



# BENEATH THE WIDE SILK SKY

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*A Note to Readers: The transliterations of Japanese words and phrases are italicized throughout the book in order to avoid any confusion with English words.*

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# CHAPTER 1

## TWO SURPRISES

*December 4, 1941*

I jumped as the rat streaked across the edge of the chicken pen. Feathers whirled around Clark Gable, our rooster, as he half ran, half flew at the rat. Head down and outstretched, Clark aimed for the rat with his sharp beak.

The rat dashed through the wire fencing of the chicken pen, then scuttled across the barn, out of Clark's reach. Its long tail disappeared through a crack in the barn's wood wall. Clark ruffled his gold and black feathers, somehow managing to look embarrassed.

I stood holding my rake, heart thumping. Rats were common on the farm, but still, each time . . .

"Sam? You in here?" Beau's voice rang, confident as the boy himself, through the open barn door.

I dropped my rake, and it clattered to the floor, sending up a cloud of straw and chicken feathers. Coughing, I used my hands to comb my bangs, shaking golden bits of hay out of my black hair. "Don't come in!" I called. "I'll come to you."

But Beau had already stepped inside. Through the doorway, cold December light silhouetted his round-shouldered frame. His hair spilled in a strawberry-blond halo around his head—an angel in suede. I stared, conscious of the difference between us.

"I—I'm just doing some chores." I pulled open the wire door that kept the chickens on their side of the barn and stumbled out of the pen.

Beau grinned. "You okay there?"

I straightened, trying to look as if I weren't ruffled. Beau was my best friend, but he lived on the other side of Linley Island—the "good" side. He would never have to rake chicken manure in a rat-infested barn, and his arrival in the middle of my chores felt like a clashing of worlds. "I'm fine," I said, swiping at my bangs again.

"Beau, we'll be late, and it's starting to snow." I stiffened at the nasal voice. SueAnn Clark stepped into the barn behind Beau. Her blond curls glowed gold with the light behind them. "And the smell in here!" She covered her nose with her handkerchief. "Are you sure we couldn't just—" She stopped. "Oh. Hello, Samantha." She said my name as if it tasted sour and edged closer to Beau.

I stared at the narrow gap between them—their hands might touch at any moment. Had they finally become an item? My stomach clenched, but I kept my voice light. "What brings you out?" I pivoted to face only Beau.

Beau fished a folded paper from his trouser pocket. "We're on our way to study chemistry at Hank's." My mouth twitched. I was in the same class and ate lunch with Hank, Beau, and SueAnn nearly every day—why hadn't I been invited? "But I had to stop by to give you this." Beau handed me the paper. "Saw it in one of Mother's magazines."

I unfolded what appeared to be some sort of entry form. Across the top, bold type read, "Call for amateur photographers! Statewide contest. Cash prizes in every category." I glanced at SueAnn and tilted the paper so she couldn't see. I scanned the subheading. "Wha—" My eyes darted to Beau, who was almost bouncing. I whispered, "Grand prize of fifty dollars?"

A smile rounded Beau's rosy cheeks. "You have to enter."

I rocked on my heels. Fifty dollars. It was more than I'd ever seen, let alone owned. My mind reeled at the thought of what I could buy. I could get a new camera. My current camera, an ancient Brownie, was taped together and sometimes leaked light.

I skimmed the rest of the form: “Top photos to be published in leading magazine.” My heart leapt. I had never had a photo published. It had always seemed like something that was such a reach, only *maybe* possible, and only in the very far future.

“What’s fifty dollars?” SueAnn stepped forward, her gray eyes sharp above the handkerchief.

“Never mind,” I said, refolding the paper.

But Beau was already answering. “It’s a photo contest.”

“That’s what you had to rush over to give her?” SueAnn asked. Her eyes narrowed and slid to me. “You take photos?”

My tongue felt fat. “Yes. Sometimes.”

Beau’s chest swelled with confidence I couldn’t imagine. “Sam’s going to be a photographer. A real one.”

“Beau!” My face flamed. He had promised not to tell anyone.

“Sorry,” Beau said. And he meant it. But still, it was as if my secret had been spilled on the floor—in front of SueAnn of all people.

SueAnn eyed me. “A photographer? Girls aren’t photographers.”

There it was, everyone’s first reaction, the boot trampling my dream. I didn’t respond.

“But there are women photographers,” Beau said. “Sam told me about a famous one. Dorothy something.”

“Dorothea,” I corrected him in a small voice. “Dorothea Lange.”

“Right,” Beau said. “Sam’s going to be like her and travel all over—”

“Beau!” My face felt hot and damp. He was telling SueAnn everything.

“Shucks, Sam,” Beau said. “You’re not doing anything wrong.”

I swallowed. Beau didn’t get it. He was a boy, he was white, and his family was probably the wealthiest on Linley Island. He could afford to dream. It was different for a daughter of a dirt-poor Japanese farmer. Dreaming was against the rules. Dreaming was dangerous.

“Sides,” Beau said, “you should see her photos, Sue. Sam’s good. She’s even better than Mr. Simmons.” Beau grinned, waiting for my reaction.

I suppressed a smile. It wasn’t the best compliment. Ancient and cantankerous, Mr. Simmons had taken the same portrait for decades, lining people up in front of the camera and shooting them straight on in something like a family mug shot. But he *was* our little island’s official photographer. And Beau only said things he meant. A tiny seed of something warm glowed in my chest.

“Really?” SueAnn asked. “You’d travel? By yourself? That’s *improper*.” There was a flat sureness to the word.

I stared at the worn toes of my boots. Most people thought like SueAnn. My brother, Charlie, was supportive. But Kiki, my social butterfly of a sister, couldn’t understand why I’d dream of spending hours behind a camera, and Dad had been livid when I’d kept back a few cents from my cleaning jobs to buy film last spring. Even my mother, before she died, hadn’t known my photography was more than a hobby.

“I just play at it.” My chin fell to my chest. “It’s not like I think I could be a real photographer.” The words burned in my throat, as hot and dry as ash.

SueAnn nodded, satisfied. Beau gave me an exasperated look and opened his mouth to argue. But SueAnn pointed out the barn door. “Oh, Beau, the snow. It’s coming down fast.”

Beau looked out the door at the snow now whirling in frenzied flurries. He stepped forward, posting himself at one side of the door so he could look out at his shiny blue Studebaker.

“Shouldn’t we drive back?” SueAnn asked. “We’re already late for Hank’s, and the roads in this neighborhood . . .” Unlike the paved streets that ran over most of the island, the corner everyone called “Japantown” was crisscrossed with rutted dirt roads.

“Yeah,” Beau sighed. “We better go before it sticks.”

SueAnn nodded smartly, then sashayed across the hay-strewn floor toward the door, dismissing me as easily as my dream.

Beau hesitated, then walked back. He leaned so close I could have counted his freckles. "Don't listen to SueAnn," he whispered. He smelled like suede and shaving cream. "Enter the contest. And stop making yourself so . . . small."

I swallowed. He made it sound so easy. But it wasn't, not for me. "Okay, Ace?" he asked.

I half smiled at the corny nickname he'd given me when I told him I wanted to be a photographer. He'd confused photographers with reporters, but I loved the name anyway. It was a secret, something just ours.

"I better get back to SueAnn." Beau put his hands in his shearling-lined jacket pockets.

"Beau," I blurted.

I checked the door. SueAnn was gone. She couldn't get out of the barn fast enough. But was she just outside? Would she hear me if I asked Beau the questions burning in my throat?

Were they a couple now? And if they were, would that change things between him and me?

I felt a desperate need to know—but as Beau's eyes lingered on my face, I couldn't form the words. I had told Kiki more than once that Beau and I were only friends. For one thing, he was white. I was Japanese. It just wasn't allowed.

But now, faced with the possibility that he might be dating someone else, I felt a little sick.

"Sam?" I jolted at my brother's voice coming from the barn door. "Is someone here?"

"Hiya, Charlie." Beau stepped into the light. "Just me."

"And SueAnn," I added, not knowing what Charlie would think if Beau and I were alone.

"Look, I've gotta go. I'll talk to you soon?" Beau asked.