

KONA WARRIOR

COURTNEY SHEETS



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romance

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A Ravenous Romance™ Fantastica™ Original Publication

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Restless is the island Kuaihelani
Overwhelmed by raging desires
The turbulent adobe of the shark that walks upright

Mark Keali'I Ho'omalu

Prologue

Kuamo'o Hawaii 1820

The sky was fierce ebony. Mano lifted a hand to his eyes, shielding them from the intense light of the sun. He stared at the clouds blanketing the land: angry, hungry, and destructive. The fire goddess Pele's anger painted the sky with streaks of black smoke from the volcano's mouth. The smell of sulfur and blood filled Mano's nostrils. It had been a mighty battle. The sound of keening, a high-pitched and continuous sorrow, cut through the still air.

The young warrior shifted his gaze to the crying woman. Kekuaokalani's wife lay across her husband's body. The battle was done. If only he had not fought against the King. The woman had begged for her husband's life, only to be denied. All too abruptly the wailing ceased. Mano did not turn around, for he already knew what he would see. She had been executed as well. Too much bloodshed on this hill, too many bodies, Mano shook his head at the waste. Mortals never understood the true value of life. They always squandered what they had, only to lament its loss when their time was done. But he remembered – all of his kind knew and remembered what it was like to be human. The clouds split, showering heavy rain on the fallen, the wounded, and the triumphant. Not a body was spared the tears of Kane. No one was spared. Mano turned his back to the battlefield and walked to the sea, not knowing when he would return to land again, to walk on legs again. Not knowing if he ever wanted to. Perhaps his existence would be better served in the sea. Without a backwards glance, Mano dove into the foamy surf.

This was the day the Gods cried...

Chapter One

Las Vegas, present day

“Pack up your desk and get out of the building. You have until noon.” James McMaster smiled crookedly at Gloria.

“You’re firing me?” Gloria Grant couldn’t believe what she was hearing. James, her viperous editor, nodded pseudo-sympathetically at her from behind the safety of his oak desk.

“As editor-in-chief, it is my responsibility to ‘trim the fat,’ so to speak.” James smirked at her, his gaze running up and down her curves. Gloria straightened her spine under the appraisal. It was difficult to be imposing at the height of five-foot-three, but Gloria gave it her all. She knew she was considered a little overweight by current standards, but she preferred the word voluptuous to fat. Not that James ever cared what she thought.

“*The Scorpion* has way too many reporters around here not pulling their weight,” he added. As the editor of *The Wandering Scorpion*, the Las Vegas Valley’s number-one “alternative” newspaper, James had the power to fire anyone whom he felt didn’t make the cut. Now he was firing his recently ex-girlfriend: Gloria. What galled her most was the fact that she was the best reporter *The Scorpion* had, a fact James also knew all too well.

“This is a newspaper, James. What kind of employees are we supposed to have around here if not reporters? Let’s be honest with each other, which I understand would be an entirely new concept for you, but let’s try. The real reason you’re firing me wouldn’t have anything to do with you hiring Mandy as your personal assistant, would it?” The other woman’s name felt in her mouth like profanity.

“Mandy does work here now, but that has absolutely no bearing on my decision to let you go.” James squirmed in his chair.

Gloria cocked an eyebrow at him. He was such a lousy liar. She smirked at the

sweat beading on his forehead.

“How about the fact you dumped me, oh, I don’t know, about six months ago, when I found you and Mandy jumping each other’s bones on the top of this lovely antique desk? Please tell me you have had it cleaned since that embarrassing little incident,” Gloria said with uncontrolled anger.

“You’re taking this much too personally. It really isn’t about you. My decision to fire you has nothing to do with our former relationship. I’m simply following orders, downsizing, stepping outside the journalistic box, if you will.” James loved catch phrases, even if he never really understood their meaning. His speech was peppered with them—usually in the wrong context.

“Fine. See if you can find a journalist who will work this hard for the crappy salary you pay.” Gloria stormed from her former lover’s office in a defeated huff.

She had been engaged to James for almost three years, until he traded her in for a younger, skinnier model. Mandy, the twenty-two-year-old intern from UNLV, had swished her blond hair and batted her baby blues right into James’s employ – as well as his pants. Gloria shivered slightly, calling to mind the sight of the two of them going at it on the oak desk. The scene had resembled a low-budget porn flick. Now it seemed, in typical James fashion, he was giving her the old heave-ho once again.

“Gloria, your aunt called about ten minutes ago. She said it was urgent.” Patrice’s soft voice drifted over the dingy gray cubicle walls the second Gloria’s ass hit her chair.

“Thanks.” Gloria answered, punching her Great Aunt Omana’s number into the phone. Glancing at the clock, Gloria realized it would be about seven in the morning in Hawaii. Aunt Monie would have been up for hours. Her motto had always been, *I shall sleep when I have perished*. Waiting for Omana to pick up, Gloria glanced at the picture of them at Kilauea Volcano taken when she was sixteen. Omana Grant had taken care of Gloria ever since Gloria’s parents had been killed in a boating accident off Captain Cook’s in Hawaii. A sudden storm had come up, launching the little speedboat her

father piloted into the lava cliffs that lined parts of the shore.

Gloria had been five years old at the time. She had been at the house visiting with Omana while her parents went snorkeling. The memory of Officer Mike Kekaula, who had been a friend of the family's for years, standing in the small entryway delivering the news, was permanently etched in her psyche. After the accident, Gloria went to live with her Great Aunt Omana and Great Uncle Peter, her only remaining relatives. Omana's little house in Kona with the brightly painted shutters and sweet ocean breeze was the only home Gloria could really remember.

"*Aloha.*" Omana's elegant voice sailed over the phone line. Gloria could almost picture her aunt's smiling face.

"Hi, Aunt Monie, it's me. Patrice said you called, so what's up?"

"Gloria! My darling, I need you to come to Hawaii as soon as possible. I am in a pickle that requires familial assistance." Omana's voice was a little too fast for Gloria's peace of mind. Usually Omana was the height of composure, with an air of calm about everything she did, but not today. Something was definitely wrong.

"What's going on?" Gloria asked.

"That horrible man is trying to take my home away." Omana's voice was pitched high, breathy and full of anger.

"What horrible man? Tell me what the problem is. I don't live there anymore, remember? I don't know what's going on."

"There is a new resort going a bit down the coast. They want the land my house sits on and I refuse to sell. Please come to Hawaii. Can you spare a few days to come home?" Omana pleaded with her.

Gloria sighed. Staring at the picture once again, she thought of all the times Omana had been there for her, through broken bones and shattered hearts. Omana was her only family, the only one who loved her no matter how much she screwed things up in her life.

"You know what, Aunt Monie? I just happen to be able to spare more than a

few days. I got fired a few minutes ago, so I'm all yours. I'll be there by the end of the month. I'll pack up my stuff and sell the rest. I need a couple of weeks to put things in order."

"Wonderful! Well, not wonderful you lost your job, but wonderful you will be here with me."

"I'll need to move in with you for a while, just until I get my bearings. Is that all right?" Gloria asked. Her mind raced. She would have to sell or give away most of her stuff here and break her lease on the ratty apartment she had lived in since the breakup. Her beautiful new house had gone to James in the separation. At least he had bought her out of the mortgage, so she had some money squirreled away.

"Certainly my darling, you may stay as long as you need. This is your home. Call with your flight information and I'll meet you at the airport in Kona. *Aloha*, my darling. I love you. Come home."

Gloria placed the phone back on the cradle. Despite the horrendous news, she felt oddly optimistic. Smiling at the picture once more, she realized she was going home. With a satisfied sigh, she packed her meager desk belongings into an empty copy paper box. After a final cursory glance at the desk she had toiled at for more than two years, she was out the door.

Chapter Two

The sun was shining high in the clear azure sky as Gloria stepped off the plane at Kona International Airport. Stopping at the top of the metal ladder, she took a huge breath, filling her lungs with the sweetly scented air. Golden sun spread its light over the tarmac, caressing Gloria's bare arms. The lush flowers and vegetation growing around the airport mixed to create a distinct aroma only found in Hawaii. The sultry air was perfumed with jasmine, plumeria, and maile, and hung low with humidity which clung to everything.

Gloria loved the Kona Airport. The open-air terminal and walk across the tarmac made her feel like Annette Funicello in a cool 1950s beach movie. She slung her backpack over her shoulder and adjusted her baseball cap over her ebony hair. She had come home, if only for a little while.

Gloria headed into the terminal. Her smile grew even wider when she spied Omana. Her great aunt stood off to the side dressed in a multicolored muumuu, almost swallowed up in the voluminous folds of her traditional Hawaiian dress. An oversized straw hat in hot pink with huge plastic flowers completed the look. Gloria let out a hearty laugh. Despite her eighty-eight years, Omana looked very much the tiny child playing dress-up in mommy's clothes. The dress was so bright it almost hurt Gloria's eyes to look at it. Nothing pleased the old woman more than bright splashes of mismatched color.

"Gloria, my darling, *aloha!* My little one, you are finally here." Omana reached up and enveloped her in a large hug, a brilliant smile dancing on her wrinkled face.

"Hi Aunt Monie, I've missed you so much." Gloria leaned down into the hug. As short as she was, Gloria almost towered over the diminutive Omana. It was one of the few times in her life Gloria felt tall.

"From the look in your eyes I can tell you have missed your home as much as it's missed you. Hawaii will make you whole again. It forever has and it forever will,"

Omana said, glancing deep into Gloria's face. Her sparkling eyes took in Gloria's attire. Dressed in faded jeans and an UNLV Running Rebels T-shirt, Gloria knew she must look terrible after seven hours on a plane. But she didn't care. She was back where she was loved. Omana's affectionate smile and cheery gaze was like a balm to her weary soul.

"I don't want to talk about it right now. Can we just go home?"

"Never the mind, we will discuss it when you are ready. I shall strive to help remove those shadows from your lovely eyes." Omana said, placing a hand on Gloria's cheek, "Come! Let us procure your baggage and off we go!"

"All I have are these two bags, Aunt Monie, and one is my computer."

"Will you be sporting clothes this excursion, or do you intend to prance the beach naked?" Omana teased her niece.

"I have the essentials: tank tops, swimsuits, shorts, and my laptop. Plus there's all the junk I left at your house on my last visit. I have a couple boxes of stuff I shipped over. They'll probably be here soon. Besides, you live near Wal-Mart if I get desperate." Gloria laughed.

"Homeward we go, then!" Omana smiled, jiggling the keys in her hands.

Home, Gloria thought, *was definitely Hawaii.*

Gloria climbed into her aunt's dilapidated green Jeep and slid on her sunglasses. Omana reached over and clicked on the radio. The soft voice of Israel "Brudda Iz" Kamakawiwo'ole filled the air. Gloria leaned back in her seat.

"What you really need my darling, is a lover," Omana said out of the blue, in her simple, elegant fashion. "It has been utterly too lengthy a time since you engaged in some recreational intercourse. And what I need is a little magic to help me out."

Gloria was unamused. Omana's solution to every problem was sex and magic. "Aunt Monie, I don't need a lover. I need to get serious about writing. Now that I'm unemployed, I can sit down and work on that book I always talked about writing. Maybe I can freelance for the *West Hawaii Today* to earn some money."

“Honestly, my dear, how long has it been since you had a good roll in the hay? It has been at least six months since James flew the coop on you. From the sound of your voice when you called those many times, he was not that wonderful at pleasing you anyway. How long has it been since your last orgasm?”

Gloria simply stared at her aunt. “I’m not discussing my sex life with you, no matter how nonexistent.” Sometimes her aunt didn’t have any sense of personal boundaries. It wasn’t as if Gloria was a prude. She simply was a little shy when it came to the subject of sex. She didn’t have all that much experience and certainly didn’t want to be discussing it with her octogenarian aunt.

“Be that as it may, I still think you need a lover. However, I will say no more on the subject for now. Enjoy your ride home.”

Gloria watched the scenery go by as they drove down the Queen’s Highway to Omana’s house. Palm trees and riots of tropical flowers in blazing colors lined the road. Purples, pinks, and luscious reds rested on a bed of black lava rock. The lava rock that was once a barren stretch of darkness was now becoming home to a multitude of life. That was the way of things in Hawaii. Pele spewed her liquid fire over the land and left charred remains in her wake. Once the lava stopped and some time had passed, life began to grow. Trees, bushes, and flowers sprang from the cracks and grooves.

It seemed to her that just as soon as her lids closed, Omana turned the Jeep into the steep driveway. The whitewashed house with its teal shutters sat proud on the hill as they drove closer. Gloria smiled. The simple, weathered house had always seemed part of the tropical foliage around it, a snowy white haven in a field of green. Peeking from off the beaten trail, the house sat a short distance from the water. The lanai had an unobstructed view of the ocean. The home had been in the family for generations.

Gloria grabbed her bags when Omana pulled to a halt. She stepped from the car, her legs still wobbly from the seven-hour plane ride.

“I have set up your old room facing the water, my darling. All your old belongings have been placed in there.” Omana said, shoving open the vivid blue front

door.

The house was just as Gloria remembered. Similar to many homes on the island, flamboyant colors painted the exterior, while rattan furniture and houseplants generously peppered the interior. An ornately carved Koa wood coffee table rested in front of the sofa on Omana's teal green rug, a souvenir from a long-ago adventure in the Punjabi area of India. Seashells that Omana had collected on various trips to beaches around the world decorated nearly every surface. Large photographs of sea life, framed copies of Omana's *National Geographic* covers and family pictures decorated the walls. A fresh bunch of plumeria flowers in a crystal vase sat on the coffee table, releasing an intoxicating scent.

Gloria stopped in front of a picture of a shark. The teeth of the impressive animal snarled at her, and its eyes were a deep black, drawing her into their depths.

"This was always my favorite cover that you did, Aunt Monie. I still don't know how you got that shark to let you get this close."

"That photograph won me my Pulitzer Prize," she said, as if Gloria didn't know. "That shark swam straight up to me, never once threatening. It simply hovered long enough for me to snap my photo and off it went on its merry way. When I first saw him swimming toward me, I believed I was about to become his lunch. He was just as curious about me as I was him."

Omana had been a celebrated wildlife photographer, specializing in sea life. Her photos had graced the covers of many world magazines and won numerous awards. In her younger years, Omana had traveled the world multiple times over. She had been to all the exotic locales and had met an array of interesting people. Her adventures had served as Gloria's bedtime stories. The money she had made from her photography had allowed her to open her small New Age shop in Kona. She still intermittently took pictures, but her shop was her true love now.

Gloria dropped her bags on the ground and flopped on the sofa like a teenager. It felt so good to be home and loved. She stretched out, letting her muscles relax. A book

on the coffee table caught her eye. She picked up the calfskin-bound edition next to the flowers. The title was embossed in gold.

“What’s this, Aunt Monie?” Gloria asked, flipping the pages. She couldn’t read most of it. There were some sketches in the book, including one of a shark. Gloria peered at the drawing. The resemblance between the sketch and Omana’s photograph took her breath away.

“That is a book of ancient Hawaiian spells and rituals, traditional Huna mysticism, quite extraordinary. I found in a thrift shop in Hilo last week. I felt I had to purchase it, as if it was begging me to bring it home.”

Gloria stared at her aunt. “Spells? Is this for your shop?” Ever since Gloria was a little girl, Omana had firmly believed in the religions of the past. Practices filled with gods and goddesses, love of nature, and respect for the earth.

“No darling, that book is for me. That book is a rare find. Most Huna practices were passed down in the oral tradition. When the Christian missionaries came, they taught reading and writing. This book is a product of that teaching, a collection of practices written down under a shield of secrecy, hidden from their Christian teachers. There is a ritual in there that may help me in my hour of need. I was hoping you might assist.”

Omana smiled, taking the book from Gloria. She lovingly stroked the leather. Gloria gave her aunt a skeptical look. Omana hardly ever asked her to participate in rituals.

“Aunt Monie, do you remember what happened last time you asked me to help with a spell?” It was before her parents died. Her world set on fire with the excitement of doing magic with her favorite relative during one summer vacation when Omana asked her to help with a spell. Gloria’s father had barged into the room, breaking up the ritual in the middle. He had been furious.

Ever since that day, Gloria was forbidden to have anything to do with magic. Her father, the ever-sensible lawyer, had lectured her for hours on the frivolity of her

great aunt's wanderlust-driven life. Sometimes Gloria was relieved he hadn't lived long enough to see the mistakes she had made so far.

"It was a long time ago, child. Your father can not judge you now and you're old enough that I don't feel guilt-ridden asking you to participate once again. I deem it is time for you to reclaim your life. Besides, what do you have you to lose?" Omana's smile widened in that Mona Lisa way of hers and she placed the book back in Gloria's hands.

"What does this ritual entail? What are we asking the gods for this time? Money, a new car, new sofa? This one's a little worse for wear." Gloria stretched farther into the cushions on the couch. She pulled one under her head like a pillow. She was wiped out from her flight.

"We will call upon an *aumakua* to help me, with the help of Namakaikaha'I, of course." Omana answered with absolute sincerity.

Gloria perked up. "Why are we asking the Goddess of the Sea for a guardian?"

"That dreadful man is trying to take my house and land from underneath me. This house has been in our family for generations."

"That's the second time you've mentioned a 'dreadful man' without explaining." Gloria sat up and stared hard at her great aunt. "Aunt Monie, tell me what's going on."

"Martin Stranberg," Omana said. "He is a representative for some glamorous new upscale resort they are building up the beach. Apparently the owner of the ostensible eyesore desires this piece of land to build his fancy house on. Well, I refuse to sell my home. I have lived here all my life and I will die here. It is my hope that one day you will decide to live here permanently as well." Omana paced the floor.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier? He can't force you to leave. You own the land and the house. Have you talked to an attorney?"

"But it seems he can. You see, my darling girl, your great uncle, in his infinite wisdom, hid the deed long ago. I have been unable to locate it, thus making me unable to prove I own the land. The Shark man can help."

“Aunt Monie, I love this house almost as much as I love you. I will do my best to help you,” Gloria said, “But I need a nap first. When I get up I will call Leilani. You remember her? We went to school together. She went to the mainland for law school and is back now with her own practice. Maybe she can help.” After her nap, she also would go through Omana’s papers and, with luck, find a way out of this mess. She stood up and headed toward her room. “Everything will work out, Aunt Monie. And seriously, we need to ask the gods for a new sofa too. That one is ready to be sacrificed to the volcano,” she finished with a half laugh.

“Have a good rest, my darling.” Omana kissed her cheek.

* * * *

The wind danced all around her, causing the Tapa cloth sarong to cling tightly to her body. Her ebony hair, loose and free, danced in the wind. Gloria reached up and pulled her wayward hair back with one hand and stared out into the distance. The golden sand of the beach tickled her toes with each step she took. The runner had come early today to tell the Village of the warriors’ return. The young boy had seen the outriggers land at Puna. Gloria had come down to the water’s edge to wait for their return. It was only a matter of time before he was here and back in her arms, her warrior.

Jubilant cries rang out from the distance. The rhythm of the poi pounders ceased and was replaced with the joyful sounds of family. Gloria ran up the beach back to the village. She had walked farther down the beach than she’d thought. Her thighs burned with the pace she was forcing herself to keep. He had to get to him.

“Hurry! They are coming!” someone shouted down to her. Gloria ran as fast as her legs could take her.

The warriors poured into the village, their skin glistening with sweat in the sunlight. Their garb of bright, colored feathers in shades of red, yellow, and black cut a contrast against the bronze hue of their battle-honed bodies. Gloria’s face split into a wide smile the moment she spotted him. He was taller than the others by a good head.

His black hair shone in the sunlight. His dark eyes drank in the sight of her. She felt her breath hitch in her lungs. It was always that way with him. The sight of him robbed her of her reason every time.

Breaking ranks, the men went to join their wives, their children, their families. He strode toward her with a sense of purpose. She felt the heat building in the pit of her stomach. There would be much lovemaking and celebration this evening.

Sweeping her into his arms, he claimed her mouth in a hungry kiss. Gloria pressed her body to his, reveling in the feel of his hard frame against her softer one.

“I have missed you,” he said, breaking the kiss and nibbling lightly on her earlobe. He cupped her button in his big hands, pulling her pelvis tight against his building erection. A shiver shot through her, causing liquid heat to pool between her thighs.

“I prayed to Kane every night that he would return you to me.” She rocked her hips against him. A small groan tore from his lips. Shifting his weight, he reached down and picked her up. She nuzzled his neck as he carried her to their hut. Depositing her on the grass sleeping mats, he followed her down. His hands were everywhere: touching, caressing, and needing. She cried out with more passion than alarm when he ripped the dress from her body. He was desperate in his need for her flesh and she was willing to comply. Her body burned for his. Minutes ticked by as he sat drinking in the sight of her exposed flesh. Gloria looked up into his dark eyes filled with passion and love.

“You are so beautiful and mine, all for me.” He cupped her breasts and dropped soft kisses to the creamy flesh. Catching one nipple in his teeth, he clamped down, nipping her with a mix of pleasure and pain. Arching her back, she let him know she enjoyed the flash of sensation. She ran her hands along the muscled planes of his back. They became more frenzied in their need for each other. He had been away so long. She had been consumed with the thought of him being lost to her, and now that he was back safe in her arms, she couldn't seem to get enough of him.

“Take me,” she commanded. He nudged her thighs apart, his thick length poised at the entrance to her body. “Yes,” she said as she wrapped her legs around his waist. He surged forward, burying himself deep in her soft flesh. She cried out as his length stretched her. The blood pounded in her ears as he pumped into her, the sound growing louder with each thrust. She came in a rush, her climax ripping his name from her lips. Her warrior was home where he belonged.

Chapter Three

Gloria never felt more childish in her entire life, including the time James had sent her to cover the Burning Man Festival in the desert. Here she was, standing barefoot in cool sand in the middle of the night, dressed in only a thin white nightgown. She stared at the alternating blue, white, and silver candles forming the circle surrounding her. Offerings of ti leaves, shells, flowers, and a fat red papaya rested near her bare feet.

When she'd woke from her nap, she was shaken by her dream in more ways than one. No matter what was happening in her life, the dream was always the same. She thought maybe most woman had several erotic dreams in their mental filing cabinets, but not Gloria. From the moment she was old enough to have wet dreams, her one dream never changed. She was always a native girl in some ancient time. Her dream man, a powerfully built warrior returning to her arms after battle, filled her thoughts. Even all those years she was with James, her Hawaiian dream man made nightly visits to her. She had even tried to force herself to dream about James, but his face simply morphed into her dream man every time.

This time, however was different: more powerful, more detailed then it had ever been. Maybe being home in Hawaii where she belonged had made her dream more vivid.

Gloria had labored over Omana's papers when she woke. She used the quest to shake off the intensity of the dream. Together they'd spent most of the afternoon digging in boxes, emptying closets, and overturning books, but to no avail. By the time the sun set in the west, the water glistening like diamonds, it was almost seven, and Omana promptly told Gloria to cease and desist.

Now here Gloria was, frolicking on the beach in her underwear. Well, not her underwear exactly, but the nightgown Omana had given her was close enough. The damn thing was barely long enough to graze the tops of her thighs. Gloria shook her

head in mild annoyance, then, heaving a surrendering sigh, she glanced up at the full moon above.

“I don’t know about this, Aunt Monie.” Gloria pulled the short hem of her gown down a little bit more. She hoped no one came along to see her in the embarrassing thing. Gloria, having always possessed a Rubenesque figure, tended to wear nightclothes that covered more of her ample frame than this flimsy scrap of silk. She preferred pajamas along the lines of sweatpants and a tank top. But Omana had commanded she put on the wispy thing, saying that the spell called for a young woman from the family in need to dress in a white gown. Apparently Gloria fit the ritual’s other requirements to the letter. The book laid down extremely specific rules for who could perform the spell.

As Omana had wandered through the house gathering the necessary items for the spell, she gave Gloria the list of desired qualities set forth in the book. The ritual could only be performed by a young woman who was unmarried, possessed of Hawaiian blood on the maternal side of the calling family, and been the descendant of a kahuna. Gloria began to understand why Omana needed her to come home so badly: she was the last of her family’s bloodline. Aunt Monie and Uncle Peter had no children of their own and Gloria’s mother was an only child. Her father may have been a *haole*, but Gloria’s mom was full-blooded Hawaiian. She knew that back hundreds of years ago, on an old branch of their family tree, was the name of Aikanaka. Omana would tell stories of Aikanaka to Gloria before bed every night in her childhood. Most children got fairy tales with princesses and dragons. Gloria got Aikanaka, kahuna to a powerful chief. She had always thought the stories Omana told made Aikanaka sound like a Hawaiian Merlin.

The wind blew all around them. The sound of the surf was the only noise that filled the air. Gloria looked out onto the water, enjoying the moon’s reflection, silvery and black all at the same time.

“Saving our ancestral home is not silly, child. This guardian will help.” Omana

smiled. She made her way around the circle, lighting the candles as she went.

“I don’t know how I let you talk me into this. This is never going to work.”

“You love and respect me enough to follow along with my schemes whenever I ask,” Omana promptly answered. When all the candles were lit, Omana turned to Gloria. The two women looked at each other: one inside the circle, and the other outside looking in. Omana opened the spell book in her left hand and took a calming breath. Gloria rolled her eyes heavenward and plunked down ungracefully onto the sand.

“You need to stand my dear, facing the ocean. Make sure you stand up straight, Gloria. I will accept no slouching from you, my dear.”

“Yes ma’am.” Gloria rose to her feet with a smile. “What now?” she asked, feeling even more ridiculous than before.

“Hold out both of your hands with the palms up to the moon.”

Gloria did as she was instructed.

“Now, repeat after me. For goodness’ sake, child, unbraid your hair,” her great aunt chastised. She paused as Gloria unbraided her thick black rope of hair

When it hung loose past her waist, Gloria asked, “Shouldn’t we have some music or something?” Something inside her was trying to stall for time. Not that she actually believed a shark man was going to appear, but she couldn’t seem to shake the strange feeling eating away at the pit of her stomach. She told herself it was only the jet lag mixed with the shock of losing her job and standing half-naked on a moonlit beach. But that didn’t seem to work.

“You need to concentrate, dear one, or the ritual will never work. Now repeat after me. *Ocean Mother, Goddess of the sea, hear my plea and answer me.*”

“It’s not going to work anyway,” Gloria muttered under her breath.

“Just repeat the damn phrase, Gloria,” Omana admonished. Gloria stared at her great aunt. The older woman seldom used profanity.

Closing her eyes, Gloria held her hands up and began the chant. She let the salty tang of the sea fill her nostrils, blending sensually with the sandalwood incense stick

Omana had lit earlier and placed in the sand at Gloria's feet.

"*Ocean Mother, Goddess of the sea, hear my plea and answer me.*" Gloria felt a tension build. Arms of power, strong and binding, tightened across her chest with each word. The wind seemed to blow even harder at her command. She opened her eyes and sat the waves crashing stronger on the beach, foamy caps cresting each ebony roll.

"Concentrate! *Mother of seaweed, Mother of fish, accept my gifts, grant my wish.*" Omana shouted over the building roar. Swept up in the moment, Gloria felt herself go with the rhythm of the chant. Her ebony hair whipped around her face, a toy in the fierce wind. Gloria opened her eyes. Clouds, pendulous and dark, hung low in the sky. The once-vibrant moon was now a shadow behind them.

"Where did the all those clouds come from?" Gloria asked, stopping the chant.

"Finish the chant please, Gloria, and I will make the offering. *By the power of moonlight, grant my request if it be right, send the guardian into my sight,*" Omana said.

Gloria began the chant again. Growing louder with each verse, the chant filled the air. Omana tossed the papaya into the choppy surf. Out of nowhere, a great bolt of lightning split the ominous darkness of the sky. Omana fell to the sand at the blinding light. Gloria dropped to her knees beside her aunt, putting her arm around the older woman. The clap of thunder shook the beach, silencing the howling wind.

Then suddenly, earth that had trembled only moments ago was peaceful once again.

"Aunt Monie, are you all right?" Gloria asked, helping Omana to her feet. The beach was silent. The soft sound of the waves breaking on the shore was the only remaining evidence of the short-lived, violent storm. The sound of Gloria's heartbeat thrummed loudly in her ears. She gathered her aunt closer into the safety of her arms.

"I am fine. A trifle shaken, but unharmed. I wonder how we will know if it worked?"

Gloria looked down at her, and suddenly Omana's eyes, wide as saucers, filled

her tiny face. The older woman's gaze locked out to the surf.

“What is it? Are you sure you're okay?”

Omana lifted her right hand and pointed out to the sea. Following Omana's gaze, Gloria hardly believed the sight before her.

A man walked, liquid, from the foaming surf. His black hair glistened silver in the slowly returning moonlight. The water ran a race with moonbeams down his bronzed skin. Gloria felt her breath catch in her throat. He was breathtaking, a god stepping from the ocean with a body carved for protection and for passion. She swallowed hard, her throat incredibly dry at the sight of him. An air of familiarity danced around him – Gloria sucked in a great gasp of breath.

It was him.

That face, that body, and that dark gaze that seemed to drink up the sight of her. His was the face she conjured up in her dreams each night, the man from her dreams.

Gloria stood transfixed. Her fantasy had become real. Hard planes of sculpted muscle rippled with barely restrained power with every step he took.

“Holy shit!” Gloria exclaimed. Omana let out a soft titter. Gloria's brown eyes widened when he stepped a few feet farther from the water. The waves now pooled at his waist, lapping at the ever-expanding coating of bronzed skin.

Her fantasy was also as naked as the day he was born.

The most gorgeous naked Hawaiian man she had ever laid eyes on strode toward her and all she could do was stand rooted to the sand like a palm tree. The man's dark eyes, the gray color of the clouds that forever blanketed Mauna Kea Summit, focused only on her. Only when he stood directly in front of her did he slow his pace to a stop.

He must have been at least six-foot-one, Gloria thought. If he wrapped those powerful arms around her, she would only come up to the crook of his shoulder. She mentally shook herself. Where had that thought come from?

“Why have you summoned me?” The man's voice was warm and husky. The

tones danced along her body. The sound rumbled from deep in his chest.

“Who are you?” she croaked out. Not for one minute did she believe he was the result of some ancient Hawaiian ritual.

“I am Mano, guardian to the Kahaunaele family. Why have you summoned the *aumakua*?”

Gloria felt a shiver run down her spine at the sound of his voice. The sound rumbled deep from within his chest, as if the Earth was shaking from Pele’s anger. She hadn’t been this affected by a man in years. Not even James.

“That was once my name, young man, long ago.” Omana said softly.

The shark man turned his attention to Omana. “Why have you summoned me?”

“Could you at least put some clothes on?” Gloria squeaked out, reaching for the blanket at her feet. “Here.” She shoved the blanket at Mano’s perfectly sculpted chest. She tried to maintain eye contact, but good Lord, she was single and horny. Mano was an impressive specimen of male beauty – in *all* areas. Maybe Omana was correct in her earlier assessment of Gloria’s life; it *had* been too long since she’d had decent sex.

“Is there something wrong with my body that causes you to wish me to cover?” Mano said, a wicked smile pulling at his full sensuous lips.

“No. Your body is perfect.” She clamped her hand over her mouth. She couldn’t believe the words had escaped.

Mano’s smile widened, his eyes traveling down her body once more, a possessive predatory glance.

“As is your body, summoner.”

Her eyes popped open. Omana giggled.

“Your body is quite magnificent,” he insisted. “Why do you cover it? You should be stripped so the entire world can enjoy such beauty.”

“Stop that! We’re not talking about bodies anymore. You can’t stand naked on a public beach. If someone sees you, we’ll all get arrested.” Gloria put a hand to her flushed cheeks. The look in Mano’s eyes scorched her flesh.

“Oh, Gloria, calm down.” Omana said. Mano wrapped the blanket around his waist, the wicked smile never leaving his sinfully handsome face.

“I am covered now.” He grinned at the blush Gloria knew painted her creamy skin.

“Thank you,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I will ask you once more. Why have you summoned me?”

“We summoned you, young man, because we need your help.” Omana pushed her way in between Gloria and Mano.

Gloria simply could not accept that this man walked from the ocean. He must be a surfer or local swimmer Omana had hired to make this crazy scheme work. *Magic didn't really exist, did it?* Just because her nightly dreams had concocted a man who happened to look exactly like this for years didn't mean she conjured his existence. She didn't believe in happy endings, wishes, or magic anymore. No good ever came of that line of thinking.

“Omana, please drop this farce. Just pay him whatever you promised him and let him go home. I can't believe you would stoop so low as to get some local guy to help you fool me. Why would you want to do that? Does he work in the shop or is he somebody's son?” Gloria turned sad eyes to Omana.

“Whatever are you talking about, Gloria? I have never laid eyes on this man before in my life.”

“Stop it! Magic does not exist and neither do shark men who walk out of the ocean looking like they stepped from the cover of a romance novel!” Gloria collapsed on the sand.

“What is a romance novel?” he whispered to Omana.

“I shall teach you all about them later, my boy. Gloria, this man is everything the ritual promised. The goddess has given us a guardian. She has granted my request. The very thought of you believing I would resort to chicanery of this nature wounds me. I love you, Gloria. When have I ever told an untruth to you?”

“Let’s see. How about the time you told me my parrot Mario flew away when you really just gave him to a family down the street because you couldn’t stand the squawking?”

“All right, I may have stretched the truth one time.” Omana said.

“What about the time when I was thirteen and you told me someone stole my ten-speed bike, but you really wrecked it into a tree trying to pop a wheelie?” Gloria raised one eyebrow at her great aunt, daring her to deny it.

“That is an entirely different situation than this.” Omana’s face flamed a bright red, visible even by candlelight.

“There was also that time you and Uncle Peter followed me to the senior prom and ended up almost getting arrested for drunk and disorderly behavior. You told me the two of you had driven over to the Hilo side for the night, but you really were in the Kona lockup until Sam’s dad let you go.” She could go on for hours, but Omana seemed to be embarrassed enough.

“It is going to rain,” Mano said, breaking up the bickering between the ladies.

“Don’t tell me – one of your magic guardian powers is you can predict the weather,” Gloria said. “This whole situation is silly. Can we please just stop fooling around so we can all go home?” She yanked down the hem of her nightgown, and blushed fiercely when she discovered how far the fabric had ridden up during her ranting. The silky fabric had rested on the tops of her thighs, showing more leg than she had realized. Mano’s eyes slid along her skin, sending shivers up and down her spine. His gaze was almost tactile in nature, giving the feeling of flesh on flesh. She was on fire for him and she had only just met him. Gloria had never been so strongly attracted to someone on first glance. The thought scared and excited her.

“I do not predict the weather. I can feel the undercurrents in the air. You called up the storm with your spell, the same as you called for me,” Mano said.

Gloria let out a big sigh. Neither Mano nor Omana was giving up on this ridiculous charade. “Stop it with this nonsense! We didn’t really call you...did we? No,

you're just some local surfer. I don't even believe in magic. You're not a shark man. Tell the truth so we can go home and put this behind us."

"Gloria," Omana said, "face it. He is a shark *aumakua*, a family guardian god. It worked like the spell promised. A daughter of Hawaii, with the blood of a kahuna running in her veins, called the guardian from the sea. The magic is in you, little one." Omana looked up, her face wreathed in a massive grin. Gloria rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"Can we go inside now? I don't feel like getting rained on in addition to everything else that has happened this week." Gloria rubbed her temples. She needed an aspirin and a stiff drink, or six stiff drinks.

"Whatever are we going to do with you, young man?" Omana asked Mano, as soon as the three had stepped through the back door.

Gloria had several ideas of what could be done with the handsome stranger, but she wasn't about to announce them as the trio trudged up the sand back to the house. Pushing the erotic thoughts out of her head, Gloria ushered everyone inside.

Once inside, Mano looked around him with intense interest. He listened to the sounds of the house. He glanced over at Gloria. Under the glow of the moon goddess, Gloria was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. Here in the light, she was captivating, raven hair flowing around her face. The silken strands fell in soft waves well below her flaring hips. The white garment she wore clung to her lush frame. Her full breasts rose and fell with each captured breath, straining the neckline of the gown. Long legs tapered to her delicate feet. Mano felt a hardening in his loins at the thought of stripping her naked. He wondered if she was mortal, for he had never known a human so beautiful, with the exception of Queen Ka'ahumanu.

"Sit down. I'll see if I can find you something to put on." Gloria said. She crossed out of his sight and into the other room. Mano sat on the couch, sinking into the softness.

"Never mind her, my dear. She is merely unaccustomed to magical

occurrences.” Omana said as if naked shark men stepped from the sea every day.

Mano smiled slightly at the inhabitants of the house. The living energy spilled forth from each room. He knew in an instant he liked Omana; her warmth and good heart radiated from her like heat from the sun.

Gloria was another story altogether. That woman he wanted. He had not for many moons felt the slam of need so strong.

“Here.” Gloria had reemerged from the other room. She tossed a scrap of brightly colored cloth at him. She had covered herself with a large pink robe. Mano simply stared at the cloth in his hands, a puzzled look painting his handsome features.

“What am I to do with this?”

“Put it on. They’re sweatpants. It was all I could find. If you intend on staying we’ll need to go shopping tomorrow for more clothes.” Gloria said.

Mano stood, intending to comply with Gloria’s command. Gloria let out a squeal of alarm when the blanket began to slip from his grasp.

Mano chuckled under his breath as if he sensed her obvious discomfort. There was no pretending to be unaffected by him. “I am covered, woman. You may look.”

“Can you two please just stop with this joke? It’s not funny anymore.” Gloria asked, her voice cracking slightly.

“I am a guardian. There is no joke in this duty. I was made a guardian by Pele herself.” Mano looked her straight in the eye when he answered. Gloria swallowed hard. He could tell by the confused look flashing in her dark eyes that she almost believed his words.

“Okay. I will accept this for you, Aunt Monie. But in the morning we are going to straighten this out for good. And no more talk of Pele. She’s a *myth*.” A loud rumble shook the ground behind the house. Gloria’s eyes widened and flew to Mano.

“You should not anger Pele.” Mano said.

“Gloria did not mean any harm. Now, apologize, Gloria, before the fire goddess blankets our house in lava.” Omana said.

“Kilauea is on the other side of the island, Aunt Monie.” Gloria answered with a tiny grin, not in the least contrite.

“Just apologize, you stubborn girl.”

“All right. We seem to have had our share of magic tonight so I might as well. Oh Goddess Pele, I was just kidding about the myth thing. Please don’t cover our house with lava. Sorry.” Gloria flopped down on the couch and looked between Mano and Omana.

“Why have I been summoned?” Mano impatiently asked.

“Oh, my dear boy, I have been neglecting you,” Omana said. “We summoned you here because I need to locate the deed to this house, which my late husband stashed away so many years ago.” She had wandered into the kitchen when Gloria went to fetch the blanket and searched out some snacks. She returned now with a small plate of cut fruit. Mano reached out and took a piece of pineapple. It had been many moons since his last taste of Hawaiian fruit. Many of the descendants of his line had forgotten the old ways. They never tossed offerings in the sea anymore or left them on the *heiau*. The sweet juice from the pineapple caressed his tongue, eliciting a soft moan of pleasure from his lips. He closed his eyes a moment and savored the texture of the fruit.

Then he slowly opened his eyes, his heavy-lidded gaze staring straight into her. He licked his lips once more. A smile tugged at the corners of his perfect mouth.

“Tell me more of this deed you wish me to find for you.” Mano asked, his dark eyes flashing, as if reading the thoughts in Gloria’s head. While Omana repeated her story to him, Mano stole a glance at the woman called Gloria once more. She truly was a beauty, one the likes of he had never seen before.

Long dark hair, the color of lava, flowed down her back in waves, stopping below her lush bottom. A body – no doubt given to her by Kane himself – teased Mano’s senses. Long sculpted legs peeked out at him from under her garment. The belted garment hugged her generous breasts and nipped in her curvy waist. She was built for lovemaking. Mano felt himself harden at the thought of stripping her of the

offending garments.

“Will you help me, young man?” Omana said, pulling Mano from his lustful thoughts.

“I will try, as is my duty as *aumakua* to your family. Know this: there are rules to my help.” Mano stated, standing as he addressed both women.

“Rules? What kind of rules? Don’t feed you after midnight, don’t get you wet, stuff like that?” Gloria asked a smirk pulling at her mouth. “I’m kidding, Aunt Monie,” she said when Omana glared at her, but the gesture lost some of its effect when the corners of her mouth twitched up ever so slightly.

“I have from full moon to full moon to be of help to you,” Mano said. “At the time of the next full moon I will return to the sea, whether or not the deed has been found. I cannot fight Kane, the provider of sunlight, winds, and water. He commands this of all shark men who walk the earth. He is the life force itself. Kane, I cannot defy.”

“Well, then, my dear boy, we had better get started as soon as possible. It is very late. Let’s all get a good night’s sleep and start fresh in the morning. Does that sound acceptable to everyone?” Omana said. Mano nodded his agreement.

“Sure, why not?” Gloria said.

“Wonderful.” Omana smiled at the two of them.

“You can sleep on the couch,” Gloria said to Mano. “I’ll fetch the sheets and things and get you all set up. Then we can all get some sleep.” She headed out of the room.

“Excellent idea. Good night, my dears. Be ready for tomorrow. We shall prevail!” Omana gave them both another once over, and sailed from the room.

“Just remember one thing Mr. Shark Man,” Gloria warned as soon as Omana was out of earshot. “If you hurt my aunt, you’ll have to deal with me.” She tossed the linens at Mano. He caught them with a startled expression.

“As you command, goddess.” Mano bowed slightly at the waist.

“Good, as long as we understand each other. Night.” Gloria said. She nodded

her head and went off to her room.

Tomorrow was going to be a long day.

Chapter Four

Gloria crawled out of bed and into the kitchen with a world-class migraine pounding in her skull. She had stayed up last night and burnt the midnight oil well into the wee hours of morning in search of the deed. The late night had made for a painful morning, made even worse by the fact she had turned up empty-handed. She was greeted with the healing aroma of rich, dark Kona coffee floating in the air and a smiling Omana at the stove.

“*Aloha* my love. You look a trifle sick dear.” Omana asked, her voice a little too chipper against Gloria’s frazzled nerves.

“Coffee first, talk later,” she grunted, reaching for the pot on the stove. Taking a sip from her brimming mug, Gloria almost wept with relief as the caffeine burned a path straight to her weary brain. The faint nutty flavor of the coffee made her thoughts run a little less fuzzy.

“Where’s our friendly shark man hottie? Did you two decide to give up the charade?” Gloria asked, plunking down at the kitchen table, a piece of toast smothered in guava jam in one hand and her coffee in the other.

“Mano is rather adorable, is he not? He went down to the pier early this morning. He mentioned something about wanting to watch the sunrise on legs and making a request of Maui for some help He will most likely return any moment.”

“You didn’t happen to notice if he was dressed, did you? That’s just what we would need, for him to get arrested for indecent exposure need us to bail him out.”

“I believe he was wearing the sweatpants you gave him last evening,” Omana smiled.

“Good. When he gets back, I’ll take him to Wal-Mart. He and I can have a chat on the drive over about how he can help us find the deed. Afterwards maybe we’ll stop by the shop to see you.”

“That would be divine, my dear. I am glad you recognize him as a guardian,”

Omana said. “I must dash off to change my clothes and head into work. The sooner I get there, the sooner I can close up and get home. I do need to open the shop for a least a couple of hours, but then I will come home so we may continue our crusade. I will see you later.”

With a sweet smile, Omana left Gloria alone in the kitchen, a denial dying on her lips. Gloria didn't wholly believe Mano was a guardian, but she still couldn't explain him appearing in the surf like that. But since neither Omana nor Mano wanted to give her the whole truth, she decided to accept it in the only way her sensible brain could manage. Besides, she would do anything for her great aunt. If Omana truly believed Mano was a shark man sent by the gods to help them out, then Gloria wouldn't say a word otherwise.

Gloria munched on her toast. As she took stock of her situation, she realized the pluses were soon outnumbered by the minuses. She was jobless, borderline broke, and facing the worst case of writer's block ever imagined. But on the other hand, she had Omana, a place to stay if they could swing it, and one extremely sexy houseguest to shamelessly gawk at.

The thought of Mano walking from the surf last night flashed up in her memory. Gloria felt her pulse race a touch faster. Exasperated, she dismissed her lust and took another bite of toast. She was horny. That had to be the real reason for all this craziness. She could control her sexual urges. She was an adult, not some hormone-ravaged teenager. Gloria understood the need to be sensible in order to come up with a game plan for her and Omana's future in case of the worst-case scenario, but that did not seem to override her thoughts of Mano's ripped surfer's body. She was not in Hawaii to stare at his tight butt. She was here to help out the woman who meant more than anything to her.

Her thoughts began to take a rather sexy turn as she recalled the sight of Mano stepping from the ocean last night. The salt water running down all those sleek hard planes of his body caused his bronzed skin to appear almost luminescent in the

moonlight. His tanned body just begged for her touch.

Gloria could almost feel herself stroking her hands down the sculpted planes of his flesh like she had in her dreams so many times before. Sighing, she bit into the final morsel of her toast. She licked the last of the jelly from her fingertips, lost in her ruminations.

“To tease a man in this manner is cruel.” The rumbling voice was so close to her ear, Gloria felt his breath fan hot on her skin. She shivered at the contact.

“You scared me. I didn’t hear you come in.” Was that her voice, husky, seductive? Gloria tried to clear her head, but the feeling of Mano’s hands on her bare shoulders blocked all rational thought. Cursing herself for not changing out of the skimpy tank top and thin men’s boxers she slept in, Gloria tried to ignore the heat radiating from his fingertips. Mano lazily toyed with one of the thin straps of her tank top.

“I am sorry.” His hands slid down her arms. “I did not mean to frighten you.” Gloria shivered again. Pushing back from the table, she put as much distance between herself and Mano as she could. She needed air.

A wicked smile lit up Mano’s handsome face. He crossed his arms over his muscular chest. The man was completely mouthwatering.

“Why do you run from me, goddess? Or do you run from yourself?” Mano asked. He stepped closer to her. With each step he took, Gloria countered one backwards. She yelped in surprise when her back made contact with the cool kitchen wall.

“I’m not running. I just need to change out of these clothes. We need to do a little shopping for you. Then we can attack the issue of the missing deed. I’m not running. I said that already, didn’t I?” Gloria let out a breathy little laugh. Mano braced his hands on either side of her, bracketing her between the wall and his hard body.

“I wish to taste the jam you so thoroughly licked from your fingers.” He leaned in closer. Her breath came faster, rapid little stabs causing her nipples to tighten in

response. The tips of her breasts brushed his chest with each ragged breath. James had never set her ablaze in this fashion. The press of Mano's powerfully built flesh against hers elicited a whimper of pure desire. Gloria placed the palms of her hands on his bare chest, but instead of pushing him away, her palms tingled at the contact.

"We can't do this. I hardly know you," Gloria half-heartedly protested. She was lying; he knew it, and she knew it. From the moment he'd stepped from the sea, Gloria knew him. His scent. His voice. His touch. She had dreamt him every night for years. Right now she wanted him to kiss her senseless.

A smile tugged at the corners of his sensuous mouth. "We are not doing anything to be ashamed of. Our bodies know each other. This you know to be true. That is all that matters. We are not strangers."

Without further hesitation, Mano claimed her mouth. The kiss was gentle at first, a slight pressure that fueled the already raging fires inside her. Gloria groaned low in her throat. Mano deepened the kiss, his tongue wetting the seam of her mouth, begging entry. She gladly gave it to him. He rocked his hips forward, his erection straining at the cotton of his sweatpants. The first brush of his hardness against her stomach sent a shock her very core. He was so much taller than her; she had to crane her neck in order to kiss him.

"I have wanted to lay hands on you the moment I stepped from the waves," Mano said into her neck, trailing a line of kisses down her throat.

"That was only last night." Gloria trembled when she felt his tongue run under the strap of her tank top.

"Do you feel what you do to me when the image of you standing on the beach in that silken gown takes hold?" Mano placed her palm to his crotch. She squeezed slightly. Impossibly, she felt him harden even more. Desire, demanding and intense, coursed through her like red-hot lava.

"Oopsies, my darlings. Carry on as if I had never appeared." Omana's gentle voice cut the sensual spell Mano wove around Gloria. She pulled her hand back as if

she had been burned. Ducking under his arm, she yanked up the strap of her tank top. Her cheeks flushed with the embarrassment of Omana finding her hand on Mano's crotch.

"Mano was just helping me with...uh...I had something in my eye and he was helping me get it out." The excuse sounded lame even in Gloria's own ears. Omana's Cheshire cat grin filled her entire face.

"Let me walk you out." Gloria grabbed Omana, tugging her along, anything to get away from Mano. She needed to get control of her hormones or she would never be able to concentrate on her work, or finding the deed.

"Think about what I said yesterday, my little love, about needing a lover. You could do considerably worse than a man who looks like Mano to satisfy a woman's lustful urges." Omana said at the door.

"I'm not going to sleep with Mano. That's not the reason why we summoned him."

"Perhaps both priorities can be accomplished. He is young, attractive, and obviously willing, if the display in the kitchen is any indicator. Furthermore, from what we witnessed last night, he is impressively well endowed. Besides that, he will be gone in thirty days." Omana smiled. "Use what he offers. There is no harm in it. He is a guardian god. His duty is to protect and look out for us. Letting him look out for you in the bedroom will do you some good."

Gloria's jaw dropped. With a kiss on her cheek, Omana got in her car and drove into town.

In her twenty-nine years she had never heard Omana talk this way. She made a valid point, but deep down inside, Gloria knew she wasn't the kind of woman who used men for sex and she wasn't about to start with Mano. No matter how tempted she was.

Stepping back into the living room she was confronted by a very surly Mano.

"Why did you tell Omana a falsehood?" Mano seemed animalistic and fierce, with his hands rested akimbo on his hips. His dark eyes cloudy with anger Mano

appeared every bit the warrior he claimed to be.

“What lie did I tell Omana?” Gloria asked Mano confused at his sudden anger.

“You told her that I was helping you with something in your eye. Why did you not tell her the truth?”

“I had to make up some excuse why I was rubbing myself all over you. I mean, how do you think it looked to Omana? You almost half naked, and me standing there with my hand on your crotch.” Gloria said. He had no right to be angry with her.

“Omana is a most worldly woman. She understood our need to touch. There was no reason to lie to her.”

“I’m going to change and then we’ll go to Wal-Mart. Put on that T-shirt I gave you last night. You can’t walk around the store without it.”

“Why did you not simply tell her we were enjoying each other’s bodies? There was no reason to advise her otherwise.” Mano asked, following her into the bedroom. He reminded Gloria of a pit bull not letting go of its prey.

Gloria whirled on him. “People don’t *say* things like that to their elders. Omana knows I have sex. In fact, she wants me to have it with *you*. But it’s disrespectful to discuss it.”

“If Omana wishes us to mate, then there are no obstacles to our joining. Let me have you, *ku’uipo*, before the moon calls me back to the sea. Our joining would be most satisfying. I promise you.”

“We are not having sex and that’s final. You are here to help us find the deed to the house, not do the deed with me.” She shoved him out of the bedroom. “Now go put on that damn shirt I gave you so we can go shopping!”

Chapter Five

By the time they finally arrived in the Wal-Mart parking lot, an hour had passed. Mano had simply refused to get in the car at first. The warrior had stared down the Jeep like prey. Gloria had cajoled, yelled, argued, and begged. He stared at the metal beast, ready to do battle. Finally she convinced him to get in with a promise of a trip to Quinn's Almost by the Sea for lunch. He was intrigued by the thought of eating something other than raw fish and finally relented. The Ono fish and chips Gloria offered had been enough to get his lean body into the car. Still, he pouted the entire ride. Not that he would admit such a thing. She guessed warriors never pouted.

"Okay, so we need some shirts, some shorts, and some underwear for you." Gloria said as she perused the aisles in the men's section, the air conditioning of the store a nice change from the humid air outside.

"Whatever you desire." Mano slipped his arm around her waist. The feel of his palm on her hip sent a jolt through her. She stepped from the hug, holding up a blue T-shirt.

"Good. I desire you to try these on." She shoved several pairs of shorts at him in addition to the shirt. Mano shrugged his perfectly formed shoulders and reached for the hem of the sweatpants.

"No, not *here!* in the dressing room." Gloria grabbed his hands before he could go any further.

"Show me." Mano said, an exasperated look on his handsome face.

The men's dressing room was off in a wayward corner of the department. Gloria counted out the items for the attendant, clearing her throat when she realized the pretty teenager was gawking at Mano. He was dressed in the sweatpants and an overly snug T-shirt that had once belonged to her uncle. Gloria's Great Uncle Peter had been a small, birdlike man, a perfect complement to Omana. Mano was more than a foot taller and considerably broader. The soft cotton fabric molded to the flawlessly formed

muscles in his chest. The edge of the blue jersey ended slightly above the top of his gray sweatpants, and a thin patch of bronzed flesh and washboard abs would entice any woman. Gloria took the number tag from the awestruck teenager and handed it to Mano with a smile. The girl's reaction seemed to be the reaction of *all* the women in the store. Gloria shook her head. Mano was lethal to the opposite sex.

Her included.

“Go in that room over there and try these on for me,” she said. “If you need help, just call me. I’ll be right out here.” Gloria ushered a scowling Mano into the back dressing room.

“Damn, lady, your boyfriend is one hot *brudda*,” The teenager behind the counter said conspiratorially. The pretty Hawaiian girl was all but drooling.

“He’s not my boyfriend, but I’ll tell him you think he’s hot.” Gloria smiled and shook her head.

The minutes ticked by and still no Mano. “Can I just go and check on him?”

“We’re really not supposed to let *wahines* in men’s dressing room, but we slow today, so go ahead.”

“Mano, are you all right in there?” Gloria tapped on the press-board door.

“I am in need of your assistance. The shorts will not stay in place like the sweatpants you gave me.” He pushed the door open. Gloria’s eyes bugged out and her jaw dropped. She pushed the door shut behind her. The desire to keep the sight of Mano all to herself overcame her. Mano had on a pair of khaki shorts riding dangerously low on his hips. A dark trail of hair started at his navel leading to the waistband. Treasure trails, her friend Patrice used to call them, because when followed, they went all the way to the buried treasure. Gloria’s throat went dry picturing Mano’s “buried treasure” awaiting her touch. She wanted to lick all the way down.

“You don’t have them zipped right.” Gloria coughed. Her mouth wasn’t working correctly. Her throat was dry and uncooperative.

“Help me?” he said with a look of exasperation on his handsome face. Gloria’s

hands trembled as she reached for the zipper.

“You pull it up like this.” She took a step closer to him, her other hand tugging on the waistband of the shorts. Her knuckles brushed across his flat abdomen, tugging up the zipper.

“You smell of *pikake*,” Mano said close to her ear. Instantly the zipper was forgotten. Gloria got lost in his ebony eyes. A second later, she slated her lips passionately against his. All the lust denied her that morning flooded through her, pooling in her core. Her arms went around his neck, pulling him closer to her. He placed a hand on the small of her back, crushing her to him. His other hand ran up the side of her body, cupping her breast. A moan of absolute pleasure ripped from her throat.

Mano flicked the pad of his thumb across her nipple. The tiny bud hardened, begging to be sucked. He deepened the kiss, thrusting his tongue into the moist cavern of her mouth, tasting her.

Gloria clung to his shoulders, her knees weak, and threatening to give way beneath her. She felt as if she would explode. He slid his hands down her body to cup her bottom. He pulled her close, his erection grinding against her belly.

“Hey, howzit? You all right in dere?” Pounding on the door broke them apart, the couple’s labored breathing the only answer.

“Don’t make me come in there.” The girl said good naturedly from the other side of the door.

“He was having trouble with the zipper on some shorts.” Gloria said through the door, her voice rough in her ears. Mano stepped back from her, a sinful smile painted on his face. He pulled up the shorts he had been trying on and opened the door. Gloria straightened her clothes. The young girl grinned wickedly at them.

“I can see why,” the attendant said, unabashedly staring at Mano’s crotch, the bulge in his shorts prominently on display.

“Thanks for your help. I think we’re done.” Gloria said, grabbing up the clothes

that littered the floor.

“Not yet, you aren’t. But by the looks of it, later you’ll be done right. You one lucky *sista*’.” The girl chuckled, walking away leaving Gloria to gape after her.

Gloria paid for the clothes and led Mano out to the car without further incident. Maybe it was because she tried to put as much distance between them on the way out the store.

Hopping in the car, they sped off. She planned on taking him to Omana’s shop in town first, then walking to Quinn’s. The restaurant sat across the street from the King Kamehameha hotel, and Omana’s shop was located next to the hotel. The King Kamehameha hotel stood on land that at one time was a palace for royalty. The great king’s bones were rumored to be buried somewhere on the hotel grounds.

Gloria parked the car in the lot behind Omana’s shop. Mano had changed out of her uncle’s old shirt into one she had purchased at Wal-Mart. While not as form-fitting as the previous one, the red shirt did little to hide his toned surfer’s body, the brilliant color bringing to life his gold-painted skin.

Little bells jingled when Gloria pushed open the door to *Mystical Minds*. Omana was behind the long Koa wood countertop, chatting with her friend, Bertha Hilani. A handsome man with sandy blond hair, wearing dress pants and an expensive Hawaiian shirt, was wandering through the store. The shelves and cabinets that littered the space groaned under the weight of books and bottles, herbs and icons, all relating in some way to magic. Omana divided the shop into sections. One wall was Wicca, another for pagan cultures, another strictly for old Hawaiian beliefs. Yet another was Voodoo, with the final section for Santeria and Christian beliefs.

Gloria smirked as the man picked up a love tiki. He looked perplexed by the carving. Shaking her head at the man, she crossed the room to say hello to Omana.

“Good afternoon, Aunt Monie. *Aloha*, Mrs. Halani,” she said.

“*Aloha*, Gloria. It has been a while since you been back to da’ island.” Bertha Hilani had been Omana’s best friend for as long as Gloria could remember. She was

married to the local *Kahuna*, or spiritual leader.

“I’m going to stay a while this time, ma’am.” Gloria smiled at her before the large woman gathered her into a bone-crushing hug. She hugged the older woman back with the full force of her affection. Bertha had been like another aunt to Gloria when she was growing up.

“Bertha, you must meet my other house guest,” Omana said. “He is staying with us for a short time. Mano, darling, please come over and meet my friend Bertha.”

Mano, who had been staring intently at the man shopping in the store, came over when Omana called. “*Aloha*, madame. It is an honor to meet one of Omana’s friends.” He bowed slightly. Bertha stared at him in wide-eyed wonder.

“You aren’t human.” Bertha said, staring intently.

“Of course he’s human, Mrs. Hilani. Whatever gave you such a crazy idea?” She glanced around, hoping the man in the corner wasn’t listening in on their conversation. To her relief, he seemed to be engrossed in a book on Hawaiian mythology at the moment and paying not the least bit of attention.

“When you have been married to a *Kahuna* as long as I have, young lady, you learn to spot otherworldly things. You are a guardian, aren’t you? Which kind are you?” Bertha poked at Mano’s chest.

“I am a shark guardian,” Mano said. If the large woman was truly the mate of a *kahuna*, then she demanded much respect.

“My husband would be honored to meet you, young man. Can you come for lunch one day? I will cook up taro poke and Ahi for you,” Bertha said.

Mano glanced at Gloria and Omana. “If Gloria has no need for me that day, I would be honored to meet the *Kahuna*. It has been many moons since I have been on land.”

“Tell me when you want him, Bertha, and I’ll bring him by,” Gloria said. Mano’s grateful smile caused a strange flip in her stomach. She found his enthusiasm infectious. He looked so happy, like a child with a special toy.

“I will call Omana later this week, after speaking with my husband, Alika, of course. Well, I need to get going now. Lunch is calling me. Good to see you, Gloria, and welcome home. It was a pleasure meeting you Mano.”

“*Aloha*, Bertha, and *Mahalo*.” Omana waved her friend out of the store, then ran her eyes up and down Mano. She nodded her head in approval of his new clothes. “There now, my boy, don’t you look more acceptable by Gloria’s standards?”

“It’s not just me, Aunt Monie. It’s society. He does look pretty good, doesn’t he?” The customer over in the corner seemed to take a sudden interest in Omana and Mano. Gloria peeked at him. “Aunt Monie, who is that man in the corner? He keeps looking over here with a strange look on his face. He doesn’t look like a customer. More like a loiterer.”

“That’s Martin Stranberg. He is the horrible man I keep telling you about. That is the man who works for that sleazy developer attempting to steal my ancestral home.” Omana said behind her hand.

“I do not trust him. There is malevolence surrounding him.” Mano’s ebony eyes snapped fire. Placing himself between Gloria and Stranberg, the shark man took a defensive stance that echoed his obvious displeasure. Subconsciously, Gloria moved closer into his protection.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Grant. It’s a fine day for business, Martin Stranberg said, oozing big city. “The sun is shining and there isn’t a cloud in the sky. Another beautiful day in Hawaii.”

His pants had creases so sharp, knives would be envious. The Hawaiian shirt he wore was obviously of the highest quality, a pricy rayon piece of vintage Hawaiiana and not some cheap knockoff. Sandy blond hair slicked back with glossy product added to his overall synthetic appearance. It was painfully obvious to Gloria that the man didn’t belong in laid-back Kona. He was a fish out of water in this sleepy ocean town.

His emerald eyes sparkled with interest as they roamed up and down Gloria’s luscious frame in the purple tank top and khaki shorts she had put on this morning.

Flip-flops decorated with dancing turtles topped off her sporty look.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Stranberg.” Omana said.

Mano sized the other man up. His battle instincts took over. He did not care for the looks Martin was giving Gloria and Omana. The women were his to protect, at least for the next thirty days. He slid one powerful arm around Gloria’s shoulder and pulled away from the other man.

“Who is this lovely woman? I don’t believe I have had the honor.” Stranberg asked, paying no heed to Mano’s possessive gesture.

“I’m Gloria Grant, Omana’s great niece from Las Vegas.” Although she held out her hand, Mano couldn’t help but notice she didn’t shake off his arm from around her shoulders. There was something in Stranberg’s speech that made her uncomfortable. He could tell by the way she pressed herself a little tighter into the safety of his body. The heat from his arm around her was the protection she needed. Gloria appeared unaware of her movements, but they were not lost on him.

“It’s a real pleasure to meet you, Gloria.” Martin lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a lingering kiss to the back. Mano felt jealousy, white hot and fierce, boil up in him. His temper began to build. Omana cleared her throat loudly, effectively tearing Martin’s gaze from Gloria’s impressive cleavage.

“This handsome young gentleman with his arm around Gloria is Mano. He is my house guest as well, staying with us for a few weeks.” Omana said.

“Pleasure.” Stranberg held out his hand, a less-than-pleasant expression on his face. Mano stared at the outstretched hand, perplexed. Gloria nudged him in the ribs. He looked down in to her beautiful face. Her eyes darted between his hand and Stranberg’s. She made a slight up-and-down motion with her own to illustrate. Understanding dawned clear his face and Mano repeated the man’s gesture, mimicking the up-and-down. Sensing this was a gesture to show your enemy strength, Mano tightened his grip on the other man’s hand.

Martin was no match for his physical strength. Mano glared down at the other

man, his eyes stormy with possessiveness. This Martin was a threat to his family, and the warrior in him would not allow them to be hurt. A wicked smile split his face as he grinned at the man. Martin's eyes went wide with confusion and a touch of fear, beads of sweat beginning to form on his upper lips. Mano knew what the other man saw when he looked at him: rows of razor-like teeth and soulless black eyes, the shark. The other man's expression contorted into one of fear and pain as Mano applied more pressure to the handshake. Finally, he released Martin's hand and stepped back slightly. Martin nervously ran his stinging palm down the expensive material of his trousers.

"Yes, well, nice to meet you. Mrs. Grant, have you given any more thought to our offer for your house?" Martin asked Omana, tearing his slightly frightened gaze from Mano. Gloria frowned at the new road this conversation was traveling.

"I have told you no on several occasions. Today will be no different, young man. Tomorrow will be the same. It is best you stop this nonsense and leave me be. Perhaps it is time for you to give up the ghost, as it were," Omana said.

"I wish you'd reconsider. It is a very lucrative offer we're making. Money in the bank and a brand-new home in your golden years are nothing to sniff at."

"My golden years are none of your concern." Omana said, a frown creasing her forehead.

Mano stepped forward, placing himself between Martin and the counter, effectively blocking the other man's view of Omana.

"Perhaps you could talk some sense into her," Martin said to Gloria. "We are offering her an obscene amount of money. After this deal, your aunt will be an incredibly wealthy woman."

"I'll do no such thing, Mr. Stranberg. That house belongs to my aunt. It has been in our family for generations. There is no amount of money you can offer her that is worth giving up our history. Find another spot down the beach for your company to buy. Ours is not for sale." Gloria said. She straightened to her full height. Five foot three wasn't very intimidating, but Gloria tried.

“Pity.” Martin said rather unconvincingly. “How long are you staying in our fair Kona, Gloria?”

“I think I’m here permanently, Mr. Stranberg. I’m a writer and Aunt Monie is letting me live with her while I work on my book and get back on my feet.”

Martin’s green eyes flashed again with definite sexual interest. Even though Martin was certainly attractive, Gloria felt indifferent. She had recently discovered her taste in men seemed to run toward tall well-muscled Hawaiian shark men with stormy eyes.

“Maybe you will give me the synopsis to this masterpiece over dinner. Say tonight, around seven-ish, at The Kona Inn?”

Gloria was taken aback. The Kona Inn was one of the finest restaurants in the town. It was a little much for a first date and wholly unexpected. She felt Mano stiffen next to her. His palm slid down her body and cupped the curve of her hip, pulling her tighter against the solid protection of his body.

“I don’t think so Mr. Stranberg. For one thing I don’t know you at all. And even if I did, you are trying to boot my great aunt off her property. That’s one strike against you already. Besides, Omana, Mano and I have plans this evening.” Gloria turned to her aunt. Omana’s face showed blatant displeasure. Mano simply seethed with unleashed power and was mumbling under his breath. Gloria couldn’t make out what he was saying, but he did not sound happy.

“Yes, we need to look for that special item tonight, Gloria.” Omana said, through clenched teeth.

“Come on, Mrs. Grant. Surely you and Mano here can find whatever it is without the aid of Gloria. Surely you can spare her for dinner. Please say you’ll come to dinner with me.”

“Well, fine. I accept your invitation, Mr. Stranberg, but only because I would like to discuss the house with you. Dinner is just as good as some meeting room. But a word of warning, we’re not selling and that’s my final answer on the subject.”

Dinner with Stranberg, as unappealing as it sounded, hopefully would take her mind, and her hormones, off Mano. And maybe she could get some information out of the man regarding the sale.

“Wonderful, I think I’m up to the challenge of convincing you. I’ll pick you up at six thirty.” He nodded.

The trio watched as Martin exited the shop. Without warning, the heavens opened. Rain came down hard, pelting Martin mercilessly, instantly ruining his expensive resort wear. Mano’s robust laughter filled the shop. Gloria and Omana stared at the sight of Martin, soaking wet and ranting at the heavens. Unable to control themselves, the women joined Mano in laughter.

“Mahalo, Hina Kuluua,” Mano said, his face pointed in the direction of the clouds.

“The goddess of rain sure did a number on old Martin there. How funny after he mentioned there were no clouds today,” Gloria said through her laughter.

“She answers pleas quickly,” Mano said.

Gloria stopped laughing and stared at Mano. “Are you saying you asked Hina Kuluua to make it rain?”

“Yes. The man needed to be taught a lesson,” he answered. Gloria stared at him in disbelief.

“That’s what you were doing wasn’t it? Chanting to Hina Kuluua. Wait, that is not possible. It rains on a dime here,”

“Believe what you will now, Gloria, but you know deep inside that I am a guardian. And I asked the goddess to make it rain.”

“Let us get back to the more important issue at hand, children. Why on Earth did you accept a dinner invitation from that man, Gloria?” Omana asked.

“Why not? He’s handsome and I need to get out more – as you repeatedly tell me.”

“You do not break bread with the enemy, Gloria. There are rules in this kind of

war. I am right, am I not, Mano? Rules of war must be followed.” Omana said.

“Gloria is not a warrior. She has never done battle. What she does is none of my concern,” Mano said, dropping his arm from her shoulder.

“I’m not in the mood for a lecture,” Gloria said. “Look, you two. I have a plan. What better way to get a good idea of what that developer is really planning than having dinner with him? Like bearding the lion. Maybe I can convince him to give us some more time. We’ll come up with plan of attack for dinner later, Aunt Monie. Right now I’m taking Mano to Quinn’s for lunch then home. She grabbed Mano by the hand and led him to the door.

Omana was not pleased but the look of intrigue was building on her lovely face. “I see. It never occurred to me to try that approach. Yes, my dear, I understand. You are going to use your feminine wiles to obtain information from that snake. You are a regular Mata Hari, my love! Brilliant.”

Chapter Six

By the time Martin arrived at six forty-five, Gloria had received a briefing that would make a general proud. Omana's battle plan for gathering information had lasted longer than any lecture she had given Gloria in her rebellious teenage years, including the time she stole a policeman's car and drove over to Hilo. While Gloria got ready, her aunt continued to give advice through the bedroom door. Only the sound of the doorbell finally stopped Omana mid-sentence.

Gloria checked her appearance one last time before going out to meet Martin. She twirled in the full-length mirror. The short royal blue sundress hit her just above the knee, her legs showing off her newly acquired tan. The dress seemed molded to her hourglass figure. Built more along the lines of Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield, Gloria never understood the current trend for boylike figures. For whatever reason, in Hawaii she never felt self-conscious. The low-cut bodice of the dress revealed quite a bit more of her ample cleavage than she was used to showing. Being so busty had been a blessing and a curse. It was just something Gloria learned to handle. Her long black hair was pulled back in a simple bun. A lone blue flowered clip matching her dress was tucked in the side of her bun.

Satisfied with the way she looked, Gloria stepped out into the living room. Omana stood arms akimbo glaring at Martin, a frown on his face as he stared back at her. Much to Gloria's surprise, Mano stood guard at the door. He had not said much all through lunch and after. Gloria felt the anger seething off him. When they had gotten home, he had marched out to the lanai and hadn't come back in for hours. She could tell by the expression on his handsome face he was still in a nasty mood.

"Gloria, you look lovely." Martin said with an appreciative glance at her attire.

Mano's eyes flashed, drinking her in. She was past lovely and this foolish mortal man did not even know the difference. Her beautiful body was encased in a Hawaiian dress the color of the calm sea that would put Laka, goddess of Hula, herself to shame.

Mano could not understand why Gloria let him kiss her in the dressing room, but was now flirting with this Martin. She had tried to explain something about using this dinner as a way to gather information from the other man, but Mano did not have to be happy about it. His blood boiled in rage. She tempted him beyond reason. Mano wanted nothing more than to lay her out in the sand, strip all the clothing from her lush frame, and kiss every inch of her creamy flesh. The thought of her moaning his name in tune with the surf caused him to harden. Shaking his head, he reminded himself of the purpose of his calling, the deed to the house.

“Thanks, Martin. Shall we go?” Gloria asked, grabbing her purse and ushered Martin to the door.

“Do not do something foolish, my love.” Omana’s voice rang thin in the air. Mano emitted a low growl.

“Goodnight, Aunt Omana. Goodnight, Mano. I’ll be home later.” Gloria shut the door behind her.

* * * *

After Gloria left with Stranberg, Mano scoured the house in a vain attempt to locate the deed. When they had returned from lunch, Mano had gone down to the beach to make an offering for help. He had asked Kamapua’a for help with an offering of fruit and rum. Hopefully the Hog God would accept his gifts and provide him with some clue to helping his charges. He knew he had a duty to these women, but at times he felt so weak, not at all the strong warrior they required. He had no idea how to locate the missing deed. The one thing he knew he could provide was his protection. But unlike his time, the enemy was not always so easily swayed by brute force. He could threaten Martin with bodily harm, but wondered if that was more of a hindrance instead of help. He felt helpless, a fish out of water.

Mano circled the floor until he could not take it any longer. Kamapua’a never was a god to provide quick results. Annoyed with his pacing, Omana banished him from the house in an effort to cheer him up. She had finally told him to take a walk

down by the surf. Hearing the sound of the waves did indeed soothe his weary soul.

Now here he was, roaming the beach below the house. He sat on the cool sand, staring into the black waves. The sun had set hours ago, producing the green flash. It was a site he had not seen in decades. Mano dug his toes deep into the sand, enjoying the feel of it between the digits.

He let his thoughts drift back to Gloria. More and more over the last twenty-four hours, she had crept into his mind. She was as sweet as a mango and twice as tempting. He knew he must concentrate on the duty at hand, but he could not stop thinking of her lush body pressed against his in the dressing room. Her soft cries from that encounter echoed in his memory, thickening his shaft with need.

“Omana told me you were out here.” Mano glanced over his shoulder. Gloria, still dressed from her date, crossed the sand toward him. Her long black hair was flowing loose from the confining knot she had wrapped it in before leaving the house. The flower now tucked behind her ear. The ebony tresses fell well past her hips in a thick curtain. Mano itched to run his fingers through the silken strands.

“You are home early from your dinner. Did you not find Martin to your liking?” Mano said. He could not understand why her desire of him mattered. Before he had become an *aumakua*, he had enjoyed many women. They had cooed at him, praising his prowess, his strength. They had danced and flirted and begged him to take them. He had never lacked for companionship, but it always had been hollow. His *kahuna* had once told him that happiness from the love of a woman was never meant to be his lifetime.

“Martin was a perfect gentleman,” Gloria said, “spending half the time trying to get me to convince Omana to sell the house and the other half trying to get into my pants. I think my Mata Hari days are numbered. I couldn’t seem to get any useful information from him. Nor could I convince him to give us more time.” She sank down beside him. and stretched her long legs out in the sand, ankles crossed. The hem of her dress rode up on her thighs slightly. Mano’s gaze drank in the sight of her creamy skin highlighted by the moon. Whether by accident or design, Mano felt her bare thigh brush

his when she shifted in the cool sand.

“Get into your pants? I do not understand your meaning, Gloria. You are not wearing pants.”

“It means get me to sleep with him. He was trying to seduce me in the hopes I’d have sex with him. It’s just an expression,” Gloria said. Mano watched as she lazily ran her fingers through the sand. A jolt went to his already hardened groin at the thought of her fingers caressing him the same way.

“I see. Have sex, the thing that Omana wants you to do with me,” Mano answered, fairly certain what the word sex meant. Scooting a little closer to her, he slowly ran a fingertip along the top of her calf. He felt her shiver under his touch.

“Yeah. About that,” Gloria said softly. “I’m not sure that would be a good idea. I mean you’re a shark man and I’m human.” Mano draped an arm around her shoulder, pulling her closer. “You really are an *aumakua*, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but I have not always been a guardian,” he said, drawing lazy circles on the bare skin of her shoulder.

“Tell me about it, please? I’d like to know something about you. I mean, you are going to live with us for a month.” Gloria snuggled into him. He breathed in deeply. She smelled so good, a heady mixture of woman, sea, and sand. It made his head swim.

“I was human once,” he began. “Long ago, in the time of the Great King Kamehameha, I lived. I was a warrior, fighting in the forces that the King used to unite these Islands. He was a great king, a great man. Those who fought by his side respected him. When I fell on the field of battle in Kauai, my best friend, a fellow warrior named Keali’i, gave me to the sea in the ancient ritual. Thus I was reborn as an *aumakua* to guard his family for the rest of eternity.”

“Why do you guard his family, I guess my family, and not your own?” Gloria asked, studiously ignoring the tingle his fingertips created as they ran lightly over her bare shoulder.

“I did not have a family of my own, *ku’uipo*. I only had Keali’i. I was orphaned

when I was young. I never knew my family. His father took me as his son. Keali'i was like a brother to me."

"Did you have a wife?"

"No *ku'uipo*. I was not blessed with a wife. My *kahuna* once told me that I was destined to fight for my family. Since I did not have a family of my own, I came to know that to mean I would be a guardian to Keali'i's." He stroked his hand up and down her arm. She shivered in response.

"Are you cold, Gloria? Do you wish to go inside?" He asked, pressing a soft kiss on the top of her head.

"No, I'm fine. I want to stay outside with you. It's not cold out here at all." She gazed up into his eyes.

Mano looked at the woman in his arms. She took his breath away with her beauty. He knew it was forbidden for him to want a mortal, but the desire for Gloria was strong. She was so unaware of what her lush curves did to him.

"It's so peaceful here," she said. "I had almost forgotten that there was some place on Earth that the rat race didn't touch. Las Vegas is so cluttered. Kona is calm."

"Why did you leave so long ago?" Mano asked.

"When my parents died, I was only five, Omana and Hawaii were all I had. She raised me to be independent and fight for myself against all odds. Omama made a name for herself in photojournalism before many women had broken into the field. She made sure I knew there was nothing I couldn't accomplish."

"We are very much the same. You had Omana to help you and I had Keali'i." Mano said simply, nuzzling her neck. He pressed a soft kiss below her ear.

"I guess we are," she sighed. It had been so long since a man had simply held her, comforted her, and made her feel cherished.

"Why did you leave Hawaii if you had Omana to care for you?"

"To make a long story short, I left at the age of eighteen. I did the stupid girly thing and followed a man all the way to Las Vegas and college. I thought I was in

love. He quit school, quit me, but I stayed. I got my degree in English and became a journalist and that made Omana proud. I thought I had found everything I needed away from the island. I was so sure I didn't need Omana, her little house, or Kona." She leaned into his warmth.

"Now you are not so sure?" Mano asked, nibbling on her earlobe.

"No, I'm not. I think I'm supposed to stay here. People always say you can't go home again, but I don't think that's true in my case. I feel better, more like me here at home, with Omana."

He pressed a kiss to the tender flesh below her ear. He began chanting something low and soft in Hawaiian.

"What are you doing, Mano?" Her stomach fluttered in response to his teasing lips.

"Something to make you smile. Look out over the water." Mano whispered. Gloria did, and her breath caught in her throat. A sleek-skinned dolphin jumped from the waves, moonlight glistening off its back.

Gloria gasped with delight as another Spinner danced in the air, joining the first. She clapped her hands with childlike enthusiasm.

"I can communicate with the creatures of the sea. It is simply one of my – what did you call them? – magic guardian powers." He continued to nibble at her earlobe. She pulled away from him and looked him in the eyes.

"Are you serious? You can talk to dolphins?" She eyed him, unconvinced. Mano grinned at her.

"Yes, ku'uipo. I can also speak with the whales and the humuhumus and even the littlest opihi. I have many neighbors in the ocean." He pressed a quick kiss on the tip of her upturned nose. She swatted him away playfully.

"Seriously?" She asked once more, turning to look out at the dolphins playing in the sea just for her.

"I would not lie to you. Now, enjoy your present a few moments longer and let

me hold you.” He ran his tongue over the curve of her ear.

“Feels like more than holding to me,” Gloria said. She turned her head slightly, giving him better access to her neck. He kissed the juncture where her neck and shoulder met. He slowly pulled the strap of the sundress off her creamy shoulder. Kissing a path to follow, he slid his other hand across to the small of her back. Gloria glanced down at his dark head and watched him press another kiss on the swell of her breast.

“I want to lay you out in this sand and bury myself deep inside you.” Mano said, running his tongue along the neckline of her gown. Gloria unconsciously leaned farther into his caress. Her breasts felt heavy and confined in the soft material of her dress. He pushed the other strap of her sundress off her shoulder. With tender urging, he pressed her down on the sand. He spread his long hard body out to cover her soft curves. She wrapped her arms around his neck, leading his lips to hers.

Growling low in his throat, he claimed her supple lips. He thrust his tongue into the moist cavern of her mouth. Gloria whimpered with desire, the hard ridge of his erection pressing against her belly. She wanted him with a ferocity she didn’t even know she had. All the longing, all the desire, surfaced as their tongues mated. His hands ran up the curve of her body to cup her breast. Rolling the taut nipple between his thumb and index finger, she shivered underneath him.

“Stop, we can’t.” Gloria said, pulling her lips from his.

“Yes we can, *ku’uipo*. I feel your body craving mine. Give in to it. Let me take you.” Mano said in her ear. He slid the palm of his hand up her bare thigh. Gloria quivered with unappeased desire when she felt his fingertips toy with the hem of her sundress.

“I can’t,” she answered, her voice husky in her own ears. Mano slipped his hand under the hem of her gown. He let out a hungry growl when his fingertips met the juncture of her thighs. Her panties, drenched with her desire, barred his path.

“You can. I can give you much pleasure. Let me show you.” he said. Pushing

aside her panties, he slid one finger into her heat. Gloria moaned, raising her hips to meet his thrust.

“Mano!” she cried out. She made little whimpering noises in the back of her throat. Mano kissed a trail down her body, stopping to take one hard nipple into his mouth. He sucked the taut pebble through the confines of her dress. She reveled in sensation, the heat from his mouth, the cotton of her dress, the coolness of the sand. Finishing with one breast, he moved over to the other, repeating his earlier actions.

He continued on his path down her body, finally reaching the hem of her dress. He lifted the material and removed her panties. Tossing them to the side, he replaced his finger with his mouth. Gloria almost shot off the sand at the first brush of his lips on her heated core.

“You taste of paradise. I knew you would,” Mano said against her. He slipped his tongue into her and stroked her deep.

“Mano. Oh God, it has been so long.” Gloria bucked hard underneath him.

He widened her thighs, fire racing through her blood in shockwaves. He placed her legs over his shoulder and lowered his mouth once more, finding her most sensitive spot. Suckling at her core, taking his time, he drove her to the very edge of passion. The air was filled with her sighs of ecstasy, beating in time with the surf.

“That is it, *ku’uipo*, relax. Give yourself to me,” he said against the dark nest of curls. He inserted one finger inside her warmth. Mano felt himself harden even more at the touch. She was so wet, hot, and tight. It was for him, her passion was for him. In all the centuries he’d walked the land, never had there been a more responsive woman.

“Mano, we have to stop. We can’t do this,” she said weakly. She ran her fingers through his ebony hair, pulling his mouth up to hers. Kissing him deep and hard, she ran her hands down the solid planes of his back. She traced the contours of flesh with her fingertips.

Plunging his finger deeper inside her, he massaged her slick heat, eliciting little mewls of desire in the back of her throat. Still he wanted more. He wanted to bury

himself so deep inside her body and mark her as his for all time. He slipped his finger out of her depths only to add a second. Gloria cried out his name in ecstasy. Wrapping her legs around his lean waist, she rocked her hips taking his in deeper.

“Mano, please, I can’t take much more”

“Then you will wait no longer.” With a self control he didn’t know he possessed, he stroked her hard and fast. The climax ripped from her throat. She shivered with little pulsing aftershocks beneath him.

Gloria clung to Mano, a soft smile dancing across her face. She had forgotten how good it was so feel like a wet noodle. She was deliciously boneless. Pulling Mano’s lips back to hers, she placed a feather light kiss there. “Thank you,” Gloria whispered against his lips.

“It was my pleasure, *ku’uipo*.” Mano answered back, pressing his hips deep into the juncture of her thighs. Gloria’s eyes grew wide. She felt his thick penis straining against the front of his shorts.

“I suppose I could help take care of that for you.” Sliding her hand to the placard of his shorts, she cupped him through the khaki, giving him a squeeze. Mano’s dark eyes became stormy with passion. Playfully, with a girlish giggle, Gloria flipped their positions. Placing both palms on his shoulders, she pushed him into the sand. He smiled up at her.

“What do you intend to do with me now?” Mano grinned, flashing white teeth against his bronzed skin.

“Anything I want.” She flicked her tongue along the curve of his strong jaw. Trailing the tip of her tongue down his body along his chest to his belly button, she enjoyed his hiss of breath. She honestly couldn’t believe she was making such a powerful man writhe beneath her.

“Time to let this bad boy out to play.” Gloria undid the buttons of his shorts. His erection sprang forth from its confines. Circling him, she slowly squeezed her palm, up and down, light and soft at first.

“Woman, you are driving me *lolo*, crazy,” he said to her from behind clenched teeth.

“We can’t have that.” Gloria took the whole of his length into her mouth. He shook with need. She could tell the touch of her hot mouth on him almost sent him over the edge. She suckled, nibbled, caressed, and claimed.

“Gloria...you must stop...I cannot hold out much longer. Please let me...make love to you.” He wanted nothing more than to spend himself inside her.

She raised her beautiful head, her black hair wild about her face. “I’m not ready for that part yet, Mano.” She looked deep into his ebony eyes, stormy with unappeased desire.

He looked hard at her. He could see fear on her lovely face. What had she gone through to fear something so natural? Mano was filled with the anger, wanting to find all the men in her past who had put that fear in her eyes. And rip them to shreds.

Gloria dipped her head once more, taking him into her mouth. Her mouth was hot and tight, her tongue dancing across the length of him. He growled deep in his throat as she drove him past all conscious thought. Time and space went black. He cried his release, his chest heaving in climax.

Moving himself into a sitting position, Mano gathered Gloria into his arms.

“I did not want to end it this way, Gloria. I wanted to be buried deep inside you. Why did you take that joy away from me?” he whispered in her ear. A few moments passed as each regained their composure. The sound of the heavy breathing was the only noise besides the crashing surf.

“I wasn’t ready for that. I’m sorry.” Gloria buried her face in his shoulder.

“We did not have to continue if you were not ready. I would have waited.” His breath teased at her neck.

“*Mahalo*, thanks. I’m sorry I went so far. It won’t happen again. I won’t let myself get so carried away again. It’s not fair to you,” Gloria said, shaking free of his hold. Rising to her feet, she righted her clothing. Glancing around, she tried to locate

her underwear.

“Understand me well, woman,” he said, and she turned to face him. “It will happen again, only this time you will give yourself to me completely. I will not walk away until I am buried deep within you.” Mano crossed his arms over his massive chest.

“You’re awfully sure of yourself, aren’t you, my little shark man.” She knew what he said was true. Despite his overbearing words, a fissure of desire raced through her. She *wanted* him inside her.

“I always get what I desire. And you are what I desire most. Nor am I little.” As if to prove his point, that part of him Gloria found herself craving more and more twitched in response.

“I’m not yours to command at a beck and call. I am not one of your little island girls, willing and ready to sleep with the brave warrior,” Gloria said unconvincingly. If only he knew about her dream. She tore her gaze away from his impressive erection. Dear Lord, the man had stamina. His penis twitched under her scrutiny.

“We shall see, my beautiful native girl.” A low chuckle came from his throat.

“Oh, just you take that big thing and go jump in the ocean!” She snatched her panties up and turned her back on him.

“We are not done, *ku’uipo*. Run to the safety of your bedroom this night, but soon I will join you there. You know this to be true!”

Mano laughed as she slammed the back door of the house. Heaving a heavy sigh, he stepped into the water. Glancing down at his swollen member, Mano realized a swim just might do him so good.

Chapter Seven

Gloria pushed back from her computer and swiped a hand across her weary eyes. She had been hard at work all morning long, searching public records online, and her brain was screaming for a much-needed rest. When the clock in the hallway chimed noon, Gloria realized it was time for a break. Not that she had much luck. Kona town had only recently gotten around to scanning public records onto the net. She had gone through site after site, looking for some information about the ownership of the land and the deed.

They were running out of time.

Staring out the sliding glass door leading to the lanai, Gloria caught the calming sight of the green sea. The waves hypnotized her. Sighing, she let her thoughts fall into a well-worn groove. Mano.

He hadn't come home last night after they'd parted on the beach and she was worried about him. Her cheeks flushed at the memory of his magic lips, all the wicked things that did to her. Shaking her head, she almost wished she had given in to him completely. She knew she was scared. After being hurt so many times, she couldn't risk her heart again.

The shrill sound of her cell phone burst through her thoughts.

"*Aloha.*" Gloria said, welcoming the interruption.

"Hi, Gloria, this is Martin. I called to apologize for my behavior last night."

"You were a little pushy."

"Can I make it up to you today with an offer of lunch?" Martin's polished voice dripped insincerity.

"Why on Earth would I see you again after last night? I don't feel like fending off an octopus over a fish sandwich." She should stay home and make lunch for Mano and herself. Maybe she would go for a swim down at the beach.. But if she stayed home, she would be forced to face Mano.

On the other hand, she wasn't all that certain Mano would be home for lunch. He seemed to be avoiding her as much as possible. She knew she wasn't ready to see the desire in his eyes – or the anger.

“Come on, give me another chance. Meet me at the Kona Brewing Company in say, an hour?” Martin said.

“Okay, Martin. I'll have lunch with you. And this time we are going to have a serious conversation about my aunt's house. I want real answers from you. This is strictly a business lunch. Understood? I swear, if you try to put a hand up my dress again, I'll deck you one right in the middle of the restaurant.” Gloria snapped the cell phone shut. Turning to change her clothes, Mano stood like a statue in the sliding door.

His ebony eyes looked as if they could shoot thunderbolts at any minute. His legs were spread in a powerful stance and his arms were crossed high on his muscular chest. Gloria cringed. She didn't know how to handle a pissed-off shark man, but she had a feeling she was about to learn.

“You are eating with him again?” he asked, his voice so low, she shivered at the sound. He rumbled like Kilauea about to erupt.

Before Gloria could answer the house phone rang, saving her the trouble of answering her sullen guardian.

“*Aloha*. Grant residence.” Gloria said, not daring to look at Mano.

“*Aloha*. It's Bertha. My husband was wondering if Mano would be available for lunch today. I know it's short notice, but Alika is very excited to meet an actual guardian.”

“Mrs. Hilani, you have the most amazing timing on the whole island. I'm on my way out this afternoon for a business lunch, so Mano was going to be alone anyway. I can bring Mano over on my way.” Gloria smiled into the phone.

“Wonderful! See you in a bit.” Bertha said. Gloria rested the phone in its cradle and turned to Mano. He had not moved from the spot at the sliding door.

“Where will you be bringing me? I am not a child to be handed off to someone

when I become troublesome,” he said.

Despite his sulking, she had the strongest desire to suck on the pouting lower lip.

“That was Bertha. Alika wants to see you. You were fine with the idea of having lunch with the *Kahuna* the other day at the store,” she said, moving to the bedroom. She needed a quick shower and change of clothes before lunch with Martin.

Mano followed her. “I do wish to speak with the *Kahuna*. However, you did not consult me about whether I wanted to see him today.”

“Why not today? Got a hot date with some local *wahine* you picked up at the pier?” Though the words were meant to be a joke, she was not prepared for the stab of jealousy that attacked in her at the thought. She could almost picture him standing with a beautiful, brown-skinned, svelte Hawaiian girl cradled in his arms.

Mano snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her tight against him. “You are the only *wahine* I want.” He lightly bit her ear, sending shockwaves of desire through her. She pressed herself back more firmly into the hot vise of his delicious body. His forearm drifted upward, resting barely below the underside of her breasts. The heavy weight brushed against his arm with every uneven breath she tried to take.

“Mano, we have to stop. We need to get ready for lunch.”

“Perhaps I want *you* for lunch.” Mano ground his growing erection against the seam of her bottom.

“No. We can’t.” Gloria pushed away from him, finally coming to her senses. She rocketed across the room, desperate to put some distance between them. “You are going to Alika and Bertha’s, and I am having lunch with Martin.”

“I think I should join you and this miserable man instead.” Mano said a truly wicked smile on his handsome face.

“You’re not serious. You can’t stand Martin. And from the look on your face the other day when you met Bertha, you’re really excited about talking to Alika,” Gloria said. She tried in vain to maneuver him to the door. The beautiful but stubborn man

would not budge. It was like pushing on a two-hundred-pound wall of brick.

“I do not want you near that man. You said on the phone to him now not to touch you. Did he try and do so before?”

“I can take care of myself. Now leave. I need to take a shower.” Gloria placed her hands on his shoulders and shoved.

“He does not have the right to touch you. You do not need to fight this battle yourself. I am your guardian. It is my duty to protect you and now you are not even allowing me to do so. I will show him how a warrior of Kamehameha deals with men who break *kapu*.”

“Mano, I am not *kapu*, forbidden. And you will do no such thing. Leave Martin alone for now. Let’s try the kill-him-with-kindness approach before you turn all shark on him and rip him to shreds,” Gloria said with one final shove to the strong shoulders.

“As you desire. But soon I will not be able to control my anger around that man. Do not make me ask Maui for help. You know the trickster will make him pay.” Mano smiled wickedly at her, shutting the door behind him. Heaving a big sigh, Gloria turned to get ready for her lunch.

* * * *

After dropping Mano off at the Hilani’s house, Gloria pulled the beat-up Jeep onto Palani Road. Following the curve into the parking lot, she had little trouble finding a spot at the Kona Brewing Company. The lot, usually bursting at the seams with patrons, was a little thinner than normal. She parked, got out, and checked her makeup one last time in the side mirror. The tan she had acquired was already turning her skin a dark golden brown. The saltwater and sun had also lightened her usually inky black hair with sun-kissed streaks. She smiled at her reflection in the mirror. Staring back at her was Omana, sixty years ago. Her smile widening at the thought, she walked into the restaurant.

She waved to the hostess, informing her she was meeting someone. The woman

showed her outside to the patio area. Underneath a large green umbrella, Martin was already waiting with a beer in front of him. Placing her own drink order with the waitress, Gloria took the seat across from him.

“I’m so glad you decided to give me another chance.” Martin smiled wide, his gaze almost lecherous as it ran up and down her body. Gloria had put on a yellow tank top and some shorts. The light green shorts showed off her tanned, long legs. She fidgeted uncomfortably in her seat. When Mano looked at her, she felt on fire. With Martin, she almost felt like a piece of meat.

“Just as long as this is lunch and not another ‘Let’s get Omana to sell’ session.” Gloria smiled at him sweetly. Before he could respond, the waitress came back with her drink, asking if they were ready to order. Several minutes passed in silence after the server went back to fill their orders.

“It’s not. Well, not entirely. I honestly want to get to know you. Besides being incredibly sexy, you seem very interesting.” Martin inched his chair closer to her. She had a difficult time believing any handsome man wanted her. She was amazed that someone as sexy as Mano was so obviously attracted to her. When she went out with girlfriends, she was usually the friend who went home alone. The token chubby girl in the group, the one that made everyone else look good.

“Yeah, that’s me, sexy.” Gloria snorted in disbelief, sipping her beer. Enjoying the taste, she realized how much she missed the little things about Hawaii when she was on the mainland. Good beer, the smell of the surf, the sound of waves rocking her to sleep, and the inherent laidback feel of life. No rushing around like a chicken with its head cut off, like in Vegas.

“You are. So tell me about this book you are working on.”

“I’m writing about the nuclear dump site in Nevada and its effect on the population there.” Frowning, Gloria realized for the first time how boring a topic she had chosen.

“Hasn’t that been researched before?” Martin asked.

The waitress returned with their lunches in hand, quelling the conversation briefly.

“Not to the full extent. The dump has only been ‘officially’ around for a couple of years,” Gloria said, taking a bite of pizza.

“Why don’t you write about Hawaii? You told me last night that you were raised here.”

“Yes. Omana raised me since the age of five. In that very house you’re trying to steal from us. That’s why it means so much to us.” Gloria said. Martin’s blue eyes took on a predatory look. She shivered slightly. There was a dark side to Martin, shining through at times like this. She could feel the anger seethe from him at the mention of the house.

“It’s a house, Gloria. I don’t understand why you and your great aunt cling to it. We are prepared to make Omana an offer that would exceed the actual value. The two of you could move to a bigger, better house if you wanted.” He threw his napkin on the table.

“You and your company have been told time and again, we are not selling our home,” she said. “It’s not about money, or a bigger house. It’s about family. Something it seems you can’t understand. That house has been in our family for generations. It has withstood the elements, as well as changing times. There have been weddings and births and deaths in that house. It is more than wooden walls. Hell, it didn’t even have electricity until the 1920s.”

“I’m sorry this had to come to such drastic measures. However, we are prepared to have the land at any means necessary,” Martin said.

“There is nothing you can do. We own the house. We own the land. You can’t kick us off. Find another spot to build your precious resort.”

“Omana has yet to produce the evidence in court that you own that land. Prove it is fee simple in your family’s name and we will leave you be. Unless she does, and soon, my company will take possession of the land in less than thirty days.” He glared

hard at her. Swallowing, she licked her lips. He couldn't possibly know the deed was missing.

"You know, I think this lunch was a bad idea. I was hoping I would be able to persuade you to give us more time, but it looks like that would be futile on my part. I will be making an appointment to speak with your boss in regards to my aunt's house. I would appreciate you keeping a distance from Omana and our home until this matter is settled." Gloria rose to her feet, grabbing her purse of the chair.

"I know your great aunt doesn't have that deed. If you know what's good for the both of you, talk her into selling while we are still offering. That silly old bag is sitting on too valuable a property for one stupid house." He rose.

"Don't you *ever* speak about my aunt like that or you deal with me. And if you know what's good for you, you had better not let Mano hear you talking about my aunt that way. His temper is a much more violent than mine."

He paled, just a bit.

"Don't come near me, Omana, or my house again or you'll understand what it's like to piss off a native. I'm going to enjoy making you eat your words when I march into your office, deed in hand." Gloria tossed some money on the table and stormed from the restaurant.

Gunning the engine, she raced from her parking space out onto the street. *How the hell did he know the deed was missing?* With the radio blasting and windows rolled down she cruised along the highway toward the Hilani's house. She hoped Mano was having a better time of lunch than she did. As soon as she got home, she was calling her lawyer friend Leilani. They needed to know if they had any legal recourse.

Cranking the radio up a little more, singing at the top of her lungs, Gloria sped off to pick up Mano.

Chapter Eight

Mano looked around the Hilani house from his perch on the rattan rocker. Bertha bustled around the small kitchen, the sound of fish frying mixed with her humming. The large woman wore a bright purple muumuu and a huge smile. The *kahuna*, Alika, was due home any moment, according to his wife. He had been called away for a blessing.

“I have fresh *Wahoo* fish for lunch, caught today down at the pier. Do you want *poi*?” Bertha’s voice called to him from the other room.

“I will eat whatever you see fit to make. I am honored to be a guest in your house,” Mano answered.

“Silly boy, we are glad to have you. I think we’ll have the *poi*. I already have some made.” Bertha giggled girlishly, the action at complete odds with her gruff exterior.

The front screen door creaked on its hinges. The *kahuna* was home. Mano rose to his feet in respect for the chief.

Alika Hilani was a frail-boned man, his posture slightly bent and legs bowed with time. His skin was a dark brown and wrinkled. His hair, long and gray, was tied back in a ponytail. His eyes lit up, crinkled around the edges and sparkling with untold stories, when they caught sight of Mano. His smile made Mano feel at home.

“*Aloha Nui Aumakua.*” The *kahuna* bowed slightly to Mano.

“*Aloha Nui Kahuna.*” Mano returned the gesture. Alika looked him up and down. Mano felt a smile tug at the corners of his mouth.

“I am honored to have one such as you in my home. Come eat, we have much to talk about.” Alika led Mano out to the porch. Located higher in elevation than Omana’s home, the *kahuna* and his wife’s house sat deep in the lush foliage. The air was cooler and permeated with rain. The patio ran the circumference of the house, with a table and deck chairs off to one side. Mano shooed a green gecko from its happy perch on the

plastic chair on which he sat.

Bertha came from the house to join them with her large arms laden down under numerous plates. Fresh fruit and vegetables, a large bowl of *poi*, and some crusty bread still warm from the oven were added to the already brimming table. Humming softly, Bertha headed back inside the house to collect the fish for the main course. Mano and Alika sat in comfortable silence, two men enjoying the day and each other's company. The *Ono*, fried to a golden brown and fragrant, instantly set Mano's mouth to watering when Bertha placed a dish in front of him.

"Eat. Enjoy," Bertha said, taking the seat opposite Alika. Mano bit into the meaty fish, and a moan of satisfaction rumbled low in his chest. Bertha Hilani was a wonderful cook and he told the woman so. She demurred and made shooing motions at him, but he didn't miss the look of happiness on her gentle face.

"Bertha, you have outdone yourself with all of this." Alika beamed at his wife and helped himself to some fish. Bertha popped a piece of mango in her mouth, punctuating her pleasure at the men's praise.

The meal passed in relative silence. Mano savored every bite. It had been decades since his last taste of *poi*. The dish, mashed taro root, was a common staple at the Hawaiian table. A light drizzle of rain danced on the tin roof over the patio. The drops provided a steady drumbeat to the afternoon's repast. Mano mulled over the many questions he had for the *kahuna* as he enjoyed the simple feast before him.

Finally Bertha rose to clear the plates. She waved off Mano's offer of help and disappeared back into the kitchen in a swish of muumuu.

"How long are you on land?" Alika asked.

"Thirty days, full moon to full moon. That is part of the curse of my kind."

Alika nodded at him. A far-off look swept across the chief's face. "Your kind is as old as the goddess Pele herself. When the fire goddess first came to Hawaii, across the great sea, she was led and protected by her brother the shark god Kamohoali'i. He was the great Mano." Alika sat back in his chair, his voice taking on a soothing quality.

His story was well worn, a record passed down from generation to generation.

“That is how my adopted parents choose my name, from Kamahoali’i,” Mano said. “My mother found me crying on the beach one sunny morning. I was wrapped in tapa cloth and very much alone. She used to say she saw a large shark swimming close off shore when she first heard my cries. My mother says the shark was Kamahoali’i giving her a gift. From that day we honored Pele’s brother. My mother felt he would know the path I was meant to travel.”

Nodding, Alika smiled at him. The priest cocked his head to one side and allowed his shadowed gaze to travel up and down Mano’s frame.

“Perhaps your mother was right, but I believe your course has not yet fully run,” Alika said. “There is an aura that clings to you so strongly. That alone tells me something great is yet to come for you, something powerful and life altering. I hope you are prepared for the challenge.”

Bertha emerged again from the house, this time with coffeepot in hand. She set the silver carafe in the center of the table and placed mugs in front of the men. Sitting, she poured her husband a cup before offering some to Mano. When the men were served, she poured some coffee for herself.

Mano took a sip of the strange but aromatic brew in the mug, savoring the richness of the flavor. It was strong and hot with just a hint of macadamia.

“What is this drink?” Mano asked. Bertha smiled wide. Alika laughed.

“It’s called coffee, Mano. Haven’t you had it at Omana’s with breakfast? Coffee is a very popular drink. Kona is world renowned for its coffee,” Bertha said.

“Gloria drinks juice in the mornings and Omana drinks something called tea.”

“You’ll need to have them make you some coffee from now on,” Bertha said.

“So many things have changed since my last time on the surface,” Mano said, sipping his coffee.

“When was the last time you were on land?” Bertha asked.

“The day the gods cried.” Mano’s memories of the event haunted his thoughts.

He had been called to guard the youngest son of the family from the warfare. The shark man had grown too attached to the young boy. When the boy fell in the battle, Mano's heart had broken. He turned his back on the battlefield, glistening with the spilled blood and walked back into the surf that day, vowing never to return.

“After the battle, I never wanted to set foot on land again. I was content to swim in the ocean. I have seen too much bloodshed in my time and enough war to last me centuries. Brother against brother, the old ways fighting against the new. It was all too much.”

“We all have battles to fight, my son. Not all of them end in bloodletting,” Alika said.

“This mood is dark. Tell us a happy tale, Alika, to chase away the shadows on our guest's face. Lift his spirits,” Bertha said, refilling Mano's coffee cup.

Although he was enjoying the *Kahuna's* company, Mano couldn't help his thoughts from drifting to Gloria. He wished she was here to share this with him. He shook his head in frustration. He couldn't let himself get attached to his charges but with each passing day, she and Omana began to mean more and more to him. He would be gone soon, called back to the sea, and he didn't want to deal with pain of losing them, especially Gloria. That didn't stop the sound of her voice moaning his name from filling his head.

Mano groaned softly, his body responding to the memory of her writhing beneath him the other night on the beach. She had tasted so sweet, like the freshest guava. Shaking his head in disgust this time, he realized he was becoming obsessed with her.

“Mano, are you listening?” Bertha broke through his thoughts.

“I am sorry. I was lost in my thoughts for a moment.”

Bertha smiled widely at him, as if she could read those naughty thoughts running around in his head. She turned her attention back to Alika, but not before she teased Mano with a sly wink. Mano threw back his head and laughed loudly at the

kahuna's sneaky wife.

“Now, that’s a happier sound than I got from him this morning.”

The sound of Gloria’s voice danced along his body and caused familiar stirrings Mano associated only with her. He felt her presence before he saw her. She came up behind him; her soft pikake perfume teased his senses and danced in the air between them. She placed her hands on his shoulders. He knew if he were to lean back, the top of his head would brush her bountiful breasts. If he turned his head slightly, he would be able to take one of those soft nipples into his mouth. Kane, he ached for her. He hardened. Shifting, he tried to hide the telltale evidence of just how much he wanted her.

“Gloria! *Aloha*. I’m glad so you came. I was just about to tell Mano a story about his kind. Sit. Listen. I have a feeling you will enjoy this too.” Alika motioned her to the spare chair next to Mano. Gloria scooted the chair closer to Mano as she sat. Hiding his smile behind his hand, Mano reached the other one down and threaded her fingers through his. He was pleased when she didn’t pull her hand away.

“Long ago,” Alika said, “before the great King but not long after the great goddess Pele made Kilauea her home, there lived a young warrior. He was strong and brave, wise beyond his years, and handsome. His task was to guard the coast near his village from invaders. Laka, goddess of hula, favored him masculine beauty beyond compare. Maui, the trickster, taught him cunning and strength. Ku gave him the intelligence of a great warrior. The young warrior was perfection, created solely by the gods.”

Alika paused a moment to take a cooling drink of water. He glanced at Gloria and Mano. They were transfixed, hanging on his every word.

“Do you know this story, Gloria?”

She shook her head.

“Then you are in for a treat. Let me see where was I? Oh yes, because the warrior had no mortal mother or father, Kane cursed the boy. Kane was angry with the

other gods for making such a perfect creature, passing him off as mortal. It was *kapu*, taboo, and Kane was furious. The god threw the young warrior into the sea. The shark brother of Pele, Kamohoali'i, took pity on the man and did not let him drown. Instead he turned the boy into a shark. The man, now shark, swam just along the shore for years and years, protecting the coast from invaders, just as he had done when he had legs. Kane saw this devotion to his village and relented.”

Alika's voice was melodious, strong yet gentle as he told the story. Mano was enraptured. He had never heard such a tale. He glanced over at Gloria. She was enthralled.

“What did Kane do? What happened?” Gloria asked, her voice no more than a whisper.

“He gave the shark man legs. However, only for the time of full moon to full moon, and only when he was called upon.”

Mano sucked in his breath. He had no idea that the sentence imposed on him was because of Kane. He thought he was like all *'aumakua*. “I was never told this before,” he said grimly. Gloria looked at his handsome face. White lines creased the corners of his mouth. His hands lay clenched at his side. A frown marred the perfection of his brow.

“Is there more to the story, Mr. Hilani?” Gloria asked.

“The shark man was summoned one day by a beautiful *wahine*, a woman with long black hair the color of cooled lava, and snapping dark eyes. She was the daughter of the *kahuna*, promised to a powerful chief on a neighboring island. The young woman did not want to marry the chief, so she summoned the shark man for protection. They fell in love, but her father found out. In the full moon, just as the young man was called back into the sea, the *kahuna* tossed one more curse upon him. You see, the young maiden had become pregnant as a product of their tryst. He cursed the shark man to walk forever between the worlds. So the *kahuna* cursed the baby and any male children after to suffer the same fate.”

Alika looked Mano straight in the eye. Mano's face changed as understanding dawned. The man and woman in the story must have been his ancestors.

"But I thought *aumakua* where ancestors thrown into the sea at their death, to be reborn as guardian animals," Gloria said. She had grown up in Hawaii. Its history was the teachings of her youth. Omana had even put her in an immersion school for a couple of years. Gloria had been one of the few *haoles*, or non-native Hawaiians, in the class. She still remembered almost everything she was taught.

"That is one way, yes, you're right, Gloria," Alika said. "However, as you know, we Hawaiians don't do anything simple in our myths and practices. They differ from island to island. This is simply another explanation."

"Finish the story Alika, so the children can go home." Bertha scolded from her chair.

"Yes, my love. The woman gave birth to a baby boy. Before she could name it, the *kahuna* cast it into the sea with its father. In retaliation and anger, the girl cast a spell as well. She asked Kane to look after her son, she asked Pele to make sure her line continued, and she asked Kaneloa to give her son a lover. The gods granted her wish with one condition."

"That's gods for you. Greek, Roman, Aztec, or Hawaiian, they have to put conditions on things," Gloria said.

Mano pinned her with a scowl. "Hush. I wish to hear the end. It is obvious the *Kahuna* is discussing my family. So please, *ku'uipo*."

"Yes, Mano," she said and bit her lip, all at once contrite for her outburst. She gave him a small smile. His lips curved up slightly at the ends.

"*Mahalo*, Mano. You're correct, it is your line," Alika said. "Where was I? Oh yes, the condition. Never would the men find true love, unless a woman proved her love was brave and true by sacrificing herself."

"What kind of sacrifice?" Gloria asked.

"No one knows. So far, no woman has ever done it. If the sacrifice was

successful, Mano or any of his ancestors would stay on land, permanently human again. As mortal as they were before.”

They sat silently, soaking in everything the *Kahuna* had told them. “Gloria, may we go home now?” Mano asked, brushing a stray lock a hair that escaped her bun out of her eyes.

“Sure. We can go home. Thanks for having him, and thanks for the story,” she said. “You know I love your stories, Mr. Hilani. I’ll try to bring him over again if you like, before he...” The words died out. Gloria didn’t want to think about Mano returning to the sea. She shook her head and rose to her feet, sliding her purse over one shoulder. Once the parting hugs were over, she twined her fingers with Mano’s, needing to feel the warmth of his body. Alika and Bertha watched their young guests until the screen door shut behind them.

“I hope they come to understand what I was trying to tell them, before it’s too late. Gloria is the woman in the prophecy. I’m sure of it. She can break the curse.” Alika looked at his wife, when the couple was finally out of sight.

“But do you think she will be up to the challenge, and the pain that comes with the test? Do you think she is strong enough to pass it? She has been through so much already.” Gloria had had enough pain and loss in her short life already, Bertha hated to the girl to suffer any more. Now that she was back on Hawaiian ground, Bertha was sure the healing could start.

“I certainly hope so, for both their sakes.” Alika answered, his face grim. He would have to check his records one more time. He wanted to be prepared, should Gloria or Mano need him.

Chapter Nine

The car ride home was intensely subdued. Gloria turned off the radio as soon as they had pulled out of the Hilani's gravel driveway. Mano, taciturn and sullen, stared at the waterline outside the window. Gloria was at a loss. She could feel the confusion radiate off him.

"Are you going to say anything or just sit there like a bump on a log?" she finally asked after several miles had passed. She felt if she did not say anything, she would go crazy from the silence.

"I do not wish to speak about the tale. I am not sure I fully understand what Alika meant by telling me."

"Fine," Gloria said, flipping on the radio. Mano glared at her from his seat. Reaching over, he shut off the radio.

"You wish to discuss this, but not the reasons behind why you would not let me make love to you last night," he said.

"One thing has nothing to do with the other," she said. Thank God they were almost home. She didn't want to discuss what had happened the night before. Her body still ached from his touch. Her blood still burned.

"It is a strange dilemma you are in, *ku'uipo*. You know your body craves mine. Give in to it." He set his palm on her knee.

"No touching the driver, Mano. We'll crash," Gloria said, picking up his hand from where it lay and shoving it back at him.

"I very much want to touch the driver, but I can wait until we arrive home."

"Tell me why the story Alika told bothered you so much. The look on your face was so strained." Gloria asked, pulling onto their street. It was funny that even though Mano had only been around for a few days, both she and her aunt seemed to consider him part of the family.

“I was shocked to learn of this curse upon me. I believed my fate was the same as any other *aumakua*.”

“So you think you’re the descendant of the shark man in the story?” she asked, turning into the driveway.

“It would explain so many things in my childhood: my mother finding me on the beach, the shark that guided me through my youth, and my destiny to become an *aumakua* myself. There is no other explanation for the *kahuna*’s need to tell the tale than to educate me of my past.”

Stopping the car and getting out, she mulled over the idea of Mano being cursed. Her logical brain had only just gotten used to the idea of an actual mythical being showing up on her beach. Now Alika was all but asking her to take another leap of faith and believe in curses.

“I wonder if that means we would be able to break the curse,” she offered. “Set you free to be human again.”

“You heard the *Kahuna*. I would need to find a woman whose love was so pure and strong for me that she would make the sacrifice.” Mano fixed his dark gaze on her, his eyes stormy with unappeased desire.

“Good luck with that. I don’t know any modern woman willing to make a weird unknown sacrifice in the name of love. Maybe for shoes, but not love,” she said, climbing the front steps. Sliding her key into the lock, she felt Mano come up behind her.

“You would not sacrifice yourself for love?” He said low into her ear, his breath warm on her neck. His strong arms wrapped themselves around her waist, pulling her flush with his hard body. The ridge of his erection pressed against the soft curve of her bottom. Gloria let out a whimper of desire, unconsciously rotating her hips against him. He groaned, the sound rumbling along his body sending a vibration through her. He slid the palms of his hands up her stomach, past her ribcage, to rest just under the swell of her breasts.

“See what you do to me, woman? I cannot move without the desire for your body making me hard and needy.” He licked the nape of her neck, grinding his erection against her even more.

Gloria’s breath caught in her throat. If she didn’t put a stop to this temptation now, the neighbors would get an eyeful.

“You aren’t a shark man. You’re a snake man, always trying to tempt me with that body of yours. You don’t see me running around flaunting myself in front of you.” She whirled around to face him. Shoving him away from her with both hands, she grinned at him.

A wicked smile painted Mano’s lips. “I would not mind if you did.” His eyes roamed her frame, drinking in her curves.

“Well, I won’t. That’s not how I do things. So for Pete’s sake, leave me alone for a while. My hormones can’t take it.” She stormed into the house, laughing. She caught Omana’s amused glance.

“Don’t start ,Aunt Monie. I don’t need any comments from the peanut gallery,” Gloria said. “This is all your fault anyway. ‘Let’s conjure up a shark man, he’ll help.’ You neglected to tell me he would look like he stepped from my dirtiest dream.”

She paused. Everything had finally begun to take its toll on her psyche.

“You dreamed of me?” Mano asked from his place in the front door. Omana let out a giggle.

“I didn’t say that,” Gloria said.

“Yes, you did. You said I looked as if I had stepped from your dreams. You dreamed of me,” he said, a huge smile tugging at his lips.

“Ugh! You both make me crazy!”

“Gloria, darling, perhaps you need a rest. You seem a trifle edgy, much like a bear with a thorn in its paw,” Omana said, barely containing her laughter.

“You’re right. I am taking a nap. When I wake up, I don’t want either one of you to bring up this subject again.” Gloria stomped into her room. The living room

resounded with the thud of her door.

“I do love her, Mano, but my boy, will you please seduce her? I cannot take much more of her sexual frustration.” Omana burst into laughter.

“I am trying. But she resists.”

“Try harder. my boy, try harder,” Omana said with a giggle.

“If I get any harder, dear lady, I will erupt,” he said with a wicked grin. Omana continued to laugh, this time with tears running down her face.

Chapter Ten

The blank white of the computer screen mocked Gloria. She had been sitting in front of her laptop for days, to no avail. Not one useable word had emerged from her to dance across the keyboard. She sighed in supreme frustration, disgusted with her inability to focus. She had been so passionate about the topic months ago when she'd put together her outline, but now in the verdant beauty of Hawaii, the nuclear waste dump ceased to challenge her. The pages remained blank, the book only a few chapters long. She was suffering from writer's block.

She got up from the desk, a glass of passion fruit juice in her hand, and headed out onto the lanai. The sun was shining, blanketing the waves in dazzling crystals. A slight breeze, sweet smelling and calming, caressed her skin. Gloria watched an outrigger speed down the shore. Taking a sip, she leaned slightly on the railing.

Maybe James had been right all along. Perhaps she was a second-rate writer who lacked the ability to finish a book. When they had first met he had encouraged her writing, telling her she was the next big thing, a Pulitzer Prize winner in the making. As time went on, the encouragement stopped and James's true feelings appeared. If she was honest with herself, she knew he was jealous of her journalistic fame in Las Vegas journalism. Her column about a single career woman's life in Sin City had been incredibly popular. It had been hailed by the other papers as a kind of Las Vegas *Sex and the City*, minus the cosmos and the expensive heels.

On top of everything else, the deed was still missing. Gloria was starting to believe it might be lost forever. Mano had spent the last week searching everywhere. He had also made her drive him over to Pu'u honua o Honaunau, or "The Place of Refuge," to make an offering. He had appealed to Hi'iaka, the goddess of healing and a guardian herself, for some kind of guidance. The Park Rangers had given them a cursory look as they made their way out over the lava fields on the south side of the state park, but let them pass without trouble. It was that way in Hawaii: many locals still practiced the

ancient rites in addition to Christianity. Back at the house, Omana had gone over every scrap of paper in the house with a fine-toothed comb. In between outlining her book, Gloria had searched the public records sites on the Internet and spoken with Leilani. Her lawyer friend had done whatever she could to help, but without the deed to prove they owned the land, Gloria and Omana were sunk. Leilani promised to keep looking into the books to see if there was some way to fight the resort company, but she had said it would take time. The Grant's simply didn't have any time left.

And again, Gloria was in the most beautiful place on earth and she couldn't seem to write a damn thing. Maybe she should look at getting a freelance job with *West Hawaii Today*. Shaking her head, Gloria chastised herself. It would ultimately just give her one more excuse not to work on the manuscript. She knew something had to be done. If the deed wasn't found soon, Omana would lose the house.

Gloria turned slightly at the sound of the front door opening. Omana was home for lunch. Her great aunt had a habit of closing up the shop for a few hours and coming home to eat. On the island this was a common occurrence, so no one thought anything of it. Everyone just chalked it up to "island time." Everything moved at its own pace in Hawaii.

"Gloria, dear, do you want to share lunch with me? Can you take a break?" Omana said from the kitchen, where she had begun pulling out the lunch fixings.

"Sure, Aunt Monie. I wasn't really working anyway. I can't seem to get anything written." Gloria walked back into the house.

"Dreadfully sorry, my dear. Perhaps you need to get out of the house for a bit. Would you mind running to the supermarket for me after lunch as a little break?" Omana asked, handing a sandwich to Gloria. With a big smile, Omana bit into hers.

"Sure, why not? Make out a list for me before you leave for the shop and I'll go. When you get home tonight, I want to go over the few ideas Leilani gave me. She says we may be sunk, but has a couple ideas on how to stall the resort company." Hugging Omana, Gloria took her sandwich into the other room.

By the time Gloria had finished her lunch and showered, Omana had returned to the shop. A piece of blindingly pink paper rested comfortably on her keyboard. The sizzling color was always a favorite with Omana. Gloria smiled to herself, picked up the grocery list, and shoved it into her purse. Grabbing her keys, she headed out the door.

The cool air of the KTA grocery store was a pleasant change to the humid environment outside. Gloria wiped a bead of sweat from her brow and moved along the supermarket aisles. She wondered what trouble Mano might have gotten himself into today. He had announced over coffee, which had fast become his favorite drink thanks to the Hilanis, that he was spending the day in search of the deed.

Gloria sighed and glanced over Omana's list. They had such little time left. She refused to let the thought depress her. But still, Gloria picked up an apartment guide next to the door. If they lost the house, other arrangements needed to be made. Gloria felt honor bound to care for her aunt.

Only a few weeks left. Her heart flip-flopped at the thought. Mano would be going back to the sea, never to be seen again. The handsome shark man had become a part of the family. She knew deep down in her heart that he really *was* a shark man. Gloria realized she had always known, but years of living with practical James had programmed her to dismiss all mystical experiences and possibilities. She also knew that her dreams had been prophetic in a way. Someone, or something, had been telling her about Mano.

He had left her alone the past few days, never once pursuing her sexually. Her skin still tingled with the memory of his touch on her heated flesh. She licked her lips as the image of his stormy eyes filled her with passion. A shock went through her body. Gloria shook her head in disgust. Here she was standing in front of the fresh fish counter with a list in her hand and all she could think about was Mano. Sexually frustrated, that's what she was, and she could think of only one way out of this mess. Smiling wickedly to herself, she just imagined shoving Mano down on her bed and

riding him hard until she rid her system of this overwhelming desire for him.

Pushing the cart forward, she went in search of the other items on the list, trying to keep her thoughts from a certain well-built shark man. Tonight, she promised herself, she was going to have a little fun. A giddy laugh bubbled up from her throat as she continued on with her shopping, suddenly eager to get home.

* * * *

Mano had returned home from his search of the outer perimeter of the house for the deed empty-handed yet again. The gods had not seen fit to help him in his search. Patience had never been one of his virtues. Glancing at the ticking contraption on the wall Gloria called a clock, he noticed that Omana should be home from the shop any minute. He looked around the house in search of Gloria. Unable to locate her Mano realized she must have gone out.

Mano sat down next to the window and waited for his women to return. He stopped short at the thought. *His* women, that's what Gloria and Omana had become, whether he liked it or not. He could not seem to figure out where the thought had come from, but nonetheless it felt right.

His thoughts drifted to Gloria. He had tried to put as much distance between the two of them over the previous few days. But it was torture; he missed her. In his plan to make her come to him, he hadn't thought of the fact that he would awaken each morning hard and heavy for her.

Mano had become used to walking around in a constant state of semi-arousal since setting foot in the Grant house. He didn't understand this attraction for Gloria. When he had been human, there was never a lack of companionship. Yet he had never wanted a woman as badly as he desired Gloria. She was incredibly loving toward her great aunt and kind to those in the neighborhood. The woman simply had a beautiful heart to match her beautiful body. If circumstances were different, Mano could see himself spending the rest of his days with the shapely brunette. But he knew, cursed as he was, that wish could never come true.

Mano shifted his position on the couch. His manhood was announcing its presence and salacious need for Gloria. Sliding his hand under the elastic waistband of his shorts, he attempted to give himself some relief. The task proved pointless. All he really wanted was to drive himself deep into Gloria's fiery heat. His body burned with the memory of her taste. Shoving himself off the couch in disgust, he walked out onto the lanai. The only way he could control his raging lust was a swim in the ocean. He glanced up at the sun. There were perhaps two hours until sundown, and then he could swim. He couldn't risk anyone spotting his transformation from man to shark, so he would have to find something else to occupy his mind until sunset.

Hearing the front door open, he crossed back into the living room. He was greeted with the warm sight of Omana, fresh and full of smiles. She was dressed in her usual oversized muumuu, this one a flaming orange color. Mano felt the corners of his mouth turn up at the site of the older woman.

"How was your quest today, my dear little one?" Omana asked, handing him the package in her arms. It mattered little to Omana that he was hundreds of years her senior, or that he was three times her size; he was her dear little boy. Mano felt his heart swell at the notion. It had been a long time since he was anyone's dear.

"I did not succeed. I searched the grounds surrounding the house to no reward. I asked Pele herself for help this time as well. I laid the necessary offering to her toward the back of the yard." Mano said. Omana directed him to put the package in the kitchen.

"Well, we will simply need to double our efforts. I am heading over to the Hilo side this afternoon to visit with a friend of mine. Jack called me earlier today to let me know my husband gave him some boxes filled with paperwork before he died. Perhaps it is there." Omana said. "I will not be home tonight, my love. You and Gloria have the house to yourself."

"Why will you not be here?" Mano asked, his pulse throbbed in his brain, and several other places, at the idea of having the house and Gloria all to himself.

"I am going to spend the evening with my friend. The drive is so long and

arduous, I don't want to have to make it in the dark. We are going to reminisce, drink wine, and have a pleasant visit." Omana said, coming from the bedroom. She had a small overnight bag in her hand. "Now I want you to behave. Tread gently with Gloria, my dear. She has so much hurt and pain in her life. I would hate to have you add any more." Omana set the bag down at the front door. Taking Mano's hands in hers, she led the handsome shark man to the couch.

"I would not hurt Gloria intentionally. But I feel that our relationship will not be easy. She has become very important to me, as have you."

"You have become very special to us as well, my love." Omana smiled up at him. "Sit down, my dear boy. I have something you need to understand about Gloria and men."

"I am not sure I wish to hear of such things. I have grown possessive of Gloria," Mano said.

Omana smiled again, in that all-knowing way. "I am going to inform you of her past so you may understand why she is so hesitant to give herself completely to you."

Mano stared at the older woman sitting next to him on the threadbare couch. He nodded. He wanted to know about Gloria. He found himself wanting to know everything about her. Omana's blue eyes were large in her small face, the pale orbs glassy with unshed tears.

"As you have found out, Gloria lost her parents long ago. She came to live with me. At the tender age of eighteen, my darling beauty fell in love with a miscreant. He was unbearably cruel to her. Being young and foolish, she believed he loved her and so she followed along with him to Las Vegas. There, he fell out of love with her."

Mano felt his chest constrict with anger. He willed himself to remain silent. Omana's manner suggested there was more to Gloria's pain than simply one man.

"The next man she met was James. He showered her with flowers and affection. They were together for several years. I tried to warn her that I thought he was using her journalistic talent to further his own pitiful career."

“What happened with this man?” Mano asked, his voice barely a whisper. In the talks he had engaged in with Gloria, she had never mentioned this James to him. Mano knew she had left Las Vegas to come home to Omana, but the details were never made known to him.

“Gloria came to her office late one evening to find James and his secretary having relations on his desk. The viper did not even have the courtesy to lie. He told her he had found love with this other woman. There were harsh words spoken on each side. The snake called my darling beauty some vile names.”

“What things did he dare utter to her?” Mano asked, his voice low, deadly. His jaw clenched with barely leashed anger.

“Gloria has had trouble all her adult life believing she is a great beauty. She is built like a movie star of days gone by. You see, that type of beauty has gone out of style these days. She simply has too many curves to fit today’s standards. James played on the low opinion Gloria has of herself.” Omana’s words came haltingly now. It was obvious the woman felt Gloria’s pain close to her own heart.

“Gloria is a goddess. Her body is made by the gods. Surely she knows this.” Mano could hardly believe the words. He vowed to himself tonight he would show his beauty just how appealing she was.

“I know you appreciate her. You see, Gloria has always been a strong woman, but in this matter, she is weak. You must help her to overcome this. I know you are attracted to my little love. Please, Mano, make her happy for as long as you are here,” Omana said, taking his hands in hers once more. Omana, despite her good cheer, looked suddenly very tired. It was obvious the older woman loved her niece beyond reason and wanted her to be happy.

“These men should be punished for the pain they have inflicted on women,” Mano said. “In my time, they would have. They would have been made to run the trail to the Place of Refuge. I do not believe they would have it to the temple.” Mano’s eyes flashed with barely contained rage. He wished he had been in the outrigger that chased

the men across the bay. They would never have completed the swim.

“I told you all this, my darling, in the event that you and Gloria move past this friendship into the next level. Please handle her heart carefully.” Omana rose from her seat.

Mano walked the older woman to the door, his thoughts jumbled in his head. Heaving a deep sigh, he decided to walk down to the pier. Maybe there he would find the answers he sought.

Chapter Eleven

The interior of the house was bathed in a radiant pink glow from the sunset. When Gloria stepped inside, the soft colors danced around her. She walked into the kitchen and placed the grocery bags on the counter. The fresh fish and produce that was almost always available only added to her love of Hawaii. She walked back into the living room, opening windows as she went. She flicked on the stereo, the air instantly filling with the Middle Eastern sounds of Prem Joshua. Gloria always listened to music when she was writing. Smiling contentedly, she switched the station to KAPA, one of the island's Hawaiian music stations. The gentle sound of ukulele danced around the room.

Gloria swayed slightly to the music, dancing her way back to the kitchen. She opened the fridge and began to put the groceries away, leaving the large Ahi tuna filet she planned on grilling for dinner out on the counter. She sang softly along with the music and shook her hips as she tried to remember all of the hula lessons she'd taken as a child.

Her bare feet felt cool on the kitchen tiles. Letting herself go she began to dance with more abandon. She pulled her hair from its ponytail and shook the midnight strands until they hung loose all around her. The silky feel was like a caress on her shoulders, bare from the aqua tank top she wore. Gloria inhaled deeply, moving across the floor, the aroma of the plumerias in the garden filled her nostrils. She lifted one hip and dropped the other, gliding almost fluidly across the floor. She was a little rusty, but the moves came back to her easily. Gesturing with one hand, she grabbed a head of lettuce with the other. Heading in the direction of the refrigerator, Gloria dipped low, swaying her hips in the process in a deep *ami*'.

"You dance well, my goddess." Gloria jumped at the sultry sound, and the head of lettuce she had in her hand skittered across the tile floor. Mano leaned lackadaisically against the door frame. His long legs crossed at the ankles, muscular arms folded across

his impressive chest. Gloria let out a little squeak at the sight of him.

Good Lord, you could grate cheese on those abs, she thought. He was wearing a pair of bright blue board shorts which the men of the island were so fond of. Mano's slung low on his slim hips.

"You scared me to death, you big doofus." Gloria said, tearing her gaze away from all that lovely bronzed flesh. She bent to retrieve the wayward head of lettuce. Her head popped up at the sound of Mano's sharp intake of breath. Gasping, she realized the neckline of her tank top was drooping and treating Mano to a magnificent amount of cleavage. She straightened, turning attention back to the countertop.

"What is a doofus?" Mano asked, stepping farther into the kitchen.

"I'll explain it later. When did you get home?" Gloria began assembling the ingredients for dinner.

"I walked down to the pier and watched the *keiki*, the children, swimming in the bay. I returned only moments ago to find you engaged in a most bewitching hula. You should dance more often. Laka has blessed you."

Gloria found herself concentrating on the tuna filet on the counter. She was an adult woman standing in an empty house with a half-naked Hawaiian surf god, and all she could do was stare at the pinky flesh of the fish. A girlish giggle bubbled up in her throat as the image of shoving Mano down on the tile floor and riding him until she found the release she had denied herself filled her mind. Shaking her head at the sexy thought, she went back to seasoning the fish. She wasn't that kind of woman and she knew it. Gloria had never been bold when flirting and she had definitely never taken the initiative in sex.

"Did you swim down at the pier?" Gloria asked over her shoulder, reaching for a large bowl to put the salad in.

"I cannot swim until the darkness falls. I will swim later when moonlight touches the waves and not the sun."

"Why can't you swim in the daylight?" Gloria turned around to face him. She

picked up the fish and headed for the lanai door, not waiting for his answer. “Can you open the slider for me?” Mano rushed forward and slid open the large glass divider that led out onto the lanai. The patio rested on an outcropping of lava rock, affording them a view of the garden and the crystalline surf below. The view never ceased to amaze Gloria. Heading toward the barbeque grill off to the left side of the lanai facing the bay, Gloria placed the foil-wrapped fish on the rack and busied herself with the chore of lighting the grill.

“I did not swim for when the water touches my skin, I cannot control the change from man to shark. I did not wish to frighten anyone.”

“That’s probably for the best. We wouldn’t want anyone to see you change. They would want to dissect you like some science project or study you like Daryl Hannah in that movie *Splash*.” Gloria found herself babbling. She was so annoyed with herself when that happened. For God’s sake, she had a master’s in English. Yet put her in the general vicinity of the physical embodiment of her fantasym and she turned into a bubble-headed idiot.

“What is a movie?” Mano asked.

“It’s a story made up with moving pictures. You watch it on the TV. Maybe after dinner, we will watch one.” Gloria said.

“Like the program we saw the other night with the men hunting for spirits?”

“Yeah, just like that. But a movie is longer.” Gloria smiled. She had made Omana and Mano watch *Ghost Hunters* with her the other night. Mano had seemed to enjoy the show once he realized Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson weren’t trapped in the TV.

“Why did everyone want to study this Darryl Hannah in your movie?”

“She was mermaid. She was different. People have trouble accepting different. They get scared,” Gloria said, returning to the lanai, veggies to add to the grill in hand. “Where’s Omana? I haven’t seen her all day. Do you know when she’ll be home from the shop?” She placed the rest of the dinner in the center of the rack and closed the grill

lid.

“She has gone over to Hilo to visit with a friend. She tells me she will not return tonight. We have the house to ourselves. Shall we swim together at dark, *ku'uipo*?”

Mano asked, his hands coming to rest on her shoulders, palms burning into her flesh.

“We’ll have dinner, then what say we watch the sunset? Maybe after dinner I will swim with you. Although I should stay home and work on the book.” She glanced over her shoulder, looking up into his handsome face.

“Gloria, what is a stud?” Mano asked.

“Where did you hear that word?” Gloria asked, a smile playing across her lips, amusement lacing her voice.

“At the pier, one of the women sitting in the sand said it to another woman. She was pointing at me as I watched the children splash in the waves. I believe they were referring to me at the time, but I did not know how to respond.”

“They were probably talking about you. A stud is a really good-looking man.” Gloria finally answered. She felt an unreasonable surge of jealousy flash through her. Annoyed with herself, she shook her head slightly. Mano was so good looking, probably the most attractive man she had ever laid eyes on, and she couldn’t fault those women on the beach for staring at him. She knew other women would look at him. He wasn’t hers to keep, so why was she so angry?

“Do you think I am a stud?”

He had moved to lounge on the nearest chaise, his legs with all those sculpted muscles crossed at the ankles, hands behind his head. Gloria smirked. At that moment he not only looked like a stud, but like he belonged on the cover of a romance novel. The man was lethal.

Gloria chewed on her full bottom lip, debating her next move. Should she follow through with the plans she’d made at the grocery store or wimp out like she had always done before? She stared at the man in front of her. The intelligent side of her knew she might never have this opportunity again. Soon Mano would return to the sea

and be gone from her life forever. Heaving a calming sigh and screwing her courage to the sticking place she walked slowly, seductively toward him. The fire in his eyes burned hotter with each step. A sensual smile pulled on his chiseled lips.

“What are you doing, *ku'uipo*?” Mano said, his voice husky. Gloria grinned wickedly. She could do this; she could seduce Mano. She wanted to be as close to him as possible before he was gone. She needed to do this. She needed to give in to him and to herself.

“Just looking. I am trying to ascertain your stud level. I want to make sure those girls on the beach knew what they were talking about,” Gloria said. She stopped her progress and stood at the edge of the chaise, her gaze drinking in all those hard planes of muscle, all that glorious bronzed skin. Bending at the waist, she placed the palms of her hands on his chest. Mano didn't make a move except for the wicked smile which stretched across his face.

“It feels as if you are up to mischief.”

Gloria winked at the handsome shark man's comment. “It appears you are differently up.” She ran her hands down his sculpted stomach, stopping at the waistband of his board shorts. The sizable bugle tenting the soft material caused her mouth to run dry. She licked her lips, moistening the plump flesh. Mano groaned roughly. Gloria pressed the palm of her hand to the hard ridge of his erection. He captured her wrist and yanked her body down flush with him so she sprawled inelegantly across his body.

“Do not tease me, woman, unless you plan to relieve me of this desire for you,” Mano said, his lips tracing a line along her jaw.

“Maybe that's what I plan to do,” Gloria said, wiggling her soft curves against his hard planes. He claimed her lush lips in a demanding kiss. Mouths clashed, tongues mingled. The sound of lovers breathing danced with the music still wafting from the speakers, the only other sound the crashing of waves.

Breaking away from the kiss, Gloria's lips forged a path down Mano's chest, stopping to suck lightly on hard male nipple. He sucked in a breath, shaking slightly

under the onslaught. Working her way down the lean length of him, she pressed a kiss to his taut stomach. She felt the steely muscles flex beneath her lips. She smiled at the power she seemed to wield over this mighty warrior.

“Gloria. You make my body *lolo*, crazy with need for you,” Mano said. Gloria kissed his lips once more, sucking his tongue into the moist cavern of her mouth. He was the first to break the kiss. He rested his forehead against hers, panting for breath.

“Are you sure of this, Gloria? I will not walk away from you unsatisfied this time. I plan to bury myself deep inside you this night.” Mano slid his right palm up to cup her breast.

A groan of pure desire ripped from her throat. “I am ready, Mano. I want you so much.”

He lifted the heavy weight of her breast, plucking at the pebbled nipple. She whimpered low in her throat.

“Good,” was all Mano said, claiming her mouth once more. Gloria felt the ridge of his hard erection pulse against the soft flesh of her belly.

“Perhaps we should enjoy dinner first. Then I will have you for dessert,” Mano said near her ear, breaking free of the fiery kiss. He pressed his lips to her neck.

“You’re probably right.” Gloria panted, trying to regain her composure. “I’ll cook the fish and make us a salad. And after that, I think I’m going to seduce you.”

Chapter Twelve

Mano contentedly watched her as she pattered around the kitchen cleaning up the last of their dinner dishes, an incredulous look on his beautiful face. If he lived with them for one hundred years, the Grant women would never cease to shock him. He wanted Gloria and he was aware she wanted him, but nothing in their brief but wonderful time together would have prepared him for her straightforward declaration of seduction. What had brought about this change in her attitude?

She was perfection to him. Every move her curvy body made was like a siren's song leading him out to the rocks. Gloria was so inherently sexy and she didn't even notice.

"Do you want coffee?" she asked, standing in front of the pantry. Her left hip was pushed out in a supremely feminine gesture. Her ebony hair swished around her, the silken locks flowing like waves.

"I would truly enjoy some coffee," Mano said. He watched her bend low in the cabinet to retrieve the beans. The action caused the bottom hem of her tiny shorts to ride up her long legs. The sight of the material stretched taut across her luscious backside hardened him even more. All through dinner his penis had been at attention, and now that dinner was over, he wanted nothing more than to bury his length deep into her dripping heat. The warrior in him wanted to rip her clothes from her and take her hard and fast. He pushed away from the wall and stalked to her. Wrapping his muscular arms around her waist, he pulled her close.

"I think I would enjoy having you more," he said, placing nibbling kisses on her neck. A sweet sigh rushed past her parted lips. The sound caused him to harden painfully.

"I think that can be arranged," she said. She rubbed her bottom against his straining erection. Mano slid his palms up, cupping her luscious breasts, weighing them gently. More than a handful, that was his Gloria. *His Gloria*; he liked the thought

of that. He flicked the pad of each thumb across her nipples. They pebbled under his ministrations. A groan of pure unguarded pleasure ripped from her throat.

“What made you change your mind, *ku'uipo*?” Mano ran his tongue along the shell of her ear. He turned her around to face him, continuously raining kisses along her soft skin.

“Honestly, I don't know. I just know I want you. I know you'll be leaving soon, but I know I want this. I want you inside me. Please Mano. Make love to me.” Gloria moved the heels of her palms across his flesh, tracing the hardened muscles and barely leashed power underneath. If only for now, this mighty warrior was hers. With an answering growl, Mano swept her into his powerful arms. When they reached the bedroom, he deposited her in the center of the red and yellow quilt.

“I want to see you,” he said. His arms folded across his chest, his silver gaze, hot and demanding. Hesitating slightly, Gloria pulled the hem of her tank top over her head. She chewed her bottom lip. Covered in a dress or shorts was entirely different than bared for his perusal.

There was something about Mano that made her bold. He drank in the sight of her, bathed in the growing moonlight. The pale light danced across her smooth skin.

“You are more beautiful than the goddesses themselves. How lush you are, like the sweetest mango. I want to devour every inch of you,” he said, cupping her right breast again.

“There is a lot of me to devour.” Gloria laughed nervously. Her every flaw was on display. Her too-large breasts, her not-so-flat stomach, her un-toned butt and thighs.

“Do not belittle yourself. You are perfection to me, every creamy inch of you. Do you not see what you do to me?”

Gloria looked up into his face. Desire, hot and strong, burned his liquid eyes. Reaching up and taking his hand, she pulled him down onto the bed with her. “Show me. Show me what I do to you.”

Mano took a deep, steadying breath as he ran his hand down one length of

Gloria's arm. Her skin was so soft. She shivered. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pulled him in close for a kiss. He tasted of sea and man, salty and so delicious. She slid her hands down the planes of his back, his muscles bunching with barely contained power at her caress. He felt so good, she didn't even mind the weight of his body on top of hers. There, he felt so right. Briefly she wondered what this bed would be like when he was gone, lonely and cold, despite the tropic nights. Pushing the unwelcome thought aside, Gloria let him kiss her into oblivion.

Chapter Thirteen

The sun was setting, the remaining light painting pink and gold shadows across the room, wrapping the lovers in its embrace. Gloria arched up slightly off the bed at the touch of Mano's hand sliding under the bottom hem of her shorts. The caress of his cool fingers on her heated skin elicited a moan low in her throat. Kissing her fiercely, he snaked his other palm up the length of her spine. He reached for the clasp of her bra. Pulling back, he stared into her eyes, a confused and frustrated expression on his face.

"What is this garment you wear? How do I remove it? I wish to taste you." He pressed soft feathery kisses on her lips.

"I'll do it. And you a fierce warrior, held at bay by a bra." Gloria answered, amused. She kept forgetting he was not as proficient at the removal of underwear as modern men. She unhooked the lace contraption and pulled her arms free of the straps. His eyes flared with unappeased passion.

"You are a gift from the gods," he said, almost reverently. Easing his way down her body, he ran his tongue around one nipple. Gloria hissed in response. She was going up in flames.

"More," she said her voice husky and low.

"As my goddess demands." Mano immediately clamped his mouth over the turgid peak. Gloria almost launched herself off the bed. He kneaded her other breast while he continued to suck on her nipple, swirling the tip of his tongue around the tight little bud.

"I want you naked, Gloria," he said, kissing his way back up her body, his hand still on her breast.

"I'm almost naked now." Gloria laughed low in her throat. "Besides, you still have your shorts on. Things seem awfully one-sided to me." Gloria slid her hands down the hard planes of his stomach to stop at the waistband of his board shorts. She felt the muscles of his abdomen jump at her touch. She bit her bottom lip, amazed at the power

she held over this potent man.

“Perhaps you should help me undress,” Mano said, sitting up. Gloria crawled up onto her knees. She licked her lips. He was so hard, for her. It was all for her. Yes, she would help him undress, and she would help herself to a taste of him.

“Stand up,” she said, scooting to the end of the bed. He stood before her. She looked up into his eyes as she began to untie the drawstring at his waist.

“You have that look on your face, *ku'uipo*.” Mano smiled wickedly down at her. Gloria nudged the board shorts down his trim hips. His erection jutted free, proud and hard, for her. She licked her lips again, and swiped her tongue out to taste the drop of moisture glistening on the tip. Mano hissed, his hands coming to rest on her shoulders. Encouraged, she took the head into her mouth. He threw his head back in undisguised ecstasy, his breath ripped from his chest in gasps. She licked, nipped, sucked..

“Stop, Gloria. It is my turn to taste now,” he said, running a hand through Gloria’s silken tresses. She scooted slowly to the head of the bed, and he followed her down. Gently he traced a palm across her stomach, his fingertips dipping into the waistband of her shorts. She sucked her breath in as he peeled the shorts and panties from her body with agonizing slowness. They fell to the floor softly. He lowered himself to kiss her lips, his tongue wetting the seam of her mouth, begging entry. She wrapped her arms around his neck, the two of them reveling in the feel of flesh on flesh, so warm, so soft, and so right. Her lush curves pressed against his hard planes in perfect harmony. Mano slid one hand down the length of her body, stopping at the juncture of her thighs. She arched up in a subconscious plea. He needed no further prompting. He swept a finger into her slick folds. She growled out her hunger against his mouth. Encouraged, he slipped another finger deep inside her.

“You are so wet, *ku'uipo*. I do not think I can wait.” Mano probed and stroked her all the while, placing nipping kisses along her jawbone.

“Then don’t wait. I want you now, Mano. Please. Don’t make me come yet. I want you inside me.”

At her plea, Mano grabbed her by the waist and pressed her down on his straining penis. She closed her eyes and threw back her head, her vagina soft as velvet around him. Whimpering with the building excitement, she began to thrust her hips up to meet him, keeping perfect time with his. He cupped her breasts, pinching the nipples slightly. She bit her lips, a determined expression on her face.

“That is it, *ku’uipo*, take all of me,” he said, feeling himself harden even further. He was near to bursting. With expert ability, he flipped her onto her back, thrusting in to her to the hilt. His name tore from her lips as he quickened his pace. He could feel her begin to contract around him, almost to the brink. The sounds of their lovemaking coupled with the ocean surf drifting in from the lanai. Mano was sure he had never heard a more wonderful sound in all his days. With a final groan of surrender, the lovers reached their peak together.

Chapter Fourteen

Gloria snuggled deeper into the muscled arms surrounding her. The sound of birds and the crashing waves filtered in through the open window. Mano's chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm beneath her cheek. She smiled at the sensation. She had forgotten how great an orgasm made her body feel. She was utterly boneless and happier than she had been for a very long time. Shifting slightly, she disentangled herself from him and headed toward the bathroom.

Smiling to herself, Gloria turned on the shower and stepped in. She was tender in some places and sore in others, but she didn't care. They had made love several more times over the course of the night. Sometimes slow and gentle, others fast and hard. Mano had been insatiable, satisfying every desire he had for her. She giggled and squeezed a dollop of *Liliko'i* body wash onto a cloth.

Sighing contentedly, she scrubbed her body until her flesh was rosy under the warm stream of water. A soft click sounded over the water. The temperature in the bathroom changed slightly, a cooler air thrust into her steam filled sanctuary. The atmosphere of the little room changed. Mano slipped into the shower, the steam and water swirling around his naked body. The liquid ran in rivulets along the chiseled planes of his surfer's physique. Gloria turned to meet him the spray of the shower pulsating on her back. His lips curled into a wicked smile.

"Wait! Won't you turn into a shark?" Gloria asked, holding him outside of the shower stream.

"Not in fresh water, my love. Only in the ocean," he said and stepped farther into the shower. He ran a hand up her body, cupping her breast. She gasped. He stepped closer to her, slanting his mouth across hers in a steamy kiss. She moaned low in her throat. She had kissed him countless times in the past few weeks, but each time it was like the first time. He always tasted so good, sweet and salty. The blood pounded in her ears, tingles of electricity rocketing through her body. He skimmed his hands up and

down her body in urgent caresses as he kissed her deeper. He pulled his lips from hers and kissed a scorching path down her neck to the tops of her breasts.

Gloria threw her head back in ecstasy, the water from the shower pulsed on her flesh. She breathed in deep, the air smelled of passion fruit, steam, and Mano; a heady mixture that thoroughly enthralled her. He licked one nipple, his hand toying with the other. She shivered in delight.

“You make my body crazy, Gloria. Your smell. The feel of you. The taste of you. I cannot seem to satisfy my need for you,” he said against her heated flesh. He sucked the straining peak in the moist heat of his mouth, and she cried out at the sensation. Pleasure, hard and intense, shot down her body, pooling at the juncture of her thighs.

Mano trailed his lips down her skin, skimming little kisses in a quest to her center. She grasped his shoulder to steady herself. Kneeling before her, he captured her hunger with his. Those stormy eyes were almost black now with desire. He was perfect to her, her sea god, her guardian.

“This time is for you, Gloria. Today, I give you pleasure you will never forget.”

“You already have,” she said, a wicked smile pulling on the corners of her mouth. He grinned at her response, his teeth flashing white against his tanned skin.

“Grab hold of that bar, *ku'uipo*, and spread your legs for me,” Mano said. His hands pushed her legs farther apart. She obeyed his command, propping one leg up at an angle on the side of the tub. Moaning in pleasure, she surrendered to the sensations his tongue produced on her fiery core. Lick. Suck. Flick. Taste. She was all but lost.

“You tasted so sweet, love, sweeter than the flesh of the coconut,” Mano said before plunging his tongue deeper into her folds. He lapped hungrily at her, increasing the pressure with each flick of his tongue. Letting out a growl, he plunged one finger into her satiny heat as he continued to lick her. He thrust in and out of her body in rapid succession, a second finger joining the first. He drove her mad with his talented hands and tongue. Gloria cried out at the intensity of it, her nails raking across his shoulders.

“Don’t stop, please, Mano,” she whimpered with unappeased desire. She was coiled tight, ready to burst, begging for the release she needed.

“I have to stop, my love. I wish to be deep inside you when you come apart. I wish you to shatter in my arms,” he said. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he pressed her back to the cool tile of the shower wall. With what sounded like a battle cry, Mano entered her in one thrust. Gloria pulled his head to hers, capturing his lips in a fierce, possessive kiss. Their tongues mated in rhythm with his thrusting.

“Harder, Mano, please, I’m almost there. Come with me!” she begged, tearing her mouth from his. He thrust upward, entering her deeper still. Her world rocked with the sheer power of the sensations flowing through her. She had never experienced such all-consuming passion. This man, the warrior of old, fit with her like no other. A tear leaked from the corner of her eye with the sudden realization that she could never keep him.

“You are mine Gloria, now and forever.” Mano’s voice was strained. “Say it.” He demanded, pumping faster into her, his control almost gone.

“I’m yours, only yours.”

Mano let out a guttural cry, reaching his peak with her. She slumped in his strong arms, their breathing rapid with exertion. She slid down the length of his body, her arms wrapped around his neck. He pressed light kisses on her cheeks, nose, and eyelids.

A few moments passed. Neither of them spoke a word. It wasn’t necessary. Unknown to each other, their thoughts were alike.

“Thank you, goddess. You have defeated this warrior.” Mano whispered in her ear. Gloria could feel the pull of a smile on his lips.

“You may need to carry me to the bed. I don’t think I can walk. I feel like an overcooked noodle and deliciously spineless.”

“You feel delicious to me.” He laughed, throwing open the shower curtain. He turned back to her, scooped her up in his arms, and carried her to the bed.

“Whatever will you do with me now?” Gloria giggled. “I’m dripping on the quilt.” Her laughter danced through the room.

Mano lay down next to on the bed. “I guess I will have to dry you off.”

Her laughter turned to sighs, then moans of sheer delight as he did just that.

Chapter Fifteen

The sound of a slamming car door jolted Gloria and Mano from their comfortable positions tangled in each other's arms. She bolted from the bed, her eyes scouring the room for her clothes. Grabbing the shorts piled on the floor, she shoved her legs in as fast as humanly possible. Mano turned on his side, stretched out on the bed as naked as the day he was born. A full smile dancing on his lips matched the satisfied twinkle in his eyes.

"Shit! Get up, put some clothes on! Omana is home!" Gloria said, struggling to get her bra clasped. She didn't relish getting caught the morning after by her great aunt. He rose from the bed, all long sleek planes and bronzed skin. "Don't you ever get tired?" Gloria asked breathlessly, pausing long enough to gap at his already demanding erection.

"I will never tire of you," he said, stalking toward her. She dodged past him, scooping up her tank top. He grabbed her by the waist, yanking her tight against him. He ground his incredible length against her. She bit her lower lip, swallowing the moan that threatened to escape.

They didn't have time for this. Omana would be in the house any minute. Gloria wiggled against Mano, desperate to be free. He slid one hand up, cupping her breast, teasing the already hardened peak through the cotton of her bra.

"Mano, please. Stop. I can't," Gloria said. Despite her protest, she arched forward, thrusting her breast farther into his eager palm. She rubbed her bottom against the hard ridge of his erection. He nipped at her earlobe.

"Do you truly wish me to stop?" Mano asked, his tongue tracing the delicate whirls of her ear.

"Yes. I can't, not with Omana in the other room." Gloria slid a free hand behind her, down his washboard abs, and rested her teasing fingers on his penis. He growled low in his throat. "Later. I promise. Later I will satisfy you, and this," she said as she

lightly stroked him.

“I pray you keep your promise, or I will be forced to punish you.” He pumped himself faster against her hand. He dropped his free hand down her stomach into the waistband of her shorts. He hissed his pleasure when his fingertips met her wet core. She was so hot and wet. She bucked at the intrusion, a moan ripping from her throat as he strummed her sex.

“Gloria, I must show you what I picked up in...oh my!” A crash accompanied the soft sound of Omana’s voice. Shocked, Gloria looked up to see her great aunt, clad in a blindly bright green muumuu, standing in the doorway to her room. A box of papers, books, and other knickknacks lay at her feet, its contents now littering the tile floor.

Gloria jumped from Mano’s arms as if she were being chased by fast flowing lava. Mano grabbed the sheet from the bottom of the bed and covered his lower half from the older woman’s gaze. Gloria scooped up her tank top from the floor and yanked it on.

“Aunt Monie, I’m sorry,” Gloria said, taking a hesitant step toward her aunt.

“Quite all right, dear. Would you children be angels and pick up this box for me? I feel the need for a very strong cup of coffee, perhaps with a shot of something in it. When you are feeling ready, please bring the box out to the living room. And darlings, put on some clothes before you come out,” Omana said. Her face was ashen, but a brave smile was on her lips. With a delicate nod, she walked to the kitchen, shutting the door slightly behind her.

Gloria bent down and began picking up the contents of the overturned box. Mano knelt beside her.

“Gloria. I am sorry to have caused this trouble,” he said. He put his index finger under her chin and tipped her face to meet his gaze. She stared deeply into those gray eyes, almost drowning in his handsome face. In that moment she knew the emotion she had been fighting for weeks.

The feeling she didn't want to name. She loved this handsome warrior, this man from another time, this Guardian.

And she could never keep him.

Oh shit, she thought, *I'm in trouble*. Tearing her gaze away before he read too much on her features, Gloria turned her attention back to the task at hand.

"It's okay. I think Omana was just a little shocked, that's all. I mean, you did have your hand down my pants," she said, trying to make light of the whole escapade.

"Go put some clothes on and we'll take this stuff out to Omana." He stood up and disappeared into the bathroom. Gloria dropped her head into her hands and surrendered to her embarrassment.

A few minutes later, after Mano had dressed and Gloria had finished picking up, the couple joined Omana in the living room. The older woman, coffee cup in hand, smiled broadly at them. For a brief moment, Gloria swore her great aunt looked like the cat that swallowed the canary.

"Now, my darlings, I wish to apologize for barging into Gloria's bedroom this afternoon. I should have knocked." Omana smiled.

"Aunt Monie, I'm sorry, too." Gloria said, coming from the kitchen with cups of coffee for Mano and herself, and handed one to him. Taking a long swig, she peeked over the rim at her aunt.

"Nothing to be sorry for, my little love. It's only natural. I am glad for the both of you. Now, that said, I believe we should never speak over this again." Omana winked at Mano. He threw his head back and laughed. Gloria glared at him. He met her gaze and smiled.

"Sounds like a plan." Gloria said, tearing her gaze from Mano's.

"Shall I show you what I found?" Omana said, placing her coffee cup on the table. She pulled the box closer to her and motioned for the couple to sit. Gloria sat as far from Mano as she could. Mano chuckled low in his throat.

"How was your trip to Hilo?" Gloria asked, peering into the box.

“Lovely. I visited with a friend, wonderful food, wonderful company, engaging weather. I went to visit Dr. Jack O’Conner in Volcano. He is that sweet boy about your age, studying Kilauea. Wonderful scientist, smart child, but needs a lady friend.” Omana started pulling items from the box. “I know it is in here somewhere.”

“What are you looking for, Aunt Monie?” Gloria asked, sitting up and leaning closer to the box.

“I am looking for a beautiful wooden box, possibly belonging to your great uncle. It was sleeping in a pile of papers and books your uncle left with Jack. Your great uncle and Jack studied lava flow patterns and such together in the last few years of my darling Peter’s life. They were wonderful friends. Peter left most of his volcanic studies with Jack in his will.” Omana’s head was almost entirely in the box by now. Papers, books, and pictures littered the glass tabletop. With a squeal of delight, Omana held up a dark Koa wood box in her left hand.

“Success! I have found it, my little loves,” she said happily, and handed the carved box to Gloria.

Gloria turned the box over in her hands. The wood was a deep brown, rich and moist, and carved in the most intricate pattern she had ever seen. The cover was a tableau of a shark, mouth agape, flashing menacing teeth with waves crashing around the animal. The back was a design of a man, a spear raised over his head. There was something oddly familiar on the male carvings features. Gloria handed the box to Mano.

Mano lovingly caressed the wood. Gloria watched his movements intently. He was thoroughly engrossed in the pictures.

“This is a puzzle box.” His words came out in a whisper. “A *kahuna* has blessed this box.”

“You’ve seen something like this before?” Gloria asked, sliding closer to him. Her gaze followed each caress of his fingers.

“Many times. This box must have been in your family for centuries. The carving

depicts a shark as your *aumakua*.”

“If it’s a puzzle box, does that mean there’s something inside?” Gloria asked.

“Peter had this for years,” Omana said. “He used to keep it on his desk at the office. You remember when he worked there, Gloria?”

“Sure. My Great Uncle Peter was a well known volcanologist,” she told Mano. “He studied lava flow, eruptions, and the historic significance of the Kilauea Volcano.”

No sooner than Mano opened his mouth to speak, a pounding on the front screen door silenced any comments.

“What do you want? I thought I told you to stay away from us.” Gloria said when she reached the door. Jumping to his feet, Mano went to stand behind her, a frown creasing his brow when his eyes landed on Martin Stranberg.

“I stopped by for a couple of reasons. May I come in?” Martin asked. Once again, he was overdressed for this casual Kona Town. The man’s dark blue sport coat looked hot and cumbersome in the tropical sun. Tan slacks, dress loafers, and a polo shirt in white completed his business-casual ensemble.

“Aunt Monie, that vile man is here and he wants to come in,” Gloria said over her shoulder. Mano hid a smile behind his hand. Stranberg’s mouth pinched tightly together in barely concealed anger.

“Let him in, my dear. Simply because we are at war does not permit us to be uncivil,” Omana said out from the living room.

Gloria pulled open the screen door, allowing Martin access. The man brushed past her and Mano. His face twisted in disgust when he saw Mano.

“Straight back that way, Mr. Stranberg,” Gloria said as she closed the door. Mano followed behind the man, not wanting the real estate developer to snoop around the house – or too close to Gloria.

Martin faced off with Omana. The older woman was calm but absolutely uninviting. She craned her neck to stare up at the taller man.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Stranberg?” Omana asked. Gloria watched as her

aunt secretly shoved the puzzle box back into hiding. Stranberg toyed nervously with the ends of his collar, smiling slightly. He looked guilty.

Gloria met Mano's gaze. The shark man's full lips were pulled into a tight line. He did not like having Martin in the house and did very little to hide it.

"I have come to remind you that the bulldozing of this house will commence in three days' time. You need to be out of here by then," Stranberg said, a look of victory on his face.

"You can't just bulldoze our house!" Gloria advanced on the man. Mano grabbed her arm and pulled her back to him.

"You have no proof the land belongs to your family," Martin reminded her. "My corporation has given you and your aunt ample time to provide the paperwork, yet nothing."

"You can't just kick people out of their homes. That's *wrong*," Gloria said to him.

"You would do well to control your temper, Gloria. If you had played nice with me earlier I might have been lenient a little while longer. Which brings me to my next topic of discussion. My company has informed me the offer we made to you previously, Ms. Grant, is no longer available."

"You're nothing but a son of a bitch." Gloria shook off Mano's grip and stood almost toe to toe with Stranberg, hands on her hips, a look of unadulterated anger across her face.

"Watch it, you little bitch! I have been patient with your family, but even I have a breaking point. You and your aunt pack up and get out in three days' time or I will personally throw you out. If you had played nicer with me, I would have been more inclined to help you out." Stranberg grabbed Gloria's upper arm in a viselike grip. Gloria didn't back down.

Mano saw red. No one manhandled his woman. "Take your hands from her," he said. Stranberg's head snapped up, his eyes darting from Gloria to Mano.

“Let the bitch take care of herself. This is none of your concern.” Stranberg shoved Gloria from him. She teetered slightly, throwing her hands out to steady herself. Mano grabbed a handful of the other man’s shirt and hauled him over the coffee table. Stranberg fought Mano’s grip to no avail. The shark man was clearly stronger.

“If your hand ever touches Gloria again, I will feed you to the sea,” Mano said into the man’s fear-stricken face.

“Mano. Let him go. It’s okay. He didn’t hurt me.” Mano felt the soft touch of her hand on his bicep. Looking down at her, he felt the haze subside somewhat.

“For you, ku’uipo.” Mano yanked the other man down the hallway. With a powerful shove, he sent Stranberg out the door and down the front steps. The other man stumbled under the push and fell to the dirt in an undignified heap. Soft chanting came from Mano’s mouth.

“Three days’ time and I will be back with the bulldozers. And no brainless, overmuscled surf bum is going to save you,” Stranberg said as he got into his car. The car sputtered but wouldn’t turn over.

Mano smiled wickedly at the sight of Martin exiting the dead vehicle in a cloud of profanity. “Call me a cab,” he demanded.

Gloria glanced over at Mano.

“Walk,” Mano shouted down at the man, laughter filling his voice.

“What did you do?” Gloria asked.

“Thank Maui, my love. The trickster god helped us out today.” Mano answered, leading her back into the house.

“We have to find that deed and soon.” Omana whispered. Omana sat on the couch looking pale and drawn. All the usual color and joviality of the charismatic woman was gone. Mano met Gloria’s gaze over Omana’s head. Fear sparked in her dark eyes. She was right. They needed to find the deed or Stranberg would be back with bulldozers and the full moon would rise. He would have no choice but to return to the sea. For the first time in all his years, Mano felt utterly powerless.

Chapter Sixteen

“Omana has gone to lie down. I think the stress has finally gotten to her. I’ve never seen her so pale,” Gloria told Mano when she reentered the living room from Omana’s bedroom. The sun was setting over the ocean, another day lost. Mano had been going through the papers in the box, looking for something, anything that might help them locate the deed. He had pleaded with Pele, Kane, and any god who would listen. They needed help.

“I was unsuccessful with these items,” he said, watching Gloria flop down on the sofa. Fine lines etched her forehead and the corners of her eyes.

“What was in there?” she asked, throwing one arm over her eyes, blocking out the light.

“Only some documents dealing with the volcano, a few old texts on lava flows, and some newspapers.” He sat down next to her.

“Let me see that puzzle box again.”

He reached across the table and grabbed the Koa wood box. Gloria sat up and took it, then turned it over and over in her hands. “I wonder how you open this thing.”

“The boxes I have seen in my lifetime had some sort of clasp or button designed into the carving. Try running your fingers along the planes,” Mano said.

She smoothed the tips of her fingers down the sides of the box. “I don’t feel anything that catches.”

After a few minutes of her fiddling with it, Mano said, “Put the box away and walk down to the shore with me. The sun is going to set soon. I want to share as many sunsets with you as I can before I return to the waves.” He took the box and placed it on the coffee table. Taking her hands in his, he lifted her from the couch.

She smiled up at the handsome man. Silently she followed him, one hand safely captured in his, and out the lanai door. Pausing slightly, she let go of Mano’s hand and scooped up the beach towel that lay haphazard on the deck chair.

“Come on *ku’uipo*. The sun will not wait for us.” Mano laughed as he watched her bound down the stairs after him.

Wordlessly, the couple walked down the hill behind the house. Once they reached the sand, Gloria stopped and tossed off her flip-flops. Her feet slipped into the soft sand. She smiled slightly, a girlish giggle escaping her lips, as the grains tickled her toes. Mano stopped and laughed as he looked down at her. She went up on her tiptoes and pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

Mano reached out to grab her around the waist, but Gloria had other ideas. She laughed and danced out of his reach.

“Gloria, what game are you playing?” he asked, a half-smile tugging at his lips.

“Catch me.” She laughed again and darted down the sand. He fell in behind her, joining the game. The pair ran and played on the sand like children for several minutes until finally he grabbed her and pulled her tight against him.

“I have caught you. What is my reward?” Mano asked, nuzzling her neck. Her soft feminine fragrance teased at his nostrils.

“What do you want?” Gloria asked, pressing gentle kisses along his shadowed jaw. She raised her arms and wrapped them securely around his neck. She aligned her supple curves tightly against him. Mano groaned low in his throat.

“Swim with me.” He said tracing the delicate whorls of her ear with his tongue. She shivered under the assault.

“Now?” Gloria panted out. Her body was on fire. From the urgent way she rubbed her curvy body against him, Mano believed he could lay her out on the sand and take her now. But first, he wanted to swim with her. He wanted her to trust him.

“Not yet, in a few minutes, when the sun has set. Now stop tormenting me with your sweet body and watch the sun set,” he said. Pulling her down with him, he sat in the sand and turned his attention to the setting sun. Gloria nuzzled closer to him as he wrapped an arm around her shoulder. With a sweet sigh, she laid her head against his chest.

The sun was a bright glowing ball of yellow. It reflected with such brilliance on the turquoise water that it almost hurt his eyes to look at it. There were a few fluffy clouds to obscure the view, but that didn't take away from the beauty of the sunset. Mano turned his head from the spectacle for a moment and glanced down at Gloria. The fading light had bathed her skin in a warm golden glow. To leave her when the full moon arrived would tear him apart. He was not sure he was strong enough to step back into the ocean. Her gaze met his, her lush mouth turned up at the corners.

"I fear we may never find the deed. I do not wish to leave you and Omana alone without my protection if we do not," he said.

"We'll find it. God, I hope we find it. I couldn't stand the look in Omana's eyes when Stranberg talked about the bulldozer. She's all I have." She sighed, defeated.

Silence hung in the air between them, the sound of the surf the only respite from total quiet. Gloria snuggled closer to his warmth. It felt so right to be in the powerful man's arms. She felt safe, secure, and protected. Mano treated her like a queen. But now she felt him stiffen slightly beneath her touch. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"I do not wish to leave when the moon rises at all."

The statement hung in the air. Gloria stared out to the sea. Only when the sun had fully dropped below the azure horizon of the ocean did Gloria finally speak.

"I don't want you to go either."

Mano cupped her chin and turned her face back to him. He could see unshed tears in those inky depths. "Shh, do not cry." He pressed a kiss to each cheek.

"I'm not crying. It was just the sun was so bright, it made my eyes water." She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him fiercely, as if she would never let him go.

"Swim with me, *ku'uipo*, Give me this before I am ripped from you forever," he said into her hair. The silky mass flowed free down her back, spilling into hands that rested at her waist.

"I can't. I'm scared." Gloria shivered in his arms, this time not from desire. "I'm

such a chicken, I know that. I'm just too scared. I can't swim with you, not when you are the shark. What if you let the shark take over and try to eat me?"

"I would never harm you, Gloria, you know that." Mano said. He pulled back from her and gazed into her face. Fear was written large across her beautiful features.

"I know that. I just can't get past the part where you grow gills and lots of razor sharp teeth. You swim. I'll watch you from right here."

"As you wish, but be prepared because when I return, you will pay the price for not swimming with me." Mano glanced around him, checking to make sure they were alone on the stretch of beach. Satisfied with their solitude, he stood. Spearing Gloria with a wicked grin, he stripped the shorts from his body. She stared unashamed at his naked form. He felt himself harden under her scrutiny.

"Are you sure you want to go swimming? It looks to me like you might want to stay right here with me." She smiled up at him.

"I will swim. I will enjoy knowing you wait for me. Go back to the house. I will be there in a little while." He leaned down and claimed her mouth. He drank from her lips, building the fires of her desire with each taste he took. Gloria moaned softly against his mouth, that distinctive noise he had come to realize telegraphed her need for him.

With strength he wasn't sure he possessed, he straightened and stepped away from her. She pouted prettily at the loss of his lips.

"I will swim from an hour, then return to you so we may finish our game," Mano said images of Gloria naked and writhing beneath him all at once assaulting him.

"Fine. Party pooper. I'll go back to the house and write. I'll come back down to meet you in one hour," she said. She rose from the sand and dusted off the backs of her legs. "Be careful, the fishing boats are still in the bay," she added over her shoulder as she began trudging up the hill to the house.

When she was no longer in sight, Mano walked to the sea and dove in. Perhaps the ocean would ease some of his worry about the deed. As soon as he was a few feet

from the shore, immersed in the salty water, the change occurred. He felt his flesh shift to the spongy texture of shark skin. His features elongated and morphed. His grey eyes grew large and turned glassy obsidian. Water filled his lungs. He was shark once more.

Chapter Seventeen

Gloria saved her work and powered down the laptop. Rubbing the sore spot on the small of her back, she rose from her chair and glanced at the clock. Nine o'clock, time to go back down to the shore and meet Mano. She grabbed a blanket from the linen closet and headed to the sliding doors.

"I'm going down to the beach to get Mano, Aunt Monie. Do you need anything before I leave? We'll be back in a little bit." Gloria shouted over her shoulder in the direction of her aunt's room. Omana poked her head out.

"You and Mano have a lovely time. I believe I will head to bed." She blew Gloria a kiss and disappeared back in her room.

Gloria slid the door closed behind her and locked it. Whistling to herself, she headed down to the shore. While Mano swam, she had worked on the book for about thirty minutes. She had also showered and put on fresh clothes. She wanted to surprise him with her appearance when she met him.

Reaching the shore, she glanced around, looking for him. The moon, not quite full, cast a silvery glow on the rippling water. Not immediately seeing him, she assumed he was still swimming. She slipped off her shoes and spread the blanket out. With an ungraceful plop, she dropped down on to the sand. She glanced out over the waves. The air was warm and sweet smelling. Gloria took a deep breath, filling her lungs with Hawaii.

If only she could figure out how to keep Mano on land.

Lost in thought, Gloria leaned back on her elbows, waiting for her shark man to appear. The sound of lapping water grew more urgent. Peering out once more, she saw him begin to emerge. A sense of déjà vu washed over her and she smiled at the memory of his first appearance. He had walked from the surf in very much the same fashion, all hard planes and sleek muscles, his bronzed skin and gleaming black hair, shining in the bright moonlight. The mere sight of him coming toward her in all his glory caused

Gloria's mouth to run dry. She grew moist at the thought of him buried deep inside her.

Mano glanced up as he walked across the sand to her. His handsome face split into a beautiful smile. Gloria rose to her feet. She opened her mouth to greet him but was cut short as he yanked her to his wet frame. She squirmed in his arms.

"You're getting me wet." She laughed up at him.

"I enjoy you wet." Mano slanted his lips against hers, silencing any reply she may have had. He ran his hands down her body, toying with the hem of her tank top. She broke away from the kiss and smiled wickedly up at him. Pushing him away so she had room, she whisked the tank top off in a flash. It fell to the blanket. Mano kissed her collarbone, trailing a path down to the tops of her breasts. He placed both hands on the small of her back and pulled her closer to him again. Leaning down, he sucked one nipple into his mouth through the cotton of her bra. Gloria cried out and arched her back, thrust her breast deeper into him. She felt the hardness of his penis against her stomach. She was already on fire, a wild passion this time.

"I want you so much, *ku'uipo*. I cannot control my desire," Mano said, switching his attention to the next breast.

"Take me," she said and rubbed herself against his thigh. She moaned low in her throat as the pressure built.

A growl rumbled deep in his chest as he ripped the shorts from her body. His heat gaze drank in the sight of her exposed body. "Where are your undergarments?" he asked as his hand skimmed down her belly, trailing to the nest of curls. He slipped one finger into her feminine folds. Gloria gasped.

"I didn't wear any. You make me bold," she said as he thrust his finger in and out of her quivering body. "Please, Mano."

"I cannot be gentle this time," he said, pulling his fingers from her slick folds. He lowered her to the blanket beneath, driving her body beneath him.

"I don't want gentle this time. Take me like a warrior. Take me like you do in my dream." She stilled as soon as the words slipped from her mouth. She hadn't meant

to tell him about her dream.

“What dream?” Mano asked. His dark eyes searched her face.

“I have had this dream all my adult life. Almost every night, I dream this ancient warrior returns to me from battle. I’m some sort of native girl. It’s just a naughty fantasy. Nothing special,” Gloria answered. She felt his hardness pressed at her entrance, and she raised her hips, begging him to enter her.

“Is the warrior me?” Mano asked, his self control surprising him. He wanted to pound into her, lose himself in her sweetness.

“I didn’t know it was you until that night we summoned you. I thought you were just someone I conjured up, a figment of my imagination.”

“I have dreamed of you,” Mano said. Gloria’s eyes went wide with surprise. Not allowing her to answer Mano thrust deep into her. She climaxed almost instantly at the feel of him stretching her. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she met him thrust for thrust. There was nothing gentle in his lovemaking tonight. It was as wild and untamed as the ocean itself.

“You are mine. I am yours,” he said as he continued to pound into her. The pressure built and Gloria swam in it. Together, they found their climax. With a harsh shout, he collapsed into her. She accepted his weight gladly.

“I am too heavy for you, *ku’uipo*,” he said, but made no effort to move his large frame.

Gloria smiled into his neck. “You’re just right.”

“You are so beautiful. I do not know what I have done to deserve to be your guardian, but I thank the gods each time I see you.” Mano pulled back and gazed into her dark eyes.

“You’re the beautiful one. Every time we go somewhere, all the ladies are checking you out.”

“You are the only lady I want checking me out.”

Gloria laughed at his adoption of the modern slang. “Okay. Get off, you big

lug. Let's get back to the house, before some police officer finds us making out on the beach." She shoved him playfully. With a groan of defeat, Mano disentangled himself from her lush body. She felt the momentary loss of him, but shook it off and gathered her clothes. Slipping on his discarded shorts, he watched her dress. When she had finished pulling her tank top off over head, she raised her head to meet his gaze.

"What's the matter, big guy?" Gloria asked, seeing the look of dismay on his handsome face.

"We only have one more night together. One more day to find the deed. Then the sea will call me back," Mano said. He slid his arm around her waist and pulled her close once again.

"We'll find the deed," she said, not addressing the topic of his departure. She didn't want to think of the empty bed, the empty place at the dinner table for him, or any other thoughts of him not being part of her life. Still she couldn't bring herself to tell him she loved him. She didn't want to deal with the pain.

"I hope you are correct. Let us return to the house. I wish to spend the remainder of my night wrapped in your arms." He grabbed the blanket off the ground and shook the sand from it. Smiling wide, he snagged her hand in his. Together, bathed in the sweet moonlight, they made their way back to the house.

Chapter Eighteen

“I’m not having any damn luck! If Uncle Peter was alive, I would kill him!”

Gloria shouted down from the hole in the ceiling leading to the attic.

“No need for violence against the dead, my darling,” Omana said from the bottom of the ladder.

“We’ve spent all morning and afternoon on this. There is nothing up here of any use. It’s almost two. I’m coming down.” Gloria climbed down the steps of the ladder, swearing under her breath. “As much as I hate to say this, we might as well start packing. We can put everything in a storage shed until we find a place.”

“We cannot give up yet my love. I refuse to admit defeat. I will make us a simple lunch and we will keep hunting. We still have the rest of today.” Gloria recognized Omana’s tone, the same tone she had used when Gloria had announced one summer she didn’t want to go to college. Omana had launched into a tirade of biblical proportions. Gloria reached out and hugged her diminutive aunt.

“I love you, Aunt Monie. We’ll get through this. I promise.”

“I know, my dear. Now, let us have something to eat and then the hunt continues. Please be a dear and fetch Mano. He is in the garage going through some boxes.” Omana headed into the kitchen.

Unbeknownst to Omana, Gloria had made arrangements to stay with the Hilanis in their *ohana*, or guest house, until a place could be secured for them. She had also spoken to the editor of *West Hawaii Today* newspaper about a job. She was satisfied she could take care of Omana. She had even set up a storage locker for their possessions and called the moving company.

“Mano, lunchtime,” Gloria said into the garage. She heard shuffling of boxes, but didn’t see him. “Where are you?”

She heard a yelp of pain. “I am here.” Mano’s frustrated voice directed her to the left.

“Are you okay?” she asked when he came into view. He was rubbing the right side of his leg.

“I am unharmed. I merely scrapped my leg on some lava rock in this box,” Mano said. He bent his long frame to pick up the box.

“Are you bleeding?” Gloria asked.

“Only a little blood, a small wound, nothing serious, *ku’uipo*. Although if you wish to kiss it better, I will not deny you.”

“You big goofball. Did you have any luck?”

“Perhaps. There a few interesting items in this box I wish to go through. You can help me while we are waiting for lunch,” Mano said. He herded her to the door, box in hand. Gloria peered inside, trying to get a good look at the contents.

“What’s in there? I’ve never seen some of that stuff before.” Tikis, lava stone tablets, and rolls of tapa material rested inside the cardboard.

“Patience, *ku’uipo*, I will take it into the living area.” Mano shoved her playfully in the back with the box. He crossed the few feet from the door to the coffee table and overturned the box. Everything spilled out.

“Aunt Monie, come see what Mano found in the garage,” Gloria called. She reached down and picked up a carved tiki, then ran a finger across its curved surface. Setting it down, she scooped up a piece of tapa material. Omana appeared in the doorway, dishtowel in one hand and a plate of sandwiches in the other.

“What have you found, my dear boy?” Omana set the plate on the table and looked over the objects on the table.

“Aunt Monie, what does this say?” Gloria asked, passing a piece of lava rock to Omana. Several sentences of Hawaiian scripture were scrawled across the front.

“I am not sure. Mano, darling, can you decipher this?” Omana asked.

The shark man took the proffered rock. His face distorted in thought. Gloria laughed under her breath. “So serious,” Gloria said, doing her best Shirley Temple impression. He shot her a quelling glance.

“It says *Mahele lua, ho’okowa, ho’oka’awale*,” he finally said. “It roughly translates to ‘divide into two parts, separate by space, keep a distance’.” He ran a fingertip into the grooves of the writing, the rough lava scraping his finger slightly.

“Sounds kind of like a Hawaiian ‘Open Sesame.’ What’s the chant for?” Gloria asked.

Mano had the strangest expression on his face. “It is for the protection of something very important. Only a great *kahuna* would know this chant. Why would your uncle have this?”

Omana took the stone from Mano. She turned it over and over in her weathered hands. She looked over the back of the stone, and a gasp escaped her lips.

“Mano, look at this. I believe you missed this part in your translation.” Omana held up the stone for he and Gloria to view. On the back was carved a shark, mouth agape, similar in design to the puzzle box.

“Do you think this chant might open the puzzle box?” Gloria asked.

Omana’s eyes lit up. “Let us try it. It will be a much-deserved break from all this searching for the deed. A little fun is just what we need.” Omana dashed into her bedroom, where she had placed the puzzle box for safe keeping.

“Can you make this chant work? Do you need anything else?” Gloria asked.

“Here we are, darlings.” Omana flounced into the room, the folds of her red muumuu floating around her, and handed the box to Mano. “Work your magic, my little love.”

“Gloria, hold the lava so I am able to read from it,” Mano asked holding the box outstretched in both hands. Taking up place next to him, Gloria did as she was asked.

He took a deep breath and reached down deep inside him. Closing his eyes, he silently asked Kane for his protection and guidance on this task. An uneasy feeling filled the pit of his stomach, but he would speak the chant for Omana’s sake.

“I am not sure this will work,” he said softly.

“It’s okay if it doesn’t. It will just be neat to see what’s inside the box.” Gloria squeezed his shoulder in reassurance.

Slowly Mano began the chant, turning the Koa wood box over and over in his hands as he spoke. Feeling around the carving with his fingertips, he searched for a latch or catch of some kind. He continued the chant, the power of the words welling deep within him as his voice got stronger. He stopped turning the box in his hands, the shark tableau face up in his palms. The eyes of the animal seemed to wink at him from the stained wood. Still chanting, he pressed the pad of his thumb to the right eye of the animal. An unknown force propelled him as he pushed hard on the piece of wood. A soft click was heard. Mano stopped chanting and met the gazes of each woman.

“What was that?” Gloria said.

Mano felt around the edges of the box, now separated. “It worked. The box has divided.” He pulled the top section of the box off and peered down into the exposed chamber. A small golden key lay at the bottom. Plucking the key from its hiding place, he handed it to Omana.

“What is this key for?”

“It looks like a safe deposit box key. I do not have a safe deposit box,” Omana said, holding the tiny key in the palm of her hand.

“It says ‘First Hawaiian’ on it, Aunt Omana. Do you think it was Great Uncle Peter’s?” Gloria asked.

“I think it would be wise for us to take a short automobile ride to the bank. Do you not agree, darlings?” Omana asked. She grabbed her purse and large straw hat and headed toward the driveway. “Gloria love, you drive, please. I am little too frazzled at the moment.”

Mano and Gloria exchanged surprised glances and followed suit. Stopping at the door, Gloria scooped up her keys and purse.

“I guess we’re going for a drive.” Gloria said as she ushered Mano out the door.

“What is a safe deposit box?” he asked.

“I’ll explain it on the way.” Gloria locked the front door behind her.

Chapter Nineteen

“Mrs. Grant. How are you today?” the smiling clerk greeted Omana the minute the threesome crossed the threshold.

“My dear, I wish to see the manager please.” Omana said to the perky blonde behind the counter.

“Are you sure there isn’t anything I can help you with?” The bubbly woman asked Omana. Gloria felt her jealousy bite at her slightly as the woman devoured Mano with her eyes. The woman was beautiful, with icy blue eyes, long golden hair, and trim and toned body. With an ache in her stomach, she realized the woman looked a lot like Mandy, James’s bed buddy. This beauty was the kind who could take men away from a woman like Gloria and never bat a pretty little eyelash.

“No, thank you,” Gloria said. “We really need to see Mr. Apaka, the manager. Tell him Omana Grant is here. We’re friends of his.” Anything to get the lithe supermodel out of Mano’s sight.

“I’ll get him. Just a moment, please.” The clerk disappeared into a back room somewhere. A few minutes ticked by before a middle-aged Hawaiian man returned in her place.

“Mrs. Grant, I understand you want to see me.”

Mr. Apaka had been a friend of the family for years. Kona was truly a tight-knit community. “Gloria! How nice to see you. I didn’t know you were back in town.”

“Hi, Pat.” Gloria smiled in greeting to the man.

“Pat, darling,” Omana said, “I hate to be rude, but I need to get down to business. We have found this key and were wondering if you could help us with it.” She extracted the key from her purse and handed it to Mr. Apaka.

“Let me go check some things, Mrs. Grant. I’ll be right back.” The banker took the key, then, after seating Omana at a desk, headed disappeared behind closed doors again.

As the minutes ticked by, the threesome sat silently waiting, wondering what Mr. Apaka might tell them about the key.

“Here we go,” he said when he returned with a stack of papers in his hand. “It appears your husband Peter purchased a safe deposit box about five years ago. I’ll need you to sign some paperwork and then we can go in the back and open her up.” He fanned the papers across the desk to Omana. She read them over carefully and signed where Mr. Apaka indicated.

“Okay, looks good. Let’s go. Gloria, you and your friend will have to stay out here. I can only let the box holder come back with me.” Mr. Apaka smiled apologetically at the younger woman.

“That’s fine, Pat. Mano and I can wait here.” Gloria smiled back at the family friend. Mano had been keeping a distance from the women, his eyes drinking in the new sights, sounds, and smells of the bank. Gloria watched as the banker and Omana went back to the vault.

“Can I help with anything sir?” The pretty blonde asked Mano. Gloria eyed the woman and it occurred to her that she was pouting. Mano smiled his high-voltage smile and halted all female traffic in the bank. Women, young and old, simply stared at the handsome shark man.

“*Mahalo*, thank you, I am fine,” he said, still smiling at the woman. Gloria ground an inch off her back molars. She hated herself for this jealous streak, but still it bothered her. But he returned to her side, all eyes following him, drinking in his natural grace. Naturally his masculine beauty and sculpted body did nothing but captivate those around him. He placed an arm around Gloria’s shoulder, but she shrugged him off, more angry with herself than him.

“What is the matter, *ku’uipo*? Have I done something wrong?” Mano asked, his handsome features shifted in concern.

“No. You didn’t do anything wrong. It was that peroxide Barbie doll over there.”

“The woman behind the counter?” Mano asked, clearly confused. Cupping her

chin in his hand, he forced her to meet his gaze. “You are jealous.”

“No, I’m not.” Gloria tried to break the hold he had on her. Damn him, he could read her so well.

“You are jealous,” said he repeated, as a smug grin split his lips.

“You don’t have to look so damn happy about it,” Gloria said.

“You think I would want that woman, when only last night I found paradise buried deep inside you?”

“Mano. Lower your voice, people will hear you,” Gloria said, as she felt heat spread over her face.

“I cannot. You must understand, no other holds interest for me. Only you.”

Mano brushed his lips across hers in a feathery light kiss. A jolt of desire zinged through her veins. They had spent last night curled in each other’s arms. They had not made love since the beach, but slept holding each other, each unwilling to let go.

“Darlings! Success!” Omana’s jubilant cry filled the air. Omana dashed from the vault area, waving a folded paper. “We have it!” She shoved the paper into Gloria’s hands, her face flushed with excitement. “Look, my love, look what your uncle left us!”

Gloria broke her gaze from her aunt’s excited face. The sheer look of joy and relief seemed to take years from her weathered features. She looked down at the paper in her hand.

It was the deed.

“Aunt Omana, did you know Uncle Peter had this box?” Gloria asked, the realization not yet fully sinking in to her mind.

“That no longer matters, darling. We have the deed. No bulldozers, no packing boxes. We are free to live in our own home.” Omana hugged Gloria to her. The smaller woman smiled at Mano over Gloria’s shoulder. “Come here, my dear boy, you are part of this family as well.” She held out her hand to Mano.

Hesitant at first, Mano took a few small steps toward the woman. Gloria turned in Omana’s arms. She smiled up at him and his hesitation was lost.

“Come here, big guy.” The three hugged each other tightly and laughed in euphoric joy. The patrons of the bank stared curiously at them as if they were crazy.

“Well, I think I’m going to pay a visit to Mr. Martin Stranberg,” Gloria said, breaking away from the hug. She folded the deed and secured it safely in her purse. “Aunt Monie, call Leilani and tell her we have the deed. The house and the land are *ours*,” Gloria stated, herding her family toward the door. She was a woman on a mission. Martin Stranberg was about to be downsized.

* * * *

“Miss, you can’t go in there. Miss, stop!”

The thin woman guarding the door to the conference room proved no match for Gloria’s determination. Slamming open the glass doors, she marched in, purposeful and smug. She strode confidently into the room to find several men seated around a large table. Martin stood at the head, a projected presentation illuminating his face.

“It’s alright, Mrs. Meyers.” Martin dismissed the watchdog secretary with a flick of his wrist. “Your timing is impeccable, Gloria. I was just going over the plans for the use of your land. Or, should I say, your former land?” Martin smirked at her.

“These are nice. Is that a swimming pool where my family’s home stands? Does it have a water slide?” Gloria asked as she approached the screen.

“Yes, I believe it does. Now if you don’t mind, I’ll ask you to wait in my office. I am almost finished with this presentation.”

“You’re finished all right. You’re finished pushing me and my aunt around. Your presentation is through. Say goodbye, Martin.” Smiling smugly, she extracted the deed from her purse. With a quizzical look, Martin took the paper from her hand.

“What’s the meaning of this, Stranberg? What the hell is going on?” an older man said. “Get this woman out of here.” The man reached over the conference table to the speaker phone sitting in the center.

“You must be Mr. Demali,” Gloria said to him, “the man who wants my great aunt’s house so he can bulldoze my family heritage for a tacky vacation home.”

“So you are Mrs. Grant’s charming niece. Martin has told me so much about you.” Demali smirked at her.

“I am. And that piece of paper which Mr. Stranberg is holding in his shaky hand is the deed to my great aunt’s house and the land it sits on. This means you can get your bulldozers the *hell* off our property.” Gloria snatched the deed back from Martin.

“Martin, what’s going on?” Demali asked. “I thought we purchased that house outright. What is this nonsense about a deed?”

Martin looked queasy. Gloria smiled behind her hand as she watched the man squirm under his boss’ steely gaze. He glanced hastily in her direction.

“Allow me to explain.” Gloria began. “Martin has been threatening my eighty-eight-year-old aunt with eviction for months. She has never sold him the property, regardless of what this sleazebag has told you. No money ever changed hands.”

“Is what this young woman is saying true?” Mr. Demali said, his face mottled purple with rage.

“Not exactly, sir.” Martin’s face had gone ashen.

Gloria was enjoying this entirely too much. But now she had had her fun and she wanted to get home to her family. She had made a stop at Leilani’s office before storming the conference room, wanting to make sure nothing was amiss with the deed. The lawyer had assured her everything appeared to be in order. Gloria had heaved a huge sigh of relief. Her family was safe. Omana was going to be okay. Everything had fallen into place, except for one thing.

Gloria lost herself in thought for a moment.

The full moon was tonight.

“Well, this has been swell, but I need to get home,” Gloria said over the argument that had ensued. “I’ll let you giants of industry debate this issue. My family is waiting.”

“Miss, you can’t leave until this situation is resolved.” Demali stopped her at the door, his grip like steel on her bicep.

“It’s resolved, Mr. Demali. I get my house and you get your bulldozers off my land. If not, I’ll have my attorney in here. She assures me the deed is legal and binding. *Aloha.*” Gloria said. Shaking her arm from his grip, Gloria strode from the conference room.

“*Stranberg!*” Gloria heard from behind her, and she laughed all the way to the parking lot. Sliding into the Jeep, she gunned the engine and headed home. To Mano.

Chapter Twenty

The smell of curry and a host of other exotic spices assaulted Gloria the second she entered the house. The sounds of laughter and clattering cookware warmed her heart and caused her to grin. Peeking her head into the kitchen, her smile grew wider at the cheery sight. Omana, covered in flour and another brightly colored muumuu, stood sentinel in front of the stove. A large pot simmered on the front burner. Mano, clad in swim shorts and an apron, stood beside her.

“Now we stir in the paprika,” Omana said to her pupil. He simply nodded, a thoroughly confused expression on his beautiful face. Gloria allowed herself a full-bodied laugh, unable to contain her amusement.

Mano turned around fast at the sound of her laughter. “Gloria! Save me. Omana is making me cook.” He darted past Omana and took refuge at the younger woman’s side.

Gloria put her hand to his cheek sympathetically. “My poor shark man, forced to cook. You didn’t let him mess anything up, did you?” She smiled over his shoulder at her aunt.

The older woman’s shoulders heaved with laughter. “No. He complained more than helped. How was the meeting?”

“It went well. I have a feeling we’ll be receiving an apology from Mr. Demali, the resort CEO, any day now.” Gloria stepped into the kitchen. She lowered her nose to the pot, breathing in the foreign aroma wafting from within.

“You’re making tikka masala? You never make this.” Gloria grabbed the spoon from its rest and tested the contents of the pot.

“It is a very special occasion. We secured the deed and our future,” Omana said, shoos Gloria from the pot. “And this is Mano’s last night with us,” Omana added softly.

Gloria felt her chest seize. She blinked away the pinpricks of tears welling

behind her eyes. “We knew he would have to leave. It was all part of the deal,” she finally said. She met Mano’s gaze across the room. Fire burned in those stormy depths, and an emotion she couldn’t name.

“Do not mar our celebration with talk of my leaving. We will eat and laugh and drink, enjoying each other for one last night.” Mano’s words seemed harmless enough, but Gloria didn’t miss the look of hunger that shone on his face. She wet her lips, drinking in the planes of his body, trying to memorize each line, each sleek angle before he was gone from her forever.

“Lovely sentiment, my little love. Dinner is almost ready. Mano darling, please set the table. Gloria, pour some wine, please. We’re celebrating!”

Omana ushered them out of the kitchen. Mano’s hand snaked out and grabbed the belt loop on Gloria’s shorts. Yanking her to him, he pulled her to him, side to side. Nuzzling her neck, he placed soft kisses behind her ear. She sighed, the fires of desire all at once raging inside of her.

“I meant what I said about enjoying each other one last night. I want to spend my last night as a man, locked in your arms,” Mano said nibbling on her earlobe. The action elicited a shudder from deep within Gloria.

“Come to me tonight, after Omana has gone to bed.” Gloria slid her palm down the hard length of his torso to cup him boldly through his shorts. He groaned low in his throat at her actions.

“That is enough, children. Attend to your chores and stop fondling each other in the dining room,” Omana said from the kitchen. The couple hesitantly separated.

“That woman has eyes in the back of her head,” Gloria said, reaching for the wine. Mano nodded and began setting the table.

* * * *

The meal was festive but somber. The threesome understood this would be the last night with Mano. Once the dishes had been cleared and the special dessert of Macadamia nut pie was eaten, Mano left to take a walk on the beach. Smiling, he told

the women he wanted to feel the sand between his toes before he grew fins again.

Gloria, having utilized the time to set the scene for seduction, was ensconced on her bed partially wrapped in the red-and-white quilt. She had showered, primped, and preened until her skin shone. Her body still carried a rosy flush from the warm water.

Originally, her plan had been to slip into her UNLV sleep shirt, but when she emerged from the bathroom, a silky teal nightie greeted her. She had smiled at the unexpected gift, knowing it had come from Omana. She didn't really want to think about her great aunt buying her lingerie, but tonight was too special for her to care.

The bedside light was the only illumination in the room. It cast a soft, supple glow throughout. Gloria tossed the book she had been reading to the side and got out of the bed. She rearranged the quilt invitingly. Laughing at her own impatience, she wondered where Mano was. She felt flutters of excitement at the coming evening's planned interlude. They had made love a number of times, but the bittersweet aura of the night crept into her heart as she waited for her shark man lover. She twisted at the thought of the lonely morning to come. She knew it was inevitable but refused to give in to its sorrowful reality.

Hearing the sliding door open spurred her to action. Dashing to the radio, Gloria flipped on the pre-tuned soft music offering from the CD she had loaded earlier. Running a hand down her gown, she smoothed any imaginary wrinkles from her negligee. Crossing the room once more, she took a seat on the edge of the bed, feeling like a young girl in love. Shaking her head at the thought, she banished it from her mind. She was almost thirty, more than old enough to be a sophisticated woman of the world. When the door opened, however, all thoughts of sophistication vaporized at the site of her brooding lover standing before her.

Mano's massive frame filled her small doorway. The kitchen light behind him haloed his muscular immensity and cast his features into a smoldering semi-shadow. Unmoving, like a Greek statue, he waited for his woman to summon him to her. Gloria felt the blood pounding her ears. He was wearing tight jeans and a T-shirt that seemed

sprayed on to his perfectly formed chest. He grasped the sides of the door frame, causing his biceps to test the limits of the flimsy cotton shirt. The considerable bugle buried prominently in his denim betrayed cool demeanor. She grew hot at the memory of his body pressed into her, naked and exposed to her wandering eyes and fingers. She wanted him that way now. She wanted to tear the very clothes from him and feast upon the chiseled body underneath.

“Are you going to stand there all night?” she asked, rising to her feet. Mano held out his hand as she took a step closer to him, eager to close the distance between them.

“I want to memorize the sight of you. So that when I am lost in the cold ocean, I can call to mind the vision of you, waiting for me in silk the color of the sea,” Mano said, his voice rumbling low in his chest.

Gloria felt her knees weaken at his words. His voice was soft as cashmere, caressing down her body.

Finally, he took a step into the room. With a soft click, he closed the door behind him. Standing mere inches from her, he ran a languorous hand up her arm. Resting it on her jaw line, he slid the pad of his thumb over her full lips.

Gloria closed her eyes. His touch was feather light, but she felt it straight to her core. Moisture flooded the juncture of her thighs.

“Open your eyes, *ku'uipo*. I want to see the passion burn in them when I claim you.” Mano nuzzled her neck on the other side of her jaw and pressed a kiss into her shoulder blade. Gloria felt his other hand wrap around her waist and rest in the small of her back. With gentleness at odds with his warrior's strength, he pulled her flush to his body. She wrapped her arms around his neck and opened her eyes, meeting the stormy depths.

“Kiss me,” Gloria said, guiding his lips to hers. The kiss, gentle at first, burned through her. He wet the seam of her mouth with his tongue. She moaned her permission. He swept his tongue inside her mouth, a man long starved for the taste of

her. She was sweet, sweeter than any fruit the island offered up, and he was drunk on her being.

Breaking free from her demanding mouth, Mano kissed and licked a path down her neck until he reached the straining neckline of the nightgown. Gloria felt her nipples tighten. The sensation of the cool silk tugging against the hard buds swelling on her chest drove her mad. He palmed her right breast, flicking the pad of his thumb in a lazy circle around the pebbled nub. Gloria cried out with pleasure, her back arched to press more of her aching flesh into his hands.

“Command me, summoner. I am here as your guardian. It is my duty to follow your wishes.” Mano dropped to his knees in front of her, his hands skimming down her body as he went. Gloria looked down, awed at the sight of this fierce warrior in supplication before her. “Whatever you desire, I will give.”

He inched his palms up the smooth skin of her legs, stopping short of the hem of her nightie.

Gloria stared into the steely depths of Mano’s eyes. She watched as he toyed with the ends of her gown.

“Stay with me. That is my command,” she said. Her voice was barely audible. She wasn’t even sure he heard her until his hands stilled on her thighs. He searched her face. His handsome features were torn, an inner battle visible in each line.

“What?”

“Stay with me. Forever. I love you,” Gloria whispered, coming to her knees beside him. She placed her hand on the side of his face. She blinked back the tears threatening to spill forth, and brushed a gentle kiss on his lush lips.

“I cannot go against the gods,” Mano whispered against her lips. “I am *aumakua*. It is my curse to return to the sea.”

She cupped his face in her hands, losing herself in the feel of him against her. “Stay with me, please. I can’t survive without you.”

Mano swept her to him, kissing her hard and fast. He scooped her up with little

ceremony and deposited her in the center of the bed.

“Nor I without you,” he said. “But I cannot. It is forbidden. Please do not ask me to defy the gods. They will punish us if I do not return. I will not have them hurt you because of my selfishness. Ask of me anything but that.”

“Make love to me, then. If I can’t have you forever, I want you tonight.”

“You shall have me, goddess.” He rose up on his knees and stripped off the T-shirt. Gloria drew a solitary fingertip along the corded muscles at his neck. Bringing her other hand to trace each sculpted muscle of his chest, she ran her palms down the smooth lines of his rib cage. He was so well built, so hard, and so utterly masculine that she almost wept at the beauty of him. Skimming one hand into the waistband of his jeans, she cupped him boldly. He was hot and hard. A groan ripped from his lips and he ground himself against her palm. She squeezed him, reveling in his steely length.

“Enough! My turn,” Mano growled, yanking her hand from his jeans. He slid down her body, spreading her thighs wider to accommodate his large frame. “Just a little taste.”

Bunching the hem of her nightie up around her waist at first, he simply stared at her. Raising his gaze to hers, the devastating shark man licked his lips. Gloria whimpered with need.

“Easy, *ku’uipo*. I will take care of that ache.”

She almost flew off the mattress at the first swipe of his tongue. He circled her center, alternating licks and sucks on her heated flesh. He continued making love to her with his mouth until she writhed like a thing possessed.

“Mano...stop...enough.” Gloria tunneled her fingers through his wavy hair. He murmured his approval against her, sending shivers of pure sensation up and down her body. She cried out, nearing the edge, and wanting more. Mano was unrelenting in his demands on her body. He pushed a finger deep, the slick heat of her muscles clenching around him. A spasm hit her, shaking her to the core, and she exploded with desire. A second finger joined the first. He kissed his way up her body, pumping his fingers in and

out of her body. She felt the building of her orgasm.

“Mano...please...” Gloria said. Removing his fingers from her body, he moved to the side of the bed. The space around her body felt cold without him. She ran a fingertip down his spine as he shucked off his jeans. He turned back to face her, and Gloria drank in the sight of his erection. The thick shaft thrust defiantly from the nest of dark curls. She moistened her lips and swallowed hard at the size of him. “Wow.”

Mano chuckled at her assessment, then claimed her lips in a demanding kiss. She felt the tip of his erection at her entrance. Wrapping her legs tight around his waist, she lifted her hips in an unconscious plea. With what could have been classified as battle cry, Mano surged into her fiery heat. She felt him expand inside her, growing thicker and harder with each thrust. She rocked her hips, meeting him stroke for stroke. She clawed at his back, desperate to hold on to him. Pinpricks of light burst behind her eyes. Her body vibrated with pleasure. His groan of pleasure mixed with her own cry of surrender as they reached their peak together. He drove deep into her one last time, her muscles milking every last ounce of pleasure from him.

He collapsed into her arms.

They lay in the silence of the night for several minutes. Mano dragged in great gulps of breath in an effort to control his erratic heart rate. Gloria welcomed the heavy weight of him. After a few more moments, he pulled back and stared into her flushed face.

She smiled widely at him.

“I would stay with you forever if I could,” he said. “I love you, I will always love you.” Leaning down, he kissed her love-swollen lips. Gloria kissed him back with all the love in her heart.

Unwilling to leave her, Mano stroked her body with gentle caresses, bringing her body to its peak slowly. Once more he made love to her, liquid and languid, a lovemaking she knew she would remember forever. Not until the first strains of pink dusted the sky did the lovers sleep, lulled there by the sound of the pounding surf.

* * * *

The sun was too damn bright. Gloria inhaled sharply, Mano's scent at once filling her nostrils. She rolled over, curling herself deeper around her pillow. Breathing in deep the scent of sea, sand, and man helped push the cobwebs from her sleepy, clogged brain. She flung out a hand toward the other side of the bed and reached for him. Her eyes flew open when her hand collided not with the warm flesh of the man, but the cool cotton of the sheets. The rumpled covers on Mano's side of the bed were the only sign another had inhabited them.

Gloria shook her head to clear it further and crawled out of bed. Padding across the room, she searched the bathroom. The room was silent. Mano's clothes rested in a neatly folded pile on the counter by the sink. Gloria's throat began to close. Running from the bathroom, she threw open the bedroom door and flew into the living room. Hoping against the truth, she frantically searched the house. He was gone.

Defeated, Gloria collapsed on the sofa, tears running unchecked down her cheeks. Her intellectual side fought to remind her Mano was never meant to stay. But her heart won the battle of wills. Dropping her head into her hands, she sobbed.

She didn't know how long she sat there until Omana found her. With all her infinite knowledge and worldly ways, there was nothing her great aunt could do for her now. Sitting down beside her, Omana hugged Gloria to her tightly.

"I can't believe he's really gone." Gloria said once she managed to control the tears.

"We knew he was not meant to stay with us. He was here to help us find the deed. I should have never encouraged you to get involved with him, but I never expected you to fall in love with him. I blame myself for this grief." Omana rocked Gloria in her arms.

"I do love him, Aunt Monie. It's not your fault. It would have happened without you playing matchmaker. I think I was always meant to love him." Gloria wiped the remaining tears from her cheeks.

“Did Alika not say the curse could be broken with true love’s power?” Omana asked suddenly. “Why is Mano not here then?”

Gloria had relayed the conversation, complete with the elaborate story of the shark man and the wahine from lunch to her aunt. Omana smiled.

“That was just a story,” Gloria said. “Besides, he never told us how to break the curse or if Mano is really the shark man from the story. Do you think it was true?” thought back to that wonderful afternoon at the *Kahuna*’s. It seemed so long ago.

“There has to be a way.” Omana said.

“I don’t feel much like talking right now, if that’s okay,” Gloria said. “I’m going to lie down. I love you, Aunt Monie.” She rose to her feet, her knees still wobbly and her chest hurting. She felt empty and numb.

“Gloria! Are you not going to fight? Have I taught you nothing?”

Pausing at the bedroom door, Gloria halfheartedly looked over her shoulder at her great aunt. “He’s gone. And I don’t believe in curses, just like I should have never believed in magic again.” She shut the door behind her on the final word.

Omana sat for a long while on the couch, wondering how she would ever help her niece. She didn’t know if Gloria would ever be the same. They had saved their past, but at what cost to the future?

Chapter Twenty-One

“How long are you going to mope around this house, my little love?” Omana’s sweet voice now grated on Gloria’s nerves.

Five months of the same question, every morning of every day.

“I’m not moping. I’m writing. That’s what I do, remember?” Gloria didn’t even bother to look at her great aunt. She kept clicking the keys of her laptop. The words flew from her fingers and created black slashes against the white of the blank page.

She was on a roll. She had sat down at her computer a week after Mano left, searching for an outlet to her grief. Instead of the rambling sorrow-filled diary of words she had expected, Gloria had found the plot for a book. Hopefully a book that would get her published. She needed to tell this story.

“I know you are writing. The question, my darling, is *what* are you writing?” She placed a glass of juice next to Gloria. Lost in her own world, Gloria didn’t even look up from her screen. “Earth to Gloria.” Omana shook her by the shoulder.

“What? Sorry, Aunt Monie. I’m not ignoring you. I was just caught up.” Gloria jerked back at once pulled from her story.

“What are you writing? I find it difficult to fathom anything about the Nevada Test Site would keep you this focused.” She sat down on the edge of the bed and waited patiently.

Gloria chewed on her bottom lip. She wasn’t sure how much to share with her aunt. “You can’t laugh. You have to promise.”

“I remember that face,” Omana said. “You gifted me with that exact expression when you informed me of your desire to become a ballerina.”

“I was serious about that.” Gloria laughed.

“I know, my darling, but you already had been blessed with a rather spectacular chest, making a career in ballet impossible.” Omana could no longer control her laughter. The sound bubbled forth and soon had Gloria joining in.

“This is serious. No laughing.” Gloria swatted playfully at her aunt.

“Cross my heart and hope to perish.” Omana said, the humor still dancing in her eyes.

Gloria took a deep breath, steeling herself before plunging forward. She knew with unfailing accuracy what Omana would say when she told the plot of her book. She counted on her aunt to support her.

“It’s a romance.” Gloria squeezed her eyes shut at the admission. Silence. No laughter, no mocking, no comments thrown back in her face. She opened her eyes and looked at her aunt.

“You have always derided romance novels.” Omana said matter-of-factly.

“Yeah. But I also secretly read them.” Gloria admitted. She had a large collection hidden in the back of her closet, a secret vice.

“I was not aware of that bit of information – and I know everything about you.”

“Well, now you do know.” Gloria propped a foot up in the edge of the bed and stretched her hands over her head. She luxuriated in the break her back muscles were getting. “What?”

Her aunt’s wizened features were drawn in a peculiar expression. The twinkle was back in Omana’s eyes and the edge of her mouth curled up in a half smile. “Does your romance end happily ever after?”

Gloria’s breath caught. Damn, her great aunt saw right through her. “I don’t know yet.”

“All romances need a happily ever after, that wonderful moment when the hero sweeps the heroine off her feet and into his arms making her his forever.”

Gloria looked away from her great aunt. She felt the familiar pain close around her chest.

“I’m not sure how that moment happens,” Gloria said. “You see it hasn’t happened yet.” She faced her computer. The cursor line blinked rapidly, sucking her into the screen.

“Ask the *Kahuna*. He will know how the tale ends.”

The answer came, faintly drifting into her mind. Gloria whirled around to face Omana once more. The older woman was gone. She jumped up and dashed for the front door, scooping her purse in the process. Slipping her feet into the flip-flops that sat by the door she picked up her keys. “Aunt Monie! I’m going out. I’ll back in a bit!” She said and almost hood slid like a reject from the *Dukes of Hazzard* in an effort to get in her car. Gunning the engine, she peeled out of the drive. She just prayed Alika was home.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“I need a piece of the fabric from his jeans or something he wore,” Gloria said, scavenging around the house in a vain effort to locate the items Alika told her to collect.

When she had pulled into the gravel driveway of the *Kahuna*’s house earlier that afternoon, it came as no surprise he was waiting at the door before she had even got out of the Jeep. He had been waiting for her to come ever since he told them the story of the shark man. Alika invited her in and told her the remaining portion of the tale.

Mano was the offspring of the shark man and the maiden. He had never known.

Gloria had begged the *kahuna* to break the curse. Alika shook his head, informing her he couldn’t, but *she* could – if she only believed. Only the love and sacrifice of a woman would appease the ancient curse.

Alika had given her a scrap of paper. Written in his grand scrawl were the instructions and list of items she would need. Cautioning her before she left, Alika told her he wasn’t sure the spell would work. But it was all he could do.

Gloria had sat in her car for several minutes, reading over the list in her hand. She didn’t know if she had the courage to do what the spell asked.

Then the thought of a life without Mano made up her mind for her. The last five months had been bearable, but she missed him so much it hurt. She missed his smile, his smell, the feel of his breath on her neck when she slept. And she wanted him back.

“Will the T-shirt do, darling?”

“Yes, Aunt Monie. That will work just fine. Where’s the puzzle box?” Gloria asked, placing the piece of lava rock on the table with the chant paper and a small silver knife.

“In my bedroom. I will retrieve it for you when I have finished my seamstress impression on this shirt. Did you find the rock Mano cut his leg on? Will it work?”

“Yes. I found it in the box right where he left it. There is a little bit of his blood on it.” Gloria entered the kitchen and crossed to the fruit bowl. Selecting the ripest,

most prime papaya from the bowl she placed it with the other offerings on the table.

Omana emerged from her bedroom, a scrap of blue material in one hand, the puzzle box in the other. She handed the items to Gloria, who was glancing over the list to make sure they had everything. “All I need now is rum and I’m in business.”

“I will get the rum. Give me another moment, my darling.” Omana scurried over to the liquor cabinet. While she waited for Omana to funnel the rum in to a plastic water bottle, Gloria loaded the other items into a bag.

“Good luck, my little love. Bring our boy home where he belongs,” Omana said, handing the bottle to Gloria. Smiling, Gloria shoved the rum into the bag and scooped up the paper from the table.

“I’m going to try. Don’t wait up. I’m not sure how long this will take or even if it will work. Alika didn’t have an idea about the success rate. No one has ever tried this spell before,” she added solemnly before heading out the sliding doors and down to the beach.

“It will work. It must.” Omana said, but Gloria was gone.

* * * *

Déjà vu hit Gloria full force when she stepped down on the sand. The moon, a silver saucer high in the inky night, lit the water with its metallic glow. Spreading the blanket out on the sand, Gloria began to empty the contents of her bag, spreading them out so that each item was within reach of her unsure hands. Taking the paper from her back pocket, she set about following the instructions to the letter. She took infinite care, wanting to get every step right.

According to Alika, she would only have one chance at this. If she made any kind of mistake or if something went wrong, she would never be granted another try. Satisfied she had everything in order, Gloria sat cross-legged on the blanket.

She picked up the puzzle box and opened the two pieces. She selected the papaya first and held it out in front of her.

“E ho’i, e Pele, i ke kuahiwi, ua na ko lili, ko imaina!” she chanted, her

Hawaiian pronunciation a little rusty. “Return, O Pele, to the mountain, your jealousy and your rage are satisfied.” She took a bite of the papaya, tasting the offering to Pele, a spurned woman but also a forgiving, protecting mother goddess. “Return my love to me, O Great Pele! This I ask of you.” She placed pieces of the fruit she had sliced off into the puzzle box.

Next she took up the piece of cloth from the shirt and placed it inside the box next to the fruit. Continuing her chant, first in Hawaiian, then English, Gloria petitioned Laka the goddess of Hula.

“Laka, Goddess of the dance, I ask you to bring my love back to me. You who made him beautiful, return his beauty to the land where it belongs.” She took a sip of the rum, tasting the offering once again. After dripping a few drops over the contents of the box, she picked up the paper once again.

“O Lono, God of the heavens, promised to return on the waves by canoe one day, to return and dwell on green backed Hawaii, return Mano in your place to this land. Give him to the people until your return. This I ask of you.”

Standing up, Gloria took a bracing breath. Apprehension gripped her hard as she read the last part of the spell. Steeling herself, Gloria reached down and picked up the knife in one hand. Exposing the soft flesh on the other hand, Gloria placed the blade across her palm. Taking a deep breath, she pulled the knife fast across her hand, cutting her palm deep enough to draw blood. She winced slightly, a small cry escaping her.

She dropped the knife and scooped up the lava rock. She pressed the rock in the palm of her cut hand and closed her fist around it. Taking deep breaths, Gloria calmed herself and centered her mind on the task at hand. The rock in her hand was now painted with her blood as well as Mano’s.

Closing her eyes, she sent a final prayer to the deities to whom she had already made offerings: Laka, Lono, and Pele. She hoped they would accept what she was about to do.

Opening her eyes, Gloria picked up the puzzle box and dropped the lava rock

inside. She closed the lid and began her walk to the surf. She gazed out on the choppy waves. White caps crested on the waves as the wind picked up speed. The gods were sending her a sign. They were listening and were waiting. She began the final chant.

“Kane, great creator, I ask you to accept all that I offer here. My *mana*, my power, I give to you. My life’s blood mixed with my heart’s blood in a box of strong Koa wood as a gift to you. Release the curse upon Mano. Return him to me with *Aloha*.”

She waded into the surf. The water was warm as it swirled around her feet. The box rested in her outstretched hands. She stopped when the water reached her chest. The sand beneath her feet slipped out from between her toes, causing her to need to shift her weight constantly to keep herself upright. The waves bashed at her body and threatened to take her under. A few feet from her, a sleek dorsal fin pierced the blackness of the water.

She knew instantly it wasn’t a dolphin circling her, but a shark.

It had to be Mano. She was shaking with fear, but stood her ground. She would not run from him. He had promised her he would never hurt her when he was in shark form. She had faith in him. The sky had gone dark and heavy with rain clouds so reminiscent of the night they had called Mano to them. Thunder clapped all around her, and lightning split the sky and the sea. Visualizing Mano and concentrating with all her might, Gloria offered the gods one final plea.

“*O ka Mano hele honua*. The shark the goes over the earth! Bring him back!” She started the final piece of the chant, low and deep in her chest. She called out the words, repeating them over and over again. Her voice grew louder stronger, more demanding until the chant reached its zenith. She shouted over the thunder. With one final hoarse cry, Gloria tossed the box far out to sea. Lifting her palms to the sky and raising her hands to the heavens, she closed her spell.

“*Amana ua noa*. The prayer has flown,” she said. She wasn’t sure how long she stayed in the water. Her toes were wrinkled by the time she waded back to the shore

and toweled off her legs.

She dropped down onto the blanket. Bunching up the pillow, Gloria contemplated spreading out and waiting. She wasn't sure how long it would take to work – or if it would even work – but her heart wouldn't let her take that lonely walk back to the house just yet. Sighing, she realized she should probably go back and get some sleep. Taking a long swig of the remaining rum, she waited a few more moments.

Minutes ticked past, then an hour. Gloria began to give up hope. She wasn't expecting instant gratification but some sign her prayer had worked was all she was asking for. The gods were fickle creatures. She tipped the bottle to her mouth once more and realized it was empty. Now she was drunk, sleepy, and had sand in her butt. And she was infuriated at the gods.

“You gods suck!” she shouted to the heavens, not caring if any one human or deity heard her. “You bring my dream man into my life and then take him back. I'm going to bed. Take your stupid offering and get out of my life. I'll mess it up on my own from now on, thank you very much”

Shaking her alcohol-fuddled head at all the magical nonsense she had endured, Gloria stood up and began to pack everything back into her bag. Swaying unsteadily on her feet, she glanced back at the ocean once more. Was he out there swimming with his sleek sharkskin and fins?

“I love you, my shark man. Come home,” Gloria said on the wind and headed back to the house.

* * * *

The pounding in Gloria's skull grew louder and more insistent the longer she ignored it. Gloria shifted slightly from her sprawled position on the living room couch. She hadn't gone right to bed when she had come back to the house, instead electing to drink more. Cracking an eye open, she grimaced at the bottle of rum sitting on the coffee table. The brown liquid, once all the way to the top of the label, swirled in a tiny puddle at the bottom. She pressed a hand to her forehead when the pounding started

again. Her mouth felt dry and her legs refused to cooperate.

“I will make you some coffee.” Omana’s voice was overly bright and shrill. “You never were more than a teetotaler. I take it there was little success last night, my little love from the amount of my best rum you consumed. That bottle was all but full when I went to sleep.”

The expression on Omana’s face was one with which Gloria was extremely familiar. It was what she referred to in her youth as Omana’s “I can’t believe you’re related to me” look. She hadn’t seen it in a while.

“It might have worked if I hadn’t started drinking and shouting nasty things at the gods.” Gloria got to her feet and fought back the wave of nausea that hit her full force.

“You chastised the gods? The very ones you asked a favor of? Whatever possessed you?”

Gloria gripped her head, anything to stop the pain. “I was pissed and more than a little drunk. I wasn’t thinking. What kind joke did they play on me? The gods couldn’t have given us some smelly, nasty-tempered old man as a guardian,” she said. “No. Kane and his cronies had to give us Mano, a Chippendale dancer look-alike. Next, they go and make me fall in love with him. Then they yank him back to the sea.”

She took in a deep breath. “I’m sorry I yelled at them, Aunt Monie. It was the rum. Look, I’m going to take a shower and try to clear my head of this hangover. When I’m done, let’s go the Angel Café and have breakfast. My treat.” She walked into her room, feeling Omana’s eyes boring into her back.

“I will bring you some coffee.”

“Thanks. Don’t eat anything. I’ll be quick. You really are too good to me,” Gloria tossed over her shoulder.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The steam of the shower swirled around her, relieving some of the pain in her head and body. Turning off the hot stream of water, Gloria stepped from the tub and began to towel off. She felt better already. The effects of the liquor were wearing off and leaving her with clearer thoughts. Not that she wanted those thoughts, considering they consisted of memories of Mano.

Wrapping herself in the plush purple towel, she ran a brush through her long black hair.

“Aunt Monie, is the coffee done?” she shouted toward the living room. Silence. “Aunt Monie? Are you all right?”

Not receiving an answer, Gloria headed out to the living room. A steamy cup of coffee sat on the table, but no Omana. Voices drifted in from the lanai. Someone must have come over when she was in the shower. Probably Bertha or Alika, she thought to herself. Great exactly what she needed, to be scolded by the *Kahuna* for yelling at the gods.

Clutching the towel closer to her body, she tiptoed over to the sliding door, trying to catch a glimpse of Omana’s guest. Masculine laughter rang in her ears. Her heart jumped in her chest. She recognized the laughter. Running out on to the lanai, she stopped short when her gaze fell on the man standing next to Omana.

“Mano.”

“*Aloha, ku’uipo.*”

Gloria shook her head back and forth at the sight of him, all sleek lines and strong muscle. “You’re not real. I’m asleep or still hung over or drunk or something.”

Mano slowly walked over to her. His bronzed flesh glow in the sunlight, the rays dancing over the sculpted planes of his yummy body. Standing in front of her, he placed a hand under her chin and tipped her face to him.

“Do I feel real?” he said against her lips, wrapping his strong arms around her

waist.

With a cry of surrender, Gloria clasped her arms around his neck and tugged him closer for a welcoming kiss. Any doubts she had were burned away by the power of their kiss. She hugged him to her, the tears of happiness running unchecked down her cheeks.

“How can you be here? I yelled at the gods. Then I drank the rum that was for the offering.” Gloria reveled in the feel of his warm body against hers. She wanted to drag him into the bedroom and have her wicked way with him.

“The gods must have decided not to incur your wrath any longer and sent me back to you. Or perhaps you appeased them with the offering of the box. You broke the curse, *ku’uipo*,” he said. “Your love for me was so strong, Kane took pity on us and released me. By wading out into the sea at night, you conquered your fear of swimming with me. You embraced me as the shark, as well as the man.”

Laughing low in his chest, he picked her up and carried her into the house. He kicked the bedroom door closed and deposited her in the middle of the bed.

“You’re really human? And you can stay?” Gloria asked, running her hands down the planes of his body. He felt so good, so strong, and so utterly masculine.

“I can stay forever if you will have me,” Mano said, placing nipping kisses along her jaw and neck. “I love you, Gloria, and want to marry you.”

“Of course I want you! I yelled at Pele for you! She melts people when she gets mad!” She tugged his face to hers and kissed him with all the passion she had buried deep inside. Her shark man had returned and he loved her.

“My *kahuna* once told me I would never find happiness in my lifetime,” he said. “That was because I was to wait until this lifetime to be with you.”

“Mano, do me a favor.” Gloria said, nibbling on his ear.

“Anything *ku’uipo*, whatever you desire.”

“Shut up and make love to me!”

“As you command, summoner.”

With a warrior's cry, Mano did just that.

THE END