

CHAPTER ONE

THE NIGHT my great-grandfather died, frigid air howled through the pines and swirled down the chimney of his shack near our fallow tobacco fields in eastern North Carolina. My grandmother and I kept vigil at his bedside, a battery-operated space heater oscillating at our feet, kerosene lamps lofting shadows on the walls. He'd refused to install electricity and insisted the fireplace remain unlit at night. He claimed spirits talked to him through the flue at the Witching Hour. So did birds, especially owls. He said they were good omens, unless they flew inside your house. *Owl in the house means death's coming*, he'd say.

I lolled my head against the wall, bare like all the others, no family portraits or prosaic artwork or thumbtacked greeting cards with snapshots of my great-grandfather's progeny tucked inside. The shack was cluttered with clothes and other debris from a fading life, but the walls were naked. He preferred it that way, no memories or illusions, except the ones that came to him at night.

At the stroke of twelve he wrapped his knotty fingers around my wrist and squeezed. "Can you hear it?" he asked, his voice like winter wind crackling through kindling. An icy shiver ran through me. He had not spoken since that balmy summer night when I was nine years old, when the river

ran dry and the pines began to cry. The night my mother committed suicide—an abomination, he'd called it. A sin against Providence. He'd sat expressionless in his rocking chair while Grandma delivered the news, his face bathed in candlelight, then hobbled into the woods and chanted my mother's name, like an incantation, a prayer for deliverance. Then he'd spoken no more.

I inched closer to him, close enough to smell the implacable stench of the dying. "Hear what?" I asked timorously.

"Owls," he said. "Like music."

My body fluttered as if I were falling out of oblivion, slowly, unwittingly, the air prickly and thin. Long ago, I'd heard a song about owls crying in the night, the singer's wail primeval, in sync with marauding guitar licks, the beat like jungle drums. I felt them vibrating inside me just then, like a distant echo from another life, one that still included my mother.

"Can you hear the music?" he persisted, struggling to raise his head.

Grandma implored me with her eyes. "I can hear it, Granddaddy."

He gave a shuddering laugh. "Ain't in your head, girl."

"Where then?"

I waited, watching his chest rise and fall, his fitful breaths grow shallow—the caesura between life and death.

"It's in your soul," he finally said. He nudged his Bible beside him, giving voice to verse: "Ecclesiastes 6:10: That which hath been is named already."

He dropped my arm and exhaled, his face pallid and drawn. Grandma and I stood over him, bearing witness, sleet pelting the windows, that song about the owls, its searing

guitar, haunting me, like fragments of memory I'd buried with my childhood—grainy images of my mother in her yellow bedroom with her lavender incense and votive candles, her black and white photograph of a Rock star standing on a stage at Kezar Stadium in 1973, dressed all in white, lips pursed, unruly dark hair framing a beatific face, guitar strapped over his shoulder, arms spread wide, as if he were awaiting crucifixion. The two of them were intertwined in my mind's eye, like ashes wafting in a summer wind, waiting for water to receive them. I was born of water and moonlight, and of her and of him.

Grandma stopped the clock on the mantle to mark the moment of my great-grandfather's passing, as if halting time held power—*then forever now*.

She handed me a flashlight then draped her overcoat around me, the scent of Jergens lotion and talcum powder lingering in the fabric. "Go on home, honey," she said. "I shouldn't have brought you here."

"You didn't," I said faintly.

I'd followed her from our farmhouse at dusk, trudged the quarter-mile past the barn and hog pen, through the woods, where the footpath ended, as if I'd heard my great-grandfather's keening call.

"Go home," Grandma said, prodding me toward the door. "I'll be along directly."

I wrenched away from her and stared at my great-grandfather, the withered shell that remained, searching for some part of him that still looked vital—the outline of his body beneath the quilt, legs splayed as if the cat he used to own were nestled between them, his arm dangling over the

It was inevitable. Perhaps it was even Providence.

Now would return me to *then*.

The tale demanded to be told.

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN I was nine, my mother gave me a leather-bound journal with gold-tipped pages and placed a pen in my hand.

“Write,” she said, her long blonde hair feral in the dusty breeze.

“Write what?” I asked.

She hiked up her tie-dye skirt and squatted next to me on the splintered wood floor of my grandmother’s front porch. I sat Indian style, my bare legs splotched with mosquito bites, the heart my mother had scrawled in red Magic Marker around the stitches on my right calf barely visible in the speckled sunlight. I’d tumbled into the hog pen while attempting to walk the top of the fence like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. My realization that I couldn’t fly once airborne had been more shocking than the bloody gash I’d sustained when I hit the ground.

“Come on,” she said. “Tell me a story.”

“Uh uh,” I said. “You tell me a story, the one about my name.”

“You’ve heard that a million times.”

“So?”

“So, so, suck your toe. All the way to Mex-e-co,” she sang in her butterscotch alto.

I rolled my eyes. “You’re stalling, Claudia.” I’d always

called my mother by her given name. She'd asked me to. Not *Mama* or *Mommy*, like my schoolmates, who marveled at my idiosyncrasy. I couldn't understand why they referred to their mothers as designations rather than distinctives.

A gust of wind carried the pungent smell of tobacco from the field across the dirt road. It was harvest time. Uncle Jack had hired a crew of local high school boys to help, and I could hear them whistling at Claudia above the distant din of the tractor. She stretched her legs then plopped into the cane-bottom chair under the ceiling fan. I couldn't tell if she was oblivious to their flirtations or simply bored with them. Either way, she never engaged.

"Once upon a time on a crisp autumn night," she began in a hammy voice, "a fairy princess flew out her bedroom window and—"

"Where was she going?" I interjected, feigning ignorance.

"To visit the wise old man who lived in a shack in the woods."

"Howcome she couldn't wait 'til morning?"

"It was important. And stop interrupting," she grouched, swatting my leg with her bare foot. "When the fairy princess got to the wise old man's shack, he was communing with the spirits who'd come calling."

"He was talking to the fireplace," I said petulantly.

Claudia groaned. "He was talking to the spirits," she insisted. "Then the fairy princess gave him a slip of paper with a question on it."

"What was the question?"

"She wanted to know what to name her soon-to-be-born child."

“You mean she wanted him to ask the fireplace.”

She gave an enigmatic grin then rolled the sweating bottle of Pepsi across her forehead, unblemished and makeup-free, as always. “Anyway,” she continued, “he read the question, then he wrote something on the paper and handed it back to the fairy princess. Then she set off for home. When she got to the edge of the woods, the full moon—the Hunter’s Moon—came out from behind the clouds and lit up the whole yard. It was like the sky had burst into white-hot fire. She could see past the hog pen and barn and the clouds and stars, all the way to the edge of the universe.”

She leaned her head back and stared at the ceiling, as if she were gazing through the wood and shingles into a fulgent fall sky. “Then the child’s name came to her,” she said dreamily. “Luna, Roman goddess of the moon, bright and beautiful and strong.” She winked at me. “And you are.”

“So are you, Claudia.” I crawled over to her and wrapped my arms around her legs, damp with sweat. “You’re not like anybody else.”

She sighed and handed me the bottle. I secretly preferred Mountain Dew, but since Claudia drank Pepsi, I’d forced myself to acquire a taste for it. I took a slug, then managed a hyperbolic belch and burst into giggles.

“I don’t need manners,” I said smugly. “I’m a goddess, just like you said. I’m not like anybody else, except you.” I pointed to my sutured calf. “See? I’ve got a red mark on me, just like you’ve got a red birthmark on your tummy. Now we’re both marked. I’m just like you.”

Her hazel eyes went stony. “Listen to me, Luna. You’re not marked. Hear me?” Her tone held fear, dread. “You’re not

marked.”

“What’s wrong, Claudia?”

She jerked my chin up and glared at me. “Don’t ever say that again. Understand? You’re not like me.”

I pushed her hand away and scrambled on my hands and knees to the top of the steps. The taste of bile filled my mouth, as if my innards had shuffled without warning. My heart was pounding in my belly, lungs throbbing in my throat.

She padded toward me, her jingle bell anklet making a tinny sound. “Say it.”

I shook my head defiantly.

“Say it, Luna.”

“I’m not like you,” I whimpered.

She knelt beside me and stroked my hair, both of us silent. Her touch felt tentative, her hand cold, spiritless.

I listened to her jingling inside the house, then upstairs to her bedroom and locking the door. The music came next. That song about owls crying in the night, the rainbow’s end, rivers running dry, running red. The song she would play whenever she’d disappear inside herself, alone in her room. Always that song. Over and over.

“You need to get her a doctor, Mama,” I overheard Aunt Lorraine tell Grandma during one of Claudia’s previous episodes. “Or maybe send her somewhere for a little while, let somebody who knows about this kind of thing get her straightened out once and for all.”

I was hiding behind the drapes in the living room, eavesdropping while they talked in hushed tones in the kitchen. Uncle Jack was upstairs trying to coax Claudia out of her room. I could hear him talking to her through the door in

his husky voice. Uncle Jack was a burly man, ursine and coarse. When I was a child, he reminded me of Grizzly Adams.

“Send her where?” Grandma said sharply. “Some asylum with padded walls and a bunch of crazy people roaming around drooling and moaning? You really think that’s the place for your sister? She just gets a little depressed is all.”

“What in the world has she got to be depressed about? She’s twenty-eight years old, living at home rent-free, never worked a day in her life, except whatever piddly jobs she does on the farm. I should be so lucky.”

Aunt Lorraine sat at the Formica table, pushing pie crumbs around her plate with her fork. She lit a cigarette and inhaled languidly. She was thirteen years older than Claudia—the clichéd homely elder sister, with a purposeful gait, as if she were marching off to battle, a cigarette perpetually dangling between her fingers, nail polish in perfect three-part harmony with her lipstick and shoes, tightly permed cropped brown hair dyed a shade too dark for her pasty complexion. She resembled an aging Morticia Addams, sans come-hither eyes and sleek figure. Claudia was the golden child, and Aunt Lorraine knew it.

She flicked her ashes in her plate. “You think it’s good for Luna to see her mama like this?” she said primly. “It was one thing when she was little, but she’s not a baby anymore. It’s bad enough the child doesn’t know her daddy from a field hand, which is probably what he was.”

“Don’t start that again, Lorraine.”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t thought of it. Mark my words, she’ll start asking questions about both of them soon enough.” She clucked her tongue. “Sometimes I think she’d be better off

away from all this.”

“You mean better off with you.” Grandma wet a dishcloth and wiped down the table contentiously, as if she were scrubbing scuffmarks off the floor. “These spells don’t happen often anymore. You’re overreacting.”

“I think you’re *underreacting*.” Aunt Lorraine sipped her iced tea then traced the rim of the glass with her fingertip, emitting an eerie trill that sent a shiver through me. “Maybe it was hormones at first, after she got pregnant, then post-partum depression,” she said. “Maybe if she’d seen a doctor then she’d be fine now.”

“Doctor Hollis said there’s nothing wrong with her a little rest and patience won’t take care of.”

“Doctor Hollis is a quack. You need to find her a specialist. Soon as she started acting funny that winter, you should have taken her to Duke. I don’t care what Daddy said, God rest his soul.”

The music stopped and I heard Claudia’s upstairs door creak open. I leaned into the silence—upstairs and down—the gathering sway of momentary stillness when possibility and certainty collide.

“Feeling better now?” I could hear Uncle Jack ask, in the conciliatory tone he reserved for children and injured animals. “Your mama says you been in there since yesterday. What in the world you been doing?”

I pictured her tipping her head and peering up at him coquettishly, the way she did whenever he would tease her. “Nothing,” she said whimsically. “Just wishing on a star.”

He chuckled. “Well, come on down and get something to eat.”