



A
PERFECT
SILHOUETTE

JUDITH MILLER

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In memory of
Dorothy Gliniecki

*I'm so thankful God brought you into my life.
I cherish the memories.*

Chapter

ONE

Manchester, New Hampshire

August 1850

“MANCHESTER! NEXT STOP, MANCHESTER!” THE CONDUCTOR raised his voice as the train hissed and chugged to a shuddering stop next to the Canal Street Depot.

Mellie Blanchard pressed her hand to her churning stomach, stood, and made her way down the narrow aisle of the passenger car. A trainman offered his hand as she descended the steps onto the wooden platform. So this was Manchester.

Rows of redbrick buildings loomed over the adjacent canal like ominous sentries assembled to keep invaders out. Or were they positioned to keep prisoners within? The thought caused a chill to race up her arms.

“Excuse me, miss, I believe you dropped this.” A young man strode across the platform, holding her copy of *La Petite Fadette*. His lips curved in a broad smile as he glanced at the cover. “Let me guess. You’ve come to Manchester to accept a position as governess for one of the mill owners?”

“No, I’ve come seeking employment at the mills.” She extended her gloved hand and accepted the book. “Thank you. I didn’t realize I had dropped it.”

“If you’ve come to work for the Amoskeag Company, I doubt there will be much time for reading French novels in your future.” The man’s clear blue eyes glistened like sunlight sweeping across ocean waters.

His cautionary words underscored what she’d known to be true when she boarded the train in Concord. Her life would never be the same.

“Thank you for returning my book. If you’ll excuse me, I need to see to the delivery of my baggage.” A gust of wind captured the edge of her gold silk bonnet and nearly sent it flying. She held it in place with her palm, then tucked the book into the pocket of her lightweight cloak before waving to a drayman seated atop a small wagon. When he didn’t acknowledge her, she hurried to the side of the wagon. “I have baggage I’d like delivered to Mrs. Richards’s boardinghouse, please.”

He spit a stream of tobacco juice toward the opposite side of the wagon. “This ain’t no free service. You gotta pay before I deliver. How many you got?”

“Two.” Mellie dug into her reticule and handed him the requested coins before nodding toward the side of the depot. “Follow me. They’re over here.”

He stopped short and shook his head when he caught sight of the two oversize trunks. “First off, them’s gonna cost you more. Most gals come here with one small trunk. Them things are huge.”

She stiffened her spine and squared her shoulders. “When you stated your price, you didn’t qualify a size requirement. I’ve paid your requested fee, and I expect you to deliver my belongings.”

His features tightened into a scowl, but at least he began moving toward the trunks. He reached for the leather handle on one side and tested the trunk's weight. "This thing is heavier than a grown man."

"You exaggerate, sir. I doubt it weighs more than a small child, and the baggage handlers in Concord had no difficulty loading it onto the train."

The drayman braced his foot against the end of the trunk and gave a hefty push. When it slid only a few inches, he glanced about. "I gotta go find my helper. He's likely inside the depot chewin' the fat with the ticket master. Ain't never around when I need him. I've half a mind to send him packing."

Mellie offered a slight nod and turned toward the adjacent hillside. Rows of brick boardinghouses marched up the incline, with their slate-covered, gabled roofs and white dormers providing the only disruption in a sea of red brick and granite. Gone were the white birch and towering pines that had likely proliferated on the graceful rise before the coming of the Amoskeag Company. Had the farmers willingly sold their homesteads knowing the pastoral countryside would be forever changed, or had they been hoodwinked like the landowners down in Lowell? Of course, it no longer mattered. The farmland had already given way to industry. Even now, she could see workers constructing additional mills across the canal. How many did they need?

The drayman reappeared with a muscular young man at his side. "Finally found him." He didn't look at her as he spoke. Instead, he pointed the young fellow to her trunks. "These is the ones. Let's get 'em on the wagon." He glanced in Mellie's direction. "I'm gonna wait for the next train before I bring your trunks, so you might as well get on over to Mrs. Richards's boardinghouse. We'll meet ya there in about a half hour or so."

"If you could direct me?"

"You gals come to town with no idea what you're in for. No wonder so many of ya end up in trouble." He shook his head and pointed to the incline. "First boardinghouse on the third street over—Pleasant Street. You're lucky you ain't got too far to go. Them fancy shoes ain't made for walking—or for working in the mills, neither."

Mellie thanked him before heading off. She stopped and attempted to wiggle her toes before she reached Pleasant Street. Though she didn't want to admit the drayman was correct, her right shoe was pinching her toes and she'd likely have a blister by morning. When she arrived at the front door, she took a moment to catch her breath and straighten her bonnet before knocking.

Before long, a plump dark-haired woman opened the door. Her gaze traveled from Mellie's bonnet to the hem of her blue-gray shot silk day dress. "Can I help you, miss?"

"I've come about a room. I have a letter from Mr. Brownell. He was in Concord hiring for the Stark Mills. Are you Mrs. Richards?"

"I am." The woman's forehead creased. "You're going to work in the mills?"

Mellie swallowed hard. "Is there some reason why I shouldn't?"

"No." She shook her head. "It's just that you're a little . . . um, a little fancier than most of the girls who appear at my door." A nervous mumble escaped her lips as she waved Mellie forward. "Come sit down and we'll sort this out."

Mellie's heart picked up a beat as she followed the older woman into a parlor off the hallway. Mrs. Richards gestured to one of the well-worn, overstuffed chairs. With her thoughts racing, Mellie forced a smile and sat down. What if Mr. Brownell

hadn't been working for the company? What if she'd been too trusting? What if she'd made this journey and spent the last of her sister's savings for naught? What would happen to her only remaining family? Her sister, her niece, her nephew. She didn't want them to suffer for the wrongs of their father. They needed as much security and normalcy as Margaret could provide. Mellie knew what it was like to grow up without either. After her parents died, she was shuttled off to boarding school, and her life had been forever changed.

"What else did Mr. Brownell tell you?" Mrs. Richards leaned back in the overstuffed chair.

Mellie retrieved a letter from her bag. "He gave me this and said I should present it at Stark Mill, Number One, and they would put me to work." She offered the note to Mrs. Richards. "Someone at the train depot asked me if I was going to work for the Amoskeag Company, but I merely told him I was going to work in the mills. Are there several different companies? Mr. Brownell didn't mention the Amoskeag Company when we talked."

Mrs. Richards sighed. "Well, I'll give you the easiest explanation I can, but it does get a little confusing. The Amoskeag Company owns all the land where the Stark Mills are situated, and if my memory serves me right, they have the water rights to Amoskeag Falls. Somewhere along the way I was told the directors of the Amoskeag Company connected with some of the men in Lowell known as the Boston Associates, but that all gets too complicated for me. Anyway, sometime later, the Amoskeag Company decided there was money to be made if they opened some of their own mills and mechanic shops. Mr. Stark owns three mills and a few of the mechanic shops, but I couldn't tell you much more than that. None of the company

business is of any great importance to me—so long as I get my pay each week.”

“Thank you. I think I understand a little better now.” Mellie gestured to the paper she’d handed the keeper. “Does Mr. Brownell’s note appear in order?”

Mrs. Richards nodded. “I didn’t know Sam—Mr. Brownell—had been in Concord, but it appears this is in order. If you’re willing to room in the attic, I can offer you space. When one of the other girls leaves, you can move into another room—if no one else claims it first. Once you’ve signed your papers over at the mill, come back here and you can get settled.” She glanced at Mellie’s shoes. “You might want to change into your working shoes before you go.” Her eyebrows dipped low on her forehead. “Where are your belongings?”

“I’m having them delivered by a drayman who was over at the depot. He said he’d bring them after the next train arrives.”

Mrs. Richards nodded. “In that case, I guess you have no choice but to wear the shoes on your feet. Walk outside with me and I’ll point you in the direction you need to go.” She pushed up from the chair and led Mellie to the front stoop. She pointed across the road and to the left. “There’s three Stark Mills. Number One is four stories high—that’s where you’ll be going—the far left. Number Two is the tallest one at five stories high. Then there’s the connecting mill. It’s also four stories—the one with the cupola.” She pointed toward the center. “Once they constructed that center mill, folks said the three mills formed a cross.”

Mellie stared at the vast buildings. A cross, or perhaps a giant man with outstretched arms pulling young women inside to profit from their labors. But no matter. She needed work, and it might help to think of the three mills forming a cross rather than greedy men taking advantage of the unfortunate.

Mrs. Richards rested one hand on her fleshy hip. “Mr. Walters is the man in charge of all the Stark Mills. The girls tell me he’s a mite picky about who he hires, but I don’t know if that’s true. They say it’s best to have a reference from someone back home.”

Mellie touched her reticule. “I have one with me.”

“Give your note from Mr. Brownell to the man at the iron gates. He’ll let you in and direct you to the agent. When you get back, you can read the boardinghouse regulations. Single girls working in the mills are required to live in a boardinghouse and abide by the house’s rules.” She lifted her hand from her hip and gave a slight flick of her wrist. “Well, you best be off. I’ll have the drayman take your belongings to the attic. I’m sure Mr. Walters will offer a nice-appearing girl like you a position. If not, you can apply at any of the other mills down the row.”

Mellie’s stomach growled. Had she taken the time to eat before leaving Concord, the contents of her stomach would now be defiling Mrs. Richards’s tidy front stoop. She hadn’t anticipated the strangeness of being set adrift in a town where she didn’t know a soul, where she’d be required to sleep in a room with girls she’d never met, where she didn’t even know how to navigate her way around. Fear mounted as she retraced her steps down the hill and crossed the street on her way to the black iron gates and brick walls that loomed like a fortress out of the hills. She must regain her confidence if she was going to secure a position, for she desperately needed the income. She uttered a quick prayer and then began to hum a hymn while striding onward.