

## Chapter 1

Lei Texeira pushed away her drink. “Let me get this straight,” she said from between her teeth. “Last night you wowed me with a paranormal stunt on the beach. By means I’ll never understand, you transformed into an African wise woman because . . . you need my help?”

The petite and supernaturally gifted hostess of the Delacorte Bed & Breakfast twirled one of the rings on her manicured hands. Pixie Delacorte wasn’t easily toppled from her three-inch heels, and Lei suspected she was silently amused. They were seated on the back patio of the Bed & Breakfast, the Atlantic’s waves crashing behind them. With the approach of the noon hour, sunbathers were converging on the Isle of Palms Beach.

“I was going for ‘African shaman’ if you must know,” Pixie replied.

“How do you become someone else?”

“How does anyone change? With practice.” The hostess took a sip of her drink. “I assumed there was a better chance of grabbing your attention if I appeared old and wise. Be fair, sugar. If I’d appeared as my usual and admittedly perfect self, would you have stuck around long enough to learn a thing or two about Lowcountry magic?”

Lei grunted. The assumption *was* accurate. She would’ve walked away.

Nothing from last night made much sense, certainly not the handful of glowing shells that had revealed snatches of her future. In stunned silence, she’d watched Pixie—transformed into an old woman the color of ebony, with dozens of cowries woven through the braids spiraling from her scalp—bring the Atlantic under her command. Waves retreated from the seabed in a fabulous column. The waters whirling and dancing around them, Pixie had then revealed tempting flashes of the future Lei would hold once she joined the South Hilo PD in Hawaii.

Recently Lei had graduated from the Police Academy in California. No one finished those grueling months of training with an inclination to believe in magic, or the supernatural, or whatever strange gifts Pixie held at her command. Still, there was no refuting what Lei had seen with her own eyes. Delicate shells glowing with

an unexplainable, inner light. Fleeting images of her future partner on the South Hilo PD, and a murder scene they'd encounter together. And finally the voice, humming through her ears, of the man she'd one day love.

Breaking into her musings, Pixie said, "Well? Will you?"

Lei brushed a frizzing curl from her eyes. "Will I what?"

"Solve a crime. You *are* a police officer. Now that I'm teaching you how to trust your instincts, you're perfectly equipped to crack the case."

"You showed me snatches of my future to hone my instincts?" A less than admirable motive, even though it *was* effective.

"I needed to demonstrate that you should trust them." A hint of triumph flashed in Pixie's expression. "I succeeded, yes?"

There was no glory in denying the facts. She was correct. With the full moon hovering overhead, she'd given Lei a mystical experience to inexplicably bolster her confidence in her ability to excel at police work. Soon Lei would put her talents to the test in the new job in Hawaii.

Despite her better judgment, she heard herself say, "What crime are you talking about?"

"Tuesday night, before you flew into Charleston? The Pirate Necklace was stolen from the Belvedere estate. Worth millions. The police don't have a single lead." Pixie studied her nails, found a chip in the red polish. "Or they have too many leads, which amounts to the same thing."

"Hold on. Who names jewelry after pirates?"

The hostess toyed with the umbrella popping out of her drink. "Nathaniel Belvedere, that's who," she replied tartly, "in 1719. He stole the emeralds from Blackbeard's ship during the blockade of Charleston. Nathaniel was only seventeen, but he was fearless. Already a capable mariner, working the docks and dreaming of becoming a landowner. He went on to build one of the biggest fortunes in South Carolina." Pausing, she surveyed the Atlantic's rippling waves. "Can you imagine? If I'd lived on the Charleston peninsula while pirates were sitting on ships in the harbor, I'd have been beside myself. They were awful men, utterly lawless."

"Blackbeard—seriously? Aren't pirates classic fare in storybooks?"

Pixie's eyes blazed. "Edward Teach was very real, and people did call him Blackbeard. He marauded from the West Indies to the coast of our new country."

Lei surveyed the colorful mansions and pretty hotels lining the beach. "Hard to imagine pirates in a place like this."

"I assure you, they were here. Charleston is one of the oldest port cities in the U.S. Back then, the city was called Charles Towne. The colonists from England and France lived in fear of pirates capturing vessels coming and going from the harbor. Blackbeard was the worst of them all. Held the wealthy for ransom, robbed passengers, and stole whatever booty he found."

"And some kid got aboard his ship?" Lei tamped down her disbelief to give the story a fair hearing. "How did he pull off the stunt?"

"Late one night, Nathaniel Belvedere crept aboard from a rowboat. Sheer luck he wasn't killed on sight. According to Charleston lore, the crew was sleeping off a rum binge. The lookout was a kid Nathaniel's age, forced into service by Blackbeard on a recent foray in the West Indies. Nathaniel helped the boy escape. The boy was so grateful, he told Nathaniel about the emeralds. The pirate had taken the gems from a Spanish nobleman. A whole sack of emeralds, and the largest was the size of a robin's egg. Young Nathaniel couldn't resist the temptation, and he asked the boy to show him the way to Blackbeard's cabin."

"They got past a notorious pirate to steal the gems?" The story was becoming more implausible by the second.

Pixie sent an impatient glance. "Pirate or not, a bottle of rum will put anyone in a drunken stupor. Blackbeard never heard a thing."

Fair enough, and Lei said, "Okay, assuming I believe the gems' provenance, why should I care? If someone lifted the necklace, your local PD will handle the case. You don't need me."

"But we do!" Pixie scooted her chair closer. "Sydney Belvedere is my oldest and dearest friend. We *must* help her. The Pirate Necklace belongs to her stepmother—it's the most cherished heirloom she owns."

"Your friend is helping her stepmother recover the necklace?"

"More like hoping to avoid her wrath if the necklace isn't recovered."

The comment didn't make sense. Why would the stepmother hold Sydney responsible?

Lei was prevented from pressing for a better explanation when the hostess added, "Yes, the police are looking for the thief. The Belvederes have also hired a private detective to make inquiries, a man by the name of Meeks. Neither the police nor Meeks will solve the case. We need a woman's intuition to get to the bottom of this. *Your* intuition."

"The local PD will have women on the beat. If you're looking for the feminine touch, start there."

"They won't have your tenacity, sugar. Or your ability to follow a hunch."