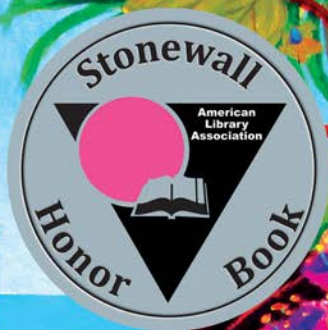




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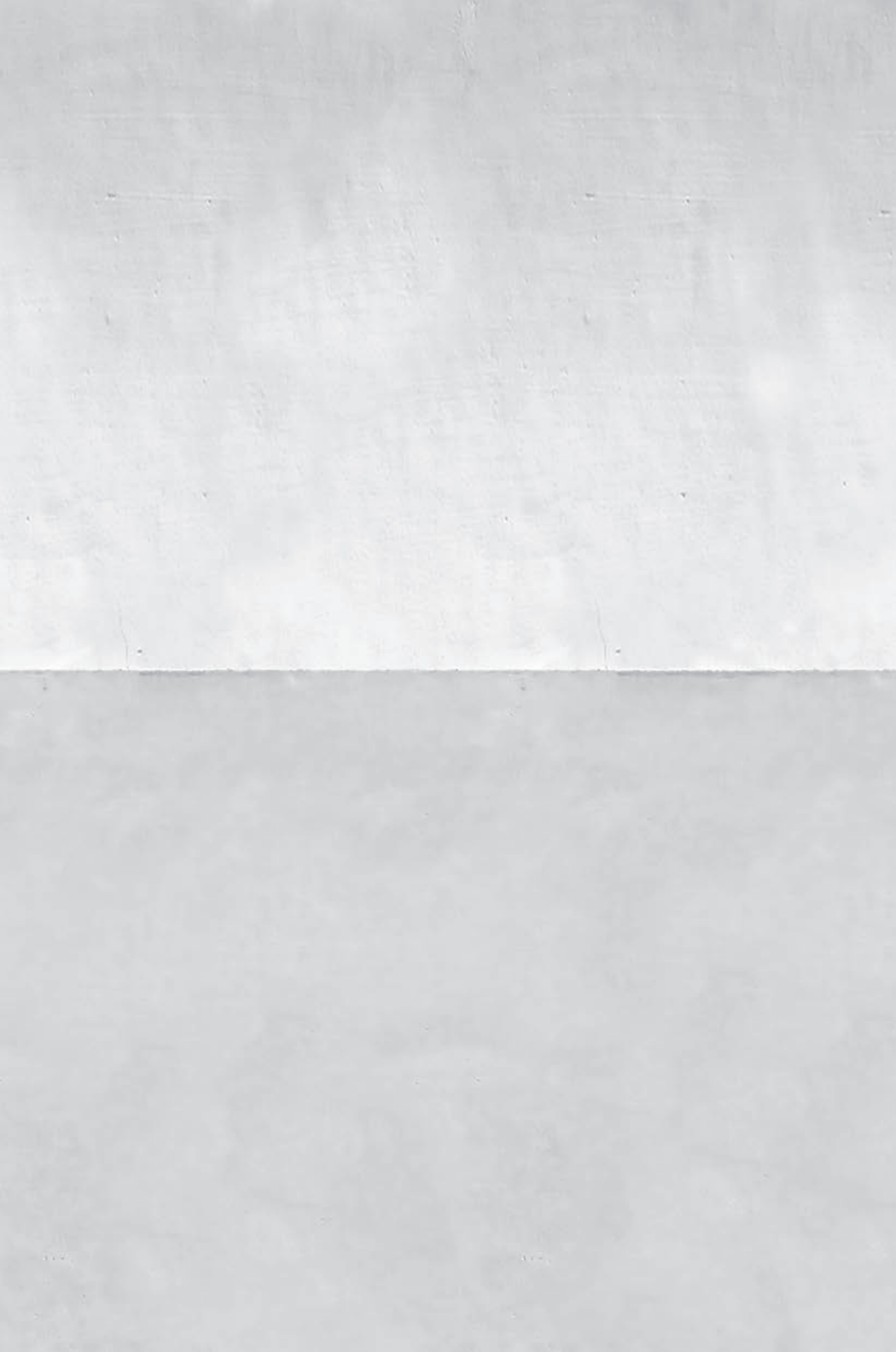
# HURRICANE CHILD


KHERYN CALLENDER



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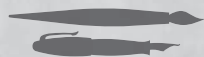
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Lyrics from BLACKBIRD

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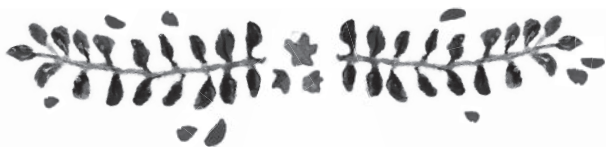
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*For my mother and my father,  
and the U.S. Virgin Islands*

THE SPIRITS OF THIS WORLD,  
THEY DON'T STAY DEAD FOR LONG.





# CHAPTER

# 1

My ma's voice is rough and low. When she speaks to strangers on the telephone, they call her "sir." I guess it must be surprising to some people, the way her voice sounds, because she's so beautiful—just about the prettiest woman you've ever seen—but I think it suits her just fine. I love the way her rough voice vibrates through the air like a beat on a drum. She sings around the house. Under her breath, since people say her voice is so ugly all the time.

*Why you wanna fly, Blackbird?*

That's the song that's stuck in my head now.

*You ain't ever gonna fly.*

\*

My dad's blue boat is flipped upside down in the backyard, which isn't really a yard but a grove of dead



trees and frogs that won't shut up at night, and the mangrove is just close enough to the water so when it's time to go, I can get out of here with a quickness that will surely inspire the speed of light. My dad hasn't so much as looked at that boat in exactly one year and three months, which is the time that our lives revolve around: one year and three months ago.

The boat's ready, and I'm ready—more ready than ever to get off this dumb rock—but I can't leave yet, because I don't know where to go. But once I do, I'll leave that second without even a good-bye. So I turn my back on my father's boat and walk through the dead mangrove, brown water smelling like something besides the trees died, mosquitoes so thick in the air they might as well be puffs of smoke, dead palms from coconut trees covering the ground like hairy carcasses. I get to the clearing, to the white road covered with dust and gravel and designs of tire marks, to my dad's house that's right there on the edge of the sea, waiting patiently for the day a wave will come and wash it away.

When I was really little—before I started going to school, when I could barely walk without holding my

ma's hand—my mom would leave Water Island whenever she needed to go to Saint Thomas for groceries and for church, and she always took me with her. The two of us went on a speedboat owned by Mister Lochana. There was a ferry on the other side of Water Island that could take us to Saint Thomas for ten dollars, but Mister Lochana only charged us five. He was an Indian man that'd come all the way from Tobago, though everyone thought he'd come from Trinidad and called him Mister Trini. I don't know how Mister Lochana felt about that, but I would've corrected each and every single one of them. When I told him so, he laughed.

“To be a child and to be passionate, eh?” he said to my mom.

I asked him, “Does that mean adults aren't passionate about anything?”

My ma told me to hush and sit quiet—I was too little to be running my mouth.

I liked that it was just the three of us, and I liked to look over the side of the speedboat too. I could see the striped yellow and red paint from the boat's side reflected in the clear water, could see the pink coral and stingray,

and one day, there was even a fish as big as me. Mister Lochana said it was a nurse shark, and my mom grabbed me and held me so tight I couldn't breathe, even though Mister Lochana promised us nurse sharks don't bite.

One Sunday morning, a wave bumped Mister Lochana's boat high into the air and when it landed again, I fell straight into the water. Since it was Sunday morning, I was wearing a church dress heavy with lace and fake pearls. I fell faster than an anchor, and after I was pulled out again and dragged onto Saint Thomas's concrete, I thought about the bubbles that were bigger than my mom's head, the smoky light that made it hard to see if another nurse shark was coming, the coral that scratched my knees, the woman that was standing on the ocean floor. She was black, blacker than black, blacker than even me. Rough hands yanked me out of the water and hit my chest over and over again until I could breathe.

"You were under there for over a minute, child," Mister Lochana said when I'd opened my eyes. "What was it like?"

All I told him was that the water was deeper than I thought it'd be, and he laughed, though my mom didn't

think it was funny. She told Mister Lochana that she wouldn't be using his services anymore, but we ended up on his speedboat again the next week because the ferry to Saint Thomas was too expensive.

\*

My dad and I stay in the same house by ourselves. Neither of us want to leave, in case my mom comes back to find the place empty. The outside of the house is painted blue, and the paint gets big bubbles whenever it rains so that I can pick and pick and pick at them until they burst and brown water splashes all down my arm, and there's a pretty little garden with yellow flowers that my mom used to love, but after she left, the flowers have been slowly dying, no matter how much I water them. The house is nice to look at from the ocean too. I used to look at it from my dad's little blue boat, same one I plan on stealing to find my mother. I don't like the ocean too much after I fell out of Mister Lochana's speedboat, but with my dad, I always feel safe. He'd take me in his boat so I could see the fishes swimming in the sea. We had to be careful in that boat, though, because sometimes bigger

boats carrying tourists would zoom by and almost hit us like a speedboat hitting a manatee.

One year and three months ago, a little while after my mom left, my dad shook me awake and looked at me with such a smile that I thought Jesus Christ himself must've been standing on our doorstep—or that my mom had come back home.

“Caroline,” my dad said. “Wake up, Caroline. There’s something you need to see.”

He picked me up even though by then I was already eleven and could walk just fine. He took me outside. From his arms I could see the glowing lights. I was scared at first, because by then I’d learned in school about how slaves were sometimes dumped off slave ships before they could even make it to the island. I thought the lights were the ghosts of those slaves coming for me because they were jealous that I’d been born free.

My dad wasn’t scared, though. He said they weren’t slaves at all but were lost jellyfish—lost, because jellyfish never came to Water Island to glow like that. He put me in his small boat and we drifted out onto the water, waves making us go up and down, and all around us those lights

glowed, and it was like the world got confused and turned upside down, and we were floating on the stars, and above our heads were the jellyfish and the sea.

“Almost as pretty as heaven,” my dad said. I agreed until I put my hand in the water and got stung so bad I had a rash for days.

\*

My dad leaves home three hours before I wake up so he can get to work—that’s what he tells me, anyway—so instead of him rowing me across the strip of sea, he takes the ferry by himself, and every morning, I take Mister Lochana’s speedboat to the Saint Thomas waterfront.

Sun shines hot and yellow and makes my shirt uniform sticky with sweat. I see the things no one else sees. A woman is standing behind a tree in the shade, watching me, but when I turn my head to say good morning, she’s gone again—nothing but the sunshine and baby green leaves swaying in the breeze.

Safari taxis don’t like to stop for locals, and the ones that stop for locals don’t like to stop for children, so I have to run to catch up with a taxi and jump on just as it slows

down for a red traffic light swinging over the street. A woman with big breasts sucks her teeth when I climb over her to squeeze into a little spot without saying excuse me.

It's hot in the safari taxi. The seats are sweaty, and there's no space to breathe, so people stick their heads out the windows. I'm afraid that those heads will get knocked off by trucks in the opposite lanes. The taxi passes by the marketplace, which smells like cooking fish and meat pies, past the baseball fields where children skipping school in their uniforms chase each other and dig through the dirt for soldier crabs. There're the restaurants that smell like the salted stew beef and boiled plantain my mom liked so much. We'd get a plate every Sunday after church, and I always looked forward to the passion fruit juice, so sweet that bees would fly all around me. After she left, I asked my dad if he'd take me to church, and I pretended it was because he'd raised me to be a good Christian girl, but it was really so I could get that juice. He told me we would go the following week, but we haven't gone once since.

Stalls under blue tarp sell fruit and summer dresses and ice-cold rum, and trucks and buses and chickens



busily stream by in the granite streets. Across the street, tourists wander off the ferry, snapping photos at the tables of wooden jewelry and fake purses and a donkey named Oprah with her big yellow sunglasses. The taxi slows down in front of a Catholic church, and behind that church is my school.

I leap out of the taxi without paying, since my dad forgot to leave out money again, and I already paid Mister Lochana with all the quarters I could find hidden around the house like in an Easter egg hunt. The taxi driver sees and honks his horn and yells at me in French through his open window. People on the sidewalk look at me as I run right into the middle of the road, cars blaring their horns, chickens squawking at my feet, and up the church steps, my bag smacking my back. I turn around to grin at the taxi driver, who looks like he wants to get out of his safari right then and there to slap me good, and, since I'm not looking, I run right into my teacher, Missus Wilhelmina.

Missus Wilhelmina had a white great-great-great-grandpa from Saint Martin that she likes to talk about all the time because he made her clear-skinned. Missus Wilhelmina says that Saint Thomas and Saint John and

Saint Croix (but not Water Island, because she always forgets about Water Island) and all the other islands in all the Caribbean are no good, seeing that they're filled with so many black people. In class, she says that the Caribbean is almost as bad as Africa itself.

My skin is darker than even the paintings of African queens hanging in tourist shops, same paintings my mom would buy so she could hang them on her living room walls. Their skin is painted with black and purple and blue, and reminds me of the night sky, or of black stones on the side of the beach, rubbed smooth by the waves. I secretly think the women in those paintings are beautiful, but Missus Wilhelmina told me one morning that I have to be a good girl since it'll be hard for me to get married with skin as dark as mine. My dad never says anything like that, but he likes to ask me, "How'd your skin get so dark, Caroline?" Both he and my ma have skin as brown as honey. "How'd you get so dark?"

Seeing that I'm the littlest girl with the darkest skin and the thickest hair in the whole Catholic school, Missus Wilhelmina doesn't like me—no, not at all. I get a smacking on my bum for everything: not looking her in the eye

when spoken to, laughing too loud during playtime, thinking I'm better than everyone else because I know the answers to her questions in class, for asking too many questions in class, for not crying after those bum smackings. I always refuse to cry after a bum smacking.

One look at her, and I can tell she saw me jump off that safari taxi without paying.

“Caroline!” she says. “It’s always something with you!”

I can’t hear her too well after that, since she pinches my ear and wrings it good. She gets an early start on the bum smacking too. She doesn’t even wait until she’s dragged me into the church. Through the heavy doors, into the heat of the church, down the aisle, Missus Wilhelmina’s voice echoes off the walls and bounces into Jesus Christ, hanging from the cross like he always does. He looks down at me with those tired half-closed eyes. It has to be exhausting, hanging on a wall like that all day and all night, listening to so many people’s complaints and prayers. He’s already going through enough, hanging on a cross, crown of thorns on his head, without having to listen to us too. I’m dragged through the church’s back door, which is only ever used by the priest and the

choir during service and leads out to the courtyard and classrooms.

The courtyard with its benches and cracked cobblestone ground is spattered with black-and-white bird droppings and filled with green-and-white uniforms and brown legs and shiny loafers, running and screaming and pushing and jumping. There isn't enough room for all of us, so every morning before class we push each other to make enough room—but when Missus Wilhelmina comes, my ear in her hand, the other hand whizzing through the air and landing on my behind, that crowd stops its pushing and parts right down the middle, like how my mom used to part my hair to give me two big braids that poked out the sides of my head.

Missus Wilhelmina yanks me into our classroom of cinder blocks, with ceiling fans pushing hot air around in circles.

“Always something with you,” she says again. The doorway she comes through fills with faces and eyes and open mouths. They're funny, pushing one another to see through the door like that, so I laugh.

“You think this is a joke?” Missus Wilhelmina asks.

“Yes,” I say.

The kids at the door gasp too loudly. Missus Wilhelmina whips around and sees them there. They scramble away. She turns back to me.

“You don’t want to go to this school anymore,” she says, “that’s what it is. You want to be kicked out of this school.”

I agree. “I do.”

“You think you’re smart,” she says, her hand raised again, but I duck.

“Smarter than you,” I say, and Missus Wilhelmina chases me out the classroom and into the courtyard, where she gives me a wallop right there, right in front of everyone to see, until the school bell rings and another teacher yells at her to stop before she kills me dead. Missus Wilhelmina is sweating from the effort. She wipes her brow and huffs and puffs.

“Go home,” she says, “and don’t come back to this school. You hear me?”

That is just fine by me.

\*

I do nothing but wander and wander and wander while a little girl no one else can see follows me, skipping along the road, and when I get home long after the sun's gone down, my dad sits on the sofa, looking as tired as the Jesus Christ that hangs on the church wall. He tells me he just got off the phone with my principal, who will let me come back to school tomorrow—as if this is something that should make me grateful.

“Did you hear me, Caroline?” he says. “You can go back to school tomorrow.”

I don't speak. I don't tell him about Missus Wilhelmina, or say he forgot to leave money on the counter again. If my mom were here, I wouldn't have to say anything at all. She would just sit me down on the floor in front of the couch so my shoulders pressed into her hard, round knees, and she would take a thin comb and undo my plaits while she sang a song so low under her breath that I could never tell what she was singing, not at first, and even though a cartoon would be on I'd strain my ears to listen to my mother's voice instead.

*'Cause your mama's name was lonely.*

The day she left and didn't take me with her, I

decided I would find her again. Remind her that I was Caroline Murphy, her only daughter, and that she loved me too much to leave me behind. Then she would laugh and say it was her mistake, and take me into her arms, and even though most people always wanted to let go after just a few seconds, my mom would only stop hugging me when I told her to, and if it were up to me, she'd just keep holding on forever.

“Caroline—where’re you going? I’m not done speaking to you—”

I get to my room before my dad can reach me, and slam and lock the door with such a quickness I know he must wonder how his little girl got to be so fast. I sit on the edge of my bed, feet too big on the sheets, knees hugged to my chest as he knocks on the door gently, politely, telling me to come back out again. Then he hammers and yells and says I’m a little brat, and he has enough to worry about already. Then he just stands there, breathing. I only come out again when I hear him leave the house for work in the morning.