



*Catfish  
Lullaby*

*By  
AC Wise*



Catfish  
Lullaby



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AC Wise

CATFISH LULLABY

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Catfish  
Lullaby



AC Wise



*part 1*  
*1986*





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*There are stories about him along the Mississippi River from Cottonwood Point all the way down to New Orleans, maybe further still. Every place's got their own name for him—Wicked Silver, Old Tom, Fishhook—but where my people come from, smack dab in the middle of nowhere Louisiana, it was always Catfish John. Depending who you talk to, he's either a hero or a devil, one so wicked even hell won't take him.*

*—Myths, History, and Legends from the Delta to the Bayou (Whippoorwill Press, 2016)*

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**C**ALEB LAY FACING THE WINDOW, HIS GRANDMOTHER'S QUILT PULLED TO HIS chin. From his position, he could just see the persimmon tree in the yard and, beyond it, the screen of pines separating his grandparents' property from Archie Royce's land. Back in the woods, past Royce's and where the ground started to go soft, Caleb's daddy—Lewis's sheriff—was leading a team to drag the swamp for a missing girl.

Caleb had heard Denny Harmon and Robert Lord talking about it at school. They were in first grade, but they'd probably both get held back, so Caleb would be stuck in the same class as them next year. Denny had said Catfish John took the girl.

"My cousin's friend was there. Catfish John came out of the swamp like a gator, mouth full of teeth. He grabbed her with his webbed hands and pulled her into the water."

Denny Harmon had grinned, looking like a gator himself, and looked right at Caleb.

“He probably killed her with a death roll and strung her up by her feet from the trees and slit her throat. He probably let her blood drain into the swamp to feed his catfish family.”

Caleb hadn’t run to tattle, but Robert held him while Denny punched him in the gut anyway, leaving him wheezing for breath.

“Catfish John likes sissy black boys best,” Robert said, leaning close. “He’ll leave us alone because we made it easier to catch you.”

Mark, Caleb’s best friend, found him after Denny and Robert left. Caleb’s stomach hurt the rest of the day, but he still didn’t tell. If Robert and Denny found out—and they would—it would only make things worse.

His stomach didn’t hurt anymore, but he couldn’t get Denny’s words out of his head. His daddy was out in those woods. What if Catfish John got him? Even a sheriff with a gun could get eaten by a monster.

“I’m telling you who’s responsible. Every damn fool in Lewis knows it ’cept nobody else is willing to do a thing about it.” His grandfather’s voice drifted under the bedroom door, interrupted by a nasty fit of coughing.

“Emmett, hush. Don’t bring all that up again. ’Sides, you’ll wake Caleb.”

“Bet you he’s awake anyhow.” His grandfather chuckled, the rattling sound of his cough lingering.

Caleb started guiltily as his door opened, light from the hall spilling around his grandmother. It was too late to pretend he hadn’t been listening.

“Can’t sleep, sweet pea?” His grandmother didn’t sound upset.

He sat up, nodding, and she sat on the edge of his bed. Caleb was surprised when his grandfather followed her into the room, crossing to the window to look out toward the trees.

“Did Catfish John kill somebody?” Caleb glanced between his grandparents.

His grandmother’s mouth made a little *o*, and the skin around his grandfather’s eyes crinkled like it did when he was mad—usually at the government buying up timber from people’s land without paying a fair price.

“Damn ghost stories.” He rested a hand on the window sill. Faint light showed a white scar across the back of his left hand, running from the knuckle of his first finger down to his wrist below his pinky. “That’s what keeps folks from going after him. They think old Archie’ll put a curse on ’em. Just like his daddy.”

He sounded like he wanted to spit. Caleb sat up straighter. Did his grandfather

think Archie Royce had something to do with the missing girl? There were stories about him too, though not as many as about Catfish John. Gators as big as trucks were supposed to guard Archie's property, and on top of that, the land was haunted on account of some people Archie's granddaddy killed a long time ago.

"What makes you ask about Catfish John?" His grandmother put her hand over Caleb's, her papery white skin a contrast to his warm brown.

Her look flickered past him to his grandfather. She smiled, but the expression went thin at the edges.

"I heard . . ." Caleb hesitated. If he told his grandmother about Robert and Denny, it might get back to them. His grandmother and Robert's nana both got their hair done at Miss Linda's place after all.

"Just something I heard at school." Caleb shrugged, looking down.

"Well, I know a story about Catfish John too." His grandmother leaned forward like she was about to tell a secret, and Caleb looked up again.

"Don't go filling his head with more nonsense, Dorrie." His grandfather spoke without turning from the window. He sounded more tired than upset.

"I want to hear," Caleb said.

"Well." His grandmother glanced at his grandfather, daring him to interrupt. When he didn't, she continued. "When I was little, my mama told me about a man who lived all alone in the swamp."

"Why?" Caleb caught himself too late, but his grandmother didn't fuss at him for interrupting like she normally would.

She smoothed the quilt. That must be why she was letting him stay up late; she was worried too.

"No one knows. There are a lot of stories about Catfish John. Some folks say he was chased out of his home by people who thought he was a bad man. They wanted to hurt him, and he ran into the swamp to hide. Now when my mama's best friend was a little girl, she got lost in the woods and wandered all the way to the swamp. She nearly drowned, but whatever reason he had for being there, Catfish John saved her life."

"But if he saved your mama's friend, then he'd be . . ." Caleb couldn't even begin to guess at his grandmother's mama's age. "He'd be a hundred years old, wouldn't he?" He looked at his grandmother to see if she was fooling him or if she'd smack his bottom for being rude.

"Maybe." She smiled, surprising him, and Caleb didn't see any sign of a trick.

By the window, his grandfather made a noise in his throat.

His grandmother kissed Caleb's forehead.

"Try to get some sleep, sweet pea. In the morning, I'll fix us all a big plate of 'nanner pancakes." She moved toward the door. "Come away from the window, Emmett. Your staring won't do any good."

His grandfather made another noise but followed his grandmother, closing the door behind him. Caleb tried to picture Catfish John saving a little girl. Maybe he'd help Caleb's daddy find the girl who was missing now. It was much a much nicer idea than the story Denny had told.

Caleb came awake to voices drifting from the hall, though he didn't remember falling asleep. Over the trees, the sky was a pearly grey. Not even dawn.

"No, but we found something else." Caleb focused in on his father's voice; he didn't sound happy.

"Might be Evaneen Milton, that girl down from Baton Rouge who disappeared six, seven years ago." His father's voice was rough with exhaustion. "There was barely anything left of her, but she had one of them medic alert bracelets."

"Oh, Charlie." His grandmother made a tutting noise. "Come on. I'll fix us some coffee." Their footsteps retreated down the hall.

Caleb sat up, fully awake now. They hadn't found the missing girl, but they'd found someone else, someone who'd gone missing before Caleb was even born. If that many people went missing in the swamp, maybe Denny was right after all. Maybe Catfish John did kill people, no matter what his grandmother said.

As he turned the thought over, a terrible sound split the air, echoing over the trees and making Caleb's skin pucker with goosebumps.

It was a snarling, wet sound. A scream that wasn't animal nor human but both. Like the swamp itself had found a voice, and it was angry that something that belonged to it had been taken away.

*part 2*  
*1992*





## chapter one

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... nine feet tall, webbed hands, grey skin, mouth turned down at the corners, just like a catfish.

—*Myths, History, and Legends from the Delta to the Bayou* (Whippoorwill Press, 2016)

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LATE AFTERNOON LIGHT HIT THE PERSIMMON TREE, SO THE FRUIT glowed, but all around, the grass was stained with a pattern like roots spread across the yard, a permanent, too-long shadow. Thin tendrils of black wrapped the tree's branches, and the leaves curled at the edges as though burned. Caleb plucked a fruit and pressed his thumb to the skin, black rot oozing from within. Dropping the fruit, he wiped his hand on his jeans.

"I've never seen anything like it." Caleb's father wiped an arm across his forehead, revealing half-moon circles of sweat staining his shirt. Early summer and already his skin bronzed brown-red from hours spent in the yard and on the porch under the eye of the sun.

"Whole thing's going to have to come out. Best burn the stump too, so it doesn't spread."

Caleb toed a blackened patch, half expecting it to smudge like ash, but it stayed put. The stain reminded him of something he couldn't place. Caleb half-listened to his father, thinking how his grandmother would have hated to see the tree go. Her persimmon jelly took the blue ribbon nearly every year at the Lewis County Fair.

“I’ll go look for the chainsaw,” his father said. “Once I get the tree down, I’ll need your help hauling it.”

Caleb nodded, and all at once, the nagging familiarity clicked into place. The rootlike pattern reminded him of the chest x-ray he’d glimpsed clipped to the chart at the foot of his grandmother’s hospital bed, just before the end. She hadn’t smoked a day in her life, but her lungs had been threaded with dark shadows. She’d outlived his grandfather but barely, and neither of them had been that old.

As his father disappeared around the side of the house, Caleb followed the shadows twisting away from the tree. They vanished in the pines bordering the property, headed toward Archie Royce’s land. A flicker of movement between the trees made him start guiltily as though Archie Royce had caught him staring and now glared back.

Turning his back deliberately on the trees, Caleb pulled on work gloves and began gathering fallen persimmons. He chucked them into the garbage can they’d dragged into the yard, each exploding with a wet splat that was equal parts satisfying and unnerving. The back of his neck itched, and he fought the urge to turn around and see if he was actually being watched or if it was only his imagination. Even if it wasn’t Archie Royce, that didn’t mean nothing watched him.

Caleb shrugged, rolling his shoulders against the sensation. It struck him that he wasn’t even sure what Archie Royce looked like. Lewis wasn’t a big town, but even after all the years of his grandparents, and now him and his father, living just on the other side of the trees, Caleb had never seen their neighbor face to face.

There were plenty of rumors of course. One of his father’s fishing buddies liked to tell a story about being chased off the Royce land with a shotgun when he was a kid. It could have been Archie Royce or his father, but whoever it was had fired into the air. From what he’d heard, with his skin, there was every chance Archie Royce would keep the gun level when he fired if Caleb ever strayed onto his land.

Archie wasn’t the only mystery beyond the trees. Some folks said he had over a dozen kids—all by different women, not all of them willing—holed up on that property. Like his own private cult. Caleb had never seen evidence of them either. The only Royce he’d ever run into was Archie’s son, Del. Even though Del looked old enough to be in college or be working at least, all he ever seemed

to do was mooch around the Hilltop store, buying liquor and cigarettes. He'd broken in after hours once, but somehow, the charges hadn't stuck, and he'd been back on the streets of Lewis by the next day.

Caleb's main impression of Del was dark hair and a slouching walk. The closest Caleb had ever seen him was last summer when Caleb and Mark had gone to set pennies on the tracks for trains to flatten. Del had been crouched on the old track, running parallel to the new one, half its ties pulled up all the spaces between growing with weeds. At first, Caleb had thought Del was trying to light a fire, but then he'd heard the unmistakable scream of an animal in pain. Caleb had gotten just close enough to see what looked like a possum or a raccoon. Del had it staked to the tracks, his hands bloody like he was flaying it alive.

By the time Caleb and Mark had found someone to tell, it was too late. Del was gone, and he'd cleaned up all the evidence behind him.

"Hey. You hear me?" His father's voice jarred Caleb back to the present.

"Sir?" Caleb realized he was standing with a handful of rotten persimmons, staring into the trees despite himself.

"I said, why don't you start in on the branches with these clippers. I'm going to have to run into Buck's for a new chain. This one's rusted through."

"Yessir." Caleb accepted the clippers his father held out.

After a moment, the truck's engine roared to life. Caleb squeezed the handles of the clippers together, and the branch between the blades gave with a dry snap like breaking bone.

Sweat gathered as he worked, his muscles aching pleasantly. Even so, he couldn't help pausing every now and then to glance at the trees. His grandfather talked about Archie's father, Clayton, sometimes, but more often than not, Caleb's grandmother would shush him. Still, it was pretty clear his grandfather hadn't liked the man.

There was a plaque at town hall dedicated to a Reverend Elphias Royce. The family had been in Lewis for generations; they'd practically founded the town, but for all that, no one really seemed to like them as far as Caleb knew. Over the years, the family had grown increasingly reclusive, and the rumors about them nastier. But that's all it was, rumors. Nothing legal stuck, just like Del breaking into Hilltop. It was like the family and even the land had some supernatural force around it.

Caleb gathered the cut branches and dumped the armload in the trash on top

of the burst fruit. The black goo in the bottom of the can smelled foul, and Caleb regretted busting them. Burning the tree stump didn't seem like such a bad idea after all. He pictured the flames following the black lines of rot all the way back to Archie Royce's house. Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing either.



Caleb woke to ruddy light blazing above the tree line, bright as dawn but the wrong color. His first sleep-muzzed thought was that his father had decided to burn the stump after all. But that would be a controlled burn and not in the middle of the night. He rocketed up, rushing down the hall to bang on his father's door.

"Caleb, what—" His father's eyes were red with exhaustion; insomnia often ate away his hours until late into the night. He'd probably only just gotten to sleep.

"Archie Royce's place is burning." A sick thrill ran through Caleb. Hadn't he wished that very thing?

Coming awake all at once, his father reached for the phone on the nightstand, twisting the cord around as he gathered his shirt and boots, dressing as he talked. When he hung up, his expression was grim.

"What's wrong?"

His father shook his head, throwing a flannel work shirt over his T-shirt, leaving his boots unlaced.

"Gerry March says it'll take him half an hour to rouse a crew and get over here. That's bullshit." A muscle in his father's jaw twitched. "Archie's got kids in there."

The words sparked guilt over the strange thrill Caleb had felt. Thoughts weren't actions but still.

"The fire won't come over the trees." His father moved toward the door. "If it does, you take the old truck down the road to Ginny Mason's place, and you stay there. You hear?"

"I want to help." Caleb spoke before his brain had time to catch up with his mouth.

His father stopped so abruptly Caleb almost crashed into him.

Even if his father wasn't Lewis's sheriff, he'd still help Archie Royce, no matter what he thought of him. Because it was the right thing to do. Caleb knew he wasn't really to blame just because he'd imagined a fire, but his father's words

and his own willingness to help still left him with a feeling of responsibility. Whatever the truth about Archie Royce might be, if he did have kids in there—Del aside—they didn't deserve to die. Caleb stood straighter, adrenaline surging and mixing with his nerves as his father looked him over.

"All right. Let's go."

As his father stepped outside, Caleb's legs turned briefly to rubber; he hadn't expected his father to agree. The truck's engine roared, and headlights flooded the yard. Caleb hurried to catch up.

Caleb's chest remained tight as his father steered onto the main road. The night was silent. No wail of sirens. If their house had been the one burning, trucks would be on the way by now, but because it was Archie Royce's place, Gerry March was content to make excuses and let it burn.

The idea dug at Caleb. No one in Lewis ever took direct action against the Royces, but it seemed they wouldn't take direct action to save them either. He scabbled for purchase as his father turned hard, slewing the truck onto a barely visible drive. His teeth clicked together as the wheels jounced in worn ruts until his father brought the truck to a halt.

Whip-thin trees framed the burning house. They looked sicker than the persimmon his father had cut down, leaning away as though trying to escape. But if the persimmon was any indication, the trees would be hell to cut down, even diseased. If the fire touched them, would they even burn?

Despite being engulfed, Caleb could see the Royce house had once been grand. He and Mark had never been invited to joyride down the roads at night when other kids from school dared each other onto the property. Seeing the place now, Caleb was glad.

His father climbed out of the truck, leaving the sharp sting of smoke to drift through the open door. Caleb opened his own door and went to stand by the hood.

A beam popped deep in the house, and a section of roof collapsed, sending up a rush of sparks. Caleb lifted his shirt over his nose and mouth. The brightness made a hard backlight to shapes directly in front of the house—a junked car, the remains of a well, and closer to the house, an odd-shaped blot. It took Caleb's eyes a moment to adjust, and even then, his mind didn't want to agree. A girl, standing far too close to the flames.

"Dad!"

His father hoisted his own shirt over his nose and mouth as Caleb pointed.



The air wavered, weirdly thick around the girl. It wasn't just the heat rolling off the place; his father moved as though wading through waist-deep water. She didn't react when his father reached her. When he took her by the shoulders, steering her toward the truck, she didn't resist either.

"Get a blanket from the back," his father called, and Caleb hurried to obey.

"Take care of her. I'm going to see if there's anyone else."

His father wrapped the blanket around the girl's shoulders and gave her a gentle nudge in Caleb's direction. Caleb watched him walk back toward the flames. The girl's attention remained fixed on the house. He couldn't imagine watching everything he'd ever known burn—his bed, his baseball trophies, the picture of his mother and father and him as a baby sitting on a big striped blanket on the front lawn.

"I'm Caleb." Introducing himself felt stupid given the situation, but if he could get her talking, maybe it would distract her. He lowered the shirt from his mouth. "What's your name?"

The girl ignored him. Caleb looked at her more closely. Smoke and ash streaked her pale skin. Out of nowhere, an odd thought struck Caleb like something coming up out of the swamp. He'd never heard of a woman living at Archie Royce's place; the rumors said all his kids had different mothers who no one ever saw. What if the body his father had found in the swamp all those years ago was this girl's mother?

There was a thinness to her like hunger but deeper. Below the blanket, her feet were bare. She looked about his age, but it was hard to tell. She was at least a head shorter than him, but Caleb was tall for his age. His limbs had been called gangly, and hers had the same thinness but without the awkwardness of knobby elbows and knees that didn't fit.

She clutched something close against her body like she was afraid someone would take it. Caleb could just make out what looked like a figurine roughly the size of a baseball, carved from dark wood. Except when he looked closer, the wood took on a reddish hue, streaked with dark bands like smoke. And as he watched, the bands grew, staining the wood pure black. The reflected firelight must have been messing with his sight.

He blinked, focusing on the girl's face instead.

"Are you okay?"

Another stupid thing to say. Of course, she wasn't. He touched her shoulder. She jerked away, startled, but finally turned to face him. Even though the

firelight was behind her, her eyes seemed to glow for a moment, and a faint light shone from her skin too. Then the girl blinked, and her eyes were just a normal muddy green-brown. Except she wasn't crying. That struck Caleb as odd. Her house was burning, and there were no tracks in the soot smearing her cheeks.

"Hey . . ." Spooked, Caleb let the word trail.

The girl pivoted on her bare heels, and for a moment, Caleb feared she would sprint back into the burning house. Instead she spat in the dirt at her feet. A sound like the one he'd heard the night his father pulled the bones from the swamp, a sound Caleb would never forget—sorrow and rage—split the air.

Caleb's skin prickled, but movement at the corner of his eye caught his attention. The smoke above the house shifted. As Caleb stared, it formed a face, impossible but distinct and inhuman. The night sky howled again, and beside him, the girl went rigid. Her fingers curled tight around the carving, her lips pulling back from her teeth. Then her head whipped around, a dog scenting deer.

Caleb squinted, trying to see what she saw. A blot of darkness, like she'd been at first, but larger. A man stood near the side of the house, but there was something wrong about his shape.

The girl lurched toward the fire. Instinctively Caleb threw his arms around her to hold her back. Her body hitched like a sob, but the noise that emerged was a keening cry. It was almost music, raw and laced with rage, and it made lightning crawl under Caleb's skin.

The sound went on, a contrast to the wet, red sound howling above the house. The girl's throat worked, reminding Caleb of a pelican struggling with a fish. The noise coming out of her looked painful.

She strained forward again, throwing him off balance. They crashed to the ground, dust billowing around them, adding to the smoke and making Caleb cough. The girl was a knot of sinew, wild and thrashing. Caleb caught her wrists to keep her from hitting him.

All at once, she went still, her breath shallow. Her eyes reflected the light from the house. Burning. Except the angle was wrong, the light behind her. Caleb let go of her wrists with a shout, her skin suddenly hot.

The wail of sirens cut the night, far too late, and the girl slumped, the fight gone. Caleb scrambled to stand. Adrenaline shook him; it was a moment before he caught his breath, a moment longer before he could string together a coherent thought. He got his hands under the girl's armpits and hauled her to her feet.

"I couldn't find anyone else." Caleb's father returned, his voice worn hollow as his expression.

He frowned as though he couldn't quite remember how Caleb and the girl had gotten there. As the fire engine finally pulled into the drive, his expression changed, going flint hard. Caleb watched his father stride toward the splash of red and white lights, ready to give Gerry March hell. When the girl spoke beside him, Caleb jumped.

"Cere."

"What?" Caleb stared at her.

Her voice was smoke-rough, a croak. Light no longer burned in her eyes. Where they'd been muddy green-brown before, they now appeared green-grey like pale moss clinging to a stone.

"Cere." She fixed on him in a way that brought back the electric fizzing beneath his skin. Caleb let out a breath, realizing she'd finally offered him her name.



Cere perched on the edge of a kitchen chair, hands wrapped around a mug of coffee she'd barely touched. She wore clothes one of the nurses at the hospital had found her—jeans and a ringer T-shirt with Lewis High's bronco in maroon against white.

"Cere's going to stay with us for a while until things get sorted out." Caleb's father put a hand on Caleb's shoulder.

Caleb nodded, but his gaze kept sliding back to Cere. She'd barely acknowledged either of them, not that he could blame her.

"Caleb." His father shook him lightly. "Are you listening?"

"Yessir." The words slid out automatically.

"Good. I have to go make some more calls." There were shadows under his eyes.

It had been a long night, from the fire to Deer Creek Hospital and back here. None of them had slept. Under the kitchen light, away from the smoke and fire, Caleb finally had a chance to get a good look at Cere. Her hair was an odd blonde that was almost silvery. The nurse had worked it into two thick braids that hung over her shoulders. Even for a white girl, she was pale, her wrists showing the faint blue blush of her veins. The pallor was offset by a shock of

freckles scattered across her cheeks and nose like a constellation. On top of that, Caleb still couldn't get a good fix on the color of her eyes, which seemed to shift constantly.

Caleb poured himself a bowl of cereal. He placed the box close enough that Cere could reach it if she wanted and then sat at the far end of the table. Cere didn't raise her head. From the far end of the hall, Caleb heard the murmur of his father's voice. He'd been on the phone for hours, trying to track down any other members of Cere's family, but the set of his jaw told Caleb everything he needed to know about how little enthusiasm he had for finding anyone with the last name Royce.

Caleb took a bite of his cereal, finding it tasteless. Within the span of twenty-four hours, less, the world had been turned completely upside down. After Gerry March's team had gotten the fire under control, they'd found Archie Royce's remains in the burned-out shell of the house. Caleb had heard his father mention someone named Ellis who must be another of Cere's brothers. He hadn't heard anything about Del, and it wasn't clear whether their bodies had been found or whether there'd been anyone else in the house.

Cere kicked her heels against the rung of her chair, a restless drumming sound. Caleb abandoned his spoon. The one bite he'd taken already felt like a solid lump in his stomach.

"Do you like baseball?" It was the only thing he could think to say.

Cere raised her head. Ignoring her unsettling eyes, Caleb plowed on.

"Our team was pretty good last year. We went all the way to regional finals. Then Coach Stevens left, and now we suck."

Anything to fill the silence. Cere didn't blink. There was something wrong with her eyes beyond their shifting color. Subtle threads of gold bled into them from the edges. It made Caleb think of the black shadows on the lawn but in reverse.

Caleb shoved his chair back, dumped the rest of his cereal into the sink. To his surprise, Cere followed him down the hall, a pale shadow. He was too stunned to close the door before she slipped past him into his room.

"What are you—"

Cere glanced over her shoulder, stilling him. Caleb held his breath as she trailed her fingers over the bedspread, taking in his books, his trophies, his bat and glove leaning against the closet door. Her hand rested on the photograph of him as a baby with his parents and something coiled tight inside him.

He'd been so young when she died. The picture was the only way he could remember what his mother looked like. He would stare, trying to fix every feature in his mind—her hair carefully smoothed and curled, her skin several shades darker than his, but her eyes just like his own. When he looked at the picture, he could almost remember her laugh, the sound of her voice as she moved around the kitchen while he played on a blanket spread on the floor. Then it would slip again, and her face would blur. Those moments of forgetting were his own personal experience of loss. It was like remembering her death, even though he hadn't fully experienced it at the time. If Cere damaged the picture . . .

He moved to snatch the frame out of her hand as Cere turned her head without moving the rest of her body. It made Caleb think of a bird. Her eyes, the color of Spanish moss now, pinned him, and Caleb's breath stuttered. The gold threads within her irises were unmistakable; they squirmed. She tapped the picture's frame. Everything he'd been feeling uncoiled into guilt. His parents smiling, Caleb between them, a happy family. Even if he'd lost part of it, it must still be more than she'd ever had.

Cere lowered her hand. She turned fully now, facing him. Her voice was still a smoke-rough whisper, every bit as startling as it had been last night.

"I was born to end the world."



Caleb woke with his heart pounding, convinced the sky was on fire on the other side of the trees. But only stars shone above the pine and oak. Vents sighed with a sudden rush of chill from the air conditioning, and Caleb tugged his blanket higher. Fragments of a dream clung to him. A fat ball of flaming gold crawling into the sky and a great frog or a fish swallowing it whole. There had also been something with scales diving into muck and a woman walking between cypress knees. Her bare feet splashed in shallow water, and she cradled her swollen belly. She glowed.

*I was born to end the world.*

Even as the images faded, certainty clung to him that the woman in his dream was Cere but older, and the thing she carried in her belly wasn't a child; it was something terrible, darkness and fire, a thing too big to wrap his mind around.

Caleb pressed his ear to the wall dividing his room from Cere's. He was startled to hear a faint murmur, what sounded like "please." The wall under his ear felt hot, the skin of the house glowing like the woman in his dream. He jerked back but not before he heard her window sliding up.

Caleb reached his own window just in time to see a shadow dart across the lawn. Cere. He knew he should tell his father, but at the same time, he couldn't help thinking about the way Cere's eyes squirmed with gold. If she chose to run away, that wasn't his problem. Caleb tried to convince himself, tried to ignore the hammer of his pulse telling him otherwise. He pulled the covers over his head. He was still dreaming; he hadn't seen anything at all.