

CHAPTER

1



“Finished.” Aunt Colleen pushed a pin into the pincushion and stood back to admire her handiwork. “As straight a hem as you’re ever going to find. You look lovely, Penny.”

“Thank you.” Penny tugged at the waistband of her bloomers under her wool skirt, then twirled around to look at herself in the mirror. Her long red braid, bound by a dark blue ribbon, thumped on her back. There she stood, tall (she had grown a whole two inches), wearing a fitted white blouse, blue cardigan sweater with a school crest, and navy blue pleated skirt. She hardly

knew herself. Maggie, almost two years old, might not recognize her. And then it occurred to her—Maggie too must have grown. Maybe they wouldn't recognize each other! That was silly, but it had been six months since she had last seen Papa, Emily, and Maggie. Did they miss her as much as she missed them? She couldn't help it. Tears brimmed in her eyes.

“Oh, sweetheart, the first day at a new school is always hard, but I promise, everything's going to be fine. Miss Potter's School for Girls is the finest in Montreal.” Aunt Colleen looked into Penny's teary eyes, then hugged her. Penny managed to pull her lips into a tight, feeble smile.

“That's better. Well, it's a good try, anyway.” Aunt Colleen smiled. “I shall write to your father this morning. I'll tell him how smart you looked on your first day at school. He is very proud of you, you know. And I'm sure you will fit right in. Mr. Davis says that you have made tremendous progress with your studies this summer.”

Penny nodded. Most Montrealers summered up in the Laurentian Mountains, but Penny had spent a long, boring summer either pounding the piano with Miss Dockrill, her music teacher, or studying with Mr. Davis, the general tutor Grandmother had hired. The worst of it was not having any friends. Since saying good-bye to Maggie and Emily on the train early last spring, Penny had not actually talked to another child.

“Penny, your grandmother is waiting.” Sally, wearing a starched cap and dressed in a crisp new black-and-white maid’s uniform, stuck her head around Penny’s bedroom door. She jumped back when she spotted Aunt Colleen. “Oh, excuse me, ma’am.” In front of the family, Sally was always careful to say *Miss Penny*, instead.

“It’s all right, Sally. Now, Penny, do you have your indoor shoes? Miss Potter is very strict about girls changing their shoes when entering the school.” Penny nodded and patted her schoolbag. “And don’t forget your tam. I shall be

down for breakfast directly,” said Aunt Colleen as she collected her thread and scissors.

Penny picked up her tam and schoolbag, then thumped down the stairs, with Sally hot on her heels.

“Let’s have a look.”

Sally took Penny’s hat and bag and ran her eyes up and down as if she were a general inspecting the troops. At sixteen, she was only five years older than Penny, but there were times when Sally seemed much older.

“Ya look grand, so ya do. A regular toffee-face. Just like one of those posh girls.”

“She does that.” Duncan, balancing a large, covered silver tray on his shoulder, popped out through a door that led from the servants’ staircase. “You’re a picture!” And he winked as he sailed past the two girls towards the dining room.

“Ach, he’s an ornament,” whispered Sally. Both girls giggled. Duncan, at seventeen, was the footman, but he fancied himself the butler. He was thin and tall, with shoulders so broad that

every few months Penny's grandmother had to send for Mrs. Hoffman, the dressmaker, to let out his uniform. He had flashing, dark brown eyes, a big smile, sandy-coloured hair, and he was awfully sure of himself. "Cocky as they come," is what Sally said of him.

Sally had known Duncan ever since she and her three brothers and father had arrived from Ireland. Duncan's family lived a few doors down from Sally's on Galt Avenue in Verdun. Verdun was one of the working-class neighbourhoods of Montreal. Duncan's family had come from Ireland, too. His father had been killed in an accident a long time ago, and both his older brothers were away in the war, one wounded and lying in a hospital in France.

"Where is my granddaughter?" Grandmother called out from the dining room.

"Go!" Sally grimaced, then gave Penny a gentle push through the doorway.

"Good morning, Grandma." Penny planted a kiss on her cheek.

Penny's grandmother was sitting at the end of the table. "Let me look at you," she said, then peered at Penny over her thin reading glasses. Why did everyone want to look at her? "You'll do," Grandmother pronounced with satisfaction.

Duncan removed the silver lid from the serving tray and Penny helped herself to eggs and sausages.

"Duncan, how is your mother?" asked Grandmother as she lifted a delicate teacup to her lips.

"Not very well, ma'am. Thank you for asking."

"Sally? Sally? Where is that girl?"

"Right here, ma'am." Sally bobbed up beside Grandmother's elbow and gave a small curtsy.

"Good heavens, girl, don't jump up at people like that. Tell Cook to make up a basket for Duncan's mother. Put in some of that blueberry jam from Maitland's."

"Yes, ma'am." Sally curtsied again while Duncan murmured a thank-you before one trailed the other out of the room.

Grandmother, as was the custom at breakfast, rattled off a list of things that had to be done that day, and then mentioned that she had sent a box of new winter coats and other clothes from Holt's to Emily and Maggie in Toronto. Toys, too. Penny nearly squealed with delight. Grandma peered over her glasses. Penny gulped. She didn't have to be reminded that young ladies and piglets should not make the same sounds.

Penny pushed her eggs around with her fork until she could make out the design on the plate. Would Emily and Maggie open the box by themselves? What she wouldn't give to see their faces. Penny looked towards the closed dining-room door. They were alone. Now would be a good time to talk about going home to Halifax, or maybe visiting Toronto. She just needed to find the right words.

“Grandma?”

“Yes, dear?” She looked up from her list. Grandmother's blue eyes had a way of looking right through her. “Penny, what is it?”

Penny's courage evaporated. "Pass the salt, please," she said instead.

"Good morning." Aunt Colleen, wearing a soft wool suit, snug at the waist, swept into the dining room. It was wonderful having such an elegant aunt. Of all the people in the world, not counting Papa and her sisters, Penny loved Aunt Colleen best.

"Penny," said Grandmother, "I meant to mention Gwendolyn Parker-Jones."

And as if on cue, Duncan appeared in the doorway and announced, "Miss Gwendolyn Parker-Jones." Standing directly behind him was a round, dark-haired girl with wire-rimmed glasses and a solemn expression.

"Good heavens, there you are, Gwendolyn. I was about to tell my granddaughter that you were coming to collect her. Well, come in, girl, don't just stand there."

"Good morning, Mrs. Underhill." The girl curtsied while looking at Penny out of the corner of her eye. Penny stared wide-eyed right back. Behind her glasses Gwendolyn had brown,

sparkly eyes rimmed with thick lashes. She had a round face, ruby-red lips, dimples in both cheeks, and brown hair that was bound into two fat braids and tied with two navy blue ribbons.

“Penelope, dear, Gwendolyn has just got back from her holidays in the mountains. She will be in your form at school.” Penny thought she heard herself say hello, but maybe not. “Won’t you have a seat, Gwendolyn, while Penelope finishes her breakfast? Perhaps you would like a glass of juice? Sally? Sally? Where is that girl?”

“Here I am, ma’am.” Once again Sally appeared at Grandma’s elbow.

“Oh, for goodness sake. You’ll give me a heart attack one day. Sally, would you please fetch Gwendolyn a glass of orange juice.”

“No, thank you, Mrs. Underhill. We mustn’t be late. Miss Potter takes a dim view of tardiness,” said Gwendolyn.

Penny’s heart sank. It was bad enough being new, but to be late, too—the thought was too much to bear.

“It is important to start the day with a good breakfast,” Grandmother protested.

“Please, Grandma, I don’t want to be late.”

“But Arthur will drive you.”

“Really, Grandma, it’s a nice day, and if we leave now we’ll be on time.” Penny had no idea how long it would take to get to school, but the last thing she wanted was to arrive there in a chauffeur-driven automobile.

Penny ran around Grandmother’s chair and landed a feathery kiss on her cheek. “Goodbye.” She kissed Aunt Colleen, too.

“Be brave,” whispered her aunt, reaching up to give her a quick hug before Penny could dash out the door.

“Penelope! Wait just a moment.”

So much for a hasty escape. Penny stopped short as Grandmother rose and placed her napkin on her chair.

“Everyone, follow me.” With Grandmother in the lead, Aunt Colleen, Gwendolyn, Sally, and Duncan trooped out into the front hall to give

Penny a proper sendoff. Sally plopped the tam on Penny's head and handed her the schoolbag.

Cheery goodbyes followed Penny and Gwendolyn down the drive to the road. Grandmother pulled a hanky from her sleeve and waved as if Penny were setting off on a great ship. Aunt Colleen, Sally, and Duncan were content with smiling and waving.



“You have a nice family,” said Gwendolyn as they set off down leafy Pine Avenue. Penny looked over her shoulder. She could still see Grandmother's hanky waving in morning's early light.

“They are not my *real* family.”

“They look real,” laughed Gwendolyn.

“I mean that my *real* family is in Halifax. Well, my father is in Halifax. My sisters are staying in

Toronto until Papa builds us a new house. He's a builder."

"So, you have two families," said Gwendolyn in a matter-of-fact voice. "We've got lots of time, actually. Well, not *lots* of time, but it's all downhill. Come on. Step on a crack, break your mother's back." Gwendolyn took three big jumps across cracks in the sidewalk then pivoted in mid-air to face Penny. "Oh, I forgot, you don't have a mother. I don't have a father." Gwendolyn started to hop as if she were playing hopscotch on an imaginary board. "He got sick and died in France. He was too old for the war but he went anyway."

Gwendolyn made it sound as if having one parent were not a terrible thing. But it *was* a terrible thing, awful in fact. The only thing worse would be to lose *both* parents. The thought sent a shudder down Penny's spine.

"Do you miss your father?" Penny asked.

Gwendolyn shrugged. "He left at the start of the war, that was four years ago. I was only seven years old."

“My mother died one year and nine months ago. Sometimes I forget what she looks like.” That was the truth of it, but it was the first time Penny had said it out loud. There had been no one to say things like that to for so very long.

Gwendolyn stopped jumping about. “There is a picture of my father at home on the mantel. I know it’s him, but he doesn’t look like the *him* I have in my head.” Her shoulders slumped. “We’re sort of the same, then,” she said with a shy smile. “Call me Gwen. Gwendolyn sounds so old.”

“I like to be called Penny. Penelope is my grandmother’s name.”

They walked on. It was a perfect fall day. The air smelled fresh and the leaves were just starting to turn colour. They talked about the test Miss Potter had given Penny over the holidays, and about Bloomfield School back in Halifax and how it was almost destroyed in the explosion.

Penny stopped walking and looked at her new friend. Gwen was staring wide-eyed at a house.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“See him?” Gwen pointed to a man wearing a black uniform and a peaked cap. He was walking up the path towards a pretty, moss-covered house. The door was made of heavy oak. A large gold knocker gleamed in the morning sun.

“He’s a mailman,” shrugged Penny.

“No.” Gwen shook her head. “He’s delivering a telegram.”

They watched while the man knocked at the door. A maid opened it, then fell back against the doorframe and shook her head. He handed her a yellow-and-blue envelope.

“That’s how we were told that my father was dead in France. That’s how everyone is told, by telegram. If a telegram arrives, it means that someone is dead, probably a soldier in the war.”

The maid closed the door and the telegram man walked back down the path and out the gate, nodding to Penny and Gwen as he passed. Maybe they imagined it, maybe not, but as the girls passed the house they could almost swear that they heard an anguished scream echoing from its depths.