

Shadows

in

Light

by

Cheryl Fehrmann Okimoto

The Shepherd Series:
Seasons of Change
A Gilded Sky
After the Storm
Always a Sunrise
The Blessed Winter

The Ohana Project:
A Cord of Three

Shadows in Light

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For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

John 3:16-21

I dedicate this book to Pastors Jeff and Barbara Yamashita. You are great friends and wonderful encouragers. Even for a writer, words fail to properly express my appreciation for all you do — for me, for my husband, for your church and for the Christian community.

Chapter 1

“Caitlyn Kurokawa, I need to talk to you!”

Cait stopped in the aisle, resisting the urge to run. Leialoha Rosen wasn't a person who allowed an escape once she had her sights on a target. Cait may as well get this over with. Hopefully it wouldn't be too bad. Since she'd just finished landscaping Mrs. Rosen's yard last week, the woman probably wanted to complain about a few minor changes from Cait's original design.

“Yes ma'am?” Cait turned toward the woman with a small resigned sigh. She was surprised to see a huge smile.

“I love it!” The older woman wrapped Cait in an enthusiastic hug. “Your changes were perfect.”

“Th-thank you,” Cait said hesitantly as she pulled away from the hug. She didn't trust either the hug or the compliment. Both had become rare commodities in her life.

“All those fruit trees in the back are perfect,” Mrs. Rosen beamed at her. “My favorites. But you know they're going to produce way too much fruit most years. What should I do with it? Have to be a wise steward, yeah?”

Cait grinned. Apparently after four years Pastor Rob's messages on stewardship were finally sinking in.

“I got the trees from Mr. Trask, of course.” Cait nodded toward their fellow church member who was exiting the church via a side aisle. “He guarantees fruit collection on all his trees. You just have to schedule it with him.”

“How much will it cost?” Mrs. Rosen didn't look worried. She had plenty of money, but she was careful with it.

“Talk to him about it,” Cait smiled reassuringly. “He's got a small ministry donating fruit to needy families. If you agree to give it away, I believe there's no charge for the collection.”

“Bless you child!” Suddenly Cait was wrapped in another hearty hug, but this time Mrs. Rosen also planted a firm kiss on her cheek. “Thank you so much.”

“Don't thank me,” Cait tried not to squirm like a little girl. “Thank Trask.” She pointed helpfully in his direction.

“I will! I’ll go catch him right now!”

The older woman was off like a whirlwind, bearing down on the unsuspecting man. Caitlyn had worked with Trask for three years now, so she was pretty sure he could handle Mrs. Rosen’s thanks, even the kiss part. He was one of those people who never appeared to be bothered by anything.

“You spreading the love around, Caitlyn?”

Cait turned and smiled at Phil Chung.

“Aloha Rosen has so much love that she needs to share it,” Cait smiled wickedly. “I merely suggested a legitimate destination for some of it.”

“Let me guess,” Phil grinned. “You gave her some of Trask’s trees.”

“You guessed right.” Cait saw Trask look at her over Aloha Rosen’s shoulder. Cait gave him a grin and a slight nod. Trask arched an eyebrow then looked back at the woman in front of him. “She definitely appreciates his fruit collection policy.”

Cait turned back to Phil and motioned toward the door.

“Brian Trask isn’t a typical retired military man, is he?” Phil cast Cait a sidelong glance as they headed for the door. “He’s rather intriguing.”

“What’s typical retired military?” Cait stifled a sigh. She suspected Phil was on a fishing expedition with that comment. She wasn’t intrigued by Brian Trask, Phil Chung or any of the other single guys in their church. Almost ten years ago she’d given up on men. She was much too busy trying to become more Christ-like to get involved in a romance, so she kept her distance from all the guys. Someday she hoped to get married, but only when God led her down that road.

“How’s things going at your mom’s house?” Cait brought up a subject that was guaranteed to sidetrack Phil from any concern he might have about her love life. His mother had recently passed away and he was left with the mess that had been her life. His troubles were compounded by the fact that Phil had loved his mother but hated the way she had lived most of her life.

“It’s going fine.” Phil turned away to hide his lie. Things were far from fine at his mother’s house.

Cait wanted to accept the lie, but she couldn’t. She’d known Phil almost all her life and she really liked him. She knew that at one time he’d wanted more than just friendship with her, but he had seemed to finally accept that there wouldn’t be a romance between them. Recently he’d even begun to date other women. That made it easier for Cait to be around him, as long as he wasn’t getting concerned about her non-existent love life.

“Look Phil,” Cait grabbed his arm and pulled him to the side. “I know your mom really deteriorated in the past year. You know I visited her more than a few times. If you need help at the house, I’ll be more than happy to work with you.”

“Thanks Cait,” Phil smiled sadly. “I’m okay right now. If I need help,

you'll be the first one I call."

"I'm not just talking about the physical labor, Phil," Cait stared earnestly at him. "If that place is half as gloomy as it was before your mom died, just having someone to vent to will help a lot."

"You're right," Phil's smile was a little more genuine. "Maybe we can have lunch later this week."

"I'd like that," Cait smiled too. "Call me."

"I will," Phil turned toward his car and threw a shaka over his shoulder.

Cait watched him go, wondering if things would ever be easy between them, if Phil would ever allow their friendship to really develop. She truly liked him, even more now that she wasn't ducking his date offers. Even though he seemed to have fully accepted her insistence that they would be 'just friends,' he sometimes seemed troubled when they were together. Cait wasn't sure if it was because he still secretly hoped for more than a friendship or if it was something else. Maybe he was still troubled about his mother.

Cait knew Phil was embarrassed by who his mother had been, but that had never been an issue for her. In some ways, she had felt an affinity for the older woman. In fact, knowing Beatrice Chung so well had helped Cait get along with Phil better than other women did. She understood that he was often puzzled by women. His mother had been irrational and self-centered so Phil had never really learned how to deal with women, but Cait and Phil got along very well. In another time and place she might have allowed their friendship to deepen into something more.

Unfortunately, Cait wasn't interested in a romance with Phil. Then again, there wasn't a man in her sphere of influence whom she was sure she would be interested in, if she was looking for a husband. They all had some flaw. She didn't want to explore that fact too closely because she was beginning to suspect it was a defense mechanism. If all the men she knew in Hilo were flawed, it would save her from getting stupid again.

Cait's steps slowed as she approached her black Jeep Cherokee. She looked around quickly to see if anyone was watching her. No one seemed to be interested in her reaction to the rose on her windshield.

Five times in five months she'd found a rose on her windshield. Twice before it had been at church, once after shopping at KTA, twice at home – once in the morning, once after lunch. Never had there been any indication who it was from. She didn't know if she was supposed to feel romanced by a secret admirer or creeped out by a stalker.

Cait stopped next to the driver's side of the hood. She stared at the single perfect red rose. This time there was a card tucked under the long stem. There had never been a card before. She didn't know if she should read the card or call Phil. As a police officer, he might have a better idea whether this was creepy or cool. On the other hand, as someone who hadn't been very subtle

about his interest in her, he'd probably tell her it was a stalker even if it wasn't. He probably wouldn't be happy to know she had an admirer other than him.

No! That wasn't fair. Cait shouldn't be thinking like that. Phil hadn't tried to get a date for almost a year. He actually seemed happy with just being friends.

She unlocked the Jeep then gingerly reached over to removed the rose and the card from under her windshield wiper. Climbing into the vehicle, she set the gifts and her purse on the passenger seat then firmly closed the door.

From behind the screen of her tinted windows, Cait scrutinized the single men of the congregation as they lingered outside the church or headed to their vehicles. Receiving roses three times now at church pretty much guaranteed that her secret admirer was part of their congregation.

Brian Trask was the logical first choice since he owned a nursery, but she'd been working with him for three years, ever since he moved to Hilo and bought the nursery. He'd never given even a hint of romantic interest in her. In fact, he sometimes seemed slightly disapproving in spite of the casual camaraderie they enjoyed when they worked together. Besides, Trask was too old and this wasn't his style.

Kawika Williams was a possibility, especially since the mystery aspect could easily be his style and he worked at Trask's Trees & Nursery. But he was a couple years too young and if she wasn't mistaken, he was interested in Shawna Tanaka.

Their organist, Andrew Nelson, was the right age and temperament, but he'd barely arrived when she'd gotten the first rose. He couldn't have worked that fast. Ken Arakaki was recently divorced. He hadn't been coming to church for long, but he'd been a classmate of hers. Dan Carvalho was separated but not yet divorced. Surely he wasn't already looking elsewhere. Ray Castro was a definite possibility. He even had a reputation as a bit of a ladies man. Then there was Phil of course, but he'd been an open admirer for years. Why would he have suddenly gotten sneaky about it? Over the years, he'd already given her way more flowers than the six her secret admirer had now given her.

She didn't recall seeing any other single guys in this service, but her admirer could have come to the early service. Maybe she should open the card and see if it gave her any clues about the giver.

Cait picked up the pale pink envelope and carefully examined it. There were a couple scrapes from thorns, but otherwise there were no marks of any kind on the front. The back bore the Hallmark embossed logo. So he cared 'enough to send the very best' but did he care enough to sign the card? If he was trying to romance her, he was going about it the wrong way! She wasn't big on secrets. They tended to make her nervous.

Cait carefully slid her finger under the upper edge of the flap. It was only

sealed at the point, so it opened easily. She saw the edge of a heart in the open triangle of the envelope. She carefully pulled out the card. “Happy Valentine’s Day” it said in bold red cursive letters on a pink heart surrounded by flowers.

Valentine’s Day? Cait looked at the date on her watch. July. She hadn’t lost track of time, but obviously he had. How had he gotten a Valentine’s card in July?

Cait noticed a tremor in her hands as she slowly opened the card, breathing deeply and deliberately in an attempt to calm herself.

The first thing she saw was that the card wasn’t signed. Then she read the short verse:

Though the years come and go
You’re still the one I know
Will always love me
Choosing to see
The glory that lies
Where love never dies.

Cait closed her eyes and shook her head. Surely she’d read wrong. This wasn’t a romantic card to give someone you secretly admire. It was a card her dad might give her mom. It was way too possessive for a secret admirer.

When Cait opened her eyes, she saw Brian Trask walking toward her with a concerned frown. She quickly turned the key in the ignition and put her window down.

“Is everything okay Ms. Kurokawa?” He seemed genuinely worried as he walked up to the Jeep. “You’ve been just sitting there since I walked out of the church. Is something wrong with your Jeep?”

“I’m –” Cait intended to assure him that she was fine, but some instinct killed the words. She wasn’t fine. She was a little scared. She looked down at the card in her hand. *Do I tell him the truth, Lord?*

“What’s bothering you?” Trask stepped closer to the Jeep though he still maintained plenty of space between them.

Cait sighed. “I either have a creepy secret admirer or a stalker.”

“Why do you think that?” Trask stepped into her space, alarm furrowing his brow. He stood right next to her door but didn’t touch it.

“This was under my windshield wiper when I came out of church.” Cait handed Trask the card, envelope and rose.

Trask hesitated briefly before he took Cait’s unwanted gift. He handled everything very carefully.

“So you don’t know who left them?” he asked as he examined the rose. There wasn’t much to see, just a typical long stemmed red rose that could easily be purchased in a number of places. Though it wasn’t yet wilting, years

of handling flowers and plants told Trask that it wasn't a fresh cut rose. It had quite likely been purchased in a grocery store rather than a nursery.

"Not a clue." Caitlyn shook her head and frowned when Trask offered her the rose back. "I don't want it! Read the card."

Trask carefully tucked the rose under his left arm then examined the envelope, touching it only along the edges. He tucked it next to the rose then began to examine the card.

"Valentine's card?" he asked with one eyebrow quirked.

"Tell me about it," Cait snorted.

He flipped the card over and frowned at the back. He retrieved the envelope, looked at the back again then at the back of the card.

"The envelope is Hallmark but the card isn't." He held them up for Cait to see. Sure enough, the card was an off brand, a company she'd never heard of.

"I think this card is rather old too," Trask observed thoughtfully. "Certainly not produced in the last few years."

"Strange," Cait said. "Read the verse."

He opened the card and stared at it a moment. He frowned at her then looked back down at the card. When he looked up again, he tilted his head slightly and narrowed his eyes.

"I thought you didn't know who gave this to you."

"I don't," Cait said firmly.

"But this is obviously from someone who thinks you've had a long-term relationship with him."

"I have no clue who he is," Cait sighed. "So you think I should be worried?"

"I'm not sure about worried," Trask said thoughtfully as he put the card back in the envelope, "but wary for sure."

"What do you think I should do?" Cait asked with a frown. "Do you think I should call the police?"

"No. Not at this point."

Cait sighed in relief. Trask frowned thoughtfully at her.

"I don't need the cops in my business," she muttered, looking out her windshield instead of at Trask.

"Not now," Trask agreed. "Not yet. There's an implied threat in this card but not a clear one. Your admirer may just be a fool when it comes to getting a woman's attention. But you need to be wary in case he's got a screw dangerously loose."

"If he escalates, I'll need to call the cops," Cait acknowledged with a resigned sigh.

"Yes. And you need to keep the evidence." Trask held out the rose and the card.

"Why me?" Cait frowned at the offending gifts. "Why don't you keep it

for me?”

“Because, Ms. Kurokawa,” Trask said dryly, “I’m your best suspect right now.”

“You!” Cait exclaimed in surprise.

“Of course,” Trask shook his head slightly. “You can’t just suspect men you like, Ms. Kurokawa. Every man, even married ones, needs to be a suspect until you eliminate him. I should be at the top of your list.”

“Why?” Cait frowned doubtfully at him. This really didn’t seem his style. He seemed too comfortable with himself to stoop to subterfuge to get a woman’s attention.

“This morning I came in after you and parked close enough to watch your truck if I’d been able to get out of church before you, but I’m still far enough away that you wouldn’t notice me sitting in the truck since I too have tinted windows. You can’t see in the windshield from here so you wouldn’t know if I was watching you,” Trask pointed to his truck, five stalls away on the other side of the driving lane. “When I was waylaid after the service, I improvised and came over to check on you. Now there’s a legitimate reason for my fingerprints to be on this card. And obviously since I own a nursery, I could’ve easily gotten the rose with no record whatsoever, no witness to its purchase.”

Cait stared at him in surprise. She was more shocked at how expertly he’d assessed the situation than by his self-accusation. She looked down at the card he still held.

“No,” she said abruptly. “You couldn’t have.”

“Don’t eliminate me just because I’m old and grouchy,” Trask said with a slightly sad smile.

“I’m not,” Cait shrugged. “There are no water stains on the card.”

“Oh?” Trask looked down at the card then back up at her, one eyebrow arched.

“It rained at the beginning of service, after you came in.”

“True,” Trask nodded thoughtfully, “but I could’ve slipped out sometime after the rain stopped.”

“But you didn’t,” Cait said with growing confidence. “I didn’t exactly notice you during the service, but after, when Mrs. Rosen was talking to me, I saw you get up from your seat. No one in front of me went out during the service.”

“Excellent awareness, Ms. Kurokawa,” Trask nodded with a small smile. “Stay that alert until you figure this out. But you shouldn’t be so quick to eliminate me. You don’t know anything about me. I could be more devious than you suspect. You have no reason to trust me.”

“I think you’re a very honest man and very trustworthy,” Cait stared at him thoughtfully, “but I am curious about why you think like a cop.”

“Your curiosity is good. Hold onto it.” Trask smiled sadly without answering her unasked question. He practically shoved the rose and card at

her. “And hold onto these too. Process this with a close friend, preferably a woman or a family member whom you don’t need to suspect.”

Cait reluctantly took the card and flower. She would call her brother Mark. He was one of the few people whom she really trusted.

“You didn’t really do this, did you?” she asked hesitantly. “You didn’t give me any of the other roses either, did you?”

“You’ve gotten other roses?” Trask suddenly seemed to be more alert. “Where? When?”

Before Cait could answer, he threw up a hand to stop her and stepped back from her Jeep. “No. Don’t tell me. You need to tell that to the friend who’s going to help you. Don’t trust anyone else right now.”

“Can I trust my older, happily married brother?” Cait asked somewhat sarcastically.

“I think you can trust him,” Trask suddenly smiled. Cait was surprised to see a touch of relief in that smile. She was also surprised to see deep dimples. “I’ll see you Tuesday.”

Cait looked at Trask in surprise.

“Yes Ms. Kurokawa, I know a lot about your life since we go to the same church and you buy plants from my nursery. Please don’t eliminate me as a suspect so easily.”

“Do you –?”

“No.” Trask held up a hand again and took another step back from the Jeep. “Send your brother to interrogate me. Don’t do it yourself.”

Cait frowned thoughtfully as she watched Trask walk toward his truck. If this had been a clever ploy to pique her interest in the man, it had worked perfectly. She’d never disliked him. In fact, she rather enjoyed working with him, but she hadn’t been curious about him. Now she was definitely intrigued especially since she’d seen someone she could really like.

Mark and Lisa hadn’t been in church with her, so she figured they’d gone to the first service. They would be home already. Cait put her Bluetooth earpiece in and called her brother before she pulled out of her parking stall. She noticed that Trask watched her leave before he too pulled out. She also noticed that he turned in the opposite direction when he left the parking lot.

Chapter 2

Mark and Lisa hadn't had lunch yet, so Cait joined them. She was happy to play with eight month old Ezekiel while her sister-in-law finished the lunch preparations and Mark got four year old Hazel and three year old Preston ready to eat.

Meals with Mark's family were always a merry affair. Lisa had a knack for finding fun in every situation. She had never tolerated fighting and complaining during meals, so Hazel and Preston didn't even try most of the time. When they did, they were whisked immediately from the table and they missed out on the rest of the fun.

Since Mark and Cait's dad's birthday was next Sunday, today's meal time game was "What should we get Grandpa for his birthday?" The three categories were silly, impossible and sweet. Hazel won in the sweet category. Her idea for Grandpa's gift was a box of candy bars wrapped in pictures of his grandkids. Preston won the silly category with a big funnel labeled as a hearing aid. Over Mark's objections, Lisa declared Cait the winner of the impossible category – a well-behaved youngest son.

"Not funny Sis," Mark gave Cait the stink eye.

"Of course it's not funny," Lisa said too seriously. "It's sad how naughty his youngest son is."

"Who's Grandpa's youngest son?" Preston asked innocently.

"Your daddy," Cait leaned over and whispered loudly.

"Oh," Hazel frowned sadly, "that *is* impossible!"

"Out of the mouths of babes!" Lisa giggled as she stood to get the dessert.

After lunch, Lisa sent Mark and Cait out to take a walk. She had sensed this wasn't just a social call.

As they walked, Cait quickly told her brother the whole story, from finding the first rose to her conversation with Trask. Mark listened pretty much without interruption. After Cait was done with her story, he stared thoughtfully at the ground for a moment.

"Trask is right. We can't just dismiss him out of hand," Mark finally said. "We'll have to eliminate him just like the others."

Cait was relieved. She hadn't entertained any serious concerns that Mark would disregard her worries, but there had been some lingering doubts. She was doubly relieved that he immediately assumed he would help her. In the past she'd given him plenty of reason to doubt her and to leave her to her own devices.

"How are we going to do this?"

"Approach it like it's an experiment," Mark suggested. As a high school science teacher, he knew a lot about experiments. "Our hypothesis is that a man from church is stalking you. What are the variables we can test?"

"The days I got the roses and the guys who could have left them, I guess."

"Do you remember the dates?" Mark asked in surprise.

"Not exactly, but I can find the dates in my journal. I wrote about getting them."

"Great! Then we can start checking them against suspects' availability."

"Do we have to call them suspects?" Cait winced.

"No, but it's sure easier than 'potential secret admirers or stalkers,'" Mark said dryly.

"I get your point, but I *am not* accusing any suspects or getting the cops to investigate innocent men."

"I understand your reluctance, Sis," Mark acknowledged, "but trust me, if I discover you have a stalker, I'll make the call to the police."

"Fair enough. Who are we looking at?"

"Since half the roses were delivered to you at church, we'll start there. Let's each make lists of all the men in church so that we're less likely to forget someone."

"Do we follow Trask's advice and look at all the guys, not just the single ones?" Cait sighed heavily. There were probably a couple hundred men who regularly attended their church.

"For now we'll eliminate our relatives."

"Only for now?" Cait was surprised.

"Of course only for now," Mark snorted a laugh. "We got plenty potential crazies in our family."

"You have a point," Cait said dryly, "but I can't see Cousin George ever being a suspect."

Mark had to agree. Dad's eighty year old cousin probably wouldn't turn out to be Cait's admirer. The old bachelor was capable of falling in love with inappropriate people, but he lacked subtlety.

"What if he came by during the service to drop off his surprise but didn't stay?" Cait asked.

"Doubtful. That would be pretty risky," Mark shook his head. "If someone saw him in the parking lot, they'd notice if they didn't see him in church. But he might've been in early service with Lisa and I then hung around until

after second service started. We'll start with a narrow selection of most likely suspects then broaden the scope if we need to."

"Okay. We'll start by giving everyone we saw in church today an intense look."

"Can you bring your list and the dates in the morning?"

"Not tomorrow," Cait frowned. "It's the Fourth."

"That's right," Mark gently thumped his own head. "Must be gettin' old if I forget that. You goin' to Doug's?"

"Of course," Cait snorted. "I don't have any other family here."

"That's right," Mark teased her. "Not only are you officially an old maid, but you don't even have a boyfriend's family to hang out with."

"Watch it mister," Cait gave him the stink eye. "I'll make you pay tomorrow."

"I don't doubt you will, but don't be too hard on me if you want me to help you on Tuesday."

"Oh, you will," Cait said airily. "You can't resist because you love me so much."

"That I do," Mark said dryly, "but I'm not sure why. You gonna come over Tuesday morning?"

"I'm working on the Sanderson place, but I don't have a set schedule, so I can come here first. After breakfast?"

"Before," Mark grinned at her. "Bring a pan of your mac nut cinnamon rolls."

Cait grinned back. Her macadamia nut cinnamon rolls were legendary in their family. It was a good thing she loved to bake them. "Make sure Lisa has the oven ready at six-thirty."

OF COURSE IT rained for the Fourth of July. It wasn't one of those big summer storms born out of a hot muggy day that were common on Grandma and Grandpa Emmet's farm in Georgia. The rain wasn't even the normal overcast with intermittent drizzle that was almost a daily occurrence in Hilo. Instead it was a steady relentless moderate rain, just enough to force the party undercover but not enough to make the day feel cool.

Fortunately, no rain could ruin a Kurokawa party. As usual, the men had set up a big tent. It overlapped the covered part of Doug's lanai which opened up to his big living room and dining room. There was plenty of room for the whole clan.

Cait's oldest brother had inherited their father's business sense so he had taken over the real estate office when Davin Kurokawa decided to semi retire. Doug had managed to keep the business in the black even in the down economy. It helped that his wife Megan was his business partner, running the office efficiently and still finding time to skillfully stage homes. Though they

both worked, Doug and Megan had managed to raise three incredible children, Mariko, Keith and Hailey. They wisely used the flexible schedule of real estate to make sure one of them was almost always at home when the children were. Doug was as active in their home life as Megan was.

Eight year old Hailey and her cousin Morgan, also eight, were the first to greet Cait when she arrived.

“Aunty Cait, we got watermelon!” Morgan cried happily as she threw her arms around Cait’s waist.

“An’ corn-on-the-cob!” Hailey hit Cait from the other side

“Oh we do?” Cait feigned surprise. They had a traditional Southern spread every year, so it wasn’t a big surprise to Cait. Her mother was originally from Georgia. As a child, Cait had spent many happy summers on the farm in Georgia so she was well acquainted with a Southern barbecue, but here in Hilo they only had it on the Fourth. Every other party featured an eclectic blend of local and Southern foods.

“Did you bring the pecan pie?” Mariko bounced happily over, trying to peek in the long flat box Cait was carrying. At thirteen she was the oldest cousin.

“I didn’t think anyone wanted the pecan pie,” Cait frowned playfully. Like her niece, she pronounced pecan properly – with a long ‘e’ and a hard ‘a’ – peekan. “I brought walnut pie instead.”

“Ain’t no such thang,” five year old Gabe frowned at his aunt.

“There isn’t any such thing,” Sherry corrected her son with a heavy sigh, “but I bet your aunty could create one.”

“But she better not have,” Ed, Cait’s third brother, kept one arm around Sherry while he tried to peek in Cait’s box. “I’m dyin’ for some of her pecan pie.”

Cait’s baking skills were legendary in their family. Her sister Ellie often told her she should shut down her landscaping business and open a bakery.

“Well, you’ll have to wait for dessert time,” Cait scolded Ed and pulled the box out of his reach.

“I’ll help you with the pies,” Lisa waded through the small crowd around Cait. “Get your greetings over with so you can help with the salads.”

Cait had four brothers and one sister, all of them married with kids. Family get-togethers were a mixed blessing. All the couples made her acutely aware of her single status but all the love filled the aching void, especially from her baker’s dozen of nieces and nephews.

The cousins fell comfortably into four groups of three, except baby Ezekiel who wasn’t old enough to care about playing with someone his own size. Almost two years separated Mariko, who’d just had her birthday, from Derryl who had turned eleven in the spring. Ten year old Keith completed their little triad. Cait often wondered if Mariko was a tomboy because she hung out with her boy

cousins so much or if she hung out with them because she was a tomboy.

Maybe she would have been a tomboy without being outnumbered by boy cousins. Hailey and Morgan outnumbered nine year old Jesse, but they were even worse roughnecks than Mariko. Strangely enough, six year old Kira managed to be every inch the girl while she bossed around the five year old boys, her brother Gabe and her cousin Drake.

The fourth triad – Hazel, Preston and their three year old cousin Julie – was still young enough to have plenty trouble playing together but old enough to utterly annoy the older kids.

The men were all outside, either manning the barbecue grill or watching the children. Dad had apparently assigned himself to a supervisory role. He was lounging in a lawn chair upwind from the grill.

“Hi Caity-girl,” he grinned and waved but didn’t get up.

“Not manning the grill today, Daddy?” Cait asked as she planted a kiss on Davin’s cheek.

“It’s not my house,” Davin said cheerfully. “I’m taking no responsibility for anything today.”

“But it can be argued that you’re responsible for everything,” Ellie’s husband Ryan laughed. “You are the patriarch.”

“And I would argue the point,” Doug grinned from his station at the grill, “except Megan has strictly forbidden any arguing today.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Cait pouted. “I might as well go home.”

“And argue with a wall?” Jack, Cait’s second brother dropped his arm across Cait’s shoulder and kissed her forehead.

“Let her leave,” Mark shrugged. “Lisa already took her pecan pies inside.”

“Hey, watch it mister,” Cait glared good-naturedly. “You’re already in hot water.”

“For what?” Ed grinned at his siblings.

“For calling her an old maid,” Mark said proudly.

“How can you get in trouble for telling the truth?” Jack asked in surprise.

“Jerk!” Cait snatched up the barbecue brush and slung it at Jack.

She hit him with a big glob of barbecue sauce, but she also splattered Ed and Mark.

“Caity!” Jack bellowed.

“Brat!” Ed snapped.

Mark didn’t take the time to complain. He jumped at Cait. She took off running, her brothers in hot pursuit. She led them out of the tent and into the wet, muddy yard.

When Cait suddenly turned direction and ran back at her brothers, none of them were quick enough to catch her. They ended up in a heap on the grass, but Mark snagged Cait’s heel at the last minute and brought her down too. Suddenly they were swarmed by kids.

By the time Monique Kurokawa finally showed up to scold her children, they were all a muddy mess. None of the men still had the evidence of Cait's barbecue attack.

THE SUN NEVER put in an appearance that day. As darkness slowly slid over the party, Cait perched on one of the picnic tables, watching the children playing with the sparklers that Jack had gotten. When Mariko was a toddler, the family had agreed to dispense with all other fireworks so they weren't bothered by the tightened restrictions in Hawaii.

It had been a good day. That wasn't a surprise. In fact, Cait couldn't remember when the last time was that a family party hadn't been loads of fun.

She wondered what it was like to live as Phil had, no siblings, no dad, not even aunties, uncles or grandparents. Now that his mother was gone, he had a lonely life indeed. It wasn't right that Cait should be so richly blessed while Phil lived as a pauper.

"You seem rather pensive for such a noisy, happy throng," Mark dropped down beside Cait. "You worried about your little problem?"

"No. I wasn't thinking about it at all," Cait shrugged slightly, mildly surprised that she had utterly forgotten that she had a creepy secret admirer. "I was just thinking about Phil."

"Phil Chung?" Mark asked in surprise. "What's wrong with him?"

"Other than the fact that he just buried his mom last month?"

"There is that," Mark agreed.

"You realize he's all alone now?" Cait said. "What did he do today? Did he hang out with someone or did he spend the day alone?"

"We should've thought about that before," Mark moaned. "We should've invited him to join us. He could've been your date."

"Our friend, Mark," Cait said firmly. "We should've invited him as our friend. Everyone knows him from church. Daddy's always liked him, especially since"

"Yeah," Mark shook his head slightly. It bugged him that Cait was still haunted by her past. When would she ever forgive herself and get back to being the woman God had intended her to be. "Maybe Phil hung out with Trask today."

"Trask?" Cait asked in surprise.

"Sure. They're friends and Trask doesn't have any family either."

"He doesn't?" Cait thought about that. "I know he's never mentioned any, but I didn't attach any significance to it."

"He's mentioned at bible study that he grew up in foster care."

"I didn't know," Cait mused thoughtfully. She had talked to Trask a lot over the years since he was her primary supplier for plants. They'd never gotten into personal stuff.

She tried to imagine what it must be like to be that alone in life. She couldn't quite grasp it. Even when she tried to hide out from her family, they wouldn't go away. They hung around in the back of her head, poking and prodding her to get back into family life.

Even though she was the unmarried, misfit rebel afterthought, Cait loved her family. They were noisy and obnoxious but loving too. She couldn't imagine life without them, didn't want to.

"Maybe they did hang out together," Cait said thoughtfully, "but maybe next holiday you should make sure they've got something to do."

"Me?" Mark scowled slightly. "It's your idea."

"But if I ask them, everyone'll get the wrong idea."

"What might that be?" Mark asked with wide-eyed innocence.

"Don't go there, Mark," Cait scowled. "They're both nice guys. Too good for me. I don't need the family getting their hopes up."

"Phil and Trask are nice guys, but they aren't too good for you," Mark growled. "When are you going to forgive yourself, Caity?"

"Forgive and forget are two different things," Cait growled back.

"And you're not doing either!"

"Give it a rest Mark!"

"Okay, for now." Mark stood and glared down at his sister. "But when this is all over and you're safe again, we're having a serious talk Sis. You can't keep pretending you're someone you're not."

"I'm not pretending Mark," Cait sighed sadly. "I am who I am. This is the real me."

"No it's not." Mark shook his head sadly. "This you is a sad parody of who you really are. Someday soon you've got to quit punishing yourself, Caity."

He turned and walked away.

Cait wanted to argue the point, but she knew it was worthless. They were at the same stalemate they'd faced for almost ten years now. She didn't understand how Mark could downplay the seriousness of what she'd done, the awfulness of who she'd been. He claimed she'd been a sweet person who made some wrong choices.

Mark could argue all he wanted, but Cait knew the truth. She wasn't going back to who she'd been. She'd left it all behind.

She had a good life now. She was a good person for the most part. She had already buried her once fledgling dreams of having a family of her own. She would enjoy her nieces and nephews whenever she longed for a child. When she craved adult companionship, she could call on her parents or one of her siblings. She didn't need a man in her life.

Once Cait got rid of her bizarre secret admirer, she would get back to the life she was comfortable with.

Chapter 3

Early Tuesday morning, Cait showed up at Mark and Lisa's with her pan of unbaked rolls and her lists. Mark greeted her at the door with a big grin. "Give those rolls to Lisa and come out on the lanai. I got news for you."

"You figured out who it is?" Cait asked hopefully as she handed the pan to Lisa and followed her brother.

"No, but I know who's highly unlikely," Mark almost bounced with his excitement. "We'll have to eliminate him quickly 'cause he'll be a great ally."

"Who?" Cait asked as Mark slid the lanai door shut.

"Brian Trask." Mark's grin broadened. "I Googled him last night. No wonder he had such good advice yesterday."

"Why?" Cait asked a trifle impatiently.

"He was Army."

"Okay. I knew he was ex-military, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"He was CID."

"CID?" Cait was surprised. "Isn't that an army cop?"

"Not just a cop, a detective," Mark nodded. "Criminal Investigation."

"No wonder he suspected himself," Cait giggled.

"We'll have to 'interrogate' him soonest," Mark chuckled too. "Before this gets ugly, we need him on our side."

"You really think it will, don't you?" Cait asked sadly.

"I thought and prayed about it a lot," Mark nodded solemnly. "Lisa agrees. That card was from someone who's unstable. The guy's not going to be satisfied with ever just being your friend. When you don't 'fall in love' with him, he's going to get violent."

"We don't have to call the cops, do we?" Cait sighed sadly.

"Hopefully not ever," Mark patted his sister's shoulder. "Like I said before Sis, if it has to go that route, I'll take care of it for you."

"I appreciate that, but you know it won't be that easy," Cait shook her head. "Even if you make the call, I'll have to deal with them."

"But I'll be right there with you. So will Dad and Mom."

“I wish I could be as sure of that as you are.”

“You should be, Sis. The past is done and over with. No one in the family holds it against you. Someday you’re going to have to accept that.”

“Maybe I will,” Cait smiled sadly and turned back toward the house, “but I’ll probably have to quit holding the past against myself first.”

“Now’s a good time to start, Sis,” Mark grinned ruefully as he opened the door.

MARK WASN’T TEACHING summer school this year. As usual, he was spending his summer break on local missions with some of the men from the church. On Tuesday, he was able to eliminate twenty-seven possible suspects from their church just through casual conversations with the other men in the missions. He was going to get his chance to eliminate Brian Trask on Wednesday. He’d called and made an appointment to meet in the morning. When Mark told Cait, she wanted to go too. Once they eliminated Trask, she wanted to be there to talk about how they would proceed, if he agreed to help them.

Mark was optimistic that they would indeed eliminate Trask as a suspect. If Mark verified some facts about church trips that he’d pieced together, Trask would be off their suspect list. Mark fervently hoped that he would be able to convince Trask to help them investigate Cait’s stalker. He no longer had any doubts that it was a stalker. The more he thought about it, the less he believed in the possibility that this was just a warped secret admirer.

Wednesday morning during breakfast, Cait was shocked to feel a stab of pain on the left side of her jaw. She spit out the piece of toast she’d just bitten off and was frustrated to see her crown come with it. Her frustration was increased when she called the dentist and the only open slot he had was for ten-forty-five. Mark’s appointment with Trask was at ten-thirty. Her brother was going to have to do that interrogation on his own. Cait’s free time that day was going to be consumed by the dentist.

At ten-thirty on the nose, Trask looked up from his desk when Mark Kurokawa knocked on his office door.

“It’s that time already?” Trask said in surprise. “I’m sorry. I lost track of time. I was trying to get my books to balance.”

“Not a problem,” Mark said as he settled into the chair Trask had motioned him to. “I have enough trouble with the books myself, and it’s only our household budget I’m trying to balance. I can imagine how hard it must be for the business.”

“You’re alone today?” Mark wasn’t sure if Trask was disappointed or relieved. “I was under the impression that your sister was coming with you.”

“She was, but something came up so she couldn’t make it. She’ll call when she’s done.”

“That’s good. She’s too close to this thing to properly process the information she receives.”

“You’re right about that,” Mark said, “but she’s also reluctant to suspect anyone.”

“Why’s that?” Trask asked with a slightly raised eyebrow.

“It’s a long story and I’m supposed to be asking about you,” Mark said with a small smile.

“That’s right,” Trask smiled slightly too. “Fire away.”

“First, I Googled you.” Mark wasn’t surprised to see a shadow descend over the other man.

“A wise move on your part,” Trask acknowledged.

“You spent thirteen years as an army investigator. What made you become a nursery owner?”

“I lived on a farm until I was ten,” Trask answered easily. “When I got out of the Army, I went back to my roots.”

“Not exactly,” Mark smiled at the subtle pun of a nursery owner going ‘back to his roots.’ Trask grinned back. “You grew up in Florida. Why are you in Hawaii?”

“Since you Googled me, you should know I was stationed on Oahu when I got out,” Trask shrugged. “Farming here’s similar to farming in Florida.”

“How’d you manage to buy this place?”

“I don’t own it outright yet,” Trask admitted, “but I had a hefty down payment for it. Between being wise with my money and a great aunt dying about five years ago, I had plenty money for the nursery.”

“You’re doing pretty well, aren’t you?”

“Well enough.” If Trask was impatient with Mark’s line of questioning, he hid it well.

“Were you at church on February twenty-seventh?” Mark asked, checking a small notebook he pulled from his pocket.

“If it was a Sunday, I most likely was,” Trask said, flipping backward in his desk planner. “I’m at church most Sundays. Nothing special noted here, so I’ll have to assume I was that day too.”

“What about March eleventh?” Mark asked. “It was a Friday. Do you know what you were doing that day?”

“Not off the top of my head.” Trask flipped a few more pages in his book. “I didn’t record anything special, so I suppose I was here working all day.”

“Tuesday, April nineteenth?” Mark asked with a small smile. The fact that Trask couldn’t account for his whereabouts for those days didn’t bother him. Most people can’t remember off the top of their head where they were on a specific day months before. Only someone who knew he needed alibis would be able to provide ones for all the days Mark had on his list.

“My book says Waianae,” Trask said after flipping pages again. “I guess that’s the day I visited a banana farm. Went on a morning flight to Honolulu, rented a car to drive out to the Leeward Coast, then returned to Hilo in the

early evening.”

“What time?”

“I’ll have to confirm it with my flight records, but I believe I left Hilo on a seven AM flight then flew out of Honolulu just after six.”

Trask still didn’t ask why Mark had chosen those specific dates. Mark figured he pretty much knew they were days Cait had been given roses.

“May twenty-second?”

Trask flipped pages again. He flipped back one page then smiled slightly as he looked up at Mark. “According to my desk calendar, I was on a short-term mission trip to Africa from eighteen to twenty-eight May.”

“That’s the rumor I’d heard too,” Mark smiled easily. “What about June sixteenth?”

“I was down in Volcano all day,” Trask said confidently as he flipped pages in his book again. “There it is. That’s the day we took the youth down to the Park. We left Hilo at zero-seven-thirty and weren’t back until well after dark.”

“That’s what Lisa remembered too.”

“That’s right! Your wife went with us while you stayed home with your keiki,” Trask was slightly surprised.

“She assured me that you were rather obviously there the whole day,” Mark grinned. “So I guess that gets you off the hook, Brian. ... You don’t mind if I call you Brian, do you?”

“Of course not,” Trask grinned back. “As long as it’s okay to call you Mark.”

“I hope you do,” Mark said with a sigh of relief, “and I hope you’ll help me figure out who’s doing this to Cait. Lisa and I are worried.”

“Frankly I think you have reason to be worried,” Brian shook his head sadly. “That wasn’t an appropriate card for a secret admirer.”

“We drafted up a list of all the men in the church,” Mark pulled a small sheaf of papers out of his pocket. “I’ve been able to eliminate some of them already.”

“I can probably help with some others,” Brian leaned back in his chair and stared thoughtfully at the wall behind Mark. “I gather those dates were the ones your sister received the other roses, so the guys who were with me on the mission trip and at Volcano would be off our list too.”

Trask began to name the men he’d been with on the two occasions in question. He also came up with other unlikely suspects. Some of them Mark already had, but Brian almost doubled the number of suspects they could eliminate.

It was shortly after eleven when Mark’s phone rang. Mark looked at the display then flipped it open.

“Hey Sis! Good new—”

“He was here Mark!” Cait almost sobbed.

“At the doctor’s?” Mark looked at Brian in shock.

“The dentist! How did he know Mark?” Cait’s voice trembled.

Mark realized Brian couldn’t hear Cait’s end of the conversation. “Hold on Cait. I’m still with Brian, with Trask. He’s good. He’s with us. Do you mind if I put you on speakerphone so he can hear this too?”

“Fine. Whatever,” Cait’s voice still shook. Trask and Mark clearly heard her fear over the speaker. “This is too creepy Mark.”

“Start from the beginning Cait,” Mark said soothingly.

“You mean when my crown fell off this morning?” Cait asked hesitantly.

“Let’s fast forward for now,” Trask said calmly. “You’re at the dentist?”

“I just left.”

“How do you know he was there?” Mark didn’t mind that Brian was taking over.

“After Dr. Inouye saw me, there was a package for me at the front desk.”

“How did it get there?”

“Kanani said a boy brought it in, shortly after I went into the treatment room. Said it was for me.”

“What does it look like?”

“It’s a two-piece gift box with a red ribbon tied around it.”

“Did you open it?”

“No. Not yet. I came out to the Jeep and called Mark.”

“Good. Don’t open it right now.”

“Sounds good to me. I’d prefer for you or Mark to open it instead of me.”

“We’ll open it with you when you bring it out here. Right now I need you to be calm. Can you do that?”

“Prob’ly, if you guys pray for me.”

“Lord we need some help here,” Mark promptly said. “This is getting kinda scary, especially for Cait. Give her your strength and peace and give Brian the insight to help us figure out what’s going on and who’s doing it. In all of this, somehow Lord, be glorified.”

“Please put a hedge of protection around Caitlyn,” Trask smoothly picked up the prayer. “I know she’s in your hands, as always, but we’d really like to know that she’ll continue to be safe. No matter what happens, we will still praise you.”

“Amen,” Cait said firmly. “Thanks guys. What now?”

“What I need you to do now Cait,” Trask said calmly, “is go back inside and ask the receptionist about the boy. We need to find him if we can.”

“That makes sense,” Cait said. She took a deep breath and willed her hands to stop shaking. It worked a little.

“Call Mark when you get done, okay?”

“Okay. Are you staying at Trask’s Mark?”

“Yeah Sis. I’ll be here when you get here.”

“Okay. I’ll call you back.”

Cait disconnected the call and asked God to keep her calm as she walked back into the dentist’s office, leaving the offending package sitting on the front seat of her Jeep.

“Hey Kanani,” she was glad that her voice sounded normal. “There’s no name on that package. Do you know who brought it in?”

“You got a secret admirer Caitlyn?” Kanani smiled slyly.

Cait groaned to herself. Sometimes she wondered if she should move somewhere where she wouldn’t run into so many classmates with their easy familiarity.

“I sure hope not,” Cait rolled her eyes. “You said a boy brought it in?”

“Yep.”

“Did you know him?”

“Nope.”

“What’d he look like?”

“He was about eleven or twelve. A little hapa boy.”

“Hapa how?” Cait stifled a sigh. This wasn’t going to go anywhere. Half the boys in Hilo were hapa something or other.

“Hapa haole with probably some Japanese and Hawaiian or Samoan.”

“So he could’ve been one of my nephews?”

“Yeah, but he wasn’t,” Kanani said with a puzzled frown. “He said it was for Caitlyn Kurokawa. If he’d been your nephew, he woulda said ‘Aunty Cait,’ right?”

“Right,” Cait smiled gently at her classmate in spite of her strong desire to scream in frustration. “Thanks Kanani.”

Cait’s smile faded as soon as she hit the door. She stood at the side of her Jeep for a long moment, staring at the package. Rather than leaving it where it would stare at her as she drove out to Trask’s, Cait put it in the back of the Jeep, as far as she could get it from herself and still arrive in the same vehicle. She climbed into the driver’s seat and called Mark, using her Bluetooth so she could talk and drive.

“Hey Sis,” Mark said gently.

“No luck on the kid. All Kanani could tell me was that he was eleven or twelve and hapa.”

“That’s okay,” Trask said calmly. “Bring the package. We’ll work with what we have.”

“Okay.”

“Cait,” Trask tried to keep his tone matter-of-fact. “Watch and see if anyone follows you.”

He heard her sharp intake of breath. “Don’t let it worry you, Cait. Just keep an eye out, okay? Obviously he followed you to the dentist’s office this morning.”

The only response was her slightly ragged breathing.

“Caity,” Mark said calmly. “Nothing’s really changed from this morning when you left for the dentist. God was in control then and he still is now.”

“You’re right,” Cait sounded considerably calmer. “I’m in his hands.”

Trask shot Mark a grateful smile. “We’re here to help you through this Cait. God provided the help before you needed it.”

“Thanks. I’ll be there in ten.”