

Beattie's Bluff, Mississippi 1920

Five minutes after Dr. Mangrove announced that Hadley Crump was going to die, Lucinda walked into the bedroom stirring a cup of chamomile with her finger and smiling as though it was Christmas. Mama had rushed off to the kitchen to fix up a pair of healing socks for his feet, leaving Hadley all alone. Lucinda bumped the door shut with her hip and poked that tea-stirring finger in his mouth as though she meant to feed him the whole cup one lick at a time.

"I brought you something," she said, and she wasn't talking about tea. Hadley followed her gaze to the little strip of violet paper on the rim of the saucer. He didn't let himself look at it until her daddy called her off to work on funeral plans.

I could hear the churning sound of her tongue as it licked her teeth and lips, and I could feel the hot breath on my neck . . .

About the time Hadley got to the hot breath part, his fingers let loose, and the words loop-the-looped away with all the devilish momentum of a broken promise.

Had he not been dying at that particular moment, Mama would have spotted the purple scrap on the floor and wondered why Lucinda Browning was writing notes to her seventeen-year-old son. Then again, had he not been dying at that particular moment, Hadley would have tucked the violet paper in his pocket and hid it away like he hid all of Lucinda's secrets. As it was, he waited with onions in his socks, curious to see which would take him first, Lucinda or his festering wound.

Because Hadley was the cook's son and Lucinda Browning was a Browning, she was careful to return later and search for her note under his bed. "Did you read it?" she asked.

Hadley nodded.

Lucinda balled up the words and pitched them in the stove. With a sigh that seemed to say, *Well that's that then*, she ran her teeth around the curve of his ear. "I'll be back after your mama falls asleep."

A few minutes later, Mama returned in her nightgown, but before she had a chance to fall asleep, Hadley asked her to open up the right-hand door on the washstand.

"There's nothing in here, son," she said. "Nothing but your *Whoops Jar*."

Whoops Jars were a Crump family tradition that dated back to slave times. For every misstep he made on the road of life, a Crump was obliged to put a nail in his jar to remind himself that a single moment of poor judgment could amount to another nail in his own coffin. Hadley came from a long line of mis-steppers.

"Hand me the jar, Mama, and that box of nails, too."

Mama reached for his jar like it might sprout teeth and chomp off a piece of her.

Some Crumps favored jelly glasses. Others liked a soup can. Hadley's jar was a spiced-fish jar with the word WHOOPS painted across the glass in pale blue egg-yolk tempera. Except for the stink of sardines, it was entirely empty.

The nail dropped with a doleful clink, spun twice, and settled in under the "OOPS". Mama wiped her nose on his blanket and cried her ever-loving heart out.

The First Nail:

It started with the advertisement for *Experienced Negro Cook*. Mama had circled another one in that same paper too. That one said:

WANTED — An active girl to do the general housework of a large family, one who can cook, clean plates, and get up fine linen. — No Irish need apply.

Mama preferred to stick to cooking, but she had a lot of skills. She'd also circled:

Hardy souls wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, safe return doubtful.

That's how desperate Mama was.

Hadley was a boy of nine back then, and this was their second week looking for work. Mama wasn't taking any unnecessary chances. [She'd tucked a lucky cat bone into her apron pocket and spit on her lucky penny](#) before dropping it into her lucky shoe. Browning House was their third stop of the day. Mama really needed that penny to work.

Stop Number One shut the door in her face before she even said hello. Stop Number Two was kind enough to offer an abbreviated explanation regarding Mr. Brampton Tripp's ironclad policy against hiring jigaboos with *skunk babies*. After Stop Number Two, Mama told Hadley to quit looking so white.

Stop Number Three turned out to be a man sitting in a zinnia bed fanning himself with the morning edition of the *Beattie's Bluff Dispatch*. His house was by far the most elegant [\[RH1\]](#) of the stops. The front porch was flanked by six big white columns, the lot of which happened to be serving at that particular moment as the Coliseum for the great Lucinda Augustus—First Empress of Rome. It was there, in the shadows of the Coliseum, that Hadley first locked eyes with Lucinda's bright monkey-flower blue eyes, and oh what a memorable day that was.

Making yourself look more nigger-colored can be a terrible task when only part of your blood knows how. Hadley was doing his level best, but when he spotted the girl with the crown of leaves on her head, he forgot about trying to be anything but his old mixed-up self. Mama gave him a swat and tried to hide him behind her good blue dress.

"Quit staring," she said.

It was typical of her to make such impractical demands. Once the words were spoken, Hadley wanted nothing so much as to stare at that girl. Beads of consternation popped out on his upper lip. His heart got jumpy. His eyes would not stay put. He tried focusing on the man in the zinnias. Failing that, he dipped his toe in a puddle and stirred it around, trying to get up a whirlpool. Finally, he rolled up his sleeves and checked his arms to see if they looked browner in the sun or the shade. To decide, he had to step back and forth several times. The answer was shade. In the end, it was all too much. Before Hadley knew it, he was shooting looks everywhere. Zinnias, girl. Puddle, girl. Girl, girl.

"Quit!" Mama hissed.

Only once before had Hadley ever attempted a feat more difficult than looking away from that girl, and that had been when he tried to lift a Guernsey with his bare hands based on some misinformation given to him by a fellow called Tibbs Deets, who claimed that a milked cow was lighter than air. He couldn't lift the Guernsey any more than he could keep his eyes off the girl.

She sat, knees apart, on a chipped wicker throne with an embroidered sheet knotted over one skinny white shoulder. Three red letters stood out on her front: **I.B.m.** Hadley particularly admired her curtain-pull belt. Even though he'd never had a single day of schooling, he knew

instantly that the girl was an emperor. His daddy had been a *Heart of the World* salesman and, according to Daddy, *Heart of the World* was the most important, comprehensive, and artistically illustrated book of recent times. Thus it happened that Hadley knew more than his fair share about Romans. He'd looked at the pages with swords at least twenty or fifty times and considered himself an expert.

While Mama and Mr. Browning talked about the fundamental joy of a good Jezebel sauce, the girl looked him over and raised her thumb in the air as though a deadly Spatha were poised at his throat, awaiting her decision. Hadley pretended to watch the little Leafwing butterfly that was fluttering around his foot, but secretly he was watching that thumb.

Before Mr. Browning concluded that he might possibly be able to stomach an Experienced Negro Cook with a half-breed son, Mama had to promise him a pot of Hoppin' John so peppery he'd cry for his mother. She also had to agree to work for a nickel less a day. The Empress was not so easily convinced.

Lucinda Augustus looked from Hadley to his mama, then back to Hadley again. With a royal shake of her butter-yellow head, she slowly turned her thumb down.

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