

A slow, painful burn flared in the pit of my stomach and tears threatened to fall. I'd had questions my whole life. Why was I so different from my siblings? Where did I get my artistic talent? Why did my father hate me so? I was sure if I met my grandmother, she could fill in the gaps. Long afternoons chatting with her, getting to know the woman who had always been a mystery, might not happen. She was on her deathbed. *You got here just in time.* If only I had set out earlier, maybe my curiosity would be quelled. At best, I'd get a chance to say goodbye.

"Helen, my wife, your aunt, has been doing all she can to provide comfort to Gramma. That's what the children call her. You'll meet them. We have two daughters—Cora, who's six, and Belle, who's three. To look at them, you'd think they were twins."

"I'm excited to meet everyone."

"They'll be surprised, most definitely."

"I'm sorry I didn't send a letter telling you of my arrival. I left Philadelphia rather suddenly."

"Is that so?"

There was something in Charles's warm countenance and strong spirit that made me trust him.

"My father and I had an argument and he threw me out. It was a blessing, really. I planned to visit. I'd always wanted to know more about my grandmother and my father's family. I only wish my leaving hadn't been so fraught with anger. My father said some hateful things."

"I can imagine."

"Do you know him?" I laid my hand on his arm and pulled him to a stop. "Have you met him?"

"Only once, before Helen and I were married."

“Was it here? When was this?”

“Calvin came to see your grandmother about her will. She’d let him know, along with your Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Sarah—surely you know your father’s siblings?”

“I do. What did Gramma tell them?”

“She was leaving the farm to Helen and her brother, Robert. Cut the Whitman children out of her will.”

“But why?”

“That, my dear, is not my story to tell.”

We continued down the lane, gravel crunching under our boots, without another word. My grandmother was dying, so would I ever learn the secrets my father had been keeping all these years? Would Helen tell me? Did she know? Maybe I was expecting too much too soon from my newly discovered family. Maybe with time—and trust—they would tell me all I wanted to know.

We stepped up onto the wooden front porch and I thought for sure my knees would give out. Exhaustion, hunger, and fear made the blood drain from my limbs and I worried I might not make it through the door. Charles must have sensed my frailty, for he wrapped a supportive hand around my arm and opened the door. The smell of onions and beef cooking over a hot fire wafted from inside as two redheaded bookends met us inside the door.

“Daddy!” the smaller girl said.

“Who is this, Daddy?” said the other child, whose red curly hair and freckles matched her sister’s identically. In fact, they looked like small replicas of me.

“Where’s your mother?” Charles asked, guiding me to a wooden chair at the kitchen table. “Go get her, girls, please.” The little girls cast a quick glance over their shoulders and scurried out of the room calling, “Mother!”

“Can I get you a glass of water, Laurel?” He pulled a clear goblet from the shelf without waiting for my reply and filled it from a large pitcher. “Here you are. Drink it slowly.”

I sipped the cool, fresh water and was instantly better. Although I was tired from the long trip, my faintness was more from the emotional toll of meeting my new family and the knowledge that my grandmother was dying.

“Charles, dear…” A tall woman, dressed in a deep blue print dress, entered the kitchen, concern etched on her freckled face. Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun, but tendrils wisped around her face, confirming the same red curls as mine. This must be Helen. We could’ve been twins.

“Hello,” she said, coming closer to me. Her brows were arched in surprise. Perhaps she, too, had noticed the resemblance between us. “I’m Helen. And you are?”

“This is Calvin’s daughter, Laurel. She’s come to see Gramma.” Charles had stepped in to answer, perhaps sensing my inability to speak. Seeing my reflection in the flesh took my breath away.

“Calvin’s?” Helen drew up short, even took a step back with the shock, and then pulled back her shoulders. She forced a kind smile on her lips and nodded slightly. “Laurel, it’s so nice to meet you.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, as well, Helen,” I croaked, overcome with emotion from seeing people who actually looked like me. Before I could stop them, I broke down in tears and dropped my head to the table. My sobs came out in great, uncontrollable hiccups. An arm wrapped

around my shoulders and I could tell from the scent of lavender that it was Helen, trying to calm my outburst.

“There, there. It will be okay. Take your time, Laurel.”

She pulled my shoulders around to face her and held me in a strong embrace as I cried into the shirtwaist of her dress. Her kind hands rubbed circles on my back as if I were a child, and the gesture calmed my emotions. Slowly, my sobs subsided and I eased out of Helen’s arms. She pressed a handkerchief into my hand and I blew like a geyser. The tears slowed to a trickle and with a gulp of water, my throat opened enough for me to talk.

“I’m so embarrassed,” I said between sips. “I didn’t mean to break down like that. It’s just—”

“You’ve come a long way,” she said, handing me a fresh handkerchief.

“Yes, I’ve been on the road three days.”