The House of Closed Doors

JANE STEEN

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THE HOUSE OF CLOSED DOORS

JANE STEEN

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DISGRACE

My stepfather was not particularly fond of me to begin with, and now that he'd found out about the baby, he was foaming at the mouth.

I mean that literally: One of Hiram Jackson's less attractive characteristics was the liberal spray of spittle that doused the room whenever he got agitated about his subject. He was in full flow now, in both the verbal and salivary sense, and a small crest of foam gathered in the corners of his thin lips as he paced, hands clasped behind his back and chin jutting. His face glowed a dull, mottled red, and the stretching of the skin occasioned by his outrage caused his eyebrows, small goatee, and side-whiskers to bristle outward like outcrops of winter trees on a piebald landscape. The charm for which he was famed had evaporated, and I found myself wondering, in a detached manner, what my mother had been thinking when she decided to end her long widowhood by marrying this man.

"Who is the father?" Hiram swung round to glare at me as I stood—as far from the spittle cannonade as possible—in a strategic position near the door. Bet, our housekeeper, had rushed me downstairs before I could reach for one of the shawls I had been using to conceal my growing belly, and my dress strained over the lump. I would have to let it out again, I thought. I was uncorseted, of course, as I had been for many weeks.

I did not answer his question, and he strode toward me, knocking over a small occasional table. Bet abandoned her position for a moment to retrieve it,

then returned to the post she'd taken up to block my retreat.

"I said, who is the father? Answer me, Nell, or I will not be responsible for my actions."

Hiram was a tall man and solidly built. His bulk hung over me, and those ice-blue eyes were the only unmoving objects in a face that seemed to be twitching in all directions. His side-whiskers also twitched. I lowered my eyes, caught suddenly between mirth and defiance and not wanting to display either.

"I cannot tell you, sir."

I felt, rather than saw, Bet draw herself up and give me one of her best daggers-drawn stares. I knew exactly what she was thinking: How many men? Only one, dear Bet, I reassured her in my mind. Only one, and just the one time. I began again.

"I cannot tell you because I do not wish to marry him, Stepfather. If I told you his name, you would oblige us to marry."

My mother's soft voice cut across Hiram's indrawn breath. "Then he is free to marry you, Eleanor?" she asked. "He is not a married man?"

A purplish flush spread over my stepfather's cheeks, producing a most unpleasant effect. He turned on his heel and stamped over to the window, glaring sullenly out of it, with one hand massaging his lower back.

"Eleanor." My mother's voice trembled, but her English accent—and the use of my proper name—lent it an imperious tone. "Come over here."

I approached her chair and looked anxiously at her face to see how the news affected her. I could hear her breath wheezing in her lungs but was glad to see that her hand was not at her bosom, always an indication that the chest pains had returned. I dropped to my knees by her side and placed my warm hands on her small, cold ones.

"Mama, I am so sorry. I—" What did I want to say? That I hadn't meant it to happen? I wasn't even sure if I had. Not the baby, of course, I had never wanted that, but the act that had caused it. In my memory I saw flashes of sunlight through a curtain of green leaves.

"You must tell us the name of this boy—this man. Nell, even to be wed in your present condition will cause a considerable scandal. But to remain

unmarried—oh, my dear child! You must think of your stepfather's political career. His opponents will use your behavior to convince the voters that my dear Hiram is unable to control his family. Just think, Nell! And, of course, it is wrong in the eyes of the law and the Lord not to marry," she added as an afterthought. My mother generally put Hiram before the law and the Lord.

"I am sorry, Mama." I knew my face was assuming the expression Bet called *the stubborns*. "I do not wish to give the name of the father."

"Then he is unsuitable for your station in life, is he not? Oh, Nell—you who have always been so particular about the young men of your acquaintance!" My mother's eyes, the faded blue of old china, were bloodshot, and tears were beginning to gather. But her voice was steady and strong now.

"Amelia." My stepfather had recovered himself from whatever emotion had temporarily robbed him of speech, and his face had settled back into its usual smooth, handsome lines. He moved toward us, ready to dominate the conversation again. "Your reproaches are quite clear-headed, my dear. But as always, you are too indulgent of your daughter's ways. She must be made to tell us the name of the—the—the unspeakable blackguard who has put her into this shameful condition. You are quite correct that my political chances may be damaged by this, this, this," he glared down at me and gestured at my belly, searching for a polite enough word. He failed to find one and began again. "She must tell."

Two tears trickled down Mama's soft, white cheeks. I shook my head.

"Hiram," Mama said, gazing up at her husband who loomed above us both, fidgeting with his watch chain with one hand and massaging his back with the other, "how do you propose to make her tell? You cannot possibly be intending physical violence. And you cannot possibly withhold food or any of the necessities of life from her in this condition. Her innocent child must not be made to suffer for her sin. And you know that Eleanor will never yield once her mind is made up."

My stepfather's face flushed again, but the mere sight of my mother's hand creeping up to clutch her chest in the region of her heart gave him pause. I will say one thing for Hiram: He really did seem to love my mother. He, too, knelt

heavily by her chair and shot me a look of such venom that I quickly stood up and retreated to the door again.

"Amelia, my dear, do not distress yourself," he said in quite a different tone. "I will give this matter thought and find an honorable course of action." He turned to look at Bet, who had held her tongue all this time, sniffing occasionally and making noises under her breath to indicate her disapproval of my wretched self. "Bet, Mrs. Jackson is cold. Bring that blanket."

Bet immediately grabbed the soft woolen coverlet neatly folded on the piano seat and went to tuck it in around my mother's legs, murmuring, "There, Madam, and I'll bring you a nice pot of tea directly. Leave it to the master to arrange things, now do. You must not get yourself into a state." I noticed that her Irish brogue was to the forefront, as always when she was trying to placate my mother.

My stepfather, who had risen to his feet to get out of Bet's way, now strode to the door. On the way he grasped me by the shoulder—so hard that I could feel his fingernails dig into bone and muscle—and breathed into my ear, the merest hiss that neither of the other women could hear: "I will arrange matters, you little whore, and you won't like it."

And then he was gone, and I heard his heavy tread as he ascended to his study.

The parlor seemed silent and much emptier without my stepfather in it. It resumed the character it had maintained for so many years since my father died: a realm of women, of soft and earnest gossip and the clink of china cup against delicate saucer. A world of women, who all adored me.

A shrinking world. My adored English grandmama, whose refined ways and English tastes had put their stamp on our Middle Western household, rested peacefully in Victory's spacious graveyard. And my mother's dearest friend, Ruth Rutherford, who had visited us almost every day despite the demands of her drapery business, now lay on her deathbed. Our refined, feminine life was

under siege, buffeted daily by Hiram Jackson's loud, large, cigar-scented presence.

I sighed and resumed my seat on the red velvet settee opposite my mother's chair. Both Mama and Bet turned to stare at my belly, which made a firm, sausage-shaped lump against the lace trimmings of my blue day dress. I felt the baby move, a mere flutter inside me, and my stomach growled loudly.

"Bet," I said in the most conciliatory tone I could summon, "I really am quite hungry. I have had no breakfast, if you recall. Please bring some buttered toast with the tea."

Bet drew herself up to her full height and gave me the benefit of her best Irish stare. She had been with us since I was three years old and had gradually grown stouter and more heavily corseted. By now her figure was so compressed that I often wondered what happened when she unlaced at night: did she burst out in all directions like a split bag of flour? She sniffed loudly and linked her freckled fingers together over her tautly imprisoned stomach.

"You are causing terrible distress to your dear mother, Miss Nell," was her only reply, her missing bottom tooth causing the sibilants to hiss and lisp. "You always were a terrible willful child, and now look! See what shame you are bringing on us all. Can't you tell us, now, even just what sort of person this," she hesitated, "gentleman may be?"

"Bet," my mother's voice hardened into the tone she used when her servants —of however long standing—forgot their place. "Have Marie make tea for both of us and buttered toast for Miss Nell. Now, please."

Bet sniffed, but very quietly. My dainty invalid mother somehow managed to exact absolute obedience from her servants, whom she ruled through the love they had for her and controlled by the tiniest changes in her faintly lined brow and her small, delicately pursed mouth.

Bet turned to leave, shooting another of her looks in my direction as she did so. I suspected there would be another talking-to later on, when she got me alone in my room. It would not work. I could resist Bet's bluster and bombast far better than I could my mother's gentle remonstrances.

As the door closed behind Bet, my mother looked directly at me. She was

everything I wasn't: petite, ladylike, and still very pretty for her thirty-eight years, with her pale blonde hair and slim, narrow-waisted figure. People loved her. I loved her. My father had loved her so much that he had died for her.

She raised her eyebrows, and I shook my head again.

"I will not say, Mama. I do not wish to marry him."

"Is he so very unsuitable?"

I thought hard, searching for a way to reassure her I had not been with the butcher's boy or a stable hand and yet not give any hint as to who it might have been.

"He is suitable in the eyes of the world, but not in my eyes, Mama. I do not wish to tie myself to him for life."

"You would rather be an unwed mother? Merciful Heaven, Nell! That is the end for you socially."

I twiddled one of my bronze-red curls, still waving around my shoulders because Bet hadn't spared me the time to put my hair up before she dragged me downstairs. I liked it this way. When it was twisted and prodded into submission on top of my head, it was a heavy nuisance, and I was always having to poke escaping curls back into the mass.

"I have never cared too much about society, Mama. And the society of Victory is not exactly extensive."

"Our town is growing fast, Nell," said my mother reprovingly. "Since the War ended, we have seen so many new people, some of them even from the Confederate states. Doreen Ahern, you know, has engaged a—a—*colored* servant from Chicago!" Her voice had dropped to a whisper, and the sentence ended in a scandalized squeak. The town of Victory was composed of almost equal parts Irish, German, and Scandinavian blood, and a dark-skinned person of any rank had been a rare sight until the War had brought its changes and peace an inrush of new people. Mama was right: In this year of our Lord 1870 Victory was a growing, prosperous place.

She cleared her throat and resumed her lecture. "My dear Hiram says that Victory is excellently situated, poised as it is between the great city of Chicago, the golden fields of grain, the dairylands of Wisconsin, and the lake. And such

an excellent road!”

Her voice grew strident as she parroted my stepfather’s political rhetoric. In point of fact, Victory was sixty miles from the lake and well away from the corridor of towns that had pushed up like a string of mushrooms in a direct line from Chicago to the Wisconsin border. Still, it was true that after two years of bullying its prominent citizens for subscriptions, Victory—called Greenersville before the heady celebrations of the Union triumph over the slave-masters—was about to receive a railroad station.

To me, Victory was an eventless desert in which I did not wish to be marooned.

My mother’s eyes had focused on me again and taken on a calculating look. I surmised this was one of the good days when the fog her illness spread over her mind lifted for a while. “Bet says you are five months gone, Nell,” she said flatly. “Then it happened in May, did it not?”

I stared at the curl wound around my fingers. “I do not wish to discuss the matter, Mama,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. My heart raced, and I had just one thought: *Please, Mama, do not remember who visited us in May*.

I was saved by Bet’s reentrance with the tea tray. It was a strange time of day to be drinking tea, but Mama was not at home to visitors until one o’clock, and tea, in a house still dominated by Grandmama’s traditions, was regarded as medicinal and well suited to any crisis. I avoided Bet’s gaze as she lowered the tray onto the table by the fire and watched as she poked at the burning logs in an effort to warm up the chill October morning.

Bet straightened up as a thought seemed to strike her, the poker clutched in her right hand like St. Michael’s sword.

“Madam,” she waved the hot end of the poker in my direction, “am I right in assuming that Miss Nell will no longer participate in receiving visitors?”

The corners of my mother’s mouth turned down in quite a comically childish fashion, and she patted her hair absentmindedly. “Dear me, Bet, you are right.”

Her eyes widened, and she stared at me, horrified. “Supposing someone has already guessed?”

“I’d not worry, Madam,” said Bet. “Miss Nell has been careful to hold her shawl just so.” She clattered the poker back into the fire-iron holder and left the room. I distinctly heard “No flies on that one, to be sure” drifting on the breeze behind her.

“Nell,” said my mother, “you will kindly remain in your room during visiting hours from now on, and you will not leave the house. I will give out that you are suffering from the influenza—or the shingles—or something infectious so that no one will ask to visit you.”

Knowing how vague my mother’s mind could be at times, I fervently hoped that she would decide on one disease and stick with it. But I dipped my head obediently, said “Yes, Mama,” and accepted the proffered cup of tea. I tore through the buttered toast as speedily as decorum allowed and made my escape to my bedroom before my mother could revert to the question of the timing of my pregnancy. Fortunately, Mama had to get ready for her daily visit to her friend Ruth, so she had other things on her mind.

Marie had made my bed and tidied my room. As I entered, she had just finished dusting the mantelpiece; her large black eyes grew round as she noticed my belly, and a small reddened hand flew to her mouth. She looked about to speak but found nothing to say.

“Thank you, Marie,” I said as briskly as I could. “I won’t need you again today—except, I suppose, to help me with my hair later.” We kept a very small domestic establishment, a habit left over from Mama’s long widowhood, and Marie was a true maid-of-all-work.

Marie bobbed her sketchy version of a curtsey, said “Yes, Miss Nell” in a tone somewhere between hilarity and horror, and flew downstairs to gossip with Bet. No guessing who would be the main subject.

I sank gratefully into the armchair by the window. So, my secret was out. I stared down at the bulge of my belly and wondered how this would all end. Not, please God, in marriage.

I closed my eyes and once again saw the May sunlight making the pale new

leaves glow, and a warm feeling spread through certain regions of my body. Admittedly, there was one aspect of marriage that had potential for enjoyment. I reopened my eyes quickly, shocked by the thought that marriage could have any attractions at all and by my own wantonness in deriving even the least pleasure from the memory of that day.

I was beginning to understand the distinctions between flirtation, love, and what Bet always referred to, mysteriously, as “relations.” I wished to God that she, and all the women who had surrounded me in the seventeen years of my life, had been less mysterious and explained to me what “relations” were so that I could have put a stop to matters before they went that far. But I had been far more innocent than my flirtatious manner suggested, and therein lay my doom.

2

MARTIN

I shook my head to drive the thought of that day in May from my mind and looked out the window. My room was at the front of the house, but the view offered little entertainment. We lived on one of the quietest streets in Victory; like my life, it led nowhere.

At least, to no place frequented by the affluent merchants, professional men, and minor gentlefolk who formed my own social class. The neat row of houses, flanked by roses and zinnias that were still displaying the occasional bright bloom, gave way eventually to some plainer abodes whose yards were rank with every flower that grew in our hot summers. Beyond them stretched open prairie dotted with patches of woodland and then endless miles of crops.

But it was not toward the fields that I stared that bright, cold October morning. I felt my lips curve upward into a smile as I spotted a flash of hair so blond as to be almost white, about ten houses along in the opposite direction.

Martin Rutherford had removed his hat to two women, both young—or trying to be young—if their ruffles and bows were anything to go by. He was listening to their chatter, bending his tall frame to catch their words. I could see the movement of his head as he threw it back in laughter and surmised that some degree of flirtation was proceeding. My smile grew broader. It would not work; Martin was just as averse to marriage as I was but for different reasons.

I flew to the bell-pull. Within ten minutes Marie had twisted and pushed my hair into some semblance of decency, and another glance from the window had shown that the conversation had ended and Martin, with less heaviness in his

step than I had seen recently, was walking toward our house.

I snatched one of my prettier shawls from my armoire and hurried downstairs as noiselessly as possible. I might not see Martin for months; I could not resist the opportunity to tease him one last time.

He saw me slip out of the front door and close it cautiously behind me. Bet, I hoped, was still in the kitchen at the rear of the house. Heaven knows what she would have done if she'd seen me outside, now that she knew of my condition. I hitched my shawl into a position where it both warmed me and concealed my torso and smiled at Martin as he slipped the latch on our gate. It was an action I had seen him perform thousands of times since I was a little girl. He had grown from the slender boy of my earliest memories to resemble an ascetic Viking warrior who had abandoned his beard and pagan ways for the monastery. The impression was reinforced by his height, the squareness of his face—clean-shaven in disdain of the fashion for whiskers—and his beaky nose.

"Well, and how is the youth of Victory today?" Martin tipped his hat to me and bowed his white-blond head in mock tribute. "You are blooming, Nell, positively blooming."

I glanced instinctively downward, aware that my appearance of radiant good health was due to the extra pounds on my normally skinny frame. The shawl was nicely in place. "Keep your voice down, please, Martin," was my reply. "I—well, I have had a bit of a falling out with Bet, and she's sure to make trouble if she finds me talking with you."

"Flirting with the boys again?" The ironic accuracy of his remark was enough to make my cheeks grow hot; Martin saw it, and laughed. "You are a terrible infant, Nellie. Always were. You will strew the streets of Victory with the corpses of your admirers, all having committed self-destruction for the want of your love."

"And you?" I wished fervently to steer the conversation away from the matter of my admirers. "Was that not Amabel Rudd? She has been setting her

cap at you for years."

"Ah yes, Amabel. And Augusta. Delightful ladies both, but Augusta has already crossed the threshold into permanent spinsterhood and knows it. And Amabel is close to the line and also knows it. Desperation never adds to a woman's allure, Nell. Remember that."

"Then you shouldn't be so nice to them and encourage false hopes."

Martin smirked and adjusted his beautifully clean shirt-cuffs. "My dear child, the ladies of Victory are my customers. I must always be nice to them."

"So marry one of them, and then people will stop saying—"

The dark core of pain, and something like fear, that lived in Martin's gray eyes deepened for a second and then masked itself. I believe I was the only one, apart from his mother, who ever saw that expression—the privilege of having known Martin since I was small enough for him to carry me around and feed me excessive amounts of candy.

"Saying what, Nell? That I am not the kind of man who marries? You know that's not true."

I did know it. I had teased Martin too many times over his crushes on women—hidden perhaps from the object of his desires but painfully obvious to those who knew him well—to imagine otherwise. The plain fact was, Martin adored women: the way they walked, the way they dressed, their shapes, the smell of their hair.

It had been fate, in the shape of his father's illness, that had confined him to a life spent shadowing his mother and ensured that the business of a draper would be his only choice. But in truth, it suited him well. He had learned to supplement his natural eye for beauty with an extensive knowledge of color and form and seemed quite content to spend his days discussing the intimate details of dress with Victory's women while avoiding their attempts to capture his masculine attention.

Add to that the fact that he was five times better dressed than any other man in Victory, and it was not surprising there was gossip. After Martin had broken the jaw of the one man who ever made a remark to his face, though, any such talk was strictly behind his back.

Impulsively I reached out a hand to my friend, cursing myself inwardly as my shawl slipped and only my fast reflexes prevented the second revelation of the day. “I know,” I said. For a moment I wished I could confide in Martin about the baby and about how I had let such a thing happen. But his sharp mind would immediately have worked out who the father was, and I did not think he would let the matter rest. No, this was a road I needed to walk alone.

“How is your mother?” I asked.

“Resting quite easily, for now. Looking forward to Aunt Amelia’s visit.” Martin always referred to my mother as “aunt,” out of affection. “In fact, I came here to tell her how much she eased Mother’s pain yesterday with her cold compresses. She is a wonderful friend, your mama, especially as she is not in good health herself.”

A blast of cold air made me shiver; the sky was clouding over, and the wind blew from the north. I could hear the sounds of Main Street and catch a whiff of its characteristic odor of dust, lumber, and horse droppings.

“Are you unwell?” Martin had seen me shiver and looked anxious.

I was about to reply that I was in the very best of health but thought better of it. Mama was soon to announce to the world that I was stricken by a contagious illness; better act the part.

“I feel a little feverish,” I lied.

Martin immediately whisked off a fine kid glove and laid a large, long-fingered hand on my forehead. “I feel nothing,” he said. “But it is cold out here. You should go inside; come, I’ll go with you.”

I backed toward the door. “No, I—I told you, Bet is cross with me. Just give me time to go to my room before you pull the bell. If I am ill, I will ring for Marie. And don’t tell anyone I’ve been out here talking to you.”

Martin grinned and touched the tip of my nose lightly with his forefinger, as if I were still his little playfellow of bygone days. I felt a slight prickling in my throat at the thought that he could soon have reason to entertain quite a different view of me. “Go inside, Nellie, and be sure not to become ill. Such feminine beauty should be carefully preserved for the lucky man who marries you.”

I felt a pang of guilt, and fear, and knew that this was indeed the last time I

would want to venture outside for a while. Truly, the situation was becoming much too complicated. In a second impulsive gesture, I stood on tiptoe and kissed Martin on the cheek. “Goodbye, Martin,” I said softly to my oldest friend. “Give your mother my love.”

“You will see her yourself soon,” he said, a slightly puzzled look on his face.

I held my smile as I closed the door, but as I crept up the stairs, I felt the corners of my mouth pull down, and a burning pain glowed in my chest. I had thought about many things those past few weeks but had never realized until then how much it would hurt to separate myself from the only world I knew. And it was entirely my fault.

3

COUSINS

I was spoiled, I'll admit it. I remember my mother holding me in her arms at the joint funeral of my father and baby brother—which could not take place till the snow melted and the ground thawed—with my face pressed into the dampness of her black dress where it had become soaked with my tears. I remember my mother's face, blotched and bloated from crying, as she assured me in unsteady whispers that she would be everything to me now, her fatherless child—her only child. I closed my eyes and half-dozed to the sound of those whispers, accompanied as they were by the muted thud of shovelfuls of wet dirt landing on the large coffin and the tiny one, side by side in the sodden clay.

Mama was as good as her word. Her interpretation of being everything to me involved indulging nearly every one of my little whims. She was aided and abetted by Bet, who loved me dearly, despite the constant stream of sarcastic correction that she kept up for my own good. Mama's lady friends made a pet of me, bought me bonnets and dolls, and laughed at my stubbornness and my willful caprices.

My mother's mother, Lillian, my darling grandmama, taught me to be an excellent seamstress and needlewoman—the only kind of study for which I had an aptitude. Mama's friend Ruth, Martin's mother, was a daily visitor, along with a group of doting old ladies, Grandmama's friends. These lovely creatures, not one of whom had an original thought in her head, exclaimed over my talent with the needle and the pencil and went into raptures about my huge blue eyes and

“strength of character.” About my bushy red hair and stick-thin, knob-jointed figure they were graciously silent.

I attended Miss Clinton’s Academy in Victory’s only brick house until I was thirteen, although my attendance during the last year was patchy as the Civil War spread its disruptions into our daily lives. Since my thirteenth year, apart from the piano lessons given to me sporadically by my mother and Mr. Layforth’s summer dancing and deportment classes in the cavernous barn behind my stepfather’s store, I had had little to do except amuse myself. I was never fond of books, preferring to roam the nearby woods and fields and then return home to my latest sewing project.

Naturally, as I grew older, flirtation became one of my amusements. I soon tired of the callow, pimply boys that Victory had to offer in my own age group, and the War had thinned the ranks of the more interesting older men. Still, visits and parties with young people from other towns offered opportunities to try out the effects of the aforesaid blue eyes and my figure, which, although still too tall and angular to be fashionable, had developed curves in all the right places. I learned the power of a demure glance, an apparent confusion at the touch of a sweaty hand, those delightful games of almost letting a boy kiss you and then retreating behind a veil of propriety.

I was quite pure, of course. Chaperones were surprisingly easy to evade, but none of us young people had any idea what we were doing and thought a kiss quite daring enough. And as I have said, older men who were whole of body were in short supply. The only older man I knew well was Martin, and although I amused him mightily and we were the best of friends, Mama had never looked at Martin with that calculating eye so peculiar to mothers of daughters.

Once I turned sixteen and we were out of mourning for Grandmama, Mama began inviting potential husbands to drink tea in our parlor and make awkward conversation while I sat there, outwardly polite but inwardly resolved to have nothing to do with marriage. Flirting with youths at parties was fine, but the idea of tying myself to any of them for life—having babies for them—disgusted me. Especially the babies. They had forgotten all about me the day that my little brother took his first and only breath, but I had not forgotten the sound of my

mother's whimpers and finally screams of pain that had penetrated to my retreat under my bed and through the fingers that plugged my ears.

My intention had been to exasperate my mother's plans for marriage for as long as possible in the hope that she would eventually take me East to continue the hunt on fresh ground. In the old society of the Colonial states, I had heard, were women who—by choice!—did not marry and devoted their lives to useful activity, free from the taint of eccentric spinsterhood that would fall on me if I remained in Victory. It would be easy enough to elude Mother's ineffective chaperonage and find out how these ladies had achieved their state of unwedded bliss.

It had been a good plan. So why was I now reduced to hiding in my room and concealing my swollen belly? The answer lay in my own stupidity and ignorance—and John Harvey Venton. Cousin Jack.

"How delightful!" my mother had exclaimed six months before, as she looked up from the letter she was reading. We had been trapped in the house for days, the combination of the spring rains and melting snow having turned every road into an impassable quagmire, and as a consequence, Mama had been spending time improving her correspondence with friends and relations.

"What's delightful, Mama?" I inquired politely, looking past her at the April rain beating against the parlor window.

"We are to receive a visit from your Venton cousins. All of them—just imagine!" She read on a little farther and giggled. "How shocking; all three girls are leaving their husbands and children at home and absconding on a visit to their acquaintance in the Middle West." She shifted in her chair to peer anxiously at the rain sheeting the window. "I do hope the roads will be dry by then. The passenger train will only bring them as far as Chicago."

"When are they to arrive, Mama?" My attention was on the handkerchief I was embroidering—one of my favorite occupations at that time was to design and sew exquisite ladies' handkerchiefs—and my replies must have sounded

bored and perfunctory. But my mother did not notice. She squinted at the letter, which caused her difficulty due to Cousin Elizabeth's cramped handwriting.

"Sometime at the end of May. Elizabeth will write when she knows exactly."

"Well then, Mama. The roads will be perfectly dry by then. You know very well that May is often a beautiful month, and there are no indications that spring will be late—why, the snow is nearly gone already."

"I am sure you are right, my darling. Oh, Nell, that handkerchief is going to be perfectly adorable! For whom do you intend it?"

"Maybe I will make one each for my cousins; what do you think of that?"

My mother's face lit up in one of her radiant, sweet smiles. "I cannot think of a better gift. But you must also make something for Cousin Jack; perhaps some plain gentleman's handkerchiefs?"

"Jack will be there too?"

"Of course; and since we last saw him he has quite grown up and been a soldier, so we will not recognize him."

"Do soldiers need fine handkerchiefs, Mama?" I asked absently, making minute snips at the cutwork border of the piece I was fashioning.

Mama laughed, a merry sound against the dull beat of the rain. "Now, Nell, you are being a goose. The War has been over for four years, after all. Ah, those terrible years. . . I am grateful that Chicago was so little affected."

"So Jack is out of uniform?" I hid a yawn behind my hand. As usual, Mama's train of thought was beginning to drift, and I was tiring of the subject of Cousin Jack.

"Oh, for some time, my dear. Apprenticed at a legal office, Elizabeth tells me, and soon to begin his career as an attorney."

"Doesn't he have enough money to live on already?"

Mama screwed up her face in consternation. "A man must do something in life, I suppose. He will be quite the gentleman by now, and, yes, of course he will carry at least two handkerchiefs." Miraculously, Mama had come back to the point. So the matter was settled, and I spent one blustery week in late April embroidering "JHV" on six large squares of soft white lawn.

Elizabeth, Florence, and Henrietta were true first cousins to me. My mother's

sister Caroline had disturbed the family's equilibrium by marrying Barnabus Venton when he owned only three carts and was therefore beneath her. After Caroline's death from influenza, Uncle Barney, by now a rich merchant, had married Aunt May, who had given birth to Jack before succumbing to childbed fever.

My mother had been fond of Barney, whose puckish features and wild sense of humor hid a deeply loving heart and a fierce intelligence in all business matters. He had died during the War. I last saw Uncle Barney at my father's and brother's funeral, surrounded by his three grown daughters and Jack, a self-assured, twelve-year-old princeling who could not quite hide his embarrassment at his father's rustic manners. I had been six, and tearful, and Jack had ignored me.

4

JACK

Cousin Jack did not ignore me this time. In retrospect, I might have wished he had. I didn't even see him at first when my cousins arrived, because his sisters—all fair, all rather fat, and all complaining bitterly about the state of the roads—burst from the carriage they'd hired in Chicago like a flight of exotic birds. I was submitting to perfumed hugs and surreptitiously studying their expensive traveling dresses for details I could adapt to my own when my hand was suddenly grasped by a strong masculine one, and I felt warm breath and the tickle of a silky mustache on my knuckles.

"Little Cousin Nellie," said a pleasant, deep voice in a tone of ironic amusement, and I looked up—not too far up, as I am tall and Jack was not quite six feet—into a pair of jade-colored eyes with strange black flecks in them.

As a little girl, I had found Jack impressive, if supercilious. His sisters adored him and waited on him as if he were the President himself, and he had that facile cleverness and athletic strength that gives a boy of twelve an aura of youthful glory. With the addition of eleven years, eighty pounds of muscle, and a respectable, if short, battlefield career as an infantry officer, Jack's impressiveness had soared to new heights.

I do believe that I blushed; certainly, something Jack saw in my face made him show all of his white teeth in a broad grin. He made the usual remarks about how I had grown and how womanly I looked, but they were swallowed up in the bustle of unloading the carriage and showing the ladies their rooms. Jack was staying at Bettle's Hotel; our house was not particularly large.

At dinner I sat between Elizabeth and Henrietta watching my mother's face, glowing with happiness, and Hiram's performance of joviality. My stepfather, when he wished, could be a most hospitable and urbane man, and I found myself laughing at his polite jokes as much as at the exaggerated responses of my female cousins.

In the midst of all this jollity I suddenly received the distinct impression that Cousin Jack was looking at me and decided to try one of my favorite tricks. I dipped my head and raised my eyelids slowly, favoring him with the full force of my eyes—which are quite remarkable, being very large and a brilliant, deep blue with sparkling depths of green, like sea-glass.

As I'd thought, he'd been looking at me. I held his gaze for just a second and saw something—was it respect?—blend with the amusement in his eyes. I looked down at my plate, pleased with myself, enjoying the buzzing sense of exhilaration in my stomach. The game had begun.

That week was one long flirtation, although we were both careful to keep our growing attraction out of sight of everyone around us. I most emphatically did not want Mama or my cousins noticing an "attachment" between us and jumping to matrimonial conclusions. On the face of it, the match would be excellent; Jack and I were not related by blood, and there was a substantial sum of money in trust for him pending his marriage, or thirtieth birthday.

Yet as much as I appreciated his muscular build, his crisply curled, sun-streaked hair, and those compelling jade-green eyes, in no way did I intend to become the wife of John Harvey Venton. To be sure, the society of Hartford, Connecticut, was bound to be far more extensive and exciting than that of Victory; but there was a whole world to be explored, and a week's delicious flirtation with the most mature, attractive unmarried man who had ever crossed my path did not tempt me to tie myself for life to a husband and home.

As for Jack, no word of love ever crossed his lips. He spoke to me of art, of beauty, of the pleasures of youth and freedom—yes, that was a definite hint that

he wished to remain unattached—and of the fellows at the law office where he was apprenticed. He wished to make his mark in the world, he told me, in a highly respectable profession that would open the doors of society everywhere. He never said so, but I knew he meant to erase completely the stain of trade from a family fortune built in the haulage business. I was glad that Uncle Barney was no longer alive to see how much his son despised him.

When Jack and I could snatch a few minutes—or even seconds!—alone, his hands would steal round my waist and his lips would be pressed to my neck or my cheek and sometimes even lightly touch my own lips. He was far bolder than any other young man of my acquaintance and seemed to know exactly how to touch me to set my blood on fire. When we were with the others, we kept up a constant play of surreptitious glances and seemingly accidental brushes of the hand that made my skin tingle and sent delicious flashes like lightning through my belly and down my legs. Looking back, I cannot imagine how we managed to hide this love-play from the rest of the family, so brightly did our flame seem to burn amid their commonplace lives.

The May weather connived with our pleasure in each other. The sun beat down warmly, soft breezes stirred the air, and the pathways through the woods and by the river were quite dry and most suitable for frequent country rambles. White and dusky red trilliums spangled the woodland floor, marsh marigolds shone brilliant gold in the damp hollows, jack-in-the-pulpits were beginning to raise their hooded heads, and the deer that had escaped the hunters in the fall could be glimpsed staring shyly at us from a safe distance. Elizabeth, Florence, and Henrietta exclaimed loudly—and somewhat insincerely—about the rural beauties of our little corner of the Middle West, while behind their backs Jack slid his warm, bare hand along my arm and my body shook with suppressed laughter and desire.

We spent most of the week in the company of my mother, her friend Ruth, and others of their generation, but for the last day of their visit, my cousins had decided that a picnic “for the young people” would be just the thing. Elizabeth, Florence, and Henrietta apparently still saw themselves as young, however staid and matronly they may have appeared to my eyes. The rest of the party was

composed of about twenty sundry youths from a ten-mile radius around Victory, and my married cousins were our notional chaperones.

I was wearing, for the first time, a particularly fetching summer dress in a wonderful blue sprigged pattern I had found in Rutherford's store. Next to my cousins' fashionable furbelows it must have looked quite provincial, but I had the advantage of youth and a slender figure. And I had sewn this particular dress with a slightly roomier, lightly boned waist so that I could go uncorseted; there was nothing I disliked more than a corset in the hot weather. Mama would always scold me if I went without, but I was slim and firm-fleshed enough that, with the right tailoring, I could disguise my incorrect dress. And Marie knew I would never let her lace me tight, as fashion dictated. I liked to be able to breathe.

And there was, perhaps, a subliminal reason for my uncorseted state. The night before I had opted to retire early but slipped down to the kitchen to refill my water jug. Marie had forgotten, and I didn't bother to ring for her. It was fortunate that I had put the jug on the table to read a printed advertisement from Rutherford's about summer hats, because I certainly would have dropped it when two warm hands stole around my waist. Jack pulled me close to him and gently kissed the skin below my ear, murmuring, "Little Nellie Lillington," and I felt the tip of his tongue touch my skin. He pulled away and was gone as silently as he'd arrived but not before I felt his strong hands caress my uncorseted body, a hitherto unknown delight. One more day stood between me and my cousins' departure, and I was hoping to experience that sensation once more.

I was not disappointed. The day was very warm but did not yet hold the stifling heat of summer, and there were not, as yet, any mosquitoes, so to be outdoors was heavenly. Among our group of young people were several couples determined to evade our chaperones so that they could hold hands and gaze into each others' eyes in some quiet woodland spot. A mute complicity seemed to exist between the young lovers and the single people in the group; the latter gathered round the three matrons and besieged them with requests for news of the East. What was in the shops? The theater? Was there any new slang? I could hear my cousins' shrill laughter as they tried to supply answers to the onslaught

of questions and smiled as I saw at least two young couples head deeper into the woods.

Jack and I drifted off toward the riverbank, where a growth of young willows made a most excellent screen from prying eyes. Jack pulled me into his arms and kissed me, lightly at first and then with increasing pressure. I had never experienced this kind of kissing before and had not realized that such an enjoyable experience could go on for so long. I soon began to feel quite lightheaded. In addition, Jack's hands had become increasingly bold and were encountering regions of my body that were, shall we say, unexplored territory. Soon I became oblivious of the distant sounds of our companions and even of the rushing of the river. If I opened my eyes for a moment, I saw the sun shining in flashes through the pale, young leaves of the willows, but what Jack was doing soon absorbed my whole attention.

The thought flashed across my mind that our activities had perhaps strayed beyond the bounds of socially acceptable lovemaking between single persons. And I didn't care; after all, what very little knowledge I *had* acquired—from whispered conversations with girls equally as ignorant as I—had taught me that one had to be in a reclining position to do anything really shocking; and the ground still being a little muddy, there was no chance of that. Although I was, in truth, in danger of collapsing into the mud; my leg muscles had unaccountably become weak and trembling, and all coherent thought was fast leaving me.

My eyes flew open in surprise when a stinging pain, coupled with a strangely pleasurable sensation, intruded on my consciousness. Jack's eyes were closed and his tanned face flushed; his teeth were gritted as if to stifle sound, and his fingers were digging into my nether regions. I closed my eyes again, not at all sure what to do. Jack gasped two or three times, and suddenly he pushed away and turned his back on me. I leaned weakly back against the smooth trunk of a young tree and tried to get my bearings about what had just happened.

After a minute Jack turned round and held out a white object decorated with the initials JHV. It was one of the handkerchiefs I had fashioned for him. To my astonishment, it was streaked with red.

"Quick," Jack said. "Use this between your legs; you are bleeding."

I took the handkerchief in mute surprise and turned away from him. A moment's investigation revealed that his statement was accurate, and it took me a few minutes to adjust matters to my satisfaction. I heard Jack stammer a few phrases under his breath, among which I made out "I thought—I didn't know—" but I was too preoccupied to pay heed to him. Voices rang out perilously close, and when I turned back to face Jack he had already slipped out of our hiding place and was hailing a group of girls, asking if they knew where I was.

Taking the hint, I moved around the back of the young willows and headed in the opposite direction to find a fallen tree where I could sit and look as if I had been contemplating the river.

I was ignorant but not stupid. I realized that I had crossed over a threshold I should never have approached; but what was done could not be undone. I spent the rest of the picnic in alternating states of mind: puzzlement over the contrast between what I felt during our lovemaking and my feelings after its abrupt conclusion; anxiety as to how I would conceal the state of my undergarments; and strange feelings, like galvanic shocks somewhere between pleasure and fear, that ran up and down my arms and legs every time I thought of the day's proceedings.

Jack was quiet and spent much of the time feigning sleep, although I saw a jade-green glance directed at me once or twice. When challenged by his sisters for being sleepy and stupid, he laughed and declared that he had eaten too much chicken.

When we returned to my house Jack handed me out of the carryall with as much unconcern as if I were one of his sisters, although this time he looked directly at me, and I thought I saw a tinge of anxiety in his gaze. I smiled brilliantly at him, and his face relaxed. Calling to my cousins that he would walk straight over to his hotel and return later for dinner, he sauntered off in that direction.

The next eighteen hours did not afford us any opportunities for private

conversation, and at ten o'clock the next morning the hired carriage drew up in front of our house. The traveling trunks having already left on an earlier cart, there was nothing left for my female cousins to do but to worry about mislaid articles, fuss about the dustiness of the road, and cover my mother and myself with lavender-scented kisses and promises to write.

Jack handed his sisters into the carriage and turned to shake hands with Ruth Rutherford, who had called to say goodbye to the visitors. He stooped to kiss my mother gently on both cheeks and then took my hand.

"Goodbye, Cousin Nell. Thank you for a most delightful visit."

His tone was polite and friendly, and there was a look of something like camaraderie in his eyes. A look that said, "No harm is done, and we are friends, are we not?" I examined my feelings. No, I was not distraught to see him go. Did I feel anything in particular toward him? He was the same as yesterday: a handsome man with pleasant manners, but now I understood better the promise of his sensual lips and watchful eyes. We had forged a bond, he and I, but not one, apparently, that either of us wished to draw tighter. I suddenly felt very grown up.

I smiled my most winning smile and lifted my eyes slowly to his face so that he could enjoy the full effect one last time. "Goodbye, dear Cousin," I said steadily. "I wish you success with your career."

His lips brushed my knuckles as they had the day of his arrival, and once again I felt their warmth and the cool touch of his silky mustache on the back of my hand. He straightened up, nodded imperceptibly at me, and sprang lightly into the carriage, instructing the driver to set a steady pace.

And then they were gone, leaving only a cloud of dust. Waving goodbye to Ruth—who had to return to her store—I took my mother's arm and we walked back inside.

As the door shut behind us, my mother smiled at me, as gaily as if she too were almost seventeen.

“Jack is a handsome young man, is he not? You two seemed quite friendly together.”

I turned quickly toward the parlor door to hide the blood I felt rising to my cheeks. “Mama,” I said, forcing a reproving tone, “I hope you are not getting any ideas.”

“Not in the least, my love. And besides, Henrietta let slip that there is a sweetheart back East. A girl of very good family, she says.”

This put a completely new complexion on things, and I felt a strange emotion —a mixture of relief and foreboding.

“Jack did not seem like a man about to marry,” I remarked. “He talked a great deal about youth’s freedoms.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Amelia.” Hiram had bidden a hasty farewell to all and had ensconced himself in his armchair with the newspaper while we lingered over our goodbyes. He ignored me, addressing his remarks to my mother. “The boy should establish his career before he thinks of marrying. And I implore you, my love, to stop treating every male who comes within three feet of Nell as a potential husband. Although,” he laid his newspaper down on his lap, “that money of Barney’s would come in useful.”

“But we have ample money, do we not?” Three small lines of anxiety appeared on my mother’s alabaster brow.

Hiram cleared his throat, jerking the newspaper back up in front of his face. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, Amelia. I meant for Nell. I do not want to have to support her husband as well as her.”

I drifted off toward the stairs while the discussion continued, my mother having adopted a bantering tone as she pretended to fret over her spouse’s parsimony. Why, I found myself wondering, had Jack flirted with me if he had another love at home? And if his attraction to me had overridden his conscience, why had he found it so easy to leave me? Really, I mused, I had thought I understood men. They were obviously not quite as straightforward as I had imagined.

5

CONSEQUENCES

Several weeks passed before I suspected that my lapse had consequences. In the first month I simply refused to believe there was any significance to the absence of my monthly “visitor”; my recent experiences, I convinced myself, had disturbed my body’s equilibrium. When the second month passed without a sign of menstruation and my breasts became tender, I began to worry; but whom could I consult?

Unmarried women were only given the information they needed to maintain the proper level of hygiene; usually a girl’s mother or married friend instructed her, as close as possible to her wedding night, about what would be expected of her. Only once she was safely married would such matters as pregnancy be discussed. Those in my social set, innocents all, were as ignorant as I; and with Grandmama gone, I had no close friendships with any married women except my mother and Ruth Rutherford. Asking Bet seemed like a possibility, but I knew that her loyalty to my mother would mean instant revelation. Ruth, perhaps? But she had already taken to her bed for what would be her final illness.

So I remained silent, hoping that I was wrong about my condition. I never felt any illness as I had heard some women did; I participated in the usual summer activities of buggy rides, picnics, outdoor dances, and rambles down by the river. Flirting had lost its thrill for me, and my few female friends were not slow to comment; but I simply stated that I was beginning to find such things childish, which was the plain truth. Two boys who were determined to take an

interest in me were eventually rebuffed by my distinctly unenthusiastic manner and turned to other girls instead.

My corset began to feel increasingly uncomfortable, but my waist was thickening, and I laced it tighter. The heat became stifling, and in the evening Bet would open every window in the house to let in what little coolness the night provided. My nights were spent listening to the cacophony of insect voices outside my window, chasing the mosquitoes that always managed to find a way in despite the screens, and passing my hands over my barely swelling stomach. I had heard that women lost their babies sometimes; could that miracle happen to me?

I was not pious; I went to church, of course, and sat with bowed head as my mother and stepfather said their rote morning and evening prayers, but prayer was not something I did unless I was expected to. Now, in the singing nights of summer, I did pray one prayer over and over again: Lord, don’t let this happen to me.

The waists of my dresses became tight, and I carefully let them out in the privacy of my own room. By September I developed a craze for shawls, even though they were not the height of fashion. Rutherford’s had some truly magnificent fabrics that year, Martin having come across a consignment of embroidered Indian silks on his monthly buying trip to Chicago. Fringed, they looked splendid; I made several, and my mother and friends became accustomed to seeing me swathed in yards of bright color. Several of the younger women in Victory were seen sporting a similar article; I could not help but laugh at the irony of being a leader of fashion when all I was trying to do was hide.

By October a distinct lump had emerged, and I was beginning to feel the flickers of life inside me. What was I going to do? The question was resolved one morning when, pleading a headache, I had begged my mother to be allowed to remain in bed a little longer. By ten o’clock I was ready to rise; and unfortunately, it was just at the moment when I swung my legs over the edge of my bed that Bet entered the room.

I could see straightaway from Bet's face that she had noticed the bump through the thin cotton of my nightgown. For a second, she froze; then she crossed the room at amazing speed for her size and seized my shoulder. The fingers of her left hand held me immobile as she poked at my abdomen with her right.

"Mother of God." Her face had drained of color, and the freckles and blotches on her weathered skin stood out plainly.

"Mother of God," she said again. "What have you done?"

I said nothing, staring at Bet's bushy, gray-streaked bun of hair as it wobbled on top of her head. Her hands were trembling slightly, and she finally let go and stared at me. Her eyes, the color of dark chocolate, were as round as billiard balls, and she clasped her hands together tightly under her chin so that the flesh of her fingers swelled over her wedding ring and the mourning ring that held a tiny, curled braid of her late husband's hair.

I waited for her to speak, torn between fear and something almost akin to relief. The moment had come at last, but I would not betray Jack and ruin both our lives.

"Who is the father?" Bet's voice came out in a whisper.

"Bet," I found my voice at last. "Please don't ask me that."

"Mother of God." Bet was becoming repetitive. "You haven't been with a married man?" Her voice rose to a horrified squeak.

"No." I was aware that I had flushed red. "Not a married man. Bet, I do not want to marry the father of this baby. It was a mistake."

"A mistake, is it?" Bet recovered her usual bracing bad temper and drew herself up to her full height, pulling me up from the bed as she did so. I was taller than she, but she was wearing shoes and I was barefoot, so our eyes were on a level.

"Some mistake!" Bet exclaimed. "Miss Nell, you have always had your own way. But when a girl gets herself in the family way, she marries the father of the child. There is no 'not marrying' to be heard of."

"Not if I refuse to give a name. What are you going to do, put up a poster in my stepfather's store advertising for the father to come forward?" Fear made me sound more defiant than I intended.

Bet sniffed loudly. “I should slap your face for your impertinence, you little hussy.” Her breath whistled through her missing tooth, and “hussy” came out as “huthy.” I couldn’t help smiling, out of affection as much as anything, but Bet saw insolence in my reaction. Her work-worn hand closed around my wrist like a vise, and she jerked me toward my wardrobe.

“Get some clothes on right now, young woman.” I had not heard that tone of voice since I was nine and ate all the strawberries reserved for a particularly nice cake. That was not a voice I disobeyed; I opened the drawers of the chest where I kept my undergarments.

Ten minutes later, I was dressed and ready to be dragged downstairs to face my mother and stepfather.

6

FALLEN

The three days after my secret came out passed in an extremely tense atmosphere. My stepfather barely spoke to me; if I looked up from my plate at mealtimes, I often caught a hard, calculating stare from the head of the table and would lower my gaze immediately.

Martin called at least twice, bringing news of his mother's worsening condition. I do not know what Mama and Hiram told him, but he went away without seeing so much as a glimpse of me. I watched him from the window as he strolled in the direction of his store, his long legs eating up the distance in easy strides, and bit my lip in frustration. Would he have understood and helped me? Or would he, a moral man if not a pious one, have looked at my disgrace with a sneer on his lips? I feared the loss of his friendship and of his mother's.

On the third day, Stepfather informed us that he would be spending two weeks in Prairie Haven and Waukegan. Waukegan, as the county seat, was a center of political influence and therefore a place where Hiram Jackson throve; if it were not for my mother's attachment to Victory—and the possibility that Hiram could rise to become mayor of our small community—I believe we would have taken a house there. Hiram was on the board of the North School in Waukegan, and in Prairie Haven, ten miles inland, he was active on a committee for the relief of the poor. He was also on the Board of Governors of the Prairie Haven Poor Farm, where those most in need of help were housed and given work.

On being informed of his forthcoming absence, my mother raised her china-

blue eyes to her husband's face with a worried expression. "Hiram. . . ," she began, "Eleanor . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Hiram subjected me to another glare, and then his expression changed as he looked at my mother. "My dear," his ice-blue eyes had softened, "I will of course be using my contacts to find a solution to the, um, problem. You need not worry about anything. I know many persons of the utmost discretion in the area and will find a place where Nell can be kept hidden until . . ."

"Hiram," my mother's eyes widened, "do you mean that Nell must leave us?"

"Naturally she cannot have her child in this house." My stepfather's tone was peremptory but became gentler again as my mother's face creased in anguish. "She need only stay away until the child is born and suitable parents are found to adopt it. After that, Nell should live quietly here," he glanced in my direction once more and his eyes hardened, "and show herself to be an exemplary citizen. There will be no more gadding about, my girl. You will take an active interest in the church and in charitable works and thereby redeem your character. I fear that news of your indiscretion will eventually come out no matter how careful we are; but there are gentlemen, widowers and such, who may marry a fallen woman if she shows suitable repentance."

"Could we not," my mother's voice faltered, "send her to my relatives in the East once the child is—is adopted? To keep her confined here, in Victory, with so little society, until her looks fade . . ." I felt a surge of alarm at this idea. My relatives in the East were precisely where the problem lay.

Hiram's thin mouth stretched into a narrow grin that was positively chilling, and his bushy eyebrows twitched. "My dear Amelia, the bloom is already off the rose, is it not? Be guided by me, my love. It would be unwise to send Nell looking for a husband too soon. A man expects a young bride to be," he cleared his throat loudly, "unspoiled. He is less particular on that point when he has reason to prefer an older woman." He smiled at my mother with a sickly-sweetness that made my stomach churn.

"And your looks have not faded, my darling Amelia. I admired you when you were the young wife of Red Jack Lillington, and I still admired you when

you were a widow of several years' duration. Nell is handsome enough; a few years of purposeful employment will add sense to her natural attributes, and she could yet make a fine wife for the right man."

I had been silent throughout this interesting interchange, as befitted a Fallen Woman—my imagination invested my stepfather's words with capital letters. I could not help noting that, even with an illegitimate child in the background, my mother and stepfather's long-term concern was to marry me off. I sighed inwardly at the unfairness of it all. A widow could legitimately work to support herself; a girl born into the humbler classes would also be expected to learn a trade.

A rich woman, married or unmarried, could play the benefactress and, if thought eccentric, would at least be respected for her wealth. Why, oh why had I been born into that narrow strip of society that countenanced no other fate for a woman than supervising her home, raising her children, and pandering to her husband's every whim?

Yet it occurred to me that my stepfather's plan of engaging me in useful works of charity was quite fair, considering what I had done. It certainly offered more freedom than marriage, and there was the potential of travel if I kept my eyes open for opportunities. My senseless act had effectively taken me off the marriage market and given me breathing space in which to plan a different future.

I felt the baby flicker in my belly and imagined handing it over to a childless couple who would rear it as their own. Yes, I could do that. After all, what was a baby but a squalling bundle of responsibilities? I had never been fond of babies and children.

I raised my eyes to look directly at Hiram.

"I will be guided by you in all things, Stepfather," I said in a tone of the utmost submissiveness and saw my mother's grateful glance.

Of course, at that point I was imagining that I would be sent to stay in a respectable, discreet household. If I had known what my stepfather had in mind, I might not have been quite so compliant.

7

MORAL IMBECILE

The next two weeks were peaceful without Hiram in the house. I stayed in my bedroom during calling hours, and my mother told visitors I was sick. She was out of the house very frequently because Ruth Rutherford was terribly ill and not expected to live till Christmas. Mama spent many hours sitting by Ruth's bedside, and I worried about her own frail health; but she assured me they were just chatting peacefully when Ruth was alert, and at other times Mama read to her or simply held her hand. Devout, if rather conventional, believers both, they found comfort in their certainty that they would be together again after a short time.

Martin, Mama told me, spent his nights by his mother's bedside and his days at the store. She did not know when he slept. I felt a deep sadness for my friend and wished that I could spare him the additional anxiety of believing I was ill. For I was sure that he was worried about me; when I was a little girl he used to warm flannel scarves by the fire and wrap them tenderly round my neck when I had one of my rare colds.

I was not idle during this period. Bet purchased several bolts of warm winter wools and a quantity of flannel and cotton suitable for petticoats and underwear but also excellent for making baby clothes. With the help of a few patterns from my grandmama's huge stock—I used some copies of Godey's Lady's Book to bring them up to date—and the sewing machine that still stood in her old bedroom, I set to making a large quantity of clothing for myself and my baby.

The dresses I made for myself were plainer and simpler than the ones I

usually wore, and I had to exercise my imagination to account for the growth in my belly over the next few months. The few maternity patterns Grandmama had saved were extremely outdated, but I was skilled enough to adapt them.

Making the baby clothes reminded me of my earliest experiments in sewing, when Grandmama had shown me how to cut and fit clothes on Emmeline, the only doll I had ever cared for. I regarded my child as a growth that I would be relieved to have removed, but sewing was my greatest joy, and I did not resent the hours I spent making tiny gowns, caps, and diapers.

Bet, bless her, had begun knitting tiny garments and warm, soft blankets for the baby about three days after she found out about it. Despite her rigid disapproval of my own wretched self, she "could not condemn the mite, innocent little morsel that it is." She told anyone who asked about her sudden enthusiasm for sewing and knitting that one of her cousins was expecting again. As Bet's forty-one first cousins, spread the length and breadth of the county, were a byword in Victory, no one even took the time to ask which; since most of the female cousins had names starting with Mary, even the most accomplished gossips in Victory could never quite remember them all.

I was sitting in my room serenely sewing yard after yard of hemstitch, such tiny, neat stitches that they could not be seen, when Marie came in to lay a fire. I was glad of it; the wind was positively howling outside, and my fingers were stiff with cold. Marie was followed by Bet, who laid a small pile of tiny bootees on the table beside my chair, each fastened with a bow of thin, white satin ribbon. She sniffed to indicate that she had not made them for *my* benefit, nodded at me to lift up my sewing, and twitched a mohair blanket over my legs.

"Thank you, Bet. It has become quite chilly in here."

"'Tis one of those days when the wind brings the freeze with it, Miss Nell. There were some late roses on the bush by the gate this morning, but they're all wilted with the cold now."

As she said this, her voice softened and our eyes met. We both knew how the temperature could suddenly shift in this area—how the cold could move so fast that it could overtake the unwary traveler. We knew it because we had learned it the hard way. My insides lurched.

“Mama should not walk home, Bet. You know the cold makes her heart worse.”

“I know that, Miss. I have already run to Mr. Drehler’s to ask if he would be kind enough to send his buggy for her and make sure that there were blankets in it.” We kept no carriage of any kind, as Victory was a small town and we could walk most places. Besides, Mama had thought a carriage a ridiculous extravagance for a household of women, and the habit, reinforced by Grandmama’s Yankee thriftiness, held firm after she remarried.

“We will have to impose on him often, Bet, until Mrs. Rutherford . . .”

“I don’t think it will be long now for the poor lady,” Bet said regretfully. She sighed and shook her head, looking out of the window at the scudding gray clouds. “Your mother will be lonely with her gone, and with you to be away soon . . .”

Marie had lit the fire and was looking at us with wide eyes. “Is Miss Nell going off to have the baby elsewhere, then?”

Bet let out a loud “Hmph!” of irritation and turned on her subordinate, who was related to her in some complicated way and bore an identical topknot of bushy brown hair. “What did I tell you? If you value your position here, you’ll keep quiet about this baby, in this house and especially outside.”

Marie’s head drooped, and I flashed a small, sympathetic smile at her. We both knew that Bet’s bark was worse than her bite, but being on the receiving end of her brisk anger was a disheartening experience.

A jingling outside announced the arrival of the buggy, and Marie, at a jerk of the head from Bet, flew from the room to open the front door. In minutes my mother appeared, slightly breathless from the stairs but with cold-flushed cheeks and a cheerful demeanor. A telegraph message was clutched in her hand.

“News from your dear stepfather,” she announced. “He says,”—she peered once more at the paper—“Returning tomorrow. Solution found.”

The sky turned leaden by the next afternoon, and a few flakes of snow were

whirling among the still falling leaves. My stepfather returned midmorning and ate luncheon alone with my mother, as he wished to discuss the arrangements he had made with Mama before speaking to me. From the armchair in my bedroom where I took my meal on a tray, I could hear their voices: my mother's soft trill, more insistent and argumentative than usual, and my stepfather's overbearing rumble. It was clear that there was not perfect agreement between them.

At two o'clock I was summoned to the parlor. I shivered as I made my way down the stairs, as it was always much colder in the hallway in the wintertime than in the rooms. I pulled my newest shawl—a soft beige wool that I had trimmed with a darker brown fringe and embellished with embroidery in the same color—tight around my shoulders and my ever-more prominent bump.

I entered the room quietly and, I hoped, with an air of assurance. In truth, my heart was thumping. This was the greatest step into the unknown that had occurred in my life since my father's death, and I was apprehensive; and yet I felt excitement tingle in my bones. How that could be when I was in such trouble, I did not know, but I could not deny the feeling.

My mother's face was pale and a little red around the eyes as if she had been crying. Yes, there was a handkerchief crumpled in her hand. What, then, was my doom? My heartbeat doubled.

"Sit down, Eleanor," said my stepfather, speaking in calm, level tones. I took my usual seat on the red velvet settee, folded my hands in my lap—I almost folded them over my belly, but thought better of it—and looked reassuringly at my mother. Whatever it was, I wanted her to understand, I could survive it.

Hiram Jackson stroked the side-whiskers that extended down his cheeks and terminated in a luxuriant bush below his slight jowls. His hands were soft and white but bore the scars of his early days in the store as his father's assistant. He began to pace the room.

"I had considered," he said, "sending you to live with a family until the arrival of your, harrumph . . ." He did not even want to refer to my child, that much was plain. "But when I came to put that plan into action, the practical difficulties seemed insurmountable. Finding a family with the right degree of discretion in a county where I have many political enemies is fraught with

difficulty. Money would inevitably have to change hands, and that would leave me open to charges of bribery, to possible blackmail."

He laid a peculiar stress on that last word and fell silent for a moment, still pacing restlessly and looking out of the window at the snow, which was melting as soon as it touched any surface.

"If," he resumed, "I were to send you East for your confinement—which was your mother's suggestion—I am concerned that you will not exhibit that degree of repentance and hard work that I wish to instill in you as a consequence of your foolishness. In any case, news travels surprisingly fast between the East and here, and it is quite likely that the tale of an illegitimate baby," he pronounced the word "illegitimate" with great precision, "would waste no time in communicating itself to our neighbors in Victory."

He stopped pacing and stood for a long moment looking at me, rubbing the thumbs of his clasped hands together with a judicial air. My mother dabbed at a tear, but there was resignation on her face. Hiram's smooth, handsome countenance was serene, almost as if he were amused by some secret thought.

"I have taken the superintendent of the Prairie Haven Poor Farm into my confidence, as he often sees cases like yours in his line of work and is not shocked by such, such, ahem, contingencies. I asked him where one would send a young woman in your condition. He described various institutions to me: orphanages, homes for unmarried mothers, and the like. But he also assured me that his own establishment could provide everything I wanted: discretion, safety, suitable work, and a framework for providing for the adoption of the child."

By this time I could see what was coming, and I am certain I became visibly paler. My mother's dabs at her eyes were becoming more frequent.

"Therefore, Nell," my stepfather pronounced calmly, "I have decided that you will spend your confinement at the Poor Farm."

I opened my mouth to speak, but he held up a hand. "Allow me to finish. You will be accorded a certain status above that of the majority of the, er, residents. There is a small number of women of more refined character who do not do work on the farm itself but perform light household work and sleep in the main Women's House instead of in the dormitories. They are above even the

unwed mothers of the rougher sort, who even so are always given the easiest tasks on the farm and are never made to work outside while their babies are small."

He drew breath, and I took the opportunity to speak, trying to keep my voice as calm and even as his.

"And if word gets out, Stepfather, that you sent your own stepdaughter to live with imbeciles, drunks, and senile old people? Do you really think that it serves your purposes to do this?" My hands were trembling, but I pushed them under my shawl and kept my lips curved in a false smile.

"Nell," said my stepfather, seating himself in the largest armchair by the fire, "as a member of the Board of Governors, I am responsible for taking in many unwed mothers," he leaned forward and an edge of steel came into his voice, "exactly like yourself. Do you see that? I am treating you as I would treat any other moral imbecile." His tone was not harsh; he sounded as if he were trying to reason with a small child.

I leaned back in shock at his words but controlled the action to make it look as if I were simply making myself more comfortable. My mother was weeping quietly, and I could hear the faint wheezing as she struggled to draw breath.

"Mama," I said, "please do not distress yourself. I am not upset." I turned back toward Hiram. "What kind of work would I do?"

"There is plenty of work for a seamstress," my stepfather said. "At present there is only one elderly woman able to perform such work well, and a feeble-minded girl who helps her. Your skill with the sewing machine and the needle would benefit the Farm greatly. It is useful work, my girl, and would be quite to your taste. You would be a privileged resident indeed and spend much time with the matron, Mrs. Lombardi, who is a most refined and Christian woman."

He rose, crossed over to my mother, and grasped her hand, remarking on its coldness. He took both of her small hands into his large, white ones, gently rubbing and massaging them as he spoke.

"I am not condemning Nell to prison, my love. I have found her a good and safe place to have her baby and be well away from prying eyes. The other governors are all Christian men who are above politics and would not dream of

gossiping. The Farm is not a luxurious place to live, but it is run by enlightened, honest employees. Indeed, as a governor I have often expressed the opinion that they are overly kind to their charges."

My mother drew a deep, shaky breath. Her tears had stopped, and her blue irises stood out sharply against the bloodshot whites. She nodded at Hiram.

"You have often told me, my dear," she said with a tremor in her voice, "that many of the unfortunate—that many of the people—who come to the Poor Farm are simply unlucky enough to find themselves without means of support and have done nothing wrong in themselves. But what about the mental defectives? Can it be healthy to be housed with insane people?"

Stepfather straightened up and assumed a stance before the fire as if he were about to give a speech. "There is a distinction, Amelia, between the mental defectives, who are born deficient of reason, and the insane. We do not take in insane persons. If we do find that a resident is insane, we transfer him or her to one of the asylums. We only care for those who are not a danger to themselves or others. Our ultimate aim is to rehabilitate, not to incarcerate."

He paused and glared at me until he was sure he had my attention. "Of course, Nell, you have an alternative. Name the father of your child, and I will take steps to expedite a private wedding."

I looked down at my protruding abdomen. So marriage was the carrot, and the Poor Farm was the stick. I could choose to name my handsome, educated, and—when he came into his majority—wealthy cousin as my child's father, or I could give birth among strangers. Why did the former prospect seem so repellent? Was marriage really so terrible? Was love important? For Jack did not love me, of that I was sure, and I did not love him. Worse, he might already have an understanding with a young lady in Hartford, and my claim on him would then cause a considerable scandal.

As for the Poor Farm: I thought hard. Hiram would surely not send me into a place where I would be treated harshly, not in an area where he was trying to make political capital. And his words had the ring of truth to them.

Above all considerations I loved Mama more than anyone and would rather stay close to her than tie myself to Jack. If I married him, I would almost never

see her.

I tried to imagine declaring that Jack was the father. I saw in my mind's eye the shock on Mama's face, pictured the endless questions. I saw the tearful faces of my cousins gathered around Jack as he faced the ruin of his magnificent marriage prospects to wed the daughter of the late Red Jack Lillington, feed merchant. His child would be born outrageously early after a secret and hasty wedding, and it would be years before Hartford stopped talking about it.

It was too late for the truth. Surely this one lie—not even a lie, it was merely a reluctance to speak—was the most expedient, perhaps even the most noble, course of action? I would be free, Jack would be free, and life would go on.

I looked up at my stepfather and forced a smile, prepared to close one door to the future forever. "I said I would submit to your decision, Stepfather, and I shall. After all," I looked at Mama and made my smile brighter, "it will only be for a short while."

8

INMATE

November blew in on bitterly chill wings as I prepared to leave. That I would not be spending Christmas with my mother distressed us both, but I tried to make light of it for her sake. She was now mourning her friend Ruth, who had mercifully been taken before her pain became too much for those who loved her to bear, but she stood up well under the burden of grief. She believed firmly in the life to come and that Ruth was walking in Paradise; and as a young woman she had endured the worst pain of loss that any wife and mother could possibly imagine, and it had strengthened her. Her fragile body was sustained by a character as strong as steel.

I had been sorry to miss the funeral. Ruth had been a part of our lives for as long as I could remember. She had sustained my mother and me in the days of our terrible grief and had in turn drawn comfort from us as her husband's heart-wrenching illness made her own home a place of shame. Our house had been a refuge for Martin when the burden of seeing his father abuse and hit his mother became too much; he would cross our threshold with tightened lips and lines of pain across his young forehead but always left us with renewed strength in his demeanor.

I would have liked, so very much, to give my condolences to Martin, and it saddened me that by my own foolishness I had made it impossible to visit him at such a time. I stood by the window to catch a glimpse of the funeral procession and could just make out the white-blond of Martin's hair under his somber hat.

As far as the town of Victory was concerned, I was recovering from a

prolonged, disfiguring, and painful case of the mumps and was prostrate with weakness from having eaten practically nothing for a month. Soon, according to my mother's story, I would depart to convalesce at a sanatorium in the burgeoning resort of Lake Geneva in Wisconsin, a place of fashion and wealth. I imagined that many of my acquaintances in Victory were making witty remarks about how I would cut a swathe through the men there.

Two trunks had been packed for me. In addition to the large one holding my belongings, a small one overflowed with tiny articles of clothing for my child. Until recently I had not really thought of the reality of giving birth, but the inevitability of that event—and the memories it evoked—were greatly troubling my mind. I frequently awoke from nightmares in which I heard my mother screaming.

The fourth of November came, the day set for my departure. I rose well before dawn so that I could be on my way before the good citizens of Victory left their beds. I urged my mother to stay indoors, as the biting cold would do her no good: I hugged them all, even planting a faint, cold kiss on my stepfather's cheek for my mother to see. Bet gave me the hardest hug of all and wiped a tear from her eye.

"I must ask your forgiveness, Miss Nell."

"What else could you have done, Bet?" I smiled, grasping her hand. "I could not have hidden the state of affairs much longer. I only wish I had told you when I first suspected." My smile faded as I looked at the worried faces of the two women dearest to me in all the world. "Don't worry," I said, drawing myself up to my full height. "I will be quite all right."

By the time the ancient, creaking brougham pulled up to the gates of the Prairie Haven Poor Farm, my bones were chilled. The enclosed carriage offered as much protection from the elements as possible, and curtains had even been hung on the inside. A bearskin rug, quite a new one with hardly any bare patches, covered my knees, and I wore every article of winter clothing I could cram onto

my body. Yet four hours of rolling jerkily along an iron-hard road, planked or corduroyed in parts but in others a frozen mess of ruts, congealed my blood into ice crystals.

And I had to ask the driver to stop twice; I had begun to discover one of the more uncomfortable aspects of having a baby taking up space in my lower parts. One feature of the Middle West farmland in winter is that there are very few evergreen bushes or convenient hedgerows, so the merest glimpse of a green patch by the road had me enthusiastically thumping on the front of the carriage with the stick provided for that purpose. The ensuing process naturally chilled me even further.

At nine o'clock in the morning of the fourth of November, the brougham finally drew up in front of a high iron gate flanked by two gray columns, each topped by a round stone ball. Yew hedges, rimed with frost that sparkled in the pale morning sunlight, surrounded the gate. I had learned that the Poor Farm lay a good three miles away from the small town of Prairie Haven; from what I could see through the carriage's curtains, it was located on the bend of a road that ran through farmland, iron-hard and silent in the cold. No other habitation could be seen as far as the horizon except for the house we'd passed about a quarter of a mile back, from whose chimney a thin stream of smoke drifted on the frosted air.

The driver lent all his weight to pulling a large bell that hung on one of the gateposts. About five minutes later a lean, dried-up looking man with a deeply seamed face opened the gate; his long, bony hands with sharply knobbed knuckles showed white against the dark iron. He said something I could not hear to the driver and smiled in a wheedling way, revealing that he lacked all but about three teeth. The driver's answer was clearly not the one he had wanted to hear; the corners of his mouth drew down in apparent disgust.

The carriage drove through the gate and headed in a straight line toward a collection of long, low buildings fronted by two imposing, entirely identical three-story edifices with gray slate roofs and green-painted windows. Split-rail fences seemed to section off one area of the grounds from another, and I thought I saw red-painted barns and silos farther off. Presumably, the livestock that lived

on the farm—I knew them to be a fact from the manure pile, pungent even in the cold weather—were inside the barns.

It looked like a farm and yet not a farm. No farm would contain such institutional-looking buildings as the cream-painted blocks that loomed larger as we drew nearer, hiding the lower buildings behind them. Small groups of men and women appeared to be making their way to their day's work in a variety of shuffling, dragging, or ungainly gaits. A loud cackling on my left indicated a hen run, and as I pressed my face to the frost-spangled carriage window, I could make out a heavily pregnant woman surrounded by a seething mass of rusty and black feathers.

The carriage stopped between the two large buildings in front of what, in the summer, would probably be a pleasant flower garden, surrounded by a low split-rail fence. As the driver helped me—I was stiff in every limb—to climb down from the brougham, a door in the southernmost building opened and an elegant woman with dark chestnut hair and olive skin walked swiftly toward me. A small, plump woman, more plainly dressed and wearing spectacles on a broad, short nose, followed her.

The taller woman held out her arms to me, guiding me toward the door from which she had come. Her companion ran alongside us, unabashedly making every effort to see my face.

"Tess, my dear," the taller woman said, "do not crowd so close to Miss Lillington; my goodness," she said, addressing me, "I am at a loss as to what to call you, in point of fact. Our inmates are usually known by their Christian names; to use a surname indicates a member of the staff, which you are not."

By this time we were inside a hallway, very plain with walls painted a deep cream, but very clean. My interlocutor held out her hand.

"I am Catherine Lombardi, the matron of the Women's House. The building in which you are standing is called the Women's House, but the term also refers to the dormitories behind this building."

I took her hand, causing her to gasp and exclaim over how cold I was. She ushered me into an oversized kitchen smelling strongly of fried pork and carbolic soap; a stove was giving off a wonderful warmth, and in addition a cast-

iron chimney corner contained a glowing fire. I felt my feet and hands begin to tingle. Mrs. Lombardi installed me by the fire and quitted the room.

A few minutes later I had warmed up enough to strip off some of the outer layers of my clothing. The woman called Tess remained near me, stared at every item I shed, but said nothing. As I laid one of my shawls carefully on the table, she finally spoke.

“What’s your name?”

Her mode of speaking struck me as awkward. I had the impression that her tongue was too large for her mouth and had already noticed that while she was not speaking she kept her mouth open and her tongue thrust forward. In addition, she stuttered over the words in a way it would be tiresome to reproduce and blinked hard several times as she spoke.

“Nell Lillington,” I replied. “Eleanor, if you want my proper name, but I like to be called Nell.”

“I’m Tess,” she said. “My surname is O’Dugan, but no one ever calls me Miss O’Dugan. They call me Tess. My real name is Teresa.”

She began each sentence with a slight pause, as if she needed to gather her words, but I quickly became attuned to her way of speaking. This, I surmised, was an “imbecile,” the term used by my stepfather when he talked about inhabitants of the Poor Farm. “Feeble-minded idiot” was another of his phrases; but this young woman did not seem to be particularly deficient in sense to me. Her speech was simple but coherent; she was clean and neatly dressed, albeit in a style five years out of date. A slender silver ring decorated the smallest finger of her right hand. Her hair, fine as a child’s and quite straight, was pulled into a small bun at the back of her head, and her almond-shaped eyes shone with interest behind their spectacles.

Yet I had not missed the fact that Mrs. Lombardi had called her by her Christian name. Tess O’Dugan was undoubtedly an “inmate.” Just like me.

For the first month I spent at the Farm I existed in a confused daze, trying to

understand the layout of the buildings, the routines, and, above all, the people. I had never realized that such variety of shapes and sizes could exist among human beings, that the human face could twist itself into so many forms and grimaces, or that human nature could be so unpredictable.

The House, as I learned to call the building I had first entered on arriving, was enormous. Its first floor housed the kitchen I had seen that first morning, the refectories, classrooms, workrooms, and the matron's office and sitting room. A cavernous basement held a huge laundry, more workrooms, and utility rooms, food storage rooms, and two more kitchens for the butchering of meat and the washing of dishes. On the second floor of the House were the bedrooms where the staff slept, two spare bedrooms for visitors, and other rooms used to store linens and supplies. The third floor had a section that was assigned to those inmates who worked indoors. This is where I slept, in a large plain room with three other women, including Tess.

The double staircase that led up through the middle of the House separated our wing from one that could only be reached by descending our staircase until we reached a break in the banister, and then reascending on the other side. This wing, apparently unused, was closed off by an extremely thick door with an elaborate lock.

I discovered that I was to work in a large workroom on the first floor. It was furnished with a sewing machine, broad tables for cutting, and a row of cupboards where bolts of cloth were stored. Our footsteps echoed on the bare boards as we worked, and I would have welcomed some adornment for the cream-painted, scarred walls, but the room, although cavernous and cold, was at least not drafty and overlooked the central flower patch—which at that time of year boasted only a few stiff stalks.

When I was not cutting cloth, piecing garments, or doing any work that required space, I was welcome to bring my sewing into Mrs. Lombardi's large, sunny office, where I could sit peacefully sewing by the fire while she worked at her desk. I asked Mrs. Lombardi about the unused wing.

"That is the insane section," she said absent-mindedly, her pen traveling slowly down the column of figures she was checking.

She must have sensed my shocked silence, as she looked up and laughed. Catherine Lombardi was a beautiful woman in her mid-thirties, with large hazel eyes, finely arched eyebrows, and a mouth that turned up at the corners as if always ready to smile.

“I thought. . . my stepfather said that you do not house insane persons,” I said.

“We do not indeed,” replied Mrs. Lombardi, her face becoming serious. “When this Farm was built twenty years ago, it was the common practice to house the insane alongside all the other residents—I believe that is how the tradition of calling our people ‘inmates’ began. That practice was discontinued before the War, and that wing has remained unused ever since, although if we get many more inmates, I will have to reopen it. The padded rooms and restraints are still there; in the spring and fall we check through the wing for evidence of rats or leaks in the roof, so I know it well. It is a depressing place.”

“And yet you still house such different kinds of people together: the feeble-minded, the poor, drunkards and women. . . well, like me, all in one place. Is that really a good idea?”

I had hit on a subject that was evidently dear to Mrs. Lombardi’s heart. She rose from her desk and joined me near the fire where I was working on a large, plain tablecloth. I had decided to make a simple pulled-thread pattern to embellish the rows of backstitching I was using to make the border more hardwearing, and she bent to admire my work.

“That is truly beautiful, Nell. You have such skill in your fingers. Do you have enough light?”

I assured her that I did, and she sat down to face me.

“I believe that the model we have here is a healthy one. I have observed that friendships will arise between the feeble-minded and those of normal intelligence. Women with better faculties of retention and organization take pleasure in caring for those who are unable to care properly for themselves. It makes us more like a family.” She stretched out her hands to the fire’s warmth and stared at the leaping flames. “Have you started to befriend the women in your room?”

I smiled. “Tess is quite determined to befriend me. Lizzie—poor thing, she must have told me a dozen times about her children who would not make a little corner for her in their homes. And Ada says nothing, but she nods at me, and sometimes I almost think she smiles.”

“And do you find their company unpleasant?”

“Not at all. I have never shared a room in my life, so to be with three other women was strange at first, but we have all shaken down together, and I feel—well, I feel accepted. None of them have asked about—the baby,” I glanced down at my middle.

“And no one will, if I have anything to do with it. You are safe here, Nell.” Mrs. Lombardi patted my arm and rose to return to her desk. I fell silent and went back to my work.

Why did I find Mrs. Lombardi’s promise of safety so reassuring? Did I not crave adventure? But I was seventeen, soon to have a baby, and in some deep, hidden part of me, I was terrified.

9

TILLY

I would not say that life at the Farm was cruel or overly harsh; we were adequately if plainly fed, and cleanliness was a byword among the staff. They also regarded hard work as necessary to a good life, so all except the most incapable were assigned a full day of tasks. Teams of inmates were responsible for washing, clothing, feeding, and reading the Bible to the most senile or imbecile women. Other teams moved through the huge building scrubbing floors, walls, doors, and baseboards so that the House positively shone from the lack of dirt.

Still others worked on butchering, brining, and rendering the huge frozen hog carcasses delivered daily from the cold house. Large flocks of sheep wintered in the barns, and the wool from the previous spring's shearing still had to be combed and spun, dyed and woven. Smells of animal fats and raw wool wafted constantly about the building and competed with the strong, clean smell of carbolic soap, but the worst of all were the days when the small onions harvested earlier in the year were pickled. Inadvertently breathing in a lungful of the vapors of vinegar and spices could clear out my sinuses like smelling salts. I said so to Mrs. Lombardi, who laughed merrily.

"Be grateful you are not in the Men's House. They clean the raw fleeces and boil bones to make glue—believe me, the resulting odors are quite impressive. They also manufacture our soap, which is a tedious process."

"Must these things be accomplished indoors, Mrs. Lombardi?" I asked. "It cannot be good to work in such unwholesome air."

“These are the tasks that can be put off till winter, Nell. In the warmer months our inmates are constantly busy with lambing and calving, milking, working in the fields, growing and harvesting vegetables. . . oh, I am so looking forward to spring! Our women are always much happier outdoors, and it is true that it’s much more pleasant to breathe the fresh air than this.”

She wiped tears from her eyes; we had just walked through a hallway redolent of pickling spices. The dimples formed in her cheeks as she watched me and Tess flap our skirts to release the smell of vinegar from them. “Fortunately, most of the vegetables must be preserved in the fall, when we can still open the kitchen windows.”

“And let’s be happy we’re not in the kitchens, Nell,” said Tess. “Imagine peeling onions by the bushel! I do not like the smell of onions. I try not to sit near the onion-peelers at mealtimes.”

We were now in the sewing room, and the large windows revealed that snow was again falling heavily, as it had been since the last week of November. I could hear a party of men whooping and complaining as they cleared a path to the barns so that a team of the more robust women could tend to the livestock while the men cleared out manure and soiled straw.

Between snowstorms the temperature plunged to the bitter cold that caused frostbite and endangered the lives of cattle. Mr. Schoeffel, Mrs. Lombardi’s counterpart in the Men’s House, organized rotating teams of men to spend no more than an hour at a time in the barns and had any that complained of pains in their fingers or feet brought indoors immediately.

I was a privileged worker indeed, thanks to my skill in sewing, which far exceeded that of the other women. When I had finished the cutting out and machine sewing, which were done in the bleak workroom alongside Edie, the other seamstress—a competent worker but sullen and bad-tempered—and Tess, who acted as our assistant, I would take my hand sewing and repairs into Mrs. Lombardi’s office, where the large windows made the most of the feeble winter light. Tess often came with me; Edie was invited but preferred to do her sewing at the smaller of the two workroom tables, grumbling and muttering to herself as she worked.

Tess had formed an almost slavish attachment to me. Seeing that our work produced numerous pieces of scrap fabric that were torn into rags, I instructed her how to cut out regular squares and put them aside to make into handkerchiefs. I also made cardboard templates of smaller squares, diamonds and triangles, and showed Tess how to use them to get every useful scrap out of the waste fabric. When we had enough, I explained to her, we would make a quilt. The excitement that this idea caused Tess seemed quite out of proportion, and I often caught her fingering the bundles of fabric and talking to herself about them.

I also taught Tess how to sew. Her hands were small and stubby but nimble enough, as I could see when she cut the scraps or cleaned up the threads that always seemed to get all over the workroom. So I began by teaching her how to baste pattern pieces together, and then how to make small stitches. She was an apt pupil, and although unable to press seams—she was afraid of the flat iron because it was hot—she soon learned to sew a simple seam neatly, to a standard that was good enough for the everyday shirts and underwear that we constantly had to make to replace those that were past repair.

We passed our evenings in the refectory; after supper, the tables were pushed to the walls or arranged for better socializing. Slowly personalities emerged from the mass of misshapen faces and ungainly bodies, and I began to learn names and understand each woman as a unique individual. Many had gregarious, loud personalities, and arguments and tears arose at frequent intervals; but I began to see that they were not serious, more in the way of the arguments of small children who make friends again a few minutes later.

Not all of the women were kind. I was approached by one or two of the other unwed mothers, who for the most part kept to their own small group in the corner of the room. They despised the “idiots” and were scornful of me for keeping company with Tess and her peers. I did not like them; they had bold eyes and sly grins and had been engaged in prostitution before their condition became apparent and they lost their jobs.

One of them, Tilly, a lanky, hard-eyed woman with a mass of pale blond hair, seemed friendlier than the others at first. We talked for a while of life at the

Farm, and then she asked me point blank: “How come you’re up the spout and not married? I thought all you classy girls did things the proper way. Married man, was he?”

I didn’t want to answer her, but she kept pestering me until I eventually said no, the man was not married.

“So why won’t he marry you?”

“He doesn’t know I am having his child.”

Tilly’s wide, malicious smile showed teeth that were blotched with brown. “Is he blind, then? Did it with a blind man, did you?”

I could feel my face burning. “He does not live in my town. And I would not tell anyone his name, because I do not want to marry him.”

Tilly twisted round in her chair, shouted, “She doesn’t want to marry him!” to her friends, who responded with howls of laughter. My face grew hot, and I wished I could get away from Tilly, whose slightly rancid smell was starting to impinge on my senses. She noticed that I was shifting my chair backward and scraped hers forward on the boards so that she was even closer to me.

“Know what I think?” she asked, her voice low and her breath, which smelled of decay and onions, in my face. “I think you’re a stupid bitch. You could have made him marry you and have your baby in a nice, pretty home of your own instead of in this shithole.” She grinned as I winced at the term.

“Wouldn’t make you no better than me, though. You’re a whore just like me, ain’t you? And I didn’t have no choice. My so-called stepdad was in my bed when I was ten and put me on the street soon as I had tits. I’ve sent two babbies to the orphanage already.” A hint of sadness crept into her gray eyes, but then she straightened up in her chair and sneered. “You’re worse ’an me, ’cause you chose it.”

She grabbed my arm and squeezed it hard. “Stupid—little—bitch. Bet you’ve always had everything you wanted, and you chose this. You stay away from us, ’cause we’re better ’an you.”

She sauntered back to her laughing friends, leaving a ring of bruises around my arm and an ache in my heart. Yes, I had chosen this, and she, in some ways, had not. Perhaps she was right that I was no better than she.

The only male I saw at the Farm in those winter months was the long, lean man who opened the gate for the brougham when I first arrived. He often worked in the Women's House, fixing doors, banging on recalcitrant radiators, and filling the oil lamps. He spoke little, often hummed under his breath, and occasionally chuckled quietly over some internal joke. His name, I learned, was Blackie.

He seemed impervious to the women in the House. One day as I cut out a nightshirt in the workroom, I heard Tilly and her friends try to get his attention as he worked on the squeaky hinge on our door. After ten minutes they gave up, threw a few choice insults in his direction, and moved off. Blackie backed into the workroom, his toolbox in his hand, muttered "Little whores," and then saw me.

"Terrible sorry, Miss," he said. His voice was low and raspy, with an accent I couldn't place; not local, certainly. "I wasn't meaning to cuss in front of you. Forgot you were there, see."

"I'll survive, Blackie. I can call you Blackie, can't I?"

"You certainly can, Miss Nell. I seen you often enough t'know you're not like them little hussies. You and me is friends."

"What's your real name, Blackie?"

He swept off his greasy black hat, revealing bristling iron-gray hair, and ducked his head; I could see his bald spot.

"Oscar Blackthorn at your service, ma'am. Student of human nature." His eyes roved over the pattern I was cutting. "Begging your pardon, miss, but that'd be for young Donny?"

"Yes, I think that was the name."

"He growed an inch or two. You'll want to cut that a bit longer to keep the chill off his ankeels."

"Really?" I studied the scrap of paper I'd been sent from Mr. Schoeffel. "It says five feet and nine inches here."

"The orderly who did that's a lazy b—critter. He don't measure; he guesses. Five feet eleven that boy is and growin' fast. You'll be doing him a service by

giving him some growin' room."

"You're very observant."

"Like I said, Miss, student of human nature. I sees everything that goes on here. Inside *and* outside." He seemed to find that funny and wheezed with laughter for a few seconds before resuming work on the hinge.

"You've been doing a lot of work in here this week," I observed.

"Christmas is comin'. Superintendent will be bringing in a few charity visitors, and he don't like it if it's not shipshape. 'Efficient, Blackthorn' he tells me. 'Clean, orderly, and efficient, that's the sort of institution I run.' Damn shame—beg pardon, Miss—he don't try talkin' to us 'stead of efficientiating us."

He began humming loudly again, and I returned to my work. I had not yet seen the superintendent. The only other staff member who lived off the premises was Mrs. Lombardi, whose home was in Prairie Haven; in this bleak, freezing weather, a Negro orderly called Michael drove her to and from the Farm in a small sleigh.

I heard voices approaching. Tilly and her friends were returning. High-pitched laughter echoed along the hallway; it had a cruel note to it.

I was absorbed in my task, lulled by Blackie's humming and distracted by the gyrations of the baby inside me, when I heard the sound of running feet. Tess pushed past Blackie into the room. Her fine hair, normally so neatly arranged, was escaping from its bun; her face was flushed and tears spattered her glasses.

"Tess?" I put down my scissors and held out my arms to her. "What on earth is the matter?"

Tess flew to me and put her short arms as far round me as she could—by now my bump made that maneuver difficult, especially as she had her precious Bible in one hand.

"They took my ring!" she wailed, and I felt the baby kick extra hard in protest at the noise. Tess trembled against my protruding belly. It didn't take much effort to guess who "they" were.

Blackie darted out into the corridor, then stuck his head back around the doorjamb.

"They've gone." He crossed the room to us and laid his hand on Tess's

disarranged hair in a fatherly fashion. “Did them little bitches—beg pardon—get you alone again? I tole you, Tessie, you got to be careful around them gals.”

Tess sobbed. “They called me a cretin. I’m not a cretin. I know what that is. Madge is a cretin, and she can’t talk, she just makes noises; she’s dirty, and she wets in her clothes. I’m not like that, I’m not!” Her tears formed a damp patch somewhere in the region of my armpit. I patted her shoulder, then pushed her upright very gently and took off her glasses, using a piece of scrap cloth to dab at the tears running down her rounded cheeks. Blackie carefully pried the Bible out of Tess’s hand and set it down on the cutting table.

“There, Tessie,” he said, his expression tender. “Don’t you listen to them sort. You’re worth ten of ’em, girlie.”

“How did they get your ring?” I stroked Tess’s right hand, checking for bruises.

Tess began to calm down and blew her nose rather ineffectually into the scrap cloth. She took a few deep breaths.

“I gave it to them. They said I had to give them my ring or my Bible.”

I sighed in exasperation, wondering how best to help my friend. The hallway outside echoed with voices, and I recognized that of Miss Dee, an orderly whom Tilly and her friends nicknamed ‘Gree-Dee’ because of her corpulence.

“. . . not permitted.” She sounded wearily frustrated. “Tell me at once where you are supposed to be this morning instead of wandering about the building.”

“Don’t know, Miss Dee.” The voice was Meg’s, one of Tilly’s friends, in a tone of flat stupidity.

“Forgot, Miss Dee.” That was Bella, the joker of the group. Stifled sniggering from the others accompanied her words.

“Well, you are now assigned to the preparation kitchen. There is a very large pile of root vegetables to be peeled and chopped for soup. Proceed there immediately.”

Whines of protest ensued, and I took the opportunity to slip out into the corridor. Blackie followed me, leaning against the doorjamb and staring hard at the women who turned to look at me.

“Excuse me, Miss Dee,” I said. “I believe that one of the women has a ring

in her possession that belongs to Tess O'Dugan."

Miss Dee's double chins wobbled in outrage. "Nell, isn't it? Are you accusing these women of stealing?" She turned to face the group, whose stares had become a shade more poisonous. Tilly shot me a warning glance and fished in her pocket, bringing out Tess's little silver ring. Stealing was dealt with in the Women's House by a month spent sluicing chamber pots, and it was well known that Miss Dee would thoroughly search the clothing of an accused woman.

"Found it, Miss Dee. Ain't that right, Nellie?"

I stared at Tilly, trying to put a wealth of meaning into my face. Blackie was also watching her with narrowed eyes.

"It could be that she found it, Miss Dee. I can't say for certain that she stole it." I held out my hand for the ring, and Miss Dee dropped it into my hand. The other women had gone silent.

"Get back to work, Nell. And you others will come with me to the kitchens on the double." Miss Dee pushed her large form through the small group of mute, sullen women and led the way toward the other end of the building.

As she turned to go, Tilly, the straggler of the group, stepped back in my direction. But whatever she was about to say was cut short by the lean, callused hand that grasped a fold of her skirt.

"Now don't you go making trouble, Tilly girl." Blackie's rasping voice held a hint of menace. "Miss Nell's my friend, see. And little Tessie. And I look after my friends." Blackie gave what might have been a grin, a gruesome glimpse of red, puffy gums and three yellowed stumps of teeth.

Tilly pulled away, muttered something vicious under her breath, and hastened to catch up with the group. I gave Blackie a smile indicative of deep gratitude and held out the ring to Tess, who had been listening from her hiding place behind the door. She squealed with delight and slipped the ring onto her little finger, then clapped her hands and bounced up and down on her toes a few times. She looked as if she were about to hug Blackie, but the old man immediately stepped back and picked up his toolbox.

"I'm done here, Miss Nell. You look after little Tessie, now. And remember to make Donny's clothes nice and long." He turned on his heel and left,

humming loudly.

I sighed, indicating to Tess that she should sweep the floor. The incident, insignificant as it was, had reminded me that I was just one inmate among many in a place where we had no power even to order our days. The baby inside me kicked vigorously, and I put a hand on my belly. I had to avoid trouble for the sake of this child; however relieved I would be to give it up for adoption, it deserved my care and my vigilance for its good health.

10

CHRISTMAS

On Christmas Eve, we inmates attended a service in the refectory. The women, who loved to sing, bawled and yodeled away, while I, increasingly uncomfortable in a standing position, endured the baby's pokes and acrobatics and longed to be excused to use the chamber pot and sit in a chair. I almost wished it were an ordinary Sunday service; interminable as Pastor Lombardi's Sunday sermons were, at least I could sit down.

Later that day, Mrs. Lombardi arrived in the Women's House with her children: a boy of ten with a round, cheerful face and sandy hair, and two girls aged around eight and six, both dark-haired and olive-skinned like their mother. An old lady, Mr. Lombardi's mother, was huddled in thick shawls against the cold; I presumed that it was she who looked after the children while Mrs. Lombardi worked. It struck me, not for the first time, how unusual it was that a married woman, with children, of my class—for Mrs. Lombardi and I were social equals, of that I was sure—spent her days working out of the home. Mr. Lombardi must indeed be an unusual specimen of husbandhood.

I liked the enlightened Mr. Lombardi, even if I did not appreciate his sermons. He was a broad-shouldered, deep-chested adult version of his son, as muscular as any farm worker. His eyes shone with intelligence and love for his wife as he watched her make the rounds of the inmates, wishing each one a Merry Christmas with a kind word and a smile.

It was a most festive occasion. Mrs. Lombardi arranged for a large quantity of hot cocoa and cookies to be served, and her children had made small gifts of

candy, hair ribbons, and little tracts to pass around to each and every one of the two hundred or so women present. More Christmas carols were sung—I was sitting down by this time and enjoyed them—and then the Lombardi family left, gifts in hand, to visit those women who were confined to bed by illness. Tilly was one of them: I'd heard that she had given birth to a strapping boy three days earlier.

This was the first Christmas I had ever spent apart from Mama. Oh, how I missed her! But even if family visits were encouraged—and they were not, as they tended to unsettle the inmates—my mother's health would not permit a fifty-mile journey over frozen roads in this arctic weather. I fervently hoped that she was well. I would even have welcomed the sight of my stepfather just to have had news of Mama, but Mrs. Lombardi had told me that the Board of Governors only inspected the Farm twice a year, and that would not happen until the weather became more clement. My isolation from the world was quite complete, and I was surprised how powerless this made me feel.

That Christmas Eve night I stood at the window of the bedroom looking out across the expanse of snow that stretched toward the gate of the Farm, broken only by the tracks of a sleigh. The silence resembled the stillness of death, the land locked into the deep frost of winter and all life buried far beneath the soil awaiting the return of the warmth.

I felt myself akin to the roots and bulbs waiting to burst forth into a renewed existence. When the baby was born—my mind tried to slide past this rapidly approaching point in the future—weaned, and adopted, I would return to Victory to begin again. And I would stay by my mother's side and be a better daughter to her, on that I had made my resolution. For now, I was locked inside this not unfriendly place, waiting for the life I carried to break free of its own confines and become a separate being that could follow its own destiny.

"Merry Christmas, Mama," I whispered under my breath, toward the tall iron gate that marked where the world began.

Suddenly my belly went rigid with a squeezing sensation that seemed to go from the bottom to the top of my abdomen. The baby, who had been kicking determinedly at my ribs, became quiet. My heart began pounding in fear; could

this be the start? Should I call someone?

I returned to my bed and waited, the fear gripping my throat and paralyzing my limbs. But nothing else happened, and eventually I relaxed. I lay there with tears sliding silently down my cheeks until my eyes closed on the silent Christmas night.

11

BLIZZARD

The passage of five weeks brought more snow, and yet more. Much of the time it was fine, tiny ice crystals that skittered across the snowpack like minuscule dancers in the fierce wind.

That morning, though, a regular blizzard hit us. The snow blew so thickly against the window that I saw nothing but a shifting mass of white, with occasional glimpses of the black night beyond. I opened the curtain to watch, hoping that it would abate, and soon. But it was as relentless as what was happening to me. I sat on the edge of my bed listening to the other women sleeping around me, clutching the blanket I had wrapped around my shoulders so hard that the fingers of my right hand throbbed with pain. I couldn't move them. I was rigid with fear.

The squeezing sensations in my abdomen that started on Christmas Eve had reoccurred at regular intervals in the last five weeks. Mrs. Lombardi told me that they were quite a common occurrence and that I should only be concerned if they started happening close together. So when I awakened to the now-familiar sensation long before dawn that day, I lay in my bed with my eyes closed, trying to relax back into another hour or two of delicious sleep.

But soon I realized I had become fully and irrevocably awake. My senses seemed unusually alert; I could hear every tiny sound in the room and every soft touch of the snow on the windowpane.

I used my chamber pot as quietly as I could and then broke through the thin crust of ice in the water-jug—we had a small fireplace in our room, but the fire

never lasted the night—and poured a little into the basin to splash my face, gasping at the shock of the frigid water. I groped for my hairbrush in the dark and spent ten minutes brushing my hair, willing the squeezings in my belly to stop. But they didn't. The hours crept on so slowly that I could have screamed with impatience and fear, and all the while my belly hardened and relaxed, not painful but increasingly uncomfortable.

It was happening. I knew I should call someone, but I remained sitting on the edge of the bed as if by remaining motionless I could put off the dread reality of giving birth. Why now, when the snow was so thick? I closed my eyes, trying to block out the white menace that brushed its fingers of death so softly against the wall of my room.

Eventually I could stand it no longer. Why didn't the snow stop? When was the morning coming? I forced my painful fingers to unlock and my chilled legs and arms to push me into a standing position and lurched awkwardly to the window. Nothing could be seen but white flakes that hurled toward me as if they were attacking.

I felt something give way, and a sudden rush of warm liquid cascaded down my legs. I let out a strangled cry of surprise and fear and heard stirrings from the other beds.

Sad Lizzie was the first to work out what had awakened her. "What is it, Nellie?" she quavered in her plaintive, worn-out voice. "Are you unwell?"

I was crying with fear now, like a little girl. "I—I—I th—think it's—it's the baby," I managed to force out between my gasping sobs. I felt Lizzie approach me and give a squeak as her bare feet encountered the damp floor. Then a golden light suddenly flared up in the corner of the room. Ada, silent and practical, had lit the oil lamp.

All three of them gathered round me and exclaimed over the incontrovertible evidence that I had begun giving birth. I could feel their hands on me, leading me away from the window, back toward my bed.

Tess, a small plump angel in her white nightshirt, looked gravely at the other two. "Mrs. Lombardi said we must call her when Nell has her baby. She always comes when the women have babies. She must come now."

Mrs. Lombardi was in her home three miles away. Three miles across the snow. I couldn't stop the scream from forcing its way out of me.

"No! It's dangerous! It's too cold, she'll die in the snow, she'll get lost and d—d—d—die . . ." I pushed away the hands trying to soothe me.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor outside, and Agnes, who was in charge of the refectory and slept on our wing, burst in.

"Who's screaming? Is that Nell? What's wrong with her?"

Tess tipped her head to peer up at the tall woman. "She's having her baby, Miss Agnes. She's very frightened. She says Mrs. Lombardi will die if she comes through the snow."

"What nonsense." Agnes grasped me by the shoulders. "Lie down, Nell. I thought you were more sensible than this."

But my rational mind had deserted me. I heard no more of what the women were saying over the sound of my sobs as I tried to make myself clear; Mrs. Lombardi should not be sent for at any price. The more they tried to persuade me to lie still on the bed, the more I resisted, and I dimly realized that the room was filling up with women.

Suddenly a violent stinging sensation in my nose and sinuses jerked me out of my crying fit and back into awareness of the room around me. I coughed and spluttered while tears, not only of emotion but of physical reaction, ran down my face.

Agnes had held smelling salts under my nose. "Now listen to me, Nell Lillington," she said, pushing me firmly—she was a large, strong woman—onto the bed. "You will do harm to yourself and your child if you carry on in this ridiculous manner. You lie down on the bed like a good girl, and let Lizzie take a look at you. Ada, get that fire lit. Tess, Mary has already gone to the kitchen to make tea. You bring up a pot and cups for all of us, and don't forget the sugar. The rest of you, out of this room."

Tess gave a delighted squeak and ran to the door; hot tea with sugar was a rare and coveted treat. The other women left the room with many backward glances. I watched Agnes's pocket warily in case the smelling salts reappeared, the violence of my sobs abating.

“That’s better,” said Agnes with approval. “Having a baby is nothing to get hysterical about. Good heavens, child, what will Mrs. Lombardi think when she gets here?”

The mention of Mrs. Lombardi’s name brought a new wave of fear, and I drew breath to shout again, but the swift movement of Agnes’s hand toward her pocket changed my mind. I lay my aching head on my pillow for the first time in hours; it felt wonderful. The inexorable movements of my belly were becoming pains, frequent and insistent. I did not resist as Lizzie pulled up my nightdress and inspected my lower half thoroughly, running her hands carefully over me and spreading my legs wide.

“We have a little while yet, I think,” she said to Agnes. The big woman nodded emphatically and left the room.

“Now, my little dear,” said Lizzie gently, smoothing back my tangled curls with her soft, leathery old hand, “don’t you worry yourself. Agnes has gone to make all the preparations, and I’m here to help you. You’re a fine, healthy girl, and I see nothing in your shape or the way the baby’s lying to give me any worry about you both. Just relax and let things happen in their good time.” I had never heard such assurance in Lizzie’s voice and smiled despite myself.

My terror did not entirely subside, but before long too much was happening in my body to make fear seem relevant. Women passed in and out of the room, and I became aware that the fire was lit, another lamp had been brought, stocks of clean linen and other necessaries had appeared, and sips of sweet tea refreshed me at intervals. I felt the touch of hands on me, cleaning and soothing.

With the lamps lit I could not see if the snow had stopped, and after I had asked about it for the tenth time, Ada silently drew the drapes to shut out the world. Gradually, the glimmer of gray-white daylight worked its way round the edges of the thin curtain while I gave in to the sensation of the baby forcing its way out into existence. I had never felt so helplessly in the grip of a physical force; my fear gave way to awe as my whole body was invaded by a new sensation, intensely painful and yet quite bearable.

A flurry of movement above me brought an impression of snow and cold into the room, and I opened my eyes, having fallen asleep for a minute between

contractions. Mrs. Lombardi bent over me, her lips curved in a sweet smile.

“What’s this I hear about you not wanting me to come, Nell? You see, I am quite safe. What a winter we are having!”

I laughed weakly with relief, but my laughter turned to tears.

“I want my mother.”

Mrs. Lombardi took off her thick woolen cloak and hung it over a chair near the fire. She came toward me, lightly touching my forehead with the back of an ice-cold hand. I did not believe that her journey had been an easy one.

“Of course you do, Nell dear. And I am sure she is anxious to hear news of you. In a short time, you will be a mother yourself, and I will write a word to your parents to give them the news. In the meanwhile, you must be as calm and cheerful as you can, for your baby’s sake. This will soon be over.”

12

SARAH

My little girl had a sleek head of bright copper hair, and the women exclaimed that they had never seen a newborn child with hair that color. Her skin was translucent white when she was at rest, bright pinkish-red when she cried, and softer than the finest velvet. The eyes that squinted up at me from a puckered-up face were a cloudy shade of green-blue.

I called her Sarah Amelia: her second name was for my mother, of course, and the first because “Sarah” simply popped into my head when Lizzie, her withered face radiant, placed the little swaddled bundle in my arms.

I scrutinized her face, wonder and puzzlement chasing each other around my brain. What was I supposed to do with her? She would not be my responsibility for long indeed. But it had not really occurred to me that for a while, I was expected to look after her. She was no longer the mysterious force that somersaulted in my belly and kept me awake at night. She was, indubitably, a person.

A sudden spasm passed over the person’s face and her mouth moved convulsively. Her face screwed up into a crumpled red ball, and she began to make squawking noises. I looked at Lizzie in alarm.

“You must put her to the breast,” the old woman said. My answering expression must have been a perfect picture of mingled astonishment and apprehension, because Lizzie, usually so gloomy, was still gasping with laughter when she took Sarah from me and showed me how I must adjust my nightdress.

Mrs. Lombardi sent my parents a letter announcing that I was safely delivered of a girl, and I wrote a brief note on the end stating her name and sending my love. I did not want to write anything more, as I knew that Stepfather would read the letter first. I would have to find some way to communicate with Mama, whom I missed with a constant ache in my heart.

I found it hard to believe that I was myself a mother. The first shock of feeling a tiny mouth clamp onto my nipple with the strength of a terrier intent on its prey led me inexorably toward my initiation into the mysteries of dressing, cleaning, diapering, recleaning, and rediapering this small yet incredibly messy being a dozen times a day. At first, these tasks seemed to take up every waking moment; I had little time to think. When Sarah slept, my own eyes closed immediately, and I would sleep like a stone until awakened by the plangent wail that meant I was expected to do something.

I had help, of course. My three roommates waited on me hand and foot; there was always one of them who seemed to be excused from her regular duties to attend to me. Mrs. Lombardi suggested that I be moved to a tiny bedroom sandwiched between a storage room and the staircase so that Sarah did not disturb the other women with her crying but laughed when Tess and Lizzie said "No!" simultaneously, and Ada shook her head with emphasis.

"Very well," said Mrs. Lombardi, "the vote of the majority carries the matter. I have never, since I came here, seen a child so welcomed; but then, this is the first baby born in the House for many years. In the dormitories, the women usually complain about the babies' crying and are happy when they leave."

Our small fire burned constantly now, and the room, although not very warm, was comfortable enough for Sarah. I clad her in the tiny boots, mitts, and hats that Bet had knitted, and her bright hair peeped out from under a lacy cap fastened with a button. As the days went by and Sarah began sleeping for longer stretches, I asked for my sewing to be brought to me. I had recovered from my initial exhaustion and even read one novel supplied by Mrs. Lombardi, but I was not fond of books and soon became bored with idleness.

Tess often sat beside me to do her work, of which she was very proud. She constantly asked if her stitches were small and straight enough; I advised her gravely, trying not to be impatient with her incessant need for affirmation. Sometimes I would stop working and watch her as she sewed, her face wrinkled in concentration, and wonder if this was what it felt like to have a sister.

A week after Sarah's birth, Mrs. Lombardi came to visit me as I sat alone, creating felled seams inside a set of men's nightshirts. She pulled a chair over to my bedside and fingered my work appreciatively.

"These will be very comfortable," she remarked.

"And last longer," I said. "The edges will not fray or tear when the men are moving around in bed. And seams are easier to do when you're sitting in an incommodious position." I grinned at her; I had protested several times against my enforced confinement. I felt strong and well, and Sarah was nursing lustily several times a day. I wanted to do something more interesting than take care of a baby and look out at the snow.

Mrs. Lombardi was silent for a moment, watching me out of her splendid hazel eyes. The weak winter sunshine struck vivid reds and greens from the plaid ribbon she always wore at her throat, fastened by a most unusual brown and cream cameo brooch.

"Nell," she said softly, "I wish to ask you about your anxiety on the day of Sarah's birth. Whatever made you so worried about summoning me through the snow? We are quite accustomed to the weather here and well organized for emergencies. This is not an easy place to manage, as you can well imagine, and we expect unusual events."

I fidgeted with my needle, weaving it into the fabric. I had guessed that she would ask me, and I did not want to tell the story. We had not talked about that day for a very long time at home.

Sensing my discomfort Mrs. Lombardi looked away, toward the small hump that Sarah made in her crib. She reached over and touched my baby's hair where it was already beginning to escape from its cap.

"What a color." Her voice held a note of admiration.

I felt my throat tighten. "Just like my father's," I whispered.

Mrs. Lombardi did not reply, and the silence stretched out for minutes. I could feel my heart pulsing as if the story were trying to beat its way out of me, crying out to be told. I waited for Mrs. Lombardi to say something so that I could answer and turn the conversation elsewhere; but she was silent, gazing at my sleeping baby.

My resolution broke. “My father died in the snow.” The words tumbled out of my mouth in a rush.

Mrs. Lombardi did not turn her head. “Really?” she said in a whisper. “I thought it might be something like that.”

Another minute went by in silence as I drew several deep, painful breaths, staring resolutely at the cameo brooch at Mrs. Lombardi’s throat, not daring to meet her eyes. The silence seemed to grow and expand until it became a huge empty space, waiting to be filled with my words.

“I was six years old,” I began.

13

SNOW

"My mother had a baby—the first since I was born. She is not in good health, you know. She has a heart condition that makes her tired and out of breath."

Mrs. Lombardi nodded. "Was she very ill?"

"Back then, not so much. She has become much worse in the last ten years. But I remember she was always tired, and the birth was . . ." My voice trailed off, and I chewed at my lower lip, keeping my eyes fixed on Mrs. Lombardi's brooch.

"She had a bad time." Mrs. Lombardi's voice was matter-of-fact, and that helped me continue.

"Terrible. For a few hours it didn't seem so bad; Bet, our housekeeper, and my nursemaid, Daisy, and the maid we had then were quite cheerful. They gave me candy and told me I would soon have a little brother or sister. My father also seemed happy, although he could not keep still and walked in and out of all the rooms in the house until Bet was nearly driven crazy. I remember asking her why Papa couldn't go into the bedroom to be with Mama; Bet laughed and said that it was women's work. And then later when the doctor came I argued that he was a man, but by that time nobody was listening to me."

I lapsed into silence, remembering my tall father with his flame of red hair bursting into the kitchen where I sat playing with an abacus. He swept me up into his arms to pace with him, up and down the room, until Bet firmly told him that he would make me dizzy.

He had swung me back down into my chair and taken a seat by the fire, staring at the ceiling where I could hear muffled noises. Outside the snow was swirling; it was almost Christmas, and I had made a line of little snowmen to represent Mama, Papa, myself, Bet, and Daisy. I put an acorn that I'd kept from the fall into one snowman's arms to be the baby. I did not like our maid, so I left her out of our little snow family. Daisy was bossy, so I made her snowman crooked.

"Why is baby taking so long to be born?" I asked Papa.

"Babies take a long time to come, Nellie," he said, his eyes crinkling.

I yawned. I had woken up before dawn with the sound of the midwife arriving, and it was now five o'clock. I hoped I would be able to kiss the baby before I went to bed that night.

The evening dragged on, and the mood of the house changed. Bet was frequently absent from the kitchen, and the maid with her; Daisy played with me but darted out into the hallway whenever she heard footsteps on the stairs. I suppose I fell asleep on the kitchen floor, and Daisy took me to bed; the cold sheets woke me, and I had only just started to drift back to sleep when the screaming started.

"Nobody came to see if I was asleep," I told Mrs. Lombardi. "I expect they all thought I was, but I sat up listening, hugging my doll and sucking my thumb until it was red raw. The screaming got worse and worse, and there were voices and feet rushing up and down the stairs and from one room to another. I could hear my father's voice, frantic to be let into the bedroom, but the doctor shouted at him that he could do no good, they were doing all they could to save my mother."

"Was the baby dead?" asked Mrs. Lombardi.

"I don't know if he was already dead, or if he died after he was born. By the time the screaming stopped, I was hiding under the bed with my fingers in my ears, trying not to hear any more. I must have spent most of the night that way, and I think I fell asleep eventually. I remember Bet coming into my room and looking for me and scolding and kissing and hugging me all at once when she found me under the bed. And the house was quiet, and it was morning."

“And then?”

“And then after breakfast my father came to me and told me that my little brother was dead and that my mother was very ill. He had been crying; oh, Mrs. Lombardi, I had never seen him look like that before. The doctor left, and the undertaker came to take my little brother’s body; I was never allowed to see him, not even to kiss him goodbye. Bet told me years later that it was better that way, but she wouldn’t ever tell me why.”

Mrs. Lombardi’s face wore an expression of deep sympathy. “Poor little thing,” she murmured, and I didn’t know if she meant me or my dead baby brother.

I drew a deep breath, preparing to tell the next part of my tale. A few snowflakes drifted against the pale blue sky, and the room was silent save for Sarah’s soft breathing.

“Bet said that Mama seemed to improve a little in the first hours after the birth, but then she became much weaker. By that time it was afternoon. My father decided to go fetch the doctor again and left on foot because the quickest way to the doctor’s house was by a narrow path through the woods, which was not suitable for a horse.”

The very last time I saw my father he was shrugging into his warmest jacket, pulling on his thick boots and sheepskin mittens, and reaching for his walking stick. He stopped to kiss me and stroked my curls.

“Be good now, Nellie,” he said. “I’ll be back soon.”

“And then he was gone,” I told Mrs. Lombardi. “The doctor’s house was three miles through the woods, and the snow had stopped hours before, so he should have made it easily. But he never came back.”

“What happened?”

“He reached the doctor’s house; the servant spoke to him. But the doctor was not there. He had been at another patient’s house and had decided to return to see Mama before he went home. No one at the doctor’s house knew that, of course, and I guess Papa just turned around and headed homeward. By this time it must have been quite dark, and the weather had changed shortly after he had set out.”

“Eleven years ago?” Mrs. Lombardi’s eyes narrowed. “I remember that

winter. It froze so hard and so suddenly that my neighbor's cow died in the night." She looked at me with a startled expression, and I answered her thought.

"Yes. He made it to about half a mile from our house, but by that time, Bet said, he must have become confused because he headed off the wrong way, farther into the woods. And yet there was moonlight, and the trail was clearly blazed; that path was frequently used as a shortcut, even in the snow."

The room was so quiet that a falling ember made us both jump. Mrs. Lombardi seized the fire tongs and deftly tossed the glowing red coal back onto the fire. She hesitated before turning back to me. "It is unlikely that he suffered much, you know, Nell. They say that dying of cold is like falling asleep."

"They found him under a bush," I said. "Bet told me that he was curled up quietly, his hands crossed on his chest, frozen. His hat, his mittens, and his jacket were found some distance away, as if he'd felt too warm."

"And your mother, of course, recovered."

"Yes; she was very ill for a while, and they did not tell her of my father's death for several days. In the end, she guessed. We could not have the burial until the ground thawed in the spring, of course, and so by that time she was quite well again."

Sarah stirred and began to make the squeaking noises that indicated she was hungry. Mrs. Lombardi scooped her out and held her for a moment. "Your father's hair was just like this?" she asked.

"Exactly the same."

Mrs. Lombardi's face lit up. "Then your father lives in her, Nell. I am sure he sees her from heaven."

I was not so sure but remained silent and took my baby in my arms.

14

A TASK

By mid-March the snow still covered the earth with a frozen blanket. My life had resumed its normal working pattern, with the addition of a wicker crib in which Sarah accompanied me in my daily tasks. I sat in Mrs. Lombardi's office hemming some tea towels that Tess, to her delight, had managed to decorate with some simple embroidery. The scratching of Mrs. Lombardi's pen mingled with Sarah's grunts as she rubbed her eyes, settling into sleep.

Mrs. Lombardi sighed, studying a sheaf of papers on the desk in front of her. We had been discussing the lateness of the spring and the quarrels that now broke out frequently among the farm workers, bored with their indoor tasks.

"We are going to open up the insane wing." As if she had only just made the decision, she stuck her pen into the inkwell with a resigned air.

"Why?" I asked, troubled by the thought. "Is an asylum closing? I thought we did not house the insane?"

"No, but we have twenty senile women arriving from a privately-run sanatorium in Waukegan that is being modernized."

"Why are the women coming here?" I asked. "Surely there are other less, well, less institutional places."

Mrs. Lombardi smiled at me, showing her small, very white teeth. "One of our governors is also on the board of the sanatorium. It is an excellent arrangement for us, as the sanatorium will pay for the refurbishment of a wing we would soon have had to open up anyway. The attendants from the sanatorium

will come with the ladies, and we will have almost no extra burden save the cooking and laundry. And as soon as the modernization is complete, they will leave us."

"When will the women arrive?" was my next question.

"On the first of June. Weather or no weather, on the first of April we must begin work on the rooms. They are not at all suitable as they are."

She was silent for a few minutes, making notes on a new sheet of paper. I watched her pen dipping into the inkwell, scratching across the page, and dipping again.

"We are receiving a sizable payment from the sanatorium," she remarked. "They have stipulated that all rooms be freshly painted and supplied with new bedding and curtains."

"By June?"

"Yes, indeed. I will instruct the company in Chicago that supplies us to send bolts of cotton suitable for making sheets, and a heavier cotton that will do for the drapes. Nell, can I count on you to supervise the confection of the bed linen and curtains?"

"Of course," I said. "I will need to take measurements of the windows and to know the dimensions of the beds."

"You may start in two weeks," Mrs. Lombardi said. "I will provide some help for you. It should be quite a straightforward task."

I nodded and then jumped as the door swung open and the superintendent walked in. He glanced for a second in my direction and then clearly dismissed me from his mind. One of the many things I did not like about Mr. Ostrander was his habit of only addressing those persons with whom he had business; he would ignore anyone extraneous to the conversation. Naturally that meant that he barely ever spoke a word to the inmates.

"Can you not prevent the women from quarreling?" was his abrupt opening. "I do not wish to have my ears assaulted by squealing females whenever I enter this House, Mrs. Lombardi. Kindly speak to your staff about it."

Mrs. Lombardi rose and stepped out from behind her desk. Her expression wore the polite, wary smile she usually adopted when dealing with our

superintendent, who was “wound up like a clock-spring” as Blackie put it. Mr. Ostrander was a tense, bony man with a mania for order and efficiency, and his regular demands for more regimentation of the women’s diet and routine ran directly counter to the kindness with which Mrs. Lombardi accommodated all the variations in the women’s abilities and needs.

Without waiting for Mrs. Lombardi’s reply, Mr. Ostrander ran his fingers over his sandy fringe of beard and went straight to his point. “I need the contract for the sanatorium tomorrow.”

“I was just instructing Nell about the preparations we must make.” Mrs. Lombardi sounded brisk and efficient.

Mr. Ostrander’s eyes flicked in my direction, and then he glanced down at Sarah. His thin mouth tightened, and he returned his attention to Mrs. Lombardi.

“Kindly do not delay the start of the work on account of the weather. We must not fall behind schedule.”

“As I said,” Mrs. Lombardi’s smile faltered, “I have been instructing Nell that we will begin work on the first of April. She is most diligent and hardworking; we are getting far more done now that Edie does not have to work alone.”

Again Mr. Ostrander’s gaze fell on me, and again he looked away without a word. I tried not to look as uncomfortable as I felt. I welcomed Mrs. Lombardi’s praise, but not in front of this man, and wished I could make myself scarce. But leaving the room would involve struggling with my work and Sarah’s basket all at once, and I knew I would make an ungainly exit at best. I did not want to do anything to lower Mr. Ostrander’s opinion of Mrs. Lombardi in any way; it already seemed to me that he went out of his way to prove her wrong wherever he could.

Mr. Ostrander removed a silver watch from his vest pocket and pressed the button to open it. He scrutinized the dial and compared it with Mrs. Lombardi’s wall clock. Appearing to find the latter inaccurate, he carefully moved the minute hand a few degrees. He snapped the case of his watch shut and slid it carefully back into his pocket, clearing his throat as he did so. I had the impression that he was trying to find something to criticize.

“Very well.” He moved toward the door, and Mrs. Lombardi followed him. Her smile had vanished. At the threshold, Mr. Ostrander turned and spoke in a low whisper. I did not think he realized I could hear.

“A fire and a footstool? For such a woman? Really, Mrs. Lombardi, you must not be seen to condone the sinful natures of these females.”

I heard Mrs. Lombardi’s indrawn breath, but Mr. Ostrander did not give her a chance to reply. His footsteps receded in the cadence of a march; he had, I knew, a military background.

My cheeks burned hotter than the warmth of the fire warranted, and I blinked back a tear as I watched Sarah sleeping. Somehow that hissed remark had wounded me; perhaps because Mr. Ostrander was a reminder of how the authorities outside the Farm would view me and my child. I did not mind for my own part, but for Sarah’s. . . I tried to imagine who her future parents might be and what they might think or speak of me, and a small fist seemed to squeeze my heart inside my ribs.

15

THE CELL

Winter still held us hostage when April arrived. A few patches of miserable yellowed grass showed through the tired snow, and the Farm rang with the sounds of livestock impatient to regain the fresh air.

Leaving Sarah with Lizzie, I dressed myself in my warmest clothing to enter the insane wing and urged Tess to do the same. Her job was to note down measurements as I called them out. A large, flabby man called Jimmy had been assigned to help me measure, as Blackie was needed elsewhere.

Mrs. Lombardi, warmly wrapped in a red wool coat and plaid beret, fitted a key into the elaborate lock of the insane wing door and turned it. The well-oiled lock moved easily; Jimmy put his large, soft hands to the handle and pulled the door toward us.

It swung open without the slightest creak and an unpleasant, musty smell filled our nostrils. Mrs. Lombardi sniffed, a worried expression on her face.

“It smells damp, somehow. Different than the last time we came in here.” She took a few steps forward, peering along the corridor. “I hope the roof is not leaking. The last time we visited this wing was in September, wasn’t it?”

“Just before you were so sick, Mrs. Lombardi,” said Tess. “I missed you when you stayed at home.”

“I missed you too, Tess,” said Mrs. Lombardi, smiling fondly.

Closed doors lined the long corridor. Our breath steamed on the cold air, and I pushed my hands into my pockets.

“Are the doors locked?” I was anxious to get done with this gloomy place as

quickly as possible.

“They are closed, not locked. In case there are insects or vermin. Tess, write down what we tell you about any work that needs to be done.” Tess nodded vigorously, her eyes on Mrs. Lombardi.

“Ten rooms for the ladies,”—Tess’s pencil moved carefully across the paper, and Mrs. Lombardi gave her time to write—“and six for the staff. The padded cells,” she turned to address me, “can be converted into storage rooms, and there are two large washrooms at the far end.”

“Those are prison doors,” I said, eyeing the one nearest to us with distaste. “I would not like to sleep in a room with those doors, even if they remained unlocked.”

“Blackie can put on ordinary door handles instead of those iron plates and locks. It will give the wing a much more homey feel.”

Mrs. Lombardi swung the first door open. A bare room with an iron bedstead greeted us. Cobwebs in the barred windows were the only signs of life.

We measured the windows in each room—they were not all the same size—and inspected it for damp or cracks in the plaster. On the whole, the rooms were in good condition and needed only a few alterations to make them pleasant. There were, to be sure, bars on the windows, but the locks could be taken off the casements to admit fresh air. “After all, this is no worse than many a nursery,” was Mrs. Lombardi’s remark.

I did not like the rooms. Some of the beds still had restraints on them, and the hairs on the back of my neck prickled at the sight.

We reached the four padded cells without finding any evidence of damp, rot, or insects. The doors of these last four cells fitted very tightly on account of the padding, and Jimmy had to tug hard to get them open. The padding was torn and streaked here and there with brownish marks. I shuddered, thinking of all the possible reasons for those marks. Were the inmates punished in those days?

The third cell that we opened had a particularly recalcitrant door. Jimmy braced his fat leg against the doorjamb, wrapped both hands around the handle, and tugged with all his might. The door gave, swung open, and something fell out into the corridor. Jimmy jumped back and uttered a word I was surprised he

knew.

A noise behind me made me look around. Mrs. Lombardi had crumpled to the floor in a dead faint.

I fell to my knees next to Mrs. Lombardi, ignoring the object in the doorway. Behind me, Jimmy was making a sound like “AAaaaaAAAAaaaaAAAAaaa”; I did not know whether he was upset or laughing. Tess was stuttering words that sounded like “Jo” and “Bey.”

“Jimmy!” I said sharply to the young man. “Be silent at once. This is helping no one.”

He fell silent, and at the same time Mrs. Lombardi began to stir. I shuffled around on my knees so that I was between her and the object, making very sure no part of me touched it.

Mrs. Lombardi opened her eyes and pushed herself into a sitting position.

“Are you all right?” I asked anxiously. “Perhaps you should not stand up just yet.”

“I’m sorry,” she said incongruously. “That was a body.”

“I know,” I said. I did not want to look at it.

“It’s Jo Ma, Mrs. Lombardi. And her little baby,” said Tess.

That got me to my feet, and I turned to face the body. Bodies.

The larger one had been a young woman, wearing a green-striped dress and brown jacket. She had on a muffler, gloves, and knitted hat, from which pale blonde hair escaped in wisps and curls. She would have been shorter even than Tess.

Most of her face was left; only the lips had withered back from her teeth, while the rest had become something resembling leather. A large stain on the floorboards showed where she had lain, huddled up against the door. It was so cold in the insane wing that there was no strong smell, just the musty odor we had all noticed.

Still clutched in its mother’s arms, a little wizened face peeped out from a

bundle of blankets, withered eyes half-closed in eternal sleep.

I felt quite calm and detached at that moment. “There have not been any maggots.” I had seen enough dead animals on the prairie to understand decay.

Mrs. Lombardi rose to her feet. Her voice trembled, but she made an effort to pull herself together.

“You are right, Nell. But she could only have been here since the cold weather started. It was cold that day. . . but I had a fever; I was hot and cold at once. I do not understand.”

“Understand what?”

“I am certain that I accompanied Jo and her baby to the cart that was to take them to Chicago. Dear God, what happened?”

“Maybe she ran away from you, Mrs. Lombardi. Maybe she hid.” Tess had retreated behind me so she could not see the bodies.

Mrs. Lombardi furrowed her brow and sighed. “Jimmy, go and find Blackie. The two of you go to Mr. Ostrander’s house—if he is not already somewhere on the Farm. Blackie will know.”

Jimmy shot off down the corridor faster than I would have expected.

“Tess, will you go find Edie?” Mrs. Lombardi laid a hand on Tess’s arm. “Tell her we need coverings: good, clean sheets. You may tell her what has happened but nobody else. And then go check on little Sarah.”

I knew I would soon have to nurse my baby. But I also knew that Mrs. Lombardi’s request to Tess was designed to keep her from returning to the distressing scene before us.

“Nell, will you stay with me?” Mrs. Lombardi said. Her beautiful face was marred by two deep lines between her brows, and her hands hung limply as she stared at the bodies. “Just until Mr. Ostrander comes. I feel so guilty—I have done a terrible wrong.”

The expressions on the faces of the three men were strangely incongruous. Jimmy seemed placid and detached, Blackie guarded and unemotional. Mr.

Ostrander's face was twisted into a grimace that reminded me of a mask from Greek tragedy.

Mrs. Lombardi knelt by the bodies, praying. I bowed my head, listening to her melodious voice asking earnestly for forgiveness for some sin of negligence and fastened my eyes on the corpses. How did they die? There were no marks of violence or even of struggle to leave the room. The padding on the door was intact.

Hunger or thirst may have caused the demise of these two, but I doubted it. There was something about the way that the young woman was curled up, as if sleeping, which recalled the descriptions that Bet had given me of my father's body. I hoped I was right and that the easy death of cold had been the end of the little fair woman and her baby.

Mr. Ostrander did not wait for Mrs. Lombardi to finish her prayer. "A body, Mrs. Lombardi," he gasped. "A body! And a baby too! How can this possibly be? What am I going to tell the Board of Governors?" The pallor of his face made the large brownish blotches on his forehead and left cheek stand out unpleasantly.

Mrs. Lombardi's lips compressed. "This is Johanna Mauer, Mr. Ostrander," she said, indicating the remains on the floor, "and baby Benjamin." Mr. Ostrander did not react; I wondered if he already knew their identity or if he cared at all.

"We should send an orderly to the town for the constable." This got Mr. Ostrander's attention; he stared at Mrs. Lombardi as if she had gone insane.

"For an idiot girl and her bastard?"

Mrs. Lombardi's teeth positively gritted. Blackie winced and began humming softly. Mr. Ostrander took a step backward under the combined force of our glares. "No, no, you are right. But it's clear what happened. She locked herself in." He twisted his sandy beard tightly around his index finger.

"Even so," said Mrs. Lombardi in a tight voice. "We—I have failed her in some way I cannot fathom." Her voice hardened. "Before we worry about what we tell our governors, let us make arrangements to give these poor creatures Christian burial. I will then write a full report, and if I am to blame in any way, I

will bear any responsibility I must.”

16

MINE

The need to nurse Sarah became imperative, and I made good my escape. I unwound my scarf and took off my hat and woolen gloves as I jogged down the echoing stairs, aware of the soreness of my breasts but otherwise unable to register much of the world around me. I asked one or two women if they'd seen Lizzie and thanked them for their answers, but I barely saw their faces. My vision was full of the wizened visage of a baby whose name had been Benjamin and who had not deserved to die.

I found Lizzie at last in the refectory. She was walking Sarah up and down, as my baby was fussy with hunger, chewing on her little fist and kicking with her strong legs. I apologized for taking so long and took Sarah in my arms; Lizzie made a few remarks—about Sarah, I think—but again I found it hard to focus. Sarah's small body felt solid and warm under my hands, a reassuring locus of movement and life. She squirmed crossly against me as I carried her out of the refectory, making a low keening noise and pushing her tongue out of her mouth to indicate her need.

The sewing room was empty, and it did not take long for me to settle Sarah to my breast. She nursed with enthusiasm for a while, for which I was as grateful as she, and then, sated, released my nipple with a broad smile on a face smeared with my milk. She rarely suffered from colic now, and the moments after nursing had become like a conversation between us as I responded to her soft cooing noises with nonsense of my own. As much as I was prepared to relinquish this child, I had to admit that she was less work and more fun than I had originally

thought.

I was hungry and thirsty and needed to use the privy before long, and I knew I should return Sarah to Lizzie so that I could attend to my own needs. Yet I found that I was rooted in my chair, my entire body shaking. I saw them again, the young woman and her baby. Presumably they were still lying as they fell, against the bare boards of the freezing, gloomy corridor above. I wondered if they would be buried just as they were, in an eternal embrace. I hoped so. I did not want the young woman—Jo?—to have to relinquish the little burden she had warmed with her last breath.

Her bastard, Mr. Ostrander had called the small bundle of withered skin. So Jo was an unmarried mother like me. A "moral imbecile." I heard my stepfather's voice, soft and measured, muted in the plush comfort of our parlor, and felt my jaw clench. No. I—and Jo too, I was sure—were simply young women who made mistakes. A few words drifted back from the endless Sundays spent listening to preachers, something I had never understood at the time. The woman taken in sin; I had never, until now, had an inkling what that sin was. Something about not throwing stones at her unless you did not sin yourself.

Sarah made a sound between a crow of delight and a sigh, and I realized that I had wrapped my arms round her and was holding her close, much like the mother held her baby two floors above. Sarah's smell enveloped me, an amalgam of scents—the salty tang of my milk, skin that had never been browned by the sun or made greasy by bad food, a wet diaper, and something that was rich and powerful to me, flesh that called to my own flesh like a siren from the sea. I knew at that moment that she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

And if I let her go—could anyone else love her as much as I did? I squeezed my eyes tight to stop the tears bursting forth. Yes, I did love her after all. And if I let her go, my heart would break, and she would not have me near to protect her from the evils of this world. Impossible. She was mine—mine—and I would not relinquish her.

17

ACCIDENT

I realized something else that day, as I finally forced myself to rise from my chair and continue with the day's living. I needed to know what had happened to Jo and Benjamin. I was certain that the lawmen of Prairie Haven, such as they were, would spend little time on two of society's outcasts who had frozen to death in a place where they had no right to be.

And there was something wrong in the idea of that little woman jamming the door of a padded cell shut and staying there until she and her baby died. Even if she were an "idiot"—I winced at the memory of Mr. Ostrander's words—I was sure that her instinct would be to save her baby, if not herself. I needed to find out more about her and try to piece together the mystery of a day that seemed to weigh heavy on Mrs. Lombardi's conscience.

I did not see Mrs. Lombardi again until much later that afternoon. I had finished my machine sewing and moved into Mrs. Lombardi's large office to take advantage of the waning light while I worked on several pairs of underdrawers for the women. Sarah lay contentedly in her wicker crib beside my chair, screened from the fire but still benefiting from its warmth. She loved to lie on her back and seemed to be intently observing everything she could see.

The dark smudges underneath Mrs. Lombardi's eyes betrayed the trials of the day. Instead of sitting at her desk as she usually did, she joined me by the fire, bringing with her the scent of freesias but also a slight taint of strong soap. She sat down stiffly, massaging her neck and closing her eyes.

"Is everything all right?" I asked. That was not quite what I meant, but I did

not want to bombard her with questions, and I needed some way to open a conversation.

She smiled wearily, watching Sarah who was yawning in contentment. Then her large hazel eyes became serious.

“We have taken care of the remains of our poor friends,” she said. “They are resting in a casket together in one of the barns. Of course, we cannot perform the burial rites until the ground thaws.”

She sighed deeply. “Mr. Ostrander is in a terrible state,” she said. “He is worried that news of this death will reflect badly on the Farm, I think.”

A shudder ran through me as I prepared to ask the question that had been ringing through my bones all day. “Was it murder?”

Mrs. Lombardi looked startled. “Murder? Nobody has imagined such a thing, Nell. The sheriff and a private detective are both agreed that it was a simple accident.”

“How could this woman—Jo?—have found her way into a wing that was locked from the outside?” I asked.

“Ah, but you see that is just the point,” replied Mrs. Lombardi. “Anything could have happened that day, anything at all. When Jo left us—when we thought she left us—on October the seventh of last year, the Farm was in an unprecedented state of chaos. One-third of our inmates and fully half of the staff were ill with a terrible septic throat, which caused an extremely high fever and made the patients quite delirious. Merely a nasty form of pharyngitis, you understand—unpleasant symptoms, but short-lived. I caught it myself in the end, and then I was very ill for two weeks with bronchitis. Those staff who were well were fully occupied in nursing the sick. We were going frantic trying to lower the fever and keep our patients’ strength up. You were lucky you did not come to us sooner; you would not have been impressed to see such an unhealthy matron.” Tiny crinkles showed at the outer corners of her eyes as she smiled.

“And were Jo and the baby sick?” I asked.

“Jo caught a mild form of the septic throat, but little Benjamin seemed immune. Jo was perfectly well by the time she left. And by the first week in October, the temperature had dropped below freezing for most of the day—the

shortest fall I have ever known—and that seemed to put an end to the contagion. Or perhaps it had simply run its course."

"But you became ill."

"Alas, yes. I awoke the morning of Jo's departure feeling dizzy and weak, and my throat was unbearably painful. I was sleeping right here"—she gestured to her sitting room, a small room leading off her office—"because I was afraid to return home and transmit the women's infection to my own children. It was all I could do to dress and put up my hair, but I wanted to be absolutely sure that Jo was seen safely off to St. Jude's."

"Was there anyone else there?"

"There must have been, but I simply cannot recall whom. All I can see in my memory is the black carthorse, not one of our own horses. I don't know why I remember that and nothing else. I don't even remember how I got back to my own bed; I do know that they brought the doctor to me, but I'm not sure if it was that same day or the next."

She was silent again, staring into the fire. "I wish I could remember," she suddenly burst out. "And I should have written to St. Jude's—I should have—when I was better, but when I returned to my duties, there were so many papers to see to. I suppose I assumed that St. Jude's would have written to us had Jo and her baby not arrived."

"Why was Jo sent away?" I asked. "Had you found a home for her?"

"Ah," Mrs. Lombardi picked at a fold of her dress. "Not exactly. Nell, the story of Jo is a painful one, and I am tired. Could I tell you tomorrow?"

18

LY-LEE

The news of the bodies flew around the Women's House on swift wings. Tess and I became objects of celebrity and curiosity. The more feeble-minded wanted clarification: was Jo really dead? Why was she here in the House and not gone away? I tried to respond to each woman according to her understanding, but the morning was a difficult one.

By the time I had answered the question, "Where is Jo now?" for what seemed like the fiftieth time, my head was pounding. I frowned in irritation when I heard a familiar wheezing laugh behind me.

"Blackie," I said without turning round, "It is not at all funny. The poor thing is really dead."

"Ain't laughin' at the poor little mite and her baby, God rest their souls," explained Blackie. "It's human nature that amuses me. That Jo were like a fly in a kitchen for the menfolk around here—she kep' landing on 'em, see, and even the strongest man can't always keep from swatting at that fly once in a while."

"You didn't like her like that, Blackie," observed Tess matter-of-factly.

"You're a clever little girl, Tessie," said Blackie, showing his three teeth in a horrible grin. "That's why they let me go all over the Women's House; they know I ain't a bit interested in that there. The devil caught me with whiskey, not women. You all could walk nekked down the room, and I'd swap you every one for a nip of firewater." He wheezed again for a minute. "Little Jo, she tried her tricks on me once, but I told her to go play with her dolls. She said 'Doll!' and trundled off, quiet as you please."

I was fascinated, but unfortunately at that moment Mr. Ostrander arrived. He looked as if he had not slept, and his normally neat clothing was askew.

"Blackthorn, back to the Men's House," he said, an edge of venom in his voice. "Don't loiter round here talking with the women."

Blackie tipped his greasy hat to the superintendent and shuffled his way toward the back of the house, humming softly. Tess and I turned quickly away to the workroom, but Mr. Ostrander was clearly not interested in us. He glanced toward Mrs. Lombardi's door, took a deep breath, and marched inside. The door shut with a firm thud.

"Mr. Ostrander is really worried," Tess said.

I nodded, gazing at Mrs. Lombardi's door. Whatever part Mrs. Lombardi had played in Jo's demise, I was sorry that she was facing Mr. Ostrander alone.

Mrs. Lombardi was too busy to talk to me the next day, and I shut myself into the workroom to get away from my newfound celebrity; Edie's unpleasant temper acted like a watchdog to keep intruders out. We had received the bolts of cotton for the new rooms and had a great deal to do.

After a hard morning's sewing, a plain meal, nursing Sarah, and attending to her needs, I was ready to sit down with some hemming for a couple of hours. Tess worked quietly beside me; she was less talkative now that she had more absorbing work to do.

At around two o'clock, Mrs. Lombardi poked her head around the door. Edie had taken over at the sewing machine and was making a great deal of noise, so Mrs. Lombardi beckoned me out of the room. I motioned to Edie that I was leaving Sarah with her—she slept very well when the machine was whirring—and slipped into Mrs. Lombardi's office.

"I promised to tell you about Jo," she said.

"I already heard something about her from Blackie," I said. "Was she—did she bother the men?"

"Johanna Mauer was brought to the Farm when she was eleven years old."

Mrs. Lombardi rested her head against the wing of the chair. “I have been trying to find news of her family, but they left to try their luck in Canada, and since then I have heard nothing from them. They will be thinking that poor little Jo is alive and safe here at the Farm, and we have failed her.” She pinched the bridge of her nose with her fingers.

“Why did they bring her to the Farm? Could they not afford to care for her?”

“No, they had sufficient money.” She took a deep breath. “Jo was a beautiful young woman; huge blue eyes and fine, shiny hair of that very pale shade of blonde that you sometimes see on small children. She loved pretty dresses, poor simple soul.”

“So what was the problem with her?” I asked, impatient to hear the nub of the matter.

“Men. Jo suffered from some kind of erotic mania. I remember the painful embarrassment on her father’s face as he tried to describe how he and his sons—her own father and brothers!—were constantly awakened to find her in their beds, making an assault on their bodies. They tried putting a lock on her room, but she would spend all night thumping on the door and screaming, and they loved her too dearly to imprison her.”

“She was lucky that they did not want to take advantage of her,” I said, remembering some of the tales I had heard in the refectory.

“They were very moral men.” Mrs. Lombardi frowned. “But some around them were not. Imagine, an eleven-year-old child! It is shameful that there are men who would even countenance such a thing. Of course, her approach to men was, well, very direct. I had to have one of our female staff sleep in the same room as Jo, with the key tied to her wrist.”

“And yet she still became pregnant.”

“She would take every opportunity to give us the slip by day and would head for the Men’s House or the farm buildings. The orderlies were given strict instructions to bring her straight back here if they found her, and the male inmates are frequently lectured about not touching the women. I believe Mr. Schoeffel has bromide administered at intervals to some of the less, ah, inhibited men.”

“But the father of her child must have been one of the inmates or orderlies,” I said. “Unless it was a man who visited the Farm; one of the carters, perhaps?”

“Perhaps,” said Mrs. Lombardi. “When her condition became apparent, I spent hours trying to identify the man—or the men—she might have been with, by dint of listing every inmate and orderly and asking her if it was he. It was an awful, wearisome process; Jo could barely speak.”

“So did she give you any clue?”

“Yes, we had a name of sorts: ‘Ly-lee.’ And I do not believe it was a resident of the Farm, because every time I gave her the name of an inmate or orderly she would shake her head and say, ‘Ly-lee.’ I believe she was trying to tell me, poor thing.”

A knock at the door interrupted us. Agnes burst into the room, an expression of disgust on her face.

“That Phebe has vomited on my floor again,” she burst out. “I simply can’t have her working for me. She don’t even have the sense to go outside when she can’t hold in the food she steals.”

“Oh, dear,” said Mrs. Lombardi, rising swiftly from her chair. “Poor Phebe. And we must disinfect the floor thoroughly. I’m sorry, Nell,” she said, turning to me. “We will talk more of this later.” And she left the room swiftly, followed by Agnes, who trailed a strong smell of cooking behind her.

I raised my eyes to the ceiling, imagining the cold, silent cell two floors above. The rooms were now being converted, and I could not suppose that any clues that remained would be present for long. My next step was clear.

I would go back to the insane wing.

19

THEORY

The door was closed but not locked. I was greeted by a strong smell of paint; drop cloths and ladders littered the corridor. The lock plates had been taken off some of the doors, giving the place a less forbidding air.

The painters, an ad hoc team composed of orderlies and residents, were eating their breakfast in the Men's House, and the wing was deserted. I wished I had brought a shawl, as it was still cold outside, and the large, barred window at the end of the corridor was open to let out the smell of the paint.

I walked reluctantly to the room where I had last stood looking down at the small, cold bodies that made me think of my father. The faintest outline of the stain by the door still showed on the boards, despite the scrubbing they had received. I squatted down to look; what, I wondered, did this stain tell me? Probably that Jo had died in this very room and had not been moved here. She had last been seen on October the seventh; the weather had taken a turn for the worse around the first week of October, as I remembered well.

By the time I had arrived at the Farm on the fourth of November, the temperature had been firmly below freezing both day and night, and it had not gone above freezing at all—and then only just—until very recently. I counted the months off in my head; five solid months of icy weather. So Jo and Benjamin could easily have frozen to death in the first week of October and lain silently there ever since.

I felt sure that murder had been committed. And yet if experienced officials were satisfied that Jo had foolishly shut herself in, had been unable to get out,

and had died of the cold, who was I to dispute their wisdom? I felt myself hopelessly inadequate to my task.

I looked around the room. It was completely padded with a strong, brownish-white canvas but was otherwise bare. A narrow, barred window high up in the wall let in shreds of light through its thick frosted glass. A large lock plate with a keyhole was fixed on the corridor side of the door; there was no key in the lock. The outside of the door also sported a huge spring bolt.

I tried to remember whether that bolt had been engaged when Jimmy went to open it. I did not think so; it seemed to me that the door had not been quite closed, just stuck in the jamb. This might support the theory that Jo hid in the room by herself. There was only one way to find out.

I stepped farther into the room, nerving myself to act. The padded walls seemed to press inward, and I imagined being in this place for hours, or even days. I nearly bolted back down the corridor, but this might be my last chance to perform the experiment before the room was altered.

I tried several times to shut the door from the inside. It was impossible to get any grip on the padding inside the door to pull the heavy, iron-bound thing shut from the inside. Then I tried grasping the metal lock plate, swinging the door toward me and jumping back, with the considerable risk of shutting my hand in the door. The hinges were well balanced and the door did swing so that it engaged partway into the jamb. I pushed against it; it was still easy to open. I tried the experiment several times, but although I was strong, I simply could not get the door to stick closed. I was glad of that, as I was not looking forward to trying to get out.

By this time my arms were shaking. I took myself off to a corner of the padded cell, as far away from the stain as possible, and sat down on the cold boards to try and work out in my mind if there were another way to shut the door. The hypothesis of an accidental closing of the door was beginning to look weak. I buried my head in my arms to shut out the oppressive cell and tried to

think.

The door slammed shut. I heard the spring bolt shoot into place with a hard thud. I leaped to my feet and screamed like I had never screamed in my entire life.

20

KNOWLEDGE

My scream was answered by a hoarse shout of fear. Voices rang out, and footsteps thudded along the corridor. I heard the spring bolt squeak back into its socket and saw the door move about an inch. Then it stuck, and voices—men's voices—cursed at it volubly. A few seconds later a miraculous grating sound announced my salvation.

I staggered, on legs that had turned to jelly, over to the door and encountered a half dozen open-mouthed faces. One of them had only three teeth.

"Blackie!" I gasped, and almost fell into the man's arms. One of the other men set up a high keening, and it took two orderlies to silence him.

Blackie set me back on my feet and patted my shoulder in an avuncular way. "You nearly scared us to death, Miss Nell. Jimmy here thinks you're little Jo's ghost, I reckon. Jimmy," he said, turning toward the doughy man, who now had tears running down his moon-shaped face, "You know Miss Nell. She don't look nothin' like Jo, so hush now. Why d'you slam the door, anyhow?" he asked the man.

Jimmy smeared snot and tears around his face with his sleeve as he explained that he didn't want to see the padded rooms open; it scared him to think of the padded rooms. He saw what he saw. He didn't like this place. He didn't want to be a painter any more.

"We won't get any more work out of him," one of the orderlies agreed. "I'll take him back to the Men's House and see if I can find a replacement." He took Jimmy gently but firmly by the arm and steered him toward the wing door,

talking to him all the while in a low, reassuring voice.

Blackie had recovered his usual air of placid amusement, and the drooping corners of his mouth turned up as he looked at me. “Tryin’ to see if little Jo got stuck in there all on her lonesome, were you? If she did, I’ll eat my hat,” and he gestured toward the greasy object perched on his head. A chill ran through my bones. So Blackie, too, thought it was murder.

“Enough of that, Blackthorn,” one of the orderlies said in a peremptory tone. “We’ve got work to do; no use speculating. The superintendent said it was an accident.”

Blackie wheezed a short laugh in my direction and shambled off toward the cans of paint at the other end of the corridor. The orderlies looked at me, and I forced an unconcerned smile.

“Silly of me to be so curious, wasn’t it? I’ve had quite a fright. I only came here to check on the window casements, to make sure I was sewing the—the right sort of tabs on the curtains.”

The orderlies said nothing.

“And I’m quite done,” I added. “I must return to my workroom now. To sew the curtains.” And as steadily as I could, I headed for the door.

Blackie looked at me as I left, an expression full of meaning on his seamed face. I raised my eyebrows at him, and a look of angelic unconcern spread over his countenance.

I was sure that man knew something.

Well, at least I had learned some things. I had learned that it was impossible to shut the door from the inside and that it only got stuck when it had been pushed hard from the *outside*. It seemed very unlikely that Jo had accidentally shut herself in. And how did she get into the insane wing in the first place? Who had the keys? Logically, this was the next question.

I walked on unsteady legs down to the workroom, where I found Lizzie rocking a squalling Sarah. I apologized, took my daughter in my arms, and

prepared myself to nurse her.

Sarah was fussy throughout the procedure and took a long time to settle down afterwards. “What is ailing her?” I asked Lizzie. “You don’t think she’s sick, do you?”

Lizzie’s careworn face crinkled into a rare smile. “I think she’s growing, that’s all. You’ll just have to nurse her more often for a while.” The smile disappeared, and she stepped closer to me. “Your stepfather wants her adopted, didn’t you say?” she asked quietly. “Don’t let them push you into giving her pap or goat’s milk too soon. They do that sometimes, to make the baby wean faster, when they’re looking for a couple to take it.”

I looked at Lizzie in blank astonishment. “Do you think they’re already looking for someone?”

“Mrs. Lombardi, now, she likes the mother and baby to stay together,” Lizzie said. “But the governors, they’re different. Grateful, rich couples are good benefactors, and the sooner the baby goes to live with them, the better. They reckon that a baby that stays with an unrespectable mother gets bad habits.”

Considering my recent decision that I would keep Sarah, this was unwelcome news indeed. As I changed Sarah’s diaper, I tried to formulate a plan of action. My first instinct was simply to take my baby and flee. The weather was getting warmer, and if I set off in the early morning, I could probably make it to the lake port of Waukegan by nightfall. And then what? Without money, what was I supposed to do?

No. I could risk my own life but not Sarah’s. I would need help, and the first person to ask would be Mrs. Lombardi. I had heard that she had helped Tilly—who, surprisingly, wanted to keep her son—find a place in a charitable house in Pennsylvania. Perhaps I could beg Mrs. Lombardi to help me find a solution; although, how could I elude my stepfather’s wishes and still see my mother? It was beyond me.

When I arrived at Mrs. Lombardi’s office, I was surprised to see that she was on her knees on the rug by her desk. She was praying fervently and did not hear me arrive at her open door. She rose swiftly to her feet and hastily snatched her cloak from the coat-stand by her window, twisting it around her neck in one

swift movement as she turned to the door. Her face held traces of tears, and her expression betrayed deep distress.

I forgot my own troubles. “What is the matter?” I asked, laying my hand on her arm as she reached the doorway. She had not seen me up to that point.

She seemed to snap back to where she was, and her hand tightened suddenly around my wrist.

“I must leave,” she said. She lowered her voice to the merest breath. “I should not be telling this to an inmate—Nell, can you be discreet?”

“You know I can.”

“Very well. Mr. Ostrander tried to hang himself not much more than an hour ago. His maid heard kicking sounds from his bedroom and found him hanging from the belt of his dressing-gown, which he had tied to the bracket of his curtains. The stitching in the belt gave way, otherwise he would have died.”

I took a step back. “Mr. Ostrander? I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I. Let us pray this has nothing to do with the discovery of Jo and her baby.”

And she was gone, leaving me puzzled. What had she meant? Then the full impact of her words hit me.

Could Mr. Ostrander have been the baby’s father? Or the murderer? Or both?

I stayed in the workroom for the rest of the day, cranking the handle of the sewing machine furiously to calm my turbulent brain and help with the thinking process. My future and that of my baby gnawed at my mind, but I tried to put off those thoughts until I had a chance of an interview with Mrs. Lombardi. The question of Mr. Ostrander’s guilt was now my foremost preoccupation.

It just *seemed* wrong. Mr. Ostrander, with his formal, stiff manner, his mania for efficiency, and his desire to retain control of any situation—somehow, I could not see him in the grip of a helpless lust. He, the father of Jo’s baby?

The light was fading, and I lit the lamp and decided to sew just one more pillowcase before stopping work. Sarah gurgled contentedly in her crib after her

third feeding of the afternoon; I was becoming quite exhausted with nursing her, but I was determined to follow Lizzie's advice.

A noise at the door made me whip my head round in surprise. I relaxed when I saw Blackie, but as he sidled into the room, I detected that there was something different about him. His eyes were brighter than normal, and a faint flush decorated his weather-beaten cheeks. He held himself taller and looked at me with something approaching insolence.

"Have you been drinking?" I asked.

"Just a nip." Blackie seated himself on an unoccupied table, a relaxed grin on his face.

"Where did you get alcohol?"

Blackie raised a finger to his lips in a gesture of secrecy. "There's ways and means when the craving overcomes me. Just a little, mind; enough to cover the bottom of the bottle. If I drink more, I'll want to make a night of it; and if I do that, they'll find me out." He nodded, as if to reassure me. "Don't you worry, Miss Nell. I'm quite as safe drinking as sober. Just a little bit more expansive, you might say." And he was better spoken when he had been drinking, I noticed. I felt sure there was more to Blackie than met the eye.

Tess chose that moment to walk into the room and looked at Blackie in mute surprise. I motioned her over to where I was standing.

"Did you have something to say to me?" I asked, facing Blackie. I felt a little afraid of him in this condition, and I was glad Tess was with me.

"Just thought you might be wondering about Mr. Ostrander." Blackie shuffled into a more comfortable position on the tabletop.

"How on earth did you know about that?" I felt a jolt of astonishment. He put his finger to his lips again.

"Word gets around," he explained. "Thinking that Ostrander might be the father of Jo's baby, perhaps? You'd be wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"Student of human nature, aren't I?" Blackie said. "Ostrander's not the marrying kind, nor the fornicating kind either—with women."

I stared hard at Blackie, trying to work out if he meant what I thought he

meant. Tess was looking at me with her eyebrows raised, and it embarrassed me to think that she understood something that I, sheltered from childhood, did not. Somehow, in my ignorance, I believed Blackie without hesitation.

“Besides,” his eyes brightened even more as he seemed to relive a memory, “he wasn’t the one sniffing round little Jo at the opportune moment.”

I jerked my head upwards. “You know, don’t you,” I said, and I could hear the hardness in my voice. “You have a duty to tell, Blackie, to give that girl and her baby justice.”

“Oh yes, oh yes,” he nodded in agreement. “But see, I won’t get nothin’ for telling ’cept a whole load of trouble for not telling before, see? And I ain’t the one to get a fellow man into trouble. But if you was to make sure I got a reward . . .” His voice had become wheedling, as if he were slipping back into a role.

“He wants booze.” Tess’s voice was flat.

Blackie launched into one of his wheezing laughs, which became a cough. His eyes watering, he beamed at the two of us, his three teeth shining yellow in the lamplight.

“Tell you the story for a nip,” he said. “For a bottle of whiskey, mind, I’ll give you a name.”

“You just told me you didn’t want a whole bottle!”

“I’d hide it,” he said. “For the day I really need it. Till I take that first nip, see, I can hold off. I just hums and makes the little demon go away. Then I’m good for a while, until the craving really catches me. But I’ve always wanted to keep a whole bottle hidden somewhere, for my day of need. An ambition, like. A little something to look forward to.”

I didn’t really understand; but then, I didn’t drink. Tess and I looked at each other.

Tess was the first to speak. “I know where I can get a bottle of beer,” she said.

Blackie’s eyes lit up. “And where’s that, then?”

“Do you think I’d tell you? You think you’re clever and know all the things that happen here. I know some things that happen here too. Things you don’t know.”

Blackie gave Tess a sour look. “Beer’s horse piss, begging your pardon, Miss Nell. But I’ll give you a little taste of the story for a full bottle.”

“You need to leave,” I said. I didn’t want to play this game, even if it meant acquiring useful information.

To my surprise, Blackie immediately slid off the table and headed for the door. As he opened it, he turned round.

“Bottle of whiskey, and you’ll know who the father of Jo’s baby was. Leastways, the probable father. Little Jo got around.”

He left, treading with a swagger I did not usually hear in his step. Tess looked at me.

“No, Tess.” I answered what was in her eyes. “I don’t think this is right.”

“It’s the only way we’ll find out,” she replied and began tidying the worktable.

21

SUPERINTENDENT

The next day Blackie did his work without speaking, humming softly. I surmised that his attempt to extort a drink out of us had been the direct result of the "nip" he had somehow acquired and that, now the effects had worn off, he did not have any desire to pursue the matter. That was fine with me.

I had a brief chance to talk with Mrs. Lombardi that morning and heard that Mr. Ostrander was alive and had been moved to a private nursing home.

"Why—" I did not quite know how to continue.

"Why did he do it?" Mrs. Lombardi's eyes were deeply shadowed, and her cheeks looked hollow. I didn't know what an attempted suicide by hanging looked like, but I guessed it wasn't pleasant.

"Well, really," I said, "I was wondering if it had anything to do with finding Jo and her baby."

Mrs. Lombardi looked surprised. "In what way?"

I didn't want to be direct. "That. . . the superintendent felt guilty in some way. Perhaps for not checking that Jo did not arrive at St. Jude's." The last words came out in a rush; they were not what I wanted to say.

"We are all guilty of that," Mrs. Lombardi said with a sigh. "But no. I think that maybe the discovery of the bodies was the tipping point." She had been sitting at her desk with her head resting on her hands. Now she looked up at me, as if startled by a thought. "Wait. You think Mr. Ostrander was responsible for the *baby*? No. . . no." She obviously wanted to say more.

I was silent, watching her face for clues.

“I have known Mr. Ostrander since he took up this post just after the War,” she said. “He was too old to serve, of course, although he would have made a fine general, I think.” Her eyes crinkled at the corners. “He was in the County Militia. A thing to be proud of, but if any attempt is made to speak of the War, he turns the conversation immediately. Still, that is not unusual. Many of our brave men who fought for the Union are silent about their experiences.”

“Has he said anything to you?”

“Just one thing. Before the doctor came. He said, ‘I will never be able to escape.’ I tried to ask him what he meant, but he simply turned his head away. And I may not have heard correctly; the poor man’s vocal cords are much damaged.” She sighed again and rubbed her eyes, blinking up at me. “I do believe, Nell, that the strain of the discovery of two bodies in the institution that was under his care was simply too much for an already fragile mental condition.”

I nodded, but I didn’t really believe that the two events were entirely unconnected. The man had been tightly wound, it was true, but not so close to the breaking point, if I were any judge. There was a link somewhere, and I just had to find it.

Then one of the staff entered Mrs. Lombardi’s office, and I returned to my workroom. It was frustrating—I desperately wanted to talk with her about me and Sarah and about the key to the insane wing.

Just two weeks before, I had felt secure in the present moment as my hard but not unpleasant life at the Farm proceeded. The future had been something that I could put off indefinitely. But now everything had changed. The discovery of the two forlorn bodies and the realization that Sarah would eventually be weaned and separated from me had made me feel as if I were walking along a cliff edge with one foot at the very brink.

After the excitements of the past few days, the following two weeks proceeded in the most deadly monotony. We sewed sheets and curtains and inspected the

new woolen blankets that had arrived from Chicago, woven from the yarn produced at the Farm over the winter. The cows and their calves, the sheep and their lambs were gradually released into the greening fields. The hens clucked in their yard in front of the Women's House. The flower garden between the two big buildings began to sprout a tender green mixture of new shoots and weeds, and Blackie and two other men spent a week tending to it. Tufts of prairie smoke, violets, Virginia bluebells, and other spring flowers popped up in the most surprising locations, to be beaten down by the April rains and rear up again with mute obstinacy.

Between the rain and the sun, only a few tiny heaps of snow were left in the most shadowed corners near buildings. The paths dried up, and I was able to put on galoshes and take Sarah out for walks to explore the Farm. I encountered various male residents and orderlies who stared at me; to them, of course, I was a newcomer. After a day or two they began greeting me and making enquiries about Sarah: Was she well? How old was she? They admired her copper hair and her eyes, which were beginning to take on more green than blue. She charmed them with dimpled smiles and wildly waving fists, and they smiled back.

Mr. Ostrander had been moved to his sister's house in Evanston and was making a good recovery. It seemed unlikely that he would return to his post as superintendent. Mrs. Lombardi and Mr. Schoeffel were often to be seen in deep discussion, presumably about what would happen next.

We buried Jo and Benjamin in a single plain pine coffin one sunny, blustery day; Pastor Lombardi's words were alternately snatched away by the wind and driven toward the group of inmates, including myself, who watched the coffin as it was lowered into its final resting place. I hugged Sarah tight, and my eyes were not dry.

And I learned two things from Mrs. Lombardi, who seemed to trust me more than ever. The key to the main door of the insane wing existed in five copies, held by herself, Mr. Schoeffel, Mr. Ostrander, and two senior orderlies. The door was generally locked after the wing was inspected in the spring and fall. But the last inspection had taken place at the beginning of the epidemic and had been rapid and cursory—just enough to ascertain that the roof was not leaking and

that there were no rats. Nobody could positively remember locking the door; therefore, it was just possible that the door remained unlocked, and that was very unhelpful.

The second thing I learned was more chilling.

Mrs. Lombardi sat with her thumbs supporting her chin as she listened to my halting words about how I did not want to be separated from Sarah, how I hoped that she could help me find another solution.

When I had finished, she regarded me in silence for a minute or two. Her expression was sympathetic, but her hazel eyes were sad.

“Your stepfather has already written to me twice asking if the baby is ready for adoption,” she said. “He has urged me to the utmost diligence in finding parents for the child. He says that your mother is most desirous to have you home.”

I felt cold all over. “But Sarah is not weaned,” I stammered.

“And that is exactly what I have told him, both times. I will not endanger the health of the child by forcing an early weaning.”

She leaned forward and placed her hand on my arm. “But Nell, eventually she will be weaned. It is just a matter of time. And your stepfather is quite adamant that he will not countenance keeping the baby with you. Do not forget, Nell, that while you remain unmarried he has control over you and that, as a governor of this institution, he has control over me. I cannot go against his wishes.”

So that avenue of escape was closed. I would have to rely on my own resources. I realized that by refusing to put myself under the control of a husband, I had effectively prolonged my status as a child.

“I understand,” I said, but I could not keep my voice from shaking.

“You have a chance,” Mrs. Lombardi began, then stopped. She must have seen the hope in my eyes and shook her head slightly. “You may have a chance to talk to your stepfather in two weeks.”

“He is coming to the Farm?”

“All of the governors are. Mr. Schoeffel and I waited to see what would transpire with Mr. Ostrander, but it is now quite clear that he will retire from his profession. A new superintendent must be appointed.”

22

DEMON

My preoccupation with the deaths and the governors' visit made me inattentive to Tess, so when she suggested saving our noon meal to make an afternoon picnic in a sunny spot near one of the barns, I agreed more out of guilt than inclination.

"Why here?" I looked around us. It was not a particularly attractive spot, and I could smell cow manure. There would be flies, I was sure of it.

"It's a good place." Tess was already shaking out the ragged blanket.

I frowned, gazing at the rusted implements leaning against the barn. Perhaps Tess was trying to punish me in some roundabout way for neglecting her. She was definitely acting oddly. I lay Sarah gently on the blanket and drew a corked bottle of cold tea from my basket. Tess pulled a large, unlabeled bottle from hers.

"Beer? Tess, what is this? You are a teetotaler, and I have never drunk beer in my life." And then the penny dropped. Blackie was shuffling toward us with a purposeful air.

"Oh, Tess." I sounded indignant and reproachful.

"He said he has things to tell us. We should know. Jo and Benjamin are dead, Nell. Maybe they didn't die by accident."

I could not refute the possibility. "But to resort to bribing a drunkard with alcohol. . . it is wrong, Tess."

Tess pushed her stubby nose as high into the air as it would go. "Killing is wrong too, Nell. Maybe Jo and Benjamin were killed."

"And maybe not," Blackie said softly as he reached down to take the bottle

from Tess's hand. "I ain't pointin' fingers. But a deal's a deal. I'll tell you what I saw." He flipped off the bottle's swing top with one hand and took a long gulp of the beer, then positioned himself carefully at a short distance from us, squatting so that he could talk without being seen from either of the Houses.

"There was a particular man around little Jo two years ago," he said with a reminiscent grin. "She set her sights on him, see? Got up to all her little tricks. She had these ways of lettin' men know she was theirs for the having. Actions speak louder 'an words." He wheezed out so violent a laugh that he was forced to drop onto one knee. He took another long slug of beer before he continued.

"Well, this gentleman—oh yes," he said in answer to my quick look and narrowed eyes, "a cut above, this one—started hangin' around the barns, all casual-like, inspecting the state of the buildings and askin' questions about the livestock."

Blackie's eyes shone as the beer began to take effect. "Saw him bein' sinful with himself round the back of the barn that one time, when she'd gotten him all, ah," he glanced over at Tess, whose eyes were as round as saucers, "bothered up and run off. Don't think his missus had much warm at home for him, see?"

I wrinkled my nose in disgust but did not miss the implication. A married man with an invalid wife. . . not an inmate, certainly.

"Well," said Blackie, finishing the beer in several gulps and eyeing the empty bottle regretfully, "after that I reckon he gave in, 'cause I saw him leavin' the barns a few times, with her just before him or just after. Didn't last long, mind. After a bit she got interested in makin' a man of young Donny, and he ran out of reasons for visiting the Farm. But by that time the damage must have been done 'cause it wasn't too long before you could see she had a belly on her."

"You don't think the father could have been Donny?" I asked. I knew the lad; a gawky, simple-minded boy of about eighteen who was innocently affectionate toward everyone.

"I asked him if he'd done it with her," Blackie said, "and he swore he hadn't. And I believe him; the lad's not one for tellin' lies."

"And the name of Jo's lover?" I felt a surge of impatience to know the truth Blackie held locked in his shuttered mind. "Blackie, in the name of justice, tell

me now.”

Blackie stood up, and an obstinate expression combined in his face with an unpleasant leer. “Oh, I know the name. . . and more besides. Just one bottle, Miss Nell. You’re a clever girl; you’ll find a way to get it. Even half a bottle, if it’s decent whiskey. Make an old man happy, missy, and I’ll give you your justice.” He scratched at his lean cheeks, which were flecked with gray stubble and handed the empty beer bottle back to Tess. “Don’t go gettin’ caught now, little Tessy. I don’t want to get either of you young ladies into trouble.”

He sauntered off toward the Men’s House, for once not humming to himself.

I looked at Tess, who had picked up Sarah. “What should I do, Tess?” I asked. “I don’t want to get whiskey for him. I don’t like him when he’s like that.”

“It’s his demon,” Tess said sagely. “His demon’s not very nice.”

“Maybe there’s another way of persuading him to tell,” I mused.

“Whiskey’s the best way, Nell.”

I looked hard at Tess. I had not known she could be duplicitous; but there was that bottle of beer. “Promise me you won’t give him whiskey,” I said.

“I promise, Nell.”

23

INSPECTION

"Why are we doing this?" Tess asked me as she carefully swept under the tables for the fifth time in two hours. It was quite impossible to cut and sew without dropping threads on the floor.

"In case the governors decide to inspect us, I suppose," I said absentmindedly. I was standing by the window holding Sarah, who was making a determined attempt to pull my hair out of its pins.

"They came to talk about making a new superintendent, not about our workroom," Tess said huffily.

Our workroom was spotless. For two days inmates and staff had mopped floors, dusted and swept, scrubbed and polished. Now carriages were pulling up between the two Houses, and I watched with interest.

I had studied the list of twelve governors in Mrs. Lombardi's office for clues as to which one of them could be Ly-lee. If Blackie were telling the truth about Jo's lover being a gentleman, then it could well have been one of the governors.

I did not know what I would do if I identified Jo's lover. What evidence did I have other than a name? Certainly no evidence of murder. The likelihood was that Jo and Benjamin would be forgotten before weeds covered their small grave, by all except, perhaps, Mrs. Lombardi, Tess, and myself. And yet I could not let the matter drop; those withered forms still haunted my dreams.

There was one governor—I had seen his name on the list—called Lysander Goodman. Could Lysander be Ly-lee? I watched carefully as twelve men descended, with varying degrees of caution, from the swaying carriages. Was

Lysander the portly man with the mustaches? Or the younger one with the curly hair?

My heart gave a small lurch as Hiram Jackson stepped out of his carriage, followed by a frail, white-haired man to whom my stepfather gave his arm. I wondered whether I would get an interview with Stepfather and what I could say if I did. The likelihood of persuading him to let me keep Sarah seemed even more remote now that I saw him in his best suit, laughing and joking with the other men empowered to decide my fate.

Sarah succeeded in grabbing my nose, and I laughed and kissed her. When I looked back out of the window my stepfather had gone inside—but into which building, I couldn't say. The superintendent's office was in the Men's House. I wondered if they were meeting in there.

I saw Blackie making for the Men's House at a purposeful pace and sighed. Every time I'd tried to get him to speak, he'd shaken his head and said, "A little whiskey, Miss Nell. Just a little whiskey." He'd been humming almost nonstop lately. Tess said that was because he had a craving for the booze, and I agreed that there was something unusually tense about him. He barely spoke to a soul, and his wheezing laugh was not often heard.

I was on tenterhooks for the rest of the morning, wondering how I would get a chance to talk with my stepfather. I needn't have worried. He came to me.

I was alone in the workroom with Sarah when my stepfather walked in. I stopped still in the middle of the room, like a rabbit when it knows the coyote is near. Sarah squirmed in my arms and kicked vigorously against the fabric of her gown.

Hiram walked over to me and stared at Sarah with an expression of distaste in his ice-blue eyes. His hair seemed a little longer than before, and the smell of his pomade reminded me of my home. There was only one thing I wanted to know right now.

"Stepfather—" It seemed strange, somehow, to be calling him this, as if I'd

suddenly become younger again—“how is my mother?”

“Well enough.” His chin pushed outwards, and he clasped his hands behind his back. “It looks like Red Jack Lillington,” he said.

“*She* is a little girl.” I tried to keep the indignation out of my voice. “Her name is Sarah. She is your—your granddaughter.”

“She’s the bastard child of an unknown father,” he said evenly. “I hear you haven’t weaned her yet.”

“She’s not ready.”

“You’ll get her weaned before August,” he replied. “You’ll have her ready for adoption. I have been in contact with a Mr. and Mrs. Gray in Springfield. That child will suit them admirably. You will return to your home and be your mother’s comfort and an example of good morals and hard work to your community.” A bland smile spread over his handsome face.

I felt my jaw clench and tightened my hold on Sarah, who squawked and wriggled even harder. “I do not want to be separated from my child,” I said as neutrally as I could. “I will do anything you ask—anything—except for that.”

Hiram’s cheeks darkened, and he spoke through clenched teeth. “You do not have any choice in the matter. I will not associate with any bastard child, at whatever distance. If you don’t relinquish that brat willingly, it will be taken from you.”

Before I could find the words to reply he stalked out, leaving a smell of pomade and cigars behind him. Sarah began to cry, and I bounced her up and down in my arms, but two tears ran down my own cheeks. I knew Hiram Jackson well enough to know that he would not change his mind. I would have to run, and I didn’t know where to go.

24

DAZZLE

In the days that followed, I could not eat or concentrate on my work. It was only after Lizzie gave me a surprisingly sharp talking-to about not having enough milk for Sarah that I began forcing myself to swallow mouthful after mouthful of food at every meal and drink the milk she brought me. I was determined to nurse Sarah for as long as possible. Weaning meant separation.

Tess seemed unhappy too and was quieter than usual. If I had felt more energetic I might have asked her what ailed her, but I was too wrapped up in the prospect of having to flee the Farm before August.

“You are both very quiet.” A ray of evening sunlight made the red tints in Mrs. Lombardi’s hair glow as she stood in the doorway, notebook in hand.

“And you are tired, Mrs. Lombardi.” Tess stopped sewing and peered over the top of her spectacles. She was right: Mrs. Lombardi’s eyes were dull, and her sweet mouth turned down a little at the corners.

“There is a great deal to do.” The matron moved a pile of pillowcases from the chair nearest to us and sat down. “Without a superintendent, Mr. Schoeffel and I have far more letters to write.” She illustrated the point by holding out her hand, which was smeared with ink.

“And you are unhappy because the governors were cross with you,” said Tess. I held up my hand to prevent her from saying more, but Mrs. Lombardi smiled.

“You are perceptive, Tess. Yes, it has been an ordeal. I have had to admit that

I was at fault for not supervising Jo's departure properly."

"But you were sick." I became aware that I was sewing my hem crooked, and stopped to reach for my scissors. My back was aching; how long had I been sitting there? We still had the linen for five beds to finish, and the light was fading. I yawned and rubbed my eyes.

Mrs. Lombardi touched my hand lightly. "I came to tell you both to come and have some supper. I saw Lizzie with Sarah in the refectory, and she told me that neither of you had eaten."

My stomach growled at the mention of supper. Tess, who loved to eat, obediently laid down her sewing and rose from her chair.

"I think the governors are not choosing a superintendent on purpose" was her next remark. "They do not think it is hard work to write letters."

Indeed, I thought, the governors had seemed to care very little for the affairs of the Farm when they had visited. I had seen them passing through the scrubbed corridors, talking of the political news of the day and only occasionally paying attention to Mrs. Lombardi's explanations. I had listened hard as they spoke to one another, trying to catch names, and had been disappointed to learn that Lysander Goodman was the frail old gentleman; an unlikely Ly-lee. So I was as much in the dark as ever. And I dared not stay too long in the governors' presence; Stepfather glanced frequently in my direction and his looks were not welcoming.

The day on which we were to receive our new, privileged residents was almost upon us, and we almost had the linens ready for the rooms. I supervised the hanging of the curtains, relying mainly on Blackie for this task. The bedrooms now looked bright and pleasant, while the padding had been stripped off the walls of the four small cells, and they were being used as storage rooms and utility rooms.

The stain left by Jo's body worked its way back up through the wood and had to be scrubbed down again before the floor was painted throughout the

whole wing. The paint was thick, and nothing more showed; but I avoided the vicinity of that particular room.

On the Saturday before the new arrivals came, I was constantly busy and infuriated that Blackie was nowhere to be found. I muttered imprecations under my breath as I bustled from one room to another, making sure all the bed linens were in place. The windows were open to let out any remaining smells of paint, and the warm air of early summer wafted in with the melodies of birds and the sounds of the livestock in the fields. Also, there was a smell of the hencoop and the manure pile, but I was used to that.

I could hear shouting in the distance; the farm workers must be busy. Lucky to be outside, I thought, instead of shut in as I was. I banged the doors crossly as I carried in yet another pile of sheets—where on earth was Blackie when I needed him? Lizzie came and went with Sarah to show me that her second tooth had broken the skin of her tender gums. The birds sang, and I worked on.

The shouting started up again but nearer the Women's House this time. Now I could hear the cries of women as well and Mr. Schoeffel's voice giving directions. I crossed to the window at the rear of the House and looked out.

Four men carried an old shutter on which something had been laid. Something covered with a piece of canvas from one of the barns. Something that resembled a human body.

I shouted, I don't remember what. A blond head moving alongside the men looked up. It was Donny, and he was crying.

"Donny!" I shouted as loud as I could. "What has happened?"

He raised a hand toward me, and I saw that he was holding a shapeless black hat that shone with the grease of long years' use. "Blackie," he said through his tears.

We sat in Mrs. Lombardi's small sitting room: Mr. Schoeffel, Mrs. Lombardi, Tess, and I. Tess was sitting in a corner on a blanket spread on the floor, watching Sarah who had learned to roll about.

I offered the wineglass to Mrs. Lombardi again. “Please take it,” I said. “You have had a terrible shock.”

Mrs. Lombardi took a tiny sip of the brandy and wiped impatiently at a tear that tracked down her face. “I am not usually so emotional.”

“You have been under great strain in the last few months.” Mr. Schoeffel’s deep, German voice was comforting.

“And you were fond of Blackie, I know,” I said, putting the wineglass carefully on the mantlepiece. “We all were.”

Mrs. Lombardi took a deep, shuddering breath and turned to face Mr. Schoeffel. “How did he die?” she asked.

“My friend, you cannot possibly want to concern yourself with that,” Mr. Schoeffel said slowly. “You are already upset enough.” I felt a frown gather on my face. It seemed to me that Mr. Schoeffel was trying to exclude Mrs. Lombardi from their shared responsibility, and that made me indignant. Besides, Blackie was dead—the third sudden death in this place in a matter of months. Was no one else thinking about that?

“I am quite all right. I would like to know how he died,” said Mrs. Lombardi, an edge of obstinacy coming into her voice.

“He was found at the back of the hay barn,” said Mr. Schoeffel. “He was lying face down, and it was clear—forgive me, Mrs. Lombardi—that he had vomited. Other than that, I would say that he died quite quickly. This was found underneath him.”

He crossed to the desk and picked up a bottle he had previously placed there. It was a plain clear glass bottle with a swing top, of the sort that was used for many kinds of liquid. I held out my hand for it, and he gave it to me.

It was quite empty, dry inside, but when I sniffed at it there was a faint smell of alcohol, resembling the kind that was used to disinfect wounds.

“What is it?” Mrs. Lombardi asked.

“I may be wrong,” said Mr. Schoeffel, “but I think it may be dazzle. Which means we need to talk to Joos Vervoordt.”

I knew the name; he was the man who delivered our firewood. “Why?” I asked, puzzled.

“Because he makes it. It’s a kind of moonshine,” said Mr. Schoeffel, his mouth pulled down in distaste. “Nasty stuff. Called dazzle because they say that if you drink a whole bottle, you go blind. Joos got into big trouble with the superintendent once for giving half a bottle to a couple of orderlies. Those men were sick for days.”

I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Tess had scooped Sarah up and left the room with her. I turned my attention back to the bottle, which looked so innocuous in the sunlight streaming into the room.

“Do you think it’s possible that he drank too much of it?” Mrs. Lombardi asked.

“Blackie? I’d be surprised,” said Mr. Schoeffel. “He was not so stupid. And Joos is a careful man. He learned his lesson with those orderlies. I don’t think he’d hand over a large enough dose of the stuff to kill someone.”

“We must talk to him,” Mrs. Lombardi said firmly. “It is pointless to speculate. Tomorrow we will give poor Blackie a Christian burial, and then I shall ask my husband to bring Joos here. He knows him well.”

“And the police?” I asked. “The constable should be informed.”

“Of course. And I shall have a physician look at the body, naturally.” Mrs. Lombardi hesitated over the bottle, but then wrapped it carefully in a clean cloth and locked it into a drawer in her desk.

Mr. Schoeffel grunted with apparent amusement, and I felt my resentment grow. “Very correct, my ladies, but when a notorious drunk dies of drink, we do not have to look so far for a cause, *nicht wahr*? The physician will say drink, and the constable will say drink, and that is an end of it.”

As much as I wished it otherwise, I knew he was right. And nobody but Tess and me realized that the only person who knew the identity of the father of Jo’s child was silenced. And he had hinted at more secrets still. I wondered how much I had lost by not giving him that whiskey.

25

JOOS

Joos Vervoordt was a young man, tall and raw-boned, with sunken cheeks and eyes and a feral look. He glared at us defiantly as Mrs. Lombardi produced the bottle.

"Is this one of yours, Joos?" Pastor Lombardi's voice held a stern note.

"I didn't give it to him," said Joos. He had a slight Dutch accent and a deep bass voice that was astonishing coming from such an emaciated body.

"It's your moonshine," said Mr. Schoeffel flatly. "I know the type of bottle, Joos. I remember it from when you got into trouble before."

Joos threw Mr. Schoeffel a resentful look and turned back to the Lombardis.

"I won't deny it's one of my bottles," he said. "And I won't deny that my liquor was in it. But you're not holding me to blame for the old bastard's death. First of all, there was nowhere near enough in there to hurt anyone, especially Blackie. *God verdomme*, the man had been drinking my stuff for years."

"Do not blaspheme," said the Pastor, and at the same time Mr. Schoeffel exclaimed, "Hah! I always thought he was finding some way to drink." His eyes narrowed as he looked at the tall Dutchman. "What kind of *verdammte* idiot are you that you were giving firewater to Blackie after all that trouble you had before?"

"A hungry idiot," Joos said sullenly. "You think I make enough to eat by selling wood? The rotgut is how I live. A bit of bacon here, a few coins there, and from Blackie I got good eggs from your hencoop." He grinned, showing several gaps in his teeth. "Leastways, I mostly got good eggs. That's why I

stopped trading with him for a while, because he gave me three rotten ones. Teach the old bastard a lesson. So I'm telling you, I didn't give the stuff to him."

"Who did you give it to, Joos?" Mrs. Lombardi's voice was gentle. Joos crossed his arms across his sunken chest and seemed to be thinking.

At last he raised a bony hand and pointed in my direction. "I gave it to her," he said.

I felt a mild swimming sensation in my head. He was not indicating me, of course. Tess had returned with Sarah, and he was pointing straight at her.

I took Sarah from Tess and put my hand on my friend's shoulder. She was trembling at having all eyes upon her; I felt her small hand reach up to grasp my own.

"Don't you deny it, now," said Joos. "Two weeks ago, it was. You were after me for the moonshine for weeks before I gave it you too. But maybe my price was a little high." He leered at her.

"You are a bad man," Tess said. "You wanted me to be like a Babylon woman with you. That is not right in God's eyes." Her stammer had become much more pronounced, but she held her head high.

The look that Mrs. Lombardi gave Joos should have felled him on the spot. "You asked for. . . *favors*?" She almost hissed out the word. "From Tess, of all people? You are disgusting." She was white in the face.

"And you will never work for us again," Mr. Schoeffel said. "We will get our firewood from the suppliers in Waukegan. I see you round here again, you better watch out." His American accent had deteriorated, and the German immigrant was showing.

Joos's mouth screwed itself into a tight twist of rage and resentment, but he said nothing. I curled my fingers into Tess's shoulder and said softly, "Tess, you didn't. Please tell me you didn't."

Tess looked up at me and her almond eyes crinkled into a smile. "No, Nell, I gave him some eggs. I may be an *imbecile*," she looked out of the corner of her

eyes at our caretakers as she said it, “but I’m not *stupid*.”

“So it’s true then?” asked Pastor Lombardi. “You obtained some alcohol for Blackie?”

Tess hung her head. “Yes,” she whispered. “I wanted him to tell Nell who made Jo’s baby. He knew.”

“*Vas*?” cried Mr. Schoeffel, and he went off into a stream of incomprehensible German while the Lombardis both looked at me in astonishment. I nodded sadly.

“I was trying to get Blackie to tell me who this Ly-lee was,” I said. “I don’t think Jo hid herself in that room. I think someone shut her in there and that it was the same person who got her with child. Why else would he want to kill her? I think that he took advantage of your illness to somehow get the key and entice Jo into the insane wing. But without Blackie, I don’t think I’ll ever know who it was.”

“So you really did give Blackie that bottle?” Pastor Lombardi was a genial man in the normal run of things. Now his face was troubled and drawn.

“Yes,” Tess said again. “He was not happy that it was not whiskey.” She glanced at me with guilt written on her face. “You made me promise not to give him whiskey, Nell.”

I hid my face in my hands. We all underestimated Tess, that much was certain.

“But he said it was all right,” Tess continued. “He said I must fetch Nell round to the back of the barn, and he would tell her. He said he must tell her and not me. He said she was the right one to bring justice.”

Something seemed to click in my brain at that last remark, but I could not understand why it seemed so significant. Why me? Because I was also an unwed mother? But there were plenty of those around here.

“It was not enough to kill him,” Joos repeated stubbornly. “It was a very small amount. Do you think I would be so *dwaas*, so—” he searched for the word, “—foolish?”

Pastor Lombardi turned on him suddenly. “It was poison to him,” he snapped. He glared at Joos as if he would have hit him, had he not been a man of

God. “Get out of this place.”

Joos stuck his tongue into the corner of his cheek and slunk out, followed closely by Mr. Schoeffel. Which left us nowhere. Again. I had the feeling that I was standing before a gigantic spider’s web and tracing every silken thread to its source; but nowhere could I see the spider.

26

PUNISHMENT

The lock on Mrs. Lombardi's door clicked, and I straightened up from leaning against the corridor wall outside her office. Tess emerged from the room, her round face red and tearstained, and I hugged her tight to me.

"I have to work in the laundry." Her stutter was much worse, and I had to concentrate to understand her. "It's my punishment for giving Blackie the drink. I have to work there for three whole months. I can't be your assistant, Nell."

I resisted the urge to smooth her hair and dry her tears as if she were a child. Sometimes it was hard to remember that Tess was older than I.

"The time will pass quickly." I placed my hands lightly on Tess's shoulders and bent to look her in the face. "You will be back in the workroom before you know it." And I would not be there; at least, I hoped I would think of a way to flee the Farm before then. *And track down a killer first*, said a small voice somewhere in my head. *Without putting yourself or Sarah into danger*. My insides churned.

"Tess." Mrs. Lombardi's voice was tired but kind. "It's time to go to the refectory. Tomorrow morning you will report to Mrs. Biedermann in the laundry, to learn your new duties. Go now."

Tess obediently turned in the direction of the refectory, her spectacles dangling from one hand as she scrubbed at her eyes with the other. Mrs. Lombardi motioned for me to enter her office, and I followed her into the large room and perched on the edge of the chair facing her desk.

Mrs. Lombardi dropped wearily into her own chair.

“Why, Nell? Why did you do this without consulting me?” Her voice held an edge of sternness, and I quailed a little at her disapproval.

“You believed that Jo and her baby died by accident,” I whispered. “You all did. The doctor and the police officer too.”

“I still believe it.” Mrs. Lombardi shifted some of her papers to one side and leaned forward. “The story you are telling me is preposterous. You have read too many novels.”

I was silent. If Mrs. Lombardi did not know by now that I didn’t like to read, I was not going to bother to explain it to her. As much as I liked her, I could see that to her I was still a foolish girl. To her mind, the existence of Sarah was proof enough that I was deficient in sense.

Mrs. Lombardi rested her chin on her hand, and her expression lightened. “Tess was adamant that you told her not to give Blackie any alcohol, Nell. Her version of events exonerates you from any blame. You may continue with your duties.” It had not occurred to me until then that I was also under the threat of punishment. I did not know what to say, so I merely ducked my head and muttered, “Thank you.”

“She hid the bottle behind the hay barn,” Mrs. Lombardi said. “She told me she had already given Blackie a bottle of beer in exchange for information.” Her voice hardened. “In your presence.”

I felt my cheeks burn, and tears pricked at the back of my eyes. I took a deep breath, not knowing whether I should defend myself—would that get Tess into even more trouble?—but Mrs. Lombardi forestalled me.

“Tess told me, Nell, that you didn’t know about the beer either.” A hint of a smile crept into her voice. “Truly, our Tess is a most ingenious young lady. I fear I have underestimated her capacities.”

At least she had seen that, I thought.

“What did Blackie tell you?” Mrs. Lombardi asked.

“That Jo’s lover was a gentleman and that he knew that gentleman’s name.”

Mrs. Lombardi’s fine, straight brows drew together in a frown.

“A gentleman?”

“A visitor to the Farm, I think.” I was reluctant to point the finger at our

governors without proof.

“And Blackie knew the name and did not inform anyone?”

I was silent, but Mrs. Lombardi supplied the answer to her own question. “Because he hoped to sell the information in return for drink. I do not like to speak ill of the dead, Nell, but I am deeply dismayed at Blackie.”

Again I said nothing; at bottom I agreed with her. Because of Blackie’s “demon,” we would never know the truth about Jo’s baby.

“Tess told me,” Mrs. Lombardi said, “that she’d gone to check on the bottle two days later, and it had gone. She thought either Blackie or another of the inmates had found it and that her plan had failed. This means that the bottle was missing for two weeks before Blackie died.” She massaged her temples, her eyes squeezed shut. “The only conclusion that any of us can reasonably draw is that Blackie did indeed find it. And that Joos was mistaken—or lying—about the amount or potency of its contents. Or perhaps, even, Blackie simply died naturally, and the bottle was a mere coincidence. A mess, Nell, a tragic mess. And no way in which we can prove anything at all.”

“Does the bottle tell us nothing?” Maybe if I could look at it again, I thought, I could find a clue. But Mrs. Lombardi’s answer quenched that hope.

“I have given it to the physician. He also took Blackie—Blackie’s body.” She looked for a moment as if she would cry but drew a deep breath. “Although I do not think that, even if there were poison in the bottle, they will spend a great deal of time looking for the killer. The sheriff is ensuring that Joos’s still is broken up, and I do not think he will be allowed to remain in Prairie Haven. But Blackie was a destitute drunk, and I suspect that any investigation will be cursory at best.” She dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief and rose from her chair. “I wish you had confided in me, Nell.”

My head hanging, I nodded dumbly. If Mrs. Lombardi knew of the other plans I was hiding from her, she would be dismayed indeed.

27

MIRACLE

With our new residents about to arrive, I finally finished preparing the linens. Which left me free to worry. I had absolutely no doubt my stepfather would ensure that his plans for Sarah's adoption were carried out by August. Getting the two of us out of the Farm was now uppermost in my mind, superseding even my determination to find out the truth about the deaths. Which, in any case, was a blank wall: I had no clues, no evidence, and no suspects. I was not showing much promise as a bringer of justice.

As I had anticipated, the physician had judged Blackie's death to be the result of the consumption of excessive alcohol. Joos's admission that he had been giving Blackie his liquor for years was enough to confirm the belief that it had ultimately killed him.

"And the medical man performed a thorough examination, Nell. I did, in the end, write to him to stress your suspicions." Mrs. Lombardi had looked sympathetic. "But he said all the signs pointed to continuous drinking. Please," she had laid a slim hand on my arm to emphasize the point, "do not spread a rumor that there is a killer here."

I had shaken my head. And I did not refer to the matter again in Mrs. Lombardi's presence. I locked my suspicions in my head and carried out my work with outward diligence while I planned my escape.

Not long after Blackie's death I had written a letter, now tucked carefully into the deep pockets of my dress. It was addressed to Rutherford's Drapery.

I had thought about Martin Rutherford frequently while living at the Farm,

almost as frequently as I had longed for Mama. With Grandmama and Ruth gone, he was practically my only link with the past; I cared little for my younger friends in Victory. Martin was a reminder of my childhood days, a safe and reliable friend, and I wished I had confided in him that day when Bet had discovered my secret.

I was still afraid that if I told him about Sarah, he would be shocked, even angry, and I shrank from making that revelation. Yet Martin was, after all, the best person to effect my expeditious release from the Prairie Haven Poor Farm. He was fond of me, in a brotherly way; he had no mother or wife to answer to; and he owned an excellent gig and a spirited, fast horse that would make short work of the roads in this summer weather. I would have to risk his disapproval.

I had procured pen, ink, and paper from Mrs. Lombardi's desk when she was out of the room—low cunning, I know, but I had no time to be nice about such things. I scribbled a hasty explanation that I was residing at the Poor Farm with my baby daughter and that I was desirous to escape from this place to avoid being separated from my child. "I will prepare myself for a rapid departure on the twenty-fourth of July," I wrote to Martin, "and will be at the gate of the Poor Farm at midnight of that very day. I throw myself on your compassion and friendship."

I blew carefully on the letter to dry the ink, regarding my scrawl with dissatisfaction. There was every chance that Martin would decide not to help me; perhaps he would even take the letter to my mother or, good heavens, my stepfather, demanding to know the meaning of my far-fetched story. Quite apart from the consideration that I somehow had to get the letter delivered in Victory, fifty miles away, with absolute certainty and yet without raising anyone's suspicions, by-passing my stepfather who drank and gossiped with every official in our little town. I would need a miracle.

As it turned out, the miracle was stunning in its simplicity. The day came when the old ladies were to arrive, and Mrs. Lombardi instructed me to work with their

attendants to ensure that they had all the linen they needed. Wanting to make a good impression, I dressed in the smartest of my work dresses and borrowed a snowy, starched apron from one of the orderlies.

And in the confusion of helping twenty senile women find their way from their carriages to their new home, it did not occur to anyone to point out that I was an inmate. Mrs. Lombardi introduced me as “our seamstress,” and I realized after a while that the attendants were treating me as an equal, even, perhaps, a superior. None of them had seen Sarah, who was with Lizzie.

At first I simply enjoyed the sensation of being treated like a respectable woman again. For so long I had been “Nell” to all around me that I had forgotten what it felt like to be addressed as “Miss Lillington.” I laughed and chatted with the attendants as I showed them the rooms and we counted the spare sheets, napkins, and pillowcases.

“And are you all staying here?” My question was entirely casual, but the answer set my heart knocking against my ribs.

“Not all of us.” The speaker had introduced herself to me as Miss Harwell, a chubby, brisk little person who was younger than the others. “Some of us are moving on to other positions. Miss Aiello,” she indicated a tall Italian girl who was trying to persuade one of the old ladies to remove her hat, “is to be married soon. And I am going straight to a new post as a private nurse in Victory today; the carter is waiting for me.” She lowered her voice. “It will be a relief, Miss Lillington, to be in a private house rather than an institution. But then you must be quite happy here.”

“Oh, my position here is also temporary,” I said with as much truth as I could muster, my mouth suddenly dry. “Tell me, Miss Harwell, do you know Victory well?”

Miss Harwell completed her count of a pile of napkins before she replied, while I held my breath. “Not at all. I understand it is a pleasant town.”

I closed my eyes for the briefest second; I believe I even sent a prayer heavenward. Then I summoned up a bright, unconcerned smile. “I wonder, Miss Harwell, if you could do me a favor.” I withdrew the letter from my pocket, willing my hand not to shake. “Could you possibly deliver this letter to

Rutherford’s Drapery on Main Street? They have quite the best hat-trimmings in the county.” This was also the truth. “I have been meaning to mail it, but since you are going straight there . . .”

Miss Harwell glanced briefly at the front of the letter and carefully slipped it into her own pocket. “Of course, Miss Lillington. I am happy to oblige. Now, do we have enough blankets?”

I led the way to the storeroom on weak legs. I dared not talk any more about Victory or about letters or about anything that would give me away as a mere inmate. I barely breathed until the moment when we bade farewell to the Misses Aiello and Harwell and I took my leave of the other attendant, heading for the refectory to find Sarah. The nurses would soon realize their mistake when they saw me with the inmates, but I did not care. I was pretty sure that nobody had seen me give Miss Harwell the letter. Now all I had to do was to wait and hope.

28

BROKEN

The waiting was the worst part. Even with Tess absent from my side—except when we met for meals in the refectory—I did not feel as if I had enough to do. We had been so busy with the confection of linens for the old ladies' rooms that I had become accustomed to pacing my work fast, and thus I found myself with idle hours. Sarah was becoming more and more delightful, and I was glad of the time spent playing with her, but while I laughed at her attempts to blow bubbles and form sounds that resembled words, my mind was free to build disquieting pictures. Above all, I was afraid that Martin would not come. I was sure that either my letter would never reach him by some mishap or other, or he would receive it but disdain to help me now that he knew I was a fallen woman.

I had sewn myself a thin cotton bag and stuffed it with a few necessities for Sarah: a change of clothing, some diapers, and an overstuffed doll that I had made to soothe her sore gums on our journey. I hid the bag under my bedclothes; I would take nothing for myself. The clothes I was wearing would have to be sufficient until I could procure more.

As the twenty-fourth of July approached I became restless. The nights were warm, and to be in bed before midnight meant a torment of hot, closed rooms, or flinging the casement open and instantly falling prey to a swarm of mosquitoes. Each night after I made sure that Sarah was safely asleep under her muslin net, I wandered around the outside perimeter of the Women's House until the approaching dawn brought a touch of freshness to the air.

And that was how I found the missing piece to the puzzle of death that had visited our Farm.

The air was singing and buzzing as a million insects trilled a chorus to the darkness. As I rounded the far end of the Women's House, treading carefully on the uneven path I could not see, I could hear the high-pitched voices of the old ladies drifting through the open windows of the Sanatorium Wing—our new name for the insane wing—far above me.

A movement alerted me that I was not alone. A few feet away I saw the outline of a man—an orderly, perhaps, taking the air. I shrank back into the shadow of the building. Inmates were expected to be in bed by ten o'clock.

I had already turned back when I realized the man was talking. I stared hard into the darkness, looking for his interlocutor, but saw nobody. Had he seen me? I froze, listening.

The voice was plaintive and somehow familiar. "I have come as you asked. . . . Why do you keep calling to me? I cannot let you out. . . I cannot. . . He will ruin me."

His white face was lifted to stare at the Sanatorium Wing as he listened to the soft, high voices from above. I stared harder and made out a balding, hatless head and a fringe of beard.

It just wasn't possible. Mr. Ostrander was in Evanston, and that was—what?—at least twenty miles away, perhaps thirty. I crept closer. The plaintive voice had turned into a blubbering wail.

"He will set the captives free. . . but I can't. . . Everyone will know."

He moved into the pool of light from the windows, and I could see him clearly. He was dressed in rough trousers and shirtsleeves like a laborer, his clothing dusty and smeared with the stains of grass and plants. As he moved I could see he was limping. His thin mouth was pulled into a strange grimace.

By now I was only about six feet from him, but he did not seem to notice me. I caught a privy-like smell emanating from him and wrinkled my nose. The light

from the window touched a dark shadow on his neck; the bruise, I surmised, from his failed attempt at self-destruction.

He saw me at last. His arms extended, and for a heart-stopping moment I thought he would rush forward and grab me. But his arms fell back to his sides.

“You are not she,” he whispered. “You are. . . Nell. His stepdaughter. You had a baby as well. Is she dead too?”

My blood ran cold, but I spoke as calmly as I could. “She is quite well. Mr. Ostrander, are you looking for someone?”

“That little girl. . . the whore. . . She is up there. He shut her in,” he hissed, a stage whisper, as if he were telling me a secret.

I felt sick and at the same time breathless to hear him speak. He knew.

“Who shut Jo in, Mr. Ostrander?”

“Hiley.”

Hiley. Ly-lee.

“Hiley who?”

Mr. Ostrander gazed up at the windows and smiled.

“My old friend, Hiley Jackson. We were in the Militia together, you know.”

Oh, God. Of course. Had I ever heard my stepfather called by that nickname? It was a common enough variation of Hiram, after all. Every bone in my legs seemed to weaken.

“He won’t let me open the door.” Mr. Ostrander was crying again. “Patrick. . . he’ll tell about us, Patrick. He’s a devil.” His voice dropped to a hoarse murmur, barely comprehensible through the tears and snot that ran down his face. “The only perfect thing in my life. . . Patrick. . . You were the only perfect thing in my life, and he ruined it.”

A wavering laugh drifted from the upstairs window, a silvery thread of sound. Mr. Ostrander took a couple of steps back and filled his lungs with air.

“WHY ARE YOU LAUGHING?” he screamed. “YOU’RE DEAD! YOU’RE DEAD! YOU’RE DEAD!”

Doors banged and footsteps scraped the gravel path. Mr. Ostrander kept on screaming; the sounds of people running and shouting reached me in waves whenever he took a breath.

Mrs. Lombardi reached us first, followed by some of the female orderlies. Behind them, I could see dark figures silhouetted against the open door of the Men's House, rushing out of the light toward us, one by one.

I lay on my back, staring into the warm darkness. I had opened the window, and the sounds of the night drowned out those of my sleeping companions.

It had taken an hour to calm everyone down after Mr. Ostrander began screaming. A chaotic hour of everyone milling around and commenting, in whatever manner befitted each person's level of understanding, on the insanity of our erstwhile superintendent.

I had been surprised to see Mrs. Lombardi still at the Farm, and in evening dress, but it was fortunate that she was present. She had taken control of the situation with admirable calm, while Mr. Schoeffel blustered and shouted and tried to ask questions of Mr. Ostrander. It was a pointless exercise; the former superintendent was obviously lost inside some maze of insanity, his eyes wandering and terrified in turns. The words he had spoken to me had been his last clear ones, and after that he had no longer made any sense.

Mrs. Lombardi's quiet demeanor and gentle words had calmed Mr. Ostrander down, and we had taken him inside. He whimpered with fear every time a door closed, and we soon learned that he needed to see a way out of any room they placed him in.

"The terrible thing is," Mrs. Lombardi said to me when she was finally able to leave Mr. Ostrander in the care of four male orderlies, "the recommended procedure in such cases is a straitjacket and a padded cell, but the poor man cannot bear to be shut in." She still appeared calm, but her face was completely white, and I could see that she was trembling.

I felt ice spread through my veins. "You won't do that—please, you won't. He has harmed no one except himself."

"No." Mrs. Lombardi seemed to melt into the wall on which she was leaning. "We won't." She folded her arms and gazed at me.

“Nell, why were you outside talking to the superintendent?”

I shook my head vigorously. “I didn’t know he was there. I swear, Mrs. Lombardi, I had no idea. I was just getting some air.”

Would she believe me? I felt my arms and legs stiffen in an effort to convey my innocence to her.

“You should not have been outside.”

“I know. I’m sorry. It was so hot.”

Mrs. Lombardi glanced at her window, firmly shut against the hordes of insects that would have been drawn to the glow of the lamp. Her office was stifling, and we were both drenched in perspiration—she must have been suffering from the heat even more than I, since she wore stays and her dress was of a fine silk.

“What was he saying to you?”

“Nothing. Just nonsense.” I was sure Mrs. Lombardi knew I was lying, but I looked her boldly in the face, and the suspicion in her large hazel eyes gave way to weariness. She pushed away from the wall and came to lay her hand on my arm.

“I am sorry, Nell. I have no reason to suspect you of any sort of complicity.”

I could smell her freesia scent and see the fine sheen of perspiration on her olive skin. Her hair was carefully arranged, and a necklace of amethysts and fine pearls shone in the lamplight.

“Mrs. Lombardi, may I ask—” I hesitated, not knowing whether my question was impertinent, “—why are you here?” It was strange to see her so finely dressed amid the plain surroundings of her office. I never really thought about her other life—that of a lady, the wife of a most respectable minister—and indeed, I had never met a lady who had a profession. Except for myself, and I had not chosen mine.

Mrs. Lombardi dabbed at her neck with a tiny cambric handkerchief. “While we were at dinner, I received a telegraph message. It was from Mr. Ostrander’s sister to tell me he had gone missing yesterday. As no trace of him could be found in Evanston, they became convinced that he might be heading back to the Farm. So naturally I returned here to find that Mr. Schoeffel had received the

same message.”

“And they were right.”

“Can you think why he may have come here, Nell?”

I shook my head, not daring to speak and give away my lie by any tremor of my voice. It was fortunate for me that Mrs. Lombardi’s sharp, perceptive mind was dimmed by exhaustion and strain. She accepted my silent answer with a nod and sank wearily into the armchair by the cold hearth.

I waited with Mrs. Lombardi until her husband arrived. I thought her iron self-control would break when she saw the pastor, but he, obviously realizing that she was on the brink of collapse, struck just the right tone of brisk concern and the moment appeared to pass. Feeling that my presence was no longer necessary, I returned at last to my bedroom.

Now, lying sheetless on my narrow bed with my nightdress sticking uncomfortably to my sweating body, I thought of the implications of Mr. Ostrander’s words.

He had known that Jo was shut up in the padded cell, that much was certain. Had he pleaded with my stepfather to release her? It seemed likely. And Hiram—Hiley—had threatened to expose some shameful secret involving a man called Patrick. So Mr. Ostrander had remained silent, and the two innocents imprisoned in the insane wing had remained locked in his mind, destroying it from the inside, a cancer eating away at his precious sense of order.

I felt my nails dig into my damp palms. It was unbearable, all of it. I believed—and yet could not believe—that my mother’s husband was a murderer. Suddenly everything I thought I knew wore a different face, as different from my former conception of reality as Mr. Ostrander’s insane countenance was from his former self. I had to know for sure about Hiram, and while I was not completely certain, I dared not denounce him to Mrs. Lombardi or anyone else.

If I accused Hiram of murder and I was wrong—or if he succeeded in convincing everyone that I was wrong—would I not appear to be an unbalanced hysteric? That would hardly help me in my quest to keep Sarah with me. I had only the word of a lunatic to go by, and nobody else had heard him. I would merely succeed in upsetting my mother and branding myself as deranged and

vengeful, as well as morally lax.

I lay for hours, tense and wakeful on my bed, as the singing of the night insects gradually gave way to the dawn calls of the birds. The only path that seemed open to me was to hold fast to my plan to escape the Farm without saying a word to anyone about my suspicions. With Sarah safe and with—oh, I hoped—Martin's protection, I might be able to face Hiram with my suspicions. And perhaps—the thought had flashed upon me like the dawn's rays—even use them to ensure that he did not try to take my baby from me.

29

TEARS

What I had learned weighed heavily on my heart. I got through the next three days in a trance, doing my work mechanically and barely able to hold a coherent conversation. I felt light-headed and detached from everyday life, living inside the room full of secrets and lies that was my own mind.

Fortunately, most of my work at that time was the routine provision of work shirts for the men and underwear and petticoats for the women. And the never-ending requests that a tear be patched, a torn seam resewn, or a worn spot reinforced. But Edie liked to make repairs and glared at me when I offered help. So I had plenty of time to stare out of the window, vaguely conscious of my baby's soft crowing as she amused herself with the little toys I had made for her, and think.

Only a few more days until I leave. Will I be able to get away without being caught? Maybe I should stay. . . Maybe I should denounce Hiram and let the law take its course and stay safely here with Sarah. But Mama. . . If I can prove nothing, they will all think me mad. . . And if they believe me?. . . They will come to the house and arrest Hiram. . . It would kill Mama. . . Hiram should be behind bars now; I am letting a murderer run loose. . . but supposing it's not true? But I'm sure it is true. . . and if I stay here, he will take my baby from me. . . and everyone here will obey him. . . If I go home, I will have Mama. . . She will believe me, surely she will. Or will she? He is her husband, and she loves him. . . And I will have to leave Tess. . . I cannot risk trying to include her in my escape.

. . but I don’t want to leave her, or Mrs. Lombardi either. . . They are family now. . . and this place feels like home. How strange that is. And I might get caught trying to escape. . .

Round and round went my thoughts, like the rats the orderlies would trick into falling into a vast galvanized vat that stood just outside the kitchens. Lured by the food floating on the water, they would fall in and swim in circles for hours before succumbing to exhaustion. Then they would drown.

I felt near exhaustion myself and had to keep reminding myself to rest and eat so that I would be in a fit state to make my escape.

On the third day, I decided on one important alteration to my plan.

The air was completely still, laden with the sullen heat that precedes an afternoon storm. A few yards from my hiding place an assortment of linens—underdrawers, sheets, pillowcases, and nightgowns, many of which I had sewn—hung like limp banners from the washing lines. The sunken windows of the laundry were wide open, and I could hear the occasional remark and snort of laughter. But most of the workers were silent; they were probably avoiding exertion in the leaden heat and damp, soapy air.

I kept a close watch on the short flight of concrete steps that led up to ground level. I had been there for an hour, and the tight feeling in my breasts warned me that I would soon have to leave to nurse Sarah. I pressed closer to the short brick wall that acted as a windbreak for the drying yard, feeling beads of sweat slide down my back. In front of me, the dusty shrub that hid me from view hummed with the activity of the long-legged wasps that sought for some kind of prey amid its dry shade.

Just as I decided that I could stay for only five more minutes, my patience was rewarded. Tess’s small, plump form rose from the ground, climbing the steps with an unwieldy basket in one hand and a small crate in the other. She set the basket on the ground next to the nearest clothesline and plunked the crate down on the other side, running her hands over the hanging sheet. She tutted

loudly, looked up at the darkening sky and, coming to a decision, stepped briskly up onto the crate and reached for the clothespins.

Nobody had followed her outdoors. This was my chance.

“Tess!” I hissed loudly, hoisted myself upright, and stepped to the side so that the bush no longer hid me from view.

Tess’s head jerked round toward the sound of my voice, and she opened her mouth to speak. I put one finger to my lips, flapping my other hand to warn her not to talk, and then motioned her over to the wall. She cast a quick glance around her, then hopped off the crate and ran to embrace me.

“Why are we being secret?” she asked. “You can talk to me in the laundry. They don’t mind.” She smelled of soap and sweat, her normally neat hair mussed and falling out of its bun. Her spectacles were dirty, and her dimpled bare arms were reddened up to the elbows.

“I do not want to get you into more trouble, Tess dear. I must tell you something, but nobody else must know.”

Tess drew back a pace, her face screwed up in puzzlement. “What has happened?”

“Nothing has happened yet, but it will. In two days’ time. On the twenty-fourth.”

“Yes, it will be your birthday.” Tess’s eyes shone at the thought, and my heart sank. I had apparently left my childhood so far behind me that I’d forgotten the date on which I was born.

“Ye-e-s, of course. And we will have lemonade, I am sure.” This was how summer birthdays were celebrated in the Women’s House. “But that night, something else will happen. When you wake up in the morning, I will be gone, and Sarah with me.”

Tess let out a wail. “Gone?”

I shushed her, glancing anxiously over at the laundry door. A faint, hot breeze had arisen, and the clouds over our heads were becoming ever darker and more massive.

“I must take Sarah away. I told you, my stepfather said I must wean her before August. And I have not done so. I do not want them to take my baby from

me.” My voice choked with the tears that gathered at the thought of separation.

Tess looked down at her feet, and when she spoke her voice was tight and hoarse. “And you will not take me with you. I will be a nuisance. I am too slow, and when you get wherever you are going, people will stare at me and whisper to each other. You can go back to the world outside, and I can’t.”

I put my arms around my friend, and a tear—mine—fell on her wispy hair. She resisted stiffly at first but then yielded to my embrace, her small body convulsed in sobs.

“Nobody wants me,” I made out from the jumble of incoherent sounds.

“That’s not true, Tess.” I pushed her back slightly from me and looked at her flushed face, blinking the tears from my eyes. “We all love you.”

“Here they love me, because they know me,” Tess said with bitterness in her voice. “Out there they say I’m an imbecile. They don’t want me. You don’t want me.”

“If that were really true, Tess, would I have told you that I was leaving? I need to get Sarah away before they take her from me. I can’t do anything—anything, you understand?—to jeopardize her safety. But I have no intention of leaving you here. I will come back for you, I promise.” This was the new decision that had formed amid my swirling thoughts.

Tess stared at me with a skeptical expression on her face. “Why should I believe you, Nell? My own Ma and Da left me here. The charity lady told them I would be better off here. And they listened to her, and they brought me here, and Da told me to be a good girl. And Ma cried, but she went away with Da, and they never came back.”

Tess jumped as a huge raindrop landed smack on the top of her head. “The washing!” she cried, and, pushing me away from her, she ran over to her crate. I followed her and helped her to bundle the still-damp linen into the basket. Leaving her crate to the mercy of the weather, Tess heaved the heavy basket up—the effort bending her backwards—and looked at me. The sadness on her face broke my self-control.

“I will come back,” I was barely able to speak the words.

“We’ll see, Nell.” The weight of the basket caused Tess to waddle as she

headed to the top of the concrete steps. “I have to call one of the other *imbeciles*,” she stressed the word, “to help. I’m too short to carry this down the steps by myself.”

I took the hint and headed toward the main door of the House, pursued by fat raindrops that cooled my hot, tear-streaked face. I would come back for her, I swore to myself. As long as I could get away in the first place.

30

FLIGHT

July the twenty-fourth came. I was eighteen years old. It meant little to me, but I smiled my thanks as a group of my friends gathered to drink a glass of lemonade in my honor. Tess, never one to bear a grudge, was among them, but her eyes were sad. Mrs. Lombardi smiled gaily, but she too had a weariness and sadness in her eyes that had not been there when I arrived at the Farm.

The day dragged. I tried to finish as much work as I could, attempting not to make it obvious that I was not leaving any garment half-finished for the next day. I took my meals late, pleading forgetfulness, so that I would not have to talk to anyone. I was grateful when the evening meal was finally over and I could escape to my shared room and pretend to be sleeping. I lay with my eyes closed, listening to Sarah's babbles fade into silence as she drifted into sleep.

I strained my ears to hear the chimes of the large clock in the hallway far below me. Nine o'clock. . . ten. . . The other women drifted in as ten o'clock approached, their candles flickering against my eyelids as they undressed. I worried that Tess would try to stay awake, but she fell asleep before she had finished her day's Bible passage.

Eleven o'clock rang. . . now I listened all the more intently for the ding-dong, ding-dong that marked the quarter hours. Ada's snoring irritated me, as it made the bell harder to hear.

At the half-hour, I slipped out of bed and dressed, as quietly as I could, in my simplest dress. I pulled the bag with Sarah's belongings from its hiding place

under my mattress, scooped my baby out of her crib and left the room, fearful to look back in case I caught the gleam of wakeful eyes.

Easy enough to make my way through the moonlit corridors; easy enough to creep down the silent stairs, slide the bolts from the kitchen door, and slip out into the warm, humid night. Sarah, barely wakened by the movement, did not make any noise, and nobody heard us as we moved through the cacophony made by the night insects. We arrived at the main gate a few minutes before midnight.

The Farm was not a prison and had never been intended as one. Its isolated position relative to the town of Prairie Haven, the fact that most of its inmates were people who had no other option, and the fairness of its supervisors ensured that escapes were rare. Those who breached its boundaries had a three-mile walk over rutted roads to Prairie Haven to the southwest, or they could make for Waukegan, about ten miles in an easterly direction. In between lay farmland, woods, lakes, marshes, and rivers. Mr. Ostrander must have had a hard walk from Evanston.

I carefully searched the yew hedge that abutted the gate until I found a likely gap and then squeezed through backward, wrapping my arms around Sarah so that the stiff branches would not scratch her. I almost fell into the ditch on the other side of the hedge but caught my balance in time and edged along it until I reached the gate again.

The night was still, if not silent. There was sufficient light from the stars and a half-moon to see the road, crooked into a right angle at the Farm’s gate. Far off I could see Mr. Ostrander’s former home, dark and silent now. Around me were fields of low-growing crops, stretching away into the darkness and offering no hedgerows in which I could hide if I were followed. If Martin did not come, I doubted that I could get to safety before dawn.

I shifted Sarah into a better position and looked anxiously both ways down the deserted road. Nothing.

I crossed the road and sat down at the foot of a large ash tree that grew opposite the gate of the Farm, one division bent oddly to the ground to mark an ancient Indian trail. I leaned my back against its rough bark and waited, a prey to anxiety but calmed by the relief of having breached the Farm’s boundaries.

Martin. I shut my eyes, willing him to appear.

Despite the insistent whine of hungry mosquitoes, I dozed off for a short while. I was awakened by the soft clopping of a horse's hooves and the quiet rumble of well-sprung wheels. A nicely kept gig halted near the gate, far enough away not to be seen from the inside of the Farm.

"Martin!" I hissed through clenched teeth, scrambling to bring my legs back to life and rise without disturbing Sarah.

I saw a white-blond head, bare of any hat, swivel round in an attempt to locate me. I stepped out into the road and was greeted by Martin Rutherford's relieved smile. A flood of joy and relief spread into every limb: he had not turned away from me.

Martin sprang down from the carriage, landing easily on his long legs. He swept me a mock bow with his right hand, his left holding the horse's bridle.

"I beseech your pardon for my late arrival," he said in a low voice. Then he caught sight of Sarah, whose face was mashed against my shoulder in tranquil sleep. Her little cap had slipped, exposing her tuft of hair to the light of the moon.

"Is that really your baby?" There was wonder in his voice. I moved closer to him and let him look at Sarah, feeling his warm breath as he bent to look into her face. "Yes, she is quite like you. I could hardly believe your letter. I wondered at first if you were teasing me like you always did. But how . . ." His voice trailed into silence.

"How did I come by her? In the usual way, Martin," I said dryly. "By doing what no respectable young lady does and declining to name the father to boot." It was such a relief to be able to speak plainly of my wrongdoings and see no condemnation, no shock, in Martin's eyes. I had always thought him to be a good man, and now I felt proud to call him my friend.

He tilted his head to one side and peered into my face. "You have grown up, young Nell. I thought as much from your letter, which, let me tell you, was a

considerable surprise to me. I thought you were convalescing from illness in some Eastern city. Your mother is a skillful fabricator. No wonder she would never let me write to you."

A breeze rustled the leaves of the ash tree and brought Martin out of his contemplation of the new Nell. "Let's not stand here talking, Nellie. Where do you wish to go?"

"Could we go straight to your house?"

Martin's gray eyes widened. "You propose to stay at my house unchaperoned?" he exclaimed, in tones befitting a maiden aunt.

I began to laugh as if I would never stop, my hand clamped to my mouth to muffle the sound, while Martin grinned at me with a bemused and somehow delighted expression. We were just as much friends as we'd ever been back in the days when he'd been the recipient of my childish confidences.

"Martin," I gasped, "I can hardly claim to be a maiden in need of protection. Yes, I propose to hide out at your house for a few days until I can settle matters with my mother and stepfather. I will make it clear to Tabby that she should not tell another living soul and not imagine more than the situation warrants either." Tabitha Stone was Martin's housekeeper, almost seventy, and one of my devoted admirers since I was tiny. "After all," I added, "you never receive visitors, do you?"

Even in the dim light I could see that Martin had flushed to the roots of his hair. I bit my lip; considering how nice he was being, that was a low blow worthy of the old Nell. The long, terrible years of his father's dementia had kept visitors away from the Rutherford house, and neither Martin nor Ruth had resumed entertaining once the old man had finally passed away.

He said nothing and simply held out his arms to me. I positioned my left foot on the runner of his gig, and he hoisted me and Sarah up into the contraption with a single swift movement. Throwing in my small bag, he leapt up into the driver's seat, gathered the reins, and touched his whip to the horse's withers. He guided the gig in a tight circle and headed back the way he had come, the gig's well-maintained wheels rolling silently over the damp dirt.

I reached forward with my free hand to touch Martin's arm. "I'm sorry I

teased you," I said. "You are a true friend to help me like this."

He grinned over his shoulder at me, and I knew I was forgiven. "I would help you for your mother's sake even if I weren't so fond of you, Nellie. What else could I do for my fiery little friend?" His smile brought back memories of a young man who could fly into a rage when treated unjustly by anyone else but who never minded if I drank from his glass, laughed at his clumsiness, or pulled his hair. I smiled back, happy to be with someone I could trust implicitly.

The gig ate up the miles, and Sarah rested contentedly against my shoulder. The hood of the gig was down, and the breeze felt good against my face and hair in the warm weather. Martin had not lit the lamps, the starlight being sufficiently bright for the road, and all I could see of him was the dark shape of his back and the stirring of his blond hair, gleaming white in the blue light. Eventually I too slept, rocked by the motion of the fast carriage and luxuriating in the feel of its velvet upholstery against my cheek.

31

VICTORY

I awoke to discover we were in a familiar place under some oak trees that reared a thick canopy of dark green leaves to the sky. I realized the gig had stopped at the edge of a small wood I had played in as a child: I was home in Victory.

The early sun gilded the trees with its dawn rays, and I could hear birdsong all around me. I was stiff and sore from sleeping in an upright position but felt much better for a few hours' rest. Sarah wriggled in my arms and chewed on her fingers, making small noises of complaint.

"I must nurse her," I said, and Martin, who had been intently watching me and my baby, flushed a little. He helped me down from the gig and led the horse over to a patch of coarse grass while I searched for a discreet patch of bushes in which to nurse Sarah and attend to my own needs.

The practicalities of the morning accomplished, I went to find Martin who was leaning against a tree watching the horse browse among the undergrowth.

"I have been thinking," he said. "It is very early, but it might be unwise to drive the gig to my front door and have you publicly enter my house. If I tied the horse up here, we could take the trail that leads to my back porch and be there in twenty minutes. Then I will return for the gig, and if anyone sees me—well, I was simply taking the morning air."

"An unlikely story, Martin, but bless you for it nonetheless." I handed Sarah to my friend and reached up to take my bundle from the carriage seat. I turned round to see Martin staring at his burden with an expression of discomfort.

“I believe she may be a little damp.” He handed her back to me and wiped his hand on a convenient patch of moss.

I pleated Sarah’s gown so that it offered some protection for my arm and then held my bag out to Martin. “So let’s get to your house quickly. Maybe we could prevail upon Tabby to heat some water so that I can bathe her.”

We negotiated the path to Martin’s house easily, passing through the tidy vegetable garden and entering via the back door. Martin’s house was like his person: trim, spare, and devoid of fashionable clutter. His father’s dementia had often led the poor man to throw china and glass objects at the walls, and over time Ruth and Martin had learned to do without knickknacks. The house looked all the better for their absence.

“I am quite an old bachelor, you see.” Martin gestured toward a large sitting room where the polished surfaces of wooden furniture gleamed in harmony with the plainly painted walls. Beyond the room was a study lined with books and containing a huge desk on which piles of paper were neatly arranged.

“Not so old, Martin.” My eye fell greedily on a stack of magazines and books depicting the latest fashions from Paris and New York. Next to them, a large basket held an enticing mound of swatches of fabrics.

Martin laughed. “Well, not old enough to commit myself to the state of matrimony just yet. My ambitions have not grown dull, Nellie. A store in Chicago to rival that of Mr. Field and his associates! Chicago may be a raw, young place now, but large fortunes are being made there, and one day it will be a great city like those of the East. I intend to dress the ladies of Chicago one day and make a name for myself.”

I raised my eyebrows but said nothing. Martin had talked about his dream of a large store in Chicago when I was just a child, but at that time it had seemed that his father would live forever and life would always pass Martin by. He had watched his friends leave to fight in the War and return scarred and battle-hardened and had no longer cared to keep company with them. I looked around

the room, missing the small touches that had been there when Ruth was alive; but in truth, the house looked better stripped of cushions, doilies, and antimacassars, like a ship trimmed and ready for action.

"I will make coffee," said Martin abruptly, "and Tabby will soon come down to complain that I am beginning the day too early for her. Then she will cry out in astonishment at seeing you, be thoroughly shocked about Sarah, say a thousand times that she would never have thought it of you and what must your mother think, and then fall to petting your baby and waiting on her hand and foot. Are we not fortunate, Nellie, to have servants who have known us since we were children and to know them so well ourselves that we can turn them around our little fingers?"

I laughed in agreement. "That sounds exactly like Tabby. As long as she does not get it into her head that you are Sarah's father."

Martin's brows drew together, and a speculative look came into his eyes. "She will not believe such a thing if I tell her. . . Nell, are you going to inform me who the father of this child is?"

It was my turn to frown. "Not for anything in the world, Martin. Please do not ask me."

Martin shrugged, seemingly dismissing the matter. "Come into the kitchen," he said. "The stove will still be warm in there, and you can divest little Sarah of her damp clothing and wrap her in a blanket." His expression softened. "And if I know you, you will soon be plundering me of my samples to make clothes for your daughter."

He led the way and I followed, bouncing Sarah on my arm. The sheer normality of being back in Victory, albeit in the wrong house, was so strange and wonderful that I felt a lump in my throat. In my mind's eye I saw Tess, Lizzie, and Ada rising from bed and discovering that Sarah and I were nowhere to be found—what would they be saying? Could Tess remain silent?

I wished, now, that I had informed Mrs. Lombardi of my plans. She trusted me, and I had betrayed that trust out of the fear that she would be duty bound to thwart my intentions. It seemed to me that one lie constantly engendered another, like an ever-replicating swarm. I kissed Sarah's curls, the thought that I had

begun her life with a lie forming a lump somewhere deep in my entrails.

32

CALM

Just as Martin had predicted, two days later I completed some new garments for Sarah from the abundant piles of samples he stored in his house. What was more, in the corner of the room where my daughter and I slept stood several bolts of fabric. Martin had made me a present of a sumptuous blue-gray dress material for myself, a more serviceable brown cotton for everyday wear, and the wherewithal to fabricate petticoats, pantaloons, chemises, and so on as befitted my return to the world. From his store he had also chosen hats and shoes that, although not made to measure as was the usual practice, were nonetheless an excellent fit. He had even, with some awkwardness, presented me with the latest style of corset.

"I have news," Martin said, having cleared his throat heavily.

"Really?" I turned the corset over in my hands and looked up at him slyly. I rather thought Martin had noticed my tendency to omit the corset and was perhaps a little shocked.

"Your mother and stepfather have heard that you left the Poor Farm."

"Ah." I had been waiting for this moment and felt a small, hard lump form in my stomach.

"I happened to call upon them just at the moment when they received Mrs. Lombardi's telegraph message. Your mother quite forgot that I was supposed to think you were convalescing out East and simply blurted out the whole story, baby and all."

"My goodness." I felt a tingling sensation in my hands as the thought worked

through me. “Did—was my stepfather cross with her?”

“I will say one thing for Hiram, he always treats your mother with consideration. He did not shout or remonstrate with her. But he went quite red in the face.” Martin’s own fair face flushed a little at the memory, and he passed his hand over his mouth as if to stifle a laugh. “I pretended the correct degree of astonishment.”

“And—well, it is not at all funny, Martin—how did Mama react to the news that I had absconded?”

Martin perched on a chair. It was late in the day, and now that the drapes were closed, I had joined him in his sparsely furnished sitting room. During the day, I kept to the room in which he had established me, which overlooked the garden at the back of the house and the woods beyond.

“She is remarkably calm. She says that she feels in her heart you are safe, and she told me privately that she is glad that you have not had to be separated from your child. And then she looked at me in the oddest way, Nell, and told me that if I should ever come across you, I should give you any money or help that you needed, and she would reimburse me.”

I smiled, tucking the corset into the work basket that had once been Ruth’s. “I hope you did not blush, Martin.”

The pink flush that was so characteristic of Martin brightened his white face. “Fortunately, I was looking out of the window when she said that, and I did not turn around. Your mother is an astonishing woman, Nell. As dainty and delicate as a china doll but with an indomitable spirit.”

“Yes. But I wish she were not so deferential toward my stepfather.” I had not yet told Martin about my suspicions—my near certainty—about Hiram and did not know how to begin. I intuitively felt, though, that to take him into my confidence would be to gain a valuable ally.

“She is everything that a proper wife should be,” Martin said and frowned. “Just as my mother never complained when my father called her every crude name in the dictionary and beyond.” His jaw tightened, making his face look even more square than usual, and his gray eyes went dark. I could sense his temper, kept in strict check but always there.

“Martin,” my voice was gentle, “your father was very ill. I saw many instances at the Farm where people acted strangely because they could not help it. Your mother understood that, and so must you. And the poor man has been dead and buried these five years.”

Martin was silent for several minutes, turning the pages of the book of theology that he had carried into the room. He had a passion for difficult subjects; he loved anything intricate that required clear thinking, which was probably why he was so very good with money.

“Your stepfather is furious,” he finally said.

“My stepfather is frequently furious about one thing or another.” I put some reinforcing stitches into the junction of a side seam and tiny armscye. “I believe that is why he loves politics so much; he can work himself up into a passion and still stay within socially acceptable bounds.”

I noticed that, now I was almost back in society, my manner of speaking had reacquired a certain edge that it never had at the Poor Farm. With sweet Tess and the godly Mrs. Lombardi, I had become a kinder person; I was not sure that I liked lapsing back into my former waspish self. I sighed and resolved inwardly to guard my speech.

“Martin.” I lifted my eyes from my sewing and met his storm-gray ones steadily. “I am so very grateful for the shelter you have given me. Let me rest here in peace for a few days, until the news of my departure has died down and my stepfather has stopped looking for me under every stone. I have many things that I would like to discuss with you before I decide on my next move.”

Martin smiled. “My dear Nell, you are welcome to stay for as long as you want. In truth, to have a young woman and a baby around the house is a revelation; I had not realized how delightful it would be to come home to company over the supper-table and a little one to dandle on my knee whenever the fancy takes me. You will quite persuade me to give up my bachelorhood.”

I smiled faintly and lowered my eyes to my sewing again. Martin might not find my presence quite so pleasant when he found out that I suspected my stepfather of “murder most foul” and was preparing to confront him with that knowledge. A most unwomanly plan indeed.

I let three weeks pass peacefully in the quiet comfort of Martin's home. He was at his store from eight in the morning until six-thirty at night every day of the week except Sunday, and even on the Sabbath—he was not religious—he spent an hour or two working on his papers. So I plied my needle steadily as the days wore on, and Sarah spent a large portion of the day in Tabby's doting care. The old woman spread three blankets on top of one another in her airy kitchen at the back of the house, and my daughter spent many happy hours there, laughing, rolling around, and playing with the various objects that Tabby found to amuse her.

I was surprised at how well Martin and I got on as adults. He said that it was because I had changed so much, which was perhaps not an entirely complimentary remark. Over the course of several days, I gradually told him the story of the Poor Farm, the discovery of the bodies of Jo and her baby, the death of Blackie, and the madness of Mr. Ostrander. When he heard what Mr. Ostrander had said about my stepfather, Martin's brows drew together, and he looked so angry that I leaned forward impulsively and put a hand on his arm.

"Don't think of confronting him for me, Martin. I will find a time and place to do it. To be honest, I am putting off the moment." As soon as I said this, I knew I was admitting a difficult truth to myself. "I feel that I have a duty to bring justice to Jo and Benjamin, to Blackie, even to poor Mr. Ostrander; yet I am afraid to put myself and Sarah into danger by confronting Hiram. And I am afraid of the effect any shock might have on Mama, and besides I keep hoping—for her sake—that Stepfather has some kind of explanation that exonerates him."

"Such as?" Martin's expression was incredulous.

"Such as that there is another Hiley Jackson, or—or—or—I don't know." I sighed. "I am a coward, Martin. I don't want it to be true."

Martin was silent for several minutes, and I listened to the thunder outside. A summer storm was beating hard on the windowpanes, but inside this haven, redolent with the beeswax Tabby used on the furniture, I felt safe and secure.

"I do not think there is another Hiley Jackson, Nell," he said slowly. "I can

tell you something that corroborates Mr. Ostrander’s story.”

33

PROTECTOR

A crash of thunder shook the house, and I stepped into the hallway to listen for Sarah. There were no sounds from upstairs, so I returned to the sitting room and resumed my place opposite Martin, who was trimming the lamp. Once the light had returned to a steady golden glow, he seated himself and spent a minute collecting his thoughts, his hands interlaced under his chin.

"You know, Nell, that sometimes I attend the political meetings held at your stepfather's store."

"Yes, I suppose I do."

"I don't make a habit of it, as my ambitions do not lie in the political arena. And yet it can be useful to be there on occasion; the most influential men in Victory make useful commercial allies as well as political ones."

I nodded, willing him to come to the point.

"About two years ago, one meeting ended early with the decision to adjourn to Murphy's saloon. There are some hard drinkers in that group, and that evening they were in the majority. So I went along; I am not especially fond of liquor, but the conversation had been interesting, and I hoped for a few words with one of the men."

Martin shifted in his chair as a gust of wind rattled the window casement. "Your stepfather is also not a drinker, I think."

"He rarely drinks. Like you, he finds it expedient to do so on occasion."

"Precisely. That was one of those evenings. Hiram partook of several glasses of bourbon. He became very loud and rather boastful."

Where on earth was this leading? I leaned forward in my chair, the better to catch Martin's words above the noise of the rain and thunder.

"He said many things that night, but one thing in particular I remember. He talked about the Prairie Haven Poor Farm and what a benefactor he was to the imbeciles who resided there. One of the other men, who was thoroughly drunk, called them 'useless dribblers' and made unpleasant remarks about their mental capacities, their appearance, and so on."

A year earlier, such a remark would have passed over me. Now I felt my lips tighten as I thought of the women I had come to know.

"So Hiram said," Martin leaned forward, "that some of the women were quite pretty. I do not want to repeat his exact terms, Nell, as they were most vulgar. But he implied that some of the women were worth taking to bed." His cheeks darkened slightly, but he held my gaze and spoke without hesitation.

"He said something along these lines: 'There's a little girl called Jo who's like a china doll—prettiest blue eyes you ever saw. She adores me, and she'd —'." He flushed a deeper red and took a deep breath before continuing. "Well, Nell, I don't want to repeat that part. But he implied that this Jo would welcome him into her arms."

My disgust must have shown on my face, because Martin reached across the space that separated us and took my hand in his. "I'm sorry, Nell. Hiram did not say anything more specific about Jo, because the conversation took a decidedly vulgar turn and some of the men talked about adjourning to a certain establishment down by the river. I shook a few hands and left, pleading an early start the next day. The truth was, I had become thoroughly tired of the conversation and did not want to be dragged into the proposed activities. I do not consort with the kind of women they planned to visit."

I was grateful for that, but I did not miss the implication of Martin's story. It seemed likely that my stepfather had joined in the rest of the evening's activities. I shuddered.

Martin released my hand and leaned back in his chair. "It is a distasteful story, and I am sorry to have told it. But it undoubtedly suggests that Hiram was the Hiley, or the Ly-lee, that Jo identified as the man she had been with. I am

really very sorry, Nell."

We were quiet for a while, listening to the sound of the rain. The thunder had headed south and was now just a muted grumbling in the distance.

I had been letting the days slip by in comfort, giving myself time for the excitement of my escape to die down, but I could not put off the confrontation with my stepfather for much longer. I said so to Martin.

"Your stepfather is currently in Chicago, I hear," was his response. "You will not see him for another two weeks."

I felt both disappointed and relieved. "So my mother will be alone with Bet."

"I believe that to be the case. There is no visitor at your house that I know of."

"Martin, I have been longing to see Mama. Would it be possible to drive me to my home tomorrow, after it is dark?"

"That will be very late, Nell."

"My mother keeps late hours; lying in bed makes her feel short of breath. And Martin, my new dress is finished," I smiled gratefully at him, "and Sarah is well dressed and bonny. We will make our appearance in glowing health and can at least put my mother's mind to rest on that point."

"Very well."

"And I will stay there until Stepfather returns, Martin. As long as you promise to visit every day." Coward as I was, I felt better knowing that I could enjoy my old friend's pleasant, undemanding company while I nerved myself up for the confrontation with Hiram.

Martin smiled, his beaky nose throwing a shadow over his face. "Of course; and I will be your protector should the need arise." I smiled with relief; he had understood me. But his next remark made me sit up straighter.

"I would like to be there when you talk to your stepfather—"

"No!" I did not really know why I objected, but Martin's next remark was to the point.

“Listen to me, Nell. I would like to be there, but I do not think it wise.”

I let the silence stretch out between us, knowing what he meant. Martin was deathly afraid of his own temper; becoming like his father was his deepest fear. If Hiram admitted his guilt to Martin’s face. . . but I also knew that would never happen. Around Martin, Hiram would be guarded. Alone, I believed I could extract a confession, simply because Hiram was so arrogant that he would believe that I, a mere woman in his household, had no power to raise the world against him.

“I will be your protector,” Martin said slowly, “at a distance. Nell, we must find some way to make it clear to Hiram that I know what you know and that I am watching out for you. And I will watch my own back very, very carefully,” he said in answer to my unspoken anxiety. “I am not Jo or Blackie. We only have the slimmest evidence against Hiram, and I am not sure whether we could ever bring him to real justice. But perhaps with the two of us ranged against him, he will at least harm nobody else.”

Martin was silent for several minutes, apparently thinking things over. And then he smiled.

“I will miss your companionship of an evening, Nell. But your mother awaits you, and you are right: it is time for you to go home.”

34

HOME

My heart beat very fast as Martin handed me down from the gig, balancing Sarah expertly on his left arm. Sarah crowed and grasped Martin's prominent nose, causing us both to laugh. We were about a hundred yards from my house.

I was smartly attired and so was Sarah, who did not seem to mind at all that she was expected to stay awake so late in the evening. The few clothes I now owned were in a carpetbag that Martin swung down from the gig.

"Are you sure that you do not want me to come with you?"

"Martin, you are very kind, but it is extremely late."

Martin sighed. "I will call tomorrow, then. Do not think that I will neglect you, Nell." He swept me into a tight hug with his free hand, and then handed Sarah to me. Leaning in, he kissed Sarah gently on the forehead, and then I felt his lips brush my own cheek. He smelled of soap and clean linen.

Martin handed me the carpetbag, which I took in my right hand. With Sarah's little hand clutching at my new dress, I threw one last look back at Martin, standing by his gig, and then turned my face toward my mother's house.

I did not wish to pull on the front doorbell as if I were a visitor. I lifted the latch on the gate leading to the rear of the house and felt my way carefully along the uneven stones of the path to the kitchen door. Sarah waved her arms vigorously

and made “wa-wa-wa-wa” sounds.

The door to the kitchen was latched, and I could see the glow of a lamp inside. Bet would have sent Marie to bed by now, but she never retired until my mother did. I knocked gently on the kitchen door.

I thought I heard a faint exclamation of “Mother of God!” inside, and the scraping of a chair on the floor. The door opened a crack, and a familiar voice said, “Who’s there?”

“It is Nell, dear Bet. Do let me in.”

The door was flung back instantly, and Bet stood there holding a small lamp in her hand. Her bushy hair was beginning to come down from its topknot, and her chocolate-colored eyes were as round as pennies. I could not stop my face from breaking into a fond smile.

“Miss Nell, and in the middle of the night!” She had the good sense to drop her voice to a near-whisper. “Get you inside now.” She grabbed the carpetbag, ushered me in, and shut the door.

Sarah uttered a crow of greeting to the oil lamp, then balled her right fist and began to chew on it with enthusiasm, fixing her blue-green eyes on Bet.

The air whistled through the gap in Bet’s bottom teeth as she held up the lamp and gazed on my child. Then her face broke into a smile as if despite herself, and she chucked Sarah under the chin with a rough hand. Sarah immediately took her fist out of her mouth and deftly landed the spittle-coated article on Bet’s fingers.

I could not help laughing, and Bet joined in. She turned and led the way into the kitchen, where she stared at Sarah again by the light of the much larger lamp that stood on the table by her armchair. Untying the strings of Sarah’s little bonnet, she lifted it off her head. A huge grin spread over her rounded cheeks.

“Look at that hair now,” she said, holding out her arms toward Sarah, who turned quite willingly into them. She balanced Sarah expertly on one arm and stroked the tuft of copper-red curls fondly. “The very color of the old master’s. Mr. Lillington would have doted on that head, and no mistake.”

She looked at me as I stood removing my own hat. “And you’re no less bonny than you were when you left, just a mite thinner. We all thought you were

gone off across the lakes to Canada, only Mrs. Jackson, she just wouldn't worry about you. Kept saying she was sure you were safe, and here you are!"

"I am quite well, Bet, and longing to see Mama again. Is it true that my stepfather's gone to Chicago?"

Bet sniffed. "Yes, he's off again on political business. It'll be a few days before he returns." She looked at me sharply. "Is it that you're intent on seeing him or intent on not seeing him?" Her eyes were full of questions.

"I need to talk with him, Bet. I am certain that I can convince him to let me keep Sarah." I saw an expression flit across Bet's open face that was compounded of relief and puzzlement. She was clearly wondering how I proposed to achieve this feat, but by the way she was looking at Sarah, I somehow didn't think she was going to try to persuade me that giving up my baby would be the best course of action.

A small bell rang in the corner of the kitchen with a silvery tinkle, and Bet handed Sarah—reluctantly, I thought—back to me.

"Mrs. Jackson will be wanting some more of the good lemonade I made yesterday." She headed toward the pantry and returned with a jug dripping water from where it had been immersed in a large bowl to keep cool. "I will take her a glass, and I will break the news of your arrival." She looked at me carefully, clearly taking in the details of my dress. "You'd not have been that well dressed at the Poor Farm, I'm thinking?"

I was aware that I looked very elegant. I had studied the fashion-plates in Godey's Lady's Book carefully and drawn on Martin's expert advice, and the result was most pleasing.

Setting Sarah carefully down in the corner of Bet's armchair, I turned to the small mirror by the hearth, unpinning my hat. "Mr. Rutherford has been kind enough to give me shelter and provide the necessary articles of clothing." I felt embarrassed to admit that I had been staying with a bachelor but eager to reassure Bet that it had only been Martin.

"Mr. Rutherford, was it?" Bet plunked the jug down on the table and darted toward Sarah, who was preparing to roll toward the edge of the chair. Setting a freckled hand firmly on my baby's squirming body, she turned a relieved face to

me. “I believe your Mama suspected as much. Why else would she be so little worried about you, and not a word from you all this time? Ah, but he’s a good man, Mr. Rutherford. No brother could be more fond of you.” She lifted Sarah up, set her firmly in my arms, and whisked a glass from the cupboard. Setting jug and glass on a tray, she prepared to go upstairs but hesitated at the doorway.

“I need to warn you, Miss Nell. I am worried about Mrs. Jackson. I think her health’s turning for the worse. I hear her coughing a great deal at night, and sometimes there’s pink on her handkerchiefs.”

“Did you consult the doctor?”

“Of course, Miss, but he says the same thing always: light exercise, rest, and no excitement. He says there’s fluid on her lungs because her heart is weak, poor lady. And she won’t let your stepfather send for a better physician from Chicago, neither. She says it’s not like they could take her heart out and put in a new one, so why fuss?”

Shaking her head, she headed for the stairs to my mother’s room. I suddenly wanted to push past her and run straight to Mama; why had I waited so long to see her? Feeling worry gnaw at the pit of my stomach, I followed Bet into the hallway.

35

MAMA

Bet returned in a matter of moments and motioned for me to go up. I took the stairs two at a time in a most unladylike manner, while Sarah squealed in delight at the sudden movement. Mama's door was an inch or two open, and I pushed it gently.

My mother was sitting propped up on a chaise, swathed in a loose gown. She did not look very changed: a little puffier in the face, perhaps, and maybe there were a few more streaks of gray in her pale blonde hair. But she was smiling sweetly, an expectant and somehow satisfied look in her eyes. Her gaze shifted immediately to Sarah, and her smile grew more tender.

I was across the room in four strides, flung myself on my knees, and buried my face in my mother's neck. I felt a lump rise in my throat as she stroked my hair and had to bite my lip to keep myself from bawling like a child. Sarah squawked loudly right next to my ear, and I jumped and laughed despite the tears in my eyes.

"I see my granddaughter is beautiful," said my mother fondly. "Put her in my lap, Nell dear, and let me take a look at her."

I stepped back to watch my mother and daughter take the measure of each other. Sarah sat up surprisingly straight, lifted her head to look at the new face, and gazed solemnly at her grandmother for a few moments before yawning and rubbing her face with her tiny left hand. In the lamplight, her eyes glowed a pale jade green.

Mama looked up at me quickly and then back down at my baby again but

said nothing. Sarah yawned even wider than before, exposing her two teeth, and grizzled a little. Cuddling Sarah against her shoulder, Mama gazed at me reflectively for a moment. I waited, feeling sure what her next question would be, but it did not come. Instead, she smiled cheerfully and spoke in a much brisker tone.

"And you, Nell. You look positively prosperous. Where did you get that lovely dress? Surely not at the Poor Farm?"

"I think you know it was Martin, Mama. He has been a true friend to us. I did not want to turn up on your doorstep in my Poor Farm dress."

"I have worried so much about how you were faring in that place." Mama's brow furrowed. "Hiram kept reassuring me that you were well treated, and I received two most elegant letters from Mrs. Lombardi—but to think of my own daughter, brought up in every comfort, living in such a place . . ." Her voice trailed off, and she coughed a little, turning her head away from Sarah.

I carried a delicate chair over to my mother and seated myself near her. "You know, Mama, it was strange at first to be in such a place, but in many ways Stepfather made a good decision. I was able to be useful and was respected there. And Mrs. Lombardi is a good, intelligent, and pious woman."

"That much was evident from her letters. But the other women. . . the imbeciles, the women of ill repute . . ."

"Some of the women have rough manners, but that is the fault of their upbringing, Mama. And I made a friend you would call an imbecile who is as well mannered and refined as many of the people we see around us every day. The women are unfortunate rather than vicious, for the most part. Most of them just want to be loved, and they respond to kindness with great devotion."

My mother looked at me with a shrewd sparkle in her eyes. "You have changed, Nell. You have returned to me as a young woman with a tender heart."

I looked at Sarah who by now was asleep, her little mouth moving in a sucking motion as she dreamed. "You're holding the reason for that, Mama."

My mother's lips suddenly parted in a broad smile that revealed her snaggled front teeth. "What is her full name?"

I felt a little dismayed; had Mama forgotten my note on Mrs. Lombardi's

letter, giving Sarah's name? Bet was right, she was getting worse. I took a deep breath.

"Sarah Amelia Lillington." I could feel my face redden slightly; it was the first time I had given Sarah a surname out loud, and for a second the name "Venton" had tried to force itself onto my lips. I thought suddenly of Jack, making plans for his future with no idea that he had a daughter, and a pang of something like guilt shot through my body. He had wronged me, I was sure of it by now; but I had wronged him in return.

My mother patted Sarah's back, oblivious to the struggles of my conscience. "Did you ever really consider giving her up?" she asked

"Oh, yes. Until—" I stopped, realizing that of course Mama would know nothing of the events at the Farm. I did not think for a moment that Hiram would have told her. "Until I realized how much I loved her," I substituted. I let my fingertips brush the warm, silken skin of my baby's face. "And now I couldn't let her go for anything in the world."

My mother looked gravely at me, and her voice took on an edge of steel. "And I will help you keep her, Nell. There are worse things than disgrace."

Bet entered, carrying a tray with a glass for me and slices of her seedy-cake. Despite the supper I'd eaten with Martin, I was ravenous again. The combination of the caraway seeds in the cake and the cool lemonade was delicious, and I put down my cleared plate with such a satisfied sigh that both Bet and my mother laughed. Bet remained in the room while I ate, looking fondly at the picture made by my mother and her granddaughter.

"It's a terrible shame Mr. Bratt and me never had any children," she said. "I always thought I'd have a houseful of boys, somehow. But the good Lord bestows His blessings according to His perfect will."

"And sometimes the Lord's perfect will does not conform to society's dictates." My mother's voice was stern, but there was a twinkle in her eye as she regarded her illegitimate grandchild.

I took a big gulp of my lemonade. “Mama, you are a wonder,” I whispered. My mother put out her hand to me. “Can it be possible,” I continued, “that you would go against my stepfather’s wishes and persuade him to let me keep Sarah? His political career . . .” Although, I thought, perhaps the combination of my mother’s determination and my knowledge of Hiram’s secret would be more powerful than his ambition.

My mother sighed. “We will try to pass you off as a widow, I suppose. That is how these things are usually done.” She laughed at my startled look. “My darling, you will not be the first young woman to return to Victory with a child and a tale of clandestine marriage and sudden widowhood. Eventually, you know, people stop counting on their fingers. If we present a united front, we will ride out the storm.”

“And Stepfather could still become mayor of Victory,” I said.

“That is to be hoped.” My mother’s mouth was primly pursed, but her eyes still held a trace of amusement.

“And as a widow with a small child, it would not be shocking if I were to work to support myself. I enjoyed my work as a seamstress at the Farm, Mama. I know that you would support me.” I laid a hand on her wrist to cut off her protest. “But I wish to be as independent as possible. My work at the Farm made me feel like an adult. I do not wish to return to a state of childhood.”

My mother nodded her head slowly. “In truth,” she said, “I am a little more shocked by the notion of my daughter working for a living than I am about this little one.” She laughed, kissing Sarah who was now thoroughly asleep, a limp bundle against her shoulder. “And yet, of course, your dear father’s sisters were both employed before they married.” I breathed silent thanks to my father for being what my mother called a “rough diamond.”

I did not think at all that Stepfather would readily accede to my plan, but I was holding a trump card. It was a bluff—all I had against him in concrete terms were the word of a lunatic and some hearsay from a drinking session. I was powerless to bring about the justice that Jo and her baby deserved—and possibly Blackie, although there only a coincidence of dates stood against Hiram Jackson—and in any event I could not subject my mother to the scandal and shame of an

accusation against her husband.

No, but if I could not bring justice, I could at least acquire my freedom. I was ready to wager my future on the instinctive feeling that my stepfather would relinquish his control over me and my child in return for my silence. I hoped that I was right.

36

STEPFATHER

For a few days my mother played with and admired her granddaughter from breakfast till the time I tucked Sarah in bed, with the exception of the hour or so in the afternoon when she received callers. During that hour, I sat in the kitchen with Bet and Marie. If Sarah were noisy, my mother would explain that Bet had an unexpected visitor in the form of one of her many cousins, who had brought her child. And I had no doubt she carried off the lie superbly.

Martin usually visited in the evening after his day's business was done and often dined with us; with Stepfather absent, my mother was free to dine late, in the European fashion, as Grandmama had always preferred. Mama, Martin, and I took Sarah upstairs to bed before dinner, and Mama's face glowed with pleasure as she watched Martin kiss my baby's soft cheek while I sang a lullaby. She had scolded Martin gently for not being forthcoming about my presence in Victory and then let the matter drop.

I had been a little worried lest Mama imagine that Martin was Sarah's father, but that thought did not appear to worry her. In fact, I often caught her looking hard at Sarah's green eyes, but she never said anything to me or even mentioned Jack's name. I had always thought my mother's character to be rather conventional and predictable, but I had to admit that now I was seeing hidden depths in her.

The day came when I heard the hired carriage draw up outside the house, and my stepfather's loud voice ordered the driver to hurry up and unload his trunks. I

was changing Sarah's diaper in our bedroom—now the larger one at the back and not the one I had had since girlhood—and I hastily finished my task. I opened the bedroom door just a crack, my heart thudding.

I strained my ears to hear what was happening, but our house was well built, and I could not distinguish any words. I heard Hiram's heavy tread as he entered the parlor and thought I discerned the faint tinkling of a bell as my mother rang for coffee.

What were they saying? Had Mama broached the subject of my presence in the house yet, or was she merely inquiring after Hiram's journey? I worried about the effect of the excitement on my mother's heart. I felt no fear—killer as my stepfather might be, I did not for a moment think that he would show me any violence with my mother present. Strange to think that such a frail, dainty soul stood between me and the wrath of a murderer.

I could hear Hiram's voice on occasion, obviously replying to whatever my mother was saying. The minutes ticked by, and I sat perched on the very edge of the chair I had placed near the door, watching Sarah's attempts to plumb the secrets of a brightly colored ball I had sewn from scraps of fabric. Then, at last, the rumble of Hiram's voice seemed to take on a more urgent tone, and I heard Bet's footsteps on the stairs.

"Beg pardon, Miss, your stepfather requires your presence in the parlor."

I swept Sarah up into my arms and walked a little unsteadily downstairs, my throat tight. Bet opened the door, and I went in.

I was hardly expecting a warm welcome. Hiram stood in front of the empty fireplace, his right hand massaging his lower back and his chin jutting out several inches. He looked down his nose at Sarah, who sat silently in my arms, as if hypnotized by his piercing eyes.

I was certain that Stepfather had not reported our previous conversation to my mother. Did she even know that he had seen my child? Somehow I thought not.

"Good morning, Stepfather." I tried to make my voice pleasant and neutral.

"You are looking well, Eleanor." His voice did not betray any emotion either.

"This is Sarah." I watched his eyes carefully. No, he had not told her.

He grunted noncommittally.

“I have not returned to make trouble, Stepfather. I am sure that Mama has told you that she wishes me to keep Sarah, and so do I. We will agree to any arrangement—any,” I searched for the word, “explanation you wish to give about my secret marriage and unfortunate widowhood.”

“You disobeyed me.” His voice was mild, but the look in his eyes was pure venom. My mother, seated in her usual chair, could not see his expression.

“I am sorry, Stepfather. But I find that I do not wish to be separated from my daughter.” I took a deep breath, willing my legs not to shake. “If I could have a few minutes’ conversation with you in private, Stepfather, I believe you would be quite convinced.” I felt rather than saw my mother’s look of surprise and shot her a look that told her to trust me. Then I stared steadily at Hiram, willing him to see the knowledge of the truth in my eyes.

Bet came to fetch Sarah when Mama retired upstairs for her afternoon nap. Hiram and I were left to face each other without the reminder of our object of contention.

We spoke in low voices, fearful of disturbing my mother’s sleep. Hiram began pacing, but lightly and warily, like a cat on a brick wall.

“Do you think you can use your mother against me?” His mouth was stretched into a thin-lipped smile. “She may dote on your brat now, but I can persuade her to see matters from the viewpoint of a respectable woman and the future wife of a mayor.”

I did not agree with him on that, but I let it pass. “I am not simply relying on my mother. I have good reason to think you will accede to my wishes.”

“And that would be?” He smirked confidently.

Better get to the point at once. I drew a deep breath, wished my heart would stop threatening to jump out of my body, and spoke with as much calm as I could muster.

“Why did you shut Jo into that room?”

He stopped in midstride. Pivoting on the foot on which he was standing, he swung round to face me. His eyes were narrowed to icy slits, and there were streaks of dark red on his cheekbones.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Mr. Ostrander told me that you shut her in there.”

Hiram laughed, a mirthless sound under his breath. “A driveling madman.”

“And it is public knowledge that you boasted about Jo in the saloon.” Did Martin’s story amount to “public knowledge”? Probably not, but I was going for maximum effect.

It seemed to have worked. He went pale, leaving his cheeks blotched and ugly. His pomaded hair lay limply on his scalp, like the feathers of a rooster when it has been out in the rain.

“Damn that little whore. Damn all of you whores.” His voice was curiously flat.

“Why did you do it?” I asked again. “Jo was being sent away. How could she be a danger to you?”

“She came to me in the refectory and shoved that filthy little infant in my face. ‘Ly-lee bay!’ she said. And the damn thing looked like me.”

“But you needn’t have killed her. She would have lived a thousand miles away for the rest of her life.”

Hiram seemed to gather his wits and resumed his pacing. “You have no evidence. None at all.”

“Very little, I admit. The circumstances were ideal, weren’t they? Mrs. Lombardi senseless with fever, the cart driver drunk and incapable?”

“The keys.” Hiram was talking to himself in a low monotone. “On the ground, right in front of me.”

“And Jo trusted you.” It was hard to keep from screaming. I wanted justice. This admission—this half-admission—was not justice. Perhaps there never would be any, not for those on the outside of our respectable, shut-in world.

Hiram leaned against the window casement, smiling. Outside I could hear the ordinary sound of a carriage making its way slowly along our quiet street, the driver clicking softly to his horse. Hiram glanced out of the window; he must

have seen someone he knew, because he motioned a greeting. A respectable man, a prosperous citizen, at his own window. I felt sick.

“Did you poison Blackie as well?” I asked in a very small voice.

Hiram only laughed in answer, and my blood ran chill in my veins. He swung to face me, planting his feet firmly.

“So you think you can accuse me? Let me tell you something, Eleanor. The blessings of Providence follow me in all my ventures.”

What did he mean? His smile seemed to turn inward, and he stared at something I could not see. Was he mad, like Mr. Ostrander?

I asked the question that had burned in my brain ever since I first suspected Hiram. “Why did you send me there, of all places? Did you not realize that a dead body cannot remain hidden?”

Hiram jerked out of his reverie and grinned, looking quite friendly.

“Would I send my own stepdaughter to the scene of my crimes? You see how ridiculous your claims are, Nell. Who could possibly suspect me?” He spread his hands in an expansive gesture.

A doubt assailed me; Hiram must have seen it, because his smile grew wider. “No proof,” he said softly. “If I admitted it out loud in this room—if I have admitted the least thing,” he appeared to be thinking back over the last few minutes, “you still have no proof. All things run in my favor, Nell. I am the one that Providence has chosen for a mighty destiny. Those who would speak against me must fall silent, or the Almighty will confound the speech in their mouths.”

This was insane nonsense. Did he really imagine that God had struck Mr. Ostrander mad rather than have his secret revealed? I had arranged this meeting to reason with Hiram, but his reason was as slippery and contorted as a nest of young snakes.

I decided to try bravado. “If you try to send Sarah away,” I said as firmly as I could, “I will nonetheless go to your political rivals and tell them everything I know and suspect. Even if they think I am a vengeful child or a madwoman, the seed will be planted in their minds.”

“Oh.” Hiram’s mood seemed to shift suddenly, and his face masked itself behind a nauseating expression of concern. I was repelled and fascinated by this

man, my mother's husband with whom I had lived for three years. I did not know him at all. "I did not say I wished any longer to send the child away, Eleanor. After all, it is your dear mother's desire that she stay. And my darling Amelia's wishes are of prime importance to me."

I was confused and thrown off balance by this sudden accession to my request. "She—she may stay?" I stammered.

"Naturally. I will write to Mrs. Lombardi to tell her to ask the Grays' forgiveness. They will not have their child." His voice had resumed its usual overbearing tone.

I did not know where I stood. Had I even heard a confession? Were Sarah and I safe? I decided to put one more card on the table.

"Martin knows what I have told you, Stepfather. He has sworn to look after us."

Hiram snorted. "Young men are fools. Young women too. Martin Rutherford may think he's your protector, but he's not your brother, or your lover either, hey?" A sneer settled onto his thin lips. "No woman's lover, by all accounts."

I felt an indignant blush creep up my neck and opened my mouth to defend Martin's character. But my remark was cut short by the creak of the door; my mother came quietly into the room. Hiram went an interesting shade of pale gray, and I could almost hear him wondering if Mama had heard anything of our conversation. But her face was serene, and her blue eyes shone with happiness.

"I peeped in on Sarah, Nell. She looks like a little angel. And that hair, so much like my dear Jack! Hiram, don't you think our granddaughter is the sweetest little thing?"

Hiram grimaced a smile as he helped my mother to her chair and grunted assent. I excused myself and returned to my room, where I lay down on my bed and tried to sort through my swirling thoughts.

Hiram had denied nothing and had come to the brink of an admission. I was more certain than ever that he had killed Jo, Benjamin, and Blackie. I was certain, but as Hiram himself had pointed out, I had absolutely no proof in the world.

And yet—he had told me I could keep Sarah. I squeezed my eyes tight shut

in joy, listening to my baby's soft breathing as she slept in her crib. My dearest wish had fallen into my lap without effort, and all because it was Mama's wish too. As long as she lived, we three would be safe and happy together.

But I would lock the bedroom door when Sarah was asleep and guard her—and myself—vigilantly by day. I was afraid—a little. But if Hiram thought he could wait for Providence to grant him an opportunity to dispose of us, he would discover that I was Red Jack Lillington's daughter indeed.

37

PRETENSE

Over the next few days, Hiram's behavior toward me was formal in the extreme. He no longer glared at me or made any remarks about Sarah. He displayed the punctilious politeness he might have shown to a visiting lady, rising when I entered the room, showing concern for my comfort, and asking my opinion on the topics of the day.

My mother was naturally thrilled by the news that Sarah would stay with us and never missed an opportunity to shower Hiram with tokens of gratitude and affection. We were quite the happy family. I did my part by showing Hiram the deference due to a stepfather, but inwardly I was a trapped bird in a cage. It seemed to me that Hiram had made—inadvertently or not—just enough of an admission to give me power over him and to display to me the power he exercised over me: that of a wild creature who could spring at will. We had found some kind of equilibrium, but it was horribly precarious.

He brought to me one day a gold wedding band incised with a tiny, delicate pattern of leaves and flowers. I must have looked puzzled, because he spoke before I could open my mouth.

"In case you are seen in this house with the child, I want you to wear this. People may not necessarily believe a story of a secret marriage followed by the death of your husband, but I want you to concoct one nonetheless. You are a resourceful woman, and you will prepare your story well." It was not a request.

I turned the band around in my fingers; it did not look new. "Where did you come by this, Stepfather?"

Hiram flushed uncomfortably. “I had it made for Emmie, but it was too big and the design did not please her.”

“Emmie?” I could not place the name.

“My Emmeline.” Hiram’s icy blue eyes actually softened a little. “My little wife.”

“Oh. Yes.” Mama had told me about Emmie when she and Hiram were about to be married. Dead in childbirth, the child dead too, many years ago. Married when she was barely sixteen and Hiram in his thirties and dead just one year later. Hiram still visited her grave.

I slipped the ring on the appropriate finger and looked at it critically. It fitted quite well; my hands are large, but my fingers, although rather solid-looking and squared off at the ends, are passably slender.

I looked up at Hiram, not wishing to thank him. “I will wear it.”

Hiram grunted his approval and stalked off, leaving me staring at the gold band. It symbolized, in my mind, not a nonexistent husband but the inescapable commitment that now bound me. I was tied to my daughter with chains that could only be dissolved by death: “whither thou goest, there shall I go.” It also seemed to symbolize Hiram’s promise that he would keep that bond intact.

It was inevitable that my presence in Victory would gradually become known. Bet and Marie were sworn to secrecy, and I do not think they betrayed me; but in a small town like Victory, scandal has all the power of a barrel of rotten fish and is just as impossible to keep hidden for long. We invented an unfortunate personage by the name of Jerome Govender, who had married me in haste but had not lived long enough to repent at leisure. This ridiculous fabrication meant, of course, that I had to adopt mourning dress.

“It will become you, Nellie.” Martin ran an appreciative finger over the fine alpacas and silks his assistant had brought over in the morning. “With your Titian hair and pale skin, the black will have a wonderfully dramatic effect.” He whisked a tulle ruffle out of the pile and held it around my neck, turning me to

the parlor mirror so that I could see the result. “And you have a long neck—swanlike, I would say if you were a customer I needed to flatter—so if you wear your hair high, a frill just so—do you see?—will be most ornamental.”

I did not know what “Titian” meant, but I could see his point about the frill. Martin’s hands rested lightly on my shoulders, and as he spoke about my neck, he brushed it lightly with the back of his hand. Something about the gesture reminded me of a far-off day in May, and I shivered.

Martin immediately stepped away from me and turned his back as he searched among the parcels. “And you must have—ah! Here it is.” There was something forced about the joviality in his voice, but I did not inquire what was wrong. He was deftly picking open the knot on a very small parcel from which he extracted a length of the softest velvet ribbon I had ever seen and something that gleamed in the light from the window. He held it up; it was a beautifully carved oval of jet, leaves and branches twisted around a single large pearl held in a setting of chased silver leaves.

“From Whitby, in England.” He grinned as he saw my face light up at the beauty of the pendant. “Just the thing for a young widow.”

I had seen much mourning jewelry—after all, the War made many widows even in Victory—but this delicate masterpiece was far different from the morbid monstrosities most women wore. I was grateful that Mama had never worn my father’s hair as a bracelet or brooch.

“Thank you, Martin.” I eyed the dull sheen of the black fabrics, calculating how best to make them up into a becoming dress. “If I must mourn an imaginary husband, then I suppose at least I may look elegant.”

Martin caught my hand and kissed the very tips of my fingers. “Nothing but the best for my dear Mrs. Govender.”

“Stop it.” I did not like the pretense, but I had to admit I had brought it upon myself, and any reminder of that fact was unpleasant to me. I looked down at the ring on my finger, twisting it around so that the minutely incised flowers danced in the afternoon sun.

“What are you going to do about Hiram?” Martin’s tone became serious. “He all but confessed from what you told me. You saw the bodies of those he

murdered; can you really keep silent?”

I did not speak for several moments, watching the play of light across the soft silk. Far off downstairs I could hear Sarah’s squeal and Marie’s answering laugh. Hiram was out on some business or other, and Mama was resting in her bedroom; she had had a string of bad nights and for once did not feel up to keeping visiting hours. Martin rested his elbow on the pianoforte and waited for me to say something, his face still and patient. Amid the crimsons and browns of our overdecorated parlor, his hair gleamed like a golden beacon.

I shook my head slowly. “No, I do not think I can keep silent. But think, Martin. Whom can we tell who is not a crony of my stepfather’s? He has every official in the county in his pocket.”

“And in Chicago? Does his influence reach that far?” Martin’s brow was wrinkled in thought.

“Go to Chicago? When? How?” It made sense. I did not think my stepfather had an extensive acquaintance with the large community of Irishmen who made up the police force.

Martin ran a hand over his hair, straightening up to his full height. I tipped my head to follow the movement, fighting the temptation to smooth my hands over his clean-shaven cheeks as I did when I was a child. We were still the best of friends, but somehow I knew I could never go back to the innocent affection of those bygone days.

“Let me think about it, Nellie. We could go to one of the police commissioners—they will surely have no jurisdiction this far north, but they will be able to suggest a solution, I am certain of it.”

“Supposing we try, and fail, and Hiram gets to hear of it? He will definitely try to take Sarah from me then.”

Martin’s square face held an oddly resolute expression. “If it comes to that, I would marry you myself and give you and Sarah the protection of my name.”

My face must have shown the astonishment I felt. “You would do that?”

“And annul the arrangement as soon as I could, naturally. Once you were well out of Hiram’s grasp.”

“Ah.” Well, yes, I did not suppose Martin wanted to be married to me any

more than I wanted to be married to him. After all, Sarah was not his child.

Martin picked up his hat and motioned to the tea table. “We have let Bet’s good pot of tea go cold. She is sure to wonder what we were doing all this time.”

“It’s none of her business, and anyway I will pour it into the aspidistra.”

Martin grinned at my cowardice and reached out his hand to mine. I thought he would kiss it again, but instead he enveloped my hand in both of his large, warm ones and gave it a gentle shake.

“If there is any justice to be found in this deplorable situation, I will help you find it. Give my love to your mama.”

And then he was gone, leaving me staring out of the window until a sound from below made me fly toward the still-full teacups. Justice, I thought as I tipped the cold, pale liquid into the dusty earth of Mama’s favorite plant. Justice for Jo, for Benjamin, and for Blackie. At what expense?

38

GILDED

"Oh, Nell, this is wonderful news." My mother's eyes were alight as she read a letter written on Cousin Elizabeth's distinctive green letter paper. "Dear Jack is an attorney at last!"

"Really?" I knew that I had flushed slightly and kept my head bowed over the black ruffle I was sewing for my new mourning dress. I cursed inwardly at myself for being sensitive to Jack's name. After all, he was my cousin, at least in the technical sense. I would be hearing news of him for many years to come, no doubt.

And from Mama's lighthearted tone of voice, she had either dismissed or forgotten any suspicions she might have harbored about my relationship with Jack. Forgotten, probably. She had become a lot more forgetful lately, and that worried me.

"Elizabeth says he is now a junior in the firm where he has been apprenticed the last two years—or is it three? I cannot remember. I am so glad for him. He found it hard to readjust to civilian life. But now look! He is on his way to success and fortune."

"He has a fortune already, Mama. Uncle Barnabas left my cousins very well provided for."

My mother chuckled softly. "You are hard on your mother's little turns of speech, Nell dear. I was merely expressing the conventional wish that Jack will do well in his profession. A man needs a profession, however wealthy he might be."

“I wish him well too, Mama. You might tell Elizabeth that when you reply to her letter.”

And indeed, I did wish him well. I just did not want to see him again for the rest of my life.

My mother, who was absorbed in the letter and was not listening to me, drew in her breath sharply.

“My goodness!”

“More news?”

“He has done it!”

“Mama, you are not making sense,” I said. “Who has done what?”

“Jack has proposed to his sweetheart. Her name is Elizabeth too, but everyone calls her Beth. Elizabeth—your cousin, I mean—says,” she paused for a moment to decipher the handwriting, “that she is a remarkably—Nell, I cannot read this. Do look.”

I made my face as expressionless as possible and took the sheet of paper from my mother’s hand, beginning where she indicated: “. . . a remarkably sweet-tempered girl who is ready to spoil Jack just as much as we have done, dear Aunt. She will make him an excellent wife and brings a considerable sum of money with her, so they will be quite a—beguiled?—no—gilded couple.”

Oh, dear. Beguiled indeed. Fortunately, Cousin Elizabeth’s letter took a more practical turn as she launched into details of the bride’s relatives. English and aristocratic. Jack must be relishing his new connections.

“Ah, that is better.” Mama took the letter back from me. “Elizabeth must have fetched a new pen.” She continued to plow through the details of family alliances, third cousins, and political connections. Her absorption gave me time to think.

I had always rather imagined Jack as the villain of our little story—after all, was he not older and more experienced than I?—but it was borne in upon me, as I listened to the soft drone of my mother’s voice, that Jack and Beth were going to begin married life on a false footing, and it was all my fault. I had never, right from the moment I had begun to suspect I was pregnant, thought of anyone other than myself. Now I began to wonder whether, indeed, it would have been right to

inform Jack that he had a child before he betrothed himself to this innocent girl. It would have ruined his life and mine, to be sure, but now there were three people involved. And soon, if they had children, there could be more victims of my silence.

“They may have children before two years are out.” My mother’s thoughts chimed in most unpleasantly with my own, and I squirmed in my chair. “How delightful it will be to have more little ones in the family! It is such a shame I cannot tell them about Sarah.”

My limbs turned to ice. “I think we should be prudent about concocting falsehoods on paper, Mama.” I felt my breathing quicken and stitched assiduously, willing myself to be calm.

“Of course.” My mother’s reply sounded vague, and a shudder ran down my legs. What was I going to do if Mama inadvertently mentioned Sarah in a letter to the happy couple?

39

DOMESTIC

Fortunately for my peace of mind, Mama did not write back immediately to Cousin Elizabeth. She had little energy for anything much, preferring to sleep late and confine activity to the hour in the afternoon when she received visitors. I was now expected to receive with her, but I found those times very trying. Which is why, one hot afternoon, I was slumped in a chair in the kitchen staring at nothing in particular.

“Ah, there you are.” Martin held a hand up to Bet, who was attempting to rise from her seat at the kitchen table. “No, please, Bet, I don’t need a thing and do not wish to disturb your rest. Nell, why are you in the kitchen?”

“I’m hiding.” I shrugged my shoulders at Martin as he pulled out one of the plain wooden chairs, watching him slide his arms out of his formal working jacket. He hung the garment over the chair and sat down opposite me, resting his elbows on the vast, scrubbed table.

“Aunt Amelia said you had gone out for some fresh air.”

“As if there were any fresh air.” I turned away from Martin, determined to be out of sorts. The late summer heat was oppressive and the black gown, although most becoming—as Martin had predicted—felt heavy. I had stripped Sarah of her gown and put her, dressed in her thin shift, on a blanket atop the cool tiles. She was busy gazing at her toes, chewing on them from time to time and keeping up a stream of very soft sounds that sounded like an attempt at speech.

Martin was silent for a few minutes, and the kitchen settled back into its former tranquility. The calls of chickadees and finches drifted in through the

half-open window, fitted with a screen to exclude the insects. The large wall clock near the scullery door ticked with a monotonous metal sound. At one corner of the table sat Marie, preparing the vegetables for dinner. Bet's meat pie was finished and sitting ready for the stove, covered with a clean cloth to keep off any flies that dared invade the kitchen. Bet had donned a clean apron and a better cap in order to serve tea to the visitors and had given me tea and a delicious slice of yesterday's jam sponge. Now she sat at her ease, her gold-rimmed pince-nez—a treasured possession—perched on her nose as she read a Beadle's Dime Novel.

A commotion upstairs announced the departure of the visitors, and the parlor bell rang. Bet sniffed and carefully removed her pince-nez from her large, straight nose. She plunked her novel on the table. It was called *Myra, The Child of Adoption*, and from its lurid cover I assumed it had a romantic ending.

"Oh, thank goodness," I said. "I simply could not bear one more moment of making polite conversation and telling lies."

"So you left your poor mother to do your dirty work? She is looking dreadfully tired, Nell." Martin's voice held a note of concern.

"Exactly. If I am there to pepper with questions, they never go away. If I leave Mama with them, she soon tells them that she is too weary for a long visit." I buried my face in my hands. "I wish they would leave me alone. I do not even want to walk around the town; there is always someone who has not yet had the chance to pry into my affairs." I sank my chin into my hands and glared at the table. If Martin thought I was not worried about Mama, he was wrong. But I had no intention of discussing her in front of the servants and lapsed back into silence.

Bet returned and seated herself at the table, pulling her pince-nez out on their retractable line from the bow-shaped brooch pinned to her bodice. "I have settled Mrs. Jackson on her chaise for a nap," she said. "Her hands are that cold, Miss Nell, even in this terrible heat. I gave her one of her fur muffs to wrap around them, the poor dear." She shook her head portentously and picked up her dime novel.

Sarah crowed loudly and rolled off her blanket onto the tiled floor. Bet

immediately shot out of her chair and scooped up my daughter, murmuring nonsense words to her and smoothing her red curls. Sarah grabbed at Bet's pince-nez and dislodged them roughly from her nose, making Bet's eyes water. She checked to see that the sudden shock had not harmed the lenses, then sat down at the table and showed Sarah the picture on the front cover of her novel. Sarah immediately grabbed at the book and shoved one corner into her mouth.

"Ah, no now, Miss Sarah." Bet removed the book from Sarah's grasp and pinched up a crumb of sponge cake from the half-eaten slice on her plate. She held it to Sarah's mouth long enough to allow it to become mush against Sarah's pushing tongue, getting her fingers covered with drool in the process. Sarah absorbed the cake, blinked a few times as if surprised, and then rocked strenuously backward and forward. Martin and I burst into loud laughter, and I began to forget my fit of temper.

"Your stepfather's off on his travels again in a few days," observed Bet.

"Where is he going?" I was glad enough of the news that I would have Hiram out of my sight for a few days. Even his newfound politeness could not reconcile me to his presence.

"North Carolina, I hear. On business."

"He sure has a lot of business." Marie had been topping and tailing green beans at an impressive speed, but now she laid down her knife and flexed her hands. "Don't he ever go to that store of his? My father says a man needs to stay on his premises, see the work's done right."

"Your father's never owned a store, nor never done work right neither," snapped Bet. "You carry on with your own work, and thank the Lord for the good training I'm giving you."

"Yes, Bet." Marie sighed and picked up her knife.

"I had a letter from Mrs. Lombardi this morning," I informed Martin, who was making faces at Sarah. "Hiram read it before I did."

"Ah. Well, it is the right of the paterfamilias to read his womenfolk's correspondence, Nell." Martin cringed in mock terror as I searched for something to throw at him, but I desisted when I caught Marie's black eyes twinkling at us in amusement. I mopped my perspiring brow with a dainty

handkerchief, trying to look the part of an elegant widow.

“Come out to the garden, Mr. Rutherford,” I said with my most dignified air and then spoiled the effect by adding, “Oh, that’s no use. We’ll either be in the blazing sun or eaten up by mosquitoes. Come up to the parlor, and I’ll tell you Mrs. Lombardi’s news.” I peered at Sarah, who yawned, showing a tongue smeared with mashed cake.

“Oh, don’t worry about the little darlin’, Miss.” Bet stifled a belch behind a freckled hand. “I’ll make a little nest of cushions on the blanket, and Marie will watch over us both as I take my nap.” She looked longingly at her large armchair. Marie breathed the faintest of sighs and stuck out her underlip just a little, but not so that Bet could see her. I rose from my chair and headed for the parlor, Martin close behind me.

40

POLICE

When we reached the parlor, I excused myself for a minute and went to peer around Mama's door. She was asleep in her chaise longue, a faint sheen of perspiration on her face. Her dainty hands and small, narrow feet were carefully bundled up to keep them warm. A faint breeze entered from the window, but it must have been at least eighty degrees in the room. I felt my brow furrow into a frown as I crept as quietly as possible down the stairs.

Martin was sitting in my mother's chair, his long legs looking incongruous as they stuck out from its plush depths. He was still in shirtsleeves, his hair tousled where he had been running his fingers through it as he often did when thinking.

"Hiram poked fun at Mrs. Lombardi," I said without preamble as soon as I was in the room. "He said she was too lenient with the inmates, that she ought not to be running the Women's House. Did you know, he and some of the other governors want to move the feeble-minded inmates to another institution? They say that they are too slow to work properly and should be in a place where all of 'their kind' can be looked after together. I heard him telling Mama."

"I would not think Mrs. Lombardi would ever allow such a thing to happen." Martin's eyes were sympathetic.

"That's just the thing. I don't think she would. But I do think Mr. Schoeffel would agree to the scheme—he is always ready to pander to the governors' whims. And they have not yet chosen a superintendent. I think Mr. Schoeffel would like that post."

“And what else does Mrs. Lombardi have to say?” Martin stretched his legs and yawned behind his hand. “You said that she had news.”

“Tess misses me dreadfully.” I sat down on the red velvet settee, feeling my shoulders slump in dejection. I also missed Tess. Although no great conversationalist, she had a way of saying droll and direct things that made me smile or gave me cause to reflect.

And my mood was not improved by the lack of useful employment in our well-run home. In truth, I was bored. I longed for real work. At the Poor Farm there had been a constant list of items of clothing or bed linen to be made or mended, and I had directed Tess and Edie in their work as well. My days had been full and lively, from the communal face-washing and bed-making in the morning to evening prayer. Despite the plain food, the bizarre behavior of some of the inmates and the lack of privacy that I had experienced there, I found that I missed my erstwhile place of confinement.

I ran my fingers over the very small ruffles on the front of my mourning dress and found myself wishing that I were wearing the cheap calico I had sewn myself for summer at the Farm. What good was my finery? I hardly dared go out in Victory for fear of people asking impertinent questions and staring hard at Sarah, trying to divine the identity of her father. It was fortunate that her baby fat obscured her features and that in most lights her eyes were still more blue than green. I was surprised that Martin had not yet made the connection with Jack; but I supposed that gentlemen did not pay close attention to the eyes of their male acquaintances.

“I am going to Chicago tomorrow and spending a few days there,” Martin announced, shifting his position so that he could draw his legs up and lean forward. “To look at winter wools, hats, all the furbelows of the season, you know. And I will make a point of calling on one of the police commissioners—State Street will probably be the closest.”

I felt a sudden jolt of fear and hope. “Are they likely to believe you? They may not even need to see me.”

“Perhaps. I really do not know. I have little experience in the realm of murder. Nell, however you may feel, please do not let your mood affect your

Mama. Hiram will be off on his travels soon, is that not what Bet said? Even if you are finding life in Victory dull, you are reunited with your mother, and you must make the most of this time together."

I nodded without speaking, looking at Martin from under my lashes. His face was grave. I knew what he thought, and I feared it too. Mama was getting worse.

41

DECLINE

My stepfather's face also held an expression of concern whenever he looked at Mama, but that did not stop him from setting off to North Carolina. He did, though, leave earlier than he had expected and promised to be back soon. For Mama's sake I imprinted a cold kiss on his cheek as he took his leave of us.

And then he was gone, and Martin was away, and Mama and I sat and talked all day, mostly about Sarah. As active and wayward as my daughter was becoming, she seemed to behave more calmly when she sat on her grandmother's lap. She would sit for several minutes at a time gazing solemnly into Mama's eyes and then favor her with one of her dimpled, carefree smiles. When she was not with my mother, I had learned to read that smile as a forewarning of mischief; it often preceded a sudden lunge or, if she were on the floor, a surprisingly fast roll toward the object of her desires. If she could not get the object into her mouth, she would pull on it, hard. The long, fringed cloths that had previously been draped over all the tables had now been replaced with rectangles of damask, while my mother's china knickknacks moved from the tables onto the shelves. And I had learned not to turn my back on my baby daughter for a second. She was, as Bet declared, "a rare 'un."

And then, one morning, Mama found that she did not care to get out of bed. Bet was pinning her hat onto her bushy hair almost before the word "doctor" came out of my mouth.

"Shouldn't you send Marie?" Respectable housekeepers did not run errands

if they had a subordinate to do them.

“I’ll be quicker and a sight more persuasive.” Bet spoke rapidly as she fumbled with the buttons of her gloves. I nodded. As stout as Bet was, she could walk very fast, and no doctor would dare claim to her face that he was too busy to see Mama. “I’ll take the trail through the woods.” I listened to her boots clatter their way down to the gate, thinking only after she had gone that maybe she should have asked Mr. Drehler for a loan of his buggy. She was following the path my father had taken all those years ago.

“Bet has gone for the doctor,” I said as lightly as I could when, having tended to Sarah, I was able to return to Mama’s side.

She smiled her usual radiant smile, although her face was pale and her eyes tired. “Nell, you are such a goose. I am merely rather sleepy and stupid this morning. The hot weather does not suit me; I am sure that when the fall arrives I will feel much better.”

But the doctor shook his head at me when he left Mama’s room and closed the door. And Mama did not leave her bed the next day or the day after that.

My newfound status as an adult did not prevent me from flying for comfort into Martin’s arms when he came to see us. He held me tight to him for a brief moment and then pushed me gently away, dabbing at my cheeks with his large, clean handkerchief.

“She wanders in her mind.” My voice was hoarse with suppressed tears. “Sometimes she thinks my father is still alive.”

“Has anyone sent for Hiram?”

I shook my head. “We—we—he left no forwarding address at the store. Martin, I always thought he was going to North Carolina on store business, but they know nothing of the purpose of his travels. Only that he goes there often, usually when there is a large bill to be paid. What do you think it means?”

Martin was leading the way up the stairs toward my mother’s bedroom. He stopped at the door, looking down at me.

“It may mean nothing—or everything. Nell, he never gave himself away as a killer until you faced him down. Who knows what other secrets he may have?”

The cheerful expression that Martin had kept on his face faded as soon as he stepped out of my mother’s room and shut the door gently. “She’s settling to sleep.”

I bounced Sarah on my arm and shushed her. The loud crowing sounds she was making became soft gurgles, and I turned away from the door and led the way downstairs.

“I spoke to the police commissioner in Chicago,” said Martin as soon as he had shut the parlor door.

I nodded, but his words barely penetrated my brain. Just a few days ago it had seemed so important to bring Hiram to justice. Now all my energies were concentrated into one thought. *Please, Mama, get better. Do not leave me*.

“He was interested in what I had to say and did not disbelieve me.” Martin seemed to be talking just for the sake of it. “He has no jurisdiction up here, you understand, but he says he will send a reliable man—not a police officer but some kind of private agent—to look into the matter.”

I felt a vague sense of relief. If the worst happened. . . if Mama. . . then there might be some hope left of staying safe from Hiram. If he thought I was friendless, what might he do? There was Martin, of course, but Hiram misjudged Martin. He held the opinion that most of the town’s menfolk had of my old friend and did not see the strength that hid behind Martin’s impeccable clothing and urbane manners. No, I did not think Hiram would give a thought to Martin if he decided to be rid of me and Sarah.

“So that is where things stand? We must simply wait?” It seemed that I was waiting all the time now. I spent hours at a stretch at Mama’s side, talking to her when she seemed lucid and listening to her vague mutterings, or her soft breathing, when she sank into torpor. Bet and I shifted her around in her bed, gave her sips of water or broth, and sat her on the chamber pot at regular

intervals.

Bet suggested a nurse, but I refused quite angrily until she finally persuaded me to allow a woman to attend Mama at night. Marie was doing all of the cooking and cleaning now, so I suppose my meals were rather plain, but I did not take heed of them.

“I will be at your side as you wait, Nell.” Martin clasped my hand and squeezed it hard.

“Yes.” I tipped my head up to smile at Martin. “I am glad you are my friend, Martin. A better friend than I was to you when your mother. . . but of course I was indisposed.”

Despite our sadness, Martin’s face broke into a broad grin, and he reached out to stroke Sarah’s cheek. “Take comfort in your little indisposition,” he said. “She has brought great joy to your mother. It’s strange, isn’t it? The greatest gift you could have given her stemmed from your disgrace. It’s enough to make me start going to church.”

42

ETERNITY

The small silver-gilt clock on Mama's nightstand ticked so softly that I usually never noticed it. Now, after an hour of sitting by my mother's bedside listening to the faint wheeze of her breath, the tick of that clock became a torment to me. I was just considering whether I should move it outside until it wound down when Mama opened her eyes.

"Hiram? My dear, it is late. You should be in bed."

"It's me, Mama. Nell. And it's just two o'clock, you know. See? It's still light outside." I shifted the pillows until Mama seemed more comfortable; she almost had to be sitting upright to breathe easily.

"Nell. Where is my husband?"

"Still in North Carolina, Mama. Remember? We cannot find an address to let him know—" I bit my lip. I had been about to say, "that you are dying." For there was no doubt in my mind by now. The doctor and Bet had done their best to prepare me. And Martin, who by now was visiting us three times a day, had sat with me for a long hour in the parlor and let me question him about his own mother's deathbed. Strangely enough, that had relieved my mind. The only deaths I had ever seen till then had taken the shape of two small, wizened bodies and a tarpaulin-covered form. The other deaths—my father's, my brother's—had happened, as it were, offstage, and I knew so little about them. Mysterious death, sinister death. To hear Martin describe Ruth's departure in simple, practical words had removed some of the frightening unknownness of what was about to confront me.

Mama struggled to moisten her lips, and I held the water glass so that she could take a sip. I was glad that the heat had abated a little, although the much-needed rain had not fallen.

Mama's gaze had fallen upon my hand, and it took me a moment to understand that she was staring at my ring. "Emmie's ring," she whispered. "It never leaves Hiram's pocket."

"He gave it to me, Mama. Remember? Because of Sarah. So that I could tell people I was married." I hoped that Mama would remember about Sarah and the circumstances of her birth. I did not want to have to explain it. Putting it into words made it sound worse.

"She had a baby." Mama had shut her eyes, wandering in the past as she often did now. "Dead, like my little boy. But they said—" she took a few deep breaths, struggling like a diver for the little air that could enter her lungs, "things. I remember that your father told me." She smiled, her eyes still closed, and her voice strengthened so that she sounded almost like herself. "Strange. I had quite forgotten. To think that so long ago we talked about Hiram, never knowing that he and I would be joined as one."

I shuddered, thinking of the fate I hoped lay in store for Hiram. At least Mama would not know.

There was silence for several minutes, and I thought Mama had drifted off to sleep again. I was startled when she spoke, her eyes still closed.

"They said that Hiram paid the midwife."

"What do you mean, Mama?"

"To destroy the child in the hope that Emmie might live. And she did survive the birth, but the fever took her. My poor Hiram." Her brow creased into deep furrows. "But perhaps it was wrong. . . to destroy the child. And it was just a rumor, after all. Just talk, Jack."

I jumped but then realized she meant my father. I did not want to correct her —let her think he was in the room with us. Perhaps he was.

Mama began talking again, but I could not distinguish the words well. I leaned back in my armchair, listening for the faint sounds in the house, and after a while I half-dozed. I thought I was at the Farm again, looking out of the

workroom window at Hiram getting out of the carriage. His large form loomed over the frail old man with him. I saw Hiram's power, the power to do what he wished with people, because we were all weaker than he—smaller, older, less capable in mind, less able to summon help. My imagination conjured up a picture of Emmie—I saw her as small, childlike, and blonde, and maybe I was seeing Jo too—whimpering in pain as a small, bloody shape was pulled out of her. . .

I jerked upright in my chair. Some noise had awoken me—was it Mama? No, I could hear her breathing, the wet sound that her overtaxed lungs sometimes made. I would have to adjust the way she was laying. Then I realized what I had heard. Voices. Bet's brogue, rising and falling like the sound of the sea—and in counterpoint, a bass rumble. Hiram was home.

Bet must have explained everything, because when Hiram entered the room he did not ask any questions. I nodded a greeting, and he grunted in return, fixing me with a look of distaste in his cold blue eyes. I hastily stood up from the armchair and motioned him to come forward. The smell of cigars wafted over me as he took my place, lifting my mother's small, cold hand and gazing at her intently.

I moved around to other side of the bed. "I will move her up a little more," I said. "Her breathing is rough—propping her up usually helps."

For a moment my stepfather glared at me. And then Mama made a small sound in her sleep, a tiny moan, and his expression changed. Nodding, he lifted Mama gently while I rearranged the pillows so that she would be comfortable. I watched him lay her back as carefully as if she'd been made of glass and wondered if he could really be the ruthless killer I took him for.

"Thank you." Hiram's tone was even, with little warmth but with no hostility either. "I will sit by her now, if you would please leave us alone." He sat in the armchair and gathered Mama's hand into his, running his thumb gently along the back of her hand and leaning forward to kiss her forehead. I backed away from

the bed and turned to go downstairs.

Mama did not wake again. Hiram talked to her, for hours at a stretch, in a low whisper that made it impossible for me to hear him through the closed door. Were they words of love? Simple small talk to comfort her with his presence? Or a confession?

He allowed me to sit in the room with him for much of the last, peaceful forty-eight hours. I drew one of Mama's dainty chairs up to the other side of the bed, and we each held one of her hands. Any animosity that existed between us was suspended as we listened to Mama's breathing grow gradually harsher and more difficult. In the last few hours there were terrifying halts in her breathing; each time I would look mutely at Hiram and he, apparently more accustomed to deathbeds, would shake his head. It was not yet time.

When the moment came when her breathing stopped and did not return, Bet was sharing our vigil. Marie had been summoned two hours before to say goodbye to her mistress but had dissolved into blubbering tears, and Bet had soon sent her away, with Sarah in her arms, to wait in the kitchen.

Martin had come too about an hour earlier and had kissed Mama's cheek and bade her farewell with simple gravity. Hiram was in the room; otherwise, I think I would have hugged Martin to me for comfort. He had been through this just a year before with his own mother, and I had not been there, and now I hated that thought. I followed Martin out of the bedroom, and Bet and I both accompanied him to the door.

"How long?" he had asked Bet.

"Not long, sir. But she'll have an easy time of it, if I'm any judge. There's been no pain as you could call it, just the usual discomforts—a little while longer and she'll pass in her sleep, I'll be bound."

Martin had dropped a brotherly kiss on my forehead and walked away, glancing back at the upper story of our house as he opened the gate. I watched him go and walked slowly back upstairs to measure out my adored mother's last

moments on this earth.

The clock ticked as we all held our breath in the silence, waiting to know if Mama had finally passed into eternity. Hiram felt her hands and her neck, running his hands over them with an intent look of concentration. Then he looked up at Bet and nodded curtly. I sat paralyzed as the two of them swiftly removed all but one pillow from under Mama and gently lowered her into a reclining position. With the lightest of touches, surprising in so big a man, Hiram slid her eyelids over her half-closed eyes.

I started as Bet produced a strip of cloth from one of her pockets and motioned to Hiram to help her close Mama's mouth, which had fallen slightly open with her last breath, and bind her jaw. "Bet—" I did not want to see my mother lying there with a bound face, as if she had the toothache.

"It's only for a short while, Miss. If you don't do it straightaway, it becomes difficult later, you see? By the time we have laid her out, we'll be able to take it off and make her beautiful."

"Laid her out." I looked with trepidation at the still form on the bed.

"Well, you'll want to do it with me, won't you, Miss? I'd hardly want to have that weak-hearted Marie helping me and crying all over poor Mrs. Jackson." She turned to Hiram. "If you could go for the doctor and the undertaker, sir, Miss Nell and I will manage just fine."

43

LEAVETAKING

Bet kindly left me alone with Mama for a few minutes, but I had little to say to the quiet face in its binding whose expression somehow settled into a deeper stillness as I watched. When Bet returned, I was ready to find relief in action.

For the next two hours Bet had me working alongside her in a purposeful hush of whispered voices. Moving mechanically under her direction, I felt calm and almost peaceful; yet I could scarcely believe that my mother had come to the end of her life at not even forty years of age. Still, I recalled, she had lived longer than my father.

Bet labored steadily and efficiently, showing me what to do and explaining every step in detail. I felt terribly shy about seeing my mother's nakedness, but the way Bet arranged things there was no undignified exposure, nothing but gentle respect and love. Indeed, I had never loved this stout, hot-tempered woman so well as when I saw her lovingly wash my mother's still-warm skin with a glow of tenderness in her brown eyes.

"Have you done this many times?" I ventured to ask.

"A few, Miss. First time was helping Ma with my little sister when I was twelve. The diphtheria took her. Ah, and a bonny mite she was, just a little over two years old. I pretended to myself for a while that I was playing with a big, curly-haired doll. It helped me bear it."

How little I knew her, I thought.

And how well she knew me. As horrified as I would have been at the thought

of laying out my own mother's body had I been given time to think about it, there was something peaceable about this form of leave-taking. I had always found hard work easier to bear than idleness, and although I had been unable to shed a tear so far, my hot eyes and aching head felt much better by the time we had Mama attired in her best nightgown and resting in a clean bed. We braided her hair, pale gold in the lamplight, and tied it with a plain, dark-blue ribbon. With the binding cloth removed, her face looked so young, so pretty, that you could imagine her as a young bride waiting for her bridegroom.

The doctor came and went, and the undertaker; given the hot weather we agreed that there would be only the briefest of visitations and that Mama would be buried the next day. So till late in the night Hiram and I held court in our parlor, receiving a steady stream of visitors while Bet and Marie were kept busy dispensing the refreshments that seemed to appear from nowhere, brought by the women of Victory I supposed.

Hiram's face was drawn but expressionless; whatever was going on in his mind was shuttered off as he responded with careful correctness to the speeches of condolence, his handsome visage composed into an expression of reverent sorrow. I was too busy to pay much attention to him, and by the time the last of the visitors left, I had fallen, exhausted, into my own bed. I barely had time to whisper "goodnight" into the darkness, in the direction of Mama's resting place, before sleep took me.

44

SILVER

We buried Mama on a hot, windy day in late September 1871. What little grass grew in Victory's graveyard was parched and yellow from weeks of drought, and the wind whipped dust from the mounded clumps of soil heaped up in preparation for the burial. From where I stood next to Hiram, my tears hidden under my heavy veil, I could see the simple, dignified double grave of my father and little brother. That was where Mama should lie, I thought. But Hiram—who assumed the role of grieving widower with aplomb—had purchased a more prestigious spot for them both and had given instructions for an elaborate grave marker in the shape of an angel.

Two days after the funeral, Hiram left for North Carolina again.

I was glad of it. I had been avoiding him assiduously whenever he was in the house and had invited Martin to dine with us twice in a row so that I would not be alone with my stepfather. So I kept my eyes on my plate as Martin occupied Hiram with political small talk and made sure I escaped to bed before Martin was out of the house. And then, even with my door locked, I slept badly.

To make things worse, now that Mama was gone, I was nominally in charge of the running of the household and responsible for my stepfather's comfort. That was intolerable.

"I will have to leave." I paced the floor of the parlor just as if I had been Hiram, the black silk of my dress swishing gently around my feet. Martin was seated in Hiram's chair, having just partaken of afternoon tea with me. The room was lamplit, as the drapes remained half-closed—Bet would not have it

otherwise. At least she had taken the covers off the mirrors.

"And go where?" Martin leaned forward and counted off the possibilities on his fingers. "If you stay in Victory, Hiram will simply demand that you come home and resume your responsibilities as the lady of the house. Unless you marry?" He smiled at me sideways, his eyes twinkling with amusement as I shook my head vigorously. "You cannot go to Mrs. Lombardi, as Hiram will hear of it. You could go to your relatives in the East, I suppose."

I suppressed a mild epithet as my foot caught in a loose fold of carpet, and I only saved myself from falling flat on my face by an undignified hop. Recovering myself, I tried to keep my voice steady and neutral as I replied. "That course of action is not to my taste, Martin. I am not particularly fond of my cousins."

"Do you intend to run away to Chicago, then? And live on what? Although," he leaned back as an idea struck him, "it would not be entirely impractical. If we could find you a respectable woman to stay with, I could give you enough money to live on until you find employment of some kind. It will not be easy, of course, not with a baby."

I laughed. "I have a little money to start with." I withdrew my bunch of keys —Mama's keys, passed to me upon her death as a token of my new responsibilities—and opened the heavy glass-fronted cabinet where Mama had kept a miscellaneous assortment of porcelain figurines. Lifting a lady in a voluminous pink dress, I withdrew the heavy purse hidden under her hollow skirts and gave it to Martin.

"I always wondered why only Bet was allowed to dust this cabinet. Almost as soon as Hiram was out of the house after the funeral, she showed me its secret."

Martin grinned as he peered into the purse. "Nell, that is a respectable sum of money." He tipped some of the silver dollars into his hand, scrutinizing them. "Dated before the War. . . How did your mother come by them?"

"My father gave them to her when I was very small. He had a theory that a woman should never depend entirely on her husband, it seems. So he began putting aside a dollar from time to time as soon as they were married." I smiled.

The link to my father was even more precious to me than the coins. “He told her to keep them close always, but Bet says he never asked where they were. He wanted the money to be entirely Mama’s.”

Martin gave a shout of laughter. “I always did like Red Jack. And Aunt Amelia and Bet had this hidden in plain sight for all these years.” He retied the purse strings and handed it back to me.

“I have already written to Mrs. Lombardi asking for her advice. She has many acquaintances within the institutions in Chicago. One of them may well need a seamstress. . . and they may accept Tess. Martin, if I can find a way to bring Tess along with me, I intend to. Like me, she needs broader horizons, and I —and I want my friend back.” I swallowed hard; I was not given to crying, but the last few days had weakened me.

“One thing at a time, Nell.” Martin laid his large hand lightly on my shoulder. “Let’s think about finding you a place to live first. You have enough to tide you over while you seek employment, but you cannot make grand plans.” He squeezed my shoulder, shaking it gently. “Not if you are determined to remain independent.”

45

DECEPTION

"I have heard from Mrs. Lombardi," I hissed at Martin from beneath my heavy veil.

"And good morning to you, Mrs. Govender." Martin's tall frame was set off well by the heavy mahogany counter in his store, and his hair glowed against the dark wood of the cubbies ranged behind him. He chucked Sarah under the chin; she blinked sleepily at him, as I had only just lifted her out of her new baby carriage.

"Er—yes. Good morning." I rolled my eyes heavenward. I certainly could not remain in Victory if I could not even remember my own married name. "I will need fifteen minutes of your time, Mr. Rutherford. We should discuss your crapes and bombazines." I motioned a wave to Augusta Rudd and nodded politely as she sailed past me to the door with a hard stare at Sarah.

"And a *very* good day to you, Miss Rudd," Martin said dryly as the doorbell clanged against the rapidly closing door. "Now, Nell, speak fast before I am interrupted again. Or—" he stuck his head through the door that led to the storeroom. "Hallo there! Bob! Come and mind the counter for a few minutes."

A youth of about fifteen popped out of the door like a rabbit from a hat and regarded me with insolent brown eyes.

"I'll thank you not to stare, Bobby Staley." I hitched Sarah up in my arms and followed Martin into the large, neatly ranged back room. Bob pushed his tongue into the side of his mouth and was about to insert a grubby finger into one ear when he saw Martin's glare and thought better of it.

“Make yourself useful and roll the ribbons,” Martin called to Bob through the half-shut door. He waited to be sure that the boy complied with his instruction and then turned back to me.

“Martin.” I threw up my veil, breathing in the mingled smells of linens, cottons, wools, and dye. “I have heard from Mrs. Lombardi. She is going to Chicago.”

Martin raised his eyebrows, and I continued before he could speak. “She and her husband are going to talk with some minister or other about going out West. She says she is weary of fighting the governors’ plans for the Poor Farm, and in any case, her husband has been longing for the challenge of the frontier territories.”

Martin shrugged. “Great opportunities out there, they say. So when will she arrive in Chicago?”

“The third of October. They will stay for two weeks or so—the men will visit several of the local missionary organizations, and Mrs. Lombardi intends to shop and amuse herself with the children. But don’t you see, Martin? I can get away before Hiram comes home and wait for the Lombardis to arrive. They will stay at the Sherman House Hotel; I can afford to stay there for a short time, I am sure. And you will help me find something more permanent, will you not? I would feel so much better if the Lombardis are with me while I am finding my feet.”

Martin closed his eyes and crossed his arms, evidently thinking through my plan. When he opened his eyes his expression was serious. “And what will you tell Bet and Marie?”

I sighed. “Marie gave notice this morning, Martin. She wants to go home to help her mother with the new baby, and I said she could go at the end of the week. And Bet—well, I think that she would not stay on if I left. She could have retired years ago; she has money that her husband put in railroad stocks and has never spent much of her wages.” I smiled, feeling rueful. “It’s strange, Martin. I cannot afford to keep servants, but Bet could. She loved Mama too much to leave.”

“And I will make a point of seeing Bet as soon as I return—as soon as I can do it without Hiram knowing.” Martin grinned. “Isn’t life complicated when we

engage in deception, Nell?”

I ducked my head in a nod. That was a lesson I had learned all too well in the last eighteen months.

“You should not be seen leaving Victory with me,” Martin continued. We were speaking in hushed tones, but now he raised his voice. “Bob! Have I not told you enough times that when you have nothing else to do, the stairs and sidewalk should be swept? Get to it.” The jingle of the bell told me that Bob had complied.

“I will have to come back here,” Martin continued, “and if I am seen with you, I will get trouble from Hiram. Listen. Take the river road as far as the portage landing. I’ll go round by the main road; there’s that stretch that branches off to the portage. How will you travel? By hired cart, I suppose. So it will take you four hours. . . I will be there before you. And carry a pistol. I will give you one.”

I smiled, shaking my head. “I don’t know how to fire a gun, Martin. But I will take my father’s big horsewhip. Would Tuesday be too late, do you think? I dread Hiram coming home before I can leave.”

“But if you leave on Saturday or Sunday, there will be more people on the road. Tuesday will be quiet. And Hiram has been gone less than a week. Unless it is an extremely brief visit, he will not return.”

I nodded, but a small knot of worry curled itself into the bottom of my stomach. I had no idea what Hiram would do now.

46

ROAD

The smooth track ahead of me was scattered with leaves that had begun falling early, exhausted by the drought and already brown and crisp. The motion of the cart whipped them into rustling acrobatics, and the sound as they were crushed beneath the wheels provided a counterpoint to the steady rumbling of the cart and the regular thud of the horse's feet on the cracked, parched mud. Overhead the sky was an even, rich blue without a trace of cloud; to my left the river, sluggish at its banks but fast and sparkling in the middle of its broad, brown expanse, added the occasional gurgle to the sounds all around me.

I was not accustomed to handling a horse and cart, and it had taken some time for the tension in my shoulders to relax. I was driving a kind of small, lightweight dray, which I had chosen for the extra room—Sarah was asleep in a traveling basket wedged tightly between my two carpetbags—and because it had four wheels. I did not want to try rehitching the horse, should the occasion arise, into the shafts of a two-wheeler.

I risked a quick glance behind me; Sarah was sleeping peacefully. I quickly returned my gaze to the road ahead. I had already learned that I was not a good enough horsewoman to keep the carthorse—even though he was a steady, sweet-tempered animal—fully under control while I shifted my weight round to look at the cart or the road behind me. If my father had lived, he would have made sure I could ride a horse and drive like an expert. But Mama had never thought of such a thing.

Not being able to see behind me made me nervous, and I made sure Papa's whip was by my side. I had twice been scared nearly out of my wits by a rider suddenly whisking past me, his approach masked by the noises of my surroundings. And now a hot breeze rustled the tops of the trees, and the dust from the road was blowing in my face. And I wanted to look behind me, every minute.

What was I afraid of? Robbers? I had little enough of value with me, just Mama's purse of silver dollars that I had sewn into my skirts just under the waistband. It made a heavy lump that I could certainly feel, but it could not be seen by casual eyes.

I scrubbed my hand impatiently over my face, cursing the dust. This was much harder than I had imagined. I thought longingly of our parlor, which suddenly seemed a haven of peace and comfort. I felt a pang in my breast as I thought of my parting from Bet; I wished I had been able to explain my plans, but if there was even the slightest chance of Hiram bullying them out of her, I did not want to risk it. Her face had looked drawn and lined as she assured me that she trusted me to do the right thing and hugged me as tightly as if I had been her own daughter.

The horse stumbled slightly, and I felt my heart give an answering jolt. How long had I been on the road? My arms were sore from the unaccustomed position holding the reins, and my derrière was suffering from bouncing on the hard wooden bench. I realized I was not nearly such a country girl as I imagined myself.

We jogged along for another interminable stretch, and I gradually reconciled myself to the fact that I would have to stop. I had no idea how far I had to go before we reached the portage landing. I thought I knew the road, but now every tree and bush seemed to resemble the next. We had passed the prettiest spot on the river a long while back, and I had grimaced at the sight of the clump of young willows that marked the end of my childhood and yet had given me the greatest gift I had ever known.

Now the road was endless, and I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. I was parched—why on earth had I stowed my water-flask in the bed of the cart

instead of hanging it somewhere within reach?—and I needed to avail myself of the bushes. My mouth felt gritty, I had to keep blinking to clear the dust from my eyes, and my bladder was very aware of the bouncing motion beneath me. What's more, Sarah was making the little noises that would eventually become a full-fledged roar of hunger.

The undergrowth to my right had become very dense, a jumble of tall goldenrod and sunflowers flanking the path and a stand of young serviceberry bushes beyond. A spindly ash tree by the river held out an inviting branch, just right for tying up a horse. I sighed and spoke to the animal, pulling on the reins. He stopped obediently, and I clambered down in a stiff, ungainly manner that would have had Martin in fits of laughter. Blast the man—why could he not have arranged a meeting place closer to home? I hastily tied the horse's reins around the branch, hoping that I knew what I was doing. I lifted out Sarah's crib but did not dare take it into the woods with me, thinking of biting insects, nettles, and poison ivy. I nestled it well away from the river and the horse's hooves and practically ran for the bushes.

The position necessitated by my, shall we say, activities made it impossible for me to see Sarah, but I could hear her complaining wail. She would have to wait until I had drunk some water and found a patch of grass to sit on, I thought hard-heartedly. I was sore in every muscle and as dry as a coal-scuttle.

I pushed through the dense patch of bushes, noting that Sarah sounded a little happier. Good. Perhaps she had seen something that would keep her amused until I was ready to feed her.

And then I nearly fainted.

47

RIVER

It was Hiram, of course. The prickling sensation on my back that had been with me during the entire journey had not been my imagination. How, in the name of all of Bet's saints, did he come to be right behind me? There was something so demonic about his sudden appearance that for a moment I was paralyzed.

His back was to me, but I knew it was he. And he was holding Sarah. And the whip—I had left it on the bench of the cart. Oh, God.

I found the strength to move forward, and my boots crunched on the dried leaves. Hiram turned slowly to face me and smiled.

I swallowed hard as fear plummeted into my belly. I kept my voice as even as I could. "Why don't you give her to me, Stepfather? She will need changing and nursing." Sarah, used to seeing Hiram in the parlor, was cooing and gurgling happily into his face, her hunger apparently forgotten.

Hiram's smile did not reach his eyes. "She's so very small, isn't she, Nell? So very small." He walked a few steps backward, bouncing Sarah in his arms and looking the very picture of a doting grandfather. He was getting very close to the river.

I think I tried to say something, but it came out in a kind of squeak. I took two or three steps forward, and Hiram took the corresponding number of steps back—toward the river. I stopped.

"How did you find me?" The thin, wavering voice that came out of my parched mouth and tight vocal cords barely sounded like mine. I had to keep him

talking, had to hope for a miracle—someone to come by, perhaps. This road was used regularly this time of year. Perhaps Martin was nearer than I thought. Perhaps I should scream. Did I even have the strength to scream? I felt as if all my limbs had melted.

"I saw you leaving Victory." Hiram hushed Sarah, who began to grizzle a little. "I came back just in time, it seems. Not very skilled at driving a cart, are you, Eleanor?"

I saw movement out of the corner of my left eye and whirled around in desperate hope. But it was a horse, saddled and bridled, slowly making its way out of the woods. It lifted its nose to whicker at us and then returned its attention to a patch of dried grass by the side of the path.

"My horse," Hiram confirmed. "Did you know," he continued quite conversationally, rocking Sarah from side to side, "that when I was in the Militia during the War, we used these woods to practice our maneuvers? I know every trail and every marker. There are many, if you know where to look. We used to practice stalking each other; an amusing game, and the fellows said I was rather good at it." He smirked almost as if he were expecting praise.

I drew myself up and faced Hiram squarely. "Just give me Sarah, please, Stepfather. Then we can talk."

"You are a strong woman." There was a tinge of respect in Hiram's voice. "Red Jack's daughter in every respect—except for the ability to handle a horse." He actually giggled. "I admire your strength, even though I do not find it particularly becoming in a woman. Not a bit like your dear Mama."

"Mama loved Sarah very much, Stepfather. You will not harm her, will you, for the sake of my mother's memory?" I tried not to sound as though I were pleading.

Hiram continued as if I had not spoken. "But strong women, you see, can be controlled. And how? By love, my dear Nell, by love."

"What are you going to do?" My voice was a hoarse whisper. I took another step toward him, knowing it was useless but drawn helplessly on by the presence of my child in his arms. We were very near the riverbank now, and I could see the water, low in relation to the bank's muddy sides, rushing and gurgling on

some small rocks near the river’s edge.

Hiram’s reply was to tense his whole body and then whip round viciously in the direction of the river. I saw his shoulders bunch, and then my baby—my Sarah—was soaring through the air in a perfect arc, aimed right at the center where the water flowed swiftest.

48

AFLOAT

I didn't hesitate, didn't think, didn't care about Hiram or the river or the stones. Some kind of noise came out of me as I took the three steps to the very edge—a scream, perhaps, or a yelp, or a howl. Then I hit the water feet first, and my shins were scraping against rocks and the water felt so cold and I propelled myself forward with all my might, my arms flailing as Sarah's had as she soared through the hot breeze.

One final push, and suddenly there was no more riverbed under my feet. I was out in the middle, and underneath the cold upper layer of water I could feel a deeper layer, colder still, that tugged at my petticoats. My calves stung, cut by the rocks no doubt, and my clothing was wrapping around my legs and made it hard to stay on the surface. I went under a couple of times and came up gasping and choking, spitting out river water that tasted pure and fresh.

I could swim—had learned as a child—but with my skirts pulling me downward the only thing that kept my head above water that day was the sight of my baby's red head a hundred yards ahead of me. Her clothing had ballooned up around her and was keeping her afloat, but I knew that could not last for long. I kicked desperately at my petticoats until they finally floated away from my body, returning occasionally to wrap lovingly around my legs in an attempt to pull me deeper into the river's embrace.

I could feel at my waist the weight of Mama's purse, doing nothing to keep me afloat. I had forborne to put on a corset that morning, rebelling against the idea of making myself uncomfortable for nearly a whole day's journey. And I

was only wearing two thin petticoats and very light drawers under my plain cotton dress. If I had been arrayed in the traveling costume of a society lady, I would have drowned for sure.

I did not seem to be getting any nearer to Sarah. She was not making any sound, and I was horrified that she might be dead. This thought made me kick out like a madwoman determined to escape her keepers and thrash my arms wildly in an attempt to make faster progress forward. Somewhere ahead I could hear the weir; so I was near the portage landing? I wished I could spare the energy to scream. *Martin,* I thought. *Martin, please be there*.

"Stay afloat, stay afloat, stay afloat." I realized that I was whimpering through chattering teeth as I pushed forward. I had gained a yard—two yards—ten—on Sarah and could see one of her arms waving as the current bore her swiftly onward. She was still alive, then.

A crashing sound to my right made me whip my head around as I kicked frantically onward. Far away on the riverbank I could see the tall form of my stepfather flinging himself against two trees as he searched the water for evidence of our distress. Oh, God, oh, God, he was not leaving until he made sure we were dead, was he? When he killed Jo and Blackie he had simply left the final outcome to fate, but he would not stop now until he had ground Sarah and me into the dust with the heel of his boot.

I looked forward again and realized I could not see Sarah. My whimpering shaped itself into a prayer: "Please, God, let me find her. Please, God, let her be alive." I could barely see a thing with the water swirling around my chin, but I whipped my head round from the right to the left and back again, wiping the water off my face whenever I could spare an arm from the task of staying afloat.

I could not believe my eyes when I saw a white blur not five yards to my left. A tree, which must have once grown where the river now ran, was sticking a single branch out of the water—and Sarah was caught on it. I could even hear her wailing feebly.

I agitated my arms and legs in a fury of desperation, and in just a few moments had a hold of Sarah with my right hand, my left wrapped around the miraculous tree.

I took stock of the situation. Ahead of me I could see the line of the weir, maybe two hundred yards from where we clung desperately to life. The opposite bank was far away, too far to swim to. But the nearer bank—where Hiram must surely be, although I could not see him—was close, and I could see small branches and pieces of flotsam being directed toward it by some quirk of the current. That same current must somehow have taken both of us away from the deepest water, although I had been concentrating so hard on my baby that I hadn't noticed.

I scanned the bank but still saw no Hiram. The trees were dense at this spot, and it was possible that the trail swung away from the riverbank as it approached the portage landing—where was the portage landing? The current had scooped out a sandy pool at the water's edge, a small haven before the river swung round to crash over the weir.

Sarah moved feebly in my arm, and I realized how tired and cold I was. It was now or never. I planted a cold kiss on my baby's wet red hair and let go of the branch.

49

FATE

Reaching the bank was easier than I thought it would be. The current that swung us away from the center of the river was strong, and I only had to aim at the place where I had seen some floating twigs being pulled out of the main race toward the bank. I kicked hard again, and then I suddenly felt solid ground under my feet. There were no rocks here, only sucking mud that overlay a firmer layer. I flung myself forward and grasped a tuft of grass with my free left hand.

It came away from the bank, leaving my arm in midair. I spat muddy water, glanced at Sarah to ensure that I was keeping her mouth above the flow, and took another step forward.

The most horrible scream sounded above and to the right of us, and I looked up to see Hiram coming toward us at a flat sprint. His face was purple and distorted, and in a split second's thought I wondered how I had ever been so foolish as to trust this man, even for a heartbeat, even with Mama in the same room.

He was upon us, and I braced myself for the push or blow that I knew would come. Shielding Sarah as best I could, I set my jaw and looked him straight in his cold blue eyes, which stood out horribly in his darkly flushed countenance.

Then suddenly the nightmare face had gone, and something shot past me into the river. At the same time a loud thud resounded across the water, audible even above the noise of the weir. There was a soft splash, and a dark shape slid along the surface behind us and headed for the center of the river.

I had absolutely no idea what had happened, but I instinctively knew that one threat to our lives was gone. Time to deal with the other. I was having trouble keeping my footing in the eddying water and had fallen again, bringing Sarah perilously close to the water's surface. I grabbed her with both hands and pushed my feet through the mud, holding her high above my head. A frightened wail reassured me that she was still alive, and then my whole body fell against the bank, and I could feel that Sarah was on level ground. I let go.

With two hands free, I was able to dig my long fingers like talons into the muddy bank and haul myself painfully upward. My arms and legs felt like India-rubber, and I could feel scratches and scrapes over every inch of exposed skin, but somehow I managed to drag myself forward and up onto the rank, weedy growth of the riverbank. I grabbed Sarah and pulled myself forward another few feet, gasping and sobbing.

I did not have the strength to stand or even sit. I lay with Sarah clutched to my chest, and I could feel her tiny lungs heaving as she screamed loudly at first, then subsided into shivering sobs. My own breath was coming out in shudders, and I was oblivious to everything around us. So when a hand touched my shoulder, I fainted.

Someone patted my hand and my cheek. Someone called my name. I knew the voice, but my eyes didn't want to open.

Then I remembered Sarah. I could not hear her. My eyelids flew apart.

Martin was kneeling on the ground beside me, doing irreparable damage to a rather good suit of clothes. The damage was being compounded by my muddy, gravelly, but wonderfully alive daughter, who had one hand firmly on Martin's chest while the other grasped a thick stick of rock candy, the end of which was firmly plugged into her mouth. An expression of surprised bliss was in her eyes.

I was aware of a point of acute discomfort somewhere around my waistline. With the help of Martin's free arm, I hauled myself into a sitting position, my wet skirts impeding every movement. I checked the sore place with my hand and

encountered Mama's purse of silver dollars, still firmly sewn into my dress.

Hiram. "What happened to Hiram?" I asked, my voice a mere thread of sound.

Martin put Sarah into my arms and shrugged off his ruined jacket, wrapping it around both of us. He gestured toward the bank, which sloped slightly and was covered with sparse growth. The surface was scored by a mark about a foot long, ending at the riverbank.

"He slipped." His voice was flat. "As simple as that. I saw him running full tilt toward you, and then suddenly his legs seemed to go out from under him. I saw his head hit that"—he indicated a half-fallen tree that overhung the riverbank—"as he went in."

As simple as that. My fate and Sarah's had been determined by a patch of loose, dry grass. I closed my eyes, and for the first time in my life, I believed in a providential God. Not Providence in Hiram's arrogant terms, but a God of justice.

Martin stood up and moved carefully to the muddy edge where I had dragged myself out, scanning the river. I found the strength to stand and tottered over the uneven ground to join him. Martin raised his right hand and pointed.

About fifty yards beyond the weir was a collection of large rocks, sticking out of the water like a mouthful of teeth. They were a landmark to travelers, marking the beginning of forty miles of smooth sailing. They called the place Durand's Point after some long-ago fur trader.

Caught in the rocks, bobbing up and down as the foaming current caught and released it, was a dark shape about six foot long. My stepfather had made one last gamble with fate, and this time he had lost.

I heard shouts and the sound of footsteps crunching on dried leaves. Two men made their way toward us. One of them was perhaps in his forties, with the carefully plain suit and hat of a pastor, and the other was a muscular young man of about twenty, dressed for a day's labor. Their long, thin faces and scanty blond

hair indicated that they were related. The younger man had Martin's horse by its bridle.

"Are you hurt? What happened?" asked the older man, clearly trying to take in the meaning of my soaked condition and Martin's comparatively dry clothes.

"My stepfather." I pointed in the direction of the rocks.

"Dear heaven!" The pastor's eyes grew round as he saw the body. He swung to face the young man, who was stolidly contemplating the black shape in the water. "Stephen, my boy, as quick as you can. Get back to the farm and call for Nathaniel and Jacob to come back with you. We cannot leave. . . he will be torn . . ." He was clearly trying to avoid having to explain the need for urgency in removing the body, but I understood. If they did not get Hiram out whole, pieces of him would eventually wash up by the crossing. I shuddered, and Martin pressed his jacket more closely around my shoulders.

"We will be most grateful for your help." Martin's voice was curt.

The pastor stared at us with, I thought, rather a strange expression and then turned to his son. "Go now. Quickly." The younger man threw the bridle at Martin and set off at a fast clip away from the river.

I shrugged my way out of Martin's grasp and shoved Sarah at him. Stumbling away as far as I could, I vomited a large quantity of river water into the bushes.

When I returned, Martin and the pastor were still watching Hiram's body tumble against the rocks. The pastor made a tut-tutting noise as I approached, wiping my mouth feebly. "You are most fortunate your husband was here to help you," he said, a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

"He is not my husband." Seeing the pastor's eyes narrow, I hastened to add, "He is a family friend. My husband is—is dead."

The minister screwed up his face, apparently thinking hard, but then seemed to relinquish the effort and addressed me with a small bow. "A deplorable situation in any event. But," he added, seeming to recall where we were, "you are cold; let us take you to a warm fire and give you whatever aid we can offer. My son, Stephen, works on a farm close to here, and they can certainly make you and your—oh my, yes, your child," his eyes focused on Sarah, a limp, wet

bundle in Martin's arms, "clean and comfortable. Perhaps, sir," his eyes lifted to Martin's face, "I could prevail upon you to take the young lady on your horse?"

"I have a horse and cart of my own, back there. Please, look after the poor animal; don't leave him tied up there." I pointed back along the trail.

After some discussion about who would do what—a ridiculous waste of time while I stood shivering despite the hot wind—Martin handed Sarah to me and swung his long legs over his horse's back. The pastor and I watched Hiram's body tumble in the turbulent water until I, in danger of being sick once more, was forced to turn away. I kept my eyes tight shut and hugged Sarah to me until Martin returned, leading my horse by the bridle with Hiram's animal tied behind the cart.

At last we turned away from the riverbank. Behind us, the black shape rose and fell in the foaming waters, striking the rocks as it rose to the surface.

50

SAFETY

No more than an hour later I sat by a freshly lit fire, wrapped in several blankets. An intermittent plashing sound indicated the filling of a large tin bath in the next room. I still smelled of the river and had mud in my hair, but Sarah had needed a much smaller quantity of warm water to restore her to her sweet baby smell. She had nursed lustily and then fallen asleep in the crib Martin brought in from our cart.

"I hope she will not become ill from having swallowed all that water." I peered at her anxiously, but her cheeks were rosy and her breathing regular.

"And mud." Martin sat opposite me in his shirtsleeves, having completely abandoned his ruined jacket. His face was troubled. "What do we tell people about Hiram's death?"

"What's wrong with the truth?" I was sure that my face reflected the anger that had been slowly burning within me since I recovered my wits enough to think. "He threw—he threw her, Martin. You didn't see it. My baby. A tiny baby, and he threw her—" I could not continue because my throat was constricting with rage and the effort to keep my voice down.

"It was a good thing I decided to head up the road to meet you, my dear. You were late, you know." Martin reached out to my hand and then seemed to recoil from the idea. "But Nell, think. The pastor is already suspicious of the two of us —have you not realized that yet? He thinks we are lovers, I believe."

I felt my face flame up with a mixture of anger, embarrassment, and some other emotion I could not, at that moment, identify. "On what grounds?"

“You were fleeing from your stepfather to meet me. With a baby. And he only has to ask a few people in Victory about the husband that nobody has ever seen and that nobody can quite bring themselves to believe in.” Martin’s smile was grim. “Of course, my own reputation would be immeasurably improved by the notion that I am your lover.”

My hands curled into fists, and I could feel my fingernails digging into my palms. I spent a few moments staring into the spitting fire, but my mind seemed to be moving with extreme slowness. Finally I looked up at Martin who was waiting patiently for my answer, the reflection of the flames turning his white-blond hair to an orange hue and darkening his pale skin.

“What would you have me do?”

Martin’s face was grave. “We must take a risk, Nell. Do you think anyone in Victory knows he had come after you?”

“I’m not sure.” I thought hard. “He said that he saw me leaving. Do you think he would have shown much emotion as he began to follow me? I think not, Martin. Hiram always tried to hide his emotions.” It was so strange speaking of my stepfather in the past tense. “It is possible he simply rode off quite calmly.”

“If that is the case, then you should say that you and he were riding together to meet me. Tell them—the pastor, I suppose, and all the others who will want to hear the story—that you foolishly took Sarah near to the river edge to see the water and fell in. And that Hiram was trying to save you.”

I felt a cold lump grow in my belly. “Then Hiram would look like a hero.”

“If we try to make him look like a murderer—”

“Which he is,” I interrupted.

“—Which he is, yes, but if we accuse him, we will have to show some evidence. Do we have any? If he is a hero, the town will be too busy lauding his name and commiserating you on his loss to enquire much further.”

“But—another lie, Martin.” I bit my lip. “Even a lie told for a good purpose has a way of perpetuating itself, doesn’t it? Look at all the trouble I caused by refusing to tell the truth about Sarah’s father.”

A small smile curved Martin’s lips, but then a thought struck him and he looked anxious. “Did you refuse to tell because it would ruin the man?”

I grimaced and glanced over at the young woman who had just come from tipping another large quantity of water into the tub. Our conversation had been in whispers, and we were obviously arousing her curiosity.

“Not at all, Martin. He was perfectly free to marry me. I did not wish it, is all. I wished for him to continue his own path and me mine. He does not even know.”

Martin’s frown deepened. “That is also an injustice, Nell. A man should know his children.”

“And the lie of omission that I decided upon will doubtless follow me wherever I go.” I squared my shoulders and looked Martin in the face. “It would not. . . I mean, the time for writing to him is past. He is engaged to be married.”

Martin opened his mouth as if a thought had just struck him, but a cough made us both look up.

“Miss?” The young woman, one of the farmer’s daughters, was standing at the door. “You should come and wash now. Your friend”—indicating Martin—“brought your trunk in from the cart, so all your clean clothes will be ready for you. It’s not next to the fire, but we thought you’d rather have a bit of privacy; anyways, it’s warm enough in there.”

Martin stood and held out a hand. “Up you come. Go and make yourself clean and presentable, and we will tend to Sarah if she wakes. And then I will take you home.”

By the time I emerged from the room—clean, dry, and respectably dressed once more—Sarah was awake, and Martin was playing with her. Also in the room was the pastor, and his manner had quite changed.

“My dear young lady,” he said as I entered the room, “why did you not tell me that your noble stepfather lost his life trying to save you?”

Martin forestalled my answer. “She has had a terrible shock, Pastor. I do not believe even now that she is able to speak of this day’s events.”

I nodded in silence, responding to Martin’s warning look.

“Let me assure you, Madam, that we have retrieved the poor man’s, er, mortal frame and will transport it to Victory for you.” The pastor hesitated, and for a moment I thought he was going to make a speech. Realizing that my legs were barely supporting me, I sat down and Martin immediately leaped to his feet, causing Sarah to coo with delight at the movement.

“I must take her home, my dear sir. I owe you a debt of the deepest gratitude for your help, but now Mrs. Govender needs rest and quiet.” Handing Sarah to me, he steered the pastor out of the room, talking to him in a low voice. The preacher may not have realized how his voice carried, because I heard him say, “Well, you must look after her. Obviously she is not very careful for her own safety.”

I swallowed abruptly, tears stinging my eyes. No, obviously I was not. I saw again my baby, her arms flailing as she flew through the air. I saw pale blue eyes shining out of an empurpled face. And then I began at last to cry, holding Sarah tightly to me, feeling the reassuring warmth of her tiny body against mine.

51

BEGINNING

Two days later I stood staring into the hole that held my mother and which was now to receive Hiram. A layer of earth covered Mama's casket, of course, but it was so soon after her own burial that I could still see stray petals from the flowers that had decorated her grave. Martin held my arm; as I was the only family of my mother and stepfather, he had insisted that, as my oldest friend, he would stand by my side. Bet was on the other side of the hole, sniffling noisily into a black-bordered handkerchief, and the rest of the mourners —Hiram's political cronies, Mother's lady friends, and a host of store-owners and other respectable citizens of Victory—milled around at the end of the grave, nodding to acquaintances and exchanging remarks on the sadness of the occasion.

The service at the church had gone on for what seemed like a thousand years. As Hiram's friends had sung his praises for rescuing me from the river, I could feel my jaw clench, and it was all I could do not to shout out the truth right there in the church. And then the endless line of people offering their condolences—Martin stood to one side and slightly behind me, just, as he said, to catch me if I fainted. That remark had brought a smile to my lips, but it was the only one that day.

I hated, hated, hated that my mother was buried with Hiram, in sight of my father's grave. If the good people of Victory knew the truth about Hiram, I thought as I stared down into the chasm of brown clay and tried not to think of Mama in her coffin, they would bury him in the weediest, most neglected corner

of the burial ground, along with the illegitimate children and suicides. They would spit on the mound and place no flowers there. Hiram deserved to become a legend of evil, a cautionary tale of how Victory nearly elected a murderer as its mayor.

But I remained silent. I let them believe that Hiram was a hero who had rescued me and my child from the river and lost his life in the deed. Nobody asked where we had been going that day, and neither Martin nor I volunteered any information. To speak of any of the true events of that day would unravel the whole fabric of lies that my life had become since the day I began flirting with Cousin Jack Venton. And I chose to stay snug inside that cocoon of lies, protected by the reticence that prevailed in this respectable town against gossiping, against prying, against inadvertently encountering the truth.

At long last it was over. No wake had taken place; Hiram was in no fit condition to be put on display. In lieu of entertaining half of Victory to a mourning feast for the second time in a month, I had made a donation to the Society for the Relief of the Deserving Poor.

“I will tell Mrs. Lombardi the truth.” I was sitting on the red settee, staring at Mama’s chair opposite. The home I thought I had left forever was now, presumably, mine; in the next few days I would have to meet with Hiram’s lawyer and sort through the tedious details of his life, matters about which I was entirely in the dark.

Martin was perched on the very edge of Hiram’s chair as if he barely wished to associate himself with it. I would have to have those chairs replaced, I thought. Then I realized that I was thinking in terms of staying in Victory. Did I really want to do that and face down the gossips and the rumors as Sarah grew older?

“I will still go to Chicago, Martin. Mrs. Lombardi will be there by now and will stay for at least two weeks, she said. So I will visit her there, tell her the truth, and ask her advice. Somebody other than you or I should know the truth

about Hiram.” I felt my jaw tighten. Twice in the last two nights I had woken up whimpering in fear, feeling sure that Hiram was in the house with me and would break down my door to kill me and my baby. I was sure that these fears would pass, but. . . I looked around the excessively elaborate parlor with its heavy furniture and multiplicity of knickknacks, antimacassars, lace curtains, and all the trimmings of respectability and felt more trapped than I ever had at the Farm.

I leaped to my feet and headed to the window, staring blindly out of the panes at the quiet street beyond. I heard Martin move behind me, and then he was gently turning me to face him, grasping my wrists and moving his thumbs along the backs of my hands in a way that made me feel quite peculiar, as if I were once more gasping for air in the river.

“Nell . . .” The word hung suspended in midair for a moment, and then Martin took a deep breath and smiled, kissing my forehead gently. “You are a brave woman. Yes, by all means talk with your Mrs. Lombardi. I would quite like to meet her—shall I come with you? Whatever you decide, my dear, I will help you to carry out your plans.”

I smiled, but my heart was not in the smile. I had complicated my life terribly, hadn’t I? The simplest course of action seemed to be to start again, and a new life would not include the man who was standing before me, dearer to me than a brother.

I shook myself mentally, withdrawing my hands from Martin’s and crossing to the bellpull to ring for Bet. “Will you take tea with me, Mr. Rutherford?”

Understanding that I needed to change the mood, Martin grinned and bowed with an ironic air. “Certainly, my dear Mrs. Govender.”

“And another thing.” I put my hands on my hips. “Whatever happens, I will get rid of that stupid name. I will be Nell Lillington or nothing.”

52

MONEY

The direction my life would take was decided for me the next day.

Leopold Buchman, Hiram's man of business, had only just returned from a month's visit to Baltimore and had missed the funeral. He duly presented himself at my mother's—my—house on October the sixth and was shown into the parlor. I came in a few minutes later, having handed Sarah over to Marie, straightened my mussed hair and wiped a few baby-related stains from my black dress.

Mr. Buchman greeted me with a quaint European bow and handed me to a chair. He was a small, slender man, with pale skin and tight black curls of hair surrounding a bald pate. He had a metal box with him, marked "H. Jackson, Esq."

Mr. Buchman made the usual remarks of condolence, and I replied just as conventionally. He did not seem terribly disturbed by Hiram's death, even though he was doubtless sorry to lose a good client. We talked a little about the unseasonably warm weather and the unpleasant hot wind that was whipping up the dust on the streets, and then finally Mr. Buchman seemed prepared to get down to business.

"I suppose you have come to talk to me about my stepfather's will," I remarked.

Mr. Buchman cleared his throat and laced his hands over one knee. "That is partly the reason. You are aware, of course, that since your lamented mother predeceased Mr. Jackson, her property passed to him under her will, and so you

inherit directly from your stepfather rather than from her, your stepfather having no other legitimate heirs." Was it my imagination, or did he lay some slight stress on the word "legitimate"?

"Yes, my friends have explained that to me." Indeed, I had discussed the matter with Martin.

"Unfortunately . . ." Mr. Buchman's face worked as he tried to frame his sentence, "Unfortunately, your stepfather died indebted to a large amount."

I thought of Hiram's store and all its appurtenances and felt my brow furrow in puzzlement. "How could that be? I always thought that my stepfather's business was successful."

"Indeed it was, and it continues to be so. Your stepfather was drawing on the monies produced by his store to fund his political activities, and, ah, for other necessities. The business itself—the goodwill and the real estate—has long been the property of a Chicago investor."

I felt quite cold. "How is that possible?" I whispered.

"That store flourishes, Mrs., ah, Govender,"—the way Mr. Buchman pronounced my presumed name was an indication of his lack of belief in it—"in an excellent way for a modest business. But it has never produced quite enough money for the kind of lifestyle Mr. Jackson enjoyed. His political life, his, ah, entertaining, his many travels. . . he had been exceeding his income for some years when he married your mother. I am not at all sure how much she knew, because she quite cheerfully signed over her right to manage her own money to him."

Oh, Mama, I thought. *You never did like to think about money*. We had always, when I was a child, had just enough to get by comfortably and even save a tiny amount for my dowry—I spared a thought to what might have become of that. By living quietly, the two of us would always have had enough.

"There were also, ah, other considerations." Mr. Buchman fidgeted with a small key, which presumably fitted the lock in the box that lay by his feet. "You are aware, I am sure, that your stepfather visited North Carolina at least once a year?"

I nodded, thinking of all the times I had been glad he was in North Carolina

and not in Victory.

“He had a small financial interest there that was unknown to his creditors and would return to Victory supplied with cash that he could use to maintain himself in apparent ease. He also, about five years ago, contracted, ah, obligations in that state.”

“Obligations?” I had no idea what the man was talking about.

“There was a child . . .” My head swam, and I know I went pale because Mr. Buchman interrupted himself. “Are you quite well, Mrs., ah, Govender?”

I took several deep breaths. “Yes. Please continue.”

“A liaison that Mr. Jackson contracted in the town of Fayetteville right at the end of the War—just about the time when he set up the business arrangement that was to prove so useful to him—resulted in the birth of a male child. He is living and healthy. And the mother was blackmailing your stepfather with the threat of revealing his existence to the world at large.”

For five years! No wonder Hiram had been so quick to eliminate Jo. He probably feared a repeat of the same strategy, feeble-minded though the poor thing was. At least, I reflected wryly, the woman in Fayetteville was strong enough to stand up to him.

I kept my voice neutral. “And of course my stepfather paid the money.”

“Always. He never missed a payment. He was deathly afraid of the secret coming to light. You see,” Mr. Buchman again searched for words somewhere on the ceiling and eventually looked down at his feet as he finished the sentence, “the mother is a woman of color.”

“Ah.” I understood perfectly. An illegitimate child was bad enough, but people often shrugged their shoulders when a man sowed his oats outside his own field. Some social taboos, though, were not to be broken in our corner of the world; the knowledge of such a child would have meant political death to Hiram in Victory, where colored people were a despised, gawked-at rarity.

“There is a picture,” Mr. Buchman continued, “which of course is now your property, as are the letters of blackmail. Naturally I have already written to inform the woman that Mr. Jackson is deceased and that there are no persons left with any interest in protecting his good name. I put it that way,” he continued

apologetically, “so that she would not seek to maintain the enterprise at your expense. If she is a sensible woman, as I think she is, she will be content with what she has gained so far, which is a considerable amount.”

“I will see the picture.” My curiosity had the better of me. “But I do not want to see the letters. If it is possible, I would like you to continue to store my stepfather’s papers at your premises.”

“Of course.” Mr. Buchman lifted the metal box onto his knees, and deftly unlocked it. His hand slid under some of the papers to what was obviously a well-remembered location, and he drew out a daguerreotype and handed it to me.

“The boy looks white.” I saw a handsome young fellow of four or five years old with a sweet smile and a mop of tight blond curls. He was dressed very neatly in the usual frills worn by very young boys in good families. The woman standing behind him, one slim hand resting on his shoulder, could have been his servant; she was dark-skinned indeed but did not look like a Negress. I thought that Indian and maybe some European blood was mixed into her veins. She was smartly dressed, diminutive, and graceful looking. Quite like my own mother in all but color.

“Yes.” The man of business nodded vigorously. “Nature often plays such tricks when there is mixed blood, but it cannot be denied that he is the offspring of the two of them.”

I looked harder. Yes, there was a definite resemblance. Mother and son had the same shape of face and the same regal bearing—but that was Hiram’s chin on the lad, and the eyes that looked at the photographer were disconcertingly pale.

Mr. Buchman took the daguerrotype out of my unprotesting fingers. “Quite damning, is it not? Well, the woman did very well out of your stepfather and contributed substantially to the parlous financial position in which he died.”

“I am destitute then?” I had recovered from the shock and lifted my head high. I could survive without Hiram’s money.

“No, no, not by any means. I have telegraphed to a trusted colleague in North Carolina to investigate Mr. Jackson’s affairs there, and I am already speaking to his creditors on a most discreet basis. I believe that we will be able to salvage a

modest, but not negligible, sum. You must leave this in my hands, and I will serve you well. But I'm afraid this house will have to be sold."

"I understand." As Mr. Buchman rose to leave, with many muttered words of sympathy and regret, another question struck me. "What is the boy's name?"

"Louis Jackson."

53

TRUST

"Another child!" I paced up and down the parlor just as if I had been Hiram, my arms lifted to the heavens. "Another child! What was wrong with that man?"

"A low resistance to temptation, I would surmise." Martin was sitting watching me, his arms crossed. "His first wife had, after all, been dead for some time."

"I don't know what you mean." I stopped pacing, frowning at Martin in confusion.

"Then I won't enlighten you." One corner of Martin's mouth twisted down, and then he smiled. "Nell, I declare that you are more concerned that Hiram fathered another child than you are about your own financial situation."

I shrugged. "I do not need Hiram's money."

Martin leaned forward, his expression suddenly serious. "You have lived at a certain level of comfort all your life. Even at the Poor Farm"—he held up one hand to cut off my interruption—"you were sheltered and fed. You have absolutely no idea what it is like to have nowhere to live and no food. And you have a small child. You must give some serious thought to your future."

"You mean you wouldn't take us in? As a dear friend, of course." I batted my eyelashes in Martin's direction.

I was gratified to see that Martin blushed dark pink, making his blond eyebrows stand out wonderfully. "Of course I would take you in. I have already told you I would ma—"

I laughed. “I am not serious, Martin. Don’t forget that just days ago I was ready to depart with merely a purse of coins. In fact, I still intend to work for my living. I am quite convinced that by applying my mind to the situation, I can avoid touching whatever capital Mr. Buchman can salvage from the damage Hiram has done.”

Martin dropped his head into his hands and shook it vigorously. “Independence,” he groaned. “You are certainly Red Jack’s daughter. Could you not simply do what other women do and graciously accept your station in life?”

I ignored him. “I sent Mrs. Lombardi a note to tell her that my departure was delayed. I did not tell her *why* my departure was delayed—better that she hear the news from me along with the rest of the truth about Hiram. If I leave for Chicago on the eleventh, that will still give me several days with her, and before that I will have a little more time to ascertain the state of my finances.”

Martin said nothing, closing his eyes and running his fingers through his hair in mock despair. I smiled as I watched his playacting. With the traumatic events of the last few days behind us, we both seemed to be attempting to bring the old lightheartedness back to our relationship. *Much better that way*, I thought.

“Anyway, back to the matter of the child Hiram sired—”

“What of it?” asked Martin. “You are surely not going to pay a visit to the family.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Only—now that the payments from my stepfather have ceased, do you think the woman will make trouble?”

“How can she? She is in North Carolina and is unlikely to come north to blackmail *you*. And in any event, you will be long gone. I propose that you forget all about Hiram’s little by-blow.”

“I will never forget the name,” I mused. “Louis Jackson. The poor innocent little thing; it is no more *his* fault than Sarah is responsible for the circumstances of her birth.”

“Ah.” Martin’s face brightened. “You are consumed with fellow-feeling for the innocents in the case! How very altruistic of you, Miss Eleanor.”

I aimed a kick at his ankle, which he neatly dodged with a short laugh. In truth, I was consumed by curiosity more than anything else. But Martin was

right: I would never see the woman and her son, who must suffer the fate of those shoved to the margins of society by the sins of the flesh.

"I will promise you one thing," Martin said. "I will help you to invest whatever capital you receive. However small the amount, I can increase it. Do you trust me in this?"

"You are certainly good with your own money." I liked the idea; Martin was a canny investor with a quick eye for opportunity and a steady head when it came to closing deals. "But won't looking after my money compromise you in the eyes of the people of Victory?"

"Well, if they knew about it, they would have a fine old time deciding between two alternatives: that I am a wicked seducer, or that I am entirely incapable of seducing a woman. They can hardly believe both. But they won't know; I will not invest your money in this town. There are much better opportunities in Chicago. I have already moved my own interests there—you should know, Nell, that I have little desire to stay in this backwater." He leaned forward, an eager look on his face. "I have been looking—in a casual way, of course—for a piece of land to build a store in Chicago. But the locations I like the most are already occupied, and barring a miracle, it will take me some time to find the right spot."

I smiled at the ambition that lighted Martin's gray eyes. "Perhaps if I do have any capital to invest, I can invest it in your schemes."

He chuckled, but I could see that the prospect had caught his imagination. "You would have to trust me a great deal to become my business partner, my dear."

"I trust you absolutely."

A smile of delight spread over Martin's square face, and he unfolded himself out of his chair in one fluid movement. "Then that is settled. I will be your right-hand man, and if—note that I say *if*—I am sure that my own business promises well for the future, I will consult you about investing in it. But your own prosperity—and Sarah's—should always come first in both of our minds." He held out his hand, and I shook it. We grinned at each other. Friends, I thought, and now business partners. I was glad that Martin would not disappear entirely

from my life when I set off on whatever new venture awaited me.

“Now I must leave,” Martin said, reaching for his hat. He glanced out of the window. “Heavens, look at that dust! One would think we were in the Sahara. Will it never rain?”

And with a brief bow and a smile in my direction he was gone, leaving me pensive as I watched him lower his head against the stinging dirt whipped up from the street. It would soon be time to make some serious plans for the future.

54

FIRE

It is one thing to plan to make plans; it is another thing to execute one's intentions. So it was that on the following Monday I was not nearly ready for my departure. At least this time I could arrive in the city with a satisfactory amount of clothing and other necessities; in truth, I had been rather daunted by the idea that I would have to sew myself a new wardrobe yet again.

I was gazing half-heartedly at my barely packed trunks and wondering whether I should just take one and send for the rest later when Bet rushed into the room at rather more than her usual speed.

"There's a big fire in Chicago," she announced.

"Another one?" I frowned, thinking of the Lombardis, but there had been so many fires lately that they were no longer really news. "Is it one of the large commercial buildings?"

Bet shook her head vigorously, her eyes growing wider. "It's a whole big part of Chicago, so they say. It started last night, and it's burned up twenty blocks at least already. They've been calling for volunteers from all over, but they say the blaze has been spreading all night, and it's even jumped the river. Terrible, they say. People running around screaming all over the place. You could see the glow in the night, they say, from the church tower right here in the town."

I bit my lip and looked toward the window, where the sky was leaden as if rain were promised, but the hot, dry wind still rattled the trees and whirled dust devils into the air. "Twenty blocks."

"Ay, and the waterworks are destroyed, so there's no water for fighting it.

Like Hell itself, so they're saying." Seeing me blanch, she added, "Yes, Miss Nell, I'm worried too. I have cousins and acquaintances in Chicago, and you have your friends the Lombardis. It's glad I am that you didn't travel there last week."

I nodded vaguely in her direction and then returned my gaze to the window. The wind outside was a veritable gale, howling around the corners of the house like a pack of wolves. It magnified the sense of insecurity that had already been impinging on my resolve to be calm and show fortitude in the face of uncertainty. In the last eighteen months, my world had been rocked in more ways than one. And yet there was an undercurrent of excitement in not knowing where I was headed.

Except that all my plans had begun in Chicago, and that great city was now burning. I crossed to the window and looked to the southeast. Was I imagining things, or was that really an orange glow on the underside of the heavy gray clouds? It must be my imagination, I decided. We were a good fifty miles from Chicago.

A thought struck me, and I opened the window in a hurry and sniffed the air, narrowing my eyes against the dust that whirled up from the street. No smell of smoke. I listened. No cries reached my ears. I could hear, in the distance, all the usual Main Street sounds—the occasional whinny of a horse, the crashing sound as a cart bounced over the rock-hard ruts in the bone-dry road—but nothing else. Victory was tranquil as always, animated only by the wind that pulled curls out of my piled-up hair and eventually made me shut the window, spluttering as I wiped the dust from my mouth and eyes.

No immediate danger to the town of Victory, then. But a fire could catch in a second and consume in minutes. And if you were in the path of it—as the Lombardis could be—there might be no place to run.

"'*In the midst of a calamity without parallel in the world's history, looking upon the ashes of thirty years' accumulations, the people of this once beautiful city*

have resolved that CHICAGO SHALL RISE AGAIN!’”

Martin crushed the slim, eccentrically printed copy of the *Chicago Tribune* in his hands as he folded it roughly. “It is headed *Cheer Up*!” There were dark shadows under his eyes, just as, I knew, there were under mine. For two days we had waited as news of the great disaster drifted up toward Victory. We had woken to a cold drizzle of rain on Tuesday morning, and I was one of a crowd of citizens who gathered in the largest of our churches for an impromptu service, giving thanks that the fire had stopped. Even though I did not relish church, even though I had to endure the stares of the people of Victory, who still gawked at Sarah and whispered to one another when they saw me, and even though I normally considered myself immune to current events, I found that I could not keep still and stay indoors. I wanted to do something. I wanted to put myself where, perhaps, a thread of hopeful news would cross my path. But what rumors there were gave cause for despair rather than hope.

“You have to admire our people, Nell.” Martin leaned back in his chair, massaging his closed eyelids. “Just a few years ago that city was little more than a depot, and they made it into a great metropolis. And now they are going to do it all over again, in brick and steel this time. Why, the ruins are still smoking and yet the merchants of Victory are already stacking their wagons.”

“Well, that is typical.” Anxiety had made me cross. “Don’t forget how much money some of the people around here made from the War.”

“Myself included, you mean.”

“Well . . .” There was truth in that. Glued by concern to his mother’s side, Martin had not even incurred the expense of joining the militia. “But,” I continued, following my train of thought out loud, “you could not possibly have left your mother to cope with your father at that time.”

Martin rose so quickly that his chair rocked backwards. He strode to the window, angry as he always became when his father was mentioned. But then he sighed heavily, and when he turned round to face me his voice was steady.

“I am not shirking my duty this time, Nell. I have already agreed to take a Chicago family into my home for a few weeks and pledged a large portion of my stock to dress the refugees who have lost everything but the clothes on their

backs.”

I rose and crossed the room to lay my hand on his arm.

“I was not accusing you of a lack of altruism, Martin. I will sew for your refugees, if you wish. And let your connections know that I too am willing to host a family.”

“They haven’t asked you yet?”

I looked down at my black dress. “Bet tells me they will not call on me unless it is absolutely necessary, because I am in mourning and live alone with a small child.” I shrugged my shoulders and picked up the newspaper from the windowsill where Martin had laid it. There was column after column advertising for missing people; maybe I should insert an advertisement for the Lombardis. I scanned the closely packed print, my throat catching at the descriptions of missing children.

Martin stretched, yawning, and picked up his hat. “I must return to the store, Nell. Time and tide—” He stopped short and looked me in the face. “You are as white as a sheet. Are you feeling ill?”

I silently handed the paper to him, indicating a spot on one of the columns with my finger.

The husband and children of Mrs. C. Lombardi are missing. They were last seen heading north from the Sherman House Hotel. A boy, Edward, and two little girls, Theadora and Lucy.

That was all. Most of the announcements were equally brief; they were packed so tightly into the space that I might easily have missed the name.

“Teddy, Thea, and Lucy. . . Martin, it can’t be another Lombardi family. Not with the same names.”

Martin looked at me, his eyes unfocused as if he were thinking hard. “The announcement must have been composed at the newspaper office. . . wherever that is. The Tribune building was destroyed.” He set his hat on his head. “That is where I shall begin. I’ll find out where the Tribune’s editors are and wire them an announcement saying you are anxious to hear from Mrs. Lombardi. I will give this address.”

“But Martin,” I realized I was clutching at his sleeve and relaxed my grip, “I

want to go down to Chicago. Mrs. Lombardi is alive, don’t you see, and looking for her family. I must help her.”

“With Sarah? Amid a chaos of smoking, dangerous ruins, looters, and people milling around searching for each other? If someone goes there, Nell, it will be me.” His tone softened, and he grasped my hand. “Now listen, Nellie, let me go arrange for advertisements to be put in the newspapers, and I will ask around to see what is to be done. If it is possible to go to Chicago to look for Mrs. Lombardi and her family, I will do so.”

55

FOUND

We heard nothing. Nothing, for days, as every cart that came from the south disgorged its load of refugees who had found temporary shelter in one of Victory's households and as every wagon that headed back to Chicago did so laden with clothing and food that the people of Victory had donated to the relief effort.

My anxiety for the Lombardi family, and the need to help in any way I could, forced me out of my self-imposed isolation. Neighbors brought families to me to be measured for clothes, and my sewing machine whirred constantly as I tried to supply them with shirts, petticoats, and clothing for the little children who played under my feet as the mothers whispered tales to me of the fear and confusion, the frantic flight amid a jostling, screaming crowd with a wall of flame behind them.

Did they know the name of Lombardi? No, they did not. *And why would they,* I thought. The Lombardis knew nobody in Chicago, just another small family among the thousands of visitors who had fled the burning hotels with no idea of where they were heading. And yet she was there still, somewhere in Chicago. She had been heard of at the Congregational Church, where relief efforts were centered, and at the other churches offering food and shelter. Martin, whose residence now housed a German family by the name of Fassbinder, spent days looking for her in a city that was already being organized for rebuilding, the mess of rubble metamorphosing into neatly stacked piles of reusable brick and stone. If the burnt fragments that were being dumped into the lake contained the

ashes of those who simply disappeared under the onrushing firewall, there was no way of knowing. Chicago was rising again amid the tears of the bereaved.

And then, after an agonizing week, he found her.

The disheveled, distraught woman who climbed down from Martin's gig to fall into my arms bore little resemblance to the neat, smiling matron of my acquaintance. Bet took one look at her ruined boots and the way her clothes hung limp on her gaunt frame and decreed that there would be no gabbing until the poor lady was fed and bathed and had a decent stitch of clothing on her back. So it was not until two hours later that we sat alone by the parlor fire, just as we had done so many times at the Poor Farm. Only now Mrs. Lombardi's damp hair cascaded over her shoulders, and she sat pleating the skirt of one of my housedresses—too long for her and much too broad in the shoulders—with hands that shook with a series of tremors as if a cold wind were passing over them.

"They are lost, Nell. All of them. My children—" her voice broke on a sob, and she clenched her hands as she regained control of her emotions.

"You do not have to tell me about it." Although I wanted to know, very much. I had seen Teddy and Thea and little Lucy often enough that their bright faces were fresh in my memory.

"There's little to tell. We were heading north; we were moving so slowly, with everyone pushing and crying, falling over the things that people would carry a short way and then drop—paintings, pots, chairs—there were animals. . . I saw a cow running with its back on fire. The wind was blowing huge sparks and burning brands onto us from miles away, it seemed, and sometimes you'd hear screaming as a woman's hair caught fire, or her skirt."

I closed my eyes, imagining how terrifying it must have been to be trapped between the crowd in front and the fire behind.

I opened them to see Mrs. Lombardi staring at her hands, which were curled as if remembering the touch of small fingers. Tears were spilling down her

cheeks.

“I had a tight hold of Thea and Lucy, but they were getting so tired. I saw a little girl—she couldn’t have been more than three—crying, all by herself, and I wanted to take her too, but my hands were full. I called to Teddy and Roderick, but my husband couldn’t hear me, and Teddy thought I was scared for his safety. The last time I saw him he was calling back, ‘I’m all right, Mother.’ My brave little man.”

Her tears turned to sobs, and it was several minutes before she could continue. My own eyes stung as I watched my friend weep for the family that had vanished, the children she could not even find to bury.

“A little while later—I became confused about everything, Nell, I didn’t know what time it was or where we were—the girls were so exhausted that Reverend Grueber carried Lucy to Roderick and took Thea in his arms.”

“Reverend Grueber?” I did not recall the name.

“One of the missionary gentlemen we had come to Chicago to meet.” Mrs. Lombardi wiped her face, staring into the parlor fire as if it contained her memories. “I followed on behind, but I dropped back just a few yards to see if I could spot the little girl. Her face haunts me still.” She passed her hand wearily over red-rimmed eyes. “And then all was blackness.”

“What on earth happened?” I leaned forward, poised precariously on the edge of my seat.

“I was hit on the back of my head, here.”

I leaped to my feet and, parting the thick curtain of damp chestnut hair, felt the spot Mrs. Lombardi indicated. Even after all those days, there was a distinct swelling.

“You must see the doctor.” I darted toward the bell to ring for Bet. Mrs. Lombardi put out a hand to halt my progress.

“No need, Nell. I was thoroughly looked over by an excellent medical man in the Congregational Church. I am quite all right, but at the time I had a nasty concussion.”

A chill ran through my bones. “You were surely not left insensible in the path of the fire? Did Mr. Lombardi see you fall?”

“I will never know.” Mrs. Lombardi’s strength seemed to be leaving her as she arrived at this part of her tale, and I took her hand tightly in mine. “I awoke the next morning in an unburned alley. I was clearly on the other side of the river from the fire. A bridge was before me, and I tried to cross it, but the smoke and heat were so intense that I could not. I was sick to my stomach and dizzy, and I was soon dragged back from my quest by a Polish laborer. He had little English, but he made it clear to me that there was no hope.”

I let go of Mrs. Lombardi’s hand and rifled among the pile of newspapers I had refused to allow Bet to remove. I had seen a roughly drawn map of the fire’s progress in one of them.

“Do you think you were here?” I indicated an area that showed the western limits of the fire. It was due northwest of the Sherman House Hotel, which was marked on the map as being the nearest to the Courthouse.

“I could have been.” Mrs. Lombardi’s brow furrowed as she studied the crude map. “Look, here are railroad tracks. I remember that it was a rough-looking place, with freight cars and stretches of rails.”

I had also read that many of the dead—of those who could be found—were discovered just on the other side of the river from where Mrs. Lombardi had awoken. They must have been trying to find their way to that very bridge. “You must have had a guardian angel,” I said, trying to cheer her.

“A guardian angel who robbed me, Nell. I noticed later that my brooch, watch, and reticule were missing. But no matter; he, or she, saved my life.”

Mrs. Lombardi was clearly not going to be able to continue speaking for long, so I asked another question to prompt her story. “Did the Pole look after you?”

“Yes, he was most kind. He took me to his home. But I remember very little; a confused sound of voices speaking words I didn’t understand, people helping me and cleaning me—I remember vomiting,” she shook her head ruefully, “and then nothing until the next day. It must have been noon before they took me to the relief center, and late in the day before I persuaded the doctor there that I was in a condition to leave.”

“You put yourself into danger.” It was not a question; I had heard from

Martin about the looting and lawlessness that followed the fire.

The faintest glimmer of a smile stole over Mrs. Lombardi's face. "I had God's protection," she said. "The biggest danger, at first, was the debris on the streets. But now there are gangs of laborers clearing them. It is like a desert, Nell, a wasteland of black with just the occasional wall or archway. Only the largest buildings resemble themselves at all. And ashes . . ." Her voice broke again, and I realized I must put an end to her tale.

"Have you taken any steps to let people know where you are?" I asked. "Perhaps your family did escape the fire and have left word for you in Prairie Haven. Does not your mother-in-law live with you? Mr. Lombardi, if he could not find you, would surely hasten to reassure her that he was well."

"She is in New York." Mrs. Lombardi shook her head in a gesture of dismissal. "Her brother is dying, and she has been gone for three months. I must write to her. . . but first I need to know what I should tell her."

She fell silent for a few minutes, dabbing occasionally at her eyes, but gradually a look of resolution stole over her face. It was the first time that day I had seen a shadow of the former Mrs. Lombardi.

"You have made me think, Nell. Nobody at Prairie Haven knows what has become of me, of course—that I am here with you. I have little hope that Roderick returned there—if he were alive, would he not be looking for me in Chicago? But I should not leave anything to chance. You have given me a purpose, my dear. I will go to Prairie Haven."

"And Sarah and I will go with you."

56

GHOST

We did not set out for Prairie Haven for another two days. Mrs. Lombardi was in a state of collapse, and I insisted that she consult my mother's doctor. Martin and Bet joined me in urging her to rest, eat, and prepare for the journey. There was also the matter of cleaning her clothes, which Bet did with great efficiency while I sewed a brace of new shirts to replace the badly soiled one she was wearing.

So it was not until October the twenty-fourth that we set off in Martin's gig, choosing to try the Poor Farm for news before we continued to the Lombardis' house. The weather was excellent, as it often is in October, and I enjoyed rolling along the roads—nicely softened by the rain—with the fresh breeze in my face. Sarah, who had gotten over her initial shyness with Mrs. Lombardi, played peek-a-boo with her and then fell asleep, a heavy, warm weight on my shoulder.

It was almost a year since I had first taken this route in cold and discomfort. Then I had been a disgraced girl; now I returned as a well-dressed, independent woman. And amid all of our grief, I was looking forward to seeing Tess, who had been much on my mind. Now I could keep my promise to her. I smiled as we approached the tall gate.

Martin's vigorous pull on the bell was answered by Donny, who recognized me instantly and beamed with joy as he swung the gate open.

"Donny, it's good to see you!" Mrs. Lombardi, whose cheerful nature had reasserted itself despite her despair, leaned forward to wave at the boy.

The effect was startling. Donny stopped, stared, screamed, and ran full-tilt

for the Men’s House.

By the time the gig rolled up to the alighting-place between the two houses, a crowd had gathered. The object of their attention was Mrs. Lombardi, although several of them squealed with delight and waved at me and Sarah.

At the forefront of the crowd were Mr. Schoeffel and a still-fearful Donny. Like the others, Mr. Schoeffel was staring hard at Mrs. Lombardi. Martin handed us down from the gig, and Mr. Schoeffel stepped forward and took Mrs. Lombardi’s hand.

“It is really you.”

“Yes. I am sorry I omitted to inform you that I was unharmed.” Mrs. Lombardi’s expression was contrite. “I had not thought—but of course you must have been most concerned. Mr. Schoeffel, has there been any news—any word at all—of my husband and children? I have returned here with the faint hope that they may have sent word, although I have steeled myself to the notion that they are no more.”

I had never seen the stolid Mr. Schoeffel look so nonplussed. He opened his mouth several times as if to speak, but each time he shut it again and continued to stare at us.

A tug on my arm made me look round, and I found myself being hugged hard by a joyful Tess. Her term of laundry duty had evidently ended; she was neatly dressed, and her fine, shining hair was impeccable in its small bun.

“Why is Mrs. Lombardi here?” she hissed, teetering on tiptoe in an attempt to say the words directly into my ear.

“Why should she not be?” I looked over at Martin, who was standing apart from the group. An expression of dawning comprehension stole over his face, mingled with one of horror. “Nell—” he began.

“Why did she need a carriage?” was Tess’s next question. “Ghosts do not need carriages.”

That remark caught Mrs. Lombardi’s ear, and she turned to face my friend. “I

am no ghost, Tess," she said gently. At the same time Martin said "Nell!" again, more loudly.

"Of course you are," said Tess. "We buried you last week. I cried a lot," she added, turning to me.

The ensuing chaos lasted about ten minutes. A phial of smelling salts produced by a female orderly soon revived Mrs. Lombardi, whose knees buckled upon hearing that the chief mourners at her funeral had been her husband and children. Joy followed, of course, and Martin scooped Sarah out of my arms so that Mrs. Lombardi and I could indulge in an orgy of hugging, tears, and shouts of rapture.

I did not witness the family's reunion, having surprised myself by becoming faint and dizzy in my turn. Anxiety, lack of sleep, and a baby who was nursing enthusiastically several times a day had taken their toll on me, and I was still waving my arms about to ward off the approach of the smelling salts when Martin, having ascertained I was not really ill, ungallantly deserted me to drive Mrs. Lombardi to her home. He told me later that Pastor Lombardi had forgotten he was a man of God and felled Martin with a punch when he had tried to break the news as gently as he could. It had taken him ten minutes to convince the poor man that his wife was alive, but the ensuing reunion was—he said—worth the wait. I wished I had seen it.

"And you never did tell Mrs. Lombardi about Hiram," said Martin as the gig rolled smoothly out of the gate the next morning.

"No, it did not exactly seem appropriate, given the circumstances. Besides, the matter of Tess seemed much more important." I cast a yearning look behind me. "Martin, do you think Mrs. Lombardi will be able to secure Tess's release from the Farm?"

"You can rest assured that she will try her hardest, Nell. She told me that she

and her family will not leave for Kansas until the matter is settled." He laughed, throwing back his head to catch the October sunshine. "I would like to see Reverend Grueber's face when he learns that Pastor Lombardi is not a widower after all. He officiated at the funeral, you know, and was quite adamant that the pastor and his children should come to Kansas to 'begin life again.' Well, they will, and in much happier circumstances than they expected."

"I still cannot understand why Mrs. Lombardi is so ready to leave the Poor Farm." I turned Sarah round so that she got a better view of the fields and trees rolling by us. "She has an important position there, and she does her job well. Do you think Mr. Schoeffel would treat her so badly once he is superintendent? I cannot help but think she is losing ground by consenting to be merely her husband's helpmeet."

"So you would not pick up sticks and follow a husband to the ends of the earth?" Martin's tone was light, but there was an edge in his voice.

"Certainly not. Besides, I may never marry. To give up all of one's independence, to be chained to a man even if he abuses you," I looked at Martin out of the corners of my eyes, "or turns out to be a murderer—and even if he is a good man like Mr. Lombardi, to feel obliged to follow his whims—no, that is not for me."

"Has it ever occurred to you," asked Martin steadily, "that she may be following him out of love? That they may be a partnership of equals and have arrived at their decision by discussion and mutual consent?"

I shook my head. "Partnerships happen in the realm of business, not in love. I would like to see the man who would treat me like a friend and not someone to dominate."

Martin said nothing more but drew my free arm through his and squeezed it with his elbow. Tired from a long night trying to become reaccustomed to the nighttime noises of the Farm, I did not try to pull it away but sat lightly linked to Martin as we rolled along in a silence broken only by Sarah's soft babbling.

57

KANSAS

It was some weeks before I began to see my future more clearly. Amid the joy of welcoming Tess to my home and settling her into my childhood bedroom—I could not bring myself to use my mother's room or the dressing room in which Hiram had so often slept—and the slow shock of adjusting to my new circumstances, I had little leisure for creative thought. But now I was beginning to see a way forward.

When Martin came on his daily visit to my parlor, I presented him with the option I had been pondering for several days.

After a few minutes Martin looked up at me from his perusal of Mrs. Lombardi's letter, a quizzical expression on his face. "She wants you to bury yourself in Kansas?"

"It's a practical suggestion." I bent down to retrieve, for the hundredth time, the stuffed dolly I had made Sarah. "Respectable work and a quiet place to raise Sarah."

"At a seminary? For heaven's sake, Nell, piety is not exactly your strong point."

"They do not need another Bible-reading student, Martin. They need a seamstress. And Mrs. Lombardi says that the housekeeper," I twitched the sheets of paper toward me to read the name again, "Mrs. Drummond, will be quite easy to live with. Did you not see that part of the letter?"

"I must admit," Martin turned the thin pages with care, "my attention was arrested by the thrilling story of the supposed dead body of Mrs. Lombardi.

Imagine being presented with your wife's brooch and watch, and then being shown their presumed owner—the charred stump of what might once have been a woman." He shuddered. "I saw that morgue, Nell. And smelt it." His beaky nose did its best to wrinkle. "Of course, it might not have smelled so bad just a day after the fire."

"It is no wonder that they searched no further," I said. "It is a coincidence worthy of one of Bet's dime novels. Do you think that the—the burned person was a looter?"

"Who knows?" said Martin. "In the panic and confusion of that night, anything could have happened. I feel mightily sorry for Schoeffel, though. Unraveling the legal mess caused by an erroneous declaration of death—and having the body of a stranger on his hands to boot—must be causing him some headaches."

I darted toward Sarah's dolly, which she had flung with such force that she had nearly toppled the always-precarious occasional table. I felt quite cheered by the prospect of being unencumbered by furniture.

"Why feel sorry for Mr. Schoeffel?" I asked. "He is the superintendent now—he can get someone else to do his dirty work. I agree that he is a good man, Martin. I just do not think he has Mrs. Lombardi's heart for the feebleminded. I am so glad that Tess has come to live with me."

Martin deftly hoisted Sarah up into a sitting position, making faces at her that caused her to squeal with laughter. "And you are now burdened with the care of a feebleminded woman as well as a baby. Truly, Nell, a husband would have been less work."

"A husband would make seven more babies on me in as many years," I laughed at Martin's face as he watched the doll warily. Sarah, deprived of her plaything, screeched loudly, and I hastily returned the doll to her grasp. "A husband would expect me to run his house and darn his socks and, and, well, sit at dinner and be nice to his business cronies. A friend is better than a husband."

Martin's shoulders shook with laughter, his face buried in his hands. When he had calmed down, he rose and dropped a light kiss on my hair. "You still have a great deal of growing up to do, Nellie Lillington. No, I do not think you are

ready for a husband." He mussed Sarah's red curls and left the room, holding the door for Bet, who was entering with the tea tray.

"Are you not staying, then, Mr. Rutherford?"

"No, Bet, I have a store to attend to, and Miss Nell has entertained me quite enough for one afternoon."

As he closed the door behind him, Bet looked over at me. "Has he asked you to marry him yet?" she hissed in a stage whisper.

"It's none of your business, Bet Bratt, but no, he has not."

In truth, I had almost expected Martin to propose marriage. After all, he called at least once every day despite the cares of his business. I did not *want* to marry Martin, but I was a little puzzled and, to be honest, a little piqued at his silence. I would have enjoyed graciously turning him down.

"Bet." I motioned for her to take a seat, and she did so reluctantly. My mother would have been shocked; in her world, servants never sat down in the "upstairs" part of the house.

"Are you really managing all right without Marie? Are you sure I should not engage another servant?"

"With this house soon to be sold? 'Twould hardly be right." Bet shifted uneasily and flapped her hand vigorously at my unspoken offer of a cup of tea. "And little Tess is handy, I'll give her that."

"And have you heard from Marie?"

"Oh, I've been to visit her poor mother and that baby. Big, lusty boy it is, round and rosy like all fifteen of 'em. Marie will wish she were back here soon enough."

I laughed, sipping my tea with a wary eye on Sarah. "Where is Tess? You are not trying to turn her into a servant, are you, Bet? She is on an equal footing with me as far as I am concerned."

"Bless you, Miss Nell, no. I told her to come and have tea with you, but she has been learning how to bake a pound cake with me, and she is quite adamant that she will not let it burn. She's quite the one for learning."

And Bet was turning out to be the most patient of teachers, never turning the sharp end of her tongue on Tess. My friend had brought out a side of her that I

had only seen when I was sick or hurt; at all other times, her bracing remarks had been intended to strengthen me and urge me to greater efforts. I saw her once again as a younger woman, less stout but already heavily corseted, standing behind me as I reluctantly apologized to the neighbor whose fence I had broken by climbing on it. If I had learned gentility from my mother, I had derived my sense of responsibility from Bet.

"I will miss you, Bet," I said quietly.

Bet's brown eyes softened. "And I you, Miss. But you have your own road to follow, and it's time I enjoyed some of the money Mr. Bratt put by for our old age. If it weren't for love of your mother, I would have retired many years ago."

Bet took my silence as the end of the conversation and rose briskly. "If I were you, Miss, I'd drop a broad hint to Mr. Martin and see if he won't pop the question. He's a better man than most people think, that one."

I merely smiled and Bet motioned at me to pour my tea, moving quickly to the door in case I committed any more social sins of fraternization with the servants. Sarah was beginning to rub her eyes and press her doll to her face, a sure sign that she was ready for a nap. I shifted away from her a little to drink my tea, looking at her small round face. She now had a topknot of soft copper curls, fat red cheeks from teething, and round, plump arms and legs. She promised to be as sturdy and as healthy as any mother could wish.

I picked up Mrs. Lombardi's letter from where Martin had left it on the piano stool. Should I go to Kansas and take up the offer of employment and a new life that my friend held out to me? A life that would be far, far away from Cousin Jack and his new wife, where Sarah could grow up free of any taint of gossip. I stroked her hair gently, watching her face as sleep took her into its arms, and felt a surge of joy in my heart that she was mine.

58

BUSINESS

The winter was mercifully short and uneventful. Boring, in fact. I saw less of Martin, who had struck up quite a friendship with his erstwhile lodger Friedrich Fassbinder and was often to be found in Chicago, where the German was busy rebuilding his store. I wondered if one of Fassbinder's tall, blonde daughters was the attraction and asked Martin so during one of his visits.

"Not a bit of it." Martin was looking exceedingly well; he had been spending much time in the open air, amid the hubbub of construction that even the snow had been unable to halt. "Nice girls, both of them, but they are being courted by two very large Italian brothers who give me the evil eye if I so much as pass the time of day with them."

I felt a curious sense of relief. "So what is causing you to neglect your store, and Victory—" I was going to say, "and me," but thought better of it.

"Business, my dear Nell. Not everyone is able to rebuild. There are parcels of land continually coming up for sale, and I need to be ready to jump on the right opportunity. Fassbinder has been helping me make the right contacts."

"You will open a new store?" I was surprised. Did he have that much money, then?

"I will move my business entirely, Nell. I would have to sell my store here, and my house, to finance the building of the marble and steel emporium that haunts my dreams."

"It's a huge risk." I could feel my brow furrow as I watched Martin warm himself by the parlor fire, and I was visited by a strange, sharp feeling of anxiety.

I shook myself mentally. Why should it bother me, since I was intent on leaving Martin, that he should want to leave me?

Martin looked down at me, his expression serious. “I am twenty-nine years old, Nell. It is time I took a risk.” He spread out his hands, still soft and white on the palms, and looked at them. “All my life I have assumed the role of my mother’s protector and helper. For her sake I kept sober and clean and worked in the store while my friends traveled the country. I saw men my age leave to join the War and wished I were among them.”

He sat down opposite me and took one of my hands in his. I felt my pulse speed up a little. Ridiculous, I thought; the gesture was quite brotherly.

“I am my own master now.” Martin was looking through me into an unknown future. “I am ready to risk all I have, in a city where thousands of people who have lost everything are simply starting again on credit and the strength of their own backs. Fassbinder had a stock of fine leather goods worth a hundred thousand dollars, and he will be lucky if his insurance pays him twenty-five cents on the dollar. And yet he just smiles and tells me that he is alive, he has a good wife and shoes on his feet, and in five years’ time his business will be bigger still. That is manliness, Nell. That is what I want to be.”

He looked more like a Viking than ever with the light of adventure in his eyes. I squeezed his hand hard and tried to match his air of optimism.

“Build your store, Martin. And I will take Sarah and Tess to Kansas and take my own risks. We are both heading for unexplored territory.”

I awoke from a dream in which Hiram was chasing me through a series of rooms, each fitted with impossibly huge locks that only gave way at the last second before his arm reached out to touch me. I pushed myself up in my bed and automatically looked toward Sarah’s crib. She wasn’t there. I was about to cry out in alarm when there was a soft knock on the door and Tess entered.

“You slept for a long time, Nell. You are a sleepyhead.” She crossed to the window and pulled the drapes open and then turned to me, the morning sunlight

glinting off her spectacles. “Why are you crying?”

I lifted the palm of my hand to my cheek, finding it wet with tears. “A dream. Where is Sarah?”

“Bet took her to give her some breakfast. She was saying ‘Momma, Momma, ey ey ey.’” Tess giggled. “I think she was saying ‘Wake up.’ She is a clever girl. She is going up and down the scullery steps, up and down again and again.”

I smiled weakly, scrubbing away the last of the tears with the sleeve of my nightgown. “Thank goodness there are only three steps.” Sarah had become very active and could be quite exhausting to watch. I had shortened all of her little skirts as much as I dared, so that she wouldn’t trip and fall.

Now that it was March, our journey to Kansas was just a day away, and I was wearing myself out trying to ensure that I had forgotten nothing we might need. I had overslept because I had been up half the night, going over my list and looking for small items—Mama’s tiny golden scissors, packets of chamomile tea—that had suddenly occurred to me as indispensable.

The process of arranging a situation in Kansas and sorting out my financial position had taken many weary weeks. A notice of sale was nailed to our front door for all of Victory to see, and Bet remained to help with the clearing of the house and the packing up of my possessions, some of which I entrusted to Martin’s care. He had my power of attorney to take care of all the financial details of the sale of the house and the rest of the furnishings and to invest whatever was left once Hiram’s debts were paid. He had assured me several times that he would not invest my money in his business until he was sure it would prosper—in fact, I had to take him to task for assuming I would not trust him.

Against my protests Martin had given me a small bag of silver dollars “for Sarah,” but poverty was not staring us in the face. Mr. Buchman had been active on my behalf and assured me that the sale of the house would pay off the last of Hiram’s creditors and leave me with a small nest egg for Martin to invest. In any event, I would receive full board and lodging and a few dollars a year from my post at the Eternal Life Seminary; I should not have to touch my capital for as long as I was there.

I swung my legs out of bed, noting that it was raining again. “I hope it will be sunny tomorrow,” Tess remarked, guessing at my thoughts. “We will want to look around us in Springfield.” She clasped her hands under her chin and jumped up and down like a small child. “We will see Springfield and St. Louis and the Mississippi River and. . . what was it again, Nell?”

“Kansas City and Wichita.” I laughed at Tess’s excitement as I reached for my shawl. “But mostly we will see the inside of stagecoaches and boats and trains. You might not think it such an exciting journey, Tess, by the time we get there.”

“It *will* be exciting. I have only ever been in Chicago and Prairie Haven.” Tess flung her arms around me again and grinned up at me, showing every one of her very small teeth. “And I will be with my *family*. I have a *family* again.”

“Didn’t you feel like you had a family at Prairie Haven, Tess?” I asked, gently disengaging her arms from around my waist.

“Not really a *proper* family. A proper family has a Ma and a Da and a baby and a big sister—that’s me. We are almost a proper family; if you can find a husband in Kansas, Nell, we will be a real proper family.”

“Stop that.” I looked gravely at Tess. “I do not intend to look for a husband in Kansas or anywhere else. We will be just fine as we are: you, me, and Sarah. Now off you go, Tess, and leave me to get dressed.”

Tess waltzed out of my bedroom, and I sat down heavily on the bed. One more day, and I would be out of Victory—perhaps forever. I was excited about this new life, and yet I feared it. Doubtless it was these fears that had led to my nightmare, which was still vivid in my mind. I wished I had dreamed of my mother and not Hiram.

59

AU REVOIR

"Haven't you checked that list enough?" Martin dodged around the pile of trunks and cases that took up most of the hallway.

I looked up impatiently. It was really most trying of Martin to be pestering me when I was striving so hard to remember what items were in which case. I wished I had thought to mark my list better.

"Please make sure the door is tightly shut, Martin. Sarah keeps trying to get out into the street."

He complied with my request and leaned on the largest trunk, grinning at me.

"Did you come here for a purpose?" My tone was not welcoming. "Or just to make fun of me for not wanting to forget anything?"

"I have news." Martin carried a large, rolled sheet of paper, and he waved it in my direction. "I have bought my piece of land."

"Really?" I was interested in that, despite my distracted state of mind. "Is it in a favorable position?"

Martin smiled even more broadly. "I have made a really excellent purchase, I think." He grabbed me by the hand, pulling me toward the dining room. "Come and see."

The dining room was dark and gloomy, but the light was sufficient. Martin spread the map out on the table, using any objects he could find as weights. The area destroyed by the fire was outlined in black ink; I marveled again at the extent of the damage.

"See, here it is." Martin's index finger hovered over a spot on the map.

“It does not mean much to me, Martin. I have only been to Chicago twice.”

“A corner location, Nell. Very close to Field & Leiter’s!”

“Won’t the competition from Field & Leiter’s be fierce?” I asked doubtfully.

“My store will be much smaller, of course. But the merchandise will be better.” He rolled up the map with a snap and waved it above his head. “I too will be saying goodbye to Victory, Nell, even before my property is sold. I need to be on the spot. I have taken lodgings—very modest ones, I will barely have room to turn around, and ridiculously expensive—and will be at the site every morning and hunting down the best suppliers every afternoon. You will have your adventure, Nell, and I will have mine.”

He still had not proposed, of course. Not a word or look of romance had ever passed between us, although he seemed to prefer me to any other companion. I was glad of it, of course. Of the lack of romance, I mean. It would have been unkind to have to turn him down.

“Nell.” Martin turned to me and grasped my arms. “I am leaving for Chicago this very afternoon, and I will not be here to see you off tomorrow. So, my dear __”

“Momma dododo baba BEY!”

The door had quietly opened, and Sarah toddled in, with Tess close behind. She was carrying her doll, to which the last five months had not been kind. Seeing Martin, she extended the chubby forefinger of her left hand toward him and asked, “Dey?”

“No, darling, he is not going with us.” I had taken a quick step backward at Sarah’s entrance and grinned at Martin ruefully. He smiled and scooped Sarah into his arms, so fast that she flew upward a little before landing safely in his grasp. She shrieked with joy, and he had to throw her four or five more times. She dampened his mood a little by thrusting the doll into his face, and I laughed to see his look of disgust.

“No, no Sary,” Tess reached up with her short arms and wagged a finger at her, “You must not push Dolly into people’s faces. Dolly must not give kisses.”

Sarah responded by flinging herself backward so that she could see me upside-down and showed all six of her teeth. Her brilliant red curls were now

long enough to be tied with a ribbon into a becoming topknot, and her limbs had lost a little bit of the rolls of baby fat but were still very much on the plump side. Her fat cheeks were bright red; she was cutting some molars, I rather thought.

"You were saying, Martin?" I looked up at him demurely, giving him the full benefit of my blue eyes.

"I was saying goodbye." Martin seemed poised between laughter and frustration but then settled for the former. "Or at least, *au revoir*. Nell, I must fly. I wish you Godspeed, and if you do not write to me soon—oh." He extracted a piece of paper from his vest pocket and handed it to me. "Here is the address of my lodgings. You must write as soon as you are settled in Kansas."

Martin cuddled Sarah to him briefly and gave her big kisses on both rosy cheeks. She squealed with delight and smashed her doll against his face. Grimacing, he put her down gently and held out his hand to Tess.

"Miss O'Dugan, it has been a pleasure making your acquaintance. I am glad that Nell has such a congenial companion."

"I don't know what congenial is, but I think you're nice too. Can't you marry Nell?"

Martin turned quite pink and coughed. I laughed. "Tess, it is not done to ask gentlemen to propose marriage to one's friends. Not in public, anyway." I held out my hand to Martin. "Mr. Rutherford, I also say *au revoir*. I look forward to hearing about your store." I was rather glad that Tess was there and that we were not saying our goodbyes in private. I was afraid I would become sentimental.

Martin gently kissed the hand I had extended to him and then headed quickly for the door, turning once to wave his map in the air above his head. Then he was gone.

"I think it's all right to ask a man to marry you, Nell." Tess was following Sarah around the table, keeping an eye on the little hand that was clearly destined to grasp the tablecloth. "Especially when he likes you."

I sighed, watching my daughter and my friend. This was going to be a very interesting journey.

60

TIES

I could feel two solid lumps at my waist. One was Mama's bag of coins; the other was a new bag, containing the money Martin had given me for Sarah. Together, they would provide our emergency funds in our new life.

I took no other money with me except the sum I had raised through Mr. Buchman to fund our trip to Kansas. He had sold for me a bracelet and necklace that Hiram had given to my mother; the rest of her small collection of jewelry was sewn safely into the pocket of my traveling dress. I felt like a walking bank vault.

It was so early in the morning that the light was gray, but we had been up for hours. Bet had had her "good cry" over our departure well before dawn and was now brisk and cheerful, though red-eyed. Tess was solemn and unusually quiet, which suited my own mood. She was holding on to Sarah who was also rather subdued, alarmed no doubt by the preparations for travel.

I had the strange, detached feeling that comes when you know that you are about to undertake a new venture. The familiar street, where even the carriage ruts on the road changed little from day to day, suddenly sprang out at me with a mass of details: the burgeoning buds on the young trees that lined it; the large ornate bell on the gate of the house opposite; the slight sag in the fence of the neighbor three doors up. I remembered noticing such things as a small child, but for years I had ignored them, wrapped in my own small, selfish concerns. Now they mattered to me again with a sharp pang of imminent rupture.

Bet shivered as she looked at the cart, which was laden with our trunks and bags.

“It’s enough you’re taking with you, Miss.”

“Madam,” I said faintly, but I didn’t begrudge Bet her refusal to pretend I was a married woman. I wasn’t, after all.

I looked down at the ring Hiram had given me. From that day forward I would pass as ‘Mrs. Lillington.’ That was how, at my request, Mrs. Lombardi had first introduced me on paper to Mrs. Drummond. It might have been easier to continue with Govender, but I had not wanted to lose my father’s name nor force a fictitious one on Sarah.

The driver of the cart returned from wherever he had been and, climbing into his seat, looked round at me inquiringly.

“You’d better go, Miss Nell.” Bet spoke gently, in the tone that she’d used when I was a little girl and needed reminding to wash my hands before meals. I grinned; back then, the gentle tone would quickly be followed up by a sharper one if I did not comply.

“Yes, Bet. Are you sure you’ll be all right with the house-clearing?”

“Oh, I have Marie coming, and three of her friends. We’ll have a fine old time.” She looked back at the yellow notice of sale on our door, one corner of which flapped gently in the freshening breeze, and then glanced at the sky. “It won’t rain today, I’m thinking. You have a good day for traveling.”

I hugged her hard for a couple of seconds, putting a world of feeling into that hug and then took Sarah from Tess. She submitted to Bet’s caresses a little crossly and rubbed her face into my coat. I knew she’d be asleep before we were a mile down the road and was glad of it.

Tess, not to be outdone, also hugged Bet—to the latter’s surprise—and then clambered with difficulty up into the cart. I handed Sarah to her and took my own place on the end of the bench.

As we swayed onto Victory’s main street to head westward, the first rays of the rising sun shone from behind us, lighting the gray street with streaks of fire. We passed Rutherford’s Drapery, which bore a large sign: New Premises in Chicago Opening Soon. Inquire Within for Closing Prices on All Merchandise.

I hugged Sarah tighter to me, trying to shield her from the worst jolts of the cart. Tess was pressed up against me. Her legs were much shorter than mine, and she could not place them on the board, so she was much more at the mercy of the cart's movement than I was. I was glad she was with me.

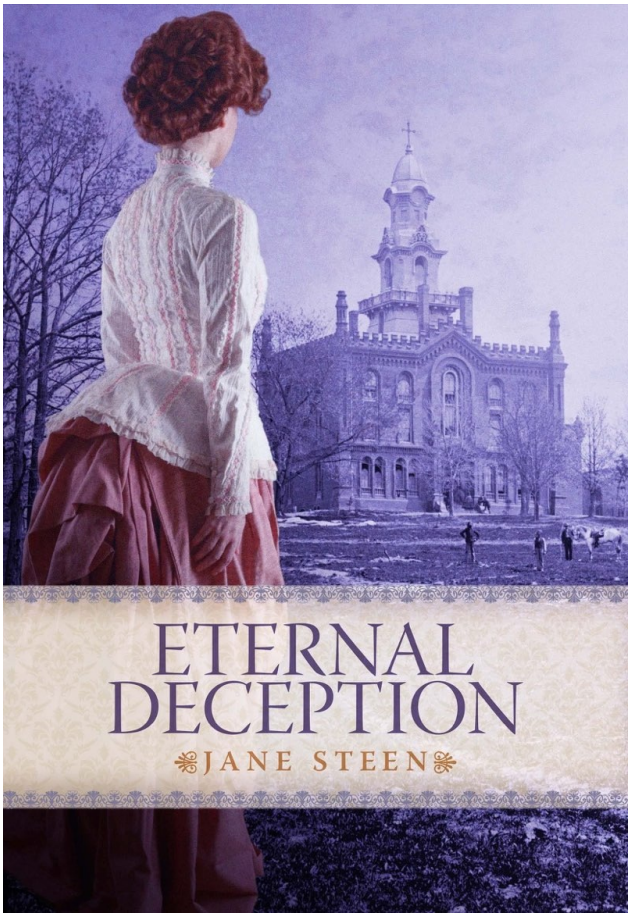
"Goodbye, Victory," said Tess.

I said nothing, but set my face resolutely away from the familiar sights of home. What ties I had now were the ones I had chosen.

<<<<>>>>

Nell’s story continues with

Eternal Deception



As a married woman, I would have been in bondage to one man; as an unmarried one, I was apparently in bondage to everyone else.

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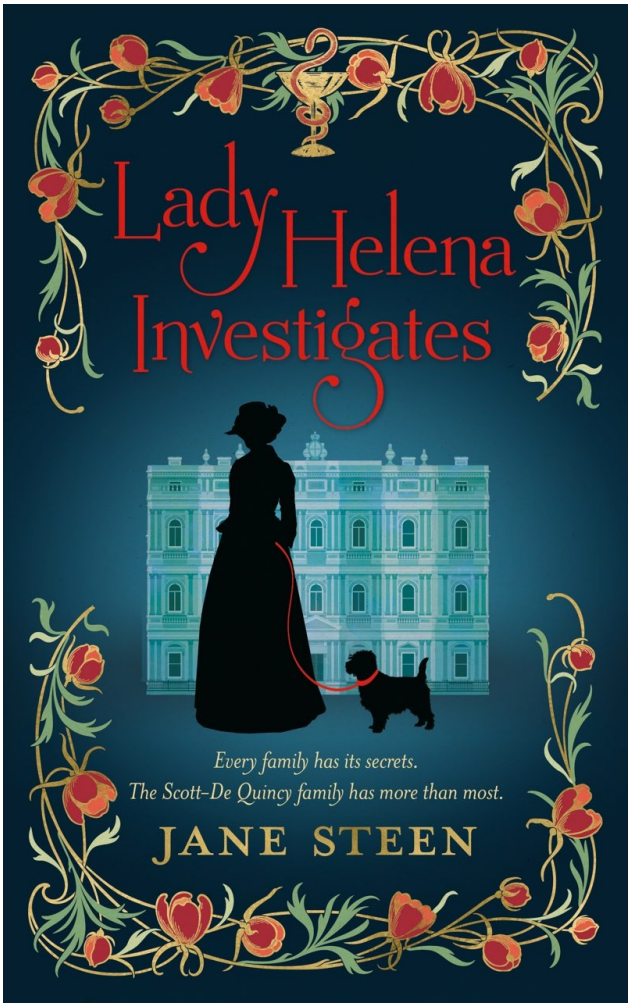

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Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed reading *The House of Closed Doors* as much as I enjoyed writing it. I'm an indie author paying bills by doing what I love the most—creating entertainment for other people. So my most important assets are YOU, the readers, without whom I'd just be talking to myself. Again.

My promise to you is that I'll do my best. I'll research to make the historical background to my stories as accurate as I can. I'll edit and polish until the book's up to my (high) standards. I'll give you a great-looking cover to look at, and I'll make sure my books are available in as many formats and in as many places as possible. I'll keep my prices as low as is compatible with keeping my publishing business going.

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And thanks again for reading.

Jane xx

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The genesis of this novel was a photograph in a local history book my husband gave to me as a Christmas present, one of those slim volumes full of pictures of times past. The photograph that stood out to me was the County Poor Farm, long since replaced by a very large nursing home (although the cemetery remains).

"What an interesting location for a novel," I thought. "Especially if there were a murder…" and soon, by the strange alchemy of imagination, a cast of characters walked on to my mental stage and began supplying me with a story that was tremendous fun to write.

Nell's home town of Victory and the Prairie Haven Poor Farm are entirely fictitious, although loosely based on a compilation of locations with which I am familiar. I have always been fascinated by enclosed communities, and the relative isolation of Victory (not yet connected to Chicago by railroad) is meant to mirror the more complete isolation of a Poor Farm set among prairie and cultivated fields. Each place has its own rules; they may not reflect with entire accuracy the social structure of any real historic place, but I hope they are plausible.

I'm a storyteller first and foremost, and on no account would I claim the noble title of historian. So please take any of the details contained in this novel with a large pinch of salt, and feel free to notify me of any disastrous mistakes. Naturally I've taken huge liberties with the weather, shaping the seasons to conform to my story with the exception of the hot, dry wind that carried the fire so swiftly over Chicago; that's an unfortunate fact.

As background material for the Poor Farm I relied heavily on *Inventing The Feeble Mind* by James W. Trent (1995 edition), from which I learned about the work of Édouard Séguin, who, in the 1860s, was doing some important work in America to improve the lot of the "feeble-minded" by teaching independence and self-reliance via work and education. Although all the explanations of Monsieur Séguin's work were edited out of the text because they got in the way of the story, Mrs. Lombardi is a dedicated follower of his methods; her rivals are intent on following the later 19th century progression toward a more custodial (and abusive) model of institutional care.

I trust this explains why the Prairie Haven Poor Farm is such an unexpectedly enlightened and even happy environment. I can only hope such places existed, somewhere.

Tess, as some readers may realize, is a woman with Down Syndrome. I have the privilege of knowing many children and adults with Down Syndrome and have based her feisty, independent character on their abilities. I could not afford Tess a "label" other than the unpleasant 19th century ones of "idiot" and "feeble-minded" because even the term "Mongoloid" would not have been in widespread use in 1871; Dr. Down described the syndrome in 1866 and the term "Mongoloid" comes from his belief that the genetic variation was a degeneration of the European race, which was trying to revert to an earlier, Asiatic type. A strange theory, but quite consistent with other 19th century scientific misconceptions.

Other locations and events in this novel are as historically accurate as I could get them. The Chicago Fire, in particular, has been very well described and documented. My personal favorite among easily available books on the Fire is *The Great Chicago Fire* by Robert Cromie; get hold of the 1994 oversized, illustrated edition if you can.

I am not nearly as expert a seamstress as Nell, but *Dressed for the Photographer* by Joan Severa was a goldmine of details about the costumes worn by ordinary Americans in the mid- to late 19th century.

And of course my thanks go out to all the many, many online sources of knowledge and anecdote. I wish I could have packed all the things I found out

into the novel.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A self-published author may seem like the most independent of writers, with no agent, editor or publisher to answer to; but in truth I doubt many self-published books see the light of day without considerable input from others. This is certainly the case of *The House of Closed Doors*; I'm not sure what shape the novel would have taken without the critiques and encouragement of a number of writer friends who scrutinized problem scenes, acted as beta readers at a critical stage of the editing process, and generally cheered me on as I waded my way through the different levels of joy and gloom that accompany the creative journey.

So many people contributed, in fact, that I am hesitant to single out individual names for fear of forgetting someone. But I can't *not* mention my critique partner Katharine Grubb, who returned to me a manuscript so heavily overwritten (in orange pen) that it almost glowed in the dark. I challenged her to be as picky as possible, and she rose to the occasion magnificently by putting every thought down on paper—it must have taken a very long time. For the rest of you—some know who you are, others may not even remember the advice they gave—just know that every suggestion, comment or incredulous reaction was carefully considered and the majority of them resulted in changes for the better.

As I neared publication I was incredibly fortunate to have the generous help of four expert professionals. Thank you Jill Battaglia for making my dream of a cover photo come to life; thank you Wayne Kijanowski for putting up with my

vague design suggestions and building them into something more beautiful than I’d imagined; thank you Joseph O’Day for making my text clean and consistent; and thank you Guido Henkel for building my first ebook.

Thanks to the David Adler Music and Arts Center for letting me pretend they were the Poor Farm for the duration of a photo shoot, and to Kate and Philip Haslar for being Nell and Sarah for a few hours.

And, of course, thanks to my family for putting up with my many absences from family life and the blank stares that they received if they happened to come near me when I was writing, and above all for acting as if writing novels is a perfectly normal occupation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The most important fact you need to know about me is that I was (according to my mother, at least) named after Jane Eyre, which to this day remains one of my favorite books. I was clearly doomed to love all things Victorian, and ended up studying both English and French nineteenth-century writers in depth.

This was a pretty good grounding for launching myself into writing novels set in the nineteenth century. I was living in the Chicago suburbs when I began writing the *House of Closed Doors* series, inspired by a photograph of the long-vanished County Poor Farm in my area.

Now back in my native England, I have the good fortune to live in an idyllic ancient town close to the sea. This location has sparked a new series about an aristocratic family with more secrets than most: *The Scott-De Quincy Mysteries*.

I write for readers who want a series you can't put down. I love to blend saga, mystery, adventure, and a touch of romance, set against the background of the real-life issues facing women in the late nineteenth century.

I am a member of the Alliance of Independent Authors, the Historical Novel Society, Novelists, Inc., and the Society of Authors.

To find out more about my books, join my insider list at www.janesteen.com/insider

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To my parents