

*Montreal, December 21, 1918*

“Wake up!” Penny’s teeth chattered. The furnace was acting up again, and it was cold in Sally’s bedroom.

“Sally!” Penny’s whisper turned into a hiss as she hopped about on the round rag rug beside Sally’s bed.

Sally’s bedroom was a lovely little room with pristine white curtains, rosy pink walls, a soft plum-coloured chair, and a pink-and-green bowl and jug on top of a washstand.

The room was at the very top of the house. Sally was the only maid to live above stairs. Nancy, the daily, lived in Griffintown and took the streetcar back and forth every day. Cook’s bedroom was off the kitchen. Duncan and old Arthur, the chauffeur, lived in the carriage house behind the main house.

“Sally, are you awake?” Penny gave her a gentle poke. She was getting colder by the minute.

“What time is it?” Sally didn’t even open her eyes.

“It’s morning!” Penny’s teeth were now clicking together so fast they were nearly playing a tune. Sally reached for her clock. “It’s five o’clock! I don’t have to get up for a whole hour yet!” She moaned, banged her pillow with her fist, and rolled over.

A warm gap in the bedcovers was left behind. The iron bedstead squeaked terribly as Penny slid in beside Sally.

“Aren’t you excited?” Penny whispered. The war was over, Papa and Maggie and Emily would arrive in a few hours, and—not that this was as important as everything else—Penny was pretty sure that she had passed all her Christmas exams at Miss Potter’s School for Girls. This would be the best Christmas ever.

There was one fly in the ointment. (That was one of Cook’s expressions.) Aunt Colleen’s brother, Robert, had disappeared. He had written from France on November 12, the day after peace was declared, saying that he would be on the first ship home. They had not heard from him since. Grandma seemed especially concerned. If Aunt Colleen was like a daughter to Grandma, then Uncle Robert was like a son.

“I wish I could go to Windsor Station with Arthur to meet them. Sally, are you still sleeping?” asked Penny as she peered over Sally’s shoulder. Sally answered by groaning again.

Penny flopped onto half the pillow. Just *thinking* about the day ahead made her giggle. Papa would arrive in Montreal on the 1:45 train from Halifax. Aunt Colleen had gone to Toronto two days ago to collect Emily and Maggie. They would arrive at the same station fifteen minutes later. Seven people could ride in Grandma’s brand new Cadillac, but Grandma had said that with three grown-ups (including Arthur) two children, and the luggage, there would be no room for either of them. Penny had pleaded with Grandma and even offered to walk home, but Grandma was adamant. Penny would wait at the house. It was the practical and proper thing to do. Stuff and nonsense all those public displays of affection at train stations, Grandma had said.

Penny pulled up the blankets. The radiator was awfully quiet. It was usually hissing and knocking as if a small animal were caught inside.

“Do you think that Maggie and Emily will like their room?” asked Penny. This time Sally didn’t even groan. Duncan and Penny had dragged boxes of Mama’s old toys down from the attic. Sally had helped paint the dollhouse, and Duncan had made a new saddle for the rocking horse. Grandma had said that Maggie and Emily could have all of Mama’s toys, except for Martha, Mama’s doll. Martha belonged to Penny. Penny started humming *Joy to the World*.

Everyone had been working hard to get the house ready for Christmas. They had decorated inside with green cedar boughs and great golden globes that Sally said had come all the way from Italy. And at this very moment, a large Christmas tree was propped against the carriage house. Penny didn’t know the third verse to *Joy to the World* so she switched to *Away in a Manger*.

With a deep sigh, Sally turned over and stared wide-eyed at the ceiling.

“Finally! You are awake,” said Penny.

“I don’t suppose I’ll be getting back to sleep now.” Sally picked up the clock. “Five thirty. Well at least Duncan will have the kitchen fire going by now.” The radiator suddenly rumbled as if to announce that it was working again. Most likely Duncan was in the basement tinkering with it. Duncan was brilliant at fixing things, although he was about to give up on what he called *the monster in the basement*. Sally rolled out of bed and slipped her feet into her waiting slippers.

“Sally, do you know how to make boxty?” Penny kneeled on the bed.

“I do indeed. ‘*Boxty on the griddle, boxty on the pan, if you don’t eat boxty, you’ll never get a man.*’” Sally sang while giving her hair a stiff brushing.

“Papa used to sing that too. It made Mama laugh. Could we make some for my father? Oh, please?”

“Well, we do have leftover mashed potatoes, that I know. But sure Cook will get her knickers in a twist if we use her ovens.” Sally turned her back to Penny, yanked a thick flannel chest protector over her head, and then quickly laced her corset over top.

“Could we make it before she wakes up?”

Sally pulled a slip over her head, then turned and looked into Penny’s pleading eyes. “Sure, what’s the harm?”

“Oh, thank you!” The bed squeaked fiercely as Penny bounced off it.

Penny fidgeted as Sally poured cold water from the jug into her wash bowl and washed her face. A spray of brown freckles across her nose stood out against her pale skin. Penny watched Sally peer into the spotty mirror above the washstand. “It’s a terrible thing to be saddled with a pug nose,” Sally sighed as she patted her face dry. Sally was always talking about her freckles and nose, but Penny thought Sally was quite pretty. Sally stepped into her maid’s uniform, buttoned up the front, and then tied an apron around her waist.

“Let me do your hair.” Sally held up her hairbrush and nodded her head towards the dressing table. Penny sat down and looked into the mirror. For the millionth time, she wished that she had inherited Mama’s blond hair, like Emily and Maggie had. When the sun was shining on Penny’s red hair, it looked as if her head were on fire. Sally expertly plaited Penny’s hair into one thick braid. “Get dressed and meet me in the kitchen in ten minutes,” she said as she shooed Penny out the door.

It didn’t take Penny ten minutes to dress—it barely took her five. She was breathless as she bolted down the servants’ stairs and ran into the basement kitchen.

“What’s this then? Has the young lady of the house come to make tea for the servants?” Duncan grinned. He tossed a shovel full of coal into the oven with one hand, while he scratched a match to light the top of the stove with the other.

“Help yourself to your own tea,” snapped Sally as she came out of the larder carrying a bowl of leftover mashed potatoes. Sally was sweet on Duncan and he was in love with her, but neither one would admit it. Of course, they were too young to marry, Sally having just turned seventeen and Duncan eighteen. “Here, Penny, you may grate the raw potatoes.” Penny sat on a stool at the counter and took the grater and three fat yellow potatoes from Sally. “Ach, well, if the young lady won’t pour a sorry soul like myself a cuppa, then I’ll do it for her—and one for Miss Sour-Puss as well.”

“Sure you will do no such thing. Mrs. Underhill will be waiting on her coffee,” said Sally.

Grandma’s coffee? Penny thought Grandma would still be asleep at this hour. Yet there, on a tray by the dumb waiter, sat a full coffee service and a croissant. “Is that for Grandma?” Penny’s voice was squeaky with surprise.

“It is.” Duncan opened the door to the dumb waiter, hoisted the tray onto the shelf inside, and shut the door.

“But it’s too early for Grandma to be awake,” said Penny. Duncan and Sally both laughed.

“Your grandmother wakes every day at five, lights her own fire, and then goes about her work. I bring her coffee at 5:45 every day, sharp-like,” said Duncan.

“What work?” Grandma did a great deal of volunteer work, but she did that during the daytime.

“Your grandmother runs the companies your grandfather built. It’s a pity that your grandma wasn’t running the war. It would have been over a lot sooner,” said Duncan as he peeled off his brown leather kitchen apron and donned his jacket and cuffs.

Grandma was in business! Was Grandma a suffragette? But Grandma did not approve of suffragettes or woman working for money. So if Grandma didn’t approve of working, why did she work?

“Back in a jiffy,” said Duncan.

“Can I come with you?” Penny jumped off the stool.

“See here, did ya not want to make your father some boxty?” asked Sally.

“I’ll be right back. Really I will.” Penny shot past Sally and Duncan and raced up the servants’ stairs. She heard Duncan bang open the door of the dumb waiter, fiddle with the coffee tray, and then shut the door again. He gave the rope several sharp tugs. Up the coffee service went, between the walls.

Penny reached the little door to the dumb waiter on the second floor, and then stopped. The coffee service would be far too heavy for her to lift.

Duncan came up behind her. “Right you are, girl, I’ll manage this. Just knock on your grandmother’s door.”

Duncan opened the dumb waiter and hoisted the tray up onto his shoulder while Penny gave her grandmother’s door three short raps.

“Come in, Duncan,” Grandmother called. Penny turned the doorknob. She had only been in Grandma’s room once before and she had barely crossed the threshold then.

The room was grand, with a large oriental rug, ornate lamps, plump chairs, a deep soft sofa, and a huge four-poster bed. Grandmother sat at her desk, holding a long, thin silver pen. Her hair, normally wound in a soft bun, was tied back with a black ribbon. It was silver and thick, as thick as Penny’s, and cascaded down her back like a stream of sparkling water. She wore a light-blue dressing gown and red Chinese slippers. Surely her grandma was the most elegant grandma in the world!

“Duncan, please look at that fireplace. It has a very poor draw this morning.” Grandma spoke without looking up from her papers.

“Good morning, Grandma,” Penny said quietly. Startled, her grandma looked to the door.

“Good heavens, Penny, what are you doing up at this hour?”

“I was thinking about Papa coming today, and Maggie and Emily ...” Her words drifted off.

“I see.” Grandma looked at Penny thoughtfully, then put down her pen. “Perhaps you could join me for a cup of coffee. Coffee stunts your growth, so we won’t make a habit of it. We’ll have our coffee in front of the fire, such as it is. Duncan, fetch another cup, if you please.”

“I’ve already taken the liberty, Madam.” Sure enough, Penny saw that two cups now sat on the tray, as well as two croissants, a creamer with milk, and a sugar bowl. When had he done that? Duncan placed each cup on its matching saucer and poured the coffee in a steady stream. Penny could see that her cup had more milk than coffee, but it didn’t matter a whit. She felt very grown-up.

“You are becoming a more experienced butler every day, Duncan,” said Grandmother. Penny darted her eyes to Duncan’s face. He grimaced. Grandma had meant it as a compliment, but Duncan didn’t take it that way. His plans did not include being *in service* for a lifetime.

“Do sit, Penny. One can’t have one’s coffee standing up. It’s not civilized.”

Penny sat down on a chair not far from Grandmother. It was then that she saw it. On the wall, framed in gilded wood, was a portrait of Mama. Penny drew in a sharp breath. Mama would have been about fifteen, maybe

sixteen, years old when the picture was painted. She had hair the colour of gold and sparkling blue eyes. Penny could hardly drag her eyes away from the sight of her mother.

“Miss Penny.” Duncan handed Penny her cup, along with a napkin, small plate, and croissant.

“Thank you,” she mumbled. Duncan gave a slight bow, then left the room.

She must think of something to say—anything would do! “Duncan says that you rise early every day.” Penny tried to speak like a lady, but it was a strain to raise her voice above a whisper.

“Your grandfather left us well provided for, but I still have a great deal to do,” said Grandma. “I have good managers running the companies, but I like to keep on top of things. And there are the investments and, of course, the regular household accounts for both this house and the house in Halifax. It all takes time.”

Companies? Investments? Penny’s mouth gaped open. “Grandma, are you a suffragette?” She blurted out the question before she could stop herself.

By the look on Grandma’s face, Penny might as well have asked her if she were a circus performer!

“I should say not! Suffragette indeed. We must not forget that a woman’s place is in the home, raising a family.”

“But why?” Penny didn’t know how exactly to ask the questions in her head.

“Why what, my dear?” asked Grandmother as she sipped her coffee.

“Why do you work? Couldn’t you, well, sell the companies?” Penny often heard the girls talking at school about their fathers buying and selling companies.

“I have no choice. I simply must keep it all going.”

“But why?”

“For you, my dear, and for your sisters. It is your inheritance.”