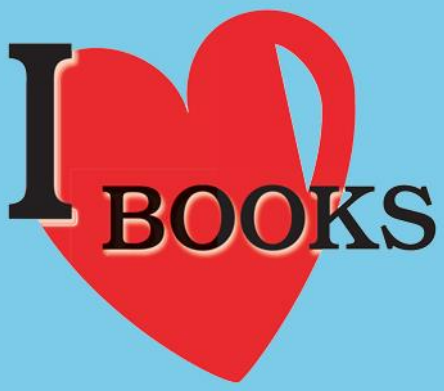


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Opening extract from

Wing Jones

Written by

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For my parents

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CHAPTER 1

My first memory is of my brother. Seeing his head bobbing along in front of me as I chased him down our street, calling after him to wait for me. And he'd turn around and grin, his baby teeth smooth as pearls. "Come on, Wing!" he'd say to me, his little sister.

I would have followed him anywhere.

This one time, the first time I can remember, we were at the swings, they were bright red swings, I can still picture them. Marcus held his hand out to me. "I'll help you up," he said, using all his six-year-old strength to hoist my tubby four-year-old body up on the swing.

"Ready?" he said, and before I said yes he gave me a big push and I was flying. Marcus made me fly.

"Like this, Wing! Kick your feet like this." He had climbed on the swing next to me and was pumping his legs as hard as he could. "We can go higher!"

And I felt like we were blasting off into the blue, blue sky.

"Higher!" he called out, and I kicked my legs as much as I could, but my calves weren't as strong as his and I couldn't get as high, no matter how hard I tried.

We couldn't have been swinging on our own for very long, but at the time, it felt like for ever that it was just us, on a rocket ship, climbing higher and higher. I didn't think we'd ever come back down.

"Wing! Let's jump!"

I remember looking over at Marcus, seeing his face set in determination, his lips puckered, brow furrowed, same face he still makes right before he throws a football, clutching the metal links of the chain, and then throwing himself off the swing into the air, shouting like a warrior. He landed in a crouch and stood, brushing sand off his hands. "Your turn!"

I should have been scared. But I wasn't. I was with Marcus. I kept my eyes on my brother, who was beaming at me, clapping, hopping up and down. He couldn't wait for me to join him back on earth.

"You can do it! Let go!"

And I did. I let go of the swing and tried to catapult myself into the air like my brother had. And for just a second, I was airborne, just like he had been.

But then I landed. And I didn't land in a crouch. I landed in a heap, my ankle under me, twisting in a way it shouldn't have.

I remember trying not to cry as Marcus kissed the top of my head and then my ankle. He said a kiss would make it better. Then he ran to get our grandmother, LaoLao.

"Stay here, Wing!" he commanded. As if I could get up and walk with a broken ankle. "I'll be right back!"

He took off running, sand scattering around his feet as he left me curled up, trying not to cry, staring at the clouds.

When my dragon flew down from the sky that first time and lay next to me, I wasn't scared or surprised. It felt like she'd always been there, invisible until now. She was so beautiful, so majestic, that she made me forget all about the pain. Green and gold and shiny all over, with steamy breath that smelled like the Chinese tea my LaoLao loved. The lioness appeared on my other side, tawny and soft, smelling like vanilla and cinnamon, like my Granny Dee, and I wasn't surprised to see her either. She curled up close, her warm head nuzzling my broken ankle.

Time is funny when you're little. I couldn't tell you how long I lay in the sand, buffered by my dragon and my lioness, but they were gone by the time Marcus came back, dragging our huffing and puffing LaoLao, our Granny Dee a few paces behind them.

"I'm sorry I left you!" Marcus was crying now, he always cried when I got hurt, he couldn't stand it when I stubbed my toe or got a paper cut.

"I have a dragon," I told him proudly, my pain momentarily forgotten. "And a lion!"

"Where are they?" Marcus sniffed and looked around.

I shrugged. I didn't know. But I knew they would be back. Someday.

"I'll show you," I said, and was rewarded with a wobbly smile.

My dragon and my lioness never did show themselves to Marcus. Just to me. And it was a long time before I saw them again.

CHAPTER 2

Atlanta, Georgia, USA
Fall 1995

The cheers are deafening.

Even though I've been watching my brother do this his whole life, watching him get knocked down and knocked out, I tense and hold my breath, waiting for the four guys chasing him to tackle him.

They don't. Marcus slips through their outstretched arms like a stick of butter, and he's glossy and shiny too, I can see that from here, and he pulls back his arm like a sling and the ball goes flying and the crowd stands as one, everyone except my mother, who's sitting with her hands over her eyes because she can't stand to watch him play. My brother's best friend, Aaron, jumps into the air like a gazelle, he's all grace and power, and I get the little shiver I get watching him, a

very different feeling I get from watching Marcus, and his hands grab the ball and he lands with it secure between his palms, and then the crowd really loses it.

Above the roar of the people around me I hear the announcer shouting "Touchdown!" as if we haven't just seen what happened. The clock hits zero just as the scoreboard updates, showing that Marcus and Aaron's touchdown has won them the game. The band starts up and the cheerleaders wave their pom-poms and all around me people are cheering, throwing their popcorn in the air, knocking over their cups of Coke, acting like they personally threw the ball or caught it or did anything at all other than stand here and watch. But Marcus says that's all they need to do and if they didn't he wouldn't have a scholarship. Wouldn't have a job playing professional football one day. So I guess the crowd is just as much a part of this moment, his moment, as anyone out there on the field.

Marcus and Aaron run at each other like long-lost lovers, their arms are tight around each other, and Aaron is ripping off Marcus's helmet and rubbing his knuckles in his hair and their smiles are so bright, I swear they light up the field more than the floodlights.

My mother finally lowers her hands from her eyes and looks up. "It's done?" she says, her Chinese accent heavier because she's scared. "He didn't get hurt?"

"He didn't get hurt," I assure her.

"And he won?" Now that she knows he's OK, she can focus on the important things. Like the final score.

"They won," I say, consciously changing the pronoun. Although Marcus once said that even though there's no *I* in team, there is one in win. Aaron tackled him for that, right off the front porch.

My mom stands. "I knew he would win," she says, voice confident. "Marcus always wins."

"Of course he does!" My Granny Dee, my dad's mom, sniffs. "He's my grandson, ain't he?"

LaoLao, my mom's mom, gives a sniff of her own. "He my grandson!" she proclaims, her Chinese accent even more pronounced than my mother's. Granny Dee and LaoLao have this argument at every game. As if one of them could have more claim to Marcus than the other. They look over at me at the same time, and I wonder if they notice how even when they bicker, they move like two parts of the same machine.

"Go get me a Coke," barks Granny Dee.

"For me too!" says LaoLao. "We are celebrating Marcus's win!"

I sigh but don't argue. No point in arguing with Granny Dee and LaoLao. "Mom?"

My mom gives me a tired smile and shakes her head. She digs into her purse and pulls out a wrinkled five-dollar bill. "Get something for yourself, sweetie," she says.

It might not seem like much, but that five dollars could

be used for a lot of other things besides buying my grandmothers a couple of overpriced Cokes at a high school football game. I love my grandmothers, but I don't love how much they love to boss me around. I sigh again, louder this time, more of a huff, and Granny Dee's walnut face snaps up, her bright eyes narrowing.

"You got somethin' you wanna complain about? You too busy to go get your Granny Dee a Coke?"

"Me too," LaoLao adds, scooting her bulk closer to Granny Dee's thin frame. "Too busy, little Wing? Too busy doing what?"

My grandmothers put their heads together, their old laughter wheezing out of them like air out of punctured tires, a most unlikely united front. Teasing me can always bring them together. It's like when a cat and a dog forget they're enemies to come together to chase a duck. I look at them, the women – one from Ghana, one from China – who have been the stalwart forces of my life since before I even took my first breath. Granny Dee, barely five feet, gray and brown all over. So thin she looks like a gust of wind could knock her over, but my money, if I had any, would be that the wind would break before Granny Dee would. And LaoLao, as round as a dumpling full to bursting, her sleek black hair still dark as my mother's, tied in a tight bun at the back of her head. She looks like she could withstand a hurricane.

"Them Cokes ain't gonna get themselves," says Granny Dee as she fans herself with a flyer. "My Lord, it is hot tonight."

I shake my head at them and go down the stairs to get them their stupid Cokes. As soon as I turn away, they start to bicker about something else. Now that I'm gone, they don't have any reason to team up. Silly old ladies, I think, affection for them blooming in my chest.

The stands have emptied out, and I'm grateful. I don't like having to make my way through crowds, pushing myself against them or asking them to move aside, feeling too big and too small at the same time. Watching their eyes go up and down me, trying to figure out what it is about me that is so *off*. What it is that works so well in Marcus but didn't quite come out right in me. Same ingredients, different result. Like a cake that came out perfectly one time and a little squashed the next. I know I don't look like anyone else at this school, or maybe even in all of Atlanta. Hell, maybe in all of Georgia. I know I don't look like my mom, with her bird bones and silky black hair. I don't look like LaoLao or Granny Dee either, as Granny Dee will tell you when she tries to do my hair. "Child," she'll say, pulling out one of my curls and watching it spring back with a bemused expression. "How can your hair be so fine but so tangly at the same time?" It never stays in braids, wisps of it coming out, but it won't straighten either. Granny Dee doesn't know what to do with it. Or with the rest of me. She'll cluck at

my hips and my butt, like I asked to have a big butt, and then she'll look up at me, because I'm more than just a bit taller than her, and LaoLao and my mother for that matter, like she can't believe any granddaughter of hers takes up so much space. And even though LaoLao is one of the fattest old ladies I've ever seen, even she always has something to say about my size. "You are too big," she'll say, all three of her chins wobbling as she shakes her head. "Like a horse. And your skin is so dark!" I don't know why she sounds so surprised. It's not like she didn't know my daddy was black.

Of course, no one ever says Marcus is too big. Marcus couldn't be too anything. Marcus is perfect.

Marcus. I glance out on the field, hoping to catch a glimpse of my brother, but he's disappeared with the rest of the team. I probably won't see him till tomorrow. He'll be going out tonight with the team to celebrate the win. Out with Monica. Out with Aaron.

Thinking about Aaron makes my heart skip like a little girl with a jump rope.