

GIVING

UP
THE

GHOST

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ATLANTA



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CHAPTER 1

“We’re here,” Dad said. *Finally*. The thousand-mile drive from Wisconsin to Louisiana had felt more like a million. Davia closed her summer journal and looked out the window with new interest.

From River Road, long beards of Spanish moss hung from two rows of gigantic oak trees that led up to a weathered plantation house. Brick columns, like stilts, seemed to lift the building off the ground. The whole place looked completely abandoned.

This can’t be it, Davia thought. The big house wasn’t at all what she’d been imagining—something more like Tara at the beginning of *Gone with the Wind*.

As the car pulled closer, she saw that the mansion needed paint. Badly. She couldn’t even tell what color it had once been. And look at that sagging, wraparound porch. Had Katrina’s floodwaters

from the nearby Mississippi passed beneath the entire house two years ago? Maybe those weird stilts had saved it from being washed away.

"Aunt Mari lives in there?" Davia asked.

"She used to," Mom said, "till she got too sick and couldn't manage the stairs. Now she lives in the stable."

"The stable?" Davia's parents had described her great-aunt as a bit eccentric, but living among hay and horses sounded ridiculous even for Aunt Mari.

"Okay, it *used* to be a stable," Mom corrected herself. "It's been remodeled, so now it's more like an apartment, I guess. All on one level."

Dad followed the drive around back, while Davia scanned the grounds for the "beautiful forest" the place was named after in French. But she saw nothing even close to a dense growth of trees, besides the grand alley of oaks at the entrance. Just weeds. "So much for *Belle Forêt*," she said. "No *forêt* is more like it."

"There were probably plenty of trees years ago," Dad said. "Cypress, no doubt. Over in the swamp."

"The swamp?" She thought of the list in her journal of "Things I, Davia Ann Peters, Am Really Afraid Of." Snakes was Number Eight. Alligators was Number Twelve. So much for taking any walks around the grounds.

Dad turned toward her and grinned.

"Don't you dare laugh," Davia said. "You won't even be here to protect us."

"Sorry," Dad said. "Duty calls."

"Doesn't it always?" She flashed a semisweet smile in the direction of the rearview mirror. Then she glanced over at Mom, wondering what she thought about Dad spending most of each week with a Tulane professor friend, helping to restore houses. What if she and Mom needed help?

"I know you said you wanted to stay with Mom and Aunt Mari," Dad began, "but—"

"You could have gone to French camp," Mom cut in. "If you've changed your mind, honey, just let us know."

Davia looked down at the hangnail she'd recently begun picking. Of course she'd rather be at French camp, but that wasn't the point. She thought back to the last session with the therapist her parents had made her start seeing a couple of years ago. Hadn't Miss Teri said the worst thing for Davia would be separation from Mom right now?

"You really ought to stay with me in the city for a few days, Davia," Dad said. "We could check out Lafayette Cemetery and see where our most famous relative is buried."

Davia rolled her eyes. Sam Peters, father of the New Orleans public school system? Big whoop. There was no way she wanted to set foot in another cemetery. And there was no way she was

ready yet to check out a city where so many people had suffered after Hurricane Katrina. For her own sake, she'd needed to try to put the TV images of the storm's aftermath on the back burner of her mind. Why couldn't Dad understand she wasn't here on some kind of vacation? She had to help Mom take care of Aunt Mari. End of story.

"Okay. Skip the cemetery. There's a great aquarium, and maybe we could take a swamp tour."

"Daddy," she protested.

"A river cruise?" he said.

There was nothing he could tempt her with in New Orleans. But what awaited her in the stable—a weird, dying old lady she'd never met—wasn't exactly tempting, either. She pictured Aunt Mari all shriveled up like a dried apple, moaning and crying, tubes going in and out of her. What would she say to someone like that? How could she even look at her? The whole idea crept her out.

"We could get beignets in the French Quarter," Dad went on.

"Kenneth..." Mom began in a warning tone.

"I could make us an appointment to visit the pharmacy museum. You'd love it—it's got all these old medical instruments and—"

"Really?" Davia said, perking up, but she saw Mom shoot her father one of those *Please don't do this again* looks. Dad shrugged and said nothing.

Davia settled back in her seat, still thinking about that museum.

Mom nervously patted her hair, super-curly and graying now, as if she wanted to make sure it was still there—her own—and not a wig anymore. “What if Davia has an asthma attack?” she said finally. “Or heatstroke? Would you even know what to do?”

Dad looked straight ahead. “She’ll be fine, Katie. Stop smothering the poor kid.”

Go, Dad, Davia thought. She wasn’t even convinced she had asthma anymore. That pharmacy museum sounded pretty cool—and maybe she and Dad could have special time together, for a change.

She begged Mom with her eyes, but Mom wouldn’t look at her. She didn’t have to. Her slumping shoulders said it all.

Davia felt like the Amazing Human Rubber Band, with Dad tugging on one side and Mom on the other. And though neither said a word, Davia knew Dad would let go, like always, and then she’d end up snapping back to Mom. After everything her mother had been through the last couple of years, how could she or Dad even think of leaving Mom here alone?

“Maybe another time, Davia,” Dad said finally.

Mom reached over and touched his shoulder. Dad gave her a lopsided smile and slowed the car

alongside a funny little two-story building with six sides. Its roof sloped gently upward, like the cap on an acorn. The lower level had high arches and a few open black shutters. Upstairs, the windows were shuttered as well.

"Not here." Mom waved Dad on. "I bet this is the *garçonnière*. It's absolutely charming, isn't it?"

Garçon, Davia knew, meant "boy" or "waiter" in French. What was this? A house for boy-waiters?

"Quite the bachelor pad, isn't it?" Dad sounded impressed.

"What?"

"The Creoles, Davia." Dad was using that teacher-tone that made her crazy sometimes, the same one he used to lecture his students—or to tell her and Mom about those PBS specials he watched alone at night in his study. "They were the descendants of the original French settlers in Louisiana. Remember? I'm sure I told you this before."

"Yeah, I guess so," Davia said.

"Anyway, a *garçonnière* is where they sent their rowdy teenage boys."

"To live?"

Dad nodded. "Yep. They kicked their own sons out of the house so they wouldn't bother anyone."

Davia's cat, GG, stirred in her crate, jingling her collar tags and bell. She'd been living on tranquilizers for the past two days just to survive the road trip. Davia poked her finger through the metal door

grid and stroked GG's paw, the only thing she could reach. In a way, she liked GG too doped up to shy away from her. All she'd ever wanted when she picked her out at the cat show was a lovable blue-gray Tonkinese kitten—usually the most playful and “dog-like” of purebred cats. But not GG. She had grown up to be afraid of anything that moved.

“That must be the stable.” Mom pointed to a long, red building to the right, opposite the *garçonnière*. A small, beat-up car was parked alongside. It was plastered with bumper stickers like the one with the Grateful Dead bears and one that said “My husband is an honor student at obedience school.” How weird *was* Aunt Mari, anyway? And what had happened to her husband?

Dad parked the minivan behind the car. “Everyone out!” he sang, as if they'd just arrived at Disney World.

As Davia slid open the door, a blast of heat plowed into the van, shoving her breath to the back of her throat. When she tried to breathe again, a hot, moist vapor threatened to suffocate her. Wisconsin had humidity in the summer, but nothing like this. Stupid air. Stupid South. Before Mom could blame the breathing difficulty on asthma, Davia fished her inhaler out of her backpack and took two quick puffs. No help at all. She heaved another labored breath, not yet ready to panic. “Welcome to Louisiana,” the sign at the border

should have read. "SCUBA gear required."

How did anyone breathe here? Davia felt like she was trying to suck air through a clogged straw. This kind of heat seemed un-survivable. Already, sweat was beading on her forehead. It inched toward her eyes. Her hair—thick and wavy and as dark as Mom's used to be—cried out for something to get it off her neck.

"Are you okay back there?" Three fine worry lines formed between Mom's pale, new eyebrows. Davia knew her mother was trying to sound casual.

"I can't breathe this air. Is Aunt Mari on oxygen? Maybe she'll share."

"Davia," Dad said. "Cut the drama. It's called high humidity."

Mom reached back and cradled Davia's chin in her hand. "You'll get used to it, hon. Just take it slow."

She didn't want to get used to it. All at once, she longed for a regular summer vacation. When she wasn't away at French camp, she and her parents had always done something special—concerts on the Square, canoeing on Lake Wingra, biking through the Arboretum. Once, before Mom got sick three years ago, they went from lighthouse to lighthouse, camping along the Great Lakes. Another time they'd overdosed on musicals in New York City—five in three days. And now this. Why hadn't she given more thought to what she'd do around

here while Mom took care of Aunt Mari? She'd only brought so many books, and *Belle Forêt* seemed a long way from any library. A long way from anything but the Mississippi River.

Dad hopped out and opened the back hatch. "Hurry up, ladies," he said. "Let's get this stuff inside. Aunt Mari's bound to have air conditioning."

That was welcome news. Davia took the cat crate and dragged her suitcase to the front door, puffing like a weight lifter. Too bad all those pounds she'd put on during Mom's chemo treatments weren't muscle. Any time now, Mom kept saying, Davia was going to get her growth spurt and then she'd be fine. Davia was keeping her fingers crossed.

Mom rapped on the door with the brass knocker.

An older woman with short, permed-blonde hair greeted them. "You must be the Peters family," she said. "I'm Sara, Mari's hospice volunteer."

Aha, Davia thought. The car with the bumper stickers was probably hers.

"She's been asking for you. Mari's gonna be real glad to see y'all."

"Same here." Mom's eyes seemed shiny. "It's been far too long."

Davia hurried into the delicious cool air, and helped Dad move their bags into the bedroom Sara showed them. It had only one big bed in it. Davia looked around for a cot or an air mattress.

As if reading her mind, Sara ushered Davia out and gestured around the great room. “Sugar, Mari says you’re to make yourself at home ri-i-ight here.” Davia’s ears tried to adjust to the woman’s drawn-out way of talking. She still wondered where her bed was. Since linens, a pillow, and a blanket were already stacked on the couch, though, she guessed it probably opened up.

The stable was pretty ordinary on the inside, Davia thought. Just a remodeled two-bedroom apartment, clean and blah. She wondered what the insides of the *garçonnière* and the spooky-looking big house were like. Maybe no big deal, either. Maybe the only scary thing around here was her dying aunt. Where did Aunt Mari sleep? Close to Mom and Dad, Davia hoped, not close to her.

As long as I keep busy and out of the heat, she told herself, I’ll be okay. So while Mom got the update from the hospice lady, Davia kept busy, busy, busy setting out food, water, and a litter box for GG, who was still cowering in her open crate. She unpacked her suitcase and stuffed her clothes willy-nilly into an empty chest. Finally, she figured out how to open the sleeper-sofa and made up the bed.

Still, she couldn’t help overhearing. Mom and Sara were reading through a notebook, a sort of “bible” of everything they’d need to know—phone numbers for hospice, the nurse, the social worker,

the bath aide, the chaplain—plus a journal of Aunt Mari’s daily care: What she ate, when she ate, how well she ate—if she ate—and pooped and peed and slept. Same thing for her medicines, including when her next pain pill was due. Any prescriptions would be delivered by the hospice pharmacy, even in the middle of the night. “No worries,” Sara assured Mom. But this was all definitely more than Davia wanted to know. Or think about.

“Davia, sweetie, aren’t you interested in hearing this?” Mom asked, then turned back to Sara. “My daughter wants to be a doctor someday.”

“How wonderful,” Sara said. “Well, she’ll certainly learn a lot, helping out here. You and your husband are doing a good thing, not shuttin’ her out. Too many people do, you know, and that makes kids suffer all the more. Leastways, that’s my opinion.”

“Well, I hope you’re right,” Mom said. “Davia’s a very sensitive child, and she’s been through so much already.”

Davia’s cheeks burned. Sensitive child. Why didn’t Mom say it like it was: “If it wasn’t for her therapist, we’d probably still have a zombie on our hands. She’s afraid of everything!” But it was true that Davia wanted to be a doctor—a lot better one than the creep who’d given her and Dad the first, devastating news about Mom’s illness over the phone.

Davia forced herself closer to Mom and Sara. They talked on and on, discussing schedules for the hospice nurse, the home health aide, the social worker, and other volunteers.

"I don't think she'll be needing more volunteers," Mom said, "now that we're here."

Davia opened her mouth to protest—they could use all the help they could get—but snapped it shut when Sara said, "Well, you think on it. There's nothin' says you have to go it alone. Y'all need to take care of yourselves, too, you know. That's real important for caregivers."

"Can we see Mari now?" Mom said.

Davia guessed Mom was including her in that *we*, since Dad was back in the bedroom unpacking.

"Now?" Davia's voice squeaked.

Could she really handle this? Even through all Mom's treatments, as pale and as gray as she got, Davia had never imagined her mom dying. Well, only once. But that was her fault. She quickly pushed the memory away. Except for that one time, she'd only thought of Mom as fighting, as going "through the Valley of the Shadow of Death," like the psalm said—but just going through. Somehow, it didn't seem right to meet Grandpa Henning's sister for the first time under these circumstances. It was sort of like shaking hands with a naked person when you had all your clothes on.

"She's sleeping," Sara said, "but go on in and sit with her. Be there when she wakes up."

Mom nodded, thanked Sara, and told her they'd be fine. The front door closed with a gentle click.

Davia tried to look busy again, laying her journal and books out on a bookshelf and refolding her clothes neatly this time into separate drawers. If she could have, she would've crawled into a drawer herself.

"Sweetie, you can do that later, can't you? Let's go look in on Aunt Mari."

"But—"

"Please, Davia. This won't get any easier. And I—" Mom broke off, looking at something beyond Davia's shoulder. "I don't want her to wake up and find herself alone."

Davia tried to swallow the lump in her throat, and forced herself to think of good things—how wonderful the air conditioning would feel in there, how grateful she was that Mom would be with her. Like a little kid, Davia grabbed her mother's hand. But it felt so surprisingly small and cold, it seemed as if Mom were the little kid, not Davia.

They hesitated in the doorway. Here goes nothing, Davia thought. Her heart ticked faster than the grandfather clock in the hall. Then Mom let go and went over to pull another chair up beside the bed. Davia hung back. Her aunt barely made a dent in

the white sheets. Someone had slicked her greasy, gray hair back off her high forehead. It fell stringy and straight to just below her ears. In the old photos Davia had seen of her, Aunt Mari's hair was ginger-colored and piled high atop her head. How sunken her closed eyes were now! Bony sockets jutted around them. The covers rose and fell with each breath, Davia's only clue that Aunt Mari was still alive.

"It's okay, sweetie." Mom waved her closer. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

How could Mom, of all people, say that? Wasn't she terrified, seeing how she could have easily ended up? Davia finally forced herself into the room, tiptoeing so she wouldn't awaken her great-aunt. She pretended Aunt Mari was lying in a field of poppies, like in *The Wizard of Oz*, her favorite movie. Maybe she could convince herself Aunt Mari was under a spell—just sleeping, not dying.

But the brisk scent of pine cleaner smashed that idea all to pieces.

She had expected at least a bunch of IV tubes and an oxygen mask, like on *ER*, but there were no signs of medical equipment. Except for a gleaming, modern hospital bed, old dark furniture filled the room. A silver hand mirror and matching brush lay on the dresser, along with a circle of fancy perfume bottles that glittered like jewels in the afternoon sunlight. A gray crackle-glaze ginger jar adorned a

separate corner. Calm down, Davia told herself. Nothing's going to happen. Not right now. You've seen people sleep before. She took her seat beside Mom, beside Aunt Mari.

They watched and waited, and Aunt Mari slept. Once she made chewing motions, and Davia thought she saw what must be dentures come loose. Were they supposed to fix them? Mom didn't seem concerned. She went to the bathroom, then Davia did, just for something to do. When she checked on GG, all that crazy cat did was huddle up and peer at her through the little slats in the side of her crate. Once GG's pill wore off, Davia would probably never see her. Dad was reading the hospice packet out in the great room. Davia wished she could sit with him. But that wouldn't be fair to Mom, would it?

Back in Aunt Mari's room, she couldn't bear to watch the old woman just lie there and breathe anymore. She couldn't sit there doing nothing, like Mom was. How could Mom stand it? What was she thinking about? Her own cancer? Maybe she was meditating again. Davia wanted to dive back into *The Secret of Stony Manor*, but she doubted she'd be able to concentrate.

She fidgeted in her chair, and finally turned toward the window. The *garçonnière*, dark with shadows, filled the frame. She wondered whether it was air-conditioned, too. What a great place it

would be for hanging out. Not that she had anyone to hang with.

Dad cleared his throat from the doorway. "I think I have just enough strength left to pick up some food." He paused. "Pick up? Get it?"

Mom groaned, shook her head.

"Do you want to come, Davia? Vacherie's not all that far. Half an hour, tops."

What if Aunt Mari woke up when they were gone? Maybe Mom would need her help. "No, thanks," she told him.

"Well, don't go anywhere without me, then," he teased.

"Like we could," Davia said, staring again at the *garçonnière*.

"What's so interesting out there?" Mom asked after Dad had gone.

Davia shrugged. How cool it would be to make the *garçonnière* her own special place! Those shutters looked like the ones on her old dollhouse. She squinted, shielding her eyes from a blinding light that reflected off the upstairs windows.

What was up with that? It couldn't be the sun. It hadn't set yet, but it was hanging low. And in the wrong direction, too.

She blinked hard, but the fierce glare persisted. Even the *garçonnière's* arched windows on the main floor seemed to glow. She got up, faced the

light, and felt almost as if she were being pulled toward it.

No. This was too weird. She had to stay away. But what was that strange light? Forget it, she told herself. Leave it alone. Push-pull. Push-pull. She was the Amazing Human Rubber Band again.

Was she seeing things? She had to get out of Aunt Mari's room, right away.

Chill, she told herself.

"Mom," she whispered, "is it okay if I go outside? Take a walk or something?" But even as she asked the question, a part of her hoped Mom would say no, it wasn't safe out there, away from her. Stay, Davia, she'd say. Where I can see you.

But the strange white light kept drawing Davia like a beacon. Don't be such a baby, she told herself. Go!

"Take a walk, sweetie? In this heat? Are you sure?"

No. She nodded. It wasn't like she'd be going to the swamp or anything.

"You'll bring your inhaler?"

Again, Davia nodded. It beat arguing about whether she even needed the stupid thing anymore.

Mom's teeth worked on her bottom lip. "Well, I suppose so. But stay right around here, okay? Don't wander off. And make sure you're back in"—she

looked at her watch—"half an hour. How's that sound?"

"Fine. I'm just going to check out the *garçonnière*. You can see me from the window."

Mom just waved. As Davia left the room, she glanced back at her sleeping Aunt Mari. She could have sworn she saw the old woman's dry, cracked lips edge upward in the faintest of smiles.