

CHAPTER 1



I woke up in a billowing pile of fresh-cut hay, wrapped in its miraculous smells—of buttercups, of those miniature fuzzy wild daisies, of grasshoppers. Not the big, prickly legged locusts that spit tobacco juice but the sweet little sliver of green grasshoppers that look like tiny blades of grass. No needles of dried-up, dead-yellow straw sticking and tickling either. Soft, like sleeping on a little mountain of emerald-colored lace.

So very different from the harsh coal-stink and hard wooden planks of the railcars Daddy had had

us hopping the previous weeks.

I snuggled deeper into the green, trying to hang on to its feel of happy, drowsy sunshine, lulled by the slow, steady breathing of horses slumbering beneath the hayloft where I was lying with my little sister and father. A sound I had grown up on and now ached for, ever since the stock market crashed and Daddy had had to sell off most every scrap of our previous life, including Mama's mare and my Dandy Boy. How I missed that fun-loving, good-natured pony. He would have lain down right next to me, content in this sweet, fresh hay.

I rolled over and put a protective arm on Vivian, wondering if she missed Dandy, too. She squirmed against my hug. Viv's got to be the world's most contrary eight-year-old, I swear. It would be a task to keep her quiet when she woke. And we'd need to be. Given how Daddy had slipped us into the barn at night, guided only by moonbeams spilling through the enormous open doors of the stable's center aisle, we clearly were supposed to be hiding.

I was growing more accustomed to our vagabond life—well, trying to be. We'd bedded down

in so many barns now, just for the night, leaving before their owners got up in the morning, on our way to wherever Daddy thought he could find work. But this felt different—he'd brought us to this stable specifically. Why, I didn't know.

The hard fact was each day and what it might hold had become a total mystery for the past two years since Daddy's bank had closed and laid him off. Like so many Americans since the Great Depression fell on us like a plague, he'd tried to make do with odd jobs. But a man who'd spent his adult life in three-piece suits and bow ties overseeing bank accounts for Richmond's old society didn't easily transition to being a handyman or tobacco picker. To say Daddy didn't know his way around a hammer or a hoe is what Mama would have called the understatement of the century.

Mama. What would Mama say to Daddy to get him out of the flask of outlawed whiskey he carried with him now? Stuff made from God knows what in some yokel's back woodshed. It wasn't Daddy's fault that everyone's money evaporated like a small puddle in the noonday sun. But

some days I just wanted to scream at him to be the daddy he used to be. The least he could do is keep his head straight.

I opened my eyes. Dawn was seeping into the barn in warm ribbons of rose light. I followed its glow. Directly above me, up in the eaves, was a barn swallow's nest, a deep balcony sculpted of mud and sticks. I hadn't spotted that wonderment in the night's darkness. As I marveled, its maker wriggled out of her cleverly daubed nest, warbled a good morning at me, and, in a flash of cobalt blue and cinnamon, dove and swooped through the open doors, disappearing into the bright-gold sunshine.

I actually heard air brushing along the swallow's feathers as she skated right by me in such a friendly hello. That gorgeous bird coming so close—like she was making sure I was all right—had to be a good omen. Had to be. Mama always read all sorts of meaning into birds. Maybe we could stay put for a while. For a few days anyway. *Please, Daddy.*

Below, the horses shuffled and snorted, waking

up as well, giving little expectant nickers, watchful for their breakfast. Someone would be coming to feed them soon. My grip on Viv tightened, anticipating having to put a hand over her mouth just as—in the clockwork that is a good barn—someone entered whistling softly. I held my breath. It'd break my heart to be discovered and chased away like a stray dog from this heavenly place.

Mercifully, Viv stayed asleep through the scoop and dump of grain into seven feed tubs and the answering chorus of methodical munching.

The scent of molasses drifted up to me. Sweet feed! Oat, corn, and barley grain mixed and moistened with thick, delicious molasses. I almost drooled remembering the taste of pancakes covered with that heavy dark brown syrup.

“Enjoy, children,” a male voice crooned to the horses. “Be back in a few to turn y'all out.” Footsteps faded away.

“Someone's coming back soon,” I whispered in Viv's ear. “Stay quiet.”

She kicked out at me. “Let me sleep, Bea. I'm so tired.”

“You do that.” I pulled her sweater up tighter around her and patted her shoulder before sitting up to stretch. My own stomach was growling with hunger that would have rattled me out of slumber. I was amazed hers wasn’t as well.

But the journey had been an exhausting one—clambering into a freight car just outside Norfolk. Hiding for hours in smelly darkness with an old gentleman and his frightened wife, who’d also become unlikely, Wall Street-made nomads. *Clank-clank, clank-clank*, the careless lurching of a delivery train not worried about discomforting passengers since there were no paid ones. Passing by Manassas and climbing out at The Plains, then walking, hitching, walking, hitching until we arrived here around midnight.

Wherever here was. Somewhere a little north of a place called Middleburg. Dropped off on the side of a dirt road by a man who gave us a lift in what he called his Hoover-cart—a car stripped down to its chassis because he couldn’t afford gas, pulled by a pair of thoroughbreds obviously unused to the task. We’d staggered up a brutally long lane

past a sign that read: Galashiels Glen. Daddy had had to carry Vivian at that point.

Sleep would do her good.

Better wake Daddy, though, before the stable hand returned, since he did snort and snore in his sleep. And lately Daddy tended to groan as he woke, holding his head. Sometimes he even retched, spontaneous with opening his eyes, as if poison had been percolating in him all through the night and had just reached the boiling point. Any of which would be a dead giveaway to someone below. I looked over to where Daddy had bedded.

I didn't see him.

He'd probably gone outside to relieve himself. Daddy did that plenty when we were on the move. Or maybe he'd burrowed down deep into the cloud-bank of hay like I had. I stood to better see into his corner. "Daddy? You awake?" I whispered.

Nothing.

"Daddy, where are you?" I called quietly.

No answer.

Vivian flopped and muttered, "Shhh. Don't wanna get up."

Kneeling, I put my hand on her once again to silence her. Where *was* Daddy? I turned to look toward the ladder, hoping to see him coming back up it. A creepy-crawly anxiety was starting to swarm me.

That's when I realized Daddy's knapsack was missing.

Then I spotted one of his monogrammed handkerchiefs, knotted tight into a little bundle, to hold and protect something. Placed atop my small suitcase—so it would be the first thing I saw. My hands started trembling so much I couldn't untie the knot. I finally tore at the handkerchief with my teeth to loosen it, tasting a tiny leftover hint of bleach from long ago and fighting back an anxious sob.

Inside was a short note scrawled with a dull pencil nub, making it all thick and smeared. The handwriting looked shaky. Not Daddy's bank-officer penmanship at all.

*My darling Beatrice and Vivian, the lady
who owns this estate—a Mrs. Scott—is the*

mother of your mama's roommate at Sweet Briar College. They were good friends once. Her roommate's name is Marjorie. Ask for her at the house. Tell her you are Cora's girls. I'm sure she or her mother will take you in and take good care of you, the way I cannot now. Your mama always said they had good hearts.

I read his words again, convinced I'd skimmed them wrong. And again. And again. My vision getting blurrier each time. Daddy couldn't mean it. He couldn't. But at the bottom, he'd scratched out ~~Forgive me~~ and replaced it with *I do this because I love you.*

Daddy had left us. Dumped us, like unwanted kittens by the side of a highway with the hope a passing stranger would take pity on them.

How could he do this?

Folded inside the scrap of paper were the only items of Mama's he'd been able to keep: a beautifully etched gold locket and her wedding ring. And a small photograph of the four of us when

Vivian was a baby, tucked into an envelope, its silver frame long sold.

I retched—dry-heaving over that beautiful bed of hay, ruining my corner of it with spittle.

Like father like daughter, I guess.