**PROLOGUE**

# Mae

### Westchester, 1934

hy was Alice making her wait? Mae Malveaux lifted the hem of her thin cotton nightdress and walked barefoot across the lawn into the shade of a sheltering willow tree. The hammock shifted gently in the warm evening breeze, and the first stars decorated a purple-pink sky. It would be dark soon, and she didn’t want to be outside by herself. She lay back in the hammock and hummed to herself, the colors above her head deepening. Soon she saw just the tree’s slim green leaves. Mae was glad she didn’t have to be in Harlem sweating through her clothes on some fire escape. She would look up when she walked down the street and see under the skirts of women she knew from church. They sat there on the metal cages fanning themselves all day. She didn’t want to be like that, exposed to the world like an animal at the zoo. And thank God,

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because of who she was, she didn’t have to perspire in public.

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Ever since her mother had looked at Mae’s long dark plaits and perfect ten-year-old face and said, “Put Mae’s picture on the pomade jars,” there had been no need for her to be like any- one else. No reason to do what other people do.

She could live in a proper brownstone and not hear strangers’ footsteps up above her head. She could come up to Westchester County and run half naked in the dark with the girl she loved more than her own pretty face. And for Mae Malveaux, that was saying something.

Now her silky dark hair flowed loose around her. She knew her mama would get mad if it frizzed up in the dewy air, but she didn’t care.

Mae sat up. She heard the shushing of Alice’s slippered feet rushing through the grass. Suddenly Alice collapsed over her leg, slapping herself on the ankle.

“Ouch! Damn mosquito! Mae! Why do we always have to be outside? You know you can come to my house. We can stay in my room.”

Mae opened and closed her mouth. She decided not to try again to explain how indoors they belonged to other people. At least that’s how life presented itself to Mae. Indoors she had to wear black stockings that clung to her legs like spiderwebs and endure dance instructors who poked at her when her step lagged a beat behind or her back remained unbending. But she had begun to suspect this wasn’t the same for Alice, especially after Alice cut her hair into the shockingly mannish bob so many white women were wearing. Tall and vivacious with skin the color of cooked caramel, Alice strode through the world as if she were a white woman and entitled to every freedom of a black man.

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Alice’s face and hair were not printed on thousands of jars of hair product. Alice could skip coming out for a full year just because she didn’t feel like getting dressed for the debutante ball. She had also experienced men, real men, not the bashful boy “gentleman callers” summoned by a mother and sitting chastely on a sofa. Mae knew for a fact Alice supped on the delights of Wayne Watts, one of the deacons at their Harlem church; Anthony Harris, owner of the Belle Fleur restaurant; and Nicholas King—the very sight of the well-muscled land- lord made women draw breath in anticipation of his body threatening to burst through his clothing at any moment. Mae would listen to Alice’s exploits in admiration and naked jeal- ousy. At eighteen Alice was already her own woman while Mae, at twenty, doubted she ever would be.

So instead she just asked Alice, “Where have you been?” “I wasn’t feeling too well after dinner. Had to make my

mama believe I was fine, that it was just something I ate.”

Mae didn’t ask why Alice wasn’t feeling well. She didn’t care. It only mattered that Alice had made her way to Mae there, now, and the feeling of loneliness that often opened up and threatened to swallow Mae whole had closed again.

“Come here,” Mae whispered. “Lie down.”

The willow fronds cascaded down around them and shielded them from prying eyes. They pulled their gowns down and lay topless. Their rounded breasts shimmered with sweat and shone like new suns in the rising moonlight.

“I heard my daddy playing jazz music in his room this after- noon,” Alice said.

Mae snorted. “Mama calls it devil music.”

“My mama too! Why do you think he was listening in his

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room? She won’t allow it in the rest of the house! It sure felt good, though. I heard it coming through my bedroom window. And to think they get to hear music like that in Paris all day long.”

Mae nodded. Alice loved to talk about Paris, how they should pack steamer trunks, run off to New York City, and board a ship to cross the Atlantic. A few weeks ago Alice had jumped on top of Mae’s bed and held a towel around her na- ked butt and waist like a sinfully short skirt.

“Can you imagine us in Paris, Mae?” She shook her rear in a shivering shimmy. “We would be queens! Josephine Baker would have nothing on us!”

Mae had pulled a chair over, put her feet up on the bed, and applauded and crowed at Alice’s dance.

“Oh yeah! Show me some sugar!”

Alice had squatted low and let her plump bare breasts bounce against her chest. She stood again and kicked her legs up, one after the other, high into the air. Then she fell back- wards and lay spread-eagle on the bed laughing.

“And you know,” she’d added when she had caught her breath, “they’re not afraid of blacks in France. People aren’t penned up—none of this ‘You live in that neighborhood and we’ll live in this neighborhood.’ You can be where you want to be. Keep the whole damn city in your pocket if you want. You’ll see, Mae. One day we’ll go to Paris together and you’ll see.”

Now Alice was quiet. Her eyes seemed lost staring into the branches above her. “I could’ve just laid there listening for- ever,” she said of the jazz music. “That piano felt like it was talking to me. Talking in my heart.”

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“Alice, that’s crazy.” Mae laughed and snuggled closer. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

Alice stared at Mae for what seemed like a very long time. “Maybe I don’t,” she finally said. “Never mind that now. Let me see you walk. Walk for me.”

Mae didn’t want to leave her perfect place nestled against Alice’s warm skin, but something about her friend’s voice, her breathy, catlike purr, always made Mae’s body obey. She dropped herself out of the hammock and skipped a few paces away.

“Remember, relax. Let your hips swing.”

Mae closed her eyes and frowned. She couldn’t remember how to relax. Everything Mae learned about her body made her straight and hard like an ironing board. Her mother never allowed any part of Mae, her hips in particular, to veer off center. She learned to walk with books on her head and her mother’s hand on her spine. The icy touch held her taut and upright.

“Mae,” she heard Alice whisper, “pretend you’re me.”

Mae took a deep breath that settled into the lower part of her body and made her right hip rise underneath her hand. She opened her eyes, gazed directly into Alice’s, and swung one foot forward until it landed precisely in front of the other. The next foot swung out from behind and Mae placed it again in front and in line with the back foot. Her left arm swung through the air as she lowered her chin. Once she got her feet going and pounding out a rhythm, her body knew better what to do. Af- ter that it was like dancing. When she arrived back in front of Alice, Mae placed her hands on both hips, threw her head

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back, and laughed with a joy that made her body tingle. When- ever she could unlock her body like this Mae felt like a god.

“That’s my girl!” Alice crowed, and Mae threw herself back down into the hammock. “When are you gonna use those moves where it matters?”

Mae shook her head. Didn’t Alice see it mattered now, more than it ever would with anyone else? She couldn’t see herself walking for anyone but Alice. Alice had brought this body out of Mae and as far as Mae was concerned, it belonged to Alice. “Yeah, like Mama’s ever gonna let me out of her sight long enough to do that.”

“You’re here now, aren’t you?” Alice sat up and looked around. “And I don’t see your mama anywhere out here.”

“Yeah, well, this is different. There are no men around here either.”

Alice laughed. “Oh, Mae, you just don’t see it, do you?” “See what?”

“You’ve got more freedom, more choices, more chances than you realize. If anything, that fishbowl your mama’s got you living in is gonna protect you so you can do even more.”

“Alice, what are you talking about?”

“I’m talkin’ about you being Mae Malveaux. Your mama’s got more money than all of Harlem and half of Westchester. You’ve already got men lined up around your parlor and going out the door of your brownstone.”

“I don’t want to marry any of them! All they want is our money.”

“But that’s just it, you don’t have to, Mae! You can have as many of them as you want, keep them dangling for as long as you want. Not one of them will say a damn word as long as they

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think they can have that money. But you’ll cut ’em loose before they realize they don’t have a chance in hell.”

Mae stared at Alice and asked a question for which, some- where inside, she already knew the answer: “Why would I want to do that, Alice?”

A slow, icy smile sprouted in the corner of Alice’s mouth and spread wide across her lips until it gleamed and struck Mae’s heart cold.

“Just because it feels good, of course.”

Mae lay back and let Alice’s words run through her. When they came out the other side they bred possibilities that ex- panded like a wave of heat until they sat enormous and expec- tant on top of Mae’s heart. She saw herself tearing open Nicholas King’s shirt, running her hands along the hard ripples on his chest.

As if it wanted to practice a similar motion, Mae’s finger floated across Alice’s chest and traced the outline of the dark areola of one of her breasts that, magically, seemed fuller than Mae had ever seen them. Her thumb took the flesh of the nipple into a playful pinch, but Alice pushed Mae’s arm away.

“Ow! Naw, Mae, that hurts!” “It never used to hurt.” “Well, it do now.”

“How come?”

“How come? Mae, don’t you know anything? Because your breasts get tender—they hurt. That’s just something that hap- pens when you’re gonna have a baby.”

Mae stared, blinked, and then began to laugh hard, deep in the belly. It was this kind of humor that made her love Alice so—she made Mae feel good deep down like they were skip-

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ping through clouds and didn’t care what anyone thought. But when she tried to move down to nuzzle into the space just un- der Alice’s arm and above her breast, Mae found Alice’s bright brown eyes staring back at her, hard and stony.

“What? What’d I do?”

“What are you laughing at? I just told you I’m gonna have a baby and that’s supposed to be funny?”

“You’re what? Alice, *no*!” Mae sat up so fast the hammock swung wildly. Alice got her feet on the ground and steadied herself and Mae.

“I told you I was sick tonight. Did that sound like a joke?” “No.” Mae stood up. She didn’t know what else to do. “Al-

ice, who’s the daddy?”

“Nicholas King, I think, but it doesn’t matter!” Alice shook her head. “Because I’m not having it!”

“Not having it? But how? Alice, what are you gonna do?” “There are ways, Mae. I’m not givin’ up my life, you can bet

your sweet mama’s fortune, I’m not!”

“How can you do something like that, Alice? Why would you?” “Mae, one of these days you’re gonna learn this world ain’t made for colored women. You don’t own nothing but what you can take for yourself. You got a mama who owns her world, so you don’t have to worry about all that. But she knows what’s what. How come she ain’t married? Where’s your daddy at,

Mae?”

Mae couldn’t respond. She only knew rumors, half-truths, and a baritone voice that still sang her to sleep in her dreams.

“At the end of the day, though, you’ll still have people callin’ you nigger behind your back, and most of them will be men. So why can’t we take what we want, just like they do? Why can’t

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we be in charge of our own lives, as long as we have our own money to do it? They think they can have it all for nothing, Mae. I will always make them pay.”

Alice’s face glowed like burning coal and Mae couldn’t take her eyes off her. She was like Moses returned from the mountaintop and Mae wanted to know more and go where her friend had been. Then she heard the feet pounding and the earth seemed to shift as she saw Alice’s mother charging to- ward them. When Alice finally turned it was too late. Della Evans’s hand came down like lightning and whacked the side of her daughter’s cheek.

“What the hell are you doing out here? Cover yourself up!” She stopped dead and looked closely at Alice’s breasts as if she were seeing them for the first time. Mae could tell she wouldn’t fail to see what Mae herself had missed. Alice shrunk back and pulled her gown up over her shoulders.

“Alice Evans, you tell me the truth right this minute! Do you have a baby in that belly?” She raised her hand again. “You tell me right now or I’ll knock your ass into next year!”

Alice covered her head with her arms while Mae stood with her hand gripping the hammock, her nightgown still bunched up around her stomach.

“Y-yeah, Mama,” she stammered. “Yes.”

“Whore!” Mrs. Evans grabbed Alice’s arm and pulled her close, then smacked her on the head and across the face. Al- ice’s mother kept pulling her across the lawn and back to their house.

“Mrs. Evans, no! Stop!” Mae protested, not knowing what else to do to protect her friend. But the older woman’s eyes flashed and Mae felt like a hole had been burned into her face.

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“Mae Malveaux, you get your sass-ass back home before I get your mama and tell her you’re out here walkin’ around half naked!”

“But Alice!” She reached for her friend. Alice waved her off. “Mae!” Alice spoke sharply. Tears flooded her eyes. “Go

home! I’ll be all right.”

“Shut up! Just shut up!” Mrs. Evans pushed Alice ahead of her and they disappeared into the dark. The words rushing from her mouth dissolved so Mae couldn’t tell what she was saying, but whatever they were, they still poured out hot and furious. And Mae was sure Alice was still crying.

There would be no getting rid of the baby now.

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tHe evanses drove back to Harlem the next day. Mae heard nothing from Alice for an entire month. Then came the day when Mama told her to pack—they were going back into the city a few days early.

“How come, Mama?”

“Oh, I thought you’d be happy to go. That Evans girl, your friend, is getting married to Ray Barton. About time that nice man found himself a wife. I hear they’re moving to Detroit after the wedding.”

“Ray Barton!” Mae’s hand swept to her mouth and her fingers felt like ice. Alice would never marry a man like Ray Barton. Yes, he was well respected in their church community and he was imposing—he stood over six feet tall and had shoulders so broad that standing in front of him was like standing in front of a brick wall. He had survived the war,

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but whether he had survived in one piece was another matter. Both Mae and Alice knew he wasn’t right in the head. The dark lines under his eyes and the hollow look within them told how a man could be snapped open like a new tin of hair pomade, and his insides scooped out just as easily to be spread out glis- tening and melting under the burning gaze of the sun.

When the wedding ceremony began and Alice appeared at the wide-open oak doors of the Fairfield Baptist Church, Mae couldn’t make out her friend. Alice was swathed in layers of organdy to hide her shape and her face was covered with a long white veil. It wasn’t until after, at the reception, that Mae could push toward Alice and have her worst fears confirmed. The girl stood glassy-eyed as she stared past the faces of each happy guest offering congratulations. But her look softened when Mae reached her. Alice’s spirit felt small, so small Mae could hold it in the palm of her hand.

“Mae! My Mae!” They embraced, close enough for Mae to hear Alice choke down a sob in her throat.

“How are you?” Mae whispered. “I’m sorry, I wanted to help.”

“Shush. I’m gonna be all right.”

“But Detroit? It’s so far. What am I going to do without you?” “You will be all right.”

Mae’s knees shook. A cool grief began to sweep over her.

Alice, as if reading Mae, grabbed her by the shoulders and lifted her up to stand taller. She turned Mae around and whis- pered in her ear. “See him?” she hissed urgently. *“See him?”*

Mae’s eyes sped around the room. “Who, Alice, who?”

He stood leaning against a pillar, his lanky frame dressed in a rich-looking suit and his pencil-thin mustache perfectly

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groomed. His long fingers held his drink so lightly it seemed to float in the air beside him. Mae didn’t know his name, but she knew it didn’t matter.

“Mae, have him,” Alice whispered. “Take him for me.” She kissed Mae on the cheek and pushed her in his direction. Mae looked back into her friend’s eyes and realized she would never see Alice again. She nodded.

Mae turned to him. She breathed down into her lower body and let her legs swing forward. Her hips swayed. As her hands moved up to them Mae raised her chest up and in that moment she felt a coal ignite in her heart. This man, whoever he was, would be the first to pay.

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**Val**

### Harlem, 1925

al Jackson didn’t want to walk any farther. Not when he already felt the hard leather rubbing on his toes so a blister could form at any moment. Not when the sun had already risen high enough to be in his eyes and burn his thirteen-year-old head. He wasn’t running all over town to find the perfect empty street when this alley right here, bounded by Mr. Porter’s pine board fence and the cellar walls of tall apartment buildings, was wide enough and close enough. They were stopping right now. “Here!” he shouted to the boys just ahead of him. He

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dropped his glove on the ground and bent over to retie his shoe. “We can play right here!”

“Naw, naw, ain’t enough room. You crazy!” Short Red Johnson kept walking and pointed the way with his stick. “We gotta go out to the street like my mama said.”

“Your mama’ll be beatin’ us over the head when you get your sorry butt run over! We’re playing right here.”

*Besides,* Val thought, *I don’t have time for this.* That little shrimp didn’t know what time was. He could run around in the streets till the sun went down and maybe even after that. Short Red’s mama didn’t sit at home reading all day, threatening to call him home the moment she came across words that made her think, *My son’s got to know this!* Short Red wouldn’t get dragged home to the kitchen table and a makeshift classroom, as though summer didn’t matter and there wasn’t enough time in the world to learn who thought what about colored people and what they needed to do with themselves.

Val rolled up the cuffs of his pants to keep them out of the dust. Some of the other boys stopped and made their own prep- arations.

“Shit,” Short Red murmured. “All right.”

They followed Val’s lead because they didn’t know any bet- ter. Val just had that way about him. They knew he wasn’t the oldest—Tyrone, who was throwing down a potato sack for sec- ond base, would be fifteen next month. But Val was the best talker and the best player. If you wanted him on your side you just shut up so he knew you weren’t gonna bother him too much. He was the best looking too. Val had smooth deep-brown skin, high cheekbones, and a blinding smile. When he stared at you with shining eyes, you felt like you were the only person

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in the world, and you wanted to follow him around forever just so you could stay in that light.

“Short Red, you up first!” Tyrone stretched his muscled back like he was about to take a nap, not pitch a ball. The boy stepped up to the plate and Val bent over to wait for the ball. Sometimes it happened too fast—the swoosh of the bat as it whipped round through the air, the *crack* when it made con- tact with the ball, the drumming of running feet, the satisfying thump of the ball into the glove.

“Boy, that wasn’t no strike! My grandma can pitch better than that and make corn bread while she’s waitin’ to bat!”

“Then you better get her out here ’cause I don’t see no one else pitchin’ and I need somethin’ to eat!”

“My grandma got better things to do than teach you how to play your game!”

For Val the best part was when it was his turn to grip the stick in his hands and feel the sting in his palms when he thwacked the ball out into the street. It burned like hell but he could sing with the pain because it just felt right to be making use of his body. Didn’t his mama understand that? Didn’t she know all the times she was scolding him for not being able to sit still when he was supposed to be practicing scales on the piano that he was just trying to give in to his body’s power? He had felt it coming on for months, like he was starting to get things he didn’t have a use for yet. But he was understanding these new things wanted him to move, to be in his body and feel every- thing there was to feel: heat, cold, pain, sharpness, and that other thing—the sensation he had no name for. It made him shiver when he watched the older girls like April Jean strut

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down the street with chests suddenly rising like they had base- balls stuffed underneath their shirts.

He didn’t know what the feeling was, didn’t know what to do with it. One day he expected the shiver to come round full force and explode out of his mouth with an exultant *Aaaahhhh!* But until then he would swing the bat and sniff the leather of his glove and whip balls out into the air. One day it would all be clear to him—one day.

Not this day. On this day the sting in his hands would be followed by the crashing sound of broken glass, his friends swearing, and the hammering of their feet running away from him. Val dropped the stick and looked up with resignation at the broken window where Mrs. Walker’s braided white head soon appeared.

“Val Jackson! Val Jackson! You get your behind up here right now, boy! Your daddy’s gonna have your hide if I don’t tear it off first! You get up here now—don’t you give me that look, boy!”

*You go ahead and get my daddy,* Val thought. *And I can look at you any way I please.* He didn’t have to run like the other boys, running scared like rabbits looking for a hole to jump down. His mama was right—there were some things he didn’t know. And his body told him there were many things he didn’t understand. But this he knew for certain: this was Harlem. His name was Valiant Jackson. And because of those two things he didn’t have to be afraid of nobody.