



# *Songbird*

## Chapter 1

May 28, 1943 - Ava's hands trembled as she gripped the wheel with one and turned the key with the other. The car roared, and so did her heart.

"Come on, Ava. Give her some gas and let out the clutch. James will be out here any second!" Carson, her older brother, shouted over the loud motor.

"I'm a' hurrying," Ava yelled back.

She scooted up as far as she could in the seat and pushed the gas pedal and let go of the clutch at the same time. The car jolted, threw them forward, and stopped.

"Slower on the clutch."

Ava inhaled and tried a second time. This time it worked, and they went whisking through the open field.

"Whew!" Carson watched the dirt fly up in the air all around them. "Take her to the right."

Ava turned the wheel sharply, the car whinnied to the side, and the two laughed at their endeavor. Her confidence was rising and so was their speed.

"Circle her up!"

One circle, two circles, three circles -- Ava obeyed. She couldn't believe she was actually behind the wheel of a car, much less driving. Her mother would find it scandalous, but she didn't care at the moment.

"Boy, what a ride!" Carson hung on for another lap.

Ava widened her circle and was about to give the vehicle yet more gas when the running and waving figure of her oldest brother, James, stopped her. Either the noise of their adventure or the missing key had given them away. Ava let go of the gas pedal, the car lurched to a stop, and they bounced back in the seat with unremorseful grins covering their faces.

“Out! Out! Out!” James hollered when he had reached them and flung open Ava’s door. “Ava, if it wasn’t your birthday, I’d tell mother on you, and Carson, I guess you’re off the hook too, but if I ever...”

Victoria Stilwell rotated the multi-layered cake, dripping with sugary chocolate icing, as she lit each of her daughter’s birthday candles.

“You better blow them all out before I beat you to it,” her father Sheffield said and leaned his puckered lips in toward the now seventeen glowing candles.

Carson mimicked his father and also leaned his sunburned face in toward the cake.

“I’ll get ya both if you blow this girl’s birthday candles out.” Victoria pushed away their faces with the palms of her hands. “Now, Ava, make a wish, and it better not be about any young men.”

Ava laughed, tilted her head, and smiled as if thinking of a wish her mother would not approve of.

“And, it better not be about driving any Fords, either,” James said and received a sly smile from his sister.

He owned the first car in their family, and he didn’t let anyone forget it.

“Enough nonsense. Let’s sing to Ava and let her blow out her candles.” Victoria quieted the family, placed a hand on Ava’s slender back, and began the birthday melody.

Ava’s luminous face hovered over the awaiting candles, and her lips parted in a radiant smile as she accepted her moment of grandeur. Her parents, her brothers, her new sister-in-law Estelle, and her grandpa, Chester Carson, serenaded her, but it was her grandpa’s bombastic voice that ended the song with a raspy howl. Ava pushed back her dark-brown hair and blew out the candles with three successive puffs. Everyone clapped, and Chester Carson gave his granddaughter a kiss on the cheek.

“Happy Birthday, little Annie.”

“Can’t you call her by her rightful name now that she’s a young lady?” Victoria sighed.

“I would if you wouldn’t have named her after that despicable aunt of yours.”

“Ava gets the first piece.” Victoria slapped away Carson’s reaching hand and set before Ava a large slice of chocolate cake.

Ava selected a sizeable bite with her fork and let it melt in her mouth, relishing the moistness and richness of the cake. Her mother made delicious pound cakes and chocolate pies throughout the year, but she would only make her celebrated chocolate cakes for family birthdays.

“Ava, Estelle and I have a little present for you.” James revealed a long, neatly wrapped package from underneath the table.

“We hope you like it,” Estelle said.

When Ava had slipped off the bow and opened the box, her gray eyes widened.

“It’s the Marian Martin dress pattern I saw in dad’s newspaper!” She held up a cream-colored dress with a fitted bodice, capped short sleeves, and full, knee-length skirt for everyone to see.

“We thought a working girl might need some new clothes to go to town in,” James explained, and Victoria sighed at the mention of her daughter working outside the home.

“You’ll look lovely in it, Ava. Your mother showed me the pattern and told me how much you liked it; so we ordered it, and I made it for you. It doesn’t have your mom’s expert handy work, but I think it turned out well, considering.” Estelle helped Ava hold the dress up to her 5’4” frame. “If it’s a little long, I can take up the hem.”

“Oh, it’s perfect, Estelle. I’m sure that I’ll look swanky walking around Anniston now.” Ava altered her voice to sound like a sultry radio actress and hugged her sister-in-law and then her brother.

James and Estelle married in early December and lived in a small house on an adjacent three-acre plot of land that Grandpa Chester had given them as a wedding present. As long as Ava could remember, though, Estelle had been a part of their family, and she loved her as much as her brothers.

When Ava finally returned the dress to its box, Carson dropped a smaller package wrapped in newspaper in her lap. She unwrapped the gift and found it to be a box of scented stationary.

“Thanks, Car,” she said without an embrace, holding the pages of stationary up to her nose.

“Yea,” he shrugged as he left the table and stretched out his long legs on the living room floor.

Her last gift was from her parents, her grandpa, and her grandparents Jack and Lavenia Stilwell in Birmingham. Her father handed her a square-shaped package, and Ava moved it from side to side and ran her fingers over it.

“Don’t guess at your presents like your brother. Open it,” Victoria said.

At her mother’s prodding, Ava unwrapped the package to find an ornate silver music box decorated with roses. She lifted the lid of the box, and an airy song that the engraving identified as *Midnight Serenade* met her ear. There was an inscription inside that read, “To Ava on your 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. Love, Mom, Dad, Grandpa, Grandma, and Granddaddy.”

“So, whatcha think?” her father asked.

“It’s beautiful. Where did you get it?”

“Your grandparents and I conspired to have it shipped from Birmingham.” Sheffield leaned over his daughter and turned the small handle protruding from the side of the box to make the music continue. “We know how you love music, and we wanted to give you something you would always remember us by.”

In response, Ava embraced her parents and grandpa.

Ava helped her mother and Estelle clean up cake crumbs, plates, and forks. The men were already seated around the radio listening to the “News from Europe” radio hour.

“With the recent surrender of German and Italian troops in North Africa, it is suspected that the war will move to a European arena now,” a clear, intuitive voice announced.

Estelle always got quiet when the war was mentioned, and Ava watched as she methodically wiped the table with a damp cloth. Her amber eyes looked beyond the table, however, and her pink cheeks paled in apprehension. She was terrified that her husband’s 3-A military classification due to his marriage status and defense work at the Ordnance Depot would be re-classified to 1-A at any moment and that she would lose the only man she had ever loved.

“Estelle, you’ll have to come to Wakefield’s and visit me. I could help you pick out a new hat,” Ava said.

“Of course I’ll come see you, and you can help me spend all of James’s money.”

They laughed, put up their dish clothes, and went to sit with the men. Estelle sat down next to her husband, and he wrapped his arm around her and began whispering nonsense in her ear.

Beside them was Sheffield, who sat listening to the radio with his long legs stretched out, his hands behind his graying dark head, and his sapphire eyes fastened on the ceiling.

“Welp, I think I’ll go lie down a bit,” Grandpa Chester said and disappeared.

No one answered; they were all accustomed to his evening ritual of sleeping off his full stomach.

Victoria emerged from the kitchen and stood with her back against the wall, wiping her hands on a cloth and only half listening to the war reports.

“I still don’t see how come we had to tramp off to Africa first. We could’ve just whooped them in Germany and been done with the whole mess.”

“I told you, blossom, the Allied forces aren’t strong enough for a European attack yet,” Sheffield explained.

“Well, they didn’t have a problem in Africa.”

“It’s a lucky thing for President Roosevelt that he doesn’t have you on his war committee.” Sheffield hid a grin from his wife.

“Umph” was her only response, and she looked over at her son Carson and told herself that he would never have to go to North Africa. James had already obtained military exemption for defense work, and she firmly believed and prayed that Carson would be exempted for farm work when he turned eighteen in September.

Carson was still lying on the floor, but now propped himself up on his elbows with a half-hidden look of excitement written on his face. Ava sat beside him, sharing his feelings about the war. She had heard him talking to his friends and wasn’t as sure as her parents that he would seek deferment from the draft. While the world

experienced peril, it was something new and exciting for them both, even in their small southern town of Jacksonville, Alabama. She now knew the names of countries she had never heard about in school, and she had an ineffable feeling emerging within her that her life was about to change. Her thoughts and the war news came to an end when the voice of Gene Autry filled the room.

“James, let’s go get Brother Whatley.” Sheffield stood up from his chair and nudged his son’s leg with his work boot. “The bus from Gadsden will be in soon, and he’ll need his rest before church and the revival singing tomorrow.”

“I guess I could beat you at checkers again,” Carson said to Ava when James and Sheffield left, and Estelle and Victoria went outside to sit on the porch swing.

“We’ll see about that.”

Her father and brother soon returned with Brother Whatley, and the redheaded preacher with risible green eyes and a freckled face stooped down and gave them both a small bag of assorted candies and a hearty hug.

“Hello, my favorite youngsters, and happy birthday, Ava.”

Ava saw her mother’s eyebrows arch up, and she knew that after the munificent pastor left, they would all hear about how their teeth were going to fall out from too much sugar.

The traveling preacher kicked off his shoes and made himself comfortable. Grandpa Chester reemerged from his nap, and they all sat up with the pastor talking, laughing, and singing every song her mother could think of to play on the piano. James and Estelle finally left, and Ava went to bed. Carson had to give up his bed for the preacher every Saturday night, and he had already found a pillow and was fast asleep on the floor.

It was a sticky Alabama evening, and Ava lay on top of her quilt fanning herself with a Brown’s Funeral Home courtesy fan. She gave up sleeping several minutes ago and alternated her attention between the storm that bellowed outside her window and the voices of her parents and Brother Whatley on the other side of the door. She was accustomed to them staying up discussing the Bible and singing into the early hours of the morning. So much for the pastor needing his rest before their own church service and the special revival and singing they were accompanying him to tomorrow. Her mother’s rich voice won her attention over the storm, and she listened to her speculate on the height of King David’s Goliath.

“They say people are taller now-a-days. So, any man over six foot tall might have been considered a giant in David’s time.” Victoria accented the word “giant” to express her opinion.

“He was a great deal taller than six foot, blossom,” Sheffield said. “I read in the *Jacksonville News* just the other day where some experts speculate that Goliath was probably over nine foot tall.”

“That’s impossible.”

After a momentary silence, Brother Whatley gave his authoritative word.

“It may not be impossible. Just like men lived to be hundreds of years old in the Old Testament, they also might have rivaled the bears in size back then.”

Ava could picture the pastor squinting his penny-sized eyes and pointing his finger in her parents’ faces to make his point. When she was younger, she was scared of his vindictive finger, but she had learned since to lower her eyes as if in prayer when she saw it coming her way.

“Regardless of how tall he actually was,” Brother Whatley continued. “He had to be a very large man to test and strengthen the faith of the stubborn Israelites.”

Just then a crack of lightning diverted Ava’s attention back to what was going on outside her window. It got her parents’ attention as well, and she heard her father shut the front door. She watched the branches of the oak tree next to her window sway back and forth with the angry wind.

Another flash of lightning brought Victoria to the door, and Ava saw her mother quietly enter the room. She tiptoed across the wooden floor and made sure that the window was closed tightly.

Ava believed her mother to be the most beautiful and strongest woman alive. She had an unblemished olive complexion and long black hair, which she always pinned up in the back. Both of these features were attributed to the Creek Indian side of her ancestry. The western features of her family softened her, however. As a Carson, she had pale blue eyes, an oval-shaped face, and a full, short figure.

She was the youngest of her parents’ six children, each named by Ava’s deceased grandmother after a royal member of the English or French court. Evie Belle wanted her children to be royalty, and in Ava’s mind, her mother was as grand as any true queen.

Ava also believed her parents’ love story to be the most romantic one she had ever heard, and she wondered if her mother was even prettier when her father fell in love with her. When her mother was her same age, a tall, affable young man from Birmingham, Alabama visited his aunt in Jacksonville and was smitten by the town beauty, who could play the piano and sing like an angel. Aware of Victoria’s two great passions, music and flowers, Sheffield James Stilwell charmed her with bouquets from his aunt’s garden and with his violin and smooth tenor voice. After four months of courting, he left his father’s prosperous grocery business in Birmingham, dropped out of Howard College, and married his young bride.

As Victoria left the room, Ava hoped she would be as beautiful in both person and spirit and as fortunate in love as her mother. With these thoughts, she finally fell asleep, despite the Alabama heat and the ongoing biblical debate on the other side of the door.

## Chapter 2

Ava sat between her mother and her cousin Rosemary in the back seat of James's Ford Tudor as her brother drove down dirt roads to Four Mile Baptist Church, where Brother Whatley would be preaching and her family would provide the music. Estelle and Brother Whatley shared the front seat with James. Rosemary's father, Jude Bonds, drove his farm truck behind them, and her mother, Myrtle, and her sister, Judith, rode along with him in the front seat while Sheffield and Carson shared the bed of the truck. Grandpa Chester stayed behind complaining of a stomach ache, but Ava knew he didn't want to listen to Brother Whatley preach the same sermon twice in one day. She looked back and could see Carson's long legs swinging over the side of the truck as it bumped along. Victoria had made the mistake of commending the pastor's morning sermon, and Brother Whatley was already blessing them with a second rendition.

The ground became more sloping as they drew closer to the foothills of the Choccolocco Mountains, and Ava looked ahead at the lofty pine trees and farms that spotted the horizon. Unable to listen to Brother Whatley any longer, she began a private conversation with her cousin in hopes the preacher wouldn't notice her muffled voice and that her mother wouldn't pinch her for being rude.

"Want to meet out in front of your house tomorrow morning?" Ava turned her head to Rosemary and whispered.

Beginning her new job and her new life was all she could think about, and she was ready for the day to be over and for tomorrow to arrive.

"Sure," Rosemary whispered back without turning her eyes from the preacher to discourage any further conversation.

Ava sighed and looked back out the window. She couldn't understand how her cousin wasn't as excited as she was about starting their new jobs. It wasn't easy to persuade both of their parents that they should work rather than help out on the farm during the summer months.

Rosemary was Ava's second cousin and best friend. Her father Jude was the son of Victoria's oldest sister, Marie Antoinette, and, because of the sixteen-year age difference between Marie Antoinette and Victoria, Victoria and Jude were more like siblings than Victoria and Marie Antoinette. Their children were also closer in age; Rosemary was only two months older than Ava.

The car turned and stopped at the outskirts of an open field by a narrow white church with an even narrower steeple. In the distance, they could see a large tent and

several long tables of covered dishes with a crowd of people surrounding them. Once they were out of the car, Rosemary pulled Ava back.

“I didn’t forget your birthday,” she said and reached inside her purse. “It’s not wrapped, but I reckoned it would make it more noticeable if it was.”

She pulled out a little black tube of red lipstick and put it in Ava’s hand.

“I never saw how a little paint didn’t improve a barn,” Ava lowered her voice and pointed her finger to mimic their beloved pastor’s response to her mother’s concern over young girls wearing make-up. They both laughed.

Even if her hair wasn’t brushed or she wasn’t wearing any other make-up, Ava always wore a deep shade of red lipstick. She felt naked without it, and in her mind, it somehow made her into the attractive, mature woman she longed to be.

“Come on, Ava! Hurry up, Rosemary!” Victoria and Myrtle shouted back to their daughters.

James and Estelle were already hand-in-hand at the tent area. Carson was carrying Judith on his shoulders some distance ahead of them, and Sheffield, Brother Whatley, and Jude were conversing with some of the Four Mile Baptist Church members.

When they were almost at the tent, a stout, blond young man began making his way to them.

“I didn’t know Jake Green went to this church,” Ava said, and her cousin’s tanned face turned as pink as her sundress. “I guess he knew he would find you here.”

Jake Green was two years older, the son of the town doctor, and the only boy around who Ava had ever thought was worth considering for a husband.

“I might have mentioned to him that we would be here,” Rosemary replied without looking at the approaching young man.

“Ava, I can’t wait to hear you sing,” Jake addressed Ava first.

“I hope I don’t disappoint you. Are you really leaving for the Navy in a week?”

“It looks that way. Hi, Rosemary,” he said, resting his green eyes on her.

“Hello, Jake.” She watched some kids playing chase in the distance instead of returning his gaze.

“Have they started eating yet?” Ava asked.

They were eating lunch later than normal, and she was famished.

“Not yet, they’re waiting for more people to arrive.”

“Ava!” Victoria called from underneath the tent, and Ava left Rosemary and Jake and joined her mother.

Carson and James took out their banjos and strummed the strings in preparation, and Victoria instructed them about the order of songs they would be singing.

“We’re going to start singing right after the blessing,” she said, now straightening the collar of Ava’s flowery summer dress.

“We don’t get to eat first?” Ava could smell fried chicken, and her hunger was growing.

Her mother started to answer, but hearing Brother Penny, another local pastor, instruct everyone to bow their heads for prayer, she only shook her head at her daughter. Ava closed her eyes and felt her pulse quicken. She was well experienced at singing before crowds, but she still got nervous right before a performance.

Brother Penny said “Amen,” and her family and cousin Jude began to assemble themselves at the front of the tent. Sheffield motioned for his sons to begin playing, and Ava began to sing.

“When I come to the river at ending of day, when the last winds of sorrow have blown,” she sang out by herself.

It was *I Won't Have to Cross Jordan Alone*, her mother's favorite song about heaven, and she was always careful not to get any of the words wrong. Just then a commotion occurred outside the tent. Mrs. Valencia Boozer was approaching the food tables with three young soldiers, and everyone was greeting them like rich relatives.

“There'll be somebody waiting to show me the way, and I won't have to cross Jordan alone,” she sang the words mechanically now, watching the older men and women make a place in the front of the picnic line for the strange men.

*They must be from Fort McClellan.* The first verse was over, and her family joined in on the chorus.

She remembered reading stories in the newspapers of street dances, driving tours, and special suppers for the soldiers, but she had only caught glimpses of the uniformed men on their family trip to Anniston in the late fall. Apparently, the city swarmed with them now as men from all across the country came to the fort for basic training before being shipped overseas. Her dad was right; the community did treat them like heroes.

She studied the backs of the three young men as they selected various southern dishes. The lanky soldier in the front of the line had copper hair and skin that glistened in the heat. The middle soldier had close-cropped auburn hair and was larger and taller than the first, but neither of them was as tall as Carson or her father. The last of the three soldiers was not much taller than she was and had a freshly shaved head that shone in the sunlight. Ava momentarily forgot the words to the song as she saw the first soldier in line turn his head and look at her and then motion for the soldier directly behind him to do the same. Knowing they were watching and listening to her made her cheeks flush to the color of her lips, and she quickly looked in the other direction. When the song neared its end, she dared to look at them again. They were eating their lunch on a blanket next to Valencia Boozer's family. She almost turned her eyes away when the lanky soldier grinned at her. The song ended, Ava looked at the dirt floor, and her father and cousin Jude began their next song.

“Who's the singer?” The lanky soldier paused between bites of fried okra and pointed at Ava with his fork.

“Her name is Ava Stilwell.” Valencia Boozer turned her head toward the tent and shielded her eyes from the sun. “Her family is the most musical family I have ever met. Everyone of them sings and plays some kind of instrument.”

“She sure can sing like a canary,” the short soldier said.

They all listened a little while longer as they ate, and the lanky soldier resumed the conversation.

“It would be nice to have her sing at the next U.S.O dance.”

“We could probably arrange that.” Their hostess smiled and shielded her eyes again to get a better look at Ava’s performance.

“What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and grief to bear.” Ava’s precocious voice began another song and deftly glided over the musical scale.

“She’s also a looker,” the lanky soldier said when their hostess left them for a piece of pecan pie.

“Not as beautiful as my Marg, but pretty.” The short soldier softened his voice at the mention of Marg.

“Oh, no woman could be as lovely as Marg.”

“So, what do you think of her?” The short soldier elbowed his silent friend sitting next to him.

“All you two think about is food and women.”

Mrs. Boozer returned with her husband, and the lanky soldier began conversing with them about the dishes he had never eaten before back in Kansas.

“I’ve never seen a bean this color.” He pushed a purple hull pea into his mouth.

“Me neither, but I sure wish Catholics ate like this,” the short soldier said.

The quiet soldier took a gulp of water and studied Ava’s confident character. Her shoulder-length hair was an enormity of dark-brown, wavy curls that leapt and fell about her oval face and petite shoulders when she sang. He could tell that she possessed a passionate and vivacious spirit by the way her voice escalated over the verses and by the brilliancy of her gray eyes. They were large for her face and were light-colored pools of emotion. As he looked into them with the rest of the picnickers, they conveyed that she was young, expectant, and believed in life, love, and God, all things that he himself had begun to question.

The song ended, and the audience clapped. Ava rejoined Rosemary, Jake, and Judith, who bounced up and down with her plate of food.

“That was some more beautiful singing,” Jake said.

“Do you want a biscuit, Cousin Ava?” Judith held up a buttery biscuit with her chubby fingers. She still hadn’t lost her baby fat, and she often reminded Ava of a plump cherub.

“Not right now.” Ava ran her fingers through Judith’s soft blond ringlets, and the little girl began to crumble up the rejected biscuit in her hands.

“Don’t play with your food, Judith,” Rosemary chided.

Ava winked at her younger cousin as Rosemary brushed the crumbs into the grass.

“Your hands are greasy now.” Rosemary looked around the blanket for something to wipe her sister’s hands on.

“I’ll get another napkin,” Jake said and hurried off.

“Did you see the soldiers from Fort McClellan with the Boozers?” Ava asked and dared to look in their direction now that Jake was gone.

The men had finished their meal, and Mr. and Mrs. Boozer introduced them to a group of churchmen in their Sunday’s best overalls.

“Yes, I saw them. Ernie Ingram told us that Mrs. Boozer is the new hospitality director of the Red Cross and is always feeding and entertaining them.”

“The one with the sandy hair smiled at me while I was singing.”

“Maybe, he likes more than your singing,” Rosemary said, and Jake reappeared with the much-needed napkin. “Thanks, Jake.”

She took the napkin from him and scrubbed Judith’s hands, which were now also covered in coconut cream.

“Are you not going to eat, Ava?”

“I’m not that hungry any more, but I guess I’ll get something.”

She made her way toward one of the food tables and selected small spoonfuls of string beans, squash, and black-eyed peas. Before she could finish filling her plate, she was taken aback to see Valencia Boozer coming straight toward her with the three men.

“Hi, Ava,” Mrs. Boozer called out.

Ava bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling as the round, older woman with tight brown curls approached with the soldiers behind her.

“These men would like to meet Jacksonville’s talented young singer.” She put a hand on Ava’s shoulder without giving her a chance to respond and turned toward them.

“Fellows, this is Miss Ava Stilwell.”

Ava stood up a little straighter and smiled as confidently as possible.

“It’s a pleasure to meet someone with such an angelic voice.” The lanky soldier put forth his hand, and Ava secured her plate in one hand and shook his hand with the other.

“It’s nice to meet you too.”

Phil Boozer approached them with a crying two-year-old.

“Goodness, what’s wrong with you?” Mrs. Boozer took her red-faced grandson from his grandfather’s extended arms. “You’ll have to excuse me for a moment, folks.”

“I’m Sydney Saunders from Kansas.” The lanky soldier leaned over her once his hostess had left and smiled as he had done earlier.

Ava stepped back, both uncomfortable and pleased with his close presence.

“I’m Barry Roosevelt from New York, no relation to the president,” the bald, short soldier stepped forward and introduced himself in a northern nasal accent that was new to Ava.

“Nice to meet you.”

Barry pulled out a wallet from his back pocket.

“You’re lucky. You get to meet Mrs. Roosevelt too,” Sydney explained as his friend located a picture in the middle of his wallet.

He handed a worn photograph to Ava.

“My wife Marg says I can only talk to other women if I show them a picture of her first.”

“You have a smart wife,” Ava said and studied the picture of an exceptionally thin woman in a plaid dress. “You also have a lovely wife.”

“Thank you. There’s not another one like her.”

They all three laughed. Ava laughed too, not understanding what she was laughing at.

“Winn, don’t be rude. Tell her your name.” Sydney stepped back from Ava and pushed him toward her.

Ava’s cheeks grew warm as his clear blue eyes first avoided her face and then swept over her.

“Hi, I’m Edwin Livingston.” He looked away as quickly as he had said his name.

“Our man Winn is a Tennessee boy and the best shot in the Army,” Sydney said, and Edwin smiled in embarrassment, but Ava noticed that it was not entirely without gratification.

“He could shoot a bottle top off a wire fence a mile away.”

“I imagine that’s a good thing for a soldier,” she said, not knowing what else to say.

“Oh, these two clowns are just such bad shots that they make mine look good.”

“Hey now!” Barry punched his friend in the arm.

“Mrs. Boozer said that you’re from Jacksonville. Do you ever come to Anniston?” Sydney changed the subject and moved close to Ava once again.

“As a matter of fact, my cousin and I are starting jobs there tomorrow at Wakefield’s Department Store.” She tried to sound as comfortable with him as he was with her.

“So, we’re talking to a working girl.”

“I think that it’s good that women are doing their part and working on the home front. Marg just got a job as a welder. That girl can do anything,” Barry said. “Maybe I could come see you at your store, and you could help me pick out something to send her.”

“I would love to.”

“We’d also like to hear you sing again,” Sydney interjected.

“I think my family is finished singing for the day, so I don’t know – “

“Excuse me, Ava. The church would like to honor you men before the service begins.” Mrs. Boozer returned with Brother Penny and her clinging grandson.

“That’s unnecessary,” Sydney answered for the three of them.

“Fiddlesticks, if you could each tell Brother Penny a little about yourselves.”

Ava excused herself and left them to the pastor.

Not wanting Jake to think that she was interested in meeting the soldiers too, Rosemary refrained from asking about Ava’s conversation with them. Exchanging knowing glances, however, Ava sat down on the blanket and finally began to eat.

“Do you know those boys, Cousin Ava?” Judith looked up at her with her inquisitive brown eyes.

“I just met them.” Ava tickled Judith’s side, and the little girl let out a high-pitched squeal.

“Are they Yankees?” Jake asked. “Buster Welch works at the fort, and he said that most of ‘em are from up north.”

“Only one is.”

Jake was about to speak again when Brother Penny’s voice boomed from the open tent.

“On behalf of Four Mile Baptist Church, I would like to thank you all for coming to our special Sunday,” he began and nodded his head in the direction of each group of people present. “Before Brother Whatley blesses us today, we would like to introduce you to three men from Fort McClellan who have honored us with their presence.”

He motioned for them to come forward, and Ava watched as Sydney, Barry, and Edwin joined Brother Penny at the front of the tent.

“Brethren, this is Private Edwin Livingston from Tennessee, Private Sydney Saunders from Kansas, and Private Barry Roosevelt from New York. Let’s give them a round of applause for being here today and for serving our country in this Job-like time of trial and need.”

Everyone clapped. Sydney smiled broadly, Barry nodded his baldhead, and Edwin acknowledged the audience and then turned his gaze back on the preacher.

“On their behalf, the men have asked that Miss Ava Stilwell come forward and lead us in our national anthem.”

Ava’s cheeks flushed at the mention of her name, and she felt a large lump grow in her throat as all eyes turned upon her. She stood up, attempted to smile, and made her way to the front of the tent. When she passed by her parents, her mother arched her dark eyebrows in a tacit question. Brother Penny made room for her between himself and Edwin, and Ava began to sing without looking at the men by her side. The congregation followed her lead, and the words of the national anthem filled the humid air. The current affairs of the country gave power and magnitude to the

familiar song, and a moment of voluntary silence hung in the air when the last stanza ended.

“Thank you, Miss Ava, for that fine rendition, and thank you men for your service to our country,” Brother Penny broke the silence.

Everyone clapped, and Ava and the soldiers made their way back to where they were sitting.

It was now time for Brother Whatley to preach. Mothers worked to quiet their children, teenagers stifled their contagious giggles, and everyone settled back on blankets to listen. Ava sat on her quilt with her legs crossed to one side. She was determined to listen to Brother Whatley’s explanation of the parable about the farmer and his seed, which she had heard numerous times, and not think about her new acquaintances. Nevertheless, her mind began to wander, and her eyes followed close behind. When the sermon came to an end and the minister gave the closing prayer, she noticed Mr. and Mrs. Boozer leaving with the soldiers. She wondered if she would ever see them again, and she smiled as Judith’s nodding head dropped in her lap.

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