

Mahalo

Rhonda stepped from the airplane into the corridor leading to the Honolulu terminal and cringed as she heard the stewardess chirp out a last *mahalo*, the ubiquitous *thank you* promoted by the Hawaiian tourist industry. *The missionaries had stolen the whole damn island from an ancient Polynesian culture for god's sake—so what was so mahalo about that?*

Rhonda honked six sneezes into her handkerchief. She was not only allergic to the scent of leis lined up for sale, but Hawaii itself—the language with its overuse of vowels and limited consonants, the sing-song falsetto Hawaiian music played by the puny ukulele, the bland, unchanging weather, the sense of claustrophobia she suffered from a 600-square-mile rock in the middle of a vast pale-blue ocean.

Rhonda hadn't been home for three years—only weddings and funerals brought her back. Her protruding stomach, always the bane of her existence, felt gaseous and uncomfortable. Her cousin, seventeen-year-old Kayla, had been murdered. It had been big news for weeks. Kayla, who had just graduated from the elitist Punahou Academy, was found strangled, her body floating in the lily pond surrounding the school's Thurston chapel, the architectural jewel of the campus.

All her relatives wanted Rhonda to help the police solve the crime because she was a big private eye just like Miss Marple. *Private eye, my foot.* She did research for a San Francisco investigative company that specialized in divorce.

Rhonda dreaded having to be at the special memorial service for Kayla at Punahou, a school which Rhonda had also attended.

“Quack, quack” the kids at Punahou had taunted her, imitating what they called “her waddle.” They made fun of her fleshy face, thin wispy hair, and near-sighted eyes. She'd

dreamed of returning to a class reunion: thin, beautiful, famous. But here she was forty-three, and it never happened, never would.

“Rhonda! Rhonda!” Relieved to hear that familiar voice, Rhonda turned and was in the arms of her dear Aunt Mattie.

“Mattie, my Mattie,” Rhonda’s voice tightened as they embraced. Her own mother, the youngest of the three wealthy Alexander sisters, had died of cancer, and her Aunt Mattie who’d cared for her since she was a baby was the only mother Rhonda knew.

The Alexander family, missionary descendants, owned the Alexander Ranch, one of the oldest working cattle ranches in America. It was hard to believe that the island’s glamorous sisters could suffer another tragedy. First, her own mother, Margaret, dying an early death, and now her Aunt Marilyn had lost her precious Kayla in such a horrible murder. It was unbearable to think of any sorrow ever coming to her own dear Mattie. Rhonda knew that Mattie was the one person who paid no attention to her awkward, blundering facade, and only saw her as bright and special.

Rhonda looked at her aunt with both admiration and envy. Despite her age, her aunt was perfect, dressed in a cool, crisp blouse and simple, classic slacks. She had a youthful, snow-white complexion and a trim, regal figure.

“Oh, Mattie, Mattie,” Rhonda felt a tear run down the side of her nose as she saw the pain in Mattie’s own stricken eyes.

“Now, dear.” Mattie patted Rhonda’s cheek with gentle assurance. “Dear, dear Rhonda. You’re here. That’s the main thing. We will take one day at a time.” Mattie’s mouth twisted in an uncharacteristic grimace as her voice cried, high and harsh, “Justice will be served.”

Rhonda tugged at her elastic polyester pants, nudging her waistband below her stuffed belly as she fretted about yet another downside of being in the cosmopolitan food capital of the Pacific—her inevitable weight gain. This was her third time to Kayla’s family home during this visit, and the tragedy never prevented the table from bulging with mango bread, sushi, Portuguese doughnuts, Chinese buns bursting with black sugar, and Korean short ribs. Seated beside her at the dining room table was Kayla’s mom, Auntie Marilyn, who looked almost feral, so intense was her visible grief. Her normally hearty and corny, joke-cracking husband, Robert, sat eerily quiet and distant. Even Aunt Mattie, treasured matriarch of the family and always surrounded by young children who loved her colorful stories and frequent hugs, looked subdued.

After three days in Hawaii, Rhonda hadn’t discovered a single clue. The murder had taken place on a Friday, and the body hadn’t been found until Monday. Kayla’s scratched and bruised throat was so waterlogged, it was impossible to detect what kind of hands, large or small, ended her life.

Yesterday, after the memorial service, Rhonda had managed to speak to practically every family member and three of Kayla’s closest friends. Kayla had been an A-student, captain of the swim team, popular. She had planned to be a doctor, volunteered at the Department of Health, and a month ago had been accepted to Harvard. A golden future seemed guaranteed.

When she saw Kayla’s boyfriend, Scott, enter the house, Rhonda got up quickly. She’d wanted to talk to him, but he’d always show up for a second, then disappear. Mattie, charitable in her opinions of everyone, didn’t think much of him. She said Scott, age twenty-two, was much too old for Kayla, and she heard he was into drinking and smoking weed.

Rhonda intercepted him as he headed into the kitchen.

“Hi Scott, I’m Rhonda, Kayla’s cousin. I’m so sorry about your loss.” Rhonda looked up at Scott’s tall, lithe physique and his striking blue-gray eyes. Scott must have been Hawaiian, Chinese, some Portuguese? That was the only thing Rhonda loved about Hawaii: the “racial melting pot of the islands,” produced exotic, vibrant-skinned youths.

“Kayla often spoke of you. I’m glad to meet you,” Scott said. Rhonda was struck by his gentle, quiet manner. He looked tired and defeated, but Rhonda couldn’t help notice a few scratches on the side of his face.

“You must feel stumped like everyone else. Who could have done such a terrible thing?” Rhonda offered. Scott looked down. Was he shy or did she detect some evasion?

“Or maybe you have some ideas about her murderer?” Rhonda probed.

“No,” he said, “I loved Kayla, but...,” he fell silent.

“Scott, we all loved Kayla, but if you suspect anyone, then you should...”

“I don’t suspect anyone. It’s just...well, everyone thinks Kayla was perfect. And she *was* wonderful. It’s just that..,” Scott stopped abruptly.

“What do you mean Scott? Was Kayla in some kind of trouble?”

Scott hesitated, “...not everyone loved her like I did. She was so talented and gifted. I think some of it went to her head. If she was in a certain mood, she could be a little mean.”

“So are you saying you might know who could have murdered her. Was there anyone you knew who hated her? “

“No...No. Look I gotta go. I really don’t know anything more.”

“Scott...” Rhonda pressed, but in an instant, he slipped back into the living room. Rhonda slapped at a mosquito that decided to take a second bite from her ankle. *Damn*, she thought, as she scratched at her insect-bitten leg, *blew it again, coming on too strong with my big fat mouth.*

Though it was only her fifth day in Hawaii, under the hot, relentless sun, Rhonda felt she had been in Honolulu forever. She and Mattie walked down the expansive lawn of the lovely Punahou campus. Monkeypod trees mingled with taro leaves and the air felt heavy with the scent of plumeria flowers, a sweetness fatal to her allergies. Rhonda reached into her pocket for a handkerchief already damp from her dripping nose.

Rhonda thought she was a mature adult by now, but the sight of academy students milling about—girls in skinny jeans with long hair swinging over casual tops—still stirred up the horrors of her overweight, painful years at this school. She'd never forget the prom. Of course, she hadn't been invited, but she continued to relive the mortification when all the kids who'd been to the dance wore thick leis the Monday after prom weekend while rejects like her slinked about with bare shoulders. Would the fantasy of being transformed into a swan ever leave her?

"Well, that looks like another dead end," Rhonda said wiping the sticky sweat on the back of her neck. She and Aunt Mattie had just spoken to Mr. Akama, Kayla's homeroom teacher.

"I'm not so sure," Aunt Mattie frowned.

"What do you mean—did I miss something?"

"Mr. Akama, he's supposed to be Hawaiian, and he doesn't know the *shaka!*"

"*Shaka!* You gave him the *shaka*? Oh Mattie, that is *so* lame." Rhonda just had to love her old Auntie Mattie. Mattie had a habit of flashing signs—peace signs, expressive Italian gestures, hand signals from African tribes—it didn't matter whether anyone understood them or not. But everyone knew the *shaka*, a rotating fist with the thumb and pinky sticking out. It's a local friendly gesture, and when President Obama, a Punahou graduate, was inaugurated, the Punahou Marching Band saluted him with the *shaka*.

“Yes, but when I flashed it, Akama had a puzzled look on his face. Not only that, did you notice how he kept hedging every question? I don't like that nasty weasel.”

Rhonda was startled by the fierce tone of Aunt Mattie's voice. She'd never heard her generous, big-hearted Mattie speak so bitterly. Rhonda was worried. This murder had taken the stuffing out of her. Bitten fingernails replaced her perfectly manicured hands. Her usual soft, luminous eyes now darted about with suspicion. If only she would cry. But Mattie was old-fashioned about showing emotion.

“Mattie, Mr. Akama is a Hawaiian American, born in Oahu!”

“That's what he says. Do you realize how many Tahitians are trying to pass themselves off as locals so they can get US citizenship? And now there's talk that French terrorist groups are trying to infiltrate Tahiti, a territory of France.”

“Terrorist! What does that have to do with the time of day! Help me connect the dots!”

“Look, Kayla volunteered at the Department of Health. She told me Mr. Akama was always asking her to check on people's birth certificates. Kayla thought that was weird.”

“Oh, I get it—Mr. Akama has ties with ISIS and is trying to get them American birth certificates—brilliant!

“Hey, I'm not necessarily saying that, but someone murdered Kayla...I thought a good detective checks everything out.”

Rhonda hesitated, maybe Mattie had a point. “No problem,” she said, I'll look into it and see what I can dig up.”

But Rhonda knew she had to get back to San Francisco. Her boss had been sympathetic about the murder of her niece, but the days had quickly added up to a week, and her bills had to be paid.

Rhonda sat in Mattie's kitchen digging at an ice cream carton, stirring vanilla chunks into her root beer.

“Oh Mattie, I feel so guilty about leaving you with this mess. Some crimes never get solved. Guess we'll just have to let this one go.”

“Let it go!” Mattie’s eyes narrowed. “There’s a murderer out there, and I’m going to find him no matter what. Did you notice how strange Robert has been acting?”

“Robert? Kayla’s own dad! What are you talkin’!”

“He’s been avoiding any kind of contact with people. Then he’s been going out late at night, throwing a lot of money around...”

“Robert is grieving.”

“How sad can he be if he's always going out to party.”

“He probably goes out to get drunk.”

“That's exactly what guilty people do.”

“Mattie! I swear if I didn’t know better I’d think you were the murderer!”

“Me, the murderer!?”

“Yeah, you’re doing the classic *throw the red herring* thing. First, you point the finger at Kayla’s boyfriend, who seems to be such a sweetheart; then it’s Mr. Akama—the so-called Tahitian who has a perfectly legit Oahu birth certificate, and now it’s Robert, who loved his daughter to pieces...”

Rhonda spoke in a light teasing tone, making comical, facial expressions. She paused giving Mattie a big smile, but Mattie didn't smile back.

There was an awkward silence.

“How dare you,” Mattie said at last, rearing herself up, gathering her full authority. But her aunt's voice came out in a croaked whisper.

Rhonda began to speak again, slowly at first. Then she felt her voice speed up as the words continued relentless and demanding. She heard herself almost screaming—screaming to stop the sight of Mattie’s once beautiful, vital face turn gray and old. The words careening from her had started as a joke, but now she pressed on, hard and fast. “Now you, who always have the most pampered, manicured hands sit here every day biting your fingers to stubs. What happened to your nails, Mattie? Did you break them while squeezing them around Kayla’s throat!?”

Rhonda stopped. She couldn’t hear herself above the strange wail, like a hurt animal, coming from Mattie. She watched aghast as tears flooded down Mattie’s cheeks, her sobs becoming louder—wild, plaintive, endless, beyond control.

Rhonda swung the seat belt over a thicker than ever waist. At least being the one to send her own mother to prison was a good excuse for gaining fifteen pounds. When her “Aunt” Mattie was able to pull herself together, she confessed. Kayla had been snooping around the records at the Board of Health and even managed to go through old police files. Kayla had found out Mattie had been ticketed a few times for drunken driving when she was young and rebelling against her prominent family. Her dad was always able to fix the ticket, but the real blemish on her record was when, on a dare, she'd turned a trick and had been arrested for prostitution. Then she'd gotten pregnant with Rhonda and had convinced her sister Margaret, dying of a cancerous stomach tumor, to pretend that the baby was hers.

The whole sordid story in hand, Kayla at first asked her aunt for favors or money. But with increasing frequency, she demanded a Ming vase, a jade Buddha, a priceless painting.

When Kayla went after Aunt Mattie's favorite diamond bracelet, Mattie totally lost it—killed Kayla in Mattie's own house, and dumped the body in the Punahou lily pond knowing it would create such a sensation that no one would consider snooping around Mattie's place. The greatest irony was Mattie said she did it to save Rhonda from the terrible shame.

Rhonda looked down at the Island of Oahu, wayward clouds covered the fading terrain, the immense ocean shimmered in the distance. She wiped her eyes, red and swollen from the tears that would not stop flowing, as the stewardess thanked the tourists for visiting the Hawaiian Islands and bade everyone a sweet lilting *mahalo*.