

Want to try a taste of this delightful Southern-fried tale?

Check out our excerpt of *Star of Flint* below.

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Chapter One

1961

I was sitting on the curb of Kingston Road popping tar bubbles with my bare toes. Cece was in the front porch swing painting her toenails.

“Allie, git out of that tar before you git it all over those new 1ermudas,” she yawned in her big sister tone.

Cece was always bossing me around these days. She was fourteen; I was not quite ten—only four years difference, but these days we seemed centuries apart.

“I bet it’s 98 degrees out here today. Hey, Cece, go git an egg and let’s see if it’ll fry on the sidewalk!”

“I’m not wasting a good egg, Allie. Don’t be so immature!”

“That’s not what you said last summer when we cracked two right out here on the curb.”

“Oh shut up! That was last summer. Anyways, the temperature’s only 92. They just said so on WSFT, and stop playing in that tar.” Ninety-degree weather was typical for a summer day in middle Georgia. No one got worked up unless the mercury rose into triple digits.

If my best friend Josie McClendon had been in town, she’d have gone down the street to her house and sneaked a couple of eggs from the kitchen when her maid Lorna wasn’t looking. But Josie had gone to visit her cousin in LaGrange for our first week of summer vacation, so Cece was all I had. Last summer Cece would’ve been popping tar bubbles with me, but something had happened to her in the past six months. All she cared about was listening to Bobby Goldsboro and the Lettermen on Flintville’s local radio station, painting her nails with the latest Cutex shade from Mackey’s Dime Store, and trying to get her hair to grow in a flip like Doris Day’s.

Aunt Bird said Cece was on the threshold of puberty; at least that’s how she explained it to me last winter when she took Cece to Nash Franklin’s Department Store to buy her first brassiere. While she helped Cece fasten it in the dressing room, Aunt Bird called it a “training bra.” I asked Cece what she was trying to train her “titties” to do.

Cece turned beet red, and Aunt Bird looked at me reproachfully, her freshly permed red curls just a jiggling, "Don't say 'titties,' Allie. That's undignified."

"Maybe I don't want to be dignified," I mumbled as I sat on the small bench behind the dressing room curtain and picked a scab on my knee.

Aunt Bird ignored my comment. "Call them breasts, please. You should always refer to the parts of your anatomy with the proper terminology." Aunt Bird, a high school English teacher who could even beat Diddy in Scrabble, had the broadest vocabulary of anybody I knew and never failed to impart new words upon me whether I liked it or not. "There now, Cecile, how does that feel?" Aunt Bird asked as she adjusted the straps on the brassiere.

Cece pulled her shoulders back, sucked in her stomach, and jutted her chest out as she stared at her reflection in the dressing room mirror. She seemed so proud to have that stupid thing on. I had to admit her body had changed in the past year. Standing in the new brassiere and a pair of white cotton Carter's panties, her legs, which had always been long and lithe like a dancer's, had a slight curve at the thighs now, and her waistline was no longer straight but had a cinched in look like she was wearing a belt buckled a little too tight. Her blonde hair, pulled up in a ponytail, had a soft sheen against her olive, smooth as a baby's butt complexion. Even her face had changed shape and lost its pudginess, so her cheekbones seemed higher. She reminded me of the mantel picture of our mama in her wedding dress.

"Well, it looks ridiculous to me!" I chimed. "Why, your tit--," an admonishing look from Aunt Bird again, "I mean your breasts ain't no bigger than mosquito bites!"

Cece blushed again and in hushed tones snarled, "Shut up, Allie, just shut up!"

"Okay, that's enough, girls. Cecile is just starting to bud. But one day soon she'll be fully developed like me." She brushed Cece's blonde bangs out of her blue eyes.

I pushed my glasses up, a habit I'd developed over the years because the frames always slid down the bridge of my freckled nose, and looked at Aunt Bird. She was my daddy's younger sister by seven years, and she was beautiful to me. Her real name was Ophelia, but the family had nicknamed her "Bird" when they discovered her voice was as sweet as a nightingale's. At the tender age of four, she could sing every song on the radio's Hit Parade. Although the rest of the world referred to her as Ophelia, she would always remain "Bird" to the Sinclair family. She had curly red hair and deep green eyes. That day she was wearing a straight wool skirt and a sweater set with pearly buttons, and she had some Big Titties! Somehow I couldn't imagine Cece with titties that big.

I loved my Aunt Bird more than anybody in the world, except for my daddy, whom Cece and I referred to as "Diddy." Aunt Bird was the closest thing to a mama I'd ever known. Our real mama died in the big fire at the Winecoff Hotel in Atlanta when I was barely three. The art teacher at Flintville High School, Mama had taken the school's art club for a weekend tour of some Atlanta exhibits. She and the school's counselor had shared a room at the hotel, and they, along with three students from the art club, perished in the fire.

“Now, Allie, while Cecile gets dressed, why don’t you take this dime around the corner to Mackey’s and buy a bag of chocolate covered peanuts. We’ll meet you there in five minutes. I think it’s time you had some nylon panties, Cece.” Aunt Bird knew what to say to make me happy; I love chocolate covered peanuts almost as much as I love aggravating Cece. As I clutched the dime in my hand and skipped out of the dressing room, I heard Aunt Bird say something about my feeling a little inadequate at the moment, and I noticed a look of relief on Cece’s face. I guess they were both glad to be rid of me for a while.

Anyway, ever since that day, Cece’d been different, I guess because of puberty, which Aunt Bird defined as “a maiden’s miraculous blossoming into womanhood.” Whatever that meant, I wasn’t exactly sure. The one thing I was sure about was that puberty seemed stupid to me, and I hoped I never got it.

“Allison Sinclair, I said stop playing in that tar, or I’ll tell Diddy when he gets home!” Cece snapped at me as she screwed the top back on to her bottle of nail polish.

“Yeh, you do, and I’ll tell Diddy and Aunt Bird what I saw you and Ned Davis doing out behind the car shed!” I snapped back.

“That was way last spring, and I haven’t spoken to that square since. Besides, what I do is none of your business, Allie! Anyways, we were just experimenting.”

“Experimenting, huh? It looked more like French kissing to me—eeeww yuk! Why you’d ever want to put your tongue in some stupid boy’s mouth is a mystery to me.”

I heard Cece slam the screen door of the porch and head across the front lawn towards me, but I didn’t look up from the tar bubbles. I knew I had her. Pink sponge rollers dangled from the ends of her blonde hair as she tried to walk on her heels so the grass wouldn’t stick to her wet toenails. She looked ridiculous. “Come on, Allie, you wouldn’t tell Diddy on me!”

“It’ll cost you,” I replied as I picked up a stick and stirred the melted tar.

“Okay, how much?”

“A dollar.”

“A dollar? You little twit! That’s my entire week’s allowance, and you know it!”

I happened to look up just in time to see Mrs. Clara Davis, Ned’s mother, backing her station wagon out of her driveway. “Hey, look, here comes Miz Clara now. I bet she’d love to hear what her little Ned’s been doing with his next door neighbor.”

Cece was furious. I could tell by the red splotches appearing on her neck, but her voice remained calm. “All right, Allie, how about 25 cents a week for the next month?”

I dropped the stick in the tar goop and looked up at Cece. “You got a deal! And I’ll take my first payment now.”

I followed her back into the house just in time to hear Tommy Edwards whine, “Many a tear has to fall, but it’s all in the game” on the radio.

Chapter Two

With a quarter in my pocket, I decided to walk downtown to Hastings Drug Store and spend a nickel on an ice cream cone. I yelled to Cece that I’d be back before 4:30, but she was too busy teasing her hair and spraying it with Aqua Net to care.

As long as I was home by the time Aunt Bird got off work at the county library, I wouldn’t get in trouble. Aunt Bird worked there in the summer to supplement her teaching salary. I don’t know why; she really didn’t need the money. She’d lived with us ever since Mama died, and Diddy wouldn’t allow her to spend a dime on anything concerning the house or the family. He said Aunt Bird’s devotion to us was payment enough.

My aunt had a standing appointment every Saturday morning at 9:00 with Miss Thelma Boswell at Charm Beauty Shop, and I learned at a very young age never to schedule anything requiring Aunt Bird’s assistance during her hair appointment. She had a love/hate relationship with her mass of red curls, which never behaved exactly the way she wanted them. She claimed Miss Thelma was the only person on earth who could tame her mane. To maintain her perfectly styled hairdo between appointments, Aunt Bird wrapped her entire head in toilet tissue and topped it with a huge hair bonnet at bedtime. She was a sight!

Although she was a redhead, Aunt Bird didn’t have the temperament of one. She rarely lost her temper with me or Cece, and the closest thing to a cuss word I’d ever heard her say was “Heavenly Father above!” It wasn’t in her nature to preach or belittle us. Diddy said she had the patience of Job, but she did become impatient if we weren’t on time.

In the summertime the one rule Aunt Bird enforced with an iron hand was for Cece and me to be home when she got home from the library each afternoon. Once she’d seen us safe and sound, we were free to take off again as long as we were at the supper table on time.

Today, I had close to two hours before Aunt Bird would be home, so I laced up my Keds and started “footin’ it.” If Josie had been with me, we would’ve ridden our bicycles, but I’d made a pact with her not to do any riding until she came home. We’d both received bike speedometers for Christmas that year and had vowed to put 500 miles on them before summer’s end. We were up to 197 miles each, and it wouldn’t be fair for me to top 200 with Josie gone even if I had to put on shoes to go to town. Josie and I did most of our riding in my neighborhood and hers, so we could ride barefoot. However, I

knew Aunt Bird or Diddy either one would tear the seat out of my pants if they caught me in bare feet on the town square.

I crossed Kingston Road and headed up Birdsong Street. I started to stop by and say hey to Miz Gertrude Stansell, who lived at the top of Birdsong, but her car wasn't in her garage. Miz Gertie was a widow two times over and was loaded with money. Her first husband, Mr. Arlen Stansell, had owned the Ford dealership in town; when he died, Miz Gertie married Mr. Arlen's younger brother, who owned the Chevrolet dealership in town. He died a couple of years later, and Miz Gertie sold both dealerships and made a fortune. Too bad there wasn't another Stansell brother to own the Studebaker dealership.

Josie and I knew we could always count on Miz Gertie to invite us in when we showed up at her front door all hot and sweaty from a bike ride. She never failed to offer us a 7-Up to drink as long as we'd sit and visit for a while. I didn't mind making small talk with Miz Gertie since Aunt Bird didn't believe in our having soft drinks much. Besides that, Miz Gertie had central air conditioning.

Miz Gertie was always dressed like she was going to church even in the middle of the week. I think she was right lonely even with all that money. The only child she had was a grown retarded boy who lived in an institution up north and came to visit once a year, but I don't think poor Roscoe Ray was much company to her. All he did was sit on Miz Gertie's back terrace in his Zoro outfit and look at comic books.

Remembering the blackmail quarter burning a hole in my pocket, I passed Miz Gertie's house and started the half-mile walk to town. At the edge of town stood the First Baptist Church, a sprawling brick building painted white and taking up almost an entire block. First Baptist had been a part of my family's life as long as I could remember. Diddy taught the ten-year-old boy's Sunday school class, and Aunt Bird sang in the choir at the morning services every Sunday of my life.

Cece and I weren't allowed to sit with our friends during the morning service. Instead we sat in the left transept on the second row with Diddy. I liked the singing part of church because Aunt Bird had a magnificent voice, but I usually dozed on Diddy's shoulder during Brother Clayton's sermon.

Cece and I also went to Sunday evening Baptist training union while Aunt Bird attended choir practice. I hated training union except when we had "Sword Drills" to locate the books of the Bible. If it ran over, we'd always miss the first act on Ed Sullivan. No amount of begging earned us a reprieve from training union. Sunday evening was Diddy's time to sit in a porch rocker and read the Sunday Atlanta Journal and Constitution -without interruption.

I walked past the church, crossed at the traffic light, and turned left into Hastings Drug Store. David Estes was running the soda fountain. David was sixteen, tall and skinny, and covered in freckles. He reminded me of a giant Howdy Doody. I jumped up on the nearest stool and set my quarter on the counter.

"Hi squirt, what'll you have today?" David grinned as he wiped off the counter in front of me. Normally, I'd be offended by the term "squirt," but I let it slide. I knew what he'd ask next. "Where's that pretty

big sister of yours?” Bingo! David was hopelessly in love with Cece, who wouldn’t give him the time of day.

“She’s at home painting her toenails and listening to the radio,” I replied. “I’ll have a single dip of chocolate ripple on a cone,” I added. I knew if I kept talking about Cece while David filled my cone, he’d give me a ten cent double dip but only charge me a nickel for a single.

“Oh really? Is she getting ready to go to the dance at Weaver Park pavilion tonight?” David whined in a hopeful queried in what he hoped was a nonchalant voice. All the time he kept packing fudge ripple into that cone.

“Uh, I think so. She’s been talking about it, but I’m not certain she has permission to go. You know, she’s only fourteen.” Cece had been talking with Margaret about nothing else but the dance for the past week. For months, Cece’d been campaigning to double date once she turned fifteen, and now her birthday was only a week away. Of course, the way David Estes mooned over her, he was probably willing to wait. David rang me up, only charging me a nickel for the double dip, handed me my ice cream, and leaned into the counter to give me the third degree about Cece when he was interrupted by Mr. Hastings, the druggist and owner, who needed David to make a delivery.

Besides working the soda fountain, David occasionally made deliveries on a little red moped with Hastings Drugs painted on a sign attached to its basket. One Saturday afternoon about a month ago, he’d pattered up our drive with a big box wrapped in white paper. Josie and I were in the driveway pumping air into our bicycle tires.

“What’s in the box, David? Is it a gift for Cece?” I asked as I winked at Josie. She giggled, and David’s face turned beet red.

“Uh, no. Uh, is your aunt here? She ordered this um, um package from the drugstore. I’ll um just leave it on the front porch if that’s okay with you,” he stammered. David set the package on the front steps, practically ran back to his moped, and took off.

“What was that all about? He acts like he’s scared of us!” Josie laughed.

“Who knows? Boys are so stupid. Let’s see what’s in the box.”

I carefully removed the Scotch tape and pulled the paper away from the box’s edge so I could get a peek and then reseal the paper. The blue box was labeled KOTEX SANITARY NAPKINS. “What are these? I wonder if Aunt Bird is having her bridge club for dinner and wants fancy napkins to use on her table.”

“No, that’s not what those are,” Josie informed me in a superior tone. “Those are to wear when you get your cycle.”

“What cycle? Aunt Bird doesn’t ride any kind of cycle.” I added.

“Not a cycle with wheels,” Josie explained. “It’s a monthly cycle of some kind. Kind of like the moon, I guess. My mama has a box just like it up in the top of the bathroom closet, and when I asked Lorna

what they were, she said, 'They's for women to wear when they's got the monthly curse just likes the cycle of the moon.'"

Josie's family had a fulltime maid because Josie's mama was a bank teller at Flintville Savings and Loan and worked from 9 to 5 every day.

Now as David cranked the moped parked out front, I hoped he wasn't making another delivery to our house. I was glad to sit in the comfort of the air-conditioned store and enjoy my fudge ripple cone without listening to him moon over my big sister.

Chapter Three

I had a full hour left before Aunt Bird would get home, so I decided to stroll around the courthouse square and do a little window-shopping. I ambled up Church Street and peeked in the windows of Edgar's Pool Room.

I was forbidden to enter this establishment where on any given day a passer-by could see several young men dressed in jeans and white t-shirts shooting pool and smoking cigarettes. Usually, I didn't recognize any of these fellows; Cece told me they were mostly mill workers who worked the four to midnight shift at the cotton mill. They'd come into town before their shift to shoot pool and have a burger. Edgar's was renowned for having the best hamburgers in Flint County; once Diddy brought a bag home for supper when Aunt Bird was at a choir convention. They were delicious! Of course, that was the only time I'd ever had one because, according to Aunt Bird, young ladies were not allowed in the place even just to sit at the counter and have a hamburger. I thought it was a stupid rule.

Past the pool room was Paris's Dress Shoppe, Cece's favorite place to shop when she was occasionally allowed to purchase a store-bought outfit. Most of our clothes were made by MiMi, our maternal grandmother, who was an expert seamstress in Atlanta. Every season Aunt Bird would take our measurements and mail them to Mimi. A few weeks later Cece and I would each receive a box filled with new outfits stitched by our grandmother. Mimi always kept up with the latest fashions, so Cece became the envy of her friends as she modeled her custom made Villager skirts and Lady Bug blouses.

A few doors down was Norwood's, another dress shop that catered to the teenaged girls in town. Aunt Bird forbade Cece from going into this shop. Aunt Bird didn't care for Mrs. Norwood, who always sent her teenaged shoppers home with a bag full of outfits "just to try." .

As I passed Mackey's Five and Dime, I had a sudden pang of remorse for blackmailing Cece. I knew she'd had her eye on a new shade of nail polish in Mackey's, so in a charitable moment, I decided to use part of my "spoils" to buy it. There was only one bottle of Cutex's Pink Sunset left.

With a nickel and thirty minutes to spare, I decided to stop by the newspaper office one block off the square. I could use my nickel to buy a Strawberry Nehi from the drink box in the pressroom. Since it

was Tuesday, the office was closed to the public. The paper came out on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, so Diddy gave his workers Tuesday afternoons off.

The front door was locked, but I knew Diddy would be there working on his weekly column, which was filled with funny tidbits about local residents and an occasional homespun Southern word of wisdom. Diddy named his column "Not Responsible" so the people he mentioned in it couldn't take offense at what he'd written. I couldn't think of anyone who took offense since most locals were quite flattered to make it into the paper.

Since Mama died, Diddy had been married to his work. He seemed to spend every waking hour at the paper. He appeared totally uninterested in remarrying although Miss Blanche Bledsoe down at the Blue Goose Café flirted with him when he went in for coffee. Diddy paid her no mind. Maybe it was because Miss Blanche was a smoker. Diddy didn't smoke and wasn't much of a drinker either because he was a diabetic. He kept a case of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer in the crawl space under our house. On Saturdays when he came home from the paper, Diddy would ice one can of beer, or two cans if Uncle Hoyt was coming for supper. That was the extent of his drinking.

The front door of the newspaper office was locked, so I walked up the alley behind the building. Diddy's 1951 Studebaker, which looked like a blue bullet, was parked there, so I knew he was inside. The back doors were chained loosely together with a padlock; because I was small for my age, I'd mastered the art of squeezing through the opening between the two doors. Sometimes, Uncle Hoyt would be in the back repairing a machine or setting type for advertisements.

Although he wasn't really our uncle, I'd called him "Uncle Hoyt" all my life. He and Diddy had been best friends since they were basic training bunkmates at Ft. Benning in 1943. They were both handpicked for pilot training, but during a routine physical, the Army discovered Diddy had diabetes. Diddy spent the entire war in an office in Washington, D.C. where he wrote for The Stars and Stripes. Uncle Hoyt became a paratrooper. He jumped over Normandy on D-day, landed in a tree, shattered his leg, and spent the rest of the war in a military hospital. He still walked with a limp.

After the war, Diddy returned to Flintville where he worked his way up at the newspaper. Once I asked him why he wanted to be a journalist in a little town like Flintville after working in Washington, D.C. for a big publication read by the U.S. Army. He explained that he wanted to return to his roots and write for the people he'd known all his life. Diddy and Aunt Bird had grown up in Milltown, a neighborhood in East Flintville.

After Uncle Hoyt graduated from Georgia Tech with an engineering degree, he visited Flintville in search of job opportunities. Diddy was just finalizing a deal to buy out the newspaper—all he needed was a partner to help fund the purchase and keep the presses running. Uncle Hoyt fit the bill.

It wasn't long before Uncle Hoyt was courting Aunt Bird, the prettiest redhead in the county. They became fast friends at choir practice since their melodic voices harmonized perfectly together. The Christmas before my mama died, Uncle Hoyt gave Aunt Bird an engagement ring. The wedding was

planned for the following summer, but when Aunt Bird moved in to help Diddy take care of my sister and me, the wedding was postponed. It had been on hold for seven years now.

Thinking about Aunt Bird reminded me that I needed to get home before she showed up. I squeezed through the opening between the two doors and was in the pressroom. The big presses were quiet now, but tomorrow they would be humming with the latest news in Flint County. I loved the sound of the presses and the smell of printer's ink. Evenings when I'd greet Diddy in our driveway as he climbed out of his Studebaker, I always knew if he'd been working on the presses because he would smell like printer's ink mingled with the aroma of Clove chewing gum, which he chewed constantly. I loved that fragrance. Diddy said I had printer's ink in my blood.

On the other hand, Cece couldn't care less about the newspaper business except to look at the fashion section in the Sunday Atlanta paper. She was a talented artist, just as our mama had been, and she'd already won every art prize in the county as well as some state medals. Cece and I were total opposites in every way.

A single light bulb burned over the drink box in the corner of the pressroom. I dropped my nickel in the box and opened the top. I was in luck. There was a solitary Strawberry Nehi left, so I slid it through the slots and pulled it out. I heard Diddy pecking away on his old Underwood in his office adjacent to the pressroom, so I decided I'd ease out instead of disturbing him. Being careful not to spill any of my Nehi, I squeezed myself through the pair of chained doors and scurried back down the alley.

Just as I rounded the corner that led to the front of the building, I saw Sheriff Brady, clad in his official uniform, tapping on the front door of the newspaper. A large man in both height and width, Sheriff Brady's presence was enough to scare any would-be lawbreaker. I wondered what he wanted with Diddy. I bet he had some juicy story for tomorrow's edition. A robbery? Perhaps a wreck? Or maybe a murder? There'd never been a murder in Flintville, at least in my lifetime.

My curiosity quickly overcame my better judgment. I scooted back around the corner, scurried up the alley, and silently squeezed into the pressroom. It was one of the biggest mistakes of my life.

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