

# Chapter 1

**W**HISPER ISLAND WAS JUST A TONGUE of land tucked into a curl of the Mississippi River, south of the Delta. At its north end was a hill, called Alright Hill, a bulwark against the flow of water. Atop it stood Espy Rojas, newly transplanted from Pascagoula, with her fists dug into her hips and her legs akimbo. She was scowling at the long, flowing arm of the river. Most nicknamed it the Mighty Mississippi, but here the people called it “the Ol’ Man.”

“Shut up,” she said to the cawing birds, gliding and swirling above her. Her black, twirly hair tickled her cheek as an easterly wind chased after the sinking sun. She wore a red shirt and a matching pair of jogging shorts with white, baggy socks piled above her clunky tennis shoes. She was alone.

She scratched her elbow and gazed down the steep slope where more birds picked at the beach below. “Come on, Sylas,” she said. “Let’s catch one of them birds.”

She set off down the hill toward the sandy towhead of the island. As her feet left the scrubby grass and hit the thick sediment, she stumbled and went to all fours. Her hands sunk into the sand until they hit mud, a rich red clay that made a deep *thok* sound when she pulled her hands out. The pit she’d made was like a wound, red and swollen. At her approach, the nearby birds had scuttled on or taken to flight.

“Sylas,” she said as she leaned back and shaped a clump of clay into a figure. “Look, it’s a *loa*.” She crafted a round figurine. “Look, Sylas. It’s Aida Wedo.” She held it up to the sky. “This must be a sacred space.”

She drew a circle in the sand and placed her creation at its center. “Shhh,” she said and paused, cocking her ears. “I bet Mama’s calling us. I bet we gotta run.”

Scraping the clumps of mud and clinging sand from her knees, she ran up the hill. From the top, she looked down on the furrows of cheap housing. The long and narrow homes were like a fallen picket fence, their white siding peeled by the sun. She hopped down through the tall weeds, burrs catching and clinging to her socks.

As she broke out onto the hard dirt and scarce grass, she heard her mother singing her name, “Esperanza!” with the first *a* carried in a long, lilting note.

“Told ya, Sylas.”

She sprinted eastward on the fine, red clay gravel of the road, the shotgun houses on either side like a row of teeth biting down on her. Her mother came into view in front of the final house on the street, standing barefoot next to a stack of boxes still waiting to be carried inside. Her mother was a brown-skinned woman with a shock of hair whose curls had lost their spiral and were content to wander every which way.

Espy skidded to a halt.

“Esperanza, they’s some boys playing soccer in that field ’cross from the fountain. You can run down there and play some before dinner.” Her speech had a Cajun clip to it, heavy with *d*’s, a gumbo of sounds.

“I don’t know them boys.” Espy looked down and counted the dandelions that comprised the green in their yard. The only other source of color was a tree with blue glass bottles stuck onto the leafless branches. Her grandmother called it her Spirit Tree.

“That’s why you go talk to them. Make ’em your friends.”

“Already got a friend.” She spat out her response quickly, hoping the words would sneak by, but her mother was good at catching words.

Carmona frowned and settled her eyes on her headstrong daughter. She brushed her hair back and waited until Espy’s eyes found her own. “You’re thirteen now, girl. You can’t be playing with Syllas no more. Go on down there and show them boys how you play. They’s only five a them. They need one more.”

Espy stared up at her mother through the crinkly forest of her hair. She pooched her lips and blew a huff of air to kick a strain from her forehead. She liked to practice her mother's own silent condemnation, to give an evil glare for an answer.

Her mother wagged a finger. "Don't you look at me like that, Esperanza Aurieux Rojas. You can go kick that ball or help your *mémé* shuck peas."

Espy showed her teeth in a mean grin and without a word spun on her heels and shot off down the road. Her strides were long and quick, her shoes smacking a heart-beat into the dirt. She followed the S-shaped road as it snaked down the hill between the houses. It was named the Red Sea Road due, she supposed, to its red clay color. Turning onto the asphalt road, named Goshen for unknown reasons, she passed the dumpster where their trash had to be taken. The city didn't yet offer a garbage service up the hill, so everything had to be carried down to the property of the island's only trash man, a smelly man named Gary.

Espy slapped her feet down hard to slow herself to a jog. She arrived at the island's wide two-lane road, named Promise, that would take her all the way to the bridge leading to the mainland of Mississippi. As she continued, the houses grew nicer—green grass and long driveways with a garage at the end. Nicer than the prefab houses of Alright Hill, but not as nice as those on the south end of the island.

Those houses were two stories, made of brick, and their yards were chubby with green.

Smack in the center of town was a fountain with a bronze figure of a man spitting water from his mouth. He was dressed like a true Southern gentleman, a long coat and vest with a pocket-watch chain hanging from an inner pocket. He held a finger over his lips like he was hushing her. Espy threw her foot onto the ledge and quickly retied her shoe, jerking the laces to suck the eyelets in. At her foot she saw a plaque that read “In Honor of Makepeace Oliver for Keeping the Secret.”

She shrugged and said, “Come on, Sylas,” and shoved off. She crossed the main street to enter the small park. It was an open field, green grass between colonnades of pecan trees. In the field, five boys ran madly after a neon yellow soccer ball. Espy parked herself against a tree, near to where the goal would be on their invisible field.

The boys shouted and called, complaining of errant passes and shanked kicks. All of them were white-skinned, and all were blond with one exception. He was black-haired and dressed all in white. Espy watched as he swept down the thick grass like he was skating on ice. He extended his toe to corral a bouncing cross kick and flipped the ball into the air so that he could deliver a crushing blow with his foot. The ball bulleted past the kid at goalie and skipped off past where Espy stood. The black-haired boy circled back to take up his post at the far end of the field.

It looked like it was two on three—the black-haired kid with a slouching sack of a boy sucking wind from between his knees versus three other kids in an assortment of colored athletic wear. Espy trotted over and put her foot atop the ball as a buck-toothed kid in black and green came to retrieve it.

“Give it,” he barked.

Espy shoved it with her foot to him. “Can I play?”

He picked up the ball. “Nah,” he said before running back onto the field.

Espy frowned and marched after him. She announced more loudly, “Hey, you boys! Can I play?”

All four turned to look at the black-haired kid in white. He was jogging in place. “Sure. Are you any good?” He shook his head immediately. “It doesn’t matter. You can be on my team.”

She ran past the other three boys and stopped in front of the slouchy, red-faced boy who was now pretending to tie his shoes. He twirled the tips of his laces until they buckled.

The black-haired kid raised his hand. “I’m Reed. That’s Torgny.” The chubby kid huffed hello. He pointed across the field. “Those kids are losing three to one. Watch out, here they come.”

Espy turned to see the three blond boys charging down the field, the ball expertly shuttled between the first two. Torgny took one step before falling. Reed bolted through the middle of the field, deftly stole the ball, headed it over

the other defender, and was streaking toward the goal when the third boy grabbed Reed's collar and slung him to the ground. The buck-toothed kid took control of the ball.

Espy snapped out of her awe and yelled, "Hey, cheaters!" But then she sprang into action. Torgny was still rising, so the boy with the ball shot down the sideline. Espy cut him off and forced him to pass. The ball bounced away, and Reed intercepted it. Espy caught his eye and set up for a cross kick.

She lit across the field as if shot from a cannon. The grass whispered beneath her feet. Reed punted the ball crisply across the field, laying it up perfectly for Espy. She ran under it and dove, heading it between the invisible goalposts. As she watched the ball arc, as her palms were hitting the soft turf, the third boy collided with her, his foot connecting with her face.

There was a pop and a warm flow of blood. She crumpled in pain, the field swung, and she collapsed into the grass with her hands templed around her nose.

She concentrated on breathing, not wanting to cry in front of the boys. Her nose throbbed. There were a few guffaws. Even Torgny chuckled. Espy's eyes went blurry with tears, and she felt a hand on her shoulder.

Reed helped her up. "Nice shot. What's your name?"

She sniffled and shoved him aside. Seeing the smirking faces of the others, she bolted off into the street. She smacked the bumper of a slow-moving car with her palms and stopped at the fountain.

Taking a seat on the ledge, she leaned her head back to staunch the flow of blood, placing her thumb and forefinger at the bridge of her nose. She closed her eyes and listened to the splash of water behind her as she probed her injury, softly pinching, wincing each time. She turned to rinse off her hands in the pool. As she scrubbed, splashing a little on her face, she turned to see two of the blond boys approaching with Torgny trailing behind. In the field, Reed was talking to the boy who had kicked her. Then they both trotted away, Reed departing with a short wave in her direction.

“I’m Blaze,” said the first blond boy, hair heavily gelled into prongs. He had freckles and spoke with a soft lisp. His teeth were crooked.

“Hi,” Espy said. She watched Reed until he disappeared into the trees.

“I’m Blake,” said the other boy. Espy looked to register his face. He also was freckled, a brown band from cheekbone to cheekbone. Espy looked back at Blaze and then at Blake, near mirror images.

“Yeah,” said Blaze, seeing her look. “We’re twins.”

Espy gave a wan smile.

“That sure was funny,” Blake said after a short pause.

“Yeah,” said his brother. “You went down like a rag doll.”

Espy stayed silent. Torgny hovered behind the other two boys mindlessly.

“Where you live at?” asked Blake as he inserted a finger into his nose.



“Or,” Blaze added in a mirthful voice. “Are you homeless?”

“Ain’t homeless,” she barked. “I live on Alright Hill.”

“Rat Hill?” said Blake, in squeaky incredulity.

“Alright,” Espy repeated sharply, her Cajun accent snapping the syllables down.

The boys were giggling. Espy looked down at Blake’s exposed shin, targeting. Torgny joined the laughter with a loud snort. Espy shot her foot out and struck Blake’s shin. As he bent over, she pushed him to the ground.

Blake cried out, but the other boys laughed.

“Shut up! You’re just a bunch of stupid boys,” she yelled at them.

Torgny lifted his heavy chin. “I can tell my dad on you. He’s the mayor. He can run you out of town.”

Espy backed away.

“His dad’s gonna run all you rats outta Rat Hill,” Blaze said. He practically sang it.

Espy set off in a sprint, leaving their catcalls to the wind. Her feet carried her northward toward the Hill, the cracked pavement giving way to the inclined gravel, red as cayenne pepper in the late day sunlight. She followed the upward sweep of Red Sea Road.

Reaching the first bend in the *S*, she looked up the shabby hill, scrubby with brush and tall grass. She couldn’t quite see her house, but she knew that it was above her, not more than twenty feet away. She vowed to carve out a little path

to cut the commute in half. With a deep breath she continued her trek up the road.

When she arrived at her mémé's house, she slumped, resting her head against the trunk of the Spirit Tree. Her near boundless energy was finally sapped. Her chest heaved while she regained her breath.

In front of the door was a blue circle of paint on the gray planks of the porch. It was a protective charm, part of her mémé's hoodoo. She threw back the screen and let it slap the heels of her shoes. Smells of cooked beans, seared pork chops, boiled collard greens, and cooling cornbread flowed around her, a wafting river.

She inhaled deeply. "Gosh, Sylas, would you smell—"

A bony woman, dark-skinned with short, trimmed gray hair, sat before a wall of boxes that separated the living room from the kitchen. She was waving her finger extravagantly. "No, no, no. Keep your Sylas to yourself." Her voice was like a raspy cat's meow.

Eulalie Aurieux was about the same height as Espy. Her dark face was run all over with rivulets, a delta of age and experience. Only her lips were smooth. Her bright eyes would squint when she talked, and her teeth were rarely seen but were as bright as a full moon when they came out. Espy called her Mémé Lollie.

For most of Espy's life, her grandmother was a hoodoo lady, but within the last few years she'd changed. She was a solemn churchgoer now rather than the incanting

unbeliever Espy had grown up with. The wizened woman growled and added, “Dem spirits don’t need a hear you.”

When she looked up and saw Espy’s blood smeared face and puffy eyes, she rose from the couch. “*Pischouette*, what happened?” Her accent was as thick as the bayou. She put her hands around Espy’s head.

“Just a stupid accident.” She twisted her shoulders to escape her grandmother’s hold. She moved around the boxes to find a space on the couch and threw herself into the saggy, low-slung cushions, crossing her arms.

Her mother looked over from the stove. “Honeychile,” her mother cooed. “Look at you.”

“Ball hit me,” Espy muttered.

“You fine?”

Espy nodded.

“Wash up then.” Carmona tapped a wood spoon against a pot, like she was calling an orchestra to order.

Espy went into the bathroom and scrubbed herself clean. In the mirror she inspected her face. Her left cheek was puffy, and there was a wispy red line of blood from her nose streaked against it. She wiped her face and gingerly cleaned her tender nose. Since she was there, she went ahead and rubbed off some of the green from her knees.

As she was coming out, she heard her mother say, “Lord, I forgot how small this place was.” She cast a sad look at the box-filled living room and shook her head. “All right now. Each one get a plate. It’s ready.”

They served themselves and found places to sit, Mémé Lollie on the couch, Carmona on a throne of boxes, and Espy on the half-buried coffee table.

Before they began eating, Mémé loudly clasped her hands together, closed her eyes, and said, “Papa Bondye, merci, merci, merci.” Mémé then picked up her fork and nodded at them so they could eat.

Her mother discussed the yard sale they were having tomorrow and mentioned the faculty get-together that was at the school.

Espy rolled her eyes. She dreaded a new school enough without needing to be dragged along to meet-and-greets with her mom. She finished her meal silently and slipped away without a word of thanks.

Her mémé caught her wrist. “I don’t want to hear you talking to nobody. They ain’t a one back there, so don’t be talking.”

Espy tugged her arm free and walked down the hall to get ready for bed. Mémé had been on her all day over Sylas.

Her legs were jelly and her eyes the softest clay. She brushed her teeth in the bathroom and examined her face again. She looked raggedy and felt worse. Flipping on the light, she entered her little bunk room, squeezing between the sliver of space between boxes and the bed.

She laid herself out on the mattress, swollen with throw pillows, and toed off her sneakers. The room was still decorated from her mother’s youth. There was a torn, sun-faded

poster of a girl surrounded by people and creatures wearing coats and hats. The girl wore a blue dress with a smock, so she figured it must be Alice in Wonderland.

There was an equally tattered poster of a mottled orange octopus under layers of blue flowing water, and then a few yellowed photographs pinned to the wall. They were of a dark-eyed girl with black hair that went to the middle of her back. It was a wild, untamable flow of hair. In the picture, she stood on a porch holding her arm out like she was putting it around the shoulders of someone, but there was no one else in the picture. The girl, clearly her mother, was giggling at something; her eyes were cast over to her invisible friend, as if to check his response.

Espy turned and opened the lid of a box across from her bed. She rummaged through it before pulling out a worn puffy octopus doll, a green, bulbous head with six legs, blank eyes, and puckered mouth. She fell back to her bed and brought the octopus to her chin, curling its arms around her. Its black bead eyes felt cool against her skin.

Carmona entered and flipped off the light. She turned sideways to slide past the row of boxes and sat at the foot of Espy's bed. The sky cast its red glare into the room. Rubbing Espy's feet, she said, "Esperanzola, I see you find Tails. All set to sleep?"

Espy grunted.

"You didn't say no thanks when you left."

"Thanks for dinner, Mama," she said into her elbows.

Carmona sighed, but said warmly, "Welcome." She looked out the window, westward toward the bank of Louisiana. "You ain't never had a night a sleep until you sleep next to the Ol' Man. He pull you under dreams like nobody."

Espy was about to disagree and she tried to lift her complaint from her throat, but her lips felt heavy, and the words sank like a rock to the bottom of the river.

Carmona stood and raised her hand, two fingers together and brought them down, and then she crossed over and motioned left to right, signing the cross, whispering as she did so. She then pulled the sliding door from the crease in the wall and shut it.

Espy's mouth fell open, but nothing emerged save the sound of her breathing. The Ol' Man, however, murmured into her ear all night.

