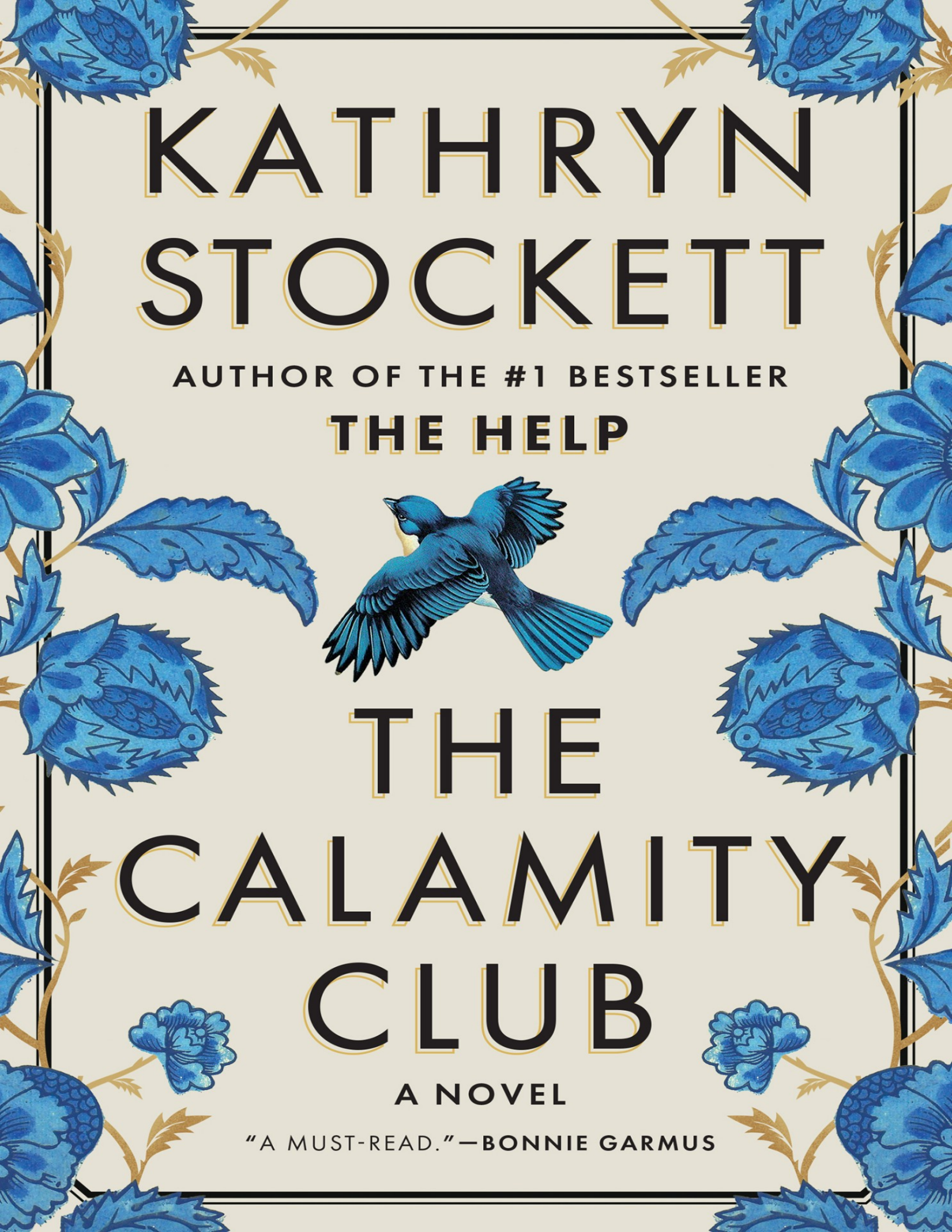


The book cover is framed by a decorative border of blue flowers and leaves. In the center, a blue bird is shown in flight, facing left. The author's name is at the top in large, black, outlined letters.

KATHRYN
STOCKETT

AUTHOR OF THE #1 BESTSELLER

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The Calamity Club

Kathryn Stockett

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To my gorgeous, brilliant mama, Ruth Elliott Stockett

Prologue



Birdie

September 1933

Downtown Drugstore had a bell on the door that made a single *tink* sound when you opened it. Oxford Pharmacy had two bells on its door so it was more of a *ta-tink*, though nothing to startle over. But the Gathright-Reed Drug Co. door bore a foot-long strip of brass sleigh bells on its knob, which, when turned, sent metal balls clanging to announce somebody's coming in the dang store so you better turn around and look see who it is. And if you did, you'd see me.

At the pay counter to my right, a heavy woman was buying something. *Pripp*, the nosiest of my sister Frances's many friends. Her blond bobbed hair headed more left and right than down on this humid September morning. "Birdie, hadn't seen you in a while," she said. She was paying for a pair of rayons sized, I'm sure, extra-know-it-all.

"Hey, Pripp," I said and kept walking straight on past her.

I went to the back of the store and stood myself behind the most human-sized rack I could find and picked up whatever thing was closest. It was a tin of men's Brylcreem. I held it close to my face, hoping it would make me less

talkable to. *Why the heck do I have to do this—and at a store on the square no less, when all the other girls got to go to the other side of town to buy bedsheets or race records?* Deep down I knew perfectly well why: because no one would ever suspect me of such a thing. I was Birdie Calhoun, twenty-four years old, churchy and chinless, kind to all animals and people. I'd never do anything even close to what I was doing.

"I'm just saying," Pripp said up at the counter, though I could hear her all the way back here, "I don't think it's fair for y'all to charge thirty-five cents for my size when you only charge thirty for the regular—" I heard her clicking nickels and pennies at the older lady on the other side of the counter.

"Well, it is near double the rayon," the lady said. "Nother way to look at it is it's a bargain for what you're getting."

Behind the display, I waited on Pripp to leave, and also a pimply boy up front who was flipping through a book at the lending library rack. Up every wall of the place, products filled the shelves, colored boxes and tins with signs explaining what they could do for you: *For That Movie Star Look*, *For That Annoying Itch*, *For the Picky College Gentleman*, but what about *For the Unmarried Lady Who Does Not Want to Be Doing This One Bit?* Where was the little sign for that? The sleigh bells clanged, and I leaned over to see. The boy at the lending rack had walked out. One down, one to go.

At the counter, Pripp hitched her yellow purse strap up on her shoulder, and I held my breath. But instead of walking out, she was looking around—evidently for me—so I put the Brylcreem down as she came my way. There was no logical reason for me to be holding that.

"There you are, Birdie," Pripp said. She had a smarty-looking smile, close-lipped. Full of guarantee that whatever I said, she would be repeating. "Noticed y'all missed church on Sunday, your spot up front was empty, and Frances has been short on her volunteer hours, I tell you Garnett Pittman is not pleased about that, Frances ought to let us know—"

"She took a trip. Frances and Mrs. Tartt are on a trip," I said. With Pripp it was all one sentence, so you had to wedge it in when you could. "They went

down to Jackson to see about some family.”

Pripp frowned, looking almost offended. “Well, she didn’t mention any traveling trip to me, and Chairlady Garnett needs to know who’s coming in the Orphan so she can adjust up the schedule, after so many little girls got adopted all we got are big girls now, not to mention—”

“I got to do something, Pripp.” My heart felt like it was trying to hammer its way out of my chest. “I need to get somewhere.”

“Well. Don’t forget to tell Frances what I said,” and she stood there until she realized all she was getting was a nod from me. Finally, she turned around and walked out, sending the strip of bells clanging for the third time.

I was the only customer left in the store. Just me and the lady at the counter up front, and the pharmacist, who was standing in the back, wearing his judgy white coat up on his judgy high pedestal, grinding something in a bowl. *Lord, don’t make me have to talk to that man.* I approached the older lady at the glass-topped counter.

She was around sixty, wearing a white ruffled pinafore, glasses nestled atop a bed of gray hair. I said it fast and low. “I need to purchase some Merry Widows please, ma’am.”

She dropped her chin at me, said, “*Oh.*” Then she leaned up and looked all the way down at the pharmacist standing in the back. “Well, I—Mr. Castel generally does these type transactions, but it don’t require a doctor’s note no more ...” She reached under the counter and set a round, silver-dollar-sized tin down, protecting it with her hand. “At’ll be fifty cents.”

In the mirror behind her, I could see my chin-length brown hair, flat and damp in the heat. “I’m going to need more.”

She nodded and reached down and set another silver disk on the counter, covering both now with her spotty, veined hand. “Alright, ’at’ll be one dollar.”

I didn’t want to have to go to any more drugstores and do this with any more ladies, or worse, men. I’d already been to the two other stores, the ones my sister and Mrs. Tarrt didn’t frequent, but they didn’t carry the right brand.

“You know they’s three come to a package,” she whispered to me.

I nodded. I knew that. A warm spongy thing slid down my back. “Yes, ma’am. I’m still going to need more.” I hadn’t even told her the worst part yet.

She wrinkled her already wrinkly forehead and pushed aside a clump of damp gray hair. “Exactly how many you looking to buy in total?” she asked and eyed my plain blue dress that my meemaw had made me, with plain buttons to match a plain unmarried woman. When I whispered the number, the glasses on top of her head perked up, like little ears.

“That is a unusual amount,” she said.

I know, lady, I know. I wiped my damp forehead with my dress sleeve. Her eyes had stopped on my unringed finger. *Dang it, I should’ve worn gloves.*

“I don’t know if I’m allowed to—” She glanced over at the pharmacist but he was gone now, and for all I knew he was weaving through the racks, headed this way. She whispered, “It might be against the law to sell ninety-nine prophylactics to a unmarried lady, I’ll have to check on that—”

“No, you don’t, it’s alright because—they’re not for me, they’re for somebody that’s allowed to ... administer them.” That these were not for me was completely true, I’d never even had a proper boyfriend before, which was *fine*, but the second part, that “allowed to” part, that was most definitely not true.

“She really needs them,” I whispered.

She tapped her ink-stained fingers against her lips, negotiating that number, ninety-nine, in her head and figuring it would be thirty-three containers since they held three apiece or maybe I needed to tell her that math. I was pretty sure she got it though.

“Well, I can certainly understand a ... woman’s plight,” she said and shook her head as if recalling a time when she could’ve used a few of these herself. “But if I sell these to you, I’m s’posed to ask—she understands they’re for disease prevention use only?”

“Yes, ma’am, she understands that.”

“Not to stop a lady from ...” She stared at me. “It ain’t legal for that other reason.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well then I guess I got to ask, does he? Have himself a disease?”

I looked her straight in the eye and said, “It is very, very likely, ma’am.”

She nodded and worked her tongue across her teeth.

Saying something so true gave me a jolt of urgency—this needed to happen now and it needed to happen quick before somebody else walked in the store, and I guess she sensed it too because with a hard snap she shook open a white paper bag that I could tell already was going to be too small. She slid the two silver disks on the counter in there and then, under the counter, dropped in the other thirty-one. When she tried to fold down the top of the bag, the edges wouldn’t meet, so I took it from her and shoved it down in a sack half full of groceries. I moved a box of Uneeda Biscuit on top of it and slid three fives, a one, and two quarters across the counter.

She looked down at the money. “One more thing.” She set a blue book on the counter, already open to a page. “You got to sign here who they’re for, that’s Mr. Castel’s rule.”

I took the pencil and let it hover a second over the paper. Should I make a name up? Would that draw more attention? But then the bells on the front door *cla-clanged* so I scratched the name of the first married woman who came into my head and shut the book hard. “Thank ya, bye,” I called, moving past a lady holding a little boy by the hand, and pulled the noisy door open again.

Lord, my sister was going to kill me.

Part 1

Welcome to

THE LAFAYETTE COUNTY ORPHAN ASYLUM FOR GIRLS

FOUNDED 1927

We do NOT accept:

Coloreds, Indians, Jews, Mexicans, Oriental types, Twins,
Anyone who has or has had Leprosy, Consumption, Missing
Limbs or Harelip.

No Boys. No Sick Children or anyone of a Retarded Nature.

No Girls over the age of twelve.

No Women in the Family Way.

We do not deliver Babies here.

May the Lord bless you all.

Meg



CHAPTER 1

July 1933

When I was first brought here to the Orphan, I used to put a pretend play on in my head. In it, my mama would walk in and say, *Margot! I have returned! I am here to take you home!* I would have her dressed in the yellow outfit she left me in with the red rickrack on the collar, or a snappy slim blue number cut on the bias, her good ruby hair comb fixed to her hair. When I got her dressed up the way I liked with all the things matched perfect, she would lean down and say, *I am so sorry I left you, Meg.*

Now at this part of the story, I know most these girls here would run right into their mama's arms. Say all is forgiven, hug her neck, let's go home. But not in my play. When my mama said this, I liked to yell at her a little first.

Well, well, I liked to say, *you sure been eating good.* And I might add, *I guess there's plenty for you now that you do not have a little girl to look after,* and then I would tell her how it *sure got cold when you were gone* and how *I burned everything that lit* and she was a *Number One Giant Shitpile for a mama* and I had a mind to *find myself a new one.* Around this time was when her begging and pleading would start. She would begin offering me things like a sack of hard candy or new patent leather shoes, a encyclopedia set with no letters missing, oh I went wild with the goods, and when it cost high enough, I would sigh and say, *Fine, I accept your offer.* Then I'd flip that big phony Miss Garnett the finger and me and my mama would walk out the door.

Mama had never left me alone at the house before that week. The most she would let me do by myself was walk the mile to school. And down to the colored Negro Ophelia's house when Mama was at work but she always came to Ophelia's after and toted me home. Carried me in her arms singing "I Can't Give You Anything but Love, Baby," until one day she did not come carry me home.

Course, that was back when I was still only nine. I am eleven now so I do not bother with those old baby plays anymore. My best friend Ava here said at our age we cannot afford to waste time dreaming about what is apt not to happen.

My paper name is Margot but I generally go by Meg. Like I said, I arrived here at the orphanage two birthdays ago. Most folks just call it the Orphan or else the Old Orphan, though I have yet to find where this New Orphan is and believe me I have asked. All it is is a old wood house run by these volunteer ladies in a town called Oxford, which is located up in the top part of Mississippi. They got sixteen of us packed in the place, which is high. I hear it is the hard times. Our numbers will thin come next View Day. That is when folks come look at us and decide do they want to adopt us or not.

Out front of the house, the ladies keep the place fixed up right nice. Azalea bushes, a birdbath lawn ornament I can see when the door is open to the little room they call the vestibule, plant in a pot, that type thing. There is fresh white paint on the inside of the front door, though I have not seen the other side since the day I arrived. They lock us up in here like we are criminals. In the vestibule, there are two clean windows and that big framed sign. If Miss Garnett is not looking, I slip up there and wonder things about that sign until my head starts to hurt.

Such as, who came up with those particular rules in the first place? And is a retarded nature different from your regular ole retard? Mostly what I think

about, though, is that leprosy item. Did some leper orphans show up here, so they had to put it on the sign? And which volunteer answered the door to that unusual call, because most these ladies will hightail it out of here if one of us girls so much as sneezes so they do not give it to their own kids at home. I can just about hear that volunteer lady saying, *You put what you want on that sign, but I will not operate with lepers.* And then another popping her hand on her hip and saying, *Or Oriental types either.* I wonder what those ladies would do if a retard leper Jew walked in the door. That would be some entertainment for me.

To the right of the sign is what is called the Ladies' Lounge. We girls are not allowed in there, but I can see in there too when the door opens. Oh they keep that room nice for their satisfied selves. Plush upholstered things to sit on, a silver coffee urn, flowery curtains on the windows, plus they keep tasty food up in that room, I know, I can smell it.

This up-front area is the more attractive part of the Orphan.

Beyond the vestibule is a long plain hall. Looking down it, a person would not suspect much right off. Along the right side of the hall is the toddler room, where they got some pretty good-looking toys, baby doll with a play crib, rocking horse, a whole shelf of books I would like to look at. But somebody separated the toddlers a few years ago from the big girls, so now they sleep and eat in there in a cute little room. On past that is the baby nursery, which is kept very white and clean. Babies are the choicest type orphan so they tend to go quick. Big girls are not allowed in these rooms either.

When a girl gets to be around age seven or so, things change. First off they make you start wearing a long-sleeved dress with a petticoat under that covers you near neck to toe. You're moved upstairs to sleep in the big girls' room with the scary water stains on the ceiling from a leak in the roof. The squeaky wire cots up there got lumpy cotton-boll mattresses covered in pee stains of yore. And Lord do not even get me started on what they give us solid-food eaters for meals. In the big girl dining room, it is a gray lumpy meal for breakfast, then for lunch and supper, overcooked peas, a corn cob