

Chapter Eight

Sarah stepped out into the garden and sat in awe of the iron-wrought chairs. All around her the backyard was like a jungle with native plants and herbs that had spread through their beds growing with little intervention. In the center of the garden was a platform at waist height. On a hook off to the side was a small metal bucket.

While Sarah sipped her tea Ya-Ya collected objects from the bucket placing them in her basket before relling the platform with peanuts, wheat, pistachios, grapes, raisins and a mix of corn and seeds. Then she carried her basket to the small bistro set to sit in the chair opposite Sarah. They enjoyed the companionable silence listening to the jazz music drifting through the air.

Mardi Gras celebrations, masquerade balls and parades had been going on for two weeks and though the neighborhood remained relatively quiet the music drifted freely without worrying about barriers.

After some time Sarah asked, "So what did they give you this time?"

Ya-Ya set the basket on the table and encouraged her to look for herself. Inside there were marbles, smooth river pebbles, a small faceted stone that could be a diamond, a bit of broken glass, a glossy black feather and even a ten-dollar bill.

"They are giving you money now?" Sarah asked.

Ya-Ya chuckled, "They are clever Lwas aren't they?"

Even as they spoke a crow landed on the platform. It looked at them a moment before dipping its beak and selecting its prize before ying off.

"Morgana," Ya-Ya chastised. "She's so impatient. And here comes Delphine. She's almost as bad."

Sarah raised a brow as another crow, or the same one, landed on the platform. It pecked at the food before ying off. Ya-Ya shook her head.

"How do you tell them apart?" Sarah asked. "They all look the same."

"Oh, if you watch them long enough every day you'll see the difference," Ya-Ya said. "Size, posture, habits, personality. Crows are very individualistic. Isn't that right, Rosa?"

Sarah glanced down to see a black cat slink out from under a bush and lying down on the stone patio. It watched them with half-closed eyes enjoying the warm, morning sun. Like all of Ya-Ya's cats this one had a notch out of its left ear signaling it was spayed and had been vaccinated. Though the cats were wild Ya-Ya took their health seriously. Every time she found a new one she live-trapped it and took it to the clinic to be neutered, vaccinated and dewormed before releasing it where she found it.

Sarah heard of other people doing similar programs for cats that were too feral to be tamed. It stabilized the local colonies and helped control the population. While the cats often started off wild they soon learned to trust Ya-Ya allowing her close enough to pet them and even pick them up for a short time not unlike the crows who sometimes ate directly from her hand.

"What's that one called?" Sarah asked as another crow landed on the feeding platform.

Unlike the others it had something shiny in its beak and looked directly at them before dropping it into Ya-Ya's collection bucket. Then it turned and quietly ate on the platform.

"That's Laveau," Ya-Ya said without hesitation. "She's the dominant female of this family group. I've seen the younger ones like Toups and Max bow to her. She always makes sure I know which gifts are from her."

Unlike the previous birds this one took its time selecting the offerings that most appealed to it. It didn't seem to mind their presence nor the cat in the least.

"Family group?" Sarah repeated.

"That's right, crows generally live in family groups especially during the breeding season," Ya-Ya explained. "You generally have the breeding pair, in this case Laveau and her mate King, and their chicks from previous years. Delphine is four or ve now. She's the oldest one still hanging around. The older chicks help raise the new brood. They gather nesting materials, help feed their mother when she sits on the eggs and even feed the chicks after they hatch."

"Really," Sarah smiled at the thought as she watched the crow calmly eating. It was nice to think of a pair enjoying so many helpers while they raised their broods.

"Now, you watch closely," Ya-Ya said. "Once she's nished she'll hop over to that gargoyle and perch there making a big old fuss about cleaning herself."

Once the crow was nished it selected one last tidbit and just as Ya-Ya predicted ew a short distance to perch on the stone gargoyle nestled in the garden foliage. There it nished its last morsel before wiping its beak against the stone, checking its talons and began preening itself.

"Now watch the platform," Ya-Ya said a few moments before another crow descended.

This one seemed duller than the previous visitors, especially Laveau who was particularly glossy. One wing didn't seem to want to fold properly in place and it stepped around the platform with a limp.

"That's Mama Odie," Ya-Ya answered Sarah's unvoiced question. "She's the oldest crow that visits. She can't y far. I think she lives in that tree now as a matter-of-fact. Since she can't get around good the gifts she leaves are usually feathers, acorn caps and the like."

Sarah nodded.

"But this is the interesting part," Ya-Ya said. "You see as long as Laveau is there the others won't come near, out of respect. So once she's done eating she perches there like a guard so Mama Odie can take her time to eat in peace."

"Really?" Sarah asked giving her a dubious look. "Why do I get the feeling you are joking at my expense?"

"Ain't no joke," Ya-Ya shook her head. "Those two might be mother and daughter. Juveniles help their parents raise their siblings so it stands to reason they would help take care of their elderly too."

"So...which one leaves money?" Sarah asked nodding to the ten-dollar bill.

"Oh, that's probably Merlin," Ya-Ya chuckled. "He disappears time from time. He can be gone for months but before he leaves he always drops something special in the cup. Somehow he's gured out humans like money so that's what he usually brings. He started with coins but now he leaves bills if he can nd them. I think he does it to make sure I don't forget about him."

They shared a chuckle at the thought of a bird being upset that it had been forgotten. Ya-Ya sighed studying her closely. It had been almost a month since Sarah arrived at their doorstep. She hadn't gone into detail about what happened to dissolve her marriage, at least not to Ya-Ya. Aubrey seemed to know more but all she would say was the dirty bastard cheated on her.

Ya-Ya didn't ask any questions. Instead, she allowed Sarah her space to recover and heal. Over the last few days Sarah once again began to bloom. Color returned to her cheeks as well as smiles when she held Jamie. Every now and again she fell into silence with a pensive look but those were thankfully few and far between. Ya-Ya still worried the scars Sarah carried ran deeper than she acknowledged but those would have to be faced later. It was enough that she regained her strength and put on some weight as she was still far too thin.

"So you girls going to have fun tonight?" Ya-Ya asked. It was Tuesday and the nal night of Mardi Gras. She knew the pair planned to head out later and enjoy themselves.

"Yeah," Sarah sighed. "I hope I don't ruin it."

"Ruin it? Honey, how do you plan to ruin Mardi Gras?" Ya-Ya chuckled.

"I just...don't know how I'll handle it."

"Anyway you handle it will be just ne," Ya-Ya said. "Go out. Have fun and don't worry about the rest."

Sarah smiled. Leave it to Ya-Ya to make everything sound so simple. After a while she asked, "What about you? Don't you want to go out?"

"I've had my Mardi Gras days," Ya-Ya smiled.

"What about the bar? Don't you need to be there? It's a pretty big night."

"Nah. Louise and the girls have it covered," Ya-Ya said.

She only kept the bar going in memory of her sister and left management to Louise who had years of experience running a bar. Louise and the bartenders made generous wages so their loyalty and passion were well-funded and assured.

Ya-Ya only made occasional appearances treating patrons to palm or tarot card readings as well as offering charms and jewelry, some of which was on sale at the bar. Those charms didn't include offerings from her crows though. Charms made with those items were special and only given to a chosen few.

One such charm had been given to Aubrey once her pregnancy was confirmed. Ya-Ya insisted she carry it with her wherever she went. Now it hung over Jamie's cradle. It was a string of beads, polished stones, a metal clasp with a ribbon and a large, black feather all gifted from the crows. According to Ya-Ya it granted protection, luck and abundance.

"You girls have a good time," Ya-Ya said. "I'll have a nice quiet night with Jamie."