

Prologue

THE BEGINNING

LWÓW, POLAND
APRIL 1, 1909

IN THE YEAR 1908, STANISLAW LUDIC JURDABRALINSKI, A TALL, RAW-boned boy of fourteen, was facing a future of uncertainty. Life in Poland under Russian rule was bleak and dangerous. Polish men and boys were being conscripted to serve in the czar's army, and in an attempt to destroy Polish unity, Catholics and priests had been jailed for anti-Russian sentiments. Churches were shut down and Stanislaw's father and three uncles had been sent to prison camps for speaking out.

But with encouragement from his older brother Wencent, who had escaped Poland five years earlier, Stanislaw arrived in New York with nothing but the ill-fitting plaid woolen suit he was wearing, a photograph of his mother and sisters, and the promise of a job. With the help of a Polish stevedore who he had befriended on the ship, he managed to hop a freight train.

Five days later, Stanislaw arrived on his brother's doorstep in Chicago, excited and ready to begin his brand-new life. He had been told that in America, if you worked hard, anything was possible.

THE ALL-GIRL
FILLING STATION'S
LAST REUNION

A MOST UNUSUAL WEEK

POINT CLEAR, ALABAMA
MONDAY, JUNE 6, 2005
76° AND SUNNY

MRS. EARLE POOLE, JR., BETTER KNOWN TO FRIENDS AND FAMILY AS Sookie, was driving home from the Birds-R-Us store out on Highway 98 with one ten-pound bag of sunflower seeds and one ten-pound bag of wild bird seed and not her usual weekly purchase for the past fifteen years of one twenty-pound bag of the Pretty Boy Wild Bird Seed and Sunflower Mix. As she had explained to Mr. Nadleshaft, she was worried that the smaller birds were still not getting enough to eat. Every morning lately, the minute she filled her feeders, the larger, more aggressive blue jays would swoop in and scare the little birds all away.

She noticed that the blue jays always ate the sunflower seeds first, and so tomorrow, she was going to try putting just plain sunflower seeds in her backyard feeders, and while the blue jays were busy eating them, she would run around the house as fast as she could and put the wild bird seed in the feeders in the front yard. That way, her poor finches and titmice might be able to get a little something, at least.

AS SHE DROVE OVER the Mobile Bay Bridge, she looked out at the big white puffy clouds and saw a long row of pelicans flying low over the

water. The bay was sparkling in the bright sun and already dotted with red, white, and blue sailboats headed out for the day. A few people fishing alongside the bridge waved as she passed by, and she smiled and waved back. She was almost to the other side when she suddenly began to experience some sort of a vague and unusual sense of well-being. And with good reason.

Against all odds, she had just survived the last wedding of their three daughters, Dee Dee, Ce Ce, and Le Le. Their only unmarried child now was their twenty-five-year-old son, Carter, who lived in Atlanta. And some other poor (God help her), beleaguered mother of the bride would be in charge of planning that happy occasion. All she and Earle would have to do for Carter's wedding was show up and smile. And today, other than one short stop at the bank and picking up a couple of pork chops for dinner, she didn't have another single thing she had to do. She was almost giddy with relief.

Of course, Sookie absolutely worshipped and adored her girls, but having to plan three large weddings in fewer than two years had been a grueling, never-ending, twenty-four-hours-a-day job, with all the bridal showers, picking out patterns, shopping, fittings, writing invitations, meeting with caterers, figuring out seating arrangements, ordering flowers, etc. And between dealing with out-of-town guests and new in-laws, figuring out where to put everyone, plus last-minute bridal hysteria, at this point, she was simply wedded out.

And no wonder. If you counted Dee Dee's last one, technically there had really been four large weddings, which meant shopping and being fitted for four different mother-of-the-bride dresses (you can't wear the same one twice) in less than two years.

Dee Dee had married, then promptly divorced. And after they had spent weeks returning all the wedding gifts, she had turned around and remarried the exact same husband. Her second wedding hadn't been quite as expensive as the first, but every bit as stressful.

When she and Earle had married in 1968, it had been just a typical church affair: white wedding gown, bridesmaids in matching pastel dresses and shoes, ring bearer, best man, reception, over and out. But now everybody had to have some kind of a theme.

Dee Dee had insisted on having an authentic Old South *Gone with the Wind* wedding, complete with a Scarlett O'Hara dress, large

hoop skirt and all, and at the last minute, she had to be driven to the church standing up in the back of a small moving van.

Le Le and her groom wanted an entirely red and white wedding, including the invitations, food, drinks, and all the decorations, in honor of the University of Alabama football team.

And Ce Ce, Le Le's twin sister, the last girl to marry, had carried her ten-pound Persian cat, Peek-a-Boo, down the aisle instead of a wedding bouquet, and the groom's German shepherd, dressed in a tux, had served as best man. And if that wasn't bad enough, someone's turtle was the ring bearer. The entire thing had just been excruciating. You can't hurry a turtle.

LOOKING BACK ON IT now, Sookie realized she really should have put her foot down when Ce Ce and James invited all their friends to bring their pets to the reception, but she had made a sacred vow to never bully her children. Nevertheless, having to replace an entire banquet room's wall-to-wall carpeting at the Grand Hotel was going to cost them a fortune. Oh, well. Too late now. Hopefully, all that was behind her, and evidently not a minute too soon.

Two days ago, when Ce Ce left for her honeymoon, Sookie had broken down and sobbed uncontrollably. She didn't know if she was experiencing empty-nest syndrome or just plain exhaustion. She knew she must be tired. At the reception, she had introduced a man to his own wife. Twice.

The truth was, as sad as she was to see Ce Ce and James drive off, she had been secretly looking forward to going home, taking off all her clothes, and crawling into bed for about five years, but even that had been put on hold. At the last minute, James's parents, his sister, and her husband had decided to stay over an extra night, so she had to quickly try and whip up a little "going away" brunch for them.

Granted, it wasn't much: Earle's coconut margaritas, an assortment of crackers, cream cheese and pepper jelly, shrimp and grits, crab cakes with coleslaw, and tomato aspic on the side. But still, it had taken some effort.

WHEN SOOKIE DROVE INTO the little town of Point Clear and passed the Page and Palette bookstore, it occurred to her that maybe tomorrow, she would stop in and pick up a good book. She hadn't had time to read anything other than her daily horoscope, the Kappa newsletter, and an occasional *Birds and Blooms* magazine. We could be at war for all she knew. But now, she was actually going to be able to read an entire book again.

She suddenly felt like doing the twist right there in the front seat, which only reminded her how long it had been since she and Earle had learned a new dance step. She had probably even forgotten how to do the hokey pokey.

All she really had left to deal with was her eighty-eight-year-old mother, the formidable Mrs. Lenore Simmons Krackenberry, who absolutely refused to move to the perfectly lovely assisted-living facility right across town. And it would be so much easier on everybody if she would. The maintenance on her mother's yard alone was extremely expensive, not to mention the yearly insurance. Since the hurricane, the insurance on everybody's house on the Mobile Bay had gone sky-high. But Lenore was adamant about never leaving her home and had announced with a dramatic gesture, "Until they carry me out feet-first."

Sookie couldn't imagine her mother leaving anywhere feetfirst. As long as she and her brother, Buck, could remember, Lenore, a large imposing woman who wore lots of scatter pins and long, flowing scarves, and had her silver hair teased and sprayed into a perfect winged-back flip, had always rushed into a room headfirst. Buck said she looked like something that should be on the hood of a car, and they had secretly referred to her as "Winged Victory" ever since. And Winged Victory never just left a room; she whisked out with a flourish, leaving a cloud of expensive perfume in her wake. Never a quiet woman in any sense of the word, much like a show horse in the Rose Parade, she could be heard coming a mile away, due to the loud jingling of the numerous bracelets, bangles, and beads she always wore. And she was usually speaking long before she came in sight. Lenore had a loud booming voice and had studied "Expression" while attending Judson College for women, and to the family's everlasting regret, the teacher had encouraged her.

Now, due to certain recent events, including her setting her own kitchen on fire, they had been forced to hire a twenty-four-hour live-in nurse for Lenore. Earle was a successful dentist with a nice practice, but they were by no means rich, and certainly not now, with all the money they had spent sending the children to college, the weddings, Lenore's mortgage, and now the nurse. Poor Earle might not be able to retire until he was ninety, but the nurse was a definite necessity.

Lenore, who was not only loud but also extremely opinionated and voiced her opinion to everyone within earshot, had suddenly started calling total strangers long-distance. Last year, she had called the pope in Rome, and that call alone had cost them more than three hundred dollars. When confronted with the bill, Lenore had been incensed and said that she shouldn't have to pay a dime because she had been on hold the entire time. Try telling that to the phone company. And there was no reasoning with her. When Sookie asked why she had called the pope, considering that she was a sixth-generation dyed-in-the-wool Methodist, Lenore had thought for a moment and said, "Oh . . . just to chat."

"To chat?"

"Yes, and you mustn't be so closed-minded, Sookie. One can certainly be on speaking terms with Catholics. You don't want to marry one, but a friendly chat can't hurt."

And there had been other incidents. At a chamber of commerce meeting, Lenore had called the mayor a pointy-headed little carpet-bagger and a horse thief and was sued for defamation of character. Sookie had been worried to death, but Lenore remained unfazed. "They have to prove what I said was not true, and no jury in their right mind would dare convict me!" In the end, the judge had thrown the case out, but still, it had been very embarrassing. All last year, Sookie had to try to avoid running into the mayor and his wife, and in such a small town, it had been almost impossible. They were just everywhere.

Since the lawsuit, they had been through three different nurses. Two quit, and one left in the middle of the night, along with one of Lenore's dinner rings and a frozen turkey. But now, after months of searching, Sookie felt she had finally found the perfect nurse, a darling older Filipino lady named Angel, who was so patient and so sweet,

even though Lenore continued to call her Conchita, because she said she looked exactly like the Mexican woman who had worked for her in Texas in the forties, when Sookie's father had been stationed there.

The good news was, now that Lenore had Angel, Sookie was finally going to be able to attend the Kappa reunion in Dallas, and her old college roommate, Dena Nordstrom, had promised to meet her there. They talked on the phone regularly, but she hadn't seen Dena in a long time, and she couldn't wait.

AS SOOKIE SAT AT the intersection waiting for the red light to change, she pulled down the visor and looked at herself in the mirror. Good God, that was a mistake. She guessed that after fifty, nobody looked good in the bright sun, but even so, she really had neglected herself. She hadn't seen her eye doctor in over three years, and she clearly needed a new prescription.

Last month at church, she had embarrassed herself half to death. The correct quote was, "I am a vessel for God's love," but she had read out loud in front of the entire congregation, "I am a weasel for God's love." Earle had said that no one had noticed, but of course, they had.

Sookie glanced at herself in the mirror again. Oh, Lord, no wonder she looked so terrible. She had run out the door this morning without a stitch of makeup. Now she was going to have to drive all the way home and throw some on. She always tried to look somewhat presentable. Thankfully, she wasn't as vain as her mother, or she would never have left home at all. Outward appearances meant everything to Lenore. She was particularly proud of what she called "the Simmons foot" and her small, slightly turned-up nose. Sookie had gotten her father's longer nose, and wouldn't you know it, Buck got the cute one. Oh, well. At least she got the Simmons foot.

JUST AS THE LIGHT changed, Netta Verp, Sookie's next-door neighbor, whizzed by in her huge 1989 Ford Fairlane, probably on her way out to Costco, and tooted her horn. Sookie tooted back. Sookie loved Netta. She was a good old soul. She and Netta were both Leos.

Netta's house was in between their house and Lenore's. Poor thing. She had been stuck in the middle, with all the Poole children and animals on one side and Lenore on the other, calling her night and day, but she never complained. She said, "Hell, I'm a widow. What else am I going to do for fun?"

SOOKIE SUPPOSED SHE SHOULDN'T have been surprised that Ce Ce's wedding theme had been "Pets Are People, Too." At one point, there had been eleven animals living in the Poole house, including an alligator that had crawled out of the bay and up the back-porch stairs, three cats, and four dogs, one being Earle's beloved Great Dane, Tiny, who was the size of a small horse.

All the dogs, cats, and hamsters—and the one blind raccoon—were fine, but she had drawn the line with the alligator and insisted that it stay in the basement. She loved animals, too, but when you're scared to get up at night and go to the bathroom, it's time to put your foot down, and hopefully not on top of something that could bite it off.

The hard part of having animals, for her, was losing them. Two years before, Mr. Henry, their eighteen-year-old cat, had died, and she still couldn't see an orange cat without going to pieces. After Mr. Henry died she told Earle no more pets. She just couldn't take the heartbreak.

SOOKIE DROVE STRAIGHT ON through town, waved at Doris, the tomato lady on the corner, then headed down the hill, toward her house on the bay.

The old historic scenic route was lined on both sides with large oak trees planted before the Civil War. On the right side, facing the water, were miles of old wooden bay houses built mostly by people from Mobile as summer homes. Sookie guessed that if she had a penny for every time she had driven on this road over the years, she would be a millionaire by now.

She had been eight the first time her father had brought the family

down from Selma to spend the summer. They had arrived in Point Clear on a warm, balmy evening, and the air had been filled with the scent of honeysuckle and wisteria.

She could still remember coming down the hill and seeing the lights of Mobile, sparkling and twinkling across the water, just like a jeweled necklace. It was as if they had just entered into a fairyland. The Spanish moss hanging from the trees had looked bright silver in the moonlight and made dancing shadows all along the road. And the shrimp boats out in the bay, with their little blinking green lights, had looked just like Christmas to Sookie. For her, there had always been something magical about Point Clear, and there still was.

ABOUT A MILE PAST the Grand Hotel, Sookie turned in and drove up her long crushed-oyster-shell driveway and pulled into the carport. Netta's house was almost identical to theirs, but Netta's yard was much prettier. As soon as she could get rested enough, one of the first things Sookie was going to do was prune. Her azalea bushes were a disgrace, and her limelight hydrangeas had just gone completely wild.

Their house, like most of the others along the scenic route, was a large white wooden home with dark green shutters. Most of the bay houses had been built long before air-conditioning and had a wide center hall that ran all the way to a large screened-in porch in back overlooking the bay. And like their neighbors, they had a long gray wooden pier with a small seating area with a tin roof on the end. When the kids had been much younger, she and Earle used to go sit there almost every evening to watch the sunset and listen to the church bells that rang up and down the bay. They hadn't done that in years. She was so looking forward to being alone with Earle again.

Sookie took the two bags of seeds out of the car and put them in the little greenhouse Earle had built for her, where she kept her bird supplies. A few minutes later, after she went inside, Sookie suddenly noticed how quiet the house was. Almost eerily quiet. As she stood there, all she could hear was the ticking of the kitchen clock and the cry of the seagulls out on the bay. It was so strange not to hear a door slamming or someone running up and down the stairs. How pleasant

to have peace and quiet, and not hear loud music blaring from someone's room. So pleasant, in fact, she thought maybe she would fix herself a cup of tea and sit and relax a few minutes before she headed out again.

Just as she was reaching for a tea bag, the kitchen phone rang. Now that the house was empty, it sounded like a fire alarm going off. She picked it up and looked at the caller ID number. It was a long-distance call, but not from an area code she recognized, so she just let it ring. She was too tired to talk to anyone if she didn't have to. In the past few days she'd had to smile and talk to so many people that her face still hurt.

Sookie stuck a cup of water in the microwave, grabbed her tea bag, and went out on the screened-in porch to enjoy it. She sat down in her big white wicker chair. The bay was as smooth as glass, not a ripple in sight.

She noticed that her gardenia bushes were still in bloom and thought she might cut off a few and float them in a dish in the living room. They always made the house smell so sweet. She took a deep breath of fresh air and was about to have her first sip of tea when the phone started ringing again. Oh, Lord, it was obviously somebody calling the wrong number or a solicitor trying to sell her something, and if she didn't answer they would probably drive her crazy all day. She got up and went back to the kitchen and picked up. It was her mother.

"Sookie, I need you to come over here right now."

"Mother, is something wrong?"

"I have something extremely important to discuss with you."

"Oh, Mother, can't it wait? I just got home."

"No, it cannot!"

"Oh, well . . . all right. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Sookie frowned as she hung up. That particular tone in her mother's voice always made her a little anxious. Had Lenore found out she had spoken to the woman at Westminster Village about assisted living? She had just been inquiring about the price, and it had only been one short call. But if someone had told Lenore she would be furious.

A few minutes later, Sookie walked over, and the nurse, who was

in the front yard cutting fresh flowers, looked up and said, "Oh, good morning, Mrs. Poole," then added with a sympathetic little smile, "God bless you."

"Thank you, Angel," said Sookie.

Oh, Lord . . . it must be worse than she thought. As Sookie walked into the house, she called out, "Mother?"

"I'm here."

"Where's 'here'?"

"In the dining room, Sookie."

Sookie went in and saw her mother seated at the large Georgian dining room table with the twelve Queen Anne chairs. On the table, placed in front of her, was the large leather box with the maroon velvet inside that held her set of the Francis I silverware. Next to the box was the large Simmons family Bible.

"What's going on, Mother?"

"Sit down."

Sookie sat down and waited for whatever was coming. Lenore looked at her and said, "Sookie, I called you here today because I am not entirely convinced that you fully appreciate what you will be receiving upon my demise. As my only daughter, you will be inheriting the entire set of the Simmons family silver . . . and before I can die in peace, I want you to swear on this Bible that you will never, under any circumstances, break up the set."

Sookie was so relieved it wasn't about the call to Westminster Village, and said, "Oh, Mother . . . I do appreciate it . . . but really, why don't you leave it all to Bunny? She and Buck entertain much more than I do."

"What?" Lenore gasped and clutched at her pearls. "Bunny? Leave it to Bunny? Oh, Sookie," she said with wounded eyes. "Do you have any idea what was sacrificed to keep it in the family?" Sookie sighed. She had heard the story a thousand times before, but Lenore loved to tell it over and over, with large dramatic gestures included. "Grandmother Simmons said that at one point during the war, all that stood between them and the entire family going hungry was your great-grandmother's silver. And do you know what she did?"

"No, Mother, what?"

"She chose to go hungry, that's what! Why, she said there were

days when all they had to eat was a pitiful little handful of pecans. And they had to bury the silver in a different spot every night to keep the Yankee soldiers from finding it, but she saved the silver! And now you say, 'Oh, just give it to Bunny'? Who's not even a Simmons—and not even from Alabama? Why don't you just cut my heart out and throw it out in the yard?"

"Oh, God. All right. . . . I'm sorry, Mother. It's just . . . well, if you want me to have it, then thank you."

Sookie certainly hadn't meant to hurt her mother's feelings about the silverware, but she really had no use for it. She didn't know anybody who used a pickle fork or a grapefruit spoon anymore, and you can't put real silver in the dishwasher. You have to wash each piece by hand. And she certainly didn't want to have to polish silver all day. The Francis I pattern had twenty-eight pieces of carved fruit on the knife handle alone, not to mention the tea service, the coffee service, and the two sets of formal candlesticks.

Sookie realized she probably should care more about the silver. After all, it had come all the way from England and had been in the family for generations. But she just wasn't as formal as her mother. Winged Victory would die of epilepsy if she knew her daughter sometimes used paper plates and plastic knives and forks and just hated polishing silverware.

Lenore dearly loved to polish silver and, once a month, would sit at the dining room table wearing white cotton gloves with all of it spread out before her. "Nothing relaxes me more than cleaning my silver."

Oh, well. Too late now. The die was cast. Sookie was stuck with it. She swore on the Bible that not only would she never break up the set, but that she personally would polish it regularly. "Don't ever let tarnish get a head start on you," Lenore said.

What could she do? Being Lenore's daughter meant she had come into the world with preordained duties. First, to proudly carry on the Simmons family line that, according to Lenore, could be traced all the way back to fifteenth-century England. Second, to protect the family silver.

It was such a beautiful warm day, and after Sookie left her mother's house, she took her shoes off and walked back home along the bay.