

# MALU FIRE - EXCERPT

*A bomb has gone off at a fund-raiser for the Hawaii Gay Marriage Project, and there's one fatality. Kimo, who's been attending the party, has assumed the role of investigating detective. In this scene from chapter eleven, he and the arson investigator, Mike Riccardi, have just finished getting a rundown from the medical examiner.*

Doc said, "Kimo, you know Mike Riccardi from the Fire Department?"

The fireman stuck his hand out to me and I finally got a good look at him. He was the handsome guy I'd seen the day before, in ballistics.

We shook, as Doc completed our introductions. "The detective's reputation precedes him," Riccardi said with a smile. "I got a whiff of some of his work Monday."

He was a mixed-breed like me, a lot of Anglo and probably some Japanese or Korean in him, but he was movie-star handsome. He had a thick black mustache and wavy black hair that I was sure danced just short of any fire department regulations on length. I could not tell what color his eyes were, but there was a smudge of soot on his left cheek. I had a crazy impulse to wet my finger and reach over and clean him up, but fortunately I restrained myself. At that point, though, I couldn't tell if the hammering in my heart and head were aftereffects of smoke inhalation, or if they came from looking at him.

"So tell me what you think about the fire, Mike," Doc said.

"Let me ask a few questions of the detective here," he said, and there seemed to be a kind of condescension in his voice. It might have been that that I was still dressed in a grimy tuxedo and a pleated white shirt that was now torn and

sooty, the ends of Gunter's bow tie still dangling from my neck. I didn't exactly look like the cream of the Honolulu police department.

Then again, he'd said my reputation preceded me. It was possible that he, like most of the rest of metropolitan Honolulu, knew I was the gay cop. If he wanted a pissing contest, though, he'd learn soon enough that I didn't have to sit down to enter. "What can I tell you that a trained fire investigator couldn't figure out for himself?" I asked.

He raised an eyebrow. "Eyewitness accounts are part of any investigation," he said mildly. "Surely you know that, detective?"

"I'd like to get this guy back to the morgue sometime in this century," Doc said. "If you two dogs could stop growling at each other long enough to get your business with my friend here out of the way."

"Sorry, Doc," I said. "It's been a long day." I turned to Riccardi and gave him a quick.

"You heard one explosion?" I nodded. "Did the fall knock you out at all? Could there have been any other blasts you might not have heard?"

"I was stunned but I wasn't knocked out. There was only one explosion."

"That was my guess based on the fire pattern. Now tell me exactly what it was like when you ran back into the building. Where was the fire? Was it all around you, or contained in one area?"

I took a moment to remember, and in that time I was surprised to see how many levels my mind was working on. Riccardi was talking just like a detective, asking the kind of clear, analytical questions I would have if I hadn't been a witness. It was a little strange to be on the other side of an investigation, even if only for a few minutes. Another level of my brain was collecting memories of what it had been like when I burst into the first floor of the building. And the third level couldn't help noticing how sexy Mike Riccardi was when he was serious.

"The door wasn't hot when I opened it, and I could see clear to the back. Robert, he's the administrative assistant, he was coming in that way and I remember telling him to get out. He was determined to save some files, though. We kind of knocked past each other as I was heading for the stairs."

"So the stairway was clear then?"

"Absolutely. The only fire was in the back corner, where the bathroom was." I closed my eyes and tried to picture it. "I don't think there were any walls left there. I just had the impression of flames." When I opened my eyes again I saw he was taking notes on a secretary's steno pad.

"Good. So go on. You ran in the door of the building?"

"I ran up the stairs. There were two rooms up there, a big meeting room that faced the street and an office that overlooked the back lanai. I didn't go into the front room; I went straight ahead, into the office. I remember I stopped short, almost fell over, because I saw a big chunk of the floor was missing."

He wrote furiously. "Go on."

I looked over at the Doc, who was listening intently. "It was like a picture in a Sunday school textbook of what hell was like." I started to shiver a little.

"It's all right, Kimo," Riccardi said, and he put a hand on my shoulder. "We're almost done."

I took a deep breath. "I made it around to Sandra and I felt for a pulse. She had one, but it was weak. I put her over my shoulder—I guess you know what the fireman's carry is—and I headed back for the door. The footing was harder going out because the floor was hotter, and every time I took a step I thought I was going to slip and go into that pit."

My throat was dry and my lips were parched. Damn, reliving those moments was tough. This must be what victims felt like when I interviewed them.

I licked my lips, took a deep breath, and coughed. Riccardi waited patiently

while I got my breath back. "I made it out to the stairway, but by then the walls were broiling hot and I was afraid the stairs were going to collapse under me. I wanted to go fast but I was afraid to put too much stress on the steps and it was hard to move with Sandra over my shoulder. By the time I got downstairs there were flames everywhere. I saw the door ahead of me and I just bulled my way through."

I looked up at him and smiled. "The last thing I remember is bursting through the door, and my brother was right there, and I knew that he'd take care of things from there. Kind of silly, isn't it?" I shrugged.

"I don't think it's silly at all," Riccardi said.

"So, you guys finished with me now?" Doc asked. "Can I take the body?"

I looked at Mike. "Fine with me," he said, and I nodded along. "Thanks for your help, Kimo. It looks like things have cooled down a little, so I'm going to take a walk through the ashes. I'll let you know what I find."

"I'd like to come with you."

He smiled. "You aren't exactly dressed for it. I think you might be missing your smoking jacket." There was that condescension again.

"I think this tux is beyond repair. I don't care if it gets a little smokier."

"It's not that. You need special gear to walk around after a fire." He looked at me. "You sure you're up to this?"

"I've got a job to do. I'll be up to it."

He nodded. "All right. I've got an extra fire suit in my truck."

"I heard that the Queen of England was touring Disneyland with Prince Charles when he was a little boy," I said, as we walked together. "And he told his mother that he wanted a Mickey Mouse costume. So she bought him a fire suit."

"Very funny," Mike said, as we stopped in front of a black pickup with red and yellow flames in a stripe down the side.

"Guess you want the world to know you're a fireman," I said.

I can't be sure because of the darkness but I think he blushed. "I bought it from another guy. I didn't bother to have it repainted." He had a big locked case that spanned the bed, and all around it were piles of junk. Scraps of wood and metal, broken down tools, what looked like half a surfboard.

"Don't bother to clean too often either."

"Please. I grew up in a house with plastic slipcovers on the sofa and a plastic runner on the hall carpet. My mom used to dust every day. I think I'm in rebellion."

"My mom would have tried that, too," I said, as he opened the chest and rooted around in it. "But she had three sons. By the time I was born she'd pretty much given up hope of keeping the house clean."

He pulled a big yellow suit out and held it up to me. He looked at me appraisingly, checking out my body. I haven't got anything to be embarrassed about there; I keep in good shape, between surfing, roller blading and riding my bike. "I think it'll fit you."

Our eyes met, and I knew. Maybe Mike Riccardi didn't know it himself yet; maybe he knew but he just wasn't admitting it. But in that glance, when our eyes locked on each other, I knew. This hunky fireman with the sexy mustache and dancing eyes was just as gay as I was.