



CHAPTER ONE

THE RAIN CAME AGAIN, harder this time. Charlotte pulled her knit hat tight, pushed up the collar of her gray wool coat, and stared through the chicken wire at the rabbits. Kate's prize rabbits.

She entered the pen and chose a plump one, furry and warm in her cold hands. Its heart thumped like a tiny sewing machine. Charlotte brought it into the dim barn and stroked its fur until it calmed, trusting. She hesitated a moment—*stealing from my own daughter*—then picked up the butcher knife.

When she cut the jugular, the sewing machine stopped. The muscles loosened and the body flopped open. Blood splattered and dripped from strands of Charlotte's white-blond hair. After stringing up the animal by its heels, she clipped the skin at the hind legs and pulled it down over the thighs and fat belly, turning it inside out like a glove.

A ribbon of dusty light slanting through the window illuminated the slick white body, front paws hanging together as if in prayer.

Charlotte lopped off the head. She'd chop it up later for chicken feed. The hide would serve as lining for a hat or mittens.

Two of the mousers darted from the shadows and rubbed against Charlotte's legs, mewling. Lulu and Ginger Cat. She ignored their pathetic cries. It was their job to keep rodents from the granary and compost heap. Best if they were hungry.

When she slit the carcass down the front—"oh!"—six tiny bodies slid into her hand, wriggling with life. Trembling, she closed the sink drain and pumped in water. She knew better. She should have palpated the rabbit's underside before cutting her open. She stared at the floating dead things. Not just one of Kate's rabbits, but seven.

Shaking off the guilt, Charlotte placed the butchered animal on the cutting board and sliced it into quarters. She scooped the babies from the sink and chopped them into unidentifiable pieces.

THE RAIN HAD SUBSIDED and the sun was low in the sky when Charlotte saw Kate pedaling down Orchard Lane toward the barn. Watching through the kitchen window, she marveled at how her daughter had grown from an awkward skinny girl into a lovely young woman, a slim figure in her knit sweater and wool skirt, pinky-white skin, long wispy blond hair.

"Saw your Kate in town yesterday," Ellie Jensen had said at the dry goods store that very morning. "All grown up now, so pretty. Reminds me of that Swedish actress, Ingrid Bergman. Same as you."

Charlotte smiled at the thought. What was that motion picture she and Thomas had last seen? *Intermezzo*. Back when they were carefree enough to afford a few hours at the picture show. She remembered that evening, that night. It had been so long now since desire stirred her. Damn war changed everything.

When Kate came in, Charlotte braced for an encounter.

Kate set her schoolbooks on the hall bench. "Mmm. Something smells good." She grabbed the vegetable basket. "Be right back."

Charlotte's mind raced with possible explanations. She had to speak with Thomas first. She needed him on her side.

Kate returned too soon with a basket of morels and spring greens. “I spied them in the woods on my way home.” She took her bounty to the deep porcelain sink and dumped it into the colander.

“Beautiful!” Charlotte reached for the basket. “I’ll take care of it. Why don’t you go on upstairs and get a start on your schoolwork. I’ll call you when supper’s ready.”

Kate happily picked up her books and hurried upstairs to her room.

Charlotte was setting the table when Thomas came through the back door. He flipped his straw hat up onto the hall shelf, took out his red handkerchief, and wiped his forehead, then breathed in deeply. “Ah, the aroma of Char’s kitchen.”

Thomas Christiansen was a lanky six-foot-three. In his early forties now, his sandy-colored hair was going a bit gray at the temples and crow’s feet crinkled the corners of his blue eyes. He put his face near Charlotte’s neck and sniffed playfully at her skin. “What you got cooking?”

She pulled away. “I have something to tell you.” Because he’d know as soon as she took it out of the pot. She could lie, say she trapped it or shot it. He’d believe her. Thomas believed anything she told him. But not Kate. Kate kept track of her rabbits. She knew exactly how many she had on a day-to-day basis, how many more she needed to pay for tuition at the university. Her piggy bank. Like stealing from her piggy bank.

Thomas turned to the sink to wash up under the pump.

Charlotte stirred the mushrooms into the stew, then put the cover back on the pot. “Olga cut off my credit at the butcher shop.”

He picked up the towel. “Why do you need credit? You have ration stamps.”

“I swapped them for kerosene and soap and toilet paper and so many other things. Oh, Thomas . . .” *Say it, just say it.* “I had to butcher one of Kate’s rabbits. She doesn’t know—”

“One of her rabbits? What about your chickens?”

“If we ate my chickens today, we wouldn’t have eggs tomorrow or the next day or the next. I need to put food on the table every single day, Thomas.”

“The eggs then. Why didn’t you trade the eggs for supper? Or cook them? We could be eating eggs tonight instead of—”

“They go just so far . . .” She couldn’t bring herself to tell him about the yarn.

“You could have made a vegetable soup—”

“Enough!” She whirled toward him.

He looked stricken. Oh, Thomas. He had no idea how difficult it was. It wasn’t her place to complain, it was her duty to keep the household going. The mama duck floating serenely on the surface, paddling like mad below. “Thomas, it’s what I had to do.”

He threw down the towel and left for the parlor, escaping into one of his books, no doubt. Charlotte lifted the stew pot from the cast-iron stove and set it on the wooden countertop. She stirred the juices with a bit of goat’s milk. One day this will be over. But until then, we do what we must.

When the rabbit was cooked through, Charlotte put a piece of meat on each plate, covered it with mushroom sauce, and added the wild greens. She called Kate and Thomas into the kitchen.

Kate was about to sit when she looked at her plate. “That’s a . . . is that one of my rabbits?” She stared at Charlotte.

“I’m sorry, Kate, but—”

“You killed one of my rabbits?” Her blue eyes blinked fast, but not fast enough to keep a few tears from falling.

When Thomas reached for her hand, Kate pulled away and rushed out the door. With an irritated glance toward Charlotte, Thomas stood and left.

Charlotte watched through the window, Thomas following Kate to the barn, the two of them off in their imaginary world.

Waiting for their return, Charlotte fussed about the kitchen, wiping counters, rearranging things, glancing every few moments

through the window. After half an hour, she scraped the plates of food back into the stew pot. All that trouble for nothing.

Finally, there they were, walking to the front of the house, Thomas's arm around Kate's shoulders. Charlotte heard the front door open and close, Kate's footsteps on the stairs.

Thomas came into the kitchen and stood over Charlotte, arms crossed. "It's not just the rabbit, it's the principle, that you didn't ask—"

"She wasn't here—"

"Selling rabbits, that's her savings. You know the university means the world to her."

Charlotte nodded as if she agreed, but she didn't. What was book learning in the face of putting food on the table? Kate would never make a good homemaker, and Thomas wasn't helping.

He reached for his chair as if to sit down.

"You need to get to that county meeting."

Eyeing the clock, his shoulders dropped. He went to the back hall and picked up his hat.

"I've got Dorothy's letter for you." She pulled it from the pocket of her housedress.

He raised a hand, dismissing her. "The growers must have something better to offer, else why would they have asked for the meeting?"

"And what if they don't?" Charlotte untied her apron. "I'm going with you."

"What?" He swung around. "Women don't go to these meetings."

"Then I'll be the first." She grabbed her hat and gloves, opened the back door, and led the way along the flagstone path to the garage.

Thomas liked to please, that was the problem. He wasn't one to stir up trouble even if it was for his own good. He didn't care much for business either. He was happiest with his books, reading made-up stories and poetry.

He ground the Chevy pickup into gear, and they lurched wordlessly down the bumpy gravel lane. The sun had set and bits of pur-

ple lingered on the horizon. Sitting on the other end of the cracked leather seat, Charlotte held her gloved hands quiet in her lap.

“What’s the point of you coming?” He glanced her way.

“Watch the road.”

“Damn it, woman.” He stared straight ahead. “This risky plan of yours . . .” He gripped the steering wheel so tightly the horn blared.

Charlotte flinched but didn’t contradict him.

At the end of Orchard Lane, Thomas turned south onto County Trunk Q. They were quiet now, skirting the bay where a pale moon climbed through clouds. Fishing boats creaked gently against their moorings. A single gull swept over the water, piercing the evening with a shrill call. Frogs, crickets, they all had their say. These creatures didn’t care about boys dying, ships lurking. If we disappeared, they wouldn’t even notice Charlotte thought, staring out the window. This cold beautiful world didn’t give a damn.

When they reached Highway 57, Thomas shifted into high gear and continued south toward the county seat.

Approaching Sturgeon Bay was like entering a new world. With the need for more and more warships, the shipyard had attracted thousands of workers, and the close-knit harbor community had been overtaken with acres of prefabricated houses and men from all parts.

Thomas pulled into the gravel lot of the Door County Courthouse. He wasn’t smiling. Charlotte didn’t wait for him to help her down from the truck, but she did wait for him to lead the way. The men would respect him more for it.

As soon as Thomas opened the door to the meeting room, Charlotte felt eyes on her. Indeed, she was the only woman. Though board members nodded toward her, she noted the looks they exchanged with each other.

Mike Peterson had an oversized presence that reminded everyone he owned Big Mike’s Lumber & Building Supply. With all the new construction, he must be rolling in money.

Ole Weborg, who ran the bait and tackle shop, was a short, stocky fellow, red in the face with sunburn or windburn, depending on the season. Friendly to everyone, he knew the run of the fish, the time to go out and the time to be patient. Likable guy, but more cautious than wise, Charlotte thought.

Bo Jenson, county administrator, the only man in a suit, was friendly in a political way, pumping hands, asking to hear about business and family, smiling, winking.

The door opened and Sheriff Bauer, big thick-chested German, came in uniform, gun in his holster. And right behind him, Pastor Duncan, tall, calm. There were other members Charlotte didn't know, nine in all.

Charlotte followed Thomas to the audience section, where growers sat in metal folding chairs, not members of the board but here because the topic was the harvest. Most were in bib overalls stained with whatever kind of produce they grew. Thomas's stains were pink from years of cherries. At Charlotte's approach, the growers stood respectfully. Thomas took off his hat and shook hands with the men and held out a chair for Charlotte. After they were seated, Thomas pulled his empty pipe from a pocket and sucked on it as if it held tobacco.

Once the board members had taken their places at the front table, voices quieted. Someone coughed. Cigarette smoke curled up through the dusty light, giving the room a sickly pallor.

Bo banged his gavel. "We've called this meeting at the request of the growers." He scanned the audience, about twenty men. "So what do you have to say?"

Ralph Sundgren stood and cleared his throat. He had cherries in southern Door. "I'm not ashamed to say we need help." He regarded the board. "Our best men and boys are off to war. The rest, taking jobs right here at the shipyard. Migrant workers too, Mexicans and Indians. And why shouldn't they? Steady work, good pay."

"Even the girls will be down here once school's out," said Gus, who owned an apple orchard. "And who's left to pick the fruit?"

“I barely made it through ’43,” shouted Artie, a major grower up near Sister Bay. “Another year like that’ll drive me out of business.”

“It’s not just the harvest,” Ralph said. “We need men *now*, to prune and spray. The county’s gotta subsidize workers so they’ll come back to the farms.”

Other growers called out, echoing Ralph’s words.

Bo banged the gavel. “The county can’t afford to match the wages at the shipyard.”

“Then tax ’em!” Artie pumped a fist. “All those laborers coming in, getting wealthy right under our noses. Tax ’em to pay the pickers. Hell, they make so much they won’t even notice.”

Mike put out his hands. “We can’t institute a tax without a public vote. Next election isn’t until September.”

“Then what are you gonna do?” Ralph challenged.

Charlotte touched Thomas’s hand. He tucked his pipe into his pocket and slowly stood. The room quieted. He glanced about, taking his time, then cleared his throat and spoke. “The Army’s going to be bringing in German prisoners, setting up camps.”

A murmur surged through the crowd. “What’d you say?” Faces stared up at his tall frame.

“Prisoner-of-war camps, here in Wisconsin,” he said a bit louder. “The prisoners can do the work.”

Charlotte breathed in deeply and sat up straight.

“Are you saying we get Nazis to work the farms?” Big Mike crushed his cigarette into a stone ashtray.

“It’s what they’re planning down in Beaver Dam.” Thomas motioned toward Charlotte. “My wife’s cousin wrote they’ll be working the canneries, living in tents at the fairgrounds—”

“Those are killers you’re talking about,” Mike cut in. “We can’t just let ’em loose!”

The sheriff cleared his throat. “They’re boys, like our boys. Just on the wrong side.”

“Boys?” Mike turned on the sheriff. “They killed my son!”

The room went quiet until Ole broke the silence. “I hear it on the QT, Canadians captured a German submarine in the Saint Lawrence River.”

Men gasped.

Ole held up a hand. “It’s not in the news ’cause of the media blackout, but just think about it.” He scanned the shocked faces. “The Saint Lawrence leads into Lake Ontario, Erie, Huron—and right to us, right to Lake Michigan. And you can bet they’d love to come on in and stop the shipbuilding here in Sturgeon Bay and down in Milwaukee and Chicago. Why, they might be mining the lakes right now.”

Big Mike pounded his fist on the table. “All we need are some Nazi spies on our shores signaling to them German subs, telling ’em how it is.”

Ole appeared frightened. “Nazis are trained solders, and we’re the enemy. They’ll escape—”

“Where they gonna escape to? They don’t even speak English, for God’s sake,” Ralph said.

Bo looked to the growers. “What else you got?”

“We got nothin’ else.” Artie nodded toward Thomas. “I like what he says.”

“Yeah. I say put ’em to work.” Ralph stood, hands clasping the straps of his overalls. “They owe us.”

Growers’ voices rose in agreement until Bo banged his gavel. “Quiet. One at a time.”

Thomas spoke up. “Our son, Benjamin, is serving with Clark’s Fifth Army in Italy now. As you can imagine, we hate those Nazis as much as any of you.”

Charlotte rose beside him. At five-foot-ten, her height was an advantage when dealing with men. “We worry about our boys overseas, but we have nothing to feed our families here at home.” She herself wondered over the consequences of the plan, but she wasn’t going to let her doubts show, not with the family farm at stake.

“Time, that’s our worst enemy. And these prisoners, they’re the only way we can get our crops in before we lose another year.”

“Where’re they gonna stay?” Ole demanded.

“We have a migrant worker camp,” Charlotte said. “Enough for fifteen, maybe twenty men on our property.”

Thomas nodded.

“I have a camp too,” Ralph shouted.

“Put the sonsabitches to work,” one of the growers called out. “Labor’s labor.”

The sheriff cleared his throat before speaking. “What do we do to get these PWs here?”

“It’s all in the letter,” Thomas said. “We petition the Army for however many men we need. They bring guards in with the workers. We give the Army the workers’ pay. But we can delay payment until after the harvest.”

“You saying the Army’s going to pay the damn Nazis?” Mike said.

“They’ll be sitting in the back of the movie house,” Ole said. “With our girls.”

Thomas shook his head. “The Army’ll pay them in scrip, only good in the commissary. They won’t be buying any movie tickets.”

Pastor Duncan cleared his throat and after a few moments of silence began. “I know the pain this community is suffering. I sit with families who’ve lost their men and boys. I see farms and businesses going under. Forgive your enemies, Christ teaches. These prisoners, we must forgive them.”

“You gotta be kidding!” Mike shouted.

The sheriff started to stand, but when Mike scowled he resumed his seat. “I move we vote,” Mike said.

The growers rose, cheering.

“I second the motion,” Bo said. “But only board members.”

Amid the grumbling that followed, Bo brought down the gavel. “All in favor of petitioning the Army for prisoners of war to work the farms, raise a hand.”

Charlotte watched as Pastor Duncan's hand went up, then the sheriff's. A few men who hadn't spoken raised tentative hands. Mike sat rigid, his face smug.

The room grew quiet until Bo shouted out the verdict: "Four in favor, five against."

"Then what are you going to do for us?" Artie jumped up.

"Cherries is what makes this county," Ralph yelled.

Charlotte stood again and faced the board. "If we don't have a harvest, we won't be buying at your stores." As the growers mumbled their assent, she realized that her voice was the strongest in the room. The men at the table had nothing to offer but fear. "You businessmen are wealthy now because of the shipyard. But once this war's over, if the orchards are gone, the tourists won't be back. And there won't be any growers either. What are you going to do then?" The room went quiet. "It's not about politics, it's about survival."

"Here, here!" Artie led the growers to their feet.

Thomas gave Charlotte's hand a squeeze.

Bo wasn't smiling now. He nodded down the table toward Ole and Mike.

"Fine, then. Do it." Mike's voice boomed. "But let the record show . . ." He pointed to the growers, his eyes focused on Charlotte. "Let the record show that you—*you*—are making a bargain with the devil."