



*June 20, 1849*

*Emmaus, Pennsylvania*

Jack knocked smartly on the door to the girls' bedroom.

"What?" came Caroline's voice.

He pushed open the door and saluted. "Afternoon, Miss Miller." He nodded toward her doll, which sat in a small wooden chair their father had crafted. "Miss Juliet."

"What do you want?"

"I have a telegram for Miss Juliet."

Caroline blinked at him. "My dolly got a telegram?"

"That's right." Jack held out a folded piece of paper.

Caroline took it and opened it. "No fair. It's in Morse."

"So."

"Telegraph people are supposed to change it into regular words before they deliver it."

Jack sighed. "I did it to help you practice code. You can read it."

Her lips waggled back and forth as she frowned over the message he'd penciled. Caroline was only seven, and she was still learning to read well, but she was quick. Jack had started

teaching her Morse Code soon after their father introduced him to it. Pa now made a good wage as a telegraph operator at a desk in the local post office.

The children saw it as somewhat of a game, but the older girls, Jenny and Elizabeth, had soon tired of it. Jack was eager to find a partner who would practice with him. Ned was too young, and the youngest boy, Silas, was barely toddling about.

“It doesn’t make sense,” his sister whined. A moment later, Caroline’s frown vanished in a flash, and she wriggled. “Meet at the swing?”

Jack grinned. “Told you!” He dashed down the stairs and through to the back door. In the back yard, a swing hung from a low branch on a big maple tree. Pushing Caro for a few minutes would be her reward for solving his message.

He didn’t have to wait long. Caroline came out the back door holding Miss Juliet tightly against her pinafore.

“You have to swing us,” she said.

“Of course.”

“For an hour.”

Jack wrinkled up his face. “That’s crazy. Ten minutes.”

“Fifteen.”

“Only if you write a message back to me.”

She pushed her lips into her signature pout. “I’ll think about it.”

“Well, climb aboard, and let me push you while you think.”

Soon Caroline and Miss Juliet were flying toward the sky. The little girl’s feet went higher than the clothesline, and she squealed in delight.

The ten minutes were nearly up, Jack judged, when he heard his name called. Ma Miller stood on the back stoop, watching them and holding a lard pail.

Jack grabbed the swing’s seat board and slowed Caroline to a halt.

“More,” she roared.

“No, I’ve got to take Pa his dinner pail.”

Caroline jumped down and flounced into the house.

Ma smiled wearily. "I don't suppose you'd take Ned with you?"

"Sure." Ned, at five, was quite a handful, and Jack tried to entertain him whenever he could. It grew tiresome, but he loved his brother. The Miller home was a pretty good place to have landed, and he tried to do his part with the little ones. Chasing them around tired their mother out worse than doing laundry for the growing family, especially in summer, between school terms.

Ned was in the kitchen, polishing off an apple Ma had no doubt given him to distract him.

"You go with Jack," she told the younger boy. "And stay with him, you hear me?"

The warning was not given without reason. Since he first began to walk, Ned loved to run and explore.

"I'll watch him, Ma." Jack took the lunch pail. "Come on, Ned. Let's go."

Jack walked briskly, but Ned ran loops, dashing ahead and circling back.

"Watch it," Jack yelled when a wagon came toward them down the street.

Ned darted back to his side, but as soon as the wagon passed, he was off again.

"Race you!"

They were within sight of the post office, so Jack let him go.

Pa was talking to a man when he stepped inside the post office, speaking through a metal grille where folks handed in their messages for him to send. Ned had slipped inside the cubicle and was cuddled against his father's knee, fiddling with Pa's pencil. Jack hung back and waited until the other man left.

"Got your lunch, Pa." He stepped forward and held out the bucket.

"Thanks. I hoped I'd get home this noon, but we've been busy."

Whenever he didn't show up for lunch, Ma packed his lard pail and either sent one of the children to deliver it or took it herself. Since Silas's birth just over a year ago, she depended more and more on Jack and the two older girls.

Pa laughed and chatted with them for a few minutes, until a customer came in to give him a message to transmit.

"Best take Ned home," he said to Jack.

The second they were out the door, Ned raced off toward home.

"Come back," Jack yelled. Several people looked at him, and his face grew hot. He began to run. There was no controlling Ned when he got bored.

Jack jogged along, keeping sight of Ned's gray shirt farther up the block. The rambunctious boy ran at full tilt—until he slammed into a man coming out of a shop. Jack could hear the man's protests clear down the street, and he quickened his pace. Ned had toppled into a water trough at the edge of the street and was now sitting up, spluttering.

"You're nothing but a rapsallion," the man ranted at Ned.

Jack arrived panting. "I'm sorry, sir. He's my brother. I'll take him home."

"I should hope so." The man turned and stalked away without so much as another glance at Ned, who was now sitting miserably in the water trough.

"I didn't mean to." His face scrunched up like a withered apple.

"Of course you didn't." Jack extended a hand to help him clamber out of the trough. "You never mean to. Yet somehow you always do."

Ned climbed out and stood still for once, with water pouring off him and dripping from his clothes.

"Ma won't be pleased," Jack noted.

"Maybe I can sneak in the back."

"No, if you don't go in with me, she'll want to know where you are. You've got to take your lumps, Ned."

Water continued to trickle down the younger boy's face, but Jack couldn't tell if it was from his dunking or tears.

He sighed and reached for Ned's hand. "Come on. If Ma's in the kitchen, you can duck into our room and get changed. Drop your wet things out the back window, and I'll throw them over the clothesline. But if Ma sees them, you've got to fess up."

"All right." Ned hung his head. His feet dragged the rest of the way home.

Ma sat at the kitchen table peeling potatoes when Jack reported to her.

"Pa says he'll try to be on time for supper, and thanks very much for the dinner pail."

"That's fine, Jack. Where's Ned?"

"He went in our room." Jack chatted a minute longer, then slipped out the back door. There were Ned's soaked trousers, shirt, drawers, and socks, lying in a heap under the window, his bedraggled shoes lay jumbled nearby. Jack hadn't thought about the shoes. He would have to oil them tonight if they didn't want their parents to find out.

He sighed and scooped up the soggy clothing, hoping someday Ned would learn to take care of himself.