

THE SPIRIT OF
CATTAIL COUNTY

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CHAPTER ONE

They buried Sparrow Dalton's mama the day the fortune-teller came. A day so hot, some say the swamp started to bubble. The water of the Everglades rose in the air and hung there, a steaming mist that cloaked the little town of Beulah in a persistent haze.

Sparrow watched as they lowered Mama's casket through the lingering precipitation and into the ground. As the casket creaked and swayed on the ropes that held it fast, vapors swirled in a way that had nothing to do with the weather. Among those rising vapors, Sparrow searched for Mama. She felt with deep certainty she would see Mama again, and she had good reason for this conviction.

Sparrow saw spirits.

In fact, she had seen one ghost, the Boy, with such life-long regularity and clarity that he was as sure as the beat of her young heart.

He was with her even at that moment, as real and as solid as the preacher who presided over Mama's grave. His

features were so unlike the murky wisps of typical spirits that she marveled no one else saw him. Though the two of them had always been different. She, a girl who looked at death. He, a ghost who looked like life.

For Sparrow, the only reminder that he was a ghost was his impenetrable silence. He was her greatest secret, yet he told no secrets himself.

She wished he would tell secrets. For if he could talk to her, then it would have been a simple matter to ask after Mama. Sparrow wanted to know where Mama had gone. More important, she wanted to know when Mama would return. Because if the Boy could live side by side with Sparrow, spending long summer days trailing her about the house like a dog, then so could Mama. She knew it wouldn't be exactly as it was before. Sparrow wasn't crazy enough to think that. She only wanted to see Mama again so she wouldn't miss her so much.

Sparrow was so lonely for Mama that her soul ached like a thumping drum, and without Mama, Sparrow had no one to love her.

Sparrow had no sisters, no brothers, and no daddy. Truth be told, she had no true friends either. Sparrow had the misfortune of being an anomaly in a town that took offense at difference. Beulah had never forgiven Sparrow for being born on the same night as the great flood. It

seemed folks found it hard to separate her arrival with the rise of the swamp waters. It felt like a bad omen.

To make matters worse, she had the nerve to show up bearing no resemblance to her fair mama. Sparrow had eyes the color of cattails and black hair that twisted like reed grass. Beulah folks joked that Sparrow must be the daughter of the swamp itself to be washed ashore in the flood and so different-looking from Daltons born in generations past. Of course, they wouldn't have speculated so, if Sparrow had a Beulah-born daddy or Mama had stopped the rumors as fast as they'd started. Mama had a defiant streak, though. She'd refused to talk about Sparrow's daddy, and the story stuck.

With Mama gone, Sparrow's only claim to friendship and family were the ghost of a silent boy and Auntie Geraldine, her only living relative.

Sparrow liked the idea of having an aunt. She just didn't like the one she got.

Auntie Geraldine was a force to be reckoned with. A force she applied liberally and often to Sparrow, as she was doing now. Auntie Geraldine pinched the back of Sparrow's arm, for the preacher waited for Sparrow to come forward and cast the first handful of dirt on Mama's grave.

Sparrow had made it clear before they left the house that morning that she wouldn't do this. It was one thing to bury Mama, quite another to throw dirt on her.

Auntie Geraldine smiled up at the preacher and then gave Sparrow another pinch.

Sparrow clamped her hands on the sides of her chair and looked resolutely at the horizon.

A few awkward seconds passed, during which the preacher mopped the sweat from his brow with a hanky and Auntie Geraldine looked around with a forced smile.

Finally, the preacher said, in an overly indulgent and patient way, "Perhaps, sister, you can take her place."

Auntie Geraldine gave an assuring nod and rose, her thin, bony body as strong as steel. She straightened her starched skirt. Paused. Then looked at Sparrow.

She reached out, cupped Sparrow's chin in her hand, and pressed her nails into the tender skin of Sparrow's cheeks before turning to do the preacher's bidding. Auntie Geraldine was good at many things, but was at her best when keeping up appearances.

Auntie Geraldine grabbed a handful of freshly turned soil and held it in her palm. The Boy moved so close to Auntie Geraldine that they were almost touching, and bent down. He put his mouth right next to her palm, as if he would kiss it, and blew. The soil lifted on a ghostly breeze, swirled playfully in the air, and fell like raindrops to the ground.

Auntie Geraldine glared at Sparrow.

It was almost as if she suspected it was Sparrow's fault.
Sparrow glared back, unjustly accused.

She no more controlled the Boy than she did the weather, although she was grateful to him. She hadn't wanted to throw dirt on top of Mama, and now she realized she hadn't wanted anyone else to do it either. Somehow, the Boy knew it. So maybe, in a way, she did control him.

Most likely not. Spirits are fickle things.