

PROLOGUE

Dahlia

I used to think that if I just stayed home I would be safe. So when the chance come, I struck a deal with a boy so homely and tongue-tied no one else would have him: I'd put some kind of supper on the table and sleep in his bed every night and he'd bring me jigsaws, and teetering stacks of books from the library and never ask me to leave the house again. Louie was just nineteen. And me--I was even younger, though I hadn't felt like a girl in a long time.

Then one night I woke up to a particular kind of lonesome, one that couldn't be answered by him or the people who kept company with me on the TV, or the ones that moved between my books and my head and sometimes deeper. It was the ache that wants a child, and no matter how I tried to shoo it out, it wouldn't leave.

That's when I found out there was no safe place. That even locked up in my six rooms, I'd never stopped traveling. And what's more, there was some kind of unseen direction to it all. What it was--and why--well, I wouldn't begin to understand that till the kids were practically grown. And most I don't expect to know in this lifetime.

But once I got a glimpse, everyone looked different. Louie and the boy my loneliness drug to the door and all the rest that followed. It was like there was a radiance to them. I only wish I'd seen it sooner. I only wish everyone could see it.

Part 1: 1959

1.

A PLACE CALLED THE MOSCATELLIS

Agnes

The day she came to take me away the sky was pure white. I sat on my crate by the window, wishing for snow so I could watch the kids next door play in it. Every time they opened up their mouths to taste it, I opened mine too. It made me forget the bad thing I had done. But the snow never came, and neither did the kids.

I took out the secret box I hid in a corner of the attic, and touched my presents one by one: a glass stone so clear the blue showed through when I held it up to the window, a broke whistle, a wish bone, and a tiny doll with hair the color of mine. I tried to open her eyes to see if they looked like me too, but they were sewed shut forever.

When I heard Mrs. Dean calling my name on the stairs, I snapped my box shut and put it back in its hiding place. The door flung open.

“You better come down. Someone’s here for you.”

Someone? Was it the one who used to bring me presents? I didn’t dare ask.

Downstairs a lady I’d never seen before sat on the edge of the couch. She patted the spot next to her and made a face like a smile. “Hello, Aggie.”

I stood in the middle of the room, looking at the floor till she got up and crouched beside me--so close I could smell the stuff she sprayed on herself when she got out of the tub. She was talking, too, but all I heard was Mrs. Dean’s voice inside my head. You touched my Jean Naté, didn’t you? Don’t lie to me!

The lady said something about the vestigation, that word Mr. and Mrs. Dean had been saying every day. It made my bad hand ache worse. “I’m here to take you to a new home. Just temporarily. Do you know what that means?”

I studied the pink swirls in the carpet, trying not to think of the day I lied about the Jean Naté or the other thing I did. The worser one that started up the vestigation. Did she really expect me to answer?

“You’ll be staying with the Moscatellis until we can find you a more permanent family.”

The color of her coat reminded me of the tree outside my window when the daddy next door came home from work and the light poured through. I wanted to touch it, but I knew better.

Mrs. Dean had folded my clothes into a pile and packed them neatly into a paper sack with a red lollipop on top. It was the first sweet she'd ever given me. When she held out the bag, I closed my eyes and dreamed the word no.

"See what she's like?" she told the lady in the summer green coat, pressing the bag into her hands. "Good luck to the next family if they think they can do better."

The lady must have heard my secret no because when we were leaving, she set the brown bag on the floor just inside the door. "How about we leave all that right here, Aggie? What do you say?"

I squinted at the lollipop and her pink mouth talking to me and the white day outside and nodded. Then I stopped and pointed at the attic stairs until she understood.

"Is there something up there you want to bring with you? Something of yours?" Mrs. Dean was still listening from the living room. "Everything she owns is in that bag. She's got nothing of her own."

But when I didn't move, she let me go upstairs to look. Long as she doesn't try to steal something on the way out.

She made Nancy let her see my secret box after we came down.

"Where on earth did this junk com from?" Her face knotted up like it did when she was going to tell Mr. Dean on me. Only he wasn't home. Finally, she shrugged and handed it back. "Belongs in the trash if you ask me."

At that point, everything I knew about myself came from the Deans:

Mr. Dean was the first one to tell me I was an Indian. See those people getting their asses kicked?" he said, pointing at his TV when I came downstairs to pee. Well, that's you. Since I didn't know anyone else who looked like that, I was pretty sure I was the last one left. Me and the one who gave me my presents. Only I hadn't seen her for so long I was pretty sure the people in Mr. Dean's TV got her too.

Yourmother they called her like she was something bad and I was the one who did it. Yourmother was a whore who didn't care two shits about me and I was going to turn out just like her. A dope fiend, too. You know what that is, Agnes?

That's when I learned you don't have to know what words mean to understand them. I nodded at Mr. Dean. Yes, I knew.

I didn't grow right or talk right or look right, but it didn't matter because nobody would ever want to talk to me or look at me anyway.

My father was no one. No one didn't know I existed and if he ever found out, he'd either piss on me or strangle me. One or the other. If it was him, Mr. Dean said he'd choose door #2. That always made him laugh.

Something called the asthma lived in my chest. It slept for weeks, but if I caught a cold or tried to run or got scared, it squeezed until I couldn't breathe. I stopped running, and I gave up being scared, too--at least, most of the time. But sometimes the asthma went right ahead and attacked anyway. Then they took me to the hospital where I slept in a tent and ladies who thought my name was Honey gave me medicine. I learned my colors from their Jello. Green was the best. After I went back to the Deans, I tasted it in my mouth every night before I fell asleep. Green. It wasn't just the best color; it was the best anything.

I didn't tell anyone my name wasn't Honey and it wasn't Agnes either. It was Agnés. When I spoke it to myself, it sounded like the whispery noise the trees make when they talk to each other. Ahhhn-yess.

Mine was never the story of all that though. Not the room with the window where I lived at the Deans' house or the paper bag with the red lollipop on top I tried to leave behind or all the ways it found to follow me.

No, mine was the story of the river. I had never seen it or heard its name, but it was the only thing that never abandoned me. When I sat on my crate and watched the kids next door, it ran and leaped. When I kept quiet so I wouldn't wake Mr. Dean or scare the asthma, it sang in the dark; and when I thought I was all alone, it reached out and stroked my face.

Everything will be all right, the river said, and somehow I believed it. I always believed it.