again went over and over everything I had lost. The nurse became alarmed when I started to cry again and she hastily stuffed me back into the MRI chamber.

Dr. Corliss knocked on the cylinder. "Are you okay in there?"

"I can't breathe."

"We don't want to sedate you until we know what's going on, Gaby. Please, breathe deeply and just try to relax."

Tears slid down my face and I couldn't wipe them away. I couldn't move a muscle or the MRI would get wrecked and I could not bear the machine.

And then the whale came back. I begged for him to take me and, for a moment, I swam in his wake...then, I had the strangest sensation. I was sinking in the ocean again. I could feel my body dropping down in the water, remembered hitting my head on the coral far below the surface. I remembered letting go of my board and my frantic race for the surface.

I felt like I'd lost another twelve years by the time they pulled me out. Dr. Corliss was waiting for me.

"We won't know the results for ten days or so. Are you okay? You look really shaky."

"I just found out I lost twelve years of my life. I'm not sure how to react to that."

He reacted by bombarding me with tests upon more tests. They put drops in my right eye that helped with the dilation. I had suffered a head injury and yes, my right eardrum was broken. It

would require surgery, but there didn't seem to be any other major injuries, but my ribs ached.

"We'll get x-rays," he assured me.

"What about this white hair?" I asked. "How did that happen?"

"I don't know." Doctor Corliss shrugged. "I've heard of things like this happening with lightning...um...also electric shocks...we need to run more tests."

All the while, I fought the urge to keep asking Mickey questions and the urge to sleep was strong. And then the phone rang in my room. I knew it was Ninto. I knew by the odd way Mickey avoided looking at me.

When he murmured, "It would help him a lot if you came and saw him..." I *knew*. I also knew the conversation had not gone well when Mickey ended the call.

"Ntino knows, right? That I'm alive? What did he say?"

"That he doesn't believe you."

I gawped at him.

Mickey spread his hands. "What can I tell you, kid? He says that some reporter ran a check on your social security number and it hasn't been used...but there are financial considerations now..."

"What considerations...what do you mean, he doesn't believe me? He thinks I've been hiding for

twelve years?"

"Give him a minute, kid. It's not every day a guy's husband comes back from the dead. Except maybe in a movie."

"Did he think I was dead? He didn't think I ran out on him or anything?"

Mickey looked at me. "He thought you'd drowned. He thought you'd died doing what you loved more than *anything*." There was something accusatory in Mickey's tone.

I was too exhausted to get defensive and sank back against the pillows. *Ntino's* abandonment hurt more than anything I could ever have imagined. This went way beyond anything I'd experienced, even losing my dad a few years before I *disappeared*. This was the worst day of my life. Outside the hospital window, a tree's branches waved at me, its leaves impossibly green.

"This sucks, Mickey." I paused. "What else have I missed? How is my mother?"

Mickey winced. "She's a bit of a recluse, I'm afraid. She's...ah...sort of senile. She's in an assisted living situation in *Lihue*...but, you know what? She never gave up on finding you. She always said you were alive. She held vigils out at Secret. Every Sunday she was out there."

I allowed myself to be weighed and measured as I absorbed this news. I felt like a piece of prime

rib, except that three of mine were broken and I now weighed one hundred and seventy pounds. Somewhere, somehow, I'd lost twenty pounds. I was still six feet tall. That much hadn't changed.

"Can I speak to my mom?" I asked Mickey.

"Let's call the place where she's staying. I think you might be just the medicine she's needed."

I felt the hysteria rising again. "What happened to Ginger? Mickey, how did she die?"

"You know...Ntino loved her and he kept her and she just...I don't know, deteriorated. One day she was breathing heavily...he heard her and checked on her...she opened her eyes and just looked at him and died."

"Oh, man...I never did get the heating fixed properly."

"It wasn't that. She lived for you, Gaby. We cremated her and threw her ashes out to sea at Secret. She wanted to be with you."

The tears came easily then. My poor little Ginger. My darling girl. Why had it all been taken away from me?

"What's happened in the world?" I needed a distraction...I was not able to fully accept a single thing I'd heard yet.

"Wow...let me see...JFK junior died. In a plane crash, couple of years after you disappeared."

"Man, that's wild. That family is cursed."

"The World Trade Center was bombed, twice."

Second time changed the world, son. That was in 2001. A lot of people died and we're at war with Iraq. A lot of troops over there. So much has happened."

"Did they ever find a cure for AIDS?"

"No, but there are wonderful treatments available now."

"Cancer?"

"A lot of advancements."

"What about the common cold?"

"Nope. None."

"Last night..." I glanced at him. "...well, the night before I...left, I remember watching Princess Diana talking about landmines..."

Mickey's face fell. "Oh...Gaby. She's dead."

I stared at him. "Landmine?"

"No. Car crash."

I sank back against the thin hospital pillows. "Is *Ntino* angry with me?"

Mickey groped for the right words. "He wasn't at first. We had no idea what had happened. He even went out with the coast guard looking for you. Then he found the bills you'd been hiding. You left with him a lot of debts, kid."

"Ah...so those are the financial considerations you were talking about."

He looked nervous now. "No, not really."

"What then?"

He picked up the room phone, pressing

numbers. "Let's see if we can't get your mom on the phone. They found your surfboard a couple days after you disappeared. Actually, it was *Pono* who found it."

"*Pono*? My ex?"

"He kept going out there, day after day. I think he was heartsick. I think he still has a thing for you. He found your board, broken in two, floating off a break a couple miles north of *Kauapea*. We knew then that you were dead, that you wouldn't have left that beauty for anything."

Again that accusatory tone. "We sold the surfboard to a collector. Would have gotten more on Ebay, but that didn't exist twelve years ago."

"Ebay?"

Mickey rolled his eyes. "Christ. It's like talking to a Neanderthal."

"Sorry." For no good reason, through no fault of my own, I'd lost everything. I tried to compose myself, acting interested when Mickey steered the conversation to our surfing buddies.

"Kelly Slater is world champion."

That hurt...it should have been me...

"He's had a good, long run. And hey, Rob Machado, Kelly Slater's best buddy, he's still active on the surfing circuit. And he's still got that ridiculous mop of hair. Not like some of us." Mickey ran his hand over his almost bald pate.

For the first time since all this happened, I

laughed. "So there haven't been many hair care advancements?"

"I see you still got that smart lip on you," Mickey responded.

"What about *Kalani* Robb?"

"Don't know what happened to him. Prob'ly sitting on a beach on *Oahu* somewhere eating Chubby Hubby ice cream. Oh...I do have one bit of bad news. Remember Mark Foo?"

I closed my eyes a moment. Then I saw him. The American Asian kid with a passion for fishing, surfing and photography. "I do remember him. I surfed Mavericks with him a year or two...oh man, I mean about fourteen years ago."

"He drowned, Gaby. He took a big wave at Maverick's and drowned. Poor Kelly Slater found his body in Half Moon Bay."

"And what about Kelly? How's he doing? Apart from being a champion?"

"He's a major surfing superstar, just like you predicted." Mickey was grinning.

"Still?"

"Yep, absolutely. Oh, and remember Laird Hamilton?"

"Wait a minute, you mean Billy Hamilton's kid?"

"That's the one. He's a surfing superstar."

"He's really into big waves. Fearless little thing."

"He ain't little anymore. Laird's revolutionized big wave surfing. He created tow-surfing, sort of like water skiing on big waves...giant waves...thirty, forty feet on jet surfboards."

"No kidding! And what about our company? You ever make anything of it?"

Mickey nodded. "It's a multi-million dollar corporation now. Kelly Slater wears our gear...we have a competition every year in your honor."

"Wow." I looked at him. "So...does *Ntino* get anything from it?"

"A third. Whatever you would have gotten, he gets."

"A third?" I was in shock. "How does that figure out?"

"Well, I brought in investors. I did all the work..."

"So you get two thirds." I understood now. *Wow, was I worth more dead than alive? Was Ntino worried he was no longer going to get his big bucks?*

Before I started getting wigged out again, I had to know how his wife Marcie was doing.

Mickey stared at the phone receiver. "She left me. We...had some troubles. She moved to California."

I stared at him. "Oh man, no. I'm so sorry. You still in touch with her? Is she doing okay?"

"No." Mickey looked defeated. "She died. Ten years ago. Bad car accident."

"Mickey, I'm so sorry..."

"Don't be." He brushed aside my words and I knew he grieved for her still. "There's no answer in your mom's room. As soon as we get the okay to take you home, I'll take you to see her. There's just a few things we need to discuss first."

"What things?" My irritation was mounting now.

A ringing sound from Mickey's pocket produced a tiny object he identified as a cell phone.

"That itty bitty thing?"

"Yeah. It takes pictures, plays music and everything. Listen, let me take it outside. I can't use it in the hospital. It messes with the equipment. I'll be right back, okay?"

I watched Mickey walk along the corridor. It felt good to have Mickey's support. Some things didn't change, thank God. A nurse came in with two Tylenol in a paper cup and some water. Dutifully swallowing the pills, I got myself a cheerful smile from the nurse who plumped my pillows for no apparent reason. Then she took my temperature.

She was probably going to run home and tell everyone how she took care of the freak from the sea, the missing surfer.

I smelled him before I heard him...the same smell he always had...I felt something tearing in

my soul as I turned to look at him, staring at me from the open doorway.

“Ntino.”

Chapter Six

The future had not been kind to him. He looked shrunk somehow. Though his black hair did not carry even a hint of silver in it, his face bore lines around his eyes and mouth. I saw it all, that it had cost him plenty to love and lose me. He moved toward me and I read the shock in his eyes...and something else. Revulsion? Yeah, I was no oil painting, but man, was he a salve to the soul of this broken down surfer.

"Ntino." My voice cracked and he stood about two feet away from me. "Please, come closer." I reached my arms out to him.

He slapped them away. "You have no right to touch me anymore."

"Ntino!" *Say something...anything...God, how inadequate words are...but I couldn't speak.* I was both anguished and overjoyed to see him again.

He came closer, beating his fists on my chest and I gasped in agony.

Mickey grabbed his hands. "Dude...his ribs are

broken.”

“I don’t care! I hate you!” His hands restrained, Ntino leaned forward, spitting in my face. “My wife knows nothing about you. She never will. You leave us alone. You are dead to me. You died once already. I am not going to bury you again!”

He wrestled his hands away from Mickey, marching out of the room.

We were silent for a moment.

“Well...” My fingers played with a pulled thread in the thin yellow hospital blanket. “How do you think that went?”

Mickey looked at me with utter bleakness. “I don’t think he meant what he said.”

“Oh, he meant it.” I turned away, hoping the stupid tears would not come back. I fought them off and heard Mickey quietly leaving the room.

I closed my eyes and when I opened them again, a big wave was washing over me. A wave the color of blood. I sat up in bed and it was twilight outside. I was all alone and needed to pee. Dragging the mobile frame containing the bag of whatever they were pumping into me along the short space, I walked to the bathroom and was peeing like a racehorse when Mickey came into the room.

He’d showered and changed, had a shave since I’d last seen him.

“That was yesterday.” He looked aghast. “You

only just woke up?"

I nodded. *I'd now lost twelve years and one day.*

"How are you feeling, Gaby?"

"Better. Confused. I don't know. The man I love spat in my face. I keep having dreams of drowning..."

"I can understand all that, especially with the surgery yesterday."

My eyes widened. "I had surgery?"

"Yeah...on your eardrum and your back."

"My back?"

He helped me get into bed. I did not resist being tucked in like a little kid. He smoothed down the covers. "They want to keep you a couple more days. They said there was something strange on your back. Like something was on you...I don't know...they're running some blood work."

"Something was on me?"

"Yeah...a type of fungus." Mickey looked nervous for some strange reason. "Have you given any thought to what you're going to do next?"

"No. I closed my eyes and lost another day, apparently. I have no idea what is happening to me, Mickey...what happened to my house?"

"Long gone, I'm afraid." He paused. "It was sold to developers."

"Who sold it?"

"Well, your mom couldn't handle things so I helped. The money went to her. There's a big

sprawling mass of condos down there along *Hanalei Bay* and some big houses.”

“So all our protests were for naught?”

“Yeah...I guess.” He looked uneasy.

“What about all my things?”

He shrugged. “Ntino boxed everything except your surfboards and gave them to your mom.”

“And my surfboards?”

“I have them. They’re in the store. Loe Boards has two stores here now...our flagship store is in *Lihue*...we have one on *Maui*...another one opening in *Waikiki* next month. Listen, I’ve have had a couple of phone calls from Ntino’s wife, Mei-Mei.”

Mei-Mei. Oh boy, he’d not only been scared straight, but married a Laotian girl to boot. I had a feeling their kids would be adorable. He’d always wanted kids, only I thought they would be ours...

“They’re worried about the money they’ve been getting from Loe Boards. She’s worried you’re going to cut them out of the deal...”

“Tell me, if she has no clue about me and Ntino, why does she think she’s getting income from the company?”

Mickey got that weird, nervous look again. “She knows you were roommates...and ah...well, it was a private arrangement between me and *Ntino*.”

“You heard the man, I’m dead to him...but he

still wants my money?" I couldn't help the bitter tone that crept into my voice.

Mickey sighed. "I always reasoned with myself that you'd still be together..."

"Exactly how much money is Loe Boards making?"

He shrugged. "A lot." He ran his hand through his thinning hair. "God, what a mess."

I didn't respond. "So what is it that you're suggesting, exactly?"

Mickey gave me a wry smile. "You always did have a way of cutting to the bone on things. Look, I don't want to take food out of their mouths. Are you willing to split your third with them?"

"A half of one third? I have no idea...I haven't even seen the company records. You're hitting me with this when I have no defenses, no clue what's been going on..."

Mickey's expression turned deadly. "Then if that's how you wanna handle things, I would suggest you call an attorney." He walked out of the room and I stared after him. Yeah, my nearest and dearest sure were pleased to see me back from the dead.

A nurse showed up a few minutes later, with a cup of ice chips and a nametag saying Leah.

"What's that supposed to be?"

"You're supposed to be on ice chips, because of your surgery, then liquids. My advice? The soup

isn't bad. When you're back on solid foods, I'd avoid the steak if I were you. I have no idea what it used to be, but I'm betting it didn't have four legs and a tail."

I sighed. "Do I have a choice?"

"Well, I can bring the soup and maybe a little juice?"

"I've gone without food for twelve years, I'm told. I guess another day won't kill me."

She burst into laughter. "They told me you were a pistol." She gave me some papaya juice in a box, a cup of coffee and a kind smile. I lay back again, watching the palm trees swaying outside my window.

Nurse Leah came back to collect my empty tray.

"What was the Millennium like?" I asked her. "I feel as though I missed the party."

She shrugged in the *Hawaiian*-no-worries way. "You didn't miss much. A lot of people celebrated, a lot of other people barricaded themselves with stockpiled food and weapons. As you can see, the world survived."

Leah smoothed down my sheets, filling me in on other world events I'd missed, like President Clinton almost getting impeached for sexual relations with somebody called Monica, Saddam Hussein being executed and former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto being assassinated.

"Anything else you'd like me to cheer you up

with?" Nurse Leah joked.

"Yeah...tell me, how do I find a good attorney?"

She grinned. "That's easy. You had a ton of them call the last couple of days. I'll bring you some of the messages we took." She returned a few minutes later and I was happy to see Hidden Pines Nursing Home on the list. My mother! I wasn't so happy, though, after a few minutes...I was staggered to learn that my mother had been sent there by Mickey who had paid her bills until a few months ago. Hidden Pines now wanted her out.

I explained my situation.

"It's unusual, to say the least, but under the circumstances, I would be willing to let her stay here let's say, fourteen days?" the nursing home director suggested.

"One way or another, you'll get every last penny we owe you," I assured her.

I needed an attorney for sure. I only hoped I wasn't twelve years and one day too late.

The nurses, now that was I awake and more or less functional, were curious and eager to spend time with me. They brought me a TV and I had fun exploring the channels...not so much fun when I came across the odd news story about me. I was hurt and bewildered to see Mickey on the only *Kauai* local station talking about me as if I

was a complete loon.

"He thinks he's been in water for twelve years," I heard him say on one station.

"Where do you think he's been?"

"Who knows?" Mickey's response was fair. I didn't know where I'd been either, but I didn't like the idea that he was trying to establish me as some sort of head case. I couldn't believe it. Loe Boards was probably making big money and, judging by our conversation, he did not want to share it with me.

I picked up the phone, making appointments to interview attorneys.

The next morning brought a fresh batch of welcome visitors who'd been kept at bay by Mickey. Those included my ex, *Pono*, and his brother, Lucky Morrison. They were two wild and crazy guys and my two best surfing buds. They turned up with *Maile* Cantrell, a female surfer who'd been my girlfriend for two years until one insane night the four of us had shared a hot tub...and more. Afterward, I discovered I preferred men and *Maile* discovered she preferred Lucky. I moved in with *Pono* and had some pretty scorching sex until he wavered on the future of our relationship and I met Ntino, the man I thought represented mine.

"Now it's a party," I cracked and they all gave

me hugs that left us teary-eyed and very emotional. I hadn't seen *Maile* since her break up with Lucky sent her packing to *Maui* a few months before I disappeared.

"Guess what, we got hitched and the fucker knocked me up! Twice!" she laughed.

Lucky nodded. "Two great boys. They're anxious to meet you."

"Where are they? I want to meet them, too."

"My mom has them over in *Maui*. We named our eldest Gaby, after you."

"Oh geez, he's bound to give you a world of trouble then."

Everybody laughed.

Pono just kept looking at me. I knew I looked atrocious. But it was more than that. I felt I could almost read his thoughts. *Would this have happened if we'd stayed together?*

"How's..." I couldn't call him *What's-his-name*.

"So significant, I've forgotten his name, too."

Pono grinned and I was trying to remember why we'd stopped loving each other. I tried to wipe thoughts of *Ntino* from my mind, nights of tangling with him in our bed...laughing...yeah. *Pono* and I had a groovy kinda love, as the song says. We had fallen gently into each other. Me and *Ntino*, we were like a hard game of racquetball. Satisfying, exhilarating...very, very different.

"You look amazing, *Pono*." And he really did.

Six foot four, his hair long. He was muscular and I found he looked like a big *Hawaiian* Tarzan. "You with anyone now?" *Man, was I coming onto him?*

"Naw. You're a tough act to follow." *Man, was he coming onto me?*

"Lucky and I were surfing on *Oahu*...the Eddie *Aikau* contest on the north shore and jumped on a plane the second we heard they found you." *Maile* held me tight.

"Not to get overly personal, girlfriend, but what happened to your titties?"

"Double mastectomy."

"Oh geez, *Maile*. Are you okay?"

"Yep."

"The cancer's all gone?"

"It is. And in a few weeks, I'm getting some big hooters...if Lucky has his way, giant mega hooters...but they'll look very nice, don't you think?"

I laughed. "Mega hooters, eh?"

She gave me a thumbs up and hugged me some more until it hurt my shoulders.

"Oh, sorry, hon. I heard on the news they removed some type of whale fungus from your back."

It was news to me. And right now, I didn't care. My friends were here and I wanted to hear all their news as much as they were anxious to help me. I had offers of clothing, a room to stay,

somebody's spare cell phone, use of a car, even help with nailing down a decent attorney.

By two o'clock, I was propped up in my hospital bed, eating *li hing* mango smuggled in by Nurse Leah. I was meeting with my third attorney of the day. His name was John *Kalpona* and I liked him on sight. He was the kind of man my dad would have liked. He wore a loud *Aloha* shirt and carried a large briefcase. I put his age at mid-forties, he was hefty and good-natured. He was *so Hawaiian*. He, like I, had grown up on the islands. He was from *Maui* and had a good grasp of business law, plus he wore a fishhook on a leather cord around his neck. We seemed to chemically connect.

"I have done a bit of digging and your...*friend*...Mickey True, has been spending money like crazy. The first thing I would like to do is declare you officially alive, freeze the company assets and launch a financial investigation. The house you owned on *Hanaiei Bay* was sold to a corporation...a shell corporation. I will find out where the profits for that went. I know a very good forensic accountant. She is in *Honolulu* and I'd like to fly her out in the morning. Her name is *Leilani Jones* and she's brilliant, Gaby. May I call you Gaby?"

"Please do. What is a forensic accountant?"

"Somebody who works on big cases. *Leilani*

works on potentially criminal investigations. She chases the money trail.”

“Cool!”

He sat and talked to me for an hour until Doctor Corliss arrived to visit me.

John asked the doctor if I was of sound mind.

“Well, he’s as sound as anybody would be after what he’s been through.”

John was all business. “Good. So I can get that in writing?”

Doctor Corliss agreed to have something written for him by the following morning. By the time John left, even my doctor was impressed by him.

As for me, I learned a lot about my rights under law, the treachery of man...and I learned that the year I disappeared, Mike Tyson bit off Evander Holyfield’s ear in the middle of a boxing match. I gave John *Kalpona* all the legal permissions he needed to help me and my mother. I wanted to find out the legal status of her home in *Lumaha’i* Beach. Technically speaking, though she’d only lived a couple of streets away from me, it was another township on *Kauai*.

Doctor Corliss gave me a relatively clean bill of health and said that they were stumped by the fungus they’d found growing on my back.

“It’s the type that whales get...you’re my new favorite guinea pig,” he joked.

“Does it affect his brain?” John asked.

“No, not at all.”

“Excellent.” John *Kalpona* gave me the *shaka* sign and went off to find out exactly how rich I was.

Chapter Seven

The hospital kept me in for a couple of days longer, moving me from room to room as reporters discovered where I was and kept trying to get photos of me. I wasn't too upset about being kept for observation. Every time I looked out the windows to see my beloved mountains, I caught glimpses of camera crews. One guy even woke me at three in the morning, crawling across the floor of my room with the smallest camera I'd ever seen. Unfortunately for him, the nursing staff liked me and made use of the two hot, handsome security guards assigned to my floor. Now, if one of *those* guys was interested in crawling along the floor to sneak into my bed, I might have been interested.

I tried hard to remember I had feelings for Ntino, but I felt at a loss to know how to deal with those feelings. In all my previous relationships, I'd never given love so freely. Now I didn't know where to put it all. Where do you put the love you

have for someone who no longer wants it? I didn't have anyone to ask and I just lay in bed, too woozy from my mending eardrum to do much walking around. Besides, my hair was still long and ugly and I didn't recognize myself when I looked in the mirror.

It helped that my back was feeling better and I longed for a proper bath or a hot shower. Everything in the hospital smelled like antiseptic and I yearned for the smell of *Kauai* again.

As I started to heal, I was more aware of the stress I was unwittingly causing the hospital staff. No matter which room they put me in, the room phone would not stop ringing and I hung up on people a lot. I wanted to keep the phone on in case my mother called...or in the vain hope Ntino might want to chat.

Then one evening, Nurse Leah brought me a tray of solid food and plumped up my pillows.

I jabbed the mysterious looking square on my plate with a knife. "Is this the steak you warned me about?"

"Yeah. I'd pass on that if I were you."

"I don't know. I'm starving and I like to live dangerously." I cut and chewed. I had no idea what the hell it was.

"Tasty, huh?" she joked.

"No. But I only have myself to blame. I'm all out of *li hing* mango." I worked my way through

it, wondering if the mystery meat would make something else funky start growing on my back. I was tossing the last rubbery cherry tomato around on my plate and looked up to see Father Kim, a Buddhist minister who ran the *Koloa Dojo* on the southern part of the island, walking into my room.

I was surprised and very pleased to see him.

"Gaby, *aloha*, my friend. You look dreadful."

"Thank you, father. I wish I could say the same about you. You look amazing."

What a beautiful man he was. In his seventies when I first met him, he was a *Nisei*, offspring of one of the original Japanese immigrants to the islands. He was also the only person who did not look a day older since I'd last seen him. He had some difficulty getting access to me and it was my friend, *Pono* who'd muscled the small priest into the hospital.

"Good thing Kim called me." *Pono* put his hand on my shoulder, giving it a massage that sent unwitting messages to other parts of my body. "By the way, some guy from a Los Angeles paper is outside and he wants me to ask you if you were the victim of an alien abduction."

"No, I don't think so. But it's a nice rumor. Let's keep it going."

Pono laughed. "I'm going to get a cup of coffee. You want anything?"

"You got any *li hing* mango?"

"I'll bring you some when I come back this evening."

"You do that. I'll ask the space ship to hold off taking me back to Mars."

Pono gave me the *shaka* sign and wandered off. He was one of those people who believed in God, when it was convenient, such as in the middle of a wipeout or a car accident. Me, I'd started believing because *Ntino* believed and it was important to him. In that moment when Father Kim sat beside me, I realized how much I loved *Ntino* and how badly I felt his loss.

"Interesting haircut." Father Kim's eyes glinted.

"Yes, I'm trying for the vagabond look. Is it working?"

He held my hand across the bed sheet and his quiet strength and grace humbled me.

"I brought you a little present." He held up a pair of scissors. It's not generally known, but I worked my way through college as a hairdresser. Come, sit over here." He led me to a chair by the window and he put a towel around my shoulders, removing most of the hair on my head. Next thing I heard was Nurse Leah.

"Say, he looks quite nice now."

"Quite nice? That's it?" I laughed.

"Yeah. Who's your handsome friend here?"

I introduced her to Father Kim as Nurse Leah swept up the hair trimmings.

"You should keep your hair white. Very dramatic against your dark skin. Say, you got some handsome friends." She gave the returning *Pono* a wink and he tossed a packet of *li hing* mango into my lap.

"Wow. I should disappear more often."

"Don't." The look he gave me was haunted and I wondered what the passage of time had really done to our friendship. "There's a catch to the mango."

"A catch?"

"A sort of...bribe. I want you to come and stay with me when they let you out of here tomorrow."

"*Pono*, I would love to stay with you. I think I am otherwise homeless."

"I tried to see your mom, you know. Several times. They kind of have her barricaded in that place."

"I know. I haven't even spoken to her yet."

"John *Kalpona's* going to help sort this mess out, right?"

I nodded.

"Cool." *Pono* leaned over to me, giving me a quick warm kiss on the lips. "I'm gonna leave you two to chant. I'll swing by in...what, an hour...and pick you up, Kim."

His hand was back on my shoulder, sending rays of warmth through me. I'd had no idea how tense I was up until that moment.

Father Kim knew all about me and Ntino and he had never judged us. Now, he had no comment about Ntino's marriage, no harsh words for the light bantering between me and *Pono*.

"He's a good man." Father Kim stared at *Pono's* retreating back. "He started a shrine for you at Secret Beach. He took fresh flowers and fruit every day." Father Kim paused. "I think your return has given him something to believe in again...I was starting to worry about him."

I just couldn't take it anymore. The stemmed tide within me flash flooded my system. Father Kim listened as I wept, both for his infinite wisdom and for the emptiness I felt.

"I feel as though I have lost my faith. Where do I go to find it?"

Father Kim shook his head. "I believe you crossed the river, as we say in Japan. And I believe you came back. Faith and love are what brought you back." He gave me a precious gift, some green beads the color of jade, and together we chanted *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo*. Some of the nurses were fascinated by our prayer and I wondered how quickly it would be on the news that the surfin' circus freak had been heard speaking in tongues.

Father Kim left me with a promise that he would visit my mother that afternoon. I thanked him heartily and promised him in turn that I would visit the *Dojo* upon my release the

following day. I spent a long time waiting for night. Nighttime was best because the phone stopped ringing and the reports lurking outside the hospital gave up on trying to catch images of me in the windows.

As night approached, the hospital staff suggested I watch some comedy on TV. "Does that crocodile hunter guy still have a show?" I asked. I was devastated to learn he'd died in a freak accident, stabbed by a stingray.

"Here, watch something fun." One of the nurses handed me a remote and I channel surfed until I came to a story about *Titus Kinimaka*, one of *Hawaii's* legendary surfers. The report was on a very bad wipeout he had during the annual Eddie *Aikau* surfing contest on *Oahu* several years ago. He free fell fifteen feet into the ocean from his board.

"I was surprised when I came to the surface and something was flapping me in the face," *Titus* was saying. "It turned out to be my foot. My leg was severed from the femur...I was shattered. I can't imagine what Gaby Loe's going through. They sewed my leg back on, but if what they say about him is true, how do you get back twelve years of your life?"

No matter who I talked to, what channel I switched to, everybody had some weird information about stuff I'd missed...all I could

think was, *why did I cross the river back again? What is my purpose here? Do I want to go through this thing we call life anymore?*

I turned the world off and closed my eyes. I slept badly, dreams of waves washing over me. I felt I was drowning and was aware of crying in my sleep. My hands shook badly when a nurse gave me a pill to take and handed me a paper cup of water. She had to hold it for me, even wiping my eyes.

“Nightmares are normal, Gaby.” Her voice sounded very far away, but somehow reassuring. I was safe to fall asleep again.

A strange thing happened some time later...in the inky blackness that made up *Kauai's* nighttime, somebody entered my room. I was so sleepy, I didn't even notice it at first, but I was aware of a man coming closer and closer toward me, peeling back my bed clothes. My eyes wouldn't open. They were crusted shut from my crying jag and whatever the nurse had given me. My legs felt cool and I was helpless when the man pulled up my hospital gown. I watched, through half-closed eyes, as his hands fondled my cock and balls. He parted my thighs lightly and I was helpless to either help him or stop him as he stroked my thickening shaft. All I knew was I didn't want this good felling to stop. My hands clenched at my sides.

“Relaaaaax.” The voice came from my soul and my head tossed back and forth. I couldn’t speak. I was afraid of breaking the silence and stopping this lovely surrender. *Don’t stop, don’t stop...oh suck me...*The man, with a short crew cut and warm, inviting mouth must have heard my mental chatter because his head dipped forward and he swallowed my cock head, slurping hungrily, his hands stroking my thighs. I felt the nub of a knuckle against my balls and hesitant fingers reaching for my ass. I floundered on that bed as he took more and more of me in his acquisitive mouth and I looked down in time to see my entire cock disappear into it.

Groaning, I grasped at his hand and head. His head felt spiky from his aggressive haircut. His hand was soft, warm, strong and bolder now. He took his mouth off me. *No, no, no!*

His face left *chicken skin* on my flesh from the five o’clock shadow dusting his chin and cheeks bristling against me. The wet intrusion of his tongue gobbling at my ass hole sent my legs flying apart, eager for whatever he wanted to do next. His fingers...one, two slipped into me and he gave my cock head a light kiss before devouring me again.

My fingers shot to my nipples, tweaking them through the nightgown as this stranger on my bed gave me more pleasure than I’d felt since coming

back from the dead. It sure beat a catheter any day. He groaned on my cock as he tasted the first explosion. I came convulsively, wave upon wave of bliss rippling through me, spiraling at the top of my head and popping, it seemed, in my injured eye. Slowly, slowly, my moonlight lover retreated, leaving one last lingering kiss on my cock before covering me up and sneaking away again. I woke some time later, my hands on my chest, my eyes creaking open. I didn't think it was a dream, but I didn't care. I only knew it felt great and I wished he'd stuck around for more.

It was before dawn when I showered and dressed. I was ready when John *Kalpona* came to collect me. Lying on my bed, I remembered the time when I was eight years old and my father had promised to take me to work with him. My mother had laid out my clothes the night before. I was so excited, I kept putting pieces of clothing on until my father found me fully dressed and rumpled when he came to wake me in the morning.

"Up and at 'em, I see." John *Kalpona* smelled nice. Mint gum and some cologne that wasn't too strong, but made me want to put my nose to his skin. It had a vibrant, gingery snap to it.

"Oh, that's body shampoo," he laughed. "It's not too girly, is it? My kid gave it to me for Christmas." He put his hand on my shoulder.

“We’ll get through this, I promise.”

The hospital administrator was wonderful, telling me he trusted me to pay my bill. I assured him this would be taken care of once my assets were back in place. I wondered whether a handshake deal was still valid in business in other parts of the world, but I was glad to see it still worked in *Kauai*.

John and I walked together out of the hospital, the night nurses waiting with the day shift nurses to hug me goodbye. I caught the eye of a male nurse, noticed his haircut...I was pretty sure it was the guy who’d stolen into my bed and sucked me off...his cheeks reddened and he glanced away.

You’re so nice...I wish you aloha oe, love forever, good luck...malama pono, take care... I accepted their well wishes and wished I could have given them something back. And then I walked out into the harsh truth of the real world, via the rear exit. That spoke volumes to me as I hid in the backseat, aware of some lingering camera crews out front.

Safely out on the *Kuhio* Highway, I climbed back over to the front, enthralled by John’s car. He had something called Navigator that gave him directions out loud in a soothing female voice. She was a real tattletale, that chick. She blabbed that I wasn’t wearing my seat belt.

“Lots of cars have these systems, but I still love

it. So does my wife. She's got the worst sense of direction, but don't tell her I said that." He drove fast along *Kuhio* and I was appalled to see that gas stations posted prices of a little over two bucks a gallon.

"It hasn't gone up much," I observed.

"Are you kidding? It was almost up to five bucks a gallon. The world is on the fast track to a recession...worst one since World War II. Prices go up and down all the time...now they're creeping back up again."

There are some unwritten, but implicit rules in the surfing code. One of them is *I will paddle out again*. I knew a few guys who'd wiped out badly and took a long time getting back into the water. *Titus* was a god to have been back on his big stick three months later.

After the gifted surfer, Dickie Cross, was lost at sea at *Waimea* in 1943, nobody went near that break for months. Me, I'd had a vicious, wicked wipeout and I didn't...I *couldn't* even think about going back out there, couldn't even look at the ocean as we headed north toward *Hanalei*. It was hard enough thinking about being back on dry land.

John drove me to *Pono's* house in *Hanalei*, a few streets back from the beach. I was glad to see it was the same disreputable dump reflecting his passion for the ocean. I was also glad to see the

huge orange tree in his yard that always seemed to bear fruit. *Pono* had brought me his house keys, his spare cell phone and some clothes the night before.

Inside the house, I could tell that he'd made an effort to pick up a little before I arrived. All the sofa cushions being on the sofa was a big sign. There was a note on the table. *Enjoy the house.*

"You sure you'll be okay here? I feel like I ought to get a tetanus shot after I leave." John looked a little unsure about the safety of the rickety director's chairs at the dining room table.

"Totally okay." It was actually a little weird to see that nothing about *Pono* had changed. We'd both been slob. Sometimes we couldn't find clean socks or the telephone, but we had fun. It also felt weird not to have my own clothing. Not so weird to be wearing *Pono's* clothes because we'd always worn each other's stuff, except I'd lost weight and things hung loosely on me. The house phone rang and I answered it. It was *Pono*.

I knew he was working at the local surf school at Three Trees Beach.

"God, it's good to hear your voice answering my phone. You okay?"

"It's good to be here. My attorney's here, we're going over some things."

"Cool. Listen, *Maile's* coming over. She'll take you wherever you wanna go. I'll be back around

four, we'll hang out and have dinner, yeah?"

"Can't wait."

He ended the call and I joined John at the table, discussing the success of the surf shop business that had my name, but was not mine at all, not in any real sense of the word. My hands shook a little as I watched John snap open his briefcase and extract some files. I wondered how long I'd have these involuntary tremors. My mind raced back to my nocturnal blow job and I smiled.

"You're right to be nervous." John's voice was calm, but he delivered some knockout punches with facts and figures that left me feeling dizzy.

"I have good news and bad news. Mickey True handled the sale of your house on *Hanalei Bay*. He sold it for a very low sum of money, which may or may not have been its real worth, and the money went into a trust account for your mother. Two months ago, he froze those assets to help stave off some bad investments."

"Is he allowed to do that?"

John shuffled some papers around. "As her self-appointed executor, he was able to do that. He also closed your bank accounts and the assets went into the business."

"So." I looked at the prayer beads I hadn't realized were rolling around in my fingers. "These beads are the last thing I own."

John grinned at me. I saw the shark in him

come out and I have always been partial to sharks. "As your mother's lawful heir, and with some fancy footwork on my part, I can lift the freeze on her accounts. We are working on re-establishing your status as living, not dead, and I want a full accounting of Loe Boards assets and income. By the time I'm through with Mickey True, he's gonna be standing outside Macy's with a tin cup."

John paged through some more notes. "I called *Leilani* Jones, the forensic accountant, and she will accompany me in court this morning. I am filing an emergency injunction against Mickey and the limited partnership agreement he has with several officers on the board of directors. He's not being very cooperative so far, but my guess is that he was doing fine until he got involved with some land developers who hit a wall with some well-funded protestors over on *Maui*. *Leilani* is going to look into that."

John had uncovered quite a lot in less than twenty-four hours. I would not be required to attend the court proceedings that day, but now that I was alive, I would need to make an appearance to prove I was, once he had me declared living and of sound mind to make some legal decisions.

"What is it that you ultimately want?" he asked me. "I don't expect you to answer that now, but I want you to think about it and I want you to lay

low until you hear from me this afternoon. What do you think you'd like to do with yourself today? After you get a shave and a decent bath, I mean."

He was stuffing things back into his briefcase.

"I think I would like to go visit my mother, then go to temple and pray." I paused. "John, I have no money, I can't pay you anything..."

"Oh, you have money," he chuckled. "You just can't get your hands on it, yet. I took this on a contingency basis, remember. Now keep your cell phone turned on...oh, and since your driver's license expired many years ago, I don't suggest you drive anywhere. Since you...you know...well, car insurance is mandatory now."

"My friend *Maile* is supposed to be coming over here to drive me around. If not, I can always take *Kauai Bus*."

He frowned. "Getting on the bus will draw attention to you. You're not ready to deal with people yet."

This was true. We both pondered the problem until there was a knock at the door. I was relieved to find it was my favorite surfer girl, *Maile*.

"Hello, nurse." I don't think I'd ever hugged anyone so tightly. After introducing her to John, he went to the airport to pick up our forensic accountant and *Maile* hustled me to the kitchen sink.

"I come bearing gifts." She held up a grocery

bag with hair dye, coffee, milk, eggs, juice and a huge loaf of *Hawaiian* sweet bread.

"What, you don't like the white hair?" I deadpanned.

"Hell, no, cutie pie. Sit down." She made coffee and mixed the hair color. The empty box read *Rich Brown*.

"Don't blonds have more fun. *Maile?*"

"How much fun do you want?"

The dye tingled my scalp and my eyebrows. She rustled some eggs and toast together, I drank the whole carton of juice in one go and suddenly felt a lot better.

"Why didn't our love last?"

"Because you play for the other team, lover. Now go wash off all that goop."

I spent a long time in the shower, the dressing on my back starting to peel off. I washed myself thoroughly, shaved and looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. *Look, ma, a scary, skinny guy.*

"You ready?" *Maile* was knocking on the bathroom door.

"Ready or not, here I come," I whispered, unable to recognize the ruined face reflected in my one good eye.

Maile drove me to *Lihue* and the place my mother was staying. A lot had changed in *Hanalei* with condos and hotel resorts now crowding our precious beaches, but a lot had not. I was thankful

that the things I loved about my town, the vast *taro* fields that most people are unaware produce almost all the *poi* available on the *Hawaiian* Islands, were still there. I was relieved and grateful that *Kauai* was still the land of wide-open spaces and lush, lush terrain. It was the writer, Edward Joesting, who first described *Kauai* as *The Separate Kingdom*. And it was. *Maile* must have sensed my anguish because she reached over and took my hand as a tear trickled down my cheek.

In *Lihue*, I saw a number of restaurants and stores that were new. On Rice Street, the huge trees almost meeting in the middle gave a lovely, old time feel to the place, until we kept heading south and to a stretch of the road that wasn't so wonderful. Outside, Hidden Pines, the place that was reluctantly keeping my mother, looked okay. Those pines sure were hidden though. I didn't spot a single one. It was an old ranch style house with a wraparound *lanai*.

On the inside, it reminded me of an article I read about the way fast food joints were painted. According to the article, certain colors make you want to eat and run. Well, I didn't want to stay and eat. I felt claustrophobic and mentally ill just walking into the place. After being kept waiting about forty-five minutes, *Maile* and I went to my mom's room, which smelled disturbingly of urine and antiseptic. There was nothing to suggest any

human contact except a small green card propped against her water jug. It read *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo* and I knew that Father Kim had been to visit her.

I was emotional seeing her, sitting up in her bed. It felt like she'd been staged for our visit. She seemed frail and disoriented. She, too, appeared to be wearing somebody else's clothing. It was upsetting to see her like this and grueling when she didn't recognize me.

"You surf?" she asked me. "My son was a great surfer."

"Mom, I *am* your son." I was determined to get her out of here, especially when I saw the drug regimen listed on a wall chart.

"I love you, mom." I stroked her face and her coarse hair.

"I love you, too....but..." she paused. "Everybody loves Raymond!"

Maile and I looked at each other. She was doggone loopy.

"They're keeping her doped up. Let's spring her right now," *Maile* insisted. She slipped the page off the clipboard and shoved it into her tube top. As much as I hated leaving her there, I had no choice but to spring my mom through the proper channels. She wept when I left, clinging to my hand.

"Do you surf? My son was a great surfer."

She just about broke my heart.

At a surfboard store that also had Internet, *Maile* and I stopped, bought honeydew melon shakes on her dime and she faxed the purloined medical chart to my attorney's office.

"Where next, Tonto?" she asked me. Tonto. She'd always called me that.

"The *Koloa Dojo*, I guess." We headed to the southern part of the island in her battered red beach cruiser. Plugged into her cigarette lighter, she was playing something called an iPod. She told me she'd downloaded all her music onto it and a little gadget hooked it up to her radio and played all the music she loved.

I flicked through her selection. It was almost all *Hawaiian* music.

"Since you died..." she looked askance at me. "I've never said that before!"

"Well it's true, I guess. So go on..."

"Well, there's been a big resurgence in the *Hawaiian* culture. They teach the language in school now."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. And the music and *hula*...and it's really something."

On the radio, a song started playing.

"I love this. Every time I play it, I think of you, Gaby. It's called *Hanalei Moon*."

I listened to the lyrics.

*When you see Hanalei by moonlight, you will be in
heaven by the sea*

*Every breeze, every wave will whisper, You are
mine, don't ever go away...*

My thoughts twisted painfully, the throbbing from my back surgery echoing in my heart. *Maile* cried quietly outside the butter colored *Dojo*.

"I knew you'd come back. Somehow in my heart, I just knew you'd come back."

I hugged her and she gave me twenty dollars in singles and fives, just in case I needed it.

Turning the notes over in my hand, I glanced at her. "Money's still pretty much the same."

She laughed. "There's some differences, but yeah." She checked her watch. "I'll pick you up in one hour. Okay?" She kissed my cheek.

"That's my first kiss in over twelve years."

"Was it as good for you as it was for me?"

I laughed. I looked at her, the emotion strong in my heart. "Better."

"Oh, Gaby, I missed you so much."

I'd missed her, too. We hugged for several moments longer in her car.

"You're almost a virgin again!" She gave me a cheery wave as I got out of the car.

Suddenly fearful of being alone, I almost ran down the street chasing her. I was wearing *Pono's*

clothing and nothing fit right. I was officially dead. Was I really alive? I sighed, realizing I had no watch, no way of knowing when an hour would pass. *Wait.* The cell phone. I checked it. The time was right on there. I smiled, maybe things were looking up after all.

Inside the *Dojo*, Father *Kim* greeted me in a whisper. Two people were chanting in the temple and a peaceful feeling blew over me as I sat on a chair and joined in. I no longer knew what I was praying for, I had no clue what I wanted. Now that the love I thought was mine had been ripped away from me, I no longer believed in dreams.

There was a remarkable stillness and clarity for me when I prayed *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo*. I was a miracle man. Somehow, I'd lost my life and I'd lost time, but God had given me a second chance. If I was to live with truth and some meaning, I had to be honest about what I wanted. Once, it was to be surfing champion of the world.

Now it was to live with love, to honor the man of my dreams. I knew it was impossible, but I wanted Ntino to love me again, for me to be a better man for him than I had been.

The lyrics of *Hanalei Moon* haunted me... *Every breeze, every wave will whisper, You are mine, don't ever go away...*

And as my injured ear, back and ribs groaned in protest against my refusal to take pain pills, I

wondered, since those things that had been broken could be fixed, what about my heart? Could I fix that?

The door to the *Dojo* opened and I felt a shift in energy. The room was filling up...people were staring at me and I saw a woman who, surprisingly, did not look completely unhappy to see me. It was Nani, Ntino's mother.

She bowed to me, I bowed back. She sat away from me, but I did not sense hostility. I sensed nothing at all.

God was clearly not through playing games with me yet.

Chapter Eight

“You’re awfully quiet.”

I sat outside the *Dojo*, waiting for *Maile*. More than an hour had passed. I had no idea how to contact her and I wanted to flee. People had been nice enough, but the endless questions, the curiosity, the disbelief...made me long for even the uncomfortable confines of Hidden Pines.

Smiling at Father Kim, I shrugged.

“People mean well you know, Gaby. There is nobody here who wishes you harm.”

“I believe that, Kim. It rattled me seeing Nani...you know. Ntino doesn’t want me anymore.”

“Time didn’t stand still when you left, I’m sorry to say. I am not sure he doesn’t...want you, but he has commitments now, Gaby.”

“He wants my money though.”

I turned and saw the surprise in Father Kim’s eyes. I had not discussed any of this with him in the hospital.

"His wife called Mickey True and they still want the money they get from my company every month. Everybody's getting money from my company except me and my mom. You've seen her, Kim. She's a wreck."

"Losing the two men she loved was awfully hard on her. First your dad dying, then you...but you'll take her home. You'll take care of her."

I nodded.

"Gaby, if I ask you a question, can you think about it for me?"

"Sure."

"When you were alive...before...you...did you have a tendency to put off happiness? Did you always think, I have tomorrow?"

"Yes, I guess I did."

"There's something I want you to think about, to pray on and share with others, if it aligns with your thoughts correctly."

"What's that, Father?"

"Our lives are infinitely precious. Not to attain a state of absolute happiness in this lifetime is a great loss. Our Buddhist practice is so that we can attain indestructible happiness. We must, all of us, fight to the fullest right now, not at some time in the future."

I stared at him, wanting to absorb the words, roll myself in them, cloak my mind and body in them. I was not surprised when *Maile* showed up.

I was meant to hear Father Kim's words. And I needed to start my fight plan right away.

"You look better." *Maile* looked relieved. "You're not as stressed."

"No. I got me a good lookin' companion and somebody mentioned dinner tonight."

"We can stop and get a snack. You want something?"

"What I really want is to go to *Hamura Saimin* Stand. If you tell me it's no longer there or they've suddenly started cleaning the place, I'm going back into the ocean and this time I'm staying there."

She raised her eyebrows at me. "I see you lost none of your flair for the dramatic. It's still there. And it's still wonderful."

"Excellent." I yawned and stretched. My cell phone rang and *Maile* told me how to answer it. I was ridiculously pleased to hear *Pono's* voice. "You want some *saimin*?" I asked him.

"I want some curly curly noodles and I want to hear about your mom."

"No, you don't."

But *Pono* managed to coax me into telling him what was going on.

"Gaby, when I get off work, we're going to pick her up and bring her home."

Home. I gulped.

"Gaby," he sighed. "There's a lot I've been

wanting to say, but the important thing is...I feel like we lent you to God for a little while and now I have you back, I...well, anyway, we're gonna bring her home, too. *Da kine*, okay?"

"*Da kine.*" I almost choked on the emotion I felt. *Maile* and I drove down the block to *Hamura's*, found parking outside the local church, which was fitting since I was making a pilgrimage, and we walked into the counter and stool stand filled with locals.

Everybody pounced on me, greeting me with genuine warmth. Somebody gave me his seat at the counter. I ordered a bowl of *saimin*, a local dish of broth with noodles and dumplings and other yummy things. I poured in the house blend chili pepper water and shoyu sauce and closed my eyes to savor the perfection.

"Ah, bliss."

Everybody roared with laughter and we ordered the curly curly noodles for *Pono*.

"So you came back from heaven and you still like our stuff? You no go to some five star hotel?" the guy behind the counter asked.

"Of course not." *Would it be rude to lick my bowl clean?* "Besides...I see you got some *lilikoi* pie over there. I hear it calling my name." I cupped my hand to my ear. "Yep...it's saying, Gaby, Gaby..."

Everybody laughed again. The counter guy cut the half pie into three wedges for us. One for me,

for *Maile* and the biggest piece I saved to take to *Pono*.

“Good luck, champ,” everyone said, shaking my hand, clapping me on the back and *Maile* and I returned to the car. I felt a whole lot better when we walked out of that place.

We drove to Three Trees and I balanced *Pono’s* lunch on my lap, afraid of losing it to *Maile’s* wild driving. Beating cancer had given this girl extra confidence.

She told me of her cancer battle and how the insurance company had jerked her around on approving her breast augmentation.

“You mean, that’s why you still haven’t had it done?”

She nodded. “We got a loan and —”

“No way. As soon as I get some money from Loe Boards, first thing I’m doing is paying for my mama and getting you some mega hooters.”

Maile laughed. “You can’t do that!”

“I can and I will. I recall, in my wild past, that I enjoyed fondling the original and best hooters, and we can call this a...homage to them.”

Maile almost ran down a bus stop she was laughing so hard and then my cell phone was ringing. It was my attorney. I sighed. Did I want to take this call?

“Gaby! It’s me, John. Let me tell you, that Mickey True...wait until you find out all the stuff I

know." The line kept crackling and we agreed he would come to the house after four.

"You're all over the news and I couldn't be happier. Everybody says you went to church to pray and then went to *Hamura's* for *saimin*...same old Gaby. I was wrong about keeping a low profile, kid. Keep doing what you're doing."

"But I thought I *was* keeping a low profile," I protested.

"You can't go anywhere without getting noticed. Everybody's talking about you like you're the second coming. And by the way, you have a court date first thing in the morning."

As far as I was concerned, the only good thing about that was I was a step closer to being able to help the people I loved most. And I realized, as I held onto the noodles and pie in my lap, that I was learning very quickly who loved me most.

At *Hanalei Bay*, certain sections are given nicknames that stick. Along the crescent shaped bay, there's Lion's Paw, Black Pot and Three Trees Beach. *Pono* had been running the surf school inherited from his family as long as I had known him. He greeted us with hugs and I saw a handful of kids lying on their boards on the sand as *Lucky*, *Maile's* husband, took them through his safety first stances.

Pono looked at me. "You feeling *da kine*?"

"Yes. You?"

He laughed. "I'm real good."

The school hadn't changed much. *Pono's* desk still looked like his house. A mess. There was a photo of the two of us on the wall and I recognized it as being the photo taken at Trestles in Australia, at the height of our romance. *Pono* followed my gaze and then the phone started ringing.

"Let me get that." He hefted the huge appointment book in front of him and I was glad to see his business was obviously going well.

I sat in a corner reading the local paper, the *Garden Island News*, and was interested to see that I shared the front page with a far more interesting story. Mickey True was trying to stop the development of a sixteen-mile multi-use path stretch from *Anahola* to *Nawiliwili*. The first two phases had been completed and the final third would, in perpetuity, give *Kauaians* access to their beautiful beaches.

As *Maile* went out to clown around with her husband and the kids, I pondered Mickey's opposition and wondered whether he wanted to develop it. I noticed the radio on *Pono's* desk and, when he went outside to handle a surfboard rental, I turned it on, dismayed to find I was the topic of derision.

"...Yeah...and then he said the *lilikoi* pie was talking to him. It was calling his name. Can you

believe that! Gaby, Gaby!" It was Mickey True. Oh, my God. Somebody had told him about my little joke at *Hamura's* and he was using it against me, making me sound like a head case.

"Don't listen to that." *Pono* stepped back inside, lunging at the radio. "He's been doing this all morning."

I looked at *Pono*, bewildered. "Why is he doing this?"

He's pissed that you're back, babe. Honey, he wants all the money for himself. Look, before we get into anything with your attorney, I want you to know that if you need anything, I'm here for you. We all are."

"*Pono*...it wasn't like that. We were having fun."

He came over and put his arms around me. "I know that. Babe...it's going to be okay."

I felt the warmth of this great man infusing me with light. For the first time since I came out of the water, I felt like maybe he was right. Everything would be okay.

Chapter Nine

John *Kalpona* approved of our plan to spring mom and *Pono* and I went to pick her up as soon as he was done for the day. In the winter months, he closed the school early. In summer, I remembered he would keep it open until around seven or eight o'clock at night. He paid up my mother's bill, ignoring my promises to pay him back and then we took her to his friend, *Aka's*, house a few blocks from *Pono's*.

Aka was the local *kahuna* and a real weirdo, but when he placed his hand over my still injured eye, I felt a blast of heat that left me dizzy and clear-headed all at the same time.

He worked for a long time on my mother, checking the list of meds she'd been given and looking stern and furious, saying the combination had rendered her senseless.

"I'm going to give you a boatload of herbs to give her. She needs to have three baths every day for the next week in black salt, then I want to see

you both Wednesday.”

He put his hands on my taped ribs. “This hurts, yeah?”

“I’ve gotten used to it.”

Aka nodded. “You’ve been busy talking to *lilikoi* pies.”

I glanced at him and caught the merry gleam in his eye.

“Something like that.”

Pono counted out a bunch of singles and left a tub of taro ice cream for the *kahuna*, who went off to watch the sunset in his overgrown backyard.

“Home, babe.” *Pono* put one arm around me, one around mom. *Home*.

When we pulled into the driveway, I thought somebody must have died. The front yard was covered in candles and flowers and notes and dishes of food left on the *lanai*.

Pono and I looked at everything, touched by the notes from local children. I guess not everybody thought I was a loon. One of the neighbors came out and I saw something spark in my mom’s eye when the lady spoke pidgin and offered us some homemade *poi*.

“I so glad dat you okay.” She kept touching me as if to make sure I was real. *Pono* hustled me and mom inside and he really did seem happy to have us both under his roof. “We’re gonna have to give your mama the second bedroom. That leaves my

bed or the sofa for you.”

“You want me to sleep on the sofa?” I grinned.

“Hell, no. I wish you were underneath me right now.”

His words made me squirm...in a good way.

Pono shrugged. “I just don’t want to be presumptuous.”

“So this idea of my being under you...”

“Babe, I’m gonna fuck the hell out of you as soon as we’re in bed tonight. That’s a promise.” *Pono* kissed my cheek and went off to find fresh sheets for my mom, leaving me with a big, stupid grin and a hardening cock.

Maile and I worked on my mom’s room as she splashed like a kid in her inky black salt bath next door. *Pono* and *Lucky* fired up the barbecue. *John Kalpona* seemed a little stunned by the domestic scene when he arrived, but he quickly recovered, helping me to seat my mom who was now dressed in a pretty lilac colored *holoku* dress *Maile* bought at the flea market across the road. My mom always loved lilac and she kept looking down at herself as the door opened again. Father *Kim* wandered in, scissors in hand, and went to work on mom’s hair.

We all sat around listening to music and then the TV news. I was pleased some people came out in my defense. The crew at *Hamura’s* scoffed at Mickey’s interpretation of my visit there. So far, I

was smelling cleaner than the dirt under Mickey's shoes. Now I had to tackle the issue of what I wanted from my former adopted dad.

Lucky kept ferrying out huge trays of meat and the smell of barbecue made my mouth water.

John explained, as best he could, some of Mickey's deals, most of which seemed shady at best. *Our* company had record earnings, but as far as I could tell, he hadn't donated a penny toward community projects.

"I want all monthly payments to Ntino stopped immediately. I would be willing to set up college funds for Ntino's two children, but that's all."

"Why would you do that? He won't even speak to you. Besides, he doesn't need your money. He's quite well off. He wrote a book about you."

"A book? About me?"

"Yeah. All about your great friendship and how he...took pity on you because you were gay."

I sat back and stared at him. "Did it sell well?"

"Not that I recall. He got a lot of facts wrong and he condemned your passion for surfing. I think he was sort of unofficially boycotted, but he has made a decent living selling Gaby Loe memorabilia."

"You're joking."

"No. As a matter of fact, you've managed to sign quite a lot of stuff for a dead guy. Things keep popping up and there are discrepancies in

the signatures.”

“I knew about the book.” *Pono* looked pissed. “The rest...I had no idea.”

“It’s all coming out now because he’s suddenly unable to make much of a living off a dead guy who isn’t.”

“Do you have any idea what happened to his sister, Kiana?”

John looked at me. “She married Mickey True.”

“Oh, man, he’s old enough to be her grandfather!” I glanced at *Pono*. “Did you know this?”

He shrugged. “Marcie caught ‘em in bed, that’s why she left him.”

“I don’t know if we can stop the monthly payments. My feeling is Ntino is the type to sue. You know, between us, it looks like hush money to me.” John was checking his notes. “Mickey must have started messing around with Kiana when she was still a teenager, but I am sure they’ll like the idea of a college fund.”

“It astonishes me that Ntino’s parents approved of Mickey marrying Kiana.”

“Ntino’s dad died some years ago. Strange circumstances. Fell out of a tree, six months later Mickey married her.”

“There was something about it in the paper. Marcie died around the same time.” Lucky gave me a meaningful glance. None of us said anything.

Boy, and *Ntino's* parents thought *I* was the bad seed.

Pono handed me a beer. I looked at it.

"Primo beer! I thought they stopped making this!"

"It just came back." He grinned. "So who's up for a steak?"

"I don't want anything to do with the business." I was adamant. "I want them to quit the use of my name. I want my surfboards back. They belong to *Pono*. I want him to have them at his school."

John nodded.

"You want *me* to have them?" *Pono* looked overwhelmed.

"If you want them."

"If I..." I knew a few actions would speak louder than the rest of his sentence, but it wouldn't be polite for us to roll around on the floor together...not polite at all.

"*Pono*, you do more for this community than any other single person I know. I bet you still give free lessons to the local kids. I bet you still waive fees for kids referred by the hospital."

"I...I..."

"Exactly. You've been cultivating champions for years. I would rather have my boards in your school than in any fancy store in *Lihue* or any other place. So there." I turned to John. "I want my

mom's trust fund unfrozen and I want him to pay me for the house he stole from me. I can't even think about the stupid hotel they built there instead."

"He built. It's an open secret it's his company that did it."

I couldn't even respond to that. "So let's scrap the idea of stopping the monthly payments to Ntino, but I don't want anything to do with them. If I am not a part of the company, I don't care what Mickey does with his money. I want it made clear the payments are not from me. I can't think of anything else. *Pono*, can you?"

"I want ice cream." My mother held up her empty bowl. It was the first spark of her that I had seen and it was encouraging.

"Coming right up." *Pono* bustled into the kitchen and I followed him. He grabbed me to him and our mouths met in a hot, urgent kiss. I could feel his cock hardening against my belly. It made me want him even more.

"Is that offer of steak still good?" I whispered.

"Yeah. You'll get your other meat later."

We both laughed. I gave him another kiss and opened the freezer to get the ice cream. I got momentarily dizzy. I couldn't remember if it had been like this with *Ntino*. What had kept me there?

"Babe, you all right?"

I turned and nodded. "Yeah. *Pono*..."

Back in the living room, I glanced at John. "I've thought of something else I want from Mickey True."

"What's that?"

"I want him to stop fighting that beach walkway project I've been reading about. He can keep all the company assets if he pays to have the walkway completed."

John chuckled. "Dude, maybe you are crazy."

"Maybe I am, but that's what I want."

John put everything down on paper and looked outside. "I smell barbecued corn. I'm a slave to it..."

We all ate heartily and, as the sun set on another day, I was happy to be here with my family, all of us—not quite who we used to be, but getting there.

Father Kim left, John took off with a stack of leftovers and Lucky and *Maile* drifted off to their room at the back of the house.

That left me, my mom and *Pono*. We read the *kahuna's* instructions on what we needed to do for her and we brewed some tea out of some green and orange flowers.

"I want ice cream," she insisted. We gave her another bowl.

"You have to have the tea, mom." I tapped the cup and she shrugged, pouring it over her ice cream and ate it all up.

After we put her to bed, *Pono* and I sat out on the *lanai* on his old-fashioned porch swing I remembered being there from the previous owners. We each picked a side and lay with our legs all over one another. It was fun and quiet and then our feet started wandering. I'm not sure whose toes started it, but pretty soon our feet were rubbing one another's crotches and two hard cocks were straining at the confines of their *Aloha* wear.

We almost toppled the old swing over in our haste to get our hands inside each other's shorts. *Pono* caught me before I fell on the weathered wooden *lanai*.

"Babe, are you okay?"

He was lying on top of me and I looked up into his face. I felt like a giant, big, smooth wave was washing over me, but the sensation was soothing, not terrifying.

"Are your ribs okay?"

"Yeah. Am I gonna get fucked here or what?"

Pono laughed and leaned down and kissed me. "I forgot how you're always in a rush for the finish line."

I laughed, too. "It's been twelve years for me, remember that."

He stopped laughing and the creases around his eyes took on an anguished expression.

"I never gave up on finding you. I never

thought God would keep you when he reeled you in, Gaby. I knew he'd throw you back because I need you more than he does."

He gave me his mouth and I tasted his tongue. Barbecue sauce and...guava. I could taste guava. I settled in for a long kiss and then he slowly started to undress me.

"I like my clothes being on you, babe." He ran his tongue over every inch of my body. He remembered all the secret little places that thrilled me...my left arm pit, the nape of my neck. The man had nerves of steel. When I touched his huge, thick cock, he was leaking like crazy and still, he wanted to worship me before he made love to me. When his hands moved down my thighs, I felt the way he lightly brushed my balls with his thumbs and they immediately felt ready to explode.

*Oh God...*had it always been this good? He tongued and sucked and kissed my balls, my inner thighs, my ass. His hands went under me and I could not get his face close enough.

"Gimme that cock, *Pono*. I need it."

"Not yet. I'm calling the shots here. Turn over."

I obeyed, despite my need of him. His mouth moved back up to the nape of my neck and I almost came all over the *lanai*. He ran his tongue down my spine, his hand touching the place where they'd removed the whale fungus.

"My big fish," he murmured. He threw off the

shirt he was still wearing, turning me over again and, with his mouth back on mine, he poised at my ass hole. I almost screamed for him to fuck me.

And then he was in me. *Pono* fucked me slow and deep and I was certain I could feel his soul's pleasure at our erotic coupling. He was in me. He was mine and I needed him. My body had ached for his touch and I hadn't even known it. His cock tested and challenged me. I had forgotten how huge he was, but I wanted it all. My arms and legs held his big body to me and I felt myself carried away on the most dizzying riptide of my life.

We came together, *Pono* shooting inside me, my heart hammering wildly against his chest like an anxious bird. He leaned down and kissed me as I shrieked his name over and over.

"Babe...babe...I missed you so much. You have to understand...I can't let you out of my sight. I can't lose you again."

I shook my head and held him tighter, his cock still moving in and out of me.

He grinned down at me. "I'm coming to court with you in the morning. If nothing else, I can testify, for sure, that you are very much alive."

Pulling his head down to mine again, I sought out his tongue. I heard his sharp intake of breath colliding with my own.

"Was it this intense...this astonishingly good between us before?" *Pono* leaned on one elbow,

holding my face with his other hand. "Gaby...I know you still love Ntino."

"No. I have some feelings left for Ntino. But not love...not anymore. *Pono*...why didn't it work between us?"

"Oh, God, Gaby...I was a fool. I was a fool to let you go. I wasn't ready to be gay and you...you didn't give me time. You just left. I don't believe in recriminations. I don't believe in regrets. I want to move forward. I want us to be together. Whatever it takes, I want this. I want *you*."

I stroked his lovely head. "You know, *Pono*, I'm the kinda guy who always believed in show, don't tell."

He blinked. "You want me to show you, huh?" He went on to show me what was what when two men *really* care about one another.

Chapter Ten

We were back on Rice Street in *Lihue* the following morning for my *Kauai* County Court appearance. We drove in nerve-wracked silence, John *Kalpona* at the wheel, his forensic accountant, *Leilani* Jones, beside him and *Pono*, Lucky and I in the backseat. *Leilani* was an impressive woman in her suit and red hibiscus tucked behind her ear. She kept tapping and muttering into a thing on her ear that kept glowing.

"It's called a blue tooth. It's a hands free cell phone," John told me. I just kept staring at her.

Pono squeezed my hand as we got out of the car and suddenly people were running at us from everywhere. It was about as horrendous an experience as I'd ever had, apart from losing twelve years of my life. *Pono* guarded me from the intrusive media cameras and I was grateful that the court allotted only twelve seats to reporters. A lot of people turned up to hear that I was alive and

more or less well, and wishing to regain the use of my name, Gabriel *Gaby* Loe.

The judge dismissed all claims that I was *madder than a March hare*, as Mickey's attorney, whom I had never met in my life, told the court. I took the witness stand, answered all the questions and watched as *Leilani* Jones took the stand and said a bunch of shocking things about Mickey.

He owed money to everyone for everything, from clothing stores to his own gardener. How in the world had she found out all these things? *Leilani* Jones turned and smiled at the judge. Something in that woman made you want to confess *everything*. I think I half fell in love with her the way she tossed around big words and impressed with her brain rather than her breasts. Although, from what I could see in the hidden depths of her business suit, they might have been worthy tools in her professional arsenal.

There was some discussion from Mickey's side about transferring the issues of the company to *Honolulu* since it was a bigger court. They struck out with the judge, who was openly hostile at the suggestion that he might not be able to handle the case.

"Are you suggesting that I, too, am incompetent?" the judge snapped. "Are you suggesting I'm madder than a March hare, too?"

Both sides requested a conference and the

Judge swept into chambers with the attorneys from both sides. For a long time, there was silence in the courtroom, then the side door opened and only my attorney came out, looking victorious.

"They rejected all your requests." John was tossing things into his briefcase.

"That's bad, so why do you look so happy?"

"The judge has given them twenty-four hours to give you everything you asked for. And, he wants you to be given a big cash settlement. Believe me, they'll bite. Mickey's not going to want this to go to trial."

My team left the court, John and *Leilani* answering questions from the reporters cramming the hallway. They even passed out a list of what we had asked the other side for, and which items they'd rejected. *Pono*, Lucky and I ran to a side room led by a bailiff, waiting for them.

"She almost made my dick hard," *Pono* cracked. "She's a pistol-packin' mama, that one."

I grinned at him. "Not too hard, I hope."

"Not as hard as you do, babe."

"Wait...are you two...you know..." Lucky looked ecstatic.

"Yes," we said in unison.

"Outstanding." He looked genuinely thrilled. "You know what...I am so jazzed about that."

"Me, too." I grinned back at him.

Pono was nuzzling me as there was a

commotion at the door. The bailiff, who had been standing outside, opened the door and John and *Leilani* came into the room, looking triumphant.

"I would lay book on Mickey True's people offering us a handsome settlement before day's end." *Leilani* looked like she was about to do the Highland fling. "You should have seen the judge's face when he read our list of demands. He kept saying *is this all he wants?* And the other guy kept saying *your honor, I object.* And the judge said *so do I. It's not nearly enough!*"

Lucky went out to get John's car, my attorney fretting over his four-wheeled baby. When Lucky pulled up to the rear exit, we all barreled in, chased by a few smart photographers, and I returned to my life, waiting for whatever Mickey's team had in store for us.

Over the next few hours, calls and email went back and forth between my attorney and Mickey's. At home, I found that my mom was in good spirits. Not exactly talkative, she'd branched out into eating yogurt and fruit and she held up her hands to show me that *Maile* had been painting her nails.

"Beautiful, mom."

"We had a little accident. She didn't tell me she needed to go potty...but I think she's getting the hang of it," *Maile* whispered.

"Thank you, *Maile*. You have no idea..."

"Oh, hesh..." She looked embarrassed.

"So book that boob job, hon." I grinned at her.

"Really?" She jumped into my arms. "Thank you, Gaby...just between you and me though, I kinda like not having to wear a bra..."

"What? And rob Lucky of his sex toys? You wouldn't be so cruel."

Pono was trying to coax my mom into eating some lunch. She looked interested when he opened a new container of *poi* brought over by our neighbor and she actually had quite a bit of it.

"You got ice cream, mister?"

Pono laughed.

After lunch, he drove me and mom to Three Trees with him and I settled her in a big chair on the sand. I sat nearby, flipping through the papers, enjoying my latest escapades, half of which were untrue, but nonetheless enjoyable. I read more and more about local events, world events and turned ideas around in mind of what to do with my future. I had a faint inkling of something, but hadn't put it together yet when I came across an item about the leading slack guitar player in the islands, *Keola Beamer*. Nominated for a Grammy Award, he was causing controversy by saying he'd made a commitment already to teach a guitar camp to a group of at-risk kids on the island of *Molokai*.

I feel my time is of much better use helping our

children than promoting myself, this wonderful man said in the article. I lowered the newspaper and thought about what I'd just read, then Lucky came out of the office.

"Gaby, your attorney's on the phone." I walked across the sand and he handed me the portable receiver through the office window.

"I have good news and bad news."

"John, why do you always say that?"

"The good news is we got an offer of three million dollars."

"Three million?" My voice must have carried because *Pono*, who was out in the water in a canoe with a couple of kids, was coming back to shore, paddling like a madman.

"You still there?" John sounded anxious.

"Yeah, but my knees just got wobbly."

"Well, Mickey's shoveling money out of all his personal and corporate accounts real fast so how much we get of that immediately is questionable, but you'll have something within a few days. We're going to fight to have this judgment upheld. We can start adding penalties for delays."

"Is that the bad news?"

"No, that's the good news. We were expecting him to pull something like this so I filed a stay of execution. The bad news is that Ntino had an attorney present. He wants to file a law suit against you."

I was pissed now. "He wants to sue me? Why?"

"His attorney is threatening to sue you for sexually assaulting him when you were roommates. Mind you, he never mentioned it in his book or his countless blogs..."

"Blogs?"

"Yes, my little dinosaur. Look, he's tossing around figures. I'm not gonna play ball with him. As far I'm concerned, we can fight him. It's up to you."

"What does he want? Money?"

"Yeah, I guess. Doesn't everybody?"

"Well, I figure he's made more than he should off my name. Both of them have."

"I agree. Now, the only sticking point is that Mickey wants to keep the name Loe Boards, but will not use the name Gaby, Gabriel or your image anymore in its advertising."

"Fine with me. Is this thing with Ntino a disaster, John?"

"No, not really. I suspect the attorney will see reason when *Leilani* meets with him this afternoon."

Leilani. Man, our secret weapon. I felt better already.

"So we have won the battle but not the whole war. I'll keep you posted." John rang off and I relayed the whole conversation to *Pono* who was pacing the sand beside me.

His canoe students stood on the water's edge as my normally mild-mannered man fumed.

"That little runt! I can't believe he wants to sue you! And I still can't believe you left me for him!"

"I didn't leave you for him."

"Yes, you did."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did!" He was screaming now and I put my hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry. I don't remember...*Pono*...I'm here now. I'm with you."

"Only because he doesn't want you."

"Is that what you think?"

"It's the truth, isn't it?"

I looked at my mother sleeping in her chair, her chin bobbing on her chest. "No, it's not. If you really feel that way..."

"Look...I don't know what I feel..."

"I do, *Pono*. I love you. I think I always have. I know now why God sent me back. It wasn't about money or surfing or *Ntino*. I was meant to come back to be with you."

He looked deflated and yet happy at the same time. I'd taken the wind out of his angry sails.

"*Pono*...I made a lot of mistakes, a lot of bad decisions. I have no idea what kind of money I'm going to have..."

"I don't care about your money. I love you. I just don't want you to leave me again."

"Then I won't."

He licked his lips. "The hardest thing I've ever had to do in my life is this. Go back out to that frickin' canoe and leave you here."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Come with me."

I hesitated. It wasn't surfing and I wouldn't be in water and I was going to be with two little kids, dammit. I could do this. Really, I could.

Pono took my silence as agreement and we walked toward the water. Only when I felt the sea rocking underneath me did I feel the sort of peace I only otherwise felt when I was with *Pono*.

I picked up an oar and we paddled with the kids a little way past the first set of breaks. It was a calm day, good waves for little guys, and I loved the way the kids instinctively followed our lead and trusted us.

When the kids' lesson was over, *Pono* and I remained in the canoe and we paddled out to a small islet where I instructed him to run the canoe to shore.

"You're not gonna dump me out and leave me there, are you?" he laughed.

"Hell no, I'm not through with you yet."

We ran the canoe up to the hard white sand and there it was...a tiny, idyllic paradise. Two palm trees, nesting birds and I was all over *Pono* who fell down, laughing as I tore at his shorts and tank

top.

I heard the caw of a wild shearwater as it flew over us...I could smell tuberose on the faint trade wind and it inflamed my desire for *Pono*.

"I need your skin....wanna be naked with you..." I muttered and his big hands brushed mine away, finishing the job I so clumsily started. I sat astride Pono and his hand automatically went to my taped-up ribs.

"Are you okay?"

I nodded, mute with need for his gigantic *Hawaiian* warrior cock. I took my time licking it, stroking it with my tongue and lips.

"Gaby, I think you are the sexiest man I ever met."

I hummed an agreement around his cock head and he came down my throat, surprising us both, then got on his hands and knees.

"Fuck me, Gaby. Please, please stick that big cock in me."

I covered his back with kisses, pushing him to the sand, parting his ass with my tongue and fingers. He arched back toward my mouth, his hand reaching around for my cock.

"Uh-uh. I'm paddling this canoe, *Pono*."

I kept working on his ass, loving the taste of him, the sounds he was making...and when I couldn't stand it anymore, I plunged into him, feeling like I'd taken a swan dive into the erupting

Kilauea volcano. My eyes closed against the warm, radiant sun, my lover's body responding to my every thrust.

"Oh yeah...fuck me, give it to me. Oh, Gaby...oh..."

We came together on a rising tide and the waves I always saw in dreams, in my nightmares, receded and all I saw was *Pono*, waiting for me, calling for me.

"*Pono*..."

"What is it, babe?"

My hot tears lashed his back.

"*Pono*...I love you. Please tell me I'm not dreaming."

His ass squeezed my cock, pulling me in just a little bit closer.

"No, we're not dreaming. We're in love...baby...this is what you call a dream coming true."

We paddled the canoe back to the school and were dragging it high on the sand when my mom came out of the office on wobbly legs toward us.

"Gaby. I'm hungry. We got any ice cream?"

Gaby? She just called me Gaby? I ran toward her, pulling her into my arms and I felt the tears on her face...were they hers or mine? I didn't know, I didn't care. My mom was coming back to me and I planned to never, ever leave her alone again.

Chapter Eleven

At sunrise, my body clock snapped to attention and my mouth went in search of that big cock between my lover's thighs. Pono laughed in his sleep, soon waking as I licked and slurped on him.

"I need you inside me, Pono." I tapped my face with his cock, loving the feel of it across my nose and chin.

"Then get on me. I need you, too." He lay on his back, letting me find the sweet spot. And I found it fast. It was better than surfing any day. We made love hard and fast. I rode him, his hands holding my legs to his body as if he was afraid I'd take off on a marathon run. His cock steamed in and out of me and we kept muttering *I love you* and *fuck me* over and over again. We had so much lost time to make up for and I didn't think we would ever feel like it was enough.

He rolled me over onto my back, giving me that monster dick and came, with his voice in my ear, telling me how much he loved me.

“Time to get up,” he whispered and we left a note for everybody letting them know we’d be back soon. We threw on shorts and flip-flops, picked a couple of oranges off the tree in the front yard and wandered around our *Hanalei*. I could smell the familiar early morning scent of wild jasmine and the woody thrum of taro on the air.

The histories of *Kauai* will tell you it was built by the *menehune*, the little people. Research shows they might have been considered mythical, but they were real. They were ancient people of a distinct and different race. *Kauai* is called the Last *Hawaiian* Place because so much of it is unchanged. The original fish and taro ponds not only thrive, but have never failed to produce food for our people. I have always felt a special bond with the taro fields because my father and I worked them together each summer. It is a rite of passage with local kids. It teaches you discipline, which I needed for surfing, and it teaches you a love for the *aina*, the land.

Decades ago, the explorer Thor Heyerdahl, advanced a ridiculous theory that the *Hawaiian* people were descended from south America, even mounting the *Kon Tiki* expedition to prove his theory. The *Hawaiian* anthropologist, Kenneth Emory, vehemently opposed this idea and was the first person to excavate archeological findings on all our islands that proved our ancestors were

Polynesians.

A few months before I disappeared, a group of big wave surfers, *Pono* and I included, went to the Marquesas Islands, to a tiny island in central Polynesia called *Uahuka*, that Emory and others said was the exact same island as *Kauai*. We were all humbled by the experience because *Uahuka* could have been our island home. I was glad to see that the *Hawaiian*-ness of my beloved island was unchanged.

"I understand why some people never gravitate toward *Kauai*," I told *Pono*.

"Why's that, babe?"

"You are confronted with nature, with yourself here. There's nowhere to hide. There's no clubs, no night life...I am so relieved it didn't become Disneyland while I was...wherever the heck I was."

Pono looked at me. "It's true, isn't it? People either love it or hate it? Gab...do you ever have memories of the other side? I mean, does anything come back to you at all?"

I shook my head. "No...it's always waves I see. Sometimes, they're bad. I feel like I'm drowning. With you it's a nice, big, clean wave."

"And it's good?"

"Oh, yes. It's good."

One of our neighbors drove past in his truck and honked. "Need a ride?"

We climbed into the cabin of the truck and laughed and chatted with him all the way to *Kauapea*, what I had come to think of as the bad beach, where it all began and where one part of my life ended. Our neighbor took off and *Pono* and I stood by the place where I'd left my car.

I was aware that not everything was clear yet, but I studied the shrine made and tended so lovingly by *Pono* in my memory. There was a brass plaque that even had an etching of my beloved dog, *Ginger*, on it. I traced my fingers over her face.

"We brought her ashes here." *Pono's* voice was quiet.

I was amazed at all the fresh fruit and flower offerings, the notes left by people and I wondered why they were still visiting it.

"That's easy. You did the impossible. You proved that not everything can be explained. You proved that some people walk the rainbow and make it back again. I believe the *menehune* rescued you. You are a child of the land. You still are one of us."

I threaded my arms around him and he kissed the top of my head.

"Gaby...I've seen people sitting here, talking to you. There wasn't anybody who didn't love you. You were good to everyone. Your leaving...it just didn't seem real." He was silent for a moment. "I

think that's why, when people have hard times, they need to believe in rainbows." He kissed my shoulder. "You want to go in the water?"

"No, I do not."

"I'm with you. You'll be okay."

"*Pono*...I'm not ready. I can't believe I left Ginger here. How long was she here on her own?"

"Don't torture yourself, babe. The lifeguard found her a couple of hours after you vanished. You sure you don't want to go in?"

I shook my head.

"It's okay, I understand. I just don't want you to be afraid of anything. I'm here. I'll look after you."

I felt I couldn't breathe. "It's too soon."

"Okay...Gaby...it's okay." He held me until I stopped shaking. We walked home slow and easy, absorbed in the beauty around us and each other. Two hours later, *Pono* was going through the same thing with my mom at Three Trees. She was so happy wearing the new lilac hibiscus print bathing suit *Maile* had bought her. Mom said she wanted to swim at the beach, then she said the water was too cold.

In a beautiful, selfless act of love, *Pono* took her by the hand and led her slowly to the water's edge outside the school. He held my mom in one hand, a teakettle with the other and poured the steaming contents into the ocean. She went in without

hesitation, giggling.

"It's nice and warm now!" She splashed around like a kid and I joined them, crouched close by on the sand, watching my mom reacquainting herself with life.

"Gaby...aren't you coming in?" she asked.

"Not yet, mom."

"But I'm lonely." She held out her hand.

"No time like the present." *Pono* gave me his hand. "Come on. Let's do it."

I resisted until...a thought came to me.

"*Pono*, I'll go in on one condition."

"Go ahead, tell me."

"I want us to have a *baci* ceremony."

"A *baci* ceremony? What's that?"

"The Laotians do it. It's a special string ceremony they do so that two lovers' souls never wander away from each other. I want to do that with you, *Pono*. I never want any part of me to wander away from you again."

He hurled himself at me, making me and my mom laugh.

"You're kissing!" she squealed like a kid and *Pono* held me to him.

"I'll *baci* with you, Gaby. I *never* want to be apart from you again." I believed him because he is a man of his word, my *Pono*, whose name, after all, in *Hawaiian* means *right*.

"*Pono*, I want to have an old-fashioned *Hawaiian*

hoe-down. A *hukilau*, right here on the beach. And afterward, I want us to have our *baci* and I want to make love to you over and over again.”

“All right. Sounds good to me.” He kissed me.

Neither of us cared what money we had. We just wanted each other. As he dragged me into the surf, I felt the water heal me and hold me as the man I finally knew I loved made me feel that an ordinary day turned into a seriously special one.

We invited everyone we knew to our *hukilau* and I got a special thrill out of seeing tons and tons of people of all ages and all the barbecues, beach blankets, umbrellas and good fun and laughter stretching along the crescent of *Hanalei Bay*. *Maile* and *Lucky's* boys flew out from *Maui* and young *Gaby* turned out to be a talented surfer who loped after me like a long-legged puppy. He walked the beach with me and *Pono* as we greeted all our friends who had shown up for our big beach party. We grazed on chicken skewered on rosemary stalks and pineapple chunks dipped in chocolate, then one lovely old lady handed me a *liliko'i* pie.

“I know this is your favorite.” I kissed her cheek and took the pie.

“Oh, it's calling my name!”

Everybody laughed and little *Gaby* piped up, “Hey it's calling my name, too. I get to have a slice.”

I looked down at him. "No, it's distinctly saying Gaby Loe...Gaby Loe."

"No, it's not," little Gaby said and ran off with my pie.

"You know, I think that kid's got some style," I told *Pono* as we moved on to our next group. A little blind boy was sitting on the sand and I knelt beside him.

"You know how to surf?" I asked him.

"I'm blind. I can't surf."

"That's not true. I can teach you. You want me to teach you?"

"Yeah!"

"Well, I'll tell you what...tomorrow morning, when it's all nice and quiet, you come down here and I'll teach you."

I caught *Pono's* proud look as I turned to the little boy's parents. "Can you bring him here early, say eight o'clock?"

His parents were ecstatic. "Oh, he'd love that!"

A little way along, we found a kid crying over a broken board fin.

"Come on, we'll lend you one of ours from the school." *Pono* was so great with the kids. Tomorrow, I'd buy the kid a new board.

As *Pono* and I stood on the shore watching him play around with his borrowed board, *Pono* gave me a swift kiss.

"I've thought about what I want to do in the

future.”

He grinned. “Apart from me?”

“Yeah. Although that is a big part of my plans. I want to run programs for at-risk kids. I’ve been reading a lot about it in the papers. Every island has a program except *Kauai*. I’d like to teach them to surf, ride horses, teach them about taro farming. Maybe see if *Keola* Beamer can’t come and teach them a little guitar.”

“That’s a fantastic idea, babe. What a beautiful thing to do. You’ve got my help.”

I looked at him. “Good.”

Pono smiled. “Time for your special present.”

“A present? For me?”

He nodded. Back at our family’s enormous spread on the sand, somebody brought forth a pet crate. I heard a puppy and my heart almost broke when I opened the latch and a tiny, three-month-old puppy, who looked exactly like my *Ginger*, tumbled onto my lap and covered my face with kisses.

“I love that puppy smell.” I clutched that baby and *Pono*’s arm went across my shoulders.

“She’s *Ginger*’s granddaughter.”

“Oh, *Pono*...how did you ever find her?”

“It’s been a mission, ever since you came home. Now what are we going to call her?”

I could not stop hugging that puppy, who could also not stop giving me kisses.

“Well, I want to call her Ginger, but that’s not right...”

“I know! Why don’t we call her Kiki? That’s the nick name for Ginger in *Hawaiian*.”

I looked at *Pono*. “I hope you’re intending on spending the rest of your life with me because you’ll need to get me arrested for stalking if you’re not.”

It was in the evening in our backyard when Father Kim performed the *baci* ceremony. There wasn’t a dry eye among all the attendees. Some of it was from laughing, some from the sheer beauty of it. For the chicken, we had barbecued chicken in our circle offering.

“Oh hurry up and tie our hands,” *Pono* urged Father Kim. “I wanna make sure he’s mine forever.”

Our puppy slept on the porch swing, occasionally opening an eye to supervise the strange proceedings and to make sure nothing happened to the barbecued chicken.

When I finally got my man to myself, we held one another, looking up at the night sky.

Our puppy jumped from her seat and loped toward us, flopping herself across our feet. Neither of us moved. We were too busy staring at each other. The white strings on our wrists shone in the fading night as *Pono* took my face in his big

Hawaiian hands and kissed me, showing me what was what when two *Hawaiian* men are deeply in love and all alone together, naked, under a *Hanalei* Moon.

About the Author

A. J. Llewellyn lives in California, but dreams of living in Hawaii. Frequent trips to all the islands, bags of Kona coffee in his fridge and a healthy collection of Hawaiian records keep this writer refueled. A. J. loves male/male erotica, has a passion for all animals (especially the dog, the cat and the turtle). A. J. believes that love is a song best sung out loud.

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