

Chapter Thirteen

On the day Noah sailed away to fight the rebs for the river, we somehow got him to the photographer's shop. The picture stands on the table by my bed.

I remember the stench of the chemicals in the photographer's shop, though it smelled no worse than the rest of Cairo. We had to stand stock-still for an eternity to get the picture made. Then the glass plate with our image slipped out of the photographer's hand and exploded on the floor. Delphine took that as a bad omen, and of course we had it all to do over again.

There we are, trapped in time, Delphine and me on either side of Noah. I stare straight ahead from under the bird

on my hat like I'm resigned to being shot at sunrise. I'd thrown back my veils, but Delphine didn't. She looks through them, forever a woman of mystery, and not quite sixteen. Her hands hide in the muff where the last of our money was living. She wears her cut-coral necklace and two or three of her best paisley shawls. She's dressed to kill, as the saying went, though Noah really is.

He stands between us in his forage cap, proud in his big new uniform that he seems to be peering out of, not wearing. But his arms hang stiff at his sides, the cuffs to his knuckles, a soldier boy before the battle. There's something missing in his eyes, a vacancy, as if he couldn't wait and has gone on ahead.

In all the turmoil of that last day, we didn't find Dr. Hutchings in time, though it would have made a better picture with him in it. Then not half an hour later we met him in the street. Even as he touched the bill of his cap, I had to look twice to know him. He was in uniform now, with a captain's bars on his shoulders. He'd joined up in time to sail with Grant's forces.

It was November 6, and the command came through to cook a day's rations and prepare to embark. In the end, Colonel Logan could muster only a little over six hundred infantry, as so many boys were still down sick. But Noah was fit to fight. I'd seen to that.

The Thirty-first joined the other regiments marching under U. S. Grant, three thousand strong. They sailed that evening in a chill mist, and Delphine and I stood in the

throng down by the wharves to see them off. Dr. Hutchings had urged us to go home to Grand Tower, to put Cairo and Mrs. Hanrahan behind us.

But I couldn't go empty-handed, without Noah. It wasn't me Mama wanted.

The streets were already a churn of red mud when the three thousand tramped past us, some of them staggering drunk, and singing as they came:

*The Rebs have taken the best of me legs,
Bad luck to the chap that hit it,
If Uncle Sam gives me a cork for me stump,
I hope 'twill be one that will fit it.*

We searched those marchers, rank and file, for Noah. But he blended with all that blue, vanished already. Did I look for Dr. Hutchings? I don't remember now.

They set sail on four great transport ships. Noah's Thirty-first marched aboard the *Alex Scott*. Two wooden gunboats, the *Tyler* and the *Lexington*, followed after. That wide stretch where the two big rivers boil together was crowded with turning boats. We watched them away in the night, hearing voices over the water singing "Yankee Doodle."

We stood in the crowd of mothers and fathers, sisters and sweethearts, falling silent as the boats disappeared around that bend down by Wickliffe, Kentucky. The street lighting in Cairo was just about what you'd expect, but some of the men had fired torches to see the boys aboard the boats.

I looked at Delphine. The flames were dim, and she'd always been darker than I'd noticed. But in the flicker of torchlight, I read her face and saw her soul. She loved my brother. And she was mourning him already.

"Delphine, did you tell him who you are?"

"Perhaps I don't have to," she said, in a despairing voice.

Now I knew why she hadn't lifted a finger to nurse him in the hospital tent, why she was always turning away from him to the others. She'd hoped he'd be too sick to die.

It was famous, the Battle of Belmont, Missouri. It sparked the career of General U. S. Grant and led him in time to the White House as President. It was the first struggle for the Mississippi, that great highway flowing between my Grand Tower and Delphine's New Orleans. As in many a battle before it and since, both sides claimed victory. But no woman would have called it a victory.

People stood on the levees all day, hearing the thunder of the guns rolling up the river valley. In the afternoon, smoke drifted on the horizon as if a sizable place had been put to the torch.

On the next morning Delphine and me were on the wharf before daybreak, wound in our shawls against the damp morning as we watched for the returning boats. There came a flash of light as the first of them rounded the bend, then the others behind it. We heard music wavering over the water. It was a steam calliope, so one of the warships had once been a showboat. It was playing a funeral dirge,

“O Rest in the Lord.” The sound of a showboat calliope sending this grieving music on ahead hung ever after in my mind.

We pushed forward in the mob when the first gangplank came down. The able-bodied carried the wounded on litters. Now we saw sights we’d been spared in the hospital tent. Blood soaked through the stretchers from the stumps of legs until the gangplank ran with it. We heard the cries of the torn and saw a boy who’d been shot full in the face. But it wasn’t Noah because this boy’s matted hair was black.

No one had witnessed the fruits of war till now. Men in the crowd wept like children. Women shrieked and keened and fell on their knees. But we didn’t. We might miss Noah.

What would we have thought if we’d known then how many of the wounded had been left behind on sandbars? I didn’t dream they’d leave a dying soldier behind, so I didn’t add that to my fears.

The sun stood high in the sky when Dr. Hutchings came down out of a boat. He saw us, and we fought our way through the surge of people. He and I were thrust together, and before I could speak, he gripped my hands and said, “I’ve brought him back, Tilly. But you’ll have to work to keep him.” Tears stood in his eyes, and I saw he was tired to the point of falling down.

Behind him on a litter borne by two ragged, dirty soldiers was Noah. His face was scraped and powder-burned, and he was a mass of stained bandages. The boys on stretchers went into a big warehouse there by the wharf, and we

followed. They laid Noah on the floor in a growing row of the wounded. His eyes were open, but he didn't know Delphine or me. A strong smell came off him.

It was rum. "I had to get him drunk to take his arm," the doctor said. "It was nearly off." Then I saw Noah's left arm was gone. It was only a blunt wad of blood-soaked bandages, no longer than his elbow.

We hung over the feverish boy, and all I could think was that now he won't die in a field somewhere. If he dies now, he dies in our arms.

They were dying all around him, up and down the rows on the warehouse floor. And others had lost their limbs.

"Where is it?" I asked Dr. Hutchings. "I want it."

He looked blank.

"His arm. I want to take it home and bury it. I don't want it to end up in a heap of . . ."

"We were on the boat when I took it," he said. "I put it overboard. I gave it to the river."

And I was satisfied with that. I had to be. And he'd been gentle in his telling. "I gave them all to the river," he said.

They brought back three hundred wounded from the Battle of Belmont. There wasn't a place for Noah in the regimental hospitals. The army had no room for a soldier who couldn't be made whole to fight again. They let us have him.

We nursed him, Delphine and me, in the summer kitchen. Mrs. Hanrahan never come near us, but she had to

hear Noah screaming through the night in pain from the arm he didn't have.

We made a pallet on the floor, for he thrashed so, he'd have pitched out of bed. He was still on the battleground in his mind. We bathed him night and day in cold water straight from the pump to fight the fever, and still he didn't know us.

The doctor come in the evenings, dead tired from treating the others, half-asleep in the trap, letting the pony find us. He dressed Noah's stump and saw that the flap of skin that covered it was holding.

We couldn't get any food down him, but Doctor Hutchings devised a kind of milk punch laced with brandy that seemed to nourish him, and quiet him.

We sent no word home. I dared not tell them that we had Noah before I could promise him alive.

"Besides," Delphine said, "Calinda, she would not believe such a letter."

"Why ever not, if I wrote it?"

"To her, Noah is dead. She read it in the cards."

"Then she read them wrong," I said, clenching my chin like a fist.

"She read death in the cards," Delphine said as if I hadn't spoken. "She see the coffin come up the river."