

WILD WOMEN AND THE BLUES

DENNY S. BRYCE



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To my mother, Daisy Mae

I wish you were here to read it

PART 1



CHAPTER 1



SAWYER

Friday, June 5, 2015
Chicago

On the fifth floor of the Bronzeville Senior Living Facility, I stand outside the smallest room in the world, doing my best to ignore the dropped ceiling and square linoleum tiles, stoking my claustrophobia.

No windows. No air. No natural light. Just stark-white walls out of focus like cheesecloth over a camera lens.

The old woman in the bed adds to my anxiety, as does the fact that I'm almost out of cash. But nothing will defeat me. Not this go-round. Not with the help of the old lady in the bed—Honoree Dalcour, my last great hope.

The backpack digs into my shoulder. I check the time on my cell phone, eight hours until my connecting flight to Paris. Six hours (fewer if I take a shuttle back to O'Hare) to coax the 110-year-old woman in the bed (who could die at any second or who could be dead now) into telling me a story to fix my life or more likely help me finish my film project.

You see, I'm a graduate student chasing a doctorate in media studies. My documentary thesis focuses on the legendary Black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux in 1925. The project, however, has a gaping hole, smack in the center. A hole I haven't thought about in over a year. Not since my sister, Azizi, was killed in a car crash with me behind the wheel.

Fifteen months and a lot of tequila later, I need something normal to aspire to, something ordinary and reasonable like finishing the damn film. God knows, something other than talking to my sister's ghost, a conversation that unquestionably doesn't constitute normal, ordinary, or reasonable.

"How long are you planning to stand in the doorway?" A young woman in navy-blue scrubs, pushing a medicine cart, stops next to me. "If you want to talk to Miss Honoree, you should go inside."

Her no-nonsense style makes me wonder: Does she sense my fear of small spaces, which annoys her, or does she merely want me out of her way?

"Excuse me?" My version of indignant is a pitch too high for a man with my usually deep baritone.

She tilts her head and frowns. "I said if you have something to say, you should stand next to her bed. Then you're not some faceless stranger, quizzing her from the other side of the room."

I can tell she doesn't like me. She's looking at me as if I were a wad of gum on the bottom of her shoe.

"I'm giving her a few minutes to wake up," I explain.

Blue Scrubs folds her arms over her stomach as her large brown eyes casually damn me to hell. This erases any hope of our having a future together.

By the way, this is my vivid imagination at work. She's beautiful and my age. Midtwenties. Super-short natural hair. Dark skin and those luminous brown eyes. The color of midnight and stars. Also, I'm a romantic, and if I were normal, I'd have her number by now.

Blue Scrubs sighs impatiently. "Don't ask her insipid questions about her secret to living such a long life. She hates that."

I smile, but her contempt is soul-crushing. "I promise I'm only here to ask her non-insipid questions. I have some photos from 1925, and if she remembers where they were taken or can confirm who was in the photos with her, it could make all the difference for my film project."

"Yeah. That is the reason you're here, or the reason I overheard you babbling about at the front desk." Her judgmental

gaze skims over my perfectly groomed dreadlocks, my stylish but plain white tee, my faded jeans, and my expensive loafers. My shoulders tense. The examination feels too thorough. Can she tell I'm not wearing socks?

"You're from Hollywood." The sneer in her voice is buzz-worthy.

I wiggle my fingers. "Comme ci, come ça. I'm more Los Angeles, well, Santa Monica, to be precise, than Hollywood," I say in my defense. "What tipped you off to my roots?"

"I told you I heard you at the front desk." Turning slightly, she peers into the room. "At least you're not one of those obnoxious people from the networks who visit once a year to gawk at her."

"Once a year? Why?"

"On her birthday. They come to see if she can still eat, talk, or hear." Blue Scrubs gestures with an angry flip of her wrist.

I wince. "I want to talk about her life in 1925 and show her some photos. I may also record her, take an oral history of sorts?"

Her gaze is resolute. "As long as you remember, she's not a freak show. Just because she's lived longer than most and kept her wits about her, doesn't mean people like you should use her as a ratings boost or clickbait."

I sigh, exasperated by all the negativity directed at me, and I don't even know her name. "I should introduce myself. I'm Sawyer Hayes. The *Ugly American* filmmaker." I smile. She doesn't. My obscure reference is just that—obscure—but I had hoped for a smile or a less pained expression. "It is a 1963 Marlon Brando flick. I'm a classic-movie buff."

"I'm Lula Kent." She extends a hand, and we awkwardly shake, touching fingertips only. "I'm a nurse's assistant here."

"Ms. Kent, or may I call you Lula?"

The go-to-hell expression answers my question.

"Okay, then, Ms. Kent. I only need a few minutes of her time."

Her side-eye is a steel blade cutting across my face into my chest. Now, what did I do?

“Who gave you permission to visit Miss Honoree? I missed that part when I was eavesdropping at the reception desk.”

I like her for admitting to the flaw of nosiness, but I need a second to think. Truth is, my grandmother isn’t aware of my trip to Chicago, let alone my visit to the Bronzeville Senior Living Facility. Or that I borrowed a few items from her long-ago box, my nickname for the storage bin she keeps in her attic.

From the look in Lula’s eyes, I can’t dodge the question. I have to say something. I nod toward the woman in the bed. “My grandmother has been paying her expenses since 1985. I think the receptionist felt obligated to let me in.”

Lula cranes her neck. “Mrs. Margaret Hendrickson is your grandmother?”

“Yes, and Honoree’s guardian angel, you might say.”

Lula visibly grits her teeth. “Her name is Ms. Dalcour or Miss Honoree. It is disrespectful to call your elders by only their first names, especially when you’ve never been introduced.” She returns to her cart and wraps her fingers around the handlebar, thinking about my throat, I imagine.

“Don’t stay too long,” she orders. “Miss Honoree needs her rest.”

CHAPTER 2



HONOREE

Friday, October 23, 1925
Chicago

Honoree Dalcour sashayed into the basement of Miss Hattie's Garden Cafe a little after seven o'clock in the evening. A squirrel-collared coat hung over her arm, and a box purse dangled from her wrist. Weaving through crates of bootleg whiskey and burlap bags of sweet potatoes, she swung her hips with an extra oomph. It made the rhinestones on her drop-waist dress crackle—just like she wanted them to and with good reason.

The proprietor of the Dreamland Cafe, the ritziest black-and-tan nightclub on the Stroll, was holding a midnight audition at his establishment on State Street. Only girls Mr. Buttons had seen dance with his own eyes—and wanted to hire bad enough to risk a beef with another club owner—received an invitation. Rumor on the Stroll was an invite guaranteed a spot in the Dreamland chorus.

Honoree was no dumb Dora—and didn't believe every note of chin music she heard—but this once, she ab-so-lute-ly, positively believed. And why not? An invitation had been pushed under her front door that very afternoon.

Hot diggity dog!

After three years of dance lessons, tap classes, practicing all day, peeling potatoes all night, and selling policy player dream books (a pamphlet of lucky numbers for gamblers) while keep-

ing her boss, Archie Graves, and his fat fingers from creeping too far up her shift, and, well—just like that—she was on her way to the Dreamland Cafe.

All she had to do was stay clear of Archie, which shouldn't be too tough. It was Friday, and he spent every Friday through Saturday morning in his office with an alderman, a madam, and, of late, an automobile dealer from Kenosha, playing poker, guzzling hooch, and smoking marijuana.

With Archie preoccupied, Honoree could skip the midnight show without too much trouble—and she'd had her share of trouble with Archie Graves. A small bone in her jaw still ached from the last time she was on the wrong side of his troublesome left hand.

Soon, she wouldn't have to worry about the goons at Miss Hattie's. A better class of coloreds patronized the Dreamland Cafe. Educated. Proud Black people. Fearless people. People who spat in the face of Jim Crow, not just getting by but *living* their lives.

The late Booker T. Washington had written the book *A New Negro for a New Century*, and Honoree kept a copy in her shopping bag. It was a gift from her childhood sweetheart, Ezekiel Bailey, given to her three years ago, before he disappeared.

She was sixteen at the time, and, of course, Ezekiel broke her heart. She didn't cry the blues like most of the flappers in the neighborhood because her man ran off. She was better than that. Better than any of the chorus girls at Miss Hattie's who wept over a man, good or bad, for months.

Honoree was a sharecropper's daughter, accustomed to hard work and hard times. She had no desire to have a man for the sake of having one, and not for better or for worse, and she made no apologies for her independent mind. Just like she had no qualms about dancing at a ghetto speakeasy every night of the week, except Sundays because she had plans.

She glided over the sawdust floor, moving effortlessly down the hall toward the dressing room. Light as a feather, she twirled by the freshly stoked coal furnace, sweat dripping down her

back, but the heat couldn't stop her feet from dancing: step, shuffle, ball change, step, shuffle, ball change.

With a swing of her hip, the dressing room door opened, and the woodsy, damp smell of sawdust and talc powder filled her nostrils.

A dim bulb in the hallway bathed the sawdust floor in pools of light, and a tune came to Honoree's mind from *Shuffle Along*, the all-Negro Broadway musical she planned to headline in one day, when it returned to New York City.

The rhythm took hold of her limbs.

She grabbed the strand of pearls around her neck, gave them a sassy twirl, and belted: "I'm gonna dance at the Dreamland Cafe!"

A shadow stepped from the darkness.

Honoree gasped. "Archie?" Her knees turned soft as tissue paper. She pushed the button on the wall, lighting up the room.

"For crying out loud!" Honoree yelled.

"Sorry to interrupt, ma'am." A brown-skinned girl with big brown eyes stood, shaking like a skinned cat in winter.

"You scared the heebie-jeebies out of me." Honoree crossed to the opposite side of the dressing room. The ragamuffin might be one of them crazy colored girls from down south. Only the other week, Honoree had a fearsome episode when one of 'em tried to grab her purse on State Street.

"I'm sorry." The girl kicked at the sawdust, worn boots ready to fall apart. "Didn't mean no harm, ma'am."

Judging from her mud-caked clothes and bruised jaw, Honoree guessed the girl had fought her way from the Mason-Dixon Line to Chicago. "You're supposed to make a sound when someone enters a room she thinks is empty."

"I thought you saw me. I was sittin' right there." She pointed a shaky finger at a stack of burlap bags.

Honoree's mind had been so full of the Dreamland Cafe, she would've missed Jack Johnson in a prizefight. "I didn't ask where you were sitting."

The girl's eyes grew as round as MoonPies.

"You best hightail it outta here before Miss Dolly shows. She doesn't tolerate no squatters."

"I'm no squatter. My name is Bessie Palmer. I'm the new chorus girl Mr. Graves hired."

Honoree's throat pinched as if someone had grabbed her by the tonsils. Why would Archie hire a new girl? Had he heard the rumors about the audition? "Archie didn't hire you."

"Yes, he did. I can prove it." Bessie dug into her coat pocket. "This is my contract. This is Mr. Graves's signature."

Honoree glanced at the papers. "I don't care what you're holding in your hand. Your legs are too short. Nose too broad, and you're two shades too dark."

Ugly words. Honoree expected to draw a slew of tears for her trouble, but Bessie raised her chin.

Honoree snatched the paper from Bessie's hand and stared at the crumpled page. "These are the same paragraphs Archie called a contract when I signed one two years ago. When did he hire you?"

"Last week."

Honoree handed her the contract with a sigh of relief. Archie had hired Bessie days before Honoree had heard squat about the audition.

"Don't you believe me?" Bessie's voice was as shaky as Jell-O.

Honoree shrugged but did not reply. The ragamuffin could stew for a few minutes—the price to pay for scaring Honoree half to death.

The other chorus girls would arrive soon, and this might be her only chance, without curious eyes watching, to pack up her costumes, makeup, and new coral-pink gown, a gossamer silk number, with rhinestones and tassels hanging from the hem.

She sat in front of the mirror, but Bessie stood behind her, chewing on her lip like a meal.

"What are you staring at?" Honoree demanded.

"I wanna ask you a question," the girl said in a small voice.

"Go on, then. Ask."

"I need a costume."

"Goodness, gracious. Didn't Miss Dolly give you a costume?"

"I never met Miss Dolly."

Honoree removed her makeup pouch from her shopping bag.

"Then who taught you the dance numbers?"

"I—I been rehearsing by myself."

"Alone? How?"

"Don't worry." Bessie's tone hardened. "I can dance."

Honoree faced her, intrigued. The girl's brown eyes were angry slits. "Miss Orphan Annie, you have a claw."

"Why you wanna go and call me a name?"

Honoree arched an eyebrow, grudgingly impressed with her sass. "If Miss Dolly didn't teach you, who did?"

Bessie opened her mouth, but Honoree interrupted before she could say a word. "Forget I asked."

This was likely Honoree's last night at Miss Hattie's. What was the point of listening to a new girl's story?

"I need a costume," Bessie said, staring at her reflection in the mirror. Again, she was standing too close, right behind Honoree.

"Lord, stop sneaking up on me."

"I don't sneak." Bessie pulled a piece of string hanging from her sleeve. "Been standing right here. Not moving since the first time."

Honoree sighed. "Okay, then."

She reached into her shopping bag and handed Bessie a pair of ruffled bloomers and a rhinestone-covered muslin bodice.

"Now, stop pestering me."

Bessie's face lit up like a Christmas tree. "Thank you!"

"It's a hand-me-down and won't fit. So don't get too excited. I'm quite a bit taller than you."

Bessie's large eyes blinked back tears as her lips quivered.

"Don't have a conniption." Honoree eyed her up and down. "I'm taller than you, but we're about the same size in the hips and bubs."

"That's what I thought, too."

"After you're done with the outfit, you give it back washed and ironed. You understand?"

"Yes, ma'am." Bessie hugged the clothes to her chest, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

Honoree squeezed her eyes shut and groaned. She felt sorry for the child but also wanted to strangle her. She reminded Honoree of hard times. Plus, the bruises on her face turned Honoree's stomach.

"Come here," Honoree said gruffly. "I don't like seeing anyone onstage, even at a brawling speakeasy like Miss Hattie's, looking like they just took a doozy of a beating." Honoree rummaged through her makeup. "We need to cover up those black-and-blue marks."

"How would I do that?"

Honoree organized her makeup: face powder, black pencil, a small black brush, lipstick, and cake mascara. "Have a seat."

Bessie grabbed a nearby crate and sat, fidgeting like her rump had landed in the electric chair with the warden's finger on the switch.

"Sit still and pay attention to me." Honoree dipped the pink puff into a powder tin and patted her cheeks. "Now, you do the same over your bruise."

Bessie put more face powder in her lap than on her face.

"I swear, you gonna give me apoplexy." Honoree picked up a cloth and dabbed it in a jar of hand cream. "Turn toward me."

Holding Bessie's chin, she wiped her brow, her cheeks, her chin. "Learn how to do this for yourself, and don't mention I let you use my makeup. I'm not known for my generosity."

After a few minutes, Honoree turned Bessie to the mirror. "See. Makes a difference."

Bessie grinned at her reflection. "We have the same shape mouth."

"I'll admit a slight resemblance," Honoree said begrudgingly, not wanting to burst Bessie's bubble. "Though it won't make you the next Queen of Sheba."

Bessie winced. Honoree rolled her eyes, but a tinge of sympathy ran through her. "I guess we do have similar mouths," she conceded. "Our lips are too thick for Clara Bow's heart-

shaped lips." She picked up the lipstick. "Colored girls paint their mouths differently."

Bessie puckered her lips.

"Stop acting up and watch me." Honoree coated her lips with a dark red color, the shade of sunset. "Are you watching?"

"Yes, ma'am," Bessie said eagerly. "May I ask you another question?"

Honoree nodded.

"What's your name, or should I call you ma'am, or is it miss?"

"Don't miss or ma'am me. We save that for Miss Dolly out of respect 'cause she's been here since before Miss Hattie died. My name's Honoree, spelled with two e's but pronounced Honor-ray."

"You sure have a pretty name."

"Yes, it is. And French. My father was Louisiana Creole." She raised an eyebrow at Bessie and her bruised but young face. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen—"

"You look younger. Not old enough to do much of nothin'. Where are your parents?"

"Ain't got no parents. Been on my own for a while."

Honoree knew about being on her own. "Who beat you up?"

Bessie stared at the floor as if she were counting splinters.

"Go on, you can tell me; I won't say anything."

"A man I met who I thought would treat me better, but I was wrong."

"You should leave him," Honoree said, putting away her makeup. "I never get my bloomers in a bunch over a man, in particular when the man doesn't treat me right."

"I ain't as pretty as you, and I don't—I don't have much to say." Her voice softened. "I gotta take what I can get if I wanna man."

"Then don't want a man so bad."

Bessie's jaw fell like a poorly stitched hem. "Can't help myself."

"You're sixteen years old. Sure you can."

"My mama married my pops when she was fourteen."

Honoree had fallen in love with Ezekiel when she was twelve, but what good had that done her?

"A woman who doesn't leave a man who beats her is a fool." Honoree applied another coat of lipstick. "I would never stay with a man who hit me more than once." She patted her lips with a tissue. "I'll never marry, neither. Those are my rules—rules a girl like you should keep in mind."

The door banged open. The mirrors shook. Ms. Dolly James stood at the top of the steps, a hand on her hip, her generous bosoms heaving. "What are you two jabbering about?"

Honoree put down her lipstick.

Bessie grabbed her arm. "Who's she?"

"Miss Dolly. The blues singer in charge of the chorus girls."

"Lord almighty," Bessie muttered. "She looks something fierce."

A gloriously healthy woman, Miss Dolly was impressive if for no other reason than the breadth of her backside and the size of her bubs—which drew as much attention as her rugged alto.

"I asked a question." She thundered down the steps, dragging her beaver coat behind her and waving her prize possession, a silver flask, like a pointer. "Is anyone gonna answer me?"

Honoree signaled Bessie with a nod. "Go on over there."

Bessie moved from Honoree's side and turned toward Miss Dolly. "Evening, ma'am."

"Who the hell is she?" Miss Dolly asked Honoree. Bessie eased into a corner.

"Speak up," Miss Dolly ordered. "What's your name?"

"Bessie Louise Palmer."

"Bessie, you say?" Miss Dolly flung her fur coat over her chair, the only chair in the room, and sat in front of her piece of mirror. "The two of you need to get dressed," she said, pulling a Victorian hatpin from her cloche. "Where are those other witches?" She lit a cigarette. "I'm still waiting to learn what you two were gossiping about."

A busybody, Miss Dolly always wanted to be in-the-know, but before Honoree could speak, Bessie had stepped up to the

plate. "We were only wondering what would happen if we got discovered at Miss Hattie's by—by Eubie Blake."

Honoree hid a smile. She liked a girl who could weave a quick lie.

"Nobody's coming to Miss Hattie's to take neither one of you to Broadway." Miss Dolly aimed her flask at Bessie. "You: too dark-skinned. And you"—she aimed at Honoree—"you might pass a brown-bag test, being high yellow with good hair and all, but you're always daydreaming."

"I don't daydream. I make plans," Honoree said, her voice firm. The blues singer had talent but no ambition other than to work at Miss Hattie's and drain a flask of hooch every hour and wait for Archie Graves to love her back.

The Archie business made Honoree feel almost sorry for Miss Dolly. Honoree had fallen for his charms briefly, too. Oddly, he was capable of showing kindness, and even some wit now and then. Drunk on his behind, he could give you plenty of reasons for the man he had become. Almost lynched at twelve and orphaned a year later, after burying his parents, he found his way to Chicago and raised his younger brother, Dewey, best he could. By then, life had ruined him, left him angry, greedy, and willing to do anything to survive.

"Ain't nothing wrong with daydreaming," Bessie was saying. "I ain't that black, neither. If I were, Mr. Graves wouldn't have hired me."

"I got no idea why Archie hired you." Miss Dolly popped a cigarette between her teeth. "Must've owed somebody something."

"I'm an excellent dancer." Bessie had gone from cowering in a corner to looking Miss Dolly dead in the eye. "Florence Mills or Josephine Baker might come in here one day—see us perform and—"

Honoree snapped her fingers. "Just like that, we'd be on our way to Broadway or Paris, France."

Miss Dolly unscrewed the lid on her flask. "And I'll be singing at the Palmer House while y'all be dancing right here until the day you die." She laughed. "Unless Archie doesn't like what

he sees tonight and fires you on the spot. By the way, he'll be watching all night long."

Honoree's leg twitched hard, kicking over her shopping bag beneath the table. "All night long? Archie ain't playing poker tonight?" With Trudy filling her spot, slipping away would be twice as hard with Archie roaming about. "He never cancels his poker game. What happened?"

"I ain't no postman." Miss Dolly held the flask to her lips. "You want to know why he ain't playing poker tonight—ask him yerself, if you dare." She took a swig. "Anyways, you should be smarter than to nose around in his affairs."

Virginia and Edna Mae, two of the other chorus girls, entered the dressing room laughing and cursing, and chatting like children in a playpen until they set eyes on Miss Dolly and clammed right up.

"Where's Trudy?" Miss Dolly asked.

Edna Mae shrugged. Having worked at Miss Hattie's since before Prohibition, the tough-talking blues singer didn't ruffle her. "I ain't got no idea."

Pressing rouge into her cheek, Honoree could only guess at Trudy's whereabouts; the bleach-blond chorus girl could be anywhere. Gary, Indiana. Detroit. A North Side juice joint—anywhere partying with anyone, including Hymie Weiss and his North Side gang.

She was the only chorus girl who could dance Honoree's solos without Archie having a conniption.

"Trudy'll be here soon enough," said Edna Mae, the cafe's burlesque dancer. Naked from head to toe, she lifted and tugged at her bare breasts, comparing one to the other—her usual routine. Once she finished playing with her bubs, she strolled toward Honoree's crate, smacking Wrigley's Spearmint gum.

"She'll come falling through the door at the last minute, raring to go." Edna Mae stopped next to Honoree. "Don't worry. She'll be here."

"She better show." Miss Dolly lifted her skirt and slipped her hip flask beneath her garter. "I ain't explaining a missing girl to Archie. Not tonight."

She clapped her hands twice. "Y'all hurry up, get dressed, and get up them stairs. And don't forget to throw a robe on over your costume. King Johnny and the band are winding down." A cigarette dangled from her lips. "Come on now. It's showtime, ladies."

CHAPTER 3

SAWYER

Friday, June 5, 2015

Lula Kent walks away from me, straight-backed and righteous as hell, pushing her medicine cart of indignation. Quite the cross to bear for a girl her age, but she is not my concern.

I take a deep breath and step into Honoree's room (excuse me—Miss Honoree's room) and tread across the linoleum to the foot of one of those sturdy hospital beds, cranked two feet off the ground.

This close, Honoree Dalcour is all angles, thin arms and legs, jutting from beneath stiff white sheets. Propped up with pillows behind her head and under her elbows and knees, she reminds me of one of the broken dolls my sister used to bury in the backyard.

"Ma'am. Excuse me? I don't mean to disturb you, but—"

Honoree opens her eyes. "Who's there?" Her voice booms, bold and vigorous.

My chest tightens. I expected a weak whisper.

"Do you understand me? Speak up."

"Good afternoon, my name is Sawyer Hayes." I remove my backpack and place it on the floor. "How are you doing today?"

She stares at me as if there's food in my teeth. Then again, she may not be able to see me with her 110-year-old eyes.

"My name's Sawyer Hayes," I repeat. "I'm a film student from California. I'm here to talk to you about Chicago in the 1920s."

Pushing aside my phobia as best I can, I circle to the side of the bed. “Margaret Hendrickson, or Maggie White, the name you knew her by, had old photographs of you in her attic. On the back of each photo was this address and the name Honoree Dalcour and the year 1925—I assume the year the photo was taken.”

I don’t mention the other items in my grandmother’s long-ago box, including the most important find—a reel of film I sent to a restoration company in LA. From the scribbling on the canister, it could be a lost Micheaux—I am holding my breath because it is almost too much to hope for—but if it happens, my interview with Honoree will be the second most important thing I do this summer.

My documentary about a lost film would be a significant contribution to film history. How wild would it be if my thesis includes an exclusive interview with one of Micheaux’s performers? I might even make my dad jealous.

Honoree clears her throat, not a pleasant sound. “How’d you get in here?”

I nod toward the hallway. “I checked in at the front desk.”

“Don’t mean you can walk into my room, happy as you please.”

“Margaret Hendrickson gave me permission.”

“She’s the same person as Maggie White, huh?” Honoree’s tone is not so much surprise as irritation.

“Sorry, I forgot to mention: Maggie is my grandmother.”

Honoree gasps, a sharp inhale of surprise, or someone walked over her grave. “Well, ain’t that some shit!” She lets loose a coarse, bitter laugh.

I take a step back and put a little distance between us. An old woman can curse, but the laugh creeps me out. I switch gears. “Lula Kent told me you have the memory of an elephant.”

Honoree isn’t looking at me. She’s focusing on the space surrounding me. Maybe she sees ghosts, too, but I’m not ready to swap ghost stories.

“Lula talks too much, but only when she has a reason,” Honoree says. “What did you do to her?”

I raise my hand, palm out. "I swear, I didn't do anything to Lula."

"You had to do something." Her eyes slam shut, and her breathing is shallow and weird. Panic grips me.

"Miss Honoree? Are you okay?"

Her eyelids flutter open. "Maggie White is your grandmother, you say?"

My jaw slackens, and I'm gulping air. I thought for sure Honoree was a goner, but, just like that, she seems fine. Clear-eyed. Breathing better—voice strong.

"Yes, she is," I say finally. "Maybe I can jar your memory."

She nods. "Go on."

"You and my grandmother were neighbors. Her foster family lived next door." I learned this from a letter I found in the box that Maggie wrote to a friend but never mailed. "From what I understand, her being an orphan and all, and her foster parents being kind of strange, the two of you became close friends."

"Is that what she told you—that we were close friends?"

My grandmother told me nothing, but I don't ask a lot of questions. I knew Honoree existed because of the things I found in a crate in my grandmother's attic—a letter, a bill of sale, photos. "Yes. Close friends. BFFs. Why else would she pay your bills all these years?"

"I don't remember much about those days," Honoree said in a quiet voice. "How long ago was this, again?"

"Seventy-five years." Which sounds weird. How in the hell is she supposed to remember ninety years ago, let alone seventy-five, when at twenty-five, I can't remember yesterday? Then again, I can't forget one second of what happened one night fifteen months ago.

"Where were we again when we were neighbors?"

"Louisiana." I shove my hands into my pockets. "Baton Rouge, Louisiana."

"Come closer. I need to have a better look at you."

I move in but not too close. "Better?"

"What's wrong with your hair?"

I pull two braids away from my face and knot them behind my head. "They're called dreadlocks."

She scrunches up her nose. "You look like a girl."

"Not a girl." I point at my jaw. "Got a two-day-old beard."

"Do you have a job?"

Whoa. *Déjà vu*. Maggie had asked me the same question Sunday mornings when Sunday mornings were ordinary. Before the car crash. Before Azizi died.

A glimmer in the corner of my eye draws my attention as the oxygen in the room evaporates. I can't breathe. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and blink hard.

My sister, Azizi—excuse me, Azizi's ghost—is suddenly standing next to Honoree's headboard.

"Wake up, Sawyer Hayes! I asked you a question, boy. Do you have a job?"

My nerves are broken glass, my palms are damp, but seeing a ghost shouldn't be easy, right?

"Yes, I have a job," I say too loudly. Shit. I need to chill. The Azizi sighting has put me on edge. "Sorry. I didn't mean to raise my voice. To answer your question, I'm a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, working on my dissertation for a doctorate in film and media studies." I breathe in deep. "I also work for a production company, and I'm headed to Paris today to work on a film for my father."

"Making motion pictures doesn't sound like a job," Honoree says. "You work for your daddy?"

"This has nothing to do with my father." I try not to look at Azizi as I pace next to the bed. "I have some photos to show you, Miss Honoree. I also want to ask you a few questions."

She raises a hand to the bed's side railing, trying to pull herself upright, which I figure is a bad idea. Her arms are spindles made of bones and skin.

"You need me to adjust the bed?" I search for a lever or a button.

"Leave it be," Honoree snaps. "I can do this." She drags herself forward with one hand, but I can't watch her struggle with-

out trying to help. I go to the head of the bed and arrange her pillows so she can sit up.

"I said I don't need your help."

"Fine. No problem." I back away, not wanting to agitate her further. "How about if we examine the pictures. You're in them." I remove a handful of the photographs from my backpack. "May I show you?"

Honoree squints. "No, you may not. Why would I talk to you about my life? I don't know you, and even if I did, I don't tell my story to just any long-haired boy—who probably smokes reefer cigarettes and tells lies. You wanna hear about me? You gotta tell me something about you to make this worth my while."

"I don't lie, or smoke weed—not in Illinois—weed is illegal in this state." I'm holding the photos she won't look at, wondering how I can focus on changing her mind with Azizi's ghost staring at me. "Miss Honoree, please, just one photo." Yes, I'm begging, but if it works . . .

"In this photo, you are with Oscar Micheaux, the legendary Black filmmaker, and in another"—I pull from the stack—"you're with Louis Armstrong, the world's greatest trumpet player, and in this one—" I break my word and show her another and then another. "Here you're with Lil Hardin Armstrong and the blues singer Alberta Hunter."

Honoree rocks back against the pillows, eyeing me with a piercing glare.

"What happened in 1925 and why it happened is my business."

Something behind me moves, and I turn. Lula is standing in the archway. Has she come to check on Honoree or me?

"Would you like Sawyer to leave, Miss Honoree?" Lula says, walking by me without a glance. "He can come back another time—or not."

Honoree smiles. "Don't you worry about him, honey. I can handle eager young men with little boy minds in my sleep."

Lula adjusts Honoree's pillows. "Are you thirsty?"

"I could use a swallow."

Lula holds a glass of water with a straw, and Honoree takes a sip, but her gaze is locked on me. "I already told him if he wants to hear my story, he'll have to tell me his first, and not some silly made-up shit. Make it worth my while."

I stretch my neck to the side. The way this woman throws jabs and blocks punches, I think she used to be a prizefighter, not a chorus girl. "What would you like to find out about me?"

"Tell me about your mama and daddy. Do you have any brothers or sisters? How about your grandmother's husband, Mr. Hendrickson? Tell me about him. Tell me everything. That's the only way you'll hear my story."

Damn. Quid pro quo? She's serious. I shove the photos into my backpack. "My dad is a historian who works in Paris, and my mother died when I was twelve."

"Mighty young to lose your mama." Honoree makes a *tsk-tsk* sound like my grandmother Maggie makes when she disapproves of something. In this instance, that makes no sense, since we're talking about my dead mother.

"You got anything else to tell me?"

"Sorry," I say. "I'm better at telling other people's stories than I am at telling my own. It's why I make films."

Honoree lifts her shoulder into a lazy shrug. "You came all this way for my stories but don't have any stories to tell me. I shoulda guessed when I saw you in the doorway—too afraid to walk inside."

I cock my head. "Should have guessed what?"

"You're a coward, Sawyer Hayes. Too much of a coward to tell me your story."

"I'm not a coward." I clench my jaw.

Honoree eases the back of her head into the pillows. "Cowardice runs in your family."

"You don't even know my family."

"You're the one who said I knew Maggie White. She's your family."

I bite my tongue because I don't want to argue with a bedridden centenarian. Why am I letting her bother me?

"I'm sorry I've upset you. I'm sure you don't mean to call anyone a coward. I'll come back later this afternoon. I have a few more hours before I am due at the airport."

Another nasty cough erupts from Honoree, and she closes her eyes. "I am tired and need to rest. I'll feel like talking tomorrow, I swear. So come back tomorrow."

"What?" I don't disguise my surprise, and my temper escalates, but Lula intervenes.

"Honoree tires quickly," she says. "Things come to her out of order, and she says things she doesn't mean."

Lula's voice is soothing, but my frustration can't be capped by a beautiful girl's sensible words or kind eyes.

"I won't be here tomorrow."

Honoree's eyes open. *Oh, she was pretending.* "You be careful how you talk to an old woman. I still have rights in this world, and one of 'em is respect. So don't you shout at me. Just do as I say and come back tomorrow."

I am dumbfounded. That's the word. *Dumbfounded.* Slack-jawed. Worn-out. Still, Honoree has taken the last straw, broken it in half, and flung it in my face. Why is this old woman stressing me out? It must be jet lag or Azizi messing with my head.

I need to leave. Finish my thesis and fix my life without Honoree Dalcour's help. It will be her bad when the reel of film turns out to be a lost Micheaux and I make my mark on history.

Honoree pulls the edges of the sheet to her throat. "I'll tell you my story tomorrow." Her voice is a faraway whisper. "I'll tell you about Micheaux and Louis Armstrong, Miss Hattie's, and the Dreamland Cafe."

I shake my head. "It was nice meeting you, Miss Dalcour. Miss Lula." Without giving either woman a chance to reply, I tip an imaginary hat and exit the room and haul ass out of the Bronzeville Senior Living Facility.

Outdoors, it's late afternoon and dense, white clouds fill the sky. The breeze from the lake makes a warm day feel cooler. I remove a UC Berkeley sweatshirt from my backpack, but my hands are trembling. Fuck.

The first shuttle to O'Hare I catch at the Palmer House hotel. I take a window seat, and the skyline rolls by, but I can't stop thinking about Honoree Dalcour.

She is not the first woman to call me a coward. Not the first woman to ask me to tell her the truth. She said some disturbing things that lodged in the pit of my stomach. Yet, in my story brain, the place where my ideas turn into films, there is one thing Honoree told me she didn't mean to tell. Something happened in Chicago in 1925. Something she doesn't want me to know. Doesn't want anyone to know. Which means, she's the one who's afraid. She's the one who's a coward. Not me.

Not this time.

CHAPTER 4



HONOREE

Friday, October 23, 1925

Honoree hurried up the narrow stairwell ahead of Miss Dolly and the other girls, hoping to be the first to set her sights on Trudy, whenever the girl arrived.

The Friday-night patrons were already zozzled. Neighborhood flappers and floozies packed the joint, laughing and singing, and boozing, smoking, and sweating. Some nights, the stench put a gag in Honoree's throat so immense, her lungs ached and her eyes watered. Thankfully, the smell wasn't too bad yet. It was still early.

Wearing a flimsy robe over her scant costume, she pushed by handsy customers until she reached a spot near the bar. Then she rose onto her tiptoes to get a better view.

Miss Hattie's was shaped like a train car with a wooden bar the length of the cafe. Scattered around the dance floor and across from the stage were a few round tables with chairs. Honoree craned her neck but still couldn't see much and circled to the other end of the bar.

This was one of those times she wished Archie had purchased some barstools. Not a tall girl, she could've used the leg up. But according to Archie, the neighborhood folk didn't come to a honky-tonk like Miss Hattie's to sit on their bottoms. They came to drink, dance, leer at the chorus girls, and buy policy dream books.

Policy. Everyone played the numbers in Bronzeville, from the most righteous preacher to the drunkest drunk. For a penny, a nickel, or a dime, a gambler bet three lucky numbers and hoped to match the wheel operator's winning draw.

Honoree detested the game. Wasting hard-earned dough on chance seemed foolhardy—just like waiting on Trudy.

She canvassed the cafe again, but no sign of Trudy or any sign of Miss Dolly or the other girls. They were still downstairs, likely quibbling over a broken shoe or a ripped pair of bloomers.

Frustrated, Honoree eased into an opening at the bar and signaled Crazy Pete. She might as well have a snort while she waited.

On weekends, there were two barkeeps, Dewey Graves, Archie's younger brother, a quick-tempered hood who punched things, and Crazy Pete, who wasn't all that crazy.

He recited poems, sometimes too loudly—poems written by Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay. He told tall tales about his exploits in the Spanish American War, his work with Booker T. Washington, and a private meeting with President Taft. Other than those stories, calling him crazy seemed unkind. He was a dreamer, and what was wrong with dreaming as long as he didn't hurt nobody? Ezekiel used to read poetry, too. No one called him addlebrained. He was the smartest boy in Chicago—Black or white. The only thing she could say about Ezekiel—he was gone.

"Hey, Pete." Honoree raised her voice extra loud to get his attention. The cafe was noisy, but Pete was also partially deaf in one ear. Probably both. "Pete!"

He swung toward her, smiling broadly and revealing two rows of black gums. "How you doing, Miss Honoree?"

"You forgot your false teeth again, Pete."

"Damn teeth hurt my mouth." He limped toward her with a bad leg caused by a white man wielding a bat during the riots in the summer of 1919. "You lookin' mighty pretty."

"Are you flirting? Shame on you. You're too old to flirt." Honoree grinned. She enjoyed jawing with Pete, the only person at Miss Hattie's she'd likely miss. "Have you seen Trudy?"

"Not yet, but she always shows up."

"Not always." Honoree braced her elbows on the bar. "Make me a drink, Pete. Miss Dolly and the others are still downstairs."

He grabbed a fifth of gin from the back shelf, filled a tumbler halfway, and then added honey and a dash of lemon juice. Pete's cocktail was the only way Honoree stomached the taste of bootleg hooch.

"Here you go."

"Thank you." She lifted the glass to her lips, but Dewey suddenly shoved Pete aside and leaned forward, looming over her.

Pete grabbed the edge of the bar to keep from falling. "Watch yourself, you oaf."

"Shut your trap, old man." Dewey's broad shoulders blocked Honoree's view of everything but him. "I have a mind to string you up by the neck."

Honoree reared back; he reeked of chewing tobacco, sour mash, and spit. "Do you mind? I was talking to Pete."

"You always talking to that crazy old bastard." Dewey hunched forward. "But I know what you been up to, Miss High-and-Mighty."

She gulped a swallow. Was he talking about the Dreamland Cafe? "I don't have any idea what you mean."

"You may belong to my brother, but you'll be sorry if you rat on me over a few crates of whiskey."

The blood stopped in her veins. "I don't belong to Archie! Where do people get such a notion?" She and Archie had been a thing for a while after he found her hiding in the trunk of his Model T, but that was a little more than two years ago.

"You tell him everything."

"I don't tell him anything." She didn't care what Dewey thought. The best news was he didn't know about her audition. He was worrying her about something else.

The week before, she had arrived to work early, and Dewey was buying hooch from someone other than one of Capone's bootleggers. It was the law in Bronzeville. Every juice joint in Chicago had to purchase hooch from Capone. Dewey cheating Capone was stupid. Dewey cheating Capone without Archie's

knowledge, however, was insane. Perhaps he should adopt the nickname Crazy Dewey. There was nothing smart about putting his big brother in Capone's crosshairs.

"Did you tell Archie about my business?" Dewey slammed his fist on the bar top. "Is that why he canceled his poker game—to keep an eye on me?"

"Archie and I talk about policy dream books and dancing. I don't talk to him about you."

"Don't lie. You saw me, but Capone is stealing Archie blind." He paused, his Adam's apple protruding. "I want you to tell Archie he's being robbed, and I'm helping him get his due. He'll listen to you."

"I'm not telling him anything, but you should," Honoree said. "If he finds out you purchased hooch from Bronzeville bootleggers, he'll light your behind on fire. And he should. He can't afford to make an enemy of Capone, and you can't afford to make an enemy of your brother. So, close it down, Dewey. End it before Archie finds out and you get hurt."

Dewey's throat bulged. His face darkened with rage, and she swore smoke rose from the top of his head. He shot forward, threatening to grab her by the throat, but something or someone, Crazy Pete, had driven his shoulder into Dewey's side.

"Stop haranguing the child, boy." Pete waved a towel in Dewey's face, shooing him away. "We got customers to tend to."

"What in the hell do you think you're doing, old man?" Dewey stared at Pete with murder in his eyes.

Wide-eyed, Honoree waited for the explosion, but a group of rowdy boys from the slaughterhouse shouted for drinks.

"All right, then," Dewey said, breathing through his nostrils. "I'll bide my time, missy. I'll bide my time." He gave Crazy Pete and Honoree an ugly glare, then stalked over to the slaughterhouse boys.

Pete winced. "What's he mean by that? Biding his time?"

Honoree lifted her glass, but her fingers, her hands, her arms trembled. She placed the drink on the bar. "I don't care what Dewey's babbling about. He talks more nonsense than a cuckoo bird."

Pete frowned. "You best be careful of him. He's been acting strange lately, like a mad dog up to something."

She smiled. "That's why they call you Crazy Pete. Mixing it up with Dewey is dangerous."

"Never mind me. I told you, he ain't right in the head—you best be careful, Honoree."

"I'm always careful."

Pete tapped the bar. "I don't want to see you hurt." He hobbled off to wait on customers.

Honoree brought the glass to her lips and took a much-needed sip.

"What you drinking?" It was Bessie, nudging her in the back. "Can I have one, too?"

"What did I tell you about sneaking up on me? And no, you're too young."

"I'm sixteen."

"I don't believe you."

Miss Dolly and the rest of the chorus girls were on Bessie's heels.

"What took y'all so long?" Honoree asked.

Virginia raised a girlishly thin brow. "Edna Mae was having a fit about her costume."

Honoree shook her head slowly. "No offense. But she don't wear a costume—"

A commotion kicked up behind them, coming from the direction of the entrance. The crowd opened a path, and a tawny-skinned blonde waving her arms yelled, "I'm here. I'm here!"

Bessie touched her shoulder. "Is that Trudy Lewis?"

"None other than," Honoree said with a whistle.

"How'd she make her hair that color?"

Honoree twisted toward Bessie with an eye on Trudy. "Bleach—lots of bleach."

"Why would she do something like that?"

Honoree shrugged. "Her roots are knotted so tight an entire jar of lye couldn't straighten 'em. So she bleached her hair the color of yellow cotton, a tribute to Mary Pickford, I believe. But

don't ask Trudy about her hair color. You might get a busted lip for your trouble."

Bessie tugged on her springy curls. "I should do something to my hair, too."

"Have you heard of Madam C. J. Walker's products? The hair-growth ointment and the iron pressing comb."

"No. Never heard of her or those things."

"Ask Virginia. How do you think she got that spit curl to lie flat against her cheek?"

Trudy was within arm's reach, and Honoree started to pull her aside, but Virginia slid between them. "Where you been?" she asked Trudy.

"Flat on her face in an alley," Edna Mae added, leaning over Honoree's shoulder. She didn't like Trudy and took any chance to pluck a feather or two from her plume.

"I don't care where she been." Miss Dolly shoved them both aside. "She here now." Miss Dolly pivoted toward Trudy. "You got on your costume?"

"I sure do." Trudy fanned open her muskrat coat and dipped her hip like some starlet in *Motion Picture* magazine.

Honoree turned away, hiding the expression on her face and her uncharitable opinion of Trudy.

"Let's go. Let's go." Miss Dolly shooed Honoree and the other chorus girls toward the stage. "We're all here now. Time to put on a show."

They paraded through the crowd and toward the stage. Honoree grabbed Bessie's hand and tugged her along, but once they were near the stage, she let her go and caught Trudy's elbow.

"We need to talk." Honoree looked around, making sure no one was around to overhear them. Trudy folded her arms over her stomach as if they had all night to chat.

"You wanna make some extra money?" Honoree asked.

"I like extra money. How much and what for?"

"Cover for me tonight at the midnight show."

"How much?"

"Five dollars." It was more than either girl made in a week,

but Trudy's lazy eye didn't even twitch. Greedy wench. Honoree would have to sweeten the deal. "Five dollars tonight, and another five on Sunday."

"Sunday's a long ways off."

"Take it or leave it," Honoree said, betting on Trudy's greed.

"What do you have to do so important you have to skip the midnight show?"

"None of your beeswax," Honoree snapped. "You gonna do it or not?"

Trudy's eyes sparkled. "Patience. I'll let you know after we finish this show."

The band played Jelly Roll Morton's "Black Bottom Stomp." A lively tune that always got the joint jumping.

The hoofers and the roughnecks swarmed the stage. The tables and chairs filled, and a standing-room-only mob gathered, screeching for the show to begin.

The chorus girls shimmied into place and formed a straight line. King Johnny's trumpet blared. The girls linked arms, kicked their legs waist-high, and launched into the dance routine.

Between the music, the giggle juice, and the scantily dressed flappers, the whole whangdoodle stomped and cheered. They were shaking their behinds, losing their minds, everyone having a good ol' time.

Honoree watched from the sidelines, waiting for her cue, but a nagging nostalgia played with her heartstrings.

Besides Crazy Pete, there were some other things to miss about Miss Hattie's. The all-nighters with King Johnny and his jazz quartet. The Monday predawn jam sessions with the band. The after-hour parties with the chorus girls and blues singers. And dancing with Pete at the Dusty Bottom. Though he did more hobbling than dancing.

The things she wouldn't miss were easy—Dewey's ugly temper. Miss Dolly's mean ways. Everything about Archie.

After finding her in the trunk of his car, Archie had hired

Honoree to stoke the furnace and peel potatoes, but Honoree was a quick learner. A flash of a smile, a suggestive wiggle, and soon, Archie was paying for her dance lessons, her rent, and the fabric and tassels she used to sew her fancy dresses and, eventually, her costumes. When the giggles and wiggles stopped working their hoodoo, Honoree allowed Archie the privilege of putting his hands on her. She just hadn't expected necking with him to be so unpleasant.

The music changed and jarred Honoree back to Miss Hattie's. Her two solos were coming up, fast and breezy. The first routine was mostly cartwheels, leg kicks, and back and front walkovers. She sang one song but primarily danced, ending with a tap sequence before prancing off the stage to loud applause.

Edna Mae performed her burlesque act next—naked. She had the bubs for it, too. Small, full, and high, they barely moved when she jumped. She then sashayed back and forth across the stage, the crowd watching with mouths open and eyes bulging while trying not to grab things they shouldn't grab. After she finished, the band played a few more tunes, and the hoofers danced, and Miss Dolly sang a medley of blues songs.

Honoree stood behind the partition, the muscles in her legs and arms knotted, the joints in her fingers locked. She shook her wrists and stomped her feet to keep the blood flowing. She put on the feather headdress, hooked the chin strap, and waited.

King Johnny's trumpet soared to a high C, and she rushed onto the stage, making a deliberate mess of the steps. She winked an exaggerated eye, a wide grin on her face, inviting the patrons to join in on her antics. She crossed her hands back and forth and from knee to knee, imitating Josephine Baker's Charleston and the crowd bellowed.

Her head and headdress held high, she waved her arms and rotated her hips, performing a cakewalk jig strutting to the rhythm of the banjo.

The audience clapped and yelled and begged for more. Honoree joyfully obliged. She propelled her body into a series of pirouettes, using the wall clock over the cafe's front door to anchor

each turn. Her eyes fixed on the clock, she whipped her head, and her body followed as she turned and turned, but in her last twirl, someone stood above the crowd and caught her eye.

A cattail in a field of withering weeds, taller than any other man in the cafe, he took off his fedora. And for the longest beat of a drum, she saw his face.

Her heartbeat fell off rhythm, and her legs crisscrossed. She missed a spin and almost fell but found her balance and twirled into another pirouette, ending in a deep bow.

The applause and the shouts of praise were cannon fire in her ears. She snapped upright and, rising onto her tiptoes, canvassed the room. Where was he? Where'd he go? She searched, quickly and thoroughly, but couldn't find him.

One last bow, one last wide smile, and Honoree fled from the stage.

She paused behind the makeshift wings separating the dancers from the patrons. Her back pressed against the hard surface, she stared at the ceiling, struggling to catch her breath.

Maybe she imagined him. Maybe the excitement of her new job, her new money, and yeah, being a New Negro, had taken a toll. But damn, she could swear on a barrel of Bibles, Ezekiel Bailey—the boy who had vanished, the man she had imagined dead, the love of her life—had just walked into Miss Hattie's Garden Cafe.