

Chapter One

"I'm sorry, Miss Legare but you will never have a baby and if by some miracle you do get pregnant...you will never successfully carry that child to term."

Aubrey woke with the verdict still ringing in her ears. She sighed. The nightmare was always the same, always ended the same. She still remembered that day, the smell of the hospital's disinfectant, her ancée squeezing her hand. That was the day her life fell apart as if it wasn't already messed up.

Her mother had passed away when she was little and she never knew her father. He was long gone before she entered the world. According to Ya-Ya he was a drifter, a traveling jazz musician. He had come to Mardi Gras like a hurricane and swept her mother off her feet. And then he was gone. Nine months later Aubrey entered the world.

She didn't remember much about her mother aside from the fact she always smelled like strawberries. Her mother owned a small jazz bar just off Canal Street. According to Ya-Ya her mother opened it in hopes her father might just wander in one day. But he never did.

Aubrey's mother and aunt were twins and maintained an old Queen Anne-style home with a wide front porch. One front corner of the house was rounded with large windows. It's brightly colored front and garden full of naturally growing herbs and native plants made it a mainstay of the Mid-City neighborhood. According to the family history Ya-Ya taught her they were descended from escaped slaves who sought shelter and sanctuary with a nearby Houma tribe. To this day Aubrey didn't know how much of the story was true and she doubted she ever would. It merely added avor to an already unconventional family.

Her aunt was a traiteur, an energy healer and oracle reader. She made ointments and tinctures from herbs and often did tarot card readings during her weekly visits to the bar. Though Ya-Ya had kept the bar in honor of her sister she left the management of it to someone with more experience.

For years she had been taming local crows offering food in exchange for any little bobble they dropped in compensation. Surprisingly the birds found an impressive amount of loose change and even a gold coin once in addition to marbles, sparkly stones, feathers, ribbons, even a pocket watch.

Children in the neighborhood traded stories about the Witch of Baudin and either gave their home a wide berth or snuck close to the iron-wrought fence trying to sneak a peek when Ya-Ya tended her garden or fed the crows by hand, several of which she had named.

The continual presence of several black cats through the years certainly didn't help to dispel rumors of Ya-Ya's alleged magical identity. Neither did her annual Halloween display, which became more and more elaborate over the years nor her rather eccentric attire that often reected their African as well as their uncomrmed Native American heritage. But while other people thought Ya-Ya was strange it was all quite normal for Aubrey. Perhaps it was inevitable that she grew up to be an artist.

According to Ya-Ya she realized Aubrey's talent rst and redid the screened-in back porch into an art studio. Aubrey certainly wasn't the rst artist in the family either. Ya-Ya made jewelry and charms from the crows' offerings and Aubrey's mother was a potter. Most of the plates, bowls, mugs and vases in the house, as well as the tankards and shot glasses at the bar, were made by her hand. In fact her potter's wheel sat in the corner of Aubrey's studio even now as inspiration and in the backyard a shed still housed her old kiln and dipping barrels for glazes. Perhaps if she had lived longer Aubrey would have taken it up with her.

Her mother passed away when she was ve. Aubrey didn't understand it at the time but later she learned it was due to complications with diabetes. Despite losing her mother so young her home life really didn't change that much. She continued to live with her aunt in the same house, on the same street.

Aubrey graduated valedictorian of her high school and immediately decided to attend college for painting. Wanting to expand her horizons she went to school in New York where she met her roommate and future best friend, Sarah Tomlinson. Though they were worlds apart they became sisters. And after meeting Ruth they became an inseparable trio dubbing themselves the Three Musketeers: Athos (Sarah), Porthos (Aubrey) and Aramis (Ruth).

Sarah claimed no family so Aubrey often dragged her to New Orleans every holiday and break. At rst Sarah hesitated not wanting to impose but Ya-Ya's open and generous nature soon put her at ease. One of the reasons Aubrey was so insistent on encouraging Sarah to visit was her insatiable appetite for spicy foods. Ya-Ya's Cajun cooking was not to be missed.

When Sarah found unexpected success as a writer Aubrey was rst to high-ve her. And when Sarah stressed about what she should do for Rosemary's next adventure Aubrey suggested Paris because...why not? Not only did Sarah accept the suggestion but she bought tickets for Ruth and Aubrey to join her. So the Three Musketeers went to Paris.

It proved an excellent experience for all. Not only providing Sarah with a wealth of experiences for Rosemary but also allowed Aubrey to visit the Louvre and numerous artistic landmarks to inspire her own artwork. When she returned to the States Aubrey was ready to make her mark.

Her rst gallery show was thrilling but even more so because that was where she met her ancée. It was a whirlwind romance and Aubrey enjoyed every minute of it. But after six months her ancée grew concerned they hadn't conceived. Aubrey herself wasn't terribly concerned. After all, they were both young but he insisted on fertility tests.

The doctor had trouble pinpointing the cause for what he called an ovulation issue. Eventually he singled out the migraines she used to suffer from when she was young and often forced to rely on painkillers before Ya-Ya switched her to a more holistic approach. He decided then that was the root cause, citing that prolonged use of even over-the-counter painkillers could lead to fertility issues.

The diagnosis was bad enough but her ancée broke off their engagement right in the hospital lobby claiming she was only half a woman if she couldn't bear him a child. Aubrey fell into a downward spiral.

After that she stopped working. Her life revolved around drinking, drugs, casual s*x with anyone willing: man or woman, anything that could make her feel something other than the despair closing in on her. Nothing else mattered, not her art, friends or the family she would never have. What was the reason for going on?

Those weeks passed in a haze. Even now Aubrey couldn't remember half of it. What she did recall was coming down the stairs one morning after a binge to nd Ya-Ya had torn apart the living room. All the furniture was piled in the center and covered in plastic. Drop cloths covered the old wood oors and Ya-Ya poured purple paint into a tray before dipping in a roller and boldly painting the wall in a bold 'W' stroke.

"What are you doing?" Aubrey asked dully, still in a fog.

"It was too beige in here," Ya-Ya said. "I needed more color."

Aubrey shook her head and went to the kitchen to make herself a cup of coffee. She returned to the living room to see her aunt still hard at work. Her rst thought was to go back to bed but she also knew Ya-Ya would be at it for days if she intended to paint the large room with a ten-foot high ceiling all on her own. With a sigh Aubrey picked up the other roller and joined her.

They spent most of the day painting. When they were done two walls were purple and the other two were green. The crown molding and baseboards were yellow completing a Mardi Gras-inspired room. When they were done they collapsed on one of the plastic-covered couches sweaty, exhausted and aching but the room practically glowed.

Ya-Ya surveyed it proudly, "It's amazing, isn't it? What a fresh coat of paint will do? This room was old, tired and needing some love. Now it's full of color and pride. People are the same. It don't take nothing to start over...you just have to make up your mind to wipe the slate clean. I'm going to make some gumbo. Don't know about you but I'm starved."

Patting her knee Ya-Ya stood and headed to the kitchen humming to herself. Aubrey sat on the couch a while longer until her eyes fell on the gallons of paint left over. Apparently Ya-Ya bought too much not wanting to run out. Aubrey stared at them for a while longer before grabbing them and carrying the extra paint to her studio.

Propped on the wall was a large canvas she originally planned to use for a landscape. Now she set the paint cans in front of it opening them before dipping one of the paintbrushes still caked with color from the living room project. Stepping up to the canvas Aubrey raised the brush before snapping her wrist to splatter the paint across the blank space.

She hesitated a moment before doing it again. With a devilish smile she grabbed another brush dipping it into another color and doubling the chaos. She spun and danced, inging paint with wild abandon. Eventually she cast aside her bushes and dipped her hands directly into the paint smearing and even hitting the canvas with her sts.

Tears lled her eyes blurring her vision as she threw everything she could at the canvas: her pain, frustrations, fear, anger, hopelessness...Everything surged out of her. Grabbing the small can of gold paint she threw the whole thing covering one corner in yellow as she nally sank to her knees shaking and unable to stop crying.

Strong arms circled around her and Ya-Ya pulled her close rocking her as she stroked her hair, "That's right, baby. Let it out. Let it all out. You been holding onto that hurt for too long. Set it free, baby. Set it free."

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Aubrey breathed deep letting the memory linger before letting it go. After that she started working again and slowly things got better. She still had that painting. It hung in the living room above the replace, a work even Jackson Pollock would be proud of. At Ya-Ya's suggestion she titled it Phoenix.

Meow?

Blinking Aubrey looked at her bedside table to see one of Ya-Ya's black cats perched there watching her with curious amber eyes. This one was named Jim after the runaway slave character in Huckleberry Finn. Ya-Ya named all her cats after famous African-American gures, both historical and literary. Currently there were six cats that came by regularly: Celie, Rosa [Parks], Jackie [Robinson], Booker [T. Washington] and Katherine [Johnson] in addition to Jim. Aubrey didn't know how Ya-Ya recognized one from the other. She knew Jim only because he was the only cat who came into the house.

"What's up, Jim?" Aubrey asked.

The cat blinked.

Aubrey chuckled. Perhaps her aunt's eccentricities were nally rubbing off on her. She was actually talking to a cat. Aubrey debated whether to rollover and steal a few more minutes of sleep when a cry suddenly erupted from the baby monitor.