

CHAPTER ONE

We filed off the school bus looking like a prison work gang, all of us in our orange Waikiki Intermediate School T-shirts and our closed-toe shoes. T-shirts so we could be identified in case we escaped and closed-toe shoes because Miss Nainoa warned us that the cemetery was littered with broken glass.

Miss Nainoa waved her clipboard over her head. “Noah, Blaise, pick up the pace.”

My cousin Blaise elbowed me in the ribs. “What’s the rush? It’s not like the dead guys are going anywhere.”

Blaise at his wittiest best.

“Gather round class.” Miss Nainoa, even standing on her tiptoes, was still shorter than most of our class. “Hurry. We’ve only got three hours to get our work done.”

Three years couldn’t put a dent in the place.

The Mission Houses Cemetery was a graveyard of toppled headstones, broken bottles, and cat-licked-clean food cans. One grave had a statue of an angel with a missing wing; another had a statue of a Scottie dog with a yellow spray-painted butt.

I nudged Blaise. “Do you think they were so rich they buried their dog with them?”

“They might have been rich, but no one’s taking care of them now.” Blaise shook his head. “Can you imagine if we let

Tutu's or Papa's grave look like this?"

Noah and Blaise had the same grandparents—Tutu Kekoa and Papa. Their daughters were Blaise's and Noah's moms.

"Tutu would come back to haunt us," Blaise said.

"I laughed. And tell us more stories."

"Listen up, class." And for the 500th time, Miss Nainoa told us how to clean a cemetery headstone. "Swirl your sponge gently and be respectful of the dead."

Frank Santos crept up behind us. "Be respectful of the dead," he mocked Miss Nainoa. "Dead people. Woo-hoo."

Blaise looked at me. "Yeah, spirits and family ghosts."

Frank raised his eyebrows. "Family ghosts?"

"The Kekoa family curse," Blaise told him.

"Knock it off, Blaise," I said.

Blaise hunched his shoulders and whispered, "The Kekoa family is cursed."

"You're not funny," I said.

Blaise grinned. "The Night Marchers are coming for one of us." He looked at me.

I shoved Blaise so hard he stumbled into Frank.

Miss Nainoa clapped her hands. "Settle down." She pointed to a rusted-out shed. "Make a line."

The shed was a corrugated tin-roofed hut.

"Pick up your duffle bags. Each bag has an index card tied to it with a plot number of the grave you'll be cleaning."

Miss Nainoa droned on, but I wasn't listening. I was watching a homeless guy walk toward a backyard fenced in by a low, lava rock wall and a wrought-iron gate. He was probably wondering what a busload of kids was doing in his cemetery.

He caught me looking at him and tipped his hat, and I waved to him like some kindergarten kid waving to his best friend from across the room.

He had on a wide-brimmed black hat and a black jacket buttoned to his collar—a great outfit for a 90-degree day! From what I could see of his face, between his hat and long shaggy

hair, he looked harmless. Shaggy, that's it. It was a good name for him.

Blaise was still running his mouth about "the Kekoa family curse." He grabbed Frank's arm. "Frank, has Noah ever told you he's 'The Chosen One'?"

"Leave it alone, Blaise." I gave him a quit-it-or-I'm-going-to pummel-you look, which was pretty much worthless because we both knew I'd never do it and if I ever tried, Blaise would wipe the sidewalk with me.

He kept telling Frank the story. "When we were little, our Tutu Kekoa babysat us. Sometimes at night after dinner, she'd sit us down at the kitchen table and take our hands in hers. Then, she'd lean over and whisper, 'You boys should know your family history.'"

Miss Nainoa clapped her hands. "Class. There are coolers of water bottles under the table. Make sure you stay hydrated."

Blaise didn't stop while Miss Nainoa was talking. "Our Tutu talked to spirits," he said.

"Our Tutu was an old woman who told stories," I said.

"You know they were real," Blaise said.

"Right. Family curses. Night Marchers. And spirits that don't rest."

Blaise smirked. "One night, when our grandfather was deep in the valley, he heard the pounding of drums." Blaise made his voice warble like our grandmother's did. "Our Papa heard the chant of warriors! Then the wind blew, and the sky turned orange and fire flowed down the valley like lava. It was the Night Marchers!

"Papa knew it was forbidden to look into the face of a Night Marcher. He knew it was punishable by death. He should have lain face down on the ground. But whether by accident or too much courage, he looked at a Marcher straight in the eye, and the Night Marcher raised his spear, ready to strike.

"Papa begged for his life, 'Spare me. I'll do anything you ask.' The Night Marcher took pity on our Papa, and in exchange

for sparing his life, he made Papa swear to save the life of someone in his family.”

Miss Nainoa was walking straight at us. Her glare was aimed at Blaise. I should have warned him, but I didn’t. I watched, knowing she could be as fierce as any imaginary Night Marcher.

Blaise kept blabbing, oblivious. “Our Tutu would reach for Noah’s hand and—,” Blaise stopped mid-sentence.

Busted!

Miss Nainoa stopped right in front of him. She crossed her arms and said, “Do you boys have something to talk about that I should know?”

“No, ma’am,” we answered together.

“Then get to the shed and pick up your stuff.”

By the time we walked over, we were the last three in line. The shed was as much of a dump as the rest of the place: black swivel chairs, plaster-splattered Home Depot buckets, twisted folding chairs, and an empty chicken coop that was being ignored by the roaming chickens.

There were only three duffle bags left. One of them was a moldy hot mess.

Frank snatched one of the clean ones, and I reached in front of Blaise to claim the other one, but when I did, a gust of dirt whirled around me. It blinded me for a second, and I turned away, rubbing my eyes. When I opened them again, I saw Blaise holding the last clean duffle.

“Guess that one was meant for you.” He pointed to the ratty one.

“That’s fine.” I picked it up, pretending I didn’t care.

The three of us looked at our index cards.

Just my luck, Frank and Blaise got graves in the main part of the cemetery with all the other kids. I had a hand-drawn map on my card that showed my grave being in the small yard on the side of the church, away from everybody else.

“My guy’s buried way over there.” I showed them my map.

“Why do you think?” Frank asked.

Blaise said, "Maybe he was a murderer, and the missionaries wouldn't let him be buried with the good people."

"Or maybe they were so rich they had their own separate spot," I said.

"Yeah, rich people do that all the time," Frank agreed.

The problem was, I didn't believe it and I wasn't excited to be so far away from everyone else. I looked over at the yard. Sure, rich people. Ha, like Shaggy!

I watched Shaggy sit on the lava rock wall and toss pebbles into a shopping cart filled with junk. I hoisted my duffle bag over my shoulder and grabbed the last straw mat on the table.

I looked over at Shaggy again. I was sure he was harmless. After all, this was his place, and we were the intruders. But I still wasn't thrilled about being alone with him.

I was afraid Blaise would make fun of me, but I asked him and Frank anyway, "Do you think I should tell Miss Nainoa about the guy?"

"What guy?" Frank asked. "I don't see any guy."

I looked back. Shaggy was gone.

"See, Frank, I told you my cousin was cursed. He's seeing ghosts now."

"Whatever." I didn't care what he thought. I trudged through the mud and pushed open the iron gate.

When I did, the hinges squealed like one in a cheap horror movie.