

The Pretenders



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Prologue: "Girl Meets Boy"

Chicago, Illinois
March 1865

"Don't be scared," Ivy crooned. "I won't hurt you."

Her softly spoken assurance lured the ball of matted white fur another cautious inch closer. She could almost touch it now. Maintaining the patient crouch she'd held for the past six minutes, Ivy Porter cheerfully patted her knees again, this latest invitation finally inspiring the bashful puppy to scuttle within reach.

"That's it. Oh, yes, that's an awfully good pup."

A victorious smile spread across the eight-year-old's face the moment her fingers sank into the greasy fur. The scruffy animal hesitantly wagged its tail, inspiring Ivy's soft touch to develop into harder strokes and pats, with the occasional joyous nuzzle a foregone conclusion. The unpleasant odors of urine and rancid meat filled her nostrils every time she burrowed her face into its coat for a cuddle, but the little girl didn't care. The spindly tail picked up speed, and it wasn't long before the rump it was attached to was shaking back and forth with remarkable enthusiasm.

She now had something to love.

"Hey!" An outraged voice punctured the joyous moment. "That there's my dog! Take your thieving hands off him!"

The startled puppy twisted and scampered away. Its clumsy gait ended at the far end of the alleyway where an equally grubby boy shifted anxiously from foot to foot. Had they recently rolled around together in the same pile of stinky trash? He scooped the animal into his thin arms and ordered sharply, "Get your own dog and leave mine alone!" That said, he dashed away, a warning glare over one shoulder his parting shot.

Ivy watched the boy and his dog disappear through the broken window of a dilapidated factory. The tips of her fingers still tingled with the warm,

coarse feel of the puppy's fur. It did no good to pine for things that could never be, or so Grammy had always said; her hand quickly squeezed into a small fist to squash the glorious sensation.

"I'm sorry, but it's just you and me again, Sarah," she said somberly, reaching into the pocket of her grimy pinafore and withdrawing a stuffed cotton doll. Sarah's crosswheel button eyes stared back vacantly, the stitched mouth remained fixed in its perpetual smile.

How Ivy envied Sarah and her perpetual smile.

"Tut-tut, don't cry." She stroked the yarn hair in comfort. A rat scurried past, causing her to gasp and shrink back. She'd awakened last night screaming, one of the city's plentiful rodents gnawing on her leg just like she used to gnaw on Grammy's fried chicken drumsticks. "Big girls don't cry, and we're both big girls now." Glancing apprehensively up and down the deserted alleyway, she hugged Sarah to her thin chest. "We're gonna be fine. You'll see."

Straightening, Ivy took a tentative step toward the street, but she couldn't prevent a wistful glance over her shoulder. She'd liked that dog. It was a shame it had to belong to someone else.

Her shoulders slumped miserably as she neared the noisy, congested thoroughfare. She dreaded walking among all those people again. They bumped into her as if she didn't exist, and some of them yelled at her whenever she stumbled and dared clutch at their clothes to keep from falling. They said she was dirty, that her nose ran, and they were always slapping and shoving to make her go away. Once, a man had offered to help her, but he'd lied and tried to put his hand up her dress. No one was nice to her, and she no longer recognized what neighborhood she was in. Wherever she was, most of the people who lived here smelled like the grog shops her daddy used to visit when she'd still had a daddy. They liked to shoot their guns a lot, too, like they were having fun and thought they were firecrackers. Yesterday, she'd seen a man lying dead by a lamppost with a bullet hole in his chest, so maybe not everyone shooting was having fun.

Get your own dog and leave mine alone!

Ivy's pace slowed, and somehow the bony shoulders beneath her tattered calico dress found the gumption to straighten themselves. She didn't want to find her own dog. She wanted *that* dog.

She quickly retraced her steps back to the broken window. Shards of glass bordered the frame like the ripping fangs of a monster. The sill reached well above her head, and even after she'd dragged a flimsy crate over to stand on, Ivy wasn't altogether certain she'd gained enough height to climb through the window.

The dog was reason enough to try. With Sarah's skirt clamped securely between her teeth, Ivy stretched up on tiptoes until her hands touched the frame. She smiled triumphantly as the soles of her high-button shoes pedaled against the side of the building. Inch by inch, she pulled herself upward until she managed to wriggle through the small opening, only crying out a little when one of the sharp glass points snagged her stocking and the tender skin beneath.

A tiny grunt of surprise slipped from her as she lost her balance and tumbled inelegantly to the floor. Startled roaches retreated between the gaps in the floorboards but emerged almost immediately to boldly reclaim their domain. Ivy heard one crunch beneath her shoe as she wandered toward the middle of the cavernous room, her face tipped curiously toward the ceiling far above. An explosion of pigeons burst from the rafters, their flapping wings echoing all around her. They escaped through a large hole in the roof, each plump body battling to squeeze through the opening at once and to comic effect.

Ivy snickered. Grammy had always said pigeons were God's stupidest creatures, and here was proof enough.

She moved toward the puddle of weak sunlight that shone on the floorboards below, mesmerized by the fleeting promise of warmth. A pigeon dropping fell from above, narrowly missing her. Yuck! Maybe the pigeons were getting revenge for her uncharitable thoughts: poop revenge! The floor was covered with similar droppings, some fresh and oily, some old and dried, and with a thick layer of feathers mixed in like the world's nastiest frosting. Nose wrinkling, Ivy halted in her approach and skirted the mess by taking a different path around the room.

"Oh! I'm that sorry, sir!"

She nearly tripped over the snoring man's legs before the odor reached her. Gin wafted from his beard and clothes. Empty bottles surrounded the elderly man, further evidence of his inebriation. Ivy carefully stepped over the glass containers, mindful to prevent them from clinking together and waking him. Drunks got angry whenever you woke them.

"What were you doin' letting that girl pet you? You don't like her better than me, do you? 'Cause I feed you, so that ought to count for something."

The muffled scolding came from a small room off to Ivy's right. A joyful bark immediately answered the boy's rebuke.

"Okay, then." A laugh. "I forgive you."

Three floors above, a stout woman clad in a corset and petticoat and little else leaned over the railing and glared at Ivy, the waning sunlight

momentarily illuminating a garish face smeared with powder and paint. She muttered something inaudible and retreated from view, reminding Ivy of the roaches. The factory might be abandoned, but it was far from vacant.

“Who’s there?”

She recognized the boy’s voice, though this time it quaked with fear instead of anger. Although her tread had been light-footed, too late she noticed the string that was looped across the threshold and the cans that rattled together as she triggered it. She staggered but didn’t fall, neatly catching herself against the jam.

“Who’s there, I said!”

She eased around the doorframe of the small room, Sarah clutched against her hammering heart for bravery. At the same time, the boy eased from his own place behind a curtained partition at the back of the room, his fingers curled around the glass neck of a broken bottle, his little dog trying its best to growl threateningly at her arrival.

“You again?” Fast as a blink, his anxious expression turned listless and disinterested, but Ivy noticed that his hand shook slightly with relief as he set down the broken bottle on the corner of a large desk.

Either that, or he was just hungry and had the food shakes like she sometimes did.

“Thought I told you to get lost.” The mound of old documents scattered across the desktop and dusty cabinetry crammed with more of the same suggested this had once been an office belonging to Somebody Important. How shrewd the boy must be to have claimed it for his own! “Ain’t no girls allowed in here, so go on.” He jerked his head for emphasis when she didn’t move. “Get!” he commanded.

Ignoring him, Ivy settled her intent gaze on the puppy, which had traded its silly little growls for excited barks. A bright smile stretched across her face as she looked at the puppy, then at the boy, then back at the puppy again.

“She’s a girl,” Ivy said, her voice brimming with happiness.

His flat expression held. “This dog ain’t no girl. Don’t you think I’d know whether my own dog was a boy or girl?” Despite that bold statement, he paused and glanced uneasily at the ball of fluff that ran around the desk in joyous circles.

She inched a bit closer. “You said no girls allowed, but your dog’s a girl.” She meaningfully wiggled her pinkie finger. “She ain’t got no pizzle.”

The boy lifted the dog by the scruff of its neck, clearly outraged by such slander. “Don’t go ’round saying my dog ain’t got no pizzle! He *damn well* has a—”

His words abruptly dried up as his gaze swiftly settled between the puppy's flailing hindquarters. Scowling, he set the fidgety animal back on all four paws again and turned away.

"I'm right, ain't I?"

"Go away," he ordered dully, disappearing behind the curtained partition. There were holes here and there in the printed fabric. Ivy strained to decipher his mood from the lifeless expression she could just make out through the perforations. He seemed to have perfected that vacant look, and yet she sensed a riot of emotions roiling beneath the emptiness.

"Does that mean I can have her?"

"No, you can't have her!" He leapt out from behind the partition again, protectively snatching up the animal and saying, scandalized, "I might've only found her yesterday, but you can't have Slayer! She's my dog, not yours!" Nostrils flaring, he once more retreated behind the curtain, a flopping sound indicating he'd defiantly flung himself onto bedding of some sort.

Ivy's shoulders slumped. Even though the dog was a girl, the boy still wanted to keep her. She hadn't expected that.

In a small voice, she suggested, "She looks more like a Snowball than a Slayer."

A contemptuous snort floated over on the musty air. "I'm gonna train her for protection. A guard dog can't be called Snowball, or no one will take her seriously. Don't you know nothin'?"

Ivy took that as an invitation to inch her way farther into the room and even peer around the curtain. She gasped in delight. The boy had created a splendid fortification against what was undoubtedly a scary place full of creaks and shadows at night. A cozy nest of quilts and blankets covered the floor. A clever assortment of makeshift candle holders surrounded the sleeping space—empty birdcages, a set of shop scales, and what appeared to be a colander, if Ivy wasn't mistaken—the squat tallows inside each vessel, though currently unlit, surely brightening the room in the evenings and even adding a bit of warmth. Her envious gaze skipped to a small pile of toys near the boy's limp hand: a wooden cup and ball game, a sailor hat constructed from newspaper, and a cloth pouch bulging with clay marbles. There was no sign of food, but if the boy owned extravagances like toys, he must have a loaf of bread or a pickled egg secreted somewhere nearby.

In that moment, Ivy had a flash of insight. She wasn't doing so well living on her own, but this boy seemed to be doing swimmingly. She needed to become his friend.

"My name is Ivy. What's yours?"

He stared gloomily at her for a moment before replying, “Shane.” He lay on his back, the dog curled loyally against his side. A little shiver ran through the animal, accentuating its knobby spine, and the boy immediately pulled it closer.

Ivy heard the puppy’s contented sigh. It said good things about the boy that he noticed such things. She kept on with her plan to make him her friend.

“I’m eight,” she volunteered. “How old are you?”

He plucked up the cup and ball game, the wooden ball seating itself on the second toss. “Ten.”

Ivy didn’t know much about boys, but he looked small for his age. Then again, so was she. His skin and clothes boasted several layers of dirt that disguised details like skin and hair color, rendering him an unvarying shade of brown.

He was lots dirtier than she was. She could yet make out some pink on her hands, and the ends of her braids were still clean, but that was probably just because she liked to chew on them.

Ivy risked another step forward. “Is that your daddy asleep out there with all them gin bottles?”

“No.” Frowning in concentration, he caught the ball again. “That’s Ezra. He’s nobody’s daddy. He won’t bother you none, though. He mostly sleeps anymore anyways.”

Each moment spent in conversation boosted Ivy’s spirits. She furtively edged her way toward the mound of blankets, sinking lower and lower until she was almost sitting on her butt. “Then is that your momma upstairs?”

“No, that’s Fat Meg. She’s a whor—ladybird.”

“I know what a whore is.” Ivy wriggled her bottom onto the edge of an old horse blanket and tried hard not to grin over her victory. She was so sneaky! “It’s what Grammy called Momma all the time.”

The boy raised his thick eyebrows but said nothing.

“Can we light the candles?” she blurted hopefully, eyeing the birdcages. They would look pretty all lit up, and she could make-believe they’d captured a family of glittering pixies.

“No.” At her hurt look, his mouth compressed into a flat line. “I ain’t got no matches left,” he confessed, his voice gruff with regret or at least something very much like it.

“If Ezra ain’t your daddy and Fat Meg ain’t your momma,” she persisted, both forgiving him his moodiness and discarding her pixy fantasy as quickly as she’d concocted it, “then who takes care of you?”

He seated the wooden ball again but looked bored, with both the game

and her. "I take care of myself."

"I take care of myself now, too," Ivy blurted, sensing she was running out of time to win this boy's favor. "Momma died after Mrs. Grayson cut out the baby growing inside her tummy. Momma was forever catching babies. Mrs. Grayson lived upstairs and always cut them out before they could get born, but something went wrong that time, and all Momma's blood poured everywhere. I was only seven when that happened. It was just me and Grammy after that, but then she up and died, too. Not from catching a baby," she explained wisely, "but because her chest hurt something fierce one morning and she did this." Splaying her hand across her heart, Ivy grimaced and planted face-down on the bedding, complete with gurgling and twitching.

Grammy would've approved. Not only did the flailing add dramatic effect to her storytelling, but it helped move her closer toward the nest of warm bedding and not just the corner of the smelly old horse blanket.

Ivy cracked open one eye, her corpse reanimating. "Some men came and took her away, and they said they'd come back for me, but they never did. The rooms we lived in didn't belong to us, and the lady that owned them made me leave. Did your grammy die, too?" she asked, head popping up to regard her now captive audience.

"I never had me a grammy."

Ivy watched Shane devote his attention to the ball and cup game again. She knew he was bored with it, but he repetitively tossed the ball and didn't look at her. And he kept missing, whereas he'd made the game look easy before.

"What about your momma? Did she catch a baby she didn't want and die?"

He shrugged lethargically, a wretched, one-shouldered motion that sent the neck of his flannel shirt slipping down a skinny shoulder. He mechanically tugged it back up, a gesture no doubt repeated a thousand times a day.

"Don't you know what happened to her?" she asked, sad for him.

He repeated the lethargic shrug, his gaze never wavering from the wooden spindle. She suddenly noticed he had dark circles under his eyes, the sort people got when they were sickly or didn't sleep well. Those smudges made her want to reach out and hug him.

"What about your daddy? Did he drink too much grog and choke on his sick in his sleep like mine did?"

"I never met my pa," he said slowly, a scowl emerging from beneath his crop of dirty hair. "Ma said he lived somewhere in a place called

Colorado Territory.”

“Col-or-a-do,” Ivy breathed, saying it in the same reverential way she’d pronounced Par-a-dise after Grammy had told her about heaven. It sounded like such a glorious place, Col-or-a-do.

Her eyes flew wide with excited discovery.

“Shane! Maybe your momma went back there! To Col-or-a-do and she’s with your pa, and they’re waiting for you!”

The ball arced wildly on its attached string.

“I know where Ma is,” he said in the same slow, halting voice. “She’s here in the city with her new man.”

Astonished, Ivy exclaimed, “Then why do you live here and not with her?”

He gave another of those pitiful, one-shouldered motions. “Mr. Fallon didn’t want to care for another man’s brat. Ma’s never really liked me much anyways, and she tossed me out when Mr. Fallon threatened to leave her. But I didn’t mind going. Mr. Fallon hit harder than the last one did, and the one before that was a pederast. He was forever trying to catch me alone. Luckily, I’ve always been a fast runner.”

“Oh.” Ivy sighed, a tremulous little breath that raised and dropped her chest like the crashing waves of Lake Michigan. Poor Shane. At least Momma and Grammy had loved her. And neither would have tolerated a pederast interfering with her.

Shane suddenly flung the cup and ball game aside.

The voice that came out sounded high and thin. “I don’t wanna talk no more.” His face momentarily pinched together before settling into an expressionless mask. He wriggled beneath the many layers of bedding and promptly flopped over on his side, his skinny back turned toward her in flagrant dismissal. “Go away. Me and Slayer are goin’ to sleep.”

Ivy nervously toyed with the frayed yoke collar of her dress. She moved the curtain aside and glanced at the cavernous factory floor. As she’d feared, the hole in the ceiling no longer had any sunlight shining through it.

It was nightfall. Ivy shuddered. The rats came out at nightfall.

“This is Sarah,” she proclaimed, speeding over the mound of bedding until her knees jabbed into his bony spine, earning an impatient, over-the-shoulder glare. Undeterred, she held out the doll for him to admire. “She’s scared of the dark.”

Shane narrowed his eyes at that bit of information.

“Can we stay here with you?”

It was immediate. Panic widened his eyes and split his voice. “No!”

Ivy had lost track of the days since the mean landlady had made her

leave, but it was still miserably cold at night. She'd had the wonderful fortune to sleep atop a steam grate three nights ago, but some older girls had evicted her near dawn, and she hadn't been as fortunate since. It seemed only the shrewdest girls and boys got to sleep on the grates.

Ivy anxiously twisted her hands. "Please? I'm awfully little, so I don't take up much space. Sarah neither."

"No," he rasped, residual panic lingering in his expression.

Try as she might, she couldn't prevent her eyes from growing damp. She didn't want to get bitten by rats again. "Can't we stay for just one night? Please, Shane? Just the one?"

Shane had changeling eyes. And not just because of the green-brown color, which she knew was called hazel, but because he tried to view her tears with cool disinterest but couldn't quite make it work. Distress shifted in his gaze before he buried the emotion behind his customary remote stare.

He sat up abruptly, startling her. His lips flattened. "One night," he said firmly, lifting layers of horse blankets, steer hide carriage blankets, and coverlets of woven wool to make room for her beside him.

"Oh, thank you, Shane!" Ivy dove in gratefully, immediately curling into the tiniest ball imaginable lest he change his mind. "And see? I don't use up any room at all, just like I said!"

"I'll take you to Old Mary Brennan in the morning." He carefully re-layered the bedding over them, the topmost cover a quilt made of orange and red tumbling blocks that made her eyes do a funny little dance because they looked so real. "She lives in Roger's Barracks over on Wells Street and trains little girls to pick pockets and snatch purses. You'll do fine with Old Mary."

Ivy stopped tracing one of the turkey red blocks with her finger, only now hearing his words. She frowned. "I don't want to pick pockets and snatch purses."

"You need to earn your keep somehow, or Old Mary won't take you in."

They wriggled some more until they were wedged in shoulder to shoulder. Soon Ivy's entire left side was toasty warm, but her right side remained chilled.

"But I don't want a new momma."

Shane laughed, but it was a humorless sound. "Old Mary won't be your new momma. She'll be your employer," he stated matter-of-factly. "You'll steal stuff for her, and then she'll give you a penny to buy yourself a piece of candy."

Ivy didn't say anything at first. She was only eight, but even she

realized that wasn't a very good deal. "Do you work for Old Mary?" If Shane worked for her then so would Ivy.

"No. Old Mary only takes in little girls."

Her mouth settled into a mulish line. "Then I won't work for Old Mary. Grammy said stealing is a sin."

"You need to find someone to look out for you, or the pimps will snatch you and sell you to one of the bordellos," he said sternly. "Do you want that to happen?"

Ivy's bottom lip trembled. "I don't want to get snatched."

A little shiver ran through her. Much as she'd seen him do with the dog earlier, Shane immediately pulled her close. He made a confused sound as soon as he did so, as if the impulse to comfort her had been a reflex and one he sorely regretted.

Ivy didn't give him the chance to back out. She flung her arms around his waist, anchoring herself even as he tried pushing her away. Her pointy little chin found a resting place in the hollow of his sternum, making him wince. She wasn't going anywhere; now her right side as well as the left was toasty warm.

"Your arms are like tentacles," he accused, futilely trying to peel them away. "Let go. You're strangling my inner parts."

"I can't." In a hushed, secretive tone, she whispered, "Sarah wants to get warm. She's used to snuggling up to Grammy, so she's real cold. Poor, poor Sarah! What are tentacles?"

His straining limbs finally gave up and went lax in deathlike surrender.

Smiling jubilantly, Ivy burrowed closer. The sharpness of her chin pressing into his sternum made him grunt again, and so she shifted it to a location less vulnerable higher on his chest. One of the buttons of his shirt made an uncomfortable indentation against her cheek, but Ivy gladly accepted the trade. "I don't want to get snatched, but I don't want to work for Old Mary neither." She perked up. "What gang do you belong to? Because maybe I could join that gang, too."

"I don't belong to a gang. I told you earlier that I take care of myself."

Fascinated, she asked, "How do you do that?"

"Sometimes I gather rags for the junkmen or collect old iron along the railroad tracks." His tone was subdued, but Ivy sensed that he was proud of his ingenuity. "You can usually find lots of coal there too that falls off."

"I could do that. I could help you!"

"You're too little," he dismissed. "The railroad bulls would get you."

"The railroad bulls?" Her eyes grew wide with trepidation.

"Men hired by the railroad to keep people from trespassing. Two of

them chased me once for stealing a handful of railroad spikes, and I had to run for over a mile. I nearly passed out, my lungs got so tired. You could never run that fast, and they'd catch you."

Ivy frowned ponderously. "Maybe so, but I'm an awfully good biter."

The lax body beneath her rippled suddenly, as if a tremor of silent laughter had passed in and out on a single breath, but Ivy didn't dare loosen her grip to glance up and find out for certain. She was finally warm and growing sleepy and wouldn't risk him shucking her like a corn cob husk, although that didn't seem very likely anymore.

"I sometimes have nightmares," he whispered unsteadily into the dark, any hint of laughter long gone.

Her fists tightened sympathetically in the flannel of his shirt. "Me, too." Ivy still saw her dead momma in her dreams, singing lullabies to the lifeless baby in her arms.

"I don't think mine are like yours." Shane swallowed loudly. "Don't be scared if I scream in my sleep, is all. It's just something I sometimes do."

It's just something I sometimes do.

Ivy's arms tightened protectively, her heart hurting for him. "I'll hold you all night and keep them away," she promised with the easy conviction only belonging to young children.

To her amazement, she felt his arms creep experimentally around her shoulders, hesitantly returning her embrace with the apprehension of someone who'd only ever known rejection.

And just like that, Ivy realized the boy named Shane needed her every bit as much as she needed him, only for different reasons.

"It's settled," she murmured. "I got nobody, and you got nobody. We'll take care of each other from now on."

"You're on your own come tomorrow," he mumbled sleepily, but his arms tightened around her shoulders in contradiction. "I'm gonna make Slayer chase you out in the morning. I swear it on a stack of bibles."

Ivy smiled and said nothing.

She fell asleep with that same smile on her face.

She now had someone to love.



Chapter 1: “Disturbing the Peace”

St. Elmo, Colorado
Summer 1884

“Answer me, Shane!” Ivy paused hopefully, perked up an ear just in case, then gave the locked door another hollow whack in light of the persistent silence emanating from the other side. She thought she heard whispering and slivered her eyes menacingly. She knew he was in there! What had begun as determined pounding nearly three minutes ago was now little more than unenthusiastic slaps with the palm of her hand. Forbearance thoroughly expired, she growled, “The town marshal is on his way! For the last time, are you coming or not?”

That finally earned a response but certainly not the one she’d been working toward. Bawdy feminine laughter and a deeper masculine chuckle attested to the low humor of the minds currently locked inside the bedroom.

“Your friend isn’t going anywhere!” Shane’s calico queen called out. “You’re such a spoilsport, Ivy. Leave well enough alone and come back late—” The rest of Daphne’s reply dissolved into a coo of carnal delight. What soon followed was an embarrassing racket of squeaking mattress springs and the unmistakable rhythm of a brass headboard smacking against the wall.

Ivy drew back her foot and aimed a decade’s worth of resentment at the door. “Fine! Have it your way,” she sang out bitterly, feeling far more infantile than any twenty-seven-year-old woman had the right to be. “But I’m not going to pay your fine this time when Marshal Palmer locks you up!”

A contemptuous snort traveled down the hallway, diverting Ivy’s attention to the only other person in the vicinity, a willowy prostitute with dark, glossy hair gathered loosely over one shoulder.

“No one believes that rubbish, least of all Shane, Tweedledee.” Adele

gave the tasseled belt of her wrapper a few lazy twirls before abandoning her slouch against the wall. “I’ve stood here and watched this long enough. Let’s enjoy a drink while we wait for the marshal to turn up and arrest Tweedledum, which is unavoidable at this point,” she concluded brightly, linking her arm through Ivy’s and firmly conducting her away on a pivot of tiny boudoir slippers.

Ivy could have resisted easily enough—quilted silk slippers edged in swansdown were no match against sturdy leather boots—and especially considering that Tweedledum and Tweedledee comment, but instead she allowed Adele to lead her toward the cantilevered balcony and central staircase that presented a view of the entire saloon. She was fond of Adele. Shane’s willfulness was more grating than usual, and a drink sounded outstanding.

“A drink sounds outstanding!” she reinforced aloud, her descent on the steps livelier now. She would even ignore the fact that it was scarcely eleven in the morning. “I’ll buy.”

“I make over two hundred dollars a month, Ivy.” Adele laughed softly. “You’re not buying anything.”

Any temptation to quibble was postponed when she caught sight of Marshal Palmer at the foot of the staircase. Ivy sighed fatalistically; he’d arrived faster than expected, especially bearing in mind he wasn’t the fittest physical specimen. He seemed to have that syndrome that affected many a middle-aged man: too much belly, too little hair.

Not that the latter impeded speed, but Ivy was in a sour mood. She was weary of paying ten-dollar fines.

“Miss Porter.” He nodded a grim greeting and began his ascent.

Ivy didn’t see a reason to delay the inevitable. “He’s in the usual room, Marshal,” she volunteered. Moreover, it gave her a measure of satisfaction to play a part in silencing those squeaking mattress springs. She really loathed Daphne.

And if she was being honest with herself, she sometimes loathed Shane, too.

Why stop there? She was on that same list.

But that was far too much introspection for scarcely eleven in the morning, so she pushed the thought away.

“I think your friend must enjoy the accommodations in my jailhouse,” the lawman determined as he dourly continued climbing. “Otherwise he wouldn’t hitch his horse in open view of my office every damn time he frequents my town.” More grumbles floated overhead. “I wasn’t even this irritated when they were laying the tracks for the Denver, South Park, and

Pacific, and those railroad men turned my town into hell on wheels.”

“Let’s get that drink,” Adele reminded, coaxing her down the last steps when she would have lingered.

Ivy forced her attention away from Marshal Palmer’s encroachment on the second floor and gamely accepted her tumbler of whiskey from the bartender. Leaving Shane to fend for himself was a new experience for her and not altogether pleasant, but she sat down at the small table Adele had chosen and smiled as if it didn’t bother her a smidgen.

“He’ll be fine,” Adele reassured, a touch of exasperation in her voice. “He always is.”

Her smile wobbled. “I know.”

Ivy looked away from her friend’s overly perceptive expression and studied their surroundings with an intensity that belied the fact she’d been coming here for years. She’d often wondered if Zane hadn’t been employing satire when he’d named his saloon. “Zane’s Liquor Emporium and Legendary Sporting Club” looked very grandiose painted in baroque letters on the false front’s oversized cornice, but the interior hardly met with such auspicious claims. It was dark and windowless, a slapdash affair of ponderosa logs and mud mortar with oddities like rusty spurs, old military uniforms, and one hundred-pound rolls of barbed wire posing as decor. As for the sporting club part of its moniker, the few drowsy prostitutes milling about the premises were, like Adele, more concerned with some light imbibing sans customers than promoting their reputations, legendary or otherwise.

“How long have we known each other, Ivy?”

Surprised by the other woman’s grave tone, she returned her focus to her friend. “Shane and I left Chicago and arrived in Colorado in April of ’72. We started passing through St. Elmo regularly beginning the spring of ’81.” She swallowed a tentative sip of whiskey, grimacing over the instant corrosion of her throat lining. “Time flies, doesn’t it? That makes it over three years now that we’ve known each other.” Ivy knew her smile was rather tight when she posed, “I imagine you asked that as a lead-up to something?”

“You’re my friend, Ivy”—Adele gripped her glass and leaned forward in earnest—“but what in the hell are you doing?”

“I don’t presume to know what you mean.” But she did.

“Why do you stay with Shane? I know the two of you have been together since you were kids, but you’ll be thirty before you know it—”

“I just turned twenty-seven in March,” she corrected.

“—and you’re still killing time with a man who’s not your husband or

even a beau, nor are you siblings or cousins or relations of any kind. What do you get out of that relationship? What does he?" Adele downed an indignant gulp of whiskey and answered her own question. "Well, I know what *he* gets out of it. Someone who doesn't hold him accountable for anything and constantly bails him out of jail."

"That's how you see me?" she contested angrily.

Adele shrugged, a dismissive motion.

Ivy knew most stranger's first impression of her was that of a slender, insubstantial wisp of a woman. Her figure was slight, her facial features on the delicate side. A wide pair of cobalt blue eyes did little to discourage the perception. Nor did her youthful choice of hairstyle help matters. She realized she was too old for braids, but her hair was fine and tangled easily, and the coronet style kept it tidy. Sometimes she felt ridiculous, though. The only thing missing was a whimsical spray of flowers tucked into the dark chestnut plaits.

It was little wonder that people with whom she only had a nodding acquaintance foolishly assumed her outward look of daintiness included a dainty nature as well, which explained their shock when they inevitably learned a river of steel ran beneath Ivy's skin.

But she'd certainly never presumed someone who knew her as well as Adele did would believe such nonsense.

"If you were lovers, then I could maybe understand the appeal to remain together, but you're not even that. Or are you?" she demanded, conviction wavering. "Maybe you've been hiding the truth from everyone for all these years."

"And I simply turn the other cheek while he's upstairs with Daphne?" Ivy huffed derisively. "What sort of woman do you take me for?"

"You're not lovers, then," she quickly ceded. "Which only brings me back to my original point—"

Ivy was absurdly relieved when the noisy clomping of footsteps descending the stairs halted Adele's furtive comment mid-sentence. Undoubtedly, it was the one and only time she was pleased to see Shane in handcuffs. She took another swallow of whiskey to fortify herself and twisted in her chair just as Marshal Palmer frogmarched Shane down the last step and paused resignedly next to their table.

Shane stared at her dully. "Looks like I'm in hot water with the marshal again, Ivy."

That was an understatement if ever there was one.

"You know the routine, Miss Porter. The fine is ten dollars. You can pay now or in the morning. Either way, he spends the night in jail for

disturbing the peace.”

“I didn’t disturb any peace—”

“You disturbed *my* peace. I was sitting in my chair outside the jailhouse, and who’s familiar bay did I see hitched outside Zane’s? There’s other saloons and parlor houses in Colorado, damn it. Try Denver! Or Leadville! My town has no use for a crooked gambler or confidence man or whatever the hell it is you’re posing as nowadays.”

Shane smirked, an expression even Ivy disliked.

It was even less popular with Marshal Palmer.

“I spotted the crook in you the first time you passed through St. Elmo,” he disdained. “When I told you to stay out of my town, McLaughlin, I wasn’t bluffing!” The lawman jabbed a reproving finger into his shoulder blade, nudging him forward a little. “You’re banned from St. Elmo. This isn’t a funny jest between us. This isn’t a nifty standing appointment you and I have every few months that I secretly look upon as a real hoot.”

The tight smile Shane saved for the town marshal didn’t fool Ivy. It was a decoy that never reached his eyes.

“My reputation’s clean as a whistle, Marshal.”

“You lie like a tombstone,” he swiftly countered. “Nobody ever believes the extravagant crap inscribed there either.”

Shane briefly caught Ivy’s eye as Marshal Palmer marched him past the table and out the door. The rueful smile was meant for her only, and it reached well into that hazel smokescreen. He shrugged, a barely detectable movement but one she easily interpreted.

I poked the bear again. Sorry, Ives. I just couldn’t help myself.

As always, her heart gave a little catch of unconditional love. Life had thrown in a few bits of broken glass and twisted metal that had left plenty of scar tissue behind, but that organ in her chest was still wholly devoted to him, for good or ill.

Adele’s soft puff of laughter put a curt end to such sentimental musings.

“The two of you communicate with those secret glances that old married couples share,” she observed dryly. “It’s weird.”

Adele smiled to lessen the sting, the expression emphasizing the vaguely exotic tilt of her eyes. Not for the first time, Ivy wondered if she had some Chinese ancestry in her family lineage. Perhaps a grandparent? She understood why Adele didn’t speak of it, though. Prostitution in general was demeaning enough, but Chinese prostitutes were regarded as little more than slaves; there was no need to volunteer for even greater abuses.

Everyone had their secrets, she supposed, and some were locked up

tighter than others.

“Why do you dislike Shane so much?” Ivy asked.

“I don’t dislike him,” Adele admitted, relaxing back into her chair. “Honestly, I’ve never really gotten to know him.”

“Shane bottles up his feelings. He’s always been that way. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t have them.”

Adele offered an elegant shrug. “I may not have gotten to know him like I’ve gotten to know you, but if he was ever considerate of your feelings and how his actions affected you, he no longer is. You wear your heart on your sleeve, Ivy. You’re not happy.”

“I’m not,” she conceded slowly, “but I’m not exactly *unhappy* either. I’m just...” Ivy shrugged. “...frustrated, maybe.”

“Whatever happened to your dream of owning a ranch?” Adele prompted. “You used to talk about it all the time.”

Ivy heaved a sigh and looked up at the saloon’s unofficial mascot: the mounted head of an unfortunate bull, complete with a faded length of patriotic bunting draped between its massive horns. The patrons fondly called him Wilbur. She felt a sudden kinship with Wilbur, trapped in one place and with nowhere to hide from her friend’s endless queries.

“I still want that.”

“And yet you’ve never mentioned it to Shane. I find that peculiar, Ivy. He’s this all-important person in your life, but you’ve never confided in him the one thing that you long for the most. Why is that?”

Ivy paused a beat too long. “I’ve mentioned the ranch idea to him before.”

She wasn’t about to admit that Shane had laughed off the idea. What did either of them know about ranching? When she’d dared mention it again a few months later, his moodiness had made living with him unbearable. The insufferable ass had relentlessly picked fights with her over trivial matters that had never signified before, and it hadn’t escaped her notice that his mood only improved when she stopped talking about her dream.

Ivy had learned from her mistake and hadn’t mentioned it since.

“If that’s true and you’ve talked about it with him, then why are you still living out of saddlebags?” she challenged.

“Ranches aren’t cheap,” Ivy explained. “We have some money saved up, but we’re still waiting for our ship to come in. I don’t see any reason to push him on the idea until we’re ready moneywise.”

“That sounds like horseshit to me,” she scoffed. “Don’t you want to get married someday? Maybe even have a baby or two?”

She gritted her teeth. Adele was fast coming up against the river of

steel that ran beneath her skin.

“Why are you so set on staying with a man who will never offer you either of those things?”

This conversation had gone on for too long; she was done feeling defensive. She drained the last of her whiskey in preparation of standing up and leaving. “I don’t expect you to understand our relationship. It’s complicated.”

“Tell me, then. Make me understand.”

It was suddenly an appealing challenge. Maybe Adele had a point. It might be beneficial to talk about the past, to try and put everything in perspective. Although, chances were, Adele would be more confused by their relationship when she finished explaining matters, not less. Ivy certainly wasn’t any less confused, and she’d had years and years to try and sort it all out in her mind.

She cast a quick look about the saloon. She didn’t know if she was entirely comfortable revealing some of the more personal details, but maybe she could skip over those. Luckily, owing to the early hour, the only customer was a lone rancher sitting at the bar. Whatever she did or didn’t choose to reveal, her private business wouldn’t have a large audience.

“I’ll need further libations if I’m going to tell this story,” she decided, signaling Zane at the bar for another whiskey as Adele leaned forward, instantly riveted. “I can point to the exact night our childhood bond was put to the test. It was October 8, 1871, the night of the Great Chicago Fire...”



Chapter 2: “Conflagration”

Chicago, Illinois
October 8, 1871

“Ivy, thank goodness! I was dearly hoping to see you today!”

Ivy smiled at Howard Skinner, the ancient driver of a passing hansom carriage, and all without once slowing her broom as she swept a clean path for a lady pedestrian crossing Madison Street. Creating a broom walk for the well-heeled ladies and gentlemen about town made Ivy welcome the appearance of any horse-drawn vehicle, an appreciation which naturally extended to their handlers, and kindly Howard Skinner was certainly one of her favorites.

“Good evening, Mr. Skinner! You said you were hoping to see me today? Do you have an exciting investment tip?” she teased, her broom industriously whisking away. “If so, I’ll promptly withdraw a few thousand from the bank, and we’ll dash off to the Board of Trade! I do love a topnotch investment!”

The lady pedestrian pursed her lips and cut Ivy a sour look. Ivy realized the hoity-toity accent she’d just employed could’ve been construed as mocking the upper class, but she’d been doing such impressions for years. Clearing horse manure from the city streets wasn’t a glamorous livelihood, and studying the myriad mannerisms and vocalizations that surrounded her each day was a pleasant enough diversion for a girl whose mind hungered for stimulation. In her opinion, it wasn’t mockery so much as it was innocent playacting, and she was good at it.

Shane was even better.

And yet the absence of Howard Skinner’s usual boisterous chortle upon hearing one of her impersonations should have tipped her off.

“Thought you might want to know I spotted Shane hobnobbing with Big Bounty David Chapman a scant half hour ago.” Howard Skinner had a

customer and didn't stop the hansom to socialize, but he slowed the horses to add, "Nothing good will come of an association with Chapman, Ivy."

"You must be mistaken, Mr. Skinner. Shane works at the stockyard slaughterhouse." Ivy paused and smiled deferentially as she finally reached the other side of the street. She anticipated a modest gratuity after saving the lady's dress hem from not one but *two* separate steaming piles of horse manure, but the woman simply tilted her nose and perambulated onward. Sighing, Ivy turned back and trotted alongside the carriage. "Our fortunes greatly improved when Shane hired on at the slaughterhouse three months ago. Soon we'll even be able to afford a larger place."

Their cheap accommodations on Monroe Street was little better than the rented cribs of the streetwalkers, but at least it was a step up from the old factory. They still strung empty cans across the door and single window as force of habit, but they'd never had a break-in, thankfully. It was only a single room, the narrow bed, kitchen, and parlor contained in one overcrowded space, and it was a space they were fast outgrowing. Shane had balked at sleeping in the same bed with her for the last couple of years, insisting it wasn't decent to do so any longer, and nothing she'd said since could convince him to abandon his pallet on the floor and sleep with her like they'd always done.

It was Ivy's hope that Shane's new wages would provide them with a larger residence before too long, and then her guilt for usurping the only bed would ease.

But Howard Skinner's silvery eyebrows shot upward at her optimistic remarks. "Don't know anything about that, Ivy. All I know is I saw him hobnobbing with Chapman and his ilk of strong-arm men not thirty minutes ago on Clark Street outside a grog shop. Strong-arming is dangerous business. Shane is sixteen, which is plenty old enough to get sent to the state prison in Joliet if he ends up killing someone with a bludgeon."

"Shane wouldn't do that," she defended. "Petty thievery is one matter, but he's never been violent. There must be some mistake."

"I hope so, Ivy, for both your sakes."

She worriedly fiddled with the end of one of her braids as she watched the hansom merge into traffic. Shane would never associate with Big Bounty David Chapman. Ivy had never clapped eyes on the man, but she'd heard enough unsavory rumors about him. He'd pocketed a tidy sum as a bounty-jumper during the war years. Folks said he pulled in a total of \$4000 and all by enlisting and subsequently deserting multiple regiments after collecting the sign-on bonuses. Currently, he was infamous for exhuming freshly buried corpses and selling them to the medical college, and it was

no great secret that he sometimes hastened a person into becoming a corpse if there weren't fresh cadavers readily available. Added to this lucrative business was a fondness for strong-arming, a mode of robbery which included some brutish thug dragging a passerby into an alleyway while his less physically-inclined cohorts ransacked the victim's pockets, and anyone would agree that Big Bounty David Chapman had carved out a solid niche for himself in the Chicago underworld.

Shane wouldn't embroil himself with such an immoral criminal.

He wouldn't!

Her stomach curdled. Or would he? Shane had never shown a thirst for physical violence, despite his brutal childhood, but he had shown an alarming interest in criminal behavior in general. Although so had Ivy, for that matter, at least as a young girl. They had shoplifted and picked pockets numerous times throughout their childhood as a means to feed and clothe themselves. Beg, borrow, or steal had been their maxim. It was that or starve.

While Shane hadn't hustled her off to live with Old Mary Brennan as originally proposed, Ivy had willingly befriended some of the little girls that had graduated from Mary's thieves' school and plied them for their pickpocketing skills. Ivy had shown a high aptitude for such sleight-of-hand work and had taught Shane, though he'd never had the patience to hone his talents for hours like she had. Instead he'd preferred openly snatching items from store counters or market stalls and relying on his speed and agility to get away scot-free, and devil take the hindmost.

Ivy frowned and chewed the end of her braid, a habit that had been inconspicuous at age eight but seemed rather eccentric to still be doing at the advanced age of fourteen.

Circumstances being what they were, eccentricity was the least of her problems.

They had grown up in a squalid netherworld of concert saloons, groggeries, gambling dens, and brothels. They called chippies, sneak-thieves, and skin artists their neighbors. They were surrounded by a warren of dens baptized Gamblers' Row and Hairtrigger Block and Shinbone Alley. Was it any wonder they grew up to be criminals, albeit petty ones?

All the same, Ivy didn't particularly want to end up in the state prison and had eventually discovered a legitimate means of generating a few honest pennies each day. She'd even convinced Shane to be a crossing sweeper alongside her for a time. It was then they'd created their frivolous game of impersonations. They'd passed the hours studying the idiosyncrasies and affectations of the city's pedestrians, refining their

talents and competing laughingly with one another as to who had the best accent or impression.

It had been silly, meaningless fun. That brief stretch working alongside one another had been a grand time, at least for Ivy. They'd been inseparable.

Unfortunately, a few months laboring to remove manure in the heat of summer and snow during Chicago's brutal winters had quickly soured Shane on the virtues of clean living, and soon enough he'd resumed his unlawful ways. Why work one's fingers to the bone when there was a happier alternative? The seedy gaming resorts of Gamblers' Row had been that alternative until some reckless cheating at cards had resulted in a sound thrashing and the promise of a knife slipped between the ribs if he ever returned.

The smile Ivy wore for the fashionably dressed pedestrians crossing Madison Street wavered uncertainly. Shane had vowed to make an honest living after that incident, and she hadn't questioned his word until now. Had he lied to her about his job at the slaughterhouse? He often came home with blood on his shirt, and so his story about employment at the slaughterhouse had seemed plausible...

Ivy bolted south toward Clark Street, her broom clutched firmly at her side, the outraged reprimand of the gentleman she bumped into scarcely registering. Her simple bodice was damp with perspiration and the hem of her brown poplin skirt streaked heavily with muck by the time she covered the several blocks that led to Clark Street. The crowds outside the shabby groggeries and brothels were rapidly increasing with dusk nearing, but Ivy had no difficulty spotting Shane among the hoodlums and ruffians waiting impatiently to satisfy their wicked appetites.

The first details she noticed were his broad smile and unruly laugh. Ivy's breath caught. Shane didn't smile, and Shane certainly didn't laugh, not like that. Shane was the solemnest person she'd ever known; she could count on one hand the number of belly laughs he'd let loose in the entire time she'd known him, and his rare smiles were always reserved, tight-lipped affairs. Thanks to eating a potato soaked in vinegar each day, neither had loose teeth, so Ivy could say without hesitation that his reserved smiles didn't stem from unsightly periodontal disease.

It had simply been his nature.

Or so she'd thought.

It seemed that his lack of genuine smiles all these years hadn't been attributable to his quiet nature but to Ivy's dull company instead. Shane's broad smiles were dashing, his throaty laugh carefree! And why wouldn't they be? He and his associates were socializing with a trio of half-naked

prostitutes hanging wet laundry from a clothesline strung between two second-floor balconies. The group as a whole was capering happily down the primrose path and more than delighted to be going there.

“I’d give my eyeteeth for an hour in your arms, Lizzie,” one of the young men shouted elatedly from the street. “I’m short on funds but *long* on the desires of the flesh!” He tittered and elbowed a friend in self-congratulation for his cleverness, although Ivy didn’t think him very clever at all. “What do you say, love? Give me a free go at it, just this once?”

A blonde dressed in ruffled drawers and black corset with golden embroidery leaned over the railing and yelled, “I’d say go frig yourself, Mikey, ’cause I’m only interested in your money and not your eyeteeth! And since when have you ever lasted a whole hour?”

Laughter roared from both the balcony and the street. Even the young man whose stamina was called into question seemed to welcome the saucy jeers and grinned waggishly, a lovesick swain deeming himself the life and soul of the party.

“Best stop taking me for granted, Lizzie, or I’ll start bearing my business elsewhere. I’ve heard that exclusive parlor over on Fourth Avenue offers some real high-class girls.”

That earned several reproachful hisses from the balcony. A rather stout whore that prompted memories of Fat Meg called out, “You wouldn’t be able to afford the classy parlor house whores, Mikey. You’d be lucky to afford Nellie Welch at Belle Jones’s place!”

“That old done? She’s past sixty!” he sniggered. “Bet I couldn’t even get my picklock to properly stand up!”

The gathered crowd liked that one and howled accordingly.

“What say you, Minna?” a different lad called out, drawing the attention of a redhaired slattern Ivy recognized as hailing from their own neighborhood. She scowled. She’d never liked Minna Blum; she was forever making eyes at Shane. “Ready to dance the buttock jig with me? Unlike Mikey here, I hold back enough dancing funds to see me through the week!”

“You’re a regular silver-tongued orator, Eugene!” she flattered but not very convincingly; her laughing gaze quickly swapped one lad for another. “What about you, Shane? You’re starting to fill out nicely these days. Interested in dancing the mattress jig with me?”

Ivy had heard and seen enough. “Shane McLaughlin!” she shouted, her voice scarcely slicing through the boisterous hoots and hollers of the preoccupied boys feeling their oats, but it was more than loud enough to capture the attention of the only boy that mattered. “I’ll have a word if you

please!”

The unruly laugh and broad smile collapsed. His dark blond head whipped around and sighted her through the crowd. The cluster of excitable youths barely noticed as he separated himself from the group and hurried toward her, agitation evident in the flat seam of his mouth, but Ivy noticed everything about that moment, about him.

Her heart gave a betraying twinge of unconditional love. The old layers of indistinguishable brown dirt had long since disappeared, revealing a fair head of sleek hair and clear skin. Shane was still small for his age, but Ivy knew he would grow into a handsome man one day, even if he never grew to be very tall. The awkward proportions of adolescence had currently rendered his nose and eyebrows too large for his face, but the passage of time would easily resolve any ungainliness in that regard. Already the bone structure beneath his skin was broadening and hardening into the early suggestions of manhood, but she was thankful one feature remained of the boy: He still had the same beautiful, soulful eyes.

Beautiful, soulful eyes that immediately narrowed as he seized her upper arm and leaned in close. “This isn’t fit company for you, Ivy. Go home,” he hissed.

Affection gave way to extreme aggravation. “This isn’t fit company for you, either!” She wrenched her arm free, and Shane wasn’t foolish enough to snatch it a second time. “What are you doing here?” she demanded. “You’re supposed to be working your shift at the slaughterhouse.”

“We’ll talk about it later. Go home!”

“Did you lose your position there? Is that what happened?” she deduced, confused and frustrated by his evasiveness. “I can’t understand why you’d go and work for a body-stealer like Big Bounty David Chapman otherwise.”

“Don’t stir up trouble, Ivy,” he bit out. “We’ll talk later.”

She noticed the nervous glance he sent back to his friends. Was he embarrassed to be seen with her? In the past few months, Shane had spurned her company more often than not, and sometimes she had the uneasy sense he didn’t even like her anymore. It broke Ivy’s heart because there was no one in the world she’d choose over Shane. Did he prefer their companionship over hers now?

Of course he preferred the rough company of wild juveniles over a mousey, goody-two-shoes girl! Ivy’s face contorted miserably. She could be so stupid!

“You lied to me,” she fumed, hurt and jealousy twisting her guts. Shane

might discount her value in his life nowadays, but she refused to be ordered home like a wayward child. “You were never going to get a job at the slaughterhouse, were you?”

“Ivy. Stop. *Please.*”

“You’ve been throwing dust in my eyes, Shane. Admit it!”

His lips pressed together, the skin around them whitening. “Ivy, I...I...”

“Admit it!”

His expression promptly emptied.

Ivy’s resentment paused and lifted its head, alerted to the change in him.

Shane’s blank expressions always signaled an internal struggle. She knew from experience that vacant look took over whenever he was overwhelmed by his emotions, a protective defense that often precluded a confession or apology or revelation that shamed him deeply.

This time proved no different.

“I couldn’t do it,” he stated flatly. “They showed me to the killing floor, and I...” He swallowed noisily, his soulful eyes expanding and becoming too large for his face. “I know they were only pigs but...the sounds...the awful sounds, Ivy. They screamed. It bothered me.”

Instantaneously, her resentment became remorse.

Shane had always been tenderhearted where animals were concerned. The recent barriers he’d erected toward her had allowed Ivy to forget how sensitive he could be; either that, or she’d simply believed he’d outgrown the tendency. She shouldn’t have pushed him to inquire at the stockyard, but she’d presumed he could reconcile himself to the differences between pets and livestock.

Slayer had choked and died on a chicken bone years ago, the poor creature scarcely out of puppyhood. Ivy had sobbed over her tiny body for an hour, but Shane had been inconsolable. He’d bolted from their factory room and hadn’t returned until the following day. His face had been splotchy from crying all night, and depression had bound him in an impenetrable stupor for days.

There had been a few more dogs after that, but either the animals had run away or followed someone home who offered better table scraps. Ivy hadn’t blamed them for doing what they had to survive, but Shane had become a little more wild-eyed with each defection. The last dog they’d taken in had been the mean guard dog he’d always wanted; when it bit Shane on the arm for trying to hug it, the stricken expression on his face had eclipsed even that of when Slayer died.

There had been no more pets after that.

“Why weren’t you simply honest with me, Shane? I would’ve understood.”

“I was too ashamed to tell you, Ives.” A smile flickered, an effort at humorous self-depreciation. “I know where bacon comes from. I shouldn’t have let it trouble me.”

She smiled back softly. She liked it when he truncated her name. It felt special, intimate. “I don’t think we get to pick what troubles us.”

“I wanted you to be proud of me.”

“I am.” Her heart swelled so full it was nearly painful. “I’m always proud of you, Shane.”

“You’re not proud of me now.”

She reached out to hug him, but he eluded her grasp. The brief connection they’d shared fractured, devastating Ivy. His aversion to her touch was yet more proof that he now found repugnance in what he’d once craved. He didn’t need her like he used to.

Worse, her attachment to him was stronger than ever.

As children, she’d introduced a relentless campaign of hugs and cuddles and hand-holding that had eventually taught Shane not to frown suspiciously at the offer of comfort or sadder still, flinch as if expecting an act of violence. In time, he’d learned to enjoy physical touch, to even seek it out on occasion and not wait for her to initiate affection, and the safe haven she ultimately came to exemplify made Ivy feel important. Purposeful.

But Shane no longer turned to her for hugs. He was as disdainful of benign affection as the average adolescent boy and reminded her of this now. “I’m not a child any longer,” he informed stiffly. “I don’t need or want your mollycoddling.”

Everything about that rubbed Ivy the wrong way, but more important matters needed to be settled between them. Shane might abhor butchering animals for a living—something she wouldn’t have been any more eager to do, admittedly—but it was concerning that same abhorrence didn’t apply to the humans he strong-armed with the backing of Big Bounty David Chapman.

“Is the rumor true? You’re working for Mr. Chapman now?”

“Yes.” His jaw retained a stubborn tilt she’d unfortunately seen on more than one occasion, an obstinance that rarely ended well. “I asked him for a job the same day I quit the slaughterhouse.”

Ivy briefly closed her eyes. Regrettably, Howard Skinner’s information had been correct.

“Tell me where the blood comes from.”

His soulful gaze turned dodgy. “I have to get back. They’ll be looking for me—”

“You’ve already admitted it’s not pigs’ blood on your shirt when you come home each night.” She angrily twisted his shirtfront—currently free of any incriminating bloodstains but for how long?—and demanded, “Whose blood is it, Shane?”

He pried off her grip but ceased his evasions with a resigned sigh. “I’ve been helping rob the drunks that stumble out of the saloons and gambling houses. Mostly we stick to Wells, Adams, and Quincy Streets. Giant Jim pulls them into an alley and holds them while Mikey and Eugene and I search their pockets. Sometimes Giant Jim gets too rough and smashes a nose or knocks out a tooth—”

Ivy couldn’t bear to hear any more. “You have to stop this now, Shane! You’ll get arrested by the police, and they’ll take you away from me. Do you hear me?” Her stomach cramped anxiously. To be torn apart from Shane? Forever separated? The very idea was excruciating! “They’ll send you to Joliet, and I’ll never see you again!”

“That won’t happen,” he said, his tone cocksure in the way only a sixteen-year-old boy could be. “Mr. Chapman pays off the police for protection. It’s why we give him half the swag and divide the rest between us, which is a really good deal, Ivy, and you know it.”

She gave a helpless shake of her head. “This isn’t like you. You don’t hurt people. You know what it’s like to be hit and beaten—”

“I’m part of Mr. Chapman’s gang now.” The facial features on the cusp of manhood hardened into an uncompromising mask, entirely eclipsing the softer features of the boy. “I can’t quit.”

“You mean you don’t want to quit!” Persuasion was having no effect; maybe denigration would yield better results. “I saw you laughing and smiling with those stupid yahoos that you call friends. You don’t want to live a law-abiding life. It isn’t nearly so fun!”

“I’m pretending, Ivy,” he defended, his voice mounting in frustration. “I must try and fit in! I’m behaving the way they expect me to behave, and that’s all it is. It’s no different than when you and I make a game of speaking and acting like rich folks. These boys will think I’m peculiar if I don’t laugh at their jokes.”

“And what about what I think of you?” she confronted angrily. “You’ve become a body-stealer, a filthy resurrectionist! Has he made you murder someone yet?”

His eyes rounded, horrified. “I wouldn’t do that!”

“Mr. Chapman might not give you a choice.”

“I’m doing this for you,” he vindicated, but his gaze was slow to surrender its dismay over her characterization of him. “For us! We’ll never get ahead any other way, and you know it.”

Ivy rubbed at the ache forming between her eyes. This situation Shane had embroiled himself in had no easy way out. “I understand why you couldn’t work at the slaughterhouse, but you could have found an honest income elsewhere...” The futility of it all was overwhelming, and she heard herself lashing out, “If you end up killing someone because you couldn’t stomach cutting a few pigs’ throats, I’ll never forgive you, Shane McLaughlin!”

She knew that was oversimplifying matters, and his anguished expression said so, but she was too furious to think clearly. And too frightened. She was terrified for what was to become of him.

“Who’s this pretty bit of petticoat, Shane?”

Ivy felt Shane stiffen beside her. “None of your business, Mikey.” He lightly took her elbow and turned her in the direction of home. Shane’s so-called friends hastened toward them, and the nervous glance she’d witnessed earlier but had mistaken for embarrassment reappeared. Shane wasn’t ashamed of her company; he was protecting her. “Hurry home, Ivy,” he instructed urgently. “These boys aren’t fit acquaintances for a proper girl like you.”

She nodded but didn’t get very far. A single pivot brought her flush against the chest of a slender, dark-haired man approaching from the opposite direction. She murmured an apology and made to move past him, but his hands settled forwardly on her shoulders and squeezed, restraining her in place.

“Didn’t you hear Mikey, Shane?” the man asked, his tone amiable enough, but his hands issued another distasteful squeeze. “We require an introduction to your pretty little piece.”

Ivy was grateful when Shane quickly reeled her against his side. And yet his protectiveness eased almost immediately, as if he found the well-dressed gentleman to be agreeable enough company as opposed to his coarse workfellows. Though he remained close at her side, his grip relaxed easily enough.

“No disrespect intended, Mr. Chapman, but Ivy’s a good girl,” he corrected. “She’s no one’s pretty little piece.”

The lavish black mustache spread in pleasant wonder. “This is Ivy?” He looked at her as one might view a surprisingly exceptional specimen in a petri dish. “The same girl you told me about?”

“Yes, sir.”

Ivy frowned uncertainly. They’d been discussing her? Why?

Big Bounty David Chapman was young, far younger than she would have expected, perhaps in his mid-to-late twenties, but he had a sure manner that was packaged inside a debonair double-breasted suit matched with brilliant white gaiters over patent-leather shoes. The swinging walking stick and beaver top hat completed the outfit and gave the casual impression of a regular man-about-town, but it was all a lie. It was a ruse Ivy saw through easily, and the assortment of thuggish characters that hailed him in passing further spoiled the illusion of gentility. Much like Shane’s ability to camouflage himself with loud laughter and broad grins, this man used the trappings of a fine gentleman to project a harmless persona to the world.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” David Chapman quickly bolstered, responding to her frown. “No one was telling tales out of school. Shane simply mentioned his aim to better himself. He wants to take proper care of you, Ivy. You should be proud of him.”

Shane seemed to puff up a little, for it was clear he admired this man’s opinion.

Now Ivy knew why Shane had taken a shine to Big Bounty. Never having known his father, he was at risk of revering any male figure willing to show him the slightest scrap of attention; unfortunately, someone like Chapman would happily exploit that.

She arrived at a sudden decision. If Shane wanted to be led along by the nose, then that was his choice, but she didn’t have to stick around and watch as he was fitted for the nostril ring.

“I should be going—”

“Not so fast.” David Chapman’s walking stick shot out, blocking her path. He smiled at her shocked expression, revealing elongated dimples. “You’re a very comely girl. Would you like to work for me, sweetheart?”

Ivy grew still as a mouse caught in the cat’s smile. Nothing about that sounded appropriate. Her uneasy gaze cut to Shane for guidance. His admiring expression had been punctured, tragically deflating him.

In that moment, her heart had never hurt for him more.

She reluctantly dragged her attention back to the cat’s smile. “No, thank you, sir,” she declined, her voice shaking a little.

“Ivy already has a job, Mr. Chapman,” Shane protested, his hand fumbling blindly for hers. He threaded their fingers together and squeezed once. Ivy squeezed back, a silent communication of strength and solidarity.

Big Bounty Chapman scarcely credited Shane’s objection with a glance. “Are you certain you don’t desire a change of occupation, girl?”

Those dimples elongated further. “I’ve been looking for a new baiter ever since Kitty eloped with her footpad swain. You’re certainly pretty enough for the work.”

Ivy flushed angrily. Again, she looked at Shane. His face had taken on its own furious, ruddy hue. A female baiter used her seductive wiles to lure a man into an alleyway, at which point her male partners would beat and rob the poor fool. It was a mere step away from prostitution.

“No, thank you, Mr. Chapman,” she repeated, more firmly this time.

“Ivy likes her job, Mr. Chapman.” A black scowl pulled at Shane’s face, any hint of adulation long gone. “She needs to be getting on home now.” He squeezed her hand again, this time as a signal to run. “It’s growing dark, and she wakes up before sunrise.”

“Is that so? I believe I can offer an incentive that might change her mind. Giant Jim?” His gaze skimmed past Ivy’s shoulder and beckoned hell to break loose. “If you would do the honors?”

A squeak of surprise was all that escaped Ivy as a pair of beefy arms grabbed her from behind and lifted her bodily off the sidewalk. Her fingers separated painfully from Shane’s. Mikey and Eugene rushed forward, ripped the broom from her other hand and fled with it, laughing. The squeak of surprise turned into a guttural sound of outrage. She couldn’t afford to replace it! Another opportunistic fellow, this one unfamiliar, tried divesting Ivy of her shoes, but she’d recovered her wits by then; she kicked him roundly in the jaw and thereafter snapped her teeth at anyone unwise enough to wander into biting range.

She hadn’t lied all those years ago when she’d told Shane she was an awfully good biter.

Shane snarled his own outrage and tried to intervene, but David Chapman turned and cracked him effortlessly behind the knees with his walking stick. Ivy turned feral in Giant Jim’s arms when she saw him stumble forward and cry out. Chapman slung an arm around his neck in a parody of companionable affection, but the bulging tendons in Shane’s neck and the muffled grunts as he tried extricating himself left no room for misinterpretation.

Thus began Big Bounty David Chapman’s incentivizing.

With his arm locked tight around Shane’s throat, he dragged him through the door of the nearest groggery. An explosion of loud music, clinking glasses, and rowdy laughter assailed Ivy’s senses as Giant Jim followed him inside. It was immediately evident they would receive no assistance from the grog shop clientele. Boisterous greetings and well wishes were extended to Big Bounty. Even more disheartening, by the

volume of laughter their arrival caused, they weren't the first victims to be conveyed through the premises in such a manner.

They reached the rear of the groggery but didn't stop there. Through a series of zigzagging passages, they wended, sometimes descending a flight of steps, sometimes not. The revelry of drunken patrons faded but didn't entirely disappear, continuing as a pulsation that ran through the cheap pine walls. A smattering of gas jets scarcely emitted enough light to illuminate the way. Rooms and odd spaces seemingly without purpose branched off like catacombs that quickly left her feeling disoriented. How would they ever find their way out?

As if she wasn't already frightened enough, an unexpected thought flashed through her brain like greased lightning: Would they even be *allowed* to find their way out?

They stopped suddenly in front of a random door. Ivy had little time to react before she was summarily thrust inside. Shane was tossed in behind her with significantly greater force, the momentum sending him crashing like the cruelest game of ninepins into an empty cupboard that ran along one wall.

"I'm going to allow you two some time to ponder my offer," David Chapman announced ominously, hand on the door.

Shane sprang to his feet. "Stop! Why are you doing this?" He forced Ivy behind him as he took a cautious step toward the door, one arm outstretched to ward off any sudden attacks. "I've worked hard for you, Mr. Chapman. I don't understand!"

"That's your problem, boy. You *don't* understand." The walking stick lashed out, jabbing him viciously in the chest and shunting him back a step. "Men who work for me need to learn very quickly that there's nothing I cannot take. You don't get to keep anything that I don't first allow you to have, and that includes this fine little petticoat cowering behind you." He turned abruptly to Giant Jim and ordered, "Fetch Madame Hawkins at Ramrod Hall. Tell her that I have a virgin to sell."

Ivy's pulse accelerated wildly. Her vision dimmed, and she clutched at Shane's shoulders to remain upright. There weren't enough debonair suits in all of Chicago to camouflage David Chapman's true nature.

"You can't! I won't let you!" Shane herded her into the farthest corner, his arms flung wide in a guarding gesture that blocked her from view. "Ivy's a good girl, Mr. Chapman. She doesn't deserve this!"

"You should have thought of that before you came to work for me. Every man Jack and mother's son answers to me in this neighborhood. Either I get my baiter or Madame Hawkins gets her virgin. What's it to be?"

Ivy peered bravely over Shane's shoulder, seeing a way out. "I'm no virgin," she boldly lied.

"She isn't," Shane reinforced, picking up immediately on her train of thought.

Black eyebrows slanted upward in disbelief. "But I thought you said Ivy was a good girl?" His intimidating gaze singled her out. "Don't lie to me. Madame Hawkins knows how to examine a girl to verify if her teacup's been cracked or not."

"I'm not lying," she bluffed. "I'm no virgin. Madame Hawkins won't have any use for me."

If Ivy thought that would put an end to matters and she would be sent home with David Chapman's compliments, his next words robbed her of that delusion.

"She'll still have a use for you, foolish girl." He laughed derisively. "She merely won't get as much money out of you."

Stymied, she released an angry snarl. She was damned if she did, damned if she didn't. Still, one option was decidedly preferable to the other.

"I'll be your baiter," she acquiesced. "I'll come work for you, Mr. Chapman."

The thick silence following that declaration was pure agony.

"Will you now?" he mocked. "I believe I've changed my mind about the whole affair. If Madame Hawkins checks you and says you're intact, I'll kill the boy for lying, and then I'll sell you to Madame Hawkins anyway." He smiled at her. "She likes to beat her girls with a horsewhip. It'll be good for you, Ivy. It builds strong character."

The door slammed shut on her shocked look, the snick of a turning lock echoing menacingly.

The room was dark without any direct illumination, but it wasn't entirely pitch black. Ivy desperately wished it were, however, for then Shane's tormented expression would have been indistinguishable from everything else.

Ivy watched him slowly pull himself along the cupboard shelves until he stood as far away from her as the tiny dimensions of the storeroom would allow.

"What have I done?" he moaned. "I've put you in the worst sort of danger."

Shane slapped the side of his head once, hard. When that didn't seem to help, he cracked the back of his skull against the cabinetry so forcefully that it sounded like a melon splitting open.

"Stop it!" she pleaded, rushing forward to brace his head still.

It had been a long time since she'd seen Shane hurt himself. Years, in fact. His boyhood confession that he sometimes had nightmares and screamed in his sleep had only been a partial admission. The more alarming piece—that he sometimes hurt himself afterwards or during moments of stress or intense self-loathing—had been carefully omitted.

For the most part, the instances of abuse had been relatively minor. He'd picked at his fingernails until they'd bled or viciously twisted his hair until the knots had to be cut out. Others hadn't been so minor. Once, after an intensely traumatic nightmare, he'd repeatedly smacked his forehead against the hard floor until a lump had formed. It had taken all her strength to climb on top of him and pin him down before he'd finally stopped.

That had been the last instance that Ivy had witnessed. He'd been twelve, and she'd been left with the unsettling suspicion afterwards that all those bad feelings he carried around inside him had finally turned into burrowing ants. They were tunneling around inside his head, chewing at his brain, and he was trying frantically to knock them loose.

All those little insects, chewing, chewing, chewing.

Ivy could only wonder what they were doing to his brain right now.

"It's okay, Shane," she soothed.

He shook his head wildly. "It's not."

"I know you're upset with yourself, but you didn't mean for any of this to happen." An epiphany struck, and Ivy's expression softened. "Besides, it would have happened between us sooner or later anyway."

He glanced up through his lashes, startled.

Shane's pallet on the floor made sense now, as did his recent avoidance regarding close physical contact. He'd been pulling away from her for a long time, but it had been an act of self-preservation from an adolescent boy in the ravages of sexual awareness.

"I know it's why you won't sleep in the same bed with me anymore. You're curious about girls. It's normal, Shane."

Twin spots of color flared in his cheeks. "No," he ground out. "It's wicked to think about you in that way."

Ivy wouldn't use that word, wicked. Strange, maybe. Startling. Unfamiliar and a touch confusing, certainly. They'd never felt like siblings, and so there wasn't that taboo to contend with. Nor had they felt like mere friends; friendship was too anemic a descriptive. There had never really been a tidy classification for their relationship, which was doubtless a blessing bearing in mind the reality they now faced.

"It's not wicked," she insisted. "It has to be done, and you're the one who has to do it." She should have suffered resentment or even fear, but all

she felt was a practical resignation for what had to be done. She would do anything to keep Shane safe. "He said he would kill you for lying," she reminded urgently. "I won't let that happen."

Another agonized moan escaped him. "I'd rather be dead than force you."

Ivy felt a surge of impatience. "You're not forcing me. It's not your fault any more than it's mine. Now hurry and do it before he comes back." Unexpectedly, she remembered Minna Blum's proposition. "Have you lain with a girl before?" she asked sharply, feeling oddly saddened by the prospect.

But he shook his head. "And I'm not doing it now, either. Not like this, Ivy. You'll hate me for it."

"It's either you or a customer at Madame Hawkins's place. I'd rather it was you." Softly, she added, "And I could never hate you, Shane. Not for anything."

He dropped his head. "Jesus," he said softly, an utterance of sheer misery.

"Just close your eyes and pretend. Do you remember the way you smiled and laughed with those yahoos Mikey and Eugene? It's like that. Don't think about it too much."

He frowned but nodded, seemingly more at ease. "Should I kiss you?" He quickly rubbed his hands over the thighs of his trousers, as if his palms were perspiring.

A kiss from Shane sounded nice. More than nice, actually. Ivy opened her mouth to say yes, but then indistinct voices and a far-off laugh made them both startle. Surely Giant Jim couldn't have fetched Madame Hawkins in so little time!

"No," she declined, casting an anxious glance at the door. "Just get on with it."

A clammy sweat had broken out above his upper lip. He made a half-motion to touch her but froze, still painfully conflicted.

Both had seen more than their fair share of copulating couples: standing in alleys, pressed up against windows, straddled across laps in open doorways. The rudiments of sex were on constant display throughout the Chicago slums. Even so, a storeroom with a dirt floor might be the saddest place on earth for a girl and boy to lose their respective virginities.

This wasn't about romance, though, as Shane's reluctance attested, a reluctance that seemed to be proving unshakable.

Ivy debated on how to move matters along. She knew her figure was still girlish, but boys Shane's age walked around with cock-stands all hours

of the day and night. The small confines of their Monroe Street lodgings didn't leave much room for privacy, and she'd glimpsed more of Shane behind the dressing screen than he probably realized. It was the nature of adolescence, but she didn't know if cock-stands were instantaneous or if they required some cajoling.

Better to err on the side of caution, she supposed. Ever pragmatic, Ivy grabbed his hand and placed it on her small breast.

He sucked in an excited hiss of air, his gaze instantly clouding over.

She almost smiled. Cock-stands didn't take long, apparently.

Shane swiftly backed her into the corner. She almost smiled again but checked the urge. This shouldn't feel effortless. She shouldn't want this. Happy smiles had no place here. Chapman's coercion had forced them together, but resentment was the last thing on Ivy's mind as Shane palmed her breast. She liked it! His fingers squeezed experimentally, gently shaping the softness and stimulating an intriguing curl of heat low in her belly. His breathing grew louder as his thumb softly swept across her nipple. That surprised Ivy. She'd seen men grab at women's breasts like they were trying to snatch them away, but Shane was sweet about it. Gentle.

Strange, but her breathing grew louder, too. Shane heard it and swiftly glanced at her, his lips parting a little in revelation. He fumbled eagerly with his broadfalls, and she told herself she would like this part, too. She even thought about lowering her gaze to see what a boy's exposed erection looked like—those glimpses in the mornings or behind the dressing screen had been too vague—but embarrassment crept in, and she was too nervous to venture even a peek.

Their joining was clumsy. It started off favorably enough when Shane lifted one of her legs and wrapped it high around his hip. Ivy tried scrambling upward with the other, but the position required a proficiency neither had. She finally settled for one foot on the floor, but the uncomfortable angle of her extended leg formed an instant cramp in her right buttock.

The whole business rolled downhill from there. After some awkward groping, he lined them up and drove his hips forward. Ivy grunted as his hardness breached the private place between her legs. The pressure was unpleasant, and for the first time, she felt apprehensive about what they were doing. He wasn't even inside her all the way, but she already felt stretched and sore. Sweat beaded his forehead as he tried pushing past the vaginal membrane that was the source of all their worries, but no amount of gentle thrusting seemed to do the trick.

"I think you have to be rougher," she determined, not liking this part

at all.

He gulped and slammed into her, hard. Ivy snorted, her belly torn apart. That warm, brief throb of anticipation from earlier was nowhere to be found. It burned down there, like she'd been cut deep inside, and every instinct told her to drop her ridiculously positioned leg and shove him away. This didn't feel good at all.

"It feels so good, Ivy."

Her guilt was immediate, but Shane didn't seem to notice she was having the opposite experience. He set forth a pounding rhythm that bowed the flimsy pine wall at her back. She hid a painful wince. Lord, he was thumping her raw. His breathing came faster and faster, like the puffing engine of a locomotive, hot and tacky against her neck. A moment of envy assailed her. Whatever he was feeling, it was glorious, and she wanted it, too.

Just when she feared it would never end, he stiffened suddenly and gasped into her neck. Ivy had seen enough couplings to know that it was over now, and her first reaction was that of relief.

The second was mortification because the doorknob was turning.

She scarcely had time to drop her leg before David Chapman threw open the door. "It's a red-letter day for us all!" he announced excitedly. "A fire broke out on DeKoven Street and now it's spreading like a harlot's legs! Make tracks with the rest of the boys and grab what you can before the engine companies gain the upper hand. Why in Christ's name are you just standing there with your dick in your hand? Didn't you hear me, boy?"

Shane fumbled with his falls while trying to shield Ivy from Chapman's view. The excitement of sexual release mixed unstably with an outpouring of noble purpose. He undoubtedly felt invincible right now, a disastrous miscalculation when placed in opposition to Big Bounty's brain-bashing walking stick.

"I won't let you sell Ivy to Madame Hawkins!" he cried, balling up his fists and assuming a fierce fighting stance that looked as extraordinary as it did pitiful.

For a moment, David Chapman appeared genuinely confused.

Then he laughed uproariously.

"I was never going to snatch your girl, Shane! I merely wanted to give you the chance to split that beautiful sweetbriar between her thighs. She's all you ever talk about! It was obvious you'd never lifted your leg on the girl and wouldn't take the initiative unless I gave you a little push. I helped you, boy! This was my gift to you. Now get out there and do some looting!"

Ivy's brain was scurrying in confusing loop-de-loops. The same

affliction affected Shane, for he stood frozen, fists still balled tremulously, mouth opening and closing soundlessly as he gaped at David Chapman in bewilderment.

“Not quite up to the task yet?” He snorted in amusement. “All right. See you out there, boy.” Chapman briskly rapped his knuckles against the open doorframe, signaling his departure. “Silks and jewelry and fine liquors for the taking, like manna from heaven!” he crowed, his happy whistle fading as he disappeared somewhere down the corridor.

The confusing loop-de-loops in Ivy’s brain had finally settled, but that only meant the full enormity of David Chapman’s deception was racing around there instead.

“Ivy? I never thought...I told him about you, but I never...I never...”

One look at Shane, and Ivy’s face crumpled like a tin can. He was a queasy pale color, his forlorn expression tantamount to wearing sackcloth and ashes, but Ivy didn’t have it in her to alleviate his suffering. She was too consumed with her own.

“What if I catch a baby?” she wailed, tears hovering on her lashes.

Shane shuffled his feet worriedly. “Can you catch a baby on the first time?”

“I don’t know.” It was decided: They were both hopelessly ignorant. “Maybe?”

The sackcloth-and-ashes look went away. He rushed forward and clasped both her hands in his, and for the first time in Ivy’s memory, Shane was the one to rally and interject reassurances instead of her. “Then I’d do right by you and marry you.” The silly fool actually smiled at her, the worry on his face easing. “I’ll always do right by you, Ivy.”

She resisted making a face. Ivy couldn’t think of anything more wretched than being a fourteen-year-old bride with a sixteen-year-old groom and neither of them fit to hold a candle. They’d forever be struggling to dig themselves out of poverty as the babies kept popping out, one after another. Their lives would be miserable.

But she didn’t tell Shane that. Discussing the worst-case scenario had somehow bolstered him, whereas it had weakened her.

Ivy still saw her dead momma in her dreams, singing lullabies to the lifeless baby in her arms. Poverty and too many babies had killed Rosalie Porter. Ivy didn’t want to go down the same foolish primrose path, but here she was, only fourteen years old, a boy’s semen smeared between her bloody thighs as she listened to his sugary promises to do right by her.

She sighed and closed her eyes, ashamed of herself. Shane wasn’t just any boy, and this hadn’t been a straightforward instance of young lust and

sexual curiosity gone too far.

It had been life or death.

Or at least, they'd been led to believe it had been life or death.

And besides, it was only the one time. It's not like they would ever have to do this again. She didn't have to go down the same path as her momma if she didn't want to.

Thus buoyed, she wiped her eyes and finally smiled back at him. "I know you'd do right by me, Shane. Thank you."

His smile beamed even brighter.

Ivy glanced away, uneasy for many reasons, the least of which included the sticky discomfort between her thighs; she wanted nothing more right now than a moment of privacy. "I'd like to rest here for a bit," she said, hoping he would take the hint and leave. He didn't. "But you should probably catch up with Mr. Chapman," she advised when he went so far as to adopt his own restful pose alongside her. "I don't want him coming back here and beating you for disobeying him."

"You truly think I'd still work for him after what he did? I hate that prick!"

"Shane," she scolded, but then she laughed a little. It was extremely vile language, but its utterance seemed to lighten the mood. "You've been spending too much time with those Clark Street boys."

"But he *is* a prick," he insisted sullenly.

"Yes, but you still work for that prick. Men like Chapman don't allow his drudges to just walk away." She frowned. "Maybe I work for him now, too. I'm not sure if that business about the baiter job was real or if it was just his way of manipulating..." Her throat sealed tight, angry tears threatening again over the memory of what that manipulation had brought about.

"Are you disgusted by me now, Ives?" The conscience-stricken look had edged its way back. "By what I did to you?"

Her head snapped up, expression fiercely loyal. "You didn't do anything wrong. *We* didn't do anything wrong."

"But you didn't like it. I didn't notice at the time, but now I realize you didn't."

The hullabaloo from drunken patrons had risen demonstrably, but the connecting groggery was no longer solely responsible for the noise. The uproar flooded the very streets themselves and made Ivy wonder if the whole city wasn't out and about causing mischief.

"Under the circumstances," she hedged, not wishing to add to his melancholy but needing to be honest, "I don't think I could have liked it."

“I liked it.” His mouth twisted self-critically with the admission. “Even though I knew I shouldn’t, I still did, but now I wonder if we’ll ever be able to look at each other again without feeling the shame of it.”

Ivy winced. He might be right about that. Although her logical mind said otherwise, emotionally, she might have difficulty separating him from the offense perpetrated by Chapman, just as Shane—who struggled with enough anxieties already—would always bear a certain burden of guilt for his unwitting part in things. It was his nature to carry the weight of the world.

“We should go home,” he abruptly announced. “I know you wanted to rest here for a bit, but it’s been dark outside for a while now. By the sound of things, it’s getting rough out there.”

Ivy nodded and let him take her hand. Life might obtain some normalcy once they were back home and resumed some sort of familiar routine. She was thankful for Shane’s first-rate sense of direction as he retained her hand and pulled her through the zigzagging passageways when she would have gone astray within the first two turns. He even discovered a rear egress that allowed them to exit without having to fight their way through the grog shop’s jeering patrons, a detour for which she was profoundly grateful.

They tumbled out onto the chaotic street at long last, but any relief over their successful escape promptly vanished.

The blazing inferno illuminated the city’s southwestern skyline, its acceleration whipped along by powerful winds that rapidly spread flames from one cheap pine structure to the next. People screamed all around them, some in fright, others in deranged revelry. An escaping horse hurdled past, neighing in panic, its broken traces bouncing wildly behind it. A dozen instances of looting and vandalism were on display. Fights broke out. A man raced by rolling a whiskey barrel, his unhinged laughter captivating their attention for its sheer lunacy.

They might have stood there indefinitely in complete shock but for a nearby window shattering, sending Shane and Ivy into an alarmed, protective huddle.

“Mr. Chapman said there was a fire and looting, but I never imagined something like this!” A fire brand hurdled through the air and landed on the groggery’s rooftop, the tar and felt immediately erupting into red, sinister flames. “I’ve never seen anything like it!” His eyes rolled with horror as he took in the surrounding mayhem.

“We have to get out of here!” She tugged frantically on Shane’s hand. “We have to get home!”

A blast of hot wind blew sparks into their hair and faces as they took off running. Their residence on Monroe Street was to the north. They would be safe there from the fire, surely, but getting there soon proved an impossibility. The streets were crammed with people running in all directions, some pillaging, some escaping, all wild-eyed no matter their objective. Men and women trampled each other in their desperate exodus, screaming children were lost to the teeming crowds, and every worldly belonging imaginable, from a child's wooden whirligig to a pair of men's red woolen drawers, were strewn from block to block in a visual exemplification of pandemonium.

"This is a mistake!" Shane stopped running and pulled them against the closest building. People surged past like tidal waves. "We'll never make it home in this mess! And even if we do, we could get trapped! There's already smaller fires starting here, too. We need to go back!"

Appallingly mesmerized, she watched an office building catch fire, only half-listening. None of the surrounding buildings were ablaze, but the office's stucco facing was inexplicably bubbling and smoking. A shiver of newfound alarm passed through her. Was the blistering heat in the air enough to bring on combustion? Because if so, nowhere was safe!

"We need to go back?" She turned to him, his words finally registering. "Back where?"

"To the south branch of the river. We need to get on a boat!"

Ivy's stomach flipped. "But that's in the direction of the fire. We want to run away from it, not toward it."

"We can get there before the fire crosses the river," he insisted. "I know we can! The fire might not even cross it anyway, but if it does we'll be long gone on a boat. We need to hurry though, Ivy!"

Shane's face was streaked with soot and sweat, but no amount of grime could disguise the impassioned set of his jaw and the conviction she saw there. Ivy nodded her agreement. She trusted him. She would always trust him.

They pushed back into the crowd, rushing in the direction of the flames instead of away. The pulsating orange glow above the city grew brighter, the smoke thicker. A procession of rats bolted frantically toward them, their naked tails brushing Ivy's shoes as they scampered past and raising unpleasant memories of childhood bites. She cast an uneasy look over her shoulder as the rodents veered east. What was that saying about rats and sinking ships?

Shane called out a warning. She scarcely turned back around in time to avoid a large gash in the sidewalk. He sent her a look the moment she

safely darted around it, a look that communicated as much relief as it did trepidation. Large sections of the wooden walkways smoked and split from the heat, and navigation had become increasingly perilous. Added to that the objects raining down from above, be it flaming debris or furniture tossed hazardingly from windows, and the odds of reaching the river without serious bodily injury were steadily dropping.

“Don’t slow down, Ivy!” he warned as she started to lag behind. “We’re almost there!”

She boosted her pace, pushing past the painful stitch in her side. As they neared the southern branch of the Chicago River, the elated sight before them helped Ivy find a hidden reserve of energy. Her exhausted lope became a sprint. Dozens of boats were moored along the banks, but any elation Ivy initially felt was quickly undermined by the vast number of people attempting to board them.

Thousands swarmed the banks and thousands more were tearing across the bridges. Poor immigrants and lowly street urchins squeezed alongside women in silks and privileged little boys wearing fashionable Zouave suits, while rough and ready men rubbed shoulders with their well-heeled counterparts. Invalids and pets and toddlers in full skirted frocks were hoisted onto shoulders or carried like squirming bits of luggage, and all were yelling, shoving, sobbing, threatening, praying, and pleading, ultimately forming a massive swell of humanity that looked like its own living organism.

Ivy drew up short, overwhelmed by the sheer scope of it all. If she hadn’t already seen the crushes in other parts of the city, she would have wagered Chicago’s entire population of 300,000 souls flocked here, and all expected to escape the conflagration via the inland waterway.

“We’ll never get through,” she realized, spirits sinking.

Shane’s stunned reaction to the panicked masses had been equal to hers, but now the impassioned set of his jaw restored itself. “We have to try!”

They quickly joined the horde, but after twenty minutes ducking beneath arms and scurrying over wagons loaded with valuables, they were no closer to boarding a boat than when they’d arrived. All the while, the inferno approached steadily, a horrific growling beast of crackling wood and buckling girders that dropped embers and flaming debris onto the bridges and nearby barges with alarming regularity. Should the fire jump the river, it required little imagination to foretell the fates of the numerous warehouses and lumber yards that extended up and down its length.

But warehouses and lumber yards weren’t the only businesses in the

vicinity.

Horrified, they turned to each other in joint realization.

“The South Side Gas Works,” he exclaimed. “Jesus!”

“All the railroad cars filled with coal and kerosene,” she added. “There’ll be no stopping it. The entire city is going to burn!”

“We run east,” Shane asserted, “and we don’t stop running until we’re standing waist-high in Lake Michigan. Don’t let go of my hand for anything, Ivy!”

They pressed forward with renewed vigor, desperate to escape the explosions they now realized were imminent. Above their heads, a menacing fire whirl soared through the air, carried on the wind like a poisonous spore that landed God only knew where. Swarms of thieves overran the business district, and Ivy wondered dimly if David Chapman and his ilk were among those stepping through the broken front windows of a department store, arms loaded with expensive suits and dresses.

In that moment, Ivy supposed not all rats were wise enough to abandon sinking ships.

Her opinion on the avarice of human nature continued to plummet as they fled past an altercation involving the owner of a small horse cart and two quarreling families.

“We paid you two hundred dollars!” a middle-aged man roared as he watched his family’s belongings get jettisoned into the street. The second family’s trunks were quickly tossed inside the cart.

“Sorry, mister,” the driver snapped as he shoved another bundle on top of the teetering heap. “This fellow’s offering me three hundred.”

“But we had a deal!”

“Melvin, do something!” The unmistakable crunch of breaking china was swiftly followed by a woman’s quiet sobs.

“Get the hell out of our way!” the other patriarch thundered. “This is our cart now!”

Ivy and Shane increased their pace, any curiosity over the altercation’s outcome superseded by the apocalyptic declaration, “The end is nigh! The end is nigh!” A man raced alongside them, his eyes rolling violently in their sockets. “Repent, sinners, repent!” He ran off as quickly as he’d appeared, bawling like a heartbroken child as he vanished into the smoke.

Ivy wanted to bawl too as she and Shane sped through the city streets. The fire was going to consume everything, and in its own way, the world *was* ending. Mansions and shanties alike would go up in the inferno. The Insurance Exchange. Tremont House. Congress Hall. The Court House. Businesses like Field, Leither and Company. The newly erected Grand

Pacific Hotel. Churches, newspaper buildings, horse stables. Grand opera houses like Crosby's would cease to exist. The original draft of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was preserved for posterity at the Historical Society on Dearborn and Ontario Streets. Would that burn, too?

But cruelest of all, their home would burn, and they would find themselves dispossessed once more. The life they'd cobbled together would disintegrate. Their cramped room with its narrow iron bed and empty tin cans strung across the door and single window would be reduced to ashes, and what little headway they'd made in this unforgiving world would reset.

Hand in hand, stumbling from trauma and exhaustion, Shane and Ivy's escape through the city finally ended as they joined the large group of people already standing safely in Lake Michigan. As promised, they waded into the cold waves until the water touched their waists but then sank to their knees, too spent to remain upright a moment longer.

She turned to him, trembling and hopeless. "What do we do now?"

"Do?" Shane was silhouetted against the burning panorama, making his expression difficult to see, but his voice bespoke his perplexity.

"There won't be anything left of the city. Our home. Everything will be gone by morning." Ivy was sick at heart. "What do we do now?"

He squeezed her hand reassuringly. Shane shifted, giving Ivy a clearer look of his face, and it was the same face the phoenix wore when it rose from its own funeral ashes.

"Now we can do anything and be anyone."