THE OTHER PRINCESS

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London W1F 8AN
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First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2024.
This paperback edition published by Allison & Busby in 2024.

Published by arrangement with *William Morrow Paperbacks*, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, New York, New York U.S.A.
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-0-7490-3064-3

Typeset in 11/16pt Adobe Garamond Pro by Allison & Busby Ltd.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

For Rhea Elizabeth Stovell

My mother's kiss, my mother's kiss,
I feel its impress now;
As in the bright and happy days
She pressed it on my brow.

You say it is a fancied thing
Within my memory fraught;
To me it has a sacred place –
The treasure house of thought.

Frances E. W. Harper, excerpt from *My Mother's Kiss* (1854)

Prologue

West Africa, 1843

The mother dipped a clay urn into the river's cool water and filled it to the rim. In her other hand, with strong fingers and a calloused palm, she balanced her newborn in the crook of her arm. Then lovingly, she poured the liquid over the child's body, rinsing away the blood, the birth, and the stench of new life. An odour that oddly smelt almost sweet in its foulness.

No other thoughts interfered with these early moments. There was only the cherished affinity between mother and child.

The mother's name was Kayin, which meant long-awaited one. Her child's large black eyes, having adjusted to the world's light, followed Kayin's every movement until the infant's and mother's gazes interlocked, sewn together with an unbreakable length of thread. Never too far away. Never too tightly bound.

The delivery had been long and torturous. A cord wrapped around the baby's throat had almost killed them both. Once the child's cries echoed into the dawn, the fear inside the mother's womb eased but didn't disappear.

A name defined a destiny for the Yoruba people, a map for the child's path in life, a path that followed her from infancy to childhood, to adulthood and death. It was Kayin's duty and Yoruba tradition to name her little girl according to the

circumstances of her birth. But she hesitated.

She wished to give her daughter a name other than Aina, the name of her birthright.

'Aina' meant born with her mother's life cord around her neck, born to a difficult life, born to an existence of heartbreak and hardship. The idea of burdening her child with such a name sickened Kayin.

Sitting cross-legged on the riverbank, she held her child to her breast, her heart at once full of love and heavy with sorrow.

What if she ignored tradition? Whom would it harm if she defied the gods and gave her daughter a chance at a joyful life? Her name could be 'Oko Mi', which meant my darling and carried no curse. Kayin could call her Nothing, or Everything, or Why or Why Not – more names that didn't sentence an infant to a life of woe.

She'd take any risk and be brave enough to challenge the gods for her pure, innocent, beautiful child. But before facing the gods, she first had to convince her husband.

Kayin was a queen and wife to a king. She must seek his counsel before she dared defy the gods.

Kayin set out in search of him. Like the other men in their village, he was a warrior and stood guard over the town during the night and early morning.

The slave traders attacked when they believed the people of her town were the most unprepared. But her husband wasn't a man of chance. He and his men positioned themselves in the forest, where the moonlight allowed them to see into the darkness and through the shadows.

On a hillside overlooking the river, she found him.

'Why are you here?' he whispered as she approached. 'Does the child continue to do well?' His voice was husky with concern.

'She is fine, but I worry about her future. Her birth was difficult and—'

'I know. What is on your mind?' he asked.

'I wish for you to grant me an act of opposition.'

'Who do you wish to oppose?'

'I want to do something against everything we've ever believed in.'

'Oh.' The look in his eyes was more tempered indulgence than concern. 'All right, I am listening. Proceed.'

'We have six children, whom I love dearly, but our seventh child is unique.'

'Each of our children holds our hearts in their hands.'

'But my heart is full of worry and regret for this little girl.'

She rocked the baby in her arms. 'How can I saddle her with a lifetime of sorrow and sadness?'

He didn't respond, only stared at the child she held.

Kayin took a deep breath. 'I want no part of the naming tradition if it means cursing her with a legacy of hardship.'

'You've had seven children. Not all the births have been easy. What makes this child different?'

'She is the last one I'll bear.'

He hadn't moved since they'd begun speaking. But now, his weight shifted backward as he peered down at her. 'You know this. How? Why?'

'My body will no longer make children.' She kept her gaze on his chest until she dared look into his eyes, praying she'd find

them understanding and not filled with hatred for her betrayal.

'I didn't expect this decision from you,' he said. 'No matter how difficult the birth.'

'My love for you is as strong as when we first met. But I am older now, my husband, and my womb is exhausted. We've had seven children. I can bear no more.'

Sunlight streamed through the tree leaves, drawing Kayin's attention to the sky. With the dawn, the clouds changed from black to grey to orange and yellow and blue and green everywhere else – the colours of a rainbow after a morning shower.

The first time they lay together, there had been a rainbow.

'Do as you wish,' her husband finally said.

Had she heard him correctly? He wasn't looking at her, but his voice had been distinct, unmistakable. Yes, she'd heard him correctly. 'Are you certain, my husband? You will allow me this?'

'Today, I learnt I cannot stop you from doing as you see fit. My arguments fall on ears that refuse to hear me.'

Her stomach clenched. His tone was a snarl. His words chewed and pushed out of his throat like chips of wood. She had hoped not to hear her king's anger, but she accepted that his ire wasn't because of her desire to abandon the tradition of the naming ceremony. She had left his bed. 'I am sorry, but I can't take back what I know to be true. I thank you, my husband, for loving me and understanding this decision.'

She leant forward, baby in her arms, to kiss her husband's cheek, but he turned away, avoiding her touch.

'I will not stop you from giving our daughter whatever name you choose,' he said. 'But I will call her Aina. An Egbado princess born with a cord around her neck. Aina, the last child

of my wife, who is Kayin, which means the long-awaited one.'

With those words, he left her and returned to his post, although he did not need to guard the road. The slave traders didn't attack the villages after the sun rose above the treetops.

Kayin stood, unable to draw a breath. The hopefulness that had flooded her chest had seeped away.

A day later, she prepared for the ritual, which had been delayed as long as she dared. After she built a fire that blazed towards the sky, she was joined by the town's wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts. All the women of Okeadon came to bear witness.

Kayin's first act was to make two small incisions with a sharp instrument in her daughter's cheeks. The wounds proved to whoever saw them that Aina was royalty, a princess among the Egbado.

Then the ceremony began, and Kayin hesitated only once and only for an instant when she met her daughter's gaze. Kayin had accepted tradition. There was no escaping it or her husband's will.

She announced her daughter's name with trembling lips, but her words were clear as thunder and bold as the lightning of a summer storm: 'Princess Aina. Born with a cord around her throat, child of a difficult birth. This is your name, and this is your destiny.'

Part One

The Watering of the Graves

Chapter One

West Africa, 1848

By the time I was five years old, I had a reputation.

All because of a game played on the riverbank with sticks and stones and lines drawn in the dirt.

They called it Mancala. An amusement of placement. The board, small holes dug in the sand, started empty, and the players chose to add a new piece or move an existing one. The game pieces were black, grey, and smooth white stones. All found on the rocky ground a few minutes from Okeadon.

I played against my brother, Kola, and two of my sisters, but there were seven of us. The oldest ones didn't play. I always won.

I credited these victories to my physical speed – I had small, quick hands – and mental acuity. My recognition of patterns, whether in sounds or figures etched in stone, filled my mind with ideas from which I created melodies. I had such a strong sense of catch. I could grab anything thrown at me before it struck its target, which in many cases was me (my siblings loved to tease). I could also decipher any puzzle, written or spoken, if it wasn't too complicated – I was only five. But even then, I believed my five-year-old talents would serve me well until the end of my days.

It was late one afternoon, and the river was full of women cleaning and washing tunics, long cloths, cooking vessels, and

infants. Kola, my sisters, and I had knelt in the dirt nearby, our stones in place, our hearts happy, especially mine, since I expected to win. But the very next moment marked the beginning of the end of my innocence.

Not only had I lost the game for the first time in my life, but also my temper. Something I hadn't realised I had or could lose.

Disbelief erupted from my throat, and I started kicking and scratching like a horned goat trapped in a briar.

One of my sisters grabbed my shoulders and shook me, hoping to calm me. 'Stop making so much noise. It's a silly game. Hush up. Someone might think you're weak-minded.'

This sister was only two years my senior and had never raised her voice towards me before. No one in the family had, for that matter, including my father and mother.

Confused, I cried harder. I didn't understand. 'Why are you mad at me? I was the one who lost. You won the game! Why are you yelling at me?'

Despair was building a nest of thorns behind my eyes. I had a right to be upset, cry, and stomp, but why were Kola and my sisters staring at me? Did they think me ridiculous? Had they forgotten I was the youngest child of Kayin, and her last-born? I eyed them with five-year-old ferocity.

Desperate, I asked, 'Why didn't I win today? I always win.'

'Your life has been too easy,' said one of the sisters. 'You needed to learn a lesson.'

'It's time we stopped coddling you,' said the other. 'At five years old, you are not a baby, and we—'

'Almost six,' I interrupted her.

'That's right,' added Kola, who was almost old enough to join

our father's army. 'And you must face your destiny like the rest of us.'

'What destiny?' I asked. 'I don't understand. Please.'

'You want an explanation,' my brother said. Then he glanced at my sisters. 'Should I tell her?'

'No, don't tell her. Mother should talk to her.'

'The way she's been treated is because of Mother,' Kola said. 'Mother never wants her to feel bad about anything because she's her darling.'

The way his voice hardened gave me chills.

'It might be difficult to hear,' he said. 'But at almost six, it is time you learnt the truth.'

'What do you mean – truth? What truth?' I looked from Kola to my sisters, hoping one of them would contribute something that made sense.

'We let you win. We've always let you win because you've never been good at games, and our mother insisted you win.'

For a child who believed she was the luckiest girl in Okeadon, his words were like a fist striking me in the gut. But I ignored the sickness rolling in my stomach.

'You are liars!' I kicked the ground, sending the stone game pieces flying. 'And I don't have to listen to liars!'

My three siblings only stared at me. I stared back. I'd feel better if one of them reached out to me, offered to wipe my tears, and apologised for their mean words and harsh expressions. But instead, they turned away and started to play another game without me.

My heart skipped a beat. I needed a hug. My mother was knee-deep in the river a few feet away, washing my father's tunics.

Kayin loved me, but when I cried, she cried too, and I had shed enough tears for both of us.

So I ran.

Forbidden or not, I headed for the forest to find Dayo, my second-eldest brother. He would hug me.

Poju, the eldest brother, had a family, and I rarely saw him. He came by sometimes to join my father and the other brothers to exchange stories of our ancestors and play musical instruments, such as the balafon or the bata drums, or my father's favourite, the ubo aka. But these times were few.

So it was Dayo whom I sought. He was fifteen and tall and wide-bodied. He was the son my father counted on. The son my mother doted on. The brother I loved the most.

A soldier in the King's army (our father's army), he wielded a sword and sometimes carried a musket and planned to marry a girl named Bimpe the following spring.

Dayo would hug me.

The field on the other side of the river was where my mother and the other women pulled root vegetables from beneath the ground. Once I reached the open area, it took a few more minutes before I entered the forest, where the day only existed in chunks of shadow and light beneath the leaves of a million trees. I couldn't see more than a foot in front of me, and the possibility of getting lost or eaten by a wily beast finally crossed my mind.

But I had to believe I'd find my brother before danger found me.

'What are you doing out here?'

I covered my mouth with my hand to silence the scream Dayo's sudden appearance had pulled from my throat. He had

leapt from the treetops and glared at me with a scowl on his face.

'Looking for you,' I said in my smallest voice.

'Whatever for? You know better than to come into the forest by yourself. You know better than to come into the forest at all.'

'I had to talk to you.' But that was as much as I said before the tears started again. And I had thought I was done crying.

'Whatever has happened must be serious.' He patted the top of my head, then knelt in front of me and wiped my tears with his fingertips. 'You are not one to sob so loudly or so much without cause. Have you been injured? Did something happen to one of our brothers or sisters? To our mother?'

'No, that's not it.' I swallowed. 'I lost a game, and they told me that I'd only won the games before because everyone let me win – they said mother made them, but now that I'm almost six, they decided to stop letting me win.'

'Don't worry about the game. It was never as important as you seemed to think,' he said. 'You should not have come into the forest. It's not safe, and you should stop crying. It makes too much noise, and you'll frighten the creatures I'd rather not see.'

Then he gave me the hug I'd come into the woods for, and I melted in his embrace.

'I love you, Dayo.'

'I love you.' He released me and stood. 'Now, I'll walk you back to the riverbank. Then I must return to my watch.'

Feeling better, I asked, 'What are you watching for?'

'Slave traders.' He pushed aside low-hanging branches with his sword. 'The Dahomey warriors, mostly.'

'What is a slave trader, and who are the Dahomey?'

'Our enemy.'

'They are people like us?' I asked.

He shrugged. 'Yes and no, not exactly.'

He sounded as bewildered as I felt. 'Is that why you are in the forest every day?' It was a question I'd asked him before. 'To watch out for our enemies?'

He nodded.

I exhaled slowly, still puzzled. 'Why are they our enemies?'

'We used to be one nation, all part of the Oyo Empire, until a brutal civil war broke out long ago. The Egba, our people, joined with several other Oyo states and ended up enemies of Dahomey and the Porto Novo, who had banded together. Bitter rivalries, opposing views on trade goods, and other things led to more fighting, and the land of the Egbado nation was caught in the middle between the two great halves of the once all-powerful Oyo.

'Many battles were fought and continue to be fought, but Dahomey does not want only to win a war. Their business, their trade, is the capture and selling of people – they are slave hunters in the slave trade.' His voice sounded as if it had been stretched so thin it might break. 'That is why we guard the road. We can't be surprised by Dahomey warriors. For them, winning a battle means murdering as many people as they enslave.'

The story frightened me, but not for the reason Dayo might have imagined. 'Am I like the Dahomey warriors because I want to win?'

He laughed softly. 'No, you are not Dahomey. You misunderstand.' He picked me up in his arms and cradled me under my bottom as if his forearm were a stool I sat on. 'Father says that the difference between war and savagery is

Dahomey – you are no savage.' He patted my head. 'You are a sweet little girl.'

Thoroughly satisfied by his compliment, I circled my arms around his neck. But as I hugged him tightly, I looked closer at the bluestone neckpiece he wore. I had admired it when I first saw it around my father's throat. It was the most beautiful shade of blue I'd ever seen, the only such-coloured stone in all Okeadon.

'I thought Father promised the necklace to Poju. Why did he give it to you, Dayo?'

'It's a long story,' he said solemnly. 'I'll tell you tomorrow. But now, let's get you home where you can apologise to your brother and sisters, and I can return to my post.'

I pouted. 'I don't want to.'

'Don't want to what? Apologise?' He shook his head, and his eyes clouded with concern. 'If you don't say I'm sorry, you won't sleep when you go to bed tonight. You will have no rest if you are still angry.'

Why should I say I'm sorry? Why should I be the one to bow my head in shame? But Dayo had sounded so severe. I had to tell him the truth. 'I don't want to say I'm sorry if I don't mean it.'

He adjusted me in his arms. 'Aina. Aina. You're almost six. You're old enough to know better.'

Of course I knew better, but that didn't guarantee I'd make the decision he wanted me to make. 'Oh. Oh. I know what I'll do.' I grinned proudly. 'I just won't sleep.'

As soon as we reached fallow ground, I began pestering Dayo about the necklace with the bluestone pendant.

The questions ran in circles in my mind. How had he

convinced our father to give it to him? A family heirloom passed down from father to eldest son for generations was never meant for the second oldest. And me? I only dreamt of wearing it. But if Dayo wore it, I could also wear it, even if I wasn't a boy. Father had made an exception to the rule by not giving it to his oldest son. He could do it again for his youngest daughter.

But after I admitted to preferring a sleepless night over an apology, Dayo stopped speaking to me. He still carried me in his arms, but no matter how many questions I asked or how heartfelt my pleas for a reply, he didn't say a word until the stranger appeared.

Dayo put me down and fisted the handle of his sword. 'Your trade, mister?' he asked, his tone none too friendly.

The stranger had stepped from between two tamarind trees and blocked our path. He was strangely thin, like a weed in the tall grass. A stiff breeze would send him deep into the forest where the anthills were high and the lions hungry. I wondered why he didn't eat his meals. Perhaps Dayo would invite him to dinner. I nudged Dayo's leg to tell him, but my brother held me behind him with the hand he hadn't wrapped around his sword.

'I am a merchant who travels between Abomey and Abeokuta. I come to Okeadon to speak to your king.'

Dayo pointed his sword at the stranger's throat but didn't extend his arm. So the blade's tip didn't touch the man's skin, only threatened. 'How are you travelling these roads between the Dahomey palace in Abomey and the Egba kingdom in Abeokuta? Those states are at war.'

The man tilted his head as if surprised by Dayo's knowledge.

'I should speak with Okeadon's king,' the stranger said.

'You can speak with me. I am his son.'

'The eldest son?'

'The second eldest.'

'The King or his firstborn male child must hear the news I have sworn to deliver.'

Dayo moved his sword closer to the man's throat. 'What is your name, merchant?'

The stranger hopped from one foot to the other as if a horde of bug-a-bugs chewed on his ankles. 'My name is unimportant, but if you must know, it is Simeon Olayinka, and I am a courier of the King of Kuta – whom your father knows. My king instructed me to speak only with your father or his eldest son, and I must obey my king.'

The man ended his speech with a crooked smile, as if he'd said something magical. I looked at Dayo and wondered what he might do next. He gave little indication of his thinking, but his eyes were narrow and darker. Was he worried about what the man had said, even though he was holding the sword?

My height wasn't much to speak of, I came to Dayo's waist if I held my head high, but I had strong lungs. And I wanted the worry on my brother's face to disappear.

'Dayo. Dayo.' I tugged at the sash of his tunic. 'Father will be home. He's always home for dinner.' I pointed at Simeon Olayinka. 'He looks hungry and should come home with us and eat dinner, and after, he can talk to Father.'

Dayo squeezed my shoulder.

Then he poked Simeon Olayinka in the side with his sword and gestured for him to walk in front of us. 'Head straight. My sister's right. You should join us for dinner and tell my father about your message from the King of Kuta.'