



 **ISLAND** *of*
SWEET PIES
and **SOLDIERS**





Prologue



MR. MACADANGDANG SHOWED UP WITH A truck full of coconuts this morning. The way his back fender scraped across the road, you'd think he was transporting barrels of lead. He knows that Mama and Jean are suckers for coconut pie, and he's been extra helpful since Papa disappeared.

There's only one problem with a mountain of coconuts in your front yard—someone has to husk them all. He taught me how once, using a cane knife that could have hacked off my hand with one slip. First you hold the coconut in your hand like a baseball. Then you crack it in half with one big hit. When the water pours out, you hold it above your head and swallow it down.

Mama put an end to that. “Macadangdang! What are you doing? Teach *me*, not Ella,” she said.

It's been almost three years now since Pearl Harbor, one year since Papa vanished. Everyone else measures time from the moment those Japanese planes shot their torpedoes into

our ships. I measure it from the last time I saw Papa. People say things get easier as time passes but not in my case. Even though we get *special treatment*, as Jean calls it, that doesn't make up for being fatherless in the middle of a war.

Mama and Jean are plotting to sell pies to the new soldiers in town. Mama says we need the money, Jean needs a distraction, and I'll get to eat the leftovers. So it works out for all of us.

But back to my papa disappearing. I was there. Mama thinks I was playing in the Codys' yard. That's not true. Don't ask me to tell because I'm sworn to secrecy. Lives depend on it.

There are days when I feel like the secret is growing inside of me, and wonder if I might explode like a popped balloon. But I have to keep Mama safe, and not let the words out. Words that could ruin everything and put us all in danger. At first all I wanted to do was run to her, screaming, to paint the story in giant red letters across the wall. But it was a year ago, and writing didn't come easily. I still got the *b* and the *d* mixed up.

Nowadays, I keep the cane knife close. But not for the coconuts.



Chapter One

Territory of Hawaii, 1944



ELLA

THE FIRST SOLDIERS ARRIVED LAST DECEMBER. More came last weekend. On the day the first group arrived, Mama and I were on our way to Hayashi store for a vanilla ice cream after school. Mama fanned her face and fought off rivers of sweat, but I didn't notice the heat. Growing up in Hawaii would do that to a child, everyone always said. We were halfway down the hill when the ground began to vibrate under our feet. I thought maybe the Japanese were back, this time coming for us by land.

Mama squeezed my hand. "Honey, not to worry. The sirens would be going off."

When we made it to the main road, we saw the first truck rolling in. In the sticky air, I could taste the diesel on my tongue. No matter what Mama said, my heart hummed along with those trucks, about one hundred beats per minute.

"That man has blood on his head," I said, worried about a soldier leaning on the edge of the truck bed. His eyes were

closed like he was in silent conversation with himself, or maybe God, and he wore a red-soaked bandage.

“Blood happens when you’re fighting a war, sweetie.”

Until that moment, I had never seen real live wounded soldiers. The soldiers were propped up against each other, looking out with blank faces. Torn shirts, bandaged limbs and eyes that had lost all smile. Folks from town rushed out to throw fruit to them. A coconut struck one man in the stomach and he slumped over. I wanted to help, but there was nothing I could do. My eyes followed him until the truck went out of sight. But even then, the funny feeling in my stomach stayed.

“Where did they come from?” I yelled above the rumble.

Mama seemed lost in her own thoughts, her big blue eyes glossy. “Hilo, probably, but before that, who knows.”

In the distance, I could see that the convoy continued on through town—past the school, the bank, the post office, following the late-afternoon sun. The last three trucks turned up the road toward Honoka’a School, where we live.

I imagined a whole new wave of war happening, and this scared the gobbledygook out of me. By now we were used to blackouts and air-raid drills. If they could so much as see the burner from your kitchen stove, you were in trouble. Big trouble, like they would arrest you and haul you off to jail, maybe forever. Saving metal scraps was also important. I used to rummage around school for any old paper clips or nails or tacks. You could turn them in for ration tickets. Rumors swirled around town, too. *Hilo will be taken over soon by the Japanese. Midway is the next target. So-and-so is a Japanese spy.* Everyone was affected.

“Where are they going?” I wanted to know.

Mama shrugged. “I don’t know, but we’ll find out.”

In Honoka’a, if you really wanted to know something, all you had to do was ask Miss Irene Ferreira, the telephone op-

erator. Why was it that some people had names that had to be said together? Mama was always Violet, and Jean was Jean. But Irene was never just Irene. She swore she never listened in, and still, somehow, secrets leaked and stories spread. Even though the military took over the phones after Pearl Harbor, for some reason they let her stay on.

Once the endless line of trucks passed, we walked across the street to the small red house where she worked. Irene Ferreira sat amid wires and plugs. She wore a headset that made her look very official.

“Any idea what this convoy is about?” Mama said.

Irene pinched her plump lips together and shook her head. “Mum’s the word. You know how the military is.”

“Come on. You must have heard something.”

Irene Ferreira looked behind Mama and me, and then stood to peer outside the dusty windows. “I hear they’re building a base in Waimea town. Marines.”

Technically, Waimea wasn’t a town. It was more a ranch with a handful of wooden houses and stores sprung up around it. A cold and windy place full of Hawaiian cowboys and more grass than you’d know what to do with.

“Why our school?” Mama said.

Irene didn’t answer.

“Is there something we don’t know?”

That got my attention. If the island was filling up with soldiers, did that mean we were going to be attacked? I have my own bunny suit, which is a dumb name for a gas-mask contraption, but I never thought I would really need it. My breath caught halfway up my throat and my chest started squeezing in. This happens a lot. Vexation, Mama says. Besides not knowing how to breathe, I gnaw my fingernails to the point where they bleed and I pick at freckles and turn

them into scabs. The worst of all is the stomachache that never goes away. It all started happening when Papa disappeared.

Irene said, "That's all I know. I promise."

As tempting as it was to stay and pry the information out of her, we decided to follow the trucks up to the school. The soldiers drove straight onto the newly clipped field in front of the gym, their heavy trucks sinking into the mud. Mr. Nakata, the principal, must have been mad, watching from the side of the gym. A man in a green uniform spotted us approaching and marched right over.

"Excuse me, ma'am. This area is off-limits," he said.

"We live here," Mama said, pointing toward our house.

"You don't live in the gym, do you? Please step away."

There was nothing Mama hated worse than being ordered around, especially by a newcomer. I sometimes point out that she was once a newcomer—here they call them *malihini*—but she believes it's more about how you behave and what's in your heart than where you come from.

Still curious, she dragged me over to the administration building, where the men unrolled strands of barbed wire and posts. Another group unloaded cots and stacks of green metal boxes. With no spare movements, they went about their business of taking over a part of our school. The war had finally arrived in our own backyard.

But for Mama and me, the war was not the worst thing that had happened lately. The worst had already come.



Chapter Two



VIOLET

THE KITCHEN WAS WHERE MOST OF THEIR LIVING took place. Violet pulled a cold towel from the icebox and pressed it to her forehead. The radio played Bing Crosby, a welcome diversion from updates on the battles taking place in Europe. It was hard to keep the names and the places in order, but Jean had hung a giant map on the living room wall so they had something to refer to when they heard that British troops had landed at Reggio Calabria or that the Italian fleet had surrendered at Malta.

“These Chinese names are impossible to pronounce. *Jiang Zhongzheng*? My mouth wasn’t designed for them,” Jean said.

Violet laughed. “The Russian ones are worse. Five consonants strung together?”

“Either way, I’m glad the Russians are on our side.”

“Me, too. I just wish the Japanese were.”

Jean stood next to Violet, husking corn and humming along with the music. Her hips couldn’t help but sway, and her lips

mouthered the words to every song. When Violet had first seen Jean in the classroom next door, she wondered why a movie star had come to town, but Jean turned out to be the newest teacher at Honoka'a High. Fresh off the boat from Seattle, where it had been *too damp and too cold*. Jean had been living with Violet and Ella for over a year. Ever since Herman disappeared and Violet's life had begun to unravel.

Campus housing was scarce and Violet had been happy for the company. Their cottage was the largest on campus, with three bedrooms and a living room big enough for a sofa, two chairs and a *pune'e*. Set back from the others, the cottage bordered a dense tangle of woods behind the school. Violet and Jean had painted the walls white and filled it with ferns and crawling plants and enough books to help them forget the outside world. The exterior of the house was another story. Sunflower yellow. For Ella.

One of the disadvantages to having the largest cottage was the abundance of windows. Windows that needed to be boarded up and blacked out at night. Houses in Hawaii were designed for the steady trade winds, with more screened windows than walls. When the school was built, no one had planned on a war. Soon after Pearl Harbor, and martial law, the shop teacher fashioned thin wooden slats that easily slipped into place. But the sliding screen doors that led from the living room onto the porch made blacking out that section of the house nearly impossible. So at night, Violet, Jean and Ella stuck to the kitchen, reading Dr. Seuss and listening to the radio. And once Ella went to sleep, Violet and Jean would discuss the war. And Jean's flame, Bud. He was one of the marines who showed up last December straight from the battle at Tarawa. The people in Hawaii had taken them in and made them their own. Jean fell in love with Bud, but now he'd been shipped out.

They also talked about Herman. And what might have happened to him.

“Ella asked me today if she could go to Japanese school,” Violet said in a hushed tone so Ella, who was drawing in the living room, wouldn’t hear.

Jean turned off the faucet and faced her, eyes big. “Our Ella?”

“I wasn’t sure I heard correctly at first.”

That morning, when Ella had asked, Violet fought to keep her face in order. “Japanese school is for Japanese. And you, my dear, are not Japanese,” she’d said, brushing a lock of Ella’s hair back.

“Why does it matter?” Ella had said.

“It’s just how it is right now. With the war.”

“Umi says all they do is make origami animals and sing.” Ella was still too young to know the meaning of skin color, and how it mattered more than it should. “Please?”

It took Violet a few seconds to realize that Ella had made up her mind. “No promises, but I can ask.”

These were the moments in childrearing that she longed to have Herman around. He was good at handling difficult matters. Violet tended to let emotions cloud her thinking. Anyway, it was the first time in the past year that Ella had shown interest in doing anything apart from Violet. She would spend a whole afternoon drawing pictures of dragonflies or petting the cats on the porch rather than venturing out on her own. Aside from when she was at school, which she hated, Ella could always be found within a thirty-foot radius of her mother.

Jean wiped her hands on a dish towel. “What did you say to her?”

“I pointed out the obvious. But now I’m wondering. Japanese learn English. Why couldn’t she learn Japanese?”

Jean shook her head. "I know you hate to say no, but this might not be the best time. People are on eggshells about whether or not the school should even be open."

"If they were going to shut it down, they would have already."

"Nothing's for certain."

Before she could respond, Ella appeared in the doorway, bare feet white against the green linoleum. "Mama, there's a tall man at the front door."

She and Jean exchanged glances. There were few tall strangers in the area. Jean smoothed her skirt and they walked out to the living room together. Ella hung back. It was September and the remaining light sent streaks of gold through the *hau* trees. A figure in a green uniform stood in front of the screen door, backlit. Another stood on the steps below, looking out toward the ocean.

As she approached the door, Jean squealed. "Zach? Is that you?" She flung open the door and flew outside, wrapping herself around one of the men before he could get a word out. "What are you doing here? Oh, Lordy Lord, I can't believe this!" She turned to Violet. "This is my little brother, Zach."

When he managed to detach himself from Jean, he shook Violet's hand, nearly pulling her arm out of its socket. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

Zach motioned to the other man. "This is Sergeant Parker Stone, Fifth Division."

Parker squeezed her hand. His eyes were either deep-sea blue or silver, and she tried not to stare. Must have been the lighting.

"Please, come in," Jean said.

Parker remained planted. "I'll wait out here if you don't mind. I can't seem to get enough of this sweet air," he said,

looking more interested in the whitecaps and cane fields than in either of them.

Jean pulled Zach in and dragged him into the light of the kitchen. Ella sat at the table, looking into her glass of milk. Violet could tell she was curious because she kept sneaking glances.

“Ella, honey, this is my brother, Zach. Can you say hi?” Jean said.

Ella’s chestnut eyes were stubborn. She didn’t look up, but in a small voice said, “Hello.”

Zach towered over her. “Well, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Ella.”

He looked down at the picture on the table. Ella ignored him.

“That’s a fancy-looking creature. Do those actually live around here?” he said.

The drawing was of a butterfly with lacy wings and a cat’s face. Ella nodded, ever so slightly.

“I wasn’t aware that Hawaii had flying buttercats. But this is good information to know,” he said, winking at Violet.

It didn’t take Zach long to make himself comfortable at the table, and for Violet to decide she liked him.

Jean beamed. “Tell me everything, young man. Why didn’t you contact me?”

Without his hat, he looked younger. Jean was twenty-five, so Violet guessed Zach to be about twenty-two. “They wouldn’t let us. You know how that goes. If anyone so much as mentioned *pineapple* or *island* in our letters home, they were crossed out or returned.”

“So you must have been in the convoy that passed through town this weekend. And you’re just coming here now?” Jean asked.

“I searched for your face when we drove through. Trust me, I came as soon as I could.”

“Your group looks different from the fellas that left us last month,” Violet said.

“Camp Pendleton is a far cry from Betio Atoll. God bless those boys.” Zach’s face clouded over.

“What can you tell us? How long are you here for?” Jean asked.

Zach shared the same smile as his sister, toothy and nearly wider than his face. “That, I can’t say. And when you contact Mom and Dad, don’t say I’m here. The last thing we need is the Japanese to know what we’ve got going on. Though Lord knows they have their spies.”

Violet’s stomach lurched. “Not in this town.” She was fed up to her teeth with outsiders assuming all Japanese were spies.

“You can’t be too sure,” Zach said.

“I can vouch for a good number of them.”

“We’re just here to protect our country.”

“Just beware of blanket assumptions based on skin color,” Violet said.

Zach backed off. “I’ve got to run, since we’re supposed to be on official business. It’s six o’clock and I don’t want to get shot, but I’ll come down when on liberty if that’s all right?” he said. “And next time we’ll bring Roscoe.”

“Who’s Roscoe?” Jean asked.

“Just you wait. You’re going to love him.” He glanced at Ella. “You, too, Ella.”

At the sound of her name, Ella perked up, but still regarded her drawing instead of Zach.

“Please do! Oh, Zach, I’m so happy to see you. You look well,” Jean said.

He placed his hat back on and bent his grasshopper legs

to bring him level with Ella. “And maybe I’ll get to see that buttercat for real next time.”

Ella looked at the floor.

Later in the evening, Violet peered through the window at Setsuko’s house down the hill. Lights were out, which wasn’t surprising, since lights were always out. She debated walking down to see if anyone was still awake. There was no excuse for being out past ten unless on official business, and she didn’t want to get shot by the guards set up at the school entrance. Curfew was taken seriously. Even still, their houses were on campus, and she would be only a thin shadow against the backs of houses.

“I’m going to walk down to Setsuko’s. Can you keep an eye on Ella?” she asked Jean.

“Now?”

If there was one thing in the world she wanted, it was for Ella to come alive again. “I need to ask.” After all, why not Japanese school? It couldn’t hurt to have Ella learning Japanese customs and language, especially living in a blended town like theirs.

Jean gave her one of her teacher looks, and planted her hands on her hips. “Wait until tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be back soon.”

She sneaked around back and padded down the pathway, following a thin trail of moonlight. Voices floated in and out from darkened windows along the way, and radios sent their noise into the black air. Everything seemed so desperately regular, except for the fact that she had to sneak to her friend’s house in the cover of night. There would be no sleeping until she talked to Takeo.

From the road up to the school, the hum of an engine grew louder. Why hadn’t she accounted for headlights in planning

her route? A beam of brilliant light shot across her path as a truck came over the hill. She pressed herself behind a tree, cursing her hips for not being slimmer. But the truck continued on toward the gym. A few minutes passed without another truck.

Outside the house, she hesitated. A knock at the door might cause alarm, but it was too late now. A radio played in the kitchen, and she tapped on the door, while at the same time whispering through the screen. "Setsuko, it's Violet."

The radio turned down and feet shuffled. Silence filled the house.

"It's Violet," she said again, this time louder.

The door opened and she was pulled into the dark living room by strong hands. "What are you doing here?" Setsuko asked. She wore a rice-bag kimono. Her hair, which usually coiled on her shoulders in permed waves, was now pinned up. Violet smelled seaweed on her breath.

Takeo stood behind Setsuko and nodded to the kitchen. A hint of light seeped out from under the door.

She had to work up the nerve for her request. "Did you sell a lot of sweet potato in Waimea?"

Takeo squinted his already narrow eyes. He knew her too well. "Is that what you came here for, Violet? To ask me that?"

Not much taller than she was, he was strong enough to carry a whole bushel of cane on his back. As a *Nisei*, he had both feet planted firmly in Hawaii. What Violet loved about him was that he spent more time listening than talking.

"I have a favor to ask of you," she said.

"Go."

"Ella wants to come to Japanese school."

For a moment, everything in the room seemed to be listening. The crickets outside quieted and the wind hushed. Setsuko coughed.

“I don’t understand,” he said, throwing a hard glance at his wife.

“My daughter wants to attend your school. As a student.”

His eyebrows lifted and he stood there barefoot and unsmiling.

“Please, Takeo. I need this favor.” An uneasy feeling welled up in her stomach. She worried he would say no. Ella rarely asked for much, and Violet wanted to give her this.

“Bring her by day after tomorrow.”

In the morning, Violet sat at the bureau, readying for school and applying cover-up to her lower lids. The blue of her once-bright eyes had rubbed off sometime in the past year. She only hoped her pink lipstick made up for the lost color. Worse than that, the waves in her latest permanent were falling out and her honey-colored hair now stood stiff like straw.

Last night after talking with Setsuko, she had tried counting convoy trucks to help her fall asleep. That hadn’t worked. Jean said maybe it was the grape juice cans rolled in her hair that caused the insomnia, but Violet suspected it was more likely from thinking about things over and over. And over. There were so many layers to her grief. While Ella had a perpetual stomachache, Violet was prone to a perpetual heartache.

Jean was already in the kitchen banging pots around when Violet walked in. “Bad sleep?” she asked.

Violet nodded. Jean always looked fresh from the beauty parlor, not one hair out of place and as though someone had smoothed coconut oil over each strand. Even first thing in the morning. When they had first moved in together, Violet was unsure how two strong-willed women would get along under the same roof. It hadn’t taken long for her to realize that having Jean around was like having her very own wife.

On some mornings, coffee was already made, banana pancakes already piled high on a plate, still steaming. And Jean knew how to scour a kitchen clean.

When Ella joined them at the table, dark smudges under her eyes were visible. Though she never complained about being tired, surely the nightmares had taken their toll. “Where’s Snowflake?” she asked.

“She must be outside hunting for mice,” Violet said.

Ella left her bowl of cornflakes and walked to the front door.

“Pumpkin, you need to eat before Hiro and Umi come for you.”

Ella’s voice cut through the morning stillness. “Snowflake!”

Snowflake didn’t show up, but two other striped cats arrived on the porch and rubbed up against Ella’s legs. She sat to pet them, leaving her breakfast unattended. Cats were more important than food and water, and Violet prayed that Snowflake really was out hunting for mice.

“Your cereal is getting soggy. Come on up and eat.” Violet looked at the clock. The Hamasu kids were never late and she wondered what was keeping them. The twins were Ella’s only friends these days, and the more she was around them, the better.

Ella remained in a fur huddle and acted like she didn’t hear. Violet stuffed an extra ball of rice into Ella’s lunch tin, then pulled her daughter along. “Come on. You’ll have to eat when you get there.”

Honoka’a School was the largest high school on the island, with almost one thousand students coming from as far as Paaulo to the east and Waimea to the west. The way the buildings stood on the hillside over town looking out on the Pacific reminded Violet of an exclusive manor. When the skies

were clear, she sometimes imagined being able to see all the way to Alaska. On the way to her classroom, she poked her head into Setsuko's room and waved.

"We missed Umi and Hiro this morning," Violet said.

Setsuko met her at the door. "They're with their father, harvesting sweet potato. His worker fell ill."

Nowadays, when people weren't where they were supposed to be, Violet's whole body filled with unease. Only natural after what she'd been through, but there was always something to worry about, between Ella and the war. There was also the matter of all her Japanese friends and their livelihoods. Everyone said it would only be a matter of time before they closed the Japanese school. When your country was at war with Japan, but the Japanese made up almost half of your population, life turned complicated.

Toward the end of fifth period, the bell hadn't even rung when Mr. Nakata showed up outside her classroom. He stood to the side and nodded, but didn't enter. The look on his face was familiar, one part pity and one part annoyance at having to trudge over here. Even though it had been more than a year since he took over for Herman, in her mind Nakata would always be the *new* principal. No one could replace her husband.

When she acknowledged him back, all her students turned their heads in unison toward the door. "Keep practicing your lines, class. I'll be right outside. And I expect that you will have no errors."

The typewriters clicked away.

"I don't want to alarm you, but there's been a small incident with Ella," Nakata said.

Her throat tightened. "Well, I am alarmed. Is she all right?"

He moved in closer and dropped his voice. Wafts of pomade rose from his slick hair. "She's fine, but she wet her

pants during the air-raid drill and Mr. Hodges sent her to the infirmary. I'll watch your class until the bell."

The school nurse should have a change of clothes for Ella, but it never got easier. Violet turned and ran.

"Violet, don't you want to put some shoes on?" She ran back in, switched out her Japanese slippers for her flats and sped across the field to the infirmary. The campus was calm-before-the-storm kind of empty, minutes before school got out. She reached the infirmary, a converted old classroom, in one minute flat.

"Hello, Mrs. Baker. Where's Ella?"

Mrs. Baker wore her whites crisp and clean, even though she had outgrown them several years ago. Nevertheless, her overabundant body made for good comforting to sick children. Or scared children, which had become more common these days with air-raid drills and gas-mask practice.

"She's in the back. I got her changed but she refused to go back to class," Mrs. Baker said.

Ella didn't look up when Violet walked into the room. In the oversize PE uniform, her arms looked like small wires sticking out from the sleeves. Red spots patterned her arm, one trickling blood, which meant she was picking at herself again. If Ella noticed her arrival, she didn't let on. She was drawing. Violet sat down on the worn-out carpet next to her.

"That's a lovely cat, honey." Nothing but silence. "Want to tell me what happened?"

Ella shook her head and filled in the wings of a giant bird hovering overhead. The bird appeared to be ready to snatch the cat away in its claws. "You worried about Snowflake? She'll be there when we get home. She always is." It better be the case. "Come on. We can bring that."

Ella remained rooted. "Where are Umi and Hiro?"

"They had to help their father today, selling sweet potato."

The distance between them narrowed when Ella's focus shifted from the drawing up to Violet. Her brown eyes were still too big for her face. "I don't like it here without them."

Violet fought to keep her expression in order. Watching Ella suffer was the worst part of this whole war. "They'll be back tomorrow. Plus, you know how close my room is."

Luther Hodges, the shop teacher and Herman's friend, popped his head in. "Everything okay here?"

"Just having a rough day. We're fine."

Ella began picking the scab on her arm vigorously. She wouldn't look up.

"The sirens seem to set her off. I'll keep an extra eye on her," he said.

Ella seemed much more comfortable around the women teachers and women in general, but any help would be welcome. "Thank you."

To Ella she said, "Did you hear that? You can always seek out Mr. Hodges if you are feeling scared."

Ella began quivering and Violet pulled her in for a hug. "What is it, honey?"

"The air-raid drills scare me."

"They're just practice. Nothing is going to happen to us, especially with half the marines in America just up the street."

There was some measure of comfort having so many armed men around. Soldiers with enough heavy artillery to sink the island and fancy new amphibious landing boats. A small piece of her wondered, though, if that also made the Big Island more of a target.