

Chapter One

The Great Storm

On a balmy day in October 1893, when I was fifteen, my life as I knew it ended, and my new life began. In my old life, I had a mother and father who loved and protected me. In my new life, I didn't. In my old life, I knew nothing of fear or courage. In my new life, they were the bedrocks of my existence. In my old life, I thought power lived outside of me. In my new life, I learned that real power lies within.

We lived in a small house, a shanty really, near the banks of the Mississippi in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana. Plaquemines is a French Creole word that comes from the Native word for "persimmon". It got its name because of the beautiful persimmon trees that flourished there.

Popa took pride in our Creole blood - a mix of African, French and Native American, but Creole is more than having mixed blood. It's mixed everything - food, language, beliefs and religion. Being Creole means that, even though you go to Mass on Sunday, you believe in juju, magic, conjures, and spells. It means you believe in a mysterious power to either keep the bad things away from those you love or bring them down on those you hate. Creoles know pointing a broom at someone brings them bad luck and, if you have a choice, you never leave a house by the same door you used to enter it. They know, if you drop a fork, you'll have a lady visitor, but if you drop a knife, expect a man. They know a howling dog signals death. Some people say these are silly superstitions. In my old life, I thought so, too.

Popa and Uncle Phonse set out to fish and dredge for oysters early that morning. Uncle and Popa grew up together in Buras, but he moved to New Orleans after he married Aunt Lucinda, Maman's sister. Although he visited us every year to fish with Popa, he always came alone. When I asked Maman why, she told me she no longer considered Auntie her sister. I couldn't understand how a sister could stop being a sister.

"Sometimes things happen that never should have." Maman followed this with one of her gazes that meant I should stop asking about this. I did.

We planned Popa's birthday celebration for later that afternoon. He loved seafood, especially oysters, so Maman arranged a seafood feast with some of his favorite dishes - fried oysters, gumbo, red beans and rice, Crawfish Etouffee and banana bread pudding for dessert. I was as excited about his birthday party as I had been for my own a month earlier.

The rain started quietly after Popa and Uncle set out for the river, but they returned a short time later.

"There's a fierce storm brewin' up, Aimee," my father pronounced as he came in the door.

"Ain't gonna be no fishin' today with those winds and undercurrents." They looked like they had been swimming in the river.

"Well then, Gus, we'll have to postpone our seafood feast, but not our party," Maman announced. "I'll fry up some chicken."

Her disappointment showed in her eyes, but it disappeared when Popa grabbed her by the waist, laughed, and planted a kiss on her cheek. He loved fried chicken almost as much as fried oysters.

"You stop that, Gus. You're soaking wet!" she protested, pretending to be annoyed.

"You and Phonse go on out to the chicken coop and get two chickens before you change out of those wet clothes," she ordered as she pushed them out the door. When they returned, they changed clothes, then played cards while I helped Maman with the cooking.

By late afternoon, we sat down to eat, and the storm picked up strength. By early evening, the wind and rain exploded into a raging storm, the likes of which we had never seen. By late evening, water began to seep under the door, and we fought a losing battle to keep it out. Within an hour, it surged into the house, breaking our shanty apart.

My heart raced. I panicked and cried as Popa tried to reassure me everything would be all right. But his happy eyes stopped laughing. Within minutes, the storm plunged us into the darkness of night and into the violent waters that swept us towards the river. Popa threw me on his back, piggy-back style, like he did when I was younger. I clenched my arms around his neck so tightly, it was a wonder he could breathe. Popa and Uncle Phonse shouted to hold on to each other as we struggled against the swelling waters. In the distance, a lit warehouse sat on higher ground, beckoning those caught in the torrent to come in for safety. Uncle Phonse held onto Maman, and Popa held onto me. The strong current pulled us under a few times. The last time, I came up without Popa. I struggled to stay afloat, frantically calling out for him.

"Where's Popa? I can't see Popa!" I shouted.

Uncle Phonse reached for me and pulled me towards him. Maman gripped my hand.

"Hold on to each other. Don't let go 'till you get to the warehouse over there. I'll find Gus, and we'll meet up there." The raging waters almost muted his voice, but he pointed us in the right direction.

By the time we reached the warehouse, the wreckage in the water cut up Maman's arms and legs, and blood spurted from a deep gash in her forehead. I thought she might bleed to death. A member of our church, whose shanty also collapsed in the storm, showed up minutes after we did and showed me how to keep pressure on Maman's head wound to stop the bleeding. It worked.

The warehouse filled up with frightened women and children, as well as men who tried to hide their fear. I scanned the warehouse all night for Popa and Uncle. They never came.

"Gabrielle, I might be hurt pretty bad," Maman said as she fingered her wounds and saw her bloodied clothes.

"Thank God, you only have a few scrapes." She said this as her hands moved up and down my arms and legs surveying the damage.

"Popa did a good job keeping you safe. I'm praying he and Phonse will walk in here any minute now and take care of us. But, you're fifteen now and old enough to understand God doesn't always answer our prayers the way we want. Some things are His will. We don't know why."

"Don't say that, Maman!" I shouted as I sobbed. How could she think this was God's Will?

I clenched my jaw to stop crying. Maman pulled me closer to her, held me in her bloody arms, and rocked me like she did when I hurt myself as a child. Her tears scared me more than the storm. I had only witnessed her crying on one other occasion.

After a while, her tears washed away some of the bloodstains on her face, and she regained her composure.

"In case something happens to me, Gabrielle..."

"Nothing will happen to you, Maman. You'll be all right. Popa will be all right!" I shouted as I pulled away from her, denying any suggestion she might not survive.

"Shush, Gabrielle! Prepare yourself for whatever comes. Wait here at the warehouse for Popa and Uncle Phonse. If neither returns by the time the rescuers arrive, tell them to take you to New Orleans, to Aunt Lucinda."

Just hearing "New Orleans" petrified me. I pleaded with her to send me any other place. She ignored my pleas, insisting Popa would know to look for me there, if he survived. She made me repeat Auntie's address several times before she drifted into a deep sleep. My fear that she might not wake up and the possibility I would never see Popa again sabotaged my attempts to doze off.

All night I waited for Popa. Popa, who dreamed of farming his own land one day but ended up an orange picker instead. Popa, who convinced himself that he enjoyed traveling up and down the Mississippi working on large groves even though it meant weeks away from us. Popa, who smelled like one big sweet orange when he returned from picking. Popa, who always threw me up on his broad shoulders and gave me a rowdy piggy-back ride to celebrate his homecoming.

I kept a vigil as Maman slept fretfully through the night, fighting a losing battle to stay awake for Popa. Her long, silky dark hair, usually pinned back in a bun and harnessed with a net, escaped its cage and fell in matted, bloody tangles. She was nothing like Popa, a large man with curly hair and skin the color of brown sugar. She could pass for white, if she wanted to. Her light gray eyes, though beautiful and powerful, always had a sad, far-away look. They didn't laugh like Popa's. When she set them on me, she saw me both inside and out.

As the winds changed from a howl to a whimper during the night, it called out to me. "Gabbie, don't be afraid." I recognized the voice. It wasn't the wind, but his voice, the voice of a man who should have loved me but never did, a voice from the grave. Goose bumps sprouted on my arms.

By daybreak, the storm subsided, Maman fell into a deep sleep, and I lost hope Popa and Uncle Phonse would show up. The warehouse was eerily quiet. When some men flung open the warehouse doors, the carnage from the night before horrified me. Trees, limbs, dead animals and dead bodies floated in the muddy waters. The storm had quieted, but my fears only grew overnight. For the first time in my life, I was alone.

It seemed like an eternity before the rescuers arrived and took us to the make-shift hospital nearby. In a few days, Uncle Phonse, who had been desperately searching for Popa, showed up exhausted and without him. He had been desperately searching everywhere for Popa and hadn't come to the hospital until he knew for sure what happened to him. What he told us broke our hearts. He had found Popa's body laid out on a street with dozens of other unclaimed bodies waiting to be burned. But, Uncle Phonse claimed his body, and he buried him in his family's graveyard. They were like brothers, and he wanted him there with his own Maman, his Popa, and his first wife, Suzanne. Before we left for New Orleans, he took me to the graveyard, and I left some wildflowers on his grave. Maman wasn't well enough to come with us. But, before we left, we all attended a Mass for the Dead, and we lit a candle for him and all the other souls that perished in the storm.

After a few weeks in emergency quarters, Uncle Phonse took Maman and me to New Orleans. We had no other place to go, but I dreaded it. My only visit there had occurred five years earlier to attend the funeral of a grandfather I had never met and who had never wanted to meet me. It etched fear in the fiber of my being. It convinced me I should never, ever visit New Orleans again...ever.