

## Chapter Seven

Delphine always made time for her trips down to Front Street, to take the air, as she said. She'd come to terms with Rodgers's store, since that's all we had to offer, and gave it a light browsing most afternoons. Like Calinda, she became a landmark. Grand Tower had never seen anything like either of these beings, though as it turned out, Delphine stirred them more.

Once she reached flat ground, she moved with wondrous grace, under a parasol hanging in points of lacework. The word went round that she never wore the same bonnet twice. This brought every woman in town to the window, to see her passing by. She had, in fact, five or six bonnets, including the new straw ones. But she retrimmed them

throughout the evenings from a bottomless supply of artificial flowers and fruit, grosgrain rosettes, glittering buckles, and feathers Calinda brought from the timber.

Front Street was a loblolly down by the landing, and so Delphine had to gather her skirts to keep them clear of the mud. This brought every loafer in Jackson County to the porch of T. W. Jenkins's store, hoping for a glimpse of her ankles. Until the last showboat played Grand Tower that summer, Delphine was the greatest draw in this part of the state. And this Secesh gal strolled a town that was snapping with the Stars and Stripes of Union flags.

She hadn't been gone long when I noticed a knot of women down in the distance one afternoon. They were starting up our hill. Cass and Calinda had taken a dip net down to the river, so I was the only one who saw. I was beating the braided rugs over the porch railing.

I'd heard somewheres of ladies with no more to do than call on one another in the afternoons. That didn't sound much like Grand Tower. And the climb alone would have discouraged them from us. Still, here a bunch came, looking for more pathway than they could find.

Darting inside, I told Mama. I didn't see surprise in her face. But she grabbed her head to smooth her hair and sent me for her shoes. She'd cast off her apron for a fresh one by the time I got back. She was still cramming her bare feet into the shoes when we heard them on the porch.

One of them was Mrs. T. W. Jenkins. Another was Mrs. Manfred Cady. And Mrs. R. M. Breeze, the preacher's wife.

They looked like three of Cass's hens, all feathered out but suffering in this heat. They were sucking air to catch their breath.

Mama pretended surprise to see them, as if she spent a summer day in her shoes and a fresh apron.

"Mrs. Pruitt," Mrs. Manfred Cady said, "it is hot weather and a hard climb, and we are all busy women, preparin' for war."

She fetched up a shuddering breath, and Mama said, calmly, "I am up for the day myself."

"We won't take more than a moment of your time," Mrs. Jenkins said, and in they came, looking around as they'd never set foot here before.

Mama could have shown them into the front room for a breath of air from the river. She gestured them into chairs around the table. The kitchen hung in the foreign scent of Calinda's *pain-patate*, a New Orleans gingerbread, baking in the Dutch oven. The whole kitchen was an oven. Mrs. Breeze sighed.

"Mrs. Pruitt, we all understand that life has not been an easy row for you to hoe," said Mrs. Cady.

Mama's hands were folded before her. "I haven't asked for charity in this town." Her gaze brushed Mrs. Breeze. "What good would it do me?"

"Nobody mentioned charity," Mrs. Cady went on, "and it's nobody's business but your own who you let out your rooms to or who you take under your roof."

Mama clearly saw eye-to-eye with her on that.

"But the tide has turned, Mrs. Pruitt," said Mrs. Cady. "Now our watchword must be 'United We Stand, Divided We Fall.' I will put it plain. We are at war, in case you haven't heard, and you've got enemy aliens in your house. We come in good faith to let you know you're on thin ice."

"And you're givin' them succor," Mrs. Breeze chimed.

Mama's hands clenched in her apron. But she spoke mildly. "Well, I don't see how I can send them home. The boats isn't running."

She glanced at the preacher's wife. We weren't churchgoers. For one thing, we'd never had the clothes. Mrs. Breeze had been agog since she got here, to see how heathens lived. "Shall I send them down to the preacher for shelter?" Mama inquired.

Mrs. Breeze bristled. "I wouldn't have them at the parsonage overnight," she said, about to spit. "I wouldn't give them loft space in the barn, nor straw from the stable. We're true-blue Americans here, and the whole community knows what they are."

Mama's eyes narrowed. "What are they?"

"Why, spies, of course," Mrs. Cady rang out. "One of them's eternally out in the timber, surveyin' the territory for an invasion, they say. And the white one's all over town, gettin' the lay of the land. She's down there right now."

"Spies." Mama pondered. "Then they come to the wrong town, didn't they? If we had a secret, you three would tell it."

The bonnets quivered and drew closer. They hadn't made that climb to be insulted.

“And another thing,” Mrs. T. W. Jenkins piped up. “It’s enough to gag a maggot to see that overdressed little miss, that Delphine whoever, putting herself on public display. She’s switchin’ her skirttails up and down Front Street even as we speak. And the men in this town is starin’ holes in her, the brazen little hussy.”

Mama stroked her cheek. “She’s a big-city gal,” Mama said at last. “She don’t know how restless small-town men can get. They say the porch on your husband’s store is about to collapse under the weight of the men watching Delphine go by. I can see how it might be a worry to you.”

Mrs. Jenkins jumped on that. “If you’re insinuat’in’ my husband has any interest in that painted-up little floozy, I have only this in answer to you, Mrs. Pruitt. I’ve held on to my husband, unlike some I could name.”

The kitchen went dead. You could hear the buzz of a horsefly circling.

Then Mama said, “Get out of my house.”

They’d never been ordered out of anywhere. They bumbled and bumped into one another. Mrs. Cady gave Mrs. Jenkins a look like maybe she’d gone too far. They were at the door when the preacher’s wife turned back.

“Mrs. Pruitt,” she said, speaking low, “as one mother to another, I will have to say my piece. It don’t look good, havin’ a son the age of your boy under the same roof with young women we don’t know nothin’ about, spies or otherwise. It just don’t look right.”

I was next to Mama, standing with her. "I don't reckon my son will be under my roof much longer," Mama said. "You have a son, don't you? Will he be going to war?"

"My son? Bertram?" Mrs. Breeze stared. "My land, no, he won't be goin' to war. He's fort—thirt—why, no, he won't be goin'."

Then they were gone.

Mama leaned against the doorjamb where we lingered for the air. She smoothed her apron and thought about taking it off to spare it. Then at length she spoke, softly. "I work hard not to draw their fire, and to keep us decent and together. I live and let live. I don't even go down to town if I can send one of you. But it don't signify. They can't let you be. One day they come after you."

That was a long speech for Mama. Now in the quiet I was thinking about Paw, and wondered if she was too. But we rarely spoke of him, and didn't now.

"What'll happen next, Mama?"

She stroked her chin. "Well, they wouldn't dare to run Delphine out of town. It wouldn't look good to their men-folk. I have an idea they've got it out of their systems."

"Mama, do you wish Delphine and Calinda had never come? Would it just have been easier on us to be like we was?"

She looked over at me in surprise. I was as tall as she was now. "No, I'm not sorry they come. You can't believe but every other word Delphine says. And if vanity's a sin, she'll fry. But before she got here, I wouldn't have answered back

to them battleaxes. That Delphine don't lack confidence in herself. I'll give her that. I believe a little has wore off on me. She put some starch in my spine."

I hadn't thought of such a thing. I didn't know grown people changed, or were changed. I thought being grown was safer than that.

"Delphine's wearing off on you too," Mama told me, "just like Calinda's wearing off on Cass."

"Delphine? On me?"

"It's in your walk, a little. And you're tidier about your hair. You don't look so much like you was dragged backwards through a brush-fence."

"Many thanks, Mama," I said. "But not the corsets. Never them."

"Well, no," Mama said. "There's limits."

Then not two minutes after our recent callers had vanished from view, there came Delphine toiling up toward us.

Climbing the Backbone was the biggest job of her day. Her summer dress was made of ticking, a fine black line against white. She had it in handfuls, climbing over rill and ridge. She labored along like she could feel every stone through her thin slipper soles. The silken morning glories on her bonnet looked to be working loose. Her face was beet red and streaming in this heat, and her curls hung lank. She was using the parasol for a walking stick.

It was a far cry from strolling the pavements of New Orleans, but she kept true to her ways. I glanced at Mama. She was stifling a smile at the sight of all this elegance melt-

ing away. And it took something to coax a smile out of Mama.

Delphine fetched up at the bottom of the porch stairs, breathing so heavy you'd think she'd been pulling stumps. "*Nom de Dieu,*" she gasped, and several other French words.

Planting the parasol in the ground, she plunged a gloved hand into her reticule. Yes, gloves in this weather, little string ones with her bare fingers sticking out. She pulled up a handbill and shook it at us.

"A showboat! It comes down from somewhere called Muscatine, Iowa. But of course the musicians are from New Orleans, where else? The Ethiopian Melodiers. And a drama! And the E. P. Christy minstrels! And 'the public is invited to dance upon the stage at the conclusion of the program!'" she quoted. "A showboat, and the last before they are taken off the river!"

Delphine was almost beside herself. Mama and I saw then how dull her life had been all this time she was making it so lively for us.

So of course when the showboat played Grand Tower, we'd go. Mama too. Our visitors that afternoon had something to do with it. Then Noah dispelled all doubt in the matter.

He came home from his work that night, lips white with anger. Being Noah, he'd have said nothing, though I heard him kick at the porch stairs before I saw him. My spine was starchier than before too, so I trailed him into his room. There I demanded to know what particular burr had got under his saddle.



He didn't want to tell, and then he did. "They run their mouths down there around the forge," he said, disgusted with humanity. "They talk to hear their heads rattle. I'd like to shorten the ears off about six of them. Maybe more."

"What for?"

"They say we're sending signals to the South from the light out of our windows."

"Who?"

"Us," he snapped. "They say we're signaling the Confederate Navy out of this house. It's what the lamps is for."

He was wrought up for certain.

"This is talk against Delphine," I said. "They mean Delphine's spying."

Of course that's just what they meant, like there was any sense to it. Men gossip worse than women and don't even know it.

Noah was hopping mad. As if trying to court a girl under his own roof didn't give him fits enough. For one thing, he wouldn't own up to how sweet he was on Delphine. For another, there was always witnesses to every little thing. The wonder is Noah didn't flee this house of women sooner than he did.

I let him rant, and use some language I won't repeat here. It wasn't like him. But we'd be going to the showboat show. No question about that. We'd pull the money out of the well for the tickets, and we'd all sit on the front row like anybody else. Maybe more so.