



Pilikia is My Business

by

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Chapter 1 - *Pilikia* is My Business

My name is Val Lyon. *Pilikia* is my business.

Pilikia means “trouble” in the Hawaiian language. You pronounce it *pi* as in what children do in the swimming pool, *li* as in the Confederate general, *ki*, an instrument to open locks, and *ah*. At one in the afternoon, two weeks before Christmas, I had an appointment with an attorney about some *pilikia*.

Brian Magruder had worked six years in the Honolulu Public Defender’s shop before striking out on his own. When he struck, he struck big, locating his office in a marble and glass downtown high-rise favored by the moneyed and powerful. The building directory listed the law offices of a former governor, two former mayors and a US senator. Magruder hadn’t been in the building long enough to be listed in the directory. A security guard directed me to a middle floor.

The hallway outside his office was wider than my apartment. It had a deep carpet and green trees in planters. The walls bore paintings of Hawaiian women in languid poses done by a local artist who had acquired a measure of status among the state’s trendsetters. All of the doors were marked with fancy nameplates except Magruder’s. His had a five-by-eight card taped crookedly to the center.

The scene inside was one of disarray. Boxes were everywhere. I announced myself to a middle-aged woman in a yellow muumuu. She looked up from the file carton she was unpacking and shouted, “Your detective is here!” To me, she said, “Don’t mind the mess, honey. We’re just moving in, that’s why. Go on back.”

I went through a conference room with more boxes to a third office and Brian Magruder. My first impression, as he came around his desk, was of a young Captain Kangaroo. He had a round face, thick dark hair worn longish, and a droopy mustache. Mid-thirties, my age or a couple of years older, with the layer of fat young men often acquire when they cease being active. I figured him for six feet and two hundred-forty pounds. His clothes, faded cotton twill slacks and Aloha shirt, fit him badly.

“Hey,” he said, “it’s the distaff shamus! Good to see you.”

His handshake was firm but not crushing. His eyes, warm and brown like Hershey’s Kisses, stayed on my face.

“Mr. Magruder,” I said, “you have a job for me?”

“Call me Brian,” he said.

He directed me to a visitor’s chair. The view, through the window behind his desk, looked towards the ocean but it was partially obstructed by the rest of downtown. I let my gaze wander around the room. There were no unpacked boxes here. The furnishings spoke money: polished hardwood desk and tables; chairs, like the one I sat in, upholstered in green leather with little buttons sunk deep into the padding. Framed photographs hung on the wall nearest me, kudos pictures of famous and powerful people posing with a man I didn’t recognize.

“I don’t see you in the pictures,” I said.

He made an embarrassed smile before settling into the chair behind the desk. He said, “My Dad. All this was his. It still is. You’re looking around this office and thinking fat cat lawyer, right? Well, it’s not me. Okay, I’ll own to the fat part. Dad happened to have this

space. He sublets it to me for a nominal fee. If not for that, I'd be in Mo'ili'ili. You know the kind of place - two rooms next to a dentist, noodle shop down below."

I nodded. If not for his Dad, we might have been neighbors. I said, "Not the kind of setting your family's used to, I imagine."

"Good insight. You've done your homework," he said.

In truth, it was a hunch based on common gossip picked up here and there, but if Magruder wanted to believe I'd checked him out, I wasn't going to tell him differently.

He continued. "I did some homework on you. You were with the San Francisco Police Department - six years on patrol and three years as inspector. Right?"

I nodded. "What else did you find out about me?"

"That you're stubborn and you don't take shit from the people you work for."

"Such glowing recommendations. Did your sources mention that my performance ratings were high?"

"They did. They also told me you got involved in something that had the brass pissing acid and that you were terminated two years ago."

"A career readjustment."

"What did you do after that?"

"I was in prison."

"Prison? No kidding?"

"No, it's a figure of speech. Yes, no kidding, Brian. I was in prison for thirteen of those months."

Magruder's expression darkened. "Hey listen, I don't mean to pry."

I waved off his protest. "You've got a right to know who you're hiring. It's not something I advertise, but I'm not ashamed of it. I did time I shouldn't have for a conviction that shouldn't have happened, but it's been expunged. I have a letter from the Governor saying so."

"So that means you can carry a gun?"

"If I have to."

"I hope you don't have to. I don't like guns, myself. I'm representing Jean Pfeifer. Does that name mean anything to you?"

"Yes," I said. I knew that Jean and her ex-husband were locked in a bitter war over custody of their son. At issue was Jean's claim that her ex had abused the boy. She had stopped the court-ordered visitations and now faced contempt of court charges. The boy, Nathan, had disappeared.

There was probably not a woman in Honolulu who didn't know the story. I'd followed it in the media, more from a sense of duty to my sex than any other reason. Had I been a mother, I'd have had more interest in it.

Magruder said, "I was a Public Defender. I guess you know that. The people I represented didn't move the needle on the public interest meter. Most of the time, all I could do for them was plead them down. This case is different. There's a wrong to be righted, which is what I love about it. What I hate is that it is a *cause célèbre*. A lawyer's nightmare. My nightmare."

"Does this nightmare take a form?"

He nodded. "There's a rally for Jean tomorrow. I tried to discourage her from attending but she insists, or more precisely, the rally organizers insist and she feels indebted to them. I want you to protect her."

"You expect trouble?"

"Nothing I can put my finger on. A lot of people have taken up sides on this case and passions are running high. Where do you stand on it?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I want to know if you're on our side."

"If you hire me, I'm on your side."

"Just like that?"

"No, not just like that. I have to live with myself. If I thought it was the wrong side, I wouldn't take it on."

Magruder beamed, "That's great! That makes two of us. Jean's doing what she believes is best for Nathan. I want to see that she can continue. I'd like to get her back together with her son so she can raise him the way a mother should."

"The ex-husband, what's his name?"

"Jason Pfeifer, goes by Jock." He reached into a desk drawer and brought out an accordion folder which he passed across to me. "This might help. It's a little background information I prepared for you. Tells you what I know about Jock Pfeifer."

"Do you expect Pfeifer to show up tomorrow?"

Magruder shook his head. A comma of hair fell across his forehead and he brushed it back. "We have a restraining order to keep him away from Jean."

"You think he'll obey it?"

"If Jock Pfeifer were the only problem, this would be easy. Once this broke, people began writing to the newspapers and calling in on talk shows. Jean received mail from every stripe of crazy. Had to change her number three times. It's the crazies, I'm afraid of."

"Look, Brian, I work alone because I like it that way. I have a tiny office because I can't afford better. But, as I understand it, the Magruder name and fortune goes a long way. If it's protection you want, you could buy a busload of Pinkertons."

"No," he said. "I don't want a lot of rent-a-cop footprints all over this. It's going to be big in the media as is. Let's not give them more to feed on. There will be mostly women at the rally. You can blend in and stay close to Jean."

"What happens afterwards?"

"Afterwards, she has to appear before the judge. If she produces Nathan and agrees to visitations she goes free. Otherwise she goes to jail. I expect her to choose jail."

"I can give her points on jailing," I said.

Brian Magruder's face split into a big grin. "Jailing. That's good," he said.

I spent the next couple of hours reviewing the information Magruder had given me.

The folder contained photos of all three Pfeifers, Jean, Nathan, and Jason "Jock" Pfeifer. Nathan was thirteen, a skinny, gangly kid. If he took after his father, he had a lot of growing to do. Judging from a rather bad photo, Jock Pfeifer was a heavyweight. He had a barrel chest and a thick neck. The photo showed him at the tiller of a sailboat, shirtless and in shorts, mugging for

the camera. The cocky, self-made man. The last picture showed Jean, a striking woman with strong, aristocratic features and honey-colored hair that belled around her face. The attached bio sheet gave her age as thirty-eight. I hoped I'd take a picture that good in five years.

Brian had written out a summary of the case on several sheets of yellow, legal paper. The Pfeifers had gotten married during Jock's last tour with the Navy. They'd settled in Honolulu even though neither of them had family here. The marriage was troubled from the start. Three years ago, Jean had filed for divorce after twelve years of marriage. Under Hawaii's no fault law, she kept the house that had been in her name and received half of the remaining property. Jock agreed to pay a thousand a month in child support and accepted responsibility for Nathan's education.

Jock was to have Nathan on alternate weekends and for one month during the summer. The arrangement worked well for two years. It fell apart in early September when Jean refused to allow Jock any more visits. Jock went to court. Jean accused Jock of abusing Nathan. She claimed the abuse had started before the divorce and had continued on the weekend visits. The court, however, ordered the visitations to resume. Jean continued to resist. Three weeks ago, Nathan had disappeared and Jean had hired Brian to defend her against a criminal contempt charge.

Jock Pfeifer was forty-two, the owner of a chain of video rental stores called Video Bazaar. At the time of the divorce, he'd owned two stores. Now, they could be found in strip malls on all sides of the Island. Recently, Pfeifer had been accused of promoting obscenity. A news clipping stapled to the sheet showed Pfeifer and a middle-aged woman in police custody. Another photo showed a pile of supposedly obscene videos seized in a raid by vice officers. The vice raid had occurred before Nathan's disappearance but after the court's order to resume visits. I couldn't help wondering if there was a connection.