

THE WOMEN OF TOURMALINE ISLAND

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Chapter One: Dream Story

A piddling, little ol' thunderstorm would never give the women of Tourmaline Island cause for concern or reason to rise from sleep. They have slept through far worse, for sure. Even as the millennium draws to a prophetic end, they rest assured that fifty years of separatist living have well prepared them for all that is to come. That is, until a dream came to call on each of them, in turn, bringing urgent news of a visitor soon to arrive.

Normally, each woman, according to her own particular logic, could find good reason for no reason a'tall to study on a dream before the light of day. Old age, they say, makes you stingy with sleep and even more inclined to wait on the sun to figure things out. However, something about this dream stuck way down deep in the seat of their souls, like an unannounced neighbor who finds cause to stay for dinner. Yielding to oblige, they each reluctantly rose to the auspicious occasion of the potent premonition. From one cabin to the next, candlelight descended on darkness until illumination came full circle around the Island's middle grounds. A clear enough sign for anyone who understands anything about the mysteries of life to know a pot of tea was in order at the fireside of Mama Delight, the tribe's matriarch.

"Watchu doin' up so late?" May Su asked as she plopped through the door with a clap of thunder at her heels, dripping rain from her well-worn calico cape. For all of May Su's 76 years, she had managed to retain the zeal of that feisty young gal who used to buck authority, wear pants, and do as she damn well pleased at a time when such behavior from a lady was scorned as simply disgraceful.

"Same thing as you, I s'pose," Dee answered with subtle, mutual realization. She knew her oldest friend on Earth understood the nighttime and all its nuances too intimately to be fooled.

But the thing that struck May Su as odd wasn't so much Dee's wide open front door at that odd hour of night, nor the slow churning whistle of her teapot set to boil, nor the way she pensively occupied her throne at the head of her round oak kitchen table, but that her 80-year-old, earth-toiled hands were uncharacteristically idle and folded, as if she were poised for a sermon or prayer.

"You sittin' there like you expectin' company," May Su baited.

"Hey there," Jude called from across the room. May Su spun surprised to find Jude stooped in front of a pile of Dee's books in the far corner of the room.

"Since when a storm get you outta bed, Jude?" said May Su squinting curiously. "Long as I known you, you sleep through a hurricane."

"Dee has better night reading books than I do," she said as she grabbed a book and joined Mama Dee at the opposite end of the table.

"Um hm," May Su muttered, unconvinced. She stopped short of snatching the book out of Jude's hands on hearing two sets of feet tromping up Dee's front porch steps.

"Well, looky here who else done come out to play in the middle of the night," May Su announced.

On cue, the twins, Lizbeth and Liza, finagled their way indoors from under a shared damp quilt.

"I swear 'fore God," Dee chuckled, "if I didn't know any better, I'd think y'all was connected at the hipbone."

"Well, we aren't, and if it wasn't for her," Lizbeth grumbled, pointing at Liza, "I would still be in bed. Shoot!"

“Sista isn’t in the best of moods tonight,” Liza warned as she sank into a cushion-bottomed chair next to Mama Dee.

“I heard her cussing and carrying like somebody stole something from her,” said Jude.

“She ain’t been in a good mood since 1951,” May Su needled, always looking for a chance to rattle Lizbeth’s last, good nerve. “How two people hatched from the same egg turn out so different beats me.”

“It makes you wonder,” said Jude as she studied Lizbeth seated next to her sister. “Other than having the same posture and being physically identical, you two have oddly opposite temperaments. Lizbeth is loud and bossy, while Liza is quiet, and calculating. The true twins,” Jude continued, pointing across the table, “is Dee and May Su. Dee may be dark-skinned, tall, and wide and May Su honey-toned, mid-height, and more curvaceous; but they share identical minds, same thoughts, and voices, too. A true contralto-alto harmony. Dee keeps the pitch with that Tar Heal accent while May Su tends to carry the bottom.”

“Jude, please. I really don’t feel like all your psycho babble tonight,” Lizbeth scoffed.

“If I’d known you was gonna turn out to be such a *grouch*,” May Su said to Lizbeth, “I woulda left you behind years ago. Course, I woulda still took you, Liza.” That’s all Lizbeth needed to get her going.

“You know, I’m just about sick of you always claiming how you saved everyone, like you are the second coming of Harriette Tubman. We all came here because we wanted to, because we had a good mind to know what was best for us. Tell her, Sista.”

“Calm down, Lizbeth” said Liza patting her sister’s shoulder. “Dee, sounds like you have more company.”

“Evening everyone,” Beatrice chirped in her most pleasant bird-like voice as she stepped through the door. “What’s all the racket about around here?”

Unlike the others, Beatrice had sense enough to bring an umbrella with her, which she placed in the sink to drain before joining the others at the table, as if she’d arrived at one of their regular Monday sermons. If there was ever a perfect, well-mannered, and poised lady on earth, it was Beatrice. She made digging up weeds in the garden look cute. The other women stopped asking her long ago why she gardened in hats and gloves that she brought with her 46 years ago to an *island* along with a ton of jewelry, perfumes, silk stockings, oil paints, brushes of every size, and rolls of canvass. The latter supplies they understood. She was a phenomenal painter who had been robbed of fame and success but somehow transformed her disappointment into genuine pleasantness.

“Everybody feeling alright tonight?” Beatrice smiled from one woman to the other, waiting for an answer. “Oh—remind me tomorrow to show you all the new parasol I made.”

Feeling no need whatsoever to defend her foul mood, Lizbeth wailed, “Whyyyyy are you always so happy? It is most unbecoming at this time of night.”

“I have the Holy Spirit in my heart all the time,” Beatrice answered, undaunted by the slight.

“Gawd—spare me!” Lizbeth moaned.

Before anyone could get a laugh in at Lizbeth’s expense, Michelle bolted through the door like a mad banshee, her unkempt hair glistening with rivulets of rain.

“What the hell’s goin’ on?” she demanded.

For a few perplexed moments, the women struggled to make sense of the sight before us. Finally, May Su offered a reasonable explanation.

“I think she’s crazier at night than she is durin’ the day. Look at her. Comin’ out here in all that rain with just a nightgown on and not a stitch of nothin’ underneath lookin’ like Topsy escaped from the crazy house.”

Oblivious to the slight, Michelle screeched for an answer. "WHAT ARE Y’ALL DOING?"

The women couldn’t answer her to save their souls. Gut wrenching laughter took hold of the room and refused to let go until they had howled, coughed, and split their sides. With feigned indignation Michelle grabbed a quilt from Mama Delight’s cedar chest, wrapped it around her head and body, and then took her place at the table.

“Y’all have a nerve to call me crazy, sitting up here having a midnight tea party in a thunderstorm. Doors slamming. Lizbeth on the warpath, probably half drunk.”

“Well, you’re here now, so you might as well stop complaining and get a cup of chamomile, too,” Jude instructed. She and Mama Dee were the only people on earth who could handle Michelle when she became high strung. The others would try to reason with her when she got out of hand but found it better to let her blow a gasket before attempting a civil conversation. Fortunately for them all, Michelle had calmed down considerably after going through the change, so much so that they could tolerate her fits and angry explosions on most occasions. Fortunately, she had arrived more tired than annoyed.

With the circle complete, Mama Delight began recalling the dream that had stirred her from a solid sleep. Unlike one of those hilariously long tales she was fond of concocting for everyone's amusement, this story was brief and vague. Most surprisingly, her audience already knew the story well enough to confirm the obvious: someone was definitely coming. When, how, and whether man or woman was another question.

“Um-um-um. . . . Same dream, same night. . . . Umm. . . ,” May Su pondered.

Suddenly, everything that was prone to speak of wisdom and truth around Mama Delight’s two-room cabin fell silent. From the creaking screened door across to the hand-carved cherry bed frame holding cotton-stuffed mattresses; to the fox, rabbit, and weasel skins shading the top half of the window above the bed; to the hurricane lamp on the round teak nightstand beside the bed; to the adjoining cedar chest of drawers packed with clothes in homemade potpourri; to the crackling cherry wood in the fireplace along the far left wall; to the deer and buffalo bones spread across its mantel; to the frayed, worn boxes strategically piled by size next to the fireplace and stuffed with buttons, scissors, threads, and scraps of fabric; to the wicker rocking chair between the boxes below the rear window and stacks of books by Wheatley, Dunbar, Hurston, Hughes, Du Bois, and other noted writers; to the potbellied stove next to the brief hallway leading to the bathroom; to the nail-hung pots and pans on the wall next to the stove; to the freshly picked bundles of herbs and pungent roots occupying her ceiling-high shelves; to the mason jars containing seashells, pot liquor, pickled peppers, gems, and semi-precious stones of every hue on her oak countertops; to the aromatic potted peppermint, sage, sweetgrass, basil, and parsley plants in the windowsill above the kitchen sink; to the river’s reeds and rushes leaning with a stiff sotol broom in the front right corner; to the scores of wire-hung tintype and sepia-toned photographs of family members long gone on the facing wall; to the ribboned and bowed hats and shawls draped around the large oval looking glass on the back of the open door; to the vased magnolias, roses, and lilacs placed in every available spot throughout the room; to the round kitchen table flickering with candles in the middle of it all—everything at once had gone stubbornly mute.

Fidgeting to break the silence, Lizbeth surmised, “It’s nothing but another lost pilgrim who took a wrong turn on his way to ‘discovering’ someone else’s’ land.”

“Not my land!” Michelle bristled. “By right, law, and deed, I own this Island—”

“—Unless someone finds a way to buy you off or kick you out of here,” Jude clarified. As one of the first black female accountants in the United States and a former honor student of land economics, Jude felt it her duty to teach Michelle the legalities of owning and keeping property in the United States worked. “Everything,” she often said, “begins and ends with Mr. Dollar Bill.” But whoever was on their way to Tourmaline Island concerned Jude far less than the possibility of one day being forced off their home. None of them liked to talk about *that*; however, Jude needed to have *that* conversation, once and for all. Unlike the other women, she didn’t choose to turn her back on the society that had first disowned her and would have thrown her to the dogs if she hadn’t left it behind. Jude needed to have an escape plan from *that* world if forced to return to it again, and she knew exactly what she would do. As for the others, they would have to go on without her. She knew in her bones that something bigger than a whole army of pilgrims was heading their way.

“It may be time to pull out that stash of cash you didn’t think we knew about,” Jude warned Michelle, whose light skin suddenly flushed orange as every face around the table nodded in acknowledgement and consent. Nothing stayed a secret for too long on Tourmaline Island.

“Don’t you worry about a thing, Michelle,” Beatrice countered in her kindest, most reassuring tone. “There is nothing—you hear me—nothing to fear. It all comes down to having God on your side, and you do or you wouldn’t be here right now. That’s all that matters.”

“Make her shut up,” Lizbeth pleaded.

Mama Delight took a long, deep breath and held it for a moment, allowing her thoughts to crystallize on her tongue. She reasoned, “Don’t nobody know how to git here ‘cept us, ‘less they lucky an’ figga out how to git up under that wall. Only two people been able to do that ova all these years since we come here.”

“Thank the Lord for ol’ Duveaux,” May Su chimed in. “If it wasn’t for him finding this place and making a home for us, we woulda still been out there in all that madness, or dead, God bless ‘im.”

“And Viola, too,” Lizbeth added. “That fool child was a blessing in disguise, bringing us that boy. I’m so grateful he looks after us now and does all the things around here we don’t want to do anymore.”

“Funny how other people’s misfortunes wind up bein’ another’s grace,” May Su reflected.

“Um-hmm” they all agreed. Mama Delight’s hands finally loosened their fold.

“That’s my point. Seems like to me, whoever s’pose to fin’ they way here, do. Whoever ain’t, don’t. Ev’ry foot ever touched this island made it their home. Question is, will that be the case, ‘cause sho’ as sugar is to cane, somebody’s comin’. An’ if they decide they wanna leave, we gotta know in our bones they won’t tell nobody where they been. Lawd knows how long that’ll take. Could be neva. Could be they might keep they word fo’ever, but who out there in the worl’ can we trus’ like that?”

“Won’t know ‘til they get here, that’s for sure,” May Su answered.

Forever the voice of hope and optimism, Beatrice sought to assuage all suspicions.

“Ladies, please, God has been good to us. I don’t believe for one minute that She’d bring us this far for something bad to happen now.”

Still, there was an indescribable pinch of fear in the air that would not be denied for all the optimism in the universe, forcing each of woman to search her heart for honest answers to the uncomfortable questions anchored in their throats. What on earth could the visitor bring to their lives that they didn't already have in that perfect paradise of their own making? What lesson was there to learn that they hadn't already mastered to one degree or another? And why, at this point in their lives would they sacrifice one iota of the serenity and peace that accompanied their every waking day just to make room for another?

That's when the truth of the matter hit Judith like a cosmic two by four. She hadn't lived to be 79 years old without understanding: what happens in a dream is far less important than one's feelings about the dream upon waking. Their individual dream angels had joined forces to sound a piercing alarm that reverberated a warning to prepare not so much for someone's arrival, but for an imminent change. Jude felt it, but how and to what degree their lives would be affected, only God knew. She decided then and there if a big change was coming, she, for one, would face it head on. She *needed* to know. Looking around the table at the lined, frowned brows and faces of her chosen family of 48 years, she realized not a one of them had a clue.

"We're looking at this thing lopsided."

"Whatchu mean?" Mama Dee asked.

"Maybe it isn't about who's coming," she said, "but what they're bringing that we should be concerned about."

"Sounds like trouble to me, anyway you look at it," said Michelle.

"Oh, please," Lizbeth whined, "we got enough to think about without you getting all morbid. Bea, talk to her."

“Well, let’s think about this,” Bea reasoned. “If someone is coming, then we may as well prepare a welcome party for our visitor, the likes of which they’ve never seen.”

“Yeahhh,” said May Su nodded, catching Bea’s sly drift. “Stuff ‘em plenty good with food and drink. Slip ‘em some of Dee’s herbs, the ones that make your mind go blank. Then kick ‘em back to the river, to their grave if need be. Be done with the whole damn thing. Lord knows, I don’t feel like putting up with a whole bunch of foolishness at this point in my life.” Liza, who had barely spoken two sentences since taking a seat, suddenly stood in agreement.

“That sounds about right to me,” she affirmed with icy resolve that chilled every bone in the room. And although none of the women could hardly be labeled “inhospitable”—except maybe Michelle—they all knew, given their collective misgivings, the only thing to do was to cut the trouble off before it took root on the Island. Michelle jumped at thought.

“We got to get that boy out of bed and downriver so he can head off whoever’s coming this way.” In a fluid movement that belied her 75 years, Michelle sprang to the door and paused long enough to issue a warning to everything in Creation.

“And if they get past him, they gotta deal with me next!”

"Oh Lord, there she goes," Jude warned. "I better head down the hill with her."

The others stay glued to their seats, listening for something, anything, in Dee’s cabin that might speak to an end to the mystery heading their way. They all would’ve figured out at least a piece of the puzzle had the one who wasn’t there—the man child outside the circle, but certainly at its core—had been there to tell his side of the dream.