

Prologue

Chicago

April 1861

At the sound of the bell jingling over the door, Meg Townsend patted her blond hair to make sure it was in place and brushed a wrinkle out of her skirt. A raw spring wind blustered into the bookshop, and she watched her father enter, wondering what he had brought from the Hoffmans' bakery down the block. He hadn't mentioned her thirteenth birthday this morning—no one had—but she knew her mother hadn't baked a cake, and a pastry by Mrs. Hoffman would make a fine substitute. Surely it was meant to be a surprise.

But her father's hands were empty. He locked the door behind him.

Something was drastically wrong.

"Father?" Meg stepped out from between two towering bookshelves. Sylvie, her younger sister, remained curled up in an armchair by the hearth, her nose stuck in a fairy tale, unaware that their father had just closed the store early for the first time since he had established it here on the edge of Court House Square.

He did not turn his radiant smile upon her, did not call out for his birthday girl, or throw his arms wide for her to fill. Instead he removed his spectacles, wiped the rain-spotted lenses on the front of his vest, and pushed them back onto his nose. Stephen Townsend was a methodical man, every word and action driven by purpose. When he looked up, it was toward Meg's mother.

"Well, Ruth. It's done." He hung his bowler on the hat rack and ran a hand over his neatly trimmed mustache.

Mother leaned against the counter where the cash register was, covering her nose and mouth with a handkerchief. She was crying.

Meg knew, then, that her father had decided to leave.

“What is it?” Sylvie set her book aside at the sound of their mother’s sniffing. “What’s wrong?” She was only eleven and didn’t understand that some news shouldn’t be asked for. This news, yet unspoken, made Meg want to run.

Father pulled Mother into an embrace and said something low into her ear. Ignored, Sylvie yanked on Meg’s elbow, brown ringlets bouncing beside her face. “What’s happening?”

Meg’s voice bunched into a hard knot at the base of her throat. All she could do was shake her head and hold tightly to Sylvie’s hand. “The war,” she finally managed to whisper.

Sylvie frowned. “But that’s very far away. It’s not in Chicago. My teacher told us.”

Movement outside the window caught Meg’s eye. A gentleman and two ladies in bell-shaped gowns sauntered from the coffeeshop next door. When they neared Corner Books & More, one woman pointed at the sign that now read *Closed* while the man frowned and tried the door anyway. The woman in a ridiculous hat pushed her face close to the glass, peering inside.

“Let’s go upstairs.” Meg whisked from one window to another, closing the blinds. “Let’s go home. The customers will come back another time.”

“Yes.” Mother drew a shuddering breath. “That’s for the best. I’ll finish up down here later.” She led the way past books on American and Chicago history, past Austen, Bronte, and Dickens, to the back of the store, where a curling staircase took them to their second-floor apartment. Meg and Sylvie followed, and Father was last to climb, ever their gentle shepherd. The books downstairs were full of heroes, none of them like Stephen Townsend, and yet he was their hero all the same. He was a man of learning who could still wonder like a child at a sunset or spider’s web. He believed that the world held great beauty, but that it could be better still.

Upstairs, the Townsend family sat in the parlor, and Father's imminent announcement seemed to take up space in the room. The light falling through the large corner windows was a pale grey sufficient to see by, but too gloomy to bear. Meg turned the knob on a kerosene lamp. Outside, a robin perched on a branch studded with lime green buds.

A strand of blond hair the same color as Meg's fell from the knot at Mother's neck, and she didn't bother to fix it. How small she looked as she sat on the settee beside Father. But how courageous, for she did not plead for him to stay.

Neither would Meg. She pulled Sylvie into the armchair that was large enough for them both, and laid a quieting hand on her sister's swinging legs. The shrill cry of newsies from across the street in Court House Square grated on her ears. *New Reports from the Firing at Fort Sumter! Lincoln Calls Troops, Prepares for War!* It was jarring to hear such headlines from the voices of little boys half her age.

"President Lincoln has asked for more men, and I cannot find it within myself to refuse him," Father began, holding up a hand when Sylvie opened her mouth to interrupt. "The country is divided, and it should not be. A house divided cannot stand. Once we win the war, the nation will be whole again, and with a Union victory, it's very likely that all those slaves in the South will be freed."

Meg squeezed Sylvie's hand and gazed out the window. The U.S. flag snapped in the wind atop the courthouse cupola. Above it floated clouds from the direction of the lake. Only a handful of blocks separated them from Lake Michigan, whose cool winds could refresh even the warmest summer day. The steamy, sun-drenched South seemed very far away. Were it not for escaped slaves who made their way here, she would think that part of the country as far away as the moon, and as foreign. Chicago had more Germans and Irish than Negroes by far, but she'd

heard that in some places in the South, white-skinned folks were outnumbered by the people they claimed to own.

“Do you know how many souls are in bondage, daughters?” Father asked.

Sylvie crossed her ankles and uncrossed them, kicking Meg in the shin by accident.

“Too many,” Meg said. “Too many to count.”

Mother bit her bottom lip but nodded.

“And too many for me to ignore. You understand why I must go. I must do more than just sell books by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. It’s a chance to effect change for the people I claim to care about.”

“But you also care about *us*,” Sylvie inserted. “Why would you leave us to help strangers?”

“Sylvie.” Mother might have meant to scold, but it came out weak and whispery. “The slaves have suffered more than we can possibly imagine.”

“You feel a moral calling,” Meg offered above the sound of Sylvie’s whimpering, “to help those who can’t help themselves. A moral responsibility.”

“Yes.” A measured smile lit his face. He was proud she understood, Meg guessed.

So was she.

She didn’t feel twelve anymore, or even thirteen, though she was only hours into her next year and no one else seemed to notice. She felt older, like she was growing up by talking like this about war and duty and not falling to pieces. If he offered her a cup of coffee right now, as he did in jest every morning, she might take it at last. Black, no sugar, for this was not a time to sweeten what was bitter.

“Then you must do your duty, and we’ll do ours by sending you off,” she said.

“But—” Sylvie wiped her face with a fist. “Do you know how to fight?”

He was tall, but not brawny like the city’s dockworkers and lumbermen. Days spent indoors with books and ideas kept his skin just a shade darker than their mother’s complexion. The conflicts in the Townsends’ lives were all neatly contained between two covers and resolved by the last page.

Chuckling, Father put his arm around Mother’s shoulders. “I’ll train at Camp Douglas first. Even booksellers can be taught to march and fire a gun. I’ve had thirty-five good and peaceful years on this earth. It’s time for me to stop reading about principles and take a stand for them. It’s time for me to set an example for the young men we know.” His eyes sparkled as he said this, and his voice took on the quality of a preacher on Sunday.

Meg felt too restless to sit. Leaving Sylvie in the armchair, she slipped into the kitchen and brought back a tin of butter cookies to set on the tea table. Pacing the room, she broke off a piece of a cookie and let it dissolve on her tongue while she pondered. In truth, he would not be the father she adored if he did not do his part in the war. It was a difficult thing to acknowledge, for it meant she would not dissuade him, nor try. Swallowing, she turned to him. “We’ll miss you.”

Tears fell in silver streams down Mother’s cheeks. She said little, except for Sylvie to be still and strong. “It will be all right,” Mother whispered, but that was just hope, not knowledge.

“We’ll write to each other, and the time will pass quickly,” Father said. “Meanwhile, you’ll carry on as usual. Mind your studies, help your mother, comfort your sister. Paint. You’re getting better at it all the time. Hiram will keep an eye on you and make sure you have everything you need while I’m gone.” Hiram Sloane wasn’t related to the Townsends, but he’d proven to be such a good friend that the childless widower felt like family.

“Is this war like the one we fought for our independence?” Sylvie asked. Apparently she’d learned enough about the American Revolution to be worried.

Father patted his knee, and Sylvie launched from the chair to climb onto his lap. “That was a very long war, love, and this one, they say, will be quick. But this war is similar to that one in the sense that we are fighting for the very existence of our country.” He reached for a cookie and gave it to her while taking one for himself. Meg wondered if he could taste anything, or if the treat had lost all flavor for him, as it had for her.

She drifted toward the whatnot in the corner of the parlor. Seashells from grandparents in New York sat in neat rows on the top shelf. Her great-great-grandfather had fought in the Revolution and hadn’t survived.

“You could get hurt,” she whispered, thinking of both injury and disease.

“I could.”

“Or worse.” What she meant, of course, was that he could die. But saying it aloud, especially before Mother and Sylvie, seemed callous of their feelings, let alone Father’s.

He didn’t flinch. “I won’t say that I’ll be spared that fate, for such a promise isn’t in my power to keep. All we can do is trust the Lord, whose eye is on the sparrow.”

Meg stared at him, unmoving. Sparrows died all the time. The Lord watched them, and they died.

Gently handing Sylvie to Mother, Father went to Meg and wrapped his long arms around her. “What I will promise is that I’ll do everything I can to serve with honor and then come home. I promise I’ll never stop being your Father.” His hand cupped the back of her head, and she leaned into him. He smelled of coffee laced with cream, and of the peppermints he kept in his pocket. “I want you to promise me something too.”

She stepped back to study his grey eyes and caught a glimpse of herself in the reflection on his glasses.

“Meg.” He smiled, his mustache bending up at the ends. “I can see you are already considering what an ugly thing war can be. Promise me you won’t stop looking for what is beautiful and lovely in this world. Keep searching for it, and you’ll find it. Once you do, study it. Paint it. Cherish it. And please,” he added, lowering his voice so it was for her ears alone, “help Sylvie and your mother see it too? They are prone to discouragement, both of them. I rely upon you to hold them up when they slip.”

Meg nodded. “Of course. I’ll hold all of you up, in any way I can. I’ll write to you and pray for you.”

Winking, he held her chin with the crook of his finger. “I’m counting on it.”

She wouldn’t let him down. She wouldn’t let any of them down. She was so much older now than she had been that morning, she marveled that her dress still fit.