



A PORT CITY

THEY SAY THE SEA makes some people sick. Its slow, billowing waves swelling beneath a ship make stomachs heave. But for Hannah Albury, this was unimaginable. It was land that made her sick. Sick near to dying.

She would have never left the sea had it not been for Miss Pringle at the orphanage — The Boston Home for Little Wanderers. How she detested that woman, with her thin, piercing voice that reminded Hannah of a needle.

The sickness started with *Go Forth Day*. *Go Forth* was the name that The Home for Little Wanderers called the day when girls who had reached their fourteenth year learned where they were to be sent. It was a day halfway between a graduation and an eviction.

The girls were considered too old to continue living off the charity of others and had to start earning their keep in the world. That day had arrived a year before for Hannah and a dozen other girls, but a scarlet fever epidemic had postponed it, giving them a reprieve. Now the scarlet fever was long gone, and it was time for them to leave.

The girls had all passed their fifteenth birthdays and sat waiting with this year's fourteen-year-olds to be called, one by one, into Miss Pringle's office and learn their destinies.

They sat in alphabetical order in a row of chairs. There were two As who came before Hannah: Lucy Abbott and Tilly Adams. The girls waited, whispering in excited voices to one another. Except for Hannah, who sat locked in silence.

Until this moment, the girls had indulged in a range of fantasies about who they really were, how some grievous mistake or cruel twist of fate had caused them, quite by accident, to become orphans. In their own minds, they had been products of wealthy, stylish families. Perhaps even royal families, as Sadie Crawford persisted in believing. Sadie was convinced

that her own mother was a princess from France, or sometimes Russia. When the girls went forth, they imagined that some of these errors would be redressed.

“Just wait and see, Bessie,” said Sadie, who sat next to Hannah in alphabetical order. “If I get sent up to one of those fine homes on Commonwealth Avenue, they will surely see that I have refinements most uncommon. And if they have a son, he might fall in love with me and then I can seek out my true mother because he will have enough money to help me find her —”

“Do you remember Martha Gilmore, Sadie?” Bessie responded, lost in her own inventions. “Well, Martha, she got a job in a hat shop down on Washington Street, and one day, the day she turned eighteen, actually, a man came in to buy a hat for his wife, and guess what?”

“What?” Sadie said.

“He fell in love with her and he divorced his wife and married her. Martha was so lovely and refined that he couldn’t help himself. He saw that she was much more than a mere salesgirl.”

“Divorce?” Sadie gasped. “Oh, I wouldn’t want anything like that — royalty doesn’t divorce.” Sadie turned to Hannah. “Don’t you agree, Hannah?”

There was a burst of giggles down the row of chairs.

“Why would you ask Hannah?” someone whispered.

Why indeed? Hannah thought. Hannah was not one to indulge in the favorite pastime of the girls at the home. These reveries of alternate lives fed the girls, nourished them, gave them hope. Hannah was not inclined toward dreams.

Lucy Abbott had just come out of Miss Pringle’s office. She was glowing.

“Where are you to go?” A very tiny girl, Cornelia Ellis, jumped up.

“There’s an opening for a scullery girl at that fancy gentlemen’s restaurant on Winter Street. If I do well, I might be able to work at the hatcheck desk. You know, where the men leave off their hats and coats.”

“Hats! Hats! That’s the answer!” Bessie exclaimed. “What did I tell you about Martha Gilmore! Oh,

you're on your way, Lucy! You always said you thought your father was a true Bostonian!"

"Yes, yes, high born, I think. Maybe a wool merchant." Lucy nodded.

"What better place to meet him than that fancy restaurant?"

Hannah settled back in her chair. She had no such thoughts, no such dreams of her parents. High born, low born, or anything else. It all seemed out of the realm of possibility that she had connections to anyone. She couldn't even imagine what to hope for in terms of her placement, and she felt her heart sink a bit as she watched Tilly Adams walk through Miss Pringle's office door. She would be next. Did it really matter where she might go?

But not ten minutes later, Hannah stood before Miss Pringle in stunned silence and marveled at how she could have ever been stupid enough to think that it wasn't important.

"Rules are rules." Miss Pringle sat erect behind her desk and sorted some papers that evidently pertained to Hannah. "The board of directors of the home has a policy about children who, upon reaching

the age of fourteen, seem unsuitable for domestic employment — and that you are unsuitable, have no doubts, Hannah. I could no more send you into the home of a Boston family of society” — she pronounced the word “so-sigh-it-tee,” so each syllable had a poisonous little ping to it — “than teach a cow how to fly!”

“But what about a position in a shop or —”

“Don’t interrupt. And, no, you are no more suitable for a shop than a position in a home.”

“Why not?” Hannah burst out.

Miss Pringle’s mouth settled into a firm line and she regarded Hannah with a look that seemed to say *Where should I begin?*

“I can read and write better than a lot of the girls here.” Hannah tried to keep her voice firm as her world reeled.

“So, I suppose, you think that you should be a stenographer or a social secretary?”

“Maybe.” Hannah spoke softly, barely concealing her defiance.

“No ‘maybe’ about it. Definitely not! For one thing you would have to be older for such a job. And

despite your writing skills, you are generally rather awkward. We can't have you going into a Boston home and spilling their dinners and breaking their Wedgwood." Hannah had no idea what Wedgwood was, but she hadn't spilled things *that* often. "So there will be no more of this talk. The board says that a child for whom placement cannot be found in Boston must be put on an orphan train."

"But I thought the whole point was that now that I am fifteen, I am too old to be considered an orphan? That is why the home is putting me out. So how can I be put on an orphan train?" Hannah was pleased with the logic of her argument. Miss Pringle was not.

Her eyes drilled into Hannah. "You see, Hannah," she barked. "That is precisely the problem. You know no boundaries. You argue, you challenge. Now, how can I send someone like you into a fine home or a decent shop?"

"But I'm not an orphan now. I'm too old."

"Not in Kansas you aren't," Miss Pringle said matter-of-factly and stood up to signal that the interview

had ended. “The next shipment is to depart within a week for Salina, Kansas.”

“Shipment?” Hannah said weakly.

“Yes, shipment of orphans.”

“Is anyone else from the home supposed to go? Will there be others?”

“No. We found suitable placements for them.”

Suitable. Why was she considered so unsuitable? She hated the word. It was not the first time she had heard it. Miss Pringle used it the most, but the other adults at the home had picked up on it. The domestic arts teacher, Miss Baker, had just said it the other day when Hannah had gone to comfort a newly arrived orphan girl with a fresh warm bun from the kitchen.

“You can’t just barge into the kitchen and take things without asking. That’s most unsuitable, Hannah!”

“Why? She’s hungry,” Hannah had replied.

“To question your elders is also unsuitable,” Miss Eakins, the home’s nurse, who happened to be walking by, had chimed in.

But Hannah now merely took a deep breath and asked Miss Pringle another question. “Is Kansas near the sea, ma’am?”

“Heavens, no! I took you for being brighter than that, child!” Miss Pringle glared at her, then in an acid voice said, “Certainly, not so bright as to match the brightness of your hair!”

The sun streaming through the window had ignited the red highlights of the unpinned hair that tumbled over Hannah’s shoulders like a cataract of flames. It was a peculiarity of her hair that the color changed with the light. On cloudy days drizzling with rain, it appeared dull, a guttering flame wrapped in fog. On a brilliant winter day with the sun reflecting off snow and glistening icicles, her hair was as dazzling as rubies. And if she were near the sea toward dawn or dusk in a gathering of shadows, her hair acquired a slightly greenish cast, like old copper.

In two quick steps, Miss Pringle strode to a bookshelf and fetched an atlas. Opening it to a map of the United States, she stuck her ink-stained index finger

on a spot in the middle and tapped it several times, then snickered. “It’s about as far from any sea as you could get.”

That was when Hannah felt the first strange twinge of the sickness.