Prologue: Roots

If you could see heat, you would see it that day rising from the concrete paving in the schoolyard, colliding with rays plummeting from the sun. The light was blinding, the heat oppressive.

The schoolyard was unlike most others on this tiny island on the Pacific. A concrete wall, eight-feet high and topped with countless pieces of broken glass embedded into the concrete, surrounded both the school and the perimeter of the 30,000 square foot yard. A young woman fully covered—except for her face and hands—in the white habit of a Catholic novice, circled the yard, watching pupils play.

About a hundred girls, ages six to eleven, clad in dark blue skirts and white shirts with peter pan collars loosely tied with wide, dark blue bows, formed groups around three or four games. Despite the buzz of activity, no one shouted, shrieked, or raised a ruckus.

The girls ignored the heat as they played in the few minutes they had for recess. All, except one girl. She sat in the shade, smiling, content with observing everyone else, and enjoying the light breeze that blew now and then.

Younger girls hovered around rectangular hopscotch courses drawn with chalk on the cemented yard. Some older pupils ran games of tag, but the majority, along with a few younger ones, waited in a long line to take their turn at jumping rope.

From a slatted wooden bench, Leilani watched the game with cool interest until her best friend, Myrna, ran into the arc of the spinning rope to join another girl from her class. Leilani leaned forward.

Two girls, each holding one end of the rope, swung vigorously down, sideways, up, and around over and over. The rope whirled so fast that all Leilani saw was an elliptical form pinched at its ends, like a sausage bulging in the middle. Inside, the girls jumped, as fast and as high as they could to evade the whirling rope. If they got their feet caught, they lost and had to get out. The player who lasted longest won.

Myrna was good at it, maybe the best. She skipped like a fawn and could outlast everyone else Leilani had seen. Before long, the other girl gave up and yielded her place to another. Leilani clapped hard for her friend, a wide smile wiping away the pout on her lips.

"Why aren't you with the other girls, Leilani?"

Leilani turned as Sister Young sat on the bench next to her. Sister Young was the newest novice who alternated with another novice, Sister Mariano, in watching the children in the schoolyard. Leilani liked Sister Mariano better. She had a nicer smile, and she spoke in a soft, sweet voice. Sister Young, tall, thin, light-skinned, and sharp-featured, looked like she disapproved of everyone. And she was too nosy.

Leilani shrugged, her pout returning, as she turned her attention back to the girls skipping rope.

"Is anything wrong, Leilani?"

"No. It's too hot to play."

"Your classmates don't seem to think so. Myrna looks like she's having fun."

"Myrna likes to jump rope better than school."

Sister Young chuckled. "I can understand that. When I was your age, I preferred running around with my brothers than playing with my dolls or reading. But what about you? What do you like to do best?"

"Watch people."

"Is there much fun in that?" Sister Young sounded as if she believed the opposite.

Leilani shrugged again. The novice said nothing more for a few minutes.

Myrna jumped out of the spinning rope, yielding her place to a girl who had just joined her in it. Standing outside the arc of the rope, she swiped her arm across her face and wiped it on her shirt. She ambled to the side and dropped her butt down next to one of the girls swinging the rope.

"She must be tired," Leilani mumbled to herself, sitting back on the bench and sticking her lower lip out farther.

Sister Young said, "What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"How's your family doing, Leilani?"

"Fine."

"Sister Mariano told me your father is a doctor who's part of the team that takes care of the president. You must be very proud of him."

"He's no better than other doctors."

"But he must be pretty good to be on the team. Do you see him much? I know doctors can't keep regular working hours like others do."

"I see him enough."

"What about your mother?"

"Mamá is Mamá."

"Does she work?"

Leilani scowled. "She paints her nails different colors every day and fills lots of vases with flowers." She knew no one who worked, among the mothers of her classmates. She added, "We have maids who do the housework."

"Like all the families of the other children here, I'm sure."

Leilani turned toward Sister Young. “Didn’t you have maids when you lived at home?”

“No. I learned to clean and cook by the time I was your age.”

Leilani stared at the young novice. She wanted to say something nice to her, but what? Cooking and cleaning at her age—nine years old—seemed like punishment. How did a child tell someone older and able to order them around that she was sorry? She reached her hand out to touch Sister Young, but remembered that school rules did not allow touching between teachers and pupils. So, she regarded her in sympathy, and the novice acknowledged it with gratitude in her eyes.

The bell rang, announcing the end of recess. Leilani jumped up from the bench. Although she felt close to Sister Young for a few moments, she was relieved to be free of her. She joined Myrna in the line for girls from her class.

“Oh, Myrna, you’re sweating into your white shirt. Your uniform has stains on it.”

“Yes, lucky our skirt is dark. I’m sure it’s dirtier than my white shirt.”

“Is that why you stopped skipping rope?”

“Yeah, but it’s too hot, anyway.”

“The stains—will your Mamá be angry with you?”

Myrna shrugged. “She doesn’t care. But Nana will give me a scolding. You’re lucky your parents didn’t get you a Nana.”

Leilani crinkled her nose. She had once asked her father for one. “No. Mamá thinks she and no else should take care of us. I’ll bet she’s stricter than your Nana.”

“Keep it down, girls,” Sister Young said as she led the line of girls back into the school.

Everyone stopped talking as they entered the classroom where Sister Lourdes, their math teacher, waited. A middle-aged nun with a thin face, whose smiling eyes had etched upward creases on the corners,

she was kind but she inspired awe. Her pupils knew quite well what that set to her jaw meant: She was determined to make them as proficient, if not better, in math as boys. She followed up on her mission by rigorous training, starting each day with written exercises on lessons and homework of the previous day.

Leilani calculated that she spent more time studying math than other subjects, although literature was her favorite. She wanted to please Sister Lourdes.

A quarter of an hour later, only the scratching of pencils on paper and the swishing of the nun's habit as she paced between desks, could be heard in the room. The class was absorbed doing the written arithmetic exercise of the day. Every second pupil or so, Sister Lourdes peered discreetly down the girl's back to gauge her progress.

Leilani sensed the nun's presence behind her. She bent lower over her work. She had solved two-thirds of the problems halfway through the allotted time but she did not want her teacher to see her progress until she finished. A soft knock on the door saved her from the sister's watchful eyes. The nun hurried to the front of the classroom. Leilani sighed in relief.

A low but excited buzz of voices broke the relative quiet of the room as Leilani and many other girls raised their heads from their work. Before Sister Lourdes reached the door, it swung open and the principal entered. Behind her, a visitor walked in, partly hidden by the principal's layers of black and white habit.

The principal once said she was anxious not to disrupt lessons, so she rarely came to their classrooms. She had meant to reassure them of her unwavering interest in growing their minds. Instead, she aroused curiosity and anxiety when she did come—reactions that grew more acute when she brought a visitor along.

A visitor meant some pupil was going to be singled out, taken out of the classroom for some shameful or unhappy reason in her family. If she had a problem having to do with school, she usually had to go to the principal's office. That was the rarest event of all, and it caused greater shame.

"Mamá," Leilani muttered, when the visitor came out in full view from behind the principal. Her mother picked her and her sister, Carmen, up when school was over, but she never entered the school grounds. She waited in her car.

She was staring at her now, her lips pressed into a line, as if she was holding back an urge to cry or to shout. Deep creases on her brow cast shadows on her eyes. Something disturbed her. Something terribly wrong.

Leilani turned toward the huddled heads of the principal and Sister Lourdes who had been talking in hushed voices. She thought, they're talking too long, as she put the stubby end of her pencil in her mouth, and bit on it so hard that the eraser broke off.

She spat the broken piece in her hand and looked around at her classmates, their faces animated with malicious delight. They were relishing the little drama unfolding before them, squirming with anticipation for what was to follow.

She knew what it was like, watching and waiting for trouble to fall on another. But the visitor was her mother, and she looked much too worried.

Before long, the principal stepped back and Sister Lourdes faced the class. Leilani knew what was coming. She held her breath. Today was her turn—the unfortunate girl drawn into a familiar scenario, the butt of the week's jokes for her often bored classmates. She had known it would come, and though she was sure it was impossible, she wished she could will it away.

Later that afternoon, they would gossip. Taunt arrogant, aloof Leilani, finally pulled down from her pedestal by the disgrace of being taken out of the class by her nervous mother.

Her teacher said, "Leilani, please gather all your things and give me your work. I'll grade whatever you finish. You must go with your mother at once."

To Leilani's relief, instead of the whispered guessing and curious stares she had anticipated, her classmates hushed up. Maybe, like

her, they sensed something terrible. Their teacher spoke in a tone they had never heard before, a tone so solemn that her usual calm demeanor seemed as troubled as her mother's.

Leilani seized pencils, books, and notebooks off her desk and hastily stuffed them in her bag. Her arms were trembling and she could not zip up her bag. She picked it up, hugging it close to her chest.

Myrna, who sat behind her, leaned over and said, "Call me tonight."

Leilani nodded without turning toward her friend. She marched, head straight and gaze forward, toward the waiting adults.

Sister Lourdes lightly tapped the top of her head. "Don't worry. I'll take the number of right answers you gave against the total number you finished. That's fair, don't you think?"

Leilani nodded.

"Thank you, Sister Lourdes," her mother said. "Let's hope she can come back to school tomorrow. She doesn't like to miss any of her classes."

"You're welcome, Mrs. Torres. And don't worry about Leilani's progress. She catches up very quickly. I'll give her extra exercises, but I don't think she'll need them. I hope things turn out all right for your family."

Leilani felt her mother's hand pushing her toward the door. She was impatient to be out of there.

In the car, her older sister Carmen waited in the front passenger seat. They bobbed their heads in greeting.

Leilani threw her schoolbag on the back seat and climbed in. She was dying to know what was going on, but she knew better than to ask. They hardly ever talked in the car. Their mother insisted on silence while she was driving.

She and Carmen needed only one incident to learn that their mother meant what she said. One day, they continued their banter after she told them to stop. Without warning, she slammed on the brakes and Carmen, who always took the front seat, hit her head on the dashboard. Leilani fell on the floor. Carmen sported a bump on her head for days after that.

Leilani was impatient to be home, certain that her sister knew what was going on. Unlike her, Carmen could coax things out of their mother. She would not hold anything back, eager to show Leilani that their mother trusted her and liked her better. Leilani refused to believe her sister, but conceded that because Carmen was thirteen—nearly a young woman—their mother told her grown-up things.

For now, Leilani would play her waiting game. She tried to calm down, but her resolve lasted only until her mother turned at a street. She could not hold her tongue then.

"This isn't the way home. Where are we going?"

Neither her sister nor her mother answered and all she could do was wait to see where her mother was taking them. She scooted close to the window and watched all the buildings they were passing by.

A while later, she heard the drone of planes flying low above them and recognized the streets they were on. She knew it. They were off to a place away from home. She was not about to be dragged away, without knowing why.

"We're near the airport. What's going on? Are we going somewhere?"

Her sister said, "Just shut up, will you? You're getting on my nerves."

Carmen was quick to notice and use their mother's expressions. "Getting on my nerves" was their mother's way of telling her children to go away. Leilani heard it often enough that she could tell from the way she glared and parted her lips that her mother was about to say it. Leilani learned to walk away before she could utter those words.

But, trapped for the moment, she could only comply.

At the airport, Mrs. Torres parked the car in a ten-minute zone and said, "Get all your things. Don't leave anything in the car and keep quiet until we're out of here."

She went to the back of the car and took two suitcases out, one large and the other small. She banged the trunk close but did not bother to lock the car, as she usually did.

"What about Papá and Rudy?" Leilani cried. Were they escaping? But where to and why? And from what?

Again, neither her mother nor her sister answered. Her mother handed Carmen the small suitcase. Carmen handed Leilani her schoolbag.

As she rushed alongside her mother and sister inside the airport building, she began to imagine stories about escaping and became excited at the idea of it. Her heart raced and her whole body tingled. They were off on an adventure. Any adventure was welcome. She had so little of it in school, and even less at home.

Walking briskly, carrying two schoolbags heavy with books, she sweated profusely. Her arms ached and her legs groaned. The air conditioning helped, but that was over too soon. They passed through the building before she could cool down.

Out in the sun, their mother ran in front of them, toward a small plane waiting on the tarmac. She looked back at them and shouted, "Run, you two. You move like turtles."

Her mother was actually laughing, as if she shared and enjoyed her fantasy that they were about to embark on a great adventure.

Leilani was bewildered. The fear in her mother's eyes and her mouth had been palpable not only when she stared at her inside the classroom, but also when she drove towards the airport, gripping the steering wheel so tight that—from the back passenger seat—Leilani could see the muscles in her arms twitching.

Leilani and Carmen ran faster, laughing, infected by their mother's mirth. Leilani felt light and carefree. Everything was going to be all right. But the feeling lasted only a few short minutes.

Before they reached the plane, she saw a man she remembered seeing with her father once. He was a big man with alert, suspicious eyes that Leilani found menacing. He waited for them at the foot of the steps to the plane.

He took the suitcase from her mother's hand and said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Torres, I couldn't get him out. Rudy is waiting for you inside the plane. He's in the front row."

The laughter died from her mother's face, and deep worry crept back on her brow. The man was clearly talking about her father. Something awful was going on, and no one was telling them anything about it. She had to find out what it was.

Inside the plane, she spotted her brother sitting on an aisle seat. He stood to let her and Carmen pass to the seats next to him. As was Carmen's habit on a bus, a train, or a plane, she claimed the window seat and Leilani had to content herself with the place wedged between her and Rudy. At least her brother, the oldest among them, liked her better than Carmen. He would tell her what was going on.

Her mother took the aisle seat across from Rudy. He helped her place the small luggage Carmen carried in the compartment above her.

Before she sat down, she reached out silently, reassuring each of them with a tender pat on their hands. But Leilani caught the sadness in her eyes.

Rudy sat down again and buckled himself in place.

Leilani said in a soft subdued voice, "Where's Papá?"

"He couldn't come. But he should follow us soon."

"What's going on, Rudy? Where are we going?"

"I don't know any more than you do. The guy you saw by the steps? I know him. He picked me up at school, said he had a letter from

Papá to me. But I wasn't supposed to open it until after we get to where we're going. It's in my jacket pocket. Then, he brought me here without telling me anything more."

"Are we escaping? Is Papá in trouble?"

"Why do you say that?"

Leilani pouted and scowled. "Because ... Why doesn't anyone say anything and why is everything so mysterious? Can't you open the letter now?"

Rudy shook his head. "No! You'll have to wait, like me."

"Does Mamá know what's going on?"

"She must, but you know Mamá. She thinks her main role is to protect Papá, at all costs."

"But why does Papá need protecting? Did he do something wrong?"

"I'm as clueless as you about this," Rudy said, scowling and getting irritated.

"What about my clothes? My dolls? I promised to call Myrna."

"I think Mamá might have brought a few clothes in that big suitcase."

"But where's that suitcase?"

"The stewardess put it away on a luggage rack. Now, Lani, will you shut up until we get to wherever we're headed?"

Leilani pouted again, leaned back against the seat, and closed her eyes. She was going to sleep if nobody wanted to talk to her. Still, she did not give up that easily. She would find out somehow.

Not long after, she felt her brother's hand on her arm. He whispered in her ear.

"I'll tell you this, though you won't like it. Be prepared. For anything."

"Why?" She tried to whisper but her shrill voice rose above the whirr of the plane.

"Shhh! I don't know much, but I've seen and heard enough. We're not going back home. Ever. No more Myrna. And you'll have to make do with the few clothes Mamá packed for you until Papá comes."