

Red Dirt Witch

The way to tell the difference between dreams that were prophecy and dreams that were just wasted sleep was to wait and see if they came three times. Emmaline had her third dream about the White Lady on the coldest night ever recorded in Alabama history. This was actually *very* cold—ten degrees below zero, on a long dark January Sabbath when even the moon hid behind a veil of shadow.

Emmaline survived the cold the way poor people everywhere have done since the dawn of time: with a warm, energetic friend. Three patchwork quilts helped, too. The friend was Frank Heath, who was pretty damn spry for a man of fifty-five, though he claimed to be forty-five so maybe that helped. The quilts were Em's, and it also helped that one of them had dried flowers (Jack-in-the-pulpits) and a few nuggets of charcoal tucked under each patch of leftover cloth. That made for a standing invitation to warmth and the summertime, who were of course welcome to pay a visit and stay the night anytime they liked. Those *had* come a-calling to the children's beds, at least, for which Emmaline was grateful; the children slept soundly, snug and comfortable. That left Em and Frank free to conduct their own warmthmaking with an easy conscience.

After that was done, Emmaline closed her eyes and found herself in the Commissary Market down on Dugan. Dusty southern

daylight, bright and fierce even in winter, shone slanting onto the street alongside the market, unimpeded by cars or carts—or people. Pratt City wasn't much of a city, being really just the Negro neighborhood of Birmingham, but it was a whole place, thriving and bustling in its way. Here, though, Emmaline had never seen the place so empty in her life. As if to spite the cold, the market's bins tumbled over with summer produce: watermelons and green tomatoes and peaches and more, along with a few early collards. That meant that whatever this dream meant to warn her of, it would come with the heat of the mid-months.

Out of habit, Em glanced at the sign above these last. Overpriced again; greedy bastards.

"Why, greed's a sin," said a soft, whispery voice all around her. "Be proper of you to punish 'em for it, wouldn't it?"

This was one of the spirits that she'd tamed over the years. They liked to test her, though, so it was always wise to be careful with 'em. "Supposin' I could," she said in reply. "But only the store manager, since the company too big to go after. And I can't say's I truly blame the manager, either, since he got children to feed same as me."

"Sin's sin, woman."

"And let she who is without sin cast the first stone," Em countered easily. "*As you well know.*" Then she checked herself; no sense getting testy. Ill-wishing opened doors for ill winds to blow through—which was probably why the voice was trying to get her to do it.

The voice sighed a little in exasperation. It was colorless, genderless, barely a voice at all; that sigh whispered like wind through the stand of pines across the street. "Just tellin' you somebody comin', cranky old biddy."

"Who, Jesus Christ? 'Bout time, His slow ass."

Whispery laughter. "Fine, then—there a White Lady a-comin', a

fine one, and she got something special in mind for you and yours. You ready?"

Em frowned to herself. The other two dreams had been more airy-fairy than this—just collections of symbols and hints of a threat, omens and portents. It seemed fate had finally gotten impatient enough to just say plain what she needed to hear.

"No, I ain't ready," Em said, with a sigh. "But ain't like that ever made no mind to some folk. Thank you for the warning."

More laughter, rising to become a gale, picking Emmaline up and spinning her about. The Market blurred into a whirlwind—but through it all, there were little ribbons that she could see edging into the tornado from elsewhere, whipping about in shining silken red. Truth was always there for the taking, if you only reached out to grasp it. Thing was, Em didn't *feel* like grasping it; she was tired, Lord have mercy. The world didn't change. If she just relaxed, the dream would let her back into sleep, like she wanted.

But . . . well. Best to be prepared, she supposed.

So Em stretched out a hand and laid hold of one of the ribbons. And suddenly the street that ran through the market was full of people. Angry people, most of 'em white and lining the road, and marching people, most of 'em black and in the middle of the road. The black ones' jaws were set, their chins high in a way that always meant trouble when white folks were around, because Lord, didn't they hate seeing pride. "Trouble, trouble," sang-song the voice—and before the marchers appeared a line of policemen with billy clubs in their hands and barking dogs at their sides. Emmaline's guts clenched for the blood that would almost surely be spilled. Pride! Was it worth all that blood?

Yet when she opened her mouth to shout at the marchers for their foolishness, the whispery voice laughed again, and she spun again, the laughter chasing her out of dreams and up to reality.

Well, this was what she'd wanted, but she didn't much like it because reality was dark and painfully cold on her mouth and chin, which she'd stuck outside the covers to breathe. Her teeth were chattering. She reached back.

"Ain't time to get up," muttered Frank at her stirring, half-dreaming himself.

"You got Sunday to rest," said Emmaline. "You want to live 'til then, you get to work."

His low, rich laugh warmed her more than his body ever could. "Yes ma'am," he said, and did as he was bid.

And because they had set to, Emmaline missed that her only girl-child, Pauline, got up and walked the hall for a while, disturbed by bad dreams of her own.

Since the spirits had given her a full season's warning, Em spent the time preparing for the White Lady's arrival. This meant she finished up as much business as possible in the days right after the dream. The cold passed quickly, as cold was wont to do in Alabama. And as soon as the weather was comfortable again, Emmaline set Pauline to grinding all the herbs she'd laid in since November, then had her boy Sample put her shingle out by the mailpost, where it read, HERBS AND PRAYERS, FOR ALL AND SUNDRY. This brought an immediate and eager stream of customers.

First there was Mr. Jake, who'd gotten into a spat with his cousin over Christmas dinner and had wished death on him, and now was regretting it because the cousin had come down with a wet cough. Emmaline told him to take the man some chitlins made with sardine oil and extra garlic. Then she handed him a long braid of garlic heads, ten in all, from her own garden.

"That much garlic?" Jake had given her a look of pure affront; like

most men of Pratt City, he was proud of his cooking. "I look Eye-talian to you?"

"All right, let him die, then." This elicited a giggle from Pauline, who sat in on most of Em's appointments these days.

So, grumbling, Jake had bought the garlic from Emmaline and gone off to make his amends. People talked about Jake's stanky, awful chitlins 'til the day he died—but his cousin ate some of the peace offering, and he got better.

And there was Em's cousin Renee, who came by just to chat, and conveniently told Emmaline all the goings-on in and around Pratt City. There was trouble brewing, Renee said, *political* trouble; whispers in the church pews, meetings at the school gym, plans for a boycott or two or ten. Way up in Virginia, folks were suing the government about segregation in the schools. Em figured it wouldn't come to nothing, but all the white folks was up like angry bees over the notion of their precious children sitting next to Negro children, competing against Negro children, befriending Negro children. It was going to get ugly. Many evils came riding in on the tails of strife, though—so here, Emmaline suspected, would be their battleground.

Then there was Nadine Yates, a widow who like Emmaline had done what she had to do to keep herself and her children alive through the cold and not-so-cold days. Nadine was afraid she might be pregnant again. "I know it's a sin," she said in her quiet, dignified voice while Emmaline fixed her some tea. For this one, she'd sent Pauline off to the market with her brothers; Pauline was still just a girl, and some things were for grown women's ears only. "Still, if you could help me out, I'd be grateful."

"Sin's makin' a world where women got to choose between two children' eatin' and three children starvin'," Emmaline said, "and

you sure as hell didn't do that. You made sure he wasn't some fool who'll spread it all over, didn't you?"

"He got a wife and a good job, and he ain't stupid. Gave my boys new coats just last week."

A man who knew how to keep a woman-on-the-side properly. But then wouldn't it be simple enough for him to just take care of the new child, too? Emmaline frowned as a suspicion entered her mind. "He white?"

Nadine's nearer jaw flexed a little, and then she lifted her chin in fragile defensiveness. "He is."

Emmaline sighed, but then nodded toward the tea cooling in Nadine's hand. "Drink up, now. And it sound like he can afford a guinea-hen, to me."

So a few days later, after the tea had done its work, Nadine dropped by and handed Emmaline a nice fat guineafowl. It was a rooster, but Em didn't mind. She pot-roasted it with dried celery and a lot of rosemary from her garden, and the rind of an orange that Pauline had found on the road behind a market truck. Emmaline had smacked the girl for that, because even though "finding" wasn't "stealing," white folks didn't care much for making distinctions when it came to little colored girls. But Pauline—who was smart as a whip and Em's pride—had glared at her mother after the blow. "Momma, I followed the truck to a stop sign and offered to give it back. I knew that white man wouldn't want it 'cause I touched it, and he didn't! So there!"

Smart as a whip, but still just a child, and innocent yet of the world's worst ugliness. Emmaline could only sigh and thank God the truck driver hadn't been the kind who'd noticed how pretty Pauline was becoming. As an apology for the smack, she let Pauline have half the orange while the boys got only a quarter each.

Then she'd sat the girl down for a long talk about how the world worked.

And so it was, as the brief winter warmed toward briefer spring and began the long slow march into Southern summer. By the time the tomato plants flowered, Em was as ready as she could be.

"Oh, Miss Emmaline!" called a voice from outside. An instant later Jim and Sample, Emmaline's boys, ran into the kitchen.

"It's a red lady outside," Sample gushed.

"Well, go figure," Emmaline said. "Ain't like you ain't a quarter red yourself." Her papa had been Black Creek, his hair uncut 'til death.

"Not *that* kinda red," said Sample, rolling his eyes enough to get a hard look from Emmaline. "She askin' for you."

"Is she, now?" Emma turned from the pantry and handed Sample a jar of peach preserves. "Open that for me and you can have some." Delighted to be treated like a man, Sample promptly sat down and began wrestling with the tight lid.

"I don't like this one," said Jim, and since Jim was her artist—none of the dreaming in him, but he saw things others didn't—Emmaline knew the time had come. She wiped her hands on a cloth and went out onto the porch to meet the White Lady.

She smelled the lady before she saw her: a thick waft of magnolia perfume, too cloying to be quite natural. Outside, the perfume wasn't as bad, diminished and blended in among the scents of Em's garden and the faint sulfurous miasma that was omnipresent in Pratt City on still days like this—that from the Village Creek, polluted as it was with nearly a century's worth of iron and steel manufacturing waste. The woman to whom the perfume belonged stood on the grassy patch in front of Em's house, fastidiously away from

the red dirt path that most people walked to reach her front porch. Why, this lady was just as pretty as a flower in a full-skirted dress of cotton print, yellow covered in white-and-green lilies. No crinoline, but nearly as old-fashioned, with layers separated by bunched taffeta and edged in lace. Around the heart-shaped bodice, her skin was white as pearl—so white that Em figured she'd have burned up in a minute if not for the enormous parasol positioned over her head. And here was why Sample had called her red: the confection of her hair, spun into an elegant chignon behind her head and topped with a crown of white flowers, was nearly as burgundy as good wine.

It was all Em could do not to feel inadequate, given that she wore only an old faded housedress, with her own hair done up in plaits and hidden away beneath a wrap. But she drew herself up anyway, and reminded herself that she needed no parasol to keep her skin fine; the sun did that itself, and black didn't crack beneath its blessing. Those were just surface things anyway. The White Lady was nearly *all* surface; that was the nature of her kind. That was how this meeting would go, then: an appearance of grace and gentility, covering the substance of battle.

"Why, I've come to see 'bout you, Miss Emmaline," the White Lady said, as if they were in the middle of a conversation and not the beginning. Her voice was light and sweet, as honeyed as her yellow eyes. "You know me?"

"Yes, ma'am," Em said, because she knew the children were watching and it wouldn't do for them, 'specially the boys, to think they could smart off to white ladies. Even if this one wasn't really a white lady. "Heard here and there you was coming."

"Did you, now!" She simpered, dimples flashing, and flicked at her skirts. As she did this, Em caught a glimpse of a figure behind her: a little black girl, couldn't have been more than seven, crouched

and holding the pole of the great big parasol over the woman's head. The little girl's feet were bare beneath the simple white shift she wore, and her eyes were still and empty.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you heard," the White Lady said, unfolding a little lace fan and fluttering it at herself. "Figured you'd have your ways. Could I trouble you for some tea or lemonade, though, Miss Emmaline? It's always almighty hot in this land. Not that that bothers your kind like it does mine."

"Mighty hot indeed," Emmaline agreed evenly. She nodded to Pauline, who stood beside her trembling a little. Even a half-trained girlchild knew power when she saw it. Pauline jumped, but went inside. "This land made its natural people brown for a reason, though, ma'am, long before either your'n or most of mine came along. Seems to me you could make yourself fit the land better—if you wanted, of course."

The woman extended one long, thin arm and ran her fingers up the pearly skin, looking almost bemused to find such flesh upon herself. "I *should*, I suppose, but you know there's more reward than price comes with this skin."

Em did indeed know. "Pauline's gone to fetch some tea for you, ma'am. No lemonade, I'm afraid; lemons cost too dear when you got three children and no husband, see."

"Ah, yes! About those children of yours."

As much as Emmaline thought she had braced herself, she still couldn't help tensing up when the White Lady's yellow eyes shifted to dance over the faces of Jim and Sample. Lord, but she should've guessed! America wasn't the Old Country; these days the White Folk didn't bother with silly tricks or living in mounds, and they didn't stay hidden, for why should they? But the one thing they still did, in spades here in this land of cheap flesh, was steal children.

And if they kept to children of a certain hue, why, the police didn't even ask after them. Emmaline set her jaw.

The woman's eyes lingered on Jim long enough to be worrying. Jim, smart one that he was, had gone still and quiet, looking down at his feet, knowing better than to meet any white woman's gaze. Sample was all a-bristle, not liking the way the woman was eyeballing his little brother; ah, damnation, Emmaline never should've picked for Sample's father a man who liked to fight. Boy was gonna get himself in trouble someday.

Em had a feeling, though, that this was a feint. Then Pauline came back onto the porch with a big sweating glass of iced tea... and sure enough, the White Lady's gaze landed on the girl with much more than greed for a cool drink.

Pauline stopped there, with her eyes narrowed, because like Emmaline, she knew what was beneath the surface. The woman laughed prettily at the look on the girl's face.

"*Trouble comin' tell*," the White Lady sang, still grinning. "*Trouble comin' fine! Nought to pay the price but sweet blood like fine wine.*" She had a beautiful voice—lilting and hymn-reverberant and high as birds flew. Hardly sounded human, in fact, which was fitting enough.

Em raised a hand in praise anyway, because beauty was meant to be acknowledged, and to deny it would just invite her further in. "Trouble always coming, ma'am," she replied to the song. "Some'a us, this world made of trouble. Not that you folk help."

"Aww, Miss Emmaline, don't be like that. Come on here, girl, with that tea. It's powerful hot."

Em glanced at Pauline; Pauline nodded once, tightly. Then she walked down the steps to the bottommost slat—no farther—and held forth the glass.

The White Lady sighed, throwing a look at Em. "Ought to raise your children to show some respect, Miss Emmaline."

"Lots of ways to show respect, ma'am."

The White Lady sniffed. Then she turned her head, and the little girl who'd been holding the parasol straightened and came around her. The parasol stayed where it was, holding itself up against the ground. As the child moved forward, Em's skin came all over goose bumps. Wasn't right, seeing a child who should've been lively so empty of life and magic. The little girl twitched a little while she walked, as if with a palsy, or as if jerked on strings. She stopped before Pauline and held her hands up, and Em didn't blame Pauline at all for her grimace as she pushed the glass into the child's hands.

"Whose was she?" Emmaline asked, as the little girl twitched and moved to bring the tea back to her mistress.

"Nobody who matters, Miss Em, don't you mind." The White Lady took the glass of tea, then smoothed a hand over the child's soft cap of hair with an almost fond smile. "Such a lovely girl, though, isn't she? Everybody says you folk can't be beautiful, but that's just not true. Where else would I be able to get this?" She preened, smoothing a hand over one unblemished, shining cheek.

"She had power," Pauline said then. Em started; she was used to Pauline keeping her mouth shut around white folks, like a good sensible girl should. But Pauline was still staring at the little girl in horror. Her expression hardened, though, from shock into disgust. "She had *power*, and you *took* it. Like a damn thief."

The White Lady's eyebrows looked to have climbed into her red hair for a moment. Emmaline was right there with her, shocked at Pauline's cheek. She snapped without thinking, "Pauline Elizabeth, shut your mouth before I shut it."

Pauline shut up, though Emmaline could see the resentful flex of

muscle along her jaw. But the White Lady let out a soft laugh, chilling them both into silence.

"Well! I can't say I think much of how you're raising your children, Miss Emmaline. Negro children never can sit still and be quiet, I suppose. Of course I took her power, girl; not like *she* could do anything with it. Now. I think I'm owed an apology, don't you?"

Damnation. Stiffly, Emmaline said, "I'm sorry for my daughter's foolishness, ma'am. I'll see to her when we're done talking."

"Oh, but that isn't enough, Miss Em." The White Lady tilted her head, long red lashes catching the light. "Honestly, how's she going to learn respect if you do all the apologizing for her?"

Pauline spoke tightly, with a darting glance at Emmaline for permission to speak. "I'm sorry, too, ma'am."

"Now, see? That wasn't so hard." The White Lady gestured with the tinkling glass of tea at Pauline, beaming. "But don't you think you owe me a bit more, after smarting off like that? Why, I'm *wounded*. You called me a thief! And even if I am, it's the principle of the thing." She stepped forward. "I think you should come with me for a while, and learn respect. Don't you?"

"No, ma'am," Emmaline snapped, before Pauline could dig herself further into trouble. "I don't think she owes you a thing beyond what you've had."

"Oh, now, be reasonable." The White Lady stepped forward once more, almost to the porch steps—but then she paused, her smile fading just a little. When she glanced off to the side, she spied the rosemary bush at last, growing scraggly in the summer heat. Growing, though, still, and by its growth weaving a bit of protection around the house. Beginning to frown, the woman glanced to the other side; there was plenty of sage, too, thriving in the heat unlike the rosemary.

Eyes widening, the woman finally turned about, spying at last the prize of Emmaline's yard: the sycamore fig. It grew in an arc over on the far side of the yard, because many years ago some neighborhood children had played on it and nearly broken its trunk. It had survived, though—through the heat, through the breaking, and through isolation, for it was nearly the only one of its kind in America. By the stories Emmaline's own mother had told of its planting, the seed-fig had been smuggled over from Africa herself, tucked into some poor soul's wound to keep it safe and living through the Middle Passage.

"Supposed to be rowan, thorn, and ash," said the White Lady. All at once she sounded sulky.

Emmaline lifted her chin. "That'd work, too," she said, "'cause Lord knows I got some Scots Irish in me from my poor slave foremothers' travails. But this ain't the soil of Eire; red Alabama dirt roots different protectors. And you ain't the same as your'n back in the Old Country neither, not after all these years of drinking Negro blood, so rosemary, sage, and fig will do for *you*."

The White Lady let out a huffy little sound . . . but then she took a dainty step back. She started to raise the glass of tea, then paused, focusing sharply on it; her lip curled. Then she glared at Pauline.

"Just a little bit of acorn flour, ma'am," Pauline said, with such exaggerated innocence in her voice that Emmaline had to stifle a smile in spite of herself. "For flavor?"

"Rosemary, sage, and fig to bind," said the White Lady. It was clear now that she was furious, as she held the glass of tea out from herself and then dropped it. The tea spilled into the grass, and the glass split into three pieces. She drew in a deep breath, visibly mastering temper. "And *oak* to strike the blow. Well, Miss Emmaline, I'll grant you won this one, but it leaves us in a bit of

a fix. You can't keep yours safe everywhere, and I can't be chasing after 'em all damn day and night." She thought a moment. "How 'bout a deal?"

"Ain't enough water in the River Jordan," Emmaline snapped.

"Sure?" The White Lady's grin crept back, like a dog badly banished. "Safety and prosperity for the rest, if you give me but one?"

"I done told you *no*," Emmaline said. She was forgetting to pretend polite; well, Sample hadn't gotten it only from his father. "How many more times I got to—"

"What kind of safety?" asked Pauline.

"Lord, have mercy, I'mma have to kill this girl," Emmaline could not help muttering. But Pauline had set her jaw in that tight, stubborn way that meant she didn't care if she got a smack for it. She persisted: "How much prosperity?"

Oh, and if that didn't spread the White Lady's grin nearly from ear to ear. "Why, *lots*, sugar. Bless your heart!"

"Girl, shut your *mouth*," Emmaline snapped. But the White Lady held up a hand, and all at once Emmaline found herself unable to speak. Oh, Mercy! Em knew, then. Stupid, *stupid* girl.

"Pauline, don't!" blurted Jim, but the White Lady eyed him, too, and he was shut up as firmly as Emmaline herself. Sample just stared from one to the other of his siblings and from them to the White Lady, his hands flexing as if he wanted to hit somebody, but wasn't sure where to start.

"Children should be seen and not heard," said the White Lady, gesturing gracefully with her fan. "But *ladies* with that blood like wine, sweet and high and so fine, get some choices in the matter 'til it's taken from them. What say you, Miss Pauline?"

Pauline, to her credit, glanced at Emmaline again. Her belligerence had faded by now, and her small face was properly anxious and

afraid. Then, though, her jaw firmed, and she faced the White Lady squarely. "You said trouble was comin'."

"Oh, indeed." The White Lady let her gaze drip left and right, syruping all over the boys. "So much trouble! Folks getting uppity from here to the Carolinas. De-seg-gregation! Non-discrim-ination! And don't you know them bullnecks will be hitting back fast, beating y'all back into your place." She stopped her gaze on hotheaded Sample; Sample set his jaw. "Hitting back *hard*, I tell you, on boys who think to be called men."

Pauline caught her breath. Then, though, thank the Lord, she bit her bottom lip. "I want to speak to my mother."

There was a moment's long, pent pause. Then the White Lady flipped her fan back up into a blurring wave, dropping into a mocking curtsy. The servant child moved jerkily back behind her, taking hold of the parasol again. "Seeking counsel is wise, and within the rules besides," the White Lady admitted. "Not too much counsel, though, little miss. Some deals don't last long."

With that, she flounced off with the child in tow—though Emmaline noted that she skirted wide around the sycamore fig before passing behind a pine tree and vanishing.

The instant Emmaline could speak and move, she did, hurrying over to Pauline and slapping the tar out of the girl before she could speak. "Didn't I tell you about folks like that?" she demanded, pointing with a shaking hand after the White Lady. "Didn't I *tell* you they'll put a pretty orange in your hand and snatch it back with the hand attached?"

It had been happening more and more lately that Pauline defied her—but then, this was only proper, was it not? A girl coming into her womanhood, and her adult power, should speak her mind

sometimes. "I know, Momma," Pauline said, without a trace of apology. Her voice was so calm and strong and even that Emmaline blinked. "But I had dreams."

"Well, you should've told me! And you should've told me about the blood coming, I know how to make you safe for at least a bit of time, and—"

"You *can't* make me safe, Momma." Pauline said it so sharp, her gaze so hard, that Emmaline could only flinch back. "That's why you told me what to be scared of, ain't it? So I could make myself safe. And I know, 'cause you taught me, that it's a woman's job to fight for hers."

"That's a man's job," Jim said, scowling—though he, too, should've been quiet, cowed by the slap. Sample nodded fiercely. Emmaline groaned and put a hand in the air for strength; all of her children had forgotten how to mind, all at once.

"Decent folks' job, then," Pauline said back, with a little heat. "But Momma, I *saw* it in the dream. People marching! Big ol' red-neck bulls, standing up like men, holding dogs and billy clubs. Blood everywhere." Emmaline's skin went all a-prickle with remembered fear. Yet there was no fear in Pauline's face as she went on, her voice rising in excitement. "At the end of it, though, Momma, at the end . . . I saw white children and black children sitting by each other in school. It was yellow and brown and red children there, too! Black people at the front of a bus! Momma . . ." Pauline bit her lip, then leaned forward to whisper, though there was no one to hear but family. "I saw a *black man in a big white house*."

There were always black men in the big white houses of downtown Birmingham. Who else was going to tend their gardens or wash their cars? And yet . . . there was a fervor in Pauline's gaze that

warned Emmaline there was something more to her daughter's dreams.

Didn't matter, though. The world didn't change. And somebody had to protect her fool children from themselves.

Seething with pent-up anger and fear, Emmaline herded the children inside. She made them go to bed early, with no supper for smarting off, because they had to *learn*—Pauline especially. Wasn't no prosperity worth a girlchild's soul and what little innocence life allowed her. Wasn't no safety for black boys beyond what humility bought them, little as that was.

And while they slept, Emmaline burned sage, and she prayed to every ancestor of three continents who might listen, and then she set herself up in a chair before the door with her grandmother's old musket across her knees. She would stay up day and night, if she had to, for her children's sake.

After a few hours had passed in slow and taut silence, and the candles burned low, and the weight of drowsiness pressed on the back of her head like a blanket, Emmaline got up to keep herself awake. She peeked in the boys' room: They were snoring, curled up, though Jim had a half-eaten peach still in his hand, sneaked out from some hiding place or another against just such an occasion of their mother's wrath.

Pauline's room, though, was cold from the open window wafting sharp bitter wind over the girl's empty bed.

There would be only one place the girl could have gone: the Fairgrounds, in the shadow of Red Mountain.

Emmaline ran to Renee's house, since Renee had the only working phone on the street. There she called Frank, who came over

bringing his mule. The mule ran like it knew what was at stake, so fast and hard that Emmaline's bottom was raw long before she reached the place.

The Fairgrounds were only Fairgrounds once a year. The rest of the time it was just a fallow field, occasionally used for harness racing. Long ago, though, it had been the breaking ground of a plantation—the place where new slaves, freshly force-marched up from the port of Mobile, got branded and stripped of name and spirit before being sent into the fields. As Emmaline halted the mule and slid off its back, she felt all that old blood there in the ground, mixed with old tears and the red dirt beneath her feet. White Folk fed on that sort of magic. This would be a place of power for them.

As Em reached the top of the hill, she saw that Pauline stood beneath a pine that was being strangled by a carpet of kudzu. Before her stood the White Lady—shining even more now, her skin catching the moon's gleam in the way of her people, ears gone to points and mouth too wide and full of sharp fangs. They both turned as Emmaline thumped up, out of breath, her legs shaking from holding so tight to the mule's sides. Still, she moved to stand between them, in front of Pauline and facing the White Lady. "I ain't gon' let you!"

"Deal's done, Miss Emmaline," said the White Lady, looking amused. "Too late."

Emmaline turned to Pauline, shaking, horrified. Pauline, though, lifted her chin. "I saw it, Momma," she said. "One life for three. Trouble coming whether we want it or not, but if I go, you and the boys will get through it."

In a wordless fury, Emmaline flung herself at the White Lady. She did this without using her body, and the White Lady met her

without hers, taking her *up* and *out* and *through* and *into* dreaming. Thing was, dreaming wasn't a thing mortal folks did so well when they were awake, so Emmaline tumbled, helpless, lashing out ineffectually. And in the perverse way of her kind—who loved to lie, but liked it best of all when truth became their weapon—the White Lady showed Emmaline the future that Pauline had bought. She saw:

Markets full of melons and greens and peaches, all artificially fresh and reeking of chemicals in the dead of winter. Long elevated strips of road carving up Negro towns and neighborhoods all over the country. Gray, looming schools isolating bright black minds and breaking their spirits and funneling them into jails. Police, everywhere, killing and killing and *killing*. This? Emmaline fought nausea and despair, lest she strengthen her enemy—but it was nearly impossible not to feel something. Oh, Lord, her baby had given up her freedom for *this*?

And yet. All at once Emmaline was not alone in her tumbling. Pauline, new and raw and woman-strong, pushed at Emmaline, helping her straighten up. Then Pauline pointed, snatching more truth from the White Lady's dream than even she wanted shown; the White Lady hissed into their minds like ice on a griddle. Pauline ignored this and said, "Look, Momma!"

And then Em saw the rest.

Marching black people, attacked by dogs. But still marching. Children—Sample!—struck by the blasts of fire hoses, the torrent peeling off clothes and tearing skin. *Still marching*. Joined by dozens, hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands.

Still. Marching.

Before these marches, prayers and church-plate dinners. *Emmaline, sprinkling a little fire into the chicken and dumplings to warm the*

marchers against the cold hose water to come. Young women refusing to be ordered out of their bus seats to go sit in the back. Emmaline braiding a donkey's stubbornness into their hair. Children holding their heads high through crowds of shouting, jeering white teenagers and adults. Emmaline trimming a few figs from the sycamore to make jam, sweetening the children's mouths with the taste of heritage and survival.

And so much more. Brown faces in space! Emmaline could only stare at the stars, and savor the impossible possibility. Brown men on the Supreme Court! Then she saw the white house that Pauline had mentioned. *The White House*, nestled amid statues and obelisks and the mirror pools of Washington, D.C., a place of power in itself. She saw a man standing on its steps, brown as fig jam. And then a woman, black as molasses, her gaze hard and high and proud. And then another woman, and another brown man, and *so many more*, their frequency increasing with the spinning of the sun.

Still marching. Never stopping, 'til freedom was won.

Pauline's single sacrifice could set all of it in motion. But—

"No!" Emmaline fought her way back toward wakefulness. "I can't—it can't be me who stays!" She didn't believe! She had taught her children to bow their heads, not lift them up high. "I'm not what they need!"

You gon' be all they get, sugar, said the White Lady into the dream, in a laughing whisper.

No. No, she damn well would *not* be.

The dream still spun around her. Emmaline set her jaw and plunged her hand into it, grabbing wildly this time, and pulling back... the jar of sycamore jam.

"Sin's sin," she snapped. The top of the jar was tight, but she

wrestled it off and plucked out a dripping, soft sycamore fig to brandish against the churning dark. "A deal's a deal. But one kind of prey the same as another to you lot, ain't it? You like children's beauty, but a woman's don't hurt you none. You like innocence, but you'll take foolishness. So here mine: *I can't believe the world will ever change.*

"I can't hope. It ain't in me. Spent too long making it easier for people to live downtrodden. I know how to survive, but I ain't got the fight for change in me—not like my baby does. So take me, and leave her."

"No!" Pauline shouted, but Emmaline had enough control to drown her out with the sound of chanting, marching crowds.

The shape of the White Lady had blurred into the dream, but she was a sharp-toothed presence amid the swirl. *Take you both, child and fool, all mine.*

Emmaline grinned. "Greed's a sin." The dream cracked a little beneath good Christian truth, allowing Em to summon the whiff of burned sage. The White Lady flinched hard enough to slow the whirlwind of the dream, for the smell carried with it lamentations for stolen lands, stolen children, and the stolen lives of Em's Creek forbears. Emmaline set that in place opposite the jar of figs. "Your bargain was one for three, not two for two."

Images of marchers warped and twisted around them, the White House dissolving into the foxy face of the White Lady. "True enough," she said, conjuring up her fan again. "Still, I'd rather the child if you don't mind. Or even if you do."

Here Emmaline faltered. She had not dreamt of rosemary. Frantically she rifled through images, tossing away the fish she'd dreamt of before each of her children, shoving aside the green tomatoes and the collards of the market. Lord! Had she never once dreamt of baking chicken?

She had not. But then, through the tittering laughter of the White Lady and her cronies, Emmaline smelled a dream of pot-roasted guinea-rooster, with orange peel . . . and rosemary. That had been the first time Emmaline accorded her daughter the respect of a fellow woman—oh, and Pauline had been savoring that feeling, all this time! There was a bit of innocence attached to it, too, lost after Emmaline's explanation about white men's oranges; the perfect sweetening to lure in a hungry fey. And indeed, the White Lady paused, lifting her face a little and half-closing her eyes in pleasure at the toothsome aroma. But then she stiffened as she caught the rosemary's perfume.

"Rosemary, sage, and fig," said Pauline, in a tone of satisfaction. "Now let my Momma—"

"Take me," Emmaline said. *Commanded*, now, because she could. She had bound the White Lady by both the ancient rules of the Old Country and the newer rules of flesh and blood. The deal had been made, one innocent life for three lives protected and prosperous, but Emmaline had control over which life the White Folk got to keep, at least.

"Momma!" Pauline, her beautiful powerful Pauline, abruptly resolved out of the dream's swirl and turned to her. "Momma, you can't."

"Hush." Emmaline went to her, held her close, kissed her corn-rowed head. "I done told you a million times that the world doesn't change—but I was wrong, and I'm sorry for that. You got a big fight ahead of you, but you can win it. And you're better suited for that fight than I'll ever be." She hugged the girl tight. "Be strong, baby. Tell your brothers the same. I know y'all are anyway."

Pauline clutched at her. "But Momma, I, you can't, I didn't want—"

The White Lady closed the dream around Emmaline, and whisked her away.

In the morning, Pauline woke up on the ground of the Fairgrounds wet with dew and weeping. Her brothers, who had come up to the Fairgrounds to find her, came quietly to her side to hold her tight.

Cousin Renee took the children in, of course, for blood was blood. She sent them one by one to Alabama State for their learning, so they were there when the Freedom Rides began. Naturally all three joined up. Through the dark times that followed, the foretold dogs and hoses and beatings—and the unforeseen lynchings and assassinations and bombings—there were white folk aplenty doing evil... but no White Folk. The fey did not go again where they had been bested once, and in any case, their time was waning. The dirt of Alabama was red for many reasons, not the least of which that it was full of iron ore. Took a lot of power to overcome that much iron... and the times were changing such that not even black children could be stolen with impunity anymore.

The White Folk kept their promise, at least: Jim got his arm bitten by a dog during a protest, but it did not tear his throat out. Hard-headed Sample dated a white woman and only had to flee town; the men who meant to chain him up behind their truck and drag him to death did not catch him. Pauline got married, dreamt of fish, and made her own daughters to carry on the family legacy. After a few more years, she ran for city council and won, and nobody strung her up. Then she ran for mayor, and won that, too. All the while she turned a tidy profit from her sideline barbecue business. The greens had a little extra warmth in them that made everyone feel better toward each other, so she called them Freedom Greens, mostly as a joke.

But one year the black man Pauline had dreamt of in the White House passed through town, and he decided to come all the way to Pratt City to have some of Pauline's Famous Freedom Greens. Folks went wild. Somebody paid her to write a book about her life. Somebody optioned the film rights. Companies called and asked to franchise her recipe—but Pauline said no, instead hiring a small staff of Pratt City dwellers and leasing a commercial kitchen to fill all the thousands of orders for greens herself.

In every can, mind, there was a sprinkle of rosemary, sage, and a tiny dab of sycamore fig. Just to cut the bitterness.

And late one cold winter's night, Pauline dreamt again of the White Folk. She saw how lean and poorly they were looking these days, deprived of their easy prey, and as the hate of the world dwindled and left them hungry. But as she fought the urge to smile at their misfortune—for ill-wishing would only make them stronger—she caught a glimpse of a painfully familiar black face among their foxy whiteness, strong and proud and shining in its own way. A face that was smiling, and satisfied, and full of motherly pride.

So the world changed. And so Pauline woke up and went to hold her oldest granddaughter close, whispering to her of secrets and savory things and dreams yet to come—and of Great-Grammy Em, never to be forgotten, who would one day also be free.