

Dreamer



MultiMind



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Content Warning:

- Severe Blood/Violence
- Brief Mention of Racism



Dreamer

Chapter I

Ever since she was four or five, Vera always had these lively dreams over and over. Not every night but often enough to feel that way. She would wake up with brushes of leaves in her coily hair, her pajamas covered in dirt, soaked with water, skinned knees, ripped clothes or snow in her pockets. If she dreamt it, she felt it.

Vera learned about her dreams and what they were, Dream Traveling, through her mother Adelia. Adelia always reminded her not to fear, as this was a trait that ran all throughout the Florence family tree. She informed Vera that the trait was much more prevalent during slavery times, even used as a method of escape and sometimes to bring families back together. But now, the trait has just about trailed off. “I guess we’re not in so much danger anymore,” Adelia assumed. The last known

member to show the trait was Adelia's great aunt Addie, who kept a dream journal that was buried with her.

The trait tapered off in recent generations, and eventually became a tale of superstition. Even now, few would believe such a thing could exist, let alone run through their blood. Hence, Adelia instructed Vera to keep the trait between the two of them. That sat fine with Vera; she wasn't too keen on the rest of her family anyways. Cataloged as the weird outcast, Vera rarely got along with anyone besides her mother. The elders thought Vera rebuked her Blackness and all the history they fought for because she liked rock bands and wore spike bracelets. The irony was never lost on Vera that she was accused of "denying her Blackness" by liking rock, a Black-made genre. The younger members regularly scoffed at her and called her "White" or "oreo" because of her diction and gothic interests. When she once showed up to a cookout in a fluffy Victorian skirt, a cousin almost set it aflame and another followed her, asking what storybook she dropped out of. It didn't matter that Vera shared her mother's deep desire for history and knowledge, especially about her heritage. She was an outsider all the same.

To be honest, Vera wasn't very outgoing outside of her family, either. Growing up, she made it a point to stay out of the way and remain hidden. Online and offline, she preferred to be a passing phantom rather than the center of attention. Keeping to herself had always been the safer

choice. If no one knew she existed, no one could harm her because she existed.

Instead, she found solace in music. Though she had an expansive palette, Rock was her home. It understood her, made her feel less alone. Less weird, even at her weirdest. Through the years, she had developed quite the collection of albums, posters, shirts and wristbands. Especially of bands that looked a lot more like her. She gravitated to them most.

Adelia could hardly understand her daughter's love for such raucous music but as long as it wasn't drugs or violence, she tried to be at least some version of okay with it. A reluctant but cautious version. Her main focus was her daughter's dream traveling. Adelia had dream traveled only once or twice herself but the trait showed up much stronger in Vera, both for better and for worse.

One night when Vera was eight, she darted into her mother's bedroom with a terrible limp and rope burns gripped across her throat. Awful, red burns seared into her rose-copper skin; there were even prickles of rough twine among the broken skin. Awash in tears, Vera cried about a horrible nightmare: sent back in time and strung up a tree for a midday picnic lynching. There were men, women and children there, all White, all cheering as if at a show. Some of them wore bleached, pointed hoods. Terrified, Vera said she tried to wrest free from the noose and woke up from the shock of falling. Adelia had always been a difficult person to ruffle and rile but this alarmed her. She swept Vera up in her arms and consoled her

suffering daughter. She had a feeling this would happen, Vera's class saw a Civil Rights documentary that day. Adelia kept Vera home the next day to aid her wounds. By mid-morning, they disappeared as Vera napped in her arms during cartoons.

Over time, Vera became better about her dreams, just another part of her life. By the time Vera graduated high school, she had come a bit more out of her shell and even had a few friends, most of them online. Vera decided around the end of high school to hold off continuing her education. Adelia had practically fallen out when she heard the decision. To keep a roof over her head, Vera agreed to take only a year off and get a job during the meantime.

Job procurement wasn't as difficult as Vera had feared, she discovered there was one waiting in the wings for her at her favorite music shop, YinYue: Music Under the Moon. Her boss, Derrick Ma, couldn't have been more excited. He even exclaimed the day she said yes, "I couldn't *wait* for you to be legal so I could snatch you up!-Wait, wait ... that came out wrong." Vera just chuckled and asked when she should start. YinYue wasn't far with connecting bus stops, and nestled in a short row of stores. She had a comfortable full-time job as "inventory clerk" but she was dragged into so many decisions and duties by her boss she felt more like a phantom co-owner.

That was five months ago. This particular day was Tuesday and Vera was doing her usual routine before the store opened at eleven: update the album release board

behind the aged check-out counter, which was crusted over with a layer or two of band stickers; change the hanging posters for albums coming out that week (Vera would secretly stash the ones she wanted to keep); shelve the respective albums and check the three practice rooms in the very back for any mess or problems.

Derrick was planted in the same place he always was – never behind the register where he belonged. He either messed with the drum sets at the rear of the store’s showroom or the turntables next to the sticker-laden check-out counter as his hard worker buzzed about to get the store up and running.

Thirty-eight going on twenty-two, life was always a party to Derrick. He had a jet-black hair rough shorn around his shoulders, a small goatee and dual snakes tattoos wrapped around his built arms. Black snake on right, red snake on left, with the heads covered by his worn red shirt. Derrick had been running YinYue since 2006, the year he turned twenty-five and wound up with a hefty trust fund. His siblings thought he would blow it on something stupid. They were partially right – Derrick never cared about business and described himself as a “Socialist Anarchist”. He only opened YinYue because he wanted to stay surrounded by what he loved and had enough sense to know running a music venue would have been too much brain work. Running a small business was decidedly easier. He was partially right.

Tapping out a steady drum roll on the practice drum pad covering the display snares, Derrick yelled over to

Vera as she minded the shop computer next to the tablet till, “Hey! Don’t forget to put on some ambiance music or something!”

Vera paused and looked up, a deadpan expression on her round face. She looked over to her boss and fussed, “I’ve been runnin’ round like a chicken with my head cut off - You’ve just been drumming away!”

“You’re on the computer, already!” Derrick shouted back across the store. He expertly twirled a drumstick with his fingers. “Pick something cool! Like Avenged Sevenfold or The-”

“Derrick! It’s too *early* for that!” Vera shot back. She checked the time on the computer. The store needed to be ready in twenty minutes. Scrolling through the various playlists stored on the computer, Vera decided, “I’m putting on some psychill and trance. Can you check on the game racks?”

Derrick craned his thick neck to look at the music games section crowded into the front corner of the store, the morning sun bathed over the small selection through the gleaming picture window. There were a couple tester dance pads, a standing rack filled with various rhythm games, tester guitar controllers hanging under the large dual televisions and a stack of product boxes, all displayed in haphazard glory. Vera clicked on the televisions and game demos sang out with vibrant colors. Derrick forgot to turn off the consoles for the weekend, *again*.

The owner shrugged, “Looks good to me.”

Vera sighed quietly at the computer. How this place

never went out of business sometimes befuddled her.

Derrick went back to hammering out a muted solo as light music began to waft from above.

Once eleven had struck, Derrick finished with the drums and got behind the register. He was tall and always walked with pride and confidence. He tapped away at the register, a thin tablet encased in a graffitied hard shell. Only a sticker showcasing the store's name sat atop the street art square in the middle. A small card reader stuck out of its audio jack on the side, colored blue, lavender and fuchsia in marker. Vera resided in the storeroom, fixing coffee.

Within minutes, the first customer arrived, except they were hardly ever a customer. It was Rikers, the local hip-hop head still hoping for a shot at greatness, even as he hurtled steadily and quickly to his mid-thirties. He strolled in with a swagger that resembled more of a bravado-filled limp than anything, especially for his small frame. Rikers wore black skinny jeans and an oversized black shirt covered with pictures of money wafting down, all hundreds. His tightly braided hair stuck out at the nape with disheveled curl. His dark cinnamon ears each held a tiny zircon stud that barely glittered. He smelled of honey and spoke with a drag, "Yuh favorite customer is here!"

Derrick greeted warmly, "Rikers, my man! Got new duds for us?"

Rikers guffawed with mocking laughter as he approached the counter and slapped Derrick's outstretched hand, "Ah haaaaa, Bruce Lee got jokes this

morning. Maaaaan, my mixes are amazin' an' you know it. Twen'ny-nine downloads offa SoundVapor just this past week." He smiled a gold-capped grin.

Derrick stared at the small wire rack nestled between the register and plastic tubs of candy. It was a touch taller than the golden cat statue in front of the register and bits of enamel paint chipped off, clearly second-hand. Taped to the top of the rack was a well-designed card: "Try Some of Our Local Flavors! Only \$5". In the middle rack sat all three of Rikers' albums. Enclosed in purple jewel cases, the cover displayed a poorly edited rendition of The Last Supper taking place in a lofty banker's office. Stamped above the holy heads was the title "Love God, Praise Money" in gold, gaudy, diamond-studded letters.

With a flat face, Derrick returned his stare to Rikers, "Twenty-nine? That's *amazing*. Because none of these moved at *all* this week. Or last. Or this month, come to think of it. I think I even dusted them once. But twenty-nine? Whatever will Kanye do in the face of such talent and competition? Jay-Z must be *terrified*." He pretended to break down and plead to a bemused Rikers, "Don't hurt them, they both have children and wives!" he choked back a fake tear.

Rikers waved off Derrick's ribbing. "Nah, man, I 'on't be messin' with no Illuminati men. That's how they all be makin' their money."

Vera sauntered out of the storeroom and stepped behind the counter, blowing on a cup of light and sweet coffee. She lamented her unfortunate timing when she

spotted Rikers. Just in time for his wild theories. Usually, Rikers would leave after Derrick reamed him but not when he is gathering an audience. Vera stood beside Derrick in moral support – she knew he would eventually call her along as co-sufferer if she didn't.

“Both him *an'* Hova, both workin' for the devil,” Rikers continued. “Don't believe me? Why they got all them symbols in their videos?” Rikers clapped with pointed passion, “They. Devil. Worshippin'. *Signs*. That's why Hov be puttin' his hands in the air like that, he doin' the Freemason sign and that's Illuminati alllll right there.” Reading the clear, wide-eyed disbelief of Derrick's face, Rikers blathered on, “Yuh 'on't believe me 'cuz you Chinese but she be feelin' me, don't you Vera?”

Vera continued to nurse her cooling coffee, her broad nose hovered over the sweet steam. Hot seat. Great. Muffled by the cup, she began, “Actually ...” She removed the cup to speak clearer, “Where'd you get all this information?”

Pleased to believe he had a rapt listener, Rikers explained, “Baby girl, I saw this thing online 'bout Hov an' his hands an-”

“Wait ...,” interrupted Vera, “A random video online? That doesn't sound reliabl-”

“Thank you!” Derrick jumped in with elation. “Now you and your rapper-alien crop-circle conspiracies can go. It's far too early for this and I haven't even had my coffee yet.”

Dejected, Rikers gruffed, “Fine. You 'on't see the New World Order comin'. Don't say I ain't say nothin'.”

As Rikers swaggered out, Derrick called after him, “And teach your grandma how to use the computer so she can stop downloading you twenty-nine times!”

Rikers flipped Derrick off in the small parking lot and stormed away.

Vera chuckled as she returned the cup to her lips. She wished she had ice to add, the coffee wasn’t cooling fast enough.

Derrick mopped his hair back and asked, “Where do people *come up* with this stuff?”

Sipping her coffee, Vera responded with a shrug. “Crazy people are crazy.”



Six hours down and six more to go of Vera’s shift. Tuesdays were always twelve-hour shifts, to make up for being closed on Monday. Derrick thought this was a good idea. Vera thought this would be a good idea if Derrick helped out more. Otherwise, Tuesdays felt like suicide runs.

The other four days Vera worked were plain eight hours, with Sunday and Monday off. Though Tuesday can be a killer, she still liked her job and the benefits it came with, including overtime.

Wiping a mottled blue rag over the glass, Vera cleaned the double glass doors. She took extra care to clean the eighth note handles and not knock the business hours off the door. The electronic sign displayed in bright blue:

YinYue: Music Under the Moon

Hours of Business

Sun: 12p – 5p

Mon: Closed

Tues: 11a – 9p

Weds: 11a – 9p

Thurs: 11a – 9p

Fri: 11a – 9p

Sat: 11a – 10p

Customers milled about the store trying out the displays and checking the wares as punk music played overhead. Muffled music and chatter muttered from all three practice rooms, they were booked all day. A small throng of people amassed at the game demo area. A new rhythm game had come out, *Stomp Thunder: World Force*, and everyone wanted a turn on the dance pads. International pop and dance songs from the game intermingled with the shredding guitars and pounding drums overhead.

Vera threw her rag into the weather-beaten, moldy yellow work bucket and moved over to the bulletin board hung between the counter and doors. The board was filled with various community advertisements, some in English, some in Chinese, and a few in other languages. Job postings, childcare programs, health classes and upcoming music shows. Postings older than six months had to be cleared off, as indicated by a small blue dot in

the corner, which Derrick would update weekly. If there was a printed date, the posting came down the day after it expired. Should there be any inappropriate postings, those were quickly yanked down. Racist ones were always handed to Derrick, who would stand at the front of the shop, call for the store's attention and proceed to light the posting on fire. He would toss out the smoldering mass and address his audience with a kind and polite, "I do not tolerate this. My store. My rules. Everyone, as you were. Thank you for shopping at YinYue: Music Under the Moon." Those postings were quite rare.

Behind Vera slumped in Viper, an up-and-coming emcee working at the electronics store, Volts, down the road. Her demos sold well at YinYue, especially the EP she just released a couple weeks ago, "Beauty Before Beasts, Vol. 1". She still donned her bright crimson work shirt with an embroidered black plug sat over the store's name in circuit outline over her heart. There were pin pricks under the logo; Viper took her name tag off long ago. Her diamond stitched pleather purse hung in the crook of her elbow, cracks vined around the bottom. She had bone straight hair, perfectly curled at the ends. The bangs were stark white, the remainder of her mane pitch black. Several strands clung to her dark chestnut skin.

Viper's cherry-glossed lips were pursed, the free bus was beyond late again so she walked. There was no incline but the summer weather took a toll on her stroll. Her muted plum platform heels didn't do her any favors, either. She had plain pumpkin seed shoes in her bag but

she didn't want to be seen changing shoes on the side of the road, it would look uncouth. Only once she spotted the top of YinYue's sign did a free bus pass her, crowded and over forty-five minutes late. Watching it rumble past her, she silently regretted not switching shoes as soon as she got off the clock.

Clasped by the air conditioned cold, Viper released a heavy sigh. She smeared away a trail of sweat threatening to slip into her dark violet eyes, she didn't feel like trying to take out her contacts for anything. She clodded to the counter and slumped over. She studied the Local Artist rack, only one copy of *Beauty Before Beasts* remained in its yellow jewel case. The cover bore a sharp pink stiletto stepping on the head of a burly, disgusting beast. The title was printed below in plain lettering. She hated pressing albums at home but she loved discovering if any of them sold.

Viper scanned the store. She spotted Derrick on the other side of the store explaining guitar differences to an undecided teenaged buyer. The teen tugged at a bleach-tipped dreadlock as he listened and swayed with indecision. Looking over her shoulder, Viper found Vera working on the bulletin board.

"Heeeey, Vera," Viper greeted with charm. The same charm she always exuded when she had a favor to ask. "Can I sit in the back? I just walked the whole way up her—"

"Well, isn't it the Madam Black Mamba herself!" Derrick marveled as he made his way to her.

Caught by surprise, Viper turned around and shot a

million-watt smile, pinning her sweaty arms close. She would usually greet with a hug but not today.

Derrick stood before her with a brighter grin. “What brings you here, Viper? Your CDs are *flying* off the shelves. The downloads are going like *crazy* on our site since your EP.”

Viper hid her satisfied grin with a modest bow of her head. She worked hard for her success but she still didn’t know how to take a compliment. A diss or snide remark, she could dismantle with the greatest of ease but kind words were another animal she was still trying to get used to. She cuffed her damp hair behind her ear with a ruby nail but her jabbing feet reminded her to stay on task.

With sweet eyes, she graciously accepted, “Thank you sooooo much but could I chill in y’all’s back for a minute so I could sit down and switch shoes? I am *dyin’* right now.”

Derrick skimmed Viper over and spotted her towering shoes. With a gentleman’s grace, he offered an arm and delighted, “Anything for my *best* seller.”

Viper took his arm and together they walked towards the storeroom. She tried to hold her own weight and keep an easy, graceful stride but her aching feet jaunted her flow. Derrick kept strong support so the hobbles weren’t so obvious.

“Vera, hold down the fort,” directed Derrick over his shoulder.

Vera nodded and picked up her bucket. The bulletin board looked neater, the work bucket was fuller. She

dashed up the triplet of red stairs behind the counter and surveyed the store. YinYue sold anything and everything to do with music: instruments, supplies, video games, practice books, practice space, albums, posters, headphones, performance equipment and little knickknacks. Derrick wanted the store to be a one-stop shop for music makers and music lovers. They sold international, they sold local, they sold online. This was how YinYue stayed afloat. They even held in-store shows and signing events from time to time.

Derrick strolled back out with Viper. She was half a head shorter now and comfortable in her dingy pumpkin seeds. Striding like the wind, Viper returned to the counter with Derrick following close behind. She had a confident smile and a firm walk; Derrick had a Cheshire's grin.

"Vera! Tell Viper how much of her stuff sold!" Derrick beamed.

Vera's lips curled into a knowing grin as she started clicking about on the computer. Viper had been a regular for almost as long as Vera. Though, Vera never knew Viper's real name, the emcee wasn't fond of it. "You'll see it on two places: my birth certificate and my tombstone," she used to say. In those two to three years, Viper grew from being just another no-name street rapper to a neighborhood name.

Charts and sales populated the screen. "You sold eleven CDs last week and got forty clicks for download from our site last night," Vera proudly reported. Viper

stood astounded. “You’re goin’ up!” Vera complemented.

Derrick gave a congratulatory clap to Viper’s shoulders and joked, “This time next year, you’ll be getting mobbed by fans here in this store.”

Viper was stunned silent. Her long, manicured hands clasped over her mouth. The flat jewels on her nails glittered in the store light. Every milestone felt massive to her. This is what she passed up college and worked awful retail jobs for, and bit by bit, it was starting to pay off. She could barely find the words.

“I wanted to check my numbers, but ... I had no idea...” Taking a deep breath, she exhaled, “Wow.” Her hands dropped down.

Derrick insisted, “You need to bring more CDs in! We’re running low a little.”

Viper nodded and adjusted her bag, “I’m gonna go now and press some! I’ll see y’all tomorrow, bright an’ early!” She left the store with a proud bounce in her step.

Still basking in the moment, Derrick praised, “Top earner right there. Works hard, gives no bull, and her music is at least more than half decent. More Vipers, less Rikers.” He propped himself against the sales counter and fiddled with the golden lucky cat. A gift from his sister, since she was sure he needed it. Derrick already had rubbed the gold off the top of the raised paw from the many times he’s thumbed it.

Vera checked YinYue’s social media, “Why do you put up with that dude, man?” The notifications were at normal rates, just a couple questions about their practice rooms

sitting in their messages. They had a sizeable following of a few thousand but nothing too stupendous. They were a small business in a small town but they made their online presence seem bigger and it paid off well. Derrick was a mastermind at guessing what would resonate well and when to schedule posts, mostly so he didn't have to remain tethered to the computer all day.

He sighed, "He'll whine if I don't. I've tried."



Soon, the day winded down to closing time, the favorite time of day. Vera picked up the store's microphone and announced, "Shoppers and browsers, YinYue is about to close in five minutes. Please bring your purchases to the register now. If you are in the practice rooms, please pack up and take your trash with you. Thank you for shopping at YinYue: Music Under the Moon." The dented microphone whined with a little feedback as she switched it off. Vera cued the vintage farewell serenade to play over the speaker system as customers lined up.

Vera had been behind the counter the entire night as Derrick spent the evening in the storeroom assembling online orders he should have done earlier. He always kept online orders until the last minute – or if he needed an excuse to get away from an annoying customer.

Tapping up his final box and slapping a printed label on it, Derrick left from the storeroom to check the practice

rooms. Despite the many signs he had on every door of the three practice rooms, still he would find trash and sometimes worse in the soundproofed rooms. The worse dropped off recently since the new cleaning fee (only applied if worse was found) was upgraded to two hundred and fifty dollars and every room had to have a name, email, phone number and paying account attached and prepaid. Coupled with a ban list, Derrick stumbled over far less horrible discoveries. Now, it was picking up the occasional snack wrapper and straightening up the chairs and music stands.

After the last customer filed out, Vera locked the front doors and rolled down the steel window covers. They clanked with a heavy ring as Vera pulled on the dingy, oily chain. She wore the work gloves stored under the till, draped over an aluminum baseball bat.

Behind her, Derrick sauntered through with the work bucket and emptied it into the waste basket behind the counter. The plastic bag crinkled and rustled as the bin filled half-way. The steel cover clinked to a slow finish as Derrick placed the bucket away and checked the till, which blended into the counter and was covered with stickers. It tinged out with a light tap into his stomach. He checked the totals of the day against the till and counted the remaining money. He slipped out a ratty memo pad from under the tablet stand and jotted down the numbers. Under the money rack in the till, he slipped out a clear money bag. Derrick copied the numbers onto the bag and carefully filled the bag. Coins jangled one by one as Vera

went into the storeroom for a dust mop. The night was truly uneventful.

As Vera worked on the marble tiled floors of the practice rooms, Derrick triple checked his numbers on the memo pad and scanned the area for any forgotten coins. Satisfied to find nothing under his vigilant eye, he closed the memo pad and slid it back under the tablet stand and then sealed the money bag shut to bring it to the storeroom's safe. It was a classic-looking safe with a grey dial and hidden behind a filled record crate. Derrick pulled aside the record crate, spun in the correct combination and opened the safe with a cold, metal click. The safe's door creaked in pips and long whines.

Inside the empty safe, velvet coated the walls. Derrick grew into the habit of emptying the safe on Sundays after closing. It helped him mentally close out the week. He used to empty the safe when it was full but a close shave changed his mind: Tire, Shocks & More, the auto part store next to YinYue, was struck with a burglary after hours three years ago. He didn't always count the money or get special bags either but time proved a strict teacher. It only took a few miscounts to learn.

Vera walked into the storeroom, dust mop and work bucket in each hand. Her legs ached and her head felt drained. She placed up the mop and bucket against the bathroom wall as Derrick tossed in the money and shut the safe door. She propped herself against the bare cinder block wall and asked, "How'd we do today?"

Giving the dial a hearty spin, Derrick answered over

the whirr, “Still afloat. YinYue lives to see another day.” He stood up to stretch his aging knees and back, croaking out, “We’re not surfing but we’re afloat.” A small twinge popped in his neck, he rubbed it. He was young at heart, not in flesh. “Ready to go?”

Vera nodded. Behind her were a set of light switches and an alarm panel next to the scuffed up door. She closed the door, turned off the store lights and set the alarm. Hearing a rhythmic beep, both Vera and Derrick walked through the long storeroom to the giant, heavy double doors waiting for them. The storeroom spanned the entire store’s length. There were two bathrooms jutting out the wall, one for Vera and one for Derrick. Old signs, logos and gear lined the hall. Inventory sat on plywood shelves Derrick spent weeks erecting himself when he first bought the store. He was grateful old friends loaned him their tools. His father owned a small chain of hardware stores downtown but scoffed, “Why should I donate to failure? I may as well loan my tools to the Marble Boat. When that sails, then see me.”

The duo exited the beat up double doors, wide graffiti spanned the entirety of both sides. Derrick started his beaten up red truck with his key as the alarm continued to beep behind him, eventually silenced by the bang of the doors. His truck was an old clunker but he loved his new wireless key. The headlight bathed them in a bright glow as the truck idled loudly with a terrible rattle. Derrick had tried to fix the engine himself in the past but he only made the rattle worse, especially because it was the exhaust

system, not the engine, that caused the problem. Stickers coated the steel back bumper in a thick layer, ranging in theme from politics to music. Some were faded, others were new. Vera liked reading them when she took breaks outside.

With a mechanical pop of the passenger side lock, Derrick unlocked Vera's side first. He sprang down from the loading dock to unlock his side by hand. Vera took her time climbing down the ledge of the loading dock. The grumble of the engine vibrated through her fingertips as she pulled open the handle. She gripped the sides of the doorway and with a strong yank, she hopped onto the passenger seat. The leather was cracked and worn, dirty foam jutted out.

Waiting for Vera to settle in and buckle up, Derrick popped in a thrasher metal CD and turned the volume dial low. He then shifted into reverse, the driving shaft orb covered in black duct tape, backed out and drove away.

The drive was relatively quiet. Drilling music played over the angry jostling in the back seat. So many things filled the back, the truck practically served as a moving storage room. There were jackets, books, even a crate of maintenance supplies such as a windshield scraper and a wrench set.

It was a short ride to Vera's house, just a few blocks. Vera usually got rides home on Tuesdays since she helped close. Otherwise, she'd wait for the free bus. There was a stop in front of YinYue and another half a block away from her home, not much of a challenge.

Derrick pulled up to the small, two storied house. It laid on flat ground with very little yard or lawn to speak of. The roof had a flat tent and the walls were made of brick. The face of the house was hidden in the moonlight shining behind it. The street lights were out on the block again, third time this season. Lining the yard was a wooden fence with a mismatched iron gate. The gate was a delicate work of tangled roses flowing into an intricate curve. Solar stakes traced up the stone-spotted path from the gate to the black storm door. The storm door also bore latticed flowers in the metal work. The mustard yellow door behind it held a narrow arc window pane deeply aglow – Adelia was home.

Vera waved goodbye to Derrick and pulled on the handle to exit the clunky truck. The grumble of the engine always reminded her of a combine tractor. She slammed the door shut; it never closed with anything less.

“Bye Derrick!” Vera shouted over the engine and walked on to the sidewalk as Derrick pulled off. The thrasher music rocketed up, drowning out the engine.

She dug for her phone as she unhooked the gate and walked through. The gate banged back and re-hooked itself. Traveling up the stone path, her phone lit up her plump face as she checked all that she missed since lunch break. The clock gears in her phone case ticked loosely in her palm with her every step, the gentle discs of light illuminated her scuffed, thick boots.

There was a new update on her favorite online show, *Mystery Pop Pop*. It was a comedic mystery show filled

with silly antics and unusual turns. Vera read comments about a surprise twist that leaked as she dug for her keys. She pulled out her keys by the eight-ball keychain and opened the storm door. Screenlight painted her face and the yellow door as she fumbled for the correct key and unlocked the door.

Vera never broke sight with her screen, even as she walked in. She tapped the door shut with her heel. The living room felt cool, and brass table lamps filled the room in a clean glow. It bordered on the cusp of messy, short stacks of books and movie cases dotted around the overcrowded and short bookcase. In the bookcase held the heaviest and widest book in the house, the Encyclopedia Africana. Vera once tried to pick it up, it felt heavier than two bricks. The television sat atop the bookcase, playing an Italian cooking show at medium volume. Adelia sat on the sand gray couch in front of the television, focused on her tablet. She had close cropped, coily jet black hair and dark, cherry-brown skin.

Vera blindly greeted, “Ey, Ma,” and headed up the stairs. She sprang over the first triplet of stairs and landed soundly on the square landing before turning and heading up the rest. They whimpered and whined underfoot, knobby and well past their time.

Adelia acknowledged her daughter with a distracted wave and kept scrolling. She was comparing bulb prices, the back patio light wouldn’t stop buzzing or flickering. Home improvement projects gave her something fruitful to do; the job she had as delivery dispatcher head

supervisor wasn't cutting it. The only thing she liked about that job was that it kept the lights on and her family fed.

Vera exited the stairs and went down the dark, narrow hall into her room. She used the back of her phone for light until she turned on her bedroom's lamp. Band posters covered her walls, and a spaceship hung from under the ceiling light. Albums splayed across the top of her squat, plastic dresser. She liked digital music but hated how she couldn't truly "own" the tracks. At least with CDs, she didn't worry about having to buy the same song just to hear it somewhere different or DRM pulls. Like the stairs, the floorboards creaked with her every step. Some of the slats bore deep pockmarks and missing strips.

Her room wasn't small, just crowded. She had a twin bed covered in clothes and albums. Her laptop laid near her black satin pillow, plugged up and asleep. Silver blue drapes and crystal beaded curtains hung over her bed. The closet was half full, the remaining half laid scattered around her room.

Vera bundled the clothes that laid on her bed into a pile, threw the albums on top, placed them on top of the dresser, and flopped down in front of her laptop. Striking orange detail ebbed to life on the lid of the computer as it woke up. The keyboard lit up the same volcanic orange, the laptop whirred softly. Vera kicked off her work boots to better curl up on her bed. It took little time for the episode page for *Mystery Pop Pop* to load. She always had a

tab opened to their episode list for convenience.

She dug around behind the laptop to find a cord to plug her phone up with. The sensation around the leaks was at a fever pitch. She hoped the rumors she heard over the past week weren't true, the leaks neither confirmed nor denied them. She heard that her favorite character, Leilani, might be killed off to make way for the second lead, Daymond. It would break Vera's heart if so, Leilani was the only one worth watching but she hadn't been in a couple recent episodes and the season finale was the next one.

The webpage of *Mystery Pop Pop* spared little frill and decadence. The show operated on a shoestring budget but made every penny count. Red curtains lined the borders of the site, and playing cards decorated every episode thumbnail. The season finale was at the top of the list, out a little earlier than usual. Vera brimmed with delight and anticipation. She jumped off the bed, turned off the lights and hopped back on. Rocking from her joyous shockwave, Vera steadied the computer. She stretched out her short, thick legs, slid the laptop onto her lap and clicked "Play".

Chapter II

Morning arrived quickly. Much too quickly.

Vera woke up, bleary and jumbled. A random episode of *Mystery Pop Pop* played on her screen. Little did she know, Vera had fallen into a dreamless slumber twenty minutes into the forty-five minute show. She saw a glimpse of her favorite character, Leilani, before drifting off during an episode flashback.

Checking the time on her computer, Vera blinked hard several times to adjust to the shining sunlight. The day was bright, brilliant and blinding as rays sprawled across her pillow. 9:34 AM, almost a whole hour past when she should have woken up and almost fifteen minutes before her shift would start.

Perked with alarm but still leaden with sleep, Vera scrambled off the bed. She did a quick look-over, at least

she still had on her work clothes. Once, she woke up with a warrior gauntlet and a soft fox pelt made of iron. Those lived in the deep corner of her closet. In vain effort to hide the fact she was wearing yesterday's clothes, Vera rooted out a faded, black vest from her clothes pile and threw it on. She yanked her phone from the charger and slipped her work boots back on. With no time to waste, Vera opened her phone and tried to get a quick lift through TwipRide. Everything was on-peak and expensive but she had no other choice, her mother had already driven off to work.

Tapping in her home information because the GPS was too slow to turn on and focus, Vera dashed into the bathroom, narrowly missing a tumble down the stairs during a skidding turn. As she waited for TwipRide to load, Vera brushed her teeth. By the time she washed out her mouth, TwipRide picked her a driver that was four minutes away. A little micro car popped up with the driver's details and picture but Vera swiped it away, all she wanted was a speed demon that could dash her to work in less than twelve minutes. Vera spotted flecks of toothpaste on her cheeks and a wipe of it on her nose. She smeared water all over her lower face and turned off her sink with a squeak. She was all clear during the second check. Her wild cloud of hair bore a flat side from her pillow. Vera picked it out in haste and promised herself to scour YinYue for a rubber band to mask her hasty work. Her phone beeped, the micro car honked its horn and text displayed underneath on the rolling map "Your ride is

almost here! Less than a minute away.”

Vera gave her face a couple quick pats with the powder blue towels as she pocketed her phone in a side cargo pocket. Then, she ripped out of the bathroom and thundered down the stairs, checking her pockets for keys. The living room was awash with golden daylight as Vera erupted out the front door.

Slamming the door shut, Vera gave her waiting driver a start. Frozen against his window, clutching his heart, the college student watched Vera rocket down the stone path and spear into his car. The sedan rocked a little from her impact; the driver paled a couple shades from his warm mahogany.

Before the driver could thaw, Vera rushed out, “YinYue, please! Forty-five thirty-five Woodson Way!”

Still shocked and wide eyed, the driver pulled himself from the window and started their journey. He said nothing, it was too early to even try. He just wanted this trip to be over and drove like it.

Vera gripped the seat as the car raced down the street. She apologized a little slower as she checked her phone, “Sorry, I’m super late.”

It was a mad dash to YinYue; the driver took nothing but hard corners and dangerous shortcuts. Anything to get this frantic client out his car faster. Vera arrived at work with a minute to spare but she was dropped off at the front of the locked business, not the back like she asked when they were close. With no time to argue, Vera jumped out the car and slammed it shut. As the car sped away,

Vera ran up to the front doors and banged on them with an open palm. The gates were up and the lights were on.

A little more banging and Derrick popped out from the storeroom, his phone glued to his ear and a bewildered, confused expression marked on his face. He sauntered up to the door with a calm, bemused stride as he watched Vera wave and point to the lock between the handles. She only had the key to the back, not the front because the only time she used the front doors were for her later shifts.

Derrick pressed the mic of his phone against his shoulder and asked through the glass, "What's the password?" The thick glass muffled his voice.

Vera stomped her foot, "Come on, Derrick! It's too early for that!" Derrick continued his call as Vera yelled, "I just ran up here! We don't have a password!"

Derrick returned the phone to his shoulder. "Yes we do." He returned to his call.

"No, we don't!" Vera protested.

Derrick turned about and started to walk away. Vera banged on the door's window again. She took a quick glance around, she started to feel ridiculous and figured it would only be a matter of time before she'd gather a crowd of some sort. Workers of the surrounding stores were filtering in as well.

Vera shouted, "What's the password! 'Sleeping Beauty'?"

The owner stopped and turned on a booted heel. He drifted back to the doors and clicked the metal latch.

Derrick cracked open the left door and placed the phone against his shoulder. With a simple and gentle tone, he informed, “The password is ‘I’m late.’”

Vera barreled past him using the other door. “I am *not* late!” she said defiantly as she stormed to the storeroom for a rubber band.

Derrick continued his call, unbothered by her temper. “Nà shì shéi? Vera, tā chídào!”

Vera had heard Derrick as she stormed back out, no rubber band to be found. As she scoured around the shop computer, her ears perked.

Derrick chuckled at the response on the other end, “I know, right?”

Ears burning, Vera darted upright and asked over the computer, irate, “Hey, Derrick! Some help?” Any excuse to make the conversation stop.

Derrick nodded at Vera in acknowledgment. To the person on the other line, he said, “Hey, talk later? Duì, duì. Bye bye,” and hung up. He found Vera focused on him with a frying glare. “What?”

Vera accused, “I heard my name. Y’all were talkin’ ‘bout me!”

Derrick rolled his eyes as he slipped his phone into the back pocket of his black pants, “Christ, Vera, my cousin wanted to know who was in the background. I wasn’t rippin’ on you in another language.”

“You sure?” Vera wasn’t convinced.

The owner blew out a defeated sigh and rubbed his face. “Vera, either learn Mandarin or stop worrying about

what I say in my personal conversations,” he stated firmly.

Vera’s fire shriveled. “It’s just ...,” Vera tried to look for the words but Derrick responded in the trailing silence instead.

“If you want me to talk in English each and every time or each and every mention I make of you just so you can feel better, regardless of what I say, you are very stunningly close to needing a new job.” Vera hastily straightened up and stammered but Derrick cut her off quick, “Let me finish: This is *my* business. I can talk in *my* home language to *my* family in *my* store if *I* want to. Especially to relatives who have very poor English, like my cousin. Now,” Derrick dropped his hard tone for a sweeter demeanor, “any questions or can I be the wonderful, adorable, fun loving and incredibly handsome boss I always strive to be? Besides, I know where you ‘secretly’ stash your posters. Twenty points for bucking capitalism, minus fifteen for stealth. I used to snatch cologne and spray paint from the rich stores uptown as a kid. Sneak smarter.” He snickered to himself.

Vera stuttered out an apology with her head dropped low and returned to the computer, stewing in awkwardness. She didn’t mind that her boss spoke in more than one language, she just didn’t want anything bad said about her in any language. She sighed and picked the light music for that morning, Victorian classical.

Soft music in the morning was still quite new for YinYue. If it were up to Derrick, the store would be playing louder and harder genres every moment of the day.

Somehow, Vera managed to reason to Derrick that there was such a thing as “too early” for raging metal and brash punk, especially for the average customer. With the compromise of trying out “Soft Time” only for the summer and up until half past noon, Derrick reluctantly agreed.

Vibrant violins piped out from the overhead speakers as Vera searched the store to find whatever Derrick didn't do for opening. She gave out a gaping yawn as she noticed some of the practice room info boards weren't updated for the day.



By half past noon, Vera felt beyond ran down. She tapped Derrick as he stood over the shop computer deciding new music and told him she was going to take her half hour break in the storeroom.

Tucked behind the dual bathrooms in the back was a little dusty brown cot situated under a tall shelf. There on that cot sat a travel pillow, a small teddy bear Derrick left “for décor”, and, at the foot of the cot, a thin blanket clumped up in a pile. Vera closed the storeroom door and dragged herself to the cot. She fluffed the lumpy pillow and slipped off her shoes to lay down. She normally avoided naps at work because of her dreams but today she was too dragged down to care. Vera pulled out her phone to set an alarm to ring in half an hour and placed it against her leg. Ska blared throughout the store as she sorted to

get comfortable, muffled by the cinder block walls and closed door. Once her head touched the pillow, Vera was out.

The dream was simple and pleasant. Vera was sliding down a dense forest path like a snowboarder. Rugged terrain passed beneath her mountain boots like smooth snow. She could feel every pebble and twig. She sliced between evergreens in the cool mountain air as sprigs of needles caught in her hair. The rushing wind turned one cluster of needles into a golden feather fascinator, solid and heavy.

It was exhilarating, until her legs started to sink into the ground as she gained momentum, speeding towards a grassy cliff and the great expanse of the wild blue yonder.

Half-way sunk to her mid calves, Vera leaned back to fall on her hands and rump. She skidded to a stop just before she crossed onto the grassland. Her hands then sank into the ground like quicksand as she started to slide again. Crossing into the grassland, Vera struggled to pull out her hands and stop herself but she was jarred awake with a close hiss and heavy shake.

“Vera! Ver-ron-nic-ca!” Derrick rattled Vera. Concern knitted across his face, he almost shook her like a doll.

“Whaaaaaaaat?” Vera whined. For once, she felt like she was getting in some restful sleep. “I’m on breaaaaaaaak,” she bumbled out as she picked up her phone with a clumsy grip. She checked the time: Break ended over half an hour ago. Time was *not* on her side today.

“What the *hell* were you *doing*?” Derrick hissed. “Look at you!”

Vera looked down at herself and jumped with a start. Covered in dirt up to her knees and elbows – and caught by her boss, no less.

Bewildered, Derrick blustered, “Viper’s watching the store. I heard your phone go off but you never came out. I come in here and here you are with that hair thingy–” Derrick pointed to Vera’s gold fascinator, which Vera clasped in shock “- growing out your poof and your pants and your hands were starting to get dirty like you were wading through dirt. I *had* to wake you.”

Vera’s mind swam. She never planned for this moment, for accidental discovery; every time she thought about it, she just would will the worry away. Now she was silent and petrified.

Derrick gave Vera’s shoulder a firm shake, “Vera. Vera, you alright? Talk to me!”

Her jaw bobbed, words refused to come. In the deep ocean of realization, she was drowning. Feeble voiced, she tried to save herself, “I ... I can explain.” She stared at Derrick’s waiting, worried face. She looked away, shaking her head, “No ... no, I can’t.”