

## Hijinks Aboard the *Hōkūlani*

From Kai Cooke's Surfing Detective Case Files

by Chip Hughes

Six a.m. Wednesday, October fourth. Ala Wai Yacht Harbor. I was staking out a deadbeat dad named Leonard Souza. Souza and his seventeen-year-old girlfriend, a high school truant named Lei, were keeping company in a fishing boat called the *Hōkūlani*, or Heavenly Star. A friend of the girl had told me she was pregnant. That's why she didn't return to school.

I was parked at the yacht harbor by Waikīkī's famed Ilikai Hotel, atop whose towering wings Jack Lord posed for the opening sequence of *Hawaii Five-O*. In my memory I could almost see the famous cascading wave that started the show and hear the drum roll and twanging guitars as Lord's character, Detective Steve McGarrett, turned steely eyes to the camera. That kind of glitz and glamour was hardly my lot today.

Serving papers on hostile deadbeats like Souza can be a dicey business. My favorite strategy is to play dumb: I don't mention what's in the envelope until it's safely in the bad

guy's hands. Though I'd never admit to deliberately misleading anyone, sometimes my prey get the mistaken idea that they're about to win the lottery, receive a check from an anonymous benefactor, or a reward for a good deed done long ago but not forgotten. Once the court order has been duly served, I mention this disagreeable fact on my way out. By the time any tempers flare, I'm heading for the surf. Aside from an occasional glitch, this strategy works. Usually.

I'm Kai Cooke. My business card says "Surfing Detective" and "Confidential Investigations—All Islands." Above these words is my company logo—a gracefully arched longboard rider with toes on the nose. A thing of beauty. You'll find my surfer logo in the Honolulu yellow pages. This is no gimmick. I really do surf. More to the point, the logo works. Potential clients may forget my name, but not the Surfing Detective. Sure, I get occasional crank calls. It comes with the territory.

The *Hōkūlani* wasn't even Souza's. From what I could gather, the dilapidated boat's absentee owner allowed him to live on board in exchange for repairs. He and the girl got themselves a love nest, though a foul one, rent free. I could see no evidence from my stakeout position of any repairs to this rust bucket.

In my lap lay the manila envelope I had come to put into Souza's hands. It contained a court order—more precisely, a "Motion and Affidavit for Post-Decree Relief"—compelling him to appear at Family Court. A year behind on his child support payments, Souza had violated the terms of his divorce decree.

Several days of turning over rocks finally led me here to the yacht harbor, hoping to catch Souza off guard and deliver the affidavit. I was being cagey because his former wife had warned me in pidgin: “Leonard *like beef*.” Meaning: If provoked, he could get nasty.

Mrs. Souza, his ex-, was my client. I should never have taken her on. She couldn’t afford my hourly minimum. She called me daily, sometimes twice a day. But how could I not help her? She and her three kids were about to lose their home. All because of Leonard Souza.

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The rising sun cast its amber gleam on two snapshots Mrs. Souza had provided: one of her ex-husband, the other of the girl—their former baby-sitter.

Souza was a scurvy looking fish with *salt-n-peppa* whiskers and shadowy circles under his charcoal eyes, the kind of scum you’d want to keep miles away from your sister or daughter or girlfriend. Lei’s picture, signed in her childlike hand “To Mr. & Mrs. Souza,” must have been taken at her junior prom. She wore an orchid corsage, frilly mauve dress, and an innocent smile. On her beauty-shop bun perched a rhinestone crown.

This “queen for a day” was girlishly slim, with the telltale curves of a blossoming woman. The pimple-faced boy in a bow tie holding her hand, a gremmie about the size of knee-high shore break, stood two inches shorter than his queen. From the nervous look in his eyes, she was obviously too much for him. Way too much.

Over the morning's *Honolulu Advertiser* I kept my eye on the listing *Hōkūlani*, docked about forty yards away. In the gauzy morning light the harbor looked lime green, but beyond a distant lava rock jetty, turquoise breakers rumbled in. I gazed longingly at their frothy white crests, riding an imaginary surfboard on each gem-like curl.

Sheltered from the churning surf, Souza's motley craft was flanked by a dozen more sparkling vessels. I could see two portholes in the small, low cabin where he and the girl slept. Since six a.m., when I started the stakeout, neither light nor human form had shown itself in those dim portholes.

Glancing at the morning paper, I flipped first to the weather page to check out the waves. Despite the confused tiger shark at Laniākea who once mistook me for his breakfast—etching my chest with sixteen pink welts—I ride my longboard every chance I get. Surfing relieves the stresses of detective work.

Since tailing Souza I hadn't caught a wave in days. It was high time. There was that body discovered in a Maui cane field—an unsolved case—to ponder. Maybe the surf would provide a clue. If there was a swell on the North Shore, I would call cousin Alika who haunts the lineups at Sunset, Pipeline, and Waimea. The *Advertiser* forecast waves in Waikīkī at two to three feet. Elsewhere, including Alika's turf, a paltry flat to one.

*Diving conditions.* To Waikīkī I would go, then, before this morning lost its blush. That is, once I served the affidavit.

I glanced up again at the *Hōkūlani*, portholes still black as night. A typical stakeout. Sometimes I sit for hours like a forlorn board rider on a waveless pond. Then—*Bingo!*—a set rolls in.

Watching and waiting have to be as active as my moves, or I might miss something. I kept the proverbial one eye on the case, even as I read the news—ready to jump into the game at the slightest change. Inevitably, when my vigilance slips, the case gets bungled; when my guard goes down, things turn dangerous . . .

So I stayed alert even as I flipped through the pages. Still no movement on Souza's boat. The morning sun sent slats of golden light between Waikiki high-rises, illuminating the drowsy harbor in jailbird stripes. Would Souza and his girl never crawl out of bed?

Before long I started to worry that this stakeout might drag on into my morning surf session. An hour and a half had gone by and nothing had happened. *Nothing.*

If Souza didn't show his scurvy face pretty soon, I might have to start something.

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At twenty past eight, my patience wearing thin, inside the slanting cabin of the *Hōkūlani* a light finally flashed on. Through the two portholes I saw movement. Grabbing the manila envelope, I strolled down the dock toward the rusty hulk.

My white cotton shorts, polo shirt, Raybans, and rubber *zoris* would have fit in well with the yachting crowd—had they been out of bed yet. I have a number of such outfits that I wear for protective coloration. From the few early risers I saw decked out on nearby boats, my yachting attire looked appropriate. So that Souza wouldn't get instantly suspicious, I folded and slipped the envelope into my back pocket.

Beneath my feet green sea water lapped between planks in the dock. Sleek sailboats and motor yachts graced countless slips. The closer I got to Souza's listing craft, the worse it looked by comparison. The rust-orange hull was not corroded metal, as I had assumed, but rotting wood whose gunwale cleats and hardware sent down streams of rust. On the bow, fiberglass peeled up like waxed paper. Below the water line barnacles had invaded, apparently without resistance, every inch of territory. So much for Souza's repairs.

In a moment I was standing near the two portholes that had appeared pitch black from my car. Now they were transparent. Souza and his girl were up. I caught a glimpse of Lei, who bore faint resemblance to her photo as prom queen. Her hair was ratted, her rhinestone crown and innocent smile gone. She wore only bikini panties and a sheer nightgown that stopped half way down her thighs. She was reed thin with little upturned breasts. The rounded bulge in her tummy confirmed what her high school friend had confided.

Behind the girl I saw the dark, whiskered man slipping on soiled denims and a black t-shirt with sleeves torn out. Flecks of gray riddled his patchy beard and oily hair.

*Scum.* That's what flashed through my mind when I scoped out this cradle-robbing deadbeat. Even if Mrs. Souza paid me nothing, I would relish busting up his little boat party.

Since neither the girl nor Souza seemed in any hurry to leave their tiny cabin, I had to do something soon or miss my morning surf session. As the tropic sun climbed, the temperature at the yacht harbor rose. This Wednesday in early October was shaping up to be a scorcher. *Kona weather.* In the faint trade winds, coconut palms along the harbor hung slack. Sweat beads formed on my forehead. There's only one thing to do on such a sweltering day. I gazed beyond the jetty again at those crystal blue breakers, wishing I was out there right now on my board rather than messing with Souza.

The *Hōkūlani's* sloping aft deck offered neither boarding plank nor ladder. I climbed aboard over a gunwale onto the badly caulked teak. The tilting boat reminded me of a rickety fun house. Without the laughs. Such unsound footing—not plumb or level or true—always makes me edgy, as if I'm about to lose my balance. Two fishing poles mounted in chocks on either side of the stern had lines out in the water. One pole bobbed. On deck lay a long, hooked gaffe. The gaffe gleamed like polished chrome in the morning sun and looked razor sharp.

I tapped on the cabin door. No answer. Though I'm accustomed to serving papers, a few butterflies fluttered in my stomach. I wouldn't exactly call this fear, just adrenaline. I knocked on Souza's door again. Silence in the cabin.

“Hello!” I said in perfect *haole* English. “You’ve got a nibble on one of your fishing lines.”

The door opened and Souza swaggered out. He looked grubbier than his photo and he smelled rank, like stale sardines. A jagged scar, not visible in the snapshot, slanted up over his left eyebrow like a bent apostrophe. He’d been in a few *beefs*, all right. But despite my butterflies, he didn’t scare me. I could handle him, though laying him out wasn’t part of my job.

“Eh, brah!” Souza snarled. “What you doin’ on my boat?”

“So sorry,” I replied like a mainland tourist. “Thought you might have a something on your line.”

He eyed me suspiciously. The bobbing pole went slack. Souza had lost his fish.

“What do you catch in this harbor?” I pointed to the murky, lime-green water.

“*Kōkala*—Puffer Fish,” he replied grudgingly. “Why you like know?”

I glanced on deck again at that razor-sharp gaffe.

“Bettah get off da boat, eh?” Souza said. “My insurance no cover you.” He turned toward the cabin.

“Another nibble!” I shouted. When he looked back at his poles I reached into my pocket and put the envelope in his hands.

“What dis, brah?” His coal eyes smoldered.

I looked toward the dock, mapping my escape. Instinctively, my knees bent and my feet shifted, like I was about to take off on a wave. Once Souza saw the manila

envelope he knew. He dropped it on the deck and, sure enough, grabbed that wicked gaffe.

Before I could leap onto the dock, he swung the gaffe. The fastest way out was over the stern. *Bail out!*

I dove down into the murky harbor as far from the boat as I could. But that gaffe came flying in after me, catching my right ankle. A sharp pain shot up my leg. I struggled under water, my polo shirt clinging like a wet blanket. My Raybans sank into the murk. I kicked off my *zoris* and swam beneath the surface as long as my breath would hold. Behind me trailed a thin stream of blood. *Hungry sharks?* I wondered.

Coming up for air, I looked around to get my bearings. The *Hōkūlani* lay thirty feet away. My rubber *zoris* bobbed on the water near the listing hull like two planks adrift. Souza glared at me from the stern.

“*Brah!*” He waved the court order angrily. The stapled legal pages flapped in the air.

I dove down deep and swam under water again. When I rose for another breath the rusty boat looked smaller, less menacing. Souza was nowhere in sight. I swam on the surface to the nearest dock, patting my shorts for my wallet and keys. Thankfully neither had gone south with my sunglasses.

I climbed onto the dock planks and limped barefoot and dripping to my car. The *zoris* I simply left floating by the *Hōkūlani*. At the harbor’s edge I glimpsed again those aqua towers of the Ilikai Hotel, where Jack Lord flashed his steely eyes for the opening of

*Hawaii Five-0*. I couldn't recall his Detective McGarrett ever serving papers on a deadbeat or getting attacked by a gaffe. Did I miss that episode?

I hobbled along, my ankle stinging and bleeding. Like a shallow coral cut, the wound thankfully went just beneath the surface. But I was peeved. *Like beef, Souza?* I thought fleetingly about going back after the scurvy deadbeat. But why risk my license and maybe my nose over a scum like him? Nah, Souza wasn't worth it. Anyway, the affidavit had been duly served. My job was done.

I checked my watch—quarter to nine—and headed for the surf.