

# 1

The blood never much bothered Grace. Maw Maw Rubelle got her used to it early on, when she was little ol' way before she let her only granddaughter, her apprentice, tend the stove at her first baby catching—before, even, Grace's first blood trickled down her thigh. There it was, her monthly making a dark red liquid trail past her calf and ankle, dripping into the thick, fertile Virginia dirt she'd planted her feet in as she reached for the pins on the laundry line. Grace cocked her head and stared at it in wonder for just a moment, then went on in the outhouse and made her sanitary pad, just like Maw Maw Rubelle had taught her to do with the pins and ripped pieces of feed sack. *Just as natural and nasty as slopping hogs*, Grace thought.

Now her best friend, Cheryl, she didn't see it that way. She cried holy hell when her blood came in. Nobody—not her mama, not her big sissy, not nan auntie—bothered to tell her what was inevitable. They held it to their chests like a big secret Cheryl had no right to know. She near killed her fool self when she saw the red puddle on her little piece of school bench and realized it was oozing from her poom-poom—knocked over the desk, tripped down the rickety schoolhouse steps, and just took off running down toward Harley pasture, hollering and screaming like a stuck pig, the laughter of the boys and the screams of Ms. Garvey, their school teacher, chasing behind her.

But Grace, she understood the power of the blood. Maw Maw Rubelle saw to that—made her look straight at it for sport and for practicality's sake.

Maw Maw knew, after all, that her grandbaby would have the calling—saw it in a vision just as plain as day one afternoon as she pulled poke sallet roots from the ground deep in the woods down by the river, where she had gone to forage and be still and make offerings to the spirits of her mother and her mother before that. In the vision, there'd been Grace's hands—small, delicate, strong—gently twisting, pulling a baby's head as it emerged between its mother's legs. The movements, the way Grace's fingers fluttered about the infant's curls, had made Maw Maw's heart beat fast. She could feel her granddaughter's happy in the tingle of her own fingertips, in each of her own palms. Maw Maw had slowly fallen to her knees, sticks and pebbles digging into the thick of her skirt; she'd kissed those palms, and pressed them—warm, pulsing with energy—to her cheeks. Love was there. Grace would continue in the tradition of the Adams women. Maw Maw's dead did not lie. *Show her the blood*, they'd whispered in the breeze, in the beams of light rushing through the leaves. *Show her what she already knows*.

Maw Maw had pulled a hand towel from her bosom, wrapped the root, leaves, and berries from the small weed stalk in it, and, with a heave, leaned all her weight against her walking stick as she struggled to stand. As quick as her thick legs could take her, she'd hobbled through the brush, across dirt and grass, past the great pear tree and the bumbleberry bush, back to the clapboard shotgun house she'd called home since she was a little girl being taught the ways of a midwife by her own grandmother.

Maw Maw pushed through the back door, squint-searching the tiny, two-room house, her eyes traveling from the bed and small bureau to the kitchen table and three wooden stools Mr. Aaron had fashioned from a fallen oak tree in exchange for two months' worth of Maw Maw's Sunday dinner plates, past the fat-bellied wood-burning stove and huge iron kettle standing sentry atop it, over to the corner beneath the window she'd opened to let the breeze carry in the scent of the gardenia bush planted on the side of the house. There was Grace, splayed like one of the little rag dolls her mama had sewn for her last Christmas, stitching baby clothes Maw Maw had commissioned her to make for a client due to have a baby any day now.

"Come here, baby," Maw Maw had said as she placed the pregnant dish towel on the kitchen sideboard. She'd carefully unfolded it and separated

the leaves from the roots from the berries as Grace scrambled to her feet. “Bring Maw Maw Ruby her bag.”

Grace, then eight years old and therefore eager, had practically flown to the chest where Maw Maw kept her special bag. Somebody was having a baby and Maw Maw had to hop to, Grace knew, because that’s what her grandmother did—she waited on babies and when they came, somebody would call on Maw Maw and she would get her bag and her walking shoes and play with the baby until the mama was ready to play with the baby herself. Or something like that.

“Who baby coming today, Maw Maw?” Grace had asked excitedly as she struggled to gently place the weighty black bag on the table next to her grandmother.

“Nobody, chile,” Maw Maw had said. The chair she dropped into creaked as she settled herself onto its frame. She’d torn off a small piece of a newspaper she had tucked in the bag and gently placed a few berries in it before stashing it in a small pocket she’d sewn in the seam of the leather tote. She’d planned to run them by Belinda’s place on the way to the ice-house the coming Saturday, as the young mother-to-be was due sometime in the next couple weeks, and a woman with a stomach stretching out as far and wide as she was practically tall needed a little pick-me-up to remind her that she was still a lady, worthy of affection. Worthy of touch. Pretty. A smudge of those berries across her lips would have Belinda remembering her fine—Belinda *and* her man, who Maw Maw had heard was down there at The Quarters, drinking and smoking and grinding and forgetting he had a beautiful pregnant wife back home. “Come here, baby,” Maw Maw had said, signaling to Grace. “Stand right here.”

Grace inched between Maw Maw’s knees and melted her face into her grandmother’s fingers.

“One of these days, this here bag and everything in it gon’ be yourn,” Maw Maw had said, looking into Grace’s piercing brown eyes. She let her thumb rest in the one dimple Grace had, a subtle dent in her right cheek.

“You mean like in my picture show, Maw Maw?” Grace had asked.

Maw Maw pulled her face back from Grace’s and wrinkled her brow. Always, Grace woke up next to her grandmother, snuggled up under her arm, and recounted her dreams—she called them “picture shows” on account she

imagined that's what it would be like to watch a film in a theater, something she hadn't yet had the pleasure, money, or right skin color to do—before the two of them put their feet on the floor, fell to their knees, said their morning prayers, and set out water and bread for their dead. Maw Maw always listened intently, as she knew the power of dreams—understood they were not at all dreams but a nod of things to come. Messages. Sometimes warnings. Surely, Maw Maw had thought, she would have remembered Grace telling her about a dream that involved her midwifery bag. “What dream you had, chile, you ain't tell me 'bout?”

“I was 'bout to tell you, Maw Maw,” Grace had said sweetly. “I was playing with a baby, but she had blood on her face. I was scared.”

“When you had this dream, baby?”

“Just now, Maw Maw, while you was down by the river.”

Maw Maw should have been surprised by her granddaughter's vision and the synching of their connection to what was to be, but she knew better than to question what was natural, true. It was time. “Blood ain't nothin' to fear, chile,” Maw Maw said simply. “It got your mama and daddy in it, me and my mama, too. Being scared of blood is like being scared of yo'self.”

Grace felt something in her stomach, though it was far from her idea of joy. It felt more like what she imagined the hatchet felt like on the neck of a freshly rung cock headed for the pot. She wanted to let Maw Maw know right away that she got her monthly—wanted to know what was to come next. She could count on her grandmother only to tell her the truth. Her mama, Basse, had long ago traded in what Rubelle taught her about menstruation for what the Bible, the pastor, and the rest of the men had to say about it, so she was tight-lipped on the subject. The most Grace got out of her was that this was a woman's lot—the curse of Eve. But Maw Maw, she knew nothing of temptation, disobedience, and atonement—of apples and talking serpents with tricky tongues. What she was sure of was what the women who spanned the generations before her were sure of, too: menstruation was a gift. The blood carried the ingredients of life: purification. Intuition. Syncopation between the rhythms of body, nature, God. Her talking to her granddaughter about it became more urgent as Grace's hips began to

stretch the fabric of her flour-sack dress and her buds got round and full. “Mama told me, she say, ‘When you become a woman, the moon will make the waters crash the shores in your honor,’” Maw Maw had told Grace on more than one occasion. “She say Simbi will make a dance in your womb.”

Maw Maw was heading for the clothesline with a freshly washed sheet when she saw her granddaughter walking slowly through the outhouse door, practically doubled over; instinctively, she knew why Grace looked pained, but she asked the child anyway. “What ails you, gal?” Grace’s answer made Maw Maw toss her head back and laugh from her gut. “Come here,” she said, extending her arms and folding Grace into her bosom. “Oh, Simbi gone dance tonight! Go down there in them woods and scrape up some cramp bark—let Maw Maw make you a little something to ease that pain.”

Grace did as she was told, only to emerge from the brush to see a white man riding bareback on a horse, rushing the animal practically up to her grandmother’s nose. He didn’t bother hopping down; just tipped his hat and got to it: “Granny, I need you over to the house. Looks like Ginny getting ready to have that little one.”

“Good day, Mr. Brodersen,” Maw Maw said calmly. She was not in the least fazed by the man’s gruffness; indeed, she was used to—and slightly amused by—how direct and bossy the white folk tended to be with her when they were procuring her services. Like she was beneath them, even though they were standing in her yard, always in a huff, always desperate, looking for her to step into the middle of a miracle. Hell, most of them were in the same predicament as the colored folk they looked down on: not a pot to piss in, and barely a window to throw it out of. They paid with chickens and promises just like everybody else, except they did it with expectation rather than gratitude. Maw Maw didn’t concern herself with the particulars of it all, though. The only thing that mattered to her was her divine mission: assisting in the safe arrival of new life into the world. Color was not specified in her soul contract. “Bout what time her water broke?” Maw Maw asked politely, shielding the sun from her eye as she looked up at Brodersen.

“Water came about thirty minutes ago,” he said.

“And her pains? ’Bout how far apart are they?”

“She got to hollerin’ straight off, but she only had the one pain before I left.”

“Well, this ain’t her first baby, so ain’t no telling if this one here gonna take its time or come on out and see the world, is it, Mr. Brodersen?”

“I reckon not, Granny,” he said, using the nickname the white folk called Black midwives.

“Well, let me go on ahead and get my bag. Shouldn’t take me no more than about an hour to get over, lessen ol’ Aaron is here and he agree to drive me to yo’ place. In the meantime, you know what to do, and that’s exactly what you did the last time I came over there to catch those sweet babies a yourn. Put the water on the stove, get your bottles and sheets in place, and make your lovely wife as comfortable as possible.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Brodersen said, tipping his hat. And with that, he rode off into the direction of the Piney Tree Mill—the largest employer of the town of Rose. To get to it, his horse would have to cross Piney River by way of the Piney River Bridge, and to get to his home, he’d have to circle around the huge wooden and steel building, where freshly cut trees went to be shaved, chopped, ground, and pulped and white men worked hard and Black men worked equally hard but got 60 percent less money pressed into their palms come Friday evening. White men used that extra money they made to live in the tiny town behind the mill, where Black folk found themselves only if they were there to work for the white families who lived segregated lives in their segregated community with segregated ideals—and even then, Black folk didn’t find themselves there after sundown. The only somebody who was safe there was one Rubelle Adams—the granny whose hands were the first to touch practically three generations of white Rose’s residents. Ruby was neither proud of nor ashamed of this fact. It was what it was.

And now her granddaughter would join her in being the Negro who could visit white Rose in the dark. “Come on in here, baby,” Maw Maw said to Grace, signaling to her granddaughter, who’d stood immobile by the wash line, waiting for the white man to get on. “Let me make you some tea and talk to you a bit. It’s time.”

From the moment Maw Maw had seen the vision of Grace catching babies, she dutifully set about teaching her granddaughter the ways of the women who wait on miracles—the ways of her own self. And now, on

this day that the spirits saw fit to make her capable of producing her own miracles, Maw Maw would bring Grace along to her first birth.

She quickly prepared Grace's tea, and then sat the child down to once again go over what was tucked in her midwife's bag—what was supposed to be there according to the Board of Health, from where she'd gotten her license almost twenty years earlier, and what was supposed to be there according to her visions, experience, and the natural order of things among women whose hands were sacred, ordained. *This is so-and-so paper for this and such, this herb here gets the mama calm, that root you need to ease her pain.* Maw Maw had gone over the bag's contents enough times for Grace to know what was what; she never tired of looking at all the equipment in that bag—and especially appreciated that she no longer had to sneak and peek when her grandmother wasn't around. But she could hardly contain herself with the thought of finally getting to see firsthand how bodies and God helped mamas push chi'ren from “a woman's sacred place.”

Just as Maw Maw twirled the bottle of iodine drops in Grace's face, Grace's mother—tall, lithe, and as fancy as one could be for a country gal with not much more than what she was wearing and carrying in a small sack on her back—meandered through the front door, lost in the thought of how she was going to wash out her clothes, press her hair, and hightail it back over to Willis Cunningham's place before the sun made its slow dance across the sky. It was Maw Maw's voice that snapped her out of her trance. Her eyes got good and narrow when she caught sight of the jar in her mother's hands.

“Mama, don't you start that mess with my baby,” Bassey said, her voice firm. “She don't need to know about this here.”

“And what do you know about what this baby needs?” Maw Maw snapped. “Ain't like you been 'round here to take an accounting.”

“Now, Rubelle Adams, don't you worry none about whether I been here or not. What I know is you stay trying to get somebody to run all around town, spending they days catching babies in exchange for a couple dollars or a chicken or two if they lucky. I told you I'm not about to spend the rest of my life walking up and down these dirt roads, listening to all these po' folk hootin' and hollerin' while they pushing out babies they can't even afford, and I sure don't want that for Gracie.”

Maw Maw carefully placed the iodine back in the bag, followed by the

red belly bands, the newspaper, her sack of herbs, the berries, and the stack of tiny pieces of cotton sheets and then she kissed her teeth. “And what would you have her do?” Maw Maw asked as she pushed herself out of the creaky chair. “You want her running around town after some man don’t want her none? Let him black her eye as a thank-you for her pleasure?”

Bassey instinctively grabbed her cheek and winced at the tenderness the thoughtless action announced. Willis had been in a mood the night before. Bassey had calmed him the best she knew how, but not before he taught her one of his “lessons” for getting smart in the mouth. “Better she learn how to make peace with a man who can take good care a her than run behind these white folk, scrubbing they dirty draws for a few pennies here and there while you wait on these niggers to have babies that’ll grow up to wash dirty draws, too. That’s not my wish for my daughter.”

“Your wishes for her can’t ever be bigger than what the ancestors got in store.”

Bassey knew the argument was futile; while she’d shunned the profession passed down from the hands of her mother and her mother before her and so many more women in the Adams line, stretching all the way back to before the ships spilled their family’s blood on Virginia’s shores, she could lay no claims to how Maw Maw chose to raise Grace. After all, Bassey was not of their world. Not anymore. She’d long ago pushed her visions and the ones Maw Maw saw, too, down deep, where darkness blotted out the ghosts and their prophecies. She wanted no part of them—saw no value in listening to their whispers, paying attention to the messages they left for her in her dreams. They simply did not serve her. She chose, instead, to serve herself. Bassey believed she alone was responsible for her destiny, and her destiny resided in the arms of Willis Cunningham, assistant pastor at the Church of the Nazarene, where Bassey was a faithful and dutiful member of the flock and a first lady-in-waiting, holding tight to the notion that if she just kept a firm grasp, if she just did what he said, if she proved the depths of her love, Willis would do what was right, what was necessary, what was divined by Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit himself: make her his wife. She cared for Willis, sure, but she cared even more about what he could do to assure she’d never have to touch another washboard again—at least not to tend wash for ornery white ladies. The respect he commanded both at Nazarene and down at the High Planta-

tion, where he worked as a foreman charged with overseeing a bunch of shiftless niggers chopping tobacco stalks, brought in enough money and prestige to assure her place on the front pew every early Sunday morning, in front of the deaconesses and their oversized hats and pursed lips, next to Lady Stewart, Reverend Stewart's wife and the first lady of Nazarene, and directly in front of Willis, whose occasionally roving eyes needed a clear focus from the pulpit.

"Now, Mama, I don't have time to get into this with you today," Bassey said, snapping. She twirled in three different directions, unsure of what to tackle first. "I have to get myself ready for Bible study at Mr. Cunningham's place and I'm going to be late if I stand here and entertain this talk on the Good Lord's Thursday." She turned her attention to Grace and softened her tone just a bit: "Daughter, put some water on the stove for me to wash up."

Yet again, there stood Bassey and Rubelle, like two prizefighters—angry, anxious, silently stalking their opponent from their respective corners, blood and sweat and snot betraying the brutality of their rage. The only thing unbroken between mother, daughter, were the bones.

This is just the way it was. How it would always be. Neither's spine was pliable and so there would be no bending. Each was rooted in exactly who she was. Rubelle received from her daughter the same restrained respect she got from the community she served. Bassey appreciated her mother's skill as a midwife and healer, but for a woman who craved both modernity and roots in God's word, accepting her mother's unusual ways was no easy feat. It shook Bassey to her core that her mother would never allow so much as her shadow to darken the doorway of the Church of the Nazarene, the place where Bassey was convinced her new life—spiritual, physical—began. Frankly, she was embarrassed by Rubelle—this woman who trafficked in haints, worshiped the rush of the river waters, and believed a sack full of leaves and dirty roots could heal better than the hand of a doctor with school learning. The community put up with her behavior because options were few: segregated hospitals and white country doctors would just as soon heal a sow than a nigger, and most of the people in the tiny colored section of Rose were too poor to pay for professional care anyway. Rubelle was all they had.

Rubelle knew that she was all her daughter had and it angered her

that her daughter refused to see it as such. Bassey was so blinded by her ambition—so busy turning her back on her destiny—she couldn't see that truth, much less the trinity of dangers that stood at the ready to end her: the church mothers of Nazarene, who thought she was nothing more than a trollop angling to lure their beloved pastor into the Adams family's web of evil and sin; the men who smelled Bassey's desperation and dabbed it on their bodies for sport; and that Willis, the darkest of them all, draping his lies in forever and dangling it before Bassey's eyes. None of them meant Bassey well. Rubelle warned her, but to no avail. Bassey was Bassey and that was all she had in her.

The two had remained silent as Grace tended Bassey's water; she treated it as if it were a precious perfume being prepared for royalty. Just like Maw Maw had taught her, Grace took a flower from the gardenia tree and pounded the tender leaves into a handful of Epsom salt. When she was sufficiently satisfied with its scent, she pinched the salt between her slender fingers and sprinkled it at the bottom of the large iron washtub that sat in the corner between the kitchen and sitting room, and when the water was warm enough, she poured that into the tub, too. Three more trips to the tub with warm water, and a few gardenias sprinkled on top, and it was done. "Mama, your bath is ready," Grace said proudly, standing back from the vessel.

Bassey nodded, tossed her sponge into the water, and let her dress drop to the floor. Her back was turned to her mother and daughter, so she hadn't seen the shadow of horror that darkened their eyes. The bruises on her back and thighs were shocking to all but Bassey; she'd been too preoccupied with getting herself ready for Willis to let the pain or evidence of it slow her down, and she sure wasn't about to harp on details of how it all happened to her mother and daughter. No, this was business between her and Willis and that was that.

Grace stared in her mother's direction, but she wasn't watching Bassey wash. Instead, she stared at the picture show—in technicolor, grotesque—flashing before her. In it, Bassey was laid out on a slab of wood stretched between two chairs, her hands resting at the sides of her smoothed-out dress—the one with the yellow flowers, her favorite. Maw Maw was putting coins on her eyelids and painting her lips with berries. Mama was perfectly still, but she was not at peace.

Grace wasn't quite sure what was unfolding in her picture show—or even why she was seeing one while she stood, rested and wide awake. But Maw Maw knew.

She knew because she was watching the picture show, too.

“We have to get on down the road,” Maw Maw said, finally breaking the silence. Her voice cracked, but neither her daughter nor granddaughter saw the water welling in her eyes. “Miss Ginny’s baby ain’t fittin’ ta wait.”

## 2

Grace had already gotten a talking-to on the walk over to the Brodersens' place and so she knew to stand in the corner and not so much as breathe unless Maw Maw instructed her to do otherwise. She was there to watch, learn, hop to and help with Ms. Ginny's four other babies, all of whom sat in the kitchen whisper quiet as they listened for their mama's moans. The children were aware that a baby was coming, but the particulars were inaccessible to them because asking questions wasn't an option. Their father, stern, gruff, and not much of the talking type, would just as soon smack them in the mouth and his own mouth, too, rather than answer to children. And so they were reduced to the conjuring of their wild minds, which served up fantastically ridiculous scenarios for what was to happen with the kettles of boiling water on the stove and the scissors being dipped in the hulking bubbles and the brushes and the fabric cotton squares the granny, a vision in all white from the top of her head to the stockings in her white nursing shoes, had piled high on the little serving tray they craned their necks to see every time the lady or Mr. Brodersen opened the creaky door to enter or leave the bedroom. "Maybe they gone cut the baby out her stomach," the oldest, age seven, whispered when their father was out of earshot. "And maybe they gone tie her belly with those sheets," another, five, added, pulling the three-year-old baby sitting in her lap closer to her chest. The four-year-old's bottom lip quivered at the thought and broke into a full-on shake shortly thereafter when a contraction forced a guttural yell from his mama's throat.

“Don’t you cry,” the oldest warned, her top lip curled as she whispered in her little brother’s ear. “Daddy gone come in here and skin yo’ hide if you don’t do like he say and set still.”

The little boy clapped his hand over his mouth. He’d already felt the sting of their daddy’s belt earlier in the day and he wanted no more part of it. The seven-year-old seriously considered taking the hit, though, settling in her mind that a whipping was worth the price of finding out why she had to sit in the kitchen like a little baby while the little nigger gal got to be in the room with their mama. Their daddy, preoccupied with fashioning a baby bed out of a large corrugated box, pads, and blankets, was oblivious to the whispers, whimpers, and wonderings.

“Now, now,” Maw Maw said as she helped the moaning Ms. Ginny out the bed. Her water had broken a few hours earlier and the contractions were coming at a steady pace, but her body wasn’t demanding she push just yet. It was Maw Maw’s job to make her charge as comfortable as one could be while pain dragged like a switchblade across her abdomen, and so, just like all the other birthing mothers before Ms. Ginny, Maw Maw walked and talked to and reminded Ginny of the sweet sweet on the other side of all that sour. “This fittin’ to be a beautiful time for you and yo’ husband and that sweet little baby. Don’t you worry none ’bout the pain. With God’s favor, we done did this four other times and every last one of them babies got here healthy and strong. Same gone be for this one, don’t you worry. We ’bout to witness another miracle.”

“Yes, ma’am,” was all Ms. Ginny could muster. There was fear in her eyes.

“Gracie, go on ahead and make this bed, now,” Maw Maw gently ordered. “Do it just like I taught you. Put down the plastic on the mattress and then the sheet and then the big pad Maw Maw made. That’s in that bag over there, nice and clean. Do that straightaway, and then get the basins together, one for Ms. Ginny here, one for me, and one for this new bundle a joy gone be joining us soon.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Grace said. She got straight to business while Maw Maw continued handing out orders.

“Now Mr. Brodersen, I’m going to walk Ms. Ginny around a little bit while my grandbaby gets the bed linens in order, and after the basins are set up, me and her, we gonna be right out there in the kitchen with the

chi'ren while you and Ms. Ginny go on ahead and spend some quiet time together in here.”

“I won't be doing that,” he said simply as he settled the baby's new crib on a stand next to the marital bed.

Ms. Ginny moaned again as a contraction squeezed her womb—a pain so strong it radiated down to the tips of her toes. She doubled over and grabbed her belly with one hand and squeezed Maw Maw's arm with the other.

“Oh, Mr. Brodersen, don't get shy on me now, hear? You and your beautiful wife were alone before this baby and you should be together, just the two a ya, as this child makes a way into the world.”

“I said no!” he yelled. The base boom of his voice made Grace jump, and that jump made Grace drop the pad, and dropping the pad made Maw Maw's tongue just as sharp, reckless, as the white man's.

“Get that pad up!” Maw Maw yelled, despite that Gracie had already snatched the pad into her arms so quickly only a small corner had actually touched the freshly swept carpet on the clapboard floor. “Know how long we had to work to get them sheets on that pad sterilized? Let me see it!” she demanded, still holding on to Ms. Ginny, who was shifting from one foot to the other, trying to loose herself from the aftershock of the last contraction.

Grace held the pad up for her grandmother's inspection. Spotless.

“You got to be mo' careful, baby,” Maw Maw said, her voice softer, sweeter. “Everything in here got to be clean and sterile so this baby and the mama don't get no infections, hear?”

“Yes, ma'am,” Gracie said, nodding. “I'll be mo' careful, Maw Maw,” she said as she placed the pad on the bed—the end that grazed the carpet positioned at the bottom of the bed where Ms. Ginny's feet would be.

Maw Maw turned her attention back to the ornery husband, but she thought better of trying to convince him to do what should have come naturally, what was exactly right. His wife, nervous, insides on fire, anxious about her new baby's passage, needed her husband's soft parts to balance out all that hard. But he was incapable; something was grating him and love was too weak a salve for the wounds he was nursing.

Maw Maw had seen this before—overwhelmed husbands leading with their nerves, cutting down to the white meat anything that got in the

way of their figuring on what, exactly, it would take for them to put food into yet another mouth. Maw Maw felt for the mamas, but she had little sympathy for the pas. They never seemed to take any of this into consideration when they were chasing their wives around with their stiff peckers, refusing, even, to let the women's bodies heal before they were demanding sex. Taking it. And then here come another baby on top of the one or two they already couldn't afford, which, on occasion, would become more than just their family problem; it would be Maw Maw's, too. Poor Mary Patterson, that was her lot. Her man couldn't find work and the two of them had plenty of hungry nights the winter before last, around when the baby was due. Might be some corn pone here and there, some beans if Mary could muster up the energy to take in a load or two of laundry for some spare change to hand over to ol' Bunch Cleary down at the mercantile. Mostly, they bent over small bowls of grits with a little fatback grease to make the taste halfway palatable, while huddled up next to an oven that saw in its belly not much more than a couple small pieces of wood Joe Patterson had managed to scrounge up on occasion while foraging. So malnourished was Mary when she was pregnant with that first baby, Maw Maw was compelled to make an extra special offering down by the river, imploring the ancestors to spare the baby the pain that was to come with what Maw Maw was sure would be its inevitable death. Alas, Mary went into labor on the coldest night of the year; the daddy and mama were so weak from hunger, exhaustion, and the beginning stages of hypothermia, that in their quietest moments, the sole signs of life were the puffs of warm breath making weak clouds against the freezing air. Maw Maw, who, upon walking not but three steps into the house, had become alarmed by their condition—the hollowness of it all—and immediately summoned a neighbor to run her back to her place for provisions: a spare quilt, some preserved beets, a bag of beans, coffee. Soap. She'd already sewn a flannel gown for the baby, but she grabbed a few more pieces of fabric, a box, and six small bottles to fashion a warm bed for the baby, knowing its mama's bones would be insufficient comfort against the winter cold. Mary Patterson had a hard labor—one of the hardest Maw Maw had seen in all her years catching babies. Can't be no weak woman in any kind of way when you're pushing a human from your loins. Mary? She'd been strong that day and with Maw Maw's grace, she pulled herself together for her child—for

her family. But her husband just sat there, useless. Waiting. Incapable. A piece of a man. Had his poor wife up, sore, struggling to fix his food before, even, she could give their little baby some nunny. “Now Joe, you gone have to let Mary rest,” Maw Maw had told him when she stopped by a few weeks later to check on her patient and the baby, only to find the baby in the box, wet and fussing, while Mary stood over the stove, breast milk soiling her raggedy dress, spooning grits and a portion of bread into a bowl.

“She all right,” Joe said, grabbing his wife’s waist in a way that made Maw Maw avert her eyes—shamed. This, she thought, was no way for a man to carry on in front of company. “Mary and me and our young’un, we gone be just fine, ain’t we, sweets?”

“Yes, Joe,” she said quietly, simultaneously placing her husband’s bowl on his lap and adjusting her dress, which was soaking and clinging to her body. She rushed to her baby and, in one quick motion, put her frustrated, hungry son on her breast. He was slurping and sniffing by the time Mary, exhausted and near tears herself, practically dropped onto the unmade bed.

She was pregnant three weeks later. Had another mouth to feed eight months after that. Joe Patterson still owed Maw Maw the five dollars from the first delivery when he came knocking on her door to tell her that Mary’s water broke and she needed her to deliver their second child—a child that would join an ever-growing list of people he could not, would not feed.

Maw Maw thought babies sacred and so there would never be a time when she would use her root work—a gift handed down through the generations—to pull an unwanted baby out a mama’s belly to die. She didn’t want that on her soul. But the Pattersons, and all too many more couples like them, made Maw Maw clear about why some women made that choice and why it wasn’t hard, at all, to find someone to help them carry out the mission, if that’s what the parents aimed to do. Judging never saved a baby from the abortionist’s hook or stopped a baby’s stomach from rumbling.

Through the bedroom window overlooking the backyard, Grace watched Mr. Brodersen, ax in hand, stalk a hunk of a black locust tree he’d been chopping for firewood. He looked angry, which confused Grace, because who could be mad about a wee-bit coming into this world? Babies, to Grace,

were like Maw Maw's Sunday lemonade—filled to the brim with goodness, made with love. A couple times, she babysat Nearest Dandy's little baby, Evermore, and Grace just couldn't get enough of how he smelled when she nuzzled her nose against the line of his jaw or how he would gnaw her cheek with his gums when she put her face in front of his mouth. His breath was so sweet—the sweetest thing she'd ever known. Mrs. Dandy warned her not to hold the baby the entire time she was sitting. "He gonna get ruint with you holding him all the time and ain't nobody got time for no spoiled baby," she warned. "Put him down, even if he fussin'. He need to learn how to get on in this world without all that coddling."

"Yes, ma'am," Grace would always say, and then, before Mrs. Dandy could get all the way out the door good, little Evermore would be back in her arms. She was addicted, and that wasn't even her baby. Why Mr. Brod-ersen was acting so funny style about his own child was beyond Grace.

Ms. Ginny's scream shocked the girl's attention back to what was going on in the room. The woman's knees buckled beneath her, and had Maw Maw not been there, surely, she would have fallen clean to the floor.

"Rubelle," Ms. Ginny said, struggling against the weight of her own breath. "It's time. I need to push."

"Now hold on there, Ms. Ginny. You know you can't push until we know for sure it's time. Come on now, I gotcha."

Grace shifted from one foot to the other as Maw Maw pulled back the sheets and helped Ms. Ginny onto the pad-covered bed. Dutifully and quickly, she fetched from the kitchen the kettle of hot water to pour into the white basin at the foot of the bed, which sat on a small table on which Maw Maw had assembled all the tools from her bag.

"Okay, Ms. Ginny, now you lay on back now and settle against your pillow," Maw Maw instructed. "I'm going to see how far along you are. Whatever you do, don't bear down just yet, okay? Don't want that baby getting stuck and we shole don't want you hurting yourself, now, you hear? You remember the breathing, don't you?"

Ms. Ginny, face contorted from the pain of a contraction dragging across her groin, nodded.

"Okay, then breathe through it, okay? It'll help with the pain. I'm going to get my hands washed up and then we'll go on ahead and get down to business," Maw Maw said.

For what seemed like an eternity to Grace, Maw Maw stood over that basin and, with great care and precision, scrubbed her hands, fingers, fingernails, and forearms with a brush—the bristles scraping against her skin so hard, Grace thought that for sure she would scrub her skin clean off her bones. When she was finished, she held her hands up in the air and then reached for one of the white sterile towels she'd set next to the basin, her eyes surveying the room as she toweled off. Scissors. Iodine drops. Vaseline. Soap. Scraps of sterile fabric. Slop jar. Scale. Box and clothes for the baby. She was satisfied; all was in order.

“Okay, let’s get your legs on up and see what’s what,” Maw Maw said as she reached down and lifted Ms. Ginny’s nightdress.

There, splayed before her, was a sight Grace had never before seen in her thirteen years—something she wasn’t sure she should be seeing for herself: a grown lady’s privates. A white woman’s poom-poom. Closest she’d ever gotten to seeing a poom-poom had been not much long ago, when she looked at her own out in the outhouse. Just like a few times before, while Maw Maw was by the river, she snatched the old, cloudy handheld mirror and rushed into the backyard on her mission to discover what her privates looked like now that she was “a woman” with her monthly. The first time she’d checked, she was eight years old and curious on her own accord—wanted to see the folds and the pink and what was making it feel funny when she put her pillow between her legs as she fell asleep or when she rubbed it with her pointy finger. She snuck the mirror again when she noticed all the fine, curly hair sprouting on her groin area. She knew she would get some under her arms, sure, because she’d seen evidence of it on a few of the older girls in her school one afternoon when the boys were getting on Mabel Tawny for stinking. “All that hair got yo’ pits smelling like a heap a scraps on a hot fire,” Lewis Melton had yelled during recess, with the obvious intent not to inform Mabel about the stench but to call her out in front of the schoolyard full of children who had long, sharp tongues and a short supply of grace. Mabel had cried that day over all the taunting, and Grace, doing her best to be invisible to Lewis’s gaze, said a silent prayer that she never grow hair under her arms for Lewis or anyone else to jones. That afternoon was the beginning of her obsession with hair—where it grew, why it grew where it did, what was supposed to happen when one got it, if everyone had it or if Mabel was just the most

unfortunate girl in the world to have under her arms hair that smelled like hot garbage. Grace, armed with that cloudy mirror, would find out a few years later that underarms and heads weren't the only place hair took up residence. A couple years after that, she would find out, too, that her poom-poom pretty much looked the same as it always had, even if, like Maw Maw said, she was officially a woman and could have a baby on her own. She expected it to be bigger—round like her hips and behind, thick like her thighs, maybe more dull, seeing as only the skin that got kissed by the sun was darker, shinier, and much more pretty than the parts that stayed up under her gunnysack dresses. Not much about it, she was sad to find, had changed after she started bleeding.

But here was Ms. Ginny's poom-poom—a whole different color from the rest of her pale white skin, and hair that looked much more like that which grew on the top of her head, straighter than curly. And peeking from the flaps and folds was a mass of dark, curly hair and blood and goo, pulsing at the crown of Ms. Ginny's hole.

Grace grew faint. There was a baby in there.

Maw Maw's voice snapped her to. "Now you gone feel my fingers right there on the rim, Ms. Ginny. You remember how I massaged you with the other chir'ren?"

"Yes, ma'am," Ms. Ginny said.

"Okay, good. Keep still and let me go on ahead and rub it. Give you a little relief and make it stop burning, so that baby come out without tearing you to pieces. We don't want that."

"No, ma'am."

Grace watched in equal parts awe and disbelief as her grandmother massaged her patient, rubbed her legs with the back of her hand and encouraged her to "bear down" when a contraction rumbled across her belly. She knew what was to come, of course; there was no way Maw Maw would let her attend a birth and assist with it all without explaining to her how babies made it into this world. Grace knew the particulars. But it was something altogether different to see a human—what Maw Maw called "a miracle between a mama and her God"—emerge from between somebody's legs.

"Okay, Ms. Ginny, this baby almost here," Maw Maw said as she positioned her hands in front of Ms. Ginny's Vaseline-slicked poom-poom,

one up top, the other below it, almost as if she were about to catch a ball. Ms. Ginny made a low, guttural grunt and then pushed with every ounce of energy she could muster—a push strong enough to get the head, full of bushy curls, out of her body. Maw Maw gently cupped the baby's head in one hand as she deftly wiped the baby's eyes with sterile cloth and dropped iodine in each one. Just as she set the drops back on the small side table, Ms. Ginny gave a final heave, sending the entire squirming body into Maw Maw's waiting hands.

"Whew, look at this pretty baby!" Maw Maw shouted over the baby's cries. "You got yourself a healthy girl. She just as pretty as she can be. Look here, Gracie!"

Maw Maw was right: she was beautiful—prettier than any of the Brodersens' other children, who were all fast asleep on the kitchen chairs.

"Let me see her," Ms. Ginny demanded with intensity; Maw Maw jumped ever so slightly.

"Now hold on there, now, Ms. Ginny. Let me get her cleaned up for you and get her weighed and dressed. There's an order to this thing."

"Please," Ms. Ginny said, this time more gently.

As if perplexed, Maw Maw gave a long, hard look at Ms. Ginny, who was giving a long hard look at the baby. Maw Maw followed Ms. Ginny's eyes to the infant, and that's when, she told Grace later, she saw it: the little girl, moments old, with only a half a minute's worth of fresh air in her lungs, was wearing the weight of the world on the tips of her ears. They were brown. Not quite the color of those that belong to a black sharecropper, but certainly the tan of a landowner whose family had been working hard to weed out the slavemaster's offence from generations before. It didn't take much more than that for Maw Maw to understand what she was looking at—what the stakes were.

"Please," Ms. Ginny whispered, pleading.

Maw Maw was quiet. She looked nervously at Grace, who was too smart to be oblivious to the heaviness of the room, but too fresh and new to know that both Ms. Ginny, the white wife of a white man with a small farm and six mouths to feed and the pride of every white man who'd come before and would follow behind, and her Black baby were in severe danger.

"Now, now," Maw Maw said, trying her best to stay calm, as if to keep Ginny calm. "You know we need to get the afterbirth out of you and I

gotta get yo' baby weighed and check her over." Ms. Ginny opened her mouth to speak, but Maw Maw raised her hand to cut her off. "It's gone be all right now, don't you worry, hear? This baby is healthy. She shole is pretty. And the whole world gon' know she a Brodersen, hear?"

Maw Maw turned her attention to Grace. "Baby, go into Maw Maw's bag and get out my paperwork and set it up out there on the kitchen table. I'll fill it out when we finish up in here."

"I can fill it out, Maw Maw," said Grace, who was anxious to show off her schooling.

"Naw, baby. The law say I got to fill out that paperwork," she said. Turning her attention to Ms. Ginny, she added: "And it say I have to be truthful on the birth certificate, too. The truth, that be important."

"Yes, ma'am," Ms. Ginny said, nodding. "And we know what the truth means around these parts, don't we, Granny?"

Maw Maw nodded as she finished bathing the baby and wrapped her in the belly holder; she attached the cloth to a hook weight and held the little girl up with one hand and leaned in to take note of the numbers on the dial. Seven pounds, three ounces. "Yes, ma'am, we do," she said finally, as she unhooked the baby and swaddled her in a blanket. "Now I need you to bear down one mo' gin', Ms. Ginny, so we can get that afterbirth out and I can check it and make sure you and this little one is okay."

The placenta, bloodied but intact, slid easily from between Ms. Ginny's legs and onto the birthing pad, on which Maw Maw examined it, checking for tears and any other indiscretions that could indicate her patient might have complications. All was well. Maw Maw would make sure of it. So many other times when the little babies' ears betrayed the lies, Rubelle Adams made sure of it.

"Grace, baby," Maw Maw called to her granddaughter, who'd returned to the room, as she wrapped the placenta in several pages of the weekend newspaper. "Take this here and go on out to that pear tree out yonder in the backyard. Ask Mr. Brodersen for his strongest shovel, and then you go on out there and dig up a nice, deep hole, hear? Bury this in it and cover it up real good. You know what to do, baby. We talked about it; you remember?"

"Yes, Maw Maw, I remember," Grace said as she cradled the package.

When she turned around to leave the room, she ran directly into the

mass of Mr. Brodersen's broad, hard torso. He smelled of earth and sweat and black locust wood. Anger.

"Won't be no need to bury that up under the pear tree," he said simply, gruffly.

"Oh, Mr. Brodersen, of course we'll put it under the pear tree—just like we did for all the other babies. You remember, right? It's the old way. My mama and my grandmama, too, say you bury the afterbirth under the tree and your babies will never, ever leave you."

Mr. Brodersen looked Maw Maw in the eye and held her gaze until she got uncomfortable enough to shift from one foot to the other. Her rubber shoe squeaked, the sound piercing through the thick in the air.

It took him only one long stride to push past little Grace and take his place directly in front of Maw Maw. He held her gaze, even as he reached down and took the baby out of her arms. His long fingers, strong, steady, pulled the blanket back from the baby's head, and only then did he switch his eyes from Maw Maw's face to that of the newborn. He stared long and hard, his eyes washing over her tight, black curls, her forehead, her nose and lips and neck. The baby craned her neck and licked out her tongue.

Mr. Brodersen stepped back and turned his attention to his wife, then Maw Maw, then to Grace. There was not even a hint of emotion in his voice, but his command shook Grace to her core. "Take that package and burn it in the stove. Now."

# 3

They came for Maw Maw before she could get her daughter into the ground. It did not matter that her heart was shattered, or that Bassey's battered body was laid out on the cooling board, her bones still settling into their new state of being, or that Maw Maw and her sister healers were in the middle of singing and stomping her child's spirit away home. The men saw more that they could break and so they did.

They moved like wild boars, their dirty boots crashing against the wooden floor already in full sway beneath the dozen feet that dragged and stomped and jumped in a ring shout around Bassey's body. The men's voices cracked like thunder over the women's high-pitched, mournful chants but failed to penetrate the trance that the funeral song produced among the lot of them. And so, the strangers, four in all, made their presence known. One, red-faced, sweaty, angry, pushed through the circle and grabbed arms, pushed backs and thighs, causing one woman to topple over the other. Another, redder, sweatier, knocked over chairs to snatch at the women's faces. "All this savage shit! Stop it, this blasphemy. Before the living God, you will stop this!"

"Which one is it?" the third yelled over his shoulder to the fourth man standing by the door, as he, too, set upon the women. Their chanting morphed into screaming. As if for sport, the third sliced his arm across Maw Maw's altar, sending plates full of food and cups of water and moonshine and vases of flowers crashing to the floor, before stopping in front of the floor-length mirror set against the living room wall. He was a

Southern man of tradition and so he knew full well that the black cloth hanging over the mirror was there to keep the dead's spirit moving, but he obviously cared not for Bassey's soul or the women who were tending to it, and so he snatched the cloth and smirked as he caught sight of his own reflection, a gummy face contorted into a sickeningly gleeful grin. His lips straightened, though, when his eyes caught sight of the rest of the reflection: there was the young girl, petite, Black, stoic, standing sentry over the dining table where the dead body lay. He likely struggled to distinguish the two bodies, so close was the girl to the dead, her hand resting on the Black-eyed-Susan-filled hand of the deceased, which, too, was dressed in a white flower-print frock, covered with a worn, hand-sewn, white quilt, the head resting on a small white pillow and surrounded by a halo of white gardenias. On the dead girl's eyes were two silver dollars, shimmering against her skin. Though the commotion rocked the table and door slab on which the body lay and sent the quilt sliding and some of the gardenias scattering, somehow the two coins, locked in the recesses of Bassey's deep-set, bruised eyes, stayed put. The man had seen dead bodies before, and he'd attended a few country wakes of his own before his own family had collected enough wealth to mourn its dead in the modernity of the whites-only funeral home. But this—the girl's penetrating stare, the disturbed body, the sight of the two in the mirror he purposefully, callously uncovered—this, it was certain, would haunt him for the rest of his miserable life.

Grace just stood there and watched. She watched it all, knowing her mother would never find rest.

It was the last position Bassey expected to find herself in—lying in the dirt with her pretty dress lifted up to her waist, legs splayed, bloomers exposed, head split, eye socket smashed, teeth sprinkled like pebbles among the sticks and roots and rocks that had served as unwitting accomplices in her brutal death. She thought, after all, that she had fixed things. The clandestine night at The Quarters was supposed to make things right between them after a disastrous morning that had ended with Willis pulling his strap from his pants and whipping her body over a transgression she

still didn't quite comprehend. Up until the beating, the morning had been every bit as perfect as the sound of the sparrows that had announced the new day—as beautiful as the hot pinks and oranges that had slow-dragged across the sunrise. It was his favorite time to have relations and so it became hers, too, despite that she loathed letting him see the havoc sleep wreaked on both her eyes, which, against a morning pillow, always looked swollen, and her hair, which, sweated out and nappy from night-before sex and hard sleep, always drew up closer to her scalp than she liked. In the sweet moments of that early morning, he'd told her she was the prettiest thing he ever did see, and she believed it to be so because that was the way he usually treated her—pulling out chairs, scrubbing her back in the tub as he fawned, staring into her eyes, his gaze so intense she could only shift and avert her own eyes under the weight. “I would kill a ox dead with my two bare hands for you, girl, you know that, don'tcha?” he'd said, leaning in to whisper the words in her ear, like he was sharing a secret. “I wouldn't do that for nobody else but you.”

She'd believed him, too. She was rooted in it as deep as a hundred-year-old oak was in a Virginia forest. And she was pleased, so much so that she stood and danced naked around his small room, giggling and jiggling, calling out “Mrs. Cunningham” from her gut.

That's when he hit her. Just rose up from the side of the bed and, in one swift move, picked up his pants off the floor where, the night before, in their throes of passion, he'd thrown them, snatched the belt from its loops, and cracked the brown leather, buckle and all, against her hide.

“*My mama* is Mrs. Cunningham,” he yelled, raging as he swung. Bassey's surprise was quickly usurped by the sheer terror that rose like the welts and bruises on her back, buttocks, and thighs.

“I'm sorry, baby,” was all she could think to say, all she could think to do to defend herself from the barrage of blows that sliced the air before raining down on her bare skin.

“How dare you stand here naked, The Jezebel, calling out that sacred name before God!” he yelled as he swung.

“Please, Willis, I didn't mean it!” she yelled as she cowered against the blows, grabbing at her face and head to protect them.

She sought neither explanation nor apology; he gave both just as freely

as the beatings—“Satan got a hold a me,” “My daddy used to do my mama like this and I can’t hep it,” “I do this on account I loves ya, Bassey, and you need to learn iffn I intend to make you my wife.” She swallowed all of Willis’s foolishness whole—grilled it up and ate it like Sunday dinner. It was more filling than the thought of spending the rest of her life alone. The rest of her life without him.

But later that evening, after she’d made up with her man, cleaned her wounds, and shushed her own mama to hightail it back over to Willis’s house, Bassey, looking like a star that could give Lena Horne herself something to envy, draped herself on Willis’s arm as they walked into The Quarters, only to face off against disrespect so grand, so unapologetically, almost unforgivingly bold, there was no amount of sugar that could help it down her gullet.

The Quarters was supposed to be a safe space for Bassey and Willis, and it was—a place the two of them could go to have themselves a little dance, a little liquor, without the judgment they found Sunday mornings in the pews of Nazarene. The owner called the establishment a “speakeasy,” like one of those fancy jazz clubs they’d all heard about up in Harlem, but really, it wasn’t much more than a slightly more gussied-up version of the average juke joint, a shack held together with spare, rusty nails and worn wood. What made The Quarters shine wasn’t so much how it looked, but how it made its patrons feel; one hard swallow of anything served beyond the heavy barn door—whisky, gin, corn—made everybody equals. Made circumstance and sin disappear.

What the atmosphere couldn’t do was make Bassey tamp down her penchant for jealousy. She’d stepped away just a moment—just long enough to grab the chow-chow from the other end of the eating counter and squeeze and bump through the tight crowd to get back to her and Willis’s plate of greens and cornbread—and there he was, leading some woman by her dainty hand to the dance floor, the two of them just grinning. It wasn’t the laughter that got to her or the proximity of their bodies as they fell lock-step into a slow dance that was half the meter of the fast groove the band was jamming. It was the way he looked at her and how she responded to his gaze. It mirrored the look they’d shared just that morning, when he promised his love was strong enough for him to kill for her.

There was no time and no space between; Bassey was at the counter and

then she was standing in front of her man and that woman, having neither sense nor care of how she'd gotten from one place to the other. "You know what's good for you, you best git off my man," Bassey said, seething as she yanked the woman's hair, pulling hard enough to toss her to the floor while keeping a clump of her hair suspended above her body.

"Woman, what the hell . . .," Willis started yelling as the patrons on the dance floor quickly scattered, leaving the man, his lady, and his mistress to it. There was no chance to finish his query, though; Bassey didn't give him time to. The palm of her hand connecting against his lips won priority over the rush of his words, the sound of it echoing off the walls that, just moments before, had been absorbing the sound of the trumpet, saxophone, guitar, piano, and drum before the commotion enticed all the band members to stop playing and start watching what was unfolding before them.

Bassey was distracted by her rage but only momentarily. Willis's grip on her arm, just as tight, strong, and furious as his eyes, snapped her back to gentle, small. "Please," she begged. "No, no, no, I didn't mean it, baby, I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

She shrunk herself as she pleaded, prepping for the blow. Willis didn't want her words. Didn't need them. He grabbed her by the gullet and practically lifted her off her feet; his eyes were red, his nostrils bull-like. "Getcha ass outside," he said, pushing Bassey by the throat through the crowd, which parted like Willis was Moses and the people were the Red Sea.

There would be no saving Bassey. No one thought to try. They just left the man to do what he was to do and so he did it: Willis pulled Bassey out into the woods just beyond the clearing of The Quarters and, under the red moon, bloodied the eyes and lips of the woman he proclaimed to love.

And when he was through proclaiming his manhood, when he was satisfied the lesson had been taught and learned, Willis pulled Bassey up off the ground and stood her in front of him, using his hand to brush off the dirt and sticks that were stuck to her dress and hair. Like she was some rag doll he was retrieving for a wayward child who'd dropped it.

"Why can't you just do right by me, Bassey?" he asked. Brush, brush. Tug. "You know I love you, don't you?" Brush, brush. Tug. "Don't you?" he asked, more forcefully.

"Yes," Bassey said, struggling to get the word through her fattened,

bleeding lips. It was all she could muster, so she nodded additional confirmation.

“But you can’t just go hitting your man in the mouth, Bassey, you know that, don’t you?” Brush, brush. Tug.

She nodded.

“Now is the perfect time to repent, baby,” he said. Brush, brush. Tug. Push.

Bassey was back on the ground, but this time, she was on her knees. Willis brushed the back of his hand lightly against her cheek as he deftly used the other to loosen his belt.

“Willis, please . . .”

“You want to be my wife? Huh?” he asked as he unzipped his trousers.

“Please . . .”

“Please? Please what?” he said softly, menacingly, as he adjusted his undergarment and pulled out his member. “What you begging for? Say it.”

Bassey’s tears choked her words and her lips were too swollen to let them out anyway. She managed a yelp when he grabbed her by her hair and pulled her face toward his crotch.

“Go ’head, beg for it, lil’ bitch. You want to be Mrs. Cunningham so bad. Beg for it.”

Bassey tried to crumble, to make herself small again, but she struggled against his grip, which only made him angrier. She felt the first blow, saw the second one coming. And then, there was her baby’s face, sweet Gracie, giggling and walking toward her, a freshly picked black-eyed Susan in her little fist, a field of the yellow flowers at her baby’s back.

Beyond that was the sun.

Grace knew something bad had happened to her mother before ol’ Jussie Mack found his way up the steps and to the front door of the Brodersens’ house to tell the news—before Maw Maw could comprehend his words. Grace had seen Bassey’s body in a picture show while she was emptying Ms. Ginny’s slop jar in the outhouse: there she was, laid out in the pitch-black woods in the stark white dress, with the flowers in her hair and the coins over her eyes, shimmering like stars against a clear night sky. Grace

couldn't quite comprehend what it all meant or how, even, her mother had gotten there in the first place. But she knew that as peaceful as her mother looked, she was not at rest.

Maw Maw was just finishing filling out the birth certificate for the Brodersens' new arrival when Jussie Mack pulled his wagon into the driveway. Ms. Ginny was sounding out the spelling of the baby's name—"That's Sandy with a 'y,' Granny, and Annabelle with two 'n's and two 'l's"—when Mr. Brodersen met Jussie out on the porch. When she heard the front screen door slam, Ms. Ginny struggled to sit upright and stated her case. "Granny, listen," she said. "She gone pass, ain't she? She light enough to be my husband's baby. Tell me she is."

"She shole is a beautiful young'un," Maw Maw said in an equally hushed tone. "But I can't guarantee nothing but that the sun gone rise in the morning and set in the evenings. That's all, Ms. Ginny."

"But you can mark that certificate to say it's so—that my husband is her pa and she is white," Ms. Ginny said, getting flustered, teary.

"I can," Maw Maw said. "But it won't be the truth, and if'n I lie on this here gubment document, I can go to jail, Ms. Ginny, and you know that."

But each knew the alternative—what would likely happen if Maw Maw marked "Negro" on that baby's birth certificate. It would be the same as signing a death sentence for that child. Maw Maw had heard about it time and again and seen it happen with her own eyes, too: little brown newborns abandoned by the husbands of cheating wives on the side of the road, left to the elements or the animals, whichever got to them first, or dropped off in the colored orphanage, where motherless children did some hard living. One family Maw Maw had heard about put its little colored baby in a gunnysack with a rock and dropped the child to the bottom of the Sussex River, and when the child washed up on shore, white folk shrugged and kept on living, as if it were the baby's fault for being and for dying. All the Negroes could do about it was mourn.

"Granny, I need you to come on out here now," Mr. Brodersen said as he appeared in the doorway. He was less gruff than earlier, when he'd been cross with Gracie.

"Yassir," Maw Maw said quickly, hiding the pen behind her back as if she were hiding the secret in her starch whites. "I'm just finishing up the

birth certificate and waiting on my grandbaby to come on back in here and help me get the rest of the baby's things settled, Mr. Brodersen. I'll be there directly."

"No, now, Granny, I need you to come on out here right now," Mr. Brodersen said. "Nigger by the name Jussie is out on the porch and he got something to tell you."

"Jussie?" Maw Maw said. "Lawd, Belinda done gone into labor sho'nuff? She still had a couple weeks on her."

"That's not it, Rubelle," Mr. Brodersen said, this time gently.

Never once had he called her by her first name. She didn't even realize he knew it. Maw Maw looked down at the birth certificate and Ms. Ginny, then back at Mr. Brodersen. Something was wrong. Terribly, tragically wrong. She could feel it between the heartbeats that picked up pace in her chest. Maw Maw dropped the pen and the birth certificate, gathered her skirt, and took off running, out the bedroom, though the kitchen, onto the porch, down the porch steps, straight past Brodersen and Jussie, and right up to the back of Jussie's wagon.

There, she found Grace, the slop jar hanging precariously off the fingers on her right hand. Beyond her granddaughter was Bassey's body, in a bloody heap in the back of Jussie's wagon. "Maw Maw," Grace said, her eyes looking past her grandmother. "Mama sleep."

Brodersen stood at the door, caring nothing about the desecration of Rubelle Adams's home or how the men—deputies in the town of Rose's sheriff's department—handled the old lady, her friends, or the body of the woman they were about to put into the ground. She had committed the ultimate sin against him and so he wanted them to get on with it and he didn't care how they did it, so long as it got done. He pointed his finger, and at the end of it was Maw Maw, the woman whose hands were the first to touch the heads of each of his children, but who also used her position as a midwife to try to saddle a nigger baby in his care. This was the white people's worst nightmare—that generations of that good blood, that pure blood, would be tainted by the one drop, the blood of savages. The unclean. So many days before this particular one, the good white folk of Rose knew how to handle this kind of betrayal. The trees told those tales. Brodersen considered him-

self more evolved when it came to Rubelle, though, seeing as she'd been his family's granny midwife and her own child had been beaten to death, and so he took mercy and suggested the deputies spare her the business end of the rope. But Brodersen wanted Maw Maw to pay. Needed her to. Because right there on that bastard baby's birth certificate, she'd cosigned the lie, swearing in ink and through her duties as a midwife that the newborn was a white man's baby. His baby.

This was a lie. This was against the law. And though he had already dragged his wife and the nigger baby and all of their things out of his home and banished her from his existence, he was not satisfied. He needed more. He needed the granny who'd perpetuated his wife's lie to suffer for her most egregious sin.

"That's her, right there," Brodersen said, pointing at Maw Maw, who, by now, was second from the bottom of the heap of root women, their white dresses stained with footprints and tears, struggling against the weight of each other and the precariousness of the moment. Nothing good ever came for Negroes who stood at the end of a white man's pointed finger.

"Please, Mr. Brodersen, I don't understand what's going on, but I promise you we can fix this," Maw Maw said as she struggled to her feet. She tried to straighten out her dress but two of the men grabbed her by each arm. "Just tell me what did I do?"

"You know what this is," he said, seething, jabbing his fingers in her direction.

"Sir, I . . ."

"Shut up," one of the men yelled at Maw Maw. Then, to Brodersen: "Who is this nigger sassin' you? Tell you what, we can go on and handle this right now, just like we used to when niggers got outta line."

Maw Maw stiffened, Brodersen held up his hand as to shush his cohorts, and the entire room fell silent, save for Grace, who was draped over her mother's body, sobbing. "Please don't take my Maw Maw. Please," she said, screeching as she clung to Bassey's body.

"Enough talking, let's go," Brodersen said, grabbing Maw Maw and marching her to the door. She had no other choice but to surrender to their will.

"Watch after my Grace," she ordered her friends as the men pulled her out the door.

“Yes,” her friends said simultaneously.

“And watch after my Bassey,” she yelled as the men pulled her out into the yard.

“We will,” they said, calling after her as the screen door slammed closed.