

WILL DO MAGIC
FOR SMALL CHANGE

Advance Praise for *Will Do Magic for Small Change*

"When I read Andrea Hairston's work, there is always the danger that the plot will draw me so quickly into the complex lives of beings so different from the humans to whom I've grown accustomed that I won't remember to slow down long enough to enjoy the richness of the writing itself. That would be a shame because the beauty of Hairston's passionate language is more than equal to the telling of her insanely imaginative tales of time travel and truth telling; memory and magic. Drawing freely and fiercely from Native American, West African, and African American cultural and spiritual traditions, she creates new worlds as richly complicated and blindingly colorful as any you are likely to encounter in the work of the world's best science fiction authors. But even as I write those words, I realize that while calling her writing science fiction assigns it to a specific and honorable literary neighborhood indeed, that label may also mean that some who do not consider themselves fans of the genre may not discover her at all, depriving themselves of the sweep of her creative vision simply because of arbitrary boundaries between what is real and what is fantasy; what is now and what was then; what is past and what is prologue. But Hairston's work is not about boundaries and labels. It is about freedom, to live, to love, to fight, and to win. I have been a fan of Hairston's work since *Redwood and Wildfire*. With the appearance of *Will Do Magic for Small Change*, she continues her quest to make us see more deeply, feel more authentically, and allow ourselves to consider the possibility that there are worlds still to discover. How lucky we are that when we're ready to go exploring, we can count on Andrea Hairston to be our guide."

Pearl Cleage, playwright and author of
Things I Should Have Told My Daughter and *Just Wanna Testify*

“It is hard to pull away from this world of aliens meeting orishas, ghosts appearing and conversing, fiery aje, and sea monsters rising, ahosi, king’s wives and warrior women, defending, gender fluidity resounding, blackbirds chronicling and ravens painting, lightning scorching and time travel transcending, wanderers flickering across dimensions and stillpoints grounding, storm fists and storm stories raining, ALL flourishing with incandescent poetic prose and shimmering song lyrics. Welcome to synapses pulsing, the flooding of ancient memories, and praise-song reframing when engaging in this neural decolonizing novel, an 1890s Dahomey, Paris, Atlantic ocean passages, New York and Chicago entangled with a 1980s Pittsburgh, emerging and becoming vibrantly alive!

Grace L. Dillon (Anishinaabe), editor of *Walking the Clouds*

WILL DO MAGIC
FOR SMALL CHANGE

a novel of what might have been

by

Andrea Hairston



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Blessings on the Beyon'Dusa Wild Sapelonians: Liz Roberts, Ama Patterson, Sheree R. Thomas, and Pan Morigan, who sent power to my writing hand.

Pan Morigan and James Emery make the writing possible.

*Dedicated to Liz Roberts (1959-2012),
dear friend and indomitable spirit*

BOOK I

Pittsburgh, PA, December 1984 &
Dahomey, West Africa, 1892-1893

*What is life? It is the flash of a firefly
in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo
in the wintertime. It is the little shadow
which runs across the grass and loses
itself in the sunset.*

Blackfoot proverb

Public Display

“Books let dead people talk to us from the grave.”

Cinnamon Jones spoke through gritted teeth, holding back tears. She gripped the leather-bound, special edition *Chronicles* her half-brother Sekou had given her before he died. It smelled of pepper and cilantro. Sekou could never get enough pepper.

With gray walls, slate green curtains, olive tight-napped carpets, and a faint tang of formaldehyde clinging to everything, Johnson’s Funeral Home might as well have been a tomb. Mourners in black and navy blue stuffed their mouths with fried chicken or guzzled coffee laced with booze. Uncle Dicky had a flask and claimed he was lifting everybody’s spirits. Nobody looked droopy—mostly good Christians arguing whether Sekou, after such a bad-boy life, would hit heaven or hell or decay in the casket.

“Why did Sekou give that to you?” Opal Jones, Cinnamon’s mom, tugged at *The Chronicles*. “You’re too young for—”

“How do you know? You haven’t read it. Nobody’s read it, except Sekou.” Cinnamon wouldn’t let go. She was a big girl, taller than her five-foot-four mother and thirty-five pounds heavier. Opal hadn’t won a tug of war with her since she was eight. “I’m not a baby,” Cinnamon muttered. “I’ll be thirteen next August.”

“What’re you mumbling?” Opal was shivering.

“Books let dead people talk to us from the grave!” Cinnamon shouted.

Gasping, Opal let go, and Cinnamon tumbled into Mr. Johnson, the funeral director. The whole room was listening now. Opal grimaced. She hated *public display*. Mr. Johnson nodded. He was solemn and upright and smelled like air freshener. Opal had his deepest sympathy and a bill she couldn’t pay. Dying was expensive.

“Why’d you bring that stupid book?” Opal whispered to Cinnamon, poker face in place.

“Sekou said I shouldn’t let it out of my sight.” Cinnamon pressed her cheek against the cover, catching a whiff of Sekou’s after-gym sweat. “What if there was a fire at home?”

Opal snorted. “We could collect insurance.”

“*The Chronicles* is, well, it’s magic and, and really, *truly* powerful.”

“Sekou picked that old thing up dumpster-diving in Shady-side.” Opal shook her head. “Dragging trash around with you everywhere won’t turn it into magic.”

Cinnamon was losing the battle with tears. “Why not?”

Opal’s voice snagged on words that wouldn’t come. She made an *I-can’t-take-any-more* gesture and wavered against the flower fortress around Sekou’s open casket. Her dark skin had a chalky overlay. The one black dress to her name had turned ash gray in the wash but hadn’t shrunk to fit her wasted form. She was as flimsy as a ghost and as bitter as an overdose. Sekou looked more alive than Opal, a half-smile stuck on the face nestled in blue satin. Cinnamon inched away from them both.

Funerals were stupid. This ghoulish statue wasn’t really Sekou, just dead dust in a rented pinstripe suit made up to look like him. Sekou was long gone. Somewhere Cinnamon couldn’t go—not yet. How would she make it without him? *Pittsburgh’s a dump, Sis. First chance I get, I’m outa here.* Sekou said that every other day. How could he abandon her? Cinnamon brushed away an acid tear and bumped into mourners.

“God’s always busy punishing the wicked,” Cousin Carol declared. She was a holy roller. “The Lord don’t take a holiday.”

Uncle Dicky, a Jehovah’s Witness, agreed with her for once. “Indeed He don’t.”

“So Hell must have your name and number, Richard, over and over again,” Aunt Becca, Opal’s youngest sister, said. “This chicken is dry.” A hollow tube in a sleek black sheath, she munched it anyway, with a blob of potato salad. Aunt Becca got away with everything. Naturally straight tresses, Ethiopian sculptured features, and dark skin immune to the ravages of time, she

never took Jesus as her personal savior and nobody made a big stink. Not like when Opal left Sekou's dad for Raven Cooper, a pagan hoodoo man seventeen years her senior. The good Christians never forgave Opal, not even after Cinnamon's dad was shot in the head helping out a couple getting mugged. Raven Cooper was in a coma now and might as well be dead. That was supposedly God punishing the wicked too. Cousin Carol had to be lying. What god would curse a *hero* who'd risked his life for strangers with a living death? Cinnamon squeezed Sekou's book tighter against her chest. God didn't take a holiday from good sense, did he?

None of Opal's family loved Sekou the way Cinnamon did. Nobody liked Opal much either, except Aunt Becca. The other uncles, aunts, and cousins came to the memorial to let Opal know what a crappy mom she was and to impress Uncle Clarence, Opal's rich lawyer brother. An atheist passing for Methodist, Clarence was above everything except the law. Sekou's druggy crew wasn't welcome since they were *faggots and losers*. Opal didn't have any friends; Cinnamon neither. Boring family was it.

"I hate these dreary wake things." Funerals put even Aunt Becca in a bad mood. She and her boyfriend steered clear of Sekou's remains.

"The ham's good," the boyfriend said. He was a fancy man, styling a black velvet cowboy shirt and black boots with two-inch heels. Silver lightning bolts shot up the shaft of one boot and down one side of the velvet shirt. His big roughrider's hat with its feathers and bolts edged the other head gear off the wardrobe rack. "Why not have supper at home, 'stead of here with the body?" He helped himself to a mountain of mashed sweet potatoes.

"Beats me." Aunt Becca sighed.

Opal couldn't stand having anybody over to their place. It was a dump. What if there was weeping and wailing and *public display*? Aunt Becca glanced at Cinnamon, who kept her mouth shut. She didn't have to tell everything she knew.

"Some memorial service. Nobody saying anything." Becca surveyed the silent folks clumped around the food. "Mayonnaise

is going bad,” she shouted at Opal over the empty chairs lined up in front of the casket. “Sitting out too long.”

“Then don’t eat it, Rebecca.” Opal sounded like a scratchy ole LP. “Hell, I didn’t make it.” She needed a cigarette.

“Sorry.” Becca pressed bright red fingernails against plum colored lips. “You know my mouth runs like a leaky faucet.”

Uncle Clarence fumed by the punch bowl. His pencil mustache and dimpled chin looked too much like Sekou’s. “Opal couldn’t see the boy through to his eighteenth year. I—”

Clarence’s third wife read Cinnamon’s poem out loud and drowned him out:

Sekou Wannamaker

Nineteen sixty-six to nineteen eighty-four

What’s the word, Thunderbird, come streaking in that door

A beautiful light, going out of sight

Thunderbird, chasing the end of night

Cinnamon joined for the final line:

What’s the word, Thunderbird, gone a shadow out that door

“Hush.” Opal turned her back on everyone. Maybe it was a stupid poem. “Sekou talked a lot of trash. You hear me?” She touched the stand-in’s marble skin and stroked soft dreadlocks. “When he was high, he didn’t know what he was saying—making shit up. Don’t go quoting him.”

Cinnamon chomped her bruised lower lip. “*The Chronicles* is a special book, *magic*, a book to see a person through tough times.” She threw open the cover. Every time before, fuzzy letters danced across the page and illustrations blurred in and out of focus. Of course if you couldn’t stop crying, reading was too hard. This time the pages were clear. The letters even seemed to glow. She dove right in.

Dedication to *The Chronicles*

The abyss beckons.

You who read are Guardians. For your generosity, for the risks you take to hold me to life, I offer thanks and blessings. Words are powerful medicine—a shield against further disaster. I should have written sooner. Writing might help me become whole again. I can't recall most of the twentieth century. As for the nineteenth, I don't know what really happened or what I wished happened or what I remember again and again as if it had happened. I write first of origins, for as the people say:

Cut your chains and you become free; cut your roots and you die.

CHRONICLES 1: Dahomey, West Africa, 1892 – Stillpoint

Kehinde was fearless, an *ahosi*,^{1*} king's wife, warrior woman, running for her life, daring to love and honor another man above Béhanzin, the king of Dahomey. She saw me come together in scummy water tumbling over smooth boulders, my eyes drawn from rainbows, feet on fire, crystals melting into skin. Momentum carried her through the cave mouth toward me as bright green algae twisted into hair, and I sucked in foam and slime to form lungs. Even if she had wanted to run from an alien creature materializing from mist, dust, and light, there was nowhere to go. Enemy soldiers rushed past our hiding place, bellowing blood lust. Seeing me emerge into human form, Kehinde did not scream or slow her pace, but accepted the event, an impossible vision, a dream/nightmare unfolding before her as truth. Her disciplined calm eased my transition. Yet, nothing prepares you for the first breath, for the peculiar array of new senses or the weightiness of gravity. I was stunned by the magnetic field and the urgency of desire—for food, for touch, for expression and connection. The first experiences are paradise.

As I selfishly reveled in the miracles of this universe, in the delight of a new body, danger threatened at Kehinde's back: bayonets, bullets, and a hundred furious feet. She gulped the humid air and glared back and forth between me and the watery entrance. Her deep brown flesh was torn and bleeding as her heart flooded bulging muscles with iron-rich, oxygen-dense blood. An unconscious man was balanced on the fulcrum of her shoulder. He bled from too many wounds, onto the knives, guns, water

1 *The Appendix to *The Chronicles* offers a compendium of words and information from the Wanderer's world for handy reference.

gourds, ammunition, bedroll, food, wooden stool, palm leaf umbrella, human skulls, and medicine bags that hung from a belt at her waist. She settled the man against the damp earth. She kissed his eyes, stroked his hair, and murmured to him. Foreign projectiles were lodged in his organs. He'd soon bleed himself away. Abandoning him would have improved her chances of survival, yet she had no intention of doing this. Kehinde's spirit appealed to me at once. My body settled on a form close to hers.

She aimed a rifle at me. Later I would learn she was a sharpshooter, *gbeto*, an elephant huntress, a merciless killer of her enemies. In these first moments I understood the murderous device yet felt certain she would not set its lethal projectiles in motion. Too noisy, why give herself away to harm me, a naked being just coming to my senses? She could not fathom the risk I posed. Trusting me for the moment was reasonable.

I pushed her weapon aside with my still spongy cheek and bent to the suffering man. Kehinde shifted the rifle toward the cave opening and held a knife at my writhing algae hair while I ministered to him. If I knew then what I know now, I might have been able to save him. Perhaps it was better for me that I was so ignorant of human bodies. He might not have embraced a newly formed Wanderer, and Kehinde might not have become my guide. Lonely Wanderers fade back into the spaces between things or fracture incessantly until they are next to nothing.

"Kehinde," the man groaned and reached for her. "Somso..." I covered his mouth quickly. Kehinde dripped fragrant, salty fluid onto my face, silently urging me to act, to aid the broken man. With minor core manipulations, I eased pain, calmed turmoil, and gave them a few moments to share. The man came swiftly to his senses and gripped her calf. She thrust the rifle into my hand. I grasped it clumsily and monitored the cave mouth. I doubted my resolve and my accuracy—my bones were still gooey, my muscles rock hard. She crouched down, and they passed soft sounds between them, inhaling each other's breath. She never betrayed his last words to me, yet I'm sure he exhorted her to leave, to let him

die with the hope that at least she had a chance to live. Kehinde shook her head, resisting his demand.

The people who carried her death in their minds raced again through the water outside our cave. The man heard them and clutched a blade at her belt. “Somso!” Insistent, he ground his teeth and spit this word at her, a name I would later learn. The sound made my throat ache. Someone splashed close to the entrance. Kehinde’s heart raced. The dying man nodded at her and closed his eyes.

Kehinde sucked a ragged breath. “Somso,” she said. Her hand shook as she forced her cutlass through his heart.

He did not cry out. My own heart rattled in my chest. Kehinde pressed her lips on his as blood bubbled to an end. She wiped the blade on the damp ground and threw a wad of cloth toward me. Words rained down, a frothy hiss, barely audible, like steam bubbling through a hole. I understood nothing and waved the cloth at her stupidly. My new body was starving for language. I gorged on her sounds, gestures, smells; I lapped up the twists and turns of her nose and lips, swallowed the flashes of light and dark from her blinking eyes. Her expressions were tantalizing and rich, but sense would only come after more experiences. Abandoning me would have greatly improved her chances of survival. She had no intention of doing this either. I resolved to know her completely. Kehinde would be the *stillpoint* of my wandering on this planet.

A rash decision, but Kehinde was taking a similar foolhardy course. A storm of feet headed our way. She gripped my wrist and dragged me through the cave. We crawled on our bellies twisting and turning through a labyrinth of darkness. Kehinde hesitated at an intersection of four tunnels. She lit a lantern, whispered *Somso*, and chose the narrowest opening. A distant spit of light might have been illusion. Just when I thought the walls would crush us, we tumbled out into a forest.

Kehinde lurched about dropping gear: umbrella, water gourd, bedroll, and several human skulls. How she chose what to abandon and what to keep was a mystery. She explained nothing.

What would I have understood? She snatched the cloth I clutched stupidly, threw it over my nakedness, and cinched it with a belt. She reconsidered abandoning two skulls and wrapped them and bags of ammunition and food around my waist on the belt. Angry voices and clanking weapons echoed in the cave. Kehinde pointed to the bright orange star sliding behind trees. I mimicked her gesture. She ran. I followed, matching her cadence, stealing some balance. Luckily a new form yields quickly to the demands of the moment, to the first experiences.

Racing through dense forest over rock-hard roots, we kept a punishing pace until the star's bright light faded from the dome of sky. My lungs expanded, increasing their volume with each tortured breath. Indeed, my whole body strained to match the warrior woman's. I admired the powerful limbs, muscular buttocks, and indefatigable heart that she'd had years to develop. I had a few hours of struggle and pain to match her physique. Exhaustion accumulated in my cells; torn muscles generated more strands; my feet bled new blood. The trees sang comfort to me. Birds let loose battle cries, goading me on. So many strong chemicals assaulted us. My skin, tongue, and nose burned. Dizzy, I faltered, but the rhythm of Kehinde's breath and heart guided me through the maze of sensations. Our human pursuers could not fly across the ground as we did. Soon our sole companions were unseen animals and the wind.

We camped in cold moonlight on burnt ground. Kehinde had tools to make a fire, but resisted offering a sign of our location to her enemies, my enemies now. Nursing bloody feet, ripped muscles, and an empty stomach, I intertwined limbs under a scratchy blanket to sort and assimilate the first experiences. When Kehinde thought I was asleep, she hugged a dead tree stump and swallowed sobs. Distant creaks and rasps from the bushes made her flinch. She scanned the darkness for spies on her grief, for enemies about to attack. Pushing away from the stump, she spit and hissed, stomped intricate patterns in the dust, then obliterated them with furious swipes of a horsetail whip. She fell to her

knees, threw back her head, and shuddered wordless anguish. As she forced herself back up, my eyes watered.

Spying on Kehinde felt wrong; yet, as I rehearsed her dance in the theatre of my mind, her love and anguish claimed me. I resolved to be a good witness.

My memories waiver. Coming from another dimension and manifesting in this flesh form, who would not be uncertain? This drawing is what I make of that funeral night. It was a fevered moment. Such is life on Earth.

Guardians and Wanderers

“It wasn’t a lie,” Cinnamon whispered to the Sekou-stand-in half-smiling at her from his flower and satin fortress. “The Wanderer’s like Daddy, an artist who sorta lost his mind.”

Cinnamon stroked images of Kehinde dancing in the moonlight. The warrior woman was muscular and fierce, scary and beautiful. She was sad too, like Cinnamon, over losing someone she loved. Trees and bushes retreated from her, pulling in stalks and limbs, turning aside leaves. Animal eyes peeked from caves, nests, and prickly branches. Stars glittered above her, or perhaps a swarm of flying insects flashed fluorescent butts. Kehinde threw ample hips and brawny arms around like lethal weapons. Wide eyes were pulled into a slant by tight cornrows that covered her head in delicate swirls. Full breasts stood up on a muscular chest. Thunder thighs and big feet made a storm of dust in a rocky clearing. The drawing captured the Wanderer’s fevered vision with photographic detail but was also dreamy like those painters Sekou loved, Marc Chagall or Lois Mailou Jones. The Wanderer was a good artist, showing how that night in old Africa had felt.

Despite the beautiful painting, it was hard to *believe* in an alien Wanderer *writing for his life*—to Sekou and now Cinnamon. Space aliens usually zoomed into big cities like New York, London, or Tokyo, and they came right now or on a distant tomorrow to conquer the world (mostly). Whoever heard of aliens going to Dahomey in 1890-something? Cinnamon looked up from the book. Opal was so embarrassed by a drug-addict son who’d maybe OD’ed on purpose that she almost didn’t have a memorial service. Cinnamon resisted doubt. Sekou always dug up cool things nobody else knew.

“Good lord, what size are you already?” Aunt Becca waved a chicken wing at Cinnamon. “You better learn to push yourself away from the table.”

“I didn’t eat much.” Cinnamon hadn’t eaten *anything*. Tears pounded her eyes.

Opal pulled Cinnamon aside. “Nobody wants to see that.” She scoured away tear dribble. “You promised not to be a crybaby today. Sekou wouldn’t want you crying.”

“I knew him better than you did.” Sekou wouldn’t want Cinnamon to be sad forever, still he’d appreciate a few tears. “There’s plenty he never told you.”

“Your brother was no good. That’s why he’s dead this day.” Opal poked the book. “I gotta dump that junk of his. Can’t have it around the house doing us no good.”

“*The Chronicles* is all true. Can’t throw truth away.” Cinnamon hugged it close. “The more I read, the truer it’ll get. Sekou got it from a weird and wonderful Wanderer.”

Opal wheezed. “Some homeless, trash-talking cokehead told Sekou that Wanderer lie ’cause—”

“No. Sekou said the Wanderer trusted him to keep several illustrated adventure, uhm, adventure journals of top, top secrets safe.”

“Don’t get wound up—”

“Can’t have it drop on somebody who doesn’t *believe*.” Words flooded Cinnamon’s mind from everywhere and nowhere at the speed of light, a story storm. “It’s a, a treasure, priceless. We’re talking about a Wanderer from the stars, I think, or no, wait, hold up.” The floor tilted under her feet. Her tongue tingled. “A Wanderer from another dimension, from *the spaces between things*, come to chronicle life here on Earth. Without me reading, the Wanderer is dust! I’m a, a life-saver.”

“Life-saver?” Opal snorted. “You wish!”

“I don’t know if the extra dimensions have stars. Anyhow we’re the Wanderer’s Mission Impossible. Only the Wanderer is like Buckaroo Banzai crossing the eighth dimension, and wait, I remember exactly: *A Wanderer from different stars traveling the spaces between things*. That’s it. New pages can appear any-time. Sekou made me Guardian of the Wanderer’s *Earth Chronicles*—if anything should happen to him.”

Opal stamped the tight-napped carpet. “Stop this motor-mouth nonsense.”

Cinnamon couldn’t stop. Consonants smashed into each other around whizzing vowels. “The Guardian should memorize *The Chronicles* in case the book is ever destroyed. Sekou worried about letting the ancient, marvelous Wanderer down. But, he had me as backup, with my steel-trap memory. Hear it once, remember forever.”

Opal gripped Cinnamon’s face, digging jagged nails into her cheeks. “What did I tell you ’bout lying and making up crap? You’re too old for that.”

Cinnamon slipped from Opal’s grasp. “Pages I don’t read will disappear. Sekou said we’re about to forget everything, but memory is the master of death!” Last week, standing in line for a sneak preview of a John Sayles movie, *Brother from Another Planet*, Sekou had handed Cinnamon *The Chronicles*. He didn’t say much beyond the life-and-death-Guardian bit. Cinnamon had to fill in the blanks. “*The abyss beckons*. Sekou said I should read to fortify my soul against Armageddon.”

“You don’t even know what Armageddon is.” Opal pressed chapped lips to Cinnamon’s ears. “Sekou was depressed and high all the time, and his baby sister was the only person dumb enough to listen to his crap.”

“I don’t see anyone from the other side of your family.” Uncle Clarence crept up on them, sniffing flowers and eyeing sympathy cards. “Sekou was no relation of theirs—”

“Sekou’s pronounced SAY-coo. And Granddaddy Aidan, Miz Redwood, and Great Aunt Iris are going to be here shortly unless they hit further delays.” Riding story-storm energy, Cinnamon lied easily. “They were supposed to come yesterday. A freak blizzard ambushed them in Massachusetts.”

Opal did a poker face; yet trial lawyer Clarence shook his head and wrinkled his nose, like lies were funky and he smelled a big one. His two grown-up sons sniggered in the corner. Their younger sister did too, and she wasn’t usually mean. Sekou claimed people

got mean in a crowd, even nice people. They couldn't help it—human beings tended to sync up with the prevailing mood. Sekou refused to hang with more than four people at a time. He hated handing his mood over to strangers. He and Cinnamon practiced throwing up shields against mob madness and other bad energy for when they might be surrounded by hostiles. Cinnamon tried to raise emergency fortifications, but sagged. Getting her shields up without Sekou was too hard. He'd left her alone, defenseless against *infectious insanity*.

“Miz Redwood is a hoodoo conjure woman, and she married herself an Indian medicine man.” Aunt Becca explained to her boyfriend, who was a recent conquest and not up on the family lore.

“They never got married, not in any church,” Clarence said. “Aidan is a plain ole Georgia cracker, no Indian anything—”

“Hoodoo?” the boyfriend said over him. “What? Like *Voodoo*?”

“Nah! Old-timey *real* black magic.” Becca rubbed Cinnamon's hunched shoulders till they relaxed. “You know?”

He didn't.

“Not Hollywood horror, not zombie black folk going buck wild.” Becca pursed her lips at Clarence and his grown kids. “They say old Miz Redwood can still *lay tricks* on folks who cross her.”

“Rebecca, don't nobody believe that old-timey mess,” Opal said. “Lies and backcountry superstition.”

Cinnamon winced. Opal was syncing up with the enemy.

“When you get along to my age...” Becca's boyfriend didn't look old: handsome as sin, a little gray in a droopy mustache and powerful muscles pressing against the velvet shirt. “Going on strong is what you want to hear about.”

That was two on Cinnamon's side.

“Devil worship and paganism.” Uncle Dicky took a swig from his flask. His hand was shaking. Jitters broke out everywhere in this god-fearing crowd.

Clarence wanted to hit somebody. Becca shoved a plate of chicken and gravy-soaked biscuits at him. “Eat,” she said. “Don't nobody want to be carrying this food home.”

Opal pulled Cinnamon away. “Read your book.” She sat her in a chair by a window onto a vacant lot and hissed, “Quit telling tales.”

“Words are my shield too!” Cinnamon watched the sun head for the hills and cold fog rise off the river. A homeless man struggled with his shopping cart through dead weeds. “I know they’re trying hard to get here. Nobody better tell me they’re not.”

“Your grandparents can’t be running down to Pittsburgh for every little thing,” Opal whispered. “They’re old as the hills. You shouldn’t be calling them up and bothering them.”

“I didn’t. They just *know*. They’re coming to keep us company, ’cause we’re sad.”

“You’re making up what you want to happen.”

“They love us more than anybody, except Aunt Becca.” Opal didn’t deny that. “I’m their favorite grandchild.”

“Only grandchild.” Opal groaned. “How did I get stuck with a stupid optimist?” She sighed. “I’m hurting inside and out. You’re not the only Guardian swallowing a flood of tears. Sekou put a knife in my heart every day, but I miss him too.”

Cinnamon licked a bruised lip. “Sorry.”

Opal scrutinized her. “You been fighting at school again?”

“No.” Not *at* school. Cherrie Carswell and Patty Banks jumped her two blocks from school by the library, calling her the dyke from the black lagoon. Cinnamon thought they wanted to be friends. They had more bruises than she did. Nobody ever wanted to be her friend.

“I better not hear about you fighting. I couldn’t take it.” Opal staggered away. “Read *The Chronicles of the Great Wanderer* and let me have some peace.”

“OK,” Cinnamon said.

“What is he doing out there?” The funeral director cracked a window on December chill. “Move on, man,” he shouted at the homeless man limping with his rickety cart through the next door vacant lot. “They got a shelter in East Liberty.”

“East Liberty is a long walk, Mr. Johnson,” Cinnamon said. “Specially pushing your whole life on rusty wheels. He could hobble all the way there, and the shelter might be full.”

Mr. Johnson turned from the window and scowled. Cinnamon clamped her mouth. She shouldn’t fuss at someone her mom owed piles of money to.

Mr. Johnson marched toward the casket. “The family thanks you for coming.” His voice was a soothing rumble. “Visiting hours are up in twenty-five minutes.”

“Only twenty-five? We just got here.” Clarence rolled his eyes. Opal couldn’t afford to pay for more memorial time to impress him. Nobody wanted to be here a second longer anyhow. “A budget funeral,” Clarence muttered.

“Driving a bus doesn’t pay like telling lies in court for guilty people with money to burn.” Cinnamon blurted this out fast.

“Where’d she get that from?” Clarence sneered.

“Cinnamon’s a bright child, making up her own mind,” Opal replied.

Becca’s boyfriend gave Opal a cup of tea. Becca stuck out her jaw, put her hands on her hips, and kept Holy Rollers *and* Atheists at bay. Cinnamon opened the book. A breeze from the window flipped pages to just past the first drawing.