PROLOGUE

August 1972
San Francisco, California

I kneel in front of the small black-and-white television, my face close to the screen, breathless at the newscaster's words. A mug shot appears. Blood rushes hot, and my head goes fuzzy. Now grown and far too thin, that face still holds a distinct echo of the boy I so loved. My brother Walden . . . lost to me for years, now labeled a killer.

Memories as thick as the air and mud and secrets of our Mississippi childhood sit heavy on my skin. Even though my three siblings are scattered, miles away and years out of mind, they dwell in a place as deep inside me as my own heart. Perhaps our extraordinary bond comes from the strain of madness that runs in our blood, the love and hate tangling until they're braided into an unbreakable rope, a lifeline and a noose.

As far as I have run, as many times as I have reinvented myself, my childhood has snaked through time and wrapped around my throat.

Have I been a fool to hope that at least one of us survived unscathed?

It's time to admit that, perhaps, the blood that knotted love and hate may have, in the end, made murderers of us all.

1

August 1972
New Orleans, Louisiana

I delude myself into thinking I am where I am today because of clear choices and controlled decisions. In the chaos of my childhood, that's all I dreamed about, power over my own life. But in the dark of night, when I lie alone in my apartment in Pacific Heights, shrouded by mist and distant foghorns, I'm forced to admit I am only a seed. At first blown to Los Angeles on the wind of someone else's dream, and then rooting in San Francisco, where I was dropped by a different someone. But I *have* rooted well. That, at least, is my doing.

Yesterday, after the newscast that named my brother a murderer, I called my boss at the Buckman Foundation. I'm in charge of public relations; a position gained by tenacity, dedication, and, admittedly, the fact that Mr. Capstone likes me. That job is my whole life—and I'm not using it as a turn of phrase.

The Buckmans are old money. Even in the progressive atmosphere of California, old money is just as prideful and unbending as it was in the South. Fortunately, James is a common last name, so Mr. Capstone, who never misses a morning or evening news broadcast, didn't make the connection when I requested time off for

a family emergency. His tone was concern laced with what sounded like surprise that I even *have* a family. He assured me Keith and Stan are happy to step up while I'm gone. Which is *not* a comfort. They both believe a woman has as much business being an executive, junior or otherwise, as a monkey. They're continually looking for ways to kick the ladder out from under me and leave me hanging by my fingernails.

My life, perfect and organized just yesterday morning, is now a tangle of worry and uncertainty. On the flight, I made a list in my current sketchbook of the scarce, yet disturbing, details I've discovered about Walden's situation. As I walk through the New Orleans airport, a group of three shaved-head, white-robed Hare Krishna step in front of me, flowers and pamphlets extended in their pale, bony hands. Even though my home city is full of such groups, I've never paused to really study those selling street-corner prophecies. Now that Walden's name has been linked with the Scholars of Humanity—a group with a leader being investigated by a now-murdered journalist and a compound deep in the Louisiana swamps—I pause to look into their eyes, searching for what ignites their doubtless devotion. But all I see are lost children who consider themselves enlightened, saved and saving others.

I empathize, I do. After all, I was a lost child, too.

Then I think about Sharon Tate. Although I met her only once, the news of Manson's butcherers shook me to the core. The girls who did the killing, delusional and brainwashed, devoted to a madman, singing like children and dressing like schoolgirls throughout their trial.

And now my own brother is accused of a crime nearly as monstrous.

I don't know how he could be capable of such a thing.

But you do know, don't you? Just like they say back home, blood always tells.

Even under the canopy of ancient trees, the heat is oppressive in the historic Garden District of New Orleans. The stately old houses

with their deep porches and floor-to-ceiling double-hung windows are closed up, no doubt cool and serene on the inside. I hear the soft burble of a splashing fountain in one of the gardens concealed behind an aged brick wall and wrought iron gate, creating an illusion of relief from the heat. In defiance of appearing weak and ordinary, even the wisteria refuses to wilt.

The irony isn't lost on me as I stand in front of the ironwork double-gate in front of Ross Saenger's home seeking his family's wealth and power to save my brother. The wealth and power I resented—as I'd resented Ross himself—so deeply and for so long. My sketchbook listing the meager facts is tucked in my tote, and a much longer list of appeals and entreaties piles up in my head. I am ready to beg. On my knees if necessary.

I do not look forward to this reunion. But this is about what Walden needs, not my wounds and grudges. Truth be, I cannot blame Mrs. Saenger for what happened in '63. It was her kindness that saved our family—right before it tore us apart.

I feel a little faint and wish I'd pulled my hair into a long ponytail at the nape of my neck. I'd forgotten how Southern air coats the skin and weighs the lungs, how the stillness carries its own mass. I regret my polyester double-knit vested pantsuit and long for the yellow cotton sundress of my youth. Nausea grips my empty stomach and I want to turn away. But this is Walden's best hope.

The grandeur of this house stands out, even in this neighborhood, two-and-a-half stories of brick solidity and symmetry tucked behind an iron fence and a tall, carefully sculpted hedge. Porches span the front of the house on both floors, trimmed in turned posts and filigreed ironwork. Marshaling myself, I open the gate, cross the walk, and climb the marble steps. I stare at the black door and study the beautiful leaded glass transom over it. I set down my suitcase beside a shiny black ceramic pot filled with red geraniums and ring the bell, desperate to get out of the heat. It hits me, stupidly and belatedly, that Mrs. Saenger might not be home. The street is quiet, the only sound the ever-present whirr of cicadas in the ancient trees. I regret my haste in letting the cab go.

As I wait, the drumbeat of my desperate heart scatters my carefully laid-out words like starlings from a wire. I must slow down my thoughts or else babble like a madwoman when Mrs. Saenger appears.

But when the door swings open, it isn't Mrs. Saenger. It's Ross. And thought ceases altogether.

"Good—" His arresting blue eyes are pleasantly expectant, as if he's anticipating a neighbor or a friend. He's even taller and broader-shouldered than when I last saw him in '63, his light brown hair longer.

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out. I'm fourteen and tongue-tied. I'm sixteen and broken.

His expression slowly morphs into surprise. "Tallulah James? Oh my God, is that you?"

"Hello, Ross." My vision is getting gray around the edges.

"You're alive!"

He thought I was dead?

"I . . . there's been . . ." I feel myself listing to one side, the grayness pushing deeper into my vision. I'd prepared myself to face Mrs. Saenger. Not him.

My knees wobble.

He reaches out and takes my elbow. "Come in out of the heat." He plucks my gold suitcase off the porch and guides me inside. "You look like you could use something cold to drink. Have a seat in the living room and I'll bring something. Coke? Tea?" He lets go of my elbow in careful stages, as if he's afraid I'll collapse.

"Just water, please." I barely feel my feet as I move into a room that screams old money: crystal chandelier, matching chintz sofas (tastefully worn and inviting), oil portraits of ancestors, carved marble fireplace, gleaming silver on the bar cart, and fine, thick area rugs underfoot. This place is just as I'd imagined it when I was hating my older brother, Griff, for abandoning me to live here. A perfect life. A movie set. Not with me where he'd promised to be.

When Ross returns with the glasses of water, I practically down mine in one gulp.

He sits on the sofa opposite me and settles his elbows on his knees, linking his hands between them. I have trouble looking directly at him. He's a man now, but I can still see the boy I pined over. And I feel that old burn of resentment.

He says, "For the past nine years, I've imagined the worst. It's quite a relief to see you alive and well." The note of judgment in his tone raises my hackles.

I take a slow breath. "I am quite well, thank you. I've made a good life for myself." *Alone. On my own. No thanks to you or Griff or my grandmother.*

"You could have called to let us know you were okay. Griff was out of his mind with worry," Ross says.

Griff made his choice. Just as Granny James made hers. Only Margo's abandonment wasn't a surprise; she just lived up to expectations. "I left a note so no one would think I'd been abducted by aliens or alligator poachers." The look on his face tells me my attempt at lightening the mood fell flat. "Honestly, I'm surprised Griff even knew I was gone. Besides, he's hardly in a position to complain about someone disappearing." I'm a little shocked at my own counterproductive childishness.

"*He* didn't disappear," Ross says. "He was right here. And you knew it."

"So, where is he now?" I imagine him all Ivy League–educated on the Saengers' charity, living well, with a wife and adoring children. He can probably help Walden better than I.

Ross holds my gaze. "I have no idea where he is."

I blink. "What?"

He leans forward, his shoulders holding the set of bad news. "He was never the same after everything that happened in Lamoyne—your dad, the accusations. After his high school graduation in '65 he packed his things and left in the middle of the night. Broke my mom's heart."

Cold fear creeps up my spine. All this time, I imagined him in the loving arms and stability of the Saengers, part of a happy family. "You have no idea where he went? He never contacted you?"

"No. Must be a James family trait." There is bitterness in his voice.

"Hey! I might owe Walden and Dharma, but I'm not going to apologize to *you* for the choices I made!"

He raises his palms to me. "Fair enough."

I remind myself I'm here as a beggar. "I actually came to see your mother. Is she here?"

"No."

I wait, but he doesn't elaborate. "Will she be home soon?"

"No. She and Dad died three years ago. Car accident."

"Oh, Ross. I'm so sorry. I had no idea." I've kept everything about home frozen in time. And, I realize, I've been deliberately *not* thinking of the possibility that some people may be gone. What about Gran? My beloved Maisie?

"Of course you didn't. Because you didn't let anyone know where you were."

"I came to ask her—now you, I suppose—for help." He stiffens slightly, so I'm quick to add, "Not for me. For Walden. He's in serious trouble. I didn't know where else to turn—"

"I saw the news."

"Do you think your mother's cousin Sam will be willing to help? He did so much for Griff. Or maybe he can recommend another lawyer? I don't want Walden left in the hands of . . . of a—" Suddenly, I smell my little brother's baby shampoo, feel his hand in mine, recall the trusting way he looked at me. "A c-court-appointed lawyer."

I feel clammy. I reach for the glass of water, only to discover it's empty.

Ross stands and hands me his. "Here. I haven't touched it."

As I take a grateful drink, the obvious occurs to me. "I suppose *you* can recommend someone, being a lawyer yourself." *Please don't let him offer to take the case. Who knows what the fallout would be?*

He gives me a smile that tickles a memory of the way he used to make me feel. "I'm not a lawyer."

"I thought it was a *foregone conclusion*." The phrase springs from the past.

His eyes soften. "Good memory. As it turns out, I bucked the family expectations and became a psychiatrist."

"Didn't know you were even interested in psychiatry."

"Circumstances spurred it."

"Oh." I shift uncomfortably, suddenly feeling as if I'm under a microscope. "Sam, then? Do you think he'll help?"

"I already called him. His calendar is full, and Walden's case will be time-consuming. But his daughter Amelia is willing." He must see the concern on my face because he adds, "Unlike me, she's always *wanted* to be a lawyer. She's a barracuda."

I have reservations. And I'm ashamed to admit one of them is that she's a woman. I know firsthand how preconceived notions create an uphill battle. And this is the South, where women are still supposed to be wearing pearls and aprons and going to the beauty shop twice a week. What if we get a male chauvinist pig for a judge?

"I don't want to sound ungrateful," I say. "But maybe I should look for someone with more experience. I'm not asking for a handout. I intend to pay."

"You could easily get someone with more experience. This is a high-profile case with national attention. Lawyers will come after this case like a shark after blood in the water," Ross says. "But Amelia is really good. And she cares about the outcome, not the media exposure she'll get. She can devote the time. *And* she's not asking for a huge retainer. She's already contacted the Orleans Parish jail to get in to see him."

I don't admit it, but that retainer would be a problem. I have a little savings, but I'd have to borrow the rest. And going through that kind of credit scrutiny will be blood for the sharks in my own particular waters—Keith and Stan are already circling at the foundation.

"Have you called your grandmother?" he asks, his voice more neutral than his eyes.

"No." I almost can't ask the question, but the wrongness of my assumption about Mrs. Saenger blindsided me. "Do you know if she's still at Hawthorn House?"

"As of last Christmas she was. She sent Griff birthday and Christmas cards here, even after I wrote to tell her he was gone."

The relief that rushes through my veins tells me I love her far more than I resent her. Still, just the thought of that emotional conversation makes me sway.

"But when I called yesterday," he says, "there was no answer. Do you want to try now?"

I should say yes, of course. But I don't have the strength.

"You don't want to talk to her." Ross has not lost his ability to see inside me. He'd been that way since the moment he saved my life.

"I'd rather not. Not right now."

The look that crosses his face makes me feel like a wayward child—and I suppose in a way I am. But at the moment, I can barely form thoughts into words.

Ross nods. "I'll try again. You look ready to drop. Have you eaten or slept?"

"I can't eat. The mere thought of food . . ." I shudder.

"Let's get you upstairs. You can take a hot bath and get a nap."

"I'll call a cab, get a hotel. Then I should go see Walden. He needs to know he's not alone."

But he is alone, because you left him.

"Don't be ridiculous. You'll stay here. And there's no way you'll get in to see him today. Amelia hasn't even gotten in yet." He's already in the front hall, picking up my suitcase.

The thought of going back out into that sweltering heat makes me dizzy. I'm not sure I can even drag myself up the long, curved mahogany staircase.

I follow him to a bedroom with ice-blue draperies, bedspread, and filigree on the wallpaper. Just looking at it makes me feel cool and calm.

"There's a private bath through that door. Get some rest, you're going to need it."

As he's backing out of the room, I say, "Don't let me sleep long. I want to go see him as soon as—as—" I put my hand over my eyes.

The first tears I've allowed since this all began start to fall. I turn away and wave Ross from the room.

I hope he doesn't try to comfort me. I'm too worn to ward it off and too weak to not crumble.

After a couple of seconds, his soft footsteps move away and I hear the door quietly close.

I reach into my purse and pull Griff's lucky arrowhead out of the zipper pocket. Then I curl on my side on the cool bed, clutching it to my chest, and allow myself a regret-filled cry.

I dream of a storm-filled sky, lightning bolts and tree-stripping winds. A dark swirling twister barrels down on me as I chase Walden, his blond hair bobbing ahead of me, a bright spot in the dimness. We're surrounded by endless acres with no shelter. The roar is right at my back, the wind ripping at my clothes, snapping my hair in my face. Then the noise rises over my head, the funnel skipping over me. Then descending, plucking Walden from the earth, his small feet still running as he hangs in the debris-filled air.

I wake yelling his name.

Feet thud up the stairs and down the hallway, stopping abruptly at the bedroom door. I hear Ross's hand on the knob before he pauses, then knocks. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." A drop of red falls onto the wide bell of my pants, standing out against the argyle design. I open my hand to see I've squeezed the arrowhead so hard I'm bleeding. "Oh shit!"

The door bursts open, and Ross is by the bed before I can blink. "What happened?" He heads into the bathroom, returning with a thick blue towel. When he tries to wrap my hand, I pull it toward my chest, careful so the blood doesn't drip onto the bedspread. "It'll ruin it."

Confidently, yet gently, he takes my hand and flips the towel around it. "It's a towel, for God's sake, not an heirloom." Then he looks in my eyes. "Lulie, did you . . . ?"

The sound of the nickname I haven't heard in years sends a clammy shiver across my skin. "Did I what?"

"Try to hurt yourself."

"Of course not!" The idea of him trying to dig around inside my head irritates me. "If I was going to kill myself, I'd have done it in San Francisco where nobody would find me until I was good and dead."

He surprises me by laughing. "Only you, Lulie." After a pause, he says, "At least you answered one of my many questions."

"And that is?" I pull my hand and the towel from his grasp.

"Where you're living." He raises a brow. "Alone?"

"Very. By choice, if that's your next question. And I'm not isolated in a filthy apartment filled with a hundred cats. I'm quite normal."

There's something in the way he looks at me that makes me uncomfortable. I shift and get off the far side of the bed.

"Normal is what I always wanted for you. Of course, *normal* is a relative term. And quite separate from *happy* or *content*."

I head to the bathroom to run some cold water over my hand and rinse off the arrowhead. "Quite content," I say over the sound of the running water. I adore my job, my apartment. I have acquaintances, not the emotional entanglements of deep friendships.

I look in the mirror and see him leaning against the doorjamb to the bathroom. "So how *did* you cut your hand?"

I finish rinsing the arrowhead and hold it up for him to see, but I keep my eyes on his reflection, not the real man.

"Unusual good luck charm," he says.

"Talisman," I correct. "I don't believe in luck."

He steps closer behind me. "Do you still have a place to cast your anger and your fears?"

I am so startled that I turn to face him.

"You're not the only one who remembers." His gaze holds mine for a second, then he turns. "I'll get some bandages for your hand."

As I listen to Ross walk down the stairs, I wonder—if I'd continued to toss my fears into a river, would things have turned out differently for all of us?

* * *

I've changed to the coolest clothing I brought, a flowered halter dress that felt totally acceptable in California but seems overexposed as I walk into the kitchen of this old Southern mansion. If Ross is shocked, he hides it well. He sets a grilled pimento cheese sandwich on the kitchen table and nods for me to sit.

Funny, I'd forgotten all about pimento cheese. Just like I'd forgotten about the weight of the air.

"It's too hot for this," he says. "But Mom always made it when things got rough."

"Thanks." I know if I take a bite, it will grow in my mouth until I choke on it. I pick up half and try to at least look like I'm going to eat it. As Ross is getting glasses of sweet tea, I wonder which of the four chairs around the table was Griff's when he lived here.

Has he seen the news? Is he on his way back home?

Even if he has, Walden is mine. Mine to protect. Mine to save. He and Dharma were always mine to care for.

I pick a few pinches off the sandwich and drop them on the plate in an effort to make it look like some of it is disappearing. "Did you know my uncle sent Walden back to Lamoyne?"

I relay yesterday's conversation with Uncle Roger.

"Walden was unhappy." Uncle Roger sounded every bit as distant and snobbish as my mother always described—before she amended her assessment when she needed to dump her kids on him, a man none of us had ever met. "We sent him back to his grandmother after two weeks."

"You separated the twins?"

"It was for the best. We adopted Dharma—she's made our lives a delight. She's in New York, on Broadway." His voice lifted with pride.

"And her twin is headed to prison because you gave up on him after two weeks! He was a traumatized nine-year-old! How could you be so heartless? You need to get him a lawyer—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa there, little lady. First of all, you do not tell me what to do. Second, Walden is not my concern."

"Do it for Dharma," I say. Your delight. "This will break her heart."

"I doubt that. She hasn't seen him for nine years."

My hand tightens around the receiver. "Can I have her number? I need to call her."

"No, you cannot. Dharma needed a clean break from all that madness down there. That's why I've thrown away every card and letter you've sent."

"You did what?" I wrote those letters so they would know I still loved them. I never expected a response, because I never included a return address.

"Her time before she came to us is irrelevant. Do not, I repeat, do not drag her into this in any way. Her life has nothing to do with her brother's, or yours—or my feckless sister's for that matter."

"No. I didn't know that," Ross says. "Griff never wanted to go back to Lamoyne. He couldn't stand you not being there."

"This all could have been avoided if Gran had let me stay." The bitterness of her betrayal is just as choking as it was then.

"Listen, Lulie, there was no good solution back in '63. Not for any of you." By the way he pauses, I know I'm not going to like what is coming. "As soon as you're done picking at that sandwich, we need to leave for Lamoyne. I finally tracked down your grandmother. She's in the hospital."

Despite Ross's assurances that Gran's situation is not life-threatening, my pulse pounds in my temples and my hands fidget as I ride in the passenger seat of his Mercedes toward Lamoyne. I try to calm myself as I listen to Don McLean sing "American Pie," glad for the noise of the radio.

"I'm not sure I would have thought to call Mr. Stokes." The admission is slow in coming, mostly because calling him is the most obvious thing to do and it didn't cross my mind.

"When I didn't get her at home after several tries, I decided I'd better do something. I mean, a lot could have happened since Christmas. And this business with Walden—"

"Are you sure it's just high blood pressure?"

"That's what Mr. Stokes said. When I spoke to her on the phone, she called it 'a little episode.' We'll know for certain soon."

My stomach drops to my ankles. After all this time, I'm going to face her—and all my assumptions are likely to be blown out of the water.

"I hope her blood pressure doesn't skyrocket at the sight of me."

"She loves you, Tallulah."

A long time ago, I believed that without question.

At the sign announcing seven miles to go, my mouth goes dry. I realize I'm as nervous about seeing my hometown again as I am about seeing Gran.

And I don't relish doing either under Ross's observant eye.

We've made the turn off before I realize he's taking us past Pearl River Plantation, a route he could have easily avoided by staying on the highway.

Long strands of Spanish moss reach low over our heads, a veil shrouding the secrets I left behind. Foliage crowds the narrow road, its density so pressing I feel as if we're going to be crushed. Living in the city, I'd forgotten how closed in a person can feel while still being outdoors. I open the window, only to be met with air so thick it feels solid and the sour smell of vegetation rotting in the humidity. Dark brown water fills the narrow drainage ditch running parallel to us. I see something slither into it.

I thought I'd faced returning to the South when I arrived on Ross's front steps. But the shock of seeing this place robs my body of breath and chills my skin. Before we left New Orleans, I put on the matching short, puffed-sleeved jacket so I won't give Gran a coronary with my halter dress. I pull it closed over my chest. *This* is my homecoming, here in this quiet isolation, amid the leafy green vines that shape trees into monsters, on this dusty road I walked for over half my life.

My time in California ceases to exist. My professional success evaporates. I am a powerless child.

As we near the lane to my old home, I swear Ross is purposefully slowing down. At least he doesn't point it out like a tour guide of my past.

I can't help but look. The painted sign is warped and peeling, the lettering no more than a washed-out memory of the vibrant

green it used to be: PEARL RIVER PLANTATION—PECANS AND BLACKBERRIES—OWNERS: DRAYTON AND MARGO JAMES. I close my eyes and I see ten-year-old Griff standing in the heat with his ruler, swatting mosquitoes until he had the lettering perfect.

The mailbox is missing, the graying post leaning away from the road. The lane is so overgrown I can barely see where it used to be.

All these years, I assumed Gran was still running the orchard, even if the house was vacant and overtaken by mice. But the farm is a ruin. By now the blackberry canes are impenetrable and wild, and foraging animals are well-fed on the pecans. Our generation killed the James family legacy once and for all.

It seems I created fanciful lives for all those I left behind, lives that had no basis in reality.

Myths.

2

January 1958
Lamoyne, Mississippi

The Mississippi sky is angry; all swirling gray and spitting. Tiny white ice balls hiss against the stage set up in front of LaFollet Hall at Wickham College—well, in just a few minutes it won't be LaFollet Hall anymore. It will be James Hall, a lasting tribute to our family. And the James family, at least our little branch of it, can use all the respectability it can get its hands on. This has only recently come to my attention—last spring, after my tenth birthday, to be exact. Daddy demands specifics when presenting oral arguments. I never used to notice the sideways looks and the whispers around town, or how people abruptly stop talking when they think I'm in earshot. But lately things have changed. Or I've changed. I'm not sure which.

Daddy is a history professor here, just like Granddad James and Great-Granddad James before him. Anybody can donate money, Daddy says, but the James family has committed their lives to this "bastion of higher education." Which, when I really think about it, makes me wonder why there hasn't been a James Hall before now.

Griff (who's just a year older than me, but a whole lot more cynical, according to Daddy) was the first to point out that a lot of

things about this honor don't add up. First, he said, Christmas break is a mighty strange time for a building dedication, when everything is deserted and dark. Dedications come in the spring, when nature decorates the campus with giant ivory magnolia blooms and bright azaleas. And then there's the *reason* for the name change; something mysterious dressed in whispers and snippy answers. For this being such an honor, it sure has a big cloud of stink around it.

I asked roundabout questions, but all I got was a whole lot of cold shoulder. Two days ago, Granny James took me by the arm and leaned in close, the way she does when she's either dead serious or sharing a secret. My hope for a secret was squashed when she used all three of my names. "Tallulah Mae James, it is unbecoming to question one's good fortune. We'll hear no more about it."

Well, I knew sooner or later adults always blab about what Gran calls *things that must never be mentioned*. You'd think they'd be better at keeping things to themselves, with their rules and maturity and all. Sure enough, last night I overheard Daddy talking on the phone. Turns out Jacob LaFollet was a *Communist*, so the name had to change "posthaste" (which is the same as PDQ, but Dad likes old-fashioned words).

I reckon the posthastedness is why I'm out here in a sleet storm, shivering in anklets and black patent leather shoes.

As I watch from the stage, the Spanish moss is getting stiff, frozen drips from the twisted arms of the old trees. My hands inside my white rabbit muff are the only warm things on me.

This muff is the best thing I got for Christmas. Naturally, it was from Granny. When I opened it, Margo—she hasn't let us call her Momma since the twins were born—had a hissy fit, saying nobody needed to wear a poor rabbit's fur and that both Granny and I should be ashamed. Granny told her to get down off her high horse before she got a nosebleed. In a polite voice, of course. Granny is always polite, even if the meaning of her words cuts deep. Margo gave Granny the stink-eye and lit a cigarette, which Granny hates because proper Southern ladies *do not* smoke. That's the way it is between them.

I keep the muff hidden in the way back of my closet, just in case Margo gets it in her head to get rid of it. She's like that. Daddy says she's a woman of *conviction* and *principles*. Maybe so, but I think sometimes she just wants her own way.

I peek at the newspaper photographer in the first row. He's not looking at Daddy, the star of the show. He's looking at Margo. Everybody *always* looks at Margo. Instead of wearing a nice dress, coat, gloves, and a church hat like the other ladies, she has on tight, tight black pants and a fluffy mohair "ski sweater." (I guess it's okay to steal the hair off a goat but not a rabbit.) Why does she always have to stick out like a kangaroo at a tea party?

She's from up north, although I've overheard some people say they think she came from another planet. She is special. Extraordinary. Daddy reminds us all the time. Lately, though, I've been wishing raising blackberries and pecans at Pearl River Plantation—or even the fact that Dharma and Walden are twins—was enough special for her.

Even this morning, on the James family's special day, she had Daddy stop the car when we got to campus. "Let me off at the curb. I need to see someone about the rally for Africa before this absurd waste of money."

"Today?" Daddy's voice was sharp, and I braced myself for a fight. *Please, please not today.*

"This is *important*, Drayton."

Daddy's ears turned red, but he let her off at the curb. And I finally let out the breath I was holding.

When we pulled into his faculty parking spot, Granny James was already standing there, dressed in her funerals-and-weddings clothes, waiting under her big black umbrella.

She waved a gloved hand at the weather. "So much for the great myth of perpetual summer."

According to Granny, Northerners have a lot of misunderstandings about the South. Like how folks shivering up there in Vermont and Minnesota think we're picnicking in warmth and sunshine all winter long—perpetual summer. She takes a great deal of pleasure

in setting Northerners straight whenever she gets the opportunity, which mostly presents itself with Margo.

"You all look quite elegant. If only your grandfather were here to see this day." Even though Granddad died in a hunting accident when Daddy was ten, Gran keeps him alive with her stories. "James Hall," she said it like it held some kind of magic. "A family tradition. And you'll be next." She patted Griff on the shoulder.

"I'm going to be a newspaper man," Griff said. "Like Clark Kent. In New York or Chicago. I'll write about things that are happening now, not stuff from a hundred years ago."

"Up north? Gracious, Griffin!" After shaking her head, she said, "When your father was your age he wanted to fly airplanes, the next week it was to sail around the world, then it was to become an African safari guide . . ." She waved her hand to indicate the list went on and on. "But you'll see, just as he did, tradition, that's what's important to a family."

"If I was a boy, I'd teach history at Wickham." I was sorry I said it even before I took another breath. I don't even like history.

"Oh, Tallulah, you'll support the James family tradition in other ways, ones more suitable to a young lady." Then, as if unsuitability brought her to mind, she asked, "And where *is* Margo?"

Daddy took Granny by the elbow, and we all started walking. "She'll be right along."

"Drayton! Can't she just—"

"It's fine, Momma. She'll be here." He didn't sound very convincing.

Griff and I hung back. I said, "I'm so mad at Margo for ruining Daddy's big day with a meeting."

Griff kept our umbrella pointed into the wind as he shrugged. "What did you expect?"

I guess he's given up. But I haven't. Someday the French will get out of Algeria and Margo can stop protesting and just be our momma again.

As we waited to be called up to the stage, Griff said, "I wonder

when Dad decided he wanted to be a history professor and work the orchard?"

I shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"What if it happens to me? I want to live in a city. Do something exciting!"

"Yeah." I laughed and nudged his arm. "Be Superman."

"Clark Kent! Superman's not a real person. I'm not stupid."

Clark Kent isn't real, either, but I suppose there are people who do his job, so I stayed quiet.

A few seconds later he said, "I just don't want to be like Dad."

"Why not?" Daddy is as close to perfect as a person can get.

"I think he wishes he was somewhere else."

"Maybe when he was a kid. Not now."

"Oh yeah? Just the other day when he and Margo were fighting, he said that her life wasn't the only one that got ruined. He gave up what he wanted, too."

Truth be, Daddy and Margo can have some real window rattlers. "That's silly. He has all the James family traditions. He has us. Maybe gave up a motorcycle or something." There never seems to be enough money, so that made sense.

"Now *you're* being stupid."

"Griffin!" Granny hissed in a rough whisper and pointed toward the stage steps. "Go fetch Dharma."

Griff shoved the umbrella into my hand and went to pull Dharma off the platform steps before she reached the top.

She kicked and squirmed as he brought her back, knocking loose the bows and braids I spent a half hour on this morning. "I want to tap dance!"

She's been taking lessons—Granny's idea, to "give her fondness for drama a place to vent." Now Dharma is crazy for it, clattering around all day long on the hardwood, demanding we watch her "shows," driving us all out of our minds.

Griff and Gran got busy shutting down Dharma's hissy fit. Granny said, "Tallulah, there's a comb in my pocketbook." She held out an arm, and I took it off her elbow.

The pocketbook is one she saves for the best occasions. It's not heavy like her everyday purse, because she only puts the bare necessities in it just before she leaves the house. The wind tugged at the umbrella, so I set the pocketbook on the step so I could flip the clasp one-handed.

There was a folded hanky on top. As I lifted it, something fell out and clattered against the wooden riser. A gold necklace with a large locket. I know all of Gran's jewelry, she likes to tell me the stories that go with each piece—and this one looks old and full of stories. But I've never seen it.

"Tallulah!" She let go of Dharma, and snatched the locket off the step. "I said I wanted a comb!"

"Where did that come from?" I asked.

"Just do as I say and hand me that comb." She slid the necklace into her coat pocket.

I know how to read the atmosphere, as Daddy says. It's an important skill when you live in a town where everybody thinks your mother is from another planet. So I see right quick Granny's not going to be telling me stories about that necklace.

Margo finally shows up as the dean finishes his speech, the eyes of everyone listening to the dean shift to her, and I am so embarrassed I want to sink into the stage. But Daddy looks so happy when she takes his hand that I find some forgiveness.

Just before we're all frozen to death, Daddy goes to the podium. He hands his umbrella to Margo, then takes off his hat before he speaks. Sleet gathers like salt in the sharp part of his dark Brylcreemed hair. Even with the dressing, I see his cowlick is trying to poke up.

As I look beyond the small crowd, I see Mr. Stokes and Maisie off at the edge of the quad, holding hands and dressed in their Sunday best. It's a little bit of a shock to see their dark faces on campus, but Mr. Stokes and Granny James go way back to when they were both children at Hawthorn House. And me and Maisie are best friends, even though we don't see each other much except in the summer. I take my hand out of my muff and give her a secret wave down at my side. Maisie smiles, so I know she sees it.

Dad only says about three sentences, then the dean shakes his hand. And that's that. LaFollet Hall is now James Hall. A big banner is pulled to cover the limestone engraving over the front doors.

The newspaperman calls, "Dr. James, can we get a shot of the family?"

Dharma jumps right up there; she loves having her picture taken. I nudge Walden to get him to move forward and stand beside her. Griff and I stand right behind the twins, and Granny takes her place between us and Daddy.

The newspaperman looks up from his viewfinder. "Where's young Mrs. James?"

I feel Granny stiffen. She hates it when people call Margo "young Mrs. James."

When I turn, Margo's nowhere to be seen. "She had to get out of the weather," I say quickly. "She's taking a cold." Some folks don't understand the importance of getting France out of Algeria.

Dad puts his hand on the shoulder of my wool coat and squeezes a little. I'm not sure if it's a warning that I'm in trouble for fibbing, or a thank-you for making a good excuse.

We all smile big, fake picture-taking smiles for the newspaper. I pull my hand out into the cold and take Granny's. Even through her gloves I can feel her warmth, or maybe I'm just imagining it because I always feel warm when she touches me.

She gives my hand a squeeze, and I'm almost glad Margo and her beatnik clothes aren't here.

When we get home—without Margo—Daddy stands on the blue-and-white-checkerboard asbestos tile in the kitchen with his coat on, like he can't figure out what to do. He's deflated and low, the happy leaked out of him when Margo disappeared.

"I'm so proud of you, Daddy," I say. "You gave a fine speech."

He doesn't look at me when he says, "Thanks, kiddo."

I look at Griff, raising my eyebrows and giving him a head jerk to join in, but he just shrugs and goes to his room. Griff always

backs me up, even when he thinks I'm wrong . . . unless it has anything to do with Margo.

Well, *somebody* needs to make Daddy feel better. "Gran's right. Margo was disrespectful. She should be ashamed!"

Daddy's gaze flashes my way and his shoulders snap straight. "You *will not* speak of your mother that way. You get to your room and think about all the good, important things she does."

His hateful tone stuns me. I stand there, unable to move.

"You heard me. Go!"

Dharma comes into the room, all sweetness and sunshine. She has some sort of radar that lets her know two things: if one of us other kids is in trouble, and if one of us is getting too much attention. She slips right up against Daddy and wraps an arm around his leg. His hand comes to rest on the top of her head.

I try to explain. "But, Daddy—"

"*You* should be ashamed! I want a list by tomorrow morning of the things your mother does to make *your* world a better place."

I heard him and Margo fighting the other night, and *he* said she was neglecting the family and needed to stay home more. Now he's acting like she's perfect and *I'm* bad.

Dharma looks up at him. "*I* love Margo."

My heart slams against my ribs. I run to my room, tears stinging my eyes. I know better. Talking about Margo always makes Daddy forget all his own rules about logical debates and presentation of facts. He loves her more than *anybody*, even us kids.

I throw myself on my bed and bury my face in my pillow. The *fact* is, Margo was selfish, no matter what Daddy says.

I lie there with my notebook and pencil, listening to the weather beat against the house, my heart filled with disappointment. This was supposed to be a good day. A day that was going to change our family back to the way it used to be. Before Margo decided it was more important to look after Africa than it was to look after us.

Instead of the list I'm supposed to write, my pencil begins to sketch on its own, as it often does. The lines and arcs, swirls and

shading begin to take shape. Soon I see it's a carousel. From my favorite day *ever*.

I was only five, but when I close my eyes, I can still smell the hot sugar from the cotton candy wagon, hear the breathy toot of the calliope in the center of the leaping horses. The beachside amusement park was filled with colorful lights and sugary treats—and happiness.

Momma, this was before the twins, before she was Margo, held me by the waist on a horse that leaped so high I got dizzy. Griff galloped beside me all on his own. Momma's bright laughter cut through all other noise as she watched Daddy stand on the horse in front of us with his arms outstretched to keep balance as it rose and fell and whirled. We were a team then, us Jameses, so we all ignored the grouchy old operator when he shouted for Daddy to sit down. Finally, the man pulled the lever, the music notes dragged slow, and the circling came to a coasting stop. He made us get off, but Daddy didn't get mad. He just laughed and took us to the next ride, then the next and the next, until the park closed and Daddy carried me on his shoulders, exhausted and sticky, to the car.

Griff comes into my room and looks at my notebook. Then he smiles. "That was a good day."

As he says it, I realize just how long it's been since our family has had a good day.

"But there wasn't a storm." Griff points to the page.

In the background, I've drawn dark swirling clouds and angry crashing waves. Jagged lightning streaks in the distance.

"No, there wasn't," I say. "That came after."

As far back as I can recollect, there were no storms in our house on Pearl River Plantation until after that trip to the amusement park. But that first one was a horrible, raging thing that rattled the windows and shook the walls.

Griff had been acting like his shadow was creeping up on him all week, jumpy as a cat in the dog pound. He was like that: seeming to know trouble was coming before it walked through the door.

Daddy tucked me into bed as usual, but it felt strange, because Momma wasn't just in the other room. She was nowhere—well, she was somewhere, but not here.

Griff and I had spent the whole sweltering day lazing in the shade and hanging our heads inside the blackberry refrigerators. It was too hot to eat lunch, so we hadn't bothered coming up to the house. When we finally came in, hungry as bears, the sun was sinking low. The house was empty except for the dirty dishes piled in the sink and Momma's radio playing on the kitchen counter.

For the first time in days, Griff was still and quiet. "She's probably gone to the store," he said.

"But Daddy has the car."

"Maybe Mrs. Buell picked her up. She's always offering to take her."

"Momma said she'd rather starve than take a ride from Mrs. Buell. Momma says she's a hippopotamus."

"A hypocrite, not a hippopotamus, you goof." He ruffled my hair, like he did when he was teasing me, but his eyes weren't laughing.

He got busy scraping the last of the peanut butter from the jar, making us sandwiches. Then we watched *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*, my favorite show. By the time Daddy got home, I'd kind of forgotten Momma wasn't there and went to bed just like always.

A loud noise startled me awake. I sat up in bed, looking around. My room was bright from the moon.

Something thumped in the house, and my heart beat fast and scared.

Then Momma yelled—I didn't understand what, but it was an awful noise. I jumped out of bed, threw open my door, and ran toward her voice.

When I got to the living room, a book almost hit me in the head.

Daddy had blood running down his forehead.

Momma was yelling, shrill, angry words.

And then Griff was there, pulling me from the room.

Daddy yelled. Words so full of anger I couldn't understand them.

"Come on, Lulie!" Griff held my arm so tight it hurt, tugging me out the kitchen door and across the damp grass.

He didn't let go as we ran out to the orchard barn.

"What's happening?" My words were smothered in his pajamas as he grabbed me in a bear hug.

"It'll be okay."

I pushed him away. "Daddy was bleeding!"

"He's fine. Forget about it."

"I can't! I can't forget! They . . . they . . ." I started crying too hard to talk.

He turned on the hose and held it for me to take a drink. I finally caught my breath.

"Come on," he said. "I want to show you something." He took my hand, gently this time, and we left the barn and headed toward the pecan orchard. Everything looked silver in the moonlight. Silvery and cold, even though it was still daytime hot. He talked the whole way, about nice things, things we'd do before school started and I went to kindergarten—find me an arrowhead down by the river (Griff found his last fall), tie a rope onto a tree so we could swing ourselves into the swimming hole, go on a Labor Day picnic with Tommy Murray's family (he and Griff are best friends like Maisie and me, but Tommy's white, so they get to spend more time together). He got me thinking on so much, I was barely crying anymore.

"Here it is," he said as he stopped.

We were at the corner of the orchard, the trees in lines like soldiers at our backs. He took me right to the edge, where the ground fell to the river below. I felt the cooler air, smelled the mud, heard the easy movement of the water.

"Are you still scared?" he asked.

I want to tell him I'm not, but I never lie to Griff.

"It's okay," he said.

I opened my mouth and a little hiccup came out, the leftovers from crying. "Not as scared as I was."

"Close your eyes and wrap it up in a tight ball."

"Wrap what up?"

"The scaredness." The silver of the moonlight shone in his eyes. "Go on now. Close your eyes."

"Don't let go of my hand," I said, afraid I'd lose my balance and tumble into the river.

"I won't. Swear on my arrowhead."

That's his most serious promise, so I close my eyes.

"Now wrap it up in a tight ball."

"Okay."

"Now open your eyes and throw that ball into the river."

I look at him.

"Do it. It's gonna sink under the water and get carried all the way out to the gulf. It'll be gone forever."

"How do you know it'll work?"

"The river has magic. Indian magic. It gave me my arrowhead, didn't it?"

I nod.

"Okay, then. Throw it."

I pulled my hand from his and hurled that ball as hard as I could.

"Good!" He laughed a little. "Next time you can just use your mind to throw it. You don't have to use your hands." He ruffled my hair. "Feel anything different?"

My heart wasn't thudding. The knot was gone from my throat. "I . . . I do feel a little better."

"It'll get better the farther the ball goes downriver." He took my hand again. "We'll stay in the barn tonight." We start back through the orchard.

As we lay side by side in the barn, just before I fell asleep, he whispered, "Just remember, when I'm not around, the river will always make everything okay."