

# Orphan Journey Home

## *a Breakfast Serials® story*

Written by Liza Ketchum ~ Illustrated by C. B. Mordan

### CHAPTER THREE



## A Scream in the Forest

June 15-16, 1828.

On the road to English Prairie, Illinois.

**THE STORY SO FAR:** *Jesse Damron has found her older brother, Moses, who ran away with their grandfather's rifle, but she can't persuade him to come back home.*

I almost leave Moses, but then I have an idea. "What about Grandma?" I ask. "What will she say if we don't come home together?"

"We don't even know if Grandma is alive," Moses says in a tight voice. "We haven't had a letter in six months."

"Don't talk about her that way!"

Before Moses can answer we hear a scream, more horrible than the time Mama found a rattler in the cabin. The hair prickles on the back of my neck, and my hands are clammy. "Someone's killing Mama!" I race toward home. Branches whip my face as the scream comes again.

"Jesse!" Moses grabs my dress from behind. "That's not Mama. It's a panther."

A panther? My legs tremble, like the time I had the ague. Papa told me about panthers, but I've never seen one. As big and fast as a wolf, he said. Even worse, they can climb trees. "It's near the cabin," I cry, "and we've got the rifle! Hurry!"

We run toward the clearing. Clouds hide the moon. We stumble and trip in the dark. Papa shouts our names, and the panther screams again. It sounds as if it's everywhere: in the trees above us, in the shadows beside the trail, right behind us. Moses grabs my hand and pulls me along. I scramble to keep up with his long strides.

I hear another scream, but this time it's the mule. My heart jumps and stutters against my chemise. "It's after Sadie," I whimper.

We burst out of the woods. "Papa, we're over here," Moses calls out, low and frightened. Shadowy moonlight lands on Papa, who stands in the doorway, gripping an ax. Mama holds up the lantern beside him. Louisa and Solomon peer out from behind her nightdress. "Stay back!" Papa warns.

We freeze at the edge of the clearing. The panther perches on the fence while Sadie circles the pasture. The panther's long tail twitches like a cat when it's about to pounce. But this cat is huge, and it wants our mule. I bite my lip to stay quiet.

Moses rams a ball and gunpowder into the barrel of the rifle and raises the gun to his shoulder. I stick my fingers in my ears. "Don't shoot!" Papa

yells. "You'll kill Sadie."

Too late. The panther shrieks, Moses pulls the trigger, and the gun kicks back, nearly knocking him down. I grab him from behind, my ears ringing.

When the smoke clears, the panther is gone. Sadie gallops from one side of the fence to the other, her hooves kicking at the split rails. Moses catches her halter, talks into her ear to calm her down, and strokes her legs. "She's all right," he says.

"See?" I tell him, keeping my voice low. "You have to come with us. Sadie won't obey anyone but you." Moses grumbles, but he pokes me in the ribs. I guess we must be going to Kentucky together.

Mama calls us inside. We fall asleep huddled on her pallet while Moses and Papa stand watch by the barn.

In the morning Papa shows us the trail of blood the panther left behind. He seems proud of Moses. "Your brother wounded that cat pretty bad," he says. "I've never seen one that big—must have been eleven feet from his nose to the tip of his tail."

Louisa's skinny hand slips into mine. "Will it come back in the daytime?" she asks.

Papa shakes his head. "Not likely. But stay close to the house while we pack up."

After breakfast everyone helps Papa load the wagon while Mama and I pack her herbs. "Can you climb on the table and hand them down?" Mama asks. "Reaching up there makes me dizzy."

I scramble onto the table and dance a little jig, rattling our tin cups. "Settle down, Jesse," Mama says, but she's laughing. The dusty herbs start me sneezing. "Boneset for a fever," Mama says. "And burdock, good for poison ivy." I try to pay attention, but I want to run outside. Mama packs the herbs in her medicine box and sits in her chair, rubbing her arms. "Goodness, Jesse. Isn't it chilly today?"

"No, ma'am." What a funny thing to say. The sun is so warm, Papa let the fire go out. But Mama shivers, so I find her soft wool shawl and drape it over her shoulders.

"I don't know why I'm so tired." Mama yawns and I stare. Her tongue is white, as if she'd dipped it in milk. I tiptoe outside.

All afternoon we stow our goods in the wagon. When Louisa starts to whine, I send her into the cabin. "Get your dolls," I tell her. "They'll be sad if we leave them behind."

Louise comes back with her favorite doll bundled against her chest. "Mama's sleeping," she says.

Papa frowns and closes up the barn. We follow him inside. There are no smells of supper cooking, and sure enough, Mama is sound asleep in her chair. Papa shakes her shoulder. "Rebecca," he says. "What's wrong?"

Her blue eyes open, round and surprised. "Why, look at me," she says. "Falling asleep when there's so much to do!" She stands up and peers outside. "Goodness—the day's gone by. How long have I been asleep?"

No one answers. "Good thing I planned a cold supper." Mama heaves herself up out of her chair.

Nettie bawls from the barn, and Papa gives me a sharp look. "It's late," he says. "Better get on with the milking."

I drag my feet as I fetch the bucket. I can't keep my eyes off Mama. Doesn't anyone else notice? As she lifts the knife to cut the cold johnnycake, her hands shake like dried leaves in the wind.

*(To be continued.)*