



# CHAPTER 1

Pardon me, ma'am," Randy said as he reached under the hen and retrieved a fresh-laid egg. He gently placed the egg in his basket and gave the butterscotch-colored bird a little pat. "Good girl, Anne Francis."

Randy had named all the hens after the stars of the movies he saw on the Saturdays when he got to go to town. Anne Francis played Altaira in *Forbidden Planet*, and Randy thought she was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. He called the arrogant black rooster, who sometimes charged up on him and pecked his legs, Godzilla. He knew that the rooster would stomp around and destroy cities, too, if he wasn't just a regular-size chicken. Two of the other hens, Zsa Zsa and Eva, were named after the glamorous Gabor sisters

who were always on the covers of the gossip magazines.

“Zsa Zsa’s a good girl,” Randy said, stroking the hen’s soft white feathers. Daddy said it was foolish to name the chickens, that they were livestock, not pets. But Momma said she didn’t see any harm in it, that Randy was still a child and children were supposed to have lively imaginations.

Daddy always said the same thing in response: “Randy is thirteen years old. I was already working in the mines when I was his age.”

But Daddy didn’t work in the mines anymore. Neither did any of the other men in the county. The mines had shut down two years ago, in 1954, and as a result, families that used to have enough food on the table and some extra money for Saturday movies and ice cream now had very little. It was the same all over the coal country of West Virginia, and boys like Randy who always figured they’d be miners once they left school now didn’t know what they were going to be.

Randy moved on to Eva and wondered if she’d always known it would be her life’s purpose to lay eggs, and if she liked her job. She was certainly good at it; she had an egg for Randy every single evening.

The truth was that while Randy missed the more-frequent trips to the movie house and the soda fountain since Daddy lost his job, he wasn’t sad that his future wasn’t all planned out for him anymore. He had never

wanted to be a miner, never wanted to make his living doing back breaking labor in a dark, dangerous hole in the ground. He didn't want to live with the constant cough his daddy had from the dark and the damp, didn't want his fingernails to be permanently stained black no matter how much he scrubbed them.

"What do you think I ought to do with myself?" Randy asked Eva. It was a rhetorical question, but one that Randy thought about a lot. He liked taking care of the farm animals, but based on how his parents were struggling, he didn't see a future in farming. Daddy had to take on odd jobs just to make ends meet.

That being said, Randy didn't know what he wanted to be. He was old enough to know he couldn't be a space explorer or a cowboy or a jungle adventurer, but still, there had to be something better than what he was doing now, helping his family barely eke out an existence on their little plot of land in a remote hollow surrounded by mountains.

Randy finished gathering the eggs from the other chickens named after movie stars, then scattered cracked corn on the ground. "There you go, ladies and gentleman," he said. The chickens pecked at the corn, making satisfied little chortling noises.

Randy made his way past the barn, where Maybelle the cow (Randy's momma had named her) was chewing her cud, and up to their little unpainted wooden house.

Rufus, their black-and-tan hound, was on the porch, gnawing on a bone from the ham hock that had gone into tonight's pot of soup beans.

"How many eggs?" Momma said when Randy came into the house. She was washing the supper dishes at the sink. Her chestnut-brown hair was coming loose from the bun she always wore it in. Momma was a pretty woman, but ever since the mines closed, she looked tired.

"Eighteen," he said, setting the basket down on the kitchen table.

"Not bad," she said. "Some to eat and some to sell."

"Yes'm," Randy said, putting the clean dishes she had just dried into the cabinet.

"You got lessons tonight?" Momma asked. She always called homework *lessons*. She and Daddy both talked more country and old-fashioned than Randy did.

"I've got a little homework," Randy said.

Momma nodded. "Best get to it, then. I'll finish up here."

Because their house had only two small bedrooms, Randy shared his room with his five-year-old sister, Cindy. Momma had sewn a privacy curtain and hung it in the middle of the room so it was "just like you each have a room of your own." It wasn't really. But Cindy had an earlier bedtime than Randy and was a sound sleeper, so he could sit on his side of the room

and do his homework or even listen to his transistor radio softly while she snoozed away.

Randy tried to pay attention to his math homework, but numbers never held his interest. He liked stories and excitement. Sometimes there were what the teacher called “story problems” in math, but the stories were boring, about how much of something somebody had or how fast a train was going. Instead of thinking about the train in the math problem, Randy fantasized about jumping on a high-speed locomotive and riding it all the way to Huntington or maybe even Cincinnati.

His fantasy was interrupted by a soft rapping on his window. “Shh,” he hissed, afraid that the noise would wake Cindy.

He looked through the window. Bill, his best friend, who lived in the house across the road, pressed his face against the glass. Bill stretched out his mouth with his fingers and stuck out his tongue. “I’m the boogeyman come to get you!” he said, laughing.

Randy rolled his eyes and pushed up the window. “You’re the sorriest excuse for a boogeyman I ever did see,” he said. “Now, don’t make too much racket. Cindy’s asleep.”

Bill climbed in through the window and took a seat on Randy’s bed. Like Randy, Bill was clean but poor-looking. He had patches on the knees of his britches, and his sneakers were falling apart at the seams. But

just about everybody Randy and Bill knew looked like this. Being poor wasn't as big a deal when everybody else was poor, too.

"You could use the door to come in, you know," Randy said, sitting down next to Bill.

"Yeah, but if I did your momma would know I was here, and she might tell my momma that I'm here. And strictly speaking, I ain't supposed to be here." He grinned, showing the gap between his two front teeth.

"And where are you supposed to be at?" Randy asked.

"Home in bed without supper," Bill said. "On account of that stunt I pulled in school. Say, you ain't got any leftover corn bread, do you?"

"We might. Sit tight. I'll be right back." Randy went into the kitchen. A few slices' worth of corn bread were in the cast-iron skillet sitting on the back of the stove. He cut off a hunk and got a glass of milk from the refrigerator, the appliance that Momma and Daddy still called "the icebox." Momma and Daddy were sitting on the couch listening to the radio. Daddy's job loss had killed any chance Randy's family had of owning a television any time soon.

"Growing boy, huh?" Momma said, nodding toward the snack Randy was holding.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, hightailing it to his room. He hadn't lied, exactly. He just hadn't said who the growing boy in question was.