

# TO CATCH THE SETTING SUN

by Richard I Levine

## EXCERPT

When the rock is lifted, the light pours in and  
the vermin will scurry in panic.

They always do.

The ancestors still come to me in my dreams to caution that these parasites are as unrepentant and  
just as predictable  
as they have always been.

Yet we must not become complacent. Vigilance is the key  
or we fall victim to their treachery.

We are close, we are almost there.

Each new day peels away another layer of the façade. No different than me,  
you too can feel the winds of change.

So, take my hand and walk this path with me. Open your eyes and see it as I do.

When we stand tall, strong, and together,  
we will weather any storm.

I take comfort in knowing you also know  
the day will be soon that the clouds will part,  
and our hands will once again be free  
to catch the setting sun.

**T**he reflection from scattered tiki torches competed with the moonlight flickering off the rhythmic ripples rolling across the black velvet lagoon. Gentle trade winds, carrying the sweet peach-like scent of plumeria, teased the palm fronds as easily as they tickled the torch lights—clearly a welcomed reprieve from five straight days of stifling temperatures. A catamaran and a couple of small outrigger canoes, their artfully painted fiberglass hulls made to look like the wood of ancient Koa trees, were pulled up along the sandy shoreline. The heavy beat of drums reverberated off the tall palms and set the tempo for a half-dozen pair of grass-skirted hips dancing on the main stage while vacationers

laughed, ogled, and stuffed their faces with shredded pork, scoops of lomi salmon, steaming flavored rice wrapped in Ti leaves, thick juicy slices of pineapple, papaya, mango, and freshly roasted macadamia nuts that were all artfully displayed on wide banana-leaf- covered centerpieces. They sat cross-legged in the sand, sipping mai tais from plastic cups made to look like hollowed-out coconut shells, lost in a tropical fantasy that came complete with a souvenir snapshot taken with an authentic hula girl—the perfect paradise as portrayed on the website. The noise from the music, chanting, and laughter drowned out the frantic noise of the nearby kitchen, and it drowned out the desperate pleas and painful cries of Makani Palahia from the far side of the beach at Auntie Lily’s Luau Cove and Hawaiian Barbecue.

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The hardened steel of the polished blade sparkled when slowly turned a mere few degrees from left to right, back and forth, as if part of an ancient ritual. Makani’s teeth clinched against the foul-tasting cloth that had been forced into her mouth and tied tight behind her head, each time the knife circled back toward her face, each time passing closer, each time pausing for effect. When rested alongside her cheek, she arched as far as her restraints would allow—the plastic zip ties cutting deeper into her wrists. She let out a muffled cry, begging for the whole ordeal to stop. A sadistic laugh from the shadows made her pray to Jesus for the long-lost comfort of her mother—a comfort stolen by the alcohol and drugs that flowed through West Oahu as easily as the tides that washed away the sandcastles from its beaches. To watch her struggle not to gag as her eyes pleaded for freedom fueled an adrenaline rush that fed the flames of her assailant— strong and powerful now, like a sovereign over all that was to be ruled and judged. The blade was pulled from Makani’s golden-brown skin long enough for her back muscles and her bladder to relax, only to make her arch and plead again when it was returned to her tear-stained cheek.

“This is on you, Princess! Brought this on yourself, yeah? It’s a shame, too, because you’re so young and pretty. Of all the others, you’re the one who looks the most like royalty. The ancients would’ve been proud of you. But they’re not, are they? No, they’re not, and you know they’re not. You’ve disappointed all of us with so many of your sins. Are you ready to confess?”

She struggled to reply, but the rag pressed hard on her tongue.

“What’s that? You say something? You look like you got something to say.”

A faceless phantom-like figure stood tall above her, causing her to squint from the intermittent sparkle of what she thought was a pendant. Makani nodded while she strained to make out the image that seemed so familiar to her.

“I’ll loosen the bandana, but I warn you right now, if you scream...” She saw the knife dance again. “But let’s not think about that, okay? We calmly talk story a little, yeah?”

Again, she nodded, almost afraid to speak now that her lips could move freely. A rush of fresh air filled her mouth and intensified the pungent taste that covered her tongue. Her stomach muscles tightened as she gagged.

“P-please, let me go. I d-don’t know you. I don’t know what you want from me.”

“Let you go? I think, I think maybe after you confess. I think maybe I can let you go after we finish our business, yeah?”

“C-confess? What business? Who are you? What d-do you want from me? Why are you d-doing this to me?”

“Why am I doing? I didn’t pick you, Princess. You made that choice. You made that choice when you picked him and rejected our own.”

“P-picked who? Reject you? I d-don’t even know you. How did I...”

“You judged us!” A heavy hand landed across her mouth. “You judged me and our bruddahs and sistas when you chose an outsider. Judge not, lest ye be judged, and today is...today is your judgment day.”

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Reece Valentine had a hard time keeping his eyes off the third girl from the left—diverting his attention long enough to down another piña colada or attempt to calm the concerns of his fiancée that he wasn’t going to run off into the bush with a native girl. But that didn’t stop him from enjoying the fantasy. With constricted pupils locked onto toned abdominal muscles gyrating within grabbing distance of his imagination, he laughed at the memory of frat house Polynesian-style parties that never came close to the evening’s entertainment.

“Reece, stop staring. It’s embarrassing.”

“Come on, Jules, I’m trying to enjoy the show. We’re on vakay. Where’s your island spirit?”

“I’m trying to enjoy the show, but that’s your fifth drink since the luau started, and you’re beginning to put on a little show of your own. At least stop howling at those girls. People are starting to look at you.”

“Jules, please. I’m just having some fun. It’s not every day we get to enjoy something like this, is it? Seriously, when was the last time we saw a show like this back in Portland?”

“Look, I’m not trying be all salty, but when you ran up on stage to do the hula, did you have to grab that dancer’s waist? And the way you started rubbing on her...geez!”

“Okay, now you’re exaggerating.” He grabbed her and nuzzled her neck.

“Really?”

“It was part of the dance.”

“Okay, so when the male dancers come out and I go running up there, are you going to get mad when I start rubbing myself all over those well-oiled muscular bodies?” She smiled.

“Now you’re the one being silly. Have another drink and chill.”

“Chill? You want me to chill? I think I’ll go for a swim...a naked swim.” She got up and raced down the beach toward the far end of the lagoon.

After a brief moment, as well as a few envious looks from other revelers, Reece went after her.

“Jules! Julie, wait up!” he called, but the alcohol had hindered his ability to maintain a steady balance over the soft uneven contours of the sand. When he fell, he scraped his knee on a piece of coral buried just below the surface. “Damn it! Jules, wait up. I just...damn, I just cut myself.” Halfway between the luau and the end of the lagoon, about thirty yards from a thicket of Kiawe bushes, she turned to see him sitting on the beach, nursing his knee, and quite possibly his ego. Julie Chow started to head back when she heard some rustling and what she thought was a grunting sound coming from the direction of the bushes. She stopped to listen, only to hear Reece call out again. She tried to listen once more but heard nothing.

“Jules! Come back.”

“Why don’t you come over here,” she said and took several steps toward the bushes. “It’s dark and deserted down this way.”

“I hurt myself. Come help me.”

With a few glances over her shoulder, she slowly made her way back.

“Serves you right. I think the ancient Hawaiian gods were punishing you just now because of your disrespectful thoughts about one of their daughters.”

“Stop it, will you? My knee is killing me.”

“Such a baby!” she teased. “I’m surprised you can feel anything with all that native juice in you.”

“Stop scolding and come help me,” he begged. She came close enough for him to grab her arm and pull her down to join him on the sand.

“You’re not hurt that bad, you faker!”

“I know, but I had to do something. I couldn’t catch up to you.” He laughed.

“Because you’re drunk, and when you get drunk, you’re horny as hell.”

“You can say that again.”

“I’m being serious.”

“Listen, I got carried away, and I’m sorry. But you’re right, Jules, I’m horny as hell, and you know I’m not interested in anyone other than you.” He leaned in for a kiss, but she pulled away at the last moment. “Hey!”

“There’s a lot of bushes down there.” She pointed. “Wanna go fool around?”

“What? Get naked here on the beach in the middle of a luau? There’s tons of people here.”

“It’s dark. There’s bushes. No one will see us. No one will hear us. Come on, you afraid?”

“They won’t see us, but they’ll definitely hear us.”

“You mean they’ll hear you. I’ll have you screaming so loud they’ll think you’re being murdered.”

She jumped on top of him, and they passionately kissed in a long embrace.

“I’ve got a better idea.” He pushed back to catch his breath. “Let’s go back to the hotel, and I’ll show you what going native is all about.”

“And give up a chance to get my hands on all those sweaty, muscular Hawaiian men? Race you.”

She took off back to the festivities with Reece in hot pursuit.

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Makani gagged at the smell of the dirty hand that covered her face—removed only when the couple from the luau got far enough away from the thicket.

“That wouldn’t have ended well for those tourists. Too bad. Would’ve made the night a little more interesting. So, where were we? Oh yes, about your choice, Princess.”

“I d-don’t know what you’re talking about. What ch-choice did I make?”

“You are one very pretty wahine, a very pretty woman, you know that? Yeah, you know you so nani, so beautiful, don’t you? I’ll bet you tease men to get things you want, yeah?”

“If you’re g-going, if you’re going to rape me, then j-just do it already. Just do it and g-get it over with. I won’t tell anyone. Just do it and, and let me go. Please? Please, just let me go.”

Save for the low sadistic laugh she had heard before, there was no immediate reply. Her breathing, fast and shallow now, seemed to make the few stars that had been visible through the branches spin wildly and caused her hands, legs, and feet to feel cold—making the hand that inched its way down the outer portion of her thigh feel uncomfortably warm.

For her tormentor, however, there was pleasure in feeling the gentle contours of muscles toned from many hours of hula as rough callused fingers crept over her thigh, past the knee, and down to her ankle. A brief pause to take in the tremble that was felt moving like a wave through her body, watching her lips press together, and her eyes squeeze tight, elicited a child-like giddiness that had long been forgotten.

Makani tightened again from the sandpaper texture of a tongue across her cheek and a heavy breath in her ear. She realized the warm antiseptic scent now lingering on her face was the smell of whiskey. The hand with jagged fingernails carved a return path up the inside of her leg to her knee, then slowed while continuing up the inner portion of her thigh—teasing, threatening. She cried a little harder.

“Did that hurt, Princess? Take it from me, a true warrior princess doesn’t cry. She’s strong, very strong, and she likes it rough.”

“Please, don’t...”

“What, make love to you? You make me laugh. I’d never soil myself on a sinner.”

She felt the grip tighten around her upper thigh, and in equal response her athletic body tightened just as much.

“I like this. I like how your legs feel. So smooth, so soft. I like how they feel in my hands. It’s so...comforting. I bet the boys like touching them too, yeah? I bet you’d really like me to do more, don’t you? I can tell the thought excites you. I bet you didn’t expect my hands to be this strong and powerful, yeah? Do you feel how strong my hands are? It makes me feel so powerful to hold you like this.”

A low-pitched hiss, then a crackled voice momentarily interrupted. “Central to Detective eight-one.”

“You almost tricked me, Princess!” The anger was as sudden and sharp as the sting she felt from the three-inch welt created when those hands were quickly withdrawn. “You almost tricked me. You were trying to confuse me. Deceitful women like you do that all the time, but I know better.” Again, the blade came into view. “You tried to tempt me with your makeup. I bet you do it to make yourself look young and innocent. But we both know better, don’t we? You tried to deceive me, but you’re not innocent, not innocent at all. You do it special for him, don’t you? Yes, I think you did it to please him. You make me angry. You make the ancestors angry.”

“I d-don’t know what you’re t-talking about. I don’t have a boyfr—”

“Liar!” The voice rose, triggering a shooting glance through the branches, down the beach toward the festivities, afraid they might have been heard. “Don’t make me gag you.”

Again, a radio transmission crackled. “Central to Detective eight-one, do you copy?”

“Who are you?” she asked, again getting a glimpse of the pendant, focusing on the letters H O N O L U L U across its face. She realized it wasn’t a piece of jewelry, but a badge. She tried to narrow her focus— her tears making it difficult to read the number. The radio crackled again.

“Lieutenant Kim to central dispatch, be advised eight-one’s radio hasn’t been working properly. You can reach him on his cell.”

She strained to see the face hidden in the darkness, the voice now mocking the radio call.

“Central to Detective eight-one. Where are you, eight-one? Come save the day, eight-one.”

“Dispatch to Kim, copy that, Lieutenant,” came the static-filled reply.

“I d-don’t know you. I don’t know you at all. I don’t kn-know what you’re talking about. Are you HPD? What do you want from me?”

“You know me,” came the whisper, this time placing the sharp edge of the blade across her costume, cutting just enough material on her shoulder to expose her breasts. “Very pretty.”

“You said you were g-going to let me go. I should be d-dancing at the show. I should be there. They’re going to m-miss me. They’re g-going to come looking for me.”

“Nobody’s going to come looking for you, Princess, nobody.”

The blade methodically moved across her flesh— circling, teasing, drawing blood from a shallow incision across her shoulder. At first Makani felt the sting before the warmth of liquid snaked into the

crease of her underarm. Her tears flowed freely now. Adding one more indignity to her suffering, the grass skirt she had always worn with pride was ripped aside, and one more time the knife came to rest across her cheek.

“You know who I am, and you know exactly why we’re here. We all must face judgment for our sins.”

“I don’t know....” She stopped mid-sentence—a dirty index finger pressed to her mouth. She gagged at the vile taste—a cross between a lack of hygiene and her own urine. The finger was forced farther into her mouth and pressed against her tongue. She reflexively bit down, drawing blood and a painful slap to her face. “I don’t know you,” she cried out. “Why are you doing this? P-please let me go! I won’t say anything. I won’t t-tell anyone, I promise!”

“Let you go?” came the angered reply. A vise-like grip squeezed her cheeks, preventing her from speaking. “Not now, damn you! Not after you bit me! Not after you refuse to confess your sins. Do you see how you’ve forced my hand? Now you have to be purified.” Again, her face was slapped.

“I’m sorry, I am. I didn’t mean to bite you. Please? I won’t tell anyone, I promise.” Her eyes, blurred from tears, tried to follow the figure as it moved about— finally catching a glimpse of a face lit by the glow of a freshly lit cigarette. “Oh my God!” She was repulsed at the sight, gagging as the bandana was forced back into her mouth—arching, straining, and kicking against the nylon cable ties when the cigarette was moved closer to the side of her face.

“I know you don’t understand. Nobody does anymore, and that’s the problem. In the old days the people needed to make their peace with the gods so they could be blessed and have a harvest, take fish from the sea, and be protected from evil, from the night marchers, from Pele. Those gods and the ancestors are deeply saddened how our way of life, our history, our culture, and our future have all been dishonored. You, and others like you, have dishonored all of us by mixing pure blood, and there’s only one way for you to be forgiven. You will serve as a message, a warning to others. And with your purification, with your sacrifice, the gods and the ancestors will grant you redemption.”

Makani’s heartbeat pounded in her chest and in her head, making the drums, the laughter, and the applause for the fire-eaters disappear. And just as another cold stinging slice was surgically carved across her throat, she thought she heard her killer recite an ancient prayer while she watched the flickering lights of the luau fade away.