

CHAPTER

No 1



“Papa, you promised. You said that we’d stay together. You promised.” Penny’s fists were clenched so tightly that her nails bit into her palms. How could he? How could he send her away?

“Penny, lower your voice.” Papa’s eyes never left the mug of tea that sat on the rough wooden table in front of him.

“I won’t be quiet. I won’t.” But even as Penny spoke, she could sense Mrs. O’Hara’s nosy children eavesdropping behind the curtain. It wasn’t even

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a proper curtain; it was just an old blanket that hung over a cord dividing the kitchen in two. Mrs. O'Hara and her three children lived downstairs, while Papa, Penny, Maggie, and Emily lived in two big rooms upstairs. She knew it was kind of Mrs. O'Hara to give up the bedrooms, but sharing the broken-down house with another family was awful.

They had no place else to live. There was precious little housing available in the North End of Halifax after the explosion in the harbour. Their own house had been destroyed, and now they had to make do. Besides, it was just temporary, until Papa built their new home in the summer.

"Penny, put on your coat. We'll go for a walk." Papa's voice was low and steady.

"What will happen to Maggie and Emily? Who will take care of them?" She mustn't cry. She mustn't!

"That's enough! Meet me outside."

Papa stood up, yanked his coat from the hook and made his way out into the crisp March morning.

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It was all Penny could do not to shout after him. Oh, she hated this war. Hated it. If there were no war, then the *Imo* and the *Mont Blanc* wouldn't have crashed into each other, and Billy Hanson would still be alive. She could see him still, running towards the port to see the fire. Then came the explosion, and he was never found! And if it weren't for the explosion they would still be in their own house. And Papa wouldn't be breaking his promise and sending her away.

"Penny?" Five-year-old Emily poked her blond head around the curtain. "Where are you going?" She plugged her mouth with her thumb.

"Stay with Maggie, Emily." Penny gave her sister a weak smile.

"Maggie is sleeping."

"That's good. You stay with her. I'll be right back."

Two of Mrs. O'Hara's children, one as dirty as the other, came around the curtain and grinned. Penny sighed. It was hard finding enough hot

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water to keep themselves clean, but this lot hardly made the effort. Still, it didn't do to criticize. After all, Mrs. O'Hara had lost her husband in the explosion.

Papa stood out on the road, one hand cupping a pipe, the other dug deep into a pocket. Penny buttoned up her old coat and felt the soft fur collar hug her neck. It was the last thing her mother had made for her. Not long after, Mama had given birth to Maggie, and then died. That was a year and a half ago. The coat was too short by half—the sleeves came up past her wrists—and there were some stains that wouldn't come out, but she wouldn't give it up. She wouldn't.

"Let's walk." Papa set out, past burnt homes, down a rutty road made dirtier by the lumps of sooty snow piled up on either side.

Penny dragged her feet. There was nothing he could say to her, nothing she wanted to hear.

"Careful!" Papa reached out and pulled her in close as a horse-drawn sleigh glided past. Penny could feel his strong arms protecting her. She

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wanted to throw her own arms around him and plead, Don't, Papa. Don't send me away. I love you. But all Penny could manage was stony silence.

"Hear me out, darlin'. This is no fit place for any of you. What would happen, do you think, if Maggie or Emily got sick?"

A shudder went down Penny's spine.

"I have to work very hard. This city needs every builder it's got. But first I have to keep my wee girls safe." Papa turned and faced her squarely. "My sister in Toronto will take Maggie and Emily. You will go to Montreal and live with your grandmother. It's final. I've already posted the letters telling them of your arrival." Papa paused, as if steeling himself for what was to come. "And, I've bought the train tickets."

Penny sucked in her breath. He'd already bought the tickets! Didn't her opinion matter at all?

"Why can't I go to Toronto, too? Why?"

"My sister wanted all three of you, and so did your grandmother. It's a hard thing, splitting you

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up, but taking on three girls is too much of a burden for either of them. Try and understand.”

Tears bottled up in her throat. She swallowed hard. This couldn't be happening. Not after all they had been through.

“Darlin’,” Papa said, his voice soft with his Irish accent, “your Aunt Colleen is in Montreal. Sure, haven't ya always loved her, and she you. Come fall you'll go to a good school, and . . .”

“Fall!” Penny nearly stumbled. “Not that long!”

Penny spun around and ran down the street, ran as fast as she could. Ran and ran until her sides were splitting and her lungs gasped for air. How could he be doing this? How? She threw herself into a sooty snowbank and covered her eyes with her hands. He was sending them away for good!