WINSTON, N.C., 1909—

One evening during the following week, Mother asked Helen to step into the kitchen where she was cutting cabbage on the slaw cutter. “I want you to run out to the barn to get Alan and Cal. They should be up in the loft checking the squab. Now is time for them to come to the house and wash up for supper.”

Her brothers raised squab to sell to the Francis Hotel. Papa had made the arrangements through his grocery business, but the boys were responsible for the care of the young pigeons until they were fat enough to be sold. They had built cages for them among the rafters of the barn.

Since her hands were occupied making the slaw, Mother nodded her head toward the hook near the back door where the umbrella hung. “Don’t forget to take that,” she reminded Helen. “I’m not certain that the rain has stopped. It may be drizzling still, and I don’t want you to get wet.”

Helen took the umbrella and walked to the back porch. She picked her way down the wet steps, through the soggy yard and under the dripping apple tree and grape arbor to the barn. There she stopped to peer from under the opened umbrella at the chickens, thrusting their heads forward and back and scratching in the dirt made soft from cool spring rains. They made good use of this time before roosting, poking the ground for worms that were near the surface. The late day sun was just coming from behind the clouds and glinting on the chickens’ feathers.

Then into the barn she went, passing the empty horse stall where Maude was kept. She headed up the ladder that led to the hayloft. Keeping the umbrella high, she balanced herself with it, like the aerial artist she had seen once in the circus parade downtown.

“Alan, Cal,” she called to them. “Mother wants you to come inside now.”

Cal responded with a cough he had had for several days.

As Helen climbed near the top, she looked over the floorboards into the eerie light of the loft. She saw silhouettes of Alan and Cal as they pitched hay out for Maude through the loft door beyond them. The fading sunlight that came slanting into the barn caught a few drifting pigeon feathers and floated them in a river of pale light. The pigeons cooed as they settled in their nests for the night.

“Come on up,” Cal called as first the umbrella and then Helen appeared in the loft. She walked over to join them near the hayloft door and looked down at the alley. She thought Papa would soon be rattling home this way with Maude and the wagon.

While she stood there, umbrella still in hand, Cal exploded with an idea. “Why don’t you try to fly, Helen? You’re so light. With that big umbrella, you’d probably float down like one of those feathers.”

Alan shook his head, “Don’t tell her that, Cal; she just might do it.” Then he turned to Helen to make certain that she knew jumping was a wild idea.

Cal continued, “You’ve heard of the Wright brothers, haven’t you? Two men with flying machines?”

Cal waited for Helen to show that she understood what he was saying. “You know they’ve experimented with flight and, in the last few years, the brothers have learned a lot about it.”

Alan spoke directly to Helen, “Well, you are crazy if you think that umbrella you’re holding would help you fly to the ground! And Cal is too!”

Alan stamped the hay from his feet and brushed his hands clean before heading down the ladder from the loft.

“You can do it.” Cal repeated after Alan left, Alan glaring up at Cal who looked horrified that she had actually tried to fly.

“She seems to be all right,” Alan shouted as he lifted Helen in his arms and turned toward the house. “Lucky for her, and for you, too, that we had pitched the hay out for Maude!”

“Now, you can be the one to rake the hay inside the stall, and you can be standing here to explain all this when Papa gets home,” Alan said.

What happened to Cal turned out to be far worse than any punishment.

next chapter—Red paper reads quarantine

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