

Fire Is Your Water

# 1

Early June, 1953

Ada reached the barn door first, her own hard breathing muffled by the cows' high-pitched bellows. Inside, the panic: cows bugling alarm calls, chickens cackling, pigs squealing as they thumped against the pen walls. All of it out of sight. Thick smoke curtained the barn windows. "We're coming, we're coming," Ada called, her voice its odd staccato, frantic and quick, but the cows couldn't hear her over the roar of the fire.

When she opened the door, a bank of smoke poured out around her, and she hesitated, but not her mother, Kate. She pushed past and disappeared. Ada gasped at the suddenness of how she vanished. Then she too filled her lungs, held her breath, and dove into the doorway.

The smoke blinded her. Three steps in, Ada saw nothing; her eyes teared and she started coughing. Her heart thrashed against

her ribs. *Easy now. Easy.* She tripped over a feed sack and caught herself on the stone wall. *Don't turn around. Keep going.* She could almost see her shoes, the smoke not as thick, so she half crouched, half ran the rest of the way into the barn.

The barn. Their barn. This barn. Her great-great-grandfather had built it, with oak troughs, oak stanchions, oak posts and ceiling timbers. The huge loft above held all the first cutting of hay. Every part of this barn was tinder. Every part except the metal links that held each cow.

Earlier, the two women had brought in the milk cows and clipped each one to a chain fastened to the floor. Then they fed them and looked over their black-and-white ladies as they listened to the sounds of contented chewing. They had talked about Ada's brother, Nathan, about how they might not see him for another year, even two. "And why is Peter late?" her mother had asked. Ada wrinkled her forehead in worry. Normally, her father would have the milking half done, but he had driven to Harrisburg to take Nathan back to the army. The train was late, and Peter hadn't yet returned.

In the barn, flames flickered and crackled in a far corner, and Ada could just see Belle, the first cow. Sweat slicked the cow's black hide, and her ribs swelled and heaved. The animal pulled at her collar, strained to look behind at the fire. Ada gentled the cow to her and unclipped the chain. Belle turned to gallop down the center aisle and away.

*You can do this.* Sweat burned Ada's eyes; she looked across the aisle. *Where's Mama?* Then came a low scrape and groan at the other end of the barn as her mother pushed open the sliding door to the barnyard. Cool air rushed in and brushed Ada's hands. But this fresh air also fed the fire. The smoldering suddenly flared into flames that flashed on the pile of hay behind her. Above in the huge loft, the clatter and rumble grew louder. She knelt to release the next cow, leaning against it, touching its hot neck with her forehead. The desperate clamor of so many animals filled her head, her chest, her whole body.

*Keep moving. You have to do this.*

She hurried to the next animal. From the far side of the barn the sound of loosened chains clacked onto the floor as her mother worked down the opposite row. Ada grabbed chains, unclipped cows, moved.

Most of the older cows cooperated, but the younger ones were too panicked, too crazy with fear. They strained against the metal holds. Their bodies arched and glistened as they whole-body yanked against the restraint. They twisted and heaved—eyes bulging, ears back, mouth open to bellow again and again. Their drool soaked her hands. Ada pulled with her long body against each animal. She braced her feet, gripped chain with both hands, and leaned back. She looked each cow in the face, pleaded with it, yelling, “Come on! Come on!” as it inched close enough to be freed. At last, she held the clip open and worked it off the cow’s collar.

She moved to the next cow, and the next, the rumbling all around her.

Ada knew these animals. She had healed their cuts, chanted to stop their bleeding. Always, their dark eyes had comforted her, even made her laugh as they closed with pleasure when she scratched their chins. Now, these eyes didn’t see her. They looked into a dark place backlit with fire. Ada suddenly saw that place too, a hell she’d never before realized was so close.

She remembered the story of the three Jews: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were thrown into the fire and they did not burn. They had faith. They had someone in that furnace with them. A man made of fire. A man who held their hands. *Where is he? Where’s my angel of fire?*

She held her sleeve to her mouth, took a deep breath. *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*, she began. But the words stopped. She stooped to the next cow, strained to pull it enough to unhook the chain, and began again: *Though I walk through the valley . . .* The words caught in her throat, and she coughed so hard she had to lean against the stanchion until the coughing stopped.

*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*, she tried a third time. Again, nothing more. This verse, a comfort all her life, now swallowed and gone. *Where are you, God?*

Behind her, a ceiling timber crashed to the floor, booming close. The massive joist erupted, and Ada leapt away to crouch against the wall. She turned back to watch the fire reach out to the door she'd just passed through, the wooden entry now a sheet of brilliant color.

*Oh God!* Ada hugged her knees, rocking and suddenly sobbing. Panic froze her joints, froze even her thoughts. *Oh God oh God oh God.* She couldn't walk, couldn't move, couldn't even yell. She coughed so hard she almost fainted.

Some flames popped toward her, and a spark smoldered on the hem of her dress. Without hesitating, she clapped her hands on the fabric until she smothered the spark. It left a small, black circle, and Ada's hands become suddenly and totally cold. *How could this be?*

Ada felt light-headed. Her lips tingled, her lungs ached. The hands before her were foreign, as if they'd all of a sudden grown there—not her hands, someone else's. *And so cold.* She held them in front of her face, bent the fingers, and slowly her world grew silent, the fire's fury, the cows' bellowing, all of it disappeared. The odd hands turned in front of her. *They could be solid as ice.* Yet she moved fingers, touched thumbs.

The hands settled beside her, fingers trailing the floor. Close by, the fire licked the ceiling, the bits of hay in the trough, the trough itself. *How beautiful*, she thought. *How absolutely beautiful.*

She pressed her shoulder against the wall and stared at the burning door. Each time it swung out and back, the colors danced. But she didn't hear the sound of it slamming. *So many colors. A whole whirling rainbow. And there, in the center, a clearness, no color at all.* The flames came closer, but she didn't move. *And all of it so cold.* Her breathing eased. Her shoulders relaxed as she settled onto the floor. *Such radiance. Is this how the angel of fire looked?* She coughed again, her lungs so tired. She rested her palm

on her cheek, felt the coldness. *Or has Satan come into this furnace?* Desperation gone, the question just filled her with a sad curiosity.

Ada held this thought—*I want to drink these flames.*

She breathed a slow breath.

*I am thirsty for fire.*

She knew nothing else.

Her mother's hand startled her. All sound returned—the cows and the drumming fire. Her fear and panic came back, too.

Slowly Ada heard her mother screaming over the roar. "Ada, are you OK?"

She grabbed her mother, held tight while her mother hugged her. But only briefly.

"Are you hurt? That timber, did it reach you?"

Ada shook her head.

"Go on. Get out. I'll get the rest of the cows."

Soot streaked her mother's flushed face, her hair loose and wild. The thought of her in here alone—no. Ada shook her head again. "I'll keep working."

"Good." Her mother squeezed her shoulders and hurried to the other side of the barn.

Ada watched her disappear into the smoke, and then she became all movement. No panic now, only numbness. No praying, just hands loosening chains, body crouching to the next animal. She leaned against cow, yanked on chain, pulled in to release out.

As she scrambled to the next, she glanced back at the fallen timber, the door swinging and aflame. *No way out but one*, she realized. She repeated this as she heaved on the next chain, unclipped and watched the black panic in the cow's eyes. *No way out but one*. Her hands moved quicker now, her body like water.

Ada reached the last cow in her row, Molly, the oldest, slow and hobbled with arthritis. The cow didn't even pull against the chain, but her eyes stared at the fire. Ada leaned against the animal's solid neck, unclipped and dropped the chain, and yelled, "GO!" The cow shifted around the stanchion to trot out the door, her huge udder swaying.

At the barn door, Ada gasped clean air, sucked the blue sky into her, while heat and smoke billowed out behind. She turned to look for her mother. After she had opened the barn door, she had worked in the opposite direction, so while Ada released cows and moved away from the fire, her mother kept moving toward it. Now, over the growing roar, Ada heard her yelling at a cow, but she couldn't see anything—no cows, no Mama, just smoke.

Ada ducked her head and dove into the smoke. She ran to the rear where flames covered the walls and flashed down from the ceiling timbers to lick the backs of Star and Seven, the two cows still chained in. Seven rammed the trough, stepped back to ram it again, slipping in her own manure. Star, a massive black cow, the newest of the herd, didn't move. She stood rigid, all four legs locked, pulling against her chain. Ada's mother crouched in front of Star, pulling, trying to free her.

Ada jumped into the stall and rammed her shoulder into Star's side. She felt the raw ooze of the cow's burned flesh, smelled singed hair. The sudden jolt shocked the cow, shoved it forward just enough for her mother to unclasp the hook. Ada leapt out of the stall as the wild creature hied for the door.

As they moved to release Seven, another timber fell from above. It just missed Ada and Kate but hit Seven squarely on her spine. The cow crumpled and roared. The heavy beam crushed Seven's back, broke her so she lay at an odd angle. She could only move her neck. The cow swung her head back with that white "7" emblazoned on her forehead, a birthmark—a good luck sign, they had thought at her birth. Kate ran to the cow.

"NO!" Ada yelled, but her mother knelt by the animal. The chain glowed orange and bright, and without hesitating, Kate grabbed the hot metal and released this last cow.

Ada hurried to her side. "Mama, come on!" She pulled her arm and together they ran away from Seven's shrill bellows. In the barnyard, they leaned against the water trough and breathed clean air. All the other cows huddled wild-eyed in the far corner.

Ada cupped her hands and poured water over her face. Her mother just stood, watching the fire. A red welt rose on her

forehead, and her eyebrows were singed and gone. Ada glimpsed her mother's hands—black and raw and oozing. That last chain had burned into her palms.

Her mother didn't notice. She ran past Ada and shouted, "Open all the doors." She disappeared through the smoke to release the chickens and heifers in the next barn.

Ada moved through the herd to the hog pen, where she slid open the chute. The pigs squealed with fright when she yelled, "Out, get out!" They grunted and circled and refused to leave the darkness of their little house. She waded into their pen to drive them out through the square of light.

Hunkering through the chute, Ada followed the last pig into the barnyard, where they cowered in a far corner. The fire was still too close, the animals too panicked. She shouldered her way through the Holsteins to the far side of the lot and opened the gate to the meadow. The older cows led, trotting through the gap and away from the heat. When the barnyard emptied, Ada closed the gate and looked back. Cinders blew into her face and hot wind licked her whole body. "Where are you, Mama?" she whispered, searching the other buildings. Finally, her mother's head of brown hair bobbed from behind the wagon shed as she shooed the hens far into the alfalfa field.

Ada turned to watch the barn. The bottom floor brightened so she had to squint and hold her arm up to shade her eyes. Flames pressed against the windows and flicked through slats. Above, in the loft, smoke and flames pushed through the wooden siding. The barn and hay, the grain and tools and equipment, all of it was lost.

She ran to help her mother. From deep in the barn, Seven's sharp call pierced the fire's drum and clatter.