

## CHAPTER 1



That day, I must admit, I was scraping the bottom of my energy barrel. Since Diana Coleman had announced to her husband Jerry that it was time to move again, we had looked at every listed property that could possibly work for them. Everything one liked, the other hated. Everything they both liked was above their means, didn't have enough of a view, or needed too much work. I was ready to take them both by the ears, whack their heads together, and boot them out of my life altogether.

Still, Diana and Jerry were jewels, my first real clients after earning my real estate license on Maui six years ago. They had become good friends, as well as a golden source of repeat business. As soon as Diana ran out of decorating ideas, they moved.

When she called that Friday afternoon in 1993 to see what I could show them over the weekend, I begged for time off. A rare weekend to myself, to read, lie on the beach, maybe cook a real dinner—even cleaning my apartment sounded appealing.

“No dice, darling,” Diana said, laughter simmering beneath her charming British accent. “I saw a new For Sale sign in Makawao Highlands this morning. Not my favorite neighborhood, of course, but the house does look interesting. And the garden is a gem.”

When Diana decided to buy a new home, she was relentless. She prowled the island, doing much of the legwork herself, presenting her finds as proudly as a Labrador retriever places a mangled duck at the feet of its master.

“But you were set on Kula,” I exclaimed. A mixed district of cattle ranches, onion farms, and glamorous estates, Kula sits high on the slopes of Mt. Haleakala with sweeping views of the entire south shore of the island.

“Of course, Kula would be ideal,” Diana replied. “But Makawao might not be bad. It’s a bit lower on the mountain and closer to the highway, just a zip down the hill for Jerry in the morning. Perhaps he could grab a few extra winks.”

Jerry was a stockbroker who needed to be at his desk by 4:00 AM in order to be live with the New York Stock Exchange six time zones away. His early-to-bed, early-to-rise lifestyle was a constant source of irritation to Diana, a confirmed night owl in every way.

“All right,” I replied, trying not to let my Friday afternoon exhaustion creep into my voice. I sifted through the loose papers on my desk until I found a pen. “What’s the address?”

She gave it to me, but it didn’t sound familiar. “It must be a brand new listing. I’ll check out the details and make an appointment for us. Nine o’clock tomorrow morning, okay? I’ll pick you up.” With an early start, there was hope for a free and relaxing afternoon—unless they decided to make an offer.

When I got home, I diligently combed through the Friday real estate section of the *Maui News*, sorry that I couldn’t just leave work and forget about my job for the weekend like normal people do. Saturdays and Sundays, when clients are free to look at property, tend to be my busiest days. I found two more new listings for the Colemans that wouldn’t make it into the Multiple Listing Service, the MLS, until Monday, and made appointments for us in the morning. In a tight seller’s market, you have to stay on top of the inventory and check out every possibility before someone else snatches it.

While I was at it, I scanned my several listing ads: “Laura McDaniel, Realtor Associate, Blue Rock Realty.” My photo was taken on a rare good hair day: straight, light brown, clipped to curve in just below the chin,

wispy bangs touching my eyebrows. Smiling hazel eyes, a pleasant face, not too glamorous, easy to trust—at least, that’s what I hoped it said.

Satisfied my ads were properly set out like baited hooks for prowling prospects, I finally allowed myself to relax. An evening of peace and quiet, with business in order and the ghosts of my past temporarily at rest. These were the rare moments I treasured.

Saturday, I stretched awake to the brisk morning scent of seaweed and saltwater two blocks away. All I had to do was dress, gather my files, and walk out the door. Once Diana and Jerry were in my car, we’d be laughing and joking, sharing the latest gossip, and having a grand time. Maybe we’d even stop for lunch on the way back. My treat, of course. I loved the social aspects of my job. The properties would be interesting, too, and who knew? Maybe this would be my lucky day. In truth, I needed another sale fast.

Quickly, I toasted a bagel and slathered it with cream cheese and guava jelly, intending to eat it in the car. As I picked up my briefcase, the phone rang. *If that’s Diana calling to cancel, I’ll kill her*, I thought. She’d done it several times in the recent past, always at the last minute for her own self-centered reasons. It meant an apologetic unraveling of our appointments with the listing agents, who then had to call their sellers and tell them they had tidied their homes for nothing. I hated doing that to people.

I smiled into the phone, forcing a cheerful note into my voice. “Hello?”

There was no response. I tightened the cord around my fingers and slipped into my sandals. An unintelligible, tinny babble buzzed against fading strains of music. At first I thought it was a bad connection. Something familiar in the melody caught my attention, though, and kept me from hanging up. Closing my eyes to focus on the sounds, I made out wisps of steel-guitar music in the background, barely discernible, but unmistakable. My ears straining, I spoke again, louder. I didn’t try to hide my irritation. “Hello?”

Again a pause. I turned toward the door, poised to hang up.

“Mommy?”

I almost didn't catch it. It was no more than a whisper, childish and uncertain. It couldn't be my youngest son, David; he was always loud and exuberant when he called from college in Utah. When Damien, my eldest, called from El Salvador, the international operator came on first, asking if I would accept the collect call. That only left . . .

My heart began to pound so hard the blood whooshed in my ears. With superhuman effort, I reined in my voice to match hers. “Annie?” My heart shouted, *Where are you? Are you all right?*

The slightest hint of desperation or judgment from me would send her running again. The only other time she had called, about six months ago, I'd made every motherly mistake in the book. She'd hung up when I'd rushed in with one too many frantic questions. I vowed then that if God granted me a next time, I'd bite my tongue and let her lead the way.

“Ma.” She sounded relieved.

“Sweetheart, I'm here.” Again, the Herculean effort to calm my voice, to stifle my instinct to overwhelm her. The pause on the line continued. Every nerve in my body flared. I dared a prompt, “Honey?”

“Can you come get me?” Spoken as matter-of-factly as if she were across the island at a high school football game.

“Sweetheart, where *are* you?” For three years I'd been desperate to know. At age sixteen, my only daughter had dropped out of my life as cleanly as a chunk of loose coral thrown from the bow of a canoe into the dark depths of the sea. The sleepless nights, the gnawing anxiety, the fathomless anguish, not to mention the endless sums spent on a private detective, had all been to no avail.

“At the airport.” Deadpanned, as if it should be obvious.

Lord, let me shake her. “Which airport?” *New York? Hong Kong? Siberia, for God's sake?* Then the steel-guitar music clicked in my mind. An amplified voice put her squarely on the map. “Hawaiian Airlines flight six-one-four departing for Honolulu in fifteen minutes. Passengers please line up for boarding at gate seventeen.” She had to be calling from Kahului, right here on Maui. Her next words confirmed it.

“Ma, it’s all changed. It sucks. What happened to the big tree?” The offended tone was Anna Kaleialoha McDaniel to the core, as if the airport’s recent multimillion-dollar renovation, including the removal of the ancient, insect-infested banyan tree at its center, had been done specifically to aggravate her. This daughter I loved to distraction, who had challenged me at every turn since the day she was born, who had caused me endless tears and heartache well before she ran away, was still impossible to please.

I swallowed my exasperation, fearful that if I didn’t hang up and get going that instant, she would disappear again by the time I could drive the twenty-five minutes to the airport.

“Where will I find you?” I asked, trying not to push her. Even giving her directions as to where I would pick her up could be interpreted as ordering her around, my capital crime of her high school years.

“Um, I just got off the plane. I’m upstairs somewhere.”

I pictured her at the bank of pay phones in the passenger lounge. “Do you have any baggage with you?” I heard myself enunciate each word as if I were speaking to an idiot.

“No, Ma, at least . . . not at the baggage claim.” She snorted, as if that were meant to be funny.

“Okay, take the escalator down and go through the exit at the bottom. Stand outside in the shade, and I’ll pull up right there. I still have my green Honda, so you should be able to spot me easily.”

“Like I wouldn’t know my own mother.”

I sucked in my breath at her sarcastic tone, but refused to rise to the bait. Softly, with as much enthusiasm as I thought she could bear, I replied, “I’m glad you’re home, honey.”

“Yeah, Ma.” She hung up.

I stood frozen in my living room. Insanely, the only thing I could think of was how was I going to rearrange my office in the small alcove off the living room for Annie. I’d purchased the condominium four years after my divorce from her father, two years after Annie had disappeared. With island real estate prices so high, the one-bedroom unit was all I could afford at the time.

The ringing phone yanked me out of my paralysis. It was Diana, breathlessly cheerful in her lilting British way. “Darling, oh, good, you haven’t left yet. Are you bringing your MLS book? There’s another property we haven’t seen, a friend was telling me about it. It sounds positively smashing. We can look up the details as we’re driving.”

“Oh God, Diana . . .” I raked my fingers through my hair, pulling until it hurt. How could ordinary life still be going on?

“Laura, what’s wrong?”

“My daughter, she’s waiting for me to pick her up at Kahului Airport.”

“Your daughter? Annie? After all this time? You must be ecstatic.” I could see Diana’s face light up with her megawatt smile. She’d been a solid, empathetic friend when Annie ran away in 1990.

My voice surged with urgency. “Diana, I have to beg off on the showings we set up for this morning. Right now all I can concentrate on is getting to the airport. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t even think about it, darling. Is there anything I can do?”

I tried to unscramble my thoughts. “If I give you the phone numbers, could you call the listing agents and cancel our appointments? I can’t waste a minute. I’ve got to get there before Annie does something rash . . . or slips away again.”

“Of course, darling. Just leave it to me. Go take care of your daughter, with our blessing.”

I rattled off the agents’ names and phone numbers, grabbed my purse, and raced to the elevator, the bagel on the counter forgotten.

Pulling onto Piilani Highway, I narrowly missed a pickup truck that turned across my path without signaling. Shaking, I swore at him as he swerved past. What if I had an accident today, of all days? Annie would accuse me, once again, of messing up her life.

Crossing the flat, central Maui plain, my car sped past the tall, dark green *wiliwili* hedges on either side of the narrow, pot-holed road. Their leafy branches shot straight up thirty feet, thanks to the irrigation of the sugar cane fields that stretched for miles behind them. The *wiliwili* cast alternating stripes of light and dark across the road, a dizzying staccato of

sunshine and shadow that flickered across my windshield like an old black-and-white movie. The hippies had called it the Psychedelic Road. The effect was usually hypnotic, but not today.

I rounded the curve at the old Puunene Sugar Mill, then turned right onto Dairy Road, heedless of the red light. What on earth would I tell Annie's father if she got all the way home to Maui, and I somehow missed connecting with her? Worse yet, what if I got her home only to offend her so deeply that she took off again? *Blessed Virgin, grant me the wisdom and patience to be the mother Annie needs this time.*

As I pulled into the airport passenger pickup lane, I scanned the area where I had asked Annie to wait. A Chinese family stood at the curb, watching the oncoming traffic for their ride. Beside them, a group of Hawaiian, Japanese, and Filipino boys carrying green-and-white Molokai High School sports bags joked and punched each other while puffing on cigarettes. To the rear, a stream of chattering tourists in wrinkled shorts and gaudy aloha shirts burst through the electronic doors and streamed toward the baggage claim. No one remotely resembled my daughter.

Frank's voice whispered in my ears: *All you had to do was pick her up.*

I switched off the car with a trembling hand and got out. Shading my eyes, I stepped past the Chinese family and the Molokai athletes, and scanned the concourse. An eerie silence lingered in the wake of the tourists who had trotted out of sight. A car door slammed behind me. I spun around to see the Molokai athletes drive off in a white van. Resuming my search, I resented every second it took my eyes to adjust to the shade. I almost missed the teenager who slouched in the shadows against a concrete wall maybe thirty feet away, his back to me.

Scruffy, short, he wore a long-sleeved black sweat suit with filthy, untied running shoes. His smudgy blond hair hung well below his shoulders. He must be sweltering in that bulky garb, I thought. No sane person wears a black sweat suit in Hawaii in August.

Dismissing him as a yet another hippie who came to Maui to live the laid-back banana-patch lifestyle without visible means of support, I turned

to look in another direction. But something about him reclaimed my attention. That scraggly fair hair, that careless slouch . . . Shifting his stance, he turned to lean his back and shoulders against the wall. As if to ease a crick, he pushed his fist into the small of his back. In stark profile, I realized that kid was no boy. The black sweatshirt stretched across a very pregnant belly.

The youngster cocked her head to one side and flipped her bangs away from her eyes. And then I knew. That gesture was pure . . .

“Annie!”