

PROLOGUE



B E F O R E

New York City
September 2000

Noire's gaze bounced between a triangle of activity: Arikè's grass-stained maternity wedding gown being scrubbed furiously by her mother, Arikè herself—clad only in pregnancy thongs—doing her best imitation of a yoga resting pose, her arms and legs spread wide across her bed, and Dennis polishing his brand-new wedding band with his Trinidad and Tobago T-shirt.

She knew it was time for her to leave. She had been happy to serve as Arikè's maid of honor but there was nothing else to do. She picked up her overnight bag, kissed Arikè on the forehead, and walked a mile to the Metro-North train station that would deposit her back in New York City. Thankfully, in less than twenty-four hours she would begin her own journey. Her apartment already sublet, she cringed at the thought of one more night on Jayna's living room floor. She had to leave; she didn't belong anywhere.

“I live alone. That hasn’t always been easy to do. For just a single woman. . . .” Noire muttered the song along with Nina Simone, corrupting her melodic reflection into the dirge it was never meant to be. The voices that spoke rapid-fire Haitian Kreyòl around her in the JFK Airport terminal crept into the spaces of her and Nina’s song, making it a lament for her current romantic prospects and a foretaste of her year in Haiti.

Noire knew she’d find little sympathy among her peers. Many doctoral candidates would kill for the high-profile fellowships she’d won to Curaçao and now to Haiti, not to mention her enviable position of being Bonita Fuentes’s personal protégée. By the force of her own professional reputation, Bonita had thrust Noire into the academic limelight, and had managed to generate enough buzz about Noire to land her a coveted slot at the Comparative Literature Association’s annual convention. But even as her professional star rose, her love life crashed and burned, starting with her breakup with Innocent in May—which hurt her as much for its necessity as the knowledge that he had already planned to do the same. So she filled the hole he left with other men’s eager penises and her own obsession with her work and Bonita’s good opinion of her.

It was a Monday afternoon, the eleventh of September, and Noire was marooned at the end of a three-hundred-person line that snaked in front of the American Airlines counter and nearly out the door. Apparently *everyone* had decided to come early, she noted with a sigh. The first song finished, Noire snickered at the next track coming from her CD player—“Lonesome Cities”—and wondered what Port-au-Prince, Haiti, would bring her.

She used her weight to move her luggage carrier, which represented everything that seemed important to her: the approved predoctoral prospectus that was the reason for her trip, and

clothes, books, CDs, empty journals, and a year's supply of tampons, Renaissance Hairtopia hair oil, birth control pill packs, and condoms. The last two were more a matter of being a responsible woman than anything else, she reasoned, but the melancholy that melted over her heart and seeped into her loins assured her that she would indeed put them to use.

Her summer in Curaçao only three weeks behind her, she had been back in the States just long enough to wash her clothes, buy a Kreyòl-English dictionary and new dildo, and grow to hate Jayna's boyfriend of three and a half months with whom she now shared a midtown condo. Despite Noire's best efforts to see very little of him from her corner of the living room floor, she managed to see quite a lot when he "accidentally" walked into the kitchen naked, his physical assets in full view. Seemed that his lucrative career—as private banker to the newly rich and fabulous—hadn't earned him enough money to buy a robe. But Jayna claimed that she had never been happier, so Noire bit her lip. If well hung, nouveau riche, and arrogant were Jayna's criteria, she had found her ideal mate.

Her luggage at last checked, Noire flipped her backpack onto her back and headed for Voulez Vous, the only restaurant that promised a reprieve from the greasy fast food of the terminal. She tucked herself into a booth and placed her order. Once it arrived, she shoved her lukewarm dessert crepe into her mouth quicker than she could taste it and assumed the posture of eating alone: bag on the opposite seat, open magazine on table, gaze nonchalant, and body covering the space of a seat for two. Eating alone was another part of the daily routine that she had mastered and had even come to enjoy, as much for the anonymity as the people-watching and eavesdropping it offered.

The husky French of a woman's voice behind her captured her imagination. She attuned her mind to the language and processed the critical edge in her voice immediately. The respon-

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dent's voice, a man's, was lower, and reflected the reverence of one addressing an elder. She listened to his voice but missed his words, their timbre knitting together nausea and arousal at the bottom of her belly.

Noire gagged, then downed her entire glass of water before standing up. She left her meal and her bags in her booth and walked toward the voice she had loved and left. "Innocent." She declared his name as a form of greeting. She clutched the vinyl back of his companion's chair and looked at the face she had not seen since saying good-bye in the same terminal only four months before.

"*Mon Dieu, Noire!*" He sprang out of his seat and kissed her instinctually on both cheeks, tasting a new scent on them, before remembering to switch into English. "How are you? Why are you here? This is my mmu—mother." The last word tripped his tongue and forced his mouth closed. He was happy for the opportunity to gather his thoughts and merely extended his arm toward Maman as if to point her out.

Noire looked at the features that were the antecedent to all that she had come to delight in during her and Innocent's one-and-a-half-year relationship. His mother was a woman with a stern countenance and enduring beauty. Her skin the color and patina of well-aged ebony, she looked like the incarnation of triumph in a hard-won war.

"*Bonjour, Madame Pokou.*" She inclined her head and offered her hand for the limp handshake she believed appropriate for the occasion. "*Je suis Noire,*" she added, by way of explanation. Noire registered no recognition in his mother's eyes but decided that it must just be a cloak of formality. She pushed the corners of her lips into an obligatory smile and released her hand.

Madame Pokou offered the slightest nod of the head and said nothing.

Innocent read the vacancy in Maman's eyes and traced their gaze back to the confusion in Noire's. He prayed for his mother to feign knowledge of Noire and smile, but when she didn't, he distracted Noire with a lingering hand on her shoulder. "So, what brings you here?" He softened his gaze and remained standing so that Noire would not be alone.

"I won that predoctoral fellowship to go to Haiti."

"Oh, right." He bobbed his head for too long and looked off. "Already? I mean, twice in one year."

"Yeah. Bonita wanted to fast-track me."

"How was Curaçao?"

"Great."

"Great!" Innocent was afraid his grin was pulled too tight. He willed it to look more normal.

"And you? Off somewhere?" Noire heard her voice an octave higher than normal.

"We're going to France to visit my sister. You know, Charlotte." He nodded for Noire. "And Maman came here to see Mireille off. She just started at Howard University this fall."

"Oh yes, she did decide to go, after all." Noire's voice was flat, her remembrance of his anger at his baby sister's indecision about leaving Côte d'Ivoire for college in the States and the irony of his negative reaction to her decision to apply for the fellowship in Haiti.

"She just needed time," Innocent responded to Noire's thoughts.

"Mmm." Noire turned back toward Madame Pokou. "You must be so proud. Of your children." She spoke in the pleasantest, accented French she could and waited for more familiarity to cross her face. It didn't come.

"*Oui*" was Madame Pokou's only response.

"So, we were just getting a bite. We figured, let's arrive early. We had lots of baggage."

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Noire missed her cue to speak, her eyes fixed upon Innocent's bottom lip that turned out in a way that always invited her to kiss it. She hated that it still moved her, and hated that Innocent could tell what she was staring at. She looked down.

Innocent felt his pores open up, unleashing perspiration from his forehead, armpits, and crotch. He let a bead of sweat roll down his leg and land in his sock before he said anything more. "When will you be back, Noire?"

"Exactly a year from now." Noire felt her nipples tighten into easily distinguishable points against her T-shirt. She pulled her jacket across her chest.

"Yeah, a whole year?! That's really something." He talked to himself because he didn't know what else to say to Noire. He willed his mind to fashion another question. Anything. "And so, how have things been going? I mean, with everyone."

"Arikè and Dennis got married yesterday. They're expecting in early January."

"Life just moves on. . . ." He clucked his tongue.

"Yeah . . ." Noire felt suddenly depressed, like sandbags were tied around her brain, dragging her thoughts into murky water. "So, I should finish my food."

"Please, can it be my treat?" He regretted his words immediately, but he couldn't retrieve them so instead he watched them hang in the air.

"No." She offered a tepid smile for him and his mother.

"Right . . . okay." He bobbed his head in understanding and endured the torrent of perspiration that emanated from his crotch and stung the flesh of his thighs. "Of course. Well, it was wonderful to see you. You look . . . *wonderful*. Have a safe trip." He kissed her on either cheek and remained standing until she walked back to her table. Noire felt his stare make mush of her belly. She dropped into her booth and stabbed the cold crepe in front of her.

Port-au-Prince

January 2001

Noire's rented cell phone vibrated on Pierre's nightstand. She pulled away from his body that had tensed in anticipation of the news to be delivered in a late-night call. Even though the New Year was five hours old, Pierre's instincts as a journalist for Haiti's most outspoken newspaper made him wary of such calls. He held Noire's naked thigh in support.

"Hello?" She clutched the phone and waited, the delay in transmission heightening her own anticipation.

"It's Dennis! We had the baby! Happy New Year!"

Noire exhaled. "Oh my God! Congratulations!" She listened to the static and fumbling on the other end.

"Thank you, Noire!" Arikè announced herself, her voice dancing across the choppy transmission in a fierce ragtime rhythm. "We're so excited! I can't believe it!"

Noire glimpsed the faintest haze of the first day of the year in the windows of Pierre's house. She smiled away the knot of confusion at Pierre's brow and asked the requisite questions: sex, time, weight.

Realizing that the news on the other end of the line was good, Pierre began to suck on Noire's nipples.

"He's a boy! Born at 12:02 A.M. And big, Noire. Eight pounds fourteen ounces. No wonder why I was huge! We were eating breakfast yesterday when my water broke. It was crazy! I pushed for like five hours! I guess he wanted to be Baby New Year! Well, this is long-distance and I know it's early, so I won't hold you."

Noire struggled to hear all that Arikè said. "You sound good! What's his name? Does he have one yet?"

"Well, Dennis won the bet, so he named him Purpose. The

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name will grow on me, I guess!” She chuckled. “Noire, thanks for your prayers through all this. I love you!”

“Okay, good-bye.” The phone went silent on Noire’s last syllable. She felt bad. Arikè had thanked her for prayers she seldom remembered to say. She looked down at Pierre, whose nibbling had migrated down to the meeting of her thighs.

“Would you like me to give you a baby, Noire?” His words breathed hot air through her thicket of hair.

“Guess.” Noire handed him a condom and let herself feel all the things that blocked the noise in her head that sounded like crying.

Abidjan

May 2001

Côte d’Ivoire’s rainy season had begun in earnest. Innocent’s latest trip home commenced over three months ago, when the heat was a welcome escape from the misery of February in New York City, the snowstorms no longer novel or festive. He watched sheets of rain slice the May sky into ribbons of cool air, making the city shine like new money atop broad boulevards and moist red earth. He felt antsy. His own business development had brought him there but Maman had seized the opportunity to resume her campaign to get him married in time for his ill father to witness it. And his many trips throughout the city on errands for Papa or in pursuit of his own business provided ample opportunity to indulge his penchant for seeing the buttocks of thick women straining against hastily tied wrapper skirts as they negotiated the marketplace. But he managed not to partake of the delights that dwelt behind those threadbare outfits, preferring discreet hand jobs of his own invention or his grade-school classmate’s widow who had offered her oral skills for no more than an hour’s conversation.

She talked about things that didn’t interest him, and he began

to revile their arrangement, and himself for consenting to it. He had weathered periods of celibacy before, and even enjoyed the opportunity for reflection. But this time he did not want to interrogate his restlessness, so he eventually succumbed to his mother's many suggestions of dates with the women whom she had deemed acceptable. And when Chi-Chi called and mentioned that May 4 was her twenty-ninth birthday, he wondered aloud if he could take her to dinner. She graciously accepted.

Her body had the roundness of a woman who had long passed the awkwardness of new womanhood and her mind percolated with more world events than local gossip. He greeted her with a kiss on either corner of her lips.

"You seem happy to see me."

"It's your birthday." He offered her a flash of his thoughts. "And it's my *pleasure* to see you."

She raised her eyebrows in response. "Perhaps it's not so bad to be an unmarried woman on the cusp of thirty after all."

"I think it's a good thing, Chi-Chi."

They drained a bottle of champagne before the main course was served, and by dessert, Innocent imagined the inside of her thighs hugging his and the softness of her belly promising a soft place to land.

Sex with Chi-Chi offered every physical thrill he had longed for. He closed his mind to his thoughts and focused on his urges. When it was over, Innocent slunk out of Chi-Chi's sister's house—which she had been minding in her absence—and walked six miles in the darkness back to his parents' home.

The main house was already closed up for the night, and Innocent was relieved to have some space for himself. He went straight to the boys' quarter and took a bucket bath, washing Chi-Chi off his body and out of his mind with black soap and cold water.