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Author

Cataluna, Lee Dorothy Alohaakeao

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The Get Girl

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for Performing Arts

by

Lee Dorothy Alohaheao Cataluna

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Thesis Committee:

Professor Mark Haskell Smith, Co-Chairperson
Professor Goldberry Long, Co-Chairperson
Professor Tod Goldberg

The Thesis of Lee Dorothy Alohaqueo Cataluna is approved:

Committee Co-Chairperson

Committee Co-Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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Chapter 1

It was a Saturday night and I was breaking in to someone's place again. Third weekend in a row. This time, it was Wally's Waffle Dogs.

I climbed up the access ladder by the Dumpsters to get on the roof. The view was pretty from the top of the strip mall – diamond lights of Waikiki, a banana moon hanging over the airport, and the hazy coastline all the way to the flashing light atop the smokestack at Kahe Power Plant. It smelled like home up there – brown algae bloom from the harbor, exhaust from the freeway, old grease from the fryers, a little hint of the plumeria trees growing in the graveyard. If I was the nostalgic type, I might have taken a moment, but I had to hustle to get in, get out, and get going.

My cell phone buzzed in my hip pocket. My brother Kaipo was out in the truck pretending to be my lookout. I knew Kaipo hadn't seen anything. He wasn't actually keeping watch. He insisted on coming along to help, then he'd get drowsy in the car and butt-dial me by mistake. I'd be happy if I made it through without him falling asleep with his head on the steering wheel and his big cheek pressing down the horn and his butt dialing the police.

The utility access door was secured by a chain that ran from the handle to a post just next to the door frame. The chain was looped twice and secured with a pad lock. This was pretty much a sign that the expensive built-in door lock had broken years ago and building management decided to cheap out the repair. They all did that.

I pulled a bolt cutter from my utility belt, cut the chain and pulled on the door. As I expected, there was no alarm. The salt air from Pearl Harbor had corroded the wires up here long ago and no one bothered to replace them.

I squeezed myself into the narrow threshold, closed the door behind me and switched on the fisherman's light I had on a stretchy band around my head. It had been four hours since the Pearl Kai strip mall food court closed but the ceiling space was still warm from all the woks, deep fryers and pho pots below.

I dropped to my knees and crawled along a water pipe. I had to keep my weight on the steel joists of the ceiling and count each time I moved my hand forward as 9 inches of space.

When I got to where I was pretty sure I was just above Wally's, I lifted up a grease-stained ceiling tile. The waffle dog iron was directly below. Perfect.

Except not totally perfect. I didn't want to land myself right on that thing. Might still be so hot it could burn right through the soles of my Lehigh Safety Shoes.

I pulled the tile aside and slipped my legs through the opening. The jump from the ceiling onto the counter wouldn't be bad, but I'd have the stick the landing, left foot on the counter next to the weenie turner, right foot up against the slushie machine, so that I would end up straddling the waffle dog iron. That machine took a long time to cool down, and if the distracted teenaged workers forgot to turn it off when they closed for the night, one little slip would mean serious ankle burns. A burned finger could be explained away, but there's no good cover story for waffle marks on an ankle.

Just get in, get the picture, and get out, I told myself.

I took a deep breath, aimed my big feet and dropped down to the Waffle Dog counter. Be a little rice bird, not a fat pigeon, I told myself. Soft landing.

Good.

I surveyed the area.

There it was way up near the ceiling, one of maybe 200 framed photographs of local celebrities, politicians and high school athletes. Each was posing with Waffy the Waffle Dog mascot while holding, eating or caressing a waffle dog, the unholy marriage of a hot dog inserted into a waffle-batter bun. I counted twelve rows up and eight rows across until I found the right one. My target. If I balanced on the top of trash bin, I could just reach it.

Yup, there was Teena posing with a sweaty teenager who was getting paid below minimum wage to wear the Waffy costume. Waffy was supposed to be a waffle dog, but he looked more like a droopy six foot Twinkie.

Teena must have lost 60 pounds since the picture was taken. Her whole life had gotten better since she broke it off with Wally and stopped eating deep fried batter-coated processed meat for every meal.

The picture was unflattering, all right. Everything that could go wrong in a photo went wrong for Teena in the instant that shot was taken. Bra strap, high beams, panty line, camel toe, high waters, eyes shut, mouth open, hair sticking sideways, nose greasy, double chin. No wonder she wanted that out of the public eye.

Teena had provided a replacement: a photo of a toothy local news anchor hugging Waffy. As long as there wasn't a blank space where the photo used to be, Wally wouldn't notice it was gone, at least not for a while.

The photograph was nailed to the wall through the frame. Dang it, I was counting on a wall hook for a simple slip-off. I started on the nail with the smallest Vaughan claw puller, but the dry wall came up instead. It crumbled like sand onto the floor. Good going on the cheap remodeling job, Wally. The grease must be holding up the walls.

I figured the only thing to do was to keep the frame on the wall but switch the pictures. I couldn't flip the frame to undo the backing. C'mon, Wally, what kind of dope nails things directly to the wall past the age of, say, 19? Twenty minutes into fumbling with the little tabs holding the cardboard back in place, I heard the employees at the Pretzel-on-a-Stick shop coming in for the first shift. Rattle rattle on the other side of the wall. I had to hustle back up the air shaft before they came nosing around toward the restrooms.

I shoved the replacement photo in the frame, locked down the tabs, tucked Teena's Waffy photo in my belt and wiped the dry wall dust off the floor with a Wet-Nap. I hoisted the top half of my body into the vent by pushing off the counter and pulling with my arms like a canoe paddler getting back into the boat. This is what I get for not working out. Maybe I should start paddling canoe. But first maybe I should learn to swim.

I was getting the ceiling tile back in place when it dawned on me that it was too early for the pretzel place to be opening.

Someone else breaking in? Kaipo sleep walking through the locked mall looking for snacks?

Then I felt something on my back. It didn't brush me, it more like *scampered*. I felt the hook of tiny toenails and the brief moving weight as it launched off me and continued on its way.

Freekin' rats. The ceiling was packed with them. They had waited for the vents to cool and now it was party time.

I told myself not to think. Just crawl. Just move. Hand, knee, hand, knee. Just go.

The rats scuttled through the duct system, their scratches and squeaks echoing in the dark.

I am not afraid of animals, but I don't care how tough you are, nobody likes a surprise rat.

The trip back through the utility space took about half the time.

I was almost to the door when I felt something sharp nick my ear. My hand moved instinctively, faster than I could think. I had the squirming body in my hand and my teeth bared like I was going to bite the thing back. What the hell kind of reflex is that? I snapped myself out of it and threw the squealing body back through the crawl space.

Yikes.

Kaipo was lying in the cab of the truck with the engine running and the radio playing. He barely opened his eyes when I jumped in the driver's seat and shifted into gear.

“How’d it go?” He wasn’t really asking. Just pretending he hadn’t been sleeping.

“I almost ate a rat,” I told him.

“Mmm. I love chicken katsu,” he said, and in the next second, Kaipo was snoring again, mouth open, head against the side window.

I drove out to the meeting spot, a playground at the back of a quiet subdivision in Aiea Heights. Teena was there leaning up against her Honda. She was wearing a pink track suit. Yeah, she’d lost a ton of weight. Looking good. Looking happy. Picture perfect.

I handed her the photo. Teena let out a whoop and gave me a celebratory hug. Then she did a little victory dance around the Honda, her pink rubber slippers slapping on the asphalt like tap shoes.

“You da best!” she kept saying. “So brave! I could never have faced all those rats!”

She knew about the rats.

“Oh sure. We used to find them in the store room all the time. The rumor was that one of the food court counters served them as chicken katsu.”

Teena said she would recommend me to all her friends, and then she took out a butane lighter and set fire to the photograph, stomping out every little glowing piece that fell onto the parking lot asphalt. I saw where the ashes smudged over part of the white parking stall marking and I realized I had painted that line.

CHAPTER 2

So how did I get to be the girl who got people's stuff back? Yeah, I ask myself that all the time.

I had been painting lines since I got out of high school. It wasn't a big life, or even a good life, but it was OK. Nobody bothered me. I didn't bother nobody.

Things got weird when Tommy and I broke up.

Actually, things got weird from the moment we met when Tommy started talking to me in the order line at Zippy's. He sure had a lot to say about the cultural significance of cake noodle and the benefits of an all-carb diet. I had nothing to add so I just listened. Tommy kept talking for so long that we ended up eating our take-out plates in the dine-in area and staying long enough to order another meal from the All-Nite menu board, which we ate at my place the next morning. Which was not a date even though he pretty much moved in that same day and stayed until he kicked me out.

He was never my official boyfriend.

He wasn't even really my friend. He was just a guy who talked so much and so fast I never really had a chance to ask many questions. I mean, he slept in my bed and stuff -- while I was working, but while I was in it, too. But that was mostly because I was in a one-bedroom apartment and the sofa had all his clothes piled on it. Tommy was a man who liked to stretch out.

It wasn't like a real relationship except when we broke up. That's when it got serious.

I had boyfriends before. A few. Some. One or two. So it wasn't like I was swept off my feet by the first guy who paid me any attention. I knew how to handle myself when he started saying stuff like how I look nice in a clean t-shirt and that I'd actually be sort of pretty if I would just do something with myself, which is what everyone says to me but somehow it sounded different coming from him.

I did think he was cute in a beefy sort of way. Mostly, I appreciated that he did all the talking. I don't like having to think of things to say.

But then he took my stuff. I didn't have much stuff to take, but he took it all anyway.

Not really took it, actually. More like he claimed it. I came home from work one day and the inside bolt was shut on my apartment door. I went to Zippy's to get something to eat and then came back an hour later. I even brought him take-out. The door was still locked but I could hear him inside. I knocked a little. He told me to go away because I pissed him off.

I pissed him off by asking him to make room for my brother Kaipo who was coming home from Iraq. Kaipo got hurt the same day he landed in the desert in an operation that must have been secret because he wouldn't tell me what happened. All I knew was that now he had pins and plates in places where he used to have bones. I wasn't sure where Tommy lived before he moved in with me, but when I asked if maybe he could go back to his place for a while so I could take care of my wounded brother, he got all mad.

“What about my wounds?” Tommy had said.

Tommy said his soul was injured and that was way worse than Kaipo's bum leg.

When he talked like that, his face got red and puffy and lost a lot of the handsomeness. When he talked like that, my thoughts got gummed up and tangled and I had no idea how to respond.

So I left the take-out teriyaki outside the door to my place and spent the night in my truck.

The next day, I went to Handy Hank's Kalihi Hardware to see if I could buy something to break into my own place. I hadn't been to Hank's Hardware since the one time when I was seven and my mom sent me in with a list and twenty dollars after she and her boyfriend had a fight. It hadn't changed much. It was still old and dusty, though it had gotten older and dustier.

Hank Kalama sat on a plastic lawn chair behind the counter fiddling with a greasy lawn mower motor. He was tall with the lean, muscled limbs of a swimmer, skin the color of coffee and waves of salt-and-pepper hair. He smiled when I walked in like he remembered me from twenty years ago, which, I told myself, could not be possible.

"Aloha!"

"Hey," I said. I had been hoping just to grab some bolt cutters and a power drill, pay in cash and get home to reclaim at least my work shirts and some underwear, but old Hank looked like there might have to be conversation involved. I generally don't like it when there's conversation involved.

“You trying to get in, get out or make it better?” he asked. I shrugged my shoulders and made like I was too deep in thought to answer. That didn’t stop him. He was determined to be friendly.

“Everybody who comes here wants one of three things – in, out or better. But really, all of it is better, right? I’m looking at you and I think you want out. Or you want someone else out. Am I right?”

A chill lit up my arm and when I looked down, I had chicken skin up to my sleeve. I thought I was pretty hard to read. It was like he knew me.

Before I could gather up the words to say something, a kid came slinking into the store, sliding through the front door like smoke. Hank turned his attention to the girl and put down the motor. When she walked to the section where he kept door fasteners and pad locks, Hank stood up to follow her into the aisle.

“She reminds me of you at that age, Delfy.”

I got head-to-toe chicken skin with that one.

The girl must have been seven or eight, a kid with eyes glassy as a tide pool. It was a windless summer day when all the city kids were at Ala Moana Beach splashing in the milky blue waves or at Palama Settlement running in sprinklers across the dead grass, but this girl was buying locks in Kalihi.

I watched Hank go up to the girl as she was looking at rows of dead bolts, reading packages as though trying to figure out which was the biggest and most unbreakable. He lifted his finger up near his eyes and said softly, “Try wait. I got something.”

Hank walked into his store room and returned a few moments later with the most expensive dead bolt kit, one meant for horse paddocks and rodeo bull chutes. He took the girl's money at the register and gave back more change than she was owed.

When the girl turned to leave the store, Hank went with her. He turned back toward me and said, "Hey, try bring me my tools." I went around the register to find the tool box, but when I looked up Hank and the girl were already down the road.

I meant to just hand him his tool box and be on my way, but ten minutes later, I was still following along, walking up the crumbling cement staircase of a second-story hollow tile apartment for no good reason other than I hadn't given Hank his tools yet.

The wooden door to the girl's place looked like it had been kicked in, knocked down, pulled off its hinges with a crowbar and whacked a few times with a hatchet. Hank talked to the girl as he installed the lock, describing what he was doing step by step. He handed her the screwdriver so she could attach the plate to the door. "You do this part. You fasten it down tight," he said. "Turn 'em hard". She did.

Hank told her he would fix the torn screens and I set to work gathering up the bent frames. Every window in the small apartment had either been broken into or out of.

The girl sat on the floor looking through Hank's tool box.

"You folks just move in?" he asked over his shoulder. There was a futon on the floor and three sagging Aloha Shoyu boxes in the corner that looked like they held everything this girl and her family owned.

"Kind of," she answered. Hank wiggled one thick Vienna sausage finger at a screwdriver just beyond his reach. She handed it to him.

“This one they call Phillip. He’s the star, see?” She nodded. “Good thing for a girl to know tools,” he said.

Hank worked on the frozen screw, pulled off the rusted frame and leaned the screen against one of the boxes. At the top of the jumble of t-shirts and stuffed animals was a photograph in a paper frame that said “Westside Riders Kristmas Kruiise” across the bottom.

Hank picked up the frame and looked at the photograph of a little man trying to look tough on an outsized motorcycle.

“This the guy?” Hank asked, making his voice as casual as a ukulele lounge singer.

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“What, he hurt you?”

She shook her head no.

“He scare you?”

The girl’s shoulders rose and dropped. Hank waited patiently.

“He has our stuff,” she finally said. She tipped her head toward the kitchenette. The cupboards had no doors. The shelves had no plates.

Hank put the picture in his tool box.

When we got back to the little hardware store, Hank put the screen frames in the back room against his work table. “I know how to fix those,” I told him.

“Later,” he said. “Come.”

So I went.

He didn't spend time laying out his plan or explaining what he was doing. He just walked to his truck, waited for me to close the passenger door and headed off to Ala Moana Beach Park.

A row of Harley Davidsons shone under the late afternoon sun. Their owners, all city park maintenance workers, lay in the shade of a kamani tree waiting out the last 45 minutes of their shift so they could clock back in for overtime. Hank brought his truck up to the edge of the grass and stuck his head out the window. The men called out a chorus of "Eh!"

The largest of the city workers hoisted his body off the grass and lumbered over to the truck. He greeted Hank with a braddah-braddah handshake that made the sound of a gun when their big palms connected.

Hank showed the guy the photograph from the girl's house. The guy nodded, but with his eyebrows more than with his head. He leaned in to Hank and said something, or I think he said something. Next thing, the truck was in gear, we were leaving the beach park and the guy was strolling back to his nap spot under the tree.

We drove west on the H-1 freeway into Halawa, the narrow windless valley that is home to Hawaii's biggest rock quarry and largest prison. Hank parked on the street outside a beat-up bungalow and turned off the engine to the truck.

We waited for nearly an hour before I worked up the nerve to ask.

"How come you don't just go inside?"

“Guys like this, it has to be face-to-face, or it never ends.” Hank said. So we waited some more.

It was dark when I heard the motorcycle blasting up the road. The guy passed Hank’s truck and drove his oversized bike up to the drooping front steps. Before he could get inside the door, Hank was out of the truck and right in his face. It took me too long to react. I was still climbing out of the passenger side when fists started flying.

The guy was little, but he was at least thirty years younger than Hank. Still, by the time I had scrambled over to the front door, Hank had dropped him to the dirt and was stepping over him to enter the house.

“All here,” Hank said, pointing to a stack of boxes just inside the front door. Pots, frying pans, blankets, toys. He hadn’t even put them away. He took them just to take them, not because he needed any of it.

It took us five trips from the house to the truck to get everything out. The motorcycle dude was out cold in the dirt path below the steps. The last time I walked past, I felt my foot itching to give him a solid kick, a big Samoan rugby shot right to his head. I resisted, though I thought about that moment for days afterward.

We drove to the little girl’s apartment and brought the boxes up to her door. Hank didn’t even knock. He just left everything there just outside the apartment.

That night, as I sat in my car eating a dinner of 7-Eleven Spam musubi, I thought of the girl and her mom, how they now had plates in the cupboards and pots on the stove and a big solid lock on their door.

I quit my job at the painting company the very next day.

CHAPTER 3

I had been working at Pro Line since the summer after I graduated high school, eleven years as a temporary hire. At first they wanted me to do estimates and contracts, but that office stuff required too many phone calls and more conversations in a day than I was comfortable having in a month. I begged to get on with the road crew, and when they lost a guy to a workman's comp claim, I jumped on the truck.

It wasn't the kind of painting I had in mind. Not that I was thinking I was ever going to be some kind of fancy artist, but I thought maybe I could do some home interiors, office remodels, maybe a logo at a state building every once in a while. For eleven years, I painted the white stripes in the middle of roads. Mostly I painted over the old stripes, like after a resurfacing project or when a passing zone got changed. The company was so small we never bid on highways, only small neighborhood jobs, so I didn't even get to put on reflectors. Just stripes. Sometimes curb markings. Sometimes parking lots. Mostly, right down the middle for miles and miles.

I started showing up at Hank's place every day even though he never made me a job offer or anything like that. At the end of the day, he'd press some money into my hand and say, "See you tomorrow". So I kept coming back

I rented an apartment in Aiea so that Kaipo would have a place to rest when he got home. It was a hot, ugly little one-bedroom in a dirty cinder-block-and-rusty-railing walk-up, but I was there just to shower and sleep, so it didn't matter much. Not like I was used to living in fancy places.

For three months, it was nice. I felt like I was helping. I felt like I had a home and a friend. Hank had figured out that I didn't like to say much and he saved up his stories for the customers who enjoyed that sort of thing.

It was amazing how many people came to him for help. He took me along when he went to get their stuff back. He usually didn't have to beat anybody up. Sometimes he just went in and took it. Sometimes it was a whole list of stuff. One time, he had to sit down and talk a lady into giving up her ex-boyfriend's license plate collection. That was probably the hardest to watch. She got all weepy and weird. People hold on to strange things for even stranger reasons.

I kept wanting to ask his advice on getting my own stuff back, but then everything fell apart so fast and there was so much to think about in front of me that I couldn't think about anything behind me. Besides, I didn't have that much in my apartment anyway. Not really.

I saw them take Hank away in handcuffs. There were six police cruisers parked in front of the little hardware store, their blue lights silently spinning. I had gone out to buy lunch for us at a Hawaiian food place down the road. It was a Thursday, and the restaurant had a laulau plate special. In just a matter of minutes, the police had swooped in. I was walking back when I saw the commotion outside Hanks. I dropped the two laulau plates and ran over to the first badge I saw. The cop stopped me with the cliché "stop" hand gesture. They were shoving Hank into the back of a patrol car. Our eyes met through the safety glass. He gave me a funny look – not quite a smirk, but he wasn't

scared or mad, either. It was like he was interested to see how this whole thing would play out. I called out to him, but he looked away, and then he was gone, riding away in a dinged-up police-issued Ford.

“You an associate of Hank Kalama?” the cop asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “He’s my friend. What happened?”

“Criminal complaint. It gotta get sorted out at the station. Got a few questions for you, though.”

I thought he was going to ask me stuff about my whereabouts on a certain day at a certain time and I racked my brain trying to think of who might have gotten mad and turned Hank in, but all the cop wanted to know was where I bought the laulau plates and was I still planning to eat them. I picked the packages off the dirt and gave them to him. He peeked inside, put the laulau into his police car and didn’t say thank you. I figured he might be mad that I had gotten poi and mac salad on the side rather than double rice.

I locked up the hardware store and went down to the main police station. Hank wasn’t there. I went up to the Kalihi substation. I waited by the information desk for two hours for them to tell me that Hank wasn’t there. I asked every police officer who walked by if there was a way for me to locate a Mr. Hank Kalama. They all told me to go home and wait for a call from Hank’s attorney. I didn’t think a guy like Hank would have an attorney, so I drove out to the Pearl City police substation just to check. Hank wasn’t there either.

I didn't sleep much that night thinking about all the people who might have been mad at Hank – the ones who didn't understand that he wasn't stealing, just returning stuff to their rightful owners. Most of the people that I knew about probably wouldn't have called the police because they didn't want to have to explain that stuff Hank took didn't belong to them anyway. Too risky for them. But who knows how long Hank had been doing this and who he had pissed off over the years?

There was a lot I couldn't even guess at. The one thing I knew for sure was that even if he had broken a law, Hank didn't do anything wrong. I just knew that in my gut.

The next morning, Hank's shop was still closed and quiet when I got there at dawn. I waited a few hours but he didn't show up. I went down to the main police station again, asked to see the public arrest logs, and figured out that Hank had been taken directly to Oahu Community Correctional Center rather than the police holding cell. The police station cell block had been full-up, so they sent poor sweet Hank to spend the night with the convicted felons. Geez.

I hurried down to the prison, but it was like trying to get on an airplane without a ticket or ID. No go. The only person who would talk to me was the groundskeeper picking up rubbish in the parking lot, and all he told me was that I couldn't park there. I couldn't even get into the gate to ask the guy in the information booth for any information.

I parked my truck at the 7-Eleven down the road from the prison and stared at the guard towers and curling razor wire. If I was a smoker, I would've smoked a whole pack

sitting there. But since I'm not, I ate two teri-chicken musubis, a package of shrimp chips and downed a Red Bull instead. It helped me think. Inside the prison yard, a guard sat in the smoking area behind the fence eating a musubi and drinking a red bull. He stared off into the distance as he ate. It didn't look like he was thinking. Just eating.

I thought and thought and couldn't come up with anything.

Then I remembered: Kaipo was coming home on Friday, and it was Friday. I was supposed to pick him up at the airport that afternoon. If I didn't floor it, I would be late.

I floored it.

CHAPTER 4

Kaipo came home from Iraq like a cake in the mail – sweet and good-intentioned, but smooshed.

My plan was for him to stay with me in my Aiea walk-up where he could limp down the cement stairs to catch the bus to his six weeks of physical therapy at the Tripler V.A.

I picked him up from the airport and when I put the plumeria lei around his neck, he leaned in and almost fell asleep on my shoulder.

He slept through the whole drive to Aiea, woke up long enough to hobble up the stairs to my apartment, and then crashed out on my bed for the next 18 hours.

The next day was Saturday, and Kaipo spent every waking hour eating. He sent me out four different times to get all his favorite Hawaii foods -- manapua from Char Hung Sut, cocoa puffs from Liliha bakery and two trips to Tanioka fish market. He even asked me if I would drive to the North Shore for Ted's Bakery haupia pie. I said no, then later I felt bad and decided I would go, but by then Kaipo was asleep at the kitchen table.

By the Sunday, he had worked out his routine: ice his leg while watching TV and drinking Coke Zeros all morning, nap in the afternoon, wake up for dinner, have a second dinner a few hours later, and then more TV until he fell asleep. Kaipo was supposed to be doing exercises for his re-assembled leg, but he got moving only to hop to the bathroom, get something from the kitchenette or cry about his ex wife.

I felt sorry for him, but not for the part about Shanda.

He wouldn't shut up about Shanda.

On Monday morning I was getting ready for work, trying to figure out how to make a sandwich with what little Kaipo hadn't eaten. I wanted to stay at Hank's all day in case he called. I had no idea what else to do. I figured I should pack provisions for a long wait.

I ended up going with a canned tuna/ kimchee combo sandwich not because that sounded good, but because Kaipo hadn't left much else in the fridge.

I tried to make that point to Kaipo, taking my time to scrape the last remaining flakes of the tuna out of the can and using the kimchee water in place of the mayo he had eaten straight out of the jar. Kaipo wasn't paying attention. He had gotten up and limped to the couch so he could get in his morning monologue before I left the apartment.

“Shanda had the most beautiful green eyes. Did you ever really look at Shanda's eyes?”

I found part of a rubbery carrot rolling around the vegetable bin. I had to lean into the knife to hack it into sticks. My back was aching from sleeping on the couch while Kaipo took the bed. Just a few weeks, I told myself. He's hurt. He's helpless.

“They were the greenest green, like the moss that grows in the pool at Jackass Ginger Falls after a summer rain.”

Chop, chop, chop.

“Green like a Jackson chameleon sitting on a young ti-leaf, or no, like a fern shoot growing in volcanic soil. That kind of green.”

I chopped louder, trying to drown out the sound of Kaipō’s mooning. I reminded myself how horrible it was to get the call that he had been hurt. I was lucky to have him here, limp-walking and talking and making me a little bit irritated.

“And when she laughs, her eyes get clear like the Koolau mountains on a June day.”

I wrapped the pathetic carrot sticks in foil rather than a ZipLoc bag because foil made more noise. Anything to shut out Kaipō’s voice.

“...with little flecks of gold like fish food flakes floating at the top of an aquarium...”

I had run out of loud things to do. I grabbed my keys and made for the door. Kaipō saw me trying to leave and he sped up so he could get in as much Shanda-talk as he before I escaped.

“Green and gold like... like... uh...”

For just that moment, I forgot how sad I was for Kaipō.

“She wore colored contacts she bought at the mall back in the 90s,” I snapped. “Didn’t you notice when she took them off to go to bed?”

Kaipō thought about it for too long. “Look in her eyes in bed? Nooooo. I was looking someplace else.” Kaipō did his dirty laugh, sighed, and then started up the crying again.

I turned back to the door to undo the series of locks I had installed. Hank always said locks really only keep out honest people, but still, I figured I could at least make a dishonest person inconvenienced.

Kaipo let out a very dog-like howl. Just pathetic.

“Snap back, Kaipo. You deserve better.”

“I gave her my whole heart,” he whined, wiping his snotty nose on his Hawaiian Warriors t-shirt.

“Then take it back.”

“Ah, it’s just all the pills. Making me loopy,” he said. He rubbed a hand across his face as though washing it with cold water. “I know it’s over. I just need some digamony.”

I gone through all the deadbolts and door chains and was just about to twist the knob.

“Some what?”

“Like alimony minus the lawyer plus the lock picking. Digamony. I gotta get back what’s mine. Pau. Closure.”

“You’re watching too much daytime TV.”

“I made it up myself,” Kaipo said proudly.

“Dig like dignity?”

“Nah,” Kaipo said. “Dig like dig out.”

Kaipo didn’t used to be such a big block of government cheese. Well, no, Kaipo was always a big block of government cheese, but he used to be happier cheese, not all

moldy and stale like now. And it wasn't the Iraq war that made him a sad lump. It was Shanda.

CHAPTER 5

On the third day of waiting at the shop for Hank to come back, a police detective came by and told me I couldn't be there anymore.

"Site of potential evidence of criminal activity," he said.

"I won't touch anything," I told him. He just rolled his eyes and pointed toward the door.

"Can you tell me what this is all about?" I asked.

"I can tell you not to come back into this building until further notified by police or the prosecutor's office," he said.

I didn't want to ask but I figured I should gather as much information as I could.

"So did you want to talk to me? I mean, because I work with Hank?"

The detective looked at me like I had asked him for money.

"What's your name?"

"Delfy Keala."

"Do you have anything you want to tell me?"

"Um, no," I said.

"Okey-doke, you've been questioned. Happy now?" he asked. And that was that. I left Hank's and drove around until I could figure out what to do next.

The next day, I got a job at House Warehouse in their paint department. I did not want to go back to painting lines. I had to agree to work nights, weekends and holidays

and go through all the corporate training, but at least it was a job and I got to work with paint colors other than white and safety yellow.

My competition for the job was Bernice from Yard and Garden. She had been hoping to transfer into Paint and Painting Supplies so she could get out of the humid, un-air conditioned greenhouse and was furious that I was chosen over her because of my years of experience with paint, even though I only really knew two colors.

I thought House Warehouse would be a good, safe spot to work while I figured out what happened and how to help Hank, but that first week, I noticed Bernice full-on surveilling me.

If I was at the register, she would circle with a hand truck as though pulling items from the shelves for a customer. She pretended not to look but I could tell she was making side-eye behind her safety glasses.

When I climbed the ladder for a disposable sprayer, there was Bernice on a hydraulic platform in the door-fastener aisle watching me from across the tops of the shelves.

On my bathroom break, five seconds after I closed the stall door in the ladies' room, Bernice's black work boots squeaked into the next stall. I froze up even though I totally had to go. It's hard to pee when you're sitting there thinking that the person in the next stall is listening to you and making judgments. I tried to close my eyes and think of Akaka Falls, but all that came out was Kalihi Stream.

Afterward, I stood at the sink and triple-washed my hands while I waited for Bernice to emerge from the stall. I figured I'd just ask her straight-up rather than trying to

figure out what was going on with her. I thought I saw Bernice's snaky little Matte Obsidian eyes peeking out of the crack between the door and the frame, but the stall door stayed closed. Maybe her eyes weren't exactly Matte Obsidian, but I was proud of myself that I was starting to learn some of those crazy paint names.

I was debating whether to break accepted ladies room etiquette about initiating conversation over closed doors when Bernice yelled from inside the stall.

"Long pee break for you, Delfy. You're on company time."

"So are you," I said.

"I got seniority over you. You're still on probation," she shot back.

"Right. Well I'm heading back to the floor right now. You OK in there?"

"Inappropriate interest in a co-workers personal issues is greatly frowned upon by the company, Delfy."

"Sorry."

"And you used five squirts of hand soap. That's four squirts beyond regulation."

I decided to leave before Bernice mentioned how many paper towels I had used, which was three, which was probably a punishable offense. She probably knew how many toilet paper squares I took, too.

As I walked out the bathroom door, which closed on groaning hinges, Bernice fired her final shot: "And you didn't spray the Febreze!"

Boy did I miss Hank.

I went back to the paint department and spent the next 20 minutes mixing paint for a lady literally trying to match her carpet to her drapes. No amount of Springtime

Yellow was ever going to make that transition work, but I kept trying, mostly just to stay busy.

Bernice struck again as I walked back to my register after my 30 minute lunch break. I stopped in front of a marble-top bathroom vanity to re-pin my flopping name tag on my uniform. Bernice came storming around the corner with one hand on her hip and the other aimed like a gun.

“You’re out of your assigned department,” she said, eyes shining with punitive delight.

“I’m walking through on the way to my department from the employee lunch area. You know that, Bernice.”

Bernice tossed her sun-bleached hair dismissively. “You’re not walking through the bathroom remodeling department, you’re in a four-wheel full stop.”

I was starting to think that Bernice was more than suspicious in nature. I was starting to think she was nuts.

“You are clearly using store merchandise without paying for it, a violation of section 6 paragraph 57 of the employee handbook under the section ‘loss prevention’.”

“Bernice, I was walking past and I turned to look in the mirror.”

“Ah-ha! You admit it! Those mirrors are not for personal grooming by store employees. How is a sales associate in bathroom fixtures supposed to sell a bathroom fixture that’s already been used, Delfy?!”

Her voice had reached a level pretty close to yelling and I was thinking oh yeah, this lady is totally crazy.

I started walking away toward the paint aisle. Bernice followed at my heels, wagging her finger and calling me out the whole way.

As I stepped behind my register, a pretty woman wearing a wrapped pareau and spray of flowers in her hair made an entrance around corner shelf display. Her eyes swept the paint displays like she was scanning an audience. When she spotted me, she focused right on my nametag. She nodded like, “Yeah, that’s the one” and headed straight for me. I had a bad feeling I knew what she wanted and it wasn’t advice on wall prep and taping.

As the pretty pareau lady got closer, Bernice’s yapping got louder but I was trying to drown it out in my head by willing the lady to suddenly turn and look at paint samples or to ask me a stupid question like ‘will house paint patch dings on a car’. Go lady. Go look at pink paint. Turn and look for Fantasia Fuchsia. Is that a color? I think so. Go for the Fuchsia.

But no. As usual, my psychic vibes had no effect.

The woman came right up to me and stopped in a little side-angle pose. One hand gracefully rose up to her Maui Jim sunglasses and she lifted them off her face. As she did, she changed her expression as if to show, “Poor me, I need help.”

Most people have a certain look when they’re asking for help, but this lady had it better, like she practiced. She made the “help me” thing look pretty.

“I was told to look for Delfy,” she whispered.

“Aha! Now I know what you’re up to.” Bernice was clearly aiming higher than the

paint department. She was trying for Senior Service Associate, which meant nothing except she would get a bigger locker in the employee break room and would be passed over for a management job more than anyone else on the floor. “I knew something wasn’t right but now I see it all. You’re a drug dealer!” Bernice crossed her thick arms, which made her look like Mr. Clean, all confident and beefy.

I looked up at the huge clock above the exit signs. I had hours to go in my shift.

Bernice smiled, her teeth lined up all white and pointy like the plastic picket fences they sell in her department.

“Oh I’m gonna get Employee of the Year for turning you in. You disgrace the orange smock.”

The lady put her sunglasses back down on her nose. Her help-me face disappeared. “Wow, you got some work dramas, yeah?” she said. “No worry. I catch you on your break. I don’t want to make trouble. I got enough trouble already.” And she glided away from the register.

“I’m calling the manager,” Bernice hissed.

“Go right ahead,” I said. “I’ll tell him how you cost the company a sale.”

Bernice wasn’t sure if I was bluffing. I wasn’t sure if I could successfully carry out the bluff.

“You have no proof she was here to buy paint,” Bernice said.

“She was in the store talking to a paint department sales associate until you scared her off. I’m sure the in-store video will be very revealing.”

“Yeah, revealing that you’re a drug dealer!”

I had to dig deep to finish it off. “Revealing that you were out of your assigned department interrupting me with a customer who walked out without any purchases.”

I pointed up to the security camera mounted twenty feet up on the ceiling. Bernice wrinkled her nose in disgust and trundled off to the rows of plants outside. As soon as Bernice was out of sight, I saw a bunch of flowers appear from around a Sherman Williams display. The pretty lady peeked her head out. She had probably been waiting in the lumber department, acting like she was looking at 2-by-fours. She waved her hand at me and pointed to the parking lot. “I’ll wait out there!” she whisper-yelled, as if I was the only one who would hear her.

Man, people and their problems.

CHAPTER 6

She was waiting for me behind the dumpsters in the parking lot when I went out on my afternoon break.

“I’m Mokihana,” she said, and unfurled a long, graceful arm to shake my hand. She said her name like I should recognize her. I didn’t, though up close, she looked like the model on the old Wicked Wahine perfume bottles.

Turns out Mokihana was a dancer in a Waikiki hotel’s Polynesian Review. No wonder I didn’t know her. People who grow up in Hawaii never actually go to Waikiki unless we end up working there.

Mokihana told me all about her troubles with Kamakoa, the hula show’s resident coconut tree climber.

I guess she saw the confused look on my face.

“Yeah, he climbs trees” she said, anxious to get to the good part.

I guess I still looked lost.

“Barefoot, with a machete between his teeth. It’s very dramatic. The tree is four-stories tall.” She nodded like I should be going, “Wow” but I still couldn’t picture it.

“He climbs the tree and then...is there a trapeze or something?”

Mokihana sighed. “He climbs the tree with the big knife in his teeth, knocks down a bunch of coconuts. All the tourists scream because they think the coconuts are going to land on his head, but he always angles them into the lagoon or straight down into the lauhala basket. Then they all clap, then we do the Maori dance number.”

I tried to picture why throwing nuts would be considered entertainment when every kid in Kalihi could do the same thing, but Mokihana pushed on with her story.

For six years she and Kamakoa had been a couple, going to work together, coming home together and spending their days off on the beach, but she had recently moved out of their apartment and moved in with Temuera, the newly-hired fire knife dancer in the show.

She apparently saw this as a relationship upgrade.

“Look, Kamakoa can climb a 50-foot coconut tree with a machete in his teeth, but Temuera, he can pass a flaming torch through his legs,” she said, and waited for my “wow”. I didn’t have one, so she kept going. “He can light a torch with his bare hand,” she said, and did a little hula girl shoulder shiver to emphasize her point. “Delfy, this man can put out a fire under his lavalava,” she whispered. She waved her hand across her forehead like she was wiping away sweat. I wasn’t sure how putting out a fire with your butt was a useful life skill, but I nodded like I understood so she would stop describing and sweating.

Apparently, poor Kamakoa had taken the break-up pretty hard and had quit his job the luau show. After two weeks of drinking awa, smoking pakalolo and crying muddy tears, he had started working for the city and county urban forestry department, leaving his long career in tourist-oriented entertainment behind him. He had, though, all of Mokihana’s old costumes still stored in the back of the closet in the apartment they had once shared, and she wanted them back.

“So what made you come to me?” I asked.

“You and that guy Hank helped my cousin. Her little girl came to you looking for a lock and you got all their stuff back. They came in this store last week looking for a tool set. I guess the girl is all into it now. Anyway, they saw you working here and knew you were the get-girl.”

Never in my life have I been recognized like that, like picked out of a crowd for something I did. It was kind of weird and cool at the same time. I was trying to sort that out when she made her pitch.

“That stuff technically belongs to the producer of the luau show,” she said. “Not like he could use them for another dancer because they’re all tailored for my body, but these guys, they’re tricky. If I ever left the show, he’d ask for them back and I’d have to reimburse him for the whole thing, which would mean I’d have to pawn my grandma’s gold Hawaiian bracelets.”

I had a feeling that the bottom line was really that she didn’t want to face Kamakoa again and re-open any wounds that might have just started to scab over. Even if she didn’t love him anymore, she didn’t hate him either. That, I figured, was good. It made my job easier.

Still, I had to do a threat-assessment.

“Does he sleep with his machete or what?”

“Oh, no. He’s not like that,” Mokihana said. “Besides, the coconuts were just props. He only carried a plastic knife. No way a coconut tree can make a new coconut for the show every night. It’s all fake.”

“Is the fire-knife fake too?”

Mokihana fanned herself again. “Oh no, girl. The fire. That’s for real. And let me tell you, it is HOT.”

I finished up my shift so focused on not attracting any attention from Bernice that I didn’t have time to ask myself the big, “WHAT THE HECK ARE YOU DOING?!!” question. I agreed to help Mokihana mostly out of habit and partly out of respect for Hank and all the stuff he believed in. I agreed to let her pay me thinking I could use the money to help Hank. But I never let myself question if it was a good idea to do something like this without Hank. It wasn’t, but I was going to do it anyway.

I was mixing a can of Habanero Sunset when I noticed a little bug-eyed man staring at me from the back end of the store. I turned my attention back to the paint, took it off the mixer and was writing a label for the the top when the little man appeared right in front of me, breathing hard like he had run full speed down the aisle to talk to me.

“I’m Dexter. From plumbing. You’re Delfy. Nice orange. Hi,” he said, all breathless. I realized he actually had run full speed down the aisle to talk to me, and that creeped me out.

He held out his hand and I shook it. He grabbed too tight and held on too long.

Bernice appeared, panting as though she had run all the way from Yard and Garden.

“Dexter, you’re out of your department,” she started.

“I’m just welcoming the new lady,” he said, smiling a goofy smile at me and blinking his eyes kind of sleepy and slow. Nobody ever called me a lady. I’m a girl or a chick or just Delfy, like the female equivalent of a guy who no one thinks of as a man. Not that that bothers me. It keeps things simple, mostly. Hearing Dexter from Plumbing call me a lady was pretty weird. It made me want to punch him.

I put up my hand like a cop to stop those two and turned my attention to ringing up the customer buying the orange paint.

“You think this will look good in my dining room?” the lady asked.

“Accent wall,” Bernice said, and I nodded yeah, even though I was thinking, “Only if you live at Taco Bell.” Bernice looked at me like she didn’t like me agreeing with her, so I had to change my yeah nod to a “Gee, I would have never thought of that but by golly you’re right!” kind of nod to let her know the idea was all hers.

As soon as the customer walked away with her Habanero Sunset, both Dexter and Bernice were about to dive in with more for me to deal with. Lucky for me, a guy came in asking for Oops Paint and I had to go digging under the counter to see what we had. Turned out, House Warehouse sure had a lot of Oops Paint. Some paint mixer had made a lot of mistakes. The customer was happy to take most of it off my hands. He must have been working on a mural, something very colorful for a big wall.

By the time I was done helping the Oops guy, both Dexter and Bernice were back in their respective departments counting down the last five minutes of the shift. It took some fancy dodging and weaving, but I was the last to clock out and the first to get to the parking lot.

After I left work, I parked by the harbor and ate a tuna kimchee sandwich left over from my lunch. I was starting to almost like the taste, which was a bad thing. It isn't a good idea to get so used to something bad that it becomes comforting and familiar.

I waited until it got dark before I headed to Kamakoa's apartment. I had a list from Mokihana with all of her costumes, including six coconut bras of various sizes, a "This is the Hour of Kalua" white sarong, cellophane "hula" skirts in blue, gold, purple and iridescent pink and six three-foot-tall head dresses for various Tahitian numbers.

At the apartment door, I tried the key Mokihana had given me. It slipped right in and the knob turned with a click. Kamakoa hadn't bothered to change the lock. It was quiet inside and Kamakoa's truck hadn't been in the parking space in the basement, but I waited a minute to see if he was there in the dark. You never know when somebody is sitting at home stewing over a lost love and working up a head of crazy steam.

I didn't hear anything, so I went in.

There in the middle of the tiny living room was a stack of three large plastic bins marked with Sharpie pen on masking tape: "Mokihana's costumes" "For Mokihana" "Property of Mokihana Contrades, the most beautiful hula dancer in all of Waikiki".

It was like he had been waiting for someone to come get her stuff.

Oh boy.

Inside the bins were all of Mokihana's costumes going back six years, from the Rocka Hula Baby opening number during the show's Elvis-themed era to the sequined fish tale she had been made to wear during an ill-conceived *Little Mermaid* hula that

never made it to stage. There was stuff in there Mokihana apparently didn't even remember she had. Kamakoa had carefully gone through the closet, taken out every costume piece and accessory that his beloved hula girl had left behind, and painstakingly wrapped everything in tissue paper like he was preparing to ship a museum exhibit.

There was a piece of paper folded in half and taped to the lid of the top box. I pressed it open with one finger to read what he had written and was instantly sorry that I did.

“When you get tired of the fire knife dancer, come home to me. Your tree climber is nuts about you.”

Boy oh boy. Just when you think you've seen it all, somebody always manages to surprise you.

I loaded up the costumes into my truck and drove to the backstage loading dock at the hotel luau grounds. As I turned to back into a stall, I spotted someone leaning against the back of the building. I figured out it was Temuera, the new fire knife dancer, star of the show. He was slumped over, holding an ice pack between his legs. Even in the dark, I could see that his eyebrows had been burned off and his hair was still smoking.

I parked my truck and started unloading the bins of costumes into Mokihana's truck. There was an envelope with my name taped to the bottom of the truck bed. I took it and looked inside. It was a stack of cash. Mahalo money. I put it in my pocket and went

back for more costumes. Temuera watched with weary eyes that told the whole story.

Braddah was burned out.

I figured it would be about two weeks before Mokihana and her coconut bras were back with Kamakoa.

Sure enough, I saw in the want-ads that the luau show was looking for a new fire knife dancer.

I just hoped that Mokihana wouldn't tell anybody what I did for her and where to find me.

Yeah, right.

CHAPTER 7

When I got home, Kaipo was crashed out on the sofa with his rubber work-out band all tangled around his legs. He must have fallen asleep while trying to do his rehab exercises. Boy was this guy a mess. I started to secure all the bolts and locks on the door and the noise woke him. First word out of his slack lips was a muffled, hopeful little, “Shanda”.

Shanda was all my fault.

The whole meet/marry/move out cycle for those two had taken a little over a month. Also during that month, Kaipo had been sent to the desert, blown up and shipped back, but the only injuries that weighed on his mind were the emotional blows from loving and losing Shanda. The way he grieved for her, you’d think they had spent a lifetime together.

“We did,” he often whined. “My life began when I met her and ended the day she left.”

I first met Shanda at Hanks.

She came in to the store my third week there, this tiny, pretty thing who sparkled so brightly it was hard to look at her without hurting your eyes. She had rings on both pinky-toes, charms hanging off her acrylic nail tips, gold dust eyeliner like disco Cleopatra, and twinkly rhinestone designs on her white plastic sandals. Even under all that glitter, she was adorable, with big eyes, a button nose and pursed lips like a doll.

I'm not someone who pays much attention to clothes or make up or stuff, but the first time I laid eyes on Shanda, I thought wow, I hope I'm wearing a clean t-shirt because this lady is fancying up the place just by being here.

She was perfect except for a shadow of a bruise under one eye.

Shanda told me and Hank that her boyfriend had locked her in a closet because she had burned his dinner of chili and rice. She said he dragged her by her hair when she tried to leave the house on Sunday morning for church service. He harassed her at work so much that she eventually had to quit her job in order to protect her co-workers from his misdeeds. He beat her. He embarrassed her. He was mean to her friends. He broke her cell phone. He scratched the paint on her car. The list went on and on.

When Shanda finally got to the part where she was asking for a favor, I turned to Hank, but he wasn't there. He had slipped away during Shanda's litany and was sitting in the back room sanding the rust off an old kerosene lantern.

I asked Shanda to wait on the porch while I talked to Hank. She said she'd wait in the car so her skin wouldn't get too much sun. She could sparkle even in the shade, though. She was amazing.

I walked in the back and stood right next to Hank. When he didn't look up, I touched one toe of my work boot to a leg of his chair. Hank kept sanding, but he slowly shook his head.

“Hank, she just wants a few things back. Some jewelry, stuff like that.”

Hank's face was smooth as a stone – cold and unmoving. I hadn't seen him look like that before.

“She should call the cops, Delfy. If he did all that stuff, he should be in jail.”

Hank scraped harder at the rusted lantern, making metallic dust puff up into the air around his face.

“She's scared,” I said.

“No scratches on the paint,” he said, tipping his head toward Shanda's shiny Honda. “She said he scratched the paint. No scratches.”

“Looks like she has a black eye,” I said.

Hank wiped his dusty hand across his face, leaving a red streak across his eyelid and down his cheek. He looked at me to make his point. He thought she had painted on a bruise.

I should have trusted his judgment.

I ended up going out to the Mililani townhouse by myself. I got everything Shanda described, every appliance and knick knack and cash stash and piece of jewelry.

Kaipo was with me when I dropped the stuff off. At the time, he had been home on leave, partying with friends and pretending not to be scared to go to war. He was with

me only because he had overstayed his welcome at one friend's house and he needed a ride to another friend's house.

Shanda was staying with her mother in a crowded Kaheka street apartment. She came out to the curb to claim the stuff I had retrieved for her and stood there in the sun twinkling like a Christmas tree. My brother just about fell out of the truck.

For Kaipo, it was love at first sight.

For Shanda, Kaipo was easy meat, her next victim.

Within days, he had cleaned out his meager savings to buy Shanda things to help her "get her life back." I thought I had gotten all her life back for her, but she wanted more. In the short time he had before leaving for combat, Kaipo decided to marry Shanda so she'd get all his benefits.

"I'll be able to take care of her even when I'm not here to take care of her," he said.

When Hank got the hand-written wedding invitation, he slid the bird-and-butterfly glittered card into the big box reserved for mail he didn't throw out but would never read.

"You gonna be an aunty?" he had asked.

"I don't think Shanda would do that to her body," I answered.

"Your brother going overseas?"

"Iraq."

"Yep," Hank nodded. "She wants to get in base housing before he leaves."

Shanda couldn't hide her excitement at the idea of being married to a man who would soon be far away. The wedding was lavish in a no-class kind of way, and being a rush-job made it even more expensive. Kaipō would have to work for months to pay for the ring and the dress.

And I just let him do it. I never said one word to stop him or to even try to slow him down. I stood by and watched him put on a rented white tuxedo with a baby blue satin vest. I helped him move all his stuff into a family housing unit on base. I nodded when Shanda asked if I thought the bird and butterfly centerpieces sitting like yard clippings on the center of the tables at Eldean's Delicatessen were pretty. I didn't say anything because I didn't know what to say.

And now that Kaipō was out of that bad relationship, all he wanted was to go right back in. If he could, he'd patch up his leg, tape up his head, strap on a rifle and fly to the desert for her, because when he was there writing her homesick letters and she was home spending his money, they were such a perfect couple.

Kaipō rolled over on the couch, opened one eye like a squid and gave me a little smile. "Oh, it's you. You brought food?"

I turned back around and undid all the locks again.

On my way to the teriyaki take-out counter, I thought about all the pieces that were out of place: Hank was locked up, Kaipō was beat up, and me, after a short little time of feeling good about life, I was back to being uncomfortable about everything,

except even more uncomfortable than ever before. I wasn't living where I wanted to live, I wasn't working where I wanted to work and I didn't know how to get my stuff back. I started eating my plate lunch in the truck, which is even more dangerous than driving and texting, but even the sugar-salty meat didn't take away that empty feeling in my gut.

CHAPTER 8

After one week at House Warehouse, I already had three big problems. One person hated me for no reason, one person liked me for no reason, and word had gotten around town that if anybody needed help getting their stuff back after a bad break-up, the chunky girl who sold paint would help you out for a good price.

All that, and they wouldn't let me see Hank at the prison.

Bernice had tried all that first week to convince the House Warehouse manager (house manager, actually, is what he was called, though I had a hard time saying that without smirking) that I was up to something because so many people came into the hardware store to ask for me by name and then, once they found me, would want to whisper to me in a corner. But Edgar, the Brut-wearing House Warehouse house manager, had brushed aside Bernice's assertions, saying, "We should be glad Delfy is bringing in business from old Happy Henry's." He then thumped both of us on the back, gave a thumbs up and waddled off to the lumber mill with a trail of his aftershave wafting in his wake.

Hank, I thought to myself. His name is Hank, not Henry, and he was handier than any of you orange-backed monkeys will ever be.

But, as usual, I kept that thought to myself.

"Just you wait, Delfy Keala," Bernice said at the employee lockers after work on Friday. "I'll take this all the way up to corporate. I got my eye on you and my hand on my flip cam. I'm taking you down."

She pointed her finger down with emphasis to show me she really meant it.

“Down to the ground!”

By the time I pulled into employee parking Monday morning, week two, I had talked myself into stopping taking on side jobs at work. People needed help, but I needed this stupid job. With Hank, I would never have had to separate the two. But for now, I had to just tell anyone who came in to asking for my help that I just couldn't afford the risk.

Yeah, it would be hard to turn them away. People got so confused when it came to reclaiming what was rightfully theirs, and really, they were just looking for closure or peace or some proof that they hadn't totally screwed up their lives.

Maybe once I was sure I hadn't totally screwed up my own life, I could go back to it.

But for now, I vowed that every time Bernice looked, I'd be hard at work mixing paint or ringing up a customer.

As I pulled into the parking lot, my mind full of firm resolutions and positive affirmation, I spotted a problem bigger than Bernice waiting for me at the employee entrance.

Dexter from the plumbing department.

Bernice may have been out to get me, but Dexter was out to get me in a different way -- a sticky, fumbly, middle school dance kind of way. A worse way.

I caught him looking at me in a manner that could only be described as gazing. There should be a law against gazing at a person like that.

He came around to the paint department way too often pretending to show a customer where to find the brushes. Brushes weren't that hard to find, especially since there was a huge sign hanging from the ceiling that said "Paint: rollers, drop cloths, brushes".

I knew Dexter was big trouble because every time he got near me, I felt a little bit nauseous. The problem with Bernice was easier to handle. She just gave me a headache. She didn't make me want to barf.

On that Monday morning, Dexter was standing at the employee entrance with a fistful of popcorn orchids in one hand, his Fabulous Faucets and Drains magazine in the other, waiting for me to park and come in to the Warehouse warehouse. As I walked up the ramp, I tried to tell myself that maybe the huge spray of flowers were for a store display. Maybe he was trying to spiff up plumbing fixtures and pipe fittings with a little bit of fancy.

I tried to get to the door, but Dexter stepped over and blocked me with a loopy grin and the profusion of tiny yellow flowers. He shoved the orchids in my face and said, "These are my mom's prize orchids. She let me pick them for you."

Oh man, I ran for the employee bathroom like I never ran for anything in my life. Pushed Dexter over and everything.

After I finished heaving, I washed my face at the sink and looked at myself in the mirror. Brown eyes, brown skin, brown hair in a braid down my back, just the average 5'3" size 14 Hawaii girl. Nobody in their right mind should pay any attention to me.

I took a deep breath and prepared myself to face my shift. I had two minutes to get to my register, and I knew Bernice would be watching like a race official.

The orchids were next to the register, a Slurpee cup serving as their vase. I made myself stare at them. I stared and breathed and kept staring. I forced my stomach to calm down and told myself I was just going to deal with those awful flowers for the seven-point-five hours of my shift no matter what.

As it turned out, the morning went by without any more trouble. I ended up being so busy I didn't have time to think about having to act busy. I just was. If anybody came in hoping to whisper their troubles and ask for help, they would have found me fully engaged in paint department responsibilities. My Lehigh safety shoes weren't still for a minute.

At the start of my shift, the maintenance supervisor of a private preschool came in to pick paint colors for all the classrooms on his campus. The guy, Stu, told me that his school's board of directors had voted to paint each classroom a different color. He had pages of wordy descriptions he showed me where they had written things like "red that isn't quite primary red, but not ox blood or Chinese sweet sour, either. A happy red conducive to learning but nothing that will over-stimulate the children into restlessness or aggressive tendencies."

"What the hell is red that isn't red?" Stu asked me.

“Pink?” I offered.

“Nah, pink is for the two-year-olds in Room 7. That one says, ‘A rosy, gleeful pink that will feel inclusive to boys. Nothing Pepto Bismol or the color of human tissue.’”

I wasn’t one to crack up laughing, ever, but that one made me smile.

“For real, they wrote that,” he said.

I set Stu up with handfuls of color cards that he could show to the school board of directors. I pulled pamphlets about paint safety and non-toxic brands. I even did a Mr. Clean Magic Eraser demo with a purple crayon on Brite White Flat Matte. He thanked me, and I actually felt useful just doing my assigned job, which was kind of a first for me.

After Stu the preschool maintenance super left, a pregnant lady and her three friends came in with a stack of magazines that featured pictures of possible baby nursery designs. This particular type of project with this particular group of customers, I soon learned, was a nightmare for a retail paint salesperson in a large hardware store. The people who went Hank’s to look for paint for a baby’s room wanted either blue or pink, or yellow if they weren’t sure. Basic stuff. But at House Warehouse, a pregnant lady with her home decorating posse of indecisive friends meant hours of tense negotiations. I figured out that I would be mixing paint samples and answering questions clear through to lunch and they’d still walk out with just one small can of paint, which they’d no doubt be back to exchange two days later when the expectant mother decided that instead of paint she wanted zoo-animal wallpaper.

This pregnant lady was as big as a front-end loader and very close to her due date. That made mixing her perfect shade of Hello Yellow all the more urgent. I felt like had spoken more words since the Mom-to-be walked into the paint department than I had all the whole last year. My jaw ached from trying to smile and be friendly and reassure. Luckily, the pregnant lady started to get hungry and her friends took it as some sort of lunch emergency. They paid for the little can of paint and left in a hurry. I was glad to see them go even though I knew they, and others just like them, would be back.

When it was time for my lunch break, I ate hunched over a damp baloney sandwich at the lopsided table in the employee break room. I had to brace the bottom of the table with my knee so it wouldn't tip. I was amazed at how many things were broken in this huge hardware store. The tables all seemed to have one short leg. The faucets in the bathrooms dripped. The toilets ran incessantly. None of the slider locks on the bathroom stalls met up right with their corresponding slots. Hank used to joke about plumbers having leaky pipes at home and electricians never changing their own light bulbs, but his own hardware store was fully functional. It might have been old fashioned, dusty and disorganized, but the toilet flushed, the light switches worked and the doors stayed shut when you shut them.

I took the tin foil from around my sandwich and folded it down into a shim. I leaned over and slipped the foil wedge under the table's short leg.

Just then, Bernice came busting in through the lunch room door.

“Ah-HA!”

I banged my head on the underside of the table. It made a sound like a hammer hitting cement.

“I see you trying to stash your stash! I caught you trying to plant your plant! I spot you trying to hide incriminating evidences!”

I rubbed the back of my head. No blood, but I had hit it against the table so hard that an egg was starting to form just above the start of my braid. I tried to give a friendly geez-did-you-see-me-whack-my-head-like-an-idiot look to Bernice, but all I could see in front of me was two identical crazy Bernices yelling while the rest of the break room swirled.

“Wow, I feel like I’m gonna’ pass out.”

“Yeah, well, whatchoo expect when you smoke your own supply, Miss Possession-with-intent-to-distribute.”

Bernice was snapping photos with her phone like a kid on prom night: *me and the evil drug dealer; drug dealer passed out at the table; foil packet of suspected drugs on the floor under the table let next to my feet; my feet; my locker; suspected drug dealer’s locker; me making the big bust.*

I lay my throbbing head down on the table, which, I took notice was now actually sturdy thanks to my fast fix. Bernice kicked the foil shim out from under the table leg with her shoe. The table rocked to the short leg again and my head followed with a big smack.

“Ow.”

“Don’t you touch that foil, Delfy. That’s my evidence right there. I have it all, photos, video, audio. I’m my own eye witness. When the police show up, you’re not talking your way out of this.”

I rolled my head to one side to look at Bernice.

“I don’t know why you don’t like me.”

“Because you’re weird, Delfy. You come in here like you know more about block sanders and base paint than anybody in the whole world even though you’ve had ABSOLUTELY ZERO corporate training. You take breaks by yourself, you eat lunch by yourself, you don’t sign up for the Friday night bowling social. And every time I look around, you’re whispering with somebody in the darkest part of Aisle 12 and when I look again, that customer is walking out empty handed. Why do they come to see you if they not buying anything from House Warehouse, Delfy? What are you selling them that ain’t going through the register? And who the hell made you boss of custom paint matching, I would really like to know. I had that job down to a science until they transferred me to Yard and Garden and I seen your mixing style and it ain’t that great. I bet your cans are full of bubbles.”

To tell the truth, I wasn’t sure Bernice had actually said all those things or if the knock on the head was giving me auditory hallucinations as well as room-spins. No one could really come up with that list of petty grievances, right? I rubbed my head lump and tried to stand up.

“Stay down!” Bernice yelled, searching around for some sort of handy weapon that could be used to keep me from leaving the lunch room. All that was near was the

monstrous spray of popcorn orchids from Dexter, which I had taken from the paint register to try to hide on top of the lockers. Bernice grabbed the flowers and used them like a crazed villager keeping Frankenstein at bay with a torch. She whacked my face with the orchids, shoving the stems up my nose to keep me from escaping.

Just then, Dexter walked into the break room. He was holding his plumbing magazines in one hand and his overstuffed fanny pack in the other. He saw me and dropped both to the floor.

“Delfy?”

He rushed over and stepped in front of Bernice, who apparently thought he was going to help her detain me and so moved aside. He knelt down and looked at my face real close – too close – and then lifted my head off the stained Formica so, so gently.

“I’m OK,” I said, shaking him off. I wanted to wash where he had touched my face.

“What happened, Delfy? Did she hurt you?”

“She’s trouble, Dexter. If you had a brain in your head you’d stay far away from her. I’m warning you. She’s going down and you don’t want her to take you down with her.”

Dexter leaned over to my ear and brushed away a strand of hair that had come loose from my braid. “You can take me down if you want, Delfy. I’d go anywhere with you.”

My stomach lurched.

When Edgar the House Warehouse house manager came in, I was leaning over the trash receptacle trying my best not to barf my baloney sandwich. Bernice was frantically trying to recover seventeen of the 52 photos she had taken before her memory card lost its memory. Dexter was arranging the popcorn orchids in a not-quite-empty plastic bottle of floor stripper.

“Go ahead, Edgar, open up that tin foil right there. That’s where I caught this ex-employee stashing her drugs.”

“It was from my sandwich,” I said. “I was just trying to keep the table from rocking.”

Bernice scooped up the scrap of foil and furiously worked it open. She held it out to Edgar with a smug look on her face.

“Smells like fried baloney,” Edgar said. “With mustard. On white.”

Bernice tried to make him taste it.

“We’ve had enough disruption,” Edgar said. “Delfy, you don’t look well. Go home and rest up, and we’ll work on your accident report when you come in tomorrow.”

Bernice rolled her eyes. “Oh, fabulous. Miss We-Did-It-Better-At-Hank’s comes in and ruins our number-of-days-without-an-accident record and now we can’t have a bounce house at the end-of-year picnic.”

Dexter looked up from his flower arranging.

“I can bring my own bounce house. I keep in my garage.”

I stood up straight and pushed back my shoulders. “Thanks, Edgar, but I’m fine. I don’t need to go home. And I didn’t have an on-the-job accident. I just got up from leaning over too fast. No need to make a thing about it, OK?”

Edgar patted me on the back.

“Atta girl,” he said, but in a way totally different than how Hank used to say it. Bernice glared. “But Bernice,” he said, “You seem to be looking for trouble. Not a good idea considering your history. Maybe you’d better take a half day and think about what it is you’d like to accomplish here at the House.”

Bernice’s eyes got big as light bulbs.

“You’re sending me home?!” Incredulous.

“Just take the rest of the day. Go think about it. Tomorrow, come back with a fresh attitude, OK? We won’t even note it in your file.”

I knew this brief respite from Bernice was going to cost me untold trouble tomorrow, but for the rest of the day, I was able to mix paint in peace. Dexter had a bunch of people come in for pipe advice, so he was off my back too. And not once did anyone come in to ask me to help retrieve their stuff. I was starting to think that maybe things had turned around and were on their way to getting better.

Thinking like that, though, is pretty much begging for trouble.

CHAPTER 9

For a second, I thought it was Hank and my heart thumped behind the pocket of my XL work shirt.

But no. That problem hadn't magically fixed itself either.

Stu the preschool maintenance guy was leaning against my truck when I left the store.

"So did they pick their colors?" I asked. I was still holding on to the slim chance that he wanted to talk to me about paint.

"Nah, they have to go through lots of meetings and votes before they can decide. It'll be months before I'm actually authorized to buy paint. I need to talk to you about something else."

Stu did not look like the kind of guy who would be involved in a messy break-up. He looked more like somebody's grumpy but loveable grandpa, the kind of guy who showed up for holiday dinners but spent most of the time silently eating in front of the TV. He looked like a man who had been married so long that he called his wife "Mom".

I braced myself for what he was going to say, knowing that even though he seemed like a good guy, this was going to be weird.

"Damn kid stole my Tuki Turtle."

OK, even weirder than I thought.

"Little girl in the toddler class was pitching a fit on the playground one day. I mean, kicking, punching, wailing. Teachers couldn't get near her. And I'm there with my

cart just to take a look at a backed-up toilet. The kid is on the ground, kicking so hard she's digging up all my new Bermuda grass. And I recognize the kid. She's the daughter of my son's friend. So I gotta at least try, right?"

"Right," I said, not because I knew what he meant but because he looked like he needed me to agree.

"So I took Tuki Turtle off my cart. Tuki usually sits right up there next to my tool box, but away from the cleaning products and stuff because I don't want him to get bleached, you know?"

I nodded like I knew.

"And I hand it to the kid. Do the funny voice. 'Hey, kid, why you crying?' Distract her from the tantrum just a little. And it works. Like the sun coming out from the clouds. I was a hero that day."

He looked up at the late afternoon sky, which was the soapy gray color of rainclouds.

"Tuki was my good luck turtle. I take him to Vegas with me. No miss. Got that turtle from my best friend Irwin. Irwin sailed on Hokulea, you know. Terrific water man. He died a couple years back..."

I cleared my throat like I was going to say something, but really I had nothing. I just wanted him to stop piling on. I'm sure he loved the turtle and the Vegas lucky charm thing was pretty common with guys his age in Hawaii, but the whole dead friend, Hokulea voyaging canoe connection was a stretch. I didn't think they let sailors bring

toys or souvenirs on board the long voyages. Those crews were so hardcore they slept standing up.

Stu was looking at me all expectantly like I should be offering to help.

“She won’t give it back,” he finally said.

“Did you ask her nicely?”

“She got attached to it. Won’t put it down. That’s her lovey now. But I got a trip booked for next week. Staying at the Luxor and everything,” he nodded. I didn’t know what a Luxor was, but apparently it was even more special than the Hawaii-favorite Golden Nugget hotel. I nodded like I was impressed.

“Can you buy her a substitute Tuki and switch ‘em out?”

“Tuki came from the South Pacific,” he said. “He’s not a factory-made turtle.”

Okaaaaay.

I knew already how this was going to go down and I wasn’t real happy about it.

“So when you came in earlier and asked for the paint, was that straight up?”

“Oh yeah,” Stu said. “I got that bastard of a project on my back. I’ll have a purchase order for 50 gallons in the second half of the fiscal year,” he said.

“But, what, something about me told you I had the skills to rip off a turtle doll from a 2 year old?”

“Nah,” Stu said. “I heard about you from my niece. She dances with Mokihana.”

Great. Like I really want satisfied customers bringing me more business.

I told myself, OK, THIS ONE. This was the last time ever. No more. Just helping out this nice older guy. Just snatching a toy away from a baby. Just righting a wrong. Then no more until I get my own life on track.

I made myself believe it, too.

Two days later, I was scheduled for the noon-to-closing shift so I took the morning to visit the little school. It was super cute, with painted plywood fairytale characters decorating the white picket fence around the play yard and brightly colored plastic slides sloping down to safely padded grass-looking surfaces. The classrooms were all an institutional gray color, though, and while the buildings looked very clean, they looked almost soulless. Kind of like where I was living. But different, because I'm not a little kid and I can handle soullessness. Stu's painting project was going to be a big hit.

I parked my truck under a big banyan tree in the parking lot and headed to the school office. I figured I was gonna do the "scouting for a preschool for my kid" bit and try to grab some information. As I opened the glass door, a line of little children was just walking out toward a waiting van. A battleaxe-looking teacher in golf shorts was leading them holding a flag. The kids were all holding on to a rope with rings that looked like big Cheerios. The whole scene was so cute it made my teeth hurt.

I gave the receptionist my unconvincing line about checking out preschools for my nephew. I knew I didn't look like anybody's mom and I worried that I couldn't even pass for anybody's aunty.

I kept my eye on that cute wiggly line of cute wiggly children. There. I spotted a little girl clutching a filthy toy turtle like her life depended on it.

“... parents have the choice of hot lunch or home...” the receptionist was saying as she pushed brochures and forms across the desk at me. I eyed my target. I could tell the little girl was going to be tough.

“... and we do monthly excursions, like right now, Mrs. Miyahara’s class is going to the zoo!”

I did the fast analysis in my head. Van, zoo, traffic in Waikiki, twelve toddlers, six chaperones, probably 20 minutes of walking around to see the tigers and then lunch by the peacocks. I got this. I won’t even be late for work.

I left without taking the brochures and was in my truck and out the drive before the last kid was strapped into the rainbow-colored Rumble Bus. Never in my life have I raced a Rumble Bus. Never thought I’d have to.

I got to the zoo and parked my truck three streets over to avoid the credit-card-only parking meters. If I had a credit card I wouldn’t be sticking it in any city meter, that’s for sure. I paid my admission, ran through the gift shop, thought about buying a substitute stuffed toy, looked at the prices, realized I didn’t have enough cash and headed over to the tiger cage.

Twenty minutes later I had adjusted to the zoo smells and my eyes weren’t watering so much. The preschool class hadn’t shown up yet, and I worried about my guesswork. I thought for sure they’d head straight to the tiger cage. After all, what could be better than baby tigers?

Then I remembered the murder monkeys.

They were probably watching those bad monkeys.

OK, they're not really monkeys. Their gibbons. They don't have tails. But they swing on their bamboo tower like some kind of crazy Cirque du Soleil show. It's very monkey-ish.

And the murder part -- that was from my one and only childhood trip to the zoo. Come to think of it, it also was a school trip, but we were bigger, probably fourth grade. Old enough to really understand what was happening when one of those blond fuzzy gibbons scooped a little gray dove off the branch of the hau tree inside their enclosure, carried to the top of the climbing structure and bit off its head.

I hadn't thought of the murder monkeys in years but it all came back now. I had come to believe we never went to the zoo because we were poor. Well, we were. But mostly, it was because of what I had seen.

I made myself go over to the gibbon enclosure. Sure enough, the toddlers were there, leaning over the low cement wall watching the long-armed gibbons swing from pole to pole. The kids were shrieking with delight. The gibbons were shrieking back in imitation. The teachers were glancing at their watches, counting the minutes until they could get everyone safely back on the air conditioned van. It was like the scene in every disaster movie of the unsuspecting crowd just before terror strikes the city in the form of a monster wave or a nuclear explosion. I had the urge to yell out a warning, but I stopped myself realizing that a distraction could actually work to my advantage.

Even though I knew it was coming, I was still shocked by how it all went down.

The biggest murder monkey grabbed one of his monkey buddies by the arm and made a chain, I swear, exactly like those plastic toy monkeys. The two of them swung together as a unit, bigger one holding on to the end of the pole closest to the viewing area, the outside gibbon stretching his fuzzy arm over the green-water moat that separated the climbing structure from the human zone. The kids squealed in delight while their teachers reflexively bent over to shield as many children as possible. The little girl who had Stu's turtle held the stuffed animal up above her head as if give it a better view of the funny monkey show.

The second monkey snatched up the toy from the girl's hands, swung back around to the climbing area, let go of his partner in crime and climbed to the top of the bamboo structure to gloat in his victory.

It was chaos.

The girl was screaming. All the kids were screaming. The lead teacher was trying to figure out what happened and what to do about it. Two zoo keepers were running over with walkie-talkies and stun guns drawn. I couldn't have asked for more.

I kept my eye on that turtle. The gibbons passed it back and forth. They gnawed on it a little as if to taste it. One gibbon discovered that if he held the toy out over the moat as if to drop it, the kids would scream even louder, so he played that game for a while before losing interest. The teachers hurried the kids off to a calmer area near the tortoise exhibit, and once they were gone, the gibbons abandoned Tuki Turtle on the poop-covered grass of their little island.

A zoo keeper busted me balanced on the top of the retaining wall trying to judge if I could make the jump across the moat.

“No worry, sister,” he said. “I get the baby’s toy for you. This happens every day.”

I jumped down from the wall as he took out a tool from his pocket that looked like a flashlight. He pressed a button on the thing and it telescoped out to the length of a deep sea fishing pole. Another button activated a pincher grabber on the end. Coolest tool I’d ever seen. He maneuvered the grabber, picked up Tuki and brought the battered toy back over the moat.

Tuki was covered in gibbon spit.

The zoo keeper grabbed a plastic bag from his pocket and slipped Tuki inside before handing it over to me. “Inside a pillowcase, in the washer, hot water, heavy cycle,” he advised.

“Thanks,” I said. “Hey, so where did you come up with that grabber? Did you make it?”

He pushed the button to retract the segments back into the six-inch sleeve. “Nah, I found it in this little hardware store in Kalihi. I told the guy there what I was looking for and he came up with this. I think maybe he made it. The shop is closed now, I heard. Too bad.”

I carried that extra kick of guilt all the way back to House Warehouse with me. It stayed with me all through my shift, too.

When it was time to go home, I clocked out and headed for my car. Sure enough Stu was standing there with the “Did you get it? Did you get it?” look on his face. I handed him the plastic bag.

“Aw man, is that kid pee?” he asked, eyeing up poor Tuki Turtle.

“Nah, just monkey spit,” I told him. He looked relieved. “And in case you ever doubted, that turtle is very lucky.”

Stu smiled at me. I tried to smile back, but I couldn’t do what I didn’t feel. He handed me a wad of folded bills that I didn’t ask for, but took anyway. I was starting to think that I might have to call a lawyer to figure out what was happening with Hank, and if I did, a wad of cash would come in handy.

On the drive home, I took a cruise past the prison. I looked at the windowless buildings behind the razor wire and wondered what Hank was doing at that moment, if he was OK and if he thought I had just walked away and forgotten him. I hope he knew me better than that.

CHAPTER 10

Honolulu is a crowded city, but it's still a small town in a lot of ways, and one of those ways is how fast gossip travels. People in Hawaii can't keep a secret. Anything that isn't supposed to get out is passed around faster than if it was just regular non-secret news.

Somehow, Hank's quiet little business of helping people get their stuff back went viral. Hawaii folks embellish when they gossip, so word got around that I could face down even the most evil ex and get back things people thought were gone forever. Which pretty much wasn't true. All kinds of people were asking me to get things that they left behind years ago. People sought me out in House Warehouse and offered hundreds of dollars for the return of stupid stuff like an old high school yearbook or a ribbon they had won at the state fair.

One guy said his ex could keep the car but he wanted his Wet Okole seat covers. He had had them custom-made in a blue hibiscus fabric that reminded him of his grandmother's throw pillows. Besides, he said, her okole didn't get wet very often.

A woman came in saying she had left her prosthetic breasts behind so her ex would have something to hold on to at night. Now that he was remarried, she wanted them back so she could look sexy in a tank top.

An old lady came in saying she regretted burying her husband with his wedding ring and asked if I could "do a little digging" to get it back.

Crazy stuff.

I told every one of them that I didn't know what they were talking about. I just mix paint, sell paint, give advice on the age-old debate of brush versus roller. I said I'd be happy to help with their home décor needs, but the other stuff wasn't in my job description.

Most of them waited for me in the parking lot when my shift was over to ask me again. And, with all my conflict-avoidant weirdness, I'd rather say yes to breaking-and-entering than say no to a request.

At some point in my personal development I guess I should work on that.

I did that thing in my head where I told myself it was OK because I was carrying on for Hank, doing what he would have done. I wasn't counting, but I knew I was raking in a bunch of money because I was filling up the size 9 shoe box under my bed with stacks of cash. I started taking Kaipo along with me to act as my lookout, though mostly just to get him out of the house. We had a little routine going. We'd get the stuff, then go to get something to eat. I told myself that if I handled my business, only did these side jobs after work and never let it affect my performance at the Warehouse, it was all good.

Then Shanda came back on the scene, and my big balancing act went splat.

They came in to see me at House Warehouse during my shift. Shanda was taking three tiny steps for each of Kaipo's lunges on his crutches. She looked tinier and shinier than ever. Her black hair was now streaked with glittery pink highlights and she had a

diamond attached to one nostril. Kaipō looked so happy, like he could drop right down and die smiling.

“Hey, Delfy! Looky who I found!” Kaipō was grinning so wide I could see he wasn’t reaching with his Reach toothbrush.

As Shanda leaned in to give me the fake “so happy to see you” hug, Bernice came riding up the aisle gunning it on a forklift.

“Delfy,” Shanda said with a peppermint-scented sigh.

“Delfy!” Bernice bellowed like a school teacher busting a cheating test-taker.

“Bernice?” Shanda said, pulling away from me.

“Shanda!” Bernice squealed. She slammed on the forklift brakes, leapt off the machine and ran toward Shanda. Her abrupt stop left a long tire mark on the polished cement floor. I just wanted to get the sponge mop and start working on the black streak right then and there rather than live through whatever the long-time-no-see torture that was about to unfold.

“Hey, cousin!” Shanda said, embracing Bernice in a fluttery hug.

“Hey cousin!” Bernice said, squeezing tiny Shanda like an Otter Pop.

“I think they’re cousins,” Kaipō said to me. “But that’s just a guess.”

I tried to kick the shin of his good leg but he scooted away just in time.

Bernice stood back from Shanda. “So, baby cousin, what you looking for? You remodeling?”

“No, actually, I came to see Delfy.”

Bernice’s head swiveled and focused on me like a laser.

“You selling drugs to my baby cousin? This is beyond dismissal. This is I going kick your ass.”

Shanda held Bernice back. “No, cousin. Delfy is ex- family. I used to be married to Delfy’s brother. That’s him. Over there trying to smell the paint samples. Kaipō, dumbass, that’s now how you sniff paint.”

Kaipō hobbled over. “We got divorced when I was in Iraq. But she called me today. She missed me.” Kaipō gave me the biggest “I am the MAN and I told you so” grin he could muster through his pain pills. I found myself wishing he was still in the Iraqi war zone where he’d be safer than here with Shanda.

Off in the distance, I spotted Edgar the House Warehouse house manager strolling around the contractors’ register, chit-chatting with two of the regulars.

“Hey, so Kaipō, let me know what you need and I’ll point you to the right aisle. I gotta’ get back to my register already. House Warehouse isn’t anything like Hank’s. Efficiency is the Key to this House,” I said, repeating one of the slogans on the posters inside the employee break room.

As soon as it was out of my mouth, I realized it was absolutely the wrong thing to say.

Bernice didn’t want anyone else enforcing the rules besides her and I shouldn’t have been asking what those two lovebirds needed because I had a feeling I already knew.

“Shanda needs your help, Delfy. She’s been seeing this guy. Her ex before me. The one from when you helped her the first time.”

Shanda made the “poor little me” face. Bernice put an arm around her. “What you need, cousin? Sledge hammer? Sling blade? Cane knife?”

Shanda shook her head. “I need that thing that Delfy does.”

Kaipo nodded his head. “Digamony.”

Bernice’s jaw dropped open. “That’s illegal. What is it?”

I could see Edgar bopping over in our direction. “Boss is coming. Nice seeing you, Shanda. I’ll give you a call later, OK?”

“Gotta’ be soon, Delfy. She needs that stuff out. Like tonight. You got time, right? You’re not breaking in to anybody else’s house, right?”

Bernice was turning purple like she was dying to fly into a full-press interrogation, but Edgar was heading straight for us.

All of a sudden, Dexter popped out from behind a display of painters’ tape, waylaying Edgar with a brochure of a custom faucets.

“Boss! Big order! Top of the line Moen brushed nickel Kingsley!”

That stopped Edgar in his tracks. “That’s the most expensive faucet we carry.”

“Yeah,” Dexter said. “And it’s for a boutique condo complex in Waikiki. The guy wants to order 30 of them.”

Edgar looked like he was going to kiss Dexter. He settled instead for a manly bear hug.

“That’s some serious up selling, Mr. In-Contention-For- Employee-of-the-Month!”

The two walked away toward plumbing fixtures together, Edgar with his arm around Dexter's round shoulders. Dexter looked back at me and gave me the, "Run! Run now!" eyes. Dexter the dork could apparently be a force for good sometimes.

Bernice hugged Shanda goodbye and then stuck a finger in my face.

"First break. By the loading dock. Be there and start talking."

And she was off to her endless task of watering root-bound seedlings, the gallons of water passing right through the plastic pots and forming a wide, shallow lake on the cement floor.

Shanda brushed her acrylic nail tips through her frosted hair. "Don't worry about Bernice. She's totally supportive of me," she said, and off she went as if swept away in a cloud of fairy dust. Kaipo turned as if to follow her, but I grabbed his arm.

"You see the trouble you started?" I said to Kaipo.

"I didn't tell Shanda about you. She already heard. That's why she called me."

"Just go home, OK? I'll talk to you folks later."

"Tonight, right? You can get Shanda's stuff tonight?"

"We'll deal with this later, OK?"

Kaipo was watching Shanda walk away, his jaw dropping lower with the sway of each step. He started to stumble-step after her, but then forced himself to turn away from his beloved. He leaned in to me and lowered his voice. "Oh and I also came to tell you something since you never answer your cell phone anymore."

"Against regulations."

“I know. Right. Regulations. Look, I just wanted to let you know the guy came to the house.”

Uh oh. “What guy?”

“Your guy. The one. Your ex.”

“He’s not my ex. He was never my...”

“Yeah. Sure. Whatever. Look, Shanda’s gonna leave me here if I don’t limp over to her car in the next 10 seconds. I just wanted to give you the warning that he was looking for you.”

Great. Of all the things I had to worry about, Tommy was the last thing I wanted to deal with.

At 10:43, Bernice was there waiting, swinging her legs off the platform and drinking straight from a warm liter bottle of Diet Coke.

I didn’t have any idea what to say or where to start.

“It’s not what you think,” I told her.

“Paint samples my ass,” she said. “You’re cooking the thinner, right? Selling drugs and ripping off houses. Just confess. I’m gonna get on the six o’clock news with my eye witness story.”

I sat down next to her on the loading dock. Bernice scooted away like I smelled bad.

“I’m not selling drugs.”

“If you’re offering to pay me for my silence, forget it. I’m an honest woman, unlike some people.” Bernice took a big swig from the bottle of soda and let out a thunderous belch.

“I’m not offering you money.”

Bernice shot me an indignant look.

“Why the hell not? I got you cold. You should be offering me at least a couple Gs for my silence.”

“Bernice, you know that big guy who came in yesterday, he —”

“Are you threatening me, Delfy? Is that it? You’re too cheap to offer me hush money so you’re going to kill me and throw me in the cardboard box recycler?”

Bernice took another gulp from her bottle as though it was cowboy whiskey in a saloon.

“How can you drink that warm? Doesn’t it give you gas?”

“I never liked you, Delfy Keala. I knew from the day I met you that you were up to something.”

From where I was sitting on the loading dock, I could see the back of the yard and garden department. The areca palms and hibiscus looked tired and windblown. Rows of St. Francis bird feeders were lined up against the black dust screen. I could just make out the cement statues’ outstretched hands.

“I don’t want anyone to know, Bernice, but I help people.”

Bernice spat some of her soda out of her nose. “Yeah, right.”

“I get people’s stuff back.”

A gust of wind blew around the loading dock sending an eddy of leaves spinning across the parking lot. Bernice slowly twisted the cap down on her liter bottle. She was quiet for a moment.

“Like what stuff?” Bernice’s eyes narrowed like a kid hoping the story was going to be good despite being determined not to believe it.

“Like, I don’t know, stuff they left behind.”

I told Bernice how people would come to Hank after a big break up. They were ready to move on with their lives except for that one Yvonne Elliman album or the favorite Toucan Sam cereal bowl they left behind. “It’s never ‘call a lawyer’ stuff,” I told her. “It’s smaller than that. Weirder than that.”

Bernice smirked. “How weird?”

“Last week I got this lady’s Menudo lunch box out of her ex-mother-in-law’s kitchen,” I said. “The old lady kept it because she thought Ricky Martin looked like her dead Chihuahua.” The whole thing seemed so much crazier when I heard myself put it into words.

“I left way weirder stuff behind in my ex-boyfriend’s truck. All my ex-boyfriends’ trucks,” Bernice said. “I’m not impressed. Keep going.”

I tried to explain that the relationships weren’t always bad or volatile. Sometimes, they just ended in a way that everything was over and nobody wanted to re-open the door to get one last thing out of the apartment. Re-opening that door would be messy or awkward.

“And so, what? You have an ad in the yellow pages? You leave your business card at Divorce Court? What does this have to do with House Warehouse or that junk shop you came from in Kalihi?”

I had been wondering about that myself, and was working on a pet theory.

“I think women always go to hardware stores after the big, ugly break up with their boyfriend,” I said. “They’re out to prove that they don’t need the cheating bastard. They can do their own plumbing and carpentry. They can change their own locks. They can finally paint the bedroom that sweet tea-rose color now that the stinking loser isn’t lying in there 18 hours a day.”

“They’re trying to rebuild their lives,” Bernice said. She had a far-away look in her beady eyes.

“Yup. My mom did that,” I said. I guess I hadn’t realized that until that very moment.

“Mine, too,” Bernice said.

“You hadn’t noticed?”

Bernice ran her hand across her orange smock, smoothing out the logo over her heart. “I swear. I never did.”

“Hank taught me that when people come with divorce stuff, tell them to call an attorney or legal aid.”

“So, no child custody stuff,” Bernice said.

“Nope. But one time I lifted a cockatiel because the ex was feeding the bird moldy oatmeal as an act of revenge.”

“I had a bird once,” Bernice said. She twisted off the cap of her soda and slowly spilled the rest onto the asphalt below.

“Mostly, it’s like this one lady from Kaimuki, she told me she finally got out of a rotten relationship with only her dignity and her flat iron. She left behind the patchwork bedspread she made in her 4-H club sewing class. That bedspread won the only blue ribbon of her life.

She couldn’t take it with her because he was sleeping underneath it when she ran.”

“Damn, girl,” Bernice whispered. She stifled a belch.

“And when I gave her back that bedspread, she held it in her arms like there was a baby wrapped inside and she told me the story of every single square of fabric. ‘This was from my father’s plantation work shirt. This was from the mu’u mu’u my mother wore when she was pregnant with me. This was the curtain that was on the window by my crib as a baby.’ On and on, like I had nothing better to do than hear about her old curtains.”

Bernice poked a finger in the corner of her eye where her black eyeliner was running.

“I’m in,” she said.

This is what happens when I let my guard down and start talking. People get the idea that I’m the sort that gets all friendly and attached and bonded. This is why I don’t like to talk.

“Nah, Bernice. I’m good. I just want you to know I’m not doing anything dirty.”

“The hell you aren’t. You’re stealing stuff.”

“Not really. I’m getting people’s stuff back. The ownership isn’t in question.”

“You’re getting even with the bad guys. I love that,” Bernice said. She checked her plastic Casio men’s watch and stood up. “You owe the company six minutes.”

“I got here after you.”

Bernice put a hand on her hip and assumed her Corporate Policy posture. “Yeah, but I worked double overtime last Christmas and didn’t put in for the hours. They owe me. It’s all documented.” And off she went to her department.

My gaze drifted over to cement St. Francis behind the dust screen. His bird feeder bowl must be full of rain water, and that rain water must be full of mosquito larvae. I wondered if Francis ever wanted to smack that cement sparrow clinging to his shoulder.

CHAPTER 11

Handy Hank's never looked like much from the outside, but it seemed broken and abandoned now. In just the few weeks since Hank was arrested, the wooden building had begun to sag like it had just stopped trying.

If I couldn't see Hank, seeing Hank's place was the next best thing. I didn't want to go home and deal with my needy brother and his needy Shanda. I just wanted to sit in a safe place and think for a while. Hank's was pretty much the only safe place I had ever known.

I parked my truck next to the building over a carpet of unraked mango leaves. I got out and went to the front steps. I'd bet Hank had never bothered to sweep those steps, but now, without him in the building, the entry was covered with a quarter inch of dirt. I sat on the top step, and though I expected the old wooden plank would still be warm from the sun, it was cool as stone. Hank's Hardware was looking like just another abandoned building in the crackhead and carjack section of town, the part of Honolulu dominated by the soup bone smell of Kalihi stream.

If I was the type to cry, I might have gotten a little misty sitting there. Instead, I picked up a small rock and threw it into the weeds. Hard.

"Hey, Aunty, you OK?"

That made me jump.

A kid had come from around the other side of the building. He had a round, serious face on a spindly body and spoke with the authority of an old timer.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“That’s crap. You look like somebody stole your lunch money,” he said.

The kid was what Hank called “goofy cute” – droopy eyes, teeth in all directions like a hurricane-blown fence, dirt smudge across his wide nose.

I felt myself almost smiling at him. I caught myself and gave him a stern look.

“Don’t tell me you’re living here,” I said.

“No problem,” he said, “I wasn’t gonna tell you jack.”

“I used to work here.”

“What, you gonna’ give me your big ‘back in the olden days’ story? Wait, let me get comfortable so I can sleep through the boring parts.”

I couldn’t stop myself on that one. I actually let out a laugh. It was so tight and unused it came out like a cough.

The boy’s funny face got hard and he leaned his weight forward, ready to run if he had to. “What’s up with you, crazy lady? It wasn’t that funny.”

A rusty powder blue Ford truck rumbled past and the driver stuck his tattooed arm out the window. “Hui! Delfy!” he yelled. I waved back. The boy watched the truck rattle away toward Likelike Highway.

“You know that guy?” I could tell my answer was going to make it or break it with this kid.

“That’s Mr. Robello.”

“That guy is syndicate,” he said.

“Nah, he’s retired City and County,” I told him. “Mr. Robello was our customer. Hank sold him chicken wire for his fighting roosters. Sometimes he’d bring in chicken adobo and say we were eating the loser.”

“All right,” the boy said. “I’ll take that as ID. You’re from here. I’ll make you a deal, then. Homegirl special. You can crash here tonight and I throw in the second night free.”

“You renting out Hank’s place?”

The boy scratched at his head. I hoped he didn’t have ukus.

“You’re my first customer. But don’t think you’re gonna have the place to yourself because there’s demand out there. Lots of people looking for a place to crash. It might even rain tonight. See the clouds above Kapalama?”

I looked. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky.

“What’s your name?”

“Classified.”

“We gonna play that game?”

“Nah. For reals. That’s my street name.”

“Your mother named you Classified?”

“My mother named me Clarence, which is why I have a street name. But you can call me C.”

He stuck out his hand like for me to shake it, so I did. “I’m Delfy,” he said.

The kid burst out laughing. “Wow, Aunty Delfy, you need a street name!”

“Just shake my hand and don’t be rude.” The boy obeyed, but when he did, he slipped the wrapper of a tiny chocolate bar, like a leftover from last Halloween, into my hand.

“Uh, thanks.”

“I’m not giving it to you. I’m practicing my technique. That’s how drug dealers make street sales. I’m trying to get a job.”

He took the candy wrapper back from my hand and put it back in his shorts pocket.

“You know I don’t want to hear that.”

“I don’t know anything about what you wanna hear. You could be a drug dealer out here recruiting for a smart kid like me. If you are, I want to show you I can do the pass. Maybe this is my job interview.”

“I’m not a drug dealer and you know it.”

“So what are you doing sitting outside an abandoned building in Kalihi talking to a 10-year-old boy? You’re not a weirdo child molester because you aren’t trying super hard to be my buddy. You’re not a social worker because you’re not wearing cheap polyester pants from Ross. You’re not buying the building because by the look of your truck, you don’t have the money to fill free air in your tires.”

I glanced over and saw he was right. The tires on my truck were bald and sagging.

“The man who had this hardware store, he would have liked you,” I said.

C. leaned back into a ray of yellow sun, the last shaft of evening light that made a zigzag line up the steps. “I heard about the old man. He helped my moms the time her boyfriend threw us out of his apartment. We didn’t even have clothes.”

A lumped started up in my throat but I coughed it away.

“That was a while ago,” he said, “And then my moms hooked up with a new guy, who turned out pretty much the same as the old guy.”

I scanned him for telltale marks and saw the yellowish blue of a fading bruise on his arm.

“Is that why you’re here?”

“Nah. We’re good. We got that cheap shelter toothpaste that tastes like soap and we’re sleeping on somebody’s old towels. It’s cool,” he said, and I thought he was going to play that game where he was tougher than tough, but then he dropped his eyes and softly said, “But yeah, I wanted to ask the old man if he would get our stuff back.”

I felt a thud in my stomach. This thing was following me around town. It wasn’t just people coming to find me at work. I was walking myself right into people who needed help.

“Why you shaking your head, lady? I wasn’t even asking you a question.”

A flock of tiny Java rice birds landed on the patch of dirt near the sidewalk. All those shiny accusatory eyes turned in my direction. I sighed, and it was as though my breath blew the little birds away like a cloud of dust.

“Hank is gone,” I said.

“I figured that,” the boy said. “Gone dead or gone Vegas?”

“Prison,” I said, though I realized I had almost been thinking of him as though he was dead, like a kind of angel, looking down at me, keeping watch, invisible but always near.

“He got caught? He shoulda’ been smarter than that,” he said.

“Hank’s a smart guy, but more than that, he’s a good guy, you know? He’d risk getting caught doing something he thought had to be done.”

Mr. Robello passed again going in the other direction. He shouted a “hui” out the truck window and waved.

“He’s totally syndicate. That was a drop,” C. said.

“He’s a retired garbage man and that was a beer run.”

C. shook his head like I was the most naïve person he had ever met.

“The mosquitoes are coming out. Come, I’ll drop you home.”

“I can handle mosquitoes.”

“I don’t want you here overnight.”

“You’re not my mom, and I’d rather sleep here in the dust than on a bunch of towels so old even the Humane Society didn’t want them for the dogs.”

I reached into her hip pocket where my cell phone had been buzzing for the last five minutes -- Kaipo trying to find out when I was coming home. I pulled out my last twenty and handed it to the boy.

“Sorry it isn’t more but I don’t get paid until Friday.”

C. gave me a look of disgust and flicked my hand away. “I’m not taking money from a lady who can’t even afford crappy polyester pants from Ross. I just wanted help getting my family’s stuff back.”

The street was all indigo twilight and the doves were settling on the rooftops. I looked down at my t-shirt and jeans. I’d thought it was an accomplishment that I could still wear clothes from high school. I had managed to keep my stocky self from getting stockier over the years. What the kid said was true, though. Even if I wanted to wear them, which I didn’t, I couldn’t afford crappy polyester pants. The money piling up under the bed, that was for emergencies. That was for Hank.

C. ducked his head to evade a mosquito attacking his ear. He swished a hand at the air and then hit my arm with a sharp whack. The crumpled black legs of a mosquito stuck to my skin.

“All right, show me where the guy lives,” I said. I stood up from the stairs.

“For reals?” C. jumped to his feet, slid under the railing and ran toward my truck.

“Yeah. For reals,” I said.

When I started the engine, C. leaned over to look at the gas gauge. “Cutting it close, Aunty. And you were gonna give me your last twenty? You’re crazy.”

As we drove up Likelike highway toward the dank forest of upper Kalihi, C. rattled off an itemized list of the things he wanted to retrieve while I tried to push out the realization that I was helping this kid partly because I didn’t know how to help Hank. Or myself, for that matter.

“A blanket my grandmother made in Kosrae, my sister’s homework, my shoes for basketball, my mother’s stew pot...”

The needle of the gas gauge was nudging the E when I parked the truck outside a crumbling cement apartment building. The place looked more like an old Army bunker than a housing complex.

“... my Jackson chameleon, the trophy I got from spelling bee...”

The jalousie windows of the second story apartment were open but it was dark inside. Maybe the guy wasn’t home. Maybe the whole recovery operation would take 10 minutes. I was trying not to think about how I was opening myself to a ton of risks for just a spelling bee trophy and a Jackson chameleon.

“... the mother-of-pearl picture my mom had from her Aunty, my basketball and the urn with my father’s ashes. That’s all.”

Oh man.

“And if you run out of time,” he said, looking at me with those droopy, goofy eyes, “just grab my dad.”

Man oh man.

I took a deep breath and headed up the stairs, repeating my new mantra that this would be the last time, last time, last time though I knew I was lying to myself with every step.

CHAPTER 12

I knocked on the mildew-patterned door. A chunk of paint came off under my knuckles and broke on the cement walk like a piece of eggshell. The apartment looked quiet and dark from the parking lot, but the guy could very well have been sleeping or hiding.

I heard footsteps from inside and then the door opened just an inch. A teenage girl with blonde matted hair peered out. "He's not home, and whatever it was, he didn't do it," she said.

C. called from the truck, "Hey Keri!"

The girl opened the door wider and stuck her head out. "Clarence! Come up here and get your crap out of my house! The whole place smells like fish!"

"Don't call me Clarence! It's Classified!" he yelled, all indignant-looking, but he scrambled out of the truck and headed up to the apartment.

"You his case worker?" Keri asked.

"Just helping him get his family's stuff back," I said.

"About time," Keri said as she opened the door and motioned for us to come in. She pointed to three cardboard boxes stacked against the kitchen counter. "My dad is sick and tired of all this junk in his house."

"Are you his sister?" I asked her. They looked nothing alike, but you never know.

"I'm his ex-common-law-step-sister," she said, as if that explained it. "My dad and his mom used to be a thing."

C. pushed past me and started to rummage through the boxes.

“Where’s my iPod?”

“My iPod. You broke it, remember? You still owe me,” Keri said. She was lean and angular like a 13-year-old but had the tired, black-lined eyes of a middle-aged woman.

“Where’s my mom’s Tahitian pearl?”

“Don’t even start, Clarence, that’s my mom’s Tahitian pearl. My dad only let your mom wear it when she was staying here.”

“Where’s the Game Boy?”

“You’re here to claim your stuff, not steal me and my dad’s stuff, OK? Lady, you need to get this kid and his crap out of here before he pisses me off. Right now I’m being nice.”

C.’s eyes were scanning the tiny, dark room looking for more things to claim.

“That’s my lamp and the chair came from my uncle and we left cans of tuna in the cupboard.”

I picked up two of the boxes and started down to the parking lot. “Get the other box,” I told him. “Let’s get going while this is still easy.”

I took the boxes down to my truck, lifted them into the bed and looked up to the open apartment door where Keri stood with her back to me, blocking C.’s way out the door. One hand was on her hip and the other was extended in an angry, pointed finger.

“That’s not yours!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a bone-hard tattooed man with strings of hair the same shade of yellow as Keri's charging up the street holding a cricket bat over his shoulder like he was going to take on the entire Fijian national team.

"C'mon C., let's go!"

Keri went back in to the apartment. The arguing got louder. That kid wasn't coming out until he got his hands on every little thing he could scavenge.

I charged back upstairs taking three steps at a time. I burst into the apartment and found Keri and the boy wrestling over a purple tie-dyed pareau.

"That's mine!"

"It's my mom's skirt!"

"It's my curtain!"

"She wore it all the time."

"Not my fault your mom had nothing to wear except my curtain, but it's my curtain!"

I pulled them apart and grabbed C. by the collar of his t-shirt. "He's coming. You hear? Leave the curtain. Let's go."

C scrambled to his feet and ran out the door. I grabbed up the last box. Oof, that was heavy. Keri gave the bottom of the box an extra push to set it on my shoulder.

"Thanks," I said and bolted out the door.

"No problem," Keri called down the stairs. "Glad it's going. Their stuff reeked like fish."

I stumbled to the parking lot with the heavy box. Before I could get to the truck, the man had grabbed C. by the neck and pinned him against the driver's side door.

"You don't want to do that, Mister," I said, keeping my voice low and calm even though my heart felt like it might pound right out of my chest.

"No, I really do. I do want to do that," the man said. He raised the cricket bat over his shoulder as if to swing it through C.'s head.

"Bad form," C. said, his voice squeaked from behind the choke hold on his neck. "That's for baseball."

The man cocked the bat even higher.

"We just came to clear out the junk they left behind," I said, nice and soothing, like Mr. Robello coaxing a fighting chicken back in its cage after a police raid preempted a fight. "Just didn't want to leave a mess. That's all," I said. Calm, calm, calm.

The man lowered the cricket bat and pushed the boy's head against the truck.

"Let me see," he said. He reached into the bed of the truck and poked around the boxes. He pulled out clothing and toys and threw them on the ground. When he was satisfied that there was nothing there he wanted, he motioned for me to show him the box I was carrying. I lowered it off my shoulder and held it for him to inspect. As he pawed through the box, I got a look at his eyes, all jumpy and wild, the eyes of a man who has nightmares when he's awake.

"Dad, come on. I made saimin for you and the noodles are getting bloated." Keri was standing outside her apartment, arms crossed, head tipped to one side as if she saw

her father threatening people with a cricket bat every day of the week and thought nothing of it.

The man finished his inspection and took his hand off C's neck.

Nice and calm, I thought, willing my thoughts into the boy's brain. Now let's go.

I put the box in the back of the truck and helped C pick up the things that had been thrown on the ground. The man stood his ground, cricket bat on his shoulder, watching to make sure we weren't going to do anything else to piss him off.

We got in the truck and, though I don't pray very often, I busted out a silent prayer that the engine would start on the few drops of gas left in the tank. I was trying to think up with a Plan B for our escape when the truck wheezed to life.

As I got the truck in gear, C. cranked down the passenger side window. Before I could stop him, his head was out of the truck.

"Hey Billy, I just wanted to say thanks for letting us get our stuff back. Thanks for not chucking it or burning it or whatever."

"Get going, kid," the man said. He raised the cricket bat with both hands.

"All right. But hey, that's my cricket bat." In one lightning fast movement, C. pitched the top half of his body out of the car window, grabbed the wooden bat from Billy's hands and pulled it into the car.

"Drive! Drive! Drive!" he yelled. My foot hit the gas and we peeled out of the parking lot. We covered a quarter mile before Billy finally quit running after them.

"That better be your bat."

“It is now,” C. said, admiring the battered wood in the flash of oncoming headlights.

We made it to the gas station on School Street before the truck started sputtering. It died just at the entrance, and I had to coast it to the pump island.

“It’s on me,” C. said and hopped out to pay the attendant.

“I thought you needed money?”

“I needed help. Money, I can always get. My mom kept cash hidden behind the mother of pearl picture.”

Later, we sat in a booth at Taka’s Noodle House and ate saimin. C. ordered a Kapalama Extra Large with extra meat and double noodles. When the bowl came, it was bigger than his head. I watched him carefully drip shoyu into the broth. He counted each drop to get just the perfect color, as though one extra drop would ruin the taste, but then he recklessly dropped a big spoonful of Chinese hot mustard into the soup.

Then I remembered. “Did we get your dad?”

“Yeah,” the boy nodded. “That’s what was so heavy in that last box. He was a little guy, but my grandfather wanted him in a big urn so all of us can fit in there when die, you know? All together.”

I stared down at the table. I did not want to look into the kid’s eyes at that moment. I grabbed the jar of Chinese mustard and plopped a spoonful into my bowl.

“You’re not as cool as the old man, but you got the job done,” he said.

I made myself look up at him.

“Nobody is as cool as Hank, but thanks.”

Classified went fishing around his noodles for a slice of hard boiled egg.

“You should steal Hank back,” he said.

The Chinese mustard hit my sinuses and my eyes filled with tears. Pretty soon, though, they weren't mustard tears, they were real ones.

The kid handed me a paper napkin. “Wuss,” he said, and kept eating.

Chapter 13

Friday at work was Mandatory Forklift Training for all new employees, which meant two hours in the windowless conference room watching glitchy safety videos, a catered lunch break with supermarket sandwiches, and then an hour of back lot practice drills known as a Forklift Rodeo, which involved maneuvering the pallet truck around stacks of boxes and culminated with a 5-pound bag of rice for the winner.

I struggled hard but I could not keep my mind on the lesson. Some of the video footage of a fork lift accident in a soda bottle warehouse was pretty cool, but when the topic turned to a 20 minute discussion of various “man cages”, I felt my brain switch to screen save.

I had managed to avoid running into Bernice that morning, but several times when I glanced over at the closed conference room door, I saw Bernice’s beady eyes peering in the small rectangular glass, her claw-like hands with the press-on fingernails forming the urgent gesture for “call me later!”

I stared glassy-eyed at the training video and tried to quiet all the troubles rattling around my head.

Just focus on the forklift.

Focus on the forklift.

What’s the difference between a rider stacker and a reach truck anyway?

Hank never did anything wrong.

I don’t want to do anything for that witch Shanda.

Maybe I should try to steal Hank back.

Focus on the damn forklift, Delfy. Focus.

At lunch break, I grabbed a flat sandwich and considered the chip selection arranged haphazardly in a fraying rattan basket. Every package had words like “hot” or “flaming” in red letters across the top. There was nothing that was just plain. What was wrong with people these days? Everything had to be over spiced for them to be able to taste anything.

Teddy, a new hire in lighting fixtures, sidled up next to me.

“I hear you’re the man,” he whispered.

Teddy grabbed a bag of off-brand spicy pork rinds and tried to open it. His fat arms strained at the sealed package. I turned my head so I could roll my eyes without insulting him.

“I hear you’re the one to talk to about getting stuff,” Teddy said, as he tried to rip the bag with his little rabbit teeth.

I watched him struggle and felt another eye roll coming on, but I resisted. “If you mean ‘stuff’ like sponge roller replacements at the top of Aisle 13, I’ll be happy to get it for you after I’m certified in high-reach power lifts with added training on use of the man basket,” I said.

Teddy took his keys out of his pocket and started jabbing at the package with the edge of his mini supermarket club card.

“I had this girlfriend back in high school. She was cool and all, but when I broke up with her, I let her keep my football jersey and you know, I have a kid now. He’s gonna be in 9th grade. I was thinking how awesome would it be if he got to wear his dad’s football jersey to practice.”

For the first time in my whole life, I felt a “no” coming on. Maybe because the glitchy video rewired my brain, maybe because Bernice was suddenly so supportive of what I was doing, maybe because that boy who called himself Classified had called my bluff and given me new perspective – whatever. Maybe all that together made it possible for me to say what I really felt.

I faced Teddy square and rolled my eyes in a big arc, doing it extra slow so maybe he would get the point, even though I already knew that he probably wouldn’t. I grabbed the bag of pork rinds out of his hands, ripped it open so it formed a perfect pouch, then handed it back to him.

“You were, what, 200 pounds lighter then? Third string?” I felt myself amping up. “My advice is don’t show your kid the jersey. Describe it to him. Tell him stories about what a great athlete you were, but don’t show him pictures. He’ll only laugh. And in case you didn’t know this about girls, they don’t save their old boyfriend’s football jerseys. Jewelry, sure. Pictures, maybe. Electronics, definitely. But your old sweaty football shirt? She gave it to the dog to sleep on years ago.”

That actually felt kind of good, in a jittery, I-can’t-believe-I-just-said-that kind of way.

Teddy was holding the bag of chips up to his eyes like a hanky and taking deep breaths. He was trying not to cry. Some people don't want the truth.

By then, my head was starting to throb, partly from staring at the safety video all morning and partly because I had slept in my truck. I hadn't figured out how to get out of helping Shanda, but I knew the more time Shanda spent alone with Kaipō, the less time Shanda would want to spend with Kaipō. If they were alone together in my little apartment, it might make her break up with him for good.

I found an old faded paper packet of generic Tylenol in the company first aid cabinet near the employee lockers. I went to the leaky water fountain and leaned over the fuzzy carpet of algae that grew up from the drain. I pressed the button to get a drink of water, but all that came out was a weak dribble of wet rust. This is a hardware store, damn it. Why don't they fix the fountain? Why would you not do something if it was totally within your power to fix things?

I couldn't make myself drink from that mossy fountain so I sat at the wobbly table and swallowed the pills dry. The bitter tablets scraped all the way down my throat.

A hand landed on my shoulder and I brought my fist up to crack whoever it belonged to.

Dexter stood there looking at me with worried, lovesick little eyes.

"You OK, Delfy? Your face looks ... sort of gray, like Colonial Twilight."

I felt my stomach starting to lurch, but then I reminded myself how Dexter had run interference for me the day before. I at least owe it to him not to barf every time I see

him. It bothered me that he could quote the Sherman Williams color pallet, though. He was a plumbing guy, not a paint guy. I hoped that wasn't, like, to impress me or something.

"Nah, just a headache," I said. "Forklift class. You know how it is."

Dexter nodded sympathetically.

"You ever need anything up high, Delfy..."

"Thanks, but the climbing isn't the problem. It's the training I don't like so much."

"I would take your place in class, Delfy. Anything for you. Anything."

"Stop it, Dexter."

"I didn't even start yet."

Dexter rustled a plastic bag in his hand. Inside were two Styrofoam lunch containers.

"I brought lunch for you."

"I have to go back to class."

"Eat something. It'll help your headache."

"They bought us lunch."

Dexter shook his head. "Six inch supermarket sandwiches cut into thirds? Nah, this is better."

He brought out one of the Styrofoam boxes and offered it to me. I didn't want to touch it. It looked like something from the food court at the Pearl Kai strip mall.

"Tell me it isn't katsu."

“It’s katsu,” Dexter’s eyebrows arched up toward the center of his forehead. He looked so worried.

“From the strip mall?”

“God, no. That’s not katsu, that’s ratsu. My mom made this. She likes me to have a hot lunch.”

I took the container and opened the lid. It smelled pretty good. The strips of chicken were marinated, battered, deep fried and served with a thick soy-plum-barbeque sauce. There was a perfectly formed dome of white rice and a side of potato salad as well. Dexter’s mom even put in a few lettuce leaves and a cherry tomato for color. My mom’s version of home lunch had been leftovers from breakfast and dinner, usually pork-and-beans pancake sandwich or canned corned beef pancake sandwich. This was deluxe.

“Your mom takes good care of you,” I said.

Chapter 14

Friday at work was Mandatory Forklift Training for all new employees, which meant two hours in the windowless conference room watching glitchy safety videos, a catered lunch break with supermarket sandwiches, and then an hour of back lot practice drills known as a Forklift Rodeo, which involved maneuvering the pallet truck around stacks of boxes and culminated with a 5-pound bag of rice for the winner.

I struggled hard but I could not keep my mind on the lesson. Some of the video footage of a fork lift accident in a soda bottle warehouse was pretty cool, but when the topic turned to a 20 minute discussion of various “man cages”, I felt my brain switch to screen save.

I had managed to avoid running into Bernice that morning, but several times when I glanced over at the closed conference room door, I saw Bernice’s beady eyes peering in the small rectangular glass, her claw-like hands with the press-on fingernails forming the urgent gesture for “call me later!”

I stared glassy-eyed at the training video and tried to quiet all the troubles rattling around my head.

Just focus on the forklift.

Focus on the forklift.

What’s the difference between a rider stacker and a reach truck anyway?

Hank never did anything wrong.

I don't want to do anything for that witch Shanda.

Maybe I should try to steal Hank back.

Focus on the damn forklift, Delfy. Focus.

At lunch break, I grabbed a flat sandwich and considered the chip selection arranged haphazardly in a fraying rattan basket. Every package had words like "hot" or "flaming" in red letters across the top. There was nothing that was just plain. What was wrong with people these days? Everything had to be over spiced for them to be able to taste anything.

Teddy, a new hire in lighting fixtures, sidled up next to me.

"I hear you're the man," he whispered.

Teddy grabbed a bag of off-brand spicy pork rinds and tried to open it. His fat arms strained at the sealed package. I turned my head so I could roll my eyes without insulting him.

"I hear you're the one to talk to about getting stuff," Teddy said, as he tried to rip the bag with his little rabbit teeth.

I watched him struggle and felt another eye roll coming on, but I resisted. "If you mean 'stuff' like sponge roller replacements at the top of Aisle 13, I'll be happy to get it for you after I'm certified in high-reach power lifts with added training on use of the man basket," I said.

Teddy took his keys out of his pocket and started jabbing at the package with the edge of his mini supermarket club card.

“I had this girlfriend back in high school. She was cool and all, but when I broke up with her, I let her keep my football jersey and you know, I have a kid now. He’s gonna be in 9th grade. I was thinking how awesome would it be if he got to wear his dad’s football jersey to practice.”

For the first time in my whole life, I felt a “no” coming on. Maybe because the glitchy video rewired my brain, maybe because Bernice was suddenly so supportive of what I was doing, maybe because that boy who called himself Classified had called my bluff and given me new perspective – whatever. Maybe all that together made it possible for me to say what I really felt.

I faced Teddy square and rolled my eyes in a big arc, doing it extra slow so maybe he would get the point, even though I already knew that he probably wouldn’t. I grabbed the bag of pork rinds out of his hands, ripped it open so it formed a perfect pouch, then handed it back to him.

“You were, what, 200 pounds lighter then? Third string?” I felt myself amping up. “My advice is don’t show your kid the jersey. Describe it to him. Tell him stories about what a great athlete you were, but don’t show him pictures. He’ll only laugh. And in case you didn’t know this about girls, they don’t save their old boyfriend’s football jerseys. Jewelry, sure. Pictures, maybe. Electronics, definitely. But your old sweaty football shirt? She gave it to the dog to sleep on years ago.”

That actually felt kind of good, in a jittery, I-can’t-believe-I-just-said-that kind of way.

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“Your mom takes good care of you,” I said.

“Aw, Delfy, I know it sounds bad that I live with my mom, but I’m not one of those guys. And my mom’s not one of those moms. It just happened that way.”

“I gotta’ go back to forklift class.”

“You can’t operate a forklift safely on an empty stomach. Just have a bite.”

Dexter handed me a real fork and knife, the kind with a pretty rose pattern on the handle part. They were probably from his mother’s wedding set. Not like they were real silver or anything. Just regular stainless steel. But they all matched, two forks and two knives from the same set, and flower-print single-ply Scott napkins folded in half. That was pretty fancy in my book.

I cut off a small piece of chicken and popped it in my mouth. Wow, Dexter's mom could sure cook. Anyone who had a mom that could make chicken like that, would live at home just for the meal service. It was so good I actually closed my eyes to focus on the taste.

When I opened them, Dexter had sat down at the table across from me and was leaning back in his chair smiling at me, all smug.

"Yeah?" he asked, though he knew the answer.

"Aw yeah," I said. I didn't mean to be so emphatic, but I hadn't had seriously good home cooking in, pretty much, forever. "Tell your mom I said thanks."

Dexter watched me as I ate. "Any time, Delfy. Any time."

I got into the katsu zone, just enjoying the contrast of the crunchy battered outside with the tender white meat inside, but then I caught the look on Dexter's face. He wasn't just enjoying the moment. He was about to say something. He was bringing something up. I knew what he was about to say before he even opened his mouth.

"About that thing you're doing..."

I put down the fork.

"No, Dexter."

"Just listen. You never know when you need someone to snake a pipe..."

"Do me a big favor, Dexter. Pretend you don't know."

Dexter shrugged. "Why? It's not a bad thing. And I can help. You don't have to do this all yourself."

Nobody had ever said those words to me in my whole life. I mean, if somebody did, they didn't mean it. Dexter looked like he meant it.

"My brother comes with me sometimes," I said.

"Isn't he on disability?"

"His biggest disability is that he falls for bad women, but he sometimes he comes along as a lookout."

Dexter shook his head. "If anyone tried to hurt you, Delfy, well, I just wouldn't let them. No way."

I tried to get back to my katsu, but it's pretty hard to just ignore someone who has just said something like that to you. It was all heavy and meaningful and kind of awful. I closed my lunch container and gave Dexter as much of a smile as I could muster.

Dexter wasn't exactly a bad looking guy -- a little shaggy, a few too many katsu lunches around his gut, but with big green eyes the shade of Tupelo Tree on a Café Ole colored face. His eyes were a little froggy, but when he wasn't trying so hard, he was passable. Almost OK-looking. If only he didn't want to help so much, if he wasn't so disgustingly earnest about it, maybe he would actually be...

I stopped myself right there. Nope. Not going to think that. That's how trouble starts.

"I'm just doing it to raise money for a friend, Dexter. I'm trying to keep it on the down low. I mean, thanks and all. But it's not a thing."

Dexter shook his head.

"But now Bernice knows, so... it's a thing."

I stood up fast from the lunch table.

“I have to get back.”

Dexter took out a Sharpie and wrote my name on the lid of my lunch container.

“I’ll save it for you in the employee fridge. You can have the rest for dinner.”

As I turned to walk away, I noticed Dexter drawing a heart next to my name, and the katsu did a flip in my belly.

Kaipo called my cell as I was walking back to the warehouse. I let the call go to voice mail. He called again. That was supposed to be the signal that he was really calling, not just accidentally pocket-dialing.

“Yeah?”

“Hey, Delfy, so we on for tonight?”

“I don’t know, Kaipo. I got Shanda’s stuff back once already. I don’t do repeat customers.”

Kaipo was eating something. I could hear him licking his fingers and smacking his lips.

“Yeah right. You told me the story about you and Hank going to the Lady Jay-Jay like five times.”

It was actually three times before Hank finally drilled a hole in the horribly-named boat Lady Jay-Jay and sank her in the Ala Wai harbor. The owner, a tall Miami grandma with a taste for younger men, liked to lure Navy sailors onto her house boat. She’d booze them, use them, toss them over and keep their wallets as trophies. Hank

spotted the first guy stumbling down Nimitz Highway trying to walk all the way back to Pearl Harbor. Hank had stopped, thrown the poor sailor in his truck and drove him to naval base where he could sleep off all the bad fun he'd had. The first guy ended up sending the rest of the guys to Hank for help in getting their IDs back. Hank got involved mostly because he didn't want the young men to get mad, gang up and go over there to get revenge on the old cougar. But then, there were so many guys involved in such a short time, Hank decided it was time for the Lady Jay-Jay to be decommissioned. He brought a chain saw and sank her in the middle of the night. Apparently the lady couldn't work her magic on sailors on dry land, and the boys stopped coming in to ask for help.

But this was different. With Shanda, she was playing the victim when, to my mind, she was the perpetrator. That's not a game that you can stop by punching a hole in a boat. That's something she's going to keep on doing long after she's lost her sparkle, but dopes like my brother will keep falling for it every time. That's not closure. That's enabling.

“Kaipo, I don't want to get involved with Shanda's domestics. She's playing you.”

Kaipo was loudly sucking his fingers. Dang it, he must have found my stash of see mui. I thought I had hidden it well in the fridge underneath a pile of Taco Bell hot sauce packets. The preserved plums were a gift from an old Chinese lady I helped by getting back an antique jade bracelet from her granddaughter's ex-boyfriend's house. Money was good, but getting paid home made see mui was almost better.

“Of course she’s playing me,” Kaipo said. Smack, slurp, smack. He wasn’t even trying to hide that he had gotten into my stash. “It’s awesome. I haven’t been played in soooooo long.”

“Don’t eat all my mui.”

“Oops. Well, the fruit is gone, but there’s a lot of syrup left. You can still suck on the plastic bag.”

I hung up on Kaipo.

By the time I got back to forklift training, the warehouse rodeo had begun. Teddy was taking his turn driving the demonstration vehicle, banging into stacks of boxes like a pinball hitting bumpers and coming up with new cuss words. He barely had enough upper body strength to shift the vehicle into reverse. What a dope. Maybe if he did have his high school football jersey back, he’d reclaim his manly mojo. I was ninety-nine percent sure that the girlfriend had dumped the sweaty shirt years ago, but maybe a replacement jersey could be found at the Goodwill or maybe through the school’s alumni group or...

I caught myself. Wow, my brain was automatically going to ways to get people’s stuff back. That’s not good, especially if I’m thinking of ways to help somebody hopeless like Teddy. The kid was right. I was a total wuss.

I watched as Teddy tried for the tenth time to navigate between two stacks of boxes fifteen feet apart. A halfway-decent driver could maneuver a backhoe through that space. It was as though Teddy was drawn by an irresistible force to hit those boxes. He’d be almost through the course and then he’d inexplicably veer to the side and whack the

tower of boxes. Maybe his old football jersey wouldn't help him, but he sure needed something.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I had to look away from Teddy's Demolition Derby act to check the caller ID.

It was Kaipō using Shanda's cell phone thinking I might pick up if I didn't know it was him. What a dope. The problem with Kaipō was that he thought being in love with somebody meant pining away for them. It never occurred to him that loving somebody wasn't supposed to ache like an empty belly all the time.

I put the phone back in my pocket and looked up to check Teddy's progress. He had finally navigated successfully through the stacks of boxes and was moving on to the next event: solo-operator proper use of the man-basket.

Teddy stumbled getting out of the cab of the forklift, bopped his head on the cab and then spilled out in a tangle of relaxed-fit jeans on the cement floor. I couldn't watch him get up. I turned my head toward the door leading from the warehouse to the retail floor. There was Bernice pressing her nose to the safety glass window, urgently clacking her nails against the glass. The doors had been locked from the inside for safety purposes during the Advanced Practical Training on Lifting Devices session. I made like I couldn't hear the frantic tapping, but one of the other forklift trainees broke from the line and went over to unlock the door.

My phone was buzzing in my pocket again. I pulled it out to turn the damn thing off.

And then Teddy really got stupid.

I heard everyone gasp, and then there was a tiny squeak, like a baby bird from Teddy. I looked up and saw him at the top of the fully-extended elevator arm of the man-basket. His head was almost to the ceiling of the warehouse and his eyes were crazy, like an animal stuck up a tree. Teddy had summoned every ounce of strength to push the “rise” lever in gear, and he had gotten it stuck. The elevator arm had shot up to its full height. You could hear the frustrated whine of the motor trying to lift fat Teddy even beyond the reach of the arm.

The forklift training instructor got on the phone to the manufacturer. Someone else found the operator manual. A few of the trainees started a prayer circle.

I didn’t want to, but I knew the only way to get Teddy down was to go up there.

I took off my work boots so my toes could grip on the metal shelving, and I started climbing toward Teddy.

Bernice plowed right through the guy who had opened the warehouse door and came crashing through like a defensive lineman.

“Delfy Keala! What the hell? Don’t you waste yourself getting hurt on that little monkey! You save your strength for our new business!”

I kept pulling myself up the metal shelves as Bernice yelled. My sweaty feet were leaving wet marks on the cardboard boxes.

A rope came flying up toward my head. It slapped my arm and then fell back down. “Catch it Delfy! I got you!” I looked down. There was Dexter, swinging a loop of tow rope around his head like he was going to lasso a stray heifer and bring her out of the storm.

“I’m OK, Dexter. Leave me alone!”

Teddy was holding on to the sides of the man bucket with white fingers.

“You’re gonna’ be OK, Teddy,” I told him. “I’m almost there and then we’ll figure out a way to get you down.”

The rope came flying past my head again. I caught it and gave it a big yank. “Knock it off, Dexter! You’re not helping.”

“Don’t worry Delfy!” Dexter called. “I’m coming! Hold on!”

I dropped the rope on Dexter’s head. He smiled up at me like he so happy I thought enough of him to bonk him with a rope.

I got to the top of the shelving unit and hooked one leg over the man basket. It swayed like a mango in the breeze as I got inside. Teddy started to cry.

“It’s OK, Teddy. I do this stuff all the time. You heard the stories. I’m the man.”

I swung my other leg into the bucket. The sound of the motor modulated to a different key with my added weight. Even the damn forklift had to be insulting.

My phone was buzzing again. Shanda must be making all sorts of impossible demands on Kaipo. He must be so happy.

I pushed the level to lower the lift. It was stuck all right. Locked in the up position, the handle covered with Teddy’s greasy pork rind finger prints. I pushed on it with just my hands. I leaned my weight into it. I leaned more of my weight onto it. Nothing, no give at all.

Bernice was throwing Styrofoam packing peanuts at me and yelling about staying focused and being careful.

Edgar the manager was yelling because an employee had called the fire department and he was afraid that if a rescue crew showed up it would trigger an “odd news” story in the local paper, which wouldn’t sit well with Corporate.

I searched my pockets for a pen or a toothpick or a coin, anything. Nothing.

Dexter saw and figured out what I was doing. He unzipped the fanny pack he wore around his waist, got out his keys and tossed them to me. I actually caught them in mid-air, something I have never done in my whole life. Usually if somebody throws something in my direction, it whacks me in the head or falls to the floor. I’m not a good catcher, but this time, I caught it like a pro.

I looked at the ring of keys. There was a long, slim one with a plastic top that probably fit his car. I thought that might work, but then I noticed he also had a vintage Primo beer opener just like the one Hank used. I stuck the sharp point along the gear lever and pushed the knob with my other hand. There was a tiny bit of movement, just enough to make me try harder.

“Almost there, Teddy. Hang in, OK?”

Teddy answered with a whimper. “Delfy, look at my pants. Am I leaking?”

I worked the tooth of the Primo opener around the lever and pulled with all my might. The basket dropped down about a foot, then froze up again. Everyone watching from the ground let out a collective gasp.

“Oh yeah, it leaked out now. I feel it,” Teddy said.

My phone was buzzing again, and in that moment, I lost it. With all the yelling and throwing and catching and leaking, I could not keep it together. I yanked the phone

out of my pocket fully intending to smash it to the floor. But then, I don't know. I got all calm.

I had that feeling like a sure hand on was on shoulder. It came over me despite the screeching motor, the screams from the warehouse floor, the thump and sway of Dexter trying to park his lift alongside the one I was in, Teddy sobbing, Bernice throwing Styrofoam peanuts like confetti and Edgar trying to save his store's safety record.

It was Hank. Hank was calling from prison. I just knew.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Delfy girl. I hope I'm not bothering."

I leaned one hand against the lift lever and the man-basket began to gently lower to the ground, slowly, sweetly, like a parent putting a baby into a crib.

A cheer went up in the warehouse. I covered my free ear.

"Hank, you OK? Hello? You need something?"

The connection was bad, and between the noise in the warehouse and the noise in the prison, I could barely make out what Hank was saying.

"In here... see me... all right..."

Before the basket had touched the floor, I jumped out and scrambled for the back exit. People were reaching out, trying to shake my hand or give me the aloha-hug, but I broke free and ran with the phone still pressed to my ear.

"Hank? Don't hang up! Let me get outside where I can hear."

I ran, flinging Bernice into a pile of boxes and slipping through Dexter's outstretched arms like a running back. I got out the back exit just as a delivery truck was pulling away. The roar of the diesel engine was deafening.

I charged up the ti-leaf-covered incline at the back of the parking lot. When I got to the top, I plopped down in the shade of a spindly shower tree. I switched hands on the phone and pressed it up to my ear:

“Hank?”

All I heard was the click as his allotted phone time ended.

I looked down at my phone: Three missed calls from Kaipo pretending not to be Kaipo. Ten missed calls from Bernice. Messages from numbers I didn't recognize, but probably people who got my number from their friends, people who wanted me to help them get their stuff back. Nothing I wanted to deal with.

But Hank had called. I didn't know what he wanted, but at least now I knew he was able to make phone calls. And when he finally got to a phone, I was the person he called.

Chapter 15

My shirt smelled like Teddy, like pork rind grease, Tres Flores hair oil and fear. His Teddy-stink soaked through the orange smock all the way down to my skin. There were actual Teddy fingerprints on my arms, little circular bruises where he had been clinging to me in the cherry picker. I needed a bath. I needed a frame-off acid dip.

I had just enough time to drive home, get in the shower, pull on some cleaner jeans from the dirty laundry basket and head out to the prison for the last 45 minutes of visitation.

Before I even opened the door to my apartment, I could smell a purple glitter bubble bath scent wafting out through the window screens. When Kaipo and Shanda first started dating, Kaipo would come home smelling like that, like a poodle just back from the poofy poodle groomer. They had been back together only a day and already that smell was invading my house. I couldn't wait for them to break up again. I'd rather have my brother crying like a teenaged girl home on prom night than giggling like a love-drunk fool in my bathroom.

I pushed the door but was stopped by the safety chain. Dang it, Kaipo. He never closes the fridge, never locks the car door, never zips his pants, but today of all days he goes and chains me out of my own apartment.

With one eye pressed up to the two inches of open space between the door and the door frame, I could see light coming from the bottom of the bathroom door. It was

flickering like there were candles lit in there. My brother Kaipō was taking a candle-lit purple glitter bubble bath with his on-again girlfriend. That's what she did to the brave war hero. He survived combat but fell victim to a psycho with rhinestone eyelashes.

I turned my head to stick my ear into the apartment. I could hear giggling and cooing over the gush of the water running like a waterfall. My mind did a quick inventory to check if I had enough bleach in the house to clean the bathroom after they were done with their little party. There might not be enough bleach in all of House Warehouse's warehouses to get that job done.

But how were they taking a bubble bath when my apartment only has a shower?

"Kaipo, if any of this involves yard- and-garden bags or a pond liner, I'm gonna disown you forever!"

No answer.

After fifteen minutes of sticking my nose in the door crack, pounding on the outside wall and screaming Kaipō's name, I decided two things. One, my apartment complex had absolutely no security system or neighborhood watch whatsoever, and two, even though it was probably the last thing in the world I wanted to do, I was going to have to climb up the side of the building, peek in the bathroom window at Kaipō and Shanda in their bubble shower and tell him to shut off the water before they run up a \$400 utility bill.

I drove my truck to the back of the building and parked it under my window so I could stand the roof of the cab and pull myself up to the little bathroom window. That smell of purple soap- like a mix of grape soda, Choward's violet gum and lavender dryer

sheets - was pouring out of the tiny rectangular screen like smoke. The closer I got, the more I wanted to run away, but the thought of the hot water running up my bill kept me climbing.

When I got to where I could look into the bathroom, I pressed my face to the screen, closed my eyes so I couldn't see anything and started screaming. "Kaipo! Damn it! Turn off the water and unchain the door! I gotta get in there and change clothes before I miss visiting hours!"

I could hear the water turn off and snickering and giggling. There were lots of squeaks and sloshes as they extricated their bodies from whatever they were up to. I turned my face away, opened my eyes and jumped back down to my truck.

By the time I got back around to the front door, Kaipo was standing there with a towel around his waist and a stupid waterlogged smile that made his whole face look like a DUI mug shot. Perfumed shower steam wafted in the apartment behind him.

"Sorry, Delfy, I couldn't hear nothing with the shower going."

I slapped his hammy shoulder to make him move aside.

"Water bill, gas for the water heater, that's hundreds of dollars that I don't have, Kaipo. Can't Shanda take a shower at her own place?"

I took off my shoes at the door and headed toward the bedroom. The bathroom door was open so I turned my head away in case Shanda was standing there all naked and sparkly.

"She did."

In the bedroom, I dug around the laundry basket for something to wear. Dirty pants, dirtier pants, something with paint stains from when the lid from the cheap brand flipped off on the mixing machine. I had a three-load morning at the Laundromat on my next day off.

Kaipo came to my bedroom holding a pair of his military dress khakis.

“These don’t fit me anymore, but you’re about the size I was when I left for Iraq.”

“Are you being mean?”

“Nah, Delfy. I used to be buff in my day. You’re not big, you’re just a strong girl.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“Ever since I became a Wounded Warrior, I eat to mask the pain.” Kaipo did his fake Wounded Warrior/ Hometown Hero face which I hadn’t yet been able to convince him looked ridiculous.

“Stop talking and go away now. You’re ruining my small feelings of gratitude,” I said as I grabbed the pants.

I found a t-shirt on the shelf above the closet pole, something with a picture of a penguin and an igloo and the name of a Halawa air conditioning company. The shirt was beat-up but clean. The holes didn’t even look like holes, more like stains, and only along the shoulder seams and the hem. That was as fancied-up as I was gonna get for this visit.