

Birdie



CHAPTER 8

My sister's house was very white and very wide and very tall. Six fat columns supported a deep front porch with a dozen black rocking chairs on it. They seemed to be leaning back, arms out, as if observing. For a long minute, they watched me watching them from dusty North Lamar Boulevard. Theirs was the only lived-in structure for about a mile. Across the property stood tall, well-placed oak trees, each with a fancy skirt of privet. The whole situation could easily be a first cousin to the Tates', which they'd recently lost. Only larger and whiter. A larger, whiter cousin, on the even richer side of the family.

I dragged myself through an unlatched gate and up a brick path, past a carriage block chiseled with the name *Tartt*. I was not looking or feeling my best, nor was their yard. A limb had fallen in the azalea bushes that lined the front porch, I reckon from the storm that had just blown through here. At the time, it'd seemed wise just to walk from the train depot instead of spending twenty-five more cents on a taxicab ride. On the way, I'd gotten a glimpse of a big town square and quite a few nice houses big as this one, several with automobiles parked out front. After about ten minutes of walking, the paved road had turned to dirt and the houses had grown smaller and then into empty fields, at which time it'd started to rain. Hard. I trudged up my sister's front steps, my good church dress stuck to my skin and my hair matted to my head. (I'd saved my one good hat by tucking it in my bag.) While I was

eager to see my sister, I was not just uncomfortable but also irritated at her all over again for not writing or calling us back, none of which made for a real good state of mind to arrive in, unannounced, especially when I really needed to use her water closet.

I set my suitcase down and tapped a heavy brass knocker on the front door. Inside, I heard a familiar laugh and thought, *Thank God she's home*. A few seconds later the door swung open. And there was Frances, smiling, like she was expecting somebody else.

She stared as the fact of me set in. Then asked, "Birdie?"

For a second I thought my sister was happy to see me, and even though I was irritated, I reached out and hugged her. "Lord, it's been too long, Frances," I said, and she wriggled in my arms like I was hugging too hard; she always said I hugged too hard. So I turned her loose and said, "And thanks a lot for not writing us *or* calling us back."

She had on a slim, navy-blue linen dress with a round white collar. A wet stain of myself was stamped on the front of her now. She'd filled out a little, but she had the same slightly pointy nose and soft, light brown curls that cupped her jawline. She was even prettier than before she left. But did I get a *Do come in and let me get you a cold drink?* I did not.

"What in the world are you *doing* here, Bird?" was what I durn got.

"We have been writing you for a month, Frances. Mama's worried sick. What, are you too busy to pick up your dang mail anymore?"

"No, I—" Her shoulders, clenched up around her long neck, slipped down a little. "I got your letters, I just hadn't had the chance to read them yet."

To her credit there was at least a trace of guilt in her voice.

"I also left a message with your help to call us. You read that one?"

"Yes, and I'm sorry. I've just been so busy. With meetings and volunteering . . ." She looked back at the door as if she was afraid of what was in there and jerked it shut. "Nobody around here'll even help me, I mean the maids act like they can't even hear me, and Rory's been out of town so much . . ." Laughter drifted from inside again.

"It's fine," I said. "And by the way this is from Mama." I handed her the now soggy pillow. "Can I come inside now? I'm soaking and these boots are rubbing holes in my feet."

She looked down at my muddy lace-up boots, many years old. "Listen,

I've got some real important ladies here right now, they're on the Senior Orphan Committee, I've been trying to get nominated on it for months, give me this," and she took the suitcase out of my hand and, opening the door a crack, set it and the pillow just inside the house. "Just go around back to the kitchen, it's thataway, and I promise I'll meet you in there in a few minutes."

"Frances Calhoun, you are not sending your only sister to the back—" But she was already stepping inside, and the tall black door shut behind her.

I'd used a flush toilet three times now, an unusual thing to keep count of, I know, but after a lifetime of pee pots and outhouses, these were all memorable events. The first had been in Jackson at the doctor's office when I was sixteen—a frightening, cold room where a cold nurse had shown me how to sit on the cold white seat; the second was at the Eola Hotel in Natchez a few years later. Mathilda Tate'd gone there for her birthday, so Frances had begged to go for hers, the ticket for iced tea and strawberry cake almost killing Daddy before the heart attack did. And the third time was the dank little water closet off Frances's back porch.

By its bare pine walls, I assumed this one was for the yardman who, by the looks of things must be on vacation. Though the front yard didn't look too terrible, for some reason, the back yard looked almost abandoned. Bermuda grass was grown up to my shins, littered with tall weeds and bursts of angry red thistle and leaves and branches from what looked like a month or two of storms.

When I came out of the water closet, a tiny Negro woman, maybe in her fifties, in a white uniform was watching me through a screen door.

"Hello there," I said, "I hope you don't mind, I went ahead and helped myself."

A good foot shorter than me, she stood with her arms crossed, a white paper hat fastened to the top of her dark hair. Through the screen she eyed my crooked wet dress, my bare feet. I'd already tugged my boots off and peeled off my wet stockings.

"We ain't handing out no plates, now you need to move on."