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FLEW IN FROM NEPTUNE



Lori Aurelia Williams

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This book is dedicated to my mother, who lived only long enough to catch a glimpse of the kind of woman that I was to become, and to my sister Lydia who has held my hand through many a storm.

Much appreciation goes to Laura Furman, a very special friend and mentor, and to Robert Tatum, who never lets me down.

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Chapter 1

Mama and Tia got into a fight this morning. Mama found a package of red condoms in the back of Tia's drawer. Mama was really pissed off. She held the condoms up and shouted at Tia so loud the dead folks at Peaceful Rest Cemetery down the street could hear her.

"Tia, what are you doing with this mess?" Mama asked, slamming the drawer of the rickety dresser. She pressed her face real close to Tia's. You could barely see where Tia's began and hers ended. Tia didn't say nothing. She just stood there in her blue-jeans miniskirt, with her slanted eyes blazing fire, and her hands on her hips.

"Did you hear me, girl?" Mama asked, looking like she was about to explode; the little veins in her forehead had popped out so far they looked like huge earthworms underneath her coffee skin.

"I'm waiting, girl," Mama said. "You tell me what this mess is for!"

"Ain't nothing to tell!" Tia yelled. She brushed past Mama with her black ponytail whipping behind her back, stomped over to our bed, and flopped down in the middle of the sagging mattress. Then she folded her arms across her chest and glared at Mama like Mama had stolen her favorite tube of lipstick. Mama rushed over to the bed and pointed a finger at Tia's face.

"Didn't I tell you to come to me about this, Tia?" Mama asked. "I always told you to come to me. You know damn well that we talked about this."

Tia rolled her eyes.

"Let me tell you something, little girl!" Mama yelled. "You just

better keep your dress down and your drawers up. Don't you be bringing home no babies for me to feed. Do you understand me, little girl?" Tia crossed her legs and stared out of the window over the bookshelf, like she wasn't particularly interested in what Mama had to say. Mama drew her hand back like she was going to slap her, like she was going to knock her all the way back to the middle of June. And Mama could do it too. She was a big woman, strong and solid-built. She stocked groceries at Miller's One-Stop week-nights. She could send Tia flying across the room with just one lick. But she didn't. She just shoved the condoms into the pocket of her blue terry robe, shook her head, and stormed out of our room, dropping pink curlers out of her slick black hair as she hurried through the doorway. After Mama left, Tia got up from the bed and ran into the bathroom. I heard her turn the rusty door lock and break into sobs, as if she had actually caught a whipping.

I sat down in her place on the bed and listened to her cry. Guys had been sniffing around Tia since she was my age, twelve. Unlike me, she was sort of a looker. She wasn't really pretty. Her forehead was a bit high, and her lips were just a little too thin for her broad nose. Her face was average, with only a touch here and there to give it a spark, and her cheekbones were just a little high.

To be honest, it was really Tia's body that kept the guys coming around. Below, everything fell into place with a lot extra on top. It was the "on top" that made the boys act all stupid and stuff. Grandma Augustine had always said that she didn't think Tia would last more than three winter seasons past her first period. She said that Tia would hear her womanhood calling her with a vengeance, and she would answer long before Mama was ready for her to stop wearing bows in her hair and lace dresses. She said that there was no way to keep it from happening, because Mama had

done the same thing at her age. Mama had gotten pregnant with Tia when she was only fifteen. "Mistakes made in the dark always come to the light through your children," Grandma Augustine said.

I wasn't sure if Grandma was right, but I was sure that Tia was hurting. I wanted to knock on the bathroom door and tell her that it was all right, but I couldn't. I was a reader and a writer, but not much of a talker, at least when it came to feelings and stuff. I got up from the bed, pulled open the top dresser drawer, and took out my blue notebook and a pen. *Everything's a mess*, I scrawled. *Anger is covering our house like pitch on a rooftop, and I'm gonna be late for school.*

After things finally died down at the house, I ate a quick breakfast of Froot Loops and ran three blocks to the bus stop. When I arrived, there was the new girl standing in the street next to the black-and-white bus sign. I had seen her once or twice from my bedroom window. She and her mother had moved next door to us a couple days ago. She was about my age, but she was thin where I was fat, and short in the places that I was long. She was lighter than me too, kinda butter-colored, like the shortbread cookies Mama cooked every Easter. Her hair was coarse like mine, but it wasn't black. It was reddish tan, and in the early morning sunlight it looked almost blond. Her eyes weren't brown, either. They were olive. She wore a dingy white dress that had two deep clip marks on the shoulders, as if she had just yanked it off of the clothesline. There wasn't any traffic on the narrow neighborhood street, but she was just standing there staring into the filthy rain gutter, staring into the blackness, as if she expected something to crawl out. I was curious, so I hopped off the curb and stared into the gutter too.

"Whatcha looking at?" I asked in a friendly voice. She just kept

staring into the gutter, as if she didn't even know I was there. I hunched my shoulders. Maybe she hadn't heard me. It was windy out. A hot breeze was rustling through the tall pecan trees in the vacant lot behind the bus stop, and a Naughty By Nature tune was blaring from the open window of Perry's 24-and-7 beer joint across the street. The small aluminum-sided building was vibrating from the beat.

"Whatcha looking at?" I asked, even friendlier than the first time.

"My bracelet," the girl said in a soft voice. "My bracelet, it slipped off and fell down there." I leaned in closely and peered into the rectangular-shaped hole, but all I could make out in the darkness was a white plastic cup and some pages of a crumpled old newspaper.

"I don't see nothing," I said.

"It's in there," she said. "I gotta have it. We gotta get it out."

I wasn't really sure who she meant by "we." It wasn't my bracelet that was down there. I looked in the hole again. I thought I saw something moving around. *It's a rat*, I told myself, *a big, hairy rat with red eyes and yellow teeth*. There were plenty of them in the Bottom—big, shaggy monsters that lived in the walls of our tiny rent shacks, underneath our porches, and, of course, in the rain gutters that lined our littered streets. "I ain't sticking my hands down in there, girl. You must be crazy!" I yelled.

The girl didn't even look my way. She got down on all fours and shoved her thin hand into the drain. As she leaned into the hole her dress hiked up, exposing her underwear. Her yellow panties were shabby and ripped in several places. The elastic was loose and hanging halfway down her bony thighs. She was wearing worse than hand-me-downs. She was wearing worn-outs.

“Let me get your bracelet,” I said. “My arms are longer than yours.”

I got down on all fours and she stood up. I stuck my hand into the gutter and fished around in the trash until I felt something round. It had to be the bracelet. I pulled it out and stood up. It was plastic, transparent, and purple. You could buy a dozen like it for a buck in any dime store on Main in downtown Houston. I handed it to her with a scowl on my face. She snatched it and held it up to her breast, like it was a new dress or something.

“Thanks,” she said, with a big grin. “I woulda been really upset if I couldn’t of got it.”

“It’s just an old plastic bracelet,” I snapped. “You can buy ’em for nothing downtown.”

“No! You can’t buy this anywhere. It’s a magic bracelet,” the girl said. “When I hold it up in the moonlight, I become so tiny that only the ants can see me. When the wind blows real hard, I blow away like dust until I find a wonderful, beautiful place to land.” With that, the girl slipped the bracelet over her wrist and stepped up on the curb.

“I gotta go. I’m gonna be late for school,” she said, fingering the bracelet and starting to walk off quickly.

“You go to my school, Martin Middle, don’t you?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “But my mama didn’t give me money to ride the bus.”

“I’m Shayla. What’s your name?” I called after her.

“Kambia,” her voice trailed. “I’m Kambia.”

I stood there in the street and watched her skinny body stepping lightly over the dirty sidewalks. There was something that bothered me about that girl and her silly magic bracelet. I just couldn’t imagine anybody showing underwear like that for a

ten-cent toy. It was way too weird. She was way too weird. I stepped up on the curb to wait for my bus.

For the past three weeks there had been nothing but rain, buckets of it pouring out of the gray sky, overflowing our gutters, and flooding our streets. But last night the rain stopped, and this morning the sun was shining bright over our houses, reclaiming its place among the clouds. It looked like it was gonna be a nice day. That is, until Mama got a visit from Miss Earlene Jackson.

Miss Earlene lives in a large two-story shack a few blocks up the street. She is a mean-spirited, sour-faced woman with pop eyes and a huge belly that hangs over her thin legs like an oversized water balloon. The children in the neighborhood call her Frog.

Frog came raging up our porch steps around noon. She had a look that would have turned the devil into a Christian, and she was throwing hell all over the place with each step. Mama stopped sweeping the living-room floor. She opened the screen door and stepped outside with her broom in her hand. I followed her out so that I could check out what was going on.

"Can I help you, Miss Earlene?" Mama asked, tugging the front of her flowered dress with her free hand. Mama had been doing housework all morning, and her dress was drenched with sweat and clinging to her huge frame.

"You sho can!" Frog yelled, throwing bits of spit in all directions. "You can tell that fast-tail mare of yours to stay away from my Doo-witty!"

"Excuse me?" Mama said. She opened her eyes real wide, like she didn't believe what Frog had said.

"You heard me!" Frog yelled. "You keep that little fast-tail mare of yours away from my Doo-witty!"

Mama's eyes narrowed.

"What fast-tail mare of mine is you talking about?" she asked. Her voice was real calm and controlled, but you could see just a hint of red pushing up through the ebony of her cheekbones.

"That little butt-wiggling, leg-spreading gal of yours, Tia, that's who I'm talking about," Frog spat. "You keep that little heifer from slipping 'round my house with my Doo-witty."

"With Doo-witty? With Doo-witty? With Doo-witty?" Mama repeated over and over, like she was in some kind of trance. Tia with Doo-witty, the thought of it made you want to throw up. Doo-witty, whose real name was Donald Dwight, was Frog's only son. He was twenty-three. He was a slow, drop-jawed, long-headed dope. When the boys in the neighborhood played The Dozens, they always said that he was so stupid that he was once fired from the M&M's factory for throwing away all the Ws. Tia with Doo-witty, it wasn't possible. Tia was fine, and she made great grades in school, like me. She could choose.

"Tia fooling with Doo-witty," Mama said. "What would my Tia want with Doo-witty? Doo-witty so stupid he had to repeat the eighth grade three times. He wouldn't even know when his own birthday is if you didn't bake him a cake. What would my baby be doing messing 'round with that thing?"

"Well, how do you explain this?" Frog yelled. She pulled a lacy beige bra out of her pocket and shook it in Mama's face. Mama's jaw nearly fell onto the front porch. On the right cup of the bra, embroidered in gold floss, were the letters T. M. Mama had been sewing our initials on our underwear ever since Tia started middle school. In gym it was common for other girls to swipe your undies. Hard times made some kids do the craziest things. I leaned against the porch column and shook my head.

"I guess you can believe your own eyes, cain't you?" Frog said with a smirk on her bloated face. "Ain't you gal named Tia Marie?"

Mama didn't answer. She just kept staring at the right cup of Tia's bra, like it was gonna do a dance or something.

"Now," Frog continued. "Like I said before, you keep that slut of a gal of yours away from my Doo-witty. I got plans for Doo-witty. It ain't too late for him. I been putting a little aside each week. Pretty soon I'm gone have enough to send Doo-witty to a decent college. I don't want no little gal throwing her legs over her head and messing up his chances."

Mama took a deep breath and let it out. Her eyes snapped away from Tia's bra and fixed on Frog. They were now just little slits in her face, and right in the middle of those slits you could see Mr. Anger jumping up and down in his red anger suit. Mama's hands started to tremble, then that tremble traveled on up her arms until her whole body was shaking.

"Ain't no college in they right mind gone let in Doo-witty," Mama said through clenched teeth. "And even if they did, the only thing that he could major in is Fool, and he already passed that course."

Mama lifted her broom up and pointed the handle at Frog.

"Now, I ain't no fighting woman," Mama said. "But if you don't get yo' frog-looking behind off my porch, I truly believe that I can make an exception in your case. You got two seconds to get outta my face, or I'm gone swat your fat ass with this broom, like you was a fly at a church picnic."

Frog got off our porch—and fast. She ran down the steps and rushed out of the wooden gate. She hit the pavement and sprinted off down the street with that big double-size belly jiggling left and right over her skinny legs. Mama ran down to the gate behind her.

"If I catch you or Doo-witty 'round my baby, I'm gone see what the law got to say about it!" Mama yelled. "Do you hear me? I better not catch you or that sorry-ass Doo-witty 'round my Tia." She watched from the gate until Frog disappeared between a row of beat-up old cars lined up in front of the red-brick project down the street; after that she came back up on the porch and swept Tia's bra into the pink rose bushes that were still growing wild on the side of the porch.

Mama sat down in the old wicker rocker beside the screen door and sighed. Her eyes looked heavy, like they were ready to drop tears. But Mama didn't cry. She always said that even from a little girl, she couldn't make water come to her eyes. So she just sat there rocking in the chair while she turned on the shower in her soul and let her tears run all over her insides. I walked over and took one of her hands in mine. While I ran my fingers over her rough skin, I made a note in my head to jot down in my blue notebook later: *Mama is all broken inside, and sorrow is hanging from our ceiling like icicles from Christmas trees.*

After a few moments Mama got up and went in the house. I didn't follow her this time. I knew what she was going to do. She was going to go into the kitchen and fix herself a pan of hot-water corn bread. Mama always fixed the bread when she was upset. She said that there was something about the sound of the cornmeal patties sizzling in the hot grease that calmed her nerves. She said that it was soothing, like listening to the blues or jazz. I decided to leave Mama to her comfort. Besides, I knew that after Mama's nerves calmed a bit she was going to go find Tia and drag her home.

Tia was at her best friend Maxi's house. Maxi was a short, dumpy, chatty girl who lived on Divine Street, three blocks away from Frog. Tia went to Maxi's house every Saturday morning to

watch rap videos on the black cable channel. Mama was going to go snatch Tia away from Maxi's house as soon as she had eaten the last crumb of her bread. It wasn't gonna be pleasant in an hour or so. I could see 'em now, fussing and arguing down the street, putting on a real show. That was the way it always was with Mama and Tia. They were like lemonade and hot chocolate. They were good by themselves, but when you put them together all you got was one big mess. This was one fight I figured I could miss. I didn't want any of those sparks that were gonna be flying off of Mama to burn me up along with Tia. I hopped down from the porch.

"Mama, I'm going down the street a bit," I hollered as I strolled up the walkway.

"Don't go too far," Mama hollered back through the screen door. I went through the gate and banged it shut behind me. The neighborhood was in heat shock. It was almost ninety-eight degrees. Here and there a fuzzy-haired kid could be seen throwing a plastic ball against the concrete porch steps, or drawing his name on the sidewalk with buckets of neon-colored chalk, but that was the extent of the activities going on in front of the rows of paintless, run-down houses. Most people were inside sitting next to their window fans. As I passed by the open windows I could see tips of dark heads flashing between the twirling blades, and hear the soft whisper of voices floating over the whir of the fan motors. When it was this hot, it was common for most of the adults to stay inside until the cooler hours of the evening, with two exceptions:

Perry's 24-and-7 was hopping as usual. The stereo was blasting a Marvin Gaye tune, and groups of stylishly dressed, sweaty brothers and sisters were standing in the open double doors gossiping, their dark brown hands wrapped around open cans of Coors beer.

The other group of people out in mass were the women of the Tabernacle of the Blessed Redeemer. On the third Saturday of each month the women put their men out of the church and held a women-only cleansing revival. Arm in arm they filed by twos into the one-story, dome-shaped sanctuary, their shiny hair covered with satin scarves, their smooth black legs sticking out from underneath their knee-length ivory robes. Once inside the church, the ladies would sing spirituals until they felt the spirit hit them. Then they would hop up and dance down the aisles, shaking tambourines and chanting. When this was over, they would hear a sermon on the role of women in and out of the church by their leader, Sister Ashada, the tabernacle's female soul-saving minister. Finally, they would take part in the sprinkling ceremony, where they were sprinkled with sand from Jesus' footprints that was supposed to take away all their sins.

Mama had taken me and Tia there for a service once. It was right after my daddy, Mr. Anderson Fox, took off on her and moved in with another woman. Mama had just been laid off from her job at Walgreens. The bills were stacking up and the food was low. Mama said that we needed the hand of God to help us quick. Even though she wasn't especially religious, she took us to one of the cleansing revivals. She said that Grandma Augustine always told her that God liked a clean soul. When the spirit hit, Mama got up and danced in the aisles like the rest of the ladies, but Tia and I just sat there. The whole thing seemed really odd to me, and I wanted no part of it. I wasn't too big on church, and I hadn't yet made up my mind about how I felt about Grandma Augustine's God. But Tia really liked the revival and the friendly way that the ladies treated us and one another. She said that she would have gladly got up and danced too, if she hadn't had a runner in her panty hose.

When Kambia Elaine Flew in from Neptune 11