

Redwood
and
Wildfire

by
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For two women who rehearsed the impossible:

Zitkala Sa (1876-1938), writer and activist

Aida Overton Walker (1880-1914), performer and choreographer

And

For my grandfather and great aunt—I am the song they sung.

BOOK I

All our stars have not yet risen.



ONE

Peach Grove, Georgia, 1898

“I can’t keep running.”

Christmas moonbeams snuck through a break in the live oak trees, and Redwood Phipps planted her eleven-year-old self in the cold silvery light. Long legs and all, she was bone tired. Big brother George, her teary cousins, and wild-eyed grownups were leapfrogging through grandmother oaks, much wider than they were tall and so tangled up in one another, could have been a square mile of one tree. A maze of moss-covered boughs going every which way at once tripped up any fool aiming for speed. Redwood pressed her feet into the muck and felt fat ole roots holding down the ground. She leaned against gnarled branches holding back the sky. Warm as an ember in the small of her back, little sister Iris cooed in her sleep and burped sweet baby breath. Redwood turned her face to the stars, shivered, and closed her eyes.

The wind picked up. Sharp oak leaves sliced at her arms. She wanted to conjure herself somewhere else and give her poor legs a rest. But she’d just have to drop back into this mad dash to nowhere. And why try for some other where and when, without Mama to catch her if she got lost, without anybody to *believe*.

Redwood sank down on a mossy bough and rubbed an angry calf.

All they’d been doing for days was run: down dusty roads, through cold swamp mud, over the dead stocks of winter oats. Since a week ago, must be. Mama woke her up in the middle of a sweet singing and dancing dream. Then they raced out into a nightmare. Red flames flared against the black sky, babies screamed, and pale nightriders pumped shotguns at shadows darting through the trees. A posse of white men were going buck mad all over colored Peach Grove.

Whose fault was that?

Yellow fever took Daddy to Glory this past summer. Otherwise the family wouldn't have been running at all. That's what George said. Redwood tried not to be mad at Daddy for leaving or at Mama for letting him go. When it was *really* your time, even a powerful conjure woman like Mama couldn't cheat the boneyard baron from his due.

First it was just them running—Mama with baby Iris on her back and big brother George holding Redwood's hand. Then two days ago, after the sun sank into mustardy mist, Miz Subie lurched out of the swamp grass, gray hair rioting 'cross her head, whiskers on her jaw twitching. "Demon posse going wild, and I was high and dry, out of harm's way. Why you calling me into this swamp between a hoot and a holler?"

Redwood snorted as Mama and Miz Subie hid behind the domed roots of a cypress tree to argue. Posse tracking them wouldn't get nowhere but lost. Mama's hoodoo spells kept them safe. She had secret places nobody could hardly find. Miz Subie had that cataract eye—wasn't too good at seeing in daylight, get lost in her own front yard. She never wanted to bother with gators or snakes or mosquitoes. Mama must've left a hoodoo trail Miz Subie could follow with her eyes closed. *Had* to follow, probably. Didn't she teach Mama conjuring? Why all the fussing and cussing?

"Garnett Phipps, you can run through fire and not get burnt," Miz Subie raised her voice loud enough for Redwood and George to hear, "but that won't put it out!"

"What you asking me to do?" Mama shouted too. "Stay here and what?"

"I'm not asking you to do anything," Subie replied. Redwood had never heard her sound so shaky. "If you're going, go. Otherwise—you running these little ones ragged."

Mama didn't say much after that. She hugged and kissed Iris and Redwood and fixed them in her eyes, but when it come to George, he pretended he was too grown for Mama still loving him like her baby. "I'm sixteen New Year's Day, 1899. A man now, ain't I?" he said. "Why we been running in circles? What you plan to do now?" Mama glared at George, but he kept on. "Why can't you tell me what's what?"

"Can't nobody tell you what's what." All the mad drained out of Mama's eyes. "You got to figure that for yourself." Mama hugged him

hard, and he didn't want to let her go. She pulled away. "Y'all watch over each other. You hear me?" She squeezed Redwood's hand 'til it hurt. "Keep a look out, Subie. For my children. Keep a look out." Then Mama took off on her own, mud up to her thighs, tiddies dripping milk, tears aching in her eyes.

"We goin' catch up with your mama later," Subie said. "She got hard business to take care of."

"I could help," Redwood said. "If she's doing a tricky spell."

Subie didn't answer right off. "No. We need you to stay with us."

Redwood wanted to run after Mama but knew better than to make a big fuss. Didn't she have to sing to keep baby Iris from howling? Indeed Redwood sang 'til they found Aunt Elisa who let Iris suck 'cause—

"Auntie be trying to wean your cousin, so drink me dry, gal."

Two days gone by since then, the whole raggedy family on the run—Uncle Ladd, Aunt Elisa, the five cousins too—sniffing, stumbling, and ain't nobody seen another sign of Mama, not Uncle Ladd who could track anything walking nor Miz Subie on the lookout for a hoodoo trail. Mama's hard business was taking too long.

Redwood peered through scraggly oak leaves curling against the chill. At least no more red fires danced 'cross the black face of night. Redwood tasted the air, drawing it slowly 'cross her tongue: cold ashes, cold soot. Maybe the nightmare was over. Maybe nobody needed to be running in circles no more, and she could lie down and catch a good sleep. Maybe Mama would come take them home...

"What you doing? We gotta keep ahead of those nightriders, 'til it's safe to go back. Get up." George pulled her off the old oak bough. His arms were thick with muscle. He shook Redwood once, twice, and rattled her teeth the third time. "Follow me. Should I take Iris?"

"No." Iris wailed if she wasn't sucking on Aunt Elisa or riding Redwood's back. Half an hour ago, despite bumping and jiggling through the woods, she got Iris to sleep singing. Why mess up that? In the moonlight, George found a way through the crisscross of boughs, but Redwood lagged behind. Each step, her feet throbbed and her legs wobbled. Wet, heavy air choked aching lungs, like she was breathing everybody's sweat. Her heart banged against her chest.

“Take your sister’s hand, George, and keep a look out.” Aunt Elisa talked like Mama for a moment.

Redwood could’ve bust out crying. Nobody was *really* like Mama. George reached out grubby fingers and pulled her along. His heart wasn’t in it. Redwood stopped again. She wasn’t running like them hound dogs who kept going even after their hearts stopped, even after they were dead.

“You feel something, sugar, the rest of us don’t?” Miz Subie placed a cool palm on Redwood’s hot brow and drew the fever, drew the weary right to her fingers. “A sign all right.” Her milky eye twitched. “You think you can help us find your mama now?”

The whole family stood ’round Redwood, gawking.

“You know how to track her,” George said.

“Can’t find Mama if she don’t want to be found.” Redwood wondered what trick they were playing on her. Grown-ups were always hoarding the truth and lying, even though they said that was sin. “She’ll find us, when she want to. I’m too tired.”

“Why you got to be so stubborn? Have *your* way every time?” George just wanted her to do what he wanted.

“I can’t run no more.” Redwood pouted.

“Garnett’s communing with...the angels,” Aunt Elisa said. “She’s too busy to find us. We got to find her.”

Miz Subie scowled, but her rough palms on Redwood’s cheeks pressed strength right into her. “George is right. Garnett don’t hide from you. We follow you, chile. Go how fast you go. We counting on you.” Everybody nodded, even George. Subie wasn’t one to sneak in the back door. She just spoke plain and true.

“Angels.” Redwood sighed. What did the angels want with Mama? “Well...”

“Play some music, Ladd,” Subie said. “You know the gal like that.”

“You think that’s a good idea?” Uncle Ladd asked, looking ’round the shadows.

“Why she say play, if she don’t mean it?” Aunt Elisa was ’bout to be through with everybody. So Uncle Ladd strummed his ratty banjo. He couldn’t play worth a damn, and George had wondered why he’d dragged the ole thing along when they were on the run, life and

death. Ladd kept strumming 'til he found *Joy to the World*. Redwood was done pouting then. She started singing loud. Nobody hushed her.



Aidan Cooper heard the Christmas music and stumbled to a halt.

And heaven and nature sing!

Thick strands of sweaty black hair obscured his line of sight. A hoot owl screeched, and he almost dropped the heavy burden that dug into his shoulder. He tried to breathe blood into constricted muscles. The alligator pouch dangling on his belt was caught between his thighs. He danced it free, juggling all that remained of Garnett Phipps' body. Not an hour ago, he'd cut her down from a Georgia pine that didn't burn when she did. He'd wrapped her in the white cloth his Aunt Caitlin used for bed sheets.

Thinking on her flesh crackling and boiling away, Aidan gagged. A foul stink leaked through the layers of rough cotton. Despite the powerful roots and herbs he'd gathered, Aidan smelled dried semen and spit, burnt hair, charred bones, and all Miz Garnett's screams; and those up-standing men, Christians, hooting and hollering, having a rip-roaring, good ole time. All still ringing in Aidan's ears, in his bones.

"Do right," Miz Garnett whispered—a spear right through his heart.

"How?" Aidan spoke out loud to a ghost. Eighteen and going out his mind, he ought to know better. He ought to know something.

Take her to somewhere before it's too late!

"It's already too late." Aidan told ancestors talking at him on the wind. "I saw Miz Garnett's face go up in flames." He wanted to fall over and not get up. His heart throbbed, like he'd been run through for sure. "What good is anything now?" He couldn't just leave Miz Garnett on somebody's doorstep. How awful for anyone to find her that way. "Well, I couldn't leave her hanging in that pine tree, could I?"

The fellow banging at the banjo on *Joy to the World* played more wrong notes than right, but he didn't lose the tune altogether. The music calmed Aidan's heart. He cleared his sinuses and spit mucous and blood at the sandy ground. Longleaf pine needles gouged his bare arms. The night was unusually chill, near to freezing, and he was

drenched in cold sweat, shivering in a north wind. Without meaning to, he was running again. Not heading anywhere in particular, he just couldn't stand still. Miz Garnett was lighter when he was on the move. Bay branches smacked his face, but the scratches on his cheek barely registered. He was lost in a spell.

The church loomed out of the dark. The clean white oak gleaming in moonbeams startled Aidan back to himself. Eighty-five years ago, after sweating and groaning all day in the fields, slaves built this house of the Lord by starlight. When the very first prayer meeting in the new church came to a rousing end, half these devout slaves, filled with the spirit of the Holy Ghost, took their freedom into the swamps and on to Florida, to live and die with the Seminoles. Paddy rollers chasing behind them got struck down by lightning, and their hound dogs got fried too. Overseer aimed to torch the church but set fire to his ownself—man run 'round for hours, burning everybody he touch, and nobody could put him out. They say, he still be burning in Hell. Even if this was a tall tale, the angry God of the Baptists made Aidan nervous. He was a sinner for sure, and no Hail Marys would help him here. God, Jesus, and the heavenly host had seen Aidan crouched up in that hunting perch doing squat, while Miz Garnett...while those men...

The door to the church was half-open, and Aidan nudged it the rest of the way. Plain wooden pews and altar were bathed in a silvery glow coming in a window that was as clear as fresh air. Aidan couldn't remember this church ever being empty on Christmas Eve before. Squinting down the aisle, he saw a mouse run from a crèche in front of the altar. Black bead eyes flashed a fleck of light. A carved wooden Mary cradled Baby Jesus and smiled at Aidan. A few donkeys and sheep stared at him expectantly. One of the Wise Men dressed in a Seminole patchwork coat had a broken leg and was tipped on his side. Indian ancestors had their eye on him for sure.

Aidan lurched past pews worn smooth by devout behinds and headed toward the crèche. He laid his burden down gently, despite the tremble in his muscles. He wanted to say some words, speak a prayer, but didn't know what he believed. Singers joined the banjo on *Joy to the World*, coming closer now. Aidan scattered a bundle of sweet bay branches and violet orchids 'cross Miz Garnett's body.

Outside the window, twelve riders in dark robes tore through the night, pounding the ground, raising a thick haze of dust. The singers and banjo player went silent. Aidan slid his daddy's hunting knife out the sheath on his thigh. The horses were wall-eyed and sweaty, tongues lolling and frothy. One rider's pale face blurred in the shadows as they disappeared. Aidan hugged himself and bent over Miz Garnett's body trying not to scream or weep or break apart. The musicians started in again. A child singer soloed, and *Joy to the World* approached the church.

And wonders of his love...

A young gal stood in the doorway and sang her heart out. The music tore at Aidan's gut. He dashed behind the altar. A blur of grownups rushed by the gal to Garnett's body. Someone wailed and covered any noise Aidan made struggling out the back.

"Subie, the child led us right to her mama," Miz Garnett's sister, Elisa Glover said, her voice cracking. Must have been Ladd banging on the banjo beside her.

Clouds crossed the moon as Aidan sprinted to the trees. Subie, a dark woman in her sixties with a milky eye and wrinkled gnarled fingers, stood in the doorway, her hands on the singer's shoulder. Aidan couldn't make out the young one—her face swam in shadows. Taller than Subie, most likely it was Garnett's gal. Aidan was covered in shadows too. Still and all, Subie spied him with that blind eye. She nodded once to him and ushered the gal into the church. Aidan raced on. Banging through brush, he didn't feel himself. But even deep in the old oaks, he felt the family grieving as the child sang a verse of *Joy to the World* Aidan didn't know.



Everybody was hollering on top of Redwood's singing.

"Garnett's in Heaven..." Aunt Elisa faltered, "communing with the angels."

"She's dead," Miz Subie talked over her.

Redwood didn't want to believe it. An acrid smell filled the church, like green pinewood burning. She felt as if scorched roots were coming apart beneath her feet, tearing through dirt, spraying bugs and mucky

old leaves in the air. If she hadn't been singing, she'd have fallen over or worse. She clung to each note, longer than she should, louder than the pounding hooves drumming the road. Miz Subie didn't lie. Mama was dead and gone and never coming back. Redwood didn't know how she could stand it. She shook Miz Subie's cold, heavy hand off her shoulder. Singing loud helped her walk the aisle between the pews and push past her cousins, aunt, and uncle to George. He couldn't holler no more and stood at the crèche, staring at orchids on dusty white cloth wrapped 'round all that was left of Mama.

Redwood took George's hand. He squeezed hard. On her back, Iris fussed. Redwood was full of tears too, howling through *Joy to the World* louder than a baby, for Mama going off with the angels and leaving them behind

"You singing like her!" George shook so, 'til he almost knocked Redwood down. "Just like Mama."

Hope burned through the hurt and held Redwood up. Everybody always said she was the spitting image of Mama. Sounded and acted like her too. So Mama wasn't all the way dead—Redwood was a spell she left behind. Spells only worked if you filled your heart, did them proper, and *believed*. So right then and there, she decided, no matter what, to sing, dance, and conjure up a storm, just like Garnett Phipps. It was what she wanted to do anyhow, but now she *had* to do it. For Mama's sake. Redwood's voice broke into wrong notes and lost words, wailing and sobbing out of tune, for she didn't know how long, but then she got a good breath and sang on:

*No more let sins and sorrows grow
 Nor thorns infest the ground
 He comes to make his blessings flow
 Far as the curse is found
 Far as the curse is found
 Far as, far as, the curse is found*


Two

Peach Grove, 1902

Redwood Phipps squirmed in the last and only empty pew of the Baptist Church. Folks had been smaller back in the day when her ornery ancestors built this church and decided how much legroom you needed to praise the Lord. Her knees pressed into splintery wood. At fifteen, Redwood was taller than a lot of grown men. Still, anybody would tell you, she was a beautiful gal with caramel skin, midnight eyes, and hair fluffy as a dandelion gone to seed. They'd also tell you she was a natural hoodoo child, beloved by the spirit in everything, wiry, spooky, working the conqueror root. And nobody—young folk or grownups—wanted to sit with her.

“You see clean through shady grins and lying skins. Of course they're 'fraid of you, of course ain't nobody goin' sit next to you,” Miz Subie said, taking her side. Big brother George beat up Bubba Jackson yesterday for calling Redwood a ghost gal, a haint child. But George and Miz Subie didn't never come to church no more.

The preacher was always railing against conjuring. “A hoodoo witch sells her soul to the devil, and she has to keep someone in her power all the time; if not, the devil will make her suffer untold agony.”

Despite all Miz Subie's supposed devil work, God didn't strike her down, and everybody sick kept on coming to her for healing. Preacher didn't sermonize against George, but why should he sit half the day praying for good times to roll *after* he was dead. “Ain't no time like now. Smile at them hinkty fools, Red, and you be surprised.”

Before heading to service, Redwood had braided her hair in neat plaits, scrubbed her skin raw, and put on one of Mama's fancy dresses. Unfortunately, when she smiled and a few folks smiled back, there wasn't no more room in their pews.

The choir slid off key—so many bad notes, it hurt. Members of the congregation wondered if the spirit could really be with such

awful singers. That was the only reason the choir director wanted Redwood to join, desperate for any kind of help, even hoodoo.

The preacher grimaced and intoned over the wayward melody. “Have you swept your spirit clean? God sees to every black corner of your heart. He knows every black deed.” The preacher mopped his brow and smiled at the widow in the first row who was swooning from the heat of the Holy Ghost—or pretending to. “Repent! Spill out your sins. Tell God your dark secrets.”

“If God knows all,” Redwood whispered to nobody, “why I got to tell him, too?” That was a good one to save for George later. Four-year-old Iris turned from two rows up and grinned. Redwood and Baby Sister could speak heart to heart even with Iris squished between Uncle Ladd and Aunt Elisa praising the Holy Ghost.

“HE sends us signs every day. Jesus wept, yes he did, for each one of us.” The preacher hadn’t said anything new for weeks but nobody noticed. Aunt Elisa, Uncle Ladd, and then the cousins were swaying with the hymn. Iris moved to her own music. Redwood stared out the open window. The sun was almost gone.

“Hoodoo conjure man only lead you astray.” Preacher was riding his high horse now. “Singing *the Blues* and telling you only what you want to hear. Easy lies. But the road to Heaven is uphill all the way. Have mercy!” he screamed, and the congregation jumped to their feet, shouting *amen!*

Redwood clutched a postcard that Mama sent from the Chicago Fair. The words written on the back changed from time to time. “We bear witness for redemption.” She quoted the latest message under the *amens* and *have mercys*. She spoke Mama’s words every chance she got, so she wouldn’t forget herself or where she come from. “We speak truth that it may come true.” She slipped out the side door into the twilight, certain that when the church sat back down, no one would notice the empty pew.



Aidan Cooper was sweating and spitting as he angled the plow into hard ground. The Lord’s Day didn’t bring rest. Aunt Caitlin’s patch of dirt farm was his now. And he was a married man, responsible

for two lives, not just his ownself. Who could say, maybe a baby, a new life was on the way. If he managed another good crop, he could afford to hire an extra hand—one of the Glover boys, whoever Ladd could spare. And if not, at least he wouldn't lose his land like the Jessups, the Crawfords, and half the poor colored and white folk this side of the creek. Determined to get one more row ready for winter oats, he ignored the sun sneaking down behind the trees. The mule had other ideas. She stopped mid-row and turned to stare into Aidan's smoky green eyes. An evening wind tangled his long black hair.

"Come on now, let's move, Princess. Just one more furrow and then supper." Tall and vibrant, a handsome man with burnished skin, Aidan whistled and shouted at Princess. The alligator pouch banged against Aidan's hip. His daddy's hunting knife sparkled in the fading light. The mule glared back at him, unimpressed. Princess was as red as the sunset, 'cept for a white nose and a patch of black shaped in a feather on her forehead. She snorted and twitched long, luxurious ears.

"What do you want out of me?" Aidan sighed, shook his head. He found a melody for just this moment, a haunting tune in a minor key. No words as yet, just nonsense sounds, whistles, click-clacks and heya bobs, which suited the mule just fine. With him singing, Princess plodded on into the twilight for three more rows.

"Anybody please." A voice rustled through the stalks and leaves.

Aidan choked on the last of his song. Princess trudged on, dragging him along.

The voice blew through the trees. "Somebody!"

Horrified, Aidan twisted and turned in every direction—not a soul to be seen.

"Do right," the voice begged as an owl hooted.

How the hell was he ever goin' do that?

It was Christmas 1898 again, and hooded men—nightriders—blazed 'cross the newly plowed earth or through Aidan's mind. Either way, the horses' hooves stamped on his nerves. Something hung from a pine tree. He could smell the foul sweat, feel hot blood rising. A turkey buzzard circled with a string of flesh dangling from its beak.

Garnett Phipps groaned with the wind. "Do right, for the sickness cured, for the babies born true, for evil spirits chased from your gates. Have mercy."

Aidan slumped against the plow. Princess stopped and turned, flicking her velvet ears toward him. 'Cross the purple sky, bats swooped through a cloud of bugs, feasting. Aidan pulled his weary self up, unhitched Princess, and reached for his jug. "What can I tell you? Wide awake hearing the voice of a dead woman."



Even if nobody sat next to her and she didn't last the whole sermon, talking to God always put Redwood in a grand mood. Sitting in church with a whole crowd of sinners and saints, *believing*, calling down the spirit, she felt right as rain, good as dirt, and wide open like the sky. She felt as ancient as the old oaks, as new as the falling dew—just how Mama said. "Listen hard, Red, and you can hear everything, all over creation."

This Sunday evening, creation was so loud with all the hooting, squealing, slithering, hollering, slurping, and buzzing, it was a wonder she could hear her own footfall. But cutting through the woods and taking the long way home, Redwood tracked the sound of good music. So faint at first, it could've just been wishful thinking. Yet a throb under her toes called her to dance. A twang vibrating her breastbone begged her to sing. Real professionals were passing through Peach Grove. That was the talk 'round town. Storm had washed them out Saturday evening. Sounded like they were goin' to give it another go tonight—blasphemy or not.

The burning flavor of moonshine tinged the air. Redwood also smelled sweet potatoes boiling, chicken and ribs roasting, biscuits and skillet bread too, melting fresh butter. A peach cobbler bubbled and popped, and she picked up speed. Laughter and love talk echoed through the trees. Lanterns swung from oak branches and winked at her. Spanish moss danced in the warm beams of light. Redwood dashed through evergreen magnolias into a clearing just as a guitar got coaxed back in tune and a washboard was wiped down. She squatted under a flickering light to catch her breath.

Eyeing the steaming food on rough wooden tables, her stomach growled. A nickel for what you could eat and drink, but she didn't have a cent on her. Young folk from all over, from thirty miles away

even, sat on splintery benches dressed in silky fabrics and starched collars. They smelled sweet as spring. Redwood smoothed her stiff cotton dress, something Mama made ten years ago to wear to the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition. It was old and faded, thin and patched, but Redwood felt beautiful as she sauntered up to the traveling Bluesmen.

"Milton, they got to be paying us cash money," a handsome man with hazel eyes and a side part in his thick hair whispered over the washtub bass, a northerner from the sound of him. "Not just—"

"Do you know who you be and where you are, Eddie?" Milton replied, strumming his guitar. Couldn't tell where he was from, but Milton had a city mustache and a breath of hair like black mist, cloaking his deep brown skull. "Backcountry, nowhere Georgia. And you think you're good enough for cash—ha!"

"On a piano, I'm so good, can't nobody touch me. My fingers're so fast can't nobody even see me. That's worth..." Eddie shook his head, marveling at his music. "Not just food, not just a lady for the night."

"Excuse me, sir," Redwood said, right in Milton's face. He jumped back as if she'd materialized out of the cooking smoke. "You the one played music for Mr. Bert Williams in *The Lucky Coon* like they say?"

"I did indeed, pretty lady." Milton smelled of moonshine, fried chicken, and hot coffee. "On stages clear 'cross this US of A."

"How you get started doing shows and whatnot?" Redwood asked.

"Me and ole Bert be thick as thieves." He looked like a fancy liar if ever she'd seen one.

"Is that a fact?"

Milton grinned at her earnest face. "You want to go on the stage, little miss woman?"

"It's my dream," Redwood replied.

Eddie looked her up and down. He frowned at her beat-up brogans or maybe it was the size of her big feet as compared to her little tiddies, which hadn't got to half of Mama's fullness and didn't seem like they ever would. "Shouldn't you be at the prayer meeting?" Eddie snickered. "Your mama let you come hear our music?"

“Mama done gone to Glory,” Redwood said to Milton. “The angels snatched her up one Christmas night, to be one of their number. But she know, *Blues* ain’t devil music.”

“You’re Garnett Phipps’ gal.” Milton laughed nervously and plucked at his guitar. Who she was spooked him. Eddie scowled and started singing. He mumbled and slurred so, Redwood couldn’t understand a word, but it was good music. The tune went in your head and wouldn’t let go, the rhythm got under your skin and took charge. She stepped toward the snarl of young folk dancing in the dirt. They were showing off for each other with swooping bird and bug steps from the Sea Islands, or jumping like rabbits, waddling like pigs, and doing the shimmy-shake from Savannah.

Beatrice and Fanny, who had grown up down the road from Redwood, smiled, swayed their hips, and eyed young men who had yet to find partners. They looked grand with full bosoms already, fluffy hairdos, and red on their lips. The two gals were close friends, always in step, tangled in each other’s thoughts, *believing* each other’s dreams. Redwood didn’t mean to be jealous of them, but she was. Seeing her approach, Beatrice frowned and clutched Fanny’s hand. They froze and their smiles drained away. Bubba Jackson grabbed Fanny and a friend of George’s snatched Beatrice. With no prodding, they were hopping and swooping like everyone else. No boy ever come up and snatch Redwood’s hand like that. She sighed and danced alone. Chasing the beat, she faltered and couldn’t find herself for a moment. She stomped on someone’s toes.

“Watch what you doing, gal!” Bubba yelled, blood still in his eye where George had punched him on Redwood’s account. “I don’t want to go lame ’cause you can’t dance.” He shoved her, hard. “Steer clear or sit yourself down.”

Redwood moved toward an empty spot near the food, and though she didn’t stop dancing, she’d lost the feeling.

“You looking good to me.” Milton winked at her. He was a showman, and everybody knew you couldn’t trust what come out a performer’s mouth. Actors could say anything and get away with it. Milton and Eddie played the crowd, not the truth. Redwood wanted to believe him though. She took a deep breath.

A powerful stink from sweaty hair, rotten food caught in a decaying tooth, and skin that had never been washed made her dizzy. She turned to a hairy beast pawing a dish of ribs on the table. The claws on the young black bear were filthy yellow. A scar on his cheek was a gray star. The dish crashed to the ground as he stuffed meat in his mouth, crunching bones and gristle and swallowing that too.

Milton halted on an upbeat. Beatrice, Fanny, Bubba, and George's friend hollered, like at church in the grip of the Holy Ghost, only they weren't faking it. Everybody was squealing, and the poor bear was so rattled it stopped chewing. It reared up on its hind legs waving a chicken breast skewered on its right paw and moaned at the mob.

Out of the corner of her eye, Redwood saw a shotgun aimed at the bear. The animal was only half-grown and wetting the ground in terror. Shooting it down dead before it got a chance to live would be a shame, a sin. Redwood jumped between the gun and the bear, close enough for a swipe of its yellow claws to reach her. The chicken breast passed under her nose and smeared 'cross her belly. The bear was hemmed in between a table and a bench, panicking. Redwood fixed her eye on him, felt his great heart thundering in her chest, felt his lungs heaving, felt the mosquitoes burrowing for a soft spot, felt his bowels squeezed tight and his stomach growling. For a moment, there was nothing but the two of them. Calmer, the bear sucked the chicken from its claws and swallowed without much chewing.

"Get on away from here now!" Redwood waved her arms. The bear blew foul breath in her face, grabbed more ribs from the table, and ran off into the cover of the trees. Redwood gaped at him, surprised and relieved. He'd listened to her.

"I'll be damned." Milton's face twisted between a grin and a grimace. "She hoodooed that bear."

Beatrice and Fanny sucked their teeth and rolled their eyes. Eddie just scowled. Everybody gawked at Redwood, whispering and grumbling—Bubba louder than most. She wiped her greasy tummy. The man with the shotgun didn't lower it 'til there wasn't even a sound of bear. It was big brother George, squinting his eyes, taking aim with a frown, and shaking his head at her, maybe a bit of awe mixed in with the anger. She could never read his mind from his face.

“We’re here to have a good time, all right?” Milton picked a rousing tune on his guitar. After several bars he jabbed Eddie. “You plan to leave me hangin’?”

Eddie blew on a stovepipe. “Better put down your nickel and eat that food ’fore more bears come along and beat you to it.” Titters flitted through the crowd.

“I’m an ornery cuss and got a mean streak as long and wide as the Mississippi River. My mama tell you, see a bear and me fighting over *my* food, don’t worry ’bout me, help the bear!” Milton got everybody laughing. “Yeah, help the poor bear.”

Bubba and Fanny danced far away from Redwood; all the other couples did too.

“Please don’t tell,” she whispered to George. “I didn’t mean to. It just happened.”

George grunted and rested the gun against his thigh.



Aidan sat up in a hunting perch and enjoyed the *Blues* music drifting in from how far he couldn’t say. A second jug was almost empty, and he’d lost sense of distance and time and just ’bout everything else. Couldn’t even remember climbing the tree. He still knew May Ellen would worry ’til he dragged his behind home. She’d want him to eat a big dinner: greasy meat, lumpy biscuits, mealy potatoes, cold okra... Well, his stomach wasn’t having none of that. And there’d be no loving with him stinking of hooch. Sober, he could get May Ellen singing to sweet Jesus. Drunk, she’d banish him to the shed. At least Princess would let him curl up next to her, ’stead of freeze. He’d better go home and get it over with. No point in waiting for dawn. The sun might not come back for a long while. Moonlight played tricks on him, but ghosts and haints never pestered Aidan with stupid talk ’bout *have mercy* when he was three sheets to the wind.

A young bear trotting through the woods with a rack of ribs in its mouth stopped right under Aidan. The bear gobbled the food and scratched sharp claws on the hard bark. “What you looking at, bear? Go climb your own tree.” Aidan threw a stick at him. The bear scarcely flinched. “All right, so I gotta go home. I will. I will. Get on now.”

The bear licked his lips and cocked his head. Aidan sighed and sang a bit of Princess's twilight song. The bear gurgled and took off into the gloom.

The song petered out. Aidan didn't move like he promised. He would've just drifted off, but *The War of the Worlds* book he'd been planning to read for two days dug into his side. Doc Johnson wouldn't want it back all sweaty and wrinkled. Aidan certainly couldn't afford to buy the man a fresh copy. He reached to pull it from under his hip and fell out of the tree more than climbed down. Miracle he didn't break his neck. Funny too, but he couldn't manage a laugh. He rubbed at bruises on his knuckles that hadn't come from the fall yet looked new. He fingered a dent in his boot and wondered where else he'd been banging 'round this night.

Since he was half out his mind and lost no matter which direction he took, Aidan stayed on a path that led into a peach grove. He recognized a gnarled tree corpse shaped like a gator swimming for the stars. This grove used to be part of the Jessup place, but Jerome Williams owned it now. Jerome aimed to own every direction you looked. Two snowy egrets flew over the orchard. A sharp breeze smelled and tasted of the distant ocean. Storm clouds crossed the moon and chased more birds from the sea to the woods. Stumbling, Aidan followed the path as it climbed up out of the grove. A young colored gal stood above him, her face turned to the sky. She was tall and fierce and beautiful, a bolt of lightning lingering in the grass. Spats of water splashed her face.

"Folk conjure this world, call it forth out of all the possibilities," she shouted at him.

Spooked, Aidan nodded. Hoodoo talk; what Garnett Phipps often said. Ghost clouds swirled above the gal, furiously doing battle over something important. Suddenly these flimsy gray and white figures broke apart and silver daggers of rain pelted the hilltop. He and the gal were soaked in an instant. Fists of wind buffeted them this way and that. She grinned and danced as trees in the orchard bent and split. Peaches shot through the air, smashed into trunks, and pummeled Aidan. It was hard to catch a breath or hang on to balance, yet the alcohol fog in his head cleared a bit.

"Damn, you ought to take cover 'bout now," he yelled.

“What ’bout you?” She twirled ’round behind him, a whirlwind herself. “Why’re you still out?”

Aidan was a haunted fool, but he couldn’t say that.

“I ain’t ’fraid of no rain,” she said. “I’m rehearsing. I’m goin’ do a show, see.” She storm-danced right past him again.

Aidan pivoted and should have keeled over, but he didn’t. “I know you,” he said, staring at his feet still on solid ground. A swollen peach branch sailed by and landed heavily beside them. Twenty ripe peaches busted open. He thought of dashing to cover, but he couldn’t leave this crazy child behind. “You Miz Garnett’s gal. Redwood?”

“I know you too, Mr. Aidan Cooper.”

“You move like a storm brewing.”

He wiped his face, flung peach flesh at the sky, and took a long swig from his jug. His stomach rebelled and the hooch came right back up. He turned from her to vomit, and the wind almost tipped him over. The jug flew from his fingers and shattered on an outcropping of rocks. Punishing rain beat the back of his neck. An angry dervish of dirt and debris charged through the orchard. Aidan strode toward Redwood, shouting against the wind. “The full fury of this storm is on us.”

“You ain’t ’fraid of the storm or me.”

“Naw, but ain’t no call for us to be out in all this. Let’s you and me both go find—”

The wind snatched the final words from his mouth. Smiling, Redwood talk/sang Sea Island Gullah words, working some spell, then darted away from him. Aidan matched her moves and gripped her at the waist. She gasped at his boldness but didn’t struggle as he turned her away from the on-coming monster storm. A twister of dust, moss, leaves, and debris blotted the orchard, the hilltop, and the sky from view. Whirling silver specters, a ghost army, a haint battalion battered them with cold, muddy water. Sharp stalks and broken branches pierced Aidan’s back. He yelped as hot blood drizzled down his side. This deadly gale hadn’t come up out of nowhere—the boneyard baron had been stalking him all day it seemed.

“Spare Garnett’s child,” he muttered, not sure if anyone was listening, if anyone cared, but he couldn’t help hoping. “Spare her child.”

Redwood reached a hand 'cross his shoulder back toward the storm.

"You want to touch the fury, huh?" Aidan whispered in her ear. "Well..."

The monster squatted on them now. Staggering air pressure slowed Aidan's heart, stopped his lungs, and crushed his muscles into his bones. Just before he would've blacked out, the roar of wind and rain cut to utter silence. He gasped. The storm went absolutely still, suspended, a photograph of twisted fury. At the center of the dark spiral mass, Redwood's palm trembled, and Aidan clutched her wrist, his fingers digging into soft flesh.

After a drunk moment or two, the twister moved again, slowly at first, like a swamp current. Its funnel coiled into tighter and tighter circles above Redwood's palm. Aidan felt the storm racing through her and had to resist an impulse to snatch her hand away. She leaned into his chest; her breath on his cheek was cold as January fog. Going faster now than he could see, the monster gale blew itself to nothing, to a dark swirl 'round a blade of grass in Redwood's hand. She squeezed her fist shut.

In the stillness, in the quiet moonlight that replaced the storm, Aidan let go of her and staggered to the crest of the hill. Two turkey buzzards flew over their heads, disappointed at the lively beating hearts below. Nearby, in a small circle of destruction, battered peach trees leaned into each other, their broken limbs dragging in churned up muck. A bit further out, untouched boughs swayed in a gentle breeze. Plump peaches gleamed in moonbeams. Aidan glanced at Redwood's trembling fist and lost his balance finally. He fell to one knee and groaned.

Redwood looked frightened of her ownself. "You goin' run away now?"

"No..." Aidan stood up on shaky muscles. "What you do, gal?"

"This is the first one." Redwood took a step toward him.

"Yeah, storm season's just coming on."

"No, the first time I ever catch the wind." Another step. "I ain't never done nothing so grand!"

"What? You a hoodoo conjurer?" He felt lightheaded, but the drink had left him. He was sober as a Baptist choir.

“And you *believing* in me. Conjure woman say that’s what a hoo-doo need to work a powerful spell, folk *believing*.”

“Miz Subie ought to know better than to fill your mind with—”

“*Believing*, but not scared.” In one swift move, Redwood pulled a sharp stalk out of Aidan’s back and tossed it aside. The pain was hot, but whatever she pressed against the wound was cold and soothing and drove the hurt to the dull part of his mind.

“Redwood! This ain’t no night to go running off.” A woman yelled, not a haint scolding her daughter but Elisa Glover, Garnett Phipps’ younger sister. Aidan was glad for that. A light swung in the distance, coming through the dense woods. He heard four feet heading for the orchard.

“We’re over here, Aunt Elisa,” Redwood shouted and then whispered to Aidan. “This is our secret, all right?”

The light turned and headed toward them now.

“You a magic gal?” Aidan’s voice cracked. “Same as Miz Garnett, huh?” He backed away without meaning to.

“Working my way to it. Mama could barter with the boneyard baron. I just—”

“Just? Either I’m drunker than I ever been,” Aidan wanted to shout, “or you snatched a hurricane down out the sky.”

Redwood reached her storm hand toward him. “This is good for what ails you.”

Aidan stepped out of reach. “What you know ’bout what ails me?”

“Take one storm to clear away another.”

Gazing in his eyes, she moved toward him. Her palm hovered over his chest. He nodded slowly, and she put that storm hand atop his heart. The cool pressure against his wet skin settled his heart right down. He didn’t know what he expected. A hoodoo lightning bolt? Hellfire? They just stood silently, close to one another, breathing each other’s breath, tasting each other’s spirits—felt like his whole life was with him and all of Redwood’s time too, the sorrow, the joy, the thrill... He hadn’t been so close to anybody for a long time, not even to May Ellen when she was singing to sweet Jesus for him to do her again. Indeed Aidan hadn’t been this close to himself since he was a boy up north in the Blue Ridge Mountains feeling close to everything, lost in everything, his spirit as wide as the sky.

“I hear Miz Garnett on the wind every time the sun go down,” he said.

“She talk to you out loud?” Tears brimmed in Redwood’s eyes.

Four years now and he hadn’t told a soul. Why’d he pick on her? “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to go and make you cry.”

“Mama don’t *talk* to me since she gone on to Glory.” Redwood sniffled against him.

“A blessing, and you should count it so.” He patted her back.

“I’m ’fraid I won’t remember what she said or who she was or how she looked or...”

He spied a postcard in the mud and picked it up. “Miz Garnett’s in you. You won’t forget that. You the love she had for this world.”

“Listen to you.” She wiped at tears and left streaks of mud on her cheeks. He pulled a gob of peach from her hair. “Saying just what I want to hear!” She smiled at him.

He smiled back. “Did you drop this?” He held out the card. In the moonlight, the White City on the front glowed.

Redwood grabbed it. “From when Mama and Daddy went to the World’s Fair.”

“Well, looks like a place you ought to visit too.”

“We could go together.” She looked thrilled at the prospect. “Couldn’t we?”

As Aidan entertained this crazy idea for a second, Ladd and Elisa Glover slogged through underbrush onto the moonlit hilltop, just twenty yards from them. Dry as dust, they wore sturdy, Sunday church clothes and working boots. Elisa didn’t have her sister Garnett’s height, sharp features, or the hoodoo flare. A round woman with pearly teeth and a fierce jaw, Elisa carried a shotgun and a *Maskókî* hunting knife like Aidan’s. Ladd was tall and broad and dark as the night sky. His deep-set eyes always twinkled and flashed with emotion. He carried a shotgun too and a lantern.

“Storm come up here and disappear,” Ladd said.

“Don’t tell.” Redwood whispered to Aidan and made a whirlwind gesture. “They ’llowed to skin me alive if they knew.”

Ladd and Elisa slipped in the mud and debris and slowed down.

“You want me to lie for you?” Aidan asked, watching them.

“*Believe* in me, the way you did in my Mama.”

Aidan wheezed and sputtered. What did she know 'bout him and Miz Garnett?

"Please." She sounded like a young gal and a grown woman too. "*Believe* in me."

"That's the most a person can do for another," Aidan said.

"I *believe* in you too."

"Me?" Aidan choked off a bitter laugh. "Why me?"

"Just between us." Redwood was moving to a safe, proper distance from him. "Everybody already 'fraid of me. They don't need more ammunition. You promise?" She stared in his eyes, like she could see clear through him, back to his ancestors, back to the beginning of everything and up to now. Or maybe that was what he saw looking through her and 'round to hisself. Not a pretty picture.

"All right, I promise." That was the least he could do.

"Friends then." Redwood's face lit up. Her dress was a ruin; wild hair twisted out of once neat plaits; big feet busted out of broke-up brogans—a real sight. What would her aunt and uncle think?

"Friends." Aidan nodded to her.

"Redwood Phipps, you know better than to have us chasing after you," Elisa said. "What is the matter with..." She quit scolding when she spied a soggy Aidan shaking mud and peach slime from his mane of thick black hair.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Elisa." Redwood ran to her. "Crazy Coop's been looking out for me though."

Ladd pulled off his cap and stepped forward, his chest caving in, his shoulders hunched. Four or five inches of height got lost to the wide grin masking his face. "Mr. Cooper, don't mind her."

Elisa hugged Redwood to her ample bosom and whispered loud enough for anybody to hear, "Hush your fresh mouth, child."

"She can say whatever the hell she want." Aidan preferred that to Ladd and Elisa acting like he was some fool white man who needed colored folk to act the coon for him. Ever since Miz Garnett passed, since Aidan was a grown married man, it took hours before they let down their guard even a little. The Glovers and the Phipps were his neighbors since he come to Peach Grove from the mountains up in north Georgia, almost family he once thought, yet they acted as if they ain't been knowing him these nine-ten years. Or maybe since

he started drinking too much and was a stranger to himself, Elisa and Ladd weren't sure if they should trust him anymore. Who could blame them? Stumbling away, Aidan got tangled in his feet. Still groveling and grinning, Ladd moved to help.

"I can stand on my own, damn it!" Aidan flailed against Ladd's sturdy arms. Ladd backed off, perfectly happy to let Aidan fall on his ass.

"Thank you for your kindness, Mr. Cooper," Elisa said with warmth in her voice.

"It's still Aidan, and no need to be thanking me."

"I do how I think is right. You too?" She jutted her jaw out, challenging him.

Aidan sucked a deep breath. "Well, Ma'am, I do try."

Elisa smiled. "I appreciate you having an eye out."

"No hardship there." Aidan glanced at Redwood. "Good evening."



"Good evening, Mr. Cooper." Redwood smiled.

Feeling better than she had for ages, she watched Aidan tramp toward the woods. Before when she'd tried to catch even a little ole breeze, it'd just blown through her hand. She sighed. A magic man for sure, he was tall and handsome and wild—eyes the color of Spanish moss and hair as dark as coal. He carried a scent of hard work, strong drink, and heavy sorrow. Aunt Elisa and Uncle Ladd watched him too, 'til he was a streak of light among the dark pines. She had someone *to believe* in her now. And didn't that make all the difference?

Ladd glared at Redwood. "Where you go off to in the middle of the Reverend Washington's sermon?"

"You look like something the cat dragged in," Elisa said.

Redwood glanced down at Mama's ruined dress.

"I tole you don't go traipsing out, dancing with the moon." Elisa shook her head. "Colored Peach Grove don't need more to run they mouths 'bout."

Ladd grunted. "What you been doing up here with that wild man?"

Aidan turned and waved, his pale face glinting in a moonbeam. They all waved and smiled at him 'til he faded into the gloom.

“You ever see that boy drunk? He a mean drunk.” Ladd said.

“I ain’t seen it.” Redwood could believe it though. “Peach Grove get under his skin.”

“This place get under my skin too sometime, but...”

Elisa wagged her hand at Ladd and he clamped his mouth shut.

“He ain’t goin’ do me no harm.” Redwood shivered. The fury of the storm had chilled her bones. She missed Aidan Cooper’s dizzy warmth. She couldn’t catch a breath. Her heart skipped and she almost fainted. Reckless, sticking your hand into all that, Brother George would have said, but she wasn’t goin’ tell him what she’d done.

“You know it all, huh?” Elisa gripped her. “Men can’t always control themselves. Plenty times they don’t want to. Aidan Cooper sure ain’t no shelter in the storm.”

“He brought Mama orchids.” Redwood pouted. “I just know what I know.”

Aidan reminded Redwood of George, not ’fraid of what he hadn’t seen before, not ’fraid to make his own way. And like George, some poison or sickness twisted Aidan’s insides. Thank the Lord, George didn’t drown his hard head in a jug of hooch. Instead her brother read books, picked fights, and stayed mad at everybody in Peach Grove—colored, white, and Indians too—for being cowards, fools, and nowhere near free men.

Redwood frowned. “How you find me?”

“I didn’t believe her, but Iris say you was up here catching peaches,” Ladd replied.

“Crazy Coop caught all the flying fruit.” Redwood’s storm hand tingled where she had touched Aidan’s heart. “Is he goin’ be all right?” She didn’t know how to heal what ailed him or her brother. Not yet.

Elisa sighed, probably so she wouldn’t scold. “Subie say he got *Maskókî* Creek or Seminole in his blood, and the spirit of his ancestors be looking out.”

“And driving him crazy.” Ladd blew his irritation into a tattered handkerchief.

“Indian blood and all, he hear Mama on the wind,” Redwood said. She’d ask Miz Subie what to do for him. “He’s a friend.”

“Friend?” Elisa exchanged glances with Ladd. “How’d you get soaking wet, child?”

“Storm come up here.” Redwood grinned and stared up at the moon.



When Aidan finally made it home, he found broken peach branches stuck in muddy wagon wheel ruts. The monster storm had blown through his front yard and chased behind a wagon as it lumbered over May Ellen’s herb garden. Aidan fingered battered chives, savory, and St. John’s Wort. Pungent fragrances screamed at him. Actually, Princess was complaining from the shed. Something didn’t set right. Duchess wasn’t making a sound, and that ole mare liked nothing better than to sing with Princess. A cold hand gripped Aidan’s insides as he tripped up the stairs and through the half-open door. He lit a lamp and lurched into the bedroom. The stench of liquor assaulted his nose, like he was breathing needles and thorns. He snorted blood onto the floor.

“May Ellen, you all right?”

The bed was stripped and cold. He tripped through soggy paper and shards of gray stoneware. Jugs he’d been saving in case of a dry spell had been smashed against Aunt Caitlin’s heirloom trunk. Books he’d borrowed from Doc Johnson were scattered on the floor. Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* was ripped in two. Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* was wedged in a hole under the window. A cracked mirror hung lopsided from the wall. Slimy okra and mealy potatoes were smeared all over its glass face. May Ellen’s brush and comb weren’t on the bureau. Not a stitch of her clothing hung in the wardrobe he’d carpentered and carved special for her. Not a scent of her anywhere...

May Ellen was gone. She’d finally left him.

“What ’bout ’til death do us part?” Aidan shouted.

He crumpled over Aunt Caitlin’s battered trunk. After the first jug, after stowing Princess in the shed, did he and May Ellen fight? Did she weep and scold and smash his jugs ’cause he was drinking too much? Did she say her sister warned her against marrying a drunk Irishman? That’s what she always said, but this evening, maybe she

couldn't holler at him anymore. Maybe she just watched while Aidan lost his mind and rampaged through the house hunting down *War of the Worlds*.

Closing his eyes, Aidan heard echoes of ragged screams—in his voice all right—'bout haints and *have mercy*. Mystery bruises on his knuckles and arms made sense now. So did the dent in his boot where he'd kicked at the stove before hurling dinner every which way. Had he left May Ellen cowering and wailing in the shed between Duchess and Princess and run off to his hunting perch?

Was that a bad dream, or worse—a memory?

Aidan tumbled off the trunk and dashed from room to room. There were only three, and nowhere for even a mouse to hide. He was chasing shadows. Shattered dishes cut at his boots in the kitchen. Broken chairs sent him sprawling to the floor. May Ellen's braided rug reeked of piss and kerosene. The smell made him retch. Or maybe it was truth churning up his stomach. The house was empty. May Ellen had packed up her things, hitched Duchess to the wagon, and left him. Lurching again from room to room, disbelieving his eyes, disbelieving his drunken memory, wouldn't bring her back.

Aidan didn't mean to scare her. He didn't mean to hurt her, and he prayed to any God who was still listening to the likes of him that he hadn't laid a hand to her. Black alcohol fog covered his memory and left him in torment. "Please Lord. Just tell me I didn't hurt her."

The Lord wasn't studying him.

Aidan banged out onto the porch with such force that he almost knocked the flimsy door off its hinges. Blood spurted from his shoulder and soaked his shirt. He staggered in circles. He'd hidden one more jug from hisself under the porch, but would never find it in the dark. He'd save that for sunrise. Princess brayed and kicked against her stall. Nothing else to do, so he tromped into the shed and glowered at her.

"What's a matter with you, hollering in here?"

Princess bared her teeth and wagged her head. The hair on her neck rippled and she stomped her forelegs. Aidan bowed his head as she chastised him. He walked toward her, mumbling what a fool he was and stretching his hand out. Princess nipped his fingers and then licked at peach slime on his shirt.

"What am I goin' do with myself?"

Aidan found his red leather journal tied 'round Princess' neck. Half a page had been ripped out. May Ellen wasn't one for reading or writing. She must've spent an hour scrawling him a note:

Coop

Gone up to Cofee County to my sisters. Jenny warned me. Dont you dare come after me. Im just tellin you so you wont fret. If you aint died out in them woods then Im glad for you. My ma watched dady kill hissself drinkin. I aint her. Dont want to hate you, dont want to die in your shadow.

May Ellen

Aidan draped his arms over Princess and leaned his face against her neck. She was quiet as he slobbered and moaned on her.