

Chapter 1

a 'ohe pu 'u ki 'eki 'e ke ho 'u 'o 'Ia e pi i

No cliff is so tall that it cannot be scaled.

Princess Leilani Kekoa stood barefoot at the edge of the rocky cliff, staring out at the blue ocean stretching endlessly around her. Strong winds whipped her long dark hair around her face. Far below, white-capped waves crashed up against the straight edge of the cliff. She closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath, letting the sun warm her skin. She smiled, opened her eyes and jumped.

Her heart pounded as she soared through the air, weightless for a moment. Then gravity pulled her down. She straightened her body and arched her back. With her arms at her sides, her toes pointed down, she held her breath. Her fall only lasted a few seconds and then she plunged into the cool ocean water.

Leilani let herself sink down to the ocean floor as she examined every detail of the incredible underwater world. Bright yellow butterfly fish darted off as she approached, and crabs scurried away on the colorful coral. And what a nice surprise! A giant *honu*, a sea turtle, swam lazily nearby. As soon as Leilani noticed it, the turtle turned and made its way toward her. The turtle looked to be as big as Leilani herself. Its shell was a light greenish color with radiating darker green markings. She froze as it approached. Was it her imagination or was the turtle smiling at her? She reached out and her heart skipped a beat as her fingers brushed against the turtle's shell as it swam by her.

Leilani surfaced for air and wondered about her encounter with the *honu*. The sea turtle was her family *aumakua*—guardian spirit and protector. This had to be an omen. Excitement and anticipation built up within her. Something big was sure to happen soon.

The *honu* popped its head up out of the water several feet away. Princess and turtle studied each other. Then the *honu* dived back under and swam away.

Leilani laughed. She floated on her back, closed her eyes and pondered the possibilities.

A snapping sound from the nearby shore caused her to turn, looking for the source. But everything was just as it should be. Tall palm trees swayed gently in the breeze and a few *nēnē* birds pecked in the bushes for food. She was alone here.

She sighed. This place made her happy. Unfortunately, she couldn't stay any longer. She had to make an appearance with her family at the big *luau* tonight. Of all her many obligations, she hated making public appearances the most. She hated being the center of attention, hated people scrutinizing her. She always had, ever since she had been a child. Now that she had become a woman, it was even worse. Her body had changed a lot over the last few years. She had become curvier and she had breasts now, which only increased the attention she received. But her mother would be angry with her if she didn't do what was expected, so she swam back toward the shore.

Back on land again, Leilani squished her toes in the warm sand as she admired the lush and wild landscape surrounding her. Sighing, she headed toward the path in the trees. Stepping over

branches that had been carefully crossed over one another as a warning that this beach was *kapu*, off limits, she made her way to a nearby waterfall to wash the ocean smell away.

Leilani was momentarily breathless as she stepped under the cold water. Then she relaxed and enjoyed the water cascading down over her. She took her blue-and-green sarong off and rinsed it under the fresh water. Stepping back out into the sun, she wrung the fabric out and laid it out on a nearby rock to dry. She worked on wringing out her long hair with her fingers next. She tied her sarong back around her waist and took off running through the forest. With luck, her hair would be dry by the time she got home and no one would be the wiser.

Her mother saw her first as she approached her family's dwellings. "Leilani!" she scolded. "Where have you been?" She looked her daughter over and shook her head. "No, never mind, don't tell me. It's better if I do not know. It's time for the *luau*, and you are not even dressed yet!" She signaled for Leilani to follow her as she turned and strutted off toward the family huts. "Come!"

"I'm sorry, Mama, I lost track of time," Leilani muttered as she tried to catch up with her mother.

"Yes, yes. Typical!" Her mother ushered her inside the women's hut, where servants waited. "Here, let's hurry or your father will be angry."

Her mother instructed the servants, and they immediately began dressing Leilani. Her blue-and-green sarong was traded for a white one. The servants placed a *lei* made of ti leafs and naupaka flowers around her neck. A single red-and-white plumeria flower was pinned in her hair, which was dry now. Thank the Gods! Her mother wore similar *leis* and flowers in her hair. Leilani shared many of her mother's traits: big green eyes with thick, long eyelashes, high cheekbones and generous lips. The only differences between the two women were her mother's wrinkles and the gray in her hair.

Leilani hugged her mother, suddenly sentimental. "Thank you, Mama!"

"Oh!" Her mother blushed, forgiving her daughter of everything, and kissed her on the cheek. "My little heavenly *lei*!"

"Are you women ready yet?" Keoki, Leilani's brother, called impatiently from outside the hut. "Father wants us all to proceed to the *luau* together." He paused, and added sternly, "Now."

"We're coming, we're coming," Leilani's mother called back. She gave Leilani one more kiss on the cheek and a hug and headed out.

Leilani followed her mother outside, where her brother and father were waiting. Her father never showed much emotion, but Leilani thought she saw a small curve in his lips as she and her mother approached. Her father was the *ali'i*, the chief of the village, and as the *ali'i*, he wore the red-and-white crested helmet and feathered cloak of royalty. He stood nearly seven feet tall and tribal tattoos covered his arms, legs, chest and back. Each tattoo told a story about his life—his victories in battle, his rule over his kingdom and his family. His long, wavy, dark hair showed the first hints of gray. He usually had it pulled back, but it hung loose around his shoulders today. His dark eyes studied Leilani for a moment before he nodded his approval and then he turned and started off toward the village.

Keoki grinned at her and gave her a fake punch in the arm before following. He also wore the red-and-white feathered cloaks, and he was almost as formidable as her father. At seventeen,

he had already been victorious in battle but Keoki only had a couple of tattoos. Each family member's first tattoo was always the turtle, the family *aumakua*, and Keoki had one on his right shoulder. He also had a tribal tattoo on his left leg, symbolizing his bravery in his first battle.

Keoki was promised to the daughter of another royal family on a nearby island, and their wedding was set for the end of the year. Leilani loved her brother and wished he didn't have to be married off so soon. She was a year younger than her brother and she knew she would get married off soon, too. The thought filled her with dread. But her mother told her it was a necessary tradition. They had to keep the *ali'i* blood pure, create bonds with other powerful royal families and continue to keep the peace for everyone. Her mother had been married off to Leilani's father at fourteen. If they could find happiness together, then perhaps Leilani would be able to find happiness as well.

Leilani had little interest in boys though. Boys could be pigs. She didn't like the way they looked at her and made comments behind her back. Hopefully, seeing the *honu* today had nothing to do with boys or getting married off soon. She wasn't ready for that yet. Would she ever be ready for that?

As she followed her family into the village, Leilani tried not to stare at the simple, small huts the commoners lived in. The homes of the *ali'i* were much larger and more extravagant, set on stone foundations and showcasing *kahili*, feather standards. She frowned. She didn't understand why the commoners had to live out their lives in such cramped quarters and without the luxuries that Leilani and her family had. Every time she questioned her mother about it, her mother always had the same response—the *ali'i* were descended from the Gods and thus were entitled to more. But that didn't sit well with Leilani. The way she saw it, everyone was descended from the Gods, not just the *ali'i*.

Leilani suddenly smelled the delicious aroma of fish cooking over fire and her stomach grumbled. She hadn't even realized that she was hungry. She put aside all of her jumbled thoughts. The Gods had been smiling down on them lately with an abundance of fish, fruit, mild weather and peace. But keeping the Gods happy required sacrifice and ceremony. The *luau* tonight was for the Gods.

The setting sun lit up the sky with brilliant shades of oranges and reds as *tiki* torches were ignited around the village center. It looked as if all of the villagers had come out tonight in celebration. Hundreds of people stood around talking and laughing while the children played. Everyone's spirits were high.

Someone blew a horn to announce the arrival of the *ali'i* and his family, and her father's warriors cleared a wide path for them. In silence, the villagers dropped to their knees and bowed their heads out of respect for the royal war chief and his family. Commoners were not supposed to touch the shadow of an *ali'i* or else his power would be diminished.

Once her father reached the pedestal at the center of the village, he faced the villagers. "My people!" he bellowed, his voice strong and deep. "We come together tonight to thank the Gods for taking good care of us this last year."

At this, everyone stood and cheered.

Leilani's father waited for the cheering to fade before he continued. "We thank Kane for our healthy, growing village."

The villagers thanked Kane, the God of Life, as one.

“We thank Ku for our strength in defeating the enemy.”

The villagers thanked Ku, the God of War.

Leilani’s father went through each of their Gods, thanking them one by one with the villagers repeating the thanks. Lono, the God of Peace, Kanaloa the God of the Sea, and many others, ending with Laka, the God of the *hula*.

Finally, her father opened his arms outward and announced, “We have more than enough good food and drink for everyone. So let us begin!”

The villagers cheered again and then the women and men separated for dinner. It was *kapu* for women to eat with men. As Leilani watched the men seat themselves at the feast prepared for them near the beach, she thought how silly it was that the men believed they were vulnerable to women stealing their *mana*, or divine spirit, while eating. But she didn’t want to eat with the men anyway. She followed her mother to the women’s feast set down the beach to the right of the men.

Leilani sat down in the sand in the middle of her mother, her grandmother and all her aunts and cousins. Giant bowls of poi, yams and breadfruit, platters full of cooked fish, chicken and pig and bowls filled with bananas, coconut and pineapple sat on mats of ti leaves. The women gossiped as they ate. The older women spoke in agitated tones about the troubles their children caused them. The younger girls whispered in excitement about the boys they liked or the men they were arranged to marry. But Leilani, bored easily with both subjects, tuned them all out. She thought of nothing more than her next opportunity to sneak away and play in the ocean again.

As the moon rose high in the sky and people finished eating, Leilani’s father once again rose to address the villagers. “A most excellent feast!” he declared as he rubbed his belly. Everyone cheered in agreement. ”Let us now thank the Gods with our finest dancers! Come!”

Drummers pounded out a rhythmic beat as Leilani’s father led everyone down the beach to the dancers. The servants stayed behind to begin the monumental task of cleaning up.

Leilani lagged behind her mother, devising ways to sneak off for a moonlit swim. As she scanned the crowd to ensure that no one was paying her any attention, her eyes stopped on one man in particular. She couldn’t take her eyes off him. He was obviously one of the *hula* dancers. He wore a white loincloth, and shark’s tooth necklace, anklets and bracelets. A green leaf *lei* sat on his head and his long wavy hair flowed around his broad shoulders. Leilani was so mesmerized she almost ran into her mother who had stopped and was now talking with another woman. She’d never seen such a beautiful man! He was tall and muscular, but not quite as fierce as her father and brother. He had a strong nose and sharp cheekbones, but the most fascinating thing about him was his light brown eyes. They appeared to twinkle in the moonlight.

He caught her staring at him and for a moment, time seemed to stop. It was just the two of them there, staring into each other’s eyes. Leilani’s heart thudded uncontrollably and she forgot to breathe. He smiled at her as if he knew her, as if they were sharing a secret. Shocked, she ducked behind her mother to hide. Commoners were not allowed to look her in the eye, let alone smile at her. No one had ever dared to be so bold with her before!

After catching her breath, Leilani peered back out from behind her mother. The light-eyed man was walking toward the stage with the other male dancers. She watched him freely now. He seemed familiar to her in some strange way but she was sure that she had never seen him before.

He was no longer smiling as he took his place on the stage. His eyes were cast down. He was almost frowning but so were all the other dancers. It was all a part of the act of their *hula* dance. Despite the serious look on his face now, she couldn't get the image of him smiling at her out of her head. It made her feel funny inside. All jittery and excited.

The dancers started their *hula*, stomping their feet and slapping their chests, moving their arms and legs to tell stories. They mimicked the movements of rowing a canoe out to sea, casting a spear into the water, catching a fish and then gutting and eating the fish. They spoke of the sea, wind and rain with their hands. Their dance was graceful but also masculine and physical. The more the performance progressed, the more the men perspired. Leilani had never been so interested in a *hula* dance before. But she was really only interested in the man with the light eyes. He had the most beautiful body and more passion than the other dancers. Every move he made was perfect and filled with emotion.

He made eye contact with her several times as he performed. Leilani quickly looked away each time, of course. She didn't want him to get caught. He could be cast out of the village, or worse, over such brazen behavior. Leilani glanced at her mother. Surely her mother had noticed, usually nothing escaped her. But her mother was smiling and tapping her foot to the beat, captivated by the performance like everyone else.

The men ended their performance with a bang, slapping their chests, stomping their feet and letting out one final "Huah!" They then knelt and bowed their heads to their *ali'i*.

Leilani's father clapped his big hands together. "Laka is surely pleased with your performance tonight!" He then signaled for them to rise. All the men filed off the stage, taking their *leis* off and piling them one on top of another on a rock altar. Leilani tried to keep track of the man with the light eyes, but he disappeared into the crowd.

Women dancers, smiling sweetly and dressed in flowing yellow sarongs with white-and-orange flower *leis* around their necks, wrists, and ankles, assembled on the stage next. Once her father gave them the go ahead, they began a much gentler and feminine *hula* dance.

Nothing about these *hula* dancers interested Leilani. She thought of going swimming again. It was the perfect night for it with the full moon. She checked once more to make sure no one was paying attention to her. She secretly hoped to spot the light-eyed man, but he was nowhere to be seen. Everyone was entranced with the women dancers now, so she edged her way back from the crowd toward her escape.

Weaving through the trees in the moonlight, Leilani quickly made her way to her secret spot. The closer she got, the more the sweet feeling of freedom enveloped her. There wasn't time to climb the cliff so Leilani walked straight down the beach, into the small waves lapping at her feet and out farther still until she was submerged up to her neck. Then she allowed herself to sink completely under water.

Leilani surfaced and swam around, enjoying the feel of her muscles at work. She floated on her back, gazing up at the stars. The full moon seemed particularly big and bright in the sky tonight.

She heard a snap from the beach, the same sound she had heard while swimming earlier in the day. It was too difficult to see anything from where she was, so she swam in closer. In waist-deep water, she stood and searched the shadows for whatever had caused the noise, but still she saw nothing.

Annoyed, she called out, "Who's there?"

A shape emerged from the trees. A man. He meandered down to the beach and stopped near the water. Her heart sped up. The beautiful man with the light eyes stood there.

"You should not be here!" she scolded him angrily, but secretly she was pleased.

"Nor should you," he replied quietly with a smile.

He had her there.

"I saw you watching me tonight." His voice was softer and smoother than she would have imagined.

"I was watching all the dancers," she replied haughtily.

"Oh, yes, of course you were!" he laughed, somehow knowing she lied. "My name is Kanoa."

"Well, Kanoa, I am Leilani, daughter of—"

"I know who you are," he interrupted and bowed. "My princess."

"Then you know you should not be speaking to me."

He said nothing in response but tilted his head, studying her.

"Or looking me in the eyes," she added for good measure.

He shrugged. "I cannot help it; I am drawn to you. And your beautiful eyes."

"You will be in trouble if you are caught." Unsure how to accept his compliment, Leilani's voice rose.

"The whole village is back at the *hula*," he told her. "It is just us here now."

Leilani looked and listened for signs that they were not alone, but she saw and heard nothing. Then she had a troubling thought. She backed up and impulsively covered herself with her arms. "Did you follow me here?"

"I admit, I did," he confessed and then quickly added, "But do not be afraid; I mean you no harm. I thought you might need protection in the dark night." He sat down cross-legged in the sand in an attempt to make her more comfortable.

"I need no protection!" Leilani told him stubbornly, standing tall, her hands on her hips now, her head held high.

"I suppose you are right," he agreed. "You were magnificent this afternoon, climbing up that rocky cliff and then jumping off it."

Leilani gasped and he chuckled. "But still, I feel the need to protect you." He shrugged his shoulders again.

"You!" she accused. "You were on the beach earlier today!"

“Ahhh, I admit it!” he confessed again. ”But I swear, it was purely chance that I was here earlier today.”

Leilani grunted her disbelief.

“I happened to be praying over there,” he pointed to a group of trees set back a bit from the beach, “to Laka for my performance tonight. You see, tonight was my first official performance as an *’olapa*. I have graduated with highest honors from the *halau*.”

“Oh, well” So he was a master *hula* dancer, just as she suspected. Leilani instantly forgave him for his intrusion. “You were very good tonight.” The words were out before she realized it and she blushed.

“Thank you, my princess! I am honored by your praise.” Kanoa rose from his cross-legged seat in the sand and bowed to her.

“So,” he said, going back to his explanation, “as I was praying, I heard someone coming. When I investigated, I saw you climbing up the cliff. I was intrigued by a princess who could climb with such skill!”

“Yes, well” Leilani took pride in her ability to do things other girls couldn’t or wouldn’t. “I’ve climbed that cliff my whole life.” She added under her breath, “Despite my parents’ wishes.”

He nodded. “And when you jumped off that cliff into the ocean, I was in awe of your bravery!”

Leilani couldn’t help but smile. She had no fear! She wished her family could see her strengths and abilities and let her do what she wanted. But that would never happen.

“You will tell no one about me. Or this place!” she commanded Kanoa in a stern voice. She needed this place and her cliff diving to remain a secret.

“No, of course not, my princess!” he assured her solemnly with his hand over his heart. ”My lips are sealed.”

Leilani couldn’t help thinking about his lips then. She wondered what it would be like to be kissed by him. Surprised by the unexpected turn her thoughts had suddenly taken, she realized too late that Kanoa was walking toward her, splashing in the water with each step he took.

“What are you doing?” she asked in alarm, backing up to keep space between them.

“I enjoy swimming.” He smiled that charming smile again. ”May I not also enjoy this moonlit night in the ocean?”

“Well,” Leilani thought about it, “if you promise to keep your distance, I suppose I can allow you to swim nearby.”

“Thank you, my princess,” Kanoa said graciously, diving under the water. Leilani waited to see him surface. She was wondering where he had gone to when he unexpectedly emerged right next to her, splashing her on purpose.

Outraged, Leilani coughed and attempted to wipe the water from her eyes. ”How dare you!”

“What?” he teased with a big grin. ”You were already wet!”

“How do you like it?” she asked and splashed him back.

He only laughed happily in response.

Leilani stood there fuming as he laughed and splashed her again.

Leilani growled. This was war, and she would win it! She splashed him with all her might, over and over again. But he just laughed and splashed her back.

After several minutes, she was laughing as well.

Kanoa stopped splashing her and took a step toward her. "You are so unbelievably beautiful when you smile," he said, turning serious.

Leilani could feel herself blushing again.

"I mean; you are beautiful even when you are not smiling." He stumbled on his words, trying to make himself clear. "But you look like a Goddess from the heavens above when you are smiling!"

"*Mahalo.*" She blushed deeply, the jittery feeling in her stomach returning. "You are not bad to look at yourself," she blurted out, not wanting to admit that she found him to be the most beautiful man she had ever seen, especially when he smiled at her.

He grinned, somehow knowing her true heart's feelings.

Just then, they heard faint voices in the distance. For a moment, time seemed to stop again as they looked anxiously at each other. They would both be in trouble if found in this *kapu* place. But Kanoa would be in terrible trouble if he was found swimming with Leilani. Without another word, they each dove under the water, heading in different directions. Leilani swam for the beach, and Kanoa swam in the opposite direction, farther out to sea. When she reached the shore, Leilani looked back, but saw no signs of Kanoa. She hoped he was a good swimmer.