
KEEPER OF THE SOULS

CAROLYN HOLLAND

CHAPTER ONE

A rural farm on Suqualena Road, Meridian (Quitman County), Mississippi (1964)

ELIZABETH ANNE FRANÇOIS FOUGHT her way out of her recurring nightmare, gasping like a woman held too long underwater. The remnants of the nightmare left her covered in sweat, the bedcovers a damp, tangled mess around her limbs. This latest nightmare was far more vivid than all the others that preceded it. It began with a hot, erotic coupling and ended with the hint of a horrific tragedy, leaving Elizabeth wet, wanting, and more frightened than she'd ever been.

Sometime during the night, her phantom lover lifted the hem of her nightgown and spread her wide, exposing her body for his taking. Her cheeks burned at the remembrance of his fierce possession.

The exotic taste of male essence that lingered on her tongue, and the soreness between her thighs, lent the lie to this being a dream. Elizabeth would much rather believe that a dark spirit cloaked in comely male flesh had slipped inside her

bedroom during the night and fucked her so hard she could barely remember her name than admit the other alternative: that she may be going insane.

Is he still here? she wondered, hastening to cover herself lest the insatiable satyr play voyeur to her nudity.

It was always like this for Elizabeth once the demons of Morpheus took control of her thoughts...disconcerting, portentous, and unbelievably frightening.

“My name is Elizabeth Anne François,” she mumbled through dry cracked lips to ensure she was no longer a prisoner of the all-too-real dream.

“I am the daughter of Calvin and Betty Johnson François. I am the granddaughter of Jethro and Tarry Carrole Johnson. I am the great-granddaughter of Morgan and Eunice Benoit Carrole. I am the great-great-granddaughter of Marcel and Anna Etienne Benoit. My great-great-great-grandmother, Shumaila bin Said el-Murgebi, was a Zanzibari princess who was tricked into slavery by her white lover and left to rot on Magnolia Hill Plantation, where she was known as Hannah.

“Mojuba beloved ancestors whose shoulders I stand upon and am so blessed. Mojuba. Please tell me that I am not insane.”

With shaking hands, Elizabeth reached for the glass of water she always kept on her nightstand and drank deeply. She knew enough about the spirit world to know that dreams have meaning, especially the recurring ones.

“What are you trying to tell me, beloved spirits?” she murmured.

When her question was met with silence, Elizabeth proceeded to drag her aching body out of bed to start her day.



If someone was to ask Elizabeth Anne François to describe her life, she would tell them that it was one long blues song, with notes that battered her spirit and left bruises on her soul. The kind of blues you feel when you try to eke out a decent living from a patch of land that keeps on giving you the middle finger. Land you can't bring yourself to leave, because your no-count husband and three of your babies are buried in it.

No matter how hard the François family worked their small family farm, they could never manage to make ends meet. It's like that when you are poor, and you live in a town no bigger than the produce section in a local supermarket. Add being Black to the equation, and you are down for the count before you get the chance to step inside the ring.

Just as soon as the François clan got a glimpse of the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, something would always happen to snuff it out. Today it was their ancient tractor. The damn thing sputtered and died mid-afternoon, with more than half the field left to plow. It was too late to call somebody out to look at it, so Elizabeth's brothers, Fruit and Junior, decided to call it quits for the day. They reasoned the tractor will be just as broken come tomorrow, and so would they.

Fruit, Junior, and Jimmy Lee, one of the field hands who also filled in as Elizabeth's part-time lover, sat on the front porch sipping some of Elizabeth's potent homemade hooch over a game of cutthroat bid whist. Elizabeth was in the kitchen, elbow-deep in a sink full of fresh-picked greens, wondering where in the hell they were going to scrape up the money to get the damn tractor fixed. All the while, Brownie McGee was making love to the strings on his guitar, and Sonny Terry's harmonica was wailing on the floor model stereo in the living room.

But Terry and McGee ain't had nuthin' on Elizabeth, who was singing along with the scratchy record as if her life depended on it, whilst images of the man in her dreams continued to haunt her thoughts and stir up her nature. Elizabeth

knew she would never meet a man like that in Meridian, or anywhere else, for that matter. Maybe that is why she didn't sing nuthin' but the blues.

"If you ever change your mind. About leaving, leaving me behind," she sang. "Oh, oh, oh, bring it to me. Bring your sweet lovin'. Bring it on home to me.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah."

Elizabeth put some down-home Mississippi stank on that song. Her voice could be heard soaring outside the walls of the kitchen to kiss the crops in the farthest corners of the field with tear-stained lips and failed intentions. Whenever Elizabeth sang the way she was singing now, the gentle stalks of wheat leaned in the direction of her rich, soulful voice and bowed their heads in sympathy. It was Elizabeth's way of acknowledging that all sweet lovin' ever got her was knocked up, fucked up, and heartbroken. Elizabeth knew all about the blues, alright. And just in case she'd forgotten, the fickle finger of fate was about to give her a sure nuf' reminder.

Something foul was coming up the road, and it was stinking to high heavens.



Everyone in Meridian knew Elizabeth did spiritual work. She was born and raised in Mississippi, by way of New Orleans, a legendary haven for Voodoo and Hoodoo practitioners. By the time Elizabeth had her first menstrual, she was already formulating spirit-infused oils and potions and performing uncrossing rituals and the like. But hardly anyone knew anything about the soul snatching.

The first soul Elizabeth snatched belonged to that of her familiar, a midnight black cat with coal-black eyes and a shock of steel gray on its forehead in the shape of a star. She called the cat Ase'. Elizabeth was only seven years old when she put

a load of buckshot into the body of a rabid bobcat that had Ase' in the grip of its mighty jaws. She snatched the feline's soul and returned it to its dead body before the coldness of death set in, restoring its life. Other than a lost eye, Ase' was no worse for wear.

Nearby farmers didn't know what to make of Elizabeth. Some referred to her as a mambo Voodoo priestess, a conjure woman, and even a witch because of that eerie looking one-eyed cat that always followed her around. Elizabeth was all of those things and so much more.

If someone suspected their significant other was cheating or thought somebody put "something" on them, they sought Elizabeth out for help. She could work a root on somebody or lay down tricks that would have an unfortunate victim quacking like a duck, clucking like a chicken, or barking like a junkyard dog whenever they opened their mouth to speak.

Many whispered that she served the Lao with both hands, practicing both good and evil medicine. If your money was right, not only would Elizabeth have your enemy lying in a sickbed at sunset but if she wanted to, she could have them dead by sunrise. Some even said she could raise a dead body and have it walking around like the zombies in a late-night horror movie.

Elizabeth also served as the local midwife, or what is commonly known in the Deep South as a doula or baby catcher. Most of the babies in Quitman County, Clarke County, and thereabout received their first smack on the backside from Elizabeth. The nearest hospital, H. C. Watkins Memorial, was about thirty-eight miles away. It may as well have been 1,000 miles away since few of the Colored farmers had medical insurance or adequate funds with which to pay. Those who could pay were housed in the hospital basement or left to suffer in crowded hallways. Many preferred to bear their children at home.

CHAPTER TWO

TIMES WERE HARD FOR everyone, and especially for Colored folks. Farms across the state were failing, and the economy was in the toilet. One thing was for sure: Poverty never stopped Colored folks from makin' love. Hard times make for the sweetest lovemaking because lovin' is free. Folks in Meridian could not afford to feed nine or ten kids like they did back in the old days, yet seeds were catching every which way but loose. Abortion was legal in parts of Europe, but not in the United States. Word got around quickly when Elizabeth stopped catching babies to go into the more monetarily lucrative and spiritually bankrupt business of killing 'em.

For the right amount of coins, Elizabeth would steep one of her special herbal concoctions. A couple of cups of what Elizabeth liked to call her "baby killin' tea," mixed with pennyroyal, cotton root bark, devil's claw, and a few of Elizabeth's secret ingredients would have you cramping in no time flat and miscarrying quicker than a swift kick in the belly. If the customer was too far along for the herbal abortifacient to work, Elizabeth would do it the old-fashioned way; with some rubbing alcohol and a clothes hanger.

Before Elizabeth knew it, women were traveling from as far away as Louisiana and Texas to avail themselves of one or both of her special services. The money Elizabeth brought in from her root work and abortions kept the family afloat through many a lean time.

There is a price for walking the dark path. Most times, Elizabeth would dream about impending danger before it came knocking at her front door. For the past week or so, the spirits had been screaming out a warning to her. But she could neither see nor hear them. Their voices were drowned out by the anguished cries of all those unborn babies Elizabeth sent to heaven before their time and by that big handsome man that continued to invade her dreams. That was why Elizabeth was unaware of the spiritual turmoil swirling around her like the worse kind of tidal wave—a turmoil that would leave her with blood on her hands no amount of soap could wash off.



Elizabeth tried not to think about the money they would lose until they could get the tractor fixed, instead focusing her thoughts on Jimmy Lee. Jimmy Lee was a big, strapping, cornbread-fed country boy ten years her junior, with enough stamina to plow Elizabeth into next week if she had a mind to let him. Jimmy Lee would help her forget her troubles, at least for a little while.

Elizabeth did not maintain any illusions about her personal appeal to the opposite sex. She was a fine-looking woman, and she knew it. Most men described her as a handsome gal with a healthy sexual appetite when, in fact, she was captivatingly beautiful. A foot of thick, bushy hair she couldn't keep straight no matter how hard she pressed it framed her delicate heart-shaped face. Her rich, dark skin shone like polished ebony because of all the wholesome, natural food she ate. Her

eyes were as dark as onyx, with expressive, long lashes that curled at the tips. But it was her body that left men weak at the knees.

Elizabeth's body was a work of art. She was blessed with a big-busted, wide-hipped, hourglass figure that put one in the mind of Bessie Smith, but with a waist so small a man could wrap his hands around it. The only reason the men in and around Meridian called her handsome instead of beautiful was because she was dark-skinned. Dark-skinned girls were good enough to creep with, but not to court. That was fine with Elizabeth because creeping was all she had the patience for.

Not only was Elizabeth real easy on the eyes, but she kept a spotless house and she liked to cook almost as much as she liked the feel of a big, rugged man pressing down on her. Any man fortunate enough to slide inside Elizabeth François's warm moist place would tell you she was more than comfortable in her skin. She was a Colored man's delight and a white man's wet dream.

Jimmy Lee didn't know it yet, but Elizabeth planned to give him everything she dreamt about giving to that mystery man—or at least as much as she was willing to give to any man. She planned to fuck him and send him on his merry way with a big old-fashioned Mississippi smile on his face. But first, she intended to fatten up the calf. Elizabeth knew one of the best ways to get a man to undo his belt buckle and share what the good Lord gave him was through his belly.

She dipped the greens until the water turned brownish-green. Then she drained and refilled the sink and scrubbed those greens like she was washing clothes instead of cleaning collards.

Two fresh-baked apple pies were cooling on the kitchen table, and a savory combination of salt pork and beans was slow-cooking on the stove along with the pork ribs cooking in the oven. The sugary sweet smell of apples, nutmeg, and cin-

namon slow-jammed with the fragrant tobacco smoke coming from her brothers' hand-rolled cigarettes. The smoke wafted through the open kitchen window to tickle Ase's nose as he sat on the sill dozing in the sun.

The record ended, temporarily plunging the house into a comfortable silence. Elizabeth found a sense of peace in the familiar sounds and smells of home. Suddenly, harsh words from the front porch disrupted the peaceful quiet.

"Naw, niggah, fuck dat shit! You reneged!" Elizabeth's brother, Fruit, shouted, throwing the cards down on the porch like a bad sport. "You cut hearts three books back, and now you throwin' out an ace of hearts. You must think my ass is stupid, Jimmy Lee!"

Fruit's real name was Lawrence Alexander François, a big name for a man less than six feet tall. Their mother named him Fruit because he'd been such a pretty baby—as pretty as a girl. "He's as sweet as a fresh-picked piece of fruit," her mother would often remark. Back then, Fruit had the disposition to go along with all that sweetness. There was nothing sweet about Fruit now. Twenty-seven years of Mississippi livin' took care of that.

Elizabeth shook her head in dismay, not even bothering to listen to Jimmy Lee's response to Fruit's heated accusation. She had sense enough to know that it was just a matter of time before her other brother, Junior, jumped in, and the François boys double-teamed him.

Unlike Elizabeth, who inherited her father's rich brown complexion, her brother Junior, whose given name was Johnny Heathcliff François, and Fruit were high yella, with light brown eyes and curly hair, just like their mother. Both were favored over Elizabeth.

Fruit and Junior were as thick as thieves. There was no way Jimmy Lee could win an argument against them, especially when they had been drinking. Instead of telling Fruit he'd cut diamonds and not hearts earlier, Jimmy Lee grabbed his

cap and hustled his thick, fine ass on down the road, taking the promise of his sweet kisses and Elizabeth's orgasms right along with him. Disappointed, Elizabeth watched his departure with a woeful expression.

"Shit! I guess I'm going to have to use five-finger Charlie on Palm Street to take the edge off," she mumbled under her breath.

Goddammit! she thought. *I hate sticking my finger inside myself. I swear, one of these days, Fruit's mouth is gonna write a check his yella ass can't cash. That boy always arguing about something and messin' shit up for everybody.*

Suddenly, the pie didn't smell so sweet, and the cooking didn't bring as much joy.

CHAPTER THREE

ELIZABETH WAS STILL AT the sink, facing the kitchen window, when she sensed a presence behind her. She would know her son Calvin if she had to find him blindfolded in a field of a thousand kids. Calvin was the only something she'd done right in her life—that and killing his no-good, piece-of-shit daddy for beating her one time too many. She smiled before issuing an admonishment.

“Don’t you let that screen door slam when you leave out of here, Calvin Lionel François!” she warned, without turning from her task.

Calvin, who had been trying to tiptoe past his mother, stopped dead in his tracks, wondering, and not for the first time, whether his mother was part bloodhound or had eyes in the back of her head.

Calvin responded with a respectful “Yes, ma’am.” Then he filled two large mason jars with homemade hooch and headed for the kitchen door with the *Damballah Weddo Vévé* talisman his mama gave him at birth swinging from his neck.

Calvin had been in and out of the kitchen since his uncles came in from the field, replenishing everyone’s drinks and fetching occasional snacks, a task he was thoroughly enjoying.

Calvin swore the sun rose and set in his uncles' eyes. His uncles felt the same about him.

The homemade liquor was in a cast-iron container on the floor next to the icebox, right beside Old Lucy, one of three sawed-off shotguns Elizabeth kept in the house. Elizabeth named the other two shotguns Fred and Ethel, respectively. She named the huge knife her brothers used to gut the pigs Ricky, after Ricky Ricardo on the *I Love Lucy* show.

Despite his mother's warning, the screen door slammed behind Calvin as loud as a shotgun blast.

Elizabeth shook her head and kept on cleaning the greens, mumbling under her breath, "Lord, I don't know what I'm gonna do with that chile."



Junior François, the younger of the François brothers, was the first to notice the lone figure coming down the long dirt road leading up to the house. Junior set his drink down and pushed off the steps to stand. He swatted an annoying fly away from his face and raised his hand to shield his eyes from the glare of the orange and red setting sun.

That's when he realized the unexpected visitor was none other than Louise Sadie Krutchner, or Lou Sadie, as everyone in Clarke County called her—that is, when they weren't calling her a trouble-making white trash whore.

The easy camaraderie the brothers enjoyed a few moments earlier vanished like a puff of smoke on a windy day to be replaced by palpable tension. Junior stepped closer to the end of the porch with a frown on his face and a lit cigarette dangling from his lips.

"I'll be damned if that trifling gal ain't pregnant again," Junior said to Fruit with pinched lips. "Didn't Elizabeth scrape a baby out of her about four or five months ago?"

Fruit was quick to reply. "She sure did scrape a baby out that ho'. I ain't surprised she knocked up again. Everybody in Quitman County and thereabouts know she been fuckin' outta both pant legs since she was seven. All you got to do is rub the top of her head, and her legs fly open," Fruit said with obvious disdain. "She bet not think I'm gone 'low her ass up in here," he added.

Junior, always the voice of reason, was quick to remind his older brother about their current financial predicament. They had a tractor that needed to be fixed and no money to fix it.

"Shit, Fruit, what the fuck you care? Long as she pay, she can get pregnant all she want. 'Cause with that broken tractor, we sure can use the extra money. I'm just saying."

Unfortunately, Fruit wasn't in a reasonable frame of mind. He rarely was where whites were concerned. He had inherited his mother's good looks and his father's volatile temper. Everyone referred to Fruit as the loose cannon in the François family, or the hot-head. His next words confirmed it.

"Dat bitch got a lot of nerve showing her face down here!"

He skeeted a stream of spit through the gap in his pretty white front teeth while shoving a toothpick in his mouth as if he hadn't heard a word Junior said.

Fruit François was not one to forget a slight. He was still upset about an encounter he'd had with Lou Sadie several months ago after running into her at a local hole-in-the-wall in Lambert.

It angered him that Colored folk weren't allowed in any white establishments, yet whites felt comfortable invading the Colored joints and bringing their special brand of trouble right along with them. That was exactly what Lou Sadie had done.

Both she and Fruit were stinking drunk on the night in question. They exchanged words over something trivial. Lou Sadie spat in Fruit's face and called him a Black nigger. Fruit blanked the fuck out.

Woman or not, it took Junior and three of Fruit's friends to keep him from putting his foot all the way up that peckerwood's ass. Seeing her standing at the bottom of the steps like she had every right to spit in a man's face and then walk in his house like nothing happened made Fruit a hundred kinds of mad all over again.

We might need the money, but I swear 'fore Gawd she ain't stepping one foot inside this house today, Fruit thought with determination. *The only way she is going to get past me will be over my dead body.* Fruit stood up, blocking her way.

"Elizabeth home?" Lou Sadie asked with that Mississippi twang low-class whites are known for.

"Yup," Fruit replied, chewing on the toothpick stuck in the side of his mouth. He stared Lou Sadie down, daring her to make a move to get past him.

"Well, can I come in?" she asked, her patience growing thin.

"No, you can't come in," Fruit stated unequivocally, mimicking her back-woods accent.

Fruit François was a proud man. Lou Sadie snatched a chunk of his dignity and all of his pride the night she spit in his face. Her mere presence made him feel slimy all over, as if she spit on him all over again. It gave him a great deal of pleasure to deny her access to his home and to his sister's special skills.

Junior recognized the storm clouds forming in his brother's eyes. He grabbed Fruit's arm in an attempt to calm him down. But it was too late. The liquor had taken over, and it was driving Fruit like an Indy 500 racecar with no brakes. Fruit François was on a roll. There was no stopping him now.

"You think I'm gon' 'low you to step foot in this here house after you disrespected me? You must think I'm a damn fool, Lou Sadie. This here," he said, pointing toward the front door, "is my house; and you ain't welcome in it.

"You need to take your nasty ass on out of here, Lou Sadie Krutchner. You need to do it right now 'cause you ain't going to get no help here! Bet you gone think twice before you spit

on somebody else and call them a niggah! Now git!” Fruit ordered with the authority of a Black man who was sick and tired of white people—this one in particular.

The tension between the adults mounted. It seemed everyone had forgotten all about Calvin, who took advantage of their inattention to drain what was left in Jimmy Lee’s glass as well as the contents of his uncles’ glasses. Now that the glasses were empty, young Calvin’s head was swiveling back and forth like the little white ball in a Ping-Pong tournament. All he needed was a bowl of his mama’s homemade pork skins, and it would be just like going downtown to the picture show.

Elizabeth stepped out onto the porch, drying her hands on her apron, curious as to what all the commotion was about. She took in the situation in an instant. When Fruit was riled up like this, there was no talking to him. The liquor only added fuel to his anger. She knew to keep her mouth shut.

Lou Sadie narrowed her eyes at Elizabeth, waiting for her to override Fruit’s order and grant her access to the house. When Elizabeth didn’t open her mouth, throwing up her hand instead to make the sign to ward off the evil eye, Lou Sadie drilled her watery blue-eyed gaze on Fruit and then on Junior. She saved the last glare for young Calvin, scaring the living shit out of his little drunk ass.

Elizabeth expelled a breath she didn’t realize she was holding when Lou Sadie turned without a word and made her way back down the road, leaving Elizabeth with a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“I ‘spect we ain’t heard the last from that one,” Elizabeth predicted, with a worried frown.