

CHAPTER 1

It's funny how years can go by as steady as telephone poles along a highway, with nothing but the bits and pieces of everyday life, and then, all of a sudden, a different kind of year will pop itself up and change everything. Topsy-turvy is what Pa would have called it. A topsy-turvy year.

I guess he'd had a couple of topsy-turvy years when he was a young man. He liked to talk about them—the year he was working in San Francisco and there was an earthquake that shook the city to pieces and left my dad running for a place as far away from mountains as he could find. Then there was the year before he and Ma got married when a twister carried away the house he was building for them—turned it into matchsticks that were left in a heap in the middle of Bentley's field three miles away.

But for me, up until the time that Pa died, life had been the bits-and-pieces, ordinary, everyday kind. Doing farm chores. Going to school. Hoeing the garden and swimming in Garvy's water hole in summer, skating on Oxbow Creek or sledding down Sprucetop Hill in winter. Learning some words of a play or a song for a Christmas concert. Helping Pa with his weekend auctioneering.

You know, sorting stuff into batches for him, writing down who owed what for which lot.

I've always been quick with a pencil. Not just writing, but sketching too; and somewhere along the line kids at school had taken to calling me "Doodlebug." So drawing was part of the bits and pieces too. Ma used to shake her head and go on about how it was harder to find a clean sheet of writing paper in her desk than finding raspberries in January. Like as not I had filled every piece with cartoons and doodles, and pictures of the cowboys I'd been reading about in the dime novels we traded one another as we ate our school lunches. Ma didn't approve of the dime novels, so at home in the evenings, I'd get my nose into a book by Mark Twain or Ma would read aloud to me from Charles Dickens or Baroness Orczy.

A pretty ordinary life, you'd have to agree. Well maybe the drawing was a bit unusual, but most everybody has something they can do a little better than other people. With Ma, it was singing. She had a way with a song—a jaunty one like "De Camptown Races" could make you feel like dancing, or something sad and slow like "Danny Boy" would bring a lump to your throat.

And Pa could tell a story to a crowd, in between his auctioning spiels, that would have everyone holding their sides with laughter. He could twist his voice into silly accents, and I can remember driving home from many an auction, the two of us talking like lunatics from who knows what country. "Zing me zat zong, Papa—zee one about Jozephine in zat flying mesheen?" I'd beg him, and he'd sing the whole song through in his most outrageous fracturing of English. I would have a chance later in my life to try this too, but I was never as good as Pa.

My best friend at school, Jimmy Bacon, could pitch a curveball that would tease the players from Huntsville into thinking it was as wild as a joker in rummy before it headed straight, smack-dab over the plate. We'd won most of our games since Jimmy started pitching.

These were the best pieces in the years that tumbled along uneventfully and finished off my first fourteen. But then, like I say, a year comes along when everything ordinary and everyday suddenly goes haywire. For me that was the year I turned fifteen.

First off there was the accident coming home from the auction at McBain's—an old couple retiring from farming and selling off pretty well everything. Ma had gone along to do the recording of the sales because I'd pleaded to be able to take my place as second baseman in a playoff with Huntsville.

The accident happened on a hill just a mile from our farm. There weren't many cars in Carrington County in 1922, so fate must've been working overtime to get two of them up at the top of that hill at the same time while the sun was just low enough to blind the encyclopedia salesman in his Reo and send him crashing into Pa's Model T.

I was in town celebrating our victory over Huntsville with Jimmy Bacon—Jimmy's dad had sprung for sodas at Carver's Drugstore—when the sheriff, Mr. McBride, found me. He told me that Pa must have been killed instantly. Ma was badly injured, and they'd taken her to the hospital over in Spirit Rapids.

I was crying so hard I couldn't see straight and I began running for home, but Mr. McBride and Mr. Bacon sent Jimmy after me.

"Leroy, no sense to you going back to that empty house." Mr. Bacon fished a hankie out of his jacket pocket and handed it to me. "You come on home with us."

I could see Jimmy was trying hard to keep his own tears back.

“I’ll send someone over to tend to the animals.” Sheriff McBride shook his head sadly. It was like he already knew that pretty well everything we owned, including our three cows and our team of plough horses, would end up being sold at auction not long after Pa was buried and Ma was released from the Spirit Rapids hospital in a wheelchair.

The auctioneer was from Spirit Rapids and was nowhere near as good as Pa—everyone said so. By the time all of Pa’s bills had been paid off and the bank reclaimed the farm, we didn’t have much to our name. In addition to the stuff from her dresser drawer and closet, Ma had her songbooks and a little portable pump organ, the pictures off our walls and some bits of china. Everything I owned I could fit into a carpet bag—my clothes, my pencils and drawing paper, some of my sketches in a folder I’d made that Ma had covered in oilcloth for me, a few books. I put in Pa’s hairbrush and his razor and shaving mug. If I looked really hard in the mirror, sometimes I thought I could see a mustache about ready to spring forth.

It wasn’t much we had on the platform of the Carrington railway station.

“You mustn’t be nervous, Leroy,” my mother said, smiling up at me from where she sat in her wheelchair. She was concerned because I’d broken out in a rash and couldn’t stop scratching at my wrists, which were sticking out from the sleeves of my best jacket, an article of clothing that had either shrunk since Christmas or else I’d grown a few inches.

I *was* nervous. We were headed four counties over to stay with

my Aunt Alvina, who, out of charity, had invited us to come and live on the farmstead where Ma had grown up. Alvina was the widow of Ma’s only brother, Hiram, and she had two sons, Albert and Virgil. They were grown men who, on Uncle Hiram’s death, had taken over the family business—the Cutter’s Creek Livery Barn and Harness Store.

“Maybe I should go off somewhere and get work,” I said to Ma, “and when I’ve saved up enough money, I could send for you.”

“Oh, Leroy, my sweet boy.” She reached up and clasped my hand. “There will be all kinds of ways you can help there. Your cousins are hard-working, pious men. And you need to go to school. You just need to be a good boy. It will all work out beautifully.”

Ma was an optimist. But the train whistle, as the locomotive rounded the bend outside of Carrington, sounded doleful in my ears. And when I first glimpsed Virgil waiting in the buggy at the Jackson Junction station, his shaggy eyebrows drawn together in a frown and his mouth set in a grim line did nothing to put my mind at ease.

I think he tried to soften his expression as he greeted me, but I found myself scratching away at a surge of itchiness on my arms. The conductor got Ma’s wheelchair down from the coach, and Virgil went into the train and collected her in his arms, carrying her like a child down to the platform. It looked like no effort for him. He was a huge man. For Ma, he tipped his mouth up into a smile as he settled her into the buggy, placing her wheelchair in the back with her.

“You all comfortable, Aunt Melinda? We got a ways to go to Cutter’s Creek. Leroy, put that extra cushion in behind your ma. Support her back better.”

Guiding me onto the driver's seat with him, Virgil got the team moving. "Gee-up, Spit, gee-up, Polish."

Spit and Polish. Could it be that the brothers had a touch of humour?

Ma kept a conversation going on the long ride to Cutter's Creek, remembering places along the way where she and Hiram had picked blueberries when they were youngsters, picnicked at a popular swimming hole and in the winter had skating parties along Cutter's Creek itself. Virgil's responses were mostly grunts and, the odd time, a loquacious "You don't say." I could see no trace of gentleness or a smile as he kept his gaze on the rumps of Spit and Polish, or gave me a glance from the corner of his eye.

Aunt Alvina hugged me when we got to the farmhouse and noted, "You're taller than your Pa ever got to be. Must take after the Grimble side of the family. You got the Grimble's chestnut-coloured hair too. Just like your Uncle Hiram's, although his weren't so curly."

Ma gave me a little encouraging smile, and I handed Aunt Alvina a picture I'd painted for her from a photograph of Uncle Hiram. In the photograph he hadn't been smiling. But in the transfer to a piece of art, I tipped the corners of his mouth up a bit.

"Well, ain't that something." Aunt Alvina held the picture closer to the light coming in through the kitchen window. "Will you take a look at this, Virg?"

Virgil took the painting from her and studied it. "Yes. Mighty fine," he muttered. "We'll have to put you to painting some new signs for the harness shop. Bet you'd be really handy at that."

Aunt Alvina put the picture up on a ledge beside some canisters. "I'll be able to look at that, Leroy, whenever I'm working at the counter."

"Why don't you take a half hour's rest and grab a bite to eat before I take you into Cutter's Creek with me?" he said.

He nodded in my direction as he eased himself onto a chair by the kitchen table.

"I thought he could wait until next week to register at the school," Ma said. "Give him a little time to get his bearings."

"My thoughts exactly." Virgil signalled his mother to pour him a cup of coffee. "I'll take him into town, and he can just help us around the harness shop, maybe lend a hand at the livery stable."

"God sees the little sparrow fall," Aunt Alvina began to sing as she checked a pot simmering on the stove. "It meets his tender view . . ."

