

LEARNING TO SURRENDER

THREE

Monday, May 11

Charlotte finished reading *The Swiss Family Robinson* and set it down. Books were scarce now, and there were no new ones to be found.

Since the war began, school and novels and talking to her best friend were the only activities that had kept Charlotte from getting bored. It had been several weeks since Alice left, and now Charlotte was out of reading material, too.

She couldn't even watch the fighting for entertainment. Although a second group of Union boats had passed the batteries of Confederate cannon on April 22, there had been no activity since then. Charlotte shifted restlessly on the settee. What were the Yankees waiting for?

When her father entered the room, she asked, "Why hasn't there been any fighting lately?"

"I don't know. Maybe General Grant is attempting to build another canal to divert the course of the Mississippi River away from Vicksburg."

"Why would he do that?"

"To give the Union boats a way to pass the city without being in range of our cannon." Papa chuckled. "General Grant tried it last year without success. Yankees don't know how to handle the rain and the mud and the mosquitos from our Southern swamps." He grinned. "They also don't understand the mighty Mississippi River. It has a mind of its own, and if it doesn't want to be rerouted, nothing the Yankees do will make a difference."

Papa looked around. "Where is your mother? The new cave is finished and Mr. Badger has time to show us around, but only if we hurry."

"Mama and Isabel are in the attic looking for some of your old clothes to remake for our soldiers." Charlotte clenched her fists. It wasn't fair. The Union army had enough uniforms for everyone, but the Confederates had to fight in whatever they could find.

Half an hour later, the Gibson family stood at the southern entrance to the cave waiting for Mr. Badger.

Charlotte giggled as she peered inside. A cave dug for a badger. He even looked like one, with his long nose and short legs. She covered her mouth. It wasn't nice to laugh at Mr. Badger. A wagon had run over his foot when he was a boy and crushed all the bones, and he had limped ever since.

When he arrived, he was using his crutch. Oh no. That meant he was having a bad day. He was bad-tempered enough on a good one.

"Ready?" Without waiting for an answer, Mr. Badger led the way into the south entrance.

As she looked around, Charlotte saw a long tunnel with daylight peeking in at the other end. It was about six feet wide and high enough for Papa to stand up straight. The floor was covered with wood planks, but the walls and ceiling were dirt.

Charlotte noticed several niches dug into the walls. "What are those for?"

"Candles."

Good. That meant she could read after dark.

“This hall is the common living area,” Mr. Badger said. “There will be a tent right outside the other entrance for cooking.”

Isabel frowned. “Where do we sleep if we have to stay overnight?”

“Each family has its own section.” Limping along the hall, he pointed out three smaller tunnels running perpendicular to the main one. “The first is for my family. The middle is for the Millers, and the northernmost one is for you.”

“I see,” Charlotte said. “It’s shaped like a backwards capital E.” she hurried ahead to her family’s wing, which was a narrow tunnel with a dirt floor. There were three “rooms” off it and an opening to the outside at the end. Charlotte could still stand up straight but Papa had to bend over.

The first two rooms had boards covering the floor. Each one also had a raised wooden platform, and Charlotte pointed to one. “What’s that?”

“The bed.”

It didn’t look very comfortable, but at least she wouldn’t have to sleep on the ground.

Then she peeked into the last room. “Where’s the flooring? And the bed? It’s just dirt.”

Mr. Badger grunted. “Didn’t have enough lumber. Use that as storage or for your slaves.”

Mama sighed. “I wish we could do better for Benjamin and Nettie, but at least it will be safer than the cave behind the house.”

After the Gibsons returned home, Mama asked Nettie to join her in the attic. Charlotte and Isabel followed them up the stairs.

“What are we doing?” Isabel asked.

“Furnishing the cave. If we have to stay there very long, we might as well be comfortable.”

Charlotte shuddered. How long was very long? She’d never make it for more than a few hours.

Judging from Isabel’s white face, she was thinking the same thing.

Soon they had a pile of quilts, Mama’s old rocking chair, and a wobbly side table that Benjamin might be able to fix.

Mama set aside the furniture for Benjamin to move later and handed the girls and Nettie quilts to carry. Picking up the last one, Mama led the way downstairs.

After placing the quilts by the back door, they went into the kitchen. Mama walked over to the table where they ate breakfast and lunch on days without company. She stared at the straight-backed chairs. “We’ll have to take some of these to the cave and use the dining room ones while we’re at home.”

In the pantry, she removed a box of candles and several bars of soap from the shelf. Then she turned to Nettie. “Should we take any food in case we have to stay for a meal?”

“Yes, Missus. And two iron kettles for cookin’.”

Mama sighed. “Benjamin will have to gather wood to build a fire, but that can wait until later.”

So two iron kettles, a barrel of flour, a keg of molasses syrup, a pound of coffee, and another of tea joined the growing pile of supplies for the cave. But when Nettie added four china plates and four china cups, Mama shook her head. “This isn’t a party. We’ll take tin dishes so they won’t break.”

Eventually, Mama stretched her back and sat down. “Do you girls have anything you want to add?”

Charlotte thought for a moment. If they were stuck there for long, she would need a book. She ran into the parlor and took her mother's copy of *Pride and Prejudice* from a shelf in the bookcase. Charlotte had already read it, but that might be a good thing. Knowing the story would keep her from getting frustrated if she had to put it down and return to the house while she was in the middle of a chapter.

"I saw some carpets in the attic," Isabel announced. "I want those."

"No," Mama said. "They're too hard to keep clean in a dirt cave."

"But the Randolphys—"

"—have lots of servants," Mama said. "Nettie doesn't have time to worry about cleaning carpets."

As Benjamin loaded the cart, Charlotte looked at the pile of supplies.

It was just a precaution. Surely they wouldn't have to stay in the cave long enough to use most of it.

Or would they?