

Prologue

MID-OCTOBER 1940

WETHERILL PICKERING'S CHRISTMAS TREE FARM

NEW SCRIVELSBY, VIRGINIA

It was late in the season. Harold hand-dug holes while Ginny followed by setting the two-year-old bushes, filling the holes with topsoil and compost, and tamping back earth. They were both hauling water to the upper field for their biggest-ever order of plantings—northern highbush blueberry bushes—when they heard the cough of the rusted green van. Tailpipe smoking, a plume of red dust trailed as the van jerked to a stop in front of their two-story farmhouse down the hill.

Mr. Skipwith, the Pickering's longtime friend and lawyer, stepped from the car, followed by a broad-shouldered boy half a sandy head taller and dressed in a blue work shirt and dungarees, belted tight at the waist. Even from that distance Ginny saw that the boy looked half man, as if he could own the place.

"That's him." Harold swiped the sweat from his brow on his shirt sleeve and turned the bill of his cap frontward.

"Who?"

"The juvenile delinquent Dad's taking on from Mr. Skipwith."

"The hired boy."

"Don't romanticize. Keep your distance. He's no good."

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Which intrigued Ginny all the more. “How do you know? What’s he done?”

“No idea.”

“Then why are you down on him? You don’t even know him.”

Harold tossed his shovel into the back of their work wagon. “Don’t need to. You don’t get broadsided by the law and hauled in for community service for no good reason. You mind your business, Ginny Dee. Behave yourself and keep away, if you know what’s good for you.”

If her older, bossy brother had handed Ginny a gold-leaf-engraved invitation to latch on to the new boy, he couldn’t have roused her curiosity more. Ginny pulled off her worn work gloves, stuffed them into the back pockets of her dungarees, and smoothed her auburn sun-kissed braids down the sides of her head. She wished for all the world she could sneak in the back door for a good wash before dinner, maybe even change into that dress Mama was after her to wear half the time. But there was no way and no time.

They unhitched Romeo, the most obliging mule in all of Virginia, and backed the wagon into the barn just as Mr. Skipwith’s van pulled back onto the lane. Ginny left Harold quick as she could and snuck in the back door, careful not to let the screen door slam, tiptoeing through the kitchen and heading for the back stairs, determined to change clothes.

Harold followed on her heels, slamming the door behind him.

“Harold? Ginny Dee?” Mama called from the front room. “Come in here and meet Curtis.”

Ginny could have kicked Harold in the shins, but he grinned as if he knew just what she’d been thinking, pleased as punch to have thwarted her plans.

“I’ll be down in a minute, Mama,” Ginny called, almost to the stairs, but Harold grabbed hold of her shoulders and steered her into the front room, much against the will of her feet. Being four years older and fully grown gave him advantages Ginny couldn’t match.

Daddy held out his arm to draw them in. “Ginny Dee, Harold,

we want you to meet Curtis Boyden. Curtis will be living and working with us here for the next year or so.”

Shy and blushing, Ginny reached her hand out to welcome the new boy.

“Year?” Harold dropped his hands from his sister’s shoulders. “I thought we said through planting the blue spruce come spring.”

“We’ll be needing more help than that,” Mama intervened, determined, and brooking no back talk. “And Curtis needs a place to stay near Leesburg.”

“How come? For court?” Harold countered.

“Harold,” Daddy warned, but it was too late. Cold came into Curtis’s eyes.

“Curtis, let’s get you settled,” Mama directed. “You’ll share a room with Harold.”

Harold’s mouth dropped open. “I thought he was going to sleep in the barn. All the seasonal workers do that.”

“It will soon be too cold for that.” Mama didn’t look at Harold, but Daddy did, and the look was hard. “Come with me, Curtis.”

Harold started to follow but Daddy called him back and lowered his voice once Curtis left the room. “Harold, Ginny Dee, you need to understand that from this minute Curtis will be treated as part of our family.”

“Family—and in my room? He’s a court kid.”

“His father died last year and his mother’s hospitalized in a sanitarium with tuberculosis. She’s not likely to make it. Curtis was charged with stealing food for him and his younger brother. They had nothing to eat. This is the least we can do.” Daddy was like that, always ready to help anybody who needed it, kids most of all.

Harold looked away.

“Where’s his little brother now? Will he come here too?” Ginny would like a younger brother, maybe trade in Harold.

“A cousin took him in. She can’t take both, so Curtis is with us. I expect you both to treat him well. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Ginny nodded.

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“Harold?”

Harold’s mouth opened as if he was about to object, but he closed it and nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Daddy laid his hands on both their shoulders. “That’s settled.”

If only it had been.