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Chapter I

Miss Eubanks, Headmistress of Chesney Hall, looked exactly like Thomas Jefferson to the fourteen-year-old Felicia. A large black-framed etching of the former President hung on the wall behind the desk where Miss Eubanks sat, and the similarity was so immediate the whole office seemed to take on an instant, almost overwhelming sense of awe as if death and greatness pervaded the room.

The portrait in the catalogue had managed to conceal all this. Obviously it had been conceived in a younger, more gentle day. There Miss Eubanks smiled out from the paper, a soft, rather winsome scholar with her hair drawn neatly to a bun in the back of her head and a rose pinned at the bosom of a long, flowing white dress. The years and the exactitude of her calling must have reduced her to this grey, cropped-haired executive she now appeared. For sitting there behind her desk Miss Eubanks was mighty. She was powerful. And, to Felicia, terrifying.

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When Felicia trailed in ^{to} the office behind her parents all her ~~her~~ fancies and dreams about boarding school vanished ^{in the moment}. Here it was at last, ^{and was} this woman who would rule over her by day and by night. And it was then the crying inside began.

Miss Eubanks, dressed in a long-sleeved, rust-colored dress, rose to a ^{imposing} tall, larged-boned height from behind her desk and extended a hand first to Mrs. Whitfield, then to Mr. Whitfield. When she shook hands with Felicia there was only the suggestion of a twitch rather than a smile. Miss Eubanks made a gesture toward the three straight chairs in front of the desk.

Felicia brushed back her blond bangs with the palm of her hand and sat between her mother and father. Slowly Miss Eubanks moved a paper weight on her desk and picked up a piece of paper. Felicia could see the lettering on top of the page: "Ashton Junior High School." It was a transcript of her grades sent by Mr. Mason, the principal. But it was a touch of home and suddenly poor, squat Mr. Mason seemed to take on qualities in truth he had never possessed ^{with} warmth, gentleness, a balm for the tortured mind. "If only..." Felicia said to herself.

"Yes, now," said Miss Eubanks. "I see we've had no languages." Her voice was low and suggested ripe patina ^{with a} brought ^{of} on by old crises and long use. "Most of our gulls have had languages." She dropped the paper as if it were tainted by something inferior.

"I think we wrote you about that," said Mrs. Whitfield. "Languages just weren't offered in the primary grades. In the ninth grade I believe ^{the}" she hesitated. "Felicia would have begun Latin this year."

Felicia looked at her mother and oddly saw her as a stranger, indeed Miss Eubanks, might see her ~~--- a~~ ² handsome woman with startlingly blue eyes and auburn hair braided at the back of her head. She fingered the gloves in her hands ^o and somehow the two, Miss Eubanks and her mother, seemed enemies ~~--- woman meeting woman,~~ ^M vying for something, exactly what Felicia was not sure. She had never seen her mother in quite this way before.

"Of course we will have to arrange for extra tutoring," said Miss Eubanks. She smiled at Mr. Whitfield, an efficient smile. "We find many of our ~~Southern~~ gulls have been slowed by primary training."

"That must mean a good portion of the school then," said Mr. Whitfield. He didn't seem in the least intimidated by Miss Eubanks. But then Felicia had never seen her father intimidated by anyone. There was something about the look of him that seemed to make other people diminish in his presence, something in his tall, slender bearing and the hard look from his small ^a grey eyes.

"No, Mr. Whitfield," said Miss Eubanks. "Most of our gulls are from the East. We have very few ~~Southerners~~ now."

"Is that so? Seems odd for a Virginia school."

"No, most of the Virginia gulls seem to prefer other parts of the country, a change of location you might say." She closed her eyes and smiled an almost peaceful smile. "The Virginia gulls go East and the ~~Eastern~~ gulls come to us."

"I see," said Mr. Whitfield and turned to Felicia. "Well, we're ^a further away from Georgia than we thought."

^{said nothing} Felicia didn't say anything. She was thinking that later, when they

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went back to the hotel, she ~~was going to~~ ^{would} tell them she had decided she ^{to} ~~would~~ go back home with them. There was nothing she liked about this place; it was not at all what she had imagined. The ~~girls~~ ^{girls}, at least the ones who had already arrived, all looked older and the one teacher she had met reminded her of Miss Manning, her gym teacher at home. Miss Manning was always saying: "Team cooperation, ~~girls~~ ^{girls}! Team cooperation" and making remarks about Felicia's long, thin legs.

"Georgia is a lovely state," Miss Eubanks was saying. "My mother was from the low country, Savannah."

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Felicia looked at her. It seemed impossible that Miss Eubanks had ever had a mother, Somehow it was almost like ^{finding} admitting a weakness, that she was, after all, like other people who had mothers and father, ^{even that she was} ~~once was~~ a child.

"Why, how interesting," said Mrs. Whitfield.

"The Eubanks were all from Virginia, however," said Miss Eubanks, twitching her smile and immediately picking up the transcript of grades again.

"We're weak in mathematics, I see."

It was a dirty trick, Felicia thought, Miss Eubanks sitting up there protected by her desk and listing all those failures---^{1/2}math and no languages. She'd like to tell her about what she had done this summer, about the book she had written. It was a book about her brother Arthur and his time at the Follett School up in Connecticut. If Miss Eubanks had read it, she'd be overwhelmed with gratitude at having someone like her at Chesney Hall. But nobody had read the book yet and she wasn't planning to have it published until after she was dead. There were too many revealing things in it. She had finished the book the night before they left for Virginia and

afterward she had gone outside and prayed up to the heavens she would like boarding school, ^{and} that they would like her. But ^{that} ~~it was then~~, there in the garden with the lights blazing from the ancient brick house, ~~that~~ ^{an} odd thing happened. Suddenly she had felt a terrible fear, a loneliness, ~~one~~ so immense she instinctively stretched out her arms as if at least the night would come to her. Later, she lay on her back and looked up at the stars, wondering if she would always feel alone and was it this way with others, too. It was all so strange and new that nonsensically she began to cry, not aloud, just silently with the tears streaming down her face.

"You don't like mathematics, Felicia?" Miss Eubanks was looking at her with her pale eyes. She pronounced her name "Feliciah."

"No'm, I guess not," Felicia said, jerking her shoulders up and down, and then she let out a rather unsuccessful giggle. The giggle was met only with a stare. No time to giggle, no time for foolishness. This was serious business. The error brought the blood rushing to her face.

"Well, we'll see if we can't remedy that," said Miss Eubanks, slowly placing aside the transcript of grades.

"We do hope Felicia can keep up here, Miss Eubanks," said Mrs. Whitfield. "That is, we hope it won't be too great a strain for her."

"It may be a little difficult in the beginning," said Miss Eubanks. "But with additional tutoring and careful watching I'm sure we'll adjust." She leaned back in her swivel chair. "It's lovely to have you here, Feliciah. May I welcome you to Chesney Hall as one of our new gulls."

Both her parents turned to her, and Felicia felt the blood come to her face again. For some reason this bit of kindness from Miss Eubanks made the ache come to her throat again. "Thank you," she said thinly. "I surely do appreciate it." She tore a huge fingernail off her thumb and frowned down at it.

Miss Eubanks rose from her chair. "It is always so pleasant to know the parents of our gulls. I'm always pleased when the parents want to bring the gulls."

It was so obviously a statement of dismissal that both Mr. and Mrs. Whitfield rose in unison.

"Thank you so much, Miss Eubanks," said Mrs. Whitfield and extended her hand across the desk.

"Yes," said Mr. Whitfield and they, too, shook hands.

Felicia remained seated. It was all over, their interview, and Miss Eubanks hadn't liked her. She hadn't liked her at all. "Just because she thinks we come from a small, Southern town," Felicia reasoned. "If we'd just---" She sighed a heavy sigh.

"Felicia, you may see Miss Gates now," said Miss Eubanks.

"Miss Gates?" said Felicia, instantly getting up from the chair.

"Yes, after you've said goodbye to your parents. Miss Gates will want to show you your room. She's there, near the main entrance."

"But I was---" Her mother had assured her she would go back to the hotel with them.

"Should we leave Felicia here now?" her mother asked matter-of-factly.

"Yes," said Miss Eubanks. "I'm sure she will want to meet her roommate and get better acquainted."

Her father looked at her, and the sudden softness in his eyes made her want to cry again. "Of course," he said.

"I wonder," said Mrs. Whitfield. "Would it be permissible to have Felicia and her roommate for a little dinner with us tonight? We thought---"

"No, Mrs. Whitfield. Gulls are permitted off the grounds only on Friday and Saturday and then only in the accompaniment of one of our

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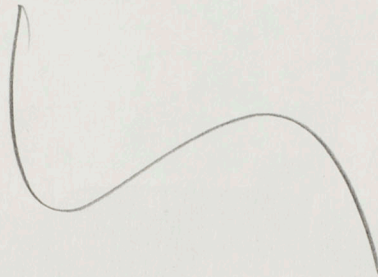
chaperones."

"I see," said Mrs. Whitfield.

"It's better this way---to just say our goodbyes and become adjusted to routine as soon as we can."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Whitfield. "I understand completely."

They shook hands once again and Felicia, stunned and dazed, followed her parents out of the room, hoping she would never have to enter it again.



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