



BLOOD ORCHIDS

A LEI CRIME NOVEL

TOBY NEAL

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Chapter 1

Drowning isn't pretty, even in paradise. The girl's features were bloated by water and nibbled on by wildlife. She lay half embedded in silty mud, naked as a seal carcass. Long hair that might have been blonde wrapped around her like seaweed, one sparkly hair tie still in place on the side of her head.

Leilani Texeira grimaced at the sulphurous smell of the mud as she stepped into it, shiny regulation shoes disappearing, and squatted to inspect the body. After three years on the force in Hawaii she'd seen several drowned corpses, and had learned to stay detached as she looked for any signs of violence. Still, she was thankful for the small mercy of the girl's closed eyes.

Her partner Pono's voice was a bass drone interspersed with static as he called in the discovery on the radio. Lei stayed on her haunches, her eyes slowly surveying the entire overgrown area of the small county park. Invasive christmasberry bushes and clumps of tall *pili* grass competed along the unkempt banks. Midmorning sun leached reluctantly from under cloud cover as she spotted what looked like a bobbing coconut a few yards out. Lei glanced around—no palm trees ringed the pond.

She pushed her pant legs up and splashed forward into murky water warm as blood, clots of yellowish algae dotting the surface.

"Hey!" Pono called. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Got another one," Lei said. The water reached her thighs. Any deeper and she'd have to go back and take off her bulky duty belt. She approached the body, floating face down. Female, small build, brown skinned and nude—Lei mentally composed the report. She extended her baton and poked the corpse, wondering if something might fall off if she touched it, but the flesh was hard. Still in rigor. These girls hadn't been dead long.

"Let the crime techs deal with it. You know you're not supposed to touch the body—I don't want you to get in trouble again" She ignored Pono, in the grip of a compulsion she couldn't put words to.

There was something familiar about this body.

She grabbed a handful of trailing black hair and gently pulled. There was bit of give, but the hair held and the body moved sluggishly at her tug. Lei steeled herself and, walking backward, slowly towed the body to shore in a parody of rescue. She backed up into the shallows, bringing the girl up onto the muddy bank, and rolled her by flipping the shoulder. The

brunette landed on her back with a splash next to the blonde.

Lei sucked a breath and bit her lip, bile rising.

The eyes were open this time, and she recognized them.

Haunani Something-or-other—a sixteen year old kid with an attitude. Lei had busted her for possession at the high school a week ago. The girl's once-brown eyes were cloudy. Her open mouth was filled with water. Rigor kept the arms raised at an angle. Haunani looked as if she were waving for help, the motion frozen forever.

Off in the distance Lei heard sirens. She staggered out of the mud up onto the grass to stand beside Pono. Her stomach crawled back down her throat as she breathed in through her nose, out through her mouth and touched the tiny cowrie she kept in her pocket.

“I know her. I mean, I knew her.”

“Who she stay?” Pono used pidgin, dialect of the Islands, when he was upset. He rubbed his mustache with a finger and she knew he wanted a cigarette.

“Remember a couple weeks ago? Drug bust at the high school? Her name's Haunani Pohakoa.”

The last name came to her along with a memory of the girl's cocked hip and long shiny hair. Haunani had been vain about that hair, tossing it around like a pony flicking flies. Lei wished she could forget the slick feeling of the wet strands as her heart squeezed, remembering the fragile bravado Haunani had worn like armor—an armor they shared. She'd felt an immediate connection to the girl when she met her. Lei rubbed her hands briskly on soaked uniform slacks.

“Wish someone else could have found them,” Pono muttered, pushing mirrored Oakleys up onto his buzz-cut head and folding bulky tattooed arms. “Simple patrol for vandalism down here and we gotta find this. Never going be done with the paperwork.”

Lei didn't reply. She'd been partners with Pono long enough to know how much he hated dealing with dead bodies, a little superstitious about them since his daughter's birth two years ago. Fortunately they didn't come across many in sleepy Hilo.

Sirens announced the arrival of reinforcements. Lei looked up to see the new detective from L.A., Michael Stevens, striding toward them with a tall man's loose-limbed grace. His wiry Asian partner, Jeremy Ito, trotted in his wake. She'd seen the pair around the station but never worked with them before.

Blue eyes lasered her briefly from under black brows as Stevens scanned the scene and the bodies, hands on jeans-clad hips. Ito imitated Stevens' stance.

"Hey. What do we have?" Stevens was all business.

"We came out on a vandalism call. Someone had trashed the bathroom, done some tagging." Pono gestured to the dreary cinderblock bunker mottled with graffiti beside their parked Crown Victoria. "We did a foot patrol around the pond and found the blonde first. Then Lei spotted the floater and towed her in."

Stevens and Ito both turned to look at Lei, incredulous. She felt a hot blush stain her cheeks, and her dripping slacks and squishy shoes screamed bad judgment. She extended a hand to Stevens.

"Lei Texeira. I've seen you around."

He shook it, a brief hard pump. "Michael Stevens. I assume you know you shouldn't have moved the body. Supposed to wait for the techs to get here, photograph it, all that."

"I thought she might be drowning." Lei's scalp prickled fiercely at the lie.

"With the other one right here, obviously gone?" Ito's soft voice had a hard edge as he narrowed eyes at her.

"I'm sorry. It seemed wrong to leave her out there." Closer to the truth, but still not the compelling need she'd had to bring the girl's body in, to turn it over and see her face.

"Well, what's done is done." Stevens squatted down to get a better look, leaning out over the mud. "The medical examiner's on his way. Why don't you two put up the tape before anyone else disturbs the scene."

"We know who the brunette is," Pono said. "Lei busted her with weed at school awhile back."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. She's a Hilo High junior. Haunani Pohakoa." Lei shut her eyes against a flash of memory of sun on that shiny black hair—but when she closed them, she saw the girls' drowned faces, and between them her own: tilted almond eyes closed, wide mouth slack, olive skin so pale the cinnamon freckles across her nose stood out like paint spatters.

She recoiled, stepping back, and stumbled a little in the rough grass.

Ito's brows had come down in a frown as both detectives glanced at her. Pono gave her arm a tug.

“Let’s go get the tape,” he said. She followed him, fleeing toward their parked cruiser, her pant legs rasping and shoes squelching.

“I’ll expect all the details on how you know the victim in your report,” Stevens called after Lei as the M.E.’s van and the Lieutenant’s cruiser pulled up, and the dismal little park filled with the organized chaos that follows death.

After combing over every inch of the banks of the small pond, Lieutenant Ohale ordered all available officers to search the two feeder streams for the original crime scene where the girls had gone into the water. Lei and Pono split from the others, taking the lower stream.

Pono trailed behind her, his eyes scanning the ground, as Lei chugged a bottle of water one of the crime techs had given her. Adrenaline from the initial discovery had worn off, leaving her shaky and exhausted—but the same compulsion that had driven her into the water to retrieve the body drove her on now.

Lei’s damp uniform chafed and her duty belt, loaded with radio, sidearm, cuffs, pepper spray, ammo, evidence bags and more, caught on scratching branches as they moved along slowly, looking for any signs of human presence. Humidity caused her rebellious brown curls to frizz out of the tight ponytail she’d restrained them with. Sweat beaded on her forehead and she swiped it away, glad of physical discomfort that distracted her from drowned faces.

Once outside the immediate area of the park, their progress through underbrush along the creek was slow, impeded by tall christmasberry bushes. The invasive species from Brazil had become an islandwide problem, smothering native growth with its rapid spread. Dark green, glossy bushes peppered with clusters of red berries blanketed miles of open space, and almost choked the stream.

A real estate sign marked the edge of the park and abandoned cars filled with trash, a rusted Jeep and rotting Pontiac, had been pushed into the undergrowth from the nearby road.

“We might as well tag these abandoned cars for pickup.” Pono, ever conscientious, took out his pad of orange removal stickers.

“I hate the way people dump their cars around here.” Lei picked her way over boggy ground to the first vehicle by stepping on top of grass clumps. “But it doesn’t help we don’t have any recycling facilities on the island. Anyway, you tag ’em, I’m going to keep looking.”

Pono was still writing his description of the Pontiac as she pushed through long grass,

hearing the rushing of water beyond the overgrown bushes. She spotted an opening.

“Pono, looks like a break here. I’m gonna check it out.”

“Right behind you.” Pono peered in to look for the VIN number on the Jeep’s dashboard.

Lei edged her way across the boggy ground, pushing through raking branches. On the other side of the wall of shrubbery, a stream flowed beside a clearing marked with a fire ring and a shelter made by tying a tarp to the bushes. A palm tree leaned out over ruffled water, fronds waving in the slight breeze.

Something about the setting oppressed Lei as she walked forward, surveying the area carefully. Perhaps it was the pile of discarded propane cans, soda bottles, and a dirty sleeping bag that testified to someone having camped there not long ago. Rocks made a handy access point to water otherwise choked by thick grass.

A white rag was caught in the vegetation, along with something shiny. Lei squatted on the rocks and fished the objects out of the water: a long strip ripped from a T-shirt and a cluster of iridescent ribbon attached to an elastic hair tie.

“Hey.” Pono crashed through the bushes, muttering as he slipped on the mud. “Anything interesting?”

“These were caught in the stream.” Lei held up the hair bow. “It looks familiar.”

“Looks familiar to me too. That’s a little girl’s hair tie.” Pono squatted beside her, examining the items.

An image burst across Lei’s brain, indelible. Bluish closed eyes, straggling blonde hair on one side, and on the other . . . a pigtail with a sparkly ribbon cluster.

“Oh my God, Pono. I think we just found the primary crime scene.”