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Chapter 1

'Did you ever kill anyone?'

The question flew like a bullet through the tense dark of the night and hit Pascal hard in the chest. He had thought Kojo was asleep. Hadn't he heard and been surprised by the stillness of his friend not so very long ago? Now the silence was shot into tiny fragments by the blast of those five words.

'Did you? Did you ever kill anyone?'

'What's it to you?'

'Just wondered. Just wondered what it feels like.'

'Maybe I don't want to talk about it.' Pascal turned over on to his other side, so that he was facing away from Kojo. The wooden pallet was hard underneath his shoulder. He put his hand over the place where the jagged, lumpy scar from an old knife wound rubbed uncomfortably against the planks.

'You talk in your sleep sometimes,' Kojo persisted.

'You fart in your sleep,' Pascal countered. 'Like a machine gun – *phut-phut-phut*.'

He waited for the retort, but it didn't come. Instead, he heard his friend scramble to his feet and pad over to the barred window. He was used to Kojo's restlessness. He was used to the nightly conversations, though he hadn't been prepared for tonight's question. He should have been prepared. It was such an obvious question to ask someone if you weren't emotionally involved with the answer.

Neither of the boys ever slept well, regardless of how hard they worked during the day, regardless of the long hours they spent toiling under the baking sun. *None* of them slept well, for there were ten other boys sharing the decrepit outhouse that passed as their home. It was hot and filthy and airless. Besides, there were too many ghosts lurking in the dead of the night, ready to ambush them the minute they were off their guard.

'Sometimes I think I'll see my mother again soon,' said Kojo quietly. 'Sometimes I think I'll be walking along a path and she'll appear in front of me. Or she'll turn up at the plantation and tell me it's time I came home because my food's getting cold. Do you ever think that?'

Pascal didn't answer. There was no need. His friend wasn't expecting an answer this time, especially if it was an answer urging him to abandon his fool's dreams.

'I don't know what I'd do if I did see her. I probably wouldn't believe it was her at first, and then I'd want to throw myself into her arms. But I'd probably pass out from the shock instead.'

'You're such a girl, you probably would pass out,' Pascal mocked. 'Then your poor mother would weep over you, thinking you had died of fright.'

'If I could just find out that she's all right,' said Kojo. 'And my brother and Papa. I keep thinking that Papa might have a new job and that it would be fine for me to go home. But he wasn't well enough.'

Silence filled the room again.

Pascal closed his eyes and tried to picture his own mother's face – not the face she had worn the last time he saw her alive, but the one that belonged to happier days. It eluded him, as it so often did, languishing in the murky shadows beyond his grasp. Next, he scoured his memory for his father and his elder sister, Angeline. They drifted towards him, fading in and out of focus. At the point when he could almost make out the details of their faces, they were blown away by a sudden flash of bright light and a deafening explosion.

Seconds later, Angeline reappeared, beckoned at him to follow her, then disappeared once more.

'If I made a ton of money, I'd send it all to my family so that they could buy things again and then I'd be able to go home. That's what I'd do, and nobody would be able to stop me,' Kojo said.

'How are you going to make a ton of money when most of the time they don't bother to pay us?'

'I'm not staying here for ever. One day I'm going to be a doctor, then they'll pay me proper money.'

'Oh yeah, and one day I'm going to build me a plane and fly me back home. How are you going to be a doctor when you don't even go to school?'

'I'm going back to school. One day. When I run away from here.'

'They'll beat you if you try to run away.'

'They won't catch me. I'll be too quick for them.'

'Huh! A snail could run faster than you.'

'Why do you always have to stamp all over my dreams?'

Pascal felt a stab of guilt. Why couldn't he just let his friend believe what he wanted to believe? What did he have to gain by bringing him down to earth every time?

'Because dreams make what's real seem even worse, that's why,' he said at last.

'You can't live without dreams,' said Kojo.

'Yes, I can,' Pascal sighed.

'I don't believe you.'

'Believe what you like.'

'I bet you hope just as much as I do.'

'I'll tell you what I hope. I hope you'll shut up for five minutes so that I can get some sleep,' Pascal snapped.

'I don't see why *you* should sleep when you keep me awake with your talking,' Kojo said sulkily.

Pascal growled through his teeth. His irritation threatened to unleash itself on his friend. 'If I talk in my sleep I can't help it,' he hissed. 'You talk when you're awake and I'm trying to sleep – yack, yack, yack, blah, blah, blah – and you can help it, but you don't because you're a selfish heap of dung. Now shut up, or else.'

There was a long silence between them, broken only by the shuffling of Kojo's feet as he found his way back to bed.

And then, just as Pascal closed his eyes and allowed himself to relax, he heard Kojo mutter, 'You wait. If I do find a way to get out of here, I'm not going to take you with me. No way.'