

## PART I - 1936

### Chapter 1

#### Billy

Dusty hat in his hand, the strange man stands just inside our front door, his eyes fixed on the wooden floor, never daring to look up and meet Momma or Dad's open-mouthed stare. His body bows forward, weighed down and tired, *rode hard* like people sometimes say.

Strangers don't usually knock on our door this late, although sometimes Dad gets phone calls in the night, picks up his black bag, and shuffles off into the darkness. But actual visitors are unusual, so, curious and excited, my brother Freddie and I crouch on the landing at the top of the stairs, our cheeks pinched between the spindles of the railing, eavesdropping, sure that a fascinating whodunit is playing out down below. In our bare feet and pajama bottoms, we are two little detectives listening for clues, just like our heroes Dick Tracy and the Hardy Boys.

"I'd like my boy back," the stranger mutters. "It's time. I never meant you'd keep him forever."

Dad steps forward, like a watch dog, the back of his neck a fiery red, shouldering out Momma, who hugs herself, hunched and tense.

"Who's he talking about?" I whisper to Freddie.

Almost a year older than me, he widens his blue eyes and shushes me with his index finger to his lips, shaking his head.

"Are you a damn fool, MacFadden?" Dad growls through gritted teeth. "You know there's a depression goin' on. Why would you be wantin' another mouth to feed for Chrissake?"

This man, whose name is MacFadden I guess, picks at a speck of something on his hat and clears his throat. "My oldest run off. I need 'nother set a hands. He's mine, and you all need to hand him over."

Momma reaches for Dad's hand, shaking her head, giving Dad a worried look. "Leave the boy be. Let him live a decent life." Her voice is whiny, begging.

I shake Freddie's shoulder and silently mouth the words, "What boy?"

Freddie swipes my hand away, and mouths back a silent demand to "Quit."

"Look MacFadden, I want you to get on outta my house. I'm not about to hand him over to you tonight. I'll talk to the judge in the morning. We'll see what he has to say about it." Dad swings his arm up, taking hold of the edge of the door.

The MacFadden man flinches, but then gathers some courage, widens his feet, straightens his shoulders and raises his head, squinting his eyes hard a minute at Dad. His eyes then move past Dad and up the stairs to Freddie and me, locking on mine. "I'll give ya till tomorra, but the boy's mine and he's comin' home." He brings his hat up to his head, slow and threatening, never breaking eye contact.

*Why is he looking at me? Am I the boy?*

A shiver runs down my back.

Dad grabs him by the shoulder and shoves him. "Get out Arthur. You get off my property now before I call the sheriff."

MacFadden turns with a grunt and leaves, the stomping of his heavy boots fading into the distance.

Freddie jumps up, gripping the handrail. "Dad, who was that man? Why was he sayin' those things?"

Hands criss-crossed over her mouth, Momma nervously shakes her head. "You can't let him, Joseph, you can't let him."

Dad squeezes her arm, turns to face us, frowning, glancing at Freddie only a second, then, with a gulp, sweeps his sad eyes to me. I lean my face harder on the spindles, expecting something, I'm not sure what, something he'll say to make this echo-ey feeling in my head go away.

"Go on to bed now, boys." With a guilty look on his face, not able to look me in the eye, he glances away before saying, "Nothin' to worry about tonight. I'll see to everything in the morning."