

CHAPTER 1



April 1932

Nora

This was all Olson's fault, Nora thought bitterly, trying to fight back her tears. They had been happy enough with Ma in the shelter and then the little apartment. But then he had come along and ruined it all. It was Olson's fault, and no one else's. *His* fault that they had been taken away by these terrible people.

Nora peered out the rain-splattered window at the landscape rolling by. Not even the fact that this was her first time in an automobile could abate her rising panic. Though she was all of eight years old, she had never been outside Chicago, and she began to feel more and more afraid as the horizon opened up, the motorcar chugging along. So much open space. It was frightening.

"Where are we going?" Nora finally managed to ask.

The man driving said nothing, but the lady next to him barked, "The Park Ridge School for Girls," without even

bothering to turn around. Nora could only guess what that meant and clutched Patsy's hand, though she knew her little sister wouldn't be of any real help. Patsy had somehow fallen asleep, her head nestled in Nora's lap. She was six years old, but still acted like a baby. Still even sucked her thumb.

Nora wiped the tears that would not stop rolling down her cheeks. Ma had tried to hide them in an armoire, but the woman had found them anyway. Patsy had managed to escape the woman's clutches and had run to Ma, but the woman had simply pried her off, despite Patsy screaming and Ma crying and begging. In the end, the woman had had to employ the silent man she'd left leaning in the hallway to help her carry the kicking, wailing Patsy down the stairs. Nora, watching with horror, had decided she wouldn't struggle. Ma had grabbed Patsy's little cloth doll and stuffed it into Nora's pocket, fiercely instructing her to watch over Patsy until she could come get them.

Nora couldn't get Ma's eyes out of her mind. She had never seen them that frantic—that scared and trapped. It made Nora cry all the harder.

The car stopped, and Patsy stirred. Nora peered out at a cluster of stark brick buildings. "Park Ridge School for Girls" was chiseled above the front door of the main one.

The tall, angular woman opened the back door. She stood there expectantly, but when the girls didn't move, she snapped at them. "Come on, out you go. It's not so bad here. Plenty of fresh air, good food. Better than that rat-infested hovel you were in. Should be grateful, I'm thinking. Not all girls get to come here, you know. Most have to go to Dixon, which is a lot worse. You got lucky, so come on." She crossed her arms and tapped her foot. "Come on! Get out, or Larry'll drag you out."

"We're here, Patsy; wake up." Nora gave her sister a nudge. Patsy whimpered and sat up, clutching the ragged doll Nora had given her.

Nora scooted out and pulled at both Patsy and the little carpet bag they had been allowed to bring. Ma had blindly shoved some things in it, but Nora had no idea what. Shivering, she looked around at the dreary grounds. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still dull, everything soggy and ugly.

"Come on," the woman repeated brusquely and marched up the wet concrete steps. Nora's throat ached as she took Patsy's hand. For a brief moment, she considered running . . . but where would she go?

"Come on; let's get this over with," the woman said, pulling open the thick wooden door. Nora climbed the steps, Patsy in tow, but hesitated before stepping into the yawning black interior, the result of which was a swift push.

Nora and Patsy stumbled inside, Nora righting them before they fell. They were in a type of common room with thick, old wood everywhere and a winding staircase at the back, under which a set of pocket doors had been partially left open. In the room's corner, under a low, slanted ceiling, sat a massive desk guarding two more closed doors. On the walls were long rectangular photographs of groups of girls, all dressed in what looked like sailor dresses and black boots. None were smiling.

Patsy clutched at Nora's dress as she hid her face and simultaneously inserted her thumb in her mouth. Nora's right leg was trembling the way it had while they hid in the armoire. The way it did sometimes when Mr. Richardt, their neighbor, was around . . .

Brushing past them, the woman stiffly pointed to a wooden bench set along one wall. Nora obediently sat, pulling Patsy

down next to her, while the woman began to pace around the room, drawing out a little watch on a chain from her pocket every so often and looking at it impatiently.

“I don’t like it here,” Patsy whined. “I want to go home!”

“Shh!” Nora said sharply, shrinking back from the woman’s icy stare.

“Mr. Ackerman!” the woman called out loudly. “Mr. Ackerman?”

Nothing stirred. After a few moments, however, an oldish-looking man slipped through the pocket doors under the staircase. He had snow-white hair and a large flowing white moustache and wore an old-fashioned white shirt with puffy sleeves. A black vest hung precariously on his rounded shoulders. He seemed startled to see them, and for a fleeting second Nora thought he might retreat.

“There you are!” the woman said, stopping any further potential thoughts the man might have had on that subject.

“Oh, Miss Whitlow, not today,” the man groaned. “Today’s not a good day, and Mrs. Harvey won’t like it. Can’t you come back a different day?” he implored, scooting behind the desk, as if wanting to maintain a safe distance between himself and Miss Whitlow.

“Certainly not. Don’t be ridiculous. Where *is* Mrs. Harvey? I’ve got two new ones.” She gave Nora and Patsy a triumphant nod.

Mr. Ackerman afforded himself a quick look. The corner of one of his eyes twitched relentlessly.

“Well, she’s out back.” He slowly scratched his head. “Been a bit of a disturbance this afternoon, you see.”

“A disturbance? What sort of disturbance?”

Mr. Ackerman glanced back at the girls. “Well, I don’t think I should say. In the present company, that is.”

"Oh, for Heaven's sake! Where's Mrs. Dubala, then?"

"Well, she's most likely out back, too . . ."

"Who is it, Jacob?" a loud voice boomed as the pocket doors banged open. A large bull of a woman stormed through.

"It's Miss Whitlow." Mr. Ackerman tried to shift out from behind the desk, but the bulk of the woman blocked him. She stared at Nora and Patsy, hands on her hips.

"What's this?"

"You know very well, Mrs. Dubala," Miss Whitlow said evenly, not at all cowed by Mrs. Dubala's hostility. She fished in her handbag for an envelope, which she then thrust at Mrs. Dubala. "Court order. Just this morning. You should have already received a telephone call from the circuit court."

"Well, we didn't."

Mr. Ackerman shuffled from side to side, still trapped behind the desk.

"I can't help that," Miss Whitlow went on crisply. "It's my job to round them up. And that's what I do. Now here they are. My part of it's done."

"We're full-up. Not a single bed open." Mrs. Dubala said it coolly, as if the two were engaged in a card game and Mrs. Dubala had just put down an ace.

"Not my business, I'm afraid," Miss Whitlow responded, laying down a trump. "Clearly, you have a problem in your communications." She waved a hand at the desk. "If you have issue with Judge Schaefer's ruling, I suggest you take it up with him. Good day." She turned on her heel and strode toward the front door.

"They permanent?" Mrs. Dubala called out.

"Probably, from the look of it," Miss Whitlow answered without looking back.

Nora felt a strange panic at the disappearance of Miss Whitlow, even though the woman had not given them one drop of kindness. Mrs. Dubala seemed infinitely worse somehow as she stuffed her thick fingers into the envelope. Roughly, she pulled out the letter inside. Her tiny black eyes darted through it. "Stand up," she barked as she read.

Nora stood, pulling Patsy to her feet as well.

"Leonora and Patricia De Lor-en-zo," Mrs. Dubala sounded out. She shot them a glance. "That you two?"

Nora nodded. She considered telling her they were never called those names, but she didn't dare.

"When it rains, it pours, eh, Jacob?" Mrs. Dubala snapped irritably as she tossed the letter onto the desk.

Mr. Ackerman made a move to pick it up and insert it neatly back into the envelope, which she had also tossed on the desk. "Yes, ma'am, I reckon so," he answered meekly.

With one deft movement, Mrs. Dubala grabbed a bit of Nora's hair, roughly pulling her head down. With the other hand, she did the same to Patsy, who let out a little yell.

"Just as I thought. Lice," she said with disgust, then wiped her hands on the apron that squeezed around her large stomach. "I hate Italians. Take them to the bath chamber."

"Then what?" Mr. Ackerman asked. "Ain't no openings, just as you said."

Mrs. Dubala sighed, thinking. "Take them to Solomon," she said finally. "They'll have to share a mattress on the floor."

"Mrs. Morris ain't gonna to like that. Maybe we should ask Mrs. Harvey."

"You do as you're told, Jacob. I'll handle Mrs. Morris."

With a heavy sigh, Mr. Ackerman finally managed to squeeze his way past Mrs. Dubala's large girth and led the girls out.