

# Prologue



*A thousand cannon burst at once and lightning split the sky,  
exploding gnarled branches of Garden's Gate's two-hundred-year-  
old oak, planted before the Revolution was a glint in Patriots' eyes.  
Surely that storm was God speaking—shouting judgment—across  
No Creek and the world in a tornado of fire and wind and rain.*

*By His mercy, sheets of pelting rain quenched the flames that  
shot up in the tree before the house caught fire. But it never kept  
that oak from crashing through the attic roof to slam open a door  
into a world none of us knew, one that would forever change  
our lives and what we'd long believed true about No Creek, the  
Belvideres, and ourselves. I reckon a violent, sudden storm can  
do that—rattle old bones and raise ghosts from the dead.*

FROM THE DIARY OF CELIA PERCY  
NO CREEK, NORTH CAROLINA



# Chapter One



MARCH 1944

NO CREEK, NORTH CAROLINA

Despite the raging midnight storm soaking her to the skin, fourteen-year-old Celia Percy helped Chester, her eleven-year-old brother, drag a heavy tarp from the barn, through the house, and up the attic stairs, doing their best to shield nearly two hundred years of Belvidere ghosts and treasures from pelting ice and rain.

But it wasn't until the stark light of day that the attic gave up its secrets. Even then, in the streaming late-winter sun, Celia wasn't sure she could believe her eyes.

"It's a room—a whole room under the eaves been sealed off somehow." She whistled, gooseflesh creeping up her pink arms.

"You reckon Miz Hyacinth ever knew about this place? Or Miss Lill?" Chester, brown eyes wide, pulled the rain-soaked tarp from some small and ancient chests in the middle of the narrow room, barely twelve by three feet, set against the stone chimney.

"Never said—at least not to me. Don't know how they could have known. There's no door." Celia could hardly believe such a mystery

room existed. They'd been living at Garden's Gate with Miss Lill for over three years and never heard of such a thing.

"Look here—there's a door. Been sealed off, is all." Chester, with skinny, winter-pale arms, pulled aside a rotted ceiling-to-floor drapery to reveal a door in the wall. "Locked." He jiggled the knob. "Been plastered over from the other side."

"Why would anybody do that?" Celia couldn't fathom.

Chester raised his eyebrows, pushing dark-brown hair from his forehead. "It's a mystery."

Celia caught her breath, thrilled to her core. "Sure enough."

"Let's see what's in those trunks."

There was nothing Celia wanted more than to rummage through those trunks, but it was up to her to see that she and Chester got to school on time. *Mama'll have my head if she learns we skipped—even for this.* "After school. We have to wait till after school."

"We can't leave with this hole in the roof."

"Doesn't look like rain today. Let's cover this stuff up best we can. We'll need Olney Tate to help with the roof anyway. I'll leave word with Pearl Mae at the store, ask him to stop by after school."

"But, Celia—"

"Don't 'but Celia' me. You know that's what Mama'd say. I don't want Pearl phoning her up tellin' tales, worrying her. Mama's got enough on her plate, what with Daddy in the hospital all banged up. So be sure to wear your jacket this morning. Pearl Mae will be watching the bus stop from the store and report every word to her mama and ours. Besides, no point catching your death."

Chester grimaced. "I guess."

"If Mama thinks we're not doing right, she'll get the next train out of Norfolk, and then where will Daddy be?"

Their mama had feared leaving them alone, what with Miss Lill in England and Ida Mae away at her sister's in New York. But their daddy's only chance of getting his job back in the shipyard was if he made a clean recovery.

"He needs you, Mama, he does," Celia had assured her. "We'll be all right. What can go wrong in a week or two?"

Celia had every intention of walking the straight and narrow while her mama and Miss Lill were away. *Can I help it if trouble trails me?* It was not a new lament.

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Nobody'd expected such a storm in the middle of March—not snow, but freezing rain in torrents and wind to rival twisters.

“Mmm, mmm. Ides of March, that's what they call it,” Olney Tate, longtime handyman for Garden's Gate and anyone else who needed him, mused when he stopped by after Celia and Chester had returned from school. “Winter's last hurrah before the spring thaw. Usually means snow in these hills.”

“Snow would have been better,” Chester conceded.

“Not that much snow.” Olney shook his head.

“It was the lightning split the tree in two. We saw it out the back kitchen window, plain as day. Like an act of God.” Celia thrilled to the drama of it all.

“Good thing you and Chester hadn't gone upstairs to bed. A tree that size, you never know—could have gone through to the second floor.”

Celia shuddered, not wanting to think on that. “We can't leave this hole in the roof.”

“Or that tree in the attic,” Chester worried.

“Reckon not,” Olney sighed, pushing his billed cap back on his head. “Let's take a look at that attic, see what needs doing.” He climbed the stairs and walked the length of the room, a good portion of which was cut off by the giant tree. Turning from side to side, he took its measure. “Let me talk with the brothers down to Saints Delight. We'll get two or three come up here and pull those limbs out, cut up that trunk, get a tarp on the roof till I can mend it. What's left in the yard can wait a day or so. You two stay out of this mess till we get things secure. Don't want any limbs fallin' and crackin' your skulls.”

“But we were gonna—” Chester began but Celia elbowed him. “Ow! What'd you do that for?”

Celia drew in a sharp breath. *Little brothers are impossible.*

“You were gonna what?” Olney asked, fixing his best eye on Chester.

“Nothing,” Celia intervened, stepping between Olney and Chester.

“Celia Percy.” Olney’s graying brows rose. “Don’t you be messin’ with me. Your ears turn pink when you don’t tell straight, you know that.”

Celia grimaced. “We just want to investigate.”

“Investigate what?” Olney looked as if he didn’t trust either of the two before him.

“The room!” Chester piped up, unable to keep quiet. “There’s a secret room—trunks and everything. Come see!”

Now that the cat was out of the bag, Celia couldn’t contain herself. She worked with Chester, pulling aside the heavy tarp to reveal the narrow hallway down the far end of the attic, its front wall made to look like the end of the room.

“Well, I never,” Olney wondered aloud, reverence in his whisper.

“No telling how long this has been here—built with the house, I guess.” Celia’d been wondering, thinking on it all day. “And these old trunks—we haven’t even looked in them yet. Why would all this stuff be here? Why would they seal it off so nobody’d see?”

“Just that reason. So nobody’d see, nobody’d know. I swan. I never really believed my daddy or his, God rest their souls.” Olney shook his head, running his hand down the grayed stubble on his brown chin. “Been hidden . . . must be more’n eighty years. I vowed it couldn’t be so, knowing old man Belvidere ran the Klan here. What a torn-apart family.”

“What couldn’t be so?” Chester pushed.

“What you’re lookin’ at is a hidey-hole—a room in a safe house, a place where those on the run could hide till it was safe to move on.”

“Run from what? Safe from what?” Chester demanded, but Celia felt the knowing grow.

“Slavery.” Olney nearly spat the word. “Slavery, and slave catchers.”