

One

Sunny Lyon pushed through the double doors of the surgical suite. The cool air enveloped her, chasing away the warmth of the Hawaiian morning that lingered on her skin. "Hey, Jack."

The day shift charge nurse stood at attention in front of a huge schedule board on the wall. His razor cut hair and properly fitting scrubs shouted ex-army medic. "Sorry you had to come in."

Sunny rubbed the back of her neck, muscles taut from eight ten-hour days in a row. "Three people out sick. What's going on with the schedule?"

Shoulder to shoulder, they studied the board displaying the names of all the patients along with their surgery start times, operating room numbers, surgical procedures, surgeons, anesthesiologists, and nurses. Every slot was full. Sunny felt the familiar adrenalin rush kick in. "You keep a handle on the schedule, Jack. I'll cover Mr. Kamokila's procedure in room five. Lani's scrubbing in there, and I haven't worked with her in ages."

Jack tapped his finger by a name on the board. "David Kaneko's assisting Grace Pukui on that case."

"This will be my first chance to see our brilliant new surgeon in action." She'd missed Kaneko's arrival from the Texas Heart Institute last week.

"Grab your antacid tabs."

"Great." It figured. Now that they finally had a tight team, they'd have to break in a prima donna. Sunny pushed dark curls away from her face.

"Your hair's getting long."

"I'm way overdue for a cut." She knew her blue eyes and fair skin looked better framed with short hair, but she never seemed to have time to make it to the salon. As director of surgical services, she spent most of her waking hours in the maze of green-tiled hallways and precise operating rooms tackling everything from managing a million dollar budget to working in the operating rooms when they were short on staff. Her life resembled a three-ring circus with the ringmaster dozing outside the tent. "As soon as we have Mr. Kamokila in ICU, I'm bolting. This afternoon's my volunteer turn at the village."

"Roger that. We have enough staff on the late shift."

Sunny changed into scrubs and hurried to room five. She shouldered the door open as she adjusted her surgical mask.

Leilani Alamea Lewis organized the sterile equipment on her instrument table. She looked up, dark, almond-shaped eyes crinkling above her mask. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"Jack or me. Take your pick."

"You. Jack's too serious."

"If I'm such a riot, why've we been missing our weekly taco and beer fest at The Wall?"

"You're the one with the out-of-control schedule, girl. How about tonight?"

"Can't. Village duty."

"Tomorrow night?"

"Can I let you know?"

"Sunny, you've got to stop living here."

"Any suggestions?"

"Hire more staff."

"No money in the budget. And I'm betting there are more cuts to come." Sunny grabbed a clipboard. "Ready?"

Lani deftly counted clamps, scissors, forceps, and a myriad of open-heart surgical instruments. Sunny recorded the numbers on the clipboard. It was a treat for the two of them to work together. Most days, the schedule of surgical procedures in ten rooms revved up, roaring on like a juggernaut until early evening, and they rarely caught a glimpse of each other.

"Kaneko's on this one. Easy on the eyes. Porcupine personality." Lani fanned out the packets of gauze squares, thick lap tape sponges, and suture.

Sunny jotted down the totals as Lani counted the packets. "Maybe he just needs to settle in."

"That was a correct administrative response."

Sunny shrugged. "We can handle him."

Lani pulled off her sterile gown and gloves. The smallest size scrub shirt and pants hung loosely on her frame. "I'm going to grab a cup of coffee and a doughnut before we get started."

"How can you eat like that and stay so thin?"

Lani shrugged. "Good genes, great gym. You look exhausted."

"Could you bring me a cup of that espresso roast?"

Sunny scanned the OR, making sure everything from the rolling trash buckets to the anesthesia machine was in place. Sunlight and blue sky glowed through the high windows along one wall. She'd planned a long jog on the beach this morning, a rare chance to get some exercise. She pulled off her mask and tossed it in the trash. It was getting harder to hang onto size eight. No time to worry about that now. John Kamokila and his relatives waited in pre-op.

The room, dimly lit and appointed in soft blues, held the faint scent of lavender. Soothing sounds of water trickling among rocks emanated from a whimsical frog sculpture in one corner. In the center of the room and surrounded by people wearing anxious expressions, an elderly man rested on a gurney, his eyes closed, face serene. Wisps of hair fringed his bald head.

"Hello, Mr. Kamokila. I'm Sunny. I'm going to be with you in the operating room." She placed her hand lightly on his arm.

The man looked up at her, a twinkle in his eyes. "Please call me John. Mr. Kamokila was for my father."

Sunny laughed. "You got it."

John gestured toward the woman holding his hand. "This is my wife, Ruth". He tilted his head back to smile at the people around him. "And my *ohana*."

"Good morning." Sunny nodded to John's family. "I'm glad you're all here. John, did you enjoy your *lomi lomi* massage?"

"Yes." He burrowed a little deeper into the plush blue blanket.

"Have you been using your breathing and visualization?"

John nodded.

“Good job. I see you have your music tapes. What did you choose?”

“Oh, I’ve got some Iz, hymns my mother used to sing, and the sound of the ocean.”

“Excellent.” Sunny checked his chart and identification bracelet. She looked back at John, studied the faces of his family members. “Any questions? Is there anything you need?”

John's wife patted a small bracelet of cowry shells pinned to John's hospital gown. “Can he take this with him?”

“Absolutely.” Sunny touched the bracelet. “Who gave you this treasure, John?”

“My granddaughters made that for me. They wanted to give their old *tūtū* something to keep him company.”

“You’re a fortunate grandpa.” Sunny glanced up as the door opened. “Here’s Dr. Mike. You saw him last night.”

A lanky body and sandy hair made Mike Jansen look more like a surfer than an anesthesiologist. He clasped hands with John. “How’re you doing? Ready to go?”

John flashed thumbs up.

Dr. Grace Pukui, John's cardiac surgeon, entered the room. She wore a lab coat printed with whales swimming in deep blue water.

John’s smile widened. “Dr. Grace. The question is, are you ready to go?”

The surgeon grinned. “I was born ready.”

John winked.

Grace squeezed John's arm. “I’ll see you in the operating room.”

Loved ones took turns hugging John. His wife paused at the door and smiled back at him. He raised a wrinkled hand to his lips and blew her a kiss.

Sunny guided the foot of the gurney, with Mike at John’s head, down the hallway. When they paused at the door of the operating room to adjust their masks, she could hear someone complaining about fee reimbursements. The voice sounded deep and resonant, but a sneer marred the tone. She turned to see him cornering Grace at the scrub sinks. Athletic build, golden-brown skin, striking cleft in his chin. Had to be David Kaneko.

Sunny shot Grace a look. The chief of surgery needed to rein this guy in.

Grace rested a hand on Kaneko's shoulder. "We can continue our discussion another time."

Sunny and Mike helped John slide over onto the operating table as the rest of the surgical team gathered round. They stood quietly while the anesthesiologist administered the fentanyl that would render John unconscious. Sunny held the old man's hand. His fingers felt cold. She pressed them between both of her hands to warm them up.

Mike spoke softly in John's ear. "When you wake up, you'll be comfortable. You won't have pain. You won't have any bleeding. Your healing has already begun. Just picture your healing place and listen to your music." John's deep sigh and relaxed body signaled that the drug had taken effect. Mike looked up. "Let's go."

Sunny checked the volume level on the tape player and adjusted the headset against John's ears. Grace, Mike, Sunny, and the perfusionists who operated the heart-lung pump each placed a hand on John. Lani, her hands wrapped in a sterile towel, stood close by. Kaneko stared down at the floor, hands propped on his hips. After a few moments of silence, Grace spoke. "We have a great team here today. Let's give John and each other our best."

Kaneko shook his head. His reaction reminded Sunny that spending a few quiet moments as a team around their patient before every surgery was an extraordinary practice, one she'd never experienced in any other OR.

The surgeons went out to scrub. Mike scanned monitoring equipment and adjusted medication levels. Sunny inserted a catheter into John's bladder and washed his chest with rust-colored prep solution.

Lani handed the surgeons sterile towels to dry their dripping hands and arms. She tugged them into gowns and snapped gloves over their hands.

Sunny fastened the ties on the back of David Kaneko's gown. "Good morning. I'm Sunny Lyon, the department director. It's good to finally meet you."

He glanced over his shoulder. "I need you to order my special instruments. Wolfram catalogue."

"No problem. We—"

Kaneko walked away and took his place at the operating table across from Grace.

Heat prickled the back of Sunny's neck. She helped Lani push her instrument table into place.

Lani handed Grace a scalpel. Mike turned up the volume on the sound system built into the wall behind him, and the soothing strains of Chopin filled the room. The procedure flowed with the same precision and harmony of a sonata as Grace removed the calcified mitral valve and replaced it with a titanium and Teflon valve.

With the incision in the heart closed, the team prepared the patient to come off bypass. Grace directed the perfusionists to turn the heart-lung pump down gradually to off.

Sunny stood at the foot of the table watching Lani ready clamps and sutures.

"We're removing the aortic cannula," Grace said.

David Kaneko grabbed the suction. "Damn it. We have a tear."

"Suture with a felt patch," Grace said, calm infusing her words.

Lani already had a needle holder ready to snap into Grace's hand.

"No," Kaneko said. "We need a Prolene suture."

Grace opened her hand toward Lani. "I'll use what you've got. Let's keep the field dry, David. "

"This suction is clogged." Kaneko pulled the suction tip out of the tubing and threw it on the floor.

Sunny hurried over to the cabinet, retrieved a sterile package, and peeled it open for Lani.

"Come on, people. Try to keep up here." Kaneko yanked the new tip out of Lani's hand.

Grace put down the needle holder and applied pressure on the bleeder with a gauze sponge. She waited for David to push the tip into the suction tubing. "Okay. Let's give it another try." She finished suturing and handed the needle holder back to Lani. "I think we've got it. Looks pretty dry." The room seemed to breathe a collective sigh.

Lani turned to the instrument table to reload another suture. She looked directly at Sunny and rolled her eyes. Sunny could almost see Lani's lips forming the word "jerk" behind her mask.

"David, now that we have the sternum wired, you can go back to the office," Grace said. "Lani will help me close."

Kaneko stepped back from the operating table and ripped off his gown. He tossed it on the floor. Sunny bent to pick it up. He shot his bloody gloves like a rubber band at the trash bucket. They hit Sunny's arm instead. She straightened up, ready for the confrontation, her neck and face burning. He'd already charged out the door. Damned if she'd tolerate rude behavior from any surgeon let alone from their latest recruit. She'd track him down first thing tomorrow.

An hour later, Sunny wheeled John and his new heart valve into the intensive care unit. She leaned close to his cheek and whispered, "John, your surgery went very well. You've got pain medication on board so you can just rest in your healing place." She squeezed his hand. His fingers felt warm.

Sunny gave report to the ICU nurse and dashed back to the OR, taking the stairs two at a time. She glanced at her watch. An hour's drive from the village. She might just make it before twenty third-graders started climbing all over the wooden tikis.



Sunny coaxed her old Cabriolet into first gear and ticked off the errands she would run after her shift at the village—pick up cat food and bread, call the dive shop about her new wet suit, and spend the rest of the evening doing a mound of laundry. She pressed the accelerator to the floor and navigated the streets to the highway.

Clouds like mounds of sugar frosting floated in a curacao sky. The breeze carried the heavy spice of tropical flowers and a hint of afternoon heat to come. Mynah birds swooped overhead, their raucous calls echoing in the palm trees.

Sunny thought about her volunteer work at Kauhale O Waimea, a restored ancient Hawaiian village. The time she devoted there provided a respite from her long days at UM. She enjoyed conducting history and cultural programs for school children. The village gave her a chance to renew her energy and give back to the community. Sunny grinned as she approached the turn off to Kauhale. Since her move to O'ahu from California more than a decade ago, not a day had passed without a rush of gratitude for her island home.

She squeezed the car into a small patch of shade, wondering at the absence of a school bus in the parking area. A sprint down the gravel

path past the first hut brought her into the clearing at the center of the village where Kap was collecting fallen palm branches.

Kapono Hanoa appeared lean and physically fit. His dark skin barely showed a wrinkle. One might have guessed him to be fifty-five instead of seventy-five if it weren't for the white hair combed straight back off his forehead and his white beard.

"Kap, sorry I'm late." Sunny glanced at the scowling tiki statues in the clearing. "Where are the kids?"

"School called. Bus broke." His eyes and mouth narrowed into a tiki frown. "Third time this month." Kap served as curator, gardener, guide for occasional tourists, and coordinator for the volunteer schedule. His family descended from a chief in the court of Kamehameha The Great, the first Hawaiian king. Kapono meant righteous in Hawaiian, and Kap felt righteous about his history. He considered his job a sacred calling, keeping the culture of his ancestors alive.

"Now that I won't be weaving grass mats with a bunch of third-graders, what can I do to help?"

Kap climbed on his riding lawn mower. "Afraid of losing your weaving skills? You can patch up the holes in a couple of *hale*." He jabbed the air with his thumb in the direction of the tool shed. "Load of *pili* grass came in yesterday."

The heat was oppressive inside the thatched structure. Sunny worked steadily, weaving grass into holes worn in the matted roof and walls. Sweat dripped off her chin and turned her hair into ringlets. It had to be 100 degrees. How delicious it would feel to don her scuba gear and descend forty feet below the surface to a cool sea cave. She pictured the cobalt water sparkling in a shaft of sunlight and teeming with a rainbow of fish. She bent over for another handful of grass. Perspiration burned her eyes, jolted her out of her reverie. Her mouth felt sticky and parched. She looked around for her water bottle. Still in the car.

She lurched toward the sunlit doorway, squinting in the bright light. Her legs felt cement heavy. Her head filled with club soda bubbles, rising and popping in her brain. Dehydration? Low blood sugar? She tried to move toward the shade of nearby palms, but her feet remained rooted in the doorway. Her lungs screamed for air. Colors zigzagged in front of her eyes, blinding reds and golds. The colors formed a spiral, whirling faster and faster until they seemed to burst from the top of her

head in a shower of sparks that rained down on her body. The sparks coalesced into a brilliant cocoon of light. She covered her face with her hands. Just then a cool breeze brushed her hot skin. The thick sweetness of gardenia scented the air. The blinding light faded and the club soda in her brain evaporated.

She leaned against the doorframe and stared at the clearing in front of her where, moments ago, Kap had been mowing the grass. Little children laughed and chased each other. Brown-skinned women and men worked in the shade around the clearing and stood talking in small groups. The children were naked. The adults wore yellow *kapa* cloth and garlands in their hair. What was going on? She shook her head and closed her eyes, willing the illusion to go away. She looked up. Ancient Hawai'i still wavered in front of her.

Her body sagged. Knees buckling and back pressing the door frame, she collapsed to the ground. She had to get hold of herself. There was a logical explanation for this. Some sort of oasis-like illusion? The *pili* grass. Maybe it had some hallucinogenic substance on it. She knew enough about native and cultivated plants in Hawai'i to know there were substances that could give you a mind-altering experience. If that's what was happening to her, she just needed to stay put and wait for her body to metabolize the stuff out. Deep breaths. Deep breaths.

Sunny blinked open her eyes and stared at her surroundings. Lush foliage ringed the clearing. Flowers glowed against the dark green of ferns shaded by palms—spikes of red ginger, hibiscus in hues of orange red and yellow, and splashes of purple morning glory. Hard-muscled men, using stone tools, hacked and carved on a tree trunk taking the shape of a canoe. A row of small canoes lined the beach along the river. Fishing nets dried on bushes and stake frames. She glimpsed an open-air pavilion with a thatched roof, where an abundance of food covered mats on the ground. A jagged peak resembling a shark's dorsal fin loomed over the village. Frothy clouds encircled it like sea foam. The place looked almost like it did on living history day, but that event had happened two months ago. Besides, there was something different about the clearing.

A huge stone, one-story high with a hole in the center, stood in the middle of the grassy area. The stone's scalloped edges were chiseled

into a perfect circle. An extravagant orange flower and fern *lei* and shell necklaces festooned the monolith. The stone didn't exist at Kauhale.

An old woman, her long hair streaked with silver, led a procession out of the jungle into the clearing. A wreath of shells rested on her head. A bright yellow *kapa* robe draped over one shoulder cascaded down her ample body.

The people following her came in two groups. The first group appeared to be adults close to the age of their leader. The women and men marched in proud strides, bodies erect, cloaked in the same golden *kapa*, countenances serene. Each person held a different implement like a scepter—canoe paddle, stone *poi* pounder, wooden bowl. A man carrying a tall drum caught Sunny's attention. His wild hair and strut made her think of the peacocks that roosted in the jungle around the village.

The second group seemed to be younger adults and teenagers, their waists wrapped with yellow cloth that stretched to their knees. Their breasts were bare. Flowers and ferns encircled their heads, and they carried the same kinds of implements. A girl, no more than thirteen with a skip in her step, turned to wave at a boy near the rear of the group. He gave a slight grin, then pushed out his chest and glowered.

The procession circled behind the stone. The old woman took her place before the monolith, closed her eyes, raised her face to the sun, waited. More villagers assembled in front of her, adults gently quieting the children. The woman opened her arms wide. Drums started a steady beat.

A young man at the edge of the gathering scanned the clearing, stretching up on one foot and then the other. He was stocky with the legs of a runner. His skin glistened with sweat. Spiral tattoos swept across his chest and shoulders and down his arms. His hair was pulled into a knot at the back of his head. Suddenly the man started toward Sunny in an easy jog. He waved and shouted, "Mahana!"

She jumped as if a telephone had jangled her from sleep to full alert. He kept shouting at her, moving in her direction. What was she to do? This was crazy. Plain-ass crazy.

Sunny pushed herself to her feet and staggered backwards into the hut, never taking her eyes off the young man. Her heart matched the pounding of the drums. What if he came in after her?

She stumbled, plopped on the ground, and found herself looking down at her bare feet. But they weren't her feet. Thick calluses and mahogany flesh took the place of her fair skin and dolphin tattoo. What in the hell? Panic turned to creeping terror as she realized she no longer wore her shorts. In their place, saffron *kapa* decorated with symbols encircled her waist. She gasped. Her blouse had disappeared and her breasts as well. She looked down at an old man's chest--concave with sparse white hairs.

The club soda bubbles fizzed in her brain again, and she felt the sensation of floating. It was as if she'd left her body and hovered just below the thatched ceiling of the hut. She stared at the old man. White strands of long hair framed his slumbering face. Who was he? What was happening to her?

A scream swelled in her throat. Red and gold flashed before her eyes and swirled into rainbows of color, spiraling wildly. She felt dizzy and icy cold. The colors dissolved to black, and a loud hum filled her ears. Then the darkness in her brain pulled her down into nothingness.

"Sunny! Sunny!"

She forced her heavy eyelids open, tried to focus on the person leaning over her. Kap's face was creased with alarm.

"Are you okay?" Kap frantically patted her arm. "I heard you scream."

Sunny moaned and struggled to sit up. "I don't know. I think I passed out." She rubbed her buzzing head, felt cold to her core. "Something really strange just happened."

"I'll take you over to the emergency room."

"I just need some water."

Kap darted out of the hut and returned with a jug. He held it to her lips. She took a swig. The warm water hit her stomach. She leaned over and heaved.

Wiping spittle from her mouth, she peered through the doorway at the clearing. The round stone and the people had disappeared. The twitter of birds in the trees replaced the pounding drums.

"Kap . . . is there . . . is there a *hula hālau* practicing today?"

He frowned. "Next week."

This time a dry heave doubled her over.

"Come on, Sunny. We're outta here." He crouched, put his arm around her, and propelled her to his Jeep. He clicked the seat belt around her waist. "You look like you've been walking with ghosts. What did you see?"

She pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. Her temples throbbed. "Mirage?" She cursed herself for not slugging down her bottle of ice water as soon as she arrived at the village.

Kap revved the engine. "Strange things happen here." He steered them out of the Waimea Valley.

The hot interior of the Jeep did little to relieve the chill running through Sunny's body. She closed her eyes and listened to a word echoing in her brain. Mahana. What did it mean?