THE MARKERS

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THE MARKERS

By

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Epilogue
Prologue

Malia and me are sitting outside at Zippy’s, by the black asphalt parking lot, sucking up diet-cokes through fat, orange straws in sweaty, waxy cups. Mynah birds march around the parking lot looking for French fries, while other kids from the three high schools around here run around, chat on their phones and, sit aloof wearing headphones. In the corner of the parking lot an ancient banyan tree shades an industrial garbage bin and the employee cars. The glossy cars avoid the banyan tree because the birds bomb the cars worse than Pearl Harbor. The cars with tinted windows and silver tire rims boom low as their owners sit in their cars with their doors open and puff up their chests like peacocks. Eva side, beach side is clear with just a spot of clouds. Mauka side, mountainside, has rolling grey clouds showering the Koolau Mountain range. Here at Zippy’s we’re halfway between Mauka and Eva. I guess that’s kind of like Malia and me in high school, half way between kid and grown-up.

Malia’s bent over rummaging through her purple backpack that’s sitting at her feet. Malia’s waist-length straight black hair falls towards her ankles, and she quickly tucks it back behind her ear. She starts emptying the pocket of junk and dumping it on the table.

“Where’s my rubber band? My hair’s bugging me out today.” She makes crazy bug eyes at me and then goes back to her search. She dumps her phone, her thick lime-green wallet, rice facial paper, a pencil, a highlighter, and a calculator on the cement table.

“Ugh,” she huffs. “I get too much stuff already. I know there’s one rubber band in here somewhere.” Malia plunks down her house keys, an eraser, some Kleenex, and a red
Crayola marker. In slow motion, the marker rolls across the table towards me. Malia stops and looks at me.

“Eh, Noriko.” Malia only uses my full name when she’s trying to make a point.

“Noriko, remember dat time when you stole my markers?” she said.

“Nuhuh, I never stole your markers. What’re you talking about?”

“Uhuh, duh, I’m not mad at you anymore, Riko.” Malia begins wrapping her hair around her finger and then twirling it towards her head. I’m searching my brain for a time when I may have stolen markers from Malia. I don’t steal stuff. I don’t think, I steal stuff, from my best friend? What’s Malia talking about? She grabs the pencil off the table and sticks it through the loose bun of hair she just made. “You don’t remember, dat time when you took my markers?” she says drumming the table with the fat, white and red marker.

“Umm. I tink dat was way back in da fourth grade, Mr. Matsumoto was our teacher yeah?” Malia says.

Malia and I have been friends forever. We have the same birthday and Malia’s mom and my mom are best friends. Now we’re older. We go to Mother Mary’s Honolulu High, but everyone calls it The Hospital because it used to be a hospital back in the 1940’s before it became a Catholic school. Every Wednesday Malia and me go to Zippy’s to hang out. Sometimes Val and Julie come and join us after they finish volleyball practice.

Zippy’s is a local style fast food place with cement picnic tables and benches. They serve plate lunches like mahimahi and loco moco and katsu, all with rice and macaroni salad. Zippy’s has the best chili and rice in Hawaii. Plus the salty, skinny fries are my favorite, but these days, Malia and me are on diets, so we’re just having diet coke. Except sometimes, I go to Zippy’s by myself on Thursdays because I want the chili so badly. Malia
and me are *calabash cousins*. I call Malia’s mom Aunty Jackie or mostly just Aunty and Malia’s dad is Uncle Joe, and Malia calls my parents Aunty and Uncle too. We’re not blood related, but our parents are best friends, so it’s like we’re family. Malia and me are sitting at Zippy’s and the waxy super-size orange cups are dripping in the sun. Malia taps the white and red marker on the table again and points it at me.


“Nuhuh, you’re red handed.”

“Ehh, come on. You don’t remember? Umm, I tink it was the same time when we all went to the winter dance and did that dance. What’s it called? Remember that dance?”

“Oh Wait. *Das* the time when my mom was sick.”

“Uhh, I don’t know.” Malia takes a sip of her soda and thinks. “It’s when you stayed at my house for like a week.”

“Kay, kay, kay, now I remember. That’s the year Mom was in the hospital and I was staying with you. Yeah that’s when you were Tony’s secret admirer. Now I remember. I remember. Those markers saved my mom. Those markers saved my mother and maybe a little magic.”
Chapter 1
Drop-Off

Dad and me walk to the side door of Malia’s house, television and chopping sounds seep through the screen door. Everyone’s shoes, sneakers, and slippers line the front of the door. In one hand I’ve got Dad’s hand, and in the other hand I’ve got my bag of markers. It’s a medium sized denim bag that Mom made for me. The stitching is in red, the zipper is silver, and there’s a little denim handle on the bag. There is an orange splotch and a navy blue splotch from when the caps fell off and the markers bled on to the bag. My bag has a mix of dried and fresh markers, fat markers and skinny markers, primary colors and exotic colors. Plus, there are crayons and pencils mixed in with the markers in my bag. We look through the screen door, and see into the kitchen. Aunty is standing over the counter, with a long, wide, black handled knife in her hand. I squeeze Dad’s hand. There’s a rhythmic chop chop chop chop sound as Aunty cuts the green leafy Bok Choy. With a shuffle, we take off our slippers, leave them at the door, and walk into Malia and Aunty’s kitchen.

“Jackie! We’re here.” Dad calls and Aunty Jackie looks up, puts the knife down. She grabs a towel off her shoulder, and dries her hands. While walking into my best friend’s house, I squeeze Dad’s hand even tighter. I think they’re going to make me let go, I don’t want to. I won’t. I don’t want to stay with Malia tonight. Dad bends down, giving me a hug and kiss. He says not to worry and to have fun with Malia, but to behave and listen to Aunty. He gives Aunty a kiss on the cheek and then gives me another squeeze. I don’t want to let go. I want to stay in the hospital with Mom and Dad. Dad stands up.
“Okay kiddo. You know the drill, when you’re in Aunty’s house you follow her house rules right? You have your markers, your book bag, and your over night bag. Everything you need.”

Wrong, I want to say. No, I want to say. I don’t have everything I need. I need my mom. Instead I nod and say, “Uhuh.”

“Now remember, like we’ve already talked about, you know I’ll be at the hospital taking care of Mom. Call me anytime you want, okay? What’s my number Noriko?” Dad says.

“808-735-2292,” I repeat for the millionth time.

“Good job,” he says.

“No. Please, Dad I don’t want to stay with Aunty. I want to go to the hospital with you. Please.”

I’m not letting go of Dad’s hand. Maybe if I don’t let go he’ll know he had to take me with him.

“No, Dad, please.” I won’t let go. I hold on tighter.

He looks up at Aunty. Aunty comes over to us. She puts out her hand, like I’m supposed to hold it. Why should I? I’m not going to fall for that trick.

“But Aunty, I want to stay with Mom in the hospital until she gets rid of the cancer.” She looks at me blankly. She looks at Dad.

“Dad.”

Aunty takes my other hand. It’s still a little cool and wet from the kitchen. Now I’m holding both of their hands.

“Dad let me go to the hospital. Let stay with Mom.”
“Your Mom doesn’t want you to miss school,” Aunty says. “And your father is going to stay at the hospital and take good care of her, don’t you worry.”

“But I can help. I don’t want to be here. I want to stay with Mom and Dad.”

“I know. I know. But you will help by doing well in school,” Dad says.

“But I want to REALLY help.”

Malia runs into the kitchen, jumps up and down.

“Yea Yea Yea ! FINALLY you’re here. We’re gonna have sooo much fun,” she grabs my wrists as if to lead me away from the grownups. “Whatchu wanna do?”

Dad and Aunty look at each other. They let go of my hands.

“This is going to be the best week ever!” she says.

“Call me anytime you need to,” Dad says. He kisses me on my forehead, “my little mango,” he says and turns towards the door. I want to cry, but I tough it out. Dad stands at the door. Malia jumps up and down.

“Riko Riko Riko! Whaddya want to do Noriko?” she asks.

“Love you, Noriko,” Dad uses my proper name because he doesn’t like me to be called Riko.

“Me too Dad,” I say and then he walks out the door.

It’s weird I want to yell and cry at the grownups. It’s not that I don’t like Malia, I love Malia. Malia’s my best friend, we have lots of fun. We take turns having sleepovers almost every week. But this is different. Mom and Dad are sending me away. I don’t think doing well in school has anything to do with Mom getting better. It’s not going to get rid of Mom’s breast cancer. Grown-ups think good grades can fix everything. Good grades only fix bad grades. I don’t see how school cures Mom. Maybe, they’re just getting rid of me. I
think they’re getting rid of me. I want so bad to stay in the hospital with Mom and Dad. At the same time, I want to run away with Malia. I want to run.

“Come on,” she says and pulls me towards the back of the house. Already I feel a little better. Maybe Mom and Dad are right. Maybe it’ll be fun staying at Malia’s house is better. They just want me to have fun until Mom gets better. But it’s cancer, and cancer is so, so serious. I don’t know what it is and I don’t know what Mom and Dad are doing.

Malia slides open the screen door at the back of the house, we step out onto the lanai jump the four steps into the yard, and run. I run and scream all the way down to the end of the yard, to the fence. Malia lives on Wilhelmina Rise, a mountain, so her yard slants down towards a metal fence that keeps wild pigs out. On the other side of the fence, a steep hill drops into the valley. We run up the hill a little bit, cartwheel down the hill and then huff it to our tree house.

Uncle Joe, Malia’s dad, built us a tree house between three coconut trees in the yard. First, he nailed ladder rungs to one of the coconut tree so that we could climb into our tree house. Then he built a wood floor way up high, near the top of the tree. Then afterwards, he built a bamboo railing around the edge, so we won’t fall off. There’s no roof because the palm leaves make a shady umbrella over our tree house. Sometimes Uncle Joe climbs up to our tree house and whacks at the coconuts stems with his machete. He gathers the coconuts and splits them open with his machete. Inside the coconut is white coconut milk and meat. I mean it’s not really milk and meat, that’s just what we call it. Coconut is really like candy. I love coconut, but Malia’s super bored with it; she says she gets coconuts coming out of her ears already! Her ears are big enough that’s for sure. Nah. Anyway, someday Malia and me will be tall enough to machete those coconuts ourselves. Then
we’re going to go into Waikiki, wearing *muumuus and leis*, and sell them to all the tourists
and make plenty of money! Kind of. Well, not that much money, but tourists like that kind
of stuff. Uncle Joe doesn’t like the idea.

We also have plastic bins in our tree house filled with stuff like sun block, mosquito
repellant, water bottles, water guns, a Hello Kitty that we turned into Evil Kitty, a plastic
thermometer to measure the temperature –but we think its broken, walkie-talkies,
binoculars, and colored chalk. There is a super big yellow flashlight with a light beam and a
lantern part. We have two big old chalkboards up there in the tree house. Oh and we have
Boggle and a dictionary too.

We call the tree house *Nani Terabithia*, because we both read this really, really
good book called *Bridge to Terabithia*, and in the book the boy and girl have a really cool
secret hiding place. It’s a super sad story, but so good too, and Terabithia was like their
refuge from the grown-ups and school and the world. So we call our refuge Terabithia and
*nani* means beautiful, so it’s our beautiful Terabithia. From our tree house, we can see
everything: the mountains, Kaimuki, Diamond Head, Waikiki, and the ocean. We can see
into the cliff at the edge of the yard. The tree house, Nani Terabithia is ours. Today, Malia
and me scramble up the ladder and open the plastic bins to look for something to do. We
scatter our stuff across the floor, but we don’t want any of it. Then I get an idea.

“Eh Malia, if we jumped from *da* tree house, you *tink* we’d get hurt?” I say.

“Are you crazy? We’re over twenty feet off the ground! We’d kill ourselves.
But…maybe, if we jumped with sheets like parachute style?”

“Hmmm…Better not jump. If we live, we’d be grounded for the rest of our natural
born lives. We wish were dead already.”
“Noriko.” I can tell something serious is coming because she’s using my proper name, she’s squinting, and looking at me sideways. “Your mom get cancer yeah?” Malia crosses her legs and looks at me directly.

“Yeah.”

“She get breasts cancer?”

“Yeah.”

“She might die?” Malia asks.

“No, I don’t know. Cancer is not like getting Mono yeah? I mean it’s real serious. Hospital serious. But I don’t know. Mom and Dad don’t talk too much about it. She’s going to be okay after her surgery. I think.”

“So,” Malia gets her squinty, thoughtful look again. “Let’s make one promise. We stay sistahs forevah yeah?” Then she spits into her hand and holds it out.

“Sistahs,” and I spit in my hand and we shake.

“Kay, we’ll ask Dad,” she says, “what we do to make it Hawaiian kine official, kay? Maybe we wrap some stones in ti leaves, or something li’ dat. But anyways, you can stay my house plenty,” she says wiping her hands on her Hawaii 82 t-shirt.

“Tanks eh, but nah. I’m going back to my house in a couple of days.”

“Nori, you no like stay?” she says.

“Mmm, nah cause I’m going help around da house li’ dat.”

“Kay den,” Malia begins braiding her ponytail.

Up here, in our tree house, on the mountain, it feels like we could stretch our arms out and reach for the clouds hanging over the Koolau Mountains. The mountains dark almost black, lush green because it’s been a wet, rainy November. And as usual, down by
the beach everything is clear, sunny, and cloudless, like rain is a stranger. The mountains can be dark, fearsome, and mysterious while the beach can be open, friendly, and bright. It’s funny, the mountains and the beach, they’re so close, but they feel so different, like strangers. And that’s how I feel right now, like everyone has become a stranger, even Malia, and Dad and Mom, everyone. It’s like I’m trying to get a handle on what’s happening, and I’m grasping at clouds.

Malia stands and points towards the edge of the yard by the cliff. “What’s that?” she asks. We stand up and lean against the bamboo rail to look for what’s making the shuffling sound.

“What?” I ask scanning the yard. Then we both hear something along the edge of the cliff and it sounds like it’s digging through the pile of dead leaves that Uncle Joe throws over the fence.

“You hear that?” she asks. “It sounds big.”

As we look over the edge from our tree house, I hold onto the rail tight to keep from getting butterflies in my stomach. We scope out the cliff, looking for movement.

“The pigs can’t get through the fence, yeah?” I say. Wild pigs freak me out. They’re scary and mean looking. They have black bristly hair and tusks like rhinoceros. They can way hundreds of pounds and look like they would knock you down, stampede right over you, and stab you with their tusks. These are no Piglets!

“Nah,” Malia says, “the pigs haven’t been in the yard for a long time.”

“Yeah, its probably nothing.” I bend down and rummage through the bin and pull out the binoculars.
We take turns scoping out the area, and when we don’t find anything, we lay down in the tree house, looking up at the palm leaves lazily swaying in the light breeze. They make a relaxing soft tapping sound, like light rain on a sidewalk. It’s approaching dusk, so bands of birds sing and chirp and holler sweetly. I can hear Aunty’s voice through the lanai screen door. She’s chatting on the phone and doing laundry. I like all of these sounds and I sigh.

“Heads up!” Malia slaps my arm.

“Oww, wassup!” I say rubbing my red arm.

“Mosquito,” she says.

“Oh tanks eh.”

“Get too many mosquitoes,” she says while her eyes buzz around looking for more mosquitoes, “because of all the rain we had.”

“Yeah, wanna go inside?” I say rubbing my arm.

I get up and position myself over the ladder, put my foot down on the ladder rung and start climbing down the tree. Going down is harder than going up. Malia is a few steps above me. When I’m almost near the bottom, I leap off the ladder. I land on the grass, right next to a mongoose! It’s grey-brown rodent body freezes like it’s ready to attack. The mongoose stare at me with creepy, beady eyes.

“Ahhh!!!” Malia! Up, up, up!” I jump back onto the ladder, “Mongoose! Mongoose! Go up! Up!”

“What!” She’s confused. “What!”

“Go go go!!! Hurry!” I can’t climb up because Malia is blocking the way up the ladder. I start smacking her heels.
“Up up up!” Malia turns her head, looks down and sees the mongoose.

“Ahhh!!!” she scrambles up the ladder. I am right behind her. She’s pulls herself onto the tree house and clambers to the railing edge, as I pull myself onto the floor. I scoot next to her, and we look over the railing. The mongoose glares at us, giving us the evil eye, and then it dashes even closer to the tree.

“Ahhhh!” We both scream bloody murder. Suddenly, the screen door slides open and Aunty runs down the lanai steps and stands frozen in the yard, staring at us. The mongoose turns its head, sees Aunty, and scurries away to the edge of the yard and through the fence. With her hands on her hips, Aunty stares up at us.

“You girls okay?” We nod. “You scared the living daylights out of me.”

“Get down here,” she says pointing to the ground.

We look over the edge. The coast is clear. We start climbing down the ladder.

“Careful,” Aunty says while we climb down the tree. Aunty has her hands on her hips again. “I don’t know why Joe had to build that tree house. Uhh,” she sighs and shakes her head. “You two nearly gave me a heart attack! What happened?”

“Mongoose attack!” we respond.

“That’s all? Girls, no be chicken,” Aunty says.

“But Aunty, I almost jumped right on it.”

“Jumping,” she replies. “What are you doing jumping? No jumping from the tree house! You’ll break your neck!”

“It was just from the bottom of the ladder.”

“Mom,” Malia says, “it was chasing us!”
“Uhuh, I doubt that,” Aunty says putting her hands on both of our shoulders.

“They’re more afraid of you, than you are of them.”

“Nuhuh,” we both say.

“Oh come on inside and wash up. Dinner is almost ready. I don’t know what I would tell your mother if you fell out of that hamajang tree house.”

“We weren’t falling.”

“Joe builds the tree house, ‘-it’ll be fun for the girls,’ he says. But who is home to have the heart attacks while you’re playing up there? Me, that’s who.”

“But Mom…”

“It’s okay. It’s okay,” Aunty says, kissing both of us on the top of our heads. Joe should be home soon. We’ll have dinner when he gets home. So wash up and then you girls can practice your times tables until dinner.”

“But Mom…”

“No lip. Wash up.”

Malia and I take a really, really long time washing up so that we don’t have to practice our times tables. When we hear Uncle Joe’s car pull into the driveway, we come into the kitchen and Aunty gives us The Look. Uncle Joe opens the door.

“Hmm. You girls must’ve washed off all the Portagee,” Aunty Jackie says.

“Jackie! I heard that,” Uncle Joe says. “Ehh, you girls be proud of your Portagee heritage,” he says leaving unlacing his boots, leaving them outside of the house.
Chapter 2

Dinner and Bedtime

We all sit down to dinner in the kitchen. Tonight, I’m not hungry. Aunty made teriyaki and I love teriyaki, but everything feels different. Even though I’ve been over here a million times, this time it’s feels weird. While we’re eating, Aunty talks about work, the tree house, news, and stuff. I look around almost like it’s the first time I’ve been here. All kinds of Christmas photo-cards are magnetized to their fridge. A photo of Mom, Dad and me from last Christmas is up there at the top. It’s weird to see last year’s card, when things were normal, before Mom had cancer. There’s also a photo of me aiming a green garden hose at Malia and her face is all crinkled up because I’m getting her good and wet. Uncle Joe is standing behind me laughing and I have a big grin on my face. I wonder if Aunty Jackie and Uncle Joe would adopt me. You never hear about single Dads and their daughters. But Dad needs me. He wouldn’t leave me. There are also wedding pictures, pictures of cousins, a picture of one cousin in New York on the Brooklyn Bridge. There’s a faded autographed photo of Magnum P.I. who was a famous T.V. actor from when Mom and Aunty were kids. Aunty still talks to the picture sometimes and sometimes she says, “Ohh Magnum’s legs, Magnum’s legs,” like its some kind of prayer.

After dinner we all clear our plates and then the T.V. can come on. I remember, one-day things were normal at my house, and then the next day there was a new rule and it was that the T.V. had to be off during dinnertime. Even Dad didn’t like the new rule at first, but then we got used to it and sometimes we’re allowed to break the rule like for special events like the World Series or the Oscars. The worst part was that after Mom started that
no-television-during-dinner-rule then Aunty started that same rule too. Malia got so mad at me, we got into a big fight, and I thought Mom ruined my life. After a while, we all kind of got used to it, plus sometimes our parents start talking about good stuff like what grown-up is mad at some other grown-up, good gossip.

It’s weird how one day, everything is normal and the next day everything is all mixed up—all hamajang. Life isn’t normal anymore. It feels like you come home from school one day, and you go into your room, and you have different furniture, different color walls, and a different blanket. You know it’s your room because there’s your two goldfish-Frank and Stein, your stuffed animals, and your Empire State building snow globe. Still you didn’t know your whole room would be changed, and it doesn’t feel like your room anymore. You can’t find anything because it’s all moved around. Your books are out of order, your clothes are all in different places, and you don’t know where your art supplies are. Everything is there somewhere, but it’s like you have to learn all over again where everything is. It’s like something snuck up behind you when you weren’t looking, and took your old life, and replaced it with a different one. I guess you need to make it feel like it’s your room again, like your life belongs to you. Except now, I’m not even at my own house, this isn’t my life. Everything is so mixed up. I’m scared about Mom.

“Noriko, aren’t you hungry?” Aunty asks.

“What? Nah, not tonight Aunty.”

After dinner we turn on the television, Malia and me lie on the floor and get comfortable for our favorite television show, Sunnydale High. It’s about these geeky high school friends who always solve some kind of mystery, and they have to watch out for the mean kids. There are a lot of Christmas commercials on television right now, like for
Long’s Drug Store, ‘Long’s Wishes you all a Mele Kalikimaka and a Happy New Year.’

Long’s is the kind of store that has everything: makeup, medicine, cracked seed snacks, slippers, cards, cameras, watches, bathroom stuff, kitchen stuff, everything except like clothes. At Christmas time it has Christmas lights, plastic trees, inflatable Santas, reindeer. For Christmas there are three aisles of toys instead of just one aisle of toys, but we’re kind of too old for toys now. After Sunnydale High is over, Malia kisses her parents goodnight, and we’re sent down the hall to get ready for bed.

“Okay girls, brush your teeth, get ready for bed, and in fifteen minutes, I’m coming back to tuck you into bed,” Aunty says.

“But Mommm,” Malia whines. “We’re too old to be tucked in.”

“Shush. I like tucking you girls in.”

We wander down the hall towards Malia’s bedroom and the bathroom. I know where everything is in Malia’s house is because we’ve had plenty of sleepovers. Being at Malia’s house feels different this time though because Mom’s sick, and I don’t know how long I’m staying. I don’t know what cancer means except that everyone is scared of it. Everyone is afraid of cancer. And that’s why I’m here at Malia’s, cancer, not just for fun. That’s what makes it feel different.

Malia and I go into the bathroom to brush our hair and teeth. Her bathroom is bright strawberry red; it’s painted sunshine yellow with red parts to it, like the towel holders are red and the bath rug is red and the toothbrush holder is red. I take my toothbrush out of my overnight bag. Things are different here; like at my house the toothpaste is a green gel and here it’s white paste. I don’t like the white toothpaste. It feels gritty, like it has tiny, tiny
bits of sand. We stare at the mirror, making monkey grins brushing our teeth, and spitting in the sink.

We brush out our hair. I’m jealous of Malia’s hair. I’ve always wanted her hair because it’s straight, long and black, and goes to the middle of her back. Her hair always looks neat and smooth. Malia is part Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, a little bit Hawaiian, and a whole bunch of other stuff too, she’s one *mixed plate*, but she has nice Asian hair. I am Japanese, but also Scottish and Hawaiian and Portuguese so my hair is more wavy-curly, thick and dark brown. It never just lays flat and smooth. It doesn’t matter if it’s up or down there’s always some hair that wants to stick out and do its own thing.

“I’ll braid your hair first, okay?” I put the rubber band around my wrist, and standing behind Malia I brush her hair into my hand. “I wish I had your hair.”

“Nuhuh it’s so boring yeah?” Malia says frowning.

“Nuhuh it’s not boring, it’s nice.” I separate her hair into three parts in my fingers, braiding it to the end, and then twisting the rubber band around the end of her braid.

“Noriko,” Malia says looking at me in the mirror. She’s got that far away look again so I know it’s something serious.

“Yeah,” I say looking at the back of her head as I braid her hair.

“I heard they cut ’em off,” she says looking at me in the mirror. I have no idea what she’s talking about. Maybe she’s talking about ponytails. I have no idea.

“Who cuts, what off?” I say.

“I heard that doctors cut off the boobs,” she says with a worried look. I can’t even believe what Malia is saying. That’s crazy. Doctors only make boobs bigger. They can’t take them off. I don’t believe it.
“Nuhuh, that’s one urban myth,” I respond.

“I don’t know Riko, that’s what I heard,” she says.

“Where you heard that?”

“Television,” she says.

“Nuhuh, Mom says not to believe everything you hear on television.” But then I think about it. Doctors cut out a dark spot on my cousin’s shoulder because they thought it might be skin cancer. So I guess doctors could cut off breasts. But with my cousin they just cut out this tiny little spot. Not a whole big part of your body. Mom is getting surgery, that’s why she’s in the hospital, but…won’t Mom bleed too much if they do that? I guess if they can transplant hearts and make boobs bigger, then I guess they can take them off too. Will she look like Dad after that? I don’t know. It’s too weird.

“Malia, your Mom told you that? Your Mom told you that, about my Mom?”

“No,” she says. “I saw it on T.V.” Malia’s mouth is white, foamy tooth pasty.

“Mom is going in for surgery, but I guess I don’t really know what that means.”

“You girls ready?” Aunty hollers from the kitchen.

“Almost,” we both holler back.

We look at each other saying, “Double jinx, no punch backs,” and punch each other in the shoulder.

“Kay den, my turn,” she says. I stand in front and she stands behind me, brushing my hair into her hand. It takes her longer with my hair because well, its wavy. My hamajang hair is like a windy day at the beach when beach balls, umbrellas, towels, and paper plates send people chasing after them.
In Malia’s room, we climb into bed, under the covers. Her *tutu* quilted a green and yellow blanket. Malia’s grandmother is a really good quilter; the blanket has a green background with a white border and yellow pineapples sewn into it. These Hawaiian style blankets take a super long time and it took Malia’s *tutu* a whole year to make. I guess her grandmother is one super busy lady. Malia has canary yellow sheets with white and pink flowers on them, and white pillowcases. Malia has a digital clock and a lamp on the bedside table. On the opposite wall is a poster of Jackson Prince. We both look at the poster of cute smiling Jack, and I wink at Malia. Then, like we always do, we blow kisses to Jackson Prince.

“Goodnight Jack,” we say. Then Aunty comes in. She folds *tutu’s* quilt and lays it over the chair by Malia’s desk. She sits on the bed, gives Malia and me kisses on the forehead. Malia’s room is cozy, but it’s not my room, and I’m remembering what Malia said about Mom.

“Aunty, what’s Mom in the hospital for?” I ask. Aunty looks at me with a confused look.

“Didn’t they tell you?” Aunty says.

“Well kinda. They said Mom was going in for her surgery, but what’s surgery?” Aunty’s eyebrow is creased and she’s kind of smiling at the same time. It gives her a kind of *Kabuki* look.

“Well a surgery is performed—”

“Performed? like a performer?” Malia asks. Aunty brushes a stray hair out Malia’s face.
“No, no, umm. Well there’s different kinds of doctor’s,” then Aunty brushes a stray hair out of my face. “General practitioners are regular doctors you go to see for your check-ups, pediatricians are doctors who work only with children – like the doctor you see before school starts, and there are dentists, surgeons, and all kinds of doctors. Surgeons are the kinds of doctor who operate, who do operations. They, well, I guess they go into people’s bodies when they operate. So the surgeon is going to try take the cancer out of your Mom’s body when he does the surgery. Does that make sense?”

I nod, and in a way it makes sense, but in another way, I don’t understand.

“Listen, we’ll go to see your mother tomorrow, don’t you worry Noriko. Little girls aren’t supposed to worry. It gives you wrinkles.” Then Aunty and Malia make funny squished up faces. Their squished up faces don’t make me laugh, they make me mad. I don’t know why but I want to punch, punch, punch my pillow. She kisses us on the forehead.

“Now girls, don’t stay up too late chatting away,” Aunty says. “Sweet dreams, goodnight, and don’t let the bedbugs bite,” she says getting up.

“Goodnight Mommm,” she says rolling her eyes. Aunty turns off the light, and closes the door. Malia turns to me resting her head on her palm, “Finally! Mom goes. You okay?”

“Yeah, we’ll go see Mom tomorrow.”

“Kay yeah, we’ll go see your Mom tomorrow but you’re still sleeping at my house yeah?” She bites her lip. So, umm, Riko guess what.”

“I dunno, what?”

“I think Tony Macaroni is really cute. Whatchu tink?”
In third grade, I thought Tony was cute, but hopefully Malia forgot about my crush way back then. I grew out of it after awhile, because it was kind of boring having a crush on Tony.

“You still like Tony since third grade?”

“Nah,” I say. “He’s cute, but nah. No more.”

“Yeah, but he’s soo cute,” she says.

“I guess so.”

“Riko, Will you do me a BFF favor?”

I am a little afraid of what Malia is going to ask because Best Friends Forever favors are big ones, like keeping a big secret, trading your favorite outfit or I guess staying at their house.

“Will you ask Tony if he likes me?” she says.

“I dunno.”

“C’mon,” Malia sits up and pokes me on my side. You scared?”

“Me? Scared of Tony Macaroni? You’re joking right?”

“You sure you still don’t get one crush?” she whispers.

“Nah, that was ages ago already.”

“Kay den cause we’re bes’ friends, so you get dibs yeah?” she says. “Maybe just ask him if he likes anyone. That way if he says you, well you know.”

“Nah, no worries, already,” I say.

Malia lays back down. We stare at the ceiling. I get an idea.

“I got an idea. Guess what?”

“I dunno, what?” Malia asks.
“Why don’t you be Tony’s Christmas Kris Kringle?” I move on my side. Malia moves on her side too.

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“Well you know how, when you have a Kris Kringle then you get little homemade gifts from a secret person, from your Kris Kringle. Then on Christmas you find out who your Kris Kringle really is. Well you could be a Kris Kringle for Tony.”

“Hhmm,” Malia stares at the ceiling again. “That’s one good idea.” She closes her eyes.

Yeah, I think, that’s one good idea. I won’t have to be Malia’s messenger. I think I just got myself out of having to ask Tony if he likes Malia. Maybe I do like Tony. I mean I never really thought about him for a long time, but maybe. I mean why does she have to like HIM? Well I guess, it’s just our class. I guess she should like him if he wants.

“That’s a good idea, Noriko,” she opens her ideas again. “And I can make cards,” she says. “And sign it from your Kris Kringle and secret admirer.”

Secret Admiral, what’s that I wonder, and close my eyes. I’m getting tired. Then I realize she means secret admirer. Should I tell her it’s really secret admirer, NOT secret admiral? Sleepy. She probably knows it’s secret admirer. She probably just had one brain fart. The cards are a good idea for the Kris Kringle.

“Das one good idea,” she says again.

“Mmmhh,” I say. If I wasn’t so tired I’d be annoyed. Okay already it’s a good idea.

“You’re one good artist, yeah?” she says. “Maybe you can help me make my cards?”
“Mmmhh,” I say. What I’m thinking is oh jeez, I don’t know what’s worse, just asking Tony who he likes or helping Malia be a Kris Kringle for him.

Malia falls asleep while talking about Tony’s eyes. Even though Tony has tan skin and dark hair, he has blue-grey eyes. Tony has pretty eyes. I can’t sleep. From the kitchen, I can hear the T.V. and the sound of Aunty and Uncle Joe talking. I just lay there listening, I can’t hear what they are saying, but the sounds of their hushed voices mixed in with the television is comforting. I can’t sleep, there’s too much to think about. Mom. Cancer. Surgery. I listen to footsteps coming down the hall and I see the light turn off through the space under the door. If it’s Aunty and Uncle Joe’s bedtime, than I know it’s late.

The digital clock glows twelve. It’s midnight. I never stay up this late on a school night, I’m a little thrilled and a little scared. I start to doze off into that in-between space, that almost asleep place. Malia kicks me as she turns over in bed, and I’m awake. Then I remember, this is not a slumber party. Mom is in the hospital. She’s got cancer. Mom and Dad left me here. Then I think, What if I can’t wake up?

Hearing someone say cancer. It’s like hearing your mother say, “You’re grounded – forever,” only a million times worse. It’s like hearing people say, “There is no Santa, only a million times worse, because I know there is a Santa. I make myself believe in Santa. Even if Santa is me or Santa is Dad or Santa is the spirit of Christmas. Hearing the word, cancer is like hearing that Auntie Charlene, my real aunt, is coming for the summer. I will have to share my room with her, and my room will be stinky like Jean Naté perfume, for the whole summer. Only it’s way worse than even that. Cancer is the scariest word ever. It’s scarier than being trapped in a room with ghosts and monsters. It’s worse than being grounded and Aunt Charlene all together. It’s worse than there being no Santa, spirit of Christmas. I fall
asleep thinking about all of these things. I fall asleep thinking about homemade cards. I fall asleep thinking about how I can help Mom. How can I do something, besides just being here, out of the way. I know. I can make art for Mom. I’ll be like Mom’s Kris Kringle kind of. Malia says I’m a good artist. I want to be good. I fall asleep thinking about homemade cards. I wonder what I can draw for Mom. I fall asleep thinking this is a good idea. I can make art for Mom. I can do something for Mom. I fall asleep under the red glow of the silent digital clock.
Chapter 3

Pilau! Stink!

THUMP! I’m on the floor, looking up at Malia laughing at me from bed.

“How can I shine with you pushing me off the bed?” I mumble from the floor.

“Uhh I feel like I went to sleep a second ago. I thought Dad waking me up was torture but you’re even worse!”

We get ready for school. Uncle Joe runs off to work wearing his uniform. Aunty drives us to school and drops us off at the playground. “Noriko,” Aunty says, “After school we’ll go see your Mom. No worry kay?” She smiles. I feel weird. It’s weird coming to school with Malia. We run across the playground.

In our school, the little kids are in another mini building on the other side of the playground. Bigger kids: third, fourth, and fifth graders are all in the same building. Our building is one long rectangle made of bricks and there are big windows that you pull open using a long wooden pole with a metal hook at the end. On our side of the building, there are two fourth-grade classes and three fifth-grade classes. We have the first two classrooms, and the fifth graders have the last three classrooms. On the other side of the building there are two third grade classrooms, two fourth grade classrooms and the bathrooms. There is a covered walkway all around the building. Then on the grass by the classrooms is a line of concrete picnic tables and benches. Skinny spindly royal flame trees offer almost enough shade. We have our own table, near our class. It’s been our table since the beginning of the year. Val gets to school super early in the morning and sits there eating her breakfast and
doing her homework. It’s our table: Malia, Julie, Val’s and my table. Every morning we sit at our table, waiting for the school bell and hoping the fifth graders will ignore us. This morning Julie and Val are having peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for breakfast. After seeing Malia and me get out of the car together Julie wonders what’s up.

“Your parents let you have sleepovers on school nights now?” Julie says between bites.

“Yeah, our parents are letting Riko sleepover for a whole week. Isn’t that cool?” Malia responds.

“Wow,” Julie seems impressed but Val just chews her PB&J gloomily, like she’s pissed. At that moment, I know why Malia is my best friend. She’s my best friend because she just saved my life. I don’t want to tell everyone about Mom being sick. Sometimes without even thinking about it, she knows exactly the right thing to do. We talk to each other about what we did this weekend, and as usual everyone says, nothing, homework. It’s not true though. Julie has baseball practice and karate. Val is learning Chinese. I don’t feel like talking about the weekend.

“I got to pee,” I say.

“What you need to make an announcement for shishi?” Val says.

“So stupid we got to hold it until after class starts and then Mr. Matsumoto gets mad and thinks we’re waiting on purpose,” I say.

“Sometimes,” Malia looks around to make sure no one is listening. “Sometimes,” she leans forward and whispers, “I go to the second graders’ bathroom.”

Julie and Val bust out laughing.

“Eh, it’s not funny, yeah.”
“For reals. It blows,” I agree. “Why the fifth graders get to act like the bathroom is their clubhouse?”

Julie and Val are nodding in agreement.

“Plus, who wants the toilet to be your clubhouse?” Julie says.

“For reals,” agrees Val. “Gross.”

“Stop it, I’m going to piss my pants if you make me laugh too much,” I say holding it in, leaning forward and whispering, “I hate going to the second graders bathrooms, the stalls are so small yeah,” I say.

Malia, Julie, and Val are falling over cracking up.

“The bathrooms are so little yeah? It’s like you got to get all grass-hopper when you’re sitting on the toilet,” I say.

“Follow the path grasshopper,” Julie says like a Kung Fu master.

“So not okay,” Val nods her head back forth.

“My knees are up next to my forehead already when I sit on those little toilets yeah,” I say. “I feel like one peeing giant.”

“And den all da second graders look at you funny kine,” Malia makes a bug eye face.

We’re all cracking up. Then a long dark shadow falls over us. The laughter stops. We look up. It’s the shadow of the evil fifth grade girls Meg and her Meg Heads.

“What happened to your face?” fifth grade Megan snarls at Malia.

“Yeah, what happened to your face?” Christy snorts. Christy is Meg’s sidekick. She does everything Meg said. Usually there’s five of them wandering the halls, stepping on ladybugs, littering the halls, stealing homework, hanging out in the bathroom, playing keep-
away with our book bags. This morning it’s only Meg and Christy. The other three probably haven’t been let out of their caves yet.

“Pilau! Something stinks over here yeah?” Julie says.

“What!” Megan says.

“You don’t smell it?” Malia asks.

Christy starts sniffing the air. “No, I don’t smell…” Megan slaps Christy’s back.

“C’mon, we’re wasting our time with these kiddies. Maybe one of them peed in their diapers.” Megan rolls her eyes and swings her strawberry blonde ponytail around like a propeller.

“Yeah smells like shishi,” Christy repeats, stomps her foot, and follows Megan. It’s like Christy is Megan’s personal thug. Megan seems always annoyed by Christy, but Christy follows her around like some ventriloquist’s puppet.

The morning bell rings. Everyone shuffles towards their homeroom class.

“Take this,” I say giving Malia my book bag. I run. I sprint like a track star weaving through a crowd of shuffling students. I run around the corners to the other side of the building. The recess ladies are shouting, “Walk! Walk!” but I don’t have time to slow down. I run across the playground, to the second grade side of our school. I run to the bathroom, and kick the door open. The bathroom is empty, because everyone just went to homeroom. In the nick of time, I jump into a stall. Oh that was close! I hate having to run to the second grade toilets. It’s so stupid. Those stupid Meg-Heads. When I’m still in the toilet I hear the door creak open. I’m afraid that I’m going to be ambushed by the fifth graders. I peak through the door of the stall. Christy is there by herself. She’s standing in front of the mirror and sink, and lifting her arm, like she’s raising her hand. She turns her head slightly.
Christy is sniffing her armpits! I can’t believe it! She thinks we were talking about her! I flush the toilet, walk to the sink, and get ready for trouble.

“What are you doing here?” Christy screeches.

“Washing my hands,” I say. “What does it look like I’m doing?”


“Fine, I got to get to class anyway,” I say, turning my back to her and drying my hands. I don’t think, that didn’t really sound very tough. I need to bluff my way out of this. I try to be casual, like I’m not scared of her. Now that’s it’s just the two of us, I size her up. She’s shorter than me, but she’s thick. She’s got arms that are the same size as my spindly legs. I’m fast, but I’m not really strong. I’m safer outside where I can run! Christy stands there staring at me.

“Hurry up,” she says crossing her arms and stomping her foot.

“Jeez okay,” I say. I saunter out of the bathroom, and then I sprint! I dash to homeroom, freeze at the door, and walk into the classroom.

“Noriko, you’re late,” Mr. Matsumoto, our homeroom teacher, says.

“Excuse me, Mr. Matsumoto,” I respond.

“Next time, please try to be ready when the school bell rings,” he says.

We take out our homework, and our reading books. The morning goes by slowly. Then, I get a note. It says, ‘Did you ask Tony yet?’ I’m too afraid to write back, I just look at Malia all bug-eyed. Like she’s crazy. We’ve only been in homeroom for five minutes. Does she want me to attack him or what?

Class goes by. Our teacher, Mr. Matsumoto, reads us a story about Colonial America. We practice our times tables. We read our chapter books. I’m reading a *Junie B.*
Junie B. Jones is always getting herself into funny little messes. The Junie B. Jones books are kind of easy for me. So, they’re my, I feel like a fun, easy read book. Sometimes that Junie B. Jones has me laughing out loud. Then I have to look up and look around and see if people think I’m crazy. Mostly, I daydream, but the teacher likes that better than talking. Then we have math.

Mr. Matsumoto makes John my math partner. Math is my hardest subject and now to make things worse, I have to have John as a math partner. Ugh. He has long, straight, dark brown hair that’s sun-bleached on at the tips. He wears baggy t-shirts and cargo pants all the time. John is the class clown, and is always making dumb jokes, like farting noises with his armpits, and blowing spit bubbles. He’s gets in trouble every ten minutes. We sit at one of the partner tables which is facing out the window, and away from the class. Mr. M. likes to keep John away from the middle of the students because he’s so squirmy and hyper. He’s always bouncing up and down, and sitting on his knees, then standing, then sitting on his okole, and then bouncing. We open our math work books to the our assignment. I get my sharpened pencils and eraser out of my pencil case. John never has any school supplies because he loses everything. You should see his book bag. John’s back pack is like a black hole sucking all kinds of garbage into it. John runs to extras bin and grabs the shortest, dullest pencil he can find. The weird thing is that, then he opens his workbook and gets started scribbling out the answers. John has his head down and all his hair falls forward and it forms like a curtain around his face. It’s like his hair blocks everything and everyone out. He’s scribbling away, knees bouncing up and down. Then his knees stop for a moment when his pencil stops, like it’s all working together, thinking, and his hair remains like a curtain around his face. Then he starts scribbling answers and bouncing knees again. I steal
a glance at his page and he’s halfway done already. I’m on my second problem. We’re
doing fractions and it’s confusing. I kind of think I get regular fractions, but we’ve already
moved on to mixed numbers, whole numbers and fractions together. Mixed numbers makes
me itchy. I mean sometimes math makes me itchy. I know. I know it’s so weird, but true,
and right now the soles of my feet are starting to get itchy and that’s the worst because I’m
wearing sneakers and I can’t even scratch them or understand this page. John lifts his face
out of his little tent of hair, and he’s done. I try not to be embarrassed that John is already
done, dancing around our table, and chanting, “zoom zoom zoom” like in the car
commercial.

“John John John.” Mr. Matsumoto steps into John’s path. “First of all, this is not a
race. Johhhhnnnn, settle down. You and Noriko are math PARTNERS, John,” Mr.
Matsumoto says. “Partners means you work together, not just next to each other. So, you
finish as a team.” John plops in his desk frowning. “What you need to do now is double
check your work for careless mistakes. While you are double checking your work, I want
you to think about how you are going to explain to Noriko, how to solve the problems.” I
am starting to get embarrassed. “Don’t give her the answers, explain to her how the
STRATEGIES you use to solve these kinds of problems.” John harrumphs. I am really,
really embarrassed now. “No math games until you both have done the work,” Mr.
Matsumoto pats John on the back. John looks at me, and then slumps in his chair.

Fractions are like Egyptian hieroglyphs to me. Numbers on the top, numbers on the
bottom, who knows what that line in the middle means? And these mixed numbers, why do
they have to mix them up? It hurts my head. It makes me itch. If we’re only supposed to do
stuff like add and subtract them when they have the same bottom number, then why do the
give us problems with different bottom numbers? The fractions are driving me coocoo bananas! Math and John together! Oh Dios Mio! Thankfully, John disappears into his hair again. I’m trying to figure out how to add $\frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{2}$ and I know this is supposed to be the easy problem. And I know they say, “think about it like quarters.” Well, quarters are 25 cents, so that doesn’t make any sense or a whole lot of cents either!

“You’re STILL on that problem!” John exclaims. “Holy cow! We’re never going to get to any math games.”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up, John,” I whisper. “I don’t know how. It’s not my fault.”

John harrumphs again.

“Aight, let’s see how can we do this.” Thinking, John looks around the classroom and taps his fingers.

“Please let this end soon,” I whisper to myself, and look at the clock, hoping that by some miracle the period is over. John jumps up, zooms over to the crayon bin and grabs a handful of crayons, and zooms back over to the desk.

“Okay,” he says looking at me and tucking his hair behind his ear. He points to the line between the numbers in one of the fractions. “Kay den, so the line in between the numbers means divide right?”

“I don’t know,” I respond truthfully.

“No, that’s not a question,” he says. “The line in the middle means divide.”

“Oh okay.”

“Kay so the number under the line tells you how many pieces you are dividing the thing into,” he says it again. “Kay, the line under the number tells you how many pieces you are dividing the thing into. So like dividing a crayon,” he says.

“So then, kay. You get ½ that means you divide the thing in two parts. Right now the thing is a crayon, but it could be a crayon or a pizza or the whole class, anything you can break a part. So then ½ a crayon looks like…” John grabs an orange crayon and breaks it in half! I can’t believe he’s just breaking crayons in half. He’s breaking valuable art supplies. This is a crime! This is a travesty! Oh wait, a second. John broke the crayon in half, in to two pieces. Into two pieces. Like the bottom number is two so break the crayon into two pieces which is break it in ½. It’s like John flipped on a math light and I can see! I can see! I can see what he means! Oh hark! Oh ode to joy!

“Kay den.” John is holding a purple crayon. “How many pieces you going break this purple crayon into for ¼.”

“Four pieces?” I ask, because maybe I don’t know, maybe I’m wrong.

“That’s right,” he says handing the crayon over to me. I feel a little guilty, because right after markers, I love crayons, but then I break the crayon in half and I feel like I understand. I try to then break the crayon piece in half again, but I can’t. The little crayon is too hard to break. John plucks the crayon out of my hand puts it on his math notebook and stabs the crayon with his tiny, dull pencil and the crayon bit breaks in half again. Then he stabs the other crayon piece in half. So now the crayon is broken into four bits. Mr. Matsumoto comes over.

“John! What are you doing now?” he says.

“Sheez, I’m helping Noriko,” he says. I look up at Mr. Matsumoto and nod my head. So, then Mr. Matsumoto doesn’t say anything. Mr. Matsumoto just stands above us
watching. John lines up the two parts orange crayon and then puts the four parts purple crayon right underneath.

“So kay den. How many pieces of the purple crayon fit the same size as the orange crayon?” John says looking at me. It seems so easy I don’t even know why he’s asking me.

“½ an orange crayon equals two pieces of the purple crayon,” I am not sure what happens now.

“Exactly,” John says. “So ½ is the same as--”

“2/4” I say.

John grabs the orange crayon pieces and stabs them with his pen. Mr. Matsumoto sighs, but doesn’t say anything. So now the orange crayon and the purple crayon are both broken into four pieces.

“Kay so…” John looks at me and lines up the crayons. “Kay move half of the orange crayon.” I move two pieces of the orange crayon.

“½ is the same as 2/4,” I repeat.

“Now we gotta do the problem ½ + ¼ yeah. So. Now, do the plus. So add ¼ of the purple crayon to the orange crayon.” I move one crayon piece next to the two oranges pieces. So how many pieces you get?”

“Three,” I say, but I don’t know for sure what’s going on.

“And how many pieces did you break the crayons into?” John asks.

“Four. So the four goes under the line.”

“Kay den,” Then John points to math problem. ½ + 2/4 = ?”

“3/4!” I almost shout. John stands up and starts chicken-walking and chanting his favorite jingle, “Zoomzoomzoom.”
“John John John,” Mr. Matsumoto says, “settle down. Sit down John.”

John sits.

“Okay Noriko,” Mr. Matsumoto explains. “So, for the other math problems remember what John said. The line tells you to divide. The number below the line is how many parts you should break the crayon or pizza or whatever into. The number below the line is called the denominator. The number below the line, or the denominator, tells you how many pieces you are working with.”

I nod. John fidgets with the crayons. Mr. Matsumoto puts his hand on John’s shoulder.

“Noriko,” now I have a question for you,” Mr. Matsumoto continues. “If John were to eat 4/8 of a pizza, how many slices is the pizza divided up into?” I think about the middle line and the number below the middle line.

“Eight!” I answer.

“Good work,” Mr. Matsumoto replies.

“That means I ate half the pizza!” John hollers.

“Good work you two,” Mr. Matsumoto says and then he looks at John. “While it wasn’t appropriate for you to be stabbing and breaking crayons into little bits John, I am impressed with your teaching skills,” Mr. Matsumoto says. John looks up, nods, and then seems kind of embarrassed. There’s a ruckus on the other side of the classroom and Mr. M. is over there in a flash. John helps me work through the rest of the math problems. Sometimes it feels like it all makes sense and then sometimes I feel confused again. We finish all of the math problems before the period ends which makes me feel a little like I won something. After math is lunch, everybody’s favorite subject.
“Okay students, it’s time for lunch. Dolphin group, and turtle group, get your lunches, and get in line. Turtles, speed it up.” Mr. Matsumoto thinks he’s being funny. He must be in a good mood today. We all scramble to get our lunches. The boys grab their electronic games. The girls take out their virtual dolls. I look to see what Mr. Matsumoto is doing. He’s busy explaining to John why it’s important that he fill out his reading log.

“Tony, I whisper. Tony,”

“Yeah,” he replies.

“You like anyone?” I ask.

He scrunches his face. “I dunno. Why?”

“Hey Tony, did you bring your football?” John asks.

“Yeah,” he tells John.

“Zoom, zoom, zoom…” John chants.

A booming teacher voice calls out. “Okay Turtles and Dolphins, you should be in line. Starfish group and shark group, get your lunches, and get in line.”

“Did you ask him?” Malia says right in front of Tony and Mr. Matsumoto!

“Shh,” I say give Malia big bug-eyes.

“Everything okay with your eyes, Noriko?” Mr. M. says.

“Uhuh,” I shake my head. What was she thinking?

At lunch we all sit at long tables, they’re like picnic tables without the picnic. Today, we have tater tots with our lunch, but ketchup is banned from the cafeteria. Some stupid fifth graders had a ketchup-fight a couple of weeks ago so now the cafeteria took away our ketchup privileges. I don’t know why we all have to suffer because of a handful of bad apples. If I had an apple, I’d throw it at those fifth graders. Do you think apples ever
get banned from the cafeteria? No I don’t thinks so. Next thing you know, we won’t be allowed to drink soda. They might as well start serving us bread and water now. I mean tater tots are kind of gross without ketchup. Ketchup should be a right, not a privilege! It’s a crime! It’s a travesty!

Suddenly, John starts chanting, “Zoom, Zoom, Zoom. Riko likes Tony. Riko likes Tony!” He stands at the table throwing tater-tots in the air and catching them with his mouth.

I want to die.

“Tony and Noriko sitting in a tree…” he calls out. He misses a tater tot and it bounces off his nose onto the table.

“Shut-up Johnny toilet!” I respond.

The whole time, Tony is just playing his game. He doesn’t even look up, and his eyes are wide unblinking, like he’s hypnotized by the game. Malia interrupts John’s chanting.

“Let’s play football,” she says. It’s totally obvious because she has never wanted to play foot ball in her life. Julie and Val look at me like, what’s going on? “Tony can we use your ball?” Malia says batting her eyes at him.

“Yup,” he replies without even looking up.

Johnny grabs the ball and runs outside. Malia runs too. A booming voice from the cafeteria kitchen yells “WALK!” So, I speed-walk outside. Everyone is ready to play two-hand touch football. Malia makes sure she’s on the opposite team from Tony. Whenever he gets the ball, she chases him around like crazy. I think Tony likes her. Tony waits for Malia to almost catch him and then runs off towards the touchdown. Every time Johnny gets the
ball he runs around Malia chanting, “zoom, zoom, zoom.” until his teammates tell him to stop fooling around. The recess bell ends the game in a tie. The teachers wait for us to line up and then lead us into our classrooms. Mr. Matsumoto has a pile of copies in his hands, so I know there’s lots of homework tonight. After school Aunty picks us up.
Chapter 4

Hospital

Malia and I are sitting in the van, and I’m rummaging through my bag, Malia is humming a song. Where are my markers? I need my markers to make Mom a picture. Just when I get my hands on my bag of markers, Aunty drives into the hospital round-about, the pick up and drop off area. Banyan trees are bursting through the black asphalt parking lot. There are potted palms and white concrete benches, large trash bin size ashtrays. Dad is sitting outside on the bench, waiting for me in front of the wide electric hospital doors, an old man is being wheeled into the hospital. The glass doors have a wave symbol etched in them; they open and close every time someone passes through. Dad is sitting on the bench smoking. I feel like I just spied on Dad. Dad is smoking, which is weird because he never smokes. The only time I ever saw him smoking was almost a whole year ago, on New Year’s Eve. Dad was puffing on a cigar with Uncle Joe. Dad explained to me that it was all-right to have a cigar because you only have cigars on special occasions, like when I was born, or like this time, because Uncle Joe got a raise. Dad said cigars were for celebrating and that cigarettes were different, and I think I know what he means now. Cigars are for celebrating, cigarettes are for sadness. If Dad’s smoking a cigarette, things must be bad. Cigarettes give you lung cancer and Mom has cancer, but she doesn’t have lung cancer. Mom has breast cancer. I don’t know what to do.

The birds are stirring up a ruckus in the branches above, and all this – the chirping birds, Malia humming, the opening and closing hospital door, I want it to stop. Shut up! All of you! – the birds sounding like joy, Malia sounding like contentment. Shut up! There
should be dark clouds. There should be rain. Rain should be forcing people to run in doors, scattering people in a panic. There should be sobbing from the sky. People should feel like they’re drowning.

I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to see Mom or Dad. Why is this happening to me? I hate this. I want to run. Oh no, I don’t want to run. Mom. In my mind, I talk to Mom, “It’s not true, Mom I do, I do want to see you. Mom I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Mom. Please hurry up and get better.” I need take care of Mom and Dad. Seeing Dad’s long frowning face, and thinking about Mom behind those doors, makes me feel like my throat is falling into my stomach.

Aunty opens the door to the van, it slides open like the hospital door. As soon as Dad sees me, he throws the cigarette to the ground, smotheres it under his shoes, and smiles. He’s smiling, but he looks tired. I put on my backpack and clutch my bag of markers. Mom said that art has healing powers. Mom said that you can make people feel better when you give them homemade gifts. I can make art for Mom, and I can make Mom get better. Armed with my markers, I step out of Aunty’s van.

“My little mango!” he says while lifting me off the ground and giving me a big hug. He smells funny, like tobacco-smoke and sadness. He puts me down, leans his head into the van and talks to Aunty for a minute. As he turns back to me, Aunty and Malia drive off.

“How was school?” he asks.

“Alright,” I say and take Dad’s hand as we walk through the sliding glass doors into the hospital. Soon as we pass through those doors, I feel enveloped in cold, air conditioner air. It’s cold, like walking through a ghost. The hairs on my arms immediately stand up with goose bumps. Hospitals are weird. Everything is metal and white and cold. The light is
strangely even, not sunny, but strangely bright. There’s a cold, non-smell, like stainless steel. The hospital is a maze of hallways, and everything looks the same. You walk through one hallway connected to another hallway, connected to another hallway. Each hallway has a waiting room, filled with people sitting and waiting. People sit in lines against walls reading magazines and books, playing electronic games, and looking at their phones. Some hallways have waiting rooms with televisions and everyone seems to be facing them. I don’t like the idea of Mom and Dad being here, waiting. Dad and me walk down the hallway towards Mom’s room.

“Your mom had the surgery this morning so she’s really, really tired,” Dad says. “Mom is going to be groggy and out of it. If she falls asleep, don’t worry. She just needs lots of rest. She’s going to be so happy to see you.”

“Dad?” and what Dad is saying, and what Malia said, and Aunty said are all a jumble in my head. It doesn’t fit together for me, like math, like fractions. “Dad?” I ask, and he looks down at me. “What surgery?”

“Well,” Dad is quiet for a minute, thinking. “Well Noriko, your mom had a mastectomy.”

“What’s a mastectomy?” I ask. Dad stops walking. He looks up, like he’s trying to remember something, and then he looks down at me again.

“Well, let me see. A mastectomy is when a doctor--”

“A surgeon?” I ask.

“Yes, a mastectomy is when a surgeon removes, um I guess takes away the tissue--”

“Tissue? Like Kleenex?” I ask.
“No not that kind of tissue, tissue like a part of the body,” Dad says. “The surgeon removes the part of the body that might have cancer.”

“Like when my cousin Russell got skin cancer removed from his shoulder?” I ask.

“Yes, kind of like that, Noriko. Except your Mom’s surgery is much, much, more invasive, much more difficult,” Dad says.

“Why?”

“Well, I guess your Mom’s kind of cancer can spread faster, so the surgeon has to remove more tissue to makes sure he gets all the cancer cells. The surgeon wants to be sure there is none left in Mom’s body, so that it won’t spread.”

“Spread?”

“Well cancer comes from cells in a person’s body.”

“Does the kind of cancer that Poopy got, come from cells too?”

“Poopy?” Dad asks.

“Dad, you know Poopy. Kuka and Paul’s dog.”

“Well I think their dog’s cancer was not the same cancer, but all cancers come from malfunctioning cells.

“Malfunctioning?”

“Umm, cancer comes from cells that don’t work right. Cells make more cells. And cancer cells can make more cancer cells. So, when the surgeon performs a mastectomy, he removes the tissue with the cancer cells, so that the cancer won’t go to other parts of the body, won’t spread. Does that make sense?” he says.

I want to say, “Yes, kind of, thanks for telling me Dad.” But I also want to say, “No Dad! It doesn’t makes sense. How can something be growing in Mom’s body? Spreading?
Does mastectomy mean they cut Mom’s thingies off? If that’s what the surgeon did, then what is going to happen to Mom without them? Can she still be a Mom? Will she still be my Mom? What’s going to happen to me?” But I can see Dad is worn. And I’m kind of worn out too, so I just say, “Okay Dad.”

“We’re almost to your Mom’s room now my little Mango,” he says like he’s trying to be cheerful. We hold hands as we walk down the hall. I’m taking care Dad. Dad needs me to hold his hand. I need to save Mom. Can I save Mom? I can help her. The room is dim, not dark like night, but dim. I crawl out of my book bag and put it on the floor at the foot of Mom’s bed. I hold onto my bag of markers, crayons, and pencils. Mom is tucked under a blanket. She is sleeping, her mouth is open. The television, mounted to the wall, is showing the zoom, zoom, zoom car commercial. It reminds me of Johnny. Dad goes up to Mom and puts his hand carefully on her arm. I want to look at Mom’s chest, and at the same time I don’t want to look. I can’t really tell anything because her blanket is pulled up to her armpits. Her arms are on top of the covers. By the side of a bed is a tall metal hook, that is almost as tall as Dad. The metal hook is holding an upside down plastic bag. There is a clear liquid in the bag, and a long tube, like a heavy duty straw poking out from the bottom of the bag and going all the way to Mom’s arm. The plastic tube is taped, above her wrist, and sticking into her arm with a needle.

“Lani,” Dad says softly into Mom’s ear. “We’re here. Noriko is here.”

Mom just sleeps. He rubs the top part of her arm, by her shoulder, so he doesn’t touch the plastic tube.

“Lani, Noriko is here,” Dad says.
I’m starting to feel sick again. What if Mom doesn’t wake up? Dad drags a chair from near the wall to the bed and lifts me on it. I’m standing over Mom. The veins in her arm are a blue-green color, and are sort of popping out. It makes me hold my breath.

“Look who’s here honey,” Dad says in a soft voice.

“Mom?” I am nervous. I shake Mom’s shoulder a little bit. I’m scared. Mom blinks, open her eyes, smiles, and holds my hand. Mom is waking up and I can breathe.

“My little mango, how was school?” she says in soft, blurry voice.

“School was okay.” Usually, I don’t want to talk about school. Usually it feels boring, and like Mom is really saying get good grades, when she’s asking, “How was school?” Except today, it feels different, like I want to tell her everything, the important stuff, and I don’t want us to think about the other stuff. “Mom it was a crazy, crazy day, you wouldn’t believe it,” I say. “Malia likes Tony, and then, so then, I asked him if he liked anyone ’cause Malia wanted me to find out. And then, and then, Johnny started making fun of me,” I explain.

“Oh, that’s just because Johnny is jealous,” Dad laughs.

“Nuhuh. He likes to torture us, that Johnny.”

Mom smiles and nods her head in agreement with Dad.

“And Tony,” I sigh. “Tony doesn’t say anything. He just has his nose in his Game Boy the whole time.”

“He’s probably just shy,” Mom says. “Sometimes girls mature faster than boys.”

I grab Mom’s hand, the one without the needle in it.

“I told Malia she should give Kris Kringle cards to Tony.”

“Great idea,” Dad says.
“Remember, how you told me that homemade gifts are the best gifts, so that’s why I told Malia she should make cards and stuff for Tony.”

“Yes,” is all Mom says.

Her eyes are closing slowly. I want so badly to keep Mom awake. I want to talk to her. I want Mom to look at me. I’m looking around the dimly lit room, trying to think of something exciting to tell Mom. I don’t want her to just fall asleep like that. I haven’t seen her since yesterday and tonight I’m going back to Malia’s house. I’m desperate for good news to tell Mom, but I didn’t get any grades back in school today. That zoom zoom zoom commercial comes on again, that’s when I tell her my great idea.

“So Mom, Mom, Mom…”

She opens her eyes.

“I’m going to make Kris Kringle cards for you too!”

“That would be nice,” she mumbles.

“Well not exactly Kris Kringle cards,” I explain. I’m going to make Get Well cards for you.”

“I don’t want Get Well cards,” Mom says, “but cards would be nice.”

“Yeah, that’s what I meant Mom, I’m going to make like Kris Kringle cards for you. Guess what Mom? I’m going to save the best card for last, for when, for when, to make you all better. Okay Mom? Okay?”

Mom scoots up in her bed and smiles brightly. She’s waking up. Making drawings for Mom will help. Mom has one of the white with little blue snowflakes hospital gowns on.
“That sounds great Noriko, I love that idea. I can’t wait to see what the cards will look like,” and she leans forward and gives me a kiss on the forehead. And now I can kind of see her chest behind the hospital gown, and it doesn’t look like it used to. It’s flat, but seems like it has ace bandages and tape all around it.

“Mom? What was your surgery like?”

“Well they gave me anesthesia, to make me sleep really deeply, and when I woke up my boobies were gone.”

“Mom! Did you know first?”

“Of course sweetie.”

“Is that what a mastectomy is?”

“Yes, mastectomy is the big doctor word for taking away my boobies,” Mom says.

“How do you know that word?”

“Dad told me,” I say.

Mom looks at Dad and smiles, but Dad isn’t smiling.

“Good job, Kam,” Mom says. Dad looks worried. I’m shocked Mom doesn’t seem worried about losing them, at all.

“Are you going to be okay without them?” I ask.

“Oh yes. At first I was sad and worried about losing them, but it’s the best option, and at this point in my life they are just decorative.”

“Decorative?”

“Just for looks,” Mom says.

“You’re going to be okay without them?”

“Yes they were getting droopy anyway.”
“Droopy?”

“Oh, don’t worry about them,” she says. “The important thing is that I beat breast cancer. The doctors say that for now, this is the best way for me to fight my cancer. I’m going to take time to heal up and get better.”

“Yes,” Dad adds. “We’re a team and we’re going to help Mom get better.”

“What is this, a baseball game?” Mom says.

“I’m going to help, Mom I promise,” I say. Mom’s eyes are getting droopy. She’s falling asleep, I think. Mom needs to rest, and I’m going to help Mom get better, and not just by getting good grades. Mom said that art is like magic. She said that gifts of art are an especially good magic. So I’m going to make Mom cards with my drawings on them. Mom eyes are fluttering like she’s going to be asleep in a second. Mom will look forward to the cards I make her. The drawings I make will help Mom. This is what I want to believe, but if that’s true, why are we here in a hospital, with doctors taking care of her? There isn’t hardly any art anywhere. I wonder if doctors believe in art. Mom’s mouth is falling open. I hope it works.

“Looks like she’s falling asleep,” Dad says.

“But she just woke up,” I whisper.

“Well, she needs lots of rest after her surgery.”

“But I didn’t even tell her about learning fractions yet.”

“You can tell me, and I’ll tell Mom,” Dad says.

“No. I want to tell Mom myself.”

“Okay Noriko, you can tell her tomorrow, but let’s let Mom rest for now.”

“Tomorrow?”
“Yes it’s time for us to go. Let Mom rest.”

I give Mom a kiss, Dad lifts me off the bed, and plops me on the floor. He tells Mom that he’ll be right back, then scribbles a note for her and leaves it on the bedside table. Dad grabs my book bag and my hand. I grab my art bag, and we leave Mom’s room. We wind our way through the maze of hallways, passed the waiting rooms, and to the sliding glass doors. As soon as the doors open, I can feel the sun-warmed air. I hate to leave Mom behind in that alien spaceship hospital.
Chapter 5

Aunty Talks Story

Dad and me walk into Malia’s house. She’s sitting at the kitchen table doing homework. Aunty is reaching up watering the plants hanging from the ceiling. It’s like everything is normal, like my world isn’t falling apart. Malia jumps up.

“Finally! You’re here! Mom said that we could play in the backyard late today.”

“No. I said you could practice your times tables in the tree house,” Aunty replies.

“That’s what I meant, I’ll go get our index cards,” Malia runs off to her room.

Aunty looks at Dad.

“How is Lani?” she asks.

Dad plunks down in a chair and Aunty does too. Dad stares down at the table and rubs his thumb.

“The doctors said the surgery went well,” he says. “Now it’s a wait, watch, and see game, before we decide what the next step is.” Dad sighs. “I think that’s going to be the hardest. The waiting and reacting, then waiting and reacting.”

“I got them!” Malia hollers from down the hall. “Let’s go!”

Aunty looks at me and nods. Dad keeps staring down at his hands, like he was just holding something, but now he’s lost it. I get up.

“And how are you doing?” Aunty asks Dad.

“I don’t know—”

She nods at me again, “Go ahead,” she says to me. Dad looks up, but not at me really. He’s just looking up. I walk out of the kitchen, but I pause outside of the doorway. I
know Aunty is telling us to go the Terabithia tree house so she and Dad can have an ‘adult’ conversation. I pause to listen.

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t feel like I am doing anything to stop this, to beat it. I feel like I’m just standing next to Lani. Standing next to Lani in different offices, standing next to Lani talking to different doctors. I want to DO something. Fix it.”

“Kam being supportive, being there, is the most difficult and important job—”

“Riko!!” Malia hollers and busts my cover. I dash.

Malia is already climbing the ladder to the tree house. I close the screen door behind me, sprint and scramble up the ladder. As my head peers up into the our tree house, I see Malia digging through the bins.

“Eh Riko,” she says, “I’m getting the binoculars, so we can look out for Mongo.”

“Mongo?”

“Hello…Mongo the mongoose.”

“And get the guns,” I say climbing in.

Malia pulls out the binoculars and then the water guns. The water guns are small pistol size clear plastic orange and red guns, with water stoppers at the bottom of the handle. Uncle Joe says that they take more skill the big super soakers. I think he was just saying that because he doesn’t want us attacking him with super soakers. As long as these pistols can keep Mongo away, that’s the main thing.

“They’re empty,” Malia says. “I’ll be right back,” and she scrambles down.

I put the binoculars up to my eyes. “I’ll keep a look out for Mongo!”

Malia runs towards the side of the house where the green hose is coiled up like a plastic toy store snake. I look out across the yard and into the valley. No sign of any
mongoose or wild boar. It’s just the birds chattering in the late afternoon, readying
themselves for dusk. I put the binoculars up to my eyes, and at first it’s just a black circle
filled with blurry bits of tree-bark-grey and shimmering shaking green. Adjusting the knob,
the spindly halekoa trees become clear. I scan the trees and finches, java sparrows, and
Japanese White-eyes dart in and out of my circle of vision. With the binoculars, every tiny
feather is clear, I can see the birds shake themselves off, and preen their wings. It feels like
I could just reach out my finger and they could hop right on. Then I scope farther, towards
the other ridge and I wonder if there is someone else looking this way. I wish someone was
looking this way, wish someone could send me smoke signals to tell me about an ancient
cure, a boiling soup of bark, seeds, shark, and seaweed.

I scan the black binocular circle down the hill towards Kaimuki, then Waikiki, and
then Ala Moana. I scan over all of the houses and all of the buildings. There are so, so
many people, but I feel like I’m the only one, like it’s just me here, by myself, alone. I
know I am with Aunty Jackie, Uncle Joe, and Malia, and even Dad’s here but, still I feel by
myself. Then I scan by downtown and the scope lands a big sprawling building, a building
with lots of buildings. I get a shiver, a tingle up my spine. It’s Mom’s hospital. I think it’s
Mom’s hospital. Suddenly, I think. Mom’s alone too. Mom’s alone with the nurses, the
doctors, and the cold steel tables. I don’t want to be alone, and I don’t want Mom to be by
herself. Mom needs to know that she’s not by herself. I am not by myself. I’ll be there with
her, like Dad is there with her. Dad should get back. I should go with him. We should be
there together.

I scramble down the tree house. Malia’s standing in the yard, about to come up.

“What’re you doing?” she says pointing the plastic water pistols towards the air.
“I got to talk to Dad, we can’t leave Mom alone there in the hospital.”

Malia’s hands fall to her side and the pistols point toward the ground.

I run into the kitchen and Aunty is folding uniforms, Malia’s school uniforms and Uncle Joe’s work uniforms.

“Where’s Dad?”

“Your father went back to the hospital.”

I can catch him. I run out the front door where the car would be, but he’s gone. My legs fall from under me. I just collapse there in the driveway. Dad just left me alone. It’s just me and this black, sinking feeling, like I’m drowning in dark, thick, mud. Sitting in front of the garage, I hide my face in my hands and sob. I feel my face getting red, hot, and splotchy by my eyes from the crying. Tears are dripping down my nose, down the side of my face too. My nose is running with the crying. I breathe in big gasps, big gulps of air. I’m alone here. Mom and Dad are leaving me alone, by myself. My mouth tastes salty from the crying. My face and hands are wet. My hands hold my head up. I swallow big gulps of air, but I still feel like I can’t breathe. I feel like a fish taking in giants gasps of air but still not able to breathe. It’s all the wrong air.

Then I feel a hand on my shoulder. Malia is squats next to me and makes little soothing circles on my back.

“Riko, what can I do to make you feel better?” she says.

“Nothing.” I peak out from behind my hands. I turn my head and see Aunty peering through the screen door. The sinking feeling subsides, it doesn’t go away, but it gets quieter. I still feel a whisper of the sinking feeling, but it’s no longer a roar.

“Girls, why don’t you come inside and help me set the table for dinner.”
Malia and I stand up, while Aunty waits in the doorway. As we walk in, we stand on both sides of Aunty as she wraps us in her arms and gives each of us a peck on the tops of our heads.

“Noriko,” Aunty says, “your Dad is just tired and preoccupied right now, don’t be too upset if he’s forgetful sometimes. You know he loves you. He didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Remember that time,” Malia says, “when my Dad forgot to pick us up from Julie’s house. Sometimes Dad’s are spacey yeah?”

“Yeah.”

We set the table, and the three of us eat dinner. The pan remains covered and the rice cooker stays on until Uncle Joe comes home. After dinner we’re allowed to turn on the television. We decide that we’re going to make cards while we watch T.V. Malia is going to make a Kris Kringle card for Tony and I’m going to make a card for Mom. I grab my bag of art supplies. Malia dashes to her room and grabs her markers. All of her markers have her name on them. They’re really nice Crayola markers. She has all of the special colors like sky blue and mint green and skin-color. Still it’s not the same as my art bag with my mix of art supplies: markers, crayons, and colored pencils. My bag of art supplies is blend new sharp clean pencils and stubby flat little crayons, moist and drying markers all together. I keep the drying markers too because I like the texture they make. While we’re making our cards, we watch the T.V. show Sunnydale High. We like Seth, the boy with the dark hair, because he’s so funny.

“Don’t you think Ryan kind of has Asian eyes? I mean he’s definitely haole. But he gets Asian eyes, yeah?” Malia says. She draws and outline of a Christmas tree.
“Yeah his eyes are pretty, like *hapa haole kine.*”

The television is on but I’m not really watching the show tonight, I’m thinking about what I can draw for Mom. What will make her happy? Then I know. I’ll draw different kinds of flowers. I’m good at drawing *plumerias.* So I decide I’m going to draw Mom a *plumeria lei* to frame the picture. The way I draw plumerias I don’t just draw the outline of the petals. White plumerias aren’t all white. In the center, there are all kinds of greens, yellows, and browns. Even the white petals are different shades of white with freckles and wrinkles. I use just a little bit of dark green and brown pencil and light lime green crayon and yellow marker to make the yellow really pop out. As I draw each flower I think about how this will help Mom get better. I make each flower in the lei frame a little different. The more details I draw, the freckles and lines in each flower, the more attention I give my drawing the stronger it will make Mom. She’ll know I’m not just doodling something for her. I’m giving the drawing care and attention, I’m offering Mom care and attention through my art. I hope this works.

In the center of my picture, I add a flamboyant, bright red *hibiscus* I use three different reds from my bag to make the flower. Near the center, I use pen and pencil to make the dark almost blood red colors that shoot from the center almost like a star points. I use two different red crayons to fill in the petals. I make its powdery, bright yellow *style* practically reach off the page. Mom will like that. When I feel like I’m done, I move the drawing just out of reach, I stop and stare at it. It doesn’t feel right there’s something missing, but I don’t what it is.

Malia is almost done with the card she’s making for Tony. Malia’s card has a big Christmas tree with lights, ornaments, and a star on top. Under the tree are tons of presents
wrapped in white paper with tiny red hearts and red bows. At the top its says, ‘For Tony’

While I am staring at Malia’s nice script, it comes to me. I know what I need to add to the picture. Behind the red hibiscus, I need to add a bright yellow sun with sunrays. A yellow sun behind the red flowers will make the red stand out more and won’t make the hibiscus feel like its just floating in space. Plus, the yellow sun will complement the yellow in the hibiscus and plumerias. When I finish the sun, I stare at my drawing, and if feels complete. It feel finished. Those bright flowers will make Mom feel better. My drawing will help. I hope.

At 8:00pm we get ready for bed. We brush our teeth, and our hair. We get in our pajamas and Aunty comes to tuck us in. She sits on the edge of the bed.

“Do you want me to read you girls a story?” Aunty says.

“Momm! We’re too old for that,” Malia says.

“Tell me a story about when you and Mom were young,” I say.

“Young! We still young!” Aunty says. “But das one good idea.”

Sometimes Aunty talks haole, she speaks like a white person from the mainland. Sometimes when Aunty is about to talk story or when she’s playing cards and stuff, she talks local or island style.

“Hmm, when we was young. Way back, can hardly remember dos olden times yeah? Before T.V. and cars!”

“Nuhuh!” I respond.

“Just playin’ wit you,” Aunty says. Lemme tink, I know. You girls know how your Mom and me came bes’ friends? We ‘came friends ‘cause we bot’ liked da same boy. We
both liked Kam. He was da cutest boy at Kaneohe High,” Aunty says. Also ‘cause your Mom tried teach me surfing and cause The Electric Slide.”

I want to stay awake. I never saw Mom surf! But my eyes feel heavy.

Aunty continues, “Me and my friends wen’ to da beach for hang out and watch da boys surf. But den your mom wen’ surfing too. And dat used to make me mad ‘cause I tought Kam going like her. ‘Cause way back den she was like da only girl on the island went surfing.”

I drift off to sleep while Aunty tells us the story. In my sleep, in my dreams, I’m surfing. I’m on my stomach paddling with my arms past the breaks. Me and the surfboard rise and fall over the waves smooth and easy. Then far from shore, I lay on my board waiting for the right wave. There are other waiting surfers scattered around me. The right wave rises, and I start paddling my arms to catch it at the crest. Then I feel the wave pick us up and push us forward. I feel my surfboard catching the crest of the wave. I’m getting on top and a little bit in front of the wave. I’m riding the wave, so I get ready to stand by crouching on my board. I’m a little wobbly, and I know my arms are out too much, but I’m doing it! I’m surfing! I’m nervous and thrilled! I’m easing into the ride, relaxing my body and arms. I’m centered on the board, no longer wobbling. I look to my left to make sure I’m not going to run into any surfers and I see Tony standing on his surfboard. My hands start propelling backwards in the air; then I catch my balance. I’m surfing towards Tony and I’m trying to lean into the board, shift my weight away from him. Tony sees me surfing towards him. Suddenly, I get the woa woa woa feeling, and SPLASH. I fall off and wake up. Malia is kicking me in her sleep. I sort of nudge her to her side of the bed and drift back to sleep.
Chapter 6

Rotten Eggs and Other Cells

BUZZ BOOM RING Ow! I’m on the floor looking up at Malia who is laughing from the bed.

“You have a hard time waking up huh?” Malia says.


“Come on, you sleep really heavy, like a bear,” she says smiling.

I jump up, yank her braid and run to the bathroom first.

When Malia and me get to school, Val is waiting for us in the parking lot. She looks like she wants to cry and punch people. We get out of the car. Val is pacing back and forth and her black ponytail is swinging. Aunty pokes her head out of the car.

“Everything okay Val?”

Val nods. Aunty drives off. We run on either side of Val.

“Val, what happened? You mad?” Val turns her head, looks at me, and gives stink eye.

“What’d I do?” I throw up my palms.

“Not you Riko, Those lolo Meg Heads, make me mad.” She wraps her ponytail into a bun and sticks a pencil through it,” that’s a sign. Val is ready to fight. “I want to broke their heads already, that’s why.”

“Why? Why? What happened?” We head towards our spot. There we all freeze in our tracks. They egged our table. It’s covered in egg slime and eggshells. Egg corpses are cracked and lying across our tables and benches. They must have done it yesterday after
school because the egg goop looks like it’s cooked right onto our table. On the ground by
the side of the table is an empty cardboard egg carton.

“Well,” I sigh, “Humpty Dumpty sat on a bench, Humpty Dumpty wish he had just
climbed the fence.”

“It looks like someone wrote something on the table.” Slowly, cautiously, we
approach the table. Just then, Lori yells, “Hey Sistahs!” The three of us nearly jump out of
our skins.

“Lori! You scared us!”

“Why you acting so funny kine?” she says running up to us. Then she sees the egg
splattered table. She stops in her tracks too. As we approach the table we see written in
black Sharpie marker You stink like rotten eggs.

“Those fifth graders are so lame!”

“Oh that’s so smart yeah?” Malia rolls her eyes. “Stink like rotten eggs! Please!
Couldn’t they come up with something better than that?”

“Yeah,” Val chimes in. “Could be something like kimchi. Now that stuff stinks, but
tastes good. Or like…”

“Riko’s toe jam.”

“Ehh.”

“Kidding yeah.”

“Stupid Meg. She’s one…”
“Ehh! Where we going to sit?” I ask. “I mean this is OUR spot. We can’t move now. All the good spots are taken, plus this is OUR spot. I don’t want to go somewhere else again!”

“Calm down Riko, it’s just a bench,” Val says.

“Calm down? What you mean calm down? It’s bad enough that I got to run to the bathroom.” That’s when I remember Christy sniffing her armpits. Then I think maybe it wasn’t Meg’s idea, maybe it was Christy’s idea.

“I say, we go take the fifth graders table right now,” Lori says.

“What are you crazy?” Malia asks. “You want to start a war with the fifth graders?”

“Maybe I DO, want to start a war with the fifth graders,” Lori responds. “They think they’re so tough.”

“Ehh,” Val starts. “Maybe we can ask your brother to come after school.”

Lori starts nodding her head.

“Yeah Vive le Humpty Dumpty! Humpty Dumpty’s revenge is ours! Let’s get them right now.”

“Yeah Vive Le Humpty Dumpty!” Val and Lori chant.

“I have Sharpies in my art bag!” I open my bag and start rifling though. Where is it? What is the meanest thing we can write on their table? “Here they are!” I hold up my Sharpies.

“Have you people lost your minds?” Malia says.

Just then the door to our class opens, and Mr. Matsumoto looks at us with cranky face. “Young ladies,” he says scolding. “Please come inside until the school bell rings.”

“But Mr. M!” we protest.
“I have work to do, so I will be brief. I called maintenance this morning and they
will clean it up as best they can,” he says.

“But Mr. M! We didn’t do it!”

“I don’t think you vandalized your own table,” Mr. Matsumoto sighs. “Now I don’t
want to hear any accusations right now. If you have some sort of evidence like a smoking
gun or a black sharpie marker to prove who done it -- that would be useful.” Mr.
Matsumoto looks at me and my Sharpie markers. “Vandalizing is a serious crime, so we
don’t want to just make accusations without evidence.”

“But we know who did it!”

“Are you sure?” he says.

“Well, not exactly but we know which group of fifth graders did it.”

“I am afraid that’s not good enough. Listen. The principal knows about it, and there
will be an investigation. The principal may ask you questions about what you think
happened.

“But it’s not fair!”

“No not exactly, but I don’t want you girls getting caught up in trouble over some
eggs. Okay?”

“Yes, Mr. Matsumoto,” everyone whines.

“Alright, so why don’t you all relax in the classroom this morning.”

Malia, Val, and Lori go to the games-shelf to grab Boggle. We all sit around the
project table. I draw a picture of us at our table while they play Boggle. Soon enough the
school bell rings, students are lining up outside of the class, waiting for the okay to enter.
Like a sergeant in an aloha shirt waiting for his troops to fall in, Mr. M. stands in the
doorway. He gives a nod and students fill the classroom with noise and motion, unpacking their bags, organizing and finding their homework, and sharpening pencils. We’re packing up our games and art supplies. When Tony walks by, Malia takes her Kris Kringle card out of her folder.

“When he’s not looking, put it in Tony’s desk, okay?” Malia whispers loudly.

“You put the card in Tony’s desk,” I say.

“What?” Tony says.

“Nothing,” Malia responds as she slips the card into my folder, and grins like a circus clown. If I get caught, I might lose recess or even get in worse trouble. Malia unpacks her bag and homework. On purpose, John falls onto the floor right in front of Malia, and she almost trips over him.

“You’re so stupid!” Malia yells.

“Malia,” Mr. Matsumoto says, “We don’t use that kind of language in the classroom.”

“But, Mr. Matsumoto--” Malia says.

“No excuses! Unpack your bag, get ready for school.” Then Mr. Matsumoto turns his attention to John. “John, that’s not how we get ready for our day. Please leave the classroom and walk back in like a student ready to learn.”

Tony snickers at John. While everyone is looking at John, I slip the card into Tony’s desk. I feel pretty sneaky and cool. Then I remember my surfing dream and I feel a little embarrassed. When we’re at the closets, putting away our bags I whisper to Tony.

“Tony, Tony, Tony, you like surfing?”

“Nah, I like skating,” he says.
“Like roller-blading?” I say.

“Skate boarding, duh,” he says smiling and walking to his desk.

As I walk towards my desk, Malia intercepts me. “Did you put it in his desk?” she says.

“Malia you can’t keep a secret!” I whisper.

“I know,” she says giggling, covering her mouth with her head, and looking at Tony.

“Okay students!” Mr. Matsumoto booms, “Be in your seats by the count of five!”

Mr. Matsumoto counts down from five. Except for John, who is still hanging up his bag, we’re all seated quietly.

“John, the whole class is waiting,” Mr. Matsumoto frowns.

In class, we practice our cursive and times tables before science period. Sometimes I think about my surfing dream with Tony. Sometimes I think about Mom. Sometimes I think about what Mr. Matsumoto is teaching.

“Class quiet please,” Mr. Matsumoto announces. “I need your eyes on me…I’m waiting…Okay take out your science lab books.” Mr. M. waits a moment for the class to be ready. “As you all know, science this year is all about systems, we just finished weather and water systems, later in the year we will study some eco-systems and eventually a really big system – the solar system.” Mr. M. walks around the classroom. “Right now we are beginning our study of the microscopic cell system which will lead to organ systems of the human body.” Some students in the class snicker. Our focus will be the digestive system and the lung system.” The class moans. “You’re going to love it! We are going to start off learning about plant and animal cells then eventually get a better understanding of how our
body works.” John makes a fart noise. “John please take an extra homework sheet from the bin and not one you’ve done before.” John sighs, grabs an extra homework sheet, and returns to his seat.

“Stupid,” Tony whispers at John.

“May I continue?” Mr. Matsumoto asks rhetorically. “In order to understand plant and animal systems we must first learn about the building blocks of life – cells. There are many kinds of cells, but we are just going to examine two categories of cells – plant cells and animal cells.”

“Mr. Matsumoto?” I raise my hand.

“Yes Noriko,” he says.

“Are we going to learn about human cells?” Some kids in the class laugh.

“Good question Noriko,” he says. “Although we often don’t think of ourselves as animals, we are. So when we are studying animal cells we will be studying the kinds of cells that are in our bodies.”

Mom’s breast cancer is about cells. Mom’s mastectomy was to stop the cancer from spreading. Dad said the cells weren’t working right in her body. I don’t really understand. I picture cancer cells like sand fleas.

“So class,” Mr. Matsumoto continues. “We will learn the parts of the cell, and the differences between plant cells and animal cells. We will learn how cells reproduce.” Heads fall on their desk in agony. “Just you see. You’re going to love it! There are going to be lots of hands-on activities with making a cell and plants and just maybe, if you behave responsibly we will take the microscopes out early this year and you can look at a cell through a microscope! What do you think of that?” Some heads look up from their desks.
“That’s what I thought. You’re not doing kids stuff anymore!” Mr. Matsumoto goes to write some page numbers on the board. Then he stops.

“Now here is some food for thought. Every single one of us starts from just ONE cell. Your birth parents make a cell and that one cell starts you. You started as one cell. Think on that!” Mr. Matsumoto exclaims. He turns around and writes page numbers on the board.

We look at a diagram of a plant cell and an animal cell. (Insert diagram) Plant cells have cell walls, *chloroplasts* that hold plant greenness, and a large *vacuole*. Plant cells are rectangular because they have a cell wall, while animal cells are round. Plus animal cells have lots of little vacuoles and a centriole.

We usually have some kind of game going, like dodge ball or kick ball or sometimes two-hand touch football. The boys are always team captains. They run to the gym teacher and grab all the good equipment first, then all that’s left are jump ropes and hula hoops.

“Okay, me and Johnny are picking teams,” Tony says.

“I’m tired of you always picking the teams! Why don’t we get to pick the teams?”

“Cause we got the ball, that’s why,” John says dancing around. I feel hot in my face, and I run right up to Johnny and smack that red rubber ball out of his hands. The ball bounces and rolls and Julie scoops up the ball like a football player picking up a fumble. John barrels towards Julie who throws the ball to Malia, and it flies over John’s head and bounces off her forehead. She stands there wide-eyed and stunned. Johnny quick picks up the ball and then falls on the ground laugh, laugh, laughing. Malia has a red imprint on her
forehead from the rubber ball. Malia face changes from stunned to mad. Then Julie starts cracking up, and then Val. A slight Mona Lisa grin spreads across her face, and then it blows up into a full blown giggling smile. John gets up off the ground and walks over to Malia with the ball outstretched like a gift.

“You want to pick teams?” he says. “Here you go—” Malia reaches out to take the ball.

“Not!” Johnny says and pulls the ball away.

“We don’t want to pick teams for your stupid games anyways!” Malia says.

“John,” Tony interjects, “Stop fooling around let’s get started already.” John and Tony walk towards each other. “Next time why don’t we let the girls pick the teams, that’s more fair.” John nods. They junk and a po, some people call it rock, paper, scissors. Whoever wins three fingers gets to picks first for their team. John wins. John and Tony pick the boys first, and then they pick the girls.

“I get Malia,” John says.

“I get Noriko,” Tony says.

“I got Val,” John says.

“Kay Julie, you’re on my team,” Tony says.

“No heads,” Malia calls out rubbing her forehead.

“Sorry yeah,” Julie says to Malia.

“Nah, no worry, beef curry, Malia says.

“Circle dodge, Tony’s team in the middle!” John announces and everyone makes a big circle around our team. There are three balls for this game. Everyone tries to get Tony out first by everyone aiming the ball at him. John’s team is throwing really fast to wear him
out. Malia throws the ball at Tony and he catches it, so now Malia has to join our team in the middle. Wherever Tony goes, she stands behind him, like he’s her bodyguard. Malia is acting silly.

“Malia, you’re going to get out if you stand next to Tony,” I shout.

“No I’m, not,” she yells back. The ball is thrown at Tony. He dodges it. And then smack! The red ball hits Malia on the leg.

“All this is your fault!” she points at me.

“Nuhuh,” I told you to stay away from Tony,” I call back.

She stomps back to the outside circle. She gets the ball and aims for me, but I dodge the ball. She stomps her foot and crosses her arms. It’s not my fault she can’t play that well. I was only trying to help. Malia is being such a brat. Then John’s team starts to win. They get everyone out except for Tony and me. Malia throws the ball at Tony and he catches it again. Now it’s Tony, Malia, and me in the circle. I think this is what Mr. M. must have meant in English class by metaphor.

“Don’t stand behind Tony this time.”

“Oh shut it,” she says.

“Let’s go for Noriko!” John calls out. So everyone aims for me. I dodge the ball once. I dodge the red rubber ball twice, three times. I’m on a roll, unstoppable! four times, five times, six! Val beams the ball at me, I bend low to catch it but the ball bounces off my arm. I’m out and my arm stings.

“Noriko, you’re out!” John calls.
“Nuh duh, Johnny!” I run to the outside of the circle. At least I’m not acting like a bratty baby. John starts chanting at Tony and Malia, who are the only people left in the circle.

“K-I-S-S-I-N-G, Tony and Malia, sittin’ under a mango tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G, Tony and Malia sittin’ under a mango tree. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes—”

“Johnny in the baby carriage!”

“Ha! Very funny Riko,” John fakes like he’s going to throw the ball, but doesn’t.

“Come on already throw the ball!” Julie shouts and John whips it at Tony, but misses.

Tony and Malia dodge the ball a bunch of times, Malia is giggling and running behind Tony like a bright feathered chicken. Then I get the ball. For a second, I hold the ball and wonder. Should aim for Malia’s head? No, she’s my best friend, but she’s being so dumb, maybe it’ll snap her out of it. I pull my arm back, ready to aim. No, Tony is the better player anyway. Then I hear the other players yelling, “C’mon! C’mon! Get him Noriko!” Aiming for Malia, I pull my arm back getting ready to throw the ball and just as I’m about to beam the ball at her, the recess bell rings, and John snatches it. Recess is over.
Chapter 7
Trouble Is My Name

After school, I’m surprised because Dad’s here. I thought Aunty was picking us up. I run to Dad and he scoops me into his arms.

“Dad! You’re here! You’re here!”

“I missed you,” Dad gives me a good squeeze and kisses me on the forehead. “You want to go see your mother?”

“Yeah, yeah, I made Mom a card, you wanna see it?” I pull it out of my book bag and show him. Dad grins wide and thinks it’s great.

“Your mother is going to love this,” he says and then seems to be looking around the school building like he’s lost, so I take his hand.

“I know Dad, cause a good homemade card is like magic,” I explain, because Dad doesn’t know about stuff like that. “Art is like magic Dad. And I’m going to make Mom all better ’cause of all the love and care I put into my drawings will go into her from the pictures. And I’m going to tell Mom that I’m saving the best drawing for last, for when she’s all better, and that’s going to make Mom want to get better even faster. She’s going to want my best drawing that I’m saving for last, and it’s kind of like healing magic.”

Dad’s eyes get a little wet, and that makes me scared. I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do. I hope I’m right about the magic. Dad looks down at me.

“Before we go see your mother, I want to talk to Mr. Matsumoto. Will you show me where your class is?” Dad says.
“How come?” I ask. What could I be getting in trouble for? Am I going to get in trouble for something at recess?

“I just want to talk to your teacher for a minute.”

Maybe I’m in trouble for the Kris Kringle card. Mr. Matsumoto is real strict. He must have seen it. He says he has eyes on the back of his head. Maybe he wasn’t joking. I lead Dad to the class, and he knocks on the door. “Mr. Matsumoto may I come in?” Dad asks.

Mr. Matsumoto is sitting at his desk and he looks up a little surprised.

“Of course, come in, come in,” he says.

“Noriko wait here for a minute,” Dad says smiling, but it’s not a real smile.

I sit outside, thinking about what I’m going to tell them. Sheez, I mean Malia told me to put the card in Tony’s desk. I didn’t even draw it. But I know what Dad would say. Dad would say, ‘if Malia told you to jump off a bridge, would you do it?’ But it’s not really my fault. Even if she’s kind of annoying me right now, I am sleeping over, I have to help her win Tony. Plus Malia is my best friend. Tony’s cute, but he doesn’t even surf.

Mr. Matsumoto and Dad came out of the classroom. I get a big lump in my throat wondering what kind of trouble I’m going to get into. Mr. Matsumoto pats me on the shoulder. He bends down towards me so that we’re face to face. “Noriko, your Dad just told me you’re staying at Malia’s house right now, and that your Mom is sick. It’s really great that you have such a good friend like Malia, but sometimes it’s hard to be away from home. Sometimes things can feel overwhelming. So, Noriko, if you ever need a break, you can take one. We’ll have a secret code. The code will be that you raise your hand twice like this, and I know that means that you need to take a little walk. Okay?”
“Okay.”

“And Noriko, if you ever need to talk to someone, we can always talk during lunch or if you want, you can always speak with the nurse. She’s a very good listener. Okay?”

“Uhuh.” I wonder why Mr. M. thinks I wouldn’t want to have lunch with my friends?

Then he gives me a really nice friendly smile, not his usual teacher face. I’m kind of confused. Why are they making a big deal about it? I’ve had sleepovers before. My Dad and Mr. Matsumoto shake hands and we go back to the car. Then it comes to my head. Mr. Matsumoto isn’t making a big deal about me staying at Malia’s house. He’s making a big deal about Mom being sick. If Mr. M. is letting me take breaks and go for walks then this Mom’s cancer must be so serious. My cards have to be really beautiful with lots of care and color on them, so that they have strong magic. At least I’m not in trouble. It would be terrible if I had to see Mom in the hospital after getting in trouble. I want to be extra good while she’s sick. Maybe they wouldn’t take me back, Mom and Dad. Maybe they would leave me at Malia’s forever. I think then I would have to run away.

I take Dad’s hand while we walk down the air-conditioned hallways of the hospital. Dad doesn’t like hospitals either. The air conditioning is too cold, and gives me goose bumps again. The air feels like an alien spaceship. It doesn’t feel human. It’s like the air conditioning sucks up smells and only leaves a metal un-smell behind. The colors are dull. Every color looks like its grey, even the yellow, orange, and blue colors look grey. The sounds all sound like you’re hearing them through a tube, like talking through a paper towel
roll. Even the television sounds coming from the waiting room sound hollow and spacey, like they’re coming from far away planet.

Mom’s room is little different though because Mom is here. There are yellow and orange flowers bursting bright, and without even a touch of grey. Next to a plastic water pitcher, on Mom’s bedside table, is a *pikake lei*. The flower lei sweetens up the room making it smell like citrus and honey. Mom is napping with an open magazine on her lap. I climb up on the bed, next to Mom, while Dad rubs her shoulder and kisses her on the cheek.

“Sweetheart, we’re here,” he says. Dad doesn’t usually say mushy stuff like that. I’m holding my plumeria, hibiscus, and sun drawing. I’m holding it right in front of Mom, so when she opens her eyes flowers will be the first thing she sees. Mom’s eyes flutter. For a second she seems a little stunned, but then she smiles.

“Look Mom! I made you a drawing with a *lei* on it.” Then I whisper, “I’m putting alotta lotta magic in them. I’m saving the best drawing for last, for when you’re all better.”

“It’s the best *lei*, I’ve ever had,” Mom says.

Then Mom and Dad start laughing and laughing until tears are coming out of their eyes. I know it’s working. I hope it’s working.

“Put it up on that wall, so I can always see it,” Mom says scooting higher in the bed. Dad tapes my picture to the wall. Mom touches her hair, and frowns. She stares blankly at Dad fiddling with the tape and the picture. Then Mom’s dark eyes brighten.

“Lay down on my lap so I can play with your hair,” Mom says. I lay down and look up at Mom, she’s upside down from where I see her. She winds a strand of my hair around her finger. “You have my hair,” she says. “It took me so long to like my wavy, messy,
unruly hair, but I love it now, because when I look at it in the mirror, it reminds me of tutu, and her mother too. I am so glad that you have our hair Noriko.”

“I don’t why you make such a big deal about hair, right Noriko?” Dad says.

“I bet if you were going bald like Uncle Joe, then you would care. Right Mom?”

“Well, I would still love your father even if he didn’t have his Japanese-Elvis hair. In fact, I’ve been trying to get your father to get rid of that curl for ages.”

“Ha! My Elvis curl is what makes me cool, right Noriko? Slap me some five,” Dad says.

Mom and me both roll our eyes at that, and I slap Dad five.

“Dad, you’re the coolest.”

“Enough about hair, let’s cross that bridge when we get to it, okay?” Mom says.

Sometimes Mom and Dad speak in riddles. I don’t know what bridges have to do with hair. I sit up because Mom is starting to look too weird from the upside down position. I sit cross-legged facing Mom. She starts to fiddle with the lei, and then she picks it up and holds it under my nose.

“Breathe,” she says.

I inhale the smell of the lei.

Then Mom closes her eyes, holds the lei under her nose, and breathes it in.

“Mmmm,” she says and then opens her eyes. “I had the best dream,” she says putting the cool lei over my knee, and looking up at Dad. “Before you came in, I was dreaming that I was surfing again. I paddled into position right at the crest of the wave. I caught the wave. It was a nice, easy, long ride.”

“Your Mom was one good surfer back in the day.”
“But that wasn’t even the best part. My dream got even better because when I look around for other surfers. Guess who I saw? You! —my little mango, and you too, Kam.”

“That’s one fantastic dream,” Dad says.

Then I know. It’s not just me who is working up some magic. I’m making magic with my drawings. And with her stories, Aunty is stirring up her magic too.

Leave the markers here

After school Aunty picks me and Malia up and takes me to the hospital. Dad is waiting for me outside by the bench again. He’s not smoking this time. I’m wearing my backpack and I have my art bag. I take Dad’s hand as we walk through the glass door with the etched wave. Goose bumps pop up on my arms again and I shiver in the cold hospital air. When we get to Mom’s room, she’s sitting up and awake this time. The television is off and she’s reading a book. I put my stuff down on the chair and climb onto the bed.

“Mango! give me a kiss,” she says.

“Mom I don’t have a picture today, I’m still working on it okay?”

“Of course, sweetheart. How was school?”

“School was okay. Mom, when are we going to go home?”

“Well,” Dad says, “the doctors aren’t releasing your Mom as quickly as we hoped.”

“They are keeping me in the hospital a little longer. The fluid from the surgery doesn’t seem to be draining properly. The catheter doesn’t seem to be filling up at the usual rate.”

“Catheter? Fluid?”
“Well, it’s pretty gross Noriko. Under my gown I have a plastic container that yellowish fluid from my body is supposed to drain into. I’ll show you later.”

“Lani, she doesn’t need to see that.” Dad frowns.

“Gross! Is it pee?”

“See Kam, kids like that stuff. Not exactly but it is kind of like pee color. It’s more like, hmm, you know when you get a cut and sometimes the skin gets pussy and oozy, that’s just your body fighting off infection. Well surgery is a cut too. You know surgery is a cut that the doctor made with a scalpel. After surgery, your body knows it’s a cut, so your body reacts by making a lot of that kind of fluid to fight off infection, but you don’t want to keep that icky fluid in your body. It’s supposed to drain into the catheter, the plastic bottle. My body isn’t draining normally. So they want to keep me here to see what’s going on.”

“So Mom, that’s not from the cancer?”

“No, it’s not from the cancer,” Dad says. “You’re scaring her,” he says looking at Mom.

“I’m not scaring her,” Mom says. “I’m telling her what’s going on, which is scary.” Dad folds his arms across his chest. Mom looks at me. “That’s right sweetheart. They aren’t monitoring me for cancer right now. Right now the doctor’s are watching my body’s reaction to the surgery.”

“Is the cancer gone now Mom?”

“We don’t know for sure yet,”

“Isn’t it enough that we just told her, that they’re keeping you in the hospital longer?” Dad says like he’s holding in a temper tantrum.
“I’m answering her questions Kam.” Then Mom looks at me. “It’s going to be awhile before they know if they got all the cancer cells. There will be lots of tests to see how things are going. After I heal from the surgery, I won’t be done fighting the cancer. I will probably start chemotherapy treatment.”

“What’s chemotherapy?” Mom twists the sheets in her hand, and looks up at Dad.

“We don’t even know yet if your Mom is going to need chemotherapy,” he says.

“Do we need to tell her about this now?”

“You have a better time in mind Kam?”

“No,” he says looking away.

“No, because there is no good time to talk about it. Just like there is no good time to get cancer,” Mom says.

Dad doesn’t say anything. He shifts his feet, uncrosses his arms, and starts jingling the coins in his pocket.

Mom looks at Dad. “I don’t want Noriko to think everything will be done, and fine when I go home. That’s not fair to her either.”

“Mom and Dad. Hello! I’m right here. What’s going on? What’s chemotherapy?”

“Fine,” Dad says. “I’m going to get a soda.” He walks out of the room.

“Why’s Dad going?”

“He’s just going to get a soda, he’ll be back soon,” Mom says. “Sometimes your father needs to walk off his worries, that’s all.”

“Why is Dad worried?”

“Well I guess he doesn’t want to talk about chemotherapy.”

“Why? What is it?”
“It’s one way of treating cancer. Chemotherapy is chemical therapy. So it’s a kind of medicine made up of chemicals. The chemicals kill cancer cells.”

“That sounds good Mom.”

“Well, the hard thing about chemotherapy is that the chemicals don’t just destroy cancer cells. They also kill all kinds of cells, which can make people feel sick even though it’s helping them. Sometimes someone going through chemotherapy looks really sick. Sometimes their hair falls out or their skin gets very sensitive. And the patient can feel really bad, like they want to vomit.”

“Oh Mom, that might happen to you?”

“Yes, I will probably need chemotherapy and I will look and feel really sick when that is happening. But even though it will make me feel sick it is really actually helping me beat my breast cancer.”

“We don’t want you to be sick anymore.”

“I know. Me neither.”

Mom looks towards the door, and I turn to look and Dad is standing in the doorway. He comes back into the room and kisses both of us on the forehead.

“We should get you back to your Aunty Jackie’s house kid o,” Dad says. “Give your mom a kiss.” I give Mom a long hug and kiss. Dad gets my backpack and lifts me off the bed.
Chapter 8

Homework For The Cure

Dad just drops me off in front of Malia’s house, he doesn’t even get out of the car. He just gives me a peck on the cheek and speeds back towards the hospital. I’m standing in front of Malia’s door wearing my backpack. Maybe I’ll run away right now. I’ll just leave my book-bag in front of their door and run away. Then they’ll be sorry. Suddenly the door swings open. Malia grabs my hand.

“Come on! Where have you been? How long have you been standing there Riko? You can’t run away without me you know,” she whispers.

I want to start my drawing right now, so that Mom gets better.

“Riko’s here!” Malia shouts.

“Okay, Get started on your homework then!” Aunty yells from the other room.

“Mom! I already did my homework!” Aunty walks into the kitchen.

“Well I’m sure Noriko still needs to do hers. Why don’t you help her get started.”

“Aunty I want to start my drawing.”

“I think you should do your homework first.”

“Aunty.”

“The best thing you can do to help your parents right now is to do well in school.”

It feels like a flame in my tummy shoots up to my head. I feel my face get hot.

“Lies! Lies! Lies! That’s a lie Aunty! You’re lying.” Malia’s mouth drops open, but she doesn’t say anything, and Aunty just stands there too. “Grades aren’t going to make Mom better. Good grades won’t bring Mom home.”
“Noriko, I didn’t mean—”

“If I do my homework, will that take away cancer and chemotherapy? Huh Aunty? Tell me Aunty! Will it? Homework and good grades don’t do anything. Does it Aunty? Does it!”

Aunty sits down like she’s is really, really tired. She looks at Malia and then she looks at me. Malia’s eyes are still wide and stunned.

“Noriko, you’re right, homework and good grades are not going to make your Mom better. But I know that your mom and dad love you, and because they care about you, they want you to succeed, to do well in school. I think your mom would feel really bad if you weren’t keeping up in school right now. I don’t want your Mom to worry. I want your Mom to spend all of her energy on getting better. I want her to know that I’m taking good care of you. So if you keep up with your school work, as much as possible, that will help your Mom feel better because she won’t be worrying as much. I know one of the scariest things for Lani, for your Mom, is that she wants you to be okay. And sometimes you might have trouble concentrating, and sometimes you might have trouble keeping up, and that’s okay. It’s normal that you might have trouble focusing. But I’d like you to try as much as you can. Noriko, Do you understand?”

I nod.

“And Malia,” Aunty says, “it’s your job to help Noriko stay caught up. Sometimes you might not feel like it, and that’s okay. But you still need to help Noriko stay caught up. You understand?”

“Uhuh,” she says.
“But not today right Aunty? I don’t want to do homework today. And Malia already finished hers. Just this time?” Aunty sighs so deep that her body kind goes up and down with her breath.

“Just this time?” Malia adds. “I promise to help Riko, I promise.”

“Ho you girls, are stubborn yeah? Did you hear anything I was saying?”

“Yes Aunty, but too much thinking already.”

“Okay,” Aunty says. You girls promise to catch up with your work tomorrow?”

“Yes yes yes.” We both nod fast, so she knows we really mean it.

“Go ahead then,” Aunty says giving us pats on the okole. I tear off my book-bag, fling it to the floor. Aunty shakes her head in defeat as we and we run for the backyard.

**Backyard Scene**

We leap off the lanai onto the yard. Malia runs straight to the red rubber ball and kicks it towards me. I kick it back to her and we go back forth for a while.

“Whatchu want to do?” Her arms are up in the air and they kind of flap every time she kicks the ball.

“I don’t know.” I kick the ball. Malia lifts her leg, the ball rolls right under her feet and stops at the fence. She runs to the fence, picks up the ball and throws it at me. I duck and it hits the house with a thwack.

“Be careful out there!” we hear Aunty holler from the house.

“Ho,” she says running towards me, “I’m tired already.”

We plop down on the grass. Malia lies down and puts her hands behind her head, like she’s going to do a sit-up, but she doesn’t. I want to pick at the scab on my knee, but I
know I’m not supposed to pick at it. So I just kind of touch its weird hard surface. I never really thought about how weird the body is before. How your body does things without you telling it to, like making a scab out of a cut. Sometimes your body does things you don’t want it to. Malia plucking the grass.

“Malia you were right,” I whisper.

“Right about what? Right about liking Tony?”

“Nah, already,” I pluck the grass to, that’s better than playing with scab.

“About my Mom.” Malia sits up. “About my Mom’s boobs.”

“They took ’em off?”

“Yeah they call it a mastectomy. The surgeon took off Mom’s boobs.”

“What’s it look like?”

“I don’t know. She’s wearing hospital gowns so, I don’t know, what it looks like. But she’s gets lots of bandages and tape around her chest *li’dat.*”

“Does she seem the same? Like a lady? Like a Mom still?”

“Yeah she still seems like a lady. She still seems like Mom, like herself. She’s sleepy. I don’t like the hospital. I’m glad she’s going home, she seems like the same person, but plenty tired.”

“Cancer can’t make your Mom stop being your Mom yeah?”

“I don’t think so, but you know what else, they might not be done after this, maybe.”

“What you mean?”

“Well Mom, was trying to explain about some kind of other thing, and Dad had to take a walk. I think it’s called chemo, chemo, chemotherapy.”
“Ho, chemotherapy sounds bad yeah?”

“Yeah, I—don’t” I see something scurry under the fence. “What was that?” I point toward the fence.

“What was that?” I point again and Malia squints. We both see its pointy little head and beady eyes.

“Mongo!” we scream, and jump to our feet. The mongoose is frozen and staring at us. It looks like it’s trying to decide how to attack. “Tree house!” we scream and run to the coconut tree ladder. We scramble up. The mongoose darts to a spot in the yard where there’s a big rock, and watches us climb. We climb into the tree house and look over the bamboo railing.

“It’s just staring at us”.

“What’s Mongo thinking?” Malia says.

“I don’t know, can they bite?”

“It’s tail is flicking back and forth, what does that mean?” Malia says.

“If they can kill snakes, they must be dangerous right?”

“What! They kill snakes? Why would they kill snakes when we don’t even have snakes in Hawaii?”

“I don’t know, but that’s what I heard.”

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh, look at its tail,” she says.

“But do they climb trees?” I ask.

“Riko, it’s coming closer.”

“Where are they?” I quick open the bin and start throwing stuff on the floor, boggle, cards, binoculars.
“Riko, it’s coming closer.”

“Here!” The water guns. I pull out the water guns. “Here! Take it!” Malia grabs the orange water gun. I scoot up to the edge of the railing, take aim with my water gun, and miss. The mongoose is moving its head looking around for what’s landing near it. “Shoot, shoot, shoot,” I say. Malia closes her eyes keeps shooting.

“Aim! We’re going to run out of water!”

“I am aiming!” she says. The mongoose darts away, near a tree.

“Sure hope they can’t climb,” I say.

“Why wouldn’t they be able to climb, if we can?”

It hides behind the tree, with just its little head poking out.

“I think we scared it.”

We stop our shooting.

“That Mongo,” Malia says holding her water gun and wiping her head. “Maybe it’s hungry, maybe, we should just feed it.”

I pick up the binoculars, and scope out the yard.

“Maybe,” I say. “I don’t see anything do you?”

“Ahhh!”

I drop the binoculars, the mongoose coming this way, straight for our tree, our tree house. Malia and me aim and fire. When it looks like it’s about to jump the tree, we both spray it with water. Confused and scared Mongo runs towards the fence. Suddenly, the sliding glass door is open and Aunty is standing in the doorway.

“Mom! Mongo was…”

“Whose Mongo?” Aunty says looking around for some guy who looks like a gorilla.
“Mom, you know Mongo, the mongoose!”

“Oh jeez, what did I tell you?” Aunty says shaking her head.

“But Mom, it’s not afraid of us,” Malia explains.

“Mmmhhmm, I am sure Mongo is a killer mongoose,” Aunty says.

“But Mom—”

“Don’t ‘but Mom,’ me. Now put your stuff in the bin so it doesn’t get wet and ruined, come in the house, and get ready for dinner.”

“But M—”

“Ehh, What did I say?”

We put all of the stuff in the bin.

“Let’s bring the water guns with us so we can fill them up, before we come out next time,” Malia says. Holding the water pistols, we climb down the ladder and quickly get inside. We take a quick glance around the yard and then shut the door.

“Ho, das one aggressive mongoose yeah?” Malia says.

“They’re just daytime animals yeah?” I ask.

“Don’t try scare me Riko, good thing you’re sleeping over. That Mongo is mean!”

We wash up for dinner, and set the table.

Aunty makes us compromise. I promise that Malia and me will quiz each other on our times tables. Malia is on her seven times tables. She’s really good at math. I’m on my sixes. We set the timer for ten minutes and take turns quizzing each other for ten minute intervals. We each have our own sets of index cards to quiz each other with. Aunty says we each have to go three times, but then we negotiate her down to two times. For some reason,
the six times tables feels like this wall that I can’t climb over. I feel like I take a running sprint, and jump up to the wall and when I get to 6 x 7. I start to slide down the wall. 6 x 6 feels neat and I can picture it like a square, 6 x 6 = 36. But 6 x 7 = 42 is hard for me to remember, to visualize. Maybe I will draw six flowers with seven pedals, then my picture will have 42 pedals.

Malia skips to her room and grabs the tin marker bin from her desk. We’re sitting at the kitchen table and the television is on. Aunty is in the kitchen with us and there’s the sound of her knife click clicking away on the cutting board. There’s a commercial for Las Vegas travel packages playing.

“Maybe,” Aunty stops her dicing, “we should go to Vegas again, after New Years.” We had so much fun. Noriko, we can take you too. Your job will be to keep Malia from gambling away our house and home,” Aunty says.

“How Mom come?”

“Your Mom might not want to get on a plane for awhile.”

“Then I won’t go.”

“It would be fun Noriko!”

“No.”

My art supplies are spread out on the table. They are like treasures to me. There are so many colors, I don’t know where to begin. I pick up the red marker, put it down. I pick up the magenta crayon, put it down. There are so many colors, so many choices. What should I draw for Mom? What should I do? I stare at the colors and the blank paper. I pick up the sky blue pencil and think. What would make Mom happy? What can I do with this color? Then I get a great idea.
“Aunty?”

“Yeah?” she’s taking dried seaweed out of the package.

“Aunty?” She stops, turns around and looks at me. “Aunty, can you teach me to draw a wave?”

“You like that surfer story about your Mom yeah?” she says smiling. Aunty puts down the seaweed and leans over me and picks up a pencil.

“Okay, so first you need to draw the outside and the crest, you know, the top part. Then you have to draw the curl – like this. Then last is the foamy, white, part – the breaks. Okay?” Auntie says.

So I use my pencil to practice, practice, practice, and I fill paper with different size waves. I’m getting better at making waves. Some of them turn out pretty good, and some waves turn out slanted or flat or just funny looking. I know it’s not going to be good enough for tomorrow. So for tomorrow, my drawing will have a plumeria lei frame again. This time, in the center, I draw a mango. I put a face in the mango, my face. I add stick figure arms and hands that are up in the air waving and I make stick figure legs and feet that are dancing. The mango is mostly yellow-orange, but I add some of the ripening red shades. The red looks like puffs of red hair around my face. In the background, I make a big sun again with sunrays shooting out, except this time I use a softer orange crayon, so that the mango-me and the plumeria lei will be what you really look at. And I sign the card, from your little Mango. When I’m done with the card, I practice drawing waves until Aunty and Uncle Joe send us to bed.
Chapter 9

Secret Admiral

Malia could give me her Kris Kringle card at home; but she waits until we’re at school. Me, Malia, Val, and Julie are sitting in a circle talking about our television show Sunnydale High and waiting for the morning bell to ring. Malia pretends she’s just remembering at that very moment, about Tony’s card.

“Oh shoot!” she exclaims and kind of smacks her forehead.

Val leans over and kind of pushes Malia’s elbow when she’s still got her hand on her forehead.

“Ehh!” Malia reacts.

We’re all laughing.

“You guys so stupid!” Malia says.

“Oh come on, just joking,” Val replies. “What! You should’ve had a V-8?”

Then we’re all cracking up.

“It’s a secret anyways. Right Noriko?” Malia says.

I just shake my shoulders, like I don’t know.

“C’mon, c’mon, Malia what?” Julie says.


“Okay, ‘kay den,” Malia says. “See, I like Tony…” Malia digs in her bag and pulls out the card. “So I’m making Kris Kringle cards for Tony. This one says, ‘from your secret admiral.’”

Val and Julie bust out laughing. I guess she really didn’t know the difference, between admirer and admiral.

“It’s not secret admiral, das like da boss in da army. Duh!” Val says.

“It’s secret admirer,” Julie explains.

Malia’s pissed. “So what, it doesn’t matter. See, I made a Christmas tree with presents underneath, see. And all the presents have hearts on them. See!” Malia says.

“Oh, Julie says.

“Sshhh. Here comes Tony,” Malia says. She stealthily hides the card in my bag.

“Put it in Tony’s desk,” she commands.

The morning bell rings. We all scramble into class. Mr. Matsumoto pats me on the shoulder and smiles.

“How are you doing, Noriko?” he asks.

“Okay, Mr. M.”

“Remember our secret code?” he whispers.

“Yeah,” I mumble, hoping that nobody heard him.

“Okay,” he says.

I’m so embarrassed.

As he looks across the class, his smile disappears and he calls out real loud in his teacher voice. “All right class, you have five minutes to unpack.”

Everyone is clustered around the book bag bins. John bends down onto his knees. Malia almost falls over him again, but she catches herself:

“John!” she shouts.
“Jonathan Mahaloha stand up. March your self outside. This time when you enter the classroom behave like a student prepared to learn,” Mr. Matsumoto booms. “Three strikes and you’re out. No recess for you for a week. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Matsumoto.”

While John marches out of the class, Tony is snickering. I slip the card into Tony’s desk.

“Right on,” Val says to me as she walks to her desk. She’s impressed.

When Tony gets to his desk, he sees the card. He pulls it out and sort of looks at it under his desk. Tony smiles. Mr. Matsumoto purposefully wanders to Tony’s desk.

“Let’s see what we’ve got here,” he says. I look at Malia. I’m so afraid that somehow, he’s going to figure out it was me that put the card in his desk. Mr. Matsumoto opens the card and says, “Looks like the Navy is trying to recruit you.” Mr. M. laughs to himself. Val and Julie muffle laughs. Then Mr. M. says loudly, “Class time is learning time.” John sits down, and Mr. Matsumoto begins his lesson. I doodle waves in my notebook; I want to get better. It’s going to help Mom, like her surfing dream is helping Mom.

We have lunch in the cafeteria and are sitting at the long tables. Some kids are eating PB & J. Some kids are eating musubi, some are eating manapua and others are munching on bologna sandwiches. Malia and I are eating school lunch. Today, school lunch is good – pizza. John is peeling the seaweed wrapping from his musubi. All that is left of his musubi is sticky rice.

“What you doing?” Julie scolds.
“Ich! I hate seaweed paper,” John replies.

“That’s the vegetable, you’re SUPPOSED to eat the part,” Julie reprimands.

“You eat it!” he retorts.

“So Tony you got one card in your desk or what?” Val says mischievously. She’s trying to start trouble.

“Yeah,” he mumbles through his pizza. “Why? You made it?”

“No Way!” she says making a scrunched up face like she’s grossed out, like she just ate seaweed.

“Maybe Noriko made it,” John chimes in.

“No! Shut up!” I say.

All of sudden some fifth grade girls come and walk over to all of us. They rarely look at us, forget about them talking to us. Pua, one of the fifth graders who wears eyeliner, stares at us. Her friends stand behind her like bodyguards.

“So do you kids like to dance?”

I don’t know whom she is talking to so I don’t say anything.

“Yeah, why?” Val and Julie say at the same time. Then they look at each other and say, “double jinx, no punch backs,” and then they punch each other on the shoulder.

“How about you boys?” Pua asks Tony, John and the boys.

“I dunno,” they say, already bored with the whole topic.

“Well, the fifth graders are voting on whether or not we should invite the fourth graders to the dance this year,” she says.

“Cool,” Malia says.
“That’s the question, are you kids cool enough for the dance?” Megan says, and then turns and walks away. Her two friends follow her like a school of goldfish. The boys are totally uninterested.

“Time for round two of the dodge ball tournament,” Tony says.

“Same teams,” John calls out, “and this time, you’re going down,” he says pointing to the ground.

“Okay,” says Tony, “but you’re in the middle.”

“Yeah, MONKEY in the middle,” Julie and Malia laugh at my joke.

“Seems like YOU’RE monkey in the middle to me,” Val says.

“In the middle of what?” I ask confused.

Val looks hard at Malia, looks hard at Tony and says, “You know what you’re in the middle of.”
Chapter 10

Kids Have Cooties

This time when I go to visit Mom in the hospital, she’s awake. She’s reading a magazine and the television is on.

“Noriko!” she exclaims softly.

Dad pulls up the chair, I squeeze onto the edge of the bed, pulling out my card.

“Look at that another lei! What a good week I’m having,” Mom says.

Mom and Dad look at each other and start chuckling again.

“See Mom, I signed it from your little mango.”

“And look at that, the mango has a face on it!”

I think she really likes it. Dad tapes my picture to the wall.

I look up at my picture because I don’t really want to look at Mom’s hand with the tube in it. Then I look at Mom because she really, really needs to believe me about this.

“I’m saving the best card for last Mom, for when you’re all better.”

“Well, I’ve got good news! My body seems to be reacting to be draining normally. Dr. Pang says I can go home the day after tomorrow. I have to be very careful not to lift heavy things or raise my arms too much.”

“Really? Hurray! Hurray! Yea! I can’t wait to go home too,” I say.

“You’re not having a good time staying with Malia and Aunty?”

“Yeah but, yeah but I want to come home.”

“Well even though your mother is coming home, the doctor says it’s better if you stay at Malia’s house a little bit longer. Just until her immune system gets a little bit stronger,” Dad explains.
“What?”

“You see honey, right now it’s really easy for your mom to get sick because of the surgery and the medication she’s taking.”

I want to stay strong but I feel tears pushing into my eyes. “I have to come home! Dad, I have to help Mom get better!”

“Sweetie,” Mom says, “the doctor says I need to rest a lot.”

“But Mom, I can help you rest!” I can’t believe the doctor wants me to stay away from Mom and Dad.

“Noriko,” Dad says gently, “Noriko, see the doctor says that there can’t be any germs in the house.”

Then my tears really let go. It comes out like a stream and my nose and mouth get all slobby.

“I don’t have cooties!”

“Oh, I know you don’t honey,” Mom says softly and sweetly. She smiles at me like when I have a fever.

“Its doctor’s orders,” Dad says.

And now, I’m getting mad too. Fine, I think, I’ll runaway forever. Take that to Doctor Pang. I want to tell Dad, ‘If Doctor Pang told you to jump off a bridge, would you do it?’ but I don’t say it. I just say, “Why? I can help.”

“Noriko sweetie,” I hear Mom whisper. “Noriko, you know how sometimes one kid in the class gets pink-eye and then a whole bunch of kids get it too? It’s not you; it’s just like that in classrooms. Understand?”
“I guess so, but then I can just not go to school. I can just stay at home and help until you’re all better.”

“No Noriko, you have to go to school, it’s your job, just like when your father has to go to work, even though he doesn’t want to right now.”

“But—”

“I promise it won’t be long,” Dad says.

I don’t like all the promises grown-ups are making. First, Aunty makes a promise; now, Dad makes a promise. Except, I don’t really like the promises they’re making. No one is promising that everything is going to be all right. I want things to be normal again.

“Sweetie,” Mom says, “looking forward to your visits and your pictures already helps me so much. You give me something to look forward to.”

“It won’t be for very long honey, a week at the most,” Dad says.

“A week! Are you going to be there?” I ask.

“Yes. I’ll be going to work and then doing special stuff at home to keep our house sanitary, you know, super clean.”

“I can do special sanitary clean stuff too.”

“You might have to honey, but it’s better if I can recover by myself for a little while, okay? You’re being really brave and strong right now, and going to school and making me beautiful art. That’s the most help of all.”

I just sniffle. I’m going to be strong. I’m going to be so strong I’m going to run away and then they’ll never have to worry about me bringing cooties home. Stupid Dr. Pang, I’ll show her and Mom and Dad.
“Before you know it, Dad says rubbing my back, “you’ll be begging for another sleep-over with Malia.”

“Are you working on a new drawing?” Mom asks.

“Uhuh. Aunty is helping me.”

“I’m so glad Aunty and Malia are here to help.” Mom’s eyes are getting droopy again.

There’s something I don’t trust exactly. It’s like when grown-ups talk to you all smiley, like everything is okay, but it isn’t. They think you can’t hear it in their voice. I mean I trust Mom and Dad, but everything is not okay. Mom might be going home and Dad’s making the house all germless. But I’m NOT going home. It hurts so badly and I want to cry and I want to punch out stupid Dr. Pang, and I hate cancer.

Mom’s eyes are closing.

“Come on honey. Tuck your Mom in for her nap.”

I’m careful about her hand and the tubes and I give Mom a really tight squeeze. When I’m squeezing, I’m saying inside, we’re going to beat it, Mom. I’m giving you my kid strength.

Dad takes me to Aunty’s house and we both go inside. Malia is sitting at the kitchen table drawing her Kris Kringle card. I’m not sure why, but I’m angry with Malia. I just want to throw all of her stupid markers out the door. Dad and Aunty walk out onto the lanai to talk. I sit next to Malia and practice drawing waves. I use pencil because I’m not very good yet. Dad and Aunty come back in the kitchen.
“Noriko, you get to pick tonight. What do you want for dinner? Pizza Hut or Zippy’s?”

“Why does Noriko get to pick?” whines Malia.

Aunty gives Malia that don’t-start-with-me-look.

“Zippy’s!” I say giving Malia stink eye.

“Mind if I eat with you?” Dad asks.

“Ehh, no be silly yeah? You getting too skinny already. I’m going to call Joe he’ll pick up some chili and rice and we’ll all have dinner. Sound good?” Aunty says.

Aunty dials up Uncle Joe. Dad comes over and looks at my drawings.

“What are you two working on?” Dad asks.

“I’m practicing drawing waves for Mom’s best drawing,” I explain.

“Drawing waves, that’s brilliant,” he says. “How did I get to have such a smart daughter?”

“The milkman,” Aunty says.

He shoots her a look. “Yeah, when I first met your mother, she was the only girl surfer on the island.”

“Nuhuh,” Malia responds.

“Well, maybe not,” he says with a wink. “She was da best surfer girl in Kailua. She could have gone pro, but nah. Some of the boys get all territorial yeah, thought girls shouldn’t crowd their waves li’ dat.”

“Some of the girls got all territorial too,” Aunty said smiling. “You know your Mom’s kind of clumsy yeah?”
I never thought of my mom as clumsy before and I feel kind of insulted, but Dad nods in agreement, so I guess it must be okay.

“Yeah,” she’s kind of clumsy on land,” Dad chimes in, “but, when she was out on the ocean, your Mom was in her element. That’s when I first liked your mother. Let me see you draw a wave.”

I show Dad, how first you draw the top and the bottom, and then you draw the curl, and then last is the white stuff.

“Can I borrow your pencil?” Dad asks. He bends over me with the pencil in his hand.

“Let’s see if I can remember,” he says.

I can’t believe it. Dad is drawing a wave. “Dad I didn’t know you could draw.”

“I can’t really. Just waves and words.”

“Words? What do you mean words?”

“Like bubble letters?” Malia asks.

“Not quite, more like—” says Aunty smiling.

“I used to doodle in class.”

“Uncle Kam,” Malia says to Dad, “Uncle Kam, you wanna see my Kris Kringle card?” Sometimes Malia can be so irritating.

While Dad is carefully inspecting Malia’s card, Uncle Joe comes in with a big Zippy’s bag and a six-pack of Primo beer. “I got good kine grinds!” he calls out like it’s a holiday dinner.

“Let’s eat on the lanai,” Aunty says.
On the lanai the grown-ups empty the bags and get out forks and knives and napkins. The grown-ups crack open a beer; and it makes that special can-popping sound. Malia and I share a Pepsi.

“Uncle Joe guess what? Mom’s going home after tomorrow.”

“Great! Your Mom must be getting bettah, must be one good sign.”

“Fantastic news,” Dad says.

“Do we get to keep Noriko a little longer?” Uncle Kam says reaching for some short ribs.

“We’d miss you if she left so soon,” Aunty says.

“Yeah I’m going to stay until I get as good as Dad at drawing waves,” I explain.

“Woohoo!” Malia says doing a little hands in the air sign. I don’t know why I was mad at Malia. She’s my BFF.

“Great!” Uncle Joe says scooping macaroni salad onto his plate and passing it over to me.

I scoop some macaroni salad on Dad’s plate, and then my plate. We’re all keeping Dad company. Even though I wish Mom were here, I’m kind of happy. I know I’m helping by staying with Aunty, Uncle Joe, and Malia. We all sit on the lanai cleaning off the plates as the sunsets. The grown-ups talk about work, and friends, and the mayor and his ridiculous car. The birds sing their goodnight calls, as the setting sun changes the color of the plumeria, coconut, and halokoa trees from bright green to a dark silhouette. The wind starts pick up so we stuff our empty bowls and plates into the garbage bag. We keep the cans for recycling and head inside.
Before Dad goes back to the hospital, he writes a note to Mr. Matsumoto that says I didn’t have time to do my homework today. I feel like I just won a prize. I feel like Dad just won me a giant teddy bear from the carnival. We turn on the TV. We sit at the table drawing. I start another drawing of a pikake lei. Those flowers are hard to draw so I put in a lot of green maile leaves, too. I am going to put a pineapple in the middle of the lei. Malia is drawing a coconut tree with Christmas lights and a star on it.

“You know what, Malia?” I say.

“What?”

“Mom told me a long time ago if you make something for somebody, you know like a card, or a cake, or like a real lei, then it’s a special gift. The special gift is like giving magic to someone,” I explain.

“So like when I give Tony his Kris Kringle cards I’m making a magic love potion?” she asks.

“Sheez, I guess so, do you ever think of anything else?”

“I dunno, what else am I supposed to think about?” Malia replies.

I feel weird because I think of other stuff like hospitals, cancer, and being an orphan. I mean if I was all by myself could I take care of myself. How would I eat and stuff, would I go into the forest and learn to hunt pig and steal chickens and papaya and banana? It’s weird. You think your parents are kind of like superheroes, like they’ll live forever. But now I know that my parents might die some day. I can’t really talk to Malia about it. It’s like I know something, and I don’t know how I can explain it to her.

“Hello!” Malia says knocking on my forehead, “anyone home?”
“Oh, yeah. When I make Mom picture cards, its like magic to help her get better, so I can go home.” I say.

“You no like staying wit’ me?” Malia asks.

“I do, but I still miss my house and my stuff, yeah?” I say.

“I get you, umm, but your Mom’s already getting bettah yeah” She’s going home, dat means soon you’ll go home too,” she says. “but I like having you here.”

So we practice drawing waves and watch TV until Malia gets bored. At bedtime we brush our teeth and hair, and I help braid Malia’s hair. Aunty tucks us into bed.

“Tell us another story about when you and Noriko’s mom were young,” Malia says.

“I tol’ you we are young!” Aunty says.

“Momm, you know what I mean!” Malia says.

“Kay den, let me tink.” Aunty says. “Hmm. I know. One day my friends and me were at da beach and your Mom was standing on da beach checking out da waves, holding her surfboard. So I ask her to teach me to surf. And every day dat summer, your mom takes me surfing—well, almost every day. And da boys harass us. Make fun. But we tell ‘em shove off. Except Kam and Joe. Kam and Joe tell da guys no be stupid, yeah?”

My eyes are getting heavy. I feel sleep trying to take over, but I don’t let it.

Aunty continues, “See back den we was tough kine wahines. So we blow da boys and go surf. Joe and Kam were the only ones cool wit us, yeah. But I never get really good like your mom. But I get good enough to have one good time. We got to take you girls sometime. Back den the Pa’aina family had blowout 4th of July parties. It was a big, luau style party with tons of good kine food, music, and hula. Like da tutus would get up and sing for real. Or da guys would play guitar and ukelele. But da bes’ part was dancing.
Back den, get no more good clubs for locals to dance, yeah? So before da party your mom ask me to teach her to dance. Not like hula. Like disco. And das what sealed da deal; made us become bes’ friends. My friends, at first, got angry wit me ‘cause they was thinking I’m blowing ‘em off yeah; but later we made up and everybody came good friends. Anyway, the Kanaka’s luau party made us bes’ friends, ‘cause like your Mom gave me surfing, and I gave her dancing. You know how your mom’s all clumsy, yeah? So not easy to teach her to dance. Man, at first she had two left feet. But by the time the party came, she was dancing pretty good and we even, all us girls, did The Electric Slide. We was so cool. And even though we both nevah really talk about it, we both knew that we both liked Kam. And so da night of da party....”

I wanted to stay awake but I couldn’t keep my eyes open and sleep won the battle. Then I had dreams. I was surfing and Mom and Dad were surfing too. We were all lying on our boards, floating on top of the ocean, waiting for the good waves. When we see the wave coming, we all start paddling, and as the wave pushes us forward we get first into kneeling position, and then stand. We all ride the waves. In my dream Mom surfed the best.
Chapter 11

Too Shay Touché

This morning a miracle happened. I woke up first. Guess what I did? I pushed Malia off the bed. I’m laughing and laughing as she looks up at me from the floor. She says: “Too Shay,” which I think is French for ‘you got me back.’ They always say it on Sunnydale High.

Then Malia runs to the bathroom first and when she comes back I say, “Too Shay!” When we’re getting ready for school, I ask Malia if she wants me to take Tony’s card. I put her card in my folder. Aunty rushes us to school. We go to our spot outside the class sitting with Val and Julie.

“You made one card for Tony?” Val says to Malia.

“Yeah, she did. We’re hiding it my bag. Wanna see it?” I say pulling the card out for everyone to admire.

“It’s nice.” Julie says. “Coconut trees with Christmas lights—Hawaiian style.” Everyone approves. Malia’s grinning and I can tell she is proud.

“Howzit staying wit’ Malia?” Val asks me. She’s looking at me funny, like she’s suspicious about something. She’s wrapping her backpack strap around her hand and then unwrapping it and then wrapping it around her hand again.

“It’s great. Last night we ate Zippy’s and my Dad wrote me a note saying I didn’t have time to do my homework.”

“For real?” Julie responds.

“Yeah, for real.” I say.
“Malia you didn’t do your homework, either?” Julie asks.

“Nah, I did my homework.”

“Bummer, how come?” says Julie but Val starts talking before Malia has a chance to answer Julie.

“When my parents were getting divorced I had to stay at my cousins ‘cause of the house. It was fun hanging out with my cousins. But, but…but…” Val stutters.

“What? You fart?” Julie says.

“Don’t be such a Pordagee!” I say defending Val.

“Don’t be so haole!” Julie says back.

“Only half haole.” I say.

“Yeah, da irritating half.” Julie says.

“Oh, shut it!” Malia says. “We’re one rainbow ‘kay!”

And we all laugh because every year we have to sing a stupid song for school about being a human rainbow.

“So Val, when did you stay with your cousins?” I ask.

“I stayed with them last summer ‘cause my parents divorce.” Val stops playing with her backpack strap. “It was sorta really fun ‘cause cause my cousins showed me teenager stuff, like make-up; and they told me about boys and da kine. But also, I was really bummed ‘cause of my parents. And I still miss my house, yeah. I mean the way it was before.”

“It’s kinda like that for me, too. It’s fun with Malia, Aunty, and Uncle Joe. But then I miss my mom cause she’s in the hospital and my stuff.”

“I thought you were getting one divorce,” Val says.
“But your Mom’s going home today,” Malia says.

“Das good yeah?” Val and Julie say.

“Yeah, except I can’t go home yet.”

“How come?” Val asks.

“Germs, pink eye, cooties.”

The morning bell rings. We all shuffle into Mr. Matsumoto’s class. Malia sort of kneels down in front of John and he trips over her. We all laugh.

“Touché,” says Mr. Matsumoto.

Malia and me look at each other in shock. Does Mr. M. watch Sunnydale High too?

Then he continues.

“None the less, Malia, rules are rules. Please leave the class and re-enter the classroom correctly,” but he’s grinning when he says it. Mr. Matsumoto looks at me like he’s sending me a secret message, while he asks Tony to come to his desk for a minute.

Mr. M. nods at me and at Tony’s desk. I put the card in Tony’s desk and wonder how Mr. M. knows everything. When Tony gets back to his seat, he looks in his desk immediately, and slyly pulls out the card. It says ‘from your secret admire.’

I go up to Mr. Matsumoto’s desk and give him the note written by my dad. He nods grimly. In class, Mr. Matsumoto reads us a story from Legends of Hawaii. During read aloud I daydream about hospitals, waves, and drawing. I wonder about cancer. My mind begins to wander and then I remember. I remember this time when I was really mad at Mom because she wouldn’t let me to go to a sleepover birthday party on a school night. I was so, so mad at her. Val and Julie were going and I was mad that they were being so
strict. I remember thinking I wanted her to die. I wish I could take that mean thinking back.

At recess, we’re bored with dodge ball already. Tony and John ask if we want to play two-hand touch football. John picks me for his team. Malia is on Tony’s team. The football game is tied. Tony tosses the ball to one of his teammates. I intercept. I catch the ball, stealing it from the other team. John is yelling, “Run! Run!” but I don’t know he’s yelling at me. I think I’m done, like during kick-off when the team catches it and goes down on one knee. I’m standing there with the football cradled in my arm. Tony is running towards me and I’m holding the football, thinking about my surfing-with-Tony-dream. Then Tony’s right next to me. He lightly smacks his two hands on me and yells “tackle!” Then I hear John yelling at me. “Noriko you’re so stupid, you should’ve run. We could’ve had a touchdown.” Then I realize he was yelling ‘run, run’ to me. It’s like light bulb. I feel like ‘duh’.

“Shut it John, dat was one good catch. I never see you make a catch li’ dat,” Tony says.

“That’s cause I’m the quarterback,” John calls back. “At least the ball is ours.” We get a touchdown out of the play. When the recess bell rings, Tony’s team wins, and I’m halfway glad Tony’s team wins.

At the end of the day, Mr. Matsumoto passes out the homework. We pack up, get in line by the door, and wait to be dismissed. Mr. M. makes an announcement.

“This year the fifth graders voted to invite the fourth graders to the Winter Dance. Be sure to return the permission slip. We’re all excited, except some boys who groan.
Chapter 12
Sanitize

After school, Aunty picks us up from school. She opens the door and has a big smile for me.

“Guess what girls! We’re going to Noriko’s house!”

“Do I have to do homework today?” Malia whines.

“Of course honey,” Aunty says. “You can do it at Noriko’s.”

“Mommm, that’s not fair, Noriko doesn’t have to do her homework.”

My face gets hot and angry. I try to hold it in, but I can’t. I stare at Malia.

“Malia you’re driving me crazy. Wanna trade?” I growl. “Guess what? I rather do homework, I rather have detention every day than have Mom be sick and be stuck at your house!”

Malia looks shocked. She stares straight ahead for a moment. I can see her blood beginning to boil. She turns to me with a look of poison in her eyes.

“You tink I want to share my room all the time? Huh? You’re staying in my room, using my things. You think I want to spend every second of the day wit you already? Guess what—”

Suddenly the car jerks to the side of the road, our bodies sway with the turn, the car stops suddenly. Aunty shoves the car into park and pulls up the brake. She has one hand on the steering wheel. It seems like she grew to be ten feet tall. She turns to look at us in the back seat.

“Girls! Girls! Girls! Stop it! Both of you!” She glares at both of us and we’re both scared. Aunty closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. “Now I know everyone is stressed
out, yeah. But *dis* one important time for you to be kind to each other. We’re one family. We need to take care of each other like we’re *sistahs*. Like *bettah* den sistahs.” Aunty sighs again. “Ho. You girls.”

Malia and I are both trembling a little bit. We look at each other.

“Sorry.”

“Me too, sorry.”

Aunty releases the car break and the car lurches onto the road. We’re all silent as we head towards Mom.

Aunty drives us past the old empty King’s Movie Theater. The sign is gold and glamorous and faded. I love that empty building. I picture people back in olden times wearing their Sunday skinny-tie suits and dresses. Everything is in black and white. I picture the old movie theater with mirrors, chandeliers, and a big red heavy velvet curtain that opens mysteriously to a gigantic movie screen. My street is the same street as that movie theater, Wisteria Avenue.

Aunty drives up the hill and we’re home in five minutes. We’re home. I feel like I haven’t been home in a million years. I’m happy and relieved and afraid as we walk up the path to my house. I open the mailbox and grab the mail. I love getting the mail even though it’s hardly ever for me. I run to the door and am about to run in but Aunty shouts.

“Wait!”

“What!”

As she walks towards me, Aunty digs through her big bag and pulls out a little bottle of hand sanitizer.
“This stuff is kind of like gel soap except you don’t need water. It kills germs.”

“Uhuh, I know what it is.”

“We have it at school,” Malia says.

“We have to rub this on our hands before we touch the door knob. Then we’re going to go to the bathroom, wash our face and hands.” She squirts some on my hands and rubs it in. “Then we’re going to put on masks like doctors wear. Your Mom is really susceptible to germs right now.” She squirts some on Malia. “Then we’ll go sit with your Mom. Okay Noriko?”

“Okay.”

“Wait,” Aunty says. “Remember, we’re all here for your Mom. Be nice to each other. You don’t want to worry your Mom. You got it? Both of you.”

Malia and me nod in agreement. We leave our shoes at the door, walk in the house and I breath a sigh of relief. As we walk through the kitchen, I have an urge to open the refrigerator and look inside. I’m not hungry. I just want to see it full of stuff Mom buys. We head towards my bathroom.

“Mommm, we’re home!”

“We’ll be down in a minute!” Aunty shouts.

After we scrub up, we put on these baby-blue masks that just cover our nose and mouth. Aunty is pretending to like she’s snapping on rubber doctor gloves.

“Doctor Doogie Howser will be meeting us in surgery in five minutes. Let’s prep the patient,” says Aunty.

Malia and me look at each other like she’s nuts. Who is Doogie Howser?

“I thought Mom’s doctor was Dr. Pang.”
We walk down the hall to Mom and Dad’s room. Mom is awake and sitting up in bed. She’s wearing a mask too. Even though I can’t really see her face, her eyes seem more awake than they did at the hospital. Her eyes widen and she says, “Honey! I’m so excited you’re here!” She holds out her arms. They don’t have any tubes, just some band-aids.

“Come here,” Mom says. And I run to the bed and she gives me a big, long squeeze. Aunty and Malia are standing in the room.

“Noriko, your pictures look great!”

All of my pictures are taped to the wall. There is the card with the lei and hibiscus flower, the one with the lei and mango fruit, and the one with the pineapple, are all on the wall.

“Aren’t they fantastic drawings! Every time I wake up I look at them and they make me feel stronger,” Mom says.

“Oh shoot!” I say whacking my forehead. “I forgot your drawing in the car!”

“It’s okay honey, you can give it to me before you leave,” Mom says. “Everyday I get a new lei,” Mom says winking at Aunty.

“I wish I got a new lei, everyday.” Aunty replies, winking back.

I wonder what is up with all the winking.

“I’m making cards, too,” Malia says, “for Tony, he’s my Kris Kringle.”

“That’s fantastic, Malia. I’m so glad you’re making cards together,” Mom says.

“How was school today?” Mom asks.
“It was good, sort of. At recess I intercepted the football, but then, then, I forgot to run, but then our team got a touch-down anyway.” I say.

“Except our team won,” Malia says.

“That’s okay,” Mom and Aunty say.

“Yeah and guess what the fifth graders invited the fourth graders to their winter dance!”

“Cool.” Mom said. “Did you do any work in school today?”

“Oh yeah, like math and stuff,” I respond. Parents always want to talk about boring stuff?

“I’m excited for the dance!” Malia says.

“I am too, except that I can’t dance…” I explain.

“Like mother, like daughter,” Aunty says.

Again I don’t know what they’re talking about. Half the time grown-ups are talking in whispers and code. At least they don’t spell things out anymore. I remember the first time I figured out Dad was spelling out pizza. Dad used to ask Mom, ‘Should we go for P-I-Z-Z-A?’ Dad would spell out.

“Is it a formal dance?” Aunty asks.

“No duh, its in the cafeteria.” Malia says.

“Oh well, excuse me Miss Thing!” Aunty replies. Then mom’s eyes get bright, not hazy like at the hospital.

“Hmm. My daughter can’t dance?” Mom says. That sounds familiar doesn’t it?

“The pineapple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” Aunty says smiling.

“Mommm, pineapples don’t grow on trees,” Malia says.
“No duh,” Aunty says.

“I got it” Mom says flinging the covers off the bed and scooting her feet over the edge. Mom gets up. “We can teach them The Electric Slide!”

“The WHAT?” Malia and me say together.

“The Electric Slide, it’s a dance.” Aunty says. “Are you sure you’re up for that?” she asks Mom.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Mom says waving her hand like she’s shooing away some bug.

Mom is wearing her pajamas still. We shuffle into the family room where the couch, coffee table, television, and stereo are. Aunty shuffles through the music list until she finds ‘Disco Hits’.

“Mom that’s old music, they’re not going to play that at the dance!” I say.

“No matter, you can do this dance to lots of songs,” Mom says. “Okay girls, you sit on the couch and watch the magic. Plus, we got to remember how to do this and I don’t want to knock you over.”

“We just need to get into the groove;” Aunty says.

Malia and I look at each other like ‘Oh, no!’ Our moms are going to do something embarrassing again. We sit down and they stand next to each other. They’re not facing each other, and they’re like in a line. Aunty looks at Mom and says; “Ready Lani? On the count of three. 1-2-3!” They start to take two steps forward. Then they make a half a turn and a step to the side. They do a little shoulder half dip. Then they make a full circle turn but they both go in opposite direction.

“Whoops!” Mom says laughing. I look at Malia, we’re trying to hold our laughs in. Malia has her hand on her mouth. She’s thinking what I’m thinking. Our Moms are such
dorks, but they’re funny too. Mom and Aunty do another turn take a step and clap. Mom
bursts out laughing.

“Looking good in that mask,” Mom says laughing.

“Yeah, maybe you could ask Dr. Pang to fix your two left feet.” Aunty says
laughing through her face mask.”

“Ha, I’m getting it now,” Mom replies. I poke Malia in the arm. We look at each
other and start giggling. The giggles turn into big laughs. Malia and me are laughing so
hard that we’re doubled over on the couch.

“Oh, you girls think you could do better?” Mom says.

“Yeah? Come on! Get up here!” Aunty says. I stand next to Mom and Malia
stands next to Aunty.


We start to do the steps and then the turn. Except I go the wrong way. Mom starts
laughing and laughing. She’s laughing so hard that tears are coming out of her eyes. She
looks at me. “Oh, sweetie, looks like you got your dancing genes from me! Sorry honey.”
But I can tell she’s just playing with me. I guess we’re both not natural-born dancers.

Aunty starts the song again. We dance. We dip and slide and turn and dance,
dance, dance. We all get really good at The Electric Slide. The four of us are dancing in-
sync without messing up.

Suddenly, there’s a flash, and we all look up. Dad’s has a camera.

“Dad!” I yell.

“We didn’t even hear you come in,” Mom says.

“Looks like we’ve got the QHDT here,” Dad says laughing at us through his mask.
“Huh?” we say.

“The Queen’s Hospital Dance Team,” he says.

We all fumble onto the couch, laughing at each other, and Dad takes another picture of us.

“Dad! So embarrassing!” But really I think it’s funny too.

“Let me get your family portrait,” Aunty says laughing. “You can use it for your Christmas cards.”

The three of us sit on the couch with our masks on. We’re making funny faces like wiggling our eyebrows and crossing our eyeballs, while Aunty takes our picture.

“Let me take a picture of Malia and Aunty.” They make funny faces too.

“Noriko get in here!” Aunty says. I sit with Malia and Aunty. Mom’s sitting on the big comfy chair. Dad’s snapping away like a professional movie star photographer.

“Kay, now just Malia and me.”

“What! I’m not good enough?” Aunty jokes.

Dad takes our picture while we do silly dance poses. I notice Mom falling asleep. Aunty looks at Mom. “We should get back home, I have make dinner and these girls have homework to do too.” Mom’s eyes open up.

“Girls that was the best time I’ve had in a long time.” I can tell, even through the mask, she’s smiling. Mom is smiling for real. I get some clothes and stuff. I give Mom and Dad big hugs. Me and Malia and Aunty take off our masks and walk to the car. Aunty starts the car.

“Wait!” I scream. Aunty jumps in her seat.

“What! What!”
“I forgot my card!” I say digging through my book-bag. I pull out the card, run into the house. I hear Malia call my name but I ignore it. Mom is napping in the big chair.

“Mom your card!”

She opens her eyes for a minute. “Oh thank you honey.” Mom cradles the card, holding it close to her chest, and closes her eyes. “Thank you,” she mumbles. She’s already falling asleep but I give her one last big hug before I run out of the house and into the idling car. Quietly, Aunty drives us back to Malia’s place.
Chapter 13

Full Moon

We get to Malia’s house, and leave our shoes at the door. Inside we wash our hands. Aunty starts the rice cooker. We plop on the floor to start our homework. The rhythm of the sound of Aunty chopping vegetables fills the room. She is chopping onions, bok choy, and slicing ham into little cubes. We have to do single digit multiplication problems, which isn’t that hard for me, like 4 x 35. When it’s all double digits, like 27 x 14, I get stuck. I have a hard time remembering all the steps and the different ways to solve the problem. Malia is way better than me in math. But I’m better than her with reading and stuff. So we help each other sometimes.

“Malia, how do you do this?”

“Maybe if you did your homework last night, you would know.”

“Shut up. C’mon.”

Aunty is taking a couple of eggs and shoyu sauce from the refrigerator. She puts downs the eggs. “Malia,” Aunty says with the look and sits on the floor next to us. She shows me how to take each digit in the bottom number and multiply it with each digit in the top number. You go the opposite of reading, right to left. You use zeros to hold the place. You add it all up.


“Sure it is, I am very good at math,” Aunty says.

“Well, me too,” Malia says, “and that’s not how Mr. Matsumoto showed us.”

“How does Mr. Matsumoto solve it?” I ask.

Aunty gets up to finish making dinner.
“I dunno, I need finish MY homework first, since I HAVE to do my homework,” says all mean and bratty. I’m stunned. I don’t what to do.

“Malia. Get up. GET UP!” Aunty says, “Come with me NOW.”

Malia follows Aunty out of the kitchen and down the hall. I muddle my way through the next problem, but mostly I feel like crying. Malia is mad at me and I just want to go home already. I don’t care if need to walk around in a hamster bubble. Then it comes to me. I remember.

I remember running into my house. At my house, after dancing, and we were in the car and I almost forgot to give Mom her card. So then I dug through my backpack really quickly, grabbed the card, and ran into the house. Oh My God. I went into the house without my mask on. I didn’t use sanitizer on my hands or a mask or anything. Oh no, Oh my god. I gave her germs just like the doctor said I would. And I gave Mom a kiss. Oh no, no, no. I’m making Mom sick again. What do I do? I’ll tell Aunty. She’ll know what to do. Oh I can’t, I can tell Aunty is having a serious talk with Malia. I know I’m not supposed to interrupt. Oh Mom. I can’t hold it in. I’m sobbing like a baby now. What do I do? Then I remember I am supposed to call home when there is an emergency. I pick up the phone. I remember the number. I call home.

“Dad!” Then I just start balling and I can’t breathe to get any words in.

“Noriko? What’s the matter?”

“Dad.” And I can’t breathe enough to get the words out between sobs.

“Come on honey, calm down, and breathe.”

“I. I. I…”

“Is Aunty there?”
“I. I…I put my hands in my backpack full of school germs, and, and, and…”


“Dad! See! Dad, I gave Mom germs! From the backpack!”

“Noriko, what’re you talking about?”

I hear Dad waking up Mom. I hear him talking to Mom. “Lani, wake up. Noriko is very upset about something, about germs from a backpack.”

“Dad, I, I…after dancing, after we all left the house, I…I… I ran back inside. I just wanted…I just…I didn’t mean to, I just, just…” I’m sobbing so much I have a difficult time getting it out.

“Lani,” Dad is talking to Mom. “Wake up, Noriko is very, very upset about a backpack or something.” Then Dad is talking to me again. “Okay, breathe, you just…”

“I just wanted to give Mom her new card…and…and…and I forgot to put on my mask. It was a mistake. I forgot to put on my mask. And no sanitizer. It was a mistake. I forgot about the sanitizer and the mask.

“When you gave Mom her card, you forgot to wear the mask?”

“Uhuh. We all got in the car after the photos. Then I remembered the card so, so I ran in the house with it and I didn’t use sanitizer or anything! I’m going to make Mom get sick again!”

“Hold on honey. I don’t think so. Mom’s awake and fine. I’m going to put her on the phone in a minute but first where is Aunty?”

“She’s,” I notice Aunty and Malia standing in the kitchen staring at me. There mouths are in a straight line and they look serious. Malia’s eyes are all crying-red.
“Honey, I’m going to put your mother on the phone in a minute, but first, put Aunty on the phone. Hold on just a minute, okay sugar?”

“I’m not sure what she’s talking about Kam,” Aunty says looking at me and smiling that fake grown-up everything-is-fine-smile. “Your mother’s on the phone,” Aunty says handing the telephone back to me.

“Noriko? What’s the matter?” Mom says. And just to hear her voice. Just the sound of Mom’s voice helps me breathe.

“Mom! I’m sorry! I ran back into the house to give you the card and I forgot to put on my mask and stuff.”

“Ohhhh, THAT. Noriko you were only in the house for a minute. I’m sure you didn’t get any germs for the second you were outside.

“But, but I touched my backpack with school germs on it.’

“Noriko, Noriko it’s okay. You were very scrubbed up. And I feel terrific. Your visit and your picture, your cards, do more for my health than a thousand blue masks.”

“Mom,” I’m not crying anymore, but in gasps, I have to suck in air to breathe.

“Listen, I’m fine. And I really can’t wait for your next visit and I feel fine. Listen, why don’t you call me at bedtime, and we’ll check on each other. Okay sweetheart? We’ll talk later tonight, okay? I’m fine. Now let me talk to Aunty for a minute.”

I get off the phone, and Aunty talks to Mom. Aunty hangs up the telephone and turns around to face Malia and me. “Wooh, what a day huh? I think we all need some dinner.” Malia and I set the table.

“Malia. Don’t you have something to say,” states Aunty.

“Sorry Noriko. Sorry I didn’t help you with your homework.”
“It’s okay.”

Dinner is quiet. We just watch T.V. Uncle Joe comes through the door and sees us finishing up dinner.

“I’m having dinner by myself tonight?” he asks.

“I’ll explain later,” Aunty says.

“Is Lani okay?” he asks noticing our somber looks.

“She’s fine, just fine, I’ll explain later.”

“I’m going to call her at bedtime to check on her,” I explain.

“We had a little scare is all,” Aunty says.

After dinner and television, we get ready for bed. Aunty braids Malia’s hair for her. I’m jealous. I remember what Mom said about my hair being like hers and like tutu’s hair. when Uncle Joe comes and announces, “Come see the moon. It’s full.”

In our pajamas, we all shuffle out to the lanai. We look out from their house on Wilhelmina Rise and Diamond Head looks like a large, dark shadow next to the lights of Waikiki. In the distance, the moon hangs over the ocean. The ocean looks like black glass and the moon shines a white beam, like a stage light, across the water. Little white stars sparkle. Wisps of thin clouds, lit by the moon, float lazily across the sky. I feel melancholy and sad, but somehow gazing at the moon, the ocean, and our island eases the sadness. There’s a slight breeze that make the palm trees flutter. The leaves make a soft flapping sound like a thousand tiny birds. The moon makes me think. The moon makes me think about how things are really hard sometimes. Sometimes things being hard, makes you do things differently. Like I know Malia and them, wouldn’t be standing here looking at the moon, if it wasn’t for Mom being sick. And it’s a good thing to stop and gaze at the moon.
I know we wouldn’t have done The Electric Slide today, if Mom wasn’t sick and that’s a good thing too. And I’m trying to grow up and help Mom. I guess that’s a good thing too. Normally, we just would be doing regular, everyday stuff. I want life to be normal again but I try to think about the moon and learning to draw a wave. And I’m going to make sure Mom gets better. Aunty has her arms around both Malia and me. Uncle Joe interrupts my thoughts.

“You know when the moon is full it has extra *mana*…that it’s an especially powerful magic time.”

“Let’s call your mother and get you girls to bed.”

“Dad? It’s me, Noriko.”

“How’re you doing honey?”

“Okay.”

“You’re mother’s doing great Noriko. Let me get her. Hold on.”

I wait for a really, really, long minute, then Mom gets on the phone.

“Noriko honey?”

“Hi Mom.”

“How you doing sweetie?”

“Okay.”

“Oh good. I’m feeling really good too. Especially when I think about us doing The Electric Slide. Hey, isn’t a little late?”

“Yeah, Uncle Joe wanted us to see the moon. Did you see it?”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Uhuh.”
“Okay sweetie, I don’t want you to worry. I’m feeling really good. Don’t you worry. You’ll be home really soon, I promise.”

“You promise? Really?”

“You, I miss my baby.” Usually, I would remind Mom that I’m not a baby, but tonight I kind of want to be her baby. “Sweet dreams.”

“Goodnight Mom.”

“Dad wants to say goodnight too.”

“Hey, sweet dreams. I’m tucking you in.”

When we get to bed, I fall asleep so fast that I don’t even feel myself falling asleep. In the middle of the night, Malia kicks me. She’s doing The Electric Slide in her dreams. I can’t fall back asleep. I’m thinking again. Then I remember that I didn’t make Mom a card. I quietly slip out of bed. I tiptoe to Malia’s desk. I snatch her tin of markers. I blindly feel my way down the hall and into the kitchen. I turn on the light; take some paper from the art box, and slide open the door to the lanai. The moon is nearly sitting on the ocean now. I remember that the moon moves across the sky. Looking at the moon, thinking about waves and Mom, I grab the markers. I know I’m finally ready, I’m ready to draw Mom a wave, in color, with markers. I draw a wave with different blues and blue-greens in it. I outline the white foam with a black marker. I use the black marker to give the wave shape and curl. It’s a good wave. Next, I draw a pink plumeria lei around it to make it happy and bright. Then I have another good idea. I outline a circle nearly touching the wave, and that’s the moon. He moon will add extra special mana. I stare at my picture. My eyes get heavy and I fall asleep right there in my arms, outside on the lanai.
In my half-sleep, I feel Uncle Joe pick me up. I’m awake enough to hold my drawing. Uncle Joe carries me to bed, lays me down, and Malia turns over. He takes the drawing out of my hand and places it on her desk. I fall asleep.
Chapter 14

Home Visit

It feels like I was asleep for only a minute when the alarm clock rings. I jump out of bed before Malia can push me to the floor. Malia drives me crazy but she’s my best friend so I tell her she can have the bathroom first. While Malia is showering, I get the markers and draw a Kris Kringle card to Tony for Malia. It’s a wave, not a fancy one, like for Mom. This wave is only one color blue and then I make a Santa on the beach wearing a red hat, red jams, and slippers. I sign it From Your Secret Admirer.

When Malia comes in, she looks bummed.

“Look Malia!” I hold up the card. “I made a Kris Kringle card for you to give Tony cause I know you didn’t get time last night.”

Malia brightens.

“Tanks Noriko! You’re my best friend forevah.”

“You too, yeah.”

I get ready for school, place my drawing in my folder, and climb into Aunty’s car. There are heavy clouds in the sky. The school bell rings, we enter Mr. Matsumoto’s class, and the weird thing is, nobody trips anyone.

Mr. Matsumoto teaches us about multiplication again. I’m so relieved that he’s teaching it again because double-digit multiplication is kind of hard for me right now. For Social Studies, he gives us a sheet to read and do about the Revolutionary War. It’s raining now. When I pull out my highlighter, I see a note in my desk. It says ‘Are you going to the dance?’ I try to read about America in the olden days but I can’t keep my eyes open. I try to
read but the words blur together. I feel my head conk against the desk and hear giggles flutter across the room. I lift my head and see Mr. Matsumoto’s face right there, which makes me jump a little. He puts his hand on my shoulder. “Why don’t you go to the nurse Noriko.”

The nurse’s office is a little room next to the principal’s office. The nurse is a big woman who can be warm and smiling or can be mean and scary. She reads the note from Mr. Matsumoto. Today, she’s warm and friendly and wearing a blue muumuu. She takes me around the fake wall where the doctor bed thing with the white tissue paper is. “Why don’t you lay down here for a minute Noriko,” she says looking at the note again.

I lie down, listen to rain fall and the grown-ups chatter and fall asleep. At lunchtime, she wakes me up and sends me to the cafeteria. Malia and I get in the lunch line.

“Noriko,” she whispers, “I got one note asking if I was going to da dance.”

“Me too!”

“Nobody signed it.”

“Me too.”

We look at each other wide-eyed, nervous, and excited.

It’s raining, so we have to stay inside. Some boys are playing Game Boys. The boys that always have their game cards are playing with them, as usual. Girls are playing Chinese jump rope, Chinese jacks, and regular jacks too. Val, Julie, me, and Malia do Chinese jump rope for a while. Julie is super good. The elastic rope is raised all the way to her waist. She’s so good that we get bored.

“I know,” I say. “Let’s teach ‘em Da Electric Slide!”

“Huh?”
“Yeah Yeah,” Malia says, “Kay den, you guys sit down and watch us, then we’ll teach you kay?”

We dance for Val and Julie. The first time, I turn the wrong way, but then I get it. They laugh but they want to try it too.

“Our moms taught us yesterday.”

Val and Julie join us in the dance line. Soon the four of us are all doing The Electric Slide in time. Some other girls join us too. One of the girls, Lisa, already knows how to do it. Then some boys come and sit on the table with their Game Boys halfway watching us. They’re laughing, but we can tell they’re impressed.

“What’re you doing?” Tony asks.

“The Electric Slide.”

“I seen my Mom’s friends do dat at one party once,” John says. Das one old people dance yeah?”

“Nuhuh,” Malia says.

The boys focus back to their Game Boys. We dance until the bell rings. Mr. M. collects us and asks me how I’m doing. I tell him good. It’s raining but we’re doing good. We’re dancing and there’s the moon, and the waves, and magic markers.

After school, Aunty picks us up, drives us through the rain to my house. I grab my card before we pile out of the car. At the door we apply sanitizer, and then enter the house.

“Mom we’re here! Be down in a minute!”

In the bathroom, we scrub up, pull our blue masks over our faces and make Kabuki eyebrows at each other. In the living room, Mom’s propped up on the couch with a pillow
behind her and a sheet covering her up to her waist. Within reach, magazines are scattered across the coffee table, a detective novel lies on its side, and a glass of lemon water sweats. Mom with her disheveled hair, looks like she just woke up. She pulls on a mask. Aunty fixes Mom’s hair. She looks at us.

“Howzit Lani?” Aunty asks.

“I was having a fantastic dream, another surfing dream.”

“Here’s your card Mom, it’s a wave!”

She claps. “Wow! So beautiful! I didn’t know you could draw waves.”

“Aunty taught me.”

“She’s been practicing a lot,” Aunty says.

“I drew it last night and this is the moon. Uncle Joe says the full moon adds special mana, makes us extra strong, so that’s why I put the moon over the wave.

“I see.” Mom gives me a nice long hug. Mom’s hug feels stronger today. “I’m sorry you were upset yesterday,” she whispers into my ear. “I’m getting stronger and stronger. Don’t you worry,”

Something about this makes me want to cry. I give Mom an extra tight squeeze.

“Ugh, careful honey, you’re choking me,” she says laughing.

I let go.

“How was school today girls?”

“Great!” Malia and me say.

“Wow great! I haven’t heard that in a long time,” Aunty says.

“We both got notes asking if we were going to the dance.”

“Who gave them to you?”
“We dunno.”

“Hmm. Interesting.”

“And guess what.”

“What?”

“At recess, we had to stay inside yeah, cause of the rain. We got bored playing Chinese jump rope cause Julie can go forever without getting out.”

“So guess what,” Malia says.

“What?”

“So den we showed Val and Julie how to dance!”

Mom claps.

“You girls will be the hit of the parade!” Aunty says.

“Parade?” we say.

“It’s an expression. Like you girls gonna be the belles of the ball,” Mom says.

“Huh?” we say.

“It’s like saying SUPERSTAR!”

“Ohhh.”

“Let’s practice,” Mom says.

This time we form two lines, Malia and me are in the front line; Mom and Aunty are the back line. It’s harder this way because we’re leading, but we’re pretty good already. We’re synchronized like soulful swimmers. After we dance through the song twice, Mom sits back down on the couch. Aunty sits down in Dad’s chair. Malia and me sit cross-legged on the floor.
“I’ve seen the beginning of so many movies this week. I’m gonna have to watch them all over so I can see how they end.

“How come only the beginning?” Malia asks.

“Cause I keep falling asleep. And I never thought I get bad breath until now. Keep these masks on too long and they start smelling like your Dad’s farts.” Mom winks at me.

“I’m going to see Doctor Pang tomorrow, then we’ll find out when you’re coming home. I know it’ll be real soon.”

Aunty makes us practice our times tables. I run to my room to get my multiplication chart so we can test each other. In my room, I have to stop for a minute, and just take in my room, my snoopy, my alarm clock, and my bed. I lay on my bed for a minute hugging Snoopy, thinking about coming home. When I hear Malia yell for me I jump up because hugging stuffed animals is kind of for kids. I grab the times table chart, and run back down stairs. Aunty sets the timer and does stuff around the house for Mom. Finally, the timer goes off.

“Can we make cards now?” Malia shouts.

“Sure honey,” Aunty shouts from the kitchen.

Moms are always in the kitchen. We get up and run to my room. At my house, the art supplies are in my room. I open my art drawer. There’s scissors, Elmer’s glue, glitter, my special gummy art eraser, yarn, scotch tape, stickers, and stuff. I grab some construction paper and shove stuff around to get markers but I don’t see them. I look under the construction paper, under the yarn, under everything.

“Where are my markers?”
We open all my drawers. We look under everywhere, even under the bed and in the closet.

“Mommm!” I yell. “Mommm, where are my markers?” Then I remember. I was in the hospital with Mom and I was drawing and stuff. I must have left them in the hospital. Oh I hope Mom and Dad remembered to pack my markers when Mom came back home.

We run into the living room.

“Ssh,” Aunty hushes us. “She’s sleeping.”

“But Aunty, I need to ask Mom if she has my markers.”

“Let your mother rest kay.”

“But Aunty, it’s really important,” I whisper.

“Don’t you think it can wait sweetie?” Aunty says.

“I guess so.”

I feel like crying, but I hold it in. I don’t know why I want to cry over markers, I just do. I feel kind of silly. I don’t really know how to tell Aunty how important finding my markers is. I know I need to be tough and strong for Mom and not bother her too much. Plus, I don’t want to cry in front of Malia or Aunty or Mom. Aunty is writing a note about what food is in the freezer. I add, ‘Love you Mom. Get better soon. Dad I love you too.’

We’re about to leave, but then I think of it.

“Wait!” I run to my room, grab the tape, and tiptoe to the living room. I tape Mom’s wave card to the window so she can dream. Mom can dream about surfing with the moon at midnight.
We’re sitting at Malia’s kitchen table. The white rice cooker’s orange light is glowing and the metal cover is steaming. Aunty is making teriyaki beef. I’m pissed because Malia’s done with her homework. She’s already decorating her card for Tony. I have to read my social studies from when I fell asleep in class. I know it’s not her fault, but still, I’m mad at her. I look at Malia’s card.

“You still can’t spell admirer! Jeez! It’s A-D-M-I-R-E-R.”

Aunty shoots me a look so I go back to reading my social studies about. There’s a knock on the door. I look up. I see Dad through the screen door.

“Dad!” I jump up.

He walks in. I give Dad a big hug. He picks me up and squeezes tight.

“Staying for dinner Kam?” Aunty asks.

“No thanks, I’ll just stop at Zippy’s on the way home.” He looks at me. I’m on my way home to take care of your Mom, but I needed a little Mango time first.”

“You sure you can’t stay for dinner?” I ask.

“Do you know what you’re going to wear to the dance?” Malia asks me.

“I dunno.”

“Dance?” Dad says as he moves to the chair at the table. I climb into his lap.

“Duh, Dad. That’s why we’ve been practicing.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right,” he says nodding his head.

“Maybe my sparkly red ‘princess t-shirt, what you think?’

“Nah. Too many girls got dat shirt,” Malia replies.

“How about my striped ‘rock star’ t-shirt?”

“Hmm.” Malia tilts her head thoughtfully. “With your blue skirt?”
“Yeah, yeah. Dad can you bring over my blue skirt and my ‘rock star’ t-shirt?”

Dad looks kind of like he’s lost.

“I’ll find it honey,” he says.

Dads aren’t really good at that stuff. I know some dads are good at that kind of stuff, but not any dads I know.

“Daaaaaadd.” I pinch his ear. “Are you sure you’re gonna remember?”

“Sure, it’s not rocket science. When’s the dance?”

“Daaaaadd! On Friday,”

“Okay honey okay!” He gives me another squeeze and says he has to get going. I think I scared him away with the clothes stuff. I get back to doing my social studies homework and being mad at Malia again. She can just open her closet and wear whatever she wants to the dance, and her Mom knows what her clothes look like. Aunty probably knows my clothes better than Dad does. Finally, just before dinner, I finish my homework and Uncle Joe comes home. I wish MY dad were having dinner with us. No, I wish I were having dinner at Zippy’s with Dad and we were both on our way home.

After dinner I start a wave card for Mom. My cards have to help her get better. At 8:00pm we’re supposed to get ready for bed and I’m really, really tired, but I have to finish.

“Aunty can I finish my card first?”

“Well, I think you should get a good nights rest.”

“Please.”

“Why don’t you let Noriko finish,” Uncle Joe says.

“Well alright, but why don’t you get ready for bed first, then finish your card.”
Malia and I are in the bathroom. I’m trying to brush my teeth super fast so I can get back into the kitchen and finish my card. Malia glares at me.

“What you rushing for, you get to go back in the kitchen anyway. I never get to stay up past my bedtime,” she spits.

“Ehh, don’t hassle me Malia,”

“Ehh, you da one hassle me,” she says spitting again, turning away, and leaving me alone in the bathroom. While I finish brushing my teeth, I think about how Malia’s going to miss me when I go home. I think about how she’s going to feel bad about being mean and she’s going to wish I was still here, but I’m going to be too busy helping Mom with grown-up stuff. She’s going to invite me for a sleepover and I’m going to tell her I’m too busy to do kids stuff like have sleepovers. Then she’ll be sorry. Then I feel kind of bad myself. Aunty and Uncle Joe go to Malia’s room to tuck her in and I go back to the kitchen to finish my card. They spend a long time tucking in Malia. I’m almost finished when they come back. My card has a wave but this time I put in a beach and a sun rising from behind the wave, and of course a lei around the whole picture. This Plumeria lei is orange to go with the sun. When I’m done, I’m so super tired and I fall asleep in a second.
Chapter 15

Thief!

The alarm buzzes. I jump to standing position on the bed so that Malia can’t push me off.

“Ha!” I throw my arms up in the air like I’m going to attack. She rolls off the bed while getting into Kung-Fu stance. She turns and faces me while making the Kung Fu flapping flying noise. We’re ready for battle. I fake towards the left and then run around her towards the right, sprinting towards the bathroom.

“Touché!” she shouts from behind me.

Aunty drives us to school, commenting about the rain stopping. Malia and me give each other a disappointed look. We’re both thinking the same thing. We want to practice the dance at recess, but if it’s sunny than nobody will want to practice. At school, we plop ourselves on the bench next to Val and Julie.

“You make a card for Tony?”

“Yeah, Wanna see it?”

Everyone is impressed with the cursive T – O – N – Y and the dancing reindeer on the beach under a coconut tree. There’s a surfboard leaning against the tree. Rudolph is in the middle, standing on his hind legs, wearing shades. There’s a girl reindeer, standing upright in a hula skirt; next to her is a cartoon voice bubble saying, ‘Are you going to the dance?’

Val says, “No more Secret Admiral?”

Except for Malia, we all start laughing. Malia gives Val stink eye. Malia hands me her card so I can sneak it into Tony’s desk.
“How’s your Mom?” Val asks.

“She’s okay. I made a card for my mom. You wanna see it?”

I hand the card over.

“Wow nice,” Val and Julie say. “Yeah, waves are hard to draw yeah?”

Just then, John and Tony saddle up to the bench.

“What’s that?” Tony says.

“A card for my mom.”

“Oh,” Tony says. “You draw waves good.”

I beam brightly.


Malia turns red. Looks like steam is going to come out of her ears. Val and Julie look at each other like two detectives discovering a clue.

“No it doesn’t,” Malia says.

“Yeah your wave was just one color,” I say.

“Oh really?” Julie says.

“How do you know wave girl?” John says.

The fifth grade girls walk by and we all get quiet. The morning bell rings just in time, and we all shuffle into the classroom. Mr. M. asks how I’m doing. I mumble okay and unpack fast because I want to see my desk. There’s another note in my desk. ‘Are you going to the dance?’ it says. I look over at Malia and she’s opening a note too. She steals a glance at Tony, then looks at me and makes her eyes big. Mr. M. sees everything. He’s standing behind his desk.
“Three more minutes!” he calls out. “Tony, can you come here for a minute,” then Mr. M. looks at me and nods. I slip Malia’s reindeer card into Tony’s desk. Only I’m tired of helping Malia with sneaking the cards. Why doesn’t she just tell him already and get it over with. If Mr. M. wasn’t being nice and giving me the signal, I’d just forget about her stupid Kris Kringle cards.

We do school work, cursive, math, and stuff. I stay awake through Social Studies. Finally, the lunch bell rings. No school lunch for us today. Malia and I open our Tupper Wares. We have leftover teriyaki and rice for lunch. We sit down across from each other. Malia gives me stink-eye.

“You still like Tony,” she accuses.

“Nuhuh.”

“How come you made da card then?” She’s whispering mad. “You trying steal Tony or what? I thought we was bes’ friends. I let you stay at my house and you repay me like dis! I can not EVEN believe you right now.”

Julie and Val come and sit down with their lunch trays.

“Nuhuh,” I say. “Malia, I was just--”

“Shut up. Shut up.”

And the weird thing is, I do. I shut up. It’s not like me, but I want to cry and I can’t talk.

Malia looks at Val and Julie, and then looks at my lunch. “Eating my lunch too!”

My hands are shaking. I hate her so much right now; I want to kill her. I want to dump these stupid leftovers all over her head. I stand up. With my hands on the teriyaki
Tupper Ware, I stare her down. She looks at the lunch. Malia knows what I’m thinking. I breathe in and just shove the container towards her so she can catch it and then walk away.

Now what do I do? I want to cry but I got to be tough, so I walk real easy and slow out the cafeteria. I head straight for the bathroom. It seems so far away right now. I finally get to the bathroom as two sixth graders leave. The bathroom seems empty.

Usually I hate the school bathroom; it’s all concrete and metal. It’s painted three different shades of dingy grey. I walk passed the row of bathroom stalls. The bathroom is completely empty and I’m relieved to be by myself. I go into a bathroom stall at the back. I lock the door, I can’t hold in the tears anymore. The tears come streaming down. It’s just too much: Mom and Malia and Tony. I just want to go home already. It’s too, too much. In the bathroom stall, I cry quietly; letting tears come out but not sound. Suddenly, I am pulled out of my own darkness by the squeak of a bathroom door, the clipping sound of shoes, and voices. I grab toilet paper to dry my eyes. I recognize Malia’s voice.

“I can’t believe she’s trying to steal Tony. She’s so sneaky.”

“C’mon Malia,” Julie says, “I don’t think she’s trying to steal Tony away.”

“Why’d Tony pick her for HIS dodge ball team?”

“Dodge ball? You crazy?”

“She’s a better dodge ball player than you, das why.” Val says.

“So,” Malia retorts.

“So boys don’t think li’ dat,” replies Val.

My ears are burning. I’m so glad Val and Julie haven’t lost their minds and are standing up for me. Should I leave the bathroom stall or should I hide in here until they leave. What if they catch me listening in here?
“How come they were the last two in the middle then,” Malia says.

“BECAUSE she’s good at dodge ball. C’mon already.”

“I think its cause John likes you,” Julie says.

“What?!"

I blow my nose and the talking stops. I flush the toilet to disguise that I was hiding, take a deep breath and step out. But I’m not calm.

“Malia! I made dat card for you cause I was being nice, cause you didn’t have time, cause we were at my house, and cause…”

“Whatever,” but she says it, almost nice, like it really doesn’t matter. She’s less pissed, still pissed but I can see there’s less venom in her eyes.

Megan and some other fifth graders saunter into the bathroom. Standing in front of the mirror, they stare at themselves.

“I’m so fat,” one of the girls says, even though she’s not fat.

“No you’re not. I’m fat,” replies another thin fifth grader.

Megan digs through her bag pulling out eyeliner. They’re standing in front of the sinks and mirrors putting on blue eyeliner and mascara. Megan looks at us, brings the blue pencil up to her eye, and says, “You KIDS coming to da dance tomorrow?”

“Uhuh.” We all nod. It is so irritating when bigger kids call other people kids, like they’re so grown-up. At the same time there is something a little intimidating about the fifth graders. Megan pulls the bottom of her eyelid down a little so she can color the inside part blue. I don’t know how to put make-up on like that.

“We voted to let the fourth graders come to the dance this year,” she says.

“Nice yeah?” her friend says.
“Yeah, thanks,” says Val rolling her eyes.

“It’s just cause some of da fourth grade boys are cute,” says another one.

“You guys going to practice da dance at recess?”

“Yeah,” Malia says.

“Kay den, see you out there,” Megan says.

“Only if you wear a blue surgical mask to match your eyes,” I say.

“What?” she says.

“Nothing.”

Malia looks at me and giggles as we go out the door. Outside, the boys are playing football. We go to our spot under the Monkey Pod tree. Malia and me are standing in the middle of the line next to each other. We don’t have any music, so we practice by counting together while we do The Electric Slide. When we get bored of that some girls do other dances to like Hip Hop dances from videos and stuff. I sit on the bench under the tree and watch for a minute. Malia comes and sits next to me and starts digging through her lunch bag. She pulls out my lunch that I had left in the cafeteria.

“Sorry I got all bent out of shape and stupid angry yeah. I didn’t mean it. You hungry?”

“Kind of.”

“Here’s your lunch, she says handing the Tupperware of teriyaki over to me. We sit on the bench and watch the girls dance until recess is over. Like magic, everyone has music in their head.
After school, Dad comes to pick me up. Malia goes home with her Mom. She waves goodbye from the car.

“Dad I’m hungry,” I say stepping into our car.

“You want a snack?”

“Yeah, Zippy’s,” I say tugging at the seatbelt and clicking it into the buckle.

“Mango, I just went there yester-”

“Please Dad!”

“Oh, all right,” he says, leaning over and giving me a kiss on the forehead.

Dad and I sit at Zippy’s eating our chili and rice. I tell him about how bad my day sucked at first. I tell Dad about how Malia thought I drew her card for Tony to trick him into liking me but that I thought I was just being nice. I tell him about our big fight at lunch over teriyaki leftovers. Dad told me not to say sucked. I told him about hiding in the bathroom and then dancing at recess. I told him about Malia sharing her lunch after all. Dad talked about how sometimes friends get in fights but that if they are true friends then they become friends again. Dad said that he really liked the wave picture and that Mom was especially excited to see me today. I scoop up my last bite of chili and rice from the orange, checkered paper bowl. I like coming here and talking to Dad.

At home, we sanitize, scrub up, and go downstairs to the living room. Mom is sitting up and looking wide-awake. I can tell she’s smiling behind her blue mask.

“We went to Dr. Pang today. I have good news, want to know what it is?”

“Yeah.”

“Dr. Pang says you can come home tomorrow!”

I jump up and give Mom a giant hug.
“Can I have one too?” So I give Dad a big hug too. “We missed our little mango, you’ve been very brave,” he whispers into my ear.

“So have you Dad,” I whisper back. “Wait!” I jump and run upstairs dig through my book-bag and pull out my wave card for Mom. I run back downstairs and show it to Mom. She looks elated, grinning brightly through the mask.

“It’s terrific Noriko, I especially love the reindeer dancing on the beach.”

“Now Noriko,” Dad looks serious. “Sit down here,” he says patting the couch. I get nervous and ready for bad news. “Noriko,” he says, “Mom’s not all better yet.”

I’m starting to get mad inside. I know she’s not all better. She’s wearing a surgical mask!

“Mom is still going to have to go to the doctor every week and we’re really going to need your help.”

“I’m a good helper.” I don’t want them or Dr. Pang to change their minds.

“I know you’re a good helper, sweetheart,” Mom says. “I’m going to need your help watering the plants.” Our house looks like a rainforest because Mom loves plants. “And I’m going to need your help with cleaning the bathroom, with laundry and with making dinner. Do you think you can handle all of those grown-up responsibilities?”

“Uuhuh.” They’ll see how much they need me when I help out with all the grown-up chores, not just my kid chores.

“We also need to keep the house really clean and sanitized until my immune system builds up, you know until I get strong again,” Mom says.

“Okay. I’ll keep my room really clean. I promise.” Mom and Dad smile at this. They look like they want to laugh. “Umm. Mom. Dad. Umm. But what about the dance
tomorrow? Will I still be able to go if I have all these grown responsibilities and stuff?
Malia and me have been practicing lots. I think Malia would be really upset if I didn’t go.”

“Malia would be upset huh? But you don’t mind staying home?” Dad says.

“Well…”

“I’m just playing with you. Of course you can go,” Dad says.

“We’re not going to make you into Cinderella or anything,” Mom says.

“We’ll get your skirt and rock star t-shirt. Tomorrow you and Malia can get ready together at their house.”

“Can Malia spend the night?” I ask.

“Hmmm,” Dad thinks.

“Great idea!” Mom says. “We’ll talk to Aunty and see if that’s okay.”

I jump to Mom and give her another hug because she’s the best Mom in the whole world, even better than Aunty, who’s the second best Mom ever.

“Remember that even though you’re coming home, Mom is still sick, and we’ll need to be clean and help your mother.”

“Okay,” I nod seriously. And I’m feeling angry inside again. I don’t know why.


I’m proud and ready to have all the grown-up responsibilities. And I’m so stoked that Malia is going to spend the night at MY house.

“Mango, we’re really excited you’re coming home tomorrow,” Dad says.

“Me too.”

Dad tapes my picture to the window.
Mom and me go to my room. She sits on the bed while I pack. I pack my regular stuff and my dance stuff. Mom reminds me to pack socks. I tell Mom about my day and the card mishap, about the bathroom and recess dance practice and everything. When we’re done, Dad takes me to Malia’s house. I give him a big kiss on the cheek. His cheek feels scratchy.

“Dad everything is gonna be okay. I’ll take care of stuff, kay Dad? And I’m gonna make Mom’s best card ever and she’s going to get all better.”

“I can’t wait to see it.” He gives me a hug. Then he beeps the horn twice and Malia comes running to greet me. Now that I know I’m going home tomorrow, it feels like a real slumber party. I wave bye to Dad, take off my slippers, leave them at the door, and go into the kitchen.

“We’re going to have a sleep-over at your house tomorrow after the dance!” Malia exclaims.

Aunty looks up from her cooking.

“I hope you like tuna casserole.”

I love tuna casserole, but I hate peas. When Mom cooks it, she puts in olives instead of peas. Actually, I hate olives too. So, I guess there’s no difference between avoiding olives or peas. Still, my mom’s casserole is better. Still, peas and all, I’m so happy to be here tonight. I start to notice things around the kitchen and etch them into my brain. I notice the faded, signed Magnum P.I. poster. I notice last years photo Christmas cards magnetized to the refrigerator. There’s one from us and there’s one of them. There’s a really old drawing of a rainbow that Malia must have drawn in like second grade. It says ‘To Mom and Dad. I lov you. From Malia.’ All the letters are big and uneven. Malia’s
homework is on the kitchen table. Mail is sitting in the corner stacked against the wall.

Uncle Joe comes in. I notice his blue uniform. He bends down for a hug from Malia, then he winks at me and musses up my hair. He gives Aunty a kiss on the cheek. He opens the oven, “What’ve we got here?”

“Tuna Casserole,” we say.

“Mmm, with peas, I hope!” he says winking at us.

“Yuck!” Malia exclaims. Now I know that’s another reason why Malia and me are best friends – our hatred of the pea. Uncle Joe goes down stairs to change into his baggy shorts. Malia and I set the table.

“Noriko, can you help me with my card? I can’t draw waves so good.”

“Sure.”

“You two need to finish your homework first.”

We groan.

“Listen, you have half an hour before dinner is ready. Get it done now and you’ll have the rest of the night free.”

We moan. I get my homework out.

“Oh, I whisper. “You do the even number problems. I’ll do the odd number problems. Then we’ll trade answers.”

Malia looks at me like I’m an evil genius. We get our homework done in record time. We eat dinner in record time, almost; except Aunty makes us eat half of our peas that we shoveled to the side of our dishes.

After the peas, Malia runs to her room to get her markers, her markers with all the extra special colors, like sky-blue, sea green, and magenta.
“Will you draw a wave for me in black and then I’ll color it in?” Malia says sweetly.

I remember our fight and I’m glad that we’re best friends again. I’m glad that Malia wants me to draw a wave. I’m glad that Aunty is the one that showed me how to draw it.

After we’re done with our cards, we get cleaned up and climb into bed. Aunty and Uncle Joe tuck is into bed. “Don’t stay up too late talking, tomorrow is a big, big day yeah.” We nod obediently. We hear them walk down the hall.

“Malia,” I whisper. “Who do you think gave us those notes?”

“I dunno.”

“Maybe Tony?”

“Yeah and John,” she whispers.

“Do you think they’re going to the dance?”

“I dunno. Sometimes boys are such dorks yeah?”

“For reals.”

“If you think I should wear my black skirt or my…”

Malia is whispering about clothes and dancing and stuff. I’ve started thinking about going home and being in my room, and Mom being sick, grown-up responsibilities, and Zippy’s with Dad. I’m thinking about what I can draw for Mom as the best last drawing. I realize Malia is asleep because she’s kicking again. I wonder if she’s doing The Electric Slide in her dreams. Then I remember something. And it’s like my brain freezes in fear. Oh no. I remember I don’t have any magic makers at my house. I left them at the hospital. What am I going to do? How am I going to make my pictures for Mom? Then my brain
thinks of something. I wish I didn’t think of it. But the thought is stuck in my brain now. I
can’t un-think the idea. I need to take those markers.

   Slowly, really, really, slowly, inch-by-inch, I slide the blanket off of me. First, the
blanket is off one leg, then the other leg. I stealthily, slip off the bed, out from under the
Hawaiian quilt. I’m standing beside the bed. Malia is sleeping soundly. She doesn’t stir. I
hear the TV on downstairs and I know her parents are awake. I tiptoe towards Malia’s tin
of markers. Just taking the markers out of the can will be too loud. I quietly lift the whole
can off her desk, and take it into the bathroom. I’m afraid her parents are going to catch
me. In the bathroom, I make regular noises by flushing the toilet and running the faucet. I
take only the important colors. The colors I need. Each marker has Malia’s name written
on them. I have the markers I need in one hand and the coffee can in the other hand. I
walk back into Malia’s room. In the darkness, I tiptoe to Malia’s desk. Softly, I place the
can of markers on her desk. I climb back into bed with the markers in my hand. Malia stirs
in her sleep. In the darkness, my eyes are wide open. Even though it’s night, I can see
everything. I can see the desk and the can of markers sitting there seem like they’re calling
out ‘Thief! Thief!’ I see the poster, the goldfish, and the Big Ben clock glowing the time -
11:57. Now that I have the markers I don’t know what to do with them. My backpack will
be too loud. What do I do? Where can I keep them? Maybe I’ll put them under the bed
but then Malia might see them. I know. I got it. I’ll hide the markers in my pillowcase. I
quietly try to slip into bed. My eyes are wide and my heart is pounding. I’m afraid it’s
going to wake Malia. I slip my hand with the markers deep into the pillowcase and turn
over to try to fall asleep. Even though I’m nervous, after midnight I fall asleep.
Chapter 16

Getting Ready

The Big Ben clock buzzes, I’m wide-awake, but I pretend to be asleep. I let Malia push me off the bed.

“You go first,” I say.

Malia goes to the bathroom. I slip my hand into the pillowcase and pull out the markers. One of the caps came off. There’s a big magenta stain on the pillowcase. I’m going to get caught for sure now. How am I going to explain that? In a panic I turn the pillow over and start making the bed. Then I realize I’m making the bed while I’m still holding the markers. I’m such an idiot. I sneak them into the bottom of my backpack. At that moment, I feel like I know need those markers. I need them for Mom. I need to make cards for her even when I’m home so that she gets better. I know Tony is important to Malia and there hers but it’s not the same. I feel like I need them more than Malia does, like they should be mine. I look at the coffee can on Malia’s desk and it looks so empty, like a giant flag waving around that says ‘thief! thief!’ I finish making the bed. I’m nervous, but I play it calm, cool, and collected. I get ready for school like nothing, like it’s a regular day. Malia doesn’t notice a thing. We get to school without a hitch.

At school we go to our bench outside of Mr. Matsumoto’s class. There’s talk about the dance and clothes and boys but I only half listen. I’m thinking about Mom and stealing and stuff. It’s just a few markers, what’s the big deal? Then I think about Malia. She’s my best friend and she let me stay at her house and I ate dinner with all them nearly every night. I feel like I lied to my family.
The school bell rings. Malia and me look in our desks and there’s nothing there. No notes about the dance. Mr. Matsumoto drones on about something or other. I daydream about hospitals and masks, dancing and waves. When lunch bell rings I wake up from my reverie, from my daydreaming. Everyone grabs their lunches and shuffles into two lines behind Mr. Matsumoto, marching like grade school zombies to the cafeteria. The lines separate into the school lunch people and the home lunch people. Today Malia and I are getting school lunch. It’s fish sticks and tater tots. When lunch is pau we all leave the cafeteria and head for our bench under the tree. Tony and John follow us but they don’t really speak. They walk and play their Game Boys and sit on the other side of the bench their thumbs firing rapid shots at the bad guys. Julie is sitting behind Val brushing her hair.

“Do you think Mr. M. is going to wear one of his dorky aloha shirts to the dance?” Malia asks everyone.

“Mr. M. could be cute but--” Val says. The boys wander off clearly bored by our conversation. Julie begins braiding Val’s hair.

“Good they left yeah. Now we can talk for real kine. You tink Megan likes one fourt gradah?” Julie asks.

“Nah, she too cool,” I say.

“Maybe Christy, Megan’s evil minion, likes Tony,” Val says.

“Maybe.”

Julie stops braiding Val’s hair for a minute and looks all serious. “Malia what you going do?”

“Oh I dunno,” Malia says casually. But I know Malia is just pretending that she doesn’t care. I know from my half listening last night that Malia totally cares. I know
Malia is nervous about the fifth grade girls. Life is easier when those fifth graders ignore you.

“You going tell Tony you’re his secret admirer or what?” asks Val.

“I dunno. Maybe.”

“What are you going to do if a fifth grader likes Tony?” Julie starts working on Val’s braid again.

“Whatever,” responds Malia.

“Maybe Jon likes you,” Julie says.

“I’ll. Ach.” Malia sounds like she’s choking on something.

“All the boys at our school are dumb,” I add.

“Yeah. It takes boys a long time to mature,” Val says.

“Yeah my mom always says it takes boys a lifetime to mature,” Julie says.

We all nod thoughtfully at Julie’s wisdom. We see the boys charging towards us like a buffalo stampede. John has the red rubber ball in his hand. As we all quick scoot over so they don’t trample us, they jump onto the ends of the bench.

“I win,” John says.

“You want to play dodge ball or what?” Tony asks.

“See what I told you,” Julie comments.


“Dis time. Da girls are team captains,” and I pound the ball he’s holding. He drops it, and it bounces away. I run, pick it up, and shout, “Girls keep away from the boys.” At this my friends, my crew, stands up. John almost tackles me so I throw the ball to Julie. Then some other boys start chasing Julie who throws the ball to Val. Tony starts chasing
Val. Tony catches up with Val and hits the red ball out of Val’s hands. They run after the ball but Malia gets there first. She picks up the ball, pauses to look around to see where to run.

“C’mon already!” Val yells. “Recess is over in one minute.”

Malia just stands their frozen, holding the ball. Then we all turn and notice Megan and her minions. The fifth grade posse sauntering over, they’re walking over slow and easy like they’re in charge. Everyone stops. Val, Julie, and me instinctively walk towards Malia, to protect her. The boys walk over out of curiosity about what’s going on with the ball and the game of keep away.

“You still going to the dance tonight?” Megan says to no one in particular and to everyone. There are mumbles and yeses from all of us. “You guys wanna practice for tonight or what?”

All of the fourth graders breathe a sigh of relief.

“Sure,” Malia says as she throws the ball at Tony and walks away from him.

All of us girls amble towards the tree. The boys stand there with lost looks on their faces. Then they snap out of it and begin to set up a game of German dodge ball. I kind of want to play with the boys.

“I snuck my mini-stereo to school today so we could practice,” Megan says. They scan the yard for the recess guards, they see it’s safe, and pull out the stereo. I can’t believe she snuck in a stereo. If we get caught they will take it away. She presses play and everyone forms lines around Megan. Now Megan is irritating me, the dance was our thing. Malia and me and Mom and Aunty’s thing. She’s acting like it’s her thing. I guess Megan seems nice enough but there’s something I don’t trust about her. Still, dancing with actual
music is better and it’s gutsy to sneak in a stereo. I guess fifth graders know more about that kind of stuff. It’s like us fourth graders are getting ready to take over the school next year and we are looking pretty good, all of us.

“Does John like anyone?” Megan asks.

“Who knows; they’re so immature.”

“How about Tony?” Christy asks.

“Tony only likes football,” I say.

Everyone starts giggling while we’re dancing. The bell rings. Recess is pau.

Finally, after science and a read aloud the final bell rings and school is pau. Mr. M. is feeling generous and says our only homework is to eat a good dinner and wear our dancing shoes.

As we line up at the door, he gives is all a warning. “I expect you all to treat each other respectfully. The fifth grade teachers will be watching you to determine if they think you should have a dance next year. I expect all of you to be on your best behavior. No monkey business. And boys dress up a little; don’t come in shorts and slippers. But most importantly…” Mr. Matsumoto pauses to make sure we are all paying attention. “Most importantly, boogie down!” as he makes a point his finger in the air disco move.

Everyone giggles.

“See you tonight. You’re dismissed. Get out of here!”

The class breaks into a run. Me and Malia run up to Aunty’s yellow Toyota. Cheering “No Homework! No Homework! No Homework!” we jump up and down.

Malia is bouncing in her seat but I’m thinking about how I don’t have any money.

“What’s the matter Noriko?” Aunty asks.

I’m embarrassed. “Ummm. I don’t have any money.”

“Don’t be silly Noriko. My treat. I’m your Aunty!”

Malia gives me an excited squeeze and I feel bad.

“We can get something for your Mom too.”

We pull into Ala Moana Shopping Center. It’s a gigantic mall. It’s got three floors and has over a hundred stores. It’s mostly an outdoor mall and there are always lots of old people sitting on the benches watching the carp swim in the sort of river fountain. There are teenagers in all black with pierced lips and choppy hair and stuff who hang out by the fountain too. It’s kind of funny to see the teenagers next to the old Japanese folks sitting on the bench near Shirokiya. Some of the clothing stores like Chanel and Armani are really super fancy with dresses costing the same price as a car. Those stores are mostly for tourists. Then there are regular stores for locals like Long’s and Macy’s and Cracked Seed. The surf stores like Locals Only, Pacific Sun, Ocean Pacific, and Hawaiian Island Creations go for the tourists and locals. We go to Long’s first. I love Long’s it has everything. It has school supplies, snacks, and electronics like watches and cameras. It has make-up, hairbrushes and perfume. Long’s also has fake Hawaiian tourist stuff like tiki key chains, plastic pineapples, and hang loose stickers.

“Mom can we get some make-up?”

“Hmm. Already you want make-up?”

“C’mon Mom.”
“Kay but, I’m keeping it in my room and you can only wear it on really special occasions after you ask permission. Understand?”

“Ahhh Mom.” Malia puts one of her hands on her hips. “It’s not such a big deal.”

“Those are the rules. Understand?”

“Kay Mom,” Malia says crossing her arms.

Aunty helps us pick out stuff. Malia gets blue eye shadow and I get mascara and we both get matching glitter bubblegum flavored lip-gloss. Aunty makes an icky face at the lip-gloss. Then we go to this other store, Bangles, that has just barrettes and earrings and jewelry. I get purple amethyst colored earrings and Malia gets light blue sapphire colored earrings to match her make-up. As I’m scanning all the stuff, I see the perfect necklace for Mom. I can’t believe it. It’s just perfect.

“Aunty!” I nearly scream. “Look! Look! Look what I found! It’s perfect for Mom!” Malia and Aunty come over to look at the treasure.

“A surfboard necklace!” It’s a gold chain with a small dangling gold surfboard charm.

“Cool,” Malia says.

“Do you really think she’ll like it?” Aunty says.

“Yeah, yeah. She’d love it!”

“I don’t know,” Aunty ponders.

“It’s just like from the story you told us about when Noriko’s mom taught you to surf and you taught her to dance,” Malia says.

Slam-dunk! I know Malia just dunked it for me. How can Aunty say no to that.

Malia’s da best.
“Oh okay. How can I say no to that?”

Malia and I have make-up and earrings. Mom will love her present that I picked out. I’m so excited for the winter dance and showing off The Electric Slide and our new earrings. I’m kind of nervous too because I never went to a dance before. The best part is after the dance Malia is going to sleepover MY house. Then I remember I stole Malia’s markers.

When we finally get to Malia’s house, we’re running late, so we just eat grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner. Then we get ready. Malia puts on her blue jeans and her special pink Hello Kitty t-shirt. In the bathroom, Malia and me hop onto the counter. As we sit in the counter, Aunty puts mascara on me. I have to look down as she applies my mascara. Aunty shades Malia’s eyelids blue. She helps us put in our new earrings. We hop off the bathroom counter and we’re ready to go.

“You girls look fantastic! Joe,” Aunty hollers, “get the camera.”

We walk into the family room and Uncle Joe is digging through a drawer. He pulls out the camera, turns around, looks at Malia and me and then puts his hands on his heart pretending to have a heart attack.

“Oh my goodness! You girls look so grown-up! What happened to our babies?”

“Looking good eh?”

We pose for the camera. “We’ve got to take you over to your house so your parents can see how cute you look.”

“Yeah, then we can give Mom her surfboard necklace present.”

“Good idea.”
Both Aunty and Uncle Joe take us to my house. Outside the house we apply sanitizer. We enter and go straight to the bathroom. The scrubbing and the masks quiet us down. It feels serious.

Mom and Dad are wearing their blue surgical masks, watching T.V. They stand up as Malia, Aunty, Uncle Joe and me enter.

“They look so pretty and grown-up yeah?”

Malia pretends to pose. “We’re going to wear the masks tonight yeah.”

“It’s the new style,” Uncle Joe says.

“If our daughters are wearing it is the new style,” Mom says bending down to give me a hug.

“Look Mom,” I say pulling back my hair and showing off my ears.

“Ooh so pretty.”

“We got matching earrings,” Malia says.

“Yeah mine are purple and Malia’s are blue.”

“I see, so pretty,” Mom says.

“We went on an Ala Moana shopping spree,” Aunty says.

“Aunty helped us with our make-up too.”

“Let me take a picture,” Dad says. “Stand by the window.”

“You can take off the masks,” Mom says.

“Really? It’s okay?”

“First take one with our high fashion masks,” Malia says.

Dad snaps away. First we pose with our masks on, then with our masks off. Aunty is talking while we pretend to be superstars.
“Malia’s sleepover bag and Noriko’s book bag are in Noriko’s room.

Then I remember Malia’s markers at the bottom of my bag, with Malia’s name on each one. We pose with our hands up like we’re superstars who don’t want our picture taken.

“Joe and I will grab some dinner, pick them up and bring them back here after the dance.

“I thought we were all going to the dance,” Uncle Joe says straight faced. Malia’s eyes bug out. “Dad!” she calls out horrified.

“Just kidding kiddo.”

“HaHaHa Dad.” She rolls her eyes.

“I’ll get the shotgun,” my Dad says. Shotgun? I didn’t even know Dad had a gun.

“Any boys who asks our girls to dance, they’re dead!” Uncle Joe says.

“What!” we yell.

Our dads laugh at us.

“Ha Dad. Real funny.”

“Da boys can’t dance anyway,” Malia says.

“Don’t forget your surprise,” Aunty whispers.

I dash to my room, grab the little black box with the gold stickers on it. Mom’s going to love it. Jumping down the stairs, I hand Mom the box.

“What’s this?” Mom says.

“It’s a surprise from Aunty,” I say, “But I picked it out.”

Mom looks at Dad. He lifts his shoulders like ‘I don’t know.’
“Jackie, You shouldn’t have,” Mom says looking at Aunty. “But I do love presents.”

“We couldn’t help it,” Aunty replies.

Mom opens the box.

“Wow!”

“Cool, one gold surfboard,” says Dad.

“Just like when you were young,” Malia reminds.

“So you can have more good surfing dreams,” I say.

Dad puts the necklace on mom.

“I love it,” Mom says with watery eyes. “I have the best daughter, the best friends, and the best husband in the world.”

“What!” Uncle Joe objects.

“Joe!”

“Just playing,” he says and gives Mom a hug and pats Dad on the back.

“Watch it Joe, I’m keeping an eye on you,” Dad says. “I know you had one crush on my wife since eighth grade.”

“Dad!” I say shocked.

“Just playing sweetheart.”

“What?” says Uncle Joe. “It’s not like Jackie hasn’t had a crush on you since eighth grade too.”

“What!” Malia eyes nearly pop out of her head on that one.

“They’re just being fresh,” Mom reassures. “Right Jackie?”

“Always these two give us trouble, we should trade them in” replies Aunty.
“Ehh, wait a second,” I say. I’m starting to put Aunty’s when-they-were-young-surf-story together in my head. “When you told is that story about when you and Mom were young…and…”

Malia is looking at me confused.

“And Mom taught you to surf because you liked Kam, that Kam is my Dad?!”

Malia’s mouth drops open with shock.

“Duh,” Aunty replies.

Malia’s face turns white.

“Duh, you girls so dense or what? When I told you that I liked Kam who’d you think it was?”

“I don’t know. I just think of Dad as just Dad, not Kam.”

“Anyways, once your Aunty saw my moves, she couldn’t resist,” says Uncle Joe.

“When we went to the Pa’aina’s luau, everything got switched up,” starts Mom.

“Joe was one good dancer back then and once Jackie saw him all dressed up doing his disco moves, she forgot all about Kam.”

“Yeah, see your mother and me, couldn’t keep up with their dance moves, so we left Joe and Jackie on the dance floor,” says Dad. “Then your mother succumbed to my charms.”

“Ha! Your father was so nervous, he could barely take his eyes off his slippers,” Mom says.

“You guys all liked the other person?” Malia still can’t believe it. Malia starts hyperventilating.

“Malia breathe, it was ages ago and just for a minute,” says Aunty.
“Yeah it was way, way back in the olden times, when we were young,” Mom teases.

“Good story yeah?” Aunty says.

“And the story gets better,” Dad says.

“How come?”

“Cause now our beautiful daughters are best friends.”

Everyone makes a sarcastic, sweet sigh sound.

“Well, let’s get these best friends to the dance,” Uncle Joe says.

“You get the truck, I’ll get the shotgun,” Dad jokes.

“Let me take a picture of you first,” I say.

“The grown-ups take off their masks, stand in front of the window, and put their arms around each other. While I’m taking the photograph, I can almost picture them all in high school at the Pa’aina’s party.
Chapter 17

Winter Wonderland Dance

When we got to the dance, Aunty and Uncle Joe walk us to the door. Mrs. Ng, a fifth grade teacher, is at the door. She looks different. She’s wearing a skirt. Her hair is down. She looks pretty. Malia and me look at each other. The grown-ups keep surprising us tonight.

“Let’s go in!” exclaims Uncle Joe.

“Dad!”

“He’s just playing,” I tell Malia.

“But the shotgun is real,” Aunty says winking. “We’ll be back at 9:00.”

“Have fun girls,” then they do a turn, dip, and clap as they leave.

“Dorks,” Malia whispers.

Megan is standing next to her cousin. He’s older, maybe seventeen. One of the fifth grade teachers doesn’t want to let him in because he’s too old. Megan is explaining to her teacher that the teenager is her cousin and he is the deejay. The teacher looks at D.J. Cousin suspiciously. The teacher finally gives in and lets him go into the cafeteria dance.

Malia and me pay our five dollars, get a stamp on our hand and enter. There’s a gigantic gold glitter Winter Wonderland sign. Most of the cafeteria tables are folded and standing in the far corner. There’s dark blue paper over the windows with white-paper-cut-out-snowflakes mounted to the night sky paper. Megan’s cousin is setting up the deejay booth. Behind the deejay there are white origami cranes hanging in front of the dark paper. Blinking white Christmas lights hang from the ceiling. There’s a twirling color disco light by the dance floor. Opposite the deejay booth, against the wall is a table with red paper
tablecloth over it. There are bowls of juice and cookies on the table. Mr. Matsumoto is standing behind the table. He’s wearing white jeans and red and white aloha shirt. Malia and me look at each other and laugh. There’s something funny about seeing Mr. Matsumoto in white jeans. Mr. M’s friend Chris is there too. Mr. M’s friend Chris is a Hawaiian guy with wavy dark hair. He’s wearing a black Hawaiian Island Creations t-shirt. We think he’s cute. Teachers are standing around talking to each other. Julie and Val come up to us.

“Whassup?”

“Gotta fut.”

We start, giggling and checking each other out.

“You look cute yeah?” Malia says.

Val and Julie both do the wave, where you start at the feet and snake your body up to the head.

“Oh yeah, Oh yeah.”

“Get da party started.”

“WhatWhatWhat.”

We scan the room. Some of the boys like Tony and John are standing by the snacks. There are groups of fifth grade girls standing near the dance floor chatting and giggling. A couple of fifth grade boys are talking to the DJ Cousin. Megan and her Meg-Heads are standing in front of the paper snowflakes. They’re scoping out the room. They’re looking around and laughing. No one is dancing. The dance floor is empty.

“One boring party yeah?” Val comments. We tell Val and Julie about our shopping spree and the surfboard necklace, and how are parents liked each other in junior high.
“Gross yeah?” Malia adds.

“Whatevas,” Julie comments.

“Mr. M’s friend is cute yeah?”

“He’s gay,” Julie informs.

“Nuhuh,” I respond.

“Yeah, my cousin is gay and he saw him at Hula’s,” Julie says.

“Nuhuh!” replies a shocked Malia.

“He’s still cute yeah,” I say.

Everyone nods in agreement.

We stand around chitchatting about what we’re going to do this weekend and how stupid boys are. I’m having fun but at the same time I feel kind of disappointed. Megan and Christy come up to us.

“Howzit?”

“Bored.”

“Let’s get dis party started already.”

“Yeah,” Malia says.

“Kay den,” Megan says.

Megan and Christy walk passed the boys and up to the deejay. They stand around chatting with the boys, and then they start talking to DJ Cousin.

“Megan’s cousin’s cute yeah?” Val says.

“Super cute,” agree Julie and Malia.
After a minute, they wave us over and introduce us to him. He has long, straight, dark hair with blonde surfer streaks in it. He has beautiful blue-grey hapa eyes. He says hi, and then puts on his headphones for a minute to cue up the next song.

“After dis song, I’m gonna play your request,” he tells us all. “Let’s get dis party happening already.”

We stand around staring.

“Da snowflakes are cute,” I say trying to think of something to talk about.

“Tanks, a whole bunch of us made ‘em at recess cause we were on the dance committee,” Christy says importantly.

“The paper cranes are good too, yeah?” Megan adds.

Then we hear the first few notes of our song, The Electric Slide.

“C’mon,” Megan commands.

We all kind of follow her to the middle of the dance floor. Megan is in the middle and some of her Meg-Heads are on her left. Malia, Julie, Val, and me are all to the right of Megan. At first, we’re all a little bit off but after two turns and dips, we’re all together. One of the chaperones yells “Woo hoo!” A fifth grade teacher claps to the beat. Some teachers scoot the fourth and fifth graders towards the dance floor. Another line of grown-ups and kids forms behind us. Malia and I look at each other and laugh. A mini-line forms behind the second line. Even Mr. Matsumoto joins in. DJ Cousin bobs his head up and down with approval. I turn again and John is pushing Tony towards the dance floor. John and Tony look groomed. They’re wearing button down shirts and their hair is combed. Now John is sort of marching Tony toward the dance floor. They join on to the side our line. They’re kind of squished near the wall. When I look over, John is in time with
everyone. John can dance. John has rhythm. Tony doesn’t really know what he’s doing. His head is turned towards John so he can copy the dance moves. Tony looks really serious. He takes too many steps and turns in the wrong direction and starts to walk off the dance floor but John grabs his arm. John shows Tony how to do The Electric Slide dance moves. John is dancing and counting and saying step, step, turn, dip, step, step, step, turn, clap. It’s cool that he is helping Tony by counting out the steps. John seems different on the dance floor, not such a dorky goof ball. Tony seems different too, not so cocky and a little bit shy. Val and Julie are dancing too and doing extra moves. Megan looks at Malia and me.

“Looks like we got the party started yeah?” As the song comes to an end, the DJ queues up The Love Shack. Some kids meander off the dance floor to find a place near the wall or the snacks. Some of the grown-ups walk off the floor sweating, but a bunch of people stay and dance. There are circles of just girls dancing and groups of boys and girls dancing together. No one is dancing like a couple. Megan, her gang, and a few fifth grade boys are all dancing together in a circle too. Malia, Val, Julie, John, Tony, their friend Mark, and me are dancing together. We’re acting silly cause The Love Shack is a jump up and down and act silly kind of song. When DJ Cousin begins spinning hip-hop, John begins really showing off. Mark dances okay. Tony dances stiffly, he doesn’t really look like he’s having fun. Us girls, we all dance pretty all right but Malia is the best out of us. Malia and John start challenging each other to see who can do better moves. After a bunch of songs, Julie declares, “I’m hot,” and exits the dance floor. It’s just the four of us dancing now, Malia facing John and me facing Tony. We dance for a little while longer then the DJ
switches up the mood and plays a slow song. Like a *mongoose* caught in headlights we all freeze.

“You wanna dance?” John asks Malia.

“Sure,” she replies casually.

After all those cards she made for Tony, this is a switch. I look over at Julie and Val who are sitting at one of the tables, sipping juice, and laughing. I look at Tony. Tony looks at me. I remember my dream about Tony and surfing and wiping out. I blush. Tony opens his mouth but no words come out. I don’t know what to do next. Then Megan, the fifth grader, walks up to Tony.

“C’mon Tony,” she says all sugary sweet and then pulls him toward the fifth graders. I’m standing in the middle of the dance floor all by myself. I’m so embarrassed. I walk across the expansive dance floor and sit with Val, Julie, and Mark. We watch the slow dancers. We watch Malia and John. We watch Tony and Megan.

“I knew John liked Malia,” Julie whispers loudly.

*Dose* fifth grade girls are sneaky *kine* yeah?” replies Val.

“Yeah,” I mumble.

They both look at me.

“No let it *boddah* you, yeah,” Val says.

“Nah *whatevahs,*” I say.

Wearing white jeans and red Christmas aloha shirt, Mr. Matsumoto walks up to us.

“Everyone having a good time?” he asks.

“Yeah, Mr. M—”
“Didn’t know you could do The Electric Slide. You have some pretty funky moves there,” he says winking.

“Hey Mr. Matsumoto, I’m going home tonight!”

“That’s great news Noriko!”

“Yeah and Malia is going to sleepover my house tonight.”

“Wow! The Winter Wonderland Dance and a slumber party,” he cheers.

Then I remember the stolen markers and I feel bad. Maybe Megan asking Tony to dance is my payback for stealing. Finally, the slow dance ends. Malia and John go get juice and come sit next to us. Mr. Matsumoto walks around talking to everyone in our class. I get up to get some juice too. Tony comes up to me and whispers.

“Noriko you got to save me from the Megan. She’s scary yeah.”

I feel my face turn hot and red.

“What do you want ME to do?” I’m nervous. I don’t want the Meg-Heads to be mad at me. Just Tony is talking to me makes me nervous. What about Malia? She made all those cards for Tony. I look over at Malia and John. They’re holding pinky fingers. I look over at the fifth grade girls. They’re looking at me. Tony looks at the fifth grade girls.

“I told Megan you were my girlfriend.”

“What!” I whisper yell.

“They’re watching us, act normal,” he says handing me a cup of juice. “Let’s go sit by John and them.”

We walk over and sit next to everybody. Tony sits next to me. Megan and Christy walk by. Tony puts his arm around me.

“Hey,” Megan says.
Megan looks at me and gives me a mean Kabuki smile.

“Sneaky kine yeah,” Val and Julie say under their breath.

“Yeah, pilau like kicks,” Tony whispers.

We all look at him confused.

“You know kicks, sneakers, stinky sneakers, get it?” Tony explains.

We all roll our eyes.

“Kay den,” Julie interjects.

“More like pilau like rotten eggs,” Val says.

“Let’s dance,” Malia says. Val, Julie, Mark, Malia, John, Tony, and me saunter to the dance floor.

“Last Song!” one of the teachers screams and DJ Cousin turns up The Electric Slide. Everyone gets on the dance floor. Our gang is in the second line. Malia and me are in the middle of the line sort of leading the group. John is next to Malia. Tony is next to me. I notice some parents milling about outside. Aunty Jackie and Uncle Joe come inside with a whole herd of parents. Some parents head to the snack table to grab cookies. Some parents are snapping photos, and embarrassing their kids. Aunty Jackie, Uncle Joe, Val’s dad, and some other parents form a line in the front. They turn, dip, and clap, doing The Electric Slide. Malia and me look at each other and start laughing.

“Wow! Your parents can dance!” Mr. Matsumoto says.

Malia gives me a yeah-whatevahs-look, but I can tell she’s not embarrassed, maybe even a little bit proud. We all dance until the song fades out. The lights pop on and the Winter Wonderland Dance looks like a cafeteria again. Some people stroll out the door. Fifth graders and grown-ups are pulling down decorations, cleaning up, and rolling the tables
into their places. We’re standing outside the cafeteria with Malia’s parents who are chatting with the other adults. Val and Julie say goodbye and leave with Val’s dad. The fifth graders emerge from the cafeteria. Megan and her gang head towards the bathroom.

“Sneaks,” Malia whispers.

Tony and John sprint towards John’s big brother who is here to give them a ride home. “See you Monday!” they holler. Tony and John are talking to the big brother for a moment. All of a sudden they both sprint towards us. John runs up to Malia and gives her a kiss on the cheek. At the same time, Tony runs up to me and gives me a kiss on the cheek. Then they both dash off like jackrabbits.

“What was that?” Uncle Joe says, “Should I get a shotgun?”

“Yes you should,” I say smiling.

Uncle Joe looks shocked and a little frightened. Then I wink at him.

“Touché, Riko,” he says.

We climb into the station wagon and head towards my house. While Uncle Joe drives, Aunty turns her head and looks over the back seat.

“So, did you tell Tony you were his secret admirer?”

“Nah.”

“How come? What happened?”

Uncle Joe’s eyes look into the rear view mirror to glance at us.

“I don’t like Tony anymore.”

“How come?” Uncle Joe asks.

“Cause we told him about the shotgun and he got scared.”

Uncle Joe looks horrified.
“Ha! Got you Uncle Joe!”

“I think John is cute now,” Malia explains.

“Poor Tony,” sympathizes Aunty.

“Nah,” Malia says, “I think Tony likes Noriko anyway.” Aunty looks at me.

“Really?”

“I dunno,” I answer.

“Yes he does,” Malia answers.

“Well…umm…He asked me to pretend to be his girlfriend because Megan this fifth grade girl likes him. And she umm asked him to dance. And umm, he doesn’t like her so…”

“That’s the oldest trick in the book, I can’t believe you fell for that one,” Uncle Joe says into the rearview mirror.

“Really?” Malia and me say in unison.

“Sounds like you girls had fun.”
Chapter 18

Caught Red-Handed

We pull passed the old movie theater, go up the hill and pull into the driveway. Dad opens the door. He is not wearing a blue surgical mask. We climb out of the car. This time Malia has a sleepover bag. Dad pokes his head into the car to talk grown-up. As we head towards the house the doorknob seems gigantic, like Alice In Wonderland. Ever since the sanitizer ritual the doorknob seems to have grown. It’s like the only part of the door I see now. It’s like some germey bulls-eye. We apply the sanitizer gel; enter the house and head towards the bathroom.

When we enter my bathroom, I pull open my drawer and it’s still in order; the toothpaste and floss are in one compartment. The Aloe Vera, Bactine, Neosporin and ointments are all in another compartment. My other drawer has hair stuff like rubber bands, barrettes, and bobby pins. The hair stuff isn’t tangled up with the toothpaste. The ointments don’t have hair stuck to them. Opening my drawers makes me feel at home.

Malia and I take off our make-up and do our get ready for bed stuff. Mom comes inside and gives us hugs. I reach for the zip-lock bag with the blue masks.

“That’s okay girls, no need, I’m feeling good. Did you have fun? When you’re ready for bed, come get me and I’ll tuck you in, and I want to hear all about the winter dance. Kay girls?”

“Sounds good Mom.”

“We’re so excited to have you back and to tuck you in.”

Malia and me stomp into the kitchen in our pajamas to get Mom and Dad, but I head for the refrigerator. I want to open everything. See if it looks like it did before. I open the
door and look at all the familiar items: Viva 2% milk, raisins, soy sauce, Sun Luck Teriyaki sauce (not Kikomen), brown bread, cream cheese, raspberry jelly – no seeds, pickles, dark pink beets – yuck, Jif peanut butter – creamy, Li Hing Mui, sesame cookies, Portuguese Sweet Bread. I stare into the refrigerator, taking the view in.

“Are you girls hungry?"

“Nah, just looking.”

“How about Sweet Bread French Toast for breakfast?”

“Mmmm. YeahYeahYeah.”

“Well, let’s tuck you in then.”

Malia and me climb in bed under my blue sheets with white clouds floating across them. I gaze across my room. There’s my photo music box and my goldfish, Checkers and Pogo. There’s a picture of Malia and me from a long time ago when we were in diapers. Snoopy is sitting in my chair with Mickey Mouse and Hello Kitty, but Snoopy is my favorite. On my desk sits my Las Vegas mug holding my pencils, pens, and a marker. Then I remember the markers and how stupid I was when I left them at the hospital. I feel bad. Malia is my best friend. Maybe I should confess, maybe I should tell Malia. Mom and Dad come in and sit on the edge of the bed.

“Tell us all about the dance.”

Malia and I take turns talking about our first winter dance. We tell them about The Electric Slide and John and Tony and Megan and the fifth grade girls. Malia starts to ramble with her eyes closed. Mine are getting heavy too.

“Your mother has a doctor’s appointment tomorrow. After she’s done, we thought we might go to Waikiki give you two some surf lessons. What do you think of that?”
“Right on!”

“And maybe when I’m a little bit stronger, I’ll take you girls surfing.”

I fall asleep, at home, in my room, with a kiss on my forehead from Mom and Dad. I sleep and I dream about the ocean and waves and surfing. I dream about the dance. I suppose Malia dreams of the dance too because she kicks me in her sleep and wakes me up. I lie in bed thinking about everything that happened. Wondering about Malia and John and Tony. I think about surfing tomorrow. I think about Mom’s doctor’s appointment and how the news has to be good news. Then I remember I didn’t make Mom a drawing and Mom still needs special magic. She needs to get strong and take me surfing. That’s when I get the best idea for Mom’s best card. I crawl quietly out of bed. I grab some paper from my desk, shuffle through my book bag in the dark. Malia stirs. My hands find the markers. I pull them out, tiptoe out of my room, down the hall, padding quietly to the kitchen. The house is still. Mom and Dad are asleep. I turn on the light and begin my drawing. I am making a sky-blue and sea–green wave. It’s nearly light and transparent and full of bright color all at the same time just like a real wave. The beach is full of details like footprints, tiny crabs, and castles. This time though, I know how to make this picture different and da best. Mom is in the picture. Mom is surfing, doing a *hang-ten*, standing strong and straight and tall.

Suddenly, I feel a hand poke my shoulder. I jump in my shoulders, and then I see its just Malia. Malia’s eyes are half closed and groggy. Her braids are messy.

“What you doing?” she says rubbing her eyes.

“I’m making Mom’s card for tomorrow,” I whisper.

“Oh,” she sits down. “You like Tony?”
I am afraid. Is she going to notice I am using her markers?

“I dunno. You like John?” I say.

“I dunno Tony Bologna is really cute but, but,…”

“But what you fut?”

Malia ignores my joke.

“Tony’s cute but John is really funny yeah?”

“Uhuh,”

I’m worried about who she likes. I’m holding her markers in my hand, the markers that have her name written on each of them. Talk about getting caught red-handed. I put the marker down.

“And John’s not as shy. He likes to dance too,” she says resting her head on her crossed arms on the table.

“Das true.” I feel like her markers are screaming ‘Thief!’

“Yeah, I guess I REALLY like John,” Malia concludes.

“You two are cute together yeah?”

“Thanks, so you like—Ehh!” Malia sits straight up. “Ehh! Wait! Those are MY markers!”

“Ssh you’ll wake my parents,” I whisper.

“You shh! Those are my markers,” she snaps.

I pick up the blue marker. I don’t really know what to do or say. She takes the marker out of my hand and stands up.

“Das mine!” she scream whispers.
“Ummm. Duh. I know they’re your markers. Your name is on them. I was just borrowing them,” I whisper.

I want to cry but I’m holding it in.

“You supposed to ask when you borrow something. Malia’s eyes are getting fiery.

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. It’s just that…I just…”

“What!” she whispers angrily.

Tears start to well up in my eyes. “It’s just I got to make these cards for Mom.”

Then I can’t hold it in. I start sobbing. I try to suck it in. “Malia I’m –I’m scared. I’m so scared of Mom being sick. And, and, and it’s REALLY important I make these cards.” My nose is all runny and my eyes are leaking salt water. I wipe my face with my hand. It’s all wet. Malia sits down and her eyes lose some of their fire.

“Malia I need to help Mom get better by, by making these cards.” I’m still sobbing. I can’t make it stop. She starts rubbing my back.

“Your Mom is going to be healthy again. Look how strong she’s getting,” she says.

“I’m so scared. And, and I need to have faith that making these cards will give her strength. Mom has to get better.”

“She will, you’ll see.”

“I’m sorry I borrowed your markers,” I say reaching for a tissue.

“It’s okay. But still. You should’ve asked. We’re best friends yeah? You can borrow markers whenever.”

“I know. I should’ve asked. It’s just I wasn’t thinking--. I guess I was freaked out about stuff yeah. And maybe a little jealous too.” I’m not crying but I can feel my eyes getting wet.
“Me too. I was kinda jealous too. I don’t know why I guess ‘cause…I don’t know why, weird yeah?”

“I just need to borrow them. Malia I’m scared of Mom being sick. You know I make the cards to help her get better. I’m sorry Malia.”

“Yeah, it’s scary yeah? I never thought of my parents dying before,” she says.

Now, my eyes are wet but I’m not crying so much. “Yeah it’s so scary. But I think my cards can help Mom get better because it makes her smile and stuff. And I think real hard and I put magic in them.”

“Yeah?”

“I think so.” Tears are making my face watery.

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” she says. “Sometimes grown-ups don’t know. Sometimes kids need to be brave too.”

I wipe my eyes and she rubs my back again. I’m starting to breathe regular. The crying feeling is going away.

“Yeah, I need to take care of Mom and Dad sometimes. We’re some brave sistahs yeah? Tanks eh,” I say.


“It’s a picture of Mom surfing, like how our parents said she was real strong when she surfed.”

“Das one good idea.”

“It’s going to be me holding a surf board, watching Mom be strong, watching Mom surfing. And I’m going to surf too.”
“You going be one artist some day,” Malia says. We stare at the card silently for minute. “You like Tony?” she asks.

“I dunno.”

“Well, you can tell Tony you’re his secret admiral, if you like.”

Malia sits with me while I finish my drawing for Mom.

“You can have the markers. No bigs.”

“You’re da bes’.”

She folds her arms on the table and lays her head down. She falls asleep in the chair as I finish drawing a yellow beach and I’m holding a magenta surfboard. I know in my heart that Malia is my best friend forever. I know in my heart that Mom is strong, and I’m helping her get better.
Epilogue

In High School

Now, Malia and me are older. We’re in high school, sitting at Zippy’s, sipping diet cokes. I pick up Malia’s red marker and then put it down.

“Dat was one crazy time yeah? You want some chili Malia? I’ll get you some,” I say.

“Oh nah, I shouldn’t.”

“My treat.”

“Mmmm. Okay, so good yeah?”

While I’m standing in line, I think about that time almost five years ago when I stole Malia’s markers. I remember how scared I was for Mom but I didn’t really even know how scared until Malia caught me with her markers. I remember how Malia stayed with me, and how she didn’t get mad in the end. I come back to the table carrying a tray full chili and rice, and French fries. Julie, Val, John and Tony are sitting at the table too. I place the tray on the table and scoot next to Tony.

“You guys on a diet or what?” Julie says.

“Not today.”

“You like go surfing on Saturday?” Tony asks me.

“Dad and me are going to watch Mom in one surfing contest,” I say.

“Yeah, it’s the Old Folks Cup,” Malia says laughing.

“I’m gonna take my board, so after the tournament we can all surf. Wanna come?”

I say having a bite of chili and rice.
“Yeah let’s go watch your mom kick everybody’s okole,” Tony says putting his arm around me.

“Yeah, bet your Mom’s wins again,” Malia says.

“Mom already won.”

“Das true,” John says holding Malia’s hand.

“Yeah, Mom and me, we’re super strong wahines.”

The End
Author’s Note

Pidgin is the way we talk in Hawaii and there is some “proper English” and Pidgin in my story. Pidgin is mostly English but sometimes we mix in Hawaiian, Chinese, Portuguese, Japanese, and other languages too. The easiest way to read or speak pidgin is to remember we don’t like ‘t’ or ‘th’. We’re not big fans of ‘r’s at the end of words either.

Pidgin is relaxed and easy, like a day at the beach.

Glossary

da – the

das - that’s

dat - that

dem - them

dunno- don’t know
	em - them Pass ‘em please. Instead of Please pass the salt.

bes’ friends - best friends or BFF – best friends forever – best friends forevah

funny kin’ - kind of funny, strange

hamajang - messy

haole - Caucasian, white person

hibiscus- a flower

ho- short for Holy Cow!

kabuki- a style of Japanese theater that uses exaggerated facial expressions

lanai - porch, deck

lei - Hawaiian flower necklace for special occasions

local kin’ - local kind, the way locals do it, Hawaiian Style

mana - powerful magic

one - a or an. You like one diet (Coke)? Instead of Would you like a diet coke?
pau- done, finished

pikake - Hawaiian flower
plumeria - Hawaiian flower
surfah - surfer
talk story - telling a story with family and friends.
tanks - thanks, *Eh tanks*. Instead of *Thank you Val, for the diet coke.*
tink - think, *Wait, lemme tink*. Instead of *Hold on a moment, let me think.*
tought - thought
tutu - grandmother
ukelele- Hawaiian string instrument, similar to a guitar
wit - with