

One

Shayla wove between stopped traffic, swinging bags of june plums in the tropical heat, when she saw him for the first time in twelve years. If she'd known, she would have at least tried to look successful. Or maybe she wouldn't have gone out to sell in the uptown business district that day, choosing an empty belly over the humiliation of her first love seeing her as a higgler. On that sultry October morning, the green Subaru Forrester was, at first, just another car on the four-lane road that held eight lanes worth of traffic.

Easily outpacing the cars, she passed a fellow higgler selling frozen bag juice to schoolchildren through the windows of a packed minibus and a one-legged beggar who hobbled from car to car selling mournful looks. She attempted eye contact only with the drivers of private vehicles, those Jamaicans who could afford to pay a little more for the convenience of fresh produce delivered through their windows instead of haggling at Kingston's downtown market.

Then she arrived at his window, and their eyes locked. The same hazel eyes with specks of green she'd fallen in love with fourteen years before. He looked good. She saw success in his bearing, even before she noticed the hospital badge around his neck and the white coat draped across the passenger seat.

The air conditioning seeped out as he rolled down the window. "Shayla," he said.

"Good morning, Stevon." Unanswered questions swirled between them as she attempted a smile. "Congratulations on becoming a doctor. I always knew you would be a success."

His brow creased with confusion, until he glanced down at his badge, as if just realizing what it proclaimed. Then he kept looking down, and Shayla sensed that he was trying—unsuccessfully—to think of a way to return the compliment.

She was all too aware of how she looked at that moment, dressed in shorts and an old tank top, a bandana tied around her head, beads of sweat dotting her upper lip, a bag of fruit in each hand. If she'd had even a minute to prepare, she might have thought to say this job was only temporary, that the top student he'd once had to chase in high school wouldn't be selling fruit on the street for long. Instead, she broke the silence with the only sentence she could think of: "You want june plum? Fifty dollar give you half dozen."

He pulled his wallet from the briefcase on the passenger seat and rifled through some bills, revealing a few American dollars amidst the Jamaican money.

"Or one American dollar," she said. Last time she'd checked it was worth twice as much as a Jamaican fifty. With the way the exchange rate worsened every day, it might be worth three times as much by the end of the week.

He pulled out a Jamaican thousand dollar bill and handed it to her, and she handed him the fruit.

"Keep the change."

She crumpled the bill in her fist, feeling her face grow hot. She was not a beggar.

The truck in front of them jerked forward. The minibus behind them honked.

She straightened up and looked him in the eyes. "No. Come back for your change tomorrow."

He hesitated, as if he wanted to say something. Several cars joined in a chorus of honking. He tossed the plums onto the passenger seat and stepped on the gas.

As she scrambled past the cars to the sidewalk, she remembered he had never really liked june plums.

* * *

During the rest of his drive to the hospital, the encounter with Shayla replayed over and over again in Stevon's head, and each time left him with more questions. How had she ended up like this? What happened to her child? Had she finished school? Was she still living in the ghetto?

Memories coursed through his head alongside the questions—eating lunch together under the mango tree, kissing for the first time in Hope Gardens, running his hungry teenage hands along her curves . . .

When he arrived at the hospital, he let the engine idle a minute with the air conditioner on high, trying to clear his head before his busy workday began. The freshly-painted two-story blue and yellow building was nicer than most public facilities, but it still had no air conditioning.

Though the outpatient clinic hadn't yet opened, a crowd of parents and children were already waiting outside the door. He hoped the hospital would have enough supplies and functioning equipment that day to let him do his job. Despite its challenges, the knowledge that he was serving his country reassured him he'd made the right choice to come back to Jamaica instead of staying in Los Angeles, where he'd done his residency. During the first month of his return, the work had been fairly routine—wellness exams and vaccinations, antibiotics for infections, bandages and stitches for injuries, albendazole for worms, and an occasional referral to a specialist. He preferred general pediatrics because he liked problems he could solve.

And now, this morning, a problem he had never been able to solve had come walking right up to him. No, he thought as he exited his car and walked into the clinic. She wasn't his problem.

His full schedule kept his mind off Shayla, but as soon as he started his lunch break, that image of her came back, like a video paused inside his head. He was still thinking of the bags of fruit in her hands when he met his cousin Everton, a lab technician, at the hospital cafeteria. They got their usual chicken with rice and peas and walked past the crowded tables of fussy children and worried-looking parents to a relatively quiet table in the corner. Everton scooped up huge forkfuls of food, while Stevon pushed the peas around his plate, occasionally taking a bite.

“You cool, bredrin?” Everton asked, in the Patois almost all Jamaicans used in casual conversation.

Stevon shrugged and took a bite of chicken.

“Your face make up. Jade stressing you? Or the lack of regular punany have you weak?”

“Just cool man.”

“Me no know how you manage until June with her in California and you here.”

“She coming to visit in December.”

“You need a girl to keep you satisfied until then?” Everton said, leaning back with an easy smile. “Because me can find you one, no problem.”

Stevon had no doubt his cousin could find *punany* any time he wanted, with his charming smile, smooth brown skin, and bulging biceps. But it would probably be hard for Everton to find a girl for Stevon without including the words “doctor” and “money.” Shy by nature, Stevon liked to know his fiancée was waiting for him, even with the challenges of a long-distance relationship.

“If I can’t stay faithful for two months, I shouldn’t take on marriage. Anyway, it’s not Jade that troubles me.”

“What is it, then?”

“On my way to work today, on Old Hope Road, I saw this girl I used to know from high school. She was really smart—brilliant, actually—but she leggo school in tenth grade and we just lost touch. We used to be bonafides, y’know. Real bonafides. She came from a rough part of town. But she made it, did everything right. She was tough. And I don’t mean rough around the edge. I mean tough minded. Focused. Determined. Was brighter than mostly everybody. Yeah man, had some fucked up family circumstances and just leggo ...”

“Which area she come from?”

“Springbrook Gardens.”

“Oh, she come from Gunman. Them girl deh start early. She breed.”

“No. She got pregnant.”

“Get is right. Them start get it early. Start give it too.”

“No. Don’t go there. Don’t judge. You don’t know her.”

“Me know you have a smart, beautiful fiancée. Why trouble yourself with some girl from the ghetto you don’t see since high school?”

Stevon shrugged, his eyes on his plate as he mashed his peas down with his fork. At twenty-three, eight years younger than Stevon, Everton hadn’t known Stevon well during high school. He didn’t know how much Shayla had changed his life, or how distraught he’d been by her mysterious pregnancy and their tumultuous breakup.

“Just say thank god you is not the babyfather.”

He looked up. “How you know that?”

“She woulda never let you leave her at the stop light in your Subaru.”

* * *

That night, Stevon found himself watching every higgler on his drive home. They had always been there, but he usually rolled up the windows, turned on his audio book, and let them blend into the scenery. Some of them pushed carts or set up tarps on the sidewalk with fruit and cigarettes and phone cards. Others walked between stopped traffic or patrolled the bus stops selling bags of banana chips and frozen bag juice. It was a job that required no resume and little capital. So many of them was Jamaica's problem—everyone selling and no one making. Though he knew many had better jobs when the economy was stronger, he'd assumed they were uneducated. But if someone as brilliant as Shayla had resorted to selling, maybe he was wrong. How many unfulfilled dreams, he wondered, were festering in the sun as the sellers went about their menial work? He studied each one as he drove along the base of Kingston's villa-studded hills, then past the United States embassy, where the long line of visa applicants snaked across the sidewalk.

The stream of higglers thinned out as he made his way uptown, replaced by modern-looking retail plazas, restaurants, and stores stocked with imported products. The traffic had finally thinned out, too, by the time he reached Papine Square at the top of the road and turned to drive up into the Blue Mountains.

He rolled down his window and breathed the fresh air as he left the pollution of Kingston behind. He loved the perpetual greenness of the mountains, a dividend of Jamaica's intense rainstorms. The towering mountain range turned into a landscape of trees, ferns, bamboo plants, flowers, and fruit trees as he wove his way up switchbacks and around potholes to the district of Irish Town. Unlike the city, the houses here were spread throughout the hills, with plenty of greenery and tourist-worthy views in between.

Stevon pulled off the main road and drove a half-mile along a muddy dirt road before he turned into his driveway. He paused for a moment to admire his house, still in partial disbelief it was his. Freshly-painted white wood paneling covered its two stories and dark blue trim framed its symmetrical square windows. A wide wooden porch wrapped around the house, complete with a porch swing on the back deck. The only reason he could afford it was because his father bought and fixed it up as an investment, and had then sold it to his son with an interest-free loan as a “welcome back to Jamaica” gift.

He walked inside and placed his briefcase in its usual place next to the dining room table. Besides the master bedroom set, the bamboo table and its matching chairs were the only furniture in the house. Though he loved the airy, open feeling of its high ceilings, the half-empty house sharpened his loneliness every time he returned alone.

Breaking from his usual dinner routine, he went outside to the edge of the back porch, which surveyed a panoramic view of the Blue Mountains, the nighttime lights of Kingston far below. He could see all the way to the polluted Kingston Harbor, which bore little resemblance to the tourist beaches on the north coast. Around it, the lights of downtown clustered together like the people living in its ghettos. He followed the illumination up to the long corridors of the white-roofed hospital, where the lights grew further apart. Moving his gaze uptown, the houses on the hills glowed like fireflies and the university buildings spread out at the top of the city. And beyond the university, in the shadows of the mountains, lay Springbrook Gardens—known to most as Gunman Gardens—the notorious ghetto where Shayla had grown up. He saw no lights, but he knew they were there, probably gone dark in yet another government effort to disconnect the illegal electricity. Was Shayla still there? Fruit selling alone couldn’t pay rent,

especially if she had a child. But she had been so strong, so determined not to become another inner-city statistic.

He sat on the porch swing and rocked back and forth slowly, thinking back to the first time he'd seen her. There were two types of students in the library at lunch: those with no lunch money, and those with no friends. At the beginning of tenth grade, he was so far into the depths of the latter that—even at the library—he sat at a table by himself, reading or doing homework and wishing he were invisible. Then one day *she* walked in, gave him a nod and a little smile, and sat down two seats away from him.

He tried not to stare as she set down a textbook and began busily doing her math homework, but it was hard not to. Her beauty was striking—large deep brown eyes, smooth black skin, high cheekbones, and a widow's peak and petite chin that gave her face a slight heart shape. And, though she was young (thirteen, he'd later find out), her curves were more shapely than most of the sixth form girls. What struck him most, though, was her strong—almost fierce—confidence. Though she was small, she exuded an aura that she wasn't to be messed with. It was like she could have stopped a train in its tracks just by stepping in front of it with her head held high and a determined look in her eyes. Perhaps he was so drawn to her because growing up he'd had the exact opposite quality, crumbling under torment in a way that gave bullies a high.

Selling on the road earlier that day, she'd still been beautiful in some ways, with her deep brown eyes and voluptuous curves. But now, she looked worn. How had someone so invincible ended up on the side of the road?

He cringed when he remembered the look of hurt in her eyes when he'd told her to keep the change from the thousand dollar bill. At least he'd seen a little spark of High School Shayla

when she'd stood up straight and asked—no, demanded—he come back for his money.

* * *

Shayla sighed as she spooned out small portions of chicken back and onions onto three plates of boiled white rice. The day before, she might have been grateful she'd sold enough fruit that day to afford even the cheapest meat. But her encounter with Stevon that morning had made her see herself through his eyes, to remember how she'd once expected a future of whole chickens and oxtail stew, cooked in a concrete house with a kitchen bigger than a closet.

“You look sad, Mummy,” her daughter Shayshay declared.

“Just vexed the light go out again,” she said, almost grateful the dim light from the single candle on the kitchen table obscured her expression as she served their dinner.

“You think we ever get proper electricity?” Shayshay asked as she scooped rice into her mouth.

“Not if the people here cyaan pay,” Andrew said between bites. “And you know it cost nuff money, because JPS is pure thief.”

Shayla squeezed into the last place at the table, unsure whether to laugh or cry at her eleven-year-old son's explanation, probably overheard from conversations among their neighbors. He was right that Jamaica's so-called “Public Service” Company was the real thief, charging the island's residents several times what most of the world paid. But she also knew most of the island considered her people the criminals. The community's “electricians” regularly strung their wires onto the power lines that connected the local businesses, siphoning “free” light to hundreds of families for a few days, during which everyone would rush to charge their cell

phones. No one could predict exactly when the power company would come and remove the wires, but they always did, guarded by a cadre of police who didn't hesitate to fire at protesters.

Like Shayla's life, darkness always came after light.

The single candle on their table flickered as the wick neared its end.

Andrew jumped up and went to the cupboard for another, but produced only an empty box. "The candle them finish."

"We cyaan do our homework without light," Shayshay said.

Shayla bit her lip, reminding herself she was lucky her children listened to her lectures about how good grades and test scores were their only chance at a better life. Just like she had believed, before everything had gone wrong. But for them, things would be different.

She pulled down her shoebox of cash from the top shelf and held it near the last of the candlelight. The envelope marked "Emergency" at the back of the box had been empty for so long it almost seemed like a joke. The front envelope held her fruit money, without which she'd have nothing to sell the next day. The bus fare for her children was equally important, since she was as strict about attendance as she was about homework, and the envelope with her own lunch money was already empty. Her hand went to the stack of crisp bills at the bottom of the box—nine hundred and fifty dollars, neatly folded in half. Stevon's change. She paused for several seconds with her hand on the money, enough to buy another candle at the grocery shop down the street tonight and a big box of candles at the wholesaler downtown tomorrow. *No*, she admonished, pulling her hand away. She reached instead into the envelope with her children's lunch money. Like her, they were used to going hungry in the afternoon.

"Just buy two candle," she said, handing Andrew a twenty dollar coin. "The light soon come back."

Tomorrow, she would give Stevon all his change, just like she'd promised. And when she did, she'd be better dressed and better prepared. He would know she wasn't just another higgler on the side of the road.