

Chapter Nine

Noah was no hand to write, though better than I'd feared. But the days between his letters were long and shapeless. Then a scrawl of pencil stub on torn paper would come in a used envelope turned inside-out. Mama wouldn't touch it. But she couldn't do anything else until she heard me read it out to us all while she stared away at nothing, straining at the bit to see his face.

He'd joined the Thirty-first Illinois Infantry Regiment, organized after the awful defeat at Bull Run. He wrote a soldier's letters from up by Jacksonville, at Camp Dunlap. I squinted to find my brother between the lines. He was a little boastful at first for what he'd done, a little proud of not

having a bath since he'd left home. Pleased with himself for not getting the trots when half the camp was down sick. "Beans'll kill more of us than bullets," he wrote.

At this first hint of dysentery in the camp, Calinda went to work, pouring her blackberry cordial cure for the runs into every bottle she could find a cork for. It was like her to see the truth behind Noah's letters before the rest of us.

They issued them no weapons up at Camp Dunlap, and no uniforms either. Noah wrote to say the legs of his butter-nut jeans were growing beards. They were given rations of salt pork and dry beans to cook for themselves if they could, or eat raw. That and thirteen dollars a month was their pay.

It was an army that didn't know how to be an army, and it treated its soldiers like beasts of the field.

"Men and boys, lost in a pasture!" Delphine said, shrugging elaborately at the helplessness of the other sex, and maybe Yankees.

Even after the first frost, the boys were still living outdoors, no canvas to sleep under, no blankets between them and the ground. We didn't have blankets, but we bundled up our patchwork quilts. Then when we were wondering how to send them off, we heard the Thirty-first had been ordered down to Cairo, to Camp Defiance.

I'd have kept that news from Mama if I could. She'd come to terms with Noah soldiering up by Jacksonville, farther from the South than we were ourselves. But everybody said that our war, the war on the river, would be

waged from Cairo. In our ignorance we still couldn't believe they'd send boys unprepared into battle, though I suppose Cass knew better, in the way she knew things.

Two terrible weeks followed without a line from Noah. But we had word from Cairo. When Dr. Hutchings learned there weren't enough army doctors to go around, he shut up his Grand Tower office and went down there on his own.

The accounts he sent back were posted by the landing. All Grand Tower read them because the Thirty-first was an Egyptian regiment, made up of our boys.

Dr. Hutchings reported that half the Thirty-first were down with measles, and the other half were drunk. Cairo had shut its saloons and was anxious for battle to begin to get the soldiers off their streets and out of their gutters.

Delphine and I read the doctor's words and resolved to keep them from Mama. But somehow she knew.

It was October now with the days dwindling around us. I'd become a fitful sleeper, staring at the dark ceiling half the night, listening to Cass's soft snore from the trundle at my feet. The brittle leaves skating across our windows sounded too much like hands scratching to get in. I heard every little noise in the sighing house. No scuttle in the walls got past me.

Then one night I knew someone was down in the kitchen. I'd dreamed of Noah and somehow thought he'd found his way home. I'd dreamed his hand was knocking at the kitchen door. Some stirring from below brought me

around, and I came bolt awake. The floorboards were cold when I put a careful foot out of bed.

At the top of the stairs I saw no light from the kitchen. Still, somebody was there. I wished for Paw's fowling piece as I started down with nothing in my hands. I was quiet, but anything with ears could hear the popping of the stairs.

The only light came from the last embers on the hearth. A figure stood there by the kitchen table. In the first moment it was a haunt with long, tangled gray hair hiding its face. Hearing me, the ghost turned, and I saw who it was.

"Mama?" I hung there in the doorway.

I hadn't startled her. She seemed to think she'd sent for me, and maybe she had. She stood there in her old night-dress worn paper-thin, without a shawl. "Mama, you'll catch your death."

"I hope I do," she said. "I can't live like this. I want him back."

"Mama, we all want him back."

"He's bad sick, you know," she said. "He is. I know things. Where do you think Cass gets it? She gets it from me. I want him back. Go get him."

She rapped the table with her knuckles. I imagine now her eyes burned brighter than the embers, like something crouching out in the timber. I felt the heat of her eyes on my face.

"Did you hear me?" she said in a terrible whisper. "He's sick. My boy's sick. Go to him. Nurse him till he can travel. Then bring him back to me."

It wasn't Mama at all. The floor yawned at my feet.

"Are you deaf?" she said in a cold voice I'd never heard.

"Mama, if I could find him, they wouldn't let me have him. He's a soldier." My head throbbed. How could I reason with her? "If he got well, Mama, they'd send him into battle."

"Go get him," she said, hearing nothing. "Wait till daylight. Then get out. Don't come back without him."

I was crying like a lost child now. This wasn't the Mama I'd known. Who was this heartless stranger?

"Mama, I can't. I wouldn't know how. You and me'll go. We'll look for Noah together."

She laughed then, and I wish I could forget that laugh. "I see what you'd do. You'd lure me away from this house. And what if he's started home already? What if he come home and found me gone?"

She whipped around, quick, her hair flying, like she heard Noah's footfall on the porch. And I saw I'd lost her. She'd been whittled to madness by her fear.

She looked back at me, one last time. The merciful dark hid her face. "I waited for his paw to come home. I wore out with waiting, and what for? I won't wait for Noah. I ain't got that kind of time now. Don't come back without him. I can spare you. I can't spare him."

That blow sent me staggering. I'd have cut and run from her, but another figure stood behind me in the shadows of the hall, another ghostly figure. I was too numb for fear now. It was Calinda, tall as the door in the long pillar of her

nightdress. She was always to be Calinda to me. Her real name, her African name, CoinCoin, came from too far away. I wanted to throw myself into her arms. I needed to be in somebody's arms.

"Light a lamp," Calinda said. She'd heard it all, or enough. With a shaking hand I brought fire on a straw from the last ember to the lamp. Mama had slumped onto a chair. She was staring away from me, as if I should be gone already.

"This one, we take her up to her bed," Calinda said, and we did. We got Mama between us, and she even leaned on me, heavy up the stairs. But when we got her into bed, she turned her face to the wall.

Still, it wasn't daylight. We went back down to the kitchen, and Calinda made a pot of her powerful New Orleans coffee.

It didn't warm me. The cold of the floor climbed my legs. My heart was frozen. I reeled at how quick my life had come to an end. I couldn't go, and I couldn't stay.

I didn't doubt but that Noah was sick. He'd have the trots by now, the way they were eating. We'd heard about the pneumonia the boys had brought with them from the wet ground they'd slept on at Jacksonville. We knew about the measles, and there was typhoid talk. Dr. Hutchings had said Cairo was a pesthole.

But how could I go? I didn't know where the world was, nor how to get there.

Gray light streaked the window. Calinda sat across the

table from me, hung in shawls, warming her long hands on the mug. "Me, I stay at 'ome," she said a moment before I asked her to go with me. "I see to things here."

Calinda was such a miser with her words that you believed every one of them. Still, I had to say, "But they's sickness down there, and you know the cures." Did it dawn on me that I was asking her to help her enemies, if that's what our side was to her?

Her arms were folded now, and her face seemed darker in the brightening day. "I send the cures with you, you and Delphine."

Delphine? What earthly good would—

"If you go among men," Calinda said, "she come in handy. She is meant for men." And Calinda said no more.

We went to Cairo, Delphine and me, in the great journey of my life. We went to try and find Noah, if he was alive, and bring him back if we could. Delphine was fierce to go, though whether it was monotony that moved her or love for Noah, I was in no position to ask.

It took us some days to get ready. Cass and Calinda combed the timber for jimsonweed and bloodwort and all the cures we were to take with us. We emptied out our sick drawer, and gathered up all the lumps of our good homemade soap, and all the eats we could carry: pots of this and jars of that, wrapped in Noah's warm winter clothes, and all the quilts we could force into the trunks. Two trunks too heavy for us to shift on our own, a hamper, and a hatbox.

Delphine needed dress upon dress, her stays and chemises and everything else that went underneath. And cloaks and capes because November was nearly upon us, and a dozen pair of gloves. Her chlorine toothwash. Even her cut-coral necklace. On our last night at home, she re-trimmed two traveling hats for us, with close veils.

I supposed we'd wait for the next boat heading south. But Delphine wouldn't hear of it. Who knew when the next boat would stop? Besides, she'd had an unpleasant experience on a boat at Cairo. We'd go on the train. My mind flickered and went blank at the thought. I'd never seen a train nor the tracks it ran on. It meant rounding up Pegleg Snelson and his buckboard to carry us and our boxes over to Carbondale—miles and miles of bad road. It meant going in the middle of the night to get there in time to meet the train. It meant stepping off the Backbone into thin air for me, who'd never been out of the county.

We did a big baking that last afternoon, biscuits that would pack better than loaves. Cass wrung the necks off four big friers she knew by name. Birds flopped headless in the yard, then popped in the pan. We ate hearty ourselves, and Cass put aside all the drumsticks and gizzards, Noah's favorites. I couldn't meet her eye when she handed me the hamper. I dared not promise her Noah. But I see her yet in my mind, holding out her offering.

In all this frenzy, Calinda took the time to lay out her cards and give them a reading. She often did, but this evening when Cass peered over her shoulder to see the cards for

herself, Calinda sent her away. She pointed a long finger to the far side of the room, and Cass went.

After Calinda had studied the cards with special care, she scooped them up, and something passed between her and Delphine. Something just that quick, no more than a word or two in one of their languages.

I couldn't have slept. When I was ready to go with my hat on, I stood in the darkness at the door of Mama's room. She lay still as a dead woman in the bed, her head turned away. But the house was astir around her. She was awake. I stood there to let her know I was going because she could spare me.