

Chapter Seven

*Pittston Town Meeting
East Parish
October 16, 1834*

This is to give you notice that the mark of my sheep is a punch to the right ear and two notches to the left.

*Alfred Stilphen,
Eastern River District*

HE LOVED keeping sheep, but he couldn't explain why.

It had something to do with his father, Alfred thought, and the soft sounds his father had taught him to make deep in his throat whenever he was around them—almost like singing, but closing his mouth around the sound of it, pushing it down inside—something to do with that.

The sheep calmed to it, bunched together and followed, bleating back at him as he led them from the lower meadows back up to the farm in the October afternoon, their small hooves clicking against the stones in the pathway. Once he got them up into the barnyard, though, they went to the pens on their own, skirting the sturdy fence Mary had insisted he build around the dooryard.

“I spent the first two years here trying to keep the sheep out of the house,” Mary Stilphen told Jane Blodgett, “and one day, I just set my foot.”

He remembered that.

He'd been mucking out stalls in the barn one morning and, hearing Mary's shrieks from inside the house, had thrown aside the pitchfork and

run hard to the outside. Five or six dirty little lambs came leaping out of the kitchen doorway, scattering, bleating, and Mary right behind them, hollering, kicking her skirts and shaking her fists.

He'd laughed out loud at the sight of her, and paid dearly for it—he spent the next two days building that fence around the dooryard, keeping the sheep without and the peace within.

He herded them now into the pens: several mixed English breed, a cluster of blackface, the best of last spring's lambs that he'd kept within the flock—nearly twenty altogether—and went in after them, pulling the gate shut behind.

The blackface were bolder than the others; they bumped at the backs of his knees, hoping for the pieces of chopped root vegetables he oftentimes kept deep in his pockets, hungry for something other than the last of the aftermath they'd found in the meadows today.

Alfred, still humming, lifted the lid from the barrel beside the shed and scooped out pieces of dried beet and turnip; he set them in the curves of his hands and leaned down. They nuzzled his palms, their noses black as night, their eyes narrow slits in this bright afternoon.

There was something about that nuzzling, he thought, that suggested their satisfaction with his company, his care of them.

His father had taught him to go over them each night, to look them over for cuts, nicked hooves, mats of mud and weed. He kept his fields as clean as he could, but the burdocks were always a problem in the fall, catching easily on the fleece of their chests and thighs, soon tangling into thick mats that pulled uncomfortably whenever they moved across the hillsides to graze.

The blackface would improve that. The nine he had now were better grazers, cleaning out his bushy hillsides and improving his pastures; he ran them after the horses, for they ate the weeds the horses wouldn't touch, and the fields were cleaning up nicely. He admired their hardiness as well—they weathered even the coldest winters easily, protected from the snows and winds by their coarse wool. Each year they dropped sturdy lambs and surrendered thicker, denser fleece than his English breeds; those better fleece weighed more.

And more weight brought more money at the markets in Portland and Boston.

“We need more of those,” Mary had said, “if thee’s to build the best flock in the Eastern River district.”

She’d been right, of course; he listened to Mary, paid great attention.

The month after they’d married, when the flush of it all was still fresh on their faces, he’d taken her with him to King’s Mills to purchase his first blackface; he’d used some of the money her father had given as dower, and he felt obliged to include her in the transaction.

She leaned against the rail of the pen, scanned the sheep, and soon pointed out the two she felt the worthiest in the yard. The drover culled them from the others and took the coin from Alfred.

“She’s got an eye,” he said. “I’d be challenged to do better than that!”

They walked the sheep home and marked them after supper. Mary hiked her skirts and straddled their haunches, squeezing them still between her strong thighs. Alfred, in front of her, held their heads between his knees and punched the right ears with an awl, drew two notches to the left with his knife.

They bleated a bit, dropped some blood, but Mary greased their wounds and scratched between their eyes, cooing and calming them; once they quieted, she turned them into the shed with the others, fed them sweet beets, hummed to them in the evening light.

“There, there,” she said softly, moving among them, “all’s right; thee belongs to the Stilphens now.”