

Judging Cicely
Strasburg: The Next Generation – Book One

By

Pippa Greathouse

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Chapter One

Coming Home

Tuesday, September 5, 1876

Mr. Greene stood behind the counter, chatting with a customer, when Cicely Andrews entered the store. "As I live and breathe," he said, stopping mid-sentence and staring. "Is it Mary Polly or Cissy?"

Cicely's mischievous green eyes narrowed and she gave him a wide grin.

"Mr. Greene." She tilted her head a bit sideways. "It's Polly. And, how are you?"

The older gentlemen leaned back, eyeing her suspiciously. "Are you sure?"

Cicely huffed out a sigh. "You don't believe me? I'm hurt, Mr. Greene."

He chuckled softly. "As long as you stay away from the peppermints in the window."

"Oh, for Pete's sake. I was six years old when I—" She halted. "And it wasn't me. It was my sister."

Mr. Green glanced at the customer who stood behind her. She started to turn to see who it was, but at the same time, the bell on the front door tinkled and another young woman entered. Cicely turned to see her twin sister, throwing her a knowing glance.

"Hello, Cissy."

The young woman stopped, looking from Mr. Greene to her sister. Putting on a smile, she said, "Hello. And hello, Mr. Greene. Mother sent me down to get some red ribbon. Grosgrain."

"Good Lord. Both of them." His eyes crinkled at the corners and he grasped the edge of the counter for support. "Look, Judge."

"I am," said an extremely deep voice from behind Cicely.

Her twin stared toward her, shooting her a knowing glance with wide eyes, and Cicely abruptly turned around to see the gentleman who had spoken. She looked up, up, and still further upward, as he moved closer to her and reached out to put two fingers under her chin, lifting her face further to study her.

She froze as she forced herself to look into the narrowed blue eyes of Abel Carter.

When he spoke again, his distinctly familiar voice made her tingle, remembering their last encounter.

"I am indeed. And," he added. "I would suggest that you think twice about pulling any childish pranks on the citizens of Strasburg this time." He paused, looking from one to the other. "Otherwise, you may just end up facing me in court." His gaze lit again on the girl in front of him.

"Good day, Cicely Allison," he said sternly.

Cicely could not help the crimson shade that flooded her face. She looked down, her chin quivering slightly.

He stood there a moment longer, still lifting her chin and then let her go, turning toward her sister. "And good day to you, Mary Polly."

Reaching for the door handle, he nodded to Mr. Greene and left.

"Abel Carter," Polly breathed, as she watched him go. "The firm and fair judge of Shenandoah County."

Cicely nodded, frowning, and they both shook their heads as they watched him turn right and make his way down the street toward the sheriff's office.

"Yes. He always *could* tell us apart."

Judge Abel Carter strode down the street, turned toward the sheriff's office, and looked in through the window. Sheriff Henson Andrews sat at his desk, in the midst of a pile of papers, sorting through them.

Henson looked up as Abel entered. "Afternoon, Judge."

Abel grinned. "You do realize you can drop the 'Judge', Sheriff."

"And you can drop the 'Sheriff,' Judge." Henson answered with a chuckle. He reached for a swig of coffee and held up his mug. "Can I get you some coffee? When the jail's full, the coffee never has a chance to get old."

"Please." Abel watched as Henson stood, preparing to go into the back, and waited until he returned with a fresh mug in his left hand. "Have any new cases? In addition to tomorrow's?"

Henson turned the mug so the handle protruded outward to hand to him.

"Yep." He pulled out an envelope from his drawer and handed it across, saying quietly, "Three new ones—found rustling cattle out at Pembroke. I'd like to schedule them tomorrow morning, too, if possible."

"It's possible." Abel nodded and put it into the pocket inside his vest.

"Cinderella said to invite you for dinner this Friday evening. The girls are home for a few weeks before their last year of school starts."

"I just saw them in the General Store."

"Ah. You don't look pleased. I hope they weren't up to their old tricks."

"Changing places? As a matter of fact..." Abel paused to take a sip of the steaming brew. "I threatened them both."

"Threatened them?" Henson threw his head back in laughter. "Good for you. With what?"

Abel didn't answer. He raised a brow, and Henson laughed again. "They both should hang around you a while, Judge. Perhaps they would learn to behave themselves a little better."

"Abel." He finished his coffee and set the cup down on the desk.

Henson smiled. "Abel. Five thirty, Friday?"

"I'll be there."

* * *

Thursday, September 7th, 1876

Cicely was in the library perusing the shelves. Her fingers had drifted across her mother's section of books by Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen and lit on a new copy of *The Innocents Abroad*, by Mark Twain. She loved the smell of new books, the scent of the leather, the way it felt in her hand. She had just picked it up and had turned the first few pages appreciatively when Polly burst into the room.

Cicely's fingers stilled abruptly. "You don't look very pleased. What is it?"

"This." Polly tossed an envelope onto the desk and went to sit in her father's swivel chair.

Cicely met her eyes. She set the leather volume down on the ledge and wandered over to pick up the envelope.

"Who's it from?"

Polly's expression was withering. "The queen."

Cicely laughed out loud at her sister's sarcasm and reached for it, ripping it open, her expression of mirth the direct opposite of her sister's scowl. Polly looked on as Cicely began to read.

Her mouth turned down at the corners. "Phebe."

Polly let out an exaggerated sigh. "Let me guess. She wants to come for a visit."

"Of course." Cicely's head tilted. "You don't want her to, either?"

"You know the only reason she comes is to see Abel. She wants to take him away from you."

It was Cicely's turn to sigh. "Polly, I have no claim on Abel. Not anymore."

"But she does this every year. Can we not have at least one month of vacation with our family, without her? It's bad enough we have to put up with her eleven months out of the year."

Cicely read the letter through again and dropped it in Polly's lap. "Do *you* want to write her and tell her she can't come?"

"I may talk to Mother and see if she'll give me permission to refuse. We could always make up something. We have other company coming."

"The last time I checked, the queen was busy. And if you decide to do that, you'd better hurry. She'll be here Saturday."

Polly groaned. "Phebe was here last year when—" She paused abruptly, staring at her sister. "—when you got in trouble with Abel." She stood there, staring, and her mouth flattened into a straight line.

Cicely didn't answer.

Polly stomped her foot. "Damn!" She rose from the chair and left the library, tossing the letter back on the edge of the desk and slamming the door.

Cicely stood there, staring at the letter. Finally, she sighed.

Polly's suspicion was true.

* * *

It was four-thirty on Friday afternoon. Cicely was upstairs in their old bedroom on the third story of the Andrews' house, pacing and muttering under her breath.

"I can't believe Mother invited Abel Carter over for dinner. Of all people."

"Actually, I think it was Father who invited him."

Cicely stopped and stared. "So? It was Mother's idea. I think I'll be sick and not go down."

"You can't."

"I believe I can."

"Cicely, what's happened to you? Last year, you would never have objected to him visiting."

"That was last year."

Polly was eyeing her with suspicion. "What happened since then? All you told me was that you got into trouble with Abel. The last time I remember us seeing him was when you—" Polly stopped suddenly. "He's been threatening to take you in hand since we were children. He finally carried it out, didn't he?" She waited for Cicely's response. When her sister said nothing, she added, "That's it. Isn't it?"

Cicely turned toward the window. "I don't wish to talk about it."

Polly stared at her. "I don't suppose you do, no." She sighed.

"Polly!" Cicely's voice was short.

Polly threw up her hands. "All right!" She turned away. "All right, whatever you say." She wandered through the doorway and turned back. "And I knew it was Phebe's fault. I'd offer to change places with you tonight, but it wouldn't work. Not with Abel."

Cicely stayed quiet, staring out the window until Polly descended the staircase toward the drawing room. Then she sighed. "How well I know."

She was strongly considering sending a message down that she was sick. Her face filled with crimson when she remembered the last time Phebe had visited. Cicely had allowed her friend to talk her into playing a prank on Mrs. Emmons, a former schoolteacher who was known for being extremely absent minded. She had brought out several small packages and gone back into the General Store, and her husband was nowhere to be seen. Phebe had kept watch, and Cicely had moved the packages around to a different spot on the wagon, disappearing and hiding between St. Mary's and the building next door. Then she peeked her head out to watch.

Mrs. Emmons had come back out, set her last package down, and looked for the others. As she stood there, obviously confused and distraught, she'd turned. Cicely had begun to feel terrible. It was then that she turned and looked up into Abel's stern face.

He had not been amused in the slightest. In fact, he'd taken her around the back of the St. Mary's and put her over his knee. He'd seen the whole thing, telling her that it was far past time for her to grow up, and if she insisted on behaving like a child, he would insist on spanking her like one.

She'd been too upset and embarrassed to admit he was right. And she'd had too much trouble sitting down, afterwards. She, who told her sister, Polly, everything, had never mentioned the spanking to anyone. But Phebe knew. It was hard to believe, even now, that Polly had figured it out. All three girls had left to return to school the next day, and although Abel had sent letters during the school year, she'd never responded to any of them. She was determined never to speak to him again.

Phebe had thought the incident extremely funny. Cicely had remained heartbroken all year long, sure that she'd lost Abel's affection forever.

She sat down at the vanity, surprised at how her bottom tingled at the memory, and stared at herself in the mirror. Long chestnut curls and green eyes, just like her mother's, stared back at her. Polly, of course, had exactly the same coloring and shape. Their big brother, Thomas, had inherited their father's brown eyes, dark hair and strong jaw.

Cicely remembered the way Abel had lifted her chin, earlier that day in Mr. Greene's store, and stared sternly down into her eyes. A delicious shiver worked its way from her neck down to her toes. His touch had always seemed to set off sparks inside her. It was as if nothing had changed.

A shudder escaped and she went back to the window, just as she saw his straight, tall figure arrive on his horse. When he dismounted, she was completely certain she could not face him.

* * *

Abel heard Mrs. Andrews' voice from inside the house.

"Henson, can you get the door? I'll be right there. The roast needs to come out." A moment later, the sheriff opened the door.

"Come in, Judge. You're early."

"Am I? Just got back from Woodstock. I was afraid of being late. Good evening, Mrs. Andrews. And Mary Polly." He looked around. "You seem to be missing a daughter."

Mrs. Andrews had just entered the drawing room, with Polly behind her, and she smiled. When he mentioned the missing daughter, she turned to Polly. "Where's Ciss?"

Polly glanced at Abel. "She said something about not feeling well."

Her mother looked concerned. "Welcome, Abel. I'll be right back. Perhaps I need to check on her."

He nodded and followed Henson to sit down.

Cicely turned as her mother entered the room.

"Ciss? Are you not well?" Her mother's concerned eyes met hers.

She looked up guiltily. "I'm all right, Mother. I just..." She blinked and shook her head. "I was just having second thoughts about seeing Abel again."

Cinderella's head tilted to one side. "Because?"

"Just...because." Cicely looked away.

Her mother's brow knit. "I see. Well, he noticed you were missing. I suppose I could send him up to get you."

Cicely's expression became incredulous, and her mother laughed and leaned down to kiss the top of her head. "See you downstairs, darling. Or that's exactly what I'll do."

"Mother!"

At her protest, her mother turned toward the door, her mouth turned up at the corners.

Cicely stared at her. Could she possibly know something happened last year between the two of them? Surely not.

"I'll tell him you'll be right down," her mother said, grinning. "And dinner will be ready within just a few minutes."

Cicely drug her feet on the two flights downstairs. The third floor had been the nursery when she and Polly were small. When they'd gone away to finishing school, Miss Emily, their governess, had taken another position, but the rooms had stayed on the same floor. Now, the journey down to the main floor seemed long and arduous, especially when Abel Carter was waiting at the bottom.

Stopping at the door to the drawing room to see Polly motioning her in, she took a step inside.

"Ah. Here's the wayward one." Her father grinned at her.

The judge stood. "Evening, Miss Cicely. I trust you're feeling better?"

"I'm fine," she said in a low voice. Noting her father's raised brow, she added, "Sir."

Abel looked as though he was having difficulty hiding his mirth but said only, "That's good news."

Dinner was full of wonderful food, as it always was with Miss Betsy there. Cicely found she'd been seated next to Abel, to her dismay, and she noticed that he glanced down at her frequently. The conversation, though it flowed well between Abel and her father and mother, was strained between Polly and herself. When dinner was finally over, she excused herself and went outside toward the stables in the back.

She was gently touching the nuzzle of Sully, their oldest horse, when she heard the sound of footfalls. She closed her eyes.

"Avoiding me?" Abel's deep voice spoke above her head.

She refused to turn around, but paused, stroking Sully's ears. "Why should I be avoiding you?"

"Perhaps because I bring up unpleasant memories for you."

She listened to his voice, but couldn't tell if he was teasing or serious. She reached for a brush and began to use it on Sully's coat as he whinnied softly.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Her chin was lifted, her tone defiant.

"Of course, you don't." He was teasing now, and he picked up another brush and approached Sully's other side. It was impossible for her to keep from seeing him. She moved toward Sully's shoulders.

Abel did the same.

Finally, the air whooshed out of her and she stomped her foot on the soft earth.

"Abel Carter! You're mocking me."

"And why would I do that?" His voice was gentle. "The truth is, Cicely, I've missed you. I looked for letters from you all year last year. But they never came."

She gave him a reproachful look. "You mean you've missed toying with me. And threatening me. And I wasn't about to write you back after—" She paused. "You're mean, Abel."

"Mean? You know better than that, young lady. As long as you behave yourself, you've nothing to worry about."

She gave him an irritated glance.

"Of course," he continued. "If you don't, that's another thing entirely."

"Stop it."

"I've even missed those little dimples you have when you show that mischievous smile."

Cicely scowled.

"Which," he said, raising a brow. "I haven't seen much of since you've been home this time. How long will you be here?"

She looked away. "A month."

"I'd like very much to see more of you this time."

She moved toward Sully's hind flank.

He did the same, his mouth turning up at the corners. "May I pick you up before Mass on Sunday morning?"

"I don't know. I'll have to ask permission."

"I already have."

She stared up into his face. "What?"

"You heard me. Unless you prefer to go to your mother. I spoke with your father."

She finished brushing Sully and set the brush down.

"Besides, we have company arriving on Saturday. Phebe is coming to stay until the end of the holiday."

"Then I'd be happy to escort her, too."

She scowled. "I'm sure you would."

When his hands descended on her shoulders, she realized he had moved around behind her. He turned her to face him, lifting her chin. His face had lost its smile.

"And what does that mean, young lady?"

"Nothing, it's just that I..." She lowered her gaze. "Nothing."

Abel's arms reached around her and pulled her to him, leaning down to kiss the top of her head. "I'd rather escort you alone. But if the only way I can spend time with you is to have her along, I'll take it. Understand me?"

It suddenly felt so good to have his arms around her. It was like old times. She brought hers around him as far as she could and closed her eyes, smiling. "I understand."

"Good. Then behave. I don't expect to hear any more comments about Phebe."

She raised her head, and he smiled down. "You have the most beautiful eyes, Cicely Andrews."

"And yours are terrifying when you're angry with me."

His expression was surprised. "Not terrifying, surely. And I don't think I've ever been truly angry with you. Perturbed, perhaps."

Her eyes widened. "Not even last year, when—" Her face became a deep shade of crimson, and she looked down, blinking with embarrassment.

Abel brought her face back to his and leaned down, kissing her nose.

"No. Not even then."

She wasn't sure how it happened, but suddenly, his mouth was on hers. His pleasant, clean, masculine scent drew her closer, and she closed her eyes in delight. When the familiar signal of the lantern in the back window of the house appeared, she sighed with regret and looked up.

"Father is signaling for me to come in." Giving him a mischievous grin, she chuckled. "The sheriff is telling the judge what to do." Walking around to Sully's beautiful white head, she leaned forward and kissed his nose. "Sully," she whispered. "You are beautiful." Then she stood up as tall as she could and stared at Abel, tilting her head. "And Abel?"

He looked down at her, grinning. "Yes?"

"You're hopeless." She turned on her heel abruptly and marched back to the house, leaving him to follow her back inside, laughing.