

Chapter 1

*The man who sold us that ticket ought to be hanged,
and I'd be willing to act as hangman.*

—ANNE SULLIVAN TO SOPHIA HOPKINS, MARCH 1887

“Ticket, please.”

I wipe at my eyes and thrust the wretched thing at him. I’ve already had to change trains six times since Boston. On top of that, I have to take this train north to Knoxville to catch yet another train south to Alabama.

The conductor examines the ticket and punches it. Instead of returning it, he lingers over my shoulder. With a sniff I try to smother my tears before my handkerchief soaks up all my dignity.

“You all right, miss?” he asks.

I glance up at him and nod. He doesn’t budge. He only stares. I can see him thinking it. Everyone who meets me thinks it, whether they say it or not.

She’d be pretty if it weren’t for those eyes.

Sometimes I wonder if it was worth all those

operations. What good is being able to see if everyone who looks at me has to force the disgust from their lips at the sight of my poor eyes? And what a sorry sight they are—red and swollen, as if I were a demon straight from the underworld. There wasn't much good in being half blind and cross-eyed, either; but at least I couldn't see people staring at me.

“Is something wrong?” I snap at him. I can't help myself—my eyes smart with coal dust, I'm sweating in my woolen dress, and my patience is worn raw as my feet after tramping through Washington, DC, in too-tight new shoes.

He blinks in surprise. “No, ma'am. It's just you've been crying since we pulled outta Chattanooga. I thought maybe one of your folks was dead.”

I don't know how to answer him. Most all of them are dead, and the living ones might as well be, for all they care about me. Even the dead ones aren't worth a tear.

Except for Jimmie.

“No, I'm going to Alabama. To teach.”

He brightens. “Well, isn't that nice! I've got a cousin lives down that way. You'll like it there.” He reaches into his pocket. “Peppermint?”

“I've never been outside of Massachusetts,” I whimper, cringing all the while at the attention I've drawn.

“Oh, I shouldn't worry about that. Southerners are good people, real kind. Famous for our hospitality.” He winks and holds the handful of candy still and

steady, like I'm a sparrow he's trying to tame. I pick a small one and drop it into my pocket.

"Thank you."

"Go on, have another."

His voice makes the words soft and lazy—I like the way he says "anutha." Against my better judgment I concede a smile and take a larger piece.

"There, now. That wasn't so bad, was it?"

I shake my head.

"I see plenty of people come down here from up north. Stiff and prim as whitewashed fence pickets, every one of 'em. We smooth 'em out, though. Sunshine and country cooking turns 'em all bright and rosy in no time. Why, my mother used to put brown sugar in near about everything she made." He pats his sides. The cloth round his waistcoat buttons puckers. "Didn't do me any good around the middle, but we all grew up sweet and gentle as milch cows."

As he speaks, I mop my sooty eyes, only half listening. He takes it for more tears, I suppose.

"You'll make a fine teacher," he insists in that frantic way men get when a woman cries.

"I don't *want* to teach," I hiccup. That stops him cold for a second, then he's off again, prattling on about his sister-in-law who's a teacher, how it'll grow on me, and how I should give it a chance. Then he winks and says the most ridiculous thing of all: "Some of the boys might be sweet on you."

I have half a mind to tell him I have no training

and I'd rather be selling books door-to-door, or even washing dishes at Mrs. D's Kitchen in Boston, thank you very much. I won't have a classroom, either, only one pupil—a six-year-old girl both deaf and blind. What would he say to that, I wonder? But he's trying to be kind to me, and I know that's no easy task. I swallow my temper and unwrap one of the peppermints. Its cool sting helps ease the thickness in my throat.

“Thank you,” I tell him. What I mean is *Go away*.

“That's better, isn't it?” he says, as if he's talking to a child. “Would you like a sandwich?”

I look him square in the eye, making the words firm and distinct: “No. Thank you.”

He hovers a moment longer, then finally seems to sense I'd like it very much if he left me alone. “All right, then. You enjoy the ride, now.”

Enjoy the ride. I wish he hadn't said that. So far I've managed not to remember the last time I rode a train.

Suddenly I'm nine years old again.

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My mother is dead and my drunken lout of a father is too busy giving the Irish a bad name to be bothered with his own children. Aunt Ellen snatches up cuddly, healthy baby Mary, but my brother and I are a problem. Jimmie's sickly and crippled; I'm mostly blind and surly as a wildcat. Finally we're dropped into the reluctant hands of Uncle John and his wife, Anastasia.

After a few months of my rages and Jimmie's frailty, their Christian charity runs out.

One day a carriage appears in the yard.

Uncle John lifts Jimmie onto the seat, his voice dripping with false cheer. He tells us we're going to have a ride on a train, and won't that be grand?

He doesn't tell us where the train is going. Or why no one else is coming.

I turn suspicious when Aunt Stasia tries to kiss me. She's never shown us any affection before, and I won't have it now. I twist my head away, and she dries her tears on her apron as if I've finally given her reason to hate me. "You might at least be a good girl on the last day," she sniffs as Uncle John hoists me into the seat next to Jimmie. My skin prickles for an instant at that, "the last day," but Uncle John makes such a fuss about shining locomotives and soft velvet seats that I forget to be afraid.

As the carriage rattles away down the road, one of the cousins calls out, "Enjoy the ride!"