

# PROLOGUE

## The Taste of Soil

1930

Mabel Tilman stooped over a wood-burning stove, stirring simmering rice. Shadows crept around her. She lit a kerosene lamp and hobbled to the front door of her three-room shanty, then peered outside as dusk settled on Chesapeake. “Marjorie?” she yelled, searching for her daughter. “Marge?”

*Should have been home by now, thought Mabel. Maybe she helping out one of them teachers of hers. She gone be somebody, doing all that homework I can't help her with no more, all them crazy numbers and letters she got going this way and that in the math she taking. She just like her daddy was, smart as a whip. She grown up, too, already fifteen, and the men done started eyeing her.*

Mabel moved back to the stove and eased the pot off the fire. *I better get to the outhouse 'fore it get too dark.* She grabbed a walking stick and ambled outside, crunching over dried dirt and windblown leaves.

When she returned to her doorstep, Mabel scanned the nearby woods, but she saw only emptiness amongst the trees. *Where is that girl?* she wondered, stomping off debris. Then she

stepped inside and felt the presence of another. She brandished her stick, searching across the room until she found the outline of her daughter cowering in a corner.

“Marge, where you been? I been worried about you, girl. What you doing over there? Come out so I can see you. Come give your mama a hug.”

Marjorie staggered out of the shadows, her eyes cast downward. Mabel squinted at features once clean and sharp, now bloodied and swollen. She bolted for her daughter.

“What happened to you? Your face! Look at these clothes! That blood on this skirt? Oh, my God, no. Oh, no. Oh, Lordy, no! Who did this? Who did it! I said *who*?”

Mabel waited for an answer, but Marjorie remained mute.

“You ain’t saying, I see. Then I know who. I’m right, ain’t I? It was him, wadn’t it? Tell your mama, or give me a sign.”

Marjorie glanced at her mother and issued a sob.

“I knew it,” screamed Mabel. “That evil, low-down fucker! Lord Almighty, strike the bastard down! Strike him down, Lord. If there’s a God in heaven, strike the good-for-nothing bastard down, down, down, down, down!”

Mabel’s mournful cry pierced the walls and filled the air. The only response: sympathetic howls from neighboring dogs.

Marjorie remained silent as she dried her tears. Gone was the lively spark, the joyful smile, the trademark laughter; now, an expression of shame, regret, and helplessness.

Mabel gathered Marjorie into her arms, attempting to stroke away the pain. She had the horrible feeling that just as she had when pregnant with Marjorie, her baby girl would soon crave the taste of soil.