

Excerpt from Civil Hearts by Claire Gem:

Tall and willowy, Heath knew just by the way the blonde carried herself she was a city gal. Oh, she'd made an effort to fit in. She wore the casual, Southern uniform of jeans, tee shirt, and sneakers. But the jeans sported a razor-sharp crease down the front. The sneakers, with their floral-printed laces and shiny metallic stripes, didn't come from Wal-Mart. And the cup in her hand—clear plastic, with a straw and jiggling ice cubes—featured the logo of that fancy new cafe out near the highway.

Cold coffee. What was it they called it? Iced something or other?

He watched her wander along the display at the front of the shop, pausing to run slender fingers down the cut glass shade of an Astral Oil Lamp, one whose brass base had been re-worked to hold electrical wiring instead of its original power source. She flipped the dangling glass pendants with one finger and they made a tinkling noise, making her smile.

Something warmed inside Heath's chest, though he wrote it off to the slice of cold pizza he'd eaten on his way in. He pushed himself away from the computer desk at the back of the shop, rising to lean on the display counter.

"Help you, ma'am?"

Her head snapped around, sending her golden ponytail to swing wildly over one shoulder.

She pressed one hand to her throat and chuckled nervously. "I'm sorry. I didn't see you back there." She pressed the dewy side of her drink cup to her cheek.

Guess he'd startled her. Oh well. Did she think the local yokels in a small town left their businesses unattended while they ran errands?

Heath cleared his throat. "Looking for anything in particular? Or just browsing?"

Wasting time, he thought wryly. Mine *and* hers.

The passers-through in this part of the South were usually just that—passing through. Camellia didn't have any well-known tourist attractions, other than a few marked Civil War battlefields and a couple of dilapidated plantation homes. They didn't even have a chain hotel.

But his interior bitch session screeched to a halt with her next four words.

"I'm new in town."

Heath blinked. He knew just about everybody in this small burg, and surely would have heard if—

"I bought the old Belle plantation home. The Bride Belle, I think they call it?" she said. She was walking toward him now, and he couldn't help his gaze from straying down. The thin cotton of her shirt didn't do much to disguise the generous, peaked mounds beneath them.

Probably plastic too, he thought.

He cleared his throat again and felt sweat prickle the back of his neck. "You did? Wow, how did I miss that bit of town gossip?"

Her eyes narrowed, pink lips pressing into a thin line.

What the hell was wrong with him? He scooted around the counter. "I mean, well . . . congratulations. That place is in need of some TLC. I drive by there now and again, and hated to see it standing empty."

She was studying him now with a critical gaze. Pale, grey eyes. Or were they blue? Hard to tell in this light. Big, wide-set, pretty eyes.

Then suddenly, she was laughing. Embarrassment flushed her cheeks and she covered her mouth with her free hand. "I know this is going to sound ridiculous. Impossible, even. But I bought a gigantic old plantation house, and I don't own a stitch of furniture."

Her giggling sent a warm flush through him, and he smiled back. "Well, you've come to the right place. Welcome to Heath's Heirlooms." He stuck out his hand. "Heath Barrow."

She hesitated only a moment before grasping his hand with her soft, smooth one. Her grip was confident and strong. Meeting his eyes, she said, "I'm Olivia. Olivia Larson. Nice to meet you."

And it was.