

## Prologue

### The Philippines—1943

The shouting of the Japanese guards awakened Sergeant Aaron Timmons, but his survey of the prison yard revealed nothing.

“Everybody here?” he whispered.

“What’s going on?” a voice from the bunk above him asked.

Aaron ignored the question while the men in his group murmured their names. They were one short.

“Where’s Whitehead?” Aaron asked.

A young private from New Mexico kicked the still form beside him. “Dead, I think.”

Aaron shrugged. Whether the man died or not made little difference to him—the body was accounted for. If one man escaped, the other nine in his group would face execution. Tonight, they would live.

The guards dragged a prisoner across the muddy yard. Sweat pouring off the man’s face glinted in the light of the full moon. The constant creak of the bunks ceased as those who remained human enough to care heard the pleas for mercy. They waited for the screams to begin. In the morning, another body would be added to the fifty or sixty who died of disease and despair during the night. Aaron and his men would dig the shallow pit for their emaciated remains.

Aaron rolled over and dozed until an agonizing wail chilled the sultry air.

“Let the dead bury the dead,” he chanted in his attempt to block the sound.

He was not a religious man, yet the words he had read that afternoon in Corporal Lowell’s New Testament echoed in his mind. *Let the dead bury the dead.*

The screaming intensified.

*Let the Dead Bury the Dead*

Between malaria and dysentery, Aaron felt as dead as the prisoners he buried. Perhaps that was why he and his men, the sickest and most wasted of the walking, were chosen for the detail. What other disease could they catch?

*Let the dead bury the dead.*

The man screaming was lucky. A few hours of torture, a shot to the back of the head and his suffering would end. The living had no hope, no relief from the fevers, the diarrhea, the toil, the beatings. Some men gave up and refused to eat the handful of worm-infested rice given them. Within days they became a meal for feral dogs and the stench of rotting flesh in Aaron's nostrils.

Aaron clamped his palms over his ears. Why fight death? What had he to go home to? He had walked out on his wife and never answered her letter telling him he had a baby daughter.

*Let the dead bury the dead.*

He was as lifeless as Corporal Lowell. Yesterday, he rolled his friend's body into a swampy burial pit with no more thought or care than if he had removed a dead animal from the road. Lowell died for him—executed for stealing quinine from a Japanese officer, quinine for Aaron's malaria.

The cries became unbearable.

"Let the dead bury the dead," Aaron murmured.

He prayed for his body to grow cold like those he buried. Let the dogs drag his body from the burial pit. Better to die than try to make up for the pain he had caused. Better to die than see the disappointment in the eyes of his child he had never held or acknowledged. His wife named the baby Grace.

*Grace. The fragrant flower of hope.* Where had the phrase come from? He banged his head against the edge of his bunk to stop the thought. In this hell, hope drove men mad. Yet, the words flowed. *I came upon a flow'r with petals pale and dewy leaf. The flower God christened Grace.*

"No," he moaned. Better to die than go insane. "Let the dead bury the dead. Let the dead bury the dead."

A cloud slipped over the moon. Across the compound, a shot ended the screaming. A man whimpered somewhere in the barracks. Another coughed. Aaron drew his legs to his chest and in the moonlight, rocked to his chant.

"Let the dead bury the dead."

## **Chapter 1**

Every spring and fall when I was a child, Gypsies passed through our county and camped in an area known then as the Cottonwood Flats. They came with their rusted cars and trailers, lit their fires on the banks of the river and stayed until they ran out of work or were run off. On the Gypsies' arrival, the small children of Iron Mound, Oklahoma hovered near their mothers, while the young men, itching to be free from toiling in the fields, sneaked away at night to hear their fortunes told by exotic women in long black skirts.

How much of that time is actual memory and how much I absorbed from stories told during holiday gatherings and late night reflections, I'm not certain, but I remember early March of 1945 when I first met Sam. It was the day I learned about my father. The day my grandpa found the moonshiners' still.

I was six. And a half. At that age, those half years were as important as the number itself. Grandpa had kept me home from school because I woke up that morning with a cough. Since Mama's tuberculosis, he fussed over every little tickle in my chest. His closet became a refuge where my sadness and loneliness couldn't find me in the months following her death. The opening where he hung his clothes wasn't much wider than a regular door, but the closet went deeper and was filled with the treasure of suitcases and boxes of dresses, hats and shoes that once belonged to my grandmother. I loved to poke through her things.

Grandpa told me to stay in bed, but by midafternoon I was fidgety and sneaked into his closet. At the time, I didn't realize finding the snapshot of my parent's wedding day would spark a longing for a father. I'd never met him. Nor had I been particularly curious. I simply grabbed the photograph from the bottom of a shoe box, stuffed it into the bib of my overalls and scrambled

out into the blustery afternoon before my grandfather caught me and sent me back to my room.

His front yard had a sprawling elm tree. I settled onto the rickety floor of a tree house built by my best friend John Caleb Parker. I pulled the photograph from my overalls. In the fuzzy image caught forever in black and white, Mama was dressed in a wedding gown, laughing, and dancing with my father. He was darker, his black hair shining. Because of his soldier's uniform, I imagined him a hero, which was why I'd never seen him. He had gone to war. Someday he'd march down our driveway, his medals sparkling. Someday he would wave to me and call, "Gracie Timmons, come here and give me a hug." By then the lady from the county would have confessed she made a huge mistake—my mother was alive, pretty like she was before she became sick. Just as in the snapshot, my father would take Mama in his arms, and they would dance to the buzz of locusts until sunset.

My eyes stung with tears. Everything around me became as out of focus as the photograph. Praying was new to me, something Grandpa taught me, and until that day my prayers were the *Now, I lay me down to sleep* sort. This one was different, specific. I prayed my father would be standing in front of me once I finished with the all important 'Amen,' such prayers a silly idea only to grownups.

I cracked open my eyelids and blinked. At the end of the driveway, a man stood inspecting our mailbox. He had the same black hair and dark eyes as in the picture. No medals. He probably had those in his pocket. When he saw me and waved, I shyly raised my hand. That was when I noticed the patterned scarf around his neck.

A Gypsy! I ducked behind a branch. I had waved to a Gypsy.

I'd never seen one this close, but John Caleb had told me enough to give me delightful shivers. Not that I believed his tales of Gypsies kidnapping children and concocting hexes, but neither did I feel the need to prove him wrong. I skidded down the trunk and sprinted to the backdoor where I pressed my face into the dusty screen.

"Grandpa." I looked over my shoulder in terror. The Gypsy had followed me. "Grandpa, hurry!" Because of my sore throat, the plea came out more of a squeak than the scream I hoped it to be.

I let the screen door slam, breaking my grandfather's most hallowed rule, and scrambled through the kitchen into his bedroom. He wasn't there. The backdoor creaked. The Gypsy was inside. I flailed past the clothes in Grandpa's closet and piled cardboard cartons atop an old suitcase to build a wobbly fort. Afraid to breathe, I slumped to the floor. My feet banged to the rhythm of my

pumping heart. Grandpa had told me this practice was a bad habit. Until then, I thought him fussy. No more. I grabbed my feet in horror as his line of suits and shirts were swept away.

The wall of boxes collapsed. A hand reached through the gloom. Cold fingers wrapped around my ankle and pulled me toward the opening. I rolled onto my back to kick blindly with my free leg forcing the Gypsy to release me with a yowl that got Grandpa's hound dog to barking. In the commotion, I crabbed deeper into the closet, only to have the Gypsy grab the back of my overalls. I shrieked and thrashed until one of my shoes flew off and bounced against the wall.

"Dadgummit, girl. Now stop that. What's got into you?"

I caught a whiff of pipe tobacco and twisted around. "Grandpa?"

"Who'd you think it'd be?"

"The Gypsy?"

"Gypsy? Where?"

I pointed a shaky finger in the direction of the yard.

"You go back to bed," he said.

He bolted from the room. I wasn't about to miss out on a fight. I scrambled for my misplaced shoe. By the time I caught up, Grandpa had the Gypsy backed against the chicken yard fence. The hens had fled to the other side of their pen in a cloud of dust and feathers. Above their squawking, I heard Grandpa threatening to call the sheriff.

The Gypsy held out his empty hands to prove his innocence. "May I be trampled by my father's horses if one of your chickens disappears into one of my pots."

"I've heard that one before," Grandpa said.

"And I hear you are the big man at school."

"I'm president of the school board, so?"

"You have a hole in your water tank."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I can fix it."

Grandpa rubbed his forehead as if the Gypsy had given him a headache. He did the same thing with me whenever I asked him too many questions. Grandpas could have bad habits as much as anyone.

"What do you want for it?" he asked.

The Gypsy removed his hat. "Teach me to read."

"What?" Grandpa's laugh erupted through his nose. "Never heard of a Gypsy wanting to do an honest day's work, let alone read."

I tugged at Grandpa's overalls in warning and whispered, "John Caleb said the Gypsies'll put a hex on you."

“I want to learn for my poor babies’ sake,” the Gypsy said. “That is good, no?”

It wasn’t much of a hex. Nothing happened that I could see except Grandpa’s face softened a bit.

“I can read,” I said. “Mama taught me. If she was here, she could teach you, but she died.”

The Gypsy’s gaze flicked from Grandpa over to me for less than a second and no more, but in that moment I saw a sadness that reflected mine. I missed Mama, her smile, the way she hugged me just tight enough. She hadn’t died of tuberculosis like the lady from the county said. She died of a broken heart, a cliché, I know, but she did. She said those very words as she was taken away.

I leaned against Grandpa for comfort and let his arm find its way around my shoulder. The warmth of the day faded quickly this time of March, along with the fun of sneaking out of bed. My throat felt raw as if I had swallowed a handful of sandburs.

Grandpa nodded at me. “I got my hands full trying to find a teacher for this girl. The dang Parker twins ran off the one we had. Tied her up in the outhouse.”

The rest of our class watched in horror. John Caleb’s brothers were too big for any of us to stop them.

“A nice hen would fill my babies’ bellies tonight,” the Gypsy said. “They’re sick and hungry.”

“You come back tomorrow and fix my tank, then you can have your chicken.”

“That is good. I will go now and come back tomorrow.”

Like the hex, the fight was a disappointment. I should have stayed in bed.

After the Gypsy left, Grandpa felt my forehead. “We’ll go see Young Doc MacKay in the morning if you’re not any better.”

“I’m better, already.”

He smiled at my lie as he bundled me into a blanket in his car. His milk cans were loaded in back. Twice a day he delivered our milk to the Iron Mound Children’s Home, a dark stately building atop a hill scoured by prairie wind and children’s feet. I loved riding with Grandpa, but the fear of being left at the orphanage hung over me. I stayed in the car while he hauled the milk into the orphanage’s kitchen. After Mama died, I was left in such a place where there were too many children and too little affection. In the manner of bureaucracy, no one told me my mother had disclosed the name of my father’s father until I was brought before a stranger with a weathered face and a clinging sweet aroma of pipe tobacco which, for some reason, assured me I would be loved.

On the way home, we took the bone-rattling river road, a short cut which usually added thirty minutes due to the route's neglect by the county. Grandpa preferred to have the bolts shaken from his car rather than contend with the traffic on the main highway. His idea of traffic was anything more than three vehicles.

We passed an abandoned tarpaper shack before our car clattered across a rickety wood-planked bridge. I raised my feet off the floor in hopes of making our car lighter. On the other side, a circle of trailers were parked in the Cottonwood Flats. Gypsy women in long black skirts looked up from their fires to shout unintelligible words to their offspring who, like other children, pretended not to hear. Men smoking cigarettes squatted near a string of horses. None of them was the Gypsy who came to our house.

"What's his name?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Our Gypsy. They got names like ordinary folks?"

"They've got more names than Carter's got liver pills, but yours didn't say."

A fit of coughing overtook me to which Grandpa responded by ordering me back under the blanket. I pulled the photograph from the bib of my overalls to hold in front of his face.

"What's my daddy's name?"

"Where'd you find that?"

"The closet."

"Thought I told you to play somewhere else. Someplace not so dark and musty."

"You told me it was too cold outside."

"Aaron," Grandpa said, giving up. "Your mama ever talk about him?"

"Nope."

"Not surprised." The car meandered toward the ditch. Grandpa whipped the steering wheel to the left, taking us back to the middle of the road. He said nothing more and drove past our house to the orchard on the hill where he stopped to pull me from my cocoon. He set me on the ground beside a peach tree and snapped a twig from a branch.

"See this? Looks dead. There's nothing here but gray trunks and branches. No blooms, no leaves, nothing."

I wiped my nose and studied the twig.

"That's how life is," he said, handing me the twig. "Sometimes it's pretty darn dreary and lonely. I know that for a fact. There'll be times you don't think you can make it through the winter 'cause it hurts so bad, but eventually spring comes and the orchard blooms. There's nothing we can

change about any of it, except keep believing and waiting. But I promise you I will. Spring'll come."

I couldn't see how this had much to do with my father so I asked, "Where's my daddy?"

Grandpa let out one of those long breaths meant to put me off.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"He got all mixed up and forgot who he was supposed to love. It hurt your mama awful bad."

Remembering to love Mama came as easily as remembering my name. And I was only six. And a half. "How can a grownup forget something like that?"

"Don't know, but he took off."

"Did he forget me, too?" Afraid of the answer, I asked another question. "Are you mad at him?"

"Doesn't have anything to do with mad. More to do with disappointment. I love my boys. Always will." He fiddled with his pipe and eventually lit it. "No use getting into it." He took a couple of puffs and patted me on my head. "It all happened before you were born. Do you remember living here?" He swung an arm in the direction of a house over the hill.

"Nope."

He'd asked me before and shown me the place. I thought it a sad house and hid my eyes whenever we passed it.

"You did," he said, "until about a year and a half ago. Then one day your mama up and left. Didn't take much more than you and a few clothes. Left a note saying she had a job in Dallas and she'd write as soon as she got settled, but she never did. How did ya'll end up in St. Louis?"

The memories of why my mother and I had been living in a place haven't to rats and cockroaches and people abandoned to sorrow were too murky to answer. Each time I shrugged away his questions. I remembered little before Mama became sick.

I jammed my hands on my hips. Grandpa was weaseling again. "Where's my daddy?"

"Last I heard, the Philippines when the Japanese invaded."

"Where's that?"

"Clear on the other side of the world."

"Farther than St. Louis?"

"Yep. A lot."

"Will he ever remember me?"

Grandpa sighed. "The army don't know if he's alive. Nobody knows. They say he's probably dead. I'm praying he's not."



Dead was an ugly word. I had yet to get past the loneliness of my mother's abandonment for that was what death meant to me.

He meant to help me understand my loss. Yet winter seemed to have settled over him as well. He shrank inside his denim coat. As he helped me into his car, he nodded at the photo in my hand.

"One thing about your daddy, he's a good looking man with those brown eyes and black hair. He got that from his mama. She was Shawnee." He patted me on the head. "Tell you what. Brownie didn't come up this evening. I bet you she's got a new calf. Let's go find her."

He steered us away from my daddy as surely as he steered us away from the ditch.

"Okay."

"Promise you'll let me take you to Young Doc MacKay and you won't fuss."

He'd caught me fair and square. I gave up without an argument and crawled back into my blanket to watch the sun set the sky above the horizon on fire. Could my father see the sunset halfway round the world, the same as me? I wouldn't forget him.

"What you gonna name your calf?" Grandpa asked. He'd given me my own milk cow for Christmas.

I didn't have to think long. "Peaches."

He laughed. "What if it's a bull calf?"

I smiled up at him, pleased I had made him happy again. "It won't be."

I must have gone to sleep after that. When I woke, it was dark outside. I was alone. Grandpa had gone to find Brownie without me. Condensation fogged the windshield. I cleared a spot with my sleeve to see his lantern twinkling through the trees.

I scrambled from the car. "Grandpa?" The night swallowed my voice.

A bitter wind whipped the tree branches into an eerie dance. I followed a cattle trail by moonlight until the path unraveled like a frayed piece of yarn. Each strand ended in a tangle of brambles where only rabbits or possums could go. All the straggly blackjacks looked alike, crooked and bare.

I was lost. My attempt at praying hadn't worked out too well, yet I tried again.

In answer to my plea, a voice cut through the darkness.

"How could you do this to me? On my own land." It was Grandpa and he was angry.

"You're flat stupid if you think I'm planning on milking cows for the rest of my life."

"It's that or jail, again."

“Go home Dad. This isn’t any of your concern.”

He called Grandpa *Dad*. My father? He had come home.

I sprinted in their direction. As I neared a ring of lanterns and several trucks, I stopped dead. Grandpa was arguing with my uncle Rag and three other men standing by a fire with barrels and big pots.

Uncle Rag looked nothing like the photo of my father. He had curly hair and something was wrong with one of his eyes. He didn’t live with us, and I only saw him once, which was fine with me. He’d wanted to borrow Grandpa’s car. Grandpa wouldn’t let him, told him now that he was out of jail he needed to get a job. Rag yelled and stomped around. I headed for Grandpa’s closet and stayed there until my uncle left.

“I was hoping you’d learned your lesson,” Grandpa said.

One of the other men pointed a gun at Grandpa’s chest. “Nobody’s going to jail, old man.”

“I’ll take care of him,” Uncle Rag said, easing the barrel to the side. “Go home, Dad.”

“I want all of you out of here by morning,” Grandpa said, his voice fading.

“All right. Now, go.”

If I had known which direction Grandpa’s car was, I would have flown to it. The last thing I wanted was for Uncle Rag to catch me. I picked my way through the low buck brush until I came to a fallen tree where I dropped to my knees. From there I hoped to follow Grandpa back to the car.

Grandpa stopped a few yards from me to wrap his arms around his chest. As he did so, his flashlight illuminated his pinched face and his struggling to catch his breath.

“Grandpa?” I whispered.

“Gracie?”

I raised my head.

“Stay down,” he said.

I ducked behind the log. He staggered over to the tree and sat beside me.

“You all right?” I asked.

“Brownie has a heifer.” A diversion even I could detect, but I let him get by with it for a moment. I wanted to make him feel better and my questioning wasn’t going to do that.

“I told you Peaches was gonna be a girl,” I said.

He moaned and grabbed at his chest. “Go to the car.”

“But I don’t know which way.”

“Go.” His grip on his chest loosened.

I tugged on his sleeve. “My throat hurts.”

When he didn't move, I buried my face in his chest the way I did when I wanted to listen to his heart. I heard nothing but my own. The awareness that something terrible happened seeped under my skin like the cold. What was I to do? Go to the strangers or try to find the car?

My hands and feet grew numb while I contemplated the question. The beam of Grandpa's flashlight grew dimmer.

"Hey, old man, you spying on us?"

I drew my shivering legs into my jacket and huddled closer to Grandpa. The man who had the rifle poked Grandpa with the barrel.

"Don't hurt him," I whispered.

Grandpa fell to one side. The man stumbled backwards.

"I'll be," he muttered, then shouted, "Hey, the old man's dead, there's a kid here." No one answered him. He pointed a finger at me. "You stay here."

Where could I go? I was lost and too cold to run.

His calling to the others echoed in the clear night air as he sprinted back toward the fire.

I clung to Grandpa's jacket, hoping he'd wake up. A pebble landed next to me. At the light's edge, a hand waved me toward the darkness.

"Little one," a voice whispered. "Come here." The hand motioned again.

I moved to stand, but it signaled me to stay low. I hesitated—what if I followed and got into more trouble? Someone from the camp approached. As I watched his shadowy form, a cold terror paralyzed my breathing. I scrambled toward the waiting hands. They pulled me into a thicket and covered my mouth. If my sore throat would have let me scream, I would have pierced the night.

"Hey, kid?" the shadowy man called.

The man carrying me didn't answer, but jumped into a blackness that looked as if it had no bottom. He landed softly, tightened his grip on me and scrambled along a gully. His breathing coarsened, but he continued to hurdle logs and circle foggy sloughs until a horse snorted quietly.

"Shhh," he whispered to the animal.

As he lifted me onto the horse's back, I caught a glimpse of his sweaty face in the moonlight.

My Gypsy.

He wrapped his coat around me and swung himself up behind me.

"You have your Mama's heart," he said. He gently clucked to his horse.

"You remember my mama?"

He soothed my cheek with the back of his fingers. "Yes."

"She died of a broken heart, but nobody believes me."

"I do."

His remark struck the sorrow of my mother's death, and I buried my face in the crook of his elbow to sob.

I kept it there as I asked, "What's your name?"

He leaned over and whispered into my ear. "Sam."

Sam? A common, ordinary name? There were three Sams at our church alone. They were everywhere.

"Grandpa says Gypsies got more names than somebody's got pills."

"Ah. . . You call him Grandpa?"

"Uh huh."

"And to some he's known as Mr. Timmons, to others Henry, to his son, perhaps, Papa? See? One man and many names. So I'm Stefan to him, Sven to someone else. Eli to another."

"I get it," I said. "But I don't know what my daddy called him. He forgot me. I thought you were my daddy when I saw you. Are you going to be my daddy?"

"We must be quiet."

The shadowy man. I'd forgotten him. I leaned against Sam's chest as we rode in silence, Sam humming a strange tune to the rhythm of his horse's gait. Before I gave in to my exhaustion and fever, I wondered if I had been kidnapped by a Gypsy.

Then I remembered my grandpa, growing cold, and knew it no longer mattered.