

The day that Tamarind Wilkerson found out that she was pregnant again was the same day that she couldn't read her husband John's mind any more. She didn't realize it at the time, but if she had, she wouldn't have been worried. They had no secrets, just happy diversions. John shielded knowledge about Christmas presents from her, and she kept her suspicions about conceiving from him. Instead, she called her friend Valerie a week after she took the home pregnancy test.

"It turned blue."

Valerie didn't ask what had. She just squealed. "*La Bella Diosa!* That's fantastic! I bet John's beside himself. He told me a long time ago how much he wanted a family."

"John doesn't know yet. I just couldn't keep it to myself."

"I'm honored you told me then. When will you tell him?"

"I was going to tell him right away, but he was at a conference. Then I decided to wait. He's been distracted with his job hunt and I don't want to add any stress. The night we go out to celebrate his first job, I'll tell him when he tries to order me some champagne. 'Oh, no, I can't,' I'll say. 'Not good for the baby.'" Tamarind laughed thinking about it. "I hope he gets a job soon. It'll be so hard to keep it from him."

"What fun! I'd love to see his face." Tamarind heard the wistfulness in Valerie's voice. "Maybe you can visit when you get settled somewhere. Sarah must be a regular chatterbox these days."

Tamarind squirmed. In four years, she'd never once returned to Culebra and the stony beach of her birth. The thought made her uneasy. Ana, midwife and mentor, squatted there, weaving her prophetic patterns. "Maybe." Another idea occurred to her. "Why don't you come visit us instead?"

Valerie sighed. "I'd love to, but I just got a huge order from my guy in New York. My hands just aren't what they used to be. I don't know when I'll be able to take time off."

Two-year-old Sarah saved Tamarind from having to respond. "Mommy, whazis?" In her hands she carried a wooden box.

"Listen, Valerie. I gotta go. My two minutes of phone time are up. Sarah's digging into my closet."

"No problem, Tamarind. Call me when you know where you're going, hear? Give my love to John."

Tamarind turned to Sarah who held an intricately carved mangrove box. A present from Ana. "Give me that, Roe. It's not a toy."

"I know dat." Sarah sounded offended. She touched the teardrop that dominated the rich red-brown lid. "Means crying."

A premonition streaked through Tamarind. She shoved it down. "No, honey. Those are special happy drawings." What she didn't say was that she couldn't remember what they meant. "My friend gave this box to me as a gift when I married Daddy."

Tamarind studied the *mer* symbol on its lid. A semi-circle surrounded the teardrop. Smaller shapes filled its inside and the area between it and the curved line. A circle enclosed all of these lines and shapes, but she was sure that it wasn't part of the symbol. She rubbed a fingertip around the engraved edges, chewing on her lower lip as she did. The grooved wood attracted and

warmed her finger as it curved around the strange shapes. The more she caressed the wood, the more reluctant she became to put the box down.

“Mommy.” Sarah put her hand on Tamarind’s wrist. “Mommy, go see Daddy today.”

Tamarind blinked and lifted her finger from the box. Its tip burned, whether pleasantly or painfully she couldn’t say. She sucked on it anyway. She remembered Sarah’s confident translation and uneasiness filled her.

“What?” she asked when she realized that Sarah stood watching her.

“Go see Daddy. Have lunch.” The way Sarah stated it gave it the force of command.

Tamarind had planned to call her friend Kerrie about lunch, but seeing John supplanted that goal. Her head buzzed faintly, like a distant FM station turned down low. She shook it.

“That sounds like a fabulous idea, Roe. We’ll surprise him. I’ll call Uncle Stefan first, make sure Daddy’s not going to some talk.” She looked down at the box in her hand, perplexed at its presence. Why was she holding this? She tucked it into the cabinet in the corner where they kept the dessert plates, the good ones with fruit painted on each one. The ones from that expensive kitchen store in the mall. They opened that cabinet only on Thanksgiving.

Even after she’d put the box up, a tang in the atmosphere troubled her, something so delicate and rotten that she hummed as she always did to console herself. It was the last *mer* gift that she’d retained upon putting off her tail besides her diminished telepathy. Nothing happened. That scared her. Again she tried, forcing her diaphragm up until her chest ached. Only a rough wheeze clattered out. Too dry. Ignoring any implications that suggested, she phoned Stefan and asked him to check John’s desk calendar. He told her not to worry, that John and he were supposed to walk into Oakland and grab something.

Relief dispelled the faint odor. She glanced out the living room’s sliding-glass doors. For the first time in two weeks the sun shone, a rarity in gloomy Pittsburgh. She’d put Sarah in the stroller and they’d walk in from Squirrel Hill. She might even stop into Java Joe’s. It was still early enough in her pregnancy that she could enjoy a latte.

It was when she went to grab her purse that her moonstone pendant, the one that she’d worn since John had returned to Culebra for her, fell to the floor. After she scooped it up, she saw that one side of its clasp curled like a scorched piece of newspaper. She would have to fix it before she could wear it again. She returned to the dining room and shuffled through the plastic boxes holding the jewelry-making supplies that she stored under the table. Even though it would have been easy to fix, she couldn’t wait that long now that she’d decided on the walk. She found the box with her silver findings and tumbled the pendant among them.

Tamarind got a jolt every time that she walked into Squirrel Hill. Electricity hummed in the chatter and bustle of people swimming on the sidewalks and the traffic weaving among the neighborhood’s congested streets. Sleepy undeveloped Culebra had more nesting seabirds than people and more wild horses and chickens roaming the streets than cars. Squirrel Hill’s teeming shops and restaurants had more in common with the island’s reefs, but she much preferred interacting with people than octopuses, no matter how complex their nervous systems were.

Once they entered Schenley Park, the thrumming life of Squirrel Hill dimmed away. Overhead shreds of old cumulus clouds dissolved into the pale sky, where a red-tailed hawk glided majestically—its raspy scream of “*kree-eee-ar*” splitting the air.

“Do, Mommy!” Sarah pointed at the hawk. “Do hawk sound.”

Tamarind hesitated. One of her former gifts had been the ability to imitate the seabirds that nested on Culebra’s wildlife refuge. She’d been so accurate that she’d fooled countless naturists who visited. Sometimes she’d discover drunken lovers on Playa Flamenco at night and so startle

them with her birdcalls that they'd stumble off into thorny scrub where they made her feel guilty. Then she'd find them in the starless pitch and, taking them by the hand, lead them safely to the parking lot. She'd fascinated John with her skill that summer after she saved his life. It came, she said, from her childhood longing to fly, to see what only the far-sighted birds could see from their impossible altitude.

She didn't want to hear how awful she sounded now. Every time she heard herself, she knew that she sounded like someone trying to imitate a red-tailed hawk. She'd fool no one. "I don't think I can, Roe."

Sarah took her gaze from the hawk. "Yes, can."

So Tamarind tightened her palate and flexed her tongue, enunciating the three sharp syllables. To her critical ears, they sounded false. "See? I don't sound like a hawk."

"Do."

Tamarind ignored Sarah and picked up her pace into the park. After fifteen minutes, the walk had loosened her stride and opened up her chest. She didn't try to hum, but sang nonsense syllables to Sarah and the sky at large. On a flat stretch of the street, she pushed the stroller at a run and then launched it, letting Sarah glide ahead of her with her fingers clutching the front of the stroller and chattering. Tamarind whooped and raced after the stroller, again singing nonsense syllables and laughing when Sarah echoed her. On the golf course to her left, golfers paused in mid-swing and looked at her. Tamarind waved.

As Schenley Drive descended toward Frew Street, Tamarind slowed down and kept a firm grip on the stroller. The brief summer term had started a few weeks ago and students' cars filled every one of the parking spots, but John rarely drove to campus on weekday mornings; instead, his bike would be locked to the rack in front of Baker Hall. Tamarind smiled at the students who looked their way. A few of them, including a young woman in a black turtleneck with black-dyed hair and black tights, smiled back.

She pushed the stroller past Baker and the cut and turned left before she reached Wean Hall. A pimply, shaggy-haired young man held the door to the main lobby open for her and Sarah. Tamarind smiled at him as she passed and he ducked his head, muttering. She laughed as the door closed behind her and then the smell of coffee assailed her nose. In another few weeks, it would make her nauseous, but today it warmed her. Combined with the effects of her sunny stroll, the rich scent satisfied her spirits. Everything was right in the world.

After passing the usual line in front of the coffee cart, Tamarind steered the stroller down the right hallway to John's office. When she reached it, the door was open and she could see Stefan's back across from her. He pounded on his keyboard and bobbed his head, earphones and motion together transforming him into some bizarre creature from one of John's science fiction movies. John wasn't at his desk or sitting in the broken-down sofa along one wall. Neon lines tumbled across his workstation monitor.

She parked Sarah next to John's desk and walked up to Stefan, laying a hand on his shoulder. He jumped and spun around to look at her, sliding the headphones down around his neck as he did. "Jesus God Almighty! You scared the hell out of me, T."

"Sorry, Stefan." She looked down and hunched her shoulders a bit, then looked up again. "I didn't mean to. Forgive me?"

Stefan grinned at her. "I can't stay upset at you, T. No one can." He looked around her shoulder toward Sarah. "Hey, Roe-baby! Come see what Uncle Stef's got for you." He pushed his swivel chair back and stood up.

Sarah's eyes turned up at the corner and she gabbled. "Stef, Stef! Get my!"

“I love it how she mixes up her pronouns, don’t you? Gets right to the point, doesn’t she?”

“That everything’s hers?” Tamarind made a face and Stefan laughed.

He picked up a floppy red thing from his desk and brought it over to Sarah, holding it in front of him and twisting it. Tamarind couldn’t tell what it was, even when he’d handed it to Sarah.

“What is it, Stefan?”

“Mushu, from *Mulan*. And here’s his buddy, CriKee.” He tossed her something, which she barely caught. Looking down, she saw that it was a large purple cricket.

“Thanks, Stefan.” She leaned over and gave him a hug. “You’re the best.”

Stefan stepped back and cleared his throat before sitting down. “Yeah, well, if you ever decide to leave that louse husband of yours, I’ll be right here waiting.”

“So where is ‘that louse’?”

No sooner had Tamarind asked than they heard voices coming down the hall, one of which belonged to John. She and Stefan turned toward the doorway and in the next moment John and his ex-girlfriend Zoë came into view carrying paper coffee cups from Buns’n Udders. Zoë, who wasn’t speaking, saw Tamarind and Sarah first. She stopped walking and smiled, a cat-who’s-feasted-on-stolen-fish smile. John continued talking and walking into his office, but when Zoë didn’t follow him, he stopped and looked back at her with a puzzled expression.

“What’s wrong?”

Silence answered him.

Sarah broke it. “Daddy!”

“I didn’t actually mean ‘louse.’” Stefan whispered so low in Tamarind’s ear that she almost didn’t hear him.

“I know,” she whispered back. She knew that John ran into Zoë around campus, but she’d never liked it. Not one bit. And this looked like more than ‘running into.’

John spoke to Sarah, but he looked at Tamarind. She read the apology in his eyes. And something more. Was that guilt? For the first time since they’d been married, she didn’t know for sure. “Hey, Roe-girl! What’re you doing here?”

“Lunch! My hung’y!”

Tamarind said nothing and then Zoë stepped into the office, put her hand on John’s forearm and kissed him on the cheek. Tamarind forgot that she couldn’t hum and tried to do so unobtrusively. A whispery sound filled her mouth. She truncated it.

“Good luck with everything, John. I’ll look you up next time I’m in Boston.” Zoë smirked at Tamarind, nodded at Stefan, and turned on her Doc Marten’s and left.

Tamarind waited until her former rival had disappeared down the cinder-block hallway, her musky fragrance clouding the office, before turning to John. “What did she mean?”

John cleared his throat, looked down at the cup in his hand as if he had no idea how it got there, and then tossed it into his wastebasket. He glanced at Stefan and back. “Uh, Indian food?”

Tamarind couldn’t believe he hadn’t answered her. “What?” Incredulity sharpened her voice.

John blinked, surprised. “I just thought we could talk outside.”

“Why not here?” Tamarind found his manner maddening.

“Well, um, we won’t bore Stefan here.”

“What’s Stefan got to do with it?” Angry puzzlement crackled from her.

“T, I think John’s trying to convey the idea that it’s none of my business. I can leave.” He stood up.

“No, no, that won’t be necessary. Sarah’s hungry. We’ll just head down to the cart.” John sounded shaken.

Tamarind's anger scalded her, but she agreed. "Sure." She smiled at Stefan, a wide, false, happy smile that caused him to shift and mutter. "See ya, Stefan. Thanks for the stuffed animals."

She slipped her hair behind her ear, grabbed the handle of Sarah's stroller and wheeled it around so fast that John had to step out of the way or risk having his toes run over by large, rubber wheels. She pushed so fast that he didn't catch up until she'd stopped in front of the elevator.

"Tam—" John gripped her elbow as she reached forward to punch the elevator button. "Tam, I'm sorry."

Tamarind pulled her elbow away. "Don't touch me." She didn't wait for the Indian faculty member, the middle-aged white industry visitor, or the Asian graduate student to exit the elevator; she shoved the stroller through the doors while they still slid open.

"Tam."

"What were you doing with Zoë? What did she mean about looking you up in Boston?" Her chin trembled. That's when she recognized her hurt.

"Please, let's wait." He touched her side, but she didn't react. When she looked at him, he kissed her. For the first time ever, she pulled away.

At the next floor, a group of students, undergraduates by the look of the sparse beards and full faces, boarded. John squeezed next to Tamarind, who wedged herself into the corner of the elevator. Her anger had cooled enough that the hurt took precedence. Both were strange and frightening to her.

When the elevator reached the ground floor of Wean and the doors slid open, letting in people carrying backpacks and takeout containers filled with aromatic Indian food, the intensity of these new emotions abated. The rich smell of *masala* with its complicated blend of coriander and cumin, cardamom and ginger lulled and soothed her, like incense burned during Mass or perfumed candles next to her bathtub. She relaxed and let John rest his hand on her lower back.

They reached the lobby of Building D where Star of India daily brought stacks of Styrofoam containers filled with steaming chicken curry, or *chana masala*, or beef *korma* to sell to the fortunate few who knew about the deliveries. Today, the entrees were lamb *vindaloo* and *palak paneer*. John bought two of the *palak paneer*, which came with *naan*, and an order of vegetable *samosas*. Still not speaking to each other, they took the elevator back up through Wean and got out at the lobby. John guided them to the cut where dozens of people idled in the gorgeous sunlight, eating their lunches while sitting on any available flat surface: benches, the grass, and steps. John stopped in front of Hammerschlag Hall and sat down. Tamarind parked the stroller and stood waiting while John handed Sarah a *samosa*. Sarah bit into it, waving the deep-fried pillow around her head so that flecks of chunky potato and peas flew through the air.

"Thanks." Tamarind sat on the far side of the stroller. She opened the Styrofoam box that he passed to her and dipped a fork into the creamy spinach and cheese. Savoring the taste of the clove-scented *palak paneer* almost made up for not being able to hum. The clove reminded her of Ana.

John hadn't touched his food. "Zoë came to a talk I gave this morning. We got some coffee to discuss our research, that's all."

"Couldn't you have just chatted there? Why'd you go into Oakland?"

He ran the palm of his hand over his head, pulling some fine hairs from his ponytail. "Look, Tam, we're colleagues. We've spent the last four years avoiding each other at every departmental gathering and IC event. I thought it was about time I treated her with the

professional respect she deserves. I didn't think you'd care after all this time."

That sounded reasonable. But then she remembered Zoë's parting comment. "What's Boston got to do with your research?"

Something flitted across his face. Again, she thought it might be guilt, but she couldn't be sure. "I got an offer this morning to work for that startup in Boston."

"I remember the interview. But she said she'd see you there." Tamarind waited until John looked at her. "Weren't you going to talk to me before you took the job first?"

He squirmed. "I should have, I admit. I just was so excited, I said yes right away. Now I can work for Dr. Mukarjee."

She knew that. She'd known that he'd wanted the job at Dr2Dr so that he could also work for Dr. Mukarjee's non-profit IndiaClinic. But he'd told Zoë first. He hadn't told *her*, his wife. "I guess I don't rate."

"What?" Now it was his turn to look bemused. "Rate? Of course you do. If you don't want to move to Boston, I'll call them back." She could see him struggling with something. Another emotion that she couldn't fathom. "I shouldn't have said yes without checking. It never occurred to me that you wouldn't want to go."

"I see that." She let hurt spike her voice. Well, if he could take away her joy by sharing his most important news with Zoë first, she'd keep her own news to herself at their celebration dinner. She calmed her tone. "No, no. You must take the job."

He reached for her hand. "Thanks for understanding, Tam. For a moment there, I didn't think you would."

"When do we go?" She found herself anxious now that the previously amorphous move had become fact.

"September. The start date's flexible since I've got a few things to wrap up for Steve here. Gives us plenty of time to find a house. I hear the market's heating up there, so that's good." He frowned. "Hey, where's your Goddess pendant?"

Forgetting what had happened, Tamarind let her hand fly to her unadorned breast. She gasped and then remembered. "The clasp broke. I left it at home."

"That's a relief. I thought maybe it had fallen off somewhere. No way would anyone give such an unusual piece back to you."

"Drink," Sarah said. "My thirsty."

"Okay, okay." John leaned toward the basket beneath Sarah's seat. "What's this?"

"What?" When Tamarind looked down, she saw the mangrove box. The one that she'd put up. A chill threaded her spine. She didn't answer.

"Isn't this the box that Ana gave you after we got married?"

"Crying drawings." Sarah pointed to the symbols. This time Tamarind didn't object.

"It does look like a teardrop," John agreed. "Couldn't believe that old hag made it." Tamarind said nothing to this, just played with her plastic fork. She'd lost her appetite. "You should use it as a jewelry box."

He pulled the lid off. "I guess you already figured that out." He held her pendant by its broken chain where the mysterious moonstone gleamed around the starfire blossoming in its milky heart. "I must have read your mind again."

Tamarind reached out a tentative finger to her beloved Goddess. How did it get in the box? Its touch restored her tranquility but answered no questions.

"Hm." She looked toward Hammerschlag and its distinctive tower, but her mind's eye superimposed the image of the curved line, the teardrop and the smaller shapes between them

that dominated the lid of the box. The symbol tantalized her. She heard Ana's voice, hoarse and wise, in unexpected memory:

*You are like the mangrove in reverse. You may try to put your roots in the earth, young one, but you will always belong to the sea.*

Despite the glorious July afternoon, Tamarind shivered. Ana had been an oracle.

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Ana sat in an aluminum chair on the small patio outside of Posada La Diosa, looking at the sugar feeders that Valerie kept filled for bananaquits and hummingbirds. The morning sun warmed the back of her neck and loosened her stiff fingers around the coffee cup in front of her. On the table sat a small shell-shaped dish that Valerie had given her for her clove cigarettes, which Valerie had gently asked her to smoke outside. Ana picked up the coffee and sipped it even though it still steamed. The piquant flavor of roasted tamarind seeds cleansed her palate and roused her senses. She smiled at the taste, the folds around her eyes collapsing in until it would have been impossible for someone who didn't know her to see the blindness in the left one.

"So, was I right? The roasted tamarind seeds add something to the coffee, don't they?"

Valerie and her feline shadow joined Ana.

"Never doubted it." Ana picked up her clove cigarette and inhaled. "You're a wise woman. I don't ever forget it."

Valerie laughed. "You're too kind. But it's nice to hear all the same."

"We both know the uses of flattery." Ana tapped the ash from the end of her hand-rolled cigarette. "Pretty words can't fool us."

"True. Although sometimes I wish I could be deceived, especially now at my age."

"Shouldn't feed them, you know."

"Feed who?" Valerie had started to sip her coffee and paused with the cup raised partway to her lips.

"The bananaquits and the hummingbirds. They're useless. Won't know what to do if you ever leave."

"I don't judge the worth of my companions on their usefulness to me. Besides, they *are* useful, if you consider how beautiful they are and how well they pollinate my *flor de maga* and honeysuckle."

"You're sentimental, my friend."

Valerie shrugged and finished her coffee. "I can afford to be. Much has been given to me. It's my duty to give back." She stood up. "Can I get you more coffee? Some banana bread? No? You know where to find me if you need anything."

Ana smiled and stubbed her clove cigarette on the bottom of the dish. She watched Valerie's straight pale hair sway along her back as she walked back into the Posada La Diosa. A shadow glided across the wall behind her and she looked up to see a large laughing gull, its wings extended stiffly, riding a current of air above her. It banked sharply and descended steeply toward the feeders where the bright yellow-and-black bananaquits and emerald hummingbirds flitted and hovered. The smaller birds scattered as the laughing gull plowed through their feeding area. Its mocking, simian laughter echoed off the canal beside her. Ana watched the bird ascend toward the morning sky again and then swallowed the final mouthful of cold coffee in her cup.