

## **The Labrys Reunion**

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Spinsters Ink  
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## About the Author

Terry Wolverton is the author of seven books: three novels, *The Labrys Reunion*, *Bailey's Beads*, and the novel in poems, *Embers*; a memoir, *Insurgent Muse: life and art at the Woman's Building*; and three collections of poetry, *Shadow and Praise*, *Mystery Bruise* and *Black Slip*.

She has also edited fourteen successful compilations, most recently, with Sondra Hale, the anthology, *From Site to Vision: the Woman's Building in contemporary culture*, published on the Internet at [www.womansbuilding.org/fromsitetovision/](http://www.womansbuilding.org/fromsitetovision/).

Terry has taught creative writing since the late 1970s; in 1997, she founded Writers at Work, a center for creative writing in Los Angeles, where she offers several weekly workshops in fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry. She is currently an Associate Faculty Mentor for the MFA Writing Program at Antioch University Los Angeles. She spent thirteen years at the Woman's Building, a public center for women's culture, eventually serving as its executive director.

She is also a certified instructor of Kundalini Yoga.

She welcomes your response to this book. E-mail her at [wtrsatwork@aol.com](mailto:wtrsatwork@aol.com).



# Prologue

**Friday, May 10, 1996**

If she'd thought about it, Gwen might have said that Emma Firestein seemed destined for trouble. It wasn't the blonde young woman's tight, black mini or her leather vest with nothing under it but bare skin. It wasn't the requisite studs in her nose and eyebrow. Or her backpack with a sticker for the Riot Grrrl band Bikini Kill.

If Gwen had thought about it, she might have noticed a certain uncontrollable spark in Emma, a reckless flame that was essential, in Gwen's view, to any artist but which she also knew from experience led to chaos in one's life.

But Gwen was not thinking about it. She'd just come offstage after performing a piece she'd intended to challenge and provoke the audience out of its mid-1990s complacency and in this, at least, the piece had succeeded. Her adrenaline high was just beginning to wane, and was slowly being replaced by the inevitable crash that followed her performances. Once she came back into her senses, all her muscles would throb; her rigorous athletics onstage had begun to take their toll now that she was in her forties.

She dragged a sweaty, leopard-print T-shirt over her naked torso, shimmied into purple overalls, and was jamming her feet into ankle-high boots when the two young women accosted her.

Convinced they were poised to pounce and harangue, Gwen was trying to decide whether rudeness or cunning would best serve her when the skinny blonde with a tattoo on her neck piped up.

“Gwen, Gwen, your performance was totally *stupid!*”

Gwen knew from her girlfriend JJ that this was not an insult; the current vernacular used “stupid” the way she would have said “cool.”

“It really pisses me off the way the seventies get so dissed,” the blonde continued. As she launched into a monologue idealizing seventies feminism, Gwen took a moment to study her. The young woman looked streetwise but well cared for. A poser, she wondered, like so many of the art students she met these days? Gwen took a certain pride in having made an art career while never having sought an MFA.

“Hey, I’m Emma, and this is Ayisha,” the blonde added.

For the first time Gwen looked at Emma’s companion, who hadn’t spoken a word. She seemed a different type, more wholesome, jeans and turtleneck topped with a neat blazer. Curly brown hair framed ivory skin. Eyes obscured by sunglasses long past dusk.

“Great, thanks for coming,” Gwen said, wanting to wrap this up so she could leave in search of a double shot of espresso, anything to give her the juice to make her way back downtown. Although the young women seemed friendly enough, she’d been on the defensive about her art ever since her last performance, *Unsafe Sex in the Urban Jungle*, had been reviewed for the *Voice* by a Gen X’er who called it “...warmed over seventies feminism...witless essentialism that neither titillates nor inspires...theoretically and artistically retrograde.”

“So, we were on our way to have coffee.” Emma’s brashness turned a little shy. “There’s not too much right around here, but we know a place that’s pretty major. Would you...uh, wanna come with us?”

Gwen didn’t, but the lure of coffee was irresistible.

In minutes she found herself sitting across from the two of them in a Cuban café, shoveling forkfuls of black beans and rice into her mouth, suddenly ravenous. As she ate, Gwen learned

that Emma was twenty-three, an art student concentrating in video art; she'd seen all of Gwen's video pieces and believed Gwen deserved to be more famous than she was. "You could have been one of those artists that got dissed by the NEA!" she exclaimed.

No doubt that would have been glamorous to Gwen too at age twenty-three. Now it was with weariness that she answered, "Actually, I just found out that my grant was pulled by Jesse Helms and they're circulating it around the Senate as an example of 'degenerate art' that the NEA shouldn't fund. It was just in the paper."

"That is *soooo cool!*" Emma's eyes gleamed with admiration.

Gwen didn't bother to explain that it could end her already stalled career.

Ayisha had remained silent, so Gwen turned to ask her, "What about you? What do you do with your life?"

Ayisha was set on ultra-low volume; Gwen had to strain to catch every word as she explained, "I was in law school for a while, but I didn't like it. Now I work in a law office and..." She shrugged, as if to demonstrate her lack of direction.

Clearly accustomed to interpreting for her friend, Emma broke in, "We're roommates. Isha's mom died last year, breast cancer. I moved into their place with her."

Over a shared plate of fried *platanos*, Gwen learned that Emma was bisexual, which disappointed her mother. "She really wants me to be a lesbian," Emma said regretfully.

Gwen smiled. "There's a switch." She thought of her own Catholic mother, who still got on her knees every morning to pray that her daughter might miraculously come back to Chicago with a husband.

"My mother's pretty rad," Emma acknowledged. "You might even know her, she's a big feminist. Dana Firestein?"

Gwen felt a peculiar rushing together of past and present. "Your mother is Dana Firestein? I knew her a long time ago, from this thing called Labrys."

"You were at Labrys?" the young woman practically squealed. To Ayisha she explained, "Labrys was this really radical feminist...thing...my mom started—what would you

call it?" She turned to Gwen. "A camp? A school?"

"A phenomenon," Gwen supplied. "Actually it was conceived of as an institute, a kind of think tank, but because it was held in the summer, it ended up feeling sort of like camp, only one where the campers tie up the counselors and set the cabins on fire."

"What do you mean?" These were the first words Ayisha had volunteered.

"We fought like crazy. We spent eight weeks bitching at the organizing collective for how everything was set up, we laid trips on each other about being working class, or lesbian, or whatever. One group of women even split off and tried to form an *alternative* alternative institute on the other side of town! It was 'Psychology of Oppression 101!'"

Emma nodded. "That's what my mom says, too. So how come you two didn't stay in touch?"

"By the time it was over, the collective made it pretty clear they'd just as soon not see any of us ever again."

"You really oughta call her up," Emma suggested. "I bet she'd love to hear from you."

Gwen was noncommittal; she dug in her backpack for money to pay the check.

"Hey, can I ask you something else?" Emma zeroed in with her intense blue eyes and didn't wait for a response. "I'm in school here at NYU, and I'm trying to do this performance and video thing but I feel like the professors don't get me. My critiques are really lame."

Her expression grew more serious. "The people at school act like feminism is over, you know? But it isn't! I mean, really messed up stuff still happens to women, violence and sexual abuse. So I was wondering..."

She trailed off as if she expected Gwen to take it from there. Gwen was already busy shaping her refusal. *Too busy, overcommitted, need to put my energy into my own work, don't do that sort of thing.*

She watched as Ayisha inclined her head in Emma's direction, the slightest nudge of encouragement.

"I'd like to show you some of my work," Emma finally got

out. Her cheeks flushed. “I think you would really understand what I’m trying to do. And your work is so rad, I think your feedback would really help me.”

*No. Uh-uh. Sorry. Can’t do it. Wish I could help. Too bad.* This was the music floating through Gwen’s head, along with JJ’s soft, insistent, “Just say no, *nená*.”

She was just about to do that when Ayisha added, barely audible. “It would be a chance to further your legacy.”

Emma stared at Gwen with naked expectation, hope. She was exactly the age Gwen had been when she’d gone to Labrys. And when Gwen looked at her this time, she saw that spark, the one that flashed *She could be an interesting artist. Fuck!*

Damned if it wasn’t Gwen’s mother’s voice that joined the chorus in her head. “For once in your life, think about someone besides yourself”—the mantra with which she’d admonished Gwen since she was five or six.

To her chagrin, Gwen heard herself say, “I guess I could look at a piece or two, if you want to send me your tapes.” She knew she would regret those words, but it was too late to take them back. So she fished out her card, a lime green rectangle with her address stamped, off-center, in purple ink.

As they said goodbye outside the restaurant, Emma squealed her appreciation for Gwen’s black denim jacket, decorated on the front with strips of zebra print fabric, on the back with a velvet painting of Jesus. Then she hugged Gwen, promised to call soon. Ayisha merely mumbled a few words and turned her back.

Watching them walk away, Gwen felt a strange list in time, recalling herself at their age, her first year in New York just after Labrys. She ached for how young she’d been then, how grown-up she’d believed herself to be, ready to fight the revolution with spotlights and handmade props and her naked body. That spark of Emma’s, she recognized it. She was surprised to realize she was curious to see the young woman’s art, to see how feminism might be rearticulated in her vision.

If she’d thought about it, watching Emma disappear down the crowded block, Gwen might have felt a stir of foreboding, a premonition of what can happen to that kind of light.



# Chapter 1

**Monday, June 10, 1996**

“So where are you going, again?”

Ayisha didn't think Emma was being very smart. Ayisha perched on the closed seat of the toilet, watching her roommate smear dark vermilion lipstick over her mouth.

“Ayisha, if I wanted to live with my mother, I wouldn't have moved in here.” Emma accentuated the bow of her lip. She studied her reflection further, then added a pair of earrings, thick silver crosses that dangled nearly to her shoulders.

“Emma, believe me, I don't wanna be anybody's mom. But you met this guy at a club, for God's sake. You don't know anything about him.” Ayisha hated the worry and accusation that turned her words to a shrewish whine.

Emma put a hand on her hip and turned away from the mirror to face her friend. “Isha, I'm gonna be fine. I'm twenty-three. I've been, like, how you say, 'sexually active' since I was fourteen. I'm down, okay?”

“All right, girlfriend. 'Scuse me I forgot I was dealing with a woman of experience.” Ayisha began rummaging around in the basket that sat on top of the toilet tank. She fished out a foil-wrapped condom and tossed it in Emma's direction. “Just don't forget this.”

Emma grinned in appreciation, tucking it into her backpack

along with the dark lipstick. “That’s great. Listen, I’m gonna meet this guy...” Seeing the question forming on Ayisha’s face, she added, “Jersey, all right? His name is Jersey! Anyway, I’m gonna meet him over at the Mercury Lounge...”

“That place on East Houston, right?” Ayisha interjected.

“That’s the one,” Emma sighed with exaggerated patience. “And then, if I’m lucky, I’m gonna get laid!” Turning to catch Ayisha’s frown, she appealed, “Isha, I *need* to cut loose after the stress-o-rama day I’ve had.”

“You met with that artist, right? What’s her name—Gwen?”

Emma wilted against the doorframe to illustrate the trauma of the experience. “The esteemed Ms. Kubacky told me I had to watch my tendency to *romanticize* violence against women in my work. She could have been a little more encouraging, don’cha think? What ever happened to sisterhood?”

Ayisha crossed her arms over her thin torso. “So, I guess you won’t be meeting with her again?”

Emma bugged eyes at her. “Are you kidding? Even if she’s a psychobitch from hell, it’s a fabulous opportunity! I’m meeting with her again next week. She’s gonna give me an assignment. I’m just trying to tell you why I *deserve* a little positive attention on a Monday night.” Emma turned the deadbolts and opened the door.

Ayisha pushed at the door to close it again, blocking her roommate’s exit. “Hey, just don’t bring him here, okay?”

“I know, I know.” Emma held up her hands as if to fend off another lecture.

“It would be one thing,” Ayisha continued, “if he were someone you were seeing, you know—going out for dinner, talking on the phone, getting to know each other? This dude is no more than a trick, and I don’t need him knowing my address.”

“O-kaaay, don’t wait up for me, okay?” Emma swept an arm around her friend’s neck, gave her a clumsy hug, then grabbed her leather jacket and was out the door.

“Be careful, please,” Ayisha whispered to the wood. She could hear Emma’s heavy heels stomping down three flights of stairs as she secured the deadbolts.

After those footfalls disappeared, Ayisha sat in the living room of the quiet apartment with the lights out as she did most nights. The apartment was an old brownstone on West Tenth, the same five rooms where she and her mother had lived since Ayisha was nine. Ayisha had wanted to move after Marilyn's death, but rent control made it impossible.

Ayisha caught a glimpse of her face in the mirror on the opposite wall. She scowled at the ivory skin, the green eyes. If she caught just the right angle, she could see the trace of African in her features, the slight spread of her nose, the fullness of her lips, but these were subdued by the colonizing genes of Europe.

Her own father's vision had failed him. When his daughter was born with her mother's pale complexion and eyes like new olives, all he could see in her face was the enemy. Lincoln Cain had departed before Ayisha was a year old; she'd never seen him again. Now that Marilyn was gone, Ayisha believed it was only her light skin and Caucasoid features that kept her father from coming back to claim her.

Turning her gaze from the mirror, she rocked, and as she did, she imagined her mother. The Marilyn she remembered from her own childhood—energetic, passionate, raising her fist high, shaking her short dark hair—threatened to blur into Marilyn in the last few years of her life, wreathed in pot smoke, defeated, bitter, dying.

Ayisha dozed then until the sky began to lighten, until the streetlights winked out, until the night sounds rising from the street dimmed to the rhythms of morning.

She was still asleep in the rocker, wrapped in an old chenille robe of her mother's, when the downstairs buzzer blasted through her dreams. Ayisha regularly ignored the buzzer—too often, it was neighborhood kids playing a joke, or suspicious types trying every buzzer to get into the building—but this blare of sound was deliberate and relentless. At the fifth blat, she stumbled over to the wall panel, and with her most truculent attitude, snarled, "Yeah?"

"Do you know a Miss Emma Firestein?" It was a male voice,

and sounded older, not like any of Emma's friends or tricks.

"Who *is* this?" Ayisha demanded.

"Detective Howard O'Hara, NYPD. I need to ask you a couple of questions." His voice retained a hint of an Irish brogue.

Ayisha pressed the button to release the door lock. Her fingers had turned suddenly cold. She could hear the long trudge of footsteps up the stairs, and was already fumbling to undo the deadbolts when she heard the knock on the door.

"Where's Emma?" were the first words she hurled at the gray-haired, red-faced man who stood before her in a rumpled jacket. He was large, a little overweight, and walked with a pronounced limp. The detective showed her his badge, took out a notebook and said he needed her name.

"Ayisha Cain. Emma's my roommate."

"Could you speak up, please? And would you spell that for me?" The portly detective recorded her words with a ballpoint pen. "Do you know how to get hold of her family?"

Ayisha thought of how Emma would handle this situation, how she would be insistent and powerful, how she wouldn't rest until she got her way. "Look, Detective, you've got to tell me what's happened. Emma would want me to know. We've been friends for a long time."

The detective sighed. He ran a hand through his thinning hair, and his face flushed a deeper shade of red. "Miss Cain, I'm sorry to inform you that your friend Emma Firestein was found assaulted and strangled under an on-ramp of the FDR..."

"Strangled?" Ayisha asked as if the word were not one she understood.

"She's dead," the detective explained in monotone. "I'm sorry for your loss. Can you tell me anything about where she was going last night?"

Ayisha dropped heavily into Marilyn's rocker. Her entire body felt swaddled in cotton, making it hard to hear the detective's words, hard to hear her own responses. Still, she told what she could about Emma's plans for the night before.

"This man—Jersey—what night did she meet him?"

“Maybe it was last week. Wednesday or Thursday, I think it was.”

“And did she meet him at the same club, the Mercury Lounge?” The detective consulted his notes.

“I don’t think so. She’s been going out a lot lately. Maybe it was the Fez, I’m just not sure.”

“And this guy, Jersey, do you know what he does?”

“I think maybe he was a musician? I don’t really remember.”

“And when she met him last weekend at the Fez, do you know if she had sex with him that night?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Did Emma tell you, or how do you know?”

“Well, she was eager to see him again, and usually that’s not the case once she’s slept with a man.”

“Did your roommate often pick up men she barely knew?”

“Often? I don’t know. She’d done it before.”

The detective continued. “And do you have any idea where I might find this Jersey?”

“I don’t have any idea.” Ayisha found that she was shaking. “Do you think he killed her?”

The buzzer screamed again. She turned involuntarily toward the noise, half-expecting it to be Emma, who sometimes forgot her keys.

The detective pressed the button on the wall panel and said, “That will be my partner. He’s going to need to search Emma’s room, Miss Cain.”

They waited for the second detective to reach the fourth floor. The apartment felt stifling. Ayisha pushed open a window, relieved to feel the air on her face. The man who came through the door was African-American, tall and slender. He showed his badge, which read Johnson. She searched his eyes for some acknowledgment of her, but his face was a closed mask.

Mechanically, she showed the detective to Emma’s room. When Ayisha was growing up, this space had been hers; now she slept in the room that had been her mother’s. She thought how vigorously Marilyn would have protested this invasion; her mother had hated cops, a hostility honed by her years of

activism.

“Miss Cain?” The Irish burr cut through her musings. “Can we continue? I’ve got a few more questions.”

Ayisha nodded as if anesthetized. She had not yet begun to feel beyond the shock, her sleepless state conspiring to make it seem as if these events were taking place in a parallel universe, unconnected to her waking life.

“Did Emma have a regular boyfriend?” the detective was asking her now.

“No. She identified as a bisexual. She’s had some steady girlfriends over the years, steady for a few months anyway, but she says...said...that she just liked men to have sex with, not to really hang out with.” Ayisha spoke in a monotone, betraying none of her own judgments about her friend’s stance.

The detective asked, “Any of these girlfriends she was still in touch with?”

“Not that I know.”

He turned a page in his notebook. “Let me ask you something else—was Emma into drugs that you knew of?”

Ayisha shook her head. “I’m pretty sure she wasn’t. Maybe a little weed now and then, but that’s it. Why?”

The detective was about to answer when the officer emerged from the bedroom. In his possession was a collection of dildos, a pair of handcuffs, a whip. He kept his face expressionless as he showed them to Detective O’Hara, who turned to her.

“Do you know anything about these?” he asked her.

She shrugged. “What’s to know?”

“These belonged to Emma?”

“I suppose so, if they were in her room. It’s not like she ever talked to me about them.”

The detective frowned. “Would you say she was into kinky sex?”

Ayisha sucked her teeth. “I’d say you’d have a hard time finding a young white girl living on her own in this city who doesn’t have some kind of collection like this. It’s a fad, I think. Like piercings.”

“So you don’t think she might have sought out rough trade?”

Ayisha knew this line of questioning would have made Emma furious. A woman is assaulted and what the cops wanna know is about her sex life. “Detective, I never slept with her. I never watched while she slept with someone else. I can’t really comment about what she did in bed.”

Detective Johnson returned to the living room and spoke in a low voice to the detective. O’Hara turned to Ayisha and said, “There’s a message from the guy Emma went to meet on the answering machine. We’re going to take the tape so we can have a record of his voice.”

Ayisha didn’t bother to nod; it had not been a request.

Detective O’Hara closed his notebook. “You said you knew how to contact Emma’s family?”

“Her mother’s name is Dana, Dana Firestein. She lives uptown; here’s her address.” She scrawled the information on a scrap of paper and handed it to him.

“Thanks for your cooperation,” he said, as he and Johnson prepared to go. “I’ll be in touch with you again after I talk to her mother. I’m going to ask you to give me the names of her friends, anybody she went out with.”

His features seemed to crumple inward. “It’s a terrible thing that happened to your friend. I really wanna catch this scumbag.”

The two men plodded out of the apartment. She heard them making their way down the stairs, and then they were gone and the apartment seemed unnaturally quiet. It was only then that the emptiness of the rooms seemed to swell, a chasm big enough to swallow her.

Ayisha moved quickly to the telephone, her fingers making quick jabs against the keypad. She heard the ring, imagined its echo in a room uptown, and then the voice in her ear, and her own voice saying, “Dana, it’s Ayisha. I don’t know how to tell you this...”

Later that morning, Ayisha waited with Emma’s mother in the chilled basement of the city morgue. She felt profoundly grateful not to be there alone, although she realized that she would never have been the one they asked to identify the body,

even though she felt as close to Emma as a sister. Both only children of mothers engaged in radical politics, they had known each other since they were kids.

Leaning back into the hard folding chair, Ayisha studied the woman across from her, dressed in a black T-shirt imprinted with the faded face of Che Guevara. This she wore with aging combat pants, their military green bleached to gray. Her attire was understated and uncalculated except for a pair of black work boots, polished to a military shine.

Dana Firestein had a beautiful face, though acne scars had left it pitted. This, coupled with her propensity to scowl, made her seem older than her fifty-one years, and forbidding. Blue eyes penetrated from behind thick, black-rimmed spectacles. Her dark frizzy hair was worn longer these days and was shot through with silver, but it was as unruly as ever, appearing, as it always had, as if she never combed it.

Although she'd shared a common politics with Dana, Marilyn Horton Cain had been a different kind of woman: rounder, softer, more concerned with how other people felt, more easily wounded. Perhaps, Ayisha had sometimes pondered, this was why her mother had been defeated by the political setbacks—she'd taken them personally—while Emma's mother was a warrior still, fierce and uncompromising.

Dana had been fighting with Detective O'Hara ever since he and his partner had shown up at her door, as if they held responsibility for her daughter's death. She'd raged at them when asked about her daughter's sexual history. She'd chastised Ayisha for allowing them to search her daughter's room; they'd had no warrant, and no judge would have granted one, she insisted. Now they had the evidence they needed to turn this crime against its victim.

Emma had always said that the only emotion with which her mother was truly comfortable was anger. Dana had demanded that Ayisha be allowed to come along to the morgue, arguing it as a point of fairness, that "the fascist state refuses to recognize extended, chosen family," but Ayisha could not help but wonder whether Dana also dreaded facing this task alone.

An odor permeated the basement that frigid air and

antiseptics did little to dispel, a scent of sweet and rot and chemical. It reminded Ayisha just a bit of the smell of her mother's room, the smell of sickened flesh, of death.

"How dare they think they can make us wait all this time?" Dana's gruff voice broke into Ayisha's musings. The older woman rose and strode down the hall, toward the door through which the detective had led them, half an hour ago.

She returned a few minutes later with Detective O'Hara, whose face was redder than ever and whose patience was beginning to fray. "Lady," he was explaining, his temper barely contained, "I can't let you view the body until the medical examiner has finished with it..."

"First of all," Dana cut him off, "do not call me 'lady.' Second, I have the right to see my daughter at any time, and if I need to get a lawyer in here to make that case, believe me, I'll do it."

Ayisha closed her eyes against the harsh voices. She wanted nothing more than for time to rewind, to be rocking in her chair in the dark apartment, watching a breeze stir the shadow of leaves. She wanted Emma to be out having a sexual escapade from which she would return with the morning light, sore and satisfied and recommitted to looking for a girlfriend.

"Ayisha, come on," Dana snapped, and then they were following the detective down the hallway, through a set of double doors like in a hospital. They were led into a cubicle; on one wall was a window, with a shade drawn.

"I'm not going to look at my daughter from behind glass," Dana protested. "You have to let me see her."

"Look, this is the department policy..."

"Fuck department policy! And if you can't get me in there, let me talk to the person who can!" She was fearless about approaching him, yelling right into his face. While Dana was a full six inches shorter than the detective, and half his girth, her intensity made her seem more massive than O'Hara.

The detective left the room, returning a few minutes later with a tired-looking woman in her late thirties, whose pallid skin was made even paler by her white coat. Her hair was a nondescript brown, and the stench Ayisha had sensed earlier emanated from her pores. Ayisha did not quite catch her name,

but understood that this woman was the medical examiner.

In a soft, faintly Eastern European accent the woman began to recite the department policy, but Dana wasn't having it. "You need me to identify the body," she reminded them. "What I'm telling you is that I won't do it unless you let me in there with her. Let *us* in there." She gestured toward Ayisha.

Ayisha wanted to interrupt, to say, "No, really, I can just stay here." She had been alone with her mother when Marilyn died, and she'd sat with that body for a long time, listening for the next breath, watching the features turn waxy and hollow, too afraid to move. She had no wish to resume a vigil with Emma's corpse, yet she did not dare cross Dana.

There was no other option than to give Dana her way; she'd made that clear, and eventually the medical examiner gave in with a tired shrug. "Follow me," she said, and led the short procession through the door and into the room beyond the window.

If the entire basement was cold, this room was frigid, and Ayisha began to shiver. Despite her thin T-shirt, Dana paid no notice of the temperature. Nor of the odor, which had grown overwhelming. She walked over to the gurney on which her daughter's body lay, covered by a white sheet. "Show me," she demanded, her voice steady.

Ayisha forced herself to cross the space between the door and the gurney; her feet dragged across the white linoleum. The medical examiner slowly drew the cloth down to reveal Emma's body. To Ayisha, her friend looked childlike, naked and motionless on the sheet. Her dark lipstick was smeared across her cheek. Dreadlocks hung like pigtails from her head. The studs in her nose and right eyebrow had been removed and her face looked undefended.

Her left eye was swollen and bruised; more bruises purpled her slender arms and delicate hips. At Dana's insistence, the medical examiner showed her the ligature marks on Emma's neck, just above the tattoo—a hexagram from the *I Ching* that was translated as "flaming beauty"—she'd had since she was eighteen. "They're consistent with those made by rope. See, there are slight burns to the skin as well."

“We didn’t find the weapon at the site,” the detective added, “although it’s possible she wasn’t murdered there, but killed somewhere else and dumped beneath the expressway ramp.”

“And you said she’d been sexually assaulted,” Dana continued; she was perfectly calm, dry-eyed. Marilyn would have been in need of sedation by now; Ayisha could not help but make the comparison.

Without pointing these out, the medical examiner explained that there were bruises on the pelvic area, as well as tearing and some bleeding in the vaginal walls, and the presence of semen.

“We’re assuming,” O’Hara interjected, “that this was assault, against your daughter’s will. Although, given her history of sexual experimentation, it is possible that the sex was consensual.”

Dana’s expression gnarled with hatred. “I assure you, Detective, that this *murder* was committed without my daughter’s consent.”

The medical examiner hastened to intervene. “Two of her fingernails are broken, see?” She lifted one of Emma’s hands. “Under the others, we’ve got samples of skin. It’s clear she fought her assailant. We’ll run DNA tests on the samples.”

“She never had sex without a condom.” Ayisha heard her voice before she knew she was going to speak. “I saw her put one in her purse that night. She had some friends who were sick with AIDS, and she was always careful.”

The detective noted that in his book. “We’ve got her belongings. I’ll check and see if the condom is still in her purse.”

The medical examiner made a move as if to cover the body once more, but Dana put out a hand to block her. She bent nearer her daughter’s face and stared for a long moment, as if trying to memorize each detail. Then she lifted her right hand and grabbed a fistful of Emma’s hair, clutching it tight. It was as close to tenderness as this vehement woman could come. Finally the detective cleared his throat, and Dana released her grip and turned away. Then she raised her fist and slammed it against the wall, hard enough to rattle the glass window, before she strode abruptly from the room.

Ayisha lingered just a minute more. She too wanted to reach

to touch her friend, but she was no longer sure she could make her limbs move at will. Even her breath felt too heavy to force in and out of her lungs. Finally she pressed her lips to Emma's forehead, the skin cold, unyielding. "Girlfriend," she whispered, half-scolding, half-lamenting, "Oh, girlfriend..."