

# NANEA

1941

## The Spirit of Aloha



## Not the Baby of the Family

### CHAPTER 1

**S**unlight slivered through the blinds. Nanea Mitchell stretched, breathing in the sweet outside smells of ginger and plumeria and the savory inside smells of breakfast. Sausage! *Mele* thumped her tail in anticipation.

“Good morning, you silly *poi* dog,” Nanea said, giving *Mele* a pat. She hopped out of bed and turned the wall calendar from October to November 1941. It was Saturday, so Nanea dressed for hula lessons, putting on a sleeveless blouse and a pair of shorts.

Her fifteen-year-old sister, Mary Lou, yawned, loosening her braids as she slid out of her bed across the room. She walked to the vanity, shaking her dark waves over her shoulders, and clicked on her little Admiral radio.

“Your hair looks nice,” Nanea said.

Mary Lou picked up her hairbrush and turned to Nanea. “Let me fix yours.”

“It’s fine!” Nanea leaped out of reach.

“Alice Nanea Mitchell!” Mary Lou scolded, using Nanea’s full name. “Sometimes you are so childish.”

“Not today.” Nanea picked up her *‘eke hula*, a basket for carrying costumes and implements. “See? I’m all ready for hula class.”

Nanea had both sets of wooden dancing sticks. The *kala’au* were the size of a ruler; when she hit them together, they made a *tick-tick* sound like the big clock in her third-grade classroom. The longer *pu’ili* made a happy noise that reminded Nanea of the cash register at Pono’s Market, her grandparents’ store.

That reminded her of something else. “Why can’t I go to work with you after class today?” she asked. “*Tutu* says I’m a big help.”

“*Tutu* spoils you,” Mary Lou answered, fluffing her hair, “because you’re the baby of the family.”

Nanea knew that their grandmother did *not* spoil her, and that she was *not* a baby. But before she could say anything to Mary Lou, their brother David ducked his head into the girls’ bedroom, sending in a wave of Old Spice aftershave.

Nanea noticed the ukulele case in his hand. “You playing today?” she asked.

Seventeen-year-old David worked as a bellboy at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, but sometimes he filled in when one of the musicians was sick, or surfing.

“Maybe,” he said. “I’m a Boy Scout. I’m always

prepared.” When her big brother smiled, Nanea thought he was as handsome as any movie star. “Breakfast is ready. Come on.”

The girls followed him to the kitchen.

“Good morning!” Nanea said, kissing Papa’s cheek. His hair was wet from the shower.

“More like good night for me,” Papa replied. He worked the graveyard shift, so he went to bed after breakfast, which was really his dinner. “Do you like my aftershave?” Papa grinned. “Instead of Old Spice, it’s Old Fuel.”

Nanea had heard that joke a million times, but she laughed anyway. Nothing washed away the smell of oil that Papa got from working as a welder at the Pearl Harbor shipyard. There were so many ships. And planes, too, at Hickam Field next to the shipyard. David said because Pearl Harbor was a big deal in the Pacific, Papa was a big deal in the Pacific. That always made Papa laugh.

Nanea turned to her mother. “Why can’t I work at Pono’s Market? I’m nearly ten.”

Mom tucked a stray lock of hair behind Nanea’s ear. “Don’t be in such a hurry to grow up.”

“Yeah, Monkey.” David waved his fork. “Enjoy being a kid as long as you can.”

“I would love to be nine again,” Mary Lou said. “No responsibilities.”

Nanea frowned. She had plenty of responsibilities! She took care of Mele and set the table and always turned in her homework on time. But Nanea wanted grown-up responsibilities, like working at the market.

"Is that a storm cloud on someone's face?" Papa teased Nanea.

She leaned her head against her father's. His hair was carrot-red and hers was brown; he had blue eyes, she had hazel. The Mitchell kids were all born on Oahu like Mom. Papa had been born in Beaverton, Oregon, far away. He grew up on a farm, not in a city like Honolulu. Despite those differences, Nanea and Papa were very much alike. They loved many of the same things: the funnies, fishing, and dogs—especially Mele. Nanea wrapped her arms around Papa's neck and squeezed two times. That was their secret code for "Buddies forever."

She sat down and poured a glass of fresh pineapple juice. "Being the youngest doesn't mean I can't do grown-up things," Nanea complained. She wondered why her *'ohana*, her family, never gave her the chance to prove it.

Papa smiled. "I remember chomping at the bit to drive the tractor on Grandpop Mitchell's farm. It was so hard to wait until I was thirteen."

"And your grandfather said I had to learn the times tables before I could run the cash register." Mom poured

herself more coffee. "It took a lot of flash cards before I rang up that first sale."

"*Tutu Kane* said you were nine," Nanea said between bites of egg. "My age."

Papa pretended to cast a line. "I hear the fish are biting," he said. "Maybe later you could round up the other two Kittens to catch us some supper." He called Nanea and her two best friends, Lily Suda and Donna Hill, the Three Kittens after the nursery rhyme. "Some fresh fish would be so *'ono*, delicious." Papa waggled his eyebrows, and Nanea had to laugh. When Papa said Hawaiian words, he sounded like a newcomer even though he'd lived on Oahu for years.

"Look at the time!" Mom said. "You girls better scoot to hula class!"

Outside, Mary Lou's rubber slippers slapped against the sidewalk while Nanea's bare feet made soft *pat-pat-pat* sounds. Mele ran behind them. She had come to hula lessons since the day Nanea had started when she was four years old.

At Tutu's, Nanea greeted her grandmother in the traditional way, pressing foreheads and noses together and taking a deep breath. This was the *ha* part of *aloha*, the



breath. The other part, *alo*, meant to share, to be close. Tutu had taught Nanea that this meant they were breathing each other's essence.

Nanea turned her cheek to catch the regular kiss that would follow. Then she skipped off to join Mary Lou and the other dancers lined up outside the *lanai*. The covered porch at the back of the house was Tutu's hula studio.

When Tutu pulled out the *ipu*, gourd drum, everyone quieted. Nanea gathered her thoughts, focusing her heart and her mind on the lesson to come.

"*Makaukau?*" Tutu began every class by asking the dancers if they were ready.

"*Ae,*" the girls answered. Yes.

With Tutu marking time on the *ipu*, the dancers warmed up by practicing all their basic hula steps.

"Very nice," Tutu said. She set the drum aside and put a record on the phonograph. As "Lovely Hula Hands" began to play, the dancers Nanea's age formed their lines and began the hula they would perform for the United Service Organization programs. Tutu's students had been regular USO performers for many years.

Next the older girls danced. Nanea hoped she would someday be good enough to dance a solo, like the one Mary Lou was practicing. Nanea thought her sister was doing the steps perfectly, but in the middle of the song,

Tutu lifted the needle from the record.

"Noelani," she began, calling Mary Lou by her Hawaiian middle name, "you must remember to keep your fingers soft and your back straight." As she placed the needle back on the record, Tutu spoke to all the dancers. "There is no shame in a mistake. There is only shame in not learning from it."

Tutu's corrections never sounded like scoldings. She was a *kumu hula*, a master teacher who had been teaching for many years, just as her mother had taught before her.

Nanea held her head high, honored to carry on the hula tradition that had been part of her family for generations.



After class, Nanea and Mary Lou sat on the front porch with Tutu, waiting for David. It wasn't long before he arrived to give Tutu and Mary Lou a ride to Pono's Market.

"See you later, sis," Mary Lou said.

Tutu smoothed the skirt of her *mu'umu'u* and gave Nanea a kiss good-bye. "Aloha, *keiki,*" she said. "You did well in class today."

Nanea watched Mary Lou climb into the backseat while David held the passenger door open for Tutu. With a wave, David drove off, and Nanea turned and headed the other way, toward home.

If only Nanea was going to the store, too! She would



sort all the penny candy into the right jars while Tutu Kane talked with the customers. Nanea would tidy the colorful displays of produce and dust the shelves of canned goods. She would straighten the bolts of fabric. She'd open the doors for the neighborhood aunties—the older women she'd known her whole life—as they left with their shopping bags bulging with purchases that Tutu had rung up. “Mary Lou would see I’m not a baby anymore,” Nanea told Mele as they walked home. “If only I could help.”

Mele wagged her tail in agreement.

Nanea arrived home just as Mom was taking a batch of guava bread out of the oven. When there was a knock at the door, Mele sang a greeting. *A-roo! Aroo!* Her name meant “song.”

Donna and Lily were at the door. “*E komo mai*, welcome!” Nanea called to the other two Kittens. “Or should I say, e komo meow?”

Lily Suda made a small bow. She was Nanea’s oldest friend, and the Mitchells and Sudas were like family. Nanea called Lily’s parents Uncle Fudge and Aunt Betty, and Lily called Nanea’s parents Uncle Richard and Aunt May. The families lived on the same street, often shared meals, and celebrated holidays together. Nanea and Lily had gone out many times with Uncle Fudge on his sampan, a Japanese fishing boat, to help him catch ‘*ahi* and other

fish to sell. Aunt Betty taught the girls how to fold origami geckos and koi and cranes.

That was one of the best things about living in Hawaii. The islands were like a jigsaw puzzle where people of all different shapes and colors fit together. There were people from Japan, like Aunt Betty and Uncle Fudge, and from Portugal, like their mailman Mr. Cruz, and from China, like Mrs. Lin, who had a tiny crack seed shop where she sold dried fruits. And of course there were *haoles*, like Papa and Donna’s family, who came from all over the mainland.

Behind Lily, Donna chomped on her bubble gum. Donna’s family had moved from San Francisco three years earlier so her father could work in the Pearl Harbor shipyard, like Papa. Donna had walked up to Nanea and Lily in first grade and said, “Hi! What are your names?” After school, Donna had given them each a piece of bubble gum, and that was the beginning of the Three Kittens.

When her family first arrived in Honolulu, Donna had been reluctant to try any new foods. But she soon learned to love Aunt Betty’s sweet rice *mochi*, Portuguese *malasada* doughnuts, and especially Mom’s guava bread.

Now Donna stopped chewing her gum. “Do I smell guava bread?” she asked.

Mom laughed. “I baked two loaves in case some hungry Kittens wandered by.” She cut three thick slices while

Donna threw away her gum.

The girls took the bread out on the porch so that they wouldn't wake Nanea's father, who was still sleeping.

"How was hula class?" Lily asked. She couldn't take Saturday morning lessons with Tutu because that's when she had Japanese language class. But Lily liked dancing as much as Nanea did. Donna had tried taking hula lessons, but she decided she wasn't much of a dancer.

"It was fun," Nanea answered. "Tutu started to teach us a new dance to perform at the USO Christmas show next month." Then Nanea looked at Donna. "What do you have there?"

Donna lifted her arm and a newspaper slid out.

Nanea caught it before it fell in the dirt. "Isn't this your dad's?" Nanea had never met anyone who was so interested in the news. Mr. Hill was always talking to Papa about the war in Europe.

Donna took another bite of bread. "He saw something we'd be interested in."

"What?" Lily asked.

Donna shrugged. "He said we'd find it."

Nanea opened the paper, skimming headlines about battles in Germany and Russia.

"It seems like everybody's in the war except America," Lily said.

"Skip those war stories," Donna said. "They don't have anything to do with us here on Oahu."

Nanea pressed her finger to the paper. "A contest!"

"The Honolulu Helping Hands Contest," read Lily.

"That must be what Dad meant," Donna said.

"The grand prize is a brand-new Schwinn bike," Nanea added.

Donna whistled. "That *is* interesting."

"What are the rules?" Lily asked.

"We have to do these four things by December fifteenth to win the bike," Nanea explained, pointing to the list.

"Enter to win, you mean," said Lily.

Donna counted on her fingers. "That's a month and a half from now. We'd have to check off one thing about every two weeks."

Lily leaned over Nanea's shoulder. "The first one's a snap: Do a good deed for a stranger. But look at the second one: Show appreciation for your family." She made a face. "That means I'd have to do something nice for Tommy." Even Nanea had to admit that Lily's five-year-old brother was a handful.

"How can a kid make a difference in the community?" Donna asked, reading the third requirement.

"What about that last task: Turn trouble into triumph?" Lily said. "I don't know what that means."

Nanea thought about one of her troubles. Her family always treated her like a baby. How could she turn *that* into a triumph?

Donna shook her head. "This seems too hard."

"I agree," Lily said. "Even if you did everything, you might not win the bike."

Nanea pictured herself looking so grown-up on a shiny new bike. *Wait a minute!* Nanea thought, jumping up. *Doing everything for the contest and winning that bike would surely prove that she wasn't a baby!*

"I'll be right back." Nanea ran inside, quickly returning with a piece of paper and a pencil.

"What are you doing?" Lily asked.

"I'm copying down the rules." Nanea smiled. "I'm going to enter this contest. And I'm going to win!"

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