



CHAPTER 2



A few days later, I closed my book and ran my hand over its cover drawing of Mary Poppins with her parrot-head umbrella. Wouldn't it just be the best to be able to slide *up* a banister like she does? I'd read the book when I was younger, sure, but I kept rereading it because I was starting to catch some of the adult humor tucked into its lines. My cousin Belle—who owns most every good book there is, I think—told me that a story can speak to a soul different ways at different times, getting better with every reading.

I also loved the book's London scenes. The city sounds so beautiful and magical. I hope to see it with my very own eyes someday—if London survives Hitler's Luftwaffe dumping bombs on it night after night.

“What's a cockney?” I asked aloud.

We were in the middle of our nightly library hour—as Mama called it—after dinner, after listening to the radio, when we all settled into different chairs, haloed by lamplight, and dove into worlds conjured by words. When I asked my question, Mama just nestled deeper into her faded chintz armchair, barely reacting—like she'd been dangling her feet in the water and gotten tickled by a minnow passing by—she was that submerged in her book.

I repeated my question to Daddy.

Without looking up from his weekly mariner newspaper, *The Pilot*, he answered, “Someone from London's East End.”

“Have you known any?”

“Yup. Used to sail with a bunch of them when I was still crossing the Atlantic on freights, before

starting to tug. And a couple during my war.” Daddy was referring to the time he served in the navy during what used to be called the Great War—the war to end all wars supposedly—and just recently been branded World War I by *Time* magazine. Daddy had gone straight from high school to crewing a merchant ship to support his widowed mother and siblings when his own father’s boat was lost in a storm—like many Tidewater watermen do. So when the Germans, Brits, and French tried to annihilate each other that go-round, he was all prepped and ready to step in and help our navy.

Just like Joe was doing now, following in Daddy’s wake, twenty-three years later.

“Really?” I asked.

Daddy nodded and turned a page. “That’s the one thing I do miss about those transatlantic voyages—meeting ‘blokes,’” he smiled, using an odd accent, “from all over the world.”

“What’s London like?” I asked, awed.

“You know, I never made it there. Was coming in and out of Liverpool.” He snapped his paper

to make the newsprint pages stand up straight. “Don’t that beat all,” he muttered.

“What, Daddy?”

He kept reading and then snort-laughed. “Ruthie, listen to this.”

Mama didn’t budge. Cousin Belle had just lent her a new book titled *Rebecca*, and clearly it was a page-turner.

“Go ahead, Daddy, I’m listening,” I said.

Butler stirred in his chair. “Me too.”

“There’s a story in here about a dozen survivors of a Nazi sub attack. Their cargo ship was hit because they’d been dimwitted enough to answer what they thought was another American ship flashing ‘P’ at them—you know, ‘show your lights.’ Thinking they were about to run into the other ship in the dark, they did. It was the Jerries, of course. Boom! Down that boat went.

“The guys drifted in a lifeboat for ten days, surviving on a biscuit a day before the coast guard found them. Guess where they got the supplies? The U-boat actually surfaced and tossed the crackers down to them. That German submarine

captain even asked how the Dodgers were doing. A Kraut baseball fan! He'd spent his childhood in Brooklyn with his parents before returning to Germany. Right before that Nazi closed the hatch to order his crew to submerge and go after more Americans, he shouted, 'Give my best to President Roosevelt! I met him when I was a little boy.'" Daddy shook his head and folded his paper. "The world's gone all catawampus, that's for sure. But maybe some of these Germans aren't demons."

It was then Daddy noticed what my brother was reading—*Mutiny on the Bounty*. "Good grief, son! Isn't that a story about sailors setting their captain adrift in a rowboat on the high seas? Maybe it's a good thing you're not a member of my crew!"

The sound of a pickup truck making its way along our lane saved Butler from Daddy's teasing. A door slammed, and we could hear Katie calling, "Night! See y'all tomorrow."

At that, Mama looked up. Carefully marking her place with the little wooden swan bookmark Butler had whittled for her, she murmured,

“Katherine’s home early. I hope everything is all right.”

Sweeping into the parlor, my big sister flung the needlepointed clutch Mama had lent her onto the piano stool, before flopping into an armchair. She hoisted her legs over its frayed arm and swung them furiously.

Daddy laughed good-naturedly at her drama. “Something wrong, Katydid?”

“I should say so!” She flipped her chestnut curls off her shoulder. (How I wish I’d also gotten Mama’s thick, glossy, wavy hair. Mine is like Daddy’s, dishwater blond and straight. No matter how Katie has fussed over it with a curling iron trying to help me out with big-sister pity, it falls back to being a dull sheet of hay.)

Katie yanked off a pin she’d been awarded by the Red Cross for her regular attendance at its dances for trainees. Boys were being brought in to the Tidewater by the thousands, arriving by train at the dozen-plus military posts around Richmond, Norfolk, and Newport News. No one knew when the new soldiers and airmen would

be ready to ship out through Hampton Roads to begin the fight against Hitler. In the meantime, the army needed to keep them occupied during off-duty hours. Carefully monitored dances with big bands and local girls seemed the solution on the weekends.

Katie took a deep breath, let it out in a long, long sigh, and said, “I was asked to leave the dance.”

Everyone sat up.

“Whatever for?” asked Mama.

“I got into an argument with a recruit who was getting a little too friendly with Emma.”

“They . . . they asked you to leave? Not the soldier?” Mama was appalled.

Katie smirked, rolled her eyes, and gave Mama a look to say: Isn’t that the way of things?

Daddy was furious. “They booted my little girl because of some pushy, hot-to-trot jackass?” He stood. “What’s the name of the stuck-up grand dame who did that, Katydid? I’m going to give her what for.”

Katie grinned, clearly gratified by Daddy’s

outrage. “I believe they asked me to leave because,” she paused, trying unsuccessfully to mask her amusement, “I might have . . . maybe . . . kicked him in the shins.” She shrugged, holding up her hands in mock apology. “And golly, I feel ever so bad. The poor boy seemed to limp a little afterward.”

Daddy doubled over laughing.

“That soldier should count his lucky stars that he survived the fray,” Butler joked. “I’ve been on the other end of an argument with my big sis, and it isn’t a safe place.”

Katie smiled and blew him a kiss.

“Well, I don’t think Katie should go back to those dances if the matrons aren’t controlling the situation better, do you, Russell?” Mama said.

“Oh, Mama, I’m not going back.” Katie turned serious. “Emma neither. I didn’t know it, but they’ve actually been keeping records on us—the girls. *Our* behavior.”

“I’m sure there’s a string of gold stars by your name,” Butler said. “Just like you always had at school.”

She smiled fondly at him. “You always think the best of everyone, Butty. Nope. Just the opposite. Evidently I already had several marks against me—for refusing to dance with some guys and similar”—she paused to make quotation marks in the air—“‘infractions.’ Mrs. Dawson said . . .” Katie drew herself up and adopted the most ridiculous, self-impressed, high-society Virginia drawl. “‘We’ve all had an eye on you, Miss Brookes, for quite a while. Yes, quite a while, I say. ALL of us.’”

“What?” Mama whispered at the same time Daddy bellowed, “WHAT?”

Katie kept reciting. “‘We’ve tried to excuse your behavior out of respect for your lovely mother and her family. But we have made note, yes, indeed we have, made note I say, many of them in fact, about your less than agreeable behavior.’”

Mama turned red. “That’s outrageous!”

I saw Katie hesitate just the littlest bit and smile to herself before she said the next thing. I’d seen that look before. Katie wanted something from Mama, and she’d used Mrs. Dawson’s patronizing speech to prime the pump. “So, Mama, as you can

see, I can't possibly go back to a place where I'm so . . . so," she put her hand atop her heart, "so . . . dishonored . . . so . . . so reviled." She paused with a pretty pout of indignation.

What was she up to, I wondered.

It only took about ten seconds to find out.

"And," Katie drew out the word, "I wouldn't want to anyway. I want to do more than just dancing with boys to keep them out of trouble on a Saturday." She paused again to make sure Mama and Daddy were listening carefully and then blurted out, "The Virginia Mechanics Institute is going to let girls take welding courses, starting next week."

Mama's mouth popped open.

Katie talked fast now, her words tumbling along like rapids. "Given those Nazis out there in the waves—watching, waiting, gunning for our boys—we need replacement boats built fast. The Newport News Shipbuilding Company is going to start spitting out a new ship design called the Liberty Boat. They can be welded together—not riveted—which means they can build a ship in a

week as long as the company runs twenty-four hours in shifts. Because most men are going to be in the fighting forces, they'll be hiring women." She got out of her chair and knelt beside Mama's. "Please say yes."

"But . . . but . . ." Mama was flummoxed.

Daddy took up the slack. "There's talk of rationing gas soon, Katie. We won't have enough for you to drive our pickup there and back every day."

Katie had her answer for that ready. "Why, that won't matter a bit, Daddy. Emma and her sister have already rented a room in Newport News. A really nice widow they know is turning her big old brick home into a boarding house for girls. I can share the room with them. Emma's mama and daddy have given her permission. And you've always trusted their opinion. I'll catch the trolley that stops just a block away and then ride it straight to the dry docks. All safe and sound. Emma and I will keep watch over each other."

She put her hand on Mama's knee and lowered her voice. "Please, Mama. It'll be like the Barbizon Hotel in New York City that you've always told me

you wanted to go live in and work at a publishing house. You know, back before Daddy. I can't just sit by, Mama, on backwaters during this fight—as much as I love home. I want to make a difference. You . . . you would, too, if you were me.”

Mama reached out and stroked Katie's hair, thinking.

Daddy cleared his throat. I don't think he liked hearing about the Barbizon. “That'll leave your mama shorthanded when I'm on a run, Katydid,” he said quietly.

I wasn't liking this conversation at all. I could see all manner of storm clouds drifting onto Mama's face. But this time I was more concerned with the ripples of this situation on me. The three of us—Katie, Butler, and I had been like the *Susan Constant*, *Godspeed*, and *Discovery*, the three little ships that brought the first settlers to Jamestown. We'd always sailed together. Plus, Katie and I had shared a bed and room all my life. Didn't she need to ask me about leaving, too? Especially with Butler going off to college in the fall. Was everything about our family going to change?

I glanced at Butler. He was frowning slightly, too.

I looked back at Katie. Her lively, freckled face was flushed with frustration. She caught my eye—the plea in hers clear.

Oh, all right, I thought. Just because I was the littlest didn't mean I couldn't do my part to help my siblings do theirs. Maybe if I did, everyone would stop thinking of me as a baby. Picking up Katie's chores might also mean I'd get some of the family's water duties instead of always being land-locked, gathering eggs and throwing slop at the hogs. That would mean more time with Butler this spring and summer, out around the oyster reefs, like I'd always craved. "I can take over Katie's chores," I announced.

Katie's return smile was pure sunshine.

For once Butler followed in my wake rather than the other way round. "She can be my first mate," he joined in. "Louisa's right handy with the sail, Daddy." He winked at me before continuing. "When she follows instructions."

“And I’ll try to come home on the weekends to help, Daddy,” Katie added.

Butler stood and tugged gently on my ponytail. “Wait until you take the rudder out there on the waters, little sis. You’ll feel such . . .” He paused, reflecting. “Such freedom. There are such worlds out there.” He closed his eyes—the telltale sign of his gathering his thoughts like a preacherman trying to find the spirit. After a moment he murmured, “Walt Whitman talks about . . . oh . . . hmm . . . the *different colors, pale gray and green, purple, white, and gold, the play of light through the water.*”

We all hushed for a moment, absorbing his poetic sermonizing. Butler’s recitations elevated our daily life from grunt work and wearily counting the catch in a bushel basket, calculating its price, to a moment of beauty that made my heart skip a bit, like a stone thrown over still water.

“Okay, okay.” Daddy held up his hands in surrender. “Your mama and I can’t fight all three of you, can we, Ruthie?” But he ended by pointing

his finger at Butler and me, adding, “Just make sure you bring back some oysters while you spout verse, all right?”

“Yes, sir!” Butler and I said together.

I could hardly wait.