

# 1

*Bellefontaine, Louisiana, 1945*

It was the first dead body I'd ever seen.

Thick July heat pressed in, sticking my dress to my skin, while steam rose from waters as dark as motor oil. Cypressess held the sky aloft, and there—in my little haven in the bayou, where the marshy ground turned firm and the old fallen blackgum slowly fell to pieces—lay a man with skin like molasses. Black eyes stared upward, fixed on eternity.

*He shouldn't be here.* That was my first thought. Nobody else knew the way into the secret heart of the swamp, through the sucking mud and tangled underbrush. Yet here he was.

Something squirmed in the shadows of his mouth, and I pressed my hands to my stomach. If I threw up, Mother would be angry. I already had mud on my dress, which was bad enough.

Lured by horrified fascination, I stepped closer. *What happened? Was he murdered?* I couldn't tell. The dead man lay so still that he gave the impression of something missing, rather than something there, as if he were nothing but a yawning void or a cicada's left-behind skin. Empty.

I knelt. Up close, his flesh was ruined, his body swollen, his right hand chewed to shreds. Faint rustling drifted from his mouth—worms *definitely* wriggled inside. I leaned in and studied the wreckage of his face. Something familiar...

I jerked backward, sprawling to the ground. More mud on my dress. But it didn't matter—no, because this dead man was no stranger. This was Tom Fletcher.

And I *hated* Tom Fletcher.

True fear fluttered in my belly. I couldn't be alone with him, not even if he was dead. I had to get away, across town to the big house, and tell Etta.

Scrambling back like a spider, I made it halfway to the edge of the clearing before my panic subsided enough for me to think. Tom was bad, yes. But Etta was good, with her warm cookies and warmer words. I didn't want her to see his vacant face, those eyes full of nothing.

I straightened up, brushed myself off, and tried hard to be brave. Even so, I stood there a long time. Closing Tom's eyes seemed impossible, but for Etta's sake, I had to. She shouldn't remember her husband like this.

I forced my feet to move.

When I got close, Tom's cold obsidian skin stole the warmth from my fingers. One eye had retreated into his skull and his lids didn't fit together right, but when I finished, the blank stare was gone. He looked more peaceful, somehow.

Then I wiped my hands on my dress, went to the water's edge, and threw up in the bushes.

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“Lucia, child, what've you gotten into? The pigpen?” Etta Fletcher put big hands on big hips and laughed, her teeth flashing white in her round, dark face. “I'll hear your mama cryin' from here when she sees that dress.” She clucked her tongue and turned away.

The plantation's kitchen was the same as ever, with its crackling hearth and billows of sweet steam. Etta stood at the stove, frying something in a dark iron pan. Oil popped and sizzled.

"Cinnamon rolls," she said.

My stomach soured. For once, I didn't want sweets. I just wanted Etta to turn around and listen, and I wanted to be brave enough to tell her. While I gathered my courage, the kitchen door opened, and Etta's son strode in, setting a dirty, tool-filled bucket on the spotless floor.

I shrank back. Nicholas terrified me, just like his father. He straightened, fixing me with creepy yellow eyes. At nineteen, he was six years my senior, but might've been a hundred for his size. He was as black as his papa and larger than any grown-up I'd ever seen.

"Ma," he said. "What's she doing here?"

Etta glanced over her shoulder. "She's come for a treat. An' since she's mudded her dress, I might take pity and give her two."

With a wink, she offered a fragrant roll. It coiled in her hand like a snake, oozing vanilla cream. From the doorway, Nicholas gave me a look like he'd found a cockroach in his gumbo.

Vomit still coated the back of my throat. I stared at the pastry as a sticky glob of icing plopped to the floor. "Tom's dead," I said.

Etta's grin slowly died and her brows drew together. "What? *My* Tom?"

I nodded, wishing Nicholas would disappear instead of staring at me like that. He made me want to crawl in a hole somewhere. "I found him in the swamp. He's dead."

Though Nicholas's expression didn't change, he quit looking, at least. His terrible yellow eyes shifted toward his mother. Etta's cinnamon roll fell in slow motion, landing topside down and squirting cream across the weathered floorboards.

Silence. Nicholas caught at his mother's elbow, but she shook him off.

I wondered why she didn't cry. My mother cried over nothing—stained dresses, rain flattening her hair. But Etta stood straight and wiped her hands on her apron.

“You show us, child,” she said. “You gone show us.”