

# SHARON M. COPPER SUN DRAPER



WINNER OF THE CORETTA SCOTT KING AWARD

## I. AMARI AND BESA

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING UP THERE, KWASI?" Amari asked her eight-year-old brother with a laugh. He had his legs wrapped around the trunk of the top of a coconut tree.

"For once I want to look a giraffe in the eye!" he shouted. "I wish to ask her what she has seen in her travels."

"What kind of warrior speaks to giraffes?" Amari teased. She loved listening to her brother's tales—everything was an adventure to him.

"A wise one," he replied mysteriously, "one who can see who is coming down the path to our village."

"Well, you look like a little monkey. Since you're up there, grab a coconut for Mother, but come down before you hurt yourself."

Kwasi scrambled down and tossed the coconut at his sister. "You should thank me, Amari, for my treetop adventure!" He grinned mischievously.

"Why?" she asked.

"I saw Besa walking through the forest, heading this way! I have seen how you tremble like a dove when he is near."

"You are the one who will be trembling if you do not get that coconut to Mother right away! And take her a few papayas and a

pineapple as well. It will please her, and we shall have a delicious treat tonight." Amari could still smell the sweetness of the pineapple her mother had cut from its rough skin and sliced for the breakfast meal that morning.

Kwasi snatched back the coconut and ran off then, laughing and making kissing noises as he chanted, "Besa my love, Besa my love, Besa my love!" Amari pretended to chase him, but as soon as he was out of sight, she reached down into the small stream that flowed near Kwasi's tree and splashed water on her face.

Her village, Ziavi, lay just beyond the red dirt path down which Kwasi had disappeared. She headed there, walking leisurely, with just the slightest awareness of a certain new roundness to her hips and smoothness to her gait as she waited for Besa to catch up with her.

Amari loved the rusty brown dirt of Ziavi. The path, hard-packed from thousands of bare feet that had trod on it for decades, was flanked on both sides by fat, fruit-laden mango trees, the sweet smell of which always seemed to welcome her home. Ahead she could see the thatched roofs of the homes of her people, smoky cooking fires, and a chicken or two, scratching in the dirt.

She chuckled as she watched Tirza, a young woman about her own age, chasing one of her family's goats once again. That goat hated to be milked and always found a way to run off right at milking time. Tirza's mother had threatened several times to make stew of the hardheaded animal. Tirza waved at Amari, then dove after the goat, who had galloped into the undergrowth. Several of the old women, sitting in front of their huts soaking up sunshine, cackled with amusement.

To the left and apart from the other shelters in the village stood the home of the chief elder. It was larger than most, made of sturdy wood and bamboo, with thick thatch made from palm leaves making up the roof. The chief elder's two wives chattered cheerfully together as they pounded cassava fufu for his evening meal. Amari called out to them as she passed and bowed with respect.

She knew that she and her mother would soon be preparing the fufu for their own meal. She looked forward to the task—they would take turns pounding the vegetable into a wooden bowl with a stick almost as tall as Amari. Most of the time they got into such a good rhythm that her mother started tapping her feet and doing little dance steps as they worked. That always made Amari laugh.

Although Amari knew Besa was approaching, she pretended not to see him until he touched her shoulder. She turned quickly and, acting surprised, called out his name. "Besa!" Just seeing his face made her grin. He was much taller than she was, and she had to stand on tiptoe to look into his face. He had an odd little birthmark on his cheek—right at the place where his face dimpled into a smile. She thought it looked a little like a pineapple, but it disappeared as he smiled widely at the sight of her. He took her small brown hands into his large ones, and she felt as delicate as one of the little birds that Kwasi liked to catch and release.

"My lovely Amari," he greeted her. "How goes your day?" His deep voice made her tremble.

"Better, now that you are here," she replied. Amari and Besa had been formally betrothed to each other last year. They would be allowed to marry in another year. For now they simply enjoyed

*Stolen from her village, sold to the highest bidder,  
fifteen-year-old Amari has only one thing left of her own—hope.*

Amari's life was once perfect. Engaged to the handsomest man in her tribe, adored by her family, and living in a beautiful village, she could not have imagined everything could be taken away from her in an instant. But when slave traders invade her village and brutally murder her entire family, Amari finds herself dragged away to a slave ship headed to the Carolinas, where she is bought by a plantation owner and given to his son as a birthday present.

Survival seems all that Amari can hope for. But then an act of unimaginable cruelty provides her with an opportunity to escape, and with an indentured servant named Polly she flees to Fort Mose, Florida, in search of sanctuary at the Spanish colony. Can the illusive dream of freedom sustain Amari and Polly on their arduous journey, fraught with hardship and danger?

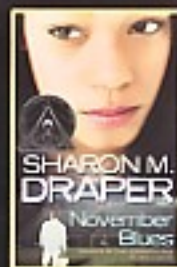
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★ "Action-packed, multifaceted, character-rich."

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