THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

BOOK ONE · FREE CHAPTER SAMPLE

By Coco

A mother. A daughter. A visit that should have lasted only a few minutes.

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CHAPTER ONE

The House That Knew Her Name

Zaharahne had made a bracelet for her mother and was having trouble with the last knot.

Three beads had escaped under the passenger seat. She could hear them rolling whenever Cypress turned a corner.

“Ma, don’t turn so fast.”

Cypress glanced in the mirror. “Excuse me?”

“My beads keep moving.”

“I’m driving, baby.”

“I know. But they’re going everywhere.”

“Then maybe you should wait till we park.”

Zaharahne held the unfinished bracelet up to the light. Purple, yellow, purple, yellow, except for a green bead she’d added because it looked lonely in the little plastic compartment.

“It’s almost done.”

“That’s what you said ten minutes ago.”

“This time it is.”

Cypress smiled and kept her eyes on the road.

They were supposed to go skating that afternoon. Zaharahne had been talking about it since breakfast,

mostly because Imani from school had learned to turn around without falling and Zaharahne wanted to see whether she could do it too. She could go straight, provided there was a wall near enough to grab. Turning around was another matter.

First they had to stop at Grandma's.

Grandma had called to say she'd made something for Zaharahne, then refused to describe it. She did that sometimes. Cypress could sew well enough herself, but Grandma's stitching was so neat that people routinely mistook her handmade things for something bought in a store.

The visit was supposed to be short.

It was the Saturday before Zaharahne's seventh birthday, and Cypress had promised to let her choose what they did after lunch. The family celebration would be small this year. Cake at home tomorrow, a few people Cypress trusted, no great production. Zaharahne was more interested in the skating rink than in planning a party.

Cypress turned onto Grandma's block and slowed.

Lenora's burgundy Cadillac was outside. Celeste's Buick was behind it. Across the street sat a dark Lincoln Cypress didn't recognize.

"Oh, come on," she muttered.

Zaharahne looked up. "What?"

"Nothing, baby."

"Is Auntie Celeste here?"

“Looks like it.”

“Can I show her my flower picture?”

“Did you bring it?”

Zaharahne rummaged in her little bag. She checked twice, then sat back.

“I forgot.”

“We’ll show her another day.”

“I wanted her to see the pink part.”

“I know.” Cypress found a space two houses down. “Come here with that bracelet. Let me see what happened.”

Zaharahne handed it forward carefully. Cypress pulled the knot tight, tied it again, and tested it with her thumb.

“There.”

“You didn’t look at the colors, did you?”

“No, ma’am.”

Zaharahne narrowed her eyes. “You did a little.”

“I saw a little yellow. My apologies.”

Zaharahne smiled and held out her hand for the bracelet.

“Nope,” Cypress said. “You said it was for me.”

“I was gonna surprise you.”

“Then surprise me.”

She slipped it onto her wrist. One green bead stood out against the purple and yellow.

“I love it.”

“Even the green?”

“Especially the green.”

Zaharahne looked pleased. Then she remembered the beads on the floor.

“We gotta get the other ones.”

“We will. After I park without taking the tires off.”

• • •

Grandma’s rosebush had survived another summer of her threatening to dig it up.

The flowers were sparse, but the branches still reached over the porch railing. Cypress had learned to avoid the thorns when she was little. She had also learned which porch step gave slightly under her weight and which window Grandma watched from when somebody sat in a car too long before coming inside.

The door opened before they knocked.

“Well, look who finally made it.”

Grandma wore navy slacks and a pale blue sweater. She bent to hug Zaharahne, who went into her arms with the easy certainty of a child who had been held by those same hands since infancy.

“Hey, Grandma.”

“Let me look at you.” Grandma stepped back. “Your mama did your hair?”

“Yes.”

“It’s pretty.”

Zaharahne touched one of her ponytails. “She had to redo this one.”

“Did she?”

“The part was crooked.”

“The part was straight,” Cypress said, climbing the steps. “Somebody kept moving her head.”

Zaharahne laughed.

Grandma kissed Cypress’s cheek.

“You got company,” Cypress said.

“People stopped by.”

“All of them?”

“Don’t start before you get in the door.”

Cypress followed her inside.

The house smelled like baked chicken, furniture polish, and a candle that had been burning too long. The television was playing in the living room, low enough to be background noise. A handbag Cypress didn’t recognize rested on an armchair.

Lenora sat at the dining-room table going through a stack of papers. Josephine Bell occupied Grandma’s favorite seat by the front window. Celeste’s voice carried from the kitchen, where she was apparently telling somebody the right way to cook cabbage.

Lenora looked up.

“Cypress. I thought you fell off the map.”

“I was here last week.”

“Not at my house.”

“That’s a different map.”

Lenora gave her a look, then smiled despite herself.

Josephine rose a few inches from her chair, enough to suggest courtesy without disturbing herself.

“Good afternoon, Cypress.”

“Miss Josephine.”

“And look at Zaharahne.” Josephine extended a hand. “Come speak, sweetheart.”

Zaharahne went over and hugged her. Josephine held her at arm’s length afterward, studying her face.

“How old will you be tomorrow?”

“Seven.”

“Already. And what do you want for your birthday?”

“Skates.”

“You already have skates,” Cypress said.

“Better ones.”

Josephine laughed. “A girl who knows what she wants.”

“She’s a girl whose old skates still fit,” Cypress replied.

Zaharahne wandered off before the discussion could turn into a negotiation.

Cypress noticed Josephine watching her cross the living room. Not an unusual thing, necessarily. People watched children. What bothered Cypress was the particular stillness in Josephine’s expression, as though she were checking something against a description she’d been given.

Then Celeste appeared with a serving spoon and started fussing over who had eaten and who hadn't, and Cypress let the thought pass.

• • •

The gift was a denim jacket, a little roomy in the shoulders, lined in purple fabric and embroidered with small flowers along one pocket.

Zaharahne gasped when Grandma unfolded it.

"You made that?"

"Every stitch."

"Even the flowers?"

"Those too."

She ran a finger over the petals, careful not to snag the thread.

"Try it on," Grandma said.

The sleeves were slightly long. Grandma folded them back once and straightened the collar. Zaharahne turned from side to side, trying to see herself without a mirror.

"You like it?"

She nodded, then threw both arms around Grandma's waist.

Cypress watched the older woman close her eyes as she hugged the girl back.

There was no doubt in Cypress's mind that Grandma loved Zaharahne. She had been sewing for her since Cypress brought her home, pressing little dresses, making quilts, taking pictures of things Zaharahne had

drawn as though they belonged in a museum. When Cypress was exhausted from work, Grandma could be depended upon to arrive with food, help with a hem, or tell Cypress to sit down and stop behaving like she was the only person in the world who knew how to fold laundry.

Loving someone didn't necessarily make every decision easy. Cypress knew that. She and Grandma argued about ordinary things all the time.

Still, she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen that particular expression on the older woman's face. It was sadness, unmistakable, arriving in the middle of a happy moment.

"Grandma? You feeling all right?"

The older woman released Zaharahne.

"I'm fine, baby. Go look at yourself in the hallway mirror, sweetheart."

Zaharahne ran toward it.

Grandma folded the tissue she'd been holding and tucked it beneath the gift bag.

"Something wrong?" Cypress asked.

"Nothing a little rest won't fix."

Cypress let it go. For now.

• • •

They ate in the dining room because Celeste had cooked enough for twelve people and would take it personally if anybody left hungry.

Zaharahne put chicken, macaroni, and cornbread on her plate. The cabbage she bypassed entirely.

Cypress pointed with her fork.

“Vegetable.”

Zaharahne looked at the dish.

She put one spoonful on her plate.

Cypress kept looking.

Another spoonful.

“Thank you.”

Celeste snorted from the end of the table. “You would’ve thought you asked her to pay a bill.”

“She acts like I raised her on candy and noodles.”

“I like apples,” Zaharahne offered.

“Exactly,” Cypress said. “You like apples. Go on and eat.”

Across the room, a photograph of Cynthia stood on the sideboard. Cypress’s mother was wearing a rust-colored dress and smiling at someone beyond the camera.

Zaharahne followed Cypress’s glance.

“That’s your mama.”

“It sure is.”

“She got your eyes.”

Cypress smiled. “Some people say I got hers.”

Zaharahne thought that over as she chewed.

“Did she know how to make jackets?”

“She could sew. Not everything Grandma makes, but plenty.”

“Did she make your clothes?”

“Sometimes.”

“Did you like them?”

“Not every one.”

Zaharahne laughed. “You had to wear them anyway?”

“Oh, yes.”

For a moment Cypress remembered Cynthia standing over an ironing board on a Sunday morning, holding up a dress Cypress had declared ugly. Her mother had looked at her, unimpressed, and told her she could dislike the dress while she was wearing it.

The memory was so immediate Cypress could almost smell the hot iron.

“Was she funny?” Zaharahne asked.

“Very.”

“Like you?”

“Funnier.”

Zaharahne grinned. “That’s a lot.”

Cypress reached over to wipe a little macaroni from the corner of her mouth.

Josephine, sitting two places down, had stopped eating.

Cypress caught her looking at the photograph.

“You remember Mama making all those cakes?” Cypress asked, more to restore the table’s ordinary noise

than for any other reason.

Celeste laughed. “Remember that wedding cake she had to finish overnight because somebody backed out?”

“She had icing bowls all over the kitchen,” Cypress said.

“And told everybody not to breathe near it.”

Cypress smiled.

Lenora joined in with a story about the bride calling three times before noon. For several minutes Cynthia was present at the table as something more than a sad ending: a talented, particular woman who could be generous and impatient in equal measure.

Then Josephine said, “She did so much for people.”

Something in her tone flattened the conversation.

Cypress looked at her.

“She did,” Cypress said. “Sometimes more than she should’ve had to.”

Josephine lowered her eyes to her plate.

No one followed that thread.

• • •

After lunch, Zaharahne settled on the rug with a notebook and a box of crayons.

She drew Grandma’s house with purple shingles and a tree taller than the roof. She added a squirrel on a branch, then erased it because it looked like a mouse. By the time she finished again, the animal resembled neither one, but Zaharahne decided she liked it.

The adults were talking in the dining room. Every so often she heard her mother's laugh or Celeste saying somebody was doing something all wrong.

A woman she didn't know came into the living room.

"Hello there."

Zaharahne looked up.

"Hi."

"What are you making?"

"A picture."

The woman smiled. She wore a cream cardigan over a dark green dress. Her handbag stayed tucked beneath her arm even after she sat down.

"May I see?"

Zaharahne held up the notebook.

"Those are lovely flowers."

"That's a tree."

"Oh." The woman laughed. "Well, it's a lovely tree."

Zaharahne smiled shyly and lowered the paper.

"My name's Evelyn."

"I'm Zaharahne."

"I know. Your family talks about you."

Zaharahne went back to drawing. Grown people were always saying they knew her. Grandma brought visitors through the house, and most of them asked about school before forgetting what she'd told them.

Evelyn watched her work.

“Do you like to sing?”

“Sometimes.”

“What do you sing?”

“Songs.”

Evelyn laughed softly. “Of course. What kind?”

Zaharahne thought about a song Miss Carter had taught the class. She didn’t want to sing it now. It was a school song, and she was busy drawing.

“My hands have been giving me trouble,” Evelyn said.

Zaharahne looked up. The woman’s fingers were swollen around the joints.

“That hurt?”

“Yes, sweetheart.”

“My mama makes cream for hands.”

“Does she?”

Zaharahne nodded. She was proud of the little jars Cypress lined up along the bathroom shelf. Some smelled good. One smelled so strong she’d been forbidden to open it after spilling half on a towel.

Evelyn laid one hand on the cushion between them.

“Sometimes it helps when somebody holds them for a minute.”

Zaharahne glanced at the hand. She wanted the woman to feel better, but she didn’t want to touch her. The thought left her uncomfortable and embarrassed, as though there was a polite answer she ought to know and didn’t.

She looked toward the dining room.

“Maybe my mama knows what kind of cream.”

“I was hoping you might sit with me.”

“I am sitting.”

Evelyn smiled, though she didn’t look amused this time.

“Would you hold my hand?”

Zaharahne stared down at her crayon. She remembered a visit months earlier when Auntie Celeste had asked her to sing for a woman who couldn’t stop crying. Zaharahne had wanted the woman to feel better. After a while she’d wanted to leave, too, and hadn’t known how to say both things at once.

“Can I ask my mama?”

“Your family said it would be all right.”

Zaharahne looked up.

“Which one?”

Evelyn’s smile faltered.

Before she answered, Cypress appeared in the doorway.

“There you are, baby. Get your things together. We’re about to go.”

Zaharahne scrambled to put the crayons back in the box. A blue one rolled beneath the coffee table. She knelt to retrieve it.

Evelyn rose from the sofa.

“You must be Cypress.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Evelyn Whitcomb. Your daughter’s a lovely little girl.”

“Thank you.”

“I was just getting acquainted.”

Cypress looked at the woman’s extended hand and then at Zaharahne gathering her things.

“Did you need something?”

Evelyn tucked her hand away.

“Oh, no. We were only talking.”

Cypress smiled politely. “All right. Come on, sweetheart.”

Zaharahne collected her picture and followed her mother out.

Cypress waited until they reached the hallway before she asked, “What did that lady want?”

Zaharahne thought about it.

“She said her hands hurt.”

“Did she ask you to do anything?”

“Hold them.”

Cypress stopped walking.

“Did you?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Okay.”

Zaharahne looked worried. “Was I supposed to?”

Cypress crouched so they were eye to eye.

“No, baby. You don’t have to hold anybody’s hand because they ask you to.”

Zaharahne nodded.

“Did somebody tell you I said it was okay?”

“She said family did.”

Cypress felt her jaw tighten.

“Thank you for telling me.”

She stood and helped Zaharahne zip her jacket.

“Go put your crayons in your bag. I’m right here.”

• • •

Cypress found Grandma in the kitchen wrapping leftovers.

“Who invited Evelyn?”

Grandma kept folding the foil. “Josephine knows her.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

The older woman looked up.

“What’s wrong?”

“She was asking Zaharahne to hold her hands.”

Grandma’s fingers stopped moving.

“She didn’t tell me she was going to do that.”

“Then what did she tell you?”

“That she wanted to meet her.”

“Why?”

Grandma looked toward the dining room.

Cypress followed the glance.

“Oh, no. Don’t look over there. I’m asking you.”

“Cypress, baby—”

“Grandma.”

Josephine appeared at the kitchen entrance, as if she’d heard her name without anyone using it.

“Is there a problem?”

Cypress turned.

“Apparently we got a difference of opinion about whether somebody needs to ask me before making plans with my daughter.”

Josephine folded her arms. “Evelyn is a family acquaintance. She’s been unwell.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“She only wanted a little comfort.”

“Then somebody needs to find her the kind of help she needs.”

“Nobody was asking Zaharahne to provide treatment.”

Cypress looked at Josephine.

“I didn’t say treatment. You did.”

For a moment the room went quiet except for the refrigerator motor.

Josephine’s expression remained composed. “You’re misunderstanding a harmless visit.”

“Then it shouldn’t be hard for everybody to understand what I’m saying now. Nobody approaches her about helping them feel better without talking to me first.”

Lenora came into the kitchen, saw their faces, and stayed by the doorway.

Josephine gave a small, indulgent smile.

“Your daughter has such a compassionate nature, Cypress. Surely you wouldn’t want to discourage that.”

Cypress felt the old pressure behind her eyes, the peculiar weariness that sometimes arrived in the middle of a family disagreement. For a second she could almost hear herself agreeing that kindness was important, that a few minutes couldn’t hurt, that she ought not make things difficult over nothing.

Then she heard Zaharahne drop her crayon box in the hall.

Blue, green, and red cylinders scattered across the floor.

“Sorry, Ma!”

The everyday sound brought Cypress’s attention back to the room. Her daughter was kneeling on the floor, flustered and trying to gather everything before anyone stepped on it.

Cypress turned toward the doorway.

“It’s okay, baby. I’ll help you.”

Josephine spoke behind her.

“We’re all on the same side here.”

Cypress stopped.

“Then act like it.”

She walked out and helped Zaharahne collect the crayons.

• • •

Grandma followed them onto the porch carrying a bag of food Cypress hadn't requested.

"Take this, baby."

"Grandma, we just ate."

"You can put it up for tomorrow."

Cypress accepted the bag. She'd been fighting about leftovers with the woman since she was old enough to drive.

Grandma looked at Zaharahne in the new jacket.

"Turn around and let me see the back again."

Zaharahne obliged. Grandma smoothed the collar.

"Looks good on you."

"Thank you."

The girl hugged her. Grandma held her close.

Cypress waited until Zaharahne was walking toward the car before she spoke.

"I need you to hear me about Evelyn."

Grandma's face sagged a little.

"I heard you."

"I don't want another surprise like that."

"I wouldn't deliberately put that baby in danger."

Cypress believed she meant it.

“That isn’t the same as telling me what people are asking for.”

Grandma stared at the porch floor.

“Okay,” she said.

Cypress didn’t push the conversation further. Her grandmother was tired, and Zaharahne was already waiting by the car. But the next visit would not happen under the same conditions.

She kissed Grandma’s cheek.

“Love you.”

“Love you too, baby.”

• • •

At the second red light, Zaharahne looked up from the back seat.

“Ma?”

“Yeah?”

“Is the lady gonna be okay?”

Cypress watched the light.

“I hope so.”

“She looked like she might cry.”

Cypress glanced in the mirror. Her daughter’s face was open and troubled, not frightened for herself so much as worried that someone else had been left hurting.

“That’s kind of you to care,” Cypress said. “But her being sick doesn’t make it your job to fix it.”

Zaharahne pulled at the end of one sleeve.

“What if she asked me again?”

“Tell her to talk to me. Or go find an adult you trust. You can always say no.”

“Even if she nice?”

“Even if she’s nice.”

Zaharahne considered that for a while.

Then she asked, “Are we still skating?”

“We’re still skating.”

“Can I get fries?”

“You had a whole dinner at Grandma’s.”

“That was lunch.”

Cypress laughed. “We’ll see.”

At the rink, Zaharahne fell twice while trying to turn around. She laughed the second time, accepted Cypress’s hand, then insisted on trying once more without it. A little girl in bright green skates offered advice. They spent half an hour going around the edge together, one careful push at a time.

Cypress watched from the benches, relieved to have nothing more complicated to think about than whether Zaharahne would remember to bend her knees.

She didn’t manage the turn.

Not today.

She was disappointed until Cypress promised they could come again.

On the way home, she fell asleep with the jacket pulled up beneath her chin. One sleeve had a smear of ketchup

from the fries Cypress had eventually bought her.

Cypress noticed it when she carried her inside.

She made a face at the stain, then smiled. Grandma had put a lot of work into that jacket. She'd made it for a girl who ran, played, spilled food, and might outgrow it before the next winter.

It was supposed to be worn.

• • •

After the company left, Grandma found Josephine standing beside Cynthia's photograph on the dining-room sideboard.

"You staying for something?" Grandma asked.

Josephine glanced toward the front window.

"Cypress has grown suspicious."

"She was upset about Evelyn."

"She misunderstood the visit."

Grandma set the serving dish she'd been carrying onto the table.

"Evelyn asked Zaharahne to use her hands."

Josephine didn't deny it.

"That's not what was arranged with me," Grandma said.

Josephine turned from the window.

"Don't start confusing an introduction with a consultation."

"Then why wasn't Cypress told?"

“She would have objected.”

Grandma stared at her.

For years she’d accepted answers like that as practical observations. Tonight she heard the thing they contained: Cypress’s refusal had been anticipated, so she hadn’t been given the opportunity to make it.

“She had a right to object,” Grandma said.

Josephine studied her.

“Be careful. You’re beginning to sound like Cynthia.”

Grandma looked at the photograph. Her daughter was laughing, her earrings catching the light.

“Maybe I should’ve listened when Cynthia spoke.”

Josephine picked up her handbag.

“After all these years, that’s a strange thing to say.”

The older woman didn’t answer.

Josephine walked toward the front door, then stopped.

“You knew people wanted to meet Zaharahne long before she was born.”

“I knew you said they were concerned about protecting her.”

“And you agreed to help.”

“Under conditions.”

Josephine’s face remained calm.

Grandma could still recall those conditions. She’d insisted on them, had watched Josephine sign the page, and had kept a copy where she believed it would be safe. At the time she’d taken comfort in knowing she had put

something in writing.

She hadn't considered what she'd do if Josephine ignored it.

"She is six years old," Grandma said.

"She won't be six tomorrow."

Grandma looked up sharply.

Josephine was already opening the door.

"I'll call you," she said.

After she left, the house was quiet except for the dishwasher and the low hum of the television.

Grandma took the photograph of Cynthia from the sideboard and wiped a fingerprint from the glass. She thought of the visit, of Zaharahne's arms around her waist, of Cypress asking direct questions she had refused to answer.

She put the photograph back where it belonged.

Then she went upstairs to the sewing room.

There was a scrap of purple lining on the cutting table, left over from Zaharahne's jacket. Grandma picked it up, folded it twice, and set it beside her machine.

She had made that jacket because she loved her great-granddaughter.

She had permitted Evelyn to come because she had not yet found the courage to challenge Josephine.

Both things were true.

Grandma sat down and opened the drawer where she kept old patterns and business papers.

At the very back lay a thin envelope she had promised herself she'd never need to open.

She rested a hand on it.

Downstairs, the telephone began ringing.

Grandma recognized Josephine's number when she checked the handset beside the machine.

She let it ring.

⁂

Zaharahne woke up at six fourteen and tried to make herself go back to sleep.

She got as far as six seventeen.

Then she sat up, pulled the blanket away, and looked at the birthday dress hanging from the closet door. Cypress had ironed it the night before. It was yellow with little white flowers, and Zaharahne had picked out shoes that looked as though somebody had glued stars to them.

She was seven.

That was a whole year older than yesterday.

She slipped into the hallway, past the bathroom, and stopped outside her mother's room. The door was open a crack. She could hear Cypress breathing.

Zaharahne waited.

Then she pushed the door gently.

"Ma?"

No answer.

"Ma."

Cypress opened one eye. "What?"

Zaharahne smiled.

Cypress looked at the clock, then at her daughter.

“Oh, I know you didn’t come in here before the sun got up.”

Zaharahne waited for her to remember.

Cypress gave a dramatic sigh.

“What day is it? Tuesday?”

“No.”

“Christmas?”

“No, Ma.”

“Tax day?”

Zaharahne began giggling.

Cypress sat up and spread her arms.

“Come here, birthday girl.”

Zaharahne climbed into the bed. Cypress hugged her, kissed the top of her head, and wished her a happy seventh birthday without asking for a single favor, demonstration, or promise in return.

For a few minutes they stayed under the blanket making plans.

Breakfast first. Then Zaharahne could open the gift Cypress had wrapped in paper with small silver stars. Denise and Marcus were coming for cake in the afternoon. There would be a video call from a friend who had moved away. Zaharahne wanted to wear the jacket Grandma had made her, at least until it got too warm.

“Can I open the present now?”

“After breakfast.”

“Can breakfast be cereal?”

“On your birthday? That’s what you want?”

Zaharahne nodded.

“Then cereal it is.”

She slid out of bed and ran toward the kitchen.

Cypress lay back for one more moment.

Seven.

She remembered bringing this girl home wrapped in a hospital blanket, so small that the sleeves on the first outfit swallowed both hands. She remembered being afraid to sleep the first night, afraid to trust that morning would come and she would still have her baby beside her.

The fear had eased over time. It hadn’t vanished, exactly, but it no longer governed every hour.

Today she intended to celebrate what was here.

Her phone vibrated on the bedside table.

Lenora.

Cypress turned the screen over.

Today could begin without Lenora.

• • •

Denise arrived carrying a cake box and three balloons, one of which had lost enough helium to hover near her shoulder rather than above her head.

“Don’t nobody say nothing about this balloon,” she announced from the doorway.

Cypress took the box. “What happened?”

“It had a rough ride.”

Marcus followed with paper plates and a grocery bag.

“She kept putting it by the air conditioner in the car,” he said.

Denise turned. “Ain’t nobody ask you to narrate.”

Zaharahne appeared, stared at the drooping balloon, and burst out laughing.

“I like that one,” she said.

Denise pointed at her. “See? Somebody in this house has taste.”

They set everything on the kitchen table. The cake was simple, pink icing over white, with seven candles arranged in a circle. Cypress had made dinner earlier, and Denise brought extra food because, as she put it, nobody ever knew how many people Marcus could eat for.

Zaharahne opened her present before lunch. New roller skates. Purple wheels, adjustable sizing, and buckles she practiced fastening three times before Cypress reminded her not to skate across the kitchen tile.

“Not even a little?”

“Especially not a little.”

Marcus leaned against the doorway. “She could make it from the fridge to the couch.”

Cypress looked at him. “You can make it outside.”

He laughed and went to get the balloons.

By the time the candles were lit, Zaharahne's hair was a little loose around the edges and there was frosting on her sleeve. She made a wish silently, squeezed her eyes shut, and blew. One candle stayed burning. Marcus pretended it meant her wish hadn't gone through.

"Leave her alone," Denise said, relighting nothing. "The candle was just stubborn."

Zaharahne blew again. Everybody cheered.

Cypress took a picture of her daughter laughing with a gap between her front teeth and icing along one finger. Later, that would be the photograph she kept coming back to.

• • •

After Denise and Marcus left, Zaharahne sat with her new skates beside the couch, trying to figure out the instruction card. Cypress gathered paper plates and carried the cake into the refrigerator.

Her phone had eight missed calls.

Four from Lenora. Two from Celeste. One from Josephine. One from Grandma.

She called Grandma first.

"Hey."

"Happy birthday to that baby."

"Thank you."

"Can I speak to her?"

Cypress watched Zaharahne struggle with a buckle. She was ready to call her over, then remembered

yesterday's conversation on the porch. Grandma had said she understood Cypress's concerns. Whether she did was still uncertain.

"Sure," Cypress said. "But before I put her on, I need us to be clear about something."

The older woman waited.

"No unexpected visitors asking her for help. No passing her information around. When you invite us over, I need to know who's there and why."

"I understand."

"I'm serious, Grandma."

"I know you are, baby."

Cypress held the telephone a moment longer, then called Zaharahne to the kitchen.

"Grandma wants to wish you happy birthday."

Zaharahne smiled and took the phone.

She talked about her new skates, the cake, and the balloon that wouldn't float. Grandma laughed at the balloon. She asked whether the jacket fit and said she hoped Zaharahne had a good day. She didn't ask her to sing, touch anybody, or show her anything special.

It was an ordinary grandmother's call.

Cypress wanted to be able to enjoy that.

Afterward she sent Grandma a photograph from the cake. She didn't send the address of the skating rink or the list of Zaharahne's school activities. A boundary wasn't the same as a punishment, and affection didn't require handing over every detail.

Then she called Lenora.

“Finally,” her aunt answered.

“Happy Sunday to you too.”

“Have you been ignoring my calls?”

“I’ve been celebrating my daughter’s birthday.”

“Well, you could’ve answered.”

“I was busy.”

Lenora inhaled sharply. “Your grandma was very upset after y’all left yesterday.”

Cypress leaned against the counter.

“She told you that?”

“I could hear it in her voice.”

“Then maybe ask her what happened before you decide how I ought to feel about it.”

“Josephine said Evelyn only wanted to meet Zaharahne.”

“Evelyn asked my daughter to hold her hands because she wasn’t feeling well.”

“So?”

“So no.”

“Cypress, you can’t teach a child to be selfish.”

Cypress looked at the birthday cake inside the refrigerator. There were five pieces left; by tomorrow there would be three, because she’d promised Denise leftovers.

“She helped you set tables at the church lunch last month,” Cypress said. “She shares her things. She cares when somebody’s upset. But none of that makes her responsible for fixing grown people.”

Lenora was silent.

“And don’t call me to tell me my grandmother’s crying when you’re really calling about a woman I don’t know.”

“You always got something to say.”

“About my daughter? Yes.”

Lenora hung up.

Cypress set the phone down, annoyed but unsurprised. Then Zaharahne called from the living room.

“Ma! I got it!”

She held up one skate, buckle fastened neatly.

Cypress walked over and knelt beside her.

“Look at you.”

“I did it myself.”

“You sure did.”

They practiced the other buckle together.

• • •

Later, while Zaharahne watched a movie, Cypress took her mother’s photograph box from the closet.

It had become a ritual she hadn’t intended: open the box, look at one or two things, close it when the weight of remembering became too much. Most days she was glad she’d kept everything. Other days she wished some of the

objects didn’t seem to pull time backward so easily.

She found a photograph from Cynthia’s salon. Her mother stood beside a chair, smiling as she worked on a woman’s hair. Cypress remembered the room. The wash station by the back wall. The front desk where someone always kept peppermints in a glass bowl. The stack of magazines so old that women argued about which celebrity couples were still together.

She remembered Cynthia bringing home folders of papers. Notebooks of appointments. Receipts with small figures written in the margins.

Near the bottom of the box, beneath some cards, Cypress found a beauty supply receipt she’d seen before but hadn’t examined closely. On the back Cynthia had written four words:

Ask why they came.

The words were ordinary enough to mean almost anything.

She read the date. It fell during the period when Cynthia’s work had begun to change, when clients Cypress knew stopped visiting and unfamiliar people sometimes arrived at the house asking whether Cynthia was available.

Cypress placed the receipt beside the photograph.

What had her mother been trying to ask?

She remembered Cynthia once telling a relative, “If you’re bringing somebody, tell me what they need first.”

At the time Cypress had thought she was upset about last-minute customers.

Maybe she had been.

Cypress wasn’t going to turn every half-remembered argument into evidence of something sinister. But the questions were there, and she wanted to understand them.

She took out a fresh notebook and wrote down the dates. On the next page she made two columns, one for things she knew firsthand and one for things she needed to verify.

She wrote her mother’s name at the top.

Cynthia.

Not patient. Not victim. Not troubled woman.

Cynthia.

Her mother had been a whole person before illness narrowed her life and before other people began describing that narrowing as if it explained everything about her.

Cypress stared at the name a while.

Then she picked up the phone and called Denise.

“Girl, you just left,” Denise said.

“I know. You remember that salon Mama worked at?”

“Of course.”

“Do you remember who worked the front desk?”

“Which year?”

Cypress smiled despite herself. “That’s a good question.”

Denise began naming people. Cypress wrote down the names she recognized and marked the others for later.

Then Denise said, “What’s going on?”

Cypress looked toward the living room, where Zaharahne was asleep at the end of the movie, one hand resting on the box containing her new skates.

“I’m realizing I never asked Mama enough about her work,” Cypress said.

“You were a kid.”

“I know. But I’m grown now, and everybody talks like her life ended the day she stopped going to the salon.”

Denise was quiet.

“I’m not trying to prove anything,” Cypress continued. “I just want to know what happened before she got so sick.”

“Then start with somebody who worked beside her,” Denise said. “Not somebody who can tell you what they heard at a family dinner.”

That made sense.

Cypress wrote down one more name.

Gloria Bennett.

• • •

Across town, Celeste was washing wineglasses when Josephine called.

“Did Evelyn get in touch with you?” Josephine asked.

“No.”

“She says Cypress made her feel unwelcome.”

“She wasn’t exactly invited by Cypress.”

Josephine let the remark pass.

“Things would’ve been easier if somebody had prepared the girl.”

Celeste dried her hands.

“She’s seven today.”

“I’m aware.”

Celeste looked toward the clock. She’d seen Zaharahne at enough family gatherings to know she loved to draw, that she wore her shoes on the wrong feet when she hurried, and that she sometimes hid behind Cypress when strangers asked too many questions. Celeste also remembered other afternoons, when adults had wanted the girl to sing to them or sit beside them. She’d participated in those arrangements. At the time she’d told herself it was harmless.

One particular visit had never sat right with her.

A woman had cried almost the entire time Zaharahne sang. Then, without warning, she’d stopped. She’d looked at the little girl and asked who had sent her.

Celeste remembered feeling embarrassed, as if she’d brought the wrong guest to a party.

Afterward the woman had said, very quietly, “That wasn’t what I came here for.”

Celeste had repeated the words to Josephine and been told not to concern herself.

Now she brought them up again.

“Remember that woman I took Zaharahne to see? The one who started apologizing?”

Josephine’s tone cooled.

“What about her?”

“I never understood what she meant.”

“Then there’s no reason to discuss it.”

Celeste looked at the glass in her hand.

“That isn’t an answer.”

Josephine was quiet for a moment.

“Since when do you need an explanation for every arrangement?”

Celeste set the glass down.

“Since Cypress started asking why we were arranging them.”

There was a long silence.

Then Josephine said, “Don’t let her turn a birthday weekend into a family war.”

The call ended.

Celeste stared at the phone.

She hadn’t asked about the birthday.

She’d asked about the woman.

Those were not the same thing.

• • •

Before bed, Cypress carried Zaharahne's new skates into the hallway and put them beside the shoes. She washed the frosting off the little girl's sleeve, gathered the discarded wrapping paper, and rescued a paper crown from beneath the couch.

Zaharahne had fallen asleep in her birthday dress. Cypress helped her into pajamas without waking her fully, then sat beside the bed for a moment.

"Did you have a good day?" she whispered.

Zaharahne nodded with her eyes closed.

"Best birthday?"

Another sleepy nod.

Cypress smiled and pulled up the blanket.

There had been a time when she wasn't sure she'd ever celebrate a child's seventh birthday. That knowledge lived inside her, though she didn't bring it into the room each time she looked at Zaharahne.

Tonight there were skates by the door, leftover cake in the refrigerator, and seven candles cooling in the trash.

Cypress kissed her daughter's forehead.

Then she went to the kitchen and opened the notebook again.

Tomorrow she would call Gloria.

Tonight she wrote one line beneath her mother's name:

Find out who she was before everybody started telling the story for her.

She closed the notebook and went to bed.

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