



*July 3, 1855*

*Emmaus, Pennsylvania*

Jack's pulse raced as he followed his father into the post office on a hot Tuesday morning. They walked over to the booth that held the telegraph station, where Pa worked ten hours a day, five days a week. His supervisor, Mr. Bane, sat behind the grille looking harried and worn out, with dark smudges beneath his watery gray eyes.

"Morning, Mr. Bane," Pa said.

"Miller. You have no idea how glad I am to see you."

"Busy night?"

"More so than usual. Tomorrow's Independence Day, you know, and there's been some holdup on getting the fireworks in hand. Even the mayor's involved. I think it's straightened out now, and we'll have our display on time, but ..." Bane shuddered. "If this receiver starts up, it's all yours."

"I wanted to ask you something," Pa said quickly, knowing he'd lose his audience in a flash. "I know we've been shorthanded since Douglas left."

"You wouldn't see me sitting up all night here if we had a

replacement,” Bane said sourly. “But I might have a lead on a new fellow.” He glanced hopefully up at Charles. “I don’t suppose you’d take off early, say three o’clock, and come back at midnight?”

“Well ...” Pa glanced over his shoulder at Jack. “Maybe. But there might be another solution.”

“I’m open to anything. Do you know someone?”

“My son, Jack, here—”

“He’s only a boy.”

“He’s sixteen, or nearly, and he’s very good at code. He could give you a demonstration.”

Bane frowned, looking him over. Jack tried to stand as tall as possible, his shoulders straight, with a neutral expression on his face. How he’d love to get a job and be able to help Ma and Pa.

Raising eight children took money, no two ways about it. And they’d taken Jack in when he had no one. It pained him to think the other children would have more if he wasn’t there, to the point where he often refused seconds at mealtime.

“I don’t know.”

At Bane’s doubtful tone, Pa said hastily, “He’s almost as good as me, Mr. Bane. I wouldn’t stretch the truth on that. Give the boy a chance.”

“Well ... we couldn’t let him work alone here.”

“Let me keep him with me today and tomorrow. You can go home and rest. Come in later today, or tomorrow morning, and see him in action.”

Bane rose and walked stiffly to a cupboard on the far wall of the little office. He lifted a metal item and brought it to the window. Jack recognized it as a telegraph key, but it wasn’t attached to a receiver or the wires that went through the wall.

“This is an old piece of equipment,” Bane said, looking at Jack. “We don’t use it anymore, but you can tap out a message on it.”

“Yes, sir,” Jack said.

Pa stepped aside, allowing Jack to move in close to the window.

“What do you want it to say, sir?” Jack asked.

Bane thought for a moment. “Send this: If you can send and receive accurately on the first try, you’ve got a job.”

Jack grinned and put his hand to the key, tapping out the code for each word swiftly but carefully. He ended the message with R BANE, EMMAUS PA.

He looked up at Mr. Bane. The supervisor lifted his chin slightly, looking down his nose at Jack with an enigmatic stare. After a moment he said, “All right, now tell me what message is coming in.”

Pa stood beside Jack with his eyes closed. Jack fancied he was praying the real telegraph—the one that was wired up and working—wouldn’t start clicking while this interview continued.

Mr. Bane placed his first two fingers on the key Jack had used and started depressing it in a distinctive pattern. Jack listened for perhaps fifteen seconds, until Bane stopped.

“You heard?” Mr. Bane said.

“When we are planning for posterity, we ought to remember that virtue is not hereditary.” Jack smiled. “Sent from yourself, sir, but I believe from Thomas Paine originally.”

Bane looked at Pa. “Well. Though virtue is not hereditary, it seems intelligence and keen wit are.”

Charles laughed. “You forget, Jack is not my natural son.”

“That’s right. I applaud you, Miller. You seem to have cultivated this lad’s sharp mind and a good deal of diligence. Keep him here today. Tomorrow I’ll stay when I come off duty and watch him take a real message or two. Meanwhile, fill him in on procedure, delivery, all that.”

“With pleasure.” Pa beamed at Jack.

As Mr. Bane emerged from the booth, the apparatus began to receive.

“That one’s all yours, Miller,” Bane nodded at Jack and headed for the door.

Jack edged into the small office and stood at Pa's elbow while he transcribed the incoming message. Jack didn't dare speak aloud while Pa concentrated. He couldn't help translating the code in his head.

At the final stop, Pa sighed and looked up at him. "You heard?"

"Yes. Mrs. Kane's mother died. She's to go at once."

Charles nodded soberly. "We get a lot of those. Can you keep from absorbing other people's woe, Jack?"

"I ... think so."

"Well, we need Benny Jackson to deliver it."

"I could deliver it, Pa."

"No, you'd be taking Benny's work from him. Besides, you need to stay here and learn the rest of the job, beyond just the code."

"Right."

That afternoon, Pa sent Jack home at three o'clock. "Days are long here, son, and you need to come with me tomorrow morning rested and ready to work."

When he reached home, he went straight to the kitchen, where Ma Miller was snapping green beans and tossing them into a large kettle.

Her eyes brightened when she saw him. "How did it go?"

"I'm hired."

"Thought so when you didn't come home all day. Congratulations, son."

Jack filched a piece of a green bean and popped it in his mouth.

"Thanks. I'm going in with Pa again tomorrow. He thinks I should be able to work on my own after that, but Mr. Bane will have to decide. Ma, I should be able to give you and Pa some toward my keep."

Her face melted, and he thought she might burst into tears. "Oh, Jack. There's no need for that. You're our son."

"I know. But I'm part of this family, and I eat my share. I want to help. With Elizabeth getting married ..."

"Oh, Jack." She waved a hand frantically for him to leave and lifted her apron to her face.

Jack tiptoed away. He was sorry he'd made her cry, but very pleased at the likelihood he would soon be able to contribute to the family's expenses.

He heard chatter and giggling from overhead, so he bounded up the stairs and paused in the open doorway to the girls' room. Caro and Ruthie were sitting on Caro's bed with another girl he didn't know. The other girl was wiggling her fingers at three-year-old Ruthie, in a threat of tickles to come. Ruthie shrieked with laughter.

Caro glanced his way. "Hey, Jack! You're home."

"Think so?" He enjoyed teasing Caroline mildly, and she was the only one of his sisters who took it well. "Who's this?" He nodded toward the visitor.

"Oh, that's Marilla. She's in Ned's class. Her mother said she could come help me watch Ruthie and keep her out of Ma's hair. I get to hem up my new skirt while they play."

"I see," Jack said.

"I'm teaching Marilla Morse Code."

Jack eyed the little girl, who must be about ten, with keener interest. "You like codes?"

She nodded with enthusiasm. "I want to be a telegraph operator when I grow up."

"Jack's going to be one," Caro said. "Aren't you, Jack?"

"Looks like it. Mr. Bane let me stay with Pa all day today, and I'm going in with him tomorrow. If Mr. Bane thinks I'm good enough, I've got a job."

Caro let out a whoop, and Ruthie mimicked it. Marilla just grinned at him.

"That's stupendous," Caro said.

"Yeah, all our practice paid off."

“You hear that, Marilla? You can do it too. All our games will help you gain an occupation.”

“Do you want to be an operator too?” Marilla asked.

“Maybe.” Caro considered that and shook her head. “I don’t think so. I think I want to be an author. But I’ll wait and see.”

“Well, don’t stop practicing, just in case,” Jack said. He didn’t want to lose his cryptography partner—although he might be too busy now to send pretend messages to his sister. He’d quit sending them to her doll a couple of years ago, when Caroline had placed Miss Juliet on a shelf, declaring she was too old to play with dolls anymore. But if Caro discovered selling poetry and novels was hard to do, she might fall back on her coding skills.

“Are you going to see the fireworks tomorrow night?” Caroline asked her guest.

Marilla’s face fell. “Mama says we can’t go into town.”

“Well, you should be able to see them from your front porch.”

“I hope so.” Marilla sounded sad. She probably just wished she could go with her friends.

“She and her ma are staying with Mrs. Clayton,” Caro explained to Jack. “Her ma and Mrs. Clayton are cousins.”

Jack nodded, wondering where Marilla’s pa was, but he didn’t ask. The little girl looked sad enough when she wasn’t laughing with Ruthie. He figured chances were good that her father was deceased, and he didn’t want to make her sadder. She looked downright jolly when she laughed.

“I’ll write you a message, Marilla, and you see if you can decode it.”

“All right.” She bounced a little on the bed, and Ruthie bounced twice as hard.

Jack determined to make his code message funny. He wanted to make Marilla laugh again.