

THE
SORTING
ROOM



A Novel

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For Terri



In memory of

C.W., Shirley, and Craig Johnson

CHAPTER ONE

Heat drew out the children and the odors on the hottest day along the Eastern Seaboard in the summer of 1928. Blasts from ship horns in New York Harbor rolled over the buildings and dropped into the alley that ten-year-old Eunice Ritter had entered with purpose. She was not an unwitting, innocent little girl who happened upon five older boys playing marbles in the dirt. Curiosity had not tempted her into their keep. Yesterday, when she'd finally gotten her chance, she had won her brother's prized shooter. Today, she was returning to finish what she'd started.

Eunice's brother, Ulrich—Uli, they called him—tried to chase her off, throwing a rock at her feet as she approached. She did not break stride as his missile sailed off target and bounded past her. Dismissing Uli with a smirk, she marched up to the boys who were competing for each other's glass trophies. All of Uli's, she held in her own sack.

Agitated by her presence, the swarm buzzed around the shooting circle they had scratched in the dirt; they had hand-smoothed the pitch's interior to remove pebbles. Two boys knelt in opposition, their bodies tight with concentration. Beads of sweat broke free from rutted foreheads, drew lines down dirty faces, and dropped from noses onto their field of play. With

grimy wrists, the contestants wiped their eyes. Eunice waited to take on the winner, her cool calm raising the heat on her adversaries, increasing their perspiration.

Uli's best friend, Gerald, won the round. He stood to unwind his legs and stretch his back. He did not gloat, as was the custom after such victories. Wary of his next opponent, Gerald was silent as he rolled his shooter in his hand. Before Eunice knelt at the edge of the circle and tossed her marbles inside, she first scanned the crowd, freezing the boys one at a time with a personalized scowl.

The high walls of the narrow alley trapped the stifling air like an empty metal boxcar left on hot tracks under a midday sun. Her thin, tattered dress gave Eunice a breezy advantage. She nodded at Gerald, then dug her bare, bony knees into the grit.

Unfazed by their attempts to distract her, in short order Eunice cleared all but one of Gerald's marbles from the circle—a single glass sphere waited in the dirt to be claimed. Anxiety mixed with the thick air as the other four boys leaned over, helpless. No one laughed.

She paused for her final shot. Relaxed and focused, like a sniper timing a kill, Eunice released her thumb at the end of a slow breath and sent on its course her newest weapon, Uli's beloved shooter. After she heard the glass-on-glass *clack*, she lifted her gaze to watch Gerald's last marble roll across the miniature pitch. It hopped on first contact with the gravel waiting beyond the circle's perimeter, then skipped and spun to a stop.

"Your baby sister's a lot better with your shooter than you, Uli."

"Shut up, Gerald!"

Eunice rose into a squat, then rocked back and leaned on her right arm. The heel of her tight fist dug into the dirt. Uli's shooter

cupped in her palm, she surveyed the stunned circle before she spoke to Gerald.

“Shoot for shooters?”

Without looking at her, he croaked out his refusal. “Nah, you win. You took Uli’s shooter yesterday. You ain’t gonna add mine to your collection. You sure you’re a girl?”

It was not a novel taunt to Eunice, who was skinny but strong, sinewy, and narrow-hipped, often mistaken for a boy. She scooped up all the marbles she had bet; Gerald had not captured a single one of hers. Eunice then stood, rubbing the skin on her knees as she unfurled. Gerald spread open the mouth of his depleted marble bag and dropped his shooter inside. It made no sound when it landed at the bottom of the empty pouch.

The last of Gerald’s glass trophies dropped with a *click* onto the pile in Eunice’s bloated leather sack. Uli’s shooter followed, and, with the drawstrings twisted around her right index finger, she pulled the bag closed. She flashed a victor’s smile, then raised and extended her arms into a V high above her head, squeezing the bulging pouch in her right fist.

“Yeah, she’s a girl, all right,” Uli yelled, as he lunged at her.

Eunice felt his fist punch her gut. She doubled over and fought for breath, her face close to Uli’s belt buckle. He scratched the back of her dress until he had two fistfuls of fabric, then pulled it over her head. He twisted the garment like a turban, trapping her arms at the shoulders. Uli forced her head toward the alley floor. Blinded and suffocating, she pressed her bag into the ground to steady herself. She knelt, grinding her knees into the gravel.

Uli leaned on top of her back, surrounding her like a wrestler. He crushed his elbow into her ribs, and then Eunice felt him paw at the pouch. After she tugged it away from his grip, she

reared back to buck him off, then stood, wobbling. She heard Uli snicker as he lost his hold on her headdress. Although he fell silent, she could sense him kneeling in front of her.

Without warning, Uli slipped his index fingers inside the waistline of her exposed panties and pulled down hard. Her underpants crumpled at her ankles like cotton shackles. The boys heckled. She gasped, imagining them all staring at her nakedness.

Eunice squeezed the bag of marbles as she stood gyrating to get her arms free. She kept her feet planted in place, knowing she would trip and fall over if she panicked. The boys spat out invectives that sounded to her like wishful incantations, frantic spells to prevent her escape.

First things first, she thought. *Free the feet, then the arms.* Up and down she marched, alternating her steps upon the hot coals of their taunts, until one foot slipped out.

Panties in a loose bunch around a single ankle, she steadied herself and widened her stance for balance in order to fight her way out of Uli's swaddle. It was hard to breathe. She contorted her arms and shoulders like Harry Houdini. The boys' laughter grew quieter as the material slackened, releasing her arms. She took a hungry breath. Once the dress fell back into place past her hips, she pulled her other foot free from the dusty cotton leg cuffs.

Still kneeling before her, Uli looked up. She fumed, wanting to cow him in front of his friends. Elbows locked, hands clenching his thighs, Uli had left his head unprotected. She held the sack of marbles in a white-knuckled fist and brandished the spoils in his face.

"What're you gonna do? You hit like a girl, Eunice," he said. "Now, give me back my shooter!"

It happened in a flash and felt instinctual, unlike a skill acquired by countless hours of repetitive practice. Not until after

she left the boys in the alley would she recall where she'd learned the move, from Pa, who had come home early one night, albeit drunk, as usual. He'd rambled on to his children about fighting, about how to stop an attacker. He had been holding a cold compress to his blackened left eye, the result of an altercation outside a speakeasy, as he said, "When they comes at ya, *box their ears!*"

Pa had dropped his compress and wobbled over to where his son sat, mesmerized. Clapping cupped hands against Uli's head, Pa boxed his ears with intemperate force. Uli absorbed the blows, then dropped off his chair and fell to his knees. He told Eunice later that a white light had blazed in his head when Pa clubbed him.

For years to come, Eunice would marvel at the quickness of her reaction, fueled by fury. Without internal debate, she simply clenched her jaw and struck. An open hand slapped the right side of Uli's head—a sting apropos for the insult. The marble-filled pouch, squeezed in her right hand, cudged his left temple. The blow left Uli lying in the dirt, unresponsive and bleeding from his ear, surrounded by his stunned friends. He would never be the same. Nor would he ever torment his younger sister again. As far as Eunice could determine, he never thought to do so.

Out on New York Harbor, a cargo ship blew its horn. The sound sailed past the water through the stale, humid air and drifted down to Eunice's ears. She tugged and twisted her dress at the waistline and then exited the alley, her posture erect. The leather sack, still bulging tight with marbles, relaxed in her hand. The panties she had stomped into the gravel swung from her other hand on a loose hook formed by her pinky.