

Now, Adunni is back.

Hear her roar . . .

ABI DARÉ

And So I Roar



Thursday, January 2015

Tia

Port Harcourt

I used to tell people my mother gave birth to a thousand books and one girl.

They would chuckle, believing I was attempting to be humorous. I wish I were. Now that she's dying, I find myself clinging to a particular childhood memory: I am six years old, and my scalp is pulsating from a headache triggered by taut cornrows. I am sitting on the cool floor tiles outside of my mother's home library and, desperate for comfort, I knock, pleading for her to let me in, but she is too engrossed in a one-sided, animated conversation with the author of the book she's reading to hear me. She has imagined this author, as she often does, and for the time being, he is her beloved child, my phantom sibling. I fall asleep waiting and dream of her pulling me into a deep hug and pressing my head into her bosom, into her scent of fresh basil, and together, we sway to the rhythm of her laughter until I startle awake and realise it's been hours. I knock again and this time, there is a pause from inside, a brief consideration of my persistence, before the resumption of her occupation. Eventually, our housemaid Ada discovers me huddled on the floor and sends me to my room.

It's been nearly thirty years, and I'm still haunted by this memory.

My mother was readmitted last week to a private ward in a hospital in Port Harcourt and has been sleeping since I arrived. I must admit that sitting this close feels unnatural, difficult. I can smell her breath, and every expulsion from her partly slackened mouth warms the air between us with the odour of antibiotics and sulphur. I used to take refuge in that green padded chair by the door of her hospital room, in filling the chasm between us with practised smiles and delicately rehearsed responses. It was a pragmatic choice, easier than sitting close enough for her to see the pain of her childhood rejection still etched on my face.

But today is different.

Today, I'd like for her to witness the scars stinging my face, to (and this seems unfair in the face of her distress) afflict her with some of the trauma I've recently suffered. I fear it's the only way she'll understand why I must pry the relics of my buried past out of her grip.

She stirs, and I pitch forward.

'Mum?' I whisper. 'Are you awake?' Her bald scalp reminds me of the small retractable head of an aged tortoise. Her fists huddle the bedsheet at the sides, but she says nothing. I suspect she knows I am here; that she is, as usual, taking her time.

Her eyes snap open. 'Your face,' she says, her own gaunt, weathered face austere with the silent analysis of recollection as she considers the lines etched under my chin like a signature, the cruel Y-shaped welt crawling along my jaw. 'Dad said you had an . . . accident,' she says. 'What happened?'

'I lied,' I say. 'It wasn't an accident.' A pause. The lacerations are slowly disappearing, but the memory of being whipped in a fertility ritual my mother-in-law organised continues to torment me. I couldn't look in the mirror for days after. Sometimes I still can't. Sometimes, in the night's stillness, when my husband, Ken, is

asleep, I hear a whip, a vicious crack in the air, and I startle, catch myself.

I ball my fists to control the shaking in my hands. ‘I’ve been thinking,’ I say, haltingly, ‘about—’

‘That’s a stack of bloody good books.’ She nods at the pile of novels on the wooden table beside me. ‘Pass that blue-covered one, will you? The one with the bookmark?’

She’s expecting me to deflect, to bow under the weight of her gaze, but I hitch my chair nearer, back straight. ‘I realise it may be uncomfortable, me asking about a sixteen-year-old document, but I need it.’ I bring my hands together, a forced plea. ‘I wouldn’t have flown over if you’d replied to my emails or texts.’

She presses a finger to the control panel on the handle of her bed so that it tilts upwards with a whirring sound, and when her face is level with mine, she licks her lips, the tip of her tongue tinged yellow and textured like aged cheddar.

‘Tia,’ she says, voice soft. ‘Your dad is around. I can’t talk about this now. Give me some time. I just recovered from another infection. My novel?’

‘I need a moment,’ I say, rising and hurrying out of her room, past a woman retching in the next ward, past the line of nurses’ stations. It’s not until the lift pings open that I realise I forgot my handbag. I dash back and halt at the cracked-open door. My mother is speaking to my aunty on the phone, on a video call, as they often do, and in a voice so serious and penetrating that I am compelled to eavesdrop.

‘You are asking me not to tell her?’ my mother is saying. ‘To carry this secret to my grave? No, Beatrice. Let me die in peace. Let me explain why she can’t have the documentation she’s—’ My aunty interrupts, her voice high-pitched and garbled like a cassette tape on fast-forward.

I listen, eyes on my distorted silhouette reflected in the foil-tinted window of the opposite ward, a hot tingle filling every

crevice of my body. I am struggling to grasp on to their fragmented conversation, to slot piece after piece in to make an entire portrait of my past, but they carry on back and forth, piercing me afresh with the sharp edge of each discovery until my aunty's voice falls to a mumble that no longer rises and I can no longer wait in this excruciating anticipation for the glue that binds the fragments of the words – *it's too late* and *she will never forgive you* – together.

So I push the door open and walk in.

My mother immediately ends the call with a feeble jab of her finger, her face contorting into a strange, anguished expression. We stare at each other: both of us trapped on this island fenced with decades of bitterness and spite, with the thorns of this fresh revelation sprouting around its barbed edges.

'You lied to me.' My mouth forms the words, but I am not sure I utter them or if I am merely thinking of speaking. 'You told me—'

'Not here, Tia,' she says. 'Give me time to be ready.'

'How could you?' I yell, feeling stuffed with shattered things.

'*How could I?* Tia, please.' She has the audacity to blink back tears, to look away. 'Everything was to protect you,' she says. 'Your future was—'

'Stop it!' The shattered things in me accumulate, filling me with a strident noise. It rides up my throat and into my mouth and I am forced to stuff a fist in, to choke on it. In the silence, my breathing aligns.

My mother turns to look at me. 'Sometimes, Tia,' she says, 'we toss ourselves the lifeboat of lies to save us from drowning. You were drowning. You're still struggling to keep your head above water after all these years. Does your husband know about your relationship with Boma?'

Silence. Cowering beneath the intermittent beeping of a machine and my thudding heart.

‘Don’t think I haven’t noticed that you stop by to visit him before coming here.’

‘My marriage is none of your business,’ I say, when I find my voice.

She closes her eyes, shutting me out. ‘Your father will be away at a business meeting next Wednesday. We can talk then.’

My father materialises from the doorway as if summoned, a paper bag full of meds scrunched up in his grasp. He stops at the foot of my mother’s bed, catching his breath. ‘Is everything all right with my girls?’ He peers at the book my mother was reading as though we inscribed the condition of our collective state of mind on its fancy blue cover. ‘How are you both?’

‘I need to get back to Lagos,’ I say, my pulse thumping in my ears.

‘Now?’ my father asks.

‘She will be back on Wednesday,’ my mother says, her miserable smile an unstable curve digging into the gaunt hollowness of her cheek. She has arranged her face into a controlled recalcitrance because she knows I have no choice. That she’s right makes me want to scream. Something acrid rises in me, and as I walk away, I decide to return one last time to hear what she has to say, and afterwards, I will conduct a wretched funeral for her in the graveyard of my heart.

Wednesday will be the end of us.

Tuesday

Tia

Lagos

At eight o' clock, Adunni waltzes into my living room, drenched in morning sunlight and the scent of mint body wash.

Adunni is a brilliant fourteen-year-old I met while she was working as a housemaid for a neighbour down our street in Lagos. The faded Ankara dress she first wore from her village hangs loosely around her neck, and her calloused toes – the evidence of a year of punishing labour – protrude out of the worn shoes she inherited from the maid who served before her. Her matted, tangled hair is sleek with cheap grease, a pen sticking out of her month-old cornrow, but her eyes, like her smile, are liquid with the thrill of expectation, hope.

'Hey!' I tilt my laptop closed, averting my eyes so that the sun does not illuminate their swollen red state. 'Did you sleep well?'

'I didn't able to sleep one eye,' she says, squinting at the sunbeams lancing through the partially drawn blinds over our bifold doors. 'Did you really text me this text message or was I dreaming of it?'

She produces her phone from the pocket of her dress and holds it up for me to read my own words:

Adunni !! you got in!!

You won a place in the scheme!

I am not waiting ONE MORE DAY!
I will fight Florence if I have to.
I am coming to get you now!!
Pack your stuff.

xx

I sent the text and picked up Adunni yesterday, but it's been nearly a week since I was notified of Adunni's long-awaited scholarship offer, since I walked out on my mum in hospital and returned to a thankfully empty home (my husband is away at a conference).

The visit had left me feeling disintegrated, and I'd used the time alone to train my emotions into a semblance of normalcy. Then, finally, I'd felt ready to go and do what I'd been wanting to do for months: liberate Adunni from my neighbour, Florence, who had used her as an unpaid servant.

'It's not a dream,' I say. 'You won a scholarship. You did that, Adunni. You wrote that essay and got yourself a place and I am so proud of you.'

She grins. 'You know, I was looking at the long hand of the clock chasing the short one, ticking-tock-tick from yesternight till seven in the morning because I am too full of excitement! Ms Tia, why is a clock so slow to run fast when you are in a hurry? What is the time now?'

'Five past eight?'

I motion towards the dining chair opposite me, the plate of buttered toast and the steaming mug of chocolate next to it. 'I made you some toast and hot chocolate.'

She glances at the food and covers her mouth. 'Ah! Sorry! I keep forgetting myself to greet you good morning! Good morning, Ms Tia.' She bends her knees in a curtsy, offering her greeting with a gesture of respect I can't get used to. 'Is today or tomorrow the day I am going to school true-true?'

My mouth gives way into a lopsided smile. ‘Today we’ll go pick up your uniform, buy some more books, get your hair done. *Tomorrow* I’ll drop you at school.’

‘What are you doing on the computer machine? Why didn’t you drink your good-morning coffee?’

It surprised me when Florence agreed to release her. I had expected some resistance, but I sensed Florence was tired of combating our relentless fight for her freedom. Adunni spent last night in our guest room – and I can tell, from the energetic bounce in her step now, that it’s the best night she’s had since she arrived in Lagos.

‘I am trying to find a flight for Wednesday,’ I say. ‘I need to return to my mother.’

‘Tomorrow? But we are going to school?’

‘She wants to talk to me tomorrow, but I’ll leave after I drop you off at school. I can catch the last flight back.’

Sleeping pills haven’t stopped the cruel loop of that conversation replaying in my mind. I’ve been rolling off my bed, stuffing the edge of my pillow into my mouth and screaming silently into it until my voice becomes hoarse.

Why this ache pulsating in my bones now, at the thought of returning to Port Harcourt? Why didn’t I insist at the time, on hearing what she had to say? Could I call Aunty Beatrice instead? I have a feeling she’d simply refer me back to Mum.

‘Ms Tia?’

‘I am good, thanks,’ I say in response to a comment or question that has lost its precise form and shape. ‘Eat.’

I am careful not to watch her eat, focusing instead on sorting out my flight timings, but she’s gnashing her teeth, swallowing with rapid gulps, burping and offering apologies for disturbing me with the noise. It’s as if there is a timer somewhere, ticking a warning towards some punishment should she eat any slower.

When last did she eat proper food?

‘Don’t rush,’ I say, glancing at her. ‘You’ll choke. And then we can’t go shopping.’

She stops chewing abruptly, holding out a piece of grilled her toast, staring at the teeth marks indented on the soggy edges as if transfixed by this very act of eating a piece of toast. Her eyes fill with tears, one sliding gracefully down each cheek, which she swipes away quickly with the back of her buttered hand, streaking grease across her cheek.

‘Sorry, Ms Tia,’ she says. ‘I am just too-very hungry.’

Watching her, the ache in my heart expands with fresh guilt. I want to spend a lifetime making up for all she’s suffered, as though I am personally responsible for her misfortunes. Perhaps I am. Partly. I could have done more for Adunni from the first day I saw Florence nearly dent her scalp with the heel of her left shoe, but I returned to this comfortable house instead, with my constant electricity and minimalist-by-choice furniture and organic diet. I closed my eyes and sobbed myself to sleep; not just because of how helpless I felt, but because I felt paralysed by my helplessness, by the haunted, pleading look I saw in Adunni’s eyes, by this child who had, unknown to me, lived down the road for months, slaving away from dawn till midnight.

Adunni opened my eyes to true compassion. She was there for me when my husband’s mother took me for the baby-making ritual bath that left me with scars along my chin, arms and shoulders.

‘There’s more bread,’ I add, gently. ‘The butter is in the fridge. Adunni, there’s a lot of food here.’

She blows a path through the milk froth in her cup, watching me over the chocolate-tainted rim. ‘Who throw the flight away?’

‘Sorry?’

‘The flight you want to catch. Who throw it? How will you reach far up to catch it?’

‘Oh, my love,’ I say. ‘It means you’ll board, get on, a plane.’

‘Is there a mat on the plane?’ A frown puzzles her face. ‘For people to sleep?’

‘There are chairs. And windows. It’s quite nice.’

She is mute for a moment. Then: ‘I want to catch a plane one day. But not to see my mother, because she is in heaven. But maybe with you?’

‘Maybe with me,’ I say, but she’s already eating and talking about how excited she is to go shopping.

I jiggle my mouse to wake my computer, complete my flight booking, and slam the laptop shut. For now, I’ll concentrate on getting Adunni to school. And when I finish with my mother, I’ll find the strength to return home to tell my husband about Boma.

And that I’m not who he thinks I am.

We are in the school uniform shop behind Ocean Academy’s admin block, and I cannot stop thinking of him. Boma. Or *Bow-Mar*, as I often used to say, with a false American drawl.

I have resisted the urge to say his name aloud until now, to sound it on my lips; the bubble of spit that forms on the first syllable, the release of breath on the last, like a tired sigh. I don’t enjoy thinking about him when I am not alone, for fear that the heat flushing my face will warm the room, that my thumping heart will be visible underneath my T-shirt or blouse, that people will stop and stare in wonder.

The seamstress, a cherry-faced Ms Somebody with a grey tapered afro, who has a safety pin tucked into the corner of her mouth and a yellow measuring tape hanging around her neck, is motioning to Adunni to pull up her school skirt. There is an electric Singer sewing machine on the wooden desk next to me; beside it, a used ice-cream container filled with spools of red, blue, white and green thread. On the floor, a mound of clothes: school skirts

and blouses and berets, perhaps awaiting mending. There is a headless polystyrene mannequin on a wooden tripod projecting out of the mountain of clothes like a flag on a hill, cut pieces of the blue uniform fabric pinned to its foam breasts.

I've got my AirPods on so that I can pretend to listen to music. I want to be lost in my thoughts, but I can hear and feel everything around me: the throaty laughter from the seamstress, Adunni's chirpy voice riding high and low with tales of how her essay won her a place in this school, the click from the button on Adunni's skirt as she fastens it, the flutter when she twirls around so that a mint-scented breeze caresses my knees.

'What you think, Ms Tia? How I look?'

I turn, but I am distracted, briefly, by the framed photo of thirty-six girls in their uniforms on the wall, the edge of the folded ironing board covering half their faces. I noticed the same photo behind the principal in the admin office, but now I have an urge to inspect it.

'Ms Tia?'

I fix my gaze on Adunni, nodding with what I hope is a keen smile. 'Amazing!'

She laughs, clapping, saluting. She keeps doing that: saluting when she has the school beret on, perhaps because she thinks she looks like a soldier.

'Where next?' The seamstress's voice is kind and patient. 'Busy day ahead?' She wedges herself between the desk and the wall to sit. Picks up a pen, scribbles into a booklet and tears out a leaf for Adunni. 'Please hand that over to your . . .' The seamstress trails off, giving me a hesitant smile. She's aware I am not Adunni's mother. This is a school for girls born into extreme poverty, girls whose mothers do not own iPhones or wear AirPods, girls whose only hope is what they are given on these grounds: a sound education and a solid mindset to prepare them for the future. But she's unsure of what to call me and I am not in a mood to clarify who I

am to Adunni so I smile back and take the paper out of Adunni's hands.

'It's the receipt for the uniforms,' she adds. 'More shopping?' the seamstress asks.

I wish she'd move that damn ironing board out of the way or shut up and tidy up. Her name comes to me then, Ms Akin. I wonder if she has children of her own. Why, of all things I could think about, is this what comes to mind?

'No more shopping,' Adunni declares, shaking her head in an emphatic no. 'Ms Tia been so kind to me. She already take me to the ice-cream shop to lick ice cream and eat *choc-late* and cake, she buy me new school shoe and new school bag from Shoprite supermarket shop, then she buy me this new yellow dress and after, she take me to a hair salon with mirror-mirror on all over the wall, where they plait my hair this fine all-back style. See it, Ms Akin. See the hair!' Adunni yanks off the beret and runs her fingers along each line of freshly braided hair on her scalp, so that the seamstress is forced to admire the feed-in cornrows.

Adunni slaps the beret back on, salutes. 'When we leave here, we go home, we sleep, we wake up early tomorrow and come back here to this fine-fine school.' She's stepping out of her school skirt and folding it now, gingerly, as if it's baby skin she's careful not to bruise. 'Me, I stay here and learn, and Ms Tia will run to catch her flight. The end.'

'We will see you tomorrow.' Ms Akin nods. The safety pin is back in her mouth, and she talks through it. 'I am certain Adunni will enjoy Ocean Academy.'

I mumble an agreement, pick up the bag of uniforms, tell Adunni to change into her normal clothes and meet me outside. I step out into the faint chatter of schoolgirls and reprimanding teachers and ringing bells.

It's a nice school: a neat building within a large compound in

Apapa; three blocks of residential flats converted by the owner, which sit behind a large garden bordered with pink and blue flowers.

There is a tree in the middle of the spacious garden, the top of which is a gargantuan crown of twigs and leaves, and I think of the tree in the garden of my childhood home, of how before it became my meeting point with Boma, I would sit under it and watch the speckled darkness of the night sky through tiny slits in the canopy of its leaves, hoping my mother would feel the anguish of my absence at dinner and come out herself to invite me to eat with her.

The boarding house at the back of this red-brick building is a tidy dorm of four rooms named and painted after precious gems: Amethyst, Ruby, Sapphire and Topaz. The rooms are furnished with metal bunk beds enough for thirty-six girls. Adunni will share Amethyst with two other girls. Her roommates were in an English lesson when we went round, and when I asked if we could peep into the lesson, the matron, a woman with thinning hair dyed blue-black, raised her eyebrows at me and asked if I understood that this was a 'highly secure school environment', as if I'd asked permission to kidnap one girl.

I put the bag of uniforms down and lean against a red-brick column.

My phone jiggles against the back pocket of my denim. Ken. I let it ring off. Later, I'll send him a text, and when he's home tonight, I'll be ready with a lie for why I must return to Port Harcourt.

Two girls walk past me, laughing at a shared private joke, gripping exercise books in their hands, and something about their uninhibited laughter, the carefree youthfulness of their chatter, sends a surge of tension through me. I try to parcel it, to look out for Adunni, who is taking longer than expected.

The smaller of the girls stops abruptly and turns to ask if I am lost, if I need directions back to the reception. She has a small hook nose and buck teeth, and her English is stilted, like Adunni's,

and I am drawn to her in inexplicable ways so that my legs move of their own accord towards her, my arms contracting as the distance between us narrows. Before I can help myself, I am grabbing her by her shoulder, my fingers clawing into her flesh so that she drops her notebook and yells, 'Excuse me, ma!' rubbing her shoulders, eyes wide with shock. 'You pinch me!'

'I am sorry!' I crouch to pick up and shake the dust out of her notebook. Her name, *Ebun Obuke*, is scribbled across the top of the cover, her handwriting neat and spaced out.

'I am so sorry, Ebun,' I say, rising, unable to stop trembling. 'I was . . . I thought I saw something on your shoulder and I . . .' I trail off. My explanation is as useless as my understanding of what just happened. What is wrong with me?

Adunni appears, a ply of toilet paper stuck to her heel. She hurries to join us, glancing at me and the two girls. 'Sorry, I keep you waiting! I was doing piss. You okay, Ms Tia?' She waves at the girl, offering a huge smile. 'Adunni is the name. Sorry for that!'

The upset girl curtsies and scuttles off with her friend.

I watch them run off, feeling light-headed, unhinged. Is it me, or is the air in this school, this environment, toxic?

It's me.

The visit to my mother changed me.

It changed everything.

'Ms Tia?' Adunni peers at me. 'You okay?'

I force a laugh and joke that I am going mad, but I wonder if it's true, and if returning to Port Harcourt tomorrow would cure me of this aberrant lunacy.

My husband isn't due back home for another hour, and so after I tuck Adunni into bed and set the alarm in her room for seven a.m., I make my way to the storage shed behind our kitchen. I don't know what compels me to go there now.

It is more than the conversation I overheard: the familiar pulls me in to the one who understands me without words.

A rush of noise fills my head as I turn the key in the lock and flick the light on. A naked bulb buzzes from the ceiling, illuminating the room with the washed-out amber of a sullen sunset, and it stinks faintly of stale rodent urine, of cockroaches and mothballs, the tiles cold underfoot, the air humid and dense. I put my phone torch on, holding it up to the neat stack of wedding gifts that have remained untouched since we moved in: a box of stainless-steel food flasks; a carton of an oversized facial steamer apparatus that came with a manual written in Chinese; two professional, standing hooded hairdryers that do not belong in a home; ten sets of (ugly) patterned fish-shaped mugs with matching plates; twenty vacuum-sealed bags stuffed with bundles of Swiss lace fabrics and *geles*, which I might have worn if I knew how to tie the bloody things.

I shuffle in, a gentle wind rattling the glass louvres, rustling twigs and debris trapped between the partly open slats. The box I am looking for is behind the bag of fabrics, a solid wood chest with a flat lid swathed in thick cobwebs I am forced to ignore because I don't want to draw my husband's attention to this box, and to the padlock that keeps it secure. I buried the key under a heap of copper coins and rusty keys at the bottom of a clay pot behind the box. The key opens the padlock easily, expectantly – a homeowner returning to a not-quite-abandoned house – with barely a hiss and a click. The air fills with a ringing silence as I pick up the envelope stuffed fat with letters.

It's a haphazard pile; the letters flimsy, delicate. The most recent of the bunch is not what I am after, but I pull it out and unfold it under the torchlight. There is still the faint smell of the ink: fruity, like bubble gum, the words crammed together, the letter unfinished after Ken nearly caught me writing it.

I don't feel the tears forming, but I watch them drop on the paper, diluting the ink to a greenish blue. The words in this letter, like the others, are still vivid in my memory:

December 2014

Dear Boma,

I am sorry I left without saying goodbye: my husband called, and I didn't want to lie to him (again) about being with my mom. I know I promised not to do this any more because the burden of deceit and guilt is heavy on me and unfair to you, but Bow, I've just found out my husband is infertile!!

I feel like I need to tell him about us

'Ms Tia?' I hear her stumbling in, knocking into a carton. 'Why is the light not bright?'

I don't have time to hide the envelope and lock the box, so I tuck it underneath my armpit and find Adunni outside, with Ken standing behind her, his arms folded, their backs turned to a crepuscular spray of light across the sky.

He looks tired but pleased to see me.

'Oh . . . hey,' I say to Ken, hoping my shock, the catch of my breath, isn't obvious. I close the storage door and turn the key in the lock, sweat soaking the edges of the envelope in my armpit.

'I tell the good doctor you are here,' Adunni says. 'He says you don't like coming to this place because it is smelling of rat piss inside.'

'I've missed you.' Ken gives me a tender but worried glance. 'You were not picking up your phone. And now we find you here? What's up? Come here.'

He holds his arms out for a hug and I trudge into his embrace, my arms pressed to my sides like pins, the envelope trapped underneath.

‘I bought dinner,’ Ken says. I sense him scrutinising me as I wiggle out of his grip. ‘Sushi. Adunni says you ate out.’

‘We eat FKC and Chickens!’ Adunni proudly announces.

‘Adunni had a chicken burger from KFC,’ I say. ‘I am not hungry, but thanks.’

‘What were you doing in there?’

‘I was searching for old newspapers for research,’ I say, observing Adunni still wearing the school uniform. ‘You still haven’t changed?’

‘I keep changing from my nightdress to my uniform to my nightdress,’ she says. ‘Sleep was running from me, so when I heard the good doctor calling your name in the parlour, I ran down to tell him you are in the outside. Want me to carry that envelope for you? You keep pinching it tight to yourself.’

‘I’m good, thanks,’ I say. ‘Let’s go.’

We begin the short walk to the kitchen.

‘And your mum?’ Ken says. ‘How is she?’

‘Mum’s . . .’ My windpipe closes in on me and I am grateful that he cannot see my face. ‘She’s good.’

I yank the screen door open, and we step into the warmth of the kitchen, the smell of rice wine, vinegar and fresh salmon. Adunni does not linger. She darts through the kitchen and shoots up the stairs with a promise to get changed and ‘truly sleep a deep sleep’.

I lean against the fridge door, the sharp edges of holiday magnets probing into the small of my back, my biceps aching from the strain of holding the envelope. ‘Are you not going up to shower or something?’

‘Think you can put your . . . research down?’ Ken goes to the sink, washes his hands, shakes them dry. He pulls out a bar stool and perches on the edge of its seat. ‘I’m going nowhere until I understand what’s bugging you. So come sit.’ He pats the empty stool beside him. ‘There’s scrumptious sushi in the fridge. Turn

around and grab it, will you? We have some chilled wine in the wine cooler.' He lowers his voice. 'Is it Adunni? She is a bit much, isn't she? Is her school stuff stressing you out? It costs a fortune, doesn't it?'

I let out a slow breath and peel myself away from the fridge door. I'll wait until after midnight to hide the letters. Or write one more, or maybe destroy them all. I won't know until I am alone with him again, with Boma.

'Tia?' Ken's eyes follow me across the kitchen. 'Can we at least talk?'

I reach the door. 'I need to lie down,' I say. 'Maybe later?'

He nods. 'Florence called to ask about Adunni's school.'

'And?' I briefly wonder if I ought to be concerned by this, if, given Florence's erratic nature, I ought to panic, but my arm is throbbing and Adunni's admission is secure, and Florence was okay with me taking Adunni away yesterday. 'What did she want?'

'Nothing really,' Ken says, hopping off the stool and heading towards the fridge. He opens the door, ducks his head in and rummages about. 'She was brief: she asked, and I said Adunni starts school first thing in the morning, and she said she wishes her well.' He emerges, armed with his box of sushi and a bottle of soy sauce, and shuts the fridge door with his shoulder. 'Where was I? Yeah. Florence. She said she hopes Adunni does well in school, and she said thanks and hung up. You appear exhausted. Go lie down.'

'Good night,' I say, letting the door slam shut behind me.