

Chapter 1

VIMBAI KNEW THAT IT WAS GOING TO BE ONE OF THOSE DAYS the moment she shuffled downstairs, her socking feet blindly finding their way on the carpeted steps. Her eyes still half-shut from sleep but her nose already picking up the oily smell of freshly roasted coffee beans, she smiled just as the raised voice of her mother cut into her mind. Vimbai stopped smiling.

Ever since she was a child, she had not liked these days, when her parents fought first thing in the morning and the rest of the day came out all narrow-eyed and lopsided, devoid of the usual sense of balance and rightness in the world. Not that those were ever serious fights—the normal spousal squabbling, Vimbai supposed; nothing bad, and most families had it far worse. And yet these fights made her feel exposed and vulnerable, betrayed in her sanctuary and given to the mercy of strange hostile elements.

She slipped into the kitchen, her eyes wary now, looking from under the lowered eyelids.

“Don’t squint,” her mother said. “Do you want any breakfast?”

“Just coffee,” Vimbai answered, and momentarily envied her mother’s accent. The words, the familiar English words that melted and mushed in Vimbai’s mouth, came out with

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startling sparkling edges, as if they were just born, unpolished by the world, rough and fresh and solid.

She sidled up to the table—they always ate their meals at the table, and even breakfast was a family occasion, an extra opportunity to either bond or hurt each other's feelings.

Her mother shook her head but poured Vimbai a large steaming cup. "You have to eat breakfast."

Vimbai's father made a sound in the back of his throat, a mild sound that seemed to serve only to remind them that he was also present and perhaps could offer opinions on breakfasts and other matters but was too absorbed in his thoughts to vocalize them.

Vimbai looked out of the window, at the familiar suburban street and the red leaves of maples that grew in this sandy soil through some miracle of gardening and landscaping. "How are you doing, dad?" Vimbai said. "Long day today?"

He nodded. "Double shift," he said. "You?"

Vimbai pursed her lips and blew on the surface of her coffee, wrinkling it like smooth brown silk. "Three classes today."

"You're coming to school with me?" her mother asked.

"Maybe," Vimbai answered. "If you're not working late again."

"You can go to the library," her mother suggested.

"Or I can take my car and drive home." Vimbai tried to keep her voice neutral—when her parents fought first thing in the morning, it was not wise to annoy her mother. If Vimbai was not careful, shit would go down and both her and her

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father would get it—not that they didn’t deserve it, Vimbai admitted to herself. After all, why shouldn’t she get in trouble every now and again?

Mother rose, pushing her chair away with a hair-raising squeak. “Fine. Suit yourself. Carpooling is of course too much trouble and inconvenience. Who cares about global warming anyway?”

“Mom.” Vimbai cringed. “Don’t be like this.”

As Vimbai had grown older, she had realized that the arguments and the problems she had with her mother were not unusual—in fact, she suspected that teenage girls who did not get along with their mothers outnumbered those who did at least three to one. It did not make her feel any better, and she still wished—selfishly, she would be the first to admit—that her mother paid more attention to Vimbai than the news from abroad, or to the Africana studies and who set the agenda there. She wished that she would pay as half as much mind to Vimbai’s problems and worries as she did to the white men trying to hijack her department.

Mother shrugged and left, and Vimbai and her father traded looks.

“What brought that on?” Vimbai said.

Her father shook his head. “Everything, darling. Be nice to her—she’s having a rough time. Her department and all that. Stress.”

“You have stress too.” Vimbai drank her coffee, sizing up her father from the corner of her eye. He was always so much more subdued, so willing to make excuses and make peace and sacrifice, always minimizing his own fatigue and heart-

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break. It's not important, darling. Such a slight man, his eyes so sad and kind. She did not know how to tell him.

"It's all right," he answered. "You get used to it; you get used to everything."

Vimbai shrugged and drank her coffee, considering all the things she never wanted to get used to; at the same time, the habitual guilt stirred—her parents had been through so much, it felt downright selfish for her to complain about anything at all. And yet, if the experience was all that mattered, wasn't hers just as valuable? All she knew was that she had to get out of here, before she became the same as her mother.

Her father was a nurse down at one of the Camden hospitals, and whenever she visited him or picked him up after work, she felt shamed for her sheltered life, reasonably devoid of suffering. This one wasn't a university hospital, and the emergency room always overflowed with gunshot wounds and overdoses, with beatings and burnings and other godawful things. Vimbai did not know how he could stand it, how it was possible to get used to things like that.

"You seem pensive today," her father said. "Hope we didn't upset you."

"Of course not," she said. "I was just thinking . . . am I getting too old to live at home?"

The words just poured out, mushed by habituality. Her parents never spoke like that, all their words considered, even in the heat of an argument. Even when they fought in Shona, even though she understood little of what they said then.

He put down his newspaper with the picture of Barack

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Obama on the page folded over. “Why would you say that? You know we don’t want you living on your own.”

“Just thinking.” Vimbai finished her coffee in a few quick gulps. “No reason. Do you think Obama could really win?”

Her father shook his head. None of them thought that he could—the country is not ready, her mother said. He is black and not really American. He was like them, the unsaid words crowded. They would never accept people like us. We are to remain on the cultural margins of multiple worlds, abandoning one and never entering the other. Even Vimbai felt that though she had lived in New Jersey most of her life—she too was on the margins. What hope was there for her parents then, and how would they cope if she was really to move out? And yet, how could she not?

VIMBAI DECIDED TO SKIP CLASS. IT WAS THAT SORT OF A DAY, and missing a lecture on invertebrate zoology seemed only fitting. What was there to learn that she couldn’t find out by walking along the shore, the dirty hem of foam curling around her bare ankles? She stopped to crouch over a dead horseshoe crab and to stare at it for a while, then to flip it over and count its limp little legs, jointed and pale and slightly obscene. She flipped it back on its belly, as if the dead crab’s dignity needed preserving.

The beach was deserted—just gulls and terns circling overhead, waiting for the tide, just sandpipers endlessly chasing after the retreating waves and then running away from them, just the surf and the sky, the tang of October bursting through the iodine smell of seaweed and the ocean to singe the back

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of Vimbai's throat. Just the wind and the promise of winter, when the beach will be gray and dead, a giant whale flank colonized by silent invisible life under the leaden clouds.

These beaches of the barrier islands lining the eastmost side of the continent like the crook of a mother's elbow had been so good to Vimbai—they nursed her through the first years here, they sustained her through school that had seemed so endless and was now over; they whispered the answer to her when her mother had asked if she considered a college major yet. Marine biology, Vimbai had answered and never lost her temper as her mother lectured that marine biology was not the same as swimming with dolphins or whatever other romantic garbage she thought Vimbai was imagining. Invertebrates, she said, the word that wondrously summed up all the fascinating transparent things that the tide left behind thrashing in tiny pools. I want to study invertebrates. Anything, she wanted to add, but your Africana Studies, anything but that continent you—both of you—carry inside; what was the point in ever leaving if you were going to bring it with you? Instead, she babbled about horseshoe crabs that were declining in number thanks to their use as fishbait and to the pharmaceutical companies who drained their blood to make vaccines.

Oh, the blood draining, the *wazimamoto* and the colonialism; as much as Vimbai resented the Africana Studies, her mind was its own little storehouse of legends and stories and memories not quite her own, she didn't think—but *wazimamoto*. The vampire, the white man who came on a medical truck to steal your blood. She learned the story from her Kenyan babysitter, an old woman who was so dark and

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shrunken she seemed to smolder. And her mother's verbal annotations—Vimbai could never get away from those. And then the books, anything that her mother could find translated, anything African. And yet, Vimbai's alliance was to the horseshoe crabs, the ones who were in real danger of having their blood stolen.

The sand under her feet—bare, her sneakers tied by their shoelaces slung over her shoulder—felt wet and solid, tamped down by the waves. Seaweed and driftwood, the usual refuse of the Atlantic, studded the solid sand surface and Vimbai wandered along, her sharp eyes looking for signs of movement of any critter left behind by the waves. She was skipping class, but let no one say that she did not study.

It was time to return to the car and drive back to school; before the inevitable, Vimbai went for a quick skip across the dunes—the signs and wire fences warned that any such behavior was illegal in the nature preserve, but Vimbai knew that the migratory birds had left already, and the rangers rarely visited the beach in October, so there was no one to witness her impropriety. She ducked under the wire slowly undulating in the wind, and staggered across the warm loose sand that sucked in her feet and stuck to her skin. The thickets of low shrubs and occasional grass patches clung to the sand with admirable, if misguided, determination; the scattering of yellow flowers surprised her—nothing was supposed to be flowering at this time of year, at least in New Jersey. Then her attention snagged on another dead horseshoe crab. It lay among the flowers, belly up, with something bright and white clutched in its stiff little legs.

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It was a piece of paper with a fringed edge, of the kind usually sported by homemade ads. None of the pieces with the phone number on it was torn off, though, and Vimbai crouched over the dead crab and its white piece of paper as if it was an exotic chimera composed of animal and inorganic parts. The paper lay blank side up, and Vimbai tried to guess what was on its other side and how it got here. It could've been blown here by the wind, after being torn from whatever wall or bulletin board it had previously graced; it could've been thrown from a window of a passing car, speeding on the way to or from the town, a sleepy place after August but screaming and bustling in the summer, in contrast to the quiet nature preserve of the beach and its environs.

Vimbai wrested the piece of paper from the clasping pincers and turned it over. The ad was handwritten in a generous loopy scrawl, and it took her a moment to decipher what it said. "Roommate wanted for house in the dunes. Own bedroom and bathroom, separate entrance. Very reasonable rent plus one-third utilities. Any pets except fish." And the phone number.

It was true that Vimbai had thought about moving out—but the thought had remained soft and amorphous, hiding in the long creases of her pillow and only surfacing with any determination in that half-asleep state at nights and mornings. The ad had brought the thought into daylight, and as Vimbai walked back to her Saturn parked in the small paved lot off the only road that bisected the island, she thought, why not? House in the dunes and a very reasonable rent sounded quite appealing, and she had never owned any fish. She decided to

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call as soon as she found herself near a phone with decent reception and away from her parents' superior hearing.

THE THOUGHT OF THE HOUSE IN THE DUNES WAS PUT AWAY AS soon as she reached the campus and stopped by her mother's office to say hello and to check on the latest drama. There was always plenty in the Africana Studies, the most current being her mother's threats to complain and quit after the program appointed a white man as a department chair; the said chair busily set about redefining the agenda, and Vimbai's mother would simply not stand for it on general principle.

She was in her office, looking run down even though it wasn't even lunchtime yet.

"You okay?" Vimbai asked. "Sorry you're not having a good day."

"I'm fine." She looked up from the sheaves of paper strewn on her desk, memos and attendance reports and student essays mixed into a terrifying entangled mess that threatened to consume any mortal's sanity with its sheer size and complexity. "Another meeting, and after that I just have to grade."

"Don't work too hard," Vimbai advised.

Her mother only shrugged in response, not bothering to pretend that she would even consider such foolishness. "And you should probably go to your next class."

Vimbai left the office marveling at her mother's ability to sniff out any shirking of one's responsibilities, no matter how otherwise preoccupied she was. And she had been preoccupied—ever since the new department chair, Dr. Bouchard, was

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appointed, Vimbai's mother seemed to know no rest. Even late at night, she paced the hallway, sometimes muttering to herself in English and Shona; Vimbai could hear her voice through her closed door. All the more reason to move out, Vimbai thought.

She arrived to her class late and slunk to the back, to take sporadic notes of plants' inner workings and to brood. The tubes inside the plants formed neat organized patterns Vimbai enjoyed sketching; it felt almost like doodling rather than studying, and her thoughts flowed along with wavy lines and pooled in quiet oases of shading, neat little areas of cross-hatch pencil strokes.

"This is nice," the girl on Vimbai's left whispered, peering into her notebook.

Vimbai remembered the girl's name—Sarah. They were in a few classes together, and Sarah had irritated Vimbai on several occasions with her pre-med student's obsessive anxiety. "Thanks," Vimbai said with a little stingy smile.

Sarah smiled back, apparently oblivious to Vimbai's disinclination to make friends. It always puzzled Vimbai, this implied certainty some people possessed that their attention could not possibly be an imposition.

Vimbai turned the page and took more thorough notes than usual to indicate that she was not going to participate in any conversations.

Undeterred, Sarah waited for her after class. "Boring, huh?" she said by the way of striking up a chat.

Vimbai shrugged. "I like it. I like anatomy." She took a tentative step away.

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Sarah followed, and there was really no good way of escaping her in the long straight hallways, made all the more desolate by the poisonous shade of their green paint. “You have any more classes today?”

Vimbai nodded. “African American Lit,” she said.

“Oh,” Sarah answered. White kids never knew what to say. “How is it?”

“Why don’t you take it and find out?” Vimbai suggested with more vehemence than she felt.

“I don’t think it’s for me.”

“Why not? You know all there is to know about it?”

Sarah shrugged. “I’m just not interested.”

Of course she wasn’t. Vimbai remembered her mother’s frequent complaints that the white kids never took any classes at the Africana studies, that they always assumed that black equaled special interest. As much as Vimbai hated to agree with her mother, she had to in this case. But she didn’t argue with Sarah—the fatigue was overwhelming, the sense that she had had this conversation and this argument too many times before. “Whatever,” she said. “I have to go.”

It wasn’t true—her next class did not start until an hour later, but she was not in the mood for explaining herself. Another thing her mother complained about—the constant necessity of explaining oneself, of answering questions. “People are just trying to be nice,” Vimbai used to argue when she was much younger. “They’re just showing interest.”

“Showing interest,” her mother had replied, “would be bothering to do some research on their own rather than

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pestering people with questions. Don't you see? Even when they're nice, they're placing a burden on you. Just wait and see how quickly it gets on your nerves."

Vimbai sighed and headed for the library—it was usually empty during the lunchtime, and in the stacks it might be easy to avoid Sarah or any other overly talkative classmates who would be eager to burden her with their interest or socializing.

The library was located in the new building, adjacent to the science labs. It had tall narrow windows running all the way from the high ceiling to the tiled floors, and Vimbai liked the way sunlight striped the stacks, while others hid in the shadows, light and dark interspersed in regular narrow slats. She headed for the shelves draped in soft shadow, meandered between them into the unexplored library depths hiding reference materials—newspapers from the sixties and the seventies, artifacts no intrepid explorer would be likely to sift through—and sat on the floor, her back resting comfortably against the cloth-bound sheaves of papers. The air smelled of dust and air-freshener, mixed with Vimbai's own scent of warm skin and salt, and she curled up in this quiet welcoming ambience.

Unlikely to disturb anyone, she dug through her book bag and found her cell and the crumpled sheet of paper from the dunes. She dialed the number and almost chickened out and hung up when the female voice said "Hello."

"Hello," Vimbai answered, keeping her voice low out of the old library habit. "I'm calling about the house . . . in the dunes."

"We still have a room," the woman said brightly. "The rent

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is two hundred bucks a month, and you will share with myself and Felix—he has the third bedroom. Interested?”

“I’d like to see it first,” Vimbai said.

“Come by tomorrow,” the woman said, and dictated the address.

Vimbai wrote it down and promised to stop by.

That night, she dreamt of sea and whales. The whales floated on the silvery ocean surface like balloons, and water from their blowholes rose and fell like the fountains in Longwood Gardens. The whales sang in surprisingly soft voices, a rhymed children’s song Vimbai could not remember when she woke up; but as the dream retreated, she kept smiling—the whales were a good omen.