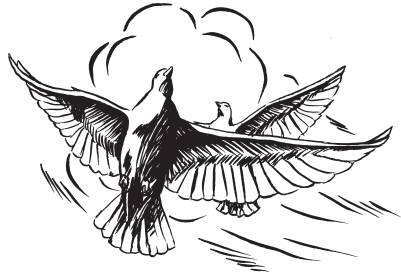


FLIGHT INTO SPRING

Also by Bianca Bradbury

Goodness and Mercy Jenkins

The Undergrounders



Flight
into
Spring

Bianca Bradbury

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Chapter One

“THIS IS THE longest war that ever was,” Sally Day Hammond said gloomily.

Her mother flashed her a warning look. The family had agreed not to discuss the war while Sally Day’s cousin Tillman was visiting. “It’s the longest winter that ever was, that’s true,” she said.

Her daughter had caught the warning and said with a smile, “Anyway it doesn’t seem so cold tonight, Mama. We’ve got a lovely supper inside us.”

They were all crowded around the kitchen stove, forming three circles. The two hounds were closest because they didn’t mind getting scorched. Eleven-year-old Willie, Sally Day’s sister, and nine-year-old Eugene huddled close to the dogs. Grownups formed the outer circle. Tillman Wyatt had the best chair because he was a soldier, home for a little while from the war. Mrs. Hammond was sewing in the soft yellow glow of the lamp. Her husband watched them all carefully and Sally Day knew he was afraid the children would ask their cousin about battles and fighting.

As for Sally Day, she was trying not to glance at Tillman, for when she did it was another soldier she saw. That one was just as tall, but dark instead of blond. He wore the blue

Union uniform instead of the nut brown of the Confederacy. Wherever Charles Horne was, this winter night of 1865, he carried Sally Day's heart with him.

War was in the very air the Hammond family breathed, for they lived in Chesapeake City, Maryland. The state was split right down the middle in its loyalties, and had been ever since the War Between the States began in 1861. Sally Day's own father was loyal to the Union and President Abraham Lincoln. Tillman Wyatt's branch of the family was just as loyal to the South. By rights Sally Day ought to hate this tall, handsome cousin. What if he and Charles Horne met in battle? They would be duty bound to try to kill each other.

Yet how could she hate Tillman? They had been friends since they were babies.

He stared into the stove's red glow. He still looked sick and exhausted, despite the good supper Mrs. Hammond had set before him. His blue eyes were haunted; some terrible memories were mirrored in them. How old did he look tonight, with deep lines spoiling his smooth, young face? At least thirty, Sally Day realized. Yet she knew for a fact he was only three years older than she, and Sally Day had turned sixteen not long before.

"Where did you get all that good food, Papa?" she asked, just to make conversation.

Her father seemed relieved that the long silence was broken. "I put over a real good deal today," he said. "A farmer from the back country came to the store to swap a side of bacon for a new spade. He didn't have any cash, of course. Nobody has any cash these days. I couldn't keep the store going if people didn't come in to barter.

"His wife was wearing a plain calico bonnet, and she kept

eyeing that green velvet one that's on the top shelf. I kind of guessed she had never owned a real fancy bonnet in her whole life. 'It's right pretty, isn't it, ma'am?' I said to her.

" 'It surely is,' she agreed. 'Would you take a pound of butter for it?'

" 'I'd take two pounds of butter and three dozen eggs,' I told her.

"Her husband figured that was too much, but I wasn't too anxious to let it go. I'd been thinking somebody in my own family would look right nice in that velvet bonnet. Still and all, I remembered that Tillman was staying for supper, and the rest of us were sick and tired of plain hoe cake. I let her have it for the butter and eggs."

"It was surely a wonderful supper," his wife agreed. "We'll have another tomorrow if Tillman can see his way clear to stay. Tillman, there's an old rooster pecking around the back porch, and I'll have your uncle kill it if you'll stay. What would you say to a boiled chicken dinner?"

It seemed as though Tillman had to come back a long, long distance before he answered. Then with his usual courtesy he said, "I thank you kindly, Aunt Sarah, and it's a fine offer, but I'll be on my way at dawn."

There was bitterness in his voice as he added, "My own town and my own state aren't very cordial to soldiers who don't wear blue and talk with a Yankee twang. I'd best not stay."

"You won't see your own mother, Tillman?"

"No, I don't dare go into Chesapeake City. I'd take it kindly if you'd let her know I'm alive and well."

"That we'll be happy to do," his aunt said gently.

"Aunt Sarah, would you allow Sally Day to walk with me now, just to the canal and along the towpath? The moon's bright as day. I won't keep her out long."

Sally Day was startled by her cousin's request to walk out with him, and her face must have showed it. "It's a cold night," her father said, guessing she didn't want to go.

"It's not too cold if I borrow Mama's cape with the hood," Sally Day said, and stood up. She had seen the pleading in Tillman's eyes.

"Tillman, you had best wear my coat," Mr. Hammond said, and took it down from the hook and put it around the young man's shoulders.

They were walking through the back garden when Tillman stopped short. "What did Uncle George have in mind?" he asked. "Did he want me to cover my uniform? Are you ashamed to be seen with me?"

"No," Sally Day told him, "Papa only wants you to be warm."

"Do the Yankees keep a guard on the canal?"

"We haven't seen any guards for a long time. Weeks, anyway. The war's—"

"The war's what?" Tillman demanded. "Finish what you started to say."

Maybe Sally Day was small, but she was spirited enough to stand up to any man. "The war's nearly over, that's what I was going to say."

"And we're beaten? Do you honestly believe that the South is beaten?"

"Yes, that's just what I do believe."

"It's not true," he said harshly. "That's only Yankee talk."

"Tillman, if you asked me to come outside so you could lecture me on politics, then we'll go back right now!"

He towered over her. The anger went out of him, and he touched her face with his finger. "You're all silvery from the moonlight," he said, "You're so tiny, Sally Day. And I'd for-

gotten that you look like a little madonna. How could I forget that when I've thought of you every single day I've been away?"

"Now, Tillman," she said with an uncertain laugh, "don't you sweet-talk me."

They started along the wooden duckwalk which Mr. Hammond had built to cross a marshy spot between the back garden and the canal. Their footsteps echoed and Sally Day shivered, hoping they wouldn't see the dark form of a Union sentry pacing along the canal. They reached the bank and to her relief she saw that the towpath was empty.

Tillman took her hand and they walked in silence. Finally he said, "Sally Day, I heard a queer rumor way down in Virginia. That's one reason I asked for a few days' furlough and came home. A friend in my company got a letter from home, and in it there was a mention you were promised to a soldier."

Sally Day's heart began to beat faster. Was she promised? Yes, she supposed she was.

Her cousin went on, "To a Yankee soldier."

"I met one I like, that is true," she said steadily, lifting her chin.

"You couldn't! That's not true."

"Yes, it is."

"Who is he?"

"His name is Charles Horne, and he's with the 18th Connecticut Volunteers."

"How did you meet him?"

"His regiment was sent to Maryland to guard the canal, and the town gave a supper for the men in one of the churches. Mama and I helped serve, and that's where I met him."

"Chesapeake City gave a supper for a bunch of Yankees?" Tillman demanded, disbelieving.

"Yes. Why not? Most of us here believe in the Union cause."

"You people don't know what they're like," Tillman burst out. "They're animals!"

Sally Day was so taken aback she stared at him, speechless. The moonlight deepened the shadows on his face and turned it into a fanatical, ugly mask. Was this the gentle, merry cousin she had known in better days, in the good days before the war?

Something in her own face recalled him from his black thoughts and he took her hand and cradled it gently in his own. "Don't look so frightened, cousin," he said more reasonably. "The last thing in the world I wanted to do tonight was to frighten you. But you've got to be warned. It's absolutely out of the question for you to like one of them. I know what I'm talking about; I fought them at Gettysburg, I fought them at Fredericksburg, I was at Antietam. I know what they're like. Sally Day, they're foreigners, they're savages!"

She pulled her hand away. "I think I ought to tell you that Charles has been in southern prison camps. Two years ago he was captured and taken to Libby Prison, and later on he was sent to Belle Isle. He was exchanged and sent home to Connecticut to get his health back. He stopped to visit us. He didn't talk to me about it but he told my father how horrible those prisons were. He watched his own brother die of starvation at Belle Isle."

Sally Day shivered in her mother's warm cloak. The night was so still they heard a fish jump in the black water below. She was about to ask her cousin to take her back to the