

June 22, 1944

One night, deep into it, when sounds are prone to carry, a baby boy lies crying on Sarah Creamer's kitchen table. He is minutes old, still wet with his mother's blood, and hungry for his mother's milk. But she does not hear his cries. She is no longer there.

Only Sarah. Only Sarah remains. Her body bent over his, her hands rummaging the wooden planks for a towel still white enough to wrap him in. Blood is everywhere, puddled up as if there had been a hard rain. The smell of it saturates the eighty-one-degree air, pushes aside the dry tang of bleach, and fills the heat with the moistness of a long-shuttered earth, now free.

The baby's cries penetrate Sarah's bosom and bounce around its emptiness. Her hands are shaking.

A lone light bulb hangs suspended over the table, a pull string running from the base of the bulb. It hangs as still as death. The light casts Sarah larger than she knows herself to be, beginning on the far wall above her husband, Harold, who lies drunk and passed out in front of the open doorway to the porch. Sarah spreads high and wide.

Harold's pocket knife lies atop one of the towels, the blade still open and awash in a red slickness. Sarah yanks the towel towards her, flipping the knife onto the table, still warm from Mattie's body. "Cut him loose of me!" Mattie's words to Sarah, who delivered the child. "Get you a knife and cut him loose of me now." The towel in Sarah's hands, she twists. The red and white spirals of a peppermint stick. "What was in my head? I can't keep him. Billy Udean will kill me and this baby, too." Mattie's voice almost too hoarse for utterance, her legs working to free herself from the table. She drops to the linoleum and heads for the door, crawls over Harold and leaves on him a trail of bright red. "It ain't the child's fault he was born," her last words from the porch, before the darkness drew her.

It ain't mine, either, Sarah thinks now, and wraps the baby in the towel, brings him in close and steps over Harold and into the sweltering night in Anderson, South Carolina, where the moon is on its way to bed, and crickets, a whole chorus of them, sprinkle the farmland in waves.

"Mattie! Sister Mattie!" she calls out, her bare feet scurrying across the dirt yard to the vegetable garden they share, the rows running from Sarah's house to Mattie's. She takes the one between the green beans. They would make in another week or two.

She rushes up the few steps to the front porch and onto the green concrete slab, throws open the screened door, and turns the knob. It's locked. "Sister, open the door!"

Mattie never locks her door. No one does.

Sarah shakes the knob. "I'm bringing him back to you. This is your baby, not mine. Don't you put this on me!"

The door does not open.

Sarah places her ear against the wooden surface and strains to hear Mattie's footsteps inside, hear the creaks her barely one hundred pounds would make. But the baby's cries do not allow for that.

Sarah kicks at the door and beats it with her fist, beats it hard. "I mean it, Mattie. I ain't no mama. You his mama. Bet he's got your dimples. Now come get him. Come get him now!"

Sarah's words come fast like the bullets Billy Udean said he wanted to go fire on the people he called "slant eyes," his arms pretending to hold one of the guns he kept stashed in every room of his house and pointing it like he could see them already. He never broke any of Mattie's bones, but he'd beaten her black and blue. The newspaper the day before splashed a headline that spanned the top of the front page, "War Hero to Return Home," and carried words that said Billy Udean Parnell would be on the train to Anderson the next day around noon. That's in a few hours. "Me and Harold won't let Billy Udean do nothing to you or this baby," she calls through and hopes to the high heavens that is true.

A sheen of sweat coats Sarah's skin, makes it glisten, and keeps fresh the red of Mattie's blood that lines Sarah's hands and wrists and arms. Against the wooden surface in front of her, Sarah lays her forehead, wide like the rest of her, except her eyes, which look almost pinched together, as if huddling. Strands of dark hair, almost black and long loose from her bun, lay stuck to her forehead and neck and sides of her face.

The baby's cries ring in Sarah's ears.

"I mean it, Sister! Come get your baby! I'm going to count to ten, and if you don't open the door, I'm putting him down, I am." Her voice has become shrill.

Sarah begins to count. She counts loud. But Mattie does not come.

"Alright, then," Sarah says and steps back, the screened door slapping shut. She lays the baby in front of it. "He's at your door now, your baby is. You the mama, now you come get him. I don't want him. He ain't mine, and I wouldn't make no good mama." The back of her throat feels like knives cutting it. "I ain't playing, Mattie. I ain't!" She stomps her foot. The jowls in her face shake.

The door stays closed.

She takes another step back and holds up her hands in surrender. "Bye, Sister, I mean it. I'm leaving. Now come get him!"

She starts down the steps.

From inside the house, a gunshot blasts.

The sound finds Sarah and lifts her arms like wings.

"Mattie!" she screams and runs back to the door and rams it with her full self. "You playing, right, Sister? Ain't you playing? Tell me you playing!" She grabs the knob and shakes it, then beats it with her fists. "Tell me!"

She listens.

There is nothing.

Blood rushes to her head. The hotness of it, then the coolness like a thousand peppermints jammed inside.

“Mattieeeeeee!” Sarah calls out, holding onto her best friend’s name as long as she can.

She is a child’s toy top spinning. She spreads her feet to steady herself and slaps her flat hands against the screen. “Oh God, no, no, no, tell me no, Mattie. Tell me noooooo!”

The louder Sarah is, the louder the baby at her feet becomes.

But their sounds are just for each other. No neighbors live close enough to hear. Field after field of young cotton surrounds them. The farmhouse across the way has long been abandoned.

Sarah slides down the door, her body folding on top of itself as if she was a knife being put away. Her hands clasp the back of her knees, and she begins to rock. She falls over and draws herself up into a tight curl.

The baby lies just out from her, his cries now wails. They shake her down to her twenty-six-year-old bones.

Drops of sweat roll down her face. They want to get away from her. She doesn’t blame them. “I ain’t enough, baby boy, I ain’t. I don’t know how to be no mama. I wouldn’t make no good one. No good one. No good one. No good one.”

The towel reveals only his face, the rest wrapped around him like the picture of Baby Jesus she saw in her mother’s Bible when Sarah was a girl.

She can see his little mouth working. He is hungry. He needs to be fed. “Why? Mattie, why? Sister, why?” Sarah’s voice is now a whisper. “No good one, no good one, no good one. No, sir. No good one.”

He is squirming like he wants to free himself. But he has nothing to free himself for.

Except her. Except Clementine Florence Augusta Sarah Bolt Creamer. She looks at the screened door behind him. It is closed. She lets her eyes climb the large metal design in its center, a bird, painted white. Billy Udean would always laugh and say it was a pelican that lived along the coast, where he pronounced he would live one day, buy a house on the beach and wait for such a bird to fly by so he could shoot it.

It’s a stork, Sarah thinks now, and it’s brought a baby. A baby boy.

She can feel light at her back. The sun now is waking. On the baby’s face, she sees the light’s timid beginnings. The world behind them is becoming midnight blue, the color of God’s handoff from night to day, that switchover that appears to occur in a single act, in a single second and setting what was, never to be again.

“No sir,” she tells him. “It ain’t your fault.”

Then she makes herself go still. Just like that, go still.

She rises from the floor and gathers him in her arms. His hair has dried some. It carries a tint of red like Harold’s. Around his tiny and heaving back, she folds her hands. They are strong hands. They can cook, and they can clean. Harold called her “handy” once. He was right.

The baby, theirs now.

Sarah bows her head. She can’t say who she is praying to. Her mother’s Jesus does not know her. But she has to believe that someone, something hears.