

Prologue



SHE SAT ON the Sunset Bench, as she had so many times before, looking down past the craggy cliffs graying in the twilight; past coconut palms and wild impatiens; past viridian ferns that nestled in the shadows and viney bougainvillea that danced on the winds and crystalline waters that plunged and splashed and cascaded their way back home to the sea. There, as always, she paused to gaze at the tranquil lagoon that so long ago had taught her to swim and to listen to the laughter of the new water babies that floated up from the beach on the warm, sweet air. It was not the carefully conceived laughter of adults. It was the full-bellied laughter of the very young who know nothing of social graces or care. “Innocence,” she whispered and wished she could remember what that felt like.

From the western edge of the lagoon, she heard the faint murmurings of friends and family coming together again at the end of another day. The voices emanated from the old wooden dock where Islanders gathered to await the return of the evening launch from the Mainland. She watched as the last of them trickled out of the palm grove in two’s and three’s, strolled down the beach past neat rows of dugout canoes and headed out over the water between the brightly painted little fishing boats that bobbed up and down in perfect 4/4 time. The Islanders looked almost indistinguishable from their ancestors as they milled about in their bare feet and richly patterned sarongs, but the illusion would end with the arrival of the launch and the impeccably tailored suits that nightly filed down her gangplank.

She had been coming to the bench for many years now, climbing the steep cliff side path with flashlight in hand for



the safe return home after sunset. Tonight though she carried a bottle of Grandfather's wine and Mama's favorite goblet, the cobalt blue one she said took its color from the night sky over the Island. She held the goblet at arm's length and spun it gently by the stem until she was mesmerized by the kaleidoscopic patterns of light and shadow that danced on her arm. *This goblet should have been Mama's.*

She put the goblet to her lips and sipped long and slow, letting the wine wash over her tongue before swallowing. By the time it had cooled her throat all the way down, she had turned her thoughts to a happier time—the day she first came to the bench on that glorious spring when the family returned to the Island from Papa's posting in San Francisco. She remembered that day clearly, how she left the cool, jade-blue waters of the lagoon behind and followed after Grandfather and Mem and Mama and Papa as they snaked in and out of view on their daily ascent to the bench. She remembered the arduous climb and how hot and breathless she felt, and how, when she finally reached the shade of the plateau, the cool damp of the jungle floor on her bare feet renewed her. She could almost hear the bits of laughter and easy conversation that had reached her ears long before she was in sight of the bench and how, when she arrived there, she found the couples already lounging comfortably, sharing a bottle of Grandfather's chilled Island wine, red-cheeked and smiling and, as always, demonstrably affectionate.

She could hear them speaking, even now, about that day and many before it in no particular order, just a random collection of remembrances, which together fashioned a collage of their family history or at least a small part of one. They were recalling some of the special places to which Papa's work had taken the family—the funny little attic bedroom in London, the marble floors in the Paris apartment where she and Emma played Ice Capades in their stocking feet, and the big house that perched on the peak over Hong Kong where she held little James up to the telescope on the veranda so he could watch the ships come into port.

When Mama looked up and saw her approaching, she didn't seem surprised. She just smiled and said, "I've been



waiting for you,” and without further comment, handed her a half-filled goblet of wine, her first, which had been well diluted to a pale pink color by the numerous ice cubes that clinked against the glass.

She remembered exactly how everyone looked that day. Grandfather sitting at one end of the bench, his arms wrapped around Mem except when he was expounding with animated gestures on the great mysteries of life; Mem, whose gentle expression on her still beautiful face belied the depth of her wisdom—a wisdom that came from just living life, not overthinking it; Mama, whose extraordinary elegance was evident even in bare feet and a sarong and hair still wet from her afternoon swim to the reef. And Papa, sprawling lazily next to Mama, smiling and relaxed, a million miles from the corporate world that loomed just offshore. His sandy brown hair and blue eyes were so incongruous next to the black hair and green almond eyes that filled the rest of the bench.

That was the day she began imagining the man with whom she would share her own sunsets, peering up at Mem and that expression she wore when she looked at Grandfather, as if she were seeing him for the very first time, and finding that same expression reinvented on Mama’s face, like a fashion trend that was repeating itself with a slightly different twist. And as young women often do, she began molding the image of him in her mind, and it acquired detail and depth until one day, she imagined him into reality. The sunsets they shared were everything she knew they would be—wet, warm bodies and cool Island breezes, lusty red wine, and Van Gogh skies. But even her wildest imaginings couldn’t prepare her for the sunrises and how she would feel each time she awoke beside him, listening for the changes in the pattern of his breathing, and watching the slight shifts of his body as he dreamed, waiting for that moment just before waking when he would stretch and roll and reach out for her. “Arianna,” he would whisper and nothing more.

The sun was in its descending arc over the western headland now. It was an artist’s sun, all big and orange, spreading its sepia light over the Island, transforming it from brilliant contrasts to silhouetted images against a vibrant sky. There was a



light trail that extended across the lagoon and out to the open sea, a *golden touch* she had called it when she was very young. But first she needed to cry the tears she had been suppressing all that day. It wasn't a moment of weakness. She just needed to leave the tears behind. And when the last one had descended her cheek and dissolved into the fabric of her linen shirt, she knew she was ready. So she resettled herself on the sleek wooden bench that Grandfather had lovingly crafted out of a single koa log all those years ago and into which he and Mem had carved their names, and then Mama and Papa had done the same after them. She followed the light trail as far as she could see and searched the horizon until she found what she was looking for—the ferry that was sailing away with everything she loved most in this world. She stared at it for a very long time, watching it grow smaller and smaller. Then she closed her eyes and tried to remember what her life had been like before Michael.