

Chapter 1

January 1918

Pauline

Morning light shimmers on the apricot horizon as I stand at the place where my baby boy rests. Stouthearted chickadees are singing in the day, just like they have done every other winter's dawn, but when this same sun sets tonight, I will be miles away from them, and inside an unfamiliar house. There will be no reminders anywhere that Henry had ever been mine. Not visible ones, anyway.

I kneel on the dead grass, brittle with icy moisture. The fabric of my skirt draws in the chilled damp, as if it is parched with thirst. The growing wetness at my knees is unhurried and easy, like a clean, slow blade. I look at the little marble slab that bears Henry's name and the etching of a sweet lamb curled up among lilies, and I'm reminded again that he was my angel child, even before he flew away to heaven.

From the moment I held my boy, glistening and new, I knew that he wasn't like the other babies I'd given birth to. He wasn't like my girls. They'd slipped out annoyed by the noise and chill and sharp edges of this world. Not Henry. He didn't cry. He didn't curl his tiny hands into fists. He didn't shout his displeasure at being pulled out of the only safe place he knew.

When the doctor placed him in my arms, Henry merely looked at me with eyes so blue they could've been sapphires. He held my gaze like he knew who I was. Knew everything about me. Like he still had the breath of eternity in his lungs.

He didn't care when I parted the folds of his blanket to look at his maleness and marvel at the pearly sheen of his skin against mine. I could scarcely believe I'd given birth to a boy after three girls and so many

years since the last one. I just kept staring at Henry and he just let me.

When Thomas was let into the room, he was as astonished that we had a son as I was. The girls were, too. They followed in right after their father, even though it was the middle of the night, and we all gazed and grinned at the little man-child, the quiet lad who did not cry.

My father-in-law came over the next morning, as did Thomas's brothers and their wives, all of them smelling of dried tobacco leaves and spice. My parents came, too, and my sister, Jane, who was newly pregnant with her own child after several years of hoping and praying for a baby. They all marveled at how beautiful Henry was, how calm, how enchanting his gaze and how sweet his temperament. My mother and Thomas's sisters-in-law stared at him like I'd done the night before, amazed as I had been at how serene this baby was. They had known, too, without knowing, that something wasn't right.

The few months we had with Henry were wonder-filled and happy. He did all the things a baby does that make you smile and laugh and want to kiss his downy head. When he needed something, like my breast or a clean diaper or affection, he didn't wail, he merely sighed a sweet little sound that if it was made of words would have started with "If it's not too much trouble . . ." We didn't know he didn't have the physical strength to exert himself. His perfectly formed outsides hid the too-small, too-weak heart that my body had made for him.

And yet had God asked me ahead of time if I wanted this sweet child for just shy of half a year, I still would have said yes. Even now, eight weeks after Henry's passing, and even when I hold Jane's sweet little newborn, Curtis, I would still say yes.

I don't know if Thomas feels this way, and I know the girls don't. Evelyn is still sad, Maggie is still angry, and Willa is still bewildered that Henry was taken from us. I can't say why I am none of those things anymore. What I feel inside, I'm not sure there are words to describe. I should still be sad, angry, and bewildered, but instead I feel a numbness regarding Death that I've told no one about. Not even Thomas.

I no longer fear Death, though I know that I should. I'm strangely at peace with what I used to think of as my enemy. Living seems more the taskmaster of the two, doesn't it? Life is wonderful and beautiful but oh, how hard it can be. Dying, by contrast, is easy and simple, almost gentle. But who can I tell such a

thing to? No one. I am troubled by how remarkable this feeling is.

This is why I changed my mind about moving to Philadelphia. I'd said no the first time Thomas's uncle made his offer even though I could tell my husband was interested. Back then I couldn't imagine leaving this sleepy little town where I've lived all my life, couldn't imagine leaving my parents, though I've never been especially dependent on their subtle shows of affection. I didn't want to move to the city where the war in Europe would somehow seem closer, didn't want to uproot the girls from the only home they've ever known. Didn't want to tear myself away from all that was familiar. Uncle Fred wrote again a couple months after Henry was born, and Thomas had said we needed to think carefully before turning down a second invitation.

"Uncle Fred might take his offer to one of my brothers," Thomas had told me.

I truly would have given the matter more serious thought if Henry hadn't begun his slow ascent away from us right about the same time. When my son's fragile heart finally began to number his days, nothing else mattered but holding on to him as long as we could. Thomas didn't bring up the matter again when the third letter from Uncle Fred arrived last week. My husband thinks I cannot leave this little mound of grass.

But the truth is, I have come out from under the shroud of sorrow a different person. I no longer want to stay in this place where Henry spent such a short time. I don't want Thomas shading a view of the wide horizon with hands calloused from binder leaves. I don't want the girls to end up mirroring this life of mine, in a place where nothing truly changes but the contours of your heart.

More than that, I want to know why Death seems to walk beside me like a companion now rather than prowling behind like a shadowy specter. Surely the answers await me in Uncle Fred's funeral parlor, where he readies the deceased for their journeys home. Thomas would've gone to his grave rolling cigars for other men to smoke, but now he will one day inherit Uncle Fred's mortuary business and then he won't be under the thumb of anyone.

I don't know what it is like to be the wife of an undertaker. I only know that I need to remember how it was to keep Death at a distance.

I kneel, kiss my fingertips, and brush them against the *H* etched into the cold stone.

And I rise from the wet ground without saying good-bye.