

## **Saving Grace**

### **From Chapter One: *A Knock at the Door***

When the carved wooden clock that was Grandma Rosa's in Germany "cuckooed" five times in the predawn darkness, Grace knew it was time to get up. Instead, she snuggled deeper into the cushions of the living room couch and pulled two gray woolen blankets up over her chin. Even with her coat and all her clothes on, Grace felt the bite of cold winter air. She looked forward to getting her hands around a good hot cup of coffee.

A warm drink with a wisp of steam in her face . . . It was not the only thing on Grace's mind as she shifted her foot to avoid the sharp spring that protruded from the back of the couch. Every morning when she awoke, eleven-year-old Grace pressed her lips together and wondered: Would this be the day?

Recently, there had been signs. Down in the dusty furnace room, where she sat cross-legged on the hard stone floor with three other children from the apartment building, Grace had watched the Ouija board mysteriously predict that she would have a new life. And in church last Sunday the Reverend Saunders had raised his fist – and his voice – and warned that a thunderous day of reckoning was coming. Despite the apprehension this aroused in others, Grace was positive that a day of reckoning would reward a poor, suffering family like hers. At the very least, she figured, a day of reckoning would come with a warm meal in the heated parish hall.

But as she listened on that dark December morning in 1932, there was not the tiniest ripple of thunder. Only the muted rattle of a milk truck down the avenue outside. And then the sound of Grace's mother in the kitchen,

striking a match to start a fire in the gas stove. Grace wondered why she hadn't heard the floor creak when Mama tiptoed through the living room and hoped it didn't mean that her mother had spent the night sitting at the kitchen table, waiting for Papa again.

In the small, one-bedroom apartment where Grace and her family had lived crowded together for the past year, a tiny sliver of winter moonlight filtered through a cracked window facing the alley, and Grace could make out the bulky form of her older brother, Pete, who lay curled up on a tattered feather mattress, on the floor. Pete murmured something in his sleep and, as Grace watched him roll over, hugging a single quilt tightly around his shoulders, an unsettled feeling slowly pulled at her inside.

What else about today had she forgotten? It was Saturday – no school, she remembered with a slight but tentative smile. They were out for the holidays. So, after the chores were done this morning, she could play with Mary Orlinsky. Couldn't she?

Maybe. Mary was three years older, and sometimes she didn't let Grace play. "I hear your mother calling you," she'd singsong to Grace when she and Hallie, who was older, too, wanted to smoke cigarettes with the boys down by the garbage cans. But Mary had a clothesline jump rope, and often there was need for an extra hand:

*Ice-cream soda,*

*Delaware punch,*

*Tell me the name of your honey bunch . . .*

Pete coughed once, and Grace's smile faded as she remembered that he had asked for her help. "It's a secret mission," he had warned with uplifted eyebrows and a sparkle in his deep brown eyes. But Grace knew where he was taking her, and familiar knot began to form in her stomach . . .

