

Chapter One

My mother was an unmarried mother, fallen woman, they called her back in Princeton, Missouri. They called her that and a lot worse names, most of which I didn't understand at the time, thank goodness. It wasn't just that Mama made one mistake—me—but I had a little brother, Will Henry, and neither of us had a father that we knew about. Will Henry was seven years younger than me, and you'd think I'd remember a man being around the house about that time to account for my brother's appearance, but I didn't. I used to wonder if Mama had somehow gotten caught in the great war just passed or if my father had fought in that war. For much of my growing-up years, Mama never told us if we had the same father or not. When either of us asked, Mama became flustered and impatient and usually just said, "I don't want to talk about it." There would be tears in her eyes that made me feel guilty and cruel, so I would abandon the subject.

But Mama's status caused both of us a lot of grief. I can still remember trips to the store for whatever small bit of staples Mama could afford. Other kids would tease, "Where's your father?" "Ain't you heard? She ain't got none." "You know what that makes her mama." I never did learn to ignore those taunts. I'd turn bright red and feel myself tense up as I headed for home instead of completing my errand. Sometimes Mama sent me to collect ironing. Taking in ironing was one way she made a little money for us, and I can still see her heating that sad iron over the stove, then struggling to press its weight down just right on some sheer and wonderful dress that belonged to a rich lady in town.

We lived in a two-room wooden shack, two rooms only because Mama hung a frayed blanket kind of in the middle to separate the cooking area from the sleeping area, and we three slept in the same bed, all the time until I left home at the age of fourteen. But that's getting ahead of my story.

Mama also took in sewing, and that's how I met the Canary family. One day I had to go with Mama to fit a dress on Mary Jane, the daughter, who was just about my age. Will Henry was a toddler then, and Mama left him with someone else; heaven only knows at this point who it might have been. But she dressed me up the best she could, even ironing my patched cotton dress, and taking great care with her own appearance, wearing a worn flannel dress in subdued gray. She had cleverly redone it to hide the worst spots and had even added a small white ruffle at the neck. If you didn't look too closely, she seemed as well dressed as the next grand lady.

"Least the patches are neat, Mattie. We want them to know that I sew a fine seam and that I have some taste in clothes, don't we?"

"Yes, Mama." I was always ready to agree with her when Mama was happy, like she was that day.

"La, child, this may be the beginning of a better life for us. The Canarys may take a liking to my work and maybe to you, and that would . . . well, it might make things easier." She laughed and tied her bonnet in a flourishing bow. Being less than ten, I believed Mama that it could all be true. I hadn't yet learned to be skeptical about Mama's new beginnings and search for my own.

We were both in high spirits as we set out. Mama was still a beautiful woman, with pale brown hair and high cheekbones that maybe came from a not too remote Indian ancestor, but she was beginning already to look tired and worn out. I guess she must have been near thirty then. Still, tired or not, she drew looks as we walked down the dirt road and crossed the tracks to the "right" side of town.

On the other hand, I must have resembled my unknown father, or at the least that Indian ancestor, for I had none of Mama's prettiness. Tall for my age and skinny, I was an awkward, angular child with coarse dark hair which I wore pulled back so that it emphasized my high cheekbones and dark eyes. I used to dream about that unknown Indian in the family background and imagine that my Indian looks were mysterious.

Little kids didn't tease me when I was with Mama, but they were only slightly more discreet about their curiosity. I saw them pointing and staring, but there was no way I could run and hide, so I marched right along beside Mama, wishing the earth would open and swallow me.

“Isn’t it a grand day, Mattie?”

“Yes, Mama, it sure is.”

“What would you most like to do today?”

“Well, maybe mend that doll of mine . . .”

“Oh, fiddle, Mattie, let your imagination go. Choose something that we probably can’t do.”

I didn’t hesitate at all. “I’d like to hitch up a horse and buggy and leave here . . . forever!”

Mama looked alarmed. “Mattie, why? This is our home now.”

“Now? Wasn’t it always?”

“Ever since you can remember, baby. But not always for me.” She had a wistful look on her face, and I wondered again about Mama, where she had come from, who her own mama was and all those questions she never would answer. In a way, I was cut off from my own roots, for we had no relatives in Princeton, Missouri, not even any friends. Somewhere, I guessed, Mama had a family, but there was no contact between them, and if it bothered Mama, she rarely let on.
rpt from Mattie