

## CHAPTER 1

Ruby Bell was a constant reminder of what could befall a woman whose shoe heels were too high. The people of Liberty Township wove her into cautionary tales of the wages of sin and travel. They called her buck-crazy. Howling, half-naked mad. The fact that she had come back from New York City made this somewhat understandable to the town.

She wore gray like rain clouds and wandered the red roads in bared feet. Calluses thick as boot leather. Hair caked with mud. Blackened nails as if she had scratched the slate of night. Her acres of legs carrying her, arms swaying like a loose screen. Her eyes the ink of sky, just before the storm.

That is how Ruby walked when she lived in the splintered house that Papa Bell had built before he passed. When she dug into the East Texas soil under moonlight and wailed like a distant train.

In those years, after her return, people let Ruby be. They walked a curved path to avoid her door. And so it was more than strange when someone walked the length of Liberty and brought a covered cake to the Bells' front porch.

Ephram Jennings had seen the gray woman passing like a haint through the center of town since she'd returned to Bell land in 1963. All of Liberty had. He had seen her wipe the spittle from her jerking lips, run her still beautiful hands over the crust of her hair each day before she'd turned the corner in view of the town. He'd seen her walking like she had some place she ought to have been, then five steps away from P & K Market, stand pillar still, her rain cloud body shaking. Ephram had seen Miss P, the proprietor of the store, walk nonchalantly out of her door and say, "Honey, can you see if I got the rise in these rolls right?"

Ephram watched Ruby stare past her but take the brown sack filled with steaming yeast bread. Take it and walk away with her acres of legs carrying her, while Miss P said, "You come on back tomorrow, Ruby Bell, and help me out if you get the chance."

Ephram Jennings had watched this for eleven years. Seen her black-bottomed foot kick a swirl of dust in its wake. Every day he wanted nothing more than to put each tired sole in his wide wooden tub, brush them both in warm soapy water, cream them with sweet oil and lanoline and then slip her feet, one by one into a pair of red-heel socks.

But instead, with each passing year, he watched Miss P do her Christian duty from the corner of his eye. Watched the gray woman stoop to accept the doughy alms. He sat alongside the crowd of men parked on their stools outside P & K. Who read their papers, played dominoes and chewed tobacco. Toothpicks dangling. Pipes smoking. Soda pops sweating. Just as they had the day Ruby arrived back in Liberty. When she'd stepped from the red bus, the porch had crowded her with their eyes. Hair pressed and gleaming like polished black walnut. Lipstick red and thick, her cornflower blue sundress darted and stitched tight to her waist. Ephram had watched her light a cigarette and glare down at the crowd on the market porch in such a way that made folks feel embarrassed for breathing. Chauncy Rankin had said later, "Not only do her shit not stink, way she act, she ready to sell it by the ounce."

They had all watched, steadily, as she slipped into madness. Concern, mingled with a secret satisfaction, melted into the creases of their bodies like Vaseline. After a time they barely glanced up from their papers when Ruby walked up to the market. They yawned her existence away, or spit out a wad of tobacco juice to mark her arrival. A low joke might rumble as Miss P handed over her bread, followed by throaty chuckles.

But one end-of-summer day, Ephram Jennings took particular notice. One by one the men on the porch did as well. For instead of walking away with her bread, as she normally did, Ruby didn't move. Her body rooted to the spot. She stood there, holding the brown sack, hand quivering like a divining rod. And then she peed. A long, steady stream that hit the red dust and turned it the color of brick. She did it absently, with calm disinterest. Then, because no one knew quite what to do, Gubber Samuels pointed and hurled out a rough bark of laughter. Ruby looked down and saw the puddle beneath her. Surprise flowered on her face, then fell away leaving a spreading red shame. Her hands leapt to her eyes, but when she brought them down the world was still there, so she dropped the sack in the pool of urine and ran. But it wasn't running. It was flying, long and graceful, into the piney woods like a deer after the crack of buckshot. Ephram almost stood. Almost ran down the porch steps and into the woods after her. But the eyes of men were too strong, and the continued spitting and snickering of Gubber Samuels anchored him against the tug of mercy.

Because Ephram's mama had long since gone to glory, that very day, he asked his older sister Celia to make up her white lay angel cake because he needed to carry it to an ailing friend. Celia looked at him out of the corner of her eye but made it anyway.

She made it in that pocket of time before dawn, when the aging night gathered its dark skirts and paused in the stillness. She made it with twelve new eggs, still warm and flecked with feathers. She washed them and cracked them, one at a time, holding each golden yolk in her palm as the whites slid and dropped through her open fingers. She set them aside in her flowered china bowl. In the year 1974, Celia Jennings still cooked in a wood-burning stove, she still used a whisk and muscle and patience to beat her egg whites into foaming peaks. She used pure vanilla, the same sweet liquid she had poured into Saturday night baths before their father, the Reverend Jennings, arrived back in town. The butter was from her churn, the confectioner's sugar from P & K. And as she stirred the dawn into being, a dew drop of sweat salted the batter. The cake baked and rose with the sun.

Ephram slept as the cake slid from its tin, so sweet it crusted at its crumbling edges, so light little craters of air circled its surface, so moist it was sure, as was always the case, to cling to the spaces between his sister's long three-pronged silver fork. Celia Jennings never cut her white lay angel cake with a knife. "It'd be like using an ax to skin a rabbit," she'd always say.

The cake was cooling when Ephram awoke. It settled into itself as he bathed and dressed for the day.

Ephram Jennings smoothed the corners of his great-grand-daddy's hat for the tenth time that morning. His wide square thumbs running along the soft hide brim. The leather so thin in places the sun filtered through softly like a Chinese lantern.

The magical thing about Ephram Jennings was that if you looked real hard, you could see a circle of violet rimming the brown of his irises. Soft like the petals of spreading periwinkle.

The problem was that no one, not even his sister, took the time to really look at Ephram Jennings. Folks pretty much glanced past him on the way to Bloom's place or P & K. To them he was just another thick horse brown man with a ratted cap and a stooped gait. To them there was nothing special about Ephram. He was a moving blur on the eyes' journey to more delicate and interesting places.

Ephram had become accustomed to this in his forty-five years of living. Slipping in and out of doorways without so much as a nod or pause in the conversation. At his job it was

expected. He was a pair of hands carrying grocery bags to White folks' shiny automobiles. Taking tips and mouthing "Thank ya, Ma'am." Anger or kindness directed towards him indifferently as if he were a lump of coal. Ephram told himself he didn't mind. But with Black folks there were times when a man might expect an eye to catch hold and stick for a moment. Folks never did see his Chinese lamp hat, or his purple-ringed irises, or the way that they matched just perfectly the berry tint of his lower lip. They didn't see the ten crescent moons held captive in his fingernails, the way he moved, like a man gliding under water, smooth and liquid as Marion Lake. They didn't notice how the blue in his socks coordinated with the buttons on his Sunday shirt or smell the well-brushed sheen of Brylcreem in his thick hair.

They didn't notice the gracious pause he'd take after someone would finish a sentence, the way he'd give folks the chance to take air back into their lungs, before he'd fill the space up with his own breath and words.

They didn't see the way his pupils got wide when his heart filled up with pride or love or hope.

But Ruby did.

When her life was only a building long scream that faded into night. Even then Ruby noticed Ephram.

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It was after the big Brownsville hurricane of '67. After eighty-six-mile-an-hour winds crashed into Corpus Christi and rippled all the way east to Liberty Township. Splashing the edge of west Louisiana and flooding the banks of the Sabine. It was after the bending of trees, of branches arching to the floor of earth. After Marion Lake had swollen up and washed away Supra Rankin's hen house, and Clancy Simkins's daddy's Buick, and the new cross for the Church of God in Christ.

Hurricane Beulah had come Ruby's fourth year back in Liberty. It was then that she saw Ephram Jennings.

She had lain in the stagnant pools thick with mud and browning leaves. She had knelt before a cracked sugar maple tree and lain in the collecting waters, letting the thick fluid cover her like a bedtime blanket. She felt her skin melt and slip from her bones; her heart, spine and cranium dissolve like sugar cubes in warm coffee.

She had been muddy waters for three hours when Ephram found her. Her nose rising out of the puddle to inhale ... and dipping back to release. Out and back. Out. Back. Rhythmic, like an old blues tune.

He did not scream. He did not leap over the tree. He did not scoop into her water center to set her free.

For Ephram did not see what anyone else passing down the road would see: a skinny dust brown woman with knotted hair lying back flat in a mud puddle. No. Ephram Jennings saw that Ruby had become the still water. He saw her liquid deep skin, her hair splayed like onyx river vines.

As rain began to fall upon her, Ephram saw her splash and swell and spill out of the small ravine. Ephram Jennings knew. That is when Ruby lifted her head like a rising wave and noticed Ephram. In that moment, the two knowings met.

They stared at each other under the ancient sky with the soft rain and the full wet earth. More than anything Ephram wanted to talk to her and tell her things he'd kept locked in the storehouse of his soul. He wanted to talk to her about the way Rupert Shankle's melons split on the vine and how honeysuckle blossoms tasted like sunlight. He wanted to tell her that he had seen a part of the night sky resting in her eyes and that he knew it because it lived in him as well. He wanted to tell her about the knot corded about his heart and how he needed her help to loose the binding.

But at that moment Ruby closed her eyes, concentrated, and melted once again into the pool.

Ephram heard himself asking the strangest question, heard it before it left his berry lips. "Are you married?" But before it could lace through the air, he saw that she was once again water. And he couldn't ask that of a puddle, no matter how perfect. So he tipped his hat, and made his way back down the road.

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"Ephraaam! Ephram Jennings your breakfast is been ready!"

As he had nearly every morning of his life, Ephram heard his sister's call.

"Yes Mama," he replied.

Celia had raised him since March 28, 1937, when their mother had come naked to the In-His-Name Holiness Church Easter picnic. Ephram was eight, Celia fourteen. The thing he remembered was his sister running over to him covering his eyes. That next morning, their father, the Reverend Jennings, took their mother to Dearing State Mental—Colored Ward, then packed his own bags and began preaching on the road ten months out of twelve. Celia tended Ephram, cooked for him, cut his food, picked and ironed his shirts, blocked his hats, nursed him within an inch of his life when he came down with that joint ailment. She had paused only long enough to bury their father, the Reverend, when he turned up dead. Lynched a few days after Ephram's thirteenth birthday. Ephram had curled up and lost himself in the folds of Celia's apron where he stayed for the next thirty-two years.

"Ephram come in here boy!"

Ephram knew without looking that Celia was biting her inner cheek, a thing she did whenever a food item wasn't eaten at the proper temperature. The colder it got the more furiously she would gnaw. Then he heard her sweeping with a vengeance. Each morning of his life Celia swept bad luck out of the kitchen door. Every evening she sprinkled table salt in the corners, and every morning she swept it out again, full of any evil the night air held. The sweeping stopped.

"I know you hear me!"

"Inaminute," Ephram called as he smoothed the weathered brim of his hat once more and faced his sister's mirror. This morning, this crisp, end-of-summer morning, Ephram did something he had not done in twenty years. He looked.

He had always straightened the crease in his slacks on Sunday, or picked bits of lint from his Deacon jacket. He had held a handkerchief filled with ice on his split chin and lip, the one winter in his life snow had slicked the front walk. He had combed and oiled his scalp

and plucked out in-grown hairs. He had shaved and brushed his teeth and gargled with Listerine. But in twenty years, Ephram Jennings had not truly looked into a mirror.

His greatest surprise was that he was no longer young. He assessed the plum darkness under his eyes, the grooves along his full nose, the subtle weight of his cheeks. Ephram pressed a cool washcloth to his skin, then he practiced a smile. He had tried on five or six when Celia launched her final call.

As Ephram sat down to eat, his chair scraped against the butter flower tiles.

"Sorry." Ephram managed.

"S'all right baby, just got to remember to pick it up instead of drag."

"I will, Mama."

"And remember not to leave your bad day cane out where folk can trip on it."

"I'll put it away after breakfast."

"Don't forget now."

"I won't, Mama."

Celia swept the long hall as Ephram dipped buttery biscuits into syrup. She straightened a wood-framed photograph of the Reverend Jennings as Ephram cut into the chicken fried steak. He had gotten the cutlet on special at the Newton Piggly Wiggly, where he worked.

By way of apology Ephram said, "You fixed that cutlet up real nice, Mama."

"That was a fair cut. Why don't you get me some more when you go into Newton today."

"I ain't going in today Ma'am."

"Oh. I thought maybe your sick friend was from Newton since you didn't say who they was."

"I'll pick up more of them cutlets on Tuesday, Mama."

Celia put *Andy Williams—Songs of Faith* on the phonograph while Ephram peppered his grits and four scrambled eggs. She finished sweeping salt from every corner of the house as "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" smoothed across the furniture. Ephram chewed slowly and glanced at Celia's cake. Flaked white inside, the outside was all honey-gold. He imagined handing it to Ruby Bell and seeing something he had not witnessed in over thirty years—Ruby smiling.

Celia sailed into the room with her dustpan full of salt. "Well, if you ain't going to Newton, do your friend stay out by Glister's?"

"No."

"Cuz Glister got six of my mason jars if you goin' round that way."

"I can't today Mama."

"I was going to make Supra Rankin some of my fig preserves for her husband's great-uncle's funeral on Monday if you was going that way ... Lord knows it's a shame that family don't believe in getting they people preserved right. And how they think the man will keep fresh while they waitin' on them Mississippi Rankins to get here I don't know."

"Shephard's Mortuary lay folk out nice, Mama."

"Shamed Mother Mercy last year with them red lips and rubbed-on fair skin."

"Mama ..."

"Woman look like a peppermint stick, Lord know. You yet one of Junie's pallbearers?"

Ephram nodded yes. Celia opened the kitchen door to empty the dustpan, just as a strong wind blew a mouthful of salt into her face. She spit it from her lips, wiped it from her eyes and quickly swept what was left out of the back door.

Celia turned to face Ephram, "You know Baby Girl Samuels back in town."

Ephram took a bite of eggs.

Celia wiped the table with a damp rag. "Supra Rankin say Baby arrive from New Orleans three days ago, painted up like a circus clown, wrigglin' like a mackerel all over town."

Ephram lifted his cup and plate as she cleaned. "Mama—"