

# BLACK GIRL POWER

A young Black girl with her hair in thick braids is shown in profile, looking upwards with a joyful expression. The background is a soft, starry night sky with a purple and blue gradient. The title 'BLACK GIRL POWER' is written in large, bold, purple letters at the top of the image.

15 Stories  
Celebrating  
Black Girlhood

EDITED BY THE AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF  
*YOU SHOULD SEE ME IN A CROWN*

**LEAH JOHNSON**

EDITED BY **LEAH JOHNSON**

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**LEAH JOHNSON**

**FREEDOM FIRE**

**Disney • HYPERION**

LOS ANGELES

NEW YORK

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# INTRODUCTION

BY **KWAME MBALIA**

Stop. Can you feel that? We're here. I've got a mission for you.

While we get set up, let me make one thing clear: There is no way I could distill the energy, the imagery, and the power of the stories in this anthology into a single introduction. Yes, as a champion of Freedom Fire I'm supposed to introduce the authors and talk about the impact of their stories, but this anthology is a little bit different. They, and my good friend Leah Johnson, the editor of *Black Girl Power*, are award winners, best sellers, and icons. They are poets and writers and singers and illustrators beyond compare. You'll find them on best-of lists, book club recommendations, and in the backpack of someone who needed their stories. How can I, measly ol' me, do them justice? I'll do my best. We can start by talking about power.

Here, hold this book for just a second. No no, don't worry, it's only glowing a little bit.

Now, where was I? Oh right. Power. Power is the ability to control the narrative. Your narrative. Your story, told through your lens, told in your voice. That's important. Power is also strength, and I'm not just talking about carrying seventeen bags of groceries inside in one trip. I'm talking about the strength to stand up—stand up for what

you believe in, stand up for someone else, stand up after you've been knocked down, dragged down, or talked down to. Power is . . .

Sorry, this book does that sometimes. Just open it to the first page. There you go. All right, come on, walk with me.

Look, take this book as an example. Power flows through these pages. Through these stories. At Freedom Fire, it is important that we collected them in an anthology like this. As a reader, it's important that we are provided these stories. It's equally important that Black girls around the world, throughout the diaspora, are continually reminded about their power. The examples the authors have set and the stories they have given us are like beacons—guides that could be a turning point in a young girl's journey to her own power.

Almost there, are you ready? Good.

So here's the bottom line: In physics, power is the ability to do work, and that's a perfect definition for what the contributors to this anthology have done. They put in *work*. The stories you're holding are transformational. Riveting. Energizing. A reminder of how, when given the opportunity to tell our story, powerful things happen.

It's time. Reader, here's your mission: Take this book, use it as the inspirational source of energy that it is, find your narrative, and show everyone your power.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kelle". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a light blue shadow effect behind the text.

BY **LEAH JOHNSON**

Here's the thing: When I was younger, the playground was my kingdom. During recess, whatever I wanted to be, I was. I went to the moon and drove Indy Cars and delivered world peace. I sang like Beyoncé and danced like one of those guys from that band my big sister listened to and strutted like a runway model.

I was a Black girl who was hungry for the world and had no idea that there were people out there who didn't think I deserved to have it, people who thought I should only be a sidekick in my own life story.

I'm not here to talk about those haters, though. They're not here, after all. You are. *We* are. And we both know that to be a Black girl is to be fierce and loud, but also quiet and clever. It's to be brave and bold but also shy and sensitive. It's to be the main character, the hero, and the storyteller all at once. And maybe most importantly: to deserve the space to explore all those things without fear or shame.

*Black Girl Power* is like a book version of the playground I grew up on—a space where we can be anything. Where, with the turn of a page, a Black girl can be a fierce hockey player or a reluctant vampire or a determined pastry witch. Where Black girls can lose themselves



in the endless possibility of how powerful Black girlhood can be, but hopefully find themselves there too.

This anthology is filled with so many of my friends, faves, and heroes all coming together to create the type of book you never want to put down. (Warning: Resist the temptation to take it into the bathtub with you, though. The last thing you want is super-soggy pages, trust me.) But more importantly, *Black Girl Power* is filled with the kinds of poems and stories that make me want to dream bigger, sing louder, and imagine more—for myself, definitely, but really, for all of us.

So, roll your shoulders back. Settle in. And enjoy these pages filled with the smack-talking, Nintendo Switch-playing, honor roll-getting main characters we've always been.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized, cursive letters that appear to be 'JG'.



**THE  
NEW  
RULES**



BY

**ELISE BRYANT**



I'm not getting out of this car.

Mom can just keep on driving to her job at the hospital and leave me in the parking lot with the windows cracked. I'm short enough that I can still stretch out all the way in the backseat, and there's an ice pack in my lunch box, so my peanut butter and jelly sandwich and cut-up nectarines won't get all mushy and gross.

And if this becomes my regular spot, which it will because as I've established *I'm never leaving this car again*, I can add some curtains in the back to block out the bright afternoon sun, and maybe some pillows to make it cozy. I can pack my stack of fantasy novels from the library and my bonnet, too, so I can take a nap after lunch, like in kindergarten . . .

"Baby girl, you've gotta get out this car," Mom says. The silver

minivan behind us in the car line honks in agreement. “As much as I wish I could walk you in . . .”

That’s good. I can work the mom guilt angle.

“Principal Roberson sent out at least three ‘friendly reminders’ that we’re supposed to drop and go.” Her eyes flick to the rearview mirror as the silver minivan honks again. “Is that lady taking a picture of my license plate? Oh lord, I’m about to get called out on that PTA Facebook group.”

Mom turns to look at me, and I don’t know if it’s how tightly my right hand is clutching the door or the pure terror that is surely shining out from my eyes. But she quickly puts the car in park, pushes a button that makes her headlights flash, and waves out the window for the silver minivan to pass.

“Oh Maya. Oh no.” Mom leans in, cupping the side of my cheek, and I smell the jasmine oil she always rubs on her wrists. Her eyebrows are pressed tightly together, and a web of wrinkles disrupts the smooth brown skin of her forehead. “What are you worried about, baby?”

What am I worried about? Well, a lot of things.

Like what if I can’t find my classes? What if, even though I’ve studied a map of King Middle School for weeks and noted where every room on my schedule was during the sixth-grade orientation, they actually went through a huge remodel just last week and changed it all around and I’m doomed to roam the halls, lost forever? What if someone mistakes the squeaky sound my new white Docs make for a fart? And I can’t even deny it because everyone knows that just makes you look even *more* guilty of farting? What if, after triple checking and putting on another layer just in case, I still didn’t put on the *right* amount of deodorant and I get labeled the smelly kid until eighth-grade promotion?

The panic builds in my chest, and I know it will help to talk it

through with Mom. It always does. But I also know that my worries always become her worries. And I don't want her day to be ruined like mine already is.

"I don't know," I say, looking at my hands instead of her. "I'm just . . . nervous."

She reaches over and laces her fingers through mine. "Breathe, Maya. Remember, like Dr. Hernandez showed you. Deep belly breaths."

I count to four as I take in a breath and imagine a balloon filling up in my belly, like my therapist, Dr. Hernandez, taught me when I started seeing her for my anxiety and panic attacks last year. I let out a long exhale through my mouth and then start again.

"It's okay to be nervous," Mom says when my heart rate begins to slow down. Somehow, she always knows without me telling her. "You're doing something new and different. That's a normal way to feel. You remember when I got this new X-ray tech position and was so sick with nerves, I was on the toilet all morning before my first day?"

She laughs, her signature snort that blooms into a loud chuckle, and I know she wants to distract me, to get me to laugh along, too. That day *was* pretty funny . . .

"And all those kids out there are feeling the same as you," she continues. "They're all scared, too! I don't care what they're posting on Instagram or the—the TikTok!"

Now that makes me let out a little giggle. My mom is cooler than most moms, but she's still a *mom*. She can't help but veer into cringey-ness and minor delusion every once in a while.

"*And* you've got Coral," she adds, ignoring a Tesla that lets out a long honk as it speeds past. "You two can stick together." She taps the lavender polka-dot scrunchie on my wrist that Coral and I picked out together at the mall back in June. We planned to wear them today,

our first day at this brand-new school, to show everyone that we came as a pair, a matching set. Best friends.

I've known Coral Duncan-Kim since we were three. She grabbed my hand and pulled me along with her to the finish line of our preschool's fun run—after I stopped halfway through and started to cry because the parents yelling and clapping and cheering didn't feel so fun to me. That was the first time she saved me.

“Yes. Coral,” I say, and I can see the relief take over my mom's face. The wrinkles on her forehead disappear, and her brown eyes are hopeful.

She always feels better when Coral's around to help me. To hold my hand and remind me to take my deep breaths when the panic is trying to take over, just like Mom does. I'm safe when I'm with Coral.

“You'll be fine. You're going to have a good day.” She reaches across the center console to hug me, and I feel her shoulders loosen. I can tell she really believes it.

Because Mom doesn't know that Coral and I aren't friends anymore.



I don't get lost on the way to my first class, advisory. Everything is exactly how it was during orientation, and after all those hours studying the school map, I could probably navigate these hallways with my eyes closed. And I basically do. I keep my eyes trained on the ground, avoiding any stares, willing myself to suddenly develop superpowers and turn invisible. I don't want any judgy looks to confirm that I'm doing something wrong—like I have a big ol' booger hanging out of my nose or that the daisy-print skirt I picked out is babyish and embarrassing—because then my whole day will get even worse.

It's five minutes before the first bell when I walk into room D21,

wave awkwardly in response to Ms. Larson's aggressively cheery smile, and slide into a chair. But any relief I feel quickly transforms into dread, burning and bubbling in the bottom of my stomach. Because I know that any minute now, Coral is also going to walk through that door. We filled out our enrollment forms together—requested all the same electives and tried to crack the school counselor's code so our schedules would match. It was a comfort then, the possibility of having someone I know in the middle of so much unknown. But that was back when being around me was something Coral liked.

"Hi." A soft voice interrupts my worries. "I like your scrunchie."

There's a girl sitting next to me wearing a pink ruffy dress, with short curly hair tucked behind a pink velvet headband. She smiles at me tentatively, revealing a gap between her two front teeth. She must be from one of the other elementary schools because I don't recognize her.

"Pink is my favorite color. Well, obviously." She giggles, touching her headband. "But purple is my second favorite."

"Um, thank you. I . . . like purple, too."

Well, of course you do, Maya. People usually don't go around wearing scrunchies in colors they hate. I try to think of something better to say—something that will make her think I'm cool, someone she'd want to be friends with.

But she talks first. "Where'd you get it?" she asks, pointing at my scrunchie.

"At that store Claire's. In the mall?"

"Oh, I love that store," the girl says. "Everything's so cute there."

Coral and I loved that store, too. We used to beg our moms to stop there whenever we were in the mall, to spend our allowance money on mood rings and lip gloss and dangly earrings. I got my ears pierced there last year, and Coral held my hand and told me it would

barely hurt at all when that lady pulled out the terrifying piercing gun and I almost made a run for it.

And suddenly the scrunchie on my wrist feels like it's on fire. Because Coral and I picked these out together, as a symbol of our friendship. But that friendship doesn't exist anymore and I'm sitting here still wearing it like a total loser who can't take a hint. What was I thinking? What is Coral going to think? I need to take this thing off right now!

As if summoned by my increasingly panicked thoughts, though, Coral appears at the door. The ends of her shiny black hair are curled, and she's wearing flared jeans and a tucked-in white T-shirt that I've never seen before. And there on her wrist, looking as if it's lit by a spotlight, is the lavender polka-dot scrunchie.

All my worries stop suddenly, as if someone pushed a mute button. Maybe this is her way of telling me she's sorry, or that it was all some big misunderstanding. Maybe this means she wants to be friends again and I won't have to go through middle school alone.

But then Olivia appears next to Coral. Olivia's long blond hair has the same precisely curled ends. And when they link arms, I see the matching scrunchie on Olivia's wrist.

I didn't misunderstand anything. Coral just found a new best friend to match with.

Coral's dark brown eyes meet mine, but she quickly looks away, smiling at Olivia. They giggle together as they walk, arms linked, to the back of the classroom.

"Oh, they have the scrunchie, too!" the girl next to me says way too loudly. I can feel my cheeks burn in embarrassment, and my heart starts beating fast again.

"Yeah," I mumble, quickly tugging the scrunchie off my wrist and



shoving it into my backpack. I curve over my desk and try to disappear for the rest of the period.



I swear everyone got a handbook with the new set of rules one day in fifth grade. Maybe they even had a whole assembly, with Google Slides presentations and think-pair-shares and skits, making it crystal clear: *This is how you act now.*

But it must have been a day I was out sick, because it all took me by surprise.

Suddenly, we didn't play at recess; we hung out. And boys now could only be boyfriends, instead of just boys that were our friends. And we couldn't raise our hands when Ms. Goldberg asked a question . . . or maybe even answer her at all, from what I could tell? Shaking your hand in the air to prove how sure you were was *definitely* out. Plus a million other things that everyone somehow just knew, while I struggled to catch up. I had to learn the hard way that what I liked, what I did, was suddenly wrong from bugged-out eyes and wrinkled noses, whispers and giggles behind held-up hands.

But Coral knew the rules.

She never outright told me—not at first—that me being the way I've always been bothered her, but I could tell by the way that she tensed up when I tried to pull her to the high bars, where we used to do fancy flips and hang until our faces got hot. Or how she turned the other way when I jumped in front of the Carter twins to stop them from stomping on a family of roly-poly bugs on the blacktop. Even though Coral ran a whole roly-poly sanctuary on the playground the year before and got in trouble with Ms. Manzano twice for hiding them in a pile of leaves in her desk.

The person I knew best was changing so fast, but I didn't want to say it out loud to her and make it real. Because then I really *would* be alone, left behind, instead of just worried that I was.

By summer, though, it wasn't in my control anymore, if it ever was.

Our moms signed us up for the same schedule of camps, like they always did: Adventures in Reading camp at the library (my favorite), sports camp at the college campus (Coral's favorite), and three weeks at beach camp (*our* favorite, together). I was so excited for things to go back to normal. To run back and forth in the waves and search for special shells and finally go kayaking in our own kayaks instead of the double ones, like we've been watching the older girls do for years. To just be Coral and Maya again, no rules.

But Coral met Olivia—a soon-to-be sixth grader at King Middle School, just like us. Except she wasn't like us at all. She wore two-piece bathing suits that tied on the side and brought sushi for lunch and had a brand-new iPhone that she used to make lip-sync videos when the counselors weren't looking. She was so much cooler and more mature, like she hadn't just learned the new rules but had a whole safe somewhere full of handbooks with even *newer*, even *cooler* rules—and Coral wanted the secret combination.

I tried not to worry as I became the third wheel. I told myself to focus on the present instead of the future, like Dr. Hernandez taught me. And I was doing okay with that until the last day of beach camp.

During free time, Coral and Olivia lay in the sun and tanned. Not even reading a book or anything, just *lying* there, which seemed pretty boring to me. And anyway, my skin is already the golden brown they were trying to achieve, without hours of wasted time and probably a sunburn. So I was building a sandcastle, modeled after the castle in one of my favorite fantasy series, complete with a moat and cursed tower. I ran down by the lapping waves to get the good wet sand to

complete the intricate brick pattern on the front, and when I came back, I caught the end of Olivia's sentence.

“—still hang out with her, anyway? She's so babyish.”

Their eyes were closed because of the bright sun. They didn't know I was there. So I got to hear Coral's honest answer. “She can be fun sometimes. And . . . I don't know. I kinda have to? Because we've known each other since we were little kids.”

Olivia giggled. “So she's just gonna keep following you around forever?”

“No. I mean, I guess I wish she could do her own thing sometimes, but it's complicated. She's, like . . . scared of everything. I have to help her.”

I dropped my bucket of sand, and they both sprung up at the sound. Coral's eyes went wide. “Maya,” she squeaked.

I didn't want to cry. I didn't want Coral to know how much she hurt me or for Olivia to see how babyish I really was. But I could feel the tears creeping down my cheeks, mixing with the salty sweat and sunscreen.

“I'm sorry, Maya. Don't cry,” Coral said. She scratched her cheek and looked away. “It doesn't have to be this big deal. I just meant that . . . sometimes it would be nice if things could be more chill. Instead of always having to deal with your . . .”

She didn't finish the sentence, but my mind could do that for her. Your worries. Your panic attacks. You.

I didn't know what to say, so I ran away to the main office and told one of the counselors that my stomach hurt, which wasn't even a lie. Coral didn't follow me.

I sat on the bench next to the lost-and-found as I waited for my mom to pick me up, and I stared at a single sock, dingy and crusted with week-old sand. Abandoned, half of a pair, and now it would just

lie there forever and ever, alone, because what can you even do with one sock? It's worthless on its own.

I picked it up and threw it in the trash can.

And when Mom came to get me, I didn't tell her what happened, that day or the rest of the summer. I didn't want her to worry. I didn't want to be a burden, like I've apparently been to Coral all along.



I seriously consider spending lunch in the bathroom, balancing my food on my knees like the kids with no friends do in movies. But then I start thinking about all the germs that are on the handles and the door and the walls, just waiting to jump right onto my sandwich. Plus, like, what if someone recognizes my white Docs under the stall door and word gets around that I like to eat toilet-tainted sandwiches? How would I recover from that??

My heart speeds up and my stomach gets wobbly, and I opt for the cafeteria instead.

When I walk through the wide double doors, I'm overwhelmed by all the sounds: people laughing and yelling to friends, snatches of songs playing on phones, trays moving along the counter and slamming down on tabletops (*everyone* seems to have trays of cafeteria food instead of lunch boxes from home—another new rule I didn't know until now). Still, I feel like each step I take is a thunderous thud, crescendoing above the rest of the noise, getting attention. I wish I could put my whole body on mute.

I scan the room, looking for a place to sit, and my heart speeds up even faster, probably thumping even louder than my footsteps. My eye catches on a flash of pink—the girl from my advisory class this morning. She has a lunch box like me and is pulling out a plastic container of carrot sticks. Maybe I can walk up and ask to sit with

her? I don't think she would turn me down, and she seems like she would be a good friend. But is it even worth it? Putting myself out there, opening myself up to the possibility of getting rejected? I mean, if Coral—the person who knew me best of all—didn't want to be my friend anymore, why would anyone else?

I see an empty table on the edge of the room and make a beeline for it, keeping my head down. And that's why I don't realize until I've already sat down that the tiny table is right next to the one claimed by Coral and Olivia.

I can't get up. I don't think they've noticed me yet, but they *definitely* will if I get up and try to walk away with my stompy, squeaky shoes and too-loud, too-fast heartbeat. My cheeks burn as I imagine their wrinkled noses and giggles behind their hands. No, I have to stay right here. I try to pull on my invisibility again like a comfy blanket.

And, okay, I'm not trying to eavesdrop. It's just that they're so close, and their voices are so loud—I don't really have a choice. Plus, I'm kinda curious what Coral talks about with her new friend. Does she tell her all the same things she used to tell me? About her silly recurring dream, with the llama and all that spaghetti. Or more serious stuff, like how she puts on her headphones when her parents fight, or the pressure she feels to never miss a goal in her soccer games. She always told me everything. Is she the same with Olivia as she was with me?

“Does it look okay?” Coral asks.

“Yeah, it's, like, so cute,” Olivia quickly assures her. “Well, maybe just fluff the right side a little.”

I sneak a glance to see Coral scrunching the curled ends of her normally stick-straight hair as she looks to Olivia for reassurance. “Like that? It doesn't look weird?”

“Perfect,” Olivia says. “Mine too?”

“Yes. So cute.”

I don't know what kind of conversation I expected—maybe a discussion of the *new* new rules to be introduced at a future assembly or at least a rundown of their days. But not this. Talking about their hair? This is . . . boring.

“Don't turn around.” Coral's voice turns urgent and low, so I have to strain to hear it over the chaos of the cafeteria. I risk another look and see her leaning in close to Olivia, clutching her arm. “I said don't turn around. But okay, he is totally looking at you. Right now.”

Olivia's eyes widen. It's clear she knows who “he” is.

“He is? Are you sure?”

“Yes, I'm sure.”

Olivia turns to the side, just barely missing eye contact with me, and I study my sandwich like it's the most interesting thing in the world.

“I said don't turn around.”

“Did he see?”

“No . . . I don't think?”

I can't hear Olivia's response, and Coral doesn't say anything, either. After a few minutes, the curiosity takes over, and I glance up again.

But they're not talking to each other at all. They're . . . looking. Coral's neck is swiveling around, like she's doing some yoga move, and Olivia is peeking over her shoulder in short, jerky bursts so often I'm worried she's going to pull something.

I follow their gazes to a table of boys. I try to pick out which one got Coral and Olivia so excited, but it's hard to tell because they're all looking, too. At Coral and Olivia, maybe, but also all around the cafeteria. They're not weirdly silent like Coral and Olivia. They're talking and telling jokes, but each explosion of laughter is followed by a scan

of the room to see who noticed their laughter, who's perceiving them having this much fun.

And it's not just them. *Everybody* is looking.

At the next table, two girls in neon sneakers and student council T-shirts shimmy along to music playing from a small speaker, their gazes dancing to everyone around them instead of each other. Next to them, a boy in all black twists his body around to take in the room in between each bite of his pizza, over and over again, like he's a character on a Disneyland ride programmed on a loop.

My eyes jump from table to table, and it's like one of those optical illusion pictures that people always post online—some are sure they see a fish, while others are 100 percent convinced it's a duck. And you can't be convinced of the other side, there's no way, until one day it just . . . clicks.

That's what it feels like right now. I walked into this room, this school, so convinced that everyone had it figured out. But suddenly, those assessing stares, those judgy glances, look a lot more self-conscious and nervous. Could they be just as freaked out about middle school and these new rules and what everyone else thinks about them as I am? Could that just be . . . normal?

I look back to Coral and Olivia's table, and they're still sitting in silence, studying the boy's table. Coral is biting the side of her bottom lip, a tiny movement. Something I might not even notice if I hadn't seen her do it for years, when I put on a scary movie or right before a big spelling test in Ms. Goldberg's class.

And *click*, suddenly she's not carefree or effortlessly cool like I thought she was. Olivia probably isn't, either. They're both observing and obsessing like me, worrying about getting it right—maybe even more so, with the steps they're willing to take to get there.

So why am I letting them define who I am?



Maybe I'm not too babyish. Maybe my worries aren't too much. Maybe I get to decide.



I walk out of the cafeteria feeling lighter than I have all day. My mom might have actually, *somehow*, been right, and everyone is just as nervous as I am. And if their heads are filled with worries about how they look and sound and act, too, then how much space could they really even be devoting to me? How could they hold on to my “mistakes” if they're busy thinking about their own?

It's . . . freeing.

Maybe if I'd let Mom in like she wants me to, instead of worrying over her worries, I could have felt better sooner.

Except, like a final quest given to the heroine in one of my fantasy books, I'm faced with the ultimate test of my newfound knowledge: P.E.

P.E. is a big ol' dragon with sharp scales and massive teeth, lurching out of its hidden cave, breathing fire, and, I don't know, probably shooting lasers from its eyeballs or something.

Because P.E. in middle school is nothing like P.E. in elementary school, where our teachers let us run around the playground or toss the bouncy ball around in four square. P.E. in middle school means physical activity so strenuous that we have to change into special *P.E. clothes*. In a locker room, with no curtains or doors to protect anyone from seeing you—I know because I checked for them during the orientation. And, okay, everyone is worried about themselves . . . but what if that doesn't apply to the locker room? What if the lightning-fast changing I've practiced since orientation isn't fast enough, and someone notices my body and it doesn't look the way it's supposed to look? What will I do then?

My heart speeds up and my stomach aches. I know it's my anxiety, but if I went to the nurse now, I wouldn't even be lying about not feeling well. Mom wouldn't be happy about it, but she would still pick me up . . .

"Ms. Lee isn't going to make us dress out today, is she?"

I jump at the voice, right next to me.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." It's the girl with the pink headband, from advisory and the cafeteria. She smiles, the same one from earlier that shows off the gap between her teeth, but her face quickly turns stormy again. "It's just, she's not *really* going to make us change, right? Ms. Lee will probably just go over the syllabus for the whole period like all the other teachers."

"No, we're gonna have to change." I deliver the bad news, and the girl's shoulders immediately droop. "I had my mom call the office last week to check."

"Oh." The girl lets out a long sigh, her gaze focused on the gym in front of us. Her fingers start to move at her sides, the pointer fingers scratching the sides of her thumbs. The skin there is raw, like she does this a lot. I didn't notice it before with the big smile and the pink, cheery clothes.

I recognize the movement. It's not the same as my quickening breath and racing heart—or Coral's bitten lip—but it's the same feeling, one I know very well.

I also know how quickly that anxiety can take over and turn into panic, and I think that's what might be happening with the girl as her jaw tightens and the scratching speeds up. I've had other people to help me in those moments. Dr. Hernandez, Mom . . . Coral, before everything changed.

But I know what to do, too. Me—*whole* all on my own, instead of half of something else. I'm capable of caring for someone like I've

been cared for, and I can do it because I want to, not because I have to. I can help this girl feel less alone.

“Um . . . what’s your name?”

“Taylor?” Her voice goes all high at the end, like she’s not sure.

“Hi, Taylor, I’m Maya.” I smile at her, and she smiles back, small and tentative. “I’m really, *really* nervous, too. Do you want to . . . maybe, um, try something that helps me?”

She blinks at me a few times and then finally nods. “Yeah.”

“Okay, so imagine there’s a balloon in your belly . . .” I start, guiding her through the deep belly breaths that help me.

At first, I feel a little silly. Are these balloon breaths babyish? Is she going along with it now, only to tell her friends and laugh about it later?

But as I lead her through the breaths—counting to four as we inhale and fill the balloon, holding it in for the same and then letting it all out in a big whoosh—I let those feelings drift away. I can’t control what she thinks about what I do and say, if she doesn’t like me . . . Maybe I need to stop trying to. Instead, maybe I’ll just be myself. Maybe I’ll let others be themselves, too, even if it’s not the way they’ve always been, even if it means we grow part . . .

Yeah. I think those are my new rules.

The final warning bell rings, and I open my eyes. I don’t even remember shutting them.

“Wow. I—I feel a lot better.” Taylor’s eyes are wide, like she’s surprised by her own words. Her fingers are still now. “Thank you, Maya.”

I grin, and a warm feeling floods my whole body. “I’m glad I could help.”

She turns to look back at the gym. “So, I guess we have to go in there now?”

Worry flickers across her face. And I feel my stomach dip, too, my heart tick up a few notches.

But that's okay. I don't think the nervous feeling goes away. I think it will always be there—for all of us. We just learn to recognize it, to help ourselves and each other through. And then keep going.

“Yeah, we do.”

I put my arm out, an offering, and she links hers through mine. We walk through the locker room door together.

**FIRST  
BITE**



BY

**DHONIELLE CLAYTON**



Bernadette “Bird” Turner ran as fast as she could. Speed wasn’t the special gift Mama had given her, but she was small enough to fold into the crowds on the Esplanade Pier and head into the French Quarter of the Eternal Ward of New Orleans. She had to get away as quickly as possible. Her sisters were catching up with her. She could hear Sora shouting her name and she felt Bea’s energy closing in on her, but she didn’t dare look over her shoulder and get caught. She had to stay focused.

She squeezed herself into the first streetcar-boat, arms crossed and challenging anyone to say something to her. Luckily, no one paid her—or her sharp teeth—any mind because every single person surrounding her was some sort of vampire. Though her mama really

didn't like that word, and said they were decidedly not that. Instead, they were Eternals, Black immortal beings.

The benches were filled with all sorts of folk that didn't ask questions or worry about what others were doing. She spotted regular vampires with their parasols and night gloves to hide their pale white skin from the few sunrays pushing through the perpetually overcast sky of this Ward. But she made sure to steer clear of other nearby Eternals. She felt the eyes of those Black folks on her, and she knew one of them might snitch to her mama. Evangeline Turner wasn't the type of woman who would want her smallest daughter out in the canals of the Eternal Ward by herself.

But Bird was brave. It didn't matter what any of her five sisters said. Their argument thundered in her head. All their fussing about her achieving her first bite. Her first time collecting blood from a human.

She plugged her ears, trying to push away the memory of their pesky voices. Her sisters had circled her, their scolds droned on and on:

*"Stop being so scared. We'll set traps in the Marrow Ward for humans. It's not that hard. Time you learned how we keep our blood vaults full."*

*"You have to take your place in this family and help with the responsibility of keeping everyone fed."*

*"There are no vegetarian vampires or vegan Eternals. Grow up and embrace your true nature."*

*"You'll ruin your taste buds if you drink too much animal blood. You know that."*

*"You're a Turner. We hunt. Your thirst and hunger will wake up soon, and you won't be able to fight it."*

She'd had enough of them telling her what to do. She wanted her first bite to be the way *she* wanted it to be, and most importantly . . . on her own terms. Sweat poured down her brow, and she felt like an earthquake had erupted inside her. The anger of it all still fresh.



Bird gazed down into the dark water surrounding the streetcar-boat, spotting an alligator skimming the surface. She leaned over the railing a little. "I could bite you," she said with a hiss, trying her best to threaten it. "You wouldn't even realize until it's too late." She added a roar to really scare it.

The creature didn't even flinch.

Bird slammed back in her seat. Her stomach knotted. She knew deep down that biting that alligator wouldn't count. She had to bite a human for the first time, but she didn't know if she wanted to. In other places where they'd lived, many humans had become her friends. There'd been Zoraida in New York City and Esmeralda in Mexico City, then Ngozi in Lagos and Aiko in Tokyo. Of course, they didn't know she was an eternal being and thought she was just like them. She might look like she was only eleven years old, the age when her heart stopped, but she'd been alive for so much longer. They'd always been good friends to her, until people started asking too many questions about why she never aged and her family had to move.

She sighed, the reality of her responsibilities settling over her. She knew she had to do her part and keep the family's blood vaults full, but part of her didn't want to admit that she was a little bit afraid. What if she didn't like the way it felt? What if she hurt someone? What if she accidentally exposed her family?

The streetcar-boat continued to snake along. Gas lamps left streaks across the murky water as the boat made its pier stops through the French Quarter canals. She journeyed along the route from the very beginning until the very end, still unsure about where she was headed and what she was going to do. She *definitely* wouldn't find a human to bite in this Ward, and she'd never been to the other ones. She didn't even know how to get there. Would she have to rely on her sisters after all? Or worse, would Mama or Papa have to help her?

She balled her small fists. She didn't want to always have to need them. Her heart had stopped at a younger age than the rest of her sisters, and sometimes she hated that. She'd be small and seemingly helpless in their eyes forever. No matter how many years passed. Nothing would change. Her angry thoughts swirled inside her.

The streetcar-boat stopped. Bird looked up, realizing she was the only passenger left aboard.

"Hey, little lady," the driver said. "It's shift change. This streetcar is out of commission. You all right?"

"Oh," she replied. "I'm fine." The lie coated her tongue.

"Have somewhere to be?" His vampire eyes burned into hers, and she felt his concern.

"Yes," she lied again. She should've taken the boat back home. She knew if Mama had returned from running errands to find her missing, she'd be in big trouble, along with her sisters. She knew they were probably still out looking for her. They'd never give up until they found her. But right now, all she cared about was not having to deal with her sisters telling her what to do or the sinking feeling that she actually needed help to get her first bite.

"Want me to drop you off before I take my break?" He flashed her a small smile. His incisors pearly and pointy.

"Okay," she replied.

"Where to?"

The first image to pop into her head was her favorite candy shop, the Sweet Blood Bank. Maybe she just needed something to get her teeth ready. Maybe that would give her the confidence she needed.

He started the streetcar-boat engine again, snaking through the traffic before parking in front of the Royal Street pier.

Bird climbed out, thanked the driver, then marched straight into the shop. Small booths lined the room, and a back door opened to a

quaint garden. Cold clouds encircled displays of blood cherries, sanguine ice cream, plasma pops, hemoglobin hot chocolate, and more. Her eyes grew bigger and bigger. Her incisors elongated, eager to taste everything.

“One jugular vein please,” she ordered. “The popsicle version.”

“Preferred blood type?”

Bird pursed her lips, thinking of Mama and Papa’s favorite blood to have their cook fold it into their meals. Her eyes combed over the blood type menu. “O positive, please.”

“Good choice. The licorice veins pulse nicely and flavor the blood. You’ll enjoy it,” the shopworker said with a smile.

The woman handed the candy to Bird as the door flew open.

“There she is! I knew it!” Carmella’s voice boomed through the shop.

Bird watched as all of her sisters burst through the door. Without hesitation, Bird ran toward the back. She threw her candy to the ground, then barreled onto the patio then out to the gardens. A beautiful topiary maze stretched behind every store along Royal Street.

Branches slapped against her face as she tried to outrun her sisters and find any possible spot where her sisters couldn’t find her. She heard their shouts and footsteps closing in.

She paused, panicked. She had to be halfway down Royal Street by now, with no idea where any of the garden alleys would lead her to. Which pier could take her to a streetcar-boat? Would she get caught before being able to catch one? The thought of the punishment she’d earn flashed in her head.

“Psst!” came a low whisper.

Bird froze, searching for the source. Her eyes combed through the thick bushes. She spotted a boy with a warm brown face. A tickle entered her nose. She sniffed the air. This boy wasn’t an Eternal. In

fact, this boy wasn't an immortal. This boy was a human, and about the age she looked. Her stomach rumbled and her teeth throbbed unexpectedly.

She gulped and shook her head. This couldn't be.

The boy waved her over. She ducked into his hiding spot just in time. Her sisters combed through the garden, barely missing her. She knew the boy's scent would confuse them. But she squeezed her eyes shut, held her breath, and pressed herself as far into the bush as she possibly could, even as its prickles dug into her skin. A strange hunger bubbled up inside her. She could hear the beat of the boy's heart and the way his blood raced through his veins. She could smell the oil he put in his locs and the bananas Foster French toast he'd had for breakfast.

"They're gone," he said.

Bird's eyes popped open. "Are you sure?"

"I can't see them anymore."

"That doesn't mean they're gone." Part of Bird wished her sisters were still lurking about so she didn't have to face whatever this new sensation was she now felt. This overwhelming urge to bite him. She didn't want her sisters to be right. She didn't want to *have* to bite him. She wanted to do everything but that.

He shrugged. "I'm sure *sure*."

Bird craned her neck to look. The garden felt quiet. When she was confident her sisters were gone, she turned to look at him. "Who are you?"

"Cameron," he replied.

"You're a human."

His eyes widened. "Aren't you?"

Bird straightened up. "I'm an Eternal."

"What's that?" His head cocked to the side.

“An immortal.” She smiled at him and showed her pointy teeth.

His flinched and his mouth dropped open. “Like a vampire *vampire?*”

Bird’s nose crinkled, and she felt like Mama whenever someone confused Eternals and vampires. “No. We have different gifts, different histories. We both drink blood, though.”

He stepped back.

“I don’t bite,” she said, even though her sisters really wished she would. “I’ve never bitten anyone, and don’t want to, so you don’t have to be afraid.”

“Okay,” he mumbled. “Can you run fast and jump high?”

“Not really. Otherwise I could’ve gotten away from my sisters faster.”

His eyebrows raised.

“My mama gave me the gift of seeing things.” She gazed at him curiously. “Where are you from?”

“New Orleans,” he replied. “But not this one . . . whatever this”—he motioned all around—“place is.”

“Which Ward then?” She was still learning about each magical Ward of New Orleans herself since they hadn’t been here for very long.

“Ninth Ward, St. Bernard’s Parish.”

Bird gazed at him puzzled. She’d never heard of it.

“I’m lost.” His shoulders slumped. “I was . . . I was . . .” His voice broke and he swallowed tears. “I was visiting my grandmother in the Quarter. She told me to grab the boxes from the attic storage. But when I got up there, I felt this strange wind, so I looked around and behind all the junk . . . there was a floating window.” He gulped. “I went and looked. There was another attic on the other side. I just wanted to take a peek, but as soon as I stepped through, the shutters slammed. I couldn’t get it to open again.”

Tears streamed down his face again, and Bird patted his back.

“Nana told me not to go rummaging in the attic, but I didn’t listen.” He hiccupped. “I never listen, and now I’m in big trouble. People keep staring at me. Some have chased me. Everyone’s weird here . . . except for you.”

Bird swallowed hard. Part of her felt like him. She didn’t like to listen either, and she felt lost right now, too.

“I’ll help you,” she said. “I can get you back home.”



Bird tried to help Cameron blend into the Eternal Ward as best she could. She used Mama’s store credit to get him a cloak and cover his clothes and clunky sneakers. “There. You look better.” She admired her handiwork. “Last thing . . . and I don’t mean to be *mean* . . . but you stink.”

His frowned and he sniffed himself.

“No like that.” She giggled. “You smell like . . . well . . . a human. And someone who doesn’t belong.”

He shrugged. “Is that why people keep looking at me or chasing me?”

“Yep,” she replied with confidence. “But I know just what to do. Follow me.”

She liked being in charge for once. She dragged him into the beauty apothecary of Mama’s vampire competitor that she’d been complaining about. She ducked under the sign, MADAME DÉSIÉE’S PARFUMEUR AND PREMIER PRODUCTS FOR VAMPIRIC BEAUTIFICATION, as if it could report back to Mama about her whereabouts.

“Stay close,” she whispered to him.

Vampires milled about.

Bird eased through the various aisles, her eyes combing over all of the gorgeous displays of perfumes, powders, and pots of creams arranged like macarons on a dessert tower. She thought of the interior of their family business—THE HOUSE OF BLACK SAPPHIRES: BEAUTY APOTHECARY AND PHARMACY OF DELIGHTS—and its menagerie of glass and liquid. The walls held cupboards lined with bulb-shaped bottles of every shape and size and vases spilling over with dried flower petals. Crystalline tones echoed all around as glass bottles nudged each other like the store’s own magical song.

With each step she took, she felt like Mama would be upset with her. She worked fast, identifying the strongest scent available.

She felt Cameron’s breath quicken as the store filled with vampires, so she paid quickly and got them back outside. Sweat dripped down his cheeks.

“What’s wrong?”

“Everyone keeps looking at me like they want to eat me.”

She hid her smile. “Because they do.”

His eyes bulged.

“Only immortals live here. Eternals, vampires, and others like them. But never mind.” She held the perfume atomizer in front of him and sprayed right in his face. He coughed. “Whoops! Sorry.”

After he was thoroughly drenched, they set off to find the window he’d stepped through. They walked along promenades and along bridges that stretched over French Quarter canals like crescent moons. Bird watched out for her sisters while also trying to pay attention to all the details he listed about his Nana’s mysterious attic where he ended up crossing into this version of New Orleans.

“There were musicians, and so many arguments. I had to sneak out the back door while the cook was on a break,” he said.



Bird paused, wondering if he'd let her use her gift. "I could figure it out faster."

"How?"

"Remember when I said that my mama gave me the gift of seeing things?"

He nodded.

"I can see people's memories. I can see what's happened to them," she said with pride.

"How does it work? And how did you get this power?"

"I'd have to touch your temple." She pointed at the side of his head. "My mama kissed my forehead and gave me the gift after my heart stopped. All my sisters have one, too."

Excitement filled his eyes. "That's so cool." He nodded. "You can do it."

She took a deep breath and placed her finger on the side of his head. She tapped three times and closed her eyes. His memories played like the spinning of a zoetrope. She saw his birth, his first day of school, the first bicycle he'd ever ridden, and the moment he went through the window in his grandmother's attic and out onto the streets of the Eternal Ward. She liked his memories. They felt so different than anything she'd ever experienced.

Her eyes snapped open. "The Blues Joint in the Frenchman's Street Canal. That's where you came through."

He sighed with relief. "Thank you."

Bird navigated the alleys, got him on and off one of the streetcars-boats, careful not to draw too much attention as they made it to Frenchman's Street Canal. She occupied him with stories of her family to keep him from panicking about all the vampires, Eternals, and other blood-drinking immortals they saw along the way. They talked

about each one of her sisters and their family apothecary business and travels around the world. She told him all about the fight she'd had and how she would rather not hunt humans.

"So are you going to bite someone?" His question felt like hot grease hitting her skin.

Embarrassment pooled in her stomach, and she stopped walking suddenly. "I don't want to."

"Why?"

"I don't want to hurt anyone," she admitted. "I'm worried they might die."

He nodded as he listened to all her fears. She liked having someone who wasn't her sisters to talk to again. Everyone else always grew up, and her family would have to move to a new city. By the time they'd reached the Blues Joint he knew everything. All her theories about all the bad things that could happen if she bit someone. All her worries about what it might feel like.

An unexpected sadness cropped up in her. It had been a good day, but she was no closer to gathering the courage to bite someone for the first time.

Cameron showed Bird how to sneak through the back and scoot up to the attic. Trumpet trills and the piano's melody masked their footsteps. The whole building rattled and hummed with sound. Once up in the stuffy, too-hot attic, Bird felt frozen. A window floated in the middle of the junk, complete with white shutters that flickered and a curtain whipping from the wind. On the other side sat another attic full of odds and ends.

"That's where you come from?" she asked.

He nodded, relief in his voice. "Thanks for helping me."

"No problem."

“I wish I could help you, too.”

Bird shrugged. “Well, you’re a good listener.” She watched as he started to climb through. “See you later.”

As his whole body disappeared through the window, she turned to leave.

“Bird!”

She whipped back around. Cameron’s arm outstretched; his hand dangled through the window. “Just a nibble. Maybe it’ll help you not be so afraid?” The vein in his arm bulged, drawing her closer.

Bird couldn’t take her eyes off him. “You sure?”

Cameron smiled. “Yep. We’re friends and I know you won’t hurt me . . . or anyone.”

She leaned forward and let her incisors prick his wrist. His blood tasted sweet. She smiled as he pulled it back and waved goodbye. A surge of confidence flooded through her.

She’d had her first bite.