

Prologue

In northern Industralaia, there's a little factory town called Songbird. I have not visited it since I was a young girl of twelve, but memories of those cobbled streets and weathered shopfronts still sing to me across the miles. I'm a Birdie by birth, having been placed into my momma's loving arms there, in the spring of 1877.

My momma's name was Louise Whittlesey, and as for my daddy, well, his name could have been just about anything from Teapot to Thompson. Momma never spoke about the man who had left her all alone in Songbird with a baby-shaped predicament she would name Constance Jessamine Whittlesey.

I have memories from when I was about ten years of age, playing in Songbird's peaceful streets with the neighborhood kids. Birdies would sometimes pause on the sidewalk to whisper and point at me, and the more curious among them would even poke and prod at my face, tug at my long black hair and if they'd been able to, they'd probably have checked for webbing between my toes—all the while trying to figure out if the sprinkling of freckles across my nose and cheeks were similar to those on Jameson Barker, the banker at Songbird Savings and Loan, or if my curly hair was like the fluffy tufts that ringed the bald spot on that quiet, twitchy civil engineer named Dobkins with the office on Kelvin Street. But no one ever managed to match my features with any of the local suspects, and after a while they just gave up trying.

It really didn't matter who my daddy was though, because I was my momma's girl. She was a clever, pretty, practical woman who must have been put to the test daily by her headstrong, stubborn daughter. No matter what she told me to do, I'd almost always do just the opposite. But she did manage to teach me the most important lesson I've ever learned in my life, and if it weren't for that, who knows where I'd be today?

It happened one evening as we were having our supper and talking about our day. "Momma," I'd said between bites, "a lady on the street told me I was too big for my britches, but I was wearing a skirt, and it's not tight at all. In fact it's near falling off me. Can you take in the waist a little?"

She'd burst out laughing, and nodded. "Of course I can, sweetheart. I swear, no matter how much I feed you, you're just as skinny as a rail."

Oh, that did it. I set down my fork and stared at her in exasperation. "Momma, I am not. And besides, if a rail is so skinny, how can it hold up a great big steam engine? Shouldn't someone be strong as a rail?"

She made as if to say something, then paused and closed her mouth to think. Eventually, she dabbed her mouth with her handkerchief and cleared her throat to reply. "Constance, words are strange and wonderful things. People play with them, and even better, they learn from them. Words have the power to change the world and how people think. For instance, I'm sure you've heard the saying, 'pie in the sky'. Now we both know there's really no pie in the sky, but..."

I interrupted her. "I sure wish there was, 'cause it would be so funny when it rained! Can you just imagine Mister Dobkins getting a face full of cherry pie before he could get his umbrella open?"

"You impossible child!" she'd exclaimed. "I do wish you'd get your head out of the clouds at least once in a while!"

"But I'm too short to have my head in the clouds, Momma! Though, if there was pie in the sky, I'd stand on my tippy toes and stretch..."

She just smiled wistfully. "My little dreamer, I wonder what will become of you?"

Chapter One

Songbird

Songbird was a nice enough town. It drew its fanciful name from a time long before I was born, when only a few farms dotted the landscape. Then one day, Mister Wendell Hayberry, a clever entrepreneur who wished to become an industrialist, decided that Songbird would be the perfect location for his new company. He bought up hundreds of acres of land near the railway tracks and built a factory which he called the Songbird Twitter Works. He also built dozens of clapboard houses for the workers that would soon be employed in the factory. Mister Hayberry had optimistically signed a contract with the Featherstone Fine Novelty Company of Ratchet Bluffs. They would supply the Songbird Twitter Works with voice boxes for a new, innovative product—clockwork musical birds.

The Songbird Twitter Works hired assembly line workers, who brought their families to live in the little clapboard company houses. Every morning except Sunday, the workers would walk down to the factory where they would build charming little sparrows and robins out of tin. Into these birds they would place the delicate voice boxes, which arrived by train, wrapped in protective fabric and nestled carefully into boxes of shredded newspaper. This collaborative venture between the two factories resulted in charming clockwork birds with the ability to tweet and sing. They proved to be very popular throughout Industria, and Mister Hayberry's gamble paid off handsomely.

Once a month, each worker would fill an envelope with enough money to pay the rent on their little house and deliver it to the Special Payments desk at Songbird Savings and Loan, a new bank conveniently located right next door to the Songbird Twitter Works. The rent money would then move through a series of transactions until it ended up in Mister Hayberry's bank account. The shrewd man was well-positioned at both ends of the town's good fortune.

Thanks to his careful planning, Mister Hayberry became exceedingly rich. His success provided inspiration to other entrepreneurs who decided to open their own businesses in town, and just like that, the town of Songbird sprang to life. So while most folks didn't get rich, at least they had a job and a house and a nice place to raise their families.

I know so much about Songbird's history because I really, really like to read. I read books of all sorts, but I'll tell you more about that in a little while. I don't want to run ahead of my story and trip over my own words.

I should tell you more about my momma. My memories of her are getting a little fuzzy from the passing of time, so it helps to recall them. I remember that Momma worked as a cleaning lady for Mister and Missus Hammernail, an overly-happy young couple who had a big fancy house about five blocks away. It was always filled with kids and dogs, thus ensuring Momma always had something to scrub.

Momma and I lived in a drafty little walk-up over Howard's Happy Steps Shoe Emporium, and we managed to be fairly content in that worn-out little apartment. We didn't have much in the way of worldly goods, but Momma was clever about finding ways to take care of us and make ends meet.

At work, Momma would gush praise on Missus Hammernail about her wonderfully tasteful wardrobe, and the next thing you knew she'd be bringing home a fine dress or two wrapped in brown paper—usually just a few seasons out of date, but never stained or tattered.

When we needed laundry soap from Merkhams Mercantile, Momma would wear a crisp white blouse. We'd linger until the shop had three or four customers milling about, and then Momma would tug at her sleeve and tell the other shoppers how the soap flakes at Merkhams were the best you could buy. "Just look at my snowy white blouse!" she would exclaim. We always seemed to get an extra scoop of soap flakes in our waxed paper bag, at no extra charge, when she put on that little performance. Momma had dozens of little ploys she'd use to help our budget stretch just a little further. Now that I think about it, maybe that's why performing in front of an audience has always seemed like such a normal thing to do. Oh, but again, I'm getting ahead of myself.

Let's get back to my love of books. I learned how to read at an early age, thanks to Momma's tutoring. I read everything I could get my hands on, and daydreamed about all the books that we couldn't afford.

Just down the street and around the corner stood a weathered old shopfront that housed Milton's Very Slightly Used Books, run by a grouchy old man named—you guessed it—Mister Milton. He didn't like children very much. Whenever any of the neighborhood kids ventured into his book shop, he would loudly complain that we scruffy urchins always put our sticky, candy-coated fingers all over his merchandise and brought down the value of the books.

Mister Milton was such a miser, he could pinch a coin hard enough to make it squeak. Truth be told, he didn't take very good care of his shop because good repairmen always wanted more money than he was willing to spend on upkeep. Not only that, but his books were horribly overpriced. Still, fancy uptown ladies and gents liked to buy them. I guess they thought if a book cost a lot of money, it had to be excellent. I suspect most of the books sold by Mister Milton were put on display and never got read. And there's nothing sadder than a book that's never opened.

Mister Milton's shop had a door of course, and that door had a lock, as most doors do. Now a sturdy, hard-to-pick lock costs more than a lock that looks sturdy but only just holds the door shut. Can you guess which lock Mister Milton the coin-pincher put on his door? He may have thought the inexpensive model was good enough in our blissful little burg that hardly ever witnessed a crime, but Mister Milton didn't count on my learning a few tricks from a neighbor's shifty son who was willing to trade lock-picking instructions for reading lessons.

Once I found out how easy it was to gain access, I would often slip from my bed after Momma had gone to sleep, and spend hours reading, curled up on the little sitting couch in the back of the book shop.

I knew stingy old Mister Milton would notice if his own lamps were running out of kerosene, so I would carry my own bedroom lamp with me. By that wee light, I would read history books, tales of adventure, medical journals, cookbooks, and picture books filled with great art masterpieces.

For a while, I became interested in reading instructional manuals and even tried to learn how to build those clockwork mechanical servants everyone calls 'tikkerbots' due to the little ticky noise you often hear coming from their insides. It's similar to the sound of metal teeth in a music box brushing over a cylinder. My dream was to make a helper for Momma, but everything I read was terribly confusing and even the illustrations were complicated. I finally gave up in exasperation, but held a new-found respect for clockmakers everywhere.

Eventually, Momma found out I was sneaking around after dark and sat me down to give me a lecture. I earnestly explained what I had been up to, and was careful to mention that I always made sure my hands were not sticky, I never made a mess, I always put the books back exactly

where I found them, and I didn't burn his lamp oil. Then I pursed my lips, tensed up, and waited for my spanking.

But Momma just laughed and tousled my hair. "Child, sometimes we do the wrong things for the right reasons. I think that pickle-faced old coot would explode if he knew he was running a free lending library, but that's what he gets for being so cheap and mean! You just keep reading and getting smarter—but don't get caught!"

I was only twelve years old when everything changed. Momma had taken to her bed with an awful hot fever, and it took me an hour of running through the streets to find Doc Slade and bring him to her bedside. Momma was burning right up, but the doc said she needed to 'sweat it out'. He wrapped her up tight in wool blankets and added wood to the fire until it was a roaring blaze. Lord, but I'll never forget how hot that room felt. After enduring this unbearable heat for a few hours, Momma reached for my hand, and as the sweat poured down her red face, she gave me the last bit of motherly advice I would ever hear.

"Constance Jessamine Whittlesey," she whispered, since that was my impossibly long name. "You pack up your good Sunday dress and your boots and anything else you can stuff into that old satchel I gave you, and you go find yourself a life. I know you're young, sweetie-pie, but you're clever and you have all those book-smarts." Her voice was creaky, like an old door hinge needing oil, and that scared me. But I listened closely. She fumbled to touch my cheek and continued. "Be careful and you'll be just fine! You've got my stubborn streak, and your daddy's—well, you've got something from him, whoever he was. I suspect a certain librarian..."

My eyes rounded up big and wide. Was she going to tell me who my father was?

But Momma rolled her head to one side and aimed a glare at Doc Slade, then coughed a bit, and whispered her final words into my ear. "Don't trust doctors, they've got no clue what they're doin'..." and then she was gone.

Oh, how I cried. I cried till my eyes ran out of tears and all I could do was shake and gasp for breath, but I remembered every word she'd said. Doc Slade asked me about my next of kin, but of course I had none. I told him about Missus Hammernail, since she'd need to know why my momma wasn't coming to work anymore. The doc wrote down her name and told me to go rest in my room, after patting me awkwardly on my head. I really don't think he knew how to deal with children.

That evening, Doc Slade and Missus Hammernail made all the arrangements for a quick, quiet funeral. I heard lots of whispers between the two of them, and caught fragments of sentences with words like 'responsibility' and 'education' and 'proper upbringing' and 'she'd like the dogs'.

While they slipped deeper into planning my future, I tiptoed around my room and quietly started filling up my satchel with clothes and paper and pencils. I didn't know where I was going but it surely wasn't going to be to the Hammernail house.

When I was all set, I carefully opened my bedroom window. I begged it not to creak, and it listened to me. As the cool night air drifted in, I slipped out, pulling the satchel with me. Luckily, a rusty metal fire escape ran up the side of the building, and it was that which I lowered my feet onto. That old metal grating sagged and groaned a little, even from my slight weight, but I shushed it and bent to lower the ladder that would reach the dirty, broken cobblestones of the alley below. Then that dratted ladder shuddered loudly as it dropped, so I just scrambled down it as fast as I could. I'll never know how Doc Slade and Missus Hammernail reacted to discovering that I'd flown the coop, as I didn't linger to listen.

I spent that night curled up on the tattered couch in the back of Milton's Very Slightly Used Books, crying quietly and attempting to comfort myself with a rather silly romance novel titled *Twilight Shadows in the Old Churchyard*. I even allowed myself the luxury of burning one of the shop's lamps for a reading light. Eventually, my exhaustion took over, so I extinguished the lamp, set it back on its proper shelf, and drifted off to sleep.

The merry jingle of the tin bell on the front door pulled me out of the comfort of my slumbers. I yawned and sat up on the couch, feeling quite fuzzy-brained. When I remembered where I was, I gasped and quickly ran my fingers through my hair in a futile attempt to comb it. The bell rang out once more, this time announcing the arrival of a very noisy group of women. I hastily smoothed my skirts and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. If I was very careful, no one would know I'd spent the whole night in the book shop.

My satchel in hand, I started wandering in a hopefully casual manner through the bookshelves, with the intent of getting to the door. The chattering customers were milling about, pretending to care about the stacks of books under the 'New Arrivals' sign. Carefully, I peered around the edge of the 'Genteel Fiction' shelves to make sure the gaggle of gossipy hens weren't friends of my momma. I didn't want anyone trying to take me back home.

"Oh, for the sake of rusty cogs," I grumbled, muttering an old factory-worker oath under my breath. Right there at the sales table stood Missus Fussbottom, bending a large picture book open so roughly that its spine must surely have cracked. 'The Gossip of Songbird' was just about the last woman I cared to run into right now.

Missus Winnifred Fussbottom—of the Copper Corner Fussbottoms, she would remind you—stood precisely six feet tall and three feet wide. Her formidable body was held upright upon size twelve shoes. Well-known throughout Songbird, Missus Fussbottom was the town's leading authority on all local news, even if she had to make it up herself on a slow day.

Mister Milton stood behind the sales counter, wringing his hands as he watched his precious inventory being mauled by Missus Fussbottom's indelicate grip. But he dared not scold her lest he end up the subject of tomorrow's 'news'.

No one was safe when the town gossip's tongue got to wagging. She'd just as soon tell tales about Mayor Obie 'Thumper' Thumpston as she would about a humble cleaning lady—a cleaning lady such as my dearly missed momma. As I stared at Missus Fussbottom, my face grew a frown and my hands turned into fists. That woman had more than once told awful, untrue things about my own family! And it was none of her business who my daddy might be. If I didn't know, then she surely didn't know any better.

I pressed my body back against the bookshelves so she wouldn't catch a glimpse of me, and then listened carefully. I needed to know if my disappearance had become local news yet. If I stood on tippy toe, I could just peer over the top of the books on the middle shelf, and if I leaned just a little to the right, I could then line up my sight with that horrid woman.

As I watched, I began to feel pity for old Mister Milton for the first time. That ghastly woman tossed the expensive picture book carelessly back onto the sales table, then thundered over to stare curiously at him across the worn old wood of the sales counter.

Mister Milton swallowed hard, his eyes lowered. He picked up a soft flannel cloth to scrub at a non-existent smudge on the counter.

I couldn't blame him—the woman was a startling sight. Aside from her astounding framework (which I must say, if dressed properly, could have supported a strikingly handsome woman), there was that *thing* on top of her head. It was a wide-brimmed yellow straw hat,

struggling valiantly to bear the gruesome load that had been heaped upon it. Above the brim, this fashion disaster was covered with curly purple, pink, and yellow feathers. A splattering of bright blue roses fought for space amongst the feathers on the woven straw. Considering that the bouncy curls of her hair were as red as a fire engine, the sum total was a clash of colors that assaulted the eyes and brought an ache to the brain.

I will not describe her attire further, dear reader, as I do not want you to throw this book in horror against the wall. Suffice it to say that her dress was heavily pleated and lime green—let's just leave it at that.

This horrific bundle of wardrobe and woman leaned upon the sales counter, trying to get her mouth as close to the man's ear as possible. Clearly she had news to share, and all poor Mister Milton could do was to brace himself for the impending verbal onslaught.

"Of course, you must have heard that a travelling circus is making a stop at Songbird," she cooed.

Mister Milton bravely looked up and replied, "No, I don't really have time for such stories," hoping she would get the hint.

Of course, Missus Fussbottom didn't get the hint and continued, warming to the topic. "It's been simply ages since I saw a circus! Such memories! Of course, I'm much too mature for such frivolities these days." She was starting to get rather excited—her voice was rising up and becoming louder. The clumps of feathers on her hat flapped about wildly as she swiveled her head, looking around to see who else might be listening. "But I'm sure my twin nieces will be simply thrilled. I read in the *Songbird Daily Warbler* that the tents are being set up right this very morning, just past the airship field north of town."

"How wonderful," Mister Milton said miserably.

The gossip's two companions hovering behind her nodded silently, no doubt fearful of attempting to raise their voices up to meet the competition.

Missus Fussbottom grinned. It was a big grin filled with very large teeth. She waggled her eyebrows and winked at Mister Milton, which caused him to step back several paces in horror. The woman sighed, exhaling a breath so long and lusty that the little paper 'All Sales Are Final' sign taped to the side of the cash register fluttered in her breeze. "Just imagine. All those burly men, stripped to the waist, hammering spikes into the ground, working up a sweat. Oh my goodness, I think I need to sit down for a spell! Where is that couch?"

Mister Milton exclaimed in alarm, "You're not going to faint in the middle of my shop, are you?"

Her meek friends immediately rushed forward to the woman's aid, and taking one arm each, began to lead her to the back of the shop, leaving Mister Milton to sigh deeply and shake his head. "Women," he muttered, "helpless as children and just as annoying." He grabbed his flannel cloth and scrubbed the spot on the counter where she had been leaning, as if he could somehow wipe away the whole encounter.

The gossip I'd overheard had my mind reeling with new ideas. You see, I had read lots of adventure stories, and I was fairly certain that one of the best ways for a kid to get out of town was to run away with the circus. It happened all the time in books!

As Missus Fussbottom was led down one aisle towards the couch, I stepped out of my hiding place in the next aisle and strolled as casually as I could towards the door. I was still fighting back the fear that I'd be snatched up at any moment by a search party looking for 'that runaway Whittlesey girl', but to my relief, no one even seemed to notice me. The bell at the door

jingled a cheery good-bye as I stepped out onto the sidewalk. “Good bye Mister Milton, good bye books, good bye Missus Fussbottom and thanks for the news,” I whispered.

The airship field was a mile away and I just hoped my battered secondhand shoes could manage the trek.