

Chapter Eight

Delphine, who didn't know she was a spy, spent feverish days planning for the night of the show. It was a great event, the last of the showboats before they were all turned into hospital ships for the soldiers, or gunboats. But, my, how she fussed, turning out her trunks for finery.

On an August day hot enough to pop the corn in their rows, we heard that the showboat had cleared Cape Girardeau and was making for us. Delphine napped that afternoon. "Beauty sleep," Mama remarked.

Calinda had said, "Me, I stay at 'ome." But Delphine wouldn't hear of it. *Mais non*, Calinda had to go because it was going to be a *gran de boubousse* and not to be missed. And

who knows, maybe Calinda wanted to go all along. With her you never knew. She put a pot of her gumbo 'zerbe at the back of the fire for our quick supper. We weren't hungry, but Noah had to eat.

When Delphine summoned Calinda upstairs, Cass went too. While they were up there, I pictured Cass and Calinda with a foot apiece in the small of Delphine's back, yanking on her corset strings.

Then by and by Mama and me looked up from our work to see a stranger in the hall door. A perfect stranger. I jumped. It was a young lady, slender as a willow wand, her hair puffed over her little shell-pink ears. She wore a sprigged dimity with a froth of lace at the throat. Her rosebud lips were a good deal pinker than her ears. Her dark-fringed eyes were cast modestly down. She looked up at us. It was Cass.

Mama dropped whatever was in her hands. My jaw was on the floor. "Cassy?" I said.

Wet-eyed, Mama whispered, "Girl, what have they did to you?" But she couldn't take her eyes off Cass. I couldn't either.

I wanted to make a run for her, but hugging had never worked. Now she was made of dainty china, too perfect to touch. But it was still Cass. She went shy after the first moment.

When I could look away from her, I saw in Mama something new, something of joy, even hope. Just a flicker. But she nudged me and said, "You better skin upstairs and see what they can do with you."

Heaven help me, I went up there. On the table that Delphine called her *secrétaire*, where she wrote letters to her *maman*, I saw a fearful sight. It was a blazing coal oil lamp. On the glass chimney rested a curling iron, heating up. Delphine and Calinda, in states of undress, turned on me.

“Oh no,” says I, “not the curling iron! You won’t get red-hot metal that close to my head.”

But they did. I was a lamb unto the slaughter as they worked me over, giving me curls fried like Delphine’s to frame my face. They jerked me into a dress of hers. I could wear it without corsets, so little figure did I have. It was a transformation that cost me dear. I felt frizzled and scalped at the end of it, and hobbled by petticoats.

They showed me beautiful tall tortoiseshell combs with glints of diamond in them. “I can’t wear them things,” I said. “My head ain’t big enough to carry them.”

“For your *maman*,” said Delphine.

In the distance a showboat’s whistle split the afternoon. “*Écoutez donc*,” she cried. “Hear that!” Her eyes flashed black fire because a steam calliope was playing “Annie Laurie.” The melody drifted over the water to us. We knew that song, parts of it, so we began to sing:

Her brow is like the snow-drift,
Her throat is like the swan,
Her face is the fair-est
That e’er the sun shone on.

We sang and danced around their room, Delphine and me, while Calinda looked on, almost smiling at us jumping over the clutter of this sudden ballroom floor.

It might be the last show we'd ever see, so they come from all over to see it. All Grand Tower was there, except for the preacher and Mrs. Breeze. They come from Makanda, and people rowed over from the Missouri side. We sat on the front row of skittery gold chairs. Noah Pruitt, hair slicked, in his paw's coat, sat by his womenfolk as the town had not seen us before, and never would again.

Mama hadn't unearthed the green silk from the death drawer, but she wore her otherwise best. And a black velvet ribbon that Calinda had tied around her neck. Deft hands had drawn Mama's hair out of its knot and dressed it high with the Spanish combs that struck sparks in the light. Behind us the room buzzed, and for once she didn't give a hoot what they might be saying.

I'd never been on a boat of any sort, so I didn't know what to expect. We sat in a great satin-lined, tufted candy box, glowing like high noon under the chattering chandeliers. It was exactly what I hoped the world would be—this bright, with gold dust in the air, and throbbing with music.

The Melodiers were on the stage, playing their fiddles and drums and horns. They played the audience in with songs they'd gathered from all the rivers they'd traveled: "Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming" and "Oh! Susanna" and "Drowned Maiden's Hair" and "Old Dan Tucker."

A drama came next, a play, and I'd never seen one. We were promised it had never been given before and was written in the light of recent events.

Abe Lincoln strode onto the stage.

The audience gasped. But it wasn't the real Abe Lincoln. It was a tall galoot with side-whiskers like his. In the play he wasn't exactly the President of the United States. He was the father of two daughters, though in real life, as we all knew, he only had sons. But they were such pretty girls, though painted up like Delphine. With the prettiest dresses.

As I'd never seen a play, it was hard to follow. But one of the sisters was dutiful. I understood that. The other one was headstrong and seemed not to have a brain in her head. It took me most of the play to decide that the dutiful daughter represented the Union and the other one who wouldn't listen was the Confederacy. So there was the Yankee daughter and her Secesh sister.

The play went on at some length with argument and weeping. But I can quote Abe Lincoln's last lines to this day:

*Go then, our rash sister!
Afar and aloof—
Run wild in the sunshine
Away from our roof,
But when your heart aches
And your feet have grown sore,
Remember the pathway
That leads to our door!*

The curtain dropped. The band struck up "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," and an American flag unfurled from the ceiling.

Applause rocked the boat, though Delphine beside me was disgusted by the whole thing. "*C'est incroyable*," she muttered, and more, all in French. She fiddled with her feather fan. Beside her Calinda stared into space with her hands in her lap, so I suppose Cass did the same.

That was the serious part of the program. When the curtain rose again, it was a minstrel show with a line of men in chairs. The orchestra was black men. But the minstrels were white men who'd rubbed burnt cork on their faces to look black. You could see the white skin behind their ears.

The man at one end was called Mr. Bones. The man at the other end was Mr. Tambo. And the man in the middle was the Interlocutor, whatever that might be. This was the comic part, and they swapped a lot of jokes I didn't get. But the crowd roared. And they sang comic songs, like,

*Mary had a little lamb.
With her it used to frolic.
It licked her cheek in play one day
And died of painter's colic.*

*Mary had a little lamb.
Her father killed it dead,
And now it goes to school with her
Between two hunks of bread.*

When they rung down the curtain, I don't know that Delphine liked that part any better than the drama. She fanned fitfully and plucked at her skirts. Because of the corsets, you could hear her breathing.

The next time the curtain went up, the stage was bare. The audience was invited to come up and dance. It reminded me that we'd had a dance in town on the night Delphine and Calinda had first come here. The orchestra struck up a lively tune, a cakewalk called "Little Alligator Bait."

People hung back. It wasn't our kind of dancing. It wasn't a square dance called by Mr. Chilly Attabury. But couples edged onto the stage. Then in this night of wonders, Noah was bowing over Delphine, putting out his hand for all our world to see. My land, he was handsome, though defiant around the eyes. Delphine pressed her feather fan against her bosom and cast great fringed eyes up at him. He was asking her to dance, and it was a waltz. She held back only a short while.

"Mama," I muttered, "does Noah know how to do that kind of dancing?"

"We're fixing to find out," she replied.

The stage was half full of couples waltzing, or trying to. But when Noah led Delphine onto the floor, all eyes were upon them. Her hoopskirts were wide enough to drive every other woman off the stage and overboard. Her shawl was filmy net, the evening being hot as day. Her black dress was cut low to show the curve of her plump shoulders. A bouquet of artificial cabbage roses bloomed on

her breast. When she reached high to plant her little mitted hand on Noah's shoulder, she engulfed him with her feather fan. And away they waltzed, her leading.

It was a sight to behold, and everybody beheld it. Behind us, the same women who'd resented Delphine's bonnets stood now to study the drape of her skirts. The men were all standing up too, bug-eyed. They saw the Confederate spy bewitching the local boy. And given half a chance, Noah would have shortened the ears of any man who called him on it.

Wonder followed wonder. A shadow fell o'er me, and there was Dr. William Hutchings, bowing. I'd never been near him. And he was old. He was twenty-five if he was a minute. He put out his hand. Delphine had hesitated prettily. I shrank. He looked to Mama. "Mrs. Pruitt, might I have the honor of a waltz with your daughter?"

Mama said he could have me, and he led me in a trance up on the stage. His coat was swallow-tailed, and the points of his high collar bit into his beard. "That's a mighty pretty dress you're wearing, Miss Pruitt," he remarked.

"Well, it's Delphine's," I explained, every curl aquiver, "and I don't know as I can waltz."

It was a right pretty dress, yellowish tussore with ribbons run through.

"If you find the waltz is beyond you," Dr. Hutchings said, "you need only climb onto my boots, and I will do the steps for us both."

This was so odd a notion that I forgot my fears and settled into the doctor's arms. I found I could waltz, if only for

that evening, though I clumped some in my winter shoes. But Dr. Hutchings was an expert dancer. Being along in years, he'd no doubt had much practice. We turned in the dazzle of light, and the petticoats rushed round my ankles. I was pretty nearly some other girl entirely.

But waltzing is work, especially in this climate. Even Delphine, who never minded the limelight, seemed ready to rest when we were returned to our chairs. She was flushed, though whether from the dance or the nearness of Noah her eyes didn't say.

Then everything changed.

One of the black men, the fiddler, crept to the edge of the stage and peered down at our row. He pointed his bow and called out, "Calinda!"

It silenced the room. Delphine, who sat between us, was motionless. Calinda stuck out her chin at the fiddler and then looked away.

"Danse, Calinda, bou-djoumb! Bou-djoumb!"

Calinda shrugged him off, and my heart thumped. It was as if something had come up the river to claim her. I didn't know whether to fear for her or not.

"Allons danser, Calinda," the man said, seeming to plead with her.

C'est pas tout le monde qui connaît

Danser les danses du vieux temps,

he sang.

Delphine murmured what he was singing, though she never looked my way:

*It is not everyone who knows
How to dance the old-time dances.*

The room held its breath when Calinda rose at last from her chair. She glided straight-backed to the steps and onto the stage, her face a grave mask. Her tignon was patterned in palm leaves. Her skirts were three layers of gauzy indienne, each a different color. Of course she was a dancer. Why hadn't I seen it the first time I ever laid eyes on her? She was a dancer in every step, every turn of her head.

The Melodiers struck up, and the strange, quick music tugged at her skirttails. Her beautiful hands came up to grab the air. She held back from the song, then plunged into it:

*Allons danse Calinda
Danser collés Calinda,
Allons danse Calinda,
Pour faire fâcher les vieilles femmes,*

the bandsmen sang.

Delphine, whose fan moved in time with the music now, chanted:

*Let's dance the Calinda,
Dance the Calinda close together,*

*Let's dance the Calinda
To make the old ladies mad.*

The music quickened, and Calinda writhed like a sack of serpents. But her face was sober as Noah's, and her eyes elsewhere. Them who'd stood up to watch Delphine stood on their chairs now, to see Calinda's thrashing skirts, her bare feet drumming the floorboards. There may have been some who covered their eyes at this wild and wanton dance, but they were behind me and I didn't see.

I thought I'd pass out from the surprise of it, and the music that took you by the throat. Mama was a statue beside me. The audience began to keep time by clapping. Delphine fanned faster and swayed in her seat, a mirror reflecting Calinda's every move. When Calinda's head began to revolve to the music, so did Delphine's. They were both being called back by the mysterious place where they'd begun. I seemed to smell all the scents that traveled in their trunks, the spice and sweetgrass, the coffee and damp.

At last overcome, Delphine sprang out of her chair. She rushed to the edge of the stage, where Calinda was throwing her skirts, awash in the music.

"*Danse, CoinCoin!*" Delphine cried out, not herself at all. "*Danse!*" she shrieked, pounding the stage with her fist.

It might have gone on till morning. The song had no beginning and no end. But Calinda had danced herself into a frenzy. Her face was wet, and I saw she was crying. I didn't know she could. She plunged down the steps and up

the aisle past the astonished crowd and away up the hill home.

Cass would have cut out after her, but Mama caught her. Delphine turned back blind from the edge of the stage. The black on her eyelashes ran in lines down her face. I saw then just how far from home she was.

The song shuddered to a stop, and the Melodiers carried their instruments off the stage. Delphine collapsed into her chair. She dropped her head on my shoulder for a moment while the muttering crowd filed out behind us.

"The fiddler knew her," I said.

"All New Orleans know her."

Delphine was recovering, reclaiming herself. "You have not live until you see her at the balls, on Wednesday nights, you know. Her and twenty or thirty like her, in the tignon, you see, and the skirts. You have not live until you see them dance the Calinda. It is a famous song, from the islands where . . ." She tapered off and closed a door in her mind.

"Her real name isn't Calinda?" I said into the silence. Mama and Cass and Noah listened.

"*Mais non, chère,*" Delphine said absently. "She is called that because no one dances to the song as well. No one like my CoinCoin. All New Orleans is there to regard the spectacle. Ev'ry man. She is CoinCoin, an ancient name, older than the islands, back, back before . . ."

Another door closed inside her. She shut her fan and said no more.

If life was a storybook, that would have been the night Noah left us for the war. From the showboat stage, his face aglow in the footlights, he'd as good as announced his love to Grand Tower. He had someone to leave behind him when he went.

But he stayed on till the eve of our sixteenth birthday in September. I hated the birthday we shared from that day forward. He went as the other boys did, in the night to spare us good-byes. "Like a thief in the night," Mama said, trying in vain for bitterness to keep her heart from breaking.

Her eyes lost their faint glint of hope and went dead. They only sparked again when I did my poor best to comfort her. Though we rarely touched, I put my hand on her arm then for however that might help. But she jerked herself away as if my touch had burned her. I had nothing she wanted. She wanted Noah.

But he was gone from us, and the time the showboat come was a bright dream I must have had before the world went dark.