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TIFFANY D. JACKSON



BLOOD
IN THE WATER

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IN
THE WATER



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BLOOD
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FOR JESSICA HARRIS-MERRIDA



PROLOGUE

I fall and fall deeper into the dark bottomless ice-cold ocean. Suddenly, I come to an abrupt stop and my body starts floating back to the surface. I flap my arms, kick my legs, and pop up with a gasping breath, the crisp night air hitting my throat. I slap the water, looking for anything to hold on to.

Through my blurry vision, I see the rocks jutting out under the bridge. I just have to swim and grab hold of one. I kick my legs wildly and try to grip the water as if it's a surface I can crawl across.

Don't splash too much. Sharks attack at night, I can't help but think.

Swim, I keep telling myself. You can do it.

But the water is strong, the current latching on to my waist. I can barely keep afloat. My clothes feel heavy, weighing me back down. I cough up salty water, staying focused on the rocks, but they look too far away.

“Help!” I cry out, wondering if anyone can hear me, wondering if the murderer is watching me sink to the bottom.



CHAPTER
— (cat silhouette) —
ONE

Some calls are so important that you can only take them in your room, on your bed, feet propped up on the window ledge. Because that's where the best reception is, and you can't afford to lose a single second to a signal drop.

"You all packed up and ready to go?" Dad asks.

I press Mom's cell phone to my ear. It can be so hard to hear Dad's voice over the other voices shouting behind him. All those men in there, trying to call their families. Girls

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like me, gripping the phone tight like a life preserver, trying to feel their dad's love through the Inmate Calling Service.

"Yeah," I say with a sigh. "Mom is letting me take her new duffel bag."

"She wants you to make a good impression. Okay, twelve times twelve?"

"Don't see why," I grumble. "And it's one forty-four. Come on, Dad, be for real! School ended two weeks ago."

"Martha's Vineyard is supposed to be *the* place that rich Black folks go. This'll be good for you! Get you out the house. Twenty times thirteen?"

I clutch the phone, nervous about accidentally hanging up. One slip of the finger and the call will be lost and then . . . silence for a whole day and this is my last chance to talk to him till I don't know when.

"Uhhh . . . two hundred and sixty? And what's wrong with our house?" Well, our apartment, on the third floor of a Brooklyn brownstone, if you want to be specific, which I always do.

"Nothing, baby," Dad laughs. "But summertime is supposed to be for adventures. And you've seen all you can on

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Macon Street. Okay, now what's one fifty-seven times—"

"You have five minutes remaining!"

The robotic lady's voice is such a painful reminder of why we're having this conversation on the phone, and not in person. Dad won't be in person again for a minimum of seven to ten years.

Dad is silent for a moment. Maybe he's thinking about it too, all the years he has left in there. Does he think about it as much as I do?

"Um," I mumble, gripping the cell phone tighter, wishing I could climb right through it. "You talk to your lawyer lately?"

"Kaylani, what did I tell you? Don't worry about all that. Your only job is to be a kid. Something you haven't been doing much of lately. That's why this trip is gonna be good for you."

I groan, flopping on my bed, my Nintendo Switch nearly falling off before I save it. Close call! If the screen breaks, Mom won't buy me another one. I don't think she can afford it.

"But why I gotta go when I don't wanna? I'm cool right

here! It'll probably be all hot out there. And you know I hate the beach."

Dad laughs. "Who hates the beach?"

"Me! 'Cause sand gets in everything. I'll be picking sand out of my sneakers till Christmas."

"Lani, why you coming up with all these wack excuses? This ain't like you. This ain't like us. We don't back down, do—"

"You have two minutes remaining!"

My hand starts to shake as I check the clock. Dad is only allowed fifteen minutes a day and it's already been thirteen. Not enough time. It's never enough time.

"Well," I start, rolling my eyes to keep from tearing up. "What if they don't like me 'cause . . . you know?"

Daddy goes silent and I wish I could see his face. I didn't want to tell him how I've pretty much lost all my friends after his trial. Or how I really don't want new friends because it's hard to explain where he is and why. But I have a feeling Mom told him what's been going on. It's why they've been so pressed about me going on this trip to visit Grandma's bougie church friend.

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Daddy clears his throat. “Lani, I know things have been rough. Tough times don’t last, tough people do, and we’re gonna get through this. Can’t promise if they gonna like you or not, but what’s there not to like? You funny, smart, pretty like your moms, and you got a good heart. Just promise me you’ll be yourself. No switching up. Keep it real and keep it honest.”

“Okay, Dad. I promise.”

Dad sniffs again and I hear some mumbling in the background.

This is always the worst part, the hanging up. The unknown happening on the other end of the line. He’s not here to play Minecraft or test my math skills. He’s somewhere far off, somewhere he don’t belong and don’t want me to visit. So instead, he calls every day, four o’clock, right after school. But calls aren’t enough. It’s like eating a big fat cheeseburger but you’re still hungry for more.

Today, he’s calling in the morning, bright and early. Because I’m about to leave for that trip that’ll take me even farther away from him than I already feel.

“Okay, kid, you’re burning up all my minutes again,”

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he says with a laugh. "Talk to you later, baby."

"Wait!" I beg, trying to keep my voice from sounding like I'm going to cry, which I'm always close to doing before he hangs up. "Did Mom give you Mrs. Watson's phone number? Do you know what time you'll call when I'm there? I want to be near the phone when you do."

Dad hesitates for moment. "Um, yeah. But you know, I probably won't be able to talk to you every day."

"What? Why not?"

"Well . . . calls are hard to make, baby."

That's an excuse. Dad ain't the best liar. Which makes him being in prison so extra stupid 'cause I know he didn't do anything wrong. I just know it. But I don't say anything. 'Cause calling him out when he's already down and out isn't a good look.

"Just do me a favor," Dad says. "Be real nice to the Watsons for me. Before . . . everything happened . . . I was trying to get some of their tax affairs in order but their paperwork was such a mess. They getting old and confused but they're real nice people. Been good to me and Grandma. Even now."

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Grandma has known the Watsons since she and Grandpa first moved to New York from Florida in the 1950s. Mr. Watson was a pastor who also worked on the stock exchange, Mrs. Watson a secretary. With no job and nothing but time on his hands, my super-religious grandpa offered to build Mr. Watson's church for free.

"Your grandpa knew his way around a hammer and nails," Grandma would say.

The Watsons never forgot the favor. When Grandpa died, Mrs. Watson gave my dad money to go to private school, then college, and Mr. Watson referred him to his job at Mercer Hedge Fund.

That is, his job before it all blew up.

Few weeks ago, Mrs. Watson asked Grandma if I would join them at their home on Martha's Vineyard. I don't want to go. But I also don't want to disappoint Dad. He's already been through so much. So I suck it up and tell him what he wants to hear.

"Okay, Dad," I say. "I promise. I'll be good. I love you."

"Love you too, sweetheart. Don't forget—stay sharp, eyes open."

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The line goes dead with a click, and my heart that had ballooned at the sound of his voice . . . deflates and flattens.

There's never enough time.

I tip my chin up and walk into the living room, where Mom is stuffing the last of my T-shirts into a duffel bag. J-Roc's album plays out of the speaker on the bookshelf. Mom has been listening to J-Roc a lot since Dad's been gone. Makes it feel like Dad's still here with us. Like he's just in the kitchen, washing dishes as always or helping her fold laundry.

At seven a.m. that morning, Mom had walked in with a cup of coffee and started packing. Still dressed in her night-shift nurse uniform, she gives me a bright smile.

"All right, Kay-Kay. I think you're all set!" she says, the zipper zinging through the air. "Mr. Watson will be here in fifteen minutes to pick you up. He says it's a four-hour drive to the ferry, so you better make yourself a PB&J sandwich and grab some juice for the road."

I stand beside her with the phone in my hand, ignoring the bag by my feet.

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“Dad says he’s not going to call when I’m in Martha’s Vineyard!”

“Mmm. Oh,” she says, turning away, her voice going a touch high. Something that happens when she’s nervous. “Well, that’s okay. You’ll be too busy to be on the phone with him. You’ll be swimming, eating ice cream, fishing, and riding bikes in the sun! Oh! Reminds me, you need some leave-in spray. Can’t let your braids get all ashy while you’re gone.”

She books it to the bathroom, and I follow to her favorite room in our house. Mom is always good about appearance. Nails always short but pink, brown face always moisturized, short black bob always silk-pressed and swaying while she walks. I barely like to comb my hair and if ash wasn’t an issue on my dark skin, I wouldn’t bother with lotion at all.

“But,” I start, trying to figure out how to convince her this isn’t a good idea, “if Dad and I don’t talk every day, who will he talk to? You’ll be at work. Won’t he get lonely?”

Mom drops a jar of shea butter into a Ziploc bag and eyes me in the mirror. “Uhhhh, you know he was my husband first, right?”

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I cross my arms. “So!”

Mom laughs, kissing my forehead. “Kay-Kay, relax. I’ll make time for the man. I promise! Did you pack up your book bag? You got your summer reading, right?”

Questions are always a distraction. Whenever things were bad with Dad’s trial, Mom would hit me with the off-topic third-degree: *Did you clean your brush? Did you turn in that extra homework assignment? Did you—*

“Did you talk to the lawyer?” I ask. “Tell him what I said? About the discovery stuff.”

Mom groans. “Didn’t I tell you to stop asking about that?” she snaps.

I step back, trying to keep the hurt off my face.

Mom closes her eyes and takes a deep breath before pinching the bridge of her nose.

“I’m sorry, baby girl. I didn’t mean that. Maybe . . . well, I guess I’m a little nervous. Letting you go on your first big trip without me. Then being in this place all . . . alone . . . for the first time. It’s just a little much.”

I rush into the cramped bathroom and bury my face into her side, wrapping my arms around her, trying to squeeze

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her just as tight as Dad would. She squeezes me back with a chuckle.

That lawyer hasn't been helping and it shows. From what I can tell, all he does is take Mom's money, but he doesn't provide many answers to our questions. He's supposed to be submitting something called an appeal. It's when after a person is found guilty, you ask a higher court to review the decision and change it. I learned that and then some at the mock trial workshop for kids that I took at the library last month. Now I know what a bunch of stuff Mom and the lawyer are talking about means.

There's a pre-law camp that starts in August. It's only for kids ages fourteen and up, but the teacher said that if I pass the entry test, I can take the course. And I'm going to. I'll learn what I need to help our lawyer and get us one step closer to freeing Dad. This summer, I plan to study. So, really, there's no time to waste on some silly vacation.

I look up at Mom, hopeful. She doesn't know about the workshop I took. She thinks I've been doing arts and crafts. She doesn't know about my plan. I have to be strategic.

"Maybe I should stick around," I offer. "I could get a job!

Help out at Ms. Merrion's day care. That could pay for Dad's prepaid calls, right?"

Calls are eighteen cents per minute. It can add up. And I see Mom working double shifts, trying to manage the bills and lawyer fees. It's a lot to juggle. So, really, I'd be better off here, where I can be useful.

But Mom shakes her head with a sniff, giving my shoulder two fresh squeezes, then walks out the bathroom.

"Out of the question, Kay-Kay. You are in need of some FUN!"

"Mom! I—"

"Kaylani McKinnon." The use of my full name makes me stand straighter. "A change of scenery will be good for you. And your father agrees. It'll just be a few weeks."

I dig my sneaker into the floor.

"Four weeks with people I don't know," I grumble.

She crosses her arms. "You've met London before. You used to play together."

"Yeah, but I haven't seen her since I was five!"

Mom waves me off. "So! Girls your age got plenty in common."

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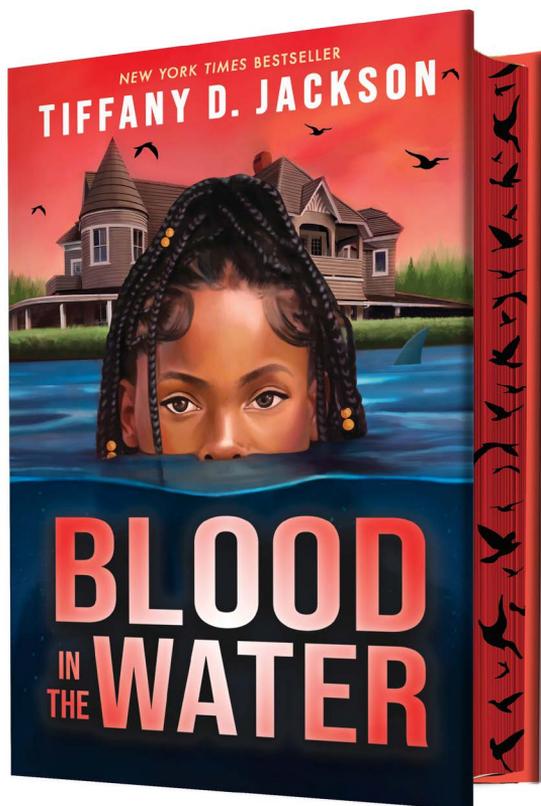
I doubt that. I have no idea what it's like going to some uptight Connecticut private school, and London Watson definitely doesn't know nothing about Brooklyn public schools. We live on two different planets. Nah, solar systems.

This is going to be a nightmare.

"Remember, Kay. This. Is. For. Fun," Mom says. "No work, just play. Okay?"

"Yes," I agree. And since #operationFREEDAD isn't work to me at all, I'm not lying.

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