

I N F E R N O

ONE

Papa was abandoning her.

Julia Stewart felt a lump in her throat as she looked around the Chicago and Alton Railroad Terminal. She had been at the train station before to meet people visiting St. Louis, but this would be her first trip away from home.

Even her visits with Uncle Albert and Aunt Emma and the cousins took place in St. Louis. Papa had never taken Julia to see them in Chicago.

Papa's job as a bank vice-president kept him busy, but Uncle Albert was a lawyer. Didn't that keep him busy too? So why did his family get to travel when Julia didn't?

She had begged to accompany Papa on his business trips, but he left her at home anyway. "I'll be spending all my time working," he would say, "and you'll be bored."

And he had never left the bank long enough to take a trip for pleasure.

Until now.

"Please take me with you." Julia tugged on her father's sleeve. "I've never been to Europe."

"You'll get there someday, Princess." Papa put his arm around her shoulder. "You've had me to yourself for ten years, but it isn't just the two of us any more. I need to spend some time alone with my new bride."

Julia wiped a tear from her eye. Mama had died when Julia was two, and she couldn't remember anything about her mother except gentle blue eyes and a sweet voice singing a lullaby. The words were fading fast from Julia's memory, and she would have forgotten her mother's face if she didn't see her parents' wedding picture every morning when she woke up.

Julia and Papa had been a twosome since Mama's death. They had never been apart for more than a week, even when he went away on business.

Then he met Claire, and now he would be gone for six months.

Papa squeezed Julia's shoulder before removing his arm. "I see the Carrolls over there. Stay here and watch the hatboxes and my satchel while Claire and I exchange greetings with them." He held his arm out to Julia's new stepmother, and they walked away together.

Grabbing her hoop skirt so it wouldn't fly up and show her legs, Julia sat down on a bench next to the hand luggage. How could she endure six months away from Papa?

Six months during which Julia had to stay with her snobbish cousin Fannie in Chicago. Fannie, who thought she knew everything. Fannie, who looked down on Julia.

Six months was an eternity.

Julia giggled, then quickly covered her mouth with her hand. She only giggled when she was nervous or afraid, but most people thought she was making fun of the situation or not taking it seriously. Even Papa didn't understand.

Still, it was better than crying.

If she couldn't go to Europe with Papa and Claire, why couldn't she stay in St. Louis with her best friend? Lucy had invited Julia to stay with her family, but Papa said no. Julia didn't think he liked Mr. Webster.

Now she had to leave both Papa and her beloved city.

Somebody had left a copy of the *St. Louis Dispatch* on the seat, and Julia glanced at the date. October 3, 1871. Yesterday. Maybe she should get today's newspaper to read on the train.

Papa had said not to leave the luggage, but she could wave a paperboy over. Looking around the terminal, she didn't see anyone with newspapers to sell. But she observed a little boy with his hand in a man's pocket. She was about to yell "police" when a tiny girl came and grabbed the boy's other hand.

The younger child was about the same age as the girls in Mrs. Marsh's Sunday school class. That was something else Julia would miss. Six months without helping Mrs. Marsh and telling stories to the five-year-olds who sat on Julia's lap or put their arms around her neck and leaned over her back.

But those girls were well fed. This boy and his sister, if that's what she was, were thin with hollow cheeks.

The boy shoved the wallet into his own pocket, and the victim continued walking as if he didn't realize his money was gone.

Julia didn't want to get the children in trouble, but she had to do something, so she jumped up, ran to the boy, and grabbed his arm. "Give that back," she hissed.

"What? I didn't do nothin'." His lip trembled.

"I saw you steal that man's wallet."

A tear rolled down his face. "I gotta take care of my sister. We ain't had nothin' to eat for two days."

"Give it back or I'll call the police."

“I don’t wanna go to jail.” Another tear followed the first. “Alice needs me.”

“You should have thought about that before you picked his pocket.” Julia sighed. “Tell him you saw the wallet fall on the ground. He may not believe you, but if nothing is missing, he can’t do anything to you.”

Julia watched the boy catch up to the man and give him the wallet. They were too far away to hear, but after the man checked the contents, he walked away.

The little girl was sniffing. “I’m hungry,” she told her brother when he returned.

“Ain’t got no food.” He sat down and put his head in his hands. “Can’t pay for none, neither.”

They really did look hungry. Julia frowned. Should she give them money for something to eat? But what if it was an act? Or what if they belonged to a den of thieves?

When Papa had friends and business associates over for dinner, Julia ate with them and listened to the conversation. A couple of weeks ago, one of the guests said that adults used orphans to steal and then took every cent the children got.

Julia had heard the same thing from Mr. Webster. He said it was worse in Chicago, where they had all those Irish immigrants. He had warned her to watch her belongings when she walked around the city.

That was another reason why going there was a bad idea.

Julia looked at the children again. She couldn’t let them starve.

“Wait here.” Julia walked over to the lunch counter and bought three roast beef sandwiches. She gave two to the children and kept the third. Then she headed back to the bench by the luggage.

Papa had gotten there first. His forehead was creased and his brows were drawn together. “Why did you leave the baggage unattended after I told you to watch it?” he demanded. “What if someone had stolen it?”

He looked at the sandwich in her hand. “You disobeyed me for food?”

“I was . . .” She glanced over at the boy, who was sitting on a nearby bench with his sister. Both were eating as if they were afraid someone would take their sandwiches away. What would happen to them if she told the truth?

“I was hungry.” Julia giggled.

Papa’s face darkened. “This is serious.”

“I . . .” Julia felt another giggle coming on, but the lump in her throat stopped it. “I know.”

“You like food too much, and now it’s making you irresponsible.” Papa took a deep breath. “I’m not going to tell your Aunt Emma what to do, but I hope she puts you on a diet. If you really want to make me happy, you’ll be as slender as your cousin by the time I return.”

Julia’s stepmother tugged on his arm. “Isaac, this isn’t the time.”

He opened his mouth as if to say something, but he closed it again as their train to Chicago was announced.

Following her father and stepmother out to the track, Julia wiped a tear from her eye. Papa would be leaving her soon.

But that wasn’t the only reason she wanted to cry.

He had never criticized her weight before.

What if he stopped loving her while they were apart?