FLOOD

A Novel

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STREET

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For my parents,
who always let me roam
and welcomed me home

FLOOD

"You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. 'Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was."

—Toni Morrison

"When a man goes back to look at the house of his childhood, it has always shrunk: there is no instance of such a house being as big as the picture in memory and imagination call for. Shrunk how? Why, to its correct dimensions: the house hasn't altered; this is the first time it has been in focus."

—Mark Twain

CHAPTER ONE

Running Backward

NOTHING COULD HOLD back the Mississippi that summer. Our flood stage was sixteen feet and when the river crested at thirty, folks panicked with good reason.

Jackson's Island, which jutted out of the river as an overgrown sandbar, was completely submerged. The island, immortalized by Mark Twain, wasn't very big to begin with, though Huckleberry Finn and Jim found it to be plenty. The annual spring rains usually caused minor flooding, but the trees on the island reached up from the river like bushes floating on the muddy surface.

Water was what people talked about, worried over, and watched. Upstream and downstream, levees busted by force and by sabotage. Barges were stuck for months and the trains stopped running.

On land, we prayed to crumbling rock and gravel walls for protection and piled up more layers of sandbags to push back the pressure. If a levee broke on one side, there was temporary

relief on the other. Some farmers walked their lines with shotguns, threatening anyone who came near their sandbags.

The fight was fair at first. Until it wasn't. Until it came to sacrificing others to save yourself. Until those with power didn't want to protect those without. Maybe that's why I left. But by then, the Mississippi had taken more than six hundred miles and much of our lives in its wake. Ten years ago, even as I was falling for Sammy on that steamy July night parked at Lover's Leap, one of my feet was firmly planted on the ground, even as I hiked the other to welcome him.

The river's to blame. When you grow up on the banks in Hannibal, Missouri, you need an escape route. You never know when the water is going to rise and you have to run.

MAMA THINKS I'M HOME AGAIN for my ten-year high school reunion. I don't tell her much more when I park my Honda in the grass, scattering chickens, and come through the door about ten o'clock. I drove twenty-two hours straight from Jacksonville, Florida, alternating between the Dixie Chicks' first album and Shania Twain's latest, skipping over sad songs. My boots make my feet ache, but I keep them on for courage.

The house smells like Jiffy Pop and tomato soup: Mama's favorite. The tang and salt make my skin itch. I scratch at the rising bumps on my forearms, but there is no relief, only more allergy to this part of me.

Mama is dozing in her recliner, waiting for the late news to announce the flood stages and her Lotto numbers. When you can see the Mississippi out your windows, flood stages are your

religion. And when you can't imagine how to dig yourself out of your hole, you put your faith in the Powerball.

On the screen, a retrospect from that summer shows houses flooded past their roofs, land stripped of crops, and schools ruined. *"The National Weather Service claims the Great Flood of Nineteen Ninety-Three was extraordinary. It's considered the most costly and devastating flood in modern U.S. history. The many record river levels, people displaced, crop and property damage, and its length exceeded all previous U.S. floods."* The voice is cheerful, as if it's a sunny weather forecast rather than the Mississippi's destruction.

The bumps on my arms swell to hives. I drag my bags in from the car, and the weight of them feels useful. If I just keep moving, I won't have to think. Just like Mama, I always kept the news on in the background of my apartment in Florida, just for the noise, to feel like I had people around me when I didn't.

As I lug in the last suitcase, a threadbare maroon one Aunt Betty bought me for my high school graduation, the zipper busts and a pathetic pile of dirty socks spills out. Mama opens her eyes, and we both stare at the socks. Then she sighs like this is exactly the kind of mess she expects from me. "Be careful with my girls out there, Laura," she says instead of hello. "Y'all haven't been properly introduced yet."

"Girls?"

"My girls. The chickens."

"Those yours?"

"Yep. Oh, they're sweet girls. Fresh eggs every morning. You'll see."

I nod at the prospect and go to my room. It's the second one on the left from the kitchen, down our trailer's narrow hall.

My veins buzz from too much coffee. Black paint chips flake off as I open and close dresser drawers and toss in my stuff. A pale pink peeks through the laminate. My best friend, Rose, and I painted the walls and furniture Charcoal Magic in ninth grade. We thought it sounded sophisticated.

Mama turns up the TV volume and follows me down the hall. "Take your shitkickers off in the house."

I hold up one of my boots to show her the spotless snakeskin. "They're clean."

She shakes her head but doesn't insist. "Looks like a long visit."

"Maybe." The last ten years of my life are these four suitcases, my shrinking savings account, and the car that barely got me here. It doesn't look like much more than I took when I left. I've given myself until the Fourth of July to decide what's next.

Mama leans against the doorframe while I unpack. The Lotto tickets are tight in her right hand.

"You play the same numbers?" I ask. I know the answer, but I know she wants to tell me, too.

"Always."

"Which ones?"

"You and your brother's birthdays. Always."

"They lucky?"

Mama huffs. "Not yet." She chews the nicotine gum I sent her, like a cow working its cud. Her face is rounder since she quit smoking. Her creamy skin is healthier, and there is a flush to her cheeks. She smooths her purple striped blouse and black jeans to have something to do with her hands besides squeeze

the tickets. I've come home unannounced and caught her wearing the clothes I sent, the ones she never thanked me for or acknowledged. Clearly, she didn't hate them.

"Just a few weeks. Maybe a month," I finally say, telling the truth, mainly. "That okay? I've got vacation time comin'. Thought I'd spend it here catchin' up." I slip back into Missouri talk so Mama won't call me out for being uppity. You can reach, Mama always says; just don't look like you're doing it.

"Catchin' up with who?" There it is. Mama's suspicious. She smells trouble. At least there's usually more on Trey, my older brother.

"It'd be nice to see Trey. Aunt Betty, of course. Rose and Bobby."

"And?" She wants me to say Sammy. I don't. Maybe she thinks I'm rooting around for Daddy, too. We haven't heard from him in years, but that never stopped me from scanning crowds and searching the eyes of every ER patient on my shift. Just in case.

"Haven't seen Rose in almost a year," I say, trying to distract her. Mama could mention that I haven't bothered to visit her or Trey or Aunt Betty in almost three years, but she doesn't. Sometimes she's merciful. Usually not, though. I hinted about the reunion on the phone last week, after everything that happened happened, but I didn't tell her directly that I was on my way home. I could hardly believe it myself.

"Rose? I seen her out and about. Her and her boy, Bobby."

"He's a good kid, ain't he?"

"I guess." She watches me unpack. "Rose's gettin' divorced is what I heard. Second time. Same guy."

"I heard that, too. Straight from Rose." I move aside a pile of yearbooks and unpack my underwear. "They both want custody of Bobby."

"Even I wasn't stupid enough to marry your daddy twice." She watches out the window and shakes her head. I hold my breath, hoping she'll keep talking and tell me something about Daddy she's trying to hold in. "I told you Rose was a wild thing. Don't know why you never listened."

"I listened, Mama. Best I could. You know how it is with Rose." I move two fat nursing textbooks from my nightstand. Nothing in this room has changed. I never bothered to take any of it with me, like I always knew I'd be back. Mama hasn't touched it either.

"Rose is saved is what I heard. Found Jesus at that slick new church downtown. You should see it."

"Do I need to?" It's an evangelical Christian getup with a rock band and indoor baptism pool. Rose says they even have a coffee bar with cappuccinos no one will drink. Kids love the bouncy house, too. Bobby apparently adores the place, but I have my doubts.

"Yep. She's got Jesus on the brain. Doesn't slow down none of her runnin'-around ways, though."

"Rose and Bobby came to visit me at the beach last summer. Did I tell you that?" I ask. "Drove all the way down. Bobby'd never seen the ocean." I picture Bobby on his first boogie board ride crashing into the waves and spitting out salt water. Rose and me in our rented beach chairs sipping piña coladas. "They just wanted to get out of town for a while. Florida's nice."

Mama fluffs a flattened pillow. Shreds of cotton stuffing

spill out. She pokes them back in and props the limp pillow up on its side. "Don't know why folks think they gotta leave. I've stayed. I'm just fine, ain't I?" The pillow tilts over again and she ignores it. "This place has always been good enough. For some of us, anyway."

I sink my weight into the twin bed, closer to her. She tucks in the quilt Aunt Betty made for my thirteenth birthday. Next to the bed on my nightstand are framed pictures covered in dust: Sammy and Rose and me at graduation, us in swimsuits posing before we dove into the muddy Mississippi, us laid out on Aunt Betty's quilt watching the fireworks. My favorite is the one where we'd parked Sammy's daddy's bass boat on Jackson's Island and grilled hot dogs and s'mores with Rose and Josh. Rose had finally lost her baby weight. She was awful proud of herself in that red, white, and blue bikini. There's also a tiny framed picture Sammy's mom gave me of him the year he won Tom Sawyer. He wore a straw hat with red suspenders and held a fishing pole, embracing his new town celebrity. Bobby's baby picture peeks out of the corner of a photo of me and Daddy—the only one I have.

Out the window facing the road, a motorcycle kicks up dirt and speeds off. I wonder if it's Trey. I didn't even let him know I was coming. I hope he's clean, but drugs are too easy to come by in a town with nothing else to do. If it's Trey on the bike, I can't see him; the glass is cloudy and needs to be scrubbed.

"I don't know why you never visited, Mama," I say. "I think you'd of been proud of me." I missed her more than I expected, even her complaining. She sighs again but doesn't answer, so I open the dirty window to let in some fresh air. A parade of

dead flies rests belly-up on the sill, their legs reaching toward freedom.

"You know I had to work. You know I can't just get time off. Your brother always needs somethin'. It ain't easy keepin' him on the straight and narrow. Besides, you seemed just fine without us." She studies a picture on my bulletin board. It's the one of me in a tutu with Trey making bunny ears over my head. Mama says I wore that same hot pink tutu for almost a year, pulling it on over my jeans every morning. Aunt Betty sewed it for my fourth birthday. It had three scratchy tulle layers, but the silk band on my belly was soft. I stuck my fingers in the waistline and stroked it for comfort. The band turned dingy and brown from rubbing. I loved that tutu until Daddy ruined it. He wasn't home much, and when he was, Mama yelled at him about money. Sometimes he brought me a pack of Hubba Bubba and remembered that I liked the grape kind. On Saturdays I watched cartoons until my eyes burned, but one morning I found Daddy in front of the TV. The night before he and Mama had had a screaming match in the front yard and he'd left in a fit. But here he was flipping through the channels and sipping iced tea. A bottle of whiskey was jammed between his knees. I stared at the weatherman on the screen, wanting to watch Scooby Doo but not wanting to make a sound. He filled most of Mama's chair. His T-shirt was crumpled in a ball on the floor. His arms were brown branches against his fish-belly white stomach, and he had freckles, like me. "You like to fish?" he asked, stubbing out his cigarette and pulling on his shirt. "Get your boots. You can help with the traps."

The walk to the river was only a few blocks; he told me to

hurry up. I jumped over busted trash bags and dog poop. I ran through an empty lot, tripped on a tree root, and scraped my knee. He didn't stop. When we reached the riverbank, I grabbed the rope to the trap and pulled hard, but it didn't budge. Then he leaned over me, lacing his arms with mine, and we pulled together. The metal cage skidded along the rocks. Leaves and sludge from the mud at the bottom of the Mississippi camouflaged it.

The first trap was empty. Daddy baited it with a can of old cat food he'd poked holes in, and he weighted the trap down with a big rock. Then he tossed the cage back into the water. I pinched my nose to keep out the rotten tuna.

The second trap was heavier. "Hot damn!" he said. "I'm eatin' fish tonight." I wondered if he'd let me have a bite. When Mama cooked fish, she coated it in milky eggs and flour and fried it in a sizzling pan of oil. She made hush puppies and Trey and I dipped them in catsup. I hadn't had any breakfast that morning; my mouth watered against my tongue.

Daddy reached in the trap and pulled out a catfish the length of his arm. The fish jerked its tail around, splashing, and Daddy's T-shirt turned dark and stuck to his skin. "You wanta touch it?" he asked. The long whiskers shot out like tentacles. It smiled in a mean way. "Come on. It won't hurt. Just don't touch those or they'll sting ya."

I inched closer and strained my neck to look down its throat. His thumb was jammed in the bottom of the fish's mouth. The catfish was oily and silver with small black polka dots. Its whiskers teased the air. I reached out my hand to poke a greasy eyeball. Just as my finger met slime, Daddy tossed the fish on

my tutu. I screamed, my hands flopping aimlessly. The fish fell to the dirt and flailed until its body was coated in dust and gravel. Its breathing slowed to a gasp. Daddy laughed so hard he choked. I stomped off, clutching my dirty tutu, and ran home without him.

"You smell nasty like river rot," Mama complained, tucking her nose in her own pit to keep from smelling me. She made me strip off my tutu and stuff it in the trash. When I reached down to rub the silk band, I found the worn-out elastic of my jeans instead, and I hated Daddy even more.

Mama traces her finger down the tutu picture and turns away.

I search around in my suitcase for my toothbrush. "I can stay, right?"

"Looks a little late to be askin'."

Then she shuffles down the hall trailing her hand on the flimsy wall, flips off the lights, and shuts her bedroom door for the night.

I'm home with mama ten hours before I really get her going. Seven of those hours were sleeping. It's a new record. I'd only asked if the towels in the bathroom were clean. They smelled a little musty to me. "My towels are fine, Laura!" she yelled. "Things are just fine. We don't all need fixin', ya know." She dropped the skillet into the metal sink and I knew I'd lost my chance for her cheesy jalapeño scrambled eggs.

I wipe the fog off the bathroom mirror, and the deep creases on my pale forehead make me look older than twenty-eight.

Small lines creep from my hazel eyes. Sammy always saw specks of brown in them, too. He called them my river water. "You can't get rid of us," he told me, "no matter how far you run." My hair hangs in dry layers from the perm I've been growing out. I pull it back and think about cutting it all off, about starting over again. My face is puffy with the extra twenty pounds that lump around my bra and belly. Mama doesn't know yet that it's me that needs fixing. I didn't even know I wanted the baby until I found out it was growing inside me. I was three weeks late. I didn't tell anyone. Not Mama or Rose or Aunt Betty or the married doctor who was the daddy. I waited three weeks to be sure. By the time the pregnancy test was positive, I'd moved from panic to hope. I'd figured out a plan to do it on my own, to be someone's mama. Until the bleeding began. Until it all slipped away. I was hollow in a way that wasn't possible but was. I toss Mama's towels in with my dirty laundry and hang up fresh ones.

After my shower, I sit on the front porch and watch Mama's girls peck at the grass where she's spread their grain. "The big black one is Pamela," she tells me. "The three red ones are Copper, Scarlet, and Ruby. And the little brown one is Sugar." She's fenced off a patch of side yard with a small doghouse for nesting. Mama stands inside their pen with a basket of fresh eggs. She couldn't be prouder if she'd laid them herself.

Every morning, after two cups of Folgers decaf, she walks the tiny garden of hydrangeas and peace lilies, picking out dead leaves and misting the plants with a squirt bottle. At the base of the trailer's steps is a rolled-out ten-by-ten section of Astroturf surrounded by a white picket fence. A black rubber mat

declares it a HOME SWEET HOME. Two red metal chairs sit beside the planters and an American flag sticks out of a bucket of sand. Every few weeks, Mama uproots and transplants her hostas in search of the perfect shade.

"You heard from anyone yet?" she says instead of good morning, joining me on the porch. I kick at the chain-link she's used to secure the chairs to each other. Mama worries that everything beyond the city limits is more dangerous than the petty crime in our neighborhood. The Jacobses' house on the corner was robbed three times last year. Their guns were taken, too. And if you leave your car unlocked, Trey says, your change tray is empty by morning, even the pennies. It could be him stealing it, though. "You got a plan?" she asks.

"I left a message for Rose," I lie, not ready to face her just yet. She'll know immediately what a mess I am. "Don't you want to know about Florida? About my job?" I'm pathetic for pushing, for wanting her approval so much. Ten years is a long time, but it's not long enough for Mama to forgive me for leaving in the first place. She always thought my future with Sammy looked better than my solo one.

"Seemed like you did fine. You didn't come back much anyway. Until now." A brown paper bag filled with corn sits between her legs. Another bag is empty beside it, waiting to catch the husks. She hands me an ear. "Make yourself useful. Aunt Betty brought these yesterday. Lord, that woman knows how to grow corn."

"She always told me the trick was to plant enough for the deer, too. At least you hear from her. Every time I call she tells me to just come home if I want to talk." That makes Mama

grin. Her ornery sister always has. Loving Aunt Betty and worrying about Trey may be the only things Mama and I agree on.

"You could of called us more, ya know," Mama says, picking at the pale silk threads.

"I sent postcards. From Disney, remember? Rose and me took Bobby there. And you know I called at least once a month, even if you didn't call me back." I shuck her two to one, ripping off the outside green shell. "You could of written, too."

"I ain't gonna write to your fancy hospital or your fancy Florida with your fancy job. Figured you were too busy anyway." A breeze blows in and spills the husk bag. I kneel to collect it all and stuff it back in. Silk strands cover my arms and cling to my hair like spaghetti.

"I wasn't too busy. And I'm not too fancy. I worked hard." Maybe it's too much to expect a soft place to land in a place that was never soft to begin with.

"I know you did. Don't get all fussy," she says, as if it's me that cut her down instead of the other way around. "Besides, you ain't the only one workin' hard."

"Oh, yeah?"

"I'm up for a promotion. Down at the hardware store. Assistant general manager. Pay's good, too. I sure the hell earned it."

"That's real nice, Mama," I say and mean it. "When will you hear?"

"Couple of weeks. Definitely by the Fourth. You stayin' that long?"

"Plan to. That okay?"

"Since when do you ask me what you can and can't do?"

Her tone tells me I don't need to bother answering. She sniffs at the air. "Smells like rain. River's up again."

"River's always up." We both turn to watch Mrs. Parker in the tan double-wide across the holler limp out to pick up her morning paper. Mama waves hello.

"She's a nice gal. Just a little crazy."

"Not much has changed, has it?"

"Not much," she agrees, "except you."

"For the better, I hope." I'm fishing for a compliment. It's unlikely I'll get one.

Mrs. Parker tucks her paper under her arm and hitches up her skirt to scratch her leg. "She had both knees replaced last winter," Mama says. "Lord, she looks old."

"Street looks the same."

"Mostly. A couple of teenagers rented the trailer at the corner. A brother and a sister. They remind me of you and Trey at their age. Worse off, though. No parents. I heard they fell on hard times. Times are tough all around." Then she opens her own *Hannibal Courier Post* and scans the headlines. "Paper says flood."

"That paper always says flood." It's true. When you live in a floodplain, you're always wrestling water.

"Your brother's out sandbaggin'. Left a note on the kitchen table. I hope he ain't spendin' more time out at Digger's. Those boys are up to no good and everyone in town knows it."

I didn't hear Trey come in last night or leave this morning. "I thought he'd at least say hi to his little sis."

"What? You expect some royal welcome? Trey's probably expectin' you to find him."

"Where's he at?"

Mama flips the pages to the weather map. Her girls coo from the side porch and she clucks back at them. "Salvation Army, I imagine. There's a crew from the cement plant. That pricey floodwall don't reach the south side, ya know. Figures." That summer the newly installed cement-and-steel floodwall held back the Mississippi from the historic downtown. They saved Mark Twain's boyhood home, but the water seeped in all around and overtook the land where a three-quarter-mile gap in the wall let it in. The floodwall separates the haves and have-nots even more. If you got money, you move away from the Mississippi, out to one of the new subdivisions by Walmart. Money buys you safety from the river and the train tracks. If you're like Rose and me, you're stuck where the water always reaches you. Mama says it doesn't make us any less for living on this side. Our view is better. Who wants to watch a retention pond? It's a good story, anyway, even if it's only half a truth. "Sammy might be there, too. His daddy's gas station always gets it the worst."

"I know, Mama. I ain't been gone that long." We spent most of that flood summer covered in slime and stink from the river. It took a week just to clean the mud from the station's ceiling. Sometimes, even today, when I wash my hair, I still feel caked mud and smell rotting catfish.

"I'm just sayin' you should let folks like Sammy know you're in town. They're gonna hear about it anyway. He's one of your oldest friends. You don't want Rose or some other busybody breakin' the news." She waves at George, our postman, who has just filled our mailbox at the end of the street with bills.

"Unless that smart degree made you forget where you're from." It's a common jab. But it's also a battle you can't win. If you try to better yourself, you're acting like you're too good for the folks who raised you. If you stay and don't, you're a loser who never even tried.

"I know where I'm from," I say, but it sounds weak, even to me. I carry the corn into the kitchen and let the screen door slam. I don't catch it. Mama's been training me since I could walk not to bang the door, but the sound is comforting. The *whap* as the metal hits the plastic frame and the *whoosh* of wind that flows through the worn-out screen. It pops out like a balloon from years of escapes.

"You're lettin' the damn bugs in!" Mama yells. She hunches over in her chair, calls back at her girls, and swats flies with a rolled-up *People*. Britney Spears's face is splattered with fly juice and bug guts.