

# Orphan Journey Home

Story by  
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Illustrated by  
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## Chapter One: Papa's News

*a breakfast serials story*

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

"Jesse! Moses!" Mama calls from the cabin. "Finish your chores and come quick. Papa has a surprise."

Mama sounds excited. I look up from milking Nettie. "Moses, did you hear?"

Moses scowls at me, then forks hay into the feed boxes. "Nothing good," he says. A mosquito whines near my ear. I aim a stream of milk at the bug, but miss.

"Don't waste good milk," Moses says, and stomps out of the barn.

I sigh. Moses and Papa have been acting strange lately.

Yesterday morning, Papa dropped his hoe in the cornfield, went off in the wagon, and didn't come home until after dinner. And Moses keeps riding away on Pearl, his mare. He carries Papa's gun, but he comes back with no game and he won't tell me where he's been.

I lug the heavy bucket to the cabin, careful not to slop milk on my skirt. What is Papa's surprise? Maybe he bought us some pretty

calico from a riverboat trader. Mama could help me sew a new dress that doesn't bind my chest and pinch under my arms.

I stop, feeling the warm mud seep over my toes. I'm almost twelve, too old to go barefoot all the time. What if Papa bought me some shoes? But I don't dare dream about that.

When I come inside, there are no packages on the table. The pale boards are scrubbed clean. Mama sits at one end. Solomon scrambles into her wide lap and sits very still. Louisa perches on her stool clutching her dried-apple doll, its face as pale and puckered as her own. Papa's beard is wet, and his hair is brushed back as if it was Sunday.

"I'm not deaf." A forkful of hay tumbles from the loft and lands near Nettie's feed box. The cow flicks her tail against my face.

"Whoa, Nettie." I crook my elbow hard against her leg to keep her still. What could the surprise be?

My brother's black boot swings out over my head. His bare foot shows through the worn sole. "You have a hole in your boot," I say.

"You have a hole in your *head*, the way you snuggle up to that cow." Moses clunks down the ladder. "I'm glad milking is *girl's* work." He says "girl" as if he were chewing one of Mama's pickled turnips.

"Wonder what Papa wants to tell us?" I ask.



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Why is everyone so quiet? I glance around the cabin to see if I've missed something. Soup bubbles in the iron kettle over the fire. Mama's herbs are dusty, hanging from the rafters, and the little pool of sun near the open door makes the rest of the room seem gloomy.

"Set the milk down, Jesse," Papa says. "Moses, come sit with the family."

My brother shakes his head. He's leaning against the wall, his arms folded over his chest. His eyes are as dark as Papa's, but they don't have Papa's warm shine. "I know what you're going to say."

How can Moses be so rude? Papa just ignores him. He turns to me as I scoot in next to Louisa. "Jesse," Papa says. "I have good news. Can you guess?"

I bounce on my stool. "You went to Shawneetown and bought me some shoes?"

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Papa looks ashamed. "No, Jesse. I wish I could. But this is something you've wanted for a long time."

What could I want more than shoes? I glance at Mama. Her smile lights her round face like a harvest moon. My heart trips in my chest. "We're going home?" I whisper.

Papa nods. "Home to Kentucky?" I screech. "And Grandma?" I jump up, knocking over my stool, and dance a little jig, my bare feet thumping the dirt floor, then grab Mama and squeeze her so tight I knock Solomon off her lap.

"Hey!" My brother whines and plugs his mouth with his thumb.

"Jesse Damron! Calm yourself." But Mama's not really scolding me. She folds me into her soft arms and hugs me back.

"When?" I ask.

"Soon as the mud dries," Papa says.

"Then you won't leave until fall." Moses sounds like a know-it-all, and he looks like one, too. He ducks his head to fit under the doorframe and glares at Papa. "The trail from here to the Wabash is axle deep in mud."

Mama eases me to the side and peers up at Moses. "Son, what's eating you?"

Moses ignores her. He glares at Papa. "You promised," he says. "You said if the Damron family moved again, we'd head west, where the prairie goes on forever."

We hold our breath. "I know," Papa says. "I'm sorry." He looks down at his hands.

"Then you'll travel without me." Moses yanks on the latchstring. The door closes behind him, and the room turns as dark as the scowl that covered his face.

"William, stop him," Mama begs.

Solomon wraps his arms around Papa's leg. "Why did Moses leave?" he whispers.

"Don't worry," Papa tells us. "He's just feeling his oats, like our frisky calf in the barn. He'll come with us in the end."

I wonder. Pearl whinnies, and I hurry to open the door. Moses swings up onto the mare's bare back.

"Moses!" I cry. "Wait up!"

But he doesn't even flinch. Instead, he grabs the reins and kicks his heels against Pearl's belly. In an instant, my brother is gone.



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