**Praise for *The Human Origins of Beatrice Porter and Other Essential Ghosts***

'A brilliant, compelling exploration of familial legacies. A mythic and edifying read'
Irenosen Okojie, author of *Speak Gigantular*

'Prismatic and dazzling, Palmer's debut entrances with its stories-within-stories structure and loving portrayal of two sisters coming into their own power while grappling with family secrets and tales untold. Anansi and other folkloric figures and deities of their Jamaican Trinidadian heritage weave throughout the novel, transforming from teller to teller, from one generation to the next – at times haunting or healing, seductive or terrifying. Palmer's ever-rippling prose also shifts deftly – from magical to macabre, playful to tender, always with compassion for all'
Angela Mi Young Hur, author of *Folklorn*

'Soraya Palmer's epic, sweeping debut contains multitudes: it is tender, daring, funny and exquisitely written. It is a love letter to sisterhood that believes in the power of stories to transform. This book certainly transformed me'
Gabriella Burnham, author of *It Is Wood, It Is Stone*

'At once mischievous and warm, Soraya Palmer's voice will bewitch you from the very first page, leading you through the complexities of sisterhood and motherhood, belonging and loss'
Mina Seçkin, author of *The Four Humors*

'Soraya Palmer's characters are unparalleled and her prose is musical. Read this novel with a sibling, a cousin or a very close friend'
De'Shawn Charles Winslow, author of *In West Mills*

‘Soraya Palmer weaves tales that are ancient and timeless, familiar yet new and strange. Just when you think you’ve pinned her protagonists down, they shift and change, slipping from your grasp like the stories themselves, like Anansi, changing form to survive the telling. I love its lyricism, the feeling of fable and oral history, one’s myriad facets reflected back as through the many eyes of a spider. This book will go on to become a classic, I’m certain. Palmer definitely has my attention. A powerful story of women, powerfully and cleverly told’
Chịkọdịlị Emelụmadụ, author of *Dazzling*

‘Envisions family as always in motion, careening through history, connection, attachment, discovery and warmth, with all the pain, loss and even violence that might include. Expertly paced, deeply imagined, by turns playful and heartbreaking, I love the way this novel understands that sometimes nothing will sustain us except the right story that is truer than true’
Madeline ffitch, author of *Stay and Fight*

# THE HUMAN ORIGINS OF BEATRICE PORTER & OTHER ESSENTIAL GHOSTS

SORAYA PALMER

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*To my parents and their parents before them.*

Wild tongues cannot be tamed, they can only be cut out.

—GLORIA ANZALDÚA

If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it.

—TONI MORRISON

# CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

# What's My Name?

*A Prelude*

BY THE TIME YOU FINISH READING THIS I WILL BE DEAD AND *you, dear reader, will have forgotten all about me.*

*You see I am what they call Your Faithful Narrator, found in places the West calls fairy tales, what men call gossip, what children call magic.*

*Let me tell you a story. This one we call the first. It is a story that sounds like all the others, and yet it is also the one that has allowed for the existence of all that will come afterward—but we'll get to that.*

*In this story, two women sit inside a bar. The first one says, "Let me tell you a story." The second says, "So, tell me already!" "Okay, okay," she goes. "Once upon a time, there was a girl," she starts and looks into her drink. Her tongue starts to hang out like an udon noodle. "Well, go on," the friend says, mistaking her hanging tongue for excitement. Only the girl's tongue won't move. The girl's breath is fixed in midair. Her lips form the letter O. Her friend pricks the tongue with her fork to see what's the matter, and the tongue falls out and skitters like worms on the ground. The bartender scoops up all the pieces he can find, and they wriggle in his hands. He worries about the mess he's made. He asks the friend to fetch a jar and cap from the top shelf of the bar in order to contain the skittering tongue pieces. He looks down and notices no blood—only eraser dust.*

*The bartender thinks this is strange, but he goes to the bar to fetch his needle and thread. He begins to sew the tongue back together for the girl.*

*This is a very difficult job for the man, as the pieces of her tongue keep moving. Like the tongue doesn't want to be caught. Mountains of eraser dust are flying from her mouth, getting all over the floor. Her breath stands before them. The bartender does a good job of mending except that he sews her tongue onto a piece of paper and stuffs it into her mouth. The girl and her friend rejoice as the girl begins to speak again. But every time she tries to tell her story, the words come out backward. The ending changes.*

*Let me tell you a story. This one will give you hope.*

*Once upon a time there was a girl. And this girl grew to be a woman. And this woman had the ability to conjure stories from ghosts. Now the conjure woman had three daughters who loved her stories so much that when she died it was all that she left them. Little did they know that these stories had a life before them. That this book had a life before me.*

*You see, the woman and her family existed in a place called Brooklyn where the maples lined the pavement, and the houses were made from limestone and brownstone that glittered like stars do under moonlight. It must have been divine providence that whitefolks refused to live on these streets, believing they were haunted, therefore leaving the most beautiful houses to be claimed by the descendants of slaves from all across the Atlantic.*

*Whitefolks were not entirely wrong about the haunting either. If you were to walk down these streets, you might hear the faint sound of steel drum and boom box and chickadee and pigeon. Or you might hear the chattering of ghosts—the spirits of colonialists, Ashanti warriors, slave holders, African griots, mythic creatures, and stories long since forgotten. But while whitefolks may call this a haunting, we know them to be the ancestors. After all, they only want to be able to walk through their homes like they did before their deaths—to sit in the kitchen drinking Milo, bestowing wisdom onto their children who are at risk of forgetting all about them.*

*Now this family lived in the only rose-colored building at the end of Maple Street. The youngest called herself Zora or She Who Will One Day*

*Grow Up to Be a Great Writer Like Her Namesake. She could be found conjuring her mother's words into stories or if not, she could be caught, face flushed with embarrassment, fantasizing about a boy or two.*

*And then there was Sasha, the eldest, who felt her story should shine brightest for once. Commonly referred to as the Black Sheep or She Who Nearly Disappeared Until She Found Her True Self—this girl did have spunk. They say the girl had a chip on her shoulder the size of El Tucuche Mountain for nearly everyone, but particularly for her father who, legend had it, defeated a Rolling Calf with only a penknife and the power of his gaze.*

*Even with the new baby on the way, the family still fought like wolves—cunning in their ability to wound each other. The man they called Father moved out one day to live with a woman who didn't expect bread to be baked by stories. New daughters were birthed, several hearts were broken, and the maple trees were cut down and replaced with coffee shops.*

*At this point we all should've known what was coming. The scars that would form, the wounds that would never heal. It's true that Anansi stopped visiting the man's dreams at night. He couldn't tell his stories the way he used to. Images of Anansi, the Rolling Calf, and the purple balloon came and went in spurts. The wife, on the other hand, never stopped believing in magic.*

*But I will never forget the day that I first arrived in the arms of the sisters. It was the day when my two girls got me as their Christmas present. I was sitting quietly between words, inside the blank spaces of* The Anansi Stories *waiting to be unwrapped. You see, the book I lived in had been given to them by their mother, who got it from her grandmother, who got it from an Ashanti Priestess, who was there when it got made. Rumor had it that all women who tried to read* The Anansi Stories *aloud had their throats and tongues cut from their bodies like farm animals. The sisters had no idea the lengths that had been taken to keep these words alive.*

*But every night they would sit in the kitchen over Milo and go:*

*— I am Nanny, leader of the Maroons, mother of all Jamaicans! The*

*eldest, Sasha, wraps her hair in a pillowcase and holds up a shell, imagining it is an abeng. She speaks to her fellow countrymen.*

*(Please if you can, imagine you are invited to watch these girls right now. Pretend that you are a part of the enactment. Pretend you can decide how this story will end. *Hint: The setting is a kitchen. The scene's objective is to show two sisters conjuring history.*)*

*Sister 2 also known as Zora: Yes, you are Nanny—lady who caught bullets in her behind and farted them out at her enemies.*

*Sister 1 also known as Sasha: Disgraceful! You are banished from my Maroon settlement!*

*Zora: Pghaw! (farting noise)*

*Sasha: I am Queen Nanny, the only African living in Jamaica who was never taken into bondage.*

*— Nanny forced the British troops to allow the Maroons to live in peace.*

*— This pot here represents the cauldron that burns without the use of fire. It lured the British into its waters. (Sasha points to her mother's pot in the kitchen.)*

*— The British troops try to climb up Blue Mountain but they fall right before the peak, breaking their backs in two.*

*— In three! One for the dupes they tricked into becoming one with their militia, two for the bloodhounds that eventually brought them down.*

*— Three for the bastard that killed Nanny.*

*The one they call Sasha stops stirring. The cauldron turns back into a pot. The air beating beneath it becomes fire. It was yesterday that they picked me up in their textbook and saw it plain: "Jamaica's national hero, affectionately referred to as Nanny, is of mythic status. Leading historians do not know how much of her existence has been fabricated by the oral tradition prominent in Jamaican culture. What is known to be true is that she was betrayed and murdered by one of her own, a man they call William Cuffee."*

*This was the first time I ever heard that version—the one where she died. Right then, I felt the spirit slip from the ink and get cold.*

*Of course in my version, she's still alive, replaying over and over again her final battle. Sometimes she shoots down the entire British army using only one bag of arrows. Sometimes she uses her cauldron to create more arrows. Sometimes the cauldron makes a soup that is poison to her enemies, but antidote to her fellow Maroons. I could never forget that story. There are burn scars from the cauldron that run up and down my thighs. Some days, I forget what happened and then I taste the bammy and escovitch she made for Cudjoe on my tongue. I feel her handkerchief rub up against my cheek. There are scars that have faded that I feel some mornings. My hands are blistered, my breasts are chapped. But I especially love the way my two girls tell it. That is until this time—the time that she died.*

*And I know we just met, but I have a small request for you. I need you to save my life.*

*Yet already I feel your interest in me waning. You think that despite the fact that I've called you by name my words do not concern you. That someone else will pick up these words and take on the job themselves. That you don't have what it takes to save a girl like me. And because you choose to be my voyeur and sit here watching me—you too have become a part of this crime. You may have to pay for this someday.*

*But don't worry, you don't need to do much. All you gotta do is know my name.*

# PART I

# Origins

CHAPTER 1

# Anansi's Daughters

*Sasha*

Brooklyn, NY
September 1997

THAT LEAN AND MEAN BEEF JERKY. IT LOOKS SO GORGEOUS resting there with all the others, third shelf, second aisle where it usually lives.

"This price oughta convince 'em, Zori. I mean it's one of the most logical things you could buy here. Do you know how many people twelve ounces of beef jerky could feed?"

But Zora just rolls her eyes because we already tried this routine three times, and if it didn't work the last three times, it wasn't gonna work now.

"For crissakes, Mom made me eat red beans with my pasta again yesterday," I continue. "I mean she's obviously depressed because she's had way too much time on her hands to be getting this creative with the dinners."

"I dunno, Sasha. I thought the beans were pretty good. And actually—"

"And then she had the nerve to tell me I wasn't getting enough protein. Well, obviously I'm not getting enough protein if we're living off this freakin' rabbit food. Did you know babies sometimes turn orange when they eat too many carrots? I read that in a science book, you know."

But before Zora can respond, we see Mommy and Daddy walking down the aisle of meats, arguing under their breaths.

As Mom and Dad approach, I pipe up a little louder, pretending like Zora and I are still deep in conversation: "I mean, don't you just wanna go camping when you eat jerky? I chew on it and I go ummph! Look, feel my stomach, Mom. You'll see there's basically nothing left." I point in between and below my two bee stings where my rib cage ends. "I swear it's because we've been vegetarians way too long."

"You're being dramatic, Sasha," my mother mutters. It's like her ongoing talks on how to be in tune with one's own body have all gone to waste, and she looks away longingly at the aisle of canned beans and vegetables.

Only Dad's face is glowing with the window of opportunity. It's story time again.

"You know, Sasha, there used to be this guy by the junction who used to sell homemade beef jerky out on his stoop," he says. "Until one day he died very mysteriously. Nobody knows what happened to him, but rumor had it he became none other than the—"

"Rolling Calf!" Zora says. She's standing on the wheels of the shopping cart so she can see him better.

"Right, Zori!" he says. "You see, when a butcher dies, he becomes the Rolling Calf to pay penance for all the cows he tortured and killed in his lifetime."

As he speaks, his eyes grow large, and his voice rises and falls like a wave. Even his neck appears to stretch upward before springing back again. People in the aisles are politely trying to move us out the way, but Daddy doesn't budge.

"You could hear Rolling Calves where my brother and I grew up because they have thick iron tails that smell like sausage and clink like chains. Whenever we had the mind to be rebellious and stray against our father's wishes, we'd hear the metal, smell the pork, and know we'd gone too far. We wouldn't run off the way you kids do now—you know, foolishly."

His stories are always like this: very entertaining, so as to keep us listening till the big moral point at the end.

But after twelve years of living with the man, I feel like I've gotten to the point where as much as I love his tall tales, they never sound as

good when families are pushing by us with their shopping carts, wondering why we're blocking the entire aisle. Zora, who won't enter middle school for another year, is like a puppy, anticipating his every line like it's brand-new.

Dad continues, "You see, once upon a time there was a boy and his brother. And this brother thought he could defeat the Rolling Calf alone. The boy went out to help his brother and barely made it out alive. But his brother, well . . ." He pauses. There's a flash in his eyes that always looks like lightning.

"Back when I was your age, we used to tend our own cows. You think that's real cow they're giving you at McDonald's? Cow shit is what they're giving you."

Mom glares at Dad, who quickly rotates his gaze to her knees to avoid feeling her eyes on him. Normally, his story ends with the boy luring the Rolling Calf into the ocean with the help of the hurricane and a penknife. Water is always key in these stories because, like the Wicked Witch of the West, the Rolling Calves—as well as other germ-infested meats—are all apparently afraid of cleanliness.

"Yes, clean people can't be bothered with dirty meats," Mom says.

She rubs her hands together and twists her lips when she says this, like she's wiping them clean of something. Her face looked this way when she caught the rat in our kitchen last week.

We follow our mother toward the cashier and see that she has replaced our beef jerky with raw and unsalted almond butter.

Lately I've been noticing that the families here are different from the ones who shop at C-Town. C-Town children whine a lot and fill their carts with things like Go-Gurts, Kraft macaroni and cheese, ice pops, the good bologna, peanut butter, crackers with salt on them, and white bread. Meanwhile their moms are running back and forth returning things so that their grocery bill won't be too high. Dad loves to remind us that he left his nine-to-five three years ago so we would never have to shop at places like C-Town again. This business was supposed to bring us up to speed with the Park Slope crowd and the people who shopped

at the co-op. Still, it's been more than a few years, and Dad's new business has continued to flop.

Here at the co-op, families buy organic laundry detergent and tofu ice cream. The fathers are always happy to help their wives and children, picking up the most natural-looking tomatoes. Mothers look younger than they are, sometimes dyeing their hair new down-to-earth shades.

My sister and I exchange glances. The line is long.

"How come almond butter doesn't come with the crunchy chunks like Skippy has?" I ask, staring at the family ahead of us.

"I don't know," my mother says.

"Well, what's the point of peanut butter if it doesn't come with crunchy chunks?"

"It's almond butter." My mother seems distracted. She's fishing through her bag. "And where's yuh father?" she asks. "Did he take my wallet again?"

I look around, noticing that he's disappeared, but I have other things on my mind. "Then we should be eating peanut butter," I say.

"Peanut butter has unnecessary fat. Also, it releases unhealthy toxins into the body that almond butter doesn't."

I look at her for a moment.

"I think some people worry too much about fat, Mom."

She ignores this comment. Zora gives me a look. Mom keeps looking into her bag and then cautiously toward the register.

Our cashier smiles, teeth white as paint, as we approach her. My mother smiles weakly, tight-lipped, and says, "I'm sorry, but I can't seem to find my wallet. My husband's coming shortly."

The woman glances at my mother before turning back to her register.

"I'm so sorry," my mother adds.

The woman smiles widely. "Oh, that's okay. Would you mind just stepping aside for a moment then, miss?"

And then the woman just shoos my mother along and moves on to talk to the next customer. We get out of line.

Moments later, Dad finally arrives with a whole new cart full of food, and we get back in line, which is now snaking around the baking aisle.

"You didn't borrow any money from me, did you?" Mom asks Dad.

"I really don't know what you're asking me." But he says this without looking at her.

"Because I'm gonna need some money."

"I have no money for you, Beatrice."

"Nigel," she says. Her voice seems tender until the smile comes. It opens up, teeth gesturing toward him in an almost threatening manner. "You have the money."

His nose flares as he looks at her. I once saw a horse in a movie flare his nose like that. I decide to take immediate action.

"Dad, tell us the story about Anansi and his family," I say, pulling his arm, trying to get him to look at me and not at her.

At first I don't think I can get Dad's eyes to stop from squinting. But soon enough those large pupils soften into butter and widen like pancakes.

"You see," he starts, "Anansi, his wife, and their four children lived in a fancy house in Red Hills until he lost his job." He pauses for a moment, glancing at Mom before continuing. "He worked hard to keep the home life comfortable, but sooner or later the food was gone, and the family started to go hungry. He went crazy and thought his wife might leave him for a richer man, and they fought a lot. And so finally when there wasn't even a decent-sized meal for the family of rats they were living with, he cut off the right side of his buttocks, spiced it up, and served it as jerk pork for the entire family. The family loved it and had a meal for the night. Sadly, the father could never sit down again and could only sleep on his side for the rest of his life."

We look at each other silently for what feels like a minute straight.

Finally Zora says, "I don't remember the story ending that way, Daddy."

I try to cut her a look as a warning to quit while she's ahead, but she's not even looking at me.

"I mean, doesn't Anansi—"

"Actually, I remember Anansi leaving," my mother cuts her off. "I guess he just couldn't take the pressure. Started up a whole new family."

I wait for Dad's reaction. Zora doesn't wait.

"No, no, no," she says. "The wife finds out what Anansi did and starts laughing. She laughs so hard she spits it out and tells him never to work so hard again. They end up living happily ever after. Don't you remember, Daddy?"

She looks so earnest, I almost feel sorry for her.

Dad only nods silently and starts humming. My mother keeps her head up, mouth closed, as we finally emerge back at the front of the line.

Dad continues to hum as the same cashier woman asks my father if she can please help him, sir.

"Can we have all this charged, miss?" he says to the cashier, his smile competing with hers. He likes to smile with his neck arched all the way up to show off his dimple that takes attention away from his overbite.

"Sure. What will you be using?"

"American Express," he says with confidence.

The woman tries to smile as she tells him the card is not working.

"Not working?" my father asks.

"Right." She smiles. "I'm terribly sorry." And she looks like she's ready to shoo us along again.

"I've never had a problem with this card before," he says. "Please try it again." Dad's eyes are going wild, his arms are steady, and I think I can hear him humming again.

"Sir, I really don't think—"

"Try it again." My father says this like an order. A woman from behind taps her foot loudly, but my father will not move. The cashier woman seems scared, and for a minute I'm worried someone might call the police. People are already staring, and all my mother can do is bite her lip.

"Here, try this," he says and pulls out another card.

The woman smiles awkwardly. "Sir," she says, "we're a bit under-

staffed today. Would you mind putting some of your items back on the shelf?"

The words sting.

"Ma'am," my father says, softer now, "please try my card."

"Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't hear you say that. Sure, I'll try your card."

Her smile sinks deep into her face as she prints our receipt. Her teeth are so white they begin to look plastic. She puts the groceries into the bags neatly without ever looking down. I look away uneasily and rub my jaw.

.....

Things only get worse when we get home. Dad tells us not to bother putting the groceries away—that he and Mom can handle it. This should have been the first sign that something was wrong. It was never the job of the adults to unpack the food. Mom shivers only for a second, and I figure I shouldn't let my mother stay in the kitchen alone with Daddy and his fearless eyes. But *Boy Meets World* is on now. So we make our way to the TV room next door.

"When I grow up, I'm gonna invent a country where there's no such thing as money," Zora says.

"Don't be stupid," I mutter, focusing on Shawn Hunter who is about to profess his love to Angela for the very first time.

"No, really. I'm gonna have it so that everyone will trade with each other. The farmers will trade with the seamstress people, and the seamstress people with the coal miners, and so on."

She moves to block the entire screen as she speaks.

"But who would the country trade with, moron? A country needs free trade," I say, trying to see around her head.

"We'll trade with no one. We'll be self-sufficient. We'll be Cuba."

"You'll have to trade with someone. Even Cuba knows that. Canadians trade with Cubans." I pause, letting it sink in that she's wrong.

Of course, secretly, I feel like we should be hugging at this point because I'm scared. Things are banging too loudly on the walls to just be putting them away.

I hear Dad say, "No, you don't get to put this shit on me right now, Beatrice. You blame *me* for not bringing *your* goddamn wallet to the supermarket? You have any idea how bloody hard I work each day so that I can put food down your bloody throat every night? Jesus, I ask you to remember one lousy thing."

Zora tries to drown out his yelling by shouting, "Why do people get jobs anyway? I mean if you think about it, there's really no point. No, there's just no point to life when you're not even happy. And the way I see it, I have maybe sixty to seventy years left." She reaches for her calculator on the couch. "So that means I'd be working nine hours a day, five days a week. That means that every week I could be spending time talking about, I dunno, art or something, I'm wasting about forty-five hours of every week for the next sixty to seventy years. And for the next sixty to seventy years, that'd be about 180 hours of wasted time per month. And twelve months in a year means 2,160 hours of time wasted. Ummm, 129,600 to 151,200 hours. Jesus. That's a lot of time to be wasted. That should be—I dunno, illegal."

The sounds from the kitchen are getting to me. I roll my eyes: "God, you're so freaking lazy. How would your people get anything done if they just laid around on the grass all day long? They'd all starve to death. You wanna be a writer and you really think that you'll get there by just sitting on your ass all day? Your stories are gonna be pretty boring." I regret saying it as soon as I see the look on her face.

And then we're interrupted. I hear the scream first and then the thud of a body.

Zora looks at me, holds my hand, and says, "So let's just say there was a spider."

I nod and follow her lead. This is our favorite game. "Yes. Anansi the Spider."

"He sees a calf."

"A Rolling Calf."

"He runs away."

"Or freezes stiff," I say, and we look at each other.

We tiptoe toward the door, cracking it open to peer at the mess. This time spilled soy milk runs across our musty old carpet. There'll probably be a huge stain tomorrow, and Mom'll fuss and make us clean it up again.

"But what if he finds a window?" Zora asks.

She's still standing in the doorway, but her eyes are closed.

"Yes, a big window with silver panes," I continue.

"He opens the window."

"He takes a step outside."

"A web is there."

"To catch him."

"He's safe now. Home free."

We open our eyes and look at our mother. Bits of tofu are all over the new shirt she bought when she took us to Bobby's last weekend. She's shaking on the ground, screaming up at my father who stands like a steel crane over her bent frame.

"Yuh want to buy new china set for yuh girlfriend, well go right ahead. Move right in with yuh nasty white woman. Calling every night saying, 'I'm stuck at the office.' What kinda foolishness dat? Ent? So doh bother accusing me of usin' up de money."

"I don't know where the hell you get that from. The bloody shit I put up with, Beatrice. Between your fucking paranoia and your overpriced vegan crap. Look at this food, Beatrice."

He shakes a box of soy macaroni and cheese in her face, and I think he might make her eat it, cardboard and all. "I mean for bleeding Christ, I can't eat this crap!"

"So dat's yuh excuse? Yuh work like a dog so yuh can bull yuh coworker?"

We shut the door. Maybe there is nothing left to say. But Zora's looking at me to be the older sister for tonight.

"You see in the web," I begin, "Anansi gets bigger and stronger. The web can't hold him."

"This is his land now," Zora continues, "outside the big silver window. He lands on his feet and he's okay."

"At least until school starts."

"Or church."

"And he has to go back across the window."

"And the Rolling Calf is there."

"Well, maybe the calf is asleep," I offer.

"Yes, it's daytime now, and Rolling Calves have to sleep in the day because they're like vampires."

"And Anansi is safe again."

"Yes. Safe. Home free."

But the kitchen is a mess. We creep behind the doorway with the next crash that sounds like the bottle of vodka sauce that smashed the counter a week ago. Now there are more tomatoes splattered on the floor. It looks like blood on my mother's arm, but I don't wanna think it could be anything other than tomato. My mother's arms shake furiously, her knees banging into each other, making a hard bumping noise, and I wonder how badly she hurts.

My father leaves the kitchen with a pack of Marlboros in hand and stops to look at us. "Look, you know how your mother can get," he says. His voice trails off as he places his hand on the wall above him. "You should go help her—the two of you," he says.

"Yes, Daddy," Zora says.

I say nothing and stare at his feet.

He turns away from us to walk out the front door, pausing every few moments to glance at the mess he made.

"Come help me," Mom says after he leaves. We walk over slowly to further assess the damage. She has all the primary colors across her skin. A mix of bruises, wounds, and food. She shines brightly beneath the kitchen's overhead lights.

"Mommy," I say, and I try hard to keep any strong feelings from entering my voice.

"Let me tell you a story," she says. Her arms and legs are still sprawled on the floor, like she's doing a yoga position.

"Maybe you shouldn't talk," Zora says.

"I'm okay," she says.

"Mommy," I repeat. I can't think of anything else to say.

"No, I'm okay," she says again, and we help her to sit up and lean on me and Zora for a while. Her food or bloodstains get onto my overalls, and I'm fine with that. I don't really want to hear a story about what my father did to her in the past or how he's still a good man and still our father or why I caught her crying out for God in the bathroom a week ago.

But instead she goes, "You know why we call them Anansi stories?"

It catches me off guard.

"Because they're not real?" Zora suggests.

"Of course they're real. All stories are. But did you know that they used to be known as Tiger stories?"

We did not know, and so we shake our heads in unison.

"Tiger has always been the vainest of them all," she says.

Now when my mother tells stories, she sings them. She taps her feet in time with her words, but her feet look so tired and caught under food that we tap our feet for her.

"Now Tiger was always naming things after his own inflated image." Fast taps. "Tiger lilies, tiger moths, tiger sharks, and so on. And every night before the children went to sleep, he wanted the children to tell one another Tiger Stories. And Anansi was sad because he thought he might go his whole life being called small, someone to be stepped on while people walked to work—without even the acknowledgment that they took a spider's life." Slow taps.

"So he said, 'If I can prove myself to be a warrior, will you let the stories be named after me?' And the forest itself broke out in hives of laughter, shaking the ground, causing Anansi to bow down in shame. A spider is weak. A spider breaks under doorways and under feet. Tiger said, 'Bring me the snake, and I will let the stories be named after you.' Tiger, of course, said this as a joke, knowing that the spider could never overpower the snake. A snake is clever. A snake is strong. A snake eats raw eggs whole for breakfast. But still, the spider felt he needed to try. So he tied a noose to string Snake up; he dug a hole to stick Snake in;

he made a fly trap and stuck an egg in it. But Snake outdid him every time. And for a while Anansi thought, 'Well, if Tiger thinks I'm weak, and Snake thinks I'm weak, and Rabbit thinks I'm weak, then I must be weak. Small. Meaningless.' Then he thought, 'Guess I could give this one last try.'

"He said, 'Snake. I'm sorry I keep trying to kidnap you. I only wanted to prove to the rest of the forest that you were the longest animal in the kingdom.

"'But of course I'm the longest.' Snake was indignant.

"'I bet you're not even longer than that bamboo stick over there.'

"'Bring it to me,' Snake said. 'Carry over the stick and I'll prove that I'm the longest.'

"Anansi did this, and Snake started to crawl out of his hole. 'But how can I trust you?' Anansi asked. 'How do I know you won't keep sliding up and down the stick to make yourself seem bigger?'

"'Tie my tail so I can't move.'

"Anansi did this. He said, 'Now stretch so long and far that you have to squint your eyes a little.'

"Snake did this, and as soon as Snake closed his eyes, Anansi tied his head to the bamboo.

"The forest became still and quiet, and all the laughter in the world stopped for an entire moment to honor Anansi. The spider had now outsmarted both Snake and Tiger. And from then on, these stories have always been known as Anansi Stories," my mother says.

But I am still upset.

For a while we sit where we are—our mother propped up against us on the dirty floor like she needs us to give her life. Zora's the first to change positions. She collapses into my mother's lap. Muffled sounds come from her mouth. My mother lifts her face to wipe the water falling from her eyes.

And then it's my move; I stand up. I open the paper towels and wipe up the soy milk and tomato sauce on the floor where we are. Zora is braver and brings the paper towels to my mother's face and arms. I put

away the tofu, carrots, and kale before coming back to sit by them. I finally look at her—her clothes still a mess but her face dry.

"So what is the story saying, Mom?" I ask. "Are you saying that they'll always be bullies, but we should keep our chin up until the day we can fight back?"

I'm feeling sick of stories. I don't see a warrior in my mother's stretch pants and tank top. She just looks old. Tired. Tomato stained.

My mother strokes my cheeks before holding my face in her hands.

"No," she says, "I'm saying that Anansi is a woman."

And then we are silent.

CHAPTER 2

# Devil in the Shape of a Rooster

*Zora*

Brooklyn, NY
April 1999

"MOMMY, WHAT'S A CONDOM?" I ASK.

"What?" she says.

Mom's cooking now, which means she'll be pleasantly distracted for at least another four hours—which means I'm more likely to get a nod and a grunt, less likely to get a beating. She's been cooking and walking around the house a lot lately considering how big she's been getting, what with my new sister on the way in eight weeks or so, according to Sasha. It's a particularly good time to talk to Mom since Sasha's got basketball practice after school all week, leaving the kitchen to be championed by my mother and me alone.

Mom's looking after a pot of callaloo on the stove, swizzling the okra and bhagi and coconut milk faster than before.

"Remember that scene in *The Mask* where Jim Carrey starts making balloon animals?" she asks without looking up from her pot. "At one point he pulls out a condom instead of a balloon. That's what a condom is."

Her body looks small and oval like an egg, her copper forehead glistens like pearls from the heat of the burner.

"Oh," I say, but I'm sure there's more to this question. "It's for Sex Ed., Mom."

Mom takes a paper towel to wipe the pearls off her forehead and