

Robert and Rose : The Hawaiian Incident

By Kate Simon

Robert looked out over the ocean from his balcony. He loved watching the sunrise. It was so quiet at this hour. He wished it could always be like this. Most employees lived in small apartments on the other side of the resort. His penthouse was the upside to owning the Aheahe. He'd had a dream of owning a piece of paradise. His piece was a five-star resort on the western coast of Kauai. Kauai was small but just as beautiful as the larger islands. A knock at the door interrupted his quiet. He opened the door to his personal assistant.

"Good morning, Mr. Dane."

"Good morning, Gina." Normally, someone of her status in the company wouldn't be delivering his breakfast. This was their time to review the day's schedule. Gina had been with him since he'd taken over the resort five years ago. He pulled the cover off his bacon and eggs. She sat at his small dining table with her fruit bowl. He poured them each a large mug of Kona coffee. "What's on the agenda today?"

She touched her tablet and pulled up their schedule. "We are booked solid for the next month. There is a storm brewing off the coast of Ni'ihau. We are stocked up on supplies and I had the generators tested last week."

Robert smiled. "Of course, you did."

Gina glanced up from her tablet and smiled. Her dark hair and dark eyes spoke to her native Hawaiian ancestry. "Flatterer."

Ni'ihau was just west of Kauai. It was a small settlement of native Hawai'ians, not a resort destination. The island didn't have the resources Robert had. "Keep an eye on the storm. If it looks like it's going to get bad, contact Kai Kalani at Ni'ihau counsel hall. Offer to ferry people over before it hits."

"You know they won't. They'll stay to protect their homes."

"I know but at least we can give them the option. Especially if anyone has medical issues."

"You're a good man, Mr. Dane," she smiled.

“Ah, shucks, ma’am,” he grinned. Gina laughed and looked back at her tablet. She was Robert’s right hand. He didn’t know what he’d do without her. She was completely focused on her position and was a large reason they had a stellar reputation. He studied her as she ate her fruit while reviewing their schedule. She was a natural beauty. Her long black hair was tamed into a braid. She wore no makeup, but didn’t need to. She couldn’t have much of a social life because she was always working. That was a shame for someone in her early thirties. He should insist she take some time off.

“You have a meeting with Glen Burton at ten.”

He rolled his eyes and sighed. “Please tell me why I’m meeting with him again. I’ve already told him I’m not in the market for a partner.”

“He’s someone who’s not used to hearing no, in business,” Gina paused and bit her lower lip. “Or in life.”

Robert went from annoyed to furious in seconds. “What happened?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Tell me,” he said a little too forcefully.

“He keeps telling me I need to go out with him. He doesn’t even ask. He says he’s too important to you for me to ignore.”

There was more. He could see it in her face. “What else?”

“The last time he was here he got handsy. I pushed him off and he was really angry.”

“Oh, he hasn’t seen angry.”

“Mr. Dane, don’t. He books suites for ten thousand a month. He’s an important man on the island. He could cause trouble.”

“Gina, you are a talented professional. I am lucky to have you working with me. I will not tolerate you being treated with less than the respect you deserve.”

“Thank you,” she whispered as her eyes welled.

Robert stared at his computer screen without seeing the report. He was focused on not killing Burton the second he walked into his office. Twenty years ago, he would have beaten the crap out of him. The only thing that tempered his reaction was reminding himself he was no longer that guy.

His office door opened and Gina let Burton enter. Burton glared and brushed into her as he past. Robert could feel Gina's disgust.

"Robert, you really need to get a new secretary. This one is very rude." He reached for a chair.

"Do not sit."

"What?"

"You won't be staying long." Robert got up from his desk and moved close. "You will apologize to Gina for your unwanted advances."

"What? Rob, buddy, I was just being friendly. I can't help it if she's a cold fish."

Robert needed all his self-control to not deck him. "You are pushing your luck with me."

"Oh, are you doing her? Sorry, buddy. I didn't know. Frankly, you could do better."

Robert grabbed his shirt and pulled him toward the door. Burton was lucky he opened the door, rather than push him through it. He held him in front of Gina's office. He could see the fear in her eyes. "Apologize," he growled. He pushed him against the glass wall. "Now!"

"I'm sorry."

Robert wasn't satisfied but he knew it was the best he would get. He pulled him toward the offices entrance. "Now, get out. Don't come back. Ever."

"You can't be serious! All this over some bitch!"

"Too far," he said before he flattened him. His security guard ran down the hall just as Burton hit the floor.

“Mr. Dane, are you okay?”

“Him!” Burton yelled, holding a hand to his bloody face. “That bastard broke my nose.”

“I’m fine, Nathan. Please escort Mr. Burton off the property.” He leaned close to Burton. “And if you ever see him again, introduce him to the cliffs.”

Nathan pulled Burton towards him and smiled. “Yes, sir.”

Rose walked along the beach, listening to the ocean. It was barely six am. All the other residents must be sleeping in. Ahehe was a beautiful resort. It wasn't the typical high rise. The main building was ten floors of luxury apartments. Each of the ocean facing rooms had beautiful balconies with the best and most expensive views on the island. She looked up and saw a man at the top floor, leaning against the balcony railing. He was looking out at the ocean while drinking his coffee. At least she assumed it was his coffee. He glanced down and spotted her. She couldn't clearly see his face but he appeared trim, about six feet tall. From the way he held himself, she thought he wasn't a kid. Most kids couldn't afford the rates. He acknowledged her by raising his mug to her. She gave him a small wave.

Rose turned toward the ocean and walked in. She wanted to enjoy the water and the quiet. She wasn't sure how long she would stay. Her apartment had a full kitchen, a beautiful balcony and the most comfortable bed she'd ever slept in. She could quite happily stay here forever. She floated up and down with the waves until her stomach decided it was time for breakfast. She swam back until she could stand on the bottom. As she walked back to her bag, she spotted a beautiful shell. She examined the curved shell with an opal shine.

"That's a cowrie shell."

She looked up and saw the man from the balcony walking toward her. "You know seashells?"

"The cowrie lives in the coral reefs. I do some scuba diving." He smiled. "You should check for residents."

She gasped and thrust the shell toward him. "You do it."

He smiled and took the shell. He turned it over and looked inside the curled shell. "All clear," he said as he handed it back to her.

"Thank you. Do you always run to a lady's rescue so early in the morning?"

"I was curious about someone who is up as early as I am."

"I like the quiet."

“So do I. I get pretty busy by nine.”

“Do you work here?”

“Yes.”

“They give employees a top floor suite? Sign me up.”

“They do when you own the place,” he smiled as he extended his hand. “Robert Dane.”

She reached for his hand. “Rose Caruso.”

“Caruso? Any relation?”

“Very distant. Most people don’t recognize the name.”

“I grew up in Bensonhurst. I recognize the name.” He followed her to her beach bag. “How are you enjoying your stay?”

His smile threw her off balance. She tried to focus as she dried herself. “Do you poll each guest?”

“I try to make sure everyone is comfortable.”

Rose gave in to his smile with one of her own. “I’m very comfortable. I have to ask who makes your mattresses. I’ve never had a better sleep.”

“I’m happy you’re satisfied. I have them made. I’ll get you my rep’s number.”

“Thank you for the information,” she held up her shell, “and for the inspection. I should let you go. I’m sure you’re busy. I’m going to shower off the ocean and order some breakfast.” She reached for his hand. “It was very nice to meet you, Mr. Dane.”

“Robert, please.”

“Rose.”

Robert walked toward his office, smiling at the thought of the woman he'd met on the beach. He didn't pursue guests, but he could tell she was different, even at a distance. He'd been surprised by seeing a beautiful blonde in a bikini alone. He thought she'd have most of the male guests following after her. He couldn't tell her age from his balcony. It took him only a moment to decide to introduce himself. If she was young, he'd simply introduce himself as the owner inquiring as to his guest's comfort. He was happily surprised to discover this was no young girl. He diverted his path to the front desk.

"Emma, would you please look up a guest, Rose Caruso."

"Yes, sir." She hit a few buttons on her keyboard. "She's in suite 404, travelling alone." She paused and studied the screen. "Huh."

"What is it?"

"She has an open reservation. No departure date. It's unusual."

"Yes, it is." He grabbed a note from the desk and wrote a message. He sealed it in an envelope and handed to Emma. "Please call the kitchen and ask them to send the tropical breakfast with this note to her room."

"Yes, sir."

Robert walked back to his office and wondered what type of woman would book a two thousand dollar a day room for an unlimited stay.



Rose dried her hair and put on shorts and a tank top. The early morning swim had been invigorating. So was meeting Robert Dane. She'd been right in her assessment of him. He was very fit and had a very male presence. Not to mention amazing blue eyes. She reminded herself she wasn't here to start something she'd never be able to finish. Her stomach growled and demanded her attention. She was looking in the fridge when there was a knock on the door. She was surprised to see a waiter with a room service cart.

"Hello. I didn't order anything."

The waiter looked at an envelope. "Are you Miss Caruso?"

"Yes."

He handed her the envelope. "This is for you, with the compliments of Mr. Dane."

"Oh, my," she said as she stepped aside. The waiter set the small table with a plate of eggs and potatoes. There was a large plate of carved fruits and a smoothie.

"The smoothie is mango. It's our most popular."

Rose reached for her wallet and handed the waiter a twenty. "Thank you, very much."

"You're welcome, ma'am. If you need anything at all, please call the desk and ask for Tommy."

Rose closed the door and smiled. Tommy's offer was probably as much for the fact that Robert Dane sent her a breakfast feast as it was about the tip. She sat down to the delicious breakfast and took a sip of the smoothie. She could see why it was so popular. She reached for the envelope.

*Hello again, Rose,*

*It was lovely to meet you. I hope you enjoy the wonderful treats our island has to offer. If you have no other plans, I would like to invite you to be my guest for dinner. I have included my cell number. I hope you will accept.*

*Best regards,*

*Robert Dane*

The post script included the name and number of his bedding supplier. She tried to analyze the tone of his letter. She wasn't sure if he was being romantic. He'd obviously looked her up and saw she was traveling alone. Maybe he was being kind. She thought about the bikini she'd just thrown in the wash. She shook her head and chuckled. "Nah." She grabbed her phone.

*I would be happy to accept your dinner invitation. If it is delicious as my wonderful breakfast, it will be very special. Text me as to where and when. Until then, Rose.*

Robert was smiling at the text he'd gotten from Rose. He was right about her. Only people in their age group use full sentences and punctuation in a text. Not one emoji. He called the dining room and confirmed there were no previous reservations for the private dining room. It was a room reserved for celebrities and rich guests who believed they more important than they actually were. Gina knocked on his door.

"Come in."

"Mr. Dane, there's a call."

From the look on her face, he knew it wouldn't be pleasant. "Burton?"

"No, sir."

"Higher up the food chain?" He wasn't surprised when she nodded. "Ah, crap. I was having such a nice day." He braced himself and picked up his phone. "Dane."

"No, you're not," said an all too familiar voice.

"Hello, Dad. How have you been?"

"You disgrace the family and you have the nerve to ask me this?"

"We've been having this same conversation for the last twenty-five years. Aren't you as tired of it as I am?"

"Fine. Why did you strike Burton? His people are very angry."

"Really, Dad? This is why you called me? Okay, let's have this conversation, again. I do not want or need any partners, especially someone like Burton. I gave him the curtesy of multiple meetings to tell him so, only because he spent thousands here every month. I didn't hit him for that. He crossed the line when he made unwanted advances toward Gina, my assistant. When I confronted him, he called her an unkind name. That's when I decked him and had security throw him out."

"All this trouble over a cagna!" his shouted.

Robert gritted his teeth. "That's the word that got Burton a broken nose. If you were in front of me, I'd give you one too." He hung up and didn't know if he was angry or sad.

Probably both. His father would never understand his desire to make a name of his own. He would also would never understand Robert's respect for anyone outside his father's tight circle, especially a woman. He knocked on Gina's door.

"Yes, sir?"

"I assume you know that was my father on the phone."

"Yes, sir."

"If he calls again, tell him I'm not in. If he gives you a hard time, hang up. If Burton or any of his people call, I will talk to them one last time. If they show up, call security."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm going for a walk on the beach. Try not to need for an hour."

"Sir?" She was shocked at his manner.

"I'm sorry, Gina. I let him upset me. I need some fresh air and some quiet." He was relieved when her expression softened.

"Of course. Before you go, I do have some good news."

"Hit me with it. I can use it."

"The storm off Ni'ihau has changed course. It will be calm seas."

Robert nodded. "One can hope."

He walked out toward the northern most part of their private beach and kicked off his shoes. He shouldn't let the old man bother him like this. He's the reason he'd walked away from everyone and everything twenty-five years ago. With his mother gone, there was no reason to stay. He could never be free as long as he was Roberto Danelli, Junior.

Robert sat on the beach and stared at the waves. The ocean always calmed him. He'd come to Hawai'i to get away and figure out what he wanted from his life. He never left. He smiled at the memory of John Hardison, the original owner of The Aheahe. He'd

given him a job at the front desk. John had taken him under his wing and taught him everything he knew about the hotel business. Robert became his general manager and when John retired, Robert bought him out.

Now he was fifty years old, sitting on the beach of the resort he owned. So why was he still letting his father get to him? His father was a dangerous man to cross. But Robert knew that no matter how angry his father was, he would never hurt him or let anyone else do so. He imagined his father was now talking to Burton's people, trying to get them to back off. Robert would never let anyone strong arm him for a piece of his resort. Especially not someone who'd go to the Don of Bensonhurst.

Rose slipped on a floor length sundress. It was one of the bright florals she bought in the gift shop. She looked in the mirror and decided she'd done enough. Anymore and she'd look like she was pushing for something. She still wasn't sure what Robert had in mind. Was it romance or was this his equivalent of sitting at the captain's table? All she knew for sure was she needed to get to know him.

She found Robert waiting for her at the reception desk of the restaurant. She took a moment to appreciate he'd made an effort too. He was wearing fresh khakis and a light blue button down. When she got closer, she could tell he was wearing a sandalwood cologne. This was not a man who'd come straight from his office.

He extended his hand to her. "Good evening, Rose. I'm so glad you could join me." He smiled but didn't release her hand.

"Thank you for inviting me. And thank you for the delicious breakfast."

"You're very welcome," he said as he finally released her hand and indicated where they were headed. They walked toward a room in the back of the restaurant and opened French doors. There was an elegantly set, round table with flickering candles. The back wall was lined with windows, providing a beautiful view of the ocean. Romance it was.

"Oh, my. This is beautiful."

"Thank you. I'm glad you like it." He held out the chair for her.

"I suppose it's a way you can get away from work."

He reached across the table and covered her hand with his. "Or maybe it's a way for us to get to know each other."

Between his lopsided smile and his bright blue eyes, Robert Dane was a dangerous man. Rose was going to have to watch herself. A waiter came in with a bottle of wine. He showed it to Robert, who nodded. The waiter poured them both a glass.

"I hope you don't mind that I've ordered our dinner. I've selected a Chardonnay. The chef makes an amazing Ahi Ahi."

"I don't mind at all. You're the owner. You know what's best in the kitchen," she smiled as she reached for her glass. "To new friends."

He touched his glass to hers. "To new friends."

She took a sip of her wine. "This is delicious."

"I'm glad you like it."

"So, tell me, how did wind up in Kauai? It's a long way from Bensonhurst."

"I decided I needed to find my own way. Kauai was as far as I could get without a passport."

Rose smiled. "I think Alaska is further west."

"I stand corrected," he smiled. "As far as I could get without snow. I've done snow," he laughed.

"I don't blame you. It's so beautiful here."

"I love it."

"Were you always in the hotel business?"

Robert took another sip of his wine. "No. The family business wasn't for me so I struck out on my own."

"What was the family business?"

"Trucking."

"I don't see you behind the wheel of a tractor trailer."

"No," he said. He leaned back as the waiter served them their entrees. "What brings you to Kauai?"

Rose noted his quick change of subject. He didn't want to talk about his family. "I need a change of location too. This is a perfect location to find peace and quiet."

"I'm glad you're enjoying your stay. Do you have something or someone you have to get back to?"

She took a bite of her fish. "You're right. This is amazing."

"You're avoiding my question."

She leaned back in her chair and smiled. "Guilty. If I had someone waiting for me, I wouldn't be here. As far as something to go back for, I'll go back when I'm ready. I'm not ready yet."

"I'm very glad to hear that."



It was a perfect evening for a walk on the beach. It was still warm but the ocean breeze was perfect. Even better was holding the hand of a beautiful woman. Rose seemed to enjoy the same things he did. He liked she didn't feel the need to fill quiet with talking. He stopped and turned toward her. The moonlight shone on her face. He touched her cheek. "You're so beautiful," he whispered. "I really want to kiss you. I've wanted to since I saw you from my balcony."

"Then I guess you better kiss me," she smiled.

He leaned in and gave her a soft kiss. "Umm, as good as I imagined."

"You imagined kissing me?"

"All day long. You made it very difficult to concentrate on my work."

"My apologies," she laughed.

"No need. It was the best part of my day, until now."

She slipped her hands up around his neck. "Well, you aren't the only one who was thinking about kissing."

"Oh really?" he grinned.

"Really," she said as she pulled him in for a passionate kiss. As surprised as he was by the kiss, he was equally surprised at how she pulled away.

"Is something wrong?"

"Ah, I'm sorry. I got carried away with myself. Please chalk it up to the wine."

"It's not the wine. Tell me, Rose, please. What's bothering you?"

"You're not what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know, big man on campus type. More showy and full of yourself. You're not like that at all."

"Thank you, I think."

“I should go. I’m sure you have a busy day tomorrow.” She turned to go but he reached for her hand.

“Rose, I would make time for you. In fact, I wanted to ask if you’d like to go scuba diving. You decide when. Now, let me walk you back to your room.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Yes, it is. It’s late and I won’t be responsible for you walking alone in the dark.” Rose started to object but he placed his finger on her lips. “I was raised by my old school mother. To do anything less would cause her to come down from heaven and slap me upside the head.”

Rose chuckled. “Well, we can’t have that.”

Robert took her hand and put it around his arm. They walked quietly up the beach until they got to a private entrance. He punched in a code and opened the door for her. He led her to the elevator and pressed the button.

“I’m inside, safe. You don’t have to walk me to my door.”

“Old school, remember?”

“Very well.”

He walked her to her door, wondering why she was scared of him. She didn’t seem to know his family history. He’d lost more than one girlfriend thanks to his father’s reputation. He got to her door and waited for her to open it with her key card. “Rose, I had a wonderful time tonight. I’d like to see you again, but I’ll respect your wishes. If you decide you’d like to see the reefs, or you’d just like to have coffee, you have my number.” He leaned over and placed a kiss on her forehead. “Sweet dreams.”

Rose closed and locked her door. She flopped down on her bed and fell back. "What the hell was I thinking?!" She yelled to no one. "I had no business kissing him like that." She stood and walked to the kitchen for a bottle of water. "But he is so fine," she sighed. "Those eyes." She shook her head. "Stop it." Her ringing cell phone stopped her self-flagellation. She saw the caller ID and sighed. "What?!"

"Hello to you too."

"Sorry. It's been a long day."

"You're running up quite a tab there."

"I'm not done yet. Make sure the charges go through."

"It better be worth it."

The caller hung up and she tossed down the phone. This was getting complicated. Robert Dane was the biggest complication of all.

Robert watched the moon reflecting on the ocean. He'd thought the night had gone well, especially when she'd given him that toe curling kiss. But she flew into reverse so fast that he was surprised he didn't have whiplash. She revealed nothing about herself, except she was taking a break from life. He wondered what or who she was running from. He was about to get into bed when his phone beeped. He looked at the text.

*I'm sorry about tonight. I'll be on the beach about six. Maybe I could buy you a coffee later?*

*I'll see you then.* He replied.

He smiled knowing he'd see her tomorrow. He leaned back and turned off the light. A good night's sleep was out of the question. He was a mix of excitement and curiosity. Who was Rose Caruso? He thought briefly about checking the internet, but decided against it. He would wait until she was ready to tell him.

Robert sat on the deck chair, waiting for Rose. He knew he should get back to the office by nine. He hadn't heard anything from Burton or his people but he doubted it was over. His father hadn't called back, but he didn't expect him too. His father knew better than to expect Robert's gratitude. He didn't want to know what his father did, or promised to do, to get what he wanted. But he did know, no matter how angry his father was with him for turning his back on the family business, he did love him. That had to count for something. It was the only reason Robert still spoke to him. He smiled and stood when he saw a leggy blonde in a bright red bikini walking toward him.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning. Thank you for meeting me. I wanted to apologize for last night."

"It's quite all right. I have to ask; did I do something?"

"No, not at all," she smiled. "You were a perfect gentleman. Too perfect."

"Too perfect?" he chuckled.

She nervously clutched her hands. "Someone like you sets off all my alarm bells," she said in a rush. "You're charming and gorgeous with blue eyes to die for. Someone like you can have any woman. Certainly one much younger than me."

"Someone like me?"

"You're all that and the most successful business man on the island. You're too good to be true."

"I don't know about that. What do you mean by someone younger than you?"

"I'm forty-five."

"Really? I'm surprised, not that it matters to me. I'm fifty. Does that matter to you?"

"No, it doesn't."

"Well, good. What's say we get in a swim?" He unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it on the deck chair. He held her hand while they walked into the water. He let go only when they were deep enough to tread water. "Blue eyes to die for?" he smiled. She responded by splashing him. He laughed and held her around the waist. "Do you want to know what I thought when I saw you from my balcony?"

"Sure."

"I hoped you weren't a kid in her twenties."

"Hah! Twenties?"

He ran his hands up her back. "You could be in any swimsuit issue." Rose laughed so hard she caught most of the next wave in her mouth. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

He pushed her hair off her face. "You're a very beautiful woman. I'm very lucky to spend time with you."

"Thank you," she whispered.

Robert risked leaning in for a kiss. He was relieved when she leaned into returning the kiss. He didn't want to push it too far. "Somebody promised me a coffee."

"I always keep my promises."

They swam up to the beach and walked to where they'd left their things. Rose slipped on a beach cover and Robert buttoned his shirt. "The café is open. We can sit on the patio."

"Sounds good."

Robert found them a table and the waitress was quick to serve them. "Good morning, Bella."

"Good morning, Mr. Dane, ma'am."

"Coffee to start?"

"Yes, thank you."

"The baker just delivered some fresh chocolate croissants."

"Oh," said Rose.

"We'll have two."

Bella smiled and left them.

"Do you know everyone's name?"

"Yes. It's not really that hard. Once someone takes a job here, they rarely leave."

"Quite the testament to your leadership."

"Thank you. I try to maintain an environment where employees feel their contribution is valued. When they feel valued, they do their best work. Everyone wins." He decided to try and fish for some answers. "You've never said what you do." He noticed she took a deep breath before she spoke.

"I taught criminal justice."

"Past tense?"

“I’m taking a sabbatical.”

He was nervous to ask his next question. “Were you police?”

“A very long time ago. I was offered the chance to get off the streets and I took it.”

He was grateful for the pause when Bella brought them their coffee and pastries.

“Thank you, Bella.”

“Bella, please charge this to my suite, 404,” said Rose.

She looked at Robert, obviously confused. “The lady is treating me,” he said with a smile.

“Yes, sir, ma’am,” she nodded and left them alone.

“Are you studying on your sabbatical?”

“No. I needed a break. I need to decide if I’m going back. The work can be very trying.”

Robert decided not to push any further. If she was ex-police, chances are she knew his father. He didn’t want her making a connection.

Robert was finishing a phone call from a supplier when he got a text from Rose.

*Can you be free for lunch?*

*For you? Yes. Can you meet me at my office at one?*

*“I’ll see you then.”* He was still smiling when Gina came into his office.

“Are you ready for me?”

“I am. Have a seat.”

“First things first. I’ve heard through the grapevine that Burton had to have surgery to fix his jaw. You broke his nose but he broke his jaw when he hit the floor.”

“Yeah, well, he had it coming.

“You’ve put yourself in a bad position for me.”

“It wasn’t just you. He’s been trying to get a piece of Aheahe for a year. I only tolerated him out of ... let’s call it an abundance of caution. His associates are less than desirable. I could have turned him down once a month forever. His behavior toward you was crossing the line. I’ve never wanted to hurt anyone but I don’t regret teaching him a lesson. He had it coming.”

“Mr. Dane,” she said with a sigh.

“Don’t worry about me, Gina. I’ll be fine.”

They continued with their meeting, reviewing personnel and deciding on bonuses. “How about Bella in the café? She’s been here awhile.”

Gina tapped a few keys on her tablet. “She’s been here just over a year. Excellent attendance and a great review from the café manager.”

“She’s always so pleasant. That attitude is what can make or break the stay of a guest. Let’s give her a bonus for her anniversary.”

“Yes, sir.”

The security guard knocked on his door. “Mr. Dane, you have a visitor.”



Robert stood and escorted Rose into his office. "Thank you for meeting me. Rose, this is my assistant, Gina Morgan. Gina, this is Rose Caruso."

"It's very nice to meet you," said Gina.

"You too," Rose smiled.

"Rose and I are going to lunch."

"I'll get started on these," she said as she held up her pad. "Quite a few employees are going to be happy at their next paycheck."

Robert was about to put his phone in his pocket when it rang. He didn't recognize the number but it was from New York. It could only be one person. He looked up at Rose. "Excuse me for a moment. I have to take this." To keep this private, he'd have to do something he rarely did. Speak his first language, Italian.

"Hello, Dad. How did you get this number?" He looked at Rose, who was looking at his artwork on the walls.

His father answered him in Italian. "There is very little beyond my reach. Your phone number is nothing. I see you haven't forgotten your language."

"Of course, I haven't. Why are you calling?"

"This Burton thing is a mess. His people are very angry. You need to make this right."

"By giving them my business? Not going to happen."

"No, give them access. They need to have a secure place to move their merchandise. It gets moved to an island near you from Taiwan. They need to get it to a private air strip near you. You don't have to do anything and they'll leave you alone."

"Let them move drugs or worse through my property. Never!" He said it a little too loud and Rose looked at him. He covered the speaker with his hand. "It's okay," he said in English. "I'll be done with this in a minute." She nodded and smiled. He switched back to Italian. "Look, Dad, I won't be a part of any of this."

“Son, listen to me. Burton’s people are Triad. They fear no one, not even me. I don’t think I can protect you. Please do as I ask.”

Robert paused and looked up. There was genuine fear in his voice. After years of ignoring and being ignored, the old man still cared. He turned, making sure his back was to Rose. He lowered his voice. “Papa, thank you for this. I really appreciate it. I promise to be careful. I have security. I’ll make sure they’re on alert.”

“Good. Good. I’ll leave you go now.”

“Papa...”

“Yes?”

“No matter what, I’ve always loved you.”

The old man laughed. “You always were a silly boy.”

Robert disconnected the call and tried to regain his composure. He didn’t know what to do with these emotions. Concern and tenderness were something that was never associated with his father. He would have to set this aside for now. He turned and smiled at Rose. “Ready when you are.”

Rose watched as Robert stopped his security guard. She watched as he gave him instructions and the man nodded. He smiled as he walked toward her.

“Sorry about that. Business. How would you feel about going off site? There is a place not far that serves the best cheesesteaks.”

“Cheesesteaks?”

“They are as good as I got in New York.”

“Sounds great.”

She waited until they were in the car before she questioned him about the call. “You seemed angry with your father.”

His head snapped toward her, then back to the road.

“I heard you say ‘Papa’.”

“He has the ability to make me angry.”

She rested her hand on his leg. “Are you okay?”

He looked at her and smiled. “I will be, thanks.”

They sat down at their table with the red checkerboard table clothes. Their drinks were served in red plastic glasses. The walls were covered with pictures and magazine covers of Frank Sinatra. This could have been a restaurant in New York or New Jersey.

“Do you come here when you miss New York?”

“Sometimes,” he smiled. He took a bite of his sandwich. “Ah, I’ve missed this.”

“You don’t come here often?”

“The older I get the harder it is to keep in shape,” he smiled as he patted his stomach.

Rose couldn’t help but grin. “You’re doing just fine.” She thought he looked adorable when he blushed.

“What about your family?” he asked.

“My parents are gone. They had me late in life. They were great and I do miss them.”

“We’re they happy you became a cop?”

“My father was proud. He got to brag on me at his legion hall. Mom was always afraid for me. I’d call her every night so she knew I got home safe.”

“Why did you give it up?”

“Burnout. I started the job wanting to help people and I did, for a while. You see a lot in the job.” She sighed and took a breath. “Sometimes it’s too much.”

“You took a job teaching.”

“Yeah.”

“That must have been better.”

“It is, but I don’t know how long I want to do it.” Rose took another bite of her sandwich. What was it about Robert that made her spill her guts? She had to shut up.

“What do you think about scuba diving?” he asked. He sensed she didn’t want to talk anymore about herself.

“I feel great about it.”

“I’ll schedule some lessons for you with our instructor at the pool. You have to learn in a secure location first. Once the instructor clears you, I’ll take you out to the reef.”

“That’s sound wonderful.”

Robert paid the bill and he walked her to his car. Rose saw the sadness still in his eyes. She put her hand on his arm. “Are you sure you’re all right?” His smile sent a shock from her eyes to her toes.

“I’m getting there. Thank you for caring.” He leaned in and gave her a heartbreakingly tender kiss.

She was done.

Robert got back on the road toward Aheahe. Spending time with Rose was becoming the best part of his day. She even helped him take his mind off his father and Burton. He glanced over at her and noticed her long floral sundress. "I see you like my shop's dresses.

"I do. They're very comfortable and the flowers are beautiful."

He reached for her hand. "Not as beautiful as you."

Rose smiled. "Does that line work for you?"

"It was pretty cheesy."

"But it was appreciated."

Just as he pulled into his parking space a loud alarm sounded on his phone. He pulled it out of his pocket and his heart sank. "Shit!" He jumped out of his car and looked at Rose. "Stay here!"

He ran into the lobby and saw Emma kneeling over a security guard. "Mr. Dane, four men came in and Jeff tried to stop them. I called for help but before the others got here, they shot him!" He's dead," she cried.

"Emma, where are the others? Emma, where!"

She pointed toward the offices. "They were looking for you."

He ran toward his office as his security team were running from the other direction. He heard Gina screaming.

"I don't know where he is!"

Robert reached for the door as his security guards warned him not to. His guards were armed with only Tasers. Nothing more had ever been necessary. "Screw that. Get the cops in here."

He pushed open the door and saw Gina being pulled by her arm. "Let her go!" he shouted. A Chinese man was holding her arm with one hand and a gun with the other. Another was rifling through her desk. The man came out of his office with his gun drawn.

“Boss says we don’t need him. We just need him out of the way.” He was aiming at Robert when a shot came from behind and the man dropped to the ground. The other man took Robert’s moment of shock to drag Gina down the opposite end of the hall and out the office entrance.

“Gina!” He got pushed to the side and someone ran past him. It wasn’t a cop. It was Rose. She ran out the door, gun in hand. She came back a few moments later. “I couldn’t get a clear shot at the other guy. I would have hit her. The other two had the car waiting for them. They pushed Gina in the car and took off.”

“What the hell, Rose?” She walked past him and grabbed a pen and scribbled something on a piece of paper. “The license plate.”

“We have to get the police.”

She reached under her long dress and he got a glimpse of a holster. She pulled out a thin wallet. She looked genuinely sad before she opened it. “I am the police. Special Agent Rose Caruso, FBI.”

“FBI?”

“I’ll explain everything later. In the meantime, I need to call my supervisor.” She hit a number on her cell. “Clyde, the shit hit the fan. They forced their way into Robert’s office and kidnapped his assistant, Gina Morgan. They killed one of his security guards.” She walked over to the man on the floor and kicked his gun out of the way. “I took out one of them. I doubt you’ll get an ID from him. It looks like his prints have been burned off.”

“Damn it, Rose. I told you this would happen.”

“Robert had nothing to do with it. He told his father he would never allow the Triads access.”

Robert was frozen in his shoes as police filed into the room. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“You’re too close to this.”

“No, I’m not, Clyde. He’s a good guy who doesn’t deserve this, no matter what the bureau thinks. Just get your ass over here. We have to get Gina Morgan back.”

Rose looked up at him and he thought he was seeing a completely different person. Someone he didn’t know.

“Robert...”

He shook his head. “No, no.” he pushed his way down the hallway and out the door. He couldn’t think about her. Not now. He had to get Gina back but he had no idea how to do that. He pulled out his phone.

“Hello, Dad?”

Rose told police the local FBI section chief would be here soon. They didn’t like she refused to surrender her weapon. This thing wasn’t over and Robert would need protection. She hadn’t thought investigating the son of a mobster would get this complicated. Damn that lopsided smile. She was hoping Robert hadn’t taken off. She knew him well enough to know his focus now was Gina. She ran down the hall and out the door. She didn’t see him in the parking lot.

“Shit.”

She moved toward the front lot where they’d parked only twenty minutes before. She sighed in relief when she saw him sitting on the asphalt, leaning against his car. “Robert.”

“What? Are you going to arrest me?”

“Of course not. You had nothing to do with this.”

“You speak Italian. You understood everything I said to my father.”

“My parents were from Milan. English was my second language too.”

“You’ve really done your research. I have to give you credit. I bought it hook, line and sinker.”

“As much as I want to talk to you about this, we have to get Gina back. We have to get the guys who killed your guard.”

“Jeff. His name was Jeff.” His eyes teared and her heart broke. “You don’t understand. This is my fault. I have to fix this.”

“That’s what we’re going to do. Come on. We’ll go to your office and wait for my boss.”

“I’m waiting here.”

She didn’t like the look. “Robert, what have you done?”

“My father is sending people.”

“You’re pouring gas on the fire.”

“These people only understand people like my father.”

“Come on. My boss is probably in your office by now.”

“I need to wait.”

“I’m sure they’ll find you. Come on.”

She walked him through the closer front door, unfortunately they walked past the body of the security guard. Robert stopped and stared as the coroner did her job. She could feel the agony in his face. She clasped his hand, just as she had when they walked along the beach. He clasped her hand tight, until he realized what he was doing and pulled away. They walked back to his office, where another body was laying, as of yet, unattended.

Clyde made it to Aheahe in record time. He had thirty years with the bureau and was very well respected. He’d recruited her for this job. Right now, he was really pissed.

“Agent Caruso.”

“Robert, this is Supervisory Special Agent Clyde Nakamura. This is Robert Dane.” Robert extended his hand and Clyde took it.



“Mr. Danelli.”

“Clyde!”

“My legal name is Robert Dane. I’d appreciate it if you’d use it.”

Robert felt like he had left his body and he was watching someone else. This was happening to someone else. This was not his world. It was his father’s world. “We need to get Gina back.”

Rose put a hand on his shoulder. “That’s our goal.”

He moved away from her and saw her hurt look. She did save his life but that was swimming in his head with all the lies and deception.

“You need to call your contacts. See what they want,” said Clyde.

“What contacts?! Burton is the only one I could call but he’s not exactly talking right now.”

“What did you do?”

“He made unwanted advances to Gina. When I called him on it, he was...well, I don’t tolerate that. I decked him. Apparently, I broke his jaw.”

“Jesus! No wonder they came at you, guns blazing. Burton is married to Shao Bai, daughter of Shao Junya. He’s the head of the Panlong, the deadliest triad operating out of Taiwan. Burton was allowed to marry the daughter because he has a gift for spotting business opportunities. He’s made them a lot of money. He’s been operating out of your hotel for the last six months.”

“What? No!” said Robert. “He rents a suite and makes a nuisance of himself at the pool and the bar. I knew he was connected so I tolerated him.”

“How did you know?” asked Rose.

"I grew up around his types. I saw his guests. I figured he was having poker games. I know that's illegal in Hawai'i but I had no proof. I had the staff check for cards, chips, anything that would give me the right to deny him a room. We never found anything.

"You never bugged the room," said Clyde.

"No, I didn't. I'm not the police. That would be your job." He turned toward Rose. "Did you place bugs in my place?"

"No, Robert, I didn't. They couldn't get a warrant."

Robert gritted his teeth. "He met with me a few times to make an offer to buy a share of my place. I always turned him down. That's as far as my association with Burton went."

"You told your father you wouldn't give him access to move product. What did you mean?"

He looked at her, reminded how she'd understood to everything he'd said to his father. "They want access on the north shore. It's very remote but I do have it patrolled. People rarely go up that far, but on occasion they do. I go there when I want to be alone. They're bringing something in from Ni'ihau. There's no access to that island except by boat. There's an airfield near here. They bring the cargo from Ni'ihau to the northern shore here. Then it's a short ride to the private airport. They want guarantees their movements would be unhampered."

"Makes sense," said Clyde. "They can sail a large ship from Taiwan, but it would be too noticeable anchored at Ni'ihau. They'd send a smaller boat in and move it around Ni'ihau to Kauai."

"They have to make sure they aren't stopped by your security."

A police officer tried to stop men coming into his office. "We are expected," said one man.

"Let them in," said Robert. Four large men wearing suits and oxfords entered. These were not tourists.

“Robert, are these who you expected?” asked Rose.

“What’s going on?” asked Clyde.

“They are additional security,” said Robert.

“Ah, Christ, they’re your father’s men.”

“They’re extra security,” said Robert.

One man appeared to speak for them all. “We are at your disposal, Mr. Danelli.”

“It’s Robert Dane. I appreciate your help. My assistant, Gina Morgan, has been kidnapped by the Panlong Triad.” He saw the men each take a breath, but to their credit, they didn’t move. They want access to the north shore of my property to run contraband undisturbed. I refused and they grabbed Gina.” Robert noticed Clyde had turned bright red.

“Are you kidding me! You just told members of your father’s criminal organization about the Triad. You’ll start a gang war. Do you care about civilian casualties?”

Rose stepped in between them before things got out of hand. It was a good thing she did because he saw his father’s men ready to move. “Clyde, please. Like Robert said, these men are extra security.”

“They’re criminals.”

“We don’t know that. What we do know is Mr. Dane has private security for his facility. People who can assist us in whatever happens.”

Clyde stared at her. “Plausible deniability.”

“Exactly,” she said.

He looked at the men. “If you step out of line, I will not hesitate to arrest you.” He looked back at Robert. “That goes for you too.”

Robert was about to reply when his phone rang. “Dane.”

“We have your girl. Tonight, at midnight, we will arrive on the north shore near the jetty. We will be undisturbed. If this happens on schedule, we will return your girl unharmed. If we spot any cops, her death will be on your head.”

“I want to talk to her.”

“No.”

“No proof of life and I will fill that beach with every cop on the island.” Robert thought he may have pushed too far when all he heard was silence. Finally, he heard Gina’s terrified voice.

“Mr. Dane?”

“Gina, are you hurt?”

“Not really. I’m scared.”

“I’ll get you home, Gina. I swear I will.”

The voice changed. “That’s enough. Just you on the beach. You will allow our truck access. Once the truck is loaded, you get the girl.” The voice disconnected the call.

“They’re going to bring her to the north shore tonight at midnight. I’m to allow their truck to drive up the beach. Then they’ll release Gina.”

Clyde shook his head. “Okay, we’ll have to work with this. I have calls to make.”

Robert grabbed his arm. “Don’t do anything to put Gina at risk.”

“Mr. Dane, this is what we do.” He glanced at Robert’s extra security. “Let us do it.” Clyde left the office.

“Mr. Danel...Dane,” the man corrected himself. “My men and I will inspect the grounds.”

“Thank you.”

They left and Robert felt dizzy. He leaned against the wall.

Rose took his arm. “That’s the adrenaline. You’re crashing. You need to sit.”

He barely realized she was still there. He allowed her to maneuver him to the couch. She pulled a bottle of water out of his office fridge, sat down and gave it to him.

“Drink this.”

He just stared at her. She looked like the woman he had lunch with but she was nothing like her. This was a cop. One of those people he’d be taught to avoid his whole life. “Was anything you told me the truth?”

“Yes, all of it was.”

“You’re no teacher. You’re a cop.”

“I’m an instructor at Quantico. I was tasked for this assignment because I’m fluent in Italian.”

“And because you look like a swimsuit model. Are those bikinis FBI issue?” He could see he made a direct hit. He was surprised by the tears welling in her eyes. She blinked them back and pulled herself together.

“Yes, you were an assignment. I was to get to know you and determine if you were a part of Burton and the Panlong Triad. Did I try to get your attention? Of course. It didn’t take me long to know you were exactly who you said you were. An honest business man who’d separated himself from his family’s past.”

“Was kissing me part of your operation?”

Rose went from defensive to furious in a split second. She jumped to her feet and pointed at him. “Why do you think I freaked out that night? I was terrified of how you made me feel. I loved spending time with you. I began to really care about you.”

He couldn’t help himself. Maybe it was the situation, maybe it was the adrenaline. He laughed a full-on belly laugh.

“What’s so damn funny!”

“You really are Italian.”

She couldn't suppress a smile. "And you're an ass. It's going to be a long day. You should get some rest. I'll need to see if I can talk Clyde down from the ledge. He's pretty pissed at both of us."

"Do you always call your boss by his first name?"

"He's my boss of the moment. I'm on loan to his office. I've known him since we were both assigned to the New York office. He rose up the ranks and I went to Quantico."

"I should go talk to my people. Before you say anything, I won't tell them anything they don't need to know." Rose turned toward the door but he grabbed her hand. "Come up to my room when you're done. We have a lot to talk about."

Robert talked to the staff and tried to calm them. He assured them that after the police notified Jeff's family, he would talk to them. In the meantime, no one was to talk about Gina's kidnapping. The police were working on it and he expected a quick resolution. God, what a crock. The police, the FBI and some of his father's men were all working, but it couldn't be called together. He sat down on his couch and leaned his head back. He'd spent his whole life trying to escape the family business. Now, it was back to haunt him.

A knock on his door woke him. He hadn't realized he'd fallen asleep. He looked in the peephole and saw Rose. She looked as tired as he felt. "Come in," he said as he held the door open. "I'm going to make some coffee. Want some?"

"Yes, please."

He noticed the time on his oven. "Crap. I didn't realize I was asleep for two hours," he said as he put the first pod in the machine.

"It's the adrenaline. You crashed hard. It's normal."

"Nothing about this is normal."

"Not for you," she smiled as she sat at his kitchen table.

He handed her a filled mug and set up his own. "Cream?"

"No, thanks. I only take sugar." She reached for the dish on the table.

"Me, too," he said as he sat down with his mug. "Now what?"

"Do we need to talk about me being an agent?"

"No," he said quietly. "I'm not crazy about what happened but I understand what you did. All my life people have assumed I was part of my father's life. It was the reason I changed my name and left New York. No matter how far I ran, it still caught up with me."

"Actually, I think your history has helped you in this situation."

"I'd love you to explain that one," he said as he took another sip of his coffee.

"You knew Burton was trouble from the start. You didn't let him get a foothold."

“I got Gina kidnapped.”

Rose reached her hand over to his. “No, you didn’t. These people would do anything to secure their goods. Knowing who your father is probably what made them step more carefully than they normally would.”

His eyes teared. “They’re going to kill her.”

“No. It’s my professional opinion they won’t. They need your cooperation to move this shipment and future shipments.”

He grabbed a napkin and wiped his eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m all over the place. One minute I want to put my fist through a wall and the next,” he held up the napkin. “This.”

“Robert, you have no need to apologize. Now, I have an update from Clyde.”

“Is he still pissed?” he smiled.

“He’s too busy. We’ve received confirmation that the Shao family yacht has dropped anchor in international waters off Ni’ihau.” Rose pulled her phone out of her pocket. “Dresses with pockets. A very big deal,” she smiled.

“I’ll see you get the entire collection.”

She touched the screen and pulled up a picture of a beautiful yacht. “This is the Longwang, the Shao yacht.” She pointed at him. “You’re allowed one chuckle.

Robert laughed. “Longwang? Really?”

“It Chinese for sea dragon or Dragon king. It rules the sea.”

He pointed to an H surrounded by a large circle. “What’s that?”

“Helipad. You don’t dock something like this at a boat slip. It’s over two hundred and fifty feet.”

“Damn.”

“Whatever Shao Junya is moving it must be very valuable. He wants to keep a close watch on it.”



“What are your people going to do?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? He’s ordered Gina’s kidnapping.”

“Robert, he’s in international waters. There’s nothing we can do. There is no one entity who has jurisdiction. They can only be pursued for crimes committed in international waters when they reach port.”

He sighed. “Since the home port is Taiwan, he’s home free.”

“I’m sorry. The best we can do is focus on getting Gina back.”

“Do you have a plan for that?”

“We do. You’ll be on the beach at midnight. Our people will be watching. Other than that, there’s nothing I can tell you.”

He stood and stuck his empty mug in the dishwasher. “You’ve got to be kidding me. I’m the one on that beach. I’ll be a hell of a target.”

Rose came to his side, putting her mug next to his. She took his hand in hers. “You have to know I would never let anything happen to you.”

“Why?”

“What? What do you mean, why?”

“Do you care this much about your job? Will it look bad on your record if we don’t get Gina back?”

“Yes, it’s my job,” she yelled. “Yes, I want to get Gina back. But you know damn well why I would protect you. I know you do.”

He managed a small smile.

“Il pene,” she whispered as she put her hand on his hips. She flushed red as she assessed him, looking up and down. She ran her hand up his chest and threaded her hands around his neck. “I would never let anything happen to you.”

Days of restraint exploded in a bone melting kiss. He kissed down to her neck and bare shoulder. Rose gave him a sly smile. She stepped back and slid the straps off her shoulders. Her dress hit the floor and Robert's heart raced. "Damn, woman," he whispered. She was wearing nothing but a thong and a loaded holster. He moved closer, then stopped. "Ah, sweetheart. You might want to lose the gun." She smiled and bent over, unhooking the holster.

"You must have a night stand I can put this on."

"Ah, yeah," he said, regaining his voice. "Follow me." He led her to the bedroom and she set the gun down. He couldn't stop staring at it and everything it represented. She put her finger on his chin and forced him to look at her.

"Let's not think about that now. We have a few hours to ourselves and I'd like to remind you that you have a naked woman standing in front of you."

"Not quite," he grinned and slipped a finger in the band of her thong. He yanked it down to her feet. "Much better."

Rose fastened her holster and brushed her dress down. She smiled at Robert, sleeping peacefully after a very enthusiastic evening. She sat on the edge of the bed and stroked his shoulder. Despite everything they were facing tonight, just the sight of him like this made her growl.

“Are you hungry?” he whispered.

“What?”

“You’re growling.” He opened his eyes and smiled.

She ran her hand over his well-defined chest. “Hungry? Yes. Food? That’d be good too.”

He smiled and pulled her down on the bed. He rolled on top of her and gave her a deep kiss.

“Ah, babe. I’d love to continue this but you aren’t the only one who’s packing.”

He ran his hand down her leg and felt her holster. “You make me forget what’s happening.” He rolled over and grabbed his boxers.

“That’s a good thing,” she said. “We both needed to step away from the situation for a while. Now it’s time to get ready. It’s nine. We have a couple hours to get something to eat and then meet with Clyde.”

“I’m going to grab a shower, then check in with my people,” he said.

“Same. I’ll meet you back here in an hour. Order us something to eat. I don’t care what, but we need fuel.” She smiled and glanced at the bed. “I don’t know about you, but I just used up what little I had left.”

Robert gave her a warm smile. “Same here.” He paused and his smile faded. “I notice you didn’t ask me what people.”

She looked at him and shrugged. “Plausible deniability.”

Robert was surprised to see Emma still behind the front desk. “Emma, did Susan call off?”

“No, Mr. Dane. I called her and told her I’d cover for her. I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course, it is, but we’ve all had a stressful day. You need some rest.”

“I took a nap on my break. I didn’t want to go home until I heard about Gina. She’s such a great person. She’s so kind.”

He reached for her hand. “Yes, she is.”

“Have you heard anything?”

“Nothing yet, but know everyone is doing everything they can.”

“Yes, sir,” she said as she wiped the tears from her eyes. “Oh, some men left this for you. They were here earlier.” She handed him a sealed envelope with his name.

“Thank you.” He turned and opened the letter.

*Beach by the café at nine thirty*

*Your friends from New York*

He looked at his watch. It was almost time. “Emma, I need a favor.”

“Of course, sir.”

“I’d do it myself but I have to, ah, go to a meeting. Would you please see what size Ms. Caruso bought from the Welina collection. Then select all you can find in that size and have it delivered to her room.” Robert blushed at her smile. “She said dresses with pockets are a big deal.”

“I’ll take care of it myself. And they are a big deal. They have some lovely blouse and short sets in the collection. Shall I pick some of those too?”

“An excellent idea. Thank you.” He nodded as he walked out the front door and around the side of the building. He could have walked through the café and out that door, but that would be showing his hand. Especially if Agent Nakamura was watching him.

When it was this dark, you could be standing next to someone and not hear them. That's exactly what happened.

"Mr. Dane."

He turned and saw the man he'd spoken to earlier.

"Yes."

"We have surveyed the area and my men are in place. We are ready to protect you."

"The most important thing is that my assistant, Gina, is returned unharmed. She is your priority."

"Yes, sir."

Robert thanked the waiter for the late-night delivery. It was commonplace for guests to place orders this late, but not for him. He usually made his own meals. He set out a light tuna salad and fresh fruit. He set the coffee maker for a cup of decaf. His nerves were already on edge. He didn't need caffeine to add to it. Right on time, Rose knocked on the door. He was surprised to see her wearing all black and carrying a ski mask. "What is this?"

"They aren't supposed to know I'll be there. The mask is to cover my hair. It will reflect any light."

"What do you mean, you'll be there? I don't want you there."

She walked to the kitchen table and popped a piece of fruit in her mouth. "Good choice. Protein and sugar."

"Did you hear me? I don't want you out there. I've already got one person I care about in danger. I don't want you in danger too."

She smiled and moved her hands up his chest. "Thank you for caring about me."

"Of course, I do. You know that."

She gave him a quick kiss. "Yeah, I do. You have to remember; this is my job. I've trained for this my entire career. I have a black belt in krav maga and I can shoot the middle out of a quarter at one hundred years."

"Black belt? Huh. Remind me not to piss you off."

She laughed and shrugged. "I'd just curse you out with some colorful Italian." She started to sit when he pulled her into his arms.

"I know, logically, that you're a perfectly capable agent. That doesn't stop me from not wanting you anywhere near that beach."

She gave him a tight hug. "Thank you. Now let's eat before Clyde gets here." She sat down and took a bite of her salad. "Funny thing happened when I went to my room to change."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. My closet was filled with enough clothes to stay here weeks and never wear the same thing twice."

"Huh," he smiled. "How about that? Decaf?"

"God, yes."

He stood and made her a mug. He set it in front of her and she took his hand. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He knew she wasn't talking about the coffee.

Rose checked her watch. Clyde should be here any minute. They had finished their meal and were sitting on the couch, flipping channels and not talking. They'd run out of words. All of this was completely mad. Once they'd finished this mission and Gina was safe, she and Robert were going to have a long conversation.

A knock at the door prompted Robert to turn off the TV. He stood and opened the door to Clyde. He was wearing all black and had a ski cap. He was also carrying two automatic rifles.

Clyde looked at Rose, still sitting on the couch. "Well, you look like you made yourself comfortable." Rose ignored his comment and reached for a rifle. She began a quick check. "Do you think I can't check a weapon?"

"Would you use a weapon you hadn't inspected yourself?"

"No," he said quietly.

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Dude, you need to chill out. You forget I've known you just about forever. No matter how much time you've spent behind a desk, you're still one of the best agents I've ever known."

He nodded. "Thanks, Rose." He looked at Robert, who was still watching Rose inspect her weapon. "We'll be out there, but you won't know where. Just stick to the plan. The service entrance has been left open and your guards have been sent home. We expect an empty truck will arrive on the service road about eleven forty-five. Don't engage whoever gets out of the truck. The boat should arrive at midnight. Let them unload whatever they have. They should have Ms. Morgan with them. If everything goes to plan, they should release her." He reached for his holster and pulled out a nine mm handgun. He handed it to Robert. "Just in case."

"I don't know how to use one of these."

Rose took the gun and did a quick inspection. "It's fine. The safety is off. If you need to, point and shoot. The closer the better." She moved behind him and stuck the gun in his waistband. She patted his chest. "You'll be fine."

He pointed at the rifle. "I still can't get over that."

“Don’t forget about the quarter.”

“I’ll try.”

“We’ll be going out the service entrance. Give us a few minutes and walk straight up the beach. Stay off the dunes.”

Rose saw the fear in Robert’s eyes. “Ah, to hell with Clyde,” she thought. She placed a hand on his cheek and gave him a kiss. “We’ll be fine.”

Rose followed Clyde to the service elevator. At this hour, there was very little chance of running into anyone. “How many men did you bring?” she asked.

“I have four. One has secured the elevator; one is at the service road entrance. The other two are in place on the dunes.”

“Sounds good.”

“When this is over, we’ll have to talk about you and Danelli.”

“It’s Dane, and no we won’t.”

“Excuse me?” he demanded as the door opened to his agent.

“Not now. Let’s go save the girl and get us some bad guys.”



Robert paced back and forth in the sand. The truck was waiting and a man was standing next to it, smoking a cigarette. The boat should be here soon. All he wanted was to get Gina back. The feds could take care of the rest of it. He saw it before he heard it. A pinpoint of light in the distance. As the light grew so did the noise from a power boat. The sound of the boat was nearly drowned out by the sound of his heartbeat in his ears. The boat grounded on the beach and two men opened the storage bins. The third man had a gun pressed to Gina's side.

"Let her go! You have what you want."

"Not until we're finished."

The truck driver came to the side of the boat and another man jumped out. The last man at the storage bins started tossing packages to each man. The men ran to the truck, dumped their cargo and ran back. Robert lost track around twenty trips for the men. The last man finally closed the storage doors and nodded to the man with Gina.

"You've got what you want! Let her go!" he shouted.

The last man pushed Gina out of the boat and led her to the beach. Robert could see she was bruised and scared. As the man got closer, he could see in his eyes something was off. The man turned his gun toward Robert.

"Gina, run!" he screamed as he pulled the gun from behind his back. He was about to fire when he saw a red dot appear on the man's chest. He heard a small whoosh go past his ear. A moment later, the man fell back onto the beach. The associates ran from the truck toward him. He heard three more sounds and the other three men fell. He heard yelling he assumed was from Nakamura's men. He got to his feet and ran toward Gina. She'd gotten halfway to the hotel when he caught up to her. He grabbed her by the shoulders. She turned and pounded on his chest.

"No, no, let go of me. Leave me alone!" she cried.

"Gina, Gina, it's me, Robert. You're safe now. It's all over. You're safe."

She looked up and finally recognized him. She fell into his arms and dissolved in tears. He felt all her strength leave her as her legs gave out. He picked her up in his arms

and began carrying her toward the hotel. He heard the pounding of running behind him but didn't turn.

"Robert, stop!" called Rose. He turned as she came up beside him. "How is she?"

He looked down at Gina who was curled onto his chest, her eyes closed. "I need to get her to a doctor."

"We need to talk to you."

"Not now. Gina's more important."

Robert set Gina down on a conference room couch. He thought it better than taking her to his office couch. She was obviously not ready to revisit the scene of the crime. He didn't think he was either. He hit the intercom on the table.

"Emma, are you still there?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm in the conference room. I have Gina." He was stunned to hear Emma's scream as the phone clattered down. A moment later, door flew open and Emma ran in. She fell to her knees by the couch.

"Gina, Gina, sweetheart."

"Em?"

Emma took Gina's hand in hers. "Are you okay?"

"I was so scared."

"I'm here now." Emma turned to Robert. "We're here now."

Robert pushed aside his surprise to address Gina's immediate needs. "I'm going to call for a doctor." He put his hand on Emma's shoulder. "She's obviously in good hands."

Gina looked up at him and his heart broke for the fear still in her eyes. "Is it over?"

“Yes, it is. You’re safe here. I’m going to get you a doctor and then I have to speak with the police.”

“You’re not leaving, are you?”

Robert never had a child, but he thought this must be how it felt. He wanted to take her pain away and protect her. “I promise you. I won’t be far. I’ll be here as long as you need me.”

Gina nodded and gave him a small smile. He walked out of the room and closed the door behind him. He leaned against the door and closed his eyes. This was all too much to process right now. He had to put one foot in front of the other and get things done. He looked toward the front desk where several employees had gathered. He waved over Paul, the security chief.

“Sir, is it true? Is Gina okay?”

“She’s safe but she needs medical attention. I’m going to contact the doctor. I want pillows and a blanket brought to her. Have the kitchen send in a light meal, with plenty of water and juice. She may not have eaten.”

“Yes, sir. Right away.”

“Paul, no one is to go in there without my approval, or Emma’s. She’s in there with her.”

“Oh, that’s good. She was so worried,” Paul smiled. “They’re so good together.”

Robert had always thought he knew his employees so well.

Robert sat on his balcony listening to the ocean. It had always calmed him but tonight, that wasn't the case. He had so much pinballing in his brain, he could barely focus. The most important thing was Gina was safe. The doctor had seen her and most of her injuries were bruises. Despite that, the doctor wanted her in the hospital overnight to be sure. He made sure both the doctor and Emma were with her in the ambulance. He promised to see her in the morning. He heard a knock at his door. He knew who it would be before he opened it.

"Come in."

"How's Gina?"

"She's at the hospital. She'll be fine physically but she's been through hell."

Rose put her hand on his chest. "So have you."

He pulled her close. "It's been a hell of a day."

"That it has."

He grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge and handed her one. They sat down on the couch and had a moment of quiet. He reached for her hand. "I understand why you took out the guy who was after me. He was going to shoot me and Gina. Did you have to shoot the other three?"

Rose took a sip and then set down her bottle. "It wasn't us."

"What?"

"None of us fired. We were prepared to, but Clyde never gave the order."

"Someone could have fired without the order."

"No. All the weapons were checked."

"Then...ah shit."

"Yeah."

"What are they going to do about it?"

“Probably nothing. They’re long gone.”

“What? Why aren’t they looking for them?”

“Beside the fact that they probably saved our asses out there, Clyde and the team are busy logging in the biggest fentanyl bust in U.S. history. One thousand pounds. Street value is thirteen million.”

“Damn. No wonder they needed a secure route.”

“Exactly. I’m exhausted but I need a shower.” She sniffed at her clothes. “I’m starting to offend myself. Do you mind if I use yours? I don’t feel like going back to my room.”

He leaned in and gave her a soft kiss. “I would love the company tonight.”

Rose snagged a t shirt and gym shorts from Robert’s drawer. She really didn’t want to go back to her room tonight. She toweled off her wet hair and ran a comb through it. That was enough for tonight. If she didn’t lay down, she’d fall down. She came out of the bathroom to find Robert pulling down the bedspread. He was wearing only his boxers. Her heart was saying ‘Yeah, baby!’ while her body was saying ‘Not a chance.’

“Hey there. What’s say we get some sleep. We can talk in the morning.”

“A truly excellent idea.”

Robert gave her a lopsided grin. “I’m known for my truly excellent ideas.”

After ten straight hours of dreamless sleep, Rose was making coffee. Physically, she felt better but the rest of her was a jumble of thoughts. Right at the top of the list was Robert Dane. He’d upended everything. Knowing him had confirmed in her mind that starting over wasn’t a bad thing, not even at her age. Now it was a matter of where to land.

“I smell coffee,” he said as walked toward her in his boxers.

She smiled as her mind and body were now in sync with a rousing 'Yeah, baby.' She handed him a mug.

He took a sip and smiled. "Ah. That's better."

She put her hand on her hip. "Oh yeah?"

"My apologies." He set his mug down and pulled her into a passionate kiss. "That's better."

"Hell, yeah, it is." She smiled and picked up her mug. They sat at the table and sipped their coffee.

"Now what?" he asked.

"I'll have to meet with Clyde later. He wants to read me the riot act about you."

"About me?"

"Yeah. Getting involved with someone under investigation," She saw the expression on his face and held up her hand. "However briefly, is top of the no go list."

"What will he do?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm putting in my retirement papers."

"Because of me?"

"Yes and no. I told you I was deciding whether or not to go back. That was true. Knowing you has shown me you can remake your life. I'm done dealing with bureaucratic nonsense, with students who think they know better. And I really never want to use myself as bait again. I want a quiet life. I've earned it."

Robert reached for her hand. "Have you decided where you'll retire?"

"I do have enough clothes to stay here for a while, thanks to a very generous man. But I can't afford your rates."

"I stopped charging your room days ago. But as nice as your room is, I think mine is an upgrade, should you like to stay here."

Rose smiled and pulled him into her arms. "Yeah, that Jacuzzi is a step up." He laughed and hugged her tight. "Not to mention the hot guy in the bed."

"Not to mention," he smiled. "So, your answer is..."

"Yes, I'd love to accept your invitation."

"Excellent." He gave her a deep kiss. "Oh, damn."

"Excuse me?"

"Look at the time. I promised I'd visit Gina."

"I would suggest some clothes."

"An excellent idea."

"I'm known for my excellent ideas." Rose smiled as she watched him go back to the bedroom. She grabbed her coffee and took another sip. This was going to be interesting. A knock at the door interrupted her decedent train of thought.

"Would you get that?" he yelled from the bedroom. "I'm almost ready."

She opened the door and was surprised to see Clyde. He looked like he hadn't slept. "What are you doing here?"

He walked past her without being invited in. "I don't need to ask where you slept last night."

"Enough. What's going on? I was going to meet with you later."

Robert came out of the bedroom, this time in khakis and a polo shirt. "Agent Nakamura?"

"We got a call from our contacts in Taiwan. The Shao yacht docked a few hours ago."

"Are they going to make arrests?" asked Robert.

Clyde made a dismissive noise. "No, but you'd know that, wouldn't you?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Rose.

“The crew told the authorities that a helicopter landed on the deck late last night. They assumed it was their men, but a strike team jumped out with automatic weapons. They killed Shao, Burton and his associates, then took off. They left the crew alone. The crew sailed back to port with the bodies.”

Rose saw the color drain from Robert’s face. She went to his side and led him to a chair.

“You knew we couldn’t touch anyone for activity in international waters.”

“Clyde, that’s enough. Robert had nothing to do with this. Just take the win.”

“What?”

“You’re about to be the FBI’s new poster boy for capturing the largest fentanyl shipment in history. No one higher up the chain is going to disrupt that good press by looking for the men who took out a deadly Triad.”

Clyde paused, seeming to consider her statement. “Maybe not, but Rose, you can’t be involved with someone who’s connected. You know that.”

“Well, that’s not your problem any more. I was going to tell you later but I’m putting in my papers. I’m done.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” he said as he left their apartment.

Robert looked at her with a renewed pain. “You believe I wasn’t involved.”

“I don’t believe, I know for certain. It’s my business to analyze people, to determine if they are a threat. I knew right away you are who you say you are. Don’t think for a moment any of this was your fault.”

“If I hadn’t called my father...”

“It still would have happened. Your father is under surveillance. It is well known he keeps an eye on what’s going on in your life. An eye on but hands off.”

He pulled her close. “Thank you.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket. “I have to.”



“I understand. I’ll be in the bedroom.”

Robert grabbed her hand. “No. Stay.” He pushed a button and his father picked up on the first ring.

“Hello, son.”

“What did you do?”

“I was just about to have dinner.”

“You know what I mean.”

“How is the girl?”

“Gina? She was unhurt physically but she’s been traumatized.”

“I’m glad you got her back.”

“What did you do, Dad?”

“I’ve always loved you too, son.” His father disconnected the call.

He looked at Rose. “He hung up.”

“I understand what he did.”

“What? You can’t possibly condone what happened.”

“I don’t condone it, but I understand it. The only way you’d ever be safe was to take out the entire Triad. He hired a strike team with connections and they got the location of the yacht.”

“They killed so many people.”

“In his world, it was the only option open to him. Now the word will go out. Endanger you and they will not survive.”

“How am I supposed to live with that?”

“The same way you have your whole life. By being who you are, a good man who does good things.

“You really believe that, don’t you?”

“With all my heart.”

Robert smiled and gave her a kiss. “That helps, more than you know.” He pulled her into a hug, seeming to draw strength from her presence. “Now what?”

“I believe you promised Gina a visit.”

“Come with me.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m certain. I want you by my side,” he smiled. “I would suggest you change clothes.”

“An excellent idea.”

Robert gave her a lopsided grin. “I’m known for my truly excellent ideas.”

Rose smiled. “Yeah, you are.”