




PROLOGUE
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For colored girls, there's no such thing as happily ever after.

My daughter knew that—it was loving Dean Heathwood that made her forget. That boy was as white as they come, but he sure did love my Marie. He showered her with gifts: an obsidian mirror, a leather atlas, a diamond ring.

Of all Dean's fancy presents, though, the books were easily the most dangerous.

Beautiful books they were. Romances and love poems, sonnets and fairy tales, all leatherbound with bright illustrations. The kind of books colored children never get to touch, let alone own. Soon enough, my daughter'd fallen in love

with those lily-white stories, with the kind of happy endings she'd never live to see.

Now I carry Marie's favorite book of all, *Love Sonnets*, under one arm, protecting it from the night air. My daughter's child is strapped to my back. I take the long route through the swamp, the very path the ancestors traveled, running from Heathwood Plantation's shackles. Like them, I push past creepers and marsh grass, following the thick, slow pulse of the water. Peat bog sucks at my ankles, but I can't afford to fall.

It's long past sundown. If white folk spot me, they might arrest me. Or kill me like they did my sweet, lovestruck girl.

I lean against a cypress tree, letting grief well up for one heartbeat—then, no more.

For my grandbaby's sake, I've got to keep moving. Struggle on.

On my back, Charlene lets out a wrenching wail. Ever since we left Freedom House, she's bunched tight with rage, like she knows she'll never see her twin sister again. Like she knows, too, that I'm to blame.

I reach over my shoulder, catching her tiny hand. "I'm gonna fix this, baby girl. You'll see."

The scent of woodsmoke leads me to the conjure man's hut. The grass-roofed shack perches on the water's edge, hidden beneath a veil of Spanish moss. Preacher says it's a mighty sin to visit with a conjure man, but it's a risk I have to take.

The night Marie birthed my grandbabies, I smelled the sizzle of a curse cooking itself up. One twin came into this world white as goat's milk; the other, pecan brown. Doctor called it a miracle, but I wondered. After Marie died—and poor Dean, too—the hex-stench grew stronger. I got to remembering what my daddy used to say: *Only thing stronger than white magic is our magic. Don't forget: Our love's stronger even than their hate.* And that got me to thinking of Old Roland, brewing up potions in the swamps over yonder.

Thunder cracks; my grandbaby whimpers.

"Hurry on in, Jeannette!" Old Roland calls. "Sky's fixin' to fall!"

Inside, I catch my breath.

"Didn't expect you'd come calling," Old Roland mutters—it's so dark, I can't see him.

I spin around.

"Last I heard, you'd been Saved."

Finally, I do see. He's the shadow crouched behind a soup pot, stirring swamp-grass-green liquid with a broom handle.

Careful now, Jeannette. You got to be careful.

My grandbaby grabs a fistful of my hair, holding tight.

Roland rises, knees popping. Squinting, I see the spirits swirling in circles around his head. Growing up in haunted Freedom House, I'm plenty familiar with spirits. Haunts can't scare me—but Heathwood's white evil does.

"I'm here to buy some of your power, Roland."

"What you need with my power?"

Grief drags me down. My lower back twitches like it might give out. I'm old—only forty-five, but all my life lived under Jim Crow, working for white folks from sunup to sundown. I'm too tired to be raising a baby again. I sure don't have time for this man's games.

"My grandbabies are in bad trouble. I'll pay what you want, do whatever it takes—"

"I know you've been through hell, Jeannie. And you know why, don't you?"

Something slithers across the wall. A snake. Silently, my grandbaby points.

Tears roll down my cheeks. "It's my fault. I broke the bond between twins. Cursed them, though I didn't mean to."

Old Roland nods. "Spirits say the white woman tricked the child outta you."

"Yes." My voice breaks, thinking of the baby that I'll never hold again: the sin that'll never wash clean. "The Heathwood woman came to me weeping. Made me think she cared—that she longed, as I did, for all that's left of our children. But her heart is ice. She's never loved. Not once in her life."

"Did her boy love your daughter? Love her true?"

In answer, I hand Roland the book of sonnets, marked at Marie's favorite page. Even now she's gone, I can still hear her chanting her favorite verse, just like she did all through her pregnancy: *I love thee with the breath, smiles, tears, of all my life...*

While Roland reads—smoky, shape-shifting spirits peering over his shoulder to spy the pretty pictures—my mind slips over a past slick as ice, remembering:

Dean and my daughter gazing down at their mixed-blood twins, the dark twin holding on to the light one like she was afraid of leaving her behind.

Marie in her wedding dress, waving goodbye to me on her way up North to be married.

The wicked shine of Marie's casket as gravediggers lowered it into the ground.

"Cursed, oh, yes, they are!" Before I can stop him, Old Roland chucks the book into the pot.

I leap up, hands trembling. It's too late; Dean's beautiful book is melting.

"Dean Heathwood gave that book to my daughter with a pure heart!"

"Dean forgot how much this world hates love between Black and white. Those young folks never should've met, Jeannette. Should've kept an ocean between them."

"Don't you think I know that, Roland? Don't you think I tried?"

Roland's eyes gleam. "Question is, what we gonna do now? And what are you willing to pay?"

I've got five hundred dollars in my pocket, thanks to the Heathwood woman. But Old Roland doesn't deal in money.

He deals, like the ancestors, in time.

"I've got two questions that need answering." I grip Charlene's hand, more to calm myself than her. "I'll pay whatever you want."

Quick as a flash, Old Roland snatches the snake off the wall. He holds it before him, letting it writhe.

"Snake'll answer you two questions. But I'm gonna need two years of whatever's left of your life."

I suck my teeth. "Take three."

Roland's eyebrows disappear into his hair. "Well, that's new. No one ever wants to pay me extra! You got a death wish or what?"

I speak through clenched teeth. "The third year's for Magnolia. The light-skinned child the Heathwood woman took. If she ever needs anything. If she ever visits you . . ."

Roland cocks his head. Again, I see the spirits swirling, whispering about me and the baby on my back.

God may smite me for coming here, but what choice did I have? When all else fails, our people look to the old ways. Roland lives on swampland, but he's as much a part of Colored Town as the soil, the cotton fields, even the star-studded river itself.

"Spirits say Magnolia'll come," Old Roland growls at last. "By then, Jeannie, I warn you—it'll be too late."

In one smooth motion, Roland pulls the machete from behind his back and slits the snake from head to tail. The dying thing thrashes, blood foaming. Chanting, Roland dips

his finger into the snake's open belly. He marks my forehead with gore—then kisses me full on the lips.

I gasp, feeling years leave my body. Pulled from my lungs like air. Released, I double over, battling for breath.

"Come back in the morning. I'll forge you a silver cane outta this snake's soul. Make him a cobra, like his proud African ancestors! You ask your questions, then catch your train. I know you're not planning on staying, after what happened to your girl."

My lips feel bruised. "No. I'm not staying."

Roland stirs the green waters, concentrating. The spirits ring an ever-tighter circle around his head, soaking up the fumes.

I want to say goodbye to Roland—goodbye to all Georgia, and the only world I've ever known. But grief clogs my throat, silencing me.

Gutted, I stumble into the dark.

It's an effort to put one foot in front of the other. For Charlene's sake, I walk.

And I plan.

I won't make the same mistake with Charlene that I did with Marie. Letting her head be filled with nonsense and dreams.

"Remember now, Charlene Yates. For colored girls, there's no such thing as *happily ever after*. No use chasing it. You've got to fight to survive, but don't hope for too much."

The next night, the two of us board the train, headed for

New York, a new life. I step carefully—a cobra's silver head nestled inside my palm.

It's a long journey for a middle-aged woman and a baby.

I don't sleep. Every time I start to nod off, a sound wakes me.

The murdered snake, hissing.