

Harlem, New York, February 1930

There are those in this country who arrogantly suggest the old religion's dead. As if any amount of torture and erasing could sever those blood-deep ties. *What do they think kept their chattel alive?* Stephanie St. Clair's chuckle is as bitter as a centuries-old grudge.

Even those lost lambs who don't recognize it, practice it all the same. She calls it Yoruba. Other children of Africa label it Santeria, candomblé, even voodoo. Name doesn't matter, though; they're all follicles from the same nappy head.

Like every religion old and new, there's a good side and a bad side. Which one you call on depends on your particular situation.

Stephanie's situation is what you'd consider the bad side. A city girl through and through, she isn't keen on being anybody's wife or mother and would sooner sail back across the Atlantic on an old tire than be somebody's maid again. Good with figures, she's carved out a little business for herself. Running numbers never hurt anybody. Well . . . not much of anybody.

And now that cagey swindler Obeah has been threatening to steal her business. He *is* practiced in the old ways and isn't afraid to use them to further his cause either. Stephanie needs to call on some help of her own. She has a nephew to think about now, especially since it doesn't look like her sister is going to be long for this world.

Her throat is dry, hands sweaty. She knows the words but can't spit them out; it's like the letters are running away from each other, crashing around in her head.

She recalls how Obeah marched up to her in the bar and, loud enough for everybody to hear him, announced that Stephanie was done. Rage and shame, they unlock the words.

Mo pe awon dudu emi.

A raindrop appears, suspended in midair. It ripples and warps. Wobbles and grows until it rips open, flooding the room with the salty tang of the ocean and something her eyes can't quite discern. Stephanie drops to her knees and plants her forehead on the floor.

The demon's voice crashes against her like a storm wave.

"Face me."

Stephanie doesn't try to hide the trembling, but she does shield her eyes. The demon doesn't have a human form. All smoke and dizzying fire. It writhes with something akin to amusement.

The demon calls herself Ahiku. After some coaxing, Stephanie lays out Obeah's plan to muscle in on her business. How his arrogant declaration of war may see her dead because she'll sooner die than hand over what she's built.

"Obeah is a powerful witch doctor. Seems to me, the son of one so powerful might be of interest to you."

It works: the demon positively sizzles. The weight of what she's suggested wedges itself in a corner of her stomach and festers.

"There is another child," Ahiku hisses. "One that has your strong chin."

Stephanie's face hardens. "I don't have the right to, but I ask that my nephew's soul be spared. If not, I send you back home."

"A hunter with only one arrow does not shoot carelessly," Ahiku says. "You offer me passage, knowing what it will mean to this country's children, yet you think only of yourself and yours."

Unwise but bold. I deem you worthy. I will spare your nephew, but he will work for me in this realm.”

Stephanie swallows; what choice does she have? Better this than her nephew being consumed. The demon glides around the room, exploring. “Even the lowly village elder understands this—an enemy must be destroyed. Dispense with that guilt you are nursing; you’re fouling the place with it. I will cripple this Obeah’s spirit when I consume his son, but you must deal with his physical form. And when that is done, make your own people dependent—do not teach them all that you know. Keep a little something to yourself.”

“I recognize wise words when I hear them.”

“As long as I have passage here, you will rule. I will hunt down and destroy those that can stop me.” She pauses. “And one last thing.”

Stephanie struggles to keep her breath. Even though the demon has no eyes, it feels like her deepest secrets lie exposed under her gaze.

“Never oppose me.”

The new Queen of Harlem heartily agrees.

Chapter One

FLEDGLING

Louisiana Swampland, February 1935

Eliza liked to delude herself by fancying the crude contraption as humane, merciful, but no matter how carefully she'd ground down the iron teeth and wrapped cloth about the sharper points, it was still a trap.

A captured possum writhed in agony before her, its beady eyes pleading. Cocooned within the wet thickness of the swamp, Eliza sat cross-legged atop a woven mat laid on the perpetually moist Louisiana earth. Her pygmy marmoset, Mico—a furry, six-inch ball of silent angst, and her constant companion—sat perched on her right shoulder.

Little light penetrated the dense canopy of tangled cypress trees and brush. Crickets and swamp things caterwauled their ceaseless nocturnal games of predator and prey. The sodden brew of centuries-old wood and wet soil, more muddy than solid, coated the air as thickly as a sloppy layer of tar spread over a dirt road.

It was perfect for her test. She released the possum.

Eliza's oval face was bowed, tormented by scads of failures past. She'd loosened her hair, and thick braids now fell to either side of her face, inky black against skin the color of exquisitely aged dark walnut.

The possum's heartbeat thumped rapidly, the leg bloodied but not broken. She closed her eyes. In her mind, she conjured an image of a gentle stream, of herself and the possum—uninjured—sitting on a grassy knoll. Mico dug his nails into her shoulder. Her breath quickened, her heartbeat matching the possum's as their connection grew deeper. Her blue cotton dress, already soaked with sweat, clung to her body.

Their combined energy bubbled up from her stomach, cold, as if a block of ice were lodged in her belly. But it didn't erupt, didn't arc out of her like it had so many times before. She was controlling it.

She inhaled a deep breath and conjured up another image: grassy hillside plump with savory worms and slugs. She settled the picture around the possum, pushing it across the mental connection that bound the animal as surely as its physical trap had—and waited.

The possum's eyes opened, and it jerked once and tensed. Its racing heartbeat slowed to normal. Emboldened, Eliza quickly formed another image. She wanted to convey the relationship that she shared with Mico, who shifted to her left shoulder, wrapping tiny fingers around her earlobe in a gesture of support. Her heart filled. Though she'd had a tenuous relationship with other animals, Mico had simply found her one day, and their connection had been an easy one. She figured someone, somewhere, still wondered where their pet had gone off to.

Clumsily, Eliza formed more images of her time with Mico—there was so much to choose from—and sent them to the possum in a tangled clump. They were too much. Before she could snatch them back, the animal on the ground lurched. Its shriek silenced the surrounding swamp. With a rattling exhale, it died.

She snapped her eyes open with a fluttering of long lashes. Cursing under her breath, she picked up the empty trap and hurled it off into the shadows. The weight of her shame and guilt, dizzying.

The thin leather cord around her neck tingled, and she pulled the amulet from beneath the bodice of her dress, fingering the three discs: the elephant, the raven, and the badger. She imagined each stared back at her in mute admonition. What did they mean? Why had her mother demanded she keep the amulet—no explanation—before disappearing?

Her father had had two opinions of his abnormal daughter: first, that she was a handsome girl but would never be considered a beautiful woman; and second, overheard as it carried on a lethargic breeze one sleepless night, that she was a monster.

Looking down at the dead possum, it seemed a fair call.

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1939

“How long does it take one silly girl to clean a toilet?” Mrs. Shippen hovered in the doorway of the sole boardinghouse bathroom with her bony arms folded. The woman had the look of an orange a week past its prime, left out in the sun to bake. Pockmarked skin covered a too-round head, set atop legs thin enough that a good wind might topple her over.

On her knees scrubbing, Liza ignored the barbs. She didn't have much choice but to take what Mrs. Shippen doled out, as she had nowhere else to go. Her family had abandoned her. Her previous employer, Mrs. Margaret, had treated her well. She'd been fed and had been taught manners and reading. In exchange, she cooked and did the housework, though her benefactor was such a tidy woman that it never amounted to much. Mainly, she acted as a companion, especially after Mrs. Margaret's husband died, her only other family in England—a place that, for reasons she never said, she would never return to.

But when Mrs. Margaret died, Liza found herself truly on her own.

She had considered herself lucky when she'd ambled down Reddy Street; deliverance was a sign outside Mrs. Shippen's boardinghouse that said **HOUSE GIRL WANTED**. She would only have to clean in exchange for room and board. But, as she soon learned, Mrs. Shippen had obviously never had a happy day in her life and was determined to exact revenge for that fact on her boarder. Liza's other wishes had all died unanswered, so now she tirelessly guarded the one where the old biddy got what was coming to her.

Still bent over the toilet, her back to her landlady and employer, Liza made a face and rolled her eyes but covered it with an impassive gaze when she turned around. "If the good, God-fearing people that you righteously call your *tenants* didn't go out and get drunk every night and throw up all over the place, I expect I could be done a lot sooner."

Mrs. Shippen parted her lips, but finding no adequate retort, she clamped them into a thin line. She swam her hands over her hair, settling on the ever-present bun at the nape of her goose neck. "Take a lot of nerve for a child whose own family didn't want her to make comment on how my tenants spend their time. Best you come to terms with who you are, your station in this life. You finish up here and come on downstairs. Albert's got a problem with his calf. He's hoping you can take a look. He'll give us two months of milk in exchange." Mrs. Shippen spun on her heels, her simple cotton housedress swirling about her legs, and marched down the stairs.

"The monster has turned into the tender to wayward animals and livestock," Liza said under her breath. She dropped her brush and rag in the cleaning bucket. "The things we do for free milk."

She stepped out on the porch. But Albert wasn't waiting out front. He was clustered with a group of other men down the road. Curious, she paced softly down to see what the fuss was about. Strangers. Two of them, one Negro dressed better than most, the other one white.

The men fell silent as the Negro peeled himself away from his white companion and approached. He was no more than a boy really, near her age or a bit older. His eyes drank her in as he passed, appraising her like a piece of livestock. “Boorish,” an elegant new word from an otherwise unremarkable novel, came to mind. What could the strangers want? Baton Rouge wasn’t a place that people came to for fun, ’cause there wasn’t much fun to be had; that’s what New Orleans was for. Anybody traveled this far north usually had a specific reason.

“Afternoon,” the boy said to the group in an unmistakable Louisiana accent. “Name’s Jamey. Jamey Blotter.” The men’s suspicion seemed to fade, replaced with tentative smiles and kind nods. He was one of theirs. Liza listened as he told them he was a prospector for a traveling carnival. *Traveling!* What if she could get out of this godforsaken town?

He asked about the alligator-wrestler show, said his goodbyes, and headed back over to the white man. As the pair turned to walk away, Liza followed. There was opportunity here. She could feel it like the bubbling of a toe blister.

The boy was handsome enough. Lean but not too skinny. Nice brown skin a bump or two darker than hers. His back was straight; he didn’t hunch over or wrestle his hat between his hands like some old runaway slave. Most men in Baton Rouge were afraid of her, but this stranger had met her eyes like he owned the place.

She trailed the men at a distance, Mico in her shirt pocket, chittering. “Hush now,” she chided the little monkey.

Shortly, the younger man—Jamey, if memory served—walked into a diner. His companion continued on along Main and lingered outside the sheriff’s office a moment before joining him.

There was little more on the main drag, because everything else had closed up. Many, many times before, Liza had watched the store owners pack up and head out in their trucks and wagons—

she dreamed of going with them, slipping beneath a blanket, remaining quiet till they got wherever they were going. It didn't matter where, as long as it was away from here.

Maybe she'd happen across her parents and track down her little sister, Twiggy. She wanted more than anything else to be back with the people who had discarded her. Not because she still held on to any fancy feelings of love—and she did, even if she didn't want to admit it—but because her father was probably the only person who could help her learn to control her most unusual *gift*. He had worked with her before he'd walked away, and in all her time looking and wondering, she had never found another person with it—but her father had to know how to control it, didn't he? And she missed Twiggy so much some days she didn't even want to get out of bed. That was the most unforgivable thing: they hadn't given her a choice in leaving her behind.

The people in Baton Rouge tolerated her. When they needed help with an animal, they couldn't get to her fast enough—but accidentally kill one or two trying to help, and she became a she-devil. Never you mind the fact that they killed and ate almost anything that moved without batting an eye. Only because she cleaned the rooms and worked around the house did Mrs. Shippen give her a roof over her head and a stingy bowl of gumbo every day. Sometimes it was only rice. Liza was determined to get out of this town, but she hadn't worked out all the particulars yet.

She'd see what these strangers were up to—and if they could somehow be her ticket out. Then she'd tend to Albert's calf. And she prayed she wouldn't hurt it in the process.

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Liza plastered her back against the wall outside the diner and willed her heart to calm itself down. She'd already drawn a few stares. A quick peek confirmed the strangers were still inside sipping coffee. Should she barge in or wait? Indecision kept her sweaty hand clutched at her side instead of on the screen-door handle.

“Almost didn’t see you there,” the Negro boy said as he swung the door open. He’d have caught her toe if she hadn’t jumped back.

Instead of moving aside, Liza lingered awkwardly, blocking the stranger’s path. They exchanged a curious glance.

“I . . . ,” Liza began and then swallowed hard. “I was hoping there might be some work for me in your carnival. I can cook, clean, do whatever needs doing.” She left out the part about the animals—of that, she wasn’t quite so confident.

“Afraid we don’t need any domestic help,” the redheaded man answered as he appeared at his companion’s side. “But I do invite you to come check out our show. We’ll be setting up just outside of town.”

They parted around Liza like a stream moving around a boulder and moseyed on down the street. She watched them go, all other pleas unspoken.