



CHAPTER ONE

If you kill the ancestor you kill yourself.

TONI MORRISON, "ROOTEDNESS: THE ANCESTOR AS FOUNDATION," 1978

MOREMI STOOD IN THE SAND at the edge of the Pacific in the howling wind that spread fire all day through the California hills. The sultry wind tugged at her white nightgown as she stared across the rippling water, waiting. This was alien and familiar. A dream, and yet—real. She knew where she was. She'd been here before.

It was an unseasonably hot September, the Indian summer of 2008, and the quarter moon lit a dim path across the surf. Her husband and eight-year-old son slept soundly at home. She tried to be calm, but her pulse matched the relentless wind, racing with dread.

It was the spirit. When it came she would have to follow. *Why now? Why can't she just leave me alone and let me have some peace? Haven't I done everything I could to appease her? I gave her the bright pink bead necklace and a six-pack of Coca-Cola. I don't know what she wants.*

Her pleas disappeared into the wind over the lapping waves. She lowered her head, letting the tears break through. This malaise had gripped her far too long—why was it getting worse? But it was inevitable, a certainty she somehow welcomed and feared.

She heard crinkling cellophane and smelled burning candles—the beeswax mixed with a fishy smell that forewarned a visit from which she knew there was no escape. She'd tried every trick she could imagine to avoid its ancient call. *I have a life now, here in the U.S. I'm married to Professor Peter Abosanjo, whose parents knew my parents. We have our son, Ayo.*

But here she was, in her nightgown, barefoot and vulnerable. *I really must stop doing this.* As if she could. She cocked her head to listen as she began to hear the drumming, spotty at first, like jazz musicians starting

to scat with each other. One hit a staccato note, the other hit two, yet another three, and before long they were conversing like young lovers touching their lips before the slow dance began.

She dropped her head, closed her eyes, and started to sway. Her long curly hair, usually so heavy when she let it loose, felt light and airy. *No!* She wanted to resist, to go back to bed. She had no time for this rumpus.

The drumming intensified and now was infused with soft harmonicas wafting over a deep and slow bass saxophone. The ocean began to ripple. The waves undulated to the music, and she leaned into the rhythmic swaying with the water. She felt helpless, wanting to back away, but caught in the dance. The push-pull inside her grew more turbulent as her body wanted to join the primal waters, blending sea and sky as the Pleiades, the seven sisters, stared down.

She was close to fainting. Sucking in her breath she almost fell back, and yet her feet were riveted in the sand. She knew this was the end. She was being punished for being dead inside for so many years. Her life in the U.S. after Nigeria, her marriage to Peter, their son Ayo all added up to what should be happiness, and yet something was wrong. It gnawed at her, wearing her out.

She lost her sense of time. How long had she been in limbo, hearing the music, yearning to run and yet unable? Then she spied it, far in the distance—a whirling on the water, a jetting fountain. With little hiccups at first it flew up and up, blocking the moon, whipping water like the huge, splayed tentacles of a monster octopus. In seconds it assembled into a tornado of seawater, a whirling dervish heading straight for her as she stood on the shore, a sentinel. The tornado stopped at the shoreline and as quickly as it began the waters calmed.

Slowly rising, Mami surfaced. The wild whips of her hair seemed like a whirling spray of water. She lay on the surface, her broad hips floating up and down like a small ship, torso ending in perky fins, breasts full and voluptuous, draped in beads. She fluttered her fins, a southern belle fanning herself, batting her eyes—shameless!

Mami was wearing the bead necklace and Moremi couldn't help feeling pleased. The spirit's bright pink suited her light brown complexion. The rippling python hugged her, flicking its tongue into Mami's neck while glaring at Moremi, wishing her away. In her deepest sexy voice, as if she'd smoked a million cigarettes, Mami commanded: "Come with me!"

In a trance, Moremi plunged into the ocean to follow, sinking down

into the dark green of the water. Kelp entangled her as she spun searching for Mami who was nowhere in sight. Dark tangles taunted her to follow skulking shapes. Her panic rose again. *I'm not a fish.* Back to reality. *How can I survive? Maybe I'm not supposed to.* She sank into terror, reality impinging, drowning in a marginal world on the edge of sanity. Either she was all in or all out. As she pushed herself upward, craving the air, Mami appeared as if there all along, undulating, batting her eyes like the Great Vamp she was, summoning Moremi to follow deeper into her kingdom.

When Mami demanded, “follow me,” she had no choice and none was offered, even when she only wanted to chat. But the prospect of a chat with Mami was never to be underestimated.

They passed through dark caverns where schools of neon minnows cattered, tiny lamps along their way, gliding over ruins—ships cracked asunder centuries ago, covered with barnacles, decaying back into their original elements in the great open seas where it all began. Moremi followed, wondering and fearing if she, like Eurydice, almost might, but never would, return. This was a sickness, and her own fault. *I haven't been paying attention. But to what?* No answer appeared. Mami would warn her about not paying attention, about forgetting the past that wouldn't let her go. There would be no escape and no excuses.

She won't let me forget. But why? I need to be happy.

She followed, dazed by the beauty of the underwater landscape. It was Olokun's palace before it became Poseidon's world. *No! Stop thinking like a human. Not good under water.* Besides, what did it matter which deity? *They're all alike. Demanding. Crazy. Narcissistic.* She swam on pushing this aside. This was her fate.

Finally, Mami abruptly turned, held up her hand while swimming circles around Moremi and spoke. Her voice gurgled and bubbled through the heaving water. “You are ill with unhappiness because you do not accept who you are, which is always who you were. Pay me homage and I will help, or otherwise forget your life. You will end up with nothing.”

She retracted like an urchin from the sting of Mami's admonition—a threat, nothing lukewarm to be defended against or bargained with. She felt the hopelessness she had lived with for so long. In Mami's netherworlds there was no truth or lies—only the moment when the meaning of everything converged and where no argument could be made. The only sure thing in this moment was that everything was up to her.

She awakened, gasping for air. She clutched her chest and grabbed

the nightstand to keep her steady. Covered in sweat, breathless, grateful she hadn't disturbed Peter, she staggered into the bathroom and peered into the mirror. Her face looked waterlogged as if all the blood had drained out. Through the mirror she saw another apparition, the spirit she recognized as her great-grandmother, now bedecked in cheap jewelry, updated with funky hippie clothes, preening, swaying back and forth like a snake. Moremi leaned into the mirror and whispered, "I love you, Mami Wata."

She had no other choice. Her attempts to distance herself from Mami in the last few years had failed. She knew the more she tried to disconnect the more Mami would close in on her. Tonight's visitation unhinged her more than ever. The tornado's arrival was a warning. Mami was up to something. Moremi knew only enough to understand that whatever she was ignoring in her life was right in front of her.

To shake herself out of Mami's world, she walked down the hall to Ayo's room and peeked in. His breathing was slow and rhythmic.

As she returned to her bedroom she thought about the next day. She would take Ayo to school, go to her part time job at the lab and then go to the therapist's office. She lay her head down on the pillow.

How did I let myself get talked into seeing a complete stranger in whom I am supposed to confide? A friend at work had suggested it, saying, "They're like spiritual counselors. It's confidential, very private. Only you will know." She closed her eyes. *I'll go once. That's all.*