

*Kirby Wright*  
**The Kaiser Blueprint**

**M**Y OLD MAN pushed himself to succeed in big ways, as if settling for a lawyer's life diminished his chances of leaving a mark. Some of his pushes were noble, such as helping find the money to build the USS Arizona Memorial and advising the displaced farmers of Waiahole-Waikane. His role model was Henry Kaiser. He'd admired Henry since his days building the Hoover Dam and then war ships for the US and Britain. Did my father's famous client make him feel small? Kaiser had built his own line of cars after the war while Daddy studied law at Harvard. I think my father wanted to be considered more of an innovator, like the character portrayed by Gary Cooper in *The Fountainhead*. I'd overheard my mother telling the Star Of the Sea priest during Confession that her husband worked in a salt mine and guzzled gin martinis to calm his nerves. Once she'd locked him out of our home. He was violent at times and she learned to dodge confrontations. I was no stranger to the belt. He'd strapped me at age three for clogging the toilet—the prong on his buckle gouged my legs and blood splattered the hallway as I ran.

One Sunday after Mass, we headed east toward Koko Head in the family Olds. I hunkered down in back on the bench seat alongside Barry, my big brother. We were less than a year apart. Boston relatives called us Irish Twins. My mother was beside Daddy. I sat behind her. She rolled down the passenger window and a whiff of her gardenia perfume made me sneeze.

Barry cranked open his window. So did I. The aroma of mangoes filled the air, even though most locals had picked their trees empty. We sped by the Ranch House Restaurant in Aina Haina, a western-themed restaurant with a prairie schooner out front. The road meandered through coconut groves, kiawe, and pickleweed flats. Cement aqueducts captured the mountain water and held it in pools so it wouldn't flood the road. The brackish water smelled like rotting fish. Most of the roadside homes appeared small and ordinary. There were neither sidewalks nor streetlights. Telephone poles leaned above rooftops. A local man picked seaweed out of a fishnet flung over a laundry line. Children hid behind hibiscus and hala trees playing hide-and-seek.

Barry slugged my shoulder.

"Owie!" I said. "What's that for?"

"For fun," he smirked.

My brother took after my mother with his blond hair, green eyes and refined nose. Uncle Bobby, my father's half-brother, had said I was a dead ringer for my old man. I shared his brown hair, olive complexion and broad nose.

The wind howled through my open window. I smelled burnt diesel.

A deep pink Jeep sporting a Hawaiian Village Hotel logo zipped past us.

"My," my mother said. "What a lovely color."

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"Mrs. Kaiser insisted on pink," Daddy laughed.

We reached the Hawaii Kai beachfront. A pair of pink boom cranes stood between hills of white coral. One appeared to be idling because there were puffs of black exhaust coming from the operator's cab. Sometimes the construction boss kept machinery running all night if the crew had trouble starting it. The cranes had giant hooks hanging from their pulleys. The coral hills seemed on fire as the trades kicked up plumes of white.

There was a bay beyond the cranes. Trucks and end loaders were scattered on the far side of the bay. A floating tube supported by pontoons extended from shore to a cutter dredge with a pink cabin. The cutter mouth was lined with jagged teeth. Daddy had told me Kaiser was carving safe passage through the barrier reef so boats and small ships could trek to shore from the deep and moor in the manmade lagoons. More trucks and heavy machinery were working the land around the lagoons to make room for more houses, a golf course and a shopping center.

My father had a hard time keeping his eyes on the road while checking out the shorefront. "Kaiser's a genius," he said.

"How come?" Barry asked.

"He's creating a masterpiece from nothing."

"Doesn't look like nothing to me," I quipped.

My father's bifocals were slipping. He pushed them back with his thumb and gazed back at me with a scowl. "Whacha talkin' about, Kirby?"

"I dunno."

"Henry took a useless fishpond and plans on turning it into something good."

"How is it good?" Barry asked.

"You boys are dunces," Daddy snarled. "Kaiser's constructing an oceanfront village for thousands to enjoy."

"Hawaii Kai will be magnificent," my mother said. She usually went along with whatever the big kahuna said, especially when the topics were law, development and finance. But the one thing she hated was his love for the Republican party. Her parents were lifelong Democrats and she'd confessed to me she had a crush on JFK; she couldn't stop crying the day the President died.

We took the exit for Portlock Road and cruised past monster homes. Daddy said the ones on the right hugged the coast and most had massive pools. A few sported tennis courts. Those on the left were in various states of construction. Workers hustled building lava walls, installing fences, and nail-gunning tiles to roofs. My father pulled over and parked beside a sprawling one-story with a flat roof, white lattice walls, an iron gate with a warrior shield, and a plumeria grotto.

"This is it," Daddy announced, "the Kaiser mansion."

"Wow," my mother said, "I wish we could take a look inside."

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"Is Henry serving lunch?" Barry asked.

"Dream on," I told him.

My father studied the mansion as if trying to discover some secret Kaiser had built into it. There was a futuristic feel to the property but it wasn't warm. It had a cold edge like a razor blade.

On the drive home, I thought about the hurdles my old man had cleared despite not having a mother or a father. I could sense him plotting a big move that would make Harold S. Wright a household name in the islands. He was driven in ways most men weren't and I hoped some of his grit would rub off on me. Kaiser was his blueprint. I knew he'd attempt something bold and unforgettable before he was through.