

"Fierce, stirring, ablaze with insight and power, and transcendent!"

—Margaret Wilkerson Sexton

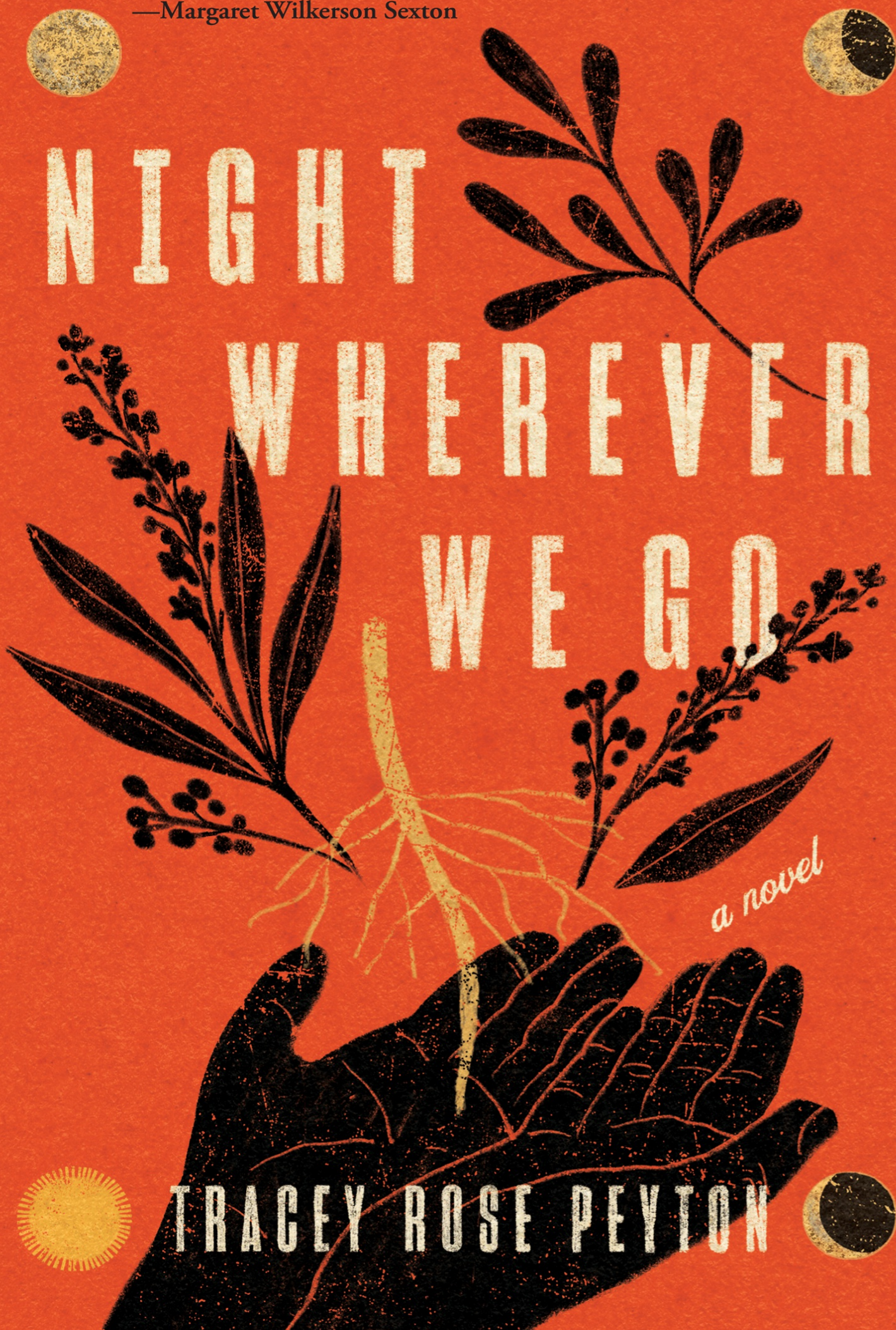
NIGHT

WHEREVER

WE GO

*a novel*

TRACEY ROSE PEYTON



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**ecco**

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*



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## Chapter One

IN THE COMING YEAR OF our Lord, the 1852 *Farmer's Almanac* predicted four eclipses, three of the moon, one of the sun. It said nothing of torrential rain. No prophecies of muddied fields or stalks of cotton so waterlogged and beaten down the bolls grazed the earth.

By the time the hot Texas sun made its return, glaring its indiscriminate and wanton gaze, it was much too late. The cotton wouldn't mature, instead choosing to rot right there, the bolls refusing to open. It held back the white wooly heads that were so much in demand, and instead relinquished a dank fungal smell that remained trapped in the air for weeks.

The day we were ordered to clear the field, we prayed for a norther, those horrible howling winds that scared us plumb to death our first winter in this strange country. But we knew better. Texas weather was an animal all its own, and we had yet to figure out what gods it answered to.

With no plow, we had no choice but to break it up by hand. We took to the field with pickaxes and dug up the roots, and patch by patch, we set them aflame. It was easy to get too close, to underestimate the direction and sway of the growing fire. We spent the day that way, leaping from one blaze or another, our long skirts gathered in our fists while black plumes of smoke darkened the sky.

The smoke remained long after dusk. It was still there late that night when we shook off sleep and stumbled out of our lumpy bedding to peek outside through the gaps in the cabin's chinking. All the while, we debated whether to go crossing at all. There was a lot of complaining and grumbling about tired limbs and feet, about bad air and threatening fog, about howling dogs, hungry lobos, and angry haints lying in wait. Yet, no one wanted to be left out.

We yanked loose the rags and moss stuffed into the cracks and crevices, but even then, we couldn't see much. Everything appeared to be still and dark. Ahead, a haphazard row of sloping outbuildings stuck out of the ground like crooked teeth. The high brilliant moon made monstrous

shadows of them, dark shapes we stared at for long bouts until we were sure there was no movement.

The wind stirred and we could hear the wild swinging branches of half-dead trees just beyond the farm, the knobby limbs that clacked all night. We listened past them, for dogs, for wolves, for any sign of the Lucys.

Opposite the outbuildings was the Lucys' house, a wide double-pen cabin nearly three times the sizes of ours. From our doorway, only a sliver of their house was visible, but it was just enough to gauge their wakefulness by the solid black reflection of their windowpanes, the lack of firelight seeping from the cabin's walls.

The Lucys did not like us moving about at night. Often, they threatened to lock us in after dark. We imagined only the fear of fire kept them from doing so. After all, burned-up property was akin to having no property at all.

A quick word about the Lucys, if we must. To most, they were known as the Harlows, Mistress Lizzie and Master Charles of Liberty County, Georgia. Or really, she was of Liberty County, Georgia, and he was one of the many who came to the Texas countryside claiming to have no past, in hopes of making the land yield some invisible fortune he believed he was owed. But to us, they were just the Lucys, sometimes Miss or Mrs., Mister or Master, but typically just Lucy, spawn of Lucifer, kin of the devil in the most wretched place most of us have ever known.

One by one, we slipped out of the cabin and around the corner and farther still, past the Lucys' property line. There were six of us total, trudging single file into the forest. Junie led the way, followed by Patience, Lulu, Alice, and Serah, while Nan, the eldest, brought up the rear. We slipped deeper into the grove of dead trees, the large oaks and elms skinned of their bark, in various stages of atrophy. This was believed to make clearing the land easier, but it seemed to us wholly unnatural, another sign that the land of the dead maybe didn't reside under the sea as we previously thought, but was somewhere nearby, in some neighboring county in Texas.

\* \* \*

WHEN WE BECAME WE, Texas country was still new, only a few years old in the Union. Navarro County was known as a land of wheat with dreams of cotton. Corn was the surer business, but men like Mr. Lucy came to Texas with cotton on the brain and dragged us along to make sure the land would yield. He had been unlucky before, we knew from Junie, because she had

been with the Lucys the longest. She had worked for Mrs. Lucy before she was a Mrs., then was carried off to Wilkes County, Georgia, where she worked field after worn-out field as the couple's debt grew and grew. And she told us how they packed up and left in the dead of night to outwit angry creditors that threatened to seize what little he had left. By then, all Mr. Lucy had between him and sure ruin was thirty worthless acres and three slaves. They took to the road in two wagons stuffed to the gills with furniture, clothes, crockery, and seeds, the Lucys fighting all the while, their two small children screaming in fits. Harlow droned on about a vision from God, about a land of plenty, while his wife called him a fool with foolish ways, her pitch increasing with every mudhole, every windstorm, every feverish river of dirty water. God's favor would surely shine upon them, Harlow assured her. But when their two male slaves were seized and held at the trader's office in New Orleans for outstanding debts, Junie wondered if Lizzie was right all along. She knew she had only been spared a place in the trader's pen because on paper Junie belonged to Lizzie, a dower slave held in trust for Lizzie's children.

Junie never told us much about the two men who had been seized, if they were kith or kin, and if that was the reason she didn't work in the house for Miss Lizzie anymore. Instead, she told us about the tavern in New Orleans where they stayed for a couple of nights. How she sat on the back steps outside the kitchen, eating a bowl of bland rice, while the men's voices, drinking and carousing inside, carried out into the alley. How she was listening for Harlow's voice, to hear how he might go about retrieving the two men and how long that might take. He was sitting at a table a few feet away from the door, downing beer with his uncle Pap, a Louisiana merchant. And she wondered how long Pap would continue bragging before he offered to pay Harlow's debt, but that offer never came. Instead, Pap told him, start fresh. Take what you have left and invest in women. They are cheaper than men and more versatile—can not only pull a plow and clear land, but can cook and clean, too. And best of all, they can breed, increasing a master's profit year over year every time a child is born. "But be careful, boy, about using your own seed," the man warned. "Out there, you'll want hardier stock and while half-breed gals fetch top dollar down here, outside Orleans, you can hardly get two nickels for 'em."

At the markets in Louisiana, Harlow asked us all the same questions. Had we born children before? How many? And had those children survived? In the back rooms of the auction houses, where they pulled dresses up to the neck, squeezed breasts, thumped hips, examined teeth, more questions were asked about the history of our wombs. Our previous



owners or the brokers that negotiated for them were asked about our health. Were we without venereal disease or tumor? Were we verifiably sound and would a doctor certify to that fact? Harlow was teased about his need for certification, while the rest of the planters assured him they could read a slave body like a book, could determine with their bleary eyes and grubby, callused hands all one needed to know.

Alice, Serah, and Lulu were acquired there, along with Patience and her young son, Silas. Nan, having been in Texas prior to the war with Mexico, was picked up in Houston. Too old to be a breeding woman, he was told, but a good cook and doctoring woman, which he figured he would need out in the wilds of the upcountry, where the land was supposed to be better albeit remote.

But like us, the land proved finicky. Nothing grew sure or full under one bout of unrelenting sun after another. Cotton buds fell off the plants, the bulbs never growing full size, or they rotted with too much rain. The corn planted early survived, while the late corn withered. And so far, not a new babe born among us.

\* \* \*

WE HURRIED ON DEEPER into the woods, dodging brittle limbs and swarms of mosquitoes, while listening for snakes and wolves, only slowing down once we reached the live part of the forest, where the grass and moss softened our footfalls and the heavy green leaves gave us cover. It was darker in this part, harder to see, but harder to be seen, with a refreshing coolness that nipped at our necks and feet. After a long day pressed with heat, the coolness pulled down our songs, had us singing under our breath, praise-house songs, feeling-good songs, the kind we knew before ever coming to this place.

For each of us, these songs were different, as all our before-heres were different, and some days, it's too much work, untangling them. We borrow and steal in good measure, sometimes throwing all our before-heres in a pot and making them available to the whole of we. She who can't remember her daddy may borrow the memory of mine. Tell me about your ma, one of us would say, what she sang to you at night, how she braided your hair, what kind of dress did she make you for church, what kind of sweet did she give you when you couldn't be soothed by nothing else. But, of course, there were things each woman held back, things she deemed too valuable for the pot or the opposite, things too likely to spoil it whole.

We finally stopped when we reached The Tree, a large split oak,

growing in two opposite directions, one reaching skyward, the other stretching out, wide and low, as if trying to reach the sea.

\* \* \*

BEFORE THE CROSSING COULD happen, there was a small matter that had to be handled. By this time, Serah knew the drill. She plopped down on the ground while the other women spread out around her, some kneeling and others sitting in the tree. It was important that all of their heads be higher than hers, a clear demonstration of her guilt.

Serah twirled a leaf between her fingers, a practiced blank expression on her face, as she listened to the details of her crime. Yes, she was in “hot water” again, but not because she was a troublemaker. That was solely Alice’s purview, let Serah tell it, but more so, because at nearly seventeen, she was the youngest and still unschooled in the ways of life. She didn’t yet understand how to manage white folks and their questions, and how often what was being said aloud had little relation to what was being asked or the request being made.

Nan, the elder of the group, dropped a bucket near Serah’s leg and tipped it upside down with her walking stick. This was the signal that it was safe to talk, that the bucket would trap the sound and make their dealings under night sky unknown.

“I still don’t get,” Nan began, “why you opened your mouth.”

“I didn’t. She asked me,” said Serah.

“You could’ve said you ain’t know. Why didn’t you?”

Serah stopped her twirling. She could hear the impatience in the old woman’s voice, could picture fresh lines of irritation creasing her forehead. She hated being the cause of it. She respected Nan. Didn’t want to be the kind of useless woman Nan thought little of, because Nan was one of those women who could do most anything. Nearly every farm had one. Not only could Nan cook and sew, but she could pull a plow, fell a tree, deliver babies, make medicines, and as such, had little compassion for able-bodied young girls, like herself, who could barely haul water. “‘Cause Lucy was in a foul mood, waving a poker in my face. You know how she can be.”

Stifled tittering broke out among the group.

“Alright, women, what say you?” Nan said, opening up the floor, but the rest of the group just yawned and waved their hands, ready to get the whole subject over with.

“We ain’t talk punishment,” said Alice, the only woman with a stake in

the matter. It was Alice who had actually done the deed in question and had already been punished by the Lucys for it. She had stolen a cut of bacon from the Lucys' smokehouse and, in a panic, hidden it under the cookhouse steps. What Serah was guilty of was the telling. As the youngest of the group, she was still liable to make a wrong move and not necessarily understand why.

"Fine," Nan said. She motioned for Junie to hand over a small sack of corn seed she had been carrying. Nan then emptied the sack onto the ground next to the bucket. "Alright, your punishment is to pick up each and every seed of this corn."

Nan tipped the bucket over and picked it up. "See this," she said, reaching down and feeling for a notch in the wood with her fingers. "It should reach here. If it don't, we'll know you ain't finish and send you back. But the longer the seed is down, the harder it'll be. You ain't got long before the mice and squirrels come calling."

Alice made a whistle-like sound through her teeth.

"What now, Alice?" Nan said.

"She got the easiest one. She should get the hardest. Something smaller, like rice or benne seed."

"You see any rice or benne seed 'round here?"

"No, but in Carolina—"

"This look like Carolina to you?"

"At least make her kneel in it first," said Alice.

The small germ of anger Serah had been tamping down threatened to rise up, her face growing warm, a snappy insult flashing across her mind.

"Oh, shut up, Alice," Junie said, from her place underneath the tree.

"Don't pay her any mind," Nan whispered to Serah, squeezing her shoulder.

Serah nodded, inching closer to the pile of gray seed, its normally pale yellow color darkened from yesterday's tarring. In this country, they didn't push corn into the soil naked. Instead, the seeds were soaked in a mixture of hot water and sticky black tar, then laid out in the sun to dry, in hopes of staving off squirrels and raccoons who'd eat the seed before it took root.

She could smell the tar as she picked faster, her face over the bucket, strangely soothed by the soft tapping sound of the seed hitting bottom. She could feel Alice watching her, the woman's arms folded across her chest, while the rest of the women chatted among themselves, already done with the matter. She knew Alice could be what the women sometimes called a "miserable spirit." Everybody had the propensity to be one, but Alice was of those who embraced the feeling of it, felt more alive in the thrall of it.

And if Serah understood anything about the prevailing wisdom of dealing with such folks, it was to handle them with care.

\* \* \*

CLEARLY, THE ROAD TO becoming a we was not a honeyed one. The sun of Texas felt different to each of us. It made us crazy for a time and that crazy was called many things—homesickness, grief, drapetomania. What forged us together was more than circumstance. In some ways, we were more different than alike. None of us the same age or born in the same place. Some of us knew the folks that birthed us and some of us didn't. Some of us were born Christians, others came to it roundabout, if at all. Some of us practiced Conjure and practical magic, others steered far clear. Some of us had born children and lost them, while others were little more than virgins. We were bound together by what tends to bind women like us together. Often, that doesn't make folks kin. Makes them trapped. And that can make them hateful toward one another, unless it's redirected and harnessed toward something else altogether.

\* \* \*

THE OTHERS BEGAN WITHOUT waiting for Serah, Nan, or Alice. Serah could hear them praying on the other side of the tree. Someone was singing, a throaty drawn-out hymn that sounded like a dirge, more vibration than song.

And it remained that way, low and thrumming, until Nan checked the bucket and emptied the corn seed back into the sack. She tied off the bag and handed it to Alice, and then carried the bucket over to the women singing, where she placed it inside the circle of women and turned it over. Serah and Alice followed her, joining along the outer edge.

Nan moved around the circle, dotting foreheads with oil as the song grew louder. The vibration grew so strong, it felt as if the group was being pulled deep inside it, made weightless, now swaying and rocking, like leaves in a strong wind. Junie moved into the circle and the women locked hands around her.

Serah watched as the woman spun and danced and cried. Moonlight shifted through the trees and lit up Junie's hair, braided and tucked at the base of her head, the long, crooked toes of her bare feet, the faded brown trousers rolled over at the ankle. Junie was the only one among them who wore pants, a set of Harlow's old trousers she wore tied around her waist with a thin rope. And that was often how Serah thought of her—the one

who wore pants. It was a holdover from Serah's arrival, this need for categorization, to understand this new world and the people inside it by their habits and tics, their wants and weaknesses. Junie slowed down, turning her tear-streaked face to the light, before stumbling out of the circle and taking her place back along the perimeter.

Patience went next, inching her way into the circle with small steps. She didn't dance or shout. Instead, she just stood there, in stillness, with her eyes closed, her hands clasped together, a strand of rosary beads dangling from her wrist, whispering a prayer. She was the only Catholic among them, but she didn't seem to mind it. If others used their faith to separate themselves from others, she wasn't one of them. She needed the gathering part, she told Serah one day.

When Serah's turn came, she entered the circle, unsure of what to do. She didn't feel much like shouting or dancing. She liked the song enough, liked the sound of the women singing, but she couldn't drop down into it, the way the others seemed to. She wasn't a Christian, but the other women didn't know that, and didn't seem to care, really. This was just a means to open the door. It was your business whose help you sought—whether it be Jesus or the moon or your dead.

She spun around, repeated a prayer she heard others pray, whispering the words over and over while she waited for something to happen. She wanted to feel whatever it was that made the other women so joyful, whatever made them rock on their heels or fan their arms with glee. She wanted to know for herself what created that dazed, wide-eyed expression they often gave her afterward, like they were still somewhere else, and hadn't yet returned to the constraints of this world. She danced and she rocked, but nothing happened past her own self, past her own muscles moving as she directed them to. No Holy Spirit descended upon her. No burgeoning warmth washed over her.

At the edge of the circle, Lulu began shouting, her eyes closed, and fists clenched. The women recognizing the presence of Spirit moved to encircle Lulu, making it safe for her to move deeper into the sacred realm. Just like that, Serah's time in the circle was up, where she thought if anything was to be felt, if any spirit was to make its presence known, it would be there, inside the heat of the women.

Serah rejoined the outer edge of the circle, where she watched Lulu go deeper, jumping higher and pumping her arms, as if on the verge of flight. That seemed fitting. That if anyone would be a vessel, it would be Lulu. Not because Lulu was more righteous or upstanding than any of the others, in fact, most would say the opposite. It was more because there was little

veneer between her and the world. Lulu was guileless. She'd say the meanest thing possible directly to your face with no shred of sass or anger in her voice, then get up and make you a cup of tea. She was fully a product of the moment itself, with little regard to the seconds before or after.

And still the sight of Lulu shouting and dancing made Serah feel worse. Locking hands like this was one of the few times Serah felt of the women, when she felt like they were something more than just a gaggle of strangers fastened together. But she found this night, she could take little comfort in it. She knew it took time to figure out a place, to learn its climate and its ways, what flora, fauna, or predators it might kill you with. So, it made sense that it took time for her gods and her dead to find her here, to cross the many miles of land and sea, not to mention, if there were protocols necessary to tangle with the gods here already. Kiowa gods, Cherokee gods, German gods.

However, the presence of Lulu shouting in front of her said different. This woman crying and dancing so freely made it clear to Serah that other people's gods had no problem locating them. So, if it wasn't Texas, with its strange air and stubborn fields, its plagues of pestilence and grifters, then surely, it had to be her. It had to be something wrong about her or in her that kept them from coming, that left her in this strange place with little to no aid in this world.

## Chapter Two

DAYS LATER, OVER THE DIN of pickaxes and hoes, we could hear Mrs. Lucy shrieking. One sharp cry, followed by another long high-pitched wail. No one cast an eye in the direction of the sound. We went on pushing oat seed knuckle-deep into the earth, as if the sound of Mrs. Lucy going into labor was the most natural thing in the world.

The shrieking kept on, at turns growing louder, then fading out, only to start up again.

“Think Nan need a hand up there?” Junie said, after a while.

“She’ll send Silas if she need us,” Patience replied.

We knew Nan would tend to the birth despite Mr. Lucy’s incessant railing about finding a suitable doctor to tend to her this go-round. Everyone knew it was all talk. This part of the country was still desolate, with few neighbors to speak of, and even if he had a connection to a bona fide doctor willing to make the journey, it was unlikely he could afford the fee.

The boy Silas ran up, waving his bony arms. He was a thin whisper covered in dust, his shirttail skimming his ashy knees. “Nan want you!” he cried. “Come now.”

“Want who, baby?” Patience asked him.

He shrugged, one naked shoulder poking out of the neck of his shirt. She stood up and crooked her index finger at him. *Come here.*

He stared at her for a moment but didn’t move.

“I said come here,” Patience said.

The boy ambled over.

She sighed. She shifted the shirt so it centered around his neck. “Boy, you are a sight.” She licked her thumb and cleared his face of sleep and crust, while he squirmed.

“Who she ask for?” Junie asked him.

He shrugged again.

Patience pinched his shoulder. “Open your mouth when somebody speak to you.”

He gave Patience a defiant look and pulled back from her. “Didn’t say. She just say come now and bring hot water.”

A flash of anger crossed Patience’s face. He saw it and ran, back in the direction of the Lucys’ house.

“Get back here, Silas!” His legs slowed a moment, so she knew he heard her, but he kept on anyway.

He was skinny and fast, but Patience was faster. Years of worry had made her wiry and taut, and she leaped over to him, in a few quick paces, her skirt gathered in her fist. She grabbed ahold of his shoulder and pinched it hard, turning him toward her. His small face twisted up and he let out a ragged breath. She bent her face close to his. “Don’t you run from me. I’m your mother, not them. You listen to *me*, you hear?”

He nodded, his eyes wide.

She wrapped her arms around him, but he was stiff as wood in her arms. He pulled back from her and leaned his head in the direction of the Lucys’ house.

“Alright,” she said, dropping her arms. He turned and ran away. She watched him until he reached the edge of the yard, a flicker of disappointment flaring up in her chest. She probably wouldn’t see him the rest of the day, and this was how the one moment she had with him went.

She went back to her place on the row and crouched back down, wrapping her fingers tight around the handle of the pickaxe she’d left lying in the dirt. She slammed it into the ground a few times, until she could let the air out of her body slowly and then slower still. She wasn’t sure when it happened, the moment when her boy became more theirs than hers. Initially, she didn’t protest too much at the idea of him being a houseboy. She figured he’d spend most of his time helping Nan, and that seemed alright, as he was a frail child, often too sickly to follow them around in the fields all day. Most of the time, she worried about harm coming to him in that small evil house, how quickly and often he’d become the target of all the discord that flowed between the Lucys. Every time she got an evening with him, she checked his back, his legs, his arms, for lash marks, for bruises, but she got fewer and fewer evenings with him now. He slept in the Lucys’ house, to aid with the Lucys’ children, and getting him back to share a meal became harder and harder to come by. “He can’t be spared now,” she was always told.

And worse, he didn’t even bother to sneak away to see her anymore. There was a time when he did, dipping by the loom for a moment to make her laugh or swinging by the cabin, while they were finishing up their sewing. Now, if he came at all, it was because she begged Nan to send



him, for a few minutes when he wouldn't be missed. Now, when he came, he'd make it plain how much he didn't want to be there. He no longer liked the ashcake she made in the fireplace, singeing her fingers in the process. He didn't want the small corn-husk dolls she made him. He no longer liked sitting in her lap and listening to tall tales or singing with her. At first, she thought he was just worried about being punished, so worried he couldn't relax, but soon, it became clear to her, that wasn't it. He no longer felt at ease, so far away from the Lucys. He missed them now, it seemed, much like he used to miss her.

Patience ran her fingers over the gaping hole she made. She pushed the dirt around, making a mound and pushing the seed down inside it. It was early, the position of sun in the sky told her, but she felt so tired she thought the sun must be wrong. "Bird, you go," Patience said suddenly, from her place at the end of the row.

"Why me?" asked Serah.

"Cause you still slow as sorghum syrup . . ."

"Like molasses."

"Slower . . . like cold tar," said Alice.

The women chuckled. "Now, you go on."

Serah groaned and headed off after Silas.

Patience watched her, hoping the girl might tell her something more about what she saw inside the house. All this time, Nan had been telling her not to worry, but it didn't ease her mind any. Instead, she suspected that Nan was holding something back, not in a malicious way, in a protective way. But if her boy was in danger, Patience wanted to know. Even if it didn't seem like there was much she could do about it. What was being somebody's mother, if not that? Sensing danger and putting your body in between it and your child. Maybe she couldn't sing him songs at night anymore, nor wash his face and hands in the morning, but maybe this she could still do.

\* \* \*

SERAH DID NOT RUSH in the hot, humid air. Silas ran on ahead, only slowing down once, to peek over his shoulder at her. She waved him on. "Go 'head. I'm coming."

She peeled off in the direction of the well, where she filled two buckets with water. It took her a few minutes to link each bucket to the opposite ends of a shoulder yoke and balance them proper across the back of her neck. Gingerly, she inched toward the yard, with a close watch on the rim

of each bucket, only spilling a cupful before Lizzie let loose another wild, piercing shriek.

When Serah reached the cookhouse, a small building with a large hearth and square table, she transferred both buckets into a large iron kettle and got a fire going.

Nan appeared in the doorway, her face shining with sweat, a long white apron cresting over her ankles. “Why you doing that out here instead of in the house?”

“Oh. I didn’t think to—”

“Girl, I declare,” Nan said, sighing in exasperation. “Hurry up.” She turned and walked away.

Serah ladled hot water into a pitcher, wrapped a cloth around the handle, and carried it into the Lucys’ house. She was blinded for a moment by the sudden darkness, an unfamiliar earthy scent washing over her.

“In here,” Nan said, calling her from a bedroom at the end of a long wide hallway. Inside the room, Serah placed the pitcher down on the floor next to Nan, without looking at Mrs. Lucy, drenched in sweat on the edge of her chair, a thin slip scrunched around her pale thighs. Serah averted her eyes and headed back out of the room.

“Where you going? Get back here,” Nan said, rubbing the pregnant woman’s stomach.

“To fetch more hot water,” said Serah, though she had no intention of returning to the dank dark room.

“I need a hand. Get behind her.”

Serah forced herself to move closer. She didn’t even want to be in the same room. The whole process stirred up a wild anxiousness inside her. Whenever women grew big with child, their bodies growing alien and monstrous, she found herself watching them with suspicion, though she couldn’t place what it was she found frightening about them. Maybe it was the deep wide bellies, so heavy they could tip a woman over on the row, sending them headfirst into the stalks. Or the sight of them unclothed, a new taut round world affixed to their bodies. Or the muck that descended from them when the babies came spilling out, one after another. Or the incessant need of the thing once it arrived, the swaddled bundles lying underneath a shelter of leaves at the edge of a potato bed, the constant sound of crying and mewling they emitted throughout the morning, only growing louder as the day went on. She couldn’t forget how the births turned the women on her old farm in South Carolina adrift, made them wan and stiff-legged as they chopped and weeded, sometimes with the babe hoisted on their backs. They spent the evenings sewing and fighting

off sleep, while the child fed or cried, or cried, then fed. But the worst part was the artless rebellion of their bodies after too many births, how their spines tipped forward, or their uteruses descended lower and lower, suddenly trying to meet the air, and how some never healed right after the fifth or eighth birth. How one woman was banished altogether, sent to the woods to live in a cave after her inside parts never mended. The woman lost all control over her bodily functions. Rivers of piss and shit dribbled with such frequency and without warning that all the time, she was afraid to eat or drink, the smallest excretions causing her great pain and great embarrassment.

Ever since then, Serah looked askance at the whole birth enterprise. And while she was surprised Lizzie of all people rekindled this anxiety in her, it just confirmed how little she wanted to do with the entire process. She had no desire to be bedside while the woman shrieked and squirmed. She didn't care to witness the elaborate protocols doctoring women, such as Nan, were insistent about following, in hopes of helping a new soul transition into the world proper. And most of all, she didn't want to be in the thick of it herself, with a trapped soul inside her, sucking her dry and tipping her organs about, or later, nursing at her breasts or cradled in her lap, where eventually it'd be taken away, the moment she allowed herself to love it.

“Rub her back, will you?” said Nan.

Serah ignored the parts of herself that wanted to run elsewhere, that would instead be grateful to be cast back outside in the sticky heat, sowing winter oats with the rest of the women. Instead, she did as she was told and rubbed the woman's back in slow circles, her fingers damp from the sweat-soaked slip. Just how long would she have to do this?

Lizzie let out a loud moan, her body sliding down off the chair. Serah slipped her arms underneath the woman's armpits and felt the woman's weight sink down into her. Lizzie's hair was now plastered to her head, her breathing slow and wide.

Serah looked down at the lolling head, the neck no longer able to support it, and she found herself looking for the seam of the woman, as if there were just a few tired stitches holding Mrs. Lucy together.

“My first lying-in, I had six women in the room with me,” Lizzie said. A sudden wave of pain seemed to hit her then and her head snapped back into Serah's chest with a thud.

Nan sat opposite the two, now squatting on a makeshift stool, waiting to catch the baby. “Mmhmm, who was there?” she said, pressing a warm compress on Lizzie's swollen stomach.

“My ma, both my sisters, Mrs. Kenneally from the farm over, and Mother Amy from the church . . .” Lizzie breathed.

The child seemed to be crowning now and Nan motioned for Serah to hold the woman firmly, lest she sink down when the child slid free. Serah tightened her grip and closed her eyes.

“Send for them, won’t you?” Lizzie said, her voice breaking.

Nan began pressing low on the woman’s abdomen. “C’mon, Mrs. Lizzie, push a little bit more.”

“It was a storm that night and they all had to stay over. There wasn’t even enough room for them all, but they wanted to be close to me and the baby—”

A long low moan stopped the anecdote, then a surge of water spurted out from the woman, splashing Nan’s arms, so high it soaked her rolled-up sleeves. Serah was startled, but Nan barely blinked. She just reset her footing and urged the woman on.

Within seconds, the baby emerged, the small slippery body coming so fast, Nan almost lost her grip. “I got you, honey,” Nan said, gripping the child firmly and placing it in her lap. She cleared its mouth with her finger and wiped it off with a warm, damp cloth. The pale red creature drew breath and screamed.

“Is it a boy?” Lizzie asked.

“Yes, yes, it is.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Lizzie said, a slow grin spreading over her face. “Let me see him.”

Nan wrapped the child up and held him out to Lizzie.

Serah looked down at the wrinkled infant, its mother slumped over and leaning toward him, and couldn’t resist the urge to extract herself. She slowly began trying to pull her arms free.

“Where you going? We have to wait for the afterbirth,” Nan said.

Serah strengthened her hold and a few minutes later, the dark purple mass slipped down and out, Nan catching it in a waiting chamber pot. Serah could see it, wet and jiggling, the long pink cord extending from its center. Nan set the child down and tied off the cord. She then cut it, firing the end with the flame of a lit candle.

Serah had never seen an afterbirth up close. She just knew there were many folks who attributed a good deal of their misfortune in life to this moment, to the separation of their body from this quivering mass. She didn’t know why exactly, only that it needed to be buried at the base of a good tree and it needed to be close by, where one could look after it and visit it, when necessary. She didn’t know what the fallout was when one