

Chapter 1

Trouble – In Paradise and At Home

Anyone else glancing out the fourteen foot floor-to-ceiling windows in Buck Cheyne’s sophisticated executive office would view a gray, blustery, ridiculously cold day in Dallas even for February. But for Buck, on the other side of the window a tropical sun shone in the cerulean sky while palm trees swayed in the fragrant gentle breeze. He was daydreaming about the time he was about to spend with Liz in Hawaii, their two week vacation that started in just four days. But there was no time for idle thinking. He still had more tasks on his “to do” list to keep Buck Cheyne Enterprises humming smoothly in his absence than were realistically possible to complete before leaving it all behind. And he had made it abundantly clear to his leadership team that he was indeed leaving it behind and fully expected to be left alone. He had worked without a break for six weeks, including weekends, after the challenges at his Element119 operation in Las Alamos surfaced. Still a little raw when he thought about it, one good thing from the ordeal was that he met Elizabeth Harrington. He knew the second time she agreed to have dinner with him that there was more to this relationship than just being friends. It took her awhile to catch on.

The ring of the phone on his desk brought him back to the moment. Caller ID showed that it was, Kileona Jones, the manager of Mea Lanakila Fish Farms, one of the past year’s new ventures which just so happened to be located on Maui.

“Aloha Kileona. This is Buck.”

“Aloha Mr. Cheyne, I mean Buck,” still getting comfortable with the easy approachability of the boss. “I do not like calling you like this but we had some problems here last night.”

“Tell me about it, Kileona.”

“They say it was arson. Our building was burned, completely destroyed. Even the new tanks and fish stock were lost.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“Fortunately, no. Nobody was there. It happened sometime during the night. But we lost everything, Buck, except what you have there in Dallas and what we have backed up online. It makes me sick. We’ve all worked so hard.”

“Hold on just a minute, Kileona.” Buck put his hand over the mouthpiece.

Kelly Patrick, Buck’s Executive Assistant, had rushed through the door waving her hand to get his attention.

“What’s going on, Kelly?”

“It’s your friend, Lana, Buck. I just got a call that she’s been hurt. It’s all over Channel 4 News. They’ve got a helicopter showing live pictures.”

“Kileona, I’m going to have to call you back. Cooperate with the authorities. I’ll be back in touch.”

In the time Buck ended the call, Kelly had the cabinet doors open and television on. From what the reporter said, it apparently was a home explosion. There was not enough of a house left to identify it as Lana's, but the street and block number matched her neighborhood.

Buck grabbed his cell phone and called Lana. It went straight to voicemail. He hung up before her greeting ended.

"I'm going over there, Kelly."

"I'll grab your coat. It's still freezing outside."

Kelly stood, jacket still in hand, watching Buck's back as he sprinted down the hall toward the elevator. Working for Buck, she'd come to know Lana. She and her partner admired the work Lana was doing. They'd even become supporters of her cause. "Why do such bad things always seem to happen to such good people?" Kelly whispered aloud. There was no one nearby to hear.

When Buck pulled onto Lana's street, it was barricaded. He parked, got out, and walked hurriedly down the sidewalk as if he owned it, not bothering to even slow down as he passed the police officer who was sitting in his patrol car manning the roadblock. Yellow crime scene tape was already strung around Lana's lot. Debris from the explosion extended several houses beyond that perimeter. What was once the beautiful Dallas ranch style home of his friend Lana Jacobs was now completely demolished and smoldering ruins.

He spotted a fire department official that looked like she was in charge standing among a group. He approached and while waiting for a space to jump in and ask a question, overheard a different official tell her that this was no accident and mention homicide, maybe attempted murder. Buck learned that the victim had been taken to Baylor Hospital.

In a flash, Buck ran back down the street, jumped into his car, and sped to the hospital. He parked at the Emergency entrance and was apparently convincing enough at the reception desk that he was Lana's only local relation, because the clerk buzzed him in and pointed the way to Lana's room.

"Oh Buck. Thank you for coming."

"Lana. God. What happened? You're okay?"

"Yes, I'm going to be fine they say. Just some scratches and bruises. My car windshield blew out when I opened the garage door. It exploded, that's all I know. When I came to, the paramedics were removing me from my car. It was a mess, Buck. My ears are still ringing but I'm told that will go away."

He sat and listened to her nervous chatter as hospital staff came in and out of the room checking on her. When she began to doze off he told her, "I'm so glad you are going to be alright. Listen, you're going to need a place to stay. You know I have the guest house. You can stay there for as long as you need to."

"Buck, that's so generous. I don't know what I'm going to do right now. I do know that you and I are scheduled to meet in Hawaii next week and I absolutely have to be there. It's one of the most important things I've ever embarked on. I can't let anything spoil this dream."

He noticed the crack in her voice and the tremors in her hands as she struggled to push those last few words out. "Don't think about that now, Lana. We can talk about it later. How long will you be here in the hospital?"

"The doctor says they're going to keep me the afternoon for observation. I probably shouldn't have said anything about how bad my head aches. They, also, want to go over me again in a little while to make sure they got all the glass out."

“Yes, you should tell them, Lana. Don’t be ridiculous. You were almost blown to bits.”

“Yes sir, Doctor Cheyne.”

“That’s better. Rest now. Let the pain meds do their magic. I need to get back to the office now. You call me later, okay?”

“Okay. I promise.”