



SARA ACKERMAN

ISLAND *of*
SWEET PIES
and SOLDIERS

*With war on their doorstep,
friendship will sustain them*

A NOVEL

Sara Ackerman

**Island Of Sweet Pies And Soldiers:
A powerful story of loss and love**

«HarperCollins»

Ackerman S.

Island Of Sweet Pies And Soldiers: A powerful story of loss and love /
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Hawaii, 1944. The Pacific battles of World War II continue to threaten American soil, and on the home front, the bonds of friendship and the strength of love are tested. Violet Iverson and her young daughter, Ella, are piecing their lives together one year after the disappearance of her husband. As rumors swirl and questions about his loyalties surface, Violet believes Ella knows something. But Ella is stubbornly silent. Something—or someone—has scared her. And with the island overrun by troops training for a secret mission, tension and suspicion between neighbors is rising. Violet bands together with her close friends to get through the difficult days. To support themselves, they open a pie stand near the military base, offering the soldiers a little homemade comfort. Try as she might, Violet can't ignore her attraction to the brash marine who comes to her aid when the women are accused of spying. Desperate to discover the truth behind what happened to her husband, while keeping her friends and daughter safe, Violet is torn by guilt, fear and longing as she faces losing everything. Again. Readers love Ackerman: "a well written novel, well researched and well told" "A book that I could hardly put down, I highly recommend it, this is a 5 star novel" "This book was a joy to read, due to the rich and interesting characters" "charming, engaging read" "A beautifully written story by an exciting new author" "I loved the book!" "a heartwarming story of friendship and survival" "After reading this book, I want to read more historical fiction"

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Island of Sweet Pies and Soldiers

Sara Ackerman



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For my grandmother Helen, who never forgot.

And for the soldiers.

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[*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 operator. 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 mouthed 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 puny 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 Paauiilo 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.

[Chapter Three](#)

Ella

I was already awake and still wrapped in my horse blankets when Mama came in this morning wearing slippers. Being from Minnesota, Mama doesn’t understand walking barefoot. Even in the house. She wears socks when it’s cold and Japanese slippers when it’s hot, the kind with velvet straps

and woven straw where your foot goes. I'm her little native, she says, because I hate wearing shoes. A lot of the Japanese kids from the plantation don't even get to choose because they're so poor. For them, an umbrella is more important. It's one or the other. Rain comes down in buckets here, so the umbrella wins out.

I pretended I was still sleeping because I worried there might be another air-raid drill at school. The noise sets something off inside me. We always have them on Tuesdays. So even if there was a surprise one yesterday, it could happen again. Half the time, I wet my pants. I guess I forgot to mention that earlier. Talk about embarrassing. It smells up the room and everyone turns to me. Sally Botello and Gina Chang pinch up their noses and fan their faces like they're dying. Even Mrs. Hicks looks at me with such pity I want to ask her to please leave the classroom and head over to detention. Teachers should know better. At least the Japanese kids ignore it.

From halfway across the floor, Mama smelled like cinnamon and morning sun. When she shook me, I acted groggy, but she was wearing a huge smile as she sat on the edge of my bed. Snowflake, who showed up last night wet but alive, turned on her purr even louder. It's almost like someone put a little motor inside her throat. I call it a purr-box.

Mama smoothed down my hair. "Good morning, sun blossom."

She calls me weird names. Jean started it. And in case you're wondering, I call Jean Jean, not Aunt Jean or Miss Quinlan. She said if we're going to live together, I might as well save my breath. Which was smart, because I have less breath than other people. But I do also call her Honey Jean, mainly because honey is her favorite word. I called her it once and the name stuck.

"I have good news," Mama said.

"School is canceled?"

She laughed. "Something even better."

Nothing would have been better. My eyes stung with the coming of tears. I cry a lot for no reason. But the doctor says this is normal behavior for someone who has been through a difficult situation. Which I have.

"What?"

"Takeo said you could start Japanese school today! You'll be the first non-Japanese in the school."

Now, this was news. If I could have picked one thing to do in life, it was go to Japanese school, especially now that it was just fun stuff. Before Pearl Harbor, they taught them to write and talk Japanese. Not anymore. No one wants the kids to be spies.

Somehow, being white made me feel like an outsider, like the only piece of corn in a barrel of rice. Mama said we're corn people, being from Minnesota. But I consider myself Hawaiian, or even partly Japanese. If you spend even five minutes around them, you will know that Japanese people are smarter, neater and more interesting than us. They also don't talk as much, and are probably good at keeping secrets. Sometimes I wonder if I should tell Umi what I know. About my dad.

"For real?" I asked.

Mama pulled out a small wooden box and handed it to me. "You'll need this, to write with."

I sat up and opened the box. Thin bamboo brushes and bottles of ink were neatly packed in on top of white see-through-looking paper. I held it up to my nose and sniffed. It smelled of tree bark mixed with some kind of chemical.

A thin smile crept onto my face. The first one in a while. After the incident with Papa disappearing, it took about a hundred years before I smiled again. At least it seemed that way. Mama, too. Neither of us had anything to smile about, and I think we were both afraid to let ourselves have any kind of happiness. Then, about seven months later, I heard laughing in the kitchen. When I cracked open the door, I heard Jean telling jokes. I don't know where she gets them, but she always has new ones.

"What's the difference between an orange and a matter baby?" she asked.

Mama sat at the table with Betty Crocker opened in front of her. “What’s a matter baby?”
“Nothing, honey,” Jean said, in a sweet syrupy voice.

A laugh came out of Mama, and from then on, I knew laughing was allowed. We were moving on. But that was a lot easier said than done.

Chapter Four

Violet

In the months after Herman’s disappearance, Violet had dragged Ella to one form of specialist after another. They began with the plantation doctor, who prescribed small pink pills that caused Ella to walk around in a fugue state, bumping into walls and drooling. After a week, Violet flushed the pills down the toilet.

The psychiatrist turned out to be even worse. On the day they made the three-hour drive to Hilo, an angry rain forced its way in through the window cracks and drenched them before they had even arrived. Then they dashed through ankle-deep puddles only to find that the doctor would have to reschedule; he had gone to Kona. On their next visit, Dr. Stern spent a full hour interrogating Ella behind a closed red door. Violet knocked several times throughout and poked her head in. Ella never raised her gaze.

After the session, he invited Violet in. Looking over his wire spectacles, past a razorback nose, he said, “Mrs. Iverson, I’m afraid that shock therapy is the only thing that might bring your daughter around.”

No expert in medicine, she knew enough to take Ella by the hand and walk out the door.

When it came to Reverend Dunn, his answer was much the same, only in this case it wasn’t shock but prayer that would be her only salvation.

In desperation, Violet decided to enlist the help of a Hawaiian named Henry Aulani. He lived in a modest house at the bottom of the road down to Haina. More prison guard in appearance than healer, his mellifluous voice and coffee-colored eyes told a different story. Kids played in the yard and dogs wandered in and out the open back door. He brought them into the high-ceilinged kitchen, where dried plants hung from the rafters, filling the room with sharp and sweet scents of mint and forest.

“Please, sit.” He motioned to the table.

Violet felt her throat constricting at the thought of explaining Ella’s condition to yet another person. But he didn’t ask her anything about Ella.

“Tell me about your home,” he said.

“What do you want to know about my home?”

“Whatever you want to tell me,” he said.

Violet thought it a strange question. Weren’t they here about Ella? “Well, to start with, it’s bright yellow...”

She continued on. Ella remained mute until a few minutes later, when a black cat with yellow eyes jumped onto the bench and climbed into her lap. “What’s his name?” she asked Henry.

“Her name is Pele. And you must be special, because this cat doesn’t do that with most people,” he said.

“She purrs real loud,” Ella said.

On more than one occasion, Ella had asked Violet why humans don’t purr and if there was any way possible to learn how. “We purr. You just can’t hear it,” Violet had said.

If at all possible, the air in the kitchen now seemed easier to breathe. Whether it was the cat or Henry pulling Violet out of her own mind full of hidden fears, she couldn’t be sure.

Henry took both Violet’s hands. The warmth in his palms made her own tingle. “Now, tell me what happened.”

The date was forever etched in her mind. Friday, September 10, 1943. Violet had been with the sewing circle in the small blue-and-white church below town, assembling cardboard slippers for the wounded men still in the hospital at Tripler, in Honolulu. The group met every week. The horrors

of Pearl Harbor were fresh in everyone's mind, even though it had been over a year ago. As usual, Ella stayed next door with Mrs. Cody, who had most of the neighborhood playing in her yard.

When Violet returned to the Codys' cottage, Ella was nowhere to be found.

"What do you mean, she's not here?"

"Maybe she doesn't know that hide-and-seek is over," Mrs. Cody said.

A brief search found Ella two houses up at the Hamasus'. Violet had to steady herself when she saw her daughter. Ella lay on the living room pune'e with blankets piled up around her and a warm cloth on her forehead.

Setsuko sat with her. "She wandered in only ten minutes ago. Something's not right."

Ella's skin was the color of cooked rice and her eyes were shut tightly. Right at that exact moment, a feeling of cold ran through Violet, turning her blood to stone.

"You should have told me you weren't feeling well, honey," she said.

Ella didn't answer. It was only the beginning.

* * *

Back at the house, darkness set in and Herman still had not returned. She assumed he was on a patrol, though he hadn't mentioned he would be out that night. Soon after the bombing, Herman and half the plantation workers formed a group they called the Hawaii Rifles. The members would ride around on horseback, keeping an eye on anything out of order. None of the men had any experience, but that didn't stop them. People wanted to feel like they were doing something.

With the onset of the war, predictability had become a thing of the past, but his absence seemed wrong in a way she couldn't explain. Call it a hunch. She fixed a pot of sweet potato soup up for Ella, who refused even one spoonful. Her forehead felt clammy and her little body shook in small fits.

"That settles it. I'm taking you to the doctor in the morning," Violet said.

A few minutes after midnight, Sheriff Souza knocked on the door. Standing on the porch, he was a mere shadow with a hat, and Violet invited him into the kitchen, where she turned on the light. Instinctively, she hugged herself. His hands were plastered in his pockets. "Mrs. Iverson, I don't want to alarm you, but do you have any knowledge of your husband's whereabouts? His car is down at the lookout below Kukuihaile."

The old Ford. Why on earth would he be down there at this hour? Her mind raced to imagine the possibilities. Submarine spotting. Airplane spotting. Aside from those, there was no reasonable explanation. Not for Herman.

"I don't, Sheriff. Maybe he was on watch duty?"

Souza's expression looked wooden and unreadable. "I yelled around. Did he mention he would be going anywhere?"

She shook her head. "I was at the sewing circle and he usually works at school until dark."

"I'll be honest with you—this seems fishy. With curfew and all."

More than fishy. Herman was the kind of man who never missed an appointment, showed up on the dot. He was reliable to a fault. If he'd had duty tonight, he would have told her.

"Maybe he said something to Luther?" she said.

Souza seemed relieved to have somewhere else to go. "I'll have a word with him. You stay here in case Herman shows up."

As she waited, minutes expanded to hours and Violet was no longer sure if she was awake or dreaming. She closed her eyes and willed herself to wake up, only to understand that she already was. Rain began to bucket down, pelting the windows with tadpole-size drops.

Before long, Souza returned. "Ma'am, Luther didn't know a thing. But he was pretty liquored up. I'll talk to him more tomorrow."

"If anyone, he would know."

"Try to get some rest. I'll put a call out, see if anyone knows anything. And send a car out first thing in the morning. Meantime, stay here. I'm sure there's an explanation."

They were the most feeble words she'd ever heard him speak.

* * *

In the kitchen, where Violet waited, the rickety icebox kick-started into high gear every once in a while, startling her with its hum. The wetness of the air caused her hair to stand on end. She felt torn in half.

Sheriff Souza called at eight o'clock with no real news. Mr. Fujimoto had been sweeping the sidewalk in front of his store when he thought he had seen Herman driving north toward Waipio, but that was all. Friday afternoons in town were usually crawling with people, now that the evenings were off-limits. No one would have been paying attention.

"I'm going to head back to the car right now with a few of my men, search the area for any signs. I'll get back to you just as soon as I can," he said.

She hated to think of what that implied. As of now, she was suffering from a trembling in her gut that would not stop. Scenarios played out in her head. Herman meeting up with Japanese soldiers who had crept ashore and scaled the cliffs. Or slipping and falling from those same cliffs. It was simply impossible that her husband would not be found alive and in one piece with a perfectly rational explanation.

Ella slept uneasily through most of the morning, thrashing about in her bed and tangling herself in the blankets. Violet felt her forehead, which had cooled but was still clammy against the back of her hand. Low clouds blocked the sun, allowing only gray light in through the windows. In despair, she called Setsuko, careful not to say much on the line.

Within minutes, her friend stood in the living room with her arms wrapped around Violet. "It will be all right, Violet, I promise you."

"Did you see him after school?" Violet asked.

"No, I went straight to Japanese school. I didn't get back until five, just before Ella showed up on my porch."

Footsteps announced a visitor, and Luther appeared at the door. A veteran of the Great War, he'd arrived in Honoka'a eight years earlier to take over the position as shop teacher and unofficial handyman. Deaf in one ear, and the size of a bear, he and Herman became fast friends. Luther had lost a nephew at Pearl Harbor and had been drowning his sorrows in the bottle, which worried Violet since he had no wife and no other family around.

Overnight, Luther's face had turned ashen and his clothes crumpled. "Any news?" he asked.

She repeated the sheriff's update and added, "Herman drove out there without telling anyone, which concerns me. He didn't mention anything to you?"

"Nope. I've been up most of the night thinking on it. Would it be possible he was meeting someone to fetch a new batch of okolehao?"

"He would have mentioned it. Plus, he still has a few bottles left," she said.

"Yes, but you know how much it's worth these days, now that everything's being rationed. We both know he's a shrewd businessman."

True. Okolehao was a Hawaiian ti-root moonshine, but some of the locals also used pineapple, taro, sugarcane or rice. Just up the road, Waipio Valley had become a hotbed of illegal okolehao production during Prohibition. Violet hated the stuff.

"I feel like he would have told me. But I suppose it's possible."

She wanted to believe him, and wondered if Herman had gone down into the valley to meet someone. There was a Hawaiian man down there he had mentioned once or twice. And maybe the river had overflowed and he was stuck down there. It made sense and was about the only thing that could possibly, remotely, hopefully have been true. But truth, she was finding, didn't always want to be known.

"I'm heading over now to talk to the sheriff," he said.

Violet dropped down on the cracked red paint of the front step. She watched him walk away. Unable to do anything else, she lay back and let the tears come. Setsuko sat next to her and held her hand while she went numb from the inside out.

* * *

Just before lunchtime that day, Ella called out, “Mama?”

Violet rushed to the pun’e. “Good morning, love. How you feelin’?”

There was a new vacancy in Ella’s eyes, like someone had taken an eraser and removed all the brightness, leaving a dull brown. Ella didn’t answer, just closed her eyes and rolled to face the wall.

Setsuko had slipped on an apron and said from the kitchen, “Ella, I have your favorite. Rice cakes.”

Violet began to wonder if Ella’s condition might not be a sickness at all. The timing was peculiar. Disease is in the mind, her father used to say, never allowing anyone to skip chores because of a sniffle or miss school due to a burning throat. As though you could think yourself well. Was it possible that we could also think ourselves sick? Violet reminded herself that Ella had been playing at the Codys’, so what could she possibly know?

“Did you happen to see Daddy yesterday afternoon? Before he drove off.” Ella shook her head. “Did he say anything to you at all yesterday about going someplace in the afternoon?”

In the silence between them, her fear began to spread.

“Honey, I need you to talk to me.”

“My tummy hurts,” Ella whispered.

“Setsuko, would you mind fixing some poi?”

A voice inside was telling Violet that the two incidents were connected. Her tough little girl suddenly seemed so fragile. “Where were you when the other kids were looking for you?”

“I had a good hiding place. I told you that,” Ella said.

Violet watched the rise and fall of her ribs. Tenderness rushed through her.

“Sometimes, when you hold things inside, it can make you feel sick. Is that what’s happening?”

Ella shook her head again, limply.

Violet let out a big sigh. “We can keep it just between you and me, but I need you to tell me anything that seemed out of the ordinary. Even if you don’t think it matters.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

She prodded Ella for more information, but Ella refused to answer. Frustration was building up inside, causing every cell in her body to hurt. She wanted to scream.

* * *

When Sheriff Souza returned, his face had bad news written all over it. He didn’t waver as he asked her to accompany him into the kitchen and swung the door shut. Her heart dropped.

He chewed on his lower lip for a moment before speaking. “Now, I can’t say that we found anything conclusive, and there was plenty of rain last night, but we combed the area around his car and there appear to be some broken bushes. And blood. Just a small amount, but it was near the edge of the overlook.”

The word blood was all she heard. “Did you look below? Could he have been hurt and fallen?”

She pictured the cliffs. Lofty, vertical slabs that plunged straight into the roiling blue. In some areas, small outcroppings of land jutted out.

“Anyone falls, they end up in the water. Or on the rocks. We didn’t see a body on the rocks.”

A body. She felt herself unraveling at the seams and had to check to make sure her upper half was still connected to her lower half. Strangely, she felt as though she were listening to a radio detective show. Herman dead was impossible. Husbands were not allowed to die. Especially young ones. Especially hers.

The words came out in a whisper. “Luther thinks Herman went into Waipio with someone for okolehao. That blood could have been from anything, couldn’t it? A pig, a goat.”

“Could have been. I sent Boy Rapozo down to check. No one coughs down there without him knowing about it. Gonna have the blood tested. Do you know his type?”

“O.”

The ringing in her ears ramped up and Violet focused on Souza’s bristly mustache and the way his lips jutted out underneath. How his gaze moved around the kitchen, trying to find an anchor.

“Thank you, Sheriff.”

“We’ll get to the bottom of this. People don’t just disappear in Honoka’a. Not on my watch.”

As it turned out, they did. The only lead that turned up was from a chicken farmer up the way who claimed he heard two gunshots that afternoon. But even he couldn’t be sure from which direction they had come. Speculation in town was rampant. Herman worked for the Japanese. A moonshine deal had soured. He was gambling on cockfights. Working for the FBI.

That people thought someone as upstanding and well liked as Herman could be a spy boiled her insides. But she had to admit most things Japanese did have a special place in his heart. His secretary was Japanese, he boasted that some of his best teachers were Japanese, and many of his friends were Japanese. He liked Japanese food, drank Japanese wine, and grew Japanese sweet potatoes in his garden. But did that make him a spy?

Violet swayed back and forth between her own two theories. One was that he might have been on watch for the Hawaii Rifles, and been ambushed by the Japanese while out patrolling along the cliffs. But no one else had seen anything suspicious and no one else had up and vanished. The other idea was that he had upset someone in the spirit business, because he had on several occasions voiced an interest in making his own. She had argued against it.

“How will it look if the school principal is also a moonshine distributor?” she had said.

“Honey, it would just be for a few of us around here. And we could use the extra money to buy more land.”

“Not a good idea,” she’d insisted.

If only she could find his calendar, which he also used as a sort of journal. It was not on his desk where it usually was and had yet to turn up. Either he had it with him, or someone took it. This was the one piece of information that didn’t fit. How could someone have taken it? Sheriff Souza had interrogated everyone in the school on this small fact, reasoning that if someone had taken the journal, someone had access to his office.

For an entire week, Ella wouldn’t eat solid food and Violet took to feeding her spoonfuls of chicken broth and rice. She refused to go back to school, and so Violet had to bring her to class once she returned to work the following week. There was no way for Violet to hide the swollen redness of her eyes, so she didn’t even bother. Sleep came sparingly. By mornings, her pillow was soaking and covered in clumps of hair. Herman, where are you? As best she could, Violet tried to stay in that slice of time just after waking, before she remembered. It never lasted more than three seconds.

Eventually, the blood results came back. Human. Type O.

[Chapter Five](#)

Violet

The next day at school passed without incident, and Violet met Ella at her class. They stopped at home for a quick snack of chocolate pudding, then continued across the worm-eaten bridge over the ravine and up the hill to the small building where Japanese school was held. They passed clumps of ginger, a thick stand of guava clouded with fruit flies and a dilapidated chicken coop with rusted wires, full of vines instead of chickens. Ella held her hand like she was trying to strangle it.

Before Pearl Harbor happened, students learned to speak the Japanese language, practiced calligraphy, and were schooled in common traditions like ikebana and yukata. Violet guarded her opinions, but she thought it a miracle the school had been allowed to keep on. The military had ordered Takeo to stick to arts and crafts. None of the kids minded.

Please, God, let this work out. Umi and Hiro already knew about Ella coming, but there was concern over how her presence would go over with the other students. Takeo had said, “Do not worry.” But worry was everywhere, as plentiful as the stalks of sugarcane in the fields. The elongated one-room building contained two sections, and Ella would be with the six-to twelve-year-olds.

When they approached the school, Ella stopped. “Do you think they will like me?”

“You already know most of the kids.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.”

The words tugged at Violet’s heart. “The sensei is like your uncle, so no one will dare bother you.”

Even before Herman’s disappearance, Ella had been shy and considered different by the kids. Partly because of her skin color, but more than that, she was the kid in the group who chose green when everyone else chose blue. She picked animals over people, and once punched Robbie Iwase in the nose when he tried to torture the class rabbit. From then on, kids steered clear.

They stood there, staring at the whitewashed wooden house. Two mynah birds chattered on the road in front of them. Ella looked around, and Violet followed her gaze.

In front of the schoolhouse, a row of garden boxes overflowed with lettuce, kale, plump tomatoes and eggplant. Off to the side a large square patch of sweet potato crawled through the grass. The students had painted VICTORY in red, white and blue on the boxes, which might have helped their cause. Several fat hens scratched about, reminding Violet of home. Leaving her hens had been one of the hardest parts about leaving Minnesota. On the sagging plank porch, two girls played jacks, too engrossed to notice them.

Ella tugged at her hand, and together they crossed the yard and entered the building. There were no desks, no tables and chairs, only tatami mats spread out across the floors. The walls were lined with shelves and everything had a place. The sills were painted a deep red and several bonsai plants caught sun through the mottled glass. Violet felt a stab of envy. Her classroom had never looked so tidy.

The chatter of young voices filled the room, and Takeo stood near the front. In the other half of the house, Setsuko taught the teenagers. After the war broke out, the school lost many students, parents fearing to seem overly Japanese. Though how could you be anything other than Japanese, if you were Japanese? She had yet to determine exactly what constituted one’s Japanese-ness, but being born in Japan was at the top of the list. Takeo and Setsuko had destroyed, or possibly hidden, all photos of their family back in Japan, some of whom had been members of the Imperial Navy. The predicament caused an ache in the middle of Violet’s chest.

Little by little, voices quieted. Heads turned. Ella’s fingers curled around her hand more tightly, and Violet squeezed back. Takeo spotted them and hurried over. “Violet and Ella, welcome.”

“Thank you, Sensei,” Violet said, feeling safe to address him here, but certainly no place else.

“Are you going to stay?” he asked her.

“Should I?”

They both looked down at Ella, who was staring at the back corner of the room. Giant origami butterflies and cranes, fish and frogs hung from the ceiling. “Sweet pea, would you like me to stay?”

At that very moment, Umi marched up and grabbed Ella’s hand, leading her to the back of the room. She pointed at the folded paper creatures, while her two long braids twisted down her back like origami snakes. Violet had been looking for some kind of sign. To tell her that life was ready to flip-flop. Maybe this was it. She took a chance and slipped out the side door.

* * *

The house felt strange without Ella, almost soulless. Violet had grown used to her always being underfoot, filling the cracks with her presence. Strange how you noticed something more once it was not there. In the kitchen, Jean was listening to the radio and grading math worksheets. She looked up and her lashes fluttered when Violet walked in.

“Don’t tell me she let you leave her there,” Jean said.

Violet had spent the half mile home wondering if she should go back. “I sneaked away while she was distracted.”

“Baby doll, that is wonderful!”

The throbbing in her feet from standing all day prompted her to sit. “Ella wishes she was Japanese, so it couldn’t be more perfect.”

Jean smiled. “I’m feeling hopeful. For Ella. For me. Even for you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that Zach is here. More than anyone alive, he will take my mind off Bud. And things are now looking up for Ella, in which case you won’t be able to help but be happy.”

Jean and Bud met a month before the first batch of soldiers left town. He had ridden the school bus into Honoka’a with her students one morning and asked for directions to the theater as he climbed out. When the bell rang, she found him hovering outside her room. That was it for both of them. All his liberty time was spent holding tightly to Jean’s hand. Aside from being a marine, Bud was a grass-chewing, rough-riding Texan. He also liked to spit. Violet had put up with him for Jean’s sake.

If someone could stop Jean from ruminating about Bud, Violet would be eternally grateful. That kind of pining was not helpful. Sewing, movies, trips to the beach, nothing worked. She’d even involved Jean in their victory garden up the hill. And Jean had gotten her hands dirty for possibly the first time ever. But in the midst of harvesting, Jean said the cucumbers reminded her of Bud and alternated between sniffing and sobbing the whole time. Violet had her own thoughts about Bud but she kept them to herself. Mainly that he seemed interested in only one thing. She didn’t quite trust the man.

Violet reached across the table and squeezed Jean’s hand. “I hope you’re right.”

Happy was a word out of another lifetime. Sure, she no longer felt like she was living underwater with the whole ocean pressing down on her. Life had become tolerable.

“Even if I’m wrong, you still better love me forever,” Jean said.

Thank goodness Jean’s moods were catching. “You? Wrong?”

“Oh, by the way, Zach called and said he might come out this weekend. They’ll be on liberty. That fine with you?”

“You don’t need to ask. Just keep him away from Irene Ferreira or he’s a goner.”

Jean winked and stood up to check on the meat loaf in the oven. By now, the entire kitchen smelled like tangy sauce and sage. Wednesday was Jean’s night to cook, and she commandeered the kitchen. With rations, they’d had to get creative. Packing sardines into sushi or fashioning Spam into casserole.

Jean poured Violet a tall glass of passion orange juice. “In high school, he was a goofball with the ladies. Sweet as can be, but his tongue tied up in knots.”

“Just warn him,” Violet said.

[Chapter Six](#)

Ella

Why don’t they have us make origami animals in regular school? Instead, Mrs. Hicks forces us to make cardboard slippers and painted egg crates for the wounded soldiers. Everything is about the soldiers. Sometimes I wish they would just go away, even though we need them for protection. I wish we could just erase the war and erase the fact that now Japanese people are bad. Maybe the ones in Japan are different, but I like most of the ones here.

At home, Umi always folds miniature origami animals, and she tries to teach me, but mine come out ugly and smooshed. I thought it was because my fingertips are too big, but Umi says I need proper lessons and lots of practice. Any paper Umi gets her hands on ends up a tiny perfect creature. Now was my chance.

These origami in the classroom were huge enough to breathe on their own or fly away. I couldn't wait to make Snowflake into a folded paper cat the first chance I got. Big fingertips wouldn't matter with these.

When I finally remembered where I was and looked for Mama, she was gone. I felt the usual pinch of fear, but instead of rising into a panic, I got drawn into the singing at the start of class. Sensei, as he told me to call him, hit a small gong that made my teeth ring. Everyone was singing with their full hearts. They all knew the words. I had no choice but to sit with Umi, feeling dumb since I didn't know the songs. Some of the other kids gave me weird looks and scooted away. But kids don't worry me too much, especially singing ones.

I knew I might be lost learning a new language, but Japanese words seem easy to me. I already know some. Sensei, obake, satoimo and arigato were just some. We have an obake living in our house. It might even be Papa. The words have trickled down to Umi and Hiro from their parents. Sometimes I feel jealous, because they have a whole family. At night, I imagine that Papa will be home in the morning, cooking coffee and waiting to pick me up and kiss the ribbons in my hair. Whenever he hugged me, I ended up smelling like Old Spice afterward. I still have his bottle, and when I really miss him, I put a dab on my wrist before I go to bed.

Singing took up a lot of the time that day. And just when I thought we were finally going to stop, we started another song or sometimes repeated the same one forty-seven times. Itchi ni san shi. I was sneaking glances around me. The boy to the left had a string of snot dripping from his nose, but he kept singing. June Higa, right in front of me, swung her silky hair back and forth as she bobbed her head in time. All Japanese girls have nice hair. It must be a God-given right. And straight parts. I don't even have a part.

After the singing, Mr. Hamasu, who no longer allows anyone to call him sensei, talked to us about plants, and how we were going to expand the victory garden to the other side of the building, which meant we would need to help clear the bushes away. Work clothes were required for next week. After that, we were going to grow our own bonsai plants! In honor of the soldiers, of course.

He told us, in his very even voice, "Bonsai plants are different than our garden plants because they're for the mind, not the body. Caring for your own bonsai will teach you patience, ingenuity and focused effort. Some of them won't survive, but that, too, is part of the process."

He passed around several bonsai trees, which seemed old and wise. Hiro says that one at their house is over a hundred years old. He sometimes makes stuff up, or at least stretches out the truth, but this time I believed him.

By the time class ended, I knew I wanted to come back. Even if I heard one girl whisper to her friend, "What is Ella Iverson doing here? She's haole."

As if that were some kind of great revelation. Of course I was haole. I had always been haole. I would always be haole. "So, what's the big deal?" I wanted to say.

It was easy to pretend they didn't exist. I'd had practice.

[Chapter Seven](#)

Violet

When the shadows had lengthened and the thrushes broke into song, Setsuko and Umi showed up at the door with Ella. Violet had been checking the window every few minutes, watching for their arrival.

"Auntie Violet, your daughter is home!" they called.

She ran out to greet them. Ella walked straight to the coffee table and set down a folded red crane before coming back to hug her. The hug was double what she usually got.

"How did it go?" She eyed Setsuko, who smiled.

Waves of excitement were pouring off of Ella. "I'm going to make a bonsai, and help in the victory garden!"

Violet bent down, not wanting to tamper with her success by making too big a deal. “Well, that’s wonderful news. I’m sure they can use you with all of your gardening expertise.”

“They sing a lot, too. I don’t mind singing, but today I didn’t know the words.”

Setsuko risked a laugh. “The words will come.”

“Did you learn anything else?” Violet asked.

Ella thought about it for a while. “I learned that it’s a whole lot more fun than regular school.”

“Oh, honey, I’m happy you had a good time. You still have to go to regular school, but this will be something to look forward to.”

With Ella on the mend, their lives could take on a whole new orbit. She envisioned Ella plumping up, waking to dry sheets in the morning, not being terrified senseless by air-raid drills and letting her skin heal over. The hurts of her daughter commingled with her own, but instead of seeming double, they more than quadrupled. Certainly Violet missed Herman as a husband and the man she counted on in life, but more so she missed him as a father to Ella, as a fellow parent. Every now and then she felt guilty for having those feelings. That she should have loved him more passionately. But that was the truth, and lying to herself would serve no purpose.

* * *

On Thursday and Friday, Violet held her breath while Ella was at Japanese school, at any moment expecting to have her show up at the door. But on both days Ella returned with new stories and an extra spot of color on her cheeks.

“Today Sensei told us a story about Tanuki, and I want to get one,” Ella said, folding her hands on her chest like it had already been decided.

“A what?”

“Tah-noo-key.” Ella rolled her eyes and drew the word out as though speaking to a four-year-old. “A Japanese raccoon dog. He says they’re jolly and mischievous and some can even shape-shift into other animals.”

If Ella had it her way, they’d be collecting animals like most people collected stamps or coins. “Ask Umi to help you make an origami one for now. That’s about the best I can do.”

Their meager food rations and low wages were just enough to feed their own mouths, let alone a zoo. Sugar had been the first to be rationed and then came milk, butter, oil, meat, coffee, and other canned and processed foods. Thank goodness for their garden and those of nearby folks, with whom they often traded. Gasoline was another story. It wasn’t something you could grow. Most civilians got an A sticker, which entitled them to only three to four gallons a week, which couldn’t get you very far. Everyone stayed close to home.

* * *

When Saturday dawned a honey-colored sky, they piled into the Ford and drove up to their garden plot above town, in a place called Ahualoa. The road was steep in some places, rolling in others. Thickets of koa and smaller clusters of ohia attracted bees, and even native honeycreepers. Ella kept her eyes glued to the window, waiting to spot the tiny red birds darting from tree to tree like forest sprites.

“Honey, I’ve got a feeling we aren’t in Minnesota anymore,” Jean said.

Ella giggled. Jean wished she was Judy Garland and was the first to admit it. Ella had joined her on the bandwagon.

“You’ve never even been to Minnesota,” Violet said.

“California, then.”

On a small patch of land at the two-thousand-foot elevation, Herman had planted potato, corn, peas, cucumber and watermelon. At first Violet had shied away from anything to do with farming, after the disintegration of her family farm in Minnesota and the unraveling of her father. But here in Hawaii, there was no dust or frozen winters and everything grew with a vengeance. Over and over, in a silent mantra, Violet had reminded herself that Herman was not her father.

Violet renewed the lease after Herman's disappearance. Some weeks, there was enough overflow that she and Jean brought bushels into town to sell.

Not only that, but Violet swore that the minute Ella stuck her hands in the dirt, whatever gave life to those plants gave life to Ella. Just add water and a touch of sun.

They rode in silence for a while, which meant Jean was stewing over something. "I want to fix those boys something special tonight. Fatten them up and keep them coming back for more," Jean said.

Violet had to keep her eyes on the rutted road. "Even if you served Spam, they'd want to come back."

After Zach's call, Jean had flown around the house in a flurry, dusting cobwebs and wiping down lizard poop. Violet was more reserved about having a house full of soldiers, but maybe they would bring some cheer. It sure seemed that this group of marines was more prone to smile than the last. There had been piles of them spilling out of buses and into the bars in town. The military had made an arrangement to let them hitch rides on the school buses. Many of them looked no older than her own students, and when they stepped onto the street in their uniforms, some of them could have been playing dress-up. But these boys were about to step into the blood-seeped battlefield of the Pacific. Her heart stung for them, and their mothers back home, who no doubt had a love-hate relationship with the telephone and the mailman.

Jean slipped on her purple gardening gloves and busied herself singing "Mairzy Doats." When the song had first come out, Violet had wondered what kind of nonsense they were singing.

"What on earth is a Mairzy Doat?" she had asked Jean.

Jean quickly set her straight. "He's saying mares eat oats. Listen carefully."

Sure enough, Jean was right and the song soon became one of Ella's favorites. Now the two of them belted it out.

Jean rolled down the window, letting in a burst of lemony eucalyptus air. Even while watching the road, Violet could see Jean's foot tapping on the floor. Her hand fidgeted with an unraveling thread on the seat.

"What?" Violet asked.

"Say, I was just thinking. Maybe you should finish off the Limburger before the boys come. Or store it at Setsuko's for the night."

"It took me months to get that cheese. You know that."

The cheese had been a splurge, a comfort that reminded her of home. Jean once said it smelled like a dirty soldier's feet. Herman had tolerated it. Barely.

Jean sighed. "Do you think the boys might have heard anything about Bud's division? Or where they've sailed off to?"

"Probably, but you know what they say."

As if on cue, Ella answered, "Loose lips sink ships."

Jean turned around. "You don't miss a thing, do you?"

When they arrived at the plot, Violet parked under an enormous ohia tree with sun-kissed red blossoms. She let herself out and opened Ella's door, since the inside handle had broken off and there was no money to fix it.

The minute Ella climbed out, she pointed. "What is that?"

On the other side of the tree, a whole mess of rust-colored feathers was strewn on the ground. It reminded Violet of a feather blizzard.

Ella bolted.

"Honey, wait!"

The tree trunk blocked any view of whatever disaster had transpired. Ella's voice was shrill. "It's still alive. Hurry!"

Alive was a generous term, she saw when she reached the scene. Large chunks of feathers were missing, including all tail feathers, and half a wing hung limp. Violet hated for Ella to see the carnage, but as a girl growing up on a Minnesota farm, she herself had seen a whole lot worse than injured or headless chickens.

The hen squawked. “Mrs. Chicken, we’re here to save you,” Ella said.

Huddled on the bare ground, the hen cocked her head to the side and stared warily at them with one blinking eye. She ruffled what few feathers she had left and tried to settle into the dirt and leaves.

Jean stood back. “I hate to say this, but I’m not sure she can be saved.”

Ella ignored her and ran to the car for a burlap sack. “Mama, can you help me?”

Violet hesitated, knowing that once they went down this chicken-saving road, there would be no turning back. Ella would fall in love and there would be another mouth in the house, another soul to worry about. If it lived. Yet she had lost the ability to say no to her daughter. Without waiting, Ella scooped the hen up and cradled it in her arms. The injured bird hardly put up a struggle and let out a few soft clucks.

That was how they ended up with a featherless chicken.

Chapter Eight

Ella

At three o’clock, when Mama was poking around in the closet for linens and Jean was swaying like she always did in the kitchen to Louis Jordan singing the “G.I. Jive,” I decided to post up near the window to keep an eye out for our visitors. High swirly clouds floated in the sky and a group of mynah birds were in the grass, fighting over what was probably a bug carcass. From a built-in cushion area right next to the screen, you can see the whole lay of the land. Who’s coming up the driveway, the other teacher cottages on our lane, and even the rusty tin roofs of houses below the school.

Our new chicken was still alive and wrapped in an old blanket next to me. The whole way home in the car, I rubbed just under her eye. Mr. Manabat, who lives out near our land and sells eggs, said that’s how to hypnotize a chicken. I thought maybe it would cheer her up. Mama agreed that we could call her Brownie, which I came up with all on my own.

For some reason, I was curious about Zach. He was nice, even if he thought my butterfly was a buttercat. And I didn’t want to disappoint him by telling him that no such thing existed. I decided to draw another butterfly that looked more like a real one, with orange-and-black lacy wings. I wanted him to see it. I got the crazy idea that if I got on the soldiers’ good side, they could help me sort out my problems. Maybe we could teach God a thing or two. I had been asking God repeatedly to tell me what to do about this horrible knowledge inside of me, but for some reason He never answered. I was beginning to wonder if at some point in my short life I did something to upset Him, or if He was just too busy with the war going on and all the new prayers to answer.

The problem is, I don’t know who to trust outside the house—besides the Hamasus and Irene Ferreira. Not talking to strangers is getting harder with so many strangers around. I am pretty sure I can trust Zach, though, since he is Jean’s brother and he has honest eyes and one of those faces that smile from the inside out. I call them trust faces.

Did you know that about people? You can tell a lot about them by the way they look at you. Take Miss Irene Ferreira, our telephone operator. Her eyes are huge and chocolaty and clear. They’re always so open that you would know right away if she was hiding something. She is simply unable to keep a secret by manner of those big eyes.

Old people also have interesting eyes. It seems like their eyes know so much that they hardly have to say anything. Mr. Hayashi is like that. He sits in the back of the store, carving things out of wood. I’m not sure he can even see, but that doesn’t stop him. He still has all his teeth, which is rare for old people, and he shows them off when I sit down on the stool next to him. Mama takes her ration tickets there, and while she picks out flour and rice and things for the kitchen, I sit with

him. He used to carve Japanese characters onto small blocks of wood, but now he sticks to American letters, or stars or animals. Even though his eyes are milky, it seems like he can see right through me.

Sometimes that makes me nervous. I don't want anyone to see into my head. It's bad enough that I'm in danger and scared of my own shadow, but I don't want anyone else to know what I know. Then they could be, too.

Chapter Nine

Violet

"Lateness is rudeness," so her mother always said, but Violet wanted to give Zach the benefit of the doubt. Jean paced on the porch, as her lips moved with the words playing on the radio. A picture of lovely, she wore a red pleated skirt and a white blouse. As always, the fire-engine-red lipstick set off the gold in her hair. Violet had stuck with a plain blue dress with red buttons. She had sewn them on herself one night while feeling patriotic.

"I'm sure he has a good reason. Once you're in the military, your time is not your own," Violet said.

"Zach never was good with time. I should have guessed he'd be late."

No sooner had she spoken the words than a military jeep rattled into the driveway. Three men hung halfway out the windows, waving. Singing must have run in the family, because Zach and a redhead were hollering like fools. By the time they arrived at the front door, it was obvious why they'd been late.

"Alma Jean Quinlan, are you ready to dance?" Zach called from the steps as they filed up.

Jean shot Violet a look before answering. "Where have you boys been?"

All three of them stood in varying degrees of leaning and swaying, and removed their hats. Her cheeks heated up. If late was rude, late and sauced was inexcusable.

Zach's smile must have been a mile wide. "Ladies, I believe you've met Parker, and this here is Tommy O'Brien, the fastest man this side of the Pacific Ocean. I apologize for our lateness, but we had to meet up with a few members of our company at the hotel."

Violet stood on the front porch, deciding whether to say anything. But since she had nothing nice to say, she kept quiet. Jean ushered them into the living room, where Ella still sat by the window, only now she was drawing rather than watching.

"Where's my talented little friend Ella?" Zach said.

"Ella, honey, please greet our guests. These are very important men, so we need to treat them with respect," she said, wondering if Ella would pick up on their drunkenness.

Ella waved at the men and said, "Hello, it's a pleasure to meet you." And immediately went back to her paper. The hen began clucking at the intrusion.

"What do you have here?" Zach said. In two strides, he was at Ella's side.

"Why don't you tell them how we got it," Violet said.

Everyone crowded around the chicken in the blanket, whose clucking had taken on a frantic tone.

Parker bent down for a closer look. "She's just about in tune with the radio. This little lady yours?"

Ella nodded.

"Looks like she got in a fight with a lawn mower. What happened?" he asked.

Ella pinched her lips together and without a word climbed down and started rubbing under Brownie's eye. Violet was impressed at the tenderness of her touch. How her small fingers were so precise, delivering just the right dose of love. Not more than a minute later, the hen stopped her ruckus. Ella beamed up at them. "She likes that."

"Where'd you learn that trick?" Parker asked.

"From Mr. Manabat. He knows everything."

That got a laugh from the men.

“Does he, now? Well, then maybe we should be talking to him about a few things,” Zach said. Tommy finally spoke up. “Like where on earth we’re headed. All I care to know.”

Ella traded a look with her mom. “I meant he knows everything about chickens. He wouldn’t know about that stuff. But you could ask.”

“Good advice. I just might do that,” Tommy said.

Jean disappeared and came back with trays full of peanuts and Saloon Pilot crackers with chunks of salted codfish. She set them out on the card table. Violet realized that this was the first group of adults she had entertained since Herman’s disappearance. Sure, the Hamasus came over often, but they were like family. These were men, and even though it was only Jean’s little brother, she suddenly wished she had worn something prettier.

Zach’s voice was several notches louder than the other night, and he scooped up almost the entire batch of peanuts in one hand. “Lord, it’s nice to get out of that wind-blasted tent city for a change. You ladies been up to Camp Tarawa much?”

“Now and then. We go to sell vegetables if we have too many,” Violet said. “Waimea is not always like that. Just you wait. It’s about the loveliest place on earth when the weather’s right. With all those pastures, the sky always seems bigger up there.”

Tommy laughed, revealing a missing tooth to one side. “You mean to tell me there’s a sky up there? I haven’t seen anything but that crazy sideways rain and heaps of clouds. It’s enough to drive anyone mad.”

“Once the weather turns, you won’t want to leave,” Violet said.

The words had already come out when she realized her error. As if they had any choice in the matter. Parker nodded as if considering the implications.

“Speaking of Camp Tarawa, guess what?” Jean said, clasping her hands together.

“What?” all three men said in unison.

“We’re going to be setting up a pie stand outside the USO on Saturdays pretty soon, so that should cheer you up!”

The pie-selling plan had come about after driving into Waimea one day to sell greens and sweet potato with Takeo. Jean took one look at all the soldiers milling about and a light bulb flashed on.

“These boys need some home-baked love,” she had said and then continued, “We’ll make them pies and end up with change in our pockets and a whole new set of handsome friends. And we will be doing something important in the war effort.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” Violet had questioned.

“Somehow having Zach here has made me feel more protective of these soldiers. Instead of a big horde of smelly men in uniforms, I see them like brothers, sons, husbands,” Jean had said.

“I suppose it might not be a bad idea. But we’d need to work on boosting our gas rations.”

Jean had stood with her hands on her hips. “Of course it will work. Boosting morale, fattening them up. In my eyes, comfort food is better than any pill.”

“Well, I guess it’s settled, then.”

Zach now slapped his forehead and fell back. “Fellas, once you taste a Jean Quinlan apple pie, you may just want to up and marry her. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Jean’s cheeks reddened, but she loved this kind of thing. “Oh please! No apple here, but we’ll have Okinawan sweet potato or chocolate honeycomb.”

Tommy’s nostrils flared and he stiffened. “You ladies selling Jap pies to the soldiers?”

“The potatoes aren’t Japanese,” Violet said. “They come straight from our garden, and I get the starters from Mr. Otake, who has lived here for a hundred years or more.”

“That may be the case, but you ought to rethink what you call your pies if you want to sell any,” Tommy said.

“Mr. O’Brien, I see your point, but let’s get one thing straight. Here in Hawaii, there are far more Japanese than haole. And as far as any of us are concerned, most of them are just as loyal to America as you or me. These are not the same people we are fighting,” Violet said, feeling her cheeks burn.

His voice was taut. “Ma’am, I’m afraid we may have to agree to disagree.”

Jean gave her a halting look, and then trained it on Tommy. “Let’s talk about something else, please? Remember we have a young lady in our midst.”

That was how they learned Tommy O’Brien was from a big family in New York, and he was a Yankee to the bone. Also, given the chance, he would talk himself to death. Halfway through his monologue, Violet left to check on the creamed corn and beef stew. Ella followed.

“Are you going to show Zach your new butterfly watercolor?” Violet said.

Ella shrugged and fiddled with one of the scabs on her arm.

“I could use your help filling up these glasses with water.” It appeared they had consumed enough alcohol already, and she kept the beer in the icebox.

A few moments later, the volume on the radio shot up. It was Bing Crosby, only now he had company. “Swinging on a Star” also happened to be Ella’s favorite song, and she knew every word. She pushed the kitchen door open just a sliver and peeked out.

“It’s the dark-haired one,” she whispered.

Violet came over for a look. Parker was leaning up against the radio and snapping his fingers. His moves were fluid, but there was nothing fluid about his voice. It was like sandpaper on a chalkboard. On the next verse, Tommy and Zach both joined in. How could this be happening? The house had become a concert hall for drunken soldiers, and yet she couldn’t draw her eyes away. The way they were singing with every ounce of heart made her dense with longing.

When the song ended, Parker caught Ella’s eye and winked. She jumped back. Then he nodded at Violet. She felt her cheeks flush, and she let the door close.

“They’re funny,” Ella volunteered.

“I think we’re going to like them.”

* * *

Before supper, they bowed their heads and Jean gave God an extrastrong thank-you for bringing her brother to town. Even after scarfing down the peanuts and dried fish, the men tore into the food as though this was their last chance to eat. The table was drowning under mounds of beef stew, creamed corn and white rice. Violet sat at the head of the table with Parker to her left and Ella to her right.

“So, Ella, have you ever been to a zoo?” Parker asked.

Ella glanced up at him as if deciding if he was worthy of an answer. She looked to Violet, who answered for her. “We don’t have a zoo here, and Ella’s never been to the mainland.”

“I used to work in a zoo,” he said, again to Ella. “We had lions and monkeys, crocodiles, even hippos. And I learned a thing or two about animals while I was there. I could look over your hen if you’d like, after dinner.”

Ella brightened.

Violet wondered at their good fortune. “That would be nice. Thank you. How did you get involved in a zoo?”

It was easy to forget that the soldiers had lives back home before this whole war started up. That they had left education, careers and families to come here. Inside those uniforms you could find the same measure of love, fear and hope as in anyone else. Often more.

“I’ve wanted to be a vet as long as I can remember. Left the ranch up north for school in San Diego, and I was halfway through premed when the war broke out.”

“Well, I’ll be,” Jean said.

Jean had been caught up in conversation with Zach and Tommy on the other end of the table, but now turned her eyes on Parker. It had only been a matter of time. Jean would flirt with the Pope given the opportunity. Violet felt a lump of jealousy form just below her ribs. What on earth?

Parker continued, still focusing on Ella and Violet. “I was the lucky one that got the buckets of slop ready for the animals. That’s about all you want to hear, trust me.”

Jean flashed her most irresistible smile, dimples and all. “Tell us more about home. Do you have a family waiting for you?”

“My folks and my little sis, Alice. And then there’s Bella.”

Jean wilted. “She your sweetheart?”

He wore no ring.

“My dog. Black as midnight and truer than the Bible,” he said, grinning.

His smile was straight across, with only the sides turning up. He had olive skin that was too dark to be from the sun and smooth like a baby’s bottom. Then there were the broad shoulders and tapered waist. All things considered, he had the kind of looks that could only lead to heartache. And no doubt he knew it.

“Surely you must have a woman back home?” Jean persisted. Lord, she could be pushy.

“When I first enlisted, I was with the Paramarines. It was a tough unit to get in with, but they had a rule you couldn’t be married,” he said.

Tommy laughed. “Sergeant Stone, married?” His mouth was full and he nearly choked on his bite.

Zach slapped his knee, which was almost level with the tabletop, and laughed out loud.

“Fellas, cut me some slack here,” Parker said.

“He’s on his best behavior here, but...”

Parker cut Zach off. “But nothing. Am I going to have to make you do an extra hundred push-ups tomorrow?”

Violet turned to Ella, who had finished eating and was watching the men’s banter with her mouth hanging open. Surely there had been nothing like this in their house before. Herman had been a straitlaced family man. Once in a while, he and Luther would have a few beers on a Saturday, but there was never this kind of loose conversation and maleness.

Out of the blue, Ella spoke. “Do you think the Japanese are going to bomb your zoo?”

“The Japanese will never get close enough to bomb my zoo. Rest easy. We’ll be taking care of them long before they ever get near California.”

“What about here? Miss Ferreira says that you guys are here because the Japanese submarines are sneaking up on us. And we should move back to the mainland before it’s too late,” Ella said.

Where had Ella gotten this information? “Darling, you know not to believe everything Miss Ferreira says. She tends to exaggerate.” Violet would have to have a word with Miss Ferreira, sooner rather than later.

Zach cleared his throat and Tommy stared at his corn, but Parker addressed her concern. “You bring up a good point. A lot of unexpected things happen during war. But I can promise you this—the animals are safe, and you’re safe, so quit your fretting.”

Over Ella’s head, he winked at Violet.

“I wouldn’t want to leave anyway,” Ella said. “Without my papa.”

Silence dropped onto the table. Jean had probably mentioned Herman to Zach, but Violet had no idea what the others knew. Everyone in town knew the story, so she never had to explain it.

“Nor should you have to,” Parker said.

Jean mouthed the word “Sorry.”

“Thank you for your confidence in our safety, Sergeant. You may or may not be aware that my husband disappeared a year ago,” Violet said.

Ella folded her arms and looked into her lap. There was that word again. Disappear. Violet was conscious of the difference between disappeared and died. And how she always chose the former. The likelihood of Herman coming back was slim to none. That much she knew. But without a body, would she ever be able to draw the line? Would she grow old wondering with an ache in her soul?

There was no easy way to talk about it, but people needed to know. These men especially, if they were to be sharing meals with them.

The truth was the truth, and the sooner everyone knew it, the better.

“Did it have anything to do with the war?” Tommy asked.

“Unfortunately, we don’t know. There was a search and an investigation, but they turned up nothing.” Violet told them her practiced version of the story while she rubbed Ella’s shoulder, at the same time tasting bile in her throat. Talking about this had that effect. Maybe having the men over hadn’t been such a good idea.

Parker didn’t seem to have a problem talking about it. “Either way, I’m sure that you loved him and he loved you. And that will never go away. Not knowing’s got to be hard.”

She nodded. By now, the whole house smelled like baked coconut and Violet excused herself to check on the pie. “Ella, I could use your help.”

Ella scooted in with her. The pie still had another minute or two before browning. She sat Ella down at the table and looked into her eyes. “Sweetie, we both want your father to still be alive. More than anything. But we’ve been over this before.”

Ella bit her lip like she was holding back tears. “I know, but sometimes it helps me to pretend.”

“Oh, Ella.” Violet hugged her in tight as the burning in her gut intensified.

If only it could be that easy. She could pretend forever that Herman was out getting milk, that he was just around the corner. That she would wake up to him snoring next to her, filling the whole room with his sounds. She had to hold back a laugh at the thought of their first night together, and how she had woken in a panic, certain that a tornado was pulling off the roof. But it had only been his god-awful snoring. She caught herself. This was happening more lately—thinking about him without tears. Where are you, Herman?

Violet sliced up the pie with freshly polished silver, and she and Ella carried out double slices to the soldiers. Living on the farm, especially in her later years, her folks had been so poor, meals were about staying alive, not about pleasure. But since moving to Hawaii, and especially since living with Jean, all that changed. In Hawaii, crops grew year-round and in such abundance, you could pluck the fruit off a tree whenever you pleased. Fruit designed for baking outlandish desserts.

* * *

A late-afternoon shower drizzled down outside, adding steam to an already muggy day and chasing the mosquitoes away. Violet and Ella set plates down in front of each man and you could have heard a pin drop. Then forks began clinking on china.

After taking a whole minute to chew his first bite, Parker was the first to speak. “So, which one of you is responsible for this?”

“Why, that would be Violet,” Jean said.

“Don’t blame me. This is your recipe,” Violet said, not wanting credit, or any marriage proposals.

Tommy put his fork down. “Zach was right. I think I’m going to have to marry you.”

“Me, too,” Zach said.

“Is there a reverse word for polygamy?” Jean asked.

“Polyandry,” Zach said.

Jean looked confused that her brother would know such a thing. “And you know this, how?”

He shrugged. “No idea, but it sounded interesting.”

All this talk of husbands made Violet nervous, but she knew they were teasing. Then Parker said, “The whole war would be worth it if I knew I was coming home to this.” She felt her body go motionless and her heart pick up speed.

He put another piece in his mouth and chewed, all the while staring into her as though she were some kind of conundrum.

She wanted to be clear on one thing—she wasn't up for grabs. There were more important things to worry about. Not that Parker would ever be interested.

“Well, that is awfully kind of all of you. And, Sergeant Stone, I have no doubt that you will find what you're looking for. We have no shortage of lovely single women on this island.” Her eyes couldn't help but flicker to Jean as she said it.

Even then, he didn't look away. Eventually Violet had to turn to look out the window, at the sun-laced trees and the town below.

“Please call me Parker, ma'am.”

“How about this. I won't call you Sergeant if you don't call me 'ma'am'?” Violet said.

* * *

After dinner, Parker stayed true to his word and inspected Brownie's wounds. They brought her into the kitchen, and she squawked at first but settled down when he tucked her tightly under one arm. The arm in question had sharply defined biceps and a rosy forearm.

He pointed to where her right wing attached to her body. “This one here looks like it needs some care. You have any kind of healing salve?”

“I have drawing salve,” Violet said.

“First I would use a honey ointment to prevent infection. You got any honey on hand?”

Jean climbed into the conversation and laughed. “Do we have honey?”

Violet explained. “We have more honey than we know what to do with. Mr. Keko'olani keeps bees. He feels sorry for me, so he brings us honey once a week.” The jars were piling up, but he kept coming. Kind of like Mr. Macadangdang with the coconuts. Anyway, Mr. K. kept thirty-eight hives at his place and had another zillion spread out in the woods and nearby farms. Honoka'a was a perfect place for beekeeping. The bees loved the honeydew from a certain grasshopper that fed on the sugarcane, and the forest was abundant with ohia-lehua blossoms.

“I have a few jars of salve back at camp. I can bring some next time, but it's easy to make, too,” he said.

Herman would have probably just cut the chicken's head off and asked Violet to stuff it for supper, so this was a surprise. Tommy and Zach lost interest quickly and retreated to the porch.

Darkness was almost here. They needed to leave, but Parker seemed so genuinely concerned for the chicken that she let him continue.

“Olive oil, comfrey, marshmallow root, witch hazel bark and honey,” he said. “You put that on Brownie, she'll be good to go in no time. Ella, maybe you can help your mother make the salve. It would be good for your cuts and scrapes, too. I use it all the time.” He lifted his forearm to show a long pink scar. “I got in a scuffle with Roscoe. He didn't mean it, of course.”

If Ella had any doubts about these soldiers, they would be blotted out by now. “Zach said we would meet Roscoe. Where is he?” Violet asked, unsure about meeting anyone who inflicted wounds like that.

“Roscoe is otherwise occupied, but you will. I promise.”

[Chapter Ten](#)

Violet

Back in Badger, Minnesota, Violet's family had always gone to church, even in the bitter freeze of winter, when it was risky to breathe outside. They would bundle in worn-out blankets and extra layers of wool socks, and trudge to the church in the middle of town. “Acceptance, deliverance, repentance,” the minister had drilled into them. But understanding those words was another matter altogether. As a girl, Violet had thought acceptance meant standing on the stage and getting your award for having the biggest goat or the fattest pig, not making the best of a situation gone wrong. Later she learned it was not an easy thing to master.

Despite the new routine of Japanese school, which seemed to be going well, and the night with the soldiers, Ella still ate less than a squirrel and picked her freckles until they formed angry red

mounds. Sometimes Violet wanted to tear her own hair out, unable to protect her daughter from invisible grief, but that pesky word acceptance kept rearing up in her head. Maybe now was the time to revisit what acceptance really meant.

Maybe acceptance meant moving forward with what you had.

Violet first met Herman in a church. He was sitting in the front row, shoulders tight with shudders, trying to hold it together, which was hard to do when your sixteen-year-old brother was lying dead from pneumonia, a by-product of the dust storms, people said. Herman was the older one who had come back from Hawaii for the funeral. She wasn't even sure where Hawaii was, but she liked the sound of the word. It sounded sweet and warm and green.

Her mother insisted she come, knowing there would be men there. The sooner Violet found a man, the sooner she could get out of the house. Violet ended up in the kitchen helping clean up, when Herman walked in. Without a word, he rolled up his sleeves and picked up a towel. They stood side by side at the sink, she washing, he drying. After the tenth plate, she broke the silence.

"Is that where the pineapples come from?"

For the first time, she saw the hint of a smile. "Hawaii is a lot more than pineapples. But don't tell anyone."

"Like what?"

"Well, for one thing, it only snows on the very top of the mountains, which are tall. You could wear a dress all year there."

She thought she had misheard. "Be serious."

"Scout's honor. The place is paradise. They weren't lying."

"Who's they?"

"The education corps that brought me out there. I'm a teacher, but soon to be principal."

Herman didn't say it in a boastful way, but she was impressed nonetheless. He could be only four or five years older than she was, at the most. His manner was sparse, and she wasn't sure if it was his nature, or because he was sad about his brother. If she wasn't mistaken, his arm had gotten so close to hers that soon they would be touching. They talked until her mother came in to tell her their time was up.

It was the first funeral that Violet hadn't wanted to leave.

Herman took her to dinner the following night, and the night after. But he was returning to Hawaii the next week. What was the point? Still, Violet enjoyed his company, and the distraction he provided from going home in the evenings to her mother and Mr. Smudge and her stepbrothers, who fought constantly. Herman got her considering that there might be life outside Minnesota. They spent the week together, walking in the fields behind town, holding hands and stealing kisses. He told her stories of natives riding canoes down the face of waves and of the white-sand beaches with palm trees and fresh coconuts. It sounded magical.

Two weeks after his departure, an envelope arrived in the mail holding something stiff and colorful. Violet's heart tap-danced on her ribs. A ticket on the SS Lurline. To Honolulu.

Herman had written a note:

Dearest Violet,

Should you wish to see for yourself, I would be most honored.

Yours, Herman.

PS: Remember that winter is on its way and what I said about wearing dresses all year round.

She smiled at his reference. There were so many reasons not to go. Another two years of college. The town newspaper job, even if it only involved sitting in meetings, taking shorthand and not getting paid. Of greater concern would be leaving Lady, her faithful collie-dog, and her lovely hens.

Her mother was another matter. Every so often, Violet would see glimpses of the way she used to be. Bright-eyed and full of song. She sang to the cows, to the family of sparrows that flew in and out of the barn, to the wheat crops when harvest time arrived. That was before Violet's dad up and

left them under the guise of finding work, before they moved in with Mr. Smudge, the town butcher, who had lost his own wife and had two sons of his own. For the first time, Violet had siblings—ones she didn't much like. Mr. Smudge smelled like blood and sweat, drank enough vodka to turn his face purple, and had a case of the shakes. But he provided for Violet and her mother and he taught her how to shoot a gun well enough to pop a can from across the field. He put food on the table. On one level, she knew her mother had chosen survival, but all joy had squeezed out of her and she'd never found it again.

Violet had been fourteen the day her father hopped on the train and headed for the city.

They stood at the station, her face in his hands and his ice-blue eyes searching into her. Sometimes at night, she could still feel the sandpaper of his skin and the sunken pit that came from saying goodbye. "Darling, I promise I will be back before you know it. Or else I'll send for you when I have enough money."

"Take me with you!" she cried.

"Your mama needs you."

Violet's lip quivered and she willed herself not to cry. But her face was wet for weeks after. Letters came, but no money. "I have hope," her father would say.

I have another interview tomorrow to sell vacuum cleaners. The city is full of men looking for work. They say I need to have experience.

The letters came less often. The letters stopped coming.

She hadn't blamed him like her mother had, at least not at first. Between drought, grasshoppers, insufferable heat and orifice-filling dust storms, their farm had been doomed from the start. What happened to the land happened to him, turning him into a hard, cracked and hopeless man. Several years later, a letter came saying he was still out of work and to move on with their lives and he was sorry. So sorry.

Herman seemed like a far cry from her own father. Dependable, employed, ambitious. Anyway, there was no law that required her to stay in Hawaii if she didn't like it. She held the ticket up to her nose, and swore she smelled flowers and sea salt.

She went by boat train to San Francisco. At her first sight of the ship, she nearly fainted. It was massive, with smokestacks like small buildings and decks layered up to the sky. How could such an enormous object stay afloat? Flags were flying, and once they cast off the python-sized ropes, Violet joined the passengers in confetti-tossing and cheering. She was alone with nearly seven hundred people on a voyage to Honolulu. What in God's name was she doing?

For Violet, the ocean was a new and wondrous body of water, and its blue was unfathomable. Salt layered everything, and she was constantly tasting the breeze. On the first two days of the voyage, she gained her sea legs, for despite the size of the ship, the seas were rolling. Plates and glasses slid back and forth during dinner, and many people took to their bunks, ill from the motion. When she saw all the green faces, she felt lucky not to be seasick herself.

All Violet wanted to do was be on deck, where she caught sight of whales and watched the albatrosses glide overhead. Much of her time was spent wondering and guessing. She had seen pictures of Hawaii, people riding waves, pineapple fields with migrant workers and women dancing in colorful dresses or grass skirts. Herman had also made it sound larger than life. But a part of her thought that there must be more to the story, more than coconuts and rainbows. In her short nineteen years of life, Violet had seen enough to know that not everything was as it seemed. People were starving and dying of cold, half the country was out of work, and her own father had abandoned them on account of losing his farm.

Many of the passengers were stopping in Hawaii, but many were also headed to Pago Pago, Suva and onward to Australia. After the second day, the ocean smoothed out and people began emerging from the depths. The deck chairs filled up and drinks began to flow. There were hula dancers and steel-guitar players, card games and even wooden horse races. Rumor also had it that there were

movie stars in first class, and even Amelia Earhart. For a time, Violet imagined herself working on the ship, traveling the South Seas and seeing another side of the world.

When the SS Lurline pulled into Honolulu Harbor, the docks teemed with people. But Violet was more interested in the green of the mountains, which to her seemed impossible. There was also something strange going on with her sweat glands, which wouldn't seem to turn off. Herman was right where he said he would be. Standing in the front row off to the left, wearing a white suit. As she got closer, she could tell that she wasn't the only one sweating in the melting Hawaiian heat.

Herman waved at her and smiled. He wore his goodness like a badge. His giant hands held a yellow plumeria lei, which he placed around her neck. His neck smelled like sardines and sweet flowers. His touch was tentative, and even after a week together and weeks of almost daily letter writing, she realized they hardly knew each other.

After the initial hug, Herman pulled out a small box.

He knelt down.

The people around them disappeared and she could see only his mouth forming words.

“Violet, will you marry me?”

In her mind, she began to frantically recall the letters and if she had possibly missed one. In all of their correspondence, marriage had not been mentioned. But then why else would a man buy a woman a ticket halfway around the world?

“We have your mother's blessing.”

His eyes were so open and expectant. Was there any other answer than yes?

* * *

A loud pounding rattled Violet from her daydream. “Hello?” a voice called.

It was Luther. “Thank you for coming.”

“Anytime, you know that. What can I do for ya?” he said.

“Jean and I are going to sell pies in Waimea on Saturday mornings. Give the soldiers a feeling of home and make some pocket change,” she said.

Luther had to bend his neck straight down when talking to her. “I'm afraid I'm not much good at pie making, so if you've invited me here for that, you're fresh out of luck.”

The thought of Luther with an apron on, baking a pie, caused her to laugh. He only cooked meat. She knew this because they shared an occasional dinner together, along with Jean and a few other faculty members. Being around Luther was a link to Herman, and she was glad for his company, even if he seemed preoccupied these days and kept more to himself.

“Now there's a sight. But we do need a pie stand, something that we can fold up and is easy to assemble. I know you would be good at that,” Violet said.

“Now you're in business. I can have something ready by the weekend if you'd like. How many pies you looking to sell?”

“I think we'll start with twenty and go from there. But I have a little extra time now that Ella's in Japanese school in the afternoons,” she said.

His voice boomed. “That such a good idea?”

Violet was fed up with paranoia. “It was her idea. And why the hell not?”

Luther tucked his hands in under his belt, lowered his voice, looked around as though someone might be hiding between the walls and leaned close enough that she thought she smelled liquor on his breath. “Just between you and me, I've been hearing rumors that they might close the school.”

Violet about fell over. “What? Where did you hear that?”

“Oh, in and about town. People talk. You know that.”

Closing the school would ripple through their small community, ruining her friends' livelihood and cutting off her daughter's newfound independence. Somewhere between the September heat and a rising feeling of dread, her palms broke out in sweat.

“Is there anything you can do about it? Herman talked to someone not long after Pearl Harbor, when there was mention of closing it then. Do you know who?” She had to take a breath to steady herself.

He shrugged it off. “No idea.”

“You must have connections. Please, Luther, we need this. Ella needs it,” she said.

He held up his hands. “I’m not privy to the government’s agenda. There’s a lot going on we don’t know about. Hard to trust anyone these days.”

She would have to warn Takeo.

* * *

October 2 turned out to be a good day for the Allies. According to the radio, they’d breached the Siegfried Line and would now be able to penetrate Germany along the northwestern border. The Germans had just crushed the Polish resistance in Warsaw and needed to be stopped. Maybe someone would finally do something about that mustached pig.

Violet was boiling coconut and listening to the news when Ella burst through the door, arms flailing. She was home far too early for Japanese school to be over.

“Mama, there are armed men at the school. You have to come!” Ella said.

Violet almost fell over. “What?”

Ella could barely get the words out between gasps. “They came while we were singing and stood outside. Sensei told us that school would be ending early today and to go home. The men didn’t look nice.”

“Honey, you stay here with Jean.”

Jean had heard Ella and hovered nearby. Shaking, Violet slipped her shoes on and ran up to the school. Branches tore at her dress and the dense air pressed in on her lungs. By the time she arrived on the small porch, she had to fold over to catch a breath. Two army jeeps were parked in front. Too late to warn Takeo.

When she opened the door, the chirping of the birds halted and the entire room froze. Papers were strewn across the room and drawers piled haphazardly on the floor. Without the singing children, the place felt stinging cold.

“What the devil is going on?” she cried.

Three men stood around the desk, and an older one with a scar carved deep into his cheekbone stepped forward. “Ma’am, this is a government matter. I’m going to have to ask you to return to wherever you came from.”

Violet couldn’t restrain herself. “How dare you come in here when the kids are in class. Have you no common decency?”

The soldiers all began fidgeting. “We were prepared to wait but Mr. Hamasu requested for the children to leave,” the scarred one said.

Takeo stood off to the side with a blank face and unreadable eyes. He nodded toward the door.

Still, she wasn’t leaving. “I want to know what you’re doing here. Takeo already went through this after Pearl Harbor. They’re not even teaching Japanese, for heaven’s sake.”

The man spoke as though she was just a small annoyance. “That may be the case, but we’re doing what we see fit to keep the country safe. This is a matter of national security. What concern do you have in the matter, anyway, Mrs....?”

“Mrs. Iverson, sir. My daughter is a student here.”

The men exchanged glances and a look of confusion spread across their faces. “At Japanese school?” the spokesman said.

“Yes, and she loves it. She comes home with folded paper animals and is learning how to create a miniature tree. Terribly dangerous stuff.”

It seemed odd that they would be coming now. The threat of direct attack had lessened and the Japanese were being forced back toward their homeland. Violet knew Takeo like a brother. He

had stepped in after Herman disappeared and been a second father to Ella. If she was sure of one thing, it was that Takeo was no spy.

The spokesman leaned against the desk and folded his puffy arms. “As of now, the school is officially closed and we are taking over the building. Sorry for your daughter but she doesn’t really belong here anyway.” The look he gave her said he wasn’t sorry at all.

Violet shivered from the understanding that these men had poisoned minds and were unable to think for themselves. The war had created some kind of mass hysteria. “My husband was the principal of Honoka’a School and the head of Hawaii Rifles. He vouched for Takeo. Shouldn’t that count for something?”

“Leonard, please escort Mrs. Iverson home so we can wrap things up here and get a move on,” the spokesman said to one of the younger men. And to her, “We are done here.”

Violet stepped back toward the door. “I don’t need escorting.” Her eyes met with Takeo’s, and behind his calm exterior, his eyes gave her the impression of a murky pond, one without answers. He failed miserably in his attempt at a smile.

Takeo spoke. “Violet. Thank you.”

Her name sounded lonely without the san at the end.

* * *

Rather than returning to her house, she went straight for Setsuko, who she knew would be at home with the kids. She didn’t bother knocking and let the screen door slam shut behind her. Glancing across the room, she saw Umi and Hiro on the floor listening to the radio. Setsuko stood by the window, her face drawn down and her eyes bloodshot.

They were about the same height, and when Violet hugged her, Setsuko trembled and wouldn’t let go. “I’m scared. They said they were searching for something of vital importance,” Setsuko said.

She had never seen Setsuko like this. “They probably always say that. If they close the school, we can do crafts with the kids here. And they have our little garden here and Ahualoa.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about. I think they’re taking him.”

Violet pulled away, still holding both her hands, and looked her in the eye. “Taking him?”

“To the relocation camp at Kilauea. The captain said something about the Ni’ihau incident,” Setsuko whispered, then put her finger to her lips.

They were practically nose to nose and Violet could see the salt from the dried tears on Setsuko’s cheeks. “That was years ago. And what would it have to do with Takeo?”

Everyone knew about the Ni’ihau incident. In 1941, a Japanese pilot had crashed on the small island after raiding Pearl Harbor. Initially, the Hawaiian people of the island didn’t even know about the bombing, but when they got wind of the attack, they apprehended him. The pilot sought aid from three local Japanese, who assisted him in breaking loose, finding weapons and taking hostages. In the mind of the Americans, it proved that anyone of Japanese descent could not be trusted.

“Nothing at all, but they already have their minds made up,” Setsuko said.

Violet gripped her wrists. “We won’t let it happen.”

[Chapter Eleven](#)

Ella

All of us kids were scared when the armed men showed up, but Sensei told us not to worry when he went outside to talk to them. I wondered if I was the cause of this. Maybe I wasn’t supposed to be there and they had come for me. But that wasn’t it. Over and over, I could hear Sensei saying, “I’m an American, you have to believe.” It turned out the men wanted to search for something in our schoolhouse.

Sensei came back in and told us that school would be closed until further notice, and that we should head straight home. Sumiko and Ethyl in front of me started crying. On the way out, the men gave me funny looks. Everything went orderly, but I got a taste of despair coming off of Sensei, like

he wanted to fold himself into an origami crane and fly away. A single tear ran down his cheek when I turned to wave at him. All I could do was give him my biggest smile, one that I rarely use.

I hated the thought of Mama alone in the near darkness. There were a lot of bad people around. Or good people, depending on who you asked. One time, just after the army moved into town, we were walking up to see Papa, who was working late at school. At that point we were used to being able to do whatever we wanted, and being the principal's family gave us what Mama called clout. It was just after sundown and I was telling Mama about the book *Lassie Come-Home* that Mrs. Hicks read us, and how they made it into a movie. Neither of us paid any attention to a man giving commands. Mama had her big blue eyes turned on me as though I was the only person alive—until we heard, “Stop or I’ll shoot!” We both turned into statues and Mama yelled who we were. He said he didn’t care and curfew was curfew. That was when we knew things had really changed.

It was dark by the time Mama came home. Her eyes were swollen and I ran up to hug her when she came into the kitchen.

She wiped her nose with a dish towel. “They took Takeo away.”

“Oh heavens, no!” Jean said.

I could see Mama was on fire. “You know what gets me? This whole hysteria. I understand that we need to protect ourselves, but there’s a line of human decency that has been crossed.”

Jean set down her glass of milk. “That may be true, but a lot of these people from the mainland don’t know our Japanese like we do. All they know is that we are at war and our lives are at stake.”

Well, that got my mama going, and her nostrils flared like they did when she was fuming. “Alma Jean, are you siding with them?”

“I’m not siding with anyone. It’s a complicated situation, and I can see both sides. You know I love the Hamasus.”

One thing about Mama mad is that she takes action. “We need to talk to everyone we know. I’m going to see if Irene can get me on the line with the governor tomorrow. Takeo is the most harmless man around.”

Jean nodded and I hugged Mama harder. I didn’t want her to get herself in a situation like my papa did. She looked down at me like she just noticed I was there. Her hands rubbed my scalp. “I’m sorry, Ella. That you had to be there for that.”

“Where are they taking him?” I said.

“To a camp near the volcano.”

If they called it a camp, it must not be so bad, and I wondered what all the fuss was about. “Will we get to go, too?”

Mama and Jean looked at each other like they knew something that I didn’t.

“No, but maybe we can visit,” Mama said.

When we sat down to eat, Jean asked God for an extra helping of love for Takeo and his family. To my surprise, she also asked for Brownie to grow a new set of shiny feathers. She had a special way with prayers, which made me wonder if I should ask her to pray for me.

Brownie had managed to live, but it would be a long time before she looked like a proper chicken. The top hen in the yard attacked her when we set her down outside one sunny morning, and I had to run screaming at them with a shovel to break it up. Pecking order is something real, not just a made-up phrase. So we still keep them apart and Brownie sleeps in a cage on our lanai.

I knew I should feel sorry for Takeo and his family, but I was caught up thinking about myself. And how I wouldn’t be able to go back to his little schoolhouse. “Can we do Japanese school here?” I asked.

Mama and Jean had been talking about the war and they got quiet. “No, we can’t. But that doesn’t mean that Umi and Hiro can’t come over and practice origami. And I’m sure Setsuko would be happy to help you keep your tree alive since she won’t be helping out at the school anymore.”

It wouldn't be the same as in the old wooden house. I liked how our voices bounced off of the floor and the walls, and I wanted to make an oshie out of old kimono material. I had only seen ones of people, but I planned on making a chicken. More than anything, I knew I was safe there.

Suddenly, it looked like a light went on in Mama's head and she said, "Say, I have an idea!"

Chapter Twelve

Violet

The week was shaping up to be one of the worst in recent memory. Sleeps were fretful, Ella wet her pants in class for no apparent reason and the trade winds had taken a vacation. By the end of each school day, Violet's dress was stuck to her back and her hair looked more like feathers. Setsuko had no option but to keep teaching, and spent her lunch breaks crying, as though she'd spent her whole life saving up the tears, and now they wouldn't turn off.

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