TOMORROW PEOPLE

Girlie

Today the sky is as dull and gray as that ol' blanket thrown cross my bed. If there's any clouds up there, I can't make 'em out. Nothin's movin. I'd be willin to bet it's quiet and still just like this all over Georgia. Last night the win' made one hell of a racket. I sat here in my room by this window and watched the branches of a oak tree bend all the way over, nearly touch the ground, then rise back up and sway the way they do when a good win' is blowin bad. There's worms out there that last night's rain done beat up outta the ground, but even they ain't movin. They just layin there -- some of 'em as big as snakes.

Cranston ain't the place to live for nobody that's scared of snakes. One day, bout two years ago, Gladys Wiggins turned back the sheet on her bed, saw one little garter snake restin there, and dropped dead. All she had to do was pick the thing up and toss it out the do'. That's what her husband done when he seen it, and he still livin.

Before they could get Gladys' body out the house good, news was spreadin all over the place that I was the reason she was dead. Whenever

somethin bad happens ‘round these parts, folks say, “Girlie Shruggs, the voodoo woman, probably had her hands in it.” But now when they ailin and needs my help, they want these same hands to make ‘em well. I don’t know nothin ‘bout no voodoo. If I did, I’d probably rid myself of a lotta trouble.

It’s a bad thing bein a woman of age in Cranston. Men folk don’t want nothin to do wit’ us no mo’, and whenever they don’t wanna be bothered, they make us out to be evil. They go all the way back to Eve in the Garden of Eden, Delilah, and Jezebel, then they cover all the territory they can till they get to witches and harlots. I ain’t never figured out how a woman can be a harlot without the help of a man, and I’m a pretty smart woman.

This house I live in didn’t cost me not one penny. I got me two rooms back here on the north road that Dr. Wilkes bought from Mr. Henry and gave to me. The doctor say if I didn’t mind he’d like to move me off the Barkley plantation and put me where I’d be in the middle of givin him some rest. He even talked Mr. Henry into lettin me use one of his horses to ride out and help folks. There was a time when Dr. Wilkes had to ride his horse and buggy all over this whole county cause we didn’t have but one doctor. Some folks would send for me since they knew I could do just as

much wit' my roots as Dr. Wilkes could do wit' his medicine. When colored folks got sick at the Barkley Plantation or one of the other places close by, it was always me that tended them while somebody else rode or walked all the way into Mays Spur to fetch the doctor. I'd usually have 'em comin round to better by the time Dr. Wilkes reached the place.

Dr. Wilkes was a good man -- he helped Whites and Negroes alike -- but he couldn't keep up the pace of runnin all over this county. As the time passed on they got another doctor over in Mays Spur, and Dr. Wilkes finally died. For the longest time there wadn't nobody here 'cept me, Tarlo, and Mr. Hernry's dogs and horses. Twice a year we'd look up and Mr. Henry would be here wit' a bunch of men. They'd go huntin, and ever now and then I'd hear the pop of a gun out there in the woods. Sometimes a col' feelin' would run up and down my spine cause I'd think they'd done shot Tarlo, but a day or so later he'd show up at my do'.

It was Tarlo's job to see after Mr. Henry's dogs and horses. He got him a little one-room house cross the ways a piece between the stable and Mr. Henry's house. I never could figure how come Tarlo didn't move in one of them houses out by the pines. He'da had mo' room. There's three of them ol' houses, and I reckon they was there long befo' the war that freed the slaves. I wadn't here, but I'd wager them houses was.

Once a month Tarlo would ride off to Mays Spur for supplies, and he'd bring me back anythin I needed. It sho' changed 'round here after Mr. Henry died and left this place to his daughter, Dora. Miss Dora said she didn't want it 'cause there was too many snakes and niggers. She kept it anyway, though, but she live over there in Mays Spur, married George Philpot who used to be the sheriff. Mr. George just kinda took over after that. He sol' Mr. Henry's house back in 1906 to a Colored man -- Neville Sloan, then he had a sto' built down there on Piedmount Road and asked me if I'd run it for him. I reckon he trusted me 'cause I'd been on the land for so long.

"Nah, sir, Mr. George," I said. "I can't run yo' sto. I got my own work to do."

Truth of the matter -- I didn't trust him. I didn't trust Neville, neither. Comin in here livin in Mr. Henry's house. That house 'bout the grandest thing for miles around. Mr. Henry used to have me and Tarlo come stand in his yard while he talked about that house. 'It's no mansion,' he'd say, 'but nobody else has anything quite this grand.' It's a two-story white house with carved pillars and a wraparound veranda. Mr. Henry sho' didn't

wanna leave this land, didn‘t want it cleared, neither. He tol’ Miss Dora to bury him on the peak of the hill so he could look down at his three hundred acres when he died. He died in 1898 and Miss Dora buried him at the foot of the hill, then she come to me sayin how her daddy’s ghost kept watchin her. She wanted me and Tarlo to dig him up, turn him round so he couldn’t see what she was doin.

“No, ma’am, Miss Dora,” I said. “It ain’t right to trouble the dead.”

She wanted to know if I could do somethin wit’ my roots. ’Just to give my daddy some peace,’ she said.

“Roots don’t work on the dead,” I said, then I gave Tarlo one of my cross-eyed looks ’cause I knowed he’d been tellin her ‘bout my roots.

Miss Dora ‘bout the same age as me, and she oughta knowed better. If Mr. Henry wanted to be buried at the top of the hill, that’s where she oughta put him. It got to the place where I dreaded to see Miss Dora comin out to her own land. I wanted to tell her, ‘See, that’s what guilt’ll do to ya.’

When her husband died in 1920, she went and buried him next to her daddy, and this time she made sho’ they turned the body the right way. Even when her husband was sheriff, Miss Dora would walk round wit’ the jail keys pinned to her clothes. She say Cranston money built that jail and she had ever right to a key. Tarlo say she be puttin that key in our face so

we'll know she can have us locked up any time she want. I'm just bidin my time, waitin on Miss Dora to die so somebody can bury her at the foot of that hill next to Mr. Henry and Mr. George.

Everythin that happens 'round here -- good or bad -- sooner or later it reaches my do'. Folks know I ain't no gossipin woman, but that don't mean I won't tell it if it needs to be tol'. So far ain't nothin needed to be tol'. There's this man by the name of Wash Gibson who lives in a lean-to a few roads over from me. He dibbles and dabbles in what he calls voodoo, then folks come runnin to me to get his curse took off of 'em. I smile inside myself, and I take they money cause I gotta earn a livin.

Sometimes I remember the great mothers out at the plantation. They got so ol' and shriveled up till one day they just wadn't there no mo'. I learned the roots from them. Don't know how it was that they came to be called the great mothers -- probably somethin the first Mr. Barkley tagged on 'em to make 'em care for all them chilluns out there while the mamas and daddies worked his fields. I reckon if I had stayed folks would be callin me a great mother by now, and I'd be up to my neck in other folks chilluns. As it is, I live in my little house all by myself.

I got this straight-back chair and a small round table that stands just inside my front do'. Folks put they money on that table, then they tell me

what's troublin 'em. Them that ain't got no money always leave somethin else like vegetables from they garden, or somethin sewed or carved. At least once a month Neville Sloan takes me out to the swamp to gather my roots. I put 'em deep inside a dark sack so he can't see what I got. I got fo' walkin sticks that men folk round these parts done carved. I'm sixty-three years old, was born free on the Barkley plantation back in 1870. My mind and my eyesight is good, and I'm in pretty good health, 'cept these knees that buckle ever so often.

Ever' body live in Cranston come here from one of the farms or plantations in Butcher County, or else they wandered in from the main road or from the railroad tracks and decided to stay. They all come wit' they own beliefs and ideas of how things oughta be, and it ain't never all the same. The railroad tracks is a few miles south of here -- runs 'long side the stream. A whistle blows when the trains start slowin down for Mays Spur. Sometime I can tell by the sound of that whistle, just like the sound of the wind, whether we in for hard times or easy livin.

Right now we havin some pretty hard times. Folks say they ain't never seen it this bad befo'. Starvin men and some women hop from them boxcars when they see these fields 'round here. A ear of green corn or a stolen tomato is better than starvin to death. Some of 'em be lookin for

work. I reckon Cranston looks kinda peaceful peekin from one of them boxcars movin up the tracks, but sometimes it ain't all that peaceful. Some folks hop back on them trains nearly as fast as they hopped off; they get on outta here. I sit by this window and wait 'cause I know that befo' long whatever happens out there is gonna make its way to my do'.

Chapter 1

The trees stood colossal and sturdy, did not mourn their brethren who had fallen to small tracts and crude dwellings for the inhabitants. Water was plentiful and easily accessible by walking through the pines, down to the stream. West of Cranston, heading toward the farmland, moss-hung oaks gave shade at intervals along a two-mile stretch between the settlement and the first farm. Small, isolated cabins could be reached by leaving the dirt roads and following foot-worn paths through the trees and shrubbery. A common hill -- nothing special about it -- separated the flat land of Cranston from the town of Mays Spur.

In May of 1933, a spring rain fell over the fields and roads. It lasted for less than an hour and lacked the intensity to keep people indoors. They had known humid, dry seasons where the crops and livestock suffered, and the waters receded in the rivers. Last year had brought a drought, and the present rain was a welcomed sight.

On a Mays Spur street in front of Dupree's general store, Jonathan Lester stood beside a street lamp with his face to the sky and his mouth open, drinking down the rain. The rain had given him a reason to move with haste, but he did not because everybody else was moving at a leisurely pace. He could not afford to bring attention to himself. His hands were shoved into the pockets of his khaki pants and his fingers toyed with the few small items he had stolen from Mr. Dupree's store. Earrings and a pearl necklace for some lucky woman and a pair of barbers' shears for himself were all he had taken today. He was twenty years old, had nothing, and therefore nothing to lose. It wasn't every day that he came into Mays Spur to see what he could pocket, only on days when he felt nimble and free. It was more of a game than a necessity for him. Women loved gifts, and Jonathan loved women. He was wondering which one of his women he would give the necklace to when a single bolt of lightning came down from the sky. He felt an indescribable heat flash across his body. The thunder

that followed had a cracking sound that faded abruptly. Jonathan never heard it. He was stretched unconscious on the ground.

When he opened his eyes, he saw what seemed a hundred faces standing over him. I'm dead or else I'm in some real bad trouble, he thought. It took several tries before he was able to focus his eyes on what he had thought was a crowd. In reality, it was less than a dozen people. Among them were the doctor, the sheriff, and Mr. Dupree.

Jonathan was flat on his back, in pain, and annoyed that he lacked full control of his limbs. When he turned his head, he saw a few Negro faces, but mostly white people staring down at him from a distance. Those who had witnessed the lightning, heard the bizarre sound of the thunder, said that God was taunting Jonathan, that the thunder had been His snicker at a worthless man. Others said that it had been a close call but the lightning had missed him completely.

The sheriff ordered Jonathan to get to his feet. Jonathan could not manage, and two of the Negro men stepped forward and hoisted his up. His right hand was still in his pocket, and there his pain resided. He grimaced, and a painful moan escaped him as he tried to lift his hand from his pocket.

"You sure you all right, boy?" the doctor asked. "I don't think the lightning got you, but it musta come pretty close."

In his confused state, the recollection of what he had in his pockets was slowly coming back to Jonathan. “I’m awright, sir,” he said.

He stood there wobbling, wanting to bring his hand out to steady himself, wanting to get out of Mays Spur and back to Cranston. He saw old man Dupree whispering to the sheriff, and then both men blocked his path.

“Get that hand out yo’ pocket,” the sheriff ordered.

Jonathan tried to ease his right hand around the loot in his pocket. He thought they could see him trying, and they could also see that the hand would not move. When the sheriff, Andrew Roderick, gripped Jonathan’s elbow to lift the hand, the lining of the pocket came along attached as though it had been sewed on. Jonathan was escorted over to the jail by the sheriff, the doctor, and Mr. Dupree. They had to cut the pocket of his pants to free his hand. When Jonathan saw it, he nearly fainted. The back of his hand, his wrist, and the lower part of his arm had a deep red color. Baked into his palm, like a smile of pearly white teeth, were the beads of the necklace.

“Anything of value here?” The sheriff asked Mr. Dupree as he placed the barbers‘ shears and the earrings from Jonathan’s left pocket onto his desk.

Barely giving notice to the items on the desk, Mr. Dupree studied

Jonathan's palm, then said, "Looks like this mighta been 'bout two dollars and ninety-eight cents worth of my best pearls."

The three men laughed hardily, and Mr. Dupree, the last to examine the palm, let go of the hand. It dropped like a sack of potatoes, bumped against Jonathan's thigh, then hung there useless except for the pain it sent radiating up Jonathan's arm.

Jonathan was on the verge of tears. "Get it out!" he pleaded. "It hurts somethin awful. Get it out!"

The sheriff unlocked a cell and shoved Jonathan forward. "You under arrest, boy."

As Jonathan stumbled across the floor of the cell, he used his left hand to halt his impact against the back wall. His right hand burned and sent excruciating pain throughout his body. He slumped to the floor, and turned teary, pleading eyes toward the doctor.

"Dr. Ramsey, can't you do somethin 'bout this hand?" he asked. "Can't you just put some col' water on it or somethin?

"I'll come back later this evening and take a look at it," Dr. Ramsey told him. "Right now I've got people waiting on me in my office."

All three of the men departed the jail, left Jonathan staring down at the smile in his palm.

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Over the hill in Cranston, the people grumbled among themselves. They suspected that Jonathan would be sent to the chain gang, and they did not think that such a small crime warranted such harsh punishment. Arrogant though he was, Jonathan was a likable young man with a quick wit and an uncanny ability to weave a tale. The women, including his mother, liked to feed him, watch his handsome features and youthful joy as he devoured their meals.

Mildred Wheaton, who lived far out in the farmland on the Blevins' property, came into Cranston the evening after Jonathan's arrest. She wore a pink gingham dress that had been given to her a year earlier. She had outgrown it and her flesh protruded through busted seams. The pink fabric against her buttery-brown complexion gave the appearance of a wild flower springing up in the center of the road. She was a girl-child of thirteen when she entered town on that warm May evening. The weight of uncertainty and a child in her womb made her feel she was a woman. She moved along with hope in her heart that the rumors she had heard in the fields that day where not true. Folks said that Jonathan had been arrested, hauled off to jail

as a thief. Mildred refused to believe it. As always, he would be waiting for her beside their special tree in the forest of pines.

"Don't tell nobody 'bout me," he had said. "Yo' papa will kill me."

Even as her belly grew, and the people whispered, and her papa demanded answers, she had kept their secret.

Mildred passed several people who were out enjoying the warm spring evening. She did not speak, left them to their business as she hoped they would do for her. When she reached the center of Cranston, she followed the winding dirt roads over to the forest, then stood beside their tree to catch her breath. She waited for Jonathan, waited until the streaks of sunshine faded from the pines. When he did not show, she suspected the rumors were true. She left the trees behind and made her way toward the jail in Mays Spur.

Standing in moonlight, she felt herself the fool her papa had always warned her not to be. She knew what folks thought of Jonathan. "Oh, I like him alright," they'd say, "but he ain't never gon' 'mount to nothin."

Mildred stood for a moment staring at the red brick building that was the jail. It was free-standing, not attached to an adjacent structure like most of the other buildings in town. She saw two automobiles parked in front of the pencil factory, but the town was quiet and she saw no one. She made

her way over to the door, pushed it open, and stepped inside. There was no one in attendance, only Jonathan staring out at her through the bars.

"Mildred," he said with a slight frown. "What you doin way out here this time of night?"

She moved over to his cell. "Folks say they gon send you to the chain gang," she said. "I come to get you outta here."

Jonathan looked like a beaten man. There was pain in his eyes that traveled up and made a deep furl between his brows. "Gon' home, Mildred," he said. "They catch you in here, you gon' be locked up like me. I don't want our baby born in no jail."

"Ain't somebody s'pose to be here watchin you?" she asked.

"What they gon' watch me for? I can't get outta here."

Mildred glanced around the room. In contrast to the brick exterior, the interior of the building was all wood, from the walls to the floor. Behind Jonathan's head was a short, narrow window, and she could see nothing through it except darkness. The cell next to Jonathan's was empty. There was a desk and two chairs at the right side of the door, and a calendar beside a wooden rack mounted on the wall behind the desk. She went over to the desk, opened the drawers, and searched for a key.

"Where they leave the key" she asked.

Jonathan tried to laugh, but it came out as a whimper. "Mildred, baby, gon home. Mr. Watson s'pose to be guardin me, but I reckon he went home to eat or somethin. But he could come back in a minute now. Don't let 'im catch you in here."

"Did you really steal somethin?" Mildred asked.

"Nah, baby," Jonathan lied, "I was just standin there lookin, thinkin 'bout what I was gon' buy for you when I get the money."

Mildred smiled through her weariness. The walk from Blevins Stretch to Cranston was a good two miles or more, and she had walked another mile to reach the jail. Until the last second when she saw him in the cell, she had hoped Jonathan would not be there. She had to find a way to get him out.

"I'm gon' get you outta here," she said.

"Mildred, you can't get me outta here. If you wanna do somethin for me, get me some of Miss Girlie's salve and bring me a plate of food tomorrow. I ain't had nothin since I got here 'cept a few beans at the bottom of a bowl."

"What's wrong wit' you that you need salve?" she asked.

Jonathan glanced down at his hand, and Mildred's gaze followed his. Dr. Ramsey had removed the beads, and Jonathan had passed out from the

pain. When he came to, the doctor was gone and there were weeping holes in his palm. There had been moments since when he had wanted the beads back to plug up the throbbing. He vaguely remembered his mother standing outside his cell either yesterday or earlier today. She had been weeping and scolding him for stealing. He had been in too much pain to even form a lie of denial.

Mildred gasped and covered her mouth. "What happened?" She asked. "Look like yo' hand is cryin."

"I fell out there on the street. Guess my hand musta hit some rocks."

Mildred thought her heart would break as she stared at the pain in Jonathan's eyes. His pants were torn and dirty, and his hair was uncombed. He was a man, but he looked young with his baby face and smooth pecan-brown complexion.

"Jonathan," she said. "I always heard ol' Miss Dora got a key to this jail."

Jonathan nodded. "Yeah, but I always heard that ol' woman is crazy. Mildred, don't you go botherin that ol' woman. She'd mo' 'an likely shoot you."

She backed away from Jonathan, opened the door, and peered out into the street. There were street lamps in Mays Spur, and the night sky

revealed a moon bright enough to light the entire county. If the moon faded, however, she would have trouble getting back to Cranston. And getting out to Blevins Stretch would be nearly impossible without a lantern. It was a bridge she would cross when she came to it. She left the jail and headed east toward old Miss Dora's house.

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Mildred was running for her life. She wasn't sure that anybody was giving chase, but she knew some one should have been. "Run, Mildred," Jonathan had told her. "Fast as you can, you run on home."

The weight of the baby was slowing her down and making it difficult for her to breathe. The paved streets were now behind her, and she knew it was better to travel the dirt roads than try to cut through the woods in the dark. Each time she heard a sound, though, she would veer from the road to hide herself in the weeds and underbrush that grew in abundance in the roadside fields. She ran for the safety of the trees, stifled the strained screams inside her throat even as low-lying branches tore at her skin and clothes. 'Run, Mildred.' It wasn't until she tripped over a fallen branch in a dark wooded area that she howled. Pain, fear, worry unleashed her wails, and she could not wrench them back.

Sunrise found Mildred slumped in the underbrush behind Gabriel Hawkins' place. Her dress had been ripped to shreds, her hands clawed at her throat. She was gasping for breath, and her body was covered with scratches and bruises. Gabriel left her where she was, but placed a blanket beneath her head. He sent word to her family out on Blevins Stretch.

Her father, Alabama Wheaton, carried her home in his arms. Mildred was heavy with child, and her swollen abdomen showed through her tattered pink cloth. The townspeople kept their distance, stood in doorways and watched. They whispered among themselves, spoke of the howls heard during the night and the bizarre appearance of Mildred Wheaton. The first to speak called it voodoo. Someone else said it was the wrath of God. The final and most authoritative voice of Tarlo Medfield proclaimed it the riding of a witch. And so it was -- at least for the moment.

All the way through the town, over to Marshall Road, to where Marshall narrowed into Blevins Stretch, Alabama carried his daughter. Instead of going to work at the Blevins' fields, he sat all morning trying to figure what was wrong with her. By noon Mildred was awake, alert, and perplexed by the bruises on her body. She claimed not to remember a thing, but nobody believed her. When a witch rides a person, it is something they are not likely to forget. Mildred was not the first to be attacked in such a

manner, and undoubtedly would not be the last.

Girlie

What a mess. The Mays Spur sheriff done gone and made deputies outta ‘bout twenty men. They done been in ever Negro house ‘round these parts, done even kicked in the dos of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers that ain‘t even got space enough to turn around, let alone space to hide nobody. Caught me just as I was gettin outta my bed. They done searched the cotton fields, corn fields, ever’ hen house and briar patch in Butcher County. They searchin for Jonathan Lester. Seems he just ‘poop’ disappeared right on outta a locked jail cell. That boy ain’t never been nothin but trouble. Now just look at this mess. Don’t nobody want the law over here goin all through they house.

Now, let me tell you what I know. Folks is crazy. They sayin that Jonathan was struck by lightnin, and I guess somehow that musta made him thin enough to step through a jail cell. Some sayin a witch sprung him from

that jail, and some of 'em claimin the witch was conjured up by little Mildred Wheaton. Say the night Jonathan disappeared, she was out there howlin in the woods.

Cranston folk talk a lot, but we can sho' keep a secret when it comes to protectin one of us from the law. Ever' body know that white folk burn they witches, and we don't wanna see no harm come to little Mildred. We don't do no foolishness like that. We either take the spell off or just run 'em outta town.

I'm keepin out of it. This been enough, though, to make me walk on down to Piedmont Road. I had to hear firsthand what folks was sayin. They ain't figured yet whether a witch ridin the girl, or if she conjured one up, or if she the witch.

Chapter 3

Tarlo Medfield armed himself with a dozen of the most boisterous, garrulous men and women in Cranston. Adorned in crudely carved and beaded charms to ward off evil spirits, they walked the long miles out to the Wheaton's house and demanded an audience with Alabama. It was early morning, the hour before the work day would begin, when they stood in the yard and called out until Alabama appeared at his door holding a lantern.

Tarlo was a thin, dark man with a patch of gray hair that stood straight up on his head. As elder and spokesman for the group, he braved the anger of the man in the doorway, and asked, "What you gon' do 'bout that gal of yours, Alabama? Ain't natural the way she be actin'. Them white folk find out she been conjuring up witches, they gon' burn her."

Alabama stepped out onto his stoop, stared at his neighbors. Most of them were people he saw everyday, worked beside in the fields. "She be

awright in a day or two," he told them, and hoped he was speaking the truth. "Just havin a little trouble. Y'all done seen folks get sick befo'."

"That girl been cunjuhed," said Marlene Lester with her hands on her hips. "Was bound to happen wit' the way she strut 'round through here like she some angel wit' wings. Some man's wife done worked a spell on that girl of yours."

Alabama sought to remain calm. "I don't believe in no cunjuh, no witches, none of that stuff," he insisted, "but you seem to know what you talkin 'bout, Marlene. You done had somethin done to my girl."

"Not me," Marlene answered indignantly, "but I ain't ever' man's wife. I ain't no man's wife. I'm just sayin' you oughta been keepin' a better watch."

"Well, I appreciate y'all's concern," Alabama told them, "but I think I'm able to take care of my own chil. Y'all can go on, get on off my land."

"Memory serves, I believe this here Mr. Blevins' property," Tarlo asserted. "We don't want the Mays Spur law keep comin over in here troublin' us, and they bound to hear 'bout yo' gal sooner or later. She bein' attacked at the throat, Alabama, to where she can't even breathe. That's what I hear, and that's sho'nuff the ridin' of a witch."

"That's right," Bill Johnson agreed. "Lay the broom, Alabama. Lay

it ‘cross yo’ do’step. Sprinkle some salt all the way from yo’ window to the girl’s bed. That’ll keep the witch out.”

“This woman I got done already tried that,” Alabama admitted. “I knew she was wastin her time when she done it, and sho’nuff it didn’t work. That’s cause there ain’t no such thing as no witch. I tol’ her, and I done tol’ y’all, I don’t believe in none of that stuff. Now, I’m gon’ ask y’all again, right politely, to get on off my land.”

“The broom and the salt -- they never fail,” Sally Blackmon said with conviction. “We ain’t seen it, and maybe it ain’t no witch. But if it ain’t, it’s likely somebody done laid a root on you. Somebody out to do you harm. You ain’t had nothin’ but bad luck since you come to Cranston.”

“You know you right, Sally,” Marlene remarked. “First, Katie took off and left him stuck wit’ them three chilluns. He don’t know whose seed his daughter is carryin’, and she won’t tell nobody. And he got that gator woman livin’ under his roof. Could be she done fixed him and ever body else in that house. Looks that way. Sho’ looks that way.”

For years Alabama had listened to the nonsense of his neighbors, had watched their ridiculous rituals as they tried to ward off witches, ghosts, conjures, and other evils. He would sit with his friend, Theron Evers, at the rear of the general store, and watch people make the sign of the cross when

they stepped out of their houses, tremble in fear at the sight of a black cat crossing their path, spin in circles, hang trinkets on their doors, sprinkle salt, spit over their shoulders. He and Theron would joke about it, but Alabama sometimes wondered how many of their superstitions had rubbed off on him.

"There's other ways of keepin' the evil away from yo' do'," Silas Rodman said. "You need to go over and see ol' man Gibson or Miss Girlie. Bet it won't cost you no mo' 'an a quarter to get that spell took off. You gotta do somethin, Alabama, or the Mays Spur law gon' handle it they way."

Alabama stood five feet, ten inches tall. He was a stout, hairy man -- arms, chest, and face. He had small, dark eyes, a pudgy nose, and full lips. "You must be some kinda fool, Silas," he said. "The law already been out here, and ain't found nothin. I'll keep my girl way from y'all, and y'all need to stay way from us."

"Now you wait just one minute," Marlene said. She was a stout, red-boned woman, mid forties, and missing most of her teeth. She took a step forward, and the others followed. "We can go anywhere we wanna. We was born here. You the one come in here talkin' 'bout what you don't believe, laughin' 'bout things you don't understand. You need to understand this, though. If they find out yo' daughter done conjured up a witch, they gon' be lookin for witches all over Cranston. And I wanna

know what she had done to my boy."

The door opened behind Alabama, and the gator woman, Van Ida, appeared next to him, towered over him. The neighbors took a collective step backwards, away from the reptilian brown eyes that seemed to miss nothing. They huddled together allowing the body warmth of the whole to protect them from the cold-blooded creature they were sure Van Ida was.

"I knows for sho' that all y'all wadn't born here," she said in her deep, daunting voice. "Bein' born in Cranston ain't nothin' to be proud of. Marlene, I heard you say somethin' 'bout Katie leavin' Alabama stuck wit' three chillun. Didn't somebody leave you wit' that no good boy of yours? And you right 'bout one thing -- you ain't no man's wife 'cause as I recall nobody never did marry you."

"Ain't nobody married you, neither," Marlene shot back.

Van Ida leaned forward, and Marlene cowered, partially shielding herself behind the smaller frame of Lawrence Anderson.

Alabama suddenly felt powerful standing beside Van Ida, and he was sure he stood a little taller. "Look at these faces, Ida." he said, holding his lantern higher. "I want you to remember ever' last one of 'um. If it looks like somebody tryin to bring harm to this house, tryin to run us outta here, I want you to remember these faces."

Reluctantly, the neighbors began to move out of his yard and up to the dirt road. The only one to glance back was Bill Johnson, the slow-walking cripple, who was convinced that his ailment stemmed from a conjure that had put lizards in his legs. "Go see Wash Gibson," he called back in a concerned voice. "Let him help the girl."

"We don't need his help," Alabama said. "How come he didn't help you?"

"Ol' man Gibson -- he say the woman had this done to me done passed on," Bill explained. "Ain't nowhere to send these lizards now."

"Couldn't be rheumatism, now could it, Bill?"

"Ain't no rheumatism. Sometimes I feel them things crawlin' through my legs. If I look hard enough, sometimes I can see 'em, too. Ain't nothin' to be done for me, Alabama. Nothin' at all. But maybe it ain't too late for you and that girl of yours. You better hope the news of this don't reach Mays Spur."

Alabama scratched through his beard, stared out at the heads bobbing agreement in the fading darkness. He thought them the most ignorant people he had ever encountered. "Well, I'll tell you what, Bill," he called out, "if I happen to see that witch that y'all talkin' bout, me and Ida gon' catch it, maybe send it to one of y'all houses."

“You oughtna said that,” Van Ida scolded, after the group was out of hearing distance. “S’pose they go get ol’ Wash to lay a cunjuh on us?”

Chapter 4

The house was an unpainted, board-thick, two-room dwelling with three windows and a single door. Ropes were strung wall to wall to hang sheets when privacy was needed. The nearly worn though sheets had been drawn back for the day, and Alabama could see all of his space and gaze the faces of his children. Last night he had listened to his daughter scream, had watch her body tremble and jerk against her mattress. Van Ida had told him that the girl was too far along with the baby, too sick to return to the fields.

As much as he tried to denounce the existence of witches and the ability to conjure, Alabama had to consider the idea that someone had done something to his daughter. After the way he had found her at Gabriel’s

place, unable to speak a word, he knew something was wrong. She was so much like her mother, Katie. No amount of talking had ever mattered when Mildred set her mind to something. She would slip away from the fields, walk the miles into town, do pretty much what she pleased. It had always been easy keeping his boys in line, but he had never known what to do with his girl.

He walked over to the bed, leaned down, and touched her face. "Why you go to town actin like that?" he asked. "Folks sayin a witch done got a hold of you."

The girl groaned, but did not answer him.

Alabama turned to his sons. The boys were fifteen and sixteen years of age. "I don't want y'all goin nowhere near town 'til Mildred is better," he said.

"What's makin her act like that, Papa" the oldest boy, James, asked. "Look like she real bad sick."

"I know," Alabama agreed. His fingers moved up to massage his forehead, trying to bring clear thoughts to the surface. "She havin a little trouble, but that don't mean she bein rode by no witch. Folks 'round here tend to get the wrong idea."

"Ever' body seen her, Papa." the youngest boy, Rubin, said. "They

say she was scratchin at her own throat. Can't be nothin but a witch or somethin evil. Mama say it's gotta be somethin mo' than that baby she carryin."

Alabama glanced at Van Ida, who was standing beside the door, staring out as though waiting for the neighbors or the Mays Spur law to return. She had begged him to take the girl to Miss Girlie, but he didn't trust the old woman. He had heard of spells worked by Miss Girlie that had messed people up for life, and of how, if you crossed her in any way, she could lay a disease on you that would have you buried within a year. Van Ida swore by her, but he had made it clear early on that there would be no roots, magic, or foolishness in his house or around his children. He was not opposed to natural things, the plants his mother had used for different ailments, but the people in Cranston tried to use roots to bring harm to their neighbors.

He supposed Van Ida couldn't help believing like most of the others since she had been born in Butcher County. They were people who gave importance to rubbish, told tales to explain everything in the world that they did not fully understand. It did not matter that Van Ida was one of them, they ridiculed her because of her appearance, said that she had not been born of a woman but had hatched from a gator's egg.

Alabama had laughed at that until he realized that he was the only one laughing. He had been born and raised in North Georgia where people had their superstitions, but nothing as farfetched as the ones in Cranston. On a request from his mother, he had traveled to Butcher County to care for an ailing uncle. He had met Katie during his first week, on a trip to the Philpot store on Piedmont Road. He courted her for four months before asking for her hand in marriage. All that time, he realized later, her interest had not been in him. She had wanted to know what was out there in the world, what he had seen, and would he take her some place exciting. He nodded that he would; he would have promised her anything. Katie married him and bore him three children, then ran off one day before the oldest one turned four. The youngest, Mildred, had been only a few weeks old.

At the time, Alabama's nearest neighbor had been Van Ida, a woman-child of about fourteen or fifteen, he guessed, who had recently moved from the Barkley plantation and into the worst shack on Mr. Blevins' property. Alabama was as guilty as the rest when it came to Van Ida. He had heard the rumors, and had not approached her until he had needed her help. On their first encounter, his first close look at her, he had found himself studying her mouth for the alligator teeth she was said to have. She did not have them. She had smooth, dark skin and even, white teeth, but she was every

bit as unattractive as he had heard.

"I'm Alabama Wheaton from up the way," he had called to her from the road. "I done seen you round and about. Where you from?" He gave no indication that he had heard the rumors about her.

"I knows what you done heard," she responded, "and I didn't come out no gator's belly. I was born to Thomas and Matilda Raynor right out yonder a ways on the Barkley Plantation. I done seen you sneakin by here tryin' to get a good look at the gator woman. What you want, Alabama Wheaton?"

Alabama had been relieved that she did not believe herself hatched from an egg. Still, he was hesitant about getting to the point, and he was not sure that he wanted to enter her yard. He was not sure that he wanted her around his children, but he had run out of people to ask.

He cleared his throat. "Well," he began, "I'm havin a bit of trouble over at my place."

"I knows all about yo' troubles," she said, staring at him through one eye as though trying to peer through a narrow opening. "You shoulda come lookin' for help befo' you married Katie. I done knowed 'bout her all my life. I coulda tol' you she wadn't no good. Now you done went and found out the hard way."

"I have," Alabama admitted. "You see the thing is, Miss Van Ida, I don't rightly know how to take care of no baby, 'specially no little girl baby. I was hopin you could help me out. If I don't get on back out to them fields, we gon' starve to death. I wanted to ask you if you'll watch my children."

"Well say." She opened both eyes and looked at him. "Don't you see me ever' day goin' to them fields myself? You think I live for free? Yeah, I see. You think I'm some gator woman, don't gotta eat food like ever body else."

He didn't know what he had been thinking. Of course, she had to work the same as he did. She was new to Mr. Blevins' fields, though, and he had never paid her much attention or worked beside her. All he knew was that he needed a woman's help, and she was suppose to be a woman.

"I beg yo' pardon, ma'am," he said as politely as he knew how. "I guess I'm just a little desperate. Wadn't thinkin like no rational man." He tipped his old felt hat. "Sorry for troublin you."

Alabama went home to where he had left his three babies asleep on a single bed. While they slept, he tried to think. When they woke up and began to cry, he felt like crying along with them. He thought about his family back in Kingston. The uncle he had come to care for had died a poor

man in debt to Mr. Blevins. Alabama had worked to pay off the debt, and it had left him with neither the money nor transportation to make the trip home. With the debt paid off, he vowed that he would work for Mr. Blevins, but he would never be owned by the man the way his uncle had been.

He thought about Katie's family. They had moved to the Dean Property a few miles outside of Cranston to work as sharecroppers. Even as he thought about it, he knew he could not leave his children there. Everybody in Katie's family worked, and there would be nobody to look after a baby during the day.

He never knew what changed the gator woman's mind. A few days after he had spoken with her, Van Ida arrived at his door with a bundle of clothes on her arms. She moved out of her tiny shack and into his larger one, brought her handful of chickens along to mingle with his. It was not what he had had in mind, but he accepted what he could get.

Nothing had ever slowed her down. From day one she had taken all of his children to the fields with her, made the oldest one watch over the younger ones. Her rest periods had been spent tending his children. And that's the way things had been for the past thirteen years. Never did it occur to Alabama that he could have done the same thing. He could not have.

As he prepared to leave for the fields, Alabama thought about the number thirteen. It was the age of his daughter, the number of years he had been with Van Ida, and the number of people who had entered his yard -- four women, nine men. He tried hard not to be a superstitious man, but maybe he was in for a bit of bad luck. He had weathered the worst of times, naturally bad things like everybody else -- floods, droughts, boll weevils, bad crops, being down to his last penny -- and he had survived. Maybe he was due another turn of bad luck.

Chapter 5

Van Ida emerged from the very swamp where the people said she had been hatched from an egg. She paused to extinguish the light of her lantern, then glanced briefly at the sky before heading for the path that led up to the road. The moon had faded, and now heavy, dark clouds were gathering overhead making it a cool morning for mid June. She was feeling exhausted -- more from the gossip and disdain of the townspeople than from

anything else. She had always been a source of ridicule, but now they were taunting Alabama and his family.

Mildred had come down with a sickness that was making her convulse, swelling her body, causing her pain. While watching the suffering of the girl-child, Van Ida had remembered being young herself and listening to the great mothers whisper about the healing roots hidden deep within the swamp. It occurred to her that if she located the right one then maybe she could help Mildred. There was a plant known to ease pain and calm the restless. It was said that the same plant could replenish the weakest body with strength. Van Ida had seen it only twice, once when the spirit of James Randle's wife had come back for him, had claimed his mind and sent his body into convulsions. The great mothers had cured him with the root. The root had large shimmering petals and the darkest stem she had ever seen.

The only other time she had seen it, and it had not looked the same, was when one of the great mothers, Margarita, had taken her into the swamp. "You ain't got no mama no mo' to help you through sickness when it come," Margarita had told her. "That's why I'm showin this to ya. But you gotta keep yo' mouth quiet 'bout this. Folks round here find out 'bout this, there won't be nothin left when we need it."

Van Ida had nodded her understanding. "I ain't never gon' tell," she had promised.

She had been awed by the multitude of colors, shapes, and sizes of the plants in the swamp. She had listened intently as the older woman explained the healing powers of each one. When she pointed out the root that was supposed to be the special one, Van Ida noticed that it was swiveled up, puny-looking like a huge, withered morning glory. "It don't look like nothin much to me," she had remarked.

"That's 'cause it's daylight," Margarita explained, "but, chile, there's power deep inside them petals."

As Van Ida followed Margarita out of the swamp that day, she had etched a map to her memory. She marked the ripples their feet made in the still water, their high steps through lush vegetation, and the feel of watchful eyes from all the surrounding creatures. Van Ida had no fear of living things. She was always careful with her steps, though, when she came to the swamp. Margarita had told her that there were areas that had no bottom, one wrong step could drop her into the depths of Hell.

Mildred was much like the man the great mothers had helped. She was restless, and every time her body jerked or shivered against the bed, Van Ida was sure it was spirits moving in to take control. Van Ida had searched

her memory for all she knew about the healing root, a night bloom that had to be snatched from the ground before dawn, before the petals closed tightly around its powers. She was certain the great mothers had strained the juice from the root and mixed it with juices from other plants, but she could not remember which ones.

In the canvas bag draped over her shoulder was the long-stem reward of her all night search -- a single zyma root. For the past two nights Van Ida had left the house while the others slept, had fearlessly trudged through the swamp to search. She had not located it on the first night, but now she had the plant; she actually had it in her hands.

It was a long walk back to her house that took her across the south end of the Barkley Plantation, around and through smaller farms, through acres and acres of Mr. Blevins' fields, and past the old shack she had abandoned so many years ago. As she passed her old place, she stopped to peer inside her sack. She needed to be certain that she had not wanted the zyma root so badly that she had only imagined it. Each time she looked, the root was still right where she had placed it. The coarse black stem seemed to pulsate with life, the large oval-shaped petals drip their purple blood onto the canvass.

Her feet, laced in waterlogged boots, made a slushy sound as she

trampled through the cattails near Blevins stretch. She was tall -- taller than any man she had ever known. Her head was covered with rust-colored hair that had never grown long enough to pin or braid. The plum-sized mounds on her chest and the slight curve of her hips were the only things that outwardly distinguished her from the male gender. She was the kind of dark that came from working too many years under a blazing Georgia sun -- the kind of black that baked into the pores. Although she was only twenty-seven, she felt that she had always been old. She wanted to be something that she probably never would be -- a mother. Alabama's three children called her Mama, but it wasn't the same as actually being their mother.

Since the neighbors had come out two days ago, Van Ida had been unable to shake the thought of Mildred being set on fire. She had never heard of anybody in Butcher County burning a witch, but she would be the first to admit that white folks had some strange ways. Yesterday in the field, she had heard bits and pieces of gossip about Jonathan. The folks in Mays Spur were acting like he was hiding out in Cranston, while the folks in Cranston believed he had been murdered. All she could think was good riddance to him.

She reached the house and pushed the door open. Alabama would be angry with her for missing a day in the field, but she thought someone

needed to remain at the house with the girl-child. Anybody could show up at any time from Cranston or Mays Spur, and Mildred should not be left alone.

"Mama?" Mildred questioned as Van Ida stepped inside the house.

Van Ida placed her lantern on the table, removed the sack from her shoulder, and pulled off her boots. She walked deeper into the room to where the girl lay on her bed.

"It's me, chile," Van Ida answered. "I done went and got somethin' that's gon' take yo' pain away."

The house was hot and smelled of the girl's sweat. It was cramped with all of their earthly possessions. Van Ida shared the back room with Alabama. The boys slept out front by the window, and the girl-child had the back space of the same room. A stove, the beds, one dresser, a table and five chairs filled the house to capacity. The table, chairs, and two wall shelves had all been crafted by Alabama and his sons. Van Ida felt blessed to be a part of this family, and she intended to show her gratitude by helping the girl-child.

She touched Mildred's head, satisfied herself that there was no fever. The girl's eyes were troubled, though, appeared sunken in her head as she stared up at the older woman.

"I feel like I'm dyin, Mama," Mildred said in a shaky voice. "I ain't never felt this bad befo'.

"It's gon' be awright, chile?" Van Ida said.

Although it was still morning, Mildred already dreaded the coming of the setting sun. Evenings wrapped her in memories, and nights brought on the dreams. In her dreams, Jonathan would be holding her in his arms beside their tree, but it always faded into Jonathan running, and she was never able to get him back. All day she felt a longing inside for him. In the evenings, sorrow would come down on her like the end of a day, the end of a life. A more mature woman would have recognized the pain inside as heartbreak, would have suffered in silence. Mildred was too young to understand it as such, and so she cried, screamed, clawed, attacked herself. Moments of calm were few and far between.

"Jonathan's gone, Mama," Mildred said.

Van Ida nodded her head. "I know."

"This his baby in my belly."

"I know."

Mildred wondered how she knew. Nobody was supposed to know about Jonathan, not even her mama. Tears welled in her eyes from anger, frustration, helplessness. "I let him outta that jail," she finally said.

Van Ida remained calm. This was not the first hallucination Mildred had had since being brought home from Gabriel's yard. Yesterday she had talked about a crying hand. 'Jonathan's hand was cryin, Mama, and wadn't nothin I could do 'bout it.' That had been Van Ida's first indication that Mildred even knew Jonathan Lester. It wasn't as though he came to the fields to work. The boy was born lazy.

"You ain't let nobody outta no jail, chile," Van Ida said.

"I did, Mama. I let Jonathan out. I snuck in Miss Dora's house and got the key. I thought we was gone run together, but Jonathan run one way, tol' me to run the other."

"Ooooooh," issued from Van Ida's mouth as a long weary sigh.

"You gon' tell?" Mildred whispered. "cause I know folks sayin a witch done it.'

"Never," Van Ida whispered back.

Mildred lay silent for a moment, then she said, "Don't tell Papa this Jonathan's baby."

"Never," Van Ida promised.

Mildred's body relaxed, her eyes closed. What ever she saw behind those closed lids caused her to shudder. Her hands rose to her neck where she began to dig and scratch at her skin. Van Ida was pulling the hands

down when Mildred opened her eyes. "Can't breathe," she gasped.

Van Ida gripped the girl's shoulders, pulled her into a sitting position, then rapidly slapped her back. "Breathe, Mildred," she pleaded. "Breathe!"

A cough, panting, and finally, after what seemed an eternity, the smooth flow of regular breathing. Mildred swung her legs over the side of the bed. "I gotta get up from here."

"Where you tryin to go?' Van Ida asked.

Mildred shook her head and began to cry.

Van Ida glanced over to where she had left her sack. It was time to see if the root was going to work. She went over to the stove, lifted the kettle and saw that it was warm and nearly half filled with water. She poured water into a wide, wooden bowl, then took a knife from the wall shelf and removed the root from her sack. She studied it, tried to remember. If Alabama hadn't been so against it, she would have taken the girl to Miss Girlie, the sickness would have been taken off, and Mildred's suffering would have been over.

Starting at the top of the plant, Van Ida plucked three petals and sliced them into fourths. She dropped the purple portions into the hot water, watched as the petals disintegrated into scores of tiny sickle-shaped

particles. This part was right. She remembered it vividly. Still holding the knife, she cut a slit along the length of the stem. The juice that bubbled from within was odorless and as black as the stem itself. Finally, she mixed the black and purple juices of the zyma root together in a cup, waited for it to cool.

"You needs to take this," she said as she moved the cup toward Mildred's lips.

Mildred did not question Van Ida, the woman who had been her mother for as long as she could remember. She opened her mouth and swallowed the liquid.

"I'm gon' rub yo' body down," Van Ida said. "This be between me and you. Yo' papa ain't never gotta know. Now I want you to pull off that gown so I can wash you up, make you clean so you can feel better."

Van Ida bathed the girl, then gathered the residue of the root from the table and began to rub it onto the girl's skin.

Mildred did not protest as the wetness of the swamp rolled across her body. Her papa would object to the use of the root, but she no longer cared what happened to her.

When the last of the root had been absorbed into Mildred's skin, Van Ida covered her with a sheet.

"Help me, Mama," the girl pleaded.

There was nothing more Van Ida could do. She sat on the bed close to Mildred and waited for the zyma root to bring the promised relief.

The rumble of thunder in the distance drew Van Ida away from Mildred's bed. She scraped together all that remained of the root and tossed it out the door. It was going to rain, and the rain would wash it away. She stood just inside the doorway staring out, which is where she was when the threatening storm finally broke. Behind her, the girl-child was silent. In front of her, heavy rain made sludge of the soil and washed away all evidence of her deceit.

Van Ida wondered what Alabama would do if he found out about the root. He would probably put her out of his house, or kill her. Dying wasn't so bad, she guessed. Anything would be better than returning to the isolation of her old abandoned shack.

After a while -- a long while -- Van Ida saw her men moving toward the house in the pouring rain. She stepped away from the door and began to gather dry clothes. After the men had changed and hung their wet clothes over the ropes to dry, they sat at the table, and Alabama asked the expected question, "Where was you all mornin, Ida?"

"The girl child," Van Ida answered, "She don't seem to be gettin no

better."

Chapter 6

Van Ida had been awake all night sitting at Mildred's bedside. Her presence seemed to calm the girl. Throughout the night, she had rubbed the girl's back, given her water, and held her up as they made a trip through the dark to the outhouse.

Alabama rose from bed at his usual time. He had spent most of the night listening to his daughter moan and Van Ida trying to soothe her. Barely a glance did he give Mildred as he passed through her space. She was in capable hands, he decided, and there was nothing he could do for her. He opened the door, looked out into the dark. "I don't reckon Mr. Blevins gon' have no work for us today," he said. "Fields gon' be too wet."

The boys heard their father's prediction. "Is it still rainin?" James asked.

"Yeah," Alabama answered as he closed the door.

Rubin was up and getting dressed. "You think it's a all day rain, Papa?" he asked.

"How I know? Don't matter. Grounds still too wet," Alabama said. Lack of sleep was causing him to be irritable, and he wanted to get out of the house, away from his daughter's suffering.

After they were dressed, the three men took a seat at the table and waited for Van Ida to get breakfast started.

Mildred lay curled on her bed hugging the pain in her belly. She wanted to cry, but she thought of Jonathan's hand, how the tears had flowed down his palm, and she held back her own tears. From her bed, she could see Rubin holding the handle of the water bucket. It seemed to her that the weight of it was cutting into his palm. She wanted to see his hand, wanted to know if it was crying. "Rubin," she called in a soft voice. "Let me see yo' hand."

He turned toward her, but it was Van Ida who left the stove and reached her first. "Shush. It's awright, chile," she whispered, and Mildred remembered that she was not suppose to talk about the hand.

Mildred closed her eyes, was drifting toward sleep when pain hit her like a dagger slitting her open from the inside. Her eyes opened to see her family gathered around the table. She wanted to tell them that something horrible was stabbing inside her body. She wanted to tell them to get it out. She wanted her mama to come over to the bed with her rough hands and deep voice. Her mama could command the thing to go away. She tried to speak, but no words would come. The horrible thing was creeping through her face, and she could hear it roaring in her ears. It crept into her chest,

squeezed her heart, then slithered on. Silently, she prayed to her papa's God.

She slid her hands beneath the sheet, touched her belly, and could feel the thing flip-flopping, tumbling, stabbing. It kicked at her bottom until she was sure she was going to mess the bed. It clawed at her insides. She tried to get up, needed to reach the outhouse, but could not stand. The pain was unbearable. She was afraid until she heard her papa's voice telling her mama to do something.

Van Ida stood over the bed, and stared down at Mildred. The girl's skin breathed, rose and settled like simmering porridge. She was thrashing about on the bed, thrusting with her hips so forcefully that the sheet slid away to reveal a swollen belly that quivered like ripples in a creek. Van Ida suspected that she was in early labor.

From a wall shelves, Van Ida grabbed a knife, and returned to the bed. She eased the knife beneath the girl's pillow to cut the pain. "It be awright, chile," she soothed, was not sure the girl could even hear her. "It be awright."

"Do somethin, Ida!" Alabama insisted.

"I think the baby comin," Van Ida told him. "It probably won't be alive, Alabama. It's too early."

Alabama pulled a sheet across the ropes to give the women privacy when he saw that Van Ida was exposing his daughter‘s nakedness. “Is that what it is, Ida? Is she havin the baby?” he called through the sheet.

Van Ida did not answer him. She worked with Mildred, who was indeed ready to deliver. The girl had grown tired and weak, but Van Ida kept encouraging her to push. “Push, chile. Push the pain away.”

Time passed slowly as heat swelled within the enclosed space. The girl had not so much as mumbled a word in the last hour. Van Ida pressed against Mildred’s belly, then she checked to see if the baby‘s head was coming. She kept doing this while pleading with Mildred to push. She was perspiring and felt like she had been working for days when she finally saw the baby’s head. “One mo’ good push, Mildred. Just one mo’.”

At long last, Van Ida was able to separate a tiny girl-child from the mother. She stared down at the quiet, blue baby, placed her on her mother’s belly, then cut the umbilical cord. She was not surprised at all that the baby was dead.

When she glanced down at Mildred’s face, she thought they would be burying the two together. Mildred’s breathing was shallow, and the only movement she made was the twitching of her fingers. Her skin was now ashen, and no matter that Van Ida prayed from the very core of her heart, the

girl's eyes never opened. A soft, single sigh escaped Mildred's lips, and the blue baby stirred. Although she could not see it, Van Ida felt it. Mildred had blown her last breath into the baby, and souls were shifting within the cubicle.

Van Ida stumbled back against the sheet. Her hands, though unclean from the birth, clutched at the collar of her dress. "The zyma root," she gasped, because it could be nothing else. "The zyma root."

Alabama pushed back the sheet to see.

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Jonathan was hungry. He could have easily broken into the Philpot store, but he reasoned that the lightning had spared him for a reason and he did not want to commit another crime. He had been hiding out for days, had gotten as far as Sandsburg when the throbbing in his hand turned him around.

Girlie

Folks want absolution. There was a preacher man used to come through here years ago when most folks was still travelin by horse and buggy. That preacher man had a automobile, and he was so religious that he could be anythin that folks needed him to be -- Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic -- just about anythin. I suspected that sooner or later he might claim to be Jesus. One day he come though here talkin bout savin souls and how we needed absolution. None of us knew what the heck he was talkin bout. He say he was talkin bout savin souls, givin folks a pardon for they sins. That's what he said.

I went wit' ever' body else over to Piedmont Road. It was night time after harvest when we put our pennies an nickels in that preacher man's hat and turned our sins over to him just like he said we should. I gave two pennies and one nickel 'cause I knew I had done a lot of wrong in my life. But the next day I didn't feel not one drop different. I guess I just didn't have no faith in the man. He never did came back through here after that

night, and I reckon all them sins we loaded on him, right along with our pennies, musta weighed on him so heavy till he couldn't come back.

I'm thinkin bout that absolution 'cause yesterday Van Ida come to me wantin to know what I could do 'bout her sins. She say she had done killed Alabama's daughter. After she had done told me all of it, I knew she hadn't killed that girl.

"Mildred was in a rush to get nowhere," I said. "All rushin do is put you in a early grave. Pray for that baby she done left in this world, then pray for yo' self. Pray over the sins you know and them you don't."

"I done prayed myself stupid," she said. "I done prayed so much till even Alabama tired of it. I can't tell 'im 'bout that root."

"You sho' it was a zyma root?" I asked. "Sounds like the girl died from the childbirth fever. But, Van Ida, you ain't got no right to be foolin round wit' stuff you don't understand."

"I know," she agreed, noddin her head and lookin like sin was heavy on it. "She ain't had no fever, Miss Girlie. And I know that baby was dead when I pulled it out."

Because she insisted on me doin somethin, I waved my hands in front her face a few times like that preacher done, then I said a prayer from the bottom of my heart and told her it was absolution. I think she left here

feelin the way I felt when that preacher man was gone -- like it was all a bunch of poppycock, and her sins was still wit' her. I watched her leave my porch wit' her head hung down, and I felt bad for her. I start to call her back, give her a cup of my berry wine. My berry wine make most folks forget they troubles, but I think Van Ida needed her grief mo' than anythin I had to offer.

I been knowin her all her life. I think she musta been bout six the last time I set foot on the Barkley plantation. She was tall, and folks worked her by her height 'stead of her age -- even the great mothers. Her folks had done left here searchin for a better life, said they'd send for her when they found the right place. They never did. Now she livin out there on Blevins Stretch wit' some man that come from who knows where, who don't know nothin bout our ways. I feel bad for Van Ida, but I ain't the one to give no absolution. I ain't one to spread no rumors, neither, that's why I didn't tell Van Ida what the folks round here is sayin.

They sayin Mildred's baby was born covered in scales, got six toes on both feet. Folks tryin to figure who the daddy of that baby is. They pointin fingers here, there, and yonder, but don't nobody know.

Chapter 7

Jonathan slowed his rapid strides and yelled at the skinny brown dog that snarled at him from behind a blackberry briar.

Chapter 8

“You may as well go on and do it, Alabama. She ain’t much to look at, but she done stuck by you all these many years. And I ain’t never seen no woman work so hard. It’ll be the best thing for all y’all if you just go on and do it. If you don’t, you may have mo’ losses than you can take.”

Those had been Theron Evers’ words to Alabama six years ago, at a

time when Alabama had been grieving the loss of his daughter, Mildred. Not only had he lost his daughter, but both of his sons had left in the middle of the night, afraid of a baby that never should have been born. Even he had been uneasy at first. The baby had come into the world from a mother who had been more dead than alive.

Right away, people had wanted to know if the baby had been born with teeth or a veil. Alabama could not have answered their questions even if he had wanted to. He hadn't even known the baby's gender until Van Ida had told him it was a girl-child. Had the boys waited, been patient, they would had seen the baby grow into a normal-looking child.

As Alabama stood in the field where the rows of cotton seemed unending, he thought about his sons and the way they had abandoned him. He could not rid himself of resentment. When they left, it had made him wonder about Van Ida. Would she stay and raise another child that was not her own? He hadn't known. Since he trusted Theron more than any other man alive, Alabama had taken his advice.

"What do I do 'bout Katie? he had asked Theron.

Theron gave an inconsequential shrug. "She been gone so long, I doubt if anybody remember who she is. Tell folks she died."

"But what if she comes back?"

"Then you'll have to kill her."

"Don't even joke like that, Theron. And how I'm gon' stand in front of Reverend Smith, tell him I wanna marry somebody else when he the one married me to Katie?"

Theron thought about it for a minute, scraped at his round chin with a thumb, then said, "Tell you what. I'll borrow Neville's truck, drive you on over to Savannah where don't nobody know nothing' 'bout you and Katie."

Alabama knew his friend meant well, but it was something he'd had to think on long and hard. Finally, he announced in church one Sunday that Katie was dead. He had been forced to keep lying. He had tried to answer questions, tried to keep his lies straight. *When did she die? How did she die? Where is she buried?* He prayed that the rumors would not reach Katie's family out at the Dean place. He kept expecting her to show up and ask why he had killed her off before her time. When she did not, he married Van Ida.

He didn't love her, and it really didn't matter. He had needed her at first to take care of his children, and he had never felt obligated to marry her. Things had changed, though. Van Ida seemed restless, and he feared she would leave the way Katie had done, not hang around to raise yet another child. He supposed he could have gone searching for a better looking

woman, somebody like Marlene Lester. Marlene, though, was lazy, bossy, nearly bare-mouth, and losing her mind over the disappearance of her son, Jonathan. Van Ida, on the other had, worked the fields better than most men. She kept his house neat, cooked his meals, and he was comfortable with her. She wasn't a beauty, but how many men looked for beauty in a cotton field?

Alabama glanced up the row to his right and could see Zyma trailing behind Van Ida. Van Ida wore an old straw hat and a dark green dress with full sleeves -- the same dowdy dress she had worn on their wedding day. Zyma, full of questions, paused long enough to pluck a mousy amount of cotton from a boll and drop it into Van Ida's sack. Van Ida was patient with the child, actually laughed with her. Alabama wondered what they found amusing because there wasn't very much to laugh about. It was a damn hot September day. He was sweating from every pore, couldn't seem to take in enough water. His sons had deserted him, and although he didn't like to admit it, he needed their help.

In the row to his left, Theron Evers was stooped, picking fast and shoving cotton into his bulging sack. Alabama took the time to glance out at the heads and backs of the other pickers. Sometimes he wondered which one of the men was Zyma's papa. Was he one of the farm tenants or one of

the workers from town? Van Ida said it didn't matter, but it mattered to him. If he found out, though, what could he do about it? Kill the man? Had the man raped his daughter, or had she, in her innocence, been willing? Probably, he would never know, and he also knew he wasn't going to kill anybody.

"You need water over there?" he called out to Theron.

Theron shook his head, never glanced up. He seldom came to the fields, but when he did show up, he was not slothful about the work. He had tried getting work with one of the government programs a few years back, but had quickly returned to Cranston.

"A thousand men lookin for the same job," he had said on his return. "Them government jobs is just another way of steppin on the Negro. Sorry I even tried."

Theron had come home and hired himself out to Mr. Blevins as a day laborer. He never showed up for planting or chopping, only a couple of days each week during the picking season. At other times he would hire himself out anywhere that help was needed. Whenever there was a rumor of decent work with decent wages, Theron would find a way to get there. Often he invited Alabama to join him on some of the jobs in neighboring towns, but Alabama always refused. Transportation was scarce in Cranston.

There were a few trucks, fewer automobiles, and men like Neville Sloan and Robert Union charged for a ride. The three Negro farmers in the area, who owned land, mules, and wagons, didn't mind providing a ride sometimes, but it wasn't something Alabama was prepared to depend on.

"You good wit' yo' hands," Theron had told him once. "You need to come on, show people what you can do."

"I'm gon' use these good hands to keep workin Mr. Blevins' fields," Alabama had said. "Folks ain't plantin crops like they used to. I ain't gon' cross Mr. Blevins. This is for sho' work in his fields, and I can't be tryin to hitch no ride to all them places you go. Nah, I'm gon' stay here and do what I know."

What he knew had changed over the years. People had left the county and moved north. Mr. Blevins had only a few tenants left and he mostly hired workers from town. Each year, Alabama noticed, the fields for planting cotton were shrinking.

Alabama wiped his brow, and threw himself back into the tedious job of picking. He decided he would work a while longer before sending his granddaughter back to the shade for his water jar. There was a water boy he could call out for. The boy would come with a bucket and dipper, but Alabama had seen some of the mouths he had been drinking behind, and had

decided to bring his own water. Maybe he could make it until the lunch hour.

Had the girl not slowed Van Ida down, Alabama was sure he never would have caught up to them. They were now nearly abreast of each other. He stood and watched Van Ida, tried to work the word ‘wife’ across his tongue. He couldn’t do it. Each time she straightened her tall frame, he could see the dark skin of her neck glistening with perspiration. She wore her cotton sack as though it were another garment, with her head through the hole made by the strap, and the strap pressed into her left shoulder.

It stood to reason that he would get tired long before she did. He was about nine or ten years older than she was. He wasn‘t nearly as tall, but he carried a lot more weight. As he watched her nimble fingers sweep through the bolls, it occurred to him the work Van Ida did each day before and after the fields. He had to admit that she had been a godsend.

Alabama abandoned his thoughts of Van Ida and glanced at Theron, who was already ahead of him. “Theron, I reckon this row gon’ end somewhere in Tennessee,” he said. “What you think?”

“I think you headed in the wrong direction.”

“If it was up to me, I wouldn’t plant cotton like this. I’d make the rows shorter so a man can feel like he gettin somewhere.”

"If you'd stop talkin and tryin to slow me down, you'd get to the end of that damn row," Theron said. "Ain't nothin stoppin' Van Ida. How you gon' feel tonight when she weight in at two-hundred to yo' fifty. Do you even have fifty pounds yet, Alabama?"

Alabama tugged at the wrists of his threadbare gloves, then stooped and began to snatch cotton from the bolls. He did not answer Theron. He figured that they had been in the field for about three or four hours already. Every man, woman, and child should have more than fifty pounds by now. Theron was right, though. It always bothered him when Van Ida weighted in with more than he had managed, especially when he had given the day and the field all that he was worth.

He saw his granddaughter coming toward him, heading back down the row. He assumed Van Ida had sent the girl for water. He would catch her on her way back, nab the water jar, and take him a long, cool drink. He waited.

Van Ida was ahead of him again, but only by a couple of feet. He experienced a smidgen of satisfaction when she removed the strap from her shoulder and pressed her hands against the small of her back. She was just as hot and tired as he was, but too stubborn to admit it. Her hands moved up to her shoulders and briefly massaged the muscles there. She was

working the kinks out. What caught Alabama's attention was the sway of her hips in that worn-thin dress each time she shifted her body. Briefly, her backside reminded him of a woman he had seen dancing at Sloan's Place one night. The woman, said to be Sloan's cousin, had hitched her skirt and rolled her hips until all the men in the place had hooted for more. She had been passing through on her way from Miami to Atlanta. She was a young, beautiful, erotic creature by the name of Wondrene. Alabama would never forget that name, nor would he ever forget her gorgeous hips, like the ones Van Ida was now flaunting in his face.

He wiped his brow for about the hundredth time. It had to be the heat. The heat was getting to him because those hips were starting to look quite tempting. Over the years, he had seldom touched Van Ida, had never desired her. He told himself that he had no desire for her now; however, if he could brush up against those hips, fill his hands with those hips instead of fiber, maybe that would take him the rest of the way down the long, long row of cotton.

"Papa! Papa!"

Alabama turned to see his granddaughter advancing between the rows. Her head was swathed in yellow cloth, but he could see her face clearly. He couldn't say exactly what is was she was wearing, just

something or the other that Van Ida had thrown together. It looked like an old dress sewn lengthwise through the center. She was holding the water jar against her chest with both hands. He stayed where he was -- not wanting to remove his cotton sack, not wanting to drag it -- waited for the water to come to him.

"Papa, Mr. Bill keeps breathin in my ear," the girl said. "Make him stop it!"

Alabama was not sure he understood the child. He leaned down. "What'd you say, Zyma?"

"Mr. Bill. He keeps breathin in my ear."

Zyma was a small six-year-old. She had his pecan-brown complexion, and her mother's gleeful, brown eyes. Somebody on her father's side must have had a thin, upturned nose, because she had that, too. He studied her eyes for some sign of fear. There was no fear, no conception of danger.

"What's Bill been sayin to you?" he asked.

"Nothin, Papa. He just breathes in my ear." The girl said it as though it were some game she had been playing and had suddenly grown weary of.

Alabama dropped his sack, sat down on it, and waited for anger to

take control of him. He wasn't angry, though, because Bill Johnson did not strike him as the kind of man who would bother a child. Bill was close to sixty, limped when he walked, and was as slow as a turtle. As small as she was, Zyma could outrun him if she needed to. He pulled his granddaughter closer to him, eased the water jar from her hands, then took a drink that nearly emptied the container. Finally, he called Ida and Theron over, and had Zyma repeat her words to them.

"You gon' stomp him?" Theron asked.

Alabama shook his head. "Nah. I'm gon' talk to him first. But if he look the least little bit guilty, I'm gon' march his ass out to the swamp. Whatever happens to him happens. Won't be no blood on my hands."

Van Ida had been looking out over the field. There were about forty rounded backs moving along the rows. She could not tell which one was Bill's. "Where this man at?" she asked.

"You can't see him from here, Mama," Zyma answered, then whispered, "He down on the ground."

"Did he try to make you get on the ground wit' him?" Alabama asked. And the thought of it brought on the anger. It surged through him, yanked him up from the sack. He thrust the water jar at Van Ida, as rage propelled him blindly forward. "Yeah, I'm gon' stomp him," he said.

"Anybody seen Bill Johnson?" Theron's booming voice called out across the field with noticeable sternness. Backs straightened, and heads turned in the direction of the voice. What they saw were the two men and the gator woman charging and searching through the rows.

Zyma rushed to catch up to her grandfather. "I know where he is, Papa. I know."

Alabama took his granddaughter's hand and allowed her to lead him. Others had abandoned their work and were now following, sensing that there was going to be trouble. Nobody questioned Alabama or Van Ida, but they kept asking Theron what was wrong. They got no answer.

Out on the road at the trailer where the cotton was weighted, they found Bill Johnson stretched on the ground. It looked as though he had been trying to crawl to the shade beneath the trailer, and hadn't quite made it. He was covered in sweat, so much that it poured from his hair and face, and wet the ground beneath his head. One hand was clutched into a fist and rested against his chest. There was a severe scowl on his face, and his eyelids fluttered when the group surrounded him, but he never said a word.

"You think it's heat stroke?" Alabama asked Theron.

"I don't know what it is, but he sho' looks bad."

Van Ida knelt beside the man and attempted to give him water from

her jar. The water dribbled from one corner of his lips, and he gave a short, dry cough. She could hear him struggling to breathe. "Some of y'all needs to move on back," she said to the crowd. "Give him a little air."

They did as she asked, but only a step or two. Curiosity held them there to gawk at their fallen neighbor. He looked as though he was about to draw his last breath, and nobody wanted to miss it.

Zyma stepped away from her grandfather and dropped down next to the man. She touched the fist that rested on his chest. "I don't like it when you breathe in my ear, Mr. Bill," she said. "Why you do that?"

Bill Johnson was trying to open his eyes, trying to speak to the girl. Then, before the eyes of all, his face relaxed. The frown disappeared and a smile curved his lips. He took in a heap of breath that expanded his lungs and allowed him to exhale slowly. He seemed to be coming around.

Van Ida, on the ground across from Zyma, could see the pained expression that came over the child's face. Zyma was now perspiring and panting rapidly. Her small hand clutched Bill's heavy fist, and she shuddered. She shuddered again, and then her body began to shiver violently, as though she were freezing. Through it all, she never released Bill's fist.

"What's wrong wit' her?" somebody asked.

Van Ida lifted the girl's hand, pulled her away from the man. She wrapped Zyma in her arms, rocked her, tried to rub the shivers out of the girl's small arms. When the trembling finally stopped, Zyma squirmed to free herself. She glanced up at Van Ida. "I helped him, Mama."

"She done killed him!" Marlene Lester shouted. "That's what she done done. She done killed him."

Bill Johnson looked dead for sure, but he didn't appear too unhappy about it. There was a smile to his lips that made it seem he had died with a secret. He wasn't breathing, he wasn't moving, and when Theron Evers knelt and pressed his ear against Brogue's chest, he heard no heartbeat.

Maude Baker took a step closer. "Is he really dead?" she asked.

"Sho' he dead," Marlene answered. "Alabama's girl done killed him just as sho' as I'm standin' here. Y'all seem 'em chargin' over here to do Bill harm. Heard that girl say somethin' 'bout him breathin' in her ear. Y'all know Bill ain't done nothin' like that."

"Maybe it was the heat, or his heart," Lawrence Anderson suggested. He was currently courting Marlene, and he wanted her to be quiet.

"Nah," Marlene disputed. "Y'all seen, just like me, how that girl had a fit on top of Bill's chest. It's the work of a witch."

"Who ever heard of a witch at the noon-day hour?" Maude asked.

"Ahhh," Marlene exclaimed. "They might come out at night, but they can leave they evil out all day long. This here's the work of a witch."

Van Ida rose to her full height, and pushed Zyma behind her to shield the girl from the hateful eyes of Marlene Lester. "You say that one mo' time, Marlene, I'm gon' have to knock all seven of yo' teeth out." She stated it flatly, firmly. "Bill is dead for sho', but ain't nobody killed him."

Lawrence turned away from the women and started up the road. He said he was going to find the field boss to bring the truck for Bill's body. The truth was he needed to put some distance between himself and Marlene. He couldn't fight her fight, not against the gator woman and Alabama.

Alabama, Theron, and two of the other men waited around to help lift the body onto the truck, but the others slowly began to head back to their rows. They glanced up at the sun, worried about the heat, worried about the time they had lost away from their work. Nobody worried much about Bill.

Chapter 9

It would be late when Alabama came home, if he came at all. Van Ida thought she knew where to find him should she need him for anything. He would be at Sloan's Place. Sloan's Place was an old weather-worn stable that had once housed Mr. Henry's horses. Neville had turned it into a juke joint, a place where whiskey was sold. It was where the men in Cranston went to listen to the radio, swap stories, and drink their troubles away. Sometimes a few of the women would join them. Tonight they would discuss what had happened to Bill Johnson. Women would speak only good of the dead, but the men would speak the truth, and nobody was going to believe that Bill had bothered Zyma.

Van Ida knew it was up to her to speak to Zyma about what had happened in the field. She watched the child, who was sitting at the table eating corn pone and cabbage. Zyma was her cross to bear. At the birth of the child, Van Ida had audibly cursed the zyma root, and had unintentionally named the child. Alabama and the boys thought she had said Zyma Ruth, and that was the name that had stuck. She had seen no

way or reason to correct the mistake, and had let it stand as a reminder of her sin. She did not think that anyone would associate the name with the root since she had never heard it spoken of outside the Barkley Plantation.

She waited until the girl was done eating and was tucked away for the night, then she sat on the edge of the bed. Van Ida touched the girl's hair. It was long, thick, and tangled. She had no hand for hair, and didn't like to fool with Zyma's anyway because of the soft spot on her skull. It was easier to tie the girl's hair up during the day and let it loose at night.

"Zyma, chile, we needs to talk 'bout what happened out there in the field today," Van Ida began. "You needs to tell me how it come to be that Bill was breathin' in yo' ear."

"He wanted me to come to him, Mama," Zyma answered. "He was loud in my ear, and I wanted him to stop it."

Van Ida was sure she did not understand. The child had been with her all day, except for the few minutes it had taken to go for the water jar. "Did he do that when you went for the water?"

"All day, Mama. He did it all day."

"But you was wit' me all day, baby. He wadn't nowhere near us."

"I know. But I could hear him."

"Did he talk to you, say anythin' to you?"

Zyma shook her head. "Just breathed."

"Well, how you know it was Bill. How come it couldna been somebody else."

The girl shrugged. "It was him, Mama. I know it was him."

Zyma had been quiet all afternoon. Out in the field, she had followed Van Ida back to the row. The only thing she had said was, "Mr. Bill gone now, Mama. I don't hear him no mo'."

Van Ida thought that there had to be confusion and questions inside the girl's head. "What you know 'bout dyin', chile?" she asked.

Zyma lay on her back, stared up at the ceiling. "It's when you go away and don't never come back. I know my mama Mildred died when I was born. It make you and Papa sad when y'all say her name. So I be sad too, but it ain't nothin' to be sad. Mr. Bill wadn't sad -- not after I helped him change somethin'." The girl lowered her voice to a whisper. "It was a bad thing."

Van Ida stood, paced the floor of the small house, wrung her hands. At the door, she peered out into the night, wondered if she should wait for Alabama before she questioned the child about the bad thing. Always, she had tried to keep a close watch over Zyma, did not want to repeat the mistake she had made with the child's mother. She needed to know who

had done this bad thing, though. The child, or Bill, or both?

When Van Ida turned from the door, she saw that Zyma was watching her, staring, patiently waiting to tell her about the bad thing. She took a kitchen chair and placed it beside the child's bed. She sat on the chair, leaned forward, and could feel dread creeping along her spine.

"Who done that bad thing that you was talkin' 'bout, child. Was it you or Bill?"

Zyma sat up in the center of the bed. She gave a nervous giggle, then covered her mouth. "Mr. Bill, Mama," she answered. "He took off his clothes."

"Go 'head," Van Ida said with a nod. "Tell me 'bout it."

"I seen Mr. Bill. He wadn't so old, and he could walk good -- like Papa. He opened the door." Zyma almost sang the words. "And then he looked at a woman who was on a bed. She didn't see him. I think she was sleep. Then Mr. Bill, he pulled down his pants. That's when I seen him naked, Mama. He tried to make that woman naked, too. He tore her gown, and she had big . . ."

Zyma paused. Sometimes Van Ida would scold her when she said things she shouldn't say, even when she was only repeating her papa's words. Once she had heard Papa tell Mr. Theron, "Fuck a ghost!" The

word had been foreign to her. She stored it away for later use. The next night when her Mama and Papa had been talking about spirits and ghosts, as they often did, Zyma had piped up to show off her new word. "Fuck a ghost!" she had exclaimed excitedly. Papa had laughed, but Mama had stung her legs with the corner hickory switch. She had not used that word again.

". . . bosoms." Zyma said cautiously.

Van Ida nodded. "Go 'head."

"Mr. Bill fell on that woman, and they was bouncin', and the woman started screamin' 'cause I don't think she liked to be bounced. Then Mr. Bill, he told her to shut up, but she didn't do it." Zyma slapped a hand over her mouth, then removed it. "He covered the woman's mouth just like that, Mama, but she was still tryin' to scream. Mr. Bill, he say, 'Shut up, Evelyn! Don't make me hurt you.' He put both his hands on that woman's neck. And her head was bouncin' just like the bed. Then she wadn't screamin'. And when Mr. Bill got up off that woman, she never did move no mo'."

Van Ida sat silent for a long while, staring at the wall behind the bed. "Then what did Bill do?" she finally asked.

"He touch her neck and her face. And he touch his own face 'cause he was bleedin' where she scratched him. I think he was scared; he look

like it. Then he pull his pant's back up, and he ran out that room. You wanna know how I helped him, Mama."

Van Ida could not answer right away. She was remembering. It was sixteen years ago when Henry Winston's daughter, Evelyn, had been raped and murdered right in her own house. The law had come over from Mays Spur to investigate, but nobody ever found out who committed the crime.

Van Ida could feel her heart pounding in her chest. She straightened her back, used one hand to rub at the dull ache that was starting behind her forehead. "Go 'head, child. How you help 'im?" she asked.

"It was makin' Mr. Bill sad, so I made it so it never did happen. It was awright for Mr. Bill to die, Mama, 'cause now he never did bounce that woman. But I know he did."

"Oh, chile! Chile," Van Ida groaned. "You be my burden to bear, my reason to breathe. This gotta stay between you and me. Don't you never mention it to nobody else."

"I won't, Mama."

Van Ida kissed Zyma's cheek. She watched as the child stretched on the bed and closed her eyes. She was certain the child had just described a murder. Zyma would be all right, she guessed, since the worse thing to her had been the sight of a naked man -- the bad thing.

After replacing the chair at the table, Van Ida went to stand outside on the stoop. Had it not been so dark, she would have worked in her garden, or maybe pulled water from the well to take another bath. She suddenly felt dirty on the outside and empty on the inside. The night sang out its strident notes, the sky was filled with stars, and yet she felt hollow -- like she was in the world alone. Alabama was somewhere out there. She closed her eyes and willed him to come to her, to hold her in his arms -- just hold her for a spell. She had seen Theron do that for his wife, Nadine. But Nadine wasn't straight up tall and ugly. She didn't work in a field; she worked in one of the big houses in Mays Spur, and her hands probably weren't rough and calloused. Theron would kiss the palms of Nadine's hands sometimes like she was somebody special. Alabama had never done that for her, probably never would, and still she willed him to come.

Chapter 10

Theron Evers lived in a rented, two-family house on a dirt road that had no name. When he thought of his town, it put him in the mind of a deformed hand cut off at the wrist with too many fingers spiraling in too many directions. At the base of the hand, where it had been cut off from the white population, was Piedmont Road. Piedmont ran about as straight as anything could get in Cranston. It was a mile-long road that ran south into the highway, and terminated north at the cemetery. Four houses and the Baptist Church stood on Piedmont. Across from those were overgrown weeds and open space.

Theron had no complaints with Cranston. The outlying fields stretched forever, and a man could always find work on one of the larger farms. His preferences were day labor and odd jobs, although both had been slowed a few years back by men stumbling in from the highway and boxcars.

Theron climbed the steps and crossed the porch of his house. There was a hallway that separated his two rooms from the two rooms of his neighbor. Every room in the house had a door that opened off the hallway, and everybody knew that at one time the three houses had accommodated Mr. Henry‘s guests. Theron stood in the hallway and could hear voices coming from both dwellings. Ulysses Sampson was preaching to his wife, Lynnette, telling her how The Good Book proved something she had done was a sin before God. They were a young couple. Ulysses worked at the lumber mill during the week, and preached in an open space on Piedmont on Sundays.

From his own place, Theron could hear the mumblings of a conversation taking place between his wife, Nadine, and his son, Brill. He wanted to pace while he contemplated how to best do what he needed to do. He didn’t move, though, because his footsteps would have been heard on the weak floorboards of the hall. He did not want someone opening a door and asking him what he was doing marching through the hallway.

What he was doing was trying to find the right words to tell his wife that he wanted to buy a house, and to ask his eleven-year-old son to teach him how to read and write. Miss Dora was ready to unload this house -- the house Theron had lived in for the past twelve years -- and the two

neighboring houses as a package deal. Theron had a choice. He could either buy the houses himself, or he could sit back and let someone else get them.

What if someone else, who had scraped and saved the way he had, got wind of the offer and bought them first? He figured men like Wash Gibson and Neville Sloan could come up with the money fast, but Sloan already owned more property than he needed. What if some man from Mays Spur bought the three houses and tore them down to build something else.

Theron tried to think of something that the land would be perfect for, but all her could think of was himself, his family, his home. He did not want to pack up his family and move. Where would they go? For sure, he did not want to live in some shack like a majority of the people were doing. He liked having a bathroom, even if it was enclosed in a tiny space on the back porch, did not have a tub, and he had to share it with the Sampsons. He liked sitting on his front porch, even though his view was a dirt road and a forest of trees.

This house had been a step up for him. When he first moved to Cranston from the Esterfield Plantation, he had lived in a one-room house on Marshall Road. Marshall Road was where Mr. Blevins' field boss came with the truck in the early morning to pick up the worker's who wanted to

ride out to the Blevins' fields. Theron would ride sometimes, but mostly he liked to walk. He had been out on Thursday, and he had watched an old friend die. He had seen Alabama's little granddaughter give more comfort with the touch of a hand than anyone could have done with words. Theron had not been back since that day.

He had spent the last three days packing, storing, and loading furniture for Miss Dora and her husband, Mr. George. They were moving to Savannah. Today, at the end of the job, Mr. George had told him about the three houses on the two acres of land. Theron had always worked, and had saved every penny he could for all these many years. He was thirty-seven now, and ready to have something to show for all of his hard work.

Standing in the hallway wasn't getting him closer to anything. He sighed, then pushed open the door to his front room. His wife and son were startled by his early arrival. They fell silent and glanced over at him.

"You home early today," Nadine observed.

"Yeah," Theron nodded, "that's 'cause I got somethin' I needs to talk to y'all about."

Theron could tell that Nadine was trying to read the expression on his face. He purposely kept it neutral. He was nearly busting at the seams at the prospect of owning property, but there were drawbacks. The major

drawback was that they purposely had nothing, had been saving for a reason, and now he was about to propose that they spend their life savings on three houses that were barely standing. The room he had entered held two beds, a backless, wooden bench, and two hardback chairs. Nadine and Brill occupied the bench, so he pulled up a chair and sat facing them. The smell of supper was drifting in from the kitchen. It was a combination of green beans, potatoes, and onions.

"Girl, you sho' got this house smellin' good," Theron commented, as he leaned forward to kiss his wife.

Nadine was a healthy woman, thick all over, from her hair to her legs. Long before he had ever tasted her cooking, she had won his heart with a smile. If his heart was breaking, and Nadine smiled, he'd have to smile, too. That's just the way it was, had always been, but she wasn't smiling now.

"What's troublin' you, Theron?" she asked.

"What make you think I'm troubled?"

"Them lines in yo' face that's runnin' ear to ear and chin to hair. Now, you gon' tell me what's wrong, or you gon' make me sit here and worry, too?"

Theron decided that he would just get to the point. "Mr. George is

gettin ready to sell this house," he said. "This one and them other two out there."

"Oh, my god!" Nadine exclaimed. "I know you ain't tryin' to tell me that we gotta start lookin' for some place to live."

"Let me finish, Nadine. He ain't told nobody yet, 'cept me. He givin' us a chance to buy 'em if we want to. I knows for sho' that they gettin' ready to move outta Mays spur. So I gotta know what you think. I gotta know what Brill think, too."

"We gotta have somewhere to live, Daddy," Brill said. "I done seen people ain't got no place to live. I don't want that to be us."

"We ain't gon' be wit'out a place to live," Theron explained. "Could be somebody we know might buy 'em, and we can keep right on livin here. But I was hopin y'all might see things my way. We can buy 'em."

Nadine was silent and staring. Her hands were crossed, and she was working her fingers along her wrists. "Did she say how much?" she finally asked. "I don't wanna waste all our money on these houses. We can't trust Mr. George no way, and ever' body know Miss Dora is crazy . Look how they sold that land to Stanley Baker, waited till he built him a house, then took the land back. How you know they ain't gon' do the same thing to you? S'pose we buy 'em, and ever'body move out. We'd be stuck wit'

three empty houses. I gotta sleep on it. And I thought we was savin that money so Brill could go to school and be a doctor or somethin."

"We'll save the money up again, Nadine," Theron assured her.

"I ain't gotta sleep on it, Daddy," Brill said. "Buy 'em! And I ain't sho' I wanna be no doctor no way. We got enough doctors around these parts. We got Mr. Wash and Miss Girlie, that doctor in Mays Spur, and two animal doctors. How many doctors we gotta have?"

"Stop it!" Nadine snapped. "I mean you stop it right now, Brill. I done saved since the day you was born so you could grow up and be somethin. We ain't never made you go out to them fields or down to the river. You don't even know what hard work is. Don't you see them other boys yo' age goin out to them fields and fishing boats ever'day? Don't you see how my feet swell up when I come home from across town, and how yo' daddy come draggin in her ever' night? All we ever ask you to do is study hard and get some education. And that's what you gon' do."

"Yes, ma'am." Brill dropped his head, but not before Theron saw the tears brimming in the boy's eyes.

They were silent, and so were the couple across the hall. Theron hoped the Sampsons had not heard his plea, Brill's whining, or Nadine's outburst. He got up, went out to the kitchen to fix himself a plate of food.

He figured Nadine was too angry to be bothered. After a while, he heard his wife apologizing to their son.

"I'm sorry, Brill," she said. "I don't mean to be cross wit' you, but sometimes you gotta think about things befo' you jump into 'em. And you ain't never gon' have to worry 'bout where to live. You got a daddy that's gon' always make sho' you got a roof over yo' head."

Theron sat down and ate. He ate everything on his plate, but for the first time since he had married Nadine, her cooking didn't taste so good in his mouth. He knew it was wrong to count chickens before they hatched. That was what he had done. All the way home he had made plans of how he would buy the houses, fix them up, and collect his own rent for a change. Nadine was right, though; they had to think about their son.

Without meaning to, he had roused hard feelings between his wife and son. An apology had been given and accepted. Theron had heard it, but when he reentered the front room he was met by two gloomy faces. Brill was on the floor trying to hide his face behind a writing tablet. Nadine was sitting on the bed concentrating on sewing the ripped sleeve of a shirt. Theron went over to his son, dropped down on the floor beside the boy.

"Show me how to write my name." He said it quickly, before he could change his mind. "I guess I gon' need to know how if we gon' be buyin us

a house. Don't wanna be makin no X's on somethin that's gon' be yours one day"

"I thought we wadn't gettin no house," Brill said sullenly.

"Yo mama said she was gon' sleep on it. So I guess we just have to wait and see." They both turned to glance at Nadine, but her gaze was fixed on her sewing.

Brill gave his father a pencil, then placed the writing tablet on the floor. "How many letters of the alphabets can you write?" he asked.

"I can make the X and the I."

Brill took the pencil back, and wrote some letters on the paper. He began to sound the letters out for his father.

Learning to read and write was going to be harder than Theron had thought, and he was ready to change his mind until he saw how enthused the boy was about teaching him. They remained on the floor for hours, wasting page after page of valuable paper. Nadine had finished her sewing and had fallen asleep. Brill finally went off to bed, but Theron stayed where he was, kept trying to get his letters look like Brill's.

He dozed, and was awakened by Nadine shaking his shoulder. The pencil was still in his hand, and the only thing that kept his face off the bare floor was the writing tablet. "Is it time to get up?' he asked sleepily.

"Nah," she answered. "I come to talk to you 'bout these houses."

"You done slept on it?"

She stretched on the floor beside him, draped an arm across his chest. "You go on and tell Mr. George that we gon' buy these houses."

Theron wanted to pull her into his arms, pick her up, spin her around. He was happy, but he thought that to move from his spot would disturb the moment, turn it back on him somehow. He kissed her lightly, then woke his son with laughter.

Chapter 11

The Lord works in mysterious ways. That was what Alabama thought as he sat in Sloan's Place across the table from Wondrene Louise Barry. He had her full name now, and she had his undivided attention. Because she was sitting on the hips that had first attracted him, he concentrated on her other assets. Stylish in dress -- she had long, slender legs, a flawless ginger complexion, and naturally wavy hair. She was, without a doubt, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She said she was in town for Bill's funeral. Bill had been a cousin, just like Neville was, just like a lot of people were. She said she couldn't believe it when Neville sent her the telegram to Atlanta telling her that Bill was dead. She'd had to

come see for herself. Thursday, a week since the day he died, they would bury her cousin, then she would be off again. She wasn't sure where she'd go.

"I'm like a homing pigeon, honey," she said. "Atlanta is home, but I gotta flap my wings. You know what I'm talkin 'bout? I ain't gon' just sit down and stay put in one place."

He had known right off that she was trouble because she was so much like Katie, still Alabama leaned in closer to her. "If you a bird, you must be a hummingbird," he said. "I hear music when you speak, and you set my heart to beatin bout a mile a minute."

She picked up a Camel cigarette from the table. He reached for the lighter to light it for her, but she shook her head, did it herself. She blew smoke in his direction. When it cleared, she winked an eye at him. "I think you trying to sweet-talk me, you cute little country boy," she said. "Be careful! Wondrene Barry will break yo' heart."

Alabama had downed two shots of Jim Beam, but it wasn't touching him the way she was. She had a voice as smooth as silk, and a throaty laugh that seemed to wrap him in a cozy warmth. "Break my heart," he whispered. "Break both my arms, one of my legs. Do what ever you wanna do to me."

He had worked the half-day in the field that was required on Saturday, and was still wearing his overalls. He had not gone home, not for a bath or even a bite to eat. All week Van Ida and Zyma had walked around the house being quiet, acting as though they were keeping something from him. It made him angry. When he asked what was wrong, all Van Ida said was that she was not going to Bill's funeral. Everybody in Cranston would be there. They would look around and see that Van Ida was not with him, and they would take it as a sign of disrespect.

"Yeah, you goin, Ida," he had told her quite firmly. "We all goin."

"I ain't, Alabama. I ain't goin."

He hadn't spoken to her since, did not intend to speak to her until she got on her knees and apologized for being disrespectful and disobedient. Of course, Bill would probably be in his grave by then. So be it!

Wondrene Barry had her soft hands on his face. She parted his lips with her tongue, drew him into a kiss that nearly took his breath away. When she released him, his breath came out like broken waves, and his body prickled from head to toe.

She stared at him, a devious smile on her lips. "How long it's been since you had good lovin, honey?" she asked. "I gon' take you wit' me. But I want you to come out the gate nice and easy. Don't you go jumpin

the gun on me."

Alabama was about to do wrong. Like a child looking to see who saw him, he surreptitiously surveyed the room. It was early in the day, and there were only three other men in the place -- Bud Williams, Neville, and Lawrence. They were playing cards at a back table, and no one seemed to be paying attention to him or Wondrene. Imagine that, he thought to himself, three grown men, and not one of them staring at this beautiful woman beside me. For all of two seconds, he felt a tinge of guilt. But then he convinced himself that Katie had deserted him and he really wasn't legally married to Van Ida. And Van Ida was a woman is some respects, but not for what he needed now.

Alabama lingered long enough for another drink, then he followed Wondrene out of Sloan's Place and up the road a distance to Sloan's house. Neville Sloan had a real house, and he was particular about who he invited inside. It was Alabama's first chance to take a look around, but he wasn't interested in what Neville had. He was interested in what Wondrene intended to do with him.

She led him up some stairs and into a nicely furnished bedroom. On an ordinary day he would have stopped to admire the oak finish of the dresser and chiffonier, would have run his fingers along the polished surface,

gauged the grain. Not today. Moving quickly, he sat on the bed to remove his shoes and socks, and was up again in a matter of seconds. He unfastened the suspenders on the bib of his overalls, removed them, then turned to see how she was coming along. She was standing beside the dresser, fully dressed, smoking a cigarette, and watching him.

"How old are you, honey?" she asked.

He felt something like a kick to the stomach, just knew she was about to tell him that he was too old for her. He was. "Forty-two."

She smiled. "You 'bout twice my age. I bet you wouldn't look so old if you'd get some of that hair off yo' face. You got what they call a strappin body, I guess."

Alabama sat on the bed again, made up his mind right then and there that he would get a shave as soon as he left Neville's house.

"Don't look so sad, little country boy," Wondrene said, as she crushed out her cigarette in an overflowing ashtray that stood on the dresser. "Come on over here and help me get this dress off."

He did as he was told.

"You one beautiful woman," he whispered, nearly choked on the words as he admired her naked body. Already his hands were caressing her breasts.

She gasped. “Rough hands, rough lover” she teased. “I’m gon’ smooth you out a bit.” She lightly kissed his lips, then pulled him with her as she dropped to the bed.

Alabama could feel his arousal surging through him. He remembered her words, ‘Nice and easy.’ He stroked her flat belly, kissed a breast, took the nipple into his mouth. ‘Don’t jump the gun.’ Using his knee, he parted her thighs. There was no subtlety about it; he had to have her.

Wondrene -- so young, so agile -- slipped his grasp, shifted positions. She was beside him, and her throaty laugh -- fused with the sound of his heartbeat -- pounded in his ears. She kissed him again. He could smell the sweet scent of roses on her slender neck. She kissed his chest, nibbled, wrapped her cool tongue around one nipple, and then the other. It was so unusual, so unexpected, that it tickled at first, but then it sent a tingling sensation throughout his body.

He tried to take control, needed to get inside of her. Wondrene shifted again. She was somewhere near, but out of his reach. With his eyes closed and the hardness of his body ready for the softness of hers, he felt her stir like a cool breeze flowing over him. And then an astonishing sensation. She held his rigid warmth in one hand, caressed it, took it into her mouth.

"Oh, Jesus! Jesus," Alabama moaned.

It had to be a dream. He opened his eyes and could see the flow of long, wavy, black hair. He sucked in his breath, stiffened his muscles, tried to hold on. *Nice and easy.* When she finally looked at him, she puckered her lips and gave the air the tiniest hint of a kiss.

"You ready for me now, honey?" she asked.

Alabama was glad she hadn't called him a little country boy, because he was sure he would have flowed like the Midogeechee River. There was something about the way she said it, the twinkle in her eyes that translated into 'you all man and I know it.' He was being all man for her like he had never been for anyone else, even as she straddled him, even as she drew him inside. Her gorgeous hips rose and fell as her sweet wetness encircled him.

And then it happened. *Don't you go jumping the gun on me.* He flowed like the Midogeechee River. But it wasn't his fault.

She knows better than to beat a dead horse, Alabama thought as she dismounted and stretched beside him. He wanted to sleep, and it didn't matter to him that he was under Neville Sloan's roof. Wondrene nestled against him and began to talk.

"I like to go places," she said. "I went to New York once. You ever been anywhere?"

He shook his head, not quite ready to speak.

“You can’t meet nobody if you just stay in one place. You got transportation?”

He shook his head. “Nah”

“A car or a truck?” she asked. “A mule?”

“Got feet.”

“Well, honey, you can’t get too far on feet. If you had a car, I’d let you drive me to Albany. I betcha I could show you a good time. Had a friend of mine bring me here. But he said he wadn’t stayin’ ‘round for no funeral. Guess I’ll have to get Neville to drive me outta here in his old truck.”

Alabama got up, started to get dressed. Wondrene did not move.

“Do you like me enough to see me again?” he asked.

“Sho‘ I do,” she answered. “I wish you had a car so you could drive me outta here.”