

The supper table was full of chatter from two separate conversations taking place, the men at one end and the women at the other.

Frankie was sharing her experiences at the hospital with Maggie, Emily, and the Brennan sisters. “Eventually, Mr. Lowry will let me lead a prayer circle with the ladies in the convalescent ward. That ward is where people stay when they’re almost cured and ready to go home.”

Maggie breathed a relieved sigh. “Ah. Good.”

“Later I might work with the general population.”

Emily and Maggie exchanged worried glances now and Emily ventured, “Who are they?”

“They’re ill but not violent.”

“Violent?” Maggie interjected. “You mean to tell me violent people are there?”

Frankie blinked. “Well, of course. It’s a hospital for the insane.”

“Does Papa know?”

“Yes.” It finally dawned on Frankie that her mother was worried. “Oh, Mama! For goodness’ sake, the violent ones are downstairs away from everyone and under lock and key. Attendants care for them twenty-four hours a day. And no one is allowed on that floor but Dr. Stanley and his best-trained assistants. I am perfectly safe at the hospital, trust me.”

Maggie frowned. “It doesn’t sound safe at all to me.”

“Or me,” Emily added.

Frankie frowned. “How odd you should say that. In July I was in the middle of a battlefield with cannon and musket fire all around and helping wounded soldiers in a field hospital. Those places weren’t safe, either.”

“No, they weren’t,” Maggie conceded. “Nor was it safe at the Smith house. You shouldn’t have run off with Gus Schultz to watch the skirmish. Had you stayed, you would have been with us and I would not have worried needlessly over—”

Rolling her eyes, Frankie interrupted, “Mama! If you are going to worry every time I set foot outside our door—”

“I worry because I never know what you are going to get into.”

“Now, now,” Emily said in mild tones, “let’s not get into an argument. That never solves anything.”

Mother and daughter each took a big breath.

“That’s better.” Emily looked from one to the other. “Now, Maggie, it is high time you accept the fact that Frankie will be leaving home sooner rather than later. As for you, Frankie, if you wish to be treated like an adult, then you need to start acting like one.”

Moira and Birgit, seated nearby, began to giggle.

“What’s so funny?” a perturbed Frankie grumbled.

“Begging your pardon,” Birgit said, “it’s just all this sounds like our own table. Our mam goes after us the same way.”

“And we say the same thing back to her,” Moira giggled.

“We thought a high and mighty family like yours’d be different.”

There was a pause. Then, Maggie, Frankie, and Emily burst into peals of laughter.

“High and mighty,” Emily chuckled. “Oh, for mercy’s sake!”

“We’re far from high and mighty,” Maggie said.

Frankie grinned at the newcomers. “We never have any money. Our old house burned down a year ago and we came back here with the clothes on our backs. If you want to see high and mighty, we can visit my Uncle Sam and Aunt Abigail’s house!”

At the other end of the table, Eli was telling the men what an excellent story the hospital would make for the *Register*. "I think I'll set up a series of visits over the next few weeks and write a feature." He proceeded to liberally butter one of Emily's biscuits. They were so tender they melted on his tongue. The very thought of them made his mouth water. "However, it won't be included in our first edition. We have to put in the article on that miserable hotel. Anyone have any other ideas?"

Carson replied, "I learned that there was an interesting trial at the courthouse recently. It involved a curious situation crying out to be covered."

Eli took a bite of biscuit. "What?"

"A vicious murder."

Nate and Grandpa grimaced but Eli said, "Go on."

"It is gruesome," Carson warned.

"Details," the editor demanded.

After a glance at the women, Carson lowered his voice. "There is a hamlet about five to six miles east of here."

"Know of it," Eli said around his biscuit.

"Apparently, a young man returned to his hometown from the war. He had sustained a wound that caused him to lose his left hand."

"The poor lad," Grandpa exclaimed.

"Indeed. He was well on the way to recovery and to all appearances healthy and glad to be home. He had a marriage of about two years' duration and all was fine for several months. Then one day, his wife's mother came round to fetch her daughter for..." Carson frowned. "I can't remember what. Perhaps it was a sewing bee, at any rate, it was one of those things women do together."

"They could have been making quilts," Nate offered. "What time of the year was it?"

Grandpa added, "Perhaps they were canning love apples."

"They're called tomatoes," Eli said. "And who cares what they were getting ready to do? Go on with the story, Carson."

"Well, the mother entered the house to find her beloved daughter lying in a pool of blood. The poor thing had been stabbed fifteen times. The mother ran out and reported the crime to the local constabulary. After a brief search, they found the husband hiding in a neighbor's barn. When he readily confessed to the crime, he was arrested, tried, found guilty and is now scheduled to be hanged four weeks hence."

"God have mercy on his soul," Grandpa murmured.

Nate said, "I don't understand. What would cause a happy man to murder his wife?"

"Perhaps losing his hand did it," Grandpa suggested. "How'd you like it if you lost your hand?"

"I wouldn't. But I don't think I'd kill Em over it."

Eli sat back in his chair. "Thanks, Carson. We'll cover the story."

"We'll need another reporter, though," Carson said bluntly. "I have two other stories to write."

Eli relented. "We'll place an ad for a reporter in our first edition."

Carson smiled in victory.

"But as the man is sentenced to die in three weeks, *you* should do the initial interview."

Carson's smile vanished.

"If it's help you're needing," Grandpa commented, "I wouldn't mind learning to set type."

"I need to think that over, O'Reilly," Eli replied. "But you could do one thing for me. You could accompany Frankie to the Western New Jersey Hospital every Wednesday and Friday. She can't go with George Lowry."

Grandpa paused, a spoonful of stewed tomatoes halfway to his mouth. "You mean you're letting our dear colleen¹ work at that madhouse?"

"It's not a madhouse, it's a hospital. Look, will you do it? Otherwise, it's Carson's job."

"What??" Carson was suddenly all porcupine quills and venom. "I shall do no such thing! It's bad enough you have me writing most of the stories for the *Register!*"

"Shh!" Eli put a finger to his lips. "Keep it down. Listen, Carson, I'm the damn editor so I make the decisions. Anyway, you're going to be paid for your services."

"Is that so? May I inquire when that might be?"

"Soon."

"You are a dreadful liar, Elijah Smith."

"No, I mean it. As soon as the money comes in, you get a salary, I get a salary, we all get a salary."

Carson sniffed. "Regardless, I refuse to babysit your daughter on her latest errand of mercy."

"Come on, Friend."

"Do not 'friend' me," Carson muttered. "What Frances needs is to marry Patrick and take up housekeeping!"

"Look, you know she won't take up housekeeping even *after* she's married to Patrick. From what I can tell they're going to share the cooking and if she has her way, the cleaning, too. Come on, do me this one favor."

"I have done far too many favors for you, Elijah, including babysitting your youngest child and changing the cloths on her derriere. You would not believe the mess she made today. I, sir, am no nursemaid! I only did it because Maggie needed help."

Grandpa spoke up now. "All right, now, you lot. We can't have a load of silliness coming between us, can we? I'll go with the girl – as long as it's only once a week and as long as *you*, Eli, give me a job at the paper."

"Deal! Put 'er there." Eli reached across the table in a display of appalling manners.

Grandpa met his hand halfway.

"Well, as long as we're on the topic of work," Nate said, "Sam Beatty offered me a job."

Eli's mouth fell open. "After what happened to you last year?"

"He says the wheels they've been putting on the wagons aren't as sturdy as mine. He wants me to make them again. *And* I can do it in my shop."

Grandpa frowned. "So, the coward won't have you in his factory, will he?"

"Even if he wanted me there, O'Reilly, I wouldn't do it."

The other men were confused.

"Look, you all can go anywhere you want and do anything you want as long as it's legal. Me? No, sir. My skin's too dark. If I'm walking down a street, I must be up to no good. If I ask for a job, I get the meanest one in the place because, you know, I don't have but half the brains of a white man. And if I'm put over a white man, it won't stick. It doesn't matter how inexperienced or stupid or unskilled he is, he still thinks he's better than me."

¹ The anglicized spelling of the Irish Gaelic word for girl, *cailin*.

Grandpa said, "I may not have black skin, Nate, but I've felt some of that. Signs saying no Irish need apply. Drawings making my people look like monkeys. It's not the full burden you have to bear, but it's enough to stick in my craw."

Nate sighed, "Yeah, well, it sticks in my craw, too."

There was a silence.

"Say, Nate?"

"Yeah, Eli?"

"Want me to give you a job at the *Register*?"

Nate guffawed. "Me? A job at the paper? Man, you must be out of your mind. I work with my hands!"

"It was just a thought..."

Nate chuckled. "Look, Eli, I know you'd treat me right. You always have. And I appreciate the offer, but I'm gonna respectfully decline."

Carson said, "Thank goodness. You don't want to work for Elijah. He is, without a doubt, the meanest newspaperman I've ever encountered."

"Friend," Eli joked, "I'm the *only* newspaperman you've ever encountered."

Dapper white moustache lifting in a smile, Carson teased, "And you shall be the *last!*"