



Mele Mistletoe (Paradise Crime Cozy Mystery)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Im Kat Smith, former Secret Service, current postmaster, and awkward private eye in Ohia, Maui.

Im currently searching for a valuable, historical Hawaiian Christmas ornament gone missing, and I'm the six-foot-something center of controversy as our cozy small-town island mystery swirls with gossip, accusations, old feuds, and new friendships.

I have my hot pilot boyfriend Mr.

K, the Red Hat Society, and my beloved one-eared cat Tiki on the case—but I'm going to need all the help I can get to find the Queens Ornament, or the fundraiser organized by my very own Aunt Fae will be a bust.

Total Pages (Source): 18

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:27 am

1

As I balanced precariously on a stepladder in the Ohia Maui Post Office, sunset approached. Warm December air wafted in through an open window, carrying the scent of plumeria from the tree beside the General Store, along with a faint whiff of the nearby ocean. That sea breeze provided welcome relief for my exertions as I stretched to hang yet another ornament on the oversized fake tree occupying one corner of the room.

“Careful up there, Kat,” Pua Chang called. “I’d hate to have to fill out an incident report so close to Christmas and the holidays.”

I shot her a look; today Pua was pretty in pink, wearing a hot fuchsia dress adorned with a lei made of little gold bells. “Your concern is touching. I’m sure it has nothing to do with the mountain of paperwork you’d have to do.”

“You got that right,” Pua said. “You’re already six-foot-one. A stepladder seems like scary overkill.”

“And I don’t know how you put this tree up at all before I moved here, you being the size of an elf on the shelf.”

Pua was five-foot-nothing or less. After a bumpy start, we were friends as well as coworkers, but our height was only one of our differences. Pua was a fashionista; my idea of dressing up was a pair of clean jeans. Pua liked order and precision; I liked a little chaos with my coffee. “You must have needed an actual ladder to get to the top of this silly tree. Why don’t we have a smaller one?”

“Your postmaster predecessor bought it. I was hoping the thing would be ‘lost’ again this year.” Pua rolled her eyes. “I stashed it way in the back of that storage closet on purpose.”

“This is my fault then. I missed it last year when we were decorating. I can’t believe this is my second Christmas in Ohia already.”

“And now we’re here to help out,” my hot pilot boyfriend Keone said as he lugged in a box of decorations from an SUV pulled up in front. “Right, Mom?”

“Bringing the authentic Hawaiian look for contrast with all that traditional stuff.” Ilima Kaihale, Keone’s mother, followed her son inside, her arms laden with freshly cut, long green ti leaves. “I’ll set up over by the counter to make some decorative ti leaf rope.”

“Oh, that is going to be great, Auntie,” I said. “And Keone, what have you got in the box?”

“Something special. Come see.” Keone was still wearing his white polyester pilot uniform trimmed in gold braid and naughty fantasies. I admired his resplendence in my favorite outfit as I carefully made my way down from the stepladder and approached.

“So nice of you two to come help us with the decorating,” I said.

“And wait ‘til you see this.” Keone opened the box and then straightened up, holding a sprig of something green in his hand. He lifted it high. “Check out this exotic Mainland plant.”

I stepped forward, my eyes on the sprig—and one of his muscled arms encircled me. He pulled me in for a kiss—which went on for a bit.

It was a testament to how far we'd come from my former touchphobia that I not only tolerated his surprise embrace but enjoyed it. There was a time such a move would have endangered both his noggin and the family jewels.

"You brought mistletoe, I gather," I said a bit breathlessly when I came up for air.

Mr. K's eyes twinkled. I always thought that was a cliché, but dang if it didn't describe their expression perfectly. "Merely looking out for the well-being of my best postal detective."

"Your only postal detective. And don't you forget it." Keone and I ran a little side hustle called K use that coconut wireless gossip network of yours for good and make some flyers and such too. Music and rune reading from the Pahinuis, of course. Elle and I are handling the donations, food, and entertainment. Ilima, if you could donate one of your beautiful quilts for the auction, that would be wonderful."

Ilima nodded, her large brown eyes shining. "Luckily, I've been working on a design that represents our community. It's colorful, diverse designs stitched together to create a new pattern. It's almost ready."

"Perfect," Aunt Fae beamed. Then she turned to me. "And Kat, I have a special job for you."

"Why do I feel like I'm about to be volunteered for something I'm going to regret?" I asked.

Aunt Fae's grin was impish. "Because you know me so well. I need you to be our emcee and auctioneer."

I blinked. "I'm sorry, what? I can't do that patter thing auctioneers do!"

“You’ll be fine,” she assured me. “You’ve got a quick wit and a good heart. That’s all you need.”

“That and the ability to speak coherently in front of a crowd,” I muttered.

Keone nudged me. “Hey, you solved a murder mystery—several in fact. How hard can auctioneering be in comparison?”

I gave him a look. “Remind me to make you eat those words when I accidentally sell Aunty Ilima’s quilt for a dollar.”

Ilima chuckled. “Kat, I have faith in you. And if all else fails, just imagine everyone in their underwear.”

“Because picturing your son in his underwear while I’m speaking to a crowd definitely won’t make me more tongue-tied,” I said.

Everyone laughed. I slurped my eggnog to hide a blush as Keone gave me a kiss on the cheek.

Aunt Fae clapped her hands, mercifully changing the subject. “Alright, everyone. The auction’s on Christmas Eve. We’ve got a lot to do, but I know we can pull it together. Sometimes spur-of-the-moment events are the best ones.”

I rolled my eyes and drained the last of my eggnog. So much for relaxing this holiday season! The next day was going to be full, even though it was Saturday and the post office was closed. I began tidying up; Tiki didn’t help, chasing a colorful ball. “We should get on home then, people. Lots to do tomorrow,” I said. “Postmaster’s orders.”

Just then, Tiki wove between my legs, tripping me as she pounced on the ball. I stumbled but Keone caught my arm. “You got this,” he said. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I managed. “Besides wondering what Aunt Fae’s gotten me into this time.”

“Whatever it is,” he said, “we’ll deal with it together.” He grinned. “And look. Tiki got you maneuvered under the mistletoe. One more kiss for the road.”

I didn’t mind if I did.

As I watched Mr. K walk away to help his mother gather her things, I enjoyed the view with a smile. Whatever challenges this holiday had in store, with Mr. K at my side it was bound to be fun. “We’ve come a long way, baby,” I whispered.

The post office glowed with warmth and light, the scent of fresh ti leaf mingled with sweet island air, and I was surrounded by people who had become my ‘ohana. I was one lucky lady, and I knew it.

But . . . I’d learned the hard way that just when I was getting happy was often when the other shoe dropped. What disaster would hit Ohia this time?

Tiki rubbed against my legs as if sensing my change in mood, and Aunt Fae tweaked my nose. “You’re a million miles away, Kat. Let’s go home.”

I thrust my misgivings away and reached for the light switch. I left the lighted Christmas tree on, glowing and huge in the corner.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:27 am

2

The bell above the door of Ohia General Store jingled merrily as I stepped inside midmorning of the next day, my arms laden with a box of donated items for the auction. The familiar scent of coffee and spices mingled with the sweet aroma of the fresh pineapple laid out on the store's counter for customers to sample. Cluttered and dim, the store carried a little bit of anything and everything residents living in this remote location and tourists passing through might need.

I loved this quirky little store . . . and its owners—even more.

“Aloha, Kat!” Opal called from behind the counter, her white hair glinting in the sunlight streaming through the windows. Today she wore a green, glittery scarf pinned with a flashing Christmas tree. “Here for a coffee?”

“Yes, please.” I set my loaded box on the counter. “Aunt Fae’s got me running all over town picking up donations. I’m starting to feel like Santa’s most overworked elf.”

“I’ll get it for you.” Opal came around to the enormous pot and filled a paper to-go cup.

Artie, Opal’s husband, emerged from the back room, his weathered face creasing into a smile. “Hey, Kitty Kat.” He carried a tray of the couple’s famous coffeecake and weekend malasadas from Komoda Bakery in Makawao. I was still amazed by how well Artie navigated his world without sight. “At least Fae isn’t making you wear green tights and pointy shoes.”

“Don’t give Aunt Fae any ideas,” I groaned. “So, I know you both heard the call for donations. Got any treasures for the event today?”

Opal handed me the paper cup of coffee and took the tray of treats from her husband. She set it beside the enormous coffee machine. “Oh, we’ve got something special for you. Artie, bring out the box.”

I noticed the excitement in Opal’s voice. Whatever this item was, it was more than just another tchotchke; that was a good thing because I already had a box full of stuffed reindeer, Nativity scenes, menorahs, glass snow globes and other holiday knickknacks.

Artie disappeared into the back again, where the couple’s residence was attached to the store. He quickly returned, carrying a small, intricately carved wooden box. He placed it on the counter with the reverence reserved for priceless artifacts.

“This,” Opal said, her voice hushed, “has been in Artie’s family for generations. It’s a very special ornament with a connection to Hawaiian history.”

Artie nodded solemnly. “My great-grandfather received it as a gift from Queen Lili’uokalani herself.”

My eyes widened. “The last monarch of the Hawaiian Kingdom? That Queen Lili’uokalani?”

“The very same,” Artie confirmed. “It was a thank-you for my great- grandsire’s service to the royal family.”

“Can I look?”

“Please.”

I carefully opened the wooden box. Inside, nestled on a bed of soft kapa cloth, was a beautiful ornament. The large oval was made of what looked like mother-of-pearl, and was intricately carved with waves, heart-shaped leaves, and the royal crest of Hawaii. A filigreed gold ring was attached to the top with a loop for hanging.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathed, carefully lifting the carving from the box. The ornament caught the light, shimmering with an iridescent glow.

“We call this the Queen’s Ornament,” Artie said proudly.

“But . . . are you sure you want to donate this to the auction? It’s a family heirloom.”

Opal and Artie clasped hands. “We’ve talked about it,” Opal said. “We don’t have any children to pass it on to, and we’d rather see this treasure go to a good cause than sit in a box forever. We’ll enjoy the community center often, and we both love the idea of helping it come to pass.”

My throat tightened and I had to clear it to speak. “That’s incredibly generous of you. I’m sure it’ll raise a lot of funds.”

As I carefully set the ornament back in its cloth and placed it back in the box, the bell above the door jingled again. I glanced up to see Ilima Kaihale enter, statuesque in a green and red muumuu , her arms full of colorful crocheted and quilted lei.

“Kat, I thought I might find you here. I brought some leis for the auction . . . oh my, is that what I think it is?” Her gaze had landed on the ornament box, and a look of recognition crossed her face. “The Queen’s Ornament!”

“It’s time for it to find a new home,” Artie said.

“You know about this antique?” I asked, surprised.

Ilima nodded, her expression reverent. “Oh yes, it’s quite famous in certain circles. Artie, it’s so great that you want to donate it. May I?”

At Artie’s nod, Ilima unceremoniously piled her crafted lei into my box of donations. She lifted the ornament, turning it gently in her hands. “This ornament is more than just a beautiful piece of art. It’s a piece of our history, full of symbolism.”

Ilima explained the significance of each shape carved into the ornament. The waves represented the ocean that brought the first Hawaiians to these islands. The kalo leaves symbolized the land’s abundance. And the royal crest was a reminder of Hawaii’s proud heritage.

“You see, Kat,” Ilima said, “in Hawaiian culture, we don’t just value things for their monetary worth. Each object, especially one like this, carries mana —spiritual power and meaning. This ornament is a connection to our past, a reminder of who we are and where we come from.”

Deep appreciation welled within me. Since moving to Maui, I’d learned a lot about the culture, but moments like this made me realize how much more there was to understand and respect.

“Thank you,” I said to Ilima, Opal, and Artie. “For sharing this treasure with me—with our town. For trusting me with this precious gift that will benefit everyone in Ohia. I promise I’ll make sure it’s treated with the respect it deserves at the auction.”

Ilima smiled, carefully placing the ornament back in its box. “I know you will, Kat. You may not have been born here, but you’ve embraced our ways with an open and teachable heart. That matters.”

I arrived at the rec room in New Ohia with my box of goodies containing the special

ornament in my car. Left over from when the newly minted state park had been a development for the rich, the large, bare space had originally been a gym. Empty of equipment, it was now lined with folding tables. Several of those were already piled high with donated items.

“Where do you want these things, Auntie?” I asked Aunt Fae, who was conferring with Elle over a clipboard at one end of the room. Auntie abandoned the clipboard to intercept me.

“Change of plans. We’re taking all these donations over to Rita Farnsworth’s place. She’s offered to store everything in her garage until the auction. It’ll be more secure there, plus free up this room to be decorated and organized before the event.”

“Rita Farnsworth? The cat lady?”

Auntie chuckled. “That’s the one. Though she prefers ‘feline welfare advocate.’”

Keone soon arrived with his truck to help us move the donated items. As we loaded up Keone’s green Tacoma with boxes of donated items, I was excited to see how Maile Ortiz was doing. Rita not only helped cats in need of shelter, but she’d taken in a little girl in need of a home, and I hadn’t seen them in a while.

The drive to Rita’s house was several miles along the coast to the town of Hana’s lush streets. Rita’s place was on the edge of town, butted up against one of the Hana Ranch pastures.

As we pulled up at her comfortable place, I was struck by the cheerful chaos of a place that once had a sad, lonely air. Now the front yard was a riot of colorful flowers and sported a trampoline. Cat-shaped wind chimes tinkled in the breeze, hanging from every available spot.

Rita emerged from the house as we pulled up, a smile brightening her face. Per usual, she wore beige linen everything—but this time, a sparkling necklace of red-and-green crystals brightened up her outfit. “Kat and Keone! Your aunty told me you were on the way. Bring those boxes right into the garage. I have space cleared for them.” Rita opened a side door and disappeared; a moment later the rolling-style door of her garage rumbled open, revealing an empty area next to her parked car.

As we carried in our first boxes, a slight figure darted out from the house, her brown eyes wide with curiosity. The slender girl gave a shy wave. “Hi.”

“Hi Maile!” I called. “Nice to see you again. Remember me? I’m Kat.”

“I remember you. And Keone.” Maile smiled. “I can help.”

“Oh, Maile, I’m sure they’d appreciate that,” Rita said. “We can fill up this whole side of the garage with all the donations.”

My heart cockles warmed as Maile hurried to the truck bed to grab a box. Maile had been rescued from a bad foster situation and found a new home with Rita, who’d lost a daughter. It was good to see both of them looking happy and settled.

As we carried boxes and bags and piled them on a foldable table Rita set up for us, Maile helped, peppering us with questions about the auction items. Her eyes went wide when she saw the ornament box.

“What’s in there?” she asked, pointing. “It looks fancy.”

I shared a look with Keone before carefully opening the box to show her. “It’s a very special Christmas ornament. It used to belong to a Hawaiian queen.”

Maile’s eyes, if possible, got even wider. “A real queen? Like in stories?”

Keone squatted beside Maile. “That’s right. Queen Lili’uokalani. Would you like to hear about her and her gift to Artie Pahinui? He has donated this very special ornament to us to sell to raise money for the community center.”

As Keone told Maile about the last monarch of Hawaii and the meaning of the ornament, I helped Rita arrange the donations in the garage.

Through the open door into the backyard, I could see the enormous cat shelter Rita had. A series of cozy looking platform structures were built around a tree inside a huge cage. Cats of all colors and types lounged about in the sunshine.

“The cats look so happy, Rita,” I said, gesturing to the shelter. “You’ve done so much for them.”

Rita beamed. “They’re family for the time we have them. Like Maile has become.” Her voice softened. “That little girl has been through so much, but she’s got a generous heart. She helps me with the cats every day, and I think they help us, too.”

As if on cue, a fluffy orange tabby kitten sauntered into the garage, winding itself around Maile’s legs. The girl scooped up the kitten. “This is Lilikoi,” she announced proudly. “He’s my best friend.”

“Well, Lilikoi is very lucky to have you,” Keone said. “Will he let me pet him?”

“Sure.” She held out the tabby.

Yeah, my heart did another one of those flips at the sight of handsome Mr. K snuggling with the kitten and laughing with a little girl.

He’d make a wonderful father someday.

The thought brought an odd hollow feeling to my stomach. Would I ever have kids of my own? After being suddenly orphaned and overcoming a debilitating touchphobia, Keone was my first real relationship that had lasted more than a few months.

“I better not jinx it by even wishing for more,” I muttered to myself.

As we finished arranging the items, Rita told Maile to take Lilikoi back to his friends in the cat house. The two of them went into the backyard.

“It’s good to see her so happy,” Keone said, coming to stand beside me. “After everything that happened . . .”

I nodded, remembering the harrowing details of Maile’s situation. “She’s resilient. And she’s got a great foster mom in Rita.”

We prepared to leave, and Maile insisted on giving each of us a plumeria from Rita’s garden as a thank-you.

Keone tucked his plumeria behind his left ear playfully. He pointed it out to Maile. “Flower on the right means available. Flower on the left means taken. And I’m taken, by this beautiful woman right here.”

“Oh, my friend Windy Nakasone will be sad. She told me she wants to marry you when she grows up,” Maile said.

My eyes widened; Windy was a handful who’d had it in for me ever since Mr. K and I started dating. She and her sister Sandy had mellowed since a couple of Tiki’s kittens came into their lives, but I was always braced for insults when the two girls came to the post office for their mail.

Keone slung an arm around me. “Tell Windy not to worry. She’ll meet someone

special her own age when the time is right,” he told Maile.

Maile frowned, looking doubtful. “Okay. You’ll come back soon, right?” she asked.

“Of course,” I promised.

Maile and Rita waved goodbye from the driveway.

As we drove off, the scent of plumeria filling the truck, I reflected. This was what the auction was really about: not just raising money, but bringing the community together, honoring history, and building a better future for people like Maile and Rita—and the Nakasone girls, too, even if one of them had her eye on my boyfriend.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:27 am

3

The next morning dawned bright, clear, and just the right temperature; the kind of perfect Hawaiian day that still took my breath away. As I walked down to the beach for a morning exercise swim in my bikini, passing the rec center, I could feel excitement about the upcoming auction buzzing through Ohia like electricity. Aunt Fae had already been out and about since the crack of dawn, zipping around working on the event.

I spotted Elle jogging towards me, her long legs eating up the distance effortlessly.

“Kat!” Elle slowed to a walk beside me. Even exercising she looked gorgeous, her mixed heritage giving her a natural tawny glow. “Heading to Rita’s after the beach?”

“Yeah. Aunt Fae brought in more donations for me to take over.”

“I’ll join you. Aunt Fae wants me to double-check the items and start an inventory so we can separate the silent auction and live auction items.”

“Sounds good.” I was grateful for the company. “How’s the planning going?”

Elle grinned. “Like a well-oiled machine.” Her medical researcher’s precision was evident in her work as an event planner, too. “The rec room at the state park is going to look amazing. We’re even setting up a little stage for musicians and a dance area near the pool.”

We arrived at the beach. Elle had a fear of water she was working to overcome, so

she shed her shoes and socks and waded in up to her knees. I dove into the bright blue water of Ohia Bay and did my laps. As always, getting my blood flowing in the beautiful clear sea lifted my spirits.

We chatted on the way back to our neighborhood. “I’m excited my parents are coming out to visit this year,” Elle told me. “They’re bringing my little sister Gabby. She is going to love Ohia. They arrive tomorrow.”

“Oh, let me know if you need any company showing them the sights,” I said. “I’ll be sure to give Garbanzo a warm welcome.”

“Don’t you dare use her full name,” Elle scolded. “I’ll be in so much trouble for letting the Beane out of the bag.”

“Elle L Beane, her secret’s safe with me.”

Freshly showered and changed, the two of us arrived at Rita’s in Elle’s car to find Aunt Fae already there, clipboard in hand. Rita was busy in the kitchen, and the aroma of freshly baked bread wafted through the air. Maile was helping Aunt Fae as Lilikoi played around their feet, batting around a stray piece of Styrofoam packing material.

“Morning, girls!” Aunt Fae called cheerfully. “Ready to turn this garage into a staging area for our auction?”

We nodded. “I’ll bring these boxes in,” I said. “I’m the muscle.”

Elle pulled out her tablet. “I’ve got the floor plan for the community room right here. We should organize things based on where they’ll be displayed.”

“Excellent idea,” Aunt Fae said. “Let’s begin with our star attraction, the Queen’s

Ornament. We'll need to set up a special display for it."

"Oh, I like that name for it," Elle exclaimed. "Great PR title."

As Aunt Fae reached in among the piles for the ornament box, Keone arrived in his truck. He got out, his phone pressed to his ear. He seemed deep in conversation, his brow furrowed in concentration, and this was the third time I'd seen him like this lately. What was going on? My curiosity was definitely piqued.

Aunt Fae's sharp intake of breath snapped my attention back to her. "Girls," she said, her voice unnaturally calm, "please tell me one of you moved the ornament."

Elle and I exchanged worried glances. "What? No, we haven't touched it since yesterday. Why?" I asked.

Aunt Fae slowly turned to face us, her expression a mix of disbelief and growing worry. "It's not here."

The world seemed to tilt for a moment.

"I brought it here yesterday, straight from the Pahinuis," I said, rushing over to the box with Elle right behind me. But Aunt Fae was right.

Where the ornament should have been nestled in its bed of kapa cloth, there was nothing but empty space.

"Oh no," Elle breathed. "This is not good."

Keone, apparently finished with his call, joined us. "What's wrong?"

"The Queen's Ornament," Aunt Fae's voice was tight. "It's missing."

As the reality of the situation sank in, I felt a familiar mix of dread and determination settling over me. “Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath. “Let’s not panic. We need to retrace our steps and talk to everyone who was in and out of this garage since yesterday when I dropped it off.”

Elle, ever the organized one, already had her tablet out. “I’ve got a list of everyone who’s been involved in the auction prep and might have stopped by. We can start there.”

Aunt Fae nodded, her composure returning. “Good thinking, Elle. Keone, can you check the security of the garage? See if there’s any sign of a break-in. I’ll go talk to Rita.”

As Aunt Fae headed into the house, I turned to Keone and Elle. “I’ll start looking around here. Elle, can you start calling people on that list?”

They both nodded, but I couldn’t help noticing Keone seemed distracted, his eyes flicking to his phone. “Sure, good idea. I’ll, uh, check the perimeter first.”

As he walked away, Elle and I shared a look. “Is it just me, or is he acting weird?” Elle whispered.

“It’s not just you,” I murmured back. “But let’s focus on finding the ornament for now.”

Fifteen minutes later, we regrouped, all empty-handed. Rita joined us, looking worried.

“I can’t believe this,” she said, wringing her hands. “Nothing like this has ever happened here before.”

Suddenly, Aunt Fae straightened, a familiar glint of determination in her eyes. “Kat, Keone,” she said, her voice taking on a tone I recognized from childhood—the one that meant she had made up her mind about something. “I need to speak with you two privately.”

Exchanging curious glances, Keone and I followed Aunt Fae to a quiet corner of the garage, away from the others.

“Listen,” Aunt Fae began, her voice low but intense. “This isn’t just about a missing auction item anymore. That ornament is irreplaceable, and its disappearance could have serious repercussions.”

I nodded, feeling a knot form in my stomach. “We understand, Aunty.”

Aunt Fae took a deep breath. “I want you to find the ornament as K it was about preserving history, protecting our community’s trust, and hopefully, saving the auction that meant so much to Aunt Fae and Ohia.

No biggie. No pressure at all. “We got this,” I muttered. But did we?

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:27 am

4

Elle and Aunt Fae reconvened over the list of auction items in one corner of the garage, clearly handing the search for the missing ornament over to us.

I approached Rita, who was fingering her crystal necklace nervously. “Rita,” I asked. “Can you think of anyone who might have had access to the garage last night?”

She shook her head. “Just me and Maile, and we were inside all evening. Oh, and the volunteer who helps with the night feeding for the cats, but she never comes into the house or garage.”

“We’ll need to talk to her too,” Keone said. “What’s her name?”

“Leilani Akana,” Rita supplied. “She usually comes by around 8 PM. I’ll send you her number.” She did so. Our phones pinged.

“Can we speak to Maile?” I asked. “She was very interested in the ornament.”

Rita’s face paled. “I don’t think she would—” she didn’t finish her sentence, instead hurried inside the house. “I’ll get her.”

As Elle, Aunt Fae and I continued to discuss possibilities, I noticed Keone stepping away, his phone in his hand again. This time, I couldn’t quell my curiosity.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

He started slightly, as if he'd forgotten we were there. "Uh, yeah. Just checking in with . . . a friend."

I didn't push. Now wasn't the time, but I made a mental note to ask him about these mysterious calls when we were alone.

"Alright," Keone said. "We need to expand our search. I'll check to see if any of the neighboring houses have security cameras that might have caught something. Aunt Fae, maybe you and Elle can start calling the other volunteers who've been helping with the auction prep, see if anyone remembers anything unusual when they came by. Kat, you go in and talk to Rita and Maile."

As everyone dispersed to their tasks, I couldn't shake the feeling that this was more than just a simple theft. The ornament was valuable, but it wasn't something you could easily sell.

Something else might be going on here.

Entering Rita's house from the garage, I called out for our hostess and her ward. "In here," came Rita's voice.

I went through a cluttered but comfortable living room and down a hall to a bedroom outfitted for a young girl with a fluffy four-poster bed. Maile sat back against the headboard, holding her kitten close. Her face looked stricken. "Aunty Rita thinks I stole the Queen's Ornament," Maile said. "But I didn't. I promise." Tears started in the girl's big brown eyes. Suddenly she scrambled off the bed, the kitten in her arms, and crawled underneath it.

I remembered the first time I'd met Maile. She'd been hiding under a bed then, too. The kid had been through a lot. Who knew what kind of psychological issues might be going on that could contribute to an impulse to take the valuable ornament?

Rita and I exchanged a meaningful glance; I held a finger to my lips, then pointed to the girl's jewelry box and closet. Rita gave a slight nod and spoke. "Maile. It's okay. We're not singling you out. We're asking everyone who came by the house if they saw or heard anything."

"I didn't take it." Maile's muffled voice came from under the bed.

Meanwhile, I tiptoed across the carpeting, grateful that the bed's long ruffle would keep Maile from seeing what I was up to as I peeked into her box—nothing there but a few simple bits of jewelry.

"Come on out, Maile. You can help us look," I said, gesturing with my chin that Rita should check the closet once Maile was out of the room. "I'll be the sheriff, and you can be my deputy."

Eventually a tearstained Maile, Lilikoi in her arms, joined me. We went out into the garage and began looking through all the donations together. I pinned one of Ilima Kaihale's coconut frond stars onto each of our chests. "Now we're official sheriffs in charge of the search."

Maile rolled her eyes but seemed to feel a little better. Not long after, Rita reappeared and communicated with a little headshake that she hadn't found anything in the bedroom.

As the afternoon sun began to dip towards the horizon, casting long shadows across Rita's cluttered garage, Elle, Aunt Fae, Keone, and I regrouped to share our findings—or lack thereof. The atmosphere was tense, a mix of frustration and worry etched on everyone's faces.

Elle was the first to speak, her tablet balanced on her knee as she sat on an overturned crate. "I've contacted everyone on our volunteer list. No one saw anything

suspicious, and nobody has any idea where the ornament might be.”

Aunt Fae nodded; her usual vibrant energy was subdued.

“The neighboring houses didn’t have any useful security footage either,” Keone said. “Nobody saw anyone or anything unusual. There was a lot of coming and going because of the donations, so anyone could have taken it.”

I leaned against a stack of boxes, feeling the weight of failure pressing on me. “We’ve turned this place upside down. If it was here, we would have found it by now.”

Rita wrung her hands, looking devastated. “I just can’t believe this happened under my roof. I feel terrible. I offered the garage as storage because I thought things would be safer here.”

“It’s not your fault, Rita,” Aunt Fae reassured her.

A heavy silence fell over the group. The missing ornament wasn’t just a valuable antique—it was a piece of Hawaiian history, a tangible link to the past. Its loss felt personal, a blow to our community.

And who was going to tell the Pahinuis it was missing? I had promised them I’d keep it safe—so it had to be me.

I felt sick with dread, but that had to be our next stop. Maybe they knew something more about the ornament they weren’t telling us. In any case, they deserved to know it was gone—and not to hear about the loss through the coconut wireless.

“Aunt Fae, you asked Keone and I to take on finding the ornament. We’re going to do that. You and Elle and Rita keep going with organizing as if it will be there, the star

of the show. We'll take it from here." I spoke in my Secret Service crowd control voice; it projected a confidence I didn't feel. I grabbed Keone's hand. "Let's go."

We headed for his truck. Keone stepped closer to me, his voice low. "Where do we start?"

I opened the door and hopped inside. He did too. "Get us out of watching eyes," I said, without moving my lips. "I don't want Aunt Fae worrying. Or anyone else for that matter."

He reversed the truck without a word. We drove down the quiet street.

I took a deep breath, my mind racing. "We start at the beginning, by going to the Pahinuis and telling them the ornament is missing. Then, we reconstruct everything that happened yesterday, minute by minute. And we follow every lead, no matter where it takes us."

Mr. K slanted me a glance. "I'm going to need one of those stars on my chest if I'm going to get into this investigation properly."

I was glad to have a reason to smile. I wasn't looking forward to telling the Pahinuis their precious relic was gone.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:27 am

5

As we drove back to Ohia, Keone got a call from his mom. She asked him to make a quick trip into Kahului to shop for items for their large, annual Christmas luau, held every Christmas Day at their house in Hana. After he ended the call, he glanced at me. “You okay carrying on with the investigation on your own for the rest of today?”

“Only if you check in with Aunt Fae and see if she needs anything from Kahului,” I said.

He twinkled his eyes at me and hit his phone’s speed dial. Soon his phone pinged with a text from my busy aunt, who did indeed need a number of things from town—as did Elle, and also Edith Pepperwhite, our Red Hat lawyer friend.

“Got my list and it’s getting longer by the minute,” Keone said, pulling up at the parking lot in front of the post office and general store.

I had a fun idea. “Hold on, partner. I’ve got to grab something for you,” I said.

I jumped out of the truck, hurried up the steps of the post office, unlocked it, and ran over to the ti leaf garland Ilima had made. The garland was strung up around the edge of the counter and along the wall, and periodically marked with glitter-covered palm frond stars. I detached one and then retraced my steps back to the vehicle. I came around to the driver’s side.

Mr. K rolled down his window, and I leaned in to give him a quick kiss goodbye. One of the perks of being tall was how easy it was to reach him. “I’m glad you were off

from flights today. Here's your official K & K holiday investigator badge." I clipped the star onto the collar of his polo shirt with a large paper clip.

Keone grinned. "And I'm glad for any chance to be together, even if I have to spend it wearing our badge and hunting for a missing heirloom. Now it's official." He tapped the star. "Meanwhile, I'm hoping we'll get a little bit more mistletoe fun sometime soon. Want to grab dinner tonight after the dust settles?"

"Seems unlikely with all that's going on," I said. "But hopefully we get this sorted and the holiday can get back on track. Let's text."

I stepped back and waved as he drove off, then headed across the parking lot toward Opal and Artie's store.

Apprehension curled my toes in my favorite size 11 Nikes—I wasn't looking forward to ruining their day.

Artie must have recognized my footsteps coming up the porch and inside the tinkling door, because from behind the counter he lifted a hand and smiled in greeting. "Kitty Kat! Here to brighten my afternoon?"

"Not this time, uncle," I said. I had begun using the honorific customary among locals when speaking to elders at Artie's invitation. "Is Opal around? I need to speak to you all about something important."

"Right here," Opal said, bustling through the connecting door between their residence and the store. "Trying to keep these two rascals off my fancy outfit."

Today she was wearing a long denim skirt sewn with bright embroidery that came to her calves. The hem was trimmed in flashy gold tassels. Their two adolescent kittens, Tom and Jerry, leaped for the tassels every time Opal took a step. As soon as she

paused, Tom grabbed onto one of them, fighting and kicking at it, while Jerry couldn't seem to make up his mind which of those beside it to attack next. He crouched, readying himself, tail lashing.

"I guess I'm gonna have to put this skirt away for a few more years until they grow out of this stage," Opal said.

"I'm not sure any cat would grow out of wanting to get those tassels," I said. "That skirt is a next-level cat toy on the move."

Opal used her broom to detach the kittens and chase them back through the connecting door. "Whew! Did you just drop by to update us on progress with the auction? If so, grab yourself a root beer and pull up a stool. No customers right now, so we can all take five."

"Don't mind if I do, and yes—I have news."

I went to one of the glass-fronted refrigerators and helped myself to one of the artisanal Maine root beers that Opal had begun ordering special for me from my home state. The obscure brand had quickly become a village favorite, and this time I was lucky to find a last one still on the cold wire shelf.

Opening my frosty cold root beer with the pop-top opener shaped like a tiki that hung on a string from the end of the counter, I sat down on a folding stool in front of two of my favorite 'ohana elders. "Bad news is what I have today. Brace yourself, friends." I took a fortifying sip of frosty sweet root beer. "The Queen's Ornament has disappeared from its case in Rita's garage."

"What?" Opal pale blue eyes went round with shock.

"How?" Artie scowled, thick black brows drawing together. "What happened?"

“We’re trying to find out. I stored the box holding the ornament in the garage with the other items I had collected that day. I know it was there because I showed it to little Maile Ortiz, while Keone told her the history. We’ve been so excited about your donation. The ornament has made a real stir and brought a lot of interest in the auction, once I told Aunt Fae and Elle about how special it was.” I paused to wet my whistle with more root beer—my voice had gone wobbly at the sight of Opal and Artie’s stricken expressions. “A lot of people came and went from Rita’s garage dropping off items the rest of the day after I put the ornament box on the table. Keone, me, Aunt Fae, Elle, and Rita spent the morning looking through the items, calling donors who had come by, and asking the neighbors if they’d seen anything. So far, no leads.”

Opal’s narrow, pale handreached over to clasp her husband’s thick brown one. The way their aged fingers intertwined as they held each other’s hands was a beautiful sight. It brought a lump to my throat—and that tightened further with Opal’s words.

“I’m so disappointed, Kat. I thought you said you’d keep it safe.”

I cleared my throat to speak. “I know, and I’m so sorry. If I had realized . . . In hindsight, I should’ve taken the ornament home and put it in the wall safe at our house.” I cast my gaze down at my root beer and fiddled with the poky-edged metal top. “I will do my best to find it for you. Meanwhile, I thought it was time that I came and told you what has happened.”

“We have never kept it locked up,” Artie said, with a chastising glance at his wife. “Don’t blame yourself, Kat. Someone saw an opportunity to make trouble and took it. It’s as simple as that.”

“And that leads me to the next part of what I wanted to talk to you about, which is that Keone and I are officially investigating the loss at Aunt Fae’s request. Is there anyone you know who has an interest in the ornament, or made indication that they

wanted it? Anyone you suspect might have taken it?”

“Maybe tell her about the Namolo family and their claim on the ornament,” Opal said to her husband.

My eyebrows went up. “The Namolo family?”

Artie nodded. He cast his sightless eyes up and to the left, clearly recalling something.

“As we told you, the ornament was given by the queen to my great-grandfather Liko Pahinui for his willingness to stand up to the troops that had appeared to overthrow the queen. She also gave an ornament to another man, Adam Namolo, my great-grandfather’s fellow guardsman. But before the two men left Iolani Palace and the Queen’s service, Namolo’s ornament was lost. He later claimed that my great-grandfather’s gift was his, and that there was only one of them. The Namolos and the Pahinuis have not been friends since. Now and then, the descendants will try to claim that we have their ornament. The fact that Opal and I never had children has made them send us letters over the years, requesting that we give it to their family.”

That sounded like motive to steal to me. Maybe one of the Namolos or their friends had seen an opportunity to take the ornament. “You said there were letters. Can I see them?”

Opal shook her head. “We did not keep them. I found the whole thing toxic and wrong.”

“Can I get the name of whoever wrote you the last letter? Maybe they had feelers out about the ornament on the ‘coconut wireless’ and heard it was being donated. I will try to establish if they might have been able to get into the garage.” I stood up from the stool and drained the last of my root beer. I was restored by having a lead to run

down.

Opal wrote down the names of the Namolo family members she knew of and handed that to me on a slip of paper. “Only one Namolo lives in Hana that we’re aware. An old man and a bachelor.”

“Malcolm Namolo,” Artie said. “He’s my age.”

“But not a nice person like my Artie. Malcolm is known as a hard man who holds a grudge,” Opal said.

“Okay. I better get going and see what I can find out,” I said. “I’ll keep you posted.”

As I walked out of the store, I decided to take a walk around town to burn off some energy. The sun dipped lower in the sky, casting a warm golden glow over Ohia. I found myself walking up toward the church at the top of the hill, my mind churning over the events of the day. I enjoyed the sensation of a good huff and puff as my Nikes ate up the bumpy old blacktop and I passed the orderly streets of Ohia, each named for a Hawaiian flower, each lined with little plantation style homes that had once been housing for workers of pineapple fields that were long gone.

Once I reached the church, which was closed as usual but still charming to walk around, I browsed the graveyard behind it, coming to a stop beside the row of polished circular black stones that marked the Chang family's resting places.

I stared at the stones, reflecting on the last time I was here. I'd walked among them with Pua as she told me her family's history, how Ohia was where the Changs, a notorious organized crime family, had gotten their start in Hawaii.

I was so thankful Pua and I had worked out our differences, but even more so, that the hold of her family's crime syndicate had loosened and fallen away from the town now that the state had taken back ownership of their corrupt development, New Ohia.

Would that have happened if I hadn't been placed here as Postmaster by my boss in the Secret Service? I had been the one to crack the case and expose what was going on. Yes, I'd had a lot of help—but without me, New Ohia would likely be moving forward, changing this area forever—and not for the better.

I was making a difference in this town. I was doing good here. Helping people, and not just from behind the counter of the post office.

And yeah, I'd made a bad call about the ornament and left it vulnerable—but I might still be able to find it before the auction and redeem myself.

I browsed on among the gravestones—and came to a simple plinth decorated with a couple of macaroni necklaces and a vase of browning gardenias. Beloved Wife And Mother, MICHELLE NAKASONE , the headstone read. Always in Our Hearts.

The weight of the investigation Aunt Fae had entrusted us with sat heavily on my shoulders—but seeing the grave, I remembered two ornery motherless girls for whom Christmas was no longer merry.

Sandy and Windy Nakasone were on their front porch, surrounded by battered boxes of decorations. Their two kittens, brother and sister to Tom and Jerry and Tiki's offspring, were making untangling the strings of lights difficult.

My heart ached a little at the sight. It had been two years since their mother passed away, but the holidays were still hard for them.

“Kat!” Sandy called out, waving me over. “Can you help us put these decorations up before Dad gets home?”

I jogged up their driveway, pushing aside my worries about the missing ornament. “Glad I was passing by. Of course!”

Windy, the younger of the two, grinned sheepishly. “We want to surprise Dad when he gets home from work. He's been so tired lately . . .”

“He pulls up the driveway after dark. We thought it might cheer him up to see the

lights and decorations when he gets home,” Sandy finished. The girls wore clean clothing and their hair had been combed. They looked better than they had in the past; but still—I felt a lump form in my throat.

Joe Nakasone had been working double shifts at a construction site in Hana, an improvement over his long drive to Kahului for work last year. Their aunt Lani, who worked at the hotel, also lived with them and helped out, but Maui was an expensive place to raise a family. The girls were Ohia’s latchkey kids, with neighbors like me keeping an eye out for them when we could.

“That’s a wonderful idea,” I said, kneeling to open one of the boxes. “Let’s see what we’ve got to work with.”

For the next hour, we sorted through tangled lights, slightly worse for wear garlands, and ornaments that had clearly seen better days. The girls’ two young cats “helped” by batting at the lights and pouncing on anything that moved.

“Sorry it’s not much,” Sandy said, a hint of embarrassment in her voice as she held up a faded plastic wreath whose ribbon had disintegrated. “We haven’t been able to afford new decorations in—ever.”

I squeezed her shoulder. “Hey, it’s not about how new or fancy the stuff is. It’s about the love you put into the decorating. And trust me, your dad is going to love this.”

As we worked, I noticed how the girls’ eyes lit up, talking about Christmases past and the traditions their mom had started. It was bittersweet, but I was glad to see them smiling.

We were just finishing up, with Sandy precariously balanced on a stepladder to hang lights along the porch roof, when I noticed a group of women in vibrant red hats making their way up the street, singing carols. The Red Hat Society, out for a little

chorus walk—and one of my favorite ladies, Josie, was carrying an ukulele and providing a strong musical backup.

“Well, would you look at this!” Edith Pepperwhite, short and gnomelike in her witch-style red topper, called out to us. “Seems Christmas has come to Plumeria Street!”

The group approached, and I recognized more familiar faces: Dot who worked at the Hana library, and Beatrice, a retired schoolteacher, as well as Rita and Maile.

Maile ran up onto the porch and greeted her friends and the kittens. The girls had all bonded last year when Maile appeared at the Hana Hotel after her ordeal. “I knew you’d be putting up something!”

“We brought dinner!” Rita exclaimed, holding up a big bag of takeout. “Hope you’re hungry.”

“Starved,” Sandy said. “Thanks, Aunty Rita.” The slender girl hugged Rita’s waist.

Beatrice’s eyes softened as she took in the scene. “Girls, this looks wonderful. Your mother would be so proud.”

Sandy and Windy exchanged a glance, a mix of sadness and pride in their eyes. “We still miss her,” Windy said.

“You know,” Dot said, reaching into her purse, “I think I have just the thing to add to your display.” She pulled out a small, handmade angel ornament fashioned of wire and beads. “Your mom helped make these one year at the library. This one that she made was left. I think she’d want you to have it.”

Windy took the ornament, her eyes bright. “Thanks, Aunty Dot.”

“It’s beautiful. Mom was so good at making things.” Sandy took the ornament from her sister and hung it from the center of the battered wreath, then hung that on their front door, a finishing touch.

“It looks great!” Dot exclaimed. “Like it was meant to be there.”

“And now, how about a song? Let’s start with Jingle Bells. Everyone knows that one,” Josie said. A statuesque Hawaiian woman, she was striking with her hair braided in a crown around her head and a wreath of twinkling battery-operated lights atop it. She struck a chord and led us strongly in a Hawaiian-style rendition.

I walked around the porch, picking up rubbish and collecting and stacking the ornament boxes. I took them to the garage and tidied everything up, letting the girls enjoy singing in the impromptu concert.

As we were going into the third song and darkness had fallen, Joe Nakasone drove his truck up the driveway—and I got to witness his grin at the sight of the decorations, the excitement of the girls, and the family’s hugs with the Red Hat ladies.

Yeah, it was the best of Hawaii’s holiday spirit, and I loved being the middle of it all.

I bid everyone goodbye as we all walked back down the driveway. “I’m on a case,” I told them. “Gotta go. Day’s a-wasting.”

“You mean the day’s long gone, And yeah, we heard,” Edith frowned. “Someone stole the Queen’s Ornament. Who would do a thing like that?”

“Well, I have a lead I need to follow up on,” I said. “And even though it’s after dark, we’re running out of time left until the event. Tomorrow’s Monday and I have to work the post office. So following up with this is now, or much later.”

“I bet you’re going to see Malcolm Namolo,” Josie said. She strummed a dramatic chord on her ukulele. “And I’m telling you, don’t go alone.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:27 am

7

As I jogged home from the Nakasones', my mind circled back to the case at hand. Despite the day's many distractions, the missing ornament still weighed heavily on my mind.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and called Keone. Maybe he would be back in time to go with me to Namolo's house in Hana.

To my surprise, he picked up. "Hey. I'm almost to Ohia. I'm coming the back way. Was hoping you still wanted to get a bite to eat."

"Perfect. I'm starved. And I need company for a home visit after we eat. Let's meet at Braddah Hutts outside of Hana and go from there."

As I arrived at Braddah Hutts food truck in my white SUV nicknamed Sharkey, I sniffed audibly. I got out of my vehicle, taking in the scent of smoky, grilled meats mingling with the salty breeze coming off the nearby ocean.

I spotted Keone at a picnic table, his face lit up with a welcoming grin. "There's my Kitty Kat!"

"Dude. I don't mind you calling me that when we're alone, but . . ." I quirked a brow. "It's a tad diminutive for public consumption, don't you think?"

"That's my woman, setting a boundary," he said, not missing a beat. "I got you your favorite."

He pushed over a to-go container piled high with tender, juicy kalua pork with sticky rice and a green salad on the side.

“Mr. K, you’re the best.”

“I aim to please.”

The first bite was a burst of savory flavor, perfectly seasoned and cooked to perfection. My stomach activated with a vengeance and so did his; there was no conversation for a bit as we made short work of the delicious food. “So, there’s this dispute between the Pahinuis and Namolos,” I explained, wiping my hands on a napkin as I finished my meal. “Artie told me the Namolos have been trying to get the ornament from them for years.” I filled in the details.

“Sounds like they have a reason to take it.” Keone’s expression was thoughtful. “A classic family feud. But why did Josie warn you about Namolo?”

“I’m not sure,” I replied, glancing around at the bustling food truck scene. “She just said not to go alone when I went to his house. What do you know about him?” Keone and his family, the Kaihales, were longtime Hana residents. Everyone seemed to know everyone here—and many were related.

“Not much. Only Malcolm lives here in Hana. His wife died ten years or so ago. He’s retired, keeps to himself. I see him fishing sometimes when I go surfing. He’s got a mean dog, though. Maybe that’s why Josie warned you.”

“Well, let’s stay positive. Sounds like, if he lives alone, he might appreciate a nice container of kalua pig from Braddah Hutts.” I stood up, waving for Keone to stay seated. “You got dinner. I’ll get this.”

After I bought a quart of smoked kalua pork, we got into Keone’s green Tacoma,

leaving Sharkey parked beside the food truck. Keone knew roughly where Namolo lived, but a quick call to his mom got us exact directions.

The road wound through dense tropical foliage; the truck's headlights cast stark light and shadow on the narrow street as we drove to Namolo's address outside of Hana.

Namolo's cottage appeared even more run-down than I'd imagined, its wooden boards weathered and paint peeling, when we finally found it hidden behind a thick ti leaf hedge.

A mean-looking pit bull barked ferociously from the yard, its chain giving an ominous rattle as we parked and got out of the truck in the driveway.

"Looks like we have an unwelcoming committee," Keone remarked, his voice low.

We approached the house but didn't have a chance to knock before Malcolm Namolo stepped out onto the porch. He had the height and build of one who'd once been an imposing man. His posture was hunched, and his face lined with age and suspicion in the porch's overhead light. "What do you want?" he demanded, eyes narrowed.

"Hi." I tried my best smile. "I'm Kat and this is Keone?—"

"I know who you are. The haole postmaster and the Kaihale boy who's a pilot."

"Hey, uncle," Keone said. "Good to see you again. We're collecting items for the holiday auction for a new community center. Were wondering if you had anything to donate?"

"Nah." Namolo folded his arms. "No need for a community center."

I advanced and held out the container of barbecue to the man. The dog increased its

aggressive barking. “We were at Braddah Hutts. I picked up some kalua pork for you.”

“What for?” He took the container, looking genuinely puzzled as he stared down at it. I didn’t try to answer over the barking—but finally he turned to the hound. “Quiet, Cujo.”

“Good name,” Keone said, as Cujo sat down and shut up.

“What do you really want?” The warm container of kalua pork was working its magic, and Namolo’s expression had softened—if only slightly.

“We’re here about the Queen’s Ornament,” I said, keeping my tone calm and steady. “Wondering what you might know about it.”

“I heard it was going to be given to that auction. And that’s not right because it belongs to my family.”

The air felt heavy with unspoken history and tension.

“Artie told me that your ancestor claimed it was his, but that his ornament was actually lost or stolen,” I ventured.

Namolo snorted. “He would say that. My great-grandfather told us Pahinui was the one to take it, and that they have two of them. That’s why it was easy for him to donate one.”

I struggled not to react to this unlikely accusation. “Have you had any disputes with the Pahinuis lately?” I asked. “Personally, I mean.”

“I nevah go their store. We don’t speak.” Namolo’s eyes flashed. “They think they

can take what's ours. It's not right."

I nodded. We wouldn't get anything more out of the man and might provoke him further. "Thank you for your time. Hope you enjoy the pork. I had some earlier; it's delicious."

As we walked back to the car, Cujo started barking again.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:27 am

8

Keone spoke when we'd pulled out of Namolo's driveway and were on the road. "Well. That wasn't helpful."

"Yeah," I agreed, the puzzle of the ornament still gnawing at me. "Glad Cujo didn't get off his chain, at least. But I have a feeling there's more to this story. I'm just not sure where to go with it next."

"I have an idea." Keone's eyes lit with excitement as he glanced at me. "I was waiting on some prescriptions for Mom and did some digging with my phone on the history of the ornament. And I think I found something. Someone we can talk to, at least." He pulled the truck over onto the long grass on the side of the shoulder. "Let me pull this up on my phone." A few minutes later he frowned at the device. "Not enough signal. Do you mind coming back to my place for a while?" He wagged his brows. "I'll make it worth your time."

I grinned. "You talked me into it. Drop me at Braddah Hutts so I can get Sharkey, and I'll follow you home."

"I like the sound of that last bit." He stroked my leg in a way that reminded me it'd been a while. "Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly."

"Don't mind if I do," I replied. "This fly's got a thing for spiders named Mr. K."

Later, after we'd taken care of romantic bodily needs and had a shower, Keone opened his laptop on the kitchen table of his little cottage. He turned the laptop

towards me, revealing an old newspaper article from the 1980s. The headline read: “Dispute Over Ancient Hawaiian Artifact Ends in Compromise.”

“According to this,” Keone explained, “the ornament was at the center of a heated debate between two prominent Hawaiian families: the Pahinuis and the Namolos. Both claimed it as part of their ancestral heritage.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” I leaned in, scanning the article. “So how was it resolved?”

“That’s the thing,” Keone said, his voice lowering. “The article says a compromise was reached, but it doesn’t give details. The guy who brokered the compromise is semiretired and lives right here in Hana. His name’s Dr. Sheldon Hale.” He pronounced the man’s last name the Hawaiian way— Hah-lay. “I think we should pay him a visit.”

I sat back in my chair, biting my bottom lip. “While it’s fascinating to dig into this ancient history about the ownership of the ornament, time’s a-wasting, as Aunt Fae would say. I honestly think this was a crime of opportunity, rather than calculation. Someone came to drop off a donated item, saw the fancy box the ornament was in, opened it and nabbed it because it was pretty and unusual.”

Keone got up. He wore a pair of black flannel boxers embellished with red-nosed reindeer that I’d bought him for the holidays; they were surprisingly sexy. Or maybe it was the man that wore them. “Want some hot chocolate? One of the passengers on my last flight gave me a gift basket that had some inside it.”

“Of course.”

While he put water on to heat, I looked around the simple dwelling. An original plantation house built in the early days of Hana town, the cottage was right beside

Keone's mom's place on the same property. Ilima's sewing talent was on display with a framed baby quilt that had been Keone's as a child. She had made his infant clothing into a traditional pineapple pattern against a white cotton background. The woman could make anything beautiful.

"I never noticed your baby quilt before." I pointed to the piece on the wall.

Keone smiled. "Mom's sentimental."

"But she's an artist first," I said, getting up to approach and view the way she had carefully pieced together pieces of blue onesie and little boy overalls into pineapple shapes and hand sewn them with nearly invisible stitches onto the batting. "I have so much respect for her."

He came to stand with me, sliding an arm around my waist and pulling me close. "I'm glad. Because since Dad died, it's part of my kuleana , my responsibility, to look after Mom. She will always be a big part of my life."

"I love a guy who loves his mama. I get it." I kissed him. "As I have kuleana to look after Aunt Fae. And Opal and Artie."

He turned me in his arms. "Guess we're not going anywhere, then."

"Where would we go?" I smiled. "I went all over the world with the Secret Service, and there's nowhere I'd rather be than right here on the east side of Maui. Ohia, specifically. Hana, in a pinch."

Keone gazed at me and there was something troubled in his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak—and then the hot water whistled; it was ready.

Seemingly relieved, he let go of me and went to pour it into our mugs. A minute later,

he brought me back a mug decorated with palm trees ringed in Christmas lights. The thick dark chocolate smelled divine, and a peppermint candy cane rested inside for stirring.

“Oh, this looks yummy.” I stirred the chocolate with the already melting sweet before glancing at Mr. K. “You looked like you were about to say something important.”

He smiled and sat back down at the table. “Later. Let’s get some more direction for this investigation. I’m thinking we relook at the list of people who had access to the garage. You said Elle had that somewhere?”

I sat down across from him. “Yes. Let me give her a quick call. Maybe, when we look through the list, some connection will pop.”

As I sat back in the cozy warmth of Keone’s kitchen, the scent of hot chocolate lingering in the air, I picked up my phone to call Elle. The soft hum of the refrigerator and the gentle rustle of palm fronds outside provided a comforting backdrop as the phone rang in my ear.

Elle answered on the second buzz. “Hey, Kat! What’s up?”

“Hi, Elle. I need that list of people who had access to the garage where the ornament was stolen.”

“Sure thing,” she replied, a hint of curiosity in her voice. “Give me a second to pull it up.”

While I waited, I glanced over at Keone, who was sipping his hot chocolate and watching me intently. The warmth in his eyes felt like a caress. I could get used to these good feelings; but the cautious part of me that had been hurt knew it wasn’t safe to.

“So you called all these people and asked them if they’d seen the ornament?” I refocused on the task at hand.

“I did. I asked specifically about the fancy box it was in, without telling them what it was. Some confirmed they’d seen the box but hadn’t opened or handled it. Most said they hadn’t noticed the box. No one admitted to opening it.”

“Okay,” I said, frowning as I stirred the rapidly dissolving peppermint stick into the last of my hot chocolate. Of course the thief hadn’t said they’d taken the ornament . . . Why would they admit to such a thing?

“Got the list,” Elle said, breaking my thoughts. “I’ll send it to you now.”

“Thanks.”

“What are you going to do with it, Kat?”

“Nothing specific. Keone and I are running back through everything, looking for anything we might have missed. How’s the event coming along?”

Elle sighed. “Between work, my family arriving tomorrow, and putting on that fundraiser, I haven’t had time to take a pee. Whether or not the ornament is found, we’re full steam ahead. I hope you like crocheted coasters and homemade coconut candy, because we’ve got a lot of that to sell.”

“I love that coconut candy. I hereby commit to buying a ton of it. I can leave it out on the post office counter for people to help themselves to when they get their mail,” I said. “I’m a big fan.”

“Great. One less thing to worry about getting rid of! Keep me posted.” Elle ended the call.

A moment later, my phone buzzed with the incoming message she sent.

I opened the list and scanned the names quickly, holding my phone out for Keone to see. Our faces bumped as we tried to read at the same time.

One name stood out to me as someone I'd heard mentioned before: the person who helped with Rita's cats. "Keone, do you know this Leilani Akana?" I pointed to the name.

He sat up straighter, recognition dawning on his face. "Yeah, she works at the Hana History Museum as their coordinator. She's got a connection with Dr. Hale through that. He's the head of the board."

I nodded. "That might be our next step. We should talk to her."

Keone smiled, his excitement infectious. "Let's set it up. This could be a lead. Mom knows her."

"Nice when you live in a small town and everybody knows everybody," I said. "Rita gave us her phone number already."

As the evening breeze whispered through the open window, I spotted a little house gecko on the screen. It darted forward, grabbing a moth.

I hoped we were one step closer to nabbing our thief and solving the mystery of the Queen's Ornament.

The scent of night-blooming jasmine from a nearby hedge mixed with the musty sweetness of old wood as Keone and I approached the Hana History Museum after parking nearby. The building, a former general store from Hana's early days, had the weathered dignity of a structure that had seen nearly a century pass. Through glass-paned windows, warped with age, Christmas lights twinkled around a half-decorated tree.

The old porch creaked as we stepped inside. The floorboards, worn smooth by countless footsteps, announced our arrival with a gentle groan. The door was ajar, and a crack of light welcomed us. I pushed the door gently, and it creaked open.

"Hello?" Keone called out. "Ms. Akana? I just texted you."

"Hey Keone. I'm glad you made it. I've been looking forward to meeting Ilima's boy. And our new postmaster." A woman perched on a stepladder turned at the sound. She wore a faded muumuu in shades of green and white, her silver-streaked dark hair pulled back in a loose bun. At her feet, an elderly dog's tail thumped against the floor, stirring motes of dust that danced in the glow shed by a lamp and the strings of light she held. "I'm getting ready for our holiday open house this coming week." The scent of pine intensified as she shifted a branch to hang a delicate antique glass ball. "Got a real tree from the continent this year. And call me Auntie Leilani, please."

"Thanks for agreeing to talk with us on such short notice," I said. "Auntie Leilani."

"Of course." She descended the wooden ladder with careful steps, each rung

protesting slightly. The dog heaved himself up and padded over to us, his nails clicking against the floor. His tail never stopped wagging. “This is Poi Dog. He showed up here one day about eight years ago and never left.”

I knelt to scratch behind Poi Dog’s ears. His coat was a patchwork of brown and white, coarse but clean. One ear stood at attention while the other flopped endearingly. He leaned into my touch, his body warm and solid against my leg. “He’s adorable.”

“We wanted to ask you about the Queen’s Ornament,” Keone said. The gentle, flickering twinkle of the holiday strands caught the planes of his face, highlighting his strong cheekbones and full lips.

I chimed in. “Keone and I are trying to locate the ornament after it went missing from the donation table at Rita’s.”

Leilani nodded, setting down a cardboard box that rattled with the sound of glass ornaments. “Oh yes, Elle called me about that. Such a shame someone took it.”

“We’re trying to piece together its history. It was donated by the Pahinui family for the fundraiser auction.” I watched her face carefully. “Did you happen to notice it when you were sorting through the donations?”

Leilani’s hands stilled on the ornament she held. She shook her head firmly. “I helped sort items, but I don’t recall the fancy box Elle mentioned.” She hung the glass ball she was holding, its surface reflecting the Christmas lights in fractured patterns. “Such a disgrace about the theft. That piece has quite a history in our little town.”

Keone moved to the box of glass balls. “Let me help.” He picked one up and hung it. “We were wondering if Dr. Hale might know something.”

“Maybe something in its history gives us a clue about who might have taken it,” I added.

“Maybe. He’s on the board of the Museum, you know, and he’s been a good friend over the years. Donated quite a collection of historical documents and artifacts.” Leilani glanced at an ancient clock on the wall, its pendulum marking time with soft clicks. “He should be home now. He keeps to a pretty strict schedule these days.”

“Could you give us directions to his house?” I asked, straightening up from petting Poi Dog.

“Of course. Head up toward the bay, take a left at the breadfruit tree. You can’t miss it—it’s huge. His place is the third house on the right. Yellow with white trim, lots of ti plants out front.” She headed for the ladder again.

Keone stabilized it. “Kat, let’s help hang all the ornaments that go on the higher branches before we go. I don’t want to leave Auntie alone here on a ladder.”

“You so sweet, Keone,” Leilani said. “Ilima always says so.”

“He is,” I agreed, approaching the tree with a glass ball in my hands. “And I agree about the ladder. We should have this done quickly for you because we don’t need one.” I reached up past Leilani to hang my ball near the tippy top. “Benefit of being tall.”

“Got to agree with that,” she chuckled. Keone helped her down and it only took minutes for Keone and me to finish decorating the higher branches.

“Well, if you happen to hear anything . . .” I let the sentence trail off.

“Of course.” Leilani’s voice was warm but definite. “You should really talk to Dr.

Hale. He knows more about that ornament than anyone else in Hana.”

The door’s brass bell tinkled as we stepped out into the humid Hana night, leaving behind the pine scent and history-laden air of the museum. As we walked toward our car, I glanced at Keone. “What do you think?”

“About Aunty Leilani? Or about Dr. Hale?”

“Both.” I smiled. Some days, I really loved how in sync we were.

“She’s a good lady, and I’m guessing he is a good man. If they had anything to do with the disappearance, they had a reason.”

The gracious old house the Hales lived in took me by surprise. Unlike most of the small, plantation style homes making up the adjacent towns of Hana and smaller Ohia, theirs was a large, two-story Victorian painted a cheery yellow with white trim, just as Leilani had described. Two varieties of ti plants lined a gracefully curved driveway, their alternating red and green leaves rustling in a gentle night breeze.

“Someone did well for themselves,” I murmured to Keone as we climbed the front steps. The lanai wrapped around three sides of the house, populated with comfortable-looking rattan furniture and hanging orchids. Large, brightly colored bulb style Christmas lights fixed around the border of the ceiling provided plenty of illumination.

Before we could knock, a loud “MRRROWWW!” announced our presence, followed by the appearance of a sleek Siamese cat in the window beside the door. The cat fixed us with brilliant blue eyes and let out another commanding yowl.

The door opened to reveal a tall, distinguished older Hawaiian man, wearing khakis and an aloha shirt. Behind him stood a shorter Japanese woman with silver hair tied

back in a neat bun, wiping her hands on a flour-dusted apron. The heavenly scent of baking and vanilla wafted out to surround us.

“May we help you?” Dr. Hale asked, his voice rich and deep.

“Sorry to intrude on your evening. I’m Kat Smith, the new postmaster in Ohia, and this is Keone Kaihale. Leilani Akana suggested we come speak with you about the Queen’s Ornament.”

“Ah, yes. I heard the ornament was donated. I bet that caused a stir,” Dr. Hale said. “And Keone, I recognize you. I taught history at the high school back when and had you as a student one year.”

Keone ducked his head. “I remember. I didn’t put the name together until this moment. I hope I wasn’t too kolohe back then.”

“A little mischievous, but nothing I couldn’t handle,” Dr. Hale said.

Mrs. Hale’s face brightened as she came around from behind her spouse. “Oh, please come in! I’m just taking a batch of shortbread out of the oven. Would you two like some cookies and tea?”

“That would be wonderful,” I answered for both of us.

The Siamese cat wound between our legs as we entered, still vocalizing. “That’s Pumpernickel,” Dr. Hale explained with an indulgent smile. “He runs the household.”

“MRRROWW!” Pumpernickel agreed.

We followed the couple into a formal living room furnished with antique koa wood furniture and family photos. The Christmas tree in the corner sparkled with vintage

ornaments, and more family photos lined the walls, including one that caught my eye: a much younger Dr. Hale standing between two groups of Hawaiians who appeared to be in the midst of a heated discussion.

“That was the day of the compromise,” Dr. Hale said, following my gaze and pointing to the photo. “1980. Hot day, hot tempers.” He settled into a leather armchair while Mrs. Hale disappeared toward the kitchen, Pumpernickel trotting after her. “Have a seat.”

We took a couch across from him.

“Can you tell us more?” Keone asked. “What was the compromise you helped with?”

“You’ve probably heard some of this already,” Dr. Hale said. “The Queen awarded two ornaments to her faithful guardsmen. Both families, the Pahinuis and the Namolos, had legitimate claim to an ornament. The Pahinuis had documentation which included a photo of the ornament being presented. The Namolos had oral history and a journal entry indicating an ornament was given to a great-grandfather. The Namolos’ piece was either lost or stolen. So the fact that there were originally two was not in dispute—who really owned the one remaining ornament was.”

“Why 1980? And how did you come to be involved?” I asked.

“I was a young historian then, fresh out of my doctorate. I collected all the information I could find on the original ornament situation and brought the families together as part of drawing attention to the legacy of the Queen.” He flapped a hand. “I’ll be honest. I was getting my name out there and was hoping to develop a book out of the topic. That part never happened, but bringing attention to the situation got me a seat on the board at Bishop Museum.”

Mrs. Hale returned with a tray of cookies and tea, the spicy scent of ginger mixing

with the buttery shortbread. Pumpernickel jumped onto an ottoman, watching the cookies with obvious interest.

“Thanks for the honesty, Dr. Hale. Tell us more about the agreement,” Keone prompted.

“The compromise I proposed was this: the ornament would be jointly owned by both families, alternating possession each year during the Christmas season. The rest of the year, it would be displayed at the Hana History Museum.” He accepted a cookie from his wife with a tender smile. “It worked for nearly forty years, until the Namolo family that had stewarded it part-time moved away. Once they did, the Pahinuis never returned the ornament to the Museum after the holidays, as we’d agreed.”

I thought of Artie Pahinui’s lovable face. That didn’t seem like something he’d have participated in. I was going to have to have another tough talk with my dear friends. “Who was the one to keep it?” I asked.

“Artie’s father, Kawika. He passed away many years ago. When was that, sweetheart?” Dr. Hale asked his wife.

“Back in two thousand,” she said. “Excuse me. I’ve got to put another tray in the oven.” She bustled out with Pumpernickel commenting loudly on his desire for a cookie.

“I’m the historian, but my wife actually remembers dates,” Dr. Hale said fondly.

I sipped the ginger tea and nibbled a warm cookie. “And she’s a great hostess and baker. These are delicious. Well, Artie and Opal never mentioned any of this to me when they donated the ornament to help with the community center fundraiser. And now it’s been stolen.”

“Yes.” Dr. Hale’s face grew thoughtful. “I heard that. Maybe someone saw an opportunity to right an old wrong.”

I leaned forward, nearly knocking over my tea. “What do you mean?”

But Dr. Hale smiled mysteriously. “Sometimes things aren’t lost. They’re finding their way home. That said, I’m afraid that’s all I can share tonight.” Dr. Hale rose from his chair with the careful movements of age. “I’m retired, but I’m teaching a winter session on Hawaiian cultural anthropology at UH Maui College. And as you know, it’s a long drive to Kahului.”

“But—” I started to protest.

Mrs. Hale appeared with a Christmas tin decorated with poinsettias. “Here, take some cookies home. I made way too many.” The scent of butter and spices intensified as she opened the lid. “The crystallized ginger ones are Sheldon’s favorite, but I put in some of the lilikoi shortbread too.”

Pumpernickel let out another commanding “MRROWW!” and wound between her ankles, clearly hoping for a dropped morsel.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hale,” Keone said, accepting the tin. “The cookies are amazing.”

“Call me Michiko,” she said, beaming. Then she glanced at her husband with a slight frown. “Sheldon, maybe you could?—”

“Not tonight, dear.” Dr. Hale’s tone was gentle but firm. He guided us toward the front door, his bearing that of a professor used to dismissing a class. “The past has its own rhythm, its own way of revealing itself. Sometimes we need to let things unfold naturally.”

The warm light from the entry chandelier caught the silver in his hair as he opened the door for us to leave. Despite his age, he stood straight and tall, his keen dark eyes thoughtful. “Kat and Keone, thank you for your visit. I wish you luck with your . . . investigation.” His body language was clear: we were being dismissed.

“Thank you both,” I said, clutching the cookie tin Keone had handed me. “And thank you for sharing what you did about the compromise.”

Mrs. Hale touched my arm gently. “Come back anytime, dear. And do try the lilikoi shortbread. They’re made with fruit from our own vines.”

As we walked back to the car, the colorful lights behind us cast a glow over the ti plants lining the drive. Somewhere in the distance, an owl called. Crickets tuned up their chorus. Waves in Hana Bay soughed against the shore in the distance.

“Enlightening visit,” Keone said, opening the passenger door of his truck for me.

I slid into the seat, setting the cookie tin carefully on my lap. “Indeed. Did you notice how he clammed up right after that comment about things finding their way home?”

“Yeah.” Keone started the truck once he got in. “And did you see Mrs. Hale’s face? She wanted him to tell us more.”

I opened the tin and inhaled the buttery, spicy aroma. “Something tells me Dr. Hale has an idea about what happened to that ornament.”

“Question is,” Keone said, backing out of the driveway, “why won’t he tell us?”

Through the front window of the house, Pumpernickel watched our departure, his silhouette regal against the warm light inside. Like his owner, the cat seemed to be keeping secrets.

The moon hung low over Hana Bay; its silvery glow caught the edges of waves as they rolled in. After the intensity of the long day, Keone suggested a walk on the beach to clear our heads. The beach was deserted at this hour, the song of the gentle waves and breeze in the palms and ironwoods the only sounds.

We parked and set off barefoot over the sand, holding hands.

“Look!” I pointed toward the water. A blue-green glow rippled through the darkness, bioluminescent organisms lighting up the sea like underwater glitter. Then I saw what had disturbed them: sleek bodies cutting through the water, leaving trails of glowing light in their wake.

“Nai’a,” Keone said softly. “Spinner dolphins.”

We watched as the pod moved through the bay, their movements painting patterns of light in the dark water. The sight was magical, otherworldly . . . the kind of moment that makes you believe anything was possible.

“Let’s go in,” I said impulsively, already pulling my shirt over my head.

Keone laughed. “What, now?”

“Why not? There’s no one here.” I stepped out of my shorts, my heart racing with the wildness of the moment. The night air kissed my skin and raised goosebumps.

“Why not.” I heard the rustle of Keone’s clothes hitting the sand. “Last one in’s a rotten papaya!”

We sprinted and dove into the water together, gasping at the initial shock of cool water. Every movement we made created swirls of bioluminescence, as if we were swimming through liquid starlight.

“This is amazing!” I exclaimed. Being caught between moonlight and bioluminescence was somehow like swimming through space.

Keone’s hand found mine under the water, pulling me closer as we returned to standing depth. His skin was slick and warm. When his lips met mine, they tasted of salt and possibilities. When we finally broke apart, his forehead rested against mine as we shared breath in the Hawaiian way.

The dolphins were long gone, but bioluminescence still sparkled around us with every small movement.

“Kat, I . . .” he began, his voice husky. There was something in his tone that made my heart skip. But then he pulled back slightly, and I saw his familiar grin in the moonlight. “I hope you’re ready for work tomorrow, because after this late-night swim, morning’s going to come way too early.”

I splashed him, creating another burst of blue-green light. “Way to ruin the moment, Mr. K.”

But as we swam back to shore, I couldn’t help wondering what he’d been about to say. There had been something in his voice, something in the way he’d held me, that suggested unspoken tension hanging between us.

We dressed quickly, clothes clinging to damp skin, and walked back along the beach.

The moon was higher now, turning the wet sand to silver beneath our feet. Neither of us spoke but our hands found each other's again. Fingers intertwined, we held onto the magic of the moment for just a little longer.

"Monday's coming," Keone teased as he kissed me goodbye through Sharkey's open window. "Maybe we haven't figured out where the ornament is, but we've learned a lot more about it."

"Sure have. And I see my next step as going to talk to Opal and Artie about why they didn't return the ornament to the Museum as their family had agreed to do."

"I don't envy you that conversation." He patted my arm where it rested on the edge of the sill. "I've got flights tomorrow, so let's check in at the end of the day when we're both off work and see if we've got any new clues."

I groaned. "Meanwhile, the clock is ticking. The fundraiser is on Christmas Eve, in two days!"

"Get some rest. We're both going to need it." He gave me a quick kiss on the nose. "And don't forget the holiday luau at our house on Christmas Day. It's going to be epic."

"Isn't it always?" I started Sharkey's engine. "I can't wait."

The sound of Tiki's food can hit my ears even before I was fully awake the next morning. She had carried it upstairs and was batting it around the floor, making sure I understood it was time for breakfast. Her one good ear twitched in satisfaction at having successfully disturbed my sleep as I pushed hair out of my eyes. "Stop the racket, Tiki!"

Tiki's mew had all the subtlety of a jackhammer as she complained of my tardiness.

"Five more minutes," I mumbled, pulling the pillow over my head. The cotton pillowcase smelled faintly of coconut shampoo from my shower after last night's swim.

My dreams had been a confusing swirl of the Queen's Ornament, bioluminescent waters, and a dim memory of chasing a mother-of-pearl ornament hanging in the sky. All of that and the late night had left me feeling like I had an emotional hangover.

Tiki escalated her campaign by hopping up on the bed and walking across my chest, each paw precisely placed for maximum discomfort while her rusty purr vibrated through my rib cage. When that didn't work, she began a methodical morning demolition derby, knocking one item at a time from my nightstand with calculated thuds. My phone, still on its charger, clattered to the floor and immediately started ringing, the vibration making it dance.

I reached down and captured the device. "Hello?"

“Kat, where are you?” Pua’s voice held equal parts concern and annoyance. “The mail truck’s already here, and Mrs. Kekoa is asking about her package from Las Vegas. We have to help Chad unload, stat.”

I bolted upright, sending Tiki leaping off the bed with an indignant yowl. Sunbeams streaming through my windows told me all I needed to know. “What time is it?”

“Nine-thirty. And you know we open at nine, Ms. Postmaster.”

“Drat!” I scrambled out of bed, stubbing my toe on the dresser. The sharp pain brought tears to my eyes but woke me up quick. “Son of a toadstool! I’ll be there in twenty minutes!”

I rushed through my morning routine, the bathroom mirror reflecting my hair’s rebellion against the humidity and going to bed with it still wet. My favorite polo shirt was wrinkled beyond hope, and I could only find one white sock. Tiki followed me from room to room, her complaints getting progressively more dramatic. Her baby, Misty, usually more docile, decided to get involved by darting out to weave between my legs, almost causing me to take a header at the top of the stairs. “Okay, okay. I’m going down to feed you! Where’s Aunt Fae? She usually takes care of you guys when I’m late!”

But Aunt Fae was nowhere to be seen.

I finally had on all my clothes, including my favorite size 11 Nikes. I’d filled the cats’ bowls with food and grabbed my keys and a bottle of water when the front door creaked open.

“Overslept?” Aunt Fae stood in the doorway. The aroma of freshly ground Kona coffee filled the air as she held up a large ceramic travel mug. “You look like you need coffee.”

“Yes! Keone and I were working on the case, and I got in late and forgot to set my alarm.” I tried to edge past her, my stomach growling at a sweet, sugary smell coming from the paper bag in her other hand.

“The missing ornament?” She raised an eyebrow, pressing both the mug and bag into my hands. “I guessed as much. We were out of coffee in the house, so I went and bought you some at Opal and Artie’s.”

“Aunt Fae, you’re the best. Thanks!” The coffee mug was almost too hot to hold, and through the lid, I could smell the dark roast Opal and Artie special-ordered from a friend’s farm on the Big Island. The paper bag crinkled as I peeked inside—three malasadas, dusted with li hing mui sugar. My mouth watered at the sight. “And yeah, we’re still working on the case. We found out a lot about it, but I don’t have time to update you right now.” I juggled my phone, keys, coffee, and bagged breakfast while trying to navigate through the door.

“That’s fine. We’ll catch up later. The event will go on with or without that ornament, though the news that it was donated and then stolen has brought us a lot of attention. We think the auction is going to be well-attended because of it.” Aunt Fae’s slippers scraped softly as she slid her feet out of them at the doorway.

“What are you up to today, Aunty?”

“Still collecting donation items. I’m calling all over the island to get activities and restaurant coupons donated. Things our Hana and Ohia residents don’t get access to but might win at auction for a bargain.”

“Sounds good, I know you and Elle will leave no coconut tree unshaken.”

Aunt Fae laughed. “You got that right. Have a good day at work!”

“I will. Thanks to you, coffee, and malasadas!”

As I hurried down the steps, the paper bag crinkling against my chest, Aunt Fae called out, “Oh, and Kat? Tell Keone his towels were still damp from whatever ‘investigating’ you two did last night . . . without your bathing suits! I put them in the laundry.”

I nearly choked on my coffee, the rich taste mingling with embarrassment. The malasadas bounced in their bag as I half-ran to my car. From the small entrance lanai, Tiki watched my departure with a slightly judgmental stare, while Aunt Fae’s chuckle floated back to me on the breeze.

At least I had coffee and sugar to get me going. And maybe, just maybe, beneath the taste of Kona beans, I could still detect the ghost of last night’s salt-water kisses.

The bell over the door jingled as I entered Opal and Artie's general store on my lunch break. The familiar mix of aromas hit me: fresh coffee, cut papaya from the sample board, and the subtle mustiness of the wooden shelves that had held local necessities for generations. Afternoon heat made the overhead fans work overtime, their wooden blades casting rotating shadows across the worn floor as I steeled myself for the conversation ahead.

Opal was arranging glass jars of homemade lilikoi butter on a shelf, while Artie sat at the counter, his fingers moving across the raised dots of a braille crossword puzzle.

"That you, Kat?" Artie asked, his eyes turned toward the door.

"Yep, Uncle, it is."

"Lunch break already?" Opal asked, wiping her hands on her apron. "Artie made some curry chicken today, and it's still hot."

"I'd love some," I said, leaning against the counter, "But I need to ask you both something about the Queen's Ornament first."

Artie's fingers stilled on the page. "What about it?"

"Keone and I talked to Dr. Hale the historian last night. You must know him."

Artie's expression was puzzled. "I know who he is, but we've never spoken. They

don't shop out here. Too far from town."

"I know his wife, Michiko." Opal said. She had gone to the pot of curry on its warmer and was serving me a bowl over rice. "Nice lady. Heck of a baker and does lots of crafts."

"Yes, we got to sample her cookies yesterday. Dr. Hale's a retired teacher and part-time professor at University of Hawaii. He's also on the board at the Bishop Museum and the Hana History Museum. He told me about the arrangement he made in 1980 between the Pahinui and Namolo families. The ornament was supposed to go to the Hana History Museum after the sharing agreement ended."

"What sharing agreement?" Artie frowned. "It's our ornament." The ceiling fan squeaked through two full rotations before anyone spoke. Opal had gone very still. "That's not true, what you said." Artie said finally, his voice tight. His hands found the edge of the counter, gripping it. "Malcolm Namolo tried to tell me that once, but my father never mentioned any such thing to me."

"Dr. Hale says?—"

Artie's face flushed. "My father would have told me if he'd made that kind of commitment. Every Christmas, he would place that ornament in my hands, let me feel every detail while he told me the story. How the Queen gave it to our family. The meaning of the symbols on it. I may not be able to see it, but I know every curve, every pattern of that ornament by heart."

Opal moved to stand behind her husband, and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Artie . . ."

"No!" He pushed back from the counter, his sudden movement making his stool rock.

"Malcolm Namolo spent years trying to guilt us into giving up the ornament. Said we

had no right to it. Said his family had more claim because we didn't have kids. And now you're telling me Dr. Hale backs up his story?"

"Not that. Just that you and the Namolos were supposed to alternate holidays sharing the ornament, and it would be stored and exhibited at the Hana History Museum in between holidays. Your father Kawika was the one to end the swapping, and it sounds like he never told you about the arrangement at all."

"He didn't." Artie had stood up and his big hands on the counter were white-knuckled with tension.

"Artie. Do your breathing. Remember your heart," Opal prompted. We'd had a scare a while back when he had a heart event. I didn't like the high color in his cheeks and neck.

"I'm sorry to upset you. I'm just trying to understand what might have happened," I said. "In case it relates to the disappearance of the ornament."

"Understand what? That my father was a liar? That he kept secrets from me?" Artie's voice cracked slightly. "I know that ornament's history better than anyone."

The fan continued its lazy circles overhead as Artie sank back onto his stool, suddenly looking very tired.

Opal squeezed his shoulder. "Maybe," she said softly, "there are parts of the story we don't know."

"Or maybe Malcolm Namolo convinced Dr. Hale to back up his version of events," Artie muttered. "Either way, it doesn't matter now. The ornament's gone."

"If we understand why, we might be able to find it," I said.

“I think you should go,” Opal said quietly, as the bell tinkled to admit a noisy family of tourists. “Artie needs a break. Take your curry and eat it back at the office.”

I nodded, forgetting for a moment that Artie couldn’t see the gesture. Hating that I’d upset my dear friends, possibly for no reason. Stinging a little at Opal’s dismissal. “Okay. Sorry for the upsetting news, and thanks for the food.”

The bell jingled again as I opened the door, letting in a blast of warm air that smelled of plumeria and dust.

“Kat?” Artie called just before I let the door shut. “My father was an honorable man. Whatever Dr. Hale thinks he remembers about some arrangement . . . he’s got it wrong.”

But there was something in his voice: a slight tremor, a hint of uncertainty—that made me wonder if he was trying to convince me, or himself.

The door closed behind me with a final jingle, leaving me with more questions than answers as I headed across the unpaved lot, the bowl of curry warm in my hands.

Evening sun turned the water of Ohia Bay into liquid gold as I dove beneath the surface for my evening swim after a busy post office day.

The sea was cooler than last night, missing both the moonlight magic and Keone’s presence, but perfect for clearing my head after the nonstop activity at work. I had my swim goggles on, so I could see small yellow tangs darting around a coral head below me as I broke into an overhand stroke, churning past their underwater home. The light caught on a school of silver nenuke below me, glittering like fool’s gold.

I did my laps, speeding up until I couldn’t think too hard about the troubling conversation with my dear friends at lunchtime. Keone and I had certainly stirred the

pot of a simmering conflict with our investigation, but would that help us find the ornament? Or had we needlessly opened old wounds?

When I finished, I floated on my back, letting the gentle swells rock my body while I stared at the clouds overhead and the palms ringing the beach. Those trees had witnessed generations of Ohia's secrets. From the water, I surveyed both the post office and the general store, historic buildings that held their own share of stories. A red-crested cardinal landed on the pier, its chirping song carrying across the water.

The pieces of the puzzle swirled in my mind like the schools of fish beneath me: Artie's passionate defense of his father, Dr. Hale's certainty about the museum agreement, Malcolm Namolo's claims, and the ornament's disappearance from the donated items table—an apparent crime of opportunity.

Rolling over, I dove deep enough to touch the sandy bottom. The coolness and water pressure cleared my thoughts like wiping a foggy window. When I surfaced, the answer seemed obvious: someone must have taken the ornament because they believed it belonged somewhere else. This wasn't about money; it was about what they felt was right.

Of course, I had no proof, and I wasn't sure where to go next with this theory.

The evening trade winds picked up, sending ripples across the bay as I treaded water. From this angle, I could see the window of Artie and Opal's store, outlined in flashing colored Christmas lights. Across from it, the enormous fake tree in the post office sparkled and glowed.

I really, really wanted to find that ornament and see peace replace a conflict. But how?

A sea turtle surfaced nearby, its ancient-seeming eyes regarding me briefly before

disappearing beneath the waves.

Leilani Akana might be the next person to interview, once more. Now that I knew more about the ornament's history and her position of access at Rita's, as well as her role at the Hana History Museum, it seemed clearer that she'd had the means (been in the garage where the ornament was stored), motive (getting it for the museum), and opportunity to take the ornament, or she might be aware of who had. As the museum's long-time coordinator, she knew everyone's connection to the artifacts of Hana.

I swam toward shore, my mind made up. The wet sand squeaked beneath my feet as I walked up the beach, wrapping a towel around my swimsuit. The cardinal was still singing, its melody mixing with the sound of gentle waves as I quickly dried off and donned a cover-up and rubber slippers.

Grabbing my phone from my beach bag, I checked the time. If I hurried, I could catch Leilani before she left the museum for the day.

As I headed to Sharkey, still parked beside the closed post office, I noticed Artie sitting on the store's lanai in his favorite old chair. His face was turned toward the bay, and he strummed one of his guitars in a quiet rhythm. Though he couldn't see the ocean he seemed to be listening with thoughtful intensity.

I regretted upsetting him so much. Hopefully he'd get over it soon.

The road to Hana and the museum wound past a late-blooming shower tree, its petals scattered across the pavement like confetti. Behind me, Ohia Bay disappeared around a bend, taking with it the golden evening light but leaving me with a growing hope that I was on the right track.

The Hana History Museum's wooden steps creaked under my still damp slippers. Through the window, I could see the warm glow of Christmas lights reflecting off the glass display cases. The door was unlocked, but the "CLOSED" sign was already turned; it was just after five p.m. when I arrived.

"Aunty Leilani?" I called out, stepping into climate-controlled coolness inside. The fresh scent of the pine tree in the middle of the room mixed with the familiar museum smell of aged wood and history. "Ms. Akana?"

A 'woof!' and the click of toenails on hardwood announced Poi Dog before I saw him, his tail wagging as he padded over to greet me. Behind him, Leilani emerged from a back room, wearing a green and white blouse and black slacks, and carrying an empty ornament box.

"Perfect timing, Kat," she said. "I just finished decorating the Hawaiian Monarchy exhibit. Come see and tell me what you think?"

I'd barely glimpsed inside that area on our previous visit to notice the low-key display area, but the transformation was stunning. Ti leaf garland wrapped with tiny white lights framed the cases, and delicate Hawaiian quilt patterns had been projected onto the walls using a light box. A small Christmas tree stood in the corner, decorated with traditional Hawaiian ornaments including dried orange 'ilima blossoms, miniature lauhala angels, and hand-painted wooden fish.

"It's beautiful," I said, watching Poi Dog settle onto a bed beneath the tree. "But

there's one ornament missing."

Leilani's hands stilled on the garland she was adjusting. "The Queen's Ornament."

"Did you know about Dr. Hale's arrangement with Artie's father? That the ornament was supposed to come to the museum?"

She set the box back into a larger cardboard container. "I'd heard rumors."

"I talked to Artie today. He claims he never knew about the arrangement." I moved closer to the monarchy display, studying Queen Lili'uokalani's portrait. "But someone must have felt strongly about where the ornament belonged. Strongly enough to take action."

"What are you suggesting?" Leilani's voice was carefully neutral.

"A museum is the ornament's natural home. It's a piece of Hawaiian history that should be shared with everyone, not kept for one family." I turned to face her. "Do you know anyone who might have felt the same way? Someone who might have wanted to . . . ensure it ended up where it belonged?"

The Christmas lights cast shifting shadows across Leilani's face as she turned to adjust an ornament on the tree. "Many people in Hana care deeply about preserving our history. But that doesn't mean any of them would steal it." Her words said one thing, but there was something in her voice, a hitch that made my investigative instincts tingle.

Leilani knew something.

"What if," I said slowly, watching her reaction, "Artie agreed to donate the ornament to the museum? Voluntarily?"

Leilani's hand paused on a lauhala angel. "Why would he do that?"

"Because it's the right thing to do. And because . . ." I smiled, a plan forming as I spoke, ". . . we could make it a special event. The fundraiser part could be a voluntary bidding by donors to ensure its place in the museum with whatever was raised. At the end of the auction, we'd make an official donation of Queen Lili'uokalani's Ornament. We'd make sure it was on the front page of the Maui News. A real Christmas miracle."

Poi Dog lifted his head, sensing a shift in energy as Leilani turned away, straightening a strand of lights that didn't need straightening. "That would be . . . amazing," she said carefully. "I bet the ornament would turn up in time for the event if that were the situation."

"Yes, I bet it would." I moved toward the door, noticing my long, wet hair had left a few droplets of seawater on the floor. "In fact, I think I'll go talk to Artie about it right now." I paused and turned back. "You know, the funny thing about lost treasures? Sometimes they have a way of finding their way home. Especially at Christmas."

The bells on the museum door jingled as I left, but not before I saw Leilani's face in the reflection of the glass cases. Her face wore an expression of relief that told me everything I needed to know.

The Queen's Ornament would reappear in time for the event.

Christmas lights in the museum window cast colorful lights on the wooden sidewalk as I headed to my SUV. Somewhere in the distance, I heard the chatter of mynah birds settling in their sleep tree. I would talk to Artie about the ornament's ultimate donation location . . . and then we'd see if someone came forward with the missing ornament.

Because someone would. Of that, I was now certain.

I was buckling my belt in Sharkey when my phone buzzed with a call from Dr. Hale, whose number I'd entered into my contacts. I picked up right away. "Hello, Dr. Hale."

"Please, call me Sheldon, Kat." The professor cleared his throat. "Any chance you could come by the house this evening? I've come across important documents relevant to the Queen's Ornament."

"As a matter of fact, I'm right here in Hana." I didn't want to go to the older couple's house wearing my wet bathing suit and a cover-up, though. Maybe Keone was home from work, and I could get a quick shower, then we'd both go over. "Give me half an hour, and maybe Keone will be with me."

"That would be great. My wife fully intends to foist more baked goods on the two of you."

"We'll be there, with bells on!" I exclaimed. He ended the call with a chuckle.

I fired up Sharkey and called Keone using voice command. "I just got home from work. All systems go," he affirmed. "I'll warm up the shower and I'm definitely coming with you."

Not long after, in a replay of the night before, Keone and I ascended the stairs to the Hales' Victorian home on the outskirts of Hana. I hadn't had anything of my own to wear after my shower, so I had on a T-shirt and basketball shorts belonging to Keone. He smiled, eyeing me in the baggy clothing.

"You make those old gym shorts look sexy," he whispered in my ear as we stood in front of the beveled glass front door.

I could feel my cheeks warm as the door opened on Dr. Hale. He also wore an old tee and basketball shorts; this time his hair was disordered as if he'd run a hand through it. His glasses were atilt on his wide nose. "Thank goodness you're here," he said, ushering us inside. The scent of old books and leather hit us as we entered, along with a hint of last night's baking. "Come this way."

Dr. Hale led us to his office, a cluttered space filled with stacks of documents, Hawaiian artifacts, and what looked like the entire contents of a small library. He gestured for us to sit in a couple of comfy chairs facing his desk as he rummaged through a pile of papers on the surface.

"I've made a discovery that could change everything we thought we knew about the Queen's ornament," he said, his voice tinged with excitement and a hint of worry.

Keone leaned forward, his knee brushing mine. "What did you find, Dr. Hale?"

The historian pulled out an old, yellowed document, handling it with reverence. "This

is a letter from Queen Lili'uokalani to her advisor, dated 1892, just before the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy.”

My heart raced as I realized the significance. “That’s right around the time the ornaments were gifted to the Pahinui and Namolo families.”

Dr. Hale nodded gravely. “Exactly. But according to this letter, the ornaments weren’t a gift at all. They were a pair of sacred emblems to be entrusted to the Queen’s favorite guardsmen for safekeeping during the tumultuous period of the overthrow.”

Keone’s sharp intake of breath mirrored my own surprise. “But that means . . .”

“It means the ornaments were never meant to be kept,” I finished, the implications hitting me. “They were meant to be protected until they could be returned to their rightful place.”

Dr. Hale spread his hands. “Precisely. The families were meant to be the ornaments’ guardians, not their owners. And there’s more.” He pulled out another document, this one a more recent legal paper. “I found this in the Office of Hawaiian Affairs records. It seems that in 1960, the Pahinui family tried to return their ornament to the Office of Hawaiian Affairs but it was blocked by the Namolos, who claimed ownership.”

A heavy silence fell over the room as we absorbed the magnitude of this revelation. The ornament, far from being a simple family heirloom or valuable antique, was a piece of Hawaiian history caught in a complex web of ownership, duty, and cultural significance.

“The Bishop Museum,” Keone said suddenly, standing up. “That’s where it needs to go. All the royal artifacts, the sacred items from the monarchy—that’s where they’re preserved.”

Dr. Hale nodded slowly, adjusting his glasses. “The Bishop Museum does house the largest collection of Hawaiian royal artifacts. They have the expertise, the security, and most importantly, the cultural authority to protect such items.”

I stood up too, my mind racing. “If we can convince Artie to donate it to the Bishop Museum voluntarily . . .” I paused, remembering my earlier conversation with Leilani. “This could be the perfect solution. We could have a ceremony that brings everyone together.”

“A pono solution,” Keone agreed, using the Hawaiian word for righteousness and balance. “But will Artie agree?”

“We have to try,” I said, gathering myself. “Dr. Hale, may we take these documents? Artie can’t see them, but if Opal reads them to him . . .”

The historian carefully placed the papers in a clear plastic protective sleeve. “Of course. But handle them with care and return them when you’re done. I’ll be looking forward to hearing the outcome, regardless.”

The drive to the general store was quiet. Both Keone and I were lost in thought once I’d brought him up to speed on my meeting with Leilani. Darkness made the lights on the tree inside the Post Office bright when we turned into the lot.

“Do you think Leilani took the ornament?” he asked at last.

“Possibly, or she knows who did. I don’t actually care as long as it’s returned in time for us to donate it at the event,” I said.

“Agreed.”

We pulled into the empty parking lot. All the lights were out but the sparkling holiday

ones.

“Store’s closed. Let’s go to the Pahinuis’ residence front door.” I led the way, holding the letters from Dr. Hale in their archival sleeve. Keone caught my hand and gave it a squeeze as we navigated a row of recessed beach stones around the side of the building to the Pahinuis’ private entrance.

“Coming!” Opal called when I knocked. She opened the door, still wearing her festive outfit from work. “We’re just getting some food on the table. Want to join us?”

“We’d love that,” Keone said. My stomach gave a loud rumble of agreement with this idea.

“I brought you cookies from Mrs. Hale,” I said, handing over the tin the professor had slipped into my hands, along with the letters. “But are you sure you have enough supper for us?”

“It’s homemade chili that Artie was cooking all day in the Crock-Pot,” Opal said. “There’s a ton of it.” Her gold tassels flashed as she walked, and the year-old kittens pounced on her from the shadows beneath the table. “Stop it, you rascals! Artie, Kat and Keone are here for dinner.”

“I heard. There was a reason I made an extra large pot,” Artie said. He was a little psychic, I’d discovered. “Visiting twice in one day, Kat? Must be important.”

“It is,” I said, pulling up a chair. “We’ve just come from Dr. Hale’s, and there’s something you need to know about the ornament. About its true history.”

“I’ll dish up dinner after we hear this,” Opal said. Opal sat down next to her husband as Keone explained what we’d discovered. I watched Artie’s face as she read the

Queen's letter aloud, his expression shifting from skepticism to surprise to something deeper, a kind of understanding.

"A sacred trust," he murmured when she finished. "Not a gift at all."

"The Bishop Museum has an entire section dedicated to Queen Lili'uokalani's personal effects," Keone said gently. "Items she trusted are preserved there for future generations of Hawaiian people."

"If you were to donate it," I added, "it wouldn't be giving up your family's connection to the ornament. It would be fulfilling your great-grandfather's responsibility as the ornament's guardian."

Artie's unseeing eyes were bright with emotion. "All these years, I thought . . ." He swallowed hard. "I thought it was about ownership, about our family's right to keep it. But it was never about that, was it? It was about protection. About doing what's pono ."

Opal squeezed his hand. "What are you thinking, love?"

"I'm thinking," he said slowly, "that it's time for the ornament to go home." He turned his face toward where Keone and I sat. "Will you help me arrange it? A proper ceremony, with all the cultural protocols? The ornament deserves that much."

"Of course," Keone said warmly. "And Artie? This is a good thing you're doing. A very good thing."

"Not only that, but we can also still have the ornament as a centerpiece of the auction," I said. "I have to speak to Elle and Aunt Fae about how to do this, but we can still have folks donate to it in the name of the Bishop Museum. Leilani at the Hana History Museum might be disappointed, but it's meant for a larger public."

“Now, if only you could find it,” Artie said.

“I feel confident that, when we get this information out, whoever has the ornament will make it reappear,” I said.

“I hope you’re right. And since you need to talk to Elle and Aunt Fae about the plan anyway, why don’t I call them up and invite them over for chili? There’s plenty for all.” Opal got up and headed for the old wall phone with its long, curly cord.

As we left the store, the night air soft with the scents of plumeria and the sea, I hoped we’d set something important in motion. Somewhere, someone was holding onto that ornament, thinking they were protecting it. Soon, they’d know it was finally going where it truly belonged. Elle was already on the phone with the Maui News and Maui Now public information bulletins. Our carefully worded message about the ornament’s provenance and Artie’s plan to donate it to the Bishop Museum was going out all over the island by formal communication, and also via ‘coconut wireless’ word-of-mouth.

The moon rose over Ohia Bay, full and bright, as if approving of the path we’d chosen. Now we had to wait and see who would step forward to help the ornament complete its long journey home.

As the day of the Christmas charity event arrived, excitement buzzed through Ohia—but the Queen’s Ornament had not yet shown up.

When I got off work that last afternoon before the holidays began, giving me four days off in a row, my shoulders were tight with tiredness from how hectic the day had been. So many cards, packages, and good vibes had passed through my hands that day—but it had taken the starch out of my collar, as Aunt Fae would say.

I glanced over at Opal and Artie’s to see that the general store was festooned in lights and decorations, a process that became more elaborate each day as the month unfolded. Artie sat on the porch in his favorite chair, playing carols on his guitar as Opal dispensed free eggnog and punch from a table beside the door. Today was a Christmas Eve that was only going to get more exciting as we went to the community center in New Ohia State Park for the auction event and party.

Somehow, I had to dig deep and get more energy, because I was the auctioneer—a role I didn’t look forward to any more now than when Aunt Fae had assigned it to me.

Pua had already gone home to feed her dog Sassy and change for tonight’s event as I locked the post office’s glass exterior doors and folded up the newly created educational exhibit showcasing the Queen’s Ornament. Elle and I had crafted the exhibit on a big piece of folding foam core board. Pua and I had directed postal customers to check it out as they came and went.

The display showcased photos from the era of the overthrow, a picture of Queen Liliʻuokalani with her two favorite guardsmen, ancestors of the Pahinui and Namolo families, along with archival pictures of the ornament. At the bottom, a large, printed statement, signed by Artie Pahinui, declared his intention to donate the ornament to the Bishop Museum in accordance with the Queen's wishes. Surprisingly, this statement was also signed by Malcolm Namolo, who'd readily agreed to this compromise on behalf of his family. In smaller script, off to the side, was Leilani Akana's signature as director of the Hana History Museum. I'd obtained it in person the day after my conversation with her. Upon reviewing the documents Dr. Hale had unearthed, she too agreed that the Bishop was the right place for the precious artifact.

Up at the top of the display was a golden hook where the conspicuously missing ornament was intended to hang.

As I folded the display up to take to the event, I suppressed a shiver of apprehension.

How would it look to have the centerpiece of the event sitting there empty?

"The night is young," I said aloud, tucking the folded board under my arm. "We've done the best we could to find the ornament and set things up. Now we just have to trust."

Tiki, sitting outside on the top step of the post office, let out a loud meow to let me know she heard me talking aloud, and of course assumed I was addressing her.

I exited the back door, and there my cat was, winding herself around my ankles to greet me. "You must have known I'm a little worried that ornament hasn't turned up yet," I told her. "I was so sure someone would have turned it in by now." Tiki rubbed her head against my black pants, sprinkling them with orange and white hairs.

I didn't mind because I knew she wanted to reassure me I was still loved even if I'd

failed as a private eye in this case.

“Thanks, Tiki.” I scratched behind her remaining ear. “Now let’s go up to the community center and put this up, then home to get ready for the auction. I can’t wait to get up in front of everyone to see if I can get them to outbid each other.”

Tiki hummed a loud purr and whacked me with her kinked tail.

“Very reassuring,” I said, and we set off for home on foot.

Stretching my legs as I pep-stepped past the artificial waterfall to the community center, I began to get some energy back. Even if the ornament remained lost, we could still have a fun event and raise some money for the new community room.

The former exercise space where the auction would be held was transformed into a wonderland of lights, decorations, and tables, where Elle and Aunt Fae were setting up the silent and regular auction items.

Outside on the concrete skirt around the pool, tables for a buffet dinner and a small stage for the music and dancing were also being assembled by volunteers. The place was a beehive of activity.

Aunt Fae beamed as she greeted me with a hug. “With all that’s been going on this week I’ve hardly seen you.”

“I know. But you’re going to see plenty of me when I’m up there.” I pointed to the small, raised dais and lectern with a gavel Elle had set up for my auctioneer duties. “Now, where do you and Elle want this display?”

“Right here.” Elle pointed to a table beside the dais. “That’s where each item will be placed while it’s being bid on. The Queen’s Ornament display will be open behind

them. Before and after the bidding, you can tell everyone about it.”

I walked over and opened the display. “Only, so far, the ornament has not been returned. I’m getting worried. The clock is ticking.”

“You have to have faith,” Aunt Fae said. “Now, we’re all set up here. Let’s get home and shower and change. It’s going to be a long, fun evening.”

“But let’s leave the display outside,” Elle said. “On the stage. That way, if the person who took it comes back to return it, they can do so without being obvious.”

I moved the display board out to the stage and set it up where no one coming into the area could miss it. Aunt Fae and Elle put finishing touches on the auction area and locked up the former gym room. The three of us walked up the road toward our houses.

“I sure hope this works,” I said glumly. “I feel like a failure for not finding who took the ornament. I have suspicions who might have done it, but not enough to accuse anyone.”

“Faith! Remember?” Aunt Fae said. “You solved the mystery of the ownership of the ornament and where its future should be. Maybe even healed an old feud between two families. If you’re wrong about why the ornament was taken, whoever did it is going to feel mighty guilty.”

“People are basically good,” Elle said as we walked up the gently curving road toward our brightly lighted homes. “Sometimes you have to take a chance and hope for the best.”

“What choice do we have?” I said grumpily.

Elle and Aunt Fae elbowed me, one from each side, and I had to chuckle at that.

A couple of hours later, after the sunset had faded and left an indigo belt of stars over our beloved little town, Aunt Fae and I walked back down to the clubhouse area. I spotted early attenders: my favorite Red Hat ladies Edith, Josie, Clara, and Pearl were clustered around the punch bowl. Each of their fancy holiday hats was a sight to see: Edith's witch-style topper was wreathed in tiny lights, Josie's dyed coconut frond hat had new bobble trim, Clara's was a brilliant silk turban, and Pearl's geisha-style headpiece was a wonder of crystals, dangles, and enamelwork.

The band was tuning up their Christmas carols as we approached. I smoothed down my little black satin dress with the hidden gun pocket, the same outfit I'd worn to a hundred state events in Washington, D.C. during my years as a Secret Service agent. I'd left the gun locked up at home, but donned a lei of tiny sparkle lights to festive-ize the outfit.

Aunt Fae, on the other hand, had gone all-in with a holiday look, wearing her new favorite ugly sweater. This one had a Menehune in a Santa hat on it. Decorating his little round belly was a flashing light where his ' piko ' or bellybutton, would be, and his wide grin was accented with sparkling white rhinestones.

"I'm so hoping the thief has done the right thing," I said as we approached the clubhouse. My heart was pounding so that I pressed a hand over it. "I'm afraid to look."

"I'll check the display," Aunt Fae said, and trotted forward, her red cowboy hat aglitter in the bright lights around the pool.

I paused to calm myself beside the building until Aunt Fae returned, her expression downcast. "Nope. The hook on the display is empty."

“Darn it.” We both went around the corner. Aunt Fae unlocked the gym room with all the auction items inside, hollering a greeting to the band and the Red Hat ladies.

I was trained to notice objects out of place, and as I stepped through the glass slider, I spotted a cardboard tissue box on the ground.

My pulse picked up once more. Could the Queen’s Ornament be hidden in that humble box?

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:27 am

16

I stooped to pick up the tissue box, my hands trembling slightly. It was heavier than it should be.

“Aunt Fae,” I called softly. She turned back, her sweater’s piko light blinking cheerfully.

Carefully, I opened the box. Nestled in white tissue paper lay the Queen’s Ornament, its mother-of-pearl surface catching the Christmas lights in a rainbow dance. My breath caught at its beauty and the relief flooding through me.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Aunt Fae whispered, reaching out to touch the ornament reverently. “Let’s put it where it belongs.”

Together we walked to the display board. I lifted the precious artifact and hung it on the golden hook. It settled into place as if it had never been gone, completing the story told by the photographs and documents around it.

“Perfect timing,” Aunt Fae said, squeezing my hand. “Now go be an amazing auctioneer.”

We moved the display inside and fine-tuned the setup. Guests flowed into the room from all directions. I took my place behind the clear Lucite podium and welcomed everyone from the microphone.

The evening unfolded like a gift being unwrapped. I found my stride at the podium,

discovering that being an auctioneer wasn't so different from managing a protective detail; it was all about reading the room and maintaining control while letting everyone have fun.

“Do I hear five hundred for this beautiful koa wood serving bowl? Five hundred from the gentleman in the aloha shirt. Do I hear five-fifty? Yes, the lady in red! Six hundred? Six hundred from aloha shirt . . .”

The bidding was spirited, the mood festive. Between items, I shared the story of the Queen's Ornament, watching faces in the crowd light up with understanding as they learned its true history. When I announced its upcoming donation to Bishop Museum and that bidding on it was donation support only, spontaneous applause broke out.

By the end of the night, we'd raised a good start for the new community room. As people mingled and danced to the band's rendition of “ Mele Kalikimaka ,” I spotted Leilani and Dr. Hale in deep conversation near the ornament display. Their heads were bent together.

Something in their manner, the way they kept glancing at the ornament with a mixture of satisfaction and relief, confirmed what I'd suspected. They'd taken it. Not to steal it, but to protect it until its true purpose could be revealed.

I considered walking over, asking them directly. But what would that accomplish? The ornament was back, its future secure.

Sometimes the best solution wasn't about solving every mystery, but about making sure things ended up where they belonged.

“Quite a night,” Keone said, appearing at my elbow with two glasses of punch. He looked amazing in a royal blue silk aloha shirt and black dress pants, a lei of small pikake blossoms surrounding him with fragrance.

I accepted a glass of the punch, watching Leilani and Dr. Hale move away from the display. “You know what? I think everything turned out exactly as it should, even if we don’t know exactly who took the ornament.”

“Yes. The Queen’s Ornament is going home,” he said, “and the community’s stronger for it.”

We stepped outside to the dinner and dancing area around the pool. Above us, stars twinkled in the velvet sky and the scent of plumeria drifted on the breeze. The band shifted into “Silent Night,” the Hawaiian verses floating soft and clear across the pool area. Keone pulled me close, and I leaned against his shoulder, at peace with the mysteries that would remain mysteries, grateful for the ones that had been solved, and happy to be exactly where I was.

“Speaking of things finding their way home,” Keone said, setting down his punch glass on a nearby table. From his pocket, he produced a small sprig of green leaves and white berries, holding it above our heads. “Courtesy of Pua Chang, by the way. She rescued it from the post office lobby decorations when I mentioned I might need it tonight.”

“So that’s why she was smirking all afternoon,” I smiled. “I should have known.”

The kiss was sweet and passionate, too. When we parted, the world seemed to shimmer slightly in the holiday lights.

“Now then,” he said, tucking the mistletoe back in his pocket and holding out his hand. “Let’s dance.” The band had started playing “The Hawaiian Christmas Song,” the melody weaving through the warm night air. Keone pulled me onto the dance area, spinning me once before drawing me close.

As we swayed to the music, he guided me with confidence. I relaxed into his arms,

letting him lead. When the song ended, he led me to a quiet spot out of the lights.

“I have something for you,” he said, reaching into his other pocket. He pulled out a square velvet box, opening it to reveal a gleaming gold bangle bracelet. In Gothic black enamel lettering, the word “ Kuuipo ”—sweetheart — stood out against a surface carved with plumeria blossoms and maile leaves.

“Keone,” I breathed, touching the bracelet gently. “It’s beautiful.”

“It was my mother’s,” he said softly. “My dad gave it to her when they were young. Before he passed, she told me to save it for . . .” he paused, his eyes meeting mine with intention, “. . . for the right moment, with the right person.”

My pulse quickened as he lifted the bracelet from its box. “Consider it a promise,” he said, “of things to come.”

As he slipped the heavy gold bangle onto my wrist, I understood what he wasn’t asking yet—but would, when the time was right.

I pulled back slightly, my fingers tracing the cool raised enamel letters on the bracelet.

“Your mom is generous,” I said softly, “to part with this family treasure. I’m honored to wear it.”

“She’s already figured out what took me months to realize—that you’re the one I’ve been waiting for.” His hands tightened on my waist.

My heart did a complicated flutter: part joy, part panic.

Less than two years ago, I’d been in DC, my life ordered around protective details

and security protocols. Now here I was in Hawaii, wearing a promise bracelet from a man I was in love with but . . . was I ready for more?

“Keone,” I started, then faltered. How could I explain that while I loved Keone, I was still finding my footing in this new life? The weight of this family heirloom felt as heavy as the responsibility it implied.

I was pretty sure he was the one for me.

But . . . was I the right person for him ?

Gazing at his hopeful expression, at the bracelet that his mother had entrusted to him, I couldn’t bring myself to voice my uncertainty. Instead, I touched the elegant script of “ Kuuipo ” and managed a smile. “It’s beautiful,” I said truthfully. “Thank you.”

Something flickered in his eyes. Perhaps he sensed my hesitation—but he smiled back and pulled me close. “I love you.”

The bracelet caught the Christmas lights as I wrapped my arms around his neck, its golden surface winking a question I wasn’t sure I was ready to answer.

Christmas morning dawned bright and clear, the sun casting a warm glow through the windows of my bedroom as I woke to the familiar weight of Tiki curled at my feet and the sound of Misty's mewing from the living room below.

As I made my way downstairs, Tiki rushed ahead. The smell of Aunt Fae's famous cinnamon rolls filled the air, a comforting constant on Christmas Day.

I paused at the bottom of the stairs before entering the kitchen, one hand rising to touch the bracelet around my wrist. Ilima's bracelet, given to her by Keone's father. "A promise of things to come," Keone had said.

"Merry Christmas, Kat!" Aunt Fae's cheerful voice broke through my reverie. She was standing in the kitchen doorway, an apron tied around her waist and a grin on her face. "Kudos. You didn't sleep in too late after last night's auction."

"Neither did you, Aunt Fae," I replied, coming forward to kiss her cheek. "That whole event was your baby, and what a party it was."

"Oh, pshaw. Elle did most of it," she said. "Now come have some coffee and cinnamon rolls."

We settled into our traditional Christmas morning routine: Aunt Fae pulling the cinnamon rolls from the oven while I brewed a second pot of Kona coffee. Tiki wove between our legs, hoping for a stray bit of anything, while Misty pranced around, carrying a new stuffed catnip mouse and flaunting it in front of her mother.

As we sat down to enjoy breakfast, I found myself quieter than usual, my thoughts a swirling mess of hopes and fears. Later, we'd be going to the Kaihales' house for their annual holiday luau; how would Ilima react when she saw Keone had given me her heirloom bracelet?

Aunt Fae watched me over the rim of her coffee mug, her eyes filled with a mixture of concern and understanding. Finally, she set down her mug and reached across the table to take my hand. She turned it back and forth, admiring the bracelet.

"Kat, honey," she said gently, "That's a beautiful bracelet. I've learned enough Hawaiian to know that 'Kuuipo' means sweetheart. Did Keone give it to you?"

"He did. And it's more than just a pretty piece of jewelry. It was his mother's, given her by his father when they were young." I gulped at my hot coffee and scalded the top of my mouth. "Gah! I'm not worthy!"

"Talk to me. What's going on in that head of yours? Why isn't this a good thing?"

"It is." I slid the bracelet off and turned it round and round in my fingers. "But it's a family heirloom. Meant to be given to 'someone special,' Keone said." I set the gold oval down on the table and traced it with a fingertip.

"You're someone special. To him. To me. To this town," Aunt Fae said. "What's the problem?"

I sighed, my fingers once again finding the carved golden surface of the bracelet. I couldn't seem to stop touching it. As I did, I glimpsed lettering inside. "From Kalani to Ilima with love ." My heart gave a painful squeeze. "I don't know, Aunt Fae. I care about Keone so much, but after losing Mom and Dad, I'm just . . ."

"Scared?" Aunt Fae finished for me. I nodded, a lump in my throat.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Aunt Fae said, giving my hand a squeeze. “It’s okay to be scared. But let me ask you this. What are your hopes and dreams for your future? Not just about Keone, but for yourself?”

I took a deep breath, considering her question. “I love helping people. That hasn’t changed, whether I was in the Secret Service, the Postal Service, or solving cases as an investigator. I want to keep doing that, whether it’s here in Ohia or . . . somewhere else. I want to honor Mom and Dad’s memory by being a force for good in the world.”

“That you are.” Aunt Fae nodded encouragingly. “And where does Keone fit into those dreams?”

“He’s . . . he’s been there for all of it since the first day I arrived in Ohia,” I said. “Supporting me, challenging me, making me laugh even when things get tough. I can’t imagine facing these adventures without him, but . . .”

“But you’re not sure if you’re ready for a bigger commitment,” Aunt Fae finished. “And the bracelet is a step closer to that. You think he might propose.”

I nodded, feeling a mix of relief and guilt at having my worries out in the open. “Yes. I have a feeling the bracelet was his way of taking a temperature check. He’s also been kind of cagey about something. On the phone a lot and won’t tell me what’s going on. I’m afraid he’s going to spring something on me, and I’ll freak out and disappoint him.”

Aunt Fae leaned back in her chair, a thoughtful expression on her face. “You know, Kat, relationships aren’t about having everything figured out. They’re about choosing someone to figure that out with. But also making a choice when you’re ready.” She lifted her gaze to mine. “I was in love once, you know.”

Aunt Fae had been solo since I could remember and had always evaded any questions I'd had about her love life. I slid the bracelet back on and straightened up. "You never told me anything about that part of your life, and I've always wondered why."

"Well, I figured you had enough on your plate with losing your parents . . ." She smiled, but it was a sad curve of her lips. "And my story didn't have a happy ending."

"Tell me."

"I fell in love when I was in the Peace Corps."

I smiled. "I've always wanted to hear more about your adventures there."

"Yes, it was quite an adventure. I'd decided college wasn't for me, but I wanted to see the world a bit, do some good for humanity before I decided on a trade, which as you know ended up being water analysis and systems management. Anyway, I went overseas with the Peace Corps and my project was in Africa—Ghana, to be specific. We were finding water and digging wells for small farmers." She gazed out the window, clearly remembering. "He was a doctor who came with our unit and set up a clinic to work with the villagers. It turns out the nurse he'd brought couldn't handle the conditions and left; but I have a strong stomach and ended up helping him." She crumbled her cinnamon roll thoughtfully. "We worked together day in and day out. We fell in love, but he was already married. In the end, he went home to his wife."

"Oh, Auntie." I covered her hand with mine. "I'm so sorry."

"Me too. Especially that I didn't know he was married until the day before he left. I never saw him again." She shook her head. "I was so naive. It jaded me, I guess. I've had other chances since, but never wanted to risk getting my heart broken." She raised her eyes to mine. "Don't get me wrong. I'm happy as I am. But if I had it to do over again . . . I would have taken a chance on one of the ones who was interested in

me, and you might have an uncle to love.”

Her words settled over me, sobering.

“Thanks for telling me, Aunty.” I squeezed her hands and let them go. “Don’t count yourself out; you could still meet someone special. Meanwhile, the Kaihales’ Christmas luau is this evening. Everyone will be there, including Ilima. I’m a little nervous to face her wearing this bracelet. Her culture is so important to her, and I’m an outsider.”

“How has she acted toward you so far?” Aunty cocked her head inquiringly.

“She’s been lovely. But she did warn me not to break his heart.” I shivered. “I wouldn’t want her mad at me.”

“Then don’t break his heart,” Aunty said. “Or you’ll break hers, too. That’s the way it goes with a parent.”

“I’ll try not to,” I said. “But I can’t be responsible for anyone but myself. Otherwise life’s too terrifying.”

“Fair enough,” Aunt Fae said. We clinked our mugs together in a rueful toast.

As we finished our breakfast and moved on to exchanging gifts, I found myself torn between the comfort of our traditions and the uncertainty of what lay ahead at the luau.

Later, when I helped Aunt Fae clean up the kitchen, I couldn’t help but wonder: was I ready to fully embrace the life and love I’d found here in Ohia? Or was I letting old fears hold me back from the happiness I longed for?

As the sun descended to the horizon, painting the sky in vibrant shades of orange and pink, Aunt Fae and I arrived at the Kaihales' annual Christmas luau. Their lush, carefully mowed yard and open garage, decorated into a party zone, were alive with twinkling lights, laughter, and the melodious strains of Artie's ukulele playing holiday music. Children ran around with glow sticks, pinwheels, and jingle bells, their excited voices mixing with the music.

We'd both dressed in our finest aloha wear—Aunt Fae in another ugly sweater, this one decorated with a surfing Santa with a lit-up red nose. She wore a matching velvet Santa hat and carried a big velour sack of gifts from us. I wore a formfitting scarlet dress with white plumerias on it, something Elle had talked me into ordering “to make Keone's eyes pop.”

The moment we stepped into the open garage, the rich aroma of roast pork wafted through the air from the nearby imu , where a whole pig had been cooking underground all day. The scent mingled with the sweet fragrance of leis worn by many of the guests.

Near the center of the gathering, in front of a row of chairs set in a half-circle, a hal?u hula was performing, their graceful movements telling stories of ancient Hawaii and the spirit of aloha. The dancers' ti leaf skirts swayed in perfect unison, rustling softly with each movement. Their hands rippled like gentle waves, reflecting the glow of tiki torches that lined the performance area.

As we made our way through the crowd, the vibrant colors of aloha shirts and long

muumuus created a festive kaleidoscope. The air was filled with a chorus of “Merry Christmas!” greetings, punctuated by the clinking of glasses and the occasional burst of laughter.

We soon spotted the Red Hat ladies, impossible to miss with their bold purple dresses and striking toppers. Clara and Edith were engaged in an animated conversation with Rita and Maile, their voices carrying over the general hubbub of the party.

“Kat! Fae!” Pearl called out, waving us over. “Come try this fantastic poke. Lani really outdid herself this year!” We made our way to the food tables, where Lani, the Nakasone girls’ pretty aunt, was busily tending to the impressive spread. Her expert hands moved swiftly, replenishing dishes, and arranging platters with an artist’s eye.

“Mele Kalikimaka ,” Lani greeted us warmly. “Help yourselves! We have everything from traditional kalua pork to my special Christmas mochi.”

The tables were a feast for both the eyes and the palate. Vibrant green ti leaves contrasted with the rich brown of the kalua pork. The lomi lomi salmon glistened with diced tomatoes and green onions, while the purple-gray poi sat in smooth mounds next to golden brown slices of turkey and the gleaming white of mounded rice and mashed potatoes.

Artie struck up a lively rendition of “ Feliz Navidad ” on his ukulele, the cheerful notes floating on the evening breeze. The dancers broke into an improvisation. Soon the lawn was filled with people dancing, their faces glowing in the warm light of the tiki torches.

I spotted Aunt Fae laughing with the Red Hat ladies, their vibrant hats bobbing as they swayed to the music. Rita and Maile were teaching some of the younger children a simple hula , their hands gracefully mimicking the palm trees. Near the dessert table, Josie was animatedly describing something to Pearl, gesturing with a half-eaten piece of pineapple.

As I surveyed the feast, savoring the mouthwatering aromas, I heard Edith's voice nearby. She was chatting with the Nakasone girls, their conversation punctuated by frequent giggles.

Scanning the area for Keone, my heart raced when I finally spotted him near the drink table, looking handsome in a crisp red aloha shirt and black jeans. Our eyes met across the crowded table, and for a moment, everything seemed to stand still.

Taking a deep breath, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the small sprig of mistletoe I'd tucked away, nabbed from the Post Office earlier. As Keone approached, I held it up above us, a smile on my lips. "Mele Kalikimaka, Keone," I said softly, my voice nearly lost in the festive sounds around us.

His eyes crinkled with warmth. "Merry Christmas, Kitty Kat," he replied, his voice filled with affection. We leaned in, our lips meeting in a tender kiss. The sounds of the luau faded away, and for that moment, it was just us: two people in love, standing beneath the mistletoe.

As we parted, I saw the joy in Keone's eyes, mirroring the happiness I felt bubbling up inside me. The weight I'd been carrying since he gave me the bracelet seemed to lift, replaced by peace.

But before I could say anything, a cheer went up from the crowd. We turned to see Ilima Kaihale, resplendent in a red and green muumuu, calling for everyone's attention now that the hula dancers had completed their number.

"Aloha, friends and 'ohana!" she called, her resonant voice carrying over the sounds of the party. "The pig is ready, the poi is pounded, and the pineapple upside-down cake is . . . well, upside-down! Let's eat, drink, and be merry!"

The crowd surged towards the food tables, and I was swept along with the tide of hungry partygoers. I felt Keone's hand slip into mine, anchoring us together.

Ilima stood at the end of the table, directing everyone into two lines, one on either side of the serving table. When she saw us, her face brightened even more. Her gaze landed on the golden bangle on my wrist. “Oh, Kat! He gave you the bracelet!”

My cheeks flushed with self-consciousness as everyone around us paused to stare. “It’s so beautiful, Ilima. Thank you for sharing your heirloom with me.”

She caught my wrist in her hand and tapped the lettering on the bracelet. “This piece is special. Filled with mana , love, and good luck. I am pleased my boy gave it to you.”

Our gazes met. I saw nothing in her wide brown eyes but kindness and acceptance—and my eyes filled. I reached out and embraced her, forgetting all about my touch avoidance.

“Thank you,” I said. “Keone is lucky to have you for a mom.”

“You can share me,” she whispered in my ear. “As my h?nai daughter.”

I sniffed loudly, unable to speak. I’d learned recently about the Hawaiian tradition of informal adoption known as h?nai.

I was once an orphan; now I had two moms—Aunt Fae and Ilima. Three, if you counted Opal, and she’d want to be counted. Plus Artie as my father figure. I had a family, now. A big one. A true ‘ohana.

I was about to lose it; my whole body shook with emotion.

Keone patted my back. “Let her go, Mom. Kat’s got a touchphobia.”

But when Ilima loosened her arms, I tightened mine. “Thank you,” was all I could choke out.

“You’re welcome,” Ilima replied. “Now go get some food. You’re too skinny.”

“She only criticizes the ones she loves,” Keone whispered in my ear. “Get ready for lots of helpful comments like that.”

I nodded, still choked up. As we filled our plates with kalua pork, lomi salmon, and all the other festive Hawaiian delicacies, the bracelet around my wrist no longer felt weighty. It was bright with a promise of love and belonging.

Surrounded by the warmth of our community and with Keone by my side, whatever challenges lay ahead, we would face them together. And wasn’t that, after all, what the holidays were truly about?

As the stars twinkled overhead and the sound of music provided a gentle backdrop to the festivities, I squeezed Keone’s hand. “You were so mysterious with all those phone calls, babe. Got something you want to tell me?”

“I had another job offer. Moving up to flying jets. But it required moving to California.”

I pulled back, my eyes widening. “What?”

“I already said no. I’ve decided I won’t take anything that pulls me too far away.” Keone tugged me close and smiled at me, his eyes full of love. “Mele Kalikimaka, Kat. Here’s to another year of helping the lost find their way home.”