

“Even when we mortals don’t understand, God’s plan is unfolding around us. *Summer’s Winter* is an incredible mystery that teaches us to believe in that divine plan for our lives. The twists and turns in *Summer’s Winter* kept me reading into the night...I couldn’t wait to reach the end! Robin Johns Grant’s *Summer’s Winter* is a heartwarming read in which good and evil collide. I loved it!”

—Nancy Grace, HLN host and author of
The Eleventh Victim and *Death on the D-List*

“Part murder mystery, part Hollywood dream-world and part thought-provoking Southern lit, *Summer’s Winter* takes the reader on a romantic ride, filled with movie-star moments that plummet into hair-raising hairpin twists and turns. Jeanine and Jamie’s relationship crackles with sparring, spirituality and suspense, leading to an ending worthy of your favorite Hollywood finale”.

—Elizabeth Musser, author of *The Swan House* and *The Sweetest Thing*

SUMMER'S WINTER

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ROBIN JOHNS GRANT



STORY MERCHANT BOOKS
BEVERLY HILLS

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PROLOGUE

IN THOSE DAYS, A PECAN ORCHARD GUARDED THE GROUNDS OF THE CALVARY Christian School. Teachers and parents were unsentimental about the graceful old trees. To them they were just a source of revenue, and not a very large one, at that. Their children, however, loved playing in the shadowy grove at recess and after school, shaded from the brutal Georgia heat in spring and summer, kicking through the brittle leaves that littered the ground in fall.

Even for the children, however, this particular day in late October was different. The trees' branches were bare and harsh, the trees strangely transformed from the gentle green protectors of spring. Gnarled and gray, they stood watch like silent sentinels as six-year-old Billy Holland began to scream.

As his screaming dissolved into hysterical sobs, the other first graders stopped their playing, gathered around him and stared in shock. Teachers poured into the orchard, but the first to reach the boy was Mrs. Frances Xavier—huffing and puffing for breath, not just from her sprint across the grounds but also out of fear. She had visions of blood and broken arms. And lawyers.

Pushing the other children aside, she collapsed to her knees in front of the boy. "What's wrong, Billy? For goodness' sake, what's the matter!" Her sharp eyes checked for damage. He was still standing, apparently hadn't fallen out of a tree or broken any limbs. No blood visible. Bee sting, perhaps? Yellow jackets were relentless in Georgia in the fall of the year.

Billy was still blubbering and incoherent, and now that Mrs. Xavier could see that any physical damage was either slight or nonexistent, she started to lose patience. “Now, Billy, I want you to calm down right now and tell me what happened.”

Billy’s eyes widened. Mrs. Xavier was the boy’s own first grade teacher, and her students knew she brooked no foolishness. He mumbled something in reply. But what he said was murmured so softly—no, be truthful. What he said was so bizarre that she demanded, “What did you say?”

He took a deep breath and then spoke clearly. “I said she grabbed me. And I don’t want her to. She’s a witch!”

“What! Who is?”

“Her.”

He pointed at one of the little girls in the crowd of children. But after he pointed, the others drew away and left the girl standing alone, as though a magic circle had been drawn around her. All eyes shifted from Billy to the girl.

Mrs. Xavier glanced at her, and then turned back to the sniveling boy. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you, Billy. You know Jeanine. That’s Preacher DeValery’s daughter. She sits behind you in class every day.”

She shouldn’t have pointed that out. Billy’s lip started to shake as he geared up for a new round of sobbing. Exasperated, Mrs. Xavier turned to Jeanine, a smart and quiet little girl. Her chief vice seemed to be a penchant for daydreaming in class. But she must have done something to make Billy this hysterical. “Now Jeanine, you tell me this instant—”

She stopped short, the words trapped in her throat.

Something about little Jeanine DeValery did seem different today. Not her appearance, precisely. She had that same disheveled look that she always developed within an hour of arriving at school. No matter how hard her mother tried to tie the wavy mass of dark hair into a neat braid, it snaked and curled its way out little by little throughout the day as though each strand had a life of its own. The little girl looked pale and serious, but that was not unusual, either—although her dreamy eyes had come into sharp focus and were meeting Mrs. Xavier’s with unusual confidence and power.

Power. That was it. There was no visible reason for it, but somehow this little girl was radiating such an unnamable force that Mrs. Xavier felt if she touched Jeanine DeValery right now, she too would dissolve into hysterics.

Of course, there was no reason to touch Jeanine. Right now, her duty was to Billy Holland. Feeling somehow ridiculous but at the same time relieved, she turned her back on Jeanine DeValery and reached for the little boy's hand. "Come on, Billy. We'll talk about this inside."

And I'll have a little talk with Lee DeValery later, she promised herself.

* * *

"Come on, Jeanine, play with us!"

"No, I don't feel like it. Leave me alone."

The little girl sat in the swing, fingers gripping the chain, and stared at the back door of the school building. Daddy was in there right now. Mrs. Xavier had called him.

"But we don't know what to play without you."

Jeanine looked at the cluster of five or six boys and girls gathered around her. "I'm usually not here this late. What do you usually do?"

They looked at each other, shrugged. "I don't know. Mess around. Wait for our mammas. But it's more fun with you."

Jeanine sighed and pushed a few strands of hair out of her eyes. "You're not gonna start screaming, are you? I'm in enough trouble already."

"No! Course not."

She stood up, the canvas of the swing bumping the back of her legs. "Okay, so listen. I'm the wicked witch. Those trees over there—" she gestured wildly with her arms—"used to be kids just like you, but the witch got them and turned them into those twisted old skeleton trees, and they have to stay there forever and ever—"

She led them deeper and deeper into the complex story and soon had them running and screaming (happily this time) through the pecan grove. Really, they were playing a glorified game of tag, but Jeanine had infused it with magic. They were deep in an enchanted wood, and shivery, skin-tin-gling surprises lurked behind every tree. It was wonderful.

Jeanine suddenly looked up and saw Daddy standing at the edge of the orchard, hands shoved down in his pockets, watching her. She stopped short, and without her, the others one by one wound down, as well.

When he saw they had stopped, Daddy motioned for her to come. For a moment she stood paralyzed, but then his face broke into its usual smile of welcome, so she ran toward him.

He grabbed her hand and bent down to smack a big old kiss right on top of her head. She looked up at him as they strolled toward the car. “You’re not mad at me, are you?”

“No, I’m not mad.” He sighed and gazed into the distance. Jeanine looked in the same direction, searching with her eyes, but she didn’t see a thing and started to fidget. She knew from Daddy’s expression that he was about to start talking about something that wouldn’t make a lick of sense.

Sure enough, he said dreamily, “It’s a special time, Jeanine—to be as young as you. Everything is so real. Heaven is as tangible as the taste of a juicy peach on a hot day, as easy and close as stepping out the school door and into another world at recess. But evil, too—so real that at night your closet is filled with monsters and your head with dark dreams. Sometimes I wish I could make my congregation feel all that, too, but by our age we’re so grounded in this world. Our heads are filled with scheduling meetings, stretching our paychecks, running the kids to soccer practice.”

He looked down at Jeanine, and then laughed. “You don’t have a clue what I’m talking about, do you?”

“Well...I didn’t do anything wrong?”

“Umm...let’s talk about it in the car, okay?”

Shadows played across the car hood as he pulled out into the road. It was getting dark.

“Mrs. Xavier was pretty upset. That little game of yours scared Billy Holland to death.”

“Oh, Billy is just a scaredy-cat, that’s all. And he has too much imagination.”

“And you don’t!”

“I know it’s just pretend.”

“I see. And do you think witches are what you should be pretending about?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. Witches aren’t fun. They aren’t for play.”

She nodded vigorously. “I know it. That’s why I had the angels fighting her. And I always make sure they win—sooner or later.”

“And why are you the one that always plays the witch?”

Jeanine shrugged. “Because none of them do it right.”

She thought Daddy started to laugh, but then he made a kind of snorting sound and started to cough, instead.

“Well, honey, I’m sure you meant well, but people are funny the way they look at things sometimes. I don’t think my congregation would like it if they heard about this.”

“You mean I might get you in trouble?”

“You’re a preacher’s kid, Jeanine. People are always going to watch how you act.”

She frowned. “People watch me?”

“That’s right. You have to set an example for the other kids. And people will judge me by how I run my home, how my children behave.”

She looked down at her shoes, clicking the heels of her tennis shoes together like Dorothy did with her slippers. The ground had been muddy under the leaves, and the toes that had been white this morning were a splotchy brown. Mamma would be mad and would fuss, but it was Daddy’s soft voice that was making her stomach feel fluttery.

She felt him touch her arm.

“You okay?” he asked.

She looked into his eyes. “Yes sir. I would never do anything to get you in trouble, Daddy.”

He laughed. She wasn’t sure why. “That’s my girl. Just remember that when you’re older.”

* * *

On the same day that Jeanine DeValery was causing trouble at the Calvary Christian School in Georgia, an eight-year-old boy named Jamie Newkirk was giving his uncle Richard a raging headache. Not that there was any connection between Jamie and Jeanine. They had never met, never heard of one another. In fact, Jamie lived on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, and had no particular dreams of ever setting foot outside the U.K. There was no connection between them whatsoever.

Richard was already tense and tired as they entered his agent’s office building, and Jamie’s bouncing a football around the lift like a little hooligan didn’t help matters. Just before the doors opened to their floor, Richard snapped, “Do stop that, *please!*”

Jamie snatched up the ball and said nothing, but the silence was deafening.

Richard sighed and pushed his hair back from his face, wishing he had managed a haircut before coming to see Cynthia. “Look, I’m sorry I made you miss your football match, but what was I to do?”

He had to lean forward to hear Jamie’s sulky response. “You knew where I would be.”

“I knew you would be at the game for the first hour or so, but then what? The way you wander off lately. Can you imagine how I felt coming home last night and not knowing where the devil you were for the next two hours! I almost rang the police.”

“I was only riding the tube, watching people. I wasn’t doing anything horrid.”

“You could get yourself killed, do you understand that? This is London, not that little town in Warwickshire you’re accustomed to.”

Jamie spoke in the direction of the floor. “It isn’t fair. You expect me to sit in that grotty old flat by myself all the time.”

They were directly in front of Cynthia’s office door, but Richard stopped and faced Jamie. “Do you think it’s been easy for me, having my whole life turned upside down for you? I’m trying to make it work for both of us, but when I’m offered a decent acting job, I’ve got to take it. If I’m out at night for a few weeks—well, you could try giving me a spot of help, couldn’t you?”

Again Jamie said nothing—and he said it quite eloquently.

Richard took a deep breath and gripped the doorknob. “Okay. Look, I just need to talk to Cynthia for a few minutes, and then you can go to my rehearsal with me. So you’ll not be sitting home alone, after all.”

“Oh, lovely.”

Richard left Jamie sitting moodily in an outer office while he spoke with Cynthia about his so-called career. When she walked him to the door of her office fifteen minutes or so later, the sound of Jamie’s blasted football thumping around was the first thing that hit their ears.

“Sorry.” Richard rubbed his throbbing temples. “I had to bring him with me this evening. Long story.”

She nodded. “It must be hard, Richard. It’s bad enough having to drive a cab and wait tables and try to squeeze in your art, but when you become a parent overnight, too, well...”

Her brown eyes filled with sympathy, and for a moment Richard won-

dered why he had never asked her out. Then he took in the designer suit, the manicured nails. Oh, yeah. That was why.

Cynthia was stepping out into the front room, sticking out her hand to the brat. "You must be Jamie."

To the boy's credit, he turned his attention from the football and gave Cynthia a smile. A brilliant smile. She beamed back at him, and Richard felt himself relaxing. You couldn't help it, somehow. Jamie had a way of dazzling everyone in his path when he felt so inclined. His dark good looks didn't hurt, of course.

Cynthia was apparently under his spell already. "Oh, Richard, he's gorgeous!" She folded her arms and gave the boy an appraising look. "You are very handsome, do you know that? And such exotic looks—nothing at all like your Uncle Richard, are you?"

Richard winced. "Jamie looks like his mother. She's Spanish."

"Oh, really? Is that where she is now? Spain?"

"Who knows?" Richard tried to edge Jamie toward the door.

Cynthia's eyes were still fixed on the boy. "Richard, can he act?"

"He certainly can when he wants something," Richard said wryly. And then, the possible meaning of Cynthia's words occurred to him. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, I was just thinking—they need boys for the cast of *Twist!* Feagin's lads are continually outgrowing the parts. They've even got to replace the lead, the one who plays the Artful Dodger, soon. Andrew Stiles has five o'clock shadow and has got to go."

Richard was momentarily speechless. "*Twist!* You don't mean—a West End production, when he's never acted at all!"

"Yes I have," Jamie piped in. "At school."

Richard looked at him. "You played a tomato. Once."

Cynthia was shaking her head. "The *Twist!* cast is quite large. Some of the boys' parts don't have any lines at all. A few basic dance moves, looking alert and dressing up the stage. And who could resist this one? Look, Richard, I'll ring them right now if you like and see if we can send him over."

Richard felt stunned. He looked at Jamie. "Do you want to?"

Jamie shrugged. "Why not?"

When Cynthia popped back into her office, Jamie grinned up at him. "I'm gorgeous."

In spite of himself, Richard felt his face melting into a smile. “Yeah, well, she doesn’t know you like I do, does she?”

A week later, Richard was watching Jamie in a matinee of *Twist!*, and the shock he had been feeling for days over this unexpected turn of events started to give way to something else, some vague and unpleasant emotion that was hard to identify. He glanced around at the other theater-goers, wondering if they, too, had a hard time tearing their eyes away from his nephew’s face. Jamie had landed the role of one of the background characters, with a grand total of five lines. And yet, there was so much going on with his face, with his body, that you could swear some dramatic plot turn was going to come from him at any moment. He was far more interesting than the carefully-rehearsed Andrew Stiles emoting at center stage.

One of Jamie’s lines came along—a throw-away line, designed to set up some gag of Andrew’s. But Jamie popped it out in such a way that a little ripple of laughter started to move through the audience, and there was a light spattering of applause. Andrew hesitated before his next speech. Whether he was trying not to step on Jamie’s laugh or was thrown by the audience’s reaction to this little upstart in the cast was hard to say.

But Richard himself was no longer shocked. He felt queasy, shaky. For five years now, Richard had been in London trying to make himself into an actor. He had studied, auditioned, starved—the whole bit. He had been successful enough not to despair of his talent, but not successful enough to actually be able to support himself from it. At least not on a regular basis. But he hadn’t minded. Even after Rob died this year and he had to buckle down and start driving a taxi to feed and clothe Jamie, he had refused to give up his dream of acting, because he was certain that he was growing and learning and that someday he could rise to the top. But in those five years, he had never given a performance like Jamie had just given on his first try and with five meager lines to work with.

As the audience rose to its feet to applaud at the final curtain, Richard knew with a sickly certainty that more had ended for him than tonight’s performance.

* * *

Jamie was ten when he landed the role of The Artful Dodger in *Twist!*

Eleven when he won the Laurence Olivier Award for playing the Dodger, and eleven when casting started for the film version. Of course Jamie got an audition. But for the first time since Cynthia suggested he try out for *Twist!*, Jamie's career hit a brick wall. The actor who'd been playing the Dodger on Broadway landed the part. Jamie just shrugged his shoulders and said he was sure he liked the live theater audiences better, anyway. But Richard had been certain Jamie would get the job and chafed with frustration every day he escorted Jamie to the little theatre in Drury Lane, which had lost its glamour in his eyes and now looked small and shabby and dead-end.

Richard was not one to be thwarted. Through some of the other boys in the *Twist!* cast, Richard had heard of an intriguing little book called *Summer and the Sea*, by a first-time author named Hannah Raney. The book had started out small—small press, small first run, low expectations. But it was catching on, and Richard watched with interest as the boys passed the book from one to another and chattered about what might happen in the sequel to the young hero, Danny Summer—who was right around Jamie's age. Scared and exhilarated by what he was considering, Richard made a few tentative inquiries about the film rights and discovered, to his dismay, that the rights were available.

Then he discovered why. Hannah Raney, the author, was that rare bird who loved the world she had created more than money, and she ferociously guarded her literary offspring. She was making unreasonable demands, wanting many of the filmmaker's typical rights for herself. Among other things, she insisted that no movie sequels about Danny Summer and company could ever be made unless they were based on her books—she was planning a whole series. Her demands were ridiculous, and yet...

Richard had a feeling—about Jamie, and about Danny Summer. And maybe the old girl's stubbornness could be worked to his advantage. He gave her everything she wanted, and in return offered her a fee that should have been insultingly low. She accepted that same day. After that, the whole project snowballed, and a year later Richard found himself on a movie set not just as Jamie's guardian, but also as the producer and director.

* * *

Jeanine DeValery caught her first glimpse of Jamie Newkirk when she was ten years old. Her nine-year-old sister, Ginella, had friends over for her

birthday. They were supposed to play outside, but a monsoon seemed to develop out of nowhere, so they played music at a roof-rattling level and danced and ran back and forth through the house. Jeanine curled up by herself in a window seat with a book and was oblivious to it all. But her poor frazzled mother apparently didn't do so well, because she suddenly pulled the book from Jeanine's hands and announced that she was taking them to a movie. All of them. The movie was *Summer and the Sea*.

In the theater, all the other kids fidgeted, giggled, nudged each other and whispered, but Jeanine scarcely breathed or moved. As Danny Summer laughed, schemed, faced imprisonment and even threats from supernatural forces—all for the sake of a band of street urchins that he had led in crime and was now attempting to lead to a new life in the American colonies—Jeanine felt every emotion as her own. She had always gotten caught up in movies and books, but nothing like this. Never anything like this feeling of complete oneness with a character.

She left the theater in a daze. In the DeValery home, God had always been a constant presence. He had revealed himself gently to her throughout her life, starting when she was barely out of the cradle, not in a blinding flash as he did to the apostle Paul on the Damascus Road. But on the day she first saw Jamie Newkirk, Jeanine felt as though she had had her Damascus Road experience. God had abruptly, shockingly intervened in her life, had blinded her with the gift of something bright and wonderful and just for her, and she could almost hear him speaking to her in an audible voice.

And he was telling her that somehow, someday, this wonderful boy was going to be a part of her life.

Eleven years later...

CHAPTER ONE

SOMETIMES JEANINE HAD HEARD HER FATHER PREACH ABOUT THE FOUR HUNDRED years of silence between the Testaments, when the people of Israel desperately waited to hear from God. Jeanine felt humbled at the very idea. So far, eleven years of silence had proved excruciating.

Since that amazing day in the theater when she had heard the voice of God, presidents had risen and fallen. The stock market had teetered, and there were wars and rumors of wars. Jeanine drifted through it all, barely noticing, growing taller, growing up. Listening. Waiting.

And then one day, everything changed.

Oddly enough, in the very hour that things were changing, Jeanine was standing in front of her mother's desk at the university, gazing sullenly down at the floor and thinking, "Here we go again."

Her mother sat behind the desk, frowning and staring at Jeanine as though trying to figure out some complicated Geometry problem. Daddy stood to one side, looking uncomfortable, bless his heart, as though he wished that Mamma hadn't called him in. Or had she called him? Just how much trouble was Jeanine in? She sighed and wondered how someone like herself, who didn't smoke, drink, or fool around, could cause so much parental anguish.

Mamma fiddled with a pencil. "I was entering grades for Dr. Calley this morning and came across yours."

"Oh." Jeanine cleared her throat. "Not good, I take it."

Mamma's head jerked up. "You're lucky I didn't have a heart attack."

Silence. Jeanine rather hoped that Daddy would jump in and save her, but he remained quiet. So Jeanine took a deep breath and prepared to defend herself. "You knew I missed that exam a few weeks ago. I've said I'm sorry. I tried to study and bring my grade back up. I don't know what else I can do."

"I thought you were going to try to make up the test," Daddy said.

Jeanine glanced at him, trying to read his face, but it was unusually blank. "Dr. Calley wouldn't let me. He said I..." She trailed off, not wanting to finish the sentence. Not wanting to start all that up again.

"He said you didn't have a good excuse," Mamma finished.

"That's right." Jeanine could hear the irritation in her own voice but hoped Mamma didn't notice. Fat chance. Jeanine took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. "Maybe if you talked to Dr. Calley—"

"I will do no such thing." Mamma's lips tightened into a thin, straight line. "I won't beg my employer for special privileges for my children. You screwed up, Jeanine."

Words were rushing through Jeanine's bloodstream, pounding in her head, tumbling over themselves in an effort to burst out. *I did not screw up I didn't I don't want to be like you and give up everything so I can be a secretary and answer phones and sit in a desk chair till my bottom goes numb and go home and cook and clean toilets and get up and do it again and never dream and never try and I tried and it was not screwing up—*

She clenched her teeth until her jaws ached but she managed to keep the words from spilling out. She knew her face was a blank mask, the one she had practiced in front of a mirror and that drove her mother crazy. When she was able to speak normally again, she said, "It doesn't matter, anyway."

Mamma's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"It was an Education class and..." She took a deep breath, and then spilled it. "I've decided I don't want to teach."

"What!"

"When did that happen?" Daddy had obviously been trying to let Mamma handle this, since the offense was happening on her turf. But this was apparently too much for him. At least he just looked interested, not furious like Mamma.

"It's been coming a long time." She felt a stray curl hanging down in her face. Absently, she pulled it to her lips, and then let it go as she remembered

that this “nasty habit” annoyed her mother even on a good day. “I just can’t teach teenagers. I didn’t understand teenagers when I was one of them.”

Mamma dropped her head into her hands and moaned. “Jeanine, you’re supposed to start your student teaching right after the holidays. You’re supposed to graduate in five months. And you’re deciding this now?”

Mamma looked tired. Jeanine noticed it for the first time and felt a pang of guilt. Mamma seldom looked tired or dull like Jeanine. She looked bright and youthful, her plump cheeks smooth and rosy and not a speck of gray in her wavy brown hair. So maybe Jeanine really had messed up. And now Jeanine was remembering the reason her mother worked at this boring secretarial job every day, even though she probably could have done something more interesting. She worked here because the employees got free tuition for their children, and it was the only way Jeanine and Ginella could have afforded college.

“I’m sorry.” This time she said it with feeling. “But it’s okay, really. I’ve talked with Dr. Persons and it turns out I can just take English courses next semester and still finish up in time with a plain old English degree.”

“And then what?”

Jeanine turned to her father, feeling a little betrayed that he’d been the one to ask such a mundane question. “I guess I’ll pray for God to show me.”

He pressed his lips together, and Jeanine knew he was trying not to laugh. “Touché.”

Mamma let out a long sigh. “I can’t tell you how thrilled I am to be having this discussion today of all days.”

“What do you mean?”

“Tell her what I mean, Lee.”

Daddy was stroking his chin, a nervous gesture that never failed to make her anxious, too.

“Is something going on?” she asked. “Other than my grades, I mean?”

They exchanged a look. Finally Daddy spoke. “So...I take it you haven’t heard the news this morning.”

“News?” Jeanine shook her head, confused. “You mean, like, family news or church news or—”

“Like CNN or Fox.” Mamma looked even grimmer than when she’d been discussing Jeanine’s grades. Surely Jeanine couldn’t be in trouble for something that had made national news...could she?

“Obviously I haven’t heard, because I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about,” Jeanine said.

“Why don’t we all sit down?” Daddy motioned her to the hot seat in front of Mamma’s desk while he pulled up another chair, so they were both facing Jeanine. Scary.

“There hasn’t been a terrorist attack or something, has there?” she asked.

“No, no, nothing like that.” Hands on his knees, Daddy leaned toward her. “It’s about Jamie Newkirk.”

Jeanine’s heart lunged in her chest, as it always did on hearing that name. But she had learned not to let it show in her voice. “Really? What?”

Daddy took a deep breath. “His girlfriend was found dead in his house this morning. You know, that blue-jeans model, Paula Klein?”

The words came out automatically, even as her brain processed the news. “She’s not his girlfriend. They broke up months ago.”

“Anyway, they’re not sure how she died yet, but it must look like foul play. Jamie Newkirk was arrested.”

“Arrested! For what?” She looked from Daddy to Mamma, then back again.

“Honestly, I’m not sure.”

Jeanine shoved her suddenly shaking hands into her pockets, tried to compose her features and breathe normally. But this time the trick must not have worked, because both parents were staring at her—Daddy looking concerned and Mamma irritated.

“You okay?” Daddy said, inching his chair closer.

Mamma let out her breath in frustration. “This is ridiculous. We’re acting as though we’re telling you a family member died.” She leaned across the desk and pointed with her pencil. “He’s a movie star, Jeanine. You don’t know him.”

“I realize that, Mamma. Do you think I’m crazy?”

“Of course not,” Daddy said.

“But you do crazy things sometimes,” Mamma added.

Daddy looked shocked. “Marielle!”

“Oh come on, Lee. You know what I mean.” Mamma picked up a folder on the desk and shook it. It must have been full of test papers—the infamous test that Jeanine had missed. “Did Jeanine miss an exam for an important reason? Or even an unimportant reason that made sense, like a real flesh-and-blood boy?”

Again Jeanine clenched her teeth, damming back a flood of hot words that would boil her mother alive if she let them spew out. When she felt she had enough control, she cracked her mouth just enough to say, "Jamie Newkirk is real."

"Not as far as you're concerned. And yet, you were willing to throw away your very real future to go chasing after him last month."

"I wasn't chasing him. I knew he wouldn't be there."

"Even worse. You skipped a test just to get near the boy's uncle!"

Jeanine jumped to her feet. "I've had enough of this."

Daddy laid his hand on her arm, and for him, she stopped. When he spoke, he was looking at Mamma. "Marielle, maybe we should cut her a little slack."

Jeanine wanted to laugh. *We?* Daddy wasn't the one giving her the hard time.

"It's not as though Jeanine ditches tests every day." He winked at her. "First time ever, that I can recall. You know how dependable she is. She's a straight A student and—"

"It's not the first time she's gone nuts over this stuff. Remember when that writer Hannah Raney died? And we couldn't find her for hours?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"That was connected to her Newkirk obsession or Danny Summer obsession or whatever it was, too. Come on, Lee, you're here in my office because you were worried how she would react when she heard a movie star had been arrested for murder. I ask you, is that normal?"

"Murder!" Jeanine stared at her father. "He was arrested for murder?"

Again the agitated chin stroking. "I'm not sure, Jeanine. You know how it is these days. They jump on the news with a story before they have all the facts—honey, come back!"

This time, not even Daddy's voice could stop her. Running into the hallway, she slammed the door and sliced the words off, neat and clean.

* * *

Jeanine sat in her ancient red Mustang under a winter-bare oak tree and devoured every morsel of news from the talk radio station. They were babbling about something unimportant. She waited as patiently as possible. There was a cycle to their programming: news and weather updates every fifteen minutes,