



ONE  
CHANCE  
DANCE

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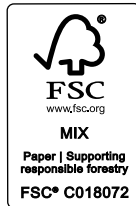
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Also by Efua Traoré

*Children of the Quicksands*

*The House of Shells*



## CHAPTER 1

# WHEN YOUR POT OF LUCK IS EMPTY

Jomi loved picking up abandoned things. Things people threw away, calling them useless.

*Nothing is ever truly useless* was his favourite thing to say, when he found something lying about.

Every single thing had a use somewhere inside of it, even if it might not be obvious at first sight. Anyone who was good at fixing things, like Jomi, knew that.

Jomi's favourite place in the world was the scrap hill outside the village. It was a hill of treasures. The first time the truck came to offload scrap at the back of the village, all the grown-ups turned into angry bees, buzzing about the mound

of scrap until late into the night. The next day they went to complain at the town council. But no one listened to them. No one listens to poor people.

And so, the trucks kept coming. And Jomi didn't mind because he began discovering all sorts of gems between the scraps. People crinkled their noses when they saw the cracked phones, broken strollers, rattling keyboards, ruptured TV screens, scrunched-up cans and plastic bottles. They didn't see what Jomi saw. The copper wires, magnets, wheel bearings, switches, DC motors, batteries and thousands of other goodies. All ready to be fixed and shined up and used to build something new.

And the treasure hill was right outside their house. Jomi didn't even need to cross valleys or climb mountains or sail away on a ship like a pirate to find the treasures.

He'd sewn extra-large and extra-strong pockets that went all the way down to his knees so he could fill them up with lots of amazing stuff. Stuff people had abandoned.

Sometimes it was tough. Fixing things, or

making new things out of them. Like this tin car he'd built with a little sail in front and a fan motor behind to make it drive faster.

'Come on!' Tinuke cried, her long braids dancing. 'Show us what you can do.' His cousin was his biggest ally.

Jomi screwed the rubber wheel back on. This car was his best yet. Or would be, if it didn't keep crashing.

He joined back the wires to the rusty battery he'd found at the scrap hill. The car staggered forward but this time it settled into a slow, smooth drive.

'Ha!' Tinuke cried and quickly popped the little iron lady she'd built into the car. The lady fit in perfectly and rattled along with the car, until it hit the leg of the table on the veranda and both crashed upside down.

'Did you see how she drove the car?'

Jomi gave her a high five.

'I told you, you need little iron people for your cars and luckily for you, you have me to supply you with them!'

Jomi picked up the car and set it right. He

smiled at the mention of luck. He'd learnt a new word at school today that was even better than luck. And it had made him excited, his whole body gripped by a vibrating energy all afternoon. It was this really long, weird word that had curled off their tongues strangely and made them laugh as they repeated it in English class.

Serendipity.

Mr Bola had said it was a very special kind of luck. Ordinary luck was what happened while you were trying very hard to do or find something and you got lucky. Just like searching for scrap on a hill. But serendipity was the special luck that happened when you weren't expecting it. When you weren't doing anything to find it and just got lucky out of the blue.

Jomi had immediately thought of his mum when he heard this. He remembered her bright, dreamy eyes filled with excitement. *Don't look too hard, Jomi, she would say. Don't even let life know what you are after. Just go about your business and then suddenly life will surprise you.* How he would have loved to tell her this word, serendipity. It was made for her.

The car began moving again. He was so absorbed in watching it jerk and rattle across the dusty veranda that he didn't hear the steps approaching. Suddenly a shadow loomed over them.

Jomi froze.

'Welcome Mummy,' Tinuke said, quickly jumping up and helping her mother remove the large basin she was carrying on her head. Jomi gulped down his shock and scanned the front yard frantically for the broom he'd dropped somewhere.

His aunt stretched her back and shook out her arms to loosen her muscles after carrying the heavy basin all the way back from the market. And all the while, her eyes were on him, slowly eating him up.

He managed to find his voice. 'Welcome Aunty Patience,' he mumbled.

Her scowl eased and her twisted eyebrows straightened. He wondered if he might just get lucky this time. But unfortunately, his car chose that moment to bump into Aunty Patience's foot.

She looked at it, bent down slowly and picked



the car up along with his instruments, which lay scattered at her feet. Jomi's muscles went limp. She inspected the car briefly, shook her head and then she squeezed it. The thin metal broke with a mournful creak that cut through his tightly wound-up insides.

'But Mummy,' Tinuke cried as she watched the iron lady clatter to the ground and lose her head.

'Get inside,' Aunty Patience barked at her. Then she grabbed Jomi's ear and pulled him forward. He yelped.

'How many times have I told you to stop playing around with this rubbish, when there are things to be done in the house? Have you washed the clothes I put out?'

'Yes, yes Aunty,' Jomi cried, tears squeezing out of the corners of his eyes.

She let go of his ear. 'And why did you not sweep the yard like I said?'

'I was just about to,' he mumbled, rubbing his ear.

'Get along with it. I am tired of feeding you and not getting anything back for it. You will work for

your keep in this house and make yourself useful! Have you heard?’

He stared at the dusty red ground beneath his bare feet and nodded.

‘Now, fetch me a bucket of water from the well, for my shower, and then sweep the yard!’

Jomi stumbled towards the well at the back of the house, his heart feeling like it had swapped position with his stomach. But it wasn’t because of the wicked throb in his earlobe. It was because of what Aunty Patience still held in her hand. He glanced back and watched her grip his pliers and scissors tightly as she walked into the house.