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by

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ABSTRACT

This fiction novel focuses on the Sankofa philosophy that we as human beings must learn from our past to better understand our current existence and future; however, sometimes we choose to ignore or suppress the past because remembering it may be too hurtful. When we forget what happened yesterday our outlook on today and tomorrow becomes distorted. *Contact* is a novel that attempts to explore how “living in the now” alone becomes problematic because the past—if not remembered—will come back to haunt you.

The erasure of the line between Diasporic Africans and their African past is the primary theme explored. The writer deconstructs how living in the now is indeed living in the past because the past and present, in the life of Tufa, become one. Reincarnation serves as the vehicle to explore this theme. Tufa, known for her aberrant behavior, is the reincarnation Afua Ataá—an Ashanti woman who survived the Maafa, or Transatlantic Slave Trade. Past love, hate, dishonor, rivalry, pain, and hope complicate the “ordinariness” of Tufa’s teenage life.

The novel is divided into a prologue and eight chapters. The bulk of each chapter follows Tufa’s current life and ends with a vignette told by five African women, one being Afua Ataá. Each vignette paints in broad strokes the landscape and historical moments of the Maafa. The present becomes complicated when traces of the Maafa seep into Tufa’s life. Some of these traces are culturally specific rather than unique to Tufa. However, other traces are uniquely shaped by Tufa’s former life. People from her past disrupt her current life by their presence. Their disruption takes many forms—some of it brings pain and some of it brings joy. By reading Tufa’s story, others may find the strength to confront their past when it makes contact with their present. Like Tufa, we must confront the pain in our past to experience its joy.

To the millions who fought and whose remains sunk to the bottom of the Atlantic.

May your spirits rise again in the hearts and minds of those who survived.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: WINDY BIRTH	1
Rattle, Rattle, Rattle.....	11
CHAPTER ONE: ABNORMAL	13
Nana Day and Night	30
CHAPTER TWO: FIRE	33
The Dead Talks.....	51
CHAPTER THREE: SIGN.....	53
Broken Screams	70
CHAPTER FOUR: BLIND	73
Unlucky.....	95
CHAPTER FIVE: FISH TALE	97
Splash.....	118
CHAPTER SIX: SPOOKISM.....	119
Enemy	133
CHAPTER SEVEN: KEY	135
Madness	173
CHAPTER EIGHT: REUNION	175
Forgive	210
APPENDIX A: WRITING LIFE ESSAY	211
APPENDIX B: BOOK LIST	217

PROLOGUE: WINDY BIRTH

The baby folks called Tufa was born on a day when the realm between the living and dead was thin. Tufa, the name her Daddy gave her, was short for two and four, together twenty-four. Twenty-four meant wata in the gambling game back home and he could not stop babbling *Tufa, Tufa, Tufa* when streams of it dripped down his woman's thighs. So much wata, that's all he could see. Don't let the baby drown Jah, he had prayed, as he left his woman to find help.

His woman was alone. Only the wind kept her company. The wind was ancient and far from home. It found comfort in making an infinity symbol, by swirling around the woman's sprawled thighs. It never touched her but wanted to. It could easily be mistaken for a draft wafting through the open door. That's how the wind liked it.

Ulrica took no heed to the wind as her toes curled and back arched off the mattress. If she listened closely, she would hear the heart of the wind. It beat like a talking drum in the distance, but her screams drowned it out. Her sweat-glistening thighs parted wider; her cries were the only sound that could be heard from Camp Building Seven.

The wind retreated from the screams and floated over the empty bunk beds where three hundred West Indian men stretched out their weary bodies. It settled over boots caked in black muck from the Belle Glade swamps. It cooled the metal of knee and shin guards that spared many legs in the fields from a fatal machete swipe. It dried the cane juice, fresh blood, and salty sweat on rusty machetes. On the kitchen counters, where electric hotplates piled up, it danced. Soon the wind was drawn back to the woman. It found a spot next to a portable television on a bed beside hers. It settled on top of dirty sheets and waited.

Sheets. They balled in Ulrica's fingers. No matter how much she screamed to God or pushed until tears rolled down her high cheeks, the baby simply would not come. Helplessly, the wind watched. To evade her screams, it wanted to flee through the open door. However, something kept the wind there. Something inside the woman's stretch marked belly that had yet to be born.

The screams never abated. The wind groaned and fled to the window. It searched for anyone who could soothe the mother with their presence, something it yearned to do but could not. The vendor called Crazy Dollymon pushed a shopping cart toward the building, hummed "Buffalo Soldier," and stopped to yank the caster wheels out of the gluttonous mud. When the wind spotted the vendor, it blew on the door.

Crazy Dollymon, like most vendors, flocked to the work camps to sell anything and everything to the West Indian farm workers that chopped sugarcane. However, unlike most vendors, Crazy Dollymon was well...crazy. Although his shrewdness could make a worker buy his own crusty drawers, Crazy Dollymon arrived at camp when least expected and least wanted.

As Ulrica's stomach grew, the wind had watched the vendor. It had blown the vendor's shopping cart into a pool of mud when Crazy Dollymon sold toilet paper to a worker that nearly messed himself as he raced to find a private spot in the fields to release his bowels. When a group of men complained to the camp manager about not receiving any meat in five days, Crazy Dollymon had barged into the meeting selling a pregnant raccoon covered in tire marks. The wind had pushed Crazy Dollmon's face into the raccoon's belly for the affront.

The wind blew and blew on the open door but it would not budge. In the threshold, it decided to wait. The vendor rolled his shopping cart past the shotgun-styled camp buildings.

Camp building one...two...three. The closer the vendor rolled his cart the louder the wind moaned. Four...five...six. Crazy Dollymon stopped singing when his locs fanned around his face and dirt blew into his eyes. But even though he stopped singing, there was no stopping him from pushing his shopping cart through the wind and into Camp building seven.

Crazy Dollymon's jaundiced eyes widened as he studied Ulrica, with hiked up skirts, breathing out her dry mouth and flaring nostrils. "Buffalo! Buffalo! Calm down. Mi soon bring to you the perfect ting."

He rummaged in his shopping cart as the wind circled him. The vendor tried to rub the goosebumps off his flesh. In disgust, the wind left the man. How dare this vendor cause the mother more distress by selling her garbage? The life in Ulrica's womb was far more important to the wind than the vendor's. The wind wanted to tell the man so. He blew in the vendor's ear. Crazy Dollymon swatted through the wind and whirled around with a bottle of curdled milk and a folded beige sheet.

"Does it look like I need a bottle?" Ulrica panted. "Get out! Don't sell me nothing! Hear? Nothing!"

Crazy Dollymon gave a snaggletooth grin and sat the bottle and sheet on the bed above her.

"The milk and sheet not for you, buffalo," he said extra slow, "but the pickiney in you that soon come."

"Who you calling a buffalo?" She raised herself on her elbows. "If I wasn't no Christian woman, I'd tell you where to go!"

Crazy Dollymon cocked his head back and chuckled, his smoky beard capturing shards of moonlight in its coils. “Mi like you, buffalo, for being the Christian woman you are. The offering you give mi will further the kingdom of Jah, and he thank you for that.”

As Ulrica did tell him where to go, in excruciating detail, two figures raced down the muddy road and into camp. The wind shot through the door when it noticed the woman’s man had returned. Vincent, a broad shouldered man with a Jheri curl, clutched a bulky knapsack as he sprinted several feet in front of Cola, a wide hipped big-breasted woman, whose freshly pressed hair the wind tousled. The wind could care less about the woman’s hair. It blew against their backs, urging them faster.

When they reached Camp Building Seven, the wind stood close to the unborn child and her mother. The man’s presence settled the air, for the wind knew him. Although much older, he was the same farm boy from the mountains in Port Antonio. For years, the wind had watched over Vincent, as he had his mother, and her mother, and so on. Vincent’s lanky limbs had grown muscle, developed stubborn scars, the old buried by the new. Vincent rubbed his nose when the wind teased it. The wind always knew Vincent had the nose of The One, but not the eyes. None of those born before him ever had the eyes. Some had the proud walk, flaring temper, stubbornness, but none had the eyes.

“Vincent, go on and sit down somewhere so mi can work,” ordered Cola before glaring at the vendor. “Crazy Dollymon, you never get the days nor times right. The camps are practically empty on weekends, mon. How many times must mi tell you that?”

“Buffalo here and so are you,” Crazy Dollymon snapped as he snatched a tiny pot off his cart. Not bothering to ask, he plugged in a hotplate on the kitchen counter. “So as mi two eyes can see, the camp ain’t empty,” he said and poured the lumpy milk into the heating pot.

“Cola, you sure you know about this kind of ting?” asked Vincent.

Cola snorted and took the knapsack out his trembling fingers. “Yeah, mon. Mi good for someting than just laying on my back every weekend.” She dumped the knapsack’s contents onto the top bed and smirked. “You no remember mi dead faddah was an obeah man back in Jamaica?”

Vincent nodded and wiped sweat from Ulrica’s brow.

“A what?” Ulrica winced when the contractions quickened. “Vincent, you told me you would call the doctor! Instead you brought a full time two dollar ho that does root work on the side!”

“Watch your tongue, hear?” Cola snapped as she dropped some crushed herbs into a bowl. “Don’t tink because you having baby you can talk to me any kind of way. Mi won’t put up with that. If your man would visit you in town like all the others instead of making you take taxi here every weekend, you wouldn’t need to see me. What would possess you anyway to travel in your condition or think your man had money for a doctor?”

“I’m a month early,” Ulrica mumbled.

Cola sighed. “You should’ve stayed your big self in town, and you, Vincent, should have never let her come up here like this.”

“Sorry, Rica.” Vincent sucked his teeth. “Mi searched the entire camp but nobody left knew a ting about babies accept Cola. After me found her in building six, mi had to run nearly a mile to get her tings.”

Crazy Dollymon shook his head. “Is that your office of business now Cola? Building six? Or is that when you’re not doing overtime in building two?”

“You only keyed up, Dollymon, because mi no invite you into my office.”

He pinched his nose as the stench of spoiled milk wafted from the pot. “Mi would never do work where there’s an infestation, Cola.”

The wind darted to every corner of the cramped quarters. Why was it taking them so long? The wind could not stay still as Ulrica’s cries reached a glass shattering pitch. Sheets ruffled from the wind’s restlessness. It floated toward them. Ulrica’s sweaty fingers snaked around Vincent’s arm. As soon as Cola handed Ulrica her concoction to drink, the hair bristled on Cola’s neck and her eyes raked the spot where the wind waited.

“You smell that?” she whispered to Vincent.

Vincent shrugged as he unclamped Ulrica’s fingers from his arm. “Cola, you should know the last ting a man cares about after chopping a half mile of cane is him smell.”

“Not that, mon,” she hissed.

“Mi milk stopped boiling, and I put it in a bottle for buffalo’s pickiney. Two dollas is my price, and to use my fan to take the smell out the room is another dolla.”

“It’s not the milk,” said Cola. “Mi smell seawata coming from there.” She pointed at the wind. “The air is thick in that spot. Vincent, tell me, did you dream of wata last night?”

Vincent's full lips curled in a smile. "So Cola, you do believe in old country superstition." When she continued to stare at him, he sighed. "Yes, mi dreamed of it and blood too. Only thing mi rememba was that mi nearly lost a leg in the fields. Before mi fall, there was a pool of blood mixed with rainwata and black muck at my feet."

Cola shuddered before she turned her back to the wind. "You dreamt of bloody water. That's different. Don't know what to make of that. All mi know is that there is something here that wants this baby born. Now."

The wind hovered above Ulrica as Cola's arms disappeared beneath the other woman's skirt. The wind's heart skipped a beat as Ulrica pushed. The wind could not make a sound until the baby cried out with life. Cola yanked the skirt higher, uncaring that it exposed Ulrica to more than just her man. When Cola commanded Ulrica to push, a head full of tightly coiled hair squeezed through the taut hole.

"Get it out!" Ulrica screamed.

"Mi can't if you don't push," said Cola.

Ulrica sobbed as the baby dislodged from the haven of her womb. Vincent held her hand, Crazy Dollymon held the beige sheet ready, and Cola guided the shoulders, torso, and legs of the baby. The wind only watched.

Cola cut the link between daughter and mother and slapped the baby on the bottom. Although she stared quizzically around the room, the baby would not cry. The wind turned away, too afraid to stare into the baby's eyes. It listened to Cola's hurried footsteps carry her to the sink. Water dripped from the faucet. The dripping stopped as Cola held the baby beneath the water.

“Why the baby no cry, Cola?” asked Vincent.

Cola shrugged. She cleaned off the silent baby and held her up to inspect. Her toes wiggled as her legs dangled in the air. Gooseflesh covered her. When everyone gasped, the wind turned to stare at the baby. A birthmark spanned her back. It was something the ancient wind had never seen. It appeared like many shapes; each individually made perfect sense. But together, they were an unusual thing for the wind to behold.

“Look at it!” Ulrica reached for Vincent and smiled, tears threading her lashes. “Don’t it look like a cross to you?”

“The mark of Jah,” said Crazy Dollymon. “Bless him for giving the mark to pickiney to let mama buffalo know her offering to Dollymon would be most appreciated.”

Ulrica gave the vendor a reprovng look before she reached out and stroked the birthmark.

“Don’t look like no cross to me,” said Cola.

“Then what is it?” asked Ulrica, her smile still in place.

Cola shrugged. “A Kemeti ankh. Mi faddah always wore one round him neck for protection. Said it was a symbol of life.”

Ulrica shut her thighs and sat up. “How dare you confuse the cross with a symbol of the devil?”

“What you talk is foolishness,” said Cola as she cradled the baby in her arms.

“Foolishness? Telling me my baby got the mark of the beast on her back is foolishness. Now give her to me.”

“Mi will just as soon as I wrap her up. The baby shivering with cold. Dollymon bring the sheet.”

“You soon have it when mi have the money.”

Vincent stormed toward Crazy Dollymon and snatched the sheet out his hands. “You won’t get a dime for a sheet you took off someone’s bed.”

The wind knew the baby would wail the moment the sheet touched her skin.

“Everybody just shut up.” Ulrica opened her arms to collect her baby. “You’re upsetting her.”

When the baby cried, the wind knew it was the sheet, and nothing else, that upset her. The wind’s heart skipped a beat as the baby’s eyes sought it. Wisdom lay within her chocolate irises. The teary eyes pleaded with the wind. The wind retreated to the furthest corner of the living quarters when realization crept into her eyes. Like bodies bound by shackles, the wind was helpless. It could not go to her. Not yet. When she shut her eyes and turned away from the wind, centuries of bottled emotions uncorked. The wind’s heart beat again. Loud. It found its voice and howled.

Ulrica sniffed the sheet, yanked it from her wailing daughter, and touched her nose with her top lip as if smelling something foul.

“No wonder my baby crying! This sheet smells like piss.”

The sobs stopped, but the eyes never opened.

The wind stole a glance at the baby. The baby suckled from her mother’s nipple, but never did she open her eyes. Her father stroked her head of damp curls, but never did she open

her eyes. Cola untied the scarf from around her bountiful hips, and wrapped the baby into its warm folds. But never did she open her eyes.

The wind flew to her when she began to snore. It wished it could pry her eyelids open and see what she refused to show. She shut her eyes even tighter as if sensing the wind's plan. The wind, reminded of the stubbornness of The One, stopped. It smiled the only way it knew how—it warmed in temperature.

The moonlight flooded into Camp Building Seven. Immediately the wind sensed its pull on the ocean's tide. It tried to ignore the sound of faraway wind slapping waves against rocks. The mother wind was calling. Soon the mother wind would come to gather up all of her children that stole upon the land. The wind grew cooler, knowing it would have to return to the ocean. It gave one final look to the little one in protective arms. The wind ached to hold what it could not. Slowly, it backed away.

It drifted through the work camp. The camp had become a ghost town. The tall trees loomed over the long buildings, their branches' shadows stretched across the ground. The sugarcane field, once full of men with worn jeans and T-shirts stained black from the cane sap mixed with the muck, was empty. The sounds of their machetes and cutlasses slicing into sugarcane, and their gossiping and ranting—about anything and everything under the sun—could not be heard. The only thing that could be heard was cricket songs and the wind's howls.

The wind flew through the sugarcane fields; its presence ruffled the sugarcanes' long green leaves and stirred up the earth. It howled and howled, wondering if the newborn baby had forgiving eyes. If the wind did not find out today, it would find out soon enough. Until then it

would deal with the pain of not knowing and wait for her eyes to open. After all, it had her entire lifetime to wait.

Rattle, Rattle, Rattle

I am Olabisi, The One with eyes that are forgiving and legs that are clean. The splintering wood stabs at my thighs and back, so I keep still. The sway of this hollow fish that swims on the water top digs the splintered wood into my flesh. The wood bites at the surface of my thighs, scrapes my back, but I don't bleed. Still, the constant picking annoys me; it reminds me of the mosquitoes in the bush that hide behind branches covered in moss.

The bush between my thighs is my only cover. The tightly curled hairs capture some of my stink, but not all. Shackles chain my ankles, sprawling them, allowing the stink to escape. When I try to shut them, the chains rattle. Rattle, rattle, rattle. They cannot rattle longer than that. For if they do, she wakes—the one chained beside me. She does not eat, only sleeps. Since they chained her beside me, she vomits when her eyes blink.

We are on the top shelf of the fish that swims on the water top, so our darkness is the purest of darkness. The square holes in the metal door above our bodies tell us when the bright light is above us. Eight times I have seen it. The stink here is not so bad, but each day it gets worse, stronger. I wait for the bright light to shine through the holes—that way I know where to put my face. Through the holes come the tiniest whisper of air and any hope I have that the stink will lessen. I raise my head so that my nose will be closer to the holes. Rattle, rattle, rattle. Her eyes blink, and then her mouth opens near my face. I turn away from her, ignoring the stiffness in my neck. Then I let her do it. Her vomit sprays my hair, my arm, my right breast. My nipple,

my crusty nipple, the nipple my baby will never again suck, becomes slick, hard. It pokes out, tall. I wonder if it is because of her or the tiny whisper of air. I hope it is because of the tiniest whisper of air. If it is, I would not mind her vomit.

CHAPTER ONE: ABNORMAL

For me, death did not seem so bad since the first person I saw die did so with a smile on his face. It happened with the quickness. Granddaddy Juno fell into the hotel pool and when he floated to the surface, there it was—his smile that always showed off the gap between his front teeth. How was I supposed to know it was unnatural for dead people to smile? One minute he was laughing, waving his cane in the air, and dancing the “Electric Slide.” The next he had slipped on the wet stone, cracked his skull on the edge of the pool and fell headfirst into the water. I was dancing by him because I knew if nobody whispered to him the moves, he was bound to knock everybody upside the head with his cane. I was the first to see him fall into the water with that encouraging smile he always saved just for me. Granddaddy Juno was the family’s big man. He asked us to do something by first doing it himself. That’s why when he accidentally baptized himself in the pool, and came back up grinning, I laughed. Before anyone could stop me, I splashed feet first into the pool and kept dancing around his body.

It happened five days ago, yet nobody seemed to stop talking about it. You see the family thinks I’m sort of crazy because I didn’t see anything wrong with what I did. Even after they sat me down, I still saw nothing wrong. It seemed like the normal thing to do, jump in after him and return his smile. But nobody else thought so, and they showed me by locking themselves in their hotel rooms when they saw me coming down the hall. When my older girl cousins—who no longer wore training bras like me—soaked in the Jacuzzi, one of them created the rule that I had to have at least a B Cup to enter. They make me sick, always making up rules to keep me away. Even when I sat down to watch some of the older men in my family play dominoes, they pushed the thirty dollars they were betting toward me and told me if I left I could keep the money. After

that, I got the hint. I was eight years old, never having a first kiss or a period. But here I was spooking my whole family.

I tucked my knees beneath my chin and rocked on the naked mattress. I rocked and rocked, hoping that would make me forget about my cousin's new rules and the thirty dollars my so called craziness earned me. I hoped Momma would let me stay in the hotel while everyone attended Granddaddy Juno's funeral that afternoon. That way I wouldn't have to hear the whispers I heard now. I stopped rocking and pressed my ear against the white wall. Some of my cousins were laughing, but I could not make out what was so funny. I pushed away from the wall and crawled to the foot of the bed.

Balled up on the floor were the white sheets I had begged Shakara—she was a year older than me and the only cousin that liked being around me—to snatch off the bed. That was another thing that made everybody think I was special. I hated sheets. I never liked them for as long as I could remember. Once, I tried to sleep on them when Shakara stayed the night. The moment I slid beneath them, my thighs had felt like a cat had scratched them. My wrists had hurt as if I had pushed a parked car. My throat burned as if somebody with big behind hands squeezed it. I couldn't breathe. My stomach was in knots and just as my eyes rolled in the back of my head, Shakara shook me. That's when I rolled on the floor and threw up until nothing else came out. After that, I sort of thought I was different. But crazy? Not.

My eyes settled on the dress I was wearing to the funeral. It was black velvet, itchy, and way too big. If I wanted to, I could stick my whole head and arms inside it and disappear. If I liked the dress, just a little bit, disappearing inside it wouldn't be such a bad idea. But I hated wearing it almost as much as I hated sleeping on sheets. I wished both would just disappear. I

reached behind me and unzipped the dress. It fell off my shoulders like a dying flower and I flung it over the white sheets, burying them, drowning them in the black velvet. I looked for a secret spot to hide both. Suitcases took up most space in the closet and above them hung family reunion T-shirts nobody ever got the chance to wear. Our bathing suits still had that chlorine smell even after they air dried in the bathroom. Momma refused to take the *Do Not Disturb* sign off our door, something about she can't grieve in peace if she hears the sound of vacuums or the smell of disinfectant. So nobody came in to clean, and aluminum trays once filled with barbecue chicken, macaroni and cheese, potato salad, collard greens, and peach cobbler overflowed the trashcan. Stuff from the would-be family reunion crowded the room, accept for one place. I could not help but smile at the refrigerator; it just had to be empty.

I tied the laces of my Converse impersonators that pinched my toes before kicking the pile of white linen and black velvet. With each kick, I moved the pile from one end of the room to the other. When I yanked open the refrigerator door, cool air fanned my face. The laughing of my cousins grew louder, so loud I could make out what they was laughing at. Me. Can't say it surprised me. I tried to block them out. I stuffed the sheets and dress into the cold space, just when the door from the other room flung open.

Shakara sucked her teeth and lifted her hair off her back. She was caramel, like Momma, but she often told me she wished she was dark like me. I hid behind the fridge and watched her fan her neck. Her skin seemed to glow from the sweat. It seemed beautiful to me, and I couldn't begin to understand why she thought her skin was so ugly.

She did not pay me any mind and sprawled on the naked mattress. Eyes closed, she parted her chopstick legs, allowing each to point to a corner of the mattress.

“Dang is hot in here! Tufa? You think after the funeral they’ll still let us go to Busch Gardens?”

I stuck a knee on the middle rack. That gave me room to lean my head against the place the eggs were supposed to be. She can’t see me now, I thought, refusing to say a word.

Shakara piled her newly relaxed strands of hair on top of her head. I peeped around the refrigerator door. I tried not to laugh when she yanked and pulled at her hair as if it growing down the middle of her back was a curse. Can’t say she wanted straight hair, but Great Aunt Frieda insisted that the mop she came with needed to be bone straight for the funeral. She had given Shakara a perm without even telling Aunt Zinga, Shakara’s mother. When Aunt Zinga found out what Great Aunt Frieda had done, everybody thought there was going to be two funerals instead of one. What was Great Aunt Frieda thinking? And they call me crazy.

Momma would not let me get a perm; she said I was too young. Instead she plaited my hair every week and put beads and foil on the tips. I hated wearing beads and foil, but Momma said that was the only way my hair would hang and shake like Shakara’s instead of being a nappy mess and shoot straight up in the air like a firecracker. I liked firecrackers.

I crouched behind the refrigerator again when Shakara pushed up on her bony elbows and smiled in my direction. Before she could say anything to me, Momma bustled into the room, her fingers pinning her hat. She stopped her pinning when saw Shakara. “Girl, what you smiling about? And got your legs all open so everybody can see your future.”

When my older cousins had pulled me out of the pool away from Granddaddy Juno, Momma had whispered, “Eight years.” What you mean by that Momma, I wanted to ask her. But what she whispered soon after, to nobody in particular, left me feeling a little funny. “It took me

this long to realize something ain't right with my baby Tufa." When she said it, I pretended not to hear a word. That was why she didn't look mad at me when my yellow sundress had turned orange from Granddaddy Juno's blood. That's why she didn't put a switch to my behind when I laughed, jumped in the pool, and kept on doing the Electric Slide as Granddaddy bobbed in the water. She thought I couldn't help myself, because something was not quite right with me.

"But Aunty Rica," Shakara protested. "I was just smiling cause Tufa hiding in the fridge."

"She doing what?"

When Momma gave me the same look she did when Granddaddy died, I wished I had never taken off that velvet dress. That way I could have hid inside it and disappeared.

"The fridge," my cousin said. "She in it. She got on them bobos you told her to take off."

I snatched off my sneakers and stuffed them on the bottom rack.

Momma sighed loud and long. She wiped her hand down her almond shaped face that now showed faint wrinkles around her eyes and full mouth. Tears were ready to spill over the wrinkles but she blinked them away.

"Daddy you died too fast," she kept screaming when they fished him out the water. While everybody else was crying, Momma was screaming. She was angry, anybody could see that.

"You told us you wanted to die in the bed you and Momma slept in. We, your children, were supposed to be around you, just like we promised." People tried to touch Momma, to pull her away from the dead body, but she kept yelling in his face as if that would make Granddaddy wake up again. She used the bottom of her shirt to wipe his forehead. Cleaning his face calmed

her down. “Fever sweat was supposed to be wiped from you brow, Daddy. Not blood and pissy pool water. You died too fast. We didn’t even sing *Wade in the Water* to you like you wanted.”

I looked over the fridge at Momma. She was singing it now, had been singing it over and over since Granddaddy died.

Wade in the water

Wade in the water, children,

Wade in the water

God’s a-going to trouble the water...

Her voice every now and then cracked, but Momma kept on singing. I asked her why she kept on singing that song if it was going to make her cry. But she would keep on singing, and only then would she say, “Cause it’s what Daddy would have wanted.”

...Look over yonder, what do you see?

God’s a-going to trouble the water

The Holy Ghost a-coming on me

God’s a-going to trouble the water...

When she finished, she sat down by Shakara. When Shakara rested her greasy head in her lap, Momma laughed. “The way he died was so unlike him. Y’all Granddaddy was like a great oak. He was always so overly protective when it came to blood, wasn’t he?”

Shakara shook her head. “Yes, Aunty Rica, I know. But Granddaddy gone now.”

I held my breath and looked at Momma. Her fingers clenched in Shakara’s hair. “I know that baby.”

I swallowed a gulp of air when somebody knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” Momma asked.

My daddy peeked through the cracked door. “The babies, them decent?”

Shakara closed her chopstick legs when Momma gave her a light slap on the thigh. “Yeah baby, they decent.”

Daddy pushed the door open, leaned against the doorway and fastened his tie. His kinky hair shaped into a box had replaced his Jheri Curl. Momma would always tell me how butterflies fluttered in her stomach at the sight of him. “That’s how you know Tufa, that the man you with is the missing part of yourself.” Even after nine years of marriage, Momma said Daddy could release wild butterflies in her that flew where they pleased, that made her want to do anything for him. Those butterflies had been what led her to the sugarcane work camp every weekend to see him. Those butterflies had been what made her swallow her excuses and take him to see the prostitute that delivered me so she could cure his snakebite. Those butterflies had been what made her agree to sneak him off from the work camp. And those same butterflies had made her handle clippers and cut ferns under the sun right alongside him. Momma was a soldier, I’d give her that. But I still didn’t get it. What in the world did Daddy do to give her all those butterflies?

She looked at Daddy through puffy eyes and sent a silent prayer above. It was probably the prayer she always had after she told me about the butterflies. “Thank you, Father God. After all these years the butterflies ain’t moths yet, fluttering aimlessly in the dark.”

“Mermaid, close the fridge.”

I peeked over the refrigerator door at my daddy and shook my head.

Without looking up from his tie, he smiled. “Mi know someting troubling you.”

“Vincent, you always talk in riddles to that chile.” Momma lifted Shakara’s head from her lap and walked toward me. “Please don’t. For once.”

“How you know?” Shakara asked as she straightened her black skirt suit.

“I’m her faddah,” he answered.

“Don’t,” Momma repeated.

“Baby, they no tink about you right now.” Daddy winked at me. “No worries.”

Before Momma could reach for me, I bolted. I did not care that I only wore panties and stockings. I could care less my coffee bean colored birthmark on my back could be seen by anyone who cared to look. It was that mark Momma woke me up at night just to see because she thought it was a cross but never touched because she remembered the prostitute had once called it an ankh. Only Daddy—who saw my birthmark as neither of those things, but instead the outline of a mermaid with outstretched arms—dared to touch it. That’s why I snaked my arms cobra style around his waist, and allowed his to crisscross my back.

“You sure?” I held my breath, waiting.

He planted a kiss on my plaits; the clear plastic beads tapped his cheek. “As sure as mi know I’m missing a finger,” he said wiggling his fingers playfully in my face, reminding me of the empty space where his left index finger should have been.

* * *

I hopped out of the brown Oldsmobile and trailed behind my daddy. The summer heat chased East Tampa residents on 68th Cutoff Street out of their houses and onto porches. Oak trees stood over the shoulder-to-shoulder homes, shading everybody from the sun. Speeding cars, with thunderous music blasting out open windows, slowed to a crawl, and drivers chattered with

folks on the porches. Young men with what Momma called, “Jail hanging pants and white T’s to their knees” pounded fists and exchanged a “Wassup, my nigga?” as they passed a group of old men playing dominoes and talking politics in front of the corner store. Old women on porches did their daily glaring and gossiping about the young women clad in jeans—fitting their apple bottoms and thick thighs like gloves—that squeezed their way through my family crossing the street to the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Unlike the space between Granddaddy Juno’s front teeth, the parted glass doors to the AME Church next to the Silas Funeral Home were not inviting. Hot air filled my lungs as black bodies dressed in black pushed me into the foyer. I became lost among legs dressed in stockings and pants. Aunts and grandaunts with fans and big hats instantly swallowed up Momma. The family men serving as pallbearers beckoned to Daddy, and he sliced through the thick crowd, leaving me alone.

My stupid cousin Jamal was the same age as me. I caught him staring at me from across the foyer. He tried not to smile outright when he decided to come over to where I stood. Scratching the dandruff out his cornrows, he said. “You know what, Burnt Black? I feel like going easy on you today.”

Yeah right. Jamal had this annual ritual of teasing me during family reunions, and I knew not even Granddaddy dying would make him stop.

“One...Two...Three...There I took it easy,” he said. “Now back to business.”

I can’t stand Jamal. I gritted my teeth as I listened to him try to explain why he couldn’t stop making fun of me. To his understanding, the reunion never really ended when Granddaddy Juno fell into the pool. It simply reinvented itself. Inspired by the newness of it all, he felt

creative and decided to create a new ritual. Funeral teasing. How dumb and sick is that? But he outdid himself with being even more stupid when he said, “It really is fate, Tufa. The two rituals come together on this very special day. It’s a new day.” A *reuneral* day he called it. Idiot.

“You know we only see each other for reunions, weddings and funerals, even though we live like a block away from each other.”

I rolled my eyes when he puffed out his chest.

“So you see? It’s my sponibility to pick on your behind twice as hard.”

“You came up with that all by yourself?”

He scowled at me. “You dang skippy I did. It’s my duty to remind you how black you is, how ugly you is, and how crazy you is. Everybody says it behind your back, but I says it to your face, ole’ black, ugly, crazy self.”

I clench my fists. “No I ain’t neither!”

“Yes you is! You probably gone cry when we go to the cemetery ‘cause nobody gone let you jump in the grave.”

I kicked him, I had to. “Now who crying, big forehead?”

It was so on. He yanked one of my plaits, and beads and bits of foil fell on the floor.

“Jamal, now you stop that,” commanded Great Aunt Frieda with her fat hands and big feet self. “I don’t feel like beaten no churren right now, but I will. Hear me?”

He nodded and watched her leave the emptying foyer before he clamped his clammy fingers on another one of my plaits. As the second set of plastic beads thudded on the ground, Shakara yanked his jacket.

“You always trying to mess up somebody hair like you wants it or something,” she said.

Jamal let my hair go and cut his eyes at Shakara. “You think ‘cause Aunt Frieda just gave you good hair a couple of days ago I can’t mess it up?”

Shakara rubbed her hands in her head until the ends of her hair stood up. “Good hair? That’s what you call this?” she asked as her hair tumbled past her shoulders. “You can have it ‘cause if I had some scissors, I’d cut it off and give it to you!”

He shouted “Pencil Legs!” but pretended to whistle when Great Aunt Frieda returned to the foyer with a you-gone-get-it look in her eyes.

Grabbing me by the hand, Shakara whispered, “Let’s get in line to go see the body.”

I snatched my hand away. “I don’t want to see. You go.”

“Don’t tell me you scared of Granddaddy Juno.”

“I ain’t, I just don’t want to.” I refused to tell her that Jamal might be right. That if I saw that smile—that same encouraging smile—I might do something crazy.

Shakara shrugged and turned away. “All right, I guess you just a baby then.”

Baby? I could not remember anyone—aside from Daddy—calling me baby. My family called me Tufa, That Chile, or Old Eyes. My eyes seemed to be something that fascinated the old folks in the family. Momma said they were the first thing they noticed when she allowed them to hold me in their arms eight family reunions ago. My eyes matched my skin, and everybody said they were larger than usual, as if I had seen too much for them to remain the normal size. Most of my cousins were jealous because they had no special nickname of their own. They took mine and gave it back only when they were in a scornful mood. I never liked the nickname Old Eyes, so when they took it from me, I could care less. Baby, on the other hand, I liked, and I hated the way Shakara was using it.

“You. Can’t. Call. Me. That.”

Shakara smiled. “Well, if you ain’t one, let’s go and see the body.” She held out her hand and closed it only after I finally offered mine.

I walked twice as fast down the corridor to keep up with Shakara’s long strides. Flickering lights lit up a mural on the wall, Jesus with woolly hair and midnight skin surrounded by his disciples eating the Last Supper. At the end of the mural was the tail of a painted snake. We turned the corner and ran alongside the snake’s body, stopping where the serpent reared up his head over the ladies’ bathroom. Protruding from his mouth were the tails of two smaller snakes, and grabbing his throat was the hand of Moses. I looked at the two tails and was surprised by the sudden sadness I felt. I tore my eyes away from the snakes being eaten. But before I could follow the arm that connected to Moses’ hand, Shakara froze.

Shakara put a finger to her lips. Rib breaking sobs came from the bathroom and into the corridor. I knew it was Momma crying. Another voice hushed her sobs. Aunt Zinga. We knew if we were caught, we would probably get switched and have welts for days. But we did it anyway. We pushed the bathroom door open and eavesdropped.

“I don’t care what Silas with that gold digging funeral home say,” said Aunt Zinga. “It ain’t right for Daddy to be smiling like that.” She applied plum lipstick over her dark lips. Even though she was thirty-five, her hair was snow white, had been that way since I could remember. Her thick hair was in Bantu knots with hexagonal shaped parts. When her hair did not frame her face, everybody could see the hooked keloid that began at the right corner of her full lips and curved up to the bottom of her high cheek.

I frowned when I stared at Aunt Zinga's incomplete smile. It really was a shame she was forced to wear it at Granddaddy's funeral.

Momma wiped her eyes. "I just can't get it out of my mind, Zinga. His cracked skull made the sound watermelon do when it drops on concrete."

"Hmm mm." Zinga leaned against the sink and crossed her arms.

"And my baby..." She covered her mouth as a new wave of tears, along with mascara, streaked a black trail down her cheeks.

"Shush. You don't got to tell me nothing. I was there."

"But I gots to tell somebody, how not normal the whole thing was."

There she goes again, I thought.

Zinga arched her smoky eyebrows. "How you, or anybody in this family for that matter, know what she did wasn't normal? Marrying that island boy was probably the only abnormal thing you ever done."

Momma smiled. "Shut up, Z."

"Hmm mm and just look at you. I ain't even said his name and you grinning." When Momma's smile broadened, Aunt Zinga shook her head. "See? Abnormal."

"Look who's talking. Traveling all over the place, wearing God knows what."

"It's genuine Akan kente cloth, Rica, and it ain't like that fake mess Daddy got."

"Chile please, and now you moving again? To New Orleans? Now who's abnormal?"

"But abnormal is the best thing there is," said Zinga nonchalantly. "And I ain't the one that got the problem with it. You do."

Momma's smile faded so fast I wondered if it was even there at all. "But why would she just jump in like that? Splashing his blood everywhere and laughing about it. Why would she do something like that?"

Aunt Zinga toyed with the miniature gold mask that hung from her neck. "That chile didn't know no better. She never watched nobody die before," she paused, "like you and me."

Momma wiped the twin trails of black from her face and let out a shuddering breath. "I'd accept what you'd say but your baby, nor Jamal saw death. Some of the older boys seen plenty of death, but none of the younger ones. Why didn't they jump in like she did?"

Why did she always have to do that? Compare me to everybody else?

Not answering at first, Aunt Zinga disappeared in a stall and returned with a few squares of toilet paper.

"Thanks." Momma dabbed at her eyes.

"Look, Rica, it's that mark on your baby's back you obsessed with. When it comes to Tufa, it always made you blind to reason."

Momma blew her nose. "It cured my blindness, Z."

Zinga smirked and cocked her head to the side. "You really believe that a whore—"

"She did do it Z, she did it."

Zinga sighed. "Tufa just ain't know Daddy Juno was gone. That's all. He fell in that water so fast it took everybody a minute to realize what had happened. Why can't you just accept that?"

Momma wiped at the white flakes of toilet paper on her honey skin. “Because a two dollar ho done cursed my baby, Zinga. I knows that with every fiber of my being. That’s why when Daddy died, I wasn’t surprised when I seen it.”

“Seen what little sister?”

I held my breath and watched her. She leaned on the counter and stared at the mirror. “How happy she was.”

I was done. I couldn’t hear another word. I followed the arm that connected to the hand of Moses. I could deal with the whole family thinking I was crazy. But Momma? My own Momma, thought I was worse than crazy, she thought I was cursed.

Shakara dashed after me, but I refused to slow down.

“Tufa! Tufa wait!”

But I did not wait. I kept on running until I saw the family lining up for the processional. I did not want to think about what Momma said. I wanted to blot it out my mind forever just like how the black velvet swallowed up the white sheets. I was so deep in thought on how to erase what she said, that I did not even realize I was crying until my daddy asked me what was wrong.

“I hate funerals.”

He pulled me in line next to him. “Mi don’t like them either. Never did. Wouldn’t come to my own if mi had the choice.”

The family lineup stretched down the hallway, through a side door, and onto 68th Cutoff Street. My tears dried up when I noticed how the black folks sitting on their porches looked at the straightness of our line and the blackness of our clothes. The young men, on their way to the community center, had stopped fist pounding. The old men stopped talking politics to distract

each other from the domino game. The young women, the old ones told to go run errands, slowed their twitching hips. The old women, no longer shouting at the young ones to do as they were told, silenced their gossiping. They watched us like we were the only big family that could come together. I tried not to smile. If only they knew how not together we really were.

Gripping my daddy's hand like a lifeline, I entered the auditorium. Friends and members of the church jumped up off the pews when we came in, like we were the ones they came to pay respects to. The choir in their royal blue robes sang *Soon and Very Soon*, their booming voices bouncing off the ceiling. I wiped my dripping nose on my daddy's sleeve as we passed them. Some looked serious, some nodded at me or gave me a smile. I turned away. I didn't know any of them.

Inch by inch we made our way to the front of the church. When we neared the open coffin, I gripped my daddy's hand even tighter. He squeezed mine in return.

"Oh lord! My brother gone! Don't tell me this the countdown, Juno!" wailed Great Aunt Frieda, her fat hands slapping against the coffin.

One of my older cousins grabbed her by the hand and pulled her close. Her fat behind face rested on his shoulder as he escorted her to one of the empty pews.

Jamal and Shakara peered into the coffin at the same time, and both came up crying. Then there was Momma. I tried to stay mad at her for what she said, but the way she shook her head and backtracked from the coffin made my eyes feel prickly. Out of all Granddaddy Juno's children, Momma was the closest to him. She was carrying on, walking back and forth, before she even saw the body. But Aunt Zinga fixed that, and urged Momma to stand in front of the coffin and peer into it.

That did it. I choked out, “Momma stop,” when she tore at the flowers on top of the casket. I kept saying it over and over, even when Aunt Zinga and Daddy grabbed her arms. She fell to her knees but the choir sung louder, drowning out her cries. They picked her up, and before they sat her down on the front pew, she looked at me. She gave me a look like she wanted to hug me, but couldn’t. Like she wanted to love me, but couldn’t. That look made me so happy that I wanted to do cartwheels right there in my dress. Even though she couldn’t, she wanted to. That was enough for me.

When Daddy returned to my side and gave my arm a soft tug, I shut my eyes. I was not going to do like Momma and Great Aunt Frieda. I would go up to the coffin, pretend to look, but not look. Simple as that. However, when I stood in front of the casket, I couldn’t help it. I opened my eyes.

His large hands threaded each other; a simple gold ring shone on his left finger. Makeup stained the left sleeve of his black jacket. I covered my nose. He smelled funny. Jamal had told me morticians were vampires. They drained the blood of dead people and injected them with their unnatural blood—that way the dead wouldn’t look like road kill when we saw them. Even though dead people that went to the mortician would not look like road kill for a long time, they still smelled funny. I know if Granddaddy knew how stank he was smelling, he would have wanted to just be put in the ground that same day. I toyed with the Kente cloth draped around his wrinkled neck. It said made in China. It was colorful, but a fake just like Granddaddy’s new blood.

Then there was his face. It was black as coal. His eyelids had been sewn shut, the thread hidden by his curled lashes. His nose spread like clay across his face. His bushy moustache

traveled around his full lips to meet his beard. Before Daddy could pull me away, I looked at Granddaddy Juno's mouth.

Although his lips had been glued shut, his smile was still in place. The choir stopped singing when I leaned into the coffin to study his smile up close. It seemed different somehow, like he wanted to say something but couldn't. Nobody else saw the difference, but I did. Granddaddy had a secret that we would probably never find out.

As I closed my eyes and contemplated what that secret could be, somebody touched my cheek. I smiled and opened my eyes, fully expecting it to be my daddy's hand. It was not. As quickly as the phantom hand felt my cheek, it vanished, and along with it, my smile.

Nana Day and Night

I am Yawa, The One with eyes that are forgiving and legs that are clean. My ankles are skinny, so I am lucky. They have not been rubbed raw. The corners of my eyes are filled with crust. When I blink, it scrapes the whites of my eyes. So I try not to blink, for fear of crying blood. There is a row of bodies above me. Some are still, some never keep still. Above them, light peeps through the door. None pays attention to the peeping light, accept for one—a woman. She cries in the darkness and laughs at the first glimpse of shy sun. Her laugh is a strange one, like the low grunts Nana Day and Night used to make every time she pouounded flour.

Nana Day and Night is her name, but to me she is just Nana. She comes to me when I sleep, when I wake. The night the women were at the river bathing, Nana scooped up the water in her large hands and sniffed it. The dirt squishing beneath our feet made the water black, thick. A young woman, bragging how she did not flinch as a boy stuck two fingers inside her, was

shushed by a woman nearly as old as Nana. The girl fixed her mouth to speak, but when she took in the old woman's sagging breasts with large nipples, she remained silent.

Silence came over all of us as the old woman stood beside Nana. Fish darted between my thighs, around my stomach, against my flat chest. I covered my mouth to keep from laughing, but the laughter escaped between my fingers when Nana dipped her pink tongue into her cupped hands and lapped like a full dog that was forced to drink water. I could not help it. I laughed and laughed, my small chest grew and shrunk. The water rippled around me, drifting to where Nana lapped like a dog that had already had its fill of water.

A woman beside me pinched my arm with a twist. Surprised, I bit the inside of my cheek. The woman, old enough to be Mami to me, told me Nana lapping the water was serious business, and I should not laugh.

"What is serious about lapping like a dog?" I asked her.

She crossed her arms over her melon-ripened breasts and refused to answer.

Nana Day and Night

With skin so black

And hair so white

Drinks, drinks she does

To see if the river

Is bleeding blood

They try to tell me but I do not listen. Who they are I do not know, but their warning did not keep me from laughing.

Nana let the water drip from her fingers. Her wide face turned to us. What I thought was water on her fat cheeks then, I now know to be tears.

“Blood is in the water. Many people have died,” she told us. “Soon there will be bodies drifting downriver. The river will add to its number along the way.”

Women cried around me, much as they do now. I try, but I cannot cry as they do. I envy their tears. It would wash away the crust from my eyes. The women in the river knew something that I did not know then. For if I knew, I would not have laughed. The woman above me laughs because she does not know about the blood in the water. She laughs because she still has hope. But there is no hope.

CHAPTER TWO: FIRE

I knew everyone considered me abnormal because I did abnormal things. Jumping in the pool with Granddaddy Juno was just the beginning. At twelve, I started to go to the neighborhood lake by myself after school. Most kids played in the kickball field near the lake. But me? I wanted to play with them but they thought I was crazier than crazy. Most of them didn't want me around for two reasons—one I loved to read and two I loved to collect the shed skins of snakes.

I started collecting snake skins about a year ago. I didn't intend to collect them; I sort of just stumbled onto one. I found my first skin next to a gutted log near the lake. It was inside out just like all the other skins I found after it. It felt like the skin I picked off the bottom of my feet and it had this off-white color when it was inside out that stood out like Jamal's high yellow Momma, Aunt Gertrude, at a family gathering. But when I turned it on the right side I could see the patterns and shiny black color of the snake it belonged to. I could run my fingers across the ridges and grooves made from its former scales and unblinking eyes. Its shed skin fascinated me more than anything I came across. Even though the live snake wriggled around God knows where, it no longer needed its shed skin. But I needed it. Bad too. With Shakara in New Orleans, collecting snake skins made me feel like I was not alone.

I kept all of the shed skins in a secret place around the lake. I stored them in the hollow of a giant oak tree that started to lean over after Hurricane Andrew. The hollow was high up in the tree, at least twenty feet. So I climb the tree barefoot. After a few months of skin collecting, my hands became calloused and my feet had crisscross scratches over them. Even though my parents never blamed me, I know my calloused hands and scratched up feet was the reason they

started arguing. A lot. I never told Momma how my hands and feet came to be all jacked up, but she wanted me to stop whatever I was doing.

“Why the baby need to stop Rica? She probably just playing kickball with the other kids. Leave her lone.” The three of us were in the living room talking in the dark. My folks had missed paying their electric bill again and the city turned off our lights with the quickness. I had gotten used to doing my homework and reading by flashlight. It wasn’t so bad. When the batteries ran out, there was always the moonlight spilling through the window. I had also gotten used to the fact that when things turned off, my momma would point out everything that could ever go wrong in the world. The topic she usually started with was me.

“If anything happen to her, what you gone do, Vincent. Huh? You got the money to foot the medical bill if she get hurt doing God knows what?”

“Me told you mi have ways of making tings happen, Rica. You just got to trust me. The baby will be fine.”

I’ll admit I felt really, really bad that I let my daddy believe that was what I was doing. Playing kickball with other kids my age. Like we were all buddy buddy? Riiiiiiight.

My momma snorted. “What ‘tings,’ Vincent? I told you when we moved to Tampa the stuff that went on at that Belle Glade work camp was to stay at that work camp. I don’t want you gambling. It ain’t righteous behavior and it certainly ain’t something I want my child growing up seeing.”

I shone my flashlight in the corner of the living room. My momma sat on the couch with her arms crossed and legs shaking. She looked madder than mad. She glared at nothing in particular; however, when the flashlight beam aimed at her eyes, she squinted.

“That chile gone blind me yet. Tufa baby, just promise Momma you gone start behaving like a normal girl should.”

I should have stopped collecting skins right then. Maybe Momma would have started to do what she wanted to do but couldn't. Maybe if she never found out what I was really doing, Momma would have no longer been scared to love me.

“I promise, Momma.” God why did I become so good at lying?

* * *

Over the course of a few months, I collected nearly twenty snake skins. When I reached twenty, there was a little pep in my step. I found myself smiling for no apparent reason at all. My folks noticed. Momma was happy because she thought I had puppy love. Daddy was pissed off because she told him she thought I had a puppy love. They argued about that too. I probably should have felt guilt having them believe a boy was the reason for my happiness, but I didn't. Not yet.

Now I'll admit there was this one boy that I did like. Sort of. Kind of. Octavius Jenkins. He was the seventh grade cutie. All the girls thought so. But then he did the unthinkable—he became best buds with my aggravating behind cousin, Jamal. I figured they were just alike and kept my distance. Besides cliquing with stupid Jamal, he loved to play basketball. Another strike against the puppy love my folks thought existed.

Octavius was the tallest guy in seventh grade and he was already the star player for the Hillsborough county basketball league. All the girls raved about how he was going to be the new “it” boy when he started playing basketball in high school. Momma always told me to not get involved with athletes because they were whorish, so even if I did like Octavius, it wasn't like I

could bring him home to Momma or Daddy. But if they wanted to keep believing it was a boy instead of snake skins that kept a smile on my face, I'd let them think that.

* * *

The hollow in the leaning oak tree seemed like the perfect place to keep the snake skins secret. That's until my skins, the skins I spent hours after school searching for, started to disappear. Someone discovered my hiding place. Instead of finding my snake skins one day, I found this stupid behind note:

To: Afua

From: E

STOP COLLECTING DEAD THINGS!

No signature, no explanation, no clue at all to tell me who wrote the note. Correction. The note was from E. I didn't know anyone with a name that started with that letter, so "From: E" told me nada. And what was up with all the capital letters and the exclamation mark? Whoever it was seemed really upset about something that was none of their business.

I shredded the note and kept the shredded pieces in the hollow tree where I found it. I needed to show whoever left that note for me how I felt about it. In a few months I would become a teenager, so they needed to recognize that I did what I wanted to do how I wanted to do it. Okaaaay. So I brushed off the note's warning as no biggie. I mean after all, it was not like they knew me or I knew them. Last time I checked my name was Tufa.

* * *

Momma always told me a hard head made a soft behind and my head was as hard as a walnut. One day after school, I came across the king of all snake skins. It was as wide as my

calf—which was not pencil-skinny like Shakara’s. It stretched out almost five feet in length. I had to have it. When I saw that skin, I threw what Momma said and what that note said out the window with the quickness. At that moment, all I could think about was adding the biggest snake skin I ever found to my collection.

The inside of the skin was still slick. Thank god. It was still fresh so I would not have to break it up to fit it into the hollow. The only downside was that a fresh skin meant two things—the snake that shed it was probably starving and could be lurking nearby. Cool by me. I would take my chances.

When I visited the lake, I always came prepared. I kept a stash of plastic grocery bags in my book bag, that way my hands were free to climb. I sat my book bag on the ground and took out a Winn Dixie bag. I rolled the shed skin up and stuck it inside the grocery bag. I normally zipped my book bag back up, but I was so excited about the skin I discovered, I left it gaping open on the ground. I kicked off my flip flops and grabbed the lowest branch of the tree. I hauled myself up and grabbed another branch that was thicker than the first. This was by far my favorite branch, because it was the perfect spot for me to read. The branch’s bark had been chipped away and carved out. It looked like someone—maybe even Mother Nature herself—went through the extra trouble to create a seat in the tree branch just for me.

It took a few minutes for me to reach the hollow. When I did, I slid the snake skin out of the plastic bag that hung from my wrist. Before I could stick the shed skin into the hollow, the first live snake I had ever seen stuck its head out of my secret hiding place. Something told me that this was the snake whose skin I found. Did it know that in my hands was the shell of its older self? Would it care that it now had to face what it left behind, what it probably—up until

that very moment—forgot or could probably care less about? My eyes took in his shiny black scales. It had brown diamonds around its eyes and down the center of its back. Was it a moccasin? Cobra? Poisonous? I never really cared about what type of snakes shed the skins I collected. But when its forked tongue slithered and nearly touched my chin, I wished I had. I looked down. I'd be crazy to jump. I was too far up. I would not make it to the ground without breaking my wrist, my leg, or my neck. The snake turned its head to the side and studied me with one of its unblinking eyes. It hissed, like the boys at school did when they wanted to holler. My heart beat faster when it opened its mouth and eyed my neck.

I knew it would bite the crap out of me if I didn't jump. It reared up its head and opened its mouth wider. God I hoped what dripped from its fangs was just spit and not venom. Did snakes even spit? I wasn't sure. I never found out—nor did I want to—because I jumped out the tree before it could sink its fangs into my neck.

I'm gonna die, I kept shouting in my mind. I closed my eyes. The wind from my fall chafed my lips. My stomach did somersaults. But then I stopped falling. The wind acted strange, like it was not created from the momentum of my fall but like it was there to slow my fall. I floated in midair for a couple of seconds, barefoot and the snake skin still in my hand. I thought the wind would carry me safely to the ground, but instead it let me drop the last few feet. It blew up the fallen leaves around me and some dirt flew into my eyes. If I didn't know any better, I'd say the wind seemed pissed. As quickly as it appeared, the freaky wind vanished. I stuffed the snake skin into my plastic bag, grabbed my unzipped book bag off the ground and ran. That was the last snake skin I collected. I never searched the hollow again, not because of the snake that

set up house there. But because of the strange wind that somehow saved me from breaking every bone in my body.

* * *

When I ran up to my folks' house, Ole' Smokey was parked in the driveway. Jamal was the bright one that named my parents' car Ole' Smokey. Thank god I rode the bus home so nobody at school could see it. Nobody ever saw Ole' Smokey's missing front hubcaps. Nobody ever saw the brown paint that had been chipped away from the hood until all anybody could see was copper-colored rust. Nobody ever saw that my momma had to roll down the window and used a wire hanger to unlock the door from the outside. Nobody ever saw me have to "untie" my seatbelt because one day the buckle jammed and my daddy had to cut me out. Nobody ever saw a thing. Of course if they ever got too close to me they would, but Shakara was not only the one cousin who talked to me. She was also my best friend. Correction, my only friend. But when she and Aunt Zinga moved to New Orleans, there was just Jamal.

Whenever Jamal cracked on Ole' Smokey during school, I pretended like it didn't bother me. So what if it left a trail of smoke nearly a mile long; his big mouth didn't have to go blabbing about it.

"Ole' Smokey is the ugliest, loudest, and stankest car there is," he said during lunch one day. He always made sure he had a crowd when he cracked on me.

"Y'all, my Uncle V still ain't got that ride fixed yet. Shoot, with Tufa big legs and crusty feet, she just like my Great Aunt Frieda. She can walk to wherever she needs to go." Everybody in the cafeteria laughed. I got up from the table I always sat at by myself and took my lunch tray out into the hallway.

I came to accept Ole' Smokey being around, but I froze when I saw it parked in the driveway. My parents carpooled with each other in the mornings to work, which was about a forty-five minute drive away. But one of them was home. Right now. That never happened. I normally stayed home by myself or was forced to go over to Jamal's house when either of my parents had to work overtime. But seeing Ole' Smokey at this time of day told me something wasn't quite right.

The house was dark inside. I searched for the light switch on the wall. I flicked it up. Darkness. I flicked it down. Still darkness. I flicked it up and down repeatedly, but no light chased out the dark.

A lighter ignited in the corner of the living room. My daddy rocked in his lazy boy and in his lap was the secret box—the secret box he told me never to open. Whenever things were bad enough, he would take his secret box and disappear. When he returned, the bad things became better. “They turned the lights off again. But tonight me gwan fix everything.”

I nodded even though he probably couldn't see me. “That's great, Daddy. I'm uh going to go in my room and finish my homework.”

He stood up and sat his secret box in his lazy boy. He made his way over to me and put the lighter in my face.

“Turn around.”

I stood there like an idiot. “Sir?”

He twirled his finger in the air. Was this some sort of joke? I stared at him. There was no smile on his face, but something else was there. I don't know if it was fear or anger, but something in my gut told me turning around would be in my best interest.

He pocketed his lighter. When my daddy stuck his hand inside my book bag, I could have just died. I tried to pull away, but his hand—with its missing finger—grabbed my arm.

“Daddy stop.” I didn’t whine. Now was not the time for that. I actually told him to stop matter-of-factly. My voice surprised me, I almost sounded like he and Momma when they told me to do my chores. I think my tone surprised him too because he stopped searching.

“What are you hiding from me, mermaid?” He almost sounded desperate, like if he didn’t find out I would die for real.

I couldn’t see his face so it was easier to talk, easier to be bold, easier to say things I would never say. Darkness had that effect on people. “Daddy, that’s none of your business.”

He grabbed my arm again, harder this time. His hand plunged into my book bag, the force made the straps press into my shoulders. I screamed then and begged him to stop. He let me go and paced around the living room.

“You must tell me. Mi know you are carrying someting deadly. Don’t know for how long and where this ting come from, but mi know you carry it.”

How did he know? Did Daddy leave the note? Was it him all along, and he just wrote “From: E” to throw me off? But it couldn’t be him, because he’d know what was in the bag. How did he know?

“Fine, I’ll show you if you tell me how you make the lights come back on.”

He said nothing. The living room was so quiet I called out to him to see if he was still there.

“Alright, mi show you.” I could hear him grabbing the box. Moonlight spilled into the house when he opened the front door. “Mi show you, and then you show me what you carry.”

* * *

Ole' Smokey coughed up a cloud of brown smoke when Daddy pulled up to the corner store on 68th Cutoff Street. Men playing dice against the side wall called to him, but he ignored them.

“You and that box V,” one of them said just before we entered the corner store. “You always walk in here with it and walk out with your pockets full. Bruh, lemme in on your secret.”

My daddy gave me a push into the store before I could hear anything else. The corner store had all the basics—candy, travel stuff, drinks, junk food. But my dad passed all of that to go into the back room. A woman from the islands owned the store. She sold dinners out of the back—ackee and saltfish, Jamaican meat patties, curry goat and red beans and rice, Haitian griot, curry chicken with fried plantain.

“Moora,” Daddy said. Some of the people in line turned their heads to stare at us. Eventually, they went back to doing what they were doing—AKA minding their own beeswax.

A man and a little boy came out the back room. Both had curry goat in their to-go plates. Somebody could throw down, that's for sure. I could tell because the aroma that hit my nose nearly knocked me backwards. Moora, a fat woman with a fake pony tail and dramatically drawn on eyebrows, appeared out the backroom. She looked like she could throw down, too. Maybe she'd hook us up.

“They turned your lights back off, V?” Her eyebrows rose high on her forehead when she saw me. “You brought the baby with you, I see.”

Baby? Uh, not.

We followed her to the front. Her daughter rang up the last person in line and she shoed her away when we approached.

“Show me what you got, mon. Mi sure hope it’s enough to get them back on.”

My daddy slipped her a lottery ticket of the numbers he played. He made sure to turn the box away from me so I couldn’t see anything else.

“Hold up. Momma was right?” I sucked my teeth when he didn’t answer. Daddy tried to give Moora the lottery ticket on the sly like I wouldn’t see it. There was not anything he could tell me at this point. I had seen what he did with my own eyes. Bummer.

“One hundred and fifty.” Moora opened up her register and handed my daddy the money. He pocketed it without saying a word. “Not bad. How much was your bill?”

He was already turning me around. “Enough. But this should cover it.”

We passed the candy aisle and a row full of feminine products before we made it back outside. The men who threw dice were gone, and in their place an old group of men had sat up a table and chairs to play dominoes. They were the same group of men I saw playing the day of my granddaddy’s funeral. I wondered if any of them got that old people’s disease that eats the memory out your brain. Some of them had to because they still fell for the politics talk that allowed a few of them to cheat. One of them slapped the first domino on the table. A second one connected a domino to his. Daddy opened the car for me, and I slipped inside, before the game even got started.

“Where are we going?” Daddy passed the street we lived on and drove in the opposite direction of the place he and Momma went to turn the lights back on.

“Rest Haven Memorial.”

Okaaaaay. I eyed my daddy with a is-you-stone-crazy look. I knew he hated the indoors and would probably take me somewhere out in the open to talk to me. But why in the world did he want to go to the cemetery where Granddaddy Juno—not to mention most of the dead folks in our family—was buried? He took his eyes off the road just long enough to notice the look on my face.

“You may not know but mi ride out here. A lot. It’s the proof that tings are what they are and will be if they are not already.”

Huh? I really hated when people talked in riddles. Ole’ Smokey turned onto East Hanna Avenue. Daddy drove down the slither of concrete that sliced a trail through the graves. He parked Ole’ Smokey under the shadow of a large oak. He worked with the wire hanger he pulled from under the seat to unlock his door. When he finally opened it, he walked between the graves and stopped in front of Granddaddy Juno and Grandma Cecile. I grabbed my book bag off the back seat and followed him.

Dozens of dead flowers sat on each of their graves. Christmas, anniversary, birthday, father’s and mother’s day cards from family members sat beneath rocks. I always found it weird that people stuck flowers and cards on graves. The dead couldn’t smell flowers or read cards. It seemed like doing stuff like that did something for the living. But whatever that something was I could only guess. Beside the cards that were never opened and the flowers that were never smelled sat two mason jars. Each jar was covered in dirt, their gold lids rusty. At first I wrote them off as probably some other pointless tokens of love, but then I noticed the strip of paper inside each of them. What was written on them was not hidden. It was a list of numbers. The sunlight hit something shiny on a grave a few rows away from us. The grave belonged to Cousin

Nick, Jamal's older brother, who was shot down when we were little. A mason jar sat on his grave too. I adjusted the straps on my book bag and continued to look around. Then my jaw dropped. Mason jars sat on several graves—some were on the graves of family members others were on the graves of strangers. I stared at Granddaddy Juno's jar, wondering what the numbers inside meant and who in the world would leave them on his grave.

“Tufa, what mi do is not as simple as your Momma tinks.” Daddy took a deep breath and opened his box. Before I could see anything, he pulled out a notebook and handed it to me.

“Read the first page. That should be enough.”

I opened it and my hands trembled as I read:

April 30th 7 means marriage and 34 means baby

The men at camp laugh at me because they hear me talk to a headless woman in mi dreams. Mi can't see her face but mi know she is my wife. Grandmomma would have liked her because she's the god-fearing type. Mi know grandmomma would've liked her because she holds the baby girl we'll have one day.

October 4th 8 means belly, 9 means cow, 12 means brain, 20 means sick

Back home sista say Itsy will have trouble birthing the calf. Mi must call momma to tell her to not help Itsy. In mi dreams the cow will buck on anyone who touches her while she give birth. Please, Faddah God, let the phone lines work back home.

May 26th 3 means death, 4 means blood, 5 means robber, 19 means coins

Mi keep dreaming the same ting. Somebody mi know will be shot soon. Mi tink it's over money. There's so much blood, mi cannot tell who it is.

June 18th 1 means duppy/ghost, 23 means black man, 24 means water

A black man will die by drowning. Mi see his face clear but in mi dreams he is already dead. There's nothing me can do but pretend to be surprised when him drown.

None of them had years, but it didn't matter. Like Daddy, I knew what each entry referred to. He took the notebook out of my hands when I turned the next page. "It's more of the same mermaid." He pulled out another notebook, which looked brand-spanking new and told me to read the single entry on the first page:

March 3rd 15 means weak, 16 means young girl, 27 means fire

Mi dreamed of mermaid last night. Mi may have been wrong about what she is doing. She plays with fire. Mi needs to know what she hides from her Momma and me. Or the fire will burn her. Soon.

I swallowed. Perhaps what I wanted to know was more than what I needed to know. The first three entries he let me read didn't convince me right off the bat. One was about Granny Hannah that almost got kicked in the head by her dairy cow Itsy. The other was about my Cousin

Nick who got shot three times because somebody mistook him for a cat that owed him thirty-five dollars. The last one was about Granddaddy Juno drowning in the hotel pool. But there was still no way for me to really know that Daddy wrote all that stuff before they died.

But everything changed when I read the entry he wrote about me.

My daddy had a gift, a gift he kept hidden from Momma and me. His dreams told him stuff which excited and irritated me at the same time. The fact that he was a prophet of some sort like the ones in the bible was tight. That part excited me and he would definitely have to teach me how he did it. But, his dreams were like a built-in eavesdropping radar, and that part got on my last nerves. There was no point in me telling him earlier that what I had in my book bag was none of his business. Shoot, with his prophetic dreams I had no business. Fabulous.

“Alright, Daddy, you got me. I climb trees after school. It’s no biggie really.”

My daddy put the notebooks back into his secret box and gave me a look. He wasn’t buying what I said for a minute. He held out his hand. “Okay then. Let me see what’s in the bag and then we’ll go.”

He must have thought I was crazy or something. I’ll admit his gift was all of that, but him telling me about his dreams was not what we agreed on. “I will just as soon as you tell me how you make the lights come back on.”

He paced around the graves, making sure not to step on any flat headstones.

“If mi tell you, you must promise never to tell your mother.”

Wait a second. Keep a secret? From Momma? Daddy had never asked me to do that before. A part of me liked it; a part of me was frightened by it. I knew my folks loved each other, but their recent arguing was so not cool, especially when most of the time they argued about me.

I pretended to turn an invisible key on my lips and slip it into my pocket. God I was just getting better and better at this lying thing.

“Back home when mi was a boy, the old folks be serious when it come to them dreams. Many interpret dreams as visions of the past or future, and sit around prophesying about what was and what will be. Others did not sit around and prophesy, but used their dreams to gamble in Drop Pan. It’s a type of lottery using the numbers one through thirty-six. Each number can have many meanings. Anybody could play a number, but the people always feared the man who played Drop Pan based on him dreams. Your Daddy is that man.”

I shook my head, trying to sort through what he was saying. “But they don’t have Drop Pan over here, Daddy. Plus you play lots of numbers, not just one at a time.”

“From the time mi was a young boy, my dreams were too complex to fit into just one number. Even though people feared me, mi was awful at Drop Pan. But because mi dreams span many numbers, playing the Florida Lotto is easy. Mi lose only when mi want to lose and win only when mi want to win.”

Clouds hid the sun. I never had a problem with hanging around graveyards at night. But I really needed to find another place to hide my snake skin before the sun went down. And here Daddy was wasting my time, beating around the bush, talking crazy. “Daddy, is you crazy? Win only when you want to? When does a person never want to win the lottery?”

“When someone’s life is at stake, that’s when. When mi use my dreams for money, my gift leaves me. The greater the money mi use my dreams for, the longer mi must wait for the gift to return. So when mi dream someting mi best be sure my dream’s clear and mi know the

outcome cannot change. When mi dream someting mi best be sure mi can afford to become blind.”

My daddy looked at me like he had wanted to tell somebody this for a long time but couldn't. He looked like all the numbers he wrote down in his notebooks and stuck inside Mason jars would also be stuck in his mind for life. He looked like a tortured man, a man that had come to accept something about himself I refused to ever do. He looked like a man who believed he was cursed.

“Don't move,” he whispered.

Now what was the problem? I didn't have to ask him what it was because within seconds I felt it. Slithering over my shoulder. And around my neck.

“Daddy?” The look on his face told me whatever snake was on me had to be poisonous. How in the world did it get in my book bag? I would have rolled my eyes and sucked my teeth if the snake's tongue did flick across my cheek. How could I be so stupid, leaving my book bag unzipped like that? Yeah, that one little slipup definitely messed me up, and would cost me big if I got bitten. Maybe if I survive this I can laugh about it. Years from now. Maybe then I wouldn't need the dark to be bold. Maybe then I could rock a customized T-shirt that read:

Hi, my name is Tufa and I no longer play with fire.

I would have laughed then, but my dad held up his four-fingered hand to distract the snake. The snake turned its attention away from licking my face, thank God. My daddy picked up a stick and pointed it toward the snake. I tried to keep my breathing calm and I looked beyond the snake, beyond my daddy toward the graves of my family. Maybe I would live through this;

please God let me live through this. I really didn't want this trip to the cemetery to be my last one. That would definitely not be a good look.

Out the corner of my eye I saw the snake circle its body around the stick. No wonder I didn't notice it inside my book bag. It was a baby. Compared to its body, its head was huge. The snake was black with red-brown crossbands. The tip of the tail was as yellow as the setting sun. If it was bigger, and not trying to bite me or my dad, its shed skin—if I ever came across it—would have been a gem among my collection.

The moment its tail curled around the tip of the stick my daddy slammed the stick into Granddaddy Juno's headstone. Before the snake could rear up its head and strike, Daddy smashed his heel into the snake's head. I felt a bit sick when I saw the splattered blood on Granddaddy Juno's grave. It brought me back to the moment he died, to the moment I started to do abnormal things.

“Give me your bag.”

I didn't argue with him this time. I handed it over to him. I burst out laughing when he found the snake skin in the Winn Dixie bag. He leaped back, his eyes wide.

“Tufa, don't tell me you've been collecting—”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, Daddy I have, but I'm going to stop. I promise.”

He flung the shed skin over my grandparents' graves. It landed up in a tree somewhere, its branches too high for me to climb. “You know I'll have to tell your momma about this.”

“Why?” I blurted.

He tickled my chin and headed back to Ole' Smokey. "To let her know she was right. Your Momma is a good ooman, we just don't see eye to eye on certain tings. But we can agree on the fact that you must stop playing with fire. You hear what mi say?"

I looked back to the tree where the shed skin had disappeared, but then the setting sun danced across a few Mason jar lids. They looked like little speckles of gold in the distance. That did it for me. The numbers 15, 16, and 27 would have gone into my jar if my daddy never intervened. From that day on I made a promise to myself—no more secrets. But as Ole' Smokey crept down East Hanna Avenue, I didn't realize how good at lying I had become. I had become so good I dang near convinced myself.

The Dead Talks

I am Faraa, The One with eyes that are forgiving and legs that are clean. Don't you remember them? How that one laughs all day and cries all night? They took her. And that little girl, no more than twelve summers old, who calls to a Nana Day and Night all night and day? They took her too. I was chained beside her, screaming. She tried to speak to me once, smiled even. But when I saw her blood red eyes and the bones in her face that stretched against skin, I screamed. Her body was too thin, breath too awful, eyes too red. I thought she was already dead. Even as she tried to talk to me, soothe me, I could not stop screaming.

Eventually she turned away from me and I did not scream as much. The specks of light above us came and went three times before she turned toward me again. She smiled. Drops of blood were on her cracked lips. I bit my tongue to keep from screaming at her. The dead was trying to talk to me. She raised her chained arms to her chest and said something in a high voice.

Her tiny hands reached for me as far as the chains would let her. I looked at the hand closest to me. Feces were under her nail, my feces. I looked away, ashamed that I messed myself and even more so because the girl pretended not to notice.

She did not try speaking to me again. Her eyes rarely blinked but when they did, her back arched, and fingers reached for her face. Never quite close enough, they scratched air. As the specks of light came and went, she did this. It was a time before I tried speaking to her. It took many tries to get her to look at me. When she did, I pointed to my chest and told her my name. She smiled, though it was a weak one. She blinked. Her back arched off wood, chains clanked as she scratched air. She bared her teeth, but did not cry. Her heels dug into the wood and sweat trickled down her ribs. A sweating tortured corpse.

I pointed to her, and then I brought my finger up to my eye. I let it slide down my cheek. She shook her head.

Why won't the girl cry?

I scooted toward her as far as the chains would let me. I reached toward her. Her bloodshot eyes looked at me, then my hands. She moved toward me. I swallowed the urge to scream as her cheek brushed my arm. I used the back of my finger, closest to her eyes, and wiped away the crust. When it was finished, she looked at me. No smile. Just looked. I hid the crust in my hands, wondering if she saw me differently without it.

And that's when the trapdoor opened and they took her.

CHAPTER THREE: SIGN

We kept it a secret. The truth about how Daddy made the lights come back on. At sixteen, I had become a pro at keeping secrets, even though I had promised myself I never would. I had so many secrets I kept, some for others, a few for me. With each year I watched my daddy dream, record those dreams in his own coded language, and wait for them to manifest into the real world. He didn't use his dreams for money often, but when he did, he took his secret box from out the linen closet and vanished. I never told Momma she had married a bonafide prophet cut from the same cloth as any biblical one. Keeping Daddy's gift hush hush was a secret I had learned to live with.

"That man would give Jesus a run for his money," Momma said. "He be gone like a thief in the night."

But he always came back, so his vanishing never bothered me. But it did bother Momma. A lot. I could understand why she was so upset. She had to find out from folks in the street that Daddy played the lottery at Moora's. He tried to explain that he was not technically "gambling" because he only bought tickets when his dreams were crystal clear. That infuriated Momma more than not knowing. She didn't believe him, still don't.

Even though I could understand why Momma was so upset, she really had nothing to be upset about. If she believed him. But she didn't. Daddy's gift was real even if she was too blinded by praising Jesus to see it. I always got sick of her saying he lied to me because he didn't want me to know he had a gambling problem. Been there, thought that. I know he would never do that. On the nights he'd go to Moora's, she'd come into my room crying, telling me how she wished my daddy could just be a-once-in-a-blue-moon type of gambler, like her Daddy, instead

of the type of man that was going to one day leave us without a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. I'd sit up in my bed and listen, not believing a word.

* * *

I waited for him in the backyard. That's where he always paced until the blindness left him. He climbed over the back gate because he didn't want to hear my momma's mouth. He paced from both ends of the yard three times before noticing me. When he saw me sitting by the tree, he smiled and pretended like nothing bothered him. He wasn't a very good liar either.

"Tell me one of your dreams, mermaid."

I did. I told him about all the dreams I saved up from that week. I dreamed on Monday of people with glowing faces and webbed fingers and feet that hid the bones of the babies they'd kill and eat. My daddy frowned and asked me to tell him another one. He always asked for another one.

On Tuesday night I flew to a place where there were no beds. Nobody there ever heard of pillows or mattresses or any of that. They never blinked so they never slept. But everybody cried all day, everyday because their eyes got that prickly feeling I got when Jamal challenged me to a stare-off. When folks died, the world cried. When lovers got married, the world cried. When a child was born, the world boohoo cried. He asked for one more. His frown was gone.

The words spilled off my tongue. Thursday night I smelled smoke in my dreams. A burnt tree sprouted in the backyard and instead of branches, hair grew from its trunk. It had hair Aunt Zinga called that righteous hair, its tight coils curled up to the sun. I actually woke up that night choking and ran into the backyard. The tree was gone, but the smoke from my dreams made me cry like the people who never slept.

“You have the gift like me, Tufa. Mi always told you that.”

I believed him. He leaned against one of the big oak trees in our backyard. “You know the gift works differently because people dream differently. Dreams tell me the future,” he said. “Yours tell you the past.”

I crossed my arms. “None of the stuff I dream about happened in the past, Dad. We both know that.”

“It’s all the past. Faddah God working through you. The people you dreamed eating the young ones, them died in that great flood. And the people never blinked because God wanted them never to forget what happened to people that do that kind of ting.”

I lay on the ground beside him and giggled. The hair lotion from my kinky twists made the blades of grass and fallen leaves stick to my hair. But I didn’t care. I always felt at peace talking to my father, especially when we were outside. He always had a way of making the strange things I thought about seem normal.

“Well, what about the burnt tree that grew hair? How’s that about the past?”

He didn’t answer right away but looked up at a robin that landed on a branch. When it saw it was being watched, it took off in a spurt of crimson.

“Remember that song by Billie Holiday, the one your Aunt Zinga loved to play when she drove her pickup in the Martin Luther King Parade?”

I nodded. Who could forget the telling off Aunt Zinga received every year when “Strange Fruit” blasted from her speakers. *The nerve of her*, most folks said as she drove by. *She done took all the fun out the parade.*

“You dreamed of a ghost tree that used to have strange fruit. When them bodies burned, the flesh would grow back into the bark and the hair would be its leaves. You can only see their true self at night, though, when the moon’s full. It’s a easy ting to know when a person dreams ‘bout the past.”

“You think this one we sitting under right now is a ghost tree?”

He shrugged.

“That’s probably why Aunt Zinga hangs blue bottles in trees, huh?”

My father laughed, making the robin that had settled back on the tree branch dart off again. “Now that’s something you must ask her. Lawd knows why Zinga do the tings she do.”

We sat there for a moment, until he turned to me. His frown returned.

“Your Momma still upset?”

I nodded. “She thank you spending to much time at Moora’s. She think your dreams ain’t got nothing to do with nothing.” I never wasted my time trying to tell Momma the truth. Daddy already tried and she wouldn’t believe him. His gift was the secret we all knew but nobody talked about. But still there were a few secrets of my own that even Daddy couldn’t know about.

* * *

My father taught me to interpret dreams by quizzing me on drop pan numerology. He quizzed me so much I would wake up with a stream of numbers running through my head. It bothered Momma. Sometimes when she’d come into my room, first thing in the morning, I’d say “12, 23, 35, 8, 16. That’s the craziest dream, ain’t it, Momma?” She’d leave without saying a word; a few minutes later I would hear her and my dad get into it. They always got into it whenever she tried talking to me first thing in the morning.

Since I turned sixteen, I stopped telling her about my dreams. She didn't understand and didn't want to understand. Talking about dreams was something I could only do with my father, even though there were a few I couldn't even talk to him about.

My naked mattress was warm tonight. Momma gave up trying to get me to sleep on the linen she bought and settled with buying me lots of sweatshirts and those socks that fit each individual toe like a glove. I wore the sweatshirts but settled for my regular socks, worn at the heels. I curled in a ball and lay on my side. It wasn't long before I fell asleep. Whispering I couldn't understand tickled my ears. Everything in front of me seemed to move. Slow. The image of a woman slipping on a floor stopped in front of me. I moaned in my sleep when a boot kicked her in the back of her head. Everything moved again, the vision in my dream narrowed until all I could see was bloody water. I swatted my pillow when the whispering in my ears grew to shouts. The bloody water seemed so far away. I talked in my sleep when Granddaddy Juno's smiling face emerged from the water. His eyes wide, unblinking. I called to him in the dark room, his face sinking beneath the water. I couldn't breathe when a hand reached out the water. A rusty shackle circled the wrist and in the hand was the shredded note I found written "From: E." I kicked in my sleep, wanting to reach for the hand. The nails were dirty, the palm calloused, the fingers large. Man hands. My headboard banged against the wall as I kicked and kicked. With every kick I got closer to the water. Before I could get close enough, something rolled me on my back, snapping my arms and legs to my sides. I saw light before I open my eyes and saw darkness.

Even though the dream was over, I still couldn't move. My gown was soaked beneath the pits. The hand was still reaching for me. I could hear it. Water splashing. Chains, shackled to his

wrist, clanking. *His* wrist. I couldn't move. I tried to turn my head from side to side. I couldn't. I tried to open my mouth to scream out. I couldn't. I tried to wiggle my fingers to grab something. I couldn't. The only thing I could move was my eyes. But it was too dark to see a thing.

* * *

The sun was going to rise any moment, but I knew my father was already up. He always checked on his mango tree at dawn. He had been trying to grow a mango tree since I turned fifteen, and even though my sixteenth birthday came and gone, he was still trying. I rolled out of bed. Not brushing my teeth or showering. I'd do all of that later. I put on my favorite flip flops. There was a time when both of them had pink flowers that would tickle my toes. Only one of them still had its pink flower. How the other one went missing was the greatest secret I ever had to keep. I gave my flip flops a final look and slipped through the backdoor.

Although our yard stopped where the gate stopped, my dad was convinced our soil was useless. He didn't care that the perfect spot to grow his tree was on city property, in the woods behind our house. If that was where the good soil was, that was where his mango tree was going to be.

What happened to me last night rarely happened, but when it did, I wanted to tell my father everything. I found him just where I knew I would. The mango tree was a couple of feet away from him. It stood a little under a foot and was older than what it really looked.

It nearly died last winter. Frosted over. He tried everything. At night he'd put on his coat, boots, and knitted hat. He took Momma's sheets and blankets and covered his mango tree with them. But after the frost, the tree grew slower. I bet that dying mango tree was warmer than most people that winter.

He held his machete. I paused when I noticed he wasn't paying attention to his mango tree at all, but chopping a ring around the base of an oak tree that grew beside it.

"Why are you doing that?" I asked.

He kept chopping when he said, "This tree going to be a problem. Look at the way it lean."

The trunk was leaning. Barely. Its thick long branches gave the impression that it was leaning over more than it really was. "It's not leaning that bad."

He sucked his teeth. "My tree gone grow tall, right into this one, in a few years. Mi can't have that. It's illegal to cut it down. So mi gradually kill it this way."

I listened to the way the bark chipped away from the trunk with every swing of his machete. I wanted to tell him. God knows I did. Not just about last night, but everything. Was it normal to see and hear things when you were awake? was the question I wanted to first ask. But I didn't want him to think of me the way everybody else did. An escapee from the loony bin. Touched in the head. Stone crazy. Cursed.

I wanted to tell him everything, but he never told me that he dreamt while he was awake. I know he'd think something wasn't quite right about that. With every machete swipe, a little bit of my resolve flaked away. When a two inch band circled the entire tree, I had decided what to do. Just like the secret behind my flip flops, I'd keep my mouth shut about last night.

A faint smile tugged at my lips when I watched him tend to his mango tree. Watching him almost made me forget he could dream about the future, and I the past. Whenever he concerned himself about that little old mango tree, things kind of felt normal. I liked that feeling. I wished I could feel that way all the time.

So I kept last night, and everything else, to myself.

* * *

I had just rinsed the lather of soap off my body when my father came back inside. I stepped out of the bathtub and dabbed the water out of my kinky twists. I was determined to not think about last night. Last night's dream was just one of those dreams; I had tried to convince myself. It didn't work.

I wiped the steam off the bathroom mirror when a wasp darted through the cracked window. It slammed into the shower curtain. It swirled around me, grazing my cheek before landing on my left breast. I shrieked and hopped up and down, my breasts bouncing. The wasp hovered in my face. I slapped my hand through the air. It dropped with a small thud in the sink. I turned on the faucet. Hot steam floated up from the stream of water. The wasp's legs stuck to the surface but its free wing flapped. This wasp messed with the wrong one on the wrong day. Grabbing my rat tail comb, I used the tip of it to sever the wasp in half; its two halves swirled around the sink for another moment, its free wing twitching. I refused to take my eyes away from it until it disappeared down the drain.

I yanked off several squares of toilet paper, and stuffed the window crack, just in case anymore wasps dared to follow their little wasp friend. I looked at my cheek and breast. Nothing on my cheek, but a purplish mark was on my breast that was sore to the touch. My body shivered as the water slid down it, catching in the hairs on my legs before soaking into the bathroom rug. I touched the mark again. The wasp's sting on my breast was a sign. It had to be. Nothing normal ever happened to me. I had never gotten stung by anything. My body was a bug repellent. I never

broke a bone or got the flu. Nothing. Even my periods came and went like night and day to a prisoner in solitary confinement. I never suffered from mood swings, knife-stabbing cramps, or blood so heavy I had to wear both a pad and stuff a wad of toilet paper between the crack of my behind while I slept.

The wasp's sting was a sign—a sign that I was not as abnormal as everybody thought. That I was making too much out of last night. That the secret behind my flip flops was the only one worth keeping. I wiggled into my pants and zipped them up. The baggy jeans fit loose around my big calves and thick thighs all the women on my mother's side of the family had. I frowned when I struggled with the buttons. Granny man hands, was what Jamal called them.

“You got them Frankenstein hands. Them thangs look older than Granddaddy Juno's face and can probably grip a basketball,” he would say. He made me sick.

I tried prove to him my hands were not that big. When we played One on One at the local court, I pretended I couldn't lift up the basketball with one hand when he rolled it to me. I had beat the mess out of Jamal in that game, but I was the one who walked home crying. I knew I could grip that ball just as easily as he could. Granny man hands were what I had, whether I liked them or not.

My flat feet were just as bad. Sunday was the only day I had to squeeze my wide feet into some high heels. Often times, when I stood up, I'd put all my weight on my heels to create the illusion of an artificial arch. Jamal caught on to that and would tease me for walking like a dinosaur. Until today, I would have probably believed him. But lots of people got stung by wasps so it had to be a sign that with my flat feet, Granny man hands and all, I was normal.

I gave myself a looking over in the mirror, content that the bagginess concealed the roundness. I glanced in the mirror at my birthmark that spanned my back. Everybody and their momma had something to say about it, but I liked my father's interpretation best, and not because *A Little Mermaid* was my favorite Disney movie of all time. Mermaids had freedom because they could hide who they really were when they walked on land. They probably didn't even have to pretend to act normal when they went shopping. It took me hours to search the clearance rack for jeans that fit too.

My granny man hands fashioned my kinky twists into a high ponytail, and brushed down the baby hair around my edges. Before flicking off the bathroom light, I pulled on a blouse that clung to my small waist and allowed the wasp sting to show.

* * *

Within the past year, Momma had had a change in house decor. Each day, I would find another family photo taken off the wall and replaced with a painting of an angel. She had wanted a Heaven on Earth theme, but to me there was nothing heavenly about locking away my baby pictures while little white babies with wings stared at me from the walls. I stuck my tongue out at one of the baby angels hanging in the hallway. I tried to keep my face straight when I entered the kitchen slash dining room—the one space was both, but changed depending on who was in it.

Cold scrambled eggs and four pieces of toast smeared with apple butter sat in front of my father. I kissed him on the crown of his head, his fade fuzzy beneath my lips. I stuck a bowl of instant oatmeal into the microwave and sat across from him.

He was reading *The Florida Sentinel Bulletin*, the only black newspaper in Tampa. “What’s going on today?” he asked, not looking up.

“I don’t know. This summer I’m playing everything by ear.”

He nodded and flipped the page.

The microwave beeped. I grabbed the bowl, stuck a wad of margarine into it and a spoonful of cane sugar. He was brooding over the obituary section when I sat back down.

“Dad, for the past week you have been so predictable. Dawn: Tend to your tree. Morning: Eat breakfast and look at obituaries. Afternoon: Work. Evening: Look at your notebooks.” I stuffed a spoonful of oatmeal in my mouth. “Found him yet?”

He did not answer.

I swallowed. “Well? Who is it?”

He looked over his shoulder.

I grinned. “Now you know Momma ain’t gone hear nothing when she showering and listening to gospel music. Just tell me who he is.”

“He isn’t in this one, and me keep telling you I can’t tell if it’s a man or woman this time.”

“Are you sure?”

He folded the newspaper. “Since I cashed in that ticket last week, nobody has died.”

“Dad you know the number three means death. Why would you buy a ticket if you wasn’t sure who would die?” When he didn’t answer, I got up from the table to rinse my bowl.

“You know your Momma’s been keyed up about planning this reunion. She say the family ain’t been the same since Granddaddy Juno died.” He shrugged. “She didn’t want to make a fuss when some people didn’t have the money for registration, so me promised to cover it.”

I sat back down and crossed my arms. “Dad, is you crazy? Somebody gone die because of this stupid reunion.” What if it was somebody I knew? Momma didn’t know what it was going to really take to pull this reunion off. Somebody had to die.

Lately my father’s dreams were becoming simpler to interpret, which wasn’t a good thing. It used to take him a at least three numbers to interpret a single dream. Now it only took him one or two. He could pinpoint a dead person in the grocery store, the park, where he worked sometimes days before they died. He tried to tell them, but most people thought he was crazy. So he stopped telling them.

He yawned. He looked old today. Probably because he stopped dying his beard. He caught me looking at it and smiled. “Just keep living.” He kissed me on the cheek where the wasp had grazed it. “Mi love you, Tufa. Always know that.”

A lump crept up my throat. I swallowed and sat on my granny man hands for fear of pushing him away. I was surprised by my sudden anger. Why did he always have to talk like this? Any other time it would not have bothered me, but I had just got a sign that things were supposed to be normal now.

“I know,” I whispered just as Momma came into the kitchen.

“Baby, you as beautiful as the day we met,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. Even my father’s game had become predictable.

Momma raised an eyebrow. “Am I? Or are you just saying that because I caught you looking at dead people again?”

He got up and kissed her on the neck. “Baby, you know mi loves you.”

“Humph. Yeah, but you love them numbers more.”

“Never more than you Rica,” he murmured in her ear.

Momma turned to me. “Tufa, you dressed up early. Where you going?”

“I dunno.”

Daddy turned her around. “Baby, mi need to tell you something.”

“Well I done told you Zinga and Shakara flying in from New Orleans, so I’m gone need for you to bring down all of them African stuff from the attic.” Now why she always did that? Talk to me like Daddy wasn’t talking to her? “You know Zinga would have a fit if she didn’t see all the things she bought me over the years. God knows this house gone need weeks of cleansing after that.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Baby, about work—”

“Don’t forget to rinse that bowl out before you go wherever you going.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Baby,” He tucked a strand of Momma’s hair behind her ear.

“What?”

“Mi don’t tink I should go to work today.”

“What you mean by ‘don’t tink?’ ”

“The dream me had last week—”

He was going to try to tell her? Again? Didn’t he get the hint the first time? Momma was not trying to hear all of that.

“Don’t tink? See that’s where you messed up. Where we messed up, Vincent. For once, you got a steady job. Weren’t you always saying, ‘baby, I’m sick of working like a slave?’” She

did not give him time to answer. “Don’t ‘tink’ I don’t know what’s going on around here. I’m sick of that unholy garbage around this house and how you got that chile believing in it. That alone proves to me that you ‘don’t tink’ about me, her, or nobody but them numbers!”

She just had to go there, didn’t she? I tried to become a fly on the wall when my father’s eyes narrowed. “Rica, you blind. Always been blind.” Although his voice was calm, the anger made his accent thicker, his tongue lethal. “Mi don’t know who mi staring at some time. The ooman that cut cane with me, or the snake in the field ready to sank fang into my foot bottom.”

I hated when they argued like this. They were all lovey dovey until Daddy started dreaming.

“We need the money, Vincent. And if your behind wasn’t too busy dreaming about having it, we would have some.”

“Is that what you tink mi doing?” He looked at her a moment before snatching the newspaper off the chair.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

He paused. A muscle jumped in his cheek, but he said nothing. Without a word, he rolled up the newspaper in his hands and stormed out the kitchen.

“And take that box with you.” Momma took a package of chicken to thaw out of the freezer. She ran it under cool water, shook her head, and closed her eyes. “Thank you, Jesus. The sooner he throws it all out the better.”

Momma started praying. I wanted to hug her, and beg her to stop fighting with Dad over his dreams. “Believe in his dreams, Momma,” I wanted to say. “They’re real.” But she had to find that out for herself. I hoped Jesus would help her find it. I tiptoed out the kitchen and down

the hall. My fingers kept stroking the wasp's sting just to make sure it was still sore to the touch. I refused to stare at the dusty angel paintings hanging on the walls. I stopped just short of reaching the backdoor when I heard a voice right behind me.

You cannot be blessed if you are unlucky. None of us will ever be blessed.

Jamal used to say that Great Uncle Pete—Granddaddy Juno's older brother—used to hear voices. Nobody wanted him to stay with them because too many members of the family woke up with him standing over them.

“You know *the crazy* run in our family,” Jamal would tell me. “County home, Tufa. Just remember that. That's where Uncle Pete ended up when he caught the crazy.”

I stared at the oval shaped mirror Momma had hung by the door. The voice kept talking to me, even though I saw nobody. I blinked several times when the mirror's surface didn't reflect my face. Red, moving red became its surface. A translucent hand—covered in sores—reached for me. I'm not crazy...I'm not crazy...I'm not crazy...I had to keep telling myself that. I had to believe that, even though that hand was reaching for me.

“Heavenly father,” Momma shouted from the living room. “Keep the evil out this house Lord. Keep it at bay. Keep it at bay, Father God. From my man and from my child. I pray in only your name Lord. Amen.”

I backed away from the mirror, the hand still reaching for me out the mirror. I tore my eyes away from it and stumbled through the backdoor.

I was going to tell him everything. Right now.

The sun was bold today which made me sweat. I looked at the ghost tree in our backyard. No flesh clung to its bark or hair grew from its trunk. Its leaves were a deep green that seemed to

glow when the sunlight hit them. The grass beneath my feet was wet from the morning dew. Rolling my pants above the ankle, I rounded the side of the house. I slowed when I saw my father dumping his secret box into the garbage can. The muscles in his arms flexed as he squished the box's sharp edges inward so it would not poke holes in the garbage bag.

Not bothering to look up he said, "Come, mermaid."

I stumbled forward. I was ready. I didn't think I could go through another night like last night. I didn't think I could go through dreaming while awake, like I did just now. He would understand. When his dreams became real, things happened to other people. When mine became real, things happened to me. He would be able to fix this.

He put the lid on top and leaned over the garbage can.

"Daddy, I—"

"After this time no more."

"No more what?"

He looked at me. He looked so old. "You know what."

"Playing the lotto based on unclear dreams? Don't."

"Do you know why mi didn't want to go to the bank today?"

I shrugged. "Because being a security officer pays better than chopping cane but by the end of the day you're so bored you want to chop something just to see if your arm still has a good swing. Yeah, Dad you told me that a million times. Now I really need to—"

He frowned. "You listen to everything I say, don't you?" His accent had lessened over the years, and if he didn't use just a spice of patois here and there, I could've sworn he sounded just like Granddaddy Juno.

“Pretty much. Look—”

“The reason I wanted to stay home today was not because this sitting up business drives me crazy. I wanted to spend the whole day staring at dead people’s faces. Mi can’t stop tinkering about it, because people keep dying and I don’t know how to make it stop.” He laughed just as I began to feel numb all over. “In a way, your Momma’s not too off on what she say.”

My ears went on mute the moment he said *I don’t know how to make it stop*. “But sometimes you don’t see who you dream about. Maybe sometimes your dreams are just that. Dreams.”

“But what if they are? What if the reason mi cannot see them is because the person I dreamed died lives in New York? Nigeria? Back home in Jamaica? There’s no way for me to be one hundred percent sure.” His gaze drifted to the busy street.

He didn’t know how to make it stop. The wasp sting throbbed, the only sign that there was a shred of possibility I could be normal.

“Remember what mi told you earlier?”

I nodded. I couldn’t say anything.

“Always know that.” Twigs crunched beneath his feet as he walked away.

“Love you too,” I said, knowing my voice was too broken for him to hear it. I eyed the trashcan. How could he throw it all away? The answers to everything used to be in those notebooks, in the meaning behind those numbers. I waited for him to disappear into the house before I lifted the trashcan lid. I grabbed the squished, secret box and disappeared down the street; the wasp’s sting the only thing that kept me going forward.

Broken Screams

I am Sisi, The One with eyes that are forgiving and legs that are clean. Do you remember the many who scream around us? The one far away screams as if she has stared death in the face. She screams strong, steady. Her voice does not crack. But the first day the trapdoor opened, her screams changed. They have weakened to a croak. They are faint and broken, swallowed up by other broken screams.

I prefer the first one. Loud and sure. Even though I like her scream, I do not like her doing it. It does not belong to her, to any of us.

Before the door opened, her screams reminded me of those who survived Elmina, the big white prison. The darkness within its dungeons prepared me for this darkness. The death behind its bars, prepared me for the dying here. The day was hot when they took those of us still alive out the castle. We had to walk many days and nights to a river, the old people called Donko Nsuo. Many died along the way. At seeing death, the young men, my man among them, screamed battle screams. The old men, my father among them, screamed broken screams. When we reached Donko Nsuo, they shoved us into the river to have our last bath. Breasts bounced and chains clanked as women washed between their thighs. Muscles flexed as men scrubbed between theirs. And all the while they stared at us from the shore with their whips and fire sticks.

My man, a ways from me, whispered Sisi. The crackle of the whip from the riverbank made me turn away. As I splashed water beneath my arms, I dared to look at him again. He was not a tall man and all his fat was in his belly. But he was a good man, even though I gave him no children. We were the lucky ones.

As the men with fire sticks called to us, I muttered thanks to the ancestors for blessing my womb by killing it.

Kapow!

An older woman with a graying bush, crumpled into herself. Her braided hair, splattered in blood, sank beneath the river.

Kapow!

A boy with a lame arm, he tried to hide, lost half of his face. I covered my mouth as what was left of his opened in a silent scream.

Kapow!

They shot the boy again. Water sloshed as the boy stumbled toward me, his bloody fingers touching my face, neck, breasts.

As I searched for my man, big hands that were once strong grabbed me. My father spun me around, shielding my body with his. A big man with broken chains used a large rock to break our shackles lest the dead carry us beneath the river. He handed the rock to my father who tried to throw it at the riverbank. He did not throw hard enough. He attempted to scream out, but his voice was not strong enough.

The weak protected the strong until the strong realized they were not weak.

I picked up a rock and flung it on the bank. It hit the chest of a man with hair like the sun. He held his fire stick, but instead of pointing it at me, he aimed for my father. A battle cry came from the pit of my stomach as I threw a rock at the side of his head.

Kapow!

My father sucked in his breath with a hiss as he grabbed his arm.

“The bush,” he whispered.

I stuck my arms beneath his frail shoulders, all the while looking for my man. “Hold your breath.”

He did and I dipped our bodies beneath the bloody waves. I dragged his body to the opposite end of the river, and rolled him to the surface. A little girl and boy started crying when they saw us. How they got across the river unseen I do not know.

“Hide in the bush. Take papa with you. Can you do that?”

They nodded and continued to cry.

He grabbed my arm then and told me not to go, even though he knew I would.

I waited for his cracked feet to disappear in the bush before I sank beneath the river and swam. As I neared the other side, I heard a scream so strong and hateful that I choked on water.

Kapow!

I came up for breath, but lost it when I saw my man. His hands were around the throat of the man with hair as pale as the sun. A hole in my man’s chest bled. He kept his grip around the man’s throat and screamed.

Kapow!

His stomach emptied out onto his thighs. I called to him, but it was too late. His scream had already been broken.

CHAPTER FOUR: BLIND

I heard the creaking of Uncle Punt's rocker and the shouts of the men he played dominoes with before I ever stepped on the porch. Uncle Punt lived a street over; he only visited when he wanted something. I was doing the same thing by coming over and asking Jamal for one of his shoeboxes, so I couldn't complain. Uncle Punt and Momma were brother and sister, but if put next to each other people would swear Uncle Punt was her daddy. He was sixteen years older than Momma, but that didn't stop him from having a sweet tooth for younger women. Within thirty years, Uncle Punt had gone through eight wives, three fiancés, and two girlfriends and he never had less than two at a time. He was all of that—Mack Daddy, wanna-be pimp, old school playa'. Out of all of them, Jamal's Momma, Gertrude stayed. Uncle Punt felt no shame about bringing two or three women to every family function. He was a proud polygamist, who said his life's goal was to save the black race.

I shook my head when I saw the group of men on Uncle Punt's porch. They gossiped like old women. I opened and closed the front gate, none of them paying me any attention.

“Y'all mark my words, too many good looking black women parading around here without a man.” Uncle Punt slammed a domino on the table. “It's just as much our fault as it is theirs.”

“Punt, you talking crazy,” a bald man with graying sideburns answered.

“Shoot, there ain't enough of us black men to begin with to pair off,” Punt said. “We make it nearly impossible for our women with our choosings the yellows, reds, whites, and each other over them. This is extinction we talking 'bout.”

“Man, is you gone play or talk us to death?” shouted a man with a cigar.

Another man, who watched Punt swipe dominoes, cracked a grin. “Y’all know how Punt do. He just say what he say to justify having a house full of women and so we won’t pay no attention to him cheating.”

Punt leaned in his rocker, and pointed a finger through a ring of smoke at the man. “Now look here, Claude. Don’t be lying about me on my own porch. If you had you a second woman around, your porch wouldn’t be looking like a Cat Five slammed into it.”

“Naw, Punt,” a man with a prominent overbite replied. “That fat woman of his is two broads in one and could work like two if she ever got off her fat behind.”

The men snickered, which always led to Claude making his nose and mouth touch. That’s what he did when he was ready to spit bullets. The men, however, only saw “stank” written across his face, which made them whoop and holler even more.

Mr. Claude was Uncle Punt’s rival in everything. Aunt Gertrude and Claude’s wife were sisters. Claude never did forgive Uncle Punt for taking the better of the two. The way he pushed his domino onto the table with his pinky made it obvious he believed Uncle Punt had the life he wanted to have. I sort of felt sorry for him. A sulky expression caused his chin to double as his face turned to his lap. Out the corner of his eye, he stole a glance at Punt’s wrap around porch. That’s another thing that made them get into it. Uncle Punt had one of the biggest porches on the block.

Two of the men sat in the swing, cushioned by pillows stitched by Aunt Gertrude’s fingers. Not only could she throw down in the kitchen but she could grill better than any man I knew. “Now that one,” Uncle Punt often said, “she can clean, cook, and sew. She ain’t going

nowhere. Not with them fingers.” He never really cared if anyone ever overheard what he said. I bet he loved telling all his business, especially when Mr. Claude was around.

“C’mon, Claude, lighten up,” said the man with the cigar. He took a deep drag and puffed it into Claude’s face.

“My Deidre keeps a clean place,” Claude mumbled.

Uncle Punt slapped down another domino. “Sure she do.”

“All of you are welcome anytime.”

The man with the overbite pulled his upper lip up to the gums and grinned. “We don’t doubt what you saying, Claude.”

As the men continued to laugh, Claude scooted his lounge chair away from the railing. Uncle Punt had carved loops and spirals into it just that past spring. He opened his mouth to say something, but the wooden chimes above their game table drowned him out. It was pathetic, how they picked on Mr. Claude.

I was already making my way to the side door to bypass them when Claude noticed me. Dang. The last thing I wanted to do was cut through the thick of Uncle Punt and his friends. I gave Claude a weak wave, shifted the secret box in my arms, and made my way up to the porch.

Uncle Punt chuckled. “Now, Claude, what my porch floor done did? No need to take your anger out on it too. That’s polished mahogany we sitting on out here.” He scratched his crotch and looked up when my shadow covered the table. His laughter came to an abrupt halt when I climbed the porch, the squished shoebox in my hands.

“Morning, Uncle Punt. Jamal home?”

The porch fell silent. The game came to a standstill, no one daring to move. Even the cheaters among them did not take advantage of my intrusion and swap dominoes. The wood chimes sang, but nobody listened to their music. All eyes were on me—the girl everybody thought was stone crazy since Granddaddy Juno’s death. Lucky me.

Feeling their eyes bore into me, I adjusted my shirt to make sure my wasp sting—in all its bruising glory—remained visible.

When Uncle Punt noticed the bruise, he leaned back in his rocker. The roof’s shade shielded his eyes. “Yeah, he inside with that boy who never seems to want to take his behind home to Jackson Heights.” The rocker creaked as he leaned forward with a forced smile. “Go on inside and leave us grown folk to grown folk things, alright?”

If making fun of Mr. Claude was grown folks’ things, I’d be glad to leave them to it. I gave them a quick nod, surprised that my uncle talked to me directly. Any other time he’d have Aunt Gertrude, or his other woman, act as his messenger. Keep your face straight, Tufa, I mentally chanted over and over. My flip flops stepped over the jagged scuff mark Claude’s chair left on the polished wood. I opened the screen door and pushed against the beveled glass of the half-open entry door. I would not let Uncle Punt, or any of the men, know it was not they who broke the law of silence between them and me; it was my initiating sting into normalness.

On a couch in the living room, Jamal and Octavius dug through a pile of clean clothes that needed to be folded. Although both of them were tall, Jamal was stocky and dressed in a long wife beater with name brand sneakers. His jeans refused to sag because of his big behind he insists is all muscle. Instead, he compensated by buying his wife beater extra long.

Octavius, on the other hand, had string bean limbs donned in his Varsity basketball jersey. However, whenever I saw him, an iron on of a black revolutionary's face was always pinned over his number. He became the "it" boy alright. But he did a one-eighty turnaround on the "it" factor. Everybody hated that his personality didn't fit the "it" athlete stereotype—everybody but me.

"Octavius, who you wearing today?" I asked.

He adjusted his red, black, and green hat on his head and gave me a lopsided grin. Jamal frowned. My cousin—who I strongly believe is evil incarnate—hated the fact that his best friend liked me. But what he hated even more was the fact that I liked Octavius too. But when have I ever cared about Jamal or his stupid feelings? "Glad you asked, queen. Mumia Abu-Jamal. Political prisoner and former BP. Wrongly accused of murder. Serving a death sentence. Innocent."

I laughed. "Tavius, why you always talk like that? Nobody on that revolutionary stuff no more."

He clamped his hands behind his back and crossed the floor to stand beside me. "But that's the issue. Nobody should be on nothing; this isn't about getting high. Revolutionary is what we should be. We have too many chicken bone licking, dropping-it-like-its-hot twirking, iced-out blinging and balling brothers and sisters instead of revolutionary kings and queens."

"Nigga, so what that make you?" Jamal threw Uncle Punt's briefs at Octavius' face.

Octavius caught them in one hand. He shot them through the hoop Jamal made with his arms. The briefs landed at the top of the laundry pile. "A very conscious John the Baptist type of brother among the confused masses."

I laughed a little higher than normal and tugged my shirt even lower so Octavius could get a full view of the sting. I frowned when he never even noticed. Jamal, however, spotted it from across the room and pretended to vomit on the carpet.

“Dang, Tufa, now what to call you? Bigfoot, Skin collector, Ms. Crispy Black?” He laughed but when he saw my face, he held up his hands. “Alright, chill. I’ll go with Bigfoot since you grave hunt now.”

“If visiting the cemetery where most of our family is buried is grave hunting, then yeah that’s my new thang.” Stupid wasn’t expecting that, I see.

He rolled his eyes. “So I guess them leeches and other things down in them graves that’ll drain your blood don’t scare you, huh?”

My fingers dug into the box. I didn’t say a word, but that did not stop Jamal from carrying on. He laughed and tossed one of his mother’s double D bras with fading cheetah spots on the couch’s arm. “That’s what you like? Having nasty things drink your blood?”

He always had to do it, make everyone think I was a freak. He just would not let me live down jumping in that hotel pool with Granddaddy Juno’s dead body. Even though he tried, he could not dog me out without getting a taste of his own medicine. The way he embarrassed me in front of Octavius made me want to curl up and die, but I’d keep the hurt caged inside my ribs long enough to tell him off. “I know you ain’t talking, coochie eater.”

Octavius guffawed behind his fist. “Wow, J, I think you better sit this one out. The queen has spoken.”

Nodding like he had a bobblehead attached to his neck, Jamal sucked his teeth. “Nigga, please, I don’t go down unless I’m helping a ho put on her shoes. Feel me?”

I crossed my arms and smirked. I had this. “That ain’t what Meisha said before break.”

His eyes widened. Yeah, I know all the business. For a moment I forgot what I clutched in my hands, what I came over here to ask Jamal to give me. At that moment, all I cared about was making him look like the freak he really was.

“She said you went down on her while she had her period and that she ain’t even want you to.”

At that point Jamal would not even look at me. The hurt drained me on the inside, like a puppy suckling milk out his momma’s breast. However, that broken law of silence that had freed me, just moments before, slowly mended itself. The breast was drained dry, but the hurt remained from the hungry puppy nibbling on my innards. But I didn’t care. It felt good to make Jamal feel just a shred of what he made me feel.

“Tavius, I’m telling you she crazy, the whole family can vouch for that. Any other female would’ve got smacked in the mouth, but she’s fam. I let a whole lot of what she say slide because she’s been out her head since forever.”

I clutched the squished box against my chest, hiding the wasp’s sting. I could not look at either of them. He always knew how to hit a nerve. If it was just Jamal thinking I was crazy, I could brush what he said off. Easy. But he was right. The whole family thought I was out my head since forever.

I tried to find a distraction. My father’s secret box was as good as any. I studied a yellow stain that smelled faintly of fenugreek on the corner of the box. Wednesday’s curry chicken and red beans and rice had left its mark. I sniffed it with a wriggled nose and turned the box upside down. I could barely smell Momma’s fabric softener on this side. The linen closet, too, had left

its mark. I swallowed. My fingers felt the crescent moon indentations my fingernails made on the sides of the box. There were four on each side, just deep enough to catch a glimpse of what was inside. I too had left my mark, but none of that mattered now. After today, I would not see this box again.

“T, Jamal just ignorant, you know that.” Octavius covered my fingers with his hands and lowered the box from my face.

I shrugged, pretending not to care. I stared at his fingers covering mine. He was too close. I loved it, hated it, but mostly loved it. I wondered how Octavius—the sort of “it” boy who ignored the groupies, sweated me since middle school, and attempted to convert me to his black revolutionary movement—could be this close without something happening.

The reason I had a thing for Octavius was because he was one of the few guys at school who figured out I didn’t speak snake. *Pssst, hey gul lemme holla at you for a minute*, is such a turnoff. The fact that Octavius never did that to me, caught my eye. His skin was night without the stars and the moon; his legs bowed out giving him a little wobble to his walk. He did not wear earrings. Thank God. What I liked most about him was his gap—it reminded me of the one Granddaddy Juno had. Since his gap was off-centered, Octavius often said, “My gap never came from a fight. The Most High anointed three as a number of power. That’s why I only got three canines instead of four.” I liked that about him, he liked being different from everybody else.

Octavius never dressed like the other boys. He’d wear a dashiki or a jacket with a row of revolutionary buttons fastened on the sleeves. I even tolerated that he was best friends with Jamal, the cousin from hell. Sometimes I felt guilty liking him, because I liked someone else too, someone that nobody knew about. I liked the man who wrote “From: E.” My flip flops were the

only sign that E was not a figment of my imagination, but flesh and blood. I knew I should stay away from Octavius, but not because I felt guilty. Whenever we got too close, invisible hands clamped around my throat.

It started subtle. The sensation on my neck was cold like the choker I wore to sophomore homecoming. The chilled feeling was coupled by pressure. My tongue folded upward as the invisible hands gripped my neck and continued to squeeze. I dropped the box, my fingers clawing the air around my neck. When Octavius reached for me, I shook my head and stumbled backwards. Jamal steadied me with a hand, and as soon as I was balanced, released me as if I was plagued by leprosy. I choked and swallowed gulps of air.

“You cool?” Octavius asked.

I nodded. “Just swallowed the wrong way.”

His eyes drifted to the box I had dropped at his feet.

Now was as good a time as any to ask Jamal why I came over. “Jamal, let me borrow another one of your shoeboxes.”

Jamal snatched up the secret box. “You just don’t care about all my homeless sneaks collecting dust and scuffs before I break them in, do you? You ain’t right, always coming over here when you want something.”

I shrugged. “It runs in the family.”

Jamal opened the box and stared at my feet. “You sure you want me to take my sneakers out before I give you the box? I know that’s why you keep wearing them flip flops. Them elephant feet done outgrew all your other shoes.”

I saw that one coming. Old nasty coochie eater. I'd allow him to have his laugh. As long as he gave me what I wanted, I didn't care what he said.

"I see Uncle V still having you believe in Santa Claus, the Easter bunny, and that he don't be hitting up the Hardrock every week."

He was pushing me, but I wouldn't push back. Not this time. I bit my tongue and followed him into his room. It was not true. I knew what the family thought, what they claimed to see and reported back to Momma. My father just played the lotto at Moora's, and only when necessary. He would never gamble crazy; he knew the risks. They didn't have a clue.

I kept my eyes on the ground when I entered Jamal's room. Hanging on the walls were posters of women with what he called "table booties," behinds so round he could balance his glass on them. That's how he picked girlfriends nowadays. A table booty let him know he had a keeper. What a superficial loser.

The acoustics of the entertainment system in his bedroom competed with the one in the living room. Jamal gave Octavius a look but didn't complain when his best friend popped in a burnt CD he had never heard of.

They want to tell you we free
While papers signing niggas dying
No refilling on your sleeping pills
For years popping pills was my wish
This American nightmare was bliss
No refilling on your sleeping pills
Pusherman my supply's desert dry

Tell me why I gotta now open my eyes
To all this death
I just wanna stay on cloud nine cause
The blood, all the blood, its rising too high
I need another refill cause niggas don't cry

“J, this is conscious frequency,” Octavius said. “Mix tapes like this you have to find on the street; you’ll never hear it on the airwaves.”

Jamal smirked. “The beat is fire, I’ll give it that.” He pulled back a corner of his bedspread and beckoned me to sit. I tried not to smile. Sometimes he forgot that his job since we were little was to bully me. Sometimes he remembered that we were family. As crazy as it sounds, I liked the moments when we forgot how much we couldn’t stand each other.

It always surprised me, how neat my cousin kept his room: made up bed, organized desk, no overstuffed dresser drawers, dusted ceiling fan, clean walls (notwithstanding the women with table booties). It was the complete opposite of mine, even when I called myself straightening things up.

Octavius opened Jamal’s small closet and grabbed the first shoebox he saw.

“She can’t have that one,” Jamal said. “Them special, only a few weeks old.”

Octavius sat down the box. “J, you really don’t need all these sneakers. A brother only got two feet.”

Pushing Octavius aside, Jamal knelt down to pick up a Nike box with worn corners and covered in dust. I glimpsed the fading checkmark on the lid. It was old, but other than that it

seemed to be in good shape. He took out a pair of sneakers that still had the brand new smell about them, but Jamal insisted they had already been “broken in.”

“Look, Tavius, I can’t do you. You sport bobos like you don’t care nothing about your swag.” Jamal shook his head and handed off the shoebox to me. “Ain’t you even a little bit shamed with how you be looking on the court?”

I held my breath when Octavius’ eyes met mine. He seemed to finally notice the ensemble I had thrown together. He smirked when he looked at my baggy jeans and how it contrasted with my low-neck blouse. My breath whooshed out when he turned away from me to study his own shoes. I frowned. His eyes never once glanced at the sting on my breast.

“J, I keep telling you, take them shackles off your feet, bruh. See me, I do my thing on the court because my feet light. I don’t need to pimp the latest sneaks to dunk. I put my money into funding this revolution. You need to do the same.”

“Nigga please.” Jamal flicked off the bedroom light. Once they reached the living room, he grabbed two towels from the heap of laundry and threw one over my head to Octavius.

“Tavius, man you better have on some trunks. I ain’t down with seeing another dude wear my clothes; that’s my wifey’s job after we get done doing what we do.”

“Which one?” I muttered as I transferred the last of my father’s lottery tickets to the new shoebox.

“Mind your business,” Jamal replied.

I followed them through the screen door; it made a whack sound as it slammed shut. “The sky looks good,” Octavius said above the older men shouting. “If he let us, we’ll have a good little minute to chill.”

“So where y’all going?” I waved goodbye to Uncle Punt and the other men, none bothering to wave back. I followed Octavius and Jamal down the steps and out the front gates.

“Like I said, mind your business.”

“Aw come on J, she can come swimming with us.”

Jamal slung his towel over his shoulder and spat on the sidewalk. “Bruh, I already told you: stop trying to holler at my cousin.”

“Oh, so I’m your cousin now?” I would not admit it, but I liked when Jamal slipped into big brother mode.

Jamal rolled his eyes. “Tavius my boy and I ain’t trying to have you tagging with us everywhere just cause he want to holler.”

I looked at Octavius and gripped the shoebox tighter when he stared back. After an awkward silence, Jamal pretended to vomit on a stray cat that had slinked toward him.

“No Tavius, don’t do it bruh,” he warned.

Octavius smiled, his gap making his teeth appear even whiter than I remembered. “Jamal, she can come with us.”

* * *

We were going swimming in the neighborhood lake. I used to keep my snakeskin collection near that lake. And that’s the place where I first saw *him*. E. The other one I liked. I felt a little bit sleazy, pretending that I only wanted to hang out and swim with the boys. They had their own agenda. I had mine. It was piping hot outside. Sweat soaked the back of my sports bra and my arms felt heavy from lugging the shoebox down the road. I refused to leave it at Jamal’s house and I didn’t trust neither one of them to hold it for me. How pathetic.

My toes felt slick in my rubber flip flops with each step I took. It was high noon and even though it was hot as burning coal outside, no one in East Tampa hid behind closed doors. Screen doors were propped open with rocks. Old women rocked on their porches waiting to exchange frozen cups, pickles, and slices of pound cake for a hungry child's quarter. I yelped when King, a Doberman pinscher who belonged to one of the old women, leaped off a porch and chased after me, Jamal, and Octavius until his chain yanked him back. Men's heads and torsos disappeared as they worked under cars. They cranked their car radios up and opened the trunks and car doors so Motown oldies could float down the street. They laughed when they caught the three of us dancing to the music. Hey, grooving to The Jackson Five or Gladys Knight and the Pips never hurt nobody.

Sprinklers watered dying grass and little children in bathing suits. While the kids played in the arcs of swiveling water and danced to music way before their time, I quickened my step. Every step I took brought me closer to him, which was something I never thought would happen again. Just like the little kids that settled for playing in the sprinklers, I had settled for never swimming in Hishka's Lake ever again.

The lake was named after Hishka, a conjure woman who drowned in it before the Seminole Wars. It was the same lake where I used to collect snakeskins. Some folks say Hishka lived nearly two hundred years ago, her people had settled in Tampa when black folk used to escape to Florida instead of the north. When my grandparents were alive, the family would stay at their two story frame house in June. I would sneak out of the crowded den where the younger cousins slept and sit among my aunts, uncles, and older cousins on my grandparents' porch. Before they caught me, I'd eavesdrop on how the conjure woman died.

“She was nearly seven feet tall, I say,” Granddaddy Juno whispered as tobacco shot through his gap, grazed the railing, and landed in the grass.

Grandma Cecile nodded her head and shouted above the crickets singing. “Remember, Juno, how your Momma used to say Hishka’s place by that lake was full of bones from all types of animals? She’d string and hang them up like drapes.”

“Don’t forget all that hair she had,” Uncle Punt said. “Momma, who was that old lady up the road who said her great grandmomma had actually seen Hishka?”

“Tessy,” Cecile answered.

“Before she died, Tessy told my grandmother how Hishka had to chop off her hair every night because the stuff grew so fast. If she missed just one night,” Juno said raising his finger, “she’d suffocate in her sleep.”

Grandma Cecile chuckled. She leaned back in her rocker since her wide hips, with their fat pressing through the rocker’s decorative wood pattern, prevented her feet from getting the necessary momentum to rock. “Tessy claimed how Hishka drowned was the best part.”

Juno moved the tobacco around his mouth. “Sleepwalking around that darn lake. Course she always done that. Folks say her shadow was so long it’d stretch clean cross the lake.”

“But what made that time so different, Granddaddy?” my cousin Nick asked as Aunt Gertrude re-twisted his locs.

“Somebody had stolen Hishka’s knife—the one she used for her nightly chopping. As a conjure woman, Hishka made all types of spells and tonics to make people be born, live, die, and come back to life. Folks say a ghost asked Hishka to stop selling one of her spells.”

“Which one?” Uncle Punt asked.

“The one that make the dead come back to life,” Grandma Cecile answered.

“Some say the ghost haunted Hishka—that’s one of the reasons she come here to live. To escape it. And it had that funny way about her talk, like them Geechee on my daddy’s side and them other island folk like Rica’s man,” said Juno. Granddaddy Juno chewed the tobacco in his mouth and leaned in his chair, his lips curving upward, his eyes widening.

“Hishka ignored the ghost’s request, and for a while the haunting stopped. She told every woman that came to her that she was the only one alive who could stand up to the dead. But the ghost returned. Hishka say the ghost’s life was a sad one, that’s why it haunted her the way it did. So she tried to trick it by giving it back its flesh.”

Aunt Gertrude’s fingers stopped twisting Nick’s locs. “Did the woman get it back?”

“Get what back?” Juno asked.

“Her flesh.”

Granddaddy Juno hawked and spat. A wad of black landed on the porch steps. “Never. When she found out Hishka tried to trick her, the ghost took Hishka’s knife.”

“Without her knife,” Grandma Cecile added, her feet dangling above the floorboards, “Hishka’s hair grew and grew. So one night when she sleepwalked around the lake, she tripped over her own hair and drowned.”

Juno rose then and stretched. “And that’s where the lake gets it.”

“Gets what?” I asked. I peered out from behind the swing where Uncle Punt sat.

“Its hair. Course with time it changed green, but its still Hishka’s hair just the same.”

* * *

I never forgot about Hishka, the ghost that haunted her, or the lake that held a secret I refused to tell a soul. The lake sat behind an empty field the neighborhood kids had cleared and made into a kickball field. Octavius' attention toward me was why some of the girls let me play with them. They didn't care a thing about me; they just wanted to know what I had that they didn't. Whenever we were in the field, they'd ask me. But I could never tell them because I really didn't know myself. They've been carrying on like that since I was fourteen. But, when I got off the bus one day and passed the field, I saw this sign:

PRIVATE PROPERTY NO TRESPASSING

Total disrespect was what us girls said in hushed voices as we taped a note over the sign that read:

We could never respect something that disrespects us just by being. We made this field into what it is and no sign gone keep us out!

The boys, however, protested that the note took too long to make its point. And was too nice, way too nice. After allowing it to stay up for about a week, they reached a unanimous decision—the note had to come down and in its place they would spray paint:

SUCK MY DICK

After a few weeks, a tall chain linked fence closed in the field, and any possible entrance to the lake. We ignored it. Cupped hands served as steps for shoes. We climbed over the fence and played kickball and swam deep into the night.

Then the man appeared. He always wore sunshades, never showing his eyes. Everybody thought he was a creeper, and he probably was. But, I knew he knew something about the lake. I knew he knew something about E. Because I knew, I think that's why he would watch me the

most. I would find him leaning against a telephone pole near my bus stop, watching me until I passed the gated-in field. One day I built up enough nerve to ask him, “You’ve seen him around the lake, haven’t you?” He said nothing back. He didn’t even look like he was breathing when he pointed down the street, which was his silent way of telling me to take my nosy behind on home. “Well I’ve seen him too.” When I refused to walk away, he turned on his heel and walked away from me.

The same man after school would leave the telephone pole to sit in the bleachers and watch Octavius practice for the upcoming season with his team. I was pissed when Octavius told me the man handed him a note that said: *Do not let her swim near the Bowing Oaks.*

“T, ain’t that something? Now who would be so dumb as to swim near that part of the lake? Everybody knows snakes breed like crazy over there.”

I said nothing. He was trying to keep me away from the Bowing Oaks, and it wasn’t because of stupid snakes. That’s the same place I used to collect snakeskins when I was little. Why not keep me away then? E tried to. Thank god it didn’t work.

When practice was finished, the man would leave the school gym and stand at the entrance of 68th Cutoff Street’s corner store at precisely 5:30 pm, the same time Jamal would enter to flirt with Moora’s daughter—his current wifey. He had told everyone what the man had whispered in his ear at the store, “Don’t do anything that would endanger her.” Jamal cussed the man out. He told him what he does with his wifey is his own business.

But I knew the man wasn’t talking about Jamal’s girlfriend. Call me paranoid. But I knew he was talking about me. It seemed as if the man was everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

He wanted to keep me away from *him*, from E, but I hoped and prayed today would put an end to all of that.

“Y’all still ain’t figure out who he is yet?” I asked Jamal when we walked down the sidewalk. The houses were more spaced out on this street. There were a lot more trees, less noise, less people. The lake sat on the outskirts of the neighborhood. But, the kickball field was replaced by an MTV Cribs style mansion, gated in with surveillance.

“Pull out the list, Tavius,” Jamal said.

I rolled my eyes. “Please tell me y’all still are not creating the list?”

“Yup.” Tavius pulled out four pieces of rolled up print paper from out of his back pocket.

“Cop was number one, but we crossed that off about a month ago,” Jamal said.

Octavius nodded. “The brother’s pushing seventy. He’s too old to be undercover. So cop was so out.”

“Number two was sex offender. Me and Tavius checked out to see if he’s listed.”

“Well, is he?” I knew they were creating the list of all the things the man could be. But I was surprised to know they’d been doing their research. Impressive.

“Nope,” Octavius answered. “But to be real with you, no one has been added to the list in the past five years, and two of the people on the list had been dead for ten. So we couldn’t really cross that off as an option.”

Fabulous. But sex offender didn’t seem right to me. I mean the man had a lot of money. There had to be something more to him than just that. Just like he watched us, I would watch tractors, trucks with building supplies and construction men trickling onto our field. I would stop to stare at the men laying down the foundation to that mansion. I had gotten used to him standing

by the telephone pole when I got off the bus. I talked to him even though he never talked back. I told him that it was not right to build a big behind house to block the only trail that led to Hishka's Lake. I told him that it was none of his business where I swam and who I met when I swam there. I told him that you think you're so bad because you got millions of Benjamins. Well think again. He smiled when I said that. His cheeks were covered in clouds of grey and his locs trailed a streak of white down his back. He seemed antisocial, like he felt some sick, twisted responsibility for my safety. Still, something in me said that sex offender did not quite fit.

“That's all y'all came up with?” I asked them.

They looked at each other and laughed. “Girl, is you crazy?” Jamal snatched the list from Octavius and fanned it in my face. “We've been making this list for nearly a year. Check this out. Number three: College Basketball Recruiter.”

I rolled my eyes. I couldn't believe they still believed the old man was a recruiter. “Have y'all forgotten why he keeps on the shades?” They gave me that look that told me they thought I was tripping. “Octavius, don't act like you didn't see them too. His eyes. Remember?”

It happened on the day practice was cancelled. Octavius rode the bus home with me. When we got off at my stop, there was the man leaning against the telephone pole. Octavius felt a little bit nervous, since the man kept sitting in on his practices. When the bus left, he dribbled and did some footwork—just in case the man really was a recruiter—and passed him the ball behind his back. The ball hit the man in the face, knocking off his glasses. Octavius swore he did not see anything. But I saw. Before the man crawled on the concrete, searching for his shades, I could have sworn that his eyes were rolled back to white.

“Did you see how hard that basketball hit his face, Tufa?” Octavius grabbed the list from Jamal. “I’m surprised he was even conscious. I could’ve knocked the man out.”

“And ruin your recruiting chances,” said Jamal. “Tavius, you’s a bold nigga.”

“I don’t care what either of y’all say. The man is blind. I know what I saw.”

We approached the wrought iron gates with two snakes forming a heart-shaped symbol at the front. There it was. Octavius called it the “Big House.” A Ferrari, Porsche, and Rolls-Royce Phantom sat in the U-shaped driveway. Jamal whistled when he saw them. Tall lotus columns stood erect behind the driveway. The grand house with its terracotta roof swallowed up any traces of our kickball field. “A couple of thousand square feet easy,” Octavius whispered as three of us ogled the beige brick and limestone foundation. The lawn was immaculate with its imported grass and sweet smelling gardenias and hibiscus flowers. My stomach growled when I noticed the Japanese plum tree in full bloom, its juicy fruit we’d hoard in our pockets and t-shirts. I should’ve known he wouldn’t cut that down.

“Yo, Tavius, tell T about the red list.”

“Red list?” I asked.

Octavius held up the last paper. Four things—which were the most ridiculous choices they could have ever come up with—were written in red ink. “T, I know you a skeptic and all. You think homeboy is just this poor blind brother that is stalking you like some estranged Godfather, but listen. Do you see this place? Your boy gots to be one of these.”

I looked over the red list, unimpressed. The choices were not numbered in any order, but had stars next to them.

* NBA Recruiter

* Pusherman Mastermind with *American Gangster* Swag

* International Business Mogul

* Victim of sex offender with huge law settlement

“Y’all got to be kidding me. I can buy business mogul. Octavius, you had to come up with that one.”

Jamal snatched the list from me. “Think you know everything, huh? That one was mine.”

I pointed at one of the choices. “Victim of sex offender, really?”

Octavius shrugged. “His walk is a dead giveaway.”

Jamal did a poor imitation of the old man’s twitchy walk. “He walks just like Tavius’ Uncle Roy did after serving five years upstate. Anybody can see that.”

And they thought I was crazy? We had to be in a right frame of mind to pull this off. Did we honestly expect the old man to let us walk onto his property, knock on his front door, and ask him to let us cut through his house to swim in Hishka’s Lake? It would never work.

I held my breath when Jamal pressed the caller button. “Uh yeah, could somebody open these gates please? We gots to ask the man of the house a favor.” To our surprise, the gates opened. Just like that. Although nobody said a word on the other end, the gates opening was all the proof we needed that someone was listening. We walked past the Ferrari, Porsche, and Rolls-Royce parked on the U-shaped driveway. When Jamal tried to touch the paintwork, I slapped his hand and pushed him up the marble stairs.

This porch put all of our porches to shame. Uncle Punt’s porch could not hold a candle to this one. I lifted the heavy knocker and rapped on the door twice. We stood there several minutes waiting, wondering. Then the door opened. In front of us stood the man with sunshades, only he

was not wearing them. I took a step back and peered into the deep brown irises of his eyes. The man was not blind.

Unlucky

I am Afua, the one with eyes that are unforgiving. My legs are clean, for now. We are inside a great boat with darkness and moaning in its belly. They have not taken her yet, the one who listens to broken screams but does not scream. She is like me, black as night, so the darkness does not scare her. She is like me, strong legged and strong backed, so she barely notices the splintering wood. A dead man with markings on his face lay between us. Warrior. His wrists are crusted with blood. His ankles have been rubbed raw. His unblinking eyes are rolled back to white. He refused to eat their food; instead he chose to swallow his own tongue.

Warrior. Neither the woman beside him nor I he knew. Yet somehow I feel as though he fought against the chains for us. Not to save us, but to show us that he could still save what he had already lost. Freedom. His pride tricked him. He thought he was still strong, even as the stench of his own urine made him vomit. He thought he was still strong as the moans of the dying haunted him in his sleep. The woman next to him is angry, revengeful. That's what keeps her alive. I see it in the set of her jaw. The muscles in her cheek clenches. She eats all of their food, licks the bowls clean. I will often find her raising her chained hands to try and massage her breasts as if they ache. She cries whenever she gazes upon the dead man's penis. She's lost someone, and that keeps her alive. Her womb is dead because I see her pat it and smile. She is truly lucky. My womb lives, and life secretly grows inside it.

She blames the pale ones. Part of me does, part of me does not. She wants them dead, and their women's wombs dead, like hers. Part of me does, part of me does not. She curses them at night, barely moving her lips. She prays to the ones in the water to swallow the ship. She does not think I know, but I know. She does not know that our tongues are nearly the same, but I do. She never looks at me, for if she did, she would realize that she is not the only one who's angry. She is not the only one who's hateful. She is not the only one who wants revenge.

The part of me that does not want the heads of the pale ones nor the wombs of their women wants something else—the one as black as me. Strong backed, strong legged. Face like mine. Blood exactly like mine. Warrior. His pride helped to kill, it helped pay for the river's blood, splintering thighs, and shackled wrists. His foolish pride I have known for some time. It clouds his judgment on how to fulfill his duty.

It was on the day they came into our village bearing gifts. They had brought one of our own to speak their words. It was on this day I knew the one with blood like mine would have his pride tested.

Shiny things, worthless things, they offered him.

He refused even though his fingers touched everything they placed before him.

Friendship, worthless friendship, they offered him. He refused.

Two choices, their last offering.

He chose the wrong one.

CHAPTER FIVE: FISH TALE

I would not tell Jamal or Octavius the truth. That I often daydreamed of E. The man with the fishtail. That's why I wanted to go back there. That's why I wanted to swim in Hishka's Lake. To see him again. As I stood on the porch and looked the old man in the eyes, I wondered if God took his sight away because he had seen the man too. Like Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt, the old man—with his snaggletooth grin, smoky beard, jeans cutoff at the knee, no shoes, unbuttoned palm tree print t-shirt, and dreadlocks the size of my wrist—had his eyes rolled back to white to keep the truth hidden. Or at least that's what I thought the day Octavius accidentally knocked the old man's shades off with the basketball. This mansion was built right on our kickball field to block the trail to Hishka's Lake, to keep me away from E, the man I had seen swim in it just before the construction started.

The first time I saw him, I was looking for my flip flop around the lake. I could not find it anywhere with its pink flower that would tickle my toes whenever I walked. It camouflaged with all the flowers in full bloom, their colorful petals blurred on the lake's surface.

The search led me to the part of the lake shrouded by Bowing Oaks, oak trees that would lean further and further with every hurricane season, but were too stubborn to fall. The tree I used to hide my snakeskins in was among them. Water moccasins always slithered around the oaks which kept most children away. But not me. I was drawn to everything the old folks said, "Meant me no good." Like I cared. I needed to find my flip flop. I remembered swimming under the canopy of Bowing Oaks. It could be there. It would be there. It was there.

In his hands.

He crouched beneath a Bowing Oak, near the edge of the lake, my flip flop twirling in his fingers. He did not have a fishtail when I first saw him, just a pair of dirty behind jeans and a grey T-shirt. His back was facing me, but as he held my flip flop close to his face, I could have sworn he was smiling. My cousin Jamal was right. Everybody was bound to find out I had big feet just like Great Aunt Frieda.

Pluck. His fingers tore off a fake petal and flicked it into the lake.

Pluck. Another one landed in the dirt by his feet.

When the last petal fell from his fingers, he held my flip flop at arm's length and burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” I blurted out before I could stop myself. Dirt kicked up when he twirled around. His legs were bent and he stood on the balls of his feet. Like a man ready to fight, ready to run. He held the flip flop out like it was a machete. I thought it was kind of funny.

I knew I should be scared. Here I was, way in the woods, near Hishka’s Lake with a complete stranger. A man that looked strong enough to overpower me if I tried to run. But why would I run if the only weapon he thought to use was my deflowered flip flop?

A smile tugged at the corners of his lips when he looked down. My left foot, with its sausage link toes, was hidden beneath my flip flop’s pink flower. Now he could see the full extent of Great Aunt Frieda’s genes in my right foot. I hated Great Aunt Frieda.

He squatted and placed the flip flop in front of me. When I wiggled my toes into it, he stood up before his fingers could graze my foot.

“It’s not like they’re contagious,” I snapped. “They’re just big and ugly.”

He tucked his hands beneath his armpits. “Big and ugly? Have you seen mine?” He stuck his foot out. It was huge with jagged toenails. He had a bunion on the side of his big toe, and the top of his foot had a nasty scar that looked like he had been shot there.

I tried not to smile. “Your feet are supposed to be big and ugly. You’re a man.”

He sucked his teeth. “Afua Ataá, now you sound like Kofi.”

I knew I should be scared. He talked to me like he knew me, like I was supposed to know what the devil he was talking about. And who did he call me? Afu-who? That was the name on the note. So this was “From: E,” the guy who stole my snakeskin collection. Momma always said the best way to outsmart a psycho was to play crazy right along with them. So I played along, pretending to be whoever he thought I was and planning to hightail it out of there the first chance I got. “What makes you think I sound like him?”

He grinned. “You used to see yourself the same as Kofi. You talked to him like a man, you’d even come to me and tell me so. You’d say, ‘Ebo, Kofi won’t listen to me unless I talk to him like a man.’ He hated that. He’s buying this place, you know. To be closer to you.”

That was his name. Ebo. I knew I should be scared of him, the deflowerer of flip flops and stealer of snakeskins. But he talked so calm, so matter-of-factly that he drew me into his web of curiosity, even if he was talking about someone that only he knew, someone that probably didn’t even exist. Call me weak, call me stupid, but I kind of enjoyed playing crazy.

“Why would he want to be close to me?”

He frowned then and took a hesitant step forward. He seemed more scared than I was. “Because he knows what I want to do but shouldn’t.”

Ebo looked at me in a way that made me feel funny in the belly. Trust me. How he stared at me, made me feel like playing crazy was so over. “I gotta go.”

“You should come back sometime, Afua,” he said casually.

I shrugged. “Lemme think on it.”

* * *

I knew I should be scared. Call me weak, call me stupid, but I came back. Several times. I always found an excuse to linger behind while everybody else left the lake to go play kickball. I would swim under the Bowing Oaks and wait for him. Ebo always came. I liked talking to him. About anything. He was a couple of years older than me. Twenty maybe twenty-one. He never told me how old he really was, said it wasn't really important. I could care less. Not a bit. Well maybe a little.

He always sat by the edge of the lake, never swimming, never coming near me. When I asked him about it he said, “Because I swim like a cat.”

I laughed, bobbing in the water a few feet away. “Cats hate water.”

“Exactly.”

Liar.

* * *

It was on the day I nearly got bit by my second snake when I saw what Ebo really was. Unlike the size of the first snake, this one was full grown. Ebo saw it before I did. Its broad head barely above water. Its thick body slithering in silence. I was floating on my back. Eyes closed. He had peeled off his jeans, too much in a hurry to take off his shirt. On the balls of his feet, he ran. Almost completely naked. In the water. Swimming. Not like a cat. But a fish. I nearly died.

Not from the snake but from seeing his near nakedness dive over me. It made my heart stop for a second. It happened so fast. The snake struck. Ebo held the snake, even as the fangs sank deeper into his arm. He told me to swim away, but I couldn't move. He told me again, even as the snake coiled around his belly. But God knows I couldn't move. Everything after that happened in slo-mo. He leaned back; shirt clinging to his muscled chest and a tail, his tail, splashed me back.

Yeah I said it. Splashed my one hundred and forty pound body back. He didn't have to touch me to do it. The wave his tail sent in my direction sent me floating away from him. My mind was skipping like a scratched CD at that point. So many things ran through it. But the only thing that stuck out was how beautiful that tail was, and how it put my birthmark to shame.

I knew I should be scared. I was. For him. When I tried to swim back, to help him wrestle that snake, he swatted his tail at me again.

"You can't touch me!" he shouted.

Tufa's drawn to things that mean her no good, the old folks' chorus rang in my head. But they were wrong. There was nothing bad about Ebo. Something about him drew me like a magnet, something instinctive. I floated a ways from him and watched him open the snake's mouth until the jaw snapped. It uncoiled from around his body and sank under the surface. When he swam toward me, I said nothing. When he swam past me, I said nothing. I followed him to the edge of the lake, my eyes glued on the fishtail that propelled him forward.

My breath came out in a whoosh when he sat on the ground. My fingers reached for that black tail speckled in gold, but he rolled away.

"You can't touch me," he said again, softer this time.

“Why not?”

His fingers inspected his arm where the snake had bitten him. The puncture wounds had healed.

“Why not?” I repeated.

Ebo grabbed his jeans just as his fishtail began to transfigure into man feet, defined calves, and thighs. I could not help myself, even if I wanted to. I drank him in with my eyes. He squirmed into his jeans before I could see anything else and said, “You won’t understand, Afua, alright? Just know if you touched me, or I touched you, you would be different.”

That’s all? I thought to myself as he walked out from under the Bowing Oaks, leaving me alone.

I was already that.

* * *

That was the last time I saw Ebo. I doubted the old man was Kofi, but he knew what was up around that lake. And it wasn’t just snakes. I did not care that the old man’s eyes looked normal now, with a tinge of red, probably from smoking a lot of ganja. They were once rolled back to white because he had seen what I had seen.

“Bruh, where them shades at?” Jamal leaned over, invading the old man’s space, to get a better look at his eyes.

The old man looked down his wide nose at Jamal. “Mi saw no reason to put them on inside.”

I tucked my father’s shoebox beneath my arm. “You talk like my dad. He’s from Jamaica.”

The man tilted his head back and chuckled. “Jamdung? Mi knew you was an island girl, them way you walk. Dead give away. What part him from?”

“Port Antonio.”

Before I could stop him, he leaned over and tapped my nose. “Even betta. My master lived there for sometime, before moving to Florida.”

Octavius arched an eyebrow. “Your master? Man, it ain’t right for a brother to be calling another man master. If this ain’t your crib, cool. But we gots to get you out that post slave syndrome. Understand?”

Jamal sized the old man up. “Wait, so this ain’t even his crib?”

The man covered his heart, like Fred Sanford would do whenever he claimed to be having “The Big One.” He stumbled backwards into the mansion’s entry way before leaning against the door. He was one of them over-the-top old men, the kind that loved to show out when they had an audience. “Mine? This place? No. Mi just do a little someting someting when him needs it.”

“Well say hired help then. That massah business is for the birds,” Octavius said.

The man squinted and scratched his beard. “Mi not exactly *hired*.”

“Illegal?” asked Octavius. “Ain’t nothing wrong with that. Your boy probably promised to help get you citizenship if you worked for him, didn’t he? That’s a fair trade.”

Dreadlocks swung like gridiron pendulums as the man shook his head. “Mi not wanting to give up my Jamaican citizenship.”

“Man quit stalling and just tell it like it is,” Jamal finally said. “You his ho.”

The old man grabbed Jamal by the front of his shirt. “If you want to keep that tongue, don’t ever refer to me as no battybwoy. Hear?”

“My bad, dawg. So what is you then?” asked Jamal.

Stupid, stupid Jamal was going to ruin everything. I’m surprised it took him this long to start acting half his age. He was ghetto personified and never really cared about thinking before talking, that’s if he thought at all. I bet if he earned a dollar for every time something stupid came out his mouth, he would be living so large.

I wanted to see Ebo and his fishtail again, but if we could not even get past the front door, I could kiss looking for him amid the Bowing Oaks goodbye. I gave my cousin a shut-the-heck-up look before saying, “Do you think Kofi would let us cut through to swim in the lake?”

The old man frowned, deepening the cracks in his full lips. Patches of dried skin peeled away from his lips like a snake shedding its old self. He knew who I was talking about. He had seen what I had seen.

“Mi no know a Kofi, but my master has been expecting you.”

“How he know we here?” Octavius asked. “And man you got to stop with that massah business. It’s taking me back to a place I don’t want to go.”

“Surveillance,” the old man said. He stepped away from the door, allowing us to squeeze through.

“Man, why is your boy doing this? Letting us pass through his place to swim in the lake?” asked Jamal. “Be real? He’s a sex offender, ain’t he?”

I did what the old man wanted to do. I smacked Jamal square upside the head. Can’t say he didn’t deserve it.

“If you must know,” said the old man, “he never felt too happy about his house blocking the only trail that led to the lake. He figured he would allow anyone entrance to the lake if they only asked. You three be the first. But he does have one condition.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“To stay away from the Bowing Oaks. The snakes bite you if you gwan near them.”

Tufa’s drawn to things that mean her no good. I gave the wrought iron gates a final look as the front door shut. Call me weak, call me stupid. The old folks were probably right.

* * *

“Where y’all bought these king kong niggas from anyway? EBay?” Jamal asked. “Got them roaming around like they own the place.”

The old man rolled his eyes. Octavius exchanged a look with me. I had to admit, Jamal was right. Chimpanzees roamed around like they owned the place.

“None of them were bought on EBay. Traveling carnivals and private owners been releasing their chimps into Florida swamps, been doing it for nearly one hundred years.” He ushered us into a large kitchen with an island counter and glass cabinets. Balls of dough that looked like pregnant dumplings sat on the counter, waiting to be boiled. “My master found a lot of the chimps on his property in Lakeland. The chimps love the Green Swamp there. So instead of kill them or report them, if he find them there, he keep them.”

Tacked on a bulletin board, beside the double oven, amid handwritten recipes, were newspaper clippings of chimp sightings dating back to the late 1900s:

1912: Dresdon Cooper Extraordinaire's chimpanzee trio, Randall, Susan, and Big Henry, last seen near Lakeland, Florida. He admits to releasing them after they attacked fat boy and gorilla woman, his most popular sideshows.

1936: Goliath, raised by a couple that lived in West Tampa, escaped from their home after attacking owners.

1975: Hunters near Green Swamp are attacked by two chimpanzees. They were able to shoot one. The other escaped.

2009: A group of teenagers reported seeing a chimpanzee bust the windows of a parked SUV while attending a Halloween Party in Lutz.

That was it for me. Was Kofi crazy, riding around the woods gathering up these chimpanzees to live with him here? He had to be.

Jamal scowled as a chimpanzee raced into the kitchen and climbed on top of the counter. "What y'all trying to do here? Outshine *Animal Planet*? Your boy gots to be smoking that uncut stuff. Niggas buy dogs or even hamsters or ferrets if they sissies. But they leave messing with the wild to all them crazy crackas itching for some fame. Feel me?"

The old man clapped his hands and the kitchen lights turned off. "That's the second time your tongue say someting mi no like. Mi master is doing what he tinks is best. All the chimps them are trained to act civilized. He retrains them to be they wild selves. At least on his property they can't hurt nobody."

"But they can hurt him." *And Ebo*, I wanted to say but didn't. "Did he ever think about that?"

“Little island girl, he is beyond hurt. Trust what mi say.”

We left the kitchen and made our way into the expansive living room. Burgundy leather furniture surrounded an open stone fireplace in the center of the marble floor. I knew I had to be dreaming when I saw two chimpanzees having sex on the ottoman. The male grunted while the female turned her head to the side to stare at me. I could not stand to watch and plugged my ears with my fingers when Jamal whispered, “Get it.”

I looked away from the two chimpanzees and watched the dancing flames in the fireplace. How gaudy. Nobody I knew owned a fireplace, and even if they did they never used it considering how hot Tampa got during the summer. I squinted. Beyond the flames was another chimp. I studied its paws. Hands like mine, but bigger and rougher, rested on their knuckles to support the animal’s weight. It breathed deep; if the fire had hips, the chimpanzee’s breath made them sway. The breathing grew louder, above the crackling fire, but it did not move. It simply watched. As the fire danced, hips swishing from side to side, I locked eyes with it. Its eyes were trained on me out of everyone shuffling through the living room.

All of their eyes were.

We left the living room and entered the dining room. In the center of it was a table that could seat twenty people. A chimpanzee crawled from beneath it, and walked on two feet toward me. It stopped a few feet from where I stood and cocked its head to the side. It looked me over once and sniffed the cheap lavender fragrance I always sprayed behind my ears and between my thighs. I held my breath when it grunted and retreated into its table-cave fortified by silk tablecloth and ebony chairs.

I kept close to the old man, my sneakers often bumping into his cracked heels. I clutched my father's new secret box to my chest. Octavius wanted to hold my hand. I could tell. When his fingers grazed mine, I pretended not to notice. Now I like Octavius. A lot. He's not afraid to touch me like the one with a tail as black as midnight, speckled in stardust. But I liked Ebo too. Call me weak, call me stupid. You can even call me trifling, but I can't help it. I liked Ebo too.

I kept repeating in my mind Bowing Oaks...Bowing Oaks...Bowing Oaks. It helped me keep my mind off Octavius. When we turned a corner, walked down a hallway or a flight of stairs, his fingers would graze my elbow, lower back, the under curve of my behind. I was surprised that suffocating feeling I always felt when he was near did not take over.

Pin hinges creaked when the old man pushed against the French double doors that opened out onto a courtyard. A dwarf citrus tree, in a large pot with zigzag patterns carved around its belly, sat in each corner. Murals of the sea were painted on the outer walls. The waves' froth—with swirls of white, blue, gray, and green—created the illusion that the sea lived. I felt dizzy just looking at the painted waves. I tore my eyes away from them to look at the outdoor furniture that circled a fountain.

A woman, carved from red marble, was the fountain's base. Her red marbled skin reminded me of the pictures Aunt Zinga would show me of Himba women. The ocher and butter fat covering their bodies transformed them into beautiful sculptures carved from the earth itself. The woman's tightly coiled hair cascaded to her waist. A gown fit like a glove covered her curvaceous body. Her almond shaped eyes looked to the sky; her face held a timeless beauty. She had me beat. I'd give her that.

I squinted when sunlight danced across the statue's jewelry. Rings fit snug around each of her marble fingers, bangles circled her wrists. Ropes of pearl, gold, and stringed cowrie shells hung from her neck. Only a few women at Momma's church wore that much jewelry around their fat necks and fingers. They could care less if everybody called them Jezebels behind their backs. They rocked their bling to the fullest.

The largest pieces of jewelry were not on the statue's neck or fingers. It was in the eyes of a huge marble snake draped on her shoulders, its massive head rested on the swell of her breasts. Diamonds.

"She's tall and got that good hair like Hishka," Jamal said.

Octavius stared the serpent in the eyes. "Any hair that in its natural state is good, J. Brothers like you need to get hip to that." He rubbed his chin and shook his head. "And even though this woman got long hair, that don't make her Hishka."

I knelt down. The fountain's water pooled at the statue's feet, pouring in a steady stream from the snake's mouth. "There's some words carved at the base. They say *Mami Wata never forsakes her children.*"

The old man laughed. "It's true what it say."

"Who is she?" I asked.

His eyes zeroed in on me, the way the chimpanzees had. "She one of the mami wata deities worshipped in Africa since ancient day. Some bring the worship over here. Your faddah probably heard of her. Back home they call her River Mama."

"Kofi worships her?" How else did a statue have more jewelry on her body than a pawn shop or any God fearing churchwoman I had ever seen?

Before the old man could answer, a large chimpanzee burst through the French doors. The doors swished back and forth from the force. Gray patches splotched its dark fur, its wrinkled face, black. It raced around the old man's legs. I couldn't breathe as a chimp far larger and older than the rest dug its fingers into the furniture. It climbed over lounge chairs and couches, leaving them toppled in its wake. It ran past me, not even giving me a second glance. Hands lifting ropes of pearl and gold, away from the goddess' neck, were the only things the chimpanzee saw. Jamal's hands.

The chimpanzee flung Octavius into the old man with a powerful swipe and grabbed Jamal by the front of his wife beater. It happened so fast. Too fast. A pop echoed off the walls. All I could think about was what if that chimp crushed every bone in my cousin's body? The chimp pushed Jamal into the fountain. The once tranquil surface of the fountain now mirrored the froth of the mural's waves.

Pearls and cowrie shells skidded down the statue's breast, waist, and followed the flair of her gown. They sounded like bullets firing underwater. I grabbed the few pearls that landed at my feet and flung them at the chimp's back. It never noticed.

The chimpanzee did not growl nor scream. It merely grunted. It placed a foot on Jamal's chest and grabbed his wrist. Jamal tried to land a punch in the chimp's belly, but when that did not work, he pushed his feet against the edge of the fountain's base to slither away.

My sneakers were soaked from all the water that sloshed out of the fountain. The chimpanzee did not move an inch when the old man called to him. It pried Jamal's hand open like a can of fruit. Pearls, bits of gold, and cowrie shells trickled out of his hand. When the last

was gone, the chimp took its foot off Jamal's chest. I never saw Jamal so shaken before in my life as he limped toward me. Thankfully none of his bones were broken.

"You could have got yourself killed. Nobody touches the statue. Hear?" The old man's voice was flat. He spoke like my dad's brother, Uncle Devon, did whenever he wanted to hide his patois and speak the Queen's English.

Jamal opened his mouth to say something smart, but the old man held up his hand. "Mi no want to hear it."

The chimpanzee paced between us and the mami wata statue. This thing is wild...this thing is wild...this things is wild... was the mental mantra I repeated over and over.

"Easy Kaba." The old man patted the air for calmness. He inched toward the great ape, his movements calculated. He continued to pat the air with his right hand as his left disappeared in his back pocket. He pulled out a flat cookie and tossed it to Kaba.

The great ape sniffed the cookie and broke off a piece. He chewed and swallowed it before stuffing the rest into his mouth.

"That great ape nearly attacked my boy and you gone give him a cookie?" asked Octavius.

"It's not the cookie mi care about him eating, but what's in it."

The chimp slowed his pace and then sat down. He scratched his belly, his eyes drooped. Whatever was in that cookie was nothing to play with.

"Tell Kofi that he can't train a wild thing that was trained to act civilized, to act wild again." I said. "Not in a civilized place."

The old man pulled a key out his pocket and unlocked the furthest door in the courtyard. The door opened to a shady trail I had walked a million times. Hishka's lake was only five minutes away. "Island girl, who say this place is civilized? He train the chimps by leaving them alone. Like my master, their home is very far away so he connects with them in a way mi no rightly know how to do. He allow them to guard tings, mourn when their own dies, throw tings when angry, have sex on tables or in the bathtub, whenever the mood takes them, hunt around the lake when them hungry, kill when someting threatens them or theirs because he tells me he's done it all himself." He tucked the key back into his pocket. "You say this is a civilized place. Perhaps that's because you don't know what wild really is."

Wild child. I've been called that enough to know what wild really was. Trust me. As I followed Jamal and Octavius down the trail that led to Hishka's lake, that's all I could think about. How wild everybody claimed I was. My grandmomma Cecile gave me that name, because I was the only grandchild that talked to trees at night and slept barefoot amid the unmarked family gravestones behind her house. I could never help that I was drawn to strange things. Before I started collecting snakeskins, I remember watching a snake swallow a mouse behind my grandparents' home. The twitching mouse kicking inside the snake's body for a full three minutes fascinated me. Since that moment, I had wanted a snake for a pet. Daddy refused. He wouldn't even buy me one that was not venomous. He believed people who held snakes period died young because their bodies shed their spirits before their time. I always took what he said seriously. That's why when I decided to make the snakes come to me, I'd wear my grandmother's gardening gloves.

At night I would hunt for mice in the woods behind my grandparents' house. I would fashion a trap made out of a green tray that was once filled with strawberries my momma would buy from the farmer's market. I'd glue a piece of cardboard on the bottom of the tray to make the trap sturdy. I would use cheese for bait and hook a wire hanger to the tray. For the final touch, I would tie a piece of string to the hanger. Pull the string and flip the tray over when the mice came marching in was my plan. They never came. Nor did the snakes. That bothered me until I found my first shed skin around the Bowing Oaks. I'm happy Daddy never bought me a snake. I'm happy I never caught a mouse to use as bait. I would never have started snakeskin collecting. I would never have lost my flip flop around Hishka's Lake. I would never have met Ebo if things had gone my way.

Wild child. That's what I was, what Kaba was. That chimp had a right to behave wild. Wildness was normal for him. Sometimes I wondered if rivers, oceans, and seas were like giant erasers to blur the line between wild and normal. Maybe wild Kaba is normal Kaba someplace else. Or maybe he's the blurred line, caught somewhere in between. Who gets to say what's wild and who gets to say what's normal? The realization of it all stole through my limbs when the bowing oaks on the far side of Hishka's Lake came into view. I raised the box over my head and danced. I had had it wrong. If wild was normal for Kaba, certainly it could be normal for me too.

While Octavius and Jamal stripped down to their swim trunks, I sat my box beneath a tree in front of them.

"Where you going?" Jamal asked.

"Bathroom."

“You too good to do it in here like the rest of us?”

I sucked my teeth. Jamal picked the perfect time to start thinking. “I think I just started my period, and I don’t want to run all the way back up the trail if I did. Blood everywhere. I’ll attract wild animals. If I’m on, I’ll have one of y’all bring me a roll of toilet paper.”

Jamal did just what I expected him to do. He gagged. “Dang, girl, I ain’t need to hear all of that. Go about your business. But don’t go too far. I ain’t trying to have Uncle V swang one of them machetes at me if something happen to you. Understand?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah.”

Twigs crunched beneath my feet as I walked into the woods. In the distance, I heard Jamal and Octavius jump into the lake. Their laughter bounced off the trees. Jamal shouted, “Man, stop acting like a faggot. Why you shivering?”

“Because my queen ain’t in here to keep me warm,” he shouted back.

I’ll admit, I thought that was kind of cute.

I entered a clearing that opened up to the Bowing Oaks. My grandfather used to say that something made things grow long and tall around this lake. The same thing that made Hishka grow a head full of hair every night was the same thing that made these Florida oaks taller than all the rest.

They weren’t so tall now leaning on their sides, barely high enough to have their leaves graze the lake’s surface. This was where I first saw him, where I wanted to see him now. I peeled off my blouse and pants. I could care less that my panties with the pink icing cupcakes showed. My pink sports bra was the problem. It pushed my breasts up giving me just a hint of cleavage. But, the wasp sting had deepened its bruise. It was a nasty red thing, lacking the vibrancy of the

Mami Wata statue and the red ocher skin of the Himba women. It throbbed and looked like a tiny inkblot. If asked what I thought it represented now, “butt ugly” would be my response.

I pulled my hair tie off and allowed my kinky twists to fall to my shoulders. I parted them in the back and pushed them forward. They reached my collarbone but were not long enough to cover the butt ugly inkblot.

Octavius kept calling me, asking me to keep him warm. I would have if I did not want to see Ebo. I wanted to run with him and just before we reached the edge of the lake, kick off. I wanted my kinky twists to fly behind me, the wind to chafe my lips so he could kiss them with his moist ones. I wanted to tuck in my legs and shut my eyes and let my behind be the first thing that hit the water. I wanted to hold my breath and for him to wrap his arms around me to ward off the sensation of a million needles poking me. I wanted to swim beneath the water with him, my thighs rubbing against the scales of his tail. I wanted to smile when the sway of green algae and darting fish tickled my belly. And then I would wrap my arms around him and trust him to catapult us to the surface. It would be so perfect. If only he would come.

“You know, I gotta birthmark on top of my right foot that looks like a dog pissing on a fire hydrant, but yours got mine beat.”

I turned around. It was Octavius with one of his gap grins. He walked toward me, drenched. His chest soaked my sports bra when his arms circled my waist. I felt numb.

“What do you care about my birthmark anyway, Tavius?” I didn’t mean to snap at him even though that’s how it came out. What was wrong with me?

“It’s beautiful. It kind of looks like a mermaid with her arms stretched out. But it could be an ankh too; never let nobody tell you Kemet’s origin was not African.” He turned me around,

his fingers dancing across my back. “But now that I look at it, it could be a cross, though I ain’t one to be branding nobody with the white man’s religion.”

I laughed, despite myself.

He smiled back. “Looka here. Now that’s the Tufa I came looking for.”

I wanted to cry and laugh at the same time. Call me weak, call me stupid, but this time I didn’t feel like I had to play crazy. This time I felt like I really was crazy. “Tavius, my birthmark is what it is. I don’t think about it much because I don’t have to see it, unless I really want to. It’s not like it’s on my face. Sometimes I think everybody else know more about it than I do. That’s why I keep it covered, to hide it from everybody. Keep it to myself.”

His hands traveled down my waist. I pretended not to notice. When they palmed my behind and drew me closer, I gulped.

“You don’t have to hide it from me because I’m not everybody.”

My eyes widened when his lips pressed against mine. It was not supposed to be like this, I kept telling myself. It was supposed to be Ebo not Octavius. This was my first kiss! Shouldn’t I have some choice in who gave it to me?

Sistah girl, you gots to be crazy, my body answered. It betrayed me and for a hot little minute—I loved it. My eyes fluttered as the kiss deepened, and they finally shut. My hands had no clue where to go. They weaved behind my back, dangled at my sides. If I was not dark skinned, I would have blushed from embarrassment when Octavius grabbed my hands and placed them around his neck.

My body betrayed me. It pressed against him. It liked the way our lips fused together. It liked the way his hands touched me, in a way no one ever touched me before, in a way I wanted *him* to touch me. I broke off the kiss before I started bawling like a baby. I had to get out of here.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Like I could really tell him. I looked into his eyes. They seemed so black; his lips parted. Jesus he was fine. I blinked away that prickly sensation I always got before I cried. Although I probably should cry and make the whole I’m-on-my-period-and-extremely-hormonal lie more convincing.

When he knelt down to kiss the wasp sting on my breast, I was shocked. Before Octavius had told me he and Jamal were going to try to swim in Hishka’s Lake, I had tried everything in the book to get him to notice it. He had noticed it all along! Thoughts of normalness and wildness danced in my mind, but my mind went blank when his once soft kiss turned into something else. His mouth sucked the sting as if willing it away. I couldn’t breathe. He had noticed it, I kept telling myself. However, the way his mouth clung to it like the suction cup from an octopus’ tentacle made me wonder if he wished it wasn’t there. A secret part of me rejoiced. Octavius was one person who understood me, who knew wild would always mean normal. He didn’t want the wasp sting there anymore than I did.

A part of me felt Octavius was the perfect guy. But that other part of me would never want the perfect guy, but the perfect stranger that wore dirty jeans and a grey T-shirt and called me Afua Ataá. That other part of me would always want Ebo, the man that became a fish whenever his feet touched water.

Splash

I am Afua, the one with unforgiving eyes, clean legs and whose womb leaps with life. They have taken him, the dead man. They brought us all through the trapdoor. The dead. The living. The other girls with clean legs I have not seen. But there are whispers among us as to where they could be. Some think they threw the women into the water with no end like they do the dead, but I don't think so.

Splash. A woman drops to her knees, carrying to the floor three other chained bodies, as a thin man with a mouth fixed in an eternal scream is thrown overboard. Dead.

Splash. A girl looks at the floor when a woman with her face drops into the sea. Dead.

Splash. A woman ululates, her sunken face tilts to the bright sun as a small boy is swallowed by the sea. Dead.

Splash. They drop the dead man that was between us into the water. I look beyond the crying women to see the one as black as me, whose foolish pride paid for the river's blood.

He stands taller than the rest. He closes his eyes when the last of the dead splash into the sea. When they splash seawater on us to bathe us, he says nothing. As they tell us to jump and dance to the sound of our own clanking chains, he does nothing. His eyes open. They drift to me. I know what he is thinking. He regrets the choice he made with the pale ones, the choice to enslave many Fante. My lover's people. But he did not foresee the many that die in the belly of this great fish. Our people. I never take my eyes off him as I spit. It is too late for regrets.

CHAPTER SIX: SPOOKISM

My wet socks looked like cinnamon buns when I rolled them up and stuffed them into my shoes. I flicked on the living room light and rolled my eyes. Momma made sure to tape a note on the television, reminding me I needed to bring Aunt Zinga's gifts out the attic ASAP. Right about now I wanted to just take a shower in the dark and cry my eyes out. The last thing I wanted to do was help Momma deceive Aunt Zinga like she did whenever my aunt and cousin Shakara came to visit from New Orleans.

I tossed the secret box on my bed and peeled off my blouse. I was not having my shirt become dirty from all the dust in the attic. There was probably more dust in the attic than all the dust found in one of those Pharaoh tombs Octavius wished he could excavate.

"Inside the tombs are untouched artifacts, Tufa. You get what I'm saying? No chipped off noses or lips or washed off paint. The secret about who the ancient Egyptians were ain't really no secret, but I could beat everyone over the head with the truth if I could just get my hand on one of them statues."

I grabbed a dust rag out the linen closet and trekked down the hallway. Octavius could keep dreaming about Pharaoh Tombs for all I cared. I had touched enough dusty statues to last me a lifetime.

I hauled the ladder out the garage and positioned it beneath the open attic door at the end of the hallway. I don't know how Momma got Daddy to open the attic door after she cut into him about his dreams this morning. But she did it. Momma got skills.

The metal felt cool beneath my bare feet and the ladder wobbled with each step I took. I barely glanced at all of the statues, masks, and wood carvings covered in dusty sheets when I

scrambled onto the attic floor. I almost fell through the attic door when I heard something bump into a statue in the far right corner. Rats never scared me like they scared Momma. In fact, I thought they were kind of cute. I reached for the broom I always kept by the attic door. Lord knows I didn't look forward to sweeping up rat mess along with the dust. But I didn't want the rat's life to be cut short if Momma ever discovered it inside the attic.

I tied the clean dust rag over my nose and swept a clean path down a row of sculptures hidden by white sheets covered in sunflowers. My fingers danced across a large ceremonial mask covered in newspaper. I swept underneath the table it rested on and froze. On the floor, on the opposite side of the table, was a pair of footprints. They did not belong to Momma. For some strange reason I did not inherit her small feet. They did not belong to Daddy either. His were just as long as the ones that left this trail of dust, but much wider.

I swept away the footprints, but found another pair. I swept those away too. I followed the footprints that snaked a trail between Aunt Zinga's gifts. I yelped in surprise when they stopped in front of a statue that had its sheet removed. It stood nearly six feet tall. Aunt Zinga loved this Benin sculpture. It sat beside the television whenever she came. That way, Momma knew she wouldn't miss it. Its full lips, wide nose, and neck roped with coral beads sat beneath a pointy headdress. Two mudfish that balanced on turtle shells were where the statue's legs should have been. Before meeting Ebo, I used to think fish for legs was funny.

"Who's there?" No answer. Whoever it was would catch me before I made it down the ladder. I gripped the broom like Daddy had taught me how to properly hold a machete. Heart racing, palms sweating I stood there. It didn't make sense. The footprints stopped here. Something told me to look behind the Benin statue. The sheet that once covered the Benin statue

sat on the floor. The only problem was that someone was now hiding beneath it. I didn't hesitate to raise the broom over my head and get to whacking. A deep grunt told me it was a man. He stood up and staggered into the Benin statue. I stopped my whacking long enough to steady the statue. In those few seconds, the man flung the sheet on the ground. Dust clouded my vision, but before he could run away, I swung the broom in the direction where I thought he was breathing.

“Afua, stop! It's me.”

The broom froze in mid-strike. I coughed, the dust settled on my kinky twists, on my eyelashes, my shoulders. I untied the dust rag from my face and looked up at him. Crisscross lines of dust covered his face from all of my whacking. His jeans and T-shirt had the same lines. I nearly died when he smiled at me through the dust.

I leaned the broom against the statue. “What are you doing up here?”

Ebo crossed his arms and shrugged. “I'm surprised your first question wasn't how I got up here, seeing that there was no ladder for me to climb.”

I could not say anything to that. Maybe he was not just a fish but could sprout wings like a bird and fly. He chuckled when I stared at his shoulder and rounded him to look at his back. “I'm nothing special really.”

“You have a tail whenever you're in water. Or did you forget about that?”

“No, I didn't forget. Though I'm good at hiding that which I don't want others to see.” He stepped behind me. I shuddered when I felt his breath on my back. I wanted to lean into him, feel his chest press into my spine, but I knew he would not want that. So like a statue, like a stupid and scared little girl, I just stood there.

“Everybody hides something they don’t want anyone else to know about,” he said.

“Being good at hiding things does not make me that special.”

His voice was by my ear. It was so close. I could not help myself, I turned around. For an instant his face was close to mine, but he stepped away from me, his fingers on the Benin statue.

“Why does your mother hide Olokun?”

I laughed. If he was standing in this attic, surely he had to walk through Momma’s Heaven on Earth theme in the living room. There’s no way he was being serious; the answer was too obvious. “You’re joking, right?”

He shook his head.

I rolled my eyes. “She doesn’t really like all of this African stuff around the house. She says it’s ungodly and takes too much attention away from her angels.”

“Yet she takes it down whenever her sister visits.”

I tilted my head back to stare him in the eyes. “How do you know that?”

He sat behind the statue and covered himself with the sheet. He must be joking if he thought I was going to fall for that. “Oh please, Ebo. I’m not going to just walk away and believe you’ve disappeared because you’re hiding beneath a dusty sheet. Now answer my question or I’m going to reintroduce you to my broom.”

I was lying about the broom part and he knew it. He threw the sheet off and looked around one of Olokun’s mudfish legs to give me a boyish smile. “If I tell you, you won’t get upset?”

I picked up my broom and said nothing.

He stood up and wiped the dust from his clothes. He had the perfect shaped head for a low cut fade. Yet his hair had grown out an inch or two since last time I saw him. He refused to pick it out, so his hair had gathered into tiny coils all over his head. His once smooth cheeks had a bit of stubble on them. He didn't need to have a clean shave or rock a low fade to be finer than fine to me. When I met his eyes staring at me from beneath bushy eyebrows, I looked away.

“Would you have me turn around as well?”

I choked when I saw him smiling. “Glad you think everything is so funny, Ebo. Look, my hands are itching to slap that smile off your face, so I suggest you get to telling me how you got in my house and know all my business.”

I meant it that time, but he didn't believe it, seeing that his smiled widened.

“Let's say the day Kofi told me he saw you being born in a Belle Glade work camp, I returned to the very same building to see if it was true. Let's say the day of your grandfather's funeral, after Kofi nearly crossed over in the flesh to touch your cheek, he forbade anyone from coming near you, especially me. Let's say on the day I found out someone has been trying to kill you I decided to continue my long tradition of disobeying Kofi. Let's say, Afua Ataá, I have been watching you and everyone around you to ensure that you remain safe.”

Hold up and rewind this for a minute. Did Ebo just say that he, this Kofi guy, and God knows who else has been checking up on me all my life? Since the day I was born? If that was the case, Ebo was so out of my league. He was probably as old as my daddy, maybe even older. But he didn't look a day over twenty-one. What was up with that? And what is this crossing over in the flesh business he was talking about? So that was Kofi after all. The way Ebo said it made it seem as if crossing over was a bad thing, whatever crossing over actually meant. If it was so

bad, why would Kofi try to do it? And on top of all of this, somebody was trying to kill me? I laughed. Out of everything Ebo just said, reaffirming that I had a killer on my hands—with strangulation as their preferred method of doing me in—was the only part that actually made any sense.

The killer I already knew about, and Kofi was just this disembodied Godfather with a lot of cheddar I had never even met. So out of everything he told me, I just wanted to know one thing.

“So please just tell me you heard about my birthing story from eavesdropping on my momma or anybody else that likes talking about it. Because if you didn’t, that would make you how old exactly?”

His smile faded. He looked down at me in disbelief. “Out of everything I told you, you only want to know about me? How old I am? Have you not been listening to anything I have said to you?”

I crossed my arms and glared at him. “Don’t try to get off the subject. And don’t give me ‘It doesn’t matter.’ ‘Cause right about now, it does.”

Ebo threw his hands up in the air, paced around the Olokun statue, and talked in a language that was definitely not English.

“Kofi was right about one thing. You were always a stubborn woman.” He paced as he spoke. From time to time he would glare at me. As if that was going to work. “Anyone would be scared to know someone was trying to murder them, but not you. No, you just want to know how old is Ebo.”

“Well? How old are you?”

He stopped in front of me just inches from where I stood. “Fine. I’ll tell you. But I don’t see how it would make much difference. Before the changing of this season, I will have become two hundred and twenty-seven-years old.”

Riiight. I stared at him with a straight face, waiting for him to burst out laughing. Gotcha! You’re so gullible, Afua! Either statement would have sufficed, yet he just studied my face without even a smirk. Man, he was good.

“You’re kidding, right?”

When he didn’t say anything, I did what I always did in extremely awkward situations.

I nodded toward the statue in front of us. “So how did you know his name was Olokun?”

He smirked then. “Now who’s trying to change the subject, though I must admit you picked the wrong subject to change it to. Your Aunt Zinga is a wise woman. She hides nothing, yet she is truly special. I remember when she told you about Olokun. Two Thanksgivings ago, wasn’t it?”

“Olokun has a palace beneath the sea,” Aunt Zinga had said when Daddy cut her a slice of turkey. She had refused to eat a bite. She hated American holidays, and she only acknowledged them because it was one of the few times during the year she could see most of the family in one spot.

“How can he breathe if he lives underwater?” I stuffed my mouth with homemade cornbread stuffing and downed it with apple juice.

Aunt Zinga sucked her teeth. “*He?* Don’t be silly Tufa. Olokun is both male and female depending on what part of Africa you go to.”

I choked and stole a glance at Momma. Her fingers had tightened around the knife she was using to slice into the pork roast. “But God is a man. Everybody says so.”

Aunt Zinga had stood up. “Have you seen God, Tufa? Have any of you? If he’s only a man, then tell me how are you and I made in his image?”

Jamal tried to grab my mom by the arm, but she scooted her chair away from the table and stood up. Knife still in hand, she pointed it at Aunt Zinga. Can’t say I was surprised. My family always acted up whenever they talked about religion or politics. “Now Zinga, don’t be putting all that nonsense into my child’s head, you hear me? Now everybody knows the only God there is, is a man, and all this female god craziness is just that. Crazy.”

I couldn’t look at either one of them. I kept my eyes trained on the knife in Momma’s hand. She tilted it in a way that made me catch a glimpse of Aunt Zinga’s keloid scar, the one nobody talked about, the one that made her look like she was always smiling.

“Rica, why don’t you or anybody ever think around here?” She placed her palms to her temples and shook her head. “Thanksgiving? Humph. The first white folk to come here was so thankful to God for not freezing them over, yet they did just that to us. Froze us. We don’t know nothing about who we was, and because of that, we ain’t got a clue what we becoming.”

Aunt Zinga shoved her chair under the table and looked at her slice of turkey in disgust. “You use that knife for what it’s made for, little sister. If Tufa wants to thaw out a little, I’ll be more than happy to bring her out into the sun. All she need do is ask me. Come Shakara.”

I couldn’t breathe as I watched my aunt and favorite cousin disappear from the dinner table. They left all of us sitting there, open-mouthed, dumbfounded. Only Momma could sit back down and continue eating like nothing ever happened.

“You saw that too?” My eyes trained on Olokun; embarrassment for how my family acted that day was probably written on my face.

Ebo nodded. “I saw enough. Though I must say that is not how I learned of Olokun’s name. You see, I know this statue is called Olokun, because I have met Olokun.”

Okay so not only was he older than dirt, but now Ebo was trying to tell me that he actually met the Benin sea god Olokun? In person? This just kept getting better. Or worse. The more Ebo talked to me, the more I felt everybody had it right all along. I was stone crazy. Big time.

“Your aunt is coming today, correct?”

I cut my eyes at him. If he already knew, why in the devil was he asking?

“Let me help you with this chore your mother always makes you do.”

That caught me by surprise. Why was he doing this? I asked myself as I watched Ebo snatch sheet after sheet off the African artwork. He let me carry down the small ceremonial masks and fertility figurines Aunt Zinga bought me for my birthday. The larger statues I usually helped my daddy bring down, Ebo insisted that he haul into the living room alone. I was at a loss for words as he cradled the artwork in his arms, holding them as if they were sacred. He put them in their proper places and all of their names he knew.

He knew to hang the painting of Papa Legba, the Haitian God that’s the gatekeeper between worlds, beside the front door. He knew to sit the Ancient Egyptian goddess Nut beside the living room window. He knew to sit the Dahomey creator of all things, Nana Buluku, on the bathroom sink. He made sure to turn her wrinkled face away from the faucet so the crack below

her cheek was barely noticeable. One by one he brought them down. They cluttered the kitchen, the living room, the bathroom, and bedrooms. Momma's heaven on earth theme had disappeared within a few hours. The last of the artwork to be brought down was Olokun and Yemaja.

Yemaja, the Yoruba goddess of the ocean, the great mother and protector of the youth, sat in the corner. I used my rag to wipe the dust away from her face. Aunt Zinga had brought the statue from Brazil, off an old man who sold his carvings on the side of the road.

"This statue is a gem," was what Aunt Zinga said she had told the old man. "Pregnant women have a special place in Yemaja's heart. It'll make the perfect gift for my sister."

"She will come to love it. May Yemaja protect the little one and the mother."

Yemaja was the first gift Aunt Zinga ever gave to Momma, and a lump crept up my throat when I saw the way Ebo held her. Like a bird with a broken wing. Standing up, the statue came to my knee. He did not put her on the coffee table, beside the warrior angels Jamal gave Momma as a Christmas gift. Instead, he sat her near the kitchen sink and turned her so that she could stare out the window, up at the sun.

"I'm sure after being covered in dust for so long, Yemaja would want her likeness to be near water and the sun. If only for a few days."

"I don't think Momma would notice."

Ebo smiled. "But your Aunt Zinga will. You can tell her it was your idea. In secret of course."

I picked up a pillow off the couch and threw it at his face. He laughed and threw it back at me. I caught it and ran toward him, ready to smack him from close range. I had him cornered.

I dangled the pillow in his face, my grin from ear to ear. My gums were probably showing. Like I cared.

“Be careful with that thing, Afua.” He was still smiling. “It could do great damage.”

I arched an eyebrow. His eyes were twinkling, his back against the wall. I swallowed. My resolve to continue our pillow fight changed into something else. It started in the pit of my stomach and traveled down my limbs, to the tips of my fingers and toes. He stopped smiling when I dropped the pillow.

“What are you—”

I kissed him before he could say another word. I surprised myself at how bold I was. But I wanted to know. I needed to know if kissing Ebo, a man that by all rights should be catching Zzzs at Rest Haven Memorial, was better than kissing Octavius. His hands gripped my upper arms. He’s going to push me a way, I thought. I whimpered, “Don’t,” but I doubt he understood me. I pressed in closer to him, the way Octavius did to me earlier today. Geesh, this had to be the most trifling thing I had ever done—kissing two guys in one day. But I couldn’t help it. Both of them called to me, and I found it impossible to ignore their calls.

I stood up on my tiptoes and kissed his neck. A groan started in his throat; I could feel it against my lips. His hands didn’t move from my arms. He thought he was in control, holding me like that. But I wanted his hands elsewhere. I must have been crazy, kissing up on a grown man in my parents’ home. At the moment, I did not care that this could get Jerry Springer ugly if my father came in. He started hiding a machete in nearly every room the day Momma told him I started my period. He had showed them to me and said, “Tufa, a boy should never touch you.

You hear what mi say? If he does, he's ready to be a man. And if he touches you before he make you him wife, mi will touch him with one of these. Understand?"

But I was doing all the touching, and I was not liking it very much. I tried to wriggle my arms out of Ebo's grasp, but he was too strong.

"I want you to touch me too," I whispered in his ear.

He shook his head. "You don't know what you've started, what us touching like this will mean for you."

He hid his face in the crook of my neck. His grip loosened from my arms with every second. "Forget about me. That boy who kissed you has a good and strong heart. He will make you happy."

He saw Octavius kiss me? God, how that must have looked like. He probably thought I was downright scandalous. I wouldn't blame him if he did. But his hands still circled my arms so I told him to look at me. It took him a while. He stared at me, not bothering to come closer, not bothering to push me away either. I gulped when I saw in the center of his forehead was a dot that glowed blue. It matched the ring around his irises. His eyes drew me to him and scared the living daylights out of me all at the same time.

"Look, I don't know much about guys alright?" I said in a shaky voice. "I've never been boy crazy. My daddy was not having that. But I'll admit when I'm around Octavius I feel normal and yeah he does make me happy." The dot in his forehead dimmed. His tongue could lie, but not what was between the eyes. He didn't want me to forget him at all. "But he only makes a part of me happy. The other part wants to be around you. I feel sort of wild and carefree when I'm

with you. I don't know why you make me happy, but something inside me calls to you, Ebo, and I can't help it. I need you. Can't you understand that?"

He shuddered and closed his eyes. The dot grew brighter, so bright that I had to squint. "More than you know, Afua Ataá. But you have no idea what you ask of me, what you're asking of yourself."

I knew exactly what I was asking him, and I felt just a tad bit whorish for even asking. I did not want him to walk out of my life, even though I told him that there was someone else I also had feelings for. Why couldn't I choose one over the other? Why couldn't it be as easy as flipping a coin, letting the wind on either side seal my fate? I looked at him, wanting him to understand that if I could choose, I would.

"I know what I'm asking, Ebo, and I know it's selfish but—"

He laughed. "You think the fact that you are drawn to me and that boy is selfish? Afua, you have no idea what true selfishness is. What you ask of me, you do out of complete innocence. But you have no idea what you ask. I want to give it to you, for I am that greedy and needy. But you must first understand what you are really asking of me."

Okaaay. Was Ebo talking complete circles around what I said to just avoid kissing me? I tilted my head up, shut my eyes, and puckered my lips. He gave me a soft shake. I opened my eyes and frowned. "Fine, just tell me, since you think I don't know what I want. What am I really asking you to give me?"

Ebo sighed. "Contact."

I couldn't help myself. I laughed in his face. "Are you serious? We just kissed. Plus your hands are still around my arms, which is extremely uncomfortable I might add. We've already made contact, Ebo."

He rolled his eyes. "The contact of the Ataw, my people. We call it Dalybé. It takes three contacts for Dalybé to occur. All three times must be consensual and with the same Ataw. The first time must be done on land, where your kind live. The second must be in water, the realm of the Ataw. The final is in the realm of the spirit, there Dalybé will be complete."

I looked up at him. "Meaning?"

He gave me an exasperated look. "Our spirits will be intertwined forever. You will be mine and mine only. You will become as I am. Ataw."

He had to be joking. All of this had to be one big nasty joke. Jamal probably was behind this somehow. Every excuse I thought of made absolutely no sense, and the way Ebo stared at me with those eyes ringed in blue light only confirmed that this was no joke. This was for real.

"But we don't have to do the Daly-thingie. I mean we can just stay out of water and last time I checked, I have to be dead to go to heaven, so the spirit realm is a no-go. We're good." When Ebo said nothing, my heart dropped. I would be his and his only? So that meant that Octavius was out. And I would become like him? What did that mean, exactly? "Ebo please tell me we're good."

"Afua, you always knew when I lied, so there's no point in me trying now."

He called me Afua, but this time the name weighed more than I could carry. "And stop calling me that. My name is Tufa, not Afua. Understand? Tuuuuufa."

The light between his eyes grew brighter. “I know that is what they call you, but they call you many things that are not your name. You wonder what is inside you that calls to me. Dalybé is never initiated by a human, but what is inside you recognized me and the bond we already shared. It would be impossible for me to stay around you and not make contact, for I recognize and am drawn to what is inside you too.

Even though you do not know it, you have already put Dalybé into motion by kissing me. And I will not have to find you. Things will happen. You will start to feel things, dream things, remember things tens times worse than what you feel, dream, and remember already. Most importantly your body, mind and spirit will call to me so much so that you will beg me to finish what you have started.”

Holy crap. I had no idea that what I wanted was so complicated. He warned me and I wouldn't listen. The old folks warned me with their, *Tufa's drawn to things that mean her no good* mantras, but still I wouldn't listen. Even now that tiny part of me that was not scared to death, was thrilled by what he told me. Just a teenie weenie part was thrilled. For the most part, I was ready to piss my pants. God, what had I done?

Enemy

I am Afua, the one with clean legs who is not lucky. My womb will not settle, even though I do not yet show. My man is still alive. The one with blood exactly like mine hates him. When we were on the upper deck, I saw my man. We pretend to not know each other for fear of what the pale ones might do if they find out. He is chained next to the one with foolish pride. If my mouth was not filled with so much hate, I would have smiled. How tortured the man as black as me

must feel, chained beside the one he forbid me to want, because his people and ours were enemies.

Enemies. I lay next to the woman who does not scream. She belongs to my man's people, but she is not my enemy. Nothing separates us now, so she looks upon me from time to time. I cannot see her stare, but I feel it. My hands with my dirty nails cover my womb, because that's where I feel her eyes.

The trapdoor has not opened in a long time. Since the dead have been thrown overboard, there is a little room. But the woman every so often closes the space between us. I do not notice it at first because the rattle, rattle, rattle her chains make does not bother me. I do not notice it at first because the stink between her thighs is no stronger than mine. I do not notice it at first because she never makes a sound, like the dead. And because I did not notice, I screamed out when her hand brushed near my womb.

CHAPTER SEVEN: KEY

Ebo's hands still shackled my arms when the key jingled in the lock. I tried pushing him toward the back door, hoping he would just disappear like the blue light from around his eyes and forehead. He refused to budge. His hands rubbed against my arms and settled on my lower back, just above my behind. He leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. A soft peck. What was up with that? My irritation must have shown on my face because he tilted my face to kiss me on my other cheek. Was he crazy? After the way I just kissed him? He giggled. Just when the key turned in the lock, he planted a kiss on my lips.

“Do you want my behind to be sore for life? Because I'm gone get a behind whooping, apocalyptic style, if you don't sneak out through the back.”

He pulled one of my kinky twists and winked. Yeah he must be crazy, pulling on a sistah's hair. Jamal was the last and only guy that tried that mess and I smacked fire to his face for that.

“There are certain things I can do as an Ataw. Your family will only see me if I allow it.”

I gulped. So he could be around people and they not know it? Great. He could have been checking up on me in the shower or when I was doing number two. Just the thought of him watching me change my tampon made me feel sick.

He chuckled. “I'll admit I have been drawn to you in an uncanny way. I want to be around you all the time. But, I have fought my desire long enough to allot you privacy, when needed.”

I rolled my eyes. His definition of privacy and mine were two different things. The loud talking on the other side of the door told me Aunt Zinga and Shakara were with Momma. I

grabbed Ebo by the front of his shirt and tried to push him down the hallway. His body felt like lead. I probably would have made more progress pushing a horse.

“Well if you won’t leave, at least make yourself invisible to me too.”

He shook his head. “I can’t. I told you when we made *contact* things would happen. Neither I nor any of my kind can now hide themselves from you. Even if Dalybé were never completed, you will always be able to see the Ataw.”

Lord, have mercy. If I wasn’t crazy before, seeing a whole bunch of people that nobody else could see was going to make me lose my mind for sure. Ebo spun me around just as the front door opened. He stood behind me closer than the limestone bricks of the Great Pyramids of Giza Octavius claimed could not even be separated by a razor blade.

I saw Momma’s face first. She lugged in Aunt Zinga’s overnight bag and frowned when she took in all of the African paintings, carvings, and statues. My breath caught in my throat when Aunt Zinga followed her into the house. Sisterlocs, locs so small they could give microbraids a run for their money, flowed past her shoulders to bra strap length. They were stark white, and whenever she turned her head they sang like wind chimes from all the gold loc jewelry she put in her hair.

Aunt Zinga was one of the few women I knew that did not feel offended if somebody called her a Jezebel. Heck, she was the only woman I knew that didn’t get offended by that. She always said that black women since ancient days wore jewelry in their hair, on their necks, fingers, wrists. She always said that if to rock her bling the way her ancestors did for thousands of years meant she was a Jezebel, then so be it.

I nearly forgot that Ebo stood behind me when Aunt Zinga turned to me first with the scar smile she couldn't help, and then with the real smile that she could.

"Tufa baby." She dropped her suitcase next to Olokun and opened her arms to me. "Come give your auntie some sugar."

Ebo released me and gave me a little push. I tried not to turn around when he chuckled. Aunt Zinga was tall, a little over six feet. I had to stand on my tiptoes to kiss her cheek. I didn't care that my lips brushed against her keloid scar. I was one of the few people that didn't freak when I saw or touched it. Her fingers ran through my kinky twists as she leaned over to kiss my forehead. She smelled so good. Her hair and skin had that raw earthy smell of unrefined shea butter and extra virgin coconut oil. I could even catch the faint fragrance of rosemary and herbs.

That was so like Aunt Zinga. Her smells never came with a label. She refused to buy any hair care products from the store. If she could not order from other black women online she would make her own. A true hustler of beauty. I looked forward to sampling her kitchen concoctions she always mailed to Momma and me. Until today, I thought I had sampled all of her hair recipes. But, as I sniffed the rosy smell of her sisterlocs, I realized Aunt Zinga was holding out on us.

"Auntie Z, your hair smells so good. What's in it?"

Shakara squeezed through the door and hugged my neck so tight I thought I would die. "Momma ain't gone tell you, Tufa. She say this recipe ain't just for the hair. She won't let nobody try it out until she figure out what else it's supposed to be for." Shakara cupped her hands around my ear and whispered, "I heard her talking to old lady Avan that sells herbs. She's into that rootworking stuff. Momma won't admit it, but old lady Avan say what's in that hair

recipe is powerful roots used for protection. Protection from what is the thing Momma can't figure out." Shakara laughed. "Momma'll believe anything that old prune say."

Aunt Zinga slapped Shakara on the behind. I laughed when Shakara jumped up and down to evade her Momma's hand. "I don't believe everything she says, and she ain't no prune."

"Riiiiight." Shakara walked around the far side of the couch, to avoid getting slapped again, and shut the front door.

When Shakara locked the door, she took off her head wrap and tied it around her waist.

"Cuz, is you crazy?" I asked. "What happened to all your hair?"

Shakara was an anomaly among the family too. She was one of the few girls who did not inherit big legs. She was model tall, like Aunt Zinga. Aunt Zinga often called Shakara "Baby Hottentot" because of how her behind practically grew overnight when she turned sixteen. That's where her hair used to be, it swung nearly to behind. But it was gone. All of it. Ebo had more on his head than Shakara did at the moment. She was not quite bald, but her fade was so low, being bald would not have made much difference.

"I thought I could transition until my natural hair grew out. But eight years is too long to be dealing with half relaxed and half natural hair. My hair was breaking off like crazy so I just went on ahead and did it." Her large wooden hoop earrings swished when she rubbed her hands over her head.

"Did what?"

"The big chop! And I've been loving every minute of it."

My momma shook her head and toted Aunt Zinga's bag into the tiny guestroom across from mine. "Zinga, you shouldn't have let your baby do something so crazy. You know what the bible says about a woman's hair."

Aunt Zinga rolled her eyes. Shakara and I giggled when she cursed under her breath. "Look, don't start all of that right now little sister. Now I came a day early to help you make final arrangements for this reunion you insist on having. Family gone be flying, driving, walking, and even creeping in if they ain't pay they registration. Rica, you know how crazy this family can be. I need to be in a right frame of mind to deal with all of y'all."

All of us laughed to that. Even Momma came out the back room grinning. I rubbed Shakara's head and laughed harder. The more I looked at it, the more I thought it suited her. She always looked model pretty to me, and with no hair, cousin was looking fierce.

Shakara did a "snip snip" with her fingers. "Soon it'll be your turn to do the bc, Tufa."

I shook my head. Shakara must be crazy. The baldhead looked good alright. On her. I avoided her snipping fingers and my gaze fell to the corner where Ebo once stood. My smile faded. He was gone.

* * *

I dreamed of rust on my tongue that night. My legs hurt to move. My stomach churned as if I had been punched. I never had cramps a day in my life, but the way my stomach felt had to be worse than any cramps during PMS. I smelled sweat in my dream, mingled with blood. Lots of blood. I had traveled from my room into a room lit by candlelight. It rocked and rocked. The whole room rocked. The rocking made my stomach hurt worse. My eyes darted around the room. I wanted to see the source of all the blood, the source of all the sweat. I worked my mouth so I

could swallow the rust taste down with my own spit. The rust taste traveled down my throat. Along with the rust was coldness that started from my tongue and ended in the pit of my aching belly. My hands shook when my fingertips touched the bed. The mattress was not naked, but clothed in a rough white sheet. I screamed out when my fingers touched the wet sheet. The rust, the cold, the aching spun in a frenzy. I raised my hands to touch my belly, to see if I could touch away the rust, the cold, the aching. Before my fingers could touch anything, a shadow came over me. It wrenched my fingers away from my body and pinned them above my head. I screamed again, but the shadow took form. It seeped into my mouth to silence my screams and pressed against my belly, but its touch did not take away the rust, the cold, the aching.

My eyes fluttered open when a hand clamped over my mouth. My own room came into focus. My fingers felt the mattress. No sheets, thank god. The sweat I smelled was my own. I screamed behind the hand of a man that stood above me. He shushed me and gave me a little shake. My teeth chattered in my head when he shook me again. I kicked and tossed my head from side to side. The soreness had not quite left my legs and the taste of rust—although it was faint—was still on my tongue. I could not tell if I was still dreaming or if I had woken up because there were several people in my room, surrounding my bed.

The man still covered my mouth when another knelt beside my bed to stare me in the face. Seeing his face made me gulp. “Little one, listen to me.” His voice reminded me of Ebo’s, but much rougher and deeper. “You mustn’t scream this way.”

When I continued to scream behind the hand that covered my mouth, he sighed and stood up. “Boku, how many?”

My eyes cut across the room to a linebacker-sized brother. He held up four fingers. “Her mother and young Vincent are in the room by the kitchen. There’s a younger woman, about her age, on the couch. The wise woman they call Zinga is in the room across the hall.”

The man knelt beside me again, his face just inches from mine. “Do you see why you must be silent? Do you want to wake up everyone?” What in the world was he talking about? Wake up everyone? His posse was up in my room like it was the new hangout spot. Waking up my family was the whole point.

I turned my head to get a good look at the guy who kept telling me—in a roundabout way—to shut up. When I saw him, my heart slammed against my chest. Kofi. I knew it was him just as sure as I knew my own name. He resembled my father, and I was struck with the notion that he looked like me even more so. Muscular arms strained beneath a designer’s suit. Dang, he had money like that to be sporting Armani? My eyes took in a golden snake pin that glinted on his suit jacket. I tore my eyes away from his designer suit to study his high cheekbones. They projected from his face in a way that made his eyelashes brush against them each time he blinked. Lucky. Here he was with eyelashes any woman would die for. His locs were pulled back at the nape of his neck and he didn’t bother to hide the three long scratches that marred the left side of his face. Those scars looked like brother had fought a lion or a real pissed off wifey. But even though he looked like me, there was something otherworldly about him, while I was just an ordinary girl from around the way.

Surprisingly, his black eyes studied me almost as critically as I studied him. His face seemed like he rarely smiled. He looked like a man born to lead, one that demanded obedience. The thought struck me with a force as I studied his face. That’s how he looked at me. Like he

demanded *my* obedience. The very thought of him thinking he could get me to do whatever he wanted by just giving me a look set my teeth on edge. So what if he had money and could rock Armani? If he thought he could stare me down into obedience, he had another thing coming.

“No one in this room will hurt you,” Kofi said. “You have my word.”

Riiight. Hurt me? How would I know that? What good was his word when this man’s hand—which I would never know if he washed or not—was still over my mouth? He probably did more hurt than good invading my space like that. I squinted and gave the man a looking over. He was tall, and his face had such a harsh expression I squirmed. Unlike Kofi, his locs dangled around his face and tickled my nose. When I glared at him, he sucked his teeth.

“Kofi, she sees us. *Sees* us. What were you thinking, giving Dollymon permission to just open the doors for her to swim in that lake?” The man sneered. “I would not believe what everyone has been saying had I not seen her eyes myself.” He leaned away from my face and hissed to someone in the room. “You will be dealt with for this.”

“Take your filthy hand off her mouth, Yao, or I will do it for you.”

Ebo! At least I knew one person among this strange crew. I tried to make a mental note of the few people I could put a name to. Playing name games was so not my thing. Kofi was in my room, the man that held my face was named Yao, and the giant that looked like your boy from *Green Mile* was called Boku. I finally had a name for the old man, who’s sort of blind, and is sort of Kofi’s servant—Dollymon. But there were still three women and two men in my room I didn’t know. This was beyond crazy. What in the devil was going on?

“Yao, Ebo that is enough,” said Kofi.

Yao removed his hand from my mouth. He sat on the bed beside me and opened up my father's new, secret box I had tossed there just that afternoon. His fingers burrowed through the lottery tickets and pulled out a notebook. He flipped through it and cut his eyes at me.

"At least our young Vincent has not forgotten the old ways, like some. Though I must admit the ways he uses his dreams are not healthy." His eyes were shrewd and they danced from the crown of my head to the bottom of my feet. "If he cannot see, someone could get hurt."

I reached for the box. "Give that back. It's none of your business how my daddy uses anything."

Yao closed the box and slid it toward me. "Oh it is definitely my business, all of our business, what your *daddy* does. Besides, that little box is useless now. Your father would not have such a gift if the Supreme One did not allow the ancestors to pass the gift of dreaming down to him and you." He cocked his head and frowned at me. "Though like so many of your kind, you seem to forget that and your place."

My place? I know this Negro did not just say that. Who in the world did he think he was? Something about the way he looked at me got on my last nerves. His eyes kept looking me up and down like I was a piece of meat. It almost felt like his hand had never left my mouth. When he whispered to me, "But that's what I'm here for, to teach you your place," I opened my mouth and said something I only expected to come out of Jamal's mouth.

"Nigga, is you crazy?"

Okaaay, I'm not going to lie. After I said "Nigga" I wanted to grab one of my momma's sheets out the linen closet and cover my head with it. Everyone in the room looked at me like I had messed myself. Even Ebo frowned. I sat up and pressed my back against the headboard. Its

coolness seeped through my sweaty nightgown to cool my skin. Nobody said anything. What was up with that? They acted like they never said the word. Just about everybody I knew said nigga. Nigga this and nigga that. A what's up my nigga and nigga please. I don't know why they were tripping, like it was some big deal.

By the time one of the women stepped forward, everybody in the room was frowning, including me. She looked around my momma's age, maybe a couple of years older. But if she was like Ebo, an Ataw, she probably was way older than Momma. She wore a white dress with beads sewn into patterns all over it. Her hairstyle I had seen before. Aunt Zinga had shown me a hair book of traditional African hairstyles. Just like the picture out of the book, she had a long braid on either side of her face and one thick one in the back. The rest of her hair was piled on top of her head and pushed toward her forehead like a big puff. She even had the facial tattoos of the women rocking those oversized bangs. I forgot what tribe those women came from, but the woman that stepped forward looked just like them.

“Child, never use that word in our presence. Understand?”

Child? Please. What was up with everybody in this room trying to tell me what to do? Last time I checked my momma's name was Ulrica Hannah. When I said nothing the woman moved closer to me and repeated what she said.

“Look, I heard you the first time. I don't know where you from, but on earth, everybody say nigga. I bet even some of y'all say it when the mood hits you.” I looked at Yao and rolled my eyes. “I know he say it.”

The woman smiled at me. She pulled out her pocket this thick translucent string that looked like it was woven from spider webs. Her face was so serene that I almost smiled back.

But the next thing I knew, she had moved in a blink of an eye and whipped my hand with the string like she was beating the dust out of a dirty rug. It hurt but not in the way a behind whooping from my momma would feel like. The string she spanked me with left my hand feeling prickly like it had fallen asleep. The prickly sensation intensified with every strike. I tried shaking it off, but she just lowered her arm to redirect the blows to my feet. By the time she finished, it felt like a thousand needles poked my hands and feet. I begged her to stop and she did. Dang, this sistah was stone crazy.

“None of us say such a word because we know where it comes from,” she hissed in my face. “We saw its birth in the womb of hate and now your kind has become its surrogate mother, refusing to abort it.” She rolled the string and tucked it inside a pocket of her dress. “Say it again and you will get more than the string.”

I believed her. If she didn’t want me to say nigga around her, cool. I could see if I had Jamal’s mouth instead of mine. That would be a definite problem. But I don’t, so it was no biggie keeping the word out of sight and out of mind.

“Look, y’all have been telling me don’t do this and don’t do that. Fine. I played along because I know Ebo. You see, me and Ebo go waaaaay back.”

When I said that, Kofi and Yao rolled their eyes. They really needed to chill.

“Anyway, he can creep up on me like that, but I don’t know none of y’all. So I just have two questions. What the devil y’all doing in my room? And when y’all plan on leaving?”

Yao cursed. “It was always her mouth I had trouble with. Everything else was perfect, but that mouth. That was the one thing I couldn’t stand and the one thing, Kofi, you could never

control. I'm done with this stalling. You know what we came here to do." When his hands reached for me, I scrambled off of the bed and wrapped my arms around Ebo.

"Shut your eyes and hold me tight," he said in my ear.

I did what he said.

"Ebo, it is not for you to decide her fate. It was never your decision to make."

My breath came out in a whoosh when Ebo wrapped his arms tightly around me. I would have said, "Now that's what a sistah's talking about," if I didn't have this gnawing feeling that I was in danger and I did not hear that stroke of sadness in Kofi's voice. Why did he sound like that? He did not even know me, and yet he sounded so sad like Ebo had squashed his whole "Tufa's Godfather" gig.

"I never made the decision, Kofi. She did."

I couldn't help it, I opened my eyes. I squinted so I would not be blinded by the blue light emanating from Yao and Kofi's eyes. Yao looked pissed off, and Kofi looked at me in a way that made my throat feel a little swollen. Something about the way he looked at me made me want to just burst out crying. But I checked myself. I was not going to fall victim to another one of Jamal's this-how-you-know-you-caught-the-crazy rules.

"You know you caught the crazy, T, when you start crying for no reason. A girl in my Spanish class did that once. Turns out she was manic. That's why females catch the crazy more than us men do. Y'all cry over every little thing. Some things y'all cry over are so small, nobody can even see them. When you do that, Tufa, it's only a matter of time before you catch the crazy. Best believe it."

I tore my eyes away from Kofi. I blamed the wetness of my eyelashes on staring into the blue light of his eyes for too long.

“Kofi, you can’t just let him take her. He’s disrespectful and reckless. He has no sense of responsibility or honor. Just look at the way he dresses. He shames our kind, parading around in rags. And another thing—”

Kofi’s eyes dimmed, until they returned to their normal, deep brown. “Let them go, Yao. She has made her choice.”

Yao’s eyes grew even brighter. He tried to walk toward me and Ebo, but two men held his arms behind his back.

“Her choice? When was it ever her choice? She was mine, Ebo! You knew that, you’ve always known that.” I held tight to Ebo when Yao shoved his knee into one of the men that held him. He used his free arm to elbow the other man in the belly. My bed squeaked when he jumped on top of it. He landed just inches from Ebo and me and whispered, “There are ways to still make her mine. Just remember that.” His hands tried to reach for me again. Man, this brother would just not give up. Only this time his fingers went straight through me.

Straight through me?

Hold up. I looked at Ebo. He was ghostly see-through. Like Casper’s brother from another mother. I was the same way, and with every second our bodies grew less and less visible. Before a minute was up, we had become the air itself.

Now I knew why he told me to shut my eyes and hold him tight. My body felt like it was falling through the clouds. We drifted away. At that moment our bodies did not feel separate. They were one. No butterflies fluttered inside me, a sign Momma always said you had found

your other half. What was happening to me was better than butterflies in the belly. I had become the butterfly.

Open your eyes, Afua.

The way he spoke to me was beyond weird. Not quite in my head, but not quite aloud either. I know how he spoke to me was not in English, but I understood him just the same. I opened my eyes and laughed. Far above the trees, the houses, the cars. Our bodies mingled with the clouds; if we flew just a little higher, I know God would have parted the sky for us to touch the moon.

Ebo, I'm burning up. Is that normal? Dang that was weird. I know that's what I was thinking, but it came out like a long, high-pitched whistle.

Yes it's normal. That's how the wind smiles, Afua Ataá.

So we were the wind? I warmed up even more. Ebo had to be the strange wind that saved my dumb behind from falling out the tree years ago. So that was what wind really was—Ebo's kind floating across the sea, through trees, in the sky? I felt like I was in on a secret, something the whole world had no clue about. With Ebo, my world looked brand spanking new, like someone had just dipped the whole thing into a galaxy-sized pool, baptizing it into a newness that beat all newness.

Where are we going? Everything below us grew smaller and smaller. I kept smiling, warming our bodies, as we drifted amid the clouds. The black sky twinkled with distant stars. The moon's glow seemed a little brighter, like its brightness came from within, instead of from its body hiding the sun.

You'll see. We're almost there.

The thickness of the clouds brushed against our bodies. Out of respect, Ebo took his time floating through them. He called the clouds Old Wind; his kind knew that the clouds hated to be disturbed. He said he didn't want to set off a thunderstorm by passing through them too quickly. I wanted to shout out, "Please Old Wind let it rain tomorrow," but I knew my shouting was bound to set off raining, cat and dog style.

It took us forever to descend through the clouds, but when we did, Ebo shot off like a rocket. Below us was nothing but ocean. I did scream that time, and it came out sounding like a freight train. The closer we got, the more I could make out a little speck of rock. Faster and faster Ebo flew. I'm sure he had this covered, but if wind could pee, we wouldn't need to worry about disturbing the Old Wind; we would be soaked.

The little speck of rock turned into a huge boulder and Ebo slowed down just before we slammed into it. Our bodies felt heavier, separate. I tried smiling like the wind, but my body did not warm up. I looked at Ebo. He towered above me, flesh and blood. I didn't need to inspect myself to know I was the same thing.

"I always wanted to show you this place." As he spoke, he took off his jeans. I tried not to stare at how the moonlight played music across his nakedness, although I must admit it wasn't easy. Lord knows it wasn't easy. He folded them and sat them on a concave spot on the boulder.

The boulder jutted out of the ocean; the waves slapped against it, sloshing my bare feet. I sat cross-legged on a smooth spot. My fingers toyed with his jeans, and I frowned remembering something Yao had said. "Ebo, why don't you dress like the others? I mean, Kofi was rocking Armani and I think Yao had on Gucci."

He placed his t-shirt and shoes beside his jeans. Butt naked in the middle of the ocean. Good lord, I had to be dreaming this for sure. “All of my kind have wealth, whether we want it or not. Like me, Kofi does not like his wealth, but he must flaunt it because much of our people expect that from him. He is a leader of sorts among the Ataw.” Ebo shrugged and winked at me. “But I am no leader. I don’t have the responsibility of flaunting what I don’t want. Yes, I have wealth, lots of it, but like Kofi I have one of your kind under my care. Her charge is to keep my wealth hidden, even from me.”

She? I don’t know why, but the fact Ebo had some other chick in charge of his stash set my teeth on edge. “Yeah, she hiding it alright. She spending it like crazy.”

Ebo looked down at me and chuckled. “Your heart was always made up of fire, Afua. You never really could hide your jealousy.”

I choked on my own spit when he said that. It was that obvious? Dang. “I am not jealous. I just think it’s stupid of you to hand over all your stuff to some woman.”

He shrugged. “It isn’t as if she can use it.”

Riiiiight. Ebo never struck me as naïve, but the more he talked, the more he proved me wrong. I had seen enough gold digging females to know that they would wipe a man’s bank account out while he was looking. Imagine what they would do to him if he wasn’t looking?

“Look, Ebo, what you do with your money is your business. But I’m just letting you know, sistah is *using* your wealth. She’s wearing it, spending it, living it. Feel me?”

He reached for my hand and pulled me up. He hugged me, not seeming to care that the only thing separating us was my thin nightgown. “You have much to learn. Any wealth owned by the Ataw in the hands of your kind turns to dust. The wealth of my people can never be given

to your people. That is one of the many rules you will soon learn, and one of the reasons Kofi and I see the riches bestowed upon us as a curse rather than a blessing.”

Before I could say another word, he leaped into the icy water, taking me with him. That string-spanking had nothing on this. Thousands of needles poked every inch of my skin. My legs, arms, face, chest. It felt like crystallized fire, and my soaked nightgown rubbed against my sensitive flesh like sandpaper. I held Ebo’s hand like a tourniquet. His thumb rubbed the inner side of my wrist. I guess that was supposed to coax me into being calm. He must be crazy. Hoping to propel myself to the surface, I tried kicking my numbing legs. No matter how much I kicked, Ebo’s hand held mine and urged me deeper beneath the surface. Our bellies stayed close to the boulder, which was not a boulder at all but looked like the peak of a submerged mountain.

My heart thumped out this off-beat rhythm and my throat stung from lack of oxygen. I was going to drown down here. I couldn’t help it. I opened my mouth to breathe in air that was not there. This was it. I would die just like Granddaddy Juno and Hishka. Only their deaths were accidental; like a lovesick idiot, I let Ebo lead me to mine.

I swallowed and surprised myself that the air did not fill up my lungs and choke me to death. My breath slowed and my heart steadied its thumping. So this is what it must feel like to be a fish. To be the Ataw. To be Ebo.

His eyes and forehead sent out a triple beacon to guide us. Having a built-in flashlight never hurt nobody. I looked up. The moon seemed like a distant star, a little glowing pinpoint out of my reach. Around us, schools of colorful fish darted past us. Sea creatures I only expected to see on *Animal Planet* swam in the opposite direction when Ebo’s light touched them. I looked at

how our fingers intertwined. I didn't have to do much. His tail, the tail I had fallen in love with the moment I laid eyes on it, propelled us lazily. Up and down it moved, its scales shimmering.

The light within him seemed to illuminate the whole sea. In the distance I could see the silhouette of a huge whale with a smaller silhouette of a baby on its back. Cute, as long as they stayed over there and did not swim toward us.

Ebo righted us so our heads faced the surface of the Atlantic. We floated just inches from the mountain, but I could not make out what Ebo scrutinized amid its jagged surface. Coral and algae grew along the surface of the jagged rocks. Tiny things that looked like crabs without the shell tried to hide beneath the coral. This mountain, just like the clouds in the sky, was old. Ebo gave the mountain the same type of reverence he gave the Old Wind. His fingers took their time dancing across its surface. He was so close he could kiss the floating algae. His triple beacon of blue light danced across the mountain. He searched for something only he could find. He tugged my arm gently, floating us a couple of feet higher. And that's when I saw it. Three holes in the mountain. The distance between each of them matched the distance between Ebo's eyes and the blue light glowing in the center of his forehead. Strange hieroglyphics were engraved around each of the holes. When Ebo adjusted his face, so that his triple beacon precisely aligned with the holes, the glyphs began to glow.

Bubbles burst from my mouth when I screamed, "Holycrapthiscantbeforreal!"

But it was. The mountain cracked down the middle like Moses parting the Red Sea. The crack was the height of Ebo. It started at his head and ended at the tip of his tail. The width of the crack even matched the broadness of Ebo's shoulders. The mountain seemed as if it knew Ebo and opened up so only he could enter. Enter into what? The mountain created a doorway that led

somewhere, somewhere sacred. The water even seemed to have a reverence for the doorway. The same force that caused the mountain to part kept the sea from flooding the dark crevice. Ebo looked at me with a smile and led the both of us into the darkness.

The moment we entered, the crevice shrank. The floor beneath us shook as the mountain closed itself. Ebo sat on the floor, his tail changing. When the last of the scales shed from his materialized legs, he stood up.

“Ebo, what in the world is this place?” I tried not to watch his muscled behind flex as he walked away. With each step his body seemed to mold with the darkness surrounding us. After a few seconds of not hearing his feet pad across the ground, or seeing his oh so perfect backside, I called out to him.

“I’m here,” he called from a distance. Before I could say anything, a ring of fire ignited around us, illuminating the cavern that opened up just moments before.

A cavern was an understatement compared to what I saw now. We were in a dome-shaped chamber. On its walls and high ceiling were strange symbols etched into the rock. Carved amid the symbols were men, women, and a ship. Some people were on top of the ship shackled together. Some were free of the shackles with knives and chains in their hands. A dim sun shone from the very center of the ceiling and Old Wind that had been disturbed surrounded it. The wind cried upon the ship, cried upon the people in shackles and those fighting to remain free.

I did not realize my feet were turning me slowly in a circle as I followed the story the pictures told. My eyes drifted lower. Just a few feet above the ring of fire sat the sea, its deep blue reddened in places. My feet stopped turning me when I saw the red. In the sea were people shackled. But the closer I looked, the more I realized that the Ataw swam among the dead.

“This story.” I gulped. I knew Ebo showed me the walls because they could tell the story better than he ever could. “It’s yours, isn’t it? I mean, of how you became the Ataw.”

He nodded. “It’s the story of millions, Afua. Your kind and mine.” His hands touched the tiny carving of a woman looking over the edge of the ship, her teardrops falling into the red sea.

I inched toward the wall and stood beside him. The woman’s face seemed too detailed compared to the others. It looked almost as if the carver made sure to spend extra time chiseling her features. I looked up into Ebo’s face as if seeing him for the first time.

“You lived this, Ebo. I mean the Middle Passage, being on a slave ship chained up like that. And that’s what you mean, isn’t it, by it being the story of millions, your kind and mine? My people survived.” My fingers touched his jaw. “The Ataw, your people, didn’t.” The puzzle pieces fit together and for some strange reason, my heart seemed to break at the same time. I didn’t want what was on the walls to be so close to home, to be lived by the man I was falling for. More like plummeting for. Man, I had it bad. It would have been so much easier if Ebo was just the same mysterious guy I met under the Bowling Oaks with the fishtail and off the chain superpowers. It would have been so much easier if everything on the walls could have just stayed tucked away in my history book.

“I didn’t bring you here to upset you, only to show you that we are closer than you think. I wanted to show you the story behind the man you made contact with.” He was right behind me, his chest to my back.

“But Ebo, you could’ve just cracked open my history book and just read that one unit about it. I mean, we were having so much fun flying and swimming. Why ruin all of that by taking me here?”

“Because your book does not tell you everything. This place is special. It is where the three of us woke up after what you see on the walls happened.”

I turned around to face him. “What do you mean the three of us?”

The shadow from his arms opening up danced across the hieroglyph walls. “We named this underwater cavern after us, we called it KEY.”

Kofi, Ebo, Yao? “But the three of y’all seem like y’all can’t stand to be in the same room. I mean, Kofi is this control freak, Yao acts like the whole world owes him something, and you seem to not mind being a major rule-breaker.”

He tugged my kinky twists. “You think you figured us all out then, huh?”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, contrary to popular belief, there is much to the three of us to figure out. The symbols you see on the wall are the written language of the Ataw. When I woke up in this place, I was able to read and write it.”

Holy crap. I know he was playing now. “You did all this?”

He laughed. “With the help of Kofi and Yao. It was more of a compulsion than anything. When I first woke up to the Ataw way, I did not feel hunger or thirst even though I had vomited or messed out nearly everything I ate on the ship. As for pain, I had been shot three times and the brand on my chest I remember burning like crazy. But inside the KEY, all of the pain was gone. When I awoke here, my first thought was to carve what happened into the walls.”

I could not help myself. I touched his chest. Tonight was the first time he had taken his shirt off in front of me. The flames danced across him. Lord have mercy, this man’s body was on point. My fingers brushed against his abdomen. He sucked in his breath when I stepped in closer.

With my fingers, I traced the brand over his chest. J.S. The letters were keloids, blackened scars against his brown flesh. When I leaned over to kiss them, he turned his head from me.

“What do they stand for?”

“Julius Sweeney.” As he spoke, the ring of fire around us crackled, warming our wet bodies. “He lived in Georgia. Much of his family still lives there.” He shrugged, his muscles rippling beneath my fingers. “Sweeney’s grandson used the family wealth from slavery to make a fortune in real estate from what I hear.”

Dang, he just had to remind me how old he was. “Ebo, let’s forget about that, about all of this.” I stood on my tiptoes and wrapped my arms around his neck. “I mean that was a long time ago, and how do you know those letters mean Julius Sweeney anyway?”

He let go of me then. His eyes held something I had never seen before. For a moment his eyes looked much older than his body, and there was anger there.

“Forget? Like your mother forgot? Like so many of your kind continue to forget?” He turned away from me to stare at the walls. “I cannot do that, not even for you, Afua Ataá.”

I glared at the walls, wishing the scene etched into them would just disappear. “You know why we forget that kind of stuff, Ebo? Because you lived it, not us. We can’t remember something we never lived.”

He whirled around, grabbed my arm and yanked me across the dome-shaped chamber we stumbled into just moments before. He walked toward a blackened doorway; his triple beacon came on like a light switch, filling the murky tunnel with blue light. He didn’t have to tell me. I knew.

For some strange reason, Ebo was beyond pissed off.

“Listen, you best loosen your grip on my arm. And where are you taking me?” I tried to keep my voice as calm as possible. It seemed like we were back to day one when I thought Ebo was crazy and I had to play along to find a way to escape.

“You talk out of ignorance. It is like you and your kind suffer amnesia. How do you define time? Huh? Who taught you about night and day? Life and death? Before me, tell me what you knew about the wind?”

I had to jog to keep up with his long strides. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Everything. Who taught you that what you know now is all you know, all you should know? I may have changed when I became the Ataw, but you and your kind too have changed. We both have become a strange people in a strange place.”

What kind of crap was that? All my life I had to listen to somebody call me strange, and I was not about to hear it from Ebo. I didn’t care how fine he was.

The tunnel opened up to another chamber. This one seemed much smaller than the first. Before us were three doors carved into the rock. Around them were inscriptions and above each door was the carving of a face. I sucked in my breath when I realized who the faces belonged to. Carved above the first door was the face of Kofi. The last door was Yao’s, and the door in the middle belonged to Ebo. The closer I looked, the more I realized that they were not real doors at all, but door look-alikes like the ones Octavius said were in Egyptian tombs.

Ebo looked at me; some of the anger left his eyes. He put on a pair of cut-off jeans that were folded in front of his door. I tried not to smile. I don’t think he owned a decent pair of jeans. “You do not seem bothered that these doors are merely carvings in the rock.”

I shook my head and opened my mouth to say, “Octavius told me all about them,” but I caught myself. Mentioning the other guy I liked was not a good look. “My friend told me that Egyptians would create false doors in their tombs. He said it was a gateway between the land of the living and the dead.”

The light in the center of Ebo’s eyes flickered when I said, “my friend.” I pretended not to notice. “Well your *friend* is correct. The use of false doors has been an ancient method for my kind to travel into your world. The Ataw used them to travel into the past and present. Only the most ancient of my kind know how to use false doors to travel into the future land of the living.”

He grabbed my hand, gentler this time, and tugged me toward him. “So choose one.”

“Choose one?”

He sighed. “You want to remember, don’t you?”

I hesitated. Something told me to ask him exactly what he meant by “remember.” Instead I pointed to the middle doorway. He did not hesitate. He kept a tight grip on my hand and walked through the false door, taking me with him.

Ebo’s Door

I never really liked the *Wizard of Oz*—all that skipping down the yellow brick road got played out real quick—but I must admit Dorothy said it best. When I followed Ebo through his false door, I knew we were neither in East Tampa nor the twenty-first century anymore. For one, there were no black folks out on the road, and that’s if you even wanted to call what we stumbled onto a road. The dirt road reminded me of the one I would race my cousins on near Granddaddy

Juno's place. But, even then I would find a car or two whizzing by. But this? Please. There was no car in sight.

"Ebo, where are we?" I tapped my digital watch and frowned when the minutes started ticking backwards. "And what time, no you better make that year. Yeah, what year is it?"

"We're in Georgia. But the year? It's been a long time, so the exact one I'm not sure. Late 1700s is about right."

I coughed when his bare feet kicked up dust, and I nearly choked when I noticed how the sunlight played peek-a-boo with my green nightgown that stopped at mid-thigh. "Ebo, is you crazy? Look what I got on, or what I don't have on is more like it. What if someone sees me?"

Ebo's eyes squinted as he stared at the empty road. When I asked him again, a little bit hysterical this time, he lips twitched when his eyes danced across my nightgown. "No one can see you. When we travel in the past or future, we do not have the power to make ourselves visible to those around us. We cannot change what we see and what we see cannot change us."

I opened my mouth to ask him was he sure, but three black men walked through the dust toward us. I could not make out their faces, but I could tell that they were dressed to kill for the eighteenth century. They wore polished shoes, black trousers, top hats, white dress shirts with ruffled collars, and buttoned vests. The one in the middle walked with a cane, and the one on the far left held an old-fashioned piece of paper in his hand.

"Kofi, this is stupid. The only one who has learned to be visible is you. Neither I nor Yao can successfully attempt such a feat. It makes no sense that we must carry these papers and pretend to be free Negroes when no one can even see us."

Ebo? My mouth dropped when I watched him, Kofi and Yao walk past us without even a glance. “But how can you be there, if you’re right here with me?”

He tugged my hand and followed them. “I already told you. We’re in the past, my past. I took you to this moment because there are a few things I need you to know.”

Ebo and I walked behind them like shadows. I’m not surprised that Kofi was the one with the cane, for some reason he always stuck out as the leader. His stroll seemed surer than theirs; the scars on his face made him appear more ruthless. But the pimp-looking cane topped it all off. He really did seem like a godfather, mafia-style that is.

But then there was Yao. Every now and then we stopped a couple of times so he could kneel down to dust off his shoes. The brother was beyond conceited. And then there was Ebo. I tried not to compare my Ebo with the one from the past but it seemed nearly impossible when the two of them walked side by side. My Ebo seemed at ease in his cut off jeans and bare feet. He had not bothered to pick his afro out in days and the J.S. brand on his chest remained visible for everybody to see. He didn’t hide under nothing. What you saw was what you got. I saw a little bit of that yearning in his older self. The old Ebo kept pulling at his dress clothes like he couldn’t wait to get them off. But something made him keep them on, something made him go along with Kofi’s idea that they should pretend to be free Negroes.

I shook my head when I stared at the three of them. “Ebo.”

“Hmm?”

“Y’all could have gone anywhere y’all wanted with those free papers. Philadelphia, New York, anywhere. Why Georgia of all places?”

He took my hand and put it on his chest. “Because when I was on the ship, there was someone I knew that had this same brand on her body.”

Okaaaay. I hated when people talked in riddles instead of just cutting to the chase.

Yao snatched the paper out of Old Ebo’s hands. “Ebo, you sure Georgia and Sweeney were the two words you remember the bastard saying when he branded you? Because if you are wrong, we will have no way of finding Afua Ataá.”

It happened so fast, I wondered if I imagined the whole thing. The Old Ebo tripped Yao, making him fall face forward in the dust. He squatted, grabbed his freeman’s papers and tucked them into his pocket.

Kofi stopped to glare at the two of them. “I see the fact that we have been chained beside each other for months, smelling each other’s vomit, piss, and feces have done nothing to soften the hate you each have in your hearts.”

The Old Ebo shrugged. “Tell Yao that I know what I heard, and I would not forget the one clue that would lead me to the mother of my unborn child.”

Yao scrambled off the ground and grabbed Ebo by the middle. “She was my betrothed. If anyone is concerned about her whereabouts that would be me.”

I ducked just before Yao landed a punch in Old Ebo’s face. I called to my Ebo to move, but he just stood there rolling his eyes.

“My apologies for this, Afua. It shouldn’t take much longer. Hand to hand, Yao never really was a match for me.” He stood his ground when Old Ebo and Yao rolled through his legs. He stepped back just when Kofi shoved his cane through his belly.

“Ebo, you cool?” I asked.

He gripped his stomach and nodded. “You might want to stay off to the side. Passing through is never pleasant; it’s one of the reasons I was never very fond of possessing others.”

I reached for him and he wrapped his arm around my shoulders. This was too much to sink in. Ebo kept calling me Afua Ataá, the same chick they were trying to find now, the same chick who was actually Yao’s fiancé, not to mention she was the same chick Ebo got knocked up hundreds of years ago? Totally scandalous. No wonder Yao was so pissed off. And he expected me to believe she and I was the same person? Please. Brother’s stone crazy.

“That’s enough.” Kofi gave each of them a whack in the chest with his cane. “You two forget she was my twin sister, and neither of you would have been with her if it were my choice. Lucky for Yao, my father saw you as a son which blinded him to your reputation for disrespecting women. And Ebo,” Kofi spat. “Even to this day, I do not see what my sister saw in you that would make her dishonor our family and break tradition.” He grabbed Yao’s arm and yanked him off the ground. He snatched off Ebo’s top hat, blew off the dust, and handed it back to him.

“You two must realize the Supreme One made it so our destinies are forever intertwined with those of our kind who were never thrown overboard but enslaved. We can never return back to the land we once knew so long as they walk upon this strange land. We must make do with each other’s company whether we wish it or not.”

All of that was well and good, but my mind seemed to be running on autopilot from the moment Kofi said twin sister. Twin sister? We did look alike, I’d give him that. But sister? Twin? There was no way that could be true. Even as I tried to convince myself this was one big

mistake, my eyes kept drifting toward Kofi's face. For some reason, my mind kept telling me there rested the truth.

"I'm not Afua," I murmured.

Ebo squeezed my shoulders. "How do you know if you do not remember?"

The sun began to set when the road sliced through a cotton field that spanned several acres. Georgia peaches were in full bloom. I could smell the fruit from the trees that loomed over the dirt road. Then I saw *them*. There were no peach trees to cover them from the sun and there were hundreds of them. I tried to focus on the peach trees above our heads; their sweet smell kept me distracted so I would not have to notice them. But then we turned off the dirt road and onto the cotton field. I could not ignore them anymore.

Black folks picking cotton. I had read about it, watched a couple of movies about it, and even listened to the stories the old folks made it their business to pass down. But nothing compared to seeing it with my own eyes. All around us were men, women, and children who looked like me. I almost laughed, to keep from crying out, when I noticed that one was the splitting image of Jamal.

The cotton crops stood to the height of my knee and grew in rows for as far as the eye could see. Big woven baskets sat amid the rows of cotton. I couldn't move a step when I saw the women in their long dresses with their long sleeves and head wraps. Good lord, I knew they must've been burning up because I could barely breathe in the little thing I had on. They outnumbered the men at least two to one and a few had babies on their backs. But that didn't stop them from picking like everybody else.

My hand touched my neck when a woman placed one of those big behind baskets on her head and made her way to the end of the row. She held her back straight when she walked right past us, the smell of her sweat dangling in the air. The baby on her back stared at Old Ebo and when he smiled, the baby burst out laughing.

“The baby can see them?”

Ebo nodded. “That is something our kind still cannot fully understand. We can hide our presence to all accept babies, animals, and those we have made contact with.”

A few of the women hummed as we passed them in the field. My stomach felt queasy when I saw one of the humming women steal away from the others. She looked over her shoulder and then squatted near the cotton and hiked up her skirts.

“Ebo, what she doing?”

He shivered and pushed against the small of my back. “Womanly stuff. We need to catch up with the others.”

I craned my neck around him to try and get a good look at what ‘womanly stuff’ Ebo was talking about, but his broad shoulders blocked me from seeing a thing.

Kofi’s strides had quickened, carrying him through the fields and into the slave quarters. Yao stumbled behind him. I grabbed Ebo’s hand tight when I saw his older self stop to vomit on his shoes.

Kofi slowed down when he noticed Ebo had stopped. “Ebo, I told you what you would see when we came here.” His voice was soft; his hand gripped Ebo’s shoulder. “I would have etched it on the walls at KEY had I known you would have forgotten so easily.”

The Old Ebo looked back at the woman squatting to do her womanly stuff. "I remember what you told me, Kofi. But look around us." He pointed toward the fields. "That could have been us. But tell me, are we that lucky? They will grow old and die one day. One day they will leave this place. But what about us, huh? We will never age. We'll have the finest things to wear, certainly, but we will have to always watch their suffering, their pain, their struggle without ever having to feel it ourselves. All the riches we will ever have can never be given to them because it will turn to dust the moment it touches their fingers."

I leaped back when Kofi spun on his heel. He almost passed through me when he yanked Old Ebo up by his ruffled collar. "What about their happiness? Do you not think amid all that suffering, pain, struggle they will not find just a little of it? I see in the set of their jaw, their walk, their eyes the people of many kingdoms from back home. I see among them the people of Saalum, Koya, Oyo and Hausa. I see among them the people of Loango, Bamun, Kongo, and Matamba."

When Kofi talked, something stirred inside me, something that made me want to race back into the fields and gather up as many people picking cotton as I could to tell them, "Come listen, listen to what this man has seen in you." But I knew they would not hear me. I knew they would not hear him, no matter how much I wanted them to.

Kofi sighed, his eyes drifting to a group of young boys dumping cotton into the large baskets. "I see among them my people, Ebo, and yours, yet they do not know the lines we had once drawn between each other."

I stepped away from Ebo, and to my surprise he didn't stop me from standing just inches from where Kofi stood. I looked up in Kofi's scarred face. I stood on my tiptoes so my eyes

could be level with his. Even though Ebo was the one who threw up on his polished shoes, something in my gut told me that it was Kofi that felt far worse pain than Yao or Ebo ever could. The more I looked at him, the more I could place a name on what that pain stemmed from. Guilt.

“We may be forced to watch them suffer; it is probably the least I deserve for what I have done in the past. But I have hope they will also find some happiness in this new life. Perhaps without the lines that had divided us, things may have been different. For all of us. Perhaps without those lines they will become one people to walk this strange land, together. Do not lose hope, Ebo, that they will find a little bit of happiness amidst the pain.”

I’m not going to lie. The words Kofi said left me dumbstruck. Even though Ebo held my hand I felt sort of zombie-ish walking beyond the cluster of cabins to one that sat on the outskirts of the slave quarters. There was more to Kofi than I thought. He wasn’t just some godfather wannabe. There was a reason he felt responsible for me, heck why he felt responsible for everybody. He blamed himself for our suffering, pain, and struggle. Dang. To live with that for so long had to be eating him alive.

“Ebo for what it’s worth, the next time I see Kofi, you know the one that can actually see me too, I’m a tell him he don’t need to keep blaming himself for everything that goes wrong in our lives. It ain’t healthy.”

Ebo gave me a sad smile. “That would mean a great deal coming from you; after all you were the one who never forgave him for his part in all of this.”

He meant Afua Ataá did not forgive him, but I didn’t see the point in correcting him. The sun had set and the moon peeked behind the clouds when we climbed the cabin’s stairs. Even though a rock propped the door open, hysterical laughter from inside kept everybody out.

Yao grabbed Kofi by the arm when he tried to step away from the door. “You seem to be the favorite of the ancient ones. Didn’t they tell you we would know her by her dying laughter? You should be the first to see her face.”

“No, Yao. My sister may not have recognized me on the ship,” said Ebo. “It was years ago when you, Kofi and the rest of the Ashanti military invaded our village, and took many of us as war captives. Since then I have changed.” Ebo’s voice shook. “You remember how she looked at me, Yao, the first day they took us on the upper deck to bathe us. She did not even recognize me.” The Old Ebo pointed at the scars on Kofi’s face. “But his face she would never forget. She would tell us nothing if she ever saw it.”

His sister? All this time Ebo had a sister that he never bothered to tell me about? How in the world would she of all people know where Afua Ataá would be?

“He’s right, Yao. There was a reason the ancient ones told me we would know Ebo’s sister by her *dying* laughter. We do not have much time if we are to know what she knows.”

I totally wished I had asked Ebo exactly what he meant when he asked me, “Do I want to remember?” Because what I saw inside that cabin made me wish I had never traveled with him through that false door.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus was what my momma would have chanted if she would have seen Ebo’s sister. She lay on a mattress stuffed with straw. Her dress open. Sores were all over her body. Her face was misshapen from large tumors on her cheek and forehead. Her thighs were covered in rashes she scratched. And she was laughing. Hysterically. She had definitely caught the crazy for sure. It took a hot little minute for me to realize Ebo’s sister was not alone.

Another woman stood in the corner of the room. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She was tall with skin as black as coal. Her wavy hair grew past her behind and in her hand she held a knife. "What the devil the two of you doing in here? Old nasty Sweeney bet not have sent you. I'll gut you first."

Her feet did not lift off the floor as she slid toward Yao and Old Ebo. Her arms stayed to her sides and her head rolled from side to side, back to front. By now I was beyond freaked out.

Old Ebo backed away from the approaching woman. "Did you make yourself visible to her, Yao? And do not lie."

Yao shook his head. "I was going to ask you the same thing. Neither of us made contact and yet she sees. How is that possible?"

Ebo's sister continued to laugh from the straw mattress, tears streaming down her face.

"Hush now," the woman told her, her head still moving as she spoke. She patted Ebo sister's leg and stopped just in front of Yao. I grabbed Ebo's hand and squeezed.

"Please tell me she can't see us, Ebo, because home girl is doing some crazy poltergeist-exorcism stuff."

"She can't see us, although to be honest, I thought she would be able to."

I know he didn't just say that. I tried to think happy thoughts as the woman towered above Ebo and Yao. Her head lolled to the side as she leaned over to sniff both their necks. She lingered on Yao's neck and even purred. Thank God she had poor taste in men. When she stood back up to her full height, it dawned on me that even though the woman's eyes were opened, they didn't appear to really be zeroing in on anybody. In fact, if I didn't know any better, I'd say your girl was just sleepwalking.

Sleepwalking. And she was Goliath tall with long hair? You got to be kidding me. I know this wasn't who I thought it was.

“Hishka?”

“Hmm mm,” said Ebo. “I’m surprised it took you that long to figure out.”

“But I didn’t know she was from Georgia? How she got to Florida?”

“Long story.” Ebo tried to sound playful, but we both knew this was not a time for jokes. God knows what disease his sister had. But I’m going to be real. Whatever she had, I did not want it.

Hishka snorted. “The two of y’all walk like us, smell like us, but neither of you are us that’s for certain.”

Ebo’s sister laughed. “It’s gutting time.”

Hishka dragged her feet and walked back to Ebo’s sister. “Didn’t I say hush?” She turned to Yao and Old Ebo. “Now look, y’all a bit different than the ones that usually come visit me. I ain’t got nothing that could bring the two of you back. The smell is off. So y’all best be off to wherever y’all came from.”

“Could you cover her body? I don’t want to see her like that,” Old Ebo whispered.

Hishka’s laugh was low and guttural and a bit manly if you asked me. Definitely not a good look. But a lot of woman had man laughs, so I could deal with that. But, if her head started doing three-sixties, I was out.

“Massah Sweeney loved having his way with her because she can’t give him no high yellow babies he’d have to explain to the missus. But look what he done gave her, that nasty disease and expects me to cure her.” Hishka shook her head. “I done did all I can for her. The

little comfort she get is when her clothes don't touch her skin. So you best just look the other way if you can't stand how she looks."

Yao stepped forward then. "Forgive him. We just want to ask her one thing and then we'll be off."

Hishka crossed her arms. "And what would that be?"

"She knew of a woman once, a woman with child." Ebo crossed the room and choked when his sister sang in a language that was definitely not English. "We used to sing that song as children. If she can remember that, she'd have to remember what we came to ask her."

"And what would *that* be?" Hishka asked. For a sleepwalker she sure didn't beat around the bush.

"I need you to ask her if she knows where they took Afua Ataá."

Ebo cocked his head up when Hishka stood next to him.

"She say that name before." Hishka nodded. "Alright, I'll ask her. Don't expect much."

When Hishka asked her, Ebo's sister squealed and reached for Hishka's hair. "I prayed for Afua, you know. The same prayer I prayed for all of us. If only my prayers were answered, the pain would have stopped with us. It'd have stopped with us, Hishka. With us!"

Hishka nodded. "I know. I know. Now tell me where she is." Hishka leaned down, not seeming to care that Ebo's sister touched her face with hands covered in rashes and open sores.

"Well?" Yao asked.

He really needed to chill; the lady was on her deathbed for goodness sake. Hishka stood up after sniffing the other woman's neck.

"She going. I can smell it on her."

Old Ebo put his fist to his mouth. He went over to his sister and called her name. But she just smiled at him and whispered, “Gutting time.” He stumbled away from her and left the cabin. I rubbed Ebo’s back when I heard him sniff beside me.

“You okay?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I thought I was over it, but seeing her again. Like this. It’s hard to forget.”

“Did she tell you or not?” Yao asked.

“She keeps saying Afua never seen flowers because she with Fowler. He like sweet sticks.”

I whispered to Ebo. “What she meant by that?”

“It took us nearly twenty-seven years to figure that out. Afua was on the Fowler sugar cane plantation in Jamaica, but she had died before we got there. It took us too long to solve my sister’s riddle.”

Yao bowed deep to Hishka and turned on his heel, but she grabbed his shoulder. “You might want to know that it wasn’t the nasty disease that made her crazy. She was never quite right when she came to Sweeney, and I think even when she leave this place her spirit may never be quite right.”

Ebo stiffened beside me. “I never listened to what she may have told Yao in private.”

I rolled my eyes when I noticed the way Yao stared at Hishka. Homeboy was definitely trying to take advantage of the situation. To be honest Hishka really wasn’t a half-bad looking woman even though she was Goliath-tall and a creepy sleepwalker. But still. I guess Yao noticed her good looks too because he whispered, “Thanks for telling me. There’s something about you I can’t quite place. Perhaps I will see you again—”

“—Hishka.” She turned to Ebo’s sister. “But when she leave me, I’m heading south to Florida. I think its time for me to leave Sweeney.”

Yao ran his fingers through Hishka’s hair. “And I will see to it that you do. You have my word.”

Oh please. Get a room. “I guess you knew Yao and Hishka had something going on?”

Ebo chuckled. “Of course. It was Yao who brought Hishka to Florida. She was keeper of his fortune until she died.”

We followed Yao out of the cabin, but instead of stepping outside, we stumbled through Ebo’s false door.

“Ebo, I never knew. I’m really sorry about what happened to your sister.”

He tilted my chin up and kissed my lips. “So am I.”

I shook my head. Something still was not quite clicking. “I get that you were able to find your sister because she had the same brand that you did and you were lucky enough to figure out what it meant. But that still doesn’t tell me how she was the only person that knew where Afua could have been.” As I talked Ebo’s head off, he led me down the corridor and back into the dome-shaped chamber we had entered earlier.

He pointed to the ship on the walls, cutting me off. “They were chained together on the ship. If you are that close to someone, for that long, you learn them. Well.”

You’ve got to be kidding me. I get that Afua was on the same ship the “KEY Club” were thrown off. But if Hishka was telling the truth, Ebo’s sister had caught the crazy long before she became a slave in Georgia. And that meant she was probably driving the one person crazy everybody swore up and down was me.

Madness

I am Afua Ataá, the one with clean legs whose womb is mourned. The woman who does not scream cries for the tiny life inside me. She prays to the sprits to take my baby from me, and to kill my womb. She thinks I do not understand her, but I do.

“Ancestors, bless this unlucky child with a dead womb.”

This she says over and over again as she looks between my legs for any sign of blood. When there is none, she weeps, scoots toward me, and tries to sink her long fingernails into my stomach.

She is going mad.

The shackles prevent her from harming my womb. So she scratches and bites wherever she can touch me. I do not scream because the first time I did, she seemed to enjoy it. Her nails scratch my ribs and arms. Her teeth bite my shoulders and snap at my breast. On the day the pale ones brought us food that is white and thick, she ate hers and mine too. She is forgetting about her revenge, as madness continues to sink its venomous fangs in her spirit.

The one I am told I should love but do not love calls to me. Even though in my womb grows the life of another, he still calls to me.

“Afua Ataá!”

I hear him call to me amid the cries and screams. A chill creeps over my arms and legs. He is close to us. The same row. Three bodies separate us. When he calls, I do not answer with my mouth, but my eyes recognize my name. Rapidly they blink. They are full of crust that I cannot wipe away. The crust scrapes against my eyes. I try to hide the pain, but the one who grows mad puts her face close to mine and smiles.

“He calls to you even though he is not the father of the child.”

I shut my eyes not wanting to see her. She spits on my face and tells me to blink. She tells me her spit will soften the crust and lessen the pain.

“I know who you are. I have seen you in the village where they took my younger brother. Afua Ataá. Ataá? So you are not only his sister, but his twin. I’ll remember that.”

She sang my name. Over and over she sang it, never letting me forget my tie to the one who is as black as me and whose stubborn pride helped pay for the river’s blood. In my ear she sang. I thought her voice, and not thirst and hunger, would kill me.

But then the trapdoor opened and it was my turn to be taken.

CHAPTER EIGHT: REUNION

Someone opened the plastic blinds in my room to let the sun come in. I groaned, turned over on my belly, and shoved my pillow on top of my head. I was so not a morning person, and the fact that I was in my room, on my bed, instead of in the KEY with Ebo made me even grumpier. Please god, tell me last night was not a dream.

“Seemed like somebody snuck out last night.”

“Whuh?” I tossed my pillow on the bed. Of course, Shakara entered my room unannounced. She’d done that for as long as I can remember. She sat at the foot of my bed blinged out with my bracelet and matching earrings. Her wearing my stuff didn’t surprise me either. What did make my eyes grow wide like a deer caught in the headlights was the note she found taped to my mirror. Grinning, she sat on my bed and opened it.

“Give me that!” I tried not to shriek when I snatched the note out of her hand. It read:

Afua,

You fell asleep in the KEY, and I didn’t want to disturb you. Knew you would be having second thoughts, so I left this as proof that what we shared together last night was real.

Always yours

“Always yours, huh? This brother don’t got a name? And what kind of pet name is Afua? Boy he must be smooth to whisk you away from up underneath all of our noses.” Shakara looked down at my dirty feet, wrinkled gown, and only god knows what could be sticking out of my

hair. “Please tell me you at least used protection, T. And girl what happens if Uncle V ever find out?”

I scrambled off my bed. I folded the note up and stuck it inside my panty drawer. “He’s not going to find out because nothing happened, alright?”

Shakara threw her hands up. “Whatever you say. All I know is I’m gone have to meet this cat and look him over with a fine tooth comb if you expect me to keep my mouth shut.”

Oh God. Shakara never made empty promises. She and Jamal got me into trouble plenty of times, even though their intentions were the complete opposite. Jamal would always wait for me to do something crazy and then tell on me, just because he knew I would get a behind whooping. But Shakara? She always told on me before she thought I would do something crazy. She claimed she was looking out for me and that’s what older cousins do. Riiiiight. So when she said she wouldn’t keep her mouth shut unless she saw Ebo, I believed her.

“Err, I’ll see what I can do. He’s kind of shy.”

She snorted. “Shy my foot. I done already told you.”

Was that my crochet halter dress she had on too? I didn’t have time to ask her because she hopped off my bed and left before I could say a thing.

* * *

I knew it was scandalous to have Shakara believe Octavius wrote the note, but when Jamal pulled up in our driveway with Octavius in the passenger seat, it seemed like a bright idea.

At the moment.

Shakara moved Goddess Nut to the side so she could peep through the front window.

“Jamal bighead self done pulled up. But who is sexy in seat number two?”

I closed the blinds on her fingers. Dang, I still couldn't let Octavius go? Even after what Ebo and I went through last night? Not to mention this Dalybé thing would definitely squash what me and Octavius had if I couldn't. Talk about drama.

My cousin giggled and pulled one of my kinky twists. Why in the world did everybody always do that? "Oh that's him, isn't it? He's a cutie T. But I gots to find out if he ain't trying to be a little player like Jamal thug-wannabe behind. 'Cause if he is, he gots to keep it moving."

Oh God, there was bound to be some drama. I opened the door and put on my brightest smile. Jamal and Octavius each carried a box full of our family reunion T-shirts into the house.

"Queen, you really are looking fly in that dress. It fits you in all the right places." Octavius sat the box down and circled me to get a good look at my getup. My sleeveless peach sundress hugged my waist and came to mid thigh. I wore matching accessories and pumps. God my feet were killing me. If I had the choice I would have on my baggy pants and deflowered flip flops. But, Momma purchased my outfit weeks ago and insisted that I wear it on the first day of the reunion since I was part of the welcoming committee.

Correction. I was the welcoming committee.

"But, Tavius, look at them feet, though. They look like they ready to bust out them heels." Jamal sat his box on the table and used his key to open it. "Tufa, you could probably swing from trees with them thangs. You better be happy there's a change in location for the fish fry today. Because if we was still going to Lowry Zoo, they might have to put you in the orangutan cage."

Shakara snatched a pillow off the couch and smacked Jamal upside the head with it. "You one to talk with that beluga whale forehead that ain't got nothing in it."

Octavius and I laughed at that.

Jamal sucked his teeth. “Please. I know you happy we ain’t going to Lowry no more because with your pencil-legged self I know they gots to be missing a giraffe.”

“Ha ha, very funny.” She put her hand in Jamal’s face and turned to Octavius. “You met my uncle yet?”

Dang. I was really hoping Shakara may have forgotten about the note.

Octavius shrugged. “I’ve seen Mr. V around. He cool people.”

Shakara smiled and knelt on all fours beside the couch. Oh god, why did my cousin always have to be so dramatic? She reached underneath the couch and pulled out my daddy’s machete and held it up in front of Octavius’ face. “Now I’m a ask you again. Have you met my uncle? And I ain’t just talking about seeing him around either. I’m talking about actually introducing yourself and letting him know that you like Tufa.”

I gulped and gave Octavius a nervous smile. He smiled back at me and used his pinky to lower the machete. “Don’t let the company I keep fool you. I’m definitely a gentleman and I’ll introduce myself formally to Mr. V if he was here, but he ain’t.”

Shakara smiled from ear to ear. God she was loving this, wasn’t she? “Lucky for you he is. In the backyard. Pacing.”

Octavius choked, but he caught himself and tried to play it off like something was in his throat. Jamal pushed him down the hallway toward the backdoor. Shakara shoved the machete underneath the couch and raced after them. I stood there a good little minute, nervous and ready to do number two. If my daddy was pacing, he was definitely not in a good mood. I needed to be there if any of the three of them said anything to tick him off. I rubbed my hand over my face

and followed them, praying this would be more like a Dr. Phil instead of a Jerry Springer moment.

* * *

“So you like Tufa?” Daddy paced around the backyard, Octavius was the only one who followed him. Shakara and Jamal sat beneath the ghost tree, cheesing. God knows both of them loved this. I stood in the middle of the yard tapping my foot. My feet hurt too badly to pace and I refused to sit by Shakara and Jamal. They ain’t right.

Daddy looked nice today in his dark jeans and red polo T-shirt Momma picked out. I laughed wondering if Ebo would ever wear something I picked out for him. Dang, I was no good. Here I was watching Octavius try to do the right thing by introducing himself to my father, and my mind strayed away to a man my father would probably never meet. Scandalous.

“Yes sir. I like Tufa a lot.” Octavius tripped over a rock in the grass. He tried to play that off too, but everyone saw it. “You raised a beautiful woman.”

“Ooman?” My father stopped so quick Octavius walked a few paces before he noticed. “Beautiful yes. Ooman no. Tufa has many years ahead of her before she become that.”

How many years Daddy thought I had? I would technically be an adult in two years. Hello.

“Oh, I-I didn’t mean that Mr. V., I meant—”

My daddy eyed Octavius, the muscles in his jaw working. “Mr. Hannah. Han-nah.”

By this time Jamal and Shakara laughed so loud I wished I could have crawled into myself like a roly-poly and hide.

“Sorry. Mr. Hannah, all I’m trying to say is that you raised a fine, young woman.”

“Fine?” My daddy crossed his arms and glared down at Octavius.

Bad move Tavius. Time to cut in. I kicked off my pumps and made my way over to where the two of them stood. I put my hand on my daddy’s arm. He didn’t even notice because he was glaring at Octavius so hard.

“Daddy.”

“Hmm.” He didn’t even bother to look at me; his eyes never left Octavius’ face.

“Daddy, Octavius trying to give you a compliment. Now stop embarrassing me.”

My daddy softened his face then. Thank god. He cupped my cheek and tilted my face up so he could stare me in the eyes. “You like this boy, mermaid?”

I did but even as I told him so, a part of me felt like I was lying—the part that was head over heels for Ebo. My father raised an eyebrow; he always did that when he knew I was not telling him everything.

“You sure?”

I hesitated. But when I saw how Octavius looked at me then down at his shoes, I nodded. My father cleared his throat. “Octavius, maybe you should help Jamal and Shakara sort through those reunion T-shirts. My wife wants to make sure everyone gets the right size.”

Jamal helped Shakara to her feet and brushed off his jeans. “So, Uncle V, what you think about my boy?”

I rolled my eyes. What an idiot.

“He must have had a lot of guts to disturb me when mi pace.” When Octavius gave Shakara and Jamal a look, they started whistling. “Or maybe he showed no guts at all since he didn’t know how mi feel about that kind of ting.”

Octavius held his hands up. “Look Mr. Hannah I really didn’t—”

My daddy patted Octavius’ shoulder and gave him his first smile. “It’s alright. My anger would be with them not you. No need to apologize for something you didn’t know. Now let me have a moment with Tufa.”

Octavius smiled at me. I guess that was his silent way of saying, “I won your Daddy over.” I smiled back even though something inside me whispered, “Trifling hypocrite.”

When the three of them left, my father stared at me for a good little minute before I broke the silence.

“Daddy, what is it now? You’ve seen Octavius. He really is a good guy.”

My father nodded. “Time will tell if that be the case. Mi want you to be careful Tufa, you hear what mi say?”

I rolled my eyes. “Daddy, I’m not thinking about having sex okaaaay?”

His eyes widened. Oh dang, I probably put my foot in my mouth on that one. “Hope not. Mi want you to be careful because of mi dream, the one that’s been giving me so much trouble.”

Oh that. The faceless soon-to-be dead person. I gathered up a corner of my dress and twirled it out of nervous habit. “Daddy, I need to tell you something about your secret box. I took it out of the trashcan yesterday. It’s in my room.” Now that I thought about it, it was on my bed when Ebo and his people soul-trained into my room last night. I didn’t see it there this morning though. “I think.”

He shook his head. “Shakara found it in your room this morning and gave it to me. To be honest, mi glad you kept it; there was a clue mi found when mi compared this dream to my earlier ones.”

I tried not to jump up and down like a peppy cheerleader. “So you’re not mad? And the secret box, it’s safe in the linen closet?”

He smiled and squeezed my nose. “Mi not mad, and yes the secret box is safe. But it’s in a place you’ll never find.”

Bummer. “So since you’re not going to tell me where you hid it, how about telling me about that clue.”

He started to pace again. Not a good sign. I followed him around the backyard twice, before he stopped by the ghost tree and said, “Twenty-four.”

I knew twenty-four meant water. It was one of the first numbers Daddy taught me, because it was how I got my name. Momma never really did like the fact that my father named me after a number used to gamble in Drop Pan. That’s why it never really bothered me that she called me that chile, baby, or anything else but my name.

“What about water, Daddy?”

He tucked one of my kinky twists behind my ear. “The fish fry not going to be at Lowry.”

“I heard.”

“Your Momma and Zinga met this man when they picked up the fish, crabs and such. Zinga say someting off about him, she could smell it in her hair.” My father laughed then. “You know how crazy your Momma sister is.”

I tried to laugh too, but it came off phony. Who was this man my momma and aunt met? Daddy just didn’t know what Aunt Zinga used on her hair these days. Shakara thought it was funny, but after Hishka’s sniffing session with Yao and Old Ebo, I believed old lady Avan was on to something when she made that hair recipe for protection.

My daddy kicked a pine cone before I could step on it. “He the one who bought that lot a few years back. He say you and them boys visit him place and swim in that lake. That true?”

Oh god. Now Kofi’s sort-of servant Dollymon was stalking my momma now? “Kind of.”

“Hmm mm. He also say his pet chimp attacked Jamal. That true too?”

I nodded. Dang Dollymon really had a big behind mouth.

“Lawd god.” My daddy laughed and walked through the open back gate that led to his mango tree. “And here me tinkin your Momma and Zinga crazier than Uncle Pete. Don’t ask me how he knew Rica your Momma, but mi know he probably heard all he needed to with them way that ooman talk.”

Daddy was stalling.

“Yeah we swam in the lake,” I said. “What that got to do with twenty-four?”

I hopped a couple of times over rocks and tiny acorns before we reached the spot where Daddy’s mango tree grew. The oak still leaned slightly over, but my father ripped off one of the branches like it was a Mr. Potato Head’s arm. He looked in the inside and smiled. The outer rim of the branch’s interior was drying out. There was no doubt about it. It’d be dead before his mango tree ever grew that tall.

“You know why trees live to be so old? Because they don’t change. But the moment someting change around them, they die. Your Momma knew for months that the pavilion at Lowry would be too small for a fish fry with a family this big. But this man I do not know opens up him house for us to have the fish fry on the lake. That kind of change mi don’t trust. And the scars Zinga seen on him face make me think he got a history mi no like.”

Hold up. It was Kofi who appeared to my momma and Aunt Zinga? A sigh escaped my lips. At least them seeing him proved I was not crazy. But why would he appear to them. Why let us have a fish fry at his place? “It makes no sense.”

My father touched one of the mango leaves. “That’s the same ting me try and tell your momma. But she no listen. This is why I want you to be careful, why I already told the rest of the family to stay away from that lake.”

I shook my head. At this point, my father and I were talking about two different things. “Sir?”

“The lake’s the clue. It’s why, in my dreams, I couldn’t properly see the face of the one who’ll die.”

Okaaay. Now I was beyond lost. I guess my confusion must have shown on my face, because my dad stopped stroking his mango tree and sighed.

“The dead person’s face is not clear because it’s beneath the water.”

* * *

During the whole drive over to Kofi’s place, I prayed that the face my father saw beneath the water was an Ataw. Technically, they were already dead and seeing one of their faces would fulfill the prophecy. But, there was a gnawing feeling in my stomach that told me whoever died would be much closer to home. Things were always closer to home nowadays.

Ole’ Smokey seemed like it led a processional. It felt like Granddaddy Juno’s funeral all over again. Instead of driving to the Rest Haven to bury him, we were going to a mansion by a lake. Funny, how the two destinations did not seem so different tonight. No Old Wind hid the bright sun as our line of cars drove. Ole’ Smokey crept down the road so slow we could have

gotten there faster if we just walked. The rest of the family seemed too afraid to swerve around us because Momma insisted they follow our car. She really was taking this family reunion coordinating business to a whole new level.

I felt like an idiot when I realized everybody wore family reunion t-shirts except me. My sundress made me look overdressed and some of my cousins gave me the eye because of it.

All of our cars had plenty of room to park in Kofi's U-shaped driveway. Some of my younger cousins went straight for the Japanese plum tree and got switched by Great Aunt Frieda. Trunks opened and arms soon became filled with covered dishes, coolers, fresh fish to fry, and lounge chairs. My Uncle Punt was the last to pull up. He brought his grill because of Momma. She insisted he bring it just in case Kofi was not good people and refused to offer up his kitchen for her to use. To my disappointment Octavius tagged along to help Jamal DJ. God, I hoped Ebo was not here. I didn't think I could pretend to like—or not like—both of them if they were in the same spot.

Momma rapped the knocker on the door, her hands full of bags with paper plates and cups. "He assured me all them chimps would be gone, so no need to worry family."

Several of my cousins, uncles and aunts whispered. I love my momma, honestly I do. But most of the family did not even know about the chimps until she told them. Geesh, she was really doing a fabulous job of freaking everybody out just to remind them she was in charge.

I fully expected Dollymon to open the door. Instead, the string-spanking lady greeted us. She still rocked her giant bang hairdo, but she dressed like it was winter instead of summer time. She wore jeans and a long-sleeved turtleneck in place of her beaded dress. Her leather gloves matched her knee-high boots. When she extended a leather-gloved hand to Aunt Zinga, I got the

hint. Home girl was taking all the precautions she could to avoid making contact. “Welcome. Please come in. And I go by Swana.” She opened the large door wider for us to come in. “Boku! Bring the others. They need help.”

Aunt Zinga shook Swana’s hand. “Fula, isn’t it? I remember seeing the hairstyle before.”

Swana touched one of her long braids and returned Aunt Zinga’s smile. “That’s right. You have seen other Fula here?”

My aunt laughed and followed Swana into the house. “Girl, please, if they here they don’t know they here. I’ve talked with some Fula when I visited Mali. I found some great artwork there.”

Boku and some other Ataw men took the bags and covered dishes out of the women’s hands. All of them wore gloves and winter clothes like Swana. I frowned when I noticed that the KEY was not among them. My family looked like they had walked into an art museum. Necks turned all over the place. Fingers danced over the expensive furniture and house décor. Eyes widened at the sight of ceiling-to-floor oil paintings. I tried not to laugh at Aunt Zinga. She was by far the worst. She behaved, or misbehaved, like a child in a candy store. Most of the artwork in Kofi’s place was authentic traditional art imported from Africa. I’ll admit Swana seemed more than gracious with Aunt Zinga’s over-the-top enthusiasm, emphasis on over-the-top. Every piece of art Aunt Zinga grabbed, Swana took her time explaining what part of Africa it originated from and its artistic and social functions.

Swana directed my aunts and girl cousins into the kitchen and Boku led the men into the Mami Wata courtyard that opened up to Hishka’s Lake. Now I know the Ataw was definitely old old school, because having the men chill while the women cook was such a cliché move. I rolled

my eyes when Uncle Punt reluctantly let go of Aunt Gertrude's priceless fingers. No one bothered to ask him about the other woman beside him. Her tight bun and half-moon spectacles reminded me of my school's librarian. She seemed like a square that feared the women in my family. Please. She acted like somebody planned to gobble her up the way she clung to Uncle Punt. I gave her two months. Tops. She pecked my uncle on the cheek and followed Aunt Gertrude into the kitchen to join the other women. I shuddered, wondering how in the world Aunt Gertrude put up with that.

Before I could make my way into the kitchen, I bumped into Swana. A trail of my younger cousins followed her.

"Toof, we gone change and swim in the lake. This nice lady say she got floats, beach balls, and everything. You coming?" My five year old cousin Rashad grinned up at me, his two front teeth missing.

The dead person's face is not clear because it's beneath the water. I stared down at my little cousin's chubby cheeks wondering if it was his face my father dreamed. God, please tell me the face beneath the water was of somebody faraway from this place because nobody seemed to care about my daddy's warning. He had used the excuse that the snakes no longer swam beneath the Bowing Oaks, but now overtook the whole lake. Of course, stupid Jamal ruined that lie when he told the family the three of us swam in the lake yesterday and there wasn't a snake in sight. But if the family would not listen to my father maybe they would listen to Swana. "Ra-Ra I don't think swimming is a good idea. Maybe I'll take you to the Y tomorrow. How's that sound?"

His bottom lip quivered and he stomped his foot. "Stupid." He grabbed Swana's gloved

hand and looked up at her. I know he was not about to give her the puppy-eye treatment. “You say we can swim in the lake. Now Toof say we can’t.”

I gathered a corner of my dress. “Swana, it really isn’t a good idea. You just got to trust me on this.”

My eyes widened when she caressed my cheek in a flash. Did this sister ever do track and field, because she had Usain Bolt speed? “I know where your thoughts are. But please trust that all will work out the way it should,” she whispered.

Okaaaay. If she was trying to make me feel better it so was not working. All will work out the way it should? “How do you know that?”

She smiled and tucked one of my kinky twists behind my ear. “Because Kofi and Ebo and even Yao have your best interest in mind. They have done all of this for you.”

I arched an eyebrow at her. “Come again?”

“Making ourselves visible to your family. It would be very difficult being a part of your life if you were the only one who saw us. Many of your kind are deemed crazy because they see the Ataw. Kofi did not want that for you. We all know you are not very good at lying. So, Kofi insisted we make things easier for you by trying to act normal.”

If wearing winter clothes during the summer was normal, Kofi and his people really missed the mark. But I appreciated what Kofi tried to do. Deep down I kept hope alive that his efforts would one day change how my family thought of me. But I knew that day wasn’t today.

Today seemed like a beautiful day to kick off our family reunion. There was no rain, the weather was just right, and no family drama broke out. Yet. It seemed like a perfect day for a fish fry. But there was one itty bitty problem. Somebody was going to die. Fantastic.

Swana pressed a caller button by the kitchen's entrance. "Yawa, please show the children to the bathroom."

A toothpick-skinny girl around twelve years old climbed down the stairs that led into the corridor that separated the kitchen from the living room. She looked so young to be Ataw, and something about her seemed familiar. She dressed like Swana, everything covered up except for her face. Her hair was set in candy curls and they bounced when she made her way toward us. Her face was rather plain and it seemed as if she never smiled. She stopped for a moment when she saw me, but the girl waved when Swana cleared her throat.

"So y'all want to go swimming?"

My little cousins turned into bobble heads when they all shouted, "Yeah!"

Yawa stuck her gloved hands in her back pockets. Something told me she didn't feel comfortable around us even though her clothes kept us from getting too close. She took them down the same corridor Boku led the men.

"Come Afua, Ebo is expecting you," said Swana. "He is in the library with Kofi and Yao."

What in the devil was going on? The KEY Club was all lovey dovey now? Last time I checked, Yao seemed pretty ticked off that Ebo and I had made contact. Kofi appeared to accept what happened, even though he didn't necessarily approve of it. I did want to tell Kofi, in person, thanks but no thanks for inviting my family to his house. We could do this whole "act normal" thing some other time. And if anyone would listen to me about someone drowning near his property, I knew it had to be him.

Swana showed me into the library and shut the door and left. Just great. Leave me in the room alone with the KEY club. My jaw dropped when I saw the library. Kofi definitely knew how to live large, I'll give him that. The library had a cylinder shape. Made up of two floors, the bookshelves were built into the walls and stretched all the way up to the ceiling. A giant globe sat in the center of the first floor; blue dots glowed across all of the continents except Africa. What was up with that? I shivered when a breeze made gooseflesh break out over my arms. Before I could touch a big cluster of blue dots on Brazil, someone spoke behind me.

“Hasn't Young Vincent and that mother of yours ever taught you look but don't touch?”

I whirled around to face Yao. Dang, how did he creep up on me like that? His locs were pulled behind his head and I got a good look at his face for the first time. Not half bad, though the way he looked at me made me want to puke all over my pumps.

“Oh, I see. Ebo must have really impressed you with last night's little performance. You think he is the only one of our kind who can become the wind?” He rubbed my gooseflesh arm with the back of his hand. “But I can perform for you much better than Ebo, Afua Ataá.”

A forceful wind knocked Yao back and another one flung his long locs into his face. Kofi and Ebo both appeared on either side of me, each looking beyond pissed off.

“Yao, your manners,” said Kofi.

Yao scrambled to his feet. He winked at me and bowed. “My apologies.”

Oh please, save it for someone who cared. I looked around the three of them to find something to shift the attention off of me. “So what's up with the globe? Why aren't there any blue dots on Africa?”

Kofi tore his eyes away from Yao to stare at the globe. “Because there are no Ataw in Africa. Our people are tied to those who survived the Maafa.”

Ebo spun the globe around so I could get a better look at the motherland. I raised an eyebrow at him. I know he touched the globe just to piss Yao off. “Many of our kind believe the ancient Ataw have the power to return home. But their whereabouts are hidden on the globe, so we have no way of knowing.”

I slipped my hand into Ebo’s and he squeezed it without hesitation. Neither Kofi nor Yao missed it. Kofi turned on his heel and told us to follow him onto the second floor. Yao became wind and appeared on the second floor within seconds. Show off. Honestly, brother was becoming a real pain. My pumps clanked against the marble stairs, and I gripped the railing for fear that I would turn into a total klutz.

A panoramic window stretched across the entire circumference of the second floor. There was a good view of the neighborhood from up here. People looked like little dolls as they rode their bikes and cars down the street. I also had a clear view of my family setting up for the fish fry around Hishka’s Lake.

“I like this reunion tradition your kind celebrates,” said Kofi, his hands clamped behind his back.

“I like it too until my fam starts cutting up.” I made my way up to the window with Ebo beside me. I tried not to show my relief. Nobody swam in the lake. Yet.

“Cutting up?” Yao asked. He lounged in a leather chair and cocked his feet up on Kofi’s desk. He acted like he owned the place.

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, you know, acting a fool?” *Sort of like what you’re doing now*, I wanted to say but kept my mouth shut.

Kofi chuckled and stole a glance at me. “Ah, families do cut up from time to time. But you love them regardless.”

I smoothed the wrinkles out of my dress. “True.”

Kofi turned to me and leaned against the window. He cocked his head toward the desk and Ebo stepped away from me to go join Yao. I knew Kofi was the KEY club president, but dang. He could get Ebo to move with just a nod? What was up with that?

He shook his head and smiled at me. For a moment he looked like a young boy and not the big bad wolf he tried to be. “You look just like her, yet you don’t remember.”

I shrugged. “Because I’m not her.”

“Hmm. Let’s say you were. Life is a curious thing. The Supreme One sometimes chooses to have us live it again—to live a full life once cut short or to learn things not learned before. Like compassion.” Kofi gave me his scars to see when he turned to stare out the panoramic window. “Or forgiveness. It could have been any number of reasons why you have been born again, Afua Ataá, hypothetically speaking of course.”

Yao snorted and lit a cigar. “Hypothetically speaking. Humph.” He cocked his head back and puffed out a ring of smoke. “There is nothing hypothetical about this.” He pointed his cigar at me. “You cannot tell me when you look into her eyes you do not see her. We all see her.”

Ebo let Yao talk. He sat in the chair beside him and the way he stared at me shot firecrackers off in my belly. He knew Yao was no competition, but Kofi was. Not like Octavius, that would be gross, because I still pictured Kofi as this weird godfather and he saw me as his

sister, twin to be exact. We had some connection and the way Ebo gave us distance, told me that he recognized and respected that. But the way he watched us like a hawk also told me he did not want that connection to be stronger than the one I shared with him. Geesh, the men in my life were really complicating things.

Kofi studied my face, especially my eyes. Believing I was his long lost twin was not enough. He needed me to believe it too, but I couldn't remember something that never was.

“Do you know why the Ataw protect your people?” Kofi asked.

I have never been someone to get distracted easily but what was playing out in Hishka's Lake at the moment was a huge distraction. My little cousin Rashad was the first of the whole bobble head pack to jump into the lake. I mouthed, “No,” against the glass, my sweaty fingers pressing against the window pane.

“They have to get out of the lake,” I whispered.

“They're fine,” Kofi said.

I turned to him. “No. They. Are. Not.”

Kofi raised an eyebrow at me. “Yao, join Boku down at the lake. Gather up the little ones and take them to the game room.”

Yao puffed a ring of smoke into Ebo's face. “Make him do it.”

Kofi threw a pair of gloves and Yao caught them in midair. “My patience grows thin with you. I'll not ask again.”

Yao put the cigar out on the surface of Kofi's rather expensive-looking desk. Brother really had some nerve. He took his time putting on his gloves, and in an instant he became the wind and disappeared.

“Better?” Kofi turned to me.

Ebo and Kofi looked amused by my near hysteria. Whatever. They could grin all they wanted as long as my cousins got out of that lake. ASAP. “I will be once my cousins are in that game room.” I breathed a little easier when Yao appeared down at the lake.

“Perhaps we can talk about this some other time.”

I watched Yao dangle a couple of popsicles in front of my cousins. They splashed water all over him trying to get out of the water. He probably wasn’t expecting to get soaked when he used the popsicles as bait. But at least it worked. When the last of my cousins wrapped a towel around themselves and followed Yao inside, I gave Kofi a weak smile.

“Now I’m good.” I tried not to look at Ebo who mouthed, “women,” to me and shook his head. “So you were explaining how the Ataw got our backs.”

Kofi arched an eyebrow. He really reminded me of my father whenever he did that. “I do not know of this having our back business. But you are the reason my people protect yours. Before I became the Ataw, my people back home believed the dead either return to the spirit world or reincarnate into this one.” He raised his hand toward me and I looked at it for a moment, dumbfounded. His hand, the same hand that caressed my cheek years ago, looked nothing like I expected. It was big with thick fingers and lots of crisscross scars on the knuckles. Dang, how many fights did he get into? I could play tic tac toe with all his scars. Thank goodness he at least kept his fingernails low and clean. Even as I stared at his hand like it was a dissected frog in biology class, I knew what he was waiting for. He had almost taken something away from me at Granddaddy Juno’s funeral. If he would have made contact with me then, Ebo and I may not have ever been what we are today. Whatever that was. He respected me enough now to let me

make the decision, to let me decide if I wanted to be close to him. I could stay in the same spot or step away from his outstretched fingers. Instead, I closed the gap between us and allowed him to cup my cheek.

That did something for him that I did not quite understand. His triple beacon blazed from his eyes and forehead. However, when he saw me make a move to step back, the blue light dimmed. “Forgive me. I know you have chosen Ebo for Dalybé, but I never thought you would ever allow me to be so close to you again. But still, even after I became an Ataw, I had always hoped.” He let his hand fall to his side. “You were the very reason for my existence, why I protected your descendants through the centuries. I had hoped through their survival you might live again. And I was right. We were the lucky ones.” He looked toward Ebo when his eyes returned to normal.

“I presume I’m being a terrible host. I’ll leave you two alone and join Swana and the others to ensure all are enjoying themselves.” He bowed and walked down the stairs.

I barely nodded. My mind tuned out everything Kofi said after, “We were the lucky ones.” Lucky? What he said to me sounded off somehow. In my gut it felt wrong, like that was the one thing he should have never said aloud, and least of all to me. He should not have said, “We were the lucky ones.” The hairs crept up on my neck just thinking about it. When he said that, it unlocked something, both inside and outside of me. Whatever he unlocked was dangerous, wild, and something that should have always been caged up. The phrase, that exact phrase, I had heard it before. I didn’t know where, and I didn’t know when but it felt like *déjà vu*. The word lucky was what did it. The moment Kofi said it, I felt sick to my stomach. I did not realize I had doubled over until Ebo came up behind me and rubbed my back. He asked me what

was wrong, but I couldn't answer. My legs crumpled from beneath me, but he caught me just before I fell to the floor and my eyes rolled back to white.

* * *

I am Afua Ataá. Through my unluckiness, Tufa lives. My round belly, proof for all to see how unlucky I am, shows. I stand beside a pale man with hair like fire who pulls me through the trapdoor. Another pale man climbs into the hold with keys I know very well. Keys that unlock the chains they thread through the shackles on our wrists and ankles. Today they will bring all of us up for bathing. Today they will sort through the living for the dead. I peer through the open trapdoor. The stink floats up from the bodies below. The smell is not so strong up here, but I know I cannot escape it. I sniff myself. The stink follows me.

Although the shackles are free from my ankles, they still lock around my wrist. The man with hair like fire squeezes my arm and yanks me away from the trapdoor. I know I am not to bathe with the others, but where he takes me I do not know. Perhaps he takes me where they take all of the women who disappear—the one who laughs at the sun, the one who calls to Nana Day and Night all night and day, and the one who screams broken screams. I wonder if the stink follows them too.

I tilt my face up to the sun. Even though thick clouds threaten to hide it from me, I feel some warmth by its presence. I smile, hoping it will rain today. We pass many pale men to get to the place we are going. They scrub the floors. They check the ropes and sails that tease the wind. They sing songs and curse in a tongue I am beginning to recognize. It surprises me how some of them are sick like many of us in the hold. I study their faces, how they walk and how they talk. I try to figure out which among them are the weakest and the strongest in body and mind. I stare at

the hands of the one who leads me. He is neither weak nor strong. His strength is something I must remember.

We stop at a door. A young man with clean hands opens it. He is strong of mind but weak in body. He does not appear like the others.

“Doc, I brought her up, just like you asked. What do you plan to do with this one?”

I do not know what the man with hair like fire says but the way he stares at my swollen breasts makes me want to spit in his face.

The one with a strong mind stares at my unluckiness and smiles. “What all ship surgeons do, James. I’ll examine her like all the others. You can collect her shortly.” He guides me through the door and locks it. The word *others* I understand yet I do not see anyone else. I look about me. This is where he sleeps. A bowl of water and a flame captured in glass sit on a small table. There is a bed beside the table and there are dark red spots on its white sheets.

Bum...Dum dum bum...Dum...Bum bum dum. They are bathing now because I hear the drums beating. *Rattle, rattle, rattle. Dum dum bum...Dum.* They are dancing because I hear their chains clanking. I keep my face straight lest I let him know that the drum plays a different beat today.

He unrolls a piece of cloth sitting on the table. It is full of shiny tools, none I have ever seen. I look over his shoulder to study the sharpness of the tools. He knows I am watching, yet he allows me to see. When he picks up one that has a flat, round head, I step back. It is not a sharp one so I am not worried. He pushes on my shoulder gently and I sit on the bed. I am careful not to touch the dark red spot that looks like blood. I look to the door to see how far it is from where

I sit. It is farther than the shiny tools. I will remember that. His hands are cold against my skin.

He pats the bed and his cold hands push my back flat to the sheets.

Bum. Dum dum bum. Dum. Bum bum dum. They play the drums just a little faster. When he sits on the bed, I use my tongue to tap the rhythm of the drum to the roof of my mouth.

He is a healer. I can tell by the way he uses his small hands. They touch me behind my ears. They open my eyes, being sure not to touch any crust the mad one's spit may not have rinsed away. They pry open my lips so he can study my teeth. He puts the shiny tool on my tongue and opens his own mouth. I look at his mouth when he creates a choking noise. He points to his chest as he opens his mouth wider. Then he points to me. I do what he does.

The healer sets the tool down and rinses his fingers in the bowl. After he dries them, his hands touch my belly. I rise up on my elbows and look over my chained wrists and swollen breasts to see what he is doing. His fingers touch my stomach and slowly crawl up. I try to keep my breathing even when his tiny fingers close over one of my breasts.

Bum dum dum bum dum bum bum dum.

I look to the door and then to the table with shiny tools. I shake my head when he rubs my nipple to a hard peak. I scream when his mouth closes over it, but the drum drowns out my cries. I push against him. My shackled hands reach for his face, but his tiny one holds my wrists above my head.

He climbs on top of me and shoves my legs open. He keeps one of his hands on my wrists while his other fumbles with his clothes. I tell him to stop, but he does not understand me. I stare at the ceiling when he forces himself inside me. I beg him to stop, but he does not understand me. He is not that big but I still feel pain. .

I keep my eyes on the ceiling, my tongue keeping beat with the drum. Tears wash the crust from my eyes, but I do not care. He keeps my arms above my head, his weight pressing into my belly. It hurts. I turn to him and whisper, “Pull-ease.”

He slows down but does not stop. He leans over me and puts his thin lips to mine. I want to vomit in his face, but I have eaten nothing. I want to spit in his face, but my mouth is dry from drinking nothing. Instead, I open my mouth and let my tongue tease his lips. His eyes grow wide and he shudders. He opens his mouth and his tongue dances with mine.

Bumdumdumbumdumbumdum.

But he does not know that my tongue plays the beat of the drum.

I suck on his tongue and when most of it is in my mouth, I bite down hard. I spit it onto the floor. I swallow his blood that is in my mouth. It tastes like rust. It streams down my chin. It covers my breast. It stains the sheets. I make a fist out of my chained hands and send it into his bloody face. His small hands try to grab me when I scramble off the bed. My legs are sticky from him and some of my own blood. I cry, hoping the mad woman’s prayer was not answered.

The healer groans and tries to crawl off the bed. I grab one of his shiny tools, the sharpest of them. When he grabs my hair from behind, I turn around and stab him in the chest. He falls back onto the bed taking me with him. His body jerks and I push deeper. His eyes stare into mine and I only blink when he stops.

My body shakes when I see all the blood.

Bumdumdu—

Rattle, rattle, ra—

The drums stop playing and the people stop dancing. I hear feet running and people shouting.

Kapow.

Splash.

I gather up the healer's tools and unlock the door. I shiver because the wind hides the sun. The shiny tools in my hands clank when I run around black and pale men fighting. The black men use any and everything to fight—their hands, chains, and the knives of dead, pale men. The pale ones use knives and fire sticks. Whoo, whooo, whoooo sounds as a young boy twirls his chain above his head. I stop running when a large pale man aims his firestick at the young boy.

Kapow.

The boy falls back, his chain crumbles onto his chest. The man's eyes grow wide when he see my body covered in blood. Before he can aim his firestick at me a dagger lodges into his forehead. I turn around. I cry out when my man runs toward me.

“Ebo, are you alright?”

He yanks the dagger out of the man's forehead and takes the chain off of the boy's chest. I kiss him, not caring that the blood of another man is still on my lips.

“I'm fine.” He looks at me and then his eyes grow wide. There are many questions that he could have asked, but only one he said aloud. “The baby?”

My lips tremble and I shake my head. “I do not know.”

I hear the clouds cry when I run behind Ebo. Thunder beats against the sails but the rain, no matter how heavy it grows, cannot wash away the ship's blood. We spot the one as black as

me with blood exactly like mine at the front of the ship. Several pale men are wounded at his feet and two that are unarmed fight him. We race toward him, and Ebo flings his knife into the back of one of the pale men. The one with blood exactly like mine yanks the blade out and shoves it into the second man's mouth and twists.

I say nothing to him when he cleans off the blade and hands it to Ebo.

“Have you seen Yao?”

Ebo shakes his head. “Kofi Atá, there are too many of them. We are no match for their fire weapons.”

Kofi leans over to grab one of the dead man's firesticks. “Guns, Ebo. They were one of the things they offered me. I remember them well.” He aims the gun at the man with hair like fire. The firestick roars and the man falls. When Kofi leans over the man to collect his weapons, another pale man from on top of a pole aims at him. Ebo does not hesitate to run toward Kofi even though I tell him to come back.

“Ebo!”

The healer's tools drop from my hands when my man stands in front of the one with blood exactly like mine that helped pay for the river's blood.

Kapow.

Kapow.

He falls to one knee; his chest and one of his legs is shot. Kofi tries to shoot the man on top of the pole but misses.

Kapow.

The man shoots Ebo in the chest again. I scream and grab Ebo before he can fall to the ground. His eyelids flutter and his mouth works as if he wants to tell me something. But he never says it before the breath leaves his body. The one with a face like mine touches my shoulder but I shake his hand off. He tries to lift me away from Ebo and I kick him.

“All of this is your fault. I hate you!”

He sets down the firestick to tear me away from Ebo. I reach for my man even though Kofi drags me away from him.

“I hate you, Kofi. If you would have listened to me, none of this would have ever happened. I told you not to help them, that they would come for us one day.” I cover my face with my hands. I cannot even stand the sight of him. “And they did. It should have been you and not him to die. I’ll never forgive you for Ebo dying to protect you!”

He touches my shoulder but I shake him off. “Afua, you don’t me—”

I look up when he does not say anything more. His eyes grow wide as they stare at me. I look at his chest. A blade has sliced clean through. He looks to me but I can’t move. He falls on his side, eyes unblinking. But still I cannot move. My eyes drift to the one who stabbed him.

The mad woman once chained beside me, now soaked from the pouring rain, leans over my brother and whispers, “I told you I’d never forget your face.”

There is nothing left for me to cry as I stare at her. “Why did you do it?”

She smiles. “Child, don’t you see? I want you to be as lucky as I am. If you are not, your children and children’s children will suffer our pain. It must end here. For him. For all of us.”

“Ancestors, please do not answer her prayers.” When I speak this, she laughs. Before I can grab one of the healer’s tools off the floor, something hits me in the back of my head, and all I see is black.

* * *

My body felt like a car had drove, reversed, and drove over it again. My vision took its time coming back into focus.

“Afua, are you alright?”

I was on a bed big enough for at least six people. Ebo had my head propped up on one of his hard behind thighs. I could really appreciate my man’s body, but I would love a pillow at this point.

My man?

God, what I experienced had to be real. It was like I was Afua and she was me. I remembered the chains, the guns, and the blood. I remembered the healer and the young boy with the chain. I remembered being pregnant, with Ebo’s baby. Ebo’s baby? Have mercy. And dang, I even remembered blaming Kofi for Ebo’s death and expressing—in excruciating detail—how much I hated his guts and wished he was dead just seconds before he actually died. No wonder he’s the sweating, all up in my business, godfather-type of brother.

Brother? I have a brother? That was weird, but a part of me kind of liked it. I also remembered Sisi, Ebo’s sister. So she was the one who did Kofi in, not to mention she would have done me in too had the ship’s crew not knocked us out and regained order on deck. I wonder if Kofi ever found out she was his killer? That’s one thing I’ll have to ask him about.

Dang, I sort of felt sorry for Ebo's sister in a weird upside down kind of way. She really thought she was doing right by everybody. What she went through did a number on her. All I know is that if Jamal ever tried to tell me I caught the crazy, I'd tell him where to go. Because after what I've been through, I know what stone crazy looked like. Trust.

"Swana, her eyes are open but she's still not answering. Maybe we should tell her family, so they'll take her to the hospital."

Ebo's voice sounded panicky. Aw, his concern was too cute. But instead of telling him so, I rolled my eyes and whispered, "Men."

Kofi laughed and knelt beside me. "I told you she would be fine. Make sure her bath is warm. The Afua I knew was never the fainting type, but this one may have another spell if the water is too hot."

I snorted. "You never listened to the Afua you knew either."

His eyes widened. Ebo's eyes stretched too. Even a wide-eyed Swana stood over me with her ear-to-ear grin. Geesh, how many people were in this room?

"She remembers," she said.

Ebo sat me up and searched my face. "Is it true, what Swana says?"

I looked to Kofi. "I don't remember everything, just enough to know I need to apologize to my pig-headed twin brother. I know it's a long time coming, but for real, though. I'm sorry for saying what I said. My bad."

He tousled my kinky twists. Okaaaay. He was taking this family reunion moment a little too far. "If my bad is your way of saying sorry," he cleared his throat, "then my bad too."

I laughed. I wouldn't knock him for trying.

“Afua, you might want to, uh freshen up,” said Swana. “I made a bath for you just in case you may need it.”

A bath? And then that’s when I smelled it. Piss. Correction, my piss, and it soaked the sheets.

Sheets? Maybe it was Ebo’s presence or finally knowing where my sheet phobia came from, but at that moment sheets didn’t bother me too much. In fact these—rather expensive sheets that, thanks to muah, will have a rather large piss stain—were kind of comfy.

My face probably looked kind of off because I was not sure whether I should feel embarrassed or elated.

“Err Afua.” Kofi patted my hand. “No need to feel ashamed. We of all people understand. It happened to all of us.”

I squeezed his hand, knowing he tried his best to not make me want to crawl under the closest rock I could find. He and Swana left Ebo and me alone. Ebo swept me up in his arms, pissy and all. He planted kisses on my neck and rubbed his nose into my kinky twists. I giggled when he nibbled on my ear. Honestly, the way he held me before my little know-thyself episode in the library was nothing like this. The way he touched me now was how a man touched his woman, a man who touched his wife.

“You know, me and you taking a bath together is so out. If you want to see me like that, me and you gone have to jump the broom. Feel me?”

He cocked his head back and laughed. It was the first laugh I heard from him that held nothing back. One of his arms dropped to his side and my feet dangled above the marble floor. When he released me, my breath caught in my throat. This bathroom was nothing to play with.

His and her sinks. A two-head shower with brown-tinted glass doors. And in the center of the bathroom was the bathtub which looked more like a Jacuzzi.

“I’ll be in the bedroom. Just call me if you need me.”

Need him? He was too slick. He winked at me, but before he could close the door a knife whizzed through the air and lodged into the tiled wall. Ebo came back into the bathroom and locked the door. He yanked the knife out of the wall and twirled it in his fingers.

The knife’s handle was made from bone. I could only guess whether the bone was human or animal. The bathroom lights glinted off the sharp blade, and when Ebo flipped the knife over, I gasped.

“It’s Hishka’s.”

The lights began to flicker and the knife flew out of Ebo’s hand. It lodged into the wall a second time and wrote:

UNLUCKY

“Reveal yourself.” Ebo made sure to keep me behind him, even though his voice sounded like he had everything under control.

A disembodied laugh shook the bathroom door on its hinges.

“Ebo, I know who it is.” I licked my dry lips. So all this time Ebo’s sister never really stopped trying to do me in. She was the ghost that was driving Hishka up the wall and always trying to kill me whenever I was around Octavius. Funny, she never tried to hurt me around Ebo. Until now. Probably because he was always so careful about not touching me. For some reason, I felt home girl wanted to wait for me to know exactly who I was before she went extra crazy. And she wanted Ebo to have front seat tickets to her craziness.

The light fixtures blew out, but Ebo's triple beacon came right on schedule. "Who?"

I tried not to breathe so loud. "Your sister."

"It's gutting time." Her voice bounced off the walls, and before Ebo could do anything, his sister's ghost flung me into the tub.

Since Ebo and I made contact, I've been able to breathe underwater, but even though Sisi did not know that, drowning never really was her preferred method for doing me in. Her phantom hands clamped around my throat like a vise grip and I tried to pry them open. But, there were no fingers to pry. I kicked my pumps onto the bathroom floor and my hands tried to get a hold of anything that could pull me out of the tub. My heart started beating really fast and loud, so loud I could hear it in my ears. As I struggled beneath the water, my father's prophecy seeped into my mind. Oh god. In his dream, the face beneath the water was mine.

Just when I thought my heart would explode from my chest, Ebo became the wind and disappeared, casting the bathroom in darkness. I don't know how he did it, but he got crazy off of me. I scrambled out of the tub and unlocked the bathroom door. The temperature in the bathroom got so cold I could see my breath in the air. If wind smiled by warming up, I could only imagine how it felt when it turned cold, Alaskan style.

My teeth chattered as I raced to open the window. Sisi's ghost had to go, and if she wouldn't leave on her own, maybe Ebo could just blow her out or whatever wind does when it's pissed off.

I wanted to race out the room, but concern for Ebo made me stay. Could she kill him? Could he kill her? How did people who were technically already dead kill each other again? I

didn't know how either could harm the other, but I refused to run anywhere with Ebo dealing with his manic poltergeist sister.

It sounded like a freight train crashed into the room. I wrapped myself up in the bedspread and sheets when the temperature got even colder. A whirlwind appeared at the foot of the bed and inside it was the transparent body of Sisi. She looked like the same tortured woman I saw on her deathbed. Her face was so grotesque I knew it'd haunt me for life. I could not stare at it for too long without feeling sick.

"It was supposed to end with us. It was always supposed to end with us. I was the lucky one." The faster the whirlwind spun, the more substantial Sisi became. She gained solidity from the feet up. But, instead of flesh and bone, her body changed into ice.

"I was the luc—" As she spoke, the ice crept up her neck and face. Her eyes were the last to change, and they became fixated on me the moment the whirlwind disappeared.

"Ebo?"

He didn't respond. Instead a forceful wind blew Sisi's ghost up to the high ceiling, and when the wind disappeared, her body crashed into pieces on the floor. Ebo appeared beside me and kissed my forehead. The shattered pieces of ice evaporated into cold air and drifted out the window.

He stared at the spot his sister's body shattered into pieces. "Why would it be her?"

I kissed his chin. "Your sister's soul clung to all the bad she lived. That made it hard for her to move on or see the possibility of goodness around her."

He turned to me and tapped my nose. “You know, when you were sixteen, centuries ago, you never talked like that. You would have bit my head off for not making the connection sooner. I think this new era has done you some good, Afua Ataá.”

I rolled my eyes. “As long as you don’t turn out to be like Yao, we’re good.”

He laughed and lifted me up in his arms again.

“Don’t you care that you’re gonna smell like piss when you meet my daddy?”

His step faltered when I said, “my daddy.” Honestly, I know Ebo was not intimidated by my father. He had nearly two centuries on my dad, yet he looked like I had asked him to stick his hand in a lion’s mouth.

“Your Daddy? Must we do that today?” I would have bought that he looked genuinely shocked had his lips not been twitching. He was right. He never really was a good liar. “I mean he has already met your *friend* after all.”

All up in my business as usual. “Wasn’t it the KEY club president’s bright idea that you all act normal? Meeting the folks is the most normal thing you could do.”

He whispered in my ear, “What about *your friend*?”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks Ebo, for reminding me of my skankiness.” And how did he know Octavius met my father? It’s not like Ebo could hide his presence from me. Unless there were other Ataw powers I didn’t know about, or he eavesdropped on stupid Jamal blabbing to the whole world about it. Yeah, I really needed to break it off with Octavius. Soon.

“There’s nothing skanky about you, Afua. But for the boy’s sake, I will introduce myself to your father. He needs to know who his daughter’s true boyfriend is.”

Boyfriend? So we're actually a couple now? Something inside me told me this was right. Maybe it was the butterflies Momma always talked about. Maybe it was Ebo's ability to become the wind or swim like the fish in the sea. Maybe it was that we share a history—a very old, baby mama drama, life and death type of history. Or maybe it was all of those things. Who really cared. I didn't need to think about why being with Ebo was right with my soul. It just was.

Forgive

I am Afua, the one with eyes that were unforgiving

Forgive me, brother, if you could see them now

They are rolled back to white

In wonder, they look within

At the little girl hidden beneath my ribs

Nestled in my womb that births generations

They look to her now

They are her eyes now

I am Afua

I am

Because she is

APPENDIX A: WRITING LIFE ESSAY

I come from a large family that loves to tell stories. Several stories come to mind. My mother would often tell me about growing up in Tampa in the 1960s with thirteen siblings. I love to hear stories about my father living in the mountains of Jamaica as a farm boy or how my maternal grandmother traced her children's feet because blacks were not allowed to try on shoes at the local shoe store. My uncle's pet bull that followed him all over the countryside, my grandfather chewing on a stick of nutmeg to bounce back from a stroke, and my great grandmother watching her uncle being lynched, although they were nothing alike in subject, were all shocking stories to hear. These stories were told to me numerous times by numerous people. I loved the crafting of my family's words, the inflection of their voices, and the passion behind their story weaving. It inspired me.

I wanted to continue my family legacy of telling stories. The past and applying its lessons into my present life was one of the driving forces that made me want to become a storyteller. I first began creative writing around nine years old. It started purely by accident. I had attended three elementary schools. The first and last were multicultural, the other one was predominantly white. I make that distinction because I tended to wonder what was wrong with me when I was the only child sitting alone in the lunchroom, on the bus, at recess. But then I would hear the racial comments and no longer wonder what's wrong with me—I was the only black dot in sight. That realization inspired one of my first poems "I Am the One Who." I wrote others, many of which were influenced by something that happened in my life. While attending this predominantly white school, I was tested for the "gifted" program. My mother was told I did not qualify for their program; yet three years later I was re-administered the test. Not only did I pass the "test" the second time around, but my records showed that I had qualified for the gifted

program the first time. This affected me on so many levels. I felt cheated and hoodwinked; more importantly, I was angry and that anger manifested in my writing. “Why Do You Hate Me?” was one of the prose poems I had written in middle school that tried to mull through the different stories about racism my family experienced and what I myself had experienced as a young girl. I found myself gravitating to books that similarly dealt with racial—as well as gender—tension and how that shaped identity. *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and the anthropological book *Life in America: Identity and Everyday Experience* each illustrated for me how people can use the art of writing to fictionalize or recount ways in which the cultures people are either enculturated in, or expected to assimilate into or mimic, shape how they identify themselves and how that identity is questioned by others. Poetry was the way I was able to negotiate my own identity, and fiction became the vehicle I used to explore the identities of my characters.

Even to this day, it surprises me how much I love creative writing even when English was always my least favorite subject. I often heard how many writers are inspired by what they read; this was true for me. However, what I did not or could not read equally inspired me to want to write. Before going to college, I learned most of my history by word of mouth. Family lore, spoken word, and plays were some of the ways Marcus Garvey, Nat Turner, Granny Nanny, Malcolm X, and Yaa Asantewaa were made real for me. Learning about history and literature in high school never seemed real. I could quote every U.S. President, but ask me about Frederick Douglass’ narrative and essays, I couldn’t tell you. I could tell you about William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and Virginia Woolf but ask me about Claude McKay, Jacques Roumain, or Richard Wright, I couldn’t tell you. There were black writers and aspects of black history I did

learn; however, there was a routinized approach to how it was taught to me. Just like the stories my family would tell, what I learned about my history and culture was narrowed to the same people and same time period. It was as if the same story was being told repeatedly by different people. Wanting that realness, or the totality of knowing, was what I sought after when writing *Contact*.

I first got this idea to write about a little black girl that was the reincarnation of an African woman who survived the Maafa from my study abroad experience for environmental and cultural anthropology in Ghana. I was afraid that I would pour too much of myself into Tufa, so I began studying how writers assumed distancing when writing from their own cultural background. Jhumpa Lahiri was a writer that opened my eyes to allowing my characters to take the wheel even though I gave them the key to drive. Her own merging of etic and emic positioning within Indian and American culture inspired her fiction and was an attribute of her writing I admired. I loved how many of Lahiri's characters were somehow stuck in this limbo inbetweenness—where they constantly needed to negotiate and renegotiate their East Indian roots with their new hybridized cultural identity in America. Her short story, “Unaccustomed Earth” was one of my favorites because Ruma's internal struggle with having her father live with her was both a culturally specific struggle with her having to constantly renegotiate her Indian-American identity, but it also held a universal message that resonated with me.

Beyond my desire to write about a culturally specific experience with a universal message, I felt that certain themes I attempted to tackle needed the thread of magical realism to really weave my story together. Alan Lightman, the author of *Einstein's Dreams*, said in an interview that there are only two types of writers—character driven and idea driven; he felt that

his writing process leaned toward the idea driven end of the spectrum. I feel that I write the same way; I always have to start out with this idea with various themes. The characters that make those themes come to life are explored and shaped along the way; however, my idea is always clear in my mind. However, as I workshopped these chapters, sometimes I felt my initial idea may have gotten in the way of character development. I had to loosen up my grip on that initial idea to let my characters speak to me, to let me know what themes were most important.

Originally I thought this novel would work best as a screenplay. I would have never imagined that I would replace my *awesome* idea of anthropologists and archaeologists on an expedition in Port Royal, Jamaica with spirits, sugarcane workers, Christian zealots, polygamists, and black supremacists all thrown in my hometown, Tampa. Through workshopping, my idea and its accompanying themes received many facelifts which brought me that much closer to the “realness” I sought in the things I read and wanted to write.

Magical realism and Diaspora African folklore ironically enabled me to achieve that totality of knowing I wanted to read and wanted to write. The main theme that I wanted to explore in my novel was how the fissure many believe separates Diaspora Africans from their African past was not as wide as people may think; in fact the past and present were one. This cyclic theme of time was an African concept I learned while studying abroad and was something that drew me to Lightman’s *Einstein’s Dreams* and Octavia Butler’s time traveling novel *Kindred*. Both authors did a fantastic job of making the surreal aspect of their novels seem perfectly normal. They were masters of defamiliarization that I studied. Reincarnation was the vehicle I wanted to use to convey this theme of cyclical time, time in which the dead, the living, and those that have yet to be born interacted. The struggle of practicing one’s own traditional

African culture in the Western world was another theme I wanted to express in my writing. I wanted to make “real” the danger of forgetting the cyclical connection that links Diaspora Africans to their African past; ancestral involvement of the Ataw in the lives of the living, I believe, allowed me to capture that. Likewise, the philosophical differences on culture and religion between the two sisters, Ulrica and Zinga, have been crucial to this.

More importantly, I wanted to deconstruct how what may be considered fantastic or magical realism in Western society (i.e. reincarnation, bodily possession, ancestor interaction with their descendants) may be considered normal in many traditional African cultures. Is Tufa reincarnated or just a lonely girl that is suffering from mental illness? This central question reflects this clash between the two perspectives. One thing I adopted in my life after studying abroad in Ghana was a Sankofa philosophy—that it is important to learn one’s past in order to understand one’s present condition and future. I find because much of my writing comes from a personal space, this philosophy resonates in my fictional work. Just as I needed to learn how my culture and history shaped my identity, Tufa too needed to remember—with the assistance of Ebo—her past life to better understand why strange things happen in her current one. By writing her story, rewriting it, tossing it, and rewriting again, I too have come full circle and am able to add another story to the long list of stories my family tells. Through Tufa I have come to realize that the “real” or totality of knowing will always in some way remain subjective; however, through her story I have come to better understand and appreciate my own, and nothing is more real than that.

APPENDIX B: BOOK LIST

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