Chapter *One*

HONOLULU, 1989

I was certain the sun's rays would filter through the legs of the table under which I slept and Grandma Pearl would wake me from my fold-up mattress with the scents of margarine-drenched toast and hot chocolate. I knew my sister Cheraine and her best friend Rene, a towering Samoan girl with waves flowing down her broad back like lava, would walk me to school, the heels of our rubber slippers smacking the warm cement. I was certain my first-grade teacher would part her coral-lacquered lips to greet me with a smile as I carefully placed my slippers in the blue cubbyhole labeled *Charles*. I was certain that when it was time for recess or bathroom breaks, we would divide into two lines: one for boys, the other for girls.

I was certain I was a boy, just as I was certain of the winding texture of my hair and the deep bronze of my skin. It was the first thing I'd learned about myself as I grew aware that I existed. There was evidence proving it: the pronouns, the penis, the Ninja Turtle pajamas, the pictures of hours-old me wrapped in a blue blanket with my eyes closed to the world. When they opened and I began learning the world, my desire to step across the chasm that separated me from the girls—the ones who put their sandals in the red cubbyholes labeled *Kawehi*, *Darlene*, and *Sasha*—rose inside of me. The stature of this faint desire, whose origins I can't pinpoint to a pivotal *aha!* moment, grew taller and bolder despite the cues, rebuttals, and certainties of those around me, who told me through a slightly furrowed brow or a shake of the head that even attempting to cross that void was wrong.

When I look back at my childhood, I often say *I always knew I was a girl* since the age of three or four, a time when I began cataloging memories. No one—not my mother, my grandmother, my father, or my siblings—gave me any reason to believe I was anything other than my parents' firstborn son, my father's namesake. But it was my very first conviction, the first thing I grew certain of as a young person. When I say *I always knew I was a girl* with such certainty, I erase all the nuances, the work, the process of self-discovery. I've adapted to saying *I always knew I was a girl* as a defense against the louder world, which has told me—ever since I left Mom's body in that pink hospital atop a hill in Honolulu—that my girlhood was imaginary, something made up that needed to be fixed. I wielded this ever-knowing, all-encompassing certainty to protect my identity. I've since sacrificed it in an effort to stand firmly in the murkiness of my shifting self-truths.

I grew to be certain about who I was, but that doesn't mean there wasn't a time when I was learning the world, unsure, unstable, wobbly, living somewhere between confusion, discovery, and conviction. The fact that I admit to being uncertain doesn't discount my womanhood. It adds value to it.

The first person I ever valued outside of my family was Marilyn, whom I met in kindergarten. She lived in the same two-story building as Grandma Pearl, in Ka'ahumanu Housing, the public subsidized complex in Kalihi that was the setting of all my early memories in Oahu. Marilyn had a stick-straight bowl haircut and a wide gap between her front two teeth that didn't prevent her from smiling. She was the first person with whom I had things in common: We were the same kind of brown—like whole wheat bread—because we both came from brown people (I was Hawaiian and

black, while Marilyn was Hawaiian and Filipino); we both lived with our maternal grandmothers; and we both loved playing jacks, hopscotch, and tag. We were always barefoot, the khaki-colored bottoms of our wide, flat feet turned black from the earth. When we wore ourselves out, we'd rinse our feet with the hose in her grandmother's front yard and rest on the ground under the clothesline, the moist grass pressed into our backs. The wind blew around us, making the floral dresses that hung above us dance, swaying like hula dancers. Humidity was in the air, and so was fragrance: Tide detergent and gardenias and lunchtime rice. The sun's rays filtered through the clothes and touched our skin in shifting patterns. Marilyn looked unblinkingly at the sun, glowing and dark, like a shiny copper penny I'd pick up on my way to school.

"Truth or dare," Marilyn said as I lifted my back from the grass. I see myself in my favorite McDonald's T-shirt, the light-blue one I wore in my first-grade school photo.

"Dare!" I said over Grandma's birds of paradise that peeked over her bushel of tea leaves.

"Okay, you see dat dress ova dea?" Marilyn boasted in her Hawaiian pidgin, pointing at a pink muumuu with a mustard and white hibiscus pattern that hung on her grandmother's clothesline. I nodded. "I dare you for put dat on," she said.

"Ho, that's so easy!" I said, standing up, reaching for the dress.

"No, I not done!" Marilyn scolded. "You gotta put it on, den run across the park, all a way to da rubbish cans and back."

The dress flowed forward in the wind toward my destination. I half contemplated the trouble I could get into for dirtying a clean dress, but chickening out on a dare was not an option. Truth or dare was more than a game; it was our way as kids to learn intimacy and trust. I trusted that Marilyn wouldn't ask me to do anything drastic, and she trusted that I wouldn't tell any of her truths, like the time she'd told me she had a crush on Keoni, the husky boy who smelled like Uncle Toma's dirty socks.

I pulled the dress down by its ruffled trim, producing a synchronized snap of wooden clothespins. As I slipped it over my small frame, the puffed shoulders rested at my elbows, and the hem circled me like a puddle of water.

"Ho, your grandma this big?" I laughed in fuchsia-clad hysteria, and Marilyn's gap-toothed grin joined mine.

Hiking up the dress, I looked diagonally above us at Grandma Pearl's front porch. She wasn't in the yard or in the kitchen, so I figured she wouldn't see me. I clenched the fabric in my fists. Stepping out from Marilyn's yard, I felt the warmth of the cement on my bare feet as the heat of the early-afternoon sun spread across my body.

Checking Grandma's front door one last time, I sprinted across the sidewalk. I felt lovely in the muumuu, which flirted with my skin as the Oahu trades blew moist kisses at me. At the trash bin, I did a little Paula Abdul move to my inner DJ's spin of "Straight Up" for Marilyn's delight. She mimicked me from across the parking lot and waved for me to hurry back. Running toward her lawn, I galloped and grinned with the glee of soon-to-be achievement. Just as my feet touched the grass, I heard my eldest sister, Cori, cackling from the balcony. "Grandma! Come look at Charles," she screamed teasingly, her long, straight black hair and blunt bangs blowing in the wind.

A bit ruffled, I picked up the pace and prayed that if God let me get the muumuu back on the line without Grandma seeing me, then I would never wear a dress again. With each step, the fabric felt heavier, confining my ability to get out of the dress swiftly. I felt silly under Cori's gaze. The joy that I had experienced mutated into transgression.

"Charles, getcha fuckin' ass ova hea!" Grandma shouted at me, though my sister's laughs lightened her bark. "Now!"

Grandma Pearl was the first woman to make an impression on me, my first example of what a woman was supposed to be: strong, dutiful, and outspoken. Her voice was harsh from years of talking to her own six children and her children's children. She didn't edit her language for anyone and was unapologetic about cursing regardless of the age of her company. Grandma penciled her absent eyebrows onto her prominent forehead in an arched line only when

she felt like it. She rarely left the house without a bright red lipstick and a light mist of hair spray on her curled salt-and-pepper bangs. She smelled of baby powder, which gave her dark brown skin an ashy appearance under her collection of patterned silk shirts.

I was sensitive to Grandma's presence at all times, checking in often to ensure that I was never in her way. "Be a good boy for Grandma, yeah" were Mom's parting words when she dropped me off on Sunday nights. Despite Grandma's toughness, she made me feel there was no other place I should be but in her apartment.

I can still feel the sting from her strong hand smacking my behind as I ran past her to the lanai, where I sat on a blanket, hoping she wouldn't follow. Grandma's lanai was my sanctuary where I hung out as she cleaned, scrubbing to the staticky rhythm of Hawaiian music playing from her silver clock radio. The lanai was outfitted with pillows, coloring books, a secret stash of Smarties, and a pair of sumo action figures, the only dolls I didn't get yelled at for playing with.

I loved the feel of their silky ponytails, which I ran my fingers through for what felt like hours until Mom dropped by after work. It was the weekend, which meant I stayed with Mom and her boyfriend in Pearl City, a twenty-minute drive from Grandma's in Kalihi. Through the screen door, I saw Mom kiss Grandma and Cori, who was thirteen at the time. Mom's visits were a nonevent to my other sister, Cheraine, who had spent the majority of her eleven years at Grandma's.

"Ma, guess who got caught wearing a dress?" Cori, ever the gossip, reported to Mom as she made her way to the living room couch to rest her feet. Mom, in her blue skirt suit with white piping, looked at me as I side-eyed the conversation, pretending I'd heard nothing.

"Charles was outside skipping in a muumuu like some Mary!" Cori said. "I caught him, and Grandma whacked him one good one."

"Hi, honey," Mom greeted me as I slid the screen door open, rolling my eyes at Cori while she continued cackling from the kitchen table.

"No roll your eyes at me for I pop dem out of your head!" Cori said, standing up from her chair.

"Enough already," Grandma chimed in from the sink. "Just be happy Papa never catch him."

The women in our family used Papa as a looming threat. I don't remember him reprimanding any of us. Grandma was the one to be feared. Papa was the giver of money. He smelled of Drakkar Noir and watched Westerners from his La-Z-Boy and gave me a dollar every time he came home smelling of beer from the bar, his go-to spot after driving the street sweeper. I usually spent it at the Manapua Truck, Hawaii's version of an ice cream truck, named after local pork buns, where a man in a van sells greasy noodles, crunchy wontons, and a variety of candy and chips.

Cori walked out the front door, probably to go hang with her boyfriend, the Filipino Cheraine and Rene said she was skipping school to fool around with. At the time, I remember Cori and Cheraine being much older than they really were because they were so independent; their lives barely intersected with Mom's. I didn't question why they were not with us on the weekends in Pearl City as I sat next to Mom in the living room on a wicker love seat with floral seat covers.

I often felt dirty when Mom came to Grandma's straight from work, all perfumed and hair-sprayed. Her hair was long, dark, and straight, like vintage Cher, whom she resembled, especially in her teen years, with big brown eyes, olive skin, high cheekbones, and thin lips she painted pink. Her growing belly was out of place with her long, lean frame.

"Want to tell me what happened?" Mom said, wiping my eye with her saliva-moistened index finger. Her breath never smelled good as it dried on my face, but I felt cared for when she did that.

"I pulled a dress off the clothesline," I whispered, afraid Grandma would hear me from the kitchen and rebut my testimony. "But I put it right back."

Pushing my short curls from my forehead, Mom smiled. "I don't think Grandma scolded you for taking the dress, even though you shouldn't touch stuff that's not yours. You're not supposed to wear dresses."

She wasn't reprimanding me. She was just telling me the way things were, the way she'd learned the world. In her

learning, what I did by openly expressing femininity as her son was wrong and, in effect, from Cori's cackle to Grandma's smack, taught me that my girlhood desires were inappropriate. Resisting and hiding my femininity would keep me from being laughed at by my sister, being hit by my grandmother, and being lectured at by my mother.

These women believed they were raising a boy child, and boys do not wear dresses, according to the rules of Western culture's gender binary system, which is rigidly fixed between two poles (boy and girl; male and female; man and woman; masculine and feminine) for all people depending on assigned sex (based on the appearance of one's genitals at birth). This system proclaims that sex is determined at birth; gender is based on your sex assigned at birth; no variation exists in sex or gender; you should not change your sex or gender; and you should act according to your assigned sex and its correlating gender-appropriate behaviors.

My family subscribed to this rigid belief system. They were unaware of the reality that gender, like sexuality, exists on a spectrum. By punishing me, they were performing the socially sanctioned practice of hammering the girl out of me, replacing her with tenets of gender-appropriate behavior. Though I would grow up to fit neatly into the binary, I believe in self-determination, autonomy, in people having the freedom to proclaim who they are and define gender for themselves. Our genders are as unique as we are. No one's definition is the same, and compartmentalizing a person as either a boy or a girl based entirely on the appearance of genitalia at birth undercuts our complex life experiences.

In my adulthood, Mom nonchalantly told me she wasn't surprised about my becoming her daughter. "You were just always like that. Very sensitive, very mischievous, too smart for your own good, and always into my things," she said, reminiscing about my early childhood, particularly the time her earring landed me in the emergency room.

Mom and Dad were still married at the time. Living with them were Cori and me and our brother, Chad, a year younger than I. Cheraine didn't come with us when we moved to Long Beach, California, my father's new naval duty station. She stayed with Grandma and Papa in Hawaii. At age three, I was playing with my mother's jewelry and placed one of her earring backs in my ear. The backing wasn't secure, so it slid inside my ear, beyond a finger's reach, and as a result of the discomfort, I screamed. I can still hear the suction from the tube the doctors put down my ear, which pulled out the gold pretzel-shaped backing, and I can still taste the sweet vanilla ice cream I got to eat for a week.

These stories of my early expressions of femininity echo many people's lived experiences with exploring, experimenting, and expressing gender. I've read and heard stories of trans people from all walks of life who remember playfully exhibiting their preferred gender behaviors and roles at age three or four without anyone's prompting. Some were given freedom to explore their inclinations; the majority were discouraged from experimenting outside their prescribed gender roles and behaviors. This contributes greatly to self-image, how people learn gender, and the path they'll eventually choose into adolescence and adulthood. Children who behave in line with their prescribed gender roles are *cisgender* or *cissexual* (throughout, I will use the prefix *cis*, which means "on the same side of," while *trans* means "across" or "on the opposite side of"), a term used for people who are not trans and more likely to identify with the gender that correlates with the sex they were assigned at birth. Most cis people rarely question their gender identity because the gender binary system validates them, enabling them to operate without conflict or correction. This makes it difficult for the majority of people—including parents of trans youth and those close to trans people—to grasp the varied identities, needs, and determinations of trans people.

Mom wasn't a disciplinarian; that role was reserved for Dad, a boiler technician in the Navy whose booming voice filled our house with reprimands about why his son was playing with earrings. He admits now that he took it upon himself to change what he believed to be my "soft ways."

"I didn't want to see it, man," he admitted. "I tried to be tougher on your ass. I thought I could fix you."

It would take decades for my father to realize that I didn't need fixing, and he should have been more focused on his marriage, which was plagued by infidelity, failed expectations, and youth. Mom was twenty-two when she met Dad at a nightclub on the Pearl Harbor naval base. She was partying with a coworker and was actually into one of Dad's Navy buddies. I don't know how she ended up talking to Dad, but I'm sure he was the pursuer, his gold tooth shining under the neon lights of the dance floor. Mom didn't tell Dad that she had two little girls, products of her first

marriage to her high school sweetheart, who at the time was in prison for theft. When Dad met Cori and Cheraine, who were five and three at the time, Mom told him they were her nieces. "I feel so bad about that," Mom later told me. "It was easier to pretend that I was unattached, carefree. But your dad wasn't innocent. He had his own baggage."

Mom was referring to the three kids Dad had left in Dallas when he joined the Navy after high school graduation. They had three different mothers, each of whom thought Dad was *her* boyfriend. One gave birth to a green-eyed boy in January 1979; the second welcomed a son that February; and the third had a baby girl in April 1979.

"Your daddy was wild, man," Dad said, chuckling over fathering three children at only eighteen.

With the contents of their baggage displayed, Mom became Elizabeth Mock, marrying Charlie Mock III in May 1982, with my sisters serving as their flower girls at the Foster Botanical Garden in downtown Honolulu. Mom said her father wasn't too thrilled that she was marrying a black man, but she didn't care what he had to say because Dad made her smile and she knew that his military career would allow her to see the world and take her away from Hawaii, which she desperately wanted to flee. After I was born the following March, Mom (pregnant with Chad), Dad, Cori, and I moved to Long Beach. Dad kept his promise of taking Mom away from Hawaii, but monogamy just "wasn't his thing," Mom told me.

I had firsthand experience with Dad's dalliances. I was four at the time, and it was just the two of us on his motorcycle, his true love back then. I was under the impression that we were heading to the toy store, but we jumped off his bike in a neighborhood that didn't look much different from ours. Though it wasn't military family housing, it was similar in the sense that it had a cookie-cutter aesthetic.

Dad, in his camouflage fatigues, didn't knock on the door to this two-story town house. He didn't even say hello when we walked in. Guiding me to a faux leather couch that made too much noise for furniture, Dad placed a box of Golden Grahams and a remote control in my hands. A woman who smelled of smoke and drugstore perfume soon appeared from the staircase. She was the color of Cheerios and had crinkly hair that looked like waffle batter fresh from the griddle. She told me her name was Dara and said I could help myself to strawberry Pop-Tarts. I was fighting the desire to be easily pleased.

Dara hugged Dad, and I took notice of how he touched her. It mirrored the way he touched Mom, and that made me want to spit out my cereal. When Dad followed Dara up the stairs, I knew this was just between the three of us. Dad didn't tell me to hush; he didn't hold his index finger up to his mouth or wink at me in code. Instinctively, I knew Mom wouldn't hear a word about the Dara detour—at least, not from Dad or me.

Months later, Chad and I sat on our parents' water bed in our pajamas. Though the bed rippled under us, the night was still and filled with the sound of sorrow. Dad's eyes were wet. He hovered over the bed with his right arm across his chest and his left hand over his mouth. The sight of him prompted me to tears. Seeing my father cry was a shelter-shifting moment: I felt unsafe and exposed. Cori was seated on the floor, just a few feet away from the bed, holding a hand towel to Mom's wrists, which she had cut as a cry for help, an intervention of sorts to save her marriage after hearing about Dad's affair. I remember the silver threads of the monogrammed M struggling to shine through the blood it had soaked up.

Mom had straight bangs that veiled her large eyes, heavily lashed and thinly lined. She was so pretty and didn't even know it, as Dad described her. She had a sweet, soft voice and smiled with her mouth closed, which lifted her lips and emphasized her already prominent cheekbones. If you didn't know her, you would think she was bashful and amiable, and you wouldn't be wrong. But she had a fire in her lit by a string of disappointments, and it is her sorrow that permeates my bedroom memory of Mom on the floor.

Recalling this in pieces feels like a betrayal of my mother. It negates the kind, soft-spoken, perfumed visions I associate with my childhood memories of her. I have photos of us surrounded by flowers and sun, and another of Mom applauding me as I blow out the candles to my birthday cake. Her head is level with mine, and she looks happy

to celebrate another year in my life. Those weightless images don't flick in the View-Master of my memory bank when I recall my parents' marriage; it's always the scene of Dad sobbing, Cori with the blood-soaked towel, and Mom, defeated, bleeding on her bedroom floor.

It's the only memory I have of my parents in the same room. Mom told me later that there were other women and other suicide attempts. Dad told me she was possessive and wasn't afraid to confront his other women. It would take decades for those disparate early memories of my parents to fuse: Dad's secret visits to Dara; Mom's anguish slashed through her veins; Dad being kicked out shortly thereafter. Mom said that Chad and I spent a lot more time at Dad's mistress's town house than I remember.

"While I was at work, you guys were at her house playing with her kids," Mom told me, and she wasn't wrong. Years later, when I was well into adulthood, I finally met my youngest sister, the product of Dad's affair with Dara. She showed us a video of Chad and me at a playground with her other two half-siblings, in which Dad and Dara's voices call out our names from behind the camcorder.

When our parents split, Mom returned to Grandma's house with me, Cori, and Chad. Dad protested that he wanted his boys back, and they agreed that Chad would live with him; I'd stay with Mom. Chad, whose skin was as yellow as the corn bread on the Jiffy box, says he remembers crying every time he saw a plane in the California sky, hoping I was on it to be with him and Dad. I imagined his big black eyes swollen with tears as he looked up in hope.

Selfishly, I wasn't mourning our separation, because I had Mom all to myself. I was the baby now. Being beside Mom as she read her paperbacks and snacked on canned tuna spread over Hawaiian soda crackers and crunched on cups of ice—that was home. But Mom wasn't all mine for long. She soon found another man, one she moved in with, leaving me at Grandma's.

Sitting on Grandma's couch, I meditated on Mom's belly, which carried my baby brother. I was excited to have another sibling and assumed that, with his birth, she would get a place big enough for all of us. When Jeffrey was born in August 1989, Mom and Dad made plans to send me to Oakland to be with Chad. "We never should've separated the two of you," Mom later told me.

The seven-year-old in the adult me can hear the silent outbursts. *What about you and me? What about us?* But I knew the answer to my unspoken protests: Mom was moving on, starting anew, and in order to fulfill the promise of new love, she had to discard her past. Like Cori and Cheraine, who were initially denied by my mother when she met my father, I represented her past, a remnant of her failure. Mom needed to travel light, so she sent her baggage to Oakland in 1990, and I wouldn't see her for another five years.