

CLINGSTONE



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Clingstone by Marti Ziegler

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CHAPTER 1: “LASTING IMPRESSIONS”

Roswell, Georgia

July 3, 1864

“Steal his clothes. Quick, afore he turns an’ sees us.”

“Why me? This was your idea!”

“Stop dithering and hurry, Mae, while the coast is still clear!”

With a huff of temper, Mae Parrish surrendered her cramped hiding place behind a tangle of smooth sumac, exasperated but disinclined to waste more time arguing. Coralie Dawson was her roommate and closest friend, plainly contestable honors in moments like this, but she knuckled under for the sake of simple expediency. She had better places to be. “Let’s get this over with,” she decided grimly.

“I can’t wait to see the look on his face!” Coralie laughed.

Mae took two steps toward the strange character standing midstream in Vickery’s Creek and froze. “It isn’t his face I’d be worrying about.” Her eyes sprang wide with discovery. Creighton Branagan stood immersed to his waist, his concentration intent on some unidentified movement beneath the water. The protuberances of his spine gleamed like pale eggshells as he leaned forward, an empty jar in one hand, the other braced upon his thigh, and all while wearing nothing more than a disreputable pair of drawers.

She spun around and hissed in a scandalized voice, “Are you seein’ this? The man’s underwear is all but fallin’ off! I can even see the crack in his rear.”

“Lemme see!” A racket of snapping twigs and merciless fern-tromping ensued, followed up by a short burst of enchanted laughter as Coralie arrived alongside her. “Side tapes look broken,” she diagnosed cheerfully. “As I live an’ breathe, that there is one white bottom. With a bit of luck, another step out into that current an’ those drawers’ll be down ’round his

ankles.”

Mae didn't want to laugh; it was never good to encourage Coralie when she was in one of her moods, but a snicker escaped anyway. “God's sake, Coralie,” she disapproved, hoping to compensate for the slip.

But Coralie wasn't deterred. “I wonder if he's exter endowed in places, like maybe the Lord made up for his unfortunate affliction by givin' particular attention elsewhere, if you git my meanin'?” She twirled a fold of her homespun skirt in lewd contemplation. “I'd maybe like to take a peek at that.”

“I wouldn't, so bite your tongue,” Mae advised, a wary eye affixed to the spectacle that was Creighton Branagan. She regretted her hand in this, but he would do well to accept a certain amount of responsibility for his odd reputation. He was friendless and reclusive and purely strange. Case in point: only an eccentric would squander his single day off from the mill in so laughable a fashion, but she supposed his indulgences were stranger than most, him being a deaf-mute.

She finally made a quick grab for his garments—tossed on the embankment with a negligence that attested to fraying seams and thinning cotton fibers—but Coralie elbowed her aside unexpectedly and seized the bundle for herself.

“Make up your mind, will you?” she complained.

“Well, I seed you were in the clouds again. Reckon I'd be dead an' buried afore you got 'round to doin' your part,” Coralie predicted. She scrambled up a nearby tree with the merry ease of a primitive. “You're more absentminded than usual today.”

“And you're a bossy cow. Give me his shirt.” Mae caught the denim pullover midair. “By the by, you're gonna break your silly neck,” she predicted dispassionately.

“Stop bein' sich a wet blanket.” Grinning, Coralie lodged Creighton's boot in the crotch of two pawpaw branches and tossed down the matching pair. “Here, take his other one. Put it somewheres high where he'll have to work for it.”

“So I can fall and land on my head, dead as a doornail? I'll find my own hidin' place, thank you very much.” Disregarding Coralie's smirk, Mae caught the boot and summarily jammed it down inside the nearest

convenient bush. “Now hide his trousers so we can leave. I’m past due in meetin’ Wade at the bridge.”

“For the life of me, I don’t know what you see in that country boy. Wade ain’t even a real soldier.” Coralie bounded away moodily, Creighton’s trousers sailing festively above her head like a child’s kite. “Let’s see what this here country boy makes of seein’ me with his britches. Yoo-hoo, lookee what I got!” she caroled, skipping up and down the creek bank. “Finders, keepers!”

“Are you off your head, Coralie? Stop that!” Mae ran after her. “He’s gonna see you!”

“Well, that’s the idea, goody-two-shoes.”

While their extensive conversation had gone by unnoticed, the indiscriminate display of leaping and running easily drew Creighton’s eye. He surmised the situation in a single glance. Face reddening, he sloshed madly through the water, apparently so intent on reclaiming his purloined goods that he neglected to hitch up his sagging waistband.

It immediately slid due south.

“Sakes alive, I was right! Seein’ is believin’,” Coralie declared. “God surely knows how to be fair an’ square!”

Another slip of reckless laughter confounded Mae. Unlike Coralie, she had no interest in scrutinizing Creighton Branagan’s endowments, extra or otherwise; she expeditiously turned her back and allowed an adequate interim for adjustments. She spun back around a moment later, her amusement quickly vanishing. It clearly wasn’t going well for her roommate, her bosom friend, the so-called mastermind of this nefarious plot. Creighton sprinted toward Coralie with murder in his eyes, and there was a marked absence of the shuffling or floundering one might expect from a man hindered by ill-fitting drawers.

Scores of unsavory rumors had followed Creighton Branagan to Roswell and chose that moment to reassert themselves. Choice among them was his penchant for murdering pretty women. For the first time in Mae Parrish’s life, she experienced immense gratitude for her humdrum looks.

Not that Coralie seemed to have the good sense to recognize her peril. “Lookee here, stupid! I found yer ugly pair of sit-down-upons,” she jeered. Though poorly educated and possessing a rather cruel streak, Coralie’s

blooming complexion and tumble of hair the exact shade of sunflower petals made her one of the more eye-catching women in Roswell. “Ain’t ya gonna try an’ git ’em back, stupid?” She sent Mae a look of exasperation. “Didje ever see sich a dumb critter as the likes o’ this one, Mae?” She glanced back at Creighton, impatient. “Hey, dummy. I’m a-talkin’ to ya.”

“Stop it, Coralie! There’s no call for that sort of meanness,” she criticized, uneasy with the spitefulness on display. “Anyways, your white trash talk is comin’ out thick,” she further dissuaded. “You know how that white trash slang starts comin’ out when you get too riled up.”

A slip of surprised laughter escaped her. “Yer right. But it ain’t like he can heer—hear me,” she corrected nonetheless. Ignoring the rest of Mae’s counsel, she laughed delightedly and whipped the object of contention in happy figure eights above her head. “Hurry, stupid, an’ catch me if you can, or your britches go swimmin’ in the crick!”

Mae deciphered the volatile expression that blazed across Creighton Branagan’s face in a mere instant, so why didn’t Coralie? They had undeniably grabbed a tiger by the tail. The water barely came to his knees at present, and soon enough he’d be within easy reach of her friend. He would spring and snatch her by the throat, but she didn’t have the good sense to notice the threat, too intent was she on twirling and hopping and laughing like a ninny.

She briefly considered not meddling and instead leaving Coralie to her just desserts, but it was a short-lived consideration. Sighing, she skimmed the ground for rocks and quickly settled on a round specimen roughly the size of a walnut.

“Sorry that my friend is such an idiot,” she apologized quietly, taking careful aim at Creighton’s arm, “but she’s the best one I got. I can’t let you kill her.”

The rock bounced off Creighton’s shoulder. He made a painful grab at the abused limb, his head whipping around to locate the source of this most recent affront. He was just able to level Mae with an accusatory glare before losing what remained of his balance. Rock, jar, and man hit the water in rapid succession, the sequence capped off by some bloodthirsty screeching thing demanding vengeance from the nearby woods.

“Uncle Creighton!”

Both women locked gazes. Each had forgotten about Creighton's orphaned nephew and his tendency to be found poised within a twenty-foot radius of his uncle.

"No need to look so grum. I doubt that little goober even saw us." Cheeks pink with laughter and excitement, Coralie launched the doomed pants out into the current and praised, "You done took the wind right outta his sails with that there rock! You're a rare bird, Mae. Nearly split my sides laughin' when I saw you hit 'im!"

Feeling querulous, Mae opened her mouth to reply, but a volley of blubbering and macabre speculations poured forth from the trees, stopping her.

"Was it a swift, Uncle Creighton? Did a Yankee shoot you?" A small boy scampered around an elderberry tree, appearing equally fretful and morbidly curious as to what he might find. "I'll save you!" he cried valiantly, glimpsing his floundering relative and hurdling into the creek with what approached enthusiasm, if not skill.

"There was no call for that, Coralie," she criticized anew.

"Well, I'm pert soured on your high-falutin attitude, so we're both of an opinion."

Most of Coralie's amusement had waned, and now she simply looked bored. It always astounded Mae how quickly she could lose interest in something that had previously been tended with such single-minded malicious devotion.

"I ain't in any mood to quarrel," Coralie suddenly announced, turning lively again. "Let's go. We're already late meetin' Lonnie an' Wade at the bridge, like you done said."

Mae wasn't exactly riddled with shame, but she did feel a twinge of pity that prevented her from immediately surrendering her position. Coralie felt no similar compunction and plowed through the tightly woven branches of smooth sumac. The saw-toothed leaves snapped back into place and stilled, underscoring the fact that she was now alone.

Creighton Branagan and his nephew were thoroughly saturated but otherwise in no danger of drowning as they carefully picked their way toward the embankment, and it was only when she became the recipient of his approaching rabid visage that her sudden scruples fled, to be replaced

by self-preservation.

“Wait for me!” she demanded, tension leaking from her in the form of a nervous chortle. She whirled and followed Coralie’s path through the compact shrubs. Skittish laughter changed into a screech as she heard the unmistakable sounds of pursuit, but she was too terrified to glance behind her and discover the particulars. “Help! I think he’s followin’ me!”

“Dang, that’s skeery! Best not let ’im catch you.” Coralie’s voice sounded far away and suspiciously devoid of sympathy as she reminded sunnily, “Else he’ll murder you like he done poor Sadie Levine.”

Mae thought it would be fairly easy to outrun Creighton Branagan. Her newfound desire to throttle her reputed bosom friend paired with her lack of enthusiasm in getting slaughtered by the village madman chasing her should have been ample motivation indeed, hence it was all the more baffling that one second she was running along the narrow brink, and the next found her sprawled face-first in a pool of gelatinous mud.

A wail of despair rose up the back of her throat that had little to do with her bitten lip and more to do with her abused Sunday best, which had been patched too numerous times to count and was nearly three years old thanks to the blockade. Mae was often overly preoccupied with material things, frequently to her detriment, and this time was certainly no exception. Muddy stains and crushed lace inhabited her thoughts when she should have been contemplating escape.

In the following instant, escape was moot and fashion woes were ejected rudely from her brain by a pair of sturdy hands that seized her from above and roughly set her to rights. The fall had dislodged her spoon bonnet somewhat, hampering her field of vision, and so the only thing to announce her accoster’s identity was a pair of droopy underwear. As expected, this was enough to launch a string of threats and petitions.

“Wade Remold is practically my fiancé! It’s true. Hurt me and he’ll bring the entire Roswell Battalion to your front door. Believe you me, that’s a piece of trouble you don’t want!” Her throat emitted a cowardly yelp as she was seized about the waist. “Please, PLEASE don’t kill me! I don’t get along well with pain—”

Mae lost her footing and staggered back a step as Creighton succeeded in wrenching something away from her. Panic gave way to feelings of

absurdity when she glanced down and realized he'd only retrieved his shirt. Apparently, it had been in her possession all this time, though she had no memory of running away with it.

"Is that why you chased me?"

She didn't expect an answer, naturally, but lifted an interested brow all the same. A blob of black mud, perched jauntily on that very same brow, was immediately dislodged and began an indecorous migration down her cheek. Creighton's attention snapped to her face. She stood frozen as he tracked its relocation, the corners of his mouth tucking inward deviously.

"You tried to kill my uncle!"

Mae swiped the muck away in time to see Owen Scott rush forward, a blur of retribution that kicked her ruthlessly in the leg.

"Ahwan! Nahvahheightahlaydee!"

A hand steadied Mae beneath the elbow; if not, shock would have deposited her in yet another undignified heap. Too many upsets in so short a time, and now she was hearing a deaf-mute speak?

"Lady? She ain't no lady! I seed her hit you with that there rock!" The boy's furious stare reintroduced itself to Mae's dripping profile. "I thought you was a dad-blamed Yankee, sure enough. Laws, you're just as lily-livered as one," he boldly topped off.

"AhwanScwott! Ahgennelmahn nahvahstwaks ah laydee, nah madder whhatdah cuhcumstances! Yew whah taugh buhter."

She shoved off her bonnet until it dangled by its apple-green chin ribbons and watched the exchange through wide eyes. Each additional word increased their circumference. She couldn't understand any of Creighton's horribly muffled speech, yet if the way Owen effortlessly shouted back was any indication, the nasally consonants and vowels were indeed coherent sentences, or at least to him they were.

"You're able to talk? Since when?"

"Ahpahlahguys, Ahwan."

Owen fixed a mutinous stare on his uncle and shook his head.

"Ahwan! Doeitnah."

"Sorry, lady—sorry I didn't break your cussed leg, that is! I seed you throw that there rock. Time to 'fess up an' acknowledge the corn, as my mama used to say."

“You didn’t see me do anything. Children who amuse themselves with wild tales and spread falsehoods get stolen from their beds at night by monsters,” she insinuated, but in the perkier tone imaginable and with a smile on her face. The uncle’s suspicious stare and his struggle to read her lips as she exchanged menacing comments with his nephew was becoming increasingly difficult to throw off.

“Liar! Grown-ups ain’t s’posed to lie.”

“And children aren’t supposed to talk back to their betters, trifling little brat.”

Owen’s small foot repeated a speedy visit to Mae’s shinbone. From the corner of her eye, she noticed Creighton put together a feeble swipe to save her, but he only succeeded in unburdening her cuff of its lace. With a dying screech, she tumbled over backward in the creek, her hoops flipping high in the air and revealing the starched white pantalets beneath.

“Pervert!” Mae was quick to slap the wired monstrosity down. “I saw you peekin’ at my limbs, Creighton Branagan!” Her outrage, based merely on speculation at that point, became founded in reality when she glimpsed him trotting along the soggy embankment after his nephew, the state of her person obviously the last thing on his mind. “Come back here!” she demanded, feeling as if something in her brain was about to rupture. “This is no laughin’ matter, mister. You can’t leave me stranded like this—dang it, I’m wearin’ hoops!”

Mae’s voice drifted away when it became apparent that he could abandon her and in fact had. She released a miserable wisp of air to convey her dissatisfaction of the situation in particular and life in general.

Righting oneself unassisted and wringing out soggy folds of mint green muslin proved grueling tasks. Her oldest sister Raeleen had sent her the steel hoops and lovely bell-shaped dress that first Christmas after the war began, before gross inflation and the blockade made such extravagances unattainable even for a planter’s wife. Though washed out and stained along the hem, it was her most prized frock, though for all practical purposes the design was cumbersome and didn’t fit into her working-class life at the textile mill. It was made for fetes and poetry readings, not excursions through the woods, but then Mae had never been invited to a fete or poetry reading. If she waited for life to present her with interesting festivities, she

would never wear anything but homely dresses and aprons. As it was, her weekly call to Wade Remold at the Chattahoochee River bridge was the pinnacle of her social calendar.

Reflecting on Wade nearly sent Mae into a fatal collapse of self-pity. Now she couldn't visit him during his guard duty at the crossing. The tiered skirt's pink crossbar pattern was no longer visible beneath the munificent layers of mud. The metal hoops were rusting away where she stood, and her chances of one day capturing a marriage proposal from her tepid suitor promptly recalculated itself from workable to highly dubious.

A blaze of anger momentarily stole her breath. She would make that little brat Owen Scott pay! Mae set off down the creek to exact justice, though precisely how she planned on doing this remained to be seen. Nevertheless, the squishing in her shoes and the sight of her bonnet's decapitated daisy marooned midstream only emboldened her.

Stride determined and chin raised high, she stepped through a final screen of tulip trees. Mae barely discerned Creighton's aloof countenance and Owen's sour one before she opened her mouth and lambasted the pair.

"Little piglet! You owe me a dress. I don't care if you got to sell your treasured collection of bugs or your cherished dog in order to finance matters, but you got a debt to pay, and you'll pay it if you know what's good for you."

"I don't own a dog. If'n I did, I s'pect the kind of dog I'd own wouldn't be valuable to nobody but me." His chest puffed up importantly. "I got a bug collection, but then I reckon ever'body got one of those. S'pose I'd have a hard time convincin' folks to buy a spare."

"You'll think of something, surely. Maybe you could sell your hair. Those pretty black ringlets would look quite fetchin' on a doll." Mae clipped her fingers in a threatening scissoring motion. "Snip-snip. The how of it makes no difference to me, but satisfy your obligation, bub. I need a new Sunday-go-to-meeting dress."

Owen licked his fingers and flattened his curls, scowling. "I don't got ringlets. I just got hair, plain an' simple." He paused in his grooming to show a smirk. "Sunday-go-to-meetin'? More like Sunday-go-to-swimmin'."

Mae's attention snapped to the uncle, who stood docilely off to the

side. She was no longer convinced of his killer tendencies. After all, if he planned on murdering her and disposing of the body, surely he would have gotten on with things by now?

“Your nephew is the most ill-mannered child I’ve ever had the misfortune of meetin’,” Mae disapproved. “Is this how you’ve been raisin’ him, Mr. Branagan? To backtalk and sass his betters? To strike a woman? Given all I’ve seen here today, I wonder if a man of your sterling qualities is truly up to the challenges of raisin’ a child!”

Creighton’s expression shifted from placid to thunderous. He took an aggressive step toward her as he mangled out a few sentences. Mae had no hope of deciphering them, but the way he delivered each strangled word, discordant and rudely informal, left little room for misinterpretation:

He’s still a child, with plenty of time for betterment, her imagination filled in. And your excuse?

“I see where your nephew gets his blowhard manners,” she added, her voice a mere peep.

Creighton’s ferocious expression slowly lifted, leaving behind clear gray eyes that settled impersonally upon her. Their impact was unnerving and made her feel as if he were extending mental feelers, like an insect using its antenna to gauge a possible threat. Or a possible meal. He finally took a deep breath, a rather impatient sound.

“Ah ahpahlahguysfah Ahwen’s bahhavvah, but eh’s atherensahtive whoa anion critahcizes spirants. Eh’s behahphaned onknee rehauntlee.”

Mae’s face submerged in hot color. “I can’t understand you.”

“He said he apologizes for my behavior, but I’m rather sensitive when anyone critter-sizes my parents. I been orphaned only recently!” For such a young child, Owen Scott could pull off a disgusted look on par with a grown man. “This is why he nary talks to no one but me. Nobody listens to him! It’s plain an’ simple what he’s sayin’, but nobody takes the time to listen. You’re just like all ’em others,” he condemned.

“What others?”

“The townsfolk, who else? Y’all treat my uncle like he’s stupid, but he ain’t. He taught himself how to read folks’ lips, and he learned to talk without ever hearin’ sounds. My Uncle Creighton’s smart as a whip. Lots smarter than you, I s’pect.”

Mae worked at Ivy Woolen Mill—the same mill as Creighton Branagan was employed at—and so she had firsthand knowledge of his lip-reading, though theirs wasn't a frequent exchange. Regardless, she took umbrage with Owen's fierce insistence that his uncle's intelligence outranked her own.

"Normally I wouldn't meddle, Mr. Branagan," she began in an intonation that clearly contradicted itself, but a deaf man couldn't detect the nuances of sarcasm. "Though if ever a man needed advice, that's you, so pay a mind, now. Your nephew needs discipline! Spank his ornery little backside before he gets even more unmanageable. Only five years old, and I'd swear he's already the devil's familiar."

"I'm six, lady. I ain't keen on your advice. Neither is my uncle."

Her fresh scolding died half-formed on her lips when she glimpsed Creighton Branagan's face. The murderous look was back, making her think she'd been too hasty in rejecting his violent reputation.

"What?" she squeaked, defensive. "Why are you lookin' at me like that?"

He angrily plunged first one arm and then the other into his sleeves, a courtesy he should have performed long before now. He yanked the shirt over his head but left the edges of the pullover unbuttoned as he verged on Mae, his manner stalking. Obviously, the man didn't take kindly to lectures about his nephew. She stood frozen and squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the inevitable, whatever that might be.

Nothing happened. She slowly cracked open her eyes and found herself alone.

"Rude," she muttered, but then she heard rustling branches and so turned around. She instantly spied Creighton standing toe-to-toe with a pawpaw trunk, his head tipped back and attention arrested on a boot in the crotch of two branches about ten feet above the ground.

"How did that get there?" She smiled disingenuously.

Creighton looked back and jabbed a furious index finger above his head. He seemed to be accusing her of the offense.

"I'm not fond of heights. Or broken bones. Coralie did that."

She listened to him mutter some nasally bit of nonsense before scaling the trunk. The man had a perfectly good right to be vexed if he'd just noticed

his boots had gone the same way as his shirt and trousers. A guilty conscience settled in firmly.

“Excuse me, Mr. Branagan?” Mae glanced aloft to see if she could be of assistance. “Is there anything I can do to help? Oh, for God’s sake,” she muttered, quickly averting her attention from his reemerging posterior. Creighton was having difficulty keeping his underwear on again. This obviously made the climbing of trees a somewhat precarious endeavor.

She turned her back on the luminous view. “Best wishes retrieving your boot.”

Owen had already scuttled off to reclaim the matching pair. From this angle she could see the heel plainly jutting from the bush. Owen went straight for it. She sighed disappointingly. She hadn’t even been able to outsmart a six-year-old.

By now Mae’s existence had been dismissed entirely. Creighton and Owen bent together in a private conversation that plainly excluded her, an omission that left her feeling unaccountably sour. She hedged a few steps closer, hoping to learn what they were saying. Her eavesdropping revealed more nasally muttering from Creighton and boisterous nods of agreement from Owen before they suddenly broke apart and searched the embankment in opposite directions.

Mae brightened. “For pity’s sake, there’s no need to do all that.” She clutched her damp skirts and hastened after them on tippy-toes, strategically avoiding the larger puddles of mud. “I know where to find your trousers.” She waved a spirited hand in the air when neither stopped to elicit her knowledge. She could understand why the uncle didn’t, but Owen had perfectly good ears and must have chosen to ignore her out of pure obstinacy.

She scanned the shoreline and muttered to herself when she saw the drowned garment shipwrecked beneath a river birch. “Mr. Branagan,” she demanded, this time with a cross hitch in her voice. “I found your trousers. Excuse me! Over here, Mr. Branagan.” Her hand gave another energetic wave. “If you’re as smart as your nephew says, look at where I’m pointin’!”

She gave up on a frustrated expulsion of air. Owen was nowhere around, and addleplated Creighton had forgotten what he was searching for and was presently distracted by the glass jar again. He filled it with brown

creek water and upended it joyfully. Mae shook her head. How pitiful! He stood not ten feet away and was in his own mysterious world. For a time, he'd seemed far more intelligent than previously credited, but his present behavior confirmed it was pointless thinking he had hidden depths.

"Gotta brazen it out, I guess." With an internal sigh, she ascertained that Creighton was still preoccupied with his little diversion before bundling the dress above her knees and venturing out into the current. A dirge of squeaks and invectives accompanied her progress into the colder depths, and her skirts ballooned about her hips like the cap of an obstinate mushroom, impeding her movements, and though she ceded a quick submersion would be best, she continued to mince along.

"Seems I happened upon your trousers." She waved them above her head at long last, sloshing sullenly toward Creighton. "You've secured all your clothes again. Pleased, are you?"

The limpid expression in his eyes abruptly vanished as he quickly seized the garment. He smiled broadly and had the boldness to wink at her. Clearly, she'd been duped.

"Bully for you," she grumbled.

"I run acrost a big ol' bullfrog back thata way!" Owen squawked excitedly, reemerging from a bend in the creek and latching onto Creighton's sleeve when he didn't immediately respond. Once his uncle was watching his mouth, Owen repeated his bit of news, this time embellishing on its size by spreading his hands nearly a foot apart.

Mae exhaled emphatically. It was a disbelieving sound that contained a multitude of grievances. She decided not to investigate the terrible suspicion that she'd been tricked into fetching Creighton's trousers. It had been her comeuppance and rightly so, but she refused to ignore Owen's cock and bull story.

"I spent every summer of my girlhood searchin' this creek for frogs. My brother Lorenzo used to fry up a big batch of legs every Independence Day and we'd picnic, and I never found any near the size you're lyin' about."

"Gross. You used to eat frogs?"

"That's why you're helpin' your uncle catch them, isn't it? To eat?" She considered Creighton thoughtfully. "I wondered what you were doin' "

standing all peculiar-like out there in the water.”

“Ew, lady! That’s disgusting. I wagered Ronald Oakley that I’d find a frog bigger than his Mr. Golden.” Owen’s mouth took on a superior twist. “Mr. Golden is only four inches long, so he shouldn’t be all that tricky to beat. Uncle Creighton’s helpin’ me find a real dandy specimen.”

“Your uncle has to spend his one day off from the mill at the mercy of your whims? You’re a worse little imp than I realized.”

“He likes spendin’ time with me. He even says so! Best git now, Miz High an’ Mighty, an’ leave men’s concerns to men.”

Mae noticed the boy spoke behind his hand, and when Creighton reached out with a frown to lower the boy’s fingers, her eyes widened with outrage. Little sneak! He was muttering his offensive remarks behind his hand so his uncle couldn’t read his lips.

“I dare you to catch it, then.” She snatched the empty jar from Creighton’s hand and transferred it to Owen, challenging from her own shielded lips, “If you really do catch this legendary bullfrog, you won’t be a liar, and then you won’t have to worry about the monster that steals lyin’ children from their beds. Did I mention it picks its teeth with little boys’ shinbones? Yours appear the perfect size.”

“I’m gonna tell what you said,” he threatened, but he dashed off down the bank instead, the jar held aloft as he circumnavigated thick tree roots and lichen-covered rocks in his quest to prove her wrong. Much to Mae’s satisfaction, she glimpsed his panicked glance downward, as if already speculating on how his legs would look as toothpicks.

She was slow to realize she stood alone in the creek. Creighton had already waded out onto the bank and was rummaging through a fishing creel. Grimacing, she was acutely aware of the saturated weight of her clothing and the clammy feel of it against her skin. She quickly located a handily positioned log and plopped down to pry off her shoes.

A small slate board slowly floated into her peripheral vision, entering from the left in a disembodied fashion that made her jump. She spun around and discovered with marginal relief that it was attached to Creighton’s hand.

“Get away.” A geyser of water poured forth from her upended shoe. “I’m tryin’ to dry out, no thanks to you.” Mae wiggled her liberated toes. “I think they’ve been pickled. Dang it! Got a hole in my stocking.”

He didn't react to her words, and so she inspected him more closely and realized he was staring out above her head. Mae turned and followed his gaze but only gleaned a phoebe quivering on a low branch, and it was then she realized he was keeping his eyes averted courteously.

"That's the first sign of civility I seen from you all day." When she looked back again, he wagged the chalkboard slightly as an incentive for her to read it.

Soldiers nearby. Should go on home now.

Mae darted a quick look upward, but Creighton was still immersed with his view of the unremarkable bird. She jerked on his sleeve, promptly gaining his attention.

"Course there's soldiers nearby; they're guarding the town bridge. Wade Remold—have I mentioned he's practically my fiancé?—is in the Roswell Battalion. And I'm not goin' anywhere till my clothes dry out. Think of the talk, what with me walkin' past all and sundry and wearin' half the creek."

His fist scrubbed away the chalk words.

Not our battalion. Yankees are coming.

Mae's soft huff of laughter interrupted the throaty call of the phoebe, now hopping industriously from branch to branch. "We live in the South, Mr. Branagan," she dismissed. "The Yankees are always comin'. You've only lived in Roswell for a few months. I don't know what it was like for you in New Manchester, but we've lived with rumors about Yankee invasions since the war started. Last September the entire village nearly evacuated because we put too much faith in rumors."

Barrington King gave away everything in the company store so Yankees won't get. Mill owners have left. Plantation owners gone. Nearly 500 of our soldiers protecting bridge retreated Friday. Only our battalion left. Time to worry.

She'd grown so impatient waiting for Creighton to write his message that sometime during its transference, she'd leaned in close to read over his shoulder. With each fragmented sentence, Mae's anxiety grew. All were facts she was privy to, but she quickly scanned the quiet woods all the same. The stillness had seemed peaceful less than a minute before, but now his reminder lent a certain sinister quality to their surroundings.

“Coralie is gonna have the devil to pay when I get hold of her. What if this was my last chance to see Wade?” she worried aloud. “I shouldn’t have stood for that stupid prank.”

Shouldn’t do that out here. Soldiers might see.

Mae followed the identifying jerk of his chin as she unthinkingly twisted folds of her skirt, squeezing out the water in dribs and drabs, scandalously revealing a pantalet ruffle here, an exposed ankle there.

“Oh, save your breath. I’m stayin’ put till my clothes dry, and that’s for that. Anyways, if your nephew hadn’t kicked me into the creek, and if you hadn’t abandoned me there, and then if you hadn’t pretended a sudden attack of idiocy while I fetched your trousers, well, I wouldn’t have any reason to DO THIS OUT HERE.”

His lips pressed together smugly as he wrote on his slate.

Present misfortune can be traced back to the moment you decided to steal my clothes.

“Such guff,” Mae announced. She was temporarily flustered by it.

Creighton’s smoky eyes gravitated her way again, in no particular hurry and not seeming overly impressed by what they saw upon arrival. Never before had she felt so irritated by a man’s attitude. Mae had not expected Creighton Branagan’s stare to contain such a lofty personal opinion of himself while such a low opinion of her, nor had she envisioned that insolent smile that was forming.

“Quite the swellhead, aren’t you?”

A black eyebrow lifted in a dare for her to continue.

Creighton had worked at Ivy Woolen Mill for eight months, but Mae had never troubled a close study of him until now. His deafness rendered him taboo as far as female interest went, but she couldn’t deny he was an arresting sight with his thick black hair that spilled in shiny, uneven waves over his neck and forehead. Dark gypsies came to mind as she looked at him. She wanted to reach out and sweep the heavy locks back from his face. It was in sore need of a trim and hung disheveled in his eyes. If she’d had her sewing scissors with her, she would have offered to cut it for him. Her jangled nerves hinted that if she hacked enough away, a surprisingly handsome face would emerge. His skin was the gilded color of bee honey, and Mae suspected that his mouth could curve sweetly and spin fortunes if

it wanted. Those eyes of his smoked and sparked, a nomadic gaze, always watching and roving. He was remarkably tall but carried his height with an odd masculine grace that was evident in his posture, even while wearing dripping trousers and an unbuttoned shirt.

It was a pity he had to be deaf.

“You refuse to speak at the mill. Why let everyone believe you’re mute?”

The moment her lips began moving, Creighton’s fascinating silver eyes dipped to her mouth, and it took all of Mae’s concentration to continue speaking. Somehow the sight of him studying their movement threatened her composure. She felt breathless and slightly off-balance and suddenly feared she’d picked up some strange illness from ingesting dirty creek water.

Can’t understand me.

“How can you know that for certain? You’ve never tried to speak at work.”

For a moment it seemed as if he would erase the words and write a new message, but instead he simply underlined the previous text, emphasizing them.

“If you spoke at work ’stead of writing on this ridiculous slate, maybe everyone wouldn’t treat you like they do,” Mae suggested. “You ever considered that?”

His smoky stare heated and shot off a spray of angry sparks.

Easier this way.

“Easier? Don’t you think your life would be easier if you tried bein’ like everyone else?”

Can’t be like everyone else. Always be different.

“I’ve never read anything so wretched, not in all my days.” She made a face. “Your nephew seems to think you’re smarter than most because you’ve learned to read lips and talk without ever hearin’ sounds. If people knew that about you, if you let them know you’re able to speak, maybe you’d get a fair shake. Very few people at the mill can read, but surely everyone there could learn to understand your odd speech eventually.”

Creighton abruptly straightened, as if her words had somehow filled his spinal column with indignant molten lead. The nub of chalk clicked

angrily against the board.

Odd speech? You've just made my point.

"You look ready to start foaming at the mouth. What did I say wrong? It is odd. You sound like you're speaking through your nose."

Go away.

"I'm only tryin' to help." Mae jerked the slate from his hands and ran with it, stopping only when she had a tree to place safely between them. "If you practiced with someone other than a six-year-old brat, your speech—such as it is—would likely improve. Practice with me."

Creighton scowled.

"Practice makes perfect. Stop glaring at me and say something."

"Gahmaymahslahbahk."

Just as he'd predicted, Mae's face remained an uncomprehending mask.

"Gahmaymahslahbahk!"

"No need to bite my head off. Shoutin' makes it harder to understand you, not easier."

In a show of frustration, Creighton scrubbed his hands in his hair, making the ends stick up in odd juxtapositions. He settled for linking his fingers together on top of his head when what he really wanted to do, his eyes threatened, was wrap them around her delicate stalk of a neck.

"Stop running your words together. They sound like one long sentence. Pause a moment between each word and put a bit more effort into its pronunciation. You're not makin' the sounds correctly. Watch my lips and repeat after me." With a combative smile, she gripped the tree trunk and leaned playfully to the side. "Say 'My nephew is an unruly devil child.'"

He glowered at that.

"I give. He isn't a devil child at all. Merely...scrappy. Let's start off with a less heated topic." Mae tilted her head, awaiting inspiration. "I'm Mae Parrish, by the by. I don't think we've ever been properly introduced. I work on the spinning floor. You got my permission to call me Mae. We don't stand on formalities in these here parts. May I call you Creighton?"

He paused a moment, then flicked the fingers of his right hand, a twitch of indifference.

"Such enthusiasm. Back to your lessons," she encouraged. "Let's

practice introductions, shall we? Say that you're pleased to make my acquaintance or some such-and-such pleasantries. Then I'll return with a humorous remark."

"*Gah may mah slah bahk.*" He stepped close and tugged the chalkboard into his possession before Mae could secure her grip. "*Nawt gah ahway un leaf may ahlawn.*"

"There now," she approved. "I've no idea what you just said, but leastways you separated your words this time. Progress! Though I suspect there wasn't anything in there about making my acquaintance? Or bein' pleased about it?"

He snorted contemptuously.

My sore shoulder is about as pleased to meet you as your limb was to meet Owen.

"We're back to that? I only hit you because I thought you intended to murder Coralie."

Her statement gave each a moment's hesitation. It had been an absurd fear made all the more outlandish by mentioning aloud. Creighton's scornful expression said she was no great pearl.

"Coralie and I live together in the company apartments," Mae defended. "Neither of us got family in Roswell, and so we share a set of rooms because it's cheaper." She showed a smile, hoping to appease him with humor. "I couldn't have managed the expenses on my own if you'd killed her. So I'm not a bloodthirsty woman, understand? Just a practical one."

He stared at her, unamused.

"It was only a prank. We didn't mean any real harm by it," she hastened, "and that's the ring of truth. But it was wrong. I see that now. I shouldn't have let Coralie take it into her head. Can we be friends now?"

"*Fends?*"

"Yes, friends. Don't you want a friend?"

His answer to that was the slightest narrowing of his eyes, as if he was dubious of such an offer and might harass Mae into recanting merely by squinting at her.

"You ever kissed a woman, Creighton?"

He abruptly ceased squinting. He blinked for a moment or two before

forming the most impassive expression Mae had ever seen. She smiled, her flagging confidence restored. She was not a beautiful woman, but she knew she was pleasing in a rosy-cheeked sort of way. She took a step closer to him.

“Would you like to kiss me?”

He stared down his nose and said nothing, but that didn’t deter her in the slightest. Her offer of a kiss had come out of nowhere, and she knew he was discomfited. Truly, so was she. What had compelled her to make such an offer? Atonement? Unlikely. A way to soothe her vanity? Perhaps. Creighton Branagan’s surprising talent of making her feel inferior with a single squinty look was aggravating. But in all likelihood, her reason was simpler than that. Suddenly her greatest earthly concern was stealing a kiss from that gypsy mouth.

“Or maybe I’ll just kiss you,” she proposed. “Got anything to say about that?”

Nothing, apparently. Creighton was disconcertingly tall, she realized, a fact she’d already been aware of but hadn’t truly appreciated until she was standing toe-to-toe with him. Since he refused to accommodate her by taking the lead out of his spine, she stretched up on bare toes in order to put their mouths at the proper distance. She made certain to hold his gaze a bit longer than necessary and even grinned a little in provocation.

He didn’t return her smile.

Undaunted, Mae touched her mouth to the warm seal of his lips, awaiting his response. While waiting, she was aware of his solid frame and magnetic warmth and how nice it would have been to lean against him fully, although she didn’t dare. That would have been outrageously vulgar, and she wasn’t vulgar, just a little untoward, and so she continued waiting.

Still nothing happened, and so she parted her mouth slightly, not enough to seem profane, just enough to tug at his stubborn bottom lip and mingle their breathing.

Like a bolt from the blue, pleasure infused her senses, shocking Mae into pulling back. What she saw reflected down at her confounded her female pride. Creighton’s unimpressed, resistant mien remained firmly in place, impervious to her charms.

Slowly he leaned down until his nose almost touched hers. *“Is dat the*

best yew can dew? Gah home, silly ghurl. Ah dunt want a fend like yew."

Her eyes rounded as horror settled in. Not only had she initiated a perversion with the village idiot, she'd enjoyed it much more than the idiot had! Her humiliation knew no bounds.

"Friends? Speak for yourself! I'd never want to be friends with someone who's off his head." She snatched up her shoes and stomped away barefooted through the wooded tract, bellowing all the way. "To think I was tryin' to be nice! No wonder everyone laughs at you, Creighton Branagan. You got a screw loose!"

Mae should have been on the lookout for the little beast, but in her ire and embarrassment, she'd forgotten he was still skulking about in the woods. Owen leapt up from his roost at the base of a rotting tree stump just as she rounded the next bend in the path, his face bright red from having overheard Mae's insults, and made a motion to have at her.

"You're just like ever'body else!" He seemed to change his mind about further ungentlemanly attacks. She relaxed when he paused and carefully situated the mason jar with its single occupant atop the stump, but this was a premature lowering of defenses on Mae's part. Owen barreled down the path in a blaze of vengeance, staying true to character, and yet still somehow surprising her.

"I hate you, stupid lady." His deadly accurate foot shot out. "I hope the Yankees eat your guts for supper!"

Rubbing her leg, suddenly wanting to cry but not because of her thrice-abused extremity, she barely retained enough presence of mind to yell, "Don't think I didn't see that worthless-lookin' frog, boy. No wonder you were hidin' all the way over here! Enjoy your shinbones for as long as you got them, which won't be very long at all!"



CHAPTER 2: "GOSSIPMONGERS"

"No more secrets," Coralie insisted cheerfully as she dropped down beside Mae in the shady grass. "Tell what really happened between you an' Brainless Branagan the other day."

Mae struggled to hide her fresh irritation as last evening's topic resumed exactly where she least wanted it to pick up: Ivy Woolen Mill, and during the noon break, no less. Her vexed condition wasn't helped any by the subsequent arrival of Prudence Colburn and Lucinda Rohner, their expressions friendly and eager and not to be trusted for an instant.

"Not this again. I already told you everything there is to tell."

Like every day at this time, the workers gathered out-of-doors in sociable groups surrounded by their little tin buckets and calico sacks, but today nearly every face carried a strained tension that went beyond the usual weariness of too much work and too little sleep. The intentional burning of the town bridge this morning was the height of discussion everywhere but here, where instead a footnote to the Inquisition was taking place.

Mae frowned and faced her accusers. "I fell in the creek and he helped me climb out. Such a scandal!" Her gaze narrowed meaningfully on Coralie. "This is the last I'll speak of it, hear? The story wasn't interestin' the first time 'round, and it surely hasn't improved any with repetition."

"Fallin' in the crick an' climbin' out takes well over an hour?" Coralie rifled through Mae's lunch bucket and blithely stole an apple, unimpressed with her sarcasm but enamored enough with the tactic to adopt it as her own. "A girl's reputation could suffer from such a lengthy tumble."

"Your mind is a filthy privy, I swan," she replied calmly. "Odd how you didn't fret over my reputation yesterday. You threw me to the wolves, leastways the closest thing this town can call a wolf, though if you ask me, he's far and away the tamest killer I ever did see."

Lucinda and Prudence immediately perked up. "Killer?" one

demanded. “What’s this about a killer?” exacted the other.

“You ain’t heerd? I thought all an’ sundry heerd by now.”

“Stop bein’ a gossip, Coralie. None of that business about Sadie Levine is true anyways.”

“Hesh up. You nary set great store by sich matters, but diggin’ up folks’ deepest secrets is a gift, an’ one I got in spades. Move in closer, ladies, lest a body got the poor manners to eavesdrop on our conversation.”

“Eavesdropping on gossip would certainly be terrible etiquette,” Mae muttered cynically.

“Ellen Blackmoore tol’ me all the dreadful particulars,” Coralie gushed. “Course, now I promised Ellen I’d nary repeat a word of it...” She paused with an expectant arched brow, awaiting oaths of eternal secrecy from Prudence and Lucinda that everyone knew would be broken before the workday ended. Once received, Coralie issued a nod of satisfaction and transported her rapt audience with the scandalized tone of one who thrills at shocking others and has perfected the role, thanks to years of application. “Naturally, I regret betrayin’ Ellen’s confidence, but then I’m only showin’ sound judgment in sharin’ what I know, wouldn’t you ladies agree?”

“Heavens, yes,” Prudence spouted. “Ellen’ll understand.”

“Dang it, ninny, jist don’t tell her I tol’ you an’ they’ll be no need for understanding.” Coralie’s irritated visage promptly smoothed back into its premeditated, compassionate angles. “You’re sich dear friends, an’ I couldn’t bear it if either one of you ended up like poor doomed Sadie Levine.”

“Who?”

“She’d git to it if you’d stop interruptin’ her,” Lucinda complained. “Go on, Coralie. Tell us what happened to Sadie.”

“She was killed in the woods durin’ one of her aft’noon walks! It was a well-known fact Sadie Levine took her constitutional at the same time ever’ day. It was the vilest killin’ ever to take place in New Manchester, so folks say. Folks heerd her screaming blue murder, an’ little wonder! The villain split her head clean open like a melon afore he hacked her body into little bits so as to hide of the evidence more easily. But now for the most fearsome part of the story, ladies...” She blinked owlshly, striving for dramatic pause. “Sadie’s murderer still roams free, an’ what’s more, he’s

here at this very moment, livin' in Roswell, searchin' for his next victim among us innocent womenfolk—”

“No!” gasped both women, their eyes shining with grisly delight.

“Yes! Fan yourselves, ladies, afore you faint from pure terror, because it's Creighton Branagan who done killed Sadie! It's true! Every ghastly word of it.”

“We labor alongside a murderer?” Prudence flapped a hand near her face. “How awful!”

“I always knew there was somethin' odd 'bout that man,” Lucinda intoned. “Other than him bein' deaf an' all.”

“Ellen has kin in New Manchester, a cousin or some sich, an' she heerd that Creighton Branagan went off his head an' killed Sadie durin' a jealous, towerin' rage! Her body was nary found so the law couldn't put 'im on trial, but folks was set on mob justice all the same. Suffice it to say, that's why he lit out of town right quick the way he did.”

Mae snorted. “For the life of me, I thought Creighton Branagan moved to Roswell to raise his sister's boy after she passed on last winter, but that must've been a ruse to avoid the hangin' mob. Well now! That puts his sister in quite a fix, pretendin' to be dead all the time, but the boy sure is mighty cooperative to play along like he has.” She snorted again. “A cousin or some such? That's our informant? Ellen Blackmoore is either a gullible scatterbrain, or she's laughin' up her sleeve.”

All attention swiveled to Mae. Coralie seemed a trace put out by her reasoning, whereas Lucinda and Prudence were clearly disappointed that there may not be a scandal worth repeating after all.

“Pshaw. There you go again, bein' all high an' mighty. What's got your dander up? You want our bosom friends to git dragged off into the bushes somewheres an' cudgeled to death an' left for crow meat because you didn't let me warn 'em away from that man? I don't know what's wrong with you today, but you're bein' very contrary indeed.” Coralie pursed her lips in grave contemplation. “Next you'll say Gillian Scott didn't turn peculiar after her husband died in the war. You'll prob'ly git all mulish an' claim she didn't kill herself neither.”

“But she didn't kill herself!” Mae argued after a brief moment of rendered speechlessness. “Everybody knows she died from a putrid fever.

Dang it all, Coralie, the whole town went to her wake. That's enough shenanigans, hear?"

"Who said anything 'bout shenanigans? This is quite seriously a matter of life an' death." Coralie's gaze narrowed a cautionary fraction before devoting her attention anew to Lucinda and Prudence. "Ellen's cousin—that's right, I said cousin!—said Sadie Levine was the most sought after lady in New Manchester, hands down. Ever' man who caught a glimpse of her offered marriage straightaway, an' Creighton Branagan was no different. She refused his proposal, naturally, an' the rest is open an' shut."

"Stop pullin' their leg," Mae ordered, refusing to be ignored, her bad temper compounding. "Your silly preoccupation with Creighton Branagan has ruined everything. I missed my last chance to call on Wade, all thanks to you. Supposing he dies in battle believin' I didn't care enough about him to keep our last engagement? I'd never forgive myself," she declared, uneasy at the thought.

"Wade's dull as ditchwater, an' Lonnie ain't no better. I did you a favor! All 'em boys ever did was peacock 'round in their uniforms an' boast of how many Yankees they'd shoot if the order ever came down to send 'em into glorious battle." Coralie smiled sweetly. "Now they'll have their chance."

"Have you told Lonnie he shares the same appeal as ditchwater, or are you gonna wait and add that bit of sweet talk to your weddin' vows? That's a fine way to talk about the man you're gonna marry."

"I nary said I accepted Lonnie Hoffmire's absurd proposal. Hmph. I gave 'im the mitten."

Mae was incredulous. Coralie gave him the mitten? No woman in her proper mind refused a credible marriage proposal, not in this day and age. "Eligible men in Roswell are quickly disappearin', and you're gonna throw a perfectly good one away?"

"They're fast dyin' in Mr. Lincoln's War. Don't make it sound as if they're simply movin' to Atlanta for the more excitin' social calendar."

"Better a widow than a spinster," Lucinda advised morbidly.

"You keep pinning your hopes on Wade, but you ain't never gonna git a proposal from that boy. Maybe you ought to worry 'bout your own unattached state 'stead of mine. And don't go gettin' your nose outta joint.

I was jist bein' supportive," she defended, turning away before Mae could recover from her embarrassment and shout something back.

She caught Prudence's awkward glance of sympathy and Lucinda's much less sincere one and felt her composure slip further. Coralie had always dominated their friendship, and usually she suffered the imbalance without much protest, but the worst unintended consequence of yesterday's prank—her foiled call on Wade—was taxing her equanimity.

"It's a darn shame the way you have to string along with Wade," Prudence interjected, her expression kindly. "Men rarely appreciate what's best for them."

"Oh, sometimes women are blind to the very same, believe you me," Coralie professed. "Boys like Lonnie an' Wade aren't the end-all, be-all for women like us. We cut our teeth on those pie eater boys, not end up married to 'em! Now, they have their charmin' moments an' all," she appeased, her lashes fluttering demurely before resuming their cool scrutiny, "but a woman can't forget it's always onward an' upward, upward an' onward. I might not talk like some fancy book, but I got me some fancy dreams, an' they surely don't include marryin' Lonnie or another hayseed like 'im. One day I'm gonna catch me a paper collar man."

"My gracious, that's much too ambitious for me," Prudence demurred. "All I need is my darling Gilbert. I'll be pleased as punch when the war is over, and we can finally marry! Though Coralie makes a fine point about the pickings here bein' slim given I've snapped up The Last Great Man!"

"Here she goes again," Lucinda grumbled. "It's like watchin' a pig in clover, unawares that the smilin' farmer has an ax."

"I can't help myself. I simply want to be married! Then I can quit this dreadful mill. It goes against nature, women bein' forced to work outside the home like we do."

Coralie smirked. "Marriage is gonna wear out its welcome with you in a month's time. You think eleven hours a day of mill work is so terrible? Drudgery nary stops when you're someone's wife, Pru. Leastways now you got Sundays off. I don't reckon husbands an' little ankle-biters observe the Sabbath."

This seemed to signal the end of hostilities. Lucinda rolled her eyes in exasperated agreement—the only one among them to have laid claim to the

marriage state, albeit only briefly before trading it for widowhood—and Prudence giggled, a guileless sound. Even Mae forced a feeble smile.

“Can y’all really see me as Mrs. Lonnie Hoffmire? That’s a heap of somethin’, and let me tell you, it’s a smelly heap that stinks to high heaven. I’d be bored to tears. I’d have to imbibe ever’ day, drink antiHoffmatics—hah! I invented a new drink!—jist to keep sane.”

In a weak attempt at diplomacy, Mae pointed out, “Lonnie isn’t so terrible. He’s sensible and nice and he’s...reliable.”

“There’s no accountin’ for tastes, I s’pose. Maybe you ought to marry ’im,” she volunteered cheerfully. “Or better yet, marry Creighton Branagan, a man among men!”

“More like a pile of manure among men,” Lucinda quipped, earning a coordinating snigger from Prudence that set Mae’s teeth on edge.

“Leave well enough alone already. Could we talk about somethin’ important for a change? Everyone knows our battalion had to abandon their position at the bridge this mornin’. God’s sake, they had to burn it! They did it to slow up the Yankees, but that won’t stop the invasion. Maybe we should talk about what we’re gonna do when they overrun the town ’stead of nattering on about everything else.”

“Mae’s right,” Prudence piped up in her little squeaky voice. Everything about Prudence Colburn was of diminutive proportions. Petite and fair-haired, her small blueberry eyes were clustered tightly together, dooming her to a perpetual cross-eyed appearance that intensified whenever her expression grew anxious, as it did now. “I can still smell the smoke driftin’ through the trees. We’re sorry for teasing you, Mae, but it was a nice bit of distraction from all this dreadful war talk.”

“My brother tol’ me our battalion was bein’ dispatched east of town to stop the Yanks from burnin’ the paper mill.” Lucinda’s normally plain face grew animated, a queer transformation unbefitting such dire news. “He sent word to Mama an’ me just this mornin’. They’re gonna whup those Lincoln-loving Yankasses, no two ways about it.”

“That’s only a couple of miles away,” Mae estimated, plainly worried.

“I already done tol’ you,” Lucinda muttered, a firm edge to her voice, “Warren said our boys are gonna cook their goose.”

“I didn’t want to say anything to upset you girls, but since our nice bit

of distraction is obviously a thing of the past..." Prudence slipped Mae a perturbed, vaguely accusatory look. "Gilbert sent me a very troublesome message this morning. He was all in a dither, like he felt somethin' bad about to happen in his bones—he said the countryside 'round Roswell is swarming with Sherman's troops. A powerful grist of them, mind."

"That's scarcely news," Lucinda dismissed.

"Heavens, 'course it's news! There's scads more troops than they first thought. Our boys might have to pull up stakes, and we all know what that means."

Lucinda's eyes darted side-to-side, unnerved. "Tell us anyways."

"Isn't it obvious? Our battalion would have to abandon the village altogether!"

"Abandon Roswell?" Mae blanched. "Our boys are gonna leave us at the mercy of those mongering Yankees?"

"What choice do they have?" Lilliputian fingers suddenly latched onto Mae's arm in an amazing display of strength. "If they stay, our boys will be captured. They'll spend what's left of the war languishin' in some horrid Yankee prison. My poor darling Gilbert!"

"Fine, poor Gilbert, but what about us?" she pointed out tersely. "How are we gonna defend ourselves against an invasion? Throw bobbins at their heads? Threaten to smother them with lint balls?"

"Listen to y'all! I've nary seed sich a silly bunch of cows," Coralie laughed, surprisingly checking her opinionated nature until now. She tugged her single braid over her shoulder and casually picked at the split ends, staging a perfect picture of indifference. "There's no reason to be afear'd. We're only women, Mae. We won't need to defend ourselves. The Yankees'll likely pass through Roswell on their way to more important towns. It's Atlanta they want. We might have to tolerate their stink for a day, maybe two, then ever'thing'll go back to normal. Mark my words."

"Stop misleading 'em women, Coralie. This ain't no laughin' matter." Lenore Simmons, a rawboned weaver who claimed the role of spokeswoman of her own nearby circle of postulaters, suddenly stood and challenged, "Roswell is a boon for our enemies. Three textile mills, and all of 'em money-making? That's a windfall no Yankee commander can pass up." She took a moment to glance around at her supporters, predicting

dourly, “They’ll seize ever’thing or force us to spin wool for their side; whichever, the writing’s on the wall. We’re done for, girls.”

Sounds of disbelief fanned through the expanding assembly, which now included most of the first floor weavers, interspersed here and there with the occasional carder, picker, and spinner from the remaining two floors.

“This ain’t nothin’ but a lot of fuss an’ feathers, I tell you! We’re unimportant,” Coralie maintained, completely in her element now that she had dozens of girls poised on her every word. “If we’re in danger, why is the mill still open? Why did we come to work today?”

“Those big bugs don’t care ’bout us,” Lenore argued. “All the King family cares ’bout—all they’ve ever cared ’bout—is keepin’ their prized mills open.”

Gemma Newland, a young blonde with an angrily flushed face that aggravated the strawberry birthmark beneath her left eye, added her own boisterous voice to the growing dissonance. “Ivy Woolen Mill has contracts with the Confederate Army. We make the wool for their uniforms. That makes us a town of great consequence.”

“Particularly from a tactical standpoint,” Prudence threw in.

“Well, la-di-dah, Pru,” Coralie taunted. “An’ who made you senior officer?”

“Ever’body knows the Kings left for Atlanta weeks ago,” Lenore resumed. “Cap’n James King consigned our mill over to Mr. Roché in May with instructions to stay open and by the very skin of our teeth if need be. Should the Yanks draw their pistols and command otherwise, guess that puts us a-tween the devil and the deep blue sea, don’t it? That ain’t the kindly orders of a family who cares ’bout its workers.”

Mae’s head began to pound over the sheer volume of replenished speculation taking place. She felt Prudence commandeer her arm like before. “They wouldn’t do that, would they, Mae?” Her eyes plumped with fright. “Surely the Yankees wouldn’t really point their pistols at innocent womenfolk? It’s ungentlemanly.”

Mae quickly disentangled her grasping fingers. She was eager to get away from not only Prudence but the entire crowd. The summer heat and closely packed bodies produced a desperate edge to her departure. She

collected her luncheon pail without delay and lurched through the mob. Hands reached out and steadied her whenever she accidentally trod on a hem or foot until she breathed a sigh of relief at long last, exiting the crush of women.

Were the conjectures she left behind groundless, or would Roswell really come under Union occupation? The possibility had existed throughout the war, and she'd lived with the disquiet attached to such speculations for three years now. Yet this time somehow felt different.

She neared the water's edge, lulled by the possibility of a few moments of peace and quiet. Such virtues were difficult to find in a thriving town like Roswell but not altogether impossible. Here Vickery's Creek expended its final southeasterly turn, disgorging its modest current into the far more impressive surge of the Chattahoochee River. Unlike the cotton mills that were built farther upstream, Ivy Mill claimed a more remote location near the confluence of the two watercourses, neatly slotted into place among the trees. If one could learn to block out the constant din of factory life—waterwheels sluicing, axles groaning, machinery linkage clanging—solitude could be found, tucked discreetly among the various and sundry noises allied with industry.

Mae slowly slid off the red kerchief that normally covered her hair and closed her eyes, breathing in deep the smells of leaf mold and verdant ferns. Calmness was there, in the minuscule sounds of the forest: the fluid ruffling of water over rocks; the throaty refrain of a distant scarlet tanager; even the barest scuffling of branches in the high green canopy above her head contained it.

Mae opened her eyes, internally calmer, but now keenly aware of her discomforts on the outside. Without the confines of her kerchief, wiry curls sprang free and stuck to her throat in humid swirls; she swiped at them unconsciously, a nuisance that dimmed when compared to the greater irritation of an itchy, perspiration-soaked bodice. She undid the top buttons and diligently reached inside. Her fingers instinctively sought out the weals left behind by corset and bodice boning. There was little room to maneuver more than a quick scratch or two, and when her knuckles—constantly rubbed raw from bashing into machinery—chafed against a particularly tight-fitting busk, she abandoned the effort entirely.

Lacy patterns of filtered sunlight danced across the abused joints of her fingers. Mae stilled, caught unaware by the sight. She carefully turned her hands this way and that, viewing with a critical eye the purple bruises, flayed skin and pared, scabby knuckles. She had ugly hands, she realized, and not for the first time. Only five years of mill work, and her fingers were disfigured permanently with nicks and pits. She curled her hands into fists, feeling every callus and lump of scar tissue and wishing her life might have been otherwise.

“I’m diggin’ my grave with a spindle, / I sure am beat; / I want a rich husband, / Before I’m dead meat.”

A soft exhalation of gloomy laughter carried Mae into her daydream. When she opened her eyes again, she would wake on a thick mattress tick filled with feathers, and she’d be wearing a lovely nightgown of oyster silk with adornments of ribbon and lace. A nearby servant would impart her morning repast—tartlets and hot chocolate!—cleverly arranged on a black and gilt lacquered tray. After taking her leisure, she would ease across the room in fur-lined slippers and throw open the windows to breathe in the morning air. Her wealthy gentleman husband would gallop by on horseback, a pastoral setting of gently sloping fields and fragrant trees in full bloom his backdrop. He would rein in his mount, smile rapturously at her appearance, and instantly voice his unending love.

Mae pasted Wade’s face on her fantasy husband even though he was as far removed from being a wealthy landowner as a man could possibly get. She ignored that inconvenient bit of reality and blew him a kiss, laughing. The sound intrigued her gorgeous husband, because of course he was interested in her every thought and desire and always asked her opinion on a variety of Important Things.

“I just had the silliest little dream,” she chirruped when he inquired about the hilarity reflected in her eyes. “There was a war goin’ on, and I was a dirt-poor mill worker. I wore ugly clothes and had obnoxious friends. Thank heaven I woke up!”

A mosquito bit Mae on the forehead, its proboscis sucking out the fantasy as effectively as it did her blood.

Humbling reality further asserted itself when she heard the mill bell signal the return to work. She hastily repaired her clothing and swung her

empty pail in contemplation as she stepped onto the path. Silk nightgowns and feather mattresses were probably overrated anyway, but broader estimations on the matter promptly ended when Mae collided with Creighton Branagan's shirtfront.

"You were spyin' on me!" Her vilification echoed among the trees as she backed away, hand shielding her bosom even though all was properly covered again. As a further display of her offended sensibilities, she chucked her pail at his depraved head, although outrage compromised her aim and sent it glancing off his shoulder instead. "You're a pervert, Creighton Branagan. You were watchin' me undo my bodice, bold as brass!"

His glance rose midway through her tirade, probably only catching half of what she said, but it was enough to hatch an irate scowl and furiously scribbled message.

"You're wastin' your breath," she dismissed, nose swiveled skyward in response to his attempt to hand over his odious chalkboard. "What sort of man skulks in the bushes and spies on defenseless women? I'll tell you what sort: the perverted sort! And I've no interest in listenin' to the madcap babble of a pervert, believe you me."

Yet again, he tried pushing the slate into her hands. Mae snatched up her pail and hurried toward the mill, but he was obstinate in his pursuit, and his legs were longer.

"Fine already. Fork it over before someone sees us."

Wanted to see what's happening. Smelled smoke.

"It's the bridge. Our battalion burned it this morning. You're surely not the cream of the crop, are you? Even someone like you ought to be able to put two and two together," she goaded. "It's just about the only thing folks been discussing."

His eyes flashed entertainingly, an unforeseen substitute for the indignation Mae had hoped for. With an efficiency of movements, he inscribed a new message, but she wasn't waiting around for the particulars.

"Now move, you great big lump. I'm not risking my job showing up late because of you." He was intently involved in scribbling, and so she knew he couldn't see her lips moving, and yet she angrily took to punctuating her words, as if sheer volume might do the trick and gain his

attention. “I’ve a good mind to report your LEWDNESS if you don’t MOVE outta my way. You’ll get the SACK, PEEPING TOM.”

He didn’t glance up until the end, so her threat didn’t have the desired potency. He reached out and compressed her fingers around the slate, and because she was perhaps a tiny bit curious as to what excuse he had concocted for lurking in the shadows, relented with a small huff.

Saw you walking to creek. Soldiers coming soon. Not safe.

“Then you were bein’ a protective pervert? That’s kindly.” She started walking again but remembered to keep her face aimed directly at him so he could read her lips, a feat that was more than a little taxing. “Which is it, Galahad? You walked down to the creek to find out what was burning, or you went there to protect me from Yankees? If you’re gonna be a liar, at least be a consistent liar.”

His lips flattened with annoyance. Wasn’t lying. Both reasons truthful.

Mae sniffed, unconvinced. She shamelessly tried placing some distance between them as they neared the last of the stragglers entering the mill, but Creighton and his detestable board remained in close proximity. Hopefully he had enough sense to follow her lead and end the conversation. She fixed her attention on Lorna Thornton’s frizzy halo of red hair as the line slowly shuffled forward, determined to ignore him if his sense proved woefully absent, as she suspected it might.

Darned if she didn’t hear the telltale sound of squeaking chalk again! Mae prayed for Creighton’s industrious chalk stick to cease and desist.

The snob in her didn’t want people seeing them together. Her social status in Roswell was questionable as it was. Being seen with Creighton Branagan would doom her as permanently unpopular, and then Wade would never marry her. Who wanted a social misfit for a wife? Moreover, Creighton had made it very clear what he thought of her at their first encounter. They were not friends and never would be, and so friendly chitchat was not permissible.

“Leave me be,” she commanded when the edge of the slate butted stubbornly against her shoulder. Creighton was standing directly behind her and couldn’t possibly read her lips, but she forgot this salient point. People were beginning to turn and stare.

Creighton baldly navigated the slate around her in that disembodied

fashion he seemed to enjoy. Mae stiffened in outrage. Darned if he wasn't nearly curled over her, much like a randy alley tomcat! Teresa Holden from carding looked back and snickered.

Bucket hurt less than rock.

A betraying twitch of laughter threatened her defenses. She made up for this lapse by putting double the vim and vigor into the elbow she tossed back into his abdominal cavity.

"And that? Did that hurt less or more than the rock?" Mae twisted around in time to see Creighton stagger backward, his palm pressed wide over his stomach, one eyelid twitching murderously while the other bulged in silent agony. It was really quite the complicated expression, and she chose to admire its intricacies, all of which were augmented beautifully by his face's putrescent shade.

She laughed and stashed the slate behind her back. She quickly forgot she wasn't to make an exhibition of herself and danced easily aside when, as predicted, he made a bloodthirsty swipe in her direction.

"Say 'please,'" she taunted, bobbling her face a few meager inches from his.

Creighton's gaze wed with hers, a pugnacious union, but only for an instant. Suddenly his features relaxed into an expression of utter conciliation as he reached out one hand, suctioned it to her face like a grappling starfish, and administered a genial shove.

"Pleath."

The man bounded up the stairs, slate in hand, a toneless guffaw floating in his wake. Offended to no end, Mae chased after him. She'd break his slate over his witless head! Fortunately, she skittered to a halt along the periphery of the spinning floor, her sound judgment restored before an all-out scandal took place.

"Coulda knocked me into a cocked hat, g'hal! Did my ears mislead me, or was that a lovers' quarrel back there?" Lorna Thornton raised her voice above the whine of spindles to successfully travel the room, the first tormentor to call attention to Mae's disgrace. "Oh, la-di-dah, let's have details, Mae! How long has that Simple Simon been a-courtin' you?"

Mae cringed. Dang it! Scandal unavoidable.

"Does poor Wade know he's got a rival for your affections?" Titters of

laughter and canny grins abounded.

She clomped over to her workstation. She sent a glare that encompassed the entire room but refused to say a word in her defense. With any luck, they would soon lose interest.

“Don’t be shy, now. Tell us the weddin’ date!”

Spinning wool was rather mindless work. Mae could perform the repetitious motions without wasted effort, usually allowing the luxury of daydreams, but not so today. Her persecution might be congenial enough, but it was still mortifying, especially as the afternoon wore on, and the remarks grew increasingly outrageous. There were periodic lulls, of course, and it wasn’t uncommon for a spell to go by, the women seemingly lost in their work, but then a smiling face would pop up, flushed pink with renewed inspiration, and the goading outbursts would continue in earnest.

“How will the bridegroom be made aware of the shivaree party? The bangin’ and stompin’ and whatnot won’t even matter none! Aah-ah-ha!”

“Yoo-hoo! Be a picture bride, Mae. I hear there’s a shortage of women in California. Go West, young bride, go West!”

“Wade could still be swayed to marry you, I reckon. Oh, I gots an ideer: trick ’im! The blacks jump together over a broomstick to git married. Hee-hee! Find a broom an’ push ’im over.”

“I’ll find an open window and push all of you out,” Mae threatened quietly, and even glanced longingly at the closest casement. Her anger quickly turned to dread. A small gathering of workers stood in an anxious tangle, their faces pressed against the glass, gesturing and whispering agitatedly among themselves. In predictable order, others abandoned their stations and congregated at the windows, lured over by the same spectacle beyond the panes. Mae fully expected one of the mill overseers to begin threatening mass dismissals, but the few men in charge of operations were gamely shouldering their way alongside their female subordinates.

“Yankees,” she whispered, instinct telling her what she would find long before she deserted her own post and joined everyone. They had lived with the inevitability all day, though they’d distracted themselves by debating and speculating. Nothing but the arrival of Yankees could cause such unprecedented lack of order in a mill that had prided itself on smooth operations throughout the war.

She watched the first wave of blue-coated soldiers sweep over the mill grounds on horseback and immediately likened them to vermin spreading a deadly plague. She spotted their wicked-looking sabers and polished revolvers and felt the goose flesh stipple her forearms, unable to dismiss their deadly function. A large United States flag and several smaller banners sped past in the hands of the color guard. Dusty blue jackets trimmed with yellow piping and black felt hats banded with the same yellow cord paraded by in orderly columns, never-ending. The billowing snorts of horses and the reverberations of wooden and metal canteens intermingled with the shouts of soldiers, creating an inundation of noise that drowned out the powerful driving drum in the mill basement and completing the impression of a biblical scourge come to smite the South.

“It’s a cavalry guard,” Mae remarked, her lips barely able to form the words. They tingled and were numb to the touch. Did that mean she was suffering from shock? A peculiar reaction considering the inevitability of everything.

“It’s only one? Looks like the entire blasted Yankee army to me!”

Prudence materialized at her side and dug her fingers into the windowsill until the joints leached of pigmentation; Mae still had the presence of mind to be thankful she chose to mangle the brick for a nice change.

“Do you think our battalion got away? I’d just die if somethin’ happened to Gilbert!”

“Hush, now. It’ll all work out fine.” At that particular moment, Mae had very little interest in the fate of Gilbert Radisson, nor was bolstering Prudence’s survival instincts particularly high on her list of priorities.

There was a small imperfection, just off center, in the glass windowpane. The defect briefly distorted each passing soldier into an amorphous blob—man then changeling, back to man again—giving the illusion of specters sneaking in from some malevolent realm, eager to consume a new kingdom.

“It’s a powerful miracle.” Curtis Elroy, one of the spinning floor overseers, peered up and down his line of workers, his smirk exposing crooked and tobacco-stained teeth. “A roomful of women an’ not even a peep, an’ it only took an entire army to git you to shut pan.”

“Join in the miracle an’ shut up yourself, Curtis.”

“Who said that? Own up, or mark my words—”

“Look ever’body!” someone interjected, and well-timed at that. “Theophile Roché is goin’ out to meet with those yahoos.”

Curtis’s bullying gaze abandoned his charges and focused on the grounds below. “That there’s a rip-snortin’ sight!” he whooped, his bad temperament swiftly replaced by elation. “Give ’em heck, Roché, an’ send those Yankasses back from where they come from! By gosh, if I was down there I’d show ’em some southern hospitality in the way of my left and right”—he vigorously punched the air in front of him to demonstrate his prowess—“an’ that’s for that!” He froze suddenly, a look of discomfiture settling in. “Er, anybody see Mr. Bonfoy today? Him bein’ head man ‘an all, I reckon he ought to be down there with Theophile.”

“Here’s my guess, / Don’t have a fit; / I think he ran home, / Lickety split!”

Stifled laughter escaped the ranks, venting nervous energy.

“Who said that?!”

“Here’s another guess, / Don’t have a fit; / I think he ran home, / Scared as shit!”

“Haw, good one!”

“Ramona, you thorn in my side, I recognize your stupid mule laugh. Don’t encourage such disrespect! If you weren’t my sister—”

The familiar family discord was immediately shushed by those anxious to overhear the conversation taking place below, demands even Curtis couldn’t refuse. Theophile had already converged on the man with the most insignias on his uniform and thrust out his hand, grinning rather imbecilically, but the Union officer looked wary about extending his own.

“*Bonjour, monsieur!*”

“You’re French?” There was a moment of disbelieving silence.

“*Oui!*”

“Get someone out here who speaks English.”

“I speak English,” he assured proudly, exaggerating his accent. “My English is *comme ci, comme ça...*” He wagged his hand, expressing his mediocre abilities but hastening to add, “We shall talk now. I will understand.”

“And what authority have you, sir?”

Beaming with pride, he declared joyfully, “I am owner! I begin here as weaver. It is wonderful triumph, *non*? We shall talk, come.”

The officer studied Theophile from shrewd eyes. It seemed deliberate, that excruciatingly long pause. Theophile’s shoulders grew increasingly tense, his invitation disregarded. When the Yankee finally opened his mouth to speak, Mae expected to see the words tumble from his lips in a black, epidemic cloud, for the moment seemed that pivotal.

“I am Colonel Robert Minty, sir, and this is the Seventh Pennsylvania Cavalry, here by orders of General Garrard. You are hereby notified that Roswell, its mills, and all the inhabitants thereof are now under sole occupation of the Union Army.”

The uproar from inside Ivy Woolen Mill resonated outside easily. Colonel Minty’s jaw seemed to tighten, or was that only Mae’s imagination? If it hadn’t been a simple trick of light and shadow, then it was the only outward sign that the sound of overwrought women had penetrated the stringy gristle surrounding his soldier’s heart, for he didn’t even glance upward.

“*Sacré bleu! Je suis désolé!*” Theophile wrestled his hands, visibly distressed. “We are all French citizens here.” Frantically he pointed up at the flagpole. “That is the French flag, *monsieur*. Do you not see? A few from Great Britain, *oui*? But mostly we are French.” A small crowd of townspeople congregated tentatively nearby, speculating among themselves in subdued tones. Theophile turned to them now, demanding with a somewhat desperate edge to his voice, “*N’est-ce pas?*”

“He’s the only French person here!” Prudence disputed. “Does he truly think the Yankees will believe such nonsense? And I still don’t understand why Mr. Roché insisted on raisin’ the French flag above our mill. It won’t keep the Yankees out, surely? We ought to have the Stars and Bars hoisted in support of our menfolk,” she opined darkly.

Mae was too absorbed with the scene taking place below to respond. Her attention immediately returned to the small cluster of Roswell citizens conferring among each other. Obviously one of them had some rudimentary knowledge of the language, because a hasty round of whispers into ears quickly changed blank expressions into comprehending ones. Person after

person vigorously bobbed his or her head and shouted “*Oui!*” in an atrocious French accent.

Theophile didn’t disguise his grimace very well. “France is neutral,” the weaver reminded Colonel Minty, continuing to lie about their nationality, plausibility aside. “This mill only produces woollens for France. We have no quarrel with your army. We are not your enemy. *S’il vous plait*, allow us to carry on with our work?”

The colonel made no pretext of how flimsy he thought Theophile’s claim and the townspeople’s performances were. “If what you say is true, then you and your workers have nothing to fear, sir. As I can only speak for the Seventh, perhaps it would be in your best interests to explain your particular situation to General Garrard.” A sardonic smile preceded his next words. “He’ll be very interested to know Georgia is home to so many French citizens.”

“*Merci beaucoup, monsieur*,” Theophile murmured, his keenness for the task at hand plainly ebbing away. “Where can I find this General Garrard?”

“His headquarters are at Willeo Creek. I presume you know where that is?”

“*Oui*, of course.” The weaver hesitated. “If not for our neutrality, may I ask, *entre nous*...what would you do to my mill?”

“Do? I wouldn’t do anything.” The colonel’s stare sharpened, a gaze of whetted stone. “I’m not the one in charge. General Garrard is.”

“Then what would the general do?”

“I should expect the same thing he did to that paper mill east of town. We can’t have Southerners making goods for the Confederate Army, now can we?”

Theophile’s eyes seemed to grow too substantial for their sockets. “He would burn it?”

“That’s the way of war. General Garrard is waiting, sir.”

Mae’s stomach twisted dreadfully, as if she had swallowed live vipers. Theophile took one last look at the amassed cavalry, then up at the flock of faces peering down from the windows, finally nodding once in acceptance and taking his leave under escort. A few of the braver townspeople followed determinedly in his footsteps.

Something told Mae that things would go much worse for the workers of Ivy Woolen Mill because of this clumsy contingency plan with Theophile as its main executor. James King, with his partial transfer of ownership to the Frenchman—undoubtedly sanctioned by a long line of superintendents, assistants, and supplementary men of great consequence—would undoubtedly not proceed as planned. It was absurdly unlikely that the military would accept Theophile’s claim, and the smallest amount of effort would expose the deception. It was also doubtful that the scheming men responsible would suffer any consequences, as they had long since absconded.

“We’re in a pretty pickle now,” Curtis grumbled, “but enough dawdlin’, I reckon,” he announced just as abruptly. “Time to buckle down to work, ladies.”

“We still gotta work? Why can’t we go home?” Sally Hinkle, one of the younger girls on the floor at fourteen, looked intermittently sallow and crimson, as if she was yet undecided on whether she wished to faint or throw a fit. “I declare to goodness, the vile Yankees are here, Mr. Elroy! How can you expect us to work under such conditions?”

“Best we pretend this is jist another day, all normal-like. Put our shoulder to the wheel like we always do. What other choice we got?”

What other choice indeed, Mae pondered resentfully, returning to her workstation but glowering at Curtis as she went. She could think of many alternatives. Hiding beneath her bed until the war ended was a viable option.

Workers abandoned the windows in knots of two and three, still expostulating in low murmurs as they returned to their posts but no longer frantically shouting across the room as they had during those first few minutes. Time now was marked by agitated whispers and resigned sighs as everyone shared renewed accountings of Theophile’s bungled ruse on the lawns.

She was slow to notice Creighton. His duties at Ivy Woolen Mill had him moving continuously from floor to floor. He was a general factory hand who helped out wherever he was most needed at any given time. This usually meant assisting in unloading the raw fleece to be cleaned and scarified by the carders, backbreaking hours transporting the combed wool to the spinning floor and the spun bobbins of yarn to the first floor for

weaving. As such, his days were spent climbing stairs and lugging heavy crates, tasks which rarely allowed him the occasion to loiter.

The nature of his job being thus, Mae hadn't considered he might be amid the workers on her floor when the cavalry had arrived. She hadn't noticed him during the commotion, but he was here now, leaning against one of the rough brick walls and watching her so intently that she wrestled with the need to shift her feet and look away.

An unnerving thought struck: Had Creighton purposefully sought her out to question her on the invasion? His deafness kept him ignorant of the details surrounding Theophile's claim of French neutrality, subjecting Creighton to the charity of others who could explain such matters.

He suddenly shoved off from the wall. Mae tensed and did her utmost to project a haughty appearance. This seemed to entertain him, though; he hooked his thumbs in his suspenders and smirked, his opinion about enlisting her aid quite clear in that brief but overconfident exchange. If there were any remaining doubts, such were put to rest when he turned his back on her, thumbs still casually sawing back and forth on his suspenders, and departed the spinning floor, his indolent saunter proclaiming he hadn't a care in the world.

"Stiff-neck," she muttered.

Disgruntled, she went back to work.