

# Strangled by Wild Geese

by Laura Martin

No one ever thought Aunt Isabelle would win the lottery. She played it for years and never won a dime and suddenly here she was a millionaire. She decided to throw a luau in her back yard and she invited half the neighborhood. She served expensive Champaign and caviar along with exotic Hawaiian cuisine. Aunt Isabelle looked young and alive that night despite her age of eighty-five. Her silver hair was done up with a hibiscus flower behind her ear and her bright blue eyes danced with merriment. Everyone stayed up all night, celebrating into the early morning hours.

Tara got home around one am from the luau and she fell asleep immediately. When the phone rang shrilly at four am, Tara crawled out of bed and floundered her way across her dark bedroom until she found the phone.

“Hello?” She asked sleepily while glancing at her alarm clock to see what time it was.

“Tara, this is Isabelle’s neighbor Mrs. Stevens from next door.”

“Is something the matter with Aunt Isabelle?” Tara asked snapping awake immediately.

“Well I don’t know for sure. You see I just got up for a drink of water and I saw that your Aunt’s lights were still on from my kitchen window. I was about to go back to bed when I heard a sudden shriek and then the lights went off. I tried to call your aunt, but no one answered the phone. I was worried and your aunt had given me your number in case of an emergency.”

“I’ll be right over. Thank you for calling Mrs. Stevens.” Tara hung up with the older woman who was known to be quite a gossip and a penny pincher. She’d been at Aunt Isabelle’s luau putting away as much caviar as she could hold.

Tara threw on a pair of jeans and a black short sleeved shirt. Her short black hair she

threw up into a quick ponytail, not wanting to waste much time. Tara ran out into the hazy summer morning and jumped in her car. She drove quickly to her aunt's house and only exceeded the speed limit by ten miles.

The thought of having anything happen to Aunt Isabelle scared Tara deeply. Aunt Isabelle had practically raised her while she was growing up. She never tired of the endless games of Barbie and hopscotch that Tara used to beg her play. Since both of Tara's parents had passed away, Aunt Isabelle was the only family she had left beside her second cousin Angela and the black sheep of the family, Uncle Terrance.

Tara pulled into her Aunt's driveway and jumped out of her car. She could see the living room lights on from next door and Mrs. Stevens standing in the window watching. Tara waved briefly and then ran up to her Aunt's front door. She tried the knob, but it was locked. Tara bit her lip anxiously and ran around the house looking for an open window. As she ran past the bathroom window she glanced up and noticed it was partially open. Aunt Isabelle had always liked plenty of fresh air while she showered.

With great difficulty and little expertise, Tara managed to climb her way through the bathroom window and then fall out of it onto the floor. Tara sat up and rubbed her elbow which was throbbing from hitting the toilet and her knee stung from scraping the shower stall.

The pattering of little feet made Tara look up. Her aunt's fat cat George stood in the bathroom door and he made a low guttural moan and then quickly ran down the hall. Tara pulled herself up and half limped down the hall after the orange cat. When she came around the corner to the living room she stopped and her blue eyes opened wide in shock. Aunt Isabelle lay on the floor with her favorite Wild Geese quilt rapped around her body. Aunt Isabelle was dead.

## Chapter Two

Tara's breath caught in her throat in a choked gasp. She fell forward onto her knees beside her aunt's body and shook her head. Aunt Isabelle couldn't be dead.

Tara gently pulled the quilt away from Aunt Isabelle's body. The quilt's edge was wound tightly around her aunt's neck and her face had an ashen pallor. Tara reached to brush away her aunt's silver hair from where it had fallen across her face and she brushed her aunt's neck. Tara gasped when she felt a slight pulse. Aunt Isabelle was alive!

The next couple of hours were a continuing nightmare for Tara as she called 911 and the police and an ambulance showed up. The paramedics hurried inside when Tara met them at the door. She watched them place a tube down her aunt's throat to help her shallow breathing and then they began to prepare her to be transported to the hospital.

"You can ride with us if you want." The older paramedic with graying hair offered kindly before they left.

"No, I'll drive over as soon as the police are finished with me. Thank you for all your help." Tara watched anxiously as the ambulance left and then she quickly answered the policeman's questions.

"Was anyone in the house when you entered?" A young blonde police officer with a narrow face asked while the other officer searched the premises.

"No."

"Have you touched anything in the house?"

"No. Well yes, I climbed in through the bathroom window because the front door was locked when I got here."

The young police officer asked a number of other questions including asking for Tara's phone number for a date, which she politely declined to give him. When he was finished with her and his partner began to dust for fingerprints they allowed her to leave.

Tara took a last look at the disheveled room and noticed all the drawers hanging open and pillow cushions ripped apart. The house had been ransacked. Tara wondered briefly where Aunt Isabelle put all the money she'd won from the lottery.

When Tara got to the hospital the nurse would only let her stay with her aunt for a few minutes. Tara was relieved to see her aunt had a little more color in her face and she was

breathing more steadily on her own.

“Aunt Isabelle I’m here.” Tara whispered as she picked up her aunt’s hand and kissed it.

“Tara,” Aunt Isabelle’s voice was barely above a whisper, “lilacs.” Her blue eyes fluttered open only momentarily before closing again. Tara stood speechless and wondered what this new clue could mean.

The next morning Tara drove over to her Aunt’s house to feed George and straighten up the place, now that the police were finished with it. Tara found George sitting by his empty blue bowl in the kitchen. He stared fixedly at her until he had fresh water and a bowl full of tuna flavored cat food. Then he gobbled it down as if Aunt Isabelle hadn’t been feeding him caviar only last night.

When Tara left the house she locked the door securely. As she walked to her car she saw her aunt’s neighbor from across the street sitting on his front porch. She decided to go over and talk to him.

“Hello, Mr. Casper.” Tara called to the elderly balding man. He was a widower and Aunt Isabelle had always described him as an old windbag.

“How is your aunt doing?” Mr. Casper asked before gesturing for Tara to sit in the other deck chair. He waited for her to speak with his small black eyes watching her every movement.

“I called the hospital this morning and they said she was doing better, but it will be a few days before she leaves the hospital. Mr. Casper the reason I came over was to see if you saw or heard anything last night when my aunt was attacked.”

“I couldn’t sleep very well last night and I came out on the porch for a cigarette. I saw a brown van pull up and a man went up and rang your aunt’s bell. She let him in for a while before she threw him out. He shouted at her something about she was a miserable relative and see if he

ever talked to her again. He appeared to be drunk and kind of staggered back to his van and left.”

Tara listened in troubled silence. She knew the man in the brown van to be her Uncle Terrance. He'd probably come over begging for money to buy another beer when he ran out. Uncle Terrance might have been a drunk, but he was Aunt Isabelle's brother and not a murderer.

“Didn't you hear me, Tara?” Mr. Casper's voice interrupted Tara's thoughts. “The police believe that your aunt was attacked by that man. He could get charged with attempted manslaughter!”

## Chapter Three

Aunt Isabelle was steadily getting better. Tara worried about what would happen when her aunt got out of the hospital. Would the attacker try again? The police didn't think so. They arrested Uncle Terrance the night before and were holding him until Aunt Isabelle was well enough to talk. The police expected her to be able to talk later that day, since her doctor decided she should be ready to go home in a day or so.

As Tara drove to the hospital to see her Aunt that evening, she made a mental list of the events that had been happening for the last couple of days. As she went over everything she decided something was bothering her, but what? Mrs. Stevens said she had gone to her kitchen to get a drink of water. She heard a shriek and then the lights went out at Aunt's Isabelle's house.

She remembered seeing Mrs. Stevens watching from her living room window which

faced her aunt's living room. Tara's heart quickened as she realized what was bothering her. Mrs. Stevens' kitchen window didn't face her aunt's living room windows, where she had been found after the attack. Mrs. Stevens had lied, but why? Was she covering for someone or was she afraid of what she had seen?

Tara went straight up to her Aunt's room when she reached the hospital. She was surprised to see her Cousin Angela walking down the hall when she got there. Angela was the opposite of Tara in every way.

"Angela, you decided to stop in on Aunt Isabelle. That was nice of you." Tara faced Angela in the hall and watched her cousin's green eyes cautiously waiting for her reply.

"Why wouldn't I stop in now that she has won all that money? I don't know why *you* take so much trouble; you were always Isabelle's favorite. You're sure to be written into her will. I have to work my way for it."

"Isn't life cruel?" Tara said icily before brushing past her cousin without a backward glance. Let her cousin try to plot and cajole her aunt. Aunt Isabelle wasn't born yesterday. She could tell who really loved her and who just was looking to make some money.

Tara went into her aunt's room and was surprised to see her sitting up in bed with a book in her hand. She looked up from her reading and her face lit up.

"Tara thank God you're here. I've never been in such a horrible place in my life." Isabelle proclaimed loudly. "This horrible woman who calls herself a nurse refuses to bring me some real food instead of the gruel they have been feeding me." Aunt Isabelle shook her head and then leaned forward and held out her hand. "Come sit down and tell me how George is doing."

Tara sat on the edge of her aunt's bed and took her hand in hers. "George is doing fine.

I've been over to feed him everyday and he misses you terribly. I'm so glad to see you are doing better."

"Yes, I was lucky I suppose. They didn't find what they were looking for." Her aunt settled against her pillows and then she looked concernedly at Tara. "Or did they? Tara, where is my Wild Geese quilt?"

"It's folded over the couch where you normally keep it. I put it there after the night you were attacked. Why would anyone want to kill you for an old quilt though?"

"Tara I am going to tell you something that is extremely confidential. Promise me that you won't tell anyone?" After Tara nodded her head, her blue eyes slightly puzzled, her aunt went on. "I was a little girl during the Depression, but I still remember the way my father lost everything. He never trusted banks again and neither have I. After I won the lottery I asked myself where I should hide my money. It needed to be someplace convenient, where I could get at it easily."

Aunt Isabelle chuckled and then she leaned forward her blue eye's dancing. "I hid most of the money in the quilt." She whispered into Tara's ear. "I had just finished sewing the last bill into the quilt the night I was attacked."

Tara stared at her Aunt in amazement. Who would have guessed Aunt Isabelle hid the money in an old quilt that she'd owned for years? "I never would have thought of that. Apparently who ever attacked you didn't either, because your quilt is still at your house."

"Tara it's not safe there. Please go get it tonight and bring it to me here. I won't sleep a wink until I know it's safe." Aunt Isabelle gripped Tara's hands anxiously until she finally nodded.

Tara left immediately to go get her aunt's quilt. As she drove in the fading evening light

she wondered for the hundredth time who had attacked her aunt and where did the scent of lilacs fit it? If the attacker smelled like lilacs it couldn't have been Uncle Terrance. Only a woman would wear lilacs, Tara mused to herself, unless Uncle Terrance was a cross dresser.

When Tara unlocked the door to her Aunt's house she closed it behind her quietly. She realized at once that the dark silence around her was too quiet. Where was George who greeted everyone at the door and why did she suddenly hear a floorboard creak from the back of the house?

## Chapter Four

Tara stiffened when she heard the floorboard creak from the back of her aunt's house. The hair stood up on the back of her neck and she shivered violently when she felt a cool draft come from a window that shouldn't be open. Someone was in the house. Tara looked around for a weapon of some sort. She frowned as she glanced around her Aunt's living room. Cushions or cheap plastic picture frames weren't going to do her any good.

Tara spotted her aunt's quilt still folded on the couch. If she could just grab the quilt and get out then she could run over to Mrs. Steven's house and call the police. Tara began to take a step forward when she heard another squeak of the floorboards coming closer.

With her heart pounding fiercely, she dashed across the living room and was just about to snatch the quilt up when a figure ran around the corner. Tara briefly smelled the scent of lilacs before she felt something solid hit the side of her head. She fell to the floor and felt dazed with pain that throbbed in her temple.

When Tara's mind had cleared enough, she remembered she was in danger, and peered

into the darkness of the room. Her eyes fastened onto a pair of dark brown eyes and pale white skin. Tara's focus adjusted to the dark and her blue eyes widened as she stared at Mrs. Stevens standing in the living room with a little gun in her hand.

"I wasn't expecting you here tonight." Mrs. Steven's said her voice leathery. "Let me guess, your aunt sent you over to get the money. She was always a little too greedy or else she would have considered that she was sending you into danger."

Tara swallowed nervously and sat up. "I came over here to feed George. My aunt isn't well enough to talk yet." Tara hoped the ruse would work. Her eyes never left Mrs. Steven's crazy stare.

"Liar," She hissed vehemently. "I called the hospital today and enquired after your aunt's health. I told them I was an out-of-town relative and couldn't make it down to see her myself. The nurse told me she was doing better and was talking just fine. Now where is the money Tara?" Mrs. Stevens took a step forward and waved the gun menacingly at Tara. She wondered briefly if Mrs. Stevens even knew how to use that gun, but the thought was inconsequential, because her life was still in danger.

The phone suddenly rang piercing the silence. Tara and Mrs. Stevens both looked at it and Tara felt a brief glint of hope. Was Aunt Isabelle trying to call her? When no one answered and she couldn't get Tara on her cell phone would she worry?

"Did you try to strangle my aunt?" Tara asked trying to take Mrs. Steven's attention away from the phone.

"Yes, it was me. Your aunt threw that big party and flaunted all the money she won, while I have nothing. No family, no wealth, only my social security income that doesn't buy me nearly anything. It's not even enough to live on comfortably." She said bitterly, her face twisted

into a cruel hateful mask. “That money should have been mine. I deserve it. Now you’re going to tell me where it is.” Mrs. Stevens waved the gun at Tara again.

“Why do you think Aunt Isabelle told anyone where her money is?”

“You know where it is!” Mrs. Stevens screamed madly. Tara realized that she was staring at a woman who had gone over the edge. “Show me where the money is!”

Tara stood up slowly and tried to ignore her throbbing headache that threatened to overwhelm her. If she wanted to get out of this alive she would have to keep her mind clear and focused. Tara gestured to the hall and spoke shakily, “It’s hidden in the kitchen. I’ll show you.”

“Go on.” Mrs. Stevens jerked the gun towards the hall and Tara stepped in front of her and followed the hall to the kitchen. “Well where is it?” Mrs. Stevens asked; her voice abnormally high pitched.

“It’s in the freezer.” Tara replied watching the mad woman’s every move, looking for a chance to escape. Tara opened the freezer door and gestured towards the back.

Mrs. Stevens in her haste forgot to watch Tara as she started to dig through the freezer looking for the money. Tara didn’t miss a second. She bolted from the kitchen and ignored the angry screams when Mrs. Stevens didn’t find the money. Tara grabbed the quilt and ran out the front door breathing heavily and her body shaking in fear.

Just as she rushed out the door she heard a shot. Tara dropped to the ground and looked behind her. Mrs. Stevens stood on her aunt’s front porch and was raising her gun to shoot her. Tara closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath thinking it was her last. When she heard the shot, but felt nothing, she opened her eyes.

Mrs. Stevens was lying on the porch. Her hand listlessly dangling over the step close to the gun she had held. A police car was pulled up to the curb and two officers jumped out. One

checked Mrs. Steven's body while the other ran over to Tara.

"Are you alright?" The officer asked. "Is there anyone else inside?" Tara shook her head slowly and then looked down at the quilt she held.

"Officer, do you have a knife I could borrow?" Tara asked.

The police officer hesitantly handed her a pocket knife and Tara slit the center of the quilt open. Hundred dollar bills peaked out from inside the fabric and Tara shook her head with a wiry grin. Aunt Isabelle had really done it this time.

"Officer, can I go into the house? I have to look for an orange cat and I need to call my aunt."

"There's a cat sitting at the front door right now. Is he yours?"

"No, he's my aunt's." Tara replied with a grin because the case was solved, Aunt Isabelle was out of danger, and George was still in one large piece.