



TORCH GINGER

A LEI CRIME NOVEL

TOBY NEAL

Torch Ginger- a novel

By Toby Neal

Chapter 1

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People said Kaua`i was the last of the Wild West, a jungle paradise of secretive people and strange spiritual forces. After two months, Detective Leilani Texeira just found Kaua`i slow and boring. She leaned on her hand and fiddled with the Bic ballpoints in a mug on her desk, looking for one that still worked as she contemplated a slim pile of case jackets in front of her.

Lei shuffled the pile, closed her eyes, and pulled one out. The vacation-rental burglary case had now become the project of the day. She sighed and opened the file, scanning the incident reports filed by Paradise Realty, the company managing the rentals.

“Excuse me.” Lei looked up into blinking brown eyes in a chubby-cheeked face. Long brunette hair curled over shoulders bisected by a bulky leather purse, a plastic shopping bag held in one hand. “The guy at the front sent me to you, and I’d like to—I’d like to report a missing person.”

The girl’s round eyes blinked harder and tears seemed imminent. Lei felt familiar anxiety, a prickle along her arms that tightened her chest. She pushed the mug of pens away and pointed to the orange plastic chair alongside her desk.

“Have a seat. I’m Detective Texeira.”

“Um. Hi. Kelly Waterson.” Kelly clutched the bulging handbag on her lap like it held the crown jewels, setting the shopping bag at her feet.

Lei shook one of the Bics and jotted the name on a yellow legal pad.

“Name of the missing person?” Lei kept her voice brisk as blinking turned to sniffing. She pushed a box of tissues over without making eye contact.

“Jay. Jay Bennett.” Kelly blew her nose and firmed her voice. “I mean, something’s very wrong. He’s not where he said he was.”

Lei turned to her computer and her fingers rattled over the keys as she typed “Jay Bennett” into the local database. Nothing came up. No Hawaii driver’s license, no outstanding warrants. She typed in Kelly’s name—same result.

“Your relationship to the missing person?”

“Girlfriend.”

“How long has he been gone?”

“He was supposed to call me yesterday. He’s not picking up. So it’s been at least twenty-four hours. I decided to fly out and surprise him. He’s been camping in Hanalei.” A catch in the breathy voice.

“So he has a cell phone?”

“He has a cell, but he keeps it off. He’s on . . . a walkabout is what he’s calling it. He’s staying away from technology.” Kelly told Lei the number, and her voice rang with pride as she said, “He hitchhiked all over the States for six months, then came to Hawaii. He’s been exploring the island.”

“Where are you two from?”

“Clovis, California. Not much to it, just a flat stretch of Central California nowhere. Jay wanted to see more, do more, before he started working in his dad’s auto dealership.”

“Any particular reason you think he’s not just on a long hike or something?” Lei pulled up the Missing Persons Report screen on her computer and began filling it in. She pushed her

thick curly brown hair back impatiently, bundling it into a wad and spearing it with the Bic, returning her attention to the screen.

“He thought someone was, you know, stalking him. He said he had a funny feeling about it. I decided to surprise him. I flew in from California today and drove out to where he was camping, at a park called Pine Trees. He wasn’t there.” She dug in the tote and brought out a man’s leather wallet, plunked it on the desk. “I looked in the trash and his stuff was there. I put his clothes in this bag here—but he’d never throw his wallet away.”

Uh-oh.

Lei snapped on a pair of latex gloves from a box beside the Kleenex and opened the wallet.

A driver’s license: Jay Bennett, Clovis, California, age twenty-seven. A Visa credit card poked its silver edge up out of a slot, along with a Paradise Realty card with a phone number on the back. Fattening the cash area of the wallet were folded paper shapes.

Lei upended the wallet, and a crane, a turtle, a fish, a diamond, and a jumble of other origami in cursive-covered lavender paper fell out onto the desk.

“Something’s happened to him! Those are my letters to him all these months. He would never throw that wallet away.” Kelly stuffed a double-fisted handful of Kleenex against her mouth, shaking. Jack Jenkins, Lei’s partner, blew into their cubicle with his typical energy and flung a jacket over the back of his chair. He paused, assessing the situation with the wariness of a man unexpectedly confronted by female emotion.

“Hi, Lei—I’m getting coffee.”

Lei nodded and he disappeared. Lei took the real estate card out of the pile and clipped it onto the case jacket for the burglaries—there might be a connection to pursue.

Kelly seemed to pull herself together and reached into the capacious purse to pull out a man's rubber sandal, then set it on the desk.

"This is Jay's shoe. It was under the picnic table. These were on it, like this." She took three stones out of her pocket and set them on the sandal in a triangle.

Lei looked at the shoe and stones, frowned. It was creepy. They looked like they meant something, and together with the wallet, this case had just gone from odd to suspicious. She dug in the drawer of the desk for her little point-and-shoot and took a picture of the sandal with the stones on it. One was reddish, one green, and one a gray matrix with flecks of blue fire. She spread the origami shapes out and photographed them and each of the items in the wallet.

"Pine Trees is not an official campground." Lei's camera clicked. She ran past the scenic park shaded by huge ironwood trees in Hanalei nearly every morning and made it a point to call in any illegal campers. In fact, she had called in a guy sleeping under a picnic table just yesterday. "Which part of the park was he in?"

"I know it's not a real camping area. He . . . likes to do things his own way. He was just crashing in his sleeping bag wherever. He said he liked the picnic table near the bathrooms."

"Hm. Okay." Lei stowed the items in two evidence bags and turned back to her screen. She got a physical description: six foot two, curly blond hair, blue eyes, bearded, age twenty-seven. By the time she'd filled in the missing persons report, she was sure this was the guy she'd seen just yesterday.

Kelly produced a photo from her wallet, and Lei took it to the back room and made an enlarged color photocopy of the young man's square-cut, smiling face.

"Kelly." Returning, Lei roused the girl from a reverie as Kelly stared blankly at the fabric-covered divider, fingers wound tightly into the strap of the purse. "I wish you'd left this in

the trash and called for a unit from out there. We may have blurred any prints that were on the wallet. Finding this is definitely concerning.”

“Some of his stuff is still in the trash.” Kelly’s voice was muffled by the pile of Kleenex she pressed to her face.

Jenkins slid into his seat in their cubicle. He set a mug of inky fluid beside Lei. “Sorry I’m late. Peace offering. How can I help?”

“Ugh, if that’s break room coffee, I’ve already had my caffeine ration for the day. This is Kelly. Her boyfriend is missing.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Kelly.” Jenkins’s fashionably spiked blond hair seemed to quiver with sympathy and his blue eyes were kind. Lei had no problem admitting he was better with people than she was.

The girl gave a snuffle and extended her hand to shake his. “When can you start looking for Jay?”

“Hopefully today,” Lei said. “Did he ever say anything about suicide?”

Kelly’s eyes went wide. “No. Of course not.”

“I have to ask. I mean, he’s alone, traveling. He may have been depressed, worse off than you knew. He could have thrown his stuff away and left the stones on his shoe as some kind of message.”

Lei felt a squeeze in her chest as the girl considered the idea, taking it like an arrow to the heart. Kelly’s eyes, which at first seemed brown, had gone foresty green—tears welling from somewhere transformatively deep. Then she shook her head, so hard her curls bounced.

“No. Jay wasn’t depressed. He would never do that. He said he was being stalked—maybe the shoe with the stones was a message from whoever took him.”

Lei knew when to back off.

“Well, then, I just need an idea of any people he might have hung with and known.” She picked up another Bic, scribbled on the pad to get the ink going.

“He mostly hung out with other people who were living in the parks. There’s kind of a group of them. They move around to stay ahead of their permits, which expire every ten days. He got a little sick of them. That’s part of why he was crashing in Pine Trees. But he never told me any names.”

“Thanks, Kelly. Give me some contact information so we can keep in touch, okay?”

“Sure. I was supposed to go back in a few days, but I can’t until I know what happened to Jay . . . This was just supposed to be a surprise, to see if he was ready to come home.”

Lei blinked at the volume of water the girl generated as Kelly’s eyes filled again. She got her number and hotel address, turned to Jenkins. “Can you sign these items into evidence? I’ll walk Kelly out.”

“Hang in there, Kelly.” Jenkins patted the girl’s shoulder and took the two bags she’d packed Jay’s items into. Lei led Kelly through the beehive of modular units to the pneumatic front doors.

“Please find him,” the girl said, green-brown eyes swimming again. She turned away and beeped open the doors of an electric-blue Ford Fiesta rental.

“I’ll do my best.” Lei reached into her pocket to rub the black worry stone she always carried as she watched Kelly drive away. She got back to their cubicle just as Jenkins returned from signing the items into evidence. He grinned at her, blue eyes alight.

“Well, this looks interesting.” He rubbed his hands together. “So tired of getting all the cases nobody wants.”

Lei flung herself into her office chair, did a couple spins to discharge energy. “Poor kid. God.” She knocked back half of the mug of coffee and made a gagging noise. “I forget how bad this stuff is. Yeah, this case ought to be interesting, and now we get to take a drive out to the North Shore. We can also follow up on these two, J-Boy.” She held up the files on the vacation rental burglaries and a noise complaint against a group located on a papaya farm in the same area.

“J-Boy? That my new handle?” Nicknames were a popular Kaua`i Police Department thing. “Fine, then. I’ll call you Hurricane Lei.”

“That wasn’t even funny when it first came out on the Big Island.”

Lei scooped up the backpack she carried in lieu of a purse. That morning she’d taken a moment to whisk mascara onto tilted dark eyes, run a wand of gloss over her wide mouth. She wished she didn’t have the sprinkle of cinnamon freckles across her nose—Portuguese, Hawaiian, and Japanese heritage made for a blend that was more interesting than pretty.

Now that she’d made detective, she no longer had to wear a uniform and had come up with her own—black jeans, black running shoes, and tank tops—functional clothing that looked good on a slim, athletic frame. She shrugged into the loose cotton blazer she wore to hide the Glock .40 in its shoulder holster.

“How about Sweet Leilani?” Jenkins referred to the famous Bing Crosby song. “Sweets for short.” He chuckled at his own wit.

“No, dammit. Just Lei. My name is short enough.”

“C’mon. It’s a Kaua`i thing. I like you as Sweets. Everyone’s going to crack up.”

“You like cracks, I’ll crack you one.” She couldn’t help smiling. “I’ll get started on the missing person—take a run out and check the park, pick up his stuff from the rubbish.”

“I’ll go by the alarm company the mansions used.”

“On the way back I’ll check out the real estate agency that reported the burglaries. Jay Bennett’s wallet had one of their cards.” She tapped the item in question. “There’s a phone number on the back.”

“Coincidence?”

“Doubtful. C’mon—a series of robberies happen at houses managed by that company, and a missing guy leaves their card in his wallet? I’m trying the number now.” She flipped the card over, punched it in, and an automated message answered. “Disconnected.”

“That is weird. Let’s meet for lunch at that noodle place and you can let me know how it goes. We’ll hit the papaya farm after.”

“Sounds like a plan, J-Boy.”

* * *

The Timekeeper set the jug of water down beside the Chosen. The man had curled instinctively into a ball on the floor of the cave, the collar padlocked on and tie-out cable secure. A chill from the surrounding rock must have penetrated his deeply unconscious state.

One good knock to the head usually subdued the Chosen, and this latest was no exception. Usually they were malleable and confused for some days, or stayed unconscious until their Time.

The Timekeeper tipped the man’s curly blond head back and poured water into his mouth. It was always a juggling act. If he waited too long, he ran the risk of being unable to find the next Chosen. If he took them too early, he had to keep them alive, and that could be tricky.

He thought he could keep this one going long enough, but it was going to be close.