CHAPTER 1

Monday, June 24, 1957—Birth of a Storm

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The Cameron Parish Courthouse
Cameron, Louisiana

Summer in the Deep South will jolt a person's senses. It's the hot, humid stillness that becomes so oppressive. If a person is lucky enough to live along the coastal beaches, however, the gulf breeze will transform a sweltering day into a pleasurable experience. In Louisiana, a cool day is heavenly, but a cool breeze is absolutely divine.

Geneva Griffith tapped her fingers to the beat and hummed along with Frank Sinatra as he crooned a tune on the car radio. She reached across the dash to increase the volume, then rolled the window down a bit more. Her long, brown hair ruffled against the blue scarf tied about her neck. It wasn't quite nine o'clock, but the heat was barely tolerable during her fifteen-minute drive to work that morning along the Louisiana coast highway. Throughout Oak Grove, farmers were already busy in the fields with the first summer harvest of their crops. She passed South Cameron High School, then Daigle's Corner, and soon after approached the outskirts of Cameron.

Turning right onto Smith Circle, Geneva arrived at the courthouse and eventually found a parking spot close to the trunk of a shady oak. The tree-lined streets surrounding the courthouse were bustling with pedestrians and leisurely small-town traffic. A multi-aged group of children rode their bikes on the dusty gravel road alongside the building.

With towels over their shoulders, they pedaled off to the beach a few miles away.

With her sack lunch and straw purse in hand, Geneva waved in passing at Thomas DeBarge, Alvin Dyson, and Sheriff O. B. Carter, who stood chatting near the front steps of the building.

DeBarge sat poised on the seat of his black bicycle with one foot planted firmly on the sidewalk. At eighty-four years old, Tommy kept in shape by accident. When his last car broke down after two decades of service, he decided to purchase a less expensive mode of transportation, one that fit the size of his pension check. To his way of thinking, if he bought a new Chevy, the car would undoubtedly outlive him anyway. The choice was simple, so for several years now he had been riding around town on the sturdy black bike, running errands and visiting longtime friends. Within a few months his muscles toned and firmed. His old heart beat stronger beneath his deep summer tan. Tommy experienced stamina and strength that he never expected to have in his old age.

The man lived a simple life and had no need to travel far from Cameron, where he shared a home with his widowed brother, Sidney DeBarge. A year older than Tommy, Sidney moved slowly about the house and had little use for either a car or a bike. He preferred his comfortable rocker on the wide front porch of his home.

"Nonsense, Tommy. I don't need a bicycle," he often repeated with a dismissive wave of his weathered hand. "I get plenty of exercise from this hoe." Formerly an oil-refinery worker and sheriff's deputy, Sidney now wanted to do nothing more strenuous than tilling his highly productive garden. At eighty-five, he was entitled.

"Good morning, Geneva," hailed the sheriff as she approached the steps. "How's D.W? Will he be in town for the Fourth of July parade?"

"Yes, sir. He's due home in five days. We'll be here for the big barbeque that afternoon, too. His folks will be driving over for the day as well. See you there!" A low-flying Pan Am Clipper passed overhead as Geneva entered the building.

"Maybe John Paul could have several of his new marsh buggies in the parade, too? Most folks have never seen them, and the barbeque

and the parade would be the perfect opportunity to showcase that new vehicle, don't you think?" suggested the sheriff to Dyson, the Louisiana state representative from Cameron Parish.

Mr. Dyson's nonstop schedule this Monday included a meeting at Geneva's office, the Department of Agriculture. With a nod and a wave goodbye, Dyson parted from the group and entered the courthouse, removing his straw hat. His forehead dripped with perspiration in the early-morning heat. Removing his handkerchief, he wiped his brow then followed Geneva into the Agriculture Department.

The Griffith family had roots in Cameron Parish for over 150 years. Geneva and her husband, D.W., lived on thirty acres of lush, scenic land filled with grassy fields, marshland, and huge oak trees overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. The young couple built their home in Oak Grove on a low-lying ridge facing the gulf, just two miles from the beach. It was an idyllic place to raise their two children, son Leslie, eleven, and daughter Cherie, five.

Louisiana Highway 82, the two-lane coastal road, stretched in front of their home, heading eastward to Grand Chenier and westward to Cameron, fifteen miles away. Between the highway and the sandy beaches of the gulf, sage-green patches of marsh grass swayed in the breeze. The centuries-old ecosystem of both the coastal and inland marshes of the Louisiana coast was a prime factor in preserving the natural abundance of wildlife in the area. These green and gold marsh grasses more recently served an aesthetic purpose by hiding the wooden boardwalk roads that led to the numerous oil wells in the coastal marsh. The short, stocky pumping mechanisms had long ago replaced the tall derricks. Now, the view from the front patio of the Griffith home was unencumbered, stretching over the rose garden, across the manicured lawn, down to the coastal highway, then out to the marsh and finally the sandy beach. On a clear day Geneva could catch a glimpse of the whitecaps crashing onto the beaches of Oak Grove. The low rhythmic sound of the waves was ever present, a soothing acoustic shadow.

Behind the Griffith home was a large green barn, with an adjoining cattle pen with nearly one hundred head of cattle. There were horses

This photograph was taken shortly after Geneva and D.W. Griffith married, while he was in the U.S. Coast Guard stationed at Port Aransas, Texas. The young couple lived in the lighthouse that year.

in the stalls and chickens in the coop. The farm-fresh eggs from their hens tasted better than any store-bought eggs from the grocer.

The *L*-shaped, three-bedroom home was built on low piers a foot and a half high. To take advantage of the gulf breeze, the front door opened onto a six-feet-wide concrete porch that ran the length of the house. From this cement patio, red brick trim rose two feet upward, gracing the front of the home. This inviting entrance was adorned by Geneva's lush rose garden. The deep floral scent of her pink floribunda and her long-stemmed red tea roses often carried on a gentle evening breeze through open windows into the living room. When Geneva played at her piano, their fragrance was especially enjoyable, almost inspiring.

D.W.'s aunt, Nona Welch, was the local registrar of voters, and she also worked in the courthouse near Geneva's office. The Welches, the McCalls, the Meauxs, and the Griffiths were family, and several of the relatives lived near Geneva and D.W.'s home in Oak Grove.

Cameron Parish embodied all that is good about small-town living, especially this rural closeness of friends and relatives. With fewer than four thousand residents in the entire parish, most people knew their neighbors well. Add to that setting the spicy Cajun culture, and you had a lively blend of hardworking people who went about their daily lives with a distinct *joie de vivre*—a joy of living.

The majority of people in Cameron Parish were Cajuns—a name derived from "Acadians"—those hardy descendants of the French-Canadian settlers who came south from Acadia, present-day Nova Scotia. Peasant families from the French provinces of Normandy and Brittany had sailed across the Atlantic to Canada, spurred by a promise of land ownership from the French government. With property deeds in hand, the French-speaking Roman Catholics forged towns, communities, and livelihoods out of the land of Acadia. These original European settlers prospered and multiplied over the next hundred years.

Between 1620 and 1713, the French settlement in the New World changed hands politically many times but always remained loyal to France. Finally, a 1713 treaty with the British changed their lives forever.

Refusing to swear allegiance to England, the Acadians faced harsh consequences. Families were persecuted, arrested, and finally deported from the prosperous colony they had established a century before. Herded like cattle onto waiting ships in the harbor, many families became lost from one another. The British troops separated these devout Catholic families in a historic period referred to as *Le Grand Dérangement,* scattering them across the Western Hemisphere in a political storm.

Over time, word spread among the exiles of a sympathetic Spanish-speaking Catholic settlement along the Louisiana coast, and the Acadians began a long journey to the Deep South. Decades after the deportations began in Nova Scotia, many of the French families were finally reunited in Louisiana. Arriving in 1763, the resilient Acadians—roughly three thousand of them—sought and found refuge in the coastal plains and along the bayous of the hot, humid wilderness. They spread out in search of land they could call their own.

In much the same manner as they had established their colonies in Nova Scotia, the Acadians worked hard to provide a good life in Louisiana. The French settlers trusted few people, keeping to themselves except for trading fur pelts with their Spanish neighbors. They also became successful farmers and fishermen once again. Most importantly, the Spanish governing officials respected the Acadians' fierce ethnic loyalty to their homeland. Over time, the area along the Louisiana coast came to be known affectionately as Acadiana.

The Cajuns continue to be a fiercely proud and independent people, a distinct culture within this large country. Their descendants thrive in the cities and bayous of Cajun country, where their seventeenth-century French dialect is still spoken today. In Cameron Parish their herds of cattle are a vital part of the economy. In spite of the early generations' hardships, the Cajun of the 1900s enjoyed an uncomplicated life, with simple pleasures.

As this particular summer began—in 1957—life was good in the Bayou State. Within a matter of days, however, the Cajuns and fellow citizens of Cameron Parish would be required to draw upon those same strong characteristics of the exiled Acadian ancestors—a love of their land, an unshakable faith, and a determined will to survive.

Monday, June 24, 1957
The Johnny Meaux farm
Oak Grove, Louisiana

"I'm sorry to interrupt your day, Raymond."

"No, ma'am, not at all. I appreciate the break. We've been at it for hours." The genial black man closed the trunk of the older lady's car. "Okay, ma'am, you're good to go." He doffed his frayed straw hat with a warm smile and headed back to the barn, where he had been unloading a flatbed truck full of peas.

"Thanks again, Esther!" Alice waved to her friend as she rolled down the window of the car. The morning was promising to turn into another blistering day, and Alice had a lot to do before leaving for Lake Charles tomorrow. The dust from the long driveway hung in the still air as she stopped, then shifted into first gear and pulled out onto the main road. Her home was only about five minutes away, and it felt good to start the day outdoors.

Alice delighted in getting some of the first yield from Johnny Meaux's crop of field peas. She drove away from the Meaux farm with four bushels of peas in her trunk. Alice and her friend Johnny Meaux had known each other for years through the Louisiana political scene, but she was even closer to Johnny's wife, Esther. Alice was twenty years older than Esther but neither of them noticed or cared. In a small rural community, age is less a factor in friendships.

Alice and her new husband, Brown Marshall, lived in a rambling, two-story home on the coast highway between Cameron and Creole. She was adjusting well to her new home and her new life. With a trunk full of farm-fresh vegetables, Alice passed the Welch home, then the Griffith home, where Johnny Meaux's nephew lived. She noted how the deeply forested cheniers blended the small villages into one larger close-knit community. For the hundredth time, she marveled at the peace and contentment she found in her husband's hometown.

Alice Cagle Jeffries, a former schoolteacher, had been a widow in her late fifties with no intention of remarrying until she met Brown Marshall from Cameron, Louisiana. Marshall, called "Tootie" by most

who knew him, was also widowed. The tall cattleman commanded attention just by entering a room, and Alice thought he looked much like her movie hero, John Wayne. At five foot five, Alice barely reached his shoulder, but she had spunk, and that's what caught and held his interest. Her soft brown eyes sealed the deal. The two met four years ago, fell in love, and married in a simple civil ceremony.

"I used to be tall and thin, but somewhere along the way, I turned into a short, fat grandmother," Alice remarked to her reflection in the full-length mirror on her wedding day. Turning a bit left, then right, she smoothed the creamy beige silk fabric of her suit over her somewhat plump midriff. A lamp softly lit her bedroom. Alice tilted the mahogany-framed mirror a fraction to get a better view of the skirt's hem, making sure it was just right. Her light brown hair was mostly gray now, and she kept it in a short, fashionable bob with soft loose curls. The long heavy drapes hanging at the two bedroom windows had been drawn against the summer heat that prevailed outside. The room was cool despite the flurry of activity as she prepared for the small wedding ceremony.

Alice had shopped at Muller's and finally chose the lovely suit for her wedding day. The well-tailored jacket hung gracefully over the straight skirt. The soft hue of the silk enhanced her pale-pink, porcelain complexion, and she fairly glowed with happiness. Alice's sister had been telling her since she was a teenager that her flawless skin was her best feature, and she openly wished she too had been blessed with it.

At nearly sixty, Alice Cagle was plump and precious—and still had great skin.

"Momma, hush! You look beautiful. You look *especially* beautiful today. Your hair looks great, too. Now turn around and let me pin the corsage to your jacket," her daughter said laughingly.

"Now, Regina, you know it's true. Had I been young and thin, Brown Marshall would have swept me off my feet," she continued as Regina pinned the lavender-colored orchid securely to the fabric. "But since I'm older and wiser, I'll just settle for being in love. Who would have thought?" The grandmother smiled. She reached up and placed her hand against Regina's cheek.

Alice Cagle Jeffries with daughter Regina Davis Phillips and granddaughter Kathleen Phillips, circa 1951.

"At least Brown's home is nearby. Cameron is so close we will still see each other often."

"That's true, Momma. Besides, the children are excited about you living near the beach, so we may become real pests by visiting too often!"

Above everything else in the world, Alice loved her daughter. At thirty-five, Regina Davis Phillips shared many of her mother's characteristics, including her inexhaustible energy. Those around Regina soon found out that they needed to keep up with her pace or they would quickly fall behind.

Alice was also one of the best cooks in the large Cagle family. Her love of cooking showed in the way she taught her daughter to actually enjoy being in the kitchen. It was one of the greatest gifts she could give to her child, because it was so personal—a lifelong gift, something that money couldn't buy. The fact that Alice was so good at it didn't hurt either. Her 1912 cookbook won first place in a state contest.

"What should I call him?" Regina had asked her mother after she

first met Mr. Marshall. "Brown is a strange first name, definitely unusual. Is that why everyone calls him 'Tootie'? But wait—Tootie is even more unusual than Brown. Hmmm, actually, the name 'Brown' is intriguing. It's starting to grow on me. Yes, I definitely like it."

The wedding had been three years ago. Life in Cameron was simple and good for the newlyweds. Mr. Marshall enjoyed his work and had no plans to retire, even though he was nearing sixty. Hard work had kept him in fit physical condition. He boasted a thick head of smooth, brown hair graying slightly at the temples and a deep tan from a lifetime in the sun, and a broad cowboy smile surfaced often from beneath the brim of his beige Stetson hat.

Marshall's large cattle operations in Cameron Parish made up a vital part of the local economy. The business included a large herd of cattle and a livestock slaughterhouse that processed a great deal of the stock from the area farmers and ranchers.

The Marshall home was as close to the beach as you could get, separated from the sandy shores by the coast highway and a narrow coastal marsh. The large, two-story Victorian home was built during the Roaring Twenties and had withstood several hurricanes and tropical storms. In 1938, an unnamed hurricane hit the Louisiana coast just east of Cameron, but the home survived in spite of being flooded by a foot of water. Situated at Daigle's Corner on the front ridge of the oak forest, the Marshall home offered Alice a quiet, rural setting in which to spend her later years.

Alice spent the rest of Monday morning shelling field peas at her kitchen table. In the heat of the afternoon she turned on the small fan nearby. The nine-foot ceilings usually helped circulate the warmer air away from the floor, but today the heat was stifling. When the fan no longer made a difference, she moved her small operation outside onto the wide veranda. From there she could hear the sound of the breakers on the beach and could listen to the caw of the seagulls as they hovered and swayed on the warm air currents along the coast. Today a somewhat warmer breeze blew in from the beach and through the tall oak trees that bordered the road in front of her home. She could usually count on this steady gulf breeze that blew off the water, over

the narrow strip of land that formed the coastal communities, and then continued blowing northward out across the marsh beyond the small town of Cameron. But lately the weather seemed unusually hot with no relief in sight.

Alice crossed her ankles and placed the wide bowl on her lap, relaxing on the long, metal porch glider as she continued to shell more peas. She glided back and forth effortlessly as she worked to separate each long purple hull from the row of peas hidden inside. The glider had just the right amount of soft, comforting squeak in its hinges—the perfect porch partner.

Two projects topped her list of chores this week—getting plenty of peas in the freezer and making fig preserves. She was just about ready to check this one off her list. When the shelled peas filled the large ceramic bowl, Alice took a break to stretch her legs. The figs on her fruit trees would soon be ready to pick. Once the figs reached the ripe stage, the birds would begin their own harvesting. Alice was concerned she would end up with little or no fig preserves to show for this year if she waited too long to pick the tender fruit. For perfect preserves, timing was essential.

The Cagle family would later note that the fig trees in Cameron Parish would play a strange, dramatic role in Hurricane Audrey.

Moving down the wide cement steps of the veranda, Alice walked to the backyard of the house to check on the two fig trees. The dense, freshly mowed lawn tickled her toes through her open-toed espadrilles. Grasshoppers hummed in the grass here and there, a summer symphony that halted abruptly as the bugs moved quickly to escape her steps. On the fig trees, the wide, flat, green leaves hid the fruit from marauding birds for the time being. All over the gulf coast, fig trees were heavy with their fruit. A close inspection and a bit of fig squeezing showed the need for just a few more days to ripen to the perfect stage.

In Lake Charles, Alice's daughter had several fig trees that were ready to pick, so tomorrow Alice planned to drive there for the annual culinary event. Mother and daughter enjoyed the joint effort and now included the granddaughters, Kathleen, Frances, and Elizabeth,

in the fun. The ladies would spend a day picking and peeling the figs, visiting and chatting all the while. The next day they would cook batch after batch on the stove until the juices and sugar became a translucent, thick syrup with chunks of tender fruit, ready to be placed in sterilized jars. They would put up dozens of jars of sweet, dark-brown fig preserves for the family to enjoy throughout the next year.

An hour before dinnertime Alice's first chore was finished. She poured all of the peas into freezer containers lined up on her kitchen countertop. She then labeled two containers for Regina, which Alice would deliver tomorrow. Alice often made the drive back and forth to Lake Charles by herself.

"It's a short drive. It's only an hour, for heaven's sake. And besides, I'm old, but I'm not dead," she often told her husband, asserting her driving rights. She didn't want to end up like her sister-in-law, Ona Cagle.

Alice's brother Robert had always driven his wife, Ona, everywhere she needed to go, and Ona had only recently learned to drive after his death five years ago. Now in her early sixties, she had never quite gotten the knack of sharing the road. Cars routinely swerved along Prien Lake Road to avoid her approach from the opposite direction. Her son Joe had given her a shiny gray Chevrolet with an automatic shift, but it didn't improve her driving skills in the least.

Alice never wanted to lose her driving skills, skills she learned from her brothers decades ago. More importantly, she always wanted to be mobile, able to drive to Lake Charles at the drop of a hat. To this Southern lady, mobility was the key to seeing family and friends.

Alice's grandchildren had been down last week to swim at the beach, one of the kids' favorite outings. Alice, too, loved the beach, so long as she had her wide-brimmed straw hat. The bright sun off the sand always hurt her eyes, but sunglasses and her trusty hat made it enjoyable. She and Regina would hold the smaller children's hands and wade out into the waves, much to their delight, while the older ones dove beneath the waves and swam with ease in the undulating surf.

Above all, however, Alice's grandchildren enjoyed the car ride

across the Calcasieu Ship Channel on the ferry at the western edge of town. Standing at the rail, the children watched the seagulls, as the gray and white birds dipped and swooped in the breeze like trapeze artists, all the while searching for food. Unlike a circus safety net, the deep green water allowed the gulls to dive beneath the waves to capture fish in their sharp beaks. If the birds flew too close to the rail with their loud caws, the children shrieked with laughter.

Despite its small size, the port of Cameron was once the busiest port in the nation, due to the fishing industry. The shipping pace had slowed somewhat in the past decade, but the area was still a hub of seagoing vessels, many traversing the waters north to the port of Lake Charles.

The ferry provided more than transportation across the busy ship channel. It was a lifeline that allowed Highway 82, which stretched along the gulf coast, to continue west to Port Arthur, Texas.

Powered by two GM 150-horsepower engines, the ferry carried fifteen or twenty cars on each crossing. It sported one large wooden lifeboat and a glass-enclosed wheelhouse atop the first floor's engine room. The skipper had a clear view of the wide ship channel at all times. As with the noise of the seagulls overhead, the children squealed and covered their ears when the skipper sounded the loud horn upon approaching the dock.

In less than fifty-two hours, however, the powerful ferry, along with its skipper and chief engineer, would be embroiled in a life-or-death struggle just to stay afloat.

Monday, June 24, 1957
Campeche Bay, off the coast of Mexico
400 miles due south of the Louisiana coastline

New Orleans Weather Bureau Bulletin, 10:30 P.M. CST, June 24, 1957:

A TROPICAL DEPRESSION WAS LOCATED IN THE

GULF OF MEXICO ABOUT 300 MILES SOUTHEAST OF BROWNSVILLE TEXAS AT 10:30 PM CST. HIGHEST WINDS ARE ESTIMATED ABOUT 35 TO 40 MPH. INDICATIONS ARE FOR NORTHWARD MOVEMENT OF THE DEPRESSION. SMALL CRAFT ALONG THE LOWER TEXAS COAST SHOULD NOT VENTURE INTO THE OPEN GULF. NEXT RELEASE WILL BE AT 4 AM CST UNLESS DEVELOPMENTS WARRANT AN EARLIER RELEASE.