

BLUNT FORCE

by

Gregory Von Dare

A Noah Blunt & Sam Hokua Mystery Novel

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Revised Second Draft

Prologue

Sir Rex Hamilton had that awful tight feeling in his stomach - someone was watching him. Someone was *stalking* him. Two rough lads in leather jackets, Turks probably, spotted him the moment he stepped out of his taxi and surged toward him, their dark faces wary and cold. One of them held something, perhaps a knife, the other had big, skull-crushing hands. Rex hoped the white and blue terminal building in front of him would be crowded so he could vanish in the scrum of travellers.

He walked faster without breaking into an open run. The insistent *tac-tac-tac* of his footsteps seemed the only real sound in the universe. Everything else was a murmur. Greeks turned to admire the tall, fair, handsome fellow who rushed by.

As the fourth son of a British noble house, Rex Hamilton received a first-rate education but had no real prospects. He grew up surrounded by nannies and tutors who envied and bullied him, while missing the truth that he led a rigid, lonely life. Through family connections Rex was sent to the Foreign Office and spent time at several missions, legations and consulates. People assumed that he had a fortune in family money at his disposal, to their regret. His Foreign Office salary was modest - in contrast to his expensive tastes. As a result, he was always on the lookout for an easy spot of cash.

Sir Rex glanced over his shoulder. Those two thugs behind him were getting closer and if they caught him, it would not go well. He kicked a trash can on the sidewalk and it spun to the ground, throwing out clumps of paper, plastic bags and discarded lunches. The Turks had to scramble around the trash. One of them lost his footing on a smear of greasy meat and fell hard, the breath knocked out of him.

Rex Hamilton turned and pressed on, his long legs flying. He dodged left and right, blurring past people in *Eleftherios Venizelos*, the long international airport outside Athens. Security was just up ahead, on the runway side of the main terminal. Only a hundred feet away, past the checkpoint, a big white Lufthansa 747 waited to close its doors, only one VIP passenger yet to board.

That passenger was walking as fast as he could but, as he glanced over his shoulder, the Turks were still gaining. His Diplomatic passport took him through security in a flash. The pursuers would not be so lucky.

Nearing the Lufthansa gate, Sir Rex Hamilton raised his boarding pass and the impatient Greek attendant waved him on. But a moment later he held up his hand and said, "Stop!"

"You idiot. . . !" Rex began.

From behind, came the shout, "Hellenic Police! Wait there, English."

Rex spun around, bringing his attache case up in front of his chest and clutching it like a shield. It was the thugs. Both of them held real Greek National Police badges and had powerful H&K 9mm automatics leveled at him. Damn it to hell, they're Greek Police, he thought. But he wasn't out of the game, not yet.

"I am Lieutenant Stavros Nikos with DDAS. You possess stolen goods and attempting to smuggle out of Greece. You will come with me." It was the one with the big hands. He beckoned to Rex.

Rex reached slowly into his jacket and brought out a worn British passport. He handed it to Lieutenant Nikos. The Greek policeman opened it and took a long look at the inner page with the photo. He pushed out his lips like a man ordered to kiss a pig.

"Not so fast, old son. British Foreign Office, full diplomatic immunity. Call your people. I'm on the list. But, please, you're making me late for my plane."

Slowly and with great self control, Stavros Nikos handed the passport back to Sir Rex.

"You are free to go."

"Thanks ever so much. Loved the Parthenon."

He turned and vanished down the carpeted jetway.

"Shit bastard," said Stavros Nikos. He bent forward and breathed roughly. Two wolves had been sent to bring down a fox - and they failed. He would hear about this.

Inside the jetliner, Sir Rex Hamilton laughed like an idiot. That was damned close, he thought. Someone had turned against him, informed the others. Odds on, that slag Sofia. No matter, he wouldn't make the mistake again. Rex was sure his heart would slow down eventually.

The massive, curved door of the aircraft locked behind him and one of the attendants marched him to his seat, 3B in First Class, waiting silently while he stowed his briefcase in the overhead and tugged his seatbelt tight. Then the flight attendant, a slender brunette named Elve, went up front and signaled the pilot that they could push back from the gate and begin the long flight to Japan, and finally to Sir Rex Hamilton's new posting, Hawaii.

Chapter 1

Sam Hokuia didn't know it but he was less than one city block from the scene of the crime. The short, muscular native Hawaiian raised a large digital camera to his eye and said, "Show me da big Aloha smiles you got!" Before him, two Honolulu society matrons in expensive gowns giggled like schoolgirls and smiled broadly, white teeth sparkling. They were at a charity event in the ballroom of the Iolani Palace, the big Victorian residence of Hawaii's last Kings and Queens in downtown Honolulu.

Tonight it was local millionaires getting drunk and writing checks for cancer research. Many of Hawaii's wealthiest were here and the elegant tables, each with a huge, fragrant centerpiece of flowers and greenery, gave the event an exclusive air. On a low platform trimmed in black velour, a youthful string quartet from the University played light classical selections and show tunes. At the moment, they were mid-way through "Some Enchanted Evening." Beyond the large windows of the ballroom thick fog swirled, dimming the lights on the Palace grounds, hiding the streetlights beyond.

Sam Hokuia had an easy way with people. His boyish charm relaxed you and made you look better in a photo. He had a talent for catching people at the best possible instant. As though the world slipped into slow motion when he was taking pictures. Now, he waited till both of the matrons' eyes were open and smiles at their widest then he touched the shutter button. A strobe reached out and froze the moment. Sam had some other abilities beyond a good eye and sharp timing, but these were known only to him and the old kahuna who was his tutor.

Sam pulled two business cards from a pack secured by a snappish rubber band. He wrote a number on the back of each in soft black pencil and wrote the same number and the subject's name into a small notebook that he took from his pocket. "Mrs. Hanepala, your number is 236. Mrs. Lahinaloa your number is 237. Here are your cards ladies, and have a nice evening."

As he watched the two matrons stagger back into the crowd, Sam got a powerful creepy feeling at the base of his spine that rolled upward like foaming surf. It tingled with a million prickles on and under his skin. His legs wobbled like jelly and he had to clutch his camera to keep from dropping it. Every time Sam got this feeling it meant that some trouble, some *pilikia*, was heading his way. Like most Hawaiians, Sam hoped there would be good news mixed in with the bad.

He looked at his watch. Ten minutes to twelve. He had been taking pictures since six o'clock.

Maybe it was time Sam Hoku called it a night?

Noah Blunt - former crime writer, former ace reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* - slept like a ploughman, until his cell phone went off with a blast of sound and fury. Roused from the deep sub-basement of his dreams, Noah lurched awake and looked around a shadowy room. Hawaii, he thought. I live in Hawaii now. That's why everything smells of fish. Noah swung his feet off the bed and felt around. Ahhh, there, you monster, he thought. He grabbed the jangling phone and touched a green icon to answer.

"Yeah?" he said into the phone, *sans* enthusiasm.

Noah was solidly built and stood just over six feet tall with a square head slightly too big for his body. He had a full growth of wild, steel-gray hair, bushy eyebrows, a straight nose with flaring nostrils and intense, dark eyes. He was a good looking man at this age - mid-forties. Everyone said Noah looked exactly like Beethoven. Behind his back they probably said, acted like him too. Arrogant and demanding - full of himself. Blunt. On warm nights like this, he slept in an old t-shirt and loose boxer shorts.

Noah bet himself a dollar that it would be Madeline, his loopy ex-wife. She was in the habit of calling after midnight, raging at him for a while then exploding into tears and hanging up as he started talking. She walked out on him just weeks after he was laid-off from the paper.

After Madeline left him, Noah felt battered. He moved to the Big Island of Hawaii with the idea that he would write a novel - exploiting his major talent and healing his wounded soul. Although Noah received a good severance package from the *Times*, he had a much reduced balance after taxes, the divorce and the move to Hawaii. He wasn't broke, but he was hurting.

Now, a hermit with a laptop, he was drafting a long, sprawling book about love and crime and betrayal in the time of Napoleon and watching his savings dwindle even more. Someone could have saved him the trouble. Mentioned that Tolstoy had already done the deed, called it "War and Peace." A light read for a day at the beach - if that day lasted six months.

Noah lost his bet. It was Dave McCord calling, the same Executive Editor at the *Times* who laid Noah off a year ago. McCord was a corporate suit, a cold-blooded hatchet man with almost no real newspaper experience. Everyone at the paper hated him - and feared him.

“Dave? Dave! Listen, you woke me up. Whatever you were saying, you'll have to start again.”

Noah squinted at the clock in his bedroom. “You know it's four-thirty here?”

“Noah, there's a hot story on the wire about a British diplomat murdered in Honolulu. He was related to the Queen. Sir Rex Hamilton. Anything about Royals is big news here. They brush their teeth, it's a banner headline and three-column photo.”

“So you're calling *me*?”

“You'll love it. His head was bashed in!”

“Well. . .”

“All right,” McCord said. “I'll get you our top free-lance rate of \$2500 a day, plus *per diem* and expenses. But send me *something* later today. You can follow-up tonight or tomorrow with the full story.”

“Slow down, slow down. Why not rewrite the AP wire?”

“Pressure from Chicago. They think we take too much off the wire now and that's why readership is dropping. Come on, Noah. I can't get boots on the ground for eight hours if I send a guy from here - and you're just one island away.”

“Let me be blunt: I'd rather eat crushed glass than work for you again.”

“Noah, I made some calls. You have next to nothing in the bank. You're thirty days late on your mortgage. If it goes another thirty, you're in foreclosure. Do us both a favor and take the damn assignment.”

“Dave, we're supposed to learn from experience. Even rats can do it. I have learned nothing if I go back to work for you. Especially on a little piss-ant, one-off, guy-got-killed story.”

“All right, Noah. I wasn't going to mention this right away, *but*. I have an opening for a deputy city editor. I think you should have that job. You would be good at it.”

Noah stood up and blinked in disbelief. “Say *what*?”

“Deliver this story and you're on the fast track for that editorial position. What do you think?”

“I'm freaking speechless. Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack. But, Noah, I can't extend this offer indefinitely. I need to know if you are on board or not.”

Noah felt a titanic shift in his psyche. An emotional dam burst in his chest and he thought he might barf on his bare feet. It had been such a miserable year. Now the past was reaching out to him. Noah had always pictured himself as an editor one day. Shaping stories, helping the newbies, kicking

ass and producing quality work. He was probably dreaming this, but what the hell?

“Yeah, OK, OK, I’m in.”

“Great. And listen. No crazy stuff on this story, right?”

Noah frowned. “Crazy like what?”

“I’ve heard the legends, Noah. I mean no going off half-cocked, no conspiracy theories. No shadowy International groups, no plots and hidden meanings, right?”

“Of course not.”

“That’s the stuff. I’ll e-mail you the wire copy I have so far and your credential. Get over to Honolulu and start cranking. Find yourself a shooter and have him bill us.”

The call ended. Noah stood very still, in the deep stillness of Onioni Street at night. Was that surf, or the laughter of the Gods he heard booming in the distance? Noah flipped on all the lights in his bedroom. He turned to the closet and began grabbing clothes in big handfuls while his thoughts ran ahead. He would charter the plane, pack his bags and confirm with the motel on Oahu. Just like riding that fabled bicycle, you never forgot. As his pulse quickened to the prospect of going out on a news story again, Noah was exactly 150 nautical miles from the scene of the crime.

Chapter 2

Robin Hernandez pushed her car door shut and headed for the brightly lit driveway. It looked like something out of a sci-fi movie, with those big, portable lights blazing in the heavy fog. She strung an FBI identification pouch around her neck and breathed the cool, damp air. It was a minute before 3:00 AM. Her first contact with the locals. This would be choice.

Robin was a tall, pretty, curvy Latina with a degree from Harvard Law. She had shoulder length, straight black hair, soft chocolate-brown eyes and wide cheekbones. Her teeth were sparkly white but blocky, wide and thick. This made her self-conscious and hesitant to smile, so she was often accused of being a dud. Robin had a keen sense of humor and the generous heart common to Latinas, but she had played the game successfully at Harvard and at the FBI, so she came across as serious, professional and a bit stuffy. No one but her own family knew that she had once been a street girl living *la vida loca* when she was a young teen. It took the shooting of her baby brother, Aurelio, to make her straighten up and raise her sights.

Sadly, the tropical beauties of Hawaii were lost on Robin. Ambitious and driven, she couldn't wait until she got back into the mainstream of FBI work. For the moment, she was keeping her head down and doing whatever assignments came her way - mostly background checks on janitors for the military bases. Incredibly boring.

When Captain Daniel Fong of the Honolulu Police Department saw Robin Hernandez walk up to the crime scene, he couldn't help but whistle under his breath. So, this was the hot-shot the Bureau shipped out here, he thought. She was cute, no doubt of that. At a distance, she could be mistaken for a *wahine*, an island girl. The straight black hair was the same, the bronze complexion, the wide mouth and the slight slanting of her almond-shaped eyes. She was plenty sexy in a snug, Navy blue pants suit and lavender blouse - and those high heels!

Fong thought about running away, but at 5'6" and 325 pounds he wasn't built for speed and it was too late now anyway. Robin had collared one of the troopers at the edge of the crime scene and the traitor was pointing right at him. Fong scowled and turned aside, even as he heard the beat of her heels coming closer. The rich, floral scent of Chanel No.5 arrived a split second before Robin herself.

"Excuse me, are you Captain Fong," asked a clear alto voice?

"I'm Fong, Detective Captain, Honolulu P.D. Aloha."

Robin extended her hand and Fong shook it. She smiled without showing her teeth.

"Special Agent Robin Hernandez, FBI, Honolulu." Robin looked around, her nose wrinkling. "Did someone puke here?"

Fong grunted, "Yeah. One of the girls who found the body got sick into a planter when they realized he was DOA."

"Too many drinks with the little umbrellas?"

"Look, Agent Hernandez, I don't see how the Bureau has any interest here. This is strictly local and we're on top of it."

Robin smiled without showing her teeth. "We're not claiming jurisdiction, Captain. But the victim, Sir Rex Hamilton, was a son of the Duke of Malmsey and a relative to the Queen of England. We've had an unofficial request from Whitehall to. . ."

"*Whitehall?*"

"The British Government. They've requested that the Bureau track this investigation. I have an authorization to review all evidence and reports. They want a comprehensive wrap-up from me in two days - 48 hours. That means they want the case closed by then; tied up in a pretty blue bow. So, let's

roll.”

“Not much to review yet,” Fong grumbled. “And two days is not enough time to work a case like this one. Put that in your report, yeah?”

“Cause of death?”

“The M.E. says blunt force. Around midnight the vic was hit from behind with a heavy object, one hard blow to the back of the head. One of my guys thought it was a Hawaiian war club, but that's kinda far-fetched.”

“Why?”

“Because anybody can get a stick and duct tape a big rock to one end of it. Or buy a baseball bat. The real war clubs belong to the *kahunas* today, and they only use 'em for da ceremonial stuff. Or in museums. We'll let the coroner rule on that one. Plus we need the bloodwork to see if he was an OD or what.”

Robin looked puzzled. “I thought a kahuna was some kind of surfer?”

“How long you been in the Islands, now?”

“Three months.”

“Yeah.” Fong made a half turn and pointed at the high-rise behind them, “That's the Princess Kamamalu Building. The British Legation has offices on the fourth floor,” Fong said, “and a display area in the lobby that was vandalized. The vic worked for the Legation as a business-development director. Played a lot of golf, if I got it right. Name of Sir Rex Hamilton – British citizen. Twenty-nine and single. Supposed to be very good-looking.”

“Display area? What's that?”

“Kind of a little museum.”

“Could the war club have come from there?”

Fong sidestepped that one. “The vic was here by himself late at night. Maybe he came out to have a smoke? Wrong place, wrong time? His pockets were emptied and we're scouting the vicinity for discards.”

“How big a radius?”

“A half mile. You want more?”

“No, Captain. Just asking. Forty-eight hour deadline, remember? Now what about the coconuts?”

“The *what?*”

“The two coconuts that were found next to the body.”

Fong could feel the acid reflux kicking-in. It started as a bitter taste at the back of the throat and by the end of the shift he'd be breathing fire.

“There were no coconuts, Agent Hernandez. There were two *kukui* nuts, which the vic may have been using as worry stones. You know? Like those ball bearings Bogart had in da movie?”

Robin could thank her boss, “half-Shel”, for that one. Special Agent in Charge Sheldon Margulies was one of those nimrods at the Bureau who kept failing upwards. If he was any worse at his job, he'd be the next Director. Unlike Robin, who had been sent to Hawaii because she drew too much favorable press for breaking up a terrorist cell in Miami, Margulies was shipped out because he bungled a hostage situation and got six people killed. For that he was promoted and put on a plane.

Margulies told Robin that this case was going to determine her next ten years at the bureau. It was very high profile. International attention, people in Washington, people in London, blah, blah, blah. It will make or break you, he told her. And then he got the details wrong.

“Oh, *kukui* nuts,” Robin said, cheeks reddening. “My bad.”

A growing clash of voices from the edge of the crime-scene announced the arrival of Lord Clapham, the British Legate. Fong signaled the HPD uniforms at the tape and they parted to allow Clapham to enter. His Lordship sailed past them like the *H.M.S. Repugnance*.

Chapter 3

Lord Clapham walked right up to Captain Fong and put a hand on his shoulder like an old friend. He spoke quietly. "Damned inconvenient, eh Fong? What's the bloody world coming to?"

"Goin' to hell in a helicopter."

"I've been led to believe the FBI are here."

Captain Fong nodded at Robin and Clapham turned to look at her. She held out a firm and steady hand, which he shook, stiffly.

"That would be me. Special Agent Robin Hernandez. I'm the FBI liaison but I'm only here as an observer – this is Captain Fong's case."

"Certainly. Thomas Lord Clapham. Attaché to Her Majesty's Government and Legate."

Clapham was tall, had a bit of a pot belly and a perfectly trimmed RAF mustache riding on his stiff upper lip. He looked elegant in his expertly tailored tuxedo, patent-leather shoes and black tie. His whitish hair was worn long to curling as were a pair of retro sideburns. A deep groove between his eyebrows showed his distaste at this evening's business. His face was red and it was a good bet he had been drinking. He turned back to Fong and leaned in very close.

"Please tell me the Logbook is unharmed."

Fong turned and gestured them to follow him into the lobby.

As they entered the Princess Kamamalu Building, Robin stopped and looked around in amazement. "No security cameras?"

"Not a one," Fong said. "So, there's no video. This is an older building, yeah? And since we have a low crime rate, the owners weren't in a panic to spend that kind of money. They will now."

The lobby was a two-story atrium with a shiny, peach-colored terrazzo floor. A large portion, more than half the lobby's floor space, was behind a tall plate-glass wall. This was the British Legation's display area. Inside was a motley collection of Hawaiian artifacts, some from the recent, plantation era, others several hundred years old. British, Hawaiian and U.S. flags decorated the walls. Some valuable pieces were in cases, some on pedestals. Several exhibits were museum quality, some little more than dusty scraps of parchment, dried leather and tapa fibers. A small counter by the door offered a guest-book with countless signatures, and vivid postcards of Hawaii for sale. The large plate-glass entry door had vanished, turned into an ankle-high pile of sparkling tempered glass pebbles on the floor.

Robin turned to Lord Clapham. "About the Logbook?"

"Right! We own a major fragment of Captain Cook's logbook from the voyages of *HMS Resolution* in 1778, when Cook discovered the Hawaiian Islands. The only version in private hands. Quite valuable. A vital link between Her Majesty's Government and the people of Hawaii. We would all be heartbroken if it was nicked."

He walked over to a plexiglas display case that housed a weathered old book, its yellow pages stained from careless use and the long passage of time. The book was leather bound with thin, pebbled covers and hand-marbled endpapers. The pages showed columns of figures - probably ship's position - and some notes in a small, neat script handwriting, by Captain Cook himself. The logbook was open and displayed on a tilted stand covered in golden velvet. A printed card gave a brief history of the book.

Clapham peered into the case to check on its valuable contents. Satisfied, he took a step back and carefully examined the case itself. Nodding slightly, he returned to where Robin and Captain Fong stood. His bearing was more confident now, less annoyed.

"Designed that case myself, don't you know. Sat up for how many nights like a schoolboy with a straight-edge and a pencil. Sticking me tongue out as I drew the lines. Ballocks, eh? Anything actually taken, then?"

Fong consulted his notebook. "There's fifty bucks and change in the cash box. The only thing that's not accounted for is an item called 'Bones of Lono'."

"Ah," said Lord Clapham, "those Hawaiians have made good their threat."

Fong scowled, his round-moon face darkening like a storm cloud. "What threat? What Hawaiians? I don't remember any threats."

"Yes, Captain. I understand your confusion. We didn't report it because it seemed a paper-tiger, a hoax, a *je-ne-sais-quoi*."

"Could you speak English for a minute. What threats?"

"Right. Over the last several years, we have received letters from some native Hawaiians, kahunas in fact, who take exception to our collection of artifacts. They claim that our display items belong to the Hawaiian people and should be returned. And there is one item that was mentioned specifically, the very same 'Bones of Lono' that were taken in this fracas. They insisted we return them for burial in Hawaiian soil."

"Wait a second," Robin interjected, "Isn't Lono a mythical figure?"

“No,” Lord Clapham snapped. “This chap was a King of Hawaii going back a few hundred years who was named after Lono. *Lonoikamakahiki* is his full name.”

“Maybe if we had da bones of Henry the Eighth over at the Ala Moana, you folks would want them back?”

Lord Clapham made a sour face. “Yes, Captain. I suppose we should.”

Robin nodded. “About the victim, Sir Rex Hamilton. What was he doing in the office at midnight?”

Clapham’s eyebrows levitated. “I’m sure I don’t know. Rex was Deputy Legate for Business Development and he often entertained clients after dark – good dinner, night on the town, bit of skirt, eh? You know the drill. He may have come in to make some notes after a meeting or dinner. His secretary will have all that. I wasn’t very close to the lad.”

“Was there a Hawaiian war club in your display area?” Robin asked.

“Don’t think we’ve ever had one. Rare these days, I believe.”

Fong nodded in agreement. “Lord Clapham, we need a formal ID on the body and I’m afraid that . . .”

“Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown, eh? And would you mention that the British Government will offer a ten thousand dollar reward for information leading to . . . etc, etc.”

“Delaney,” yelled Captain Fong, “take Lord Clapham down to the morgue for an ID on the vic and then take him home.” A detective with red hair collected Lord Clapham and led him to an unmarked police car.

Robin waited until they were alone. “And the rest, Captain?”

“That’s it, Special Agent.”

“I mean the rest of the evidence.”

“I got that, ma’am. There is no forensic evidence. No murder weapon, not even a toothpick. It’s like a ghost did the crime, yeah? And no eye witnesses, either. When this happened, the fog was so heavy you couldn’t see an elephant.”

“Fingerprints?”

“There I can help you. We got about a million and counting. Remember, this is a tourist spot. They come trampin’ through here day after day. Touch something, pick it up. Gonna take us a year to trace ‘em all.”

Robin shook her head slightly. “You’re telling me that we have no reliable physical or forensic evidence whatever in this case?”

"I'm not telling you, it's a fact," said the grumpy detective.

"Cell phone records?"

"Hawaii Telecom got a computer glitch. They say 8 hours. You'll be the first to know. Now, pardon me, but I got to prepare a statement for da press." Fong turned away and waddled toward his unmarked car.

Robin was suddenly struck by the idea of running her own investigation. She would get to the bottom of this case long before the locals. Captain Fong couldn't accept that the murder weapon might be a war club, or that the killers were kahunas. But, come on. Street punks weren't going to leave fifty dollars in cash behind, no matter what.

Robin nodded slowly to herself. A successful resolution to this case might be her ticket off this island and back to the real world of international crime. And forty-eight hours was not a lot of time. She almost ran back to her car.

Chapter 4

“Hello, Laniakea YWCA. How may I help you?”

Noah disguised his own warm baritone, giving it a nasal whine. “Hello, this is Father David Eustace from St. Theresa’s, I’m calling to offer grief counseling to the girls who found that dead body this morning. Do you think they might be interested?”

“I don’t know, Father. I think you should speak to them directly. You never know if someone wants to talk or not, do you?”

“Thank you, my child. Would you remind me of their names?”

“Yes, Father. It’s Linda Floss, and Debbie Hugens. Two good, Christian girls. I can’t give out room numbers, but I’ll put you through if you like?”

“Thank you and bless you.” Noah wrote: *Linda Floss, Debbie Hugens.*

In five minutes, Noah had booked both girls for an interview at the crime scene.

The *Times* had booked him into an older place, the *Coconut Beach Motel*, on the edge of downtown. It was a downscale operation, but his room was clean and didn’t smell like cigars, mildew or garlic. There were no visible insects. He was somewhere in Chinatown, near the old red-light district on Hotel Street. About a mile from the crime scene.

After unpacking, Noah selected a shooter named Sam Hokua from a faxed list of photographers - mostly because Sam was in Honolulu this morning, charged a reasonable rate and was ready to go to work. Noah found himself damned excited to get rolling. He dialed the number for the British Legation and waited while it rang and rang. He thought they might have closed down in mourning when a beautiful purring voice answered.

“Good Morning, British Legation.”

“My name is Noah Blunt. I’m with the *Los Angeles Times* and I’d like to interview Lord Clapham?”

“We’re a bit shorthanded this morning.” A phone rang somewhere nearby. “Pardon me, but I must answer that. Don’t hang up, now.”

And she was gone. Gilbert and Sullivan was the music-on-hold. Noah hummed along, “I am the very model of a modern. . .”

“Mr. Blunt? One of our staffers hasn’t come in this morning and it’s absolute bedlam this end. I will be able to connect you with Lord Clapham, but give me a moment, all right?”

Noah was about to say something when Messrs. Gilbert & Sullivan returned. The music had

speeded up and the modern Major General was spitting out his lyrics like a machine gun.

“Mr. Blunt? Lord Clapham wants to put you on his schedule. Nine o’ clock today, if that suits. By the way, Carlotta Silverstone. I’m office manager and factotum at the Legation. But you may not call me Carlotta till the second phone call.”

“Who is out?”

“Mary Montrose, Sir Rex Hamilton's secretary. She was very devoted to Sir Rex. She’s probably in bed with a nice hot cuppa and the phone unplugged, crying her eyes out. We British women are good at that.”

“Crying?”

“No, silly boy, making tea.”

“Could I have her address? I won't be hard on her and I'll go easy on the death aspect.”

A quiet pause.

“Mr. Blunt, I understand your need to be timely, but I'm afraid I can't give out an employee's information. However I can give you her full name as it appears in the *phone book* - if you take my meaning.”

“Thank you, Miss Silverstone.” Noah wrote at the top of a notebook page: *Mary Montrose*.

Sam Hokua suggested the River of Gold for their meeting, an anonymous little Chinese restaurant where King Street crossed the river. Several blocks away, open 24 hours. As Noah headed outside, he smelled the briny Pacific Ocean on a strong breeze. The night’s heavy fog leisurely surrendered to the crisp air of a new day. He also realized that he was hungry and low on energy. His watch read: 7:55 AM.

In a northwest corner location where King Street met River Street, the little River of Gold had tall windows, frosted part-way up to give the diners some privacy. Noah scouted the inside. He noticed a short Hawaiian man sitting at a rear table intently reading the *Honolulu Reporter*. Ahhh, there was a camera on the table. This had to be Sam whatshisname. As Noah walked in, a little brass bell fixed to the door rang and the short man looked up from his newspaper with a huge, bright smile. As Noah walked over to him, the man began speaking.

“Aloha, I'm Sam Hokua. Howzit? And you're Noah, right? The guy I talked to?” The short man stuck out his hand and Noah shook it. The man's grip was strong and firm. Even his fingers seemed muscular. Despite Sam giving off a good vibe, Noah feared he was a goof, like most news photogs.

“Yes, I’m Noah Blunt. Working for the *L.A. Times*. Free-lance now, but lots of experience. I was a crime reporter for almost twenty years, then the paper got orders to cut staff.”

“Plenty doing da same thing.”

“Very true.” Noah took a closer look at Sam Hoku. Sam was wearing a subdued green Aloha shirt, loose linen trousers and fisherman sandals without socks. Noah guessed that Sam was about five feet six inches tall and must have weighed about 140, with the smooth muscles of a longtime surfer. He had the flattened nose and jet-black hair of a polynesian Hawaiian. There was a bald spot like a monk's tonsure on top of his head, and there were some lines at the corners of his eyes, but Sam's age was hard to guess. As long as he could keep up, thought Noah, the age really didn't matter.

Sam was still smiling as he gestured Noah into the chair opposite him. The *haole* looked like a writer - that was something positive anyway. This Noah guy had a big head, choke gray hair, shaggy like an American surfer. He tilted his head as Sam talked and seemed to look deep into you, like Superman's x-ray vision. His bushy eyebrows went up and down as he talked. He seemed fairly fit and was maybe something like forty. Not that Sam cared. As long as the guy could keep up, no worries.

“How did you get started taking pictures?”

“*Buggah* big surf.”

“Sorry. . . ?”

“Used to be a competition surfer,” Sam said quietly. “But I got tired of seaweed in da shorts. My friends help me get started with pictures, yeah? They gave me a camera, a little camera. And I was ova' on da beach when a cruise ship full of *malihini* – that's tourists - catch on fire, so I took all kinda pictures. Some of them got published and made big money, choke money. I stuck with it. Done pretty good. I take lots of pics for the Island newspapers and some big magazines as a stringer. Like when the President comes to Hawaii, I'm workin' round da clock. Weddings, bar Mitzvahs, funerals, new boats. That about it, yeah?” Sam looked down at the table top, then back up at Noah. “And you?”

Noah nodded his big head. “I was a career journalist. Crime and investigative reporter. Feature stories, mostly. Two Pulitzer prizes. I was a star player, you know? One day, they call me into an editor's office and in two minutes, it's all over.” Noah looked down at his hands. There was still a pale band of skin on the finger where his wedding ring used to be.

“It put a chill into me. Oh, I made some half-assed attempts to get other jobs. Nothing ever clicked. So, I moved to the Big Island, and I'm writing a book. But now . . . I want to do a great job on

this story.”

“You got it, as my great uncle Jungle Jim Kanaloa used to say. But, man, it hard to work on an empty stomach. You ever have egg-foo-yung for breakfast?”

Noah shook his head. So, this shooter was a chow hound, he thought. Weren’t they all?

“Look, Sam, we have to run and gun. The editor wants something as soon as we can produce it, so we’ll have to get going, I’m afraid.”

“Order take out.”

“Sam, we need to get moving.”

“Breakfast da most important meal, you know? Everybody say so.”

“Egg rolls, on me. But that’s it.”

Sam waved at an empty cab just a half-block from the restaurant and they ducked into it. He had told Noah almost none of the really important details of his life and for the moment that suited him. But it was a kind of dishonesty and he would have to chant his way out of it when time allowed. They ate their egg-rolls in the cab, sharing the short supply of paper napkins. Noah could have sworn there was pineapple in his.

“Sam, I have the names of the two girls who found Hamilton's body. We're going to meet them in a few minutes, then talk to Lord Clapham, and we'll get a look at the crime scene in daylight and see what's there.” Sam just nodded.

Noah had the impression that Sam was singing or humming to himself in a very low voice but it was masked by the endless chatter on the cab's two-way radio. Buildings were mostly two stories tall – except for the recent skyscrapers – and had a colonial look about them. Quaint. The leftover fog covered it all in a hazy wrapper. Postcards from paradise, and a dead body in the midst of it.

Chapter 5

They climbed out of the cab mid-block on Richards Street. Noah stood there for a moment taking it in while the cabbie wrote out the receipt. Across the street the big, Victorian, Iolani Palace stood in the middle of a large, grassy park in downtown Honolulu, with a low companion building off to one side. A tall, wrought-iron fence surrounded the Palace grounds. The heart of old Hawaii, Noah thought. The air smelled impossibly fresh and vibrant, flowery and sweet.

Sam's voice broke in. "Crime scene ova' here."

Noah turned around. He could see the layout now. There was the Princess Kamamalu Building on the corner of Richards and King Streets. Then the driveway, and then the YWCA, with its blank facade and Moorish entrance. Sam walked up the cobblestone driveway. The area had been worked over by evidence technicians and not even a gum wrapper remained to lend it a human touch. A man had died here for unknown reasons. Noah wanted to discover the why of it, to report on more than just the bare facts of the case. That's what made for a memorable story.

Sam took a smaller digital camera out of his backpack and began shooting in every direction. The smaller camera had a powerful flash and each burst of the strobe illuminated a big, thin ball of haze, while etching sharp black shadows on the ground.

Meanwhile, Noah crossed the driveway, walked up to the side door of the Princess Kamamalu Building and looked into the lobby. Inside was a long, open room. It was about seventy-five feet to the back and a little less than fifty feet wide, two stories high. There was a glassed-in area along one wall of the lobby.

"Sam?"

Sam straightened up and came over to where Noah was staring through the door.

"What is that, in there, a gift shop?"

"Ho! It's a *buggah* little museum where the Brits keep Hawaiian stuff. Very old stuff. Art-effects. Some go all the way back to Cap'n Cook, yeah? They got a book from da ship they say worth a couple million to collectors. What they say, anyways."

"And it wasn't taken in the break-in?"

"No, man."

"Bizarre. All right. Let's check the scene."

Sam's eyes darted back and forth. His body language grew tense and alert as they walked to the back of the driveway where the yellow crime scene tape twisted and bowed in the rising breeze.

Noah said, "There's a break-in, a man is killed by street punks. The same punks left a potential million-dollar item behind and just took some old bones? It's not right. Doesn't feel right."

Sam shrugged. "I just take da pictures."

"Then take some."

"No worries."

Sam took a series of photos of the crime scene, most of them close ups. Each time his flash went off, a brilliant, blue-white light ball filled the foggy driveway. After Sam had taken his snaps, they turned to walk out onto Richards Street when a voice came out of the misty darkness behind them.

"Freeze right there. Stretch out your hands."

Sam and Noah instinctively stepped closer together as protection against their unseen foe. A moment later the large form of Captain Daniel Fong emerged from the fog like a drifting planet and, on seeing Sam, his eyes opened in surprise.

"Sam Hokua! What da heck you doing in Honolulu, and who's the *haole*?"

"Dan-O, you want to shoot me for somethin' do it now and get it over. Or put that thing back in your pocket and we can talk like men. This here is Noah Blunt from da *Los Angeles Times*. He won that Nobel Prize, twice."

"Pulitzer," Noah said.

"Listen, Hokua, don't call me Dan-O. It ain't funny. Now, I asked you what's going on. So sing."

"Noah gonna write this news story," Sam explained. "And I'm gonna take the snaps. Nothing wrong with that, yeah?"

Fong thumbed the hammer down on his 9mm and clicked on the safety. He turned to Noah as he replaced his gun in a belt holster. "You got some identification?"

"Absolutely."

Noah fished out his driver's license, his old press card and the new credential from the editor at the Times, and handed them to Fong. The overweight detective examined them carefully in the beam of his pocket flashlight and then nodded. He handed the papers back to Noah.

"Since when does the *L.A. Times* give a damn about murder in Honolulu?"

"Maybe they think they're running a newspaper."

"How the hell you get over here so fast?"

"I live on the Big Island, now."

"Oh, so you're some kinda fucking local, yeah? You and this burned out surf bum. Nice pair of jokers you are." Fong's cell phone rang and he turned away from Sam and Noah as he answered it. "Yeah, this is Fong." His back straightened. "Yes, Governor." Fog listened intently. He kept trying to talk but said little more than "yes, sir." You could hear someone straining his voice shouting on the other end. It went on for a while. Then silence. Fong ended the call.

Noah jumped on it. "I hear the Governor doesn't tolerate unsolved murders on his watch - makes the tourists nervous. Let me be blunt: unless you get a break, you could be directing traffic in a week."

"He got you there, Dan-O."

Fong cooled down a little. "I get a report from a black n' white that somebody's creepin' in here, taking pictures. Sounds suspicious, yeah? I came down to see who." Fong looked at Noah. "You, mister Nobel Prize. You got credentials and I'm good with that. But this guy?" He pointed at Sam. "Don't pay him till you got your pictures in hand. That's all I got to say. Oh, and don't goof around with the scene, you hear me Sam?"

"No way, Dan-O. We just here to have a look-see, yeah?"

Fong shook his head. "I'm leaving a man here to keep you poi-hounds honest. And, goddammit, Sam, don't call me Dan-O." he turned and pointed at a uniformed cop, who then walked over to the entrance of the alleyway and stood guard as Fong waddled out the opposite way, to Alakea street, where his unmarked car was waiting.

Sam grinned. "Delicious Kona coffee just up the street. It's a little place owned by my great Auntie Dolores Haleaki. She's the one who thought she had a two headed snake in her house. And she called the papers so they could come and take snaps of the two headed snake. But she forgot that her husband, the wrestler, Rudy "Conch Man" DeLuca had hit her in the head with a two by four da night before and she was just seein' double."

"So there was no two-headed snake?"

"Was no snake. Some green pantyhose got tangled up in da wash."

"Do we get a family discount on the delicious Kona Coffee?"

"I do. Ain't no snakes in Hawaii - except da legal profession."

But, delicious Kona coffee was not to be, because the two girls had stopped on the sidewalk and were now walking up the driveway toward them, quarreling.