

KIDNAPPED

A Tara Shores thriller

Rick Chesler

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Arizona ❁ Alabama

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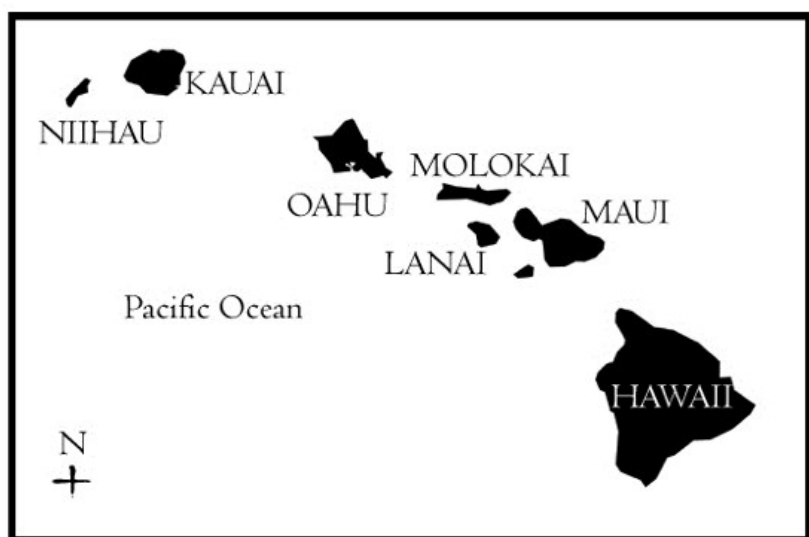
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every one of you.

In wildness is the preservation of the world -
Henry David Thoreau



Part I: Discovery

...GCATITAGC...

*Offshore Waikiki Beach, island of Oahu, Hawaii
9:37 A.M., Sunday, June 14*

Down here an hour already. Where is this damn thing?

Dave Turner took another giant underwater leap as he considered the question. A puff of sand billowed from the impact his foot made as it landed on the seabed. A trail of similar disturbances marked his path for about a hundred feet behind him, the limit of his visibility. He still wasn't used to the heavy boots, but he managed to avoid falling face first into the sandy bottom by extending for balance the metal detector held in his right arm.

Although Dave was an experienced scuba diver, the recent marine biology graduate was unfamiliar with the equipment he now used. Feeling the tug of the yellow air line from the boat anchored above, Dave was reminded that he wasn't scuba diving. He was practicing a form of commercial diving where air was fed to him through a hose from above, rather than carried on his back in a tank. The lead-soled boots kept him upright while he walked along the bottom, sweeping the metal detector in front of him as he went. In his left hand he held a tool known as a sand scoop - a metal pole with a mesh basket welded on one end, for digging objects from the sand.

So far, Dave had found a whole lot of nothing. Not even junk. He was seventy-five feet down, far off the beach. There was not much boat traffic here, the nearest

harbor being a couple of miles away. The outrigger canoes, kayakers and paddleboards were much closer to shore.

Dave gave one sharp tug on the rope that wound around his air tether. The rope was connected to a bell on his support boat's deck, the low-tech signal to his employer to give him more slack. The water gradually became deeper as he walked out to sea away from the boat.

The headphones he wore, which delivered the metal detector's audio signals to his ears, also took some getting used to. But after a while Dave grew to like the cumbersome new gear. It was not unlike being a moonwalker with some exotic space equipment, he imagined, trudging down a gentle slope that he knew eventually led into the serious abyss that was the mid-Pacific Ocean.

Dave felt the air line slacken, increasing his freedom of movement. *At least the old guy hasn't fallen asleep up there*, Dave thought.

It wasn't a comfortable notion. He was alone on the bottom of the ocean, his feet encased in lead boots. For whatever reason, if a problem should develop, he couldn't swim to the surface as he could with the more mobile fins and air tank used in scuba. He had to be lifted to the world above in what they called The Elevator—a stainless steel rectangular contraption that resembled a shark cage, but without cross-bars on the sides.

When he was ready to ascend, Dave was to ring the bell three times, and his boss on the boat would lower the elevator. Dave would then step onto the metal platform and ring the bell again, at which time his boss would start the electric winch that would crank him back up, pausing for decompression at a shallower depth. The system had worked flawlessly on his last two dives. He knew somewhere in the back of his mind that there was a lot to potentially go wrong with this situation, but by thinking of the money he was making, he pushed these thoughts aside.

Dave forced his mind to stay on the detector as he

swung it back and forth across the sandy seafloor. He recalled his recent on-the-job technical training and the importance of keeping the instrument's search coil level above the bottom, at just the right distance. Until he'd met his new boss, Dave had never even touched a metal detector, much less an *underwater* metal detector, but after a few training sessions in shallow water he'd found that the machine wasn't difficult to use. In fact, he'd been surprised to discover that he wasn't even the only guy combing the sands of the world's most famous beach for the valuables dropped by hordes of jewelry-laden tourists.

He'd dug up all the practice targets his boss had thrown into a shallow lagoon for him to find—nails, pop tops, costume jewelry—and after that he'd even ventured out into the surf and pulled up a gold chain. When his new boss said he could keep the find as a bonus, Dave began to wonder what saint he had to thank for this fortuitous turn of events.

Only a month earlier, he had graduated college with no job prospects and nothing in the bank. Students were always cash-strapped, and living in Hawaii was anything but cheap. Dedicated more to surfing and beach life in the last five years than to his studies, Dave was far from an academic star. In fact, he'd barely managed to graduate. The Hawaii job market being what it was, Dave had resigned himself to the reality that soon he would have to return to the mainland—the real world—in order to make a living.

To say Dave had been interested when he saw the job advertisement for a certified diver with a background in marine biology was an understatement. He was taken by surprise when he received an offer of employment a day after responding to the ad.

The gig was only temporary, his new employer was quick to point out. Still, the money would buy Dave at least another three months in the islands for what promised to be only a few days' work. Three more months of surfing,

diving and partying...

The job's objective was simple. His new boss was a rich old guy who had lost the wedding ring he'd had for thirty years while out fishing on his boat. He had to get the thing back or his wife would kill him. He had to at least make an undeniably serious effort, he'd told Dave.

But he was not a diver. "I like being on the water, kid, not in it," he was fond of saying. To this end, he had acquired all of the equipment someone would need to do the job, and then put out the ad for the right person.

He'd wanted a marine biologist because he needed someone who would be comfortable working in the water alone, who wouldn't be surprised by much and who might be able to put local knowledge of ocean currents and shore erosion patterns to practical use. If there was one thing Dave had done a lot of since moving to Hawaii, it was diving. He'd logged more time underwater than in the classroom, a balance which was reflected in his grade point average. Marine biology, Dave had discovered, wasn't really about fish and dolphins and exotic locales — it was more about chemistry, genetics and statistics.

But Mr. Johnson, his new boss, had been suitably impressed. Over a couple of Kona lagers at Duke's on the beach, Dave had convinced the old man that he was right for the job.

He had started actually searching for the ring two days ago. He began by working a grid pattern based around the GPS coordinates Johnson said he took only minutes after he noticed the ring had slipped his finger. Probably because he'd been rubbing suntan oil on his wife, he'd said with a wink. But the elusive ring had refused to make itself known to the detector.

Day number two, yesterday, had been equally fruitless.

Sometime during one of his lagoon training sessions, it had occurred to Dave that if he was the only one down here, then how would Johnson know he wouldn't just pocket the ring if he found it and not say anything? But his

new employer had thought of this also. That's why he offered Dave a hefty finder's bonus if he actually delivered him the ring, in addition to the substantial wages just for trying. "Heck" Johnson had said, "I'll even pay you a nice bonus for *anything* you bring up that's not obvious trash. All I really want to do is show my wife that I'm trying to find this ring. So you just bring stuff up to the boat and let me look at it."

That finder's fee, Dave thought now, as he trundled along the ocean floor, would allow him to remain in Hawaii even longer. Funny how much sentimental value people could place on things, Dave thought, turning to look at a green sea turtle gliding above him. He himself had had a number of girlfriends, but was still nowhere close to getting married.

Find the damn ring, he thought, and went back to work. With the boat floating silently at anchor above, Dave found it eerily quiet knowing there were so many thousands of people just a half mile away on the beach. A pair of spotted eagle rays soared majestically out of sight ahead of him.

Dave was thinking how he wished that this job wasn't only a temporary situation, and that over the next couple of months he would find a way to stay permanently in the islands, when the tone in his earphones suddenly rose in pitch.

He stopped walking.

He moved the search coil a foot to his right. The tone leveled back to normal. He swept the disc back over the spot to his left. He was rewarded with an immediate and decisive pitch increase.

Target detected!

He couldn't see anything unusual about the suspect patch of sand at his feet. There were a couple of seashells—tiger cowries, Dave couldn't help but identify—and some bits of coral rubble, but he couldn't see any obvious metal.

Dave gripped the sand scoop. He was about to bring the scoop down when he heard the faint but unmistakable

sound of a splash from above...

Followed shortly by his support boat's engine starting up.

Dave looked up in time to see something falling toward the bottom. The object was limned against the tropical sun's intense late morning rays, but Dave could see that whatever it was, it was going to land not far from him. About twenty feet.

Was old Johnson playing some kind of practical joke on him, dropping something for him to see? Was it something that would help him with the ring, extra equipment, maybe?

Dave's eyes followed the object's path to the bottom, taking a bit to readjust to the dimmer ambient light at depth. The thing was going to land closer to him than he had thought. Maybe ten feet away.

And then he recognized it. The goofy aloha shirt Johnson had been wearing. His mind even identified the necklace his boss always wore, the classic Hawaiian bone fishing hook.

Johnson!

With a spreading rash of panic, Dave realized that his boss now lay unmoving on the bottom.

He ditched his detecting gear and began a slow-as-molasses run toward the immobile figure.

From five feet away Dave could see that Johnson's throat had been savagely cut. Blood drifted from his open neck. His eyes were vacant and lifeless. His curly mop of gray hair stood on end in the current. He wore a belt strewn with lead weights, meant for divers.

Somewhere in the back of his mind Dave registered that the boat had begun to accelerate, its engine increasing in cadence and pitch.

Suddenly he was knocked off his feet as the craft sped away, severing his air hose.

He struggled to his feet in great heaps of sand clouds and a gush of bubbles that poured from his disconnected hose. The exertion of getting to an upright position left him

wanting for breath.

But he knew that none was available.

He considered yanking off his boots and bolting for the surface. He fought the impulse.

The boots were not designed for quick removal. It would take at least a minute to get them both off. And then he would face an eighty foot swim to the surface, without the propulsion of fins.

Eyes fixed on Johnson's inert form, Dave took the few remaining steps toward his dead boss.

...AATT2CGGC...

Waikiki, island of O'ahu, Hawaii
9:45 A.M.

Special Agent Tara Shores steeled herself for the climate shock as she stepped out of her air conditioned Crown Vic into all 88 humid degrees of the finest tropical heat Hawaii had to offer. A year after being transferred from the Los Angeles field office, she still hadn't acclimated. It wasn't so much the heat, she liked to tell friends back on the mainland, but the constant sameness of the weather—the near *lack* of weather. Excepting the occasional storm, almost every day looked the same as the next.

And not just the weather, either, Tara fumed as she sidestepped past an awestruck tourist marveling from behind his camera about the “quality of light at this latitude.” Her Hawaii cases thus far had been boringly straightforward. Lots of drug cases—crystal meth in particular, a few ordinary bank robberies, a couple of auto theft rings (Tara had been surprised to find such a prevalence of car theft on a small island where vehicles couldn't be driven very far, but learned that they were disassembled and shipped internationally), and a few fugitive arrests. Even without the nationally publicized murder case which was the catalyst for her transfer, she felt like her L.A. casework had been much more interesting and varied.

It hadn't been Tara's idea to come to Hawaii. Barely recovered from a long-time case of hydrophobia, she now found herself living on the most physically remote island on the planet, thousands of miles from the nearest continents. After solving a high profile L.A. murder, she had been told by Bureau higher-ups that she was being considered for Assistant Special Agent In Charge of the L.A. Field Office once the long-time ASAIC retired that year. A slightly more junior agent—a man, Shores noted with disgust—had been picked for the job, and she had been given the ASAIC position at Honolulu. Transfers were commonplace in the FBI, and it didn't bother Tara to relocate, but to her mind it seemed like the Bureau was trying to lower her visibility after receiving so much attention. Honolulu was but a mere FBI outpost compared to the urban command center maintained in L.A.

As Tara emerged from the pack of visitors and stared up at the skyscraper set back from the sidewalk, she focused on the task ahead while she made for the building's lobby. It was a *condotel*, a building containing both hotel rooms and condominiums. Unlike the tourists and the residents around her, she was here to work.

This particular job was the result of months of research into a suspected real estate scam. An unknown former—perhaps even current—employee of the building was suspected of using key copies to gain access to vacant units in order to pose as a real estate agent to “rent” them out to unsuspecting clients. After dispensing bogus information to collect application fees and sometimes a deposit, they simply disappeared, leaving the legitimate owner to deal with the aftermath of ripped-off would-be renters and buyers. An almost identical scam had been reported in Las Vegas—Hawaii's “ninth island” as it was sometimes called due to its popularity with the locals—and Tara had spearheaded a cooperative project with the Vegas field office to take action and compare notes.

Tara passed through the lobby with its walls of volcanic

stone, high ceiling fans and assortment of worn rattan furniture. A mixture of fake and real potted plants provided a modicum of ambience. A young security guard manned a desk in front of a discreet bank of closed circuit monitors. Tara had seen him here on previous visits. He winked at her as she crossed the room, not because he knew of her official capacity, but because he, like many other men, found her slim figure, stylishly cropped black hair and piercing green eyes to be attractive. The lobby was crowded enough that both the wink and the Asian man extinguishing a cigarette in a potted fern went unnoticed.

Tara strode to a bank of elevators. She entered one and pressed the button for floor 43, the highest except for the penthouse. After a ride up that was shorter than the wait for the elevator itself, she stepped into the hallway of 43. Playing the part of a prospective condo buyer from the mainland, Tara clutched an advertisement for the unit and slowly made her way down the hall. She found the unit without any trouble, door open with a few people walking out. She heard one mutter “Way overpriced,” as she passed. Tara continued down the hall until she reached the advertised condo. Her ad claimed it was for sale by a reputable agency, but Tara knew the con-artists often used fake ads to lure their victims. It wouldn't take long to figure out if this was a scam or not, Tara thought as she stepped through the doorway into the condominium.

Three prospective buyers milled about the place while a realtor, a Caucasian woman in her fifties, hovered behind the kitchen counter over a stack of brochures. Tara recognized the woman from an earlier canvassing and knew her to be legitimate, although the realtor had no idea Tara was FBI or that she was under investigation at all. Tara held her ad up to the realtor, doubting she would recognize her from previous visits, each of which was made wearing a different casual disguise—sometimes she wore a hat, sometimes not, sometimes oversize sunglasses, sometimes she was accompanied by a male agent posing as her

husband. Tara disliked this type of role-playing since she herself was single in real life, but her dedication to the job led her to do whatever it took to solve a case.

“Still available?” Tara asked.

“Yes, unbelievably, it still is!”

“I’ll just have a look around,” Tara said. She walked out toward the *lanai*, or balcony, to escape the hard-sell. The place was a small, partly furnished studio condo. Tara had seen all of it and was getting ready to leave when the Asian smoker from the lobby walked in. He ignored the real estate agent’s attempt at pleasantries or information by breezing past her and walking directly out to the *lanai*. The man wore casual business attire, was well groomed, and, if not for his brusque attitude, wouldn’t have attracted undue attention.

He went to the rail to take in the incredible view from the 43rd floor—the tallest building in Waikiki, the realtor was used to boasting. The distinctive outline of the Diamond Head extinct volcano lay before them as if one could walk right into it. To the right lay the glorious panorama of Waikiki Beach and the ocean beyond, transitioning in color from an aquamarine near shore to the deep, royal blue of the open ocean, various boats and watercraft dotting its surface. To the left lay a rain forested mountain range, its tops obscured by clouds. Overhanging everything was a brown haze that some visitors mistook for smog, although its source was a natural one: the sulfur dioxide gas emitted from the active Kilauea volcano on the Big Island, over a hundred miles away.

Tara saw the realtor give an irritated huff at being ignored, before pursuing the man out onto the *lanai*. On occasion the realtors of high-floor units had to deal with tourists who only wanted entry in order to take pictures of the breath-taking views.

The man on the balcony, however, possessed no camera. He had placed both hands on the rail and was now rocking back and forth.

“Excuse me, sir, did you have any questions about the unit?” the realtor asked. The man ignored her and continued his trance-like rocking.

Tara looked at the man's face and knew something was wrong. He was staring ahead but seeing nothing, eyes brimming with tears as he flexed his biceps against the waist-high rail. He wore what Tara judged to be a moderately expensive outfit—light suit jacket, silk shirt without a tie, slacks and brown leather loafers. A jeweled lapel pin was affixed to the jacket.

“Are you feeling alright, sir?” Tara addressed the man from the opposite end of the ten-foot wide *lanai*.

The man tossed his head back and uttered a guttural yell. He flexed his legs.

Tara knew she had to get him away from the edge. She lunged toward him, hands outstretched, grabbing his sport coat just as he jumped over the rail. She clutched the fabric with both hands, wincing as her own shoulders slammed against the rail while the realtor shrieked nonsensically behind her.

“Mrs. Garrish, get building security up here. Tell them to call 911. *Now!*”

If the realtor was surprised that Tara knew her name, she didn't have time to show it. The woman had her cell-phone out and was fumbling with the buttons while Tara gripped the man's jacket as he dangled over the side of the *lanai*, 43 floors above a busy sidewalk.

“I want to die!” the man said in accented English. He began kicking against the side of the balcony while working an arm free of the jacket. “You must let me die!”

Tara tightened her grip on the man's jacket—all that was holding him up. “No! You could hit someone else on the ground. Let me help you up.”

“They will kill my family if I do not kill myself. My death will allow good lives for my children.” The man started to worm his remaining arm free of the jacket. Tara looked into his eyes, where equal parts fear and

determination stared back at her. She guessed his age to be in the neighborhood of forty, about ten years older than herself.

“Who will?” the investigator in Tara couldn't help but ask. She felt her grip on the man began to slip away. She called over her shoulder for help. Heard the trammel of approaching footsteps.

Then the man slid his arm from the jacket and fell away. Tara gasped, spellbound, as gravity did its work. His form seemed to shrink as it plummeted past floors. She was dimly aware of people screaming somewhere behind her—a small crowd had gathered in time to see the man plunge.

“Look out!” she called to the people milling about like ants on the sidewalk below, but her warning was lost in the breeze at this great height.

The man's body impacted an open patch of concrete with the force of a bomb, his bone and blood exploding up from the pavement like a human frag grenade. A woman looked over the *lanai* railing to witness the person's fate and promptly slumped to the floor in a self-controlled faint.

An eerie silence ensued on the balcony during which Tara could hear oblivious vacationers partying on another unit's *lanai*. Then, “What happened? Why'd he jump?” people were asking. Tara realized she was still staring over the rail, holding the man's jacket. She stepped back from the rail and examined the dead man's clothing. Rifling through the pockets, she turned up an advertisement for this unit and one other, on the 29th floor of a different building in Waikiki, but with an open house date for the following Sunday. *He'd looked for a high-floor open house just so he could come up and jump. How bad could his problems have been?* Perhaps police would find his ID on what was left of the clothes he still wore, Tara thought.

Then she saw something on the jacket catch sunlight. The lapel pin: a gold form in the shape of some carp-like fish, its large scales depicted with encrusted rubies. Tara was no gemologist, but she was a woman, and she

recognized a nice piece of jewelry when she saw one. This was not a costume piece. *He talked about providing for his family, yet left behind a valuable piece of jewelry. Stolen?*

As she turned to go back inside, Tara neatly folded the dead man's jacket in preparation for handing it to the police. When she walked back into the condo, an elderly Asian woman who had been looking at the unit pointed at the lapel pin.

“That was his jacket, the man who jumped, right?”

“Yes, I'm holding it for police,” Tara said, thinking she was about to insinuate that Tara was attempting to walk off with the pin.

“It seems the dragonfish did not live up to its name.”

“Pardon?”

The woman pointed at the pin. “This fish— Chinese call it the dragonfish, because of their big shiny scales. They are a common art object in my country, China. Red ones, especially, are thought to bring good luck.”

“So much for that.”

The woman shrugged. “Perhaps this dragon's luck is meant for someone else.”

...GCAT3TAGC...

Clouds of sand mingled with tendrils of blood as Dave neared his boss's corpse. The shock and revulsion of seeing the dead man up close almost made him forget that he still needed to make arrangements for his next breath of air. Only when the body became obscured in sand was Dave startled into action.

That Spare Air thing...

Whenever he was on the boat, Dave had noticed that Johnson always had a small, yellow emergency air canister tucked into his waistband, semi-concealed under his loose fitting Hawaiian shirts. Dave had guessed that the old man couldn't swim, and so carried the device as a precaution. He hadn't wanted to embarrass his new boss if that was the case, so Dave had never asked about it.

Dave had hoped for many things in his life—*please let me pass this class, please let me get a date with this girl, please let me get this job*—but he had never, ever hoped for anything so much as

this moment, when he prayed with every fiber of his being that the little yellow bottle of air would still be tucked into old Johnson's waistband.

His hand was reaching out to the body...touching it...the sand cloud reducing his visibility to near zero, so that he couldn't tell which part of the dead body his hands were on.

The urge to breathe was painful now. Dave knew that the first craving was only a warning—that the human body could endure considerably more than what the brain said was enough. But if there was no air source here, he would not have enough time. There were biological limits which could not be exceeded, physical thresholds that could not be crossed.

Dave fanned at the corpse with one hand, hoping to push suspended sand out of the way and gain water clarity. After a moment he saw a swatch of Johnson's red shorts—purple now due to the color filtering at depth.

He grabbed the shorts with one hand and used his other hand to feel along the waistband.

Nothing.

Think!

Dave knew that the emergency air source was sold with a holster that could be strapped to a calf or thigh. He ran his hands along the length of Johnson's legs.

Denied, again!

True panic welled up within the marine biologist. The first sense of, *This time I've really gotten myself into something I can't get out of...*

He gripped at one of his boots, its tightness

making him want to scream. It would probably take less than a minute to get out of it, but he did not have even thirty seconds per boot plus the ascent time.

How could I ever have agreed to this?

He needed to breathe, yet was still no closer to the surface.

And then the water cleared some more, and he saw it.

A flash of yellow.

Clutched in Johnson's right hand was the slender yellow cylinder that right now represented nothing less to Dave than life itself.

Of course! If Johnson had the Spare Air he would have tried to use it himself as long as he was alive, Dave thought as he scrambled for the life-giving object.

But this brought up a new fear: *What if Johnson had already sucked all the air from the damn thing?*

Dave knew the reputation that the Spare Air's had: better than nothing in shallow water situations, but don't take it too seriously. Filled to capacity at this depth, the little bottle would only provide about three or four breaths of air.

But what he wouldn't give for even one of those now...

He had a few more seconds before his body lost all control...

He was prying the gas container loose from Johnson's hand...*Literally from his cold, dead hand,* Dave somehow managed to think through the fog of his suffering.

And then he had it.

He brought it to his lips.

He had to rip the full facemask part of the way off of his face to be able to insert the Spare Air's mouthpiece between his lips, which caused the mask to flood. But he didn't care about being able to see.

Please let it have at least one breath.

Dave held the device firmly in his mouth and inhaled.