TINA KNOWLES

MATRIARCH

A MEMOIR

Matriarch

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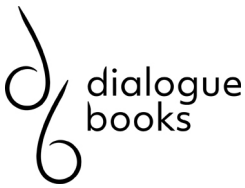
Tina Knowles
Matriarch

with Kevin Carr O'Leary



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To my mother,
Agnes Derouen Buyince,
who taught me by example.
The very best parts of me came from you.

To my daughters,
who became my friends:
Solange, Beyoncé, Kelly, Angie—
you are my crew, my tribe, my ride-or-dies.
What would I do without you?

To all the women out there
who are the Matriarchs of their families.

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I believe that there are two types of family! One is blood and the other is given to you by God.

—Tina Knowles

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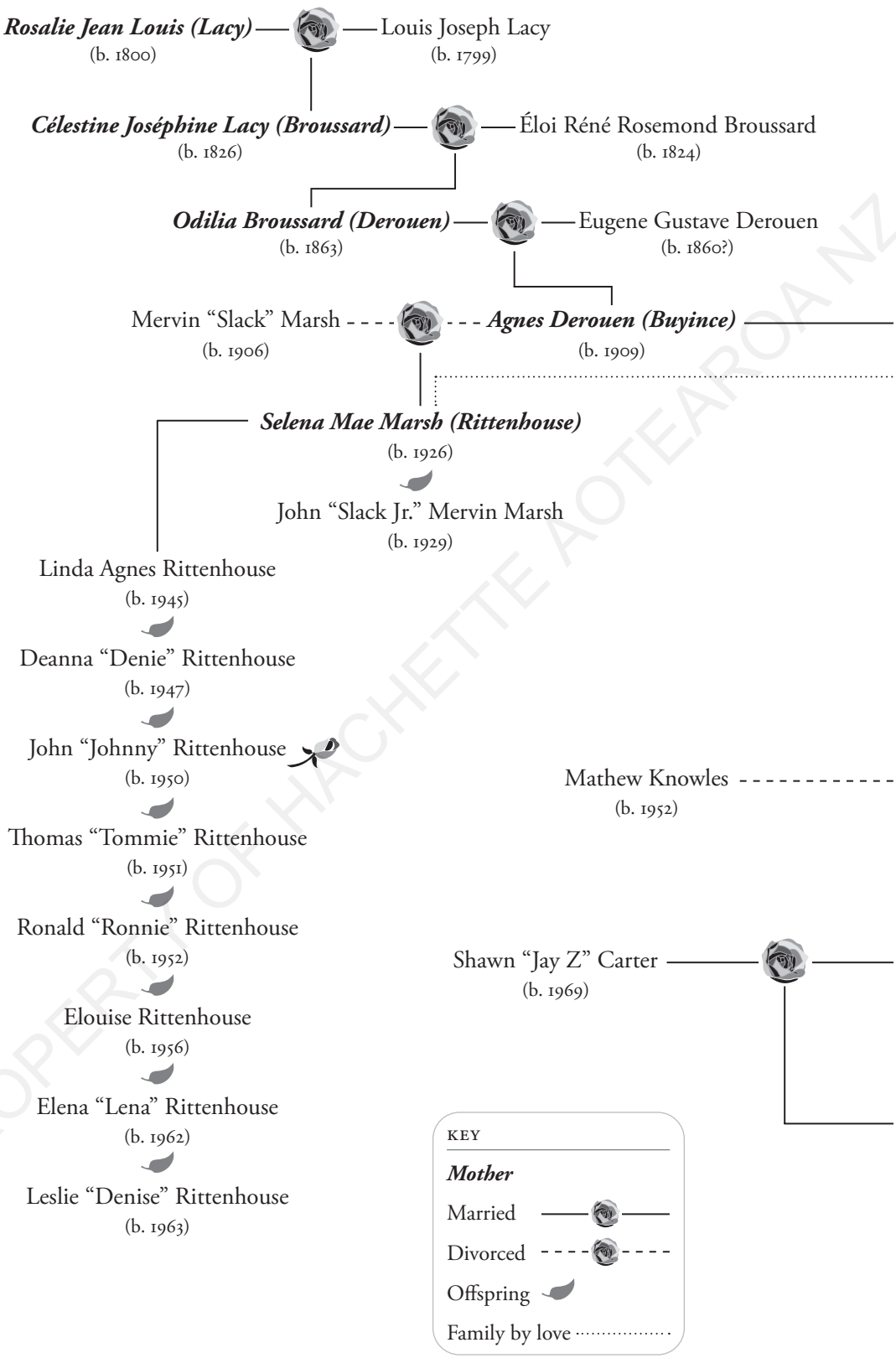

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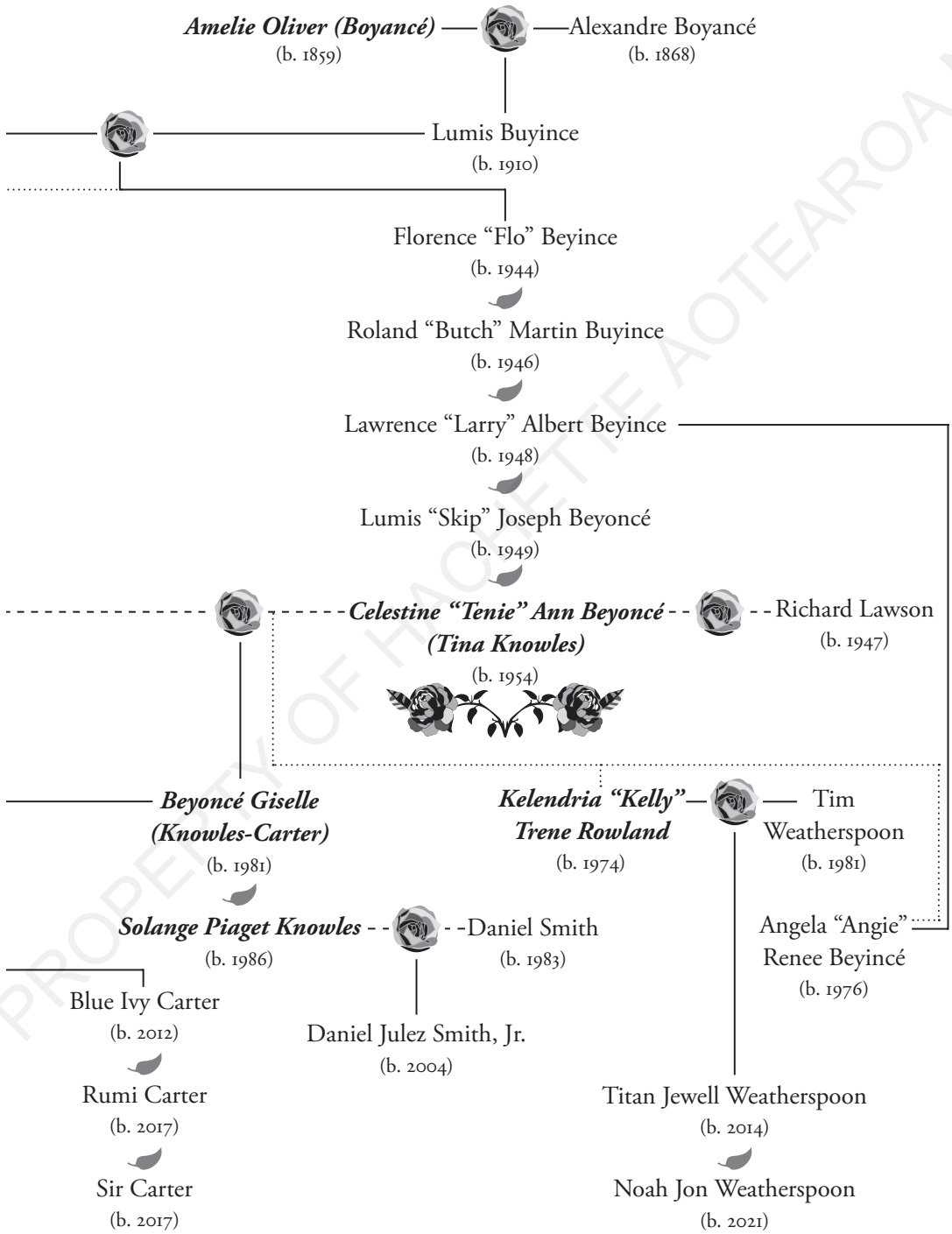
The Mother Tree



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PRELUDE

UNDER THE PECAN TREE

December 1958

Later, a daughter will miss the sound of her mother calling her name.

You can't convince her of this when she is young. Not while that voice is so plentiful in the air. She hears her mother say her name over and over, whether as a command to pay attention or a plea to know her worth; a sigh of maternal love or a warning to be cautious.

She cannot understand in those moments what she would someday trade to hear that voice again.

"Tenie."

I was four years old and in a dream. The kind where the sequins my mama had sewn onto a Sunday dress became diamonds to be plucked and passed out to only the best friends. Or one where we discovered the Pleasure Pier amusement park on Galveston Beach was running free rides with all the five-cent sodas we could drink. That kind of dream. And now, here was my mama, calling me home just as it was getting good.

"Teeenie." She said my name louder now, the accent of my mother's childhood Creole smoothed out but still there. Agnes Derouen Buyince had polished her soft voice to a pleasing shine on her way to the sixth grade, as far as school went for a Black girl back where she grew up in Louisiana.

Before I opened my eyes, the first thing I noticed was that our

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house was warm. In Galveston—well, in any poor house—when you went to bed in winter all the heat was shut off. Old houses like ours didn't have heating anyway, just a space heater. Even here on the island off the Gulf Coast of Texas, the nights could get down to freezing.

A warm house in the morning meant my mama was well. Ever since she had me, the last of her seven babies at age forty-four, my mother had been sickly. She would go into John Sealy, a charity hospital in Galveston, at least twice a year with heart ailments that seemed tied to her constant worrying. Her health problems weren't made up or exaggerated, rather something scary that lurked in the background like a phantom, waiting. I was always fearful of when they would come back. When my mother was home, she would get up before everybody else in the family, around five in the morning, to light the heater. If she was staying in the hospital, my father or one of us kids would have to get up to coax the heater to life. We never did it early enough like her, and the rest of the day it would feel like we were catching up to the chill that stayed two steps ahead. But this day, I knew she was fine, and we were warm.

We had this little two-bedroom home with seven people living in it: My three older brothers, Larry, Butch, and Skip, slept in one bedroom, and my mom and dad built a partition wall in their bedroom to give my older sister Flo her own space. My bed was kind of floating out in the middle of that room.

In that bed, too cozy to move, I heard my mother in the kitchen fixing breakfast. My parents were big on us all eating together. I could smell the homemade bread toasting in the stove, her pecan pancakes on the griddle, and the sausages my three brothers would wolf down before school.

I closed that one eye again, then remembered it was now December. Each morning I woke up one day closer to Christmas, which also meant one day closer to my fifth birthday in January. That got me off the bed, the padded feet of my all-in-one pajamas hitting the floor. I slid on those footy pajamas, pretending I was an ice skater on the worn wood floor to the kitchen. Everyone was already at the table, of course. Everyone always got up before me. My big sister Flo was fourteen and all business getting ready for school—I was born on her tenth birthday, and her party was canceled when my mom went to the hospital to have me. "She came into the world screwing my life up," Flo would

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say. Butch was twelve, his good looks and gift of gab causing a stir wherever he went, boys already hating him as much as girls loved him. Quiet, brilliant Larry was ten, reading the newspaper that my mother also read front to back. Skip was making some corny joke to try to get our father laughing, a nine-year-old who had already mastered dad jokes. It was tough to get a laugh out of my daddy—Lumis Buyince was so handsome that he had worked hard to seem gruff. I would always sit on his lap and try to hug on him. He might let you hug him a couple of times and then you'd hear in his thick Creole accent, "*Okay!* That's enough. Get goin'. Go on now." We would giggle at how uncomfortable our affection made him.

Sounds like a lot of people, but our house was quiet. My parents were older, closing in on fifty years old and already grandparents whose two oldest kids had moved out long before I showed up. They were tired, and I *was* tiring. I'm pretty sure I had ADHD, but people didn't know what that was. So they just called you *bad*. My nickname at first was Dennis the Menace, after the little comic about a mischievous boy that ran in the *Galveston Daily News*. But the name that stuck was Badass Tenie B.

Tenie was short for Celestine Ann, which didn't suit me because people didn't say it right. You say it like "Celeste-een," but I would get "Sell-isteen" or worse, "Sulluh-steen." The *B* was for my last name, Beyoncé, and the Badass was for everything I did. I never hurt anyone, I just moved quicker than I could think. God had given my mother, the most cautious woman I would ever know, a girl without fear. Or, my mom might have said, any kind of sense. So Badass Tenie B was a good fit.

My sister and brothers didn't want to be bothered with a hyper four-year-old, and their real lives happened out of sight with their friends at school. When they left for the school day and my dad drove to work at the docks, it was only my mother and me. By the time they all were out the door, she had already been to the seven o'clock mass that she went to every single day at Holy Rosary Catholic Church across the street. Then she'd start her seamstress work. Sewing. That was her profession, and her mother was a seamstress before her.

My mother had a gift for making the most beautiful masterpieces from remnants. When you went to the fabric store in Galveston, remnants were the ends of the expensive bolts of fabric. If it had once cost

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something outlandish, maybe six dollars a yard, now it could be yours for fifty cents. There might have been a half of a yard left, certainly enough for a little girl's dress, and they would durn near just give the fabric to you. Mama was a beader, taking tiny seed pearls and meticulously sewing each millimeter bead into a dress or jacket, one by one, to make a work of art.

But before any of that work started in those early winter days like this one, we picked pecans. This was the harvest time for the pecan tree in our backyard, when my mother would go out every morning after breakfast to fill a bag. She would make pecan pralines, or press them into the pastries of pies, or hand them to the boys to crack and eat fresh to keep them busy and fed. We always had pecans, and I don't know when I realized it was because they were free.

"Come on, Tenie," my mama said, grabbing the large brown burlap bag to head out to the yard. I followed in my pajamas outside, attempting cartwheels behind her.

The pecan tree was huge, beautiful with a rounded canopy of branches. I skipped around its scaly gray-brown trunk, pretending to have a ribbon as I stretched out the opening lines of "Maybe" by the Chantels. "Maybe, if I cry every night, you'll come back to me. . . ." Whirling, I looked up at the tree's sturdy branches, strong enough to hold even the bigger boys. My brother Larry had built a bench high in the branches, and that plank of wood was my throne, the yard my kingdom, and my mother our queenly matriarch.

My mama saw me looking up, and she knew I was about to climb. But she needed me on the ground, where the pecans were. Earlier in the season, she might need to send the boys out with a stick to shake the tree for an avalanche of pecans to collect, but now they fell freely. You just had to beat the birds to them.

To keep me grounded, she told me stories from our family history. "Now, Tenie," she would say, lassoing my focus before launching into some tale about my grandmother, or a story from early in her marriage to my daddy.

As she talked, I picked up pecans. All the while, I did somersaults and cartwheels, or spun in place until I fell back, holding on to the earth that might throw me off. But I *listened*. I listened to every single word my mother told me. These people, my people—my ancestors

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and my parents when they were young—were characters in a long drama that I was now a part of. Their struggles were not mine, but their lessons could be. This was my inheritance, these stories that people had done their best to erase or degrade to keep us from passing them down. So that we wouldn't know our history and ourselves.

Just like she did in her work as a seamstress, my mother could take the stories of lives that might have been discarded or lost, some precious scrap of information, and weave it into the tapestry of her storytelling as something precious and unique. Sometimes all we had were names, but even names held multitudes, and mother to daughter, each had kept a word going. We would not be lost.

I could ask my mother anything under the pecan tree. And that December morning I did have a question. The night before, I'd sat at the kitchen table next to Larry as he wrote his name at the top of his homework. I said I wanted to practice my own name, so he let me borrow his pencil and said each letter for me. When we got to my last name, Larry thought for a second. "Yours is different, Tenie," he said. He reminded me that all of us kids had different spellings of our parents' last name, Buyince. There was Beyincé, Boyance, and mine, Beyoncé.

Now in the yard, I placed my hands on the ground and tried to do a handstand, leaning against the tree as I formed the question. "Mama, our names . . ." I said, looking at her upside down, as she bent to the grass. "You know, it's all those different spellings."

I talked as if maybe she had never noticed. As if she'd gone to the store and carelessly brought home a mismatched set of last names.

"That's what they put on your birth certificate," my mother said, focusing on the pecans.

I tumbled over, kicking my feet in the air as if that would slow my fall. "Why didn't you make them fix it?" I asked, sitting up again. "Fight and say it's not right?"

"I did one time," my mama said, not looking at me. "The first time."

"So what happened?" I pressed, stern now. I picked up a pecan and wasn't sure I even wanted to give it to her to put in the bag.

"I was told, 'Be happy that you're getting a birth certificate.' Because, at one time, Black people didn't even get birth certificates."

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There was a hurt in my mother's voice, and she picked up pecans quicker, as if they might run off. "What's a birth . . ." I'd already forgotten the word.

"*Certificate,* Tenie," she said. "It says what your name is."

"Well, I want to change my name," I said. I held that pecan tight between my thumb and forefinger.

"You can't change your name," she said. "Your name is beautiful. Celestine Ann Beyoncé."

It was music when my mother said it, but I wouldn't budge. "I hate this name," I said. "Nobody can say Celestine." I mimicked the ugly zombie-voice pronunciation I often heard: "Sulluh-steen."

She laughed, coming closer to me with the bag, still keeping a hand low to the ground for pecans. "What would you rather your name be?"

"Something easy," I said, finally dropping the pecan in the bag. "Plain. Linda Smith."

"You are Celestine," she said, smiling. She squatted to push the hair off my face and pull leaves off my pajama legs. "Like my sister and my grandmother."

My mother's sister had died as a baby, and she was named for her grandmother—my great-grandmother—Célestine Joséphine Lacy, who had lived to be almost a hundred. Gone long before my mother gave me their name. "She was very pretty," my mother said, "like you." She caught herself and stood up as she added her usual line: "But pretty is as pretty does, Tenie."

And there under the pecan tree, as she did countless times, that day my mother told me stories of the mothers and daughters that went before me. The house of Derouen, her maiden name, a matrilineal line as worthy of memorization as the bloodlines of the mythological Greek gods I would learn later. I am the daughter of Agnes, who was Odilia's daughter, who was Célestine's, who was Rosalie's. My mom did not have the details found in the records of modern historians and genealogists. She had what had been passed down to her, which was, above all, the knowledge that these mothers held on to their daughters against all odds.

Rosalie, born around 1800, had been enslaved all her life in Louisiana when she had her daughter Célestine on a June day in 1826. My mother told me her great-grandmother Rosalie called her Célestine "Tine," pronouncing her nickname just like mine. At a time when

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Black families were considered property and routinely ripped apart, they managed to stay together. There was a close call, when the newly widowed woman who enslaved the mother and daughter in Louisiana said she was scaling down and only needed six out of the twenty-nine people she held in captivity and forced labor. The rest would be farmed out for her relatives, their fates unknown. But Rosalie held on to her Tine, and they were part of that six that stayed.

Célestine became a mother herself as a teenager, giving birth to two sons. Her children's biological father was the widow's white grandson, Éloi Réné Broussard, who was about two years older than Célestine. And then, in 1853, the widow who had enslaved them died, and all of her "property" was presented for public auction. Three generations of my family—Rosalie, Célestine, and her two children—were placed on a block to be sold individually.

I type those words, say them aloud, and I feel that fear and rage in my blood, the trauma passed down through my DNA.

Éloi Réné Broussard came forward at the auction. A receipt shows he paid $1705 in cash for Célestine and her two children. *His* children. A relative of the widow put down money for Rosalie's life, and she was taken from her daughter and grandchildren. I don't know if they ever saw each other again.

Célestine and the children moved into Éloi's house, where he had a white wife and his three daughters. He and Célestine would have ten more children, and she would live in his house for fifty years. She named her first daughter Rosalie after the mother taken from her, and then she had Odilia, my mother's mother.

Éloi was my great-grandfather. With all its awful complexity, that is who he was. Éloi acknowledged paternity of all of his children with Célestine and donated a small bit of land and livestock to her before his death in 1904. The way it's been presented to me, Éloi acknowledging that he was the father of her children gave Tine some degree of security, even before the Civil War. There was a portrait commissioned of her at some point, which I'm told speaks to her standing. I know it shows her beauty.

But under the pecan tree, what mattered was this: Célestine was enslaved, and she became *free*. And she got her kids free. They stayed together.

These stories under the pecan tree nourished my soul, and part of

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that was my mother making sure that I knew what an honor it was to be Black. Once I was wearing a T-shirt that read "100% BLACK" while I was out buying groceries.

"You better take that off," a Black man I was walking by said, peppering the insult with a certain familiarity to soften the blow. "You're no hundred percent." I knew this was about my skin being light.

Stopping in my tracks, I turned to him. "Brother," I said, "I'm the Blackest woman you'll ever meet."

From my first breath, I was told, shown, and embraced into knowing that it is an honor to be a Black person. My mother saw to that, making sure I carry all these mothers with me. Rosalie, who had Célestine, who had Odilia, who had Agnes, who had me, who had Beyoncé and Solange. This is not simply about a bloodline. I watched my mama mother children who were not hers by birth. I have mothered children, like my daughters Kelly and Angie, who are as much my daughters as if I carried them. We all have this power to be matriarchs, to be women of the sacred practice of nurturing, guiding, protecting—foreseeing and remembering. The matriarch's wisdom is ancient, for she is filled with the most enduring, ferocious love.

When my oldest daughter was born, my mother had just died, and it was inconceivable to me that she would not be there to show *me* how to be a mother. I wanted my mother to be the one to tell my daughter these stories of all the mothers that overcame incredible odds to be with each other. My firstborn daughter looks so much like my mom, more like her than me. But that is genetics—how would I pass on our *spirit*? That unspoken knowing? The pride of our history?

So my first gift to my daughter would be my name, Beyoncé. It didn't matter how it was spelled when it was given to me, it was our name. Our history. The most valuable possession I had, and it was now mine to give. I've kept a word going.

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Act One

A Daughter

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CHAPTER 1

BADASS TENIE B

June 1959

I WAS THREE STEPS out the door by the time my mama realized I'd pulled my disappearing act again. She'd turned her head in the kitchen, and I was running out the house to my sister Selena's.

"You need to let me comb your hair," my mother called from the door. "And brush your teeth!"

"Okay, Mama," I said, aiming to fall between pleasing and pleading as I kept my pace. I could not stop. A perfect summer day—like this one at age five—could last you forever if you started it early enough.

"Or else I'm not gonna let you go over there, Tenie," she said, her voice farther from me now. She would not get louder than that, I knew. She had what people on the island called a "sweet demeaneh" and I could outrun the sound of her disapproval even if it followed me on the breeze off the water behind me.

In Galveston, the wind off the Gulf is a constant reminder that you are on an island. The city is a skinny strip of beach town two miles off the coast of Texas. Now the wind was at my back, and the gray pavement of the lane was already warmed by the morning Texas sun. I was barefoot, which was the only way to live in June. Wearing shoes just meant keeping track of them when you took them off at Galveston Beach or climbed a tree. And Selena's house wasn't more than a slim eighth of a block around the corner. Otherwise, my overprotective, fearful mother would never have let me go on my own.

When you're little, you don't know how small your world is. Mine was contained in my neighborhood, and the four points of my

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compass were set: There was the east and west daily back-and-forth between my house and Selena's. Then Holy Rosary Catholic Church to the north, so close we could see into my siblings' Catholic school directly from our front door. And just a few blocks south was the small strip of segregated beach that we were allowed onto. They took thirty miles of coastline and only allowed us access to three blocks' worth of sand and water between 29th Street and 32nd Street. As kids on the tiny island of Galveston, our lives centered around that bit of beach—but I still loved being at Selena's house best of all.

My oldest sister, Selena, was twenty-seven years old when I was born, and she and her husband, John, had eight kids by the time she was thirty. My nieces and nephews were closer in age to me than my siblings, and they were my very best friends.

I ran faster in the lane, racing with myself as I passed the little houses tucked tight next to each other. I spotted a yellow buttercup in the grass I had not seen yesterday, but by the time I had decided to stop to pick it, my legs had kept moving until I found myself at the steps to the little porch of Selena's duplex without the flower. This happened all the time—my body moving and my brain catching up.

Now I could finally stand still, and my heart beat so fast from the run, like a tiny bird fluttering in my skinny chest. Not fluttering, more like hurling itself against the cage of my ribs, trying to escape. Sometimes that heart felt like it was leading me, making me run faster, outrunning boys with my long legs. And me, always following it, never going as fast as it wanted. A heart threatening to burst out and fly away from any tether—me, my family, Galveston.

I gave myself a second to calm down outside Selena's house. It looked big, but they only lived in the downstairs of the duplex and had no yard to really speak of. Suddenly, I moved, trying to jump the first two steps of her porch like the big kids did. A high jump in my mind, a prize I was always chasing as the baby of the family. I fell just short, having to do the stutter-step compromise of taking two steps like a normal five-year-old. *Next time,* I told myself, marching through the open door to my sister's house, a finish line into the living room.

Immediately the music of all that life in Selena's house enveloped me, excited me, held me. The sounds of her three sons and five daughters: Deanne, Linda, Leslie, Elouise, and Elena, Tommie, and of course

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Ronnie and Johnny. Don't try to keep track of all of them—even Selena couldn't.

And there she was, my big sister, turning to see me as she exhaled the smoke of a cigarette. The way Selena Mae Rittenhouse smoked her Salem Menthols was something out of a movie, the two manicured fingers holding the cigarette, rolling the smoke around her tongue and then blowing it out as a glamorous verdict on any situation. You could not meet my sister and not think of the word "spitfire"—a spark taking the trim shape of a woman who swore by the power of dark red lipstick and wearing a girdle and sleeping in a bra to stay tight through having all those kids.

Selena, who her kids called M'dear, kept her house as streamlined, occasionally doling out a "get your stuff together because we don't have time for that," to keep everyone in line. Her husband was a trucker, often doing long drives as she did her seamstress work while looking after the kids. You can't be so tender when you have eight stair-step kids—it would be hard to be soft and still keep ahold of things, so she was no-nonsense in a sisterly way. I was starting to realize that everyone in the neighborhood saw her as the big sister they wished they had, and as I put my arm around her waist as a greeting, I had the sense to be grateful that this beautiful, funny woman was mine.

Deanne—Denie—turned the radio up and grabbed Elouise to twirl a circle around me. They were dancing to Jackie Wilson, "Mr. Excitement," singing "Lonely Teardrops." Galveston was a radio town. I did a quick dip with them as the beat dropped on Jackie's second "say you will," but then I kept walking through the house.

I was looking, of course, for Johnny.

I homed in on him standing outside on the side staircase, the sunlight falling on his face. Johnny's head was slightly bowed, always looking like he was listening to—or for—something only he could hear. My nephew Johnny was nine, four years older than me, and he was my very best friend. If you ask me what my earliest memory is of him, you might as well ask me about how I knew I needed air to breathe or water to drink. Johnny was just *there.* My mother put our inseparable closeness less delicately: "When Johnny farts, you gotta be there to catch it."

Now we smiled at each other, best friends reunited, and I was at the

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door to him when his brother Ronnie jumped into the doorway to scare me. I jumped back just as fast.

"I got you!" Ronnie yelled. "I got you, Tenie. I saw you coming. Didn't I, Johnny? And I said, 'Oh, I'm gonna get her.' Right?"

I rolled my eyes in the way my mother said might freeze someday and moved to stand on the balls of my feet. At five I was already taller than seven-year-old Ronnie—but back then I was taller than everybody. I knew Ronnie could not *stand* that I was taller because he was such a competitive athlete about everything. I raised my chin to look down my nose at him.

"You didn't *get* me," I said.

"I did scare you, Tenie," Ronnie said. "Your face!"

I pulled back a hand, ready for another of our knock-down, drag-out fights. Once a week Ronnie and I would have to have at least one—real fistfights, always squaring off. But Johnny cut in.

"It *was* funny, Tenie," said Johnny, his soft voice conspiratorial, trying to get me to see the humor. And maybe it was funny, I thought, but only because Johnny said so. I unclenched my fist to push my hair behind my ear, then faked going left to do a twirl to the right around Ronnie, a half-turn pirouette to stand next to Johnny. So close to him that my left foot almost stepped on his right one.

Ronnie reached down to pick up a ball, pretending I hadn't just fooled him. "We're gonna play kickball in the lane."

"I think we should go to the beach," I said.

"Naw, kickball," Ronnie said. But that's how it was with me and Ronnie. I would say the sky was blue and he would say the sky is *not blue*. The sky would be anything *but* blue.

I shrugged a no and Ronnie got on his tiptoes. "Tenie, why do you have to try to be a boss?"

"I'm not *trying* to be a boss," I said. "I am the boss."

Johnny laughed. Ronnie didn't. "We'll decide on the way," Johnny said, and that meant we would end up doing whatever he wanted to do. Because, really, *Johnny* was the boss, and we all knew it. Even at nine years old, he ran everything. Now he walked from the back steps into the house, stopping only to give a wiggle with the girls to the end of "Little Bitty Pretty One." Without a word, our whole crew, almost all my nieces and nephews, walked in step with Johnny out the front door.

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Outside we moved the singular way children do, crisscrossing and meandering. Some of us marched backwards if we had to, just to keep a conversation, falling and laughing. I saw the buttercup flower again and stopped now to pick it. I breathed in the flower's scent and resisted the urge to smear the yellow on someone's face or chin. Instead, I tucked it over Johnny's ear, and we smiled at each other.

Johnny's presence could calm me and that careless heart that always led me into trouble before I really knew what I was doing. The heart that made adults call me "bad." Badass Tenie B wasn't ever mean—I tended to be the victim of every wrong impulse I said yes to. I would literally play with fire, drawn to it because its unpredictable nature seemed to temporarily drown out mine. Seeing a small flame, beautiful as it glowed, made me feel calm.

In houses like mine, you would have to light your stove with a match. When my dad was at work and my mom left me with my older siblings, I would sometimes go in the kitchen and turn the gas on, then wait a few seconds to put the match on it so the fire would go *whoosh*. A fireball that disappeared as fast as it came, as pretty as anything I'd ever seen.

One day I said to myself, "Oh, I'm gonna get a big one." I let the gas go long, and then when I lit the match the flame was so ferocious the force of it sent me clear under the kitchen table in the middle of the floor. Knocked me *out*.

I came to as my brothers Skip and Larry entered. "She's dead," Larry said, as nonchalant as you please because he knew I was fine. He probably saw me fluttering my eyes to peek at them, the way little kids do. I was mad he was so easygoing about my death, but I kept my eyes closed because I needed all the sympathy I could get to keep from getting in trouble.

"Yep," said Skip. "What do we do with her?"

"Just get her feet and let's go put her in the trash can" was Larry's answer. They picked me up and started carrying me, so I started screaming, "No, I am not dead!" I had the nerve to be mad at them when my parents came home and the boys told on me. "They were gonna throw me out!" I yelled.

Dad moved the matches, but even that seemed like a challenge to take on. Competitive Ronnie and I were together in this. We'd light the toilet paper on fire in the bathtub, watching it burn and turn like

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a snake. Ronnie made everything a test of my will. He would only have to say the words "bet you . . ." and I would be ready for whatever dare. "Bet you won't jump off that porch." I'd be Superman. "Bet you can't beat me in a real fight." I'd be Miss Golden Gloves. "Bet you won't start a fire." A cranky old neighbor had left his ratty work boots out, and the dare was that I wouldn't light them on fire. I went and got those matches my daddy thought he hid, along with some paper to put in the boots to get a good fire going. We loved the colors.

Johnny challenged me in a different way. While Ronnie helped me find stunts to briefly release the energy, Johnny was a place where I could put all that energy into looking after someone. Protecting him. Because as powerful as Johnny was in the family, with nothing happening without his stamp of approval, he could be instantly fragile in Galveston, which was the whole world. In a second, the place we loved could become a hardass little town. Johnny was obviously gay by the time he was three they say, and I had never known him to hide that light. Selena filled him with such love and had him so confident that he never hid who he was. But he would be called things, and adults, strangers, would sometimes eavesdrop on our conversations and grimace at his freedom, or raise an eyebrow at his loud, free laugh. They would shoot him a look, menacing and judgmental, and I would give it back magnified.

Johnny would listen to my stories, my explanation for how I skinned my knee or how I got sick trying to see if breathing underwater would turn me into a real mermaid. He'd shake his head. "Lucille Ball," he called me, even that young, the "Lu" sung high as he laughed at my latest predicament. In Johnny, all that energy I had, all those big feelings, found a focus. It was my honor to be his protector. To give him the flower that he tucked behind his ear.

Now we all walked, loose-limbed and free. Our two houses always moved through Galveston as one family. "Seventeen kids if you see one," people would say, all of us already standing out because we were so well dressed thanks to my mother and Selena's seamstress work. "Sharp" was the word people used to describe our tribe, and that was the standard for our family's culture. My mother beaded all my dresses into masterpieces, and Selena's kids all had beautiful clothes that were expertly maintained. If you messed with us, we could take you out, but the skirt would be ironed. When you were on the ground, you could

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admire the perfect hem of my nephew's pants, with a crease like the edge of a penknife. Our fashion wasn't about what other people thought of us, however—it was our first understanding of art. A celebration of beauty, of detail, of design.

We slowed down, as we always did, by the Stanfords'—another family with eight kids. Then those children would start to trickle out and join us.

"The beach?" I suggested to Johnny, though I knew he would say no. Johnny didn't love the beach the way I did.

"Let's go to your house," he said, which I also knew he would say. Us kids always gathered at my house, because we had the yard we all thought was huge. My mother made sure that our yard was where everyone wanted to be. Anything to keep us in her sights and reach, as she was always worried something would happen to us.

Her secret weapon was S&H Green Stamps. These were part of a rewards program at grocery stores, where you received a certain amount of green postage-like stamps with your purchase. You licked the back of them to place them in a Sperry & Hutchinson stamp book, and when it was full, you would then be able to redeem the stamps toward items in the S&H catalog, the *Ideabook*. Most people would get household items, say, a blender or a set of dishes. But my mother held out for the big game: a Ping-Pong table, sets for badminton and croquet, and one of our biggest gets, a swing set. Do you know how revolutionary it was to bring a swing set to a poor neighborhood with that many kids? It was like an amusement park in our backyard, with everything centered around the pecan tree. And under my mother's eye.

You were supposed to spend money to get the stamps, which we didn't really do. I figured out a way around that. Ronnie, Johnny, and I would wrangle a few kids and we would sit right outside the grocery store. "Okay, now look sad," I would tell them, and you never saw such a dejected bunch. Elbows on our knees, fists holding up our cheeks, waiting for our mark. And like a fish on a line, there one would be, coming out of the store. Men acted as if they'd never shopped in their lives, holding the stamps out like they would actually lose something by pocketing them. The best were the women who wanted to act like they were above collecting the stamps. But they sure would walk out holding them to show they'd spent enough to earn that many.

"What a cute family," a woman would say.

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I'd look up, trying to seem like we'd never heard that before. Us? Cute? If you say so, ma'am.

Then they'd say the magic words: "You want my stamps?"

We'd rise to our feet, like no one had ever paid us such a kindness. "Yes," I would say, gratitude making me breathless in my performance.

"Thank you so much," Johnny would say, somehow keeping a straight face. We would really work it. The little grifters. Then we'd watch them walk away, smug with their public display of affluence, and we would sit right back down to wait for the next mark.

We were playing poor, none of us knowing we were actually *very* poor. Some of that comes from living in a neighborhood with so many people in the same boat—you don't have people to feel less than in comparison. My parents made it seem like it was our choice to be thrifty. When they said "We can't afford that" in response to some want or need, it seemed like it was a decision about what was worth putting our money toward, never lack.

My father worked as a longshoreman, which was probably the highest-paying job for a Black man in Galveston. In all of Texas, probably. Longshoremen could really provide for their families, but my father was blind in his right eye and deaf in that ear. When I overheard people asking my mother or older siblings what happened to my daddy—nobody ever asked *him*—they referred to "the accident" back in Louisiana. No one would tell me more until later. What I did know was that his impairment meant he was only cleared to move small crates from ships, using manual labor. There weren't many light loads, so even though he was a hard worker and made a lot of money in a day's work—as much as a man doing another job might make in a week—he might only work that one day for a few weeks.

My daddy also liked to drink, and he made up for not touching alcohol all week by getting real familiar with it every Friday and Saturday. Our mama used to send my older sister Flo to be there when Daddy got his check to cash it with him and take most of it home while he went out.

He was a weekend alcoholic, and Saturdays were the worst. My father had become an unofficial barber for all the longshoremen, who lined up at his porch Saturday afternoons to pay for his haircuts. Starting at twelve noon they would have beer out there, and that would continue until he left with people to go find more. Then my mom

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would be standing in the screen door early in the morning when she thought I was asleep, nagging the hell out of him about going out drinking. How irresponsible he was staying "out all night." It would be midnight and for years I thought staying out until twelve meant you stayed out all night. I hated hearing that and blamed her for their struggles because I *loved* my daddy. He was so handsome and kind, my hero. As she whisper-hissed at him, I thought, *My mama just wanna take his money from him.* How many times did I confront her the next morning? Saying, "*You* should be stronger to just stop him from doing it if it bothers you so much."

I didn't understand that my mother probably made more than him as a seamstress, since, a lot of the time, my daddy was on what they called Pennies. It was a sort of unemployment, thirty-five dollars a week with seven people in the house and my mama always sharing our food with people. Then at church with my parents—because no matter how drunk my daddy got Saturday night, that man went to church every single Sunday—I would watch my mother put a dollar, sometimes three, in the collection plate and get so mad at her. "Mama, why can't we afford anything I want, and you're just putting all this money into church? How you gonna put in a whole dollar?" Because to me—to *us*—a dollar was a *lot*.

"Tenie, this *is* how we make it," she said, pointing to the collection plate as it moved along. "*This* is how we don't go hungry. It's called tithing. God provides for us because we give back."

I shook my head, watching that money leaving us.

"Tenie, one day you're gonna understand that this is how I'm able to stretch this money." God had to be stretching that dollar to no end.

But on that June day, as we arrived at my yard with all the kids we'd collected on the way from Selena's, how could I *not* feel rich? People I loved scattered about, pairing off and grouping. Some on the swing set, a few starting to play badminton as Ronnie tried to order kids into teams. My brother Skip came out to show us how to really play table tennis, with Larry putting his engineer mind to explaining the vital importance of angles to your serves.

My mom poked her head out, and I watched as kids each took note, calling out "Tenie Mama!" to tell her something or find some reason to seek her nurturing. A shoelace to be tied, a drink of water to be asked for. She was known as Tenie Mama in the neighborhood for

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all the times the kids said, "Tenie's mama is taking us to the beach." Or "I'm gonna ask Tenie's mama." I felt pride thinking that she was an extension of me. As children, and even as we grow into adults, our mothers become synonymous with *us*. They exist for our needs. Many of us think *we* give them life, rather than understanding the truth that we owe our existence to them.

All the kids in the yard felt that way, because when you were with Tenie Mama, you were Agnes's child. She looked after every one of us, finding stuff for us to do together. Any activity that was free she found out about because she read every word of that newspaper. If there wasn't a free concert, there was always the beach. In December, she helped kids gather acorns from all the oaks in Galveston because there was a flower shop that would pay five dollars per bushel, and my mama split the cash fairly so we could all buy Christmas presents. On the weekends all summer, she would walk me and the neighborhood children down to the beach, packing hot dogs for each child and five-cent sodas she bought on sale at the store. Our next-door neighbor Miss Russell would also give us her "commodities"—government cheese, butter, and Spam—and Mama would stretch that to pack sandwiches to feed everyone. Mary Russell was our surrogate grandmother, so chatty from loneliness after outliving all her people that you had to walk fast by her house, or you'd hear "C'mere now" from her porch and be trapped. We guessed she was almost a hundred because she told us she was born a slave in Brazoria County. Orphaned or taken, she didn't know her own birthdate, growing up picking cotton and cutting cordwood. We later found out Miss Russell was estimated to be born in 1870. Though slavery ended on paper in 1863, notice of emancipation came to Texas's enslaved people of Galveston two and a half years late—the first Juneteenth of 1865. Who knows how long it took for word of newfound freedom to make it to a little girl living on a plantation.

As the kids all followed my mother and the fried Spam and cheese sandwiches, courtesy of Miss Russell, they would collect more and more friends on the way to the beach, not even knocking on doors—just yelling out in yards, "Tenie Mama's taking us." My mother always figured out ways to make what she had become enough. Dividing attention, food, money—all that care—into equal parts. The algebra of motherhood.

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On these trips, my mother would remind us all of the limits placed on us. White people had segregated the beach, and only allowed Black people access to a strip of three blocks. That small space was book-ended by the Pleasure Pier amusement park to the left, if you were looking at the water, and the in-town beach to the right. We could go on the Ferris wheel and merry-go-round of the Pleasure Pier along with the white people, but it was only as an equal opportunity to spend our money there. They made a fortune off that place. The in-town beach, however, was considered the "real" beach, and we weren't to step a toe on it.

If you went past that beach, three or four miles down to the right, there was a part of West Beach that we could be on. The whites found its rocks and grit distasteful and had unofficially abandoned it to us. But you had to drive down there, not walk, and you had better not get out of your car on the boulevard. Not till you got down the hill onto West Beach—then you could do what you wanted to do.

My mother drilled these and many other rules for survival into us. One of the many cruelties of racism is that mothers are made to be the guards of their children, enforcing rules that were designed to limit them. Constantly telling them what they cannot do for fear that if they don't remember the box they were put in, they will be hurt or killed.

She was not wrong. A few years later, my brothers—Larry, Skip, and Butch—would be at the beach riding bikes on the boulevard. They were in junior high and high school, playing with two friends of theirs. They rode their bikes half a block into the white area, probably one following the other. They later said they didn't realize where they were.

Some white teenagers slowed their car, then stopped. They called my brothers the n-word to get their attention and started shooting them up with BB guns. They aimed for faces, Larry getting the most BBs in his face, head, and neck. BBs get under your skin—embed themselves in—and the pain was unbearable. My brothers came home, bloody and injured, trying to pull the BBs out of themselves. My dad was at work, and my mother asked a neighbor to drive her with them to the hospital.

All for half a block of space. Had these teenagers just driven back and forth, hunting us? Did they have these spaces only to guard them? To not even enjoy themselves but keep us from having them? With all

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the energy put into preventing Black people from doing things, what did they have that did *not* involve us?

Before my brothers got shot up, I didn't have the capacity to understand this pressure on my mother as she took care of all these kids. To simply go to the beach and keep all these Black children alive, some her children and grandchildren, some entrusted to her for the day.

But she kept doing this for us. And on days when it was gloomy or cold, my mother might let us all ride the free ferry across to Bolivar Peninsula and back. This was the way to Louisiana, where she was from. Out on the water that rocked and soothed us, she'd hand us day-old bread to feed the seagulls, each kid jostling another to give them more. "This is our own boat," she would tell us.

The ferry had cars, and I'd see them drive off while we turned around to get the next one back. I would watch them, wondering where some of the people were going. Galveston was a resort town, so it could be anywhere. I had a child's understanding of life and geography, but this was the very beginning of realizing how small my world was, and how big the world out there might be.

That impulse to see what was outside Galveston grew until I thought about it all the time, even that June day, surrounded by all this love in my yard. *What would it be like,* I thought, *to go and keep going?*

Johnny touched my arm. His fingers splayed on my forearm just for a second, and he turned to the pecan tree in the middle of our yard. He'd said something I had not heard, but we didn't need words. I followed him as he climbed up the tree so we could sit on that bench in the tree together. Without a word spoken, we turned to each other and began clapping our hands together, falling into the game-songs that generations of Black girls, and some boys, have passed down to each other. I can't remember which one we started with that day, but I do know that if Johnny were right here next to me this instant, we could raise our hands to each other and fall right back into that handclap rhythm.

My heart stayed in that rhythm, content for now. *This* was abundance. A game-song with my best friend, a swing set bought on stamps, bulk-packed hot dogs, five-cent sodas, our own boat, and bread for the birds. We shared what we had, and we felt like we had it to give. My family was on Pennies, but we were living like millionaires.

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