

Chapter One

Mourning Side of Midnight

"I envy those who are dead and gone; they are better off than those who are still alive. But better off than either; are those who have never been born, who have never seen the injustice that goes on in this world." — Ecclesiastes 4:2-3



Chicago's street noises were sound asleep as the midnight heat fueled Frances Bailey's thoughts of fire—the raging fire that had consumed her mother, brother, and the Alabama home she'd forsaken years ago, running away with her first love.

Softly humming Billie Holiday's *God Bless the Child*, she pondered, checking her sleeping nephews on the enclosed back porch.

Afterward, she sat for hours at her living room window gazing at the full moon shadows lurking around gray-stone apartment buildings. Wondering, if she *could be Frances, the Jazz singer, and mother to these boys?* She swallowed shots of gin to rinse the taste and consequences of the ashes of the dead that clogged her

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Comment [WS2]: Do you want a table of contents or acknowledgements page?

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She was told their bodies were charred beyond recognition, burnt like useless logs in a smoldering fireplace. From that fire, she inherited her sister's fatherless, 9-year-old twins who survived the terrible Alabama blaze but not the nightmares. Her younger sister died in labor giving life to the boys. Now her mother and brother, the only *parents* the boys had known, were dead too.

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The city buildings now appeared as monstrous tombstones. Moving away from the window, she was hungry, and her mouth felt filthy.

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She showered, rinsed her hair, and glared into the mirror, trying to find the face men called irresistible. Gargling cool water she realized she killed a few more shots of gin than she had intended. She gripped the sink, and looked into eyes that had not seen her family in years, hurt because she had lost any chance to resolve things with her mother.

Just as she knotted the sash on her yellow, satiny robe, she heard the metal of Willie's key twisting the lock. She believed she would always have them both— her first love and Willie. For a while, she did. However, after she crept down South, and brought her little sister, Gusta Lynn's orphaned kids home, Willie refused to let her love them. Hated her caressing them— shut down her capacity to love him. Tonight she mourned her loss of love with shots of gin and tears.

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