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Cutting the Lilies

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by

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ABSTRACT

Cutting the Lilies is a historical-fiction novel that begins in April of 1963 and ends in June of 1964. Settings include rural areas on Alabama's Sand Mountain, the small towns of Fort Payne and Scottsboro, and the city of Birmingham. As with much historical fiction, the novel interweaves a personal, ostensibly fictional story about everyday people with true events. In this case, the personal story is based on a real family involved in a boating accident on the Tennessee River in 1963. A mother and six of her eleven children, as well as two extended family members, drowned. The personal story will follow the remaining five children, with 17-year-old Paula Keaves (the eldest daughter) serving as narrator. Elements of Paula's personal circumstances will bring her in contact with people and events – both well-known and little known – that are part of the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama. In particular, she will witness the Children's March in Birmingham and meet William Moore, a white postman who is walking from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to his birth state of Mississippi to deliver a letter urging equal rights for African-Americans to Governor Ross Barnett.

The book will begin two days after the funeral for Paula's mother, brothers, and sisters. Glimpses of the accident and the family's life before the accident will be provided through flashbacks. A particularly horrific detail of the accident, known only to one character (Benny, Paula's 10-year-old brother), will be revealed near the end (like in *Sophie's Choice*). In telling the story of Paula, her family, the events she witnesses, and

the time and place in which she lives, the book will touch on myriad social issues, including poverty, domestic violence, racism, classism, mental illness, and how the Civil Rights Movement was perceived – or ignored – in rural areas that were relatively close geographically to major events. Paula will struggle to understand tragedy and resilience as they relate to her own situation as well as the momentous events unfolding around her. She will discover that the way forward lies in facing the past and contributing to a hopeful vision of the future.

Keywords: historical fiction, Civil Rights Movement, Alabama, tragedy, resilience

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In the acknowledgements of a book I read while researching this project, Mary Stanton, the author of *Freedom Walk: Mississippi or Bust*, a creative non-fiction work about William Moore's life and murder, wrote: "Nobody writes a book alone, not a book worth reading." Those words often have come to my mind during the six years I have been researching and writing this novel. In most instances, I did not create the stories that begin to unfold in these first thirteen chapters; rather, I was lucky enough to find them, and they sparked my imagination. I also was fortunate enough to meet talented people who took an interest in my work and helped shape it into something "worth reading." For their willingness to share their memories, insights, and wisdom, I am grateful to Sonja Grider, Randy Grider, Harle Eddie Jones, Diane Pruett, Virginia Helton, Olivia Cox, Russell Greathouse, Shelia Washington, Ann Hillhouse, and Oma Gayle Malisky. For the time they have taken to read and improve my work, to offer suggestions, to ask me questions, and to identify themes, parallels, and threads that I had not considered, I would like to thank Rachel Houghton, Marcus Narvaez, Katelin Adams, Brett Bralley, Ned Freeman, Jessie Dunbar, Kerry Madden-Lunsford, and Karim Shamsi-Basha. I especially want to thank Jim Braziel for the many hours he has dedicated to making the first chapters of this book as effective as possible and for teaching me so many things I need to know about fiction writing. My knowledge and abilities are not equal to the true stories and topics covered in these pages. I have and will continue to depend on the generosity of

others to do justice to this subject matter.

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CHAPTER 1

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 17, 1963

I can still hear them screaming. Not when I'm asleep, the way Rhonda hears them, but when I'm awake. Waking up is the worst part. It all comes back to me then, dread like a tiny seed sprouting the details: darkness, splashing water, cries for help. The voices fade one by one, and the knowledge that they're gone – my mother, four of my sisters, two of my brothers – overwhelms me. It's the exact opposite of waking from a nightmare. When that happens, you tell yourself everything is okay because it wasn't real. I have to convince myself this *is* real.

Gray light peeks through the small window and around the edges of some of the bare wood boards. I know it's around six o'clock. Rhonda slept through the night, I think, after refusing to sleep the past two. She and June lie on the other bed, their pale hair spilling from beneath Granny's quilt. I sit up, feel the strangeness of Caroline and Maura's absence from my own bed, and look instinctively to the pallet on the floor, where Benny is curled up alone.

Benny is one of the dark ones, like me. I haven't gotten used to seeing him without Will, his olive skin and dark eyes and hair a sharp contrast to Will's fair, freckled complexion. Of the eleven of us, only June blends our parents' looks. The rest of us are either light like Daddy, descended from Scottish and Irish immigrants, or dark like Momma and her Cherokee and Italian ancestors.

“Rhonda, June,” I call softly as I step onto the cold floorboards, goosebumps rising on my arms. “We have to get up now.” We’re supposed to go back to school today, and I swallow hard to keep the nausea down.

Benny turns over on his back, stares up at the rafters still dark above the dim light spreading across the room. He hasn’t spoken since the funeral, when he was still coughing up the Tennessee River and laughing as he pointed out the “pretty flowers” in Straight Creek Baptist cemetery while half our family was lowered into the ground. Whatever medicine they gave him at the hospital made him act strange for two days.

“Benny, what do you want to wear today?” I kneel before his stack of school/church clothes against the wall with the window. The wall used to be lined from one end to the other (each of us had a stack of nice clothes for going places and a stack of tattered clothes for home), but I moved the younger kids’ garments to our mother’s room so we wouldn’t have to look at them. Now I think the empty space is just as bad. Benny doesn’t answer. I didn’t expect him to, but I talk to him just the same.

I’m the only one who does talk anymore, which is odd because they all called me “quiet” before, like Iris, our mother. Rhonda and June trudge to their stacks of neatly folded clothes without a word. Rhonda picks up her plainest dress and goes behind the hanging sheet to change out of her nightgown.

“I don’t want to move any more of them,” June says, her eyes fixed on the dwindling stack of clothes. “She folded them. She put them here,” June says. “It’s like erasing her.”

I put a hand on her shoulder and she shakes it off.

Just last week Momma plucked the clothespins off the clothesline in the yard and

dropped them in the pocket of her purple housedress with one hand while using the other to toss the dresses, shirts, pants, skirts, and socks of all sizes into the basket. Sweat beaded on her forehead in the bright sunlight. It was only April and already scorching. I worked the other side of the line much slower, hoping to one day match her speed.

The younger kids squealed and laughed as they chased each other across the smoothly swept, hard-packed dirt. Our cousin Henry, who lives up the road, had brought over a little bright orange ball that came in a Tide washing powders' box, and he and Benny and Will bounced and threw it to each other. Momma didn't seem to notice any of it, a troubled, faraway look furrowing her brow.

"I wish we could go to the river today," I said.

After several moments, she registered my words and replied. "I do, too. It'll be nice to get away from here for a while. Maybe the girls could go to the creek this evening to bathe. That would cool you off." She had reached the end of the clothesline, and she paused to glance toward the trees that hid the creek bank from our view. No breeze disturbed the young leaves that had sprouted on some of them. Then she wiped a stream of sweat from her temple, picked up the basket, and stepped around to my side of the line. In one swift motion, she snapped the two clothespins off June's blue-flowered blouse, and it fell into the basket at her feet.

June and I have been staring at the flowered blouse atop her clothes stack for a long time. I regret disturbing my own carefully folded garments, but what can we do? We have to wear clean clothes.

"She would want you to wear them," I say finally and pull a plaid dress from the

middle of the stack. I hand it to her. She grabs some underclothes from the cardboard box next to it and goes to change.

I pick a shirt and pants for Benny and take them to him. He's still staring at the roof beams. "What do you see?" I ask, lying down beside him and looking up at the beams, too. I make out the underbelly of the tin, can even see where a few nails missed the boards.

Benny turns his head, looks at me. I smile and rub his shoulder. After a few seconds, I say, "Let's get you dressed." He sits up and cooperates by putting his arms through the sleeves as I pull the shirt over his head.

After I dress myself, I open the door a crack and light fills the hallway. Glancing toward the living room and kitchen, I detect no movement or sound except the hissing of drizzled rain against the tin roof. The sound makes me shiver.

"Y'all can use the pot out back if you don't want to go to the outhouse in the rain," I say over my shoulder. Then I ease my way down the narrow hall and stop when I catch a glimpse of my father, passed out in a chair in the living room. Two glass bottles are on the floor in front of him. One full of liquor. The other, on its side, empty.

At the hospital, he told the reporters gathered around, "This has hit me hard." It was about him. "I'm devoting my life from this point forward to the care of my surviving children. They're going to need all I can give." Some of the reporters wiped away tears. One of the articles called him "a stunned husband and father."

I know it's a sin to hate. Momma taught me that, taught all of us that. I don't know how she did it, not hate him for what he did to her.

Daddy's mouth is slightly open, his head pitched forward on his stained

undershirt, his sandy hair disheveled. He's probably snoring, but I can't hear over the pattering on the roof. And I can't help but hate him. I can't help but blame him for what happened. My skin gets hots like it did when he talked to the reporters, like when I stood in the funeral home, surrounded by the caskets, and it hit me – this was all his fault. Why should he be here, slumped in that chair, while she's gone – while they're all gone?

During the funeral, Preacher Nelson stood in front of the caskets and claimed, "The Lord works in mysterious ways." I accepted this before. Now I think there's something terribly wrong with those words. I don't know exactly what, and I don't have time to think about it. I'm just glad Daddy's asleep. We might be able to slip out without having to deal with him.

I pick up the bottle of bootlegged whiskey and tread quietly down the hall, easing the back door open. I pour the whiskey off the porch, carefully replace the bottle near Daddy's feet, then head to the kitchen.

The table is piled high with casserole pans and dishes from what seems like every family in DeKalb County. I have no idea how I'll return them. I had to throw out most of the food last night. The raccoons and the Harkleys' dogs probably had a feast while we slept. I've never thrown away food before.

Someone put ice in our ice box – something that hasn't happened in months – but only five dishes fit inside. The drip pan is full now and most of the ice block is melted. I slide the pan from beneath the box and toss the water out the back door. No one wants to eat, but I know we need to. I decide on cake and pie since those haven't ruined and will be quick – we need to get to the bus stop.

I fill a plate with two slices of pound cake and two slices of pecan pie, then tiptoe

across the hall to the bedroom. Rhonda is standing in front of the little mirror, a gift from Granny, on the wall. She is brushing her hair. June is sitting legs crossed in their bed, looking at her hands in her lap. Benny is still lying on the pallet.

I go to each one, telling them to take a slice of cake or pie and eat it. They don't refuse, to my surprise. I eat the remaining slice of pie so fast I can barely taste it, run the brush through June and Benny's hair, catch my own reflection in the mirror long enough to know I am here, then tell them to gather their school stuff and wait by the back door while I get the plastic sheeting we use to cover ourselves when we go out in the rain. "Don't wake Daddy," I whisper.

It rained off and on yesterday and probably all night, too, turning the ditches on both sides of the dirt road into muddy rivers. My heart beats faster. I hate water now. Birds are chittering in the trees, and a couple of crows and some robins are scouring the ground for worms by the old barn across the road from our house.

We walk single file, with me in front, Rhonda in back, and Benny and June between us. I hold the edge of the thick, clear plastic in front of my face. Through it, I see only blurred shapes and colors – the gray-white sky, blackish trees, the sandy-orange road. The second sheet, the one for the smaller kids, is still folded in the shed. Wind is blowing the rain toward us, and it soaks through my dress, stings my ankles, and seeps into my shoes.

"I don't think I can breathe," June says.

"Take deep breaths through your nose and breathe out through your mouth," I tell her, remembering Uncle Joe's remedy for hyperventilating and giving it a try myself. "Concentrate on your breathing. Nothing else."

Rhonda steps up next to me.

"You're going to get wet," I say.

She shrugs her shoulders. "I don't care."

I check on June and Benny. June is at the back of the line now.

"Paula, what do you think's gonna happen to James? Will he go to jail?" Rhonda asks.

The newspaper reports everyone has been bringing along with their casseroles say the director of water safety with the Alabama Conservation Department is going to file charges against James, our older brother, for operating an overloaded boat with no life preservers or lights.

"I don't know. He doesn't have the money to pay any fines, so it might end up that way. It seems like they would realize he's suffered enough. He lost his wife, his mother… everyone," I say, forcing my voice to stay steady. I remember James's face from yesterday, when we all sat in the living room, quiet for hours. Granny says it's a shame a boy got the prettiest eyes and eyelashes in our family. It's more of a shame to see those eyes so sad.

"And now they want to put him in jail," Rhonda says.

"What if you wrote a letter to that man, Tom Shackleford," she says in a rush. "You could tell him why he should leave this alone, why it doesn't make any sense. I would send a letter myself, but you know I'm terrible at writing. You would do a good job. You could convince him."

I mull it over as we pass Granny's house. I keep looking in the windows for light from her oil lamp, but she must not be up yet. On the right is an old gas station, the

pumps unused since the highway came through and the county stopped maintaining the bridge down from our house, turning the road into a dead end except to the bravest drivers.

Beyond the gas station thick woods open on a newly planted cotton field, like the one behind our house. Granny owns the land – our Grandpa Jim's father homesteaded it – and leases the fields to farmers.

"I would have to find his address," I say, "and I'm not sure it would do much good. June, how are you doing?"

"Okay," she says. "I don't understand why we have to go back to school today. I don't feel like it, and I'm tired of people gawking at us like…like we have two heads same as Mr. Clark's chicken." I almost smile because June's comparison is exactly right.

"None of us feels like it, but you know what the grownups are saying – it'll be better for us to get back in a routine." My words come out like a tired recording. I should try to find something of my own to say, but nothing comes. "They might be right. What would we do at home?"

"It doesn't matter," June mumbles.

The rain pours harder as we approach the four-way stop and Uncle Ed's big white house set back from the road. The sound of the giant drops pounding on the plastic makes conversation impossible, and we revert to our own worlds.

A light is on in Uncle Ed's front room. The house has electricity and light bulbs, like at school, but I don't see why they need them, what with the massive windows that stretch from floor to ceiling and the painted walls. There's so much light, even on cloudy days. Going home after a visit feels like entering a cave. Henry moved in with Uncle Ed

– his grandfather and our great-uncle – a couple years ago, after his mother died. The adults whisper that she was murdered, but they don't talk about it. I used to envy Henry living in that house, even under the circumstances. Now I'm ashamed.

The front door opens, and Henry runs out to join us under the plastic sheeting, next to Benny. Henry's hair is all disheveled, and raindrops are caught in the curls.

"Hey," I say to him, glad he is joining us. The more people around me who are family, the better I feel.

"Hi, Paula," he says and nods at Rhonda and June. He looks at Benny like he wants to say something, but Benny appears not to have noticed him. He stares straight ahead, and Henry closes his mouth. Normally Henry would greet Benny with a playful shove on his shoulder, Benny would push him back, and then they'd run circles around the rest of us, laughing and teasing one another.

We pass the corn fields where the baby plants are just poking their heads from the muddy soil. If it keeps raining like this, the crop will be swept away and the farmers will have to replant. I keep walking because someone else has taken over my mind and my body, doing what has to be done. I'm not here in this world where the younger kids are no longer walking with us, trying to keep up, trying to stay dry under the tarp.

Rivulets of water have stained our shoes orange-brown by the time we make it to the paved road. The bus shows up, stops, the door opens, and I yank the plastic sheet from over our heads.

"Get in, hurry," I tell them, and Rhonda corrals June, Henry, and Benny up the steps. I shake the plastic sheet hard three times before folding it into a one-foot square. When I climb the

steps, I see that June was wrong. No one is looking at us.

*

I'm in a bathroom stall, looking at the pattern in the little pink floor tiles and breathing in cleaning fumes while trying to escape all the people not looking at us. Because the thing is, they really are looking – or want to. They just don't want us to realize they're noticing us. I felt almost invisible at school before, but this is different: like we're on stage in front of a full audience, but no one is looking directly at us. A few kids I don't know that well accidentally made eye contact, then immediately looked at their feet to wash me away, the same way the kids on the bus stared at their laps. When I walk into a classroom or past a group, everyone lowers their voices and any laughter comes to a halt. I guess they're trying to be respectful, but it makes me feel more empty.

None of this matters. I don't care what any of them think, how they behave. I just don't want to be here. I don't want to think about the War of 1812 or diagramming sentences when most of my family is underground. I can't.

At least our cousin Rachel came up to us right after we got off the bus. She didn't say anything, but hugged us all, then walked with me to take Benny to his fourth-grade classroom in the elementary wing. June is in eighth grade, Rhonda in tenth, and I'm a junior. In the hall this morning, Mr. Sanders, my history teacher and the assistant principal, said he's glad we're back and to let him know if we need anything. His smile was too wide to be genuine. He means well. They all mean well.

I hear Sally Thompson at the sinks. Her high-pitched, nasally, know-it-all voice –

always spouting the latest gossip – is something I've tried for years to block out.

"If you didn't get there at least two hours early, there's no way you would have gotten in the church. Ugh!" she says, disgusted. Through the crack in the painted metal door, I see Sally flipping her blonde curls and straightening her red, store-bought blouse. "My parents made sure we got seats on the third row, of course."

"Of course," Sally's tag-along, Ida Mae Simms, says.

"I've never seen anything like that funeral," Sally continues. She's putting on lipstick now. "There were two rows of caskets, and they filled the whole wall behind the preacher. And there's still five kids left."

"I know there were way too many of them, but I think it's just awful what happened," Ida Mae says, shaking her head.

"You are so right," Sally says. "My mother says it's just as well, though. Those kids never would have amounted to anything but a drain on the government and whoever was unfortunate enough to be their neighbors."

I feel hot and lightheaded and sit down on the toilet to steady myself.

Last winter James and I sat at the kitchen table in the pre-dawn dark, trying to figure out what to do. The month's commodities had run out, we'd eaten all the canned food from the previous summer's garden, and it was February – the winter collards weren't enough. The summer garden wouldn't be planted until April. The house was quiet – it didn't have any answers for us, either. The younger kids were still asleep, and Momma was lying down in the front bedroom. She was having one of her spells.

"What about Granny?" James asked.

"Have you been in her cellar lately? We've asked her too many times already," I said. "She barely has enough for herself."

James nodded. "We could go across the creek and ask Hazel for some flour. We could make pancakes and bread."

I sighed. "We just used her phone last week. I don't want to bother her again this soon."

"There's Uncle Ed…"

The light from the kerosene lamp danced with the shadows on the table – and flickered across James's face, occasionally illuminating the dark hair swept back from his widow's peak, the stubble growing on his chin, and the worry creasing the olive skin between his large, almond-shaped eyes.

I tried to think of an alternative to asking Uncle Ed but couldn't. "I guess that's what we'll have to do," I said. "I know he still has plenty, and he always gives us more than we ask for. I'll go."

But I didn't want to. I hated begging for food. If it were just me and James, we'd find a way to get by, but we couldn't let the others go hungry. I grabbed my wool coat and a bag from the hooks by the back door and headed up the road.

Uncle Ed always has a huge garden. So big he pays Momma, me and the older kids to help tend it. Momma saves that money, along with the money we make picking cotton, in a metal coffee tin. Every fall, she walks 15 miles to Fort Payne and uses the money to buy us each a new outfit and shoes.

It was especially hard to ask Uncle Ed for canned food from his garden since he'd already paid us to help with it. He's always really nice, though, and says they have way

more than they need. I know he used to sell the extra to Mr. Traylor, who owns Traylor Grocery at the end of our road, but has quit doing that because of us. This is what I thought about as I walked.

I imagined how the situation would play out – I'd knock on the front door, Uncle Ed would answer and tell me to take what I needed from the pantry around back. But there were no lights on in the house. They must be sleeping later than usual, I thought, because of the cold. The wind was blowing a front down from the north.

I could just make out the outlines of the house and the two big oak trees in the yard. I didn't want to wake Uncle Ed, and I knew he'd tell me to help myself anyway, so I went around back, where a little storage room had been added onto the house. The door was unlocked, and inside shelves on every wall were lined with glass jars sealing in last year's harvest of okra and tomatoes from the garden, pears and peaches from the orchard. My mouth watered at the thought of the fruit.

I put a jar each of pears and peaches in my bag. They clinked against each other, and a light came on in the kitchen. It shone through the window into the pantry, making a bright patch across my body. I began to step away just as Uncle Ed looked over and – I'm almost certain – saw me. He started to lift his arm, as if to wave, and looked like he was going to say something. Then he seemed to have a new thought, and his expression fell. He put down his arm, turned out the light, and left the kitchen.

I quickly filled the bag with enough jars to get us through the week and left. Halfway home, I sat down on the stump of an oak to breathe.

Sally and Ida Mae pull paper towels from the metal dispenser on the wall.

“Probably so,” Ida Mae says, her voice trailing off as she and Sally walk toward the bathroom door. “But I still think it’s sad.”

CHAPTER 2

THURSDAY, APRIL 18, 1963

I'm scrubbing our clothes in a wash tub behind Granny's house when June comes out the back door.

"Paula, there's someone on the phone for you," she says.

I look up, puzzled.

"A Mr. Blevins. He said he's a cousin who lives in Fort Payne," she says. "Granny says it's her cousin's son, the one who owns a dry cleaners and drove that fancy car."

I remember. The sleek, shiny black Ford looked so out of place amid the others in our yard. I wouldn't have noticed the layers of dust covering the rest of the vehicles, or how bulky they were, if that car hadn't been there. The man had a kind face I've seen before. His red-headed wife and daughter looked familiar, too. I think they've been to some of the family picnics at Uncle Ed's place. But not in that car.

*

"Hello?" I say cautiously into the receiver.

"Paula, this is Tal Blevins. I don't know if you'll remember me, but I was at your house Monday with my family. Beatrice Blevins, your grandmother's cousin, is my

mother."

I'm not sure what to say. "Yes, I remember you," I manage.

"I hope you won't feel like I'm meddling in your affairs, but Mother told me your brother Benny had pneumonia and hasn't been speaking. There's a new health clinic here in town. I thought it might be a good idea for a doctor to examine Benny."

Mr. Blevins pauses briefly before going on, and the electric hum in the receiver gets louder. "They have a counselor there, too. You and your sisters and brother have been through a terrible thing, a tragedy unimaginable to most people. It can help, after something like this, to talk with a professional. I wanted to invite you all down for the weekend, and we could go to the clinic Monday."

Now I really don't know what to say. We can't afford to go to a health clinic. Granny said yesterday it's a good thing Daddy signed for Benny and James at the hospital. "Good luck to 'em gettin' anything out of him," she'd added.

I know a counselor is someone who gives advice, but I don't know why there would be someone like that at a health clinic – or even what a health clinic is like. I remember the bright lights, pale walls, and antiseptic smell of the hospital. That night, when I went to check on Benny and James, was the first time I'd been inside one. Jack was born at a hospital, but I stayed home to help take care of the other kids. The rest were born at our house. I delivered Maura, and named her, too.

"We have plenty of room. I thought a change of scene might be helpful," Mr. Blevins says.

There's something unfamiliar and a bit formal about his words and the way he speaks them. His voice is deep, and the tone sounds caring, but what can I tell from a

voice over a phone line?

The seconds are ticking away. I need to say something. “That’s a nice offer, Mr. Blevins, but I think a health clinic would be too expensive for us.”

“Oh, I meant to say before,” Mr. Blevins clears his throat, “there wouldn’t be a charge for you all to go to the clinic.”

I wonder why that is, but it would seem rude to ask. Would he pay for it? Or maybe whoever runs the clinic is offering a free visit because they know what happened to us. Momma always said never accept charity unless you have to. And we’ve had to plenty.

“I’ll have to talk with Rhonda and June, see what they think,” I say. “Could I call you back later?”

“Of course,” he says. “I’ll give you my home number and my number at work as well. I’m usually there until five-thirty. Are you ready to take them down?”

I’m not. “Just a minute.” I fumble with the drawer in Granny’s telephone table, fetching a small notebook and pencil from the clutter of old postcards and letters.

He gives me both numbers and talks again about how welcome we’ll be.

Granny and June are in the kitchen. Granny is rolling out dough for biscuits and June is resting her head on her crossed arms atop the table.

“Mr. Blevins wants us to come to Fort Payne this weekend,” I say from the doorway.

June looks up. “Why?” she asks.

“He says a change of scene might do us good. And he wants us to go to a health clinic there Monday, mainly for Benny, I think.”

Granny looks up from her rolling pin, flour spinning around her head. “Beatrice told me he was going to call,” she says. “It’s up to ya’ll. I think it would be good for Benny. Gracious knows I don’t know what to do for him. I’m not getting involved, though. Your Daddy might not like it.”

She’s still worried about that. After all that’s happened. “Maybe it’s best to not worry about what he likes,” I say, but she gets to rolling and won’t look at me.

“I don’t feel like going anywhere,” June says dully and puts her head back down on the table.

“Mr. Blevins said it might be good for us to talk to a counselor they have there,” I say.

She turns her head but remains hunched over the table. “What’s a counselor?”

“I think it’s someone you talk with if you’ve been through something… difficult,” I say. “And maybe they give you advice. They’ve had some special training, I think.”

“Preacher Nelson said we could talk to him,” June says. “I liked what he said about the Lord working in mysterious ways. I think I’ll do that, talk to Preacher Nelson, if I feel like talking to someone. I don’t want to talk to a stranger down in Fort Payne.”

“The Lord is too mysterious for me,” I say, though I’m not even sure what I think about seeing a counselor.

Now I have Granny’s attention, but it’s June who replies. “Paula, don’t say things like that.”

“Where’s Rhonda?” I ask.

“She said she was going down to the bridge,” Granny answers, nodding in that direction, and I leave the two of them there.

I walk to the front of the house to check on Benny. My knees give way when I see him, and I clutch the doorframe leading into the living room while my mind catches up. Benny is lying flat on his back on the couch, his hands clasped over his stomach, just like…

It's a pose I never want to see again, but the pictures keep arriving daily in our mailbox and Granny's. Some of the newspaper photographers took individual photos of my family members in their coffins, and people from all over the world are sending articles about the accident and funeral to us, some of them with those terrible pictures. It's bad enough that I saw them like that, that everyone is seeing them like that. I try to block the images, but they're burned into my brain. I'm afraid it's the only way any of us are going to remember them.

I focus on Benny's face – his closed-eyed expression is relaxed and solemn – and step over to him. I watch his stomach until I see it rise and fall with his breathing. Uncle Joe is sitting on the fireplace hearth, his tall, lanky frame all angles as he softly strums his guitar. His eyes, almost black like my mother's, but set closer together, bore into the cedar chest that serves as a coffee table. I know he's seeing something much farther away, longer ago. Uncle Joe has been collecting the newspaper articles. He told me not to look at them, just bring them to him.

He pulls his gaze to my face with seeming effort. "I'm keeping an eye on him for you, Paula," he says.

I nod and say, "Thank you, Uncle Joe."

It's been a couple years since Uncle Joe had an episode and had to go down to Tuscaloosa. I worry another trip might be coming soon.

CHAPTER 3

THURSDAY, APRIL 18, 1963

The sun is deep orange and hanging low over the sprouting treetops as I open the screen door and step onto the front porch. I'm almost done with the washing, so there's time to talk with Rhonda. The walk to the creek will give me a chance to think.

The road slopes gradually down from Granny's house to the bridge. Soon the tin roof and unpainted boards of our house come into view over the embankment on the right, and I see the old barn across the road from it on my left.

I slow when I notice Daddy sitting just outside the front door, a white Schlitz can in his hand. He's been staying at the house a lot, which is part of the reason I took our laundry to Granny's this morning and stopped there after school. There's no way I can pass without him seeing me. I hesitate, wondering if I should go back to Granny's and talk to Rhonda later. No, I decide, I'm not doing anything differently because of him – not ever again. Momma tried for years to keep the peace, tried not to upset him. She said some things weren't worth the strife. But it didn't work. Even after she got him to sign the divorce papers, she was a prisoner.

At least she's finally free. I brush away tears and start walking again. I look straight ahead, toward the thick, rusted-red arches of the bridge rising alongside the treetops.

What had he been planning, I wonder? What had she heard that made her so

determined we should cross the river at midnight? And why didn't I stop her?

"Paula," Daddy calls out. "Get over here, girl. We need to talk."

Maybe I should be afraid, but I don't care what happens to me anymore. Except for the time James stood up to him, Daddy's never laid a hand on me or any of us kids. All that was saved for Momma. And it made no sense. She was the most gentle person. So many people said so at the visitation, and Preacher Nelson talked about it during the funeral.

"I can't believe Iris is gone," Granny keeps saying. "She was the sweetest of all my children. She was really like a flower, so delicate John never did whip her. She was his pet."

Who will be Daddy's outlet now?

I march over to him.

The legs of the wooden chair he's pulled outside are sunk in the still-wet clay under the roof overhang. He's thrown several empty cans into the yard. One is lodged in a bed of Momma's roses.

"Where've you kids been?" he asks. "I barely seen you in two days."

"We've been going to school," I say, keeping my tone steady. "And this afternoon I'm washing clothes up at Granny's. Benny and June are up there, and I think Rhonda is down by the creek."

"Why couldn't you wash the clothes here?" he demands. "They's still a scrubbing board and wash tub here, ain't they?" He leans back and gestures toward the shed with the hand holding the beer can.

"We thought we should check on Granny," I say, and I realize I'm doing what I

didn't want to do – softening the truth to avoid making him angrier. I heard her do it so many times.

"You had to check on Granny," he mocks. "What about me? I lost six children – she only lost one. Does no one care what I'm going through? And now I'm not even gettin' to see the kids I got left. You coulda least had the courtesy to come down here and tell me where y'all were." He pauses to take a swallow of beer. "You're keeping them from me, aren't you? Just like your Momma tried to do." And he stands up, almost loses his balance. With the fear gone, I realize how ridiculous he looks: a short, blustery, red-faced man with a crazed expression and ruffled hair and clothes.

I take a step toward him, my fists balled at my sides, nails pressed into my palms. "You're drunk," I say firmly, "and you need to go to bed."

His face slackens into an expression of surprise and confusion. His eyes are locked with mine, but he says nothing.

"Go on," I say, like I tell the Harkleys' dogs when they come into the yard looking for food. "Go inside and go to sleep."

He stares at me a few more long seconds, then says, "You oughta know better'n to talk to me like that." I clench my fists tighter and my elbows bend, raising them a little.

"What's that?" he says, but instead of coming closer, he turns and walks through the open door. My arms fall back to my sides, weak. My hands open.

I wait, then peek inside and see him sprawled on the bed in Momma's room. I pull the front door closed and continue to the creek.

The sound of the rushing water strikes my eardrums before I even leave the yard, and goosebumps rise on my forearms. There hasn't been any rain today, but the flood is

still affecting the creek. Most of the cotton crop is going to have to be replanted, I heard some kids say at school. The rain made a mess of the fields and washed away the seed.

As I approach the bridge, I leave the evening sunlight and open fields behind and step into the shadows of the large oaks and poplars that surround the creek. Vines have begun climbing the metal supports rising on both sides of the wooden bridge deck. Tiny yellow jasmine flowers have sprouted from some of them, and their perfume fills the air. Yellow jasmine dots the rest of the woods, and delicate, bright green leaves are emerging from almost all the trees. Purple violets sprinkle the roadside. Those flowers always made Momma smile.

Usually I love this time of year. The new growth signals cold days will soon be behind us, and we'll be able to spend time outdoors again instead of cramped inside the dark house. But now nature's rebirth seems like a cruel, ironic joke. Everything is springing to life above ground while my brothers and sisters, who were so full of life just a week ago, are decaying underground. Caroline ("Flip," we called her) should be turning cartwheels in the yard, Jack should be toddling behind Momma, tugging at her skirt, as she and I start the garden, Wren ("Cotton" to us because of her white hair) should be chasing Granny's passel of cats, still hoping one will let her snuggle it in her arms… and E.I. (Rosa, but we never called her that) should be skipping circles around us all, singing about Old MacDonald and his farm – *"*E-I-E-I-O.*"* An image of Will, with his wide blue eyes, lifting a handful of Red Hots in my direction springs to mind, him asking, "Will you lick the hot off them, Paula?*"*

Then the dimly lit funeral parlor pushes through, and I see the white coffins lining the walls, each one a little smaller than the one to its left. I see the pale, waxy faces that

supposedly belong to my sisters, my brothers, my mother, the makeup failing to disguise the deep purple of their lips, the strange bruising on some of their cheeks.

Once the funeral home had been cleared of gawkers so family members could get inside, I had stepped away from Benny, June, and Rhonda to ask Mr. Burt, the Rainsville Funeral Home director, about the bruises. There were purple circles under his own eyes. Someone said he and Mr. Wooten, the mortician he brought over from Henagar, hadn't slept the night before. My question seemed to make him uncomfortable, and he took a while to answer. "There were some marks," he said eventually, "from the… equipment used to recover them from the river. We did our best to cover the marks. I'm so sorry, Paula."

I knew what the "equipment" was – hooks.

The fat man with the rescue squad had said, "No sense going out tonight boys," before he spit a stream of tobacco juice into the cattails. "We'll drag the river tomorrow."

My stomach heaves, and I retch onto the sandstone dirt road before I can stumble to the shallow ditch beside it. When I'm done, I wipe my mouth with my sweater sleeve. I look up and see Rhonda is still sitting on the bridge deck, her legs dangling over the side. She hasn't heard me over the roar of the creek rushing across the rocks below. Good.

With her fair complexion, sky blue dress and white sweater, Rhonda almost glows in the fading light of the woods. She has one slender arm propped on a metal bar that slants upward, connecting with the bridge's arch structure. Her head leans against her arm, and her yellow hair spills around her shoulders. She hasn't curled or styled it – tasks she used to perform religiously – since the accident. The week before, she had been

giving Caroline and E.I.'s locks the same treatment. Momma said it was a bit too early for E.I., at 9 years old, to get started with the "whole beauty business," but E.I. was proud of her new, grown-up look. She sat next to Caroline on the bed and begged Rhonda to twist her locks into pin curls, too. Even though she was three years older than E.I. and it was her idea to begin with, Caroline had begun to complain about the time commitment. She said she wasn't sure she wanted to be a teenager if it meant you had to spend hours a day thinking about your hair.

Rhonda looks down at the water. I used to sit on the side of the bridge myself, reading or doing homework after all the chores were done. I've always been Momma's work partner, helping with the laundry, the garden, the cooking, the cleaning. Rhonda helped Momma take care of the younger kids – she combed their hair, boiled water for their baths and got them dressed in the mornings. She was always coming up with new games for them to play, laughing and frolicking with them like she was still a little kid herself even after she turned sixteen last fall.

All that energy seems drained from her now. I still have my work, but hers is gone.

I realize we won't be able to talk by the creek without shouting, and neither of us feels like doing that. I don't want to hear or smell the creek water anymore, either. I don't know how Rhonda stands it. I decide to talk with her when she comes home, but just before I turn to head back up the road, Rhonda looks up and sees me. I falter, unsure whether to stick with my decision of going back to the house. Rhonda will wonder what I'm doing, so I need to explain. I begin walking toward her. She raises her feet to the bridge deck, grabs hold of the rusty metal supports, and gradually rises. Her slow

movements remind me of Granny's. It's like an old woman is inhabiting my vivacious sister's body.

We meet where the bridge connects with the sandy-orange dirt. The creek thunders in my head, and I can barely hear my own words: "I need to ask you about something."

She nods, gestures toward the road, and we continue side by side up the incline, not trying to speak until the roar of the water has settled into the background.

Finally, I say, "Do you remember the family who came to the house in that fancy car after the funeral?"

Rhonda chews on the right side of her lower lip, then says, "I think so. It was a tall man and a red-headed woman and girl about our age, right? They're related to Granny somehow."

"Yes, that's them," I say. "I just talked to the man – his name is Mr. Blevins – on Granny's phone. He wants us to spend this weekend at their house in Fort Payne, then take Benny to a health clinic on Monday. He says the clinic is new and they have a counselor we could all talk with."

Two crease marks appear between Rhonda's wideset, green-gold eyes, and she chews on her lip some more.

She has Momma's lips, full on the bottom and heart-shaped on top. I never noticed how thin my own lips were until we tried on lipstick at cousin Rachel's house last year. Rhonda applied the lipstick in a few easy strokes, and the color brought out her eyes. I, on the other hand, felt like a painter who couldn't stay inside the lines. My mouth looked like a bleeding gash in my face. After the third try, I wiped the oily red stuff off

for good and decided there were more important things to worry about than how compatible one's features were with cosmetics. Caroline and I were alike when it came to the beauty business.

Rhonda's freckles have almost disappeared. They used to dot her nose and the skin below her eyes. All the light kids had them, too. Will, Caroline, and Cotton. Every one of us except June and James have the Keaves nose – upturned and a bit on the large side, but remarkable in its symmetry. "Look how perfect that nose is!" people would exclaim upon seeing the babies for the first time. Rachel says the nose makes us look like pixies.

"Why would this family want us to stay with them?" Rhonda asks, stops walking, and turns to me. "They don't really know us, Paula. And are they going to pay for Benny to see a doctor? It all seems weird." Her voice drops and she looks at the ground. "Maybe they just want something to do with us because we're famous now."

"I don't want to be famous," I say, and we start walking again. I think for a few moments, then add, "I don't know the answer to either of those questions. I got the feeling Mr. Blevins is worried about us. Maybe they just want to help." At least, that's what I'm hoping.

We're about to pass our house. It's set only sixty or so feet back from the road, but I can barely make it out in the gray, grainy twilight that has descended. The windows are dark, so Daddy must still be asleep.

"It would be good for Benny to see a doctor again," Rhonda says. "But I don't feel like going to Fort Payne or being around a bunch of people. Going to school is bad enough. And I don't want to talk to any counselor, whatever that is. Did you ask June

about it?"

"Yes," I say.

"What did she think?"

"Same as you," I say. "She doesn't want to go."

I need to figure out what to do. The Blevins seem nice, but Rhonda's right – we don't really know them. And I don't feel like making conversation with strangers, either. But I'm worried about Benny. I'm not sure if the people at the health clinic can help him. It would be wrong not to let them try, though.

"What would you think if I just went to Fort Payne with Benny? You and June could stay up at Granny's while we're gone."

"I'm all right with that," Rhonda says. "But what about Daddy?"

"I'll tell him," I say as we walk up the steps to Granny's porch.

I need to dump out the wash tub and get everyone back to our house for the night. I'll call Mr. Blevins tomorrow.

CHAPTER 4

FRIDAY, APRIL 19, 1963

I've come to the Indian rock in the woods, past the old barn, through the field Mr. Sanders replanted today with soybeans instead of cotton. I've come to write a letter to Tom Shackleford, director of the Water Safety Division of the Alabama Conservation Department.

Down from this row of boulders, the pines and the pine-needle floor slope towards the creek. The creek seems everywhere now. In truth, it makes a big U around our house. Funny how I've never thought much about that before. With my index finger, I trace the shapes carved into the rock: a diamond, a snakehead, a human eye. Granny says they were signposts, directing Choctaw Indians to something – or some things – we don't know what.

I need to format the letter the way Mrs. Evans taught us in English class last fall.

April 19, 1963

Tom Shackleford

Director

Water Safety Division

Alabama Department of Conservation

Mr. Shackleford:

My name is Paula Keaves, and I'm writing in regards to the charges you are planning to file against my brother, James Keaves. As you know, our family has suffered a terrible tragedy. We still have trouble believing what happened is real. It seems like a nightmare from which we are incapable of waking. James is suffering more than anyone. He lost not only his mother and six of his brothers and sisters, but also his wife and mother-in-law. James cared deeply for each one of these people, and there is no way he would have intentionally put them in danger.

I stop to pull out the newspaper clipping in my dress pocket and flatten it against the rock. I hold it there so the wind can't take it, and I reread the charges against James before continuing to write.

I understand you intend to bring charges against James for overloading the boat, not equipping it with Coast Guard-approved life preservers, and for its lack of lighting. You have said the boat had questionably safe capacity for four passengers. That doesn't take into account most of the people aboard were small children. I have been told the boat was wider than most fishing vessels. Everyone was seated comfortably in the boat, with adults holding some of the smallest kids. James did not know life preservers were

required. Even if he had, we would not have been able to afford them. And as for the lighting, James and I pleaded with our mother to let us camp on the riverbank and make the journey to the island the next day. She insisted we had to go that night. I don't know why, but I have never seen her so upset. If James had not piloted the boat, she would have gotten someone else to do it.

James is not an irresponsible person. He did the best he could with what he knew. If he is guilty of anything, it is failure to convince our mother to wait until morning to make the crossing – a crime of which I am just as guilty. It seems strange to me that James should bear full responsibility for what happened when five people older than him were present and went along with the plan, which was not James's. He just happened to be the one driving the boat. Many of us, including James, would have preferred crossing the river in daylight, but we did not think lives were being risked by making the trip after dark. The water in the cove was calm, and James had already crossed the channel to the island once. He said the water was smooth there, too.

In any case, James has already paid more than anyone could possibly be expected to pay for the offenses you have listed. James is so grieved and guilt-struck that he told me he doesn't care what happens to him. He doesn't care if he is charged fines he can't pay or even if he is sent to jail. But I care. The rest of my

siblings care. We have lost half our family. Those who remain are all we have left in this world.

I beg you not to make our situation worse. I fear James will be tempted to flee if charges are brought against him, and he has no place to go. Powell is our home; almost all of our extended family live in this area. Please let us remain together during this time without the anxiety of worrying about what will happen to our brother.

Sincerely,

Paula Keaves

CHAPTER 5

SATURDAY, APRIL 20, 1963

The inside of Mr. Blevins' car is as sleek and shiny as the outside. The smooth black upholstery is perfectly stitched every few inches, creating vertical stripes on the seats and door panels. Bright metal accents, and plastic that looks like wood, are everywhere – the dash, the door handles, and window cranks. I hesitated to step inside because I knew the soles of my shoes would taint the flawless ebony carpet. Crumbs of orange-brown dirt now litter the floorboard near both my and Benny's feet. I want to pick them up, but they will disintegrate in my fingers, making the matter worse.

Benny is sitting between Mr. Blevins and me on the wide bench seat. He is staring out the windshield as we descend the mountain on Highway 35. It's a sunny day, and light filters into the car through the budding tree branches. Benny is bathed in brilliant light one second, then cast into shadow the next, and he doesn't seem to notice.

We pick up speed. Air rushes in through the windows, making the car's clean, crisp scent of newness less noticeable as we pass a small grocery store, a big cemetery, and the Pine Ridge Baptist Church. The porches of the town's narrow houses sag, and white paint peels from their siding.

"Do you all get to Fort Payne often?" Mr. Blevins asks, resuming his attempts at small talk. I feel bad about my short responses, but it was a struggle to come up with those. Before we got into the car, Mr. Blevins asked if we wanted to sit in the back seat,

where we would have more space, or the front seat, where we would be able to hear each other talk. I said the front because it might seem rude not to want to talk.

"Momma goes to Fort Payne once a year to shop, but we usually stay home," I say, realizing I've just used the present tense about Momma. I start to correct myself, then change my mind. "I went with her a couple times, but Benny's never been there."

Momma walked Highway 35 to Fort Payne every fall, once the weather cooled. The walk takes five hours. The times I walked it, I was sore for a week. We're halfway there now, and it's only been 10 minutes since we left Granny's yard. Sometimes people offered Momma a ride, but I only knew her to take someone up on it once, during a thunderstorm. She said walking to and from was something she needed to do on her own.

Momma wanted to be independent. I overheard her talking to Hazel once, right after Hazel's second baby was born and she was trying to decide whether to go back to her job at the telephone company. *You have to go back,* Momma had told her. *That job gives you some control over your life. I would do just about anything to be in your shoes.*

"What parts of town did you see?" Mr. Blevins asks.

"Momma always went to Hammer's on the edge of town – I can't remember the name of the street it's on," I say.

"That's Gault Avenue," Mr. Blevins says, glancing at me over the top of Benny's head. "So you haven't been past Hammer's to see the theatres and shops and the city park?"

"No, sir. We just went there and then headed back."

There was no time to spare if Momma wanted to make it home before dark. She made sandwiches and carried them in a small cotton-picking sack slung over her

shoulder. When I was with her, we ate them as soon as we left the clothes store. Then we started back through the valley, behind us Lookout Mountain, and in front of us our mountain looming like a distant wall.

"Peggy would love to give you both a tour," Mr. Blevins says. "She wanted to come with me, but she's in a play her school puts on every year, and they had practice this morning. She's a very enthusiastic person, my daughter. I'm not sure where she gets her energy from because neither her mother nor I have it. I told her you and Benny might want to just rest at home, so don't let her talk you into any adventures if you're not comfortable with them."

I nod my head, then remember Momma's instruction to "Always say, 'yes, sir,' and 'no, ma'am,' to grownups." Mr. Blevins' eyes are on the road anyway, so he doesn't see me. "Yes, sir," I say hastily.

We emerge from the narrow tunnel of trees into the open valley, the soil freshly plowed. The flooding washed away the seed here, too. Lookout Mountain towers before us. Fort Payne sits at its base, but we can't see the town yet because it lies on the other side of a ridge the highway cuts through at an angle up ahead. A long, gleaming structure intersects our path just before the ridge.

At first I'm confused, but then I remember what it must be: the new freeway. Daddy said it was going to go south all the way to New Orleans and north to Chattanooga, but it wasn't quite there yet. He'd gathered a crowd around him at Uncle Ed's last picnic as he explained what it was like to drive on the "raised highway" – how you drove up a ramp to get on. "No stop signs to stop you. You just keep going," he'd said. "The ramp funnels you into other lanes of cars going the same direction."

I couldn't quite picture it, but he had the full attention of the Bailey cousins and neighbors gathered round. Even Virginia Bowens, who declared she couldn't be paid to drive on a road like that and asked why in the world did her tax money need to be spent on a freeway that would do what Highway 11 already did just fine, even she was hanging on every word.

Daddy is a genius at finding out information others will want to know and then unwinding it like bait on a line, leaving his audience hungry for the next detail – and making him feel important. He's a darn good storyteller. He knows just what to embellish and what to leave out. I don't trust his tales because I know he takes liberties with the facts, but they have the desired effect on most people. He tells the stories and gossip when he hasn't had too much to drink. After a certain point, he's not good for anything but passing out or terrorizing Momma.

"Have you been to town since work started on the freeway?" Mr. Blevins asks, pointing. We're nearing the place where the freeway flies over 35, supported by giant concrete arms. The ramp flies, too, ascending up a perfectly sloped hillside to the freeway's level.

"No, sir," I say. "The last time I came down here with Momma they had cleared the trees. That was all."

Mr. Blevins takes a hand from the steering wheel and indicates the raised roadway as we pass under it. "For now, this chunk of it doesn't mean much. It can't even take you to Chattanooga or Gadsden."

I have only vague ideas about what these places are like. Moon Pies are made in Chattanooga, and I like their marshmallow sweet taste. There's a famous waterfall in

Gadsden. When I was eight, Momma and Daddy took a trip to Chattanooga. Daddy had worked with cousin Rachel's daddy and uncle all summer, delivering the handmade furniture Rachel's family built to stores all over Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee. The money was burning a hole in Daddy's pocket, like Granny said it always did on the rare occasion it actually found his pocket.

They were just supposed to be gone overnight, but my parents didn't come back for almost a week. There was no word and nothing we could do but wait – and worry. It turned out they'd been in a car accident and both had gone to the hospital. I worried more. When they got home, Momma's arm was in a sling and her nose was swollen and bruised. Daddy had cuts on his left arm and a big bump on his head. His summer earnings were gone.

Momma and Daddy said Chattanooga was a big, busy city, and there's a train that runs straight up the side of Lookout Mountain there. To me, though, it was a place you might not come back from.

We head through the gap in the ridge, and water spills out of the rough rock face, sparkles in the sunlight, splashes into the ditch below. The earth is still draining from the flood. Somehow small pine trees and vines with little white flowers grow out of the stone crevices.

A big flat area appears on our right. A bridge leads to it from the highway, and a few rundown cabins and overgrowth fill the space.

"That's the old Civilian Conservation Corps campground," Mr. Blevins says, gesturing toward the clearing as if he had heard my thoughts. "Do you all know about the CCC?"

"I learned about it in history class," I say and repeat what I've heard in lectures, what I've read in books. "It was part of President Roosevelt's New Deal during the Great Depression and provided jobs for young men, who sent most of the money they made home to their families. The projects they worked on were supposed to conserve natural resources on government-owned lands."

Mr. Blevins takes a quick, sidelong look at me and seems to be resisting a smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

"That's right," he says. "Do you know about the work the CCC did here?"

"No, sir," I say, feeling a bit foolish. Why hadn't Mrs. Gilbert or any of my other history teachers told us about that? It seemed like they were always in a hurry to get through the Depression so they could cover World War II by the end of the school year.

"They built DeSoto State Park up on Lookout Mountain," Mr. Blevins says. "People had been going there for decades to swim in the river that runs on top of the mountain and to picnic by the waterfalls, but the CCC made it into a real park, with roads and a lodge and trails. I hope you can see it sometime."

"Yes, that would be nice," I say, not really meaning it. What matters now is bringing Benny back from wherever his mind has retreated, keeping James out of jail, and making sure Rhonda and June are all right.

The road splits and we veer left, heading for the intersection with Gault Avenue, which, the signs point out, also happens to be Highway 11. A Dairy Queen sits on a triangular island amid the curving roadways, and across from it is a football field marked off in white lines.

"That's the Fort Payne High School football field," Mr. Blevins says, and I

suddenly realize I haven't spoken to Benny since we got in the car. I feel like it's important for people to talk to him as usual, even if he doesn't seem to hear.

"Benny, look," I say. "Wouldn't it be nice to run or throw a football there?"

Sometimes Rachel's parents would drive us over to our school after church on Sundays and let the kids run around outside. They brought a football and a basketball, too, and Benny and Will spent all afternoon playing without ever eating.

I should have thought more before I spoke. If Benny did register what I said, he's probably thinking about Will now. And I had hoped this trip would give him new things to think about.

I touch his knee. The traffic light changes to green, and we turn onto Gault. Hammer's is up ahead on the left, a short brick building with a small parking lot in front of it and a green metal awning. A sign with a drawing of a hammer and the store's name in orange-red letters against a white background is attached to the awning. I'm not sure what a hammer has to do with clothes, fabric, bed sheets, and shoes. Momma didn't know, either. It's hard to believe she'll never come here again, that Jack, Maura, Wren, Rosa, Will, and Caroline will never need new outfits again.

Hot tears form behind my eyelids and I jerk myself back against the seat so the wind can cool me down.

A swirling red, white, and blue pole hangs by a barbershop door.

"Look at that," I say to Benny, pointing and trying again. "That spinning post is where people go to get their hair cut."

Not that we would ever do that. Momma or Granny always cut our hair on Granny's front porch. Granny pulled teeth there, too. Kids' teeth, grown-ups'. If you

lived in our part of Powell and had a toothache for more than a week, you were going to end up on Granny's porch eventually. She's got fingers small and almost as strong as the pliers she uses.

We pass a gray, two-story building with "City Hall" in official-looking capital letters across the top of its facade. A red brick building with an American flag on a tall pole is next. "U.S. Post Office" announce the gold letters attached to the brick. Maybe I can mail my letter there.

We approach an intersection with four tall buildings on the corners. Signs jut out from two of them. One sign reads, "Owen Hardware and Furniture," with the letters in "Hardware" stacked vertically. I count the floors of the building coming up on our right – four. It's Quin Hotel, the tallest building I've ever seen. The McCurdy mansion in Rainsville is only three stories high. I move away from the window, closer to Benny.

"Downtown is always crowded on Saturdays," Mr. Blevins says. "Lots of farmers and their families come to shop."

The sidewalks are full with men wearing overalls, men wearing button-down shirts and dress pants, women and girls in colorful dresses, boys in blue jeans, and small children holding their mothers' hands. Except for the men who are farmers, everyone's shoes look so clean. I bet they've never walked a dirt road in them. The crumbs of dirt from home are still on the car's floor. The traffic slows and the flow of people moves like its own stream beside us.

"We have two movie theatres," Mr. Blevins says. "The Strand, coming up on your right, is the smaller one, and the DeKalb Theatre is a block ahead on the left."

The Strand blends in with the surrounding buildings, but the DeKalb Theatre's

massive sign – flashing with green, pink, and golden-white lights even though it's daytime – is impossible to miss.

"We'll pass the city park to the right soon," Mr. Blevins says. "It used to be the grounds of the DeKalb Hotel, which was across the street. It had 180 rooms and was the fanciest thing in this part of the state until it burned in 1918. Now it's the Piggly Wiggly shopping center." He gestures toward the window.

A long, low building stamped with "Piggly Wiggly" in bright red letters appears. It's hard to imagine a 180-room hotel there, but the Piggly Wiggly looks fancy enough to me, despite the silly name, despite not one pig wiggling nearby. The large parking lot out front is freshly paved and full of cars, many of them as new and clean as Mr. Blevins'. Women with strange hairdos and make-upped faces push brimming silver carts through glass doors that open by themselves. The building is enormous. What could be taking up all that space? The front of Mr. Traylor's store is just a wooden door flanked by two square windows, one on each side – and its rough-hewn boards are worn gray. Upstairs is an apartment Mr. Traylor shares with his wife. The painted sign over the door is so faded it's not really legible, but that's okay because anyone needing to buy food knows where to go.

On the other side of the street, steps lead down to a park, and a brightly painted fountain spurts streams of water. People are sitting on blankets they've spread on the grass beneath the branches of large trees.

The things here are too much to take in.

"We're almost home," Mr. Blevins says as we turn left at an intersection. "I should have asked already: Do you have any questions for me?"

I want to ask him more about the health clinic, the doctors, the counselor, and whether he thinks they'll know what's wrong with Benny. But I can't ask that with Benny sitting right here. So I ask the other thing on my mind.

"I need to find the address for the Water Safety Division of the Alabama Department of Conservation. I think maybe it's in Montgomery. I wrote a letter to the director – a Mr. Tom Shackleford – because I read in a newspaper article that he's planning to file charges against James. I just need to mail the letter, but I don't know where to send it."

"Hmm," Mr. Blevins says. "I think I can find what you need. It was smart of you to write a letter. Did you bring it with you?"

"Yes, sir. I thought maybe I could mail it here."

"You certainly can," he says. "It should get to Montgomery in just a few days."

We are in an area full of houses. I didn't think anything could surprise me after the drive down Gault Avenue, but I don't know what to make of this. Almost every corner is occupied by a house as big as the McCurdy mansion. Even the smaller houses in between are big, and they're all freshly painted, either white or cheerful colors like yellow, blue or green. The front yards have grass, and it's trimmed so even and close to the ground. There's no way it was cut with a scythe, the way Uncle Ed keeps the grass in his yard down. Some of the yards are enclosed with little white picket fences or black iron ones. Behind and to the side of many of the houses are smaller houses painted the same color. Cars are parked on the ground floor of some of them, and stairs lead to second floors. No wonder the cars are so clean. They have their own houses.

We pull into the driveway of a green, two-story house with a big porch. There's a

balcony outside a door on the second floor. Mr. Blevins has a car house, too.

"Well, here we are," Mr. Blevins says as the car comes to a stop, and he turns the ignition off, pulls the keys out, making them jingle.

He turns to look at me and Benny. His face is earnest, and I brace myself for the words so many well-meaning people have said: *Everything's going to be all right.* I think I'll scream if I hear them one more time. Nothing will *ever* be right again. "I wish I could say something that would lessen your pain, but nothing will make that better now," he says. "Paula, your grandmother told me how well you're taking care of Benny and your sisters, and it's so admirable. But don't think you have to shoulder all the burden on your own. Judy and I want to help in any way we can."

I don't know what to say, so I just nod.

Mr. Blevins turns and opens his door. "Judy said she would have lunch waiting for us."

I push open the door on my side of the car, careful not to let it tap the wall. When I touch the ground, it feels as if it's moving. The world isn't quite still.

"Time to get out, Benny," I say, giving his hand a gentle tug. He scoots across the seat, and I hold his hand as he steps onto the ground. We walk toward the back of the car and look up at the main house. I realize Mr. Blevins' fine automobile isn't out of place anymore. We are.

CHAPTER 6

SATURDAY, APRIL 20, 1963

I'm still holding Benny's hand when I lower my eyes from the second-story gables and three chimneys I counted atop the Blevins' roof to see that Mr. Blevins is holding open the gate in a white-picket fence and waiting for us to walk through.

"We can get your suitcase from the trunk later," he says. "We'll eat dinner first, and then you two can get settled in."

"Let's go," I whisper to Benny, and he follows me, single file. We pause on a red-brick path that runs alongside the house as Mr. Blevins latches the gate and then leads us to the porch. Flowers bloom on the house side of the path, and the close-cropped grass I'd noticed in other yards grows on our left.

I'm suddenly nervous about meeting the woman and girl who live here, even though I've probably met them before, at Uncle Ed's picnics, where there are so many people the introductions blur together. I didn't know how they lived. What must they have thought about our dirt yard and tiny, ramshackle house? Another part of me wonders why such a big house is needed for three people, and this thought makes me feel more confident, makes me curious enough about what's inside to willingly follow Mr. Blevins as he steps onto the porch. The invisible rope tied round my waist, pulling me back toward the car and everything I know, slackens a little.

"You can stay in the guest room we have upstairs," Mr. Blevins says as we walk

around a corner. The porch wraps from the side of the house to the front. “It’s right next to Peggy’s room and has twin beds. I hope you’ll be comfortable.”

“Thank you. I’m sure we will,” I say, still struggling for the right, polite words.

He opens the screen door, then the wooden door beyond, and the smell of frying chicken spills into the evening air. As I step inside, trying to figure out why the heavy front door and windows are closed on such a warm day, cool air surrounds me, turning the thin layer of sweat I hadn’t realized was on my skin into an icy envelope. I look at Mr. Blevins, confused. “Why...what’s making it cold in here?” I ask, forgetting to be polite.

His eyebrows come together and two vertical lines appear between them for a brief moment, then he smiles. “It’s the air conditioner,” he says. “We had it installed a couple years ago. See that box in the window?” We’re in a hallway with a staircase in front of us, and he points through a wide doorway on our left to a room with a fireplace and windows on each side of it. The one on the right is raised, and a tan and woodgrain contraption with silver knobs fills the opening. It makes a humming sound. “That’s one of the units,” Mr. Blevins continues. “We have one in the kitchen and one upstairs, too. They keep it cool and the humidity down in the summer – and sometimes spring and fall, too.”

I nod and look at Benny. He’s staring down at the dark, glossy wood floor. I’ve never seen floors like these, though I imagine the floors in Uncle Ed’s house could look like this, if the scratches and stains were gone and a coat of whatever the glossy stuff is were painted on. Benny seems to be looking through the floor, as usual. I rub the back of his arm.

Movement to the right catches my eye, and I look through a columned entryway to the dining room and see a woman pushing open a swinging door with her back, both her hands occupied with food dishes. She smiles when she sees us, and Mr. Blevins strides quickly through the dining room and takes the big bowl of mashed potatoes from her left hand. “Let me help,” he says.

I take a few steps toward the dining room and pull Benny with me.

Mr. Blevins puts the bowl on a long, narrow piece of furniture against the wall closest to us, and Mrs. Blevins places a platter of bread next to it. She has dark auburn hair that’s streaked with white and almost touches her shoulders, and the skin below her blue eyes crinkles when she smiles. I judge she and Mr. Blevins are at least ten years older than Momma, maybe fifteen.

“Paula and Benny, I’m so glad you’ve come to stay with us,” she says. “Dinner is almost ready.” Mrs. Blevins is much shorter than her husband; the top of her head is level with his chin. “What would y’all like to drink? We have tea, orange juice, milk, and water, of course.”

“I’d like water,” I say, because I don’t want to ask for anything more expensive when they’re already doing so much for us. She’s looking at Benny now. I remember how much Benny liked the orange juice Granny made for us one time, after her sister who lives in Memphis gave her a giant bag of oranges for Christmas. “Benny likes orange juice,” I say.

“You’re here!” a voice rings out behind us. Benny and I are still standing in the area between the hall and the dining room. I turn and see Peggy on the stairs. I remember her because of her hair, which is a brighter shade of red than her mother’s. Mr. Blevins

walks back into the hall as Peggy approaches.

"I don't know if you all have been formally introduced," Mr. Blevins says. "Paula and Benny, this is my daughter, Peggy."

"Hi," I say.

Peggy's round face beams at us. Mr. Blevins is right: energy seems to radiate from her. She looks from me to Benny, then back at me. Benny returns her gaze, seeming more alert than usual.

"We're going to have a wonderful time," she says.

I don't know what to say to that. Having a "wonderful time" wasn't a purpose of the trip, as far as I knew.

Mrs. Blevins rescues me. "Peggy, you can show them the guest room, and y'all can wash your hands in the bathroom upstairs, if you like, while I bring out the chicken and drinks," she says.

"Right," Peggy replies. She heads back through the hall to the stairs, and I follow, tugging Benny by the hand.

"All the bedrooms and the bathroom are up here," she says.

At the top of the stairs there's a hallway similar to the one downstairs, with four doors in the surrounding walls and a window with another humming air-conditioning unit. The doors to all the rooms are open, I suppose to let the cool air circulate.

"We don't usually run the air conditioner when we're not upstairs," Peggy says. She must have noticed me looking at it. "But we knew y'all were coming, and we wanted you to be comfortable."

I don't think anyone has ever worried so much about my or Benny's comfort. The

attention makes me uncomfortable.

Peggy goes to a doorway on the left side of the hall. “This is the guest room,” she says.

I peek inside. It’s a large room with two wooden beds, a nightstand between them, and a chest of drawers. The walls are painted beige, the ceiling is high, like in the rest of the house, and light floods in from two windows. I almost don’t feel like I’m indoors.

“It’s going to be so nice having someone close to my own age in the house,” Peggy says. “Mother and Father were going to fill the bedrooms with kids, but I was all they got.” She shrugs. “I always wanted brothers and sisters. What’s it like?”

What *is* it like? Or what is it like now, now that six of them are gone? I haven’t really thought about it. I still have four siblings, which is four more than Peggy has, but even so it feels like less than half a family, especially without Momma.

Peggy must have read my thoughts on my face. Her hand flies to cover her mouth. “Paula, I’m so sorry,” she says. “How could I have said something so stupid? I’m always speaking first and thinking later. Father says it’s something I have to work on. I try, but it’s so *hard*. I don’t think I’m getting any better. Not one bit.” She sighs. “And here I am, complaining again about something trivial, when you’re going through something so terrible I can’t begin to understand it. Father said we should try to take your minds off what happened. I guess I took mine off it, too.”

“It’s okay,” I say, and I mean it. I know the smile I give her doesn’t reach my eyes. I’m sad, but I feel bad for Peggy, too. I think she might cry. Instead, she reaches out and gives me a warm, shoulder-squeezing hug. So many people hugged me before and after the funeral, but only a few of those hugs felt as genuine as this.

Peggy finally pulls away. “I’ll show you all the bathroom, now,” she says, turning and crossing the hall.

I think I might like Peggy. At least she isn’t scared of us, like the kids at school. She’s treating us like we’re normal.

*

The food is good. Maybe better than Granny’s cooking, but I wouldn’t dare tell her that. The chicken is crispy on the outside and juicy on the inside. The green beans are flavored with bacon, and the mashed potatoes are buttery and whipped smooth. After a week of barely eating, my appetite is back. Benny has almost cleaned his plate, too, and is working on his second glass of orange juice.

The conversation has centered around the high school play – *Romeo and Juliet* – Peggy practiced for this morning, with her commentary about the drama teacher’s direction and her laments about the poor casting and the limitations of her own role, as Juliet’s nurse. I can’t help thinking that casting decision, at least, was appropriate. From what I remember, the nurse was overly talkative.

Mr. and Mrs. Blevins hear Peggy out and are positive and encouraging.

“If this were a weekday, we’d go to the den and watch the Huntley-Brinkley Report now,” Mr. Blevins says. “Have you seen it, Paula?”

“No, sir,” I reply.

“It’s a news show with one reporter in New York City and another in Washington, D.C. I think you would like it. But it doesn’t come on over the weekend. So

we just skip straight to the newspapers on Saturdays and Sundays."

"You wouldn't believe the number of newspapers we get," Peggy says. "Fort Payne's *Times-Journal*, *The Birmingham News*, *The Chattanooga Times*, the Huntsville and Gadsden papers, even *The New York Times* and *Chicago Defender*. And they read them all." She looks at her parents, who are nodding in agreement.

"We want to know what's going on in the world," Mrs. Blevins says in their defense. "We're lucky we can be so informed."

"Do you know many people with television sets up on the mountain?" Mr. Blevins asks. "Our cousin Rachel has one," I say, "and Uncle Ed." I don't add that we mainly watch *Bonanza* and *The Andy Griffith Show*, not the news, when we get a chance to see TV. "Granny listens to the news on her radio."

Mr. Blevins nods. "What about newspapers?"

"Granny gets the *Sand Mountain News*," I say. It's a small paper published in Rainsville. I think she mainly uses it to keep up with local gossip, not to stay informed about what's happening in the bigger world, but I keep that to myself, too.

"Peggy, you could help Paula get her suitcase out of the car while your mother and I wash the dishes," Mr. Blevins says.

I'm not sure what to think about Mr. Blevins' participation in domestic duties – or about the respectful way he addresses Mrs. Blevins, almost as if they are acquaintances at church rather than husband and wife. He fixed his own plate at the "sideboard," the word they used for the table where the food was laid out. I've never known a married man to do that. Wives always prepare plates for their husbands before giving a thought to their own nourishment. Then he took empty glasses to the kitchen to replenish them, and now

he's planning to help wash the dishes.

I try to imagine Daddy doing any of those things, but the effort only makes me recall the night Momma burned the meat from a deer Daddy shot. The police officer who eventually showed up, thirty minutes after Daddy peeled out of the driveway, wanted to take Momma to the hospital.

"Paula, do you think it would be okay if I got Benny settled in the den?" Mrs. Blevins asks. "It's right next to the kitchen, so I can keep an eye on him while we do the dishes."

I snap back to the present, to the beautiful, wood-paneled dining room where Mrs. Blevins is looking at me, expecting an answer.

"Yes...yes, I think that will work," I say, though I'm not really sure I should let Benny out of my sight.

Everyone begins pushing their chairs back from the long table, and Mrs. Blevins comes around to our side, bends down and speaks to Benny, who is still sitting.

"Benny, would you like to see our den?" she asks. "It has carpet, like a thick rug that covers the whole floor, and I can turn on a TV show for you."

Benny moves his legs to the side of his chair and starts to rise. I touch his shoulder as he stands and say quietly, close to his ear, "I'll be there soon."

He follows Mrs. Blevins through the swinging door into a bright yellow kitchen and disappears when the door flaps shut.

*

Ten minutes later, Peggy and I are sitting on the den carpet, which is made of yellow and green yarn. She's right, it is incredibly soft. I want to sprawl out on it the way Peggy is doing, but I'm embarrassed to do that with Mr. and Mrs. Blevins in the room. Plus, Peggy is wearing lime-green pants, and I'm in a dress. So I lean against the chair Benny is sitting in, a copy of *The Birmingham News* in my lap.

"I only scan the papers," Peggy told me when we walked into the den. "I read what seems interesting. I don't read every page like Mother and Father do."

Mr. Blevins is wearing gold-rimmed reading glasses and sitting in a dark green recliner, his feet propped up and a stack of unfolded and re-folded papers on a side table next to him. Mrs. Blevins sits on the yellow-and-green, flower-printed couch, her own stacks of read and unread newsprint occupying the empty cushion beside her.

"This looks interesting," Mr. Blevins says. "There's a mailman who's going to walk from Chattanooga to Jackson, Mississippi, to deliver a letter to the governor there. He's going to come through Fort Payne on Highway 11, right down Gault Avenue."

"Why would he do that when he could just put the letter in the mail?" Peggy asks.

"I think he's trying to emulate the freedom riders and peace walkers," Mr. Blevins says. "He's riding a bus to Chattanooga from Baltimore. He spent his childhood in Mississippi, and he wants the governor to make sure black people have equal rights and can vote. Here, you can read it."

Mr. Blevins pushes down the recliner's footrest and stands. He's taken off the suit jacket he was wearing earlier and unbuttoned the top button of his white dress shirt. He's a large man, but mainly because of his frame. His shoulders are broad, and his belly protrudes only a little.

Peggy, who's been lying on her stomach, her elbows propped so she can read, rolls over and sits up as Mr. Blevins crosses the room and hands her the paper. She moves to sit next to me.

"We can read it together," she says, spreading the Chattanooga paper across our legs. "It's this one." She points to a small article on the bottom right corner of the page.

Baltimore integrationist walking from Chattanooga to Mississippi

William Lewis Moore, 35, a postal worker from Baltimore, Md., arrived in Chattanooga today by bus and began a walk to Jackson, Miss., intending to deliver a letter to that state's governor demanding civil rights for Negroes.

"I am not making this walk to demonstrate either federal rights or states' rights, but individual rights," Moore wrote in a letter to this publication's editor. "I am doing it for the South, hopefully to illustrate that the most basic of freedoms of peaceful protest is not altogether extinguished down there."

Moore set out from the Greyhound bus station on a trek of roughly 350 miles with only a few belongings in a cart he pulled behind him. He said he plans to walk 40 miles each day on U.S. Highway 11 all the way to the Mississippi capital. He anticipates arriving in Fort Payne, Ala., tomorrow night, walking through Gadsden on Wednesday and making it to Birmingham by Saturday.

"I think Gov. Barnett acted badly last year when he refused to allow James Meredith, a black man, to register for classes at Ole Miss," Moore commented this morning. "The governor had no right to keep a resident of Mississippi who'd passed his

entrance exams out of a public college."

Moore's letter to Gov. Ross Barnett follows.

Dear Governor Barnett:

I have always had a warm place in my heart for Mississippi, the land of my childhood and my ancestors. I dislike the reputation this state has acquired as being the most backward and most bigoted in the land. Those who truly love Mississippi must work to change this image.

Frankly, I do not know which is worse – to be raised to believe that one should be happy to live in poverty and die twice as fast as the white man and to be told to reject the ideas of those who tell you democracy means the right to vote whatever the color of one's skin; or is it worse to be raised as members of a sort of 'master race' which fights a losing battle to preserve injustice with barbaric laws and police state methods.

The white man cannot be truly free himself until all men have their rights. Each is dependent upon the other. Do not go down in infamy as one who fought democracy for all which you have not the power to prevent.

Be gracious. Give more than is immediately demanded of you. Make certain that when the Negro gets his rights and his vote that he does not in the process learn to treat the white man with

the contempt and disdain that, unfortunately, some of us now treat him."

"Whoa," Peggy says, looking up at her father, who is looking back at us both from his recliner.

I feel the same way. The letter sounds big, important, even though I don't understand much of it.

"What do you think of what Mr. Moore is doing?" Mr. Blevins asks.

He's talking to Peggy, but I try to silently answer the question, too. The parts about voting rights confuse me. I thought everyone – or all adults, anyway – already had the right to vote. I've learned about the Constitution and its amendments in school. The Fifteenth Amendment gave men the right to vote, no matter their race, and the Nineteenth gave women the right to vote. I don't know any Negroes, but Mr. Moore is right – Daddy and his friends definitely talk about them with "contempt and disdain." That's how Daddy treated Momma, too. She didn't deserve it, so I don't judge anybody just because Daddy speaks ill of them.

Peggy doesn't answer immediately. She's thinking before she speaks, I realize, so she wasn't right about mixing up those things *all* the time.

"I think it's a brave thing to do," she says. "An admirable thing... and maybe a dangerous thing."

Mr. Blevins seems to be thinking hard, too. The creases between his eyebrows are back. "I agree on all three counts," he says. "You know, Mr. Moore will probably walk right by the dry-cleaning plant Monday morning. Would you all like to go to work with

me and watch him walk by? You could go into school late, Peggy. I'll make sure you're excused."

"Are you serious?" Peggy exclaims. "We have to say 'hello' to him. How could we not?"

"It's a plan, then," Mr. Blevins says.

"Have you been following the civil rights movement, Paula?"

I shake my head. "No, sir."

I'm not even sure what it is. I heard Hazel one time talk about "troublemakers" from up North coming down here to cause friction between the races and to try and make us do things their way. Based on the article and what Mr. Blevins said, maybe what she was talking about has something to do with the civil rights movement. If so, it sounds like Hazel and the Blevins have different perspectives on it.

"You haven't heard of the freedom riders?" Peggy asks.

I shake my head.

"Or Jim Crow laws?" she continues, her eyes wide.

"No," I say, tucking my chin and feeling evermore ignorant, like the kid who's called on in class and doesn't have a clue about the answer. It's an unfamiliar feeling. I almost always know the answer, but I never raise my hand.

"Well, that doesn't make you any different from a lot of people around here," Peggy says, then sighs. "But we have so much to tell you."

CHAPTER 7

SUNDAY, APRIL 21, 1963

The streets of Fort Payne are so empty compared to yesterday that I imagine this is what the town would look like after the rapture. Peggy and I seem to be among the few souls left wandering about. We pass a few kids playing in one of the narrow streets that separate backyards – Peggy calls these "alleys" – but for the most part the houses are quiet, the porches and yards vacant.

"Where is everyone?" I ask, whispering.

Peggy shrugs her shoulders. "After church, most families have a big lunch and then take naps or watch TV. Everything's closed downtown, so there's no place to go. And no one does laundry or cuts grass or even has their help do those things because it's the Sabbath." I nod, wondering what "their help" is. Peggy said it so matter-of-factly that I would feel foolish for asking.

As we walk beneath the storefront awnings on Gault Avenue, I peer into picture windows. The interiors are dark, and I can see only a few feet beyond the glossy-painted sills. The mannequins, toys, and household goods look lonely and forgotten.

Benny and I didn't go to church with the Blevins. They'd invited us, of course, but had given me the option to say no, and I was grateful for that. If churches in Fort Payne are anything like they are on Sand Mountain, visitors are curiosities that command the entire congregation's attention and require so much welcoming that you can tell most

of the guests wish they could melt into the floor. I couldn't handle a church full of eyes on us again – or the questions that would be asked. And I have no idea how to politely explain Benny's lack of responsiveness. I'm not eager to hear a sermon again, either, not after Preacher Nelson tried to make sense of what happened to my family using words I suspect even he knew sounded hollow. "Rest assured things happen for a reason" was the gist of it. I heard Charlotte's prayers from across the water that night. She must have been hanging onto the overturned boat. Whatever reason God had for not answering, it wasn't good enough. Who and what can I trust now? I feel my cheeks burning. What would Momma think if she could hear my thoughts?

"…and that's Stallworth's Drug Store across the street," Peggy is saying. I haven't been paying attention. "We usually go there after the movies because they have the best root-beer floats. Haroldson's has a soda fountain, too – it's farther up on this side of the street."

I try to think of something intelligent to say. I've only tasted soda twice, and I'm not sure what a soda fountain is. I imagine the fountain I saw in the park yesterday spouting streams of dark-colored soda into the big, round pool at its base.

Peggy barely pauses, so I'm saved. "And here's Elmore's Five and Dime. It's fun to look around in there."

The entire storefront is glass, and it insets in the middle to make an entryway that leads to double glass doors. Bright bolts of fabric, framed pictures, stacks of decorative boxes, some toys and games, magazines and records fill a deep shelf on the other side of the window… so many new things in one place. A miniature porcelain village right on the other side of the glass contains a church, school, train station, stores and houses. I feel

like I'm standing in a larger version of it.

Occasionally a car passes, now that we're on the main road through town, and I keep glancing behind me for Benny. It feels strange not to be looking after him. Mrs. Blevins talked me into leaving him under her watch at the small table in the Blevins' sunny kitchen. He was staring at the notepad and colored pencils on the table, but still hadn't touched them. I spent the morning reading the family's newspapers, mainly the Fort Payne ones. There were stories about the flooding across the county last week. More than eight inches of rain fell in three days. I was right that most cotton and corn farmers will have to replant. And parts of the town flooded, too, although I haven't seen any evidence of that on our walk. Photos showed cars, kids, and buildings standing in two feet of water. The most interesting part of the papers might have been the advertisements. If you just go by those, people here are primarily concerned with the "Carnival of Fashion" at Penney's, choosing from a slew of automobiles that "blend beauty and action," getting the best deal possible on "luncheon" meat, and outfitting their homes with new toilets and giant ice boxes called "refrigerators." I gave the comics to Benny, but he didn't touch them.

Before leaving for church, Mrs. Blevins spoke directly to Benny, kneeling a little so she was at eye level with him where he sat beside me on the couch in the den. "Is there anything you would like to read or look at while we're away?" she asked. "Peggy has lots of books from when she was younger. Or maybe you'd like to watch TV or draw something."

Why hadn't I thought of trying to get Benny to draw? He's always been good at it.

Benny stared through her, and Mrs. Blevins looked toward me. “He does like to draw,” I offered. She unfolded a slim little table in front of Benny and placed the notepad and colored pencils on it.

Peggy and I are nearing the intersection with the tall buildings. Featherston’s, a clothing store, is across the street, next to the hardware store on the corner. Mannequins sporting the plaid and flowered “practical prints” advertised in the Fort Payne *Times-Journal* decorate the window. First Street crosses Gault Avenue here, and it’s twice as wide as most of the other streets we’ve crossed. I step off the sidewalk onto the pavement. Both the concrete and the asphalt are almost impossibly clean. I’m walking through a place that isn’t quite real.

“It looks like someone sweeps the sidewalks and the road every day,” I say to Peggy.

“That’s Mr. Thomas,” she replies. “He does sweep every day – except Sunday.”

“Why does he do it?” I ask. I don’t like sweeping our front yard, and it’s a heap smaller than downtown Fort Payne.

“The store owners and people walking by give him tips,” Peggy says. “Mother and Father say it’s a crime the city doesn’t pay him. But he’s a black man, and he gets by fine on the tips, so I guess the city leaders think they don’t have to.”

It was smart of him to create his own job, I think.

“Where did the streets flood?” I ask. “It doesn’t look like that happened here.”

“No, that’s a couple blocks east,” Peggy says, pointing toward Lookout Mountain, “near the Monroe Branch. People call it a stream, but it’s really just a wide ditch that runs all the way through town. It’s the low point between the ridge and the mountain. But

anyway, it overflowed, and places on both sides of it flooded. There was a bunch of debris left in piles in some of the streets – tree branches, even lumber from the Builder's Supply Store. The city brought in big machines to take it away. It was too much for Mr. Thomas to tackle." Peggy smiles as if she's imagining him trying.

"We can walk down there if you want, after we drop off your letter at the post office," she continues.

I don't want to see any rushing water, not even in a ditch. "That's okay," I say.

We pass another two-story building – this one with two shops on the first floor and lace-like metal decorations framing the bottom of its four second-floor windows – and then I recognize the red-brick post office I noticed from the car. Its slanting, green-tin roof, with a little tower and weather vane on top, make it stand out from the boxy buildings we've passed so far.

I clutch my letter to Tom Shackleford in both hands and wonder if I should have made a copy. What if it gets lost in the mail? But then, how would I even know if that happened?

Mr. Blevins had managed to find the address for the Water Safety Division of the Alabama Department of Conservation in less than a day. Mrs. Blevins gave me a long white envelope with a stamp on it, and I tucked my folded pages inside, then copied onto its front the address Mr. Blevins had handed me on a lined piece of yellow paper.

Around the side of the post office, there's a small parking lot. The letter box is between the parking lot and the building. I pull the handle and let my letter fall into the darkness. The flittering white rectangle seems so insubstantial. I can't see where it falls, but I hear it land. When I turn, Peggy is watching me. Her face is serious.

"I hope it works," she says.

"Me, too," I say. An image of James being handcuffed and taken to jail flashes across my mind.

Peggy and I walk back on the other side of Gault Avenue.

"How is your brother James doing?"

"I think he's okay," I say, but I'm not sure it's true. "I haven't seen him since the rest of us went back to school Wednesday. He said he was going back to work at the church pew company in Rainsville."

"Does he live far from you?" Peggy asks.

"No, not too far," I say. "On the other side of the creek by our house and about a quarter mile downstream."

James and his wife had been renting a room at the back of Hazel's house. Hazel is a cousin of ours some way, but I could never remember exactly. James's wife, who was younger than me by a year, babysat Hazel's kids all day while Hazel worked at the telephone company. James is living in that room by himself now. I asked him to stay with us, but he knows Daddy is hanging around the house, so he won't. I don't know how to explain all this to Peggy.

When we get to Second Street North, the street the Blevins live on, Peggy asks if I want to take the long way around and walk through Union Park. I don't want to disappoint her – she enjoys showing off her town – but I feel bad for leaving Benny alone with people who are practically strangers to him, even if they are extremely nice.

"You want to get back to Benny, don't you?" she asks.

"I'd like to see the park sometime," I say, "but, yeah, I'm worried Benny might

think I've left him."

"I understand," Peggy says. "Let's head back."

We cross Gault Avenue and start up a sloped sidewalk that leads away from downtown. The area with houses extends up the ridge a bit. Peggy's house is several blocks up Second Street. Maybe it's because I feel guilty for cutting the tour short – and for being a dull companion in general – but I think I need to pretend interest in something. I look around. We're approaching an intersection with Grand Avenue. Tall, narrow houses loom on the corners. They have two full stories and gabled roofs that create partial third floors. I think the architecture might be called "Victorian," but I'm not sure how I would know that. Maybe from one of the books in the school library.

"Why are there such big, fancy houses on the corners and smaller, plainer houses in between?" I ask. The "smaller, plainer" houses are like mansions compared to my family's tiny, unpainted shack.

"Oh," Peggy says, "I guess that does seem odd. I was so used to it growing up here that I was ten before I even thought to ask. It's because of the Boom Days. Or the Bust Days more like – but people would rather talk about the boom. Coal and iron ore – the main ingredients for making steel – were discovered here in the 1880s. A bunch of investors from the Northeast rushed down and founded the city in 1889. There was a town here before that, but it wasn't really official. They planned out all the streets and lots and made it just like a New England town. I haven't been to New England, but that's what I'm told."

Peggy stops and turns toward the houses on our side of the street. "That's why the yards are smaller than they are in most Southern towns." She makes a gesture that

encompasses three tiny front yards. Some houses barely fit on their designated bits of earth. “And why our park is called Union Park. They built the big hotel and the Opera House, too. Anyway, the investors and the Coal and Iron Company leaders, and other people who were doing well built their houses first, thinking houses like them would be filled in later. But then it turned out there wasn’t as much coal and iron ore as they thought, and the quality wasn’t good, either. Better coal and ore were found in Birmingham, so the Yankees packed up and left. Eventually we became a mill town – they don’t call us the Sock Capital of the World for nothing – and the mill workers and shop owners built these smaller houses.” I notice Peggy’s bright white, turned-down socks and wonder where the handed-down pair I’m wearing was made.

“That’s interesting,” I say, and I partly mean it. The fact the place has struggled some makes it seem less like the perfect village set in Elmore’s window.

A short, dark-skinned man rounds the next corner walking quickly, a paper bag in one arm, and Peggy, who’s walking a little ahead of me on the narrow sidewalk, steps off to the right. I do the same.

“Hello, Mr. Davis,” Peggy says.

The smile of recognition that was forming on the man’s face clouds over. He removes his hat, glances quickly over both his shoulders, then says, “Miss Peggy, you know you aren’t supposed to call me that. You shouldn’t be stepping off that sidewalk, neither. You’re going to get in trouble, and get me in trouble.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Peggy says. “You came around the corner so fast I didn’t have time to think anything different.”

“Just be more careful next time,” the man says, his voice softening.

He looks at me and seems thankful for a reason to change the subject. “Who is this?”

“Paula, this is Rob Allen Davis,” Peggy says. “He works with Father at the dry-cleaning plant. Rob Allen, this is Paula Keaves. She’s a cousin who lives up in Powell. I did the introduction right, didn’t I?”

“Yes, Miss Peggy, you did,” Mr. Davis says, “and I almost led you astray.”

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Paula,” he continues.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” I say, though I’m not even sure what words are okay to use. Mr. Davis doesn’t extend his hand, so I stay put next to Peggy.

“Where are you going in such a hurry on a Sunday?” Peggy asks Mr. Davis.

“I’m on an errand for Mallie,” he says. “Mallie’s my wife,” he explains, looking at me. “She’s helping Mrs. Putnam get ready for a Home Demonstration Club meeting tomorrow. Mrs. Putnam was sick on Friday and thought she was going to cancel the meeting, but she’s feeling better and called Mallie over. They found a stain they can’t get out of a tablecloth, so I’m taking it down to the plant. It’s a good day for walking, but they’ll expect me back soon.”

“We won’t hold you up,” Peggy says.

“Enjoy the rest of the afternoon, Miss Peggy and Miss Paula. And give my respects to your parents,” he says to Peggy, then returns his short-brimmed hat to his head.

When we’re out of earshot of Mr. Davis, Peggy says, “Well, I guess some people do have their help work on the Sabbath.”

I understand what this means now.

“Why can’t you call him Mr. Davis?”

Peggy stops walking and looks at me. “We’re not supposed to call black people Mr., Mrs., or Miss,” she says. “There’s a law against it in Alabama. The same law says black people have to use those titles when talking to white people, even little kids.”

“That seems ridiculous,” I say. “And what did you mean about getting the introduction right?”

“Blacks are supposed to be introduced to whites – not the other way around,” Peggy says. “So I had to introduce Mr. Davis to you first.”

“And he couldn’t shake my hand?”

“Noooo,” Peggy says, her eyes big.

I decide not to tell Peggy that Rob Allen Davis is the first black person I’ve ever met.

CHAPTER 8

MONDAY, APRIL 22, 1963

The inside of the dry-cleaning shop has a sweet, chemical smell. I imagine workers stirring sugar into large pots of rubbing alcohol in the back of the building, beyond the customer area where Benny and I are seated on chairs cushioned in rough, dark-orange-colored fabric.

It was only a little after six in the morning when Mr. Blevins turned the key in the glass door and let us inside. He showed us his office – a small room off the lobby – and said he was going to do some accounting work. We were to watch the road for Mr. Moore, who should be approaching from the north. Mr. Blevins somehow knew Mr. Moore had spent the night at Black's Motel. The motel is in the north part of Fort Payne, Mr. Blevins told us, and the dry-cleaning shop is near the center, just north of the downtown buildings on Gault Avenue.

"How do you know where he spent the night?" Peggy had asked on the short drive from the Blevins' house to the dry-cleaning shop, which all the Blevins seem to refer to as "the plant." We were stopped at an intersection, and from the backseat I saw Mr. Blevins give Peggy a long look.

"Not many people know he's here yet – the story was only in the Chattanooga paper. But I talked to someone who does know," he said. "I expect it will be on the radio later today." He switched on the car radio and tuned it to a local station, but we only

heard advertisements for Van Camp pork and beans and Cliff West Motor Company.

Yesterday evening Mr. Blevins said we would need to be ready to meet Mr. Moore by sunup. “If he’s going to walk forty miles a day, he’ll have to get an early start,” Mr. Blevins said.

Watching the road is easy from our vantage point because of the big window on the front of the building and because the chairs are positioned along the south-facing wall. I can see the road, flanked by gas stations, rows of one-story brick businesses, and houses, as it fades into the far distance. Traffic has died down to a trickle. I didn’t understand all the cars on the road with us before sunrise. Mr. Blevins had explained, without me asking, that the people driving them – and those treading the sidewalks, lunch boxes clenched in their hands – were workers headed to the sock mills.

“Most of this town works at the mills,” he’d said, “and the rest of us make our living off of them.”

Peggy couldn’t sit still next to us for more than a minute, so studying the road has been left to me and Benny. Now she’s behind the counter, which is opposite us, about eight feet away.

“I run the register after school sometimes,” she says. “Mrs. Collier leaves at three, so father or Mr. Davis have to work the counter until five. They like it when I can help out.”

A blue pickup pulls onto the pavement out front, and we all look toward it. The truck is old, but sparkling clean. It passes the big window and turns the corner to the area on the side of the building where Mr. Blevins parked his car.

“That’s Mr. Davis,” Peggy says.

Soon he's pushing open the door, the bell tied to the handle jingling. His smile is warm when he sees us, and light glints off his oval, metal-framed glasses.

"Ya'll beat me here," he says, his voice rich and deep. "I can't claim to be the most dedicated employee at Blevins Dry Cleaning now." He shakes his head in mock disappointment. "Are you playing hooky today to help us at the register, Miss Peggy?"

"I would," Peggy says, "but Father is making me go to school later this morning."

"Education is something that should not be taken for granted," Mr. Blevins says from his office doorway. Peggy looks as startled as me to see him there. We didn't hear him get up from his desk.

He glances from Peggy to Mr. Davis. "Mornin', Rob Allen," he says.

"Mornin'," Mr. Davis says in return.

"This is Paula and Benny, the cousins I mentioned would be staying with us," Mr. Blevins says.

I stand and tug at Benny's arm so he'll do the same.

"I met Miss Paula yesterday," Mr. Davis says, "when she and Miss Peggy were out for a walk." He turns toward me. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Miss Paula."

"It's good to see you again, too," I say. My words sound thin and bland. I don't say his name because I can't imagine calling him anything other than "Mr. Davis," but if Peggy's right, that's illegal. Even Mr. Blevins called him "Rob Allen." I know Daddy wouldn't approve of me showing any respect.

"And it's nice to meet you, Mr. Benny," Mr. Davis says, looking over at my brother.

I squeeze Benny's hand, but he only stares through Mr. Davis' chest.

Mr. Blevins must have told him about Benny because he doesn't seem surprised Benny doesn't answer.

"Have you heard about the civil rights activist who's going to be walking through town today?" Mr. Blevins asks.

"No, I have not," Mr. Davis says.

"He's planning to walk all the way to Mississippi. He should be coming past here any time now. The children and I are going to greet him. I doubt he's had a hospitable welcome to our fine state. Would you like to join us?"

Mr. Davis thinks for a few moments. "I just might do that," he says. "I just might… I need to get the machines started first, though," he says. "You all let me know when you see him coming."

"Here's an article about what he's doing," Mr. Blevins says, taking a couple steps back into his office and retrieving neatly folded pages of *The Chattanooga Times*.

"Thank you," Mr. Davis says as he takes the paper and walks behind the counter.

He grabs a long, black apron from a nail on the wall, fits it over his gray, button-up shirt. Then he disappears through the racks of brown-paper-wrapped clothes. I hear a door open and shut.

Peggy looks back at me and Benny for a second before her eyes rest on something to our left. "Hey, do y'all want some gum?" she asks.

I spot the gum machine by the door, its small glass globe filled with colorful squares. My mouth waters at the thought of the crunchy candy coating, and I bite one side of my lower lip. "Sure," I say.

"We keep some pennies in a drawer so we can have gum when we want it – only

once a day, though," Peggy says.

In a flash, she's around the counter with three pennies in her hand.

I start walking toward the gumball machine myself and remember I'm supposed to be looking past it, to the road outside. I've forgotten my one simple task.

There's a tall figure moving along the sidewalk, only two or three blocks away. The man is wearing some sort of sign.

I stop mid-stride and point. "I think that's him," I say.

Peggy looks up from the gumball machine, squints through the window, then drops her pennies on the floor.

"Father!" she yells. "Mr. Moore is almost here."

Mr. Blevins walks quickly but calmly to the window and looks out. "So he is," he says. "It's okay, Peggy, we have time. Go tell Rob Allen. He doesn't have to start the machines if he hasn't already. And grab a Coca-Cola from the refrigerator."

Mr. Blevins turns to Benny and me. "Let's go wait for him on the sidewalk," he says.

We cross the small section of pavement where a few customers could park their cars and stop just before the sidewalk. I look up and down the street. Traffic has picked up, but no one else is out except us and Mr. Moore, who's on our side of the street, about halfway down the block to our north. The sign he's wearing is made of cardboard and covers him from the middle of his chest to about a foot above his knees. The words on it are hand painted. I start to make them out as he draws closer: "End Segregation in America, Eat at Joe's – Both Black and White."

I'm not even exactly sure what "segregation" means. I know segregate means to

separate. Daddy's friends say the federal government wants to put black kids in white schools and mix the races so all Americans will be like mutt dogs. I suppose segregation means keeping the races apart. I don't know what to make of the second part of the message, either. Are we supposed to end segregation by going to a restaurant? It must be a metaphor, like I've learned about in literature class.

I keep hold of Benny's hand since we're so close to the road. He could wander off, and I don't trust myself to notice.

The bells on the door jingle faintly. Peggy runs across the concrete, a glass Coke bottle in her hand. She thrusts it at her father. "Here you go," she says breathlessly. "Mr. Davis says he'll be here soon. He's already started loading."

Mr. Moore has made it to our block. He sees us looking at him and nods and smiles.

"Are you William Moore?" Mr. Blevins asks when the man is within earshot.

"I am," he says. "But you can call me Bill."

Mr. Moore tilts the metal cart he's pulling – just like the newspaper article said – so it's upright and reaches out to shake Mr. Blevins' hand.

"I'm Tal Blevins, owner of the dry cleaners here." He gestures to the building behind us. Lookout Mountain towers in the background, and the sun is beginning to peek over its rim. Orange light reflects from the windows of the gas station across the street. "This is my daughter, Peggy, and our cousins, Paula and Benny."

"We're pleased to meet you, sir," Peggy says, her face filled with awe as if Mr. Moore were Elvis Presley or some other celebrity.

"We wanted to welcome you to Alabama and tell you we admire what you're

doing," Mr. Blevins says.

Mr. Moore smiles again. His lips are thin and his hair is receding, but his face is open and friendly, and his blue eyes seem to hide nothing. He's taller and stouter than Mr. Blevins.

"This is the best reception I've had so far," he says.

A flatbed pickup roars down Gault Avenue, making further conversation impossible. "Hey you – *you* – nigger lover!" a young man yells from the open window.

"Better watch yourself," his passenger adds, leaning across the seat.

Mr. Moore doesn't turn to face the road, but he seems tired, his shoulders slumping slightly.

"How did you know I would be coming through?"

"It was in the Chattanooga paper, which most people around here don't take," Mr. Blevins says.

Mr. Moore's face lights up. "I was worried my walk wasn't going to get any publicity," he says. "There's no point in doing this if people don't know about it."

"I think you're very brave," Peggy says.

I'm not sure "brave" is the right word. Despite the men in the pickup truck, I can't tell if Mr. Moore knows how upset some people will be when they read his sign.

"Thank you," Mr. Moore says, "but I don't think it's brave. It's more of a duty. You see, I was born in Mississippi, spent most of my childhood there. I still have relatives there, and in Birmingham, too. Most of the white Freedom Riders were Northerners who had no empathy for the South. But I understand the South and I want to

change it. So many whites here pretend they don't see how blacks are denied anything much, or don't see how it's wrong or how it concerns them. I want them to stop pretending. Others are afraid to speak up for what they know is right. I want to show them they can."

I try to commit these words to memory because I want to mull over them later.

"Can I give you copies of the letters I wrote to Governor Barnett and President Kennedy?" he continues.

"Of course," Mr. Blevins says.

We haven't read the letter to the president. I hope Mr. Moore will give me a copy.

Mr. Moore reaches into his cart, which I've been looking at. There's an extra pair of shoes, some clothes, a leather-bound book, a couple folders, a map, and some newspapers in it. But the poster attached to the cart is by far the most interesting item. It shows a drawing of Jesus on a wanted sign. The words say: "Wanted – agitator, carpenter by trade, revolutionary, consorter with criminals and prostitutes."

I think I understand what it means. Jesus was all those things. But it makes me uneasy. I shift my weight from one foot to the other and try not to bite my lip. I'm pretty sure seeing Jesus on a wanted poster is going to make folks even madder than they will be when they read the segregation sign.

Mr. Moore retrieves the folders and hands Mr. Blevins, Peggy, and me two pages each.

"I don't know why some people won't see the truth," Mr. Blevins says. "But we'll get there one day, thanks to efforts like yours."

"Amen," Mr. Davis says, walking up behind us.

Mr. Blevins steps aside so he can join our group, directly in front of Mr. Moore.

"This is my friend, Rob Allen Davis," Mr. Blevins tells Mr. Moore.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Davis," Mr. Moore says, extending his hand.

Mr. Davis shakes it heartily and says, "I'm proud to meet you, Mr. Moore."

He doesn't rebuke Mr. Moore like he did Peggy for calling him "Mr. Davis."

"Thank you for what you're doing," Mr. Davis continues, then lowers his voice, even though the sidewalk is still empty save for us. "Most white people around here think we're satisfied with our lot. We just know what happens when we complain." Mr. Davis' face is sober, all traces of his smile gone.

Mr. Moore nods. "So many people and organizations are working to make things better."

"I know," Mr. Davis says. "I've read about them. But I've never met any of those folks."

Mr. Moore opens his folders again. "Here are copies of my letters to Governor Barnett and President Kennedy."

"Thank you. I'll read them," Mr. Davis says.

"I'm so glad I met you," Mr. Moore says. "All of you. It's given me new energy."

"Here," Mr. Blevins says, holding out the Cola bottle. "I almost forgot. All that walking must make you thirsty."

"It sure does," Mr. Moore says. "But this will get me all the way to Collinsville." He holds up the bottle and grins. "I better be on my way if I'm going to meet my mileage quota."

I remember walking to Fort Payne with Momma and try to imagine walking 40

miles on a day like today. It's not summer yet, but there isn't a cloud in the sky – or a breeze – and the sun is already hot on my forehead.

"Get off the road before dark," Mr. Davis says.

"I'll do my best," Mr. Moore answers, grabbing his cart by the handle and resuming his southward journey.

Mr. Moore has a sign on his back, too. Straps across his shoulders connect the two signs. The one on his back says: "Equal Rights For All (Mississippi or Bust)."

The five of us stand there on the sidewalk, watching Mr. Moore get smaller and fade into downtown. Other people are about now, opening the shops and businesses. I see Mr. Moore smiling and nodding at them. He seems vulnerable, despite his size.

"Do you think he'll make it?" Peggy asks.

"I sure hope so," Mr. Blevins answers.

CHAPTER 9

MONDAY, APRIL 22, 1963

The painting on the waiting-room wall in the DeKalb County Health Center shows the head, shoulders, and bosom of a woman with impossibly large eyes, a cleft chin, and a long neck. Her hat, which conceals her hair, and her dress seem to be made with rectangles of textured paper in contrasting hues. The technique reminds me of papier mâché projects from Bible School, but with a modern twist. "Modern" is the word everyone has used to describe the health center itself, so I guess that's fitting. A small plaque at the bottom of the frame indicates the picture was a gift from the Fort Payne Jayceettes. The frame is white and so are the walls, as well as the shiny square floor tiles, with the exception of a primary-colored tile here and there. I've never been in a space with so much white, and not a smudge anywhere. The center opened just a couple weeks ago, Mr. Blevins told me. The paint smell is still in the air.

On the outside, the building looks nothing like others I've seen in Fort Payne. After dropping off Peggy at school, Mr. Blevins drove us back through downtown to the health center on Grand Avenue, further south than the post office Peggy and I walked to. We parked in a lined-off space in the lot behind the one-story building, then walked around to the wide concrete steps leading to the glass entryway. The building is made from two types of brick – one red and the other a sandy beige color. Like the woman's hat and dress in the painting, the health center seems put together with long rectangles –

the windows, the shapes made by the alternating brick colors, and the raised flower beds at its base. I'm not used to seeing so many straight lines.

I turn away from the painting and walk back to where Benny and Mr. Blevins are sitting in chairs made of blue plastic and metal so thin it doesn't look like it should support even Benny's weight. An old man and a woman with a baby also sit in the chairs that line two walls in an L shape. I take a seat next to Benny just as a woman opens a door in the opposite wall and announces, "Benny Keaves."

I look uncertainly at Mr. Blevins. He doesn't get up.

"Paula, why don't you take Benny? Dr. Gilliland said he would call me in later."

I lift Benny's hand from his knee. He stands, and I lead him toward the door the nurse is holding open for us. We follow the fair-haired woman down a hall with lots of doorways on one side. She is wearing all white: a dress that buttons down the front and ends just below her knees, an angular white hat that sits on the crown of her head, shoes with thick soles, and even white pantyhose. She leads us to a tall metal contraption at the end of the hallway.

"I'm Nurse Beck," the woman says, smiling at us. She looks to be in her early fifties.

"You must be Benny." She looks at my brother, who is staring at the wall to her left.

"Yes," I say hurriedly. "And I'm his sister, Paula."

"Nice to meet you," Nurse Beck says.

"Benny, could you step onto the scale?" she asks.

So that's what this thing is. I've seen scales for weighing food and cotton, but I

haven't seen a people scale. There's a black platform a few inches high at the base. That must be where Benny is supposed to stand. I take his hand and walk over.

"Step up here, Benny," I say, and he looks down at the platform.

He slowly lifts one foot and then the other. I let go of his hand, ready to catch him if he falls off balance. The nurse moves some clunky metal pieces on the part of the scale in front of Benny's face, then says, "sixty-seven pounds," in her announcement voice. "I'm going to check your height now," she continues, lifting a metal rod attached to the scale's column and touching the top of Benny's head with it. "Fifty-three inches."

She quickly retracts the height rod. "You can step down now, Benny." She walks over to a desk in the corner, opens a red folder, and scribbles on a paper inside. "I'll take you to an exam room now," she says.

Nurse Beck leads us to a small room, flips out a panel at the bottom of a metal table, and extracts a set of steps. "Benny, you can sit here," she says, patting the cushioned tabletop. "Paula, you're welcome to sit in that chair."

"Go up the steps, Benny, and sit on the table," I say. I walk over and stand by the steps. Benny follows me and complies.

Nurse Beck puts her hand on the door handle. "The doctor will be with you soon," she says, closing the door behind her.

The smell of paint mingles with the scent of a disinfectant – the kind they use on the school cafeteria tables, I think. I realize the bright lights in the ceiling are amplifying the stark whiteness and illuminating every corner of the room. Their light isn't yellow like the light that comes from most electric bulbs. All the unfamiliar settings in Fort Payne have been making my mind spin. I feel tired, unable to handle much more, and I

wonder if all these new places are taking a similar toll on Benny. He looks so small hunched on that medical table.

"This place is strange, isn't it, Benny?" I ask. "It's nothing like home."

Maybe I should have prepared him more for the doctor's exam, but he probably knows what to expect better than I do. He spent a night in the hospital in Scottsboro. I didn't go beyond the lobby, where Daddy was holding court with the reporters.

"The doctor is going to check to make sure you're getting better," I say. "You had all that water in your lungs."

Someone raps on the door and then opens it before I can catch another breath.

The man who enters is wearing a long, thin white coat over a white dress shirt, black tie, and black dress pants. "Hello, Benny," he says. Benny is staring at the floor. The doctor turns to me. "It's Paula, isn't it?" he asks, looking at the clipboard in his hand. Nurse Beck's red folder is clenched in its metal grip.

"Yes, that's right," I say.

He spins a round stool with wheels out from under the desk in the corner and sits level with me. He's gray headed, but moves with swift, fluid motions, like someone younger than the lines etched in his face reveal him to be. "I'm Dr. Gilliland," he says and extends his hand, which I shake. "We're just going to do a fairly routine exam," he continues, speaking to Benny as well as me. "It shouldn't take long."

The exam does move quickly, even though Dr. Gilliland explains most steps before he proceeds using equipment he pulls from the glass-doored cabinet over the desk: checking blood pressure and reflexes, listening to Benny's lungs and heart, looking into his eyes, ears, and throat with a tiny flashlight, feeling his neck for "abnormalities of the

vocal cords." The contraption he calls a stethoscope is particularly strange. The way the doctor puts one end of it in his ears makes it seem like a phone line to Benny's insides.

When it's over, Dr. Gilliland asks me to speak with him in the hall for a few minutes.

I walk over to Benny and put my hand on his knee. "I'm going to be right outside the door," I say. "I'll be right back."

He's looking at my face, the way he occasionally does, and I feel more certain he hears what I'm saying.

Dr. Gilliland is waiting in the hall, the clipboard in the crook of one arm.

"Paula, his lungs sound fine – the pneumonia has cleared. He's extremely withdrawn emotionally, but he's physically healthy other than being a little underweight. Has he been eating this past week?"

"He didn't for the first couple days," I say. "But I kept pestering him. I think he started eating again just to get me to leave him alone. Now he eats when I tell him to. Sometimes he seems to forget that he's in the middle of eating something. He just fades away. When I remind him, he starts again, though."

"That's good," the doctor says. "Please let me know if anything changes with that. He doesn't need to lose any more weight."

"Yes, sir," I say.

"You and Benny are going to meet with Mrs. Brewer now," Dr. Gilliland says. "She'll have a better idea of what's going on with him. She graduated top of her class at the University of Alabama, and she worked as a therapist in Birmingham for years before moving back here to work at this clinic. We're lucky to have her."

Dr. Gilliland holds my gaze but pauses before going on. “She wanted me to tell you, before you meet her, that you’ve seen her before.”

How could I have ever been in the same place as this woman? Was she at the funeral? I wouldn’t even recognize any of the strangers who were there.

“Mrs. Brewer joined the DeKalb and Jackson county rescue squads last month,” he says slowly, as if to let the words sink in gradually. “She was at the river that night.”

I remember – the woman who stood up to the tobacco-juice-spitting leader of the rescue squad.

“If you won’t take the boat out, I will,” the woman said just as I’d been about to scream a protest. I wanted to rush that disgusting man and beat him with my fists. “I only need help getting it through the woods and into the water.”

“Look here, Margaret, I don’t give a damn what letters you got behind your name now,” tobacco man said. “You ain’t running this show. You ought not even be here. You oughta get back in a kitchen where you belong. I’m sure your husband would appreciate that.”

Some of the other rescue squad members snickered as he continued: “The fact is it’s been at least an hour since that boat overturned, probably more. I’m not about to go through all that effort and put my people at risk. Listen to her,” he turned toward June, illuminating her with the light on his helmet. She was sitting on her knees by the water’s edge, in hysterics. “She knows.”

Between sobs, June was repeating the same sentence over and over: “They’re all gone. They’re all gone.” Rhonda cried quietly beside her.

“We have a boat,” I called to the tall woman wearing baggy pants and boots.

“Herman, show her the boat,” I said to Rhonda’s boyfriend, who was standing as if petrified, staring across the blackness that concealed the water of the slough.

“It has a leak, but there’s a bucket to bail the water out,” I said to the woman as she inspected the fishing boat with her flashlight. “Some of the boys took this boat out before, but they only had a flashlight that was barely working. We think the other boat is floating upside down. They just couldn’t find it.”

She swung the light away from the boat that had been pulled hastily ashore. “This is good enough.” She marched back to the rescue group. “Who’s going with me?” she asked.

Three men looked at their feet.

“None of ‘em,” their leader roared. “And if you go, I’m writing you up. That boat ain’t got no lights.”

She looked at the man who appeared to be the youngest. “Give me your flashlight, Jimmy,” she said. He handed it over.

“Go to hell, Howard,” she said over her shoulder. “There could be kids fighting for their lives out there.”

“Will you come with me?” the woman asked me and Herman.

I started to step into the boat, then I had another idea. What if the current had taken my family downstream? I looked at the woman and Herman, thinking. They seemed capable. “You go, Herman,” I said, “and hurry.”

I pushed the boat off, then I hurried, too, past the rescue squad and along the edge of the slough, toward the river’s main channel.

"Mrs. Brewer didn't know until today that she would be meeting with you," Dr. Gilliland is saying. "It was my oversight. I didn't realize there was any connection. She said she would have given you more warning if she'd known."

I don't know how I feel about seeing this woman again. In a way, it's nice she isn't a complete stranger. But there's no time to think more about it because Nurse Beck is whisking Benny and me to the other side of the building.

*

Mrs. Brewer's office is cozy compared to the rest of the clinic. The harsh overhead lights are off, and the room is lit by two lamps and sunlight from the high windows. A plush rug covers much of the floor, and full bookcases line one wall.

After greeting Benny and me and inviting us to sit on a couch across from her desk, she pulls an upholstered chair close to us, then takes a seat in it.

"I know seeing me again is unexpected, Paula, and could bring back some specific memories," she says.

I nod. "It's okay," I say.

"I'm so sad about what happened to your family and about what you both are going through," she continues, looking at me and Benny, who is staring at the front of Mrs. Brewer's desk, in his own world. "I don't know why things like this happen. I don't think anyone knows. So it's confusing and upsetting. If you have been thinking about what you saw and heard – even when you don't want to – that's normal. And if and when

you want to talk about those things, you should. It's also normal to be sad and angry. Something you must understand is that what happened is not your fault – not in any way, not even a small one."

I nod again. Is she right that it's not my fault? Couldn't James and I have changed Momma's mind about crossing the river after dark, if we'd tried harder? Couldn't I have talked her into putting fewer people in the first boat? I feel tears forming behind my lids and tell myself not to blink so they won't materialize. Benny is still staring at the desk, his shoulders hunched and turned inward, his hands gripping his forearms.

"Benny, what grade are you in at school?" Mrs. Brewer asks, leaning into his line of vision.

No response.

"Paula, would it be okay if Benny sat with Nurse Beck while you, Mr. Blevins, and I talk?"

"Will they be close?" I ask.

"Yes, just across the hall," she answers.

I take in a deep breath. "I think it will be all right," I say.

After Benny is settled in the little room with Nurse Beck, a coloring book and crayons he's almost certain not to use within his reach, I return to Mrs. Brewer's office, where Mr. Blevins is already seated in the side chair. Mrs. Brewer is back behind her desk. They seem to be making small talk.

I return to the couch. Mrs. Brewer clasps her hands together and leans forward. She has a round face and light brown eyes. I could barely see her face that night at the river. I guess her to be in her thirties, but younger than Momma, who was thirty-six. Both

her navy dress and her hairstyle look relatively plain and functional compared to the fashions of most women I've seen in town.

"To better understand what might be happening with Benny, I need to ask you some questions, Paula," she says.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Before the accident, how would you describe the way Benny interacted with others?"

The question sounds so formal that it takes me a few seconds to understand what she means. "It was just…normal," I say. "He acted like a normal ten-year-old boy."

"Did he ever seem depressed or withdrawn? Was he quiet?" Mrs. Brewer asks.

"He could get upset and pout, but most of the kids did that sometimes," I say. "He wasn't the loudest in the family, but no one called him quiet, either."

Mrs. Brewer nods. "Has he talked at all since the accident?"

I think about this. We didn't know Benny was going to stop talking, and we were all quiet in the days after, so it's difficult to pinpoint when he quit communicating.

"He was really groggy when we picked him up at the hospital Saturday evening. James was, too. They had given them something there to help them sleep. Benny slept all night and then most of Sunday. The funeral was Monday. He didn't seem to know where he was or what was happening, but he was talking that day – talking out of his head, actually, and laughing for no reason. We thought it might have been because of something else they gave him at the hospital. I don't think he spoke on Tuesday. We all just sat in the living room most of Tuesday, and hardly anyone said anything."

Mrs. Brewer had been writing on a notepad as I talked. She finished writing and

looked up. “Since Tuesday, has he looked at people when they’ve spoken to him or made eye contact?”

“It’s happened some, but not much,” I say.

“Does this only happen with you or with others?” she asks.

“I’m not sure,” I say. “I think it’s mainly with me.” Rhonda and June haven’t tried much, and Granny tried too hard at first, grabbing him by the shoulders and insisting that he say something, if he could. I’ve kept Daddy from noticing so far, because I know he’d do far worse.

“What about facial expressions?” Mrs. Brewer asks. “His expression was flat the whole time he was in here. Does it ever change?”

“Not much,” I answer. “Sometimes he seems less dazed, more present. His eyes will focus on me. But that’s about it.”

“Does he communicate at all through body language? Nodding or shaking his head? Pointing to things he wants?”

“No,” I say.

“Has his posture or the way he walks or moves changed?” she continues.

“He doesn’t move much at all; that’s very different,” I say. “He and Will were always running around the yard. He kind of slumps now, whether he’s sitting or standing, and he pulls his arms and even his legs in toward his body a lot. The way he walks is different, too. It’s slow, and he steps like he’s trying to be quiet.” I didn’t even realize I’d noticed all this.

“Was Will a brother?” she asks, seeming to choose her words carefully.

I nod. “Yes, ma’am.”

"He seems to do what you ask him. Was that always the case? Does he do that with others?"

Will these questions never end?

"The first few days were harder," I say. "I had to move his arms and legs to dress him, like he was a baby. And I didn't think he was going to eat. But he's become more… cooperative. Sometimes he doesn't seem to hear me, but I can pull his hand and he'll walk toward me. If I put food or silverware in his hands and tell him to eat, he will. He doesn't always respond to other people."

Mrs. Brewer puts down her pen and looks at me and Mr. Blevins. "I'm not sure, because I'm not qualified to make such a diagnosis, but I think Benny might be suffering from elective mutism. Children with elective mutism choose not to talk. It's rare, and it can happen for a number of reasons. Sometimes it manifests suddenly, after a traumatic event.

"I think Benny would benefit from meeting with someone who has more training and experience than I do in working with trauma victims. There's a psychiatrist at University Hospital in Birmingham who worked with children who survived the war in Europe. Would it be possible for Benny to go to Birmingham? Meeting with Dr. Kestler would be good for you, too, Paula."

"I could drive them there," Mr. Blevins says. "If it's all right with you and your family, Paula."

Birmingham. I don't even know how long it takes to get there.

"I'll need to talk with Granny and my sisters," I say.

"Of course," Mr. Blevins and Mrs. Brewer say at the same time.

"In the meantime, it's important not to pressure Benny to speak," Mrs. Brewer says, "since that could make the situation worse."

So Granny's reaction was definitely wrong. I wonder what else would be considered pressuring him to speak. "Should I…and everyone else…keep talking to Benny? Should we ask him questions even though he doesn't answer?"

"Talk to him, yes, but try not to ask questions," Mrs. Brewer says. "Is there anything else you want to ask me?"

"There is another thing I've been wondering about," I say. I'm not sure how to ask this question because I don't want to offend Mr. Blevins or sound ungrateful. "Could all this… change of scenery…and being away from home… could it be bad for Benny?"

"He does need a stable environment where he feels safe and secure," Mrs. Brewer says. "So travel and unfamiliar places are not ideal. It's possible his condition won't improve without treatment, though. A proper diagnosis by someone who knows more about these kinds of reactions would be helpful.

"There are other ways to provide a safe and secure environment, and I think you're creating that for Benny with your presence and your attention. Keep doing that. But take some time for yourself, too, Paula. You need to grieve. Don't try to be strong all the time."

"Yes, ma'am," I say, looking at my lap. When would I grieve? And what does that even look like? These don't seem like questions I should ask.

"Whether you all see Dr. Kestler or not, I'll be here if you or any of your siblings want to talk or if you want me to check on Benny," Mrs. Brewer says.

"Thank you," I say.

"There's something else I need to say to you, Paula," she continues. "I'm sorry I couldn't be there for you and your sisters that night. The main reason I joined the rescue squad was because I thought I might be able to help people through their emotions when they or someone they care about is hurt. But I needed to do something else that night, and I can't tell you how angry and sorry I am that the other members of the rescue squad didn't do their jobs."

"It's not your fault," I say. "I appreciate what you did."

"What *you* did is amazing, Paula," she says. "Benny is here because of you. And he's going to be okay."

Surprisingly, these words don't bother me the way "everything is going to be okay" does. I know the "everything" part is a lie. But I can still hope for Benny.

CHAPTER 10

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 24, 1963

The soil has hardened since last week's rain. I use the broad end of the pickaxe to scrape off the upper layer, where little plants with tiny leaves have grown a thin green carpet over last year's garden. Careful not to let the blade dig more than an inch or two into the ground, I control the tool's fall, then pull the handle toward myself, uprooting the weeds and creating a line of fresh earth. Later I'll rake away the plants and their roots.

It's slow-going, tiring work, but I don't mind. For minutes at a time, I think of nothing except making the lines straight and disturbing as little of the topsoil as possible. When my mind wanders to all the times I worked the garden with Momma, to the ache of her absence and my worries about Benny and James, I pull my focus back to the dirt.

Benny is sitting cross-legged in the grass a couple feet beyond the border of the garden, which is situated between the back of our house and one of the fields Granny rents to a cotton farmer. I had Benny sit on the side of the garden I'm facing, so he's in my line of sight. This way he can see me, too – not that he seems to have noticed. He's been looking at a point on the ground about four feet in front of him the whole time we've been out here. Rhonda is down by the creek again. I don't like her being by the water alone. Herman came to see her today, but didn't stay long. I think she's avoiding him. I remember how, before we found the other boat, she begged him to swim out into the river – begged him because he *could* swim and we couldn't – and how he wouldn't do

it. June has gone to Wednesday evening church service with Rachel's family.

Benny turns to the right, toward the field. He seems to be following something with his eyes. I glance quickly in the direction he's looking, expecting maybe to see a dog or a cat, but nothing is there.

"Benny, do you see something?" I ask. He doesn't look at me. His head turns slowly as if he's watching something or someone moving across the field. I turn toward the field again. Nothing. I've noticed him doing this a few times inside the house, too.

I watch Benny a few more moments, then return to my work. A soft breeze is blowing, and the sunlight filtering through the trees separating our place from Granny's is warm on my face, even though it must be getting close to five o'clock. The garden, the yard, the house all feel physically different without Momma and the younger kids here – like the color and energy have been sucked out of them. This time last year, I'd drop my books in the house after school and step out the back door to join Momma in tending the seedlings and pulling the weeds. The younger kids would be laughing and playing around the garden's edges. Now Benny sits silent and alone. The only sound is the call of birds flitting among the trees. There's so much I want to ask Momma, but mainly I just want her to be here.

Half an hour passes, and Granny approaches us on the trail through the woods. "Paula," she yells. "Peggy Blevins called for you."

I rest the head of the pickaxe on the ground, let the handle lean on my leg, and straighten my back. The Blevins must be wanting to know what I've decided about letting Benny go to Birmingham to see the psychiatrist.

"Is she still on the phone?"

"No," Granny says. "I told her you were working on your garden. She said you could call her back. I've almost got dinner done, so maybe y'all should head up to the house soon."

Granny has been cooking a lot of meals for us, and that's been nice. At least I don't have to worry about doing that. I do have to provide her with things to cook, though, and our supplies are running low. We're late with the garden, too. Normally we plant it in early April.

"If I'm here next week, I'll start on the garden," Granny said Momma told her when she chided Momma about not getting seeds in the ground. What had Momma meant by that? Maybe she had some kind of feeling about what was going to happen. Or maybe she already knew Daddy was mad and was coming for her. I recall her troubled expression at the clothesline, when we talked about going to the river.

Granny inspects my work.

"Looks like you're making good progress," she says. "The ground's probably soft enough for you to use a hoe instead of that pickaxe. You won't have to bend over as much – easier on your back that way." She pats the small of my back right where it has started to ache.

I hadn't been sure which tool to use. Momma usually prepares the soil while us older kids are at school.

I nod. "I'll try that."

Long shadows are filling the garden with cooler air. I look at the sky. The sun is about to dip below the horizon. A chill runs through my body. Before the accident, we hated to see the sun go down. It meant Daddy could show up any minute, drunk and

ready to go after Momma. Now, with no small children to herd into the house, no fears about Momma's safety, the evening scent of the woods mixing with the smell of the freshly turned earth fills me with a sense of sadness.

"We'll be up for dinner soon," I say. "Thanks for cooking for us, Granny."

"It ain't nothing," she says with a dismissive wave of her hand as she starts back up the trail.

With Benny and Rhonda seated at the kitchen table and Granny's declaration that dinner is still five minutes from being ready – I can smell the turnip greens and cornbread – I head into her living room to use the phone. Granny has written the Blevins' number on a piece of paper wedged under a porcelain eagle that watches over the telephone table.

"Hi, Peggy," I say when she picks up. "I'm sorry I haven't called already to let y'all know about going to Birmingham. Everyone's okay with it, so please tell your father he can make an appointment."

Getting Daddy's "permission" for Benny to see a psychiatrist in Birmingham had been the hardest part, especially since I didn't think I needed it. He hadn't done a thing to take care of any of his kids in years, so why should his opinion matter now? But I knew getting his blessing beforehand would be easier than dealing with his anger over not having been consulted. I found him sitting out front one night, after everyone else had gone to bed. I had to tell him that Benny hadn't been talking – hadn't been talking "much," I said, downplaying it, hoping he wouldn't decide he could force Benny to speak. I haven't left Benny alone with Daddy, and when he's asked Benny a question, I've answered for him. Daddy barely gives anyone a chance to answer anyway, before he's talking again, so he hasn't noticed. Still, I threw in, "At the clinic in Fort Payne, they

said we shouldn't try to get him to talk. They said that would make it worse."

"He'll start talkin' again," Daddy said. "It'll just take some time. He doesn't need some fancy doctor in that city that can't even control its niggers. And I sure as hell ain't payin' for it."

"You don't have to pay for it," I said.

"Who's payin' then? Is everybody around here going to think this family takes charity?" He eyed me over the liquor bottle he'd brought to his lips.

They already know we take charity, I thought. How can Daddy not know that? "The Blevins are," I said, but I wasn't sure myself. "They're family, and they wouldn't tell anyone anyway."

Daddy took a swig and didn't say anything.

"Is it okay?" I asked.

He leaned his chair back against the house. "Do whatever you're gonna do," he sneered. "But you better be right about those folks not sayin' nothin'."

It was the best answer I could hope for.

Peggy breaks the silence on the other end of the line. "That's great, Paula. I'm glad you're going to do that."

But Peggy doesn't sound glad. She sounds subdued, compared to the way I've heard her talk before.

There's silence on the other end of the line. I try to think of what I should say to fill it.

"Um… I guess you or your father will let us know what day the appointment is?" Saying "father" feels strange to me. I don't know anyone else who uses that word. They

say “daddy” or refer to both their parents by their first names. But Peggy always says “father,” and I’m trying to follow along.

“Oh, yes, of course,” Peggy says after a pause, as if she were thinking of something else and it took her a while to travel back to the present and what I’d said.

Another silence is filled with tension. I get the feeling Peggy wants to say something, but is stopping herself.

A soft thud and click sound like a door closing.

“There’s something else,” Peggy whispers. “Mother and Father say we shouldn’t tell you. But… I think you would want to know.”

I’m confused. What would I want to know that Mr. and Mrs. Blevins think I shouldn’t? Is it about Benny?

“It’s William Moore,” she says, still whispering.

I sit up straighter, bracing myself.

“Did he make it to Birmingham?” I ask.

“No, no he didn’t,” Peggy says, her voice breaking a little on the last word. She takes an audible deep breath. “He didn’t even make it to Gadsden. Someone shot him on the side of the road thirteen miles from there.”

I hear Mr. Davis’s words: “Get off the road before dark.” Was Mr. Moore still walking after nightfall? I remember the tall man pulling the cart as he walked away from us, fading into a downtown that was just waking up, nodding at those he passed, probably giving them the same tired smile he’d given us. Then I see my mother’s face, another tired smile, right before James shoved the crowded boat off from the shore. The kids were sleepy, and oddly quiet for that reason. James started the motor. It sputtered, caught.

Then the boat, my mother, and most of my brothers and sisters sailed away from me. For a while, their backs were visible in a flashlight beam, and then they vanished into darkness.

I'm starting to get used to how quickly death can strike.

"That's…terrible," I say. The words aren't sufficient, and I want to take them back.

"I know. It's just awful," Peggy says. I think she might be crying. "I knew what he was doing was dangerous and people were worried for him. But I didn't think this would really happen."

An anger wells up in me that's different from the anger I feel about what happened to my family. That was an accident. This was murder. Someone intentionally cut short the life of William Moore, a nice man who wasn't hurting anybody and had the courage to stand up for what he thought was right. I've wrapped the spiral phone cord around my hand and now I'm gripping it tightly, digging my thumbnail into it.

"Did the police catch the person who did it?" I ask.

"They arrested someone in Fort Payne just as the Gadsden Times was going to press this afternoon, but the sheriff in Etowah County isn't giving a name, not yet. We've been watching the news and listening to the radio, but they're not releasing a name because charges haven't been filed. Another man from here was taken to Gadsden, too. They questioned him and then let him go because he has claustrophobia."

That's strange. If someone can use claustrophobia to get out of a murder charge, James should be able to come up with something to get out of a charge of operating a boat with no running lights or life-saving devices.

"The Gadsden paper published some of the journal entries Mr. Moore made while he was walking. There was a picture of the coroner with those signs Mr. Moore was wearing and his letters." Peggy is crying again.

She composes herself and continues. "People around here are saying some horrible things. A man who walked to the murder scene from a store close by saw the body and the signs and said, 'It looks like he asked for trouble and got it.' The paper published the quote. Lots of people are saying things like that – and worse. But some people are angry and sad, too. The editorial in the Gadsden Times called what happened an 'ugly, evil thing.' President Kennedy has even talked about it on TV. He called it an 'outrageous crime' and said the FBI could help in the investigation. Oh yeah, and two civil rights groups are planning to finish Mr. Moore's walk."

All I can think is: Mr. Moore got the president's attention after all. But what a sad way to succeed. I remember a line in Mr. Moore's letter to Kennedy – something about part of the reason for his walk being to prove that the freedom to peacefully protest is still protected in the South.

Granny is calling me to dinner. I was hungry when I came in the house, but now the pungent smell of the cooked greens makes me queasy. I tell Peggy I have to go.

"Was I right?" she asks.

"About what?"

"Was I right that you would want to know?"

I think about that for a few seconds. I feel the weight of more sadness tugging physically at my limbs. But I don't want people to hide things from me as if I can't handle them. I don't want the people around me knowing things I don't. "Yes," I say,

"yes, you were right."

"I thought so," she sniffles, and somehow I know a small smile has returned to her face.

"Peggy, do you think you could save some of those newspapers for me? I'd like to read them."

"Father usually takes the old papers to the library," she says. "But I don't think he's taken the ones from this week yet. I'll see if I can sneak out the pages about Mr. Moore."

Later, after Benny, Rhonda, and June are asleep, I pull an old shoebox out from under my bed and unfold my copy of Mr. Moore's letter to President Kennedy. I hold the page next to the lantern and reread it.

Dear Mr. President:

After I attempt to leave this letter for you at the White House, I will start for my native Mississippi. I will take the bus to Chattanooga, then walk from there wearing signs on my front and back opposed to segregation. I will also bear an open letter for Governor Ross Barnett, which I will attempt to deliver personally.

If you, Mr. President, wish to write to Governor Barnett, I would be delighted to have the opportunity to deliver your letter, also.

I expect that the Southern hospitality which I have cherished so much in the past will manifest itself in less desirable

forms this time. I may well feel like I am living the Perils of Pauline, with no hero around to come to my rescue.

I will be engaged in interstate travel, and, theoretically, under the protection of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, guaranteeing – on paper – equal rights and privileges to all citizens. I am not making this walk to demonstrate either federal rights or states' rights, but individual rights. I am doing it, among other things, I feel, for the South, and hopefully, to illustrate that the most basic of freedoms of peaceful protest is not altogether extinguished down there. I do not believe that such a walk has ever been undertaken before. I want to show that it can be done.

Sincerely,

William L. Moore

CHAPTER 11

FRIDAY, MAY 3, 1963

We are on the way to Birmingham. Peggy is sitting in the front seat with Mr. Blevins. Her parents let her stay out of school to accompany us, and she's excited about a trip to the city. Benny and I are in the back seat. The spring day is sunny and warm. Some of the trees and bushes alongside the highway we're traveling are bursting with purple and white flowers, others with young, yellow-green leaves.

"We'll be driving on the same road Mr. Moore walked," Peggy whispered to me before we got into the car. "Remember, you don't know what happened." She had knocked on our door while Mr. Blevins waited in the car. I still don't know if she was able to save any newspapers for me.

We took the route to Fort Payne, but this time, when we reached the Y in the road near the high school football field, instead of going left toward downtown, we went right – south toward Birmingham. We were out of town almost immediately, and the scenery has been peaceful and pretty. Houses and fields are scattered here and there along the road, with Lookout Mountain looming behind the ones on our left.

"We're about to go through Collbran," Mr. Blevins says quietly. It seems like he's talking only to Peggy. I lean to my left to look through the windshield, but I don't see any signs of a town.

"Here's the store," Mr. Blevins says, quieter still. He slows the car.

This must be something to do with Mr. Moore. I wonder if we're close to the place where he was killed. But Peggy said he got almost to Gadsden. We haven't travelled nearly that far.

I see the gas pumps first. A sign advertises Gulftane high-test for thirty-two cents a gallon. The store, set further back from the road, comes into view as we pass a clump of trees and bushes separating it from the yard of the house next door. The siding is painted white, and a gabled roof at the building's center juts out to form a covered area large enough to drive a car under. This roof is supported by two wood posts on brick foundations. A tire leans against the concrete steps leading to the door. A few cars are parked to the side of the building, and two men sit in chairs under the overhang. They watch us drive past. As Mr. Blevins speeds up, we pass a cemetery and a church on the same side of the road. Then there's another service station store on our left, at an intersection with a road that heads up the mountain, and that seems to be the extent of Collbran.

"We've never stopped at either of those service stations, have we?" Peggy asks.

"No, we haven't," Mr. Blevins replies.

"Why not?" she asks.

"Well, I've never been a fan of the Killians," Mr. Blevins says. "And that family owns both those places. The Killian name is probably on half the mailboxes in Collbran."

Peggy nods.

"Why aren't you a fan of the Killians, Mr. Blevins?"

Mr. Blevins' eyes flit to the rearview mirror, where they meet mine. He seems a bit startled that I've been paying attention. I brought *A Tale of Two Cities* with me for the

drive, so maybe he thought I'd been reading. After a pause, he says, "Well, for one thing, most of the men are members of the Klan. Do you know much about the Ku Klux Klan, Paula?"

I'm not prepared for this question. I heard Daddy bragging once to a friend that he was a member of the KKK, but later James told me they kicked him out, after they learned how he treated Momma. All I know about the Klan is they don't like colored people or, apparently, men who beat their wives. I don't know why Daddy or anyone else on Sand Mountain is worried about colored people because there aren't any. "Colored" is the word Momma uses; its sounds nicer than the word Daddy and his friends say. But women don't talk much about colored people. It's mainly the men, when they get together. Maybe I should think of dark-skinned people as "black," not "colored." The Blevins say "black," and that's what Mr. Moore's sign said: "Eat at Joe's, both black and white." I think Mr. Davis said "Negro," so I'm not sure what word is right.

"No, not much," I say in answer to Mr. Blevins' question.

"They hold rallies in the park," Peggy says, "all dressed up in their silly white robes and pointed hoods. They even burn crosses." Peggy turns and looks at me as she says this. I can tell she expects me to share her emotion, but I don't understand what she's talking about.

"The Klan has been terrorizing and killing black people in the South since Reconstruction," Mr. Blevins says. "And now maybe they've begun killing whites who stand up for blacks…"

He said the last sentence in a low voice, as if to himself. I had to strain to hear it. He's talking about Mr. Moore. I'm not supposed to know, I remind myself. I wait for Mr.

Blevins to say something else, but he remains silent. I can see his knit brow in the rearview mirror, a troubled expression around his eyes I think about what he said. Could he be in danger, too?

Peggy is twirling a lock of her hair around her finger. She's studying her father with a worried expression. I wonder if she's thinking what I am – or if she's nervous I'm going to let on that I know what happened to Mr. Moore.

I look at Benny. He's sitting with his hands folded in his lap, staring at his knees. I give his shoulder a gentle squeeze. "This is a pretty drive, Benny," I say. "You can see Lookout Mountain out your window." There's no change in his face. The new crayons and coloring book Mrs. Blevins gave him lie between us on the seat. She wanted to come with us but couldn't take the day off from her job at a utility company. I consider trying again to interest Benny in the trucks on the pages of the coloring book.

"Paula," Mr. Blevins says in a tone that sounds like he's made up his mind about something. "I wasn't going to tell you this because of how much you've been through. It seems unfair to burden you with any more tragedy. But I know you're going to find out, so it might as well come from us." He and Peggy look at one another.

I don't know whether I should say something during this pause. Mr. Blevins is facing the road again and seems to be choosing his words. I stay quiet.

"The man we met at the plant last week – William Moore – who was walking to Mississippi – well, he didn't make it there. Someone shot him on the side of this road before he got to Gadsden. He died instantly."

Instant death is a blessing. I hear my brothers and sisters splashing in the water, screaming for help, struggling for their lives.

I realize I should respond in some way. This is worse than the first time I had to reply to the news of William Moore's death because I'm not even surprised now. If I said, "That makes me sad," Mr. Blevins would feel bad for telling me.

"That's…horrible," I say at last. I can't come up with anything better.

"Yes, it is," Mr. Blevins says. "I hope you can forgive us for bringing more sorrow into your world."

"It's not your fault," I say. "I'm glad I met Mr. Moore." And I am glad, although it's not something I'd consciously thought about until I said those words.

"The sheriff in Etowah County – it happened there – arrested two men from the store we just passed. One is the owner of the store, and the other operates it."

"They let the owner go," Peggy butts in, sounding like she would have burst if she'd stayed quiet any longer. "And they released the other man on bail."

I remember the two men sitting in front of the store. Were they the killers?

"Mr. Moore talked with some men at that store," Peggy continues. "They caught up with him later and asked him a bunch of questions – he wrote about it in his journal. Then he was killed that night."

"All the men who hang around that store are Klan members," Mr. Blevins says. "I'm not saying the accused men are the murderers. It's possible they aren't. Lots of people were upset about what Mr. Moore was doing, and everyone should be presumed innocent until proven guilty. But there is some strong evidence, according to what I've read. I wish to God I'd thought to tell Mr. Moore to avoid that place. I don't know why I didn't think to say it."

Mr. Blevins is doing what I do: thinking of all the things that could have changed

what happened, going over what he, himself, could have done.

Peggy turns her head from the window to her father. “You couldn’t have known what was going to happen,” she says. “You’re not to blame at all. The awful people who killed him are to blame.”

“Thank you, Peggy,” Mr. Blevins says.

I wonder if what Peggy said is right about me, too. I didn’t know what was going to happen. And I guess Daddy didn’t, either, I begrudgingly admit. But if he isn’t to blame, who is?

“Mr. Moore’s message is getting a lot of attention now,” Mr. Blevins says. “People are even trying to complete his walk. A group from Birmingham started in Gadsden yesterday, and another group started in Chattanooga and is supposed to cross into Alabama today. The Gadsden marchers were arrested, and the Chattanooga ones probably will be, too, but it’s encouraging that people were inspired by Mr. Moore and want to stand up to injustice by finishing what he started.”

Injustice. The way my mother lived was unjust. She never knew when Daddy would show up or what he would do, so she was always afraid. She was always struggling to feed and clothe all of us kids. Those charges against James are unjust. Why would anyone want to take anything else from him, from our family? I wonder what kinds of injustice Mr. Blevins is talking about – what is going on that would make Mr. Moore and those trying to finish his walk risk their lives? And what would make other people want to *take* the life of someone who was just walking down the road with some signs, not bothering anybody. Peggy said before that the Blevins had a lot to tell me about the Civil Rights Movement, but I hadn’t felt like asking. I didn’t want to expose more of

my ignorance, and I wasn't that interested. Maybe I should ask now. Or maybe I'll just keep paying attention and try to piece it all together.

I look out the window, at the blue sky and bright green growth erupting on the side of the long mountain still paralleling the road, and ponder this hidden ugliness amidst visible beauty, the injustice of what happened to Mr. Moore and the injustice he was fighting against. I think of the strange rules Peggy and Mr. Davis had to follow during their conversation on the sidewalk. I wonder what else there is to know.

CHAPTER 12

FRIDAY, MAY 3, 1963

I get my first glimpse of Birmingham miles before we reach the city.

"Look, Paula, the downtown buildings," Peggy says.

I move to the middle of the back seat and lean down so I can see through the windshield to what she's pointing at. Yes, I see a cluster of five or six tall boxes rising beyond the one-story brick buildings, telephone poles, and wires that surround the wide road our narrow highway has become. The buildings remind me of the cardboard boxes my younger brothers and sisters would sometimes erect in the front yard, trying to make a "city" for uninterested cats. I did something like that, too, when I was little.

The sky has turned overcast. I see plumes of dark smoke rising on the horizon to the left of the buildings.

"Is there a fire?" I ask.

"No," Mr. Blevins says. "That's one of the iron furnaces in Birmingham. The iron is used to make steel. All the ingredients needed for making steel can be found in the hills in and around Birmingham. That's the main industry here."

I remember Peggy saying something about that – that Fort Payne was abandoned by Yankees because better minerals were found in Birmingham.

We're crossing a bridge now, and the furnace is right beside it, on our left.

"Look at that, Benny," I say, leaning over to point out his window and stare up at

the smoke stacks and red-orange towers. A silver water tower among them has “SLOSS” printed on it in black letters. Giant metal tubes run through the complex, connecting the towers and a brick building. The smoke puffing out of the narrow cylinders reminds me of people sitting around a table smoking cigarettes, tilting their heads back to blow the smoke up instead of into each other’s faces. Benny is looking out the window, but I’m not sure he sees the furnace.

We descend the arch of the bridge and then we’re in the city. At first we’re surrounded by two- and three-story brick buildings. Gradually, the buildings get taller. Signs attached to light posts and wires stretching across the street proclaim “It’s Nice to Have You in Birmingham.” Bunches of red, white, and blue fabric extend from the sides of some of the signs. People are walking hurriedly down the sidewalks, and, despite being five lanes across, the street is packed with cars, trucks, and buses. More vehicles are parked alongside the road on both sides. The whooshing sounds of the traffic, the blare of car horns, and the buzz of voices make me want to roll up my window, but I don’t know what I’d say if Mr. Blevins or Peggy asked me why I did that. Now the fronts of the buildings are getting fancier. We pass two with white diamond patterns and stone columns built into the brick. On the next building, a giant, Roman-looking face peers down at us from the top of a single arched window that stretches across the top floor. We’re approaching some of the really tall buildings we could see from miles away. They don’t look like cardboard boxes anymore. They block out the light, and being surrounded by them makes me feel anxious for some reason. I don’t know if it’s because I feel hemmed in or if it’s because the buildings seem like they could topple over on us. I lean my head near the door and look up. I can’t count the number of floors in some of the

buildings before we pass them. On the next corner, where we're stopped by a traffic light, four buildings rise especially high. One seems to be made almost entirely of smooth white stone. "John A. Hand Building" is etched into a horizontal band above three-story-tall columns topped with ornate carvings.

"We're quite a bit early for the appointment," Mr. Blevins says. He had built in time in case we had car trouble or ran into a traffic jam.

"Do you mind if we drive around the city for a little while, Paula?" Mr. Blevins asks. "That might be better than sitting in a waiting room for an hour and a half. We could eat the sandwiches Judy made for us."

"No, sir, I don't mind," I say, happy to put off stepping out of the bubble of the car and into the bustle and chaos of these streets. It's funny how this machine that seemed like it was from a different world has taken me and Benny to yet another planet. Now the car feels familiar and comfortable against an even more alien environment.

"Good," Mr. Blevins says. "I'd like to drive through the downtown shopping district and maybe by city hall. Peggy, can you hand out the sandwiches? They're peanut butter and jelly."

"Those are the places people have been marching to, aren't they?" Peggy asks, reaching into the area by her feet and producing a brown paper bag. She hands me two tin-foil wrapped squares.

Mr. Blevins exhales a small sigh and hesitates a moment. "Yes," he says eventually. "People in Birmingham have been marching, too, Paula, kind of like Mr. Moore – their reasons are the same, they carry signs like he did, but their trips are from some of the churches in the city to the shopping district or city hall."

"Why those places?" I ask.

"They go to the shopping district because black people aren't allowed to work in the department stores there or eat at the lunch counters. They go to city hall to ask for a lot of things – but they all amount to fair and equal treatment of black people here."

The traffic light changes to green, and we turn onto an even wider street. Soon I'm struggling to take in the sights up ahead. Tall buildings line the street, and there are so many signs – big, vertical signs sticking out from the sides of the buildings like the hardware store and theatre signs in Fort Payne, signs on the buildings themselves, above the glass storefronts, and more "It's Nice to Have You in Birmingham" signs. Red-and-white and blue-and-white striped flags hang vertically from wires above the street at what seems like 20- or 30-foot intervals. A few Confederate flags are among those waving over the street, too. I read some of the signs on the buildings: "Wormser Hats," "Blackburn's Fabrics and Linens," "Britling Cafeteria," "J.F. Knox Studio." People are rushing everywhere, as if they're late to important appointments, and many are wearing the finest clothes and jewelry I've ever seen. One woman crossing the street is clad in a velvet hat, a matching dress, big pearl-looking earrings, and shoes with impossibly high, impossibly thin heals. I notice other women wearing shoes like that, too, and carrying fine purses that hang from the crooks of their arms. Most of the people are white, but there are a few black people, too. A black man wearing some kind of uniform is among the group crossing the street, and a black woman walks down the sidewalk on my side of the car.

Peggy turns fully around in her seat, propping her knees under her, and looks me straight in the face. "What do you think, Paula?" she asks.

"It's… a lot to take in," I say. "Where is everyone going in such a hurry, and why are the women dressed in their Sunday clothes to shop?"

Peggy giggles a little. Have I said something stupid again? "That's just the way most people in the city dress," she says.

"Not all the women are downtown just to shop," Mr. Blevins adds. "Some of them probably work as typists or as clerks in the department stores. They might be shopping on their lunch breaks."

We turn left, then left again and are headed back in the direction we came from, one street over. I'm beginning to realize the streets are laid out in a grid pattern, like the graphing paper we use in math class. If I were at the top of one of these tall buildings, I wonder if I could see the grid below, filled with smaller buildings, cars, and people.

"This is Nineteenth Street, the street with the big department stores," Mr. Blevins announces. I don't know what a "department" store is, but I don't ask. I'm afraid Peggy would giggle again. "Some of the marchers have been going in these stores and sitting at the lunch counters."

I lean down and look out Benny's window at Kress's. It's another building made of smooth, off-white panels. Awnings stretch over the first-floor windows, and gold letters above the second-floor windows spell out "S. H. Kress & Co."

"Loveman's is on the corner to our right," Mr. Blevins says. "Protests have been happening there."

I swing my attention to my own window. A building that looks like it's made of concrete, with tall windows stretching vertically across its upper floors, faces us from an intersection we're nearing. An octagonal clock with a black background and gold hands

sits above the window on the building's flattened corner. People are streaming in and out of the building and along this street, too.

"There are eight escalators in that store, Paula," Peggy says while we wait at a stoplight. "Mother and I went in there last year. Do you know what an escalator is?"

Of course I don't, and have to say so.

"It's a set of stairs that moves," Peggy informs me. "You just stand on the same step and ride all the way to the top – or the bottom."

I imagine a never-ending staircase rising perpetually from the ground and to infinity in the sky. Because how would it start or stop? Or maybe it's attached to some sort of arm that continuously raises and lowers the steps. This is making my head hurt. I don't know how to word a question about how the stairs work without sounding silly, so I ask instead, "Why can't people just walk up or down the steps?"

The look on Peggy's face suggests she might not have considered this. "I guess it's just easier not to have to do that when you're carrying a lot of shopping bags," she says.

Maybe. It seems like a lot of trouble just so people can stand still a little while.

"If you look to your right when we cross this street, you might be able to see the Alabama Theatre," Mr. Blevins says.

I'm not sure I see the theatre, but I do see a massive vertical sign that reads simply "Alabama" in giant letters and might be as tall as the Loveman's building. The DeKalb Theatre sign would be tiny in comparison.

"And here's Britt's of Birmingham – it was Newberry's until they changed the name late last year," Mr. Blevins says. "This store has the largest lunch counter in the

state and a cafeteria that seats more than 150 people. Marchers have been going in there, too."

This building is taller than the other two department stores, and a flat awning juts out from it, covering part of the sidewalk. Above the awning, some kind of wavy metal that looks sort of like our tin roof – but painted aqua blue – is a background for the store's name in big, cursive letters. And on the corner coming up, there's a sign as tall as the one for the theatre, with the same metal backdrop.

We pass one more department store, the largest one yet, called Pizitz. Its white-stone exterior is decorated with carvings instead of being plain like the Kress building. The bottom-floor walls are made almost entirely of glass. Inside I see mannequins wearing sunglasses and brightly printed dresses sitting and standing around a palm tree. We turn, and I'm pretty sure we're back on the same street we drove into the city on, but I wasn't paying attention to the street signs, so I'm not sure.

"We're close to the black business district, and we still have some time before the appointment," Mr. Blevins says. "Would you all mind if we drove through?"

"I don't mind," Peggy says. "I've never been there before, have I?"

"No," Mr. Blevins says. "Neither have I, as a matter of fact. What do you say, Paula?" Mr. Blevins looks at me in the rear-view mirror.

"That sounds good," I say.

We head right again, and in a few minutes Mr. Blevins is announcing we've arrived. "We'll just drive down Fourth Avenue North," he says.

There's a three-story building on the corner, and then mainly one-story brick buildings with awnings line the street. It looks surprisingly like downtown Fort Payne,

just not as clean and freshly painted. People – mostly dark skinned – are on the sidewalks here, too, but few seem to be in a hurry. Some are just standing in clusters, talking, near the shop doors. The ones who are walking are going at a normal pace. Their clothes look practical and comfortable. Some of the cars that line the road remind me of those from home. I feel my body relax. I didn't realize until now that I'd been sitting with my back straight, my arms crossed, my muscles tense – or how the rushing and strangeness and too-much-to-see-at-once of those other streets had made me feel so out of place. The tops of some of the buildings here are darkened with soot, and I wonder how those tall white department stores stay so sparkling clean. The signs jutting from these buildings are worn and of a reasonable size. One looks like a miniature of the huge vertical emblems. "Famous Harlem Shoe Shop," it says, with the letters in "Harlem" running vertical. An image of a man hammering at a shoe is part of the sign, too. A couple other signs include Coca-Cola advertisements. The "Jones Valley Barber Shop" and "20 Grand Restaurant" signs include Coca-Cola advertisements. We pass more cafes, billiard parlors – I wonder what those are – a variety shop, another barber shop.

"Utopia Cleaners," Mr. Blevins says, sounding pleased. It's next to the New Deal Barber Shop. "I met the owner at a convention a couple years ago. He has locations all over Birmingham."

"He must be a dry-cleaning god," Peggy says sarcastically.

"Well, he's very successful," Mr. Blevins says, sounding a little embarrassed, "and apparently he's doing good business in Birmingham's black and white communities."

There's a theatre coming up on the corner. I can recognize these pretty easily now

by the style of their signs – usually vertical lettering with the theatre's name and then a long sign beneath where the names of the movies appear. This one is a two-story red brick building with a tall silver block of a vertical sign centered over the entrance. It proclaims "Carver" on multiple sides against a shiny black background. The message on the sign below it seems urgent: Suspense! Excitement! Susan Hayward in "Back Street" and "Damn the Defiant." Across the road from the theatre is the tallest building we've seen on this street. I lean my head out the window a little and count while we wait at a traffic light. Eight floors. The building's made of sand-colored brick with what looks like the face of a Greek temple from one of my history books stretching up a few stories. "Alabama F and A.M. Prince Hall Grand Lodge" the sign jutting from the building's corner says. I recognize the symbol on the sign – two V's, one upside down, enclosing a letter G – but I'm having trouble placing it. Some of those going through the doors of this building are dressed more formally and seem to be businessmen.

"What's that big building?" I ask.

"It's a Prince Hall Masonic Lodge," Mr. Blevins says. "There are offices and businesses in there, too."

We have masonic lodges at home, but the couple I've seen are just little concrete-block buildings. All I know about the masons is they're some sort of secret society. Grandpa was a member, and Granny is a member of the Order of the Eastern Star, a women's group that has something to do with the masons. I wish I had a photo of this building to show her.

"The Alabama branch of the NAACP was based there before it was kicked out of the state," Mr. Blevins says.

"It's an organization that fights for black people's constitutional rights," Peggy says.

I'd like to know more, but I can't absorb anything else right now. Instead of asking a question, I check on Benny. He is staring out the window on his side. I want so badly for him to come back to us. Yet I know why maybe he can't – not right now, anyway. What must he have seen and heard all that time he was in the water? What Rhonda, June, and I heard, from the river bank, was too much to bear. I stop myself from thinking about it. But I feel like what Benny is doing is some sort of self-protection. If he doesn't come back to this world, he doesn't have to deal with what happened here. I wonder if the psychologist would agree with these thoughts. Depending on how this appointment goes, I might ask. If that is what's happening inside Benny, maybe it's selfish of me to want him to come back. And in a way, I don't. I want him to be shielded from the memories, from the grief for as long as possible.

We turn right at the next intersection and pass a two-story, red-brick church with arched stained-glass windows. The building seems to go on forever; it's even bigger than the churches in Fort Payne. A sign identifies it as the AME Zion Church. People are standing on the sidewalk, looking in the direction we're headed. Some of them are walking that way. I lean over and peer between Peggy and Mr. Blevins so I can see out the windshield.

"Something's happening," Mr. Blevins says, just as I'm seeing that for myself.

Crowds of people are blocking the street, their backs to us. Mr. Blevins slows the car. Other drivers are turning their vehicles around and heading back toward us. Mr. Blevins pulls the car to an open spot on the side of the street.

"What are we doing?" Peggy asks.

Mr. Blevins is straining to see what's happening up ahead and doesn't answer her at first. Then he looks all around us. There's a row of brick shops on our right, and up ahead on the corner to our left, a two-story building that seems to be made all of glass, with some of the geometric panes painted turquoise blue. Mr. Blevins twists in his seat to look at Peggy, me, Benny, then back at Peggy. "I'm going to walk up there and see what's going on," he says. "I won't be long."

"Can I come with you?" Peggy asks.

"No," Mr. Blevins says. "You stay here with Paula and Benny."

"But why not?" Peggy persists.

My muscles tense. I don't know anyone who would question their parents like this – or get an answer other than "Because I Said So," if they did. I hope Mr. Blevins doesn't relent because I don't want to be left in the car without him or Peggy.

"I don't know what's happening up there," he says. "It might be people are gathering for a march. It could be dangerous. You have to stay inside the car. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Peggy says in a resigned tone, crossing her arms forcefully and looking away from him, out the window on our side of the car.

Mr. Blevins shuts his door. Then he puts some coins into a metal box on a pole that stands between the car and the sidewalk. I've noticed these things lining most of the streets, and now I understand what they're for. I guess you have to pay to park your car in the city.

Benny is still looking out his window, but I can't tell whether he's actually seeing

the passing cars and people or the building across the street.

"I don't know what it would hurt for me to walk up there with him," Peggy says. "We can see all those people standing there. Nothing's happening to them."

Mr. Blevins disappears into the crowd. There isn't much car traffic on the street now. People are walking in the middle of the road, toward the crowd. Most of them are black, but some are white. A group of singing teenagers walks past, right next to the car.

"Where are all these people coming from?" I ask Peggy.

"It's not even one o'clock yet," she says. "They're probably on their lunch breaks. They probably heard something is happening and they're going to see for themselves. I don't know about those kids, though. They should be in school."

I guess we should be too, I think.

Peggy looks all around us the way Mr. Blevins did. Half turned on the front seat so she can look at me, she alternates between fidgeting with a lock of her hair and tapping the fingers of her right hand on the dash, where her unwrapped sandwich sits, the tin foil gleaming. I haven't touched our sandwiches either, since putting them down on the seat between me and Benny.

"Should we eat our sandwiches?" I ask timidly.

Peggy seems to ponder the question for a long time. Then she says, "Yes, you all eat your sandwiches. I'll be right back. I can't sit here eating peanut butter and jelly while something important happens this close to me. I think I can run up there real quick, see what's going on, and get back here before Father does. But I have to go now."

Peggy jerks open her door, slams it back, and just like that, Benny and I are alone in the car. I trade places with the sandwiches and lean my arms on the middle of the front

seat so I can get a better view of what's happening up ahead. Peggy isn't actually running – that would have drawn attention – but she's walking fast. The crowd up ahead has grown significantly. I notice a couple of uniformed men in white helmets – police – and see some motorcycles that I hadn't noticed before parked in the street. One policeman is sitting sideways on the seat of a motorcycle, his legs stretched out and crossed in front of him, and the other is standing close by. They seem to be casually talking, even laughing every now and then.

Benny is still looking out the window. "This sure is a crazy place," I say. "So many people working and living so close together."

I peer through the windshield again, expecting to see Peggy on her way back, but there's no sign of her. My empty stomach does a flip-flop. What will happen if Mr. Blevins comes back to the car before Peggy does? The sun breaks through the clouds, and I feel sweat forming under my arms and at my temples even though the temperature is comfortable. With no currents flowing through the open windows, the air is thick and heavy. Another group of teenagers, about my age, walks past the car.

"We're going to be late," a girl in a yellow sweater says.

"No, we'll be right on time," the boy walking behind her says. "We're only two blocks away."

I wonder where they are going and what it would be like to be one of them. They begin singing a song I recognize from church – "I Shall Not Be Moved" – only they are singing "*We* Shall Not Be Moved." I pick up a sandwich and start to unwrap it for Benny, but I hesitate, remembering what Peggy said: she couldn't sit here eating a sandwich while something important was happening right outside the car. I look at Benny. He's

drenched in sunlight, and I think I see a bead of sweat at his hairline. What if we just stood on the sidewalk for a few minutes? When Mr. Blevins comes back, I can tell him it got too hot inside the car.

I close the tinfoil, place the sandwiches in the hatbox area behind our seat, and tug at Benny's hand. "Let's get out and have some fresh air," I say. Benny scoots across the seat.

Once we're outside, standing on the sidewalk, thick clouds obscure the sun again, and I feel conspicuous. We're the only ones standing still, and people walking past are giving us curious looks. Holding Benny's hand, I walk a few steps in the direction of the crowd to get a better look. The police are still there, pacing around the back of the crowd. I question Mr. Blevins' claim that what's happening could be dangerous. Whatever is going on, the police are there to protect people, and they don't seem alarmed. The groups of teenagers hadn't seemed afraid. They were laughing, singing, walking confidently. The police hadn't protected Momma, I remind myself, but that was because they never got there in time.

I scan the crowd for Mr. Blevins or Peggy and see neither. I'm starting to wonder if we might miss our appointment with the doctor. Cautiously, I continue forward, keeping Benny tight beside me. As we get closer, I see trees beyond the people and to the right. It must be some kind of park, like the one in Fort Payne. Beyond the treetops the sky is a thick white curtain. I wonder if it will rain. A dim roar of voices from the crowd reaches us. The policemen are holding black boxes that emit staticky words. One of them raises the box to his mouth and speaks into it, but we're not close enough for me to catch his words. I notice the crowd is split into groups of mostly white people and mostly black

people. I keep looking for Peggy and Mr. Blevins, ready to rush back to the car should I see the latter. We are easy to spot, hanging just beyond the back of the squirming crowd. If we can get lost in that big group of whites, I think, Mr. Blevins will be less likely to see us. Assuming, of course, we don't bump right into him.

The group isn't as tightly packed as it looked from a distance. We maneuver fairly easily between the men and women who seem to be idly chatting with one another while peering eagerly ahead. My best dress is obviously out of style here, but thankfully no one pays us any notice. There's a sense of anticipation in the air, as if they're waiting on something to happen. I'm reminded of the time Uncle Ed had a fireworks show in one of the fields behind his house. Everyone was gathered and waiting a while before it started.

Then I spot a flash of brilliant orange – the back of Peggy's head, I'm pretty sure – and move instinctively toward it. She's toward the front of the crowd, where people are standing more closely together, and she's straining to see around them. I tug at her sleeve. Her eyes widen when she sees me and Benny.

"Oh, no, Paula, you all weren't supposed to get out of the car," she says, scanning the crowd. "Father really will be angry with me. Why don't you go back?"

"Well, since we're here now, can we at least see what's going on first?"

"I still don't know," Peggy says, twisting a button on her blouse. "There's a fire truck over there, and people are saying the firemen have connected the hoses, but when I asked someone if there was a fire, he just laughed at me." She's talking quietly now.

Two rows of people separate us from the front of the crowd. I can see some sort of white barrier beyond them, preventing them from moving farther up the street. Over their heads and in the distance, I see what maybe is another big church. It's an orange-

brown color and has two towers with dome-shaped tops on each side and another dome in the middle. Above the din of the crowd I begin to hear voices chanting in unison, low at first, but growing louder. Eventually I make out what they're saying: "We're going to walk, walk, walk. Freedom, freedom, freedom." It must be a group of marchers, the ones Mr. Blevins said are like William Moore. I remember his solitary figure walking down Gault Avenue. Too bad he can't be here for this.

Peggy is straining to see them through the people in front of us. Suddenly she grabs my hand and pulls me to the left, away from the park. "Let's go this way," she says.

I'm still holding Benny's hand, so we make a chain, Peggy charging ahead, with Benny and me trying to catch up. The crowd is thinner here, and Peggy weaves into it, dragging us along. "Excuse us," I say apologetically to the people we're brushing past, but they don't seem to notice us much. And then we're right next to one of the barriers stretching across the street. The barriers look like giant sawhorses you would lay lumber on to cut it. A couple more police motorcycles are turned sideways in the road, as an extra blockade, and a group of white men are gathered in the street. Some are wearing police uniforms and round white helmets or hats with badges above the brims. Others are wearing firefighters' gear – thick coats, bulky boots, and dark helmets with chin straps. Hoses are connected to the fire hydrant at the corner of the park, and two firemen are holding the nozzles, but there's no smoke coming from the buildings lining the street across from the park.

What I do see is maybe more people in one place than I've ever seen in my life. And less than two weeks after meeting a black person for the first time, I'm now seeing hundreds, mostly young people. If there is a fire, why are the police and firemen just

standing there? Shouldn't they be trying to move people away from the danger, wherever it is? An image of another group of uniformed men springs to my mind: the rescue squad, standing next to the water, doing nothing while members of my family might still have been drowning. I hold Benny close by my side. He's staring away from the park, toward a gas station on the corner near us. A group of black men and women are gathered there.

We should go back to the car, but I try to quickly take in the scene first. Kids who look like they're in high school, with a few who could be as young as Benny, are lining shop fronts that stretch up the street beyond the gas station. A policeman is walking down the row, taking away the signs they're holding. I strain to read what they say, but the angle makes that impossible. Kids are also milling about the park in groups, holding signs, leaning against trees, sitting on sidewalks. They're neatly dressed, the girls wearing dresses, skirts, and sweaters, the boys clad in collared shirts and dress pants or new-looking denim. More police officers and firemen are in the park, too. Light glints off their helmets and badges. Some of them are holding the leashes of large dogs. But the main source of action seems to be coming from straight ahead. I can see the bottom two stories of the church now. A wide set of stairs leads to three arches on the second floor, and the stairs and street level surrounding the church are covered in people. A stream of marchers has begun pouring out of the church. They're crossing the street to the corner of the park and heading diagonally through it. They're the ones chanting: "We're going to walk, walk, walk. Freedom, freedom, freedom." The voices echo against the buildings and up into the sky.

My view of the park is temporarily blocked by three white women who walk past us in a line, carrying signs. I see what's written on the second two: "Keep Alabama

White" and "Close Mixed Schools." Daddy would like that. I wonder if he has ever known a black person.

A single scratchy voice somehow climbs louder than all the other noises and draws my attention back to the park. The lead marchers from the church have almost reached the center. "Turn back, or you'll get wet," the voice says. I'd noticed one of the policemen at our corner was holding some sort of device that looks like the megaphones cheerleaders use at football games. It's much shorter, though, and attached to a box about six inches square. In his other hand, the officer holds a palm-sized black contraption that connects to the box by a spiral phone cord. I wonder if one of the officers in the park is using the same kind of device. The significance of the words start to sink in. Could this mean… My unformed question is answered by a burst of fine spray from fire hoses in the park.

A cheer goes up from the crowd around us, behind the barricade. The black people lining the sidewalk by the service station boo and yell protests. Both groups are raising their fists in the air. We have to get out of here. I don't know what is happening. All I know is I have to get Benny back to the car.

"We're going back," I yell in Peggy's ear. There's fear in her face, too.

She says something, "I'll come with you," I think, and we turn together. But the crowd behind us has grown large and dense and now it's pressing forward. People at the back want to see what the cheering is about. There's no space in the sea of bodies to escape through.

"What do we do?" I ask Peggy.

"We'll have to wait a few minutes," she shouts back.

With Benny tucked under my right arm, I turn back around and place my left hand over his ear, my arm shielding his eyes.

I look back toward the park. The marchers are continuing through the mist. As they approach the firefighters, the mist suddenly narrows into a defined jet of water that drills into the lead marchers. The kids clutch at each other and cover their faces. Some are knocked down, some sit down in groups. More hoses fire into the wide line of marchers. A tall boy at the front stands his ground. He holds out his arms and leans into a stream that's battering his stomach. The sound, even from this distance, is like the worst rain storm on our tin roof. The boy's shirt rips and flies away. Some of those sitting on the ground tumble head over heels across the park, like toys or debris skittering across a yard in a wind storm. I feel like I might be sick at the sight of the water, at how it's being used. I swallow the saliva that's collected in my mouth, turn to find a way out of the crowd, and my face almost comes in contact with a boy's shirt. He's standing on tiptoe, looking over our heads, and he's flanked by two other boys with freckles and crew cuts.

"That's right," one of them shouts.

"Show 'em," the one behind me adds.

I turn back around to find a human traffic jam at the church. With the route through the park blocked, a group is now marching down the street, straight toward us. The kids who had been standing along the storefronts, the ones whose signs were taken from them, are moving into the street to get a better view of what's happening in the park.

"Clear the area," another crackling, unnaturally loud voice booms, close to us this time. My body jerks involuntarily at the sound. The policeman with the megaphone-like

device walks away from our barricade, toward the kids. “Stay away from the park,” he continues.

An officer with a tan-and-black, German-shepherd-looking dog that’s pulling against its harness intercepts a boy who looks to be about my age as he continues across the street, heading for the park. He tries to step around the officer, but the dog lunges and bites into the lower part of his shirt, which comes untucked from his pants. The boy tries again to go around, and this time the dog’s long teeth sink into his leg, just above his knee. An image of stray dogs attacking the goat we once had comes to me. The goat was mauled so badly that Daddy had to put it down. That’s the only other time I’ve ever seen a dog bite when it wasn’t fighting with another dog. The marchers are getting close to where the boy and the dog are. Another policeman with the same kind of dog seems ready to meet them.

“Go back,” the officer with the megaphone says. “Go back to the church… NOW.”

But they keep walking. I can read their signs, written in marker on plain poster board. “God Loves Everybody,” one says. “Make Democracy Real,” reads another. “Equality for All.” “Don’t Buy Segregation.” A large sign two girls carry between them proclaims, “This is OUR Home, Too!”

In the park, more dogs are menacing wet children who have fled the fire hoses. One teenager taunts a black dog with his jacket. A boy who looks to be about twelve proudly holds his sign toward a white man with a camera and smiles. “No Dignity, No Dollars,” the sign reads. Cameras are flashing in other parts of the park, too.

A man dressed like he’s going to church has arrived at the corner of the park

closest to us, and the police and firemen have gathered around him. He holds his suit jacket over his shoulder with one hand and is pointing with the other, jabbing a stubby index finger in different directions. The white people in the crowd seem to be cheering him. He must be someone important. A hat decorated with a striped ribbon near the brim covers most of his white hair, and his thin, matching tie looks too short. Black-and-gold-rimmed glasses adorn his fleshy face.

The man stops talking to the officers and firemen and surveys the crowd behind the barricade. He looks right at me. Or it feels that way, at least. Maybe he's looking at the boys behind us.

"I think that's Bull Connor," Peggy says in my ear. I have no idea who that is.

"Let those people come forward, Sergeant," the man shouts, motioning toward us. "I want 'em to see the dogs work. Look at those niggers run."

Run? If it had been me being sprayed with fire hoses or attacked by dogs, I probably would have run. These kids have taken cover behind trees or banded together. Most aren't running, though.

The sole policeman still standing next to the barricades begins removing them, and the crowd pushes into the intersection. For a few moments, we're carried along with it. But we hang back as others go to the corner of the park or to the sidewalk or just fan out in the intersection. Up ahead, a dog is tugging at the sleeve of one marcher near the sidewalk, but the rest of the group is progressing. Benny takes a few steps away from me before I notice. I reach frantically for him, grip his shirt, and pull him back.

"And open up that hydrant," the man in the suit barks at a fireman before starting to walk away. "It looks like you're going to need it."

Then I see Mr. Blevins. He's standing next to a man holding a notebook. He sees me, too. His expression changes from surprise to concern to anger. I look over at Peggy. Her eyes are glued on the marchers.

As I pull on Peggy's arm, I'm vaguely aware of the fireman attaching what looks like a giant wrench to the hydrant and using his whole body to turn it.

"Peggy…" I say. "Your father…"

"What?" she says, not looking at me.

But there's no need for me to say anything else. While firemen move down the street with hoses and policemen warn onlookers to stand back, Mr. Blevins crosses the pavement, navigating through the loose crowd with long strides.

"Peggy Marie Blevins," his voice booms. "What are you doing?"

Peggy looks up at her father. Her mouth opens, but no words form. Behind Mr. Blevins, I see water spurt from the fire hose. The marchers disappear behind a wall of spray. As the firemen move closer, some are knocked off their feet and pushed down the street, back toward the church. Others try to continue walking close to the storefronts, but the firemen hone in on them and the blasts from the hose pin them against the brick and glass. Mr. Blevins turns around, sees what's happening.

"Get back to the car, now," he says.

I'm turning Benny away from the scene – my arm has been over his eyes the whole time – when I see something green fly through the air and land near a fireman. A bottle. Two others follow. The people at the gas station on the corner are throwing them. A man standing near us launches one back.

"Hurry," Mr. Blevins says. "We need to get out of here." There's urgency in his

words, but he moves calmly and confidently, turning Peggy by her shoulder and using his outstretched arm to usher us all back down the street, away from the park and toward the car. We're quickly out of the crowd, passing only a few people walking hurriedly in the direction of the park.

Back in the car, Mr. Blevins breathes heavily, and I see a vein throbbing in his neck. I'm surprised the clock in the dash reads only 1:20. Has it stopped? Mr. Blevins looks at Peggy. Then he twists his neck and looks at me, at Benny, back at Peggy, then faces forward again. I wait for the yelling to begin. I remember my excuse about the heat inside the car, but it seems feeble now.

Peggy has her head down and is fidgeting with her hair again. She looks up at Mr. Blevins and seems about to say something. She looks away without speaking, though.

Finally, Mr. Blevins lets out a long sigh. He turns and looks into the back seat again. "Paula, is Benny all right?" he asks.

Benny is sitting with his hands in his lap, staring at the seat in front of him. He didn't seem to notice anything we witnessed in the street, but how can I know what's getting through to him? Some things must.

"Yes, sir," I say. All I can do is go by outward appearance, and Benny seems unchanged.

"Peggy, it goes without saying that you're grounded," Mr. Blevins says. "We'll talk about what you all saw later."

He pulls the car into the street. I see water still streaming through the air up ahead and a chill runs through my body, despite the fact I'm sweating. We make a U-turn and dodge some pedestrians. Peggy looks back, but I don't.

CHAPTER 13

FRIDAY, MAY 3, 1963

The tranquil quiet of the hospital building is jarring. It took us less than ten minutes to get here from the park, but my heart is still thudding, and I'm surprised the couple and old man waiting with us in front of a row of metal doors don't seem to hear it. Everything inside my body is moving fast – the blood my heart is pumping and the thoughts churning in my brain – yet outside things are moving slowly – the nurse pushing a man in a wheelchair down the hall, the numbers lighting up above the metal doors. Eight. Seven. Six. Peggy's cheeks are red. I know mine are, too. Mr. Blevins straightens his tie. His jacket covers the sweat stains on his shirt. Maybe we don't look terribly out of place. I feel like we are, though.

I jerk when a ding breaks the silence and a set of metal doors parts. Everyone walks inside the tiny room, then turns and faces the doors, so that's what I do, too – and what I direct Benny to do. He's standing in front of me now. I forget to breathe for a few seconds after the silver doors close with a powerful finality. No one else is worried, I tell myself as I wipe my palms on my dress and cast sidelong glances at Peggy, Mr. Blevins, the couple, and the old man. People must ride elevators all over this city every day.

I feel pressure in my feet. My knees lock. Benny's don't though, and I grab him under his arms to keep him from crumbling to the floor. He regains his balance and

stands on his own as the upward movement stops. The doors slide open, revealing a different scene from the one they closed on. The old man hobbles past us and a nurse steps inside, presses a button in the panel near the doors, and looks impatient. I put my hands under Benny's arms before the elevator moves this time. We get out on the fourteenth floor, but I noticed there wasn't a button for the thirteenth floor on the panel. We either went past it or that's where we are. I guess people in the city *are* afraid of some things – a number and black children with signs, apparently. Why else would grown men have felt like they had to put them out like a fire? People must have been afraid of Mr. Moore, too. It doesn't make sense. I want to tell them there are real things to be afraid of – like boats without life jackets and those bottles of golden-brown fluid that made Daddy terrorize Momma.

Mr. Blevins directs us down a hallway, and we all slow to a stop as we approach two doorways with signs sticking out from their tops. "Colored Waiting Room" and "White Waiting Room," they read in white capital letters against black backgrounds. Peggy and Mr. Blevins look at each other.

"Wow," Peggy says. "I've never seen that."

Mr. Blevins sighs. "Birmingham is not like Fort Payne, where everyone just knows where they're welcome and where they're not."

We continue walking. I glance into the colored waiting room and see a cramped, windowless space. A man sitting in one of the wooden chairs twists his hat in his hands and watches us pass. The white waiting room is open and bright, with a wall of windows and cushioned furniture. My stomach knots. I'm used to being treated like I'm invisible. That doesn't bother me; it feels safe, even. I'm not used to being treated like I'm better

than other people.

Mr. Blevins gives Benny's name to the woman behind a glass partition and sits down with a clipboard of papers to fill out, like he did at the Fort Payne clinic. Benny and I sit next to him, but Peggy grabs my hand, draws me to the windows.

The view is a lot like I thought it would be. The cars look like toys moving on their own through the grid-like streets. The people are so small they seem about as important as insects. Where is the park? I don't see any signs of large trees, the police, or water from fire hoses. Does anyone here know what's happening a short distance away? The woman calmly processing papers behind the window doesn't seem to. Neither does the woman reading a magazine while her son works on a puzzle at a child-sized table.

"You can stand closer," Peggy says, smiling. My feet are planted about a foot from the wall, and I'm leaning over to look down through the window, which starts at about waist height and extends nearly to the ceiling.

"I can see enough from here," I say. I'm feeling a bit dizzy as it is, and Peggy is making me nervous with her forehead pressed to the glass. I take a last look – past the buildings to where bluish green hills stretch into the distance. I wonder how far I can see and whether I'm looking in the direction of home. Then I sit down next to Benny and hold his hand, as much for myself as for him.

The woman behind the window pushes open one of the panels and leans forward. "Mr. Blevins, Dr. Kestler can see you now. Come through the door to the left and I'll show you where to go."

"This shouldn't take long," Mr. Blevins says as he stands.

But by the clock on the wall, it takes fifteen minutes. When Mr. Blevins returns,

his face is red and his shoulders are hunched. I'm reminded of a dog Granny chased away from her back porch with a broom. What did the doctor say to him?

"She's ready for you, now," Mr. Blevins says as he retakes his seat.

I look past him and see Dr. Kestler standing in the doorway. She wears thick-rimmed black glasses and her white and honey-colored hair is piled on top of her head in an old-fashioned style like the one Granny's sister Ida wears. I stand and tug at Benny's hand, then walk as quickly as possible across the room because I don't want to keep this doctor waiting.

The hospital is not new like the clinic in Fort Payne – the doors have wooden panels, the ceilings are high, the light isn't as harsh – but there's a contrast between Dr. Kestler's office and the rest of the space the same way there was a difference between Mrs. Brewer's office and the other parts of the clinic. I almost feel like I'm in Granny's living room, but with fewer knick-knacks. The couch Dr. Kestler invites Benny and me to sit on is comfortably worn, with colorful crocheted blankets folded and hanging over its back, the ceramic and brass lamps are old, and the dark wood furniture includes even more bookcases than Mrs. Brewer had. Rugs with floral patterns cover the floor. There's a softness to everything, from the dense beige curtains outfitting the two tall windows to the tasseled fringe hanging from the lamp shades to the many throw pillows. If it weren't so filled with furniture – little end tables and chairs, even a large table in one corner – the space would seem cavernous.

Dr. Kestler offers blankets and tea, which I decline for both of us. She finds a large throw pillow and places it behind Benny's back since his legs are too short for him to lean against the back of the couch and keep his feet on the ground. Then she sits in a

chair opposite us and leans forward, focusing all her attention. Her pale blue eyes look huge behind the lenses of her glasses, and I glance at my hands in my lap to avoid their intensity. “First, tell me how you’re feeling right now,” she says. “I understand you just witnessed something horrible at a park.”

Dr. Kestler speaks more quickly than anyone I’ve ever been around. My brain struggles a bit to keep up. She also pronounces some words strangely. “Park” was more like “pok.”

“We’re all right,” I say. “I don’t think Benny saw much.” Benny seems to be staring through the wooden legs of the chair Dr. Kestler is sitting in.

“Do you want to talk about what you saw?”

What did I see? I don’t even know yet. Water, the children falling, dogs lunging. It’s all fragments. Maybe later, after I’ve gone over it in my mind, I’ll be able to order it, put it into words. But not now.

I shake my head, then remember to speak my answer. “No, ma’am,” I say. It feels rude. She did give me a choice, though.

“Horrible things are happening in this city. One would hope the concentration camps and the Second World War would have taught humanity some things, but apparently not,” the doctor says, glancing toward the windows. “When I lived in New York, I worked with Jewish survivors of the war. Many of them were children during the war and lost their entire families – or all of their immediate family members.”

Daddy and a lot of the men on Sand Mountain who are his age or older were in the war. I haven’t thought much about how Jewish survivors might have fared after the fighting was over. I guess Benny, Rhonda, June, James, and I are in a similar situation.

We still have each other, though. I've felt like no one else in the world could understand what we're going through. If this doctor has worked with people who lost everyone close to them, maybe she can help Benny.

"It's okay if you don't want to talk about what you saw," Dr. Kestler says. "Can you tell me how your body felt and the emotions you experienced? Did your heart beat fast? Did you feel afraid or anxious?"

"My heart beat fast for a while," I say. "I felt… confused… about what I was seeing. I was worried because we weren't supposed to be where we were and I didn't know what was going to happen."

"And how do you feel now? Has your heart stopped racing?" Dr. Kestler asks.

It has. "Yes," I tell her, "I feel better now." I don't know how to explain how I really feel, and I don't feel like trying, especially with someone I've just met.

"That's good. I'm glad you were able to tell me a little about how you're feeling." So she knows I didn't tell all of it.

"Let's talk about where you live. Can you tell me who lives in the house with you?"

That's complicated, too, but I try to make it simple. "Besides me and Benny, there's Rhonda and June. They're our sisters."

"How old are they?" Dr. Kestler asks.

"Rhonda is sixteen, and June is fourteen."

"And what about your father? Does he live with you?"

I clench my teeth. He's not supposed to. No one invited him. The land and the house belong to Momma's family. He had only been showing up occasionally…before.

Now he's there a lot of nights. He either stumbles in after we've gone to sleep and passes out in the front bedroom or drinks in the living room or on the front porch in the evenings. We usually stay up at Granny's on those days, even spending the night sometimes. He keeps saying he's going to help me with the garden, but I'm glad he hasn't. He stays so drunk most of the time now that he can't do much of anything. At least that makes him easier to manage than before. Still, I can never relax when he's there. We all wish Daddy would just stop coming around. It's the same problem we've had for years. But now it's mainly my problem to handle instead of Momma's.

My hands are clenched, and I feel my face reddening. "He's there sometimes," I say with as little emotion as possible. I want to tell her Daddy hasn't really lived with us for years, but that might make her think ill of Momma. She doesn't know what things were like.

"Does he take care of you and your siblings?"

The question almost makes me laugh. "No," I say. Keep it simple.

"What does he do when he's there then?" Dr. Kestler asks.

There's a simple answer to that question, but I don't want to give it. I look away from her, cross my arms, and try to come up with something to say. I know more color is rising into my face.

"It's okay," Dr. Kestler says. "I can see you don't want to talk about your father. We don't have to do that."

Good.

"Does someone else help take care of you and the children?"

"There's Granny," I say. "She's been cooking for us. We spend a good bit of time

at her house."

"And how far is your grandmother's house from your house?"

"It's just right up the road," I say. "The next house."

"Is she your maternal or paternal grandmother?"

I'm not exactly sure what this means, but I make a guess. "She's my mother's mother."

Dr. Kestler nods. "Who does the other things that need to be done – clothes washing, cleaning, things like that?"

"I do those things," I say.

"Why you?"

It seems like an odd question, and I don't know how to respond. I helped Momma with those things before, so it makes sense for me to keep doing them. Besides, I don't think it would have even occurred to Rhonda or June that such practical things needed to be done, at least not at first, anyway. I picked up the commodities this month, too, and then there's the garden. But I don't say all of that.

"Because I'm the oldest, I guess – except for James, but he lives across the creek."

"And how old is James?" Dr. Kestler asks.

"He's nineteen."

"Why doesn't he live with the rest of your family?"

"James was married. His wife…" I don't know how to put this. "She… was in the boat."

"I see," Dr. Kestler says, nodding again.

I wonder if Dr. Kestler has read any of the newspaper accounts. It seems like she would have, but if she did, she would know the answers to some of the questions she's asked. At least the ones about who survived and who didn't. All the articles had that information, even though some of them got the ages wrong. Maybe she's just asking to see how I'll react.

"Tell me what a typical day looks like for you and your siblings," the doctor says.

There are no typical days anymore. But what does she mean by asking what the day looks like? Is she asking about the weather? She must see the confusion on my face because she continues, "What do you do from the time you wake up in the morning until the time you go to bed at night?"

Right, of course. "I wake everyone up around six. We get dressed, have something to eat. Usually it's leftover biscuits from Granny's. I cut them in half and spread some jam on them. Then we walk to the bus stop. I take Benny to his classroom in the morning and go back to get him in the afternoon. We ride the bus home, and then everybody kind of does what they want to until dinner time. June usually goes up to Granny's. Rhonda sometimes does that or she goes down to the creek. I sweep the house and the yard," if Daddy isn't there, but I don't say that. "I straighten up inside the house, then work in the garden or do the laundry. Benny stays with me most of the time. Granny fixes dinner, and we eat at her house. We do homework there or go back home and do it, then we go to bed."

I used to stay up reading or writing in my journal, but I haven't felt like doing that. It's a relief to escape into sleep. Sometimes Rhonda or June will wake up from a nightmare and I'll have to calm them down. Dr. Kestler only asked about sunup to

sundown, though, so I don't share this.

"Thank you, Paula," Dr. Kestler says. "That's helpful."

"Benny," she says so suddenly and loudly that I jerk a little in surprise. I don't think Benny did, though. I look over and see he is still staring at the floor near Dr. Kestler's feet.

She rises, walks to the side of the room, and brings back a small chair that she places right in front of Benny. She sits down picks up one of his hands, holding it between both of hers. "Benny, I'm Dr. Kestler," she says. "I want to get to know you and your sister Paula. We're going to meet every couple weeks. I want to help you with what you are experiencing. You have lost many important people in your life. That's an incredibly tough thing to handle. But you are strong, and you can get through it. You also have family members who care about you and are here to support you."

Benny seems to be looking at Dr. Kestler's shoulder now, but he doesn't give any indication he's heard anything she's said. She gently places his hand back on his leg.

"Paula, would you be all right with taking Benny to sit with Mr. Blevins in the waiting room and then coming back here to chat with me a little more?"

I don't feel like we've been "chatting," but I agree to take Benny to the waiting room. Dr. Kestler is writing at her desk when I return. "Have a seat on the couch, dear, and I will join you in a moment," she says.

She seems to finish a sentence and then retakes the chair across from me.

"Mrs. Brewer took excellent notes during your visit with her, so I don't need to ask you the same questions about Benny," Dr. Kestler says. "I just need to know if anything has changed with his behavior since that time."

I think about that for a few seconds. “I have noticed him seeming to follow things with his eyes sometimes – in a very slow way. He never moves them quickly. Sometimes, I think maybe he’s looking at people near him. Other times he seems to be looking at something, but there’s nothing there.”

Dr. Kestler nods. “Other than that, there has been no change?”

“Not that I can think of,” I say.

This is my chance to ask the question I thought of as we were driving through the city, before we reached the park. It seems like a long time ago now, and I struggle to bring the exact wording to my mind.

“Dr. Kestler…” I begin. “Could…what’s happening with Benny be something that’s… protecting him in some way? I mean, maybe he’s in a place where he doesn’t remember what happened?”

Dr. Kestler gives me a long look with those giant blue eyes before answering. “Yes, Paula, I think that is most likely what is happening – in some way, at least. We cannot know the details because we do not know his thoughts.”

“Do you think he has elective mutism, like Mrs. Brewer said?”

“It is possible,” she says. “Some of the symptoms certainly line up. But I am not ready to make a diagnosis yet.

“In New York, I studied and practiced a system of evaluating patients by observing and analyzing their movements. It offers some surprising insights. Our experiences get stored in our bodies and are reflected in body movement.”

I’m suddenly conscious of my hunched posture and crossed arms. Has she been evaluating my movements?

"I think this method will be particularly helpful with Benny," the doctor continues. "Since I'll only be seeing him every two weeks, there are some things you might be able to do that could move things along faster."

I nod.

"Do you take notes in school?" she asks.

"Yes, ma'am, in almost every class."

"Good. Please write down any new behavior you notice in Benny. Also note when he seems to be following things with his eyes. Write down the time of day, the setting, what is happening, what he might be looking at. Anytime he seems more engaged with the outside world, make a note. And pay attention to his body language. Is his posture closed – shoulders, arms and legs pulled in – or open most of the time? When is it different? How does he walk? Does he move more quickly at times? If so, when? Definitely write down anything that seems out of the ordinary. Could you do that and bring your notes to me?"

"Yes, I can do that," I say.

"I would like you to do some writing for yourself, too, Paula. Have you ever kept a journal?"

"I used to," I say.

"That's good. What did you write about?"

"Just things that happened and things I thought about."

"Start doing that again," Dr. Kestler says. "But also pay special attention to your feelings – your emotions and the feelings in your body – and try to include those."

"Okay," I say, even though I'm not sure why those things are so important.

"And Paula, take some time for yourself when you're not writing, even if it's only fifteen or thirty minutes a day. I know Benny and your sisters need you, but you have lost a tremendous amount as well. A lot has happened that you need to acknowledge and think through. Let your grandmother watch Benny and spend some time by yourself. Don't think about what you need to do or worry about your siblings. Just try to relax and reflect."

"Okay," I say again, but I don't really know what she means by "relax and reflect," and I'm not sure it's something I even want to do. It seems like a waste of time when there's so much that needs to be done at home.

Dr. Kestler stands, and I follow her to the door.

"You are a strong person, Paula, but to stay strong, you need to be aware of your own needs and tend to them," Dr. Kestler says. "We can talk more about that next time. I want you to know that you are doing all the right things for Benny. We know from children who survived the camps during the war that the environment a child is in after the trauma is over can be more important than how bad the trauma was. Having a stable caregiver who is consistently available is very important, and you are being that person for Benny."

That's similar to what Mrs. Brewer said. At least I'm doing something right. I worry about what happened in the park, though, and about what Daddy might do at any time.

"Thank you," I say, despite my misgivings. I do want to be that person for Benny.