

Big Island Blues

A McKenna Mystery

Terry Ambrose

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A painting of three mountains inspired Terry Ambrose to write his first short story when he was a child. The painting was titled “The Three Sisters” and the story, which he called, “The Great Spirit,” was about how the sisters angered a powerful god, who then transformed them into mountains.

Terry started his business career skip tracing and collecting money from deadbeats. During his first day on the job, he learned that liars come from all walks of life. He never actually stole a car, but sometimes hired big guys with tow trucks and a penchant for working in the dark to “help” when negotiations failed.

Much like his protagonist in the McKenna Mysteries, Terry is a baby boomer, has a quick wit, and likes to follow a hunch. He and his wife live in Southern California where they run their own small business. Terry enjoys walking, swimming, and writing. In addition to working on his next novel, Terry writes real-life scam tips, interviews authors, and does book reviews on his website at TerryAmbrose.com.

Stay in touch! Get Terry’s monthly newsletter, “The Snitch,” for scam tips, recipes, contest info, and more. Read the latest issue at TerryAmbrose.com.

CHAPTER ONE



Island time. Anyone who's ever visited Hawaii gets the joke. This is the land that time ignored. Sure, we've got all the modern amenities right down to free wi-fi and the latest kick-your-ass-into-the-ether illegal drugs. We who live here, the *kama'aina*, sometimes joke about island time.

The truth is, it drives the tourists nuts because they've only got a few days here in paradise. But, even those born and raised here like my best friend Alexander see the downside of "no worries" under the right circumstances—like when his sister called four hours ago and begged him to catch the next flight out of Honolulu to the Big Island.

The big guy, as I sometimes liked to call Alexander, sat next to me in Seat 11B. I'd snared the window seat, which put him in the middle. Miles below Hawaiian Airlines Flight 120 to Kona, the blue Pacific lazied along as we rushed to finish our complimentary juice or water in less time than it would take to run the hundred-yard dash. I'd downed my little carton of modified corn syrup flavored with real guava juice in three swigs. Alexander hadn't touched his. He hadn't even wanted lunch, which confirmed that his laid-back front was for my benefit only.

"She'll be fine, Alexander."

He stared at me. "You serious, brah? Andi's gonna get the break of her life in a few days.

Now she disappeared. McKenna, that ain't right."

The flight attendant meandered through the cabin, her smile and open plastic bag signaling us it was time to discard our trash in preparation for landing. I held out my neat little package of napkin stuffed into juice container stuffed into the plastic cup, hoping Alexander would pass it along. "You mind?"

When he didn't respond, the flight attendant extended the bag. I reached across him, but he glanced down, took the package from my hand, tossed it in. He said, "Sorry, I was thinking 'bout Andi."

"We'll find her." I tried to sound upbeat, but the reason I'd been asked to drop everything and come along had nothing to do with my sunny disposition. No, I was the guy charged with finding Andi Kapono. Age: 22. Occupation: jazz singer. Reason for disappearance: unknown. Time missing: two days. Reason her mom hadn't called the police: hell if I know.

The burden weighing on me was certainly no less than what Alexander felt, but on this trip I was the expert. The one who, if Andi didn't come home safe and sound, would take the blame.

Out the window, the first signs of the Big Island came into view. Today, a mixture of volcanic gasses spoiled the otherwise pristine classic island coast. "Hazy today," I said. "The trade winds must be blowing the vog northeast."

Alexander leaned across me and pursed his lips. When he sat back in his seat, he said, "You using a belching volcano as an excuse to go home?" He gave me a weak smile. "You try to weasel out of our deal and I gonna tell all your friends McKenna's a welsher. No. Can't do that.

You don't got no friends.”

“Ouch,” I said.

His winced and his smile fell away. “Sorry, that was a low blow. You really need to get out more. Make some friends. Maybe find someone.”

I wasn’t about to add to Alexander’s burden by reminding him that I couldn’t “meet someone” while I was helping him find his missing niece. “Maybe I should just get a poodle. Would that make you feel better?”

“You got a no pet policy, remember? You need someone who gonna talk back and not make you carry a pooper-scooper. Once we find Andi, we gonna have fun. You gonna meet my sistah and her soon-to-be-famous daughter. Benni and me talk on the phone, but we ain’t been together in years. Andi’s my niece, McKenna. I wish I didn’t have to drag you into this. Maybe she just met a guy, yah? Maybe . . .”

I held up a hand. “It’s okay. I want to help. I’m happy to help.” I just wished I understood why the cops weren’t doing that. Once again, I hoped I could break the dark mood hanging over my friend. I used my best John Wayne drawl and dragged out the words. “Pilgrim, once I find your little niece, I’ll rope her in and carry her back whether she likes it or not.”

“You just a little skinny guy, McKenna. How you gonna pick up a hundred and twenty pounds. You gonna hurt yourself. Mo’ bettah you just ask her real nice like.” He paused for a second, then smiled. “*Da kine* world-class music this weekend, yah? No?”

I laughed and Alexander narrowed his eyes as he watched me with a “now what” look. He’d

completely missed my impression of The Duke, but I actually understood what he meant. It was worth trying to explain. I said, “You know, ‘da kine’?”

“Tough one for haoles.” He winked and smiled at me.

“Tough?” I shook my head, grateful for the chance to leave the Andi subject behind for a moment. “There’s nothing like it in the English language. That word blows the mind of every tourist who tries to understand it.” Just like a chameleon, context was everything for “da kine.” In this case, Alexander meant we were going to hear a lot of world-class music. He could just as easily have meant only a little—or great—or something else. Or, none at all if I didn’t find his niece.

Alexander gave me a mock scowl. “Like I said.”

“*Ohana*,” I said. “That’s what I need is family.”

“You got ohana, McKenna.” Alexander put a hand on my arm and squeezed. “Me, Kira. Once you meet my sistah, she gonna be in your ohana, too.”

I felt a bit of moisture building in my eyes. Nothing like adding more pressure to my future guilt trip if I failed. Unlike the fairer sex, I don’t normally get all sappy. In fact, I’ve been accused of being crusty and called other adjectives best not used while sitting in the passenger cabin of a commercial flight. Alexander probably had no idea how much his statement meant to me. Or maybe he did. No more avoidance, I thought. My friend was right. I needed to expand my little ohana. If I couldn’t be surrounded by relatives, I could at least make a few friends that would give me my own sense of belonging. It might only be May, but it was time for a New

Year's resolution. It was time to become a new McKenna. Friendlier. Less grumpy. The kind of guy people might even—maybe, possibly—like. The trip would be a good segue into the new me. It would give me a chance to make a plan—and practice some aloha spirit. Right after I found Andi.

The captain's voice broke through my thoughts. "Flight attendants, prepare cabin for arrival."

"Crap," I muttered. "Island time's over."

Alexander tilted his head in my direction, his eyebrows raised. "What was that?"

I smiled and gave him a thumbs up. "I said, let's get this flight over. I'm looking forward to making some new friends, yah? No?"

In Hawaii, it's not unusual to make a statement with an embedded question. "Yah? No?" was our little way of politely seeking agreement and then circling back to give the other person another chance to disagree or ask questions. Alexander used the expression a lot and it was starting to seep into my vocabulary.

He stared at me as though I'd gone off the deep end. I turned away to stare out the window.

Our approach to the Kona International Airport bordered on surreal. At times, the view was reminiscent of a lunar landing. Miles of lava rock in shades of gray and black, interspersed only with craters, a paved road, and occasional stunted clumps of brown vegetation in the midst of nothing. Closer to the airport, the harsh moon-surface facade gave way to patches of green. Yet, in a land stripped bare by lava flows and less than twelve inches of rain a year compressed into a few short months, harsh was a mild description.

We landed without much ado. Smooth touchdown. Deafening reverse engine thrust. Euphoric passengers arriving at an airport they would love or hate. Those that loved it cited the small-airport feel. The complainers would bitch about the lack of air conditioning and limited flights. Personally, I liked the quaint tiki-hut architecture and open atmosphere, although I'd have preferred to be here for pleasure, not as an unpaid hired gun.

On our way to baggage claim, we passed through a picturesque gathering area complete with larger-than-life hula dancer statues. The buildings surrounding us had pointy roofs and plenty of overhang to provide shade or protection from rain. Our bags snaked toward us, side-by-side on the carousel. Alexander spotted Benni and waved as he lifted his bag and set it at his feet. I followed his gaze. A gorgeous brunette with long hair pulled to one side waved back. I was so busy gawking at her that I almost missed my bag. Fortunately, I recovered before the bag passed.

Had I met Benni on the street, I never would have guessed these two were related. Whereas Alexander was tall and robust, Benni stood a head shorter and had the trim physique of a runner. Talk about opposites. And completely engrossed in their meeting.

“Snoopy!” Benni squealed. “Welcome to the island of Hawaii. It’s been so long!”
“How’s my big sistah?” Alexander laughed as he swung Benni in a circle. When he set her down, she gazed up at him, still not even noticing me.

“Snoopy?” I chuckled at my good fortune. Was this a childhood nickname? One thing was certain, assuming I could find Andi, this was gold. Blackmail gold.

Obviously, Alexander wasn’t the little brother in physical terms, so that made Benni the older

of the two. Watching her face and movements, I found that almost impossible to believe. Her face had classic straight lines, her eyes were brown and almond-shaped with a hint of playful innocence.

Alexander gestured at me “This is McKenna. He’s the one I told you about.”

I extended my hand, but Benni only glanced at it. She gave me a reluctant hug. When she pulled away, she said, “Do you think you can find—sorry. I should have at least introduced myself. I’m Benni. Welcome to the Big Island.” She forced a smile despite her misty eyes.

In that moment, I had nothing. No thoughts. No smart remarks. Thank goodness there were no flies zipping around, otherwise one could have mistaken my mouth for a landing strip. This woman looked way too young to be Alexander’s older sister. How could she possibly have a daughter in her early twenties?

Alexander and Benni cocked their heads as they gazed at me. How long had my brain had been on idle? The answer was, no clue. Nevertheless, I managed a quick recovery. “I’ll find her.” “McKenna’s da’ best, Benni.” Alexander put a hand on his sister’s shoulder. “We gonna find her and she gonna make her show. No worries.”

Benni frowned. “She’s gone. She gets the break that could make her career and she’s decided she needs time to herself.”

Time to herself? That didn’t sound much like a missing person, I thought. As a former skip tracer, I’d heard a lot of reasons why people didn’t pay their bills. More than once, spouses had used that exact excuse for why they’d been abandoned. Personally, it didn’t seem so hard to find

yourself, just look in a mirror. But, on more than one occasion I'd been tempted to ask if their spouse could find my money while they were at it. Andi probably hadn't skipped out on anything. She was probably hanging out with her friends. But, because my life had been all about finding people who did skip, I tended to think the worst. I might have to add "See the good in people" to my McKenna Improvement List.

"You know these kids," said Alexander. "Andi's solid. She got mo' bettah things to do than hang out with Mom and a couple of old guys. Right, McKenna?"

"You two know her better than I do," I chirped. Benni's lower lip trembled at my comment and I saw her eyes brim with tears. Good grief, I'd taken the chicken's way out. Noncommittal. Defer to the experts. How had I screwed this one up?

"We had an argument." She confessed, wrapping her arms around her sides as a tear dribbled down her cheek. "I'm trying to give her space, but I think I've pushed her away."

"That sucks." I hadn't even realized I'd said the words out loud, but Benni's quick glance made it clear I had. I cringed at my latest social transgression. "Sorry, I sometimes open my mouth when I shouldn't."

A six-foot-tall, well-tanned guy with sandy blond hair and a Billabong T-shirt strolled by, all the while keeping his eyes on Benni. Benni didn't seem to notice him, which made me wonder how many hot surfer dudes like that one she had in her address book.

With worry painted on her face, Benni asked, "How long does it take to find someone?" She grimaced. "Andi can't miss rehearsal. She knows better. The band members haven't heard from

her either.”

Pulling his sister close, Alexander gently pressed her head to his chest. “You gotta stop worrying about her, Sis. It’s probably nothing, yah? What about that big client you said you got? Don’t you gotta be doing stuff for him?”

“But I have to know. I’m her mom!”

“Like I said, no worries.” Alexander winked at me. “You focus on your job and that client. McKenna gonna be your bloodhound.”

So much for the no-pet policy. I’d gone from being the one who needed to make friends to being a spy for Alexander’s sister. I’d known the moment Alexander had told me about Andi’s disappearance and asked me to come along that this entire trip spelled trouble with a capital T for yours truly. But, with everything Alexander had done for me over the years, there was no way I could have refused.

Benni pulled away from Alexander, gazing at me with worry in her eyes. Pleading eyes was the phrase that came to mind. Her voice trembled. “So you’ll find her?”

“Sure.” The word had popped out automatically. What a dumb ass. Suckered again by a pretty face, a smile, and a tear. Not to mention my best friend. “When’s the last time you two spoke?”

“Sunday afternoon she called, said she’d gone to the store for some tampons.”

Uh-oh, that time of the month. I stuttered, “Maybe she’s just, uh, under the weather.” I glanced toward the sky. “Hot day.” There, I’d successfully avoided the P word.

I extended a fist toward Alexander. He ignored it, chuckling instead. “I think maybe McKenna don’t like talking about periods.”

Benni snorted. “Serious?” She stared at me.

My cheeks felt hot. I supposed women talked about that kind of stuff all the time, but I wasn’t one of the girls and we weren’t going to share hoo-hoos about cramps and bloating and all that homicidal maniac stuff that happens during The Week. Right now, unless we were talking about the end of a sentence or a hockey game, I’d have to find alternatives for my use of the P word.

Alexander didn’t seem fazed. “Benni, this makin’ McKenna uncomfortable. Look at him, he’s all queasy like.”

“I’m fine.” But, he was right. I was queasy. And it wasn’t the P word. No, this talk of being Benni’s secret agent had me worried on every level. I could lose my best friend if I botched this. I could alienate a mother and daughter. I could—oh, boy, could I. So many things could go wrong. The more I heard, the less this sounded like anything more than a mother-daughter tiff. “She only said she was going to the store?”

“What about her dad?” asked Alexander. “Did she go visit him maybe?”

After a long pause, Benni waved away our questions. “You know what, I can’t ask you to do this. If she finds out I’m having her followed, she’ll go ballistic.”

I was stunned. We’d flown to this island at her request, she was worried to death, and now we weren’t going to help? “But, I thought you were desperate for help. That’s what Alexander told

me.” I shot a glance at my best friend. He was avoiding my gaze by staring at the pavement, his face red. I should have been pissed, but his desperation to help his sister made sense. “You lied to me.”

“Sorry,” he said as he glanced at me.

I gave him a gentle punch on the arm. “It’s okay. I understand.”

“Snoopy? You told me you two were coming over for the jazz festival anyway. I told you I’d think about having McKenna help—not take over. You lied to him? And me? This is getting out of hand. I don’t want to make things worse with my daughter.” She straightened up and took a deep breath. “What matters is that you’re here. Are you two ready to go?”

The uncertainty on Benni’s face, the worry in her voice, they both had me wondering if there was more to this situation than Benni was letting on. I filed my doubts away until Alexander and I could talk. Until I could ask those questions, it was time to be a good guest. “I’m ready.”

The brakes on the shuttle bus pulling to a stop in the loading area squealed and Benni jumped, glared at the bus for a second, then swore. “Damn busses!” A second later, she winced. “Sorry, I overreacted.” She gave me a weak smile. “My little brother’s been bragging about you solving murders, McKenna. I’ll deal with finding Andi. And, my client’s not your problem either. All you two need to do this week is enjoy some jazz. Andi’s band is going to be hot this weekend!”

I kept my mouth shut. Benni’s bravado and cheerful attitude were clearly for our benefit. There was something so wrong with this whole situation and from what I could tell, this was

shaping up to be anything but a “no worries” trip.

CHAPTER TWO



We walked to Benni's car, three sets of *slippas* clip-clopping on the already scorching asphalt. The rest of the world calls this type of footwear flip flops. I have a simple response—*chillax*—chill out and relax, which is exactly what I figured I wouldn't be doing for the duration of our stay on the Big Island.

While Benni and Alexander chatted, I brought up the rear. "Snoopy" seemed to make his sister laugh easily despite the tenseness hanging over everything. Alexander had told me they hadn't seen each other in years, so I wanted them to have time together during our short stay. They were reminiscing about their childhood when we reached the car. Benni unlocked her door and I yelled, "Shotgun!"

They both jumped and gawked at me. "What da kine?" said Alexander. "You calling shotgun on me?"

I shook my head. "I'm calling shotgun for you. I'm riding in back so you two can catch up." Let's leave out the fact that riding in back would let me watch Benni's eyes in the mirror when I slipped in an occasional question about Andi. I'd be watching for a rapid change, anything from happy to sad or spontaneous to hesitant. I would be watching for exactly what the Big Island is known for, stark contrasts.

"Hey, Benni," I said. "I heard that you can drive to the snow on Mauna Kea in the morning, gather up a few buckets of the white stuff, then drive like mad to the shores on the Kona Coast and rinse off in the warm surf. Is that true?"

She checked her rearview mirror, shrugged, then said, "If your bucket's big enough."

In the eight-mile drive from the airport, we'd left lava flows and arid countryside behind and were entering urban sprawl overflowing with lush green.

A lull in the conversation on the outskirts of Kona gave me my opening for my first question. "Benni, are you on Facebook?"

She glanced at me in the rearview mirror. "Yah, isn't everyone?"

"I should send you a friend request. What about Andi? She's probably got thousands of friends."

Benni nodded absently. "That girl, she's a social-media diva."

"Snoopy doesn't believe in that stuff. He's old school."

"No way. Snoopy, is that true?"

Alexander twisted sideways in his seat. "McKenna, you lucky I'm strapped in. You call me that again and I might have to mess with you for real."

I smiled. "Right." But, inside, I was contemplating the derivations possible from that one name. The Snoopster, Snoop Man, and more. The list could take days to compile, months to use as torture material.

"I don't got much time for diddling around," said Alexander. "You try running a business

with two *keiki* and one more coming.”

“I’d say Daddy Alexander had plenty of time for snooping around someplace he shouldn’t have, yah? Benni, you agree?”

Benni glanced at me in the rearview mirror. “You know what’s good for you, McKenna, forget you heard that nickname.”

I winked at her. “Right. Sorry. I couldn’t resist. It won’t happen again.” At least, not in the next ten minutes.

Benni broke eye contact as the stoplight turned green. We made a left onto Henry St. A block later we turned right into the parking lot of a little strip mall complete with the requisite Starbucks, a bakery, and a cell-phone shop. “I just wanted to check something.”

I guessed the “something” was Andi, but wasn’t about to embarrass Benni by asking. We turned back onto Henry, this time heading west and crossed the Queen Kaahumanu Highway. With its lava rock retaining walls and lush tropical vegetation, the Queen K was a pretty face designed to welcome tourists. We made turn after turn toward Benni’s apartment, going from the Queen K’s upscale feel to the backstreets and reality of life for locals. Benni lived on Ala Onaona Street, where stone walls, sidewalks, and multiple lanes had given way to narrow streets, no curbs, and cars parked on the shoulder between uncontrolled landscaping. Overhead, power lines snaked from house to house along streets and alleys.

Our destination turned out to be a second-floor apartment. Even though it had two bedrooms, it would be considered tiny on the mainland. By island standards, it bordered on spacious. Being

a landlord, I sometimes found myself comparing other complexes to the Sunsetter. Although she had me beat on the unit's size, my complex was more modern and, I judged, better maintained thanks to my own personal crusade to make it top notch. I also won in the view category. Sorry, Benni, but beachfront beats out distant ocean every time.

I was assigned Andi's room, which I accepted reluctantly. Furniture-wise, it contained a day bed, a small dresser, and a computer desk. The furniture shared the room with the important stuff —two guitars, a keyboard and a small amplifier. The desk overflowed with handwritten sheet music. Each page had a song title, a date, and Andi's name at the top.

On the computer desk, there was a laptop. I felt betrayed by my own Type A personality. I'd moved to the islands hoping to work my way down the alphabet, instead, I was licking my lips at the thought of having someone to find. Hide and seek, one more time. *Andi's laptop*. How much more golden could I get? The urge to fire up that baby burned in my head like a raging wildfire. Then, the mental debate ensued.

Good McKenna jumped into the fray—Do not snoop. Do not snoop.

Bad McKenna countered—Go for it, who's going to know? Everybody wants you to do this; they just won't admit it.

—Don't be an idiot, this is your best friend's sister. They'll throw you out on the street.

—That's ridiculous, they're going to fall at your feet and thank you for being so helpful.

I stood there, fallen arguments littering my mind like dead bodies at Gettysburg. "Enough!" I hissed. "Fine, I'll do it. But only to help my friends." These people were, after all, the closest

thing I had to ohana.

When I opened the lid of the laptop, a flood of messages filled the screen. I was shocked. The kid probably used her phone extensively, yet she hadn't accessed her email since Sunday? Very strange, indeed. I put a hand on the back of my neck to rub out the growing worry. How was I going to pull this off without getting caught?

Skimming through the messages, I found emailed receipts from a bakery in Kona. Both were for less than ten bucks. Those purchases alone confirmed that Andi was alive and eating. A crook would have done one small charge, then gone for the big bucks. The amateur skip didn't know to handle all transactions in cash. I still couldn't see Andi as a skip. She was a kid who'd had a disagreement of some sort with her mom. On the other hand, emotions made people do stupid things. That might be what worried me most.

Many of the messages were feeds from sites about old Hawaiian culture, the most prominent of which was one with the acronym KOLA—Keep Our Legends Alive. Oddly enough, Andi's email contained no social media notifications. Not one. Did that mean Andi wasn't the diva Benni thought she was? There was one easy way to find out, take a peek at her Facebook account.

I found icons for Facebook and Twitter. On Twitter, she hadn't posted a thing since Sunday even though she had more than 8,000 followers. When I got to her Facebook profile, I stopped and stared at her picture. Andi was the image of her mother—long dark hair, bronzed skin, almond eyes. A smile that could stop a man in his tracks. The only difference was that this girl's

beauty hadn't fully matured.

Prior to Sunday, Andi had posted numerous times each day. Her Facebook friend count was an impressive 4,589. That number was about 100 times larger than my own and definitely put her into the social-media-diva category in my estimation. Obviously, she was considerably better at mixing online than I would ever be. She had 149 notifications waiting for review. If I had three in one day, that was an avalanche. In any case, now I understood why she didn't need notifications, she always had something going on and had turned off the emails to avoid getting buried. I winced at the thought of that word—buried. No, she was alive. She had to be.

This kid was definitely a world-class Facebook blabber. The temptation was more than I could stand, so I scanned through the list. Soon, patterns emerged. The most frequent name in the list wasn't really a name at all, it was a handle: "Blueslover." There was also a message from Blueslover open at the bottom of the page.

"That's weird," I said to the computer screen. "Why aren't you using a real name?" I clicked the link to view Blueslover's profile. There was no picture, nor were there any details about him, other than he was male and in a relationship. With Andi? Or someone else? Why would he share almost nothing? I murmured, "You're not very social, are you?"

The other thing that was odd was that Andi hadn't responded to any recent messages. Was that normal? Without going into the Facebook black hole where I'd lost countless hours trying to connect and "be social"—a task at which I'd failed miserably—there was no way to tell. While Blueslover disclosed nothing about himself, he did list his location as Hawaii. Big Island? Or the

state?

I said, “You’ve only got thirty-eight friends. And most of them are musicians. You’re a weird duck, aren’t you?” Great. Now I was having conversations with a computer. “Alexander’s right, I’m a one-man pity party.”

Blueslover’s last message to Andi read, “cn u mt at the bean?”

The time on the message was Sunday morning at 10:48 a.m. After that, there had been no activity on any of Andi’s social media accounts. What was so important about that meeting? Why hadn’t she taken her laptop with her? And how the hell would I ask about this without exposing what I’d just done?

CHAPTER THREE



The tantalizing aroma of barbecue drifted through the window, extracting me from my ruminating about Andi's sudden disappearance. It was nearly five-thirty and the primal urge causing my stomach to growl reminded me that ignoring food for most of the day was not a wise choice. I'd done enough snooping. It was time to go in search of the source. With luck, it was Benni's barbecue and not a neighbor's.

I'd learned a long time ago how a missed opportunity could mess with the future. Missing dinner wouldn't kill me, but why was Andi not buckling down when the opportunity of a lifetime was fast approaching? On the other hand, perhaps she had a different dream. Benni's reaction at the airport didn't make a lot of sense, either. One minute, she was the protective mom, the next she was dismissing her daughter's behavior as a simple overreaction. I wasn't believing that option for a second. There was something else at play here and I was determined to find out what it was.

Outside and alone, Benni stood next to the grill, gazing off toward the ocean. Red tank top. Cutoff jeans. A stunning figure. And a voice to match. She sang a sad, soulful melody to herself. She stopped to rub at her cheek with delicate fingers.

"That's beautiful," I murmured.

When she started and put a hand to her chest, I tried to sound more businesslike. “Alexander told me you were a professional singer.”

Benni flushed. “I thought I was by myself. Snoopy’s in the kitchen.”

I was suddenly embarrassed by the realization of how caught up with Benni I’d been. I hadn’t seen Alexander as I’d walked past him. “Why’d you stop singing?”

She flashed me a smile and tilted her head up slightly. Her dark hair was pulled back on the right side. There was a fresh plumeria flower over her right ear, which, for you mainlanders, means “I’m available.”

Alexander approached with a wineglass in each hand. He extended the glass of red to me. “I know, I know, doctor’s orders.” He crossed to Benni, who took the other glass and raised it in the air.

“*Mahalo* for coming,” Benni said.

Alexander grabbed his beer from the lanai table and we all clinked glasses. Now, I was more intrigued than ever. Benni had a songbird’s voice, yet she no longer performed. She obviously wanted to bring her daughter home, yet seemed fearful of saying or doing the wrong thing. And her daughter was no less bewildering.

I echoed Benni’s cheerful tone. “And *mahalo* for hosting us!” So many things about this trip were off-kilter. This would definitely not be a carefree vacation. “What’s on the grill?”

“Turkey burgers.” She shrugged. “We make do with what we’ve got. Neither of us eat red meat, so I hope you don’t mind.”

“Love ‘em.” Smoke rose from the grill, then drifted away, riding the breeze until it dissipated into nothing more than a faint aroma. “Got a question, Benni.”

Alexander sat at the table watching his sister. “Me, too. I’m goin’ first. You gotta wait, McKenna.”

Benni pushed at one of the burgers with the spatula. “These guys need a few more minutes.”

“How come you not worrying about Andi?” asked Alexander. “You always been a very protective mom. Now you don’t care?”

I hadn’t noticed the laugh lines around the corners of her eyes until this moment. Now, they became more obvious as they filled with worry instead of the crinkling that comes with enjoying a moment. Benni chewed her lip and stared off at the distant ocean, her hand resting on the grill cover. She jumped when I stepped closer to put my hand on hers. Her startled smile was fraught with concern as she closed the cover. A moment later, she said, “Like I said, I think maybe she just needs a little time away. We argued about a few things. A few more years, Snoopy—you’ll understand when yours are doing the same thing.”

“Like Blueslover?” My response had been automatic, based on years of experience looking for people in the field. The little demon Bad McKenna was already ranting in my ear—*Ixnay, dumb ass, you’re going to out yourself!* At times like this, I cursed the little bastard—who had a fondness for Pig Latin, got me into trouble, and then chewed me out when I got busted.

“Who’s that?” Benni asked.

It was too late, the proverbial cat was out of the bag. “I saw it on a scrap of paper in Andi’s

room.” It was just a little lie—not even a lie—just a . . . rephrasing. Besides, she didn’t even know about him. “The note said something about meeting him at the bean.”

Benni eyed me suspiciously. “Nothing like that around here except maybe The Roasted Bean. It’s downtown.”

“You been checking things out?” Alexander was obviously pleased, but I could have shot him. How did I tell him he could kill my investigation before it even had a life?

Benni opened the lid of the barbecue, but she kept one eye on me as she flipped one of the burgers. For some reason, I couldn’t take either of mine off her or that plumeria.

A six-inch flame shot up, the perfect complement to her growing suspicion. “Andi was meeting a guy at The Roasted Bean?” She winced as she searched Alexander’s face. “That’s Warren’s business you know.”

“Warren? Crazy Warren? Your ex?” Alexander had his arms at his sides, but he’d clenched his fists.

“Oh, this is bad,” said Benni. “He’s been talking wacko again.”

“Wacko?” I asked.

“Paranoid. Warren’s version of the world might be pretty weird, but there’s nothing illegal about being paranoid. I don’t want to be the one responsible for ruining his life. He’s got enough problems.”

“Like what?” I asked.

Benni avoided eye contact as she massaged the back of her neck. “He called a couple of

weeks ago and said some old curse was coming Andi's way. I told him to leave her alone and he said she was an adult. We really had it out. I hope he didn't do something stupid."

"You want McKenna and me to look into it?" Alexander asked.

This was, to my knowledge, the second time Alexander had volunteered me for a job. Next thing you know he'd be pimping my services on street corners. To my surprise, Benni's expression softened. If I didn't know better, I'd say she was even considering it. Based on her earlier reaction, I didn't expect her to go for it, even though I echoed Alexander's offer. "I wouldn't mind. I mean, we're almost . . . well, kind of like, ohana."

"That's not a good idea." She gave the burgers another scooch, then a crack appeared in that strong exterior. "I've tried everything. Called everyone. Gone everywhere she hangs out." She backed away from the grill, gazed at me again with those pleading eyes. "I really don't know what else to do."

"No worries." I said. Inside, warmth radiated through me. But, that warmth was tinged with the cold that comes from lying. I had to confess before this went any further.

"Would you mind?" A moment later, she added, "I just keep doing the same things over and over and keep getting the same answers."

Alexander answered for me. "He not gonna mind at all, Sis. McKenna, you think Warren might be this blues lover guy?" Great. Hang out the shingle. The McKenna and Best Bud Alexander Detective Store was open for business.

Benni shook her head. "Warren's no blues lover. And you didn't find a piece of paper, did

you?"

"No, I didn't."

"I could see it on your face."

"Benni, I can't lie to you. That was a post on her Facebook timeline. He's not a blues lover, that's the name he uses. Blueslover is his nickname."

By the count of ten, I fully expected to be homeless in Kona and hitchhiking my way back to the airport. Instead, Benni's eyes misted over. She pulled me into a tight embrace and said,

"Thank you for not lying to me."

Alexander stood, his mouth agape, while I asked myself what the hell had just happened. I had no idea what to say, but found myself rambling. "I also thought it was suspicious that Andi hasn't tweeted in days. Ever since she got that message. C'mon, Benni, what do you say? Will you tell me what happened?" Me running on autopilot was a dangerous thing. There was no telling what I'd do next.