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## Embers to Ashes

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Embers to Ashes

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
Jah'Marra Maqueda Garcia

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021

Dedication & Acknowledgements:

Dedicated to my parents

Jahna Joseph,

Ludalwa John,

and Marcelino Garcia.

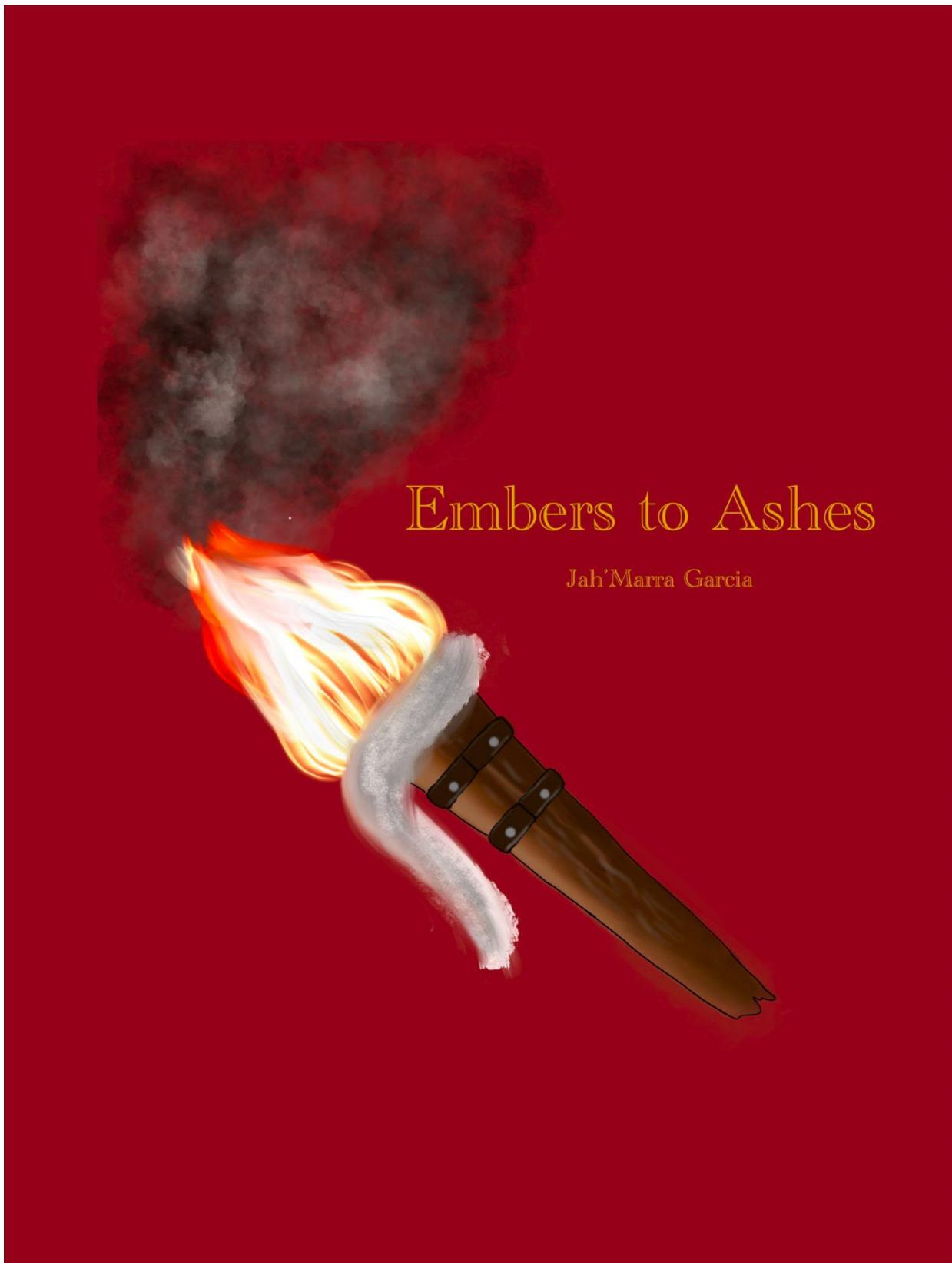
My grandmothers Diane Joseph and Ruby Ritter.

I would like to acknowledge my advisor Dinaw Mengestu,

my Posse mentor Thurman Barker,

the Office of Equity & Inclusion,

and my Posse family Bard Posse 9.



# Embers to Ashes

Jah'Marra Garcia

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## *1 - Peter's Estate*

“Breathe. Come on. In through your nose, out through your mouth. Count all the way down from ten, four times like you practiced,” Aziza Henry whispered to herself. She wiped her sweaty hands on her blue shorts and willed herself not to cry as her lungs begged for a streamline of air. She could only manage groggy, haphazard breaths. Aziza had had her fair share of panic attacks in her twenty one years, but Crucian people had a tendency to be nosy. She didn't have the normal grace of keeling over and catching her breath or stepping outside for some fresh air. Any sudden movements and the talk of the town three hours from now would ring that Palmer Henry's youngest daughter had passed out in the soup and coffee aisle of Rooftop Plaza.

Truth be told, she didn't even have to actually fall down. On a bad day, she didn't have to do anything at all. Talk was cheap and you better believe Caribbean people loved saving money. Back up north in the states, she could blame her shortness of breath on the cold air, but on the smallest island in the Caribbean where 104 degrees still warranted a hot cup of tea in the morning, that wouldn't cut it. It was a week into the month of December, Aziza's first hot winter since she'd left St.Croix when she was fifteen. She had to get it together.

By the time she'd made her mental countdown to one for the third time, an elderly woman made her way down the soup aisle and Aziza had no choice but to gather her composure.

“You okay, dearie?,” the older woman asked her.

Dressed to the nines in a red suit, knit skirt, and matching hat, the woman looked fresh off of a church runway. Her gray hair was shaped into a neat pixie cut and she smiled as she

brushed some of the strands out of her eyes to get a good look at Aziza. Aziza stuffed her hands in her jeans to hide their shaking.

“Yes, ma’am. Doing just fine, thank you.” She responded.

The woman nodded and grabbed two cans of chowder from the shelf next to Aziza’s head before exiting the aisle. Aziza had never been one to break down in public spaces, yet she couldn’t shake the nerves she had been feeling as of late. She stared down the can of vegetable soup that she knew she should pick up. She wanted to be healthier. That was the whole point of her choosing the grocery store on the other side of town. She needed healthy food alternatives for the impending holiday and Rooftop Plaza was the perfect balance of slightly healthy without her having to go into Rasta or Seventh Day Adventist territory to get a head of broccoli. Her father would’ve forced pernil down her throat if she hadn’t come to find her own means of food. Her hands shook as she reached for the veggie soup. She looked at the can one more time and walked over to the beef stew on the other side of the aisle. She grabbed two cans of the top value brand and made her way to the front of the store. She paid for the two cans and when the cashier asked if she’d had a pleasant shopping experience with Rooftop today, she laughed and told him she hadn’t. Her second laugh came immediately after that though, which allowed the cashier the grace of not having to ask her why.

Aziza found her way to the store exit and sighed. Pouring rain met her with enthusiasm and she wanted to curse, but she knew people around her were listening.

“Yuh need a ride, Henrietta?” A deep, malt-like voice called behind her.

The corner of Aziza’s mouth turned up in a smile as she looked over her shoulder and saw her favorite uncle that was only her uncle every three years, Uncle Dennis. Uncle Dennis was madly

in love with her Aunt Priscilla, yet her aunt only felt the same periodically when she wasn't "finding herself and focusing on her career." Career doing what? Aziza wouldn't know even if it was a question on Jeopardy, and Aziza loved Jeopardy. She just knew that Uncle Dennis had never and would never love another woman so if he could only have her Aunt Priscilla in three year intervals, he'd take what he could get. By the looks of him though, his several month old salt and pepper beard, the lean in his step, and the way he smiled back at her told Aziza all she needed to know. His smile held the confidence of a lost elephant and Aziza then knew that her Aunt Priscilla had broken his heart once more.

"Uncle Dennis, my last name is Henry! I'm no Henrietta," Aziza reminded him, swatting at the air in between them for emphasis.

"Yuh fadda is a Henry, dat does mek you a Henrietta. Or you wan be deh Wizard of Oz?" He chastised in a playful tone, grinning at her.

"Wah dah gah do with my name, Uncle Dennis?" She put her hands on her hips, knowing a cheesy punchline waited at the end of all of his nicknames for her.

"Wizard of Oz..zee-za," he laughed, bending over to catch himself. Aziza coughed so as to not laugh along and encourage him.

"Henrietta it is then. Yes, please for a ride. Meen knew it wuh gon rain." She stated, pointing outside the double doors at the entrance.

"Dah mean yuhn paying attention, Ozzy. The birds been on the lines all day. Skies been grey. How yuhn see that?" He questioned her.

Aziza shrugged. She thought she'd been hyperaware lately as she felt like she was constantly looking over her shoulder. Truth be told, she hadn't looked up at the sky much lately.

She'd lost use for it when she'd turned thirteen and decided heaven wasn't real. It wasn't a drastic decision, but a conclusion she'd been meaning to arrive at once she had spent years trying to call out to her cousin who had passed away not too long before her thirteenth birthday. Every word, every prayer, seemed to fall on deaf ears and Aziza couldn't waste time and energy on things she couldn't see; she wouldn't.

Uncle Dennis threw his brown worker's coat over Aziza's head as they made their way to his gray pick-up truck. Most of the men she knew at home had a truck of some variation. They were all bushmen and often filled their open and spacious trunks with coconuts, avocados, quineps, or jugs of water after a crazy hurricane. It always came in handy when Aziza needed a ride home, but due to the pouring rain, she'd have to sit in the front today. To fit her body onto the seat cushion, she had to push over scratch off wrappers and red bull cans that only further confirmed what she'd already known in her heart.

Uncle Dennis was funny that way, as if setting himself up to fail, Aziza believed he always put his hope in things that never brought him what he wanted. The last person to win the lottery on the small island of St.Croix was a nineteen year old boy who had since died of old age. The red bull was probably just for sleepless nights and as they made eye contact, she noted the smoky bags under his. She buckled her seatbelt, breaking eye contact. He hadn't looked at her with guilt though. She identified more of a resignation than anything in his eyes as he was probably sure he wouldn't be called out. He could count on Aziza for that. She had recently grown out of "a child's place" since the last breakup, but still assumed the role whenever necessary. Uncle Dennis seemed grateful as they eased their way out of the Rooftop Plaza parking lot.

“You goin home?” He asked her, dodging a few familiar potholes before making his way onto the main road.

“Yeah, could you take the other way for me please?” Aziza responded, bracing herself for the impact of a pothole Uncle Dennis didn’t see. The truck rattled.

“Sorry, meen see that one. Why you wan tek the long way?” He questioned.

“It’s long? I thought it would be betta cause it gah less potholes,” Aziza shrugged. She knew the crucial math made no sense. Six potholes always beat out wasting even an ounce of gas to take the long way back to Cana’s Bay. She was avoiding and even if Uncle Dennis noticed it, he didn’t say anything. She’d never been more grateful for their special dynamic.

He made a bumpy u-turn and headed toward the highway. The highway really wasn’t more than a recently paved strip of road, no higher than any other road on the island. In fact, it was pretty low for a highway. To get to Cana’s Bay, they would really be driving all the way back around in a circle. The other side of town was a lot closer from the other direction. They sped down the highway, completely ignoring the resistance of the Old Gray. Traffic backed up the road before they even made it halfway to town. Uncle Dennis groaned out loud which caused Aziza to groan silently. She knew they were going to turn back around before Uncle Dennis had even backed up to the side of the road.

“Sorry sweetheart, but we gah tek the short way. I could bun gas if we smooth sailing, but not if we deh here standing still in this pouring rain.” The rain and traffic made the idea of going all the way around fairly pointless and Uncle Dennis wasn’t one for wasting gas anyway.

Aziza nodded, cursing in her mind. They were headed back to pothole central, but that alone wasn’t enough to cause worry. Regardless, Aziza’s leg caught a nerve and she tapped her

nails against the window of the truck as Uncle Dennis meticulously avoided damaging his Old Gray on the road. Aziza took a deep breath and sat back in her seat. Fate would have it that she ended up in the last place she wanted to be, but she wasn't going to cry about it. She eased into the stubborn material of the Old Gray's seats, wishing they would offer some comfort. Uncle Dennis did a lot of heavy work though and the seats had evidently been worn down over time. They held as much comfort as a brillo pad.

"So yuh in school still?" Uncle Dennis asked as he fumbled with the radio. They both knew it wasn't gonna work in this weather, but she appreciated his effort as he tried to make conversation.

"I graduated last year, Uncle Dennis. You came to deh graduation." Aziza laughed. It was like the man had been living in a time warp every time she saw him.

"Mehn, time does really fly. You was just at my wedding, throwing petals all ovah di place." She had been their flower girl when she was four, seventeen years ago. Actually, almost to the date, Aziza realized. Her aunt and uncle had gotten married early in December. She remembered because she had been so excited to get to travel twice in one month for the wedding and then for Christmas a couple of weeks later. Her family never traveled more than once every six months, but her father wouldn't have missed his sister's wedding. Twiddling her thumbs, Aziza figured that her aunt must've ended things again right before their anniversary. She looked over at Uncle Dennis, then quickly avoided his eyes so as to not see anything she didn't want to see. If he had a flash of guilt, hurt, or pain, she *wouldn't* notice.

"A lot has changed since then, Uncle Dennis." Aziza offered, staring out of the window. They were about two blocks away from her home as they entered Cana's Bay. Aziza silently

prayed they'd make it. She crossed her fingers in her lap and took another deep breath. Time slowed in her head as Uncle Dennis attempted to cross Peter's Rest into Hannah's Rest, her neighborhood. She looked down in her lap as Uncle Dennis turned the corner. Suddenly, there was a loud horn and Uncle Dennis cursed. The Old Gray attempted to dodge the likes of a giant, white, moving truck driving on the wrong side of the road. However, the dingy Old Gray didn't stand a chance against a truck three times its size along with the slippery rain of hurricane season. The car went spiraling into a nearby fence, lodged into the wires of Peter's Rest's famous estate. Uncle Dennis appeared to shake himself out of his stupor as he quickly assessed his body and then turned to Aziza to make sure she was alright. Aziza, however, was frozen; paralyzed and unable to move an inch.

"Zeez, yuh good? Yuh hurt?" Uncle Dennis asked, unbuckling her from her seat. Aziza snapped her head up to the property.

"No, no, no.." She whispered to herself, her eyes welling with tears.

"Zeez, it's alright. Yuh bruised up?" Uncle Dennis' voice seeped with concern. Aziza shot up in her seat and opened her side door. She quickly pushed her head over the edge of the open door and began throwing up a deep green substance on the wet concrete. Probably the brussel sprouts from her first healthy meal today. Rain ran down through her shoulder length, brown locs that got in the way of her face as it washed through the green muck on the ground.

"Sheesh! They betta have a good reason to be riding on the wrong side of deh goddamn road!" Uncle Dennis called out. He jumped out of the Old Gray into the rain. He looked across the street where the giant moving truck should've been to find smeared grass and debris. Uncle Dennis cursed again. He got back into his car, soaking wet.

“Zeez, hang on for me there, okay? I gon get you home.” Aziza’s head spun. With low strength, she pulled down the visor to get a look at her face. A giant, red, and swelling coco sat at the top of her forehead. She pushed the mirror back closed and screwed her eyes shut, leaning back into the seat. Uncle Dennis slowly attempted to reverse the Old Gray out of the Peter’s Rest fence. The fence was stuck to the front of the car and offered a crazy level of resistance for such a thin set of wires.

“Hate tourists, driving and don’t know which side of di road to drive on. Causing ruckus and ting like we could afford another life gone! No care at all. At all!” Uncle Dennis made his way down Peter’s Street with a chunk of the fence attached to the front of his car. They crossed over into Hannah’s Rest and turned down Aziza’s street. Moments later, they pulled into the Henrys’ family driveway. As the front end of the car neared the bricks meticulously layered at the bottom of the driveway, strategically separating it from the front porch, the sharp end of the fence scraped the ground. Aziza found the sound very unpleasant with her current unbearable headache.

“Why ayo meking so much noise up and down the neighborhoo-” Aziza’s father walked out of the house onto the front porch. He was wearing a black and white, pleated suit with a colorful tie as he’d insisted to Aziza several times that just because he worked in corporate America didn’t mean he had to lack style. His normal salt & pepper beard that indicated he was in his mid forties had recently been dyed black after his “black don’t crack” mindset was shattered due to receiving his first “yuh getting old” a few weeks prior. He stroked the black beard for a couple of beats, examining the damage done to his seasonal brother in law’s car. “-What the hell happened?”

Uncle Dennis stepped out of the car and hurried to the passenger seat to meet Aziza.

“Meen really know. Dumb tourist driving on di wrong side of di road. Turn the corner and man come outta nowhere, y’know. Up by Peter’s estate. Ain even stay to check if we breathin or nuttin!” With a new burst of energy, ignited by finally zeroing in on his youngest daughter’s bruised frame, Palmer Henry hopped over the small row of bricks and rushed over to his daughter as she groaned her way out of the passenger’s seat. Aziza let out a whine as her father attempted to lift her from the truck.

“You hurt? Wah hurting? You need a hospital?” He touched the coco on her head and she winced.

“I just wan my bed, Daddy.” She muttered as her father guided her to the front door.

The Henrys’ house sitting right at the entrance of Hannah’s Rest was separated by a couple yards of woods and the busy road linking Peter’s Rest to Hannah’s Rest. The woods next to the house ran for miles all the way back to the main highway on the other side of town. A lot of Aziza’s scary dreams of her earlier years took place in those very woods as they were always connected to the folklore she’d heard as a child. The house itself was about two stories high, painted a deep auburn red and bright blue. Aziza hated the paint job colors because it reminded her of the crooked law enforcement on the island, while her father felt it showcased their sophistication. Looking up at it made her want to roll her eyes, but she knew she’d suffer from the sudden movement and she was in enough pain as it were.

Once she was safely on the front step, she waved him off and continued into the house, limping on her own. Aziza could’ve broken both her legs and needed to be put on oxygen, but if there was one thing she couldn’t stand, it was being babied; especially by the man that made it

his business to do everything but baby her. Being the youngest of the Henry's family line, Aziza still developed the urge to be completely self-sufficient around the age of three years old. If she could've prepared her own bottle of formula as a child, she would've.

It wasn't that Aziza felt her father didn't care about her. How could she have missed the worry she saw in his deep set bushy eyebrows and off-kilter support as he helped her from the Old Gray? She didn't. She noticed it all. Yet, Aziza knew that the concern only went as far as her father felt necessary, which never managed to meet Aziza anywhere she felt sufficient enough. She learned to make do. Consequently, not only did Aziza never ask for his help or concern, but she went about her life never anticipating it and, quite frankly, expecting the opposite.

She'd left the house for about two hours on her own and came back wrecked, literally. She wasn't looking forward to overhearing her father chatting with his brethren over dominos later that evening about how Aziza managed to get into something in a record one hundred and twenty minutes of leaving his front porch. She wished he'd had a little more intuition and a little less ego to recognize that even, and especially his peers, probably rolling in jealousy of his success, were gossips. Not a single bushman in a suit could hold water even if you flung him into Rainbow Beach on the West Side with a bucket tied to his feet. She just wished he could see things for what they were.

Aziza didn't wait up to hear her father get the full scoop of the accident from Uncle Dennis either, as she slowly made her way to her shoebox of a room. There were five bedrooms in the two story house, and Aziza felt more comfortable within the only four walls that didn't make her feel small. She was quite large in the only room without a walk-in closet. Aziza carefully removed her clothing, realizing she hadn't taken off her shoes at the front door. This

was further confirmation that her father was actually worried by her appearance because two steps in the door and she would've heard a loud

“How you expect other people to respect the house if yuh walking in wid yuh dutty shoes on?!” She tossed her shoes into the small bedroom closet, opposite her white and yellow draped bed. She spread her arms and allowed herself to fall into the comfort of the thin sheets. She eased into an onset of rapid thoughts. Here she was, bruised and tired after simply driving down a street that was connected to that property. She wished she believed that praying could do something because she would find her battered body kneeling on the floor within seconds. Yet, she shrugged with a firm “What’s the use?” and turned her body over in the bed. Her coco brushed against the soft pillow and it felt like she slept on a cheese grater. Sleep wouldn’t grace her with its presence no matter how hard she screwed her eyes shut. Aziza blew out a puff of air and pushed up onto her elbows. She didn’t want to think about what this could mean again. This was the third incident over the course of three months. She wasn’t superstitious by any tangible means, but she knew there was a problem when she had to avoid an entire street on her island, especially the same street she used to parade and traipse like she owned it when she was younger.

She’d never had the best experience with that property though. There’d always been something eerie about it. The street itself had never been a problem before though. Now, she wanted to laugh because she’d managed to strategically avoid it for the last three weeks and it would’ve been four! It would’ve been four, but it wanted to rain today. Aziza would’ve walked on foot from Rooftop all the way home but it had to rain. It had to have traffic today because of the rain and some random tourist just *had* to not know how to drive. It was ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous.

## *2 - The Rock Pendant*

Hours later, Aziza stirred at the sound of yelling which could only mean two things. Her older sister, Meredith, or Murda as they called her, had come home dissatisfied with her latest expensive purchase or her Aunt Priscilla just so happened to pay her favorite older brother a visit. Aziza rolled over, covering her head with a yellow pillow, trying to drown out the sound of yelling until it got significantly louder. A booming voice she'd never heard before outshining all of the others.

She scrambled to her feet too quickly causing a blast of dizziness to attack her senses. Slowly, she slid on her brown pair of leather house shoes and followed the voices out onto the front porch.

“-You need to leave!” Her aunt shouted.

“-The woman ain gon tell you again!” The unrecognizable voice called after her.

“-I helped build this house! This probably the first time this dude done seen it!” She heard her Uncle yell a lot quieter than the other two voices. Aziza's eyes widened at the scene unfolding in front of her. Her Uncle Dennis stood at the Old Gray with two sets of pliers in his hands and half of the silver fence off of the front end of his car. Opposite him, with the meanest look Aziza had seen in a while, was her Aunt Priscilla. She stood tall in all of her five foot three glory. She had the type of glare that meant business and no one wanted to be on the other end of that wager. Sadly, she saw her uncle's big, brown eyes staring as they met her aunt's, sealing the deal.

Her father was nowhere to be found, yet there was another body here unaccounted for. Standing directly in between the heated showdown was a tall, Rasta man with locs running down his back. Aziza had never seen him before and with his buff frame and affinity for muscle shirts, he was hard to miss.

“The lady ain gone tell you again, dawg!” She heard the large man bellow at her dangerously armed and freshly heartbroken uncle. She knew she had to act quickly.

“Auntie! I didn’t know you’d be back in town so soon!” Aziza called, stepping down from the front step.

“Let me get a look at you, dear. I can’t believe this man put your life in danger like this!” Her aunt walked over to her, immediately pressing Aziza’s head to her chest. This man? Not her husband of at least thirteen inconsecutive years in total. Aziza knew that had to hurt. Aziza struggled against her aunt’s chest before giving in. Her aunt seemed content with holding her head there against her red tank top for a couple beats of emphasis. Her aunt looked back up at Uncle Dennis. He made eye contact with Aziza as if to ask a question and Aziza slightly shook her head. It wasn’t worth it. Uncle Dennis looked off to the green front lawn at his side for several seconds before conceding to Aziza’s silent request.

“I gon come back and check on you later, Zeez.” He backed away from the man glaring at him and the love of his life wearing the same glare but with less intensity.

Aziza nodded to his retreating figure as he dashed the pliers into his back seat. He came around the car, picked up the piece of fence and proceeded to unlock his trunk and stuff it in, haphazardly. Physically embodying the rage he’d been trying to suppress, his aggressiveness with the fence caused one of the sharp hooks at the top to cut into his right hand. Aunt Priscilla

held a wavering foot in the air as if she intended to step forward while Uncle Dennis rubbed the blood of his hand on his already dirtied shirt. Aziza's aunt quickly dropped her foot. The man that was standing a couple feet in front of her aunt widened his stance as if he were standing his ground. He lifted his arms and folded them across his chest. If there were ever a greater display of overflowing testosterone and ego, Aziza didn't know it. It disheartened her because she was aware that her uncle wouldn't have retreated had she not asked him to. He would've stood his ground. That man still held a fire of love that burned in his soul for the woman standing in the driveway and if standing his ground meant burning down the entire house for her, he would've stayed until he did just that. But there was another factor: another man.

She'd brought another man to her brother's house. Even more so, a man that Aziza had never met before which means that while Uncle Dennis had been heartbroken over her for the umpteenth time, her Aunt Priscilla had been, well.. busy. That realization was enough for Aziza to make the request for him to leave and for Uncle Dennis to be awarded some time to think, or drink, or cry. Whichever came first. The slicing of his hand just made things more annoying and he could've sworn he saw his former lover stumble in response, but she quickly regained her stature. Minutes later, Uncle Dennis was driving back down toward the entrance of Hannah's Rest in his battered Old Gray, getting blood on his steering wheel.

The mysterious man turned to face her Aunt Priscilla while her aunt turned to face Aziza instead. The man had a smirk on his face, though, that made Aziza wish he'd been the one to get in an accident. Her headache would look so much better on him.

"He'd never put me in danger. You know that right?" Aziza whined to her aunt, breaking the silence. "It's not his fault, we had to drive by Peter's Rest. There was traffic going the other

way and it was raining.” Her eyebrows sunk with her heart as she tried to explain her uncle’s actions. Aunt Priscilla had to know him better than that. She had to, no doubt.

“It don’t make no difference cause-” Her aunt’s eyes widened. “Peter’s Rest? No wonder you geh lick up suh. Why he ain drop you up the road?” Aunt Priscilla asked. Aziza paused and looked up at her aunt once more.

“Wah you mean no wonder?” Her aunt shook her hand in the air dismissing her question.

“Never mind that. You’n riding wid he no more. If you need to go somewhere, me, your fadda, or Mykel cuh take you.” Her aunt then gestured toward the man

Aziza looked up at him, “So you’re suggesting I ask a ride from this stranger you bring home over my Uncle who been giving me rides since I been 3?” Aziza stared at her aunt like she was ludicrous.

“Dohn speak to your aunt that way, missy. Have some manners.” Rasta man, Mykel, said to her with a pointed look.

“Me? You just pull up to my property and disrespected my uncle. Meen even know who you be.” Aziza snapped back.

“I know your father ain teach you to raise your mouth at your elders. Keep talking about yuh ‘mista uncle,’ tell her nuh,” Mykel turned to her aunt as if he didn’t want to waste any more time talking to Aziza himself. Aziza craned her neck at him, annoyed that he was dismissing her. Her Aunt Priscilla raised her hand and let the object on her finger hit the rays of sunlight that were finally seeping through the rain clouds from earlier. The ring on her aunt’s finger glistened. Aziza thanked the powers that be, whoever or whatever they were, that her uncle had actually left when she’d asked him to. Although glistening and shining in the light, something about the

sight of a pear-shaped diamond ring on her aunt's left ring finger made Aziza feel sick to her stomach. Pears didn't even grow here. Aziza felt a dizzying spell attack her senses and seconds later she was bent forward on the porch, dry heaving whatever green liquids were left in her stomach cavity.

Sickness. Aziza wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and sprung toward the side of the house for the outside mop. She drowned out the sound of her aunt shrieking and her apparent new fiance' cursing at the vomit that had been all too close to his name-brand sneakers. Maybe adidas or nike, but they honestly looked pretty knockoff-ish to Aziza. Her green matter would've given the shoes some life and vibrancy. Yet, it hadn't touched either one of them, so she deduced them both to be overreacting and effectively, getting on her last nerve. How could her aunt just show up engaged? She knew she hadn't seen her in at least two months, but that had been around the same amount of time from which she'd last seen her uncle before he'd picked her up today. How do you get engaged so quickly and so close to the anniversary you shared with the man you spent most of your life loving?

Aziza didn't get it and she didn't want to. She brought the outside water hose up to the patio and washed off most of the gunk into the grass. Whatever she couldn't wash away, she proceeded to douse in Fabuloso and bleach, then scrub away with the outside mop. She refused to continue acknowledging the man standing on her patio as she cleaned her father's porch. At some point in her task, her aunt had made her way into the house to share her news with whoever would listen. At the very least, Mykel had some manners to know not to walk into a house he hadn't been invited to, especially that of another man he would have to get into the good graces of. Well, she guessed the man *did* have a sensible cell in his brain.

After cleaning up, Aziza changed her clothes and made her way down the backstreets of Hannah's Rest. There was less traffic than there had been earlier so she was able to cross her favorite streets without any hassle. Her favorite streets were Rosa's Street, Mango Tree Street, Mama People Dem Street, and the street with Therese's Bakery on it. Rosa's Street was where you could find Ms. Rosa, an older, kind, "auntie" figure to a lot of kids on the island. She sold her famous lindy's out of her family-built store truck. She would freeze flavors like blue raspberry, passionfruit, and tamarind into cups for the kids to enjoy year round at the price of a dollar. Aziza knew statesiders called them "popsicles" or "frozen pops," but Crucian people called them lindy's. Over the years, even when her demand increased and the island got more expensive, Rosa's prices never changed.

Mango Tree Street simply had a giant mango tree that belonged to Father Richards who was the pastor for Aziza's grandmother's church. His mango tree was the biggest on the island, so big that the tree spilled over into the street and locals could walk by and grab mangoes that drooped over their heads. Did he encourage people to? No, he chased people off with the back of his broomstick that he'd sharpened with a machete. But he had a bad leg that he insisted God hadn't gotten a chance to heal just yet, so if one could run, they could get away with at least a handful of mangoes.

Mama People Dem Street was the only street Aziza knew of that used to house individuals from her mother's side of the family back in the day. She didn't know any of them to live there now or Lord knows she would have been parading the street every waking second she got. She made her way down Rosa's Street taking a dollar to the woman's tip jar as she thanked her for the blue raspberry lindy she'd requested. They made small talk about her father which

was honestly the *only* reason the conversation had been so short. Aziza could talk to Ms. Rosa for hours, but when the woman greeted her with a “So how has my favorite godson been doing? Still at his government job?,” Aziza couldn’t force herself to exchange words on the topic for more than five minutes before she was waving a goodbye and making her way to the next street toward Therese’s Bakery. She hoped the line wouldn’t be too long.

An hour later, Aziza hopped along the coarse path of the earthy orange sand below her. The sand and water fought against each other for the claim to extreme temperature. While the sand could probably fry an egg even on a windy day, the water brought the crispiest, icy feeling that felt a percentage below refreshing on good days, but other days- it was just cold. Crucians were a warm community of people though. They drank scalding tea first thing in the morning like the heat didn’t rise with the sun. An eighty degree morning and a cup of lemongrass tea, paired with fresh baked titi bread is what had all the locals lining up at Therese’s Bakery on the West Side. Most days the cold water was just what one needed to ease from a warm morning into a hot afternoon.

Aziza was careful not to drop her own bag of bread and cheese while hopping her way across the hot sand. Only tourists wore sandals to the beach. She loved the way the sand felt between her toes. If her feet were hot, the solution was either getting in the shade or getting in the water, but she continued to hop her way along. The water was roaring today, creeping up the path of sand as if attempting to attack her feet and soothe the heat. The waves frothed and foamed as they hit the shore and bubbles were swept back into the depths of the sea. When all was clear, the water was an electric blue hue hovering over glass.

After the rough past twenty-four hours, Aziza was grateful to be in a place of comfort, meeting with her most cherished childhood friend. She looked up across the beach toward the tall figure standing under the shade of a low hanging palm tree. He'd been waiting for her using his tall frame as a marker for her to find him. Once he saw her, he sat down and beckoned her with his hands. She walked up under the tree and sunk into the cool, shaded sand with her back slumped against the broad tree trunk.

“Hey stranger. How ya doing?” Jumani greeted her.

He crossed his long feet over hers, their favorite form of comfort despite the scalding heat. Aziza pushed her legs together and placed her elbows over his legs for support. They sat diagonal to each other in a triangle with the tree as the triangle's point.

“Deh yah.” Aziza responded, flicking her hair out of her eyes. She looked up at her friend who had two-dollar, blue headphones dangling from his small ears. The only small feature he seemed to possess. With full lips, bushy brows, long orange locs, and hands that could wrap around her body twice, his tiny ears were his number one insecurity. If it weren't so hot outside, his locs would probably be covering them instead of wound in a tight, top-bun on his head. Her favorite feature of his was his giant forehead that matched hers. They could land planes at Henry E. Rohlsen Airport with the space between their collective heads. Aziza quickly pushed her hair back into her eyes to cover the coco she just remembered stood front and center on hers.

“Any reason you might not.. deh yah? Or rather, a reason you might not had mek it yah?” Jumani asked, tipping his head at hers.

She sighed, “Word does travel dat fast?” She dragged some sand between her fingers to ease the nerves creeping up on her.

“Yea, something bout a drunk tourist from Canagata ain know which side of di road to drive on.” Jumani shook his head. “Buh good to see you deh in one piece. Ih feel like you stay having accidents now mehn. Gah geh you a protective suit or something.” Aziza laughed and shook her head. She couldn’t make it to her friend in time before the talk of the town had caught up to him. They both hated how word traveled here because if there were any slight miscommunication in the gossip, the next thing she know, the story would claim that it was Aziza drunk-driving on the wrong side of the road.

“At least they got the story right.” Aziza shrugged.

“Word is ih happen near Petah’s estate? Das true?” Jumani asked, a worrying wrinkle making its way across his forehead.

Aziza didn’t care to be a source of worry for anyone, but she knew not to expect anything less from the guy that knocked out a seven year old’s tooth for her. Granted, they had both been six at the time, which made it all the more heroic and impactful for her six year old self who’d been crying over her stolen lunch. She knew better than to think she would be able to keep this incident under wraps so she sat up against the palm tree and indulged her friend.

“Yes, right at the entrance too. Like the fence just jumped out at Uncle Dennis’ Old Gray. We end up leaving wid it too. I almost throw up in he car cause I had went head first into the visor ting on top of the seat.”

Jumani poked out his lips, looking at her as if she were a lamb that tripped on its own feet. She hated that pitying look. If it weren’t for their height difference, Jumani would have a hard time looking down at her in any capacity. But she knew he didn’t mean to coddle her and that made all the difference.

“I’m alright, just pretty banged up. You want some of this bread and cheese, or no?”

Jumani’s worry was short-lived as he saw the brown bag sitting in the crux of her lap. It had stains on it, either from the heat of the bread or the grease of the cheese. Both thoughts made his mouth water. Aziza pulled the contents from the bag and handed them to Jumani. She then straightened the creases of the bag out in her lap and Jumani placed the bread and cheese on their new makeshift tray. In a haphazard manner, Aziza pulled the loaf of bread apart into two giant halves, handing Jumani’s piece back to him with two slices of fresh bakery cheese. The bread oozed steam and she inhaled the best smell to ease an empty stomach as she remembered she’d vomited her first meal of the day. Gross, brussel sprouts. They were silent for the next several minutes, savoring every flake of the bread’s buttery crust and every crumb of its soft center.

“So wah dis mean Z? We gah find you a nice obeah lady or wah?” Jumani cocked his head at her.

“Are the obeah ladies ever nice? You’n remember di Mongoose Woman they used to tell us about growing up? They used to tell me that was my mother after she went crazy. I look like the child of some crazy obeah lady, Jumani? Meen deh in that.” Aziza shook her head. She refused.

“Z, you gah stop believing in them crazy witch stories. Being connected to the spirit world ain never been a bad ting, that’s just what Columbus them people wanted us to think. Cyan believe you fallin for dat. You see this pendant yah?” Jumani dug into the collar of his blue shirt and pulled out a pendant Aziza swore he never took off. Dangling from the strings of his necklace was a wire-wrapped crystal. Jumani had told her before that he wore it for protection and safety.

“You remembah when I had say I find this pendant on the street, just suh? Dat deh ain true, Z, I was dealing with everything with Father Bim putting me out and I was down bad. I come here, right up there by the shore,” He pointed to the shoreline with his long fingers. “and I ask my people for some protection. Meen had no money and nowhere to go. Next thing, I feel something hard hit my foot from deh next wave and I end up picking this piece yah up. Meen know what it was at di time, buh I wrap it in some twine and throw it on my neck. Next ting, a old woman in Pueblo see me with it and ask me about it. She tell me it’s black tourmaline and it’s made for protection. She said she could wrap it for me, smudge it down, and bless it. Tell me why, that’s the day Carmen had call me back to gih me the job at Shark Shack?” He stretched out his palm, emphasizing his question. Jumani was one to talk with his hands. He’d find a way even if they were tied behind his back.

“Ohh that’s how you end up getting a job so close to King house? You saying a obeah lady gih you di job?” Aziza’s forehead crinkled and she leaned back to get a better view of him.

She tried to put on a straight face, but she could feel her eyes crinkle with her forehead as if she was judging him. Jumani appeared unphased.

“Nah, I think she was the medium for the message. I ask my ancestors for protection myself and they sent it for me. The lady just made sure I didn’t use the message wrong. She does still check on me every now and then.” Jumani shrugged and Aziza sat up. She felt the weight of the conversation trying to drag her down and she just wouldn’t let it. Jumani wasn’t about to tell her he’d been ‘oh so’ protected since finding a rock pendant on the beach and giving it to a mock Mongoose Woman, and now he was just a walking lucky clover.

“Meen neva seen you tek that necklace off your neck, but you still had problems.” Aziza shrugged at him.

“I mean it won’t just automatically mek you invincible or nuthin. We still geh free will. But you seen me in any car accidents lately or..?” Jumani attempted to make a joke, but the steady tone of his voice had Aziza rubbing her arms as if a chilled breeze had passed over them.

“So you think I geh some bad juju or something?” Aziza asked, attempting to cool the hot piece of bread and cheese she’d just burnt her tongue on in her mouth.

“Meen know mehn, I think you fighting something. Or something trying to fight you.” He stared at her for a couple of beats. “But I gah go clock in soon, you could walk me to big dock?” He asked, cocking his head to the side. Aziza nodded as they both stood and dusted the sand off of their clothes. They grabbed their trash and made their way across the beach.

“Look, meen trying to put no ideas in your head. Or make you believe something you don’t, but dohn act like everything fine and dandy in your world. You geh a coco the size of a jojo on your head,” Jumani tapped her forehead lightly with his finger and Aziza winced. They walked side by side.

“So if I go over there,” she pointed to the shore, “and pick up a rock. This won’t happen?” She then pointed to her forehead and furrowed her brows.

Jumani laughed for a couple beats. “They’re not just rocks. And I asked my ancestors for mine. You don’t even talk to yours, no wonder nobody protecting you. I wouldn’t talk to you either if you thought I was a crazy mongoose woman that haunted your dreams as a kid. Give them more credit than that,” He nodded to her.

They passed between trees on the near the road before Jumani pulled her to the inner side of the sidewalk. “With your luck with di car dem, meen wan nothing to happen.” But Aziza knew he was always this way. He never let her walk near the road. There was nothing outwardly wrong with the way their friendship worked. If there was, Aziza would’ve found that problem and ran with it. They would’ve severed ties years ago.

If Jumani had ever given her a single reason to go running for the hills, even when they were kids, she would’ve been at the peak before he’d counted to three. Not because she was waiting for a way out, but because she believed her life was a lot easier to manage when she was alone. But Jumani never added any extra weight to her shoulders, he offered to carry what was already there and lug it across town if she needed. She was grateful and hopefully he knew that without her having to declare so. By now, he had to know that he was one of the only people she could tolerate. Double points for him not being related to her by blood! That way the connection wasn’t obligated, which would’ve caused her to be less graceful with him. Their relationship just *worked*. She looked up at him, pondering his words and realized that because her safety was being threatened, he would continually bring this “magic-ancestor-vooodoo-rock” stuff up until she gave any semblance of actually taking him seriously.

“So if I gave this thing a try... if I actually got a rock— er, crystal and wore it or had someone speak over it, I’d be safer.” She asked him.

“At least, until we figure out what bad juju you have going on here..” He pointed at her chest.

“My heart?” She looked down at her chest.

“No, your spirit. You’re probably harboring some bad energy from a past life or you’re being targeted in the spirit world here for some reason. Especially with Peter’s Estate. I heard stories about the family that lived there. Not good people..” He shook his head and appeared to visibly shudder. “Everyone who lived in any of those wealthy estates back down the line were bad people.”

Aziza rolled her eyes, “There ain’t nan a saint living in those marked graves that were good people.”

“Nuh, I mean really bad. I walk by there to get to your house and it’s like you could hear the spirits of those who died there. It’s horrible.”

“I hate when you talk about this stuff! What would those spirits want with me, Juma?” She shook her head in exasperation. It just didn’t make any sense to her. It wasn’t like she was particularly scared of the dark or anything, but she really didn’t want to consider that anyone or thing actually wanted to hurt her. She didn’t make it her business to bother anyone and she especially didn’t mess with that magic stuff that seemed to be the underlying tension of every bad thing to happen on this small island. “Sister Mary’s plane tickets went missing, the spirits didn’t want her to leave her roots” or “The baby was born with a birthmark under his eye and that means he got stabbed in his eye in a past life and he’ll be blind to hardship.” She’d rather not lean into that delusion. All of a sudden, everything is “spirit this” and “full moon that.” Aziza just couldn’t live her life that way. Yet, as she thought about how she’d strategically been avoiding Peter’s Estate since the second incident three weeks ago, she didn’t see what the harm was in wearing a rock around her neck.

“I don’t know, Z. That’s why you have to find out. I could take you to my obeah woman if you want. She could probably tell you something about it. Meen want to influence you in a bad way, y’know that right?” He turned to her. She nodded. Aziza knew he meant well and with the way things have been going for her, she actually considered his offer.

“I think I just want to wear the crystal. I don’t need no spirit woman telling me about myself or my spirit or whatever. The crystal is fine.” She nodded at him. Jumani smiled as they walked up onto Big Dock.

“We should go swimming next time. Not just sit on the sand.” Jumani said. “I miss seeing you cry over the cold water.” He laughed as they made their way across the dock and into the doors of Shark Shack. “I just don’t get how you anemic and want to stop eating meat. That protein was the only thing keeping your bones warm,” He continued.

“If I geh cold, I could jus start a fire. And meen gon leh you geh no warmth!” Aziza countered. They both knew she was right. Aziza had an affinity for fire. The one useful thing her father taught her was how to start a fire with the least materials available. She could practically snap her fingers and make a fire appear.

### ***3 - Old Hi-Biscuits***

The smell of fresh fish and stewed fish filled Aziza's senses. She smiled as she saw an elderly couple sitting at a red table eating chips and the shack's freshly made ceviche. Shark Shack was the best place for the right kind of fish. Not just any fish that anyone could go steal out the blue waters with a line over Big Dock, but only the best fish. Located right in front of the crisp water, Shark Shack replaced the budding fish market that used to live right next to its current location. If there was fresh fish, already cleaned and marinated in the best crucian seasoning, just waiting to be put on the grill, then no one wanted to buy it from the guy sitting on a boat by the water with the fish still bloodied, while its eyes bulged out of its head. Only the elders on the island loved to suck on the eyes. Aziza couldn't stand the thought of fish eyeballs as a snack, while her father's mom would happily suck on them like they were candy. She really wasn't looking forward to this upcoming Christmas dinner as she bleakly remembered the beef stew she had purchased in her stupor and distressed state.

The Shack was a stark orange color to combat the deep and captivating blue of the sea next to it. It was welcoming with silver plastic seats and tables. Aziza understood that having wood tables in a shack next to the sea was a stupid idea for the threat of hurricanes, but under that same principle, wouldn't plastic be the second worst thing? Yes, the water would destroy wood tables, but wouldn't the plastic just pollute the ocean? Do we just not care about polluting the oceans we claim to love? Aziza zeroed in on the silver chairs.

"I promise you I'll start a petition," She whispered to Jumani.

Aziza looked up at his boss, Carmen Alvarez. She stood at a measly 5'4 while all the men she hired to work at Shark Shack were easily 6'1. She said it was the reason they never got robbed, but Aziza knew the real reason was that Carmen's temper doubled her height and no one wanted to be on the receiving end of a cussing from her. Aziza didn't care though and she was about to show just how much when she straightened her back and began to march over to where Carmen was stacking used trays, but Jumani grabbed her by the hand.

"I just want to mention it to her!" Aziza whined. Jumani shook his head and chuckled.

"For the fiftieth time, if she had any intention of changing the furniture, she would've used the donations she got last year from Village and made use of it." That made sense. Village was a week-long festive event that came around Christmas time. An entire street was blocked off in the middle of Frederiksted's town, just for this series of days. Tents and booths providing popular Crucian drinks and delicacies lined each side of the street. There were also vendors for toys, bags, jewelry, hand-made leather shoes, and souvenirs. Right in between stone booths in the middle of the street was a giant stage where the Caribbean's most popular artists would come out to perform and show love to St.Croix. The love and community during this time was unmatched, which made it the perfect time to petition and get your local Crucian to support and donate to whatever special cause was in need of funds at the time.

Many popular restaurants and brands would set up personal booths during Village time, independent of their regular building or restaurant to make good use of a willing and loving crowd. This generated a more guaranteed stream of revenue, because not only was it Christmas time, but it was also the touring season and locals and international people all had one thing in common: they loved good food and crucian rum. As long as the crowd was drunk and having a

good time, every booth made money. Now Aziza was just wondering what Carmen did with all the revenue from Shark Shack's booth last year. There were no small lines where they had set up shop, but they couldn't afford furniture that wouldn't stab or suffocate a sea creature? Nonsense.

"Village is in a couple days again, I'll just make sure that Carmen uses the donations right this time." Aziza yanked her hand away from her friend. He moved faster than she'd ever seen and crossed her path.

"I just need you to not threaten my job, Z." Jumani extended his hand to her. "How about some imitation crab cakes? On me?" Jumani grabbed a tray from a nearby table.

"Fine, but I want it with the spicy tamarind sauce." Aziza crossed her arms.

After scarfing down her weight in imitation crab cakes, Aziza cleaned her table and made her way to the exit, searching for Jumani's head in the crowd that rushed in for lunch time. She spotted him and waved her goodbye. He quickly walked over and gave her a tight hug. She smiled and hugged him back, grateful he stopped in the middle of the busy room to tell her goodbye. She left with his promise to check on her the next day and hurriedly made her way back toward her home.

The house was eerily quiet when she returned and the weight of the day really had Aziza dragging her body across the living room. She didn't want to go right to bed. There was always a nauseating feeling in the back of her head that reminded her something was wrong. Now, the feeling had transferred to the top of her head in the form of a small mound that ached at her touch. If she were outside of these ten to twelve walls, or even in another person's company here, she would revert into her cold frame and slide her concrete, tight poker face on, but that wasn't necessary. She had time to herself and, if she was being honest, she needed an outlet.

Aziza made her way to the back stairs of the house that led to their oversized storage basement. The stairs creaked and cracked under her one-hundred and thirty pounds as she felt her way into the dark room, searching for the metal strings of the ceiling fan with a lightbulb in the center. She slowly managed to grab one of the strings and yanked as hard as she could. Aziza screamed as she heard something shuffle around the room, still cloaked in darkness. She had accidentally grabbed the string specifically for the fan and whatever critter hid in the darkness was not fond of the three-piece guillotine in the sky. She rushed to grab the right string and breathed a sigh as the room illuminated. The critter was as good as a ghost because it didn't make another sound once the light was on.

Lining the dingy, white and grey walls were storage boxes, old picture frames, cleaning supplies, and a lot of trinkets and knick knacks that Aziza and her siblings collected growing up. She smiled at her, since outdated, Easy-Bake oven with faded and worn down buttons from her insistence that she was on Top Chef as a child. Aziza brightened as she saw her target sitting cozily across the room. The grand piano was the one thing in the room not standing with three layers of dust along its body and keys. She'd named it, Biscuits, when she was around the age of seven. Not after the breakfast food, but because for the life of her, she could never pronounce her favorite flower as a child, and for some reason her father never forced her to get it right. *Hi-Biscuits* was her favorite pastime as a child, even back when she would just poke at the keys with no good ear for music. Aziza had recently cleaned Biscuits, and remembering this brought her comfort because that meant she had gotten time alone in the house at least twice in the last two weeks. It was usually harder to keep track.

As she sat at the instrument that doubled as her favorite mode of therapy, she felt the ice of her last twelve hours melt into the white keys. She played for hours. She played until her fingers cramped up and she couldn't stand inhaling forty percent of dust every time she took a breath in the stuffy room. She played until she felt the pound of footsteps on the floor a story below her and realized that there were now others privy to the intimate moments she'd spent with Biscuits. She wouldn't allow that. Aziza stood quickly, brushing whatever dust had fallen onto her body, and hurried to walk back down the creaky stairs. As she left, she swore she heard a gust of wind across the quiet room.

The next morning, Aziza woke with a start and phlegm lining the back of her throat. She knew better than to sleep directly in front of her standing fan, but she liked the way the air felt across her face. Some people slept with the door open, others slept with a leg off of the bed; Aziza slept with the fan directly in front of her face at night. She cleared her throat and walked over to her shared bathroom. Aziza hurried to get herself ready for the day, scarfing down her leftover bread and cheese from the day prior. It never tasted as good when she had to re-melt the cheese, but she ate it as fast as she could, making her way down the street to the popular trolley pick-up area in the neighborhood. The day was cool, which had surprised her. She only had on a pair of blue capris and a red crop top that complimented her red sandals. The cool brought in a swift wind and Aziza rubbed her hands along her exposed shoulders for comfort and warmth.

It was nearly afternoon before the trolley came for her and a few others in the neighborhood, but the chill of the morning still hadn't eased up. If she had known it would've been this cold, she would've brewed a cup of bush tea this morning. She sat back in the bright red and yellow trolley seats. It was one of the more reliable means of transportation than getting

lucky when a family member or friend found her in the right place to offer her a ride at random. Despite always being late, the trolley always managed to get there eventually. That guarantee was all Aziza needed. She was never really in a rush.

She took the trolley to the other side of town and, luckily for her, the trolley had its own route that was non-combative with Peter's Estate, although it would've been smarter to go through pothole central. The trolley wasn't equipped with the proper seatbelts to handle that though and Aziza didn't want anything to drive her back into the other side of Peter's Estates' fence. When it came to that area, or any area the trolley driver didn't feel like driving through, he always said something like, "Yuh tink I geh that kind of insurance? You wan go deh? Buy yuh own trolley and drive true deh yuhself." His annoyance always cracked Aziza up because he was as serious as a stroke. If anyone dared buy another trolley and compete with him, he would easily win due to the fact that this had been his family's business for the past several generations. He was a trusted driver in the community so no other transportation services really stood a chance.

The trolley came to a rough stop and Aziza hopped out, waving away the passing cart as she made her way up the dirt hill to her destination. She worked part-time as a tutor for the Little Tots Daycare in Christiansted. It was the only fully restored building on the island since the hurricanes Maria and Irma, outside of the tourist buildings that stood every five miles. The community made sure the kids were taken care of first. The depiction of two lengthy coconut trees with giant alphabet letters for coconuts, rising along the side of the building always brought a grin to Aziza's face. The children would be happy to see her.

She walked inside and signed in, greeting the other tutors on the way. India, Takeem, and Miguel were all at their respective posts, trying to manage control over their group of kids. Aziza

heard laughter as a small figure zoomed past her with Takeem chasing shortly after. One of the toddlers had a pair of first-act scissors in one hand and a block of LEGOs in the other. Aziza wasn't sure which was more dangerous as this specific young toddler, Isaiah Mendes, had a bad habit of putting whatever he could find in his mouth. Between the LEGOs and the scissors, he'd lose a tooth either way.

Aziza walked over to hug and greet India right as India had been trying to show a child that she could tie her shoe without the "bunny ear" method. The child in question, Kaleemah, sat very still so as to not ruin the magic that India was showing her. When India pulled a loop through and tightened the white laces into the perfect little bow, Kaleemah gasped and smiled.

"I wan learn to do it the India way too!" Kaleemah yelled.

India chuckled and stood from her knees, "I'll definitely teach you mama, but we gah focus on yuh schoolwork right now, okay?"

Kaleemah looked back at her half-done worksheet and nodded. India turned to me once Kaleemah was safely counting numbers again.

"Z! How you doing, girlie? I hear you geh in some accident with a tourist and you geh so mad you had beat he wid a fence? Meen know too much about the last part, buh I had drive by the area and I had see foh myself dah Peter's Estate missing a fence so meen know what to tink, you know?," India rambled, interlocking her fingers then unraveling them.

Aziza smiled. She appreciated that her coworker was always interested in giving the gossipee benefit of the doubt, despite how compelling the gossip may have seemed. India would only believe so much of a story as long as she could imagine it herself. At least half the island's population would believe it if someone said Aziza was an ax-murderer by night, so long

as there were enough details to make the story juicy. Those stories would last at least a week until another local eventually did something to catch everyone's attention. No one would stop to question if Aziza had morals or if this was the same girl they'd watch grow from birth to age seven without so much as hurting a caterpillar. If the story awarded them time from their daily lives to spread around gossip, they didn't care whose expense it came at.

While India did love the talk of the town, she had some discernment about her which made it very easy to stomach her presence over a lot of other people Aziza engaged with daily. Standing at about five-nine with her hair in a tight puff, India cocked her head to the side, waiting for Aziza to confirm or deny what she had heard. Aziza forgot about this part of the transaction. Due to India being kind enough to not believe everything she heard from their peers, and waiting to hear from the horse's mouth, she *expected* to hear the full truth from the horse's mouth. Aziza, however, felt that she resembled more of a bird. Maybe a hummingbird, or a woodpecker, or even a regular old pigeon on one of the power lines in town. Yet, with India's slinky frame leaning toward her like a bald eagle, her eyebrows raised in impatience, Aziza knew she might as well have had a saddle on her back.

"The car accident was real. I got this coco on my head," Aziza pointed to the shrinking bump on her forehead. "Meen hit no tourist wid no fence. Dude had drive off before we even geh out deh car. The fence gone cause it geh stuck to my Uncle Dennis car, das why you'n see it when you drive by. Buh you know how people love to tink I rude outta nowhere and meen gah deh patience to correct nobody. You's only the second person to seh sometin to me to my face."

India nodded and fought back a smile. India in particular knew all too well what happened when Aziza handled rumors *her* way. At six years old, India had made the mistake of

calling Aziza dumb for not correcting the rumors that had been swirling around about her mom at the time. India had lost a tooth that day. Luckily, a very loose tooth that kept Aziza from being suspended. From then on, India vowed to just ask Aziza if she'd heard a rumor concerning her friend. Aziza had never been one to clear up anything or even give her second grade class the time of day, but India learned her lesson. Ask first, accuse later.

“So what you want me to do about this one?” India smiled.

Aziza gave her a sheepish grin. Her friend always offered to clear up any rumors for her, while Jumani offered to knock everyone's heads off of their shoulders. Aziza shrugged as Takeem walked up with a pair of first act scissors in his hands.

“Ayo think a child could lose a tooth off a LEGO?” Takeem asked them.

It appeared he and the little toddler, Isaiah, had made a compromise. They laughed as Takeem walked behind them and put the pair of scissors in the top cupboard of the bookshelf in the corner of the room.

“So you ain knockout some Carambola tourist?” Takeem strolled back over to them. Aziza stepped back as if Takeem's words had electrocuted her and she quickly dismissed herself to go help her kids. Takeem looked over at India and India shrugged. Aziza knew however that India would spill her guts once they all checked out for the day.

She walked over to her section of the room that was blocked off in bold, white letters against the green backdrop of the wall. “Ms.Henry's Safari.” The corner was decorated with reptilian cutouts and hand-drawn waterfalls that Aziza originally credited to the kids, but it was later revealed as her own painful arts and crafts job. Aziza's kids were never too rowdy. A couple of the toddlers were seated at a mini table with Dr.Seuss books in their hands. One of her favorite

older little girls, De’Janae was at the mini kitchen set by the back wall, appearing to fix a plastic grilled cheese sandwich for her younger brother.

“Alright, Lion, just give me one second so I could add the buttah. You cyan have a good grilled cheese widdout the buttah.” De’Janae took the toy knife and proceeded to cut a stick of butter that hadn’t been crafted by the toy company to break off into pieces.

What a wack toy. She stuck the knife onto the yellow plastic block, but the butter would not budge. De’Janae didn’t care. She moved the plastic knife along the edge of the block and swiped it across the slice of shiny, plastic bread sitting on a ceramic plate in front of her brother, “See, nice and buttery. Just how Mommy does mek it.”

Aziza walked over to join them, “I think I wan a grilled cheese too, Deej.” She smiled at the little girl. De’Janae lifted her head to look at Aziza.

“Well, I gon have to check if we have enough in-vi-to-ree, Ms.Henry. I doh want to promise you yuh sandwich and I cyan mek it.” De’Janae beamed as she turned around to look at her supplies.

They had bread and butter blocks for days and both Aziza and De’Janae knew that. Yet, De’Janae always jumped at the chance to use new words she’d learned that week in everyday conversation. What Aziza loved especially about De’Janae was that although she could rarely pronounce the words right, she always used them in the right way regardless. Lion seemed satisfied with his make-shift sandwich as he sat back on his Little Tykes bike and pretended to scarf down his sister’s creation. The siblings were the cutest pair Aziza had the pleasure of working with. Lion had a full head of baby locs that grew each day he came into the daycare. He had an addiction to motorbikes and cars so while he technically wasn’t allowed to bring his Little

Tykes motorbike inside to ride, he had the brilliant idea to just use it as a seat for snack time. He was a smart kid. Not many four year olds could make eating a fake sandwich look so enticing. In the same token, not many seven year olds could make running a mini restaurant look so fun. De’Janae turned back around with her clipboard and pen in hand.

“So we geh the tings to make your grilled cheese, Miss. Did you want a drink with that?”

Aziza tapped her chin for a second.

“You have tamarind juice?,” Aziza leaned over the tiny counter.

“No ma’am, we only geh passionfruit. But it’s the Island Dairies kind cause we want only the best for our customers,” De’Janae smiled and nodded her head.

Island Dairies’ passionfruit juice was without a doubt the best passionfruit juice in the world. It had the sweetest taste of fresh passionfruit with the perfect amount of thickness that slid right down the throat on a hot day and before the lucky Crucian knew it, the box was finished when it was supposed to have lasted all week. Definitely a delicacy like no other. The Island Dairies factory had closed down about a decade prior so how this little chef came to know of its existence was beyond Aziza.

“That sounds perfect.”

“Your total is three dollars and twenty eight cents,” De’Janae said, dragging her pen along the clipboard.

Unlike the other play restaurants across the world, De’Janae expected real compensation for her services. The kid was a hustler. Apparently, there was a madras dress that she wanted so she could perform in the Children’s Parade this Christmas. They usually debuted their dresses on

the first night of Village, though, so De'Janae had a short amount of time from now to get the dress. Aziza handed her a crispy ten dollar bill and she took it with excitement.

“Yuh want change? I gotta geh my math book out so I can count it out for you,” De'Janae looked slightly panicked as she walked over to the bag cubbies to search for her book bag.

“The money is yours, DeeJ, just go ahead and geh working on my meal.” Aziza smiled and walked over to her other kids that made up the Dr.Seuss book club.

“No, buh if you put food coloring. You could make anything green..” One of the little girls explained.

“No, yuh have to find a green chicken, Makeda! Yuh cyan mek green eggs widdout a green chicken. Just ask, Ms.Henry!”

All eyes turned to Aziza. She snatched a different book off of the book cart near the table and fashioned her best “order in the court” voice.

“Green eggs & ham is cool and all, but have ayo ever seen a red fish or a blue fish?” Aziza raised her brows in question with a smile teasing her voice. Makeda's hand shot up and Aziza called on her.

“I had a red snapper for breakfast. Mommy made it for me and she ain put the peppa sauce on it 'cause she know I can't eat it too spicy.”

“Great job, Maked-” Aziza began, but was cut off,

“-Yuh too weak to handle spicy stuff? I bet I can eat a whole bottle of peppa sauce by myself!” One of the young boys stood up on his chair in declaration.

“No, KJ, you can’t eat the bottle ah peppa. Issa liquid so yuh gah drink it. And if you did, the pee-dee-ah-tri-ckan would come and pump yuh stomach cause you woulda bun it off,” De’Janae came up beside Aziza with a ceramic plate and cup in her hand.

An all too excited “yeah!” came from Makeda as she stood up on her own chair. The look that grew in KJ’s eyes meant he was out for blood and the all too unsuspecting Makeda standing happily on her chair next to him was the match to his kerosene. Aziza wasn’t quick enough before she heard a loud thud, followed by crying. It was going to be a long day.

#### *4 - Customs House*

Three hours, several ice packs, and two parent phone-calls later, Aziza had finished cleaning up her section of the daycare and signed out for the day. She'd made her way out into the chilly evening as a strong fog had encompassed the entire hill she stood on. She could barely see her left from her right. The fog made her weary as she stumbled down the steep hill. Choosing to close up the daycare last meant she'd forfeited any chance of her coworkers giving her a ride home. She cursed at herself and promised for the fiftieth time that she would learn to drive so she could avoid situations like the one she was in right now.

After waiting in the cold for the better half of fifteen minutes, Aziza wanted to cry. The trolley was later than she'd ever known it to be. She preferred to have been home before the streetlights came on and, at this point, the lights were the only thing bringing her comfort as her phone had died and she was almost completely enclosed in darkness. She normally would've had at least thirty percent of her phone battery by the end of her shift, but she'd needed a way to keep poor little Makeda distracted from the pain of landing on her arm after the fall she'd taken at the expense of KJ's anger. The little girl had candy-crushed the life out of her phone. She thought about making her way back up to the daycare, but once the security system was armed for the night, there was no way for her to get back inside the building unless her name was Harina Janet Johnson. Unfortunately, the boss lady herself, whom Aziza couldn't stand, had been the first person to leave for the evening.

Aziza took a deep breath of the cold night's air and willed herself to take a sharp left turn at the end of the street. She quickly remembered which part of town she was in and realized there

had to be a tourist building a couple blocks down from where she stood. Aziza made her way down the street, circling her arms around her body. Soon, the cold in the air was filled with salt and Aziza realized she was right at the Fort Christianvern boardwalk. The waves were rough as they came into view. Foam and bubbles hit the boardwalk wood before disappearing back into the water. More lights lit up the area near the boardwalk than there had been on the dimly lit streets and for that, Aziza was grateful.

The stark colors of the buildings near the boardwalk made Aziza smile. She loved the unique architecture of St.Croix because back in the states, the majority of buildings were bland and drab. Crucian buildings were always bright. They were the same colors that appeared to only be used for fast food buildings in the states. Aziza had learned that certain colors elicited specific reactions in the brain. She knew for certain red made a person hungry so that was why half of the fast food logos she saw in the states had red in them. Red reminded her of her house though and, therefore, it just agitated her. Luckily, the buildings in the area were mostly green and yellow. Oftentimes, the brightness had been drowned in soot and dirt over the years and not a soul had bothered to clean them off so instead of bright green and yellow, there was a deep, grass green and mustard yellow.

Aziza walked toward the main steps of the Customs House that stood at the far left of her, opposite the excited waters. She took her time walking toward the grand steps that had railings which curled both left and right. She was hoping she'd get lucky and the building would be open. As she climbed the steps, two at a time, she felt a light drizzle begin to fall over her head. She raced up the last of the stairs and yanked on the grass-green doors. They didn't budge. She

knocked repeatedly, but no answer came. Just heavier drops of rain. She refused to be both cold and wet though, as she skidded back down the steps and ran to the back end of the building.

There was one dingy, silver car sitting in the parking lot behind the Customs House. Aziza didn't have an affinity for cars so she couldn't identify the model, but she was sure it belonged to a less fortunate soul who worked here or someone that dropped their car off in this parking lot and never returned for it. At times, if something became of the car someone drove around the island with, they would leave it in the nearest parking space, negotiate with the owner of said parking lot, and spend the next several months working to get it fixed. This car, however, looked like it was on its last leg and wouldn't be moving any time soon. She rushed toward the back entrance and brown double doors that sat right across from a giant black dumpster.

Aziza almost cried when she saw that one of the brown doors was propped open slightly by a rock from the beach. Slightly damp, she pushed her hair out of her face and pulled the door open, shutting herself inside. Only one light in the giant historic building was on and it was across the room. Her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, as she felt across the main wall near the doors for a light switch. Successful and grateful, she flipped all of them as the grand, main floor with lights atop every important tour post illuminated. Aziza breathed a sigh of relief, quickly cut short by the heap of dust that crawled its way up her nose as she inhaled again. She coughed and choked, fanning her hand over her face.

“Ew,” she groaned.

The floors of the building were shiny as if they'd been freshly cleaned and polished. She walked over to one of the wood posts that held a glass container on top of it. Inside the glass was a quill with what appeared to be half used ink. The gold plated words on the side of the post

indicated that the quill had been often used by employees of the once booming Customs House, as they attended to business and trading matters. Aziza hadn't formally been inside the Customs House and that was by choice. She remembered her early Virgin Island History classes, which for some annoying reason doubled as American history, which told her all she needed to know about this building. Quite frankly, this area of town gave her the creeps in the same way Peter's Estate did.

She knew it was here that Alexander Hamilton had been given his first job and through a series of events following, he went on to be a founding father. His biography and ties to the small island had stamped St.Croix as a leading tourist destination, but Aziza never liked the history lessons that centered the great "pioneers" of America. They always felt like the bigger picture in a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle. There always seemed to be something or someone who'd been compromised and used to drive those pioneers to the forefront of history and her second grade teacher, Ms.Owens, never cared to address those who couldn't be named. "History is history, Aziza. There's no use in getting upset about the past," Ms.Owens had told a seven year old Aziza after they'd reached a dead end on her makeshift family tree. All of the other kids' tree branches had stopped at one point or another, a lot of them surprised they'd even gotten as far as they had. No one knew their great, great, great grandparents' names.

Aziza, in particular, didn't even know her grandmother's name. Her father never talked about her mother or what happened to her further than the memories Aziza had of her. It was a given that discussions of her mother's parents were out of the question. All Aziza knew was that her mother's family had lived on Mama People Dem Street. Aziza had cried that day and Ms.Owens went right back to teaching about historical monuments the next day, making sure all

of her class members could name each head on Mount Rushmore. Those names ran across all the pages in the history book, sitting prim, pressed, and entitled on her desk. None of the kids could name more than two generations back, but that wasn't important. Aziza had gritted her teeth and raised her hand to call out "Thomas Roosevelt" on the mountain, causing her young peers to erupt in laughter. Ms.Owens rapped her long ruler against the chalkboard as she gave Aziza a second try to answer correctly. Aziza clutched a blank branch of her incomplete tree from the day prior in between her small fingers.

"It don't matter. There's no use, y'know, wid deh past and all," she shook her head, cementing her place indoors during recess while the other kids filled in the missing names with ease.

Aziza refocused on the glass frame she'd been staring at in the main room as she took a step back. She sneezed as she felt more dust making its way through her sinuses. She could hear the rain beating down on the roof of the three-story building. She took her time scanning the souvenirs around the room. Aziza noticed several framed documents lined the back walls as she made her way over to them. They were letters. She stared closely at the words as she made them out. They appeared to be letters between Alexander Hamilton and whoever he'd needed to be in touch with at the time. Tenche Coxe, John Fitzgerald, William Sellers, and Nicholas Cruger were all named on the walls. Aziza skimmed the letters. There was something almost eerie about them. Most of the interactions sounded casual, explaining current events and that they'd be in touch soon. The exchange between Hamilton and Nicholas Cruger caught her eye, though. It was slightly different than the rest due to its tone. It didn't appear to be just a business exchange.

They were speaking with an air of comfortability and Hamilton had seemed genuinely worried about his friend.

Apparently, Cruger had been sick around the last few times they had communicated. Aziza remembered that there had been rising rates of sickness during this time period and it appears Cruger had fallen victim. Being a wealthy merchant at this time, this seemed to pose a threat to the well-being of Cruger's trading company that was based here. Hamilton recounted the current health of their commodities and detailed how he was managing business as smoothly as he could until his boss returned from New York. Aziza took a step back from the letters and ran her finger along the glistening edge of the glass that encompassed the so easily flammable page. She'd exhaled a tough breath amidst the dust and searched around for a place to set her bag down and an outlet for her phone. Aziza heard shuffling behind her and jumped.

"Wah yuh doing in here?" An unknown man asked her as she turned around to face him. He had a huge mop bucket at his side and a tall, old mop in his hands.

No wonder the floors had been glistening when she'd first walked in. The man had a blue vest on with a pair of khaki pants that fell all the way to his ankles. He had a scruffy beard along his chin and bushy eyebrows that swallowed his forehead. His bald head was almost as shiny as the floor and Aziza smiled because she'd seen the man before.

"Good evening, you Ms.Mable's husband?" She asked taking a step toward him.

The man cocked his head as if he were contemplating. "You knew my wife?" He tapped his foot on the ground, awkwardly.

"She was my middle school teacher back when I had braces and needed her to cut my food into small pieces," Aziza smiled

. “Baby braces? That’s you?” The man smiled back. “She used to talk about you like you was her own child. Anytime she cook soup for dinner, here she come with a bowl for lil miss baby braces so she could have food she ain had to chop up. And look how grown you is now!” The man smiled, “I’s Inches.”

“Inches?” Aziza repeated, rolling the name around in her mouth.

“Yeah, like a ruler. I mean ain a ting I does rule, but I good wid math and I does keep tings clean.” Inches flipped the wet mop down onto the already cleaned floor. “Yuh looking for something in here?”

“Not really. The fog and storm had come outta nowhere and my phone had die. I needed a place to plug it in and deh back door was open.” Aziza explained to the man, noticing a limp in his step as he dragged the mop along the ground.

“I see Mable still looking out for her people,” the old man chuckled. “Meen even supposed to be here this day. I come in for some peace ah mind. People dohn be on this side ah town dis time ah night.”

Aziza squinted a him, “Wah yuh mean?” The man sighed, “Mable pass last Octobah- She wake up dead.” Inches offered a grim smile, but it didn’t travel all the way up his face. The rest of his features were ice frozen. Aziza choked on an already hard dust-infused breath and made a mental note to stay more aware of recent events. How had she missed the death of her favorite grade school teacher? She began to tear up a little and willed her emotions away.

“How you mean looking out?,” Aziza asked to distract herself.

“Yuh know her spirit watching out fah you,” Inches held a knowing grin.

“She had tell me to come in tonight when meen had no plans ah doing suh.”

She wasn't sure what exactly he was referring to, but her manners knew she wouldn't dare question the man a second time. It was a very sweet thought that the man had and she refused to combat it.

"That's so sweet," She clasped her hands together.

"Yeah, whenever my Mable wan me to do something, I do it. Or else she gon have my neck." He chuckled as he pulled a loose fitted necklace from inside of his blue vest. It had a small heart shaped pendant on it. "Carry she everywhere wid me."

Aziza realized that Ms.Mable's ashes must've been located in the tiny heart on Inches' neck.

"Buh yeah, I bout to close up the building so you need a ride home or something? Or you havin someone come for you?" He moved the mop back into the mop bucket and grabbed the handle off of the ground.

Aziza graciously accepted the offer and they made their way outside. The storm had calmed, although the clouds still blocked the bright stars from their view. The dingy car that had been sitting in the parking lot came to life under Inches' old hands as they sped out of Christiansted town. He didn't really look both ways every time they crossed a street and rarely did he stop for street lights for longer than two seconds. Despite having been in an accident only a couple days prior, Aziza didn't feel that her life was threatened at the will of his driving. That was the thing about the older men of the island; they knew the place like the back of their hand and could probably make their rounds blindfolded. She was happy to even be getting a ride home after the trolley had abandoned her. At the intersection between Fredriksted and Christiansted, Inches looked toward her.

“Which way, my dear?” His left hand was paused at “two” on the steering wheel as he was already slightly veering to the right.

“I live near Hannah’s Rest,” She responded sitting up in her chair.

“Oh, then I could just tek the main road,” Uncle Dennis continued his turn to the right.

“Wait!- or we could tek the back way,” Aziza chimed in.

“That’s funny that you think this car would mek it on all dem potholes,” Inches chuckled as he finished to turn and they made their way down the street.

“Yuh sure? Cause dat’s the betta way,” Aziza gave her final attempt willing her voice to stay as steady as she needed it to.

“I been driving these roads since before you could speak. Plus this the way to Petah’s estate. I gah stop there and drop off some tings anyway.” He wasted no time speeding off onto the main highway and the anxious feeling Aziza hated overtook her.

Inches was speeding and Aziza felt the panic set into her bones. She could barely breathe and not in the same way she felt in the Customs House with the dust-laced air. This time there was fresh air all around her, courtesy of Inches’ passenger window being stuck at the halfway point, but Aziza felt her throat close up. She silently cursed and wished she could teleport herself back to her house. The car was speeding in the direction of the place she dreaded even more than she dreaded her own house the days her father got off work early. The roads were clear at this time of night. Unless there was a major function happening on one end of town or the other, traffic was virtually nonexistent past ten at night. There was no reason to be out this late unless there was a party or emergency. In their case, it was neither. Just an old custodian who insisted

that he hand Aziza over to “the powers that be” that took control whenever she was near Peter’s Estate.

Nothing had really prepared her for the first time. No caution tape or signs that said “Turn Back Now.” Aziza had been distracted to say the least. Young kids were always distracted and today was no different for her. She had woken up late and missed the first bus of the morning; her first indication that it was going to be a bad day. The second indication was the fall. She had been in a rush and the backroads connecting Hannah’s Rest to Peter’s Estate had more holes in them than a cheese grater. One wrong step and Aziza was limping to the idle front doors of the mansion she’d always wondered about as a child, but never had a reason to visit. Being neighborly was a silent commitment on the island, especially toward children. She’d just needed an ice pack or a bandaid and she would’ve been on her way, but two knocks and no one answered the door.

She wanted to say the door had been open when she retold the story to an eight year old Jumani the next day, but truthfully, she had crawled through the side window with her injured leg first. The house was cold and not the kind of cold to ease a sweat on a sunny day, had been a dead cold like the white floors of a hospice. Aziza was afraid to talk about what she’d seen because she wasn’t really confident she’d seen it. She’d been injured which could’ve altered her judgement. She’d already been having a bad day and to make matters worse, she *had* to have been seeing things. She moved faster than she’d thought possible with a busted leg, but her adrenaline had kicked in with her flight-and-flight response, sprinkled with a will to live. She’d made it off the property and raced to the end of the road before the door had properly slammed behind her and vowed to never return.

Yet, here she was, more than a decade later, with the wind from the night mocking her lungs for not receiving it. She coughed as she tapped her leg on the car floor. Never again had come too soon. Inches hummed a distant tune to match the cracked sound that slightly rang from his radio. It was Gyptian's "*Mama, Don't Cry*." Within minutes, they'd pulled up to the corner of the estate. The missing front fence was confirmation where reminders were not needed. Aziza instinctively touched her forehead and winced at the memory.

"I just gah drop off ah couple ah tings, okay mama? You could grab a box for me? Ain dah heavy."

They got out of the car, the cold air staining Aziza's skin. She was shaking for more reasons than one. The gap where the, once fully intact, fence stood was almost mocking her as she grabbed a small box and followed Inches up to the front of the property. Inches wasted no time bounding up the steps. Aziza felt like crying. Instead of knocking this time, Inches pulled out his janitor's keychain and picked a long and dangly key out of the various different sets. The house was as big as she remembered it. Giant oak doors stood before them that whispered to her to turn around.

"Just do me a favah and don't touch nuttin. Meen wan nuttin happening cause di people dah had use to live yah don really like visitors," Inches explained.

Aziza just nodded. She cursed her voice for leaving her. She wondered why he'd said "used to," but the ringing in her ears drowned out any questions she may have posed to him. They walked inside. Aziza stood tall on both her feet, the best condition she'd been in in all the times she'd encountered this place. The floorboards creaked and resisted under their heavy feet.

Inches stepped into the darkness of the hall for several seconds as several lights across the main dining hall turned on.

“I gon carry dis yah up deh stairs and come back for di otha one,” Inches began taking steps toward a very steep, white staircase.

“I mean, I cuh just bring it up deh for you,” She offered, shifting the weight of the box between her two hands, and her own weight between her two feet.

“Nuh, y’know how I seh deh people dem dohn like visitors. I gon be right back,” He turned his back to her and continued up the creaking stairs. She stood in the quiet doorway near a long hall. Minutes passed and she felt the lightweight box grow heavy. Aziza bent over to rest the box on the ground as a sharp light bounced across her vision. Curious, she took a large step toward the giant hallway and saw the culprit. There was a full-body length mirror at the end of the hall and one of the doors on the right side of the hall had reflected a straight line of light off of the bottom of the mirror. Aziza turned back toward the box and leaned against the wall waiting another five minutes for Inches to come back. The initial creepy feeling she’d come into the house with manifested into a mixture of boredom and curiosity. She looked back down the hall and she somehow found herself in front of the unlocked door. She slipped into the well-lit room, allowing her eyes to adjust from the dark hall.

### ***5 - Raisin Buns & Lemon Grass***

Her eyes adjusted first, then slowly widened in shock. The walls were painted an auburn red. Almost like the red of a dying fire. It was a very spacious room with all of its contents meticulously placed across the room. There was a grand piano in the far corner of the room that Aziza refused to let tempt her. She didn't like touching other people's pianos because all of the energy and tension a person contained would always be released through playing. Well, if they were doing it the *right* way. She didn't know what energy she would be releasing into an unknown and fairly tense space. It reminded her of the superstitious notion to hold one's breath while passing by graveyards so spirits wouldn't overtake you. Although Aziza didn't believe in a lot of the mumbo-jumbo on the island, some things were just Caribbean custom due to having respect and manners. Don't walk into someone's house without greeting the owner, don't get on anyone's bed with shoes on, never tell anyone the food they slaved over tasted bad, and don't breathe when passing graveyards. These were all customs of a well-rounded and well-mannered Caribbean person that didn't want to suffer any consequences, physically or spiritually.

There was a boar's head mounted over the top of a soot-painted fireplace to her right and, for some reason, the boar seemed to have ceramic eyes installed in its head. It was already creepy for there to be a beheaded animal hanging over her, but giving it eyes that stared directly into Aziza's soul was a little too much. She turned her back to it quickly, although she knew the image would be cemented in her nightmares from then on. There were bookshelves on the back

walls across the room. She wondered if she pulled one of the books backward by its spine, would it reveal a secret lair?

The interior design of the room matched the sophisticated aesthetic of the entire house, but it seemed more intimate as if someone had hand picked every decor item to intentionally be an ancient collectible or antique. There were a set of curtains guarding a suspiciously dirty mirror to her left. The curtains had to be made from the fleece of an animal that had since been extinct. They were thick and heavy, but the patterns stitched into them were very intricate and beautiful. There was a long, wooden desk at the head of the room with a quill and ink where a computer should've been. The desk seemed to be the only polished thing in the room, but it seemed that someone had just thrown gloss over it and didn't sand it down properly. It had several tiny spikes that Aziza was sure would still manage to warrant splinters if she was ignorant enough to swipe her finger across the desk. She wondered how old this study was and if Inches or anyone had been in here recently. It was cold, but the actual vacant feeling she was searching for in the room never came. The red walls were making her arms itch and she wished the main window wasn't so dirty so she could at least get comfort from knowing outside wasn't too far away.

The main facet to the room that captured Aziza's attention were the letters. There were letters everywhere. All encased in glass like the ones at the Customs House. There were also pictures. They were ancient, dust-coated, gray pictures with almost brown qualities to them and they were hung around the room in every vacant space on those fire-red walls. The pictures before her had the striking features of an old painting, despite their dull colors. Majority of them had backgrounds filled with trees and bodies of water. Now, Aziza was no artist, but she was sure she could do better than what was hung in this, no doubt expensive, home. There were hilly

mountains that could've been shot at some of the peaks of the island, but Aziza doubted that they were. None of the trees, nor the water, had a tropical aura to them. The sunlight was hidden behind grey clouds, as if the painting wasn't grey enough. They seemed drab to say the least and there was an eerie quality to them that didn't go away when chills ran through her body three separate times. Not by the fourth time either. Pictures across the room depicted canoes resting above the marshy waters with short, white men sitting in and out of them.

The overcast moonlight caused the water to glisten in a way that made her stomach turn. It appeared to be hiding something and Aziza wasn't sure she wanted to find out what. There was one picture that had a white man in what she would call overalls today, sitting in the woods with the curve of two tall arches standing on their own above him. Sculptures were featured in the photos to Aziza's right. The sculptures were falling apart, but from what she could make out, they depicted people with round faces and yellow, gold-like skin. They didn't fit with the other pictures around them. They seemed the least bit "natural" to the eye in comparison to the others as they weren't landscapes, yet they had the most authentic aura to them. Aziza scanned the random names listed under some of the paintings and the name "Kruger" with a 'K' stood out to her. Back at the Customs House, she'd just read Alexander Hamilton's letters to a man named Nicholas Cruger, but not with a K. Other names like "Schuyler" were displayed that she hadn't seen before and under the pretty, yet crumbling sculptures were the words "Red Hook Ruins". These pictures couldn't have been from the island. There was a Red Hook on St. Thomas of the Virgin Islands from what Aziza knew, but she was sure it didn't look like any of these drab and marshy photos. She didn't know too much about Kruger or Cruger, whichever way it was spelled and that made her even more curious to see the name a second time.

She took an abrupt step backward, catching herself as she had managed to transport herself into the world of the paintings and had to snap herself out of it. Her hand accidentally knocked over a once stable vase, standing on a glass pillar from the corner of the room. The fake flowers that were protruding from the top of the vase fell to the floor along with the sound of clinking. Her hands scrambled to collect the items, feeling grateful that the vase hadn't shattered in the process. She scooped the pink and yellow flowers back into the gold plated vase, pleased she'd made them look presentable again. She'd remembered there was a clicking sound as the flowers fell and she searched around the floor for the source. She pushed a creaking chair, sitting at the desk in front of her forward. Under the old, wooden chair was a silver-lined key. Big enough to make a healthy sound against the cold tile floor, but small enough to be covered by Aziza's hand. Her hand had just covered the item when she heard a deep voice behind her.

"Meen tell yuh not to break nuttin, mama?" Inches emerged from the shadows of the hall and Aziza released the breath she hadn't realized she was holding. She didn't even hear him open the door.

"Nuh, yuh said not to touch nuttin. And meen mean to touch it, buh ain break," she pointed to the vase behind her, safely tucking the key behind her fingers.

"Come leh we go, man, we been yah too long. I cuh feel the walls closing in and tellin us to leave." The man joked, but the laugh was cut short as he ushered her out of the room.

They quietly made their way back to his car, Inches picking up the box Aziza had left on the floor on the way out and placing it where it belonged. The ride back near her house was quiet. The edge of the silver key she'd taken bore into her small hands. Aziza dreaded the idea of going home.

“Actually, yuh could drop me near Cannegata?” She asked, quickly, before she could change her mind.

“Back da way? Youn live with di Henry dem up deh street?” The wind slowed as the car came to a stop.

“Yeah, buh I gah go by my uncle house tonight. Meet tink my father deh home,” Now, she knew it wasn’t good to lie to your elders, but that was just too bad right about now. She knew most likely that her father was in his small study, silently marking up whatever plans he’d hoped to share with his firm the next day. Not in the slightest bit worried about the reason why his youngest daughter hadn’t found her way home yet. He probably hadn’t even noticed. It’s not like he made his way to her side of the hall that often to ever see if she was home anyway. She’d prayed for that type of leniency back when she was a kid and had actually wanted to be a troublemaker. Nowadays, it just made her uneasy. Uncle Dennis welcomed her into his home with open arms, questioning her about why she was leaving a silver car he hadn’t seen before in the dead of the night. He seemed more alarmed about the car than he was to see her.

“Das Inches. My old teacha’s husband. I had geh stuck down by the daycare cause the trolley wanted to pick today of all days to not come. I end up down the hill by the Customs House in town so I cuh charge my phone. Inches had gih me a ride back down dis way.”

“Why yuhn call me to come geh you?” He asked all too quickly.

“Uncle Dennis, meen jus seh I had to charge my phone? Deh phone was dead. Das how I end up at deh man job anyway.” She peeled her red sandals from her feet. They were slightly damp from the light rain she’d encountered back at the Customs House.

“And yuh safe?” He asked as she placed her sandals neatly into the shoe rack he’d built for his guests.

“Wah.. Why? You know he?” She tilted her head at him.

Her uncle didn’t make it a habit of asking her too many questions. She was grateful that someone cared of her whereabouts and she could count on him to be up at this time of night. With that, she knew came a natural curiosity, but Aziza didn’t like the tense look on Uncle Dennis’ face. She presumed it was more from the concern about who her chauffeur was than the time of night she arrived at his doorstep, and she wanted to know why.

“Ain nuttin. Just meen sure if I like deh dude. Since we been young, he had a weird vibe to he. Like jumbee weird. Talk to he’self type vibe. When we would be out skipping stone and playing dog and bone, he used to talk to he self and move like he ain need no friends.”

She wanted to move into the house and settle down, but she knew there was more to what he was saying, “Oh, well he was talking to me fine. Nuttin too crazy except-”

He cut her off mid sentence,“-Oh right, and he had a ting for yuh mudda too.”

Aziza twisted her face like she’d been gutted. No one made a habit of referring to her mother so freely. It always caught her off guard when anyone did. Whether to share a memory they’d had with her mother or just refer to Aziza as her mother’s child, which never exactly came across as a compliment, it was always a fleeting, one time only reference. Never in succession and never with pure fondness without the bite of “it’s a shame what happened to her,” lingering at the end of every comment. Uncle Dennis wasn’t like that, though. When he told a memory, he was present in it. Whatever came before or after that experience was null and void as long as he

was sharing what he remembered. He was one of those men on the island that you could count on for a good “back in my day” story that didn’t *need* the condescending tone it often afforded.

“Yeah, quite deh ting. Couldn’t geh enough a she. She was one ah di only people I had really see he talk to, yuh know? Always sitting near she when we went by the Dimas’ Place for lunch. Right up the street by Sunny Isles too,” He nodded. Aziza pursed her lips at him as he continued.

“Dimas was a short man who had own a small “Purrican” spot. Y’know dey ain had no hardness to deh words back den like ayo do now, no “puerto” nuttin. If you from PR, you’s e a “Purrican,” He laughed. “His people dem had deh best rice and beans on island hands down, unless yuh could geh yuh hands on a Ms.Torres recipe. Anyway, dah dude deh,” Uncle Dennis pointed outside the front window of the house where Inches’ car had been several minutes prior. “He convince he self he wuh gon marry she. When yuh fadda end up tekin your mudda to village one year, he went back to talking to he’self. Ain wan hold a conversation wid a soul. Meen know how he end up with dah Mable woman he marry. Buh yeah, meen kno about dah one. I ain saying he bad, he just always been weird is all.”

Uncle Dennis walked over to the coat closet standing strategically between the doorway to the kitchen and the one for the half bathroom. He always seemed happy to pull from the closet because he’d also built that himself. When she was younger, Aziza remembered he would always complain that he had to go all the way upstairs to fetch linen, towels, and new toilet paper rolls, and her Aunt Priscila would always respond that they had nowhere else to put those items, unless he wanted towels hanging in the kitchen.

He'd built it after she left the second time and he'd made a habit of sleeping on the couch. Now, he pulled two sheet-sets from the closet to set up the couch for Aziza's stay. Uncle Dennis was pretty proud of his house in general because he'd done most of the renovations himself. It was a one story, studio house when he'd found it. That was what Aziza loved about being here whenever she found her way here. It wasn't home-y by accident. It wasn't home-y just because her Uncle found it that way. He'd intentionally chosen the butter, yellow walls and gold accents about the interior. She'd crossed all of her more important milestones here. She'd learned to ride a bike down his cracked driveway. He taught her that the cardamom the bakery used for their famous buns made the best ingredient in homemade pancakes in that exact kitchen to their right. Aziza had discovered her favorite song from the old school radio with the broken silver antenna on her uncle's desk upstairs when she was seven. Sometimes when she visited, it felt like the house missed her too.

She looked up at her uncle. She hadn't mentioned anything about stopping at Peter's Estate, but that had been the entire reason for her coming to Uncle Dennis' house. She wanted to talk to someone she knew would understand her anxiety, but reassure her that there was nothing to worry about. He already seemed off-put by Inches dropping her off, that diving straight into a conversation about where she and Inches had actually been felt like another can of worms to open and it was late. Aziza resigned to asking for a glass of water, knowing he would send her to the kitchen herself.

“Yuh tink you'se a guest here? The kitchen deh right deh,” he pointed in front of them.

Aziza made her way to the side pantry near the fridge, opening it. She pulled her phone from her pocket and removed its case. She quickly tucked the silver key from her hand into the

case of her phone before sticking it back into her pocket. She filled a glass cup with water from the sink and met her uncle back in the living room.

“Irie, I heading to lay down now. Yuh need anything else, Henrietta?” She hesitated getting a good look at his exhausted features in the dim light of the room.

“Nuh, I good. Goodnight.” She dismissed him as she made her way to the couch.

“Ahrite, goodnight mama.”

He switched the small knob under the desk lamp near the living room and bounded up the stairs to his room. Aziza sat in the darkness of the night. The only light coming in through the front window from the street light outside. She laid back into the couch, willing herself to sleep after the night she’d had. Maybe she would talk about it in the morning.

The next morning came in a flash, as if Aziza hadn’t closed her eyes for more than a few moments. Uncle Dennis had the type of windows that not only allowed the hands of the sun to penetrate and illuminate the darkness in the decently spacious living room, but the warmth came along with it. At some point in the morning, Aziza had thrashed about enough to throw the linens that were covering her body, down to the carpeted floor. She never quite liked that Uncle Dennis had carpet across his living room floor. Living on St.Croix where hurricane season loomed over every summer through fall, meant that having carpets installed in any room was a dangerous decision. A potentially wasteful decision, actually, and just the idea of that bothered Aziza. Plus, the thought of wet carpet made her skin crawl. She’d been having so many uncomfortable dreams lately, but whenever she woke up the next morning her covers would be off of her body like she couldn’t take the heat.

Her uncle haphazardly made his way down the stairs minutes later. He looked even more restless than the day before and she wondered if the problem was that he struggled to get out of bed or struggled to stay in it. It was probably another side effect of his perpetual heartbreak saga. At least it caused him to devote more passion to other things, as he seemed to need an outlet for those misplaced feelings. Due to this, Aziza was granted some fresh, vegan raisin buns and lemongrass tea to start her morning. He hadn't anticipated her arrival yesterday, yet still managed to prep two batches of raisin buns from the previous day. She wondered who else he'd made them for or who he had planned to give them to. Aziza sat at the corner of his small dining room table as Uncle Dennis stood at the kitchen sink, leaning over the counter with one leg crossed over the other, and a cup of bush tea in his hands.

"You going Village tonight?" He sipped at the tea with no regard for the heat probably scalding his tongue. Aziza nodded.

"Yeah, I tryin to see wah Jumani doin and if his people dem for deh Shark Shack gon have a booth there tonight. Which night ih be?" She asked, wondering which festive theme Village would start with this year. By the end of the week, the themes of the nights usually blurred for her and she had a hard time keeping track of them.

"First night is always bachata night. You know deh purrican people does come out wid dey coquito by deh bottle. I wan see if Ms.Miguelina gon set aside a bottle for me if I use deh Old Gray to help her carry some supplies down to deh function," He smiled and Aziza laughed.

"You know she love you, she gon proolly give you two..." She cleared her throat.

"I..um.." She paused, then continued. "I was meaning to tell you. So you know how I had come wid Inches from Christiansted last night," She looked up at him.

He nodded at her, “Meen mean to mek you feel no tyra way by saying deh dude weird, you know?” He swallowed a gulp down, awkwardly rubbing his hand on the side of his tea cup.

“Nuh, ain dat. It’s just da we had stop by Peter’s Estate cause he had to drop something off there. And it was done giving me bad vibes from before and so I had try to go anotha way home but he needed to stop,” She could feel herself fidgeting with the lemon grass leaves that were poking out of the top of her mug, but she kept her eyes trained on Uncle Dennis and tried to keep her voice steady.

“So we had went inside and it was real dark and den he went tek some tings upstairs, buh wouldn’t leh me come. And I had seen this light and-” She threw her hands up, annoyed with the way she was retelling the events.

“Long story short, I end up in this random room in the people dem house and they had a buncha pictures and letters on deh walls, but the picture dem wasn’t from here. And deh letters were between dah Alexander Hamilton dude, you know “Mr.Founding Father,” She tilted her head, “Mr.I put the island on the map” dude.” She paused to confirm he knew who she was referring to, then continued. “And this dude name Cruger. And I forget, buh when we was back at the Customs House, they had more letters between dem two so das why I was drawn to dem ones when I notice them in the house. I jus feel like they were important. Like I gah do more research on that or something.”

In the midst of her fiddling with the tea leaves, her fingers slipped into the brim of the water and she scrunched her face in pain from the heat crawling up her hand. The nerves she always had when it came to that place surged through her body like she’d plugged her hand into a socket.

“So you mean to tell me you end up going inside dah place that we went and crash into?”

Uncle Dennis asked as he sat his tea down on the counter and Aziza nodded. “Man, dah house deh just creepy. So ah bunch ah letters on deh wall is why we went crashing into the gate? You see anything else on deh letters?”

It was very crucial of him to put three and two together and get one hundred. Aziza wasn't exactly sure what she was trying to say by telling him. She'd just felt that she had to tell someone and she saw no reason why it shouldn't be her favorite, once in a while, family member that she knew would actually be interested. Yet, she couldn't give him a straight answer because she just wasn't sure. She shrugged.

“Just other names. The pictures were also weird, they just had a gloomy vibe to them. But honestly, meen want to overthink nuttin. I just feel like I gah look into the names more and see what comes up.”

She wouldn't dare mention the key either. They'd be back in front of the property before Aziza could blink. They finished the morning in comfortable silence, letting Aziza's last words swim around the room. Aziza ate about four raisin buns, slowly realizing that she hadn't eaten properly the day before.

Uncle Dennis brought her back to the quiet, red and blue stained house. Everyone in the house had already been up, and properly molded and groomed into their perfect selves to engage in whatever activities they'd had planned for the day. Her sister, Murda, was no doubt spending the day looking for a guy to take her to Village later that night. The first night debut was important. Back in middle school, it was the first time students saw their friends since school ended for their winter break so if they had anything to show off, that was the perfect time to do

it. She felt herself drifting back to what Uncle Dennis had said about her parents and specifically, about her mother. They'd made their Village debut back in the day and that made her smile for some reason. She didn't usually smile when the woman was referenced. Granted, her mother had never been referred to so objectively and without malice.

Aziza spent most of the day in the backyard, testing her dad's friend, Reebah's rooster trap. It'd been scientifically proven that every ten feet that someone walked on St.Croix, there would be a cock on the path in front of them. The problem with that was the fact that roosters were scared of their own shadow and ran at the sight of air. Reebah had made a contraption out of wood and pieces of the deteriorated shed in her dad's backyard. It formed a small wooden cage with food to lure the rooster. The important part was getting the trap to close before the rooster ran out of it.

Several hours later, Aziza was dirty with grass stains all over her blue jeans. She'd caught one though, and she proudly took a picture to send to Reebah. On the table, near the patio, was a fruit basket filled with jojos, quinep, and tamarind that Aziza had spent the afternoon picking. Jojo was a small fruit that possessed the shape of an olive or grape, but bloomed with shades of green, yellow, and orange if she wanted them to be sweet. They had the crunch and juice of an apple with a giant seed in the middle. Quinep was Aziza's favorite for her sweet and sour cravings. They had a green outer shell that she would crack open with her teeth and inside was the sweet, moist, orange fruit, almost resembling a mango's flesh. Like jojo, one would suck the sweet flesh of the quinep until all that was left was the seed.

The tamarind, on the other hand, was sticky like taffy and the perfect fruit for stew along with the fruit, gooseberry. The treat Crucians called tamarind stew which had a recipe that

consisted of boiling tamarind, sugar, water, and other ingredients together was actually a jelly. She always wondered why they called it a stew. Maybe it was more of a verb than a noun because you had to boil it down. Luckily for Aziza, her father had picked one of the most fertile parts of the neighborhood to live on. This was a fact he'd taken pride in, although he himself couldn't grow anything. He only knew how to chop things down. Coconuts from trees, mangoes with the help of a stick, and quinep picking was especially his forte, but he couldn't help Aziza plant a cherry tree to save his life. A part of her knew he wasn't the parent she had gotten her green thumb from and it made her wonder how many of the things her father claimed to be the truth, were *actually* true, like the fact that he'd picked the house.

## ***6 - On The Fritz***

The afternoon from then on consisted of Aziza snacking on her fruits, checking her rooster to make sure it hadn't done anything stupid like leave the cage, and playing some new songs on her piano. She could've spent the day doing the research that her palms were aching for, but after the week she'd had, she wanted a day to herself. She kicked back on her great, great grandmother's rocking chair and watched 3ABN knowing she didn't care for what was actually being displayed on the screen, but the channel itself brought her comfort. Something about a devout Christian, smiling at her through the screen, and telling her it was okay to cry because God would wipe her tears, made her want to cry even if she knew she had to wipe her own. The channel was therapeutic that way. Soon, the ultramarine blue of the evening set in and she'd gotten a call that Jumani was on his way and she hopped in the shower.

The car ride to Village was cramped to say the least. She was grateful she'd worn shorts and not the skirt that she'd glanced at for a millisecond in her room because now a random girl was sitting on her lap and she had to fight the strongest urge to not roll her eyes. When Jumani had called before her shower and said he was picking her up, he failed to mention that the ride consisted of the two guys from his job and their girlfriends. Granted, she knew that both she and Jumani always walked to their destinations for a reason, but he could've elaborated on what the details of the ride entailed. Six people in a car should've been illegal. Aziza shook her head because she was damned sure it was. The hip bone of the girl she learned was named Winella

dug into her thigh and she nearly pushed the girl off of her when they'd pulled into the village parking lot.

Cars that came with booths got priority parking and Aziza couldn't be more grateful they were able to get out within minutes of them arriving. It was the first night of Village and she could see the same cars circling the parking lot several times because they'd come too late. The night air was cold on her face, but luckily she'd brought a cardigan to wear over her shoulders. She wouldn't be caught out in the cold for a second night. She and the other women were ushered into the function, while the guys stayed back and unloaded the car. One of the other girls, Indica, seemed upset.

"They really gon mek us walk up into Village on the first night without them? Watch the next talk on the block gon be 'Gyul, I see Indica come Village by she self so dah mean Nelly back on deh market'." Indica shook her head. "Das how you geh tump up forreal, leh any of these gyuls here say anything to my man this week."

Indica untied and retied the knot on her halter top, while Winella looked over at Aziza and shrugged. It didn't seem to matter to Winella, just as much as it didn't matter to Aziza, which was odd because Winella actually knew Indica. Yet, if Nelly was the same Nelly that Aziza used to hear about in middle school, girls saying anything to him this week would be upon his request, not because they thought he was single.

Village was already at its peak for the night. Uncle Dennis had been right about Bachata Night. The music had all of the couples over twenty-five mopping the floor with their spins and dips. People were really letting loose. The music and sounds grew louder as the girls walked toward the crowd and began to integrate.

“Ayo wan drinks?” Indica asked, pointing to one of the booths selling pina coladas with Cruzan Rum bottles displayed along the counter.

“Yeah, a rum and coke,” Winella responded.

Indica made her way toward the booth gesturing for the girls to follow her. Aziza desperately wanted a rum punch from the booth, but she desperately wanted to ditch the “friends” she’d just made a lot more. As Winella followed Indica toward the Upperclass booth, Aziza slowly took several steps backward, retreating back into the noisy crowd. Aziza maneuvered her way near the main stage, watching one of the couple’s in the front steal the spotlight from the others. For some reason, their routine seemed rehearsed like they’d been waiting all year to put on a performance like this. She wouldn’t put it past them. If any talented people wanted to put on a show, now was the time to do it.

Aziza began to sway to the song playing on the stage as she was sure she had heard it a couple times growing up. The thing about living on St.Croix was that at least ninety percent of the island was about thirty percent bilingual, and that was at the very least. A lot of people were more fluent than others, but a decent amount of the population could make small talk in both Crucian and Spanish. Her Aunt Priscilla once told her that back in her day, they all used to watch one television station after nine o’clock. Once nine o’clock hit, all they had playing on the air were telenovelas. As a result, most of the girls on the island knew how to claim they’d been dramatically wronged in Spanish, and most of the guys knew how to apologize. Aziza had heard her share of “Lo siento, mamita” from drunk men, stumbling out of the corner store near Hannah’s Rest to confirm that statement.

Moments later, the song on the speakers ended and *Riddim n Blues* announced their first artist of the night. Top Shotta took the stage and the crowd went wild. He'd been making a name for himself for the past two years, and it wasn't until he'd dropped the song "Deh Yah," that his peers started to take him seriously as an artist. It wasn't easy to claim one's self as a music artist on the island because if an artist was on stage and performed badly, the crowd would let them know. Crucians didn't play about their parties and functions. In the same token though, Crucians were the biggest supporters once they approved of an artist. If a new artist was actually good, they got to perform at all the major events throughout the year. Not a lot of international artists came to their small island, so when a new artist broke onto the scene, the locals milked them for everything they had. The stage lit up and Top Shotta began to perform. The crowd went absolutely nuts and Aziza found herself waving her hands in the air in support as well.

After his performance, Aziza made her way over to the Shark Shack booth. It was the same bright orange color as the building and there was already a line stretching a few feet from the front of the booth. Aziza could see Jumani working hard. He took orders, carried them to the back of the booth, and came back with the food to ring up the customers. Aziza wondered why he had to do all three tasks by himself while his coworkers had just been there setting up the booth with him. When the line began to die down, Aziza hopped up on one of the stools near the booth and Jumani leaned over the counter near her.

"Where Nelly and dem? Ain no way you gah tek orders and fix them up yoh self!" Aziza yelled over the loud music. Jumani nodded his head and cracked a knowing smile.

“I tell dem they could go with deh gyuls for a while cause miss ting one and miss ting two was standing here mad they ain come in wid dem.” Aziza offered him a slight grin, although, she wasn’t pleased with his answer.

“You wan anything? Rum punch? Crab cake? Saltfish pate’?” Jumani strummed his fingers on the wood counters.

“Rum punch, pleaseeeee!” Aziza smiled, grateful she wouldn’t have to go wait in another ridiculous line.

Aziza downed half of her drink while the line at Shark Shack got ridiculously long for the second time as she watched her friend strategically maneuver and complete everyone’s orders.

“Aziza, go have some fun. Here’s another drink. Dohn come back unless yuh smiling,” Jumani said handing her another red cup and ushering her away from the booth. He knew that if it were up to her, she would stay coddled up at his booth all night while he served her drinks periodically. Rum punch in hand, Aziza made her way back down the main strip of booths. She stumbled and felt something hit her feet on the ground. She noticed her phone had hit the floor and bent down to pick it up. She was grateful to have worn sneakers tonight because she knew the impact would’ve hurt. The phone screen was bright in the dim lights as she noticed the camera application had opened itself in the fall. Aziza was startled by her appearance as she was growing disheveled. This wasn’t how she’d stepped out of the house and she couldn’t remember if Jumani had given her two drinks or three.

In the view of the camera, she saw a familiar face hanging over her bent body. She grabbed her phone and stepped back, standing up straight to look down at the little girl.

“Ms.Henry!” De’Janae called her.

The little girl ran forward and wrapped her arms around Aziza's legs. Aziza smiled and rubbed the small of De'Janae's back, holding the drink she had high above her head and away from the child.

"Hi, Ms.Henry," She stepped back. "Look! Look at me! Look at my dress for deh parade!" De'Janae exclaimed, twirling around so Aziza could get a good look at her.

The dress De'Janae wore was extremely beautiful. The madras colors were vibrant and lively. It was a royal purple and blue dress with ruffles along the sleeves and a matching headwrap that De'Janae wore proudly.

"Aww, you look so beautiful, De'Janae. I love your dress!" Aziza smiled at her, willing herself not to move too quickly. The drinks she'd had were really setting in.

"Thank you! You wanna see my walk?" De'Janae ran a couple feet in front of them and began to do a zigzag walk down the strip.

The kid was adorable and Aziza was really glad she'd gotten the dress she had been working so hard for, but seeing her walk right now was making Aziza feel lightheaded and it had something to do with the fact that De'Janae had a hard time walking in a straight line. Aziza felt slightly nauseous, as she closed the distance De'Janae had made between them.

"You should save your walk for the parade, mama, so you can surprise everybody!" Aziza put on the most excited voice she could muster.

"Yes, you're right, Ms.Henry! Dey gon all be so excited and our parade team gon win!" De'Janae jumped around, bouncing on her small feet.

"Where's your mom and brother, Deej?" Aziza asked, knowing she couldn't leave the little girl walking around by herself.

“They deh ova dere at our booth! Mommy even leh me help mek deh dumplings today. She said dah I cyan help now that I deh in my pretty dress, but I cuh stand by the booth and “beck-on” customers,” De’Janae used air quotes as if the word she’d used was wrong in some way.

Aziza then realized that “beckon” must have been a new word of the week for the little girl. After safely returning De’Janae back to her family’s booth, forcing small talk, and greeting baby Lion, Aziza made her way back into the crowd. She stumbled slightly, then squared her shoulders, hoping that that would bring her more traction. The lights on the stage lit up with the famous ice, gold, and green colors. “Ice was for the blood that was shed, gold was for the money they took, and green was for the land,” Aziza whispered the words to herself. Those had been the only words she remembered from childhood that were actually her mother’s own. Her dad used to repeat it to her a lot as he explained the origins of some customs in Caribbean culture. He never took credit for those words, though. She knew her mom had told him the significance of the phrase and he would say it whenever he saw the colors. Aziza couldn’t help but recite them whenever she saw the captivating colors herself.

Seconds later, the music sped up like one from a fever dream. The tune that swept across the crowd sounded like one from a wild goose chase in cartoons, or a montage in an action movie. It didn’t fit with the theme of Bachata Night and the fast-paced music was making Aziza feel sick all over again. She rested her head on one of the draped poles near a large booth a couple feet from the stage. The pole began to rumble under her head and Aziza squinted as she opened her eyes and looked up at it. The masked and colorful face of a mocko-jumbie stared directly into hers as it bent over to meet her. She’d rested her head on a mocko-jumbie. The

“pole” had actually been one of its stilts and now she had its full attention. It danced around her in circles as Aziza struggled to breathe. She looked across the village and noticed that several mocko-jumbies had made their way out into the crowd. They were everywhere, scaring the kids and dancing with the adults.

Aziza had always been terrified of the stilt men since she was a little girl. They were part of one of the bedtime stories her older sister told to scare her like the Mongoose Woman. The legend claimed that mocko-jumbies were created to mimic the spirits of the dead. “Jumbie” itself meant “spirit” in Crucian and a lot of other Caribbean dialects too. Some mocko-jumbies weren’t exactly mocking anything, but they were said to be real spirits. The first man that’d been claimed to be possessed with the spirit of the dead was an old mocko-jumbie performer named Fritz Sealey. Fritz had been a lovely dancer, always called to perform at major events, especially Carnival. People couldn’t help but notice that Fritz was always dancing when the music came on and didn’t stop dancing until it was over. Many mocko-jumbies after him followed that tradition and were overtaken by the music until it stopped. Tonight was no different. The mocko-jumbie in front of Aziza was dancing around her and following her wherever she walked. It was as if she’d provoked it when she’d rested her head on it as the music had started. Now, it wouldn’t leave her alone.

Minutes later, a different song came on and the man picked up the speed of his dancing. Aziza stared at the ground, refusing to look back up at the man. Slowly, he seemed to notice her indifference and started walking away from her and toward the rest of the crowd. Aziza breathed a deep sigh of relief, and chugged the last of her drink down, before turning around to toss it into

a nearby trash can. When she turned back, the mocko-jumbie was back, and it wasn't just him this time.

At least, six of his friends had come back with him and they began dancing around Aziza's small frame in a group wave. Their tall frames enclosed her small body as she looked up at them. The flaps of colors and decorations from their outfits disguised Aziza from the inside. All she saw were bright, colors, lines, and feathers. She was trapped and it felt like she was in a trance. They moved their arms in front of their faces as if they were casting a spell. The drink she'd finished eased into her bloodstream and their rhythmic moves made her feel dizzy. Her eyes widened and closed as she felt herself surrendering to the will of the music and the dance that the colorful men performed around her. "Fritz," She heard herself whisper, as she was taken with the man she'd originally rested her head on. She didn't know his name before tonight. At this point, she wasn't even sure of her own, but she said it again. "Fritz," she called, swaying her head to the fast-paced music.

One of the masked men swooped down and grabbed one of her hands as he encouraged her to dance with them. She felt herself unintentionally begin to sway. Soon, she felt like she was being lifted off of the ground. Surely, one of the men had picked her up. She felt so weak that she was powerless to the tightness of his arms around her shoulders and legs. She'd remembered when she was a kid and the mocko-jumbies used to terrify her. She didn't like anything even remotely related to the stories she had grown up hearing about. All of the "supernatural beings" or people from the "spiritual realm." It seemed that every person who appeared the most opposed to superstition and spirituality still managed to have some kind of ties to it, especially the elders on the island. The story that had terrified her the most was the Mongoose Woman. The

Mongoose Woman was said to be a creature that had the beauty and sensuality of a woman, but the sharp, predatory claws, and red, beady eyes of a mongoose. Mongoose were known to steal food on the island and attack any creature that was even remotely its size and sometimes even bigger. Mongoose were known to attack snakes like deadly cobras. They were little menaces.

The Mongoose Woman was similar in that she was said to steal the souls of bad children. Specifically, children that spoke back to their parents, that didn't do their chores, and especially, children that stayed outside after the street lights came on. That was exactly the time that the Mongoose Woman would strike. If a child's parent had to call them inside more than once, so help them. As Aziza grew older, she realized it had been more of a tactic to get her to be obedient and non-combative than anything else. Sometimes when they were younger, her older sister, Murda, would run inside and lock the door behind her, while Aziza screamed to be let in. Those times, she swore she saw shadows of the Mongoose Woman on the pavement under the streetlights across from her house. She could have sworn she'd heard her snicker in the wind as Aziza banged on the front doors before her father came down to see what all the commotion was about.

"Zeez, I tekin you home, okay?" She heard a rough voice declare even though the words sounded like they should've been a question. She wondered where it came from, but the sleep that overtook her body didn't allow her to be curious for too much longer.

Aziza jumped out of her bed, screaming as she just roughly managed to escape the embers of the fire that was sweeping across town in her dream. It had encompassed the entire island and she was being swallowed up by it before her eyes had managed to snap open.

“Woah dere, missy. You should lay back down,” She heard Jumani call from the floor of her bedroom.

She was shocked to see him. She couldn't remember the last thing that had happened the night before, nor how she'd gotten home. She looked down at her clothes, realizing she was still dressed in her Village outfit from last night. The downside to having a male best friend was that he couldn't change her clothes when she passed out. Gross, now she would have to scrub her sheets with dettol and baking soda after washing them twice because she didn't even want to think about the amount of germs she'd contracted from the random people she'd brush past in the crowds. He could've at least thrown an oversized shirt over her obviously dirty outfit.

“Why I still deh in dese clothessss, Mani?”

She walked over to the small vanity on her dresser and wrinkled her nose at her appearance. Her hair was lopsided as it had been dug into her pillow from her incessant nightmares.

“Just be grateful I bring yuh home in one piece. Nelly ain even wan you in his car cause he been 'fraid you wuh gon wake up and throw up in the back seat,” Jumani joked.

Just because of that comment, a part of her wished she had. She stared down at Jumani's makeshift bed on the floor. He'd stayed with her enough times to know where they kept all of their fresh linens. A part of her knew he loved her, though, because she couldn't have been paid three thousand dollars to sleep on the floor of any St.Croix house. Regardless of how clean Caribbeans were, nature was nature and critters made their way inside and across the floors. The worst of them all were centipedes. The too-many-leg-having bugs were the bain of Aziza's existence and she couldn't believe Jumani slept on the floor, risking the appearance of centipedes

and spiders, to make sure she was okay. She opened her mouth to thank him for everything, but he cut her off.

“Just mek me some cream ah wheat and ovaltine and dohn worry about it.”

She smiled as she grabbed a brush off of her dresser and tried to make sense of the hair she'd spent an hour last night detangling in the shower. Why did she have to be such a lightweight? They ate their breakfast in silence as Jumani picked out the orange peels out of his bowl of cream of wheat.

“It's just like a orange zest. It adds to the flavor. Ain like I expect you to bite down on some orange peel,” Aziza explained.

She broke a saltine cracker in half and stirred it into the cup of steaming ovaltine in front of her. They heard a beep from outside of the house and Aziza pulled the window's curtain back to see a black pick-up truck outside near the road.

“I got it,” She said as she rushed to meet Luda, the Mauby man.

She tucked a five dollar bill into his blue coat pocket and thanked him for the two jugs of mauby. Mauby was a carbonated non-alcoholic brew that had a tinge of spice to it and with a glass of ice, served as the perfect christmastime drink. Luda was the only man on the island who had the Ritter family recipe that had been passed down through generations. He was the last in his line that was still alive to make the drink and actually took pride in that role. Impatient as they were, neither Aziza nor Jumani could wait until they'd finished their hot ovaltine mugs to pour a healthy glass of mauby.

“So, I gah somewhere I wan tek you today if you down to come,” Jumani said sipping on his glass.

“Wah you had in mind?,” Aziza tipped back onto the angle of her chair’s hindlegs, balancing in midair.

“Das deh ting, it’s a surprise,” He countered, attempting to lean back in his chair as well.

He tipped back too far in his chair, but luckily, he stood up quickly enough before he went crashing to the ground. The chair wasn’t so lucky and it slid under him and hit the ground. Aziza laughed harder than she had over the past several days and stood to clear the table. Jumani had always had access to a special kind of clumsiness because while the chair had toppled to the floor, he and the glass of mauby in his left hand had remained untouched and upright somehow.

An hour of walking later and the two of them stood outside of an abandoned street shop in Frederiksted town. What the island called “town” consisted of several main streets lined with small boutiques, corner stores, restaurants, and souvenir shops. The store that occupied the building they stood in front of had either been a fish shop or an antique store and there was a massive difference between the two, but the worn down building gave no indication of which it had been. Instead of a front door, there was a giant curtain for a doorway and Aziza wondered for the second time that afternoon what this “surprise” must be. She knew Jumani couldn’t have dragged her out of her house fresh off of a hangover to explore an abandoned shop. She would chop his pinky finger off. Jumani caught a glimpse of her face and chuckled.

“Just follow me, mek sure to greet everybody when you walk in,” He smiled.

Aziza slowly followed behind him as he pushed open the long curtain. The pungent smell of vanilla incense attacked Aziza’s nostrils as she took in the room around her.

“Well meh peace, if it ain Jamala daughta,” She heard a honey-like voice exclaim.

## *7 - Fyahbun Dem*

The room was quaint, but highly decorated. There were african statuettes and intricate face carvings lining the earth-green walls. There were lit candles in every corner of the room despite it being midday and the collection of crystals that stood on a cased shelf near the door astounded Aziza. Aziza remembered what Jumani had said and greeted the lady in the room.

“Now, everyone,” Jumani encouraged as he ushered them closer near the woman and two empty seats near a large bookshelf.

“Who else yuh wan me to greet? She deh only woman here,” Aziza whispered to him.

“Incorrect. Buh I know you have a rough time seeing them so no worries. Jus say an acknowledgement to deh room,” The older woman spoke again.

Aziza gave a general greeting to the room and narrowed her eyes at Jumani. He gave her a guilty smile and introduced her to the old woman.

“Ernestine, this is Aziza. Aziza, this is Ernestine. She’s the spiritual healer I told you about,” Jumani explained.

Aziza zeroed in on the woman’s features. She could tell she must have been a hot commodity back in her day. The older woman had strong cheekbones, long eyelashes, full lips, and a medium-sized mole on the apples of her cheek. A very striking woman with a sweet and sugary voice. Aziza wanted to be mad at Jumani for tricking her into coming to see his obeah lady, but the woman didn’t creep her out in any fashion. Quite the opposite actually, she felt taken with her like she knew her in some way.

“Come sit, dearie. We have a lot of work to do,” The woman held the flame of a camping lighter onto the wick of yet another candle, as if the room didn’t already have enough lit ones.

The combination of scents worked well together, but the incense still hovered over all of them. Aziza did like the vanilla scent though as she eased into the chair and the woman began asking her questions. The questions eased into a deep conversation once Ernestine felt Aziza’s apprehension toward the spirit world. Ernestine smiled a knowing smile like that of the cheshire cat.

“It never fails. We get one of you every couple of years.”

Aziza’s eyebrows shot up and she chuckled, “One of me?”

“Yes, you’re connected here,” Ernestine gestured around Aziza’s body, “but not here.” The woman’s hand swept over her head. Aziza knew she was a little stubborn when it came to the recent events she’d experienced, but disconnected was a pretty strong word and it unnerved her.

“Being that disconnected can get you in trouble, mija,” Ernestine tilted her head at Aziza. “How are your dreams?”

Aziza looked down at her hands as she started peeling away at one of her fingernails. How was she supposed to communicate this without sounding deranged or like she was losing it?

“They’re pretty..um.. fiery, I would say.”

Aziza recalled the dream she’d woken from this morning where the island had been encompassed in flames and that for some reason, she had felt that it was her fault. Ernestine’s eyebrows furrowed as she turned toward one of the crystals on her crystal shelf. A neon green one and a blush pink one. She plucked two from the shelf and placed them in front of Aziza. The

woman then pulled some herbs from a nearby drawer, along with a small mortar and pestle. She proceeded to grind the herbs up, distributing half of them to a small tea bag and the other half to a bottle with a thick liquid in it.

Ernestine sat back down and Aziza looked over at Jumani who was standing against the wall. He nodded his head as he encouraged her to continue her conversation with Ernestine.

“So, my dear, you have a connection to a couple of specific spirits. Fritz Sealey is one of them. He doesn’t mean any harm, he just likes to dance and usually will encourage you to get loose, physically, especially if you’ve let some of your inhibitions go. You seem to harbor a lot of tension in your little body. There’s also a very sweet horse that is very attached to you.”

Aziza smiled at that revelation. She and Jumani used to go to the horse races when they were young as their favorite pastime and she was always close to a specific horse named, “Peanut Buttah.” He’d passed after she’d turned eleven, but she’d gotten the privilege to ride and feed him a handful of times. She never felt that the horses at the racetracks were treated properly, so she took advantage of her free time there while her dad placed his bets, to cater to the horses in the way she felt they deserved.

“But the strongest connection you have is with a woman named Bottom Belly. Have you ever heard of her? You done your VI history, right?” Aziza nodded, but she was still focused on the woman mentioning her baby, Peanut Buttah. “Oh, no wonder! You’re a Abramsen on your mudda side!” Ernestine exclaimed as if she’d solved a jigsaw. Aziza stared like a few pieces were still missing. This was the second time the woman had mentioned her mother and it caused Aziza to shift in her seat before she leaned forward.

“You knew my mudda?” Aziza squinted.

“I know she, yes. How young you tink I be, baby girl? Dohn leh the cheekbones fool you,” Ernestine smiled.

“And you seh I related to Bottom Belly like Firebun “Bottom Belly”?” Aziza picked up one of the white crystals that Ernestine placed before her.

“Yes! I was hoping you’d be called to that one. That’s a chrysoprase. It’ll help with your nightmares and offer you some protection. We can’t have the spirits taking control, can we? But, yes, Bottom Belly is your great, great grandmother. She is with you often. You geh dah fire from her,” Ernestine said, mixing the herbs tincture she’d created.

“Have you set anything on fire recently?” The older woman asked abruptly after she seemed satisfied with her mixing. Aziza shifted backward in her seat.

“No, meen set nuttin on fire,” Aziza responded, hating how defensive her tone was. Why would she light something on fire? She didn’t even walk around with a lighter. Although, she knew she didn’t need one to start a fire, that was beside the point. Aziza wouldn’t just go around setting fires. “Just because I’m related to Bottom Belly does mek me ah arsonist? They had a good reason to bun stuff dung,” Aziza asked.

“Yuh tink Frederiksted jus geh bun down with some matches? Ain nuttin you been interested in lighting up? Not even ah piece ah paper?” Ernestine asked, her eyes meeting Jumani’s before they settled back on Aziza.

Aziza’s mind flickered to the thousands of letters she’d found at Peter’s Estate and she shook her head quickly, ridding herself of the crazy thought. Where had that come from? Aziza’s eyes began to water as she felt her nerves spike.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. Tell me more about these fiery dreams you have,” Ernestine said.

She stood and made her way to an electric kettle Aziza hadn't noticed in the room. Great, now the woman was making her tea.

"The dreams dem are recent. Last night was deh only time deh place had actually catch on fire, buh ih wasn't my fault," Aziza explained.

"So, you did light something on fire?" Ernestine eyes lit as one of the candles flickered in the reflection of them.

"It was just a dream, I didn't do anything!" Aziza raised her palms in defense, growing increasingly irritated by the woman's implications.

She didn't want to sit here and explain to a forty-something year old woman that dreams were dreams and reality was r

eality. She appreciated hearing about Peanut Buttah, but she didn't like where this was headed.

"Just a dream until it's not. Your mudda thought the same thing. They thought she was crazy, then Maria came. Jamala Maria Abramsen, where you tink they geh deh name for deh hurricane from? You geh deh fire, but she had deh water. Dreams jus like you and next ting yuh know," Ernestine was stirring a spoon around in a glass of tea she'd steeped, but Aziza was up and on her feet within the next free seconds.

"I have to go. I forgot the daycare wants me to come in and work and extra shift today. Actually, right about now," Aziza pulled her phone from her pocket and looked at the time. It was time to go.

"Okay now. Here, take these with you," Ernestine placed the two crystals, the tea bag of herbs, and the herb tincture into a small paper bag and handed it to Aziza. Aziza didn't meet

Ernestine's eyes. She knew it was bad on all levels to try and lie to an obeah woman, but she couldn't be there for a second longer. Jumani didn't ask any questions as he walked over to Ernestine, handing her a twenty dollar bill and thanking her for her services.

“Tek good care ah she for me, please? Until she find her way back, okay?” Ernestine asked and Jumani nodded as he followed Aziza out of the store. Ernestine swiped her hand lightly across the room and all of the candles in the room ceased their flame.