PROLOGUE

Here is how it happened: Percy Kipapa of Waikâne lay face down on the ground desperately sucking for air, his mouth opened wide, dry all the way to the back of his throat. His huge upper body heaved up and down. His mind raced as he prayed that whatever it was they were hitting him with would stop sending its stinging jolts of pain across the bare skin of his back. He tried to open his eyes, but with his already blurred vision now clouded by a well of tears, he could make out nothing, only the feeling that they were all surrounding him. When the burn of the sand and salt they had shoved into his face became too much, he shut his eyes tight, feeling their presence—more than twenty of them—shouting and taunting as the stick came down yet again with a whack! The sting that arose was so sharp that it must have drawn blood, but he couldn’t tell for sure, the rest of his body burning with muscle fatigue so deep that even his feeble gasps for air hurt. His back, the backs of his big legs, his massive shoulders were on fire, his arms now rubbery with exhaustion. The voices kept shouting from all directions, coming closer. All he knew for sure was that he had to get up off the ground somehow, if only he could suck in enough air, if only his arms would move.

And then the kicking started. As if it wasn’t already struggle enough to get some oxygen into his lungs, the biggest guy there was now kicking him in the ribs. He’d wanted it to end long before they’d even thrown him down, but no: it had gone from pushing and slaps to the head, to getting thrown to the rock-hard ground, to the beatings with the stick. And now, with each thud to his side, he’d begun to give up on the chance of it ever ending. Percy tried opening his eyes again and through the blur he could make out the shape of a man, bigger even than his brother Kurt, stepping forward like a massive five-hundred-pound field goal kicker with one leg pulled back. Then Percy’s side exploded in pain, the kick pushing all the
air from his greedy lungs again, and for a moment he wondered if this might be what it felt like to drown. Twenty guys mobbing him, and he was going to die from lack of oxygen.

Another whack and this time the pain went deeper—not a sting, but a body punch that lit up every muscle in his back. The shouts around him grew louder, and when he opened his eyes, even through the blur, even on the edge of passing out, he could see that what they were now hitting him with was an aluminum baseball bat. The big Hawaiian held it high over his head with both hands for one still moment before bringing it down again hard, and it occurred to Percy that he might actually die, that all of them had gotten so caught up in the moment that they could no longer see how far they were taking this, that he would never see his mother’s face again, that they would send his body home to her in a box, and what in the world would they tell her? That he couldn’t get up off the ground?

And suddenly Percy began to feel the slightest drips of energy seep into his exhausted arms. If not for the fact that every ounce of his own four-hundred-pound body was now focused on the task of lifting himself to his hands and knees, he would have seen that what was now energizing him was the purest form of fear he had ever felt. Heaving loudly now, pushing the air out and then sucking in with all he had, he pushed on the floor with his big hands and rose, this first little surprising show of progress energizing him further, until he managed to bring one leg under himself, and then the other, opening his eyes to the sting of tears in search of something to hang onto. Finding nothing but the round shapes of the men standing over him, he stood at last and reached out for a shoulder to steady himself.

The shouts rang out again, now with more urgency, and Percy’s thoughts exploded from someone’s roundhouse open-hand to the side of his head. A voice was telling him, *The water, brah! Go get the water!* For a moment he stood in confusion—the water?—until another open-hand shook him. He followed his instincts through the surrounding bodies and over to the corner of the area, wiping his eyes so that he could just make out the tiny faucet and the long bamboo ladle leaning next to it. He managed to fill the ladle, and then fought against his heaving body to steady it and carry it over to the big Hawaiian holding the baseball bat, with enough water spilling from its sides so that when he reached the man it was only
half full. Bowing his head, he offered the water and said through heavy
breaths, *Mashita!*

When the Hawaiian sipped from the ladle and then spat out onto the
ground, Percy found it hard to believe that he was free, that it was over.
Still a bit unsure if it had really all happened, he stood against the wall and
waited. The sound of his greedy gulps for air filled the room, even over the
slap and swish of the next boy charging the big Hawaiian who then slid
him back across the sand-covered ring, even above the grunts and shouts
of encouragement from the other boys who, only moments earlier, seemed
about to converge for the kill. As Percy waited for his labored breathing to
show some sign of slowing down, he wondered what on earth it was they
had just put him through. And suddenly, as if to answer his thoughts, a
voice cut through the loud huffing sound, a knowing voice that had once
been through the same thing, a *local* voice telling him this: *That’s whatchoo
call “kawaigari.”*

*Kawaigari?* Still gulping for air, Percy turned to see the massive fig-
ure of Troy Talaimatai, his *senpai*, his senior, whose hair was tied into a
samurai topknot that bent over his forehead into a black point. A Samoan
from Hawai’i, Troy looked nearly twice the size of the biggest lineman
on a Hawai’i high school football field. But even standing there almost
naked—dressed in nothing but a length of canvas that covered his balls
and the crack of his ass and then wound around his waist into a thick black
belt—if he were to jump up and down not an ounce of his rock-hard body
would jiggle.

*Kawaigari* means “tender loving care,” Troy told him, a can-you-
believe-this grin spreading out over his square jaw. Tender loving care,
brah!

*If the slippers they gave him* were stiff-as-a-board versions of the
rubber ones he wore back in Hawai’i, it was because they were made out
of wood. Sumo, as it turned out, worked according to rank, and the new-
comers ranked at the bottom had to wear what they called *geta*—two foot-
sized rectangular boards with wooden slats running widthwise at the ball
of the foot and just in front of the heel. Although the slats may have been
affixed to the soles for traction, they made it hard for Percy, who stood
six feet three inches tall, to balance. The idea was to roll them forward
as you walked heel to toe, a motion that created a loud clack-clack sound that seemed to come from ancient times. Once he got the hang of it, the geta, along with his yukata—a kind of kimono tied with a long length of cloth wound around the waist and tied on the side—filled him with pride. Eighteen-year-old Percy Kipapa had come more than seven thousand miles from his home in the rural Hawaiian valley of Waikāne all the way to an official professional Japanese sumo training facility—a sumo beya, filled with some twenty other hungry young men—and the wooden clack of his slippers announced that he was well on his way to becoming a professional sumōtori.

Percy’s first tender-loving-care kawaigari beating had been enough to show him that the path would be a long one—that sumo was not as simple as just standing up and pushing the other guy out of the ring. Every morning someone would kick him awake well before dawn. He would follow the other bottom-division boys down to the basement locker room, where they would strip down to nothing and wrap the long lengths of black canvas around each other into thick belts called mawashi before filing up to the ground-floor training area. They shook off the sleep by lifting first one leg and then the other high in the air to alternately pound their feet into the practice area’s rock-hard clay, steam beginning to rise from their sweating bodies in the November air. Only after they warmed up the room with a couple of hours of practice bouts would the rest of the boys begin to enter, according to rank, and start their own limbering up. Percy could see that even so many steps down from the sumo he had seen on TV back in Hawai‘i, guys ranked near Troy were far out of his league: quicker charges, smooth and graceful footwork, and throws so calculated they looked almost relaxed. For a long time he stood and watched, trying to pick up on how a real sumōtori fought off a throw or positioned his feet. Percy looked forward to watching Akebono train—Akebono was only the third sumōtori from Hawai‘i to reach one of sumo’s top two salaried divisions—but by the time he finally entered the ring, dressed in a white mawashi to indicate his exalted rank, Percy was in the kitchen covered in sweat, his stomach growling as he helped prepare a meal he would not be able to touch until everyone else had eaten and bathed.

No, the paid ranks could not have seemed further away—a fact brought home even harder once morning practice finally ended. The real reason
they made the new guys wear the wooden slippers, Percy soon figured out, was less for tradition than it was so his senpai could hear them coming. Percy had grown up on O'ahu's tough Windward side, where there had always been some punky kid singling him out just to prove to everyone how tough he was. He knew all about the anonymous elbows and fists on the packed city bus from Kāne'ohe home to the country, about getting kicked off the bus because the driver looked in his mirror just in time to see him hitting back. He also knew about charming the little punks into becoming his friends. But here there was no way to charm them, to put his tree-trunk arm around a guy's head in that affectionate way of his, because Percy couldn't understand a word they were saying, let alone speak their language. Everyone was his senpai, all the way from Azumazeki Oyakata—the beya's boss, who had come from Maui long before Percy was born—down to the fifteen-year-old Japanese kids who'd joined only a couple of months before Percy did. And when they heard the clack-clack of his wooden slippers, they took advantage.

One day one of them reached up and smacked him, right in the face, right there in front of everyone, yelling on about his frickin' futon: fix my futon, put away my futon, is what Percy thought he must be saying. Shocked, Percy stood for a long moment—the guy wasn't even old enough to drive yet; one week at Castle High and his pants would be flying from the flagpole. “Fuckin' young punk, you tell me what for do! You know, when I was brought up, you always show your elders respect. You see one grandma crossing the street, a car coming, you go and stop the cars. You see her getting hard time carrying a bag, you go grab 'um for her.” He looked around the room to see everybody watching him, waiting to see what he would do. The constant ordering around, that was one thing—this was Japan, this was sumo, of course things were different here. But back in Hawai'i his friend Shane, he knew, would have caught one of these punks in the alley by now. In that one long moment, Percy would have recalled walking up the concrete ramp onto the King Zoo football field to face an army of boys from the Red Rags gang, Shane and Charles at his side, working him up fo' scrap. In the face. You don't hit a local boy in the face. So Percy let fly not with a slap, but with a solid punch right at the kid's head.

Immediately they all converged on him, almost twenty professional sumo wrestlers battle scarred from years of fighting and tender-loving-care
beatings. Shouts of *Nani! Baka yarō!* rang out all around. Incredibly, Troy managed to step in and settle the whole thing down, pulling Percy aside and telling him that when your *senpai* says anything to you—*anything*—you suck it up and *do* it. It was only because Boss was far out of sight, because Akebono was in his back room, and mainly because Azumazeki Beya’s self-appointed hazing expert wasn’t around—a frustrated mid-ranker named Tsuji—that things went no further.

At night when Percy was left alone in his corner of the big second-floor roomful of Japanese sumo wrestlers, the cold hardness of the tatami floor inevitably sent his thoughts towards the question that had recently started hitting him from as far out of nowhere as had that slap to the head: *Why am I here?* The first time he had walked into his crowded new home he had concluded that, if nothing else, he would never be lonely. While everyone may have fought alone in what appeared to be a sport as individual as boxing, Percy could see that sumo was a brotherhood in every other way—from the topknot on everyone’s head all the way down to the rule prohibiting stable mates from meeting in the ring unless in a rare playoff match. Even the Japanese terms for the stable mates who sparred together day after day translated into the words for older brother or younger brother. When they’d surrounded Percy for hitting the young loudmouth, that’s what it had looked like: a group of topknotted brothers protecting their own from some kind of invader. And now he could only listen as they talked away those last moments before drifting off to sleep. Trading stories of their hometowns, joking away the pain of their various bruises or recent losses, anticipating the upcoming tournament—whatever it was, the bond these battle-scarred boys had formed was already as strong as what he’d had at home with Shane and Charles. From time to time, Percy had made his best effort to join in, maybe trying to teach someone a “shaka” or a couple of words of English, but those exchanges could only go so far. More often than not, their happy banter and the occasional laughter that passed between them all made Percy feel like he was feeling now: more isolated than if he were sitting in the big room by himself.

When they’d recruited him back in Hawai‘i, Percy had thought that sumo was supposed to be easy. Everyone knew about Takamiyama, who had competed for more than twenty years before retiring into the elder name Azumazeki Oyakata and becoming the first non-Japanese to open a sumo
stable, Azumazeki Beya. Hawai‘i’s Konishiki was already threatening to become the first foreigner to reach sumo’s top rank, *yokozuna*. Akebono, the big Hawaiian who had grown up just down the road from where Percy’s brother Kurt lived in Waimānalo, was also on his way up. But Percy soon learned that for every foreign sumo star there were three or four other Hawai‘i boys who had found their career options back home limited enough to give this strange, ancient sport a try—and not just Troy, and his other local *senpai*, John Feleunga. More than ten other Hawai‘i *sumōtori* were spread out across Tokyo in four different *sumo beya*. At first Percy figured that the presence of the other local boys would ease his transition to Japan—he would be joining three of them at Azumazeki Beya, after all. But the recruiter—a retired Honolulu firefighter and longtime friend of Azumazeki Oyakata named Larry Aweau—must have left out the part about rank and seniority when he told him about the other local boys. Even after practice—sometimes especially after practice—the issue of rank hung over the *beya* like some kind of relationship-defining cloud that indicated who could talk to whom and how familiar they were allowed to be. Troy and John weren’t as bad as Akebono, who was ranked so far out of reach that they couldn’t even refer to him by name—they had to call him “*sekitori,*” the honorary title for *sumōtori* ranked in the top two divisions. But this thing about rank kept them from talking with Percy much, leaving him lonelier still for the fact that it was an isolation he couldn’t blame on the language.

Inevitably, the sound of the boys all talking story would get Percy thinking of Shane and Charles, friends since that first day at Waiāhole School what, thirteen years ago now? And not just friends, but blood brothers—the three of them having cut their hands and promised that “*no matta what, we all going die togedda.*” They were right up on Grandpa’s Hill when they did it, Percy recalled, that rise deep in the valley that looks out towards the steep wall of the Ko‘olau Range and the mist-shrouded peak of Pu‘u Ōhulehule—the *mountain*, their playground. The boys had grown up together on Grandpa’s Hill, exploring the valley’s thick jungle trails every day after school, swimming in Waikāne Stream. He could close his eyes and picture it, how that land had brought them together. And that was really what he missed, wasn’t it? It wasn’t just his *boys*. His visions of that vast green valley yawning out to catch the trade winds just
north of Kāneʻohe, right where town suddenly becomes country, got Percy thinking that there was something more about home that pulled at him so strongly. It wasn’t just that the valley was his playground. It was that it was their land, the ʻāina—that which provides. It had mana so strong you could almost hear the spirits talking to you as you walked up the trail—that’s how Charles always put it. And now it was gone.

Though there would be no re-creating Waikāne’s mana among Tokyo’s narrow crowded streets, or replacing his view of Puʻu ʻŌhulehule with this endless gray skyline, Percy could at least work to find some alternative to Shane and Charles—something he was quickly able to do once he got beyond the rank-dictated confines of Azumazeki Beya and boarded a train bound for Kyūshū, Japan’s southern island. The whole contingent of the Japan Sumo Association was headed there for one of sumo’s six annual major tournaments: all active sumōtori, rotund former sumōtori coaches and bosses, slight and skinny referees and ring announcers, and the master artists who oiled and sculpted each competitor’s hair into the kind of traditional samurai topknot that Percy’s hair was still too short to form. In Kyūshū, Percy would be competing in qualifying matches in an effort to have his name added to those of the more than eight hundred sumōtori listed on sumo’s ranking sheet. For the long ride, Azumazeki Beya’s manager had the sense to seat him across from George and Bumbo Kalima, brothers from the neighborhood where Percy’s brother Kurt now lived. Larry Aweau had recruited the Kalimas a couple of years earlier for Magaki Beya, which was a few blocks away from Azumazeki Beya.

What Percy saw across from him on the train were two local boys dressed in kimonos, their hair tied like samurai, and their faces beaming with bright, welcoming smiles. They laughed good-naturedly at his geta slippers, pointing out the incongruity of such a big guy having to balance on such footwear, since most of the low-rankers were just scrawny fifteen-year-old kids. With a smile of his own, Percy boasted that he would climb the ranks in no time. The Kalima brothers, both of whom were around a year into the sumo grind and hovering about midway up the ranking sheet, just gave each other knowing looks and shook their heads. And it became clear right away to Percy, even from this first brief exchange, that they would be friends. Though rank and seniority were still supposed to
guide their conversation, with the Kalimas belonging to a different beya it mattered far less. So the stories poured out over the long train ride, where Percy saw Bumbo’s face smirk from time to time into a look of resignation at sumo’s baffling behavioral demands. Bumbo’s distinct bullets of laughter came out as he told a story of trying to throw his opponent out of the ring and into the lap of his own boss whenever the man was assigned as a ring judge for one of his matches. George’s warm face morphed into a look of anger that seemed to cause his prominent forehead to protrude as he recounted the story of how although his hair was long enough, they hadn’t tied it into a topknot until the hair of two of his Japanese stable mates at Magaki Beya had grown long enough to tie first.

Percy told them where he was from, immediately evoking the Bruddah Waltah anthem from the 1980s, “Sweet Lady of Waiāhole,” a song about an old woman from the valley adjoined Waikâne who spent her days “sitting by the highway, selling her papayas, and green and ripe bananas.” The song took the homesick Kalima boys straight back to the romanticized version of what every local boy considered “paradise.” They may have known better, but several months in gray and crowded Tokyo had turned home into an ideal place, its every imperfection melting into the postcard image of the parts they missed most. George and Bumbo knew that the Waimānalo they’d left, with its houses popping up on former farmland and its long line of traffic bending all the way up the hill past the golf course, wasn’t the same as the one they missed. What they missed was country, and by creating the Sweet Lady character, Bruddah Waltah had given them a lasting piece of it. Then Percy let them know that he and his two good friends used to help the Sweet Lady as they walked to Waiāhole School, way up in the valley surrounded by papaya fields.

Right! came their reaction. He’s talking like the Sweet Lady of Waiāhole is a real person.

No, I telling you! She’s real. Miss Matayoshi. Every morning, Percy told them, he and Shane and Charles would take turns pushing her wheelbarrow down to the highway where she’d set up her little fruit stand, and then run back up Waiāhole Valley Road to get to school on time. Straight through their years in Kāne’ohe’s King Intermediate School—“King Zoo”—they would help her. That’s where the bus stop was, right in front
of where she sat. They’d even found out that she’d been robbed once, and they chased the guy down and made him pay. She was real. That’s what it was like in Waiāhole-Waikāne. That’s what it was still like.

Sitting talking story with the Kalimas, Percy was, above all, relieved. Simply talking about home with someone who could relate was a vacation from the relative cold of Azumazeki Beya. So for the first time since getting his passport stamped, Percy was able to relax enough to begin thinking about beating all of these little Japanese kids, some of whom looked half the size, at best, of the three Hawaiians. It wouldn’t be long, he reasoned, until they all would be called sekitori, just like Akebono. All George and Bumbo could do was shake their heads again and smile, as if Percy had no idea how hard the whole thing would really be. But Percy would hear none of it. Boss had come all the way up to his house in Waikāne Valley to recruit him, he reasoned. Even promised him a new car.

Percy did manage to qualify in Kyūshū, but in the context of living in a house where everyone else was his senpai, nothing had changed. Still struggling simply to make himself understood, let alone figure out the complicated levels of formality and the in-group versus out-of-group Japanese verb forms and so on, Percy found himself on the phone to his mother one afternoon when an order to wash the dishes came from the kitchen. Though he thought they might understand that the rare connection to home—to his mother, of all people—would be enough to put the dishes on hold for a couple of minutes, he also recognized the voice of the senpai delivering the order: it belonged to Tsuji.

George had warned Percy about Tsuji. “The Japanese senpai in Azumazeki Beya,” George had told him, shaking his head, “that guy is a prick.” George’s own cultural struggles at Magaki Beya were certainly not limited to the one incident about having to wait to have his topknot tied. But from time to time he would walk across the neighborhood to practice at Azumazeki Beya, and there he saw Troy and John take more abuse than he ever would have been able to tolerate himself. As Troy had explained it to George, Tsuji would “make you eat every damn grain of rice in your bowl, and if you didn’t, he’d knock you on your head.” And if being a prick wasn’t enough, the guy was also that lowest form of creature that local guys like Troy and George and Percy learn to despise from the mo-
ment they walk through the doors of elementary school: Tsuji was a *rat.* “You broke curfew?” George said, “Five minutes late? He’d go and tell Boss.” And what did that mean? It meant *kawaigari:* tender loving care, which wasn’t just how you toughened someone for battle. It wasn’t just how you got someone to dig deep. It was also how you managed to get a testosterone-soaked roomful of fifteen- to twenty-two-year-old fighters to stay in line. “He’d go and tell Boss.” The words were enough to send many former *sumōtori* into flashbacks whose soundtracks are nothing but the primal, blood-curdling screams of grown men.

Percy was expected to hang up on his mother immediately or, barring that, offer a humbly delivered fourteen-syllable honorific form of the request, “wait.” He was proud to simply know the word for “wait,” which he delivered humbly enough in his usual friendly tone, but which contained only the three syllables of its most familiar form—the form everyone else used when addressing the low-ranking Percy, and thus, the one that had stuck in his brain.

Tsuji’s response came in the form of a frying pan to the head that sent Percy’s thick glasses flying.

Stunned, Percy again felt the moment stretch. Percy and the Red Rags—nobody ever found out about that. Whenever he’d gotten kicked off the bus, it hadn’t been because anyone had ratted him out—it had been because no one, including himself, had ratted out the guy who’d thrown the first elbow when the driver wasn’t looking. He could hear Troy’s words: *You suck it up and do it.* Percy could have pounded Tsuji right there if he’d wanted to, but then what? He knew exactly what, and the thought frightened him into silence. It wasn’t Tsuji. It wasn’t Troy. It wasn’t any of his *senpai* in the big tatami room. It wasn’t even the *sekitori,* however loudly he might roar from his back room. It was this: *He’ll go and tell Boss.*

Percy quietly said goodbye to his mother and hung up the phone. He retrieved his glasses, swallowed hard, and stood up to go and wash the dishes.