

Excerpt from Part One, *Returns in Found and Lost in Paradise*
(2nd novel in *Pinctada*, a novel duo)

It is early morning in Puama'u, which is still in the shadow of Hiva Oa's backbone, but the gleam from the rim of the sun that has just breached the rim of the Pacific's eastern horizon is coloring the sky a pastel rose, a hue that suggests itself in the light seeping through the windows of Oliana's bungalow. Bambi lies on her side on a sleeping mat within the confines of mosquito netting, and her bare skin perceives the hint of dew that has settled onto it. As her head rests on the crook of her right arm, she cradles Rebecca Rowena Randall Macey with her left hand as the baby noisily and happily suckles at her mother's breast.

There are other morning sounds, distant sounds like the gentle pulsing rush of Puama'u's diminished surf, which, in the perpetual lee of the island's high ridge does not benefit from the constant push of the trade winds. Complementing the rhythm of the surf, the fronds of the plantation's palm trees rustle in the moderated breeze and coming from within the cocoon of the mosquito netting, there is another sound: the rhythmic purr of Oliana's, sleep-subdued respirations. But Bambi's senses are tuned only to her baby, the feel of her little one's soft, smooth, and warm skin, the still novel sensation of Becca's eager mouth slurping sustenance from her breast, and every tiny twitch or stretch the baby makes.

Each time Bambi has engaged in this simple and ubiquitous motherly experience—one as old as the species—she has been brought nearly to tears by an awareness that she is fulfilling some predestined, almost sacred charge, and each time, she has been reminded of her own mother, a mother who had left her as a small child with no explanation, never to be heard from again. Each time Bambi has looked into the blue eyes of her daughter, every time she has held Becca to her breast, she has felt a gaping wound in her soul beginning to heal, the horrific pain of her mother's abandonment lessening with each assertive suckle upon her breast, but as she has felt the hurt diminish, it is supplanted by a growing anger toward her mother. The high heat of that anger is steeling her determination—no matter what twists and challenges she will have to face in the months and years ahead—to never abandon the tiny soul she is cradling with her hand.

Feeling Becca's mouth fall away from her breast and noting how still the baby has become, Bambi knows her little one has fallen asleep. She rolls onto her back and gently

places the baby on top of her, tummy to tummy, and yawns. She wonders how long it may be before she once again has a full night's sleep; perhaps after Becca graduates from high school, she thinks, and then she smiles as the fleeting acknowledgement of high school brings images to mind of the big brick school on a hill that faces the eastern flank of the Olympics, the school from which she would have graduated with honors in June of the previous year.

Despite the small student population, she and Bill had only known each other from afar at Port Townsend High School, aware of one another because they would see each other at sporting events like basketball games where he had been a prolific scorer on the Varsity, and she had been a cheerleader. Despite his prowess and local acclaim as an athlete, she had known him to be reticent during the school day, although polite and friendly enough to respond with a "Hi" and a shy smile whenever she had addressed him when passing in the hallways. And she had, as she had eventually admitted to him, spied on him from time to time when she discovered him silently musing behind the fire tower on the bluff that overlooked the town and bay, and from which, on a clear day, Mount Rainier could be seen one hundred miles away.

Bambi glances at her sleeping baby and smiles, and then closes her eyes to return to images of the first time she had approached Bill, one early, very cold morning, a day after he had moved from where he had been living with his parents onto what is now the Ultima Thule, which had then been docked at the P.T. Boat Haven. Bill's move had been precipitated by catastrophic events for which he had blamed his parents, a notion about which Bambi had concurred then and still. She recalls that first meeting with warm emotion: Bill's adorable shyness, their first kiss, and the surprise on his father's face when Mr. Myers had discovered the two of them that Sunday morning, sitting behind the settee in the salon, sipping strong coffee from the mugs they still use. In less than a day-and-a-half after Myers—who had been her Senior English teacher—had discovered them together, she and Bill were on their way to the South Pacific, both determined to escape what she now accepts had been disproportionate and immature reactions to Bill's anger at his parents and her soon to be disproven fears of an unwanted pregnancy to the young first mate on her father's trawler, the Albatross. Bambi chuckles at what now seems to be the lunacy of what it is they have done, but the humor dissipates in the face of other ruminations.

First to intrude on her reminiscences is what it is she might write in today's letter to Bill. Certainly, she will tell him about his daughter, how sweet she is, the odd little sounds she makes, how she definitely has his eyes, how much she loves her, and she

will also relate a few of the routine events that have transpired here in Puama'u since the previous day's writing. Because there is no postal service between Hiva Oa and Tikehau that might allow letters to lessen the strain of their separation, she and Bill had agreed to keep a diary of their time apart in the *form* of letters, which they had promised to exchange when they reunited. One set of letters had already been exchanged, written between the time she had left Bill and Mahana for her confinement and the Ultima Thule's timely return two days before Becca had been delivered. That first batch of letters had proven enlightening enough in their reading for the practice to be confirmed.

Becca had arrived on the seventh of January, in the new year of 1957, and had been delivered with the help of Oliana and another woman who served as an unofficial midwife for the occasional expectant mother found on this side of the island. The delivery had been uneventful and typical according to Oliana, but the pain associated with it was something that Bambi was having difficulty forgetting. Oliana had promised there would be a kind of mothers' amnesia that would eventually take care of the birthing memory, and in that same conversation, Bambi had asked Oliana how long it might be before she and Bill could resume having sex. Recalling that part of the conversation redirects Bambi's thoughts to a more shadowed place, the place where the actual truth of things is borne beneath a heavy coat of chain mail, its pieces linked by fears that the coat was not invincible, that it could be rent and allow those truths to emerge into the light of day.

Bambi is conscious of her going to this shadowy place more and more frequently during the three weeks since Becca's arrival despite what her intellect suggests should be the antidote of a new life to distract her. Too often as of late, she decides, her imagination has been emerging from this dark place to taunt her libido and expose memories of actual erotic experiences, memories that morph into fantastical scenarios where she is the center of a writhing mass of naked, stunning men and women, each slithering slowly like serpents over one another, dispensing and receiving carnal gifts, with the imagery stimulating her to the point of exasperation. She had been in the close company of Bill over the past year, and their uninhibited and frequent sensual play had come to include Mahana on an almost daily basis until three weeks before Becca's birth when, on their last night together before she had abandoned the Ultima Thule for the safe haven of Oliana's bungalow at Puama'u, the boys had taken her—despite her being swollen to bursting with Becca—to a consummate carnal conclusion.

Since that last tryst with Bill and Mahana, she has struggled to distract herself from her erotic imaginings, but without the physical attentions of those boys, her periodic

arousals have become more frequent and more urgent. She imagines writing to Bill about how she has sought private moments—something hard to come by in Oliana’s world—to replace his and Mahana’s hands with her own, guided by her insatiable imagination and her vivid memories of what the three of them have shared. Should she confess to Bill that following each inevitable culmination of arousal, she has assured herself that the application of that moment’s self-ministrations would lessen the probability of a return engagement? Should she put down on paper an admission that despite her self-assurances, the urges have persisted, aided by fantasies that seem to be conjured by a spirit beyond her control, one that needs to satisfy its own longings through a submissive surrogate, that despite her silent vows to resist the urges persisting within her, she has succumbed to them, again and again?

In yesterday’s letter to Bill, she had tried to convey her longing for his touch, for his arms to hold her and more, but composing the words had led her to imagined scenarios that had taken her to a place of wanting that commanded the attention of every fiber of her being, even eclipsing her determined affirmation of what she wanted desperately to believe was her preeminent role as a mother. It had frightened her, that moment when she had left the letter unfinished and her sleeping baby in a netting-covered cradle to find a corner of the bungalow, closeted like a thief, to steal relief from beneath the raised hem of her pareo. And here I lie only a day later, she thinks, with my baby on my belly and me wanting to resolve my arousal, wondering, can I do this thing with the baby upon me and with Oliana lying asleep only inches away? In the midst of her dysfunctional, addict-like rationalizations, she is saved by a distant, growling sound that seems to be nearing the plantation: the sound of a Jeep in its lowest gear.

The growl rouses Oliana, who opens her eyes and smiles when her gaze falls upon Bambi and her sleeping baby; the old woman whispers, “*Il n’y a que quatre Jeeps sur l’île, mais un seul propriétaire assez idiot pour avoir voyagé la crête dans le noir.*” [“There are only four Jeeps on the island, but only one owner silly enough to have traveled the ridge in the dark.”]

Confirmation of Oliana’s assertion comes from Rawiri,¹ an ancient, Maori mahu who jumped ship from a Kiwi steamer in Puama’u Bay in 1922, and who has earned his keep as Oliana’s principal servant—in effect, the equivalent of a consummate English butler—since then. In his soft, melodious, woman’s voice, he announces, “*Madame ... Terai arrive ... Puis-je faire du café? Et Poebei a fait assez de poisson cru pour qu’il nous rejoindre,*

¹ Rawiri is a Maori name meaning beloved.

si vous le souhaitez.” [“Ma’am ... Terai is arriving ... may I make some coffee? And Poehi has made enough poisson cru for him to join us, if you wish.”]

“*Bien sûr que je souhaite, mon cher vieil ami ... S’il vous plaît saluez-le et mettez-le à l’aise ... et alors vous pouvez m’aider à me préparer pour la journée.*” [“Of course, I wish it, my dear old friend. Please greet him and put him at ease, and then you can help me prepare for the day.”]

Bambi turns and watches as Rawiri bows slightly to the request, his long gray hair pulled back in a woman’s way, his pareo worn high and knotted above the illusion of breasts that exist because of his modest corpulence. As Bambi lies there more naked than her nappy-attired baby, Rawiri smiles and winks, to which she replies with a smile and wink of her own, knowing as she does that despite his once having observed, while deftly running a large towel over her body following her daily bath, “*La vue de vous réveillerait un homme mort,*” [“The sight of you would wake a dead man,”] his observation had been born of envy and nothing more.

“*Devrais-je prendre le petit, mon cher?*” [“Should I take the little one, my dear?”] Oliana asks as she sits up.

“*Oui ... je vais visiter le toilette et être de retour en un instant,*” [“I’ll visit the john and be back in a jiffy,”] Bambi replies as she hands Becca, still sound asleep, to the baby’s surrogate grandmother.

Bambi stands and smiles at her child as Becca snuggles into the softness of Oliana’s embrace. She exits the netted sleeping space, picks up a pareo lying across a small chest, and ties the fabric around her. There is a fleeting but distinct impression of escape as she glances at her daughter before departing for the loo, a feeling that tweaks her conscience and touches at the edges of her own mother’s abandonment. In the privacy of the loo, after one pressing need is relieved, another follows, inspired by the readily-conjured and haunting images of the three of them—herself, Bill and Mahana—intertwined within the womb of the Ultima Thule. With one hand sealing her open mouth and with her face conveying an expression that might have been inspired by the tortures of Torquemada, it is not long before she succumbs to the anesthetizing rapture of *la petite mort*. [the little death.]