

Chapter 1

SPRING 1951 - THE HALL FARM

I grew up one day when I was five years old.

I was on my Grandpa Hall's farm because my mom was in the hospital. My younger cousin, Jeffrey, and I were exploring Grandpa's chicken coop, which was full of baby chicks. The chicks covered the floor like a bright flowing yellow carpet.

They climbed onto our shoes and as carefully as we stepped out of their way, I managed to crush a chick with my foot, and then crush another, and then, a third. We grabbed up the three lifeless yellow chicks and left the coop before we killed any others or got caught by Grandpa.

We got the chicks out of sight by dropping them in the old outhouse next to the chicken coop. It would be a while before anyone would notice a missing chick or two, if ever. If they did find out, the chicks' absence could be blamed on a hawk or Gretchen, the cat.

We escaped our little crime scene and ran to the barn to play in the bales of hay, and slide down the hay chute, quickly forgetting the incident.

Except, one of the chicks was not dead.

It started peeping. It peeped and peeped, just as Grandpa Hall needed to visit the outhouse. There were plenty of faint peeps to be heard. They had over one hundred chicks. But this was a singular PEEP. It was a peep that piqued Grandpa's curiosity. He turned around and looked down the first hole in the outhouse seat.

"PEEP. PEEP!" he heard. But he could see nothing. He looked in the second hole. There it was. Surrounded by two yellow, furry, lifeless bodies, one chick, standing at attention on a pile of poop.

"PEEP. PEEP!!" the chick implored. Grandpa buttoned his pants and threw open the door.

"Jeffrey," he yelled, "Jesse, where are you!"

Grandpa Hall headed for the barn calling us as he walked and fastened his overall straps.

When he found us, we were standing on a stack of hay, trying to look innocent. Tom Hall had seen those looks on our fathers' faces a generation before. He read us like a book, and as he studied us and our shifting eyes, he immediately knew who the guilty party was.

"Jesse, you need to follow me." Grandpa hurried back to the outhouse. I ran close behind. Jeffrey followed.

Grandpa stopped at the outhouse. My eyes were wide, full of fear.

"PEEP. PEEP!"

The chick was desperate now.

"Jesse, what do you hear," Grandpa Hall asked.

"I hear the chicks in the chicken coop, Grandpa," I said.

"Did you put any chicks down the outhouse, Jesse?" he demanded.

"No sir." I said the lie without even thinking.

Grandpa Hall bent over, his weathered face now six inches from mine.

"Jesse, did you put any chicks in that outhouse?" he repeated, only, louder, and deliberate.

My tears welled up; the lie tried to get out, but the truth screamed louder, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Don't spank me," I yelled, holding both hands on my butt.

"Come here!" Grandpa led me into the outhouse. "Look down there!" I looked through the hole at the yellow chick on a mound of poop.

"PEEP. PEEP! PEEP!"

“You’re going to rescue that chick,” Grandpa said. “I’m going to lower you down there so you can grab it. You’re gonna save that chick. You hold that chick soft and don’t let go of it!” I had no time to protest. He grasped my ankles in one hand, held my arms in the other, and I was upside down and face to face with the chick. Flies were darting around my face. I held my breath.

“Peep. Peep.” I grabbed the chick, making sure that was all I grabbed.

“I have him Grandpa!” Thomas Hall pulled me back up through the opening in the outhouse. I gasped for a breath of fresh air.

“Take him to the coop,” Grandpa commanded. I stepped down from the outhouse, walked over to the coop and placed the chick with the others.

“Don’t step on any chicks!” he yelled. My heart was pounding as I retreated, leaving the rest of the chicks unharmed.

It was over. The chick had survived. I looked up at Grandpa ready for my punishment.

“Jesse, we need to bury the other chicks,” he said and turned around. “Jeffrey go get the shovel.” Jeffrey obeyed.

I realized what he meant and was back down the outhouse hole, picking up the two dead chicks. Grandpa pulled me back through the opening. We stood there facing the outhouse, me holding two dirty dead chicks and Grandpa looking for Jeffrey.

Jeffrey brought the shovel. Grandpa marched us to the rear of the barn, to an area where the ground was soft. Jeffrey dug; I deposited the chicks in the hole, and we all stared solemnly at the little grave.

“There would have been three to bury if I hadn’t heard that third one peep, boys. He peeped loud enough to get saved. He peeped, and I listened. God kept him alive so we could learn an important lesson.” Jeffrey and I started sobbing while Thomas Hall prayed over the little chicks.

“Dear God, we ask your blessing on these poor dead chicks who died too early to meet their purpose in life. Forgive these two boys, God, for causing their demise and lying about it, and we give thanks for the one that survived the ordeal. In Jesus name. Amen.”

Jeffrey repeated, “Amen.”

Then I sobbed, “Amen.”

Jeffrey filled the grave, now consecrated, with dirt.

“Boys, let this be a lesson to you. First, do no harm. Don’t forget it. You hurt those chicks; Lord knows how the chick we saved feels right now.”

I thought I knew.

“That’s the lesson. First, do no harm.” This time he said it tenderly. It was instruction and we understood.

That was my first lesson from Grandpa Hall.