



Mai Tais and Murder

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Description: With their relationship still new, Helen Hardy and her partner, retired LAPD detective Mel Nelson, go to the beautiful island of Oahu, Hawaii. The idea is for Helen to do research for her next sapphic romance novel. However, things don't go as planned. When their reclusive neighbor hints he is working on a dangerous story and then suddenly disappears, everything becomes much more complicated. The two of them find themselves caught up in a web of secrets and suspicious characters. Using Mel's detective instincts as their guide, they work together to try and uncover the truth before it's too late.

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ChapterOne

Letting her body float with the gentle ebb and swell of the warm Hawaiian ocean water, Mel Nelson watched the small, colorful fish dart in and around the rocks and sand beneath her. The crystalline water shimmered like liquid diamonds, casting dancing reflections on the coral-studded seafloor below. Schools of butterflyfish, their fins trimmed in electric yellow, darted between patches of purple sea fans that swayed hypnotically in the current. The only sound was the whisper of her breathing through her snorkel. In a way, she was in a special world all her own. Of course, the beach nearby had several people, particularly families, on it, but no one swam near her. She couldn't remember a time she felt more at peace. Life was simply that good.

Raising her head and treading water in place, she looked across the turquoise water to see the primary reason everything was going so well. Helen Hardy—a pretty, little ash-blond woman relaxing on a bright yellow beach blanket and reading a book on her Kindle. Recently celebrating her sixty-sixth birthday, which made her only four years younger than Mel, Helen was a beautiful woman. Although she would wave Mel off when she said someone appreciatively watched her walk by, Mel knew it was true. Not for the first time, she wondered how such a bright, cheerful, and downright lovely woman fell for a grumpy, old, retired LAPD police detective, but she was smart enough not to look a gift horse in the mouth. If Helen Hardy loved her, Mel would do everything in her power to keep that going.

As if sensing she was being watched, Helen looked from her Kindle to scan the open water. When her eyes fell on Mel, she smiled. As it did every time, the smile made Mel's heart skip a beat. Mel lifted her hand to give a quick wave and noticed her diver's watch showed almost one p.m. Time had flown by while she was snorkeling.

With a kick of the flippers on her feet, she propelled herself toward shore. It was time to get out and enjoy one of the sandwiches she knew Helen had packed for them. A cold beer would go nicely to wash it down, but that wasn't going to happen. Although she would never complain outright, Mel knew Helen wasn't a fan of how much beer Mel liked to drink, so she subtly curtailed her intake. It was a worthwhile sacrifice, not to mention her doctor would certainly approve.

Once she made landfall, Mel stripped off her fins and made her way through the hot sand to their chosen patch of beach, which sat in a perfect sweet spot. It was far enough from the crowded tourist areas to feel private but close enough to watch the entertaining parade of beachgoers passing by. Towering palm trees cast shifting shadows across their blanket, providing intermittent relief from the March Hawaiian sun.

"How was it?" Helen asked as soon as Mel reached the edge of their space. Helen held out a blue and yellow towel for Mel to take. "Did you see any fish?"

"Loads," Mel said, wiping her face with the towel. She grinned. "You'd like them. Lots of little, zippy yellow ones."

Helen laughed. "You're right, I probably would," she agreed. "I'm just not sure I will be able to get the hang of breathing through a tube."

After slipping her snorkel gear into its mesh bag, Mel slumped into one of the two chairs they had brought. It wasn't easy. The dang thing nearly sat on the ground, and Mel tried not to think about how ungraceful she would look trying to get her stocky body up again. As she got situated, Helen knelt beside the large, soft-sided cooler. "Ready for some lunch? You must be starving after all that swimming around."

"Actually, yes, I am," Mel said. "And it's not so hard once you stop thinking about it."

Helen looked over her petite, tan shoulder at Mel. "I suppose," she said. "I brought us turkey on wheat with some potato salad and cut-up pineapple. How does that sound?" Before she could answer, Mel's stomach rumbled, making Helen's brown eyes twinkle. "I take that as a positive response."

Suddenly, Helen's eyes narrowed. "What?" Mel asked, looking in all directions for any sign of trouble. Old cop habits died hard. "Is something wrong?"

Helen shook her head. "Only that you're getting burned," she said, closing the lid to the cooler. "Before we eat, let me put some sunblock on your nose and shoulders at least."

* * *

Helen reached for the bottle of sunscreen, shaking her head fondly at Mel's predictable resistance to sun protection. Even in their short time together, Helen had learned the woman acted like a teenager when it came to basic self-care. But that was part of what made Mel endearing. "Hold still," Helen instructed, squeezing some sunscreen onto her palm. The coconut scent mixed with the salty ocean air as she gently dabbed it onto Mel's reddening nose. "You'd think after all these years in California, you'd have learned about sun protection."

Mel wrinkled her nose but submitted to Helen's touch. "I survived just fine before you came along and mothered me."

"Survived with skin damage," Helen murmured, moving to Mel's shoulders. The skin there was already warm to the touch. "And I'm not mothering you, I'm caring for you. There's a difference."

A light breeze carried the sound of children's laughter from further down the beach, where a family was building a sandcastle. Helen smiled, remembering similar days

with her own daughters years ago. The Hawaiian sun was different though. It was more intense than the Maryland beaches near where she grew up. As she massaged the lotion onto Mel's shoulders, Helen couldn't help but marvel at how their lives had intertwined. If someone had told her a year ago that she'd be on a Hawaiian vacation with a female ex-detective, she would have laughed them out of the room. Yet here she was, happier than she'd been in decades.

"There," she said, wiping her hands on a napkin. "Now you won't look like a lobster at dinner tonight." She settled onto the beach blanket. "Speaking of which, what do you think about trying that little place we passed while out walking yesterday? The one just down the promenade with all the tiki torches?"

Mel stretched in her low chair, looking relaxed despite the awkward angle. "Sounds good to me. Though I still say we should try that food truck the guy at the front desk recommended."

"Tomorrow," Helen promised, reaching for the cooler again. She pulled out their sandwiches and handed one to Mel. A young couple walked past their spot, the woman wearing a barely-there bikini that made Helen momentarily self-conscious about her own more modest swimsuit. But then she caught Mel watching her with that familiar look of appreciation, and her insecurity melted away. It was still amazing how Mel could do that with just a glance.

"You know," Helen said, opening her sandwich. "Since we only have three days left before we fly home, I was thinking about trying snorkeling tomorrow. If you're willing to be patient with me."

Mel's face lit up. "Really? That would be great! I could show you where all the best fish are." She took a bite of her sandwich, talking around it in her enthusiasm. "There's this one spot near those rocks where these colorful fish hang out. You'll love it."

“Just promise you won’t laugh when I inevitably panic and forget how to breathe,” Helen said, only half-joking. The idea of breathing through a tube while floating face-down in the ocean was more than a little intimidating.

“I would never,” Mel said solemnly, though her eyes twinkled. “Besides, I’ll be right there with you. Former cop, remember? Trained in rescue and everything.”

Helen shook her head but couldn’t help but smile. “My hero,” she said, her heart warming at the protectiveness in Mel’s voice. It was one of the things she loved most about Mel. Her instinct to keep others safe was wrapped in a gruff exterior that fooled exactly no one who knew her well. They ate in comfortable silence for a while, watching the parade of beach life around them. A man walking his dog, the animal splashing at the water’s edge. An elderly couple holding hands as they collected shells. A group of teenagers playing volleyball further down the beach, their shouts and laughter carrying on the wind.

“We should probably head back soon,” Helen said eventually, noting how the sun had shifted. “Give ourselves time to shower and change before dinner.” She began gathering their lunch things to put in the cooler.

“Already?” Mel said, but Helen could see the slight redness spreading across her shoulders despite the sunscreen.

“Yes, already. Unless you want to go to dinner looking like a tourist who forgot about sunburn?” She stood. “Besides, I thought we might take a walk along the beach later, when it’s cooler. Maybe catch the sunset?”

Mel’s expression softened. “Well, when you put it that way...” She struggled briefly with the low beach chair, cursing once under her breath as she shifted her weight around before managing to stand. Helen pretended not to notice the expletives, just as she always did. As they packed their beach gear, Helen felt a surge of contentment.

The vacation had been a splurge, but watching Mel relax and enjoy herself made it worth every penny.

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“Ready?” Helen asked, hoisting the cooler while Mel gathered their chairs, the backpack filled with gear, and the blanket.

“Ready,” Mel confirmed, then paused. “And Helen?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks for taking care of me. Even when I’m being stubborn about it.”

Helen smiled, reaching out to squeeze Mel’s forearm. “Always,” she said simply. And she meant it.

* * *

Mel shifted the beach chairs in her grip as they made their way across the hot sand, keeping a watchful eye on Helen navigating with the cooler. “Let me take that cooler,” Mel offered, noticing Helen adjusting its weight for the third time.

“I’ve got it,” Helen replied with a determined tone Mel knew so well. “You’re already carrying everything else.”

Mel chuckled, knowing better than to argue. Instead, she found herself admiring how the sunlight caught Helen’s ash-blond hair. Even after six months together, simple moments like this could still take her breath away. They reached the paved path that led back to their rental apartment, and Mel felt the immediate relief of her feet leaving the scorching sand. The path wound through a meticulously maintained tropical garden that led into the courtyard at the resort where they were staying. The

building where they had rented a condo apartment for the week rose before them. A young man on a rental bike whizzed past them, causing Mel to instinctively step closer to Helen. The detective in her never really went away, even on vacation.

“You’re doing it again,” Helen said with a little laugh.

“Doing what?”

“That thing where you try to put yourself between me and any possible threat. Even harmless college kids on bikes.”

Mel felt her face flush, and it wasn’t from the sun. “Force of habit,” she mumbled but smiled when Helen bumped her shoulder affectionately. As they approached their building, Mel noticed a man with disheveled gray hair and a face full of white stubble crossing the courtyard. Wearing a wrinkled Hawaiian shirt, he walked quickly with his head down. Something about his intense focus caught her attention, but Mel refocused on getting them to the elevator, trying to distract herself from automatically profiling their neighbor. She was retired. No more detective work.

“I’m very glad we have an elevator right now,” Helen said as she pressed its button. “Three flights of stairs do not sound appealing.”

Mel nodded. “Especially after I spent hours swimming with the fish,” she said as the elevator arrived with a soft ding. They managed to squeeze themselves and their beach gear inside. As the doors closed, Mel caught a whiff of Helen’s sunscreen. It was a scent she was quickly coming to associate with happiness.

As if sensing Mel’s thoughts, Helen smiled at her. “What are you thinking?”

Caught thinking sappy thoughts that went against her tough exterior, Mel hoped her sunburn covered her blush. “I was thinking,” Mel said as they ascended. “Maybe we

could order in tonight instead of going out. That way we wouldn't have to change out of comfortable clothes."

Helen raised an eyebrow. "This wouldn't have anything to do with your shoulders being burned, would it?"

"My shoulders are fine," Mel insisted, though they were starting to feel warm and tight. "I just thought it might be nice to have a quiet evening in. Watch the sunset from our balcony, maybe open that bottle of wine we bought yesterday." The elevator opened on their floor, and they made their way down the open-air hallway to their apartment.

The ocean breeze was stronger up there, carrying the sound of distant waves and palm fronds rustling. "That does sound nice," Helen said as she set down the cooler to fish out their key card. "Though I'm not letting you off the hook about those shoulders. I packed some aloe vera gel, just in case."

Mel rolled her eyes but felt a familiar warmth in her chest that had nothing to do with sunburn. Helen's caring nature was one of the things that had first drawn Mel to her.

Inside their apartment, the air conditioning hit them like a welcome wave. Their unit was decorated in typical island style with rattan furniture covered with plush tropical print cushions, local artwork featuring surfers and palm trees on the walls, and gauzy white curtains that billowed in the trade winds whenever they opened the balcony doors. Mel propped the chairs against the wall and stretched, her muscles pleasantly tired from the morning's swimming.

"I think I'll go take a quick shower," Helen said, already headed toward the bedroom. "And change into something fresh, but dining in does sound nice."

"I'm full of good ideas," Mel said, smiling at Helen's answering laugh. Alone in the

living room, Mel walked to the sliding glass doors that led to their balcony. The view was nice. Through the end of the courtyard, she could see the ocean stretching to the horizon and palm trees swaying in the breeze. Then again, she could also see into their neighbor's apartment in the building directly across from them. The man she had seen before in the courtyard was at a desk in what Mel guessed, based on their own apartment, was the space's second bedroom. He was talking on the phone and gesturing animatedly. Something about his body language suggested tension, but Mel forced herself to look away. She wasn't on the job anymore. She was on vacation with the woman she loved, and that was all that mattered. The sound of the shower starting in the other room brought a smile to her face. Maybe she'd order some food now and surprise Helen with having dinner ready when she got out. It was the least she could do to thank her for all the little ways she showed she cared.

ChapterTwo

Helen settled into one of the cushioned chairs on their balcony, careful not to spill the glass of chilled Chardonnay in her hand. The late afternoon sun painted the sky in brilliant oranges and pinks, its warmth gentler now than during their beach excursion earlier. She smiled, watching Mel fuss with the other chair, knowing her partner was still feeling the effects of her sunburn despite her protests to the contrary.

"I put some aloe vera in the refrigerator," Helen said, taking a sip of her wine. "It'll feel better when it's cool."

Mel finally sat, wincing slightly. "I'm fine," she insisted, though Helen noticed she was careful not to let her shoulders touch the chair's back. "This view almost makes up for the sunburn anyway."

Below their balcony, palm trees swayed in the gentle breeze, their fronds casting intricate shadows on the manicured courtyard. The resort's swimming pool sparkled in the fading sunlight while the distant ocean rolled in endless waves of blue meeting

the horizon. As she looked at the scene, Helen felt contentment wash over her. “You know,” Helen said, turning to look at Mel. “I never thought I’d be sitting on a balcony in Hawaii, sharing wine with a retired police detective.”

Mel smiled. “And I never thought I’d be sitting beside such a beautiful retired middle school teacher turned lesbian romance writer either. Life’s funny that way.” She reached over and squeezed Helen’s hand. “But I’m glad we are.”

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Movement in the apartment across the courtyard caught Helen's attention. Through sliding glass doors off his balcony, she saw a man sitting at a desk, typing furiously at his computer. The warm glow from his desk lamp illuminated a cluttered workspace, papers scattered across the surface. The reading glasses the man wore caught the light as he moved, creating brief flashes that drew the eye. Something about him seemed off. "Mel," Helen said, nodding toward the apartment. "Look at that man. Does something seem strange to you?"

Mel followed her gaze, and Helen could practically see the detective instincts kick in. The way Mel's posture straightened slightly, how her blue eyes narrowed with focus. "Yep. He seems agitated," Mel answered before taking a sip of her wine. "See how he keeps looking for something on his desk? And his typing is erratic. Lots of stopping and starting."

Helen nodded, finding herself drawn into watching the man. "Should we be concerned?"

"Probably nothing," Mel said, but Helen noticed she didn't look away from the neighbor's apartment. "Could be on a deadline. Could be having an argument with someone online. Could be..."

"Could be something more serious?" Helen finished, raising an eyebrow.

Mel chuckled, finally turning back to Helen. "Sorry. Old habits die hard. We're on vacation, remember? No mysteries, no investigations, just relaxation and romance."

As if to emphasize her point, Mel lifted her wine glass in a toast. "To vacation?"

“To vacation,” Helen agreed, clinking her glass against Mel’s. But even as they sipped their wine and tried to return to their peaceful evening, Helen noticed Mel glancing at the neighbor’s window. She couldn’t blame her. There was something compelling about the man’s obvious distress.

“You know,” Helen said. “Just because we’re on vacation doesn’t mean we have to ignore it if something seems wrong.”

Mel’s expression softened. “You’re enabling my worst habits, you know that?”

“I prefer to think of it as supporting your natural talents,” Helen replied with a smile. “Besides, what’s the harm in being observant?” A particularly aggressive burst of typing from the neighbor made them both look over again. The man ran his hands through his gray hair in what appeared to be frustration, then resumed typing with renewed intensity.

“Well,” Mel said, settling back in her chair. “If we’re just being observant, I’d say he’s either writing something very important or very controversial. Maybe both.”

Helen watched as the man abruptly stood, paced a few steps out of sight, and then returned to his computer. “He certainly seems invested in whatever it is.”

The sky had deepened to purple now, the last rays of sun painting the clouds in brilliant gold. The neighbor’s apartment was more visible in the growing darkness, his desk lamp creating a bright window into his world. Helen found herself wondering about his story and what could have him so worked up on what should have been a peaceful Hawaiian evening.

“Remember,” Mel said, reaching for Helen’s hand again. “We’re here to relax. No getting involved in other people’s drama.”

Helen squeezed Mel's hand, noting the contradiction between her words and the way she continued to watch the neighbor. "Of course not," she agreed, hiding her smile behind her wine glass. "We're just two people enjoying the sunset. Nothing more."

* * *

Despite her best efforts to focus on the peaceful evening and Helen's company, Mel found her attention repeatedly drawn to their neighbor's increasingly erratic behavior. Years of detective work had honed her instincts, and right now, they were humming with familiar tension. The man appeared to have started muttering to himself, not audible through the glass but visible in the way his lips moved rapidly between bursts of typing. "You're doing that thing with your jaw," Helen observed softly, her thumb still tracing gentle circles on Mel's hand.

"What thing?"

"That clenching thing you do when you're analyzing a situation." Helen's voice held equal parts amusement and concern. "The same look you had when you thought the valet at the airport was suspicious."

"He was suspicious," Mel said. "No valet should be that interested in people's luggage tags."

A sudden movement drew her attention back to their neighbor. He had answered his cell phone, his free hand gesturing animatedly as he spoke. Even from their balcony, Mel read the tension in his shoulders, the defensive posture as he half-turned away from his sliding glass doors. "I wish I could read lips," Mel muttered.

Helen chuckled. "Now who's enabling whom?"

Before Mel could respond, their neighbor slammed his cell phone down on the desk

and returned to typing as crazy as before. “That’s not normal behavior for someone writing a grocery list,” Mel said, trying to add a little humor to what was starting to feel like a tense situation. “Look at how he’s started checking his phone like he’s waiting for something specific.”

The ocean breeze had picked up, carrying with it the sweet scent of plumeria from the gardens below. Palm fronds rustled, creating moving shadows across their neighbor’s apartment. The man jumped at a particularly loud rustle, his head snapping around to look behind him. Mel shook her head. “I think he’s scared of something. Not just nervous or anxious. He’s genuinely afraid of something.”

Helen shifted in her chair. “Should we report it?”

“To whom? And for what?” Mel sighed, running a hand through her short battleship-gray hair. “Being agitated in your own apartment isn’t a crime. He could just be an anxious guy.”

Their neighbor had started pacing. He took a few steps out of sight, then back to his desk with his phone pressed to his ear again. He kept nodding while making quick notes on a pad beside his computer.

“You know,” Helen said thoughtfully. “We could always introduce ourselves tomorrow. Bring over some of those chocolate macadamia nuts we bought. As a neighborly gift.”

Mel turned to look at her partner, a slow smile spreading across her face. “Now who’s the detective?”

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“I prefer to think of it as being hospitable,” Helen replied. “Besides, you’ll drive yourself crazy if you don’t at least try to figure out what’s going on.”

The man had returned to his computer, but now he was repeatedly glancing at his watch. Whatever was happening, it seemed to be operating on some kind of timeline. “You’re too good to me,” Mel said, squeezing Helen’s hand. “Most people would be annoyed that I can’t just relax and enjoy the vacation.”

“Most people haven’t seen how brilliant you are when you’re working something out,” Helen replied. “Besides, I find it rather attractive when you get all focused and analytical.”

Mel felt her face flush, and this time it had nothing to do with her sunburn. Even after six months together, Helen’s casual compliments could still make her feel like a teenager with her first crush. Before she could reply, she saw the man practically leap from his chair as if he had heard something loud. Mel watched as he stood, staring at something out of sight, his entire body language screaming anxiety. “Now that’s interesting,” Mel murmured as their neighbor quickly gathered some papers from his desk and shoved them in a drawer before walking out of sight. “He’s hiding something specific.”

After a beat, the man returned to stand beside his desk, but a woman with long red hair in a lightweight business suit was with him. Although Mel couldn’t hear anything, the neighbor’s body language spoke volumes. His shoulders were hunched, hands gesturing defensively, and his eyes constantly glanced at his computer.

“Well,” Helen said, taking another sip of her wine, “I suppose we know what

tomorrow's agenda includes now."

Mel tried to look innocent. "What? I thought we were just being neighborly with some chocolate macadamia nuts?"

"Mmhmm," Helen hummed. "And I suppose you won't be casually observing everything in his apartment while we're there?"

"Would I do that?"

"Yes," Helen said with a smile. "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

* * *

The night air had grown cooler, carrying the sweet scent of plumeria mixed with salt spray. Helen watched as their neighbor's visitor left. The man immediately slumped in his chair, running his hands through his hair in a gesture of clear distress. Then, as if suddenly deciding he should have more privacy, he closed the door's blinds. In a way, Helen was relieved. "Well, that's that," she said. "We should probably head in."

Mel nodded reluctantly, her eyes lingering on their neighbor's apartment. "You're right," she said. "Though I hate leaving things up in the air."

"The mystery will still be there tomorrow," Helen said, gathering their wine glasses. "And you'll be better equipped to solve it if you're not distracted by your sunburn. Let's get some lotion on you." Inside their apartment, she set the wine glasses in the sink while Mel closed and locked the sliding door. "Let me get that aloe vera." Helen headed to the refrigerator. "Go sit on the bed. It'll be easier to reach your shoulders."

Holding the gel, Helen moved into the bedroom and sat on the bed to gently apply the cool aloe to Mel's shoulders. Mel sighed contentedly, leaning slightly into Helen's

touch. “Your hands are magic,” Mel murmured.

Helen smiled, pressing a gentle kiss to the nape of Mel’s neck. “Thank you,” she said. “Just be a little more careful in the sun.”

Mel turned slowly and caught Helen’s hand in hers. Their eyes met a moment before Mel leaned in and gave her a gentle brush of a kiss on the lips. “How did I get so lucky?” Mel whispered, moving her body closer.

“I ask myself the same thing every day,” Helen replied, her free hand coming up to touch Mel’s cheek. Their next kiss was unhurried and tender with the kind of patience that comes from finding love later in life.

Helen tasted the lingering sweetness of wine on Mel’s lips and felt the strength in her partner’s hands as they settled on her waist. “I love you,” Mel breathed against Helen’s lips. “More than I ever thought possible at this time of my life.”

Helen smiled, resting her forehead against Mel’s. “Love doesn’t care about timing. It just is.” They were quiet for a moment while Helen traced patterns on Mel’s arm. “You really can’t turn it off, can you? The detective instincts?”

Mel shifted to look at her. “Does it bother you?”

“No,” Helen said honestly. “It’s part of who you are. Besides, I find it rather exciting, being with someone who notices everything.”

“Not everything,” Mel murmured. “It took me a while to pick up on your flirting with me at the campground back in August.”

Helen laughed softly, remembering how they had met not long ago. Mel had been the campground host at Needle Lake Campground where Helen spent part of last

summer. “You were just too busy keeping all the campers in line.”

“Maybe I was too nervous to look directly at the beautiful woman who kept stealing glances at me.”

At Mel’s words, Helen felt that familiar surge of affection, still amazed at how naturally they had fallen into each other’s lives. Pulling back a little, their gaze held, and Helen saw the love in Mel’s eyes, a love that had grown steadily over the past six months. It had filled her world with a warmth she had never expected to find at the age of sixty-six. Mel reached out, her hand cupping Helen’s face. Helen leaned into the touch, her heart beating faster as Mel’s fingers trailed down her neck, a feather-light touch that sent shivers down her spine. They were in no rush, their every movement slow and deliberate, a dance they had learned to enjoy together.

Helen’s hands explored Mel’s body. She felt the softness of her skin and the tight muscles in her arms. They moved closer until Mel’s lips found Helen’s in another kiss. It was a kiss with love but also passion. Helen parted her lips, inviting Mel in, their tongues meeting in a slow dance. They took their time, continuing to touch each other’s bodies. Helen felt Mel’s hand move to the buttons on her blouse, pausing for a moment. Mel broke the kiss. “I want you,” she said. “Like always.”

“I want you too,” Helen said, her voice taking on a hint of breathiness.

Mel opened the buttons before slipping her hand under the fabric, her warm touch on Helen’s bare breast sending a wave of heat through her. Slowly, Mel laid her back. They had come to know each other’s bodies well and knew what touches would draw out the most pleasure. As they continued to explore each other, their bodies pressed close, Helen felt a warmth spread through her as she whispered Mel’s name. Her climax was more than a release, but also a deep sense of contentment and love.

“We should try to get some sleep,” Helen said eventually after they were both

content, though she made no move to break their embrace. “Especially if we’re going to be playing detective tomorrow.”

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“Being neighborly,” Mel corrected with a smile Helen could hear in her voice. “With macadamia nuts.”

“Of course,” Helen agreed, snuggling closer. “Just being neighborly.” As she drifted toward sleep, Helen couldn’t help but wonder about tomorrow. Their peaceful vacation had taken an unexpected turn, but somehow, she wasn’t disappointed. Life with Mel was always an adventure, and she wouldn’t have it any other way.

The last thing she heard before sleep claimed her was Mel’s quiet voice. “Thank you for understanding me.” Helen squeezed her partner in response, knowing no words were necessary. They had found each other later in life, but that only made their connection more precious. Whatever mystery awaited them, they would face it together.

ChapterThree

Mel stood in the kitchen of their vacation apartment, measuring coffee beans with the precision of a chemist. The sun had barely risen, painting the sky in soft pinks visible through the open sliding glass doors. Palm fronds swayed lazily in the early morning breeze, casting dancing shadows across the balcony. Through the doors, the distant sound of waves breaking against the shore provided a gentle rhythm to the quiet morning. It was a perfect start to another day in paradise, and Mel loved it all.

She had always been an early riser. It was a habit from her detective days that refused to fade even in retirement. But now, instead of rushing to crime scenes, she spent her mornings perfecting her coffee technique. Today, though, it was her detective instincts that had her up especially early. She simply could not shake the uneasy

feeling she had about the agitated neighbor across the courtyard. Pushing his unusual behavior from her mind again, she counted the seconds as the coffee grinder hummed quietly. Eighteen seconds exactly for the perfect coarse grind needed for the French press she had packed in her suitcase from the mainland. Helen often teased her about being a coffee snob, but Mel noticed she never complained about the results.

She gathered ingredients for two omelets. Eggs, cheese, and the fresh vegetables they had bought at the local market yesterday. Although she had always enjoyed grilling food, cooking was something she had discovered she enjoyed after retiring. It gave her the same satisfaction as solving a case. Following recipes, gathering ingredients, and creating something worthwhile ultimately made her happy.

“I smell coffee,” Helen said from the bedroom doorway. She padded into the kitchen wearing a light-yellow terryclothrobe, her hair charmingly mussed. “You’re up extra early.”

Mel’s heart did that familiar skip it always did when she saw Helen in the morning. It was like every day she was surprised at her good luck in finding the beautiful, cheerful woman. “Couldn’t sleep,” she admitted, pouring hot water over the coffee grounds. “Thought I’d make us breakfast.”

Helen came up behind her, wrapping her arms around Mel’s ample waist and pressing a kiss between her shoulder blades. “You’re thinking about our neighbor, aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” Mel said, setting the timer for the French press. She turned in Helen’s embrace, taking in the warm brown eyes she had fallen for six months ago. “But I’m also thinking about making you the perfect omelet.”

“My hero,” Helen smiled and pecked Mel on the lips. “Though I notice you didn’t deny thinking about the neighbor.”

Mel chuckled before sliding away to open the refrigerator. “Would it do any good?”

“No,” Helen admitted, settling onto one of the barstools at the kitchen counter. “But I appreciate that you considered it.”

Mel moved with practiced efficiency as she sliced mushrooms for the omelet before moving on to cracking the eggs. “What kind of writer did you say he looked like?” Helen asked, watching Mel in action.

“I didn’t,” Mel replied, starting to whisk the eggs. “But based on his typing patterns and the way he kept checking over his shoulder, I’d guess something controversial. Maybe investigative journalism.”

Helen’s lips curved into a knowing smile. “And the red-haired woman who visited him?”

“Not a local. Someone he knew but not particularly friendly with because he didn’t relax. From the pantsuit, I’d guess she was there more for business than pleasure,” Mel said, then caught herself. “Sorry. Force of habit.”

“Don’t apologize,” Helen said softly. “I love watching your mind work.”

The timer dinged, and Mel pushed down the French press plunger with careful force. She poured them each a cup, adding a touch of cream to Helen’s and leaving hers black. The familiar ritual grounded her, even as her mind wanted to race ahead with theories about their neighbor. “Perfect, as always,” Helen said after her first sip. “Though I still don’t understand how you can drink it black.”

“Years of bad precinct coffee,” Mel explained. “You either learn to drink it black or give up coffee altogether.” She set the bowl of eggs aside. “How about we enjoy this coffee on the balcony for a few minutes?”

Helen raised an eyebrow. “You wouldn’t want to do that to check on our neighbor, would you?”

“I plead the fifth,” Mel said, carrying her mug toward the sliding glass doors. As soon as she was outside, a movement caught her eye. Across the courtyard, the window blinds were open, and their neighbor was back at his desk. He looked even more of a mess than the night before. His typing seemed more frantic, his movements sharp and jerky.

“He’s back at it,” Helen observed as she joined her, following Mel’s gaze. “And he looks worse.”

Mel nodded. “No sleep, based on the way he’s moving. And he keeps checking his phone.”

“Waiting for something? Or afraid of something?”

“Could be both,” Mel said before taking a sip of her perfect coffee. “But we’re on vacation, so no mysteries, no investigations.”

Helen gave her a knowing look. “Says the woman who’s been analyzing his behavior in her head since she woke up.”

“I’m just curious by nature,” Mel said with a shrug.

“Mmhmm,” Helen hummed as she enjoyed her coffee. “And what time are we taking those macadamia nuts over?”

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Mel couldn't help but smile at Helen's casual acceptance of what they both knew would happen. "I was thinking around ten? Give him time to get settled into whatever he's working on."

"Sounds perfect," Helen agreed. "That gives us time to enjoy breakfast and get cleaned up. And maybe you can tell me more about what else you've been theorizing."

"You know," Mel said, reaching for Helen's hand. "A year ago, I never would have imagined this. Having breakfast in Hawaii, planning to investigate a mysterious neighbor with someone who actually understands why I can't just let it go."

Helen squeezed her hand. "A year ago, I never would have imagined falling in love with a retired detective who makes the perfect cup of coffee and can't help but solve mysteries." She paused, her eyes twinkling. "Though I did imagine Hawaii. Just not quite like this."

* * *

As she finished the divine-tasting omelet Mel made for her, Helen's phone buzzed on the kitchen counter, the screen lighting up with her eldest daughter Diane's smiling face. "Good morning, sweetheart," Helen said, answering the phone and moving toward the balcony. She slipped into one of the chairs and relaxed.

"Mom, how's Hawaii? Are you being careful? Are you using sunscreen?" Diane's questions made Helen smile. At thirty-eight, her eldest daughter seemed to think their roles were reversed.

“Everything’s wonderful,” Helen assured her, settling into one of the cushioned chairs. “The weather’s perfect, the ocean’s beautiful, and Mel’s already got a sunburn despite my best efforts.”

There was a slight pause on the other end. “And how is Mel?” Diane’s voice held careful neutrality. While both her daughters had been supportive when Helen introduced them to Mel, she knew they were still adjusting to the idea of their mother in a new relationship.

“She’s good. Made me a wonderful breakfast. She’s quite the cook.” Helen watched through the glass as Mel cleaned up the kitchen. “You’d really like her if you gave her more of a chance, Diane.”

Another pause. “I know, Mom. It’s just all so... unexpected,” Diane said as her voice trailed off.

“I never expected it either,” Helen said softly. “But sometimes life surprises you in the best ways.”

The sound of waves in the distance filled the silence between them. “Are you happy?” Diane finally asked. “Really happy?”

“Yes,” Helen said without hesitation. “More than I’ve been in a very long time.” She watched as Mel glanced her way, offering a small smile. “She takes care of me but lets me be independent. Makes me laugh. Challenges me to try new things.”

“Like what?” Diane asked.

“Well, I’m going snorkeling tomorrow,” Helen said, chuckling at her daughter’s surprised gasp. “I know, I know. Your mother, who barely puts her face in the shower spray, is going to breathe through a tube in the ocean.”

Another pause. “Are you sure you should be doing that?”

Helen took a deep breath, reminding herself that Diane only meant well. “I’m sure,” Helen answered. “I’ll have Mel take pictures.”

There was a flash of movement from the neighbor’s apartment. Helen looked to see the man pacing with his phone to his ear. “Mom?” Diane’s voice brought her attention back to the call. “Is everything really okay? You seem a little distracted.”

Helen considered how to explain their current situation. “Everything’s fine, sweetheart. We just have an... interesting neighbor. Mel thinks something might be wrong, but you know how detectives are. They see mysteries everywhere.”

“And you’re getting involved?” Diane’s sounded even more concerned. “Mom, you’re supposed to be on vacation.”

“We’re just being observant,” Helen said, using Mel’s words from earlier. “Besides, I trust Mel’s instincts. She was a detective for thirty years.”

“Just be careful, okay?” Diane sighed, and her voice softened. “I know you’re an adult and can make your own decisions, but you’re still my mom. I worry.”

Helen smiled. “I know you do, sweetheart. And I love you for it,” she said. “But I promise we’re being careful. Mel would never let anything happen to me.” Through the glass, she saw Mel making notes on a small pad, probably documenting their neighbor’s behavior. The sight made her smile widen. Some habits never changed.

“You really love her, don’t you?”

“I do,” Helen admitted. “Very much. It surprised me too, you know. Falling in love right now. But sometimes the heart knows better than the head.”

“Well,” Diane said after a moment, “I suppose I should meet her properly then. Maybe when you get back, you could both visit? The kids would love to see their grandmother, and, well, I’d like to get to know Mel better.”

Helen felt her heart swell. “We’d love that, sweetheart. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I am happy that you are happy, and now I won’t keep you from your vacation any longer,” Diane said, her tone back to business. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

After they hung up, Helen sat on the balcony and processed the conversation. She heard movement behind her. “Everything okay?” Mel asked, appearing in the doorway with a fresh cup of coffee for Helen.

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Helen accepted the cup gratefully, breathing in the smooth aroma. “Yes,” she said, smiling at her partner. “Diane invited us to visit when we get back.”

Mel’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Really? That’s good, right?”

“Very good,” Helen confirmed, reaching for Mel’s hand. “Though she’s a bit concerned we’re getting involved in a mystery on our vacation.”

“We’re not getting involved,” Mel replied. Then she glanced at their neighbor’s apartment, where the man was still on his phone. “We’re just...”

“Being observant?” Helen finished, her eyes twinkling.

Mel laughed, squeezing her hand. “Exactly. Now, should we start getting ready to be neighborly?”

Helen kept their fingers intertwined. “Lead the way, detective,” she said. “But first, kiss me good morning properly. Our neighbor’s mystery can wait five minutes.”

* * *

At precisely ten o’clock, Mel stood beside Helen in front of their neighbor’s door, the box of macadamia nuts in her hands feeling like a flimsy excuse for what was essentially surveillance. As she lifted her hand to ring the doorbell, she noted the apartment number—327—and rang the bell. “Here we go,” Helen whispered. Before Mel could reply, the rapid typing sounds from within ceased abruptly. Footsteps approached, sounding slightly hesitant. The door opened partially, secured by a chain

lock, and their neighbor peered through the gap.

His bloodshot eyes darted between them. “Yes?” His voice was hoarse, matching his unkempt appearance. Mel couldn’t miss the man’s oily gray hair and the fact he wore the same Hawaiian shirt as the day before. There were dark circles under his eyes and beads of sweat forming along his hairline despite the morning’s cool air.

“Hi there,” Helen said warmly, stepping slightly forward. “We’re your neighbors from just across the courtyard. We couldn’t help but notice you seemed to be working hard and thought you might like a treat.”

The man’s eyes narrowed, but Mel caught the quick scan he did of the hallway behind them. “That’s, um, that’s very kind,” he said, but didn’t unfasten the chain.

“I’m Helen Hardy, and this is Mel Nelson,” Helen continued smoothly. “Forgive us for being nosy, but we couldn’t help but notice you typing away at all hours. Are you a writer?”

The man blinked but didn’t say anything for a beat. For a moment, Mel thought the man might slam the door on them, but then he sighed. “One second,” he said before closing the door to reopen it again with the chain unfastened. One hand remained behind the door, making Mel wonder if he still held his phone. “James Abramson.” He accepted the box of nuts with his free hand. “And yes, I’m a journalist. Sports.”

Mel noted the qualifier ‘sports’ and how his eyes seemed to tense when he said it. “Must be an important story,” she commented casually. “To keep you up all night.”

Abramson’s fingers tightened on the box. “Deadline,” he said shortly. Then, seeming to remember his manners. “Would you like to come in for a moment? I just made coffee.”

“That would be lovely,” Helen answered as she stepped inside without hesitation. Mel had to work hard not to smile at how smoothly her partner had gotten them access. The apartment was a mirror image of their own, but where theirs was neat and organized, his was cluttered with papers, takeout containers, and the scent of old coffee. The living area looked barely used. Through the open door to the bedroom, Mel saw the man’s laptop sat on the desk, screen carefully angled away from view.

Mel motioned toward the desk. “That’s a lot of paperwork,” she said, noting the multiple notebooks scattered across the desk and onto the floor. “Must be more than just box scores you’re working on.”

Abramson’s laugh held no humor. “You could say that.” He moved to the small kitchen, his movements slow as he reached for coffee mugs. “How do you take it?”

“Black,” Mel replied, watching as he poured with unsteady hands. Helen declined politely, and Mel noticed the woman’s subtle positioning near the couch, giving them both clear views of the room.

“James,” Helen said, her voice carrying that gentle warmth that could easily get people talking. “Are you here on vacation or work?”

“Both, sort of,” Abramson said, handing Mel her coffee. “Needed somewhere quiet to finish this story. Somewhere out of the way. And you two?”

Mel smiled. “Vacation,” she replied. “We’re retired and decided to soak up some sun.”

Nodding, Abramson met Mel’s eye. “Retired from?”

Feeling like the man had already guessed her past profession, Mel didn’t see any reason to hide the truth. “Los Angeles Police Department.”

“She was a detective,” Helen added, and Mel heard the pride in her voice.

Before Abramson could comment, a phone buzzed, and he nearly dropped his coffee. The flash of fear across his face was unmistakable as he pulled the cell phone from the pocket of his wrinkled shorts. He checked the screen, his complexion going slightly pale before he quieted the call.

“Everything okay?” Mel asked, though she already knew the answer.

“Fine,” he said too quickly. “Just my editor. Always pushing deadlines, you know how it is.” Although not an author like Helen, Mel did understand deadlines, and that wasn’t the look of someone dealing with an impatient editor. That was the look of someone who might have seen something they shouldn’t have and was now in over their head.

“Must be quite a story,” Mel pressed, taking a sip of the surprisingly decent coffee. “To bring you all the way to Hawaii to write it.”

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Abramson's eyes met hers, and for a moment, she saw something calmer there. "Sometimes the best stories are the ones that don't want to be told."

The phone buzzed again, and this time Mel caught a glimpse of the screen in his hand. A generic-looking text message, like it was automated and not an actual person. Looking far less agitated, Abramson gently turned the phone face-down. "I think I need to get back to work," he said. "Thank you for the gift."

"Of course," Helen said with a smile. "Thank you for the coffee."

"Sure," Abramson said, already moving toward the door. But then he paused, turning to look at them. "You said you're right across the courtyard?"

Mel nodded. "We are," Mel said. "Same floor and everything."

She noted a mix of fear and calculation in the man's expression. "Good to know," he said softly, more to himself than them, before nodding. "Thanks again for the nuts. And the company."

ChapterFour

The tiki torches cast dancing shadows across the resort's luau grounds as Helen adjusted the delicate orchid lei around her neck. The sweet scent of plumeria mixed with roasting pork from the underground imu ovencreated an intoxicating blend that epitomized their Hawaiian vacation. "Stop fussing with your lei, my love," Mel whispered into her ear, reaching to still Helen's nervous fingers. "You look beautiful."

Helen felt warmth spread across her cheeks that had nothing to do with the balmy evening air. Even after six months together, Mel's casual compliments could still make her blush. "I'm just not used to wearing flowers around my neck," she admitted, though they both knew her restlessness had more to do with their observations of their neighbor that morning. Even though they had spent the rest of the day at Oahu's famous Aloha Market, Helen knew neither of them could get the mysterious James Abramson out of their mind.

"Well, you wear them well," Mel replied, guiding them toward their assigned table. The setting sun painted the sky in brilliant oranges and pinks, providing a stunning backdrop for the evening's entertainment. Traditional Hawaiian music played softly, and the gentle ocean breeze carried the sound of waves mixing with conversation and laughter. They had just settled into their seats when Helen spotted him. James Abramson sat several tables away, looking markedly different from the disheveled man they met earlier. He wore a clean aloha shirt and appeared to have shaved, but tension still radiated from his posture. Beside him sat a young woman Helen didn't recognize. She was perhaps in her early thirties, with short blonde hair and dressed in a colorful sundress. A lei similar to Helen's draped around her neck.

Helen felt Mel's subtle shift beside her. "I see them," Mel murmured, picking up the Mai Tai a waiter set in front of them. "What do you make of her?"

"Too young to be his wife," Helen observed, keeping her voice low. "Or at least one would hope."

"Yeah, the body language is wrong for that," Mel replied, and Helen heard the detective creeping into her voice. "His right hand hasn't stopped tapping since we sat down."

A server appeared with appetizers as the first course of the dinner's menu, momentarily interrupting their observation. Helen thanked him and then asked Mel,

“Should we try to get closer?”

Mel’s lips curved into a small smile. “You’re getting good at this, you know that?”

“I’ve had a good teacher,” Helen replied. “Besides, I think those empty seats at the table by the bar would give us a better view during the show.” They gathered their drinks and food and moved closer to the entertainment area, positioning themselves where they could observe both the upcoming performances and their subjects of interest. The young woman spoke to Abramson, her movements sharp and agitated despite her pleasant expression. Abramson kept shaking his head, his earlier tension visibly mounting.

“Ladies and gentlemen, aloha,” A voice boomed over the speakers, announcing the start of the evening’s production. After a moment, traditional dancers took the stage, their movements graceful and mesmerizing. The dancers’ grass skirts swayed hypnotically as they moved in perfect synchronization, their bare feet sliding across the wooden stage with practiced ease. Tiki torches cast flickering shadows across their faces, highlighting the serene smiles they maintained throughout their performance. The sweet melody of the ukulele mixed with the deeper thrumming of drums, creating a rhythm that seemed to pulse with the ocean waves beyond. Helen found herself drawn into the performance despite their unofficial surveillance mission. Mel’s hand found hers in the growing darkness, their fingers intertwining naturally. For a moment, Helen was able to forget they were watching a potential mystery unfold. The music, the dancing, and the warm night air were exactly the romantic evening she had imagined when they planned this vacation.

“I love you,” Mel whispered, squeezing her hand. “Thank you for understanding this part of me.”

Helen turned to look at her partner, seeing the firelight reflected in Mel’s eyes. “I love all parts of you,” she replied softly. “Even the ones that can’t help solving

puzzles on vacation.”

Their moment was interrupted by raised voices from Abramson’s table. The young woman had stood, her face flushed with either anger or embarrassment or possibly both. Abramson reached for her arm, but she jerked away, knocking over her water glass in the process. “It’s only because I care about you,” the woman hissed, her voice carrying despite the music. “You need to—” She cut herself off, apparently remembering their public setting. With one last look at Abramson, she stormed toward the resort’s main building.

“Should we follow her?” Helen asked.

“No,” Mel answered. “Look at Abramson.” Their neighbor had slumped in his chair, his face buried in his hands. After a moment, he pulled out his phone, typed something quickly, then stood to leave. As he passed near their position, Helen caught fragments of muttered words “...should have known...” and “...too late now...”

The fire dancers took the stage then, their flaming batons cutting bright arcs through the twilight. The flashes of fire created an almost theatrical effect as Abramson disappeared into the shadows beyond the luau grounds. “Well,” Helen said, taking a sip of her Mai Tai. “That was certainly dramatic.”

“More than dramatic,” Mel replied. “I wonder who the woman was.”

The fire dancers continued their mesmerizing performance, but Helen’s mind raced with questions. “I suppose this means we’re officially investigating?” Helen asked.

“No. We’re not investigating,” Mel replied with a small smile. “We’re just being very observant tourists who happen to be concerned about our neighbor.”

Helen laughed softly, leaning into Mel’s shoulder. “Of course. Just concerned tourists

who might need to do a bit more observing tomorrow?”

“Exactly,” Mel agreed, pressing a kiss to Helen’s temple. “But for now, let’s try to enjoy the rest of our evening. The fire dancers are dang impressive.”

As they watched the rest of the show, Helen found herself reflecting on how naturally they had fallen into a pattern. The retired detective and imaginative author solving mysteries on vacation. It wasn’t the relaxing beach holiday they had planned, but somehow, it felt perfectly right for them. The fire dancers finished their performance with a spectacular flourish, earning enthusiastic applause from the crowd. As the regular lighting came back up, Helen noticed Abramson’s abandoned table had been cleared, leaving no trace of the drama that had unfolded there.

* * *

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Night settled fully over the resort, transforming the carefully manicured grounds into a different world. The path lights cast pools of warm yellow illumination at regular intervals, while moon-silvered palm fronds created shifting patterns on the ground. The air had grown heavier with moisture, carrying the rich scent of night-blooming jasmine and the distant salt tang of the ocean. Crickets provided a steady chorus, punctuated by the occasional rustle of leaves in the evening breeze. Mel kept her arm around Helen's waist, savoring the warmth of her partner against her side. As they rounded the corner near the koi pond, a familiar figure appeared from the shadows ahead. Abramson stood at the railing, staring into the dark water where ornamental fish created ripples in the moonlight. His earlier neat appearance had devolved into something rumpled.

Without looking up, he spoke to them. "I wondered if you two might come along here."

"We were just heading back to our apartment," Mel said carefully.

"Of course," he said, finally turning to face them. In the dim lighting, the shadows under his eyes looked like bruises. "But you've been watching. Observing. I know the look. I used to see it in the mirror when I was working on big stories."

Before Mel could respond, quick footsteps approached from out of the shadows behind Abramson. "Dad." The blonde woman from the luau appeared. "Dad, we need to talk about this."

Mel felt Helen's subtle shift closer to her, both now caught in what felt like a family drama about to play out in the tropical night. The woman suddenly noticed them and

stopped short, smoothing her sundress. “Oh,” she said with a polite smile. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Brigitte,” Abramson said, his voice tired. “These are my neighbors from across the courtyard. Helen Hardy and Mel Nelson.” He paused, something flickering in his eyes. “Mel’s a retired police detective.”

Mel caught the slight emphasis on her former profession, filing it away with all the other oddities she had observed.

“I remember seeing you at the luau. Nice to meet you properly,” Brigitte said, extending her hand. Brigitte’s handshake was firm and confident.

Up close, Mel recognized the family resemblance. Father and daughter shared the same sharp blue eyes, though Brigitte’s held a hardness that seemed at odds with her youth. “Likewise,” Mel said.

“I’m sorry about the scene at the luau,” Brigitte continued. “Family business can be complicated.”

“Especially when that family doesn’t understand what’s at stake,” Abramson muttered, earning a sharp look from his daughter.

“Perhaps we should give you some privacy,” Helen suggested, always the diplomat, but Abramson shook his head.

“Actually,” he said, “I’d appreciate it if you’d stay a moment.” His fingers drummed on the railing that circled the koi pond. “Sometimes it’s good to have witnesses to conversations.”

Brigitte’s carefully maintained smile faltered. “Dad, don’t.”

“Don’t what?” he said. “Don’t tell them how you’ve been trying to convince me to drop the story? Don’t tell them who else might want me to stop?”

“You’re making too much of this. I’m only because I’m concerned about you,” Brigitte replied. “This isn’t like your other investigations. This is different.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “It is different. Because this time I have proof.”

Mel felt her pulse quicken at the word ‘proof.’ She had heard the word countless times in her career. Sometimes it involved someone sitting on information they knew could be dangerous. Beside her, Helen’s hand found hers and squeezed gently. “Mr. Abramson,” Mel said carefully. “If you’re in some kind of trouble—”

His sudden laugh interrupted her, but there was no humor in it. “Trouble? No, Detective Nelson. How can I be in trouble?” he asked. “I’m just a sports journalist.” A grim smile crossed his face. “But one who stumbled onto something bigger than box scores and player statistics.” His eyes met Mel’s, and she saw a hint of something there. Something that might be fear. “Much bigger.”

“Dad, please.” Brigitte’s voice softened to something almost pleading. “Just come have a drink with me. We can talk about this rationally.”

“Like we did at the luau?” he asked. “Or like we did yesterday when you first arrived?” He turned back to Mel and Helen. “My daughter flew in specifically to talk me out of publishing my story. Isn’t that right, Brigitte?”

“I flew in because I’m worried about you,” Brigitte said, but Mel noticed she wouldn’t meet her father’s eyes.

A security guard appeared at the far end of the path, making his rounds. Abramson straightened, suddenly looking more composed. “Well,” he said, “I should get back to

work. Deadlines wait for no man. Good night.”

“Good night,” Mel said, but as the man started to move past them, he slowed his step.

“Detective Nelson, if anything happens to me...” he said quietly so only Mel could hear. “Find the story.”

Before Mel could respond, he disappeared down the path toward his side of the building. Brigitte watched him go, her expression unreadable in the torchlight. “I’m sorry you had to witness all this,” she said finally. “Dad gets intense about his stories sometimes. Especially since Mom died.”

“When was that?” Helen asked gently.

“Three years ago.” Brigitte’s hand went to her neck, touching a pendant that hung there. “He hasn’t been the same since. Started seeing conspiracies everywhere.” She glanced in the direction her father had gone. “I should go after him. Try to talk some sense into him.”

As Brigitte walked away, Mel found herself cataloging details. There was a slight tremor in Brigitte’s hands when she mentioned her mother and the expensive designer watch she wore, which looked new but had a tan line, suggesting she usually wore something else.

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“Well,” Helen said once they were alone. “That was enlightening.”

“Mmm,” Mel agreed, her mind already working through the implications. “Did you notice how she never actually denied trying to stop his story from being published?”

Helen nodded as they resumed their walk back to their apartment. “I did,” she answered. “Very mysterious.”

“Very,” Mel murmured. Abramson’s parting words echoed in her mind. “Find the story.” After her years as a detective, she knew a cry for help when she heard one.

* * *

Back on their balcony, Helen settled into one of the cushioned chairs, letting the gentle evening breeze cool her skin. The bottle of local Hawaiian Chardonnay they’d bought at the Aloha Market that afternoon sat between them, condensation beading on its surface. “His blinds are closed,” Helen said, glancing at their neighbor’s apartment. The earlier drama seemed to have retreated behind drawn curtains, though a faint light suggested Abramson was still awake.

“Likely because he knows we can see him,” Mel replied. She had her phone out, fingers tapping the screen. “I’m looking him up.”

Helen smiled. “What happened to ‘we’re just being observant neighbors’?”

“We are,” Mel said, not looking up. “We’re just being thorough about it.” She paused, then nodded. “Well, he’s legit. James Abramson. Sports journalist for the Los

Angeles Times for twenty years. Won several awards for investigative reporting.”

Helen leaned closer. “Anything specific?”

“Mostly coverage of college sports, but...” Mel scrolled further. “Here’s something interesting. Three years ago, he was apparently working on a story about college basketball recruiting violations when his wife died suddenly.”

“That matches what Brigitte said,” Helen noted, reaching for the wine bottle to top off their glasses. “Did they say how she died?”

“Not much. It was a car accident,” Mel said. She looked up at Helen. “Doesn’t look like his college basketball story was ever published either.”

Helen felt a chill despite the warm evening air. “That seems convenient.”

“Very,” Mel agreed, still scrolling. “There’s a gap of about six months after she died where he didn’t publish anything. Then he starts again, but it’s just basic game coverage. No more investigative pieces.” She paused again. “Until now, apparently.”

The ocean waves provided a soothing backdrop to their conversation, but Helen’s mind was racing. “So what changed?” she asked. “Why start investigating again now?”

“And what could be big enough to make his daughter fly out to stop him?” Mel added, setting her phone down. She picked up her wine and leaned back in her chair. “Did you notice how defensive Brigitte got when he mentioned others might be interested?”

Helen remembered. “Yes,” she said. “And how quickly she tried to imply he was paranoid.”

“Classic deflection technique.”

“You’ve seen that before?”

“In investigations, yes. When someone wants to discredit a witness or source, they often start by questioning their mental state.” Mel paused, and Helen could almost hear the wheels turning in her head. “But Abramson didn’t seem paranoid to me. Scared, yes. But clear-headed.”

Not sure what Mel meant, Helen tilted her head. “You think he is scared?”

Mel turned to face her. “I haven’t told you yet, but Abramson whispered a message to me as he walked by.”

“A message?” Helen asked softly, knowing it must be serious if Mel had waited to tell her.

“Yes,” Mel said. “He said ‘if anything happens to me, find the story.’”

Helen took a moment to absorb Mel’s words. Things had suddenly become much more serious. “Well, at least he recognizes you as someone who might help if something happens to him.”

“I suppose,” Mel said. “But why say that unless he thinks something might happen?”

The night deepened around them, and more stars emerged overhead. The resort’s grounds were quieter with guests having returned to their rooms after the luau. “Should we tell someone?” Helen asked, returning to her chair. “The police, maybe?”

Mel shook her head. “Tell them what? That our neighbor, an investigative journalist, is working on a story his daughter doesn’t want him to publish? That he made a

cryptic comment about finding his story if something happens to him?” She sighed. “They’d probably react the same way Brigitte did and just suggest he’s being paranoid.”

Not happy with the answer but knowing Mel was right, Helen took a thoughtful sip of her wine. “So we wait?”

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“We observe,” Mel said, picking up her phone again. “But not get carried away with it.”

Helen reached for Mel’s hand. “Says the woman who just looked into our neighbor’s background.”

“Occupational hazard,” Mel said with a small smile. “Once a detective, always a detective, I suppose.”

“And that’s one of the reasons I love you,” Helen replied softly. “Your need to help people, to solve puzzles, to make things right.” They sat in comfortable silence for a moment and watched as the light in Abramson’s apartment went out.

ChapterFive

While the coffee’s water came to a boil, Mel measured coffee beans with practiced precision as she thought about their neighbor across the courtyard. She had already wandered onto the balcony for a brief look, and although the blind was open, the man was not at his desk. With all the nervous energy he displayed so far, Mel would have thought Abramson would be an early riser, but perhaps not. There was also the possibility Brigitte talked him out of writing whatever story seemed to possess him, and Abramson finally crashed to sleep for a week.

“I can hear you thinking from here,” Helen called from the bedroom, her voice warm with amusement. “Whatever happened to our agreement about taking a break from the mystery?”

Mel smiled despite herself, carefully pouring hot water into the French press. “Not sure what you mean,” she said. “I’m just making coffee.”

Helen appeared in the kitchen doorway, already dressed in her new swimsuit with a light cover-up thrown over it. “Mmm hmm,” she hummed, crossing to kiss Mel’s cheek. “And I’m pretty sure I heard you go out onto the balcony already this morning. Am I wrong?”

“No,” Mel said with a smile, turning to pull Helen into a proper good morning kiss. The familiar scent of Helen’s shampoo mixed with the rich coffee aroma, grounding Mel in the present moment. “Though I will point out that the blind is open and there is no sign of—”

“Ah!” Helen pressed a finger to Mel’s lips, stopping her mid-sentence. “No detective work until after we try snorkeling. You promised.”

Mel sighed, knowing she was caught. “You’re right. I’m sorry.” She finished preparing their coffee, adding a splash of cream to Helen’s cup before handing it to her. “Are you nervous about trying it?”

Helen accepted the coffee, wrapping both hands around the warm mug. “A little,” she admitted. “It seems silly to be afraid, but...”

“Hey,” Mel said softly, reaching for Helen’s hand. “It’s not silly. And I’ll be right there with you the whole time.”

After breakfast, they gathered their snorkel gear, and Mel double-checked that Helen’s mask was properly adjusted. The resort’s concierge had recommended a quiet cove just a short walk from their building, perfect for beginners.

“You’re sure about this?” Mel asked as they made their way down the path, noting

how Helen clutched the mesh bag containing her gear. “We could start in the swimming pool if you prefer.”

Helen shook her head. “No, I want to do this properly. Besides,” she added with a small smile. “I trust you to keep me safe.”

The words warmed Mel’s heart. Trust. Such simple words, but ones that carried so much weight. Like Abramson trusting her with his cryptic warning about finding his story if anything happened to him. There was certainly something odd there, but Mel cut off that line of thinking. The morning was about Helen, about sharing something she loved with the woman who had brought such unexpected joy to her life.

The cove was exactly as the instructor had described. The sheltered inlet was calm, and the crystal-clear water was perfect for first-time snorkelers. A few other early morning swimmers dotted the beach, but the water was relatively empty. “Okay,” Mel said, setting their gear on a patch of sand. “First thing is to get comfortable with the mask and snorkel on land.”

She helped Helen with her equipment, showing her how to clear water from the snorkel and create a proper seal with the mask. Helen listened intently, asking all the right questions. Mel was confident Helen would do well. “Now,” she continued. “We’ll start in the shallow water. Just get used to putting your face in while standing.” She demonstrated, making exaggerated breathing sounds through her snorkel that made Helen laugh.

“You look a little ridiculous.”

“That’s the point,” Mel replied after lifting her head. “Takes away some of the anxiety when you can laugh at it.” They waded deeper into the warm water together, and Mel felt Helen’s hand tighten on her arm as the water reached their waists. “I’m right here,” Mel assured her. “Just take your time.” Helen nodded, adjusting her mask

one final time before slowly lowering her face to the water. Mel watched as Helen's body tensed, then gradually relaxed as she got used to breathing through the snorkel.

After a moment, Helen lifted her head, eyes wide with excitement behind her mask. "I did it."

"You did," Mel agreed, feeling a surge of pride. "Ready to try actually swimming?"

They moved slowly into deeper water, Mel keeping one hand lightly on Helen's back for reassurance. The morning sun penetrated the clear water, illuminating the sandy bottom and occasional darting fish. Helen's movements became more confident as they progressed, though she still stayed close to Mel's side. Watching Helen discover a new world filled Mel with a joy she hadn't expected. Every time Helen spotted a particularly colorful fish or interesting coral formation, she surfaced with childlike excitement to share her discovery. It reminded Mel of her early days as a detective when each new clue would bring that same rush of discovery. As they floated over a deeper section of the cove, Mel couldn't help but notice how different things looked beneath the surface. Just like their situation with Abramson, what might appear straightforward on top held layers of complexity underneath.

* * *

Helen adjusted her mask once more, determined to make Mel proud. The water was so clear she could see every detail of the sandy bottom below, scattered with patches of coral formations that ranged from deep purple to vibrant orange. Tiny, iridescent fish darted everywhere. She had just started to feel truly comfortable when something dark moved in her peripheral vision. Her heart leaped into her throat as she turned her head sharply, losing the seal on her mask. Cold water rushed in, and suddenly she couldn't see. Panic seized her chest as she tried to remember which way was up. Then strong hands gripped her shoulders, guiding her to the surface. "I've got you," Mel's steady voice cut through her fear as they broke the surface. "You're okay. Just

breathe.”

Helen clung to Mel’s arm, gasping slightly as she pushed her mask up. “I’m sorry,” she managed, embarrassed by her reaction. “I thought I saw something big and dark, and then my mask leaked, and—”

“Hey,” Mel said softly, keeping them both afloat easily. “No apologies needed. It was probably just a shadow from the coral. Even experienced snorkelers get spooked sometimes.”

The gentle waves rocked them as Helen’s breathing steadied. She felt Mel’s solid presence beside her, an anchor in more ways than one. “I think maybe I’ve had enough for today,” Helen admitted.

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“Of course,” Mel agreed. “I think we’ve had enough excitement for one morning.”

As they waded out of the water, Helen couldn’t help but feel a mix of frustration and gratitude. Frustration at her own fear, but immense gratitude for Mel’s unwavering support. The sand was hot under their feet as they gathered their gear. “You did really well, you know,” Mel said as they started toward their apartment. “Before the shadow thing, you were a natural.”

Helen squeezed water from her shoulder-length hair, touched by Mel’s encouragement. “Thank you for being so patient with me. Both with the snorkeling and my moment of panic.”

They walked in comfortable silence for a while, the morning sun warming Helen’s shoulders. As they approached their building, Helen noticed a taxi pulling up to the entrance. A man stepped out. He was tall, pale, and wearing a dark suit that seemed completely at odds with the tropical setting. The man retrieved two large, black suitcases from the trunk, paid the driver, and disappeared into the lobby before they could get a good look at his face.

“Well, that’s interesting,” Helen said, knowing Mel would pick up on her meaning. “Not exactly standard resort wear.”

Mel nodded, her eyes fixed on the lobby doors. “And two large suitcases? Seemed like a lot for one person on a typical vacation.” She paused, then added with forced casualness. “You know, maybe we should take the stairs instead of the elevator. Get some exercise.”

Helen hid her smile, recognizing Mel's transparent attempt to investigate. "Of course, dear. Though these wet flip-flops might make that a bit treacherous."

They entered the open stairway and made it to the third floor just as they heard the elevator ding. From the steps, they watched the mysterious man exit, wheeling his luggage toward James Abramson's end of the hallway. "Mel," Helen whispered. "He's heading in the direction of our mystery writer's apartment."

They waited a minute before emerging into the open hallway. The man and his luggage were nowhere in sight, but Helen hadn't heard a door close, so he must have gone around the corner. "What should we do?" Helen asked, but Mel was already moving toward their apartment. "Follow and see where his room is?"

"No. I don't want to risk being seen. Let's get changed first," Mel said, her voice low. "Then maybe we can take a walk, see if we notice anything interesting."

As they entered their apartment, Helen felt a mix of excitement. She watched Mel move to the sliding glass doors, trying to catch a glimpse of any activity in their neighbor's apartment. "Abramson at his desk," Mel said.

Helen stepped closer, placing a hand on Mel's shoulder. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"What's that?"

"No more joking that we're not investigating," Helen said with a grim smile. "That man was definitely not a tourist. Something feels wrong."

Mel turned to face her. "Are you sure you're okay with that? We're still on vacation..."

“I’m sure,” Helen assured her. “Though perhaps we should change out of our wet swimsuits before we start playing detective.”

Mel smiled. “I love you,” she said simply.

“I love you too,” Helen replied. “Now, let’s get dried off. I have a feeling this vacation just got a lot more interesting.”

* * *

After changing into dry clothes, Mel stood at their sliding glass door, studying Abramson’s apartment while Helen finished getting ready in the bathroom. The writer was on his cell phone again, pacing and looking agitated. Her mind drifted to the pale man in the dark suit. It seemed like too much of a coincidence that he was staying at the same vacation complex Abramson was, but anything was possible. From Mel’s experience, based on his appearance, he could be anyone from a federal agent to hired muscle, but his bearing and those large, black suitcases pointed toward the latter.

“You’re doing that thing with your jaw again,” Helen said, emerging from the bathroom in fresh resort wear, her ash-blond hair neatly combed. “The clenching thing.”

Mel consciously relaxed her jaw, turning to face her partner. “Just thinking. Not only was the man’s outfit not appropriate for a vacation in Hawaii, but the suit was expensive. If I had to guess, I’d say it was custom-tailored, probably Italian.”

“And all of that matters because...?” Helen prompted, though her slight smile suggested she already knew where Mel was going.

“Because he’s not here for a vacation. He’s here on business, but what kind is the

question,” she answered. “I don’t think he’s a government agent because even undercover ones tend to wear off-the-rack suits. Budget constraints.” Mel moved away from the window, gathering her thoughts. “This guy’s suit screamed private sector. High-end private sector.”

Helen nodded, slipping her feet into comfortable sandals. “The kind of private sector that might be interested in whatever story our neighbor is working on?”

“Exactly.” Mel checked her watch. It was barely noon. “Want to take that walk now? Maybe past the front desk?”

“Let me guess,” Helen said. “To casually inquire about our new neighbor?”

Mel grinned. “The desk clerk seemed chatty when we checked in. Might be worth a conversation.”

They left their apartment, taking the elevator this time. Mel’s mind was already constructing questions that wouldn’t seem suspicious, ways to guide the conversation naturally toward their target. It felt good, familiar, like slipping back into a comfortable routine from her days with the LAPD.

Thankfully, the lobby was relatively quiet, with just a few guests milling about. The same young clerk from their check-in was behind the desk, his name tag identifying him as “Kai.” He looked up as they approached, offering a bright smile. “Good morning! How are you enjoying your stay?”

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“Wonderful,” Helen replied warmly. “We just came back from snorkeling. It was perfect.”

“Oh great! First time?” Kai asked, his enthusiasm clearly genuine.

“For me,” Helen said. “Though I had an excellent teacher.” She squeezed Mel’s hand, and Mel felt that familiar warmth in her chest.

“Always good to have someone experienced showing you the ropes,” Kai agreed. “Speaking of new experiences, we just had another guest check in. Always nice to see the resort filling up.”

Mel kept her expression neutral, though internally she celebrated the perfect opening. “Oh? We saw him arrive. Seemed a bit overdressed for Hawaii.”

Kai pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Yeah, that was different,” he said. “Usually, our business travelers lose the jacket and tie before they make it here from the airport.” He glanced around before leaning forward slightly. “Between us, he wasn’t exactly friendly during check-in.”

“No?” Helen asked.

“Let’s just say some people could use a reminder that they’re in Hawaii.” Kai straightened up as another guest approached the desk. “Anything else I can help you with?”

“Actually,” Mel said. “We were thinking of trying that new restaurant down the

beach. The one with all the tiki torches? Any good?"

As Kai launched into a detailed review of the restaurant's menu, Mel noticed a flicker of movement near the elevator. The pale man appeared, still in his suit but now without his luggage. He moved with purpose toward the exit, barely acknowledging the concierge's cheerful "Aloha."

"Well, thank you for the recommendations," Helen said. "We should let you help your other guests."

Together they walked outside where the Hawaiian sun was high and bright, making the pale man's suit look even more out of place. He headed toward the beach promenade, and Mel felt Helen's gentle tug on her arm. "Shall we take that walk now?"

Mel smiled. "Lead the way." They maintained a discrete distance, letting other tourists provide cover as they followed the man along the path. He moved with the confidence of someone who knew exactly what he was doing, checking his phone periodically.

"What do you think is in those suitcases he checked in with?" Helen whispered as they walked.

"Impossible to know," Mel replied. "But something tells me it's not tanning lotion and snorkeling gear."

The man stopped suddenly, pulling his phone from a pocket and turning to take a call. Mel guided Helen to a nearby beach vendor, pretending to examine Hawaiian-style jewelry while straining to hear the conversation. "...yes, I understand the urgency..." The wind carried away fragments of the man's words, but his tone was clear that whoever he was talking to had authority over him.

“Should we head back?” Helen asked softly, holding up a shell necklace. Mel nodded. They had pushed their luck far enough for one day, and she didn’t want to risk being noticed. As they turned toward their building, she couldn’t shake the feeling that things were escalating faster than she had anticipated.

ChapterSix

The taxi wound its way through Honolulu’s busy streets as Helen watched palm trees and storefronts blur past her window. She reached for Mel’s hand, squeezing it gently. “Thank you for agreeing to this,” she said softly. “We both needed a break from playing detective.”

Mel smiled. “You’re right,” she said. “Though I keep thinking about that man in the suit yesterday and his phone call.”

“Ah!” Helen pressed a finger to Mel’s lips. “No mysteries today. Just us, the ocean, and hopefully some beautiful views.”

The taxi driver chuckled from the front seat. “First time on an Oahu harbor cruise?”

“Yes,” Helen replied, grateful for the distraction. “We’re hoping to see some whales.”

“Good timing,” the driver said. “Lots of activity in the channel lately. Just yesterday, my brother-in-law’s tour saw a mother and calf.”

Helen felt excited at the prospect. She glanced at Mel, whose expression had finally softened, and she hoped that meant the mystery of their anxious neighbor was fading. For the day at least. The morning’s decision to step away from their amateur investigation had been the right one. They were supposed to be on vacation, after all. The harbor came into view, a forest of masts and rigging stretching toward the cloudless sky. Their boat, the *Island Princess*, waited at the end of the dock, its white

hull gleaming in the afternoon sun.

As they paid the driver and gathered their things, Helen couldn't help but notice how Mel's shoulders had already begun to relax. "It's beautiful," Helen said as they made their way down the dock. The air carried the smell of tropical flowers from the nearby lei stands. The late morning light danced across the water in diamond patterns, while seabirds wheeled overhead, their calls mixing with the distant sound of boat horns. Palm fronds rustled in the steady trade winds, casting shifting shadows across the sun-bleached dock planks. Everything felt perfect. "Now this is more like I imagined."

Mel adjusted the bucket hat Helen insisted she wear against the bright sun. "Are you saying you want to spend more time on the water?"

"Not necessarily. I'm saying getting away from it all and seeing something beautiful is more what I imagined when we planned this trip," Helen replied. "Before we got caught up in, well, everything..." She trailed off, remembering their promise not to discuss the mystery.

"Before we got distracted," Mel finished with a smile. "That's all that's happened."

"True," Helen said with a sigh as they approached the gangway where a young crew member greeted them with a warm "Aloha" and checked their tickets. Looking for seats on the open deck, they found an elderly couple standing close together at the rail at the back of the boat. The woman wore a flowered muumuu and a broad-brimmed hat, while her husband sported a Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts.

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Something about their comfortable togetherness made Helen smile. “I’m Martha,” the woman said, noticing Helen’s attention. “And this is George. We’re celebrating our fiftieth anniversary today.”

“Congratulations,” Helen replied warmly. “I’m Helen, and this is Mel. We’re celebrating too, though it’s only because we are together on vacation.”

Martha’s eyes twinkled as she looked between them. “Sometimes just being together is worth celebrating,” she said. “George and I learned that early on, didn’t we, dear?”

George nodded, patting his wife’s hand where it sat on the boat’s railing. “Best lesson we ever learned.”

The ship’s engines rumbled to life as the crew prepared to cast off. Helen felt Mel’s arm slip around her waist, and she leaned into the embrace. “Fifty years,” Helen murmured. “Can you imagine?”

“With the right person?” Mel replied softly. “Yes.”

The simple words made Helen’s heart ache a little. She couldn’t help but wonder what it would have been like to meet Mel when they were younger. Turning to look at her partner, Helen found such depth of feeling in Mel’s eyes that it took her breath away. The mystery of their neighbor, the pale man in the suit, all of it faded away in that moment.

As they pulled away from the dock, the captain’s voice came over the speakers, welcoming them aboard and pointing out various landmarks. The afternoon sun

sparkled on the water, and a fresh breeze carried the salty ocean air. “Look,” Martha said, pointing at the water near the boat. “Spinner dolphins.”

Helen watched in delight as sleek forms cut through the waves, occasionally leaping and spinning in graceful arcs. “They are beautiful.”

“Yes indeed,” George said. “Life gets complicated enough without missing the simple joys.”

Helen nodded, understanding exactly what he meant. It had been easy to get caught up in mysteries and concerns, forgetting to appreciate the beauty right in front of them. She thought about their neighbor, about all the questions still unanswered, but for once, those thoughts didn’t take hold. Instead, she focused on the warmth of Mel’s arm around her waist, the sound of waves against the hull, and the way the afternoon light sparkled on the water. Today’s experience was why they had come to Hawaii. Not to solve mysteries or right wrongs, but to be together, to make memories.

“You’re thinking deep thoughts,” Mel said quietly.

“Just appreciating the moment,” Helen said, resting her head on Mel’s shoulder. “And the company.” The boat rounded a point, revealing the full majesty of Diamond Head rising against the sky, making everything even more magical. Helen’s heart felt full. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Mel said. “Thank you for making me take this break.”

Helen smiled, knowing that tomorrow they would probably be back to their amateur sleuthing, trying to understand what was going on with their neighbor. But for now, on this perfect Hawaiian afternoon, they were just two people in love, sharing a moment on the sea.

* * *

Mel found herself relaxing into the gentle rhythm of the boat. The salt spray occasionally misted her face, and the warmth of Helen against her side grounded her in the present moment. She watched a frigate bird soar overhead, its forked tail adjusting to the wind currents with effortless grace.

“The whales often come through that channel,” George was saying, pointing toward a deeper blue stretch of water. “Something about the currents there attracts them.”

Martha leaned forward suddenly. “There! Did you see that splash?”

Everyone turned to look where she pointed. At first, Mel saw nothing but endless blue, but then a distant spout of water shot into the air. “Oh,” Helen gasped beside her as a massive dark form breached the surface, water cascading off its body as it crashed back into the sea. The sight was magnificent, raw power and grace combined in a way that made Mel’s heart race. The entire boat erupted in excited chatter.

“That was a big one,” George said. “Probably a male, based on the size.”

Mel felt Helen’s hand touch her shoulder. “I’ve never seen anything like it,” Helen whispered, her voice filled with wonder. “Thank you for coming with me today.”

The simple gratitude in Helen’s voice made Mel’s throat tight with emotion, and she knew how lucky she was. After decades of putting her job first, of keeping people at arm’s length, she had found someone who not only accepted her peculiarities but seemed to cherish them. The whale breached again, closer this time, and Mel took in all the details—the distinctive pattern on its fluke, the barnacles clinging to its massive form. She found herself wanting to document everything, to preserve this perfect moment forever.

“You’re doing that thing with your jaw,” Helen said softly, and there was a playfulness in her voice.

“What thing?”

“That thing when you’re mentally taking notes,” Helen replied, covering Mel’s hand on the railing with her own. “Just watch, dear. No need to catalog everything.”

Mel laughed quietly, appreciating Helen’s perception. “Sorry. Force of habit.”

“Don’t apologize,” Helen said. “It’s endearing.”

The boat’s engines had been cut to idle, allowing them to drift quietly in the whale’s vicinity. “You know,” Martha said from where the couple stood nearby. “George and I met on a boat not unlike this one. Though it was off the coast of Maine, and we were looking for seals, not whales.”

“How lovely,” Helen replied. “Was it love at first sight?”

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George chuckled. “Not exactly. I got seasick and spent the first hour hanging over the rail.”

“But he was so embarrassed and sweet about it,” Martha added, patting his arm. “And he still asked me to dinner afterward, even though he could barely look at food.”

“Sometimes the best love stories start unexpectedly,” Helen said, giving Mel a meaningful look. Their first meeting last summer started with Mel rescuing her when Helen became lost using the GPS trying to find Mel’s campground. Mel remembered how beautiful Helen looked that night and how nervous Mel felt around her from the very start.

A collective gasp from the other passengers drew their attention back to the water. The whale had come even closer, rolling onto its side as if to get a better look at them. “Magnificent,” Mel breathed as the whale slapped its massive pectoral fin against the water, sending a spray that reached the boat’s deck. Several passengers squealed in delight, but Mel barely noticed the cold mist.

She was too captivated by Helen’s expression of pure joy. “I never thought I’d see something like this,” Helen said. “I feel so lucky.”

Mel nodded, understanding exactly what Helen meant. She felt it too and as the boat’s engines rumbled back to life, Helen looked in her eyes. “Penny for your thoughts?”

Mel pulled her closer, pressing a kiss to her temple. “Just thinking about the future,” she said honestly. “And how lucky I am to have someone to share moments like this

with.”

* * *

As the boat made its way back toward the harbor, Helen felt a deep contentment settle over her. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the deck, and the breeze off the water had grown cooler. She watched as other passengers began gathering their belongings, many still chattering excitedly about the whales they saw.

“I suppose we should start getting ready to go too,” Helen said reluctantly, not wanting the magical afternoon to end. “Though I hate to break this spell.”

Mel squeezed her hand. “We can always come back before we leave. Maybe see those whales again.”

“If we’re not too busy solving mysteries,” Helen teased gently, though she kept her voice low. She noticed how Mel’s expression flickered briefly at the reminder of their situation back at the resort. “Hey.” Helen touched Mel’s cheek. “I didn’t mean to bring that up. This afternoon has been perfect just as it is.”

Mel smiled. “You don’t have to apologize,” she said. “It has been perfect, but a part of me is ready to get back and check on things.”

The boat’s wake created a gentle rocking motion as they turned into the harbor entrance. The late sun caught the windows of the waterfront buildings, turning them to gold. Helen found herself studying the easy way Martha and George moved around each other as they gathered their things, anticipating each other’s needs without words. It reminded her of how she and Mel were beginning to develop their own rhythms and patterns. “You know another thing that I love about you?” Helen asked.

Mel raised an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

“How no matter what else is going on, you can be completely present in moments like this. How you let yourself just be.”

A slight blush colored Mel’s cheeks. “Only with you.”

“Would you like to walk along the harbor before heading back?” Helen asked. “Maybe find somewhere nice for early dinner?”

“That sounds perfect,” Mel agreed as the gangway was being secured. As they reached the dock, Helen breathed in the mixed scents of salt water, tropical flowers, and grilling food from nearby restaurants. “Are you hungry?” Mel asked as they began walking along the harbor’s promenade. The setting sun painted the sky in spectacular shades of orange and pink.

“A little,” Helen admitted. “Though I’m enjoying this too much to rush into dinner.” They passed various shops selling everything from tacky souvenirs to high-end art. Helen noticed how Mel’s stance had relaxed completely, her usual alertness softened by their peaceful afternoon at sea. A street musician played slack-key guitar nearby, the gentle melody floating on the evening breeze.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Mel asked, echoing Helen’s earlier question.

Helen smiled, squeezing Mel’s hand. “I was just thinking about Martha and George,” she said. “About how lovely it must be to share fifty years with someone. To know each other so completely.”

Mel stopped their steps. “I know we don’t have fifty years,” she said softly. “But we’re making a good start.”

The simple statement made Helen’s heart swell, and she leaned in for a kiss. “Yes, we are,” she said. “And I adore everything about you.”

“Including the detective parts?”

“Especially those parts,” Helen said as she started them walking again. Even though it was not yet evening, the sunlight grew softer, and lights on the beachfront hotels came on. “You know, when I first agreed to this vacation, I thought we’d spend our days on the beach and our evenings having quiet dinners. I never imagined we would end up playing detective.” Mel tensed slightly beside her, but Helen continued quickly, “But I wouldn’t change it. Any of it. Because it’s perfectly us.”

“Even if there turn out to be dangerous parts?” Mel asked, her protective instincts showing through.

“Even those,” Helen confirmed. “Because I trust you to keep us safe. And because I love seeing you in your element, even if you’re supposed to be retired.” A group of tourists passed behind them, their excited chatter in what sounded like German adding to the international atmosphere of the harbor. “Now, should we find somewhere to eat? Maybe somewhere we can still see the water?”

“Yes, let’s find something,” Mel replied. “Tomorrow we can go back to being amateur detectives, but tonight, let’s just be us.”

ChapterSeven

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Returning from their perfect day and wonderful dinner, Mel waited with Helen in the resort lobby for the elevator. Through the large windows, Mel saw the sky already darkening into twilight after a magical day. Helen took her hand and leaned closer. “Thank you again for everything,” she said. “This was the most beautiful vacation day I’ve ever had.”

Before Mel could respond, voices approached from around the corner. One of them Mel recognized as their anxious neighbor, Abramson, but the other voice was new. It sounded female, authoritative, and with an East Coast accent. Mel felt Helen’s hand tighten in hers as their neighbor appeared. After a beat, Mel realized he was accompanied by the red-haired woman they had last seen visiting his apartment. Abramson pulled up short when he saw them, his familiar disheveled appearance seeming to wilt further. In contrast, the woman beside him, dressed impeccably in a lightweight cream linen business suit, maintained perfect composure. When their eyes met, the woman gave Mel a tight smile.

“Oh, hello,” Abramson said, his voice strained. He cleared his throat. “Good evening, neighbors.” The elevator dinged its arrival, doors sliding open to reveal empty space. Mel watched as the red-haired woman gestured for Abramson to enter first, the movement subtle but commanding. Helen followed, gently tugging Mel along, and finally the red-haired woman stepped in, positioning herself between Abramson and the door. “What floor?” she asked with cool politeness, though her finger had already pressed the button for the third floor.

“The third,” Helen replied with equal politeness. “We’re on the same floor as Mr. Abramson.”

The woman's green eyes sharpened with interest. "How lovely. I'm Felicity Coedy, James's agent."

Mel noticed how Abramson flinched at her introduction. "Helen Hardy," Helen said, then gestured to her companion. "And this is Mel Nelson."

"Pleasure," Felicity murmured, though her attention had already shifted back to Abramson. "So, are we clear, James? Our agreed deadline isn't flexible. Everyone has been more than patient."

Abramson glanced at Mel and Helen, coloring a little as if embarrassed to be having the conversation in front of them. "It's not ready," he muttered. "The story needs more... verification."

Felicity seemed to have no qualms about having what Mel thought was a rather private discussion for an elevator ride with strangers. "Verification?" The woman's laugh held no humor. "We've been over this," she said. "The story is fine as it is. Perfect, even. Unless you're suggesting there's something you haven't shared with me?"

The elevator seemed to move slower than usual, the tension making the small space feel airless. Mel watched the floor numbers illuminate one by one, her detective's instincts recording every detail of the conversation her neighbor and his agent were having. It was almost as if Felicity positioned herself to intimidate Abramson, while the man kept glancing at the emergency stop button. There was a slight tremor in his hands. "I just need more time," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Felicity smoothed an invisible wrinkle from her jacket. "Time isn't something we have in abundance, and you know it." Mel felt Helen shift closer to her, clearly trying to appear casual while witnessing a private conversation. The elevator reached their floor, and the doors opened.

With what looked like a forced smile, Felicity gestured for Mel and Helen to exit first. “It was lovely meeting you,” she said. “I do hope you’re enjoying your vacation.”

“Thank you,” Mel said as they stepped out. “Have a nice evening.”

As they walked away, Mel heard Felicity’s voice drop lower, clearly meant only for Abramson, but carrying in the open-air corridor. “Remember what we discussed,” the woman hissed. “Make the right choice.”

The walk to their apartment felt longer than usual. Once inside, Helen immediately moved to the sliding glass doors. “Well,” she said softly. “That was interesting.”

Mel joined her at the window, wrapping an arm around Helen’s waist. “Very. Did you notice how he reacted when she pressed him about time?”

“I noticed how she positioned herself between him and the door,” Helen replied. “Almost like she was preventing him from running when they opened.”

“Exactly.” Mel’s mind was already connecting the dots. “She seemed very interested in his story being finished.”

Helen turned to face her. “But wouldn’t that be normal? Or do you think she’s more than just his agent?”

“I think nothing about this situation is what it seems.” Mel watched as Felicity and Abramson appeared in front of the window. The woman was talking, her gestures sharp and commanding, while Abramson slumped into his chair beside his desk. “First his daughter flies in to convince him to drop the story. Then we see that pale man in the suit checking in with suspicious luggage. Now his agent shows up, clearly here to pressure our poor sportswriter.”

“About deadlines,” Helen added. “Though somehow, I don’t think she was just talking about publishing dates.”

Mel nodded, pulling Helen closer. “No, I don’t think she was either.” They watched as Felicity finally appeared to have left Abramson’s apartment. Abramson immediately slumped forward, burying his face in his hands. “Whatever story he’s working on, it’s big enough to attract some serious attention.”

“Dangerous attention?” Helen asked softly.

“Maybe.” Mel pressed a kiss to Helen’s temple, trying to reassure her. “But we’re just observers right now. No need to get further involved.”

Helen gave a slight laugh. “Says the woman who’s already profiled everyone involved and probably has a pair of theories about what’s really going on.”

“Three theories, actually,” Mel admitted with a small smile. “But who’s counting?”

They stood together, watching as Abramson returned to his laptop, his typing more frantic than ever. The sun had started to set, painting the sky in brilliant oranges and pinks, but their neighbor seemed oblivious to the world outside his window. His focus was entirely on whatever story had people after him.

“I love you,” Helen said suddenly, turning in Mel’s arms. “Even when you can’t help solving mysteries on our vacation.”

Mel felt her heart swell with familiar warmth. “I love you too,” she replied. “Even when you enable my worst habits.”

“They’re not your worst habits,” Helen said, reaching to touch Mel’s cheek. “They’re what make you you.”

* * *

Standing in Mel's arms, Helen watched through the sliding glass doors as the last rays of sunlight painted Abramson's apartment in deep shadows. His desk lamp created a harsh circle of light around him, making him look isolated and vulnerable. Despite Mel's earlier assurance about being just observers, when Helen glanced at her, she knew her partner well enough to recognize the familiar signs of her detective mind working overtime. "You should see your face right now," Helen said softly. "And I can practically hear the gears turning."

Mel's arms tightened slightly around her waist. "Is it that obvious?"

"Perhaps only to someone who loves you," Helen replied. "Want to share what you're thinking?" Before Mel could answer, Helen's phone buzzed in her pocket. When she fished it out, the screen showed her youngest daughter calling. "I want to take this," Helen said to Mel, already stepping away.

"Of course," Mel said a moment before Helen answered.

"Hi, sweetheart." She opened the sliding glass doors to sit on one of the chairs on their small balcony.

"Mom. Diane told me about your mysterious neighbor," Jenny said without preamble. "Please tell me you're not actually investigating something on your vacation."

With a small sigh, Helen tried to keep her voice light. "We're not investigating anything, dear. We're just being observant neighbors."

“Uh-huh,” Jenny’s skepticism carried clearly through the phone. “And I suppose you being partnered with a retired detective has nothing to do with this ‘observation’?”

“Jenny,” Helen said, reminding herself her daughters only meant well. “Everything’s fine. We’re having a wonderful vacation. The weather’s perfect, the ocean’s beautiful—”

“Diane’s worried about you, you know,” Jenny interrupted. “We both are.”

Helen rubbed her temple, watching Abramson make another frantic phone call, his gestures sharp with anxiety. “I appreciate your concern, but I’m perfectly safe. Mel would never let anything happen to me.”

“That’s not—” Jenny paused, and Helen pictured her frustrated daughter running a hand through her hair, a gesture she’d had since childhood. “Mom, you’re supposed to be relaxing, not getting involved in whatever this is.”

“We’re not involved,” Helen insisted, though even she had to admit it was becoming less true by the moment. “We just happened to notice some odd behavior, that’s all.”

“From your neighbor who is acting weird,” Jenny said a little sharply. “Because that’s totally normal vacation stuff.”

“Jenny, sweetheart,” Helen said, taking on a more parental tone. “I promise we’re being careful. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Mom,” Jenny’s voice softened. “I know you’re capable of making your own decisions. And I know Mel will protect you. Just be careful, okay? Both of you.”

“We will,” Helen promised. “I love you, sweetheart.”

After ending the call, Helen leaned back against the patio chair cushions, letting out a long breath. “Children,” she muttered as Mel joined her on the balcony and sat in the chair beside her.

“Everything okay?” Mel asked. “Is Jenny threatening to put you under surveillance?”

Helen laughed. “Nothing that drastic,” she said. “But she and Diane are worried.” She watched Abramson pace in his apartment. “What do you really think is going on, Mel? With him, his daughter, and that agent?”

Mel was quiet for a moment, her expression thoughtful. “I think Felicity Coedy has only her interests at heart. I didn’t get a sense she cared much about her client’s wellbeing.”

“She acted like someone used to getting her way, that’s for sure,” Helen added. “And whatever James is writing, it’s hot stuff.”

“Exactly,” Mel said. “I think whatever story he’s writing, it’s dangerous enough to attract a lot of attention.” She frowned. “The kind that makes a successful journalist look over his shoulder and jump at shadows.”

The night air had grown cooler, and Helen pulled her legs under her. “Should we be worried?”

“About Abramson? Maybe.” Mel slid an arm along the back of Helen’s chair and wrapped it around her. “About us? No. We’re just tourists who happened to notice some strange behavior. That’s it.”

But even as she said it, Helen sensed the tension in Mel’s body, the way her eyes kept tracking movement in Abramson’s apartment. She knew they were past the point of being casual observers.

* * *

As Mel sat with Helen on the balcony, she found herself analyzing every detail of their elevator encounter. Something about Felicity Coedy's intensity toward Abramson nagged at her. One question she had was why she would be in Hawaii anyway. It seemed excessive, but a lot of what they had witnessed so far seemed off.

"I can hear you thinking," Helen murmured against her shoulder.

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“Just trying to piece it together,” Mel admitted. “I’m kind of thinking Felicity doesn’t fit the profile of a typical literary agent. Her bearing, and how she talked to Abramson, plus the fact she is here in Hawaii anyway... It feels all wrong.”

Helen shifted to look up at her. “Well, then, what do you think she is?”

“That’s just it,” Mel said, feeling frustrated. “She reminds me of people I’ve encountered before, but I can’t quite place it.”

Across the courtyard, Abramson had stopped typing. He sat with his head in his hands, occasionally glancing at his phone as if waiting for something. Or dreading something. “Could she be representing someone else?” Helen asked. “Someone else with an interest in the story he’s writing?”

Mel shrugged. “Impossible to know,” she said. “But she clearly wants the story published. Which makes sense because as his agent, she would get a huge cut in the royalties.” Suddenly, Mel’s mind went back to the pale man in the dark suit. A part of her knew he had to be involved somehow too. She blinked a second before a chill went down her spine. “Shit,” she said softly. “I think I know why the pale man from the lobby is here.”

“Why?” Helen asked. “Why is he here?”

“He’s here because he’s a fixer.”

“A fixer?”

“Someone wealthy people or organizations hire to make problems go away quietly.” Mel straightened slightly, her mind racing. “Someone powerful must want to stop whatever story Abramson’s working on.”

Helen tensed beside her. “Make problems go away quietly? That sounds ominous.”

“It can be,” Mel admitted, tightening her arm around Helen protectively. “But usually fixers prefer legal methods like bribes, threats of lawsuits, that sort of thing. Violence tends to attract attention they want to avoid.”

“Usually?” Helen’s voice held a note of concern that made Mel’s heart ache.

Conversation like they were having wasn’t how their vacation was supposed to go. “Hey,” Mel said softly, turning to face Helen fully. “We’re still just outsiders, remember? If things get dangerous, we’ll call the police and let them handle it.”

Helen gave her a weak smile. “Do you promise?”

“Yes,” Mel insisted, though in her heart she knew her protective instincts might override that promise if pushed. “Besides, Abramson seems more scared than threatened right now. Like he’s trying to decide something.”

As if on cue, their neighbor stood and began pacing, his shadow moving back and forth across the lit window. His movements were sharp, agitated, like a caged animal seeking escape.

“What would you do” Helen asked. “if you were in his position?”

Mel considered the question carefully. “If I had evidence of something big enough to attract this kind of attention? I’d be really careful but still make sure the story gets out even if something happens to me.”

“You think that’s what he’s doing?”

“Maybe.” Mel watched as Abramson looked at his watch and then returned to his laptop. He seemed to fiddle with something and focus on his desk. “But something’s holding him back. Fear maybe, or loyalty to someone involved.”

The night had deepened around them, the resort’s grounds quieter now. Only the sound of palm fronds rustling in the courtyard broke the silence. Mel found herself cataloging every detail of their situation, old cop habits refusing to die: Abramson’s increasing paranoia, Felicity’s intimidation to publish soon, Brigitte’s arrival to get her dad to kill the story, not to mention the pale man’s presence. All pieces of a puzzle she couldn’t quite solve yet.

Helen stifled a yawn. “We should probably head inside,” Helen suggested. “It’s getting late.”

Mel nodded, but her eyes remained fixed on Abramson’s window. “You go ahead. I think I’ll stay out here a bit longer.”

“Mel,” Helen’s voice was gentle but firm. “You need rest too. Whatever’s happening will still be there tomorrow.” Looking at Helen’s concerned face, Mel felt a familiar surge of love and gratitude.

She didn’t take for granted how lucky she was to find someone who understood her so completely. “You’re right,” Mel conceded, pressing a kiss to Helen’s forehead. “As usual.” They stood together, taking one last look at their neighbor’s apartment. Abramson had finally stopped typing and stared at his screen, his expression unreadable in the harsh desk lamp light.

ChapterEight

As Helen moved to open the sliding glass door, she noticed Mel still watched Abramson's apartment. She was about to prod the woman again when suddenly, a shadow of movement through Abramson's window caught her attention. At first, she thought it might be a reflection from the courtyard lights, but then she saw it again. A dark figure moving behind Abramson, who remained oblivious, focused on his screen. She covered her mouth with her hand. "Mel," she whispered. "Do you see that? Someone's in his apartment."

Before Mel responded, the figure stepped fully into view. Dressed in black from head to toe, face obscured by a ski mask, the intruder moved with practiced stealth toward Abramson's desk. Helen's heart pounded as she realized what she was witnessing. She wanted to shout a warning, to do something, but her voice was trapped in her throat. Time seemed to slow as the masked figure raised what looked like a heavy object. Helen's fingers clutched Mel's shoulder, trying to find some reassurance that what she witnessed wasn't real. "No," Helen breathed, but it was too late. The blow came swift and brutal. Abramson slumped forward, his head hitting the keyboard of his laptop before his body slipped from his office chair and crumpled to the floor. Helen heard herself gasp as Mel surged to her feet beside her.

"I'm going over there," Mel said, already moving toward their sliding door.

"No," Helen held Mel's arm, surprising herself with the strength of her grip. "We need to call the police first."

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“He could be dying, Helen,” Mel’s voice held that familiar tone of protective determination that Helen both loved and, at this moment, feared. She slipped out of Helen’s grasp. “I can’t just stand here.”

Helen’s hands shook as she fumbled for her phone. “And what if the attacker is still there?” she asked, her voice unwavering. She knew she had to be the voice of reason right now. “What if they’re armed with a gun? You’re not a police officer anymore. Please.” The last word came out almost as a plea, and something in Helen’s voice appeared to reach through Mel’s instinct to rush in. Mel stopped, though Helen could see the tension vibrating through her partner’s body. Helen held her breath, waiting to see what the woman she loved would do.

Finally, Mel nodded. “Okay,” she said, pulling out her own phone. “But let me make the call. I know what details they’ll need.”

Grateful, Helen took a deep breath. “Thank you,” she said as Mel dialed her phone.

Walking to the glass door, Helen saw that neither the attacker nor Abramson were in view. Clearly, while they were deciding what to do, the attacker dragged their victim away. The violence of it felt surreal, like something from a television show rather than their peaceful Hawaiian vacation. She heard Mel using her professional voice to say into her phone, “Yes, I need to report an assault. Apartment three two seven on the third floor of the Kailua Palms Resort. Victim is James Abramson. Suspect is dressed in black with a ski mask. The attack just happened. The perpetrator may still be inside.”

Helen’s legs felt weak as the reality of what they’d witnessed sank in. She lowered

herself to the edge of the sofa's cushion. "I can't believe this," she murmured to herself. "I can't believe this."

"They're sending units now," Mel said, ending the call. She knelt beside Helen, taking her trembling hands. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know," Helen admitted. "The way he just fell forward." She squeezed Mel's hands. "What if he's dead? What if we could have prevented this somehow?"

"Hey," Mel's voice softened. "This isn't our fault. We had suspicions but no proof of any real danger. And we're doing the right thing now by calling it in."

In the distance, Helen heard the first sirens. The sound seemed to make everything more real, more frightening. "I'm scared, Mel," she whispered. "Not just for him, but for us. We've been watching and asking questions at the front desk. What if whoever did this knows that?"

Mel's expression hardened slightly, and Helen saw the protective glint in her eye. "Nothing is going to happen to you," Mel said firmly. "I promise. But we need to go to meet the police and help lead them to the apartment."

The sirens grew louder, and lights from the police cars pulling up to the resort splashed eerie colors across the courtyard. Soon, they would have to talk to the police, explain what they saw, and become officially involved in whatever dark thing they'd stumbled into. "What do we tell them?" Helen asked. "About everything else we know?"

Mel stood, helping Helen to her feet. "For now, just what we witnessed. The attack itself. We'll figure out the rest once we know if..." She didn't finish the sentence, but Helen understood. Once they knew if Abramson was alive or dead.

* * *

The hallway felt longer than usual as Mel led Helen toward Abramson's apartment. Red and blue lights from the police vehicles below strobed faintly across the walls through the open-air corridor, creating an otherworldly atmosphere. The familiar sound of radio chatter and boots on the stairs nearby brought back decades of memories, though Mel had never been on this side of a crime scene before. Two uniformed officers were just reaching the third floor when they arrived at the end of the hall leading to Abramson's apartment. Mel noted automatically how young they were and guessed they were probably not long out of the academy based on how they held themselves. The taller one had his hand on his holstered weapon, a good instinct, given the situation. Mel read the nametag on his chest—Robbins. "Office Robbins, I'm Mel Nelson," she said. "That apartment is halfway down the hall on the right."

Robbins gave her a nod while his shorter partner moved past them toward that apartment's door. "Thank you, Ms. Nelson," Robbins said. "You made the call?"

"That's right," Mel said, unconsciously shifting into her professional demeanor. "We witnessed the attack from our balcony. Apartment 307, directly across the courtyard."

"Good," Robbins said as he started to follow his partner. "Stay back please."

The shorter officer knocked firmly on Abramson's door. "Police! Open up!" There was no response. The hallway fell silent except for a brief crackle of police radios and the distant wail of another approaching siren.

"Have you tried the handle?" Mel asked, leading Helen closer, knowing protocol would be against it, but unable to help herself. The shorter officer gave her a slightly annoyed look before testing the door. It was locked.

"We'll need the building manager or whoever's on duty this late to come to open a

door,” the shorter officer said into his radio. “Unit 327.”

Mel’s mind raced through everything they’d witnessed over the past few days, and she was conflicted. She knew details that may or may not help the situation. Felicity Coedy’s behavior. The pale man in the suit. Brigitte Abramson’s odd comments. But without context, it would sound like wild speculation from two nosy old ladies. The shorter officer looked at her and Mel read his nametag—Hale.

“Can you walk us through exactly what you saw?” The officer pulled out his notebook.

Mel described the attack in precise detail, keeping her voice steady despite the emotion she sensed coming from Helen. “The assailant was dressed entirely in black, including a ski mask. Build suggested male, but I couldn’t be certain. The person didn’t seem especially tall. The weapon appeared to be a heavy object, but I couldn’t see it well enough to know what it was.”

“You seem very observant,” Hale said as his pen scratched the paper.

“I’m a retired LAPD detective,” Mel explained. “Thirty years on the force. Old habits die hard.” This information changed both officers’ demeanor slightly, as Mel knew it would. The elevator dinged, and the building manager hurried toward them. He was a heavysset Hawaiian man in his fifties, wearing a polo shirt with the resort’s logo.

“Stand back, please,” Robbins instructed as the manager handed over the keycard for the room. Mel drew Helen a few steps away, positioning herself slightly in front of her. The officer pressed the card to the lock and it clicked. Turning the handle slowly, he pushed the door open. “Police!” When there was no sound, the officers drew their weapons and entered the apartment.

Mel held her breath, straining to hear any sound from within. The seconds stretched

like hours.

“All clear in here,” came the call from inside. “Ms. Nelson, I need you to come see this.”

With the officers’ permission, Mel and Helen walked into Abramson’s apartment. As Mel had observed the last time, the living area looked barely touched, as if Abramson only used the extra bedroom turned office and ignored the rest of the apartment. Some details had changed. There were now even more takeout containers on the counter, trash overflowing from a trashcan, and dirty dishes piled in the sink. The scent of coffee had worsened, mixing with old food and garbage, and the air had grown stale. As they walked as a group into the office, the desk lamp still burned, casting harsh shadows across the empty chair where they last saw their neighbor. His laptop sat open, screen dark. But there was no sign of Abramson or his attacker.

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“No blood anywhere,” Robbins noted, examining the desk area with his flashlight. “No signs of struggle.”

Mel scanned the room, taking in every detail. The bed was still made. No desk drawers were open. Nothing seemed disturbed. “This doesn’t make any sense,” she said. “There should be something out of place.”

“Ma’am,” Hale said. “Are you certain what you saw?”

Mel felt Helen touch her arm. “Yes, we saw it happen,” Helen said, her voice tight but with a hint of confusion. “He was right there. The person hit him, and he fell from his chair.”

The officers exchanged a look that Mel recognized all too well. It was the one that said they were dealing with unreliable witnesses. “We’ll take a full report,” the shorter one said diplomatically. “And check the security cameras.”

“There aren’t any in the hallways,” the manager said. “Just the lobby and parking areas.”

Mel felt a familiar frustration building in her chest. She knew what they had seen. But she also knew how it looked. Two elderly women claiming to witness an attack in an empty apartment with no evidence to support their story. “Look,” she said, trying to keep her voice level. “I understand how this appears. But we’re not confused or mistaken. Something happened here, and James Abramson could be in serious danger.”

Robbins holstered his weapon. “We’ll document everything and file a report. If Mr. Abramson turns up or anyone reports him missing, we’ll investigate further.”

But Mel could hear what he wasn’t saying. The officer thought she and Helen were just overexcited tourists, maybe having had too much wine on their balcony. She wanted to argue, to make them understand the significance of everything they’d observed over the past few days. But her years on the force had taught her when pushing would do more harm than good. “Thank you, officers,” she said instead, seeing the surprise on Helen’s face out of the corner of her eye. “We appreciate your quick response.”

Mel ushered Helen toward the door, leaving the officers behind. As they passed by the small kitchen, Mel noticed a wallet on the counter among the trash. If it was Abramson’s, it would be unlikely that he would have left it behind if he had gone under his own power. She thought about bringing it to the police officer’s attention, but at the last second, she slipped it into her pocket and followed Helen out the door.

* * *

As Helen and Mel walked out of the apartment and started down the hallway, the sound of hurried footsteps approaching made Helen pause. Brigitte Abramson was rushing toward them. “Where’s my father?” she demanded, looking between Mel and Helen before focusing on the police officers emerging from the apartment. “He’s not answering his phone. What’s going on?”

“Ma’am,” Robbins said, his tone professionally neutral. “Your father appears to have left his apartment.”

“And gone where? It’s getting late,” Brigitte asked, her tone almost accusatory, but Helen caught the flicker of something else in her expression. “I just spoke to him a few hours ago. He was working on his story and didn’t say anything about leaving.”

Helen watched as Brigitte started to push past the officers into the apartment. "I can assure you," Hale explained. "He is not here."

"Then why are you here?" Brigitte asked as if finally registering the police were in her father's apartment.

The two officers looked at each other, then Hale shrugged and pointed at Mel. "She called in an attack at this location."

Brigitte's face paled. "An attack?"

Holding his hand palm out as if to calm Brigitte, Robbins shook his head. "There's no sign anything happened here."

Helen couldn't keep quiet any longer. "No sign? We saw someone attack him."

Brigitte's head snapped toward Helen. "You saw what?"

"A person in black, wearing a ski mask," Helen said, drawing strength from Mel's steady presence beside her. "They hit your father from behind." Her voice faltered as she remembered the horrible moment.

Blinking as if not registering what Helen said, Brigitte hesitated. "That's impossible," she whispered, but her voice wavered slightly and she rushed into the apartment. For a moment, Brigitte was gone from sight but then returned. She was frowning. "If someone attacked him, where's the blood? Where's the evidence?"

Robbins cleared his throat. "As we said, there is none."

Helen felt a chill despite the warm Hawaiian night. She knew what they had seen. The image of Abramson slumping forward was burned into her memory. But

standing there near the seemingly undisturbed apartment, even she had to admit how improbable their story sounded.

“Officers,” Brigitte said. “I appreciate your response, but clearly there’s been some misunderstanding.” She gestured toward Helen and Mel. “Perhaps they saw shadows, or maybe my father was just resting. He’s been working very hard lately.”

The dismissive tone in Brigitte’s voice made Helen’s chest tighten with anger. “We know what we saw,” she insisted. “Your father was attacked, and now someone’s trying to cover it up.”

“Ms. Hardy,” Hale interrupted gently. “Without any evidence of a crime, there is nothing more we can do.”

Helen felt tears of frustration threatening. “Then why isn’t he answering his phone when Brigitte calls him?”

A brief silence fell over the group. Helen saw Brigitte’s hand twitch slightly at the mention that Abramson wasn’t accounted for. Helen couldn’t help but believe the young woman knew something she wasn’t sharing. “I’m sure he is fine,” Brigitte said. “Sometimes he just needs to stretch his legs on the beach and doesn’t hear his phone.”

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“Well,” Robbins said, closing his notebook. “We’ll file a report, but without any signs of forced entry or struggle, we are done here.”

“Thank you, officers,” Brigitte said quickly. “I’m sure my father will turn up.” She pulled out her phone, frowning at the screen. “I should try calling him again.”

Helen felt Mel’s hand on her lower back, a gentle pressure guiding her away. The subliminal message was clear. They had pushed as far as they could for now. But as they turned to leave, Helen caught the expression on Brigitte’s face. Concern had vanished, replaced by something harder, more calculating. Helen leaned closer to Mel as they walked away, keeping her voice low. “She’s lying,” Helen whispered. “About something.”

“I know,” Mel murmured back. “Did you notice how quickly she tried to explain away what we saw?”

Helen nodded, then jumped slightly as Brigitte called to them down the hallway.

“Ms. Hardy, Ms. Nelson,” she said. “I apologize if I seemed dismissive. It’s just my father’s been under a lot of stress lately. Sometimes he doesn’t think clearly.”

“Of course,” Helen replied, forcing a small smile. “We understand. We just hope he’s safe.”

“I’m sure he is,” Brigitte said, her tone clearly dismissive. “Thank you for your concern.”

ChapterNine

Mel stood looking out their sliding glass door, watching Brigitte Abramson enter her father's office. After the police left and their dismissive response to what she and Helen had witnessed, Mel felt frustration building in her chest. She knew what they had seen. Someone attacked James Abramson. The fact that there was no evidence didn't change that reality. "She went straight to his office," Helen said quietly from beside her.

"I wonder how much she looked around the rest of the apartment," Mel said. "Someone looking for a missing father would check everywhere." She frowned. "I wonder what exactly she's after." As Mel focused on the scene across the courtyard, she saw Brigitte ruffle through the papers on Abramson's desk and then start on the drawers. Her movements grew increasingly aggressive as one of the drawers refused to yield.

"She's getting frustrated," Helen whispered, though there was no need for quiet across the distance.

Through the window, they watched as Brigitte moved to the laptop, her fingers flying across the keyboard. "Trying passwords," Mel assessed. "But not getting in, based on her expression."

"Could she be trying to find evidence of what happened to him?" Helen asked, but her tone suggested she didn't believe it herself.

"If that were true, she'd be more concerned about what we told the police about the attack," Mel said. "Instead, she dismissed it as if she didn't want the police to investigate further." Mel's jaw tightened as she remembered Brigitte's quick explanation of her father's disappearance. "No, she's looking for something specific. Something she doesn't want anyone else to find."

Brigette had returned to the drawer, this time with what appeared to be a kitchen knife. “She’s desperate,” Helen observed. “Whatever’s in that drawer, she wants it badly.”

“The question is why,” Mel said, her mind racing through possibilities. “We know she flew here specifically to stop him from publishing his story. Now he’s missing, and she’s breaking into his desk instead of looking for him.”

Helen’s grip on Mel’s arm tightened slightly. “You think she was involved? In what happened to him?”

“Hmm,” Mel hummed slowly. “I think that she guessed something was going to happen. Whether she was directly involved or just aware of the danger, I’m not sure yet.”

They watched as Brigitte finally abandoned the drawer and returned to the laptop. After another frustrated attempt at the password, she unplugged it and slipped it into her designer handbag.

“She’s taking it,” Helen said, a note of alarm in her voice. “Shouldn’t we stop her?”

“We can’t,” Mel replied, though every instinct screamed at her to intervene. “It would be hard to dispute that she didn’t have her father’s permission. Besides...” She hesitated, then reached into her pocket and pulled out a worn leather wallet. “I may have acquired something during the police search.”

Helen’s eyes widened. “Mel Nelson, did you steal evidence?”

“I preserved evidence,” Mel said. “I saw it on the counter and knew the police wouldn’t take it seriously. If something happened to Abramson, there might be clues in here about why.”

Before Helen could respond, movement across the courtyard caught their attention. Brigitte was leaving with the laptop in her bag. “What do we do now?” Helen asked once Brigitte had disappeared from view. “We can’t really just let her walk away with potential evidence.”

Mel turned the wallet over in her hands, feeling the worn leather. “We have no choice,” she said. “But we might have something just as valuable. Help me go through this?”

They moved to the small dining table where Mel carefully emptied the wallet’s contents. Credit cards, a few crumpled receipts, and... “Hello,” Mel said softly, holding up a small key. “What do you want to bet this opens that drawer?”

Helen let out a long breath. “Oh, I think you’re right. But how do we get in to try it?” she asked, examining the key clutched in Mel’s fingers. “We can’t exactly break in, and the police won’t help us.”

“No,” Mel agreed, her mind already working on solutions. “But we might not need to break in. Remember, the resort has a cleaning service, and cleaning services have master keys.”

Helen’s eyes lit up with understanding. “We just need to figure out when they clean his room.”

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“Exactly.” Mel gathered the wallet’s contents, except for the key which she slipped into her pocket. “But first, we need to think about what Brigitte’s actions tell us. She came here to stop her father from publishing something. Now he’s attacked, missing, and she’s more concerned with getting into his desk than finding him.”

“You really think she might have been involved in his disappearance?” Helen asked softly.

“There’s no way to know for sure,” Mel said. “But sometimes family ties aren’t as strong as other motivations. Money, fear, blackmail—any of those could make someone act against their father.”

Helen was quiet for a moment, processing. “The police won’t believe us without evidence.”

“No,” Mel agreed. “Which is why we need to find some. Whatever is in that drawer is important enough for Brigitte to try breaking into it. Important enough to take the laptop.”

“And important enough for someone to attack James Abramson.”

Mel reached across the table, taking Helen’s hand. “We don’t have to do this,” she said. “We could walk away, finish our vacation, let the police handle it their way.”

Helen squeezed her hand. “I don’t think you could do that. Am I wrong?”

Mel paused, considering the question. “It would be difficult,” she finally admitted.

“But I won’t put you in danger. This isn’t what you signed up for when we planned this vacation.”

“What I signed up for was being with you,” Helen said, a determined look in her eye. “And you’re a detective at heart, Mel Nelson. If that means helping solve a mystery instead of lounging on the beach, then that’s what we’ll do.”

Mel felt that familiar warmth that seemed to hit her daily since meeting Helen. “Have I told you lately how amazing you are?”

“Not in the last hour,” Helen said with a smile. “Now, shall we figure out when they will next clean the rooms on this floor?”

* * *

Helen watched as Mel hung up the phone after speaking with the front desk. “We are in luck. The cleaning service does this floor tomorrow morning,” Mel reported, setting her phone down with a slight frown. “Between nine and eleven.”

“So we wait,” Helen said, trying to hide her relief at the delay. While she was committed to helping solve whatever had happened to James Abramson, part of her welcomed a brief respite from the mounting tension.

“We wait,” Mel agreed, running a hand through her hair. “Though I hate giving Brigitte more time to cover her tracks.”

Helen stood from where she’d been perched on the edge of the apartment’s couch. “Then let’s get out of here for a while,” she suggested. “I know it’s getting late but maybe a stroll under the stars while we hear the ocean will help.”

Mel looked like she wanted to protest at first, but then she nodded. “You’re right,”

she said. "Sitting here won't make things happen faster."

The stars were out as they made their way to the resort's courtyard and toward the walkway that followed the beach. The night air was warm and sweet with plumeria, and tiki torches cast flickering light along the path. Under different circumstances, it would have been perfectly romantic. Helen felt Mel's hand slip into hers, a gesture that had become as natural as breathing over their months together.

"What are you thinking?" Helen asked, noting the distant look in Mel's eyes.

"Just trying to piece it all together," Mel replied. "The pale man in the suit, Brigitte's behavior, that literary agent Felicity..." She shook her head. "There are too many players, too many possible motives."

They reached a small cluster of restaurants near the beach. The sounds of live Hawaiian music drifted from one establishment while the smell of grilled fish wafted from another. "Let's get something to drink," Helen suggested, pointing to a quieter spot with ocean views. "Somewhere we can talk without shouting."

The hostess led them to a corner table on the outdoor terrace, where strings of lights created a soft glow above them. The ocean stretched dark and endless beyond the railing, its waves providing a soothing backdrop. "You know what bothers me most?" Mel said after they'd ordered a pair of Mai Tais. "The way Brigitte didn't even pretend to be worried about her father. It was all about getting into that drawer and accessing his laptop."

Helen nodded, thinking back to their observations. "Like she already knew what had happened to him?"

"Maybe." Mel's fingers drummed lightly on the table. "And then she searched his office."

“Because there’s something in there she really wants,” Helen said. Their drinks arrived. Helen took a sip, letting the cool, fruity cocktail calm her nerves. “The question is, what could be so important?”

Mel’s expression grew thoughtful. “Remember what we found out about his past? The story he was working on when his wife died?”

“The college basketball scandal,” Helen said. “The one that never got published.”

“What if this is connected? What if he finally found proof of something bigger?”

Helen’s eyes widened. “Big enough to kill him for?”

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Mel reached across the table, covering Helen's hand with her own. "Hey," she said softly. "We don't have to talk about this now. We can just have a nice drink and forget about it."

Helen managed a small smile. "Can we? With everything that's happened?"

"We can try." Mel squeezed her hand. "Tell me about your call with Jenny earlier. How are her grad school applications going?"

The attempt at normalcy was touching, but Helen could see the wheels still turning behind Mel's eyes. Still, she appreciated the effort. They talked about Jenny's plans, about Diane's kids, about anything except their neighbor's disappearance. As they finished their drinks, a cool breeze picked up off the ocean, making Helen shiver slightly. Mel immediately shrugged off her light jacket and draped it over Helen's shoulders. The gesture, so automatic and caring, made Helen's heart ache with love for this woman who could be both tough detective and tender partner.

"Should we go down to the surf and walk on the beach?" Mel suggested as they left the restaurant. "The moon's almost full."

Helen nodded, slipping her arm through Mel's as they made their way down to the shore. The sand was still warm from the day's sun, and the moonlight created a silver path across the water. They walked in comfortable silence for a while, each lost in their own thoughts. "I'm scared, Mel," Helen finally admitted, her voice barely audible above the waves. "Not just about what happened to James, but about what might happen if we keep investigating."

Mel stopped walking, turning to face her. In the moonlight, her expression was serious. “We can stop,” she said. “Right now. No one would blame us.”

Helen reached up to touch Mel’s cheek. “I know I keep asking this, but could you really do that? Knowing what we saw?”

“If you asked me to, yes,” Mel said without hesitation. “You matter more to me than any investigation.”

The simple declaration brought tears to Helen’s eyes. “And that’s exactly why we have to keep going,” she said. “Because you’re the kind of person who would give up finding the truth to protect someone you love. But I also know you care about justice more than anyone I’ve ever known.”

Mel pulled her close, and Helen buried her face in her partner’s shoulder, breathing in her familiar scent. They stood like that for a long moment, holding each other as the waves lapped at the shore behind them. “We should head back,” Mel finally said, pressing a kiss to Helen’s temple. “Get some rest before tomorrow morning.” As they returned to their apartment, Helen felt a strange mix of fear and determination. Whatever they found in that drawer tomorrow, whatever dangers lay ahead, they would face them together. And somehow, that made even the scariest possibilities seem manageable.

* * *

Back in their apartment, Mel stood at the sliding glass door, watching the moonlight play across the courtyard. The glare of the desk lamp still lit Abramson’s apartment, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that they were missing something important. “You’re brooding,” Helen said softly behind her. Mel turned to find her partner had changed into her favorite silk nightgown. The pale blue one that she liked so much.

“Just thinking,” Mel replied, though they both knew it was more than that. She watched as Helen moved to the small kitchen to pour them each a glass of water. Even such a simple action carried grace that never failed to catch Mel’s attention.

“Share them with me?” Helen asked, bringing the glasses over and settling onto their small couch. She patted the space beside her.

Mel joined her, accepting the cool glass. “I keep going over everything we know,” she admitted. “Brigette’s behavior, the pale man, Felicity... it’s like having all the pieces of a puzzle but not being able to see the picture they make.”

Helen’s hand found hers their fingers intertwining naturally. “Maybe we’re trying too hard to force them together,” she suggested. “Sometimes patterns emerge more clearly when you step back.”

Mel smiled, feeling some of her tension ease at Helen’s touch. “When did you get so wise about detective work?”

“I’ve had a good teacher,” Helen replied, her eyes twinkling. “Though I suspect I still have a lot to learn about proper investigation techniques.”

“You’re doing just fine,” Mel said, bringing their joined hands to her lips. “Better than fine, actually. I don’t think I could do this without you.” The moment stretched between them, filled with unspoken understanding. Helen’s presence beside her was both grounding and electrifying, a contradiction that had fascinated Mel since they first met.

“You know what I love about you?” Helen asked, setting her water aside.

“What’s that?”

“How you can be so fierce about justice, so determined to solve mysteries, and yet so gentle with the people you care about.” Helen’s free hand came up to trace Mel’s jawline. “It’s quite remarkable, really.”

Mel felt warmth spread through her chest that had nothing to do with the tropical night. “I’m not always gentle,” she said.

“No,” Helen agreed with a soft laugh. “But you are with me. Even when you’re frustrated about a case or worried about what we might find tomorrow.”

The mention of tomorrow’s plans sent a pull of anxiety through Mel’s stomach, but Helen’s touch anchored her to the present moment. She turned her head slightly to press a kiss to Helen’s palm. “I meant what I said on the beach,” Mel said quietly. “If you want to stop investigating, we can. Your safety matters more to me than solving this mystery.”

Helen shifted closer, her knee brushing against Mel’s thigh. “And I meant what I said too. We’re in this together.” Her voice dropped lower. “Though perhaps we could take a break from thinking about it for a little while?”

The suggestion in Helen’s tone made Mel’s breath catch. Even after six months together, Helen could still make her heart race.

“A break sounds good,” Mel managed, her voice rougher than usual. She reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind Helen’s ear, letting her fingers trail down her neck. “What did you have in mind?”

Helen’s smile was both tender and mischievous. “Oh, I’m sure we can think of something,” she murmured, leaning in to capture Mel’s lips in a gentle kiss. After a beat, the kiss deepened naturally, filled with both familiar comfort and electric anticipation. When they finally parted, Helen’s eyes were dark with desire. “Perhaps

we should move this somewhere more comfortable?” she suggested, glancing toward their bedroom.

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Mel nodded, suddenly unable to form words. She stood, pulling Helen up with her, and couldn't resist stealing another kiss. Helen laughed softly against her lips, the sound full of affection and promise. Mel pulled her closer, feeling the softness of her skin and the warmth of her body through the thin fabric. She savored the sweet taste of her.

Responding with a soft sigh, Helen's arms wrapped around Mel's neck, deepening the kiss. They moved slowly, exploring each other's bodies with gentle touches and tender caresses. Mel's hands traced the curve of Helen's back, feeling the smooth fabric beneath her fingertips. Helen's breath hitched as Mel's lips moved to her neck, kissing every inch. Helen's fingers tangled in Mel's hair, pulling her closer, needing more. After a beat, they broke apart for a moment, their foreheads touching, their breaths mingling. "I love you," Mel whispered, her voice filled with emotion.

Helen smiled. "I love you too," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. "Take me to the bedroom."

Later, as they lay tangled in the sheets with the sound of waves drifting through their partially open window, Mel felt more at peace than she had all day. Helen's head rested on her shoulder, her breathing deep and even. Tomorrow would bring its own challenges. Dealing with the cleaning service, hopefully opening the locked drawer, and whatever secrets they might uncover. But for now, everything was perfect. "Thank you," Mel whispered into the darkness.

Helen stirred slightly. "Thank you, too," she murmured sleepily. "Now stop thinking about the case and go to sleep." Mel smiled, pressing a kiss to Helen's temple. Even half-asleep, her partner knew her too well. Pulling Helen closer, Mel closed her eyes

and let the rhythm of the waves outside lull her toward sleep.

Chapter Ten

The next morning, Helen's heart pounded as she and Mel waited in the hallway, positioned near the ice machine where they could observe Abramson's door without being obvious. After tracking the cleaning lady's movements, they calculated that she should arrive any minute. Despite the early hour, sweat beaded on Helen's forehead in the humid Hawaiian air.

"Remember," Mel whispered, her hand finding Helen's in a reassuring squeeze. "Stay calm and move with purpose. People rarely question someone who looks like they belong."

Nodding, Helen fought the urge to fidget with the hem of the sleeve of her resort-wear cover-up. The key from Abramson's wallet felt impossibly heavy in her pocket. "What if she recognizes me? We've been here almost a week."

"She won't," Mel assured her. "These resorts have high turnover, and the cleaning staff rarely pays attention to guests' faces."

"Okay," was all Helen could muster. The sound of wheels on tile made them both tense. A cleaning cart appeared around the corner, pushed by a middle-aged woman in the resort's white and tan uniform. She moved with the efficient manner of someone who had done this job many times, barely glancing at them as she passed. Helen watched as the woman used her master key to open Abramson's apartment door, leaving it slightly ajar, as she prepared to go inside. This was it. The moment they'd been planning since finding the key.

"Ready?" Mel asked softly.

“No,” Helen said. “But let’s do it anyway.” Mel squeezed her hand once more before moving toward Abramson’s door. Helen hung back, waiting for her cue.

She heard Mel’s voice, pitched perfectly to sound like a concerned guest. “Excuse me? I’m so sorry to bother you, but I think there might be a problem with the towels in my room...”

Helen counted to ten, giving Mel time to draw the cleaning lady into conversation and away from the door. Then, moving as naturally as possible, she hurried to the door and slipped inside. The cleaning cart blocked part of the entryway, forcing Helen to squeeze past it carefully. The apartment felt different in daylight, less mysterious than last night but somehow more forbidden. Moving to the office, she heard Mel’s voice echoing from the hallway, asking detailed questions about the resort’s laundry service. The cleaning lady’s responses grew increasingly confused as Mel continued her distraction. Helen moved quickly to Abramson’s desk, her hands shaking slightly as she pulled the key from her pocket. The laptop was still missing. Helen inserted the key into the locked drawer, holding her breath as she turned it. The mechanism clicked softly, and the drawer slid open.

Inside, amid a scatter of paper clips and rubber bands, sat a small black thumb drive. Helen’s fingers closed around it just as she heard movement from the hallway. The cleaning lady’s voice was getting closer. Heart racing, Helen slipped the thumb drive into her pocket just as footsteps approached the office doorway. “...need to get back to work now,” the cleaning lady was saying.

Helen looked around frantically, not daring to take time to relock the drawer. The bathroom was too far, and the closet would be suspicious if the woman needed to clean it. The sliding glass door caught her eye. The small balcony was just wide enough to leave some space between the railing and the window. Without allowing herself to think about it, Helen moved swiftly to the door and slipped outside, pressing her back against the wall. Glancing over her shoulder through the glass, she

could see through the bedroom turned office's open doorway the cleaning lady walking with fresh towels. Mel's voice drifted from the hallway, making one final attempt at distraction. "Oh, just one more question..." For a minute, the cleaning lady was out of view and then she entered the office. Helen could only hope the woman would realize there wasn't anything to do in the room as her legs trembled from the tension of standing perfectly still. A bead of sweat rolled down her back. She didn't dare move to wipe it away.

Finally, after what felt like hours but was probably fifteen minutes, Helen faintly heard the apartment door close. Still, Helen waited another full minute before carefully sliding the balcony door open and slipping back inside. She moved quickly through the apartment, pausing at the main door as she hoped her luck would hold and the cleaning lady wouldn't be standing in the hallway. Taking a deep breath, she slipped out, relieved to find only the cleaning service cart in the hall. Her heart was still racing as she walked as calmly as possible toward their apartment. Mel was already there, waiting by their door. Once inside, Helen's legs gave out, and she sank onto the couch.

"I can't believe we just did that," she whispered, though there was no need for quiet now.

Mel sat beside her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "You were amazing," she said softly. "Did you find anything?"

Helen reached into her pocket with still trembling fingers and pulled out the thumb drive. "This was in the drawer. Nothing else seemed important."

Mel took the small device, examining it carefully. "No labels, no identifying marks. Could be nothing..."

"Or could be everything," Helen finished. She leaned into Mel's embrace, letting her

racing heart slowly return to normal. “Now what?”

“Now we need to find somewhere to look at what’s on it,” Mel said. “And fast.”

* * *

Mel turned the thumb drive over in her fingers. “We need somewhere with computers we can use,” she said. “Somewhere public but private enough that no one can see the screen.” She thought for a moment. “There’s that little internet café and bookstore we passed yesterday. I think they would have something we could rent time on.”

Helen smiled weakly. “That could work. We should go now, before...” She trailed off, but Mel understood. Before someone realized what they’d taken. Before whoever had attacked Abramson discovered someone had potentially crucial evidence.

She slipped the thumb drive into her pocket. “You’re right,” she said. “Let’s go.”

“I want to change first,” Helen said, standing on slightly steadier legs. “These clothes smell like fear and adrenaline.”

Mel nodded. “All right,” she said. “You did really well. I think you’re getting good at this.”

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“I had a good teacher,” Helen replied, then paused on her way to the bedroom. “Mel? Thank you for trusting me to do this part.”

“Of course I trust you,” Mel said simply. “You’re the bravest person I know.” As Helen disappeared into the bedroom, Mel felt anxiety churn in her stomach. Whatever was on that thumb drive, they had to know. She tried not to think about how far they’d come from their planned peaceful vacation.

Helen reappeared in a fresh sundress. “Ready?” Mel asked.

Helen nodded, picking up her oversized purse. “Ready,” she said firmly. “Should I bring my tablet?”

After thinking for a beat, Mel nodded. “We never know what we might need.”

“Okay,” Helen said, slipping the device into her purse. “And Mel, another thing. The next time we want to play detective on vacation, maybe we could pick something less stressful? Like missing seashells or stolen beach towels?”

Mel couldn’t help but laugh as she opened their door. “Where would be the fun in that?”

The internet café was quiet for mid-morning, with only a few tourists scattered among the tables. Mel guided Helen toward a corner table with a computer terminal on it. “I’ll find out how to rent this thing and get us some coffee,” Mel said, pulling the thumb drive from her pocket. “You get settled and maybe take a preliminary look if it will let you?” Helen nodded, taking the thumb drive. Mel watched her partner for

a moment, struck by how naturally Helen had adapted to their impromptu investigation. Once a middle school teacher and now a successful author, Helen's hands were steady as she focused on the computer, and all traces of her earlier nervousness were gone.

At the counter, Mel waited anxiously. Finally a young woman joined her. "What can I get you, ma'am?"

"We need to use that computer for a few minutes," she answered, pointing to where Helen sat engrossed in the screen. "And a plain black coffee and a vanilla latte."

The young woman nodded. "No problem," she said. "Those are public workstations. No password, but we charge seven dollars an hour."

"Perfect," Mel said, taking out her wallet to pay. "We won't need more than an hour." The barista worked with practiced efficiency, giving Mel time to scan the other customers. A young couple absorbed in their phones, a businessman working at a different computer near the entrance, a woman typing on her laptop. Nothing suspicious, but Mel had learned long ago that danger often wore the most innocent faces.

"Here you go," the barista said, sliding their drinks across the counter. "Anything else?"

"No, thank you," Mel replied, gathering the cups. As she walked back to their table, she noticed Helen's expression had changed. "What is it?"

Helen waited until Mel was seated before answering, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's a large document," she said. "And some video files, but I haven't opened those yet."

Mel set their drinks down carefully, positioning herself so she could see the computer screen. “What kind of document?”

“It looks like a novel,” Helen scrolled through the document. “No, more like an exposé. About sports.”

Mel took a sip of her coffee. “That tracks with what we learned about Abramson’s background. Can you tell what it’s about specifically?”

She heard Helen suck in a breath. “Game fixing,” she said quietly, her eyes moving rapidly across the screen. “But not just at the college level. This goes all the way to the pros.” She paused on a particular page. “Mel, these are serious allegations. With names, dates, specific games...”

Mel felt her pulse quicken. If Abramson had proof of games being fixed, it would explain a lot about recent events. The kind of money involved in professional sports could make people do desperate things.

* * *

“What about the video files?” Mel asked, and Helen turned down the computer’s volume to almost nothing and held her breath as she tapped one. They both leaned closer to hear. The video showed a darkened room, with someone speaking from off-camera. Although very faint, Helen could tell the voice was digitally altered, but the content was clear. It was a confession of how certain games had been manipulated. Mel whistled softly “Well, that would certainly explain why someone wanted to stop this story from coming out.”

A server approached their table, and they quickly closed the video file. “Can I get you ladies anything else?” she asked cheerfully.

“No, thank you,” Helen replied with a smile that almost hid her tension. Once the server moved away, Helen leaned closer to Mel. “What do we do with this?” The information they had found was explosive, the kind that could destroy careers and possibly entire organizations. No wonder someone had been willing to resort to violence.

“First,” Mel said, taking another careful look around the coffee shop. “We need to read more of this. Can you make a copy? And save it someplace you can reach with your tablet?”

Helen nodded, already logging in to her secure Dropbox account. “And then?”

“And then we need to figure out who to trust with this information,” Mel said while Helen started the copying process. “Someone who can’t be bought off or intimidated.”

As Helen watched the progress bar slowly advance, she couldn’t help but marvel at how quickly life could change. A week ago, her biggest concern had been whether she would be brave enough to try snorkeling. Now here she was, uploading stolen evidence about sports gambling corruption in a Hawaiian internet café. The air conditioning hummed steadily overhead, almost but not quite masking the soothing music playing through the store’s speakers. A few other customers came and went, their flip-flops squeaking against the polished tile floors.

“Almost done,” Helen murmured, watching as the final video file uploaded to the secure cloud storage she had created. Her hands were steady now, though her heart still raced whenever she thought about their morning’s activities. “Should we make physical copies too?”

After a beat, Mel shook her head. “Not yet,” she said. “That might be too hard to keep hidden if anyone comes asking questions.”

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Mel's answer worried Helen. If she thought they needed to be this careful, the situation was probably more dangerous than Helen had initially realized. The thought made her stomach tighten, but she pushed the anxiety aside. They were committed now.

"There," Helen said as the final upload was completed. "Everything's backed up." She carefully ejected the thumb drive, slipping it into her purse. "What next?"

"Now we need to read through that document properly," Mel said. "Figure out exactly who might have the most to lose if this gets published."

Helen stood, gathering their things. "Back to the apartment?"

Scratching the back of her neck, Mel was quiet for a moment. "Let's not go there yet. I just don't know who, if anyone, might be watching it. I need some time to think as well as read this."

The gravity of their situation hit Helen anew. They weren't just playing at being detectives anymore. This was real, with potentially dangerous consequences. "The library then?" she suggested. "I would imagine the one we passed yesterday has private study rooms."

Mel's face lit up with that smile that still made Helen's heart skip. "This is another reason why I love you," she said softly. "Always thinking of the perfect solution."

The library was cool and quiet when they entered. Helen felt some of her tension ease in the familiar environment. Taking her students to the library was one of her favorite

activities. Libraries she understood. She loved the hushed atmosphere, the orderly shelves, and the sense of knowledge waiting to be discovered. She led them to the reference desk, where a librarian sat typing on a computer. “Excuse me,” Helen said, slipping easily into her former professional manner. “We’d like to use one of the private study rooms, please.”

The librarian smiled, reaching for a sign-out sheet. “Of course. How long do you think you’ll need it?”

“A couple of hours?” Helen glanced at Mel, who nodded.

“Room four is available,” the librarian said, handing them a key. “Just return it when you’re finished.” The study room was small but well-lit, with a table, four chairs, and no windows. Helen set up her tablet and logged into Dropbox. It was time to start getting to the bottom of things.

ChapterEleven

The library’s study room had a hushed atmosphere and soft lighting, creating an illusion of calm that was at odds with what they had found on the thumb drive. Mel glanced at Helen’s face as they read through Abramson’s manuscript together on Helen’s tablet. She couldn’t miss how the woman’s expression shifted from general interest to deeper concentration, and then to shock as the scope of the corruption became clear.

“This goes beyond just college sports,” Helen whispered, her finger tracing a line of text. “Look at these names—team owners, league officials, even politicians.”

Mel nodded, her mind already connecting the dots. “It’s incredible,” she said. “Somehow, Abramson found the paper trail and then, amazingly, talked people into giving videoed confessions.”

Helen leaned closer, her shoulder brushing Mel's. "There's something else," she said. "The timing of these games and the way the fixes were coordinated. I think it's too sophisticated for small-time criminals."

"What do you mean?"

"Look here," Helen said, pointing to a particular paragraph. "The pattern suggests someone with intimate knowledge of both the gambling industry and professional sports. Someone who could manipulate multiple games simultaneously without raising suspicion."

Mel felt a surge of pride mixed with concern. Helen's analytical skills continued to amaze her, but the implications of what they were uncovering made her increasingly uneasy. "You're right," she said. "This is organized crime level coordination, but with white-collar sophistication."

They read in silence for a few moments, the only sound the gentle hum of the library's air conditioning and the occasional tap of Helen's finger advancing to the next page. "Mel," Helen said, "remember what Brigitte said about her mother's death? The car accident?"

"Yes, why?"

"Because according to this, it confirms what we guessed before," Helen said. "Abramson was investigating similar corruption in college basketball when his wife died." Helen's voice dropped even lower. "He mentions here that he was close to exposing key figures when the 'accident' happened."

The implication hung heavy in the air between them. Mel felt her jaw tighten. "So either Brigitte doesn't know the truth about her mother's death..."

“Or she was trying to protect her father from the same fate?” Helen finished. “And possibly failed? Then why isn’t she more concerned that he is missing?”

“But then there’s Felicity,” Mel said. “An agent who travels to Hawaii to show up in person to pressure him about publishing.”

Helen nodded. “This is such a hot story. I am sure she could sell it to the highest bidder for a lot of money,” she said. “I mean, we are probably talking millions, even if the book is never published.” She paused, then added softly, “And let’s not forget our pale friend with the large suitcases. The man you think is the fixer.”

The mention of the suitcases sent a chill down Mel’s spine. She glanced at her watch, noting they had been in the library for over two hours. “We should go,” she said. “We have enough information to know what’s going on. At least a little more.”

“Where to?”

Mel considered their options. “Back to the resort. Now that I’ve had time to think about it, I can’t see how anyone could connect us with what we’ve found. We are just a couple of busybody neighbors, remember? A harmless pair of old ladies,” she said. “And I need to make a call. I know someone from my LAPD days who might be able to trace some of these financial connections.”

They packed up, Helen sliding the tablet into her bag while Mel tried to convince herself not to start getting paranoid. The walk back to the resort would leave them exposed if she was wrong, but they couldn’t very well hide forever.

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Outside, the Hawaiian sun was warm on Mel's face. They walked close together, Mel constantly turning over the facts they knew. "You're doing that thing with your jaw again," Helen said softly, her hand finding Mel's.

"Sorry," Mel said, forcing herself to relax slightly. "I just can't help thinking about how this was supposed to be a peaceful vacation."

Helen squeezed her hand. "I wouldn't change it," she said. "Well, maybe the part about Abramson potentially being murdered, but not the rest. Not working with you like this." The simple statement made Mel's heart swell. She glanced at Helen, marveling at how naturally the woman had adapted to their impromptu investigation. The successful author had revealed depths of courage and insight that continually amazed her.

"Still," Mel said as they waited for a traffic light, "I never meant to possibly put you in danger."

"And maybe you didn't," Helen replied firmly. "But if so, we chose this together." She gave her a slight smile. "Besides, I always wanted to be Nancy Drew when I was young. I just never expected to get the chance at sixty-six." The resort came into view, its white walls gleaming in the afternoon sun. Mel felt her investigator's instincts heighten as they approached. Somewhere in that building was likely at least one person who wanted Abramson's story buried, possibly literally. She slowed their steps to consider what to do next. Helen turned to her as they paused in the shade of a palm tree. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that we need to be very careful about our next moves," Mel said

slowly. “The people behind this corruption have already proven they’re willing to kill to keep their secret.”

Helen nodded, her expression serious but unafraid. “Then we’ll be careful,” she said. “Together.”

* * *

Helen’s phone buzzed just as they entered the resort lobby. Seeing Diane’s name on the screen made her stomach tighten. Her daughter had an uncanny ability to sense when something was wrong. “I should take this,” she told Mel, who nodded understanding.

“I’ll scout ahead,” Mel said. “Meet you by the koi pond.”

Finding a relatively private spot near some potted palms, Helen answered. “Hi, sweetheart.”

“Mom.” Diane’s voice held that mix of love and concern that Helen knew so well. “How’s the vacation going?”

Helen watched Mel disappear around a corner, no doubt checking their surroundings. “Oh, wonderful,” she said, trying to keep her voice light. “The weather’s perfect, and the ocean is just beautiful.”

“Uh-huh.” A pause. “And how’s the mysterious neighbor situation?”

Helen silently cursed her earlier honesty about their investigation. “Everything’s fine, dear. Just a misunderstanding, really.”

“Really?” Diane’s voice relaxed through the phone. “Good. Jenny and I were both

worried you were getting involved in something unnecessary. We thought for a moment that you might be in danger. You're not, right?"

Helen sighed, moving deeper into the corner by the palms. "Right," she said softly. "Mel and I are being very careful." It wasn't exactly a lie. They were being careful. She just couldn't mention the organized crime connection, the suspicious deaths, or the very real possibility that someone might figure things out and want to silence them.

"Being careful about what exactly?" Diane's voice sharpened. "Mom, you're supposed to be relaxing on the beach, not getting involved in anything."

A group of tourists passed by, their beach gear dripping water on the marble floor. Helen waited until they were out of earshot. "Diane, I promise you, everything is under control. Mel knows what she's doing."

"That's what worries me," Diane said. "She's a retired detective. Maybe she can't stop detecting. And she could drag you into it."

"She's not dragging me anywhere," Helen replied, perhaps more sharply than intended.

The silence on the other end suggested Diane wasn't buying it. "Mom," she finally said, "I love you, but you're a terrible liar. What's really going on?"

"Nothing dangerous," she said, which felt like the biggest lie yet. "We're just helping a neighbor sort out some confusion."

"Confusion?"

"Yes. But it's probably nothing," Helen said. "Listen, sweetheart, I need to go. We

have dinner reservations.”

“At four in the afternoon?”

“Time difference, remember?” Helen said quickly. “It’s later here.” It wasn’t, but she needed to end the conversation before she revealed anything more.

“Mom—”

“I love you, Diane. Give the kids hugs from grandma. I’ll call you tomorrow when we get to the airport, and I will be home before you know it.” She ended the call before her daughter could protest further, feeling guilty but knowing it was necessary.

She quickly went to the koi pond to meet Mel. “Everything okay?” Mel asked when she arrived.

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Clearly, she was having trouble hiding the concern she felt. “I had to lie to Diane,” Helen said softly. “I hate lying to my children.”

Mel squeezed her hand. “It’s for a good reason,” she said. “The less they know, the better at this point.”

Helen nodded but felt anxiety tighten in her stomach. “So, what next?”

“Let’s go to the bar where we had a drink last night,” she answered. “They have an outdoor courtyard where I think I can make this call without anyone hearing.” Mel’s face softened. “Are you ready?”

Straightening her shoulders, Helen put on a smile. “Ready. But Mel?”

“Yes?”

“When this is over, we’re taking a proper vacation. Somewhere with no mysteries to solve.”

Mel’s smile was warm despite the tension. “Deal,” she said. “Though with our luck, we’d probably stumble onto a mystery at a knitting retreat.”

* * *

The bar’s garden seating provided decent cover while still allowing Mel to watch the street. As the reality of the possible danger started to sink in, she decided to be more careful. For starters, she positioned them in a corner where the dense tropical foliage

created a natural screen. Helen had gone inside to order them Mai Tais, giving Mel privacy for this call. Her fingers hesitated over Mickey Chen's contact information. During her LAPD days, Mickey had been her go-to person for digital forensics, though his methods weren't always strictly by the book. That's why she'd kept his number even after retiring. Sometimes you needed answers that wouldn't come through official channels.

She pressed dial. Mickey answered on the second ring. "Well, if it isn't my favorite retired detective," he said, his familiar voice carrying a hint of amusement. "Don't tell me you're bored with the easy life already?"

"Hello, Mickey," Mel said quietly. "I need a favor."

"Of course you do. You never call just to chat." She heard a keyboard clicking in the background. "So, what do you need to know?"

"I need information on someone. James Abramson. Sports journalist with the LA Times."

More typing. "Interesting," he said after a beat. "Seems your guy was a top reporter for a bit, then all but disappeared. What'd he do?"

"Maybe nothing," Mel answered. "Maybe something. I need his financial records. Recent transactions, accounts, anything unusual."

"You know that's not exactly legal without a warrant."

"Since when has that stopped you?"

Mickey's laugh was warm with nostalgia. "God, I've missed you, Nelson. Give me a minute." Mel waited, trying to control her impatience. Helen would be back any

second and she wanted to be done with the conversation with Mickey if possible. The less the woman knew about Mel's once darker ways, the better.

"Okay," Mickey said. "Got something interesting here. Large cash withdrawal seven days ago. Ten thousand dollars."

"Going on the run money," Mel murmured.

"Maybe. He booked a ticket to Singapore three days ago. One way."

Mel's mind raced with implications. "Was it used?"

"Nope. Scheduled for tomorrow, actually." More typing. "But another thing. Guy's basically broke. Massive credit card debt, second mortgage on his house in LA, late payments on everything," Mickey said. "I'm impressed he was able to get his hands on even ten-k."

Helen appeared with their drinks, setting a Mai Tai in front of Mel. Her questioning look asked if it was okay to sit. After hesitating for a beat to consider what she wanted to say in front of Helen, Mel nodded. "Interesting," Mel said into the phone. "And Mickey? Check his wife's accident from three years ago. Something's not right there."

"I can do my best, but that might take longer," Mickey said. "But more importantly, how is retired life treating you?"

"I'm not exactly acting retired at the moment," Mel replied, watching a resort shuttle bus stop across the street. "How long do you need?"

"Give me an hour. And Mel? Be careful. I don't know what you're doing, but you're not protected by a badge anymore."

“Thanks for the reminder,” Mel said. “And thanks for the help.” She ended the call, wrapping both hands around her drink’s cool glass.

Helen touched her arm. “Well?” she asked, her eyes concerned.

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“Abramson was planning to run,” Mel finally said. “He withdrew a bunch of money and booked a flight to Singapore for tomorrow morning.”

“But something happened first,” Helen added softly.

“Yeah.” Mel took a sip of her cocktail, organizing her thoughts. “It’s interesting, but the man is deep in debt yet was able to withdraw ten thousand dollars from his bank account. He had to have received ten thousand dollars from someone.”

“Hush money?”

“Or funding his escape,” Mel replied. “My friend Mickey’s looking deeper. He’ll call back in an hour.”

Helen nodded, her expression thoughtful. “So either someone wanted to help him disappear...”

“Or wanted him to look like he disappeared voluntarily,” Mel finished. “The question is, did Brigitte know? Or Felicity?”

“The daughter and the agent,” Helen mused. “Both trying to control his story, but for different reasons?”

Mel let out a slow breath, her mind working. “Exactly. And now we have proof he was planning something.”

“But not proof of what happened to him.”

“No.” Mel’s hand found Helen’s under the table. They sat in thoughtful silence, the gentle splash of the garden’s fountain mixing with distant traffic sounds. The late afternoon sun filtered through palm fronds, creating shifting patterns on their table. In another context, it would have been perfectly peaceful.

“An hour,” Helen said finally. “What do we do until then?”

Mel considered their options. “We stay visible but vigilant. Order some lunch. Act like normal tourists.”

“Do you think someone might be watching for us?”

“I think the probability is low.” Mel managed a small smile. “But I can’t be one hundred percent sure.”

“So, we continue to be careful,” Helen said matter-of-factly. “And not let anyone figure out what we know.”

Chapter Twelve

After lunch, Helen walked with Mel along the now-familiar pathway to the resort. Her hand found Mel’s as they approached the entrance, seeking comfort in her partner’s steady presence. The manuscript’s revelations still churned in her mind. It was all she could do to grasp the detailed accounts of game fixing, the massive amounts of money involved, and the list of powerful people implicated. It felt surreal that their peaceful Hawaiian vacation had led them to uncover something so dark. “Are you sure about this?” Helen asked softly, entering the lobby. “Coming back here after what we found?”

Mel squeezed her hand. “I really think we are okay,” she answered. “No one should know who we are, and staying away from our apartment tonight might draw more

attention.”

Nodding, Helen followed Mel’s lead. Suddenly, movement near the elevator caught Helen’s attention. The pale man in his dark suit emerged, walking with purpose toward the front desk. They watched from behind a large potted palm as the man approached the desk.

“Checking out,” the man said to Kai, his voice carrying across the quiet lobby. “Room 325.”

Helen felt her stomach clench. “Mel,” Helen whispered, tugging gently on her partner’s hand. “He stayed in the apartment next to Abramson’s...” Then her heart went cold as she realized something else. “His suitcases. Where are his suitcases?” The large, black suitcases he had arrived with were nowhere to be seen. She remembered how conspicuous they looked when he checked in. In an instant, the implications hit her like a physical blow. “Oh God.” Her grip tightened on Mel’s hand. “You don’t think...”

“Not here,” Mel murmured, though Helen felt tension radiating from the woman. They watched as the pale man completed his check-out, his movements efficient and unremarkable.

Nothing about him suggested he might have disposed of a body, but Helen’s mind couldn’t shake the horrible possibility. Only when he’d left the lobby did Helen release the breath she’d been holding.

“We should sit down,” Mel suggested, guiding her toward some chairs in a quiet corner. “You’re shaking.”

Helen sank into the chair, her legs suddenly weak. “Those suitcases,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “They were big enough, weren’t they? To... to...”

“Yes,” Mel confirmed grimly. “They were.”

The horror of it threatened to overwhelm her. Helen had read mystery novels, of course. She had even considered trying to write one. But this was real. This was happening, and they were somehow in the middle of it. “What do we do?” she asked, looking to Mel for guidance. “We can’t just let this go, but we fly home the day after tomorrow.”

Mel leaned forward, her voice low but intense. “We have the manuscript now,” she said. “We have proof of what Abramson uncovered. The question is, what’s the safest way to use it?”

“Safe for who?” Helen asked. “For us, or for justice?” The question hung between them as resort guests passed by, their vacation chatter creating a surreal backdrop to their grim conversation. Helen watched a family with young children check in, their excitement about their Hawaiian vacation painfully familiar. She had trouble believing it had really been less than a week since she and Mel had stood there themselves, thinking only of sunshine and romance.

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“We need to be smart about this,” Mel said finally. “These people, the ones Abramson exposed in his manuscript, they’re powerful. They’ve already shown what they’re willing to do to keep their secret.”

Helen nodded, her mind racing. “But we can’t just walk away. Not now.”

“No,” Mel agreed. “We can’t.” She reached for Helen’s hand again. “But we need a plan. Something that protects us while ensuring the truth comes out.”

The lobby’s air conditioning raised goosebumps on Helen’s arms, or maybe it was the weight of their situation. “We have less than forty-eight hours,” she said. “To figure out what to do and how to do it safely.”

“I know,” Mel said, her expression holding a mixture of concern and determination that Helen had come to know well. “And I promise you, we will find a way. But first, we need to go to our apartment and talk this through.”

As they stood to leave, Helen caught sight of their reflection in the lobby’s decorative mirrors. They looked like any other couple on vacation. She was in resort wear, and Mel in her comfortable Hawaiian shirt and cargo shorts. Nothing about their appearance suggested they were sitting on explosive evidence of corruption. And very possibly murder.

* * *

From their balcony, Mel watched the afternoon shadows lengthen across the courtyard. Her mind kept returning to those black suitcases, trying to piece together a

timeline of events. Movement in Abramson's office caught her eye. Mel's eyes widened as she realized Felicity Coedy had just entered, her red hair unmistakable even from a distance. The literary agent moved straight to the desk where they had last seen Abramson. "Helen," Mel called softly through the open glass door. "The literary agent is back." She watched as Felicity started to rummage through the papers on the desk before focusing on the desk drawers. The woman's movements were precise. They were not the frantic searching of Brigitte earlier. It was someone who knew exactly what they were looking for.

Mel watched as Felicity noticed the slightly open drawer. Felicity's posture changed. Even from across the courtyard, Mel read the tension that suddenly appeared in her shoulders. The agent began a more thorough search of the desk, her earlier precision giving way to increasingly aggressive movements.

"What's happening?" Helen asked, joining Mel on the balcony.

"I think she's realizing something has been taken," Mel whispered, though there was no way they could be heard. "And she's not happy about it."

They watched as Felicity pulled out her phone, typing rapidly. Mel's detective instincts hummed with warning. Something about the woman's behavior suggested more than just literary agent concerns. The way she carried herself, her authoritative presence in the elevator. It all pointed to someone used to wielding real power. Suddenly, Felicity's head snapped up, looking directly toward their balcony. Mel instinctively ducked down in her chair, pulling Helen with her, but it was too late. For a moment, their eyes met across the courtyard.

"Did she see you?" Helen asked, pressing close to Mel's side.

"Yes," Mel said grimly. "And she definitely recognized me."

They waited in tense silence, barely breathing. When Mel carefully peered out again, Felicity was gone from the window. “We need to move,” Mel said, already stepping into the apartment and thinking of what essential belongings they needed to gather. “I’m beginning to think that woman is more than just a literary agent, and now she knows we’ve been watching.”

Helen nodded, quickly grabbing her purse with the thumb drive and tablet containing Abramson’s manuscript. “Where are we going?”

“First? A walk on the beach,” Mel said, her mind racing through options. “We need to be visible, public. Then we’ll figure out our next move.”

They took the stairs instead of the elevator, Mel’s hand protectively on Helen’s lower back. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows through the open-air corridor. Every shadow seemed to hold potential danger. As they emerged onto the path that wound through the courtyard and led to the beach, Mel kept her pace deliberately casual while scanning their surroundings. The area was still busy with late-afternoon tourists. She knew that was good. Witnesses made everything safer.

“Talk to me,” Helen said softly as they walked. “What are you thinking?”

Mel guided them onto the sand and toward the water where the sound of waves would make it harder for anyone to overhear. “I’m still not sure, but what if Felicity Coedy is trying to double-cross Abramson? What if she is negotiating directly with the people behind the game fixing?”

“Which means she’s dangerous?”

“I think she could be,” Mel answered. “And now she knows the drawer was opened. I’m afraid she will guess we have whatever was in it. Or at least realize we know who else might have been in the apartment.”

They walked in silence for a moment, their feet leaving paired tracks in the wet sand. “The pale man,” Helen said. “Do you think she’s the one who sent him?”

Mel nodded slowly. “It fits. She tries to control the situation legally first with pressure, maybe bribes. When that doesn’t work...” She let the implication hang in the air.

“And now she knows we’re involved.”

“Yes.” Mel stopped walking, turning to face Helen. “I’m so sorry. I never meant to put you in danger.”

Helen’s hand found hers, squeezing gently. “Don’t you dare apologize. We’re in this together, remember?” The beach was beautiful, the sun just starting to set in the distance, and Mel knew under different circumstances, it would be breathtakingly romantic.

Instead, Mel found herself cataloging escape routes and calculating how quickly they could get to the airport if needed. “Thank you,” Mel said, pulling her closer. “I remember.” She kissed her gently before pulling back and letting the seriousness of their circumstances come back into focus. “But I think we should consider finding another hotel. Somewhere she won’t expect us to go.”

“Agreed,” Helen replied. “But first, shouldn’t we make another copy of everything on that thumb drive? As insurance.”

Mel smiled. “Good idea,” she answered. “We’ll need to be careful, but I agree that insurance is exactly what we need.”

* * *

The copy shop was nearly empty when they entered, and the fluorescent lights were harsh after the Hawaiian twilight outside. Helen clutched her purse close to her side. Only a teenage employee stood behind the counter, more interested in his phone than their arrival.

“Over there,” Mel nodded toward a self-service printer in the corner. Helen’s hands trembled slightly as she connected the thumb drive to the printer. The magnitude of what they were about to do, making a physical copy of evidence that had likely gotten a man killed, made her stomach churn. But they needed something tangible in case anything happened to the digital version. Even with a copy safe in her online Dropbox, Helen would feel better with a paper copy. Although when she created the account to back up her in-progress manuscripts, and her granddaughter assured her no one could get into her data, Helen was old school enough to want something she could put her hands on. As the printer hummed to life, Helen watched the pages emerge one by one. Words that detailed corruption at the highest levels of professional sports, names of people who would do anything to keep this information buried. She thought of Abramson, of those big suitcases, and had to steady herself against the printer.

“Hey.” Mel’s hand found her waist. “You okay?”

Helen nodded, forcing a small smile. “Just processing everything.” She gathered the warm pages into neat stacks. “What next?”

“We call the police,” Mel said. “But carefully. We tell them our concerns without

revealing what we have. See how they react.” Outside, they found a quiet coffee shop a few blocks from the copy store. Helen sipped her tea while Mel made the call. She listened as Mel explained their situation. Starting with their neighbor’s suspicious behavior, the attack they witnessed, his subsequent disappearance, and the pale man’s suitcases.

“Yes, I understand,” Mel was saying, her jaw tightening. “But if you could just have a detective call us back... Yes, I know it’s getting late and how busy everyone is... Former LAPD, thirty years’ experience... I see.” Helen could tell from Mel’s expression that it wasn’t going well. When she finally ended the call, the woman’s face was tight with anger. “They want us to come into the station. But I don’t have high hopes. The dispatcher’s tone said it all. They think we’re just nosy tourists imagining things.”

After a long Uber ride and an hour’s wait in the precinct, a young man in a suit with an expression that suggested he’d rather be anywhere else came to greet them. “Mel Nelson?” he asked. “I’m Detective Kanahele. I hear you have something you want to tell me.”

Helen watched Mel lift her chin as she stood. “Yes, I’m retired police detective Mel Nelson,” she turned to Helen. “And this is Helen Hardy. An additional witness.”

Detective Kanahele raised an eyebrow. “I see,” he said. “Come with me then, so I can hear this out.” They followed the detective to a small room with a table and four chairs. He motioned for them to sit while he sat across from them and took out a notepad. He flipped it open and read something before fixing them with his gaze. “So. You witnessed an assault through a window, but when officers responded, there was no evidence of any crime?”

“That’s correct,” Mel replied, her voice professionally neutral despite the condescension in his tone. “We saw someone in dark clothes and a ski mask attack

our neighbor, James Abramson.”

“And now Mr. Abramson is... what? Missing?”

Helen leaned forward. “He was working on an important story,” she said. “Something that powerful people wouldn’t want to be published. Then he disappeared after we saw him attacked, and clearly—”

Detective Kanahele held up a hand. “Mrs. Hardy, with all due respect, it sounds like your neighbor simply checked out early. People do that all the time at resorts.”

“Without his laptop?” Mel asked sharply. “Without telling his daughter?”

The detective sighed, closing his notepad. “Look, I understand you’re concerned. But we can’t launch an investigation based on speculation and coincidence. If Mr. Abramson doesn’t show up in a few days, his family can file a missing persons report.”

Helen felt frustration bubble up in her chest. “By then it might be too late.”

“I’m sorry I can’t be more helpful,” Detective Kanahele said, standing to indicate the meeting was over. “Enjoy the rest of your vacation.”

Outside the station, the humidity wrapped around them like a wet blanket. Helen’s tea from earlier sat sour in her stomach. “Well,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. “That was useless.”

Mel took her hand as they walked toward the Uber they called. “Not entirely,” she said. “Now we know we can’t count on official help. Which means we need to be even more careful about protecting what we have.”

Helen thought about the copy of Abramson's manuscript in her purse. Mel carried the thumb drive in her pocket. "What do you think Felicity will do?" she asked. "Now that she knows we've been watching?"

"Nothing public," Mel replied grimly. "She'll want to handle this quietly, like everything else." She opened the car door for Helen. "For now, we go back to the resort and pack our stuff. It's time we went into hiding."

ChapterThirteen

The hallway's cheerful tropical wallpaper and potted palms felt jarringly at odds with the knot forming in Mel's stomach as they approached their apartment. After the dismissive treatment from the police detective, her instincts were already on high alert. Those instincts screamed louder when she noticed their door was slightly ajar, a gap barely wide enough to see but definitely not how they'd left it.

"Helen," Mel said quietly, putting out an arm to stop her. "Stay behind me."

Helen's sharp intake of breath told Mel she'd spotted the door too. "Should we call security?"

"Not yet." Mel's mind shifted to the familiar patterns of her police training. "I'm guessing whoever did this is long gone. But stay close."

"Okay," Helen whispered. Moving forward carefully, Mel noted the subtle marks around the lock that most people would miss. Professional tools, not amateur break-in equipment. She pressed the door open slowly with her fingertips, conscious of Helen's presence at her back. The apartment's interior was dark, and as much as she hated to give away their presence, Mel turned on her cellphone's flashlight. Nothing immediately appeared disturbed, but Mel's trained eye caught the subtle signs like a throw pillow slightly askew, a chair not quite where it belonged.

“Wait here,” Mel whispered, but Helen’s hand found hers.

“Together,” Helen said firmly. “I’m not letting you face this alone.”

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Mel wanted to argue, to insist Helen retreat to the safety of the hallway, but she knew that determined tone. Instead, she squeezed Helen's hand once before letting go. "Stay behind me then. And if I say run..."

"I know," Helen replied softly. "I will." They moved through the apartment slowly, Mel checking each potential hiding space with the thoroughness ingrained by decades of police work. The living room had been searched systematically. There were drawers opened, but the contents weren't dumped onto the floor, and things were moved but not thrown aside. The kitchen showed similar signs of a careful invasion.

"Whoever did this, I think they knew what they were looking for," Mel said as they entered the bedroom. She moved to the bureau. What she found made her jaw clench. Their clothes had been removed from drawers and replaced, but not quite perfectly. Someone had gone through their most private space.

"The thumb drive," Helen said, her voice steady despite the circumstances. "They must have guessed we took it."

Mel nodded, noting how their suitcases had been searched too. "Felicity saw us watching from the balcony. She must have figured out we had whatever was in that drawer."

The bathroom was the final room to clear. Mel's reflection in the mirror looked grim as she checked the last possible hiding spot. "It's empty," she announced, though the knowledge brought little comfort. Their sanctuary had been violated, and their safety compromised.

Back in the living room, Helen sank onto the couch, her usual composure cracking slightly. “What do we do now?”

Mel sat beside her, pulling her close. “We can’t stay here,” she said, her mind already working through options. “They will likely be back.”

“A hotel like you thought we should?” Helen suggested, leaning into Mel’s embrace.

“Yes, but not an obvious one. Somewhere they wouldn’t expect us to go.” Mel pressed a kiss to Helen’s temple, trying to convey comfort even as guilt churned in her stomach. “I’m so sorry, Helen. I never meant for this to get dangerous.”

Helen pulled back slightly to look at Mel directly. “Don’t you dare apologize,” she said firmly. “We’re in this together, remember? Besides, I’m not some fragile flower who needs protecting.”

The fierce determination in Helen’s voice made Mel appreciate her all the more. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

“So you keep telling me,” Helen replied with a small smile. “Our flight is in the morning so should we just pack all our things and get somewhere safer? Preferably before whoever did this decides to come back?”

They packed quickly, filling their suitcases much more haphazardly than when they left the mainland to go on their vacation. Mel noticed how Helen’s hands shook slightly as she gathered their things, but her movements remained purposeful. The thumb drive was secure in Mel’s pocket, while Helen’s tablet was in her purse. Mel had the hard copy of the book in her carry-on suitcase. “Ready?” Mel asked, doing one final sweep of the apartment.

Helen nodded, adjusting the strap of her purse. “Ready. Though I have to admit, this

isn't quite how I imagined our Hawaiian vacation ending."

"No?" Mel replied, managing a small smile as she checked the hallway before letting them out. "You mean you didn't plan on investigating a possible murder and uncovering what looks like major sports corruption?"

"Oddly enough, no," Helen replied, her attempt at humor not quite hiding her tension. "Not quite."

* * *

Helen sank onto the edge of the hotel bed, finally letting exhaustion catch up with her. The room was smaller than their resort apartment but clean and anonymous and exactly what they needed. Through the window, she saw palm trees swaying in the moonlight. Mel was doing another security check of the room, testing the locks and examining potential entry points. Helen knew better than to tell her to relax. After their apartment was searched, Mel's protective instincts were in overdrive. "The balcony door has a decent lock," Mel reported, drawing the curtains closed. "And we're high enough that access from outside would be difficult."

"That's good," Helen said, though her mind was still processing the violation of their vacation home. The way their belongings had been searched haunted her. "Do you think they'll figure out where we've gone?"

Mel sat beside her, taking her hand. "Not likely. I paid cash, used a fake name, and we're on the other side of town from the resort. Basic counter-surveillance."

Helen couldn't help but smile slightly. "You make it sound so routine."

"Well, I did spend thirty years dealing with this sort of thing," Mel replied, but Helen heard the tension beneath her casual tone. Her phone buzzed making them both jump.

The screen showed an unknown number. Helen's hand trembled slightly as she showed it to Mel. Mel nodded. "Put it on speaker and let me do the talking."

Helen answered, holding the phone between them. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Hardy." The voice was electronically distorted, impossible to identify as even male or female. "I see you and Ms. Nelson have left the hotel."

Helen felt Mel's hand tighten on hers. "Who is this?" Mel demanded.

"Someone who knows what you took," the voice replied. "And someone who strongly suggests you forget everything you've seen and learned during your vacation. Go home, enjoy your retirement, and leave this alone."

"Or what?" Mel's asked, her tone hard as steel.

"Or your peaceful retirement might become significantly less peaceful." The threat hung in the air for a moment before the voice continued. "Return what you've taken for your continued wellbeing." The line went dead.

Standing abruptly, Helen began to pace. The hotel room suddenly felt too small, too exposed. "Maybe we should just give it to them," she said. "Whatever's on that drive, is it worth risking our safety?"

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Mel caught her hand as she passed, pulling her to a stop. “Helen, look at me.” When their eyes met, Mel’s expression was serious but tender. “If you want to walk away from this, we will. No questions asked. But remember that they killed Abramson over what’s on that drive. If we don’t do something with the information, his death means nothing.”

Helen sank back onto the bed beside Mel. “I know,” she said softly. “And I don’t want to walk away. I’m just scared.”

“Me too,” Mel admitted, wrapping an arm around her. “But we have options. We have a copy of everything, remember? And I’m calling that detective again. Maybe when he sees our apartment and hears about that phone call, he will listen to us.”

* * *

“Are you sure about this?” Helen asked as they rode in a taxi back to the resort. “Going back there?”

Mel squeezed her hand. “We need Detective Kanahele to see the evidence of the break-in while it’s fresh,” she said. “And having official documentation of the intrusion could help protect us later.” The resort’s familiar facade came into view. Detective Kanahele was waiting in the lobby with two uniformed officers, his earlier dismissive attitude replaced with something more professional. “Ms. Nelson, Ms. Hardy,” he greeted them. “Show me what you found.” As they led the officers up to their apartment, Mel noted how Helen stayed close to her side.

Their door still showed the subtle signs of entry that Mel had noticed earlier. “Here,”

Mel said, pointing to the marks around the lock. “Someone used tools to get in.” The detective examined the door frame carefully while one of the officers took photos. Inside, Mel walked them through the systematic way the apartment had been searched. “Whoever did this knew what they were looking for. They were thorough but careful not to leave obvious signs of disturbance.”

“And you believe this is connected to your neighbor’s disappearance?” Detective Kanahele asked, making notes in his small pad.

“Yes,” Mel said firmly. “We saw him being attacked, and now our apartment is searched. That’s not a coincidence.”

The detective’s expression remained neutral. “Tell me your theory, Ms. Nelson,” he said. “Former detective to current detective.”

Mel chose her words carefully, aware of how much to reveal. “James Abramson was an investigative journalist working on a story about sports corruption. His daughter flew out to try to stop him from publishing. His literary agent showed up to pressure him about deadlines. Then a man in an expensive suit arrives, Abramson disappears, and our apartment gets searched by professionals.”

“You think he uncovered something big enough to kill for,” the detective said, but it was not quite a question.

“I think he had proof of something that powerful people wanted to keep quiet,” Mel replied. “And now those same people think we have whatever evidence he collected.”

Helen stepped forward. “We just received a threatening phone call,” she added. “They know we are staying somewhere else. They’re watching us.”

The detective frowned. “A threat? Why didn’t you lead with that?”

“Because we needed you to see this first,” Mel explained, gesturing to the apartment. “To understand that these aren’t just random events or an old lady’s imagination.”

Detective Kanahele walked to the sliding glass doors, looking across at Abramson’s apartment. “You said you witnessed the attack from here?”

“Yes,” Helen confirmed. “We saw someone in dark clothes hit him from behind while he was at his desk.”

“But the investigating officers found no evidence of an assault,” the detective reminded them.

“The attacker may have cleaned up any sign,” Mel said. “These people know what they’re doing.”

The detective was quiet for a moment, processing. “I’ll have officers dust for prints,” he finally said. “And I’ll put in a request for the resort’s security footage, but I can’t promise we’ll find anything useful.”

“So you believe us now?” Helen asked.

“Let’s say I’m taking your concerns more seriously,” he replied. “A break-in and a threatening phone call changes things.” He turned to Mel. “You said Abramson was investigating sports corruption?”

Mel nodded, careful not to mention the thumb drive or manuscript. “Based on his background and what we overheard. He seemed scared but determined to publish something big.”

The detective closed his notebook. “And now he’s missing, and you’re being threatened,” he said. “I’ll assign officers to patrol the area tonight. Do you have

somewhere safe to stay?”

“Yes,” Mel said, not offering details. “We’ve taken precautions.”

Detective Kanahele nodded approvingly. “Good. I’ll need a statement about the phone call, and then I suggest you both lay low until you are on your way home.”

Mel held the man’s eye. “We can do that.”

“We’ll be in touch,” the detective said as they prepared to leave. “And Ms. Nelson? Current detective to former detective. If this really is what you think, watch your back. People willing to make someone disappear rarely stop at one victim.”

The warning sent a chill down Mel’s spine, not for herself but for Helen. She’d dragged the woman she loved into something dangerous, and now they had less than twenty-four hours to figure out what to do with the evidence they had.

ChapterFourteen

After the dismissive treatment from the police detective, a knot formed in Helen's stomach as she followed Mel toward the resort's side gate, trying to process everything that had happened. Just as they reached the gate, movement caught her eye. Brigitte Abramson walked purposefully toward the beach path, her blonde hair reflecting the subtle overhead lights. "Mel," Helen whispered, touching her partner's arm. "Look."

Mel turned, and her eyes widened. "Let's see where she's going," she said quietly. "But stay back a bit."

They followed Brigitte at a discrete distance, using the shadows as cover. Helen noticed how Brigitte kept checking her phone, her movements growing more agitated with each glance at the screen.

"She's meeting someone," Mel murmured as Brigitte veered off the main path toward a more secluded area near a cluster of hibiscus bushes. "Quick, behind here." Mel guided them behind some dense foliage just as another figure appeared.

It was Felicity Coedy, her red hair vivid even in the moonlight. "Where is he?" Felicity's voice carried clearly in the humid air. "What did you do?"

Brigitte's laugh held no humor. "Me? I thought you were the one who made him disappear," she said. "Or isn't that what literary agents do when their clients won't cooperate?"

Helen felt Mel tense beside her as they listened. The accusation in both women's voices seemed genuine, not performed. "Don't be ridiculous," Felicity snapped. "I needed him to publish the story, not vanish. My entire career is riding on this book."

"Your career?" Brigitte's voice rose. "What about my father's life? He was going to expose everything, ruin people who don't like being ruined. And now he's gone, and you expect me to believe you had nothing to do with it?"

Felicity stepped closer. "If I wanted to stop him from publishing," Felicity said. "I would have used legal channels. Contracts, injunctions. Not whatever this is."

"Then who?" Brigitte demanded. "Who else knew what he was writing about?"

Helen's heart raced as she processed the implications. Neither woman seemed to know what actually happened to Abramson. They assumed one or both were involved, but watching them now, she wasn't so sure. "The pale man," Helen whispered to Mel. "Could he be working for someone else entirely?"

Mel nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving the two arguing women. "Someone with more to lose than either of them," she whispered back.

"He was going to run," Brigitte said suddenly, her voice cracking. "Did you know that? He had a ticket to Singapore. He was scared."

"Singapore?" Felicity's composure slipped. "He never told me... When?"

"Tomorrow morning. But now..." Brigitte's voice trailed off, and Helen saw genuine fear in the young woman's face. The women's argument ended abruptly at the sound of approaching voices from tourists on the path. They separated quickly, Felicity heading toward the beach while Brigitte took the path back to the resort.

Once they were alone, Helen turned to Mel. “What do you think?”

Mel’s jaw had that familiar set that meant she was processing information. “I think we’ve been looking at this wrong,” she said slowly. “Both women had motives to pressure Abramson, but neither seems to know what actually happened to him.”

“Which means someone else is involved,” Helen finished. They emerged from their hiding spot. Helen checked her watch. It was less than twenty-four hours before their flight home.

“I’m not sure,” Mel said. “We need to figure out who else knew about the book.” They walked back toward the resort. “Someone powerful enough to send a professional to handle the situation.”

* * *

Mel kept her eyes on Brigitte’s retreating form while her mind raced through the new information. Years of detective work had taught her to trust her instincts, and they were screaming that Brigitte knew more than she had revealed in that heated exchange. “We need to talk to her,” Mel said quietly. “Now, while she’s rattled.”

Helen nodded. “I agree,” she said, falling into step beside her as they followed Brigitte at a careful distance.

They caught up with her near the resort’s back entrance, where the path opened into a small courtyard dotted with empty lounge chairs. “Ms. Abramson,” Mel called, keeping her voice firm but non-threatening. “We need to discuss your father.”

Brigitte spun around, her face flushing when she recognized them. “Were you following me?”

“We saw your conversation with Felicity Coedy,” Helen said, her gentle tone balancing Mel’s more authoritative approach. “We know you’re both worried about your father.”

Something shifted in Brigitte’s expression—fear, maybe, or resignation. She glanced around the empty courtyard before sinking into one of the lounge chairs. “You don’t understand,” she said, running a hand through her hair. “None of this was supposed to happen.”

Mel took a seat across from her, studying the younger woman’s body language. “Then help us understand,” she said. “What exactly wasn’t supposed to happen?”

Brigitte’s laugh was hollow. “All of it. The book, the threats, the...” she swallowed hard. “I was supposed to convince him to kill the story. That’s all. Just talk him out of it.”

“Who hired you?” Mel pressed, watching Brigitte’s hands twisting nervously in her lap.

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“I can’t... these people, they’re not the kind you cross.” She met Mel’s eyes. “But I swear I didn’t hurt my father. I would never. I was trying to protect him.”

Helen leaned forward. “Protect him from what?”

“From the truth about what would happen if he published.” Brigitte’s voice dropped. “They offered me a lot of money to convince him to drop it. Said it would be better for everyone. I thought I could make him understand the danger he was in. Danger like what happened to Mom.”

Mel exchanged a quick look with Helen. “These people who hired you, do you think they know about Singapore?”

Brigitte shook her head. “I don’t think so,” she said. “But who knows? When he told me about it right before he disappeared, I realized he was more scared than I thought.” She pressed her fingers to her temples. “I should have helped him leave instead of trying to stop him.”

“What about Felicity?” Helen asked. “Do you really think she was involved?”

“Felicity? No.” Brigitte’s laugh was bitter this time. “Especially not after talking to her. She’s ambitious and ruthless in her own way, but she’s not stupid. This book was going to make her career. A tell-all about corruption in the sports industry? With hard evidence? She stood to make millions.” She shook her head. “She wouldn’t risk losing that payday.”

Mel leaned back, processing this new information. A group of intoxicated tourists

coming back from a nearby bar walked past, their laughter jarring against the tension of the moment. Mel waited until they passed before asking her next question. “Have you ever seen a pale man, tall and dressed in a suit?”

The color drained from Brigitte’s face. “Last week. Outside my apartment,” she said. “I didn’t think much about it.” Her voice cracked. “Oh god, did he...?”

“We don’t know yet,” Helen said quickly, shooting Mel a warning look. “But any information you can give us about who hired you could help us find your father.”

Brigitte glanced around again, her fear palpable now. “I never met them directly. Everything was through encrypted messages and cash drops. But...” she hesitated, then reached for her phone. “I saved screenshots of everything. I was worried they might try to double-cross me.”

Mel felt her pulse quicken as Brigitte pulled up the messages. Finally, something concrete to work with. But as she reached for the phone, a sharp ringtone cut through the air. Brigitte looked at the screen and went pale. “I have to go,” she said, jumping up. “They’re watching. They’ll know I talked to you.”

“Wait,” Mel started, but Brigitte was already hurrying away, her heels clicking rapidly on the stone path.

“Should we follow her?” Helen asked. Mel shook her head slowly. “No. She’s spooked now. But she gave us something valuable. She confirmed what we thought; that there’s a bigger player involved. Someone with enough resources for surveillance, encrypted communications, and professional muscle.”

“But we still don’t know what they knew about Singapore,” Helen added.

“You’re right,” Mel said as she stood, her mind already mapping out their next

moves. “We need to find out who had access to his travel plans. Someone knew he was planning to run.” Mel hated her next thought, but in her gut, she believed it was true. “And they moved before he could.”

* * *

As the time on her cell phone revealed it was already past midnight, Helen watched as Mel paced, the woman’s mind clearly racing through possibilities. After their conversation with Brigitte, they decided to move again to a different hotel. Now, surrounded by cheap, generic hotel furniture instead of their cheerful vacation apartment, Helen felt the full weight of their situation.

“I think we were right about organized crime. It has to be someone with serious resources,” Mel said, more to herself than Helen. “Someone who could afford professional surveillance, a fixer, and enough influence to make Brigitte afraid to name names.”

Helen sat on the edge of the bed, her tablet open to Abramson’s manuscript. “The book mentions several major sports franchises,” she said. “Any one of them would have the money to secure those kinds of resources.”

Mel stopped pacing, turning to face Helen with that familiar look of determination. “We need to get this information out there,” she said. “Before whoever’s behind this confirms that we have it.”

“But how?” Helen asked. “The police won’t help, and we can’t exactly walk into a newspaper office.”

A slight smile crossed Mel’s face. “No, but I might know someone who can help.” She pulled out her phone. Helen watched as Mel scrolled through her contacts, finally selecting one. “I can call my contact in LA again. Mickey.” Knowing Helen could

help more if she listened in, Mel put it on speakerphone.

“Twice in two days? I’m honored,” Mickey said. “What’s up, Nelson?”

“First, you’re on speakerphone,” Mel said. “My partner, Helen, is here with me, but no one else.”

There was a pause on the phone. “Okay,” Mickey finally said. “I’m going to go out on real limb here and trust you. Talk to me.”

“Thank you. Mickey, we need your help,” Mel said, sitting beside Helen on the bed. “Remember that background check you ran on Abramson? Well, we’ve got his story, and it needs to get out. But it needs to be untraceable.”

There was another pause on the other end. “How hot is this story?”

“Hot enough that someone’s willing to kill for it,” Mel replied grimly. “We need it released through channels that can’t be traced back to us or Abramson’s family.”

Helen listened as Mickey whistled low. “That’s not exactly easy nowadays, you know.”

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“I know, but that’s what I need,” Mel said. “Can you help or not?”

Mickey sighed. “Send me what you’ve got,” he answered. “I know some people who know some people. Dark web journalists who specialize in exposing corruption. They can verify and release it without compromising sources.” Helen felt a mix of relief and anxiety at the man’s answer. What they were doing was far beyond anything she’d ever imagined, yet somehow it felt right. Necessary. “I’ll need to encrypt everything before you send it,” Mickey continued. “Give me an hour to set up a secure channel. And Mel? Be careful. If you’re right about this, people who kill to keep secrets tend to keep killing.”

After ending the call, Mel turned to Helen. “This is going to happen. You’re still one hundred percent sure?” she asked softly.

Helen reached for Mel’s hand, squeezing it gently. “I am,” she said. “We’re just helping the truth come out. Besides, it feels right. James Abramson wanted this story told.”

They spent the next hour preparing the files to send to Mickey. The manuscript, the video confessions, everything they’d found on the thumb drive. “Mickey’s good at what he does,” Mel said as they waited for his signal to upload the information. “He helped me crack some tough cases back in the day. And although I’m not proud of it, things did not always go through official channels.”

Helen nodded. “Sometimes we do what have to do. I’m sure that came in handy sometimes,” she said. “And these people he knows, will they be careful with the information?”

“They’ll verify everything before releasing it,” Mel assured her. “And they’ll protect their sources. It’s what they do.” The phone buzzed. It was a text from Mickey. He had sent the upload instructions.

Helen carefully followed each step, her hands steady despite the stakes. Finally, she set down the tablet. “It’s done.”

“Mickey will let us know when it’s been passed along securely.”

Helen felt a curious mix of relief and tension. “What do we do now?”

Mel checked her watch. “Now we lay low, and we wait.”

The hotel room felt smaller suddenly. Helen moved to the window, looking out at the tourist crowds below. Somewhere out there, a pale man in an expensive suit might be looking for them. The thought sent a chill down her spine.

“Hey,” Mel said softly, coming up behind her. “We’ll be okay. Our flight’s in the morning. Once the story starts circulating, we’ll be long gone.”

Helen leaned back against her partner, drawing comfort from her solid presence. “I know,” she said. “I just keep thinking about James. About what might have happened to him.”

“Me too,” Mel admitted. “But this is what he would have wanted. He knew the truth needed to come out.” Helen found herself watching the shadows, wondering what would happen next. Mel kissed the back of her neck. “We should get some rest. It’s a long ride home.”

Helen nodded, but she knew sleep wouldn’t come easily. Not with everything they had learned, everything they’d done. But as she felt Mel beside her, she knew they

had made the right choice.

ChapterFifteen

Mel stood in the lobby of the cheap hotel, barely listening as Helen handled their checkout. Her mind kept circling back to their failure to solve Abramson's disappearance. Something nagged at her. It felt like there was a detail she was missing, a connection she hadn't made. The morning sunlight streamed through the lobby's windows, catching dust motes in golden beams that seemed to mock her inability to see what was right in front of her.

"The taxi should be here in about ten minutes," Helen said, touching Mel's arm gently. "Are you all right? You've been quiet all morning."

Mel managed a weak smile. "Just frustrated," she admitted. "Thirty years of solving cases, and this one..." She shook her head. "I feel like we have all the clues, but something doesn't add up." They moved their luggage outside to wait in the warm Hawaiian morning. Palm trees swayed in the breeze, their fronds casting shifting shadows across the hotel's entrance. A young couple emerged with matching floral leis, clearly just starting their vacation, while Mel and Helen's was ending in uncertainty.

Suddenly, Mel straightened. "Rear Window," she said, more to herself than Helen.

Helen blinked, clearly confused. "Rear window?"

Slowly, everything seemed to fall into place. "Yes," she said. "Have you ever seen the old Hitchcock movie with Jimmy Stewart and Grace Kelly?"

Nodding, Helen still looked puzzled. "Yes, of course," she said. "Jimmy Stewart in a wheelchair with a broken leg, watching his neighbors out the window all day. I

remember it being quite the dramatic mystery, trying to figure out if his neighbor murdered his wife.” She shook her head. “But why are you bringing it up—” Suddenly, she stopped, and Mel could see the woman’s mind working out the answer. “You don’t think...”

“I do,” Mel said, reaching for her phone. “We need to find out when Abramson is supposed to be leaving. Mickey said Abramson had booked a flight to Singapore for today.” Her fingers flew across the phone’s screen, typing a quick message to her old friend. “But I never asked what time.”

Helen moved closer, lowering her voice. “What do you intend to do?”

“I don’t know yet.” Mel’s mind raced, connecting fragments of information they had gathered over the past few days. Abramson always leaving the blinds open as if he wanted them to see him. The mysterious “find the story” statement he made to Mel. The lack of any signs of forced entry or struggle in the apartment. The way the wallet was left out in the open on the kitchen counter. Her phone buzzed. Mickey’s response was brief: “Flight leaves this morning. 11:45 A.M.”

Mel checked her watch. It was 8:30 A.M. “Helen,” she said slowly. “I have a crazy idea, but what if we are being used?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if Abramson staged his own murder?” The more Mel thought about it, the more it made sense. “Think about it. He needed to disappear, but in a way that would protect him from whoever he was exposing in his book.”

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Helen's eyes widened. "And he did it when he knew we would be watching."

"It's perfect," Mel said, warming to her theory. "He gets sympathy instead of suspicion. Nobody looks for a dead man." She quickly typed another message to Mickey, asking for the flight number. Their taxi pulled up, the driver hopping out to help with their luggage. "Slight change of plans," Mel told him. "Take us to the airport, but now we need to go to the international terminal."

As they settled into the back seat, Helen took Mel's hand. "Walk me through this," she said. "How would it work?"

Mel squeezed her hand, grateful as always for Helen's willingness to follow her instincts. "I have no idea when he planned it, but Abramson stages a scene where he appears to be attacked, expecting us to be witnesses."

"But what about the pale man?" Helen asked though Mel could see she was already following the logic. "How does he fit in?"

"I'm not sure," Mel answered. "Yet." The taxi wound through Honolulu's streets, palm trees and ocean views flashing past. Mel's phone buzzed again. Mickey had sent the flight details.

"But why go through all this?" Helen asked. "Why not just leave?"

"Because someone powerful wants to stop his story," Mel said. "Someone who would keep looking for him unless they thought he was dead." She paused, remembering something. "Remember what Brigitte said? About her mother's death?"

Helen nodded. “The car accident three years ago, when he was investigating college basketball.”

“What if it truly wasn’t an accident?” Mel said softly. “What if Abramson learned his lesson then? That these people would hurt his family to stop him. This way, Brigitte’s genuine reaction helps sell his disappearance, and she’s protected by his apparent death.” The airport appeared ahead, its control tower rising against the blue Hawaiian sky. Mel felt her pulse quicken. If she was right, Abramson would be there somewhere, preparing to board a flight to freedom while his explosive story circulated through Mickey’s dark web contacts.

“Should we try to stop him?” Helen asked as their taxi pulled up to the departures level.

Mel considered Helen’s words as they unloaded their luggage. “I’m not sure,” she said finally. “If I’m right, he did what he had to do to protect himself and his family while making sure the truth got out.” She smiled slightly. “Besides, we helped make that happen.” They rolled their bags toward the terminal entrance, the automatic doors whooshing open to release a blast of cool air. Mel scanned the crowd, looking for either Abramson or perhaps even the pale man. She still wasn’t clear on that connection.

Her detective instincts were humming now, telling her she was finally on the right track. “What do we do now?” Helen asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“We wait,” Mel said, guiding them toward some seats near the Singapore Airlines check-in counter. “And we watch. If I’m right, we might see something interesting before we have to go to catch our own flight.”

Helen settled beside her, their shoulders touching. “You know what amazes me?” she said softly.

“What’s that?”

“How your mind works. How you put all these pieces together.” Helen’s brown eyes were warm with admiration. “I love watching you solve puzzles.”

Mel felt her face warm slightly. Even after six months together, Helen’s praise could still make her feel like a teenager with a crush. “Well,” she said. “We’re not sure I’m right yet.”

“Oh, I think you are,” Helen replied, gently squeezing her hand. “And even if you’re not, I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else but here with you, waiting to find out.”

* * *

Helen’s heartskipped a beat when she spotted him. If she hadn’t spent days studying James Abramson from their balcony, she might have missed him entirely. The baseball cap and sunglasses were obvious disguises, plus he had dyed his hair brown, but it was his changed posture that truly transformed him. He had gone from nervous energy to purposeful movement. “Mel,” she whispered, touching her partner’s arm. “By the currency exchange. Baseball cap.”

Mel’s subtle nod told Helen she’d seen him too. “Yep,” she whispered back. “In a pretty decent disguise.” They watched as Abramson checked his phone, then headed toward a partially renovated section of the terminal. Construction barriers created a maze of temporary walkways, most passengers avoiding the area in favor of clearer paths.

He was about to disappear from view. “Should we follow him?” Helen asked though she was already starting to stand.

“Yes,” Mel replied, gathering their carry-on bags. “But carefully. If I’m right about

him staging everything, he's cleverer than we thought."

They maintained a discrete distance, letting other travelers provide cover. The construction area was quieter, the sound of their rolling luggage seeming unnaturally loud against the temporary flooring. Abramson disappeared around a corner where plastic sheeting created a tunnel-like effect. When they rounded the same corner, he was waiting for them.

"I wondered if you'd figure it out," he said, removing his sunglasses. "Though I admit, I didn't expect it quite so soon."

Helen felt Mel step slightly in front of her, always her protector. "It took me longer than it should have," Mel said. "I should have been suspicious when everything seemed to happen so conveniently for us."

"I suppose that's fair," Abramson said. "I counted on you both being smart and clever, and luckily, you were."

Narrowing her eyes, Helen studied the man. "I still don't entirely understand," she said. "Why the elaborate deception?"

Abramson nodded, glancing at his watch. "We don't have much time," he said. "But I admit I owe you an explanation."

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“Damn right you do,” Mel said, her voice was tight with anger.

Abramson held up his hands in a placating gesture. “I know you’re angry,” he said. “You have every right to be. But everything I did, including letting you think I’d been attacked, was necessary.”

“Necessary?” Mel asked. “We thought you’d been murdered. We investigated, put ourselves at risk—”

“Which is exactly what I needed,” Abramson interrupted. “I needed witnesses I could trust. People with the skills to understand what was happening but who weren’t connected to anyone involved.”

Helen felt understanding dawn. “You were watching us too, weren’t you? From the beginning?”

Abramson nodded. “Once I saw Mel’s detective instincts kick in that first day on the balcony. Coupled with your intelligence, Helen, and well, you were perfect.”

“Perfect for what?” Helen asked though she was beginning to understand. “To be your unwitting investigators?”

“To be credible witnesses,” he explained. “When you reported my ‘attack’ to the police, it created an official record of my disappearance. When you discovered the thumb drive and ensured the manuscript would be published, it came from sources no one could trace back to me.”

A plane passed overhead, and Helen used the moment to process what he was saying. All their amateur detective work, their genuine concern and fear, had been orchestrated. She should have felt manipulated, angry even. Instead, she felt a strange sort of admiration for the intricacy of his plan.

“The pale man with the suitcases,” Mel said. “Was he part of your plan too?”

“No,” Abramson’s expression darkened. “He was very real. A fixer who was sent by people who want my story buried. That’s why I had to move when I did, stage my disappearance before they could make me actually disappear.”

Helen thought about all the pieces falling into place—Brigitte’s conflicted behavior, Felicity’s aggressive pursuit of the manuscript, the threatening phone call they’d received. “But your daughter,” she said. “Brigitte seemed genuinely worried.”

“She was. Is.” Abramson’s face softened. “She knew I was planning something but not what. It was safer for her that way. Just like it was safer for you not to know the full truth until now.”

“So, you hired someone to attack you,” Mel said.

“Yes,” Abramson said, suddenly looking tired. “He’s an actor friend of a friend. Someone who could help make it look convincing.”

“But why?” Helen leaned forward. “I still can’t quite see why you needed to go through all this elaborate staging?”

“Because they killed my wife.” The words hung in the air between them. “Three years ago, when I was investigating college basketball corruption. It wasn’t an accident. They made that clear afterward. Said next time it would be Brigitte.”

Helen felt her throat tighten. “So you needed to appear dead to protect her.”

“And to ensure the story got out.” He looked at Mel. “I knew you were a detective the moment I met you. Retired LAPD, you said. I hoped you’d be curious enough to investigate, smart enough to find the thumb drive.”

“You left your wallet on purpose,” Mel said. “So we’d have the key.”

Abramson nodded. “I needed someone trustworthy to find the story, someone who would know what to do with it, but I didn’t know how. But when I saw you watching from your balcony that first day...” He gave them a small smile. “I knew you were perfect.”

“You used us,” Mel said, but her tone had shifted so that it held more admiration than anger.

“Yes,” he admitted. “But for a good cause. The story needed to come out, but I couldn’t risk anyone tracking it back to me. This way, it appears I was killed to prevent publication, which makes the story more credible, not less.”

A distant announcement reminded them of where they were. Abramson checked his watch again, and Helen noticed how his movements betrayed an underlying anxiety despite his composed explanation. “Your flight to Singapore,” Helen said. “Is that also part of your misdirection?”

Abramson smiled slightly. “You really don’t miss much, do you? Yes, I needed people to think I was planning to run. It made my disappearance more believable.”

“And now?” Mel asked. “What’s your real plan?”

“Now I disappear for real,” he said. “But I won’t be staying in Singapore. Just

passing through. This morning I saw hints that the story was breaking, so thanks to you, the manuscript is out there and spreading through channels no one can stop. My story will be told, but I'll be safely away before anyone realizes I'm still alive."

Helen felt Mel shift beside her, and she knew the woman was struggling with the ethics of letting him go. "The people behind the game-fixing," Helen said carefully. "They'll still look for you."

"Yes, but they'll be busy dealing with the fallout from the manuscript first," Abramson said. "By the time they realize what really happened, I'll be long gone." He checked his watch again. "Which needs to happen soon."

A family's laughter echoed to them from the main terminal. Helen studied Abramson's face, seeing both fear and determination there. "Was it worth it?" she asked softly. "All this deception?"

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“To expose corruption that goes to the highest levels of professional sports? To show how games are being manipulated, how people’s livelihoods and dreams are being traded like commodities?” His voice carried absolute conviction. “Yes, it was worth it.” Helen watched as he replaced his sunglasses. “Thank you,” he said, looking between them. “For helping bring the truth to light. And for understanding why it had to be this way.”

Mel offered her hand. “Good luck,” she said as the man took it to shake a moment before turning to disappear into the main terminal.

Helen felt Mel’s arm slip around her waist. “Well,” Helen said softly. “I suppose that solves our mystery.”

“Mmm hmm,” Mel agreed. “Though I’m not sure how I feel yet about him using us as unwitting allies. Although I can admit it was clever.”

Helen turned to face her partner, seeing the mix of professional appreciation and personal concern in her eyes. “Are you angry? About being manipulated?”

“No,” Mel said after a moment. “He did what he had to do to protect his daughter and expose the truth. I can’t fault him for that.” Pulling their carry-on roller bags, they made their way back to the main terminal, where their own flight would board soon. The morning sun had risen higher, streaming through the windows and making the terminal bright.

“You’re a good person, Mel Nelson,” Helen said as they found seats at their gate.

“Why do you say that?”

“You can appreciate the solution to a mystery even when you’ve been part of someone else’s plan.”

Mel smiled, bringing Helen’s hand to her lips. “Well, it helped that I had you by my side,” she said. “It makes everything better.”

Epilogue

The late afternoon sun slanted through Diane’s kitchen windows as Helen watched her eldest daughter move effortlessly between stovetop and counter, stirring a pot of sauce while directing her children in setting the table. The familiar domestic scene made Helen’s heart swell, especially when she caught sight of Mel helping fifteen-year-old Michael arrange the silverware just so.

“Mom,” Diane called from the stove. “Can you taste this and tell me if it needs more basil?”

Helen moved to her daughter’s side, accepting the proffered spoon. The rich tomato sauce brought back memories of teaching Diane to cook so many years ago. “Perfect,” she said, squeezing Diane’s shoulder. “Though you haven’t needed my opinion on your cooking for a long time now.”

“I’ll always want your opinion,” Diane replied softly, then glanced toward Mel. “She seems to be fitting right in.”

Helen followed her daughter’s gaze. Mel had moved on to helping the twins, Emma and Jack, fold napkins into triangles. “She was nervous about tonight,” Helen said. “She wants so much for you all to like her.”

“Well, the twins already adore her,” Diane said, stirring the sauce. “And Sarah seems very intrigued by the fact that Mel is a retired police detective.”

As if summoned by her name, Sarah breezed into the kitchen, her long dark hair swinging. At eighteen, she carried herself with that particular young adult mix of confidence and uncertainty that Helen remembered well from raising her own daughters. “Mel’s teaching the twins how to make origami boats with the napkins,” she reported, reaching for a piece of garlic bread. “Dad’s trying to learn too, but he’s pretty hopeless.”

“Hey,” Tom protested from the dining room. “I heard that.”

The easy laughter that followed warmed Helen’s heart. This was what she’d hoped for—her family and Mel blending naturally, creating new connections and memories.

“So,” Sarah said, perching on a kitchen stool. “Tell us more about Hawaii. Did you really see whales?”

Helen exchanged a quick glance with Mel, who had appeared in the kitchen doorway. “We did,” Helen confirmed. “They were magnificent. Breaching right next to our boat.”

“And what about the mysterious neighbor?” Michael called from the dining room. “The one Aunt Jenny said you were investigating?”

Helen’s eyes met Mel’s. She was happy when the woman’s voice remained casual. “Oh, that was nothing really. Just a misunderstanding about a missing laptop.”

“But Aunt Jenny said—” Sarah started, but Diane smoothly interrupted.

“Dinner’s ready! Everyone wash up and find your seats.”

As the children scattered, Mel touched Helen's elbow. "You okay?" she asked softly. Helen nodded, understanding the deeper question.

They had agreed to keep the truth about Abramson's story and their involvement in its release between themselves. "Perfect," she replied, reaching for Mel's hand and squeezing it gently.

Around the dinner table, conversation flowed easily. Tom asked Mel about her years on the force, showing genuine interest in her experiences. The twins peppered Helen with questions about snorkeling, their eyes wide when she described the colorful fish. Even Sarah seemed engaged, though she kept returning to hints about their mysterious neighbor. "But why was he acting so weird?" she pressed, twirling pasta around her fork. "If it was just about a laptop?"

Helen took a sip of water, buying time. "Sometimes people get very focused on their work," she said carefully.

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“What kind of work was he doing?” Michael asked.

“He is a journalist,” Mel supplied, and Helen admired how steady her voice remained. “Sports mostly.”

“Cool,” Michael’s attention immediately shifted. “Did he know any famous players?”

The conversation drifted to safer topics, but Helen caught Diane watching her thoughtfully once or twice. Luckily, her daughter didn’t press for more details about their Hawaiian adventure. Later, as they gathered dishes for dessert, Diane cornered Helen in the kitchen. “You know,” she said quietly. “Whatever really happened in Hawaii, I’m glad you had Mel with you.”

Helen paused in slicing the apple pie. “What makes you think anything happened?”

Diane smiled, looking so much like her younger self that Helen’s heart ached. “Because I know you, Mom. And I’ve seen enough cop shows to know that ‘missing laptops’ don’t usually require this much careful explanation.”

Before Helen could respond, Mel appeared with a stack of dirty plates. “Need any help?”

“Perfect timing,” Diane said. “You can help Mom with the pie while I make coffee.”

As they worked side by side, Helen felt Mel’s familiar presence like a comfort. They moved in easy synchronization, gathering plates and forks, adding whipped cream to each slice. “Your family is wonderful,” Mel murmured. “Thank you for sharing them

with me.”

Helen touched Mel’s arm, remembering their Hawaiian adventure, the trust they’d built, the secrets they kept together. “Thank you for being someone I want to share them with.”

The evening wound down with the twins fighting sleep on the couch, while Sarah had disappeared into her room, claiming homework called. Tom and Diane curled together in the loveseat, looking content. Helen sat back, taking in the scene, marveling at how naturally Mel fit into this tableau of family life. “Next time,” Diane said as they prepared to leave. “You’ll have to stay the weekend. The twins especially would love it.”

“We’d like that,” Helen replied, hugging her daughter close. Over Diane’s shoulder, she saw Mel accepting shy hugs from the twins, and her heart felt full to bursting.

In the car, heading home, Mel reached for Helen’s hand. “That went well,” she said softly.

“It did,” Helen agreed, thinking of Diane’s knowing look in the kitchen. “Though I think Diane suspects there’s more to our Hawaii story than we’re telling.”

“She’s observant,” Mel said. “Like her mother.”

* * *

Back at their house, Mel settled into her evening routine, checking the locks, setting out the coffee grinder and filling the kettle for the morning while Helen got ready for bed. The familiar motions felt grounding after the emotional evening with Helen’s family. As she scrolled through news headlines on her phone, a particular story caught her eye. “Helen,” she called toward the bedroom. “Come look at this.”

Helen appeared in her favorite silk nightgown. “What is it?”

“Anonymous Source Exposes Major League Sports Corruption,” Mel read aloud. “A shocking tell-all book released today details systematic game-fixing across multiple professional sports.” She looked up at Helen. “It’s Abramson’s story.”

Helen sat beside her on the couch, leaning in to read. “Mickey did it,” she said softly. “He really got it published.”

Mel scrolled through the article, noting how carefully the source’s identity was protected. “Listen to this: ‘The revelations have already prompted investigations by several state gaming commissions and calls for congressional hearings.’” She shook her head in amazement. “Abramson was right about how big this would be.”

“Do you think he’s seen it?” Helen asked. “Wherever he is?”

“Probably,” Mel replied, remembering their last conversation with him at the airport. “This is exactly what he wanted. The truth coming out while he stayed safe and anonymous.” She continued to scroll. “Mickey did good work making sure nothing could be traced back to us or Abramson.” She paused on a particular paragraph. “Though I have to admit, part of me wishes we could tell people we helped break this story.”

Helen chuckled. “Like your new fans? Sarah and Michael would be even more impressed with their almost-step-grandmother if they knew.”

The casual way Helen referenced their future together made Mel’s heart skip. She set down her phone, turning to face her partner. “You know, watching you with your family tonight... it made me realize how lucky I am.”

“Oh?” Helen’s eyes twinkled. “Do tell.”

“Not just because you love me,” Mel continued, taking Helen’s hand. “But because your family is opening up to me. New people to tell my old cop stories too and teach how to make origami boats.”

Helen squeezed her hand. “They’re your family now too, you know. Even if we must keep some of our adventures secret from them.”

Mel leaned in to kiss her softly, still amazed at how naturally they fit together. When they parted, she reached for her phone again, wanting to finish the article. But a different headline caught her attention. “That’s odd,” she murmured.

“What is?”

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“Local story about a series of art gallery break-ins,” Mel said, frowning. “Nothing was stolen, but security cameras caught someone in black examining specific paintings very carefully.”

Helen sat up straighter. “Why is that odd?”

“Because it reminds me of a case I worked years ago,” Mel replied. “Someone was authenticating paintings before a major heist. Checking which ones were worth stealing.”

“Mel Nelson,” Helen said in that tone that meant she knew exactly where the line of thinking was going. “We just got back from one adventure. Are you already looking for another?”

Mel tried to look innocent. “I’m just reading the news.”

“Mmm hmm,” Helen hummed, but Mel saw the spark of interest in her eyes. “And I suppose you won’t be thinking about this at all tomorrow?”

“Well,” Mel said slowly, “there is that new gallery that opened downtown. The one you mentioned wanting to visit?”

Helen laughed, the sound warm and familiar. “You’re impossible,” she said fondly. “But I suppose we could stop by. Just to look at the art, of course.”

“Of course,” Mel agreed, setting her phone aside. “Though maybe I should call my old contact at the department first. Just to get some background on the break-ins.”

“Naturally,” Helen said, standing and pulling Mel up with her. “But that can wait until tomorrow. Right now, I think we both need sleep. It’s been a busy evening.”

As they got ready for bed, Mel couldn’t help but think about the art gallery case. But watching Helen move around their bedroom, so naturally part of her life now, she knew her priorities had shifted. Whatever mysteries lay ahead, they would face them together, on their own terms. “I can hear you thinking,” Helen said as they settled into bed.

“Just wondering what our next adventure will be,” Mel admitted, pulling Helen close.

“As long as it doesn’t involve large, black suitcases or masked attackers,” Helen murmured, already sounding sleepy.

Mel pressed a kiss to Helen’s temple, breathing in the familiar scent of her shampoo. “No promises,” she said softly. “But I’ll try to keep it to art galleries and maybe the occasional missing person.”

Helen’s quiet laugh was the last sound Mel heard before drifting off to sleep, her mind already spinning theories about the gallery break-ins. But that was tomorrow’s mystery. Tonight, she was content just to hold Helen and appreciate how their Hawaiian adventure had brought them even closer together. As she finally dozed off, Mel’s last thought was that maybe retirement wasn’t so bad after all, especially when she had someone to solve mysteries with.
