

SILENCE BROKEN

PROLOGUE

This was one of many entries from my mother's secret journal. A page I was never intended to read. I didn't know she kept a journal. I didn't know she wrote poetry. I didn't know a *lot of things*. By the time I was eighteen I didn't know her. I didn't know her at all. This is our story from my perspective and it is tempered with age since I am now thirty-six, the same age she was when I turned eighteen.

April 19, 1928

There was screaming and hollering and pushing and shoving and I looked up at him and then I remembered—it's Mr. Williamson. We danced last Christmas. He said one dance with a woman so beautiful and he could die a proud man. Blue Heaven. It was a nice dance but still, I forgot him—until he pulled me from the mob. I tried to be invisible in all of the madness, wanting to disintegrate somehow, until he found me and carried me through the collision of noise and confusion. Something told me—don't go with him, told me I should stay and face this; but then another something told me—go! What could I do but comply with whatever force pushed the hardest? I could collapse and be trampled; I could end up in the paddy wagon; I could be led by the man who danced with me one year ago at the Silverman's house beneath the teardrop chandelier, tipsy from the fizz of bootleg champagne. I had no power to decide; I thought of blue heavens and remembered him now, even though I had forgotten all about him, he remembered me, and he picked me up this time with no champagne and no music. I sunk into the back seat and his automobile was a womb where I could remember all things and suckle on secrets and sleep, then forget. I saw the top stories of Woolworth as the needle pierced a giant cloud, white against blue, then vanished. I was the cloud above the tower and I wanted to be pierced and disintegrate into the vast blue above the passing buildings. I closed my eyes and heard my own whimpers—the sound of my voice as

the infant with no mother, the quivering panic of a lifetime now, a lifetime then, a lifetime wasted. No one, no one would understand. Not my daughter, not my husband.

RED LEATHER

Hands like, how like, brown lilies sweet~

I recited the Anne Spencer poem in a whisper, lips forming words from memory. The waiting was less daunting when we exchanged poems. But tonight was quiet, the alleyway quiet, too still for even the faintest sounds to escape unnoticed. We crouched in the against the brick by the back door, hoping they would let us into the club before being discovered. “Rose, recite another,” Tessie mouthed as if I were deaf.

“No,” I mimed looking up at her big eyes, drops of black licorice, sweetness stored behind glass. “We can’t get caught!” If someone were to hear us, discover us there in the jagged high-rise shadows, there would be consequences. I couldn’t have imagined the depths to which the whites would punish Tessie if we were reported. Beatings. Perhaps. Tessie’d be fired. Tessie knew the truth but never let it penetrate her sheath of confidence. She always did for me whatever I wanted, without a will of her own, and with the strength and abandon of a mother in a sinking ship, throwing over whatever needed to be tossed.

“Please? Just whisper one poem?” Tessie insisted. I was too scared. I vacillated between panic and sheer excitement at getting caught and being out. Tessie and I had snuck out four or five times before, finally reaching the point of ‘having lost count’ but that didn’t mean my bravery should turn to carelessness. Or stupidity. Downtown Harlem after dark was not a proper place for a proper girl from the upper west side of Manhattan. But it was where I felt I belonged.

Tessie pulled out the queen of hearts from her stack of cards, slid it under the door, flicked it with her middle finger, which sent it through

the club's kitchen. The secret signal: *we're here, open the door*. "Hands like, how like brown lilies sweet," the stanza rang in my head. Tessie's favorite because of the time we first met. Tessie was at work, five years ago, tucking in the sheets, me watching, listening to the rhythmic strokes as they brushed and pressed, the roughness of her skin scraping against the sheets, her brown fingers against the white cotton. "Remember how you took my wrist in your hand?" Tessie had asked me once, smiling. I had taken it and flipped it over, smoothing it with my smallish fingers. I liked the pink white of her palm. I traced the creases, petting her like a bunny. In spite of me being thirteen and Tessie being eighteen, I was her superior. She was my sweet pet. Not that I treated her like I owned her. I would leave that to my parents. My hand on Tessie's hand was like night and day, smooth and rough, gentle and harsh. About the only thing we had in common was that we were both slaves—me to my parents and Tessie to her skin color.

Footsteps sounded in the alley, distant thuds approaching. "Hurry, open the door!" I prayed. Tessie closed her eyes and became invisible there in the dark. Unlike me. I glowed like a sparkling lily under the peripheral light of a far-off kerosene streetlamp. My hands, my neck, my hair, as white as the moon, a gray layer of haze stretching across translucent flesh, thin magenta veins, all frail. Our deliberate quiet only magnified the nervous waiting. Reciting poetry was a favorite activity between us whether hiding from authorities or interjecting fun into the monotony of daily tasks. Tessie would stop polishing the silver just to listen to me. I never stumbled on words and was not afraid to pause. I found that long silences were extremely effective when reciting poetry. When I was ten, my parents gave me a quarter for each Shakespearean sonnet that I memorized which was said to have helped me develop this unique talent. All of those love sonnets and odes brought me oodles of quarters, stacks of them, which ultimately led to my habit of purchasing stacks of literature and periodicals when other girls my age were buying new stockings or sneaking cigarettes at the corner store. And just look what it

brought my parents. I refused to recite another poem for them. Ever.

Finally, as the footsteps clunked closer, Jake the pot scrubber opened the painted-over window of the club's back door and waved us in. The smell of stale cigarette smoke oozed through the slot intermingling with the stand-up bass rattling the tiny window. He cracked the door open and we slithered in. Bolting it behind us, he said, "H'llo girls!"

Tessie leapt upon Jake, their legs wrapping around each other like ivy and trellis. She hung there out of breath, panting with relief and she kissed him right on the mouth. Her lips transformed into a giant rose against his, dark on the top and richer, redder in the center, a bud opening. Next to Jake she looked diminutive and feminine, the opposite of how I perceived her every hour of every other day.

Jake signaled. Together, he and Tessie led me across the club, navigating through the smoky cyclones, behind the rows of four-tops and deuces on which glasses buzzed and tables resonated with beating, beating. The vibrations dwarfed the remaining senses. One could forget all about the rancid taste of the water or the stench of musty floors and caked-on mildew from hoisted drinks or even urine. No one danced. It was strictly a sit-down-and-listen club.

They led me to my regular table and I scooted into the back booth behind the black curtain. Jake and Tessie slid around the side of the booth, all in a tangle of limbs. Housemaid transformed into lover, Tessie settled into stronger, harder-working arms. I slicked my indigo silk skirt down with my hands, tuned my ear to the wild chords of the piano player. Tessie and Jake created heat like sticks rubbed together make fire. Heat was all around.

I was the only white girl, the only white woman, the only white *person* in the building. I was hidden from view but if I carefully peeled open the drapes, I could still feel a part of all of this. The piano player's name was George Ferlin and he'd been known to open for Duke Ellington at *The*

Cotton Club. My parents and their friends would go to *The Cotton Club* almost regularly, as if they had some interest in Jazz but if you ask me, they went to impress their friends. They didn't care about music at all. Mother hardly used the radio nor did she bother to touch the grand piano in the living room, which she knew how to play. Daddy was always away on business. He worked in the textile industry with fashion, which meant he could chase down trends in Europe and make them at home, what with the war being over and women now deserving more than one dress. When he was in town, it was off to entertain associates at the ever-famous *Cotton Club* or fancy restaurants uptown. As a child, I thought it was fun to order caviar in French Café's, to listen to adults discuss fashionable fabrics like mousseline do soie, charmeuse or the newest talk, rayon. But that was before I knew—about upper-crust business and society. About them.