

## ***PROLOGUE: THAT NIGHT***

The summer of 1973 was our twenty-first move and, my mother said, the last one, once and for all. As we drove the miles toward Dauncy, a town she liked for its healing springs, the radio in our van told us about a rock festival with the Grateful Dead in Watkins Glen, New York and I worried she'd change her mind and head us north. But we turned the radio up sang along to "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown." We heard about peace in Vietnam, crookery in Watergate. We heard about Bruce Lee's dying and about the Russians orbiting Mars. In Dauncy, summer was just heat, little ones playing in buckets of melted ice water on the sidewalks, gardens suffering for rain. Dauncy. *Home of Kentucky's Healing Springs*. The springs were a pipe and a little drizzle off a bank beside the road where we rented a big blue and white camper they called a trailer. As I lugged suitcases and boxes from the back of the van, my arms and hands aching from carrying, I reckoned Dauncy was about hurting, but I didn't know how much quite yet.

As I stood in the high grass of the yard, I felt a little bitty shiver start in my belly, a thing that could have been excitement but wasn't really. I told myself not to be foolish. Anything could happen where me and Ruby were concerned. I was sixteen, then, and I wanted everything. I wanted to be a torch singer in a city somewhere way up north. I wanted kohl around my eyes and chocolates all the way from Paris, France. I wanted the world and my life had hardly started yet and then there it was, ready to change directions, though I didn't know it yet.

We hadn't been there two weeks before they showed up toting Bibles, handing out fellowship meeting brochures like they always did. We were an odd pair, part hippy and part some country song. Waydean and her who-rented-her mother, Ruby Loving. Me minus a father and her with too many men left behind along the way. I tried not to listen, but I could tell they

didn't know what to make of us, those church ladies who came to our door in Dauncy, like they had in all the other towns. Neighbors looked at us like we were joined at the spine or missing a hand or a leg and I wanted to hide, but my mother never did.

*Sweetie, is the lady of the house in,* one of them asked as Ruby padded to the door in her bare feet, her toes painted bright green. She laid her hand on a hip and said, *Well, I reckon I ain't much of a lady in the usual way of things, but I'm in all right.*

By fall, they'd be calling because I was missing school or because they hadn't seen me out and about at church or for this, for that.

*Let's just show them,* Ruby said. She got out her notebook, which always seemed to hold god's own secret truths.

She opened it. *Waydean, honey, wait just wait a minute.* She spun her finger around in the air and settled on a page and a line and sat a minute.

*What,* I said.

*I told you, Waydean.* She got that in-the-distance look on her face. *Give me a minute.* Before long she set about mothering good and hard for awhile. She'd tell me about things library book knew about the divination of bones and entrails. The study of lucky or unlucky days. The study of markings in soil and sand and dirt. And all the famous tellers of lives. Sylvia Browne who'd seen heaven itself, a place where there were houses like the ones from childhood nestled into groves of trees. Nina Kulagina, a Cold War silent film star who could move things without touching them. Marie Laveau, her cat named after an African God. And Laurie Cabott, defender of the civil rights of witches. I knew enough about the world as it was.

We'd lived all over, Ruby and me, and I could count those places like it was a map cut into my heart. Dauncy, and before that, Dayglo, South Carolina, because we liked the name, and

after that Biglersville, Pennsylvania, just because Ruby liked the idea of a handsome ghost in a uniform. And so it went, a list of places I could trace back inside me until I reached the first one in my memory, a room above a dry cleaner's in Swannanoa, North Carolina. I was all little then and I loved pretending the hiss I could hear from downstairs was god, maybe, telling me everything would be alright and that someday, maybe, I'd know who we were, us two, where we came from and who my father was. Sometimes the owner of the cleaners would let me press my face into an ironed dress because I liked it, how safe the scent made the world seem.

My mother, who I called Ruby most of the time, was an artist of dark things. She'd do drawings on the walls some rooms we rented, penciling in sad-eyed women she copied from stray encyclopedias from the thrift store. Most places we rented for six months, a year, until a time would come I'd see her own eyes go all haunted and lost and I'd know we were ready drift all over again, telling our fortunes in farther west or back again toward the coast. My job was to take the sign down off the front door. *Ruby Loving, Fortune Teller Extraordinaire*. But that time, in Dauncy, I had hope. She painted mermaids on every wall, their scales silver with nail polish and sequins glued to their tails and their faces were kinder, like they wanted us to stay put awhile. In Dauncy, she hummed, that mother I called Ruby did. She dropped rose petals into a big, steamy kettle atop the stove and I told myself how if I didn't know any better she'd be happy enough for us to stay put for awhile and maybe we'd fall in love, her with staying put and me with her, become a mother rather than a fortune teller.

Before long, we'd been all the way through spring and out the other end of summer and the trailer kitchen smelled of August., sweet and bitter from the potions Ruby cooked up. Charms and spells against the world, she always said. In Dauncy, her charms were made of ripe paw paws, made with the husks of corn and the thick skins of cucumbers peeled and dropped in

to what boiled on our stove. She danced and swigged from a bottle of sweet wine and stirred and sprinkled in a little of whatever was at hand. Petals from wild sweet peas if they were growing out back or rosewater bought with the last two cents we had. She danced and stirred and whispered her charms for love. *On a night of the full moon, whisper your beloved's name three times to the night wind.* She danced and sipped and wrote each thing she cooked up down in the notebook she kept with her, always.

I wished and wished she'd make a love potion for me, but she never did. The love she gave me came in don'ts. Don't this, don't that, little daily spells to make me safe or to make me bitter, I wasn't sure which. They were double-sided potions. Don't look at them boys like that, she'd say, but I'd see how she was doing the looking, not me. Her eyes trailed up lean arms, along chests. She had such longing it came off her skin like cold rising off ice. Don't, she'd say at night when I had my hand on the radio dial, about to change the station, about to find us a song we could dance to in our feet bare, our toenails painted red. *Don't ever trust love, girl,* she'd say at the same time she'd grab my hands and danced to songs off the radio, no Joni Mitchell and her blue, blue love. She'd pick Frank Sinatra songs like "Some Enchanted Evening," or guitar blues with lyrics no one had ever heard of.

If she was drunk enough, I'd ask her whatever I wanted to know. *Can I put a red rinse in my hair? You reckon I'll ever meet my father?*

She changed the subject in a heartbeat. *Don't take rides from someone you don't know,* she'd say. *Mind me, now.*

The truth was Ruby had often taken rides, stepped inside some car down a road and disappeared for days at a time, though not yet, not in Dauncy. The truth was, Ruby never talked about who we were, why we were, and the name of my father never crossed her lips.

Time traveled by light and heat those long summer days. I was not quite seventeen, and the world moved slow and quick, all at once. Mornings, the trailer was still cool where the long night's heat had let go. By midday the kitchen was bright again and the tails of the mermaids caught the sun. Later, light struck the glass prisms she'd strung across the kitchen windows and the heat came in strong. I sipped ice water and wondered if I could catch it, that hot light, before it traveled through the blue of the bottles she'd set along our windowsills. How pretty she was, my mother, my Ruby Loving, her black hair tied up in a purple scarf, her face shiny with the stove's red eye. Just before dark, her brown eyes went amber went dusky red, a color like her name. *Ruby. Ruby.* Oh, how I've said that name over and over, these years since. Said it from the underside of my heart, cast it out like a spell to make me forget.

The afternoon sun let down as Ruby lit incense and draped scarves over the lamps like she always did. She set a record going, some woman singing the blues. *Love me in the morning, love me at night*, a song fit to break any heart. Ruby's heart was broken, had always been far as I knew, but she told futures all the same. She gave out horsetail and stinging nettle to cure what hurt. Read cards and photographs. Told how new-laid eggs buried under a full moon could bring a lover back.

*Go on, now, sweetpea*, she said. She lowered the kitchen lights and lit candles. *Find you something to do for a spell.*

That's what I did, most times. Walked the half mile down to a country store, or up the road the other way to the Skatarama or the Dauncy Diner where I'd order sit by the window air conditioner and eat a plate of french fries with gravy while I studied fortune books from the public library. There were so many ways and means. Spirit board readings. Tea leaves in the bottoms of cups. The reading of palms, faces, stars. The bones of tiny birds. Some tellers read

crystals, others poems, history at the very hour of a birth. And, lord, the love potions. Periwinkle mixed with leeks and earthworms made a paste to strengthen love. Or, come a full moon, you'd cut three pieces of sod with a knife to tie up in a stocking and place under your pillow, all the while reciting a love charm. *Moon, moon, tell unto me, when my true love I shall see.* And sometimes what I did was fill up sheets of paper with words. *Mother. Daughter. Ruby. Me.* I made rows and columns and tallied them, like I could add up and love and happiness on one side and not on the other and decide which was stronger. I was sixteen and stubborn. *Where do we come from?* I'd asked her so often I was about to not care about anything but how the soles of my feet and the palms of my hands itched. I wanted to get on with it, head down a road of my very own making. But I couldn't completely imagine such a road without knowing who I was, without knowing why. I believed that fortunes worked in reverse. You could reach inside the past and figure out where you came from as much as where you were going. *Who is he, the man who made me out of you?* I asked and waited and asked, but she said nary a word.

That night, I stayed put as Ruby played her record over and over. *Love in the morning, love me at night.* I watched her pour another inch of sweet red wine into her glass as she talked until it wasn't me she saw sitting at her own kitchen table. She sat across from me, that notebook she loved in her lap. She opened and studied a page, studied two, then held my hand and showed me all the lines I ought to know. Girdle of Venus. Line of Intuition. Line of Mars. *What's written in that thing, anyway,* I asked. The outside light was on at our door and music carried out our windows, but not a customer had come to have their fortunes told.

Some nights women came, wanting to see how it felt to sit across a table from somebody with hands as wise as Ruby's. Her pretty eyes full of love affairs and the foreign places they

believed she'd seen. They were afraid of my mother, and they ought to have been. Her candlelight and her visions, the things she knew. Men weren't afraid at all. Their faces were hard and they were ready to take what she had, whether she knew their futures or not.

Eight o'clock, almost nine and coal trucks shifted gears and headed on past. *Reckon anyone will stop*, I asked. Cars spilled rock n' roll from their open windows, promising the all night parties I could have gone to if I'd taken a shine, but I was a looker and not a doer, most times. Some towns I'd go someplace they had a jukebox and watch the swaying and toe tapping and hips touching hips in time to the Eagles or Johnny Cash. If Ruby showed up, she'd cut a rug. Don't let on too much I know you, girl, she'd say like it was a joke, but oh, how bright her eyes would be. I'd watch her like she was a stranger-woman, pretty and stumbling into a pretty man, reaching a hand into a pocket to feel around for a light or a five dollar bill. Back at the trailer she'd say, hush now, and I'd sleep, voices and love from the other side of a wall.

From the highway a truck skidded to a stop in the gravel. Our first customer that night, just as Ruby had set the record going the dozenth time. *Hold me, Inez, honey. Hold me in the morning, hold me at night*. Out by the road, a door slammed. She lifted her head to a warm stir of air coming from the open kitchen window. All these years later, I can't rightly say how it was, the way the checkedy curtains at the windows settled as the breeze did, or the way her eyes got still. How she seemed to stop breathing as she heard a truck door slam and footsteps in the dark, her hand across her chest. I sighed. I reckoned, if I was lucky, I'd sit tight and learn a thing or two if she opened her notebook and looked it up, a spell for an August summer night and the customer we'd waited on, me and her. Somewhere in the distance a dog howled high-pitched and restless and it was that the moment I'd recall most over the years ahead. It was maybe the only time, ever, I was able to see anything like a fortune at all.

She'd said telling fortunes, real ones, not ones via cheap decks of cards, not ones via palms too scarred with work for a lifeline, came to you quick, quick, a glimpse of forever. And so it was. She lifted her head to the still air from the open kitchen window and I pushed through a door so far from myself I felt dizzy. I saw a Ruby Loving I'd never known, just a glimpse of her, but it was enough. Times tangled up inside me like string for Cat's Cradle. I saw some past that must have been hers. A dirt road, a house. Creek on the rise and someone's footsteps on a wooden bridge. The wings of hens hanging down as they were carried up a hill. Fire in a stove and a woman skimming froth off a pot of beans and fatback. A room. A girl combing her hair and a man telling stories. *Pretty is as pretty does and you will, you will be loved.* That girl, her eyes so bright and big I could see how she must have been when she was my age, excited and scared all at once. And then it was gone, the past, swallowed right up into nothing.

She laid her notebook down and slammed it shut and looked at window. I couldn't exactly hear anything, but I knew someone was out there. Sticks snapped from the weeds in the yard. It was dark, and the flame from a match struck but didn't show a face. Was there a voice? *Hey, you. Ruby Loving. You in there?* There wasn't a sound from anywhere now. It was nigh on ten o'clock, but the heat. It had sealed itself inside the trailer, even with the windows open. It was as heavy as hand in the air outside. The road was quiet and from the trees at the back of the trailer, whippoorwills and the scratch of junebugs.

*Get on, now,* she said, looking like she wanted to shush me away. *I need to be alone for a little spell.*

*Who's out there,* I asked.

She looked at me again. I could have been a haint, a robber, anyone but her own daughter.

I went out the back door of the trailer into the yard, but I didn't go far. I sat in the metal chair beneath the mulberry tree watching Ruby's shadow behind the curtains. Her shadow moved from stove to table, and I thought I heard the small sound of glasses clinking down as the song began again. *Love me Inez, honey, until long past sweet daylight.* Her candlelight looked pink from where I sat and that song drifted out the open windows. I knew how it was, most times. She'd take out the snow globe, the one she used like a crystal ball and not a soul could utter a word but her. Or she'd take out her special Tarot deck that only she could touch, the one that had pictures of mountains and stars, or maybe just the velvet bag of stones with hieroglyphs, she called them, Egyptian signs that could tell her everything she needed to know about how the world could be ahead. And then, a man's shadow at our table leaning his big self in.

I can still imagine it easy enough. Her red scarf falling down, how she waved it aside. His question, easy as liquor. *You think you can just say what you want and get by, woman?* The window screen rippled and their shadow selves bent in. For years I would think of her standing, her one arm held out. Her hand must have been open, a card in its palm. Her present, not his. Her dancing around this kitchen or the one before or the one before that, the radio going full blast. Her dancing and telling me charms to make me laugh. *Three silver spoons of brandy wine and you shall be mine, you shall be mine.* A love spell. Some days while she worked, she told me stories about being little. *When were you little,* I'd ask. *Where?* But she'd just say, oh, things were happier then. Happy, like she never was. Maybe, I still tell myself, the card she drew for him as his shadow sat in front of her was the Lovers. Two of cups, spilling sweet wine. All I knew for sure was how tall he was. A tall shadow rounding the table, touching her, both long arms holding her. How many nights I'd seen her want just that. *Hold me in the morning, hold me at night.* The record, playing and playing. *Hold me, hold me.*

The truth, I told them later when a sheriff's car came and an ambulance lit the road red, was how quick it all happened. How their voices crossed and hit, hit and crossed. Veins of lightning began across the sky and I pulled my knees in to my arms. Him. Her. I heard most of it, I told them.

*You owe me, and that's that.* A chair crashed against the floor. *I know what I know.*

Someone said that, but by then it didn't matter who said what. Glass shattered against a wall. How long it had been since a good, long rain, and it didn't come then, either. Fat warm drops fell down and hit cheeks and raised my mouth, open, wishing the world would be cool and alright, but it was not. Heat lightning flashed and quit. Another coal truck went on by. The man's voice was so angry it broke the night open.

But what did you see, the sheriff asked later on. What happened then?

From where and who I am now, I want to reach back and tell the real truth. I want to tell them about lovers who are only parts of themselves. About the feel of a rough face against your own face, how raw the heart can feel. About boy fingers itching to touch, not me, but the strings of air guitars. How, sometimes the eyes of pretty women stare off at nothing at all, into futures where they were movie stars or astronauts and anything is possible. But I no longer know who it is I am describing, and to whom. Whose future is it that I am now living? Have I become her, Ruby Loving, me, become my own lost mother? Or am I only myself now, a woman who long ago learned how not to love?

The truth is this. Lightning, then thunder and a gun shot. Boots again, out the back way and her calling, *Waydean. Waydean.* My name from inside Ruby's mouth. My mother in my own arms. Her blood's scent. I pressed my hand against her and I still don't know what I

heard, her as she died or that song that has stayed inside me my whole life long. *Hold me, Inez, honey. Hold me all night long.*