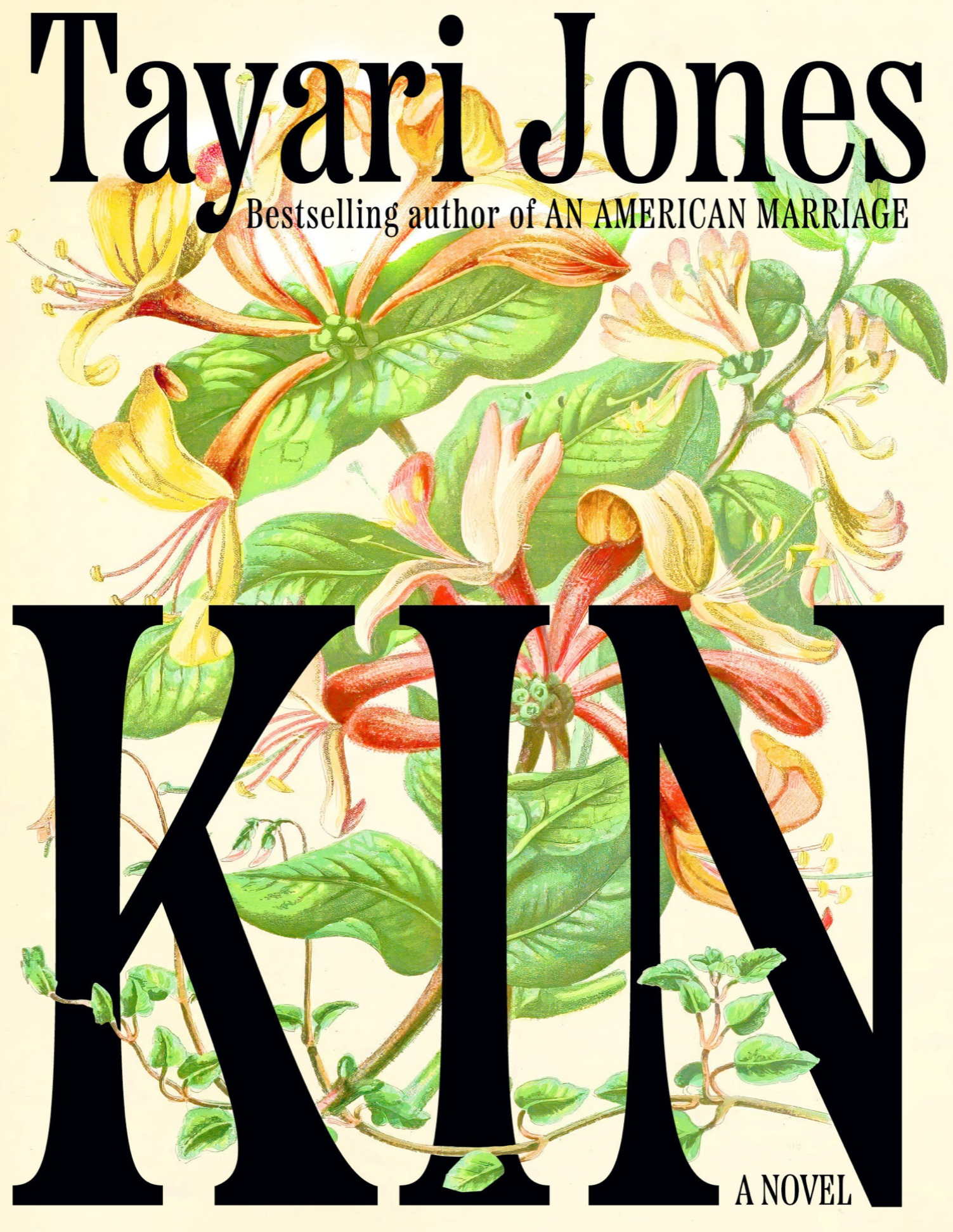


Tayari Jones



Bestselling author of AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE

KIM

A NOVEL

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An American Marriage

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TAYARI JONES

KIN

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For
June McDonald Aldridge
Spelman College, Class of 1953

*we are each other's
business:
we are each other's
magnitude and bond.*

—GWENDOLYN BROOKS

Chapter 1

VERNICE

My first word was “mother,” spoken out loud and with texture. MOTHER. There was a host of witnesses, including Aunt Irene, who called out for God and considered running down the block to fetch the pastor. But before she could even straighten her skirt, she decided that this wasn’t a pot to be stirred by any man’s spoon. It was August, canning season, and the women were gathered to put away snap peas and pole beans. It was Louisiana hot, but even more so, due to the water boiling to purify the mason jars. Aunt Irene, never at home in the kitchen, busied herself plaiting my hair while everyone else hulled and cut up the harvest. The Ward Sisters sang out amid the thick radio static as Aunt Irene added her colorful soprano to the arrangement. Sitting between her knees, I rested my face on her thigh, still as stone and just as quiet. Sharp against my scalp, a rat-tailed comb created precise parts.

After the death of my parents, I had shown myself to be a peculiar child. No one could say if I was born that way or if I turned that way. I walked early and would do so in my sleep, escaping my crib. I once found my way to the front porch, where I was discovered humming with my face resting on the matted fur of a stray puppy.

At two and a half, I had yet to speak. Folks worried that I was slow. My cradle friend, Annie, was already talking up a storm. She even gave me my nickname, because Vernice had been too many letters for her to hold in her

mouth at the same time. “Niecy!” she called, determined to shake loose a response. When shouting didn’t work, she tried kindness, breaking her shortbread cookie in two. I smiled in gratitude, and sometimes offered sloppy baby kisses in return, yet I didn’t say a word.

Annie’s grandmother joked that Aunt Irene should be grateful for my silence. Annie never shut up, not even when she was asleep. Shut eyes quivering, she mumbled the name of her own mother, Hattie Lee.

“This baby will talk when she has something to say.” Aunt Irene knew there was quickness in my eyes but feared that seeing my mama shot dead had shocked the words right out of my mouth. Others worried that I had been taken over. Spirits can be hardheaded and hold grudges—purposely missing their ride to the next place. When this happens, they might just set up house in a defenseless body. Aunt Irene shut that conversation down, dismissing it as “hoodoo”—her catchall word for anything not of this world that didn’t involve our Lord and Savior. That said, even though there could be substance to that hoodoo talk, she knew her dead sister, my mother. When Aunt Irene held my face to hers, she didn’t see Arletha staring back.

Because of this, but not only this, my aunt didn’t indulge any gossip. She knew what it was to be whispered about and couldn’t bear loose tongues lashing an orphan baby. But she was worried for a colored girl who seemed slow, even if she wasn’t, a girl who couldn’t say what had happened to her. I made people nervous, which is probably why no one objected when Aunt Irene ducked out from the canning kitchen and sat on the couch to fix my hair. I had been touched by blood, and not the blood of the lamb.

There I was, this haunted child, not even whimpering as Aunt Irene raked the comb through the thicket at the nape of my neck.

“Mother,” I said, softly at first. As I raised my voice to a bellow, every heart in the house contracted, vulnerable as a scalded tomato gripped in a tiny greedy fist.