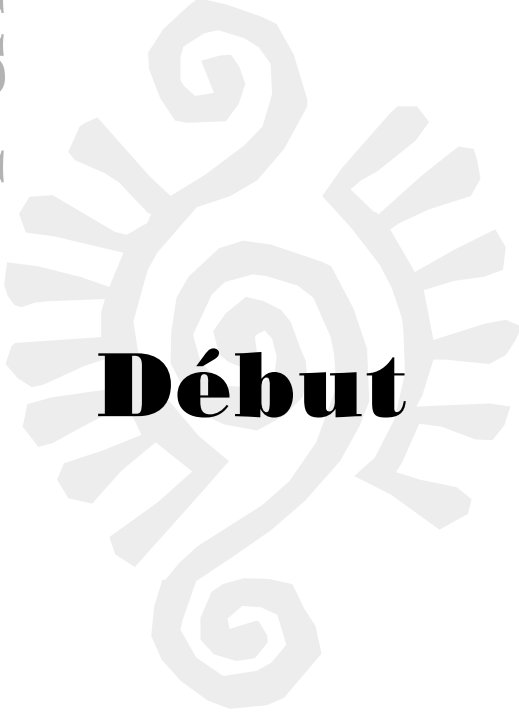


# Part I

## **Début**





# Chapter 1

## **See No Evil . . .**

Noire was in the wrong place at the wrong time, an Afro in a sea of perms. Regretting her decision to wear a thong that rubbed her cheeks like industrial-strength dental floss, she adjusted herself surreptitiously and cut her eyes at her lacquered, perfumed, and coiffed business-casual brethren and sistren at Brown Betty Books clutching copies of Marcus Gordon's bible on black folks and finance.

First, Jayna lied. Second, Jayna was late. Noire rammed her hand into the pocket of her waterlogged overcoat, crumpling the copy of Jayna's e-mail message that disingenuously proclaimed the evening to be about black empowerment and a magnet for progressive brothas. Instead, she was stuck trying to amuse herself amid a swarm of coffee-colored men whose tailored trousers and five-hundred-dollar shoes attracted equally well-heeled women with hungry eyes. Noire hated the pose.

Even Brown Betty herself—her head a cascade of golden dreadlocks and her body awash with purple fabric and musk-scented cowrie shells and crystals—looked at, through, and past Noire in the time it took her to say hi. Clearly, her hair was *not* political tonight.

Her disdain mounting, Noire railed against the ready display of brand-name degrees, six-figure salaries, and gentrified addresses that smacked of a latter-day slave auction. Was this what the Civil Rights Movement was all about?

“Don’t hate, congratulate!” she heard one of her sistas tell an empathetic friend. She imagined they were corporate lawyers.

Noire made a plastic cup of white wine her temporary companion. She sipped it too fast and scanned the bookshelves lining the walls. Her eyes flitting over the haphazardly stacked volumes, she consoled herself with the presence of books by Maya Angelou, Ben Okri, Toni Morrison, and Edwidge Danticat. She jotted down a few titles in her Filofax, crammed it into her mini-backpack, and refilled her cup with seltzer before reclaiming her mantle of righteous indignation at the scene. Measuring the smugness of those around her with the yardstick of her own discomfort, Noire wondered about Jayna. Where *was* homegirl?

Jayna was straight-up wrong. She just was. Fifteen years of friendship with Noire should have taught her that, at twenty-eight years old, Noire had no time or interest in the self-congratulatory games of “name-that-Negro” that the newest generation of the talented tenth had a particular fondness for. Wasn’t the biggest argument that Jayna and Noire ever had over love and money? Then high school seniors, they had fanatical obsessions with Terrence Trent D’Arby (Noire), Blair Underwood (Jayna), LL Cool J (both), and half the boys in their Queens neighborhood. At seventeen, Jayna was then a recent nonvirgin and reflective.

“Sex is no big deal. Mama says it’s as easy to love a rich man as a poor man. I plan to marry rich!”

“Jayna: Sold to the highest bidder!”

“Let’s hear you say that when you’re shackled up on skid row!”

“Fuck you!”

“At least someone *does* want to fuck me! And, Nicholas is going to Stanford, too! I suggest you check your *attitude*.”

Noire remembered the sting of Jayna's words. She had masked her hurt with anger over the Jayna-Nicholas hookup; she would have done anything for just a *kiss* from him. Shrugging off her thoughts, Noire became annoyed with her unplanned solitude at the bookstore and resolved to pass the time near a ripe discussion between Brown Betty's yards of purple fabric and a buppie poster boy. Amusing herself with her role of infiltrator, Noire nodded at both parties who, as recent Harlem residents themselves, vigorously debated the effects of the latest wave of multicultural homeowners into "their neighborhood." Her interjected comment about the displacement of longtime Harlemites because of the steep increase in rents received a cool glance from Buppie Poster Boy and a huff from Brown Betty. She wondered if they bought their groceries in lower Westchester.

Jayna was still missing in action when, at seven-thirty, Brown Betty asked everyone to sit for the start of the reading. Buppie Poster Boy glared at Noire before revealing himself to be the center of attention by propping himself against a stool at the front of the room and holding a much book-marked copy of his tome. His face looked important and solemn, his thirty-two privileged years filling the air. Five rows of mismatched chairs ringed him in a tight arc. Noire claimed a place toward the back of the store and attempted to hold the aisle seat to her right for Jayna. She figured that Jayna was trying to be slick, timing her arrival so as to miss the start of the reading and thus the brunt of Noire's venomous response to her. Planting her bag on the chair, Noire surveyed the assemblage of about forty-five people and caught the eye of Jayna's friend Alan. He was too far away to say anything so she mouthed a tepid hello.

Marcus Gordon had already shared five of his ten commandments of creating wealth in the black community when someone approached Noire. "Is this seat taken?" he whispered, handing Noire's bag back to her and lowering himself into the chair. He raised his right fist in an abbreviated black-man salute to the pontificating Marcus and settled into immediate concentration upon his words.

*Arrogant*, she thought, settling her bag onto the floor in front of her. She stared ahead but noticed his well-defined profile in her peripheral vision. *Probably full of himself.*

"Number Five is 'Own instead of rent.' Too many of us have spent

too much money on our sound system, our silk sheets, and our summer vacation without first investing in our futures. If you don't own your spot, you're just making someone else rich."

Noire thought about the late rent check she had put in today's mail and the vacation she and Jayna were taking to New Orleans in a couple of days. *Maybe Marcus is my landlord.*

"Number Four is 'A penny invested is a penny earned.' Checking and savings accounts are cute, but in today's economy they're not enough. With interest rates barely outpacing the rate of inflation, that's as bad as hiding money in your mattress. And at that rate, your golden years will be spent flipping hamburgers under the golden arches. Invest in your company's retirement plan and make your own plans as well."

6 *Maybe he can be my sugar daddy!* Noire mused, trying to mask her discomfort about her own grim graduate school finances. Her mind unwillingly fast-forwarded through her prospects of five more years of student-induced poverty as Marcus shared his financial wisdom.

"... But most of all, you must follow the first commandment if you are to realize your own potential. 'Remove all people and barriers that stand in the way of your success.' I'm going to repeat that one. 'Remove all people and barriers that stand in the way of your success.' This is the one that always confuses people. They say, 'What about my family and my friends from back in the day? I can't just cut them off like that.' My response to that is simple: Cut them off or suffer from excess baggage. Last time I checked, we only had one life to live and a finite time in which to live it. So you better seek to thrive and not simply survive. Trying to hang on to all the folks who ever passed through your life 'just because' can strain your limited personal resources—whether that's your time, your money, or your emotions. People who impede progress will cause you to digress and ultimately regress. You can't afford that. So if you have family and friends who are messing up your program, they've got to go. If folks are distractions to you, kick them to the curb and don't look back. A person without direction is dangerous. But more dangerous is a person who is heading in the opposite direction from you. Because if you're trying to go forward and they want you to follow them, that means you're going backward—plain and simple. People like

to make this a more complicated issue than it is. But folks—and black folks in particular—need to grip this reality if they really want to attain success and financial stability.”

*Mom, Dad, thanks for the memories.* Noire almost laughed out loud but silenced herself amid the appreciative audience. Their clapping was enthusiastic. Her eyes rested on the still hands of her neighbor. Shifting in her chair, she noticed that his eyes were cast on the page emblazoned with Marcus’s first commandment. He fingered the page, then folded down its corner before snapping the book shut.

Marcus fielded questions for fifteen minutes before encouraging people to purchase the book and get it signed. Noire’s seatmate still sat. He clutched his copy in both hands. She looked at the cover and noted that Marcus’s name was in larger type than the book’s title.

“Mr. Gordon seems to think a lot of himself,” she said, pointing to the book cover.

He turned to face her. “I suppose that when you’re a part of the Gordon family, you want people to stand up and take notice. He’s my boy from b-school. We went to Columbia Business School together. He’s good people.” *He has an accent.*

Noire feared expelling all the contents in her stomach. *THE Gordon family?!* “Oh.” She tried to look indifferent.

“Why are you here?” her handsome companion looked at her blankly.

“I was meeting a friend.”

“Tell your friend thanks for the seat.”

“Something came up.” Noire shot out of her seat, seeking to reclaim her dignity.

“I’m Innocent.” He extended his hand.

“Noire.” She shook it belatedly. “Interesting name.”

“As is yours. You’ll have to tell me where it comes from,” he said before getting up. “Let me just get Marcus to sign my book. I haven’t seen him in quite a while.”

Noire marched toward Alan, wanting to move before Innocent did.

“Hey, Noire, happy you could come.” Alan blew warm air onto her cheek and introduced her to his friend Nate.

Shaking Nate’s hand, she said, “Apparently Jayna was looking for an

inventive way to break friends with me, inviting me to something like this.”

“I went to Morehouse with Marcus.” Alan looked at Noire as though all of her teeth had fallen out of her mouth. He sighed and continued, “Jayna asked me to tell you that she’s really sorry but she got caught up in this oral surgery project she’s working on with some folks. More dental school hazing . . . Anyway, her group’s test subject rescheduled for six-thirty tonight. The first draft of the project is due tomorrow, you know.”

“Mmm.” Noire warbled and thought about her own late paper languishing in the bowels of her laptop. “Yes . . . well, OK, Alan, good to see you again. Nice to meet you, Nate.”

Alan blew cool air on her cheek this time and Nate winked. Seeing the sparkle in his eye, she couldn’t imagine his familiar expression had been for her. When Alan winked in return, her question was answered.

Noire turned away from them, measuring the steps it would take her to get to her coat and umbrella, when Innocent approached her. She was blinded by the whiteness of beautiful teeth flashing between welcoming, full lips. He said something to her. His velvety dark skin warmed the harsh overhead lighting. He was probably in his early thirties, a shade under six feet and of a medium, athletic build. His custom-tailored Shaka King suit was complemented by a tie a bit too risqué for the corporate America he inhabited and cufflinks that were understated works of art. But he carried off his look with such finesse—from his nearly bald head to his highly polished shoes to—

He touched her elbow and she realized that he was waiting for a reply to whatever he had said. She didn’t know what he had said. So she figured she’d ask a question of her own. “Yes, so, why the French pronunciation . . . for your name?”

His eyes held a hint of confusion before he answered, “Because I’m from Côte d’Ivoire in West Africa.”

“I’m familiar with it.” She made her face subdued.

“But Noire is pronounced with an American accent.”

“That’s because I’m from Queens.”

“That seems appropriate.” Innocent’s looks were clouded with unknowable thoughts. Noire met them with question marks and points

of ellipsis. His next statement reminded her who he was and why she didn't like him. "So, did you enjoy the reading?"

"I'm not Marcus's target audience." She narrowed her eyes and recovered her former righteousness.

"Well, Ms. Noire from Queens, I'm happy to have made your acquaintance. If you don't mind, I'd like to give you my card. Maybe we can get together . . . to talk shop."

She restrained her surprise. "Take mine instead," she said, remembering the flimsy cards she had printed in the computer lab for the symposium she attended last month.

"OK."

She fished around her overstuffed wallet to find one that didn't have information already scrawled on the back of it. Retrieving a slightly dog-eared card, she presented it to him with a hint of a flourish.

"Noire Demain, Ph.D. Candidate, Comparative Literature, New York University.' Mmm. So what exactly does that mean you're doing?"

"Ask me later if you really want to know." Noire slid him a coy smile, and Innocent gave a surprised laugh.

"Oh, it's like *that*?"

"Yes, it's like that."

Noire departed gracefully before letting her warring thoughts draw lines of confusion across her face. She walked through the bone-chilling rain toward the subway. She couldn't wait to talk to Jayna.

Fingering Noire's tattered business card, Innocent felt tingly. Her energy had put him off balance. He ruminated on her bohemian good looks: five-feet-eight womanly build, burnished brown skin, retro cat-eye glasses. Her lips were pouty and small, but her voice was rich and her expressions quirky. *Noire*. Her name delighted Innocent's tongue. He wanted to know more about her.

Slipping her card into his own slim cardholder, he returned it to his breast pocket and rejoined the dwindling crowd around Marcus. "This was nice, man. Really nice."

"I'm just happy you made it, man," Marcus said, shifting his attention to Innocent. They had become "boys" at business school, but their

hectic professional schedules and personal lives prevented them from seeing much of each other in the four years since graduation.

“Yeah. Look, do you want to get a drink? I’m never out of work this early; it’s like lunchtime for me.” Innocent snickered.

“Sounds good. But I can only have one because Lydia has the flu. I don’t want to leave her alone with Nile for too long.”

“How are she and the little guy doing? How old is he now?”

“He’ll be two on April 1. Look, just give me a second to wrap things up in here.”

“Sure.” Innocent watched Marcus clap people on their arms and gesture expressively in response to their questions. People have always loved Marcus. He was from a family firmly entrenched in the business world and well known for its support of black philanthropic causes. He always joked that his family was a part of the black bourgeoisie *for real*, but Marcus was down; he was good people.

“Alright, man, let’s push out.” Marcus had his coat on and his fedora between his fingers. Innocent slipped on his trench and grabbed his umbrella from the stand by the door. They dashed out into the steady March rain and ducked into Sublime.

Innocent ordered a Black and Tan, and Marcus a vodka tonic.

“Here’s to you and what is sure to be only the first of many books that will get black folks to see a rosy financial future. Cheers!”

“Here, here.” They toasted and had their first gulp.

“So what’s up, man, what the hell is goin’ on?” Marcus started off.

“Well, work is kickin’ my God-given ass is what’s up. The bank is unrelenting.”

“That’s why I don’t work for the proverbial ‘man.’ I’ve got to *be* the man!”

“Easier said than done, Marcus. Easier said than done.”

“You’ve got an M.B.A., money in the bank, and me. What more do you need?” His face held no hint of facetiousness.

“Man, I haven’t even seen you in two years!”

“Then consider this the first day of the rest of your life.” Marcus clinked his glass against Innocent’s a little too hard and took another swallow.

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“Jayna?!”

“Hello? Oh, hey, Noire. Sorry I missed you earlier. Did Alan tell you about my project?”

“I figured you just couldn’t face up to your lie.” Noire struggled out of her rain-soaked coat without dropping the phone. “Actually, I’m happy you didn’t come; it would’ve been ugly.”

“Damn, Noire.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t know it would be an incognegro scene!”

“I didn’t know.”

“Bullshit, Jayna!”

“For godsakes, Noire, are you saying that you can’t hang in that crowd for two hours?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, get off your fucking high horse. We need for *some* black folks to make money and God knows it sure ain’t gonna be you!”

“There is *no* reason for you to go there, Jayna.” Noire frowned at the phone.

“What ever happened to your ugly LIVE AND LET LIVE T-shirt, Noire? If I recall, you wore that damn thing so often in undergrad that I had to steal it from your room just to wash it. That slogan should have been practically tattooed to your breasts. What happened to all of that liberalism?”

“I’m just not into all that bourgie bullshit. That’s all.”

“My dear, foolish friend, bullshit comes in many forms. *Trust*. So now what? I’d like to see you put your hundred-thousand-dollar Amherst degree in the shredder.”

“We’re not talking about my degree; we’re talking about the book signing.” Noire laughed, signaling her defeat.

“Love-15. Venus and Serena have nothin’ on us! Your serve, Ms. I’m-Getting-My-Ph.D.-But-I’m-A-Righteous-No-Money-Havin’-Nubian-Sista.”

“Remind me why I like you!”

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“So, where’s the money at on the continent, son?” Marcus sipped his drink. “Dad wants to see me get into some more Latin America stuff, but I really want to explore some opportunities in Africa. You’re gonna have to drop some knowledge on a brotha.”

Innocent laughed. Even after six years he still couldn’t get used to that African Americanism, “the continent.” It was cute. “Well, it depends on what you want to do. Of course there’s South Africa, but if you want to create your own thing, and potentially get a really big return on your investment, you should look to the West—Ghana, Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire, and Senegal especially.”

“Man, I don’t know about Nigeria. Folks are getting swallowed whole over there.”

“Mmm.”

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They chatted, Marcus filling him in on the most recent Gordon family dramas. Despite his hemming and hawing, Marcus was equally invested in being a Gordon, with all of the rights and responsibilities it afforded him.

“So, man, tell me about the other you.” Marcus gulped his drink. “What honeys have you got lined up? Give me the details. Since I’m a one-woman man in front of God and everybody, I’ve got to live vicariously through a smooth African brotha such as yourself.”

“You are *so* full of shit!” with a laugh. “Look, the waters are not being stirred.”

“Well, you know what they say, ‘Still waters run deep!’”

“Well, then I’m a deep muthafucka right about now.”

“That’s alright, man; the year is young. Just don’t forget how to play ball.”

“I’m sure I won’t.”

“I saw you speaking to Afro before. Don’t trip. Believe me, she was there by accident. Probably looking for an incense-making class . . .” He scoffed and put his drink up to his mouth.

“She seems alright.”

“Alright in the don’t-fuck-with-me-unless-you’re-a-revolutionary kind of way, yeah!”

“Why all that?” Innocent finished his drink prematurely and ordered another.

“I met her before the signing. She’s trying to hate, man. What she doesn’t know is that *I’m* not her enemy.”

“Did something happen?”

“That’s not the issue. What’s important is the fact that you’re my boy and I want you to handle your business in a large way. She’s going in a different direction from you, Innocent. Plain and simple. Sure, she’s pretty to look at, but New York City is full of pretty women. And believe me, most of them would be happy to suck your six-figure African dick.”

“Damn, Marcus!”

“Oh, you can handle that, black man. The thing is, am I lying?”

Peeling her cold and wet tights off of her legs, Noire announced, “Well then, you’ll be happy to know that I gave a guy my number. One of *your* kinda people. I was holding a seat for you and he came and sat in it. He’s Ivoirian.”

“Ivoirian?”

“Just a second.” Noire tussled with her velvet blouse. Slipping it over her head, she put on her ten-year-old AMHERST sweatshirt. Bringing the handset back up to her head, she cradled it between her right ear and a hunched shoulder as she hung her clothes up to dry. “He’s from Côte d’Ivoire. Corporate but with sort of an artsy thing happening.”

“So you’re not holding his salary against him?” Jayna sounded incredulous.

Noire ignored the statement. “*Anyway*. His name is ‘ē-nō-sah.” She said his name phonetically, enjoying the novelty of it. “He was wearing a salmon-and-blue-striped tie with a gray wool pinstripe jammie.” She was now cross-legged on her bed.

“Noire, you’re speaking to me in codes! Tell me what happened in plain English. And fill in the details.”

“OK, but wait. Let me just get some orange juice.” Noire uncrossed her legs and scooted herself to the edge of the bed. Walking with the receiver nestled in the crook of her neck and the base in her hand, she laughed at her friend’s expressions of impatience on the other end.

“Girl, I know you can talk and walk at the same time. It’s not a cordless but I know that shit’s got a long-ass cord!”

“OK, Jayna.” Noire began to unwind her tale, embellishing her descriptions of Marcus, Brown Betty, and all the man-hunting women and posers in order to elicit the right reaction. Making a pit stop at the bathroom, she found her way to the kitchen.

The light from the refrigerator illuminated a triangle on her tiny square of yellow linoleum flooring. She gulped her first glass of orange juice with the door still open and then filled the glass again before returning the carton to its chilly home and kicking the door closed.

“So basically I told him to keep his business card and I gave him mine instead.” Noire walked into the living room, dodging the pile of books strewn on the floor around her desk, and plopped down in front of her computer.

“Well what’d you do that for? Now you don’t even know his last name or where he works! How you gonna run a check on Negro?”

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They polished off their drinks and Marcus offered to settle the bill. “Look, it’s pushing ten o’clock. I better get outta here.”

They walked out of the bar and stood on the sidewalk saying their good-byes in the now misty rain. Marcus tried flagging down a cab. Three zipped by him until one finally slowed to a stop. “Thanks, brotha,” he said to the driver. “Looked like nobody was trying to stop for a homeboy in the rain. Not even a homeboy in an Everett Hall suit!”

Then to Innocent, “Don’t be a stranger. Give me a call sometime.” He handed him his newest business card. “Better yet, Lydia and I will have you up soon, around Nile’s birthday. You know we bought a brownstone up in Harlem?”

“No, I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, it’s great. Huge spot in Sugar Hill, and I got it for a *great* price.”

“More power to you, then.”

“Yeah. Listen, take it easy. And tell the man to take his foot out your ass.”

“I’ll remember to tell him that tomorrow.” They embraced like the old friends they were. Innocent closed the taxi door for Marcus and watched the cab pull off before he began to walk toward home. He lived

about twelve blocks away, in the heart of SoHo, and thought the walk would give him more time to think about the mysterious Noire.

“Well, Noire, it definitely sounds exciting. A ‘corporate Cudjoe!’” She snickered. “Just don’t be too cute for your own good. Let me know if he contacts you.”

“When.” She tapped her laptop’s ON button.

“Right, when. Look, I’d love to tell you about my glamorous evening full of saliva and halitosis, but schoolwork calls.”

“Yeah, I have a paper that I need to hand in by Wednesday. It’s overdue.”

“Well, good luck then. E me.”

“Remember, the revolution will not be televised.”

“I know. It’ll be on the Internet. Good night, Ms. Thang.”

Noire’s neighbor’s coo-coo clock announced the hour: 10:00 P.M. Her unfinished paper screamed her first and last name from the laptop. She stared through the screen saver that danced before her and envisioned Innocent’s facial expression as he said, “Oh, it’s like *that*.” What a curious expression it was—surprised, reserved, engaged. She replayed in her mind him taking her card, reading it, smiling. *I think he likes me*. Or was he just flexing his charm at her expense like so many homeboys? *I hope he’s different*. Noire sighed. Her relationship with Cudjoe when she was twenty-one was the last one of real significance. The intervening seven years of dating were a hodgepodge of high drama, insecurity, immaturity, and the tired formula of three dates plus good sex equals no relationship. Her threshold for game playing was at an all-time low, her emotions a house of cards atop a fragile ego. Touching the mouse, Noire resolved not to think about Innocent for at least the next twenty minutes. After all, she was a woman of discipline.