

PRAISE

'An incredible read' OFF THE SHELF

'One Awesome book' SHELF LIFE

DEW ANGELS

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DEDICATION

To Grandma, who loved to teach, and who saw no difference in the class or colour of any soul. Mom and Dad, you are my wings, and with your support, I have never been afraid to fly.

*We all suffer from the same affliction ...
adored by some, abhorred by others.
But the worst affliction of all,
is to be abhorred by ourselves.*

Anonymous.

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Prologue

Nola's birth uncovered the secret of the great sin that Fin Thomas had committed many, many years before, but one she bellowed to the world from the very first moment she poked her kinky head into it.

The secret spoke of a lapse in judgement. Some blamed it on a hidden streak of madness which was said to rear its ugly head every now and again in some member of the outwardly perfect Thomas clan. It must have been madness that caused such a fine specimen of a 'high-brown' man to fall in love with, and marry, a girl whose skin was so black that the sun shone its reflection from her face.

The girl was Patricia Rose Leland, the only daughter of the fruit seller by the Pitts Pen train track. She was the bumptious gal who, in her unlearned, barefooted state, had had the audacity to earn the favour of the most coveted bachelor in Redding.

It happened the morning her mother was too sick to carry the fruit basket from their shack in the hills to the train tracks that ran through the village, and Patricia had taken over the chore. It was then she captivated the sweet, caramel love of Fin Thomas. That morning, as Patricia sat before her basket of fruit, Fin looked into her ackee-seed eyes and his steps faltered. He came to a complete halt as his gaze fell

on those lips, thick as liver, with their soft inner flesh as startling in colour as the girl's middle name implied.

To the shock of the village, Fin married Patricia Rose Leland and, in just a shimmy of six years, bred with her four offspring. The only blessed thing about the union, people whispered, was that the children were born with skin as golden as the retreating sun.

Over the years, as those Thomas offspring bore their own golden babies, the shame of Patricia's midnight shade retreated into village history, becoming whispered warnings to anyone who showed signs of repeating Fin's sin: "Choose a girl with nice high colour. Don't bother with no 'Fin' Bride!"

The sin remained a well-guarded secret until Nola Chambers, Patricia Leland's great-granddaughter, unearthed it from her mama's loins and screamed it into her papa's shocked ears. Nola was born at dawn, but it might as well have been in the dark hours of night. When she revealed her face, as black as a moonless night in December, the muted whispers were at once amplified.

Unfortunately for Nola, there was no Fin and his unfaltering love to shield her from the disgust of the village. From the very first moments of her life everything she did, every step she took, would be directed right back towards those train tracks—tracks which led, without one bend or curve, straight out of the village of Redding.

CHAPTER

1



Mama was dying. Even before Louisa called with her swollen voice, Nola knew. That proverbial ‘feeling in the gut’ that put a misty haze on everything. Only the feeling remained sharp, tearing at the senses and mangling the marrow of the bones. Even when she tried to escape it with sleep, it was there, burrowing through the sheets like a maggot. It squirmed into her dreams, and lurked there for three nights.

The dream itself never showed death. But, Nola knew what it meant to see Mama standing still. Mama never stood still. She was always moving, always chopping. Always that incessant chopping! And yet, here she was standing still in the scallion field, with only the wispy, white-streaked hair blowing like dried river grass in the breeze.

The dream showed every detail of the field, every ditch, every hump, every muddy curl of worm shit. She could even smell the damp ruddiness of the soil, the spicy sting of the scallions. Mama’s scallions had always bristled with the substantial girth of rain and good manure, but in the dream they were covered with fungus. Mama stood in the midst of the mottled crop, at the end of a broken trail of the stalks. Her path stopped in the middle of the field, even though a gate, just a few yards away, opened wide onto another field dotted with the lush pink of rice-and-peas vines. Nola wanted to shout to Mama to go through the gate, to move away from the rot, but the words were frozen in her throat.

As Nola watched, the scallions began to collapse. One by one, they bowed to the lifeless statue of Mama. Soon there was no difference between the muddy earth and the curdled rot of the stalks. Suddenly, Mama's eyes moved. She stared out from the dream. Nola could feel the eyes piercing her. She turned fitfully in her sleep, but the eyes bored deeper to hold her still. They pierced the lifelines of her body – the blood pumping through her heart, the bubbles of air fizzing into her lungs, the tears perched on her lids. Then Mama's mouth opened, but instead of words, a blackbird flew from the dark cavity of her throat, with wings so wide that they cast a shadow over the field.

Mama's head finally moved. She tore her eyes from the mist of breath perched on Nola's nostrils and followed the bird with her gaze. Her eyes were brimming with longing as she panted with every wild caw – eyes dry, but longing for tears; mouth open in a silent circle.

Nola had not seen or spoken to Mama for eight years—eight years of no letters, no birthday greetings, no messages through Louisa's quick, sporadic phone calls, yet here she was, over 80 miles and eight years away, feeling Mama's death: drenched in sweat on a pillow musty from three nights of weeping, dreaming of the mother who had sent her away. Dreaming of her, and wondering if she still smelled of bitter onions and sweet rosewater.

“You better come, she keep callin' your name.”

It was to be that simple. Nola was to jump on a bus and head to a home that had branded her soul, then dashed her like a piece of trash unto the roadside. Mama was calling from the euphoria of pain medicine and the erosion of cancer, but calling just the same. Whatever Mama's body had wanted in life was not what her spirit now wanted in the face of death. After waiting eight years for Mama to call, the wail of a blackbird would do just as well.

To return was a task that Nola had never thought she would have had to face. It wasn't that she hadn't wanted to see Mama, to look into those dull eyes and share her agony. But Nola had always imagined it happening here in Kingston. Mama would come, her market basket filled with her guava cheese and banana bread, and they would sit

at the table, the steam of hot cocoa rising over their faces like a hot salve. They would heal the pain without words ever having to be spoken.

Now memories would have to be faced. On that third night, the last night of the dream, Nola resigned herself to going back and the dream never returned. The ghosts came quickly, as if waiting at the door. The river came too, its gush so strong that her bed bobbed in its power. It coursed into her veins as if it had finally found its wayward tributary.

That third night, when Nola finally faced her ghosts and her river, they left her body racked dry, and her cheeks streaming with tears.