

## **FROM THE ENLISTMENT: A FRANKIE BLAINE STORY**

*(Sixteen-year-old Frankie Blaine disguises herself as a boy and runs away from home to become a soldier with her beau Patrick at Camp Fair Oaks in Flemington New Jersey)*

Frankie's first view of the camp was the same sea of white canvas that she had seen when Patrick and Edgar had enlisted. A line of rectangular wall tents sat at the camp entrance. Behind them, conical-shaped Sibley tents were arranged in regular rows across what had been the county fairgrounds. Eli had told her that the enlisted men lived in the Sibleys and that the officers lived in wall tents.

Frankie contemplated the site for a few minutes. The encampment was enormous, almost like a town. Once she had joined the army, how would she ever find Patrick? No matter. She would. She was determined.

Looking around, Frankie spotted the tent into which Patrick and Edgar had gone to enlist. Squaring her shoulders, she marched over and entered its stuffy, dim interior.

Two blue-uniformed men were sitting behind a table. One of them motioned for her to come over.

Frankie did so.

"What're you doing here, son?"

Son! He thought she was a boy. So far, so good.

"I came to enlist," she said, deepening her voice as much as possible.

"Oh, you have, eh?"

"Yes. I want to be a soldier."

The men looked her over and snickered, which diminished her confidence.

"How old are you, boy?"

She defiantly lifted her chin. "Eighteen!"

The two erupted with laughter and nearly fell off their chairs.

The man who had spoken first recovered enough to say, "The hell you're eighteen. You're not over fourteen if you're a day."

"Fine. But that makes me old enough to be a bugler or a drummer, doesn't it?"

"It does, son, but I'm afraid you're too late. We're full up."

"Oh." Frankie's heart sank down to her feet. She hadn't anticipated this.

The second man said, "Look, you can walk around the camp all you want, but you gotta be outta here by sundown. Understand, boy?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Sucking in her tears, Frankie hurried away before either man could notice that she was about to cry.

Her plan to enlist had collapsed. She did not have an alternative scheme. She was in a strange place. And, worst of all, she had burned her bridges so that she couldn't go home. Miserable, Frankie raced down the camp's main thoroughfare and, upon finding a patch of woods at the camp's edge, sought solace there. Curling up at the base of a tree, she began to sob.

After a bit, her courage returned, and she stopped weeping. Frankie reminded herself that crying was useless because it solved nothing. So, she sat under the shelter of the trees until an idea occurred to her: she needed to find Patrick or Edgar. They would know what to do.

Picking herself up, Frankie wandered back into the camp and stood at the junction of the main street and the smaller, perpendicular road at its edge. The main street was lined with tents to the left and right and was a hive of activity. Soldiers were everywhere, walking and chatting and laughing and lounging around the Sibleys. In the distance, she could hear the sharp crack of firearms and voices cheering and shouting.

Suddenly Frankie was alerted by chanting voices to her left. Turning her head, she saw a squad marching down the perpendicular street. And it was bearing down on her. Quickly hopping back to avoid the line of soldiers, she nearly collided with an enormous tent, the sign in front of which said, "Mess."

She frowned. Mess? Had someone left a mess inside? Why would anyone advertise a sloppy tent?

Curious, she peeked through the flap. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she saw lines of tables and benches. Obviously, people were supposed to sit at the tables. *That's probably where the soldiers eat*, she decided, *but why call it a mess? Don't they clean up after they've eaten?*

Confused, she brought her head back out into the bright sunlight. Shading her eyes, she turned to her right and squinted down the perpendicular road. The marching soldiers were just making a sharp left turn and going down another street. Camp Fair Oaks ended several roads beyond it.

Outside the camp's boundaries a smaller encampment was clearly set apart. In that area, Frankie saw cauldrons suspended over fires and groups of two to four women scrubbing and rinsing clothing, addressing stains, ironing, and mending.

Frankie's eyes widened. They were doing laundry!

Heartened to find other females doing a familiar task at Camp Fair Oaks, she wandered toward them. As she drew near, she saw a large sign that read, "Suds Row. No soldiers permitted!"

Although she was dressed as a boy, Frankie obviously was not a soldier and so figured it would be all right if she entered the women's encampment.

Once she entered Suds Row, she found more signs identifying which group of laundresses served which Company. Frankie quickly located Company B's tents. Three women were working there: a pale brunette, a suntanned blond, and a dark-haired girl with cocoa-colored skin.

Upon Frankie's approach, the brunette sharply lifted her head and squinted hazel eyes at her. "What d'you want, boy?"

"Nothing. I... I came here to enlist, but they told me I was too young."

The response made the blond laugh. She was buxom, round, and jolly. "Too young, eh? Well, boy, you better skedaddle. We ain't got time to hear your tale of woe. We gotta finish our work before sundown."

The dark-haired girl, skin glistening with sweat, said, "Oh, shoot, Lily, that ain't no boy."

"Says you," Lily replied.

"Yeah, says me. Ain't my problem you can't tell a boy from a girl."

"Well, now, *that'd* be a first for Lily," the brunette smirked.

As a blush crept its way from her neck to her face, Frankie protested, "I *am* a boy. Really!"

The dark girl chuckled. "No, you ain't. You're way too pretty to be a boy. And you got little titties. Skinny boys don't have titties."

Embarrassed, Frankie crossed her arms over her chest. She hadn't thought her bosoms were all that obvious.

"So, girly, what're you doing dressed like a boy?" The brunette was squinting at her again.

"I don't know. I mean... what else am I to do? My beau enlisted and I wanted to come here to see him and... he's going to be leaving for the war... and... I don't know where he is... and girls aren't allowed to be soldiers... and..." A big tear suddenly slid down her cheek.

The brunette quickly got to her feet. "Oh, for goodness sake, don't cry." She came to Frankie's side and slipped an arm around her shoulder.

Frankie sniffed, pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket, and mopped her face.

"That's better. I'm Becky. What's your name?"

"Frances, but everyone calls me Frankie."

"Well, Frankie, welcome to Suds Row. We do the laundry for the regiment."

"And other things if they'd like," the blond added.

Becky glared at her. "Shut up, you. Ain't nobody's business what you get up to in your free time. Anyway, I got a suspicion Frankie here ain't no adventuress.\* Probably pure as the driven snow from the look of her." She nodded at the blond. "That's Lily. She's all right if you ignore her tongue and her manner." She pointed at the dark girl. "And that's Rosa. She's colored."

"Just in case you hadn't noticed." Rosa rolled her eyes. "White people... I declare..."

"Hey! Watch your tongue!"

"Why don't you watch yours?" With that, Rosa scooped sudsy water out of a tub and splashed it at Becky, splattering it all over the chief laundress' apron. "Ha-ha! Got ya!"

But instead of getting angry, Becky laughed. "Why, you little so-and-so!" She scooped a handful of suds from Lily's tub and rubbed them onto Rosa's head.

Rosa shrieked, fell off her stool, and lay chortling on the ground.

Pushing her disheveled hair away from her face, Becky chuckled. "God protect me! I'm in charge of this lot and they're driving me crazy already!" She turned to Frankie. "So, you say your beau's in this regiment?"

Frankie nodded.

"Fine. Plenty of girls come here to visit their fellas. Couldn't you have done that without all the dramatics?"

Frankie sighed. "I wanted to join up and fight beside him."

That caused all three women to laugh loudly.

Lily said, "Once your monthly came on everyone'd know you was a girl. Takes a wily woman to hide that. We got one or two lady soldiers in this camp. But they're good at hiding it."

Rosa squinted curiously at Frankie. "So, what're you gonna do now? You gonna go home?"

"No," Frankie replied, feeling miserable again. "I'll be in big trouble if I do."

"You really love your fella, huh?" Rosa said.

Frankie nodded.

"Look, I got an idea. What we're doing here is something for the war, isn't it? Laundry, I mean. These men ain't going nowhere without clean clothes. You could get a job with us, do something important, and see your beau all at the same time."

"Her?" Becky was skeptical.

"Sure. Why not? She's as good as anyone."

"Well, maybe it'd work." She turned to Frankie. "Lemme see your arms, girlie."

Frankie held out her arms.

Becky felt one and then the other and nodded. "You got muscle; I'll say that."

"Yeah," Rosa said. "I knew she could do this."

Becky considered the idea. "Well, we've only got three of us washing for Company B and we're allowed to hire four." She turned to Frankie again. "You can petition to join us if you want, but you'll have to pass muster and be fine with scrubbing your life away. You'll need to buy your own equipment, too. But you can share ours until you can afford to purchase what you need."

Frankie felt her heart begin to rise in hope.