

Chapter 3

Lirah Wesley stared out the window of the crowded Plymouth station wagon, in absolute stillness and silence. Her nut brown curls constantly shifted with the breezes flowing inside. She swiped the wisps away from her troubled brown eyes. While working in her vegetable garden than summer, her peachy complexion had turned bronze; now, though, her face was pale. Kirk, her husband of nearly twenty years, was beginning to get concerned. From the time they'd picked up Highway 441 outside of Eatonton until the time they'd turned on to Highway 82 outside the city limits of Waycross, Lirah had talked nonstop. Though her four children were thankful that their mother had finally hushed, this new quiet was anything but calming.

The family of six was traveling to Lirah's family's home in Branch County, specifically to a three hundred acre tobacco farm near the small town of Tiger Bay. According to her father Jacob, entirely too much time had passed since her last visit. Lirah wanted to feel joyful about returning home, reuniting with her parents and siblings, but the lead stone of anxiety sitting in her stomach wouldn't let her.

The last time her family was all packed into the station wagon, they had ended up in Dogwood, Georgia. Welcomed there, they had made a few good friends and established their own identities. There had been trials and tribulations since they moved into the log cabin at the edge of a copper mine, just off the railroad tracks, but as a

family, they had persevered and were stronger, more united, than ever. Lirah was counting on that strength to get them through the next several days of this short trip to Branch County. She was hoping to pack enough memories on this trip to merit not returning for at least another year, such was her anxiety.

“Sugar Plum,” uttered Kirk, as he ashed his cigar out of his cracked window, “everything will be just fine. You’ll see.”

The youngest of the four, Samantha, threw her petite legs, one at a time, over the bench seat and landed none too easily between her parents. With her clear gray eyes and short blond hair, she resembled a pixie. And like a fairy, she was known to be fleet of foot.

“It’ll be fine Mama, you’ll see”, said Sam mimicking her father. “Let’s have some adventures!”



Finn Wesley, second child and only son of Kirk and Lirah, sat beside his bossy oldest sister, Amelia, at the kitchen counter of their grandparent’s home. Amy barely remembered the last time they’d visited her mother’s family at the farm near the Okefenokee Swamp. Finn had even fewer memories of the place where his mother had learned what he called alchemy, but she called magic. The duo’s younger sisters, Delores and Samantha, had no memories of the place nor of the people.

The family of six had arrived a few hours earlier, much to everyone's relief. The Plymouth station wagon finished the trip quite easily, despite being burdened by suitcases and gifts for relatives. Why their mother, born Lirah Ganit, had packed two cases of mulberry jelly was beyond them. When questioned, she merely shrugged her shoulders before replying, "It's good jelly." Yet Finn had noticed the smirk on her face as she turned away, and he knew then that there was more than sugar soaked mulberries congealing within those Mason jars.

The adults were spread about this kitchen, catching up on family news. More specifically, Lirah's father, Jacob Ganit, was talking to Kirk about the farm in Dogwood that the Wesley family could finally call their own. "He just gave it to you?" was Jacob's stunned question.

"No sir, not given", replied Kirk, father of four rambunctious children. "We're managing the property for him, but we'll do a better job of it than Davis Mincey did. And there are certain contingencies that our realtor, Marlon Satterwhite, included in the contract to protect all parties." Kirk paused long enough to test his mother-in-law's sweet tea, finding it perfectly delicious. "We can paint bedrooms and build shelves as needed. Lirah can plant whatever she wants outside and use the cellar as much as she needs. The kids can have swing sets in the pecan trees but the magnolia tree is not to be touched. That was Miss Rosa's tree and since it's doing so well, I suppose Ash wants it protected for as long as possible."

After another swig of tea, Kirk reached his conclusion. "The contract states that when we get ready to move, that won't be a problem. We'll just take our things and go. The house and property though, are not ours to sell. Those assets stay in a trust managed by MC Hammond, Ash's lawyer from Kansas."

Jacob knew there was more to the story, much more. *I should have found more time to talk to Asher this past winter.* Details were what he needed, but there always seemed to be more questions than answers.

Then Finn heard the spit of harshness erupt from his grandmother. "Lirah! Don't you dare touch that pot of black-eyed peas. I don't need none of your voodoo to fix my dinner!" Shoulders slumped, energy resigned, the children's mother turned away from the stove to see Amy and Finn staring at her, their mouths agape. "It's OK little ones. I think I'll go finish unpacking." With her anxiety justified, Lirah left the room with saying another word.

Jacob excused himself to go over to his wife, Lucille. They had been married a long time and rarely had they seen eye to eye on much of anything, but her comment was too much.

"That was unnecessary Lucille. Your daughter just got home, with four of your grandbabies, and here you are trying to drive them all away." He was unprepared for the torrent of fury that was unleashed in the galley kitchen.

Lucille slammed down the spoon she had been stirring gravy with, and faced her husband. She leaned off to the side to catch Finn's eye and spoke to all.

"I have put up with this nonsense for nearly 40 years, Jacob. Lessons in the hen house with Trudy; lessons while fishing with Dan. Lessons on this. Lessons on that. Did you honestly think I didn't know about those? And what were you and your demented kin teaching our children Jacob? A bunch of hogwash, that's what. Somehow, someway, that nephew of yours got himself into trouble and now Lirah's caught up in his web of lies and deceit. Y'all sit around here conspiring about 'gifts'." Lucille made air quotes with her flour covered hands as she practically spit the words out. "You whisper about that boy's birthmark like he's the second coming of Christ, but let me tell you one thing. *He is not!*"

Amy and Finn could not have moved if the house had been on fire. Their grandfather could only stand with his long arms hanging by his sides. It was Kirk who finally broke the stilted silence.

Slowly shifting his weight from the wooden stool where he'd been sitting to strategically finding his standing balance, Kirk placed one hand on the well-worn kitchen counter before he softly spoke. "If it's all the same to you Mrs. Ganit, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't speak about my children in such a way. Particularly not in

front of them. You don't have to believe what we believe, but that doesn't make our wisdom traditions any less true."

Untying her gingham apron in exasperation, Lucille tossed it on the laminate counter where it landed in front of Finn, who backed away from it. "I could say the same to you about my beliefs."

Undeterred, Kirk carefully approached his mother-in-law, as though she was a wild animal caught in a trap not of her own making. "Mrs. Ganit, we can agree to disagree about these things, but there is one thing on which we simply must have an accord." Pointing to his children, Kirk said "These children are precious gifts, wouldn't you agree? And raising them in a home full of love, laughter and learning is important to Lirah and me. We are not here to attack you or your beliefs. We are here to spend time with you and Mr. Ganit. Let's not spend it fighting." With that, Kirk stepped out of Lucille's way, allowing her to pass, but she didn't make that choice. Instead, she sighed deeply. Removing her glasses so she could rub the perspiration from her face, Lucille drew a rattling breath. Emitting a sigh that sounded as though it came from the depths of a wounded soul, she said somberly, "I can do that."

Finn gingerly reached forward to touch Lucille's abandoned apron. "Would you like for me to hang this up for you, Grandmama?"

Tears pooled as Lucille responded but she brushed them away. "No, supper's not done yet. Go get your mama." Amy eased from her seat at the counter to fetch Lirah, but touched Finn's shoulder before she left with a whispered "I'll be right back".

The apron returned to its place around Lucille's ample waist as she picked up her stirring spoon. Another exasperated sigh escaped, this one from wounded pride. "This gravy's gotten all lumpy on me. It's gonna need some of Lirah's magic if we're planning to eat by sunset."

Jacob could only gawk in astonishment. His wife had been outsmarted by his son-in-law and out-loved by his grandson. And welcomed, no – invited - the family lore into her blessed kitchen.

I wonder who else is gonna change while Lirah's home. Jacob's thoughts turned from his wife to his nephew, Asher, who was known to not merely avoid change, but run from it.