

THRIPZ

Robert Farley

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Prologue

Eglin Bays woke himself up scratching at the back of his neck. Fingernails caked with blood, he tenderly felt the line of sticky, nickel-sized welts ringing his hairline. Great. A bunch of bloody bumps would look real nice at the beach this afternoon.

He rolled off the bed and trundled to the bathroom. Using a hand mirror, he saw how inflamed the sores looked. Bloody and puffy, they practically flashed in rhythm with his pulse.

Nothing he could do about it now. Drenching a wash cloth with water, he wrung it out and laid it over the back of his neck.

“Ouch. Buggah. Wonder what caused these things?”

Heading back to the living room to check the couch, where he’d fallen asleep the night before, he could hear wind whooshing through coconut palm and monkeypod trees. A tropical storm had been heading west toward Hawaii for the past week, but a quick look outside told him it hadn’t arrived during the night. He turned on the television to check the news, just to be sure the weather would hold up the rest of the day. Switching through channels, he found a weather report on TV4.

“...tracking Tropical Storm Delbert at five hundred and twenty miles from the islands, moving at five miles per hour. This one is all over the place. Computer models show it approaching our shores anywhere between two and five days from now. We’re also watching a high-pressure area to the north that could drop down and knock the storm out of the picture, but till then, look for increasing winds for your Sunday afternoon. Kim.”

Eglin didn’t wait to hear what Kim had to say. “Just don’t come today,” he said to the television as he flicked it off. Bad weather would mean moving his afternoon family plans from the beach to someone’s

house. Not out of the question, but cramming his fiancée's and his big families into any normal house was a little too much togetherness for him.

Pulling on his cut-off Levi's and plastic house sandals, he walked onto the porch. Blue skies everywhere, the lone exception along the Ko`Olau Mountains, where small rolls of fluffy white cumulus clouds looked like giant eyebrows skirting the jagged peaks.

The weatherman was right about the wind kicking up, but the feisty gusts didn't worry Eglin. "Picnic, here I come," he said to a passing mynah bird. A quick breakfast and shower, and he'd be on his way to Kuhio Beach in Waikiki.

Entering the kitchen, he wrinkled his nose at something that smelled like hog pen stink. It didn't take long to pin it to a watermelon he'd been given only the day before at work. Its color had changed from dark green to moldy brown. The rind, spotted with tiny holes, had folded in on itself like a mushy flat tire. On the counter all around it, hundreds of little gray insects hopped, crawled, and flew.

"So much for taking you to the picnic."

Looking closer at the holes in the melon, he saw they were bursting outward, not inward. Had the bugs come from inside the fruit? Looked like it. He'd worked on Tapaya Farms a long time and had never seen an infestation work so fast.

"Hoo boy, Old Man Tapaya's gonna love this," Eglin said, reaching for his trash can.

Using the edge of his hand to scoot the spoiled produce into the garbage, he exposed a fresh horde of the creatures. He watched them spread their tiny, feathery wings and fly onto his upper torso and legs. They looked like big gnats.

Seconds later, he quit wondering about their identity, as waves of pain swept through his body. He hadn't expected to be bitten. The surprise was almost worse than the bite, but not for long.

He slapped and scraped, trying to get the things off. The skin on his arms grew bumpier by the second with welts like the ones on his neck. Frantically, Eglin flailed and beat at his arms, legs, chest, shoulders, and head. A folded magazine became a bat to swing at the thickening swarm buzzing around him.

Twirling like a marble in a pinball machine, he bounced between

the fridge and the stove before winding up back at his trash can. Dizziness overcoming him, he started to slide down the side of the counter, a seed of panic taking root in his gut and growing.

With a last-ditch flurry of motion, he pushed himself up, swatting and brushing until he'd cleared off most of the tiny whatever-they-were. Retreating to the living room, he stared into the kitchen, perplexed and hurting. His body, now covered with red bumps, throbbled from the many tiny punctures. Oddly though, the pain wasn't as severe as when the biting had started.

Eglin thought about leaving the house then and there, but he didn't want to return later to the same problem. Besides, he reasoned, they were just bugs.

In the small cabinet above the refrigerator, he kept a spray can of insecticide. Dashing in, he grabbed the tall can, shook it fiercely, took aim and sprayed. "How do you like that, you buggahs"

But the more he sprayed, the more the things attacked him.

"That's it," he croaked. "I'm outta here." Vision blurring and throat tightening, he threw the spray can into the kitchen and stumbled for the front door.

On the way, he picked up his cell phone from the coffee table and after making it to the yard, he thumbed the redial button. Lianne, his fiancée, answered with a drowsy, "Hullo?"

"Lianne!" Eglin screamed. "Baby, I got some crazy bugs over here. I thought they were just gnats or something, but then they started biting on me, and now I'm swelling up like a puffer fish."

"What are you talking about, Eglin?"

"I'm talking about..." Eglin pulled open the door of his pickup and reached for his keys. "My truck keys!" They weren't in his pocket. He'd left them on the hook by the door. "My truck keys are back in the house – ahhh!"

"Eglin! Are you all right? What's the matter?"

Staggering back toward the house, Eglin opened his mouth to answer, but his fingers had swollen and stiffened so much that he fumbled and dropped the phone.

Gasping for breath, he forced his leaden legs up the porch steps and back into the house. He had to use both hands to pick up his keys. Waves of nausea rippled through his stomach as he headed back out-

side, his equilibrium more off-kilter with each step. Behind him, a murmuring cloud of insects followed through the open doorway.

He made it to the edge of the porch but could not will his legs to go down the steps. Nor could he make his arms hold the porch post for balance. He swayed and fell to the ground, inches from where he'd dropped his cell phone.

The fluttering swarm gathered on his outstretched arm, which was bent at a curious angle from his shoulder. He thought he might have broken it, but felt no pain and wondered ridiculously how he would get a doctor's appointment on a Sunday.

In his narrowing field of vision, his crooked limb disappeared under a gray cloak of writhing insects. As the creatures covered his face and his vision blurred and dimmed to nothing, he focused on the sound of Lianne's voice, still audible on the cell phone's tiny speaker. He wanted to shout an answer, but the muscles in his throat and mouth felt as stiff as cooled lava.

"Eglin!" Lianne called out. "Eglin! Talk to me! Eglin!"

Then she stopped.

Nathan Brewster stood at the dispatcher's counter of the District 6 Honolulu Police Station in Waikiki studying one of the strangest police reports he'd ever read. Having covered the cops and robbers beat for the *Waikiki Times* for over four years, he knew he could count on bar fights, fender benders, domestic disputes, and lost traveler's checks to make up the bulk of his "Police Log" column, especially on a Monday. This story wasn't one of those.

This particular report claimed a woman's fiancé had been attacked by insects and was now missing. Sounded more like the front page of a supermarket tabloid than the *Waikiki Times*. Still, he had a feeling about it, one that manifested as a palpable ringing between his ears. Invariably preceding trouble of some sort, this faulty sixth sense had been with him as long as he could remember. Taking a quick look around, he noted nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing except the report.

Poking a finger at it, he asked, "Hey, Jane, what's the story on this bug lady? Is she a wave short of a set or what?"

Police dispatcher Jane Elser looked up and over the Plexiglas shield stretching the length of the counter and cracked back at him. "Bug lady, huh? I figured you'd zero in on that. You're really nothing but a lowlife paparazzi, aren't you? And what's with the surfer lingo? Since when were you ever on a board?"

"Just trying to brighten up your Monday, Janie-bird. The report says bugs attacked and possibly killed a man, and now he's gone. You know I love a mystery."

"You're right. I shouldn't razz you when you're actually trying to do more than you have to. Anyway, paparazzi are the photographers, aren't they?"

Nathan took the jab about his work ethic without comment and watched Jane roll her chair backward and stand up on her tiptoes, stretching her uniform in all the right places. He followed her gaze out the east window of the one-story, open-air building, to the beach and ocean beyond. Tourists and locals meandered across the view, some with surfboards, most with blankets, all of them ready to spend the day enjoying the sun and surf.

A lone woman occupied a bench outside the station building. As Nathan focused on her, the clangor in his head rose to a screech which did not subside until Jane turned to him again and spoke.

"If you want to find out about the bug woman's story, go ask her yourself. That's her on the beachside deck. Been there since six this morning."

Nathan's watch read 8:10. "She must like the beach, huh?"

"I wouldn't know, and I'm sort of busy, as you can see." Jane held her arms out, palms up, to point out the mass of loose paperwork in front of her. "The weekend dispatcher couldn't file a report right if it walked itself to the filing cabinet. And that's not all —"

Nathan interrupted before she could continue, "Guess I'll go introduce myself to the bug lady."

He gave Jane a two-finger salute and backed away from the counter.

Pushing her short bangs off her forehead, Jane allowed him a one-sided smile before going back to her paperwork. She could be a little too outspoken from time to time, but that's what made her one of his best tip sources.

Out on the beachfront deck, he wondered what to make of the woman on the bench. She sat with her legs crossed at the ankles, hands interlaced on her lap, rocking almost imperceptibly back and forth. Her tan shorts and red, sleeveless blouse revealed athletic arms and legs. Dark, shoulder-length hair fluttering in the breeze, she stared straight ahead and didn't move when he stopped alongside her.

Turning in the direction of the woman's gaze, Nathan eyed the two-foot waves breaking on the reef fifty yards from the beach. A tropical storm churned somewhere out there, five hundred miles away or maybe closer. "Looks like the storm's pushing up some nice steady surf for a change," he said.

The woman turned her head abruptly and stared briefly at Nathan, her eyes wide. She had a healthy-looking golden complexion. Late twenties to early thirties. Her face, while lined from worry or lack of sleep, was, by most measures of modern society, very pretty.

"I guess so," she answered, scooting away from him and returning her attention to the ocean.

That went well, Nathan chided himself. Trying to put himself in her place, mentally, he decided to take the direct approach. Stepping up and holding out his hand, he said, "I'm Nathan Brewster, with the *Waikiki Times*. Could I talk to you for a moment?"

"What do you want?" she asked, her voice quavering despite the directness of her question.

Nathan dropped his hand to his side. "Just to talk to you. Are you the woman who filed the report of a missing man who was attacked by insects?"

"What if I am? You want to ridicule me? You think I'm crazy?"

Not yet, but the morning is young. "No, no, no, nothing like that. I just want to ask some follow-up questions about the incident, because it seems so strange."

Lianne Halea – the bug lady, as Nathan had dubbed her – pushed a long strand of hair away from her face and hooked it behind her ear. "Maybe you should tell that to the police. They didn't think it was strange enough to investigate, at least not until after their precious forty-eight hours. They said 'Maybe he just gone on a trip or something.'"

Her mocking, pigeon-English impression of a policeman made Nathan smile, despite himself.

"Well...what makes you think your friend is missing and not just on a trip, as the police say?"

She gripped the front of the bench, muscles tensing in both arms, like she was going to get up and run away. Considering how upset she must be, Nathan wouldn't have blamed her. But then she said, "He's my fiancé. We were getting our friends and family together to announce our wedding date." She hid her face in hands cupped to catch the sobs that escaped through her fingers. "Eglin and I were in love. He wouldn't take off without telling me. I don't care what some lolo-headed policeman thinks."

Nathan hoped that was true for her sake, but he'd seen stranger things. "Could you go over the story with me? I have the report, but I'd like to hear it from you."

Lianne lifted her shoulders, straightened her back, and took a deep breath. "Okay," she said. "I'll tell you, but only because I really need help. If you make a fool out of me—" She paused, her lip quivering. "I don't know what I'll do." Again, she hid her face in her hands, catching sobs, taking deep breaths.

"Damaging you in any way is the last thing on my mind, Miss Halea. I assure you that's not the way I work."

Two small children ran screaming from behind them to the beach, each lugging a bodyboard. Lianne raised her head gave them a sorrowing look and then began talking. "Eglin called me Sunday morning around eight, screaming about bugs being all over him. He said he was getting out of there, but he'd left his truck keys in the house, and then I heard a noise like the phone falling, but I could still hear him screaming. Finally, there's a loud sound like a screen door slamming, but I don't hear Eglin any more. Nothing."

Nathan waited, not prompting her.

"But that wasn't all." Lianne took another stuttering breath. "In a few seconds, I could hear voices, but like they had hands covering their mouths or something. I stopped yelling Eglin's name to listen. Then it sounded like somebody picked up the phone, I heard breathing, and I starting yelling again, 'Eglin! Eglin!' but nobody said anything, and then the phone went dead."

Nathan stopped writing. "You say strangers were talking? Could you understand anything they said?"

"No. But I know I heard them. Men's voices."

"I see. Then you drove to his house?"

"I didn't know what else to do, so I drove up to his place, but there wasn't any sign of him. The only strange thing, other than him being gone, was the kitchen."

"The kitchen?"

"It was cleaner than usual. I mean, Eglin's no slob, but he's no Martha Stewart either. There would be a dirty dish or two in the sink, a dishcloth on the counter, a few specks on the fridge and stove, you know. But everything in the kitchen was spotless."

“What about the rest of the house?”

“Just like always. Pants and shirt on the bedroom floor, empty beer can on the coffee table, dirty towel in the bathroom. Normal stuff.”

“The police didn’t say anything about finding any bugs. I should go back in and ask them. Thanks for your time, Miss Halea.”

“I found one. I didn’t give it to them. They didn’t seem interested. And I didn’t think of it. I was so mad.” From her purse she withdrew a handkerchief folded into a small square. Inside was a dark gray, very small insect, looking a bit squashed and definitely not dangerous. She was careful not to let it blow away. “This is it. I wouldn’t have seen it if the counter hadn’t been so clean.”

Nathan eyed the creature dubiously. “Well, it doesn’t look dangerous, but you can’t always tell, I suppose. Do you mind if I take it to an entomologist I know, over at the university? I’m sure he can tell us what it is.”

Lianne hesitated, but then handed it over. “I guess that’s better than keeping the creepy thing in my purse. Will you tell me what you find out? I gotta find Eglin. I’m so afraid something awful has happened to him.”

Nathan wrote her number on the back of a business card and promised her to call as soon as he found out something. Leaving her sitting on the bench, he stashed the bug carefully into his pocket and set off for the university, the ringing in his head ebbing and flowing like the water lapping the shoreline.

Driving to work Monday morning, Tommy Wagner, the field supervisor for PalmTree Farms, could not believe his eyes. Over two hundred acres of watermelon plants looked dead. Two days ago, the fields had been a deep, vibrant green, with buds and melons hanging from thousands of healthy vines that now looked dry as dust. Why hadn't his field scout seen a problem here?

"Six to ten, six to ten," Tommy said into his walkie-talkie. With more than two thousand acres of farmland stretching over ten miles, the walkie-talkies allowed cheap, efficient contact with his field supervisors. "Elizondo, come in."

"Yes, boss, ten here," came the Filipino-accented reply from Elizondo Petaling, chief field scout for PalmTree Farms.

"Zondo, where are you?"

"In the parking lot getting ready for the morning meeting."

Morning meetings ensured that every crew leader knew what the other crews were doing and where. Before a tractor was started or a sprayer loaded, problems could be solved, safety issues ironed out, and ideas aired inside the twenty-by-twenty converted construction trailer where the meetings were held.

"I'll be there in two minutes. You guys been in 333 yet?" Tommy asked, referring to the largest of the stricken melon fields.

Elizondo hesitated. Tommy knew that meant his field scout was afraid his answer was not going to be what he wanted to hear. "Uh, no, boss. We're waiting for the meeting."

"That's all right. Get your roguing crew together and be ready to head out. We'll go through a few rows real quick and bring back something for the meeting. Okay?"

"Yes, sir."

At the entrance of the compound, Elizondo and three women huddled by their field pickup. A dozen other men and women joined them as he watched, talking and gesticulating toward the damaged fields.

Tommy motioned Elizondo to the passenger seat. "Get in. Tell your crew from last week to get in the back."

Elizondo said a few words in Filipino and three women hurried to the back of the pickup, climbed up the customized step, and sat for the ride to the field.

A couple of dusty minutes later, Tommy braked the truck to a stop. The damage was worse than anything he'd experienced in the six years he had worked for his father. Vines, leaves, and fruit hung limp, covered with crusty orange scales, ugly in the morning sun. A total loss. Might as well plow it under.

Elizondo got out and scratched his head as he gaped at the crippled crop. Pointing to a block of rows, he said, "I don't know how this could have happened. Darva, Melana, Croisus, and I, we walked these very rows last Thursday." He turned his head toward the women in the crew, as if for corroboration.

Tommy walked into the nearest row and knelt for a closer look. "Easy to see what's wrong, my friend. Thrips." Tipping a leaf, he showed Elizondo the tiny, crawling insect larvae. "There are dead adults on the ground, too. See?"

Elizondo turned over a leaf. "I don't know how this could be. There was no sign of thrips last week."

High-pitched screaming interrupted their discussion. In the melon field, Tommy saw Darva bent over and running, thrashing at her legs, hopping on one foot for a few steps while she beat at something on the opposite foot. If not for the screaming it would have been a funny sight.

For a split second, no one did anything.

Tommy had been about to tear off the leaf he was holding when he felt a sting on his hand. Letting go of the leaf, he stared at his palm, but saw nothing there.

He stood and watched Elizondo reach the frantic field worker. He removed his long-sleeved overshirt and used it to thrash at the woman's legs. After a few moments, Darva stopped screaming, and

Elizondo threw the shirt down, as Tommy ran to their side.

“What happened, Darva?” Tommy asked.

“I brushed against some of the thrips, I think, and they must have crawled into my leggings.” She peeled off a heavy sock to reveal ugly red welts on her shin. The lower part of her left leg looked nearly twice the size of the other.

Shocked by how quickly her system had reacted to the bites, Tommy said, “Better get you to the hospital.”

Reaching into his pocket, he noticed the pain in his hand was much worse. Looking at it, he was stunned to see the fat part of his palm below his little finger had swollen, throbbing insistently from a thickening welt.

“What the devil is going on today? Zondo, you all right? Melana? Croisus?” Tommy asked. The women nodded they were okay, but Elizondo held back.

“Zondo?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, boss. A couple of stings on my hand is all. I’ll be all right.”

“Not up for vote, Zondo. You’ll be going with Darva to the doctor, and I’ll be taking some of our new bugs to the college.”

As everyone climbed into the pickup, Tommy carefully put some leaves into a plastic bag and zipped it shut. With the injured Darva beside him in the truck, he raced along the red clay roads bordering the infested fields back to the compound area. Sliding to a stop, he told Elizondo to use the truck to go to the doctor. Then he headed for the meeting room, a few minutes late.

Walking up the dusty wooden step into the slightly tilted building, he held up his hand to show the other crew leaders and his dad the bright orange swelling. “I think we’ve got a problem.”

At the Agricultural Sciences Institute on the campus of the College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Nathan delivered his dead insect to the third-floor office of Dr. James Lanahino, chairman of the Molecular Biosciences and Bioengineering Department. He told him the woman's story of her missing fiancé's harrowing call, then watched expectantly as Lanahino studied the creature.

"Sit down, sit down, please," the doctor said, studying the dead creature with a magnifying glass. "Rest your feet."

Nathan thanked him, taking a look around the large but crowded office, as he maneuvered into one of two leather-covered chairs. A window to the campus area outside was open to let in the breezes, which once inside found little to disturb. No stacks of papers littered the dark-stained bookshelves or red leather chairs. The desk, while covered with books, notebooks, and an older-looking laptop computer, offered no candidates for a gust of wind to take away. Diplomas hung on the wall, and one picture of the doctor and an attractive woman held a prominent spot. No pictures of children, though.

Looking over his glasses at Nathan, Dr. Lanahino shook his head and said, "It's not too unusual for a person to be so highly reactive to an insect fluid that he dies, but it's extremely uncommon for insects to attack humans. Not to say it doesn't happen. It does. But I've never heard of thrips being poisonous and certainly not man-eating."

"My neighbor's hobby is growing roses. Sometimes he'll talk about having thrips, so he puts some dust on them, maybe throws on some ladybugs or pirate bugs, he calls them, and poof, no more thrips." Nathan pointed to the thrips in the doctor's hand. "Are those things the same as this thing?"

“Yes, that’s right. Thrips are your basic garden-variety insect pest,” Dr. Lanahino said. “There’s a kind or two for just about every plant, especially fruits and vegetables. They’re a hardy insect, too, very difficult to kill. Most of the farms on the island use natural predators and rotation planting against them, though some use different varieties of pesticides, and a couple use a combination attack.”

An assistant came to the office door. “Excuse me, Doctor. Tommy Wagner is here to see you.”

“Sure, Nia, send him back. Speaking of pesticides, Nathan, Tommy Wagner is from PalmTree Farms. They are very high-tech and use the latest in pesticides, along with a few of the old ways. The chemical use doesn’t make them a lot of friends with the organic lobby, but no denying the system works. PalmTree has become the biggest vegetable farm in the islands. Some—like Tommy here—would say it’s because their fruit and vegetables look and taste better than anyone else’s.”

Tommy Wagner walked in carrying a small paper sack. Setting it down on a table, he reached around the desk and shook Dr. Lanahino’s hand.

“Hey, so that’s why my ears are burning. You’re in here talking about me.” Tommy’s eyes met Nathan’s, then dropped to the media badge on Nathan’s pocket. “And to a newspaper reporter, to boot! What kind of trouble am I in now?” Extending his hand to Nathan, he said, “Tommy Wagner, PalmTree Farms.”

“Nathan Brewster, *Waikiki Times*.”

“Cool. What’s the news in here this morning?”

Dr. Lanahino showed Tommy the tiny, dead thrips Nathan had brought in. “A lady told Nathan that a swarm of these things may have killed a man.”

Tommy looked surprised when he saw the insect. “You’re not going to believe this. Hold on.” He back-stepped to the door, grabbed the sack he’d left there, and placed it on the table in front of Dr. Lanahino. “Take a look at those things. We found them on a couple hundred acres of watermelon and bell pepper this morning. In three days, they’ve destroyed most of our melon crop—that’s more than a million dollars, Doc—and they bit the crap out of Zondo and one of his crew. Had to send them both to the hospital. Their wrists and legs

were swollen like you wouldn't believe. And look at this." He thrust out his hand where he'd been bitten. The skin was orange and stretched taut from the base of his little finger to his wrist. "Hurts, too."

"My, my. Let me see what you've got here." Carefully opening the bag, Lanahino looked inside. "Hui, look at those buggahs eat!"

"I know, Doc. They go crazy. I've never seen anything like it. Four days ago, nothing. Now these larvae all over the melons. And we got dead mature thrips, too, so it looks like they came in as adults sometime after last Thursday. That's when Zondo and his people rogued the fields. They'd have found an infestation this bad if it had been there."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Dr. Lanahino said. "Four days ago your fields were clean, and now this? Impossible."

"I know, but Elizondo wouldn't lie about it."

"Sure, sure. Let's get that bag into the lab. I don't feel real comfortable with it in here."

As they headed for the door, Nathan said, "Wait a minute, I'm lost. What's *roguing* and what's so unusual about four days?"

"Roguing is removing diseased and damaged plants from a field. You're a reporter and you don't know that? I thought you guys knew words," Tommy said.

"Never heard it used that way," Nathan admitted. "I'll have to reread my Webster's for secondary definitions. Now what about the four days?"

"These insects normally take close to two weeks to go from egg to adult, with a couple of larval and pupal stages between," Dr. Lanahino said, as he led the way through the lab adjacent to his office. "Even if the eggs were laid on Thursday, it's still a stretch to think they could have hatched and grown this much in so short a time."

"So what does that mean?"

"It means," said Tommy, "that someone planted these babies."

"That's a possibility," Dr. Lanahino said, "but it's also possible they were blown there from somewhere else."

"Either way, same result," said Tommy.

Nathan looked back and forth between them until Tommy explained, "The prevailing winds come up the island, hitting our

neighbor's fields before coming to ours. Anything from stray pesticides to the pests they're supposed to kill can come with the wind. If we use a pesticide and more of the same pesticide comes on the wind that we don't know about, bam, we have an overuse, increasing the possibility that more of the bugs become resistant. Last year Tapaya overused Ridomil on their tomatoes and caused a resistant mite that came across the road on the wind to us. We lost plenty before we figured out we needed to use a different pesticide."

Nathan had almost digested the news about pesticides, resistance, and winds, when the name Tapaya reminded him of the interview with Lianne Halea earlier. Her missing fiancé worked there. "Are you talking about Tapaya Farms?"

"You know our no-good neighbors?" Tommy asked him.

"Not exactly," Nathan said, "but the guy who was supposedly attacked by these bugs worked there, according to his fiancée."

"Ah," Tommy said, "and the plot thickens. Tell me more."

"Excuse me for a few moments, gentleman." Lanahino held up the bag of larvae. "I'm going to assign a student to get started on these in the lab." He walked out and spoke to one of the students in the adjoining room. "Shawn, get some folders and grab a team. We've got a mystery."

The student settled a wary look on the bag in Dr. Lanahino's hand. Through the doorway to Tommy and Nathan, he sent a darker glance. "Sure, Doctor."

Noting the stare, Nathan nodded toward the unhappy looking student, then watched as he and the doctor strode off into the lab. "So Tommy, what about this Tapaya Farms? What's their story?" Nathan listened and took notes as Tommy told him about the excesses and violations that Tapaya had piled up over the years. From the picture Tommy painted, the Tapaya people would have thought nothing of deliberately causing a super-thrips infestation.

"The guy denied his workers proper protective clothing?" Nathan asked.

"Didn't even tell them the stuff they were using was dangerous," Tommy answered. "One guy died, another dozen people hospitalized. It was a big scandal five years ago, just after I came home from college on the mainland. My dad's been fighting it out with Sid Tapaya for

years, ever since my family came here, I guess. I hardly noticed because I was just a kid, but looking back on it, some of the situations got nasty.”

Besides learning about the feud between the Wagners and Tapaya, Nathan picked up a lot of information about how technological farming on the islands had become. It was less about putting seeds in the ground and harvesting the product a few weeks later than it was about making sure you were a few days or even hours ahead of the nearest competitor. A new seed variety, a faster-acting pesticide, a more effective fertilizer could mean the difference between feast or famine, literally, for a farmer.

Nathan was about to ask how farms kept tabs on each other when Tommy looked at his watch. “Oh man, I need to get back to the farm. I was going to ask the doc about treating the crops we’ve got left with something new, after he made sure of what kind of thrips these are. They’re bigger than usual. That’s what threw me at first.”

Nathan looked around and located Dr. Lanahino, talking with a group of students in long white coats. “There he is.”

“He’s busy. I’ll call him later about killing the buggahs. He probably doesn’t know anything certain yet, anyway. Listen, it was good to meet you, Nathan.”

“You, too. I’d like to follow this story with you, if you don’t mind. Could I maybe come out to your farm, get some pictures, see firsthand?”

Tommy gave a sideways, piercing glance at Nathan. “I’m usually a pretty good judge of character, and there’s something trustworthy about you. Just how firsthand do you want to get?”

“As firsthand as there is?”

“How would you like to help me bust out Mr. Tapaya’s farm?” Tommy whispered. “Sort of an exposé on the old weasel?”

Immediately, Nathan’s ears began to ring, wavering slightly in pitch. He was not surprised. “An exposé on Tapaya? How do we do that?”

“First, if you write anything, you have to keep my name out of it, okay?”

Nathan had never been one for making promises where the news was concerned, other than to tell it truthfully, but the aggressive

insects, the feuding farms, the missing man, and the carillon bells in his head convinced him to play along for now. "I can do that. As long as I don't wind up reporting from the inside of a jail cell."

Tommy snickered. "What I've got in mind is a little night excursion, some agricultural espionage, if you will."

Nathan had never heard those two words—*agricultural* and *espionage*—together in a sentence. But from Tommy's expression, he could tell it was no joke.

When Nathan didn't respond right away, Tommy said, "You don't have to if you don't want to. I understand. You don't know me. I could be some wacko trying to poison my competition. But I do this from time to time, usually just to see how the crops are comparing, sometimes for other reasons. Like now."

"Ever been caught?"

"Nope. Had some close calls."

"How do you know I won't turn you in to the authorities? We've just met, after all."

"That would be a bummer. But I could be getting ready to do the same to you. Not sure why I'd want to do that, but there you go."

Nathan was in a quandary. He didn't want to get in trouble, but he had to get this story. And while Tommy's proposal sounded like something delinquent high school kids might do, sneaking onto the Tapaya Farms property and seeing it firsthand could provide important background. This wouldn't be the first time he'd done something spur of the moment that could have questionable results. Besides, life had been too sedate the last few years. Time to stir it up. "Okay, I'm in."

"Cool. Wear something dark and meet me at the lower parking lot of the Waikele Wal-Mart at one o'clock tonight."

After Tommy left, Nathan, the ringing in his ears settling down a pinch, walked over to where Dr. Lanahino was still engaged in conversation with a student.

"Brynda, you work with Shawn on the receptor series. Ah, Nathan, where is Mr. Wagner?"

"Went back to the farm, he said. And I've got to head back to the office. Here's my card and number. Will you call me when you find out something about these critters?"

“Sure, sure. We’re going to get to work on the mystery right away. No thrips should be able to bite like this.” He held out his hand to show Nathan his fingers and thumb where three ugly lines of red welts had appeared.

Nathan grimaced at the brightly colored bites.

“It feels as bad as it looks,” Lanahino assured him. “Enough bites like these could definitely kill a person.”

“Wow, Doc, how did it happen?”

“I was getting one of them ready for the microscope, and since they’re only thrips, I just grabbed a few of them with my hand and they bit me. Or actually, they cut me. Their mouths are made for cutting leaves and plant material. They make slits, also, to deposit their eggs. Normally – and I’m going to have to stop using that word – they don’t go after meat, but these obviously do. And the sting certainly points to a chemical reaction, something delivered by the thrips’ system.”

As Lanahino spoke, a sheen developed on his forehead. Small beads of perspiration trickled onto his nose. That didn’t make sense, because the room was cool and breezy. “Are you all right, Doctor?”

Lanahino didn’t answer but continued looking at his injured hand. Then he lifted his head slightly, looked at Nathan from under drooping eyelids, slurred one word that Nathan couldn’t understand, and fell toward the floor on buckling legs. Nathan grabbed hold of him as best he could, slowing the man’s descent to the checkerboard tile floor.

“Somebody call nine-one-one,” Nathan yelled.

Nathan stayed with the unconscious Dr. Lanahino, trying to remember if he should raise his head or his feet. To be safe, he did neither, and finally paramedics arrived to remove the responsibility from him. After a few minutes, he saw the professor's eyes open and close, then a paramedic gave him a thumbs up. That was his cue to head back to the office; reporters don't survive on lead stories alone, at least not at the *Waikiki Times*.

After writing a front-page piece on the thrips, he concentrated the rest of the morning and early afternoon on filling his "Police Log" column with fender-bender and theft reports, refining his editorial column for Friday, and formatting the for-the-record news. The latter was all the stuff that subscribers demanded so they would know who was suing whom, who was divorcing, who was marrying, who'd had a baby, and who was paying fines for doing what. Collecting it and setting it could be boring and tedious, but it sold papers and kept poi, for which he had yet to acquire a taste, off his plate.

The first fingers of light from the afternoon sun had found their way through the southwest office windows when the phone rang, accompanied an instant later by a wavelike whine inside his head. Marie transferred the call. "It's Mr. Wagner."

"Nathan, here."

"You hear about Doc this afternoon?"

"Yeah, I was there when he passed out. You'd only been gone a few minutes. Pretty scary stuff."

"Not to worry, dude. I got a call from him just now. Said he found out that the bugs metabolize pesticides. That's why he figures he had the bad reaction, and it's why the danger level on them has risen."

"So if these thrips metabolize pesticides, then that means they

can't be killed?"

"Not chemically, at least not with the chemicals we have now. If it comes down to torching the whole farm, I suppose we'll do that before we let some mutant bugs have it."

Nathan hadn't known Tommy long enough to tell if he was being serious. "That sounds extreme."

"Won't be our first choice, that's for sure."

When Nathan didn't reply at once, Tommy added, "Just kidding, I think. But it's not looking good, that's for sure. We had three more people bitten and hospitalized this afternoon. Some of the field hands are beginning to worry about coming to work and I can't say I blame them. Which reminds me. The bugs started going into pupa stage a couple hours ago. So tonight, if they're in the Tapaya field, like I think they are, they shouldn't be dangerous."

"Wait a minute. 'Shouldn't be dangerous?'"

"Don't worry, man. The pupa stage is non-feeding. I'll have some gloves and protective footwear just in case."

"You do that. I'll bring a couple of butane torches."

Tommy laughed. "Good to see you're being level-headed about the situation. But seriously, we'll be fine. In and out in a flash."

Sounded like famous last words, Nathan thought, wondering if the tropical sun had finally baked the common sense out of his head. Knocking on the wooden slide-out table on his desk loudly enough for Tommy to hear, he said, "That's the sound of me knocking on wood. I'll see you tonight."

Curious how Dr. Lanahino was doing, he dialed the doctor's inner lab phone number, bypassing secretaries and assistants. After ten rings somebody picked up, and seconds later a preoccupied voice on the other end said, "Dr. Lanahino."

"Doc, Nathan Brewster here. Glad to hear you're doing better. Tommy Wagner said you had some updates on the thrips."

"Oh, Nathan, yes. You'd better get over here. I have information that needs to get into your paper. Photos, too, if you don't mind making the trip."

"On my way."

Looking at the office wall clock, Nathan saw it was almost quitting time. The other reporters were gone, leaving only Maria, the

receptionist and classified ads manager, and Jael Duncan, the photo and Internet editor. He didn't want to, but he'd have to tell Jael what his plans were. If something went wrong, she would know what to do. Whether she'd do it or not, that was another question.

"Jael, I'm heading over to the university to talk to James Lanahino about a bug situation. And tonight—" He paused before continuing in a conspiratorial whisper. "I'm doing some covert observations on Tapaya Farms with Tommy Wagner."

"You're doing what?" Jael asked.

"Going to the university to get some pics and info."

"And?"

"Taking a hike around some farm land?"

"Covertly, did I understand you to say?"

Besides working at the *Times*, Jael was also the daughter of John Duncan, the owner, editor, and publisher. She had inherited her father's height, standing five-ten in her bare feet. Raven hair and a tawny complexion from her native Hawaiian mother made her a striking young woman in any culture. Right now, however, it was her Irish temperament Nathan needed to address. "Jae, Jae, Jae, you know I'm not going to do anything to get hurt. This guy, Tommy, says he's done this sort of thing many times."

"It's not you I'm worried about. It's the paper. We don't need our insurance rates going up after the company pays court costs and fines because you want to play James Bond again."

"Your concern overwhelms me." Nathan pretended to stiffen with hurt. "Rest assured I won't be playing James Bond. Anyway, how long has it been since I did anything to cost the paper any money?" Jael opened her mouth to reply. "Don't answer that." He rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Sheesh, make a tiny mistake in judgment, it slithers around in the tall swaying grasses of your peaceful unassuming life till the end of time."

"Tiny mistake?" Jael challenged.

"It turned out good for the paper, didn't it? I've been on my best behavior since. Right? Win-win, everybody happy."

"You could call it best behavior, I suppose. Some would call it putting in time."

That was the second instance in a day somebody ragged on him

about his work habits. What did they want, a Pulitzer every week? He put the thought aside. "This bug situation is linked in some way to Tapaya Farms. I'm merely resorting to some on-site measures to get to the bottom of it."

"So you and some *paniolo* farm boy are going to spy on Tapaya."

"That's a good one, Jael. You don't think I know what *paniolo* means, do you? Well, think again, girlfriend. I've come a long way since I fell off the poi wagon and landed here."

"You didn't answer my question. You and your new cowboy action figure boyfriend are going to go trespassing."

"Trespassing is a strong word."

"But accurate?"

"Pretty much. I just have a feeling about it. You know what I mean." He knew Jael was familiar with his "extranormal" ability, even though they rarely spoke of it. For Nathan's part, there was no payoff in dwelling on it too much. It was an unexplainable part of his life, and that was all there was to it.

Jael looked away. "Okay, Nathan. But I'll be listening in on the scanner tonight to see if you get yourself in any real trouble."

"Always the optimist. Be sure and have cash handy in case I need you to post my bail." He didn't wait around to hear the response from that one.

The entomology section of the university buzzed with research students peering through microscopes, studying monitors and readouts, poring over large tomes of arcane insect data, tapping on notebook computer keys, and countless other activities Nathan had not yet seen on the Discovery Channel.

Dr. Lanahino peered through the dual eyepiece of a microscope, while around him three men and two women stared intently at a black-and-white monitor in front of them. The doctor looked up, pointed to an area on the monitor, and said, "And this is the area where, normally, receptors will tell the insect something is not right in its environment." A couple of the students grunted in assent, nodding their heads.

Nathan, brows furrowed, leaned in to see, interested in hearing more, but mystified as to what it could mean.

Dr. Lanahino pushed a shock of hair out of his eyes and looked straight at Nathan briefly, before recognition set in. "Oh. Nathan. Good."

Nathan relaxed his brow, leaning back to nod, though his nod was only a greeting, not meant to convey understanding.

"How are you, Nathan? I guess I gave you a bad scare earlier, yeh? That's the first time I ever passed out, you know. Not a lot of fun. Thanks for catching me."

"You're welcome. Great to see you're up and around. What have you got for me to work on tonight?"

Putting on his glasses, the entomologist said, "You're not going to believe what we're finding here. If there are many of these things on the island, we're in big trouble."

"That bad?"

"We haven't seen their entire life cycle yet, but they're going through their developmental phases very fast. The ones Tommy brought us this morning have already entered the pupa stage, but since we don't know when they actually hatched, we can't make any firm predictions about when the adults will emerge. From the data so far, we can guess it won't be long."

"That doesn't sound so terrible," Nathan said.

"On its own, no. But here's the terrible part. They have the ability to digest pesticides. They positively thrive on the stuff."

"Heard that one already from Tommy. What else you got?"

"They're able to metabolize what should be poisonous to them into their own weapon of defense." The doctor turned away and motioned Nathan to follow.

"You mean like some kinds of ants and fish. I've seen that on the Discovery Channel. Now *that* sounds further on the wrong side of terrible."

"You're right. That's why their bites are so painful, the added impact of the digested pesticides." Lanahino wagged his bandaged thumb and forefinger.

"But you're going to solve the problem, right?" Nathan said.

Lanahino frowned, then slowly nodded his head, an action that sparked no confidence in Nathan.

"Another problem we're going to encounter soon," Lanahino said, "is that the trade winds will carry the insects into populated areas if we don't find a way to stop them. Right now, they're mainly in fields and farm areas, which is bad enough."

"Not good, Doc, not good."

Dr. Lanahino massaged his brow. "It's not. These thrips have shown an unnaturally strong resistance to everything we've thrown at them. We don't think it's something that just happened."

"What does that mean?"

"Good question. Pesticide resistance occurs, yes. Give too much of the same pesticide to an insect population and soon only the naturally resistant insects are left to procreate. Their offspring are likely born with the same resistance. Eventually, that pesticide becomes useless. But these other abnormalities, these don't come from pesticide overuse, in my opinion."

"Their ability to metabolize poisons, you mean?"

"That and their increased appetite. A few labs are experimenting with genetic insect control, but their work centers on destroying negative characteristics, not producing super-resistant ones. I've put out the word to my colleagues worldwide, both in research universities and with the large chemical companies, about the situation. I should hear something back soon."

"Sounds like recombinant DNA research that can actually change life-forms," Nathan said, showing off more of his educational television knowledge.

Dr. Lanahino's sagging shoulders drooped further. "I'm afraid you're right, Nathan, and with all the possible directions to take the research, finding the right answers is going to be like finding the proverbial needle in a haystack."

"Could be worse. At least you know the answer's in a haystack somewhere."

"More like in a field full of haystacks."

Dr. Lanahino's warnings echoed in Nathan's head as he stood in the middle of a twenty-five acre watermelon field. Long, straight rows of melon plants stretched far and wide, following the contours of the land, inducing a mild sense of vertigo to go along with the ringing chirps in his head. He looked up into the starlit sky, so bright and close, as if supported by the nearby Waianae Mountains. Beautiful, but not why he was here.

Half an hour earlier, just after midnight, he met up with Tommy Wagner in the Kunia Wal-Mart parking lot. They took Tommy's truck to a red clay "cane-haul" road off Kunia Road. A legacy of the sugar cane companies that had once used them for access, the roads crisscrossed much of the island's farm interior.

After going less than a mile, Tommy parked the truck on the far side of a six-foot earthen windbreak, hidden from the main highway.

Now, here they were, smearing green and brown camouflage makeup onto their faces like they were going on a military mission. Tommy applied the stripes quickly and easily, then helped Nathan.

"You don't want to think about it too much, that's the secret of good camouflage," Tommy told him. "Ready?"

"Lead on."

They moved out quietly and walked, hunched over, into the field. As they crept through the rows of melons, Nathan noted a meandering line of trees stretching through the middle of the field.

"Is that a stream over there?" he whispered.

"Yup. Dries up this time of year."

Nathan watched a cloud scud past the nearly full moon. "Can't believe how bright that moon is. I don't get out in the country, away from city lights at night so much."

"Yeah, I usually wait for a new moon to do a recon. But this can't wait. I need to find out what's going on."

After a few more minutes of stealthy walking, Nathan asked, "So, Tommy, what exactly are we going to find here?"

"I thought we'd find the same problems we have in our fields, but as you can see, that's not the case." Bending close to the ground, he produced a flashlight and directed its narrow beam onto a plant. Even Nathan's untrained eyes could see the plant was healthy, under no stress from an insect invasion.

They had gone almost another hundred yards when Tommy put out his hand to stop. Looking in the direction his other arm pointed, Nathan saw a shack nestled in the corner of the field. A light came on inside it.

The chirping inside Nathan's head turned into a steady whine, moving from one ear to the other, like a sloshing bowl of liquid. What it meant exactly, Nathan had never been able to decipher. Did it mean he should run now, or he had a few minutes before he should run hard, or maybe he should just hide and wait something out? The bleating multi-tone continued, as mysterious as ever, keeping him on edge for something.

Tommy motioned at the trees along the dry streambed and started toward them, his head low. Nathan followed. They had covered only a few yards when a loud engine roared to life in the distance. Headlight beams pierced the night, jittering up and down and back and forth, around the shack and toward the field, where Nathan and Tommy stood frozen by the sound.

"We're busted, Nathan. Come on!"

Tommy took off at a run toward the row of trees, and Nathan followed, jumping over and stomping on watermelon plants along the way. The sound of the vehicle chasing them grew louder. Nathan chanced a look back and made out the lines of a large four-by-four with lights mounted across the rooftop and an extra set of foglights on the front. Looking ahead, he saw no way to outpace the pickup. Tommy's truck was still at least eighty yards away.

They slid, ran, and jumped down the steeply sloping bank into the bottom of the dry streambed. The ten-foot high banks would keep their heads out of sight of the pickup driver for a few more yards.

“He didn’t see us. He’s going the other way. Hurry!”

As he ran, Nathan pushed partway up the sloping bank to see for himself. The four-by-four was moving slowly in the opposite direction, a handheld spotlight raking the field back and forth. When the searchlight started to come back to the gully, Nathan ran back into the deep section, only it wasn’t as deep as it had been. The banks got shallower the farther they ran along. Soon their heads would be visible from the field.

Again the engine’s rumbling grew louder, the streak of the searchlight fanning out directly above them. Then, the roar, the smell, and the bright lights of the pickup assaulted his senses as it barreled toward the dry streambed. The truck was almost on top of them.

He ran into something. It was Tommy. He’d stopped in front of him, grabbing him by the arm. “Get down!”

Tommy threw him to the ground and now, just ahead, the black truck lumbered like Howard Hughes’s Spruce Goose over the embankment, barely airborne. If they had kept going, it would have smashed them.

They’ve got us for sure now. But the truck continued speeding up the other side of the embankment. He couldn’t believe it. Hadn’t the driver seen them after all? Maybe he couldn’t stop the truck. Time for a second wind.

Tommy grabbed Nathan’s shirt collar, hauling him to his feet, and they climbed out of the arroyo and headed for Tommy’s truck. Nathan figured the two of them made quite a picture, dodging plants and jumping over the melon rows. In the swaying searchlight, Tommy was silhouetted as he stopped for a split second and “harvested” a vine with a young green specimen on the end of it. Nathan climbed in the truck, followed by Tommy, who started the engine, put the truck in gear and revved the engine. “Hold on to something!”

Looking back, Nathan saw the other truck heading toward them, sliding down the far side of the stream bed. It would be at their bumper in seconds. “Hurry up!”

Tommy gunned the truck, sending it lurching forward over the earthen barrier between the field and road. Nathan held onto a passenger courtesy handle, necessary with the jerking back and forth and side to side the ride caused him. Oversized tires bit into the dusty

road, sending the truck rocketing into what would have been blackness if not for the gibbous moon.

Nathan looked behind them, not surprised to see the black four-by-four shoot over the berm and slam down onto the road barely a second behind them. It wallowed like a boat on its huge tires before settling down.

"He's still there, man," Nathan yelled.

"I know. Just hold on."

Sparks flickered up from the road behind Tommy's truck. Then a *ding* produced a spark off the side of smaller vehicle. "Might want to kick it up a notch. I think he's shooting at us!"

"I really don't want to have to explain bullet holes in my truck," Tommy said, finding some extra speed from somewhere in the truck's gear box. Driving with his lights off, he drifted around corners and turns, on and off the road, on and off the planet at times, Nathan felt. It seemed like they'd been riding a long time, much longer than it had taken to get to the field.

"Are we going in circles?"

"More like rectangles. Should be coming out to the road...now."

They shot over a hill. On the other side, the lights of Makakilo spread out over the Ewa Basin next to Pearl Harbor. Tommy turned on his headlights, slowed the truck slightly, then turned left onto a blacktop road and stopped.

Getting out, both men listened for their pursuer. Hearing nothing out of the ordinary – outside or inside his head – Nathan said, "Close one."

"For sure. Must be losing my touch. Don't usually have to leave a place that fast. Hey, but I got a vine to show for it! I don't think it's got any thrips on it, at least not the kind that bite." He pulled a plastic trash bag from the tool compartment in the bed of the truck and carefully stowed the stolen plant.

"Lot of work to go through for a vine," Nathan observed. "I hope it'll be worth it."

Back inside the truck, they drove south to the H-1 and headed east to Kunia Road, then back to the Wal-Mart parking lot where they'd left Nathan's car more than two hours earlier.

"See you at Lanahino's in the morning?" Nathan asked him.

"I'll be early," Tommy said. "I may go wake him up in a couple of hours, have him get an early start."

"It's a plan. I had a great time tonight, by the way," Nathan joked, trying to act like he hadn't had the tick removed from his tick-tock. "Not sure what kind of story I'll get out of it, but we should do it again soon."

"I'll have my people give your people a call," Tommy responded with a wry salute.

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Neither Nathan nor Tommy looked around to see if they were being observed as they made their switch-off in the parking lot. From behind a two-story wall of glass at the top of the Wal-Mart storefront leading to the rooftop parking lot, a man stood in the darkness watching Tommy's dusty truck pull away from the VW Beetle that Nathan had gotten into.

Shaking his head, he walked to where his own car, a green Honda Civic, was nearly invisible in the shadow of the building. The reporter and the farmer were going to be problems, he judged. They were nosing into too many of the right places too soon. Their fates depended on how many more "right places" they found and how much too soon they found them.

