

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mma

Mma came down for Christmas. Atsu had gone to her hometown and I couldn't manage the household by myself, especially with the rock of a headache knocking about in my head. When she arrived, Mma said that I looked gaunt, that Atsu hadn't been cleaning the house well, that I was neglecting Theo, that she could see the unhappiness in his eyes. And I wanted to tell her that her cloth looked faded, to let her know that this wasn't her house, and that my relationship with my husband was none of her business, but the rock in my head ricocheted faster and I could only wonder if I'd made a mistake in asking her to come.

It was always strange having her over for Christmas, a holiday she didn't believe in, even though we'd been doing this for so many years. After managing to convince her that Theo wasn't condemning my soul to hell by making me a Methodist, she was slightly placated, although she let me know that my father in his grave would never forgive me, that I had broken his sweet heart. I wish I'd stopped listening to her earlier. If I had, I'm convinced my life would have been different.

Obi and I met when I was in my third year of Senevol-

ta Secondary School and he was in his seventh, with one foot already out in the world. He was the prefect in charge of grounds, and had punished my class by assigning us to clear the football field of weeds after we'd been caught talking during quiet hours. Our instructions were to trim the field to exactly half a centimetre. Midway through the task everything blacked out, and when I came to I was in the German-run hospital next to the school, a fat bandage wrapped around my head. I'd fallen on a rock. I didn't think the nuns would let him in, but in the three days I was kept in the hospital, Obi visited twice a day to check on me. When he asked me out a few weeks later, I couldn't tell if it was guilt or genuine interest.

Our relationship lasted into my fifth year of secondary school, when a few months before he was to leave for university in England he came home to meet my family, to drop hints of marriage. It was the three scars on either side of his face—marks that I'd run my fingers over many times under the baobab tree behind school—that were the problem. Mma said no way was I marrying a man from an ethnic group that had made it its due to steal our livestock, burn our houses, and rape our women. She was, of course, referring to the Black Cattle War, which happened decades before she herself was born. In 1837 somebody from Obi's ethnic group (the three-scarred) or Mma's (the unscarred)—who the culprit was depended on who was telling the story—stole a black cow from the other, and for ten days both sides went at each other, inflicting damage on women, livestock, and property. Mma told him he wasn't

welcome in our house, and for the entire three-month vacation, she kept me indoors or chaperoned me wherever I needed to go. I hadn't heard from him since then, only getting snatches about his life from former classmates. When I eventually got to England, I spent my first year searching street after street, hoping I'd find him, looking at every face I encountered, hoping one of them would be his. It was futile.

'Your city is getting uglier by the minute,' Mma said, looking out the window in my kitchen, her fingers submerged in water-soaked corn grains. She wasn't letting me cook; it had been established that my food was always insipid or the wrong texture. And Mma blamed herself for letting my father treat me more like a son than a daughter.

'Dirtier than before the transition?' I asked.

'Soldiers keep things neat.'

'You might be right.' Then I said, 'You won't believe who I saw when I picked up Kojo from school.'

'Who?'

'Obi Majid.'

Mma's face registered no recognition. She puckered her lips, and her irises rolled to the left. She shook her head.

'Who?' she asked. I couldn't believe it!

'From Senevolta. The one who went to England, the one whom you wouldn't let me see?'

'Oh! That one with the three marks.' She sucked her teeth and smiled. 'I did the right thing. Your father was so relaxed about the whole affair. If I hadn't put my foot down, the man would have ruined your life. Being Christian is

better than having those horrible marks. Just look at what a beautiful child you have today, thanks to me.'

'Mma, they don't mark themselves anymore. Well, he's coming for our party.'

'Does your husband know about him?' This said in an almost conspiratorial whisper.

Luckily Kojo walked into the kitchen just in time and I didn't have to respond. Mma wiped her hands on her long skirt, walked over, and wrapped her arms around him.

'Big boy!' my mother said. 'You still haven't told me about your glamorous new school. And where's your father? Why does everybody in this house like to stay hidden?'

'I'll go check on him,' I said, because I could see judgment in her eyes. I let the eyes carry me to our room, where Theo, bare-chested, flipped a page of *The Daily Post*.

'Mma wants to know why you're always hiding in here,' I said.

'You two haven't started squabbling yet.'

He tossed the newspaper onto my side of the bed and walked over. His hand reached under my T-shirt and he danced his fingers on my belly, then settled them behind my back. He whispered, 'Now that Mma's here, we should go away, take a quick trip somewhere.'

'Hmmm,' I said, unsure of what to do with his hand on my back. It was warm but didn't feel like an extension of my skin anymore, not the way it used to. Now it was foreign, like having a stranger touching you, and I wondered when it had come to this. The last time we slept together was five months before, after my boss Somto's fiftieth-birthday par-

ty. The alcohol-addled sex had been messy and embarrassing, and I had to take a shower as soon as we were done, when some of the alcohol had worn off. I couldn't say exactly when I lost interest in Theo. I still thought him good-looking; I loved him; and he was smarter than the average Kofi, but I just wasn't physically, emotionally, or intellectually turned on by him anymore.

'Let's think about it,' he said, rubbing his fingers along my hips and between my thighs. The air in the room thickened. I was annoyed at my body, that it was betraying me by responding, growing wet and warm and hungering for more than just his hand on my back.

'Theo,' I said, as he pressed closer to me. 'What are you ... What is this, Theo?'

'What is what?' he said.

'I can't do this. I've had a migraine all morning.'

It felt like I was being suffocated. Then he said, 'Sex is proven to cure headaches and other ailments. But you should get it checked out. You keep getting them.'

'It will pass.'

'Zahra.'

'It's fine,' I said and walked out to lie down on the living-room sofa, unable to shake off what had happened. I'd never flat-out refused his demands for sex. Usually I played along, and luckily he hadn't been very needy these last couple of months. The rock of a headache didn't care about me or Theo or sex, it was swimming from its nest in the middle, bounding left and right. Mma came and hovered over me.

‘Zahra,’ she said, ‘I’ve thought about it and I don’t think you should let that man into your house. I’m not comfortable with it. On top of his being three-marked, wasn’t he the one who didn’t believe in God?’

Mma’s memory was terrifying. She didn’t remember his name, but she remembered a comment I’d made in passing about Obi’s agnosticism?

‘At least you go to church. You have a religion,’ she went on.

What Mma didn’t know was that, like with sex, the last time I went to church was not a choice I had made on my own. It was my friend’s baby’s baptism. Our attitude to church seemed to be the only thing in common Theo and I had left. Theo started questioning God, I started questioning God, church faded into the muddy brown areas of our lives.

‘It’s better than having no religion at all,’ Mma said. ‘Like that politician who got into trouble with the white woman. It’s because he declared himself an atheist.’ Mma’s monologue was boring. More and more, Theo seemed like a better option that Sunday afternoon.

‘Where did Kojo go?’ I asked.

‘Said he had to read for school. He’s quieter than I remember, Zahra.’ I don’t know what she wanted me to say. The boy was an adolescent, a strange time for most people, as far as I recalled of my own teenage years. Mma looked comfortable in her seat, and just when I thought she’d never leave, she said, ‘Time for prayer.’

I waited for the sound of water hitting the bathtub, then

dashed into our room with such speed that Theo turned to regard me. I switched on the air conditioner, pulled my T-shirt over my head, peeled off my leggings. His eyes were fixed on me as I climbed onto the bed. I pegged my thighs around his waist; he wrapped his arms around my bottom, pressing his nose into my belly. He dug his fingertips deeper into my flesh, massaging circles into my skin. A slice of pain jabbed in my left temple. He was stiffening between my legs. I knew what would come next—he'd turn me onto my back, and we'd get him satiated. I didn't want to go on, couldn't go on. I stopped moving. He stopped moving.

‘What's wrong now?’ he asked.

‘The headache.’

His body pulled away; all that was left was the cool, electric breeze of the air conditioner.