

TIMES FIVE



RENÉE RIDLEY

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A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

I stand in awe of the blessings God has poured into my life and the lives of those I love. Every day, I am carried by a strength that is not my own—an immeasurable gift that renews my spirit. Above all, I am thankful for the divine guidance that helped me uncover the quiet, powerful value of forgiveness. Thank you, Lord, for teaching me that in letting go, I find the true freedom You intended for me.

I want to acknowledge Margie for inspiring me to write this book. Thank you for listening to my story, encouraging me to pen it, and instructing me never to say the word “can’t.”

To my friend, Chris: thank you for being the push I needed. Your constant encouragement was the catalyst for publishing this book, and I am eternally grateful for your belief in my story.

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After all this time? Always!

TRIGGER WARNING:

The text of this novel contains obscenities, naturalistic descriptions of spousal abuse, sexual abuse, and sexual situations.

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Chapter One

Ami

My mother, my makuahine, a beautiful Hawaiian-born goddess, married a tall, dark, and handsome Greek naval officer stationed at the Pearl Harbor Naval Base. My parents had meticulously mapped out a life for two, one where 'children' was a chapter they had intentionally left out of the book. Just as they were settling into the predictable rhythm of their mid-thirties, the universe staged a coup. On September 12th, fifteen

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years after they'd decided to remain a duo, I arrived—the ultimate 'plot twist' they never saw coming.

We lived on the majestic island of Oahu, where Daddy was a self-employed investment specialist based in Honolulu. Daddy stood 6'4", had tanned skin, jet black hair, blue eyes, and, as Mama always said, “a smile so bright that you had to put sunglasses on!” His suits were always sharp and crisp, his shoes were always polished, and his voice was deep with an authoritative tone. He never had to raise his voice at me, though; all I needed was a stern look in my direction with those piercing eyes of his.

Mama was 5'6" with olive skin and alluring with long, straight black hair flowing down her back just above her waist. She often wore her hair up, but took it down anytime I asked to brush it. Her sultry brown eyes glistened when she smiled. She was a direct descendant of native Hawaiian ancestry and showed me generations of photos kept

in a large wooden box.

I cherished the bedtime stories of ancient Hawaii, echoes of a culture she carried in her heart and passed down to me. She was a homemaker by Daddy's insistence, caring for and teaching me during the day while impeccably cleaning and preparing luscious, traditional Hawaiian Cuisine every night.

Daddy was magnificent at his job, making upwards of \$1,500,000 a year. He worked for very high-end clients not only on the Islands but also remotely in Los Angeles and New York. The proceeds from the stock he invested in for his clients, plus his own dividends, enabled us to purchase a very lavish four-bedroom, two-bath home on the Leeward Coast. The sandy beaches leading out to the crystal blue North Pacific Ocean were only a few miles away.

My modeling career began when I was just two months old. Mama was out grocery shopping one day. A woman strolling by stopped to peer into my car seat, perched on

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top of the cart, to gawk over me, and paused to observe that my eyes were purple.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” she whispered, squinting at me, “are those her natural eye color?”

“Um, yes,” my mother replied, her face bearing a peculiar look.

The woman explained, “I beg your pardon, it’s just that I’ve never seen anyone with eyes that color before. My husband is a marketing exec, and he’s always looking for, you know, ‘not your average kid’ for his clients.”

“Oh no,” Mama contended with hesitation. “That’s quite all right.”

“No, please,” the woman insisted, “just have a meeting with him. If you choose not to, that’s no problem at all.”

She then called her husband and described the beautiful baby she had just seen, with bright purple eyes and a head full of black, curly locks, insisting he needed to meet her. Mama went home and told Daddy, and he suggested a meeting wouldn’t hurt.

After all, he had so much overwhelming love for his princess and had no problem with letting the world know. The exec took one look at me and immediately consulted the owner of a Hawaiian-produced baby food line who was looking for the face of his new brand.

The more people saw me on the jars' labels in the store, the more they wanted to know who I was. Retailers were constantly calling Daddy to put my face on print, in catalogs, and even on camera. My ability to smile and laugh on command was the deciding factor in my being selected for shoots over other babies. My jet-black hair grew exceedingly fast and had to be trimmed constantly. At a year old, it was flowing in soft curls down the middle of my back.

When I was three years old, Mama took a friend's advice and entered me into a toddler beauty pageant. Everyone took note that I was "the pretty little girl with the long, curly black hair and purple eyes." Looking back on old photos, there were some ridiculously

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frilly dresses that I wore. Mama particularly liked my baby blue ruffled one with the puffy satin sleeves and lace bodice that she had commissioned to be made for me. “It makes her eyes stand out,” she would always explain. The poise and grace she instilled in me as a precocious three-year-old was probably why I would place first or second in competitions. This would be the inevitable path of my modeling and pageantry career.

Unfortunately, as in any other family, ours was plagued with its fair share of generational issues. Unbeknownst to me, a “curse” was placed on my family on my mother's side. The story is told that one of our Hawaiian ancestors angered another member of their tribe. He was a very vain man and constantly boasted about how beautiful his wife and young daughter were.

Another member of the tribe had only just buried his wife, lost to a ravaging disease, when the unthinkable happened. My ancestor, unable to settle a spooked horse, acci-

dentially killed the man's young daughter. It wasn't just an accident; it was a catastrophic addition to an already unbearable season of mourning. In a state of complete anguish, the man went to the priests, begging for retribution.

The priest demanded that my ancestor suffer the same grueling fate as his accuser. His curse would entail the wife dying before the sole child, a daughter, turned five years of age. The man would never see a son in his lineage, and so it has been for five generations. I was the unfortunate successor of this curse.

I was four years old, sleeping in the king-sized bed with Mama after sneaking in with them in the middle of the night. Daddy tended to let us sleep in when he left for his office. I woke up as usual to the sunlight glistening off her soft olive skin and ebony hair. I reached over as usual to kiss her to wake her up. However, this time Mama did not return my kiss; she was not breathing, she was

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not moving, she was lying there motionless.

Daddy taught me how to dial his number on speed dial, so I ran across the marble floor, went over to the koa wood table, and picked up Mama's cell phone. I called him and told him Mama wasn't waking up. He rushed home extremely distraught, and I heard him scream something about "that fucking curse!" I wouldn't know what that meant until later.

Standing in the O'ahu Cemetery with an unforgiving sun and soft Pacific breeze on our backs, we placed her body into the ground next to her mother, my kapuna. I wore a similar style of her favorite blue dress as I held Daddy's hand. I loved holding his big, strong hand, but on this particular day, he held on too tightly – as if to never let me go. I don't remember the feeling of grief. I just sensed a feeling of emptiness. It took me nearly a year to accept that I would never see her radiant face again, except in family photos and videos.

Daddy and I loved watching movies together. He introduced me to all types of genres, with his favorites being science fiction and action. Mama would get so upset with him for letting me watch mature movies like that, but she also knew I had the intellect to handle their intense content. One day, I walked in on him watching *Enter the Dragon* with Bruce Lee. I was so fascinated that I started mimicking some of the fight sequences.

“Princess, what are you doing?” Dad inquired.

“I’m doing karate!” I exclaimed with glee.

“Hmm”, Daddy pondered, “would you like to learn Karate for real, Princess?”

My eyes lit up as I squealed, “Yes, Daddy! I want to learn how to do that!” I jumped up in his lap and put my little arms around his neck as tightly as I could!

Several days later, Daddy enrolled me in the local Dojo. I started in the Kiddie class,

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but my skills developed quickly, growing exponentially. He explained to my Sensei that I had a photographic memory and could learn the moves just by watching them. At the age of twelve, I tested for and became a second-degree black belt. At that point, I was assisting the trainers in the younger classes. Learning karate felt as if I had known it in a past life. I mastered both Tai Chi and Taekwondo, won local competitions, and placed first in the state in the girls' categories.

Daddy decided to hire a nanny in addition to Kapuna Kaipo (my grandfather) to take care of me while he worked. Nani was much older than Mama, with pale skin, graying hair, and a kind, caring disposition. Daddy opted to have me home-schooled since my accelerated learning skills caused me to surpass traditional schooling. I soaked up every learning objective and quickly moved to the next.

By the time I was seven, I was reading at a ninth-grade level, working on algebraic

problems, and studying chemistry. Daddy chose to conceal my superior intellect from the school system to avoid unwanted attention, yet still had my IQ tested. I was admitted to Mensa with an IQ of 142.

Meanwhile, my face, my eyes, and my pearly white smile continually dominated magazine covers, catalogs, billboards, and TV commercials on the Islands. I was very recognizable, and Daddy polished me to be perceived as a fresh face with a wholesome personality. Many parents saw me as a beacon of purity and innocence. They wanted their little girls to be like me, and young girls looked up to me.

My community came together as the proverbial “village to raise a child.” Everyone knew we suffered a devastating loss, so neighbors contributed in any way they could. My Ohana made sure that I would be taken care of. When I was fourteen, an old pageant friend of Mama’s told Daddy I should run for Miss Hawai’i USA Teen.

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“I don’t particularly care to do pageants anymore, Daddy,” I communicated frankly in response to his inquiry.

“That’s perfectly fine, Princess,” Daddy replied with a soft tone, looking down at the floor. “A few of the women thought it would be a good homage to your Mama.”

I contemplated for a moment, thinking back to how happy she was when I participated. After a short sigh, I disclosed, “Well, I do recall how much she loved watching me participate. I guess I can do one last pageant in her honor.”

Nani made sure I was ready for the pageant by taking me to all the necessary appointments. Daddy hired one woman to do my wardrobe and another for my makeup. Gone were the frilly, lacy dresses, replaced with full-length, form-fitting pageant gowns. The shoes were much higher, with one-and-a-half- to two-inch heels. I was already 5’7 then, but adding two more inches had me towering over the other girls. Because I was

so recognizable, I didn't feel as if I would be an equal competitor. I suggested changing my look somehow. Daddy sparked the idea of having me wear blue contact lenses to obscure the purple.

I ended up being one of the youngest contestants and got along well with the others. I was voted Miss Congeniality because I was always helping other girls with their hair or dresses, since I had stylists at Daddy's insistence. It wasn't until I made it to the final three that I revealed my true self. I took the contacts out before walking onto the stage in a sleek, beige gown with ruching along the sides for the final presentation.

A lot of my Ohana on the islands knew my face or nickname, Ami, but weren't aware of my birth name, Ami'leia, so imagine the surprise when the cameras zoomed in. I heard people gasp in awe. I could literally see them whispering from the stage. I answered my final question of "Why do you want to win this title?" with something more elabo-

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rate than, “Because my mom would have wanted it.”

I thoughtfully replied, “My makuahine was the heartbeat of our family, holding dreams for my future that she didn't live to see fulfilled. This opportunity allows me to not only honor her memory but also to create a ripple effect of positive change for others. Ultimately, that is the true meaning of ‘ohana.’”

The audience cheered as the final two contestants and I held hands waiting for the results. With intense energy and a stomach full of nerves, I waited with bated breath as I heard my name being announced as Miss Hawai'i USA Teen. I exhaled and began trembling. The audience was on their feet, the other girls were clapping and whistling, and it was overwhelming. The sight of Daddy and Nani smiling in the audience was my signal to breathe. Finally, it felt real. I looked up toward the ceiling and whispered, “I did it, Mama! For you!”

As is customary, I was to represent Hawai'i in the Miss USA Teen pageant. The pageant was being held in New York, so Daddy flew Nani and me up until he could join us. The hotel was luxurious with marble floors, the tallest glass ceilings I'd ever seen, and a room overlooking the skyline. The city enchanted me as I'd never been off the island before. I was wide-eyed and over-stimulated. We went down to the lobby, registered for the competition, and then spent the week participating in the individual competitions.

Daddy raised me to maintain a strong moral compass and not conform to the standard expectations of young girls in this world. I was perfectly fine with it. I didn't show any interest in showing a lot of skin, cursing, displaying reckless behavior, or participating in what all the other girls were talking about or doing. Sometimes the conversations embarrassed me and were vulgar. So, competing as Miss USA Teen was an un-

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nervning experience for me.

I was only fourteen, and I didn't associate myself with those things! I gradually became a mockery among the other contestants. Fortunately, I had Daddy's strong personality and didn't really let it sideline me. You could feel the temperature drop whenever I stepped onto the floor. It wasn't just whispers; it was the way they grimaced at the mention of my name or looked away when I smiled at them. They didn't need to know my name to know that the crown was no longer a sure thing for any of them.

I was the 'baby' of the group—long-legged with caramel skin and soft black curls—possessing a presence and a pair of purple eyes that commanded the stage. I was subjected to ridicule and called names for no apparent reason other than they were jealous. I was never treated that way by the girls on the islands!

The worst insult was that my name in Hawaiian is pronounced “Ah-me,” and eve-

ryone there kept calling me “Amy.” I consistently corrected both staff and contestants, but then I became the butt of jokes about it. I cried to Daddy about it. Daddy suggested, “Princess, you can continually explain yourself to weak-minded people or refuse to acknowledge them when they say it. It’s totally your decision.” I decided it would be best not to bother with correcting them and to spend my energy elsewhere.

Though I befriended a few of the girls, others were just downright malicious and tormented me. The pranks included snipping a chunk of my hair, using their make-up to deface one of my dresses, and intimidating me with threats if I made it to the final ten. Fortunately, Nani came prepared with alternate dresses, and the hairstylist was able to restyle my hair to cover the damage. Daddy was furious when I told him, but I begged him not to intervene and make matters worse.

Once again, I made it to the final three

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and presented myself on the stage to answer the final question. The question presented to me was, “If we jumped ten years into the future, what contribution would you have made to change the world?” Without hesitation, I answered,

“I am committed to tackling the crisis of childhood homelessness. While public attention often focuses on homeless adults, children are frequently overlooked. There is no reason the government cannot repurpose abandoned malls and vacant buildings into safe havens for families. By providing a stable residence, we create the environment children need to learn and thrive. These families would be supported as they pursue employment or education, eventually empowering them to give back to the communities that helped them rise.”

I’d had that model in my head for years, and had even discussed it as a project with Daddy. The judges were eerily quiet after my response. The other two contestants gave

cliché answers to their questions, but mine was both contemplative and spontaneous. When the second runner-up was named, I held my breath, caught between fear and hope. My mind raced with, “Do I really want to win?” “Do I want to see this through to the end?” “What’s my endgame here?” I could see Daddy’s position in the audience and observe his pride in my answer.

I was lost in the labyrinth of my own thoughts, the world around me muffled and distant. I almost missed the announcement of the first runner-up entirely. It was only when the thunder of applause broke my trance—when I saw the sea of people rising to their feet and the glint of the crown moving steadily toward me—that the reality crashed in: I had won!

As the weight of the crown settled upon my head, the shadows of doubt that had plagued me vanished like mist at sunrise. I found myself caught in an unending smile, clutching the bouquet as I made my way

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down the aisle for the ceremonial walk—a moment of grace I shall never forget.

Upon the completion of my reign as Miss USA Teen, I was expected to go on to represent the United States in the Miss World pageant. I was apprehensive as I had such a negative experience with bullying during the competition. I used the time during my reign to contemplate doing it all over again. I wanted to make a difference in the world, but not at the expense of facing cruelty and trying to change public opinions in an environment plagued with negativity. I was all about maintaining my peace. I met with the pageant board and respectfully declined to allow the first runner-up to compete in my place.

During my reign, I was honored with the opportunity to meet with celebrities, filmmakers, and business moguls. The parties and meet-and-greets were illustrious, the celebrities were awe-inspiring, and it took everything in me not to fangirl at the events.