

Chapter One

Minnie

Blackwelder Mill, Concord, North Carolina

February 1949

The scream rent the air like cotton fabric ripping, rising over the din of the looms and pulleys, bobbins and gears, belts and spindles and spinners. The room was so loud Minnie had not heard the *thunk* that must have preceded the scream, the moment when Netta, tired from sitting up the night before with her new baby, accidentally stepped too close to the machine and the belt snatched the loose fabric of her dress, yanked her into an embrace, and Netta flung out her hand to try to pull back the cloth.

The scream went on and on, cutting through Minnie's ears, and she stood paralyzed in front of the rows of spools of white cotton thread. It was just before lunchtime, and the February air was thick with cotton lint, so when Minnie looked toward the end of the room where Netta worked, everything seemed coated in falling snow.

Then she was running through that white snow toward Netta, who had fallen to the floor and was clutching her arm, a bright red stain growing on the yellow cotton print of her lap. Minnie bent over her, her arm around Netta's shoulder. "What is it, Netta? Show me."

But she didn't want to look.

Netta was whimpering now, rocking herself back and forth, cradling the arm.

The other winders had begun to gather around them, leaning in to try to see. "Call First Aid," Minnie shouted. She could barely hear her own voice over the roar of the machines. "Get a supervisor in here."

She shook Netta's shoulder. "Netta. Show me."

Still whimpering, Netta held up her arm. Where there should have been a hand, there was a mess of mangled bone. Bright blood squirted from the open wound onto the floor, spattering onto Minnie's shoes.

Minnie turned away, gasping. The hand lay several feet away, palm up, where the belt had tossed it. It had brushed a clean path across the floor through the lint. Blood oozed from what remained of the wrist. The fingers were open, still pink, as though they were waiting to catch a ball in a game with Netta's older baby.

"Shut off the power!" someone yelled, and all through the room the belts and pulleys, the gears and shuttles in the machines slowed to a stop, grinding and hissing and moaning, the noise dying down like the lint settling. Minnie's ears rang with the sudden lull.

Her stomach lurched. The smell of blood, machinery oil, and cotton hit her all at once, and her mouth watered with bile. She swallowed it back, bending over Netta. Someone handed her a towel, and she wound it around the stump of Netta's arm. Instantly the blood wicked through the white terrycloth.

"My hand," Netta whispered. "How will I take care of my babies without my hand?"

"Hush," said Minnie. "You're going to be okay." She pressed the stump down into Netta's lap, holding the towel tightly, looking around to see if help was coming. The blood pumped warm and wet against her fingers.

A crowd had gathered a few feet away, other workers silently watching.

"Get me another towel," Minnie said, and within moments, Thelma stepped forward and knelt beside Netta, wrapping the new towel over the top of the bloody one. Minnie pressed Netta's arm back into her lap.

"I didn't want to come back to work," Netta whispered. "I had a bad feeling. I begged

Joe to just let me stay home with the babies. But he said no, we needed the money.”

“Don’t talk,” said Thelma. “First Aid’s on the way.”

Netta rocked back and forth and keened. Minnie closed her eyes and tried to wish it all away—the stench, the throbbing roar of the machines in the next room, the cotton falling, falling through the air.

“Ladies, step aside.” It was Mr. Griffin, the supervisor. Minnie and Thelma stood up and backed away. The onlookers folded back to make room for them. He squatted beside Netta. “Now, Netta, what happened?”

But Netta just went on keening and rocking, pressing the bloody-toweled stump down into her lap.

Mr. Griffin looked up at Minnie and Thelma. “Did anyone see what happened?”

“No,” said Minnie.

Mr. Griffin took Netta’s chin in his hand. “Now, Netta, did you get too close to the belt?”

Netta’s eyes rolled back and she slumped over onto his shoulder. His feet slipped and he fell sideways, carrying the weight of both of them to the floor. Netta’s blood spread out across his white shirt. He extricated himself from under her, leaving her stretched out, the mangled arm flung free of her body as though in bloody supplication. She had fainted, her face as white as the cotton on the stilled spools above her.

“Goddamn it,” he said, wiping at his shirt.

Then the nurse broke through the circle of onlookers, carrying her black bag, and went down on her knees beside Netta. She pressed her fingers to Netta’s neck to check her pulse, then picked up the arm and unwound the towels. “Did anyone call an ambulance?” she asked,

turning the arm in her hands. The mangled white bones caught the light, severed unevenly. Minnie remembered Sunday lunches as a child, how she and Helen would make wishes at the table and break the chicken's wish bone.

"Did anyone call?" Mr. Griffin asked the onlookers, still wiping at his shirt.

Minnie looked around at the others. Someone shrugged. Wasn't that what the supervisor was supposed to do? "No," she said.

"I'll take care of it," he said. "In the meantime, everybody take an early lunch. Be back here ready to work at one o'clock."

Minnie and Thelma went to the bathroom and washed their hands. Minnie leaned over the sink and watched the red water drain away, scrubbing and scrubbing until the water ran clear. Out of nowhere, she thought of Lady Macbeth, back in Mrs. Sloop's class all those years ago. *A little water clears us of this deed. How easy is it, then.* She wiped her hands and face and looked at herself in the dusty mirror. Her face was almost as white as Netta's had been.

She followed Thelma out of the building. On the sidewalk, she shook the lint out of her clothes and hair. She brushed it off her eyelashes. It was cold outside, but not bitter. The air held the promise that spring was only weeks away. Minnie coughed, beat her fist against her chest, drew in deep gulps of clean winter air.

Beside her, Thelma ran her hands through her red hair. "That bastard Griffin," she said. "Did you see the way he was trying to get her blood off his shirt? 'Did you hurt the equipment, Netta? You know you did.' He might as well have said it."

"It's hard to know what to say or do. I'm sure he didn't mean that," Minnie said.

They walked toward the store. Everyone else was already heading in the same direction. Thelma reached into her purse and took out her pack of cigarettes. She struck a

match and lit up, closing her eyes as she inhaled. Minnie watched the end of the cigarette dull from red to gray as Thelma sucked in smoke.

“Give me one,” said Minnie.

“You don’t smoke,” said Thelma, the cigarette bobbling.

“I do today,” said Minnie. Thelma lit a cigarette with hers and handed it to her. Minnie drew in a long breath of smoke and held it, fighting back the cough. Her stomach lurched. They stood in line in the store to get their Cokes and Nabs. Thelma ordered a BC powder, then stood at the counter, took a long sip of the Coke, made a funnel of her fingers around the mouth of the bottle, and poured the powder into it. The cola foamed up and she drank it quickly.

“You’re going to ruin your stomach,” said Minnie.

“I’ve got a headache something fierce. I figure the head will kill me before the stomach does. Wish I had some whiskey, and I’d drink that, too.”

Minnie knew the feeling. They went back outside and sat at a concrete picnic table and ate the peanut butter crackers. Minnie thought her stomach felt a little better after she drank the Coke. She closed her eyes and held the cool bottle against her forehead.

“What’s Netta going to do now?” Thelma said. “She’s got two little babies. She’s not going to be able to be a winder or anything else without that hand. And I wouldn’t put it past that Joe to up and leave her after this. He’s cheated on her before.”

Minnie glanced at her watch. It was only noon. They were losing money, sitting here; their checks would all be short. No one would make production today, although it seemed a terrible thing to be thinking right now. They heard the wail of the ambulance siren and watched as the attendants went into the building, then came back out with Netta swathed in white, on a

stretcher.

After the ambulance left, they sat on at the concrete table, getting colder, trying not to think about Netta or time lost. Minnie looked down at her feet. She had forgotten her bloodied shoes. She wiped the brown leather in the crunchy grass. Most of the blood wiped off, but they were stained. She'd have to throw them away now. She leaned her elbows on the concrete and looked up at the huge brick building, the glass windows dingy with cotton fibers.

The summer Minnie was eight years old, she woke up one night and the bedroom was so hot that the sheets stuck to her legs like the adhesive tape Mama kept in the kitchen drawer to make a bandage when one of them scraped an elbow or cut a knee. Minnie pulled the sheets back, just like she'd pull off the tape and look at her wounds, until the tape wouldn't stick to her skin anymore. In the darkness she fanned herself with the sheets, cool air swooshing over her legs. But really, it wasn't very cool air.

Helen was snoring, lying on her back. She mumbled and flung a sticky arm across Minnie's face.

"*Hey,*" said Minnie, shoving her.

Helen rolled over onto her side. In a minute she was breathing heavily again.

Someone was in the kitchen downstairs. Minnie could hear the clink of a glass on the table. It would be Harry, home from a date, drinking a glass of milk and eating a sandwich. She had heard him do this before, feeling comforted that he was home again with all of them, safe.

She sat up. The back of her head was damp. She ran her fingers through her hair, lifted it off her neck. She heard the clink of the glass again and stood up. She tiptoed across the room and eased the door open, slipped out, eased it shut again.

Now she could see the kitchen light shining into the hallway downstairs. She crept down the steps toward the light. Harry sat at the table, drinking the glass of milk.

“Well, look who’s here!” he said. “What brings you down here in the middle of the night? Shouldn’t a little girl like you be getting her beauty rest?”

“Shouldn’t you be getting yours?” she said.

Harry laughed. “I’m already handsome enough,” he said.

Everyone knew this was true. Minnie had heard Mama say that Harry practically had the girls lined up just waiting to date him. Mama said it in a tone of voice so Minnie couldn’t tell whether Mama thought that was a good or a bad thing. But that was the way with Mama: lots of times you couldn’t tell about her. It was better just to be careful and try to stay out of her way. Harry, though—Harry didn’t have to worry about Mama. You could see in the way she looked at him that he was her favorite. But that was okay. He was Minnie’s favorite, too.

Harry pulled out the chair beside him. “Come on in, then, little night owl,” he said. “How about a glass of milk? It’ll help you sleep.”

“Okay,” said Minnie, crawling into the chair. She pulled her knees up to her chin and tugged her nightgown down over them.

Harry put the glass of milk on the table in front of her and sat back down. He raised his glass of milk toward her. “Cheers,” he said. Minnie stared at him. He laughed. “You’re supposed to touch your glass to mine and say ‘cheers,’ too.”

Minnie touched her glass to his. “Cheers,” she said. “But why?” She took a noisy slurp.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know, really. I think it’s a wish for happiness or good health or something. Can’t hurt, right?”

“Right,” said Minnie. The milk was cold and good.

“You ever been up late at night like this before, Miss Minnie?”

“No,” she said. She would never have come downstairs by herself. Some nights, she woke up needing to go outside to the outhouse so much it hurt, but the thought of going down the dark stairs and out across the yard to the dark outhouse was enough to keep her right there in the bed.

“You ever seen a shooting star?”

“A what?”

Harry laughed. “A shooting star. A *falling* star, maybe? Is that what you say?” “I don’t say anything,” said Minnie. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Harry stood up. “Come here. You follow me.” He held the screen door open for her and they stepped out onto the porch. Harry grabbed under her arms and swung her up onto his shoulders. “You look up at the sky. Just look at one part for a long time until your eyes get used to it. And then see if you don’t spot a streak going across.”

Sure enough, in a couple of minutes, she did see a streak—and then another, and another. It felt funny to lean her head back and look into the sky—almost like she could fall into it. She tightened her legs around Harry’s shoulders.

“Are they falling stars, for real?” she asked. “Where do they fall?”

“I don’t know,” he said. She could feel his voice vibrating through her legs. “Maybe in China or India, where little girls find them and wonder where they came from. Maybe in the ocean, where nobody sees them at all.” He shifted her. “Whew, you’re getting heavy. Time for you to get down.” He pushed her into the air, over his head and back down onto the ground. The grass was cool with dew under her feet.

They stood side by side for a few minutes more, watching the stars streak across the

sky, plunging back toward earth. And then Minnie was yawning, feeling her eyelids grow heavy.

Harry looked down at her. “That glass of milk is working its magic, hey, little sister? Reckon we should let you get on back up to bed.”

He walked her to the foot of the stairs. Back in the bedroom, she slipped into the bed beside Helen, who was snoring again. She fell asleep thinking about stars, dreaming she fell into the sky that wrapped around her like a warm black blanket.

To think of Harry now was like eating snow cream in winter, the pleasure of the sweetness and the bite of the cold crystals all wrapped into one until she couldn't decide if she was better off not remembering at all. Five years had passed since the telegram came. Harry would never return from France, would forever lie in the ground in that foreign place. The laughter and the magic had winked out of their lives, like those shooting stars, falling into some dark oblivion. Lately it seemed to Minnie she was falling, too, all around her things were crumbling away, there was no railing she could grab for support—only belts and gears waiting their chance to grab her as well, sink teeth into her, finish consuming what was left of her. It was only a matter of time until she also would be hurt. The only question was to what degree. She had been working at Blackwelder Mill now for nine years. For all of those years, day after day, shift after shift, she had been a winder, winding thread into spools, tying off knots. She was unskilled labor. There was no way forward, no way up.

Across the concrete table from her, Thelma lit another cigarette. Minnie looked at her watch, coughing again. It was almost one o'clock, almost time to go back inside and finish what she could salvage of another shift of work.