

Chapter Fourteen

As Noah grew less fitful, Delphine and I spoke more. We sat in the evenings with our work and talked across the sleeping boy. I couldn't keep from asking her about her papa.

"Delphine, is it true? Does he have another whole family—a white family?"

"But of course," she said. "He has three strapping sons, golden-hair like himself. And two daughters who—how do you say it? Simper."

"Do you know them?"

"*Mais non, chère.* To them I do not exist. But they sit below us at the opera. They are in the first loge. We are in the second."

She'd already made me see her *maman* in my mind's eye. Now I saw how much brighter the diamonds blazed on her mother's darker throat. I saw these two families, their faces lit from the brilliant stage of the opera house that I supposed was like a great showboat gone aground.

Questions bubbled up in me. "Your mama has brought you up to be like herself," I said, "to find a white man to . . . protect you. But what about Calinda?"

Delphine's eyebrows rose in that way they had.

"Does your mama want Calinda to find a white man too?"

Delphine shrugged off that entire notion. "*Mais non*. Our *maman* see early that Calinda has the gift of prophecy and is born with ancient secrets. *Maman* see that Calinda can make her own way in the world."

Still, one question just led to another. "But what if you and Calinda had been boys? Sons instead of daughters?"

Her eyes grew huge. She was forever astonished that I didn't know something she'd never told me. "But we have a brother. Andre. He is sent to Paris, of course. *Papa* sent him to perfect his French, to be educated."

"What will he do when he comes back home?"

"Andre? He never will. He become a Frenchman where people do not ask questions."

I tried to see him in my mind, this sudden brother.

"But not all your young men go off to Paris, do they? Isn't there one you could marry? Really marry?"

Delphine looked away, uninterested. "Perhaps. But it is not what my *maman* want for me."

“But—”

“Ah, *chère*, it does not matter now. We are doom the day the Yankees take New Orleans. It was always, how to say it? A delicate balance.”

“But if the South wins—”

She put up a thimble to still me. “It will not. We lose the war. This year. Another year. I dream. I pretend, but it is in the cards. Calinda see it. Why deceive oneself? Her cards are never wrong.”

We spoke of Calinda, of course.

“When you first come, we thought Calinda was your slave, your servant anyhow. We reckoned you made her sleep on the floor.”

“Pffft,” said Delphine. “But we are sisters. We are born in the same bed. We sleep in the same bed. And she take up her full share of it too!”

But no, I misremember. She said that later, after the war. After Calinda had gone from our lives.

Into one of our murmuring, meandering conversations, Noah awoke one evening. He blinked up at us, and knew us. He knew too his arm was gone. I don’t know how because he could feel it right to the fingertips for years after. We swept down on him, our skirts collapsing on the floor. There came a moment of perfect happiness then, however much it had cost.

We hung there, waiting for his first words.

“I could eat something,” he said in a croaking voice, “if I could get it and it was cooked through.”

I laughed for pure joy until I wanted to cry. But when I looked deeper into Noah’s eyes, I seen the boy was gone, and so the perfect moment passed.

As quick as Dr. Hutchings said we could, we took Noah home. We packed our traps to leave Cairo forever. On the day we went, Mrs. Hanrahan sent down her handyman to take the crockery out of the summer kitchen and break every piece over the pump outside because Delphine had eaten and drunk from it.

We left that place. Lot’s wife may have looked back, but we didn’t. We had Noah strong enough to travel, and that’s what mattered. I changed the dressing on his arm, then—would you credit it?—he wanted to wear his uniform, bloodstained and mudstained, with the arm pinned up over emptiness.

Dr. Hutchings seen us off at the Cairo depot. When we parted, my hand lingered in his, just long enough to know it was where my hand belonged. But I saw no more of him for all the years until the war was over. He was good to write, from wherever they sent him. I kept the letters and read them over and over until I found myself marking time until their author come back to me.

We traveled in a chair car full of others like Noah, one-armed boys and one-legged boys who’d carved their own crutches. These were the ones who could afford the train

fare home. The others struggled and straggled along the sliding gravel of the railroad right-of-way outside the window.

After I settled Delphine and Noah together, I perched across from them with the hamper and her hatbox. We were going home now, and the locomotive wasn't pulling us fast enough to suit me.

Once, Noah reached across himself to touch Delphine's hand and said, "I won't be helpless."

I held my breath for her answer. So much seemed to depend on it. Then she turned those vast violet eyes on him and said, "What is an arm? You have another."

And so I suppose that began their courtship. How many, I wondered, began that way, in the wake of war? How many like Noah reached out with the only hands they had left to women who would help them heal?

We were getting north now, and the humpbacked hills had lost all their reds and yellows. Gaunt winter was on the way. At the Carbondale depot we collected Delphine's trunks and paid a man with our last money to take us home.

Noah felt every jolt in the road. We seemed to make no headway whatever, after the speed of the train. But one last rise and there it was—the great, gray river rolling past Tower Rock on the Missouri side. Down the last dip was the scatter of houses around the landing, and the house astride the Devil's Backbone, halfway up. The leaves were off the trees now, so we saw the smoke from our chimney.

The sight of it sent the blood hurrying through my veins. I'd been sent to bring my brother home, and here he

was. So that was the very last time when I was truly young, young in my heart. That breathless moment in the rattling backboard, almost safely home.

How empty Grand Tower seemed, after the boom of Cairo. There was emptiness to our house too, a vacant, staring look about the windows. But then the kitchen door flew open, and out plunged Cass, down the porch stairs, pounding to us before we could get the trunks down.

My arms were out to her. But it was the old Cass before Calinda—whey-faced and wan. Her dress ought to be tight on her, but she was lost in it. Her eyes were big and haunted in their former way.

She flung herself at me, and there up on the porch Calinda was standing. She wore a black tignon. Evening was coming now, and there was evening in her face.

"Mon Dieu," Delphine murmured, "what has happen?"

Cass had come out without her shawl. She trembled against me like a broken bird, then turned to Noah. Her eyes filled when she saw his pinned-up sleeve. She grabbed at her own arm because she'd known he'd lose his. She'd suffered its loss in her visions. She'd felt the doctor's cleaving knife through more nights than I knew, there on the windowsill.

She took his hand and mine in a somehow formal way. From the porch Calinda gestured Delphine to her. And so it was only the three of us, my brother, my sister, and me, walking now around the house, above the chicken yard. We were making for the woodshed, dreaded through the summers because of the snakes.

Cass threw open its sagging door. I staggered against Noah. Inside on two sawhorses was a coffin. A plain wood coffin nailed down.

A terrible howl began low in me. "Mama!"

"No!" Cass said. "Paw."

I couldn't think. Something lay on the coffin lid within the shadows of the shed. Noah went in there and brought it out—a gray forage cap and the buckle off a belt with some insignia on it, something military. I wouldn't have known what it meant.

But Noah could read it clear. "He was in Polk's army. He took up with the Secesh side. I fought against him and didn't know." There was wonder in Noah's voice, and this was the first time he'd spoken of the battle.

"We drove 'em back through the woods, past their camp. I'd lost my musket by then. It never would fire. When we fell to looting the camp, Grant made us torch the place to learn us not to steal. The smoke drew Polk's fire from across on the Kentucky side. That's when I lost this." He touched his sleeve.

All I could think was that they'd ship a dead man home, even a dead reb. But they'd let a one-armed boy find his own way.

I wouldn't mourn Paw. He'd learned us long before how to get by without him. And all he'd left behind himself was there in Noah's hand. It was fitting that Paw had ended up fighting on the other side. He'd never been on ours.

“They brought him back by boat,” Cass said. “They put the coffin ashore and sent word up from the landing.”

How dark the hollows under her eyes, like bruises. She looked deep at our brother. “Noah, Mama thought it was you, come home in the coffin. She thought it was you she’d lost.”

Cass seemed to shrink. There was fear of us in her eyes.

“Cass, where’s Mama now?” I said.

“Gone in the river.” Her voice was low and lost. “Before we could stop her.”

Gone in the river, when I’d been a daughter to her and done her bidding and brought my brother home.

He gathered us up in the arm he had left, and the three of us turned back to the house.