

NO  
MARBLE  
ANGELS



Raleigh, 1968

The night offered no sign of an emergency. Shannon Douglas lay sleeping under a white cotton canopy in front of an open window. Light broke apart on the carpet in her room, shifting as the moon shifted. Outside wisteria vines stirred in the shadows, and the room smelled of the sweet dense flower. She slept with the covers pulled back in a blue-flowered gown. One arm stretched above her head as though she were reaching in her sleep, but her body lay motionless. As the moon crossed the arc of the sky and began its descent, the phone beside her bed rang. Next door a dog barked. Between the sounds Shannon began and awakened from a dream.

Downstairs Wes Douglas answered the phone from the couch in his study where he had fallen asleep. The television still murmured in the corner, and a reading light burned into his eyes.

Shannon and her father met on the landing after the call. It had been her aunt on the phone. Rheba, her maid, had been stabbed. Her uncle had gone to the hospital; her cousin was still out on a date, and her aunt was alone and afraid. Shannon grabbed the car keys from the hall table and a Middlebury College sweatshirt from a brass hook. "Let's go."

Her father hesitated as if he wanted to say something to her, but she was already at the door. Her thin mouth was set in a defensive line; the look bid him away. She opened the door. She didn't want him to speak for she knew he

## NO MARBLE ANGELS

didn't know what to say. As if realizing this himself, he picked up his wallet and without a word followed her outside. Honeysuckle and gardenias perfumed the night air. In the mimosa trees whippoorwills trilled; the crickets chirped. The moonlight settled in a filigree across the lawn.

Shannon and her father sped in the blue Lincoln Continental the few blocks to her aunt's house in silence. At the door Josie Simpson Douglas met them in a bathrobe with the shiny remains of night cream over her face. She led them to the kitchen where she'd set out coffee and cookies as though she'd invited them to a party. She brought in napkins, put down plates, poured cream. Her hands searched for activity as she chatted in an excited drawl. Yet behind her liveliness, a startled, betrayed look flickered in her eyes.

"I've never heard anything like it," she said filling cups with coffee. "Screams like a cat fornicating or dying. It frightened Joe and me so that we sat straight up in bed. Joe turned on the light till we realized it was coming from out back and whoever it was might see us. We turned off the light then and went to the window where we saw Rheba in the doorway of her quarters holding a knife. Joe thought she was hurt, but we were afraid to go down. Then Rheba started towards the house still carrying the knife. She began hitting at the kitchen door. I hurried to see if the noise had wakened Georginna, and that's when I saw she wasn't even home. I thought of her still out there and of what might happen."

"What happened to Rheba?" Shannon urged. Her green eyes pressed upon her aunt. Her small nose flared as it did when she grew excited.

Josie took a swallow of coffee. "Rheba was pounding on the glass. In the back porch light she looked like a crazy woman. I was almost afraid to let her in, but Joe saw she was all covered with blood. He called an ambulance while I tried to clean her up the best I could, but she was hurt pretty bad. I can't imagine who would have done such a thing. I wonder what she did."

"Why do you think she did anything?" Shannon asked.

Josie reached for a macaroon. She was a tall, husky woman, and her uncorseted body slouched in the chair. "Shannon, honey, someone doesn't come in and practically kill you for no reason. To rob you maybe, but if they were going to rob, why wouldn't they have broken into our house? Rheba doesn't have anything."

Shannon lifted the china cup to her lips. She didn't answer. She stared into her aunt's face; it was a kind face, grown complacent over the years. She tried to remember her talk with Rheba just this afternoon. Today had been her first Sunday home in almost a year, her first since she'd graduated from college. They'd had a family dinner, and afterwards she'd lingered at the table stacking plates to take into the kitchen. As always the table had been set with a pink linen cloth, bone china, heavy Georgian silver: a fork for salad, one for the main course, one for dessert, two spoons and two or three knives. At the end of dinner half the silver was left because everyone except Aunt Josie used the same fork for salad as for roast beef and the same knife to cut the meat as they used to butter the rolls. Shannon had gathered the clutter of silverware and gold-rimmed dessert plates and backed through the kitchen door.

*"I was thinking you better come out and say whatsfor," Rheba said from the sink where she was rinsing the plates.*

*"Hey, Rheba. . ." Shannon went over and hugged her. Rheba was a wiry woman who moved furniture and hefted baskets of wet laundry, but today she'd felt frail in Shannon's arms. Rheba had helped raise her, along with Aunt Josie, ever since her mother died ten years ago, before that even. She'd spent as much time in Rheba's kitchen and Aunt Josie's screened porch as she had in her own home for as long as she could remember.*

*"Been home over a week and hadn't even come by to say hello," Rheba complained. "That's not like you, Shannon. You got a reason or you just been plain neglectful?" Shannon stacked the plates Rheba had rinsed into the dishwasher. She avoided Rheba's eyes. "Even yor friends starting to complain. . . that old boyfriend Brandt whats-his-name, he called here, say he tried you at your house time and again, but you never will call him back."*

NO MARBLE ANGELS

*"I've been busy," Shannon said.*

*"We all busy." Rheba's pinched brown face peered at her. "Georginna say you coming home just to leave again; no sense getting too attached to you. But I say it's time you stayed for a while. Yor daddy for one needs you about." Rheba handed her a plate.*

*"What's wrong with Daddy?"*

*"Nothin wrong with him. He just needs his chile around; that's all."*

*"He's never even home."*

*"You two still strangers to each other, aren't you?"*

*Shannon didn't answer. She shut the dishwasher, turned the knob, then listened to the hot water rush across the dishes.*

*Rheba had always gotten to the heart of what troubled her. When she was a child she used to sit at the kitchen table and help Rheba shell peas or fold laundry and wait for Rheba to unravel what bothered her. Sometimes she didn't even know herself what it was, but Rheba could circle it, untangling the knots until she finally drew it out . . . whether it was a friend who had slighted her or her father who had ignored her or her mother who had suddenly died on her . . . Rheba would find the loneliness and soothe it until it receded.*

*"It is unusual for someone to attack a maid for no reason in this neighborhood," her father was saying. He folded his hands behind his head. His peppered grey hair was stylishly cut. His eyes were cautious as he spoke.*

*Josie began telling him all they could have stolen, had they broken into the main house, when the front door opened. "Georginna?" she called.*

*But Joe Douglas stepped into the doorway. A stocky, muscular man with a flushed face and thinning hair, he wore soiled pants, a Banlon shirt and a cap. He lacked the polished appearance of his younger brother, but his eyes were sharp.*

*"You mean Georginna's still not home? I can't understand what came over you, Josie, letting a young girl like that go out with a twenty-two year old man." He dragged into the room. "Wes . . . Shannon."*

*"I called them," Josie said. "I got afraid after you left.*

How's Rheba?"

Joe shook his head. "We better start looking for a new maid."

Josie gasped.

"Whoever did it, hurt her pretty bad. She may be in the hospital a long time."

Josie glanced at Shannon, who stared intently at her uncle. "We'll do whatever we can of course," Josie offered, "whatever she's done."

Joe sat down at the table. "I don't see what we can do. She could be in the hospital for months, the doctor said. She didn't carry any insurance. It's beyond me why she never bought any. I must have talked with her a dozen times about it. We just can't swing thousands of dollars in hospital bills right now. I told her not to worry in the ambulance; she was all upset at how much it was going to cost, but frankly I told the doctor as soon as she was stable to transfer her to the county hospital. The best thing we can do is get her whatever she's entitled to from the government—unemployment, disability—and get her in with the county; then I guess we could pick up any cost left over."

Joe reached to the pantry and poured brandy into the coffee Josie passed him. "I thought about it all the way home. Rheba would understand. We'll store her things in the garage, and when she gets out, she can come back, but until then, you better start looking for a maid."

"But Rheba is family," Shannon declared.

Josie's thick-lidded eyes turned slowly to her. "Rheba is not *our* family," she said. "She is like family, but she is not family."

Shannon stood. She went to the sink where she looked out the window. The back porch lights were on, and she stared at the clapboard quarters beside the garage. Wisteria hung in heavy purple clusters over the porch by Rheba's room. Rheba had lived in that room five days a week for the last twenty-five years. She had a son Shannon's age, who lived with her mother across town where Rheba lived the other two days of the week. She had been almost forty when

NO MARBLE ANGELS

she had Washington. Josie agreed to let her stay on, but there wasn't room for a baby in the servant's quarters so Rheba had her son and came back to work two weeks later without the child. No one but Rheba knew who the father was.

*"Do you and Washington still talk?" Shannon had asked Rheba this afternoon.*

*Rheba paused from rinsing the knives and forks. She pushed her grey hair off her face with the back of her hand. "We don't see so much of each other anymore, but I know when something troubling his mind. It used to be I could get him to tell me what it was." Her shoulders sagged in her white uniform, and her top lip tucked under the way Shannon remembered it did when something was worrying her. "But Washington calling himself Malik these days."*

*"Does that bother you?"*

*Rheba spread out a dish towel and began laying the silverware on it. "The name don't bother me so much. I don't much like the name Malik, but then I never like the name Washington either. That was my mamma's idea, and since she the one raising him most of the time, I let her name him." She spread another towel on the counter and began washing the long-stem crystal goblets which she handed one by one to Shannon.*

*"But Washington in with friends I don't think much of; they too sure of theirselves. I always trusted Washington long as he follow his heart, but he listens to other people now. Looks at me living in one room all my life serving white folks and wonders what I got to teach him. I guess I wonder sometimes too." Rheba set the last two goblets on the towel.*

*"It's odd," Shannon said.*

*"What's that?"*

*"You taught me my whole life, but it doesn't count. Washington holds it against you; Uncle Joe and Aunt Josie don't even know it. And I'll go off somewhere because I don't fit here. I wanted to come back and find this was my home, but it's not."*

*Rheba's dark eyes narrowed. Her lips closed over teeth which were too big for her mouth. She began folding the towel with quick fingers, pressing the creases to the corner. "Well, Shannon Marie Douglas, you have got yourself educated beyond me at last if this*

*ain't your home."*

"Have you called her son?" Shannon asked.

"Washington?" I wouldn't have the first idea how to get hold of Washington," Josie answered.

"I'm sure he'd like to know."

"If I knew how to phone him, I would, but I don't think he even has a phone. The last number I had for them was disconnected a while ago."

Shannon grew silent. She turned and stared back out the window. Her eyes focused on the morning glory vines twisting up the side of Rheba's room. Their blue and purple trumpets were closed for the night. They would open in the gentle light of dawn but would fold again in the heat of mid-day. She moved to the stove and poured herself another cup of coffee. She stared at the pale red coil of the electric range then looked down at the clean tiles of her aunt's kitchen. She drank the coffee with her back to her family, holding the cup so tightly in her hand that she was afraid it might break. Yet she was even more afraid to set it down and turn to face her family for she was afraid then she would cry.

The front door opened, and a soft, lilting voice whispered, "Sh-h-h... it's upstairs." The family in the kitchen grew quiet. Joe and Josie looked at each other; then Joe stood, and Josie followed. The hall light flashed on. "Just where the hell do you think you're going, young man?" Joe demanded.

Shannon and her father moved to the edge of the doorway where they saw Georginna and Brandt Phillips halfway up the stairs, hand in hand.

"Daddy! Mama! What are you doing up? Are you spying on me?"

"We're not the ones answering questions," Joe retorted. "You come down right now, and you too, sir." Joe looked at his watch. "I want to hear where you've been, and what you're doing getting home at a quarter till two in the morning. And why were you taking a young man upstairs with you?"

NO MARBLE ANGELS

"I'm not a child, Daddy. You have no right to interrogate me." GeorGINna drew up her small shoulders. She was wearing a sun dress, and both straps had fallen off her shoulders. Her hair was tangled; her eyes, puffy, and her lips, smeared.

"I'm your father, and I have every right. But first I want to question this young man."

"Mamma!" GeorGINna pleaded. "Daddy, you will not. You don't have to answer, Brandt." Her words slurred, and she was leaning on the staircase for support. Then she saw Shannon and her uncle in the doorway. "Uncle Wes! Shannon! My god, did you call the police too? I can't believe you came, Shannon."

Brandt glanced over at Shannon and smiled. He and Shannon had dated in high school, and he seemed pleased to have her here as a witness, but Shannon's eyes were focused on her cousin.

"For your information, GeorGINna, the reason Uncle Wes and Shannon are here has nothing to do with you," Josie said. "Rheba's been stabbed tonight, and they came over to give us comfort which is more than we can say for you."

"Rheba?" GeorGINna looked at Shannon. "Where? When?"

Josie told GeorGINna what had happened, and GeorGINna sank down onto the stairs. She stared at the floor in front of her; then all of a sudden her tiny shoulders heaved forward, and she vomited all over the peach carpet and over Brandt Phillips' shiny leather loafers. Brandt looked stunned as his eyes moved from his shoes to GeorGINna. Shannon saw in them the urge to bolt. She doubted her uncle saw the same urge, but he had the same idea for he opened the front door. "Perhaps it's time you left," he said. And Brandt, without further prompting, without glancing back at GeorGINna or Shannon or anyone, took the invitation and disappeared into the night as fast as his soiled shoes could take him.

On the way home that morning, in the twelve blocks between Williamson Drive and St. Mary's Street, in the first

lighting of the sky, Shannon decided to tell her father she was moving to New York at the end of the summer. She had been postponing the decision for months. When she entered her father's study that evening, he was sitting with his feet up on his desk contemplating a map of the northside. He was dressed in a three-piece grey suit; his face was tanned by a sun lamp, and he was, even in his daughter's eyes, a handsome man.

"Did you call the hospital today?" he asked.

"They say she can have visitors in a day or so after she's moved." Shannon leaned her pale arms onto the desk. "Daddy, I've been doing a lot of thinking," she began without transition, "and I think I'm going to take the fellowship in New York. First of all, Columbia offers me more money than Duke..."

Her father fixed a pin into the map then looked up. "The money isn't important."

"And Charlotte, you remember Charlotte..."

"The one you spent last Christmas with." His voice still registered disapproval.

"That's right. She's gotten a job in New York and an apartment, and she's looking for a roommate."

"You're going to Columbia because Charlotte needs a roommate?"

"Columbia happens to be an excellent university."

"Isn't Duke an excellent university?" He set the map down and lowered his feet to the floor.

Duke was only half an hour away. "Duke is a good school," she conceded. She wished her father would argue with her the way Uncle Joe did rather than stopping at the edge of his disapproval as if he didn't dare go further. "I also know a lot of people in New York," she went on.

"You know a lot of people in Raleigh-Durham."

She shifted on the chair. Outside the sunlight had faded into the shadows of the garden. The warm air drifted through the french doors. "I've been thinking about this a long time, and it just seems best."

Her father considered her answer. He leaned towards

NO MARBLE ANGELS

her. "Have you thought about what sort of men you'll meet at Columbia? I know that's not the only consideration, but it's one you don't seem to think about."

She picked up a pen and began to mark on a Douglas Realty notepad. "I think about it."

"What sort are they?"

"I don't know. I'm not going to graduate school to catch a man."

"I'm not saying you are. I simply asked what sort of men you were likely to meet at a place like Columbia?"

"All kinds I expect." She pushed a strand of dark hair from her eyes. She had wide eyes, a small nose, a fine mouth. Her face held the possibility of beauty, but she took little pains with herself. She set down the pen and met her father's gaze. All her life people had told her how much she looked like her father, but she didn't see the resemblance. She saw only how different they were. Yet because she was insecure about men, his view threatened her, and a defiant, vulnerable look now settled over her face.

Her father glanced away. Ever since she'd come home he'd been seeing her mother in her. "Maybe I am out of place trying to give you advice," he said finally. "You always do what you want anyway; I don't guess you're likely to change." From the edge of his desk he picked up a trophy he'd won from the Chamber of Commerce and held it around its base. "But I want you to be happy, honey, I really do."

"I appreciate that, Daddy." She wanted to say that if he didn't have a right to advise her, who did. Part of her wanted him to care enough to give the advice while the other part rebelled at his trying to take responsibility in her life at this late date. "I guess I don't have to decide everything tonight," she retreated. "I still have a little time."

On Wednesday Shannon went to visit Rheba in the county hospital where she'd been moved the day before. Connected to various feeding and disposal devices, Rheba had slept most of the trip across town and had awakened in a large white room behind two white curtains which

separated her from the other patients in the room. That afternoon Washington came to see her.

Josie has finally been persuaded by her own uneasiness over what had happened and by her conversation with Shannon to unearth an old address book and look up the last address for Rheba's mother. She wasn't sure if Mrs. Jackson still lived on Heck Street, but she decided she could at least go there. Turning down the half-dirt, half-paved road she recognized the yellow clapboard house and saw Mrs. Jackson and Washington sitting on the porch. Approaching them, she assumed a solemn expression. Carefully she told her story, apologizing for what had happened though she didn't really know what had happened, but apologizing as though it had been her fault, and on the porch that afternoon she felt somehow it had.

Rheba's mother and son only nodded at the news. They didn't ask questions. She emphasized this fact later when she reported the tale of her journey. She had been prepared to stay and tell them everything she'd seen, but they simply thanked her for coming and didn't ask a single question.

"Of course we'll stay in touch," she had assured them and herself as she left. Her whole visit lasted less than five minutes. She drove away quickly for suddenly she'd felt afraid, not of them but of what had transpired between them.

Washington visited Rheba the next day. He only stayed a short time, and after he left, Rheba slept for the rest of the afternoon and well into the night; but at three in the morning she woke up screaming and had to be given a sedative. The day of her move her condition had been listed as serious, but stable.

When Shannon arrived at Wake County the following day, she was shown into Rheba's cubicle by a nurse who walked on tiptoe and told her Rheba had suddenly gotten worse. She had expected Rheba to show the strain of what she'd been through, but she wasn't prepared for the woman she saw. Rheba looked as though she'd aged ten years and lost half her body's weight. She was wrapped in bandages

NO MARBLE ANGELS

and propped up on pillows. The loose white hospital gown was hunched around her and made her appear even less substantial than she was. Her skin was ashen, and she looked so weak that Shannon couldn't imagine her only a few days earlier carrying a tray of heavy dishes. Rheba's eyes were shut when the nurse drew the curtain aside, and Shannon glanced around to see if she should proceed.

"She's awake," the nurse said. "She's just resting." And at that assurance, Rheba opened her eyes, which began to tear as soon as she saw Shannon.

"Rheba..." Shannon sank into the chair beside her. Rheba's head was bandaged around the forehead. From the bristles of grey hair, Shannon could see that part of her head had been shaved. "We miss you..." she whispered. Rheba didn't answer, and finally Shannon said, "Oh, Rheba, what happened?"

But Rheba just shook her head and shut her eyes. She stretched out her fingers, and Shannon took her hand. Rheba began to breathe heavily for a moment as if she were falling asleep, but again her eyes opened. Finally she spoke, and her voice was stronger than Shannon expected. "They try to kill an old fool," she said.

"Who did?"

"The monkey on they backs. Go get us money from the house, they say."

"Did you know them?"

"Bad ones. Ust hang around the doorstep every weekend I come home see if I brought anything."

"They were Washington's friends?"

Rheba dropped her head back on her pillow. "Washington never they friend, but they hang round anyway."

"They stabbed you because you wouldn't give them Uncle Joe's money?"

Rheba turned her head to the side and fixed her eyes on the wall. "Because I'm an old fool. Old fool pull a butcher knife on two grown men, tell them to get out like they still boys on the stoop. They hyped up on drugs, but they almost go till suddenly I see they not boys, and they see what I

see and next thing they got the knife or they own knives, and I feel the blood. I hadn't screamed and Mister Douglas hadn't turned on the light, they'd of kilt me." Rheba shut her eyes. "Maybe it of been the best thing if they had."

"Don't say that." Shannon squeezed her hand and tried to pass her own strength on to Rheba.

But Rheba didn't answer. Again Shannon thought she was falling asleep. Shannon glanced about the space which had been given her. There was only the hospital bed and a white metal cabinet. On top of the cabinet was a box of Kleenex, a Bible and next to these a glass of water with Rheba's teeth in it. Shannon stared at the teeth. They were yellowed and stained; magnified by the water, they looked grotesque. The teeth were so personal and vulnerable that Shannon couldn't take her eyes off them. She had never been so close to Rheba's intimate living before. As a child she had visited Rheba's room by the garage. It was always neat but cluttered with a double bed, an old dresser stacked with magazines, a worn arm chair with a floor lamp arched over it and a wardrobe where Rheba hung her faded dresses and uniforms. It smelled musty and damp, and it was dark for vines hung so thick over the windows that little light could get through. Off the room in a smaller area was a toilet stained yellow and a shower stall and a sink. These two rooms were where Rheba had lived almost half her life. Shannon hadn't been to visit Rheba's room in years.

Rheba sighed now. Shannon looked back at her to see if she was awake. She asked quietly, "Has Washington visited yet?"

Rheba nodded.

"I should go see him," she volunteered. She hadn't seen Washington since high school. She remembered playing with him when she was a little girl. She remembered Rheba's stories about him most of all. She used to love to hear Rheba talk about what a bad boy he was because she knew Rheba was really saying how much she loved him. She would listen to the tales of Washington skipping school and going hunting as though he were some character out of a book. That

NO MARBLE ANGELS

was about how much reality he had for her. She liked the idea of finding Washington and seeing who he had become.

But Rheba shook her head. "No," she said sharply.

"I'd like to tell him personally how sorry I am and see if there's anything I can do."

Rheba opened her eyes. She stared directly at Shannon now. "He don care how sorry you are. Why should he?" Her voice was harsh.

"But maybe I could do something."

"Nothing you can do. You only make things worse you go there. You stay where you belong."

Shannon didn't understand why Rheba wouldn't let her see her son, but she nodded, "Well, what did he say?"

"Nothing to say. He see what happen. He stood at the foot of the bed, didn't come closer. Mostly he just stare off over my head. When I tell him what happen, all he ask is why I didn give them the money, who I'm protecting?"

"Rheba, I'm sure when Aunt Josie and Uncle Joe find out what really happened..."

"He just keep asking why I didn give them the money, and laying here I'm starting to think he right. I don think he coming back. He don say it, but I can see it in his eyes. He hardened hisself against what happened to me, and he ain't coming back to see it again."

"Rheba, I'm sure he will..." But a nurse came in then and told Shannon it was time to leave. "I'll come back too," she promised, "...tomorrow or the next day." And she leaned over and kissed Rheba on the mouth, something she had never done before, and Rheba's lips felt dry and cold.

Shannon didn't return to the hospital the next day. Instead she began looking for a summer job. That afternoon she stopped by her aunt's house where she found Josie on the screened porch painting landscapes on hollowed out eggs. She donated the eggs to ladies' bazaars around town. Georginna was reading magazines on the divan. No one asked about her visit to Rheba; no one else had visited.

"You'll stay for dinner?" Josie asked, touching a stroke

of yellow to the tiny painting. Shannon nodded. Josie secured the egg in its egg cup then rose to tell the new maid to set an extra place.

As soon as she left, Georginna sat up. "You have got to talk to Mamma," she said. "Daddy's grounded me for *two* weeks and Mamma's agreed."

"Why?" Shannon asked.

"Sh-h-h," Georginna glanced into the living room then gestured for Shannon to follow her up to her bedroom. Inside she locked the bedroom door then dropped onto her bed, her legs crossed, her shoulders rounded in the conspiratorial pose of a girl at a slumber party sharing gossip about those who weren't there. "Because of the other night. And what's worse, Brandt hasn't called. Has he called you?" She glanced at Shannon from under the thin arch of her eyebrows.

"No."

"Well, I'm sure he was so embarrassed, he'll never call either of us again." She reached over to a shelf lined with dolls and removed one in a frilly crinoline skirt. Lifting the dolls head off, she produced a bottle of scotch. "You want a drink?" She smiled at her cousin's surprise. "You always were more of a prude, Shannon." She poured out a glass.

"Mamma and Daddy still treat me like a child. No one seems to realize I have a lot on my mind these days. Did you know I'm head cheerleader next fall, and my grades have already gone down. Daddy says I'll never get into Duke with grades like last spring. Besides I've even been thinking of going North like you..." she cast a sidelong glance at Shannon, "...to Middlebury or maybe even Bryn Mawr if I could get in."

There was a knock at the door. "You girls in there?" Josie called. "Georginna, why is your door locked?"

Georginna tucked the bottle back in the doll's skirt. "Just a min...ute..." she answered, handing Shannon the doll to put back on the shelf while Georginna hid her glass. Stuffing a stick of gum into her mouth, Georginna unlocked the door. "I like *some* privacy sometimes you know."

NO MARBLE ANGELS

"What could be so private?" Josie moved into the room and sat on Georginna's bed as though she were a teenager herself used to sharing secrets with her daughter. She was barefoot and wearing a long flowered muu muu. "What are you two talking about anyway?"

"I was just asking Shannon about college."

"Oh, well, that's good. I've been telling her she should at least apply to Chapel Hill."

"Mamma, I told you..." But before she could repeat what she'd told her mother, the phone rang, and Georginna answered. Glancing at Shannon, she said, "I'll take it in the other room." She handed the phone to her mother. "And hang up and don't listen. She always listens."

"I do not listen," Josie defended as Georginna went out. "She's gotten so high-strung lately..." But when Georginna picked up the extension, Josie paused to hear the other voice.

"She's growing up," Shannon offered.

"That she is. But then you haven't seen her in almost a year what with your working at that camp last summer and spending Christmas in New York. It'll be good for Georginna to have you around for a change, won't hurt anyone, and I can think of a lot of people it might help."

Shannon glanced out the window into the backyard, at the swing set by the hedge, at Rheba's quarters. "I'm not staying in Raleigh, Aunt Josie." She turned and faced her aunt. "Or Durham."

"Why? What's wrong with Raleigh/Durham?"

"Nothing. I just know everyone here and everything here. There are too many places I don't know."

"Places such as?"

"New York. Washington. Baltimore."

"What's in Baltimore? Baltimore's a dirty, smoky city half torn up by riots."

"I don't know what's in Baltimore or anywhere, and I'm never going to know unless I go." Her aunt's double chin tucked in the way it did when she'd heard a friend of hers had said something unkind behind her back. "I wish you wouldn't take this personally," Shannon said. Yet she knew

there was no other way for her aunt to take it.

Shannon planned to visit Rheba on Friday, but she finished her job interviews late and went out to dinner with friends instead. However, on Saturday she arrived at the hospital with a handful of carnations. She was feeling more lighthearted than she had since she'd come home. She had several prospects for jobs at community centers, and she was beginning to think she could at least survive Raleigh for the summer. She had come prepared to tell Rheba about the possibilities and talk with her about which job sounded best; but when she pushed back the curtain to Rheba's cubicle, she found the bed empty. The stand beside the bed was empty too. Rheba's teeth were gone; the Bible was gone, and only the box of Kleenex was left. She hurried to the nurse's station on the floor.

"Rheba Jackson?" The nurse looked down at her ledger of patients. "Why, she died Thursday night, dear, passed in her sleep. At her age, in her condition, it was probably for the best."

"What?" Shannon stared at the nurse. Her eyes focused on the plastic supper trays stacked beside her, and she could see the food already congealed.

"I see here that we called her family, and they asked that we take care of the body so it was buried this morning out in the county field. Simple, no marble angels, but I'm sure she would have liked it."

Shannon watched the nurse's placid white face, and she found herself wondering if anyone had put Rheba's teeth in before they buried her. "How do you know?" she asked. "How do you have any idea what she would have liked? I don't know what she would have liked. Her own family didn't know. No one . . . no one knew what she would have liked."

Shannon turned then and started down the brightly lit corridor; she walked across the newly mopped linoleum, past the janitor mopping the linoleum; and then she began to run, carefully at first so she wouldn't slip, then faster, until

NO MARBLE ANGELS

she was running as fast as she could as she pushed out the door into the cool, sweet air of the Raleigh summer evening.