

# *Sophie and the Rising Sun*

AUGUSTA  
TROBAUGH

A NOVEL

SOPHIE  
AND THE  
RISING SUN

*Augusta Trobaugh*



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## Chapter One

*Miss Anne said:*

Some folks in this town still think I know what really happened to Sophie—leastwise those folks old enough to remember Pearl Harbor and the terrible days that followed.

Why, to this very day—over twenty years later—once in a while, somebody will say to me, “Miss Anne, you can tell me what *really* happened to Sophie, now that it’s been so long.”

But I can’t tell them.

Because I was never sure.

And I guess the reason they ask in the first place is that most of us still care about Sophie and want to know that she’s all right.

To be truthful, I guess everybody in town—leastwise those old enough to remember—always felt a little bit bad for Sophie, how she wasted all her youth and beauty—and to be perfectly



truthful, there was precious little of the latter—taking care of her mama and those two old aunts. Everybody used to say that one day, Sophie would just up and run off and get married. When she was younger, I mean. But she never did. Guess you have to have a young man to do something like that, and I don't think there was anyone who was interested in her.

There was a little talk about a beau, just before the Great War—World War One—but most of those boys never came home again. Boyd and Andrew and Henry and others whose names I can't remember now, so if there was ever someone who was interested in Sophie—and I doubt it—he must have been one of them. It really didn't matter, anyway, because if anyone had come around about Sophie, her mama and the aunts would have nipped that right in the bud. I'm sure of it.

"Nothing lasts," her mama used to say. "So no use in Sophie getting started with it."

Sophie's mama was always like that. Bitter, in general. And about men, in particular. How on earth she ever agreed to marry any man is beyond me. All I can say is that Mr. Willis must have slipped her some elderberry wine or something. Because they only kept company for about a month or so, and the whole time, everybody in town could hear her berating him in a loud voice, right there on her front porch when he came courting. But he just kept on coming. Sat right there in the swing and smiled off into space while she went into tirade after tirade. Maybe she finally wore herself out.

Mr. Willis was quite elderly, and I guess he'd learned plenty of patience. Of course, Sophie's mama was certainly no spring chicken herself, by then, but she hadn't learned anything about



patience. Never did, to tell the truth. But I guess one thing that kept Mr. Willis coming around was that he figured it was his last chance to get married.

So—somehow or other—he got her to the church.

Then he took her off on a grand honeymoon trip to New Orleans for two whole weeks, and when he brought her back, she was with child—we found out later. Only about a week after that, Mr. Willis died in his sleep. Left her a well-off widow with a nice, big house. And he left her Sophie, too, though she didn't realize that right away. And of course, that was certainly some surprise when she found that out. She sent right off to Atlanta for her two old maid sisters—Elsa and Minnie—to come and live with her. And they did.

But goodness, what a time they had of it, especially right at first. Because Sophie's mama must have thought that *they* were going to wait on her hand and foot, and those older sisters must have thought the same thing about *her* waiting on them. Led to an awful lot of fussing and pouting, it did. But eventually, they learned how to get along right well, I guess.

And of course, they were happy about the baby that was coming, so that settled them down a bit. Almost every single evening for months, you could see them sitting together on the porch, crocheting to beat the band—with their heads down and their crochet needles just flashing away. Went at it with a vengeance, they did. Why, by the time that baby was ready to come, they had enough clothes for a whole army of babies! Caps and sacques and booties and sweaters and blankets. But of course, not a single one of them could crochet worth a flip, so the sweaters all had one long sleeve and one short, and the caps



would have fit a watermelon, they were so big. And the blankets came out shaped like triangles, for the most part. Still, they did their best, and I guess their hearts were in the right place.

Well, the baby started coming on a Thursday morning—and it turned out to be the longest labor in the history of Salty Creek. By Friday night, everybody in town could hear the screaming, and around noon on Saturday, she was shrieking, “Shoot me! For God’s sake, somebody shoot me!”

I was hardly more than a child myself. Only twelve or thirteen, and my mama made me stay in the back part of our house so I wouldn’t hear any more than she could help. Wouldn’t even let me sit out on the porch.

The doctor came and went at their house until Saturday afternoon, and after that, he never left until the baby finally arrived, around church-time on Sunday. Folks said that when he came out about an hour later, he looked like he’d been run over by a train, he did. Went straight home, his wife said, drank a fifth of bourbon, and slept for two whole days. Later, he told her he’d never seen anything like it. Just flat out a little baby that didn’t want to be born. “I had to drag it out!” he said. “And God only knows what-all it was hanging on to!”

Sophie’s mama always said the birth ruined her health. And I guess all the hand-wringing and the hollering and the running into each other the elder sisters did must have taken a toll, too. Because they said the birth ruined *their* health as well. So that as soon as Sophie could toddle around and understand when they told her to go get their crocheting for them or another pillow to rest their feet on, or a clean hanky, they had her doing everything for them. All the time. Just like she owed them something.



It must have been hard for Sophie, waiting on them hand and foot from the time she was just a little thing. And growing up under the black little bird-eyes of those women. And none of them young. In a house full of medicine bottles and handkerchiefs and smelling salts. And boredom.

That's why I say that if there was ever a beau for Sophie, they would have nipped that right in the bud. Because they weren't about to give up the one who ran around and waited on them. Besides, Sophie would have told me if there had been someone. I'm sure of it.

So she never did marry. Just took care of those old ladies and grew older and more faded-looking herself, every single year, what with them getting so elderly and so much more demanding and living for such a long time. And Sophie's mama, especially, was always hard to get along with. When she got older, she took to doing some strange things, like collecting dead birds she'd find out in the yard from time to time. Take them right inside the house and lay them out on a shelf in the pantry. Such as that.

She was the first one to pass on, Sophie's mama was, and I always thought somebody ought to have put her on a shelf in the pantry, too—let her see how she liked having that done to her. But of course, they didn't. Then a few years later, Sophie's Aunt Elsa passed on. Her Aunt Minnie was the only one left after that, and she was just as senile as a coot for a long time before she finally passed away. Used to sneak out of the house almost every night and wander around in the front yard in her nightgown, calling and calling for her mama. Can you imagine? Sophie never had a whole night's sleep for all the years that went on, but she didn't complain about it. Not even to me.





Afterward, when they were all gone at last—her Aunt Minnie passing on only a few months after Mr. Oto came to stay in my gardener's cottage—folks thought then maybe Sophie would do a little traveling or something like that. But she didn't. Just went about doing what she'd always done—taking care of the house and tending to her crab traps and painting some pictures down by the river. I guess by then it was too late for much of anything else.

But I'll say this about Sophie: She was a real lady. One of the few left in this whole town, someone who was raised right—whatever other faults her mama and the aunts may have had. So Sophie always came calling on me—and she was the only one who still kept up that fine old tradition.

I was a little bit older, of course, and I'd known Sophie all her life, knew her better than is usual in small towns like this one, where everybody knows everybody else, anyway. Because when I was a young lady—and already being courted by my late husband—Sophie was just a little girl, and even then, I thought she was very special.

Maybe it had something to do with the way I'd always wanted a sister. Someone younger than me to look up to me and share her little secrets with me. Sophie was the closest I had to that. But of course, her mama didn't let her get away very often, so it didn't blossom into a real friendship—like sisters—it could have been. Still, I always thought she was a precious little thing.

I remember one twilight evening when I was sitting in the porch swing, and Sophie came skipping down the road right in front of my house—she couldn't have been more than six or seven—and waved her fingers at me as she went by. Must have



gotten away from her mama for a few minutes. She was wearing a white pinafore and skipping and singing right down the middle of the road, and I thought she looked so pretty that day. And, too, there was something about the way it was, right at dusk, that made me think she looked just like a little white egret, ruffling its feathers this way and that. But if her mama had seen her, she'd have had a fit.

"Keep your skirt down, Sophie!" she would have admonished. "And behave like a *lady!*" Like I said, whatever other faults Sophie's mama had, she certainly raised Sophie to be a real lady.

I don't know why that particular image of Sophie stands out like it does in my mind. But then, we never do know how it's going to be with us when we get older.

Anyway, when she was just a little girl, Sophie used to come over to my house some afternoons, whenever her mama would let her, and she'd play dress-up, draping herself all over with my scarves, and sometimes, I'd let her put some of my face powder on her nose. Other times, she liked just lying across the front of my bed and watching me mending my silk stockings or making some tatted lace for the pillowcases in my hope chest.

"What's a hope chest?" she asked me once. It was a rainy Saturday afternoon, I remember.

"It's where you keep all the things you fix up for when you're a married lady," I told her.

"Is that what you're supposed to hope for? Is that why it's called a hope chest?"

"I think so. And yes, it's what every young lady hopes for."

"Not me," Sophie said in a voice strong with that particular kind of certainty children have.



"Yes—you, too," I assured her, enjoying the little proclamation she had made. And her absolute confidence in it.

"No," she insisted. "'Cause Mama wouldn't let me."

"She would if you were a grown-up young lady," I explained, and then I amended that: "She *will* when you're a grown-up young lady."

"I don't think so," Sophie said matter-of-factly.

I was really quite amused at her earnestness about it. As I said, she was such a precious little girl. Other folks may have thought that she was plain-looking, but I always thought it was just that she'd never had a chance to be free. Or happy, maybe.

By the time Sophie was a young lady, I was already married and had a home of my own—this house, built by my late husband's grandfather, the one who started this whole town. And I think that one of the reasons Sophie particularly liked calling on me was because she enjoyed being with someone who really had a life of her own, if you know what I mean. Not just living right in the same house where she was born, like she did. Years later, after my husband passed on and when all Sophie's old ladies were gone at last, she just kept on coming to call on me anyway.

Such a *lady*, she was. That's why I don't . . . Well, I'm not sure what happened. About two years after Mr. Oto first came to work for me, it was, if I'm remembering it right. Because after all, it was such a long time ago.

Right around Halloween, and nobody knew what was coming to us in that terrible December.

## Chapter Two

*At the front walkway of Miss Anne's house,* Mr. Oto, her "Chinese" gardener—as everyone called him, if they mentioned him at all—weeded the border plants quietly and methodically near the street, glancing up from time to time, as he watched for Sophie to pass by on the sidewalk. His glance at her from beneath the brim of his straw hat would be so judicious and so brief, no one could have told that he noticed her at all.

And besides, even though no one knew exactly how old he was, he seemed to display all the mannerisms of an older man: His movements were almost always leisurely and slow, his speech—when he spoke at all—measured and soft, as if the sound of his own voice might startle him. So certainly, he was not a man anyone would expect to notice a lady. But notice her, he always did. And that brief glimpse was all he ever expected



to have, for after all, she was a real lady—almost old enough then to be called one of the town's matrons. And he was only a gardener. And poor. And finally, not even of her race.

The one and only time he had called himself to her attention in any way was the first time he ever saw her, only a few days after he moved into the cottage behind the back wall of Miss Anne's garden. One of the first jobs she gave him was replacing the broken faucet in the backyard, and so she sent him to the hardware store down the street to buy a new spigot.

As it happened, Sophie was in the hardware store that same day, looking over a display of seed packets near the front door. When Mr. Oto saw her for the first time, she was holding a packet of yellow zinnia seeds in one hand and a packet of sunrise-pink petunia seeds in the other and tilting her head a little as she tried to decide between them. Mr. Oto had never seen such a lovely lady before, and he came very close to staring at her—could not seem to tear his eyes away from the impeccable white lace collar on the dark blue dress and the rich, chestnut-brown hair that was only lightly touched with gray on the deep waves that framed her face. And the deep, mature eyes that were an incredible shade of green—as dark as the leaves of oleander trees. Finally, he cast his eyes down, where they belonged, and as if in a dream, he passed by her and went to find the clerk.

By the time the new spigot was in his hand, Mr. Oto had regained his composure—or so he believed. Because when he turned to leave, he had no intention whatsoever of saying one word to the beautiful lady who was still studying the seed packets. But as he passed so near her on his way out, he watched in horror as his hand came forward with a mind of its own, and his



thick, soil-stained finger lightly tapped the packet of pink petunia seeds in her hand.

"Beautiful," he murmured, not knowing if he was speaking of the flowers at all.

Of course, he startled her, even as he startled himself with such an unintentional gesture, so that the first time her eyes turned fully on him, they were filled with offended surprise, and her cheeks instantly flamed into a more vibrant pink than the petunias on the packet. Mr. Oto's own face began to burn at the realization of what he had done, so that just as abruptly as he had intruded upon her privacy, he bowed deeply before her.

"Please excuse me," he whispered, and scurried from the store without glancing her way again.

On his way back to Miss Anne's house, he chastised himself mercilessly. How *dare* he presume to speak to her? After all, he was no impetuous boy—even though he was still young enough for his blood to flow hot in his veins on rare occasions. But he was, after all, mature, and with over fifty years of discipline in him. So there was no excuse for it.

But for days afterward, he found it impossible not to think about her and wonder why she had no husband—as he knew by the absence of a ring on her hand. How could the men of the town, those who were worthy of her—the bankers and the managers and the quiet gentlemen—fail to see the beauty of a face that reflected mature wisdom and gentleness? Why had they never seen it! For she was definitely a spinster, not a widow. He knew that because of the faint aura of expectancy that still clung to her.

In those first few days, he thought about her so often that he even found himself fantasizing about what could be possible if



he were not so poor and so old and if only she had come into his life when he had been young and straight. And if only he were wealthy.

*"Good morning, my dear Miss Sophie,"* he would have said, standing tall and strong in front of the gates of his vast estate, wearing a beautiful, embroidery-encrusted coat and bowing low before her. *"I hope this day sees you in excellent health."*

The English would flow softly and easily from his mouth when, in truth (although his English was exceptionally good), it was not the language of his childhood in his father's house, so he had never felt completely comfortable with it. But in his daydream, English was completely easy and natural for him—because it was Sophie's language.

*"Good morning, my dear Mr. Oto,"* Sophie would have answered in a voice softened around the edges in the way of Southerners, and then, to his delight, she would have blushed and fluttered a little—prettily—walking toward him the whole time and with the soft folds of her summer dress flowing around her.

But those images set his heart to thudding ominously and caught and held his breath against the thuds, so that finally, he disciplined himself against feelings that had come far too late in his life and for a lady who would have been completely unattainable anyway. So that never again in those years since he first saw her had he spoken to her or tipped his hat or called her attention to him in any way.

The only thing he allowed was that he weeded Miss Anne's front walkway every weekday morning, when Sophie was likely to pass by, but even then, when she was so near, he tended the



plants as if they were the only important things in the world—working his thick fingers into the soil around them and waiting to take the brief glance at Sophie that was all he would ever have. So that particular October morning, as usual, he weeded and waited and wondered what she would be wearing and where she would be going.

Sometimes, she wore a wide-brimmed hat with tiny silk flowers on it and a voile dress—that was usually on Tuesdays, when she went to the book discussion meeting at the library. Other mornings, she wore baggy men's coveralls—even then, somehow managing to convey an impression of complete elegance—and carried a crab trap. That's when she was on her way to tend the traps she set in the creek that ran through the marsh at the edge of town. At those times, he envied even the crabs she would reach in to grasp, take out of the trap, and declaw on the spot.

On Wednesdays, she wore the same dark blue dress she had been wearing that infamous morning in the hardware store—but with a variety of tatted or crocheted collars, all pristine and immaculate. That's when she came calling on Miss Anne, opening the gate and coming right up the walkway, her feet passing—*incredibly!*—within inches of his busy hands, and the delicate wake of her cologne wafting over him where he knelt, weak-kneed, among the marigolds. The first few times she came into the yard like that, he was terrified that she would remember him as the one whose rude behavior had so deeply offended her, but if she remembered, she never gave the least indication of it. In fact, she never looked his way at all.

On this custom of "calling," Mr. Oto had once asked





Matilda, who came to Miss Anne's house once a week to clean and do the laundry.

"What do you mean?" Matilda demanded of him, suspiciously, when he asked her about it. She was ironing a damask tablecloth and, as usual, thumping the heavy iron down upon the cloth hard enough to make the ironing board shudder on its wooden legs.

He was hesitant to continue, for Matilda's open contempt frightened him. After all, he had heard her refer to him as that "*ugly, dried-up, yellow foreigner.*"

"Please . . ." He pressed forward with it, in spite of Matilda's scowl. "Why do ladies come here sometimes?" He was trying to keep the question very broad, although he knew and Matilda knew also, that no other ladies from the town ever came to call on Miss Anne.

Matilda slammed down the iron against the board once again, only harder than ever, and turned to face him, threatening and ominous.

"Folks just come calling," Matilda spat out the words at him, as if they explained everything. "Don't you know nothing at all about good manners?"

And because he didn't know how to answer her question, he said nothing more.

Other times—when Sophie wasn't coming to call—she wore sandals and a voluminous paint-stained blue duster and carried an easel under her arm and a paint-spattered wooden case from which he could hear the rattle of brushes. That's when he knew that she was going to paint watercolor pictures at the river.