

FOR BETTER OR CURSE

Alexis Jacobs

FOR BETTER OR CURSE
Published by Alexis Jacobs at Smashwords
Copyright 2013 Alexis Jacobs

Cover design by Scott Luxor

All rights reserved. This is a work of fiction. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without prior permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
CHAPTER TWELVE
CHAPTER THIRTEEN
CHAPTER FOURTEEN
CHAPTER FIFTEEN
CHAPTER SIXTEEN
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

To my parents, siblings and friends, for their inspiration through the story-telling process;
and to my luv, Scott, for his creative gifts and support.

CHAPTER ONE

There will be times in your life when fate will have you by the short and curlies, and at those times there won't be much you can do about it. A wise woman might keep herself still until fate lets go, but not Manda Love. Not when her wedding was at stake. She couldn't just sit back and let fate treat her like rubbish for the umpteenth time.

After all, she wasn't like her cousin, Andrew. Nothing ever worked out well for him, and he had come to believe that nothing ever would. Aunt Beryl said she had always known it would happen. When Andrew was an infant, she had warned his father many times not to hand a baby to anyone backwards, or it would have no future. You were supposed to turn the baby around to face the other person, and then pass it forward. Every Jamaican knew that. But his father wouldn't listen, and now Andrew was thirty-something and running around London with no job, no woman, no children and no future. Aunt Beryl swore his father had cursed Andrew's fate with all that backwards-baby-passing.

Until the day before her wedding, Manda had believed Andrew's problems were more self-inflicted than anything else. But by the time she fell into bed that night, she wasn't so certain.

All day long it had been one problem after another. A mysterious yellow stain had even appeared on her wedding gown out of nowhere. Now the cleaners had rang to say the gown probably wouldn't be ready until the next morning. *And where was Daniel?* "Sherrie, I'm about to have a bloody fit," Manda had shouted into the phone to her best friend after that call.

Sherrie, bless her bleeding heart, had left her husband at home in Plumsted and hauled her pregnant belly all the way to the southwest end of London, determined to calm Manda's nerves. She had brought along a book, *Meditations for the Muddled Mind*. Manda had never tried meditation, but she decided to give it a go.

Now here it was, half past eight. Sherrie had the living room all séance-like, from the burning incense stick filling the air with the scent of patchouli, to the three white candles sitting on the coffee table and the Enya music drifting through the room. Sherrie sat on the couch, legs stretched out before her, one hand resting on her large belly. The candlelight threw a ghostly shadow-puppet of her head on one of the large boxes that lined the walls. The room had been stripped naked of the books, pictures, and decorations that had once breathed life into it. Those things were now packed away in the cardboard boxes that Manda and her fiancé, Daniel, had hauled from local grocers, and the boxes were now stacked around the room with labels announcing their contents. Medical Books. Dinner Plates. Photo Albums. Antique Collectibles – Handle With Care!

Manda tried to sit still on her cushion and prepare herself as Sherrie flipped through the pages of her book.

"Where the hell is that blasted page?" Sherrie said, in a thick Jamaican patois. Sherrie, with her bony English nose, fair complexion and straight blond hair, came from a family of white Jamaicans who had relocated to England decades ago. She herself had never been to the island, yet sometimes she sounded like she had just stepped off Air Jamaica.

“Ah, here it is. Yes. You’re standing on the bank of a river,” Sherrie read in a slow, soft voice. “All of your fearful, anxious thoughts flow from your mind one-by-one and drift into the water, where they are carried away by the river’s currents.”

Alright then, Manda thought. I see Daniel drifting by, looking sick as a dog...too sick to return my call or get married tomorrow...and there goes my wedding dress with its ugly yellow stain...and there’s Mum, drifting downstream, looking sad and lonely as usual...and there goes my car...if it stalls again tomorrow I’ll be late for the wedding...and I see Aunt Beryl, glutton dressed as glam in a red mini dress that shows off her knickers when she bends over...oh, and there goes Dad, looking like a right wanker in that tight powder-blue tux he wore at his own wedding. And he’s got his girlfriend with him. Ugh! And there goes Sierra...no, she’s not there! She’s not coming again, isn’t that what her message said? What kind of sister is she? Ah, sod it. This isn’t working. Now I have to start all over.

Manda took a deep breath. This time, she made a valiant effort to toss those anxious thoughts into the river, one-by-one, and keep them there. After a while, she found herself beginning to relax and felt the tension easing from her neck and shoulders. For a while it was going quite well and she might have slipped into a well-needed sleep, if the telephone hadn’t rang just then and made her jump.

“Damn it,” Sherrie cursed. She reached over to the side table and grabbed the phone. “Hullo? Yes, she is.” She held the phone out to Manda. “It’s your horrible sister.”

Manda scrambled up from the cushion and snatched the phone. “Sierra, I’ve been trying to reach you the entire day. What happened? Why didn’t you get on the plane?”

On the other end of the phone, she heard Sierra sigh. “Manda, I’m sorry, I just couldn’t do it. When I got to the airport, I didn’t feel so bad. But when I was heading for the flight, I thought about everything, and I had to turn back. I’m just not ready to face them again.”

“Them? They’re your parents, Sierra. And this is my wedding. You have to be there.”

“Manda, I just can’t.”

“You can’t? Why not? How can you do this to me?” Manda breathed hard into the phone.

“It has nothing to do with you.”

“Yes, it does. It’s my wedding you’re missing.”

“I said I’m sorry. I tried, Manda, I did.”

“Sierra, I don’t understand. What happened between you and Mum? And what did Dad do to you?”

There was silence on Sierra’s end.

“Sierra?”

“Never mind about that, it’s not important right now. All that’s important is-.”

“Not important? For God’s sake, you’re ready to miss my wedding. Sierra, I’m your sister. Don’t treat me like this.”

“Manda, don’t get yourself all upset. Just go to bed and get some sleep, alright? Listen, why don’t you and Daniel come to New York for Christmas? I’d still love to meet him.”

“We’re not coming anywhere.”

“Hang up on the cow,” Sherrie said, pulling at Manda’s t-shirt.

“Shhh. Sierra, you listen. If you don’t come to my wedding, you’ll regret it.”

“Manda, I can’t. I have to go. Nik is waiting for me.”

“Well, let him wait. Don’t you dare-.”

“Sorry, Manda, I’ll call you tomorrow. Forgive me, okay?” And Sierra was gone. Just like that.

“She hung up,” Manda said, staring at the phone in her hand.

“Cheeky wretch,” Sherrie said.

“She said she can’t come to my wedding. Then she said her boyfriend was waiting, and hung up.”

“Hmpfh!” Sherrie shook her head. “I can’t believe she’d do that to you. Selfish cow. What excuse did she give?”

“She just said she wasn’t ready to face our parents again.” Sierra had moved to New York two years earlier after a terrible fight with their mother, and now she no longer spoke to either parent. Manda and Sierra had stayed close, but she still hadn’t told Manda what the quarrel had been about.

“That’s a bloody weak excuse,” Sherrie said, sitting up as straight as she could.

Manda wondered if Nik had anything to do with Sierra’s change of heart. Had he encouraged her not to come? According to Sierra, he was very protective of her. “I’m knackered,” she said, as a wave of fatigue flowed through her, threatening to knock her down. “I just want to go to bed, though I’d be lucky if I fall asleep tonight.”

“Of course you’re knackered. If I were you, I would never speak to Sierra again. This is exactly why I’m glad I don’t have sisters. They’re horrible.”

As Aunt Beryl liked to say, “Those who can’t dance say the music is no good.” Sherrie was an only child. She had no trouble dismissing siblings she never had. But as angry as she was at Sierra, Manda couldn’t imagine cutting Sierra off. Nobody knew Sierra like she did. It wasn’t that she didn’t care about other people, it was just that Sierra had always responded to trouble in the exact same way. *Pay No Mind*. And if that didn’t work, she would resort to her other response. *Run*.

“Your sister’s dry and heartless,” Sherrie said now. “That’s what your parents get for naming her after a desert.” She had only met Sierra a couple times before she left England, and she hadn’t liked her.

Manda looked at the candles, still flickering on the coffee table. She had enough on her mind, without having to worry about Sierra too. For one thing, she hadn’t heard from Daniel since the night before, and when she last spoke to him, he hadn’t sounded like himself. “Well, that’s it for the meditation,” she said. All of the tension that had momentarily left her body had dug their steel fingers into her neck and shoulders again.

“Oh, everything will be fine.” Sherrie gave her a pitiful smile. “Do you remember all the chaos the night before my wedding? I was ready to drink my weight in rum, and let’s not forget the hysterical blindness. But you single-handedly kept me from touching even one drink. Manda, you’re the most stable person I know.”

Manda smiled back at her friend. That night had been truly ugly, but Sherrie had come a long way and Manda admired her for it. She used to have a gift for attracting the worst sorts of men. Adulterers. Abusers. Liars and the like. Then Sherrie had finally met and married a wonderful bloke, and now they had a baby on the way. If it wasn’t for her example, Manda might never have believed a person’s luck in love could change. She might never have given Daniel a chance. Now in less than twenty-four hours, the two of them would be honeymooning on the island of Mykonos, splashing around in the Mediterranean Sea, and Manda could still hardly believe her own luck.

She had first met Daniel at Tesco’s on a busy Saturday afternoon nine months earlier. Manda had just queued up to pay for her groceries when she heard people shouting for a doctor. She followed the commotion and found a man lying flat on his stomach beside an overturned

cart, with frozen pizza packages scattered around him. Manda had bent down and checked his pulse, and put her hand on his feverish forehead. He was so hot, she half-expected to see steam curling off him. She had rang for the paramedics and tended to him until it came, and even felt compelled to accompany him to the hospital. She had never imagined that anything much would come of it.

As for Daniel, he believed he and Manda had been chosen to be each other's mates before time began. He had asked for a wife who would be loving and caring, a wife who would be the perfect helper. He was a minister after all, and finding a wife was a very spiritual matter. Then, against his better judgment he had crawled out of bed with the flu and drove himself to Tesco's one afternoon, determined to pick up his weekly supply of packaged man-meals. And next moment he was looking up into the face of a pretty nurse who had come to his rescue. He told Manda the moment he had opened his eyes and seen her, he had started to fall in love. To him, that ambulance ride had been their first date.

The telephone rang again and Manda snatched it up, thinking it was Sierra calling her back. But it was Daniel's voice on the other end.

"Daniel, oh, thank God," Manda said, clutching her chest. "I was so worried about you. How're you feeling?"

"Fine. I'm fine."

Something in his voice chilled her. "Daniel, is everything alright? Where are you?"

"I'm in my car. Manda, I... I'm on the way to your flat."

"My flat? But-."

"I'll be there soon," Daniel said, cutting her off.

"Well then... alright." She put down the phone and looked at Sherrie. "It's Daniel. He says he's coming round."

"Why? What does he want?" Sherrie gasped.

"I don't know?"

"But he can't come here. It's bad luck to see the bride before the wedding."

"Well, obviously it must be important, or he wouldn't be coming, would he?"

"What could be that important that he can't say it over the phone? In some African countries, a girl doesn't even get to meet her husband until the wedding."

Manda rolled her eyes. Sherrie was a dry-land tourist. She had never stepped foot out of England, yet she was always talking about life in other countries like she had experienced them first-hand.

"Anyway, I'm glad he's coming," Manda added. It felt like she had been waiting years for his call. "I'm concerned about him. He doesn't sound well."

"Don't worry about Daniel," Sherrie said. "He's probably so nervous, the poor bloke's given himself an ulcer."

Manda saw Daniel's face in her mind, and felt love well up. Daniel, with his neat and tidy habits, and his penchant for using tissue to remove crisps from a bag so he wouldn't get his fingers greasy. He was so different from all the other men she had dated. In the first place, he was the only man she had ever met who wasn't afraid to be vulnerable. He had never seemed to be aware of the usual games men and women played with each other – whether or not to wait a few days to make that precious first call, pretending he wasn't eagerly waiting by the phone for her to call him back. His sheer passion and openness about his feelings for her had intimidated her at first, but Manda had quickly learned to relish it.

And the thing Manda loved most about Daniel was that he was a true Family Man. Some of her ex-boyfriends had accused her of being too wrapped up in her family, but Daniel was all about family. She got the feeling that he was one of those men who mated for life - unlike her father, who had walked away from her mother three years earlier. Their divorce had been devastating. Daniel didn't seem like the kind of man who could ever abandon his wife, and Manda loved him for it.

Manda looked down at the old blue t-shirt and baggy trousers she had put on for the meditation. She didn't want Daniel to see her looking so awful. She left Sherrie in the living room and hurried off to the bedroom, where she pulled back on a pair of jeans and a decent blouse. She rushed into the toilet to fix her hair.

"Blimey," she said, looking at herself in the medicine cabinet mirror. Her hair was a mess. She picked up the hand mirror that hung on the bathroom door and lined it up with the bigger one so she could see the back of her hair. It looked thicker than ever. Cousin Anthony, Aunt Beryl's hairstylist son, would be coming early in the morning to do Manda's makeup and hair. That would be the only real challenge. Her hair was big, thick and curly—the kind of hair that broke the teeth out of plastic combs and tore the bristles out of brushes. Her hair was a source of envy for the women in her family, and a nightmare for anyone who had ever had the task of washing, combing, braiding or twisting it. And now tomorrow, poor Anthony would have the daunting task of magically transforming that hair into something worthy of a bride.

Manda was so busy studying her hair, it took her a moment to notice that another face had appeared in the glass, just behind her own. A dark, drooping face framed by a mass of matted gray dreadlocks. When she noticed the face, she let out a yelp. She spun around and found herself face-to-face with a thin old woman, dressed in a long blue frock.

Where did...? Manda opened her mouth to speak, but her tongue had turned to stone. The eyes were what struck Manda the most, what would haunt her dreams for a long time afterwards. Eyes blackened with such bitterness, it filled Manda with a fear that took her breath away. Her heart froze in her chest. She couldn't move. A million years seemed to pass in seconds. Finally, she closed her own eyes, trying to shut out the face. When she opened them again, the old woman was gone. The mirror slipped from Manda's hand and fell to the floor. It hit the ground with a crack, sending glass shards shooting across the tiles.

"Is everything alright?" she heard Sherrie call out from beyond the door.

Manda turned back to the medicine cabinet mirror, then spun around in the bathroom. *Nothing there.* Her heart thumped back to life, beating so loud, she could feel the pulsing in her eardrums. She felt dizzy, and had to quickly sit down on the side of the bathtub.

"Manda, did you hear me?" Sherrie called out again.

"Yes...I...I just broke a mirror." *What on earth was that? A duppy?* But there were no such things as ghosts. "This is no time to lose your bloody mind," she whispered to herself. "Daniel is on his way. It's just stress, that's all. Stress."

Manda bent over and picked up the mirror's frame and a few pieces of the shattered glass, her hand shaking. At the other end of the flat, the door buzzer sounded.

"Daniel's here," Sherrie shouted.

Manda dropped the frame and broken glass into the rubbish bin. She opened the door and stumbled quickly out of the toilet.

"Sherrie, where's Manda?" She heard Daniel ask from the living room.

"She just broke a mirror," Sherrie answered. "She's in the loo cleaning up seven years of bad luck."

Both Daniel and Sherrie looked up as Manda entered the room. Sherrie had turned the floor lamp back on, and the living room had lost its mystery and shadows.

“What’s the matter with your face?” Sherrie asked, staring hard at her. “You look like you’ve seen a duppy.”

“A duppy?” Manda let out a hysterical laugh and grabbed a fistful of her hair. But now it was Daniel’s appearance that was frightening her. The first unusual thing she noticed about him was that his blue shirt was crushed, and a prickly-looking stubble had sprouted on his face. If a nuclear missile had been cruising towards London, while everyone would have been busy scrambling for a hiding place, Daniel would have stopped for a shave.

He stepped forward now, carrying several hangers with the nurses’ uniforms that he had washed and ironed for her. She didn’t have a washer or dryer, and Daniel often took her clothes over to his flat to launder them himself.

“Your finger’s bleeding,” Daniel said, a squeamish look on his face.

Manda looked down and saw a bright red drop of blood slip off the tip of one finger and spatter on the floor. “The glass,” she said. “I must’ve cut myself.” She popped the finger into her mouth, tasting the metallic tang of her own blood.

“Manda, I have to talk to you about something. It’s quite serious,” Daniel said, glancing across the room to where Sherrie sat watching them.

“I can take a hint,” Sherrie said, struggling back to her feet. She came over and took the uniforms from Daniel. “I’ll be in the bedroom.”

When they heard the bedroom door close, Daniel cleared his throat and looked at the wall. “You know how sometimes you make decisions about something, serious decisions, and then odd things come about that aren’t even feasible to your mind and you’re left having to do something...something you could never have imagined?”

“Yeah...?” She pulled her finger from her mouth. What was he rambling on about? And what had she really seen in the bathroom?

“Right, then. Well, I have something to tell you, and...and I don’t know how to say it, exactly.” He glanced at her.

Manda peered at his face. His eyes were redder and more watery than usual. “Daniel, have you been crying?” she asked, reaching for him. She felt another chill course through her.

Daniel stepped back from her. “I can’t do this,” he said.

“You can’t do what?”

His arms slumped by his side. “I can’t marry you. There, I’ve said it.”

At first, Manda just stared at him curiously, as if he had addressed her in a foreign tongue.

“You can’t marry me,” she said finally, trying to figure out the meaning of the words.

“I don’t know what’s happening to me,” Daniel said. “I can’t even explain it.”

“You can’t explain it. You don’t know what’s happening to you.”

“Exactly. Three days ago, everything was fine, but then the next morning when I woke up – I don’t know, things changed somehow.”

“Everything was fine, but-.”

“Manda, please stop repeating everything I say. This is hard enough as it is.”

“I’m just trying to understand.”

He slapped a hand to his forehead in exasperation.

“Daniel, what happened? Did I do something?” She felt the first real stirrings of panic rising in her.

“No, no, you didn’t do anything. That’s just it. I don’t know what’s happening.”

“All right, calm down.” She stepped before him and rubbed his tight shoulders. “Let’s go over to the couch and sit down and have a talk. We can figure this out together.” Yes. That was it. They just had to have a reasonable talk, figure it all out.

“I can’t sit,” Daniel said, pushing her hands away. “My car...I left it running.”

“Daniel, you what? This isn’t a bank robbery. We have to talk about this.”

“No, there’s nothing to talk about, Manda. I’ve made up my mind and that’s really all I have to say. Sorry.”

Manda shook her head. It didn’t make sense. This wasn’t like him. Daniel was usually the most sensible, reliable bloke a woman could meet.

“What...what about Greece? The tickets, hotel...” The smell of patchouli from the burning incense stick suddenly made her nauseous.

“Don’t bother yourself about it, I’ll take care of everything. It’s my fault after all.” Daniel sighed, and his eyes filled up with tears.

“Did you...did you stop loving me?” It ached her head and heart, just to ask it.

“No, I never have and I never will,” Daniel said, his voice firm.

He *meant* it. She could see it in his eyes, brimming up from the deep well of pain and confusion that she had never seen there before.

“Manda, I don’t know what’s happening to me,” he said. “I can’t seem to help myself.” Daniel dropped his head in defeat.

“But what about the flat?” she said suddenly, looking over at a stack of boxes piled against one wall.

“Oh, hell. I hope you’ll forgive me.” Daniel was crying now, the tears painting dark blue streaks down the front of his light blue shirt.

The flat had once belonged to Sierra, and Manda had taken it over after Sierra’s sudden departure. She had already told the landlord she would be moving out at the end of the month, and then had felt free to add what a horrible landlord she thought he was. He never fixed anything. At the time, she had walked away feeling relieved to have finally gotten that off her chest, but now bile rose up and almost choked her. A new person was already scheduled to move in.

“Daniel, I’ll be homeless,” she said, her voice a screech.

He took a deep breath. “No, you won’t, Manda. You can move in with your mother or...or perhaps your auntie?” he said, his voice quiet.

“What?” That was like asking her why she didn’t just check into Bedlam or a whorehouse. This was all wrong. Daniel couldn’t leave her. Their lives were knitted together too tightly, like conjoined twins who shared the same heart and lungs. They shared almost everything, even an Ebay account, for cripes sake. Two lives couldn’t just be easily separated. Panic raged through her now.

Deep breath, she told herself. That’s it. The wedding is tomorrow, and Daniel is just nervous. We’re both out of our minds tonight.

“Cold feet.”

“What?” Daniel said. “Manda, I’ve gotta go.”

“It’s just cold feet. That’s not unusual, Daniel. Ha, that’s all it is. Nothing to worry about, really.” She felt a drop of relief.

“No, Manda, it’s not cold feet.”

On the little table beside the couch was her book, Down the Aisle with a Smile: A Couple's Guide to a Blissful Wedding, the one she had read cover-to-cover. She picked it up now. She flipped to the chapter called "Warm Heart, Cold Feet".

"Listen, Daniel," she said, coming back to him. "It says here that it's natural to get cold feet before the wedding." She skimmed down to a paragraph. "You may be faced with the gravity of the commitment you are about to make, and it is at once daunting and exciting. In this state, you should never panic. Instead, this is-."

"Manda, stop it." Daniel grabbed at the book, but she held it away from him.

"This is the time for you to utilize the opportunity to-."

"Stop it," Daniel said. "It's not about that. The answer isn't in some book."

"Where is the answer, then?"

Daniel let out a sarcastic laugh. "You always need answers, don't you? Well, life doesn't always come with bloody answers, eh, does it?"

It also said in the next paragraph that when one partner got cold feet, the other partner should try to be patient and understanding. Well, sod it. Manda had been patient and understanding when her first boyfriend had dumped her at her sixteenth birthday party. And it had only gotten worse. Now at thirty-three, she had so much practice in being patient and understanding, Mother Theresa would've been proud of her. But breaking up with someone on the eve of your wedding, well that took the biscuit. That was just plain evil.

"You bleeding coward," Manda said. "You bastard." She swung the wedding guide at Daniel. It caught the side of his face and sent him staggering sideways into the floor lamp. He grabbed at it for balance, but both he and the lamp went crashing to the floor in a symphony of thuds and tinkles. The light went out and the room fell into darkness.

Manda heard him groan from the floor. She bent down and reached for him, and her finger connected with something slimy and soft.

"Ow, my eye," he said.

"Daniel, I'm sorry, I..." She tried to take his arm to help him up. She wasn't sure what to say to him.

"No, leave me. I'm fine." He started to struggle to his feet, pulling himself away from her grasp.

Manda heard Sherrie's footsteps coming down the hall, and her loud gasp when she reached the living room and turned on the overhead light.

"What's happening?" Sherrie asked. "Manda, did he hit you?"

Daniel put his hand over his sore eye. He stumbled towards the door.

"Daniel!" Manda scrambled up after him.

He wouldn't even look at her. He opened the front door and stepped into the building's hallway.

"Manda, please. What's happening? Talk to me." Sherrie tugged at her arm.

"Let me go." She tried to pry away her friend's hand.

"Lord, gal. Just talk to me."

"No, Sherrie. I have to go after him." She wiped away the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Where's he going?"

"I don't know." Manda grabbed her purse off the chair by the door and ran after Daniel. She had to stop him. What else was she supposed to do?

Outside, the night wind cooled her damp skin. Her car was parked in the little lot behind the building. As she was heading for it, she heard Sherrie shouting out her name. She turned to see her friend standing in the building's front door, waving the phone.

"Manda, it's the cleaners. They say you can pick up your dress in the morning."

"Aaahh." Manda screamed so loud, a cat hurled itself from a windowsill where it was lounging, and scampered away. She turned back around and hurried towards her car. As she reached the parking lot, she saw Daniel's blue Toyota speed by on the road.

"Daniel, stop," she screamed after him, but if he heard her, he didn't look back.

Manda hopped into her own car. Less than a minute later, she had turned onto the road after him. She could see Daniel's car at the light, several cars ahead of hers. She thought he was headed back home, but when he got to the intersection he turned left onto Southampton Row and sped towards the center of London. Where was he going? She followed his turn. He must have known she was there, because he swiftly changed lanes and sped up. Manda swerved out of the lane and cut in front of another car. The driver honked his horn. Ahead of her, Daniel raced through the light. Manda sailed through it after him just as it turned red. He wasn't getting away that easily.

Daniel, please. She tried to reason with him in her head, like she planned to do when she caught up with him. *You can't do this to us. I love you, and I know you love me. You're just afraid, that's all. I'm afraid too. Please, Daniel, listen to me. We need each other. We've shared so much.* Daniel was the best thing that had ever happened to her. If she lost him, she would never again meet another man like him. She would end up like one of those lonely middle-aged women who had no husbands to hold their hands when they came into hospital.

"Please, Daniel. Don't do this to me," Manda cried out, as she followed him through a left turn and down a street lined with tall hedges. Before she had gone another hundred yards, she felt her car slowing to a crawl, like a tired beast. She pulled onto the side of the road just before it stalled completely.

"No," Manda yelled. "You can't do this now. Please." She turned the key over and over, trying to force life into the car, but the car was dead. She glanced up the road and saw Daniel's car disappear around a corner. She slumped back in her seat and let the tears come. Everyone was abandoning her. First Sierra, and now Daniel. She wished her sister were right there beside her. If Sierra had come back for the wedding, she would have been there when Daniel came over. She might have been able to talk some sense into him, turn him around with her charm.

"Sierra, I need you," Manda whispered. "I need you. Why aren't you here?" She saw Sierra's face before her. The traffic lights blurred into red smears across the dark sky.

Manda wiped her eyes. She drew in deep, jagged breaths. She could hear Sherrie's soothing voice in her head, coaxing her to relax. *That's it. Deeper now.* Her heart rate slowed down as she talked quietly to herself. *Deeper. That's it.*

And then a calmness came over her, just like it had in the living room when she was meditating. But this time she must have fallen all the way through the slim crack between waking and sleeping, because Manda forgot she was behind the wheel of her car, on a rain-washed London road. She forgot about Daniel and the woman in the toilet, and everything that had happened only minutes earlier. It was as if she had left the present moment and slipped into an entirely different one. She found herself staring right into her sister's face as if they stood only inches apart. So close that Manda could see the tiny scar on Sierra's forehead where a stone had once caught her, and the silky white scarf around her hair with colorful butterflies all over it. Sierra's eyes were wide, and a tear ran down her cheek. They were on a cliff-side. Behind them,

the sky was a canvas of thick white clouds with just a few small patches of blue. But then Sierra was falling backwards into this sky, a look of horror on her face. Manda reached out to grab her, but she was gone.

“Sierra,” Manda shouted, bolting upright. She was still looking at the sky, but this time it was the dark, cloudy sky that belonged to the London night beyond her windshield. Someone knocked on her window, making her jump. Manda looked up to see a grim old face peering at her through the glass. Her ears started to ring, and she felt her mind melting into the darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

By some particularly sick-minded cosmic practical joke, Manda's surname was "Love". Yet if there was any part of her life that was a right mess, a dark-comedy for the gods, it was her love life.

To begin with, her father's family hadn't always had the last name, "Love". The family name used to be "Graves". The story went that when her paternal great-grandfather Latimer Graves was a young man, he used to be plagued with a mysterious illness. Lattie had traveled to every corner of Jamaica, visiting every kind of doctor he could think of, in an effort to find a cure. The doctors had never seen anything like it, a disease that defied definition and resisted all treatments. Finally, when regular doctors couldn't help him, Lattie went to see an Obeah woman. She told Lattie something that cut him to the heart. She said the only way he could cure himself was to change his last name. If he didn't do it, he would soon die. Lattie was mortified. He had always been proud to be a Graves. The name carried much importance in his part of Jamaica.

According to family history, Mortimer Graves, a former slave, had given his master so much grief that the master had two choices: kill him or free him. The master chose the latter, being a man who had inherited slaves, but opposed slavery in principle, and also being a man who was known to rule with a cotton fist. Mortimer made his way to Pebble Beach where he built himself a house, married an Arawak Indian woman and had seven sons. Mortimer's sons had then given him so much grief that he had two choices: kill them or free them. He also chose the latter, and his sons had gone out to spread their seeds and their name to nearby towns. The Graves men were known to be a rebellious, headstrong and enterprising lot. They were good with money, and owned nearly half the land from Pebble Beach to Linstead. People respected the name. How could Lattie give it up? But as the Obeah woman said, his choices were clear. Either live without the name, or die with it.

And so Lattie decided to change his name. He wanted one that would carry its own power, and bring him and his progeny good fortune. He thought about the one thing that had always been missing in his life. Love. His parents hadn't been very loving. He had a wife, but as it turned out she loved other men more than she loved him. Three of his children had been conceived while he was traveling around Jamaica looking for doctors.

Lattie went home and wrote the name "Graves" on a piece of wood, as the Obeah woman had instructed. He built a fire in the yard, gathered his family around him, and had the youngest child throw the piece of wood into the fire. Lattie's mysterious illnesses disappeared, and he went on to live to ninety-seven. The name Graves had been burnt out of his bloodline forever, and in its ashes, Love blossomed.

But not for everybody. Skip forward three generations and here was Manda, slumped down in the seat of a London bus headed for Lewisham, wondering what exactly had gone wrong in her love-life this time. She had always been extremely unlucky when it came to men. Even her mother had finally given up and sold the sixty-piece Wedgewood dinnerware she had always planned to give Manda on her wedding day. It wasn't that Manda had never been loved. It was just that men usually dumped her just when they seemed to be falling in love with her. One day

she might get flowers and a tender love note, then the next she might get a Dear Jane telephone call or an email with some baffling explanation, and that was the end of it. The pattern never changed – that is, until Daniel came along. His proposal had been so unexpected, every one of Manda's dead ancestors, including Latimer, must have sat up in their graves and bumped their heads. But now Daniel was gone, just like the others before him.

Manda had come to conclude that falling in love was like being afflicted with Alice in Wonderland Syndrome. This rare affliction caused its sufferers to temporarily see people and things in a distorted way – usually bigger or smaller than they actually were. It was all in their heads, of course. With Daniel, she had tried her best to remain as objective as possible, and see him for exactly what he was. But the Daniel who had abandoned her recently, wasn't the Daniel she thought she knew. How had she been so blind again?

She had spent the first few days after Daniel's departure curled up in bed like a dead caterpillar, drowning in grief. She couldn't bring herself to leave the house, let alone change out of her nightgown. Even the sunlight spilling through the window was an insult to her grief, and she had gone around the flat and drawn all the curtains closed. Her mother, Myrna, had taken on the terrible job of breaking the news to everyone that the wedding was off. Sherrie had wanted to stay with her for a while, but Manda had insisted she go home. She didn't want to share her pain with anyone. Myrna stopped by and tried to pry her out of bed with a huge container of curry chicken and rice, Manda's favorite dish. She wouldn't leave until Manda had eaten a chicken leg and a little of the rice.

Manda kept her phone in bed with her, and from time-to-time she would call Daniel and leave him yet another message. She had also spoken to his distraught mother, his brother who was supposed to be his best man, and two of his sisters. No one knew where he was, or why he had left. It was as much a puzzle for his family as it was for Manda. That was the worst part of it – not knowing what had led him to abandon her in the first place. Even Daniel didn't seem to understand his own behavior. But in spite of the amount of times she had lost at love, she wasn't prepared for this kind of grief. The all-consuming, body-racking, stomach-cramping kind that made it hard to draw in simple breathes.

Then as if she wasn't feeling bad enough, Sierra's gift had arrived the day before. Manda couldn't even look at the box, but Myrna had opened it out of curiosity and then tried to hide it among the other boxes in the living room. But Manda had seen the box, and when she peered inside, she clapped her hand over her mouth. There, lying on a bed of blue tissue paper, were two dolls the size of one-year-old children. They weren't just any dolls, but a girl doll that looked remarkably like Manda – long thin body, big floppy hair and all – and a boy one that resembled Daniel. Manda's doll was dressed in a white nurse's uniform with a little white cap sewn onto her hair, and Daniel's wore a black suit and had a little red Bible glued to his hand. Now she knew why Sierra had asked her to email a picture of him the month before, although Sierra had improvised with the Bible.

Sierra, how could you do this to me, she had thought. But Sierra hadn't known what would happen. She must have imagined the two of them opening the box together and having a good laugh when they saw the dolls. Manda picked up Daniel's doll and studied him. He had big brown eyes and big feet, just like his human counterpart. She started to laugh, but the laugh quickly turned to wails as she felt a sudden, crushing love for the real Daniel. She missed him so much. She held up the doll and kissed him all over his cool rubber face. He just stared back at her with his big, sad eyes. She took the doll back to bed with her and held it through the night.

On the fifth day, Manda had finally gotten up and spread her bed. Then she had gone into the bathroom to wash up. Every time she entered that room, she felt as skittish as a frightened cat. She would avoid looking in the mirror, afraid she might see the old woman's face again with its two horrible eyes.

But when Manda did happen to glance at her reflection in the mirror, the only image that made her gasp was her own. Her face was a mess, the skin puffy and dull. And worst of all, there were four prominent gray hairs at the front of her temple – four gray hairs that hadn't been there a few days earlier. Was she aging rapidly? She had heard of extreme stress having that effect on the body. The first thing she did was to take a tweezer from the medicine cabinet and pluck out the hairs. Then she had rang Aunt Beryl, hoping to pay her a visit. Manda wanted to tell her about the strange things she had seen on the eve of her wedding, and ask what she thought about them. Since Manda and Sierra were little girls, they had been running to Aunt Beryl to talk about things they couldn't discuss with their own parents. Nothing phased Aunt Beryl, because what she had to say to them, was usually more shocking than anything they could come up with.

When she got to her aunt's house in Lewisham, Manda had to pound on the door for several minutes before she finally heard footsteps coming down the stairs. The door barely opened before an arm shot out and grabbed her, pulling her into the house. It was Aunt Beryl, wearing a pink dressing gown over a too-tight white bra, and a black girdle that squeezed her belly upwards into a wide lump. She had big fluffy pink slippers on her feet and her hair was braided against her scalp in cornrows. For a fleeting moment, Manda wondered what an Aunt Beryl doll might look like.

"Minchie, why didn't you come round the back?" her aunt asked, slamming the door fast.

"Sorry, I forgot," Manda said. "My mind isn't too clear right now."

Aunt Beryl rarely ever used her own front door. She claimed the ex-wife of the man who had rented her the house had gotten someone to work Obeah on her. The woman had lost the house during the divorce, and she wanted it back. Whenever Aunt Beryl entered the house through the front door, something was sure to catch on fire soon afterwards. She said she had a hole in her favorite bedspread, a blackened kitchen counter, and a burn on her right buttock to prove it.

"Yes, I heard what 'appened to you, so I'll forgive you this time." Aunt Beryl grinned, exposing the gold cap on one of her front teeth. She drew Manda into her damp arms. "See, if I forgive you, then it's myself I'm forgiving then, ain't it?"

"What?" Sometimes Manda had a hard time following Aunt Beryl's logic.

"It's just like if I pinch you, then I'm really pinching myself." She pinched Manda on the arm with two red, talon-like nails.

"Ow, what the-." Manda flinched away from her fingers.

"See? That 'urt me too. What I do to you, I do to me, you understand?"

"Not bloody likely." Manda looked at the two indentations in her skin. She rubbed her arm. "You really shouldn't-," she started to say, but Aunt Beryl's behind was already wriggling its way back up the stairs.

"Come, Minchie, "I don't have a lot of time to spare," Aunt Beryl said, as Manda followed after her. "I've got to meet someone soon."

Minchie was a pet name Aunt Beryl had given her when she was small, and it had somehow stuck. Long before Manda, the name had belonged to a beloved puppy Aunt Beryl once owned that had been trampled by a goat.

“Aunt Beryl, I thought you said you had no plans this evening. I have to talk to you about something. It’s important.”

“I didn’t have plans then, did I? But Cleavus called an hour ago and asked me to go dancing. You would like Cleavus, darling. He’s fifty, but he’s as fit as a boy, and he’s quite spiritual now. Prison really was good for him.”

Manda wondered what he had gone to prison for, but then decided she would rather not know. Aunt Beryl’s boyfriends always came with a twist. The last one had been a recovering drug dealer.

“Go make yourself some tea, Minchie. I’ll be in the bedroom.”

Manda went into the kitchen and made some tea and brought it back to Aunt Beryl’s room. The air smelled of toilet water and cigarettes. She had once given her aunt a medical pamphlet on the dangers of smoking, but Aunt Beryl had taken out a lighter and set it on fire.

The bed was covered with colorful pieces of lingerie. Manda pushed aside a camisole and a crotch-less red knicker and sat down. She looked around her in a daze. Aunt Beryl opened the red lacquered jewelry box on her dresser and took out a pair of gold loop earrings. Her jewelry box was a pirate’s dream. It was filled with every piece of gold jewelry she had collected (or pilfered from other relatives) over the years. She loved gold more than anything else under the sky, and gold bangles had always adorned her wrists ever since Manda could remember.

“Aunt Beryl, something horrible happened to me the other night,” Manda said.

“I know, darling. I’m so sorry about what that wanker did to you,” her aunt said, hooking the earrings in place. “But you’re only thirty-three. There’ll be lots of other men.”

Manda bowed her head and stared into her tea. She felt the darkness of the past few days descending on her again. “I don’t know how I’ll get on without Daniel,” she said.

“You’ll learn to cope, lovey. It’s amazing what a bottle of wine and a cucumber can do.”

“What? Oh,” Manda said when the meaning dawned on her.

Her aunt winked at her in the mirror. Manda spotted a box of condoms sitting beside a pack of cigarettes on the dresser. There was no doubt how Aunt Beryl planned to end her night.

“My poor Minchie,” Aunt Beryl said. “You look like you haven’t slept in a fortnight.”

“I feel like I haven’t,” Manda said.

“Well, as I said, preacher or not, that Daniel is a right wanker.”

Manda bristled. “Aunt Beryl, I don’t want to talk about him.”

“I know, the truth ‘urts.” Aunt Beryl came over to the bed and pulled a pair of black stockings from the frame. She sat down beside Manda, threw a leg up on the bed and started to work the stocking up over her foot. Her legs were shaped like chicken drumsticks, skinny at the ankles and fat and fleshy at the thighs. She was the only person Manda knew who wore stockings over her girdles, instead of under them. When she was done, she went to her closet and took down a black mini dress that had been hanging on the door.

“Manda, I never planned to tell you this, since I’m not one to cause trouble between lovers,” Aunt Beryl said, fighting the dress up over her waist. “But our Daniel wasn’t as good a bloke as you imagined him to be. When we got together for your birthday at that Chinese restaurant, he made a pass at me when you went to the loo. He asked if he could take me ‘ome. It was the way he said ‘ome. I told him I wasn’t that type of girl, and you were my niece after all.”

“Aunt Beryl, he was offering to take you home because you were a bit sloshed as I remember.”

“Manda, how dare you. I only had one bottle of Stella,” Aunt Beryl said, wheeling around.

“You fell off your chair,” Manda said, growing indignant. “You squeezed the waiter’s bottom and told him he had a lovely arse.”

“I was only playing with the man, but I wasn’t drunk. I don’t get drunk.” Aunt Beryl scowled. She went back to her dresser and picked up a curling iron that lay beside a white foam head with a red-haired wig on it. She started to curl the ends of her wig. “See, that’s why I never told you. You and your sister have always been naïve when it comes to men.”

“Aunt Beryl, I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” Manda yelled.

Her aunt almost dropped the curling iron she was holding. “Lawks, Minchie, you nearly give me a ‘eart attack. You’re really not yourself these days, are you?”

“No I’m not. I’m sorry, but I’ve been going through a really hard time. Blimey, I feel like I’m going mad.” Manda put her teacup on the bedside table. She massaged her temple with her thumbs. “The night Daniel left, some other things happened... frightening things... and I’m not sure what to make of them.”

“What things, Minchie?”

“Well...” Manda said. “Before Daniel arrived, I saw something in the mirror when I went into the toilet.”

“What was it?” Aunt Beryl eyed her through the glass.

Manda told her about seeing the old woman in the mirror, right before Daniel had arrived. “And those eyes.” She shivered as she remembered how they had looked at her. “They were the most frightening eyes I’ve ever seen.”

“You saw a duppy?” Aunt Beryl turned around, her own eyes growing round. “Lord, Manda, that’s terrible.”

“Well, it might just have been my imagination, I don’t know. I was under a lot of stress that night after all. And I really don’t believe in ghosts. At least... I didn’t. Have you ever seen one?” She looked up at her aunt.

“Yes, of course,” Aunt Beryl said, her voice filled with excitement. “I’ve seen at least two duppies when I was still in Jamaica, and when I was also at the flat over in Brixton I saw an old English man standing by my bed more than a few times. I think he must’ve lived there a long time past, and didn’t want me there. Why do you think I moved out so fast?”

Manda had heard it was because the landlady had caught Aunt Beryl under her husband, and had chased her out.

“But duppies don’t visit you without a reason. Like maybe she wanted to warn you about Daniel.”

“I don’t know what she wanted,” Manda said. “And that wasn’t all I saw. When I was in the car afterwards, I had a vision. It was about Sierra, and it was awful.”

“Oh lord, what did you see?” Aunt Beryl rested her curling iron beside the wig this time, and hurried over to sit on the bed.

Manda told her about the vision and how she had been in such a state of shock, she had promptly fainted when a concerned old man had appeared at her window because he had seen her car stall. When Manda was finished, Aunt Beryl got up and paced the carpet in her stocking feet.

“You saw Sierra falling off a cliff? Did somebody push her?”

“I don’t know. I just saw her falling backwards.”

“Minchie, I hope you’re taking this seriously. Remember the time when you were twelve, and you came and told me about another vision you had? The one about your teacher?”

“Mr. Franks,” Manda said. “Yes, I remember.” She had tried very hard to forget Mr. Franks. He had been her favorite teacher, and such a marvelous man, tall and handsome and full of jokes.

“You told me you saw him sprawled in the snow unconscious, you remember that?” Aunt Beryl said. “And I told you, you better warn him, but you were too ‘fraid to do it.’”

Manda saw Mr. Franks in her mind again, lying in the snow, his body twisted at an odd angle. She had tried to warn him one evening after all her schoolmates had gone - but instead she had dashed from the classroom, afraid he would think her quite mad. Then they had returned to school the following Monday just to find out Mr. Franks had met with an accident. He had smashed into a tree while skiing.

“It was terrible,” Aunt Beryl said. “The poor man was almost killed, and you were wracked with guilt.”

“Yes, I was.”

“Well, Minchie, I’m not surprised you had another vision. I always did think you were a bit odd that way, what with that weird ring around your eye and all.”

“Thanks,” Manda said, sarcastically. Her eyes were a deep brown, but her right eye had a thin, mysterious band of blue wrapped around the iris, much like the bright band of white that rings the black moon in a solar eclipse. Aunt Beryl always said the blue ring was a sign that Manda was a bit of a mystic. Especially because there were a few other times in her life when Manda had seen things before they had actually happened. Each time she had told her aunt about it, Aunt Beryl had linked it to that eye.

Aunt Beryl went over and lifted her wig from its head. She pulled it over her cornrows and stood by the mirror, trying to twist it into place. “Maybe you could’ve stopped your teacher’s accident,” she continued. “Minchie, everybody has a gift. Mine is physical.” She cupped her large breasts in her hands. “And yours is otherworldly. But you have it for a reason, and you’ve got to use it. If anything ‘appens to your sister and you could’ve stopped it, you’ll never forgive yourself.”

Manda sighed. Aunt Beryl had a good point, and she couldn’t deny it. Her visions always seemed to come true. And now she had seen Sierra’s future and this vision frightened her more than any of the others had.

“But what am I supposed to do about it?” Manda said, falling back on the bed and staring up at the ceiling.

“I don’t know, but you better act fast. Minchie, don’t you see? It’s just like that Obeah woman said all those years ago. It’s the curse coming round.”

Manda sat up again. “The Obeah curse? That thing about me and Sierra? I’ve only heard bits and pieces of that story.” A lot of West Indians of her parents’ generation believed in Obeah, and Manda had grown up hearing secondhand accounts of Obeah magic and duppy sightings. But all of those things had been like empty threats from a dark, mysterious island world where her parents had been raised. In the civilized city of London people didn’t bury the dead in their backyards like countryside Jamaicans did, unless they were serial killers, and only people like Aunt Beryl still thought that everything that went wrong in her life was the result of Obeah. Manda had never even met an Obeah person, and the idea of a curse hadn’t meant much to her. Until now.

“Yes, I know your mother likes to pretend it never ‘appen, because it makes her look bad,” Aunt Beryl said. “I was just a girl then, but I remember it all.”

“Aunt Beryl, can you tell me about it?”

“Oh, lord, I’m late. Cleavus is gonna have a fit,” Aunt Beryl said, but she came back and sat on the bed beside Manda. And while Manda listened quietly, her aunt recounted the whole story of how she and Sierra came to be cursed, even before they had seen the light of the world.

Before Manda’s parents moved to England at the end of the 1960s, they had lived in a small country town in Jamaica called Pebble Beach. No one remembered how the town came to have that name. Though the town had plenty of pebbles, there was no beach to speak of. Pebble Beach was located up in the hills above Linstead, and you had to take a hair-raising drive up one of those thin mountain roads that had no barrier to stop you from plunging over the edge, just to get to it. Bertram and Myrna had both lived in the town all their lives, and had grown up knowing each other.

Myrna’s best friend was a girl named Darette Brown, whose mother, Dar, was the local Obeah woman. Little, dried-up, toothless, pipe smoking Dar, who could stop a man’s heart with a few choice words, and who came from a long and mysterious line of Obeah women originating all the way back to somewhere in Africa. Dar was the town’s doctor, psychologist, police force and executioner, all rolled into one bony little package. She could often be seen wandering around the rocky hills and dirt lanes of Pebble Beach at twilight, bending down to pick the herbs and plants that grew all over the countryside. She seemed to know every last inch of the land. Not a small feat for a woman who had been blind since birth. Some people said that what Dar couldn’t see with her eyes, she could sniff out with her nose – much like a blind mongoose. And so people would seek out her Obeah skills for various reasons, because like all such arts, Obeah can be used for good or evil. For healing the sick, igniting love, blessing a man, cursing his brother, breaking up a relationship, or breaking a neck.

Dar had apparently done all of the above. She was the first person people turned to whenever they were in trouble, and whether you feared, scorned or revered Obeah men and women, you knew to give them a healthy dose of respect. Even the local preacher, Pastor Wright, stopped railing against Obeah when he opened his Bible one Sunday and found some lizard bones and bird claws in St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Dar had her own bible, a Black Heart book that she would consult when she wanted to work the worst of her Obeah curses. Rumor had it, this was the book she had turned to when she put a spell on a woman who stole some money that was for a sugarcane crop. Every year during sugarcane time, the woman would tear off her clothes and run through the streets naked, barking like a dog. The woman was now living in a madhouse in Linstead.

People eventually learned never to cross Dar, and life in Pebble Beach went on peacefully for a while, until Darette fell in love with one of the Love boys. Back then, there were still more donkeys on the main road than cars. In the mornings when Bertram rode his donkey past the gully where Darette lived, she would be sitting on a rock by the road waiting for him, with a plateful of coconut drops or some other delicious treat on her lap. People started warning Bertram – “Don’t be a greedy wanga gut. Never eat nothing she gives you.” There were too many love spells a woman could use to “fix” a man and make him hers forever, and food was the biggest weapon. She could let her sweat drip into a pot of rice and then feed it to him. Or if she was really desperate and evil, she could mix a little of her blood into some gravy and feed him that powerful spice. That was why he must especially stay away from stewed peas with salt beef, dumplings and brown gravy, which did happen to be his favorite meal. But it wasn’t long before Bertram fell under Darette’s spell – which was how everybody explained it. How else could an Obeah woman’s daughter catch a man, if she didn’t work a little magic on him? But on

Bertram's part, he defended his love for Darette to everyone he knew. Not only was she sweet and pretty, but she was the best cook in the world. So what if she practiced a little Obeah on the side? Everybody had a hobby.

Before long, Bertram and Darette were engaged. Things went on quite fine for a while, and even Bertram's family got used to the idea of the two of them. That is, until the day when Bertram started having terrible stomach pains. Darette mixed up some bush tea for him to take, but Bertram wouldn't touch it. He wanted to try the "real" doctor first. Darette complained to her mother about it, and Dar was livid. That was strike one. Bertram rode his donkey down to the closest clinic in Clarendon, where Myrna worked as an assistant. The doctor said Bertram had a bad parasite and gave him some medicine for it. Myrna started dropping by Bertram's house in the evenings to help nurse him back to health, and she told him to stay away from Darette's cooking until he was better. That was strike two. They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. When Darette no longer had access to Bertram's stomach, she also lost his heart. It now belonged to Myrna. The two of them had quickly fallen in love while playing nurse and patient. For a while, Myrna did her best to hide her feelings from him. She told herself that these visits were strictly professional. Strictly practice. After all, she did plan to go off to England soon to join a nursing program. And Darette was her friend after all, and deeply in love with Bertram.

But one day, when Myrna was sitting on the side of Bertram's bed spoon-feeding him some soup, their eyes connected and this time she didn't look away. Myrna put down the soup bowl, leaned over and brushed her lips against his. He pulled her to himself and the two of them kissed long and hard.

"What Myrna did was foolish," Aunt Beryl told Manda. "Because 'ell hath no fury like an Obeah woman scorned."

At the bottom of the hill behind where the primary school sat, there was an old hut where people once used to go to buy their cocoa beans and chocolate. People called it the Chocolate House. It hadn't been in use for over two years, when the last of the cocoa farmers had let his crops dry up and moved away to Canada. Pebble Beach was once a thriving little country town, but in the 1960s when Canada and England had been opening their gates to West Indians, Pebble Beach had lost much of its businesses. And so places like the old Chocolate House was now used for more intimate transactions.

When Bertram got better, he and Myrna would meet in that old hut every night at twilight and make love on a pile of crocus bags, with the scent of chocolate filling up their nostrils (for years afterwards, if one of them wasn't in the mood, all the other had to do was wave a piece of chocolate under their nose and that was it. Fireworks).

It was Dar who, coming within half mile of the hut one twilight, apparently happened to smell the scent of sex and chocolates in the air. She followed her nose to the hut, and caught Myrna and Bertram right in the act. People could hear Dar screeching from miles away. But it was too late. Myrna was already pregnant, and Bertram immediately broke off his engagement with Darette and took up with Myrna instead. Soon afterward, Bertram asked Myrna to marry him. Myrna's yard was cleaned and decorated, the fattest goats were killed, and a big rum cake was baked for the ceremony. The whole town was invited. In Pebble Beach, there were twelve funerals for every wedding Pastor Wright performed. It was no wonder everybody was excited. They didn't care about the background details.

On the afternoon of Bertram and Myrna's wedding, Dar showed up in the yard during the ceremony. Just as Myrna was about to say "I do", Dar walked up and tossed a jar of oil on her, soiling her hair and wedding dress. In front of all their guests, she declared to Myrna,

"You will have two daughters, but none of them goin' breed. The daughter in your belly will pine after rich men, but she will meet her end before she reach thirty-five. And your next daughter, she will never find love. She's goin' end up a lonely old woman, and rats will bite her up when she's dead."

The wedding guests chased Dar out of the yard, and one man threw a rock and konked her on the head (she cursed him too, and within weeks he died in a freak attack when some woodpeckers mistook him for a tree). Myrna and Bertram soon moved away to England, where Sierra and Manda were born.

"So you see, Minchie? Those Obeah people don't joke," Aunt Beryl said. "They have a lot of power. I wouldn't..." she paused.

"Wouldn't what?" Manda asked.

Aunt Beryl grabbed her arm tight. "Wait. You said the duppy you saw was an old woman with mean-looking eyes?"

"Yes, she had very mean, awful eyes." Manda said, shuddering at the memory.

"You know, I think it was Dar you saw. Of course, it would make sense. She came back to stop your wedding and work out her Obeah curse."

Manda stared at her aunt. Could that explain Daniel's behavior? And the reason for her vision? A rope of fear twisted around her stomach. "Do you really think it was Dar?" It all sounded so mad.

Aunt Beryl rubbed her arm. "Lord, Minchie, with Dar on your tail, you have your work cut out for you. You'd better get to your sister before she does."

Manda let out a long, slow breath. "Do you realize Sierra is going to be thirty-five in mid-September?"

"Oh, lord, how time flies," Aunt Beryl said. "Well, according to the curse, she won't live to see this birthday. Minchie, you're gonna have to help your sister."

"But she'll never take me seriously. Sierra can be really stubborn."

"Stubborn or not, you're gonna have to find a way to make her listen."

"Then I'll have to talk to her face-to-face."

"You're going to New York?" Aunt Beryl asked.

Manda nodded. There was no other way. Sierra certainly wouldn't come there. And it was not only Sierra she had to save. Didn't the Obeah woman also say Myrna's younger daughter would wind up alone and get eaten by rats? Her own future was at stake.

"Well, if you're gonna go to New York, you must go see my daughter, Angie. Bring her a little gift from me. And I want you to get me a few bottles of hair oil, and some good relaxer. Those Yankees have better hair products for black people than we do here."

That was Aunt Beryl, a true opportunist. "Fine. Anyway, I have a lot to do, so I'd better get going," Manda said, standing up.

Aunt Beryl went over to the dresser and pulled a cigarette out of her pack of Benson and Hedges. She picked up her lighter and flicked it against the cigarette's tip. A big orange flame sparked upwards from the lighter, instantly setting the front of her wig on fire. Manda lunged at her aunt and snatched the wig from her head. She dropped it on the floor and stomped down the flame. They both stood there staring down at the simmering wig, too stunned to speak at first.

“Well,” Aunt Beryl finally said, crossing her arms over chest, her face indignant. “Manda, this is your fault. I did tell you why I don’t like using that front door, but you had to make me come down and open it. And that was a brand new wig too.”

“Aunt Beryl, forgive me if I don’t bleeding remember all your house rules.” Manda gathered her things and left the room. She headed for the back door this time, with Aunt Beryl following after her.

“I’m sorry, Minchie,” Aunt Beryl said, hugging her goodbye at the door. “I know you never meant any trouble. Now, you go to New York and help your sister. She don’t deserve to die, no matter how awful she is.”

Manda pinched her on the arm.

“Ow, that ‘urt,” Aunt Beryl said, looking at her in surprise.

“I know,” Manda said. “It hurt me too.”

The day after her visit with Aunt Beryl, Manda went to the administrative department of St. Mary’s Hospital, where she had worked for the past six years, and asked for a two-months leave of absence. Rumors about her pre-wedding breakup had flown around the hospital from wing-to-wing, and a shared look of pity had come over the administrators’ faces when she sat down with them. They agreed to allow her the leave, provided she returned at the end of it. She went home and called Sierra to tell her she was coming to New York.

“Does that mean you’ve forgiven me?” Sierra asked, sounding relieved.

“You’re not escaping that easily. You were ready to miss my wedding, remember?” She paused. “Even if it’s a moot point now.”

“Manda, I’m so sorry about Daniel. But it’ll be good for you to leave England behind. I’m so glad you’re finally spreading your wings.”

“Blimey, I said I’m coming for a visit, not moving there,” Manda replied. Next, she headed for Tottenham to tell Myrna about her plans, and she knew she was in for a battle.

When Manda got to her mother’s house, Myrna had just returned from her job at a local nursing home. She warmed up some of her home-made beef soup and sat at the table to eat with Manda. The soup tasted good, but Manda couldn’t eat all of it. Her appetite still hadn’t returned to normal as yet. Myrna seemed to be avoiding the subject of Daniel, and Manda wasn’t sure whether it was to spare her, or to spare Myrna herself. She had grown to look at Daniel like the son she never had. His loss was clearly written all over her face as well.

When Manda had gotten through half of the soup, she wiped her mouth on a napkin, pushed away her bowl and said, “Mum, I have something to tell you.”

“What’s that you’re wearing?” Myrna asked, pointing her chin at Manda.

“Oh, this blouse? I made it from some shirts I found in a thrift shop,” Manda said. She loved vintage clothes, and she would give new life to tops and bottoms by cutting them apart and sewing them back together to make her own outfits.

“Manda, you Old Soul, why do you like people’s frowsy old clothes so much?” Myrna asked her. “You have to get with the times, young lady.”

This was the same woman who still poured Dettol in her bath to sterilize the water, and who was now dressed in white trousers and an oversized white shirt with various types of clocks printed on it that she had bought in the 80s.

“Well, Mum, I didn’t come here to discuss clothes. I just dropped by because I have something to tell you.”

“Never mind that right now,” Myrna said. “Come follow me upstairs. I have a surprise for you.”

Manda reluctantly got up and followed her mother upstairs and down the hall, past Myrna's bedroom with its dresser still covered in the ancient bottles of Avon perfume that must have turned to vinegar by now. There sat the green glass bird and the giraffe Manda used to play with as a child. Myrna didn't like to part with the things she had first bought when she came to London. Manda and Sierra had once lived right here in this Tottenham house, with its oversized furniture cluttered up with her mother's large collection of figurines, mostly horses, birds, and big-teethed black children engaged in all sorts of play. Myrna loved her life in Tottenham, where some of her neighbours were Jamaican. She judged a neighborhood's worth by the distance between her house and the closest grocers where she could buy a can of ackee or some other West Indian produce.

"So? What do you think?" Myrna asked her, standing by the door of Manda's old bedroom, her arms spread out like a game show beauty revealing a prize.

Manda peeked inside. Her mother had bought a beautiful pink spread for the small bed, hung new pictures on the walls and had the room painted a grinning yellow. She heard a gentle burbling coming from one corner and looked over to see a stand with a small fish tank set up on top of it. Inside, a school of colorful tropical fish swam back and forth.

"Remember how you were always riding me for a fish tank when you were little?" Myrna said, smiling proudly. "Well, there it is. Did your mother get it right, or what?"

"Get what right?"

"Everything. I've even put in a separate phone line for you." Myrna walked into the room to point it out.

"For me? Why?" Manda asked. She suspected she wouldn't like the answer.

"Why not? I can spoil my daughter a little, can't I? I just want you to be comfortable when you come back."

"Come back?" Manda heard the terror in her own voice. "Mum, you shouldn't have gone through so much trouble. I'm not coming back."

"How's that? What do you mean?" Myrna squinted at her.

"I'm not...coming home."

"But you'll have to leave your flat soon," her mother said. "I just naturally expected you would be coming back here." She sounded terribly disappointed, and Manda felt awful.

"But Mum, I never told you I would."

"Well, where else are you going to go? We Jamaicans didn't come to London to go sleep on people's couches."

"I won't be sleeping on anyone's couch."

"Then where are you going to live?"

"Well...that's what I've come to talk to you about." Manda sat down on the bed she had slept in for most of her life. She watched a brilliant blue fighter fish bumping its face along the glass, as if looking for an escape route. She remembered what the Obeah woman had said about her dying old and alone. Moving back into this house would be much worse than going backwards. She might be dooming herself to that depressing future. But now that moving in with Daniel was no longer an option, she knew she could very well wind up back in this bed. At least for a while.

"I've decided to go to New York for six weeks to visit Sierra. Then when I come back, I'll look for another flat." She tried to sound as cheerful as she could.

"What? You can't be serious," her mother said, far from cheerful.

Manda nodded. "I am. I've already been making preparations."

“But what about your job? We Jamaicans didn’t come here to live like paupers.”

“It’s all been taken care of. I’ve asked them for a temporary leave, and they’ve given it to me.”

“How do you know you’ll still have your job when you get back? How do you know they won’t give it to someone else?”

“Mum, people take leaves all the time, and they don’t lose their jobs. Sherrie’s on temporary leave.”

“But Sherrie’s pregnant. And what about me? Manda, you’re all I have left. What if I get sick and drop down?”

“The carpets are padded. You’ll be fine.” Manda gave her a weak smile.

Myrna shot her a blood-chilling look. She went over to the fish tank and picked up a little container of fish food. She shook the flakes furiously over the tank. It spread across the water’s surface like miniature confetti, and the fish rushed up to it, mouths open like children at a parade.

“I’m just joking, Mum. Listen, I’ll only be gone for a little while. And you’ll have Aunt Beryl here if anything happens.”

“Beryl.” Myrna hissed her teeth at the mention of her younger sister. “I would be dead and a vulture would pick me dry before that Beryl would look in.”

“Sorry, Mum, but I need to do this.”

“Why?” Myrna put the container back on the stand and turned around. “Why are you going there? If you need a holiday, why don’t you just come over here and relax?”

“Because Sierra needs me.”

Myrna fell silent for a while. Sierra was a touchy subject between them. “Did she say that?” she asked finally.

“She didn’t have to. I just know it.”

“So this is her fault,” Myrna said. She crossed her arms over her chest. “It’s not enough that she turns her back on me, but now she’s working on you too. She can’t find enough ways to punish me, can she?”

“Mum, you’re being unreasonable and I’ve got to go.” Manda stood up.

“You know it’s the truth,” Myrna said, following Manda back downstairs. “She’s always using you to get to me.”

“What are you talking about?” Manda turned at the bottom of the stairs to look up at her mother. “And how does she do that?”

“Very easily, because you’ve always been gullible when it comes to her.”

Manda had heard enough. She was already sorry that she had come. She went into the living room to get her purse, but Myrna followed her inside.

“Manda, don’t do this,” she said. “Don’t run away from your problems like Sierra did. Don’t let her influence you.”

“Mum, stop it.”

Myrna knelt down on the carpet beside the coffee table.

Oh, here she goes, Manda thought, as her mother raised her hands to heaven.

“Lord, please help my daughter to come to her senses,” Myrna said. “Help her to see the selfishness of her ways.”

Two could play that game. Manda knelt down on the carpet by the couch. “Lord, please help my mother to see that I’m not being selfish,” she said.

“Please open her eyes to her foolishness,” Myrna continued.

“Please open my mother’s eyes to her unreasonableness.”

“And help her to know that children should obey their parents.”

“And help her to know that I am not a child.”

“And erase her stubbornness...”

“And erase my mother’s controlling ways...”

“That she gets from her father.”

“That she was probably born with.”

“And that probably pushed her fiancé away.”

“And...and that’s pushing me away. Just like she pushed Sierra away.”

Myrna opened her mouth to speak, but closed it again. She looked over at Manda and dropped her arms.

Manda scrambled back to her feet. She had done it. She had walloped her where it would hurt the most. But looking at her mother’s face, Manda felt suddenly guilty - even if Myrna had spurred her to it with that horrible comment about Daniel. “Mum, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to say that.”

“So my children hate me,” Myrna said.

“We don’t hate you.”

“I guess I deserve it. I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life, and sooner or later you have to pay for them.” Myrna got up and went to sit on the couch.

“Mum, I’m sorry things went so wrong between you and Sierra.”

“What went wrong with me and Sierra started way before she left,” Myrna said. “The two of us, we just always clashed. No matter how I tried, I could never get close enough to her.”

“You miss her, don’t you?” Manda sat down beside her mother.

“She’s my firstborn. I’m always going to love her, no matter if she’ll never forgive me.”

“Forgive you for what?”

Myrna patted Manda’s knee. “Promise me you’ll come back. That’s all I want to know.”

“Of course, I promise,” Manda said. “But Mum, let me ask you something. Aunt Beryl was telling me about what happened in Jamaica, when you were pregnant with Sierra. How the Obeah woman cursed...”

In spite of her bad knees, Myrna sprung up so fast, Manda stopped talking in surprise.

“Mum-”

But Myrna was already making a quick retreat out of the living room. She turned and headed down the hall towards the kitchen.

“Manda,” she heard her mother shout. “Next time you finish eating, take your bowl off the table for goodness’ sake.”

CHAPTER THREE

When Manda and Sierra were small, they had looked so much alike that Myrna used to dress them up in matching clothes, and people had thought they were twins. Then at age thirteen, Manda started to sprout upwards, leaving Sierra behind at 5'4"; but Sierra had been busy sprouting outwards, growing breasts and round little hips that made men think she was older than fourteen. Myrna once said if her daughters had been trees, Manda would have been the palm, tall and straight up and down, with a big head of hair that flopped over her small face. Sierra, on the other hand, was like a baobab tree, curvy, with ample hips, and a way of posing that drew all the attention away from everything around her.

Sierra reveled in attention. She gloried in it. She had always needed to be the brown girl in the ring. That was why she tended to gravitate to careers where she could be seen and heard, but she had never stayed in one profession for very long. For three years, she had found moderate success as a print model, then she dropped modeling for stage acting, and from there she decided to try her hand at singing. She was lucky enough to land a job as a backup singer for a rising band, but then soon dropped it to pursue a career as a dancer. Right before she left England, she had won a part in a musical, but hadn't stayed to see it through.

Sierra was one of those people who approached life like a child in an amusement park, running from one colorful ride to the next, addicted to the head rush, the screaming, dizzying, heart-pounding thrill of risk. Manda on the other hand, normally approached life like a road trip, with a map beside her that outlined in black marker the route she planned to take, and a big bag in the back seat, full of emergency supplies that she might need for the journey. Her latest bag was like a red leather house, with a million compartments for all sorts of things one might need should they ever find themselves washed up on a desert island – things like a mini medical kit, a sewing kit, a tiny hammer and screwdrivers, umbrella, flashlight, toiletries and snacks. She always tried to be prepared.

Unlike Sierra. Why was she always late? Nearly an hour had passed since Manda had gotten off her flight at LaGuardia, and Sierra was still nowhere in sight. Manda searched the area in front of Virgin Airlines, and even took a look outside before dropping into a seat to wait. When she rang Sierra's phone, the voice mail came on. Manda grunted. She was still feeling the sleepy after-effects of the travel sickness tablet she had taken right before boarding the flight. She reached into her bag and took out the bottle of water and biscuits the air stewards had handed out on the plane. She ate the biscuits and tried to make herself comfortable in the uncomfortable seat. People passed back and forth before her, but none of them was Sierra. Manda was just nodding off in her seat, when she was jolted awake by someone calling out her name. She opened her eyes to see a woman standing near a set of glass doors, waving her arms like she was trying to flag down a rescue plane.

"Manda," the woman called out again. She was dressed in low-waisted white leather pants, a frilly black blouse that left her toned midriff showing, and black stiletto boots. On her head was a white cowboy hat with a rhinestone star on the front. She looked like someone who was used to having an entourage.

Was that Sierra? It didn't quite look like her, but blimey, it was. Manda staggered to her feet as her sister approached her. She had changed a lot in two years. Sierra's hair, once black and curly, was now a coppery color and hung straight down her back. She had also lost a bit of weight, and looked younger than ever as she strutted towards Manda.

"Manda, darling." Sierra greeted her now with a big hug, and an "I Love New York" button that she deftly pinned to Manda's jacket.

"Just to get you into the spirit of things," she said, giving Manda a sparkling grin. Her teeth were different. They had been whitened, and the tiny space she used to have between the two front ones was gone. "You look... had a rough flight, did you? I forgot you hate flying. That's all right, love, you're on the ground now. I love your hair, of course. It's cute, in a Side Show Bob sort of way. Do you know who that is? You do? I'm just joking, love. Oh, I'm so happy to see you." Sierra alternately spun her, hugged her, and squeezed her in places as she spoke.

"I'm happy to see you too," Manda said. She had managed to bind herself together quite well since Daniel's departure two weeks earlier, what with all the rush and confusion of preparing for a long trip. All the packing and shopping, the storing of furniture, and the million little things a person had to do when putting their life on temporary hold. But now, with Sierra's comforting, perfumed and jeweled arms around her, all the binding dropped off and a wave of emotions came over Manda. She fell apart in soggy, sobbing bits.

"Oh, Sierra, it was horrible, he just ran out the door and I tried to chase him in the car, but he... he got away from me, and now I'm all alone and hate him for what he did, but I want him back because it wasn't his fault really... it was fate, see, so I know he still loves me, doesn't he? Nobody can..." Her chest heaved. She could hardly breathe. "Love you one minute and not the next. Can they? It doesn't make sense."

"I know, I know, it was awful," Sierra said soothingly. "But Manda get a hold of yourself. It'll be all right, you'll see. Forget about that awful Daniel. He's not worth it."

"No, that's the problem," Manda tried to explain. "He was worth it. He wasn't like the other blokes. This was different. *He* was different."

"Manda, he was typical," Sierra said. "Or he'd still be with you, wouldn't he? That's what I tell my listeners. If you were meant for each other, you wouldn't be calling in to ask why he left you."

"But that's just it, he didn't really want to leave. I could see it in his eyes. Ouch," Manda said, as she felt something tug her hair from behind. She put a hand to the back of her head and felt warm fingers and the hard plastic of a comb.

"What are you doing?" she asked, trying to untangle herself from Sierra's grip.

"Sorry, love," Sierra said, letting go of the comb. "Your hair's all flattened down in the back. I was just trying to fluff it up a bit."

Manda tugged at the comb, but it had gotten tangled in her hair and she had to work it out with her fingers. "Sierra, for goodness sake..." She handed the comb to Sierra and wiped her eyes. The airport's harsh overhead lights were beginning to burn her eyes, and the cold air conditioning chilled her skin.

"Aw, look at you, you're a right mess," Sierra said. "Come on, love, let's get you home and get you some tea. Or coffee if you'd rather. Everybody drinks coffee here. Joe, they call it, although no one seems to know why."

Sierra grabbed a suitcase and wheeled it away, and Manda followed along quietly. Outside, Sierra waved to one of the black cars parked along the sidewalk nearby, and it moved forward and pulled up beside them. The driver put the suitcases in the trunk, as they climbed into the car.

The air smelled of stale cigarettes that seemed to pre-date the no smoking sign stuck to the back of the driver's seat.

"Don't worry, New York will be good for you, I promise," Sierra said when they had settled into the back seat. "By next week, we'll have your spirits up and your knickers down."

Manda smiled. Like Aunt Beryl, Sierra thought a good shag was the cure for the common headache.

"I'm so glad you're here. I've missed you so much." Sierra squeezed her arm.

"Me too," Manda said, sniffing. She watched Sierra apply more lipstick and face powder to her already made-up face. Sierra had never worn that much makeup in England.

"Where did you get that hat?" Manda asked her.

"This?" Sierra pulled off the hat and held it out proudly. "It's my Sistah Britain hat. I always wear it when I do my show."

Since moving to New York, Sierra had built herself a moderately successful career in radio, and she already had her own show on FM-102 called Sistah Britain Speaks. It used to be a source of worry for their parents that Sierra never stuck to one thing for long. But so far she seemed to love this job.

They joined what seemed like a highway death race speeding towards Manhattan. At one point, they came so close to smashing into the back of a yellow taxi that had suddenly darted in front of them, Manda yelped.

"You'll get used to it," Sierra said. She hadn't even flinched.

"I think I bruised my liver," Manda said.

Sierra chattered on and on excitedly about New York and life in her East Village neighborhood. The clutter of Indian restaurants around 6th Street where suited-up waiters stood outside to ambush you as you passed; the pierced and tattooed crowd on St. Mark's Place; and the NYU students who swarmed around nearby Union Square and made Sierra wish she had come to college in New York like she had originally planned, before their mother put her foot down.

Manda wondered, was it her imagination or had Sierra's speaking voice vaulted up whole volumes? She had never been this loud in England. At times she was practically shouting, and Manda had to pull back to avoid going deaf. Her whole manner of speaking was different... Americanisms thrown in, and sometimes she would switch to an imitation New York accent.

"Girl, tomorrow's gonna be very busy for you," Sierra said. "First, I want you to come visit the radio station - do you see the Empire State Building?" She pointed out the taxi's window. "The station's just a few blocks from there. And afterwards, we're going to a barbecue party on the Upper West Side. Doesn't that sound exciting?"

Manda listened and actually felt herself cheering up and liking the New York City Sierra described. Sierra wrapped her love around the city like a proud mother, and Manda had to admit that she did look happier than she ever had in England.

"We're going to have so much fun together," Sierra said. "And you watch. By the time your six weeks are up, you won't even remember your old life."

"That's not possible," Manda said. But she was looking forward to spending time with Sierra again, in spite of the reason why she had come to New York. They had always been close. Before Sierra left London, Friday night had been their night, and they used to get together in Soho at Kettners where they would sit at the champagne bar drinking cocktails and commiserating about their lives. Sometimes Sierra would bring along the entertainment

magazine from the Evening Standard and they would go through it, looking for something fun to do. Manda didn't care much for Soho, with its crowds of people dropping food in the streets and spilling beer on the ground, and with all that vomit-dodging. You could see the entire Liverpool diet on the sidewalks. But Sierra was adventurous and social, and going anywhere with her was always good for a laugh. When she left for New York, Manda felt like she had lost her best friend.

Sierra lived in a pretty three-story building on 5th Street in the East Village. The building was salmon-colored, with white trim around the windows and front door and white cherub faces embedded in the wall below each window. Daniel would have liked it. He was always pointing out the gargoyles and statues on the faces of buildings and explaining their significance, like which ones were meant to ward off evil spirits, and which ones had a story behind them. Before him, Manda had never noticed those things. Just looking at the building made her miss him.

Sierra's flat was on the third floor, and by the time they dragged the heavy suitcases all the way up three flights, Manda was exhausted and Sierra was complaining about a broken nail, and having to re-do her manicure. When they had entered the flat, Sierra pulled off her hat and hung it on a hook near the door. She went straight into the kitchen to fix them both some tea. Manda looked around her. Sierra's living room was painted a mustard yellow, and the sofa and loveseat were beige. A large, gold-gilded mirror hung on the wall behind the sofa, which reflected back the living room and made it look bigger than it was. In a corner of the couch sat a boy doll with black shoulder-length hair that had been combed back, and dark sunglasses over its eyes. This had to be Nik. Manda recognized him from a picture Sierra had emailed to her. She picked up the doll. It smelled of cologne.

There were dolls everywhere, a whole United Nations of them. Manda wondered around the room, looking at them. Some were dressed in beautiful lace, satin or velvet dresses, with ribbons in their hair. There was a Japanese doll in a red kimono, an African doll wearing a head-wrap and a green and orange dress, and a Scottish boy doll dressed in a kilt and playing the bagpipes. Sierra had always loved dolls, and in England she had kept a few of them scattered around her flat. But this was something else. It was as if New York had pulled the stopper out of Sierra, and she had exploded into the world. Manda barely recognized this sister-stranger. She couldn't help feeling a little unnerved.

"Sierra, where did you get so many dolls?" Manda called out to her.

"Do you like them?" Sierra said. "I order them from a company in Kansas. All you have to do is send them a picture and a description of someone you know, and they'll make a doll to look just like the person. Isn't that clever?"

"All of these dolls are of people you know?"

"Yes, every single one of them. Sometimes I give them as gifts, but I usually just keep them. Did you like the dolls I sent-?" Sierra stopped herself.

"It's alright, Sierra. I won't break if you mention Daniel," Manda told her. "Yes, the dolls were adorable. Especially Daniel's."

The only dolls Sierra didn't have were of her real family. These empty-headed replicas of people she now knew, it seemed they had become her real family. But at least these dolls would never disappoint or hurt her, like real people could. She could love them unconditionally, and they would never make her regret it. Manda guessed that was why she loved her dolls so much.

"Listen, the first room on the right is yours," Sierra said from the kitchen. "I usually use it as a home office, but Nik and I fixed it all up for you."

Manda wheeled her luggage to the room. It was tiny, but comfortable enough for a short visit. There was a red futon against one wall, and a computer sat on a desk across from it. Manda closed the door behind her. She hoisted the larger of the suitcases onto the futon and unzipped it. She reached under her clothes and pulled out the Daniel doll. When she was packing for New York, on impulse she had grabbed the doll and shoved it down into her suitcase. She couldn't bear to leave it behind. The other doll, the one of herself in the nurse's outfit, she had put it away in a box like a piece of her own soul awaiting her return home. Now she sat down on the futon, the Daniel doll propped on her lap.

"Well, here we are," she said softly to it. "I'll bet you're quite glad, after being cooped up in that suitcase all this time."

Lately, she had developed a habit of conversing with the doll, the way she used to do with Daniel. It felt oddly comforting, as if in some sense the real Daniel was connected in spirit to his doll-self, hearing her in some sixth-sense sort of way. She had also started doing other things, like sleeping with the doll clutched against her, its cool plastic face smothered in the space between her breasts.

"But Daniel, I'm not here to muck around," Manda said, wagging her finger at the doll. "This isn't a pleasure trip. It's going to take a lot of work, but I've got to set things right for Sierra. And for us."

"Hey, Manda," Sierra called out from the living room. "Have you seen my bedroom? How do you like it?"

Manda quickly pushed the doll back into her suitcase and zipped it up. If Sierra saw she had brought the doll with her, she might think Manda was a pathetic example of a bride who had lost her mind when she lost her fiancé. Like the old woman in *Great Expectations*, who wouldn't take off her rotted wedding dress years after she had been jilted.

Sierra's bedroom looked like the inside of a jewelry box, from the blue satin bedspread to the matching curtains at the windows, and all the pretty, glittering trinkets that lined her dressing table. There were dolls here too. Sitting proudly on top of Sierra's dresser was a doll whose little round face was a replica of Sierra's. She was wearing a sleeveless blue satin dress and patent black shoes. Beside the doll, there was a large photograph of Sierra and Nik, hugging each other at a restaurant table. Manda picked it up. Her going-away present to Sierra had been a family photo, taken when she and Sierra were in their early teens, and their parents were still together. She had gotten the photo enlarged, put it in a silver frame and given it to Sierra to take with her to New York. Now the silver frame contained the picture of Sierra and Nik, and the original photo was gone.

Manda put down the photo and left the room. She wanted to ask Sierra what happened to the original photo. Had she tossed it out? As she came back down the hall, she caught the sound of whispering coming from the living room. Sierra was talking to someone, and at first Manda thought she was on the telephone, until she heard the low pitch sound of a man's voice.

"Sierra-"

"Nik, please. Don't mention it," she heard Sierra say. "She's got enough on her mind as it is."

"Don't mention what?" Manda asked, stepping into the room.

Sierra stood before a man, frowning up at him. They both turned and gave Manda a startled look. The man ran his fingers through a heap of black shoulder-length hair that framed his wide forehead and curled up slightly at the ends. His restless brown eyes settled on Manda for a moment, then jumped back to Sierra, and over to Manda again.

“Don’t mention what?” Manda repeated.

Sierra smiled. “Nothing. We were just talking about Nik’s mother, weren’t we? The poor woman’s had a lot to deal with lately. She’s being forced to retire, and I was asking Nik not to mention it when he talks to her.”

Wow. She was quick. Sierra had always been good at inventing lies on the spot, and sometimes Manda would even fall for them. But not this time. She could hear the nervous little catch in Sierra’s voice. She wondered what they had really been talking about. If it hadn’t been about her, then why would Sierra lie?

Sierra cleared her throat. “Manda, this is-.”

“Nik. I know,” Manda said, walking towards them. “You look just like your doll.”

“Nik wanted to meet you,” Sierra said. “I had told him you might be tired, but I see he couldn’t wait.”

Nik handed Sierra a white plastic bag he had been carrying. He was dressed in blue jeans and a white shirt, and had a pair of designer sunglasses hooked into the opening of his shirt. An expensive-looking watch decorated one wrist, and he wore a silver ring on one thumb, with a snake etched into it. He looked...well, rich and handsome. Just the way Sierra liked her men.

“Good to finally meet you,” Nik said, reaching for Manda. He gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “I brought you some dinner. Thought you might want some real food after consuming that airline crap.”

Manda glanced at the bag. It might have been only half past eight in New York, but it was after one in the morning London time. As much as she had prepared herself for the time change by eating and napping at the right times, her body couldn’t make up its mind whether or not it wanted food, sleep or both.

“What did you make?” Sierra asked, peering into the bag.

“Shepherd’s pie. I wanted your sister to feel right at home.”

“Nik’s a great cook,” Sierra said. “He can make just about anything.”

“What kind of food do you like?” Nik said, turning back to Manda. “I can cook for you. Whatever you want.”

“Thank you, that’s...nice,” Manda said.

“Manda loves cheese,” Sierra said. “She’ll eat cheese with anything. Once we were in an Italian restaurant, and she poured grated parmesian into her tea.”

“Sierra, you cow,” Manda said. “The place was dark. I thought it was milk.”

“Yup, I can see how milk and parmesian might look alike,” Nik said, grinning. “But if you love cheese that much, I make a wicked lasagna. I’ll bake you a dish. As I’m sure you already know, Sierra has no idea how to work an oven.”

“Nik, don’t exaggerate,” Sierra said, slapping him lightly on the arm.

Nik went into the kitchen and came back moments later with three dinner plates and some cutlery. Instead of putting them on the table, he set them down on the coffee table beside the tea things. Sierra sat down, with Nik and Manda on either side of her. Nik turned on the television and settled on a documentary about World War II. He said the History Channel was his favorite, the only one he liked to watch. He told them about some of the other documentaries he had seen. Some part of his body was always in motion, and as he spoke, he would tap his finger on something for emphasis, or pick up objects, squint at them and put them back down. He and Sierra were two of a kind, in that way. Two restless birds who could barely stay still for a moment. Watching them was like a workout for the eyes.

And Manda was knackered. But because Nik had made the pie especially for her, she spooned a square of it onto her plate and ate it slowly. It might have been the best shepherd's pie she had ever tasted. He certainly could cook. Sierra said she had grabbed a bite on the way to the airport, and she didn't want any of the pie. Nik complained to Manda about how hard it was to get Sierra to eat a proper meal. He worried that she might starve herself. He finally coaxed her into taking a slice, and then kissed her on the forehead when she did.

They were always kissing, slapping, grabbing and poking at each other. Right in front of Manda, Nik pushed his hand up under Sierra's blouse and gave her breast a quick squeeze. Manda looked away. Daniel would never have done anything like that. While he often showered her with private displays of affection, he had insisted on remaining celibate until their wedding night. He said it was the proper thing for ministers to do. That was why Manda had wanted a short engagement, and he had kept her burning for him for more than nine months, only to run away the night before they were to marry. Now she felt the heat of rage rising in her, as she thought about what he had done.

"So, Sierra told me what your fiancé did to you," Nik said suddenly, as if he had heard her thoughts. He leaned past Sierra and looked at Manda. "That's tragic."

Manda shot Sierra a look. Why had she told Nik her business?

Sierra gave her an apologetic smile. "Yes, it was tragic," she said. "But it's over now, and Manda wants to put it behind her. She's here to forget about all of that."

"You can't forget something like that," Nik said.

"Yes, you can if you make up your mind to do it," she snapped back.

"Manda, for some of us, life is a series of worst-case scenarios," Nik said. "You've just got to be tough. Did Sierra ever tell you my great-grandfather, Nicos, went down with the Titanic?"

"Really? No she didn't."

"No, Nik. I wanted you to have that pleasure," Sierra said. She raised an eyebrow at Manda. "He tells everybody this story. That's his claim to fame."

"It's my family's history," Nik said, putting his hand on top of Sierra's head. "It's what makes me the great guy I am today. The one you love." He kissed her above one eye.

"Tell me about your grandfather," Manda said.

"My great-grandfather. He was part of the peasant class. You know, the guys they put down below? Anyway, it was 1912, and he was traveling with my grandfather, Andreas, who was barely a teenager at the time. They had been living in Greece, but Nicos' wife had died the year before, so Nicos decided to take Andreas to New York to start a new life. His brother – my great-uncle – was already living here. Anyway, Nicos had lost a leg during an accident, and he had been fitted with a wooden one. But when the ship started to go down and everybody was scrambling to get upstairs, Nicos got his wooden leg caught between some twisted metal. Andreas managed to pull off the leg for him, but he was just a skinny little runt and he couldn't carry his dad after he fell over. So my great-grandfather made Andreas leave him behind."

"That's awful," Manda said. She remembered how she and Daniel had gone to see Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio in a special re-playing of Titanic, and how excited she had been, since she had missed the original screening years before. And also because she and Daniel rarely went to the cinema. He didn't approve of the content of most films. But when Leonardo slipped under the icy water near the end, and away from Kate, Daniel had wiped his eyes.

"Your poor grandfather," Manda said to Nik. "Having to leave his dad behind like that."

He nodded. "For the rest of his life he always felt guilty about that. And I don't think he ever went near a boat again. He used to always say, "*Nik, life is like a great big ship. Don't let it suck you down.*" Nik kissed the snake ring on his finger.

"That's his good luck charm," Sierra said, in answer to Manda's puzzled stare. "He kisses it to ward off trouble."

"Are you superstitious?" Manda asked him.

"Superstitious? You don't know the half of it," Sierra said, patting Nik's shoulder. "He won't leave his flat if it's Friday the 13th. And he has the biggest collection of horror films I've ever seen. The only thing bigger is his collection of Titanic memorabilia."

"You should come over sometime. I'll give you a tour," Nik said, his face glowing with pride.

"Do you plan to pass it all down to your kids one day?" Manda asked.

"Nah, I don't plan to have kids," Nik said. "Maybe I'll donate it all to a museum."

Sierra gave Manda a tight-lipped look, but then turned away.

"So, you believe in ghosts, curses, luck and all of that?" Manda said, changing the subject.

"Well, I don't believe aliens go around snatching people out of their beds at night," Nik said. "But, yeah. I believe in some of that stuff."

Hmmm, Manda thought, studying him carefully. She wondered what he would say if she told him about her vision, and seeing a ghost, and about the real reason she had come to New York. He seemed awfully protective of Sierra, and she probably listened to him more than she did any one else. If Manda could get Nik on her side, he might do anything to help save Sierra. Wouldn't he? She would have to find a way to talk to him alone.

"Do you want more pie?" Nik asked, holding out the container to her.

Manda shook her head and yawned. "No thanks, I'm knackered. I just want to sleep." She stood up and stretched. Her back hurt. Her body had had enough for one day, what with the long bumpy flight that had kept her rigid in her seat for most of the way, and the sensory overload of New York City itself. Plus, if she was to somehow keep Sierra alive until her birthday, she would have a lot of work ahead of her. She bid Nik and Sierra goodnight.

"Goodnight, Manda," Nik called out, as she headed for the bedroom that would be hers for the next six weeks. "And remember, don't let the ship suck you down."

The next afternoon, Manda took a taxi to the radio station where Sierra worked. FM-102 was on the 15th floor of an office tower in mid-town. Manda had never visited a radio station before, and so Sierra took her around, pointing out the electronic equipment and trying to explain how things worked. It was clear that she barely knew how herself. In the hall, there was a giant poster of Sierra with her trademark white Stetson sitting on top of her head. When the time came for her to go on the air, Sierra propped the hat on her head. She sat behind a window in a booth, headphones clamped over her ears and a microphone pointed towards her lips. Manda sat on the other side of the window, wearing her own set of headphones and a sticker that said "Visitor" pasted to her shirt.

"Hullo, New York," Sierra practically shouted into the microphone. "What's kicking with you today? Sistah Britain here, did you miss me? I've got a bleeding headache, so you'd better be nice to me. My sister's here from London, and I want to give her a shout out. Oi, Manda. How's the jetlag treating you? She winked through the glass at Manda.

Manda smiled and winked back at her, feeling a sense of pride for her sister.

Sierra turned to a bald man sitting near her, also wearing headphones. "I've got Nuff Sed here, from one of New York's best rap groups, Blak Attak. How're you doing, Nuff? I heard you shaved all the hair off your body. Why?"

The two of them bantered back and forth, arguing playfully, until Sierra invited listeners to call in.

Sierra really was a natural. She had always been a great conversationalist, and now she had found her calling. She laughed easily and never seemed to run out of things to say. Charisma was one of her natural gifts. She was so alive, sitting there in her glass booth, chattering away happily. Imagine that, she was getting paid to entertain people with what she liked to do best. Talk.

By the time Sierra said her signoff line, "This is Sistah Britain saying goodnight New York, and may the night be good to you," Manda was impressed.

"You were wonderful," she said, putting her arm around Sierra's shoulders as they left the station and headed for a barbecue party on the Upper West Side. "I couldn't stop listening."

Nik slipped his arm around Sierra's waist. "I made her wonderful," he said. "She belongs on the radio, and not on stupid television."

Sierra turned her head to Manda and crossed her eyes.

They arrived at the party at sunset. The host, Theresa, was a media consultant for Ebay, and her husband, Curt, was a television executive with MTV. Theresa was dressed in a pretty blue kimono, and she had twisted a blue silk flower into her blond hair. Their party had a theme to it. Theresa and her husband had spent most of July in Japan, and this was a sort of welcome back to America party. All of the songs were about America and its cities, from Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA", to Gladys Knight's "Midnight Train to Georgia". This was Manda's first time in America, and she soaked it all in with a mixture of wonder and confusion.

Nearly everyone Manda met had a fabulous job in some area of the media. When they asked Manda what she did for a living, she kept hearing a hitch in her voice whenever she said, "I'm a nurse". It sounded so dull next to everyone else's jobs, and even though they would nod and say "that's nice" or "that's a noble profession", she could see the interest drain from their eyes.

Once Sierra jumped in and added, "But she's a designer at heart." She told them that Manda had made her own outfit, and all of a sudden Manda was surrounded by a group of women. They were touching her clothes and asking where she sold them. Two women even asked for her card. Of course Manda didn't have any. She hadn't come to New York to be a designer after all. A French woman named Antoinette who was the buyer for one of Sierra's favorite Soho boutiques, even told Manda she was interested in seeing more of her designs. She gave Manda her card, much to Sierra's excitement.

"Do you know what an opportunity this is?" Sierra whispered. "Even celebrities shop there. You'd better call her."

Manda just laughed. She doubted a New York boutique would truly be interested in her clothes, what with all the talented designers competing for their attention already. But it was the first time she had ever gotten such a strong reaction over her clothes. In England, most of the people she knew regarded her designing as an odd quirk, if anything else. "*Aw, she makes her own clothes. Such a clever cow. Pass the peanuts, will ya?*" So she had had to satisfy with making clothes for the few people who would ask for an outfit. But here, people took her seriously, and Manda was flattered.

Sierra spent at least an hour by the barbecue pit flashing away smoke and talking to Theresa's husband as he flipped burgers and turned chicken and corn on the grill. She was in Sistah Britain mode, and kept her rhinestone-studded white hat on all through the party. When Nik arrived, he immediately came over and put his arm possessively around Sierra and joined in their conversation. Before long, he had wheedled Sierra away from Curt altogether.

For her party, Theresa had churned up some homemade strawberry ice cream, which she scooped into colorful little bowls with star-spangled toothpick flags planted on each scoop. Manda took a bowl and wandered over to a bench that sat along the fence by a tiny herb garden. She bent over and plucked a leaf off a mint plant, and sniffed it. She thought about her home in England, and how every day when she got home from the hospital, she would make herself a hot cup of mint tea and curl up on the couch with it. At this moment, England seemed to exist in another reality completely separate from this one. In this reality, she was in New York eating very sweet ice cream on a summer night, with the smell of strawberries and mint in her nostrils. She gazed up at the bright buildings rising above Theresa's backyard. Manda smiled to herself when Christopher Cross started to sing about getting caught between the moon and New York City. That was exactly how she felt at the moment. For a long time afterwards, she would always think about the way the city looked from the yard that night, whenever she heard that song. But that wasn't the only thing that would make the party a memorable occasion for her.

Manda caught sight of Sierra and Nik, sitting together in a lawn chair across the yard. Nik was feeding Sierra spoonfuls of ice cream, and she was laughing and trying to swallow at the same time. Manda smiled at them. Once she and Daniel had sat on the boardwalk in Brighton one afternoon, sharing an ice cream cone. She had deliberately smudged the ice cream against Daniel's nose, and then leaned over and licked it off. He had looked at her in surprise, and she had burst out laughing. That afternoon seemed like a thousand years ago. She and Daniel used to be inseparable, like bench and backside, but now she had no idea where he was. He had left her alone. She felt a cold ball growing in her stomach that had nothing to do with the ice cream. Manda shook her head, trying to dispel all thoughts of Daniel and what had happened. She decided to go across the yard and join Sierra and Nik.

She was just about to rise to her feet, when something caught her eye at the bottom of the garden and she turned her gaze that way. Manda gasped. There, drifting just beyond two men who stood near a tree drinking beers, was an old black woman with clumped-up gray dreadlocks framing her face, and a dark blue house frock hanging down to her shins. Her dark eyes bore into Manda's like daggers, even across the yard. Manda froze. It was her. The same old woman she had seen in the bathroom mirror. Dar, the Obeah woman, Aunt Beryl had said it was.

"Sierra," Manda croaked. She sprang to her feet and turned to run across the yard to her sister. Instead, she ran right into Theresa, who had been going around the yard collecting empty ice cream bowls on a tray. Manda practically ran her over, knocking the tray out of her hands and sending bowls falling to the grass. Pink ice cream dribbled down the front of Theresa's kimono.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Manda stammered. "I didn't..."

"Manda, what's wrong?" It was Sierra, who had appeared by her side with Nik. "You're shaking."

Nik helped Theresa back to her feet, and some of the other guests bent down and collected the tray and bowls.

Manda turned and looked down the garden. Dar was gone.

"What's she looking at?" Nik said to Sierra.

“What are you looking at?” Sierra echoed.

“Huh? Nothing.” Manda turned back to them.

“Did someone do something to you?” Sierra asked, holding her arm. “You don’t look well.”

“No, no one did anything. I thought I saw...”

“What did you see?” Sierra asked.

Manda glanced around her. Theresa and some of the others also stood by, waiting to hear what she had seen.

“Never mind.” Manda wiped the perspiration from her forehead.

“Nik, I think we’d better get her home,” Sierra said. “She looks like death.”

“I’ll call a car service,” Theresa said. She turned and hurried away.

“I’m fine. Really,” Manda said.

“No, you’re not. Your eyes are practically popping out of your head, and you’re as cold as ice.” Sierra rubbed her arm.

Minutes later, she and Sierra were in the back seat of a car headed towards 5th Street.

Manda was glad that Nik had stayed behind. She was still jittery and out of sorts. On the way home, Sierra told Manda that for a while now she had been pitching an idea for her own show to Curt. It had become a bit of a controversy between her and Nik, because he thought she belonged in radio and nowhere else. Nik wasn’t just the station manager at FM-102, he was also her personal manager.

“Nik has done so much to help me,” Sierra once told her during a telephone conversation. “Remember how hard it was for me when I first got here? I didn’t have a job. I didn’t have anything. Nik was the only one who wanted to take a chance on me when I auditioned at the station. It’s because of him why I have this job. And he was the one who helped me to get a flat. Else I would probably still be stuck in Queens with crazy cousin Angie, or God knows where else. He’s always looking out for me, Manda. I owe him so much.”

Now Sierra said she hated to go against his lead, but her heart was in television. She thought Sistas Britain belonged on the air.

“Ah,” Manda said. She realized why Nik had snatched her sister away from Curt so fast.

Sierra said tonight Curt had finally come around. He told her he would talk to his people, and he seemed enthusiastic about it. Sierra was like a child who had just been handed a ticket to Disneyland. Manda tried to enjoy Sierra’s good news, but her mind kept going back to what she had seen. Sierra was so elated, she tipped the driver an extra five dollars when they got out of the taxi.

“Look at that,” she said to Manda as they climbed up the building’s front steps. “You’ve barely arrived, and you’re already bringing me luck.”

Manda paused and looked at Sierra, buzzing with joy as she shoved her key into the front lock. She herself was still shaking. Dar had followed her to New York. She dreaded what the next six weeks would bring, and she doubted it was luck.

Manda got up before Sierra the next morning. She made herself a cup of Earl Grey tea and drank it in her room before the computer. She spent the next two hours online, jumping from site to site, reading about Obeah. It was a little like voodoo, except that while Obeah people used oils and herbs and communed with spirits, voodoo practitioners had their deities and their sacrifices. Yet of the two, Obeah was supposed to be the more powerful. It had come over to the West Indies with slaves, and even slave masters had once feared the practice. Probably because Obeah men had a powerful influence over slaves, and they would give slaves spells to work on their masters. They were even known to lead uprisings – and so the practice had been

banned in Jamaica during the colonial period. Laws had been created to stop the practice, and even though nowadays it was still illegal in Jamaica, Obeah was still very popular, especially among rural folks.

But Obeah had gone high tech now, as Manda found out. She found sites where people claiming to be specialists sold their spells for as much as \$150.00. People were supposed to fill out a form and submit their credit card number, then a spell would be emailed to them. These spells were supposed to bring them success, protection, love, or help them get even with someone, and the like. One specialist warned that his spells were so powerful, customers had to be sure of what they wanted. If they asked for a certain person to fall in love with them, and then changed their mind, he could not be held liable for the outcome. Manda shook her head. How was she supposed to separate the real specialists from the opportunists?

Later that night, Manda sat at the kitchen table with Sierra, glad that they were alone. Sierra was on her third glass of white wine while Manda was still swilling around her first. She had been telling Manda about the big party she was planning for September to celebrate her thirty-fifth birthday. The thought of her birthday sent shivers of dread up and down Manda's spine.

Sierra had shaken out the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle onto the table. When completed, it would be a picture of her and Nik sitting arm-in-arm on a terrace in Puerto Rico, with palm trees rising up behind them. They had stayed at a bed-and-breakfast on the island of Culebra, where she said the water was the most beautiful blue-green color she had ever seen. Nik had been upset because this was his favorite rustic island getaway, but now they had built a hotel on one of the beaches and the island was getting more popular. Sierra had taken one of their vacation pictures and had it turned into a puzzle. So far, she had put together part of the border and most of the section with the two of them. Now Manda watched her searching through the pieces, looking for the one that would complete Nik's face. She didn't seem to want to go any further until she had found this piece.

Manda looked at the original photo and thought about the honeymoon trip she and Daniel were supposed to take to Greece. She felt an awful pang of loss.

"Sierra," Manda said. "Have you ever had something happen to you that was so dramatic, it changed the way you thought of things?"

"Where could that stupid piece be?" Sierra mumbled, turning all the pieces face up. There was a slight slur in her voice.

"Something that made you see things in a whole new light?"

"It has to be here somewhere."

"The night that Daniel ran, some very odd things happened."

"Manda, do you see it?"

"Blimey, will you listen to me?"

"Come on, love, you're in New York now. Put Daniel behind you and forget about all that...stuff." Sierra waved it away with a flick of her wrist.

"I can't forget about it. I have to talk to you about something, and it's important."

"Fine. Talk."

"Don't say it like that. Besides, I really need you to hear me."

Sierra sighed. She slumped back in her chair and studied the puzzle. "Go ahead, talk. I'm listening."

It seemed as good a time as any to tell her. "Sierra, I had this dream," she said, leaning towards Sierra. "A vision really, because I wasn't asleep at the time." She told Sierra about what she had seen in the car.

Sierra furrowed her brows and listened.

“It was so real,” Manda said. “Then when I told Aunt Beryl about it, she told me all about the curse that an Obeah woman had put on us years ago. The woman said I would never find love – that was why Daniel left me. And you’re... you’re-.”

Sierra pulled away Manda’s wine glass. “I think this wine might be a little too strong for you,” she said.

“I’ve only had half a glass,” Manda said, pulling it back. “Sierra, this is serious. I’m really frightened about us.”

“I think you just need some sleep.”

“I’m not tired.”

“But you’re obviously still suffering from jet-lag. After all, it’s already half past three, your time, and I know you’ve had a very long week.”

“No, Sierra, I’m not suffering from jet-lag.”

“Then maybe it’s post-traumatic stress. You lost the love of your life. Aunt Beryl put all sorts of frightening things in your head. And now you’ve come clear across the Atlantic to a city where you’ve never been before. It’s all catching up to you now, don’t you see?”

“Sierra, you’ve got to listen.” Manda said it with more force than she intended, and Sierra jumped. “I think this is real. There’s more. I saw the Obeah woman myself. Dar. Or her ghost, actually. First, in the bathroom before Daniel arrived at the flat, and then...” She paused for a moment. “And then at the barbecue party the other night. That was why I was upset.”

Sierra was staring at her as if she had just fallen through the ceiling and landed in a seat. Her mobile phone rang from its place on the table, and this time they both jumped. Sierra grabbed it up and put it to her ear.

“Hi Nik,” she said, with a little too much relief in her voice.

Manda sighed. She reached for the bottle of wine.

“Um...sorry, Manda. I have to talk to Nik.” Sierra got up to go to her room, only pausing long enough to snatch the wine bottle from Manda’s hand.

CHAPTER FOUR

How could you convince someone that their life was in danger, that an Obeah woman's curse was supposed to send them hurtling off a cliff in less than six weeks, when you didn't have a pinch of evidence to back up your claim? When their life was on the upswing, while yours was speeding steadily towards the ground? After one week of being in New York, Manda was at a loss. Sierra was the epitome of life and energy. She usually slept late in the mornings, then she would get up and go for a jog along the East River. When she came back, she would have a yogurt or some other insufficient breakfast, and then spend the next two hours bathing, putting on her makeup and dressing for work. And she had mastered the method of doing all of these activities while talking non-stop on the telephone. She would finally leave for the radio station by early afternoon. Then in the evenings, she would often call Manda to come and meet up with her at a restaurant, or a function where she was sometimes required to make an appearance. There, Manda would see her in full Sistah Britain regalia, fabulously sexy clothes, heels so high that Manda worried for her safety, and always the rhinestone-studded hat sitting like a white crown on top of her head.

Nik was usually by her side. He obsessed over Sierra and stuck closer than a bodyguard. He didn't like anyone else doing things for her, or taking away her attention from him for too long. Even Manda could barely talk to Sierra for five seconds, before Nik would interrupt them. And he loved to surprise Sierra with gifts – pretty pieces of jewelry and other trinkets he thought she might like. Manda could see why Sierra couldn't resist him. She was drawn to men who showered her with gifts and loads of attention.

Sierra had never been without a boyfriend since she was fourteen, and Manda had always envied her for it. There was the commercial airline pilot who offered Sierra the World. Literally. Followed by the bloke with bigorexia who lived in the gym and had an unnatural obsession with his body. He was constantly getting people to squeeze his arms to see how hard his muscles were. And the list of Sierra's men went on and on.

But unlike Manda, Sierra was the one who usually tired of her boyfriends after a short while. Manda remembered several broken-hearted men who had come and begged her to get Sierra to take them back. Maybe it was age, but she seemed to take Nik far more seriously than she had her previous boyfriends. She actually seemed to love him.

Now Sierra had both Nik and Manda keeping watch over her every move. As a nurse, Manda was used to working long hours, but this was more exhausting than anything she had ever done. Except for the one night when Nik insisted on bringing over his homemade pizza for Manda to try, they had gone to a restaurant for dinner nearly every single evening. Manda thought it was all a bit too expensive and extravagant, this new Manhattan lifestyle Sierra had slipped into with so much gusto. Her sister was a local celebrity, a true social butterfly and like all such members of that species, she flitted around the city, never alighting in any one place for very long. Sometimes as they sat in a restaurant finishing a meal, Sierra's mobile would ring and soon they would be leaning back on someone's sofa, sipping wine and admiring the person's collection of swords from around the world, or their albums from the 1930s.

In a week's time, Manda had learned a lot about Sierra and her life in New York. Sometimes more than she cared to learn. Sierra seemed to have so many friends, if you could call them that. A friend was someone who knew even the uglies about you, but still managed to like you anyway. But around her friends, Sierra was always Sistah Britain, light-hearted and witty, the glowing center of attention. She hid her uglies from them, and they seemed to do the same. It was all as surface as the light kisses they planted on each other's cheeks in greeting. Manda and Sherrie shared everything with each other, and Sherrie had become more like a replacement sister since Sierra moved away. There was hardly anything Sherrie didn't know about her. Yet it surprised Manda to know that Sierra's friends hardly knew anything about her family. Not even a woman named Carmen Rodriguez, who was supposed to be Sierra's closest friend.

On Saturday night, they were at a book launching party, when Manda and Carmen got into a long conversation about family. Carmen started complaining about her mother's knack for making *her* feel guilty. Manda started to say how her mother had gotten down on the floor, hoping to guilt her out of coming to New York.

That was when Carmen stopped her and said, "Wait. You and Sierra must have different mothers then. Sierra's mother is dead."

Dead. Manda confronted Sierra about it as soon as they got home. Instead of feeling guilty, Sierra treated the whole thing as if it hardly mattered.

"Manda," she said, as if talking to a clueless foreigner. "You can't go round telling everyone your personal business here. It just gives them ammunition to use against you."

"For goodness' sake, Sierra, so what if they know you have a mother?"

"You don't understand," was all that Sierra would say.

"I don't understand what?" Manda kept asking her. "What wouldn't I understand?"

But Sierra wouldn't say, and finally Manda felt so infuriated, she grabbed her bag and went out to burn off her anger in the streets. There were enough distractions in the East Village to make anyone forget their own troubles. This time her thoughts were the biggest distractions. She couldn't figure out what was wrong with Sierra. If their mother had done something that hurt Sierra so much that she felt compelled to mentally kill her off, Manda wanted to know what it was. How else could she help her? In her frustration, Manda bumped into a homeless man and spilled his cup of change. Some of the coins rolled into the sewer grate and disappeared. The man's face was red as a hot water bottle and he was obviously smashed, but she felt so bad that she gave him five dollars instead.

By the time she returned to the flat, Sierra had locked herself away in her room. Manda watched an old film on television and then went to bed.

Sierra stood near the edge of a cliff. Above her, the sky was full of clouds, except for a few jagged blue holes. Tears ran down her face. On her head was a white scarf with butterflies printed all over it. The edge of the scarf flapped in the breeze. Then Sierra stepped back and stumbled on something. She flailed her arms, trying to catch her balance. Then she fell backwards, a look of horror on her face. A shout cut through the air...

Manda lurched up in bed. She could still hear shouts bouncing around the room. It took her a moment to realize she was awake and somewhere in the flat Sierra really was shouting. Manda hurtled out of bed and raced out of the room, her heart pounding. She threw Sierra's bedroom door open and it banged loudly against the wall. In the early dawn light, she saw something spring sideways off Sierra's bed.

“What the hell?” the thing said. It was Nik’s voice. He stood by the bed panting. He grabbed up the blanket and started to drape it around his body.

Oops. Manda took a step back.

“Manda, what’s wrong? Are you okay?” Sierra sat up in bed naked, her arms crossed over her breasts.

“No, nothing...nothing’s wrong.” Manda backed away, her face burning with embarrassment. “Thought I heard something, that’s all. So sorry.” She pulled the door shut after her. She hurried back to her room, and even though she couldn’t go back to sleep, she stayed in bed until after she heard the front door slam and knew Nik had left.

Sierra thought the incident was hilarious. So funny in fact, that she mentioned it on the air during her Sistah Britain broadcast. This time it was Manda who screamed, but in fury. How could Sierra do that? How could she take something so sensitive, so embarrassing, and spill it out to the city for entertainment? Here she was, still shaken up by the second horrific vision she had had about her sister falling off a cliff. And here was Sierra having a laugh, taking the piss. Making Manda look like the lunatic sister who had arrived from London, clumsy and cross-eyed, with one eye looking at the soup pot, the other fixed on the clock.

Manda turned off the radio. These next few weeks were gearing up to be a battle, but her biggest obstacle would be Sierra herself. Well, this battle wasn’t something she could win alone. She needed help. She needed someone on her side. Someone who would take her seriously. Aunt Beryl said that Angie would know a lot about Obeah curses, since she had spent most of her life in Jamaica. There had even been talk that some of Angie’s cousins on her father’s side were Obeah people.

“I want to go pay cousin Angie a visit,” Manda told Sierra when she came home that night.

“What for?” Sierra picked a green apple from the fruit bowl and bit into it. A spray of juice shot into the air.

The scent of apple filled the air in the kitchen. It reminded Manda of the time she and Daniel had gone apple picking, and poor Daniel had been stung on the lip by a bee. She had taken a jar of ointment from the little medical kit in her bag and rubbed it on his bulbous lip. When he went up to do his sermon that Sunday, no one could understand a word he said.

Manda winced. Each memory of Daniel was like the twist of a knife in her gut. She shook her head and told herself not to think about him, as she always did. “I promised Aunt Beryl I would go visit Angie. Besides, she’s our cousin. It seems wrong to be here and not even reach out to her.”

“Well, whatever you do, don’t invite her here,” Sierra said.

“Why not? What have you got against her?”

“She’s too backwoods,” Sierra said. “The woman doesn’t even shave her legs.”

“Loads of people don’t shave their legs.”

“Even when they’ve got so much hair, you can see it through their stockings? She’s been in New York for five years, and you’d think she just arrived yesterday.”

“There’s nothing wrong with holding on to your roots,” Manda said.

“Yes, but shave them off your legs, for goodness’ sake.” Sierra bit another chunk out of the apple, exposing the tiny black seeds of its heart.

“But that’s no reason to hate Angie,” Manda said.

“I don’t hate her,” Sierra said. “I just don’t want to be around her. So if you want to see her, you’re just going to have to find your way out to Queens alone.”

“Sierra, she did let you live with her when you first got here, remember? When people put their own lives on hold to help you, you should be a little more grateful.”

“What are you getting all knarky about?” Sierra said. “Anyway, we don’t have time for this. Nik will be here any minute.” She tossed her apple and the subject of Angie in the rubbish bin. “We’re going to a vegetarian restaurant for dinner, so I hope you won’t have a problem with that.”

“I’d rather stay home tonight. I’d be happy to cook,” Manda said.

“No, that wouldn’t work,” Sierra said thoughtfully.

“Why not?”

“Well, for one thing, there’s no food here. And I’ve been really eager to try out this restaurant. It’s supposed to be...amazing.”

“Why? You’re not even a vegan.”

“I eat all kinds of food, love. Anyway, let’s go find something for you to wear, shall we?”

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” Manda looked down at the hand-made blouse she had thrown over a pair of loose-fit blue jeans.

“The shirt is great, but those jeans...” Sierra said. “I just thought you might want to look like you’ve got hips for once.”

She talked Manda into swapping her jeans for a pink silk skirt from Bergdorf Goodman. Then she insisted that Manda sit down while she applied foundation to her face, fattened her lashes with mascara, and then teased, tormented and finally wrestled her hair on top of her head with a gold barrette that was wrapped around it so tight, it made Manda’s eyes bulge. And then right before they left the bathroom, Sierra maced her with a spray of perfume that made Manda sneeze all the way to the restaurant. Manda felt it was all a bit much, but Sierra said the restaurant was quite upscale.

Ophelia’s Garden was supposed to be the most popular vegetarian restaurant in the East Village. On the walls were pictures of landscapes made entirely of vegetables. Sweet potato mountains rose up behind broccoli forests and some sort of river made of green juice coursed through the sceneries. The sun was a slice of yellow squash dangling in the sky. When their table was ready, Nik and Sierra sat down facing each other and Manda sat beside Sierra. They studied the drinks menus the waiter had brought them. Manda and Sierra ordered carrot juice, while Nik ordered tomato juice. Nothing on the food menu looked appetizing to Manda. She was a carnivore in an herbivore’s world. She chose a dish of tofu and seaweed over brown rice, with tahini sauce on the side, and Nik and Sierra chose mushroom burgers for themselves. They waited for their dinners in silence. Sierra kept glancing alternately between the door and her watch, and Manda briefly wondered if she was expecting someone. Nik drummed his fingers on the tablecloth. He seemed agitated about something.

“Oh, hello,” Sierra said to someone who had just appeared by the table.

Manda looked up, expecting to see the waiter again. But instead she saw a tall, candle-stick of a man standing by their table. He was dressed in blue jeans, a white shirt and a tie speckled with yellow flowers.

“Noah, I’m glad you could make it,” Sierra said, standing up and giving him a hug. “Come on, then. Have a seat.”

The man sat down and lowered a big black briefcase onto the floor beside his chair. Nik smirked at him and the man nodded back and smiled. They seemed to have a history, and an unpleasant one at that. Manda studied the new arrival. He looked familiar and she wondered where she might have seen him before. He had a tanned complexion and almond-shaped eyes

that gave his face a slightly Asian look, but his black hair had just a hint of Mother Africa in its curls. Ah, she remembered where she had seen him. It was a few days earlier, when she was going up to Sierra's flat. He was hurrying down the stairs, carrying that same briefcase. He had given her a quick hello as they passed each other, but when she glanced back, she had caught him doing the same.

But what is he doing here now? She thought, as the waiter came by and took his order.

"Manda, you're sitting across from one of the most inspirational, the most amazing writers in this entire country," Sierra said, as if hearing her thoughts. "Every other person I know has a copy of his new book, Faith Your Fears, isn't that a great name, Manda? Not only is he fantastic looking, but he's also a bundle of talent. He's even been on Oprah."

"Yippee," Nik said, clapping his hands together daintily. Sierra glared at him.

"Manda, it's a pleasure to meet you," Noah said, smiling at her.

It took Manda a moment to get it. She shot Sierra a look, but Sierra chose to ignore it. So that was why she had made such a fuss about Manda's clothes.

"How did your reading go?" Sierra asked, turning to Noah.

"Believe it or not, I had a heckler," he said.

"You're joking. Who would heckle you?"

"A priest. Can you believe it?"

"Maybe it was your tie," Nik said.

"Nik, behave yourself." Sierra shot him a look. She reached over and held up Noah's tie. "I think it's lovely. Don't you, Manda?"

Manda gave her a smile that said, I know what you're up to. She had this all planned, the sneaky wretch. Pretending they were going out for a quiet dinner, when all along Sierra had just wanted to set her up with some bloke.

"Noah, what do you think of Manda's blouse? Would you believe she made it herself?"

"You did? It's beautiful," he said, smiling at Manda. "You're very talented. Are you a designer?"

"No, nothing like that," Manda said. "Just a nurse, really." She sipped at her carrot juice.

"Noah is part Jamaican," Sierra said, as if she was announcing the breeding of a studhorse she had for sale.

All of Manda's past boyfriends had been Jamaican, and she knew Sierra was trying to use this as her selling point.

"Yes, my mother is part Jamaican and part Native Indian, and my father's a mixture of White and Japanese."

"Damn, how do you keep track?" Nik asked.

Noah laughed.

"Manda is a big reader," Sierra said. "She was once nearly arrested for walking out of a store with a book. She was so engrossed in it, she forgot to pay."

"Sierra," Manda said, horrified. "I'm sure he doesn't need to know that."

"Why don't you tell her about your books," Sierra said to Noah.

"I write inspirational books," Noah said, bending down to open his briefcase. He took out a book and put it on the table.

Manda picked it up and studied the cover. Faith Your Fears.

"I write the kind of books that's supposed to motivate people to stop whining and start helping themselves."

“Do self-help books really work?” Manda asked. “It’s hard to believe a person could find salvation in a few words.”

“I think there’s a lot of power in words,” Sierra said. “At the station, I get countless letters from people who want to let me know how much my advice has helped them.”

“I agree.” Noah said. “There is a lot of power in words.”

“No, I’m with Manda on this one,” Nik jumped in. “People can’t change. Self-help books just feed them a load of crap and make them think they can. No offense, Noah.”

“Well, that’s not what I meant, but-” Manda started to say.

Noah waved away the offense. “You’re right,” he said. “Many people aren’t ready to change. But that’s why in my book, I try to help people identify the source of their fears, because that’s always at the heart of what’s holding them back. And then I give them a strategy for using faith to overcome those fears. I give people faith-lifts.”

“And it works,” Sierra said. “I used to be afraid of heights, but after reading Noah’s book, I’ve overcome that fear.”

Manda reared back and looked at Sierra. “No, I don’t remember that,” she said. What else didn’t she know about this new copper-haired Sierra?

The meals arrived, and everyone paused to dig into their dishes. Then Sierra brought up Noah’s book again, and for most of the dinner the discussion was all about the book and Noah’s theories on fear. Nik interrupted and started to talk about a cabin he had bought upstate that was undergoing renovations, but Sierra switched the topic back to Noah. Nik finally gave up and entertained himself by pouncing all over Noah’s theories, while Sierra defended them. Fear was Noah’s food. According to him, he had spent years researching everything there was to know about fear, its myriad sources, its religious, psychological and scientific significance, and its potent, often deadly effects on the human body. Like a wild dog encountered in the wilderness, Noah could sniff out a person’s fear.

At first Manda just listened, trying to learn a thing or two about Noah. She found herself drawn to his eyes. She thought about Daniel, with his big, watery-looking eyes that would tear up even when he was happy. Weeper’s eyes, she called them. Like Aidan Quinn’s. Daniel felt everything deeply, and his depth of compassion made him very popular with his congregation. The women, in particular, just worshipped him. But while Daniel could feel people, Noah seemed to be able to see them with a clarity that reached beyond the obvious. His eyes held the kind of objective wisdom Manda had only seen in certain old men. That was why, whenever Noah tried to meet her eyes - which he did quite often - she couldn’t help looking away.

But then Noah started to name some of the more bizarre fears that people had.

“You have heliophobia,” he said. “That’s the fear of sunlight. And there are women with androphobia, that’s a fear of men. And cibophobics are afraid of food, can you believe that? They can’t even go into a restaurant. And then you have phasmophobics, who see ghosts everywhere.”

Manda looked up from her dish. “Phasmophobics?” *Was he talking about her? Had Sierra said something to him?*

“Yes, phasmophobics,” Noah repeated.

Manda cleared her throat. “Is it possible they really might be seeing ghosts? Or do you think it’s just their fear?”

“It’s fear, of course,” Noah said. “Fear does funny things to the mind.”

“But...” Manda put down her fork. “What if the person didn’t fear ghosts until she...he started seeing one?”

Noah gave her a curious look. "Then that person would have to ask herself what changed in her life. What could be psychologically triggering these sightings?"

"Like loss," Sierra piped in.

Manda shot her a warning look.

"I don't know," Nik added. "I think some people really do see ghosts. Didn't you see that movie, *Sixth Sense*? That kid saw dead people. I believe there really are people like that. And hey, after my great-grandfather went down on the Titanic, my grandfather claimed he saw him many times."

"Your great-grandfather went down on the Titanic?" Noah asked, looking amazed.

"Yes-."

"Noah, please don't get him started," Sierra said, clapping a hand over Nik's mouth. "I can't listen to this story any more."

Since arriving in New York, she had heard the Titanic story several times herself. Sierra was right. Nik loved to tell it to anyone who would listen.

The waiter came by and took orders for tea and coffee. When he had returned to the table with their orders, Manda turned to Noah.

"Are you afraid of anything?" she asked, pouring milk into her tea.

"No, I'm not," Noah said. "I've spent so much time analyzing fear that I know how to squash it as soon as it appears."

"Really?" Manda had never met anyone like him, so absolutely self-assured.

Noah shook his head. "As I say in my book, fear is just an illusion. It's subjective. Do you know there are even people in this world who are afraid of tin foil?"

"Are you serious?" Sierra laughed and turned to Nik. "Can you believe that, hon?"

"It takes all kinds," Nik said. He was busy tearing the rest of his bread to shreds.

"What about bigger things, like the future?" Manda asked, thinking about her vision. Now that she had seen the same thing twice, she was more afraid than ever. "What about the unknown, or things beyond your control?"

Noah gazed at her. "Mystery doesn't scare me," he said. "Faith and love are the biggest armor you can hold up against fear. I have faith that the universe is built on a foundation of pure love. And everything I encounter will somehow add to my ultimate good, even if I can't immediately see it."

"What about things that could possibly kill you, or the people you love?" Manda asked. She could hear the tension in her own voice.

"Being afraid of death doesn't stop it from coming, and we only fear it because we don't understand it. Ignorance is the base of all our fears."

"Manda," Sierra said, making her jump. "Why are stirring your tea with your fork?"

"What? Oh." Manda pulled the fork out of her cup and laid it beside her plate. There were now grains of rice spinning around in her tea.

Nik snickered. "Would you like some grated parmesian with that?" he asked.

"Nik." Sierra gave him a warning look.

Noah called over the waiter and ordered fresh tea for Manda. It would strike her only minutes later that something about Noah frightened her. She didn't know what exactly. It was just a tiny ball of feeling that started in the pit of her stomach, and then rose up to her chest as she finished up the last of her tofu and seaweed. At first she had mistaken it for gas, but belching softly into her napkin didn't get rid of it. She tried belching again, but gave herself the hiccups. It was only when Noah picked up her glass of carrot juice and held it out for her, that she had

looked into his gray eyes and realized what that ball of feeling was. It was fear, and he was, for some unfathomable reason, the source of it. She had never in her life felt intimidated by any man. Except possibly Mr. Herzog, her old biology teacher who used to get more joy out of dissecting his students and exposing their insides to the class than he did those boring dead frogs.

Noah held the glass closer to her. Manda took it from him, but her hand was shaking so much that juice splashed out of the glass and onto his book.

"I'm sorry," she said, wiping at the cover with a napkin. "I've ruined your book."

"That's okay, it's just an extra copy," Noah said, smiling kindly. "Anyway guys, I've got to run. I have a whole bunch of notes to go through."

"I'm glad you could make it," Sierra said, reaching out and taking his hand.

"Thanks for the invite," Noah answered. "Hey, I'm doing a reading at the Barnes and Noble at Union Square on Friday. Why don't you guys stop by? Manda, will you be around?"

"Well, I'm sort of busy. I-."

Sierra kicked her under the table. "We'll be there," she said.

"Great." Noah gathered up his briefcase and stood up. "Manda." He reached for her hand. She put her hand in his and he held it firmly.

"It was great meeting you," Noah said. He winked at her as he left.

Manda felt herself flush. She turned to see Sierra smiling a little too hard at her. She cleared her throat and studied the picture on the wall above them. She had a feeling that Noah Kato, with all his fear theories and gray-eyed wisdom, wasn't going to go away so easily. But whether he would be a help or a hindrance to her...a blessing or a curse...well, that remained to be seen, didn't it?

Manda sat on her bed the next morning, sorting through a box marked "Goodwill" that she had found in Sierra's front closet. It was full of Sierra's old clothes, and Manda was trying to see which ones could be made into other outfits. She was also thinking about the things Noah had said at the table. Sierra claimed she hadn't mentioned anything to Noah about the ghost. Manda wondered if he had somehow seen it in her eyes. He seemed capable of it. But if she had admitted it, he would have thought she was phasmophobic. But if it was simply fear that was causing her to see Dar, then why had the old woman first appeared before Daniel arrived at the flat? Why not after, when he had already done the damage?

The Daniel doll sat by her pillow, watching her with its two big eyes. After coming home from the restaurant, she had pulled it out and hugged it to herself. At nights, she had started sleeping with the doll clutched against her body, its cool plastic face smothered in the space between her breasts. Then in the mornings, she would hide the doll back in a drawer, where Sierra wasn't likely to come across it and announce her finding to her radio audience, who must have already thought Manda was mad. Did Noah think she was mad? Manda dismissed the thought. Why did she care anyway? He obviously didn't know everything. Had he even heard of Obeah? Speaking of which, she remembered she had planned to give Angie a shout. Manda dropped the clothes back in the box. She went into the living room and rang up Angie.

"Hello, this is your cousin, Manda," she said when Angie came on the phone."

"Yes, cuz. Beryl told me I should be hearing from you," Angie said.

Angie hadn't grown up with Aunt Beryl. That, and the fact that Aunt Beryl was only thirteen years older than her daughter, gave Angie the privilege of being able to refer to her mother by her first name. After answering a series of *how's this one, how's that one, and who's my madda fornicating with now*, Manda cut off Angie's questions and got to the point.

"I'd like to come and see you," she said.

“Uh-huh. It’s about time,” Angie said. “Come Sunday. I’ll be cooking up a big pot of ackee and saltfish. You can bring Sierra if you want. I haven’t seen her in a long, long time. The gal never even give me her number.”

“I think she already has plans for Sunday,” Manda said.

“Uh-huh,” Angie said again. “She no’ want to come. That’s alright, man. More ackee for us.”

That evening, Manda walked over to Barnes and Noble in Union Square. She wanted to see what books she could find on Obeah, and possibly pass by Noah’s reading for a bit. Sierra had nagged her into going, and Manda finally gave in and decided to kill two birds with one stone. The evening was warm and Union Square buzzed with life and color. At the Farmer’s Market, vendors were busy taking down their tents and loading crates of fruits and vegetables into trucks. College kids milled around the square in hordes, and Manda had to jump out of the way of a boy who came flying over the stone steps in the middle of a skateboard stunt. It was bad enough that she still felt somewhat clumsy whenever she walked the streets alone, like an octopus on dry land. More than once she had almost gotten herself run down by a car, because she had looked the wrong way before crossing the street. She supposed this disoriented feeling would pass once she got used to the chaos and frenetic pace of the city. It was worse than London.

Just as she entered the store, she saw the billboard fixed onto a stand that was halfway between the two sets of double doors leading into the store. Manda stopped in her tracks so suddenly, a girl bumped into her from behind and dropped the plastic bag of tomatoes she was carrying. Manda mumbled an apology and helped the girl gather up her tomatoes. Some of them were badly bruised and by the time they were finished, Manda had a big splotch of red, slimy tomato juice on her white blouse.

“Bullocks,” she whispered to herself. She took a tissue from her bag and tried to wipe it off, but it only made the stain spread. She turned back to the billboard. On it was a black and white photograph of Noah, and under the picture was the caption,

“Come Faith Your Fears with Noah Kato.”

Even in the poster, Noah’s eyes seemed deliberately fixed on hers. For some inexplicable reason, Manda felt herself growing nervous. For a second she thought about turning around and leaving, but she stayed her ground. What was she so afraid of? Why should she leave? Why should she let Noah Kato intimidate her? She would just go in, pass by the reading for a moment, and then find books on the occult, or religion or whatever Obeah was considered, and head straight for the registers.

As she rode up the escalator leading to the third floor, she could hear Noah’s voice coming from somewhere above her. She gasped when she saw the crowd of people filling up the wide rows of gray metal chairs spread over that entire section of the bookstore. Other people stood in the crowd behind the seats. Noah stood before a podium set on a stage at the front of the large room. Manda found a spot by a white pillar, behind a guy with a shaved head. If she leaned a little to the right, she could see without being seen.

Noah was reading from his book, and the crowd silently listened. He had them hypnotized. Mesmerized. Now as she listened, she could understand why they came. Manda thought about those times in the past nine months when she had sat in the congregation, listening to Daniel preaching from the pulpit. He had seemed almost shy up there, like a reluctant servant sent to deliver a message. Noah, on the other hand, spoke with such conviction, it was hard not to get drawn into his aura. She wanted to walk away, but before she knew it, she had spent nearly a half hour standing there in the crowd.

Noah stopped and took a sip from a bottle of water that rested on the podium near the microphone. He continued with his reading. When he had finished and closed his book, a woman sitting by the stage stood up and invited the audience to ask questions. All around the audience, hands sprouted up like cornstalks. Noah fielded a bunch of questions, and Manda listened carefully to his answers.

The bald man who had been standing before Manda, turned and squeezed his way through the crowd. Now there was no one blocking Manda from Noah's view. Manda was just about to duck away when he looked in her direction

"You, the lady in the white blouse with the red design. You had a question," he said.

Manda glanced around to see the lady he was talking to.

"Yes, you Miss. In the white blouse," Noah said. He seemed to be smiling at her.

She looked around again, before realizing other people were gazing at her expectantly. She wiped at the red tomato stain on her blouse.

"Me? No, I didn't."

"Yes, what's your question?"

"My question?"

"Yes."

"But, I..." Manda swallowed.

"Go ahead, don't be shy," Noah said.

What was he doing? He knew she hadn't raised her hand. She considered bolting, but the passage behind her was clogged with more people who had come to join the crowd.

"Uh yes, I wanted to know about... what you said about... parents who pass down their fears to their children like genetic diseases. Are you saying...are you saying what we fear may be genetic? If so, then what can we really do about them? If they're already in our genes, that is?" She was surprised to realize how closely she had been listening after all.

"Very good question," Noah said. "Yes, I do believe some fears may actually be genetic. Just like genius can be inherited, or an anxious personality can be passed down from a parent to a child. Or even a propensity to excel in certain areas..."

Manda could barely follow his answer. Why had he put her on the spot? When he was done, the woman stood up again to announce that the question and answer period was over, and people could now line up for their signed copies of Noah's book. Manda turned and pushed her way through the crowd. She headed over to the shelves where they kept the books on spirituality and religion. She wanted to take a quick look to see if there were any books on Obeah, and then get out of there before Noah was finished. She found a book on Obeah and stood by the shelf skimming through it. The first sentence she read was,

If the captains of the Titanic had taken Obeah seriously, the ship would never have sunk.

She laughed to herself. She had to buy this book. Nik would have loved to hear this.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to see Noah standing behind her.

"I just wanted to thank you for coming," he said. "Listen, can I buy you a cup of coffee when I'm done?"

"Thanks, but I'm on my way out." Manda quickly lowered the book to her side.

"Are you annoyed with me?" he asked.

"Well, actually I don't like being put on the spot like that."

"I'm sorry," he said. "When I looked your way, you just seemed like you had a million questions to ask me."

Manda smiled. He was right. She did.

He glanced at the book in her hand and gave her a puzzled look. "Are you interested in spiritualism?"

"No, no, I'm just browsing," Manda said, putting the book back on the shelf.

"Well, as I said, I'm sorry about what I did."

"Mr. Kato, can you sign our books?" Two college-aged girls came down the aisle towards them.

"Sure. Just a minute," Noah said. He turned back to Manda. "Can I take you to dinner sometime? I'd like to finish up our conversation from the other night. And get to know you better, of course."

Manda looked away. The girls stood waiting for Noah, prodding each other and giggling. It was clear that they weren't going to go away.

"Will you think about it?" Noah said.

"You'd better get back to your fans," Manda said.

Noah grinned. He had a beautiful smile. "I really did like your question," he said. He touched her elbow before walking back to his waiting audience.

As she headed for the escalators, Noah looked over and waved to her. She waved back and quickly made her way down to the first floor. She was already at the other side of the Union Square before she remembered the book she had wanted to buy. She decided to let it wait for another time, when Noah wasn't around..

CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning when Manda came into the living room, Sierra was curled up on the couch writing in a notebook. Manda had gotten up early as usual, and had spent the last two hours online, looking up accounts of paranormal sightings. She must have read at least fifty of them. Her eyes were tired from staring at the screen for so long.

From the windowsill behind Sierra, two male dolls eyed Manda blankly as she walked across the carpet. She had seen that same blank stare in the eyes of many real boys a long time ago when Sierra had tried to introduce them to her. Sod all of them. Sunshine spilled through the living room curtains and washed Sierra and the couch in a river of light. She was dressed in a luxurious blue silk dressing gown with matching slippers, and her hair was pinned up like an auburn crown on top of her head. Her skin glowed from an early morning cleansing and a good dollop of expensive face cream. She looked portrait-ready. Even at home, she wouldn't be caught dead looking anything but fabulous. She had always been that way, and probably at birth her swaddling clothes had to be silk or cashmere. Manda, meanwhile, was still wearing the black headscarf she had tied around her hair before going to bed, and an old yellow dress she had rescued from Sierra's Goodwill box. That was one of the many differences between her and Sierra. The things that Sierra could easily discard as old and unworthy, were the same things that Manda yearned to give new life to. But if there had been a fire right then, there was no doubt who the firemen would scoop up and rescue first.

"Morning, Miss Kizzie," Sierra said, when she looked up and saw Manda. She flipped over a *Brides* magazine that had been lying on the couch beside her.

"Sierra, you don't have to hide it. I already saw the cover," Manda said. Ever since they were young girls Sierra had been buying bridal magazines. Now she was acting as if Manda might break if she even saw a cover.

"I just thought...well, never mind. Did you enjoy Noah's reading yesterday?" Sierra smiled.

"Oh, it was alright." She thought about the way he had looked, standing on the podium before a roomful of people, hypnotizing them with his words. "He's got a lot of fans, doesn't he?"

"Did he take you to dinner afterwards? Or drinks?" Sierra cocked one eye up at her.

"No, Sierra, it wasn't a date. I told you I'm not ready for that sort of thing. It's only been a few weeks since Daniel...since he..."

"Okay, have it your way," Sierra said. "Oi, what do you think of a mini-ball?"

"A mini ball?" Manda dropped down on the couch beside her. What was she on about now? Sometimes Sierra switched subjects so fast, it was impossible to keep up. "What do you mean? Like a golf ball or tennis ball?"

Sierra poked her in the arm with the pen. "I'm talking about my birthday party. I was thinking of having a mini-ball. Nik's living room is massive. If we push back all the furniture, it could serve as a ballroom. Everyone could dress up in gowns, gloves and tuxs, and we could have a champagne fountain and a lavish banquet spread. What do you think?" Her hands flashed around excitedly as she spoke.

"I think it's a bit much, actually," Manda said.

"Listen, Manda. You only turn thirty-five once. That's only five years to forty, and another step closer to the grave. You might as well celebrate every step, that's what I say."

Manda jumped and looked around as something dark slid by behind her.

"What's the matter, love? Are you cold? It's hot as blazes in here."

"Nothing." It had just been the shadow of a cloud passing through the living room. She had read too many of those ghost stories. They had left her jumping at shadows. "Sierra, I can't think about your party right now."

"Do you want to help me plan this thing, or what?"

"I do, but...I think it's a bit much. It's not a wedding, for goodness' sake."

At that, Sierra frowned. "Manda, with your attitude, you'd think I was planning a funeral."

Manda shuddered. "That's what I'm afraid of," she mumbled.

"What was that? I didn't catch it," Sierra said.

"Sierra." Manda cleared her throat. "Angie invited me to her house on Sunday for lunch. And she's hoping you'll come along. She really wants to see you, and-."

"Oh, no," Sierra said, dropping her notebook on the coffee table and springing up.

"But-."

"No, Manda, if you want to go see her, then fine, but I'm not going to her house."

"Sierra, don't you think it's time you make peace with her? She's your family, isn't she?"

"Family? Manda, this is the same woman who accused me of trying to seduce her husband. And when you meet Tee, you'll understand how ridiculous that was."

"She did? You're joking."

Sierra shook her head.

So there was something behind all that animosity Sierra held for Angie after all. "Why did she think that?"

"I really don't know." Sierra threw up her hands. "Maybe he grinned a little too broadly whenever I was around. But that's not my fault. And then one night I walked into the bathroom when I thought it was empty, and there he was - standing by the bathtub, naked. Angie thought I did it on purpose. And you should see her husband too, with his dried-up little winkie. What a laugh," Sierra said. "But Manda, you know me. Would I do something like that?"

"No, you wouldn't." She wouldn't have to. Sierra had a way of seducing men even when she wasn't trying. Nik seemed to know it too, judging by the way he stuck so close to her whenever they went out. And there was that very awful time in secondary school when one of Manda's boyfriends had fallen head over heels for Sierra.

"That's why I had to move out so fast," Sierra said. "I couldn't take it anymore."

Manda took a deep breath. "Well, be that as it may, that was a while ago, and Angie is obviously sorry and wants to put it behind her, and I think this lunch will be the perfect opportunity to do so. She's the only family you have in New York."

"Nik is my family now," Sierra said, pointing her chin over to the corner of the couch, where his doll sat. "And anyway, I couldn't go with you, even if I wanted to. He's taking me to Connecticut tonight to meet his parents, and we won't be back until Sunday afternoon."

"But..." Manda jumped to her feet. "But you can't go!" Since arriving in New York, she had barely let Sierra out of her sight, except to go to the radio station. Now the thought of Sierra leaving the city and going off without her...a lot could happen between Saturday night and Sunday afternoon.

"Manda, I've wanted to meet them for a long time now, and this is the perfect time."

“Why? Can’t you go next week? I think this is more important, Sierra.” She paced the floor. “Angie will be hurt if you don’t come.”

“I doubt that very much.”

“Then let me come with you,” she said, wheeling around to face Sierra.

“Manda, really. You don’t take your sister to meet your boyfriend’s parents for the first time. It’s...tacky.”

Manda rubbed her forehead. She knew pleading with Sierra would be hopeless. “Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“Manda, you’ve got to stop worrying about me,” Sierra said. “You’ve been through such a rough time as it is. You have to take care of yourself. Have some fun. Listen, there’s a salsa dancing event at Gonzalez y Gonzalez at eight tomorrow night. Why don’t we go?”

“I really don’t feel like going dancing,” Manda said.

“But you love to dance. Come on, it’ll be a blast. I’ll ring up a couple of my mates, maybe Jackie and Carmen, and we’ll make it a girl’s night out. I’m not taking no for an answer, so you might as well pick out something to wear tomorrow.”

With that, Sierra snatched up her notebook and went into her bedroom to get ready for work, leaving Manda alone in the living room. It was clear that Sierra was going to Connecticut, and there was nothing Manda could say or do to stop her. She couldn’t keep an eye on her twenty-four hours a day, for the next month, could she? It wasn’t possible.

Manda picked up the *Brides* magazine and put it on the coffee table. Under any other circumstances, she would have been happy to come to New York and help Sierra plan a special event. But this was no pleasure trip. Something terrible was going to happen to her sister, and Manda didn’t know exactly when or where it would happen. That was what made it so terrible. Now all she could do was pray for her safe return, and hope Angie knew as much about Obeah as Aunt Beryl thought she did.

That evening, Sierra called from Nik’s car to say that they were on their way to Connecticut. Manda made her promise to ring her back when they got there, and the next morning. She also made Sierra leave the phone number for Nik’s parents, just in case she needed it. She barely slept that night, thinking about Sierra. She kept imagining all sorts of horrible scenarios, and all of them ending with Sierra going over a cliff.

She got up late the next day, exhausted from a lack of sleep. She quickly dressed and hurried out of the flat. As she reached the second floor, she met Noah coming up the stairs towards his flat. She greeted him and hurried past.

“Wait a sec,” Noah said, coming down the steps towards Manda. “I’m glad I ran into you. I wanted to give you something.”

“Can it wait till later? I’m heading for the train.” She had also planned to stop at a local flower shop and pick up a plant for Angie. Aunt Beryl had said that Angie loved plants.

“Where are you going? Maybe I can give you a lift.”

He was dressed in nice black trousers and a light blue shirt. She wondered where he was coming from so early on a Sunday, with his large briefcase. “Thanks, but I couldn’t ask you to do that,” she said. “It’s quite far, actually.”

“Okay, maybe next time. But I think you could use what I have to give you. I’ll just be a sec. I promise.” Noah turned and hurried back up the steps.

Manda stood waiting for him on the landing, wondering what he could have to give her. She had told Angie she would be there by one o’clock, and she hated to be late for things. She heard Noah’s footsteps hurrying back down the steps towards her. When he reached her, he pulled a

book out of a Barnes and Noble bag and held it out. Manda glanced at the cover, expecting it to be a copy of his own book, but it wasn't. It was the same book she had been looking at two days earlier, when Noah had surprised her in the bookstore's aisle. She had tried not to make him see it.

"Noah, you shouldn't have," she said.

"No worries," he said. "You seemed to be into it, but since I held you up and you didn't get a chance to buy it, I thought I would get it for you."

"Well, you didn't have to. Really."

"I know." He put the book in Manda's hand and winked at her. "You can read it on the train."

"Thanks, I will." Manda smiled and looked away. She hurried out of the building. When she emerged into the sunshine, she glanced again at the book's cover and read the title to herself. Obeah: Mystery and Magic. She pushed it down into her bag and headed off to the train station.

Angie lived beyond the last train stop on the E line in Queens, followed by a long, twisting bus ride through the streets of Queens Village, and then an endless walk down shaded sidewalks past old brick houses, some looking like they had seen better days. Flag decals for Jamaica and other Caribbean islands were proudly displayed on the windshields of cars that sat outside some of the houses. Myrna would have approved of this neighborhood, but Manda wondered how Sierra had managed to last there for even six months. There were no cute little cafés on the corners, or trendy new bars on the main street. And how on earth had she managed the long commute to the city, and the isolation of living so far into the suburbs? And why did West Indians like to pick neighborhoods in the most out of the way places they could find? By the time she reached Angie's door, Manda was exhausted from the trip. She was carrying Angie's plant, and it had grown heavier by the block.

Angie lived in a red brick house with a neatly trimmed lawn spread out before it, and gray stone steps leading up to the front door. Heavy-looking red velvet curtains hung in the living room windows.

"Hello, Cuz," Angie said, laughing, when she opened the door and saw Manda. "You look like you just walk all the way from hell's bottom."

Manda panted in response. "It feels like I did." She handed Angie the plant and a little package that Aunt Beryl had sent for her, and Angie thanked and hugged her profusely. She smelled like soup. Manda remembered the summer she and Sierra were sent to Jamaica to spend two weeks with their grandparents. Mama Dove had smelled just the same way when Manda had crawled up to sit on her big, flower-print lap. And she remembered the first time she had seen Angie, a skeletal thirteen-year-old girl, legs spotted with mosquito bites, standing over a large metal basin in the yard washing her knickers.

Now Angie spun Manda around and pinched up her flesh.

"Eh-eh. Look at that. Not one ounce of fat," she said. "You people don't eat, but don't worry, I got a big lunch ready for you."

"Great. I'm famished," Manda said. She couldn't help staring at Angie. It was like standing before a younger, slightly taller version of Aunt Beryl. Angie had grown into the spitting image of her mother, from her little round dumpling figure to the gold front tooth that sparkled when she laughed. An ill-fitting black pageboy wig sat on top of her head, with the red tag showing in the back that said "Made in Korea."

Angie led Manda through her small house, showing her the carpeted rooms, including the one where Sierra had slept. She showed off her many plants, and put the one Manda had given

her on a stand by the door. The only room that didn't have plants was Angie's bedroom. Angie was afraid they would suck up all the oxygen at night and suffocate her and her husband in their sleep.

As they came back downstairs and entered the living room, Manda reached out and tucked the tag under the wig.

"Oh, thank you darling," Angie said. "Boy, I would kill for even half of that weed growing on that head of yours. You lucky." She tugged Manda's hair. She even sounded a lot like her mother, though she hadn't been raised with her. It was uncanny, positively amazing.

The living room was decorated with a burgundy replica of a Victorian sofa and love seat, both covered in plastic. Gospel music played from a stereo that sat on a corner bookshelf. On the wall was a large, beautiful print of an emerald green paradise with a crystal blue river winding through it, and little white-robed people petting lions and feeding tigers from their palms. A dove flew above it all against a clear blue sky. As Manda followed Angie across the living room towards the sofa, she glanced at the picture again. The green paradise was gone, and in its place was a red, fiery landscape. Little naked humans ran here and there, trying to escape from the sharp spears of grinning, horned devils with long tails. Manda gasped. She had never seen a holograph like that one. It was in turn both beautiful and horrible, depending on where you stood.

"So, how's life treating you, cuz?" Angie said. "Haven't laid eyes on you since you were just a little thing." She pinched Manda on the leg. Yes, this penchant she had for pinching was definitely genetic.

Manda told her about her life in England, and Angie responded with tales about her own life in New York and what things had been like for her in Jamaica. Manda thought she was warm and funny, in spite of what happened between her and Sierra.

Angie was Aunt Beryl's oldest daughter. Because Aunt Beryl had been only thirteen when she got pregnant, some people said "duppy breed her." The duppy turned out not to be the vaporous apparition people expected, but a seventeen year old cousin of theirs who used to come by the house to feed the hogs. When Angie was born, Mama Dove and Papa Gordon decided to raise her themselves. Aunt Beryl was sent away to England to stop her from breeding up the place, as Mama Dove had described it. But swapping salt fish for fish and chips didn't curb Aunt Beryl's breeding, and within seven years' time she had had a brood of five additional children, for four additional men. But Angie had done fine for herself. She had met her husband, Tee, while visiting New York five years earlier. Tee was a transplanted Jamaican who had moved to New York some years back and opened a small West Indian restaurant in Queens. Now he and Angie ran the restaurant together and she spent her days cooking up all sorts of dishes.

"You must come to the restaurant some time," Angie said now. "We make pure Caribbean food. None of that American rubbish."

"I'd love that," Manda said.

"But you better come soon," she said. "Cause we're moving to Miami, come September."

"You are? How come?"

A creak sounded nearby. Manda turned to see an old man coming through an archway at the other end of the living room. He had a short salt and pepper afro, tired eyes, and a slightly stooped walk.

"We can't take these New York winters anymore, isn't that true, Tee?" Angie said.

Tee nodded. "Man wasn't meant to live in a refrigerator," he said. He came over and Angie introduced him to Manda. He eased himself down on the loveseat with a groan.

Manda sneezed as a strong herbal smell filled her nostrils. It seemed to be coming from Tee.

"Tee, Manda's allergic to you," Angie said, laughing.

So this was Tee, Angie's husband. Angie was about forty, and Tee had to be at least twenty-five years older than her. Manda wondered why she hadn't married someone closer to her own age.

"I was just telling Manda about the restaurant," Angie said. "I want her to come have a meal on us."

"I'll come soon," Manda said. "And maybe next time Sierra will come." She had told Angie that Sierra hadn't come this time because she had to go out of town. Angie had just given her a look as if to say that was just an excuse.

Now Angie shook her head. "Sierra would never come to the restaurant. After how I was there for that girl when she first got to New York, and she just turn around and treat me like a dog. Now she doesn't want to know the likes of us. True, Tee?"

Tee nodded. "Man can't please everybody," he said, giving Manda a broad, wrinkled grin.

"Tee and I will be celebrating our fifth anniversary next week," Angie said. She turned and smiled at him. "It's been five good years. True, Tee?"

Tee scratched the top of his head. "True," he said. He held onto the chair arm and pulled himself back up.

Manda sneezed again.

"Tee, get out of here before you kill Manda," Angie said.

He scuffled back out the room the way he had come.

"Tee goes to get his money washed in special herbs," Angie explained. And then in answer to Manda's puzzled look, she said, "Before he left Jamaica, he went to an Obeah man and the man tell him people are gonna try to get his money in America. So now he goes to get his money washed, to protect it. One time he gave me some cash - three hundred dollars I think it was - and the money stink so bad I had to try and wipe it off. But not even water could get rid of that smell, and it even stink up my purse. Manda, I was so embarrassed, carrying that money to the bank." Angie laughed.

"I've never heard of that," Manda said, laughing too. "It seems a little mad."

Angie's face grew serious, and at first Manda thought it was because of what she had said.

"Manda, I don't know what I'm gonna do with that man," Angie said. "Look how he run himself so ragged. That's one reason I can't wait to get him out of here."

"Well, at least when you get to Florida, he can retire and take it easy," Manda said.

"Retire? Tee's not ready to retire. He's forty-three," Angie said.

Manda's eyes popped. "Oh."

"Yes, never mind." Angie rubbed her leg. "People always think he's older than he is. I'm hoping Miami will young him up again. Come on, let's go get something to eat."

Angie led her into the kitchen. The air smelled of chicken soup.

"And this is the room I spend the most time in," Angie said. "It's where I brew up all kinds of concoctions."

Tee called out to her from the back door.

"Just a minute," Angie said. "Let me bring Tee his lunch." She shared out a plate of food from the stove and hurried off to her husband.

Manda looked around the kitchen. There were covered pots on every burner, including what looked like a large black cauldron. She went up and peered inside. A mass of yellow chicken feet floated in a sea of oily water. Manda jumped. She grimaced and backed away from the pot. Just under the window, there was a shelving unit and on it was a row of glass bottles filled with orange pepper sauce, with round white pepper seeds floating in them. Manda had seen similar bottles on the kitchen shelves of many West Indian homes.

"That's my special pepper sauce," Angie said, coming back into the kitchen. "I sell it in the restaurant, and people buy it up as fast as I can make it. I grow the pepper plants myself." She beamed with pride.

"Good for you," Manda said. "My father loves pepper. I don't think I've ever seen him eat a meal without it. He picks up peppers and bites into them without flinching."

"My Tee loves pepper too," Angie said. She adjusted the black wig on her head, and one of her own braids popped out from under it.

Manda tucked the braid back under the wig for her. She sat down at the table, while Angie shared out a meal of ackee and saltfish with fried dumplings.

"Angie," Manda asked, when they were through with lunch. "I have to talk to you about something. Aunt Beryl said you might know some things about Obeah."

"What did she tell you?" Angie gave her a suspicious look.

"Not much, really, except that you might have some fam-."

"She thinks my father's family is full of Obeah people, but my mother don't know nothing. She just likes to gossip."

"Listen, the reason I'm asking is because...well, alright, this might sound strange, but I think Sierra and I are cursed."

"That don't sound strange to me," Angie said. "I know plenty of cursed people. But why would anyone want to curse you? Sierra, maybe, but why you?"

Manda let out a breath of relief. At least Angie didn't think she was losing her mind, like Sierra did. She told her cousin all about what had happened between her and Daniel the night before their wedding, and about the visions she had been having. She ended with what Aunt Beryl had said about the curse put on them by Dar, the Obeah woman, all those years ago. "I tried to talk to Sierra about it, but she wouldn't listen."

"That's Sierra for you," Angie shook her head. "She don't take nothing seriously, not even herself. But I believe you, Miss Manda. "My father had three sons by another woman out in Jamaica. About seven years ago now, one of his sons, Manley, he went and slept with another woman and his girlfriend catch him in the act. Well, before anybody could say eh-eh, all three of those boys got sick and died suddenly, one-by-one. Everybody knew it was because that wicked girl got somebody to work Obeah on them. These things have been happening for generations, Manda."

"It's like Ondine's curse," Manda said, nodding

"What about cousin Ondine?" Angie asked.

"No, not... we have a cousin named Ondine? Never mind. Ondine's curse is the name of a rare medical condition. Some people's brains forget to tell them to breath once they go to sleep. It's a problem with their central nervous system. Ondine was a water nymph whose lover betrayed her, so she put a curse on him that would make him stop breathing whenever he tried to sleep, and so he had to stay awake forever."

"Wretch," Angie said. "Well, I'm not too sure somebody hasn't put a curse on me either. I spend so much time in the restaurant cause I don't have a baby to keep me home."

“Yes, Aunt Beryl told me you were having trouble getting pregnant,” Manda said. What Aunt Beryl had actually said was, “*Angie can’t breed. Poor girl, her punani must be all dried up.*”

“It’s been years of trying, but no baby to show for it. It don’t seem natural to me.”

“Is there anything people can do to stop an Obeah’s curse?” Manda asked.

“The best thing is to not get cursed in the first place,” Angie said. She put her elbow on the table and rested her chin in her hand. “Some of those Obeah people are wickeder than the devil himself.”

“Well, if I don’t find a way to change things, Sierra will be over a cliff very soon and my life will turn out miserably. Angie, I’ve even been seeing Dar’s ghost.” She told her cousin about the incident in the bathroom, and at the barbeque party the week before. “Before then, I’ve never seen a ghost in my life. I didn’t even believe in them, for goodness sake.”

Angie had that same stunned look Aunt Beryl had given Manda when she had spoken to her about the ghost.

“Does Dar say anything to you?” her cousin asked. “You know you should never answer back a duppy.”

“No, she doesn’t say anything. She just appears and looks at me with those horrible eyes, and then vanishes again. Aunt Beryl said she’s come back to make sure her curse comes true, now that Sierra’s thirty-fifth birthday is coming up. I’m not sure where she’ll pop up next to frighten me out of my skin.”

“Manda, you need to see a professional about this,” Angie said. “Tee goes to a man out in Brookyn – the same one who wash his money for him. I hear he’s really good. Obeah people like to set duppies on other people, but if Dar is coming to you herself, she must be pretty powerful. So you need all the help you can get, and this man might be able to do it.”

“Angie, I’m not really comfortable with that idea. Maybe if I can talk to him on the phone,” Manda said. In fact, the more she read about Obeah, the more the practice frightened her.

Once, when she mentioned to Daniel about Aunt Beryl’s refusal to use her own front door, and that she had been looking for an Obeah person to put a protection spell over it, Daniel had accused her aunt of playing with fire. He said Obeah was evil and unbiblical, just another form of black magic, and people would do best to stay away from it altogether. He told her about the time when he was in seminary school and he and three friends had taken a trip to the Philippines. They had stayed at a man’s house, where Daniel had come across a ouija board for the first time. The man had shown them how to use the board, and they had taken turns asking it questions. Later that night, they had all been woken out of their beds by loud noises coming from the kitchen, and when they had run inside, Daniel swore that a pot had flown across the room and crashed into the wall, hurled by unseen hands.

“*When you open that door,*” he had said to Manda. “*You can’t predict what will come through.*”

“I’m not telling you to go practice Obeah,” Angie said now. “That’s another thing altogether. But sometimes you gotta fight fire with fire. It’s no different from going to a priest for an exorcism.

“What do you think he’ll do?” Manda asked. She hoped it wasn’t anything like an exorcism.

“I don’t know. Probably give you something to help break the curse. He’s a little too expensive for me, though. I buy oils from a woman who lives right here in Queens Village. Her aunt is an Obeah woman, and she sells oils and herbs for the old woman out of her basement.

The only thing is, that Obeah woman is strange. She doesn't like to see people. At least you can sit down with Tee's man."

Manda frowned. What other option did she have? Sierra's birthday was just over a month away, and there wasn't much time to waste. If an Obeah curse might have sent the Titanic into that iceberg, then it could certainly send Sierra over a cliff.

"Alright, I'll go see him. But will you come with me?"

"Well, the restaurant doesn't leave me with much spare time, but I'll see what I can arrange," Angie said. "In the meantime, I want you to take this." She pulled a silver ring off one of her fingers. "This is a little something I wear for good luck. It certainly couldn't hurt."

"I can't take your ring," Manda said.

"No, man, I can get another one easy. I bought it in a shop on Jamaica Avenue that sell all kinds of stuff like that. Besides, it's not for you, it's for Sierra. Just don't tell her who it's from."

Manda took the ring, although she knew Sierra would never wear it. "Thanks, Angie." It felt good to have an ally in her.

"Here, I want you to taste this," Angie said. She hurried to the stove and scooped a chicken foot out of the Dutch pot. She came back and dropped it on Manda's plate, then poured a little of her pepper sauce on it. "Tell me what you think."

Manda looked down at the small, scaly yellow foot sitting on her plate, with its three puffy claws.

"Um... Angie..."

"When Sierra was here, she wouldn't even eat my food," Angie said. "She act like I was trying to feed her poison or something."

Thanks, Sierra, Manda thought. Well, she had come all the way out here to seek Angie's help. There was no point offending her like Sierra used to do, was there? Manda picked up the foot. She closed her eyes and nibbled at one claw. The effect was immediate. Pepper burned her lips, her tongue, her nostrils.

"Whaaaa." Manda dropped the foot. She looked towards the sink. She needed water, anything. Her mouth was on fire. It felt like a flaming lump of hot coal was burning a hole through her tongue.

"I thought you said your daddy can take pepper?" Angie looked at Manda, her face incredulous. "Aren't you your daddy's daughter?"

"Whaaa," Manda said louder.

Angie walked over to the sink. "It's my new and improved pepper sauce," she said, catching some water in a glass. "On a scale of one to ten, how hot would you say it is?"

"Haww-up," Manda said. Her tongue felt like it had swollen to twice its regular size.

"What's that? Did you say eight?" Angie handed her the glass.

Manda took a huge gulp of water and swilled it around her mouth, trying to wash away the pepper. The water was done. Manda jumped out of her seat and dashed off down the hall to go stick her head under the bathroom tap.

"Boy, your mouth is sensitive," she heard Angie saying from the kitchen. "But don't fret. A little pepper sauce never kill anyone. At least I don't think so."

CHAPTER SIX

After the ordeal with Angie's pepper sauce, a whole day passed before Manda could drink anything hot, or taste food again. Angie apologized, but it was obvious that she took this as good news. The more damage a pepper sauce did, the better it meant it was. Sierra thought it was quite a laugh. She was in even better spirits than usual. She had floated back from Connecticut on a big white cloud. Nik's father had loved her. His mother had been a little cool at first, but by the time they were ready to return to New York, she had come running out to invite Sierra back for a shopping trip. Just the two of them. Sierra showed Manda a little spotted vase Nik's mother had given her. She had made it in her pottery class.

Manda was just happy to see her back in one piece. There were a few hours when she hadn't been able to reach Sierra on her mobile, and no one had been home at Nik's parent's house. Manda's imagination had galloped off with her on its back. She saw Sierra lying on the bottom of a ravine, her body twisted and broken. She had worked herself into such a frantic state, she had given herself a headache. She rarely ever got headaches. When Sierra did finally ring her back, Manda almost cried with relief. But she realized she couldn't go on like that, worrying constantly about Sierra day after day. Counting down the days to her sister's birthday, and jumping at every shadow, afraid it might be Dar's ghost. If she was phasmophobic, she had a right to be. She called Angie at her restaurant and told her she wanted to go see the Obeah man as soon as possible.

"And remember, Angie, I want you to come with me. I don't want to go alone," Manda said.

"I will certainly try, I promise," Angie said. She told Manda she would get Tee to call the man, and then call her back with the details. Ten minutes later, Angie rang back and said that Tee had left a message on the man's phone. They would let Manda know as soon as they heard from him.

With that done, Manda made her weekly call to England. She liked to make sure everyone was getting on alright without her. First, she rang her mother. Myrna listed the various illnesses that had been plaguing her since Manda left, and she begged Manda to cut her trip short and come back. She needed her, and there was no one else to rely on. She even quoted the Bible, something about "*Whoa to the man who's alone...no one being there to catch him if he falls*", etc., etc. Even the pound had plunged in value in the past two weeks, and Myrna reported the news as if it was somehow connected to Manda's departure.

Next, Manda called Aunt Beryl and begged her to go visit Myrna. Aunt Beryl said her new boyfriend Milton was keeping her too busy. Her old boyfriend, Cleavus, had hooked up with some Nigerians on an Internet scam, and had gone back to prison. Manda then called Sherrie's number, but couldn't reach her. Lastly, she called her father's house. His girlfriend answered the phone and quickly announced that she and Bertram had gotten engaged. Manda hung up without speaking to her father. She went into her room and sat on the futon. She opened the top drawer of the night table and pulled out Daniel's doll.

"Can you believe it, Daniel?" she whispered, hugging the doll to her chest. "He's marrying that cow. He's never going back to Mum." She had spent the last three years hoping her father

would come to his senses. But this was partly her fault. If she had been home, she might've been able to talk her father out of this madness. Her mother wouldn't be able to handle this alone. She wasn't very strong these days. Everything was falling apart and Manda had barely been gone two weeks. Her family needed her, and so did Sherrie. But Sierra needed her more, even if she didn't know it. Manda couldn't be in two places at once, could she?

When Sierra came home that night, Manda told her about their father's engagement. A shadow passed over Sierra's face.

"By the way," she said. "Have you sent pictures of your designs to Antoinette as yet? These opportunities don't come very often, and they don't last very long."

"No, I haven't. But what about Dad? Don't you even care?" Manda asked her.

Sierra shrugged. "It's his life," she said. "And I suggest you get on with yours." She headed down the hall towards her bedroom.

"It might not matter to you, but it matters to me," she shouted after Sierra, but Sierra only closed her door behind her. At first Manda was angry, but when she calmed down, she knew her sister was right. She had enough to worry about as it was. Like saving Sierra's life before it was too late. And wondering why she still couldn't reach the real Daniel when she never rang his number. What if he had gone off and done something stupid? He hadn't been himself when he had stood in her living room that night. These things were already robbing her sleep at nights and causing her nightmares when she did manage to doze off. Adding her parents' problems to the list certainly wouldn't help. The only thing that was important right then was protecting Sierra from the people...or things...that wanted to hurt her. She knew if it were the other way around, Sierra would bend over backwards to help her. They had always been each other's sturdiest armor. When they were in secondary school, more than once Sierra had stormed into the principal's office and risked her own punishment to defend Manda after she had fought with another student. And there were many times when Manda had stood up to her mother or someone else on Sierra's behalf. This time was no different, except the enemy wasn't made of flesh and blood like the others had been. But she was ready for the fight, and when it was over, she would jump on a plane and return home in time to be there for Sherrie and for the rest of her family.

But if Manda had any hope that the battle might be easily won, it was Sierra herself who killed that illusion. Manda had gone to the grocer's to pick up some ingredients for a beef stew she wanted to make. Sierra had said she was spending the night at Nik's, and Manda decided to make herself a meal. She was glad to have a break from all the restaurant food. When she got home, she made the stew and sat down at the kitchen table to eat. She turned on the radio and listened to Sierra's show.

It had started innocently enough. Sierra had invited listeners to call in to give their opinions on cross-cultural dating. First a woman called to say she had dated a rainbow of men, and had discovered one thing. All men sucked. She and Sierra had a good laugh about it. Next, a black man called in to say why he preferred to date Asian women, and Sierra had badgered him about his reasons until he got annoyed and hung up. Then a woman called in to say she had dumped her Jamaican boyfriend for a blond ex-Mormon guy from Utah. Now they were getting married, and her parents refused to come to the wedding. To make matters worse, her ex-boyfriend's cousin had threatened to work Obeah on her.

"Oi, don't believe that Obeah rubbish," Sierra said. "That's just backwoods Jamaican thinking."

Manda winced.

“It might be, but he’s got me scared all the same,” the woman said. “I’ve heard about things that sound pretty real.”

“Trust me, it’s nonsense. Pure foolishness. People who follow it are a bunch of wackos. Your ex’s cousin is just hoping to scare you out of marrying your fiancé. But remember, it’s just rubbish.”

That had set off a barrage of calls from other listeners, most of whom wanted to let Sierra know they were angry about what she had said. One woman said she was the one who was talking nonsense. Sierra was in her element. She laughed at the callers and poked fun at their beliefs. The angrier they got, the more she taunted them. A man insisted Obeah was a religion and should be respected like all other religions, and Sierra told him Sistah Britain was a goddess and should be respected too. When someone else called to demand she apologize for her remarks, Sierra called them a nutter.

Manda dropped her spoon on the plate. What was Sierra trying to do? Had she lost her flipping mind? Someone had to stop her, or knowing Sierra, she would keep this up. Manda cleared away her dinner and grabbed her purse. Sierra should be coming off the air soon. She wanted to go meet her at the station, before she and Nik went off to eat.

As Manda was heading for the train, a light rain started to fall, and by the time she reached Midtown, it had started to pour. She took out her pocket-sized umbrella and opened it. When she got to the corner where Sierra’s office building stood, the wind flipped the umbrella inside out. Water drained from the umbrella, which had now become a bowl, and poured down on Manda’s head, soaking her to the scalp. She fought with it until it flipped back around, but by then three of the thin metal spokes had broken. She shoved the cheap umbrella down into a rubbish bin on the corner, alongside two others that had already suffered the same fate. Just as she let go, she felt the ring Angie had given her slip off her wet finger. She caught a glimpse of it as it slid down into the bin.

“Ah, bugger.” Manda leaned over the bin and tried to spot where it had landed. The bin was nearly full and it was hard to see past the Styrofoam food containers, soggy newspaper pages and other rubbish crammed inside. For a moment, she thought about giving up the ring for lost, but Angie wanted her to give it to Sierra for good luck. Manda had kept it herself, knowing nothing would make Sierra wear cheap jewelry. But it didn’t seem right to leave it there. She picked up a container with her thumb and forefinger and moved it aside, then pushed some more pieces of rubbish away. She worked her way gingerly towards the bottom, holding her nose with the other hand. Manda saw the ring resting on top of a discarded KFC box, but just as her fingers touched it, it slipped off the box and slid away from her. She cursed. She leaned further into the bin. Her head was practically buried in the bin now, and still she couldn’t see it.

“Manda? Is that you?” A voice said above her.

Manda pulled her head out of the bin and looked around. Sierra stood beside Nik on the sidewalk, peering at her from under the cover of a giant black umbrella.

“Is everything alright? What are you doing here?” Sierra looked almost frightened of her.

“Yeah, what’s up?” Nik added.

“Nothing. I...I dropped something in there. A ring. I was just trying to...never mind.” Manda looked at Sierra. “I came by because I need to talk to you about something.”

“Can it wait?” Nik said, glancing at his watch. “We have a dinner reservation. We’re gonna lose our table.”

“Why don’t you come along, then?” Sierra said. “We can talk at the restaurant.”

“No, no, I just need to talk to you for a minute. I promise, it’ll be short.”

“Nik, give us a minute, will ya?” Sierra said.

Nik stepped out from under the umbrella and went to stand by the building’s front doors. Manda took his spot and she and Sierra stepped aside to talk.

“Sierra, I was listening to your show today-.”

Sierra laughed. “I had no idea I’d get a reaction like that,” she said. “I couldn’t believe it. Those people were crazy. Did you hear the woman who called and said...”

“I don’t think you should talk about Obeah anymore,” Manda said. “It’s making a lot of people very angry, and I think it could be trouble.”

“Manda, don’t take it so seriously. It’s just some light fun. That’s all.”

“But that’s the problem. Those listeners are taking it seriously. I think you should just drop it, or apologize to them.”

“We get angry callers all the time. It’s nothing new.”

“Hey.” Nik called out. “I don’t want to lose this reservation. It took a week to get it already.” He started to pace before the doors.

“Just a minute.” Sierra turned back to Manda. “Listen, there’s nothing to apologize for. I haven’t done anything wrong. But let’s talk about this at home, yeah?”

“Sierra, I’m serious about this.”

“You worry too much,” Sierra said. “Why don’t you go to a film, or rent a movie or something? Lighten up a little.”

“Sierra, if you need to talk, I’ll go on and save our place,” Nik said.

“No, wait for me,” Sierra said. “Manda, I’ve got to go.” She gave Manda a quick kiss, missing her face altogether, and turned and hurried back to Nik.

“Really, Manda,” she called out. “Go have some fun. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“What’s going on with her?” Manda heard Nik ask as they walked off. Sierra said something, but Manda didn’t catch it. The rain pelted down on her head. She turned and headed back in the other direction. When she looked around, Sierra and Nik had already blended into the mass of umbrellas moving down the street.

When Manda got back home, she called Angie right away. Angie, who often listened to Sierra in the afternoons herself, said she had heard the show and she couldn’t believe Sierra’s audacity. She had even called the station several times, and when she got through, she had given Sierra a piece of her mind.

“Your sister gonna get herself in hot water,” she said to Manda. “She don’t know them people. They don’t joke. I remember this man who got in a fight with an Obeah man. Everybody tell him he was gonna be sorry, but he don’t listen. He walk around laughing and saying nothing gonna happen to him, and Manda, let me tell you it wasn’t pretty. The man go drown himself.”

“Aw, he couldn’t swim?” Manda said.

“Swim? He was in his own tub.”

“Oh. Well, Angie I really don’t know what to do. I begged Sierra to stop, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“Did you give her the ring?”

Manda slapped her forehead. “Yes, about that ring...the oddest thing happened. I leaned over a bin to toss something away, and the ring fell in and disappeared. I tried to find it, but it was buried too deep.”

“Boy, you clumsy like Tee,” Angie said. “You people would lose your own shadow if you could catch it.”

"I'm sorry."

"Don't fret. Sierra will need more than a ring to protect her now, all the same."

"I don't know. I hope she'll get bored and stop."

"No, Sierra is too stubborn. More likely she'll just keep going until things get out of hand."

By the way, Tee made you an appointment with that Obeah man in Brooklyn."

"Oh, that's great news, isn't it?" Manda said.

But the appointment was for the upcoming Saturday, and Angie said she wouldn't be able to leave the restaurant in time to go with Manda.

"Angie, I don't want to go there alone," Manda told her. "Can't you get away for even an hour?"

"Sorry, Manda, Saturday is our busiest day. Tee needs me here, else who would cook?"

"Then can't you reschedule it for Sunday?"

"I won't have time on Sunday, and this man is very busy too. Tee had to beg him to squeeze you in."

Manda tried to plead with her to reschedule the appointment for another time, but it would be more than a week before Angie would be available to go with her.

"Besides," Angie said. "Now that Sierra's making trouble for herself with them Obeah people, it don't sound like you have much time to waste."

"Angie, I don't even know this man. Maybe there's another way..."

"Manda, you got nothing to be afraid of. He's not gonna hurt you." Before she hung up, she gave Manda the address and directions to the Obeah man's house.

Manda sat on the couch, staring at the paper in her hand. The temperature in the living room felt like it had dropped twenty degrees. The thought of going to visit this Obeah man by herself made her almost want to just forget the whole thing altogether. *What was she afraid of exactly?* She tried to reason it out to herself. Was it what Daniel had said about Obeah? Was she dabbling in the occult, opening a doorway that was best left locked? But was this any different from going to a priest to do an exorcism? If evil had been set on her and Sierra, then they needed the help of an expert. Someone who battled evil for a living.

As it turned out, Angie was right. Sierra was letting things get out of hand. It wasn't long before she was receiving letters from listeners who were angry about her attacks on Obeah. Someone had even sent her a letter with bits of feathers inside the envelope. Manda begged her to stop goading Obeah followers, but Nik believed the controversy was good for the show, and he urged Sierra to milk it for all it was worth. Sierra didn't even stop when she received another chicken feather letter at the station.

"I'll bet it's that Angie who's sending them," she said, standing over Manda in the living room a few days later. "Ah, it makes sense now. She did call the station to run her mouth."

"Yes, but she didn't hide who she was, so why would she send you anonymous letters? Angie would never do something like that."

"You don't know her very well," Sierra said. "She's Aunt Beryl's daughter after all."

"What? Sierra? She's nothing like Aunt Beryl."

"Of course you'd stick up for her. Now that the two of you have become bosom maddies."

"Oh, come off it."

"I've heard you whispering to her on the phone, telling her my business."

"Well, it's better than broadcasting it to the whole city, like you do with mine," Manda said. "But Sierra. We're just concerned about you."

“Thanks, but keep your concern to yourself. And you’d better watch out, before she turns you into a lunatic just like her.” Sierra walked away.

Manda threw a cushion after her. *What cheek.* Here they were, trying to figure out how to save Sierra’s arse, and here she was, making them out to be a couple of nutters. How could she even think Angie would do something like that? Manda hadn’t known her for long, but if there was one thing she had gathered about Angie, it was that she was honest to a fault. Like her mother, she wasn’t one to hide her feelings about anything, even when it might have been better if she did.

Manda was sitting on the couch the next day, telling Angie about the chicken feather letters, when Sierra came up behind her and grabbed the phone.

“It’s me, Sierra,” she said, hand on hip. “Never mind the small talk. It’s you, isn’t it? You’re the one who’s sending me those letters.”

Manda heard screeching sounds coming from Angie’s end of the phone.

“Look. Don’t try to deny it.”

There was more screeching from Angie. Manda grabbed at the phone, but Sierra spun away from her.

“Because I recognize that horrible handwriting of yours. Well, you can curse all you want. But all I’m telling you is, you’d better stop it, hear? If I get one more letter at the station, I’m coming after you myself.” Sierra hung up the phone. She flipped her hair and marched out the front door.

Manda called Angie back straight away. Poor Angie was sobbing, and Manda apologized profusely to her.

“How can she treat me like that?” Angie said. “I never did that wretch nothing.”

“I know. I don’t think she really believes it’s you. She’s probably just testing you.”

“From I was born, I’ve never been accused of such a thing.”

“Please, Angie, don’t let it upset you. I’ll have a talk with her later, okay?”

“If that would mean anything,” Angie said. She blew her nose on the other end of the phone. “Manda, can you come to the restaurant on Monday? I need to tell you something.”

“I’m afraid Monday isn’t good,” Manda said. “I’ve already promised Sierra I would go to a brunch with her. Nik can’t make it, and she doesn’t want to go alone.”

“Well, this is about her, so I would think you’d want to hear it.”

Manda tried to get her to say what it was, but Angie said her break was over and customers were waiting.

“Alright, I’ll see you on Monday,” Manda said. She hung up the phone and stared out the window. Across the street, a film crew was busy unloading camera equipment from a truck and laying out the pieces before a building. From the size of the white trailer stretched out before the truck, Manda knew major celebrities would be involved. She felt a small stir of excitement, and remembered how much she and Sierra had loved going to the cinema to see films that were shot in New York. Sierra’s heart had grown fat with romantic images of the city, and it was probably the main reason she had chosen to move there, and not anywhere else. Now, one of those very films was going to be shot right there across the street from them, and Manda sat and watched the setup begin. She didn’t feel like making the long, tiring journey out to Queens Village on Monday. It was already bad enough she had to find her way alone through Brooklyn on Saturday. Sierra recently admitted it was easier for her to get on a plane and leave the country, than it was to take a train trip to the outer boroughs. Manda could see her point. Manhattan was completely self-contained, with everything they wanted only blocks away. Just as she had in

London, Manda usually walked to wherever she had to go. And if she was with Sierra, it was taxis all the way. She rarely had to set foot on public transportation. But a trip to any of the other boroughs was a commitment, with a specific purpose and destination in mind.

Ah, well, it is for a good purpose, she thought to herself. *My sister's life is in danger.*

On Saturday morning, Manda got up with the sun. She had spent the night flipping around in her bed, fighting to fall asleep and fighting to wake up. At least two of her nightmares had been about Obeah men. Her appointment with the one in Brooklyn was for half past two. She wandered around the flat dusting surfaces and sweeping rooms, like a zombie who had decided to spend eternity cleaning instead of eating flesh. When Sierra got up, she went for a jog, came back and showered, and then sat on the couch with her notebook open. She was writing out the invitation list for her party, but when Manda went to dust the coffee table, she quickly closed the book and put it aside. She had become very protective of her book, and Manda had to wonder what else she might have been planning in those pages.

Manda fixed them both a brunch of omelets, toast and orange juice, but Sierra barely had a bite of her eggs before she pushed aside her plate and said she was full. Nik was right. Sierra wasn't eating enough. The healthy appetite she had had in England seemed to have disappeared. Manda looked at the DVD's clock and saw that it was already almost one o'clock. She put away the cleaning things and went to get dressed.

"Where are you off to?" Sierra asked, when Manda came back into the living room with her bag over her shoulder.

"Um...nowhere really."

"Why do you look so nervous?"

"Nervous? Ha. I'm not nervous."

"Hmm. You're off to see Angie, is that it?" Sierra asked, putting down her notebook.

"Well, you don't have to hide it. I already know the two of you have become your own little Jamaican posse. Although I can't understand why you're so fascinated with her."

"For your information, I am not off to see Angie. I'm just off to Brooklyn, that's all."

"Brooklyn? What's in Brooklyn?"

"People. Places. There's more to New York than Manhattan, isn't there?"

"If you say so," Sierra said. "But I still think you're up to something."

"I'll see you later," Manda said. She checked that the directions were in her bag and then went out the door.

When she reached the second floor, Manda glanced towards Noah's flat. She had been a little hasty with him the other day, when he had given her the book. It was nice of him, and she had barely said thanks. As she headed for the next set of steps, she hesitated, her hand on the railing. She wondered if he was home. She forced herself to cross the landing and knock on his door. He answered, dressed in a white t-shirt and black pajama shorts that left his long, tanned legs exposed.

"I just wanted to say that...I didn't thank you properly for the book the other day. I practically bowled you down the stairs, and then...ha, ha." She snapped her mouth shut. She knew she must have sounded like a lunatic.

Noah leaned against his door and crossed his arms.

"See, I was in a hurry to get somewhere, and I didn't want to be late. I really hate to be late for...things." Why was it so hard to look into his eyes? She gazed beyond him instead, into his back office where a computer sat idling on a desk, its screensaver displaying a series of lush

landscapes. “But I’m not usually that rude. On purpose. Anyway, I see that you’re busy, and so thanks for the book. It was kind of you.”

“You’re welcome,” Noah said, smiling. “Do you want to come in? I’m about to put on some coffee.”

“No, I can’t. I mean...I’m on my way somewhere.”

“Maybe another time then?”

“Yes, maybe.” She stood awkwardly by the door for a moment, then turned to leave.

“Manda.”

“Yes?” She turned back around.

“Is everything okay?” He took her hand in his and eyed her carefully, his face full of concern.

“Pardon? Yes, of course. Everything is fine.” She gave him a genuinely fake grin, and he gave her a doubtful look in return. She felt the urge to both pull her hand away and hold his tighter at the same time.

“Okay. Well, if you need anything...or need to talk about anything...don’t be afraid. Just knock.”

Manda swallowed. How she wished she could tell him everything, beginning with the night of her wedding and ending with why she was now on her way to see an Obeah man in Brooklyn. Well, she could imagine what Daniel would’ve had to say, let alone this stranger. Noah was a stranger after all, even if he did have a way of looking at her like he could see straight through to her heart, with all its dreams and fears backlit like jewels on display. But instead all she said was “Thanks.”

Noah’s smile returned.

Manda turned to leave again. She could feel his smile still warming her back as she made her way across the landing. He didn’t see that she was smiling too. *Skinning up her teeth like a fool*, as Aunt Beryl would say.

The Obeah man lived in a house in Bedford Stuyvesant that was painted white on the outside. A gold cross was nailed to the door. It was the only occupied building on the block that did not have iron bars protecting its front door or windows. It sat in its spot looking as confident as a white tiger among house cats. Both of the houses on either side of his had boards nailed over their windows, and one was just a blackened shell of a house, the leftover from a past fire. Manda wondered what had caused the fire, and if the inhabitants had made it out alive.

She walked up the front steps and rapped the bronze knocker against the door. She drew in long, slow breaths as she waited. The door opened and she found herself standing before a dark-complexioned man, dressed in a floor-length white cotton robe with a white cloth wrapped around his head. His pupils were two black discs set in eyes that looked like they had yellowed with age. The Obeah man looked at least seventy-five.

He stepped aside and a woman came out of the house and slipped past Manda, her eyes hidden behind a pair of sunglasses. She shoved something down into her purse and hurried away. Manda turned back to the man.

“Are you the...um...Obeah man?” It struck her suddenly that she didn’t even know his name.

“I am he,” the man said in a soft Jamaican patois. He gave her a kingly bow. His gaze rose all the way up from her feet to her face.

Manda took a deep breath, trying to slow her racing heart. “I have an appointment for half past two.”

He bowed again and beckoned for her to enter, and his thick gold watch slipped down his bony wrist. Business was obviously very good. Manda followed him down a long hall lit by red candles that had been fixed into four gold-toned wall sconces. He was very swift for an old man, and before she could catch up to him he had already dodged away into a room to the right. Manda entered slowly and looked around. The air smelled like the herbs on Tee's money, only more intensely so. She sneezed twice, and he threw a "Bless you" behind him.

A round table stood in the middle of the parlor. It was covered in a red cloth, and a glass of water had been placed in the center. The Obeah man pulled out one of the two chairs that flanked the table and waited for Manda to sit down. She lowered herself into it and dropped her bag on the carpet by her leg. Along one wall was a long wooden bench that looked like it had once belonged in a church, and hanging on the wall above it was a green chalkboard with a price list written out in white chalk.

Charms\$25.00+

Oils\$30.00+

Wanga Doll\$35.00

Basic Reading\$45.00

Manda had gotten halfway down the list, when the Obeah man cleared his throat. He began to describe some of the oils he sold.

"So," he said when he was done. "What is it you would like?"

She took a tissue from her bag and blew her nose. "A basic reading. Alright, I'll start with that."

"Show me your hand," the Obeah said, sitting down across from her.

She stretched out her hand gingerly. He took it in his and stroked the middle of her palm, sending a tingling sensation through her arm. His own hands were unusually cold. He raised her hand and held it over the glass of water.

"Your duppy follow you," he said.

His words caught Manda so off guard, it took her a while before she could say anything. "My duppy? The ghost?" she said, her voice trembling. "Then you can see her too?"

"I can sense her," the Obeah man said, nodding. He wet the tip of his forefinger against his tongue, then made a sign with it in Manda's hand. She gave a slight jump, as her patients often did when she pushed needles into their arms.

He leaned forward and peered intently into her right eye. Then he reached over and pulled down her bottom lid. "I see you have a mark," he said, impressed.

"What...the ring around my eye? I've had it since birth."

He nodded. "All visionaries mark-up with something. But I mus' warn you. Don't follow it. It mus' follow you."

"Don't follow what?"

"What you see, what else?"

"I don't understand."

"So, what is it you come for?" he asked.

Manda pulled her hand away and put it in her lap. "I need you to break a curse," she said, as if she was asking a doctor to break a fever.

"A curse," he said. "That's a common thing."

Manda told him all about Dar, how the Obeah woman had put a curse over her and Sierra, and about what had happened on the eve of her wedding, ending with the vision she had seen in her car.

“So, do you think you can help me?” she asked him, when she was through.

The Obeah man gazed at her with his two yellow eyes.

“I been helping people for a long time.” He got up and went out the door. He came back a few minutes later and put a cup on the table before her. It was roughly carved out of a dark wood, and filled with a clear, hot liquid. “Drink this,” he said.

“What is it?” Manda asked, sniffing at the cup. It smelled like herbal medicine.

“Something to help you.”

“Yes, but what’s in it?”

“Herbs. Special herbs.”

“Yes, but what kind of herbs?” How many times had she seen people come into the hospital, sick to death because of something they had eaten or drank, when they didn’t know what it was?

“All kinds of herbs,” the Obeah man said.

“Has any of your patients...I mean, customers...has any of them ever had an allergic reaction to this?”

The Obeah man paused and gave her an amused look. “Like what?”

“Vomiting. Diarrhea. Hives, possibly. Fainting.”

“No.”

“Well, just in case something happens...do you have any emergency equipment?”

He grinned at her, exposing a set of brilliant white dentures.

“Have you tasted it?” she asked.

“Many times.”

Well, if it didn’t kill him...Manda stuck her tongue in the water and tasted it. The liquid was so bitter, it made her tongue recoil. But she drank it down in two big gulps, and sat there grimacing.

He nodded his approval. “Now,” he said. “I know what you need.” He sprang up again and went through a red curtain that separated this room from another one off to the right. Various symbols and roman numerals were painted in black on the curtain. He was gone for at least fifteen minutes. Manda could hear the sound of splashing water coming from the other room. Finally, the curtain parted and the Obeah man beckoned for her to come in. She ducked through the curtain and stepped into the room. It was slightly larger than the first. A row of white cabinets had been built into the opposite wall, and inside were many glass bottles and jars filled with oils, herbs, and unidentifiable objects. In one jar, she spotted what looked like human hair. A wide black bookcase stood against another wall. The top two shelves were filled with books, but on the bottom shelf was a row of the ugliest clothe dolls Manda had ever seen. They were dressed in brightly colored robes, and had black hair that spiked away from their scalps.

“Are those the Wanga dolls?” she asked.

The Obeah man nodded. He walked over to the shelf, bent over and picked up a doll in a red robe. “Each one has a powerful spirit,” he said. “All you have to do is tell it what you want. This one bring you money, some bring you revenge, that one in the blue can bring you a boyfriend...you want a boyfriend?” He cocked his head at her.

“No, thanks,” Manda said. “I mean, I don’t want a doll.” Just the thought of touching one of those ugly things chilled her.

“Well,” the Obeah man walked towards her. “There’s the tub, when you’re ready.”

Manda turned around. There, across the room was an old-fashioned white bathtub with clawed bronze feet. She went over and looked inside. It was filled with water that had so many

types of herbs mixed in it, the water had turned green. She looked at the bits of leaves floating on the surface, and the tiny sprigs of steam furling off it. A white candle sat in a holder on the floor near each corner of the bathtub, and as she watched, the Obeah man took out a box of matches and walked around the tub, lighting each one.

“Tek off your clothes and get in,” he said when he was done.

Manda looked at the bath. “What? Get in there?”

He nodded.

“In that water?”

He nodded again.

“But... what’s in it exactly?”

“Special herbs.”

More special herbs. “What are they for?”

“To wash evil off you.”

“But... how will that help my sister?” It seemed if anyone urgently needed that bath, Sierra did.

“That will help you. I can give you something for your sister. Else you can bring her back and I’ll draw her up a bath.”

“How much is it?”

“Usual price is seventy-five dollars, but I give it to you for fifty. You need it bad.”

Manda wondered why she hadn’t noticed it on the price list. What had she gotten herself into? The thought of stripping off her clothes and lying naked in a bath in front of this strange man...well, it was just too much. Even if he was old enough to be her grandfather. Why didn’t Angie tell her what would be involved? She wished she hadn’t come alone, but it was too late now.

“Is this really necessary?” she asked the Obeah man.

“Depends on how bad you want help,” he said.

Manda sighed. Well, she had already come this far, and she had promised herself to do whatever it took. Now she decided she’d never tell another soul about this, except Angie.

“Alright, I’ll do it,” she said.

The Obeah man nodded. “I take pay up front.”

Manda pulled some bills from her wallet and handed them to him. He counted them and recorded the amount in a notebook on the bookshelf.

“You want a receipt?” he asked.

“A receipt? For what, tax purposes?” She wondered what part of an income tax statement his services would fall under.

“I am an up-and-up business man. If you want a receipt, I give you one.”

“That’s alright, thanks.”

He gave her a pink shower cap to put over her hair, and went back through the curtain, drawing the two panels closed behind him. Manda kicked off her shoes. She pulled off her blouse and stepped out of her skirt and knickers, watching the curtains as she undressed. She raised one leg over the side of the tub and tested the water with her toes. It was very warm, but not too hot. She glanced back over her shoulder. She could have sworn she saw a yellow eye peaking through the tiny slit where the curtains met in the middle. Manda drew her other leg into the tub and sat down in the green water so quickly, water sloshed out and soaked the floor. She sunk down in the tub until her chin touched the water’s surface. The herbal scent was so strong, it filled up her head and made her brain swim.

She was barely inside when the curtain parted and the Obeah man re-entered the room. In a moment, he was standing over the tub, looking down at her. Manda crossed one arm over her breasts and the other over her pubic hair. The Obeah man watched her, chuckling to himself. Old man or not, she didn't like the way he was looking at her – his eyes a little too wide, his grin even wider.

“You have nothing to be ‘fraid of,” he said.

Bloody easy for you to say, Manda thought.

The Obeah man closed his eyes for a good minute. When he opened them again, he raised his hands over the tub and started to chant. Even in the warm water, Manda could feel her body begin to shiver. This went on for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, the Obeah man went over to the bookcase. On top it were two books, a Bible with a red cover and a second book – a large black one with yellow Post-it notes sticking out of many of the pages. Was that a Blackheart book, the same kind of witchcraft bible that Dar used to consult? She wondered if it was something all Obeah people possessed. She hoped he wouldn't need it now, and sighed with relief when he picked up the Bible instead. He brought it back to the tub and flipped it open. He read a verse from Psalms, and followed it with a few more. She felt like the unwilling star of a death-bed scene.

Manda kept her eyes wide open, watching his every move. Finally, because the bath's strong herbal smell was starting to sting her eyes, she closed her lids and listened. His voice droned on and on above her. Was the water getting colder, or was it her? Suddenly it felt like she was sitting in a tub of ice cubes. She was shivering worse than ever.

That was when she noticed that the Obeah man had fallen silent. Manda opened one eye and looked up at him. His pupils had rolled back so far in his head, his eyes looked like two yellow marbles in his skull.

“Oi,” Manda yelped. She bolted upright in the tub, forgetting she was naked.

Her voice brought the Obeah man back to himself somewhat, and his eyeballs rolled back down.

“P-Pass me a towel,” she stuttered. “I'm c-cold.”

He lowered the Bible and went over to the chair. He brought back the towel and handed it down to her, still looking as if he was lost in a trance. Then he left her alone to put her clothes back on.

Manda stood up and wrapped the towel around her, feeling her teeth chattering loudly in her head. She had no idea what had happened, what exactly he had done, or what supernatural forces he had summoned. All she knew was she had never felt colder in her life. It frightened her. She wanted to get into her clothes and out into the warm summer air as fast as possible.

When she had finished dressing, she went through the curtain into the other room. The Obeah man stood by his table, as still as a statue.

“Is that all?” she asked, peering at him. “I want to go.”

“That's all,” he said, softly. He took a deep breath and looked at her. “How you feeling?”

“Cold,” Manda said. “Really cold.”

“That's normal,” he said reassuringly. “Come.”

The Obeah man led her back down the hall and to the front door. He took a tiny bag out of his robe pocket and handed it to her.

“This is for your sister,” he said. “It's the same tea I give you. Jus' mix it up in hot water.”

“Thanks.” Manda put the bag in her purse. She hurried through the door as soon as he opened it. The warm air surrounded her in an instant, and she felt her skin prickling gratefully back to life. She stopped on the front step and turned to him.

“By the way, what if this doesn’t work?” she asked. She had no intention of coming back.

“I don’t give refunds,” the Obeah man said. “If it don’t work, the fault lies in the patient, not the doctor.” With that, he shut the door and left her standing on the front step.

As she went down the path towards the sidewalk, she saw a black woman around her own age coming towards her. Manda guessed the woman was the Obeah man’s next appointment. Her lips were squeezed together in a thin, angry line, and she walked with such quick, determined strides that she seemed to barely notice Manda as she passed. Manda couldn’t help feeling sorry for the person who was the inspiration behind her visit. She headed back to the train station, eager to get back home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I’ve got a surprise for you,” Manda said, pushing open Sierra’s bedroom door on Monday morning. “Look, breakfast in bed. Aren’t you a lucky cow.” She pushed aside the clock radio and placed the tray with the scrambled eggs and fried plantains on the bedside table. This used to be Sierra’s favorite breakfast as a child. Sierra sat up in bed bare-breasted.

“For cripes sake, put on a shirt, will ya.” Manda said. Sierra rarely slept in anything except her knickers. She saved her nightclothes for lounge wear.

Sierra just scowled at her. “This won’t make up for what you’re doing,” she said. “How can you abandon me to go visit that nutter?”

“She’s not a nutter and I told you already, Tee is sick, and Angie needs my help at the restaurant.” Manda sat on the edge of the bed. She took a plantain slice off the plate and bit into it. She felt a little guilty about saddling poor Tee with an illness, but Sierra wouldn’t remotely accept any other excuse that related to Angie.

“So now you’ll do anything for Angie, but not your own sister.”

“Come now, you know that’s not true.”

“Then why are you letting me show up at this brunch alone?”

“It’s not all about you, you know. People can’t help being sick, can they? Besides, you won’t be alone for long. You always know people wherever we go.”

“That’s not the point,” Sierra said. She had never liked showing up anywhere by herself. If she had her way, she would always be surrounded by an entourage.

Manda cleared her throat. “I made you some special tea.” She took a cup off the tray and held it out to Sierra.

“What is it?”

“Oh, just something I bought in Brooklyn. It’s made of...special herbs. The man said it’s supposed to be very good for you. And it must be because the old bloke is about one hundred years old, but he moves like a young boy.”

Sierra sniffed at the cup. “It smells like hell,” she said.

“But it comes from heaven.” Manda gave Sierra a benign smile.

Her sister glanced at her sideways. “Why are you looking at me like that? What’s in it really?”

“Come on, just drink it,” Manda said, patting her leg. “You said the trouble at the radio station is beginning to get to you. This will help calm your nerves, I promise.”

“But I won’t back down,” Sierra said, her voice belligerent. “I refuse to let a bunch of lunatics dictate what I can or can’t talk about on my own show. Would they do that to Oprah? They wouldn’t dare.” She raised the cup to her lips.

Manda leaned forward. Drink it, she pleaded silently.

Sierra lowered the cup again. “I just can’t believe how crazy people are. You should see the letters. They’re unbelievable.”

“Drink the tea, love. It’ll calm you right down.”

“And I don’t care what you say. I know Angie is behind some of them.”

“Drink the tea.” Manda gave the cup a gentle nudge.

“Alright, damn it.” Sierra raised the cup and took a sip. Her mouth twisted downwards. “Ugh. This is just horrible,” she said. “How can anyone drink this rubbish?” She put the cup on the night table.

“The taste will grow on you.” Manda picked up the cup and put it back in Sierra’s hands. “Now quit mucking around and drink it.”

Sierra took one more sip. “Thanks, but no thanks,” she said. She put the cup back on the table. She climbed out of bed and headed off to the bathroom. At the door, she stopped to shimmy her behind at Manda. Another of her childhood favorites.

“So much for that,” Manda mumbled. Saving Sierra’s life wasn’t going to be easy. Not if Sierra had anything to do with it.

An hour later, Manda came down the front steps of the building carrying her subway map. She saw Noah by the road, just about to get into his car. He looked handsome and summer-ready in a white t-shirt, blue jeans and brown sandals. He smiled when he spotted her.

“Off to enjoy this great weather?” he called out.

“No, I’m off to Queens,” Manda said, standing at the bottom of the stairs.

“Queens? What’s going on out there?”

“I’ve got a cousin who lives in Queens Village,” she said. “I’m paying her a visit.”

“Hey, if you’d like, I’d be happy to give you a lift.”

“Thanks, but I couldn’t ask you to do that,” she said. “I’ll be alright. I’ve got my map, some water and everything I need to pass the time.”

“You’re not asking, I’m offering,” Noah said.

“But it’s too far.”

“I’ve driven cross country on book tours. Now that’s a long way.” Noah cocked his head. “Anyway, I was just going to jump in my car and go for a drive out of the city, find a patch of green somewhere and just stretch out and enjoy the weather.”

“Then don’t change your plans on my account.” She bent down to loosen the straps of her white sandals. It was actually Sierra’s sandals, which she had squeezed into at the last moment, since one of the straps had just broken on hers.

“Listen,” Noah said. “I don’t mind. Really. I’d rather have your company.”

Manda looked at his sleek blue car. If she took the train, it would probably take her nearly an hour just to get to Angie’s stop. And then there would be another long ride on the bus from the station to the restaurant.

“Alright,” she said, shrugging.

Noah ran around and opened the passenger door of his car.

“That’s a pretty dress you’re wearing,” he said, when she passed him and slid inside. “Did you make it?”

“I did, actually,” Manda said, smiling at him as he sat down in the driver’s seat and started the car.

She called Angie on Noah’s phone, and got the driving directions to the restaurant. The drive across the city was quite pleasant. The sky was a perfect blue, and a warm sun beat down on the crowds cramming the city streets. Noah stopped to buy water from a street vendor and tossed a bottle to Manda. He put on a Bowie CD and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel in time to the music.

“Is this a new car?” Manda asked him, taking a sip of the cold water.

He nodded.

“It smells like it,” she said.

“My old Honda bit the dust somewhere near San Francisco on my last cross-country trek.”

As they headed through the city, they had to take a roundabout route to avoid a large street fair that stretched down Third Avenue. She didn't mind. She was enjoying the ride. And Noah's company. He pointed out restaurants where he liked to eat, and told her some of the history behind certain buildings. She asked him about his trips across America, and he told her about things that had happened and people he had met along the way. He still kept in touch with some of them. He really loved these trips and looked forward to doing another one in the autumn. Noah was a people-lover, the sort of bloke who feasted happily on the scraps and detritus of other people's lives.

“So,” Noah said, suddenly. “How does New York compare to London?”

“Well, it's certainly a good deal hotter here,” she said. “But I can see why Sierra loves it so much.” She also shared Sierra's attraction to cities. She loved a busy, wide-awake life, the kind cities offered in abundance. New York City was appealing, with its constant hyperactivity, and the perpetual rumbling of trains that ran all night. In a way, New York was more modern than London. “It's like a masquerade ball where you can come all dressed up as the person you dream of being, and no one ever has to know the difference,” she told Noah.

“Sierra said you're a nurse.” Noah glanced at her. “Had you ever dreamed of becoming a designer?”

“Yes, when I was younger I thought about it for a while. But it's not very practical, is it?” In spite of that, she had finally given in to Sierra's constant urgings about following up with Antoinette, the woman who had wanted to see her designs. One evening, Sierra brought out her digital camera and took photos of Manda's clothes, using the living room curtains as a backdrop. Then they had emailed the photos to Antoinette. Manda didn't expect much to come of it, and she hardly dared to hope. She hadn't come to New York to be a designer after all, as she kept reminding herself.

“Nursing is a lot more stable, and I think nurses contribute far more to humanity than designers, don't you?” she asked Noah.

Noah shrugged. “There's good in both,” he said. “I think we contribute the most to humanity when we use all our best gifts. And besides, both nurses and designers are after the same basic goal. To make people look and feel good.”

Manda smiled across at him. “I never thought of it that way.” She watched as a flower vendor pulled a mixed bouquet of flowers from his cart and handed it to a woman. She liked being a nurse, but if she was honest with herself, she had gone into the profession to appease her parents more than for any other reason. They hadn't come all the way to England to watch their children go after frivolous careers. And Sierra was impractical enough for the both of them. But if Manda could have started all over again...she brushed the thought away. People hardly started all over again. Why bother think about it?

“Thanks, Noah, I really appreciate this ride,” she said. “You saved me a trip I wasn't looking forward to.”

“Anytime,” he said, winking at her.

“Daniel hates driving. Especially in the city, with all those cars crowded together in traffic.”

“Who? Your ex?”

Manda looked out the window. She hadn't meant to talk about Daniel, but he had been such a huge part of her life, not thinking or talking about him at all was like trying to ignore a giant rock sitting on her chest. In a silver car next to them, two little boys sat in the back wrestling over a video game while their parents sat up front laughing about something.

“Sounds like he’s an agoraphobic,” Noah said.

“No, he just doesn’t like driving,” Manda said. But maybe Noah was right. The longer she was away from Daniel, the more of a stranger he was becoming. She missed the Daniel she had known. The ache never went away, especially at night. She had rang his number again the evening before, but his voicemail had come on as usual. If they had gone ahead and gotten married as planned, they would have already returned from their honeymoon. But here she was, thousands of miles away from him and all that happiness she had anticipated. If her love-life had a theme song, it would have been “Alone Again, Naturally.”

Manda had been just about to ask Noah about his past relationships, when she suddenly caught sight of a figure standing in the road, not ten yards ahead of them. A figure Manda recognized instantly, with its long dark frock, unmistakable gray locks, and hard, piercing eyes. *Dar*. The car barreled towards her.

“Noah, stop,” Manda yelled, grabbing his shoulder.

Noah slammed on the brakes and the car screeched to a stop in the middle of the road. The driver behind them had to hit his brakes to keep from crashing into their back. He swerved his car around them, yelled something out his window and sped off.

“What’s wrong? Did I hit something?” Noah asked, peering out the windshield.

Manda struggled to catch her breath. “In...in the road.”

“What? I didn’t see anything.” Noah opened his door carefully and went around the front of the car. He bent down to look under it. Manda went rigid in her seat, although she knew he wouldn’t find anything. The driver behind them started to honk. Noah straightened back up and looked around him. He shrugged.

“There’s nothing there,” he said, getting back into the car.

“No, she...” Her heart had come loose. It bounced around in her chest.

“You saw someone?”

Manda buried her face in her hands and shook her head. She could feel her body trembling.

Noah steered the car out of traffic and stopped at the side of the road. He turned to her.

“Are you okay?”

She drew in a ragged breath. “I’m fine.”

“Maybe you saw a shadow,” he said. “The sun is very bright today. It can create mirages.”

She turned slowly and looked at the empty road beyond him. “Yes, you’re probably right.”

Noah rubbed her shoulder. “You’ve been through a lot lately,” he said. “It can be very hard on the mind. But it *will* get better.”

Manda nodded. She remembered Sierra had said he was a trained therapist.

He started the engine again and pulled back into traffic. As they drove on in silence, Manda thought about the Obeah man’s words. “*Your duppy follow you.*” But the herbal bath was supposed to wash away evil. Wash off spirits. Yet it hadn’t worked. She remembered something else he had said – that the fault was in the patient, not the doctor. *What was she doing wrong? Why couldn’t she get rid of Dar?*

“If you don’t mind telling me,” Noah said, interrupting her thoughts. “What happened between you and Daniel?”

“It’s too hard to explain,” she said.

“It’s just that, I can’t imagine what kind of loser would leave a woman like you.” Noah reached over and touched the back of her hand lightly. He held her gaze for a moment, before turning his attention back to the road.

Manda realized she had been holding her breath, and she released it slowly. It still made her uncomfortable, that way he had of looking into her eyes as if they were the private journals that hid all her thoughts.

“Turn right, here,” she said, as they reached Hillside Avenue. She could hear the shakiness in her voice. “There, that’s the restaurant. On the left.” They pulled up in front of a tiny building squashed between a beauty salon and a Chinese restaurant. The words Big Yard were painted in yellow on the building’s green awning.

The minute they stopped at the curb, Angie came hurrying out the door. She was dressed in a stained white apron that reached down to the knees of her jeans, and had a black hairnet pulled over her wig. She grinned, and the sun spangled off her gold tooth. Manda grimaced. She had never had an easy time introducing her relatives to other people. Then she felt instantly guilty for thinking that way. Angie was a great girl. She got out of the car and gave her cousin a hug.

“Who’s that?” Angie whispered, peering past Manda.

Noah came out of his car and approached them. “Thought you might need your subway map for the trip back,” he said, handing it to Manda.

“This is Noah, Sierra’s neighbor,” Manda said.

Noah shook Angie’s hand and she smiled up at him. She seemed so much shorter than before, standing in front of Noah.

“Why don’t you come in,” Angie said.

“He was just dropping me off,” Manda said before Noah could answer. “He’s on his way somewhere.”

“You can’t send the boy away hungry. Where’s your manners?” Angie grabbed Noah’s arm and pulled him towards the door.

He turned around and mouthed “Sorry” to Manda, before Angie yanked him into the restaurant.

“Angie-.” Manda hung back for a moment. She wished her cousin hadn’t done that. She had embarrassed herself enough in front of him for one day. She could have made him crash his car. He probably thought she was losing her mind.

Manda opened the door and went inside. There was a line of people stretching from the door to the glass partition, behind which all the food was spread out in metal bins. Tee waved to Manda from his place at the cash register, and she felt another moment of guilt for lying to Sierra about him being sick.

“We’re always busiest at lunch-time,” Angie said to Manda and Noah. “But come. Sit here, and just tell me what you want and I’ll go get it. It’s on us.” She seated them at a table for two, and brought back menus.

“I already know what I want,” Noah said. “Jerk chicken and rice and peas. And can you bring me some pepper sauce?”

Both Manda and Angie turned to gaze at him.

“I’m one-quarter Jamaican,” he said, smiling.

Angie looked impressed. She bent over and hugged Noah around the head. “Forget about that foo-fool boy in London. This is the one you should marry,” she said.

Manda picked up the menu and covered her face. What was Angie trying to do? Embarrass the daylights out of her?

“Angie, wasn’t there something you wanted to tell me?” she said from behind the menu. That was the real reason she was here, after all.

“Oh, yes, yes. When you finish your lunch, I’ll come get you.”

Manda ordered a curry chicken dish with boiled bananas, yam and dumplings, and a glass of sorrel, and Angie hurried off to get their lunches. She caught Noah staring into her face.

"Your eyes," he said. "The right one is different from the left. There's a ring around it."

"I know, it's always been that way," Manda said, looking down.

"I've never seen that before." Noah peered closer at her.

"It's..." Manda paused as she remembered what the Obeah man had said. *All visionaries mark-up with something.* "It's just a part of me," she told Noah.

"Your eyes are beautiful," Noah said, warmly. "Like you."

"Hmmm, where's Angie with our lunch?" Manda looked towards the crowded counter, trying to avert his eyes.

Noah took the hint and dropped the subject. "Yes, I'm starving too," he said.

"Just don't touch Angie's pepper sauce," Manda said. "It should come with a warning label."

But that only served to make Noah more intent on trying it. When Angie brought their meals, he reminded her about the pepper sauce, and she ran off to get it.

"Wow, this food is great," he said. He ate slowly, savoring each mouthful.

Manda had to admit that Angie's curry chicken was even better than her mother's.

Angie came back a few minutes later with the pepper sauce, and Noah poured a heap of it onto the side of his plate.

"Be careful," Manda said. "That's too much."

"I can handle it," Noah said. "I'm one-quarter Jamaican, remember?" He took a piece of plantain and used it to scoop a lot of sauce into his mouth. In an instant his eyes popped. He flashed at his mouth with his hands.

"My mouth ith on fah," he said. Sweat poured down his face. He looked left and right, as if searching for a pool to jump into.

He had already finished his glass of sorrel, and so Manda handed hers to him. He drank it down in one long gulp.

Manda shook her head, feeling sorry for the bloke. She took a couple packets of sugar from a little basket on the table and gave them to him.

"Suck on these. It might help a little," she said.

He tore the packets open and shook them into his mouth, while she went to the counter and requested some water from a sour-faced girl who was helping Angie to serve food. As the girl passed it to Manda, she gave her a resentful look.

"Don't mind that lazy wretch," Angie said, ducking under the counter and following Manda back to the table. "She's Tee's cousin. She used to have to walk clear down gully bottom to draw river water, and now she act like it pain her to turn on a tap."

Manda laughed. She handed the water to Noah, who gulped it down desperately like a parched man in a desert. The skin on his throat had turned red.

"Poor bugger," Angie said, patting Noah's forehead with a napkin. "Your tongue may be one-quarter Jamaican, but you forgot about the other three-quarters."

Noah nodded and tried to smile.

"Manda, follow me round the back," Angie said. "I can take a little break now. Colleen can handle things for a while."

"Will you be alright?" Manda asked Noah. She hated leaving him there in such obvious distress.

He nodded again and fanned his mouth.

Manda followed Angie through a door marked "Employees Only", into a hall just outside the kitchen.

"I want to tell you about a dream I had," Angie said. "But first tell me, what happen with you and Tee's Obeah man. What did he tell you?"

Manda told her everything the man had said, and how reluctant she had been to get in the bath, and that she swore she had seen two yellow eyes watching her. Angie laughed.

"And he gave me some tea to give Sierra," she continued. "But when I tried to get her to drink it this morning, she absolutely refused."

"Of course, she did, that stubborn donkey," Angie said. "She don't recognize when people trying to help her." She held Manda's arms, and her face got solemn.

"Last night, Mama Dove come to me in a dream," she said, referring to their grandmother. "I dream I was walking in the cane field out back of her house, and I hear her voice calling, 'Angie, come up on the veranda.' That's how she always used to call me when she had something to tell me. So I come out of the cane field and up the veranda steps, and I see her sitting in the same chair she used to sit in when she was alive. And she shake her head and say to me, 'The duppies are restless. The Obeah woman stir dem up.' And I ask her, 'Mama, what can I do?' And she say, 'The girl must stop her tongue. She's tempting her own fate'. And Manda, I wake up shaking so bad, Tee had to get out of bed and warm up some milk for me."

"Speaking of duppies," Manda said. "I saw Dar in the road on the way over here. She was standing right in front of Noah's car. But naturally, he didn't see anything."

"Of course not. She don't have no business with Noah."

"But she does with me. How marvelous. So do you think your dream was about Sierra?"

"Who else? Anytime Mama comes to me in a dream, it's always to warn me about something. Like how she come tell me I was gonna lose the baby."

"You lost a baby? Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't know."

"Yes, Ma'am, but I don't want to talk about that now," Angie said. "Manda, you must make your sister stop. She won't listen to me. Tell her she's stirring up more trouble than she knows."

"Sierra doesn't listen to me either," Manda said. "The only person she takes seriously is Nik."

"Then talk to Nik. Maybe he can get through to her."

"Who do you think is spurring her on?"

"You told her about your vision?" Angie asked.

"I tried, but she didn't want to hear it. And she can't bring herself to believe what some old Obeah woman said before she was born."

Angie squatted down and sat on a box. "Let me tell you about something that happen to me when I was jus' finishing high school in Spanish Town. One day I was riding my bicycle past somebody's house. I saw a crowd of people outside, and I asked them what's going on. The people tell me there was a woman inside who could tell you anything about yourself. I didn't believe in that kind of thing back then." Angie let out a laugh, like she had been so naïve.

"So I decide to prove them wrong. I put my bicycle down and go line up with the people. When it was my turn, I went into the woman's house. She made me drop a coin in a bucket by the door, and when I sit down, the first thing the woman ask me was, 'Who's Alfred?' I told her Alfred is my father. The woman said, 'He's a policeman?' I said, 'Yes.' And she tell me my father was gonna meet in an accident, and it would take him a long time to recover. Then she tell me Mama Dove was gonna have a dangerous operation, but she would live. And Lord, Manda, let me tell you – everything the woman tell me would happen, happen just like she said."

“That’s amazing,” Manda said. But it was also frightening. If psychic visions could be that accurate, how could anyone prevent them from happening?

Tee appeared at the hall door. “Manda, your boyfriend wants to know if he should wait for you.”

“He’s just a friend,” Manda said. “Tell him I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Man don’t like to be kept waiting,” she heard Tee mumble as he turned back through the door.

“If I were you, I would have a word with that boyfriend of Sierra’s,” Angie said.

“I’ll try,” Manda told her. “But I can’t promise anything.”

She went back out front to where Noah still sat at the table, sipping more water.

“Are you okay? You look a little upset,” he said, touching her arm as he rose.

“I just need to get home,” Manda said. She was suddenly very glad he had stayed with her for lunch.

Angie walked them outside. “Wait,” she said, just as they reached the car. “I nearly forget something.” She ran back into the restaurant and came out a short while later with two foil dishes filled with food for them. Then she pulled Manda away from Noah, until they were standing under the restaurant’s shaded green awning.

“Here,” Angie, said, slipping a bottle into Manda’s hand. “Take this and put it in a corner of your clothes closet, where it’s nice and dark.”

“Is it some sort of charm? Isn’t it better if I put it in Sierra’s closet?” Manda raised the bottle to her face and peered into it. The bottle was just like the kind from which Angie had poured glasses of sorrel for them earlier. Opaque white, with an orange cap. It was filled with a clear brown liquid that looked like tea, and there were two pieces of folded paper floating inside.

“I guess it could work no matter where you put it,” Angie said. “But I think you should keep it close.”

Manda pushed the bottle down into a corner of her purse. Just one month ago, it would have made her smirk in amusement to hear Aunt Beryl or Sherrie talking about charms and spells and other such things. Now here she was, about to go hide a bottle in her closet, willing to try anything that might change the future for her and Sierra. She was now a hopeful Thomas, as opposed to a doubting one.

Manda thanked her and kissed her goodbye. When Noah bent over to hug Angie, she pulled his ear down and whispered something to him.

“What did she say to you?” Manda asked, when they had driven away from the restaurant.

“Nothing,” he said. But his neck had gone even redder.

“Hmm,” Manda said. She turned and waved at Angie, who gave her a big, exaggerated gold-toothed grin.

And Manda did have a word with Nik the next day, for all the good it did. He came home with Sierra and immediately kicked off his shoes, turned the television to the History channel and made himself comfortable on the sofa. He was soon engrossed in a show about UFO sightings. Manda sat down in the armchair adjacent to him. She held the book Noah had bought for her on her lap. She waited until Sierra went into her bedroom to change out of her Sistah Britain alter ego, complete with yellow leather pants and her white cowboy boots.

“Sierra told me she’s been getting threatening letters,” Manda said to Nik.

Nik laughed and shook his head. “Unbelievable.”

“This is serious,” she said, but then softened her tone. “Nik, don’t you think this whole Obeah bashing has gone on long enough?”

“Listen,” Nik said, looking over at her. “You never stop doing what works. We haven’t had this kind of response since the fat and flabulous topic last year. A whole fat posse, storming the station.” He laughed again. “Boy, that was heavy.”

“Well, as amusing as that might’ve been,” Manda said. “There must be a million other topics Sierra could talk about.”

“Yes, but this one’s a winner. Who knew?” Nik kissed his silver ring. “And when it runs dry, she’ll go on to something else.”

“What about your listeners? They’re offended. Don’t you care if you lose them?”

“Manda, these are just a few nut-jobs who have nothing better to do with their time. Trust me, they’re not going anywhere.”

“Well... there could be consequences.”

“Consequences? What consequences. We’ll gain a bigger audience. That’s good.”

“Is that all that matters to you?” she asked him, her voice tense.

Nik nodded. “Frankly, yes. That’s what keeps us in business.”

“Well, I think Sierra’s headed for an iceberg if she keeps this up.”

“Nah.” Nik turned his attention back to his show.

But Manda wasn’t going to let him dismiss her like that. “Look, we both care about Sierra, and I’m really worried about these threats she’s been getting. I don’t think they should be taken so lightly.”

“Manda, you’re taking it too hard,” Nik said. “As my grandfather always said, don’t let the ship suck you down. Don’t you worry about Sierra. I can take care of her well enough.”

“But what if someone comes after her when you’re not there?”

He fixed Manda with a steady gaze. “They would live to regret it,” he said.

Manda sat back. From the look on his face, she knew he meant it. “Perhaps. But things don’t have to get that far, Nik. Not if you tell her to stop talking about Obeah and go on to another topic. It’s simple.”

“I’m not telling her anything,” Nik said. “Sierra is free to talk about whatever she wants.”

Manda studied the cover of her book. “Well, did you know an Obeah curse may have been behind the sinking of the Titanic?” she asked, speaking to him in a language he could understand. One evening when he had cooked dinner for them at his flat, he had taken Manda from room to room, showing her his collection of Titanic memorabilia. He had a huge painting of the ship hanging in his living room, and on a side table below it was a black-and-white photograph of his great-grandfather, Nicos.

“Where did you hear that?” Nik gave her an incredulous look.

Manda opened her book to the page she had book-marked and passed it to him. She watched his face as he read it to himself.

“Ha. This is funny,” Nik said.

“What’s funny?” Sierra asked, coming back into the room.

Manda looked up and gasped when she saw her. On her sister’s head was a white scarf decorated with butterflies – the exact scarf she had been wearing in the visions just before she fell off the cliff. Before she could stop herself, Manda leaped up as Sierra reached the couch. She snatched the scarf off her sister’s head. She stood staring down at it, clutched tightly in her hand.

CHAPTER EIGHT

At first there was the cloudy gray sky with its tiny patches of blue. Then a forest appeared, hovering in the distance below the sky. The trees rushed up at Manda, and she seemed to be soaring above it and through it at the same time. In another moment, she could see Sierra standing on the cliff. There was the sound of calling birds coming from the trees behind them. She could hear Sierra's sobs, and see the edge of her scarf fluttering in the breeze. Sierra suddenly stepped back, and in another moment she was falling backwards, off the edge of the cliff.

"Manda," Sierra's voice called out.

Manda yelped. She looked frantically about her. She was sitting on the couch, and Sierra was standing before her, a puzzled look on her face.

"What's going on?" Sierra asked. "What were you staring at?"

"I...I..."

"You're practically hyperventilating," Sierra said.

Manda closed her eyes. The last thing she remembered was staring at "The King of Queens" on the television, and then thinking about Angie's dream about their grandmother. Exactly when had she slipped into a vision?

"Didn't you hear me come in?" Sierra asked.

"No, I was..." Manda shook herself. "I'm okay. I just dozed off, that's all."

"Well," Sierra said, reaching into her purse and pulling out a small manila envelope. "I got another letter today. Now tell me if it doesn't sound like Angie." She dropped the envelope in Manda's lap.

"Sierra, can we do this later? I'm...tired." She was still having trouble separating the Sierra who had fallen off the cliff from the Sierra who stood before her, very much alive and well.

"Come on, it'll only take a moment. The letter is really short."

Manda looked down at the envelope. She picked it up gingerly and pulled out the letter. There were other things in the envelope as well. She shook them out onto the coffee table. Two black feathers and something small and dried up. It might have been a tongue from some tiny animal, or a liver or heart. Either way, its vinegary smell made Manda queasy. She unfolded the letter and read it.

Miss Britain,

*I try to talk to you and you spurn me. I write you letters,
but you pay them no mind. From I was born, I never seen
such a stubborn mule like you. But my patience is running
out. I warn you before, and I'm warning you again. You
better hush up your mouth, if you know what's good for you.*

The letter wasn't signed. It just ended where it ended. Manda turned it over, but nothing was written on the back.

"See," Sierra said. "The person said she tried to talk to me. Angie did call me at the station. And she said 'from I was born'? That's Angie's phrase."

“That’s a Jamaican phrase.” Manda rubbed her forehead.

Sierra flailed her arms, just as she had done in the vision as she was falling backwards. “Let me ask you something,” she said. “If Angie confessed to you that she was doing it, would you tell me?”

“Don’t be silly,” Manda said. “Of course I would...I would...” She sniffled.

“What’s the matter?” Sierra asked. “Are you crying? Did Angie say something?”

Manda got up and stepped before her. She threw her arms around her sister’s neck and held her tight.

“Manda, what’s wrong? Tell me,” Sierra said, her voice filled with panic.

“I...I don’t know how to stop it.”

“Stop what?” Sierra held her at arms length. “Is it Angie? She told you something, didn’t she?”

“No, it’s not Angie. Blimey, you’re driving me mad.” Manda stepped back from her.

“Then why are you so upset? It was the letter, wasn’t it? I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have forced you to read it.”

“It’s nothing,” Manda said. “I’m just knackered. I’ve had a long day.” She sat back down on the couch. What was the point of telling Sierra? She would never listen.

“Well, I did also have some good news to tell you,” Sierra said. She bounced down on the couch beside Manda, letter temporarily forgotten. “Remember Theresa’s husband, the MTV exec? He had asked me to send him a tape of my show, and so I did. I sent one of the latest shows. Well, I got a call from his secretary today and guess what? He wants me to come and meet with them.”

“That’s fantastic,” Manda said, trying to sound cheerful on her behalf.

Sierra screeched and pummeled Manda’s shoulder. “Do you know what this means?”

“Ouch,” Manda said, leaning out of the way of her fists.

“It means by this time next year, I could have a television show of my own. Can you imagine that?”

“I can.” She wanted to imagine it.

“So can I. Please God, make it happen.” Sierra closed her eyes. “I want this so much, I can taste it.”

Manda looked at Sierra, so filled with anticipation that she was trembling. “Then I hope you get it,” she said. “I really do. I hope you get a chance to achieve everything you want to in life.”

“Thanks, luv.” Sierra went on to describe what she would do if she had her own show. “So you see,” she said. “Angie might think she’s putting a hex on me with those stupid letters, but she’s actually bringing me luck. But that’s Angie after all. Can’t get anything right.”

When she had flounced off to the kitchen to make them celebratory cocktails, Manda picked up the letter and read it again.

Manda waited until Sierra had hung up the phone after her usual night chat with Nik, and then bid her goodnight with her Sistah Britain sign-off. After Sierra had sunk down into the blue satin nest of her bed, Manda picked up the phone. It was still slightly sticky with the lavender-scented night cream Sierra always smoothed on her face before bed. She called Angie, who answered the phone with a whisper.

“Oh, Angie, I woke you. I’m sorry,” Manda said.

“No, mi’ dear, you never wake me,” Angie said. “It’s Tee who’s sleeping. Just a sec.”

She could hear Angie’s footsteps padding from one carpeted room into the next.

“There, now,” Angie said.

After she had asked Angie about her day at the restaurant and listened to some kitchen stories, Manda told her about her latest vision. This time she had seen a little more, and she knew it would happen by a forest.

“Well, that’s at least something,” Angie said hopefully.

“Yes, now all I have to do is keep Sierra away from every forest in the country.” Why did she have the feeling it wouldn’t be as easy as it sounded?

Now Manda paused. She thought about how she would phrase her question to her cousin, without sounding as if she was accusing her of anything.

“Angie, I have to ask you something.”

“Wait. How’s Noah?” Angie asked suddenly.

“Noah? He’s fine, I suppose.” She wasn’t certain. Since their trip out to Queens, she had seen him three times and each time he had behaved stranger than the last. “Angie, I have-.”

“Is he...being a little sweeter?” Her voice was edged in mystery.

“Sweeter? I suppose he is. But Angie-.”

“How so?”

“How?” It looked like Angie wasn’t about to drop the subject too quickly. She decided she might as well indulge her cousin for a little while. “Well, now that you mentioned it, he has been quite sweet these days. Yesterday, he knocked on the door and when I answered it, he handed me a dozen yellow roses. And then he walked away before I could say a word. Then this morning, he knocked again and handed me a sliced pineapple, and he just smiled and walked away again.”

Angie let out such a loud burst of laughter, Manda had to hold the phone away from her ear.

“It worked,” she said. “Whoopee.”

“What worked?” Manda asked her. What was her cousin up to?

“Manda, I have a confession to make,” Angie said, her voice gleeful. “You no’ see me watching the two of you at the restaurant, but I see everything. I see the way Noah keep staring into your eyes like a love-sick cow. And I thought he seem to like you, and all he need is a little push. So I work a little love spell on him. Now, look at that. It worked.” Angie laughed again.

“A love spell? Angie, what’re you talking about?”

Angie stopped long enough to repeat herself. “I put a little love spell on Noah. Just to help him along.”

“You’ve got to be joking,” Manda said.

“Nope, it’s true,” Angie said. “You know that bottle I did give you the other day?”

“Yes...”

“It wasn’t for Sierra, it was for you. I mix up some water and brown sugar, and I write Noah’s name on a piece of paper and your name on another. Then I put the papers in the bottle, and tell you to put it in a corner of your closet. That way, Noah would come to you.”

“What? Angie, I don’t understand.”

“And, lawks, it worked,” Angie continued. “It’s the same way I did catch Tee. After we did first start chatting, he was too slow and shy and I had to do something to help things along.”

“But Angie, I thought you said you don’t practice Obeah?”

Angie caught her breath. “No, Manda, I don’t do the kind of evil things some of them Obeah people do,” she said. “I wouldn’t hurt nobody. I was just trying to help you get on with your life, seeing as how Noah likes you and such, and you don’t know what could happen.”

“But you know I haven’t gotten over Daniel. It’s only been a month since he left, and as I told you before, I believe we would be married now if it weren’t for that curse. I’m not ready to start anything with anybody else, and I would thank you and Sierra to stop trying to push me.”

“I’m sorry, cuz, I didn’t mean to rile you up,” Angie said, quietly.

“No, I’m not angry, I just...I just don’t want to even think about another guy right now. It would feel like I’m betraying Daniel.”

“I understand,” Angie said.

Manda sighed. “Do you know what Sierra gave me and Daniel for our wedding present? She gave us dolls that look exactly like us. Angie, I know it sounds mad, but...I brought Daniel’s doll with me. I hid it in my luggage. And I sleep with it every night, and talk to it all the time. If Sierra knew, she would announce it on her show and have the whole of New York laughing at me.”

Angie suppressed a laugh herself.

“It’s not funny,” Manda said. “I quarrel with this doll sometimes. That’s not normal, is it?”

“Depends. Do you kiss and make up?”

“Well...”

This time Angie let out a howl.

“Goodnight, Angie. Go back to Tee,” Manda said, irritated. She hung up the phone.

It wasn’t until she had sat back in the chair that Manda remembered what she had called to ask Angie in the first place. It was just as well that she had forgotten. Her cousin might have thought she was accusing her of something, and gotten upset. Manda went into her room and pulled the closet door open. A love spell. Angie is a real nutter, she thought. She bent down to the floor and crawled on her hands and knees under the hanging clothes, past the frowsy-smelling box filled with Sierra’s old discarded shoes. She pushed her hand into the farthest corner and felt around for the bottle until she touched the firm plastic.

“Aha,” Manda said, wrapping her fist around the bottle. She backed out of the closet and stood up, gripping it firmly in her hand. She peered at the pieces of soggy paper drifting inside the sugary brown liquid. Did Angie really think this sweet little brew of hers was enough to ignite love between two people who were, in effect, nearly strangers? Did she think it would be enough to make her heart let go of Daniel, whose love it had cradled like an egg for the past year? Then, ha! Angie had to be as mad as Sierra said she was. And she obviously did not know Manda. She didn’t fall in love easily, and once she did, it usually took a very long time to pry someone from her heart. Noah didn’t have a chance.

Manda walked down the hall to the bathroom. She might have believed many things, but this potion...nonsense. She twisted off the bottle’s orange cap and stood over the toilet. Love wasn’t something you could stir up in a bottle. It wasn’t something you could leave in a dark corner to simmer. Was Angie really that naïve?

She took a nail file from the cabinet and used it to retrieve the pieces of paper from the bottle, not wanting to risk clogging up the toilet. She held the bottle over the bowl. Noah had come to the door twice already, hadn’t he? The way he had looked into her eyes...it was clear that something was going on in his head. Or his heart. But he hardly knows me, she thought. Besides, there was Daniel to consider. She was just tipping the bottle over the bowl when the door flew open, startling her. Sierra stood in the doorway, blue-knickered and bare-breasted, blinking against the light.

“Oh, sorry. I thought it was empty,” she said. She squinted at the bottle in Manda’s hand. “What have you got there?”

"It's nothing," Manda said, fumbling to put the cap back on the bottle. "It's just a drink...I didn't like it. Tasted horrible."

"Is it like that tea you tried to poison me with?"

"No, it's just...something Angie made." Manda held the bottle down by her hip.

"Does it have rum in it? She makes very good rum drinks, I'll give her that." Sierra reached a hand out for the bottle.

"No, there's no rum in it. Go back to sleep."

"Then why are you acting so suspicious?"

"I'm not." She closed her eyes for a moment. Sierra could be so aggravating.

"Let me taste it."

"Fine. Taste it." Manda handed her the bottle.

Sierra twisted the top off and took a swig. She nearly choked.

"Satisfied?" Manda asked.

"Ugh. This is horrible." Sierra grimaced. "Why did she put so much sugar in it?" She poured the rest down the sink, then turned on the tap and rinsed out her mouth.

Manda smiled. If Sierra only knew what it was for...

"Who were you talking to on the phone earlier?" Sierra asked.

"Just Angie," Manda said, for once glad that Sierra had the attention span of a fish.

"Oh, of course." Sierra made a face. "Well? Did she say it?"

"Say what?"

"*From I was born.*" She gave Manda an exasperated look.

"As a matter of fact, she didn't," Manda said. "And even if she did, it wouldn't mean she's guilty, would it?"

"Fine, then if she's innocent, prove it to me," Sierra said. "Then I promise I'll leave her alone."

"Fine."

Sierra yawned. "Now, get out of the bathroom," she said. "I have to pee."

The next morning, Manda rang her mother while Sierra was in the bath. Myrna had just wrapped up an hour of Bertram-bashing with Aunt Beryl. But Manda hadn't called to discuss her father. At least not his latest antic.

"Mum, do you know how Dad is always saying that phrase 'from I was born'? Do you know a lot of other Jamaicans who say it?"

"Did you hear the old bugger's marrying that woman?" Myrna asked.

"Yes, I did. But Mum, did you hear my question?"

"He might think that's the end of it, but life isn't easy, Manda. They will both get what's coming to them, you watch."

"Yes, but Mum I only have a few minutes left on my phone card. I had a question for you." Manda repeated her question.

"Hmmm." Myrna said. "Well, that's an old phrase. A lot of Jamaicans use it. Why do you ask?"

"No reason, Mum. I was just curious."

Myrna was silent for a moment. "How's Sierra?"

"She's well." *Considering that her life is in danger*, Manda thought. She wished she could talk to her mother about everything, but like Sierra, Myrna always cut off conversations she didn't want to have. Instead, she told her mother about Sierra's potentially good news.

"I always thought she would end up on television one day. She was always a little performer," Myrna said. "Tell her I'll say a prayer for her."

"She might be upset that I said anything to you."

"That's alright, tell her anyway."

"She's just come out of the bath," Manda whispered. "Mum, why don't you tell her yourself? Don't you think it's time you two ended this silence?"

Myrna paused. "Would she want to talk to me?"

"I don't know. But you've got to at least try. Maybe if she just heard your voice, she might... she might listen."

"Alright, I'll try," Myrna said.

"Sierra," Manda called out. "Someone wants to say hello to you."

Manda heard Sierra's footsteps coming down the hall.

"Who is it?" Sierra said, peering around the corner.

"They want to surprise you."

Sierra came into the living room wrapped in a blue bath towel. "It's not Angie, is it?" she asked suspiciously, rubbing her hair with another towel.

"Of course not," Manda said, feeling a spasm of guilt.

She took the phone from Manda, a tentative look on her face. "Hello, who's this?" Sierra listened for a moment. "Who...?" Her eyebrows bunched up together. Without another word, she put the phone down in its cradle and glared at Manda.

"I can't believe you did that," she said, her voice shaky. "That was a dirty, horrible trick."

"She wanted to talk to you," Manda said. "She just wanted-."

"So what?"

"So, isn't it about time you two ended this ridiculous feud?"

"Ridiculous? You have no idea."

"But she was ready," Manda tried to explain to her.

"But I'm not ready." Sierra threw the hair towel on the sofa. "And I would thank you to mind your own business."

"Is it so terrible that I want to see my family members getting along?" Manda pleaded with her. "Sierra, you have no idea how painful it's been for me? Dad went off, and now he's marrying some other woman, and you and Mum no longer speak – I feel like I'm stuck in the middle just watching my own family crumble around me, and I can't stop it. You weren't going to come to my wedding, for cripe's sake."

"I told you I was sorry about that," Sierra said. "I wasn't trying to hurt you, Manda. But I have nothing to say to Mum. It's far more complicated than you think."

"Fine, then what about Dad?" Manda asked. "What did he do to you? Why did you stop speaking to him?" It had always seemed to Manda that while she had to practically dance a jig for her father's attention, he had always lavished it freely on Sierra.

"I don't want to talk about him."

"I don't understand. You and Dad were so close. Now you act as if he doesn't exist."

"Not anymore, he doesn't."

"You go on your show and tell other people how to fix their problems, but yet you avoid yours. I don't get it."

"At least I don't try to fix it for them," Sierra said, standing nose to nose with her. "People come to me for advice, and I just tell them what I think. But you always try to swoop in and save the world like flipping Superwoman. Manda, the world can save itself without you."

Manda shook her head at her. "I only want to save my family, Sierra. Is that so terrible? Dad loves you, and so does Mum. But I'm all they have now."

"Yes, you are all they have."

"Ugh, your parents aren't rubbish, Sierra. You can't just toss them away like a pair of old shoes."

"Ha," Sierra said.

Apparently she could.

"Whatever happened to that brooch?" Manda asked. "Do you remember? Did you toss that away too?"

"What brooch?"

"The angel brooch. Don't tell me you forgot about it."

"Manda that was a long time ago," Sierra said. "We were children. Let it alone."

"It should've been mine," Manda said. "Or did you forget that too?"

Manda had first discovered the brooch when she was twelve-years-old. She had been rooting through their parents' closet, trying to see if they had already bought Manda's birthday presents. She had noticed the old wooden box that belonged to Bertram. It had always been in there, but this was the first time she had seen it without its padlock. She pulled it out and pried it open. The first thing that had caught her eye was the little blue velvet box that lay on top of the other treasures inside. She opened the little box and peered at the brooch, resting on a bed of white cotton batting. It was a gold angel with diamond-studded wings. Manda thought it was the most beautiful brooch she had ever seen. She took it out and pinned it to her jumper.

That was when her father had walked in and caught her with the brooch. He made her take it off, and reminded them not to play in his closet. Unlike their mother, Bertram rarely ever raised his voice at them or punished them for disobeying him.

"Daddy, can I have the brooch?" Manda asked him.

Her father patted her on the head. "You're too young."

"I'll be thirteen in three weeks."

"Sorry, you'll lose it. And besides, it's not just any brooch. This one is special." He told her that the brooch had once belonged to her grandmother, Lizzie, who had been the best singer in town. It had been given to Lizzie by Bertram's father, because he thought she had a voice like an angel. Her voice had been the first thing he had fallen in love with, back when they were courting. Since she had no daughters, Lizzie had passed the brooch on to Bertram. He was the only one of her sons who had inherited her voice. Before it came to him, the brooch had been lost three times and had always found its way back to the family. Bertram had put it in his box of treasures to keep from losing it, and had intended to pass it on to one of his own children one day. Hopefully a daughter.

If Bertram had thought the story would make Manda understand why she *couldn't* have the brooch, he was mistaken. Just the very idea of owning something that had once belonged to their grandmother, the great singer, only made Manda want it more. She wouldn't stop pleading with her father for it, until he finally gave in and promised she could have it for her birthday.

And so it had been firmly planted in Manda's brain that in a few short weeks the beautiful brooch that had once belonged to their grandmother would be hers. It was the main reason why she had looked forward to her birthday. When her birthday came, and it was time to open her presents, everyone gathered around Manda's armchair. She opened the ones from her family members first, then from her friends. She finally picked up the one her father had handed to her, already knowing what was inside. But when she tore away the red wrapping paper, the smile

she had been wearing left her face. Instead of the brooch as she had expected, inside the box was a watch – a grinning, white-gloved Mickey Mouse walking across the face with his big yellow feet. What happened to the brooch?

“And here you go, Sierra,” Bertram said, pulling a small box from his jacket pocket. Ever since Manda could remember, he had never given either of them a birthday gift without tossing in a little consolation gift for the other.

Sierra took the box and shook it. When she tore off the paper and opened the box, she gasped. “Oh, it’s lovely! Thanks, Daddy,” she said.

Manda slapped her hand over her mouth. It was the brooch she had loved so much, the one he had promised to give her for her birthday.

Manda sat and watched her father pin the brooch to Sierra’s dress. Sierra turned around to show it to the room and everyone oohed and aahed for her.

“You’re a liar,” Manda said, jumping out of her seat and storming at her father. She had never been one to suffer quietly. “You said that brooch would be mine. You said it. You’re a liar.”

“Oh, lawks, I forgot about that,” her father said.

Manda hurried out of the living room. As she headed for the stairs, Sierra snatched her by the arm.

“Listen, Manda-,” she started to say.

Manda turned and pushed her, harder than she had meant. Sierra banged into the wall, and the wooden rack with the souvenir spoons her mother had collected, slipped off its hooks and fell down on Sierra’s head. Silver spoons rained over her and went tinkling to the floor. Sierra bent over, holding her head in pain. Manda was just leaning down to her, when she saw Myrna and Bertram hurrying towards them. She turned and dashed up to her bedroom instead. She had stayed there, face down on the bed until her father came in to talk to her. He tried to explain how he had originally planned to give Sierra the brooch since she was older, but had forgotten when Manda asked him for it. Manda turned her face away and stayed silent until he left. It was too late for apologies.

The brooch had been the clearest sign to her that their father loved Sierra more than he loved her, if she ever had doubted it before. Yet for all the love he had showered on Sierra, and the many times he had chosen her over Manda, Sierra had ended up tossing the brooch away, and him with it. And now Manda was the one left trying to scrape up the broken pieces of her family and put them back together, before it was too late.

CHAPTER NINE

Manda rushed into the reception area of FM-102 and introduced herself to the two young women sitting behind the wide, boomerang-shaped desk.

“You’re Sistah Britain’s sister?” one of the women said. She put down the stack of mail she had been sorting and stood up and grasped Manda’s hand. She was a tiny thing, with two long braids framing her small face. She looked like a ten-year-old.

“I’m Tamako. Sistah Britain is sooo cool,” she continued.

“Yes, she’s a blast,” Manda said. “Can you tell Sistah...Sierra I need to see her right away? It’s a bit of an emergency.”

“Of course. I’ll go get her.” Tamako turned and hurried over to a door at the back of the room. She punched in a code on the security pad, pushed open the door and disappeared inside.

Manda glanced down at her watch. It was already five minutes to two. Sierra was scheduled to be on the air in a few minutes. Manda had rushed there, hoping to catch her before then. She sat down in one of the soft purple chairs that decorated the waiting area. The walls showed off the large framed posters of the station’s radio personalities. There was Sierra’s poster, across from the man who came on the air at night, and on another wall was the poster of the deep-voiced woman who was usually on in the mornings when Manda got up.

Tamako was back in a flash. “I’m sorry, she wants to know what’s your emergency,” she said, looking sheepish.

Manda frowned in embarrassment. She didn’t want to have to tell this woman her business. “Tell her I’ve lost my keys. I can’t get in her flat.”

Tamako nodded and rushed off again. Manda put her bag on her lap and started to root through the different compartments for the fiftieth time. She didn’t understand how she could have lost her keys. She had always been very, very careful. But it was the news from London that had thrown her off balance. She had rang Sherrie’s number and had gotten happy, yet sad news. Her husband picked up the phone and said that Sherrie was in the hospital. She had delivered a baby girl the day before.

“What?” Manda had said. “But she’s too early.”

The baby had arrived early and taken everyone by surprise. She would have to stay in the hospital for a bit. Manda had then rang Sherrie at the hospital to congratulate her, but had burst out crying on the phone. She had promised her friend she would be there for the birth. She was the closest thing Sherrie had to a sister, and her friend had needed her. But Manda had failed her. It was no wonder she had lost her keys. She had been so upset. And what with seeing ghosts and visions, visiting an Obeah man, worrying about Sierra and everyone else, and not to mention the hell Daniel had put her through lately, and now the surprise arrival of Sherrie’s baby...it was a wonder she hadn’t lost her bloody mind, let alone the keys. She remembered locking the door and dropping the keys in the same zippered pocket in her bag where she always kept them. But when she returned home and reached for the keys, they were gone.

Manda looked up to see Nik hurrying through the door with Tamako following close behind him. He had his mobile phone pressed against his ear.

“Mike, that wasn’t the deal we had,” Nik said to the person on the other end of his phone. He gave Manda a distracted hug as she stood up.

“Where’s Sierra?” she asked him.

“Sierra can’t come out. She’s about to go on the air,” he whispered.

“But I need-.”

“Don’t worry.” Nik dangled a set of keys before her. “You can borrow mine. But don’t lose them. No, not you, Mike,” he said to the person.

“Nik-.”

“Gotta go, Manda. We’ll see you later. I made you that cheese lasagna you’ve been asking for.”

“Well... thanks,” Manda said, then remembered she hadn’t been asking for cheese lasagna. He had just been promising to make her one since she arrived. She watched him disappear through the door again, still in conversation. She knew Sierra could have spared a moment to come out if she wanted to. She had been very cool with Manda ever since she had put her on the phone with their mother. It had been a spur of the moment decision on Manda’s part, and now she regretted it. She had hoped it might be the first step in getting Sierra and Myrna to at least say a few words to each other. But she hadn’t expected Sierra to get so angry. And then when she had mentioned the brooch, it had only made things worse. She had gone about everything the wrong way. Tonight when Sierra got home, Manda would apologize to her again. The last thing she wanted was to cause a rift between her and her sister. A rift could turn into a gap and a gap could turn into an abyss that might separate them forever. She had already seen it happen between Sierra and their parents.

Manda pushed Nik’s keys down into her bag and zipped the pocket up carefully. Tamako tapped her on the shoulder as she turned to go.

“Don’t you want to stay and listen to your sister?” she asked. “I can take you back there if you want.”

“No thanks, I’ll listen from home,” Manda said.

“Okay.” Tamako shrugged her tiny shoulders and headed back to the desk.

Later, Manda would wish she had stayed.

It was the radio that first made Manda realize something was wrong. She had arrived home just after four o’clock after stopping at Macy’s to buy a baby gift for Sherrie. While she fitted the gift in a box and wrote a tearful card to Sherrie saying how sorry she was for missing the birth, she turned on the radio to listen to Sierra’s show. Sierra was in the middle of promoting a contest the station was having. The winner would get an all-expenses-paid vacation for two to Bermuda. After twenty minutes of listening, the subject of Obeah hadn’t come up, and Manda crossed her fingers, hoping it never would. But of course it was too much to ask.

A woman called in to ask Sierra if she had found out yet who was sending her the chicken-feather letters. The mysterious letters had drawn more interest from listeners, who were following the saga like a soap opera, and Sierra was glad to provide them with updates.

“Sierra, drop it,” Manda said out loud to the radio. But as usual, Sierra kept going.

“I can’t prove it yet,” Sierra said. “But I think I know who it is. It’s someone who’s very much into that Obeah-.”

There was a popping noise and the radio went silent. Manda got up and pressed the power button, but the radio was dead. She looked around the room and noticed that the times on the DVD player and the cable box had both disappeared. Manda flicked a light switch up and down, but nothing happened. She tried to ring Angie, but a message came on saying the phone lines

were busy and to try again later. She then tried Sierra at the station next, and got the same message. She sat down with the telephone beside her. It was a power failure, and there was nothing to do but wait until the power came back on. For a moment she wondered if this was Obeah at work, but then dismissed the thought as just paranoia. No Obeah person could be that powerful. But it was strange though, how it had happened right when Sierra had said the word Obeah.

Manda finished up her note to Sherrie and put it in the box with the gift. When she was finished, she went around the flat, cleaning everything in sight to distract herself. Over the next two hours she kept trying to reach Sierra, but she still couldn't get through. She started to feel worried. Darkness was only a couple hours or so away. What if night arrived before the blackout was over, and Sierra still wasn't home? The last thing she wanted was to be alone in the dark. Just the thought of it made her shudder.

Alright. There's no time to panic, Manda told herself. She just had to prepare while there was still light. And as long as she was prepared, there was no need to fear the dark. She would need candles. Candles and flashlights. She searched the flat and found the pink rose-shaped floating candle in the bathroom that Sierra liked to use in her baths. In Sierra's bedroom, she found another candle and a folder of matches, but no flashlight.

By eight o'clock, the electricity was still out and the telephone wasn't working. Manda went to the window and glanced up and down the street. The sky was beginning to darken as the city moved towards sunset. Down at the corner, even the neon sign in the window of the Japanese restaurant was still out. It was usually glowing red by now. Manda felt the first real pang of nerves in her stomach as she watched three people pass by on the sidewalk, swinging flashlights in their hands. The first shadows had started to form in the living room. She took the matches and lit the two candles. As darkness swelled around her, the candlelight grew smaller and fainter. Two little candles really were no match for the dark. She needed more light. She would go down to the shops and buy whatever candles she could find, and place them around the whole flat. She hoped a shop would still be open.

Manda picked up the larger candle. Her purse was on a chair in her bedroom. She wished she had left it in the living room, like she often did. As she entered the hall that led to the room, she felt a puff of wind on her arm and the candlelight went out, leaving her in blackness. She let out a frightened gasp.

"It's just the wind", she said, half-laughing at herself, as if she was trying to calm a child. "Don't panic. Just go back and get the other candle."

She got the second candle and headed back to the hall. But just as she reached her bedroom door, she heard a sound coming from the end of the hall by the bathroom. A soft shuffling noise, like the sound of bed slippers moving along a floor. She felt a chill and the little hairs on her arms stood at attention. She stayed frozen in place, hardly breathing. The shuffling grew louder, as if someone was moving towards her. She peered beyond the tiny candlelight, but saw only shadowy corners. She took a step backwards and the candlelight went out. The hall was now completely black. Manda's heart battered against her chest. She pressed her back to the wall. She strained her ears to the dark, but heard nothing.

Calm down, she scolded herself. Maybe it was nothing. Only...only.... The shuffling noise started up again, closer than ever now. She felt a light breath against her face, followed by a low murmur. *Dar*. Manda put her hand over her mouth to keep from screaming. *Dar* was there. In the darkness with her. *She's gonna get me*, she thought. *I have to get out of here*. But at first she couldn't move, just like in her worst nightmares. She stayed pressed up against the

wall, standing as still as possible. Until something squeezed her left shoulder, and that was it. Manda jumped and screamed. She dropped the candle and ran back into the dark living room, not caring that she couldn't see where she was going. The front door was somewhere off to the right. She ran blindly at it, her arms outstretched. When her hands smacked against the door, she fumbled with the lock and bolted into the hallway. There were no lights here either, but she rushed for the stairs. All she wanted to do was get outside where there were people. But she was moving so fast, by the time she saw the small circle of a flashlight beam appear at the top of the steps, it was too late to stop herself. She slammed right into someone who had just arrived on the landing. She heard a yelp, followed by a clattering and banging as the person went tumbling back down the steps. There was a loud thud, then silence.

"Oh, my gosh." Manda stood at the top of the stairs, staring down into the dark.

"Aaaaah," the person moaned in pain. It was a man's voice.

"Who's that?" she said, stepping forward in the dark.

The man only moaned again. Whoever it was, she had to get to him. She felt for the banister and made her way down the steps to the next landing. She could barely make out the man, sprawled in the shadows beside the beam from a small flashlight.

"Are you alright?" Manda bent down and picked up the flashlight. She shined it in the man's face. "Noah!"

"I think I broke my foot," Noah said, blinking against the light.

"Oh, Noah, I'm so sorry." *Why were they always meeting like this?* "Okay, don't move." She squatted down beside him.

"It's... it's the right one," he said.

Manda gently pulled up his trouser leg and shined the light on his foot. He was wearing dark socks and black dress shoes. She would have to take them off to get a look at his foot.

"Alright, I'm going to help you back to your flat. Just put your weight on me, and try not to move your foot."

Noah groaned. "I was just coming up to see if you needed anything," he said. "Why were you rushing like that?"

"I... I was going to buy candles," Manda lied. Although it was partly true. She couldn't tell him what she had heard and felt in the hall. He would be certain she had lost her mind – especially after what had happened during their drive to Queens.

They made their way over to Noah's door, one slow step at a time. He held on to her with one arm, and used the other arm to balance himself against the wall. Manda kept her arm firmly wrapped around his waist. She could feel his warm, crushing weight pushing against her. When they had almost reached the door, his flashlight slipped from her free hand and clattered down the steps that led to the main landing. The beam disappeared, leaving them in the dark.

"Bugger," Manda said.

She left Noah leaning on the wall and fumbled her way, bum-first, down the steps. She felt around the landing, her palm sliding over grit and something cool and wet, until she touched the hard plastic casing of the flashlight. She pressed the button, but it seemed to be broken. She dog-scrambled back up the steps to Noah.

When they got to Noah's door, Manda helped him inside and into his living room. Two large white candles cast flickering shadows around the room from their place in the middle of the coffee table. She led him over to the couch, and he fell back on it with a loud groan. She cleared some space on the coffee table and slowly eased his foot up, then pulled off his shoe. Then she slid off his sock and balled it up.

“Can you wriggle your toes?” she asked him.

Noah tried to move his toes, but couldn't.

“I think your ankle might be fractured. Do you have a bandage? I can make you a temporary cast.”

“No, I don't,” Noah said. “But don't worry, I'll be fine now.”

“Fine? Sitting here in the dark with a fractured foot?”

“I think I can get around.” Noah tried to move his leg. He howled so loud, Manda had to press her palms to her ears.

“Aw, crap that hurts,” he said.

“Have you got any pain tablets?”

“I don't use pills,” Noah said, through gritted teeth. “Pain is psychological.”

“What do you do when you're in pain then? Just sit there and suffer?”

“No, I hum commercial jingles and tell myself it's not there,” Noah said. “And before I know it, the pain is gone.”

“You're joking.”

Noah closed his eyes and started to hum.

“Then go ahead and hum,” Manda said, getting up. “Do you have anything cold to drink?” Her throat felt like sandpaper.

“Yes, there's water in the fridge,” he said.

While Noah sat there humming his jingles, Manda took a candle into the kitchen and poured them both some water. She felt ashamed of herself for running out of the flat in such a blind panic. Now she had knocked Noah down the steps for the second time. Because of her, he was sitting there in pain, humming silly jingles.

She brought the water back to the living room, along with a dishcloth that she used as a temporary bandage for Noah's foot. He said he was feeling a little better. She sat beside him on the chair, the two of them drinking their waters quietly. She thought about what had happened in Sierra's dark flat. She was glad to be out of there, and glad to be with Noah in his flat.

Manda stared at a flame and remembered her wedding eve, when Sherrie had set up the living room with candles to help her meditate. It seemed like a thousand years ago, yet Manda felt that same bewildered ache she always felt whenever that night came to mind. She gazed around the room, peering at Noah's things, trying to bring her mind back to the present. Standing against two opposite walls were floor-to-ceiling bookcases crammed tight with books. She could make out many self-improvement and spirituality titles among them, along with books about various cultures. Sitting in a corner of a bookshelf, with its legs hanging down, was a doll that looked just like Noah. It was long and thin, with dark curly hair and gray almond-shaped eyes.

“Sierra gave you a doll?” Manda said, pointing at it.

Noah nodded. “It's your sister's official way of saying I love you,” Noah said, smiling. “When she has a doll made in your image.”

“I didn't know the two of you were that close,” Manda said.

Noah pulled off his shirt. “It's boiling hot in here,” he said. He picked up a magazine and started to fan himself.

Manda glanced at him sideways. His stomach was flat like a teenaged boy's, and there was only a smattering of damp, dark hairs on his chest. He was slim-bodied, but toned like an athlete. Daniel, on the other hand, had a soft little stomach that never got any firmer, no matter how many sit-ups he did.

“Are you hot?” Noah asked her.

Manda fanned herself with her hand and nodded. “Maybe I should open a window,” she said. She sprang to her feet and went across the room to a window. She pushed it up halfway and felt the slightest night breeze cooling her face. She closed her eyes and let herself enjoy it for a moment.

As she was on her way back to the couch, she noticed a large antique radio, sitting in one corner of the room. Manda caught her breath. She went over to take a closer look. It was an austere thing, built of solid reddish-brown wood, and hailing from back in the days when radios were made to look like furniture. There were ivory-colored buttons on the face that could be pushed to tune in to different stations that she was sure no longer existed. The names of places like London, Rome, Berlin and Australia were printed along the band.

“Where did you get this?” she asked, stroking the smooth wood.

“The radio? It belonged to my grandfather,” Noah said. He seemed to welcome the distraction. He told her that during World War II, his grandfather used to follow broadcasts about the war on that radio, and that was how he had found out the Japanese were being rounded up and forced into camps. “Unfortunately he landed in one before he could escape,” Noah said. “When he died, the radio was the only thing I wanted, because it reminded me so much of him. Even the smell reminds me of him.”

“It’s beautiful,” Manda said, fiddling with the knobs. “It’s too bad there’s no electricity. I’d love to hear it.”

“Maybe when the blackout is over you can come back and listen to it with me,” Noah said.

“Perhaps,” Manda said, leaving the radio and edging back over to the couch. She sat down beside Noah. “Were you and your grandfather very close?”

“We were,” Noah said. “When I was a kid, I used to spend my summers with him and I would sit for hours and listen to stories about his childhood in Japan. One summer he took me back to Japan with him so he could show me the places he always talked about. It was the most amazing trip of my life. I was his only grandchild, so you can imagine how much he spoiled me. I think I loved him more than my own father.” Noah looked at the radio, and there was sadness in his gaze.

“And all I got when my grandmother died was her favorite pink nightgown, and it was about seven sizes too big,” Manda said. “I thought about reshaping it into something I could fit into, but I couldn’t bring myself to cut it.”

“I also respect old things,” Noah said. “My furniture is mostly antique and my computer was made in 1999, which definitely makes it an antique.”

Manda looked over at the radio again. “Daniel didn’t like antiques,” she said. “He said they depressed him, because the people who once treasured them were now dead and gone.”

“But that’s the beauty of antiques,” Noah said. “They connect us to lives that were lived before ours. In a way, part of their owners survive through them.”

“I think so too.”

“Manda,” Noah said, shifting in the chair to face her. “What went wrong with you and Daniel?”

This time, Manda didn’t back away from his question. Half of New York already knew her business, thanks to Sierra. “Well, nothing really,” she said. “Nothing went wrong with us. Everything was perfect, and he was just as excited about getting married as I was. He was the one who chose what flowers we would have in the church, and he even had us write our own

vows. Then the night before the wedding, he just... fell apart. At first I thought it was cold feet, but it was more than that.”

“What do you think it was?”

Manda looked into Noah’s eyes. “I think it was fate.”

“Fate?”

“Yes, fate wasn’t on our side. Daniel couldn’t help himself.” She picked up a cushion and hugged it. She wanted to tell him about the Obeah curse, but he would think she was ridiculous. He didn’t seem like the kind of person who believed in curses. She hadn’t been that kind of person either, but what she thought she knew about life...about herself...had been snatched from her only weeks before. “We were up against something much bigger than us, and Daniel couldn’t handle it,” she told Noah.

“I don’t think fate is ever against us,” he responded.

Manda gave him a serious look. “So do you think fate was for you, when you happened to be coming up the steps just when I was coming down? Do you think fate pushed me into you and injured you as a favor?”

“Actually, I do,” Noah said. “It’s brought us here together now, hasn’t it?”

Manda looked away.

“Manda, everything happens for an ultimately good purpose. You’ve got to have more faith, or you might miss out on some very good things. Some very good people.”

“And how about you? You’re handsome, and you’ve got a great career. So why are you alone?”

“Well, I’ve been in several relationships that didn’t work out. Sometimes it was my fault, but most of the time we were both to blame. And that’s as complicated as it gets.”

“But aren’t you afraid...worried about ending up alone.”

“No, I’m not. Unlike most people, the thought doesn’t frighten me. Because if that happens, then there would be a good reason for it, and it would be the best possible outcome for my life.”

Blimey, how could he be so stoical? There he was, nursing a fractured foot that must have been painful, and still he managed to have a pristine, one-with-the-universe look on his face.

“Well, you might not mind ending up alone, but I do. Growing old alone can make you go batty. Have you ever heard of Diogenes Syndrome? People start doing bizarre things like collecting dozens of cats, or they stop taking baths. So, yes, the thought of ending up alone frightens me, scares me right down to the knickers. And if that makes me human, then fine. I’m human.” Manda paused and glanced at him.

Noah’s smile was gone. She had hit a nerve. But he looked so serious as he sat gazing at the candle flame, that her feeling of victory was short-lived. Had she been too hard on him?

“I was afraid of death once,” Noah said suddenly.

“You were?” Manda gave him an incredulous look.

He nodded and looked at her. “Eleven years ago, I started getting terrible headaches. I was completing my doctorate at the time, and I thought it was because I was studying too hard. So at first I tried to just deal with them, but one day I passed out in class and they rushed me to the hospital. The doctors discovered I had a brain tumor - a massive one, in a spot that would make it hard for them to operate.”

“Noah, I’m so sorry.” Manda put a hand on his shoulder.

“They tried to make me face reality,” Noah continued. “The survival rate was very low, only about ten percent, and I wasn’t expected to live for even four months. I couldn’t believe it. I thought, how could something like that happen to me? I was strong and healthy, I ate right,

took great care of my health...and now I was dying? I was terrified. How was I supposed to fight this thing? But my grandfather was still alive then, and he said, 'Noah, don't fight against dying. Make peace with living. You know what I think the difference is between the ninety percent who die and the ten percent who live? Most put their faith in the doctors' words. They expect the worst outcome, and they become afraid and the fear feeds the disease. But a few put their faith in something else. They put their faith in surviving, and it works like a medicine. You have to be like that ten percent.'

"And so I listened to my grandfather," Noah continued. "What else did I have to lose? Believe me, it was hard at first, especially after I had the operation. But the less fearful I got, the stronger I felt. Soon I started living like I had fifty more good years ahead of me. There were goals I still wanted to accomplish, and I put my faith in being alive and well. And it worked. It's been years, and the tumor is gone and I'm even healthier than I was before. On the inside and the out."

Manda swallowed the lump in her throat. "When you've been through something like that and survived, it must be hard to fear much else," she said. "I think you're the strongest person I've ever met. No wonder Sierra admires you so much."

Noah put his hand against her cheek. "What Daniel put you through...a lot of people would have gone over a bridge. But look at you. You're resilient...beautiful." He rested his forehead against hers.

"Am I?" she asked. She didn't feel resilient, and she hadn't felt very beautiful lately.

Noah leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers. Before she could stop herself, she was kissing him back, sucking at his warm mouth, breathing in his breath until she felt a painful cramp in her chest.

What am I doing? Manda pulled away from him. "I...I need to get back upstairs," she said. She stood up, her heart pounding.

Noah cleared his throat. "Manda..." He reached out to touch her hand, but she pulled it away.

She turned and stumble-walked across the room, feeling tipsy and light-headed. Just as she reached the hallway that led to his door, she remembered the hand that had gripped her shoulder in the dark. The last thing she wanted was to go back to the flat alone. But she couldn't stay here either. "Can I borrow a candle?" she asked.

"Go ahead," she heard Noah say. She took a candle from the little table by his door, and followed its small halo of light back up the steps. Back in the flat, she put the candle on the coffee table and curled up on the couch.

You've really done it, haven't you? She scolded herself. *You've let things get out of hand.* She saw Daniel's face in her mind. There had been so much between them. Now she owed it to him, and to herself, to try to recover what they had lost. To try and undo what fate had done. Didn't she? Soon she would have to return to her life in England. Where would Noah fit into things? She lay on the couch, staring into the shadows of the living room.

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door. Sierra. She must have finally made it home. Manda picked up the candle and bounded across the room. She pulled the door open, expecting to see Sierra. But it was Noah, standing there in the hall, using a broomstick for a crutch and holding the doorframe with the other hand.

"Noah, what are you...you shouldn't be climbing stairs in the dark," she said.

Noah dropped the broom. He stretched an arm towards her and Manda put down the candle and reached for him, afraid he would fall. As they held on to each other, Noah kissed her again. This time she didn't resist. It felt too good. His kiss was all heat and light.

"Can I come in?" Noah whispered, pausing for a moment.

"Um, alright," Manda said softly. Her voice was almost gone. "But you'll have to behave yourself."

"I will," Noah said, grinning. "I promise."

She led him into the flat and over to the couch. She went into the fridge and poured them both a glass of pomegranate juice. They sat on the couch together and exchanged stories of what they had been doing when the blackout had started. Manda told him how she had found out that her best friend had delivered her baby, and how awful she had felt for not being there. At first she kept a reasonable distance from Noah, but as they talked, she found that they were shifting closer and closer together.

You've got to stop this, she kept telling herself. But it was too late. Angie's love elixir had already taken hold. That had to be the answer. What else could explain the powerful tugging she felt when he raised his cup to his lips and some of the red juice dribbled down his cheek? What else could explain her sudden, consuming desire to grab hold of the body of a man she hardly knew? She couldn't control herself. Something was coursing through her like anesthesia. Once it entered her veins, no amount of willpower could keep her from succumbing to him. Like a patient in an operating room, she could barely count to ten backwards before she was gone.

Now, before Manda could hold herself back, she plucked the cup from Noah's hand so quickly, the last of the juice splashed out. But she didn't care. She leaned forward and tasted the tangy juice on his chin. Then she grabbed him around the head and kissed his mouth. Heat spread through her body from head to foot.

"Come on," she said, pulling away from Noah and standing up. She reached down and hoisted him to his feet. She picked up a candle and Noah hopped after her obediently as she headed for her bedroom. It dawned on her suddenly that they didn't have protection. She left Noah in the bedroom, and it took her only seconds to find a box in Sierra's night table. She took out a few condoms, hoping they weren't enough for Sierra to notice their absence.

Back in her room, she threw the cushions off the futon and flattened it into a bed. Then as Noah dropped down on it and pulled off his shirt, Manda bent and eased his trousers down for him, as she had for many injured patients over the years. She pulled off her own skirt and blouse and lay down beside him. She gazed at his toned, slender body, his long legs that stretched beyond the bottom rail of the futon-bed. Even though she tried not to do it, she found herself comparing his body to Daniel's softer, shorter form. For a moment, she came to her senses and asked herself what she was doing. She felt suddenly naked and self-conscious. But one look into Noah's admiring face as he stared at her from the bed, and she was gone again.

Their love-making was a mixture of intense pleasure, spotted by cries of "Yow", "Ouch", and "Oops, sorry about that", as Noah's injured foot kept getting in the way. Manda tried to be gentle, but whenever he touched her in a way that brought her body to an ecstatic boil, she would react with a force that surprised even her. The first time she felt his tongue flicker against her skin, she kicked him hard on the bad foot. He nearly bit her. They made love by the flickering light of a candle, its scented smoke filling up their nostrils. The smell reminded her of the ocean. She closed her eyes and imagined that she and Noah were lying on the sand before a sea, under the moonlight. The Mediterranean Sea. Her mind flashed on Daniel. This might have been the two of them on their Grecian honeymoon. Daniel was the only man whose body she had touched

this closely in years. She felt a wave of guilt swelling over her, dousing her fantasy. Noah took her face in his hands again and pressed his lips hard against hers. She heard the painful catch in his breath as she accidentally kicked his foot for the umpteenth time. She ran her fingers soothingly through his damp black curls.

“Here, maybe if we turned the other way,” Noah said, rolling onto his back.

Daniel, Daniel. Why couldn't she get him out of her mind? As she eased herself carefully over to his other side, Manda glanced towards the little table by the futon. Daniel's doll was in the bottom drawer where she now kept it. The drawer was slightly open, and she wondered if the doll could see her, if it somehow knew what she was doing. Could the real Daniel sense it too? Another wave of guilt broke over her. But why did she feel so bad? Daniel was the one who had abandoned her, who had left her to grow old without him. She took a deep breath and tried to let the guilt pass.

That was when she heard the shuffling sound again. This time it was coming from the corner near the door. She twisted her head and looked into the shadows. Dar's ghost stared back at her with those hard black eyes. Manda sat up with a gasp.

“What's wrong?” Noah asked, touching her leg.

“Can't you see it?” she whispered, her heart thumping.

Noah pulled himself onto his elbows and looked. “What is it?” he said. “I don't see anything.”

Manda squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again. There was nothing in the corner but the small wastebasket Sierra kept behind the door.

Noah touched her shoulder. “You're shivering,” he said. “Come here, let me warm you up.

She let him pull her back into the safety of his embrace. When she finally calmed down and managed to fall asleep, for the first time in weeks the guy in her arms wasn't made of plastic and other man-made materials.

When they awoke the sun had come up, but the electricity was still out. Manda helped Noah back to his flat to get dressed. Then they made their way outside, where she left him sitting on the front steps while she stood in the street hailing a taxi that would take them over to the hospital. It took nearly an hour, but she finally managed to stop an empty cab.

The hospital was running on emergency generators and limited staff. They returned home several hours later with Noah leaning on a pair of crutches, his fractured foot shielded in a proper cast. They went back to Noah's flat and ate the sandwiches they had picked up at the hospital.

When she went back upstairs, Sierra was home. Manda was so relieved to see her, she ran up and gave her a hug. Sierra said she had tried to call Manda from Nik's place, but couldn't get through the line. She asked how Manda had made out in the dark.

“Not too bad, really,” Manda said. She decided not to tell Sierra about Noah. She had already cleared away all evidence of his visit.

Sierra had brought home the rest of the cheese lasagna Nik had made. She and Manda sat at the table and ate by candlelight that night, listening to the shouts and laughter drifting up from the streets. When Manda looked out the window, she saw the bright circles of light from candles and flashlights as people passed up and down the sidewalk. Sierra suggested they go for a walk. It was better than staying in the dark, hot flat with nothing to do. Besides, there was no food in the fridge, and no more juice or water to drink. They stopped and checked on Noah before they left, and Sierra promised to bring him back whatever supplies she could get her hands on. Noah didn't reveal how exactly he had hurt his foot, and Manda was grateful.

Outside, the air was humid and smelled of smoke and candle wax, and the sidewalk was stained with colorful wax drippings. People greeted them happily as they passed within each other's circles of light. They heard drumbeats echoing in the night, and followed the sound over to Washington Square Park. In the center of the park, a fire had been lit in a huge garbage can and men, women and children danced and spun around the fire, some barefooted, as the drummers played on. Manda had never seen anything like it. It was as if without lights, without computers, pocket electronics and mobile phones, without television and the Internet, people had reverted back to a primitive era. As if these had been the only things separating them from cavemen all this time. Sierra took off her sandals and joined in the fire-dance. Manda soon followed, leaving her own shoes under a tree and letting herself get caught up in the spirit of the dance. It had been a long time since she had felt so free. As she spun, she looked up and could actually see stars peeking through leaves, without the brightness of city lights to blur them out.

When they had exhausted themselves, Sierra and Manda sat down on the grass amongst throngs of people who were heaving, laughing, singing and chatting. The blackout had also brought out the camaraderie in everyone, and they were soon in full conversation with the people sitting around them. A man weaved a wagon through the crowd, passing around bottles of water. A few other people walked around offering food to anyone who was hungry. Manda and Sierra sat with the crowd until they were ready to go home to their beds.

The next day, not having anything to do still, Manda and Sierra went for a walk again. This time they ended up in Tribeca by the river. Around them, people had spread out picnics on the stretch of lawn that followed the river, and some lay back on blankets, tanning in the afternoon sun.

"You know," Sierra said, when they had settled on the grass. "At first when the blackout started, I was very upset. The whole station shut down and nothing was working, no phones, no computers, nothing. We had to walk down fifteen flights of stairs using flashlights. Then I had to walk to Nik's place in heels and when we got there, we thought the lights would come back on soon, but we had to do without power for the entire night. My phone had died, and I couldn't even charge it. But I have to confess, this is actually the most fun I've had in a long time." She looked up at Manda. "What did you do in the dark all by yourself?"

"Oh, nothing," Manda said. "Just...slept."

Sierra eyed her. "You spent the night with Noah, didn't you?" she said.

"What? Huh..." Manda was stunned.

Sierra sat up on the grass. "I'm right, aren't I?" she gasped. "I suspected it the minute we stopped at Noah's, and I saw the way you couldn't even look at him, and the way he couldn't stop looking at you. The two of you might as well had screamed, 'Hey everybody, we had sex.'"

"Shhh. Lower your voice," Manda said. She could feel her face grow hot.

Sierra laughed. "So tell me..."

"Promise me you won't mention this on your radio show." Manda gripped her arm. "Or I'll..."

"Calm down. Of course not. I have my limits, you know," Sierra said. "So tell me. How did it happen?"

"Well, when you didn't come home, I tried to leave the flat to...to get something, but I ran right into Noah and that's how his leg got injured. I helped him back to his flat, and then went back to ours. But he managed to make it upstairs, and...and one thing led to another, and we...we."

Sierra had a grin on her face as wide as the Brooklyn Bridge. “She’s hot-blooded after all,” she said, pinching Manda. “I was beginning to think Daniel had damaged you for good.”

“Please don’t mention his name. I feel guilty enough as it is.”

“Guilty? About what?”

“Daniel, of course. Who else? But it’s like...Noah has woken up something in me, but I don’t know exactly what. Something unnatural.”

“Oh, please, it’s perfectly natural. Noah is a hot guy,” Sierra said.

“So is fire, but it doesn’t mean I should get too close.”

“Well, speaking of fire...” Sierra leaned in closer to her. “He’s really sizzling in bed, isn’t he?”

Now Manda fell silent for a moment. “What?” She gripped a fistful of grass so hard, the blades tore off their roots. “How would *you* know that?”

“How do you think I know?”

“You...you slag.”

“Oh, shut up, it wasn’t like that. Noah and I had a little thing for a while, when I had just moved into the building. Anyway, it was over a year and a half ago, before Nik and I were even an item. In fact, Nik had a girlfriend at the time, but they were having problems. He started inviting me to dinner, and before I knew it the two of us had fallen in love.”

Manda frowned. Sierra and Noah had a thing. This was not good news. Now she knew what Noah had meant when he said they were good friends. And why Sierra had gotten a doll made of him. And why Nik had been so jealous of Noah when they had all sat down to dinner that first time.

“And then what?” Manda asked. “You tossed Noah aside for Nik?”

“No, it was amicable,” Sierra said, defensively. “I told him about Nik, and he said ‘no problem’. And so, we have been friends ever since. That’s what’s great about Noah. He’s not prone to angry, jealous fits like some men are. As he always likes to say, the root of all anger is fear.”

“And what about Nik’s girlfriend? Did she feel amicable about it too?”

Sierra gave her a steady look. “She died.”

“She died? How?”

Sierra shrugged. “Nik doesn’t like to talk about her. She was some ex-deejay who used to work at the station. In fact, he had hired me to replace her. Spacey Stacey, they used to call her.”

Manda lay back on the grass near Sierra. They stayed by the water while sunset played out over the Hudson River and the Statue of Liberty slowly turned from green to black. When the last hint of the sun had vanished from the horizon, and all that was left was a twilight blue sky, Manda switched on her flashlight and followed Sierra through the darkness.

CHAPTER TEN

The blackout was over and the cause was still under investigation. The Americans took their instructions from the *South Park* cartoon to “Blame Canada”, and they blamed Canada. Canada, a country that didn’t like to start trouble, but preferred to send it boomeranging back to its source, put the blame back on America. Manda watched all the news coverage with amusement. What did it matter? Either way, it was over, and there was a reasonable, logical explanation behind it that had nothing to do with Obeah. Angie wasn’t as convinced. When Manda told Angie about her silly notion, her cousin hadn’t laughed as she had expected.

“Could be,” Angie said. “Some of them Obeah people – they have the devil’s power behind them. Remember that last hurricane that did nearly mash up Jamaica? Some people think it was Obeah that cause it. I don’t disbelieve nothing.”

But by the time electricity surged through the city’s veins again and tea could once again be reheated in the microwave, Manda had to agree that it had been the best three days she had spent in New York so far. At one point, they had walked all the way to Central Park, where they had practiced cartwheels on the grass near the merry-go-round until they were dizzy and exhausted. Without television to distract them, without Sierra’s constantly ringing phones and busy schedule, the two of them were able to hold lengthy conversations on everything and nothing, just as they had before Sierra had left England.

The only fly in her soup had been finding out that Sierra and Noah once had a thing, as Sierra had described it. A *thing* was that short path between base attraction and a real relationship, that shaky bridge that could collapse at any moment. And their thing had quickly collapsed, but it had first lead to sex. Sex between Noah and her sister. How could Manda look at him the same way again? That was why, ever since Sierra told her about the two of them, Manda had been avoiding him. If she were about to leave the building, she would peak out the window to make sure she didn’t see him. She didn’t know what she would say if they ran into each other. *Why didn’t you tell me you slept with Sierra? You couldn’t have her, so you thought you’d have the next best thing? Keep it in the family, is that it?*

The blackout had given Noah an unfair advantage. He had caught Manda at a weak moment. For one thing, there was Angie’s love spell, which she now highly suspected had a lot to do with the unreasonable attraction she and Noah had for each other. And for another thing, she had been worried about Sierra that night, and still on edge about what she had heard in the hallway. Then she had felt guilty about injuring Noah in her rush to get outside. But then his kiss – it had rendered her powerless, like Superman and kryptonite. She had felt feverish and lightheaded afterwards. With all those odds against her, how could she have resisted him?

“Do you regret it?” Angie had asked, after Manda had told her about sleeping with Noah.

Manda had thought about it for a moment. “I regret the timing. Noah and I don’t even know each other, and I’m usually very cautious about these things. I don’t usually just dive into the sack with the first bloke who comes along. Blimey, Daniel and I never even got that far. But with Noah... Angie, I didn’t even recognize myself.”

“Well, you can blame it on me,” Angie said. “I never warn you about the spell.”

“No, I have to share some of the blame,” Manda sighed. “It wouldn’t have happened if I didn’t let it.”

It had taken her two days before she could even bring herself to look at Daniel’s doll. And when she did pull it out of the drawer one night, she could have sworn there was a look of sadness and disappointment in its big brown eyes.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she had told it. “Don’t you dare. You were the one who abandoned me, remember? If you hadn’t done that, I wouldn’t be so confused right now. I’m only human.” But Daniel had never cheated on her, and she knew the reason he had left her had nothing to do with any other woman.

“Oh, Daniel, I’m so sorry,” she said, hugging the doll to her chest. “I can’t seem to help myself. I truly think it’s that spell. It’s affected me somehow. I know you’re against things like that, but you always said there were powers in the universe far beyond our comprehension. I can’t fight what I can’t see, can I?”

Noah rang twice the next night, but each time Manda told Sierra to say she wasn’t home.

“Don’t you think it’s time you stopped avoiding him?” Sierra asked her, after the second time. “I mean, he’s the one who should be avoiding you, after all, since you did knock him down the stairs.”

“That was an accident,” Manda said defensively, wishing she hadn’t told her. “And by the way, did you have to mention it on the air? Wasn’t it bad enough?”

Sierra pointed a finger at her. “My listeners love you. They think you’re hilarious.”

“Oh, marvelous. I’m a circus act.”

“Big hair and all. A woman’s hair is her clowning glory,” Sierra said. “Well anyway, Noah’s not asking you to marry him. He just wants to get to know you better.”

“I’m not ready to be known better. And besides, I’ll be going home in a few weeks. Why start something now?”

“Then don’t go home,” Sierra said. “You can get a job here. Don’t you listen to the news? They said there’s a nursing shortage.”

“I already have a job in London.”

“So what? What does London have to offer you, except bad memories?”

“I have a life there. A full life,” Manda said, with less confidence.

“Well, I think Noah is just what you need to get your mind off that Daniel. But don’t worry, I’m through with pushing you to talk to him. From now on, it’s up to you. I’ve got my own problems.”

“Thanks.”

“I got another one of those letters today.” Sierra went into her bag, pulled out a letter and handed it to Manda. It was in the same handwriting as the previous one had been, but this letter was even more threatening.

Miss Britain,

I see you still think you can take step with people. The lights come back on, but you still in the dark. But you have your fun for now, cause it won’t be long before you will wish you had stop-up your tongue. Duppy follow you to your yard and you can’t hide. And that boyfriend-boss of yours will be no help. You watch.

“Sierra, why won’t you just stop?” Manda said. “Why won’t you just drop the subject?”

“Because it’s about free speech. I do a radio talk-show, and that’s what I’m paid to do. I have the right to talk about any subject on my show, and anyone who doesn’t like it, they have the right to turn it off. If Howard Stern had been concerned about trying to please everybody, he

wouldn't be where he is now. So I can't let myself get frightened off by threats, or I'll never get anywhere, will I?"

"Then what about responsibility? Aren't you responsible for the things you say? You said yourself there is power in words."

"But what am I saying that's so terrible?" Sierra said. "People take things too seriously."

"And you don't take anything seriously enough. That's the problem. You've let this Sistah Britain alter-ego go straight to your head. You can't go round casually joking-off everything. It's frustrating, Sierra. People have feelings. They're not your bloody dolls."

Partly because she was a little angry, and partly because it was within reach and she wanted to get at Sierra, Manda grabbed the Nik doll from the corner of the couch and tossed it to the floor.

"Huh." Sierra slapped her hand over her mouth. She ran to the doll and picked it up. "You're sick," she said, turning the doll round and round, as if she expected to see blood.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't be so childish. It's just a doll. It has no feelings, unlike the real people you insist on taunting."

"Just a meaningless doll, is it?" Sierra said. She put the doll on a chair and stormed out of the living room. She came back seconds later carrying Daniel's doll.

Manda opened her mouth, but closed it again, shame-faced. *How did she know?* She had never left it out where Sierra could see it. She felt as embarrassed as she did the time when Sierra had caught her rubbing up in bed with Raggedy Andy.

"Is that why you brought Daniel's doll with you? Is that why you talk to it sometimes? I'm not as blind and deaf as you think," Sierra said, holding out the evidence before her. "So, what have you got to say for yourself now?"

"If you dare mention this on your show, I'll never forgive you," Manda said holding her head high.

"Fine, I won't," Sierra said, smiling deviously. "Now why don't you pick up the phone and give a real man a call?"

A soft thud outside the front door made them both turn around. Sierra walked over and looked out the peephole. She pulled the door open slightly.

"Oh, it's just the newspaper," she said. "But how strange. I wonder who brought it in?" She stepped into the hall, peered down the stairs, then picked up the paper and came back inside.

"It was probably Noah," Manda said.

"No, his foot isn't healed as yet," Sierra said. "He could never get back down the stairs that fast."

Sierra came back across the room carrying Saturday's copy of the New York Times. As she bent over to place it on the coffee table, something slipped out and fell to the floor.

"What's that?" Manda asked.

Sierra leaned over to pick it up, then lurched back and grimaced.

Manda looked down at the small black object, lying on the carpet beside the coffee table.

"It's a chicken foot," she said, gasping. It had been burnt black as if someone had held it over a flame.

"That's disgusting," Sierra bawled.

Manda remembered Angie's big cauldron filled with boiling chicken feet, and a shiver went through her. *No, it couldn't be her.* Angie lived all the way in Queens, and besides, how would she have gotten into the building? The front door was always locked. And from what she knew of Angie so far, she didn't seem to have this kind of pathological streak.

"I know you hate to hear it," Sierra said, hands on her hips. "And I know I can't prove it, not yet anyway, but I still think this is Angie's work."

"Alright, I'm not saying I agree or disagree...but it is a bit strange."

"I don't know how she did it though," Sierra said. She went back to the door and peaked outside, then came back. "You didn't happen to give her keys to my flat for any reason, did you?"

"Oh, Sierra, please."

"Well, I have to ask. How else would she have gotten inside?"

"Then obviously it's not her," Manda said. Although she had plenty of questions herself now. "It might be someone inside the building. Perhaps Noah. Maybe he's secretly angry at you for dumping him for Nik. Or maybe...maybe it's Nik. He does have a key, after all."

"Alright, that's enough. Nik would never do something like this," Sierra said. "And besides, you never did give him back his key after you locked yourself out." But Manda thought she saw a spark of doubt in her eyes. "Anyway, Nik is taking me to a play, and then I'll be spending the night at his flat. He's coming to pick me up soon, so I'll thank you not to bring this up. He'll go on the war-path if he finds out someone is coming right to the door now."

"Then Sierra, why don't you stay home tonight," Manda said. "I really don't feel comfortable staying here alone. Not when strangers are lurking about."

"Come on, you'll be fine," Sierra said. "Besides, Nik is already on his way so I can't change my mind now without a big fuss."

"I'd rather if you'd just stay home," Manda said, knowing it was hopeless. If she could have found a way to stop Sierra from going, she would.

"Well, as I said before, give Noah a call and go down and spend some time with him. He would love it."

After Nik had come and spirited Sierra away, Manda put on the door's chain-lock and turned on nearly all the lights in the flat. She sat in the living room and flipped through each section of the newspaper, looking for any type of clue that might shed some light on who might have put the chicken foot in there. She saw nothing suspicious, except black smudges in the Arts and Leisure section, between the pages where the foot had been placed. The only articles on those pages were about a new dance company, and a young soprano who had broken onto the New York opera scene. Manda skimmed through the articles, but could come up with no connection between the subjects and the foot. She folded the newspaper and dropped it back on the coffee table.

She needed someone to talk to, someone who might be able to calm her fears about the whole thing. Someone like...Noah. She picked up the phone and looked at it, then put it back down again. She went into the bathroom to tidy up a bit, and spritzed herself with a little of Sierra's perfume. When she was done, she took her keys from her bag and went downstairs.

"Noah, how are you?" Manda said, standing at his door, trying to look and sound as casual as possible.

"Hi," Noah said hesitantly. He had swapped his crutches for a cane, and now he leaned on it and asked her, "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. How're you feeling?"

"Pretty good," he said, nodding. "I'll be able to walk without this thing in a couple of weeks."

"That's great."

"I'm glad to see you, Manda."

She looked down. "Listen," she said. "I want to explain something. I know it might seem like I've been trying to avoid you-."

"No need to explain," he said, opening the door wider. "Here, come in. I want you to hear something."

Manda followed him down the hall and into his living room. She wondered how she would bring up the subject she had come to discuss.

Noah's coffee table was lost under a mass of paper and notes. "I'm working on a draft of my next book," he said, stacking the papers together in a neater pile.

"Oh yeah? What's it about?" Manda asked.

"Love," he said. "As it relates to fear, of course."

"Really? What could love and fear possibly have to do with each other?" She smirked at him.

Noah grinned. He hobbled over to the antique radio. "I've been playing around with this," he said. He twisted a knob and the numbers on the radio's face lit up with a yellow glow. The radio let out a loud moan that grew louder and louder as Noah turned up the volume.

"It's not used to being played anymore," he said. He fiddled with another knob. As he turned the dial past the stations, between the static they heard first a German voice, then an Italian song.

Manda got up and went to stand beside him. "Noah, this is marvelous," she said.

"That's Rome," he said. He turned past that station and they heard a Spanish voice rolling out what sounded like a news report.

"Here's London," he said, turning the dial again. The British news was on and a female voice was reporting on Americans and the Iraq war.

"Nothing really changes, does it?" Manda said, remembering how he had said his grandfather used to listen to war updates on this same radio.

Noah shook his head. "Same thing, different wars." He twisted another knob and now they heard various AM stations from nearby. He stopped at a classic oldies station where the song "Hey There Lonely Girl" was playing.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked, touching her elbow.

"What about your leg?" she asked.

"I'll be fine. No back-flips, I promise."

He leaned his cane against the radio. He took one of Manda's hands in his, put his other hand around her back and gently pulled her close. They rocked in place before the radio. She could feel his gaze fixed on her face, but she kept her own eyes focused on the buttons of his blue shirt. Her heart clip-clopped along in her chest like a runaway horse. The last time she had danced this close with anyone, it had been with Daniel. She felt that familiar wrenching guilt. Then as if surfacing momentarily from a dream, she remembered why she had come to see Noah.

"Noah, I want to ask you something," she said to him.

"Hmm. What is it?" He leaned forward and brushed his lips against her forehead.

She felt a tingle below her belly button. "Have you ever heard of...?"

"You smell so sweet," Noah said, flicking his nose against hers.

"Did you ever hear about...?" She could hardly think straight.

"What do you want to ask?" He gave her a light kiss on the ear.

"I want...I just want to..."

Noah pressed his lips against hers and closed his eyes. One touch, tongue-on-tongue, and the question in her head flickered out like a candle.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Manda leaned back in her chair and stared at the computer screen. The afternoon sunlight pouring through the window made the picture on the screen look dull and faded. It was a photo of Nik and Sierra at an awards show a few months earlier. Sierra had been nominated for a media award, but hadn't won. In the picture, the grins on her and Nik's faces barely hid the disappointment in their eyes. Manda focused her attention on Nik, standing there with his arm fixed around Sierra's waist. This was about the seventh picture she had seen of him and Sierra together, and Manda had stared into his eyes in each one, trying to see if there was anything strange lurking there. Ever since she had heard about his dead girlfriend, he had been popping into her mind more and more.

She hadn't even gone online to do a search on Nik. She had wanted to find out more information about Obeah. What did it mean if someone sent you a chicken foot? And a burnt one at that? After reading several accounts of people who had received animal body parts in the mail, she still had no idea what to think. Had the chicken foot in the newspaper been a warning, or a promise? Either way, it had left her frightened and so worried that someone might be lurking around, that after she came back from Noah's, she had kept most of the lights in the flat on all night.

She had gone downstairs to confide in Noah about the whole thing, but before long she had found herself folded up in his arms on the couch, the two of them listening to his radio and chatting about their school days. The time had gone by so fast. Their conversation had been light and happy, and she had forgotten why she had come to see him. She hadn't even brought up him and Sierra. Three hours later, she had reluctantly climbed back upstairs to her bed, afraid that otherwise she might land in his. Daniel's presence still trailed her like a ghost, and no amount of Noah's kisses could keep him away for very long. Noah was both a comfort and a distraction, but she still loved Daniel. He had been the biggest part of her life for most of the past year. Only weeks ago, he had given her a card in which he had written,

*To my soul-mate,
Until I met you, my glass was only half full,
But now it runneth over.*

And she knew he had meant it, because Daniel didn't know how to mask his love. Manda cupped her hands behind her head and looked up at the white ceiling. What did she really know about Noah anyway? Except that whenever he looked into her eyes, she felt a warm stirring in her belly. And whenever he touched her, it sent tiny shockwaves flowing through her entire body. And his kisses were like morphine to her pain.

The telephone was ringing. Manda sprung out of her chair and hurried into the living room to answer it. She had left a message on Sierra's mobile, but hadn't heard from her since she went off to Nik's the night before. But the number on the caller id wasn't Sierra's. It was a London number. Manda snatched up the phone and said hello.

"Minchie, darling, it's you," Aunt Beryl said on the other end.

“Aunt Beryl,” Manda said in surprise. It was the first time anyone had called her from England since she had left. “Is everything alright?”

“It took me seven tries before I got your number right. I was about to give up.”

“How’s Mum?” Manda asked.

“Well, I did see Myrna the other day, and she don’t look good at all.”

“What’s wrong with her?” Manda pushed aside some magazines Sierra had left on the couch and sat down.

“I don’t know, but she look drawn and out of sorts.”

“But is she actually ill?”

“Minchie, she’s always bothered with one thing or another. But I’ve never seen her so unhappy-looking. I think you should come ‘ome and see about her.”

Manda let out a breath. “Aunt Beryl, I really need to be here right now. I’ll only be here for another few weeks. Less than that, actually.”

“Yes, but a lot can ‘appen in a few weeks’ time.”

“Then why can’t you look after her until I come back?”

“Because I’m not the one she needs, Manda. She’s your mother. She give birt’ to you.”

“And she’s your sister, Aunt Beryl. And you can help her too, just like I’m trying to help my sister.”

Her aunt was silent for a moment. “How’s that sister of yours anyway?” she said, finally.

“Things aren’t going very well,” Manda said. “Sierra still isn’t taking me seriously. That’s why I need to be here, at least till I can make sure she’ll be alright.”

“Well, there’s something else I wanted to tell you...nah, never mind,” Aunt Beryl said.

Never mind what?” Manda asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing, really. I don’t think you’d want to ‘ear about it, so it was bad of me to bring it up.”

“Bring what up?”

“Nothing, love. There’s no point rehashing old feelings. And I’m not one to get into other people’s affairs as you know.”

“Aunt Beryl, if you have something to say, just say it.” She wasn’t in the mood for games.

“Well, if you must know...Milton took me to dinner over at Covent Garden last night. Manda, they have a fancy new Italian place over there and you’d just love it. I know ‘ow you love your pasta and cheese-.”

“Aunt Beryl, what happened?”

“Keep your knickers on, I’m getting to that. When we got to the restaurant, lo and behold who do you think comes waltzing by?”

“Who?”

“That Daniel, the devil’s spawn himself.”

“Daniel? Oh.” Hearing his name was like a blow to her gut. Manda sat down on the couch.

“Yes, there he was, wearing his Sunday best. Said he was coming from some play or another, but the boy was so nervous he was stumbling over his own tongue.”

“Nervous? Why was he nervous?” *Aunt Beryl had seen Daniel.* She couldn’t believe it.

“Ah, well, he didn’t expect to see me, did he? He’s lucky I didn’t smack him, after what he did to you.”

“Did he...” Manda took a deep breath. “Did he ask about me?”

“That wretch? No, but I said ‘Manda’s fine, in case you want to know’.”

Manda felt her heart deflate. *He hadn’t even asked about her.* “Was he...by himself?”

“Well, not at first, but she went into the restaurant without him when we start talking.”

“Who was she?” It felt like someone had wrapped a fist around her heart.

“I don’t know, Minchie. Some woman who was standing beside him, dressed up like a Christmas cow.” Aunt Beryl started to tell her how, back when she was a child in Pebble Beach, every Christmas townspeople would choose a special cow and paint its face, put a fancy hat on it, and hang a wreath around its neck. A man would dress up like a clown, bang a cymbal and lead the cow down the road with a crowd of people following after them. The poor cow would moo along, never knowing the Christmas feast specialty was stew beef.

Manda slapped a hand against her forehead. “What did the woman look like?” she asked, cutting off Aunt Beryl’s story. She didn’t want to hear about some bleeding cow.

“Minchie, what does it matter?” Aunt Beryl said. “He never introduced the woman, but as I said, I don’t like getting into other people’s business.”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. I don’t care, and I wish you hadn’t mentioned it in the first place,” Manda said.

“Well, I did tell you, you wouldn’t want to ‘ear about it. Now you’re all ‘urt, and you probably want to blame me.”

“No, I don’t blame you. I did ask, and I’m sorry. So let’s just drop the subject, alright?” “Fine.” Aunt Beryl went on to tell her about Milton, his good points (he had bought her a gold bracelet, and he never let her touch the check) and his shortcomings (only five inches when he was excited).

After she hung up the phone, Manda curled up on the couch and turned on the television. She stared blankly at the images onscreen, not seeing or hearing them. All she could think about was Daniel. It had barely been six weeks since he had left her. How dare him forget about her so soon, when not a day went by without him coming to her mind? And to think how much she tortured herself every day because of her feelings for Noah. And how guilty she had felt after the blackout. It seemed Daniel had instantly moved on with his own life. Manda spent the next hour throwing herself a pity party, complete with tears and tea. Sierra’s dolls watched the tragedy with indifference from their seats around the room. She needed to get out of the flat before she did something awful, like skewer one of those dolls. She washed her face and grabbed her purse.

Outside, the bright sun gleaming down from a cloudless sky was like a glaring counterpoint to the thunderstorm that was raging inside her head. She walked west, then headed uptown along Fifth Avenue. By the time she looked up, she had reached the corner of Fifty-Ninth and Fifth, where Central Park began. Pedestrians, mainly tourists, jammed up the sidewalks and paths, and stood gawking at the sites and taking pictures of themselves. The air smelled of manure, mixed with the perfume of some late-blossoming tree. Manda stepped out of the way of a white horse with a purple plume on its head, pulling a white carriage behind it with a couple inside. Other horse and buggy teams were parked along the sidewalk while their owners, one dressed in a beige top hat and waistcoat, solicited tourists for rides.

Manda kept walking, past the girl who sat stiffly in a metal chair, fidgeting with her mobile phone while an artist drew a pencil sketch of her. Past the vendors selling prints of New York streets and landmarks, and pencil drawings of celebrities like Audrey Hepburn, Mick Jagger, and Lucille Ball. She stopped for a minute to listen to a man playing a jazz piece on his saxophone. Beside him was an open case with coins and dollar bills scattered inside on the red velvet. When he finished his song, she dropped a bill in his case and moved on.

This was exactly the sort of distraction she needed, and she soaked it all in like a healing balm for her aching heart. She entered the park and walked towards the only unoccupied bench she saw. It stood along the path across from a green lake. As she passed a couple stretched out together on the grass, the woman's head nestled comfortably on the man's chest, Daniel sprung back to her mind. She felt the gloom wash over her again. Why had she prompted Aunt Beryl to tell her details she really hadn't wanted to hear? Daniel didn't want her back. He had already found himself a girlfriend. She could barely believe it. Swallowing this truth was like swallowing a stone with nothing to wash it down. Her throat ached. She felt ill. What would happen when she returned to England? What if she ran into him?

Manda sat down on the bench and watched two children scramble up the face of a big rock that sat by the water. She closed her eyes for a few minutes and listened to the city-symphony of taxi horns, children's laughter and a multitude of voices. When the vision came this time, she was even less prepared for it than she had been before.

Again, there was the cloudy sky above her with its little blue patches, and the forest spread out below her. She heard the birds calling around her. Now she could see Sierra standing on the cliff. Her silk scarf flapped in the wind, and tears ran down her face. But this time, as Manda looked on, a hand suddenly shot by her – a man's hand, pale, with a red mark on the back of one wrist. She saw the flash of a silver thumb ring with a snake carved into it...and then Sierra was falling backwards, with that look of horror on her face. Manda reached for her. She heard the horrific scream...

And her eyes flew open. The children on the rock had turned to look at her. Had she been screaming? She was gasping for breath like someone who had just been rescued from drowning.

"Miss, are you alright?"

Manda's head flashed around. An old man stood nearby, squinting at her through a pair of thick bifocals. "What? Um..." She glanced around for her bag. It was lying on the ground between her feet. She snatched it up, and staggered away from the bench, clutching her bag to her chest. She had to get home and call Angie.

When Manda got home, she collapsed on the couch, exhausted and trembling. She had taken the train back home, but the vision had stayed with her all the way on the ride. Over and over again, she saw the hand flashing by her, with its silver thumb ring. *Nik's? But how...why?*

She picked up the phone and rang Angie at the restaurant.

"Angie," she stammered, when her cousin came on the line. "The vision. I had it again. It was worse than ever. I saw his hand, and a silver ring, and Sierra...she fell, and..." She realized she was babbling.

"And what happened?" Angie asked. "Start from the beginning."

"Daniel," Manda blurted out. She was crying. The bugger didn't deserve her tears. She told Angie what Aunt Beryl had said about seeing Daniel.

"You poor wretch," Angie said. "But why did my madda tell you that? She love gossip too much."

"Well, I did ask her, didn't I? But that's not all," Manda said. "I needed to get out of the flat, and when I went to Central Park, I saw another vision." She described what she had seen to Angie.

"What a thing to happen, back to back," Angie said. "But you really think it was Nik?"

"I saw his thumb ring. Who else's would it be?"

"Uh-huh. I hear you. But why would Nik push her? Unless something's going on that you don't know about."

"I don't know." Manda closed her eyes. "Sierra's very secretive. I can't imagine why he would want to hurt her, but I saw it happen."

"Listen. Why don't you come by the restaurant? Let me feed you some soup."

"No, Angie, I can't. I have to talk to Sierra. This can't wait."

"Alright, but call me later. I want to know you're okay."

Sierra rang just as Manda hung up the phone. Her voice was drenched in excitement. She wanted Manda to come out and meet her and Nik at a function in a couple hours. She said it was important for Manda to be there, but she didn't say why.

Manda wondered how she would face Nik. And how she would get a chance to talk to Sierra, with Nik always hovering close by. Would Sierra even believe her? Not bloody likely. But she would have to listen. Her life depended on it.

The event was at a large West Side club called Passion. It was a private function to promote the opening of the club, and most of the people there were journalists and other people in the media. There was a dance floor on the first level and multiple lounges and bars on the other two levels. Loud music echoed throughout. Colorful fluorescent lights lit up the main floor, and there were neon-lit yellow, purple, blue and red rooms on the two upper levels of the club. The whole effect was mind-numbing, a shock to the senses. Manda felt like she was on another planet.

Sierra was wearing a form-fitting white dress, and her white Stetson hat sat on top of her head. As they roamed about the club, people kept coming up to chat with her and offer her compliments. On the second floor, they found themselves in a large open space. Glass-enclosed showers had been set up on stands around the room, and in each one there was a woman in a spandex mini-dress dancing under running water. Fluorescent lights built into the showers over their heads turned the water to different colors as they danced. Nik went up to one of the showers to get a closer look, and Sierra latched onto his arm and tugged him away.

Trays of hors d'hoerves were spread along tables on one side of the room, and a chocolate fountain flowed into a basin in the middle of a table, surrounded by islands of desserts. Nik hooked a marshmallow on a stick, and stuck it under the chocolate waterfall. He held a napkin under the dripping marshmallow as he chewed on it. Sierra picked up a doll-sized burger and bit into it. She and Nik stood grinning at each other. Manda watched them together, trying to pick up any clues that could possibly turn her vision into a reality. Sierra's birthday was less than two weeks away now. Somewhere in that time, Nik was going to push her over a cliff. It didn't seem possible.

When Nik went to look for a bar, Manda and Sierra found themselves a free table and sat down on the soft round seats.

"Did you cut yourself?" Manda called across the table to her, when she noticed a bandage wrapped around one of Sierra's fingers.

"Oh, just a little cut," Sierra said, staring at her hand and smiling. She seemed quite proud of it.

"Sierra, I have to talk to you about something. It's very important. Urgent, actually," Manda said. "Can we go outside? It's too loud in here."

"Wait," Sierra said. "Nik and I have some news of our own. I think you should hear ours first." She squirmed around in her seat like a child in church. She glanced over Manda's shoulder and waved her hand.

Manda turned to see Nik beckoning to Sierra, who got up and hurried towards him as if she was all too glad to get away. They both disappeared around a neon-lit pillar. Manda sat alone at

the table, watching people pass back and forth, carrying drinks and little paper plates covered in hors d'oeuvres. She wondered what it was that Sierra wanted to tell her. When she saw them coming back to the table, Nik holding a bottle of champagne and Sierra carrying three glasses, Manda frowned. Sierra put down the glasses and Nik filled up each one.

"Champagne," Manda said. "What's the occasion?"

Sierra gave her a sheepish smile. "We've got some good news," she said.

"What?" Manda didn't like the way they were looking at her.

Sierra pulled away the bandage that had covered the bottom half of a finger. "We're getting married," she said, revealing a diamond engagement ring that hadn't been there before.

Nik pulled Sierra to him and kissed her on the side of her head.

Manda stared at the gold engagement band on Sierra's finger.

"I still can't believe it," Sierra said, grinning.

"When...when did this happen?" Manda asked, frowning.

Sierra's grin disappeared. She looked at Nik, who rubbed her shoulder. "Well, you see, Manda, it was about six weeks ago, before you arrived. I couldn't bring myself to tell you, seeing what happened...between you and Daniel, I mean. It just never seemed like the right time. But now, we want to share it with you."

"Oh..." Manda took a big gulp of her champagne. *Was this what the two of them were whispering about, that night she had arrived? The thing Sierra hadn't wanted Nik to mention?*

"Manda, are you okay?" Sierra asked, touching her hand.

"I...I don't know what to say, that's all."

"You could say 'congratulations'," Nik said.

Manda looked at him. This was the man who was supposed to hold her sister's fate in his hands. The one who would bring about the Obeah woman's curse. She felt a chill go through her, looking at him now. What did you say to a person who was supposed to do something terrible, if they hadn't done it as yet? If there were no physical way to prove they would ever do it?

"Well?" Sierra said, her eyes growing worried.

It was like a standoff. Manda opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again. She pushed back her chair and stood up.

"Where are you going?" Sierra asked, standing up herself.

"I need some air." Manda turned to walk away.

"Manda," Sierra said, grabbing her arm. "What was it you wanted to tell me?"

"Oh..." Manda glanced at Nik, who stared back at her with curiosity. "We'll talk when you get home," she told her sister.

"I won't be home tonight. I'll be with Nik."

"Sierra, no, you have to come home. It's important."

"What is it about, then?"

"I...I can't tell you here."

"Why not? Is it because you don't want Nik to know? Listen, Manda. I don't hide things from Nik, so you might as well tell me."

Manda glared at her. "That's right. But you have no trouble keeping secrets from me, do you? Well, go on then. Stay at Nik's. I'll just go home." As she walked away, she heard Sierra calling after her, but she didn't look back.

When she got outside the club, she leaned against the wall and looked up at the dark night sky. Her chest burned. She didn't know whether it was the champagne, or Sierra's news. Or

both. So, Sierra and Nik were engaged. At any other time, she would have been happy for her sister. But in the space of hours, she had found out that the man who had practically dumped her at the altar had already moved on with his life; and her sister had been engaged all along, but was hiding it from her. Now she knew why Sierra was always hiding her notebook. It wasn't just a birthday party she was planning. She was also planning her wedding. Manda could have forgiven Sierra for being secretive about it. Sierra had been trying not to be insensitive, after all. But the real problem was, Sierra was engaged to Nik, the man who was soon going to push her off a cliff unless someone stopped him. So there was nothing to say congratulations about. Now there would be no turning back. No convincing Sierra that she should run while she still could.

Sierra stayed at Nik's that night, and never even rang to say anything. But the next evening, she came home. She hardly spoke to Manda, and when she did, her words came out as hollow as a doll's.

"Sierra," Manda said, when she saw her standing before the bathroom sink later that night, brushing her teeth. "About the other evening...I'm sorry I walked out on you in the restaurant."

Sierra studied her for a moment in the mirror. "That's alright. Really."

"No, it's not alright. I shouldn't have run off like that. I didn't mean to ruin your evening."

"You didn't ruin it." She spat toothpaste into the sink and rinsed out her mouth.

"But still. I was rude, and you didn't deserve that. I'm just worried about you."

"Thanks, but you don't have to worry about me."

"Yes, I do. Sierra...I had another vision. But this time-."

In the mirror, she saw Sierra roll her eyes.

"But this time, I saw why you fell." Manda leaned against the door. "I know you might not believe this...I know it might sound crazy to you – it does to me too – but it was Nik. He pushed you."

Sierra stopped in the middle of rubbing night cream into her cheeks. "Nik. Nik pushed me," she said. "Manda, you've lost your bloody mind."

"Sierra, I'm not mad. I saw his hand and his ring," Manda said. "I'm not making this up."

"How can you say something so awful?" Sierra wheeled around to face her. "Nik would never hurt me. He's always bending over backwards to protect me."

"I know, I don't understand it myself. But Sierra, I'm sorry, I saw him do it."

"Manda, you were dreaming. Have you ever considered that?" Sierra put her hands on her shoulders. "That's all it was. You had a nightmare, but now you have to let it go."

"But Sierra-."

"I understand, Manda. I get it. You're going through a very rough time, and your mind is in flux." Sierra brushed down Manda's hair with her hands. "Just yesterday I had to tell a woman it was time to stop grieving over her runaway boyfriend. I was thinking of you when I said it. Just let it go, luv. Let it go."

"It wasn't a dream..." Her voice sounded feeble in her own ears.

"Shhh." Sierra wrapped her arms around Manda and patted her back. "The nightmares will be over soon. I promise." She kissed Manda on the forehead, then went into her room and shut the door.

The nightmares would not be over soon. Manda spent most of the night awake, rolling from one side of the futon to the other. She didn't know what to do. Time was running short. Sierra's birthday was only a couple weeks away, but she had no idea how to get her away from Nik. She remembered how Sierra had mentioned Nik's previous girlfriend, when they were sitting on the grass during the blackout. *How did she die anyway?* Sierra said Nik didn't like to talk about it.

Manda wanted to know more about that woman. She wished there was someone.... Manda sat up in bed. There was one person who might be able to tell her something. Carmen. Sierra's friend.

The evening that Sierra had returned from Connecticut, they had gone on a girls' night out with her mates. Carmen had had a little too much to drink, and she started making snide remarks about Nik, until Sierra got up and walked away. Carmen had made no secret of her dislike for Nik. She said he was too controlling, and he was going to squash Sierra if she didn't watch out. She told Manda that she had been friends with Nik's old girlfriend, and she said he used to try to control her constantly. But at the time, Carmen had failed to mention that the woman was now dead.

As soon as she got out of bed the next morning, Manda found the business card Carmen had given her, and called to ask if they could get together later in the day. They agreed to meet at a Starbucks in Greenwich Village, close to Triple One FM, the competing radio station where Carmen worked.

Manda had already been there for twenty minutes before Carmen arrived. When Carmen sat down, she said she didn't have much time to talk because she was on her lunch break and had to meet a client straight afterwards. The café was crowded, and the line was already long when they joined it.

"It's hot in here," Carmen said, even though the cold air conditioning was making Manda shiver. Carmen lifted up her hair with one hand and fanned the back of her neck with the other.

Manda noticed a tattoo on her back, a clenched red fist at the end of a wrist rising out of her shirt collar. Sierra had said Carmen had been through a lot. She had a history. Manda wondered what kind of history would have prompted that tattoo.

By the time they ordered some lunch and dashed at a table that had just been vacated, another ten minutes had already passed. Beside them, a policeman sat at a table reading a copy of the New York Post. The radio strapped to his belt was on, and static and scratchy voices rose up from it. Most of the people at the other tables sat before open laptops. Some had headphones on, possibly to drown out the melancholy singer with the trembling voice whose CD was currently playing. Manda sipped her tea through the little hole in the cup's plastic lid and nibbled at a blueberry scone. She could feel the rumbling of the train in the station underneath them. Carmen opened her tuna salad sandwich and scraped out half its contents.

"I'm on a diet. Trying anyway. But this, I can't resist," she said, opening her cup of raspberry mocha frappuccino and slurping at the layer of whipped cream on top.

"Mmm," she said, closing her eyes and smiling. She opened her eyes and laughed when she saw Manda's face.

Everything about Carmen was big, from her head-full of black curls that spiraled down her back, to the over-long lashes that jutted out over her eyes like awnings, and the wide mouth that she would open even wider to let out her loud, howling laughs. She wasn't one to hold anything back, and had probably never kept a secret in her life. Manda had felt instantly comfortable around Carmen from the moment they had first met.

Manda took a deep breath. The strong scent of coffee flowed through the air. The smell enervated her, even though she rarely ever touched coffee. "Carmen," she said, leaning forward and lowering her voice to a near-whisper. She didn't want to waste any more time. "Tell me about Nik's girlfriend. The one he was with when he met Sierra. What was their relationship like?"

"Stacey?"

“Yes, Stacey.”

Carmen gave her a curious look. She fingered a black rubber band that was fitted around her left wrist. “Stacey was one of those people you would want to face a tribe of cannibals with,” she said.

Manda squinted at her.

“She was a very good friend,” Carmen explained. “And she could make a friend out of anybody. Kind of like Sierra. But Stacey had one drawback. Nik. He was always trying to control her, and she was always letting him. Used to drive me crazy.”

“Kind of like Sierra,” Manda echoed.

Carmen nodded. She gave Manda some examples of things Nik had done, in his crazed efforts to control Stacey and take over her life. He would never let her out of his sight, and had even gotten her a job at his radio station so he could keep an eye on her. It all sounded so much like his relationship with Sierra.

“He’s a control freak. I wish Sierra would dump his ass. He’s such a freakin’...” Carmen stuck a finger under the rubber band on her wrist and snapped it. “Ouch. Damn it.” She snapped the band again and grimaced.

“Pain therapy,” she said, before Manda could ask what the daylight she was doing. “My boyfriend says I got a good heart, but a rotten mouth. He thinks I swear too much, so I’m trying to cut down. You know, if it hurts enough, you’ll stop. So now every time I curse – or get tempted to light a cigarette – I snap this thing.”

Manda stared at the red bruises on Carmen’s wrist. “I hope it’s working for you,” she said.

Carmen barked out a laugh, although Manda was quite serious.

“Um, Carmen, I hope you don’t mind if I ask you, but...how did Stacey die?”

Carmen put down her frappuccino. She wiped away her whipped cream mustache. “She drowned.” Her face had lost its laughter. “In her backyard swimming pool, of all places.”

“How awful,” Manda said. “Was Nik there when it happened?”

“Oh, he was there alright.” Carmen sat back in her chair. “According to Nik, the two of them had been drinking by the pool. The ratings at the station had gone up, and he said they were celebrating. Then he got a headache and went up to bed without Stacey. And when he woke up later that night and she wasn’t beside him, he went back down to the backyard and that’s where he saw her. Floating in the pool.”

Manda shuddered. “Did they figure out how it happened?”

“They said she was drunk,” Carmen said. She shook her head slowly from side to side.

“But you think Nik had something to do with it,” Manda said. She glanced at the policeman, who was sipping at his coffee, still lost in his paper.

Carmen gave her a steady look. “All I’m saying is, I knew Stacey since grade school. She was the one who got me the job at the station. And I can tell you that Stacey wasn’t a big drinker, and there is no way in hell she would’ve touched a drink that night. Not willingly anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the coroner said she had an alcohol level in her system somewhere over 4.0, I forget exactly how high. But here’s the thing. Three nights before that, Stacey told me she was pregnant.”

“Pregnant. Really?” Manda leaned forward.

“Yup. And she was afraid to tell Nik, because he always said he didn’t want any kids.”

“So do you think...do you really think he-.” Manda could hardly say the words.

“Oh shit, I’m late,” Carmen said. She sprang up and grabbed her bag from its place on her chair arm. “Gotta go. Let’s continue this another time, okay? Maybe over dinner soon. I’ll give you a call.”

“Alright. See you,” Manda said, as she watched Carmen dashing for the glass doors. She sat and finished up the last dregs of her tea. She wondered if Nik really had anything to do with his girlfriend’s death. If he did...oh shit was right.

Manda rang Angie at the restaurant when she got back home. She told Angie about Sierra and Nik’s plans to get married, and then about her conversation with Carmen.

“Oh, Lawd,” Angie said when she was finished.

“I’m so upset, I can hardly breathe.”

“Of course.”

“Angie, I’ve got to get her away from Nik. I’m willing to do anything.”

“Well, you know the woman I tell you about? The one who sells charms and stuff from her basement? I’m gonna go to her and get a bottle of Obeah oil. We need to protect Sierra from that man.”

“What should I do with the oil?” Manda asked. “Put it in her food?” She remembered how she had tried to get Sierra to drink the special tea the Obeah man had given her, but Sierra wouldn’t touch it.

“All I want you to do is call me when she goes to sleep tonight.”

“Why? What do you plan to do?”

“You just call me and I’ll drive straight over.”

“Angie, I don’t think it’s a good idea. I can get it from you tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry, I can bring it tonight. I remember when Sierra falls asleep trumpets could sound, but she’s not waking up.”

“But what if she does?”

“As I said, don’t fret. I know what to do.”

“Why don’t you just tell me what to do, and I’ll do it myself?” Manda insisted. She could imagine the scene that would ensue if Sierra found Angie in her flat.

“Listen, she already don’t like me, but I don’t want her turning against you too. She’s your only sister.”

That night, Manda waited until she saw the band of light disappear from under Sierra’s bedroom door, then she hurried to the phone and called Angie.

“She’s in bed,” she told her.

“Okay, I’m on my way,” Angie said.

“But what are you planning?” Manda asked. Was she going to soak Sierra’s toothbrush in Obeah oil and say special words over it? Spike her nonfat yogurt? Angie wouldn’t specify, except to say she needed to do it herself, and not to worry because she would be there and gone before Sierra even spun around twice in her sleep.

Manda sat on the couch and flicked through the television stations while she waited for Angie to make the drive from Queens. She found one of her favorite channels and watched Laura Ingalls tangle with Nellie Olsen on the prairie.

“Here,” Angie whispered, when Manda let her through the door an hour later. “I brought you some curry chicken and rice. Give you a break from all that Yankee food.”

“Thanks,” Manda whispered back. “I’ll have it for dinner tomorrow.”

Angie pulled off her long black cardigan and dropped it on the couch. Underneath, she was dressed in pajamas – yellow happy faces on a white background – and she had a pair of white

trainers on her feet. Her black wig had been put on slightly twisted, which made her face seem a little lopsided.

“Oh, Angie, I didn’t mean to drag you out of bed,” Manda said, taking Angie’s sweater and hanging it on a hook beside Sierra’s white hat.

“Don’t worry. I was trying to get friendly with Tee, but it wasn’t happening. That wrinkly little worm of his wasn’t rising for any occasion.”

Manda quivered. This was far more information than she needed.

“Anyway, this is more important. I can sleep later.” Angie pulled a clear plastic bag from her purse. Inside was a two-ounce glass bottle filled with a pale yellow liquid.

“Obeah oil. It’s very powerful,” she said, holding the bottle up before Manda.

“How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing, darling, it’s on me. But I’m doing this for you, not for her. I know she’s your sister, but that wretch could stand to learn a good lesson. She have the nerve to accuse me of sending her death threats. What a piece of cheek.”

“She’s just confused,” Manda said, patting Angie’s pajama-clad shoulder. “But for the record, I don’t believe it’s you. I told her you would never do anything like that.”

“Thanks, cuz.” Angie gave her a gold-toothed smile. “So, which one is Sleeping Beauty’s bedroom?”

“It’s up the hall, second door on the right. The bathroom is beside it. All the products are Sierra’s, except the ones on the left side of the cupboard. Those are mine. Or if you need something from the fridge-.”

“You know, since that wretch move here, she never invite me over even once.”

“Yes, sorry about that. Will you need anything?”

“Maybe just a piece of paper towel. I don’t want the oil running everywhere.”

“Alright. I’ll be back in a second.” Manda turned and headed for the kitchen. The savory smell of curry chicken drifted to her nose. It stirred her stomach juices, and she had a sudden desire to have a little taste. Normally she wasn’t a night eater, but the salad she had made herself for dinner was long gone, and Angie’s food did smell good. She put the bag on the counter and took out a plastic container filled to bursting with chicken and rice. She opened it and let the scent warm her face. Angie had even put a set of plastic cutlery in the bag, and Manda used the little knife to cut off a chunk of chicken. Oh, it tasted so good. She cut off a little more and shoved it in her mouth, then quickly packed the food back up and put it in the fridge. She unrolled a few pieces of paper towels from its holder on the wall and left the kitchen.

When Manda came back into the living room, Angie was gone. She must have been in the bathroom going through products, trying to decide which one to use. But when Manda reached the bottom of the hall, she saw Sierra’s bedroom door standing open. Angie was nowhere in sight. Manda’s skin flushed cold. She tiptoed towards the door.

Manda peered into the room and saw Angie standing beside the bed, holding the bottle of oil. Her heart practically stopped. In the dim glow pouring through the open curtains from the streetlights outside, she saw Sierra lying sprawled on her back, fast asleep and snoring lightly. The blanket was down around her waist, and her bare stomach and chest were exposed. Manda saw Angie fumbling with the bottle’s cap.

“No, Angie,” she whispered, gripping the doorframe. “Don’t-.”

But it was too late. Angie had already tipped the bottle over Sierra’s chest. The liquid oozed out and spilled down on her, running between her breasts.

It all happened so quickly, as Manda would remember it. Sierra bolted upright with a loud gasp. Her eyes flew open and she stared wildly about her. When she saw Angie, she pulled back again with a cry.

“Whaaa. Who-?” Sierra’s chest heaved as she tried to catch her breath. “Manda?”

Manda stood rigid in the doorway. “I’m over here,” she said through a parched throat.

“Who...who’s this? What’s happening?” Sierra scrambled to her knees.

“It’s me, Angie.”

“Angie? What? *Angie?*”

Manda flicked on the light switch by the door and stepped into the room.

Sierra looked down and brushed at the oil draining down her chest and onto her bedsheets.

“What’s this? What’re you *doing?*” She looked back at Angie.

“It’s just oil,” Angie said innocently. “Just some oil.”

“Sierra, I can explain,” Manda said, resisting the urge to run.

“It’s to protect you from Obeah,” Angie said.

Sierra stared at her for a moment. Then, like a lioness springing at its prey, she lunged up at Angie and grabbed her around the head. Angie screamed. She went crashing to the floor, with a mostly-naked Sierra pinned on top of her. The bottle flew out of Angie’s hand and went sailing through the open closet door.

“Help me, Lord!” Angie bawled, as Sierra thrashed on top of her.

“Sierra, stop.” Manda raced around the bed. She grabbed Sierra’s arms and tried to pull her off Angie. “Stop it.”

But Sierra wasn’t letting go that easily. She shook Angie by the shoulders, while Angie tried uselessly to push her away.

“Leave her,” Manda said, hooking Sierra around the waist, accidentally stepping on poor Angie’s leg.

Angie let out a yowl. Manda finally managed to pull Sierra up, and it gave Angie time to wriggle out of her reach. As she tried to get to her feet, Sierra snatched at Angie’s wig and pulled it off.

“Run, Angie, run,” Manda yelled.

And Angie ran, but Sierra was after her in a flash, with Manda right behind her.

As Angie sprinted for the front door, Sierra tossed the wig after her. It bounced against the back of Angie’s head and fell to the floor.

“Angie, your wig,” Manda said, snatching it up and hurrying through the door after her.

Angie didn’t even look around.

“Wait,” Manda yelled from the landing.

But Angie bounded down the steps in her pajamas, the little braids on her head flattened against her scalp. Manda sighed. At least Angie had worn her running shoes.

CHAPTER TWELVE

To say Sierra was livid after Angie's night visit, would have been putting it gently. Her anger was like a fire raging from room to room as she stormed back and forth, practically naked, with Manda following after her. She had really let Manda have it.

"Have you two lost your flipping minds? What the daylighters were you doing?"

Manda tried to explain it to her as reasonably as she could, but it only made matters worse.

"A protective what? A spell? Are you two bloody witches now?"

"No, it was innocent, really."

"Innocent? Do you have any idea what it's like? Waking up and finding some mad woman pouring oil on you?"

"She didn't think you'd wake up."

"Arghh," Sierra screamed.

"I'm sorry. Don't blame Angie, it was my fault," Manda told her.

"And what will you do when you're angry with me? Stick pins into my doll?"

"No, it's not like that. We were trying to help you. Really."

"By giving me a stroke?" Sierra grabbed her head. "My head is pounding."

"Why don't you go back to bed? Get some sleep." Manda reached out to touch her shoulder, but then decided against it.

"How can I sleep after that? I'm afraid I'll be sacrificed."

"Um... would you like a head massage?"

"A head massage?"

"Tea?"

But whatever power it was supposed to possess, the Obeah oil couldn't stop what was about to come. It had been too late already, as Manda would soon find out.

On Sunday evening, Manda was going around the flat emptying the rubbish bins that Sierra usually liked to leave until bits of rubbish started falling on the ground. Rain battered against the windows, rattling the glass in their frames. Manda had forgotten to close her bedroom window, and water had leaked in and drained on the floor. She had to cancel her trip to a local ATM, where she wanted to get some money to pay Angie back for the Obeah oil. Once she had taken an old towel and dried up the water, she had ended up washing the whole floor. From there, she had just continued to clean. Sierra was hurrying back and forth between her bedroom and the bathroom, getting ready for an evening out with Nik. They were going to sample the food of a Midtown restaurant that also had a catering business. Sierra still hadn't settled on a caterer for her birthday party, although nearly everything else was in place. She had searched the racks of all her favorite stores, trying to find the perfect party dress. When she hadn't been able to settle on anything, Nik chose one for her – a brown silk dress with a little flare at the bottom and white lace trim across the chest and hem. It reminded Manda of an old lady's slip. Manda could tell Sierra didn't like it, but she oohed and aahed just enough to make Nik think she did.

As Sierra's birthday drew closer and closer, her excitement grew, along with Manda's dread. Now, there was less than two weeks to go before the big day, and things were about to get worse.

Sierra and Nik were now engaged, and Manda and Angie consorted day and night about what more could be done. So far, they had no answers.

When Manda went into Sierra's room to empty her bin, she saw the last thing in the world she had expected to see. It was lying beside the bin by Sierra's closet door. An innocent-looking little pink and white box. Manda picked it up and was about to toss it in with the other rubbish, when she saw the words written on the side. *Home Pregnancy Test*. Home pregnancy test? What was that doing-? Manda slapped a hand over her mouth. No, it couldn't be. She flipped over the box. On the back was a diagram of a hand holding a blue strip to show what a positive result looked like.

"Oh, hell." She dropped down on Sierra's bed, her mind reeling. *Could Sierra be pregnant? No, she couldn't be. She didn't look pregnant. And if she was...no, she couldn't be.* Manda stared at the box in her hand and thought about what Carmen had said. Nik's girlfriend had been pregnant when she died. If Sierra really was pregnant now... Manda slapped a hand over her mouth. She got up and hurried out of the room and into the bathroom, where Sierra stood before the mirror, lips spread wide as she painted on a coat of wet-looking pink lipstick.

"What do you think of this color?" she said, glancing at Manda. "Does it match my complexion?"

Manda didn't answer. Sierra looked at her through the glass. When she saw the box in Manda's hand, her lipstick grin disappeared.

"What's this?" Manda asked, dangling the box in the air.

"What does it look like?" Sierra said, shrugging. She dropped the lipstick and picked up the bottle of glass cleaner that Manda had left by the sink. She spritzed blue liquid on the glass.

"Well? Aren't you going to explain?" Manda stood there, tapping one foot on the floor. Sierra's reflection wavered before Manda like a face under water.

"Explain what?" Sierra reached over and unrolled a handful of toilet paper. She rubbed the paper on the mirror, spreading lint all over the glass. It looked worse than before.

"Come on, don't play games," Manda said. "What's this box doing here? Are you pregnant?"

Sierra sighed. "So now you know. What about it?"

"You're pregnant?" Manda smacked her hand against her forehead. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Excuse me, but I don't owe you an explanation," Sierra said, her voice cool.

"So you were going to let me go back to England and find out about it?"

"No, of course not. I would've told you eventually."

"Eventually? Well, at least now I know why Nik suddenly wants to get married."

"No, that has nothing to do with it," Sierra said, finally turning to face Manda. "I just found out myself a few days ago."

"What did Nik say about it?" Nik had said he didn't want children.

Sierra turned back to cleaning the mirror. "That's none of your business."

"Come on? What did he say?"

"Nothing. He was surprised."

"Happy surprised, or angry surprised?"

"I'm sure he's happy. Why wouldn't he be?" Sierra said, but her voice had a ring of uncertainty to it.

Manda shook her head in disbelief. "This is horrible."

“Why? Manda, what’s your problem? And why were you going through my rubbish anyway?”

“I wasn’t going through your rubbish, I was cleaning.”

“Look. Let’s just drop this. Nik is on his way over, and I don’t want you to upset him.”

“But how did this happen? You’ve got a whole drawer full of condoms for goodness-.”

Manda stopped talking as one of Sierra’s eyebrows flew up.

“How do you think it happened? I stopped using protection when Nik proposed. Either way, what does it matter? We *are* getting married.” Sierra pushed past her and walked out of the bathroom.

Manda crumpled up the pink box and tossed it into the rubbish bin. She followed her into her room. This was not an issue she was willing to let Sierra just dismiss, as she always dismissed any difficult subject. “Listen,” she said. “Sierra, I want to be happy for you, but I can’t lie. I believe you’re headed for trouble. Serious trouble.”

“I don’t want to hear anything else you have to say.” Sierra picked up a pair of black and white striped jeans that lay on her bed.

“No, Sierra will you listen? This is important.” Manda snatched the jeans from her and tossed it back down. “I spoke to your friend, Carmen-.”

There was the sound of a key in the front lock.

Oh, great, speak of the devil, Manda thought. Nik always had horrible timing.

“What does Carmen have to do with this?” Sierra asked.

But before Manda could answer, Nik peeked into the room. He was soaked from head to foot, and his black hair lay flat against his head like a hood.

“What’s going on?” he said, looking from Sierra to Manda, his face puzzled. “What were you two yelling about?”

Neither of them said anything for a moment.

“What?” he asked again.

“Manda’s upset because she found out we’re pregnant,” Sierra said.

Nik looked at Manda. “Why would that make you angry?”

Manda didn’t answer. This was between her and Sierra. It wasn’t a discussion she wanted to have with Nik.

“First she was upset about our engagement, and now this. I give up,” Sierra said.

Nik pulled off his wet shirt. He went into the bathroom and came back rubbing his hair with Manda’s blue bath towel. “So, Manda,” he asked again. “Why are you angry?”

“Maybe she’s just jealous,” Sierra said.

“Well, after what happened with her boyfriend, can you blame her?” Nik bent down and pulled off his wet socks.

They were talking about her as if she wasn’t even there.

“You know damn well this isn’t about jealousy,” Manda said. She caught a whiff of cheese and plugged her nose. Nik had the smelliest feet in the world.

“Then what is it about?” Sierra asked.

“I don’t want to discuss it in front of him.” Manda crossed her arms.

“Anything you can say to me, you can say to him.”

“Yes, go ahead. Tell me, what’s going on?” Nik said.

Manda scowled as he rubbed her towel against his hairy chest. If they wanted the truth, she would give it to them. “Just tell me something, Nik. Do you really want this baby?”

“What? Why would you ask me that?” Nik said.

Manda took a deep breath, trying to slow her racing heart. "Just answer the question."

"Manda, for God's sake-," Sierra started to say.

"Listen, Manda, I get it," Nik jumped in. "You're going through a hard time, and maybe, just maybe you're having trouble seeing Sierra happy right now."

"That has nothing to do with it," Manda said. "And please don't use my towel to dry yourself. That's disgusting."

Nik threw the towel on the bed. "Then tell me, what does it have to do with?"

"I think..." How could she say it? He would just deny it. No, it had to be said, because her gut told her it was true, even if Carmen hadn't said a word. Even if Sierra herself wanted to ignore it. "I think-."

"Manda, you shut up right now," Sierra yelled.

"What do you think?" Nik asked, stepping towards her.

"I-."

"That's enough," Sierra screeched. "Manda, I swear, if you don't shut up, I'll never talk to you again. I won't."

"You're upsetting your sister," Nik said, turning to Manda. "It's not good for her to get upset in her state. I think you should leave."

"Leave? You can't make me leave."

"Yes, get out." Nik went over and put his arm around Sierra's shoulders.

Manda stared at her sister. "Sierra, say something."

Sierra rested her head against Nik's.

"Well, if that's what you want, I'll leave. I'll leave your room. And while I'm at it, I'll just leave your flat too."

Guilt obviously wasn't their forte. Neither of them objected.

"Well, goodbye, then. And good luck. You'll need it." Manda stormed out of the room and slammed the door behind her.

"Sierra's pregnant," Manda said to Angie, when they were alone in her kitchen later that evening. A few hours earlier, she had rung up Angie and told her Sierra had kicked her out in the rain, and now she had nowhere to go. Angie had told her to come stay with her.

"Pregnant? Oh, lawks." Angie was at the counter slicing up peppers for her hot sauce. She turned around and pushed up the plastic goggles that had been covering her eyes. She was wearing a white cotton lab coat and yellow rubber gloves, and her head was almost lost under a large blue shower cap. She looked like a mad doctor.

"I think you should get a refund for that Obeah oil," Manda said, through the cloth of the mask that covered her own nose and mouth.

"I should've poured it on her punani," Angie said.

"Yes, you should have."

"Well, what now?" Angie pulled off her gloves and dropped them in the sink.

"What do you suggest?"

"Me?" Angie said. "No, man. I'm done."

"Then I'm done too," Manda said. "All I've ever wanted to do is protect her, and now she's stabbed me in the back. That's it." Sierra had betrayed her. She had chosen Nik over her own sister. She hadn't even tried to stop Manda from leaving, but instead had stayed in her bedroom with Nik while Manda had packed up one of her suitcases and left. Thinking about it made her stomach go sour.

"No, you can't be done," Angie said. "She still needs your help."

“But you know what she’s like. You try to help her, and she ends up turning against you. Look at how you gave her a place to stay when she got here, and now she won’t even speak to you.”

“I know, but she’s the one sister you got.”

“Not anymore. Sierra doesn’t want her family. She only wants Nik.”

“Well, you can’t let no man come between you and your sister,” Angie said, wagging her finger at Manda. “Listen, I got three sisters over there in England, and I could pass them on the street and not even know them.”

“Angie, right now you’re more of a sister to me than Sierra is.”

“Look. I have more reason to be angry with her than you do,” Angie said. “First, she come accuse me of sending her curses by mail. I don’t like it that she’s still going on her show to make fun of something she don’t understand, but I don’t hide my feelings in anonymous letters. And then she go chase me out of her yard like a duppy.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Manda said. “I’ve got your wig and your cardigan in my suitcase.”

“Thanks,” Angie said. “But as I was saying, she’s your one and only sister, so you can’t give up on her. Anyway, right now I have my own problems to deal with.”

“Sorry Angie, I keep running on about my troubles, forgetting that other people have problems too. What’s wrong?”

Angie looked towards the kitchen entrance. She leaned closer to Manda as she spoke.

“I don’t know what to do with Tee. Now he start backpedaling about Florida, just when we should be packing up. Landlord is offering him a new lease for the restaurant and he wants to take it. But Manda, I can’t wait five more years to get out of here. Doctor says I’m still fertile, and I get the feeling when we get to Florida, it will young-up Tee and we can have a pik’ney before it’s too late. Problem is, Tee likes his New York life, except he don’t like the cold. I don’t think he really wants to start over in Florida, and I’m the one pushing him. But I tell him, that’s five more winters to think about, and when cold catch your behind you’ll regret it. I don’t want him to sign that lease.”

“You really don’t think you can have a baby in New York?”

“We been trying for years already, and we’re still getting nowhere.”

“And you really believe it’s the place?”

“Like I tell you before, it’s either that or it’s a curse. Either way, we may never know if we don’t give Florida a try. But look at that. Some women - all a man has to do is look at them crossways, and they’re pregnant.”

Manda brought her elbows to the table and rested her chin in her hands. “Yes, but now that Sierra is pregnant, it’ll be impossible to separate her from Nik. And time is running out fast. Her birthday’s right around the corner.”

“Then you must go talk to her again,” Angie said.

“And tell her what?”

“Tell her you were just concerned about her, and you’re sorry.”

“Sorry for what? I want to be happy for her, but not under these circumstances.”

“All the same,” Angie said, going back to the sink and her peppers. “It’s better than seeing her dead.”

The next day, Manda went to the restaurant with Tee and Angie. The girl who normally worked alongside them had been sick all week. Manda thought helping out was the least she could do, after Angie had taken her in. She spent the morning helping Angie prepare food and roll out roti skins. Tee went off to pick up supplies for the restaurant and when he came back, he

went to the kitchen to chop up goat meat. For the most part, Angie kept Manda away from the stove, afraid she might burn herself. Manda wondered how on earth Angie could work in such an unbearably hot kitchen, six days a week, without going mad.

When the lunch crowd started coming in, she went out front and helped Angie fill containers with food orders. She had never worked in a restaurant before, but it didn't take long for her to get the hang of it. And the work was good for her nerves.

"You're great with the customers," Angie said. "I soon hire you and fire that lazy gal. But she's his cousin's daughter, and Tee has a bleeding heart. No' true, Tee?" She looked over at her husband, who now sat before the cash register.

Tee nodded. "Man got to put family first."

"Exactly." Angie went over and planted a kiss on Tee's cheek. He broke into girlish giggles that made both Angie and Manda laugh.

Manda watched them as they teased each other. Angie was small, sturdy and round, and Tee was a good two heads taller than her, and frail as an old man. Physically, they were Jack Sprat and his wife. But none of that mattered. They clearly connected on a level that was far beyond the physical, and Manda admired what they had.

By three in the afternoon, the crowd was gone and only a few people sat at the tables. Manda stayed out front to serve food and do some cleaning. She turned on the radio and tuned to Sierra's show. She wanted to see if Sierra had finally dropped all the talk about Obeah, but she kept the volume low so that Angie wouldn't hear it. Everything was fine at first. Sierra was wrapping up an interview with a bloke who had written a book about how a person's name could hold them back in life. But after the interview when Sierra started taking calls, a woman got on the phone and brought up the subject of Obeah again. And Sierra went on her usual tirade. What was wrong with Sierra? Why didn't she just tell her callers to drop the subject?

Manda turned off the radio and went back to her cleaning. She was busy wiping down the top of the glass counter when she felt eyes staring at her. She looked up and saw a woman sitting at a corner table, steadily watching her. She was an older woman, around sixty-ish, dressed in a blue frock with a sunflower print on it. A blue scarf was tied around her head. Something in the woman's black eyes made Manda shudder involuntarily. She looked down. When she glanced back up, the woman was still watching her. Manda left the counter and went into the kitchen, where Angie was at the sink washing pots with a long hose.

"Angie, do you have a moment?"

"Everything irie?"

"Yes, but there's this strange woman sitting out there, who keeps staring at me.

I was just wondering if you might know her."

Angie turned off the water and wiped her hands on her apron. She followed Manda back through the tiny archway that separated the kitchen from the front of the restaurant. The table where the woman sat only moments ago was now empty.

"She's gone," Manda said, glancing around.

"Well, as long as she don't come back," Angie said. "Sometimes a few neighborhood crazies come wandering in here, but Tee usually give them a little something and send them right back out."

Angie went back to the kitchen and Manda stayed out front. For the rest of the day, she glanced at the door from time-to-time, watching for the woman with the chilly black eyes. Fortunately, the woman didn't come back. But that wasn't the last Manda would see of her, as she had hoped. Not nearly.

Manda took Angie's advice and went to the radio station to meet Sierra the next day. All the way there, she thought about what to say, how to apologize without making things worse. She didn't want to get into another quarrel with Sierra, and so she planned her words carefully.

The sun was setting by the time Manda arrived in the city. As she headed towards Sierra's office building, she saw her come out one of the glass doors in front. Her eyes looked downcast under her white hat, and her mouth was set in a frown. Manda felt a stab of pity for her. She was still as upset about their fight as Manda was.

"Sierra," she said, hurrying over to her sister.

Sierra looked up and when she saw her, she pursed her lips. "Come for round two, did ya?"

"No, I didn't come here to fight. Do you have a minute? Are you meeting Nik somewhere?"

A flash of hurt crossed Sierra's face, but she quickly put a mask over it. "Nik's busy," she said, raising her eyebrows.

So that was the real reason she was upset. She and Nik had a fight. "Alright. Well, I came because I wanted to say I'm sorry."

"Sorry about what? Sorry that I'm pregnant?"

"No, Sierra please. Don't start."

"You're the one who started this."

"Fine, but I'm here to end it."

"End it? I thought you did that the other day when you abandoned me for Angie."

"I didn't abandon you, you abandoned me." Manda took a deep breath. She hadn't come here for this. She had come to make peace, to offer that proverbial honey that was supposed to catch more flies. But everything was already going wrong.

"Sierra, please listen to me," she said. "I'm really sorry about-." She was cut off in mid-sentence by a croaking voice.

"Sierra Love?" someone said behind them.

They both turned to see a woman standing a few yards away. Manda bristled. It was the same woman who had been watching her in the restaurant. She was wearing a prim white blouse tucked into a long black skirt. Her gray hair was parted down the middle and braided in two. She might have passed for a church lady – the kind who stood in subways handing out copies of *Watchtower* magazine – if her thin feet hadn't been planted in a pair of neon yellow rubber boots.

"Oh no," Sierra groaned. "The poor old girl probably wants my autograph. There's always someone waiting out here for me."

"I know your face. It's just like the others," the woman said.

"Others?" Sierra said.

"I been hearing what you have to say 'bout Obeah on your show. You think people who practice it, you think dem foolish. Wackos, you call dem."

"I don't think it's your autograph she's looking for," Manda said.

"Well, you don't know what you chatting 'bout. You're the one who chat foolishness."

"Ma'am, if you have a complaint, you can contact the station manager."

"Sierra, come on. Don't say anything." Manda pulled at her sister's arm. "I saw this woman yesterday in Angie's restaurant."

"I'm telling you, you better hush your mouth from now on if you know what's good for you."

“Pardon me, but I don’t appreciate you coming here to threaten me,” Sierra said, hands on her hips.

“Threaten you?” The woman clamped her bony hands to her own waist. “You don’t see threat yet. You don’t know who you dealing with.”

Manda gasped. “That’s her,” she said to Sierra. “She’s the one who’s been sending you those letters.” All along, Sierra had been blaming Angie for sending her those angry threats, but here they were, facing the real culprit.

“I think you’re right,” Sierra said. She turned back to the woman. “I know who you are. You’re that nutter who’s been sending me hate mail. Well, if you don’t go away right now, I’ll have you arrested.”

“Me not going nowhere till you tek responsibility for what you done.”

“Sierra, please. Just tell her you won’t do it anymore, and let’s go home.” Manda tugged at her arm again.

“No, stop it.” Sierra spun on her. “I haven’t done anything wrong, and I’m not letting some batty old crow stand here trying to frighten me.”

Sierra might not have been afraid, but the malevolent squint in the woman’s black eyes made Manda realize she was not one to be crossed. Perhaps she could reason with her, or at least calm her down. Sierra certainly wasn’t helping. Manda approached the woman cautiously.

“Listen, Ma’am,” she said, giving the woman a benign smile and standing at a safe distance.

“I know you’re upset about all this, but it’s all just a big misunderstanding, see? Things just got a little out of hand, really. Sierra never meant to offend anyone. She respects everybody, even Obeah people.”

The woman hissed at her like an angry cat, baring a mouthful of small, jagged teeth. Manda felt goosebumps form on her arms. She stepped back.

“Get away from me, you scrawny, knock-knee wretch,” the woman said. “This is between me and her.”

“That *her* is my sister,” Manda said. “And if you’re going to resort to name-calling, then-.”

The woman started to finger something in a little cloth bag that hung from a string around her neck. Manda turned and hurried back to Sierra.

Sierra was on her mobile, talking to someone. “Yes, it’s an emergency,” Manda heard her say. “My sister and I are being harassed by a woman. She’s crazy, and she’s been threatening to hurt me.”

In the short time it took Sierra to say that, the woman had approached them quietly. There was a rustle behind them, and as they glanced around, the woman blew what looked like a handful of ground parsley into Sierra’s face.

“Aww,” Sierra screamed. “What the...” She sneezed. “You...you mad old-.” She sneezed again, then tried to lunge at the woman.

Manda had to use all her strength to hold her back. “The police are coming to arrest you,” Sierra called out to the woman, who had now retreated.

“So let them come,” she said. “They can’t stop what’s meant to happen.”

Sierra shook her head and bits of green herb rained down from her hair and the brim of her hat, where some had settled. It seemed like only moments passed before Manda heard the scream of sirens and turned to see a police car pull up curbside. Two officers got out and approached them. Sierra rushed up to them and started to explain what had happened. She showed them the green dust on her clothes, and on the wad of tissues in her hand. The woman

stood back with her arms crossed over her chest, waiting. Some on-lookers had dawdled on the sidewalk to watch the scene. Manda wanted to shoo them away.

While the shorter, pudgier officer reported an update back to his station, the young African-American one took out a pair of rubber gloves and slipped them on. He approached the woman, said something to her, and she raised her arms silently. He patted his hands down her body and pulled the little pouch from around her neck.

“What’s this?” he asked, reaching in the pouch and pulling out a tiny white box. It held the remainder of the green herb the woman had blown on Sierra.

She bit her lips and closed her eyes.

“Hey, Sam, bag this for me.” The officer handed the box to his partner.

“We can send it over to the lab. Make sure it’s not some dangerous substance.”

“Officer, I want her arrested,” Sierra butted in. “She’s been threatening me for weeks now. And she’s dangerous. Better watch your back.”

“Ma’am, what’s your name,” the officer said, unhooking a black leather notepad from a belt around his waist.

“Darette,” the woman mumbled, still keeping her eyes closed. “My name is Darette Brown.”

“Huh?” Manda said. She felt the blood drain from her face. She stumbled backwards a few feet. *Darette Brown?* Could this be the same Darette Brown Aunt Beryl had told her about? The same *Darette Brown* who was once their father’s fiancé? The Obeah woman’s daughter?

“Do you know who she is?” she stammered to Sierra.

“I don’t give a toss.”

“Sierra, you can’t let them arrest her. Tell them to let her go.”

“You gonna regret this, Sierra Love,” Darette said. “You mark my words.”

“Officer, did you hear that?” Sierra screeched. “She’s still threatening me. Well, I won’t have it. Haul her off to jail, that’s what I say.”

“Okay, you’re under arrest,” the officer said. “We’ll need you girls to come down to the precinct and fill out a report.” He gave Sierra the information, then unhooked a pair of handcuffs from his waist and locked them around Darette’s wrists. He recited her rights, while Darette, who had found her tongue again, cursed at Sierra. The officer started to march Darette towards the car, but then stopped and turned back to Sierra.

“You seem familiar. Where do I know you from?” he asked her.

Sierra cocked her head and grinned. “You’ve probably heard me on the radio. Sistah Britain Speaks. I’m Sistah Britain.” Her voice had dropped a whole pitch.

“Hey, that’s right,” he said. “I love your show.” The officer let go of Darette in his excitement. It was just enough time for her to turn around and bite him on the arm with her little knife-teeth.

“Ow, you little-” The officer grabbed Darette again. “That’s it, old lady. I’m charging you with assault.” He pushed Darette over to his car and folded her into the back seat. He gave Sierra a smile as he got in beside his partner. The police car pulled away from the curb and bullied its way into traffic. Once they were gone, the dawdlers lost interest and went on their way.

“Good riddance to her,” Sierra said, clapping. “Well, that’s the end of that, then.”

“Somehow I don’t think so,” Manda mumbled.

“He’s sort of cute,” Sierra said. “And did you notice he wasn’t wearing a ring. How do you feel about cops?”

“I can’t believe it’s her,” Manda said, staring after the car. Darette was back. It felt strangely inevitable. Even Sierra’s goading of Obeah people now felt like part of a chain of events that had always been meant to happen.

“What’s the matter? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Sierra said, peering into her face.

“Believe me, I have,” Manda said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The duppies had come to their yard, just as Darette had threatened in her letters, and they had arrived with a vengeance. But it wasn't Manda they wanted. It was Sierra, who had gone on the air to tell her audience that the letter-writing culprit had been caught, and lo and behold, it was an Obeah woman herself. And as usual, Sierra had a laugh about the whole thing, as she described how the "wacky old hag" had thrown green stuff on her. That had prompted a barrage of calls that still hadn't slowed, even three days later. The whole event had frightened Manda, especially as she mused about how Darette's mother had done the same thing to their mother, going to her wedding and tossing oil on her.

When Manda told Angie about the incident, Angie said it was a good thing she had been there, or who knew how much worse things might have turned out. Still, Manda was worried about what might ensue. She begged Sierra to drop the charges against Darette, but Sierra would have sooner painted herself green like the Statue of Liberty than do that. A nice coat of green paint would have been better for her than what was to follow.

The following Saturday evening, Manda set herself a bubble bath and settled in to melt away her stress in the hot, sudsy water. Sierra had gone into the kitchen to make fried eggplant sandwiches for the two of them. It must have been the pregnancy cravings that had hit her, since Sierra never went near the stove if she could help it. And she had never even liked eggplant before then.

Manda was just beginning to relax when she heard a scream coming from the direction of the kitchen. She sat up in the water, startled.

"Sierra? Is that you?" She stepped out of the bath onto the soft mat. She snatched her towel from the rack and wrapped it around her body, then opened the bathroom door and rushed down the hall. When she got to the kitchen, she skidded to a stop. Sierra stood by the counter, staring down at her hand, her face twisted into a grimace. Blood dribbled from a wound on her wrist and splattered on the kitchen floor. A knife lay on the ground in the middle of the mess.

"What happened?" Manda asked, as she sprung to action. She rolled off a wad of paper towels and soaked them with cold water.

"I don't know." Sierra shook her head. She raised her wrist obediently to let Manda wrap the paper towels around it. "I was coming back to the counter to get the eggplant, and the knife... it just fell off the counter and whacked me. I didn't even touch it."

"Are you sure you didn't bounce against the counter?"

"No, I hadn't even reached it yet. The knife just seemed to... jump almost."

"Jump?"

"Yeah," Sierra said, her eyes wide and innocent as a child's.

Manda could tell she was in a bit of a shock. Sierra had never been able to handle the sight of blood, especially her own. She let Manda lead her into the bathroom and sit her down on the toilet seat. She didn't have so much as a Band-aid in her bathroom cupboard, and Manda had to fetch the little medical kit she had brought with her from England.

"It's not too deep," Manda said, as she cleaned and disinfected the cut.

"Uh-huh," Sierra said, her eyes closed and jaw clenched.

Manda put a square of gauze over the cut, and secured it with medical tape. If the knife had struck even half an inch away, it might have severed a vein or a tendon. But she kept that knowledge to herself, not wanting to frighten Sierra even more.

"Alright," she said when she was done. "You'll live."

But Sierra's string of misfortunes was only just beginning. By the end of the week, she was limping around the flat, looking like a bruised piece of fruit. She had been hit on the head by a flying bottle of expensive perfume tossed by a panicked shoplifter in Macy's. Gored in the side by someone who had dashed onto the train carrying a big wooden sculpture of Don Quixote holding a sharp, pointed spear. And she had been knocked down by a delivery man riding his bicycle on the sidewalk. One moment she had stopped to watch some street dancers who were doing back-flips over each other, and the next moment she was lying on the ground beside a bag of Chinese food.

"Angie, we've got to do something," Manda said to her cousin on the phone early the next morning. "Or she's liable to top herself off at this rate. And there's the baby to think about."

Sierra was now so badly shaken by all of her accidents, she had gotten skittish. Earlier that morning, when Manda walked up behind her in the kitchen and patted her on the shoulder, Sierra had yelped and dropped a glass on her own foot. So now she also had a sore foot to contend with.

"You know, the gal had the nerve to falsely accuse me of sending her hate mail, and then when she find out it wasn't me, I hear nothing from her, not even a 'sorry, dog'."

"I think she's just feeling a little sheepish," Manda said. "Sometimes it takes her a while to apologize, but you'll hear from her." The truth was, Sierra had asked Manda to apologize to Angie on her behalf, and Manda had told her to do it herself.

Manda heard the click of Sierra's bedroom door. "Angie, I've got to go. I'll ring you again later." She hung up the phone and grabbed a copy of *Time Out* from the coffee table.

"Off for a jog, are you?" she said to Sierra when she came into the living room, dressed in black shorts and a sports bra and carrying a white t-shirt. There was an ugly red scar on her stomach where she had been gored.

"Just a light one." Sierra pulled on her t-shirt. She bent over and did some stretches.

"How's your foot?"

"Healing," Sierra said.

"Hey, wait for me," Manda said, jumping up. "I'd like to come."

"Since when?" Sierra said. "Manda, you hate jogging."

"I know, but I think it's time I give it a try."

"No, Manda, I don't have time for you to get dressed. And besides, you'll just slow me down."

"But Sierra..."

"I'll see you later." Sierra hurried out the door.

"Be careful, will ya?" Manda called after her. Now, every time Sierra went through the door, Manda felt dread settle into her stomach. She could never relax until Sierra walked back into the flat.

"I'll be fine," Sierra called back up the steps. "Don't worry."

But Manda did worry, even as she looked out the window and watched Sierra go jogging down the street, a headset clamped over her ears. And even as she made her usual string of calls to England to check on her family. By the time she finished talking to Aunt Beryl, over an hour

and a half had passed and Sierra still wasn't back. She tried to distract herself by ringing Sherrie next. She didn't mention Sierra's pregnancy to anyone but her friend.

"You're going to be an auntie, but you don't sound too excited," Sherrie said.

"I would be," Manda said. "If the circumstances were different."

She told Sherrie all that had happened over the past week.

"Cho, Manda. You're busy trying to save your sister's behind, but she don't even appreciate it. But you're the closest thing I have to a sister, so I hope you come back soon."

"I will. No matter what happens, I'll be home soon." Manda said. When she finally hung up the phone, she went into the kitchen to make herself some lunch. She looked at the microwave clock. It was nearly one o'clock. Sierra had been gone for a couple hours. She was always back from jogging within an hour at most. Manda drummed her fingers on the counter and wondered what to do. She picked up the phone and dialed Noah's number. He might not be able to do anything, but she could use some of his calm. Noah wasn't home. Manda hung up without leaving a message.

The phone rang just as she was about to walk away. Manda turned around and grabbed it.

"Manda, I'm so glad you're home," Sierra said on the other end.

Manda dropped her head and let out a breath of relief. "Where are you?"

"Um...can you come and meet me?"

"Meet you where?"

"I'm at Beth Israel, in the emergency area, you know, where the ambulances come in."

"The hospital?" Manda clutched her chest. "What're you doing there?"

"Don't panic. I just had a little accident, that's all. And now they won't let me go unless someone comes to meet me."

"Sierra, what happened?"

"I'll explain when you get here. Just bring some i.d., alright? And bring me some dry clothes." She gave Manda the hospital's address, and hung up.

Manda hurried into Sierra's bedroom and gathered up a pair of jeans, a shirt and some underwear. *What had Sierra done?* She shoved them into a plastic bag and slipped a pair of sandals on top of them. She grabbed her purse and ran out the door.

Thanks to a taxi that had just stopped to let out a passenger on the street, Manda got to the hospital in a matter of minutes. She flew through the door of the emergency area. She went up to the reception area and asked the woman behind the glass where she could find Sierra Love. The woman directed her down the hall to a room on the right. A doctor stepped out of the room just as Manda arrived.

"Are you the sister?" he asked Manda. "I'm Dr. Singh. I've heard a lot about you."

Manda frowned. "Is she alright?"

The doctor nodded. "She's a very lucky young woman. It could've been a lot worse. Especially in her condition."

"What happened?"

"I'll let her tell you all about it."

"Did you check her temperature? How about her blood pressure?"

"We've checked her out fully," Dr. Singh said. "She's okay, just a little shaken up still. Which is understandable, after what happened."

Sierra stared at them from where she sat on the hospital bed. She was wearing a pale blue gown that was covered in tiny, dark blue stars, and her hair was a damp, frizzy mess. It

frightened Manda to see her looking so plain and vulnerable, dressed in the last piece of fashion people often wore when they exited the world.

“Why is your hair wet?” Manda asked. She stepped by the doctor and into the room. Dr. Singh left them to talk.

Sierra ran a hand through her hair. She untangled a piece of twig and sat staring at it. “I nearly drowned, that’s what.”

“Drowned? How?”

She shook her head. “I was just jogging along the river, minding my own business. Then out of nowhere this crazy wind started to blow. I mean, it was amazing.” She looked up at Manda, her eyes intense.

“I’ve never felt anything like it before. It was like a hurricane had hit suddenly...and people were trying their best not to get blown away. I had to stop and grab the rails. I could barely breathe. Then next thing I knew, the damn wind just plucked me from the rail and sent me down into the river. Manda, I was hysterical. It was a good thing a jet skier was passing by, or I probably wouldn’t be here right now. I still can’t believe it.”

“But there’s not one bit of wind outside,” Manda said.

“I know. By the time I was plucked from the river, the wind had stopped. It must have been one of those freak river phenomena.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing.” Manda passed her the bag with her clothes.

“Well, they do exist,” Sierra said, taking the bag. “Anyway, it’s over and I’m still alive and well. And so is my baby.”

As Sierra pulled out her clothes and got dressed, Manda sat in the chair by the bed and tried to calm herself. Of all the things that had happened to Sierra lately, this was definitely the most frightening. What could possibly be next?

“Sierra, I’m really worried about you,” she said.

“Pass me a comb,” Sierra said.

“Don’t you see, you’ve been having all these accidents lately.” Manda took a comb from her purse and passed it to her. “But I don’t think they’re just coincidences. Not this many times.”

“Don’t start,” Sierra said. “I’m not in the mood to hear about all that Obeah rubbish. I’ve had a very long morning, and I just want to get home and take a bath. Wash that filthy river off me.”

“I don’t think it’s rubbish.” She heard the anger in her voice and tried to hold it back. “I believe Darette is behind it.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Sierra pulled the comb through her tangled hair.

“You’re the one who’s being ridiculous.”

“Drop it, Manda.”

“What will it take to make you see this is serious? Does a bus have to fall on your head?”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have had you come meet me.”

“Why didn’t you call Nik, then?”

“I did, but I couldn’t reach him.”

“Hmph. He seems to be unavailable quite a lot lately,” Manda said.

Sierra ignored her comment. She bent down and slipped on her sandals. “Let’s just get out of here,” she said. “I can’t stand hospitals.”

But when getting run down by a bicycle delivery man didn’t do it, or being gored on the train, or gashed by a knife – when almost electrocuting herself just changing a light bulb, and

even nearly drowning in the East River still didn't do it, the one misfortune that Sierra considered so awful that it put an instant stop to her goading of Obeah practitioners, was an attack on the part of her body she valued the most. Her face. The same face she washed tenderly every morning with a special cleanser and smoothed over with an SPF 25 lotion before coloring it with lipstick, mascara and a perfect layer of foundation. The same face she covered with an expensive age-defying cream every night before climbing into bed, and the same face she steamed, plucked, patted, massaged and hid under a green clay mask at least once a week.

Manda was in the living room at half past seven in the morning, watching television. She had barely slept the night before. She heard footsteps coming down the hallway.

"You're up early," she said, as Sierra entered the living room.

"I've got to meet with those MTV execs about the television show," Sierra said, yawning.

Manda's gaze had been fixed on one of the early morning news shows, where a Con Edison spokesperson was defending the company's response to the blackout. But at the mention of the MTV execs, she glanced up at Sierra. She was going to say she had forgotten, and wish Sierra good luck. Sierra had been gearing up for this meeting for a while now, and today was the big day. But when Manda looked up and opened her mouth to speak, instead a startled sound came out.

"Your face. What's wrong with your face?" she said.

"My face?" Sierra gave her a puzzled look. "What about it?"

"It's got... it's got welts all over it."

Sierra brought her hands up to her face. She ran over to the mirror by the door. When she saw her face, she let out a blood-chilling scream.

Manda got up and hurried over to her.

"My face," Sierra howled, still staring into the mirror. "My face." She turned to Manda and grabbed her arms so hard, they hurt.

"Sierra, calm down," Manda said.

"What's happening to me?" Sierra let her go and turned back to the mirror. She howled again, clutched at her face and backed away from her reflection.

"Shhh... calm down," Manda pleaded with her.

"Calm down," she screeched. "I can't..."

Manda had never seen her like this. Her eyes were practically spinning in her head.

"Help me," Sierra said. She gave out a pitiful cry.

"I will. Just take a deep breath, alright?"

Sierra lowered her hands from her face. It seemed like she was about to take a step forward, but instead she dropped to the floor like a lifeless rag doll.

Manda knelt down beside her. "Come on, Sierra. Wake up." She patted frantically at her sister's head.

Someone was knocking on the door.

"Just a second," Manda shouted. She got up and went to open it. Noah stood in the hall in his bed slippers, leaning on his cane. She felt relieved to see him.

"I heard a scream coming from up here," he said. "Is everything okay?"

"No, everything is not okay," Manda said. "It's awful. Sierra's fainted."

Noah looked past her shoulder and saw Sierra sprawled on the floor. "Is she sick?" he asked, coming inside after Manda.

"I'm not sure."

He peered down at Sierra and grimaced when he saw her welts. “What’s wrong with her face?”

“I don’t know,” Manda said, bending back down to Sierra. “Can you do me a favor? Can you get a washcloth from the bathroom and wet it with cold water?”

“Of course.” Noah went off as fast as he could, his cane thumping loudly on the floor.

“Come on, Sierra. I said wake up,” Manda patted at her face. The welts felt hard and horrible beneath her fingers. “Noah,” she called out. “There’s a bottle of antihistamine in the medicine cabinet. Can you bring it too?”

“Got it,” Noah answered.

Manda ran over to the couch and grabbed two cushions. She went back to Sierra, laid one cushion on top of the other and propped up Sierra’s legs on the mound.

Sierra stirred and groaned. Her eyes opened slowly, and then widened when she saw Manda.

“Shhh. Lie still,” Manda told her. “It’s alright. You just fainted.”

“Fainted?”

Noah arrived with the washcloth, bottle of tablets and a paper cup filled with water. Manda dabbed Sierra’s face with the cloth, then placed it on her forehead.

“We should get her to hospital,” she told Noah.

“Noooo,” Sierra groaned from the floor.

She tried to get up, but Manda held her down. She had gotten plenty of practice holding down sick people in hospital wards. Sierra was no match for her.

“Do you want me to call an ambulance?” Noah asked, which made Sierra groan even louder.

“No, a car service should be fine,” Manda said. “It might just be an allergy, but I want to get her looked at. Sometimes an allergy can affect your internal organs too.”

While Noah went over to the phone to make the call, Manda forced Sierra to take the tablets. Sierra brought a hand up to her face, and when she felt the welts, she let out another scream.

“Calm down,” Manda said. “Or you’ll faint again.”

With Noah’s help, Manda got Sierra back to her feet and down the stairs to the building’s front doors. Noah went back to his flat to swap his bed slippers for a pair of sandals. A black car was waiting by the curb when the three of them stepped outside. They got in and Noah told the driver to take them to Beth Israel. Sierra sat between them looking shell-shocked.

Manda shook her head. “I can’t believe it. I haven’t been in New York very long and yet this is the third trip I’m taking to a hospital. I can’t seem to get away from them.”

“One more trip and you’ll qualify for frequent visitor miles,” Noah said. He smiled at her.

She was glad to have him there with her. Poor Daniel wasn’t good in emergencies. On their one little holiday together, their flight had hit terrible turbulence on the way to Madrid. Daniel had gone stiff and dug his nails into her arm so hard, he had drawn blood. Noah, on the other hand, seemed like he could take over piloting a troubled plane if he had to.

“Nik,” Sierra said suddenly, as if she had just snapped out of sleep. “I’ve got to call him. He’s supposed to go with me.”

“Don’t worry, you can call him when you get to hospital. But right now you should just relax.”

Sierra dropped her head in her hands, felt the welts again, then pulled away her hands in disgust. She turned to Manda, her face all screwed up. “This is horrible,” she bawled. “I’m ugly.”

“Aw, there, there,” Manda said, taking Sierra in her arms. “They’ll make you pretty again soon, I promise.”

At the hospital, they had to wait for over two hours before Sierra finally got to see a doctor.

“Oh, lordy, lordy, look at that face,” the nurse said, as she led Sierra away.

Sierra started to bawl.

“Are you hungry? Do you want to grab a bite?” Noah asked when they were alone.

“Yes, but not hospital food,” Manda said. “And let’s be quick about it, before she comes out and panics.”

They left the hospital and crossed the street to a small café that stood on the corner. Manda ordered a bagel with lox cream cheese, and Noah got himself a turkey burger.

“So,” Noah said, as they sat down with their orders. “What happened to Sierra?”

Manda shook her head. “I’m not sure. When she went to bed last night, she was fine. But this morning she got up with her face all covered in welts.”

“Do you think it was something she ate? Or maybe an insect bite?”

“It could be either, really.”

“My father broke out in welts the first time he ate clams,” Noah said. “But it wasn’t as bad as Sierra’s.” He shuddered.

“I know, I’ve never seen anything like it,” Manda said. “No wonder she fainted.”

“She’ll be okay,” Noah said.

Manda put down her bagel. She suddenly didn’t feel very much like eating. “I wish I could believe that.”

“Hey, why would you say that? It doesn’t seem like anything too serious.” He patted the back of her hand.

She stared away. She needed to talk to someone – somebody besides Angie – who might give her a clearer perspective on things. She looked back at Noah. Could she really confide in him? She had tried before, but couldn’t do it. It was worth another try.

“Noah...do you believe that people can possess certain powers, like psychics and the lot? And that certain people can even cause things to happen, in unnatural ways?”

Noah thought about it for a minute. “I believe that faith is one of the most powerful forces in the universe,” he said. “And that just by putting our faith in something...just by believing it to be real...we infuse it with far more power than we sometimes realize. We can manifest anything with our minds.”

“What about...what about curses?”

“Curses? Do you mean like, putting curses on people?”

“Yes.” Manda looked across the street at the hospital. “Noah, I’m going to tell you something, and I know it might sound like I’ve gone crazy, but I’m still going to say it.”

“Okay.” Noah took a bite of his burger. “Go ahead.”

“Have you ever heard of Obeah?”

Noah nodded. “I’m one-quarter Jamaican, remember?”

“Alright then. I believe that Obeah is behind what’s happening to Sierra.”

“Okay...” he stopped chewing.

“I mean, the whole thing started a long time ago before we were even born, when my mother was young and pregnant with Sierra. An Obeah woman put a curse on us, through our mother, and so far our lives are playing out just as she predicted. I might never have believed it myself, if it wasn’t for some things that happened before I left England, and a vision I’ve been having

since then. In fact, I've had a few other visions before that came true and so...so that's why I decided to come here. Those visions confirm everything the Obeah woman said."

"What did you see?" Noah asked, leaning forward.

Manda couldn't tell whether or not he was taking her seriously. She told him exactly what had happened between her and Daniel the night before their wedding was to take place, and the image she had seen in the bathroom. Lastly, she told him about her visions. When she was finished, she looked into Noah's eyes to see if he thought she had lost her mind. So far, he seemed noncommittal.

"So," Noah said, looking at her steadily. "You think that what happened between you and Daniel, and what's going on with Sierra and Nik, all ties into this curse. And you think the Obeah woman is haunting you."

Manda nodded. "I do. I know it might sound a bit...a lot like nonsense, but I've come to really believe it."

"So then...what does this have to do with Sierra's face?"

"Have you been listening to her radio show over the past few weeks?"

Noah shook his head. "I usually listen to music when I write."

"Well, Sierra has been goading Obeah followers for weeks now. And because of it, she had started getting angry calls and even threatening letters from someone. Then we found out that the person behind the letters is the daughter of the Obeah woman who had put the curse on our mother. She came and blew some sort of herbs on Sierra, and Sierra had her arrested. Now Sierra has been having one accident after another. She thinks they're just coincidences, but things are just getting worse."

"And now her thirty-fifth birthday is coming up in a matter of days, and you're afraid the Obeah woman is right, and Nik will push her over a cliff soon," Noah said. "It's not that easy to find a cliff around here. But why do you think he would want to push her?"

Manda looked into his eyes. "Because she's pregnant, and I don't believe he wants that baby. His previous girlfriend died mysteriously, and she was pregnant too. And Sierra wasn't pregnant when Nik asked her to marry him."

"Sierra's pregnant? And she's getting married?" Noah stopped, the burger halfway to his mouth.

"Oh, I see she hasn't said anything." Now Manda wasn't sure she should have told him herself.

"No, she hasn't," Noah said. "Not that she has to tell me. I was just surprised. Well, congratulations to her."

"Don't tell her I told you," Manda said.

"No, of course not."

"But it makes everything so hopeless now. Everything feels inevitable. I can't stop it. And Sierra just goes on planning her birthday party and her wedding and her bleeding career as if she has no worries in the world."

"Manda," Noah said, putting down his burger and taking her hands across the table. "I won't pretend to see everything the way you do. But as I said before, so much hinges on faith. If you're going to help Sierra, you're going to have to believe you can. Right now, you're putting so much faith in this curse, you're giving away all your power to it. Well, I believe you can create your own destiny. You and your sister – you're not fate's bitches."

"Right," Manda said, smiling. "Then why does fate keep sticking it to us?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sierra was so badly shaken about the hives on her face, she wouldn't leave the house the next day. The doctor concluded that the hives were probably brought on by stress. Manda felt sorry for her. If that wasn't horrible enough, Sierra was also devastated about missing her meeting with the MTV execs, and was sure she had blown her chance. When Nik finally called her back, she begged him to speak to the execs on her behalf—give them any excuse—and get her another meeting with them soon. She was too afraid that if she called them herself, she might break down on the phone and lose her professional edge. Manda remembered how Nik had said that Sierra belonged at the radio station, and she didn't trust him to make that call for Sierra.

Especially now that Nik was acting strange. When he stopped by to see Sierra the next evening, he was so quiet that Manda felt uneasy. And he left after only a half hour. Even Sierra must have felt something was wrong. She clung tight to him, but he barely hugged her back. At the door, when Sierra lifted up her shirt and asked him to touch her belly and tell her if it felt any bigger, Manda saw a look flash in his eyes that bordered on fear. If Sierra saw it, she chose to ignore it.

When Nik reached up to push his sunglasses back over his eyes, Manda gasped. On the back of his hand, right above his wrist, there was the distinct red mark of a burn. The hands in her vision—the ones she had seen reaching out—one of them had had a red mark on the back.

"Oh, look, you've hurt yourself," Sierra said, taking his hand.

"It's nothing," Nik said, pulling it away. "Just a little run-in with the toaster oven." He gave Sierra a quick kiss on the forehead and went out the door.

"He seemed a bit somber," Manda said, when she and Sierra were alone again. "Is he angry with you?"

"For what?" Sierra asked, staring at the door.

"I don't know. But he seems to have something on his mind."

"He's probably just worried," Sierra said, with a dismissive flick of the wrist. "He knows what I've been going through lately. Anyway, he wants us to go up to his cabin for the Labor Day weekend. He thinks we need some time alone."

"His cabin?" Manda jumped up. "You're not going, are you?"

"Of course. I'm looking forward to it, after this week I've had."

"Oh, hell-." Manda paced up and down before her sister. "Sierra, you can't go."

"What're you on about? Oh, let me guess. Your vision, right?"

"Yes," Manda shouted up at the ceiling. "Yes, my vision. I told you what I saw-."

"And I told you it was just a dream, and I don't want to hear any more about it. Enough!"

"No, Sierra..."

But Sierra was already on a fast exit out of the living room. Manda reeled around the room, her head in her hands. *Nik's cabin. This is where it will happen.* In her mind she saw the forest and the cliff, and the river below it. It all made sense now. Nik and Sierra alone, with no one to witness...Manda grabbed the phone and dialed Angie. When Angie picked up, she blurted out what Sierra and Nik were planning.

"How're you gonna stop her now?" Angie asked.

"I can't stop her. Not alone, anyway. I-." She paused as an idea struck her. "Angie, I've got to find Darette."

"Darette? Are you mad?"

"Yes...I mean no. I need her to undo whatever she did to Sierra, and I need her to break the curse her mother started." If she had any hope of healing the rift her family had caused with Darette's, she would have to go straight to the source. Nothing else had helped, and Sierra had only made things worse.

"Manda, you don't want to stir up that woman no more than she stir up already," Angie cautioned her.

"I don't have a choice. Nik's taking Sierra to his cabin. I know that's where it'll happen. I'm sure of it."

"Oh, Lawd. And Labor Day holiday is this weekend," Angie said. "That don't give you much time to find her."

"Angie, you said you bought the oil from a woman whose aunt makes them. Can you find out who's the woman's aunt? If she's into all that stuff, who knows? She could know Darette."

"Alright, let me give her a call," Angie said. "I'll ring you back."

Manda curled up in a corner of the couch, a cushion clutched to her chest. Her stomach was a churning mass of nerves. She felt like she herself was backed up to the edge of a cliff, and the only hand that could help her was the very hand that had helped to put her there in the first place. What if Darette wouldn't help? What if it would just stir her up even more, like Angie had said?

Angie rang back five minutes later. "You're not gonna believe this," she screeched into Manda's ears. "Guess who the woman's aunt is?"

"I..."

"Darette Brown," Angie said, laughing. "The Obeah woman herself"

"What?" Manda dropped the cushion.

"She live with her niece, just a half mile from here. Practically in my own yard."

"So that's why she knew about your restaurant. That's why she was there."

"She probably saw us together and come there to frighten you that time," Angie said.

"But how did she even know who I was? Or where Sierra lived?"

"Who knows? Them Obeah people have many tricks."

"Angie, give me their address," Manda said. She picked up a black pen. The logo FM-102 was blazened in yellow along the barrel. The pen was out of ink. She flung it down and went searching for another.

At the 8th Avenue station, the train was delayed and a Saturday evening crowd packed up the platform. When the train finally arrived, Manda pushed her way through the crowd and squeezed inside. She was on a mission and no amount of people, no train delay, nothing was going to stop her. She hadn't even told Sierra she was leaving the house, but had just fixed herself up a little, grabbed her red bag and flown out the door.

The train trip out to Queens felt much longer than it had on her previous trips, and Manda had to stand all the way. When she finally stepped off the bus that wound its way through Darette's neighborhood, and found the little brown house Angie had described, her back was stiff from the long journey and from the pressure of preparing herself to face Darette.

Manda stopped on the sidewalk and studied the house with its green-painted door and dark curtains that were drawn so tight, she wondered what secret rituals took place in the rooms beyond them. She rolled her head on her shoulders, cracked her knuckles and ordered herself to calm down. She took a deep breath and marched up the stone path leading to the front door.

She had barely touched the doorbell when a woman suddenly pulled the door open. She looked about fiftyish, and was dressed in a white nurse's uniform, white stockings and white shoes.

"Good afternoon," Manda said, feeling somewhat of an automatic kinship with the woman, who was a nurse just like herself. "Is Darette here?"

"Who're you?" the woman asked, scowling down at her.

"Manda Love."

"And you want to see Darette?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

The woman looked Manda up and down as if she couldn't believe what she was asking.

"Well...is she home?" Manda asked her.

The woman shook her head. "I'm her niece. No, she's not here."

Blimey, why didn't she say so in the first place? "Well, do you know where I can find her? I really need to talk to her. It's urgent."

"Aunt Darette always leave when the weather goin' drop."

"Leave? Where did she go?"

"She's gone back to her house in Jamaica. We won't see her again till at least May, when the weather warm back up."

"May?" *Damn it.*

"What do you want her for? If you want to buy her oils, I have a whole box left."

A nurse who was into Obeah. Manda wondered if she rubbed oils on her patients. "No, I just needed her help with something, but...never mind. It's pointless now."

The woman's face softened. She let go of the doorknob and crossed her arms over her chest. "Where are you from? England?"

Manda nodded.

"It must be some help you need, to come all the way here to get it. But sorry, honey.

You're too late. Aunt Darette gone since Tuesday. And speaking of gone, I'm gonna be late for work." She reached into the house and grabbed her purse. "If you're heading to the bus, I'm passing that way. I can give you a ride."

"No, it's alright, I'll walk. Thanks." Manda turned away and headed back down the path. She could feel the woman watching her, but she didn't turn around.

Darette was gone. Now what was she supposed to do? She had come all this way for nothing. She swallowed down the grape-sized lump that had formed in her throat.

"Hey," the woman called out behind her.

Manda turned around.

"Do you want her address? You can write to her in Jamaica. Tell her your problem."

"Sure. Alright." Manda headed back up the path. The woman had given her an idea.

"Jamaica? You've got to be joking," Sierra said, when Manda told her about her plans.

"I'm serious." Manda sat down on Sierra's bed.

"But why would you want to go there?" Sierra screwed up her mouth in disgust. She had been seven-years-old the summer their parents had sent them out to Jamaica, and she had hated every minute of the trip. Whenever she misbehaved, their mother had often threatened to send her back to their grandparents for some real country discipline. Out there, children couldn't get away with being rude and out of order like they could in England.

"I just thought it would be good to see Papa Gord and the family again before I go back to England. I've already come all this way." She didn't dare tell Sierra her real reasons for

wanting to go out there. Or how nervous she was about the trip. Darette had Obeah on her side, and Manda could still remember how dark it was up in the country at nights. She had no idea what to expect.

“But I thought you were going to help me make the final arrangements for my party.”

“Sierra, I’ll only be gone for a few days,” Manda said. “And I thought you said everything was done.”

“Well, not exactly.”

“You’ve already booked the caterers and sent out the invitations... what else is there to do?”

Sierra dropped down on the bed. She laid back and stared up at the ceiling. “Everything was ready, but now Nik doesn’t want me to hold the party in his flat. He says he’s not in the mood to entertain. He wouldn’t even be doing anything really, except standing around. Lately, he’s been such a... such a...”

“Mystery?” Manda asked.

“Party-pooper,” Sierra said.

Angie made all the arrangements. Bill, a distant cousin of theirs, was to meet Manda at the small airport in Kingston. Angie had even emailed him a picture she had taken of Manda, so he would know her on sight. But after Manda got off her flight and joined the crowd of passengers waiting for their rides in front of the hot, chaotic airport, no one stepped forward to claim her. While she waited for Bill, she went over to a food stand and bought herself a beef patty and a soda. Every seat in the sitting area was taken, and Manda had to lean against the airport wall while she ate. She had never in her life felt heat so intense, but in spite of it there were a good number of men wandering around dressed in warm wool hats.

Cousin Bill finally arrived when Manda was ready to faint from the heat. He was about twenty-five, with smooth, sun-blackened skin and taut muscles. He wore a white shirt, khaki-colored pants, and his own wool hat. He apologized and told her that he had to drop someone off to catch their flight first. This was how he made his living, taxiing people between Pebble Beach and the airport in his little white Honda. Other than that, there wasn’t much else for him to do up in the country.

The drive from the airport to Papa Gord’s house up in the hilly countryside of St. Catharine took nearly three hours. Bill’s car had no air conditioning. Manda leaned close to the window, where she could feel the wind on her face as they zipped through one town after another, past houses and shops painted in dazzling blue, pink and yellow colors. So this was where her parents were from, this island that was prettier than any postcard she had ever seen. Manda could see why so many people made Jamaica their favorite holiday spot. She had been so small the first and only time she had visited the island, and she barely remembered the place.

At a crossroad, the car was suddenly surrounded by pushing, shouting children carrying baskets of fruits. Bill bought some mangos and sweet sop, and a large bundle of quinneps for Manda to try. She sat beside him, biting the green shell-like skins off the little round balls, and sucking the thin layer of pink fruit from the big seeds. It was sweet, sour and slimy all in one. They drove by a busy marketplace, where prune-faced women in head scarves sat over baskets of fruits and vegetables, calling to passersby.

“It’s less than an ‘our from ‘ere now,” Bill said, as they sped along a road banked on both sides by gorgeous green cane fields that stretched so far into the distance, it felt like they were driving through a parted sea. Above them, the sky was its own blue ocean, with ships of white clouds sailing on it.

Manda stared at the land around her. It was the kind of beauty that pulled at her gut, and made her want to jump from the car and throw herself joyfully into the landscape. For a moment, she forgot why she had come to Jamaica.

They turned onto a bumpy, hole-riddled road that led up into the hills, and took the steepest, most prayer-inspiring climb Manda could ever remember in her life. Bill sped around the hills as if he was on a racetrack, while Manda gripped the seat with all her strength. She was sure at any moment they would go plunging off the barrier-less road and down an embankment into a gully. She didn't let go of the seat until they had reached the more level ground that ran through Pebble Beach. More pink, blue and yellow houses and buildings lined the road, some so hurricane-battered, there were still big stones on the roofs to prevent them from blowing off. They finally turned up a paved path and stopped before Papa Gord's blue and yellow house. Manda climbed out of the car and heaved herself up the veranda steps, while Bill retrieved her bag from his trunk. She was so glad to be on solid ground again.

Papa Gordon may have been a thin-boned eighty-two-year old, but he carried himself like a much younger man. He came climbing up the veranda steps a few minutes later with a bag of flour slung over one shoulder, and a battered old brown hat on his head. When he saw Manda, he threw down his bag, sending flour dust everywhere, and he gave her a rib-crushing hug. He took her in the house and showed her to his bedroom, where she would be sleeping.

The other bedroom was used by Tim, a teenage girl who cooked and cleaned for Papa Gord in exchange for a place to stay while she finished her studies at the local high school. Like half the people in the area, Tim was also a cousin of theirs, by some roundabout, labyrinthian route. She was immediately obsessed with braiding Manda's hair, but Manda wouldn't let her. Tim said if she could braid that heap, she could braid anything. In spite of that, Manda quickly came to like Tim, whose real name was Wilhelmina, although nobody called her that. She was hardworking and industrious, and seemed far older than fifteen. When Manda and Sierra were her age, their mother still made their beds and did everything for them except wipe their noses.

That first day in Pebble Beach, Manda got to see various relatives who stopped by when they heard Bertram and Myrna's daughter had come from Foreign. One cousin brought sugar canes, because he remembered when Manda was visiting as a little girl, she had loved to suck on cane sticks. Another cousin told her how she had looked that first day in the country long ago, sitting there on the veranda in a pair of white patent shoes, with her little pink purse on her lap. She listened to their stories, fascinated to hear about this Self she could barely remember. While she and Sierra had been busy living out their lives in England and America, these relatives had held onto tiny nuggets of memories of them from so long ago. It was like finding childhood pictures of herself in someone's album, that she didn't even remember taking. It made her feel important.

After the sun had set and night surrounded the house like a fog, Manda sat on the veranda with Tim and Papa Gord, sucking the juice out of cane sticks and throwing the trash in a bucket. The moonless night was so black, Manda kept staring beyond the veranda's light in amazement.

Papa Gord started telling her about the various cousins who lived in Pebble Beach.

"What was Mum like when she was young?" Manda asked him.

Papa Gord laughed.

"Dat Myrna give me all kind a' trouble, man,," he said. He told Manda about Myrna's youth – how she loved dressing up in miniskirts and going to dances, and how many times she had fallen in love with the wrong types of men. "But dat Myrna, she fickle like river water," he said. "She had this boyfriend... what was his name again? Cecil, that's it! Then one day she

come tell us she goin' marry Bertram Love. Her madda nearly drop down when she hear it. We never even see her bat an eye in his direction, but she goin' marry him. When we ask her why she tek away a man from Obeah woman's dautta, she come say she never mean it to happen. She was nursing him and they fall in love."

"Do you really think they were in love?" Manda asked.

Papa Gord tossed a piece of dry cane into the bucket. "Well, I don't want to say she didn't love him, but Myrna never seem to know her own mind. But the Love boys, dem did like to flash money around and dress up like pappy-show, and Myrna, she always did love the flash."

Just like Sierra, Manda thought.

"But Myrna stubbornner than a ram goat, so we let her marry him and just like we knew goin' happen, Obeah woman come to the yard and curse her."

"Dar. I know all about her," Manda said. "Papa Gord, do you believe in curses, duppies and what-not?"

"Curses, duppies, what-not. I believe in the whole lot. If I tell you some things I've seen in my life-time, you would say I lie."

Here, she didn't doubt anything. She remembered how alive the darkness had felt, when she was alone in Sierra's flat during the blackout. But that was nothing in comparison to the living, breathing darkness that lay at the edges of the veranda, with its mysterious night sounds.

"Papa Gord. I see things too," Manda said. She told him about how she had been seeing Dar, ever since her wedding eve.

"It mus' be trying to tell you something," Papa Gord said, grasping his hands together and looking into the dark.

Manda couldn't imagine anything good Dar might want to tell her. The old woman's eyes were so cold. So loveless.

"So? Do you think I should try to find out?"

"Of course, man." Papa Gord picked up a piece of cane and looked at it. "The next time you see your duppy, ask it what it wants. You will get an answer."

When Manda looked out the window and saw the first flush of pink appear in the sky between the branches of Papa Gord's mango tree, she got up and went to sit on the veranda. The morning air was cool and breezy. Manda wrapped her sweater around her body and curled up in the chair. She wanted to do what she had come to Jamaica to do, then get on the plane and get back to her life. When Tim got up and came onto the veranda, Manda asked her where Darette Brown lived.

"Why you want to know?" Tim stood by the veranda's low ledge, a wash bucket in her hand.

"Can you take me to see her?"

Tim shook her head. "Me not going anywhere near her yard."

"Well, can you at least take me down by her? You don't have to come in with me, I promise."

"A promise is a comfort to a fool," Tim said, dipping her mop in the bucket.

"Please, Tim," Manda said. "I'll let you braid my hair."

Tim stopped to consider this. "I will tek you as far as the gully, but I'm not gonna tek you any further than that. No, siree."

Later that afternoon, Manda sprayed herself with mosquito repellent, put on her broad sunhat and a pair of boots, and strapped her big red bag across her body. Tim watched and

shook her head. It was clear in Tim's eyes that she thought her cousin was crazy, but Manda didn't feel like explaining to her why she had come to see Darette.

True to her word, when they reached the top of the gully where Darette lived, Tim stood by the side of the dirt lane and wouldn't take another step. Manda looked down at the green tangle of palm and fruit trees swaying below them. She heard the cackling call of some hidden bird, and the whispery sound of the breeze passing through leaves. She imagined snakes, scorpions, mongoose and other unfriendly creatures slithering and crawling around the dark gully floor, and felt a chill run through her. She pleaded with Tim to accompany her just to the bottom of the gully, or even partway, but Tim wouldn't budge.

"I will wait for you right here," Tim said. She sat down on a rock nearby and crossed her legs daintily.

"Have it your way then," Manda said. "But I change my mind. You can't braid my hair after all." She hoped this last bit of negotiation might stir Tim.

Tim shrugged. "Like you will have any left 'pon your head when Darette done with you."

Manda spun away from her. Sod it. This was her mission. She had to do it, whether or not anyone was willing to help her. She headed down the thin dirt path that led into the trees. The afternoon sky was as gray as the inside of a Dutch pot. When she reached the thick of trees and peered into the gully, she could barely see ten feet ahead of her. She reached into her bag for the flashlight. It wasn't there. She remembered exactly where she had left it – on the veranda's ledge. How was she supposed to get through the dark gully without it? She chided herself for being so unprepared. For a minute, she thought about turning back and coming another time, but she would be returning to New York the next day. There was no other time.

Manda stepped over the fallen fruits that lay on the gully floor, rotting and infested with insects. The smell of rotting nature was overpowering, and she felt her head swelling up like a balloon. She walked down and down, swatting insects away from her face. The gully seemed endless. In some places, the earth was soft and wet and sucked at the bottom of her boots like it was eating her from the feet up. There was a large raised platform up ahead, in a clearing to the left of the path. When Manda got closer, she saw it was a crypt, made of white-washed cement, with a red cross painted on the head. She stiffened. It was the last thing she wanted to see. She glanced at it as she stepped by, and was stunned to see a familiar name written in black lettering below the cross. *Dar-Lynn Brown. Dar, the Obeah woman. Darette's mother.* The same woman she had been seeing for weeks now. Just the surprise of coming upon a lone grave anywhere, especially this grave, and especially here in a shaded gully when she had no one for company, spooked Manda to the roots. She hurried away from it, half expecting to see Dar appear before her again.

She was just coming around a tree, squinting into the shadows ahead, when she saw a pair of yellow eyes fixed on her from yards away. Manda stopped. Her body flushed so cold, she began to tremble. The eyes moved towards her and she could now make out the shape of an animal, darker than the darkness around it.

Alright. Don't run, she told herself. She knew if she did, it was likely to chase her, whatever it was. She took a slow step forward, certain that the thing could hear the loud thud of her heartbeats. The animal moved a little closer. Manda stayed rooted to the ground for what seemed like an eternity. Could it see her eyes? Could it feel the fear that had filled her heart to bursting? She tried to draw a breath, but her lungs had shrunk to the size of a change purse. Her head swam and she felt herself growing faint. She started to whimper. *What did Noah do when he was in pain? Hummed commercial jingles?* She tried to think of jingles, but not a single one

would come to mind. But just the effort of trying was enough to give her mind something else to focus on. Her fear diminished slightly. She took a step. This time, the animal let out a low growl. It jumped forward and sprang towards her.

Manda yelped. She leaped forward and raced through the shadows, smacking away tree branches that threatened to blind her, stumbling over the living and dead things scattered on the gully floor. She could hear the animal's feet crunching on leaves as it followed her through the gully floor. She ran faster, propelled by the fear that threatened to stop her breath for good. Ahead of her, stripes of gray light showed between the trees. Manda rushed forward. She didn't stop until she had broken through the trees and into a clearing where a little house stood by itself in the shadows.

She stopped running and turned to look back at the woods, her body heaving. She could see no movement in the shadows, no yellow eyes watching her. Whatever had been chasing her, had decided to stay hidden in the forest. She dropped to her knees and bent her head, then lay down on the ground. Her lungs ached. She rolled onto her back and lay on the ground, panting, her eyes closed. She could feel the sunlight burning hot against her lids. It was over. *You did it, she told herself. You made it. You're through.*

Something warm and wet splashed down on her cheek. Was it raining? Manda popped one eye open. She froze. A large black dog stood over her, its lips spread apart to reveal red gums and sharp yellow teeth. The sides of its mouth trembled as it snarled, and drool ran down the sides of its face. The dog glared down at her, the muscles twitching on its back. Its soulless yellow eyes seared her own.

Manda lay absolutely still. The dog leaned its face closer to her own. She could smell the rot of its breath, worse than the decay of the gully. One wrong move and its teeth would be in her jugular. Her blood turned to ice. She lay as still as she could, afraid if she called out for help or so much as moved a finger, she would be torn to shreds. This was not some tame pet dog, brought home from a pound as a pup and raised on store-brand dog food poured into dishes that read "Fido" or "Fluffy". This dog probably didn't even have a name. It was a backwoods dog, raised on table scraps and the chunks of flesh it tore off other animals while their hearts were still beating. She could tell. Probably because of the red bloodstains on its incisors. Either way, she wasn't about to move, even if her body would have allowed it.

She heard footsteps coming towards them. She opened the other eye and saw Darette appear beyond the dog.

"Please," Manda said quietly. "Please call off your dog."

"Heed, Killer." Darette said, pulling a black pipe from her mouth. She smacked the dog hard on his bottom and he ran off into the trees.

So he did have a name after all.

"Thank you," Manda said, drawing a breath of relief. She got slowly to her feet, breathing heavily. "I thought it was going to kill me."

"He would," Darette said. "He don't like trespassers."

Manda nodded. "Well, I'm glad you called him off. I'm-."

"I know who you are."

"Um...my throat is really dry. May I have some water?" Manda tried to swallow.

"You think you come to tea party?" Darette said. She was wearing a long black dress, with stockings rolled down to her ankles and a red scarf on her head. Around her neck, she wore the same type of little satchel that had held the substance she had blown into Sierra's face. "Get out of mi yard if you know what's good fi you."

"I can't. I've been looking for you," Manda said. "I need to talk to you."

"I have nothing to say to Myrna's pik'ney." Darette turned and swaggered off towards her house. It was a small cement structure, painted the bright pink of a stomach medicine.

"Well, I've come all this way..." Manda said.

Darette kept walking.

"Listen," Manda said, hurrying after her. "I've come all the way from New York, I've just been nearly eaten by your blood-thirsty dog, and I'm not going anywhere till you hear me."

Darette climbed the step that led into her house. She turned around and raised a fist at Manda. "Go away before I call back Killer," she said.

"But I need to talk to you."

Darette went inside and slammed her door, leaving Manda standing alone before the house.

Manda glanced around to make sure Killer was nowhere in sight. "Please, Darette. Listen to me," she said, turning back around. "My sister and I need your help. I know you hate my family, I understand that."

"Come outta mi yard, you mauga wretch," Darette called out, her voice muffled by the door.

"We're not your enemies," Manda continued. "And I didn't come here to argue with you. I come to make peace." Manda stepped up on the porch.

"I will curse you so-till you wish you never draw breath," Darette said through the door.

"What have we ever done to you?" Manda kicked at the porch step in frustration.

"Nothing."

"You call police to come drag me to jail. You call that nothing?"

"Look, you were threatening my sister. She had to protect herself."

"And I have to protect me too."

"Have a conscience, Darette. It's not us you really hate. It's our parents."

"Your madda tek Bertram from me. It's she who have no conscience."

"But that was decades ago," Manda pleaded. "People make mistakes, especially when they're young. You've got to put it behind you."

"You're vipers, all of you. Evil, devilous vipers."

"You're going around trying to hurt people. You're the one who's a viper," Manda said.

The door flew open and Darette glared down at her, her eyes dark with hatred. "Killeeerrrr," she shouted towards the trees.

Manda dashed up on the porch and knocked Darette backwards out of the doorway in her haste to get in the house. She slammed the door behind her and leaned her back against it. Outside, she could hear Killer's sharp barks getting closer and closer. There was a loud thud, and the door shook as the dog launched itself against it, barking and snarling.

"Well, now I can't go anywhere," Manda said, sliding down to the floor. Killer butted and scratched at the door, but Manda kept her weight pressed hard against it. "I'm trapped in here with you until you call him off."

"Gal, you can't come in my house wit' your big dutty shoes," Darette said, pointing angrily at Manda's feet. "You have no respect. Tek them off."

"You didn't exactly give me a choice, did you?" Manda said, but she quickly pulled off her boots. "Anyway, now will you listen to me?"

Darette sat down at a little table set up near an old-fashioned black stove. She bent forward and scratched her leg above the stocking, leaving chalk-like streaks on her dry skin. Then she rubbed the swollen, arthritic fingers of one hand.

Manda looked around. She was in a small, two-room house. Through the shafts of sunlight that managed to find their way through the tiny windows, she could see walls lined with jar after jar of oils, herbs, powders, feathers and even what appeared to be birds' eggs. The air was musty and heavy with their smells. It was like being inside a witch doctor's house. And just like in the Obeah man's house in Brooklyn, there was an old bathtub sitting on a mat on one side of the room. Through a half-open door, Manda could make out a small wooden bed, and a night table with a kerosene lamp sitting on it. If it wasn't for the small television that sat on a shelf near the kitchen table, this little house could have been a part of any past century.

"What do you want from me?" Darette asked.

"I think you know what I want," Manda said. "I'm not here to cause you any trouble, but you've been following me and my sister around..." She paused for a moment. "By the way, how did you know who I was?"

Darette looked at her as if she had asked the dumbest question in the world. "You're the spitting image of Bertram, what else?"

"Oh. Alright, well, you've been following us around, and even trying to hurt my sister. And so...so I want you to break the curses."

"What curses?" Dar said, squinting at her.

"The one your mother put on us, and the one you put on Sierra when you blew that dust in her face."

"The sins of the father are visited on the children," Darette said.

"That's unreasonable," Manda said. "You can't punish children for their parents' mistakes."

"Generation after generation."

"Darette, you have to help us."

"And why should I do that?" There was so much bitterness, so much resentment in her voice.

"Because you're ruining our lives, and we're not to blame. You're trying to punish us because of what our mother did to you. I'm sorry about that – believe me, I know what it's like to lose your fiancé just when you expect to get married. Only weeks ago, I went through the same thing." And she was still going through it. Just thinking about Daniel's departure always caused her a fresh round of pain, as it did now. Would it ever end?

"Hmph!" Darette said.

"And it must be even harder to see them marry someone else. I won't excuse what my mother did, and I don't blame you for holding a grudge. But I know she regrets it very much, and if she had it to do all over again...I think she would make different choices."

Darette looked away, her face set in a scowl. "Myrna used to call herself my friend. She don't know what friend is."

"She was young," Manda said.

"She shoulda known better. She took the one man I ever did love. That girl hurt me so bad..." Darette sniffled and cleared her throat.

"Well, if it makes you feel any better," Manda said. "They're not together any more, my mum and dad. He left her for someone else."

Darette's head snapped around. "That wretch," she said. She chuckled quietly to herself. So many years of bitterness and disappointment echoed in that noise.

"Go ahead, have a laugh," Manda said. "But I don't find it particularly funny. It's painful to see your family fall apart. Now all I want to do is help my sister before it's too late." She closed her eyes and leaned her head against her knees. This was a waste of time. Darette was

too hardened, too unwilling to let go of the past. There seemed to be an age when people lost their capacity to forgive. Manda had seen it many times among her patients at the hospital. So many of them still embittered about things that had happened decades before. She dreaded what she would face when she got back to New York. If she made it back at all. There was a dog waiting outside to make sure she didn't.

A creaking noise sounded across the room. Manda looked up. Darette had gotten to her feet. She went over to a shelf, studied its contents, then picked up a small bottle of green liquid and brought it back to Manda.

"You take this, and you give it to your sister," she said, holding it out to Manda. "Tell her to rub it on her body."

"Sierra is not going to rub anything on her body, I can tell you that," Manda said, scrambling up. "Besides, we already tried something similar and it didn't work."

"Hmpf. It's easier to mek a curse than to break a curse," Darette said.

"That doesn't sound like much of a guarantee."

Darette hissed her teeth. "Life don't come with a guarantee."

"But is that all? Isn't there anything else you can do?"

Dar looked around. That was when Manda noticed it. There, displayed on what looked like a little pulpit standing in a corner, was a large book that was so old, the edges of its paper had turned brown. It had a frayed black leather cover with a faded gold symbol etched into it. Was this *the* Blackheart book? *The book that Aunt Beryl had told her about, and the same one Dar had used for the worst of her spells?* As she watched, Darette headed for the book. She hoisted it up and went into the only other room, closing the door firmly behind her.

Manda could hear murmurs coming from the other room. She wondered what Darette was doing in there, but thought it better not to know. It seemed like the woman was in that room forever. Manda paced around the cabin the meantime, thinking about everything, pondering what things would be like when she got back to New York. Darette finally emerged from the room and put the book back on its stand.

"Alright, you can go now," she said, waving her away.

"But... is there anything I need to do?"

"Nothing. It's done. You go."

"You're sure? It's done?"

Darette just glared at her.

"Thank you." Manda pulled her shoes back on and headed for the door. Outside, Killer had grown quiet. "Listen, Darette," she said, turning around. "I know this hasn't been easy for you, but I really appreciate it. I want you to know I'm truly sorry for everything that happened. I mean it. And here." She took out her wallet and retrieved a few bills. "It's just a little money for all your trouble."

"You can't clean up trouble with likkle money," Darette said. But she took the money and pushed it down the front of her dress. The *tittie-bank*, as Aunt Beryl called it.

Manda took her hand and Darette stiffened. "Again, thank you," she said. "Now, how can I get back to the road without being eaten by your dog?"

"I will tek you," Darette said.

As Manda turned to leave, she noticed a framed picture that hung on the wall on one side of the door. It was a color photo of a dark-skinned old woman with eyes that were so green, they looked like a set of cat's eyes fixed into her face. The woman was scowling as if she had been ambushed and forced to take the picture.

“Who’s that?” Manda asked.

Darette glanced up from pulling on her yellow rubber boots. “That’s my madda, who else?” she said.

“Dar?” Manda stared back at the picture. “But...but it can’t be.”

“You don’t think I know my own madda?”

“Yes, but...” But this wasn’t the duppy Manda had been seeing for the past weeks. This woman looked nothing like her.

“Come on, and stop sniffing your nose in my business.” Darette opened the door and went out.

Manda hurried after her, remembering the dog. Darette led her back up through the gully, and when Manda turned around, Killer was following silently behind them. She kept looking back at the dog, making sure it didn’t get too close. She might have lost her fear of Darette, but the dog was another story. When they reached the top of the gully, Manda saw Tim still sitting on the rock, waiting for her. She was bent over, in the middle of tying her shoes.

“You tek so long, I did think that ole woman a kill-.” Tim stopped when she saw Darette and her dog standing by the road with Manda. She flew off the rock and went dashing down the road, her braids flying behind her like kite tails.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Angie picked Manda up right on time when she arrived at La Guardia. During the drive back to her house, Manda told her everything that had happened.

“Ratid.” Angie cursed when Manda told her about the visit to the Obeah woman. She thought the part about the dog was exceptionally funny, and banged so hard on the steering wheel as she laughed, that she accidentally blew her horn and made a pedestrian jump.

“Well, never mind,” Angie said. “You did what you went to do, and you face Darette. Most people too ‘fraid of her.”

“Her dog was far more frightening.”

“You lucky she didn’t mek him kill you.”

“She wanted to,” Manda said. She wondered what would have happened if she hadn’t been able to get through Darette’s door in time.

Manda rang Sierra minutes after getting to Angie’s house. She wanted to know if anything had changed in the few days since she had been away. She was amazed to find out something had indeed changed.

Sierra came on the phone sounding hoarse and miserable.

“What’s the matter?” Manda asked her.

“I’ve got some bad news,” she said. “Well, maybe it’s not bad news to you, but it is to me.”

“What’re you talking about?” Manda sat down on the couch.

“Yesterday, Nik and I had a talk. He’s been acting weirder and weirder, so I finally forced him to tell me what’s going on.”

“Yeah...?” *Could it be?*

“He said he’s been doing a lot of thinking and...he’s not ready for a family. He said he wasn’t expecting me to get myself pregnant - can you believe it? I got myself pregnant, as if he had nothing to do with it.”

“Yeah...?” Manda slapped a hand to her chest.

“Now he wanted to come clean,” Sierra said. “He doesn’t want to be a father. So he...he called off the wedding.” Her voice broke. “We’re finished.”

They were finished. It had worked! For a moment, Manda was elated. The trip to Jamaica had been a success. The curse was broken. *Thank you, Darette,* she thought. *You’ve saved our lives.*

But Sierra’s pain was real, and her sobs soaked up some of Manda’s joy. As she had told Darette, she knew what it was like to be left at the altar.

“Sierra, I’m so sorry you’re going through this,” she said. “I know how much it hurts, and I would never make light of that.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll be home soon, okay? And then we can talk all night if you need to.”

“Actually, if you don’t mind...” Sierra said. “I need to be alone right now. Can you come back tomorrow?”

“Oh. Oh, alright. I’ll see you tomorrow then. Love you.”

“You too,” Sierra said.

When Manda told Angie what had happened, Angie clapped her hands and laughed. "Let's have a toast. I'll mix us up some rum punch," she said.

"No, please don't," Manda said. It didn't feel right celebrating when Sierra was grieving.

The next day, she accompanied Angie as she drove around Queens picking up supplies for the Labor Day bar-be-cue she and Tee were planning to have. The phone was ringing when they got back to Angie's that afternoon. Angie put down her bags and ran for it, but the call had already gone to the answering service.

"It was your sister," Angie said when she had checked the message. "She left a message for you and you ain't gonna like it."

"What did she say?" Manda put her bags down on the loveseat.

"Here," Angie said, passing Manda the handset.

"Hi, Manda, it's two o'clock," Sierra said. "I'll probably be gone by the time you get here. Nik's coming to get me. We're going up to his cabin after all. He wants to talk." She paused. "I think you know what this means."

Yes, she knew what it meant. It meant Sierra was a dead woman. It was three minutes past two, according to Manda's watch. She dialed Sierra's number right away, but the voicemail prompt came on. She started to leave a message, then changed her mind and hung up.

"Angie, you've got to drive me home right away. I have to get there before Nik does," she said.

Angie shook her head. "I tell you before, I'm done. Last time I try to help the cheeky gal, she come beat me with my wig, and then throw me out of her yard like a piece of fowl doo-doo."

"Yes, that was awful, but-"

"And now she busy planning her big, fancy birthday party, and I know I could wait till kingdom come for an invite."

"Please, Angie." Manda grabbed her shoulders. "If you won't do it for her, then do it for me. I can't let Nik take her up to that cabin."

Her cousin sighed and went limp. "Alright, let's go before I change my mind. And yes, I'm doing it for you, and not that gal."

Manda gave her a hug and followed her out to her car.

"Do you want me to wait?" Angie asked when they pulled up across from Sierra's building. There was nowhere for her to park.

"That's alright. If she's gone already, there's nothing we can do about it." She gave Angie a quick goodbye and then headed into the building.

Sierra was still at home waiting for Nik when Manda burst through the door. "Is that you, Nik?" she called out from her bedroom. "Sorry, I'm running a little behind."

"No, it's me, Manda." She felt a moment of relief as she hurried down the hall to Sierra's room.

"Oh, Manda, hi. Did you get my message?"

"I did, and I got here as fast as I could."

"Why? What's the rush?" Her Gucci weekend bag stood open on her bed, partly packed. She carried a blue silk nightie over to it.

"Sierra, even if you never ever listen to me again-even if you never want to speak to me for the rest of your life-I need you to listen to me now."

Sierra stopped. "Oh no, not this again. Manda-."

"Yes, Sierra, I'm serious. You can't go up to the cabin with Nik. You're in danger. I believe it with all my heart."

“That’s enough.” Sierra flung the nightie in her bag. “People have bad dreams all the time, Manda, but you take it to a whole new limit.

“Sierra, listen. It wasn’t a dream, I know it.”

“Not another word,” Sierra walked into her closet and came out with a pair of jeans. She rolled it up and pushed it down into her bag.

Manda stood watching her, wandering what to do. All she knew was she had to stop her. “Sierra.” She reached out and held her sister’s arm.

“You listen,” Sierra said, pulling away. “I’m going to that cabin whether or not you like it. And Nik and I will probably get back together and there’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

Not knowing what else to do, Manda knelt down on the bedroom rug and looked up to the ceiling. “Please help my sister to see the foolishness of her ways,” she said. “Please help her to heed my words, no matter how strange they sound.”

Sierra burst out laughing. She walked back into her closet, shaking her head. The wooden hangers clicked against each other as she rooted through her clothes, searching for something.

Manda got back to her feet, feeling quite foolish. It never worked for her mother. Why did she expect it to work for her? She sat down on the bed and dropped her head in her hands. How could she stop her? There was no way... it was too late.

“Where’s that stupid jacket?” Sierra said from the closet.

The closet key. Manda had come across it in Sierra’s bedside table. It was in the top drawer. She hurried over and slid the drawer open quietly. She fished the key out from among the junk inside.

“Forgive me for this,” she mumbled.

“I’m not listening.” Sierra’s voice drifted out of the closet, muffled by her clothes.

Manda slammed the closet door shut and leaned on it.

“What’re you doing?” Sierra shoved from the other side, trying to force the door open.

“Saving your life.” Manda leaned against the door with all her weight. She fumbled with the key, trying to get it into the lock.

“Manda,” Sierra shouted.

“Damn it. Why won’t it go in?” She twisted the key round and round. It finally slid in and she turned it until she felt something click. She spun around the room, looking for a place to hide the key, some place where Nik wouldn’t think to look. Her gaze fell on a box of tampons sitting on the opposite night table. She pushed the key down inside the box, under the little bullet-shaped tampons, and shut the box tight. She left Sierra in the closet, hurling blood-curdling curses through the door.

“It’s done,” she whispered to herself. She sat down and turned on the television, trying to drown out Sierra’s screams. Her hands trembled. Nik would be arriving at any moment. She knew he would demand to know where the key was, but Manda would stay silent and ignore him. And he would try to get Sierra out somehow, but he would have to take the door off its hinges. He would end up going away angrily, and leave them to sort it out. After that, Manda wouldn’t let Sierra out until she promised to listen. She played this scenario over and over in her mind, trying to prepare herself. She switched the channels until she found a channel where a rerun of “Good Times” was playing. She watched JJ dancing in his living room with a very young Janet Jackson.

When she heard Nik’s key in the front door, Manda felt her insides clench up like a fist.

“Oh. You’re back,” Nik said. He sounded surprised. “Sierra said you were in Jamaica.”

“Yes, I was,” she said, then remembered she had planned to ignore him.

“How was your-?”

A series of thumps sounded from the bedroom.

“What’s that noise?” he asked, looking towards the hall.

Manda kept her gaze fixed on the television.

“Sierra?” Nik called out.

“Nik. Help me,” Sierra hollered from the closet.

He gave Manda a puzzled look, then hurried up the hall towards Sierra’s room.

Manda heard him jiggling the closet’s doorknob, while Sierra carried on from the other side.

Nik came marching out to the living room. “You locked her in the closet?” He gave Manda an incredulous look.

She picked up the remote and switched the channel on the television.

“Give me the key,” he said, holding out his hand. He stood like that for a while. When she wouldn’t answer him, he came over and leaned over her. “Where’s the key?” The sunlight coming through the window made his pale blue pupils look almost white.

She clamped her mouth shut tighter.

“I don’t have time for this,” Nik said. He stormed across the room and into the kitchen.

Manda heard cupboards and drawers banging open, and the clattering of cutlery as Nik searched through the kitchen. He came out carrying a box of tools, and headed off to the bedroom. Manda got up and paced the floor. Now how could she stop him? She couldn’t. She turned back to the couch. Nik’s doll sat in its corner, eyes hidden behind its black sunglasses. Manda snatched up the doll, shook it and yanked its black hair. She dropped it to the floor and stomped on its little head. Its sunglasses snapped under her feet. Its little face caved in. There. She had killed it.

“Manda!”

She whirled around and saw a wild-haired Sierra standing in the living room beside the real, tight-lipped, very much alive Nik.

“I can’t believe you did that,” Sierra said, her voice shaking. “I...I can’t...believe it.”

“I just want to protect you,” Manda tried to explain again, though she wasn’t sure if Sierra was referring to the doll or the closet. “I wish you would listen.”

“If you don’t leave right now...” Sierra paused. “If you don’t get out right now, I’m calling the police,” she said, folding her arms.

“Sierra, you wouldn’t,” Manda said. “I’m your sister.”

“Not anymore.” Sierra said it with a cold finality.

“You don’t mean that.”

“Yes, I do mean that. Get out.” She took a step towards Manda.

Manda picked up her bag. “Alright then. Have it your way. She stomped towards the door, then turned back around. “Sierra, you’re going to regret this. You’ll be sorry.”

“I’m sorry I allowed you to come here.”

Manda slammed the door so hard, she could hear the sound echoing through the building. She walked half-way down the street and stopped to look back at the building. Her mind whirled. Her body couldn’t stop shaking. How had things turned out so horribly? A few minutes later, she was still watching the building when Sierra and Nik came out the front door. As they hurried down the steps, Sierra took a quick glance up the street and turned away when she saw Manda. She followed Nik into his little red Jaguar. Just before they sped off, Manda saw him bring his hand to his lips and kiss his silver ring. Sierra had said he did that for good

luck. Manda wondered what exactly he needed luck in, this time. Seconds later, they were racing along Fifth Street.

“Oh bleeding hell,” she moaned. There was nothing she could do. Sierra was already on her way to the cabin with Nik. She was going to die, and there was nothing Manda could do about it. She sat on a stoop and put her head in her hands. People passed up and down the sidewalks like blurry figures in a dream. She felt completely alone in the world. She was startled by a hand on her shoulder. Manda looked up to see Noah peering down at her.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asked, his eyes full of concern.

“She’s gone,” she cried. “I couldn’t stop her, and now she’s gone off to Nik’s cabin.” Tears spilled down her cheeks and she brushed them away. She didn’t want him to see her like this.

“Hmm,” Noah said. “Do you want to go after her?”

Manda looked at him. “Go after her? How?”

Noah ran his hand through his hair. “I actually have a book signing in Midtown in about an hour. Maybe I can put you on a bus?”

“It’ll be too late by then,” Manda said, wiping her eyes again. “Sierra is in trouble. Nik is going to... he’s going to do something to her unless I can stop him.”

“How do you know...wait. Does it have to do with what you were telling me about the other day?”

“The vision. Yes, and it’s all coming about right now, whether or not you can believe it.”

Noah nodded. “What can I say? Trust your instincts. Okay, I’ll take you.”

“But what about-?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll tell them I’ve had an emergency. Car trouble. Come on.” Noah headed down the block towards his car.

Manda got up and followed him. There was no time for protests, no time to consider the feelings of his fans. To hell with his fans. She had a life to save. If it wasn’t too late.

“So, what’s the address?” Noah asked.

The address. Damn it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It took Manda another fifteen minutes just to get the address for Nik's cabin. Sierra had mentioned that it was near a place called Cold Spring, but that was all she knew.

First she had to dash back up to the flat to find Sierra's address book. Then once she found it in one of Sierra's night tables, she had to go through it and start calling the familiar names she saw in there, like Carmen's. Sometimes only voicemails came on, and the few other people she had managed to reach didn't know the address. She finally found the phone number for Nik's parents and dialed them in Connecticut. She made up a story about following them on the road and getting lost, and that was why she needed it et cetera, et cetera, and his mother was happy to give it to her. Manda ran back down to the car and threw herself inside.

"Got it," she said.

Noah passed his phone to Manda and while he pulled into traffic, she went online and mapped out the direction to the cabin. Now they were on their way out of Manhattan, and her heart hadn't stopped racing. She felt like a rubber band stretched to its limits and ready to snap. She looked at Noah, feeling a wave of gratefulness that he had been there.

"Hey," Noah said, when they had stopped at a light. He lifted her hair back from her face and smiled. "Sierra's lucky to have a sister like you."

Manda scowled. "Well, she certainly doesn't think so, does she?"

"I'm sure she does," Noah said. "Your sister loves you very much. She talks about you a lot."

"Yes, I've heard her on the radio many times. She broadcasts everything I do to her listeners."

"I mean when she's not on the radio," Noah said. "She told me her one regret about leaving England was that she had to leave you behind."

"But it didn't stop her, did it?" Sierra had left with very little warning. She had rang Manda one day to say she was moving to New York, and Manda could have her flat if she wanted it.

Manda went back to studying the directions. According to it, they had another forty minutes drive ahead. Twenty minutes later, she heard Noah clear his throat.

"I think we missed our exit," he said. "Though I don't know how."

"That can't be right. I've been watching carefully," Manda said.

"I've been watching too, but I think the directions may be off."

"Damn it." Manda drummed her fingers on the keyboard. "We'll never get there in time."

"We'll be okay," Noah said.

Manda wanted to scream. Instead, she turned to the window and watched trees fly by. It wasn't Noah's fault. If it weren't for him, she would still be stuck back on Fifth Street. "How's your foot?" she asked, turning back to him.

Noah glanced down at his foot. "It's doing great," he said. "I no longer need the cane, though I'm not quite ready to start jogging again."

"You jog too? Sierra's a big fan of jogging."

"I know." Noah glanced in his rearview mirror. "We used to run together sometimes."

Just how close were they? Manda wondered. But she didn't ask.

They wasted more time having to turn off at the next little town and drive another few miles before finding the entrance to go back on the Palisades Parkway in the opposite direction.

Manda realized she had misread part of the directions in the first place. It had been her fault, but Noah brushed it off. Daniel would have at least sent some subtle, well-deserved guilt her way.

The driver on their right was trying to hog his way into their lane, and Noah slowed down to let him in. When another driver tried to do the same, he let him in too.

“Can you drive faster?” she asked him.

“I could, but there are a lot of cops along this route. The last thing we need is to get pulled over.”

“Well, everybody’s passing us,” Manda said. “At least let’s keep up with them.” Blimey, he was going along like an old woman on a Sunday drive through the countryside.

Noah sped up. “Is that better?”

“Much.”

They had been going along at this pace for about ten minutes, when a police car appeared behind them out of nowhere. The car flashed its lights.

“Uh-oh, they’re signaling for us to pull over,” Noah said. He slowed the car and pulled off to the roadside.

“Auuuu,” Manda howled. They were so close. They didn’t have time to waste.

Noah rolled down the window and gave the officer a friendly greeting. The officer only squinted back at him and demanded to see his license. He told them they had been going 90 in a 60-mile zone. That was way over the speed limit. He wiped the sweat from his shaved head, took the license and walked back to his car. Ten minutes later, he still hadn’t come back.

“What’s taking him so bleeding long?” Manda peered out the back window at the police car.

“I have no idea,” Noah said calmly. “He’s probably running a standard background check. They do that whenever they pull anyone over. But you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Nothing to worry about? My sister’s life is at stake,” Manda said, shaking her head at him.

“You can’t be absolutely certain she’s in danger. Things may not be as bad as you think.”

Manda gave him a steady, Dead-Eyed-Dick look and turned back around to watch through the window. Noah slipped a CD into the drive and the moaning, sleep-inducing strains of Enya filled the car. Manda tried to resist the soothing pull of the music. She knew Noah had chosen this one on purpose. He wanted her to lay back, close her eyes and let everything go. But she wasn’t having it. This was not the time to get all serene and one-with-the-universe.

After an eternity had passed, the officer came back to the car. “I thought I recognized you,” he said, handing Noah back his license through the window. “You’re Noah Kato, the guy who gives people faith-lifts. My wife’s always quoting from your book.”

“Really? That’s great to hear.”

“Yeah, small world. I’ll tell you what. I won’t give you a ticket this time. My wife would never forgive me.”

“Thanks, officer. I really appreciate that.”

“Are you holding any seminars anytime soon? I’d love to take her.”

“Well, I’ll be-.”

“For goodness’ sake, can’t you see we’re in a hurry?” Manda leaned over Noah and glared up at the officer.

“Manda, calm down.” Noah put his hand on her knee.

“How can I? My sister’s in trouble.”

“What kind of trouble is that, Ma’am?” the officer asked, peering past Noah at her, his thick brows furrowed.

“Well, my sister...” How could she explain things to him without having him call for backup to cart her off to the madhouse?

“We don’t know if she’s actually in trouble,” Noah jumped in. “She’s in a cabin nearby and we just wanted to make sure she’s okay. That’s why we were hurrying.”

“Oh.” The officer straightened up. “Anyhow, we’re in the area if you need help. But watch the speed. The next cop might not be so nice.”

“Certainly, Sir.” Noah rolled up the window as the officer walked back to his car. They pulled back onto the road and drove off.

“We’ve lost twenty more minutes,” Manda said, studying her watch.

“That’s why I wanted to avoid speeding,” Noah said.

Manda glared at him. “Rub it in, go ahead.”

Noah sighed. “Manda, I’m just trying to help you. I care about you.”

“Really? Did you care about Sierra when you slept with her?” Where did that come from?

Noah flinched, but he kept his eyes on the road. She could tell he was thinking of the most diplomatic thing to say.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say that,” she told him.

She saw his Adam’s apple go down, then back up as he swallowed. “She told you,” he said. “Manda, it was a long time ago.”

“I said don’t answer it.”

“No, I think we should talk about it.”

“Please. I’d rather not,” Manda said. Then, “Did you love her?”

“I was attracted to her, but that was it.”

“How attracted?” She hated hearing the jealousy in her own voice.

“How attracted? I don’t know. Fairly...attracted.” He cleared his throat.

“Are you still attracted to her?” Why couldn’t she stop her tongue? Was she just trying to distract herself from what lay ahead?

“No, I’m not,” Noah answered. “As I said, it was a long time ago and it lasted for ten minutes. But I understand why it would make you uncomfortable-.”

“I’m not uncomfortable. I was just curious. But let’s just drop it. I’ve got more important things to think about right now.”

Noah nodded. His shoulders relaxed and he drew in a deep breath.

Five minutes later, they arrived at the road that led to Nik’s cabin.

The cabin stood on a wide green lawn at the top of a long driveway that wound upwards away from the main road. It was a small cabin, made of wood the color of matchsticks. Nik’s car was parked in a clearing beside it. Manda got out of Noah’s car and hurried up the three wooden steps that led onto the screened-in front porch. She knocked, but behind the door there was only silence. She tried the knob and was relieved to find the door unlocked.

“Sierra,” she called out through the door. “Are you here?” She stepped inside the cabin and tiptoed around. There was a little kitchen off the living room, and a bedroom down the hall. Both Sierra and Nik’s weekend bags sat on top of the quilted bedspread, but it looked as if nothing had been unpacked. It seemed like they had literally dropped their things and went out. She could imagine Nik coaxing Sierra to go for a walk. And she knew where that walk would lead.

“They’re not in the cabin,” Manda said to Noah as she came back outside. “You stay here in case they come back. I’ll go look around.”

“Manda,” Noah said, tugging at her shirtsleeve as she was about to start down the porch steps. “Listen. I’m sorry about what happened in the car...and about Sierra. Maybe I should’ve told you.”

“Noah, it’s alright. It doesn’t matter now.”

“It matters to me,” he said, touching her face, rooting her in place with his gaze. “I’m falling in love with you.”

Manda swallowed. “You are? Huh.”

He drew her close and kissed her. It took nearly all of her strength to pull herself away from him.

“Noah,” she said, giving him a steady look. “I-.” There was so much she wanted to say, but there was no time. She had to find Sierra. “Wait here.”

Manda leaped down the porch steps and ran around the cabin, her legs almost buckling under her like a newborn colt. And there it was rising before her. The forest she had seen in her visions, spread away at the back of the cabin. Manda plunged into it without hesitating. She strained her ears and listened for voices.

“Sierra, where are you?” she called out. She hurried through the forest, jumping over exposed roots and ducking under low-hanging branches. She had no idea where she was going. The forest was dark and shadowy, but unlike in the gully leading to Dar’s house, this time it wasn’t the dark she feared. All she cared about was saving Sierra. The words *Save Sierra* echoed over and over in her mind.

Images flashed through her mind as she ran. Nik pushing Sierra. Sierra falling backwards. *Save Sierra*. Her heart raced. She said a prayer under her breath. Daniel said prayer could move mountains. She had prayed after he left, but it hadn’t moved his feet back in her direction. He had left her to face life without him.

Something stirred at the root of a tree ahead of her. Manda glanced over there and came to an abrupt stop when she saw it. There it was again. That bloody old woman. She stood by the short stump of a tree, in that same blue frock, with her matted gray hair dangling like seaweed over her face.

“Bleeding hell, not now.” Manda said. “Not here.”

As the old woman’s dark, empty eyes bore into Manda’s, she felt her body weakening with fear. She leaned forward with her hands on her knees. *You’re not there. You’re not there. You’re not...* She looked back up. The old woman was there, and it didn’t seem like she was going anywhere this time. *What does she want?* Manda thought to herself. Who was this woman anyway, if it wasn’t Dar? But who else would want to get her attention this way? What was it Papa Gord had said to do? Her mind span.

“Speak to her,” Manda whispered to herself. Papa Gord had said she should speak to the ghost. She had thought it was a ridiculous suggestion at the time, but now...

“Please,” she said out loud, looking at the ghost. “I need to know. Who are you? And is there...is there something you’re trying to tell me?”

The old woman only held her gaze.

“What do you want from me?” Manda shouted at her. She gripped her hair in frustration. “You’re driving me crazy, can’t you see that? Is that what you want? To see me pulling my hair out by the roots.” She looked at the broken strands in her palm. Some black hairs, mixed in with a couple gray ones. *Gray ones*.

“That’s it,” she said softly as a realization hit her. She stood up straighter. “You’re not a ghost, are you? Or not exactly.” She was certain she understood now. It seemed like whenever this apparition appeared, she had been thinking about the future. A future in which she was growing old alone, the very thing she feared more than anything else in the world. A horrible, ugly future in which she had failed to find love, and had lost anyone who had ever meant anything to her.

“I know who you are,” she said to the old woman, feeling bolder now. She walked slowly towards her. “You’re me, aren’t you? That’s it. You’re me. You’re my future, or...or what I might become if I keep going this way.” The more she talked, the closer she moved to the vision, the more she understood. This must have been what the Obeah man in Brooklyn had meant when he said her duppy was following her. Now she was standing face-to-face with it.

“If I stop trusting anyone and let myself become hardened and bitter.” She really understood now. This is the future she would be creating for herself. *This would be the woman who would look back at her in the mirror one day.* Manda studied this future vision of herself – the pursed lips, the thick hair that had turned into gray matted dreadlocks, and the dark, empty eyes with that tiny blue ring around the right iris.

“I can’t let this happen,” she said. “Do you hear me? I will never let myself become you. So you might as well go away. She shoved at the image, but felt only air. It had vanished at her touch, like a soap-water bubble.

“It’s gone,” she whispered. “My, gosh, it’s really gone.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

In the sudden quiet, she could hear the faintest voices coming from ahead of her in the distance. Manda ran towards the sound. As she moved forward, she finally made out the distinct voices of Nik and Sierra. They were arguing. Sierra was alive. There was still time. She ran faster.

As she neared the wall of trees where the forest ended, Manda could see them standing near the edge of a cliff, against the same gray sky she had seen in her visions, with its tiny patches of blue. Sierra was crying, her face buried in her hands. On her head was the familiar white scarf covered in butterflies. She hadn’t even been wearing it when she left the flat.

“So that’s it?” Manda heard Nik say. “You’re not gonna change your mind?”

“I can’t,” Sierra moaned.

“Sierra, you’re not being reasonable. We discussed this before. You knew how I felt.”

“And you knew how I felt,” Sierra bawled at him. “I don’t care, I’m not changing my mind.”

“Alright, then, what choice do I have?” Nik stepped forward quickly, his arms raised out to Sierra.

“No!” Manda screamed. She ran out of the woods and barreled towards them. Sierra lowered her hands from her face, just as Nik dropped his arms and spun around, stunned.

“Manda? What...?” Sierra started to say.

“No,” Manda said again, as she charged at Nik, slapping at him. “I saw you. I saw you.”

Nik tried to duck away from her slaps.

“Manda, stop it.” Sierra grabbed at her arms.

“No.” Manda turned to Sierra. “He was about to push you. I saw him this time.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Nik said. His voice had risen to a high octave.

“What were you doing then?”

“I was just reaching out to hug her. That’s all.” Nik held her wrists tight.

“Liar,” Manda barked at him, trying to pull free. “I know what I saw.”

“You didn’t see *anything*,” Nik said, pushing her away from him. “Because I didn’t do anything.”

“Right. Just like you didn’t do anything to poor Stacey. How did she drown, Nik?”

From the look of surprise on Nik’s face, she knew she had hit her mark. “Stacey? How...” he stammered.

“What does Stacey have to do with this?” Sierra said, her face paranoid. “She’s dead.”

“Answer me, Nik,” Manda said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Really? You don’t?” Manda eyed him incredulously. She turned to Sierra. “Stacey, his old girlfriend. She was found drowned in her pool. Nik was there. He said it was an accident, but Carmen...” Manda paused to catch her breath. “Carmen never believed his story-.”

“Oh, my...” Nik rubbed his face and cursed. “Carmen wasn’t even there. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

“And that’s not all, is it Nik?” Manda said. She looked at Sierra, who had her eyes fixed on Nik. “Stacey was pregnant.”

“No, she wasn’t,” Nik said, in a shaky voice.

“She told Carmen she was. But Nik didn’t want kids. Then suddenly she ends up dead.”

“What? Do you think I had anything to do with it?” Nik squinted at her. “She was drunk. She fell in the pool. It was an accident.”

Sierra’s eyes toaded out of their sockets. She looked at Nik, and her arms fell to her sides.

“Of course you’d say that,” Manda said to him. “And now Sierra’s pregnant, and you don’t want her baby either.”

“So what?” Nik said, his voice near hysteria. “That doesn’t mean I’m a murderer.”

“Then why did you drag Sierra all the way up here?”

“To talk,” he yelled, throwing his arms in the air. “To talk.”

“Who are you going to believe this time?” Manda said to Sierra. “Me or him?”

Sierra stared back and forth between them, a confused look on her face. But then as she always did, she chose Nik’s side.

“Manda, Nik would never hurt me. Not like that.”

“What happened to you?” Manda said. “There was a time when you would never let any old bloke come between us. What happened?”

Sierra didn’t answer.

“I didn’t make this up, Sierra. Why would I?”

“Because you’re jealous.” Sierra had found her voice again. “You lost your own fiancé, and now you’re jealous of us. That’s it.”

“Sierra, don’t be daft. That isn’t one bit true.”

“Yes it is. You’re just like Mum,” she fumed. “You both can’t ever admit you’re not perfect.”

“What? What does she have to do with this?”

“Nothing. She has nothing to do with this. And I want nothing to do with you.”

“You don’t mean that. Sierra, I’m your sister-.”

“Half-sister.” Sierra spat the words at Manda.

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

Sierra stared at her. "You've always wanted to know why I left England the way I did. Well, I'll tell you. I wanted to get away from this two-faced family of ours, especially our wonderful mother."

"What..."

"Dad...Bertram...he isn't my father."

"Why are saying this? He is your father," Manda squeezed the words out of her tight throat.

"No, he's not," Sierra said. "Mum was pregnant for someone else when she married him."

"But..."

"It's true." Sierra nodded. "For the longest time Mum made Bertram think he was my father. But then he found out the truth three years ago – why do you think he left her? And then he finally told me the truth himself, because he said when he died, he didn't want to take that secret to his grave. I wish he hadn't told me." Tears streamed down Sierra's cheeks and she wiped them away.

"I don't understand-."

"And at first when I confronted Mum about it, she said Bertram was just trying to turn me against her. But then she admitted it. She said my real dad was some bloke named Cecil, an old boyfriend of hers."

Cecil. Manda covered her face with her hands. She remembered Papa Gord had mentioned that name, and how their mother had been fickle with men.

"I didn't want to speak to either of them again for what they did," Sierra continued. "And Mum was always treating me like I was such a bad example for you, when all along she was no saint. But it's true. Bertram is not my father, and we're only half-sisters. And now I don't want anything to do with the bloody lot of you."

For the first time in their lives, Manda slapped Sierra across the face. The world seemed to come to a sudden, screeching halt as they stood there looking at each other in stunned silence. Sierra raised a hand to her cheek, her eyes full of pain.

"I...I..." Manda said. She reached a hand towards Sierra. She had just wanted to hold her, to tell her how truly sorry she was for everything. But in that instant, Sierra stepped back as if she thought Manda was going to slap her again. She tripped on a rock and stumbled backwards. And just like in the vision, Sierra flailed her arms, trying to stop herself from falling. Manda let out a shout and grabbed at Sierra. Startled birds rose up from nearby branches and took to the sky. Nik's hand shot by Manda, as he tried to grab Sierra too. Below them, the river burred by like a pot that had reached a boil.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Manda sat in the window of Sierra's living room, staring outside. Across the street, Noah was loading a box of books into the back of his car. As if sensing she was watching him, he looked up and waved when he saw her. She waved back and gave him a weak smile. He was going to do a reading at another Barnes and Noble store across town. He had wanted her to come along, but she had told him she had too much to do. Noah had given her a look that said he suspected there was more going on, but he hadn't pushed it. He was right. There was a lot more going on, and she wasn't ready to share it with him. Manda's mind hadn't stopped reeling since the day before. Just when she thought things couldn't get crazier, she had gotten an unexpected phone call that had thrown her off kilter.

While she was packing up a bag of Sierra's old clothes, the phone had started ringing. Manda had grabbed it and said an impatient "Hello?"

"Hello, Manda," a male voice said on the other end.

"Hi, who's this?"

There was a momentary pause, then the voice said. "It hasn't been that long, has it? It's Daniel."

"Huh...," was all she could manage to say.

"Surprise." Daniel laughed nervously. "Your mother said I could reach you here."

"But..." Was this really Daniel, or was she just dreaming?

"I know. You can't believe it's me. Well, it is," Daniel said.

"What...what happened to you?" Manda's tongue felt as big and heavy as it had after she had eaten Angie's pepper sauce.

"I need to talk to you," Daniel said. "Manda, I've missed you so much." While Manda listened silently, still hardly believing he was on the phone, Daniel explained what had happened to him. After they had parted, he had left the city for a bit. All he could think about was what he had done. He couldn't understand it. He said it was like he was having a breakdown or something, and he had even started to question his faith.

"Where did you go?" Manda asked him.

"I went to my cousin's in Manchester."

Manda remembered how she had called every relative of Daniel's whose number she had, hoping someone could tell her where he was. No one had helped her.

"I wish you had told me," she said now. "I was sick with worry."

Daniel sighed. "Yes, I'm sorry about that. I was a right bastard."

"Aunt Beryl said she saw you with a woman," Manda said. "Who was she?"

"Oh, right," he said. "That was my cousin, Jessica. You met her before."

Manda wasn't sure whether or not to believe him, but she wanted to think it was true. Still, she wasn't ready to forgive him. "So... why are you calling me now? What do you want?"

He paused for a moment. She could hear him breathing heavily on the other end. "I wanted to tell you that...I made a terrible mistake. I'm sorry it took me so long to come to my senses, but Manda, I was hoping we could...we could pick up where we left off. My feelings for you have never changed. I still love you as much as ever. More, possibly."

Manda had played this moment over and over again in her head, like a favorite scene from a beloved film – imagining how elated she would be to hear Daniel say he had made a mistake. He wanted her back. But instead, all she felt was an overwhelming sense of sadness, mixed with anger.

“You *abandoned* me. You practically left me at the altar.” She wiped at her eyes, remembering that night.

“I know, and I could never apologize enough. I don’t know what happened that night...why exactly I ran...but I’m a whole lot better now. After much soul-searching, I know we were meant to be together. And that’s why I had to call you. We can get married, like we planned. We could-.” He sniffled on the other end. “We could start over.”

Manda felt herself caving in to his feelings, as she always did. Her heart was thumping so hard, she felt like she might collapse.

“I need to think,” she said, finally. “I need to call you back.”

Daniel reluctantly agreed, and Manda hung up.

Now, a whole day had passed and Manda still hadn’t called him back. She wasn’t sure what to say to him. Daniel was in London, waiting for her. It hardly seemed real. And he wanted her to come back to him. He wanted to pick up where they had left off. They could, couldn’t they? The wedding dress was hanging in the back of her mother’s closet, enclosed in plastic, the yellow stain cleaned from it. Only two months ago, all she had wanted was to marry Daniel. How many people got the chance to recapture their best dream? She thought about how much she had loved Daniel.

But what about Noah? She couldn’t deny having feelings for him. Strong feelings. But there was no guarantee that this thing she had with him...whatever this thing was...would even go anywhere. It struck her then that she didn’t even know his middle name. So Daniel was fate. Noah was...faith.

Manda got up and went down the hall to Sierra’s room. She entered softly and went over to the bed where her sister lay asleep.

“Sierra? Sierra, open your eyes.” Manda raised one of her eyelids and stared into the brown orb. “Can you hear me?”

Sierra’s mouth fell open and she let out a long groan.

“Come on. Wake up.” Manda shook her shoulder gently. “I want to make you breakfast.”

Again, Sierra just groaned. Manda flicked her nose, but she swatted her hand away and rolled over.

“Alright, have it your way then.” Manda got off the bed. “It’s up to you if you want to sleep your whole birthday away.”

Sierra shot up straight. “It’s...it’s my birthday,” she said blinking, a sleepy smile spreading across her face.

“Yes, it is.” Manda threw her arms around Sierra’s head and hugged her. “Happy Birthday, you old cow.” It felt so good to say that.

Only days earlier, Sierra had almost been killed. Manda had thought she was dead for certain, when she had teetered momentarily on the edge of the cliff, her arms thrashing in the air. But Manda had grabbed her in the nick of time, pulling her back with a strength she didn’t even know she had. They had sat there on the cliff, crying and holding each other, with Nik standing over them looking stunned.

Afterwards, Manda had almost drowned in guilt. Nik wasn’t the one who had nearly sent Sierra over that cliff after all. He might have been too controlling, but it was Manda herself who

had nearly caused the fall when she had lost control and smacked Sierra. The thought devastated her. She had misinterpreted the details in her vision. She hadn't understood the warning from the Obeah man in Brooklyn. He had been trying to tell her not to follow her vision, but let it follow her. She had almost created a self-fulfilling prophesy.

When they had finally gone back through the woods to the cabin, Noah had been standing in the yard waiting for them. Manda threw her arms around him and wouldn't let go. Sierra later told her that when she and Nik had reached the cabin, she was the one who had wanted to go for a walk. She needed to cool off after her fight with Manda. And so they had gone walking through the woods, the two of them holding hands. Nik had been so quiet, she had wondered what was on his mind. When they got to the cliff, Nik held her and told her how much he loved her and really wanted to be with her. Then he told her something that broke her heart. He said they could go ahead and get married, but only if she didn't have the baby. It was still early enough for her to do something, he had insisted. He told her this baby was a ship, and it would only suck them down. Sierra had been crying when Manda arrived because she had just broken up with Nik and told him she was keeping the baby.

But Manda no longer had to convince Sierra that her vision had been real. She might never have believed Manda, if she hadn't felt herself about to fall over that cliff, just as Manda had warned. Before then, she hadn't been able to even think about its possibility. Sierra admitted that Manda may have had a gift after all, and the Obeah woman, Dar, may have affected their future with her curse."

Now, aside from a broken heart, Sierra was alive and well, and her baby was safe. Manda thought it had to do in part with whatever Darette had done in the room that time. And Angie thought the oil she had poured on Sierra had protected the baby.

And after everything, Manda had thought Sierra would cancel her party plans, but one of Sierra's gifts was her amazing ability to put on a smile and get on with the show, no matter how awful she felt. Sierra's birthday party was going to be that evening. When Carmen found out Sierra and Nik had broken up and Sierra no longer had a place to hold her party, she had offered up her building's roof garden.

Later that evening, Sierra threw a garden party in the sky on the roof of Carmen's building. The party began when it was still light, so that people could watch the sunset from the roof. It wasn't exactly the lavish extravaganza Sierra had originally planned. But it was a catered affair, with just enough glamour and dazzle to keep Sierra happy. Manda had talked Sierra into letting Angie cater the party. They were family after all, and Angie was happy to put aside her feud with Sierra. She hadn't wanted Sierra to pay the regular price, but Sierra had insisted. She said it was her way of apologizing to Angie.

Manda looked around for Noah. He had been invited, but it was two hours into the party and he still hadn't arrived. She wondered if he was still coming. She went over to the tables where Tee and Angie had set up their silver containers of food. Angie flashed her a grin. She hadn't gotten Tee to change his mind about Florida, but they had postponed the move until after the Christmas holiday. She was still convinced that Florida would young-up Tee again, and give her that baby she had always wanted.

"I'm really going to miss you," Manda told Angie, giving her a hug. She would later have a vision in which she saw Angie laying in a hospital bed, holding a baby boy up to her face. The baby was as wrinkled as Tee.

Manda smiled as she saw Sierra come through the roof door and gaze happily around her. She looked quite pretty in her silky blue party dress. Manda had made it in just two days, from

two dresses Sierra no longer wore. Sierra had loved it. She was all too happy to put the dress Nik had bought her in the Goodwill bag. Manda felt cheerful and light-hearted herself.

The day after the cliff incident, she had gotten some good news. She had gotten a call from Antoinette, the woman who wanted to put her clothes in her Soho boutique. They had just started acquiring clothes for the following spring, and she had seen Manda's photos and said they were interested in getting some pieces from her. Antoinette was also the buyer for Fleur, their sister boutique in Paris. She wanted clothes for that store too, and said they paid their designers very well. Manda couldn't believe what she was hearing. She had successfully convinced herself that nothing would come of the whole thing. Antoinette invited her to come in so they could work out an arrangement. Manda said she would think about it, and Antoinette asked her to get back to her soon. But Manda wasn't sure she was ready. She had a career in England to think about. That kept her busy enough. When would she have time to make clothes?

But they had a lot to celebrate. Being alive and well, for one thing. And by this time next year, God willing, she would have a baby niece or nephew. It thrilled her each time she thought about it. They needed new blood in the family. Babies had a way of uniting people sometimes.

"Hey, I was just talking to Curt," Sierra said now, sharing her own good news. "He told me I should set up another appointment and come in to meet with them."

A few days earlier, Sierra had found out that when she had asked Nik to reschedule her meeting with Curt, he had told Curt instead that Sierra had changed her mind about wanting a television show. She had learned about this when Curt had called about her party, and at first she was livid. Nik had sent Sierra a huge bouquet of flowers and a bracelet for her birthday, but she wasn't ready to talk to him yet. Manda actually felt a bit sorry for him.

"Oh, wow. Sierra, this is great news," she said.

"It is, isn't it?" Sierra's grin vanished.

"But... you don't seem so happy." Manda told her.

"Well, I've been doing a lot of thinking lately... about what I want. I can't just think about myself anymore. I'll be someone's parent."

"I think you'll be a great mother," Manda said. "Certainly a fun one."

"I hope so." Sierra stroked her belly. "I haven't been the most forgiving daughter, and I've definitely been a terrible sister lately."

"Sierra... it doesn't matter if we're technically half-sisters," Manda said, bringing up the one subject they had been avoiding since the time on the cliff. "I won't love you any less."

"Thanks, Manda." Sierra reached out and held her hand. "You know, if Mum had just been honest in the first place, she would have saved the family so much heartache."

"But it's been more of a tragedy for her than for anyone else. Why do you think she's ended up so lonely?"

"Yes, she did bring that on herself," Sierra said.

"But don't you think you've punished her enough?"

"I know," Sierra said quietly.

"She made a mistake, Sierra. Parents make mistakes. They make one bad decision, and sometimes that's all it takes to create a lifetime of trouble. But she wants to clean up this mess, if you'll only give her a chance. How would you feel if your baby grew up and stopped speaking to you? You would be devastated, no matter what caused it."

Sierra rested her hands on her belly. "Children can change your perspective, can't they?" she said.

"I believe they can."

“Manda, I know you’re right. I do take my family for granted. You came all the way here to try and help me. You were willing to have me call you crazy, face Nik, have a showdown with an Obeah woman down in Jamaica – and all because you feared for us. You had no proof about anything, but it didn’t matter. And all I did was keep turning my back on you. But I think it’s time I stopped running.” Sierra looked across the roof at the people sitting around the tables, dining on Angie’s food. “Manda, I’m going home for a bit,” she said.

“Home? Your party is just beginning. You can’t go home.” Although Manda had to admit she was a bit knackered herself. It had been a long, long week.

“No, Manda. I mean home. I’m going back to England to have the baby. Then I’ll come back to New York afterwards. I told Curt, and he said it would be fine.”

“You’re what?” Manda’s mouth dropped open.

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot. I want my baby to know its family. And besides, I think it’s time I faced Mum again. We have a lot to work out.”

“Oh, Sierra.” Manda wiped away a tear. She wrapped her arms around her sister’s shoulders. “I can’t believe I’m hearing this.”

“Now, don’t expect miracles,” Sierra said. “It’s time we moved forward, but I’m taking it one step at a time.”

“I understand,” Manda said. The roof door opened and she saw Noah step outside and look around. Sierra followed her gaze.

“That’s right, you have two men to choose from, lucky cow,” she said.

“I don’t think there is a choice,” Manda said. It was time for her to move forward too. What had Noah said to her that time? *You’re not fate’s bitch*. She straightened up and brushed down her clothes. She walked across the roof towards Noah. How on earth had she even thought for a moment that there was a choice? He turned to her as she approached. She paused in front of him and took a deep breath.

“Noah,” she said, looking up at him. “What’s your middle name?”

“I’m afraid you’ll be going back to England alone,” Manda told Sierra two days later. “I think I want to stay here for a little while. If I can.”

“You have to,” Sierra said. She was still beaming from her party’s success. “You can’t blow this thing you have with Noah. And don’t forget about Antoinette.”

“I know.” Manda had been in shock that a boutique wanted her clothes. All her life, she had tried to do the practical thing. She had always chosen the safest routes through life, the roads she had anticipated would have the least bumps. And the one time she had wanted to take a risk and try designing clothes for a living, she had let her mother in particular talk her out of it. She was a good nurse, but maybe she could be a good designer too. After all, it was something she loved even more than nursing.

“Well, I’m glad you’re staying,” Sierra said. “Someone has to water my plants while I’m gone.”

“You don’t have any plants,” Manda reminded her.

And so everything was arranged. Manda would be extending her stay and taking over Sierra’s flat for a while. And in a few weeks, Sierra would be going back to England until her baby was born. She would be living with their mother, keeping her company. Myrna had cried when Sierra had finally picked up the phone to speak to her. She was too happy to berate Manda for extending her stay in New York.

On a cool Saturday morning in October, Noah volunteered to drive Sierra to La Guardia. Manda sat in the passenger seat beside him, and Sierra stared wistfully out the back window,

watching her beloved New York go by. It would be another year before she would see it again. Before leaving the flat, she had hung her white hat on the hook by the door as a symbol that she would be back.

Noah was happy to know that Manda would be staying. She had confessed to him about Daniel's phone call, and how she had finally called Daniel back and told him she didn't want to try again. Noah said that he had suspected something was up, and he was afraid he was losing her.

"You? Afraid of something?" Manda said, in mock horror. She didn't tell him that he was a big part of the reason she had decided to stay. She had even put Daniel's doll in the Goodwill bag, with all the other things they no longer cared to keep.

Noah shrugged and smiled.

They reached the ramp that read Departures. It had only been a couple months since she had gotten off her flight at this very airport, but to Manda it felt like a lifetime ago. So much had changed in that time. *She* had changed. She had thrown away Daniel, and thrown away her job in England. And here she was, about to take a risk in love and in her career. Two things she would never have imagined before. She had no idea what would become of her and Noah, or how far her designing would take her. But she was no longer so afraid of being unprepared, or afraid of the unpredictable future. Whatever came, she would be able to handle it.

"Manda, I have something for you," Sierra said, when they were inside the airport. She pulled a small blue box out of her pocket.

"What is it?" Manda asked, but Sierra just handed it to her.

Manda pulled the cover off the box and gasped. It was the angel brooch, the one she had wanted so long ago, when their father had given it to Sierra instead.

"But Sierra," she stammered. "You said you had lost it."

"I lied," Sierra said. She pinned it to Manda's blouse. "It's been sort of a good luck charm for me. I thought you might demand it back. It should have been yours after all."

Manda hugged her. She had to force herself not to cry. "I'll see you soon, okay? Tell everybody I love them."

They watched Sierra walk away. When she reached the glass doors, she turned and blew a kiss to them. "This is Sistah Britain, saying goodnight and may the night be good to you," she said. And with that, she was gone.

###

Thank you for reading my novel. If you enjoyed it, please leave a rating or review at your favorite retailer on my behalf. Thanks!

Alexis Jacobs

About the Author

Alexis Jacobs is a New York City author who was born in England of West Indian parentage, and raised mainly in Canada.