

Iron Lace

CHAPTER ONE

1965

Phillip Benedict was never easy to find. He had an efficiency apartment on New York's East Side and a room with a bed and hot plate in West Los Angeles. But when Phillip was in New Orleans, he shared quarters with Belinda Beauclaire.

Belinda had a place of her own, half of a run-down shotgun double with four rooms that lined up from front to back like the passenger cars on the *City of New Orleans*. She had painted those rooms the colors of jewels, amethyst and emerald, garnet and sapphire, and covered them with collages of fabric and photographs. Phillip had never been inside the shotgun when there weren't candles burning or incense from one of the botanicas on Ramparts Street that sold goofer dust and John the Conqueror and whispered free advice on how to use them.

Belinda didn't believe in voodoo, but she liked it better than the Christian religions that had kept Negroes down since they stepped off the slave ships. She didn't like the term *Negroes*, either. *Negro* was all right if that other race wanted to call itself by the formal *Caucasian*. But if that other race was white, then by God she was black, and certainly not colored, like something a little kid did on a boring rainy day. Phillip's mother agreed with her. It was just one of the ways Belinda and Nicky were compatible.

Belinda was a stunning woman, a kindergarten teacher with a fluid, loose-limbed walk, a slow smile and her own disturbing mixture of intelligence and sensuality. Everything about Belinda suited Phillip, and these days he found his way to New Orleans more and more.

Early on a Saturday evening in February, Phillip left Belinda's house and locked the door behind him. Belinda had been gone since early

morning, and he had spent the day hunched over his portable typewriter, punching keys with the fingers of one hand and swilling dark roast coffee and chicory with the other. He was a free-lance journalist, and unless he wanted the "free" to mean more than it should, he had to keep work hours like anybody else.

The sun had nearly reached the horizon, but he was surprised to find that the evening air was still warm and fragrant with the promise of spring. There were rain clouds forming, and the sunset was going to be spectacular.

He was not from New Orleans, had not masked for Mardi Gras as a child or attended the city's staunchly segregated schools. He had no memories of first cigarettes or first kisses to fill him with nostalgia, but every once in awhile the city could still reach out and grab him, despite his best efforts to maintain a journalist's objectivity.

Curiosity could do the same. Today curiosity, in the form of a telephone call, had grabbed and shaken him until he suspected that his good sense had been jarred loose. But for better or worse, he was on his way to find out.

Phillip backed his car out of Belinda's drive and turned it toward the Garden District. In her brief call Aurore Gerritsen had given him careful instructions on how to reach her home. He followed them now, but his mind dwelled on the remainder of their conversation.

Aurore Le Danois Gerritsen, majority stockholder of Gulf Coast Shipping, mother of State Senator Ferris Gerritsen, and daughter of a family with blood as blue as Louisiana's fleur-de-lis, wanted him to write her biography.

The horizon was a glorious sun-washed gold by the time he parked just off of Prytania Street. There had been room to park in front of Aurore Gerritsen's house, more than enough room, considering that her property could easily have accommodated the greater portion of a football field. But

he wanted to experience the neighborhood, to understand the milieu that had helped to make her the woman she was.

There were more than enough clues along his two block stroll. The houses he passed were a selection of Italianate, raised cottage and Greek Revival styles that had settled comfortably into the scenery a century before. Some deserved to be called mansions, while others were only homes for the well-to-do. Moss-draped live oaks as old as the Civil War creaked in the evening breeze, and magnolias waited patiently for the days in far-off May when their blossoms would perfume the city.

He glimpsed swimming pools and highly polished Cadillacs. Since it was carnival season, the coveted flag of Rex--flown only by those elite few who had been king of carnival--waved from two different balconies.

If any black people lived here, they were housekeepers and maids who fanned away the summer nights in airless attic rooms.

By the time Phillip reached Prytania, he was aware that his presence had been noticed. He was not dressed like a gardener or a house painter. He wore a dark suit and a conservative tie, and he was headed for Aurore Gerritsen's front gate.

"Hey, boy!"

Phillip considered ignoring the summons. Almost any other day he would have. But this was research, too. He turned and gave the old man who had shouted to him a quick survey.

The man was pale and as gnarled as a cypress root. He wore a seersucker suit that was perfectly appropriate south of the Mason-Dixon line--but nowhere else on earth. He leaned against an iron fence about fifteen yards away, in the nearest corner of the yard that bordered Mrs. Gerritsen's.

Phillip didn't respond to the man's beckoning hand. He spoke just loudly enough to be heard. "I assume you're talking to me."

The man pointed to another gate at the side of the house. "Deliveries in the back, nigger."

"Is that right? I'll remember that, in case I ever hire some white boy to run errands for me." Phillip opened the gate and walked through it, closing it carefully behind him. Then he strolled up the sidewalk and rang the front doorbell.

* * *

Aurore had no appetite for dinner. In the dining room she picked at fish and a stuffed mirliton, much as she had as a little girl. Now, as then, she was roundly scolded by a young woman who came to clear the table. It had long since occurred to her that life was a circle, the old and the young much closer on its vast circumference than she once had believed. She only hoped that she passed away before she was as helpless as an infant.

Dressed in a blue print dress and one strand of pearls she waited for Phillip Benedict in the front parlor. The room was not her favorite. Long ago she had furnished it with pieces from her childhood home, heavy, dark furniture from an era when tables and chairs had been made to last forever—and unfortunately did. She had never been skilled at ridding herself of the encumbrances of the past.

The doorbell rang, and she gripped the arms of her chair. She had instructed Lily, her housekeeper to show Phillip in, and she waited as calmly as she could while the seconds seemed to stretch into hours.

Lily appeared at last, followed by a tall man with calm, dark eyes that had taken the full measure of the room before they turned to her.

Words of greeting caught in her throat. She stood, although that was no simple feat. But she would not greet Phillip Benedict enthroned, like a grand dame in a bad costume drama.

"Mrs. Gerritsen?"

She held out her hand. He swallowed it with his. Dark and light. Young and old. Strong and fragile. She was overwhelmed with the contrasts, and for a moment she thought about telling him she had changed her mind. She could not go through with this.

He seemed to sense her confusion. He didn't smile--she doubted he smiled often. But he withdrew his hand and stood very still, giving her time to compose herself.

"I'm glad you could come," she said at last. "I've wanted to meet you for a long time."

"Have you?" He sounded doubtful.

"I've long admired your writing."

"That surprises me. I'm not well known here."

"You're not well known here because of what you choose to write about. This is a city that prides itself on . . . itself."

He seemed to relax a little. "If the rest of the world disappeared, New Orleans would hardly notice."

"Would you like coffee, Mr. Benedict? And my cook has promised dessert."

"I'm fine for now."

She wished he had said yes. She would have liked the time to get used to having him here. Much could be said over coffee that seemed silly without it.

"Then let's sit over there." She gestured to a sofa by the windows. "I'd like to get to know you a little before I tell you why I've asked you to come."

"An interview?"

She smiled. "Not really. I'm absolutely sure I want you to be the one to write my story." She saw curiosity in his eyes, and she knew that she

had hooked him. For the first time since he had arrived, she began to feel hopeful.

The sofa was uncomfortable, and she settled herself against a nest of pillows to make it more bearable. He settled himself at the far end of the sofa and sat forward, as if he planned to spring to his feet at any moment.

"Have you been in New Orleans long?" she asked.

"A matter of weeks." He faced her. "If you don't mind me asking a question at this point, how did you know I was here at all?"

"I've read your Atlantic Monthly articles, and your series on integration in the New York Times. As I said, I follow your work. So I know that your mother is Nicky Valentine and you visit here from time to time. When I began thinking about this project, I wished there was someone of your calibre who could write it up for me. And then I realized you might be able to, at that. So I asked around . . ."

"And you found me?"

"It's really a very small town."

"I've discovered that."

She smiled. "You would have by now. You weren't difficult to find. You've allied yourself with civil rights activists who make their presence known, even though you haven't been openly involved in any demonstrations yourself."

"I'm a journalist. I strive for objectivity."

"I see that."

"And nothing you've learned about me so far disturbs you?"

"No, it doesn't. It intrigues me."

"What would you like to know about me?"

"Tell me how you're enjoying your stay here."

He seemed to sift through answers. She already knew that he was not a man who would lie. He would be certain that whatever he said was exactly the truth. And sometimes the truth took time.

"I'll tell you a story," he said. "I took the streetcar yesterday, and though I didn't have to sit in the back, a woman got up and found another seat after I sat down across the aisle from her. I don't suppose you'd be surprised to learn she was white."

"No, I wouldn't."

"In the few minutes I've spent in the Garden District I've already had an interesting encounter with your neighbor."

Aurore nodded. "I suppose Mr. Aucoine didn't mention that he and I haven't spoken in years because we've found absolutely nothing to say to each other."

"There's another side to the city," Phillip said, obviously struggling to be fair. "Change is simmering in the air. You can smell potential everywhere you go."

"I'm glad to hear you say that."

"Why?"

She was startled, although she shouldn't have been. Nothing about talking to Phillip Benedict was going to be easy. The man had no easy inside him. "Because I want things to change."

"It won't benefit you," he said bluntly.

"You might be surprised what would benefit me."

He tapped his foot, and she knew he was anxious to get on with this. She purposely let him tap, and took her time examining him. He was a handsome man, but that didn't surprise her, since she had seen his photograph more than once. Phillip Benedict had been on the front lines of the civil rights movement for so long that he had been caught on camera nearly as often as the people he had been there to write about.

Photographs could capture the elegant set of his head, the strong, striking features, but they couldn't capture the vitality, the essence of a man who rose above the crowd. She had hoped that he was the man she believed him to be. Now, watching him, she was sure.

She would like to have stared longer, but she took pity on him. "I'm not going to keep you. Let me tell you what I have in mind, and we'll see if we can come to terms. First, I want you to understand that I know what an odd request this is. The world isn't holding its breath waiting for my biography to be published."

"I'm sure you've lived an interesting life."

"How lovely of you to be so tactful. But the truth is we both know there's a limited market for the story of my life."

"How limited?"

"More than you've imagined. This is a private and very personal project. I have no intention of anyone besides the immediate members of my family having a copy of the manuscript when you've finished."

"That limits my royalties, wouldn't you say?"

"There will be no royalties. I'll pay you a set price." She paused. "You can set it, yourself."

"I thought you were a business woman."

"I'm an old woman who wants this very badly."

"Why?"

"I think when we've finished, you'll have your answer."

He didn't say no, but he didn't say yes, either. He examined her as if he could extract the answer by telepathy. "I'm going to be in and out of town for the next month or so. I'm covering the voter registration activities in Alabama. How long do you think this will take?"

"I don't know. I tire easily. And I'm old. There's a lot to tell."

"From what you've told me so far you could get the same results from plugging in a tape recorder."

"No, that's where you're wrong. I'll need your help. I couldn't tell this to a machine. I need someone with your intelligence and insight--"

"You don't need me."

"I do. I've read your interviews. You're unique. People tell you things that they wouldn't tell anyone else. You know how to get the information they're withholding."

"Why would you pay me good money, then withhold information?"

"Because I've spent a good portion of my life living a lie, and sometimes, I'm not even sure where the truth can be found."

He sighed and shook his head, but Aurore knew that he wasn't refusing to write her story. He had made a different decision, and already it annoyed him. "Five thousand dollars," he said at last.

"I'll have the check for you at our next session."

He stood. "That will be tomorrow. The sooner we start . . ."

"The sooner we finish." She nodded, and stood, too. She wished she had her cane, but she hadn't wanted him to see her with it at first. She had wanted to appear stronger than she was.

She held out her hand, and he took it again. "Will ten be too late for you?" she asked.

"Ten will be fine."

"Then I'll look forward to tomorrow."

He nodded and said a polite goodbye. Then he was gone.

She counted the lies she had told him already. And the biggest was the last. She was not looking forward to tomorrow.

She was not looking forward to it at all.