

MARIE BENEDICT
and
VICTORIA
CHRISTOPHER MURRAY

The

A NOVEL

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LADIES

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Titles by Marie Benedict and Victoria Christopher Murray

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The First Ladies



The
**FIRST
LADIES**



Marie Benedict
AND
Victoria Christopher Murray

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CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Titles by Marie Benedict and Victoria Christopher Murray](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)

[Chapter 67](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[*Historical Note*](#)

[*Marie Benedict's Author's Note*](#)

[*Victoria Christopher Murray's Author's Note*](#)

[*Marie Benedict's Acknowledgments*](#)

[*Victoria Christopher Murray's Acknowledgments*](#)

[*Readers Guide*](#)

[*Discussion Questions*](#)

[*About the Authors*](#)

For Mary and Eleanor, First Ladies and first friends . . .

CHAPTER 1

MARY

New York, New York
October 14, 1927

Nearly fifty blocks whir past my cab window as I ride through the upper reaches of Manhattan from the Hotel Olga in Harlem. Traveling toward the Upper East Side, I feel as though, somewhere, I've crossed an invisible line. The shades of complexions fade from colored to white. Not that it matters to me. I have never been hindered by the views and prejudices of others, not even the Ku Klux Klan.

My cab stops in front of a limestone town house amidst the expanse of brick facades on East 65th Street. I exit the cab, then pause before I mount the few steps to the front door. The number 47 is on the left of the wrought iron gate, while 49 is on the opposite side. Yet there is only a single entrance.

Odd, I think, and a bit confusing to have one door for two residences. I certainly hope Mrs. Roosevelt gets along with her neighbor.

The door is opened by a young woman wearing a white-collared black uniform. For a moment, she stands still, her eyebrows raised and her blue eyes wide with astonishment.

"I am Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune, here for the luncheon," I say.

She recovers. "Yes, ma'am." As she gestures for me to enter, her face becomes, once again, the expressionless servant's mask.

Chatter and laughter float in from down the hall. “Ma’am?” she asks, reaching for my coat.

I shrug out of my black fur-collar wrap and pat my hat to make sure it hasn’t tilted. The young lady leads me down a hallway darkened by mahogany panels. As we approach the sound of voices, I listen to the medley of tones, searching for the accents and intonations that will give me clues to who these women are and where they’re from.

When I step into the drawing room, the gleaming chandeliers, the velvet burgundy drapes framing the large windows, the deep chintz sofas, and a crackling fire offer a warmer welcome than the women inside. Unfazed, I move to the walls covered with bookcases. Glorious leather-bound volumes line the shelves. How much my curious students at Bethune-Cookman College would enjoy and appreciate a library like this.

If I didn’t know this was a luncheon for women leaders of national clubs and organizations—some of the most powerful women in America—I’d think I’d stepped into a fashion show. Each woman wears a different variation of the latest styles; there are skirts and sweater sets and drop-waist dresses, and all, of course, are wearing silk stockings. Quite the contrast with my ankle-length navy dress trimmed in velvet.

I peruse the bookshelves, noticing that the conversation dips to a whisper whenever I skirt close to a group. As I draw near women I recognize from my position as president of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, I smile and nod, but I only occasionally receive a nod in return. Most often, my acknowledgments are met with steel-cold glances. Funny how the same women who talk with me about the advancement of women in a formal meeting space open to whites and Negroes pretend not to even see me in this social setting. Instead of allowing this to smart, I read the titles as I survey the books: a biography here, a novel there, a historical study in between.

"Ah, Dr. Bethune. What a pleasure."

My smile widens as the officious-looking Mrs. Sara Delano Roosevelt approaches, surprisingly light on her feet for her seventy-something years. "It is good to see you again, Mrs. Roosevelt."

"You as well, Dr. Bethune."

I hesitate, then say, "I hope you'll pardon me for clarifying." I pause, and Mrs. Roosevelt's expression hardens; she's not used to correction. "I prefer to be called Mrs. Bethune. Although I am grateful for the recognition, my doctorate degree is an honorary one. I prefer that honorific be reserved for the men and women who worked hard to earn their doctorates."

"As you wish." Mrs. Roosevelt's voice softens at the benign nature of my clarification. "Please tell me—I understand you've just returned from Europe. How was your trip?"

"It was the most glorious eight weeks."

"Isn't Europe amazing? So full of history." Leaning closer, she whispers, "Did I hear you had an audience with the pope?" The astonishment in her tone matches the amazement I felt standing before Pope Pius XI and receiving his blessing. As we talk about the Vatican, I wonder how news of my travels spread so fast and so wide.

But of course I say nothing about that, and when Mrs. Roosevelt asks the purpose of my trip, I tell her I traveled to Europe with Dr. Wilberforce Williams, the noted public health care expert and writer. "He's a friend from Chicago who's been to Europe several times, and when he arranged a travel group, I knew it was time for me to get an understanding of life across the ocean."

We chat about our experiences in Europe, especially the beautiful gardens. "I love Kew Gardens in London in particular," Mrs. Roosevelt says. "They have the largest botanical collection in the world, you know."

"Ah, yes," I say. "I found it lovely as well, but I preferred the black roses in Switzerland."

“Black roses? Oh my,” she says with a bit of surprise. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a rarity.” A butler approaches and whispers to her. “It seems I am needed for a matter crucial to the luncheon. Will you excuse me?”

I am left alone once again and find myself facing a cluster of three women. I can imagine their thoughts, wondering what on earth I have in common with the society matron, mother to former assistant secretary of the Navy and failed vice presidential candidate Franklin Roosevelt. He’d been considered a promising politician on the rise until polio felled him six years ago. But I am not here because of him.

The women and I catch one another’s gazes, and I smile. When I’m rewarded with cold shoulders once again, I resume my perambulation, letting my favorite walking stick lead the way.

I do wonder which of these women is Mrs. Roosevelt’s daughter-in-law. Her name was on the invitation, and she is my host as well. I long to meet Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, who has become an advocate for the underrepresented and one of the most prominent women in politics, albeit for the Democratic Party. From what I’ve read, she, alone among the women in this room, shows promise.

CHAPTER 2

ELEANOR

New York, New York

October 14, 1927

Move, I tell myself. *Walk across the room and offer your hand in welcome.* But as I watch Mary McLeod Bethune stroll around the drawing room alone, I don't break away from the conversation I'm having with the head of the American Association of University Women. The sight of the only colored woman in the room unnerves me, and I wonder about the wisdom of including the renowned educator in this national luncheon of women's club heads. Were my mother-in-law and I naive to invite her?

Dr. Bethune is a sturdy, rather short, smartly dressed colored woman. She moves confidently, seemingly impervious to the women's slights, like that of Mrs. Moreau, a leader of the Daughters of the American Revolution, who stares at her with mouth agape. Oh, how I wish my mother-in-law would return. No matter how easily she can irritate me, this is the sort of situation she would handle with command and grace.

How does Dr. Bethune maintain her poise? Even in the face of this inhospitable crowd, she doesn't cower. Not like I would have.

You look like a granny, the constant refrain of my mother's words to me—an insult conveying the ugliness and joylessness she saw in me as a child—comes back now. Those words haunt me from time to time, returning me momentarily to the darkness of my childhood.

My long days were spent alone in the children's attic nursery with only a governess and my brother Hall for company, trotted out at mealtimes for my mother's inspection and inevitable criticism. It didn't matter that I'd been raised in wealthy homes or that I had the elite Dutch ancestry of the Roosevelt and Hall families. I grew up believing that I had to apologize for the unpleasantness of my existence, that somehow, someday, I must find a way to prove my worthiness.

That the hateful insult of "granny" came from the lovely, delicate lips of my beautiful, slender, fair-haired mother, Anna Hall Roosevelt—the leading debutante of her season—made it especially hurtful. I knew I was everything my stunning mother was not. Still, part of me wondered what society would think if they could hear a daughter and wife from two of the most esteemed families in America speak to her child in such a way. Not that I'd ever divulge it; I was better bred, and anyway, I was only eight years old when she spoke those words for the last time. Still, they remain.

Our house steward announces luncheon, snapping me back to the present and jolting me into action. I make my excuses to the woman to whom I've been speaking. I rush after Dr. Bethune, who has started toward the dining room, marching proudly with a walking stick in hand. It is then I feel a firm tug on my arm.

"Mrs. Roosevelt, what were you thinking?" It is Mrs. Moreau, with a gaggle of women in tow. "How can we sit down to lunch with her?"

I flinch. Mrs. Moreau is speaking loudly. It's as if she isn't aware that Dr. Bethune can hear her, or perhaps she just doesn't care.

A woman with a Southern drawl chimes in. "I am astonished that you and your mother-in-law thought it appropriate to include a colored woman."

The six women encircle me. "Ladies," I say, my voice sounding even more high-pitched than usual, "Dr. Bethune is one of the most

respected women in her field—in the nation, even—and the head of a national club. Her presence here is perfectly appropriate.”

“We know who she is. And she might be respected,” that same woman says, her arms now crossed over her chest, “but she’s still a Negro, and you cannot possibly expect us to sit down to lunch with her.”

Embarrassed and ashamed, but also boiling mad, I cross my arms, too. No more apologizing or explaining. “My mother-in-law and I wanted to bring together women who run clubs across this nation. I expect us to find common ground so that we may bring change and opportunities for women and girls of all kinds.”

My eyes take in these supposed leaders. They are a representation of America, old and young, some from the South, others from the North, and I’d assumed their altruism would extend to *all* people. “Ladies, Dr. Bethune is my guest, and we shall treat her as such, in keeping with our missions to support the women of America.”

But my tone and intractability do not make them back away.

“Do you know what’s not acceptable?” the woman with the Southern drawl practically yells. “Being labeled a woman who loves nig—”

I gasp before she can finish spewing out her venom.

“Dr. Bethune has as much, if not more of, a right as any of you to be here. And I will not allow you to speak about my guest this way.” My heart is racing as I pivot away from them.

Following Dr. Bethune, I wonder if I am partly to blame for the behavior of these women. If I had rushed to her side as soon as she entered, would they have dared? Maybe I am as bad as they are for not greeting her upon arrival, for allowing her difference to make me hesitate. Every time I think I’ve made progress, think I’ve become more like my dear, forward-thinking friends Marion Dickerman and Nan Cook—the principal of the progressive Todhunter School for girls we recently acquired and the secretary of the Women’s Division of

the New York State Democratic Committee, respectively—I realize how much further I have to go.

When I enter the dining room, I see that Dr. Bethune sits by herself at the central table, around which the other tables stem like petals of a flower. It is a chair where she can see and be seen. As the other guests move into the room, many join the crowd forming at the periphery with Mrs. Moreau, who refuses to select a chair. With utter aplomb, Dr. Bethune accepts a bowl of soup from a maid. She dips her silver spoon into it as if all this strangeness is nothing. As if all is proceeding as normal, which perhaps it is for her.

I race to her side, sputtering, “It—it is nice to finally meet you, Dr. Bethune. I am Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt. When my mother-in-law mentioned that you’d accepted our invitation, I was thrilled I’d have the opportunity to meet the woman who serves not only as the president of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs but also as the president of Bethune-Cookman College.”

Dr. Bethune carefully places her spoon down next to her bowl and replies, “It’s a pleasure, Mrs. Roosevelt, and please call me Mrs. Bethune. I thought you’d forgotten about me.”

Her words, spoken bluntly but without acrimony, cut through me. How could I have allowed her to flounder in the face of this disrespect? What I’ve done is unforgivable, and my cheeks flush with heat.

“I cannot apologize enough for putting you in this awkward position, Mrs. Bethune. My mother-in-law and I did not anticipate that the ladies would behave in this way. After all, these women have pledged to lift up other women in their work,” I say, feeling that I must give her a complete explanation for what she’s had to endure.

She smiles and asks, “How did you think this luncheon would go?”

I am silent. *What can I say?*

“Mrs. Roosevelt,” she continues, the smile never leaving her lips, “you need only to have asked me. While many will sit in a meeting

or a conference with me, there aren't too many white folks in this country who care to break bread with colored people, no matter their station in life." She gives a rueful chuckle.

"Mrs. Bethune, I'm so sorry for what you may have heard."

"Oh, there is no *may*. I *definitely* heard them."

"I don't know what to say. I have never—"

"*You* may have never, but I have. Women and men like this pass through my life every day." Her voice holds no anger or even frustration.

"It's unacceptable, and I want to apologize."

"You must never apologize for a sin someone else has committed," she says with a shake of her head.

"I appreciate that, but still, I'm terribly sorry. May I join you for lunch?"

"I was hoping you would," she answers with a nod. "I have a feeling we've got lots to talk about." Then she smiles at me with such warmth that I feel at ease for the first time since the luncheon began.

"I agree," I say, lowering myself onto the chair next to her. "I have been following your impressive career for years, and I'm in awe of your accomplishments."

"And I yours." She tilts her head toward the ladies refusing to sit. "In the meantime, those ladies are missing out on some excellent soup."