



# Bird of Paradise

*Marilyn Anne Hughes  
and  
Emily Hughes Johnson*



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*For my daughter, Emily—*

*May you find Paradise, that place where you know who you are and you like what you know, where dreams go beyond your wildest imaginings, where life is celebrated, not merely lived, and where love is only the beginning.*

*May you always be my little dreamer. Dreams are desires you hope to fulfill. Passions are dreams you fight for. There are no passions without first having dreams. A life without passion is only a life half-lived. Continue to dream, never settle, and never let your passion fade into the background.*

*May you find Sanctuary. Your life will be filled with your visions grown from the seeds that your father and I worked so hard to plant but are very much your own. As you grow and experience life, you will find your own voice. You will find your Sanctuary. Not a place in the world, but a place in your heart. A place that, when opened, you will see your own visions and you will speak with your own voice, and that voice shall shout to the world I AM HERE!*

*I know now that this is where my story ends, so I hope you will begin where I left off. I will watch over you through the good times and the bad. I will be there with you to share the joys of becoming a mom, and I will be there watching as you and Matt grow old together. And each night I will be there to whisper sweet dreams. I love you.*

*Forever and Beyond,  
Mom*



*For my mom, Marilyn—*

*Thank you for entrusting me with Ari's story. You have given me the gift of a lifetime, and it has been an honor to finish your story for you. I miss you each and every day, but I know you're looking down on me from above. Sweet dreams, Mom. I love you.*

*Forever and Beyond,  
Emily*







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## Prologue



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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

*Part One*

**San Francisco**





## *10 Years Earlier*



ARI ENTERED THE house and the scents of Mama's dinner greeted her as usual. She could smell the dinner rolls baking and the curry and fresh ginger from her favorite peanut chicken. And of course, there was Mama's jasmine, always her jasmine. Ari heard James's tiny voice, laughing over a shared joke with Mama, probably a joke only a five-year-old would think funny, but Mama was laughing too. This was their special time together, when James awoke from his nap and Mama put her writing away, and for a few hours each day, he was the sole object of her affections.

James always knew when it was time for Ari to come home from school. He couldn't actually tell time, but she had taught him to count the chimes on the old grandfather clock in the front foyer—three chimes for her return, six chimes for Papa's and seven chimes plus two sets of church bells for his favorite television show—*Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*. Today he had counted the three chimes and was waiting for Ari to call out to him. "*I'm home, big guy.*" That was his signal to climb down from his bright yellow aluminum step stool and go speeding through the dining room and down the hall to Ari's waiting arms.

It always made Ari smile to see James hurtling toward her, his arms flailing and his hair flying off in a million different directions from his nap and his insistence that hair didn't need to be brushed more than once a day, if at all. But not even her affectionate baby brother could make her smile now—not



after the worst day any girl ever spent in high school. She knew she should call out to him, but she was so tired, she just leaned her hundred fifteen pounds against the heavy timbered door until she heard the iron latch clank behind her. Then, after what seemed like her first real breath of the day, she shuffled quietly into the foyer.

There was a tall mahogany hallstand just to the right of the front door. It had at its center a small beveled mirror surrounded by ornate carvings and two large filigreed candle holders, a remnant from an age when houses were gas lit and furniture was handcrafted. Ari usually stopped there to look at her reflection—a kind of ritualistic closure to the school day rather than a simple vanity—but she didn't even glance at the mirror today.

Instead, she moved along the row of brass hooks that ran down the wall leading toward the living room entrance, removed her navy woolen pea coat and hung it in its appointed place, right next to the tiny camel hair John-John coat that James wore on "*going out good days.*"

At the center of the foyer was a round pedestal table on which a simple floral arrangement of money tree and white orchids attempted to balance the ostentations of the old Tudor house. The day's mail was piled there as usual, and Ari stopped briefly to shuffle through it for any foreign-stamped letters addressed to her. There was only one envelope of any promise, a bright yellow parchment one, made thick by a multi-page letter inside, with postal stamps from Bombay. But the handwriting was Madu's, Mama's friend, and not her daughter, Gita's. As was his custom, Papa had laid the daily newspaper next to the mail for anyone who wanted to read it after he finished. It wasn't uncommon for Ari to glance over the headlines, but today she had her own problems to deal with, and she didn't have room to be concerned with what President Johnson did or didn't do that day.

It was from the kitchen that Mama listened for the sounds of her daughters returning home each day, and she always felt a little frisson of relief when her chicks were safely back in the nest after a day in the big world. She knew the sounds of their return by heart and could always tell who entered the house first. Today it was Emma with her soft footsteps and graceful,



rhythmic moves as she unburdened herself of her hat and coat and binder, stopped by the kitchen for a quick greeting, and then floated upstairs to wait for *him* to call. Arianna's return was always faster paced, more energetic. She would burst through the door, dump her things on the floor next to the hall stand, call out to James, and come bouncing into the kitchen with her baby brother securely fastened around her neck.

So, the moment Ari entered the house Mama knew that something had gone wrong. Her movements were slow and her sounds were those of someone who had been exhausted by her day, not exhilarated by it. There was no customary greeting for her or James. Mama waited for Ari's appearance at the kitchen door but heard her daughter climbing the stairs instead. Perhaps this was a time for sisters, not a mother. So she returned her attention to James's story about his best friend's brand new puppy, smiling at the increasing frequency of new puppy stories that filled the warm air of the big country kitchen each afternoon.

Upstairs Ari dove onto her bed and pulled her big overstuffed comforter around her until only her black hair and emerald eyes were visible. She could hear music coming through the wall from Emma's bedroom—"Misty," as usual. After months of play on the little portable hi-fi, the song rasped and skipped and faded in and out, and the sound grated on Ari a little, but Emma didn't seem to mind. Ari didn't know if Emma had ever listened to any of the other songs on the album. She thought it kind of silly to buy a whole album for just one song. But forty-fives were out, and albums were in, and "Misty" was Emma and Roger's song. It was clearly destined to be played over and over again until either the grooves wore out or Emma and Roger broke up.

A tear perched itself at the corner of Ari's eye and finally spilled over onto her cheek, down her chin, and onto the floral duvet cover, where it disappeared into a crimson rose. For some time after, Ari didn't know how long, she just lay staring at the wet spot made by the tear until a sound at the door brought her out of her deep thoughts. "Come in," she whispered to her sister's familiar knock.



Ari and Emma had always been there for each other, able to read each other's thoughts and feel each other's feelings, almost as if they were identical twins, not sisters separated by twenty-one months. They were anything but identical, on the outside anyway. Ari had inherited Mama's dark, exotic looks and Emma, Papa's All-American athleticism. Mama called her girls "*opposite ends of the same circle*." Ari didn't know what that meant when she was younger, but she did now, and she was glad to have her soulmate so close at hand. Not that Emma's being there would change anything, not really, but she could help her get through the long night of dreading tomorrow.

"Are you all right?" Emma asked. Ari wasn't one to go to tears easily.

"I don't know," she answered honestly.

Emma took a seat at the end of the big four poster, stretched her long legs out straight in front of her, and leaned back against the footboard, squirming and twitching in search of a comfortable place to rest her back. "Here, you better take this," Ari said, throwing her a plump green toile pillow. "This could be a long story."

"Thanks," she smiled back and waited while Ari marshaled the energy to revisit the day's events.

"I could just kill Brittany!" Ari suddenly blurted out.

Emma didn't have to ask who Brittany was. She had become a household name. She was one of those girls who could be found on every high school campus, a female bully who isolated other girls and then got everyone else to gang up on them without seeming to have been remotely involved herself. "Tell me what happened," she said gently.

It had all begun innocently enough at Susannah's slumber party last Saturday night. Ari and a dozen other girls were circled around big bowls of popcorn and M&M's with only their heads and arms protruding out of their sleeping bags, as they alternately stuffed their mouths with food and spewed out gossip with the reliable rhythm of ocean waves. At eleven o'clock they played Truth or Dare. Ari learned that there weren't quite as many virgins at her high school as she thought. At twelve o'clock they froze Mary Lupinski's underwear, the price she



paid for falling asleep too early. Shortly after midnight about half the high school football team pulled a panty raid, hoping to catch the girls in scanty nighties, but they were met instead by Susannah's father, a retired naval officer from Treasure Island, and by a symphony of giggles from the girls. After that everyone settled down to sharing secrets about boyfriends, boys they wished were boyfriends, and boys they met last summer at the beach that their boyfriends would never know about. By early morning, the conversation grew more high-spirited and less careful. That's when Ari blurted it out.

"I really didn't tell them all that much about the Island," Ari insisted. "I just told them about our holidays on the Island and what it was like there and what the people were like and . . ." she couldn't bring herself to say what she was sure her sister already knew.

"Oh, Ari, you didn't," Emma gently chided.

Ari lowered her eyes and aimlessly twirled a lock of her long, thick hair around her forefinger until no more would fit. "Well, Brittany was going on and on about all the places she had been last summer and all the things she had done, and I guess I just got tired of her one-upping everybody. So . . . so I told them about Celebration Night," Ari finally admitted.

"What exactly did you tell them, Ari?"

"Well, I told them how every year there's a special celebration on the Island with a big feast made by all the families, kind of like a luau. And how there's drums and music and how all the women dance for the men they love, but that the celebration is really for the women who are dancing for the very first time. And I kind of told them about how the couples go off together when the dancing is over to . . . well, you know. And how when you and I were younger, we used to hide behind the banyan tree and watch the dancing part." She stopped there, not sure what else to say.

"Is that all?" Emma asked.

"I tried to explain that it wasn't some kind of wild orgy or anything." Her voice trailed off as she shrugged her shoulders and looked sheepishly at her sister.

"Oh, Ari!" Emma exclaimed, exploding into laughter.



"I thought they understood. I really thought they did." Ari pulled her outstretched legs toward her and leaned her head on her knees.

Emma reached out to place a comforting hand on her sister's shoulder. A wayward curl from the bangs she was growing out fell over her face and covered her nose. With some slight irritation she pulled it back and tucked it behind her ear with her other curls. She said, "I don't know what Brittany did to you today, but it should blow over pretty quickly. Girls like her already have their next victim lined up before they've even finished with the current one."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd been at school with me today," she said despondently. "I'll never tell anyone about the Island again!"

Ari had gone to her locker before first period class to retrieve her physics book and found a larger than usual gathering of oxford cloth, lamb's wool and pinwale corduroy in the hallway. She didn't think anything of it at first, but then conversations faded to whispers when her classmates saw her coming and then to silence as they exchanged those knowing glances that told her they all shared a secret. Many of the girls from the slumber party were there, standing in groups of threes and fours, in perfect *clique* formation, and a number of the boys who had pulled the panty raid milled around the fringes. But Ari knew there was trouble for sure when she saw Brittany, who had positioned herself to one side of the crowd, like an innocent bystander, flanked by the girl guard that followed her on command. She was standing there, rhythmically stroking her perfect blond flip and wearing her too-tight royal blue sweater that was intended to bring out her eyes but only accentuated the padding in her bra. She flashed Ari a smile, not a congenial one, more like a warning shot across her bow. Ari had seen that look before, and all she could do was return the smile and steel herself against whatever awaited her.

She dialed the combination on her lock. With each turn of the wheel, she heard muffled snickers behind her. Obviously, Brittany's nasty little joke was waiting for her behind her locker door. How had she gotten the combination? A horrible thought



fitted through her mind. Only her best friend, Meghan, had her combination. Surely she wouldn't. No, that was too horrible to think. Probably just some spy of Brittany's looked over her shoulder one day. She considered not opening the locker and just going to class, but she needed her physics book and wasn't about to let Brittany cost her valuable grade points by showing up to class without it.

She had only three turns of the wheel to think of the perfect comeback—the one you usually think of a day late. Nothing was coming to her. When the last number clicked into place on the tumbler, she opened her locker and the snickers erupted into riotous laughter. Ari stared silently at the object of their amusement taped inside her locker door. It was a picture of a naked woman on a beach, obviously a centerfold from *Playboy*, with long black hair and green eyes drawn on with permanent marker. Across the belly it said, "Will you be my date for the dance?" and it was signed, "The Football Team." Ari froze in place, knowing that everyone was staring at her, just waiting for her to fall apart, especially Brittany. As she turned toward them, willing her face to remain expressionless, she was still desperately trying to think of something clever to say, but all she could think was, *if only Emma were here, like in the good old days.*

Ari and Emma had learned to depend upon each other in ways siblings do when they live in faraway places. Being independent and outspoken as a youngster, Ari had gotten herself into a few playground scrapes over the years, and Emma had always stood with her, daring anyone to take them both on in that subtle way she had of standing her ground without being confrontational. Emma was so like Papa. Ari, however, was not as conciliatory. One day the school bully decided to ridicule Emma in front of everyone for wearing her family sarong to school on *Family Tree Day*. Ari was not about to let that injustice go unpunished. She marched right up to that bully, made a fist, cocked her elbow as far behind her head as she could, and fired one startling blow to the bully's mouth. The day ended with the bully at the dentist, Ari in the Headmaster's office with Mama, and a lot of children knowing that they would never tease the Heywood girls again. That night Ari got a stern lecture



from her parents in Papa's study, but as she was leaving, she was sure that she heard laughter from beyond the doors that had closed behind her.

Ari had the sudden impulse to send Brittany to the dentist, and this caused her to smile, which perplexed her onlookers and irritated Brittany, who was hoping for a far more flamboyant response. Recognizing her momentary advantage, Ari swallowed her anger and calmly retrieved her Physics book from her locker. Then she looked directly at Brittany, rolled her eyes and shook her head to convey boredom with her childishness, took the picture down from her locker, crumpled it up, dropped it in the nearest garbage can, and exited the building without looking back.

It felt like every pair of eyes followed her as she made her way across the quad and into the math and science building on the other side. When she entered the building, she was sure that the hallway had grown at least a hundred yards longer since yesterday. But finally she reached what she hoped would be the sanctuary of her classroom and the temporary protection of the teacher who, for fifty minutes at least, would give her a chance to regroup. What greeted her instead was a sea of staring faces whose expressions left no doubt that they too were in on Brittany's little joke. Ari began to wonder if there had been some kind of announcement on the P. A. system before she arrived at school. *There will be an all-school assembly in the gymnasium today to celebrate National Make Fun of Arianna Heywood Day!*

Ari maneuvered down the narrow aisle toward her desk at the front of the room, and a wave of whispers behind her replaced the silent stares in front. When she reached her destination, she stopped abruptly and just stared. Stuck to her desk was a half-naked plastic hula dancer, the kind that bobs up and down in the rear window of old cars. She loudly exhaled her contempt. Then she moved calmly but swiftly to her seat and, without emotion, pulled the doll off of her desk and dropped it in her purse. The loud pop from the suction cup at its base evoked snickers all around, but Ari just kept her eyes focused straight ahead and wondered how she would get through what was sure to be the longest day of her life.





At lunchtime, she looked for her best friend, Meghan O’Leary, who usually met her outside U.S. Government class, but apparently even Meghan didn’t want to be seen with her today. No matter. She wasn’t really hungry anyway. She headed for the back corridors, making a wide arc around the quad where she knew most of the kids would be congregating, and retreated to the solitude of the art room. She was still staring at her feet when she entered the door and barely noticed Jonathan Mallory, a pale-faced, overweight boy sitting in the far corner of the room as he did every day at lunch. She looked at him without speaking, trying to tell from the expression on his face if he too was in on her humiliation. But he looked the same as always—blank to the point of being almost invisible.

Ari had never been mean to him like some of the other kids had. It simply wasn’t in her nature to do that, but as she looked at him now, hiding behind his easel in the remotest corner of the room, she understood for the very first time how even she had contributed to his loneliness. “Jonathan, do you mind if I sit at the easel next to yours? The light’s much better over there.”

“Sure, if you want to,” he said nervously, his paintbrush flying out of his hand and landing in a big gooey vermilion splotch on his blue smock. She laughed and he smiled. It was the first really nice exchange she had had with anyone all morning.

That afternoon, Brittany left school in her fancy yellow Thunderbird feeling triumphant. As she drove by a group who had gathered on the sidewalk, she waved and shared a last laugh with them at what she was sure was Ari’s expense. It wasn’t until she arrived home that she discovered the half-naked hula dancer bobbing up and down in her car’s signature porthole. The doll wasn’t suctioned there. It had been permanently cemented on.

“Oh, Ari, you didn’t!” Emma exclaimed, unable to control the laughter that followed.

“You keep saying that, Emma.” She slumped back on her pillow with dramatic flair and added, “Mama’s going to know something happened today. She always knows, and I bet I know what she’s going to say. *“Arianna, you must see your enemy as an opportunity to practice patience and tolerance. These are virtues that*



*bring happiness.*” Ari loved Mama, and she loved her Island ways, but sometimes those ways seemed better suited to the Island than to San Francisco.

“She’s right you know, Ari,” Emma said. “If you were on the Island, you’d know it was true.”

“Maybe. But right now the truth doesn’t help me very much.”

## 2



ARI LAY MOTIONLESS on her bed for some time after Emma left, staring up at the ceiling, tracing the random patterns in the cream-colored plaster that filled the spaces between the heavy blackened timbers. When she tired of that game and could think of no others to replace it, she scooted off the end of the bed and walked over to the full-length mirror. It stood in the corner near the bathroom door, just to the right of one of the two window seats that flanked the porcelain-tiled fireplace.

Ari usually liked the image that stared back at her from the glass, but today she wasn't so sure. She surveyed herself from every angle, trying to assure herself that she didn't look fat in her black and white watch-plaid skirt and her favorite green cardigan, which only that morning she was sure had accentuated her slim figure. She had to admit, she liked the way the outfit brought out her eyes, large, almost almond eyes that Mrs. O' Leary said looked like a Keene painting, but Tommy Lloyd once told her reminded him of his favorite green purie marble. She glanced over at her dresser and at the translucent green marble that sat there among her treasures, and she remembered fondly the day she found it inside a large red construction paper envelope, accompanied by a handmade valentine of pink paper and doilies and a fistful of pastel candy hearts that said *Be My Valentine*. Life was so much simpler when she was only eight.

She studied her hair, piling it up on top of her head movie star style and then releasing it, letting it fall in thick, straight sheets. It was Mama's hair, blue-black and smooth and shiny. Papa had always said it looked like Egyptian black onyx. She had



Mama's sculpted cheekbones too, and her full lips and tall slender body that curved in and out right where it was supposed to.

Ari turned from the mirror and aimlessly looked around her bedroom. She liked this room a lot, not as much as her own bedroom in the Great House on the Island, but still the fabrics and the furniture and the English country atmosphere were very cozy. The furniture was all British—dark polished hardwoods and heavy-doored, intricately carved and dentil molded. And the fabrics were chintz and pinstripes and toiles perfectly put together on fringed drapes and dressing table skirts, which matched bed linens and throw pillows, in layer upon layer. It was all terribly grand. In fact, Ari thought the whole house was rather grand, but she guessed that was only befitting Papa's position in the company.

The house was a half-timbered English Tudor that stood on a quiet, tree-lined street in St. Francis Woods. It was reminiscent of lawn tennis and gin and tonics and crocks of Christmas puddings hanging from rough-hewn rafters. There was a little pointed roof over the entrance to keep off the rain and a large, round leaded glass window in the door affording visitors their first blurry glimpse into the house's interior. Beyond the door was the two-story foyer with rich amber walls that looked like leather and a small crystal chandelier overhead that made shadows dance every time the door opened. To the left of the foyer was a pretty little powder room with a big cast iron claw-footed tub that sat under a frosted window and a skirted sink and matching paisley wall paper that reminded Ari of the silk waistcoats the male secretaries used to wear in Papa's Singapore office. Ari couldn't imagine how the tub had come to be there. After all, who would want to walk through the front foyer of the house to take a bath? But Mama explained that long ago the bath had probably been accessed from the other side where a series of tiny storage rooms off the kitchen had once been occupied by household staff.

To the right of the foyer was a long living room with a huge carved oak fireplace on one side, made almost black with age. The walls were wainscoted in the same dark oak over which silk wallpaper hung in an ancient shade of celadon green. On



the far wall were two pairs of heavy paneled oak doors that faced toward the front of the house and beveled glass French doors that faced the English garden. The oak doors led to Papa's study and the glass doors to Mama's writing room. Taken all together it was the perfect room for an English country house Christmas. Except that it was even better because the house was centrally heated, the furniture was soft and comfortable, and the fog that lay as a gentle blanket over the rooftops was fresh-breezed and ocean sent and not one of those dank, coal-fed *pea-soupers* that frightened instead of refreshed.

"If only it really was Christmas," Ari mused aloud. "Grandfather and Mem would be here, and I'd have two whole weeks off from school."

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the Westminster chimes of the old grandfather clock sounding the six o'clock hour. Papa would be home soon, and she hadn't even changed out of her school clothes yet, except to kick off her knee-high leather boots. She picked up the boots where they still lay in the middle of the floor and returned them to the closet, slipping out of her skirt and hanging it up before closing the door. Then she carefully folded her sweater and returned it to the bottom drawer of the mahogany wardrobe, before retrieving a comfortable pair of denim bell bottom hip-huggers and a purple t-shirt from the drawer above. Miss Higgins, the head counselor for the girls, wouldn't allow girls to wear pants to school, much less the hippie clothes so popular at Berkeley right across the Bay. Mini-skirts and the mod look completely undid her. It wasn't fair, Ari thought, because straight skirts and scratchy sweaters and blouses with little peter pan collars were not very comfortable. For a moment Ari considered fomenting a sit-in like the one the Free Speechers put on at Berkeley a few years earlier but decided that perhaps this wasn't the time to be drawing any more attention to herself, so she quickly dismissed the idea and headed for the stairs.

It was an impressive staircase, perfectly designed for the slow, graceful descent of elegant ladies in exquisite ball gowns. She had often stood at the top landing imagining her Senior Prom night when her date would stand in the foyer and wait



breathlessly for his first glimpse of her. She would finally appear at the top landing, wearing Grace Kelly's gold lamé ball gown from *To Catch a Thief*. His gaze would draw her down the oriental stair runner to the landing below, where she would slowly turn and descend toward him in full view. Of course, there wasn't much chance she'd have a date for the prom this year. What a waste of a great staircase, she thought, and bounded down the stairs like a clumsy colt.

Before joining the others in the kitchen, she entered the living room and headed for Mem's rosewood-framed painting of the Island that hung over the cavernous old fireplace. She stood squarely before it on the claret Turkish carpet and stared as if she were looking at it for the very first time. She did this whenever she was feeling troubled or homesick or was particularly missing Grandfather and Mem. Nothing bad ever happened to her on the Island.

The longer she stared, the deeper her eyes penetrated beyond the peaceful waters and palm-fringed beaches, beyond the cozy bungalows and ornate pavilions, sinking into the terraced valleys and jungled mountainsides and to the confusion of brushstrokes that transformed tubes of goeey paints into the one place she loved most on this earth. For a moment or maybe longer, the birds sang, the air filled with seductive fragrances, the gentle breezes blew in off the waters, and Arianna was home again.

She floated there for a while in the sea of tropical colors—cadmium yellow deep and alizarin crimson, manganese violet and cobalt teal, ultramarine turquoise and phthalo green and earthy shades of sienna. These were Mem's colors, and over the years they had found their way, in large part or small, to all her canvases. Ari could almost see her now, standing next to Grandfather, dressed in their native sarongs and crisp cotton shirts, bronzed and vigorous, looking altogether too young and vibrant to be grandparents. They were the first Islanders ever to attend a university, and after graduation, Grandfather traveled the world until he knew it well, and Mem returned home and came to know every tree, every flower, every creature, every drop of water and grain of soil and every Islander who had ever



walked among them. By the time they came together again, Grandfather was a very learned man and Mem had cultivated a wisdom rarely found in one so young. So, no one was surprised when the Elders selected them to be the Teachers, charged with guiding the next generation toward a harmony of old ways and new. It was even less surprising when Mem announced that she intended to dance for Grandfather at the next Celebration.

“Papa, you’re home!” James shouted from the kitchen, jolting Ari back to San Francisco. She didn’t go to the kitchen right away; instead, she stood in the shadows, unseen by Mama and Papa and her siblings, watching the portrait of her family unfold. She often did this, mentally filing away images of her family to be used as sources for future paintings. Ari’s art teacher, Mr. Davis, said that her paintings showed real promise. Mama said that she had inherited Mem’s special gift.

It was a warm and welcoming kitchen, one that invited family and friends to gather. A large butcher block table occupied the center of the room. Its contours waned up and down from years of knife blows, and it was stained several shades of brown to black by the foods that had been prepared there. The stove was a six-burner stainless steel Thermidor with two huge ovens. They could hold the biggest turkeys at holiday time, and there were warming drawers so that the dinner rolls were always the perfect temperature when the rest of the meal was ready. Big copper pots hung from a rack on the ceiling and large porcelain spice jars stood on open shelves on the wall. Above the brick floors, hand-built hickory cabinets reached to the ceiling, the tops of which were fitted with glass doors showing off the various sets of china, cups all hanging from shiny brass hooks in neat rows that Papa had meticulously measured out according to Mama’s instructions. There was a big walk-in pantry that James sometimes used as his *downstairs fort*. As with the rest of the house, plenty of paned, double-hung windows showered the room with natural light and brought indoors the manicured lawns and wild English gardens.

Papa stood at the garage entrance, hanging up his coat



and tie on the heavy brass coat rack that stood by the door and unbuttoning his shirt collar and the buttons of his double-breasted vest. He turned just in time to receive James, who had climbed down off his stool, and was running to Papa's welcoming arms as fast as his little legs could carry him. Papa bent down until he was at eye level with James who stood on his tiptoes with his arms outstretched, waiting to be lifted. They looked just like a Norman Rockwell painting, Ari thought. One of those simple moments in life that ultimately are more fondly remembered than the most extravagant events.

Papa negotiated the length of the kitchen in just a few strides with James riding on his shoulders, squealing and ducking down every time Papa called "*low bridge*" to avoid bonking his head on one of the rough-hewn rafters that traversed the kitchen ceiling at regular intervals. He stopped to give Emma an affectionate kiss on the cheek and tell her how pleasantly surprised he was to see her as she usually spent Monday nights at the sorority, and then continued on to the other end of the butcher block where he lowered James onto his stool and then wrapped his arms around Mama, who was busy scooping orange sherbet into iced chillers. She stopped to return the affection, and they held each other just a bit longer than most couples of nearly twenty-two years might have.

"Well, this is how I like to find my family at day's end." Papa's voice resounded, as he took the seat at James's right hand. "Preparing a hearty meal for the Master!"

"Oh, we've made dinner for you too, darling," Mama retorted playfully, and just managed to grab a lock of her long, loosely held hair before it fell into the sherbet container.

It was James's job to stick a large wafer cookie into each of the chillers, but for each cookie that went into the sherbet, one went into his mouth. "James, no more cookies," Mama admonished, as he munched yet another. "If you get a tummy ache, it will spoil our plans for Golden Gate Park tomorrow."

James stood up on the top step of the stepstool, pulled up his Micky Mouse t-shirt with both hands, and stuck out his belly as far as he could. "See, Mama. I have a really big tummy. I can fit a lot more cookies inside!"





“James, you better do what your Mama says,” Papa warned, winking at Emma across the butcher block. “You’re getting so heavy I almost couldn’t lift you onto your stool!”

“Really, Papa?” He looked down at his tummy and tried to hold it in his hands, but some of his baby flesh had disappeared with his perpetual motion and, being at the age of more is always better, looked a little disappointed at his diminishing girth.

“Don’t worry, James,” Emma smiled. “You don’t want to be fat like Santa. You want to be tall and handsome like Papa.”

“Yeah, like Papa!” he grinned and stood as tall as he could on his tiptoes. He would have toppled to the floor if it weren’t for Papa’s quick hands.

It was true. Papa really was handsome. Everybody thought so. Last summer at the company picnic in Sigmund Stern Grove, Ari overheard some of the wives talking. They were watching Mama and Papa playing tennis with Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey, the company president and his wife. Papa was wearing his white tennis shorts and navy pullover, and Mama her little pleated tennis skirt that accentuated her long, slender legs. They were both laughing and shouting out orders and rushing the net like teenagers. “*Ethan Heywood certainly is a handsome man,*” she heard one woman say. “*Ruggedly handsome,*” another added. “*And Mary . . . I wish I could look that good with no make-up on. How do they stay looking so young?*” People were always saying things like that about her parents.

“Ari!” James squealed, when he spied her standing at the door. “Mama said I couldn’t go up and get you. I been waiting and waiting forever!”

“I know, big guy, but I’m here now,” she said, crossing the room to give him a big hug. She smiled hello at Mama and then continued round the table, kissed Papa hello, and sat next to Emma who was busily working on a green goddess salad. Papa reached across the table and stuck his forefinger in the dressing and quickly whisked it back to his mouth, hurriedly licking the drips of sour cream and mayonnaise, anchovies, and garlic and chives, before they reached the rolled-up cuff of his shirt.

“Oh, Ethan!” Mama laughed. “Is that any way to set an example for your children?”



“Yes,” Emma and Ari answered in unison, and stuck their fingers in the dressing as well. The kitchen erupted into laughter and spurred the onset of the congenial conversation that filled the warm country kitchen of the Heywood house every evening at this time. And soon Arianna assumed her place in the family portrait and was a million miles from the day that, just an hour ago, she was sure was the end of her life.

When the dinner was out of the oven and the chillers returned to the freezer, the family congregated as usual in the little family dining room off the kitchen to enjoy the evening meal and share the happenings of their day. Ari knew that this was a different experience from most of her friends, who sat behind collapsible TV tables watching *Gunsmoke* or *Jackie Gleason* or *The Wild, Wild West*, barely speaking while they munched away on a replica of roasted turkey from a shiny aluminum TV dinner tray. Perhaps it was because her family had lived in so many houses that didn’t have televisions, or perhaps it was just good—no essential—to maintain some sort of family ritual inside the house when the countries outside the house kept changing. Or maybe it was because the whole family knew that one day they could be scattered to the four corners of the earth and they needed to make use of this time together. Ari took no end of ribbing from her friends who couldn’t understand her apparent lack of typical teenage rebellion. She tried to tell them that she’d already gone through a whopper of a rebellious stage when living in Hong Kong, but they didn’t really believe her. So, she just started nodding silently when the others complained about how their parents “*just didn’t get it.*”

The little family dining room was one of the most casual rooms in the house, second only, perhaps, to the adjacent TV den. It overlooked the gardens and a fountain that spewed water from the top of a stone umbrella perched over the heads of two small stone children. The walls were covered in warm sienna plaster, and there was a cottage-style china hutch with open shelves filled with Spode plates in the Blue Tower pattern. Encircling the room on a high plate rail was a collection of majolica platters whose hand painted country characters seemed to be eavesdropping on the family conversation at the



dinner table each night. Most of the conversation tonight centered on the growing anti-war unrest at Berkeley, the absurdity of the Twiggy look, the excitement over the first heart transplant to be performed in December by Barnard, De Bakey, and Kantrowitz, Mama's new tie-dye t-shirt that confirmed Papa's suspicions that indeed his free-spirited wife had been born a hippie, and, of course, the brand new puppy that James wanted now that his "*bestest*" friend Georgie had gotten one. There was no talk of Ari's day.

After dinner Papa went upstairs to change his clothes and then went to his study to organize his papers for his morning meeting with the British and Dutch businessmen whose companies also had dealings in the Far East. James disappeared into the pantry to play Batman and Robin, Emma went upstairs to do her homework, and Ari joined Mama at the kitchen sink where she loaded the dishwasher and then grabbed a towel to start drying the pots as Mama finished scrubbing them.

Mama emptied the dirty water from the sink and refilled it with fresh water and a new supply of frothy bubbles. She gathered the serving utensils and put them in the water to soak. "Have you decided what you're going to do about Brittany?" she asked casually, handing Ari a spoon to dry. Mama's intuition when it came to her daughters always amazed Ari. It wasn't always a good thing though. Mama seemed to see all and know all, which made it very difficult for Ari and Emma to get away with anything. As long as it was a mistake that they could take back, Mama let the girls make them and learn from them, and she was always there to support and comfort them when those mistakes reared their ugly heads.

"I don't really know what to do," Ari replied, "short of praying that she moves to another state by morning."

Mama turned to look at her daughter, but her hands kept moving under the water, cleaning a small sauce pot by feel. "Oh, Arianna, if Brittany suddenly moved away tomorrow, someone else would take her place in twenty-four hours. The world is full of Brittanies."

"There's a gruesome thought."

"Perhaps."



“You weren’t there, Mama. You don’t understand.”

“I understand better than you think.” She took the dish towel from Ari’s hand and led her over to the butcher block island where they sat facing each other. “Ari,” she continued, “all teenagers want to fit in. People like Brittany count on that. It’s only natural to hate what’s happening to you. Just don’t start doubting yourself in the process. As horrible as today was, it will all blow over eventually.”

Ari knew by the way Mama was looking at her that she wished she could make all of troubles disappear. But Ari knew that wasn’t possible. Only she could do that.

“Let me ask you something,” Mama said at last, “and you must be completely honest with me.”

*Uh oh*, Ari thought. “Sure, Mama. What is it?”

“Are you ashamed of me?”

“What!”

“Are you ashamed of me?” Mama repeated. “Are you ashamed of our Island and our people? Are you ashamed to be my daughter?” Her tone wasn’t accusatory. She already knew the answer to her questions, but in her own way, she was trying to drive home a point to Ari.

“No, Mama! How could you even think that?” Ari protested. “I love the Island and everything about it, and I love you, Mama! How could you even ask me something like that?” Ari was hurt by the fact that Mama even doubted her feelings for a second.

Mama grabbed both of Ari’s hands in hers, squeezing them tight. “Then that’s what you want to remember when you walk into school tomorrow, Arianna. Brittany wants you to feel ashamed of who you are, of who I am. You’re never going to change her, but you can choose how you respond to her.”

“That’s a lot easier said than done, Mama. Any suggestions on how I do that?”

“I’m not really sure,” Mama admitted. “Only you can figure that out. But promise me one thing. Please make sure it doesn’t involve a dentist.” Mama smiled and Ari laughed. Mama always knew how to make her smile at even the hardest of times. It was a special gift she had, and Ari was ever so thankful for it.

They returned to the sink and finished cleaning in silence



until all the pots and utensils were neatly returned to either the pot rack or proper drawer, the food was put away, and only a small pile of wafers remained on the butcher block to be properly stored.

When Mama was satisfied that all was in perfect order, she thanked Ari for the help, grabbed up James from the pantry, and turned to go, but Ari stopped her before she reached the door. “May I ask you something, Mama?” she ventured.

“Of course,” she replied.

“How do you know so much about people like Brittany?”

Mama answered without hesitation. “Jennifer Taylor Winthrop! She was my first Brittany,” she said and left the room without explanation.

Ari stood at the base of the staircase, watching Mama climb the stairs with James in hand, on their way to their nightly ritual of face scrubbing, teeth brushing, and pajama selecting. James made a big production out of choosing his pajamas, as he was sure that they were somehow connected to the dreams he would have that night. And Mama, who was a dreamer herself, indulged her son’s idiosyncrasy. Each night Mama went to James’s pajama drawer, pulled out all of his neatly folded pajamas and laid them out on the bed. James marched down the length of his bed, stopping before each pair in silent consideration, looking much like a judge at a dog show. Mama always maintained a serious demeanor, never showing her amusement, as she assisted James in choosing between cowboys, outer space, Batman, dinosaurs, San Francisco Giants’ uniform, sea creatures, or plain pajamas, which Mama said were a blank page on which he could write his own adventures.

Ari had finished all her homework in study hall, having spent no time in whispered conversations or note passing, so she didn’t know how she was going to pass the time tonight. She wandered aimlessly into the living room, stopping first at the pedestal table between the burgundy duck club chairs to look at a silver-framed photograph of Mama and Papa lazing in a gondola in Venice. Mama was wearing a long, flowing silk dress, delicately embroidered and beaded in eggshell over minty green, and Papa was wrapped around her, the arms of his white



dinner jacket looking like an evening shawl. They were obviously returning home from a party; the smiles on their faces were too broad for sobriety. Or perhaps it was anticipation that made them smile. With Mama and Papa, you could never be sure.

Italy was Papa's first posting, and with just one glass of wine on spaghetti night these days, Mama and Papa would spew forth a litany of memories. "Remember our picnics in the Chianti Ruffino, Ethan?"

"I certainly do," Papa's voice would lower an octave or two, and his eyes would drift to some far-off memory. Ari guessed that their picnics had included more than just eating and drinking wine, but it was not something she wanted to think of her parents doing. It was sweet though the way they were still in love with one another after all this time. She wondered if she would share that kind of love someday.

"Mmm . . . warm Tuscan bread and hearty red wine and those purple and orange sunsets over Venice,"

Mama would continue to reminisce.

"And more hearty red wine," Papa would always repeat before draining his wine glass.

They spoke of hot summer days on Venetian canals and cool summer nights at lakeside villas and cobble street strolls through ancient pastel hill towns that rambled down to the Ligurian Sea. Ari never tired of hearing about their romantic adventures in Italy. Or about Signora Grumaldi, the once-famous opera singer who opened her house by the sea to special friends each weekend and in whose gardens they breakfasted on dark coffee and speck and breads baked fresh by Guillermo, the affable Peruvian houseboy. "How romantic," Ari sighed, and was suddenly acutely aware of the absence of romance in her life right now.

It had been several months since she and Mark Bingham had broken up. For a while she enjoyed the single life, or at least that's what she told herself. Mark was the first boy who ever broke up with her. He said he still wanted to be friends, but that he was going away to college and she was going to be on the Island all summer, and they needed to get used to seeing other people. Later she found out from Micki Taylor that Mark had been "*getting used to seeing other people*" long before they broke



up—namely Laura Pederson, one of Brittany’s best friends. Mark didn’t want to go to college a virgin, and everyone knew that Laura Pederson hadn’t been one for a really long time. Ari was devastated for about a week or two, especially because she had lost her date to the Spring Semi-Formal. That seemed so long ago now; it was hard to remember why she felt so upset over Mark.

On the wall behind the club chairs there were three portraits in oil. Mem had done them from memory of her grandchildren and had given them to Mama and Papa for Christmas last year. Mama cried when she unwrapped them saying that they not only captured the look of her children but their spirits as well. Ari often found her parents looking at them, always with the same odd expressions on their faces, both sentimental and amused.

Mama said that Emma would always be proof of Papa’s existence. She had his wavy brown hair, which lay to the middle of her back in layered cascades—a perfect backdrop to her beauty. She possessed a slender build, less curvy than Ari’s, and the graceful elegance that could only belong to a classically trained dancer, yet she had the hardiness to strap a full pack on her back and survive a week in the wilderness. She was kind and gentle and vigorous and steadfast and always seemed to know exactly the right thing to say. She could do that, Mama said, from the time she was very little, probably because she knew how to listen and was genuinely interested in what others had to say, just like Papa.

Arianna was Mama’s proof of life. Her beauty was both wild and serene, a creature of mountaintops and valley floors, of blue lagoons and steamy jungles, yet equally at home in the marble hall museums of the world’s largest cities and at Formica tables in cafés of the quaintest small towns. Both sisters were beautiful, both standouts in a crowded room.

James was Mama and Papa’s most intriguing concoction, from his unruly mop of hair that couldn’t decide if it wanted to be black or brown or curly or straight to his big round eyes that were not quite blue but not really green to the liberal sprinkling of freckles that came from nowhere and sat between devilish





little dimples. James was guileless and pure, able to cut straight to the core of adult pretensions, still possessing the innocence of youth that so charmed his elders. Ari thought that he would always possess such innocence.

A drawer slammed from somewhere upstairs, and Ari guessed that James had settled on tonight's pajamas. It wouldn't be long before she'd hear his bare feet scuffling down the stairs. She continued moving through the room, a bit more rapidly now, examining the mementoes of the family's travels scattered about the numerous occasional tables and curio cabinets. Finally, she came to her favorite treasures, Mama's collection of glass bottles that stood in order of purchase across the mantle. All together the bottles created a chronological history of the Heywood family, each having been purchased during the first week of Papa's new postings. Mama would set off on forays into the local marketplaces to ferret out the perfect bottle, taking the children just as soon they were old enough to accompany her. Together they would trek down thoroughfares and back alleys, through department stores and cellar hideaways, stopping along the way to enjoy the local delicacies and immerse themselves in the language and the culture.

There were bottles of all shapes and colors, most with some distinctive markings identifying the country of origin. There was the emerald green Venetian glass bottle bought at the Murano factory where glass blowers demonstrated their craft before taking customers to the showrooms upstairs. Then there was the saffron bottle from India that Mama found in the street market and the cranberry bottle with gilt edging that they discovered in a naval salvage shop in Annapolis, Maryland. And there was the aquamarine bottle from Singapore that the little boy with no shoes was selling and the little fluted bottle with an etched crystal stopper from Coco Channel's in Paris, which had once held an ounce of No. 5. Next came the cobalt blue bottle with the royal seal that they found in one of the antique stalls on Portobello Road in London. The hawker claimed it had once held mango chutney and had graced the side table of the Queen Mother. They didn't believe him, of course, but they so loved the enthusiasm with which he delivered his story in his delightful





cockney accent that they bought the bottle anyway. Then there was the amber glass bottle from Hong Kong with the hand-painted Chinese lettering, which they found in a back alley cellar belonging to a Chinese herbalist who dispensed ginseng in the front of his shop and opium in the back. Finally, there was the San Francisco bottle, which wasn't a bottle at all, but a big kitchen salt shaker made to look like Coit Tower.

There were nine bottles in all, eight representing all the places Papa's business had taken his family since he and Mama were married, and one very special bottle that stood first in line on the mantle. It was a clear glass pear-shaped bottle, larger than the others, which Mem had given to Mama when she first left the Island for college. The bottle was filled with alternating layers of black earth from the terraced mountainsides and golden sand from the beaches and varieties of dried leaves and preserved orchids and other tropical flowers. The only ornamentation on the bottle was a single Bird of Paradise, which Mem had painted with a miniature brush and a delicate hand. It was Ari's favorite. Mem said that all of Mama's memories of the Island were held in that bottle, and that as long as she had it with her, she would never be very far from home.

Ari took Mem's bottle down from the mantle, opened the stopper, and breathed deeply the air held inside. The fragrances of the contents had long since dissipated, but they were so firmly engrained in her memory that she smelled them anyway. A smile crept across her face—the same one that always found its way there whenever she thought of the Island. It didn't matter how badly her day had gone or how black her mood. the smile always made its way to the surface.

She continued meandering around the room, running her fingertips over picture frames and figurines, not really taking notice of much, until she reached Papa's study. The big oak doors stood ajar revealing the masculine atmosphere of a fine old English men's club inside. Ari could just see bits and pieces of the oversized red Persian carpet that filled most of the room, the big square partner's desk covered in files and memos, and the dark green leather furniture that was arranged around a stone fireplace whose hearth was just begging for an old hunting dog.



A tall glass curio cabinet stood to the left of the fireplace. It was filled with Royal Doulton Toby Jugs—another of their collections that held memories of places visited.

She slipped quietly into the room where she found Papa relaxing before the fire in his favorite wingback, wearing some loose khakis and his lemon yellow lamb's wool crewneck. A cloud of smoke from his Meerschaum pipe perched over his head and swirled about whenever he exhaled. He was obviously deep in thought, but from the distant expression on his face, Ari guessed that it wasn't business that occupied his mind. A minute or two passed before he looked up and smiled her into the leather chair that sat opposite his. It was the only surface not covered with files. She lowered herself into the chair, fitting herself squarely into the soft impression made by all the other backsides that had rested there before her, and waited for Papa to speak.

Papa was leaning back with his feet planted comfortably on the hassock, his head resting on his left hand while he rhythmically puffed on his pipe. "I hear you had a tough day at school," he said at last. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Nothing I can think of, Papa. I got myself into this, and I guess I'll have to get myself out."

"Well, you have every right to be angry, Arianna. I have little control myself when it comes to bigotry. And Brittany wasn't just attacking you today. She was attacking Mama," he added, unable to keep the contempt out of his voice. "But perhaps you could find a slightly less flamboyant response next time. You know, Elmer's glue instead of contact cement!" Papa said this in a teasing voice, but Ari got the message.

"If we have to pay for damage to Brittany's car, I'll pay you back, Papa. I promise."

"We can settle all that if the need arises. In the meantime, I want you to come to me if you need anything, even if you have to wake me."

They sat silently for some time, Papa perusing his papers and Ari staring at the fire, whose warmth was therapeutic. Periodically, she glanced around the room at Papa's mementoes, pausing at the King's Arms Pub sign for a quick remembrance and at the maroon and black Pallio banner from Sienna and the



photographs of the family in high mountain valleys and quaint coastline villages. Eventually she came to the giant world globe that waited patiently in the corner for Papa to retrieve it for another game of *guess where we're moving to next*.

Every couple of years the family gathered around the globe with bowls of popcorn and mugs of hot cider and listened to Papa's geographic and cultural clues to systematically narrow their guesses from hemispheres to continents to countries to exact locales. Especially memorable was the night in the London House when Papa pulled out the globe, and Ari had declared that she wasn't going anywhere because Mama was way too pregnant.

But since Mama hadn't seemed bothered by the move, Ari forgot her anxiety and was soon caught up in the game.

"We're going to the continent with the most populated country in the world," Papa had said, and Mama wrote it down. "That's China, Mama, so we're moving to Asia," Emma had shouted, and Mama wrote it down too. "We can rule out cities west of Istanbul," Ari had added. And so-on and so-on and so-on. Later that night, after they had gone to bed, the sisters wondered what their new rooms would be like in the Hong Kong house and what their school would be like and their friends. When they awoke the next morning, they were ready to take on another change in their lives, but they were wholly unprepared for the change that had already taken place. Their brother, James, had been born at sunrise.

"Arianna, a penny for your thoughts," Papa said, bringing her back to the present.

"It will cost you more than that, Papa," she replied.

"Really, Ari, would you like to talk? I can do this work later."

Before she could answer, James came bounding through the door wearing his monkey pajamas and clutching his Curious George book in his pudgy little hands. "Read to me, Papa, please. You promised! You promised!"

Papa put his files aside, pulled James up onto his lap and wrapped his big, strong arms around him. With a quick wink at Ari, he began, "This is George. He was a good little monkey and always very curious."



James squirmed himself into position, rested his head in the crook of Papa's arm, and alternately looked down at the page and admiringly up at Papa's rugged jaw and serious demeanor. Papa always kept his promises, and James adored him for that.

### 3



THE NEXT MORNING Ari was late coming down to breakfast. She had changed her clothes repeatedly before deciding on her coral pink crew neck, straight black skirt, which just passed dress code at an inch above her knees, and her soft leather Cappezios that showed off her long legs better than her boots. Papa and Emma were already seated at the table when she arrived in the little dining room and were watching Mama retrieve another waffle from the stainless steel waffle maker. It was now a well-worn appliance, all batter-dripped and scorched from extensive use by the waffle lovers who salivated like Pavlov's dogs the minute the top popped open and the aromatic steam escaped.

"Oh, Ari, you're just in time for a waffle," Mama said, disengaging it from the iron with a fork and plopping it on a plate.

"No thanks, Mama. Why don't you have it?"

"Are you sure? I made them just the way you like them with plenty of drippy butter and Log Cabin syrup," she replied, pointing to the red, cabin-shaped tin."

"I'm sure, Mama. Thanks anyway."

"Well, eat something, Arianna. I don't want you going to school without breakfast."

Ari didn't reply. She just grabbed the box of Cheerios that sat on the table and poured a small amount into her bowl. She covered the cereal with a layer of sliced bananas, splashed milk on them to make them wet, and then poured enough sugar on the bananas to transform her breakfast into dessert. She took a big mouthful and munched on it, a single drip of milk escaping her mouth and reaching her chin before she caught it with her



napkin. “Where’s James?” she asked after swallowing, suddenly noticing that he wasn’t at the table.

Mama leaned forward and spoke in a whispered voice. “James is lying on the sofa in the den with a little tummyache. He says it has nothing to do with the empty cookie box I found in the pantry. Someone else ate those, you know.”

“Oh, poor James!” Ari replied. “Is he too sick to go to the park today?”

“I’m afraid so, and he’s so disappointed.”

“Maybe we could all take him this weekend,” Papa suggested. “I know you girls are too old for such things, but it would mean a lot to James. Do you have any plans?”

“Not anymore,” Ari said, feeling a bit sorry for herself. Mama had little patience for self-pity and was about to say something, but decided to remain silent, knowing her own propensity for showering her daughters with philosophical wisdom when what they really needed was time to figure things out for themselves.

“What about you, Emma. Do you think you could spare a day away from what’s-his-name to join us?”

“His name is Roger, Papa, and he’s working Saturday at Petrini’s Market so I can make it.”

“Good, that’s settled then. We’ll take James to the Aquarium and the Museum of Natural History and then head up to the Cliff House for lunch.”

“Could we go to Playland?” Ari asked, trying to show a bit of enthusiasm.

“Why not!”

When the family relocated from Hong Kong, they interspersed their unpacking with excursions around San Francisco to introduce the girls to the culture of their new home and to appease three-year-old James whose patience for unpacking was rather limited. It was on one of those junkets that they visited one of San Francisco’s historic treasures, Playland at the Beach—a collection of carnival rides and midway games, a Fun House, food shops, and an original Charles Loeff Carousel built in 1906. It was a special place that the Whitney brothers reigned over for nearly fifty years, where generations of



young children spent Saturday afternoons and young lovers, Mama and Papa among them, spent Saturday nights and where Captain Fortune, a local TV personality in the '50s regularly held court on the weekends. By the time the family arrived in San Francisco, Playland was in its final decline. The Big Dipper Roller Coaster, one of the old-time wooden works of art, had long since succumbed to modern safety codes, and the other attractions were rusting and peeling and showing their age and neglect. Still it was one of the last urban amusement parks of its kind in America, and worth a visit if only to relive youthful memories or pay final respects.

"I'm going to tell James about Saturday," Ari said. "Maybe it will make him feel better."

Ari slipped quietly into the den. It was a small, cozy room, all soft leather and green and red plaid, just big enough for a sofa, two recliners, some shelves full of toys neatly stored in sturdy baskets, James's wooden trains, which were usually set in some wild configuration on the floor in front of the coffee table, a small stereo set and a large console television. Ari remembered when they first moved to San Francisco. What a novelty American television was then. She and Emma were glued to the TV and never missed an episode of *Dr. Kildare*. Emma thought Richard Chamberlain was even more dreamy than Troy Donahue, but Ari thought that was going a little too far. By the end of the year, *Dr. Kildare* was cancelled, the novelty had worn off, and the television was relegated to the infrequent watching of sporting events, Saturday morning cartoons, Ed Sullivan on Sunday nights if someone like the Beatles happened to be on, *Disney's Wonderful World of Color*, and a handful of other programs and movies sprinkled in between.

When James saw Ari, he reached out his arms and began to cry. She sat down close to him, grabbed him up and rocked him soothingly on her lap. "*Ariiii . . .*" he bawled, "I'm sick and I can't go to *Golding Gate Park*." He clutched onto her arms and buried his face in her chest and cried until he had made a wet spot on her sweater.

Ari let him cry himself out, just holding him with one hand and stroking his hair with the other. Finally, she said in as jovial



a voice as she could muster, "James, I have a surprise for you!"

"For . . . for me?" he sputtered, lifting his quivering little chin.

"Just for you!"

"What is it, Ari, what is it?"

"We're all going to the park. You, me, Emma, Mama, and Papa. All of us together, James."

"Now?"

"No. On Saturday when you're all better and Emma and I don't have school."

"When's Saturday, Ari?"

She held up James's right hand and counted out the days on his fingers. "Today is Tuesday," she began, pointing to his baby finger, and continued until she reached his thumb and Saturday.

James looked dejected again. "That's too many fingers. I want to go in this many." He held up two fingers and smiled at her in that way he already knew, even at his young age, made it hard for people to say no.

"If you go in that many days, James, I can't go with you," she said in mock sadness.

He popped up on her lap and threw his arms around her neck. "It's okay, Ari. You can go. It's okay."

"Oh, thank you, James," she replied with exaggerated excitement. "Saturday will be the *bestest* day of the whole week!" For more reasons than one, she thought to herself.

She plumped James's pillow and snuggled him down under his favorite woolen "*blankie*," the one that was all balled up and napless from repeated washings, and returned to the others in the dining room.

"Is James all right?" Mama wanted to know.

"He's just fine, Mama. I told him about Saturday."

"Good. I'm sure he'll start feeling better soon."

Ari wished she would feel better soon, but first she had to survive whatever awaited her at school today. "I have to go right by your school this morning," Papa said, reading his daughter's thoughts. "I'm picking up a colleague who lives near there. Why don't I drop you and then Emma can pick you up after school. You only have morning classes today, right, Emma?"





“Yes, I can come get you, Ari.”

Ari thought for a moment before answering. “That’s awfully nice of you,” she said, “but it’s probably time I learned to fight my own battles.”

“Perhaps you could learn to fight your own battles tomorrow,” Mama interjected. “The station wagon’s still in the shop, and I have to go to the market for some ginger ale for James. I could really use the other car today.”

“Okay,” Ari answered, “but we better get going. I don’t want to be late on top of everything else.”

A car horn sounded outside, announcing Roger’s arrival, and Emma said a hurried goodbye and headed for the front door. Ari grabbed her bowl, and the carton of milk on her way out. She opened the refrigerator door and placed the milk on the top shelf, right next to a full bottle of ginger ale. She just smiled thinking about all the times Mama had said that it was her job to help her children, not to rescue them. Even Mama wasn’t above a little rescuing every once in a while.

The drive to school was only a few miles through neighborhoods of neat stucco houses with little patchwork lawns and matching ornamental trees planted one to a property. Ari stared out the passenger side window at the passing houses until she was hypnotized by the optical illusion of one pastel house replacing its neighbor in the same space. When the game no longer distracted her from the day ahead, she looked at Papa. He was wearing her favorite navy blue Pierre Cardin suit—the one with the wild burgundy and blue lining in the vest that reminded her of a psychedelic poster from the Filmore West. Papa always wore three-piece suits with notched-collared vests and an etched gold pocket watch Mama had given him as an engagement present. There was an inscription inside the watch that read *My Love for All Time*.

Ari reached over and gently shook the watch chain until Papa’s Phi Beta Kappa key lay flat against his vest. “Thanks,” he said, glad to have an excuse to start up a conversation. “We wouldn’t want the old man looking sloppy.”

“You never look sloppy, Papa. Not even when you’re wearing a sarong and are covered with sand.”



“Well, I’m glad to know you think I’m . . . what’s the word all the kids are using now? Bitchen’?” Ari laughed at the sound of that word coming out of Papa’s mouth. Not even she could get used to using American slang after all her years abroad.

They drove on, exchanging small talk about the fog that was lifting early today and pleasantries about their impending outing on the weekend until they reached the yellow house with dark green trim that meant school was only a few blocks ahead. When they pulled up in front of the school, Papa turned off the motor and waited. Ari didn’t move; she just sat staring straight ahead, twirling that familiar lock of hair around her finger.

“Who was Jennifer Taylor Winthrop?” she asked suddenly, shifting around to face her startled father.

“Whatever made you dredge up her name?”

“Mama mentioned her last night. She said that she was her Brittany. No, actually she said that she was her *first* Brittany.”

Papa didn’t respond right away. He was remembering events that had taken years and a lot of help from Mary to put behind him. At last he said, “Jennifer Taylor Winthrop was the girl I was supposed to marry.”

“Marry?” Ari exclaimed. “Papa, did you leave her at the altar or something?”

“Nothing quite so dramatic,” Papa laughed, his voice resuming its familiar calmness. “Our fathers were close business associates, and they looked upon Jennifer and me as a perfect merger of two fine old families.”

“Did you even like Jennifer, Papa? I mean, would you have married her if you had never met Mama?” Ari wasn’t sure if her questions were getting too personal, but Papa was always so reluctant to talk about his family. Sometimes she felt like she was missing a whole part of herself.

“I never would have married her under any circumstance, but that didn’t keep my father from blaming Mama for ruining one of his biggest business deals.”

“It must have been really awful for Mama, with your parents I mean.”

“I was their only child, Arianna, the only one who could carry on the family name, and I had the nerve to bring your



Mama into their house and say that I wanted to marry her. They tried everything to dissuade me. They even enlisted Jennifer's help to demonstrate to Mama how she could never fit into proper society."

An audible gasp escaped from Ari's throat as she imagined what it must have been like for Mama, walking into the big Sea Cliff house and being set upon by a savage hoard of Brittanies. Papa had driven Ari by the house once, and she thought it a forbidding place with its iron-gated doors and windows and its thick granite walls. She thought it looked more like a fortress than a home, and in a way it was.

"The last time I saw my father alive," Papa continued, "we were screaming at each other. He said that women like Mama were okay for mistresses but certainly not worthy of bearing Heywood children. He said that if I married Mama, I was no longer his son. I said that I would never forgive him for the way he treated Mama and that he was no longer my father."

"And you never talked to him again after that?"

"No."

"What about your mother?" Ari asked. "Was she ever nice to Mama?"

"I think in her own way she tried to be kind to Mama, but she never was able to stand up to my father. I wish . . ." He didn't finish the thought.

"Mama told me once that you wanted to be an ambassador like an uncle of yours. Was she the reason you never became one?"

"I wanted to be just like my Uncle James. He was my mother's brother. I was closer to him than I ever was to my own father."

"You didn't answer my question, Papa," she reminded him.

"Let's just say that marrying your Mama wasn't the wisest career move a diplomat could make, but it was the best decision I ever made," he replied. "I'm not saying that you should give up everything for someone, but for the right person, some sacrifices are worth making. But let's not mention any of this to Mama. She's not responsible for the circumstances of my career, but she would blame herself if she knew."



“Papa, can I ask you something else?”

“Of course. You can ask me anything. Except female stuff . . . that’s all your mama.” He laughed and Ari giggled.

“How did you know Mama was the one worth sacrificing for?” Papa sat back in his seat, his blue eyes sparkled and Ari knew his mind was no longer in the car.

“When I met your Mama, I felt like I had known her my whole life. It was unlike anything I’d ever felt before.” Ari cocked her head to the side, studying his profile. “I’m sorry I can’t give you a better answer, Ari. I just don’t have one.”

At five past eight the warning bell rang, and Ari and Papa said goodbye. He didn’t drive off right away but watched her descend the stairs to the little courtyard in front of the main entrance. She looked so tiny as she opened the heavy glass door and disappeared into the belly of the whale. If only he could vanquish her enemies for her, like when she was his little baby girl and he’d chase away the monsters from under her bed and inside her closet with just a flash of his Eveready “*light-ray*.” Still, there might be something he could do, if only in the background.

Once inside, Ari joined the steady stream of students who were migrating down the wide hallway that separated the offices from the school library, keeping to the edge and staring at the wall as she walked. For a while she busied herself counting the cinder blocks that rose in monotonous gray lines to the acoustic ceiling but stopped when she nearly collided with the glass cabinet that held the school’s athletic trophies. Among the gleaming trophies, which Principal Hayes required to be polished weekly, were photographs of the smiling young students, mostly boys of course, whose teams had won the awards.

She continued on, past a drooping rubber tree plant that thirsted for water, an announcement board about college applications, an inspirational banner about school pride that hung over a garbage can, a large portrait of President Johnson hanging on a red, white, and blue background under big block letters that invited boys to join the R.O.T.C., and a hand-drawn poster surrounded by twists of brightly colored crepe paper announcing Friday night’s dance after the football game.



When she finally reached the quad, she broke off from the herd and skirted around the edges until she reached the Arts and Humanities building. No Brittany yet. She took a deep breath and entered cautiously. She expected to find a group of students waiting for her at her locker, but there were only a few students in the hall, all retrieving items from their own lockers. They smiled casually as Ari passed but showed no apparent interest in her now well-publicized troubles. Brian Murphy gave her kind of an odd look, but then Brian, or *Murph the Surf* as he was known around school, was one of those hippie surfer types who *smoked* his breakfast and perpetually wore an odd look. It probably didn't mean anything.

She opened her locker slowly, remembering the shock of the previous day, and retrieved her books for her morning classes. Still no Brittany. Perhaps things wouldn't turn out as badly as she feared. Perhaps she might not even run into Brittany today. Perhaps Paul McCartney was going to call tonight and ask her out on a date.

Returning to the quad, Ari took a direct path this time right through the center, stopping here and there to greet the groups of threes and fours who were engaged in a buzz of simultaneous conversation, hoping to give the impression that she had been completely unaffected by yesterday's events. Usually the conversations before school were lively and gregarious and focused on sports or Friday night's dance or which boy was going to ask which girl to the dance. Today the conversations sounded more like the casual small talk in which theatre patrons engage while waiting for the curtain to rise on a memorable production. No one mentioned Brittany.

"Ari, wait up!" a voice called from behind her, and before she could turn around Meghan O'Leary came bounding up beside her.

"Aren't you afraid to be seen with me?" Ari said, a little disappointed that her best friend was nowhere to be found yesterday when she needed her most.

Meghan frowned at the tone of Ari's voice. "Ari, I was absent yesterday. Don't you remember? I had my wisdom teeth pulled on Saturday. I didn't know anything about what happened



until I got to school today. Why didn't you call me last night?"

"I'm sorry," Ari returned. "I guess I was afraid you had abandoned me like everyone else. When you didn't call me, and Jen and Jess didn't call, I guess I didn't know what to think. I should have known better," she added.

Meghan smiled her big, toothy smile, making her half dozen freckles dance, and her auburn pageboy bounce. "Didn't you even notice that I wasn't in Government class?"

"No. I spent most of the day looking at my feet!" Ari replied.

"Well, I have to turn in my note at the front office before the bell. Do you want to come with me?"

"That's okay," Ari said. "I think I'll go to class."

"Okay. See you after Government." Meghan whirled around and quick-stepped her way to the office, calling over her shoulder, "Hang in there!" Ari was glad to know that at least one of the fifteen hundred students in her school wasn't laughing at her.

She continued her slow, casual walk to the Math and Science building, hoping that no one would notice the exaggerated length of her strides. She could see the door to the building not twenty yards ahead. Still no Brittany. Maybe she was absent today. She quickened her pace a little until she was only a few feet from the door and the safety of the teachers who were in their classrooms preparing for the day's lessons. That's when it happened.

"Arianna Heywood!" Brittany yelled. Ari turned to face a wildly gesticulating, long-sleeved, bright pink sweater and matching mouth, both of which were way too loud for a school day. Brittany was screaming something about Ari ruining her car, and how she would have to pay for it, and how normal people wouldn't behave like that, and only a stupid, backward native girl from a stupid, backward island would. A gallery of spectators had already formed, some looking horrified, but most smiling and enjoying the show.

"Well, Ari, say something!" Brittany's tone was menacing.

Ari dropped her books on the ground, put her hands on her hips and slowly tapped her right Capezzio while steadily fixing her gaze on Brittany's purple face. She had a vague feeling that something was going on here, something more than a doll



and a bit of glue, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

"Well!" the pink sweater screamed again.

An abrupt stillness had settled over the quad, much like the eerie silence before a tornado or a volcanic eruption. Everyone was waiting to see what Ari would do next. She dropped her hands from her hips and slowly walked toward Brittany, hoping something really clever would pop into her head on the way. When she was just a foot or two away, she stopped, smiled, and opened her mouth to speak, not having the faintest idea what words would emerge. Before she had a chance to find out, a boy in the crowd shouted, "What are you so mad for, Brittany? You started it!"

Ari watched the color drain from Brittany's face but return just as suddenly.

"I'm sure Ari just figured that if you took all that trouble to buy one of those dolls, you probably wanted it back *permanently*," the voice added. The emphasis on the word permanently drew laughter from the crowd.

Ari tried to identify the owner of the voice, but Brittany, who had whirled around to face her new adversary, blocked her view. All she could see were snatches of long blond hair hitting the collar of a pale blue oxford button down and one muscular shoulder and one blue eye. She walked forward a few steps more, straining to see around Brittany, who stood motionless, not yet responding to the voice. Finally, Brittany spoke.

"Oh, come on, Jason," she said in a voice turned syrupy sweet. "I know you're only joking, but this isn't funny."

Ari couldn't believe her ears or her eyes once she managed to maneuver through the crowd. The voice belonged to Jason Caldwell. Jason Caldwell—most popular boy on campus. Jason Caldwell—captain of the football team and the boy Brittany most wanted to date. Ari knew Jason. They had spoken often in last period Art class, but Jason Caldwell was untouchable. He went out with a lot of girls but never settled on any one of them for his girlfriend. He had once asked Ari to a party when she first arrived in San Francisco, but she had turned him down. She didn't want to be just another one of his trophies, or anyone else's for that matter. He also had a reputation for



drunken parties and fast friends, and Ari wanted no part of that. Not that you could find a party where there wasn't some drinking going on. But Jason's parties went over the line, at least so the rumors said.

Now as Ari stared at him in amazement and he smiled back, she didn't know what to think. Maybe Jason wasn't anything like the stories that circulated around the campus. Or maybe this was the work of the Gods. (That would please Mama.) Whatever the case, she'd have to find out later. The final warning bell had sounded. Only three minutes to get to class.

As quickly as the crowd had gathered around the combatants, it dispersed, along with Brittany, to engage in school business as usual. Ari stood motionless, returning the congratulatory smiles of passersby, and the bewildered expression on Meghan, who had returned from the office just in time to witness the strange turn of events. Ari still thought she must be dreaming until Jason approached her. "We better get to class before we both end up in the office with tardy slips," he said with a casualness that belied any of the previous drama. He retrieved her books from where they still lay in a heap on the pavement, tucked them inside his elbow, and led the still disbelieving Ari to class.

They entered the Math and Science building and stood before the Physics room door. Ari could see Mrs. Thomas at the blackboard writing out the problem of the day, and she knew she had a minute or two more before she needed to take her seat. "Thank you for what you did back there," she said. "But why? Why did you do it?"

"I don't know. Maybe because you're never afraid to stick up for other kids when Brittany goes after them. Or maybe because I wish I had the nerve to glue a hula dancer to her car. You're a campus legend, Ari. Everybody knows what you did."

"Really? How could they all know? Brittany was ranting so crazy, I wasn't even sure what she was talking about."

"We all knew yesterday."

"Yesterday!"

"Sure. She drove out of school with the hula dancer bobbing around in her rear window, and every kid in the parking lot





saw it. She was just waving and laughing. She had no idea that everyone was laughing at her, not you. You should have been there.”

Ari studied him as he walked away. He was broad shouldered and athletic and was just about the closest thing she'd ever seen to Troy Donahue or Steve McQueen. She never thought that a high school boy who looked that good could be that nice. Maybe it wasn't fair to have judged him by the rumors.

“Are you planning to join us today, Ms. Heywood,” Mrs. Thomas's voice called from inside the classroom. There was laughter from the class. This time she didn't mind.

Ari could barely concentrate on her classes. A vague feeling of excitement was building in her, the kind that starts in the pit of your stomach and spreads through your insides like a great overture building to a crescendo, announcing that some extraordinary experience awaits you behind the curtains, and you won't know what it is until they slowly draw open and reveal the stage. She couldn't wait to get home and tell Mama and Emma. Even Mama might not believe this one, and Mama thought there were no limits to the possibilities in life.

At lunchtime Ari met up with Meghan and the two of them walked to the cafeteria as usual. “I talked to Jess in English class today, Ari. She and Jen are really sorry they didn't call you last night. They didn't know if you wanted to talk to anyone, and they figured you'd call them if you did. Don't be mad at them.”

“I'm not,” Ari replied. “I'm too happy to be mad at anyone just now.” When they reached the cafeteria, they took seats opposite each other at their usual table overlooking the quad. Ari left just enough room for Jason to sit next to her in case he decided to forgo his customary seat at the far end of the table. She and Meghan were used to watching him there, his surfer blond hair and easy charm making a striking impression on all the girls. It seemed effortless for him, being the center of attention in the group, and Ari wondered if he ever had to think about what he said before he said it or worry about what he said afterward. He just seemed so comfortable with who he was. Ari felt like that whenever she was on the Island. She wished she could feel like that all the time.



Jason arrived carrying his institutional green plastic tray piled high with noodle surprise (everyone joked that the only surprise was that you didn't throw up after eating it) and Jello medley, which was a fancy name for all the different Jellos that were left over from previous lunches. He headed straight for Ari and sat down next to her. It was his first public announcement of his intentions. The first of many, Ari hoped.

The conversation around the table was boisterous and familiar. Mostly, they talked about last Thursday's Government test and how Bruce Danforth had to complete an extra-credit paper by Friday if he hoped to play in the football game that night, and how everyone would help him out because the game was for the conference championship, and he was their quarterback. And they talked about the dance afterward and how the school's social committee had raised enough money from car washes and donut sales to hire a live band and how there was a rumor going around that the band was going to be Country Joe and the Fish. Jason said that it was going to be the best dance of the year because they would all be celebrating their second conference championship in a row, but when he said the part about it being the best dance of the year he was looking straight at Ari. She wondered if Jason was working up to asking her to the dance, and she periodically shot secret glances at Meghan across the table, signaling her excitement.

Suddenly the table grew silent. Ari looked up and saw Brittany and Meredith Sweeny (Brittany never went anywhere alone) standing there with their lunch trays. The kids around the table were fairly spread out, and someone would have to shift over to make room for two more. Ari glanced first at Meghan and then all around the table at the people who were waiting for her to make the first move. "*Take the high road whenever the opportunity presents itself,*" she could hear Papa say. "*In the end, it is always the position of superior strength.*"

Ari moved closer to Jason, who smiled back at the beautiful girl he once thought had some nerve turning him down for a date. Brittany took the space that opened at the far end of the table and the two girls neither spoke to each other nor made eye contact after that, but it was clear to everyone that Ari was in



command. When the bell rang ending lunch, Meghan shot Ari a look that said *you better call me tonight*, and Ari and Jason got up from the table, threw their lunch remains in the garbage, and joined the line of students who filed out of the cafeteria. Jason slipped his arm casually around Ari's waist, and she responded in kind. That's when she knew for sure—*he's going to ask me to the dance*.

Emma had arrived at school early in case Brittany decided to ambush her sister when the teachers weren't looking. She was ready to put the little princess in her place if need be. At the very least she wanted to be there so Ari wouldn't have to make the long walk through the courtyard and up the front steps all alone with everyone's eyes on her. When the bell rang, Emma got out of the car, making her presence known to all who emerged through the front entrance. "Well, isn't that typical," Emma said to herself as she watched Ari come bounding through the doors, laughing and animated, surrounded by half a dozen friends. "Somehow she always lands on her feet!"

"Emma, I'll be right there," Ari yelled when she spotted her. She said a hurried goodbye to Jason, who headed to football practice, yelling over his shoulder, "I'll call you tonight," and she signaled Meghan that she'd call her right after. Then she ran up the stairs and jumped in the car, saying nothing until she and Emma were well off school grounds.

"Okay, Ari, give! You seem to be the most popular girl on campus. What happened?"

"You'll never believe it!" Ari exclaimed and told Emma the whole story.