

Orphan Journey Home

a Breakfast Serial's story

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CHAPTER TWO

Grandfather's Kentucky Rifle



June 15, 1828. West Bank of the Little Wabash River, Illinois.

THE STORY SO FAR: Eleven-year-old Jesse Damron and her family are moving back to Kentucky, but Moses, the Damron's oldest son, refuses to go with them.

Low voices wake me in the night. I sit up slow, trying not to jostle Louisa. How can a skinny six-year-old take up so much room? The cornhusks rustle in our pallet as I peer out the tiny window.

Is Moses back? The moon slips in and out of the clouds, so I can barely see two figures standing in the dooryard. I sigh with relief when I recognize my brother's voice. "Are you fixing to farm again?" Moses asks Papa.

"No," Papa says. "I'll go back to working with stone. Every town needs a mason. Or I'll work at the gristmill."

Moses edges close to Papa until he's right below me. "Maybe this wet bottomland does give the girls fever," he says. "But why can't we move to higher ground, where the farming's better?"

I hold my breath. Are we moving because of Louisa and me, and the terrible sickness Mama calls "fever and ague"?

"Moses, I'm not a farmer," Papa says. "And you've seen the young corn—only half our seed sprouted. What will we eat this fall?" His voice breaks. "Look at the little ones. They're pale and scrawny as fledglings, especially Solomon—you'd never guess he was four years old. Besides, your mama misses her family. And she wants you all to have an education." He sets a hand on my brother's shoulder. "Come on to bed. We have a big day tomorrow."

Moses turns away. I strain to hear his voice. "I talked to Mr. Flower, at the English Prairie settlement. He says the western prairie is bigger than the sea. Maybe I'll try my luck there." He leans toward the west, as if the prairie tugs at his shirt.

"Suit yourself," Papa says. "But you're likely to get bound out, traveling alone."

Bound out. Those words make me shiver. Mama has told us stories about orphan children who get snatched up like stray chickens. She says people treat bound-out children like slaves, and they can't get away until they're grown.

"I'm fourteen now," Moses says. He draws himself up.

Papa laughs gently. "You've grown tall, son, but you have a child's face and voice."

Moses ducks his head. Papa shouldn't have said that.

"I'm sorry." Papa's shoulders are slumped. "I don't want to go back to a slave state. Owning someone else is wrong. But your mama and I are too tired to start over in a new place." A cloud scuds across the moon, hiding their faces. "I can't stop you if you want to go west," Papa says, "but we need your horse for the trip, so you'll have to go on foot. As for your mama—I won't make excuses for you. Talk with her yourself."

When Papa comes inside, I wiggle back under the featherbed, breathing slow as if I'm asleep. I pinch myself to stay awake. After a while Papa starts to snore and Moses slips inside, leaving the door open. Moonlight washes over the table, where Mama's johnnycake sits waiting for breakfast. I watch through half-closed eyes. Moses snatches a piece of corn bread, bundles his clothes, and tiptoes to the pallet he shares with Solomon. He leans over him, touching his head.

My heart skips so fast my brother must hear it. Moses stands beside the open door a second, then reaches up over the frame and grabs Grandfather's Kentucky rifle. I almost scream. He can't take our gun!

Moses shoves the leather sack of gunpowder into his pocket, tucks the rifle under his arm, and leaves without a sound. I pull on my clothes, fingers shaking as I button my dress. When I slip out the door, the clearing is empty. Sadie the mule snuffles at me from inside the fence. The river hisses below the willows. Moses must be headed to English Prairie. I have to stop him. But which way did he go?

I pick up my skirts and run barefoot along the muddy track that leads north from our clearing. An owl hoots in the distance and something snorts from the tree overhead. Could it be a bear cub searching for its mama? I run even faster.

Not far from the cabin, I hear a strange sound like a puppy whimpering. I stop running, my breath coming ragged in my throat. Then I inch forward and hide behind a tall tree. Moses sits on a fallen log with Grandfather's rifle balanced on his knees. Its silver stock gleams in the moonlight. Moses holds his head in his hands—and he's crying!

"Moses!"

He clutches the gun as he jumps to his feet, but slumps back down when he sees me. He swipes at his tears. "You shouldn't be here alone," he warns me.

"You can't steal Grandfather's Kentucky rifle," I say. "That's the one he used in the war against the British. We'll starve without a gun!"

Moses bites his lip. "Jesse, I can't go back to Kentucky. Don't you see?" His eyes look dreamy. "The new life is out west, where there are so many buffalo you can walk across their backs. A river called the Mississippi flows all the way to the ocean. And miles of black soil with no stones or stumps to clear away." He grabs my hand. "Come with me, Jess. We'll have an adventure."

I twist my hands in my skirt. "We can't leave our family. And I don't want to be bound out."

"Then go on home." Moses turns his back on me.

I tug on his shirt, but Moses won't budge. If my brother disappears, our family will topple, like Mama's chair when it was missing a leg. What can I do?

(To be continued.)