

Chapter Ten

The Illinois Central locomotive made straight for us. At the sight of that one-eyed iron thing, I'd have run off across plowed ground if I wasn't afraid it would follow me. It lumbered into the station at Carbondale and shook the world. Live steam shot at our skirttails, and the sound was deafening.

Delphine was naturally unfazed. While we'd waited in the depot, she'd sent a message by telegraph to Cairo, in hopes it would find Dr. Hutchings for whatever good he might do us. To send word by a wire was well beyond my imaginings.

At the platform the engine seemed to claw the ground like a living thing. Delphine directed our trunks into the

baggage car. The train was a long one, crammed with military supplies. We were handed up into the only chair car.

It was nearly full of men stirring from their sleep for a look at Delphine behind her veils. Two of them give up their seats for us. With a sickening lurch we pulled out of the station and gathered speed. I'd kept the hamper with me in case we were hungry on the train, but I left my stomach at Carbondale.

I'd never moved this fast. It was like a dream of flying. The hills and hollers of Southern Illinois blurred past the window, red and yellow under the autumn sun. I learned now a purpose for the veils Delphine had tacked to our hats. Soot and ash blew continually through the open window.

My veil plastered against my nose with every breath I drew. Delphine's veil, with dots that gave her beauty marks, hung in a graceful swag, caught up by a corsage of cloth flowers on her shoulder.

She could have been any age behind her veils, beneath the dip of her hat brim. I sat opposite her, yearning for one crumb of her confidence because I needed it now. The two men in officer's uniforms sitting beside us got up to smoke their cheroots at the end of the car. I asked her then what I'd never managed to ask before.

"Delphine, how old are you?"

"Me?" Her eyebrows flew up behind the spotted veil. I wondered if she'd tell me, but she shrugged and said, "Fifteen."

I nearly fainted and fell back in sheer surprise.

"Sixteen at Christmas. Calinda, she is seventeen."

"Never! Why, you're younger than me!" Only months, but I'd been looking up to her all this time.

She shrugged again. "For me, it is not young." She withdrew a gloved hand from her muff and pointed to herself. "Much should have been decided for me by now, my future made certain."

"You don't mean married?"

"Married?" She turned the word over like it was a new one to her. Then she jammed both fists back into her muff where she hid the money for our journey.

"We don't marry," she said. "Not as you know it."

The men came back to their seats, and she looked away out the window to discourage them if they tried to speak to us. I did the same, wondering what I'd heard her say, wondering if I'd heard her right.

We smelled Cairo before we saw the place. It was the end of the line. In better times this train ran all the way to New Orleans to connect with the ships to Panama. All the mob milling on the platform outside looked like tough customers. I was too scared to stir. But Delphine turned to the two officers beside us.

"You will be good enough to help us with our trunks?" she said, like it was the least they could do. They fell over themselves to hand her down onto the platform, and me too since I wouldn't turn loose of her.

I was occupied then in keeping my skirts off the filthy platform. It was littered with busted boxes and crates broken open with their labels gone. Food of every kind rotted on the ground: broken crocks of fruit and splintered jars of jam, cured hams crusted with flies, loaves of bread frosted with mold. It was the provisions families had tried to send their soldier sons, poorly packed and too long in the journey. The combination of smells cut my eyes. But worse smells were on the way.

The crowds parted, and there like a knight in armor was Dr. Hutchings, lifting his hat to us. He'd found our message when he'd come to the telegraph office to wire for supplies. And yes, there was a place where we could stay, though the town was bursting at the seams and they wanted two prices for everything.

Oh, it was good to see him, though he looked tired to death. He'd slept in them clothes. Still, he seemed younger than I'd remembered. He had a trap pulled by a piebald pony, tied up by the platform. The officers swung our trunks up onto the back of the trap and melted away once they saw a gentleman had met us.

I made sure Delphine was up on the board beside the doctor, to reward him for coming to find us. When I'd hunkered among the boxes behind, we set off through streets deep in mud and worse.

Cairo crouched in a swamp under the levees that held back both rivers, the Ohio and the Mississippi. I couldn't have pictured a town this big. The endless rows of houses,

one right after the other, crowded me. Long trains of army wagons drawn by mules clogged the streets and slowed our way.

The filth of the place was beyond anything you ever seen. Along all the mud streets water stood in the ditches, abuzz with bluebottles and mosquitoes, as there hadn't been a frost yet this far south. The whole town was a dump. The swollen carcasses of dogs lay about, and even a dead horse half in a cut of water red with its blood. I clutched the hamper to me and tried to cover my nose. It was a terrible place, this Cairo, right down there at the end of Illinois, at the end of the world.

People swarmed wherever you looked. Men mainly, of every age. Most were in uniform or parts of uniform. Some went about their business, but more of them were drunk—reeling drunk and fighting drunk and sleeping it off with their boots in the ditches and their heads cradled in filth.

“They train on the parade grounds all morning,” the doctor said, “but nobody can decide what to do with them the rest of the day. The able-bodied.”

The ruts turned us into another street where the houses were bigger. Dr. Hutchings drove up the lane of quite a fine place, finer than any in Grand Tower. He had a room here from a widow woman, a Mrs. Hanrahan. “She’s a Southern lady,” he said, “indeed, a Southern sympathizer, I gather.” This may have been for Delphine’s benefit. She’d seen nothing welcoming in this town so far.

Dr. Hutchings said Mrs. Hanrahan had a full house, but

there was a summer kitchen around back where we could sleep. She'd have her handyman set up beds for us out there by nightfall.

But what did I care where I slept? I was here to find my brother. I plagued Dr. Hutchings about him before he'd seen me down from the trap. He pulled on his beard when he told me about Noah. Yes, he was in one of the Thirty-first regimental hospitals. "He's over the worst," the doctor said, "with any luck."

And it wasn't measles. It was dysentery, according to the doctor who was too refined and scientific to say trots.

The summer kitchen was a little black-shuttered one-room shanty overgrown with brilliant sumac. An iron range stood inside, the first kitchen stove I ever set eyes on.

When we threw open the trunks, the doctor brightened at the sight of Calinda's cures, the horehound and lobelia and the jimsonweed painkiller. They seemed to be short of everything here. We folded what we could carry in a quilt, and I was ready to set off.

But Dr. Hutchings thought we ought to pin up our skirts because the campgrounds were a quagmire. He was a little shy of the female sex, for he looked away when he spoke of our skirts and the heels on Delphine's slippers. He stood out on the porch, examining the sumac, while we made these adjustments.

What a sight I'd have been. My brown-striped calico was hitched up to show my broken boots. But I wore my hat and veils, elegant because Delphine had seen to them.

There was a full bird on the wing, stuffed, about to take off from my hat brim. I know there was because of the picture we had taken later.

Delphine seemed to think I ought to drop to my knees and lace up her flat-heeled boots. I wouldn't because once you started waiting on her, there was no end to it. I came this close to telling her I wasn't her slave, but thought better of it. Batting at her veils, she managed to bend over and lace up her own boots with much sighing and grunting on account of her corsets.

Then we were ready with some afternoon left. Off we went through the terrible Cairo streets, making for Noah.

They'd pitched Camp Defiance out on the point where the Ohio River runs into the muddy Mississippi. The great earthworks that held back the rivers were the fortress walls. Cannons bristled on top. Some were trained across at Kentucky, some across at Missouri, rebel country both ways.

The front gate was only an opening in a rail stockade fence. The families of soldiers crowded around outside, waiting for them. But Dr. Hutchings had passes into the camp for us, though we were to be off the post before they fired the sunset gun.

It was a tent city inside, row on row of white tents, close as teeth. The first ones were raised over wooden floors. These were where the officers were quartered. And will I ever forget the first real sight there was to see?

A great cart wheel, six feet across, leaned against a

flagpole. Tied hand and foot to that wheel, spread-eagle, was a soldier boy—no older than Noah. He was burned by the sun, and his tongue lolled out of his mouth. Around his neck a sign hung on twine:

THIEF

He wasn't Noah, but he was somebody's son. I saw then I was going to have to be stronger than I was.

"Military justice is rough justice," Dr. Hutchings said, "or no justice at all." But he went on to say he'd end up in uniform, doctoring for the army. He had thought he'd do more good as a "contract surgeon," a civilian doctor, but he was finding out different.

The camp roads were worse than Cairo's. We were up to our hubs now. These were meaner tents back here, for the regular soldiers, pitched right in the mud against the seeping levee. The reek of cooking fires hung low over worse smells. We were pretty nearly mired now. Dr. Hutchings helped Delphine and me down on the only dry patch. He said he'd go see if Noah was up to coming out to us.

"But where is he?" Delphine demanded to know, gazing about for anything resembling a hospital.

"There are six regimental hospitals," Dr. Hutchings said. "Those three tents are one of them."

"We go there." Delphine hiked her shortened skirts.

"Oh no, Miss Duval." The doctor put out a hand to bar her way—never a good idea. "They're under quarantine."

Most of them are measles cases. Half the regiment has had—”

“Me, I am a Creole from New Orleans.” Delphine struck herself a blow. “If yellow fever can’t kill me, what can? And what does this girl care for measles?” She indicated me. “She want her brother.”

“But no women—ladies—are allowed in the hospital tents. It’s entirely for your own good. The men are in their underwear, and there are no blankets and . . .” Dr. Hutchings was getting right down to the end of his rope.

Delphine had drawn up to her almost five feet without the heeled slippers. She glanced back at me, and her veiled eyes sparked their dark fire. “This girl’s brother is in that tent. Is it so?”

Dr. Hutchings admitted it was.

“You are not an officer to command me. And me, I am not a soldier.” She pointed herself out with a gloved finger. “And if I was, I wouldn’t be soldiering on this side. Get the quilt,” she said to me.

The doctor was this close to wringing his hands. “Truly, Miss Pruitt,” he said as we bore down on the tent flap, “I can’t permit—” But it would have taken five or six men his size to keep us out. I wanted my brother.

Delphine, with the hamper on her arm, ducked inside and stopped dead. I walked up her heels, with the quilt bundled in both hands. The smell hit me, and nearly sent me sideways. Delphine swayed like a sapling. The doctor edged in beside, with some last-ditch notion of sparing us the worst.

I supposed it was a tent for four or five. There were ten in there, five on a side. In the middle a Sibley stove smoked and used up what air there was. Two or three boys were on cots. The rest were stretched right out on the ground in beds of stinking straw.

They lay there where they'd been sick. They sprawled in their messes because they were too weak to get to the privies, if there were privies. In the afternoon light slanting through canvas, they looked like old men. One sat at the end of his cot with a bucket and a dipper at his feet. He was badly wasted, and his cheeks were sunk to where he looked like a death's-head. "Tilly?" he said.

Noah. It was Noah. We couldn't faint nor flee now. We threw back our veils and made our way to him, sinking in the slime with every step. None of the prone figures marked our passage, though some were wide-eyed.

"Delphine?"

I wouldn't have known him in the street. But they were Noah's eyes, blue and keen. I saw he'd already decided to live, though he needed encouragement.

He pointed at the bundle I'd made of the quilt. His fingers were long and gaunt now. "You pieced that quilt, Tilly." And so I had, in my coarse stitches, using thread of whatever color I could find. The tears flooded his eyes and swam down all the hollows of his face. A boy's tears for home and what had been.

He tried to hide them from Delphine, but it didn't matter. Her temper flared up like sudden sunrise, and she

sputtered into French: "*Mon Dieu, c'est incroyable!* It is—how do you call this place? A sty. Who nurses these men?"

"I'm the nurse," Noah said. "Them that can get up off their pallets is the nurses. It's the army way. We can't get any other help in here for fear they'll catch the measles. I ought to have brung the boys water, but I ain't worked up the steam." He touched the empty pail with the toe of his boot. He wore his boots from home.

Dr. Hutchings hovered. Delphine was just about to hold him personally responsible for the entire war on all fronts. I grabbed up the pail and handed it over. I didn't know if a doctor would lower himself to tote water, but this one was glad enough to make himself scarce. Delphine and me both knew he had a good heart, and he was stretched thin. But he was a man, and men can't look after themselves, let alone one another.

"Could you eat something?" I asked Noah. I longed to take a cake of pine tar soap to his neck and ears, but first things first.

"I could eat real good," he said, "if I could get it and it was cooked through." We showed him the hamper. "Fried chicken?" he said in a thick and wondering voice.

"They was strutting around Cass's chicken yard this time yesterday, eatin' bugs," I told him, and watched him light into a leg. He was starved. The dysentery had wrung him out, but he was past that now and weak mostly from hunger. We had the biscuits too, and I fished a jar of preserves out of the quilt.

Delphine and me, we stood over him while he wept at the chicken and then gnawed it to white bone. Then he sobbed at the sight of the biscuit and put it away, both halves heaped with preserves. Oh, it done me good to see him feed.

But wedged beside him on the filthy cot I spied a book he'd been studying. It was Hardee's *Tactics*, a text about soldiering and great battles and how they were waged. My heart sank. Noah was too weak to heft a bucket of water, and still he was studying the arts of war, and yearning to let fly with grape and canister.

I marveled at the way men's minds are made and how they think, if you can call it thought at all. I saw plain that we'd get him on his feet only so he could go off and try his level best to get himself killed. I could have wept, but I thought I better save my tears for when I'd need them most.