

PHOTO FINISH

A McKenna Mystery

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DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad, who taught me three lessons to carry me through life.

Wear a smile instead of a frown.

A kind word gets a much better result than an unkind word.

Do what you say you're going to do.

While I don't always practice these lessons, I'd like to think that I work on them all the time.

Chapter 1



Harris Galvin gave me what the Hawaiians call “chicken skin” the moment I met her. The goosebumps this new girl in paradise brought on were seriously scary. Harris might be drop-dead gorgeous, but she had an aura about her—something as old as the islands themselves. Put the emphasis on the drop-dead part and make that aura what the locals call *malu make*, which is pronounced mah-loo mah-kay, and roughly translates to “shadow of death,” and you had Harris, an irresistible package that said, “big trouble coming—soon.”

My name is McKenna. I don’t usually act this way. Spooky music, getting all weird on people—that’s more wacko than me. I’m just—hell—I’m just sitting on my lanai half-drunk and muttering Hawaiian death phrases about a woman I barely know because she and my best friend are missing.

Death phrases or not, nobody was going to lock me away unless I started ranting down on Waikiki in front of the big hotels. That wasn’t likely since I had no overpowering urge to give up my job managing the Honolulu Sunsetter, a sweet little apartment manager’s deal that gets me free rent and a great view. So no matter how crazy this whole Harris thing made me, I had to plug along. Fact is, I’m a work in progress. Maybe progress isn’t exactly the right word, I’d gone from hotshot bank skip tracer to grumpy landlord faster than you could say, “The rent’s due.”

Anyway, while the owners of this little moneymaker did their rich-people things, my job

entailed judging Harris's suitability as a tenant, which I'd done. Despite her little black-cloud aura, Harris seemed to have her life together. She'd passed all my usual sophisticated landlord checks like not bitching about the money and not being stoned. She even had twenty-five grand in the bank and called me "Honey." My other research, a couple of quick database checks, had turned up nothing. So I figured, "What the hell?" When she moved in, I got two months' rent and a deposit. And a hug that was two inches too close and lasted three seconds too long to be considered just friendly.

At five-foot six, Harris was lithe and stood just a few inches shorter than me despite my tendency to slouch. Her voice sounded proud as she handed me a letter from National Geographic and said, "I'm a photographer and have a job lined up."

Her blue eyes reminded me of the early-morning sea—mine were more like the brown of a Malibu mud slide. She struck me as more Cosmo model than nature photographer, but what did I know?

My brain must have still been working on that hug when I'd opened my big mouth. "Hmmpf. Didn't realize that there were any unphotographed parts left on Oahu."

"Honey, I'm gonna do it like it's never been done before. My article's gonna be called Spectacular Island Waterfall Day Trips. It'll cover waterfalls throughout the islands. Perspectives nobody's seen before. The tricky one's going to be Sacred Falls."

"Tricky? More like impossible."

"I know, the rock slide in '99. Killed eight hikers, yada, yada."

“Yada, yada? You can’t get in there. Not legally, anyway.”

“My employer has a lot of pull. I’ve already talked to State Parks. Got the email approval yesterday. Now that I have an address, the letter should arrive any day.”

So, yeah, she’d impressed me. Hot. Organized. I might have proposed on the spot if she hadn’t kept jabbering about fame and fortune, her path to the big time. Talk about yada, yada. Sheesh, give it a rest. Given her business plan—act dangerously, get paid handsomely—I probably should’ve gotten three months’ rent. Who in their right mind went off on a damned-fool photo safari in the mountains and expected to get paid for it? Probably somebody who didn’t know you couldn’t make a living that way. Count me out, I’m too smart for that.

But now, it was 7:08 PM and the sun hung at half mast on the horizon and they hadn’t returned from that photo safari and, damn, I was getting worried. A picture of little Harris parts scattered over the mountainside somewhere on the north end of Oahu flashed in my mind.

Goose flesh tickled my skin again. I muttered, “Dat *wahine*, she *kine* chicken skin.” Kine is what the locals call a placeholder word. Hawaiians use it to mean almost anything. It can mean “a lot,” “a little,” “I don’t know,” “I forgot,” or whatever else the speaker wants it to mean. In this case, it meant that despite her good traits maybe Harris just had really bad karma.

The Sunsetter apartments border the ocean on Kalakaua Ave. With Diamond Head on the east, Honolulu on the west, and the Pacific smack dab in front. They’re not hard to rent despite the utilitarian white paint and island-standard musty carpets. True, a good carpenter could shoehorn one of these units into the owner’s closet, but with studios and one or two bedrooms to

choose from, people who had money and were so inclined could live close to the water. They're well kept, thanks to yours truly, and this little investment let my bosses go off and sip expensive drinks on about any beach in the world while I sat here and managed their little Honolulu gold mine, a task I performed admirably. I'm definitely a go-getter—after midmorning. And you can't count my afternoon nap. Or when I might worry about other people's karma.

In any case, back to Harris. Talk about energy. And how that girl had oozed confidence. Sheesh.

"I've got the drive. I've got the ambition. My photos are better than the others, that's why I got this gig."

"Got your eye on the big prize, huh?"

"You bet, honey. Just watch me."

Well, I could certainly do that. "Maybe you are better, maybe I'm wrong. But there's a lot of Ansel Adams wannabes out there."

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing."

I remembered thinking that she had a nice chunk of change in the bank, a great apartment, and knew where she wanted to go in life. As long as she paid her rent and didn't get herself killed—ah, hell. If she did, she'd be visiting her *kupuna*, that's her ancestors for you mainlanders.

Under my breath, I whispered, "Don't let me be right."

Deep down I liked this gutsy newcomer. Even without the hugs, her friendliness just

made you want to, well, like her. Still, as her landlord, I had to hope she didn't kick the bucket before I could cash her check. I snickered. Or get a few more of those hugs.

Black cloud or not, Legs, oops—yeah, that's how I thought of her, was pretty smart. She'd persuaded me to get her a guide for her little photo safari—not something most people could accomplish, then made me feel good about it by pulling me so close I almost forgot my age. At 62, I'm old enough to be her father, which is a depressing thought that just makes me want to get drunk and listen to Jimmy Buffett all afternoon. Just the same, I'd made a commitment and that meant calling my only friend in the islands, Alexander.

Alexander's lived here all his life and he's like an umbrella drink; lots of Hawaiian, two parts haole, a shot of Chinese and a dash of Japanese. The haole part is pronounced "how-lee" and just means that a couple of the pretty Hawaiian girls who were his grandmothers jumped the racial barrier and married white people, probably sailors from the mainland. A couple of his other kupuna became enamored with Asian members of the opposite sex and so Alexander's was a very common mix here in the islands. In any case, Alexander knows almost every inch of Oahu, from the mountains to the sea, or *mauka* to *makai*, as we say here. He's got more aunties, uncles, and cousins than I can count, and if you toss in the other people he knows, they could probably fill Aloha Stadium. It was now 7:21 PM and red tinges on the horizon had grown bright and fiery. The ocean was turning pink and gray.

I took another sip as the last of the sun's fire dropped below the horizon. This part of the day, the time when the struggle between daytime and night reached its climax, had become my

favorite. My ten-by-twelve lanai with its four-seater patio set and chaise lounge gave me an oil-painting view of the sunset.

An electronic version of Margaritaville began to play on my cell phone, breaking the spell. I checked Caller ID. Shit. Alexander's wife. Maybe I should switch to tequila. "Hi, Kira."

"Where's Alexander? You set him up this job, yah?"

"I'm getting worried, myself."

"You get him in trouble, McKenna, I gonna come after you."

And I knew she would. "I thought they'd be back hours ago—"

"Don't make excuses, you. This not just another case of you wandering fingers."

Kira called me a leech once just because I got my hand too close to her ass. I tried to explain that I was old and deserved a little leeway, but that response earned me a bruise on my arm that hung around for weeks. "Uh, about that, I really do apologize—again." For about the tenth time. "I'll send him home as soon as he shows up."

"You keep him. That teach him a good lesson."

Kira hung up and left me listening to a dial tone. My heart pounded in my chest; my palms felt sweaty. Confrontations just weren't my thing. It was definitely time for another round.

7:42. Not good. I slumped back into my chair.

Gentle trade winds brushed across my face, whispering their island secrets. The sky grew darker, dimming to pinkish grays and purples. White lights from a yacht streamed across the ocean on the distant horizon. The crazy surfers were long gone, having done their thing from

sunup to sundown. I call them crazy because, in addition to the obvious issues about fair-skinned people getting fried in the sun, the idea of flopping around in the water close to a wave the size of a bus scares the crap out of me. I'll stick to my little lanai and sunset view, thank you very much. Now, it was just the ocean—the colors, the sounds, the smells. The here, the now. Locals say that people come to the islands to run away. Maybe they're right.

My eyelids grew heavy as the trades worked their magic. I downed a mouthful of my vino du jour, a tasty, cheap-but-effective Pinot Noir I'd found on sale at the market, then crossed my arms over my chest and settled down into the chair. I hadn't always been grumpy. Chasing skips had been a rush. I'd found a lot of people who didn't want to be found. My relationship with Jenny and her son had been—who was I kidding, that's when my life imploded. As I nodded off, a familiar image flashed in my mind—me, alone in the middle of Waikiki Beach, a “Do Not Disturb” sign hung around my neck.

A knock on the front door startled me so much I damn near fell out of my chair. It took me a minute to get on my feet. I felt like a human pretzel until about halfway to the door. That's when I realized I'd taken the long route. My little end unit has a lanai that's just ten feet from the walkway to the central courtyard, which would have been a much easier route. I checked the wall clock in the dining room on my way to the door. It was after 9:00 PM. Who the hell would be coming by now? I could only think of two possibilities. It could either be Alexander and Legs, or the cops coming to confirm my fears.

“Not the cops. Please.” I blinked in a weak attempt to clear my head. “Who is it?”

“It’s me, Alexander. Open up, McKenna.”

Oh, good. They were back and had stopped by to tell me about the day. “Hang on, I’ll be right there.”

“Hurry up, I had to park on the back end of the lot and my knee’s killing me. I can’t hold her up much longer.”

Uh-oh. Hold her up? I swung the door open, then stared at what looked like a couple of massacre-movie stunt doubles. “What the hell happened to you two?”

Alexander had bruises everywhere I could see. A cut near his right eye had bled and caked the side of his face like war paint. And Harris, well, looking at Harris broke my heart. I stepped aside to let Alexander assist her into the room.

As the two hobbled past me, Harris smiled and gave me a weak half-drunk wave. “Hi, hon.”

Alexander shook his head. “She been calling me that all day, brah. Don’t get your hopes up. And don’t say nothin’ about a hospital.”

The evening trades hadn’t yet cooled the room, and the air felt heavy. “She’ll do better outside. Why no hospital?”

“We were outside all day.” He shrugged. “We both got our reasons.”

“Whatever. Put her on the chaise out there where she can rest.”

Alexander made his way past my glass-topped, wicker dining table and TV to the lanai, lowered Harris onto the chaise lounge and occupied the chair I’d vacated. I tried to nonchalantly

move my wine glass, but he just rolled his eyes.

“Crap, I’ve got to pee.” I hobbled off to meet my favorite friend in life these days, the toilet.

“You don’t care what happened to us?” Alexander shouted after me.

I was about to make the right turn towards my bathroom when I yelled over my shoulder, “You live to be my age and your bladder will explain it all to you.” I closed the door and said hi to Bosco. You probably think I’m nuts, but when you spend as much time as I do visiting this guy, you might as well give him a name. The way I looked at it, he was better than a tech-support hotline—available 24/7 and no long wait times.

Back on the lanai, Alexander gently wiped Harris’s face with paper towels. I’d barely made it through the lanai door when he said, “I never saw anything like it, brah, somebody threw a body off a plane.”

Chapter 2



Alexander Kapono is my best, and really my only, friend in the islands. True to his heritage, Alexander likes to talk story. He has some great ones, too, like the time he lost the surfing contest in high school because a 300-pound green sea turtle decided it wanted to surf the same wave. The way he told the story, the sea turtle lost control and began to tumble. End of contest for Alexander. And maybe the turtle, too.

The idea that someone would throw a body, alive or dead, out of an airplane struck me as ridiculous. Unless some wise guy had come up with a new tourist attraction, I doubted that anyone in their right mind would do such a thing. I studied Harris for a moment, then raised my eyebrows and pointed at her. “I thought she was with you, not in a plane.”

Harris glared at me. “I’m like, tied to a rope and hanging off the side of the mountain. It was, like, a thousand feet down.”

Alexander stood and crossed his arms. “I had the line, and it’s no thousand feet, more like eighty, yah?”

“It seemed like a thousand. Anyway, there I was, looking at death and the most spectacular photo I’ve ever taken in my life and all hell breaks loose.”

Talk about melodramatic, jeez. “So what did you do, drop your camera?”

“No! I kept telling myself to take the shot, take the shot.”

“What if Alexander lost his grip?”

Harris got a worried look on her face. “I tried not to think about that.”

“You don’t weigh nothing. It was no problem.”

“You weren’t the one that was gonna fall. Anyway, I’m setting up for my last shot and there was this noise like a plane engine or something. Alexander yelled at me to look up and I saw a man shoving something out the door.”

“Maybe it was camping gear or supplies for hikers.”

“Park’s closed, remember?” Alexander looked miffed that I didn’t believe their—
whatever it was.

Harris winced. “I’ve seen people haul dead weight before.”

The tone in her voice sent a shiver down my spine. “Even so, who throws a body out of a plane, huh? Tell me that.”

“A murderer, that’s who! So I started taking shots of the plane instead of the waterfall.”

Alexander said, “They had guns, McKenna. They shot at us.”

“How could they shoot at you? They were throwing bodies out of planes.” I looked from one to the other, then back again. “I’ve heard some lines before, but you two will never get that story to fly here. Alexander, this is worse than that high school surfing contest story you told me.”

“McKenna! Don’t you start on that!”

“I never did believe that sea-turtle story, so one day I asked your brother about it.” After

he'd stopped laughing, Alexander's brother had told me that the great mishap had nothing to do with sea turtles. The real story went that a pretty girl by the name of Loni Whachamajiggy on the board next to Alexander lost her bathing suit top. I said, "If you need an alibi for Kira—oh, Kira. She called. You're in the dog house."

He rolled his eyes. "Again?"

I nodded. "You've got to do better than this. I'll tell her—I'll come up with something. Long as you two didn't—you know."

Alexander glared at me. "Screw you, McKenna. You think I got this gash from some little nature walk?"

"No, I guess not. So'd you go into a biker bar by mistake? How many of them were there? Five? Six? What'd they do, try to haul off Legs or something?"

"Legs?" Harris fixed her gaze on mine, then winked.

Alexander added his suggestion. "Go screw yourself, McKenna."

Though I felt stupid for letting my pet nickname for Harris slip, I realized that maybe she felt the same attraction I did. My pulse quickened at the thought, but I remained undaunted. These two were BS'ing me.

Harris's face went white with pain as she shifted position in her chair. "Don't worry, Alexander, I've got the pictures to prove it."

"You hope you do. Your camera, maybe it's broke."

"Thank God it landed on me, not the other way around."

Now I had them. “So you did drop your camera! Even an eighty-foot drop, you’d be sushi, yesterday’s beef stew, Hungarian—”

Harris said, “Enough! There was a ledge, just a small outcropping of rocks about twenty feet down. If I’d have missed that—all I’d be is legs.” She snickered, then winced.

She wasn’t going to let me live that one down. “So your camera doesn’t have a neck strap, huh?”

Alexander butted in. “For chrissakes! She was all, ‘I’ve gotta have that shot over the cliff.’ I tied the line around her waist. I wrapped my end around a big boulder. But, when a bullet shatters a couple of feet from your head, you notice. She fell cuz the guy in the plane almost blew my head off.”

This ridiculous improvisation needed lots of work. Maybe, if I heard the whole thing, we could polish it up a bit. “I’m an old man and can’t keep up with both of you. One tells the story; otherwise, I’m outta here. Wait a minute, this is my *hale*. You’re outta here.”

“You got the pics. You tell him.”

Harris said, “It all happened so fast. I was hanging off the cliff, the plane skimmed the ridge and a guy in the plane threw a body out the door. I snapped a couple of photos of the plane. I guess my lens reflected the light. The plane did this big turnaround thing and came back. This time the guy had a gun, and he started shooting at us. I heard Alexander yell for me to grab onto a rock or something and take cover. That’s about the time he must’ve gotten that gash on his face because before I could grab anything the rope went slack.”

I waved my hands. “Kira would see through this in a second. Let’s try—”

Apparently, Harris was just getting wound up because she only paused long enough to take a deep breath. Nobody had cut me off like that in a long time and, in a way, I kind of admired her for it. She was a take-charge kind of girl. I half-wondered if that’s what my life needed as she continued.

“Next thing I know, I’m trying to run uphill, but my feet can’t feel the ground. I was looking up at the sky wondering why I felt like I was in slow-motion. That’s when I realized I was looking at the opposite side of the canyon—upside down. I thought I was gonna die and had this crazy thought about why didn’t I become a lawyer like my mother wanted me to be. I think Alexander thought I was—”

“Hey, my tours are always round trip.”

Legs smiled. “I’m glad to hear that.”

Alexander rested a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Company policy.”

He leaned over the chair, and they did a big wimpy, huggy thing.

A twinge of jealousy shot through me as I watched them. For crying out loud, was this entire cock-and-bull story true? It was actually a lot better than either version of the surfing contest story. “So what’s your problem? You survived, you only got a few cuts.”

Harris winced again. “And stuff.”

“So what are you worried about? Maybe the cops’ll find these guys, yah?” I realized after I said it that as time went on I sounded more and more like a local. The longer I lived here, the

more I adopted the island lilt in my speech and some of the common idioms, like “yah,” which subconsciously solicited agreement when speaking. It was polite and friendly and when I wasn’t feeling like a grump, I used it quite a bit. Of course, being from LA, I also used the good old American “yeah,” a word that reminded me of tough guys in movies with cigarettes hanging out of their mouths as they stared down the barrel of a gun.

Harris seemed to be zoning out.

Alexander said, “McKenna, I can’t report this.”

“Why not? If you two witnessed someone disposing of a body—”

“She didn’t have permission for us to be there. We were trespassing on state land.”

“What?” I glanced from Alexander to Harris, then back.

“Right after I pulled her up, she told me the email from the state was a lie.”

“It’s in the works! I got a verbal approval to go in, okay? I’m like, really sorry, but I don’t have the written confirmation yet. I just needed to get those pictures.”

“So she’s got a verbal approval,” I said. “How long can it take for the paperwork to get here?”

Alexander let out a deep sigh. “What bureaucrat you know gonna give an okay to go in there after what happened today?”

I groaned. “State land. Trespassing. Tour operator.”

Alexander added, “No more license.”

Harris said, “Prison. Divorce.”

Alexander glowered at her. I thought she was cute.

She and I exchanged an abbreviated smile as she apologized. "Sorry. I got carried away."

Alexander said, "You get the idea? Besides, this guy had a gun. Okay, maybe he can't hit anything, yah, but he might have friends who can. If the cops arrest us for trespassing and those pictures hit the news, it won't take long for these guys to connect us. We gotta be really careful."

"So somebody's gonna want to kill you? Here?" I squeaked, then cleared my throat. "In my apartment building. And you can't call the cops." I glanced at Legs. "Or see a doctor."

Alexander waved his hands as if he were fending off a swarm of fruit flies hungry for a rotten apple. "We just need some time to think this through. Tomorrow morning we can figure out how to clean up this whole mess."

Harris had a faraway look in her eyes, but she nodded agreement.

I licked my lips. "Uh, about that. You can't go home tonight."

He sighed, "I figured. Use your couch?"

"Sure." I had to admit that Harris appeared as though she'd come close enough to death to realize she was too young to die. Or that she still had things to do.

She reached out and took my hand. Though roughened by the day's adventure, her touch still felt soft and warm. She stared into my eyes.

Talk about having a stupid-me moment.

Alexander said, "You could help her out with this, McKenna."

As a skip tracer, it had been my job to find people who'd bailed on their debts. In the old

days, I'd even repossessed cars in relatively safe situations. I'd found a few guys who always carried weapons and one who was rumored to have bombed a church, but in those cases I just turned my results over to tow-truck drivers who were used to stealing cars in the middle of the night, and the cops, who were used to dealing with the bad guys. Again, Harris jarred me from my thoughts. The spiders crawling down my back and arms caught me totally off guard. I shivered and rubbed my arms to warm them, but the effort was futile. Nothing I could do would shake that feeling as long as I held her gaze.

It had been so long since I felt as though I'd really accomplished anything important that I had to think about it for a long time. They both stayed silent while decades worth of incidents flashed through my mind. My parents' childhood mantra, the one brought on by my own deceptive behavior, played loud and clear. "Better safe than sorry."

Come to think of it, I'd never played it safe. And I'd frequently been sorry. I'd never hurt a soul, but I had an arrest record in California and an ex-girlfriend who'd disappeared when I screwed up our relationship. It would have been easy for me to find her afterwards, but she didn't want that, so I'd never tried. All in all, I'd become an emotional wreck and fled to Hawaii, where I'd played it safe. And still wasn't happy.

I made up my mind, there was only one thing I could do—evict Harris for something. With her gone, life could return to normal.

Quiet. Dull. Tedious.

That's when she did the one thing I feared most.

She started to cry. "Please?"

Chapter 3



It had been a couple of hours since Alexander and Harris had shown up on my doorstep. During that time, I'd learned a couple of things about myself; I was still a sucker for a pretty face and a tear and tired of being a lonely old grump. I was also petrified by the thought of becoming anything else.

During my four years here in Hawaii, I'd gotten close to Alexander alone—that due more to his persistence than my receptiveness. Tonight, I had him on my clean couch, taking up the only real sitting room in the apartment other than the dining-room chairs. Harris was on the chaise lounge on my lanai, leaving me a choice of a dining room or lanai chair. I took the lanai. I could have gone to bed, but that seemed rude and if there's one adjective that doesn't fit me, it's rude.

A movement to my right jarred me from my thoughts. Alexander stood at my side and put his hand on my shoulder. In a voice as soft as the surf on the shore, he said, "Why not give her some *kokua*?"

Me? Help? My eyes rolled at the thought. I grumbled, "Like that's going to happen."

"You like her; I can see it."

He was right. I liked being around Harris. She made me feel—yeah, that was it, she made me feel again.

Alexander squeezed my shoulder. "I had to get up for a minute, saw you moping out here. Think about it. I'm going back to the couch."

He left me listening to the surf, admiring the moon's reflection off the black ocean surface and wondering what to do about Harris as I got sloshed on my third glass of wine. Every time her eyelids closed and her facial muscles started to relax, she jerked like a hula-girl doll in the back window of an old Chevy on a bumpy road. Her pain-noises were starting to bug me, but she'd nearly gotten her brains splattered on a mountainside. She hadn't asked for some guy to fly over in a plane and start shooting. Watching her suffer brought back memories of my own problems.

The last time I'd been anywhere close to someone else's personal drama was in Los Angeles. I'd had a growing case of depression, which had been brought on by a digestive disorder called Celiac sprue.

Celiacs can have a rainbow assortment of symptoms and until you know you're not able to tolerate wheat, oats, rye and barley, the symptoms will worsen. To top it off, you're basically screwed because doctors don't always know to test for it. The bottom line is that on a particularly bad day, my girlfriend Jenny's son Michael was beaten up because he wore the wrong colors, a gang's colors, to school. Like an idiot, I made things worse by ranting at him about his choice of apparel instead of driving my stupid butt to the school to obtain justice. I made the ultimate mistake of threatening to shake some sense into him. Jenny called the cops.

My dumb luck included two hard-nosed uniforms who hated domestic abuse cases. The

cops and I played a short game of “I Can Top That” and, needless to say, they slept in their beds that night while I got a drunken, smelly roommate who kept calling me Ralph. The next day, when I arrived home, Jenny and Michael were gone.

Just like me, Harris had unknowingly brought this on herself. The major difference was that her situation had been completely avoidable, mine, medically inevitable. I watched her face. A wince of pain. A twitch of discomfort. Why the hell had she gone to that park in the first place? For a stupid job? To make it big in her field?

Fifteen minutes, or maybe an hour later, I’d drained the glass when Harris started. She blinked, then glanced over and said, “Help me up, McKenna.”

“You gotta pee?” Just asking the question made me think that it might be my turn to go again.

“No, I’m going back to my place.”

Talk about conflicted. Stay? Or go? If she stayed, we could help her. If she went, she might die in her apartment. That would be exceptionally bad news. I could lose my job if I let her die in there. And even if I didn’t lose my job, I’d have a helluva time renting her place because prospective tenants were so picky about that dead body thing. “Can’t do that.”

“I want to download those pictures. Besides, I’m getting cold.”

Having watched how much pain these two were in for nearly two hours, I kind of wanted to see those shots myself. It might also help to pull me out of the exceptionally funky mood that grew inside of me. She tried to roll herself out, but her face turned crimson. She couldn’t make it

up on her own.

“I’ll get you a blanket.” Talk about sounding stupid. I was about three sips from losing all common sense, but could recognize a no-win situation when it bit me in the behind. “Wait till morning.” I could stick her in my bed and sleep. But where? Here, I guess.

Her head moved slightly from side to side, but even that seemed to cause her pain. “I’m too keyed up to sleep.”

It was well after eleven, and Alexander snored like a happy pup on my couch, but wouldn’t stay asleep for long if Harris didn’t shut up. Women. Why couldn’t they be less trouble? She probably didn’t want to die in her landlord’s home. I didn’t want her to die in hers. I hoisted myself out of the chair, teetered towards her, and kept my voice low. “I’m stiff, can’t sit in one place for more time than it takes you to say *humuhumunukunukuapua’a*. You ever wonder who named that little fish?”

“I need to see those photos.”

My reaction reminded me of a drunk who’d just seen the flashing red lights in his rearview mirror and desperately wanted instant sobriety. I was way off my game. Who was I kidding? I hadn’t been on my game in five years. My only hope was to stall and hope Harris didn’t notice. “They were from Tahiti, you know. The first Hawaiians, not the fish. I don’t know where the fish is from.”

Her lower lip began to quiver, and I saw another of those damn tears. “I’m a twin.”

“A twin what?” Oh. Wow, I really was drunk. “Sister?”

“I need the money from this job to help her. If I get delayed, she might—are you gonna help me up, or not?” Harris’s face turned scarlet. Even like this, she was gorgeous.

“We’ll take them to one of those 24-hour photo places tomorrow, then we’ll call the cops. You rest now.” She wouldn’t go for that, but it was worth a try.

“It’s a digital camera. I have to transfer them to my hard disk.” Her blond hair, which she’d tied back in a ponytail, combined with the cuts, scrapes and bruises she’d picked up gave the straight lines of her face a severe appearance that told me she wasn’t about to take any of my crap.

I was stuck. I’d have to get Harris back to her place and keep an eye on her. If I could keep her from dying immediately, it would be a win-win for me. She’d live and my bosses wouldn’t be inconvenienced by having to fire me, their faithful, indentured servant.

I stood over her and extended my hand, then leaned back a bit to keep from doing a splashdown on top of her.

She said, “Don’t let go.”

Her grip felt strong and warm and weak and vulnerable all at the same time. It looked as though it would be my job to keep Ms. Photographer from killing herself. We took the shortcut, our footsteps crunching on the lava rocks that separated my lanai from the main walkway.

Harris said, “I’ll be okay once I’m back in my place.”

The last thing in the world I wanted now was to leave her. Alexander had been right; I did have feelings for Harris. We stumbled along like a couple of amateurs in a three-legged sack

race. “We’ll get you settled in, then tomorrow—”

“Nuh-uh. I have a deadline. No delays allowed.” She stiffened in pain.

I scrunched up my face in sympathy. “I get along pretty good with computers. And I’m interested in seeing if this whole story is for real.”

“It is.”

“But before the cops will send someone up there to look around, they’ll want proof that the body’s real.”

She shook my shoulder as though I’d just heartily volunteered for something. “That’s the spirit.”

Shit. She’d done it again. If I volunteered one more time, I’d be up for a damn humanitarian award. My mouth stayed shut as we made our way through the courtyard, the scent of jasmine and plumeria filling my nostrils. The dull murmur of the ocean’s waves lapped against the shore in the background.

We shuffled quietly past five apartments to the end of the walkway, then took a left to Harris’s unit on the end. These places had no air conditioning so the tenants slept with their bedroom windows open at least a crack. The last thing I needed was crabby tenants—crabby was my province.

Once inside, Harris said, “I’ll boot up the machine.” She pressed the power button, then said, “Be right back.”

When she returned, she extracted the media card from her camera, which sported several

nasty scratches. It looked a lot like her on the outside. I hoped its insides were in better shape.

Otherwise, they might both die for nothing. “Looks like you.”

“Ha, ha. It landed on me. Thank God. This thing cost me almost two grand.”

“Two—jeez, what’s it do, serve lunch while you shoot?” I chuckled, another good one, McKenna.

She just held onto her side and stared at me. Finally, she said, “So what do you do on computers? E-mail? Surf the net?”

“A little of this, a little of that. I was a skip tracer for a bank.”

“Oh. One of those.”

It surprised me that she knew what a skip tracer did, most people had no clue. “I was the guy who found the tough ones. Before we had computers, anyway. Once computers came along, the job changed.”

“Got too technical?”

“In the old days, it was a rush. Like solving a puzzle. The harder the puzzle, the better it felt. Computers made it a production line. I learned to query databases instead of questioning people. Management wanted more work with fewer workers. Then, I got outsourced.”

“Honey, you don’t look like the kind of guy who got off on his work.”

I shrugged. “I am—was. In the old days. Now, I’m sort of a techie.”

“Me, I’m a people person.”

“And a photographer.”

“That too.”

“And a twin.”

She grimaced.

“Did I say something wrong?”

She shook her head. “My sister needs a kidney transplant. She’s stuck with a loser husband, two kids and no insurance.”

“So that’s why you were willing to go to a closed park to get photos? And now you’ve got people wanting to kill you.”

“My concern is getting more money for my sister’s operation. If I don’t do it, she’ll die.”

I didn’t want to break the mood, but I realized that it had been hours since I’d been to the bathroom. “Hey, I gotta go.”

“Sure, go back home, get some rest.”

“No, I’ve gotta GO.”

Harris nodded, then smiled. “You know where it’s at, right?”

While in the bathroom, I splashed some water on my face to help the sobering-up process. I stood, staring at my image in the mirror. “You moron, she’s a Darwin Award candidate.” Maybe I was half-drunk, but Harris seemed to deserve one of those little awards that are given to those who help “improve the species . . . by accidentally removing themselves from it.” Personally, I prefer one of their other sayings, “chlorinating the gene pool.”

I splashed more water into my eyes, then dried my face. “Get a grip,” I told myself. “And

a hug.”

By the time I got back, file names from the media card had filled Harris’s screen and she scrutinized the list. She clicked on a name towards the end. Her screen began to reveal the photo of a waterfall crashing to the canyon floor below. We waited while the photo grew, line by line. I glanced around the room. She had flash attachments, tripods, lenses, camera bags, and other assorted paraphernalia scattered everywhere.

“Shoot, wrong one.” Harris drummed her fingers as she waited for the download to finish.

“Wow. That’s quite a shot.” Forget the Darwin Award, Harris was a damn good photographer.

On the screen, water tumbled past the camera. The rushing blur at the top of the picture gradually became more clear until it plunged into a pool surrounded by rocks at the bottom. It looked as though you were rafting the falls. Though I knew Alexander was right, that it was only eighty feet to the bottom, I stood, mesmerized by the perception of plunging ten times that distance to the canyon floor. “If you’d have used a webcam, you’d have full motion video.”

“And it would look like a low-res postage stamp. These photos are ten meg each. Unless you’re doing posters, the quality is as good as film and immensely more flexible. I can use photo editing software to manipulate the photo, crop, and adjust colors.”

I hadn’t thought about photographers adjusting the colors on their photos before. If Harris had a few more shots like this one and a couple more answers like that, she’d move from the

Darwin Award candidate category into the Wonder Woman category. Unless, of course, she died. In which case, I was going online and reluctantly making a nomination. “Is that how they get those bright-red sunset shots?”

“Sometimes. They might also use a special lens or combination of lenses. This one’s pretty good, but I’ve got a couple that are better. This was the last one before the plane showed up.”

Harris closed the window with the waterfall and clicked another file name. This time, the screen began to paint an image of the sky—a pale-blue canvas with fluffy white clouds and a miniature image of a plane. Harris grabbed her head and leaned forward. She rested her forehead on the desk and groaned, “It’s too small!”

Well, I’ll be. The whole story was true. I moved in closer to the photo, trying to make out the details. There was the little plane with an ant in the middle of a miniature doorway and forever suspended in midair below the plane was another ant. But, this ant had two arms, two legs, and definitely no parachute. I said, “How come you didn’t just zoom in?”

“Goddammit, McKenna, I had on a wide-angle lens to shoot scenery and didn’t have time to get back to my camera bag and change lenses!”

Wow, she’d gone from Wonder Woman to the Wicked Witch in two heartbeats—and I’d missed the costume change. Crap. I’d try something out of my comfort zone—sympathy “I’d be crabby too if I got caught with the wrong lens on my \$2,000 camera.”

She glared at me, then began to laugh.

My breath caught in my throat. I wanted to hear that sound again.

Her nose wrinkled and she nodded. “You think you’re so funny. All right, funny man, can you make out the number on that plane?”

I winked at her. “I can do better than that, I’ll bet I can find out who owns the damn thing.”

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