

PROLOGUE

Tornado Road

1996

SARA JACKSON EASED HER husband Jack's dirt-brown Buick Oldsmobile down Tornado Road, which stretched out before her like a red clay river, rippling with thick waves of tire tracks and dipped with shallow pools from the footprints of her cousins, aunts, and uncles, who had lived in this countryside for about as long as anyone could remember. Tall pine trees leaned in over the car, flickering Alabama sunshine through her dusty windshield. The forest soon gave way to a clearing. On the left was a rusted barbed-wire fence strung across an expanse of grass.

Sara rolled the Buick's steering wheel to the right and pulled up in front of her parents' trailer. It was the summer of 1996. She was only sixteen and was entering the eleventh grade, but she and Jack had just married and already moved into their own house a hundred yards farther down the road. They called it the green house. Maybe once it had suggested such a bucolic sentiment, but the southern heat and rain had stripped the paint and warped the wallboards and window frames, so that from the outside it had the dreamy look of a reflection off the waters of a still pond.

Sara couldn't quite articulate why she liked it better here than in the city. Her parents had recently moved her and her younger sister Rebecca back to Choctaw County after they had spent most of their childhood in Mobile. There was less crack, violence, and gang activity in the country. But the presence or absence of those social ills didn't quite capture the innate qualities that distinguished the two places. The country seemed to retain a stability that calmed her. She shared enough blood with the black

families who lived in the constellations of trailers and small homes sprinkled across the county that she could comfortably call a good portion of them kin. Her grandmother, who lived in a cottage across from the green house, had bought the land they lived on, with the help of a white family in whose home she'd worked. There was plenty of fishing for trout in the weave of creeks that rushed through the surrounding forest. And there were whole stretches of yard for growing vegetables.

Sara was pleasantly surprised that Jack had followed her to Choctaw. He'd been raised in Mobile and was five years her senior. They'd met through a cousin of hers. He was her second real boyfriend, and she didn't exactly love him, but she was attracted to his etched muscles, loosely curled hair, and light skin. Their relationship was a point of tension between Sara and her mother, Angela, who worried about Jack's temper, the way he hovered over her, wouldn't let her talk to other boys, wanted to keep her in the home, and was pressuring her to have children. On some level Sara knew Angela was right. Sometimes Jack's breathless, pressing affection felt more like obsession than real love. In a way, though, that was what drew her to him.

Sara didn't believe that anyone could love her—maybe, she thought, because her father, Robert, had left them to spend fourteen years in a Texas prison. She had secretly blamed herself for his absence. It was completely illogical—the kind of all-powerful conclusion a two-year-old might dream up to reconcile the confusion of a divorce—but she had felt that way for as long as she could remember. It made her feel that her heart was sealed off, that she was naturally cold and impenetrable, that no one could really become attached to her.

She didn't have to worry about Jack abandoning her, though, not as long as he needed to touch, taste, control, and virtually inhabit every moment of her life. That didn't mean she was submissive to him. They were nearly the same size, and she was capable of fighting him off when she wanted to spend some time with her mama, or daddy, or sister. Rebecca had always been Sara's baby or, as she affectionately called her, Sustuh!! She was more sensitive and trusting than Sara, the one person who Sara felt understood her.

Sara grabbed a bag of groceries off the seat of the car, stepped into the summer heat, walked up the steps of the trailer, and pushed through

the screen door. The living room felt darker than it was, because of the stained faux wood-paneling pasted to the walls. To the right was Rebecca's room. She wasn't home. Sara's mother was moving around in the back. She didn't like to hang out for long with Angela—if she did, they'd inevitably light into each other about Jack, or school, or pretty much anything.

Angela had fallen for Sara's daddy, Robert, when she was only seven and he was twelve. She was thirteen when she gave birth to Sara. It was young, even up here in the country, to have a baby. But Angela had figured they'd get married when she was eighteen and settle in with all their other kinfolk. Robert got her pregnant a second time, with Rebecca, when she was fifteen. Soon afterward he was sent to prison for nearly fifteen years. Angela waited for him to be released, and she and Robert were finally wed on Tornado Road last summer. Robert looked tall and lanky in a brown pinstriped suit, a white pressed shirt, and a maroon tie embroidered with the silhouettes of dancing couples. And Angela had seemed distinctively southern in a simple white cotton dress decorated with lace. Robert was working as a logger now, and for the first time probably ever they resembled a normal family.

Any mail for me? Sara called out.

There's something from the health department, Angela yelled from the back.

She found a large envelope on the kitchen table. She was excited—it probably had information about that badge and T-shirt she was supposed to get for the blood donation she'd given at school. She'd volunteered to donate partly because she liked the idea of doing something for the sick, but also for the lure of a citation. For the last three years she'd taken ROTC classes, earning medals for bravery and drill team, and she was preoccupied with the thought of joining the army and fighting for the United States overseas.

She tore open the envelope and stared at the words. Thank you, it read, for your donation. But we are unable to use your blood, because it is contaminated with HIV.

Sara didn't know much about the disease, except that it was deadly. Dazed, she angled past the kitchen table, walked down the narrow hallway, and found her mother in the back of the trailer.

Angela was still young, but she carried herself with the world-weariness of a middle-aged woman whose youth had slowly been leached out of her. Sara numbly handed her the letter and then saw her mother's eyes rush with tears. Sara wrapped herself around Angela. They were nearly the same size: full-figured, round at the cheeks, and square-shouldered. *I must be dreaming*, she thought. *This must be a nightmare.* It'll be all right, Mama, she said. God does things for a reason. Angela continued to weep.

Three days later an identical letter arrived from the county health department. This time it was addressed to Rebecca.

CHAPTER ONE

Smoke

2000

WHAT IF THEY'RE DYING? What the hell am I gonna do about their babies? The questions raced through David deShazo's mind. He was chain-smoking Marlboros as he drove north out of Mobile, up State Highway 17 into the Alabama countryside. A black garbage bag stuffed with blankets, baby clothes, and toys took up most of the dusty backseat of his Pontiac. The car was cold and reeked of stale smoke; his heater was busted, and he didn't have the two hundred bucks it would cost to get it fixed.

It was eight-thirty Friday morning, November 10, 2000, and he was headed up to Choctaw County to find two black sisters who were infected with HIV. The girls lived with their mother and two baby sons down a dirt road somewhere outside Gilbertown, near the Mississippi border. The caseworker in Selma, who was supposed to be in charge of their case, had told David that morning that they hadn't been heard from in seven months. Now winter was coming, and as best he knew, they didn't have heat, a telephone, or a car to get to the doctor. He just hoped that neither of them had developed full-blown AIDS. He took a draw off his cigarette, squinted through his bug-smearing windshield at the two-lane highway, and tried to fight down a flickering current of anxiety.

His twenty-one years of social work had produced enough dark memories for David to be able to reassure himself that he was prepared for anything he might encounter. The memories had a way of floating through his head and calming him. Sometimes he could all but see that pretty brown-haired girl he was supposed to help at the mental hospital in