

## Chapter One

### Agnes

AGNES MUNDER WALKS AWAY from Quaker City Mill, walks away without a backward glance or a single misgiving about jeopardizing her employment, or that of her husband who so doggedly toils there. In fact, she gives him no more heed than she does the place itself, for she knows she's meant for finer things than the noisome floors of a textile manufactory. Cloaks of damask rather than cheap cottonade should be at her daily disposal, and silk slippers, and bonnets trimmed with aigret, or fur, or flowers fashioned from genuine French *peau de soie*.

Oh, yes, she's aware of what the other laborers will say when they discover that she's quit her loom again. They'll accuse her of imagining herself "above her station;" they'll mutter that she's "fanciful" and "capricious" and "prettier than she should be." Many will even accuse her of being "not right in the head"—which words they'll pretend to whisper, sending sidelong glances toward her poor, patient Oscar—although some will take pleasure in denouncing her husband for "sanctioning her wistful, hedonistic ways." And a few will add sneering queries regarding the childless state of a wife who's twenty-two and has been wed for five long years.

But what does any of that malicious cant matter? Agnes has inured herself to the combination of mistrust and envy. The other weavers, spoolers, throstle-spinners, carders, and cord-room hands can carp and cavil all they wish; and her masters can threaten and then dock her wages—as they've done repeatedly. And will do so again, she has no doubt.

She shakes her head in queenly forbearance of these trivialities, then pulls a red ribbon from her mantle pocket, ties it round her neck, and lifts her long skirt and smiles. Given her diet and station in life, her teeth are incongruously white; their only flaw a curious overlapping of the front two. Although, the effect makes her appear more winsome and naïve as if she were still half-child, half-adult and her years had been spent in pampered luxury.

“Ah,” she sighs aloud; her smile grows, beaming upon those around her. Casting herself as a lady of stature and means, she becomes one. So the true Agnes Munder is transformed, just as the streetscape improves, and the weather—the raw March day that threatens snow and worse—grows, in her invention, benign. Gone is the reeking, pulsing industrial heart of the city; gone is Fishtown and Otis Street where William Cramp and Sons build their vast iron ships, gone the Dyott Glass Furnace on Bank Street, the Vauclain Boiler Works that spread viscous, yellow puddles on Palmer, the stink-enclosed calico printing factory on Beach, the tanneries whose choking stench affects all but the hardiest of stomachs, the smelting works and the sugar refinery on Church Alley that belch out so much noxious waste it’s a wonder there’s any wholesome air left to breathe.

Gone also are the snowflakes that now have begun spiraling through the waning daylight, increasing in number and density while shrinking in size—an unwelcome change that often presages a blizzard.

Agnes trips along, oblivious to the truth. She holds her skirt just so—between her forefinger and thumb in the same dainty manner as the wives of the mill’s managers—while she drifts away from the docks that carry Quaker City Mill’s finished products to America’s southern states or the great world beyond. For a moment, she considers how it would feel to be a bolt of cottonade or calico and wonders what marvels she’d behold if she were to be stored in the belly of a ship and then off-loaded onto foreign soil. How would those fantastical places smell? Would the sunlight blind the eye? Would there be music instead of grinding gears and catcalls and oaths? Would there be food aplenty—and not just food, but morsels of indescribable sweetness and delicacy?

As she wanders, her black hair comes loose, spilling down from the single braid coiled at the back of her neck until the locks make a frame for her face. She knows this

haphazard appearance isn't seemly, because it garners curious and sometimes acquisitive looks from the men she passes. Agnes returns the hungry stares with a beneficent tilt of her head; to some men she even nods. Those who receive her attentions gape and then look away, frowning in recognition and confusion.

By now the snow is pelting down; it's like fire ash spewing from a dirty chimney, although, of course, it's white and frigid. The laborers employed along the wharfs or in the factories that comprise the city's commercial center glance upward in dread. For them, a continuation of the icy days of February is like doom. Pennies saved for food will have to be spent on additional fuel; sickly babies won't have the blessing of an early spring. Those men and women—and the child laborers among them—hunch their shoulders against the precipitation, lowering their heads as though waiting for God to strike them. Agnes remains unaffected.

Vanished wholly from her mind and heart is the filthy common privy built in a vault below the building she and her husband share with the other mill workers. Gone is the quarter of a day's wages withheld for tardiness, or the full day's earnings forfeited for poor work, or the salary paid but once a month when the rent must be delivered fortnightly. Vanished are the children chained to the looms' frames, whimpering while their hands and bodies keep time with the steam turbines' jittering roar. Forgotten also is the "spinners' phthisis," an affliction of the lungs that always leads to death. Instead, she sings to herself.

A carriage stops. It's a very fine rig, a handsome brougham painted glossy black, and the gelding pulling it is the same lustrous color. The owner raps upon the door; the coachman reins in the horse, and Agnes is hailed through the carriage's now half-open window.

When she approaches, the owner's greeting is a discomfited "My apologies, miss. I mistook you for an acquaintance."

Agnes is accustomed to this type of statement. Strange gentlemen in handsome rigs have summoned her before. How else could she have afforded the silk ribbon at her neck, the lengths of fabric for the cloak she's fashioned?

“It’s no trouble, sir,” she says. Her smile grows brighter, and she tosses her hair, which elicits a sharp intake of breath from the master and a quieter sigh from the servant who remains aloft, his attention seemingly on the wet and steaming beast in the carriage traces.

“Are you employed hereabouts?” she’s asked, but her response is a cagey shake of her dark curls. Agnes never supplies her name or the name of the mill. “Or perhaps you work on your own?”

“Perhaps I do, sir.”

“And perhaps you’d care for a ride in my equipage?”

“That I would, sir. Indeed, I would, especially with the snow starting to make my path so treacherous. And me with such a sorry excuse for shoes.”

With that the coach door opens, and Agnes climbs up the steps into an interior that smells of new leather, polished brass, and *eau de cologne*. It’s a heady, rich scent and far superior to the oily odor of smoked and curing river eels that has given Fishtown its name. She inhales the pleasant aroma as if by swelling her lungs with it she could grow as wealthy and self-satisfied as the gentleman seated in that handsome space.

The brougham’s curtains are drawn shut; the owner taps his cane’s silver handle upon the wall leading to the coachman’s box, and the carriage moves away toward a less congested thoroughfare while Agnes smiles her glowing smile at her unknown admirer. “The hem of my dress is drenched,” she says at length. “And my little feet quite frozen. I should have better footwear than I do.”