

LBRIS

We know  
books

TAYARI JONES

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KIN



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*Chapter 1*

## VERNICE

My first word was “mother,” spoken out loud and with texture. MOTHER. There was a host of witnesses, including Aunt Irene, who called out for God and considered running down the block to fetch the pastor. But before she could even straighten her skirt, she decided that this wasn’t a pot to be stirred by any man’s spoon. It was August, canning season, and the women were gathered to put away snap peas and pole beans. It was Louisiana hot, but even more so, due to the water boiling to purify the mason jars. Aunt Irene, never at home in the kitchen, busied herself plaiting my hair while everyone else hulled and cut up the harvest. The Ward Sisters sang out amid the thick radio static as Aunt Irene added her colorful soprano to the arrangement. Sitting between her knees, I rested my face on her thigh, still as stone and just as quiet. Sharp against my scalp, a rat-tailed comb created precise parts.

After the death of my parents, I had shown myself to be a peculiar child. No one could say if I was born that way or if I turned that way. I walked early and would do so in my sleep, escaping my crib. I once found my way to the front porch, where I was discovered humming with my face resting on the matted fur of a stray puppy.

At two and a half, I had yet to speak. Folks worried that I was slow. My cradle friend, Annie, was already talking up a storm. She even gave me my nickname, because Vernice had been too many letters for her to hold in her mouth at the same time. “Niecey!” she called, determined to shake loose a response. When shouting didn’t work, she tried kindness, breaking her shortbread cookie in two. I smiled in gratitude, and sometimes offered sloppy baby kisses in return, yet I didn’t say a word.

Annie’s grandmother joked that Aunt Irene should be grateful for my silence. Annie never shut up, not even when she was asleep. Shut eyes quivering, she mumbled the name of her own mother, Hattie Lee.

“This baby will talk when she has something to say.” Aunt Irene knew there was quickness in my eyes but feared that seeing my mama shot dead had shocked the words right out of my mouth. Others worried that I had been taken over. Spirits can be hardheaded and hold grudges—purposely missing their ride to the next place. When this happens, they might just set up house in a defenseless body. Aunt Irene shut that conversation down, dismissing it as “hoodoo”—her catchall word for anything not of this world that didn’t involve our Lord and Savior. That said, even though there could be substance to that hoodoo talk, she knew her dead sister, my mother. When Aunt Irene held my face to hers, she didn’t see Arletha staring back.

Because of this, but not only this, my aunt didn’t indulge any gossip. She knew what it was to be whispered about and couldn’t bear loose tongues lashing an orphan baby. But she was worried for a colored girl who seemed slow, even if she wasn’t, a girl who couldn’t say what had happened to her. I made people nervous, which is probably why no one objected when Aunt Irene ducked out from the canning kitchen and sat on the couch to fix my hair. I had been touched by blood, and not the blood of the lamb.

There I was, this haunted child, not even whimpering as Aunt Irene raked the comb through the thicket at the nape of my neck.

“Mother,” I said, softly at first. As I raised my voice to a bel-

low, every heart in the house contracted, vulnerable as a scalded tomato gripped in a tiny greedy fist.

Only three women stood in that tight kitchen, but nearly the entire congregation would let the story play on their lips, sharing details as vivid as those of any eyewitnesses. Some say their throats closed to hear me call for Arletha, dead by then just over two years. They lost their breaths, the way you choke in your sleep when witches ride your dreams. Annie's granny said she heard wonder in my voice like I gazed into the eyes of an angel. Aunt Irene said she understood it as a command, her dead sister telling her that I was hers for life. Only Mrs. Ola Mae, the midwife, attended to me. Scooping me into her stout arms, she cooed, "I hear you, baby." Annie, who had been in the kitchen yapping away, toddled up to Mrs. Ola Mae, arms raised to be held as well. We were both crowded onto her lap. I kept saying my new word over and over, but Annie was quiet for once, sucking my thumb as though it were her own.

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Women in my family have never been particularly fruitful. My grandmother had only the pair of daughters to show for some thirty years of marriage. She never gave Granddaddy a son, though word on the street was that there was a boy down in Bogalusa who shared his middle name and narrow feet. Four years in the marriage bed, and my mother hatched only me, and I hadn't come gently. (Mrs. Ola Mae told my mother to name me Miracle but instead, she called me Vernice up top, and Irene just after—like all the women in our family.)

Aunt Irene was what the old folks called "barren" but what she called "lucky." She figured this out when she was just a teenager, the summer a revival came to town. Aunt Irene heard that altar call and what was done, was done. When the tent came down and the saints moved on to Jacksonville, Aunt Irene had joined the choir. She also joined the associate pastor in whatever accommodations were available for colored travelers who hap-

pened to be servants of the Lord. “Have mercy, he was a pretty man,” she said. “Listen. If you ever get a chance in life, grab you a preacher—but just temporarily. Don’t fool around and end up being somebody’s First Lady.” She laughed at the memory, grinning into whatever was on the rocks. “I was wild when I was a girl.”

Eight months later, she returned home slender as a daisy. Granddaddy flogged her like she was a runaway slave, so that the neighbors would be sure to hear her crying and know what was and wasn’t allowed in his house. My mother, just nine, passed on the words whispered by the ladies in the parlor. These were grown women who dared not lift a finger while a skinny girl was beaten like a man.

“They say you must can’t get pregnant, after all the you-know-what you been doing.”

Aunt Irene lay on the narrow bed that would end up being mine. “They just jealous,” she said. “All these heifers got nineteen kids pulling at their titties.”

“Not Mama. She just got us.”

“So what?” Aunt Irene said. “It’s the worst when you resent your own daughters.”

My mother said, “I’m going to have me a whole bunch of babies.”

**Aunt Irene said,** “You’re not. But have yourself a lot of fun trying.”

As soon as she was healed enough to sit on a bus for four days running, Aunt Irene left Honeysuckle. She had some money that the reverend had given her and also the cash her mother squirreled away in a crystal candy dish. She left a note. In those days folks wanted to make things plain, putting it all in writing. She didn’t write “Dear” because what she had to say was addressed to everyone on God’s beautiful earth. *You can’t stay where they beat you. I don’t care who they is.*

She ended up in Ohio, just over the Mason-Dixon, where she lived for eleven years. No babies, no beatings.

“Don’t let nobody sprinkle dirt in your pocketbook.” She shook her head at her folly. “There I was sneaking off in the night and Mama was two steps ahead of me. When I opened up my bag and I felt that grit and saw that crop soil in the corners, all I could do was laugh. But that was because I didn’t have sense enough to believe in bewitchment.”

By the time Aunt Irene entertained me with her stories, I had grown into a normal-seeming little girl, bubbling with wonder. “How come you didn’t put Ohio dirt in your suitcase, so it could pull you back up there?”

She gave a little nod to let me know that I had asked a good question. “First off, I don’t practice none of that hoodoo. I don’t believe in it, and I don’t *not* believe in it. Second, it’s only home dirt that can pull you back.”

Up in Ohio, as the purple cornflowers and lemon puffs were doing their thing, Aunt Irene had received a letter saying her mama was on her deathbed and wanted to make amends for letting her daddy whip her like that. Saying she understood why Irene didn’t come back for his funeral. Services are for the dead anyway. Wouldn’t Irene come on home while her mama was still living? Her mother, who was deeply sorry, was dying of regret as much as diabetes. *Sleep with this paper under your pillow for three nights before you say yes or no.*

It didn’t take but two nights. Without the protection of any talisman or charm, Aunt Irene returned to Honeysuckle. No matter who your mama is, or how long she’s been gone, you can’t help but miss her. When you are born, she marks you with her milk, even if you never tasted her breast. That’s not hoodoo, it’s just the way the body and the spirit come together to make you a person.

Despite Aunt Irene’s man already having himself a wife, he kept her content in a yellow-shuttered house. When she told him she needed to go home for one last moment with her mother, he paid her round-trip bus fare and kissed her like he would never see her again.

Whether it was the letter or the crop dirt that brought her back, it was me that kept her there. Six weeks before she buried her mama, she ended up burying her sister—my mother. I was just six months old, so new that I had lived inside the womb longer than I had been breathing air. I took a bottle at night, but in the morning, Arletha opened her pink-checked duster and fed me from her body. I looked just like her with my thick dark hair and flat nose. “See my sweet baby?” she said to anybody that caught her eye. I remember. This is not an orphan’s fantasy or me making Aunt Irene’s memories my own. If you have ever experienced motherlove, you can never forget the fragrance of it.

On the day that turned out to be the Day, Aunt Irene pranced around town, enjoying herself in the way a person does when she knows she’s not here to stay. She was a little too dressed up in a seersucker sundress and nylon panties with a bra to match. Yes, her mother was dying, but she was passing softly, her spirits buoyed because her oldest girl didn’t hate her. By the same token, Aunt Irene was lifted, letting go of the anger holding her down like the sandbags tethering hot air balloons. She had come to understand that despite it all, she had a perfectly fine life. No, she wasn’t a wife, but she wasn’t a whore and there were no out-of-wedlock kids desperate for a last name. A relationship that kept you dressed like a lady, even if maybe you weren’t really one, was worth it for the dignity alone.

I was with my aunt, buttoned into a little romper made of the same pink piped fabric as her cross-back frock. Aunt Irene toted me on her hip over to Mrs. Ola Mae’s place. The midwife liked to love on the babies she ushered into the world. “Look at this little wonder!” I gummed on a sugar tit while Aunt Irene talked about Dayton and her man. His given name was Josiah, but everyone called him Van.

The Day had been lovely. War raged overseas, but those storm clouds were not visible from Honeysuckle, where the afternoon was as peaceful as a field of buttercups. No bad mojo stirred the air. Nothing odd happened in threes. The blind boy who sold pencils in front of the post office didn’t make any eerie

pronouncements. But now Aunt Irene thinks that the thing that should have let us know that something was wrong was that nothing was wrong. This was Louisiana in 1941. We were colored. Something was always wrong.

That night, Aunt Irene planned to wear a red dress and dip into The Den, letting the men fill her glass. Proudful, proudful. Smoking a cigarette with the midwife, she said, "The best part about being an auntie is that you can take the baby back home when it's time to go cut a rug." Everyone laughed, and agreed. With a smile lingering on her lips, Aunt Irene climbed the front steps of my mother's house. Her arm was raised to knock when she smelled the burnt-copper scent of gunpowder.

On the other side of the door, there was my mama, dead as Jesus, and my daddy lay on the carpet, moaning. What kind of idiot can't even figure out how to kill his own fool self? Aunt Irene swung her leg, driving her shoe into his face as he groaned and wept.

Preparing to lay my mother in the plot she had bought for her own mother, Aunt Irene wrote to her man, asking him to pray for her and telling him that she wouldn't be returning to Dayton for a month, maybe two. Certainly, there was a family in town willing to take in a motherless infant. When I was clean and dressed up, I was pretty cute. Even my aunt, who didn't cotton to children, found herself kissing my plump face.

Aunt Irene's first choice for me would have been Mrs. Ola Mae, who lived by herself with Miss Jemison the schoolteacher. People whispered about the two of them, but Aunt Irene didn't give that no never mind. She liked Mrs. Ola Mae and her lady friend, too. They'd be excellent mothers. But this is how life works—the women who would be capable mothers too often don't want kids. And too many of those with children probably should have just sat that one out. Luckily, most were in between. Maybe not baby-crazy, but willing. And while they were not the sorts of matriarchs who would raise up a race of heroes, they could get the job done.

What Irene hadn't counted on was that the women of Honysuckle wanted to see her tamed. As folks came to the house to pay their respects, no one asked Aunt Irene when she would be heading back to Dayton. Even though they coochie-cooed in my face, nobody even joked about adding this precious little girl to their own families.

The day before my mother's homegoing, Aunt Irene walked about a mile to the east to visit Annie's granny. "I don't have a husband. I don't have work down here. My situation in Ohio can't accommodate children."

Annie's granny acted like she thought my aunt was seeking advice, rather than relief. She said, "Irene, nobody knows anything about raising children. Each one is different and you just have to do the best you can to make sure that Jesus will accept them when they get to heaven. And you can find work. You got two hands, don't you? I raised every child that Jesus has seen fit to give me. And I will continue. But only the ones *the Lord* gives."

Just then, Annie woke up from one of the back rooms and gave a little bleat. Her granny disappeared into the back of the house and returned with Annie hooked on her hip. With one hand, Annie's granny prepared a glass of sweet tea and a slice of buttered toast that she offered to my aunt on a chipped plate. "Our girls can be friends," she said.

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For an entire season, Irene dragged through her childhood home like a ghost herself—baby strapped to her chest and coon circles darkening her eyes. The toll of losing her mother was layered on top of the weight of learning to be one. Hers became a life of diapering and spoon-feeding. Finally, on Pearl Harbor day, my grandmother breathed her last, with a smile on her chapped lips, secure in her belief that everything happens for a reason.

Facing facts, my aunt wrote to the Ohio Man, who pined for his time with her in the yellow-shuttered house. She asked that he send her clothes and put everything else up for sale. A brass-

buckled trunk arrived at the bus station in Baton Rouge three months later and a money order came to her via post. The Ohio Man may have been married, but he was true to his word.

At least one Sunday each year, the weather was cold enough for Aunt Irene to wear her beaver coat and pretend to be up north. For many years, it was as sleek as the animal that God gave the pelt to in the first place.

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I never did without. I was always tidy and well lotioned. Aunt Irene informed me that Jesus loved me, as had my mother. One of the many gifts she gave me was telling me that the Lord was more flexible than most folks knew. She adored that Ohio schoolmaster without ceasing. "God will never fault you for loving someone." When I outgrew my first shoes, Aunt Irene sent them to be cast in bronze, which wasn't cheap. Around the time of my first sins, I was baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each night, I laid my head on a clean pillow slip and looked forward to a hearty breakfast in the morning. I am forever grateful for her sacrifice.

While I was tended to, I was never mothered. Many people suffered far more, even people raised at the knees of their actual mamas. Still, the hole in my spirit made me into the girl I was and then the woman that I am. One day, I will grow a person within myself and love that little person so hard that it would bind her to me like rich dirt in the corner of a canvas satchel.

This is not a play for pity. I wasn't the only bottle-nursed child in Honeysuckle. Being raised by relatives wasn't nothing but a thing, as people say.

My best friend, Annie, raised by her granny, had some thoughts on the matter. "We are not orphans," she said when we were five or six.

"I am," I said. "My mama is deceased, and my daddy is dead." (This was language that I got from Aunt Irene. "Dogs die," she said, "but my sister is *deceased*.")

"But we never lived in an orphanage," Annie said.

"I don't think that orphanages are real."

"Maybe they just have them for white folks," Annie wondered. "So colored children that's orphans must live outside. And neither one of us is outside."

Annie's mama was doing GodKnowsWhat, out in GodKnows-Where. Nobody had seen hide nor hair of her since before Annie was old enough to sit up by herself. One Sunday, Annie had the idea to ask the pastor where her mama was.

It must have been before 1948, when Calvary split from First Iconium. In those days, we all went to the same church and listened to the same man of God. I liked Pastor Robinson's gold-toothed smile and the way he sang at the same time he was giving the sermon. To this day, I am a sucker for a melodious man of the cloth. Annie never was.

We went together to his little office in the basement. We knocked on the door and he answered, "Come on in."

The room was tight due to the oak desk, handmade by one of the deacons right after the Civil War. In slavery times, the man had been a woodworker, and the first thing he did when he got free was to make a piece of furniture for the Lord. It was magnificent, with legs and feet like the flanks of lions. Pastor looked surprised to see us standing there, two little girls wearing blue-sashed dresses.

"Pastor, could we ask you something?"

"But of course," he said with that sparkling grin.

I nudged Annie forward.

"Granny says GodKnowsWhere my mother is," Annie said.

"Well," said Pastor Robinson, "God knows all. Sees all."

I piped up. "And she is doing GodKnowsWhat. So could you ask him where she is and what she's doing?"

And then Pastor Robinson smiled that smile that people do when kids are cute. Then he straightened his face, pretending to take us seriously. As he flattened his lips, I knew whatever we were about to hear wasn't the truth. He motioned for us to sit like we were two tiny deaconesses with a concern.

"Annie," he said, "Hattie is in God's hands."

"No, she's not," I said, because I knew that my mother was

supposed to be in God's hands and that was someplace you couldn't come back from. "Annie's mama is living."

Annie raised her voice, too. "My mama is GodKnowsWhere, dancing too much. That's what my granny says. She just danced all night. And drinks too much wine. But she is not deceased with Niocy's mama."

"Or dead neither," I added.

The pastor fiddled with a fountain pen. "We are all in God's hands. Some of us on this side, some on the other side."

Annie jerked on the strap of her little pocketbook, just like her granny did when she was mad. I jumped up, too, but I didn't yet carry a purse.

"We leaving," she said, and flounced out.

I followed her, but before we left, I told Pastor to have a nice day because Aunt Irene didn't like me acting like I was born in a barn.

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Time kept on going, the way that it does. Five or six years after we so amused the singing preacher, on the twenty-eighth of March, Aunt Irene took me to lay a clutch of paperwhites on my mother's grave to celebrate her birthday in heaven. Her name, Arletha Irene, was dug into the granite. She had been a Davis when she died, but Aunt Irene refused to lay her under a stone etched with a killer's name. But to call her Merriweather was a lie. She had readily given up her daddy's name when she said I do. In the five years she was married, she had ample opportunity to move back home, but she never did, even though her daddy was tucked in his own grave, unable to harm anyone, and even when her husband had her spitting out her teeth in bloody shards. In death she was a Davis, and I was one in life—although nobody with that name was allowed to look at me, let alone claim kinship.

I knelt to say the Lord's Prayer as my aunt said her own private words to her sister in a low humming like bees when they are creating honey. I raised my bowed head and observed the