

CHAPTER 1

December 15, 1864
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Keziah knotted a crimson bow to the end of the evergreen limb and tilted her head, studying her work. A tad crooked. She bit her lip and adjusted the decoration. Though the tree was small, not much taller than herself, she longed for it to look perfect.

She inhaled the spicy scent of the fir and smiled. Micah always teased her for filling the Christmas tree too full. This year, her tree would outshine Queen Victoria's.

Reaching for a red netting sachet, she tied it to a separate branch and hummed. Outside, the breeze rattled the shutters of their modest two-story townhouse. A bittersweet pang pinched. Though far different from Savannah, Philadelphia had been kind to them. They had friends, peace and purpose. Still, the miles between them and their loved ones yawned wider every year.

It always seemed worse at Christmas.

The front door slammed open, blowing in a gust of frigid air. Icy wind slapped her cheeks as she turned with a start. Micah stood in the doorway, a sheepish grin on his handsome face.

"Stars and garters!" She clutched her throat. "You scared me out of ten years."

His low chuckle warmed her, despite the sudden fright. Battling the wind, he pulled the door shut and swept her up in his arms. His blue eyes danced above his scarf.

"I keep you on your toes, Mrs. Greyson."

"That you do."

He leaned in to claim her lips. His skin was cold, causing her own flesh to prickle in delight.

"I've missed you today." He pulled away and sighed.

She tugged his hat from his head, running her fingers through his tousled chestnut hair. "You look a bit tired, Sweetheart. How were things at the shelter today?"

He kissed her hand and shrugged out of his coat before hanging it on the hook by the door. "Exhausting. Frustrating." He scrubbed his fingers down his face. "More fugitives are arriving every day. It seems as the Confederacy grows weaker, slave holders grow more rabid." His jaw hardened. "Today I treated a child whose leg had been so badly mangled by blood hounds from his family's first escape attempt, he's now lame. His father carried him through the swamps of South Carolina and every conceivable type of danger just so he would not suffer the same fate as his forefathers." Micah swallowed. "I'll never be able to erase that child's injuries from my mind."

Keziah wrapped her arms around his middle and squeezed, wishing she could ease the pain he carried inside. He rubbed her back and rested his cheek against the top of her head.

“I shall accompany you tomorrow.”

“No.” He eased her back and studied her face, concern flicking through his eyes. “You’ve not been well. I’ll not risk your health.”

“Nonsense.” She smiled and leaned into the fingers he cupped against her cheek. “I’ve flourished under your care these past two years.”

“But the past weeks---”

“Nothing more than a common malady. I miss the children. I miss helping.” She reached up and brushed his stubby cheek with her lips. “Most of all, I miss working side by side with you.”

He grunted, though a mischievous light flashed in his eyes. “You do have a way of getting what you want, despite my protests.”

“Speaking of protests,” she winced, “I know you told me not to go overboard with the Christmas tree this year, but---”

“Kizzie...”

She pinched down a giggle at the exasperation coloring his tone. “Once I started, I hardly knew where to stop.”

He sighed. “I wish you’d never seen Queen Victoria’s Christmas tree in *Godey’s*. I’ve not had a moment’s peace since. I surrender. Show me.”

With a smile, she tugged him into the parlor. He stopped and stared at the trimmed fir, his mouth agape.

“How is it still upright?”

Keziah feigned an indignant frown. “I have no idea of what you speak.”

“It’s so laden with decorations, the entire thing is sure to topple with the slightest breeze.”

She laughed at his incredulous expression. “Odd you should think so. I’ve still more bows to add. Not to mention the string of popcorn.”

He groaned and she swatted him.

“Come now. Let me have my fun. You know how much I love Christmas. And certain things about this time are,” a lump lodged in her throat, “difficult.”

He slipped his arms around her waist and nuzzled her neck. “I know, my love.”

She stared at the ribbons, mistletoe and sweetbags hanging from the tree, her eyes stinging. “I remember Christmas when I was little. That was the one time when Father wasn’t too busy with business for celebrating. We always had a large dinner and would sing carols around the pianoforte. And on Christmas Eve, Hiriam would lift me up over his head so I could place the star on top of the tree.” Her eyes filled. “It was a special silver star he had made from metal scraps in the stable, but oh, how he shaped it and polished it until it shone like heaven.” She sniffed. “I miss him.”

Micah pressed a kiss to her forehead. “He was a good man.”

“And mother. I’ve not heard a word from her since we fled.”

Micah’s face turned solemn. “I was trying to find the right time to tell you, but...” He moved to rifle through his coat and pulled out a rolled-up newsprint. He gently placed it in her hand. “Here.”

Swallowing the cotton in her throat, she opened the oily pages and read.

SHERMAN SETS GEORGIA ABLAZE: SAVANNAH SOON TO FALL

She lowered the missive. “Oh my! Poor mother. How different life has turned out from the way she’d always planned it.”

Micah grasped her free hand. “Do you regret it? Life with me? Moving away...all that you’ve had to give up. I---”

She silenced him with a kiss. “Never. You are my home, Micah Greyson. Forever and always.”

He opened his mouth to speak when the foyer door flew open yet again, slamming against the wall with such force, it rattled the glass globes in the parlor wall sconces. A figure stood silhouetted in the shadows of the doorway. Frozen breath puffed white in the wane light. Keziah jumped as Micah whirled to face the intruder with a scowl.

“Who are you, barging into my home?”

From beneath the layer of coats, a female voice cackled.

“Well, if that ain’t a way to treat your long, lost friend! I’m pert near frozen and you ain’t got nothing better to do than frighten an old woman, Doc?”

Keziah’s heart thrummed like a hummingbird’s wings. She reached for Micah’s hand but her husband stood in shock, transfixed at the sight before him.

“Ma Linnie?”

CHAPTER 2

Micah stared at the large form squatting in their door. Snow spat around her in dancing ribbons. The twilight made it hard to distinguish her features but there was no mistaking the sassy twang spilling from her mouth.

Kizzie moved to pull her inside with a warbling laugh. “Ma!” The two women embraced as Micah moved to shut the door, locking away the frigid wind. Kizzie took Ma’s wraps and hung them on the hook with a stunned smile. “What a delightful surprise! Why didn’t you tell us you were coming to Philadelphia?”

Ma chuckled and patted Kizzie’s hands. “I’m getting a mite lonesome, working for all those crude men at the pub day after day. Linnie, says I, you could do with a holiday. What better time to visit than at Christmas?” Her smile dimmed. “I thought to surprise you, but got to worrying that my coming might be a bit of an intrusion.”

“Stuff and nonsense.” Kizzie hugged her once more. “I couldn’t be more thrilled.”

Micah frowned. Something was wrong. Ma had always vowed she’d never step foot outside Georgia soil, yet she arrived at their doorstep...with nary a word of warning.

An itch burrowed between his shoulder blades.

“And you!” Ma grabbed his cheek with her cold fingers, giving them a motherly pinch as she grinned up into his face. “I never thought I’d see you again, Doc. My, my. More handsome than ever. Married life suits you.”

He smiled and leaned down to brush her cheek with a kiss. “That would be Kizzie’s doing.”

Ma chuckled. “Still smitten, I see. That’s good. Come on. Don’t stand there with your teeth in your mouth. Invite an old woman to sit. And, Micah, would you mind getting my trunk? The driver left it on the door step after he brought me from the train station.”

Trunk? Micah scrubbed the back of his neck. Since when did Ma Linnie travel with a trunk? Or travel at all? She could boast no more than two dresses and an assortment of aprons. Other than her pub, she had little of value. Crossing his arms, he fixed Ma with a hard stare as she collapsed into their parlor sofa with a satisfied grunt.

“You know I’m delighted to see you, Ma, but what’s going on? What are you up to?”

She blinked wide in her round face. “Ain’t it enough to want to spend Christmas with my dearest friends on earth?”

“Historically? No.”

“Micah!” Kizzie shot him a scolding glare but he pursed his lips.

“Come on, Ma. I know you too well. You always said you would live and die on Georgia soil, and nothing save the Almighty could force you to step foot outside of it.” He arched a brow, attempting to squelch the smirk forming. “Are you at death’s door?”

“Micah Joel Greyson!”

Kizzie stood to her feet, eyes flashing, but paled and swayed like a reed. His suspicions melted into concern as he rushed to her side, steadying her with a hand to her waist.

“Sweetheart, are you alright?”

She blinked slowly. “Yes. Just a bit dizzy for a moment, that’s all. It will pass.”

“Sit down.” He eased her into a chair and studied her with a physician’s eye. She had been a bit pale of late, but seemed healthy otherwise. Had he been so busy at the shelter he had neglected his own wife?

He glanced to Ma who was observing Kizzie with a discerning stare. A small smile played around her mouth. His eyes narrowed. “You haven’t answered my question, Ma.”

Ma huffed and scolded him with a pudgy finger. “I must say, your manners have suffered terribly since moving up here. If it’s all the same to you, I’ll visit with your sweet wife since you seem to have been sitting in a pickle barrel all day.” With a sniff, she shooed him away. “My trunk, if you don’t mind.”

He grit his teeth and marched to the door, letting it swing open with a satisfying bang. Bossy woman. Some things never changed.

A large steamer trunk waited on the top of the outside stairs. With a grunt, he lifted the massive box and carried it inside. It was heavier than he imagined it would be. He dropped it with a thud in the foyer and shut the door with his foot.

“Land-a-Goshen! You trying to break it apart?”

Ma’s admonition from the parlor served only to rankle him further.

“What did you pack in here? A body?”

Ma coughed and sputtered, fanning her red face as she fought for control. Kizzie moved to rub her back.

“Let me get you some water.”

As his wife rushed from the room, he watched his old friend carefully. Ma wiped her eyes but wouldn’t meet his gaze.

“Pardon me. I reckon I swallowed wrong.”

Kizzie entered with a cup of water and pressed it into Ma’s hands. “Here. Take a sip. I become dreadfully thirsty when I travel.”

“Thank you, dearie.” Ma drank, letting her eyelids slip closed in pleasure. Kizzie offered a weak smile.

“You arrived just in time. I have a filling soup on the stove and some fluffy biscuits ready to be heated.” Her cinnamon eyes twinkled. “They are outstanding, if I say so myself.”

Ma cackled. “Are they the biscuits I taught you how to make?”

“Of course.”

“Then they’ll be the best in all of Philadelphia.”

The two women chattered like hens, but Micah couldn’t rid himself of the nagging sensation that all was not well.

Before he could ponder further, a knock sounded on the door. Kizzie's eyes rounded. "Whoever could that be at this hour?"

Micah winced, rubbing the palm of his hand into his eye socket. "I completely forgot. I invited one of the surgeons from the hospital to dine with us tonight."

Kizzie's heaved a thick sigh. "Again?"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I should have told you."

"What shall I do with you, Doctor Greyson? Brilliant physician. Absent-minded man. You need a keeper."

He chuckled sheepishly. "I thought you had already volunteered for the job."

"That I did." She shook her head. "I hope your friend doesn't mind soup."

"Anything you prepare is superb." He planted a quick kiss on her lips. "You're my treasure." He moved to greet the surgeon waiting on the other side of the door.

She murmured at his back. "Remember that on Christmas Day."

He chuckled and grasped the handle, pulling it open with a yank. A cold gust greeted him as Dr. Brumley stepped inside. The older man's voice boomed.

"'Tis a night not fit for man nor beast, yet a beast has arrived at your doorstep. Thank you kindly for having me."

Micah shook the surgeon's hand with a grin and took his long coat. "It's our pleasure. May I introduce my wife?" He pulled Kizzie to his side, enjoying the rush of pride that welled up. "Dr. Alfred Brumley, this is my lovely wife Keziah Greyson."

His pale blue eyes twinkled above his gray beard as he grasped her hand and brushed it with a courtly kiss. "Charmed."

She blushed prettily and smiled. "We are delighted to have you in our home, Dr. Brumley. I hope you'll forgive me for the simple fare this evening. I had not prepared an elaborate meal, but I pray it will be filling just the same."

The large man tucked his hand into his lapel. "Ah, that is the beauty of good company, Mrs. Greyson. The best company makes even the most humble meal a feast. I shall enjoy bread and water if it is shared with wonderful people."

"How kind." She turned and swept her arm towards Ma Linnie. "May I introduce a friend of ours, only just arrived from Savannah? Dr. Alfred Brumley, this is Linnie Hoffman, one of the kindest souls to ever make our acquaintance."

Micah held his breath. There was no telling what Ma's blistering tongue might do to turn the tide of the evening. Dr. Brumley's eyes lit up as he bowed low over Ma's hand.

"Enchanted. How wonderful to meet a lovely Southern flower."

Micah bit back a laugh at the red flush creeping up Ma's neck, but the repressed chortle turned to astonishment when she did not pull her hand away.

"It's a pleasure, sir." She smiled and batted her eyes.

He blinked. Ma was acting...flustered. And smitten. He looked to Kizzie whose smile was bright enough to ignite a lantern.

"Come. The soup should be ready. We can all become acquainted over supper."

Dr. Brumley's gaze followed Ma as she rose to join Kizzie in the dining room.

"A prospect I'm most looking forward to."

Micah shook his head. What was happening?

CHAPTER 3

“Ah, real coffee. Ain’t had anything nearly so grand for years now.”

Keziah smiled at Ma across the parlor as they sipped the steaming brew from delicate cups. The supper had been a success, but not from the grandeur of her own cooking. Rather, the witty conversation between Ma and Dr. Brumley crackled the room with vibrant energy. The older man was smitten.

And Ma didn’t seem to mind one bit.

Keziah’s gaze swung to her husband. Micah sat brooding in the corner of the parlor. What had put a bee in his bonnet? She tried to push Micah’s dark mood from her mind and turned her attention to their company.

“How do things fare in Savannah? I’ve been gobbling up the news from the papers, desperate to find any scrap of information I can.”

Ma Linnie sighed deeply and shook her head. “Not good, I’m afraid. Sherman’s gunning for us, burning everything in his path. Folks lucky enough to still have meat have taken to calling it “Shermanizing” it when it gets a little too black.” Lines deepened around her eyes. “Food is getting scarce and the prices are high. Folks are nigh unto starving in some parts.”

Dr. Brumley frowned. “A pity.”

Keziah bit her lip. “And have you,” she swallowed, “have you any news of my mother? Nathaniel?”

Ma shook her head. “Sorry, lamb. I’ve not heard. They’ve likely fared better than most though, being more financially stable than some.”

She studied the dark brew staring up at her from the confines of her cup. “I pray so.”

Dr. Brumley cleared his throat. “This war has gone on far too long, and exacted far too heavy a toll. How much longer can the Confederacy survive?”

Ma sipped. “I hear tell Sherman thinks this push will crush the last of the Confederate spirit, if his efforts prove successful.”

“It’s difficult when success involves the welfare of those we love.”

Micah’s softly spoken words caused her head to lift. Her gaze captured his. When he smiled tenderly, her heart squeezed. He understood.

He always understood.

Ma Linnie harrumphed. “Well, I’ve not heard a peep of your mother or brother, but the whole town knows about that man you were once betrothed to.”

“Lyman Hill?” Keziah straightened. “What of him?”

Wrinkling her nose, Ma waved her hand in disgust. “You don’t know?” She snorted. “I figured his behavior had even made the papers up here.”

Micah leaned forward. “What do you mean?”

Ma Linnie’s mouth twitched into a grimace. “Mr. Hill married a stage actress. An *actress*, for land’s sakes! When I think about the way he scolded poor Keziah on the importance of reputation and propriety...” She tisked.

Keziah giggled at Ma’s theatrics. “Anyone we know?”

“I should think so. His wife is none other than your cousin.”

Micah choked on his coffee as Keziah sputtered. “Jenny? Lyman Hill wed my cousin Jenny?”

“Unfortunately, yes. And a more terrible match, I’ve yet to see. Jenny makes the Savannah papers every week for her melodramatic roles. Critics have dubbed her the Siren of Savannah.” Ma cackled. “Fancy that! Anytime a bevy of reporters are around, Mr. Hill brags on the merits of his incomparable wife, but the man has a string of women all over town.” She huffed. “And a slew of gaming debt to go with them.”

“Poor Jenny.” Keziah winced, her heart throbbing for her cousin. Jenny had always been difficult. Hurtful, even. Her need for attention had been a cry for her broken soul. “She always tried to fill up her emptiness with things and people that left her more void than she was before.” The coffee soured in her stomach. “I cannot think of a worse fate than marriage to Lyman Hill.”

The older surgeon set aside his coffee and steeped his hands as he leaned back. “Human nature is a strange thing. We consume more only to find ourselves starving to death.”

Ma grunted. “Truer words were never spoken.”

They fell silent, save for the mantle clock gently ticking away the seconds.

Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock---

“Ah-choo!”

Keziah straightened and frowned. The slight, muffled sneeze had been distinct but no one in the room had issued the sound. Ma’s round face mottled crimson as she burst into a bout of raucous sneezes.

“Ah-choo! Ah-choo! Ah-choo!”

Dr. Brumley leaned forward, studying her ruddy face with concern. “Are you quite alright, Miss Hoffman?”

Coughing loudly into her hand, she gasped and wiped her damp brow with the handkerchief he offered. “I can’t imagine what caused such a fit.”

Keziah glanced at Micah, who was studying Ma through narrowed eyes. What was going on?

“Perhaps our damp, Northern air will take some adjustment.”

Ma nodded and dabbed her neck. “Yes. You’re likely right. Thank you for the use of your kerchief.”

He smiled widely, his beard tugging with the movement. “Think nothing of it. In fact, I insist you keep it. A memento of your first night in Philadelphia.”

Ma laughed and fluttered her fingers as if uncertain what to do with them. “How kind.”

Dr. Brumley placed his hands on his knees. “I should go so you can retire for the evening. Travel is an exhausting endeavor.” He stood and Micah rose to grasp his hand. Keziah followed suit and moved to her husband’s side.

“Dr. Greyson, Mrs. Greyson, thank you for a lovely evening.”

“Thank you, sir. We shall have to do it again.”

He nodded and slipped into the icy darkness, letting the door shut behind him with a firm click. Mere seconds after his departure, Micah stomped over to the steamer trunk still sitting in the foyer and hastily unstrapped the leather buckles, a scowl marring his face.

“What are you doing?”

Ma jumped up, her face red. “Stop that! I can attend to my own affects, thank you very much!”

Micah ignored them both and flipped open the lid. A gasp issued from inside. He froze. Keziah’s heart thrummed as she pressed close to his side and peered into the massive trunk.

A small, dark-skinned child blinked up at her, her eyes round, body trembling.

Micah’s voice was tight as his gaze snapped to Ma, who took a sudden interest in her shoes.

“Ma, would you care to explain why an innocent child is locked away in your trunk?”

She wrinkled her nose and mumbled, “Thought it felt a mite heavy.”

“Ma!”

“Fine!” She threw up her hands. “You caught me.”

He crossed his arms and glared. “Wasn’t hard. In all the years I’ve known you, you never stopped grousing about how you would never step foot outside Georgia.” He smirked. “Not to mention your little sneezing fit that did little to cover up hers.” He nodded towards the mite cowering in the trunk.

Keziah turned her attention to the shivering child and smiled. “There now. Mister Micah isn’t nearly as grumpy as he appears.” The girl only blinked. Keziah knelt and grasped the edge of the trunk. “Let’s get you out of there.” She offered her hand and the child hesitantly grasped her hand. The tiny fingers were like ice. “My name is Keziah but you can call me Kizzie if you’d like. What’s your name?”

The small child looked to Ma for approval as she climbed out. When the older woman nodded her consent, she murmured, “Annie, ma’am.”

Keziah smiled. “Annie. A pretty name for a pretty girl. How old are you?”

She shrugged. “Ain’t got no idea. My momma says I’ve been here five or six, maybe seven summers now.”

Micah grunted. “And what happened to your momma, Miss Annie.”

The thin girl sniffed and wiped under her nose. “Paddyrollers got her.” She looked up in his face as her lips trembled. “Would of got me too if the blood hounds had been out that night.”

Keziah grasped Annie’s hands. “I’m so sorry.”

“I found her hiding behind my pub, shaking from the cold and half starved.” Ma’s voice was gruff with emotion.

Thick silence descended, and Keziah shook her head. “Forgive me for standing here wool gathering while you must be hungry. It was such a shock to discover you tucked away in the trunk. Let’s find you something warm to eat.”

Her gaze slid to Micah’s and held for a solid moment. His eyes were full of questions and compassion. She knew he would want her to do all she could for the child, even while he longed to throttle Ma for her ill-advised scheme.

Imagine...smuggling a fugitive slave girl in a steamer trunk!

Keziah’s heart tugged as she watched Annie stare in slack-jawed wonder at their papered walls and thick floral-patterned carpets as they walked towards the kitchen.

“Ain’t never seen nothing so grand.”

Keziah smiled. “It’s sweet of you to say so, but our place is only modest compared to most homes in Philadelphia.”

Annie scratched through a threadbare spot on her dress sleeve. “I wasn’t never allowed in the big house back on Master’s plantation. This looks mighty fancy compared to our cabin.”

“Where was your old plantation?”

“Mississippi, ma’am.”

Keziah squeezed her bony shoulder and pushed the kitchen door open. She made short work of slicing cheese to serve alongside the remaining biscuits. Blackberry preserves would sweeten the meal. Keziah reached into the back of the icebox to fetch the remaining jar of milk.

Ma patted the stool tucked underneath the work table. “Come, dearie, and sit. Can’t eat while pacing the floor.”

“Yes’m.”

Keziah placed the food before her and tried not to wince as the scrawny mite shoved it in. She was nearly choking for want of sustenance. Her gaze caught Ma’s.

“What’s the plan, Ma?”

The older woman sighed.

“I was hoping you could tell me.”

CHAPTER 4

Christmas Eve, 1864

Micah ran his fingers through his hair and blew out a tight breath.

“You mean to tell me all the orphanages in Philadelphia are full?”

Across the desk, the pencil-thin man sighed, his thick mustache drooping.

“I’m sorry, Micah. The war has had a devastating effect on the number of children seeking refuge in our orphanages. I’ve never seen such a number of homeless, displaced little ones in all my life. Most of the homes are already over capacity as it is.”

“What of those couples longing to have a child of their own?”

Mr. Brown frowned. “You know as well as I that placing a negro child with a white family is extremely difficult. It cannot be done with a simple snap of the fingers.”

Micah fell against the back of his chair, defeat washing over him. In the week since Ma Linnie and Annie had appeared on their doorstep, the precocious child had woven a spell over both him and Kizzie. Her initial hesitance and fear had melted into bright curiosity. She followed Kizzie everywhere, eager to help with baking, sewing and peppering her with questions. Between caring for the child and laughing with Ma, his wife glowed. As for Micah, his heart turned to mush the first time Annie had hesitantly crept to his side as he read the newspaper and whispered, “You’re awfully kind, Mister Micah. Ain’t never seen you cross with Miss Kizzie. Do you suppose,” she had swallowed, “that is, would you mind reading to me from that paper?”

He had pulled her into his lap and read news from the war, as well as human interest stories and shown her the illustrations of Thomas Nast. When her fingers had traced the bold type of an “A”, he’d spent the better part of an hour teaching her how to spell her name, as well as shape other letters of the alphabet.

She had lapped up the knowledge like parched land thirsty for rain.

What would become of her if there was no one willing to care for her needs?

He left the director’s office and shoved his hands in his pockets, hunkering inside his coat to protect himself from the damp chill blanketing the air. The acrid stench of coal mingled with aroma of baking bread from local bakeries, spicy sausages from the markets and the odor of rotting garbage littering the alleys he passed.

Please, Lord, show me what to do for Annie. She is far too bright and sweet to be cast off like a forgotten rag doll. Bring a family to her. Soften their hearts and let them open their home.

He turned the corner, weaving between scurrying families and somber businessmen. The clatter of wagon wheels and the clip-clop of horses buzzed in his ears until he saw the Meier's Dry Goods store ahead. Christmas was tomorrow and he'd promised Kizzie he would try to find candy and oranges for their celebration. Perhaps the diversion would tug him free from his dark mood.

He pushed the door open, as cheery bells jingled overhead. The aroma of leather and soaps wrapped around him. People milled about in small clumps, whispering as they eyed various trinkets. Crimson ribbons were pinned in draping streams under the countertops. In the front corner, a Christmas tree stood erect, proudly displaying baubles all labeled with tags bearing prices. A lopsided smile tugged.

Kizzie loved Christmas. What she wouldn't give to have a grand display like this one.

He let his gaze wander to the top of the tree and his breath caught. There, nestled amid the greenery, red bows, and striped candy canes hanging from its branches was a glittering silver star.

A man moved to his side. "Nice looking tree, isn't it?"

Micah smiled. "It's wonderful. I was just thinking of my wife and how much she would enjoy it."

"You'll have to bring her in then."

Micah dropped his voice to a whisper and leaned in. "I had something else in mind..."



Micah nearly skipped as he entered the house. The aroma of cinnamon and cloves warmed him. He sniffed in appreciation. Kizzie must be making her special tea she steeped on holidays. Smiling, he lugged the small crate of treasures in his arms. The oranges would be appreciated but he was far more excited about the paper-wrapped gift nestled in the bottom.

Ma's cackle drifted from the parlor.

"If that ain't the beatenest thing I ever saw."

Kizzie's gentle voice followed. "I loved making these as a little girl."

Intrigued, he moved softly towards the parlor. Ma Linnie sat in the rocker, her hands noisily clacking knitting needles as she watched Kizzie and Annie sitting on the floor. A small mound of white handkerchiefs lay scattered around their laps. Kizzie and Annie's head were bent close together as Kizzie showed her how to wrap and twist a thin scarlet ribbon through the middle of the white linen.

"Hard at work, I see."

Kizzie gasped and clutched her throat before laughing. "Micah! You have such a habit of startling me."

Rising, she moved to kiss his cheek. "How did things go?"

He shook his head slightly and murmured, "Nothing yet."

Kizzie bit her lip and glanced towards Annie, watching her meticulously craft her project, her pink tongue tucked between her teeth. "What shall become of her if no homes are available?" Her whisper was laced with worry.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “God will provide.” He raised his voice. “I come home bearing gifts but see you’re hard at work making your own.”

Annie turned, beaming a wide smile. “Look, Mister Micah! Miss Kizzie is teaching me how to make handkerchief angels! Aren’t they pretty?”

He placed the crate on a solitary chair and knelt to examine the faceless doll. “Indeed they are.”

Annie reverently touched its snowy dress. “Miss Kizzie and Ma said we can make enough to decorate the whole tree!”

He groaned. “More Christmas decorations?”

Kizzie laughed and tweaked his side. “It’s a shame to be merry, isn’t it?”

The little girl giggled at their antics. Ma chuckled.

“Your wife is a great hand at decorating. I think her tree rivals Queen Victoria’s.”

Micah laughed. “That was her goal.”

Cheeks pink, Kizzie rose and moved to hang a handkerchief angel on one of the few undecorated tree limbs. “Stuff and nonsense.” She looked over her shoulder and winked, grinning wickedly. “Mine looks much better.”

At Annie’s laughter, Micah tilted his head and studied the plump tree with pursed lips. “I don’t know. It still needs something.”

“More bows?”

“More mesh bags?”

Annie jumped from foot to foot. “More handkerchief angels?”

He snapped his fingers. “I’ve got it!” With a sly smile, he turned and reached into the bottom of the crate he’d lugged across town. Carefully, he lifted the paper-wrapped parcel from inside and held it out to his wife. “Here you go, Kizzie.”

Eyeing him with suspicion, she carefully took it, plucking the thin string free and let the paper fall away. She gasped, her eyes glassing.

The silver star looked even better nestled in her hands than it had in the shop.

He whispered, “Do you like it?”

She swallowed, a tear slipping free. “Like it?” She sniffed and fingered one of its shiny points. “It looks so much like the one Hiriam made. I love it!”

He smiled at the pleasure lighting her cinnamon eyes. “It reminds me of the costume you wore so long ago. Remember?” He nuzzled her cheek and whispered, “North Star?”

He delighted in her blushing smile until a strangled cry snagged his attention. He whirled to see Annie staring. Trembling.

Ma Linnie sat upright. “Child, what’s wrong?”

Annie pointed at the gift with shaking hands. “The star. I asked God to show me...” Her lips quivered as she took a step back. Then another.

Micah reached for her, his fingers circling her upper arms as he knelt before her. She was quaking like a leaf in a storm. “What did you ask him, sweetheart?”

“After Momma died, I asked him to show me if he was real.” She sucked in a breath, her streaming tears slipping between her lips. “Momma used to tell me about her own Pa. Every Christmas he would tell her about the star that led the wisemen to the Christ Child.” She heaved a shuddering sob. “He would listen to the white folks as they shared the Christmas story in the big house, then he would go back to the cabin and tell

my mama all the wonderful things he heard from the Good Book. She and her momma was sold away from her Papa, but she never forgot the story of that star.”

Kizzie stroked her dark hair. “So, the Christmas star has special meaning for you?”

Annie nodded and wiped her nose. “Momma used to tell me the star would lead me home. After the paddyrollers got her, I would look up at the sky every night, wondering if God was real. Told him if he gave me a special star that would lead me to a family who would love me, I would know he was real.”

Micah’s heart hammered. “Oh, Annie...”

She clutched his shirtsleeve. “Don’t you see? You’re the family God led me to find! He’s real! The star proves it!”

He glanced at the shiny star resting limply in Kizzie’s hands. He glanced up at his wife, whose complexion had turned ashen.

“Annie, your mother. What was her name?”

“Ruby, ma’am.”

Kizzie’s eyelids slid closed. “Micah, may I speak with you for a moment?” Her voice had grown hoarse.

“Of course.” He released Annie after offering a small smile and reached for Kizzie, leading her to their bedroom down the hall. Once inside, she shut the door with a click and whirled around, skirts swishing and dark eyes wide.

“Do you know who that child is?”

Micah frowned and shrugged. “I haven’t the faintest idea. Who?”

Keziah’s eyes shimmered. “I believe Annie is Hiram’s granddaughter.”

CHAPTER 5

Keziah bit her lip, staring at her dumbstruck husband.

“Hiriam’s...granddaughter?”

She pressed close and clutched his shirt fabric. “Hiriam once told me of his wife and child. Of how much he loved them.” She sucked in a light breath. “His daughter’s name was Ruby.”

Micah frowned, his dark brows lowering. “Still, that doesn’t prove---”

“And that Christmas when he hammered the silver star together for our tree? He told me how much his little girl had loved hearing about the Christmas star from the Bible. He would tell her the story over and over.” She swallowed down the knot welling in her throat. “He said making that star made it seem like she wasn’t so far away.”

Micah’s eyelids slid closed as he released a heavy breath. Taking a few steps back, he plopped into the bed with a grunt, funneling his fingers through his hair.

“That does seem convincing.”

She eased down beside him, tucking her form to his and nestled her head into his neck. “Did you see the hope on her face, Micah? She thinks God used the star to lead her to her new family.”

“I saw.” His deep voice rumbled his chest.

“What do we do?”

“I think there’s only one thing to do.” He spoke slowly, his voice thoughtful.

“What’s that?”

His lips moved to kiss her forehead. “I think we give Annie a home.”

Keziah gasped and eased back to look into his face. His blue eyes studied hers. Probing. Wondering. His mouth curled into a wide smile. She traced the lines with the tips of her fingers.

“Oh, Micah, do you mean it?”

He cupped her face in his hands, using the pads of his thumbs to stroke her cheeks. “I was so disheartened on the way home, Kizzie. All the orphanages are full. William Still himself can’t seem to get Annie placed. Every door has slammed shut in my face. As I was walking down the street, I started praying to God that he would provide Annie with parents who would love and cherish her.” A rueful smile tugged. “Little did I realize he was preparing my own heart.”

Her vision blurred. She leaned into his touch and placed a kiss in his palm.

His face grew serious. “I only want this if *you* do, sweetheart. Tell me. I’ll not burden you down with something you don’t feel ready for.”

She laughed and kissed his lips. “Ready? I’ve never been more ready! She’s a darling child. And to think...we would be raising Hiriam’s granddaughter.” She sniffed down the tears forming once again. “I could think of no greater way to honor him.”

He smiled. “I agree.”

“So, when do we tell her?”

Winking, he whispered, “Christmas is tomorrow.”

He rose. The bed squeaked and shifted beneath the change in weight. Keziah smiled to herself and placed a hand on her still-flat abdomen.

Annie would not be the only one surprised on Christmas morn.

###

Keziah smiled as she set the steaming, golden-brown chicken on the table, watching Annie’s chocolate eyes round in amazement as she stared at the stuffed fowl. The aroma of stuffing, sage and onions drifted up in a heavenly scent, causing the child to lick her lips.

“Is it time now?”

Ma chuckled and patted her hand. “Not yet. Still got the baked pears, beans and potatoes to bring out.

Micah groaned. “How are we ever going to eat all this, Annie-girl?”

She smacked her lips as she looked at the feast accumulating on the Christmas table. “Don’t know, but I’m gonna try my hardest.”

He chuckled and helped Keziah placed the last dish on the laden table, before pulling out her chair. She sank into it with a grateful smile. “Thank you.”

Winking, he sat down and glanced towards Annie. “What say you, Annie? Have you had a nice Christmas?”

She nodded her dark head, eyes shining. “Ever so much. Never had such a grand one! I ain’t never been given gifts before.”

Keziah swallowed and looked down at her plate. How utterly pampered her own life had been. When the girl had opened the beginning reading primer and the doll earlier that morning, she hadn’t squealed or danced. Only touched them with reverence, like she feared they might vanish with the slightest touch.

She cleared her throat. “The day isn’t over yet.” She nodded towards the festively wrapped boxes next to each plate. “Looks like Saint Nicolas left a few things behind.”

Micah shared a smile with her. “Should we say grace before or after we open them?”

“Oh, after. I’m too excited to wait.”

Ma snorted in an unladylike manner. “What are you doing, spoiling the lot of us like this? I won’t ever want to go back home!”

Micah grinned. “You might not want to anyway, not once you see what’s in that box.”

“Poppycock!” Still, she tugged the ribbon free and tore away the colored paper. Prying open the lid to the small box, she plucked a single piece of stationary from inside. With her spectacles perched on the tip of her nose, she scanned its message, her cheeks burning a deep shade of scarlet.

Annie bounced in her seat. “Tell! Tell! What is it?”

“Humph! Nothing important, that’s for certain.”

“Come now, Ma.” Micah teased. “I would say it’s quite important. After all, Dr. Brumley is quite smitten with you. It’s not every day that a handsome bachelor asks to be a beau for the flower of Georgia.”

She glared hotly. “You stop that nonsense right now, Micah Joel Greyson!”

Keziah leaned forward. “All teasing aside, what will you tell him, Ma?”

She sniffed. “Some things a woman likes to keep secret, missy.” Yet the wink Ma Linnie sent her way was message enough.

After Keziah opened her gift, a beautiful locket from Micah, she turned expectantly to Annie and smiled. “Your turn.”

She carefully unwrapped the small box, and opened the lid, gasping as she saw the small glass star nestled in cotton.

“It’s a star!”

Micah slipped from his chair and knelt before her. “Do you know what this means, Annie?”

She shook her dark head, eyes wide.

“Kizzie and I listened when you said you believed God had directed you to our home. We talked about it,” moisture glossed his blue eyes, “and we want you to be our girl.”

Her sweet face crumpled as sobs shook her shoulders. Keziah couldn’t restrain herself any longer. She rushed to her side and gathered Annie’s shuddering form in her arms.

“But I’m only a slave girl. I’m a nobody.”

Keziah smoothed her hair and kissed her head. “No. You’re our daughter. That makes you more precious than all the jewels in Midas’ kingdom.”

Annie sniffed. “Who’s Midas?”

Micah laughed as Ma hooted.

“I knew it! I knew you two would take her in!” She reddened and fell silent. Micah rose and crossed his arms.

“You mean this was your plan all along?”

The older woman sputtered. “Well, ah, that is...”

“Ma!” Keziah smothered her laughter. “Really! Such manipulation. Coming all the way to Philadelphia. And here I just thought you were trying to find a beau.”

Ma glared as Micah’s laughter boomed.

Annie swiped at the tears streaming down her dark cheeks. “This is the best day of my life.”

Keziah tugged her into a hug. “Mine too.”

Ma Linnie grunted. “Enough with this boo-hooing. The chicken’s getting cold. Open your gift, Micah, so we can enjoy the Lord’s bounty.”

He slid back into his chair and smiled as he yanked off the paper, only to frown moments later when he pulled a rattle from inside. Annie giggled.

“Very funny.”

Keziah smiled. “It wasn’t meant to be amusing, Doctor Greyson.”

He stared at her for a long moment. He blinked once. Twice. He jumped up and scrambled to her side, cupping her face between his hands.

“Kizzie, are you saying---?”

She bit her lip and nodded, smiling at the wonder lighting his eyes.
He opened his mouth but no words emerged. With a whoop, he leaned in and kissed her.

Annie turned to Ma, her nose wrinkled. "What is it?"

Ma Linnie chuckled. "I think you're going to be a big sister, that's what."

The little girl squealed and clapped her hands.

Micah kissed Keziah's forehead. Shivers of pleasure danced across her skin. He murmured, "Christmas, Eighteen Sixty-Four and in the span of one day, I'm the father of two children."

"And I have a beau!" Ma's declaration brought on a round of laughter.
"Some things take some getting used to."

As the day's merriment drifted into evening, Keziah stood at the window, watching flurries drift down from the sky like tiny feathers. A cheery fire crackled in the fireplace. Annie had fallen asleep on the sofa, her arm wrapped around her doll. Ma's snores from the rocking chair punctuated the serenity with a mirthful stamp. A smile twitched her lips. Next Christmas would be far different from this one. An excited shiver coursed through her.

A baby. By next Christmas, she would hold a baby in her arms.

Warm hands slid across her hips and rested on her stomach. Micah.

She settled against his chest as they watched winter's beauty through the fogged window.

"Are you happy?"

His voice rumbled against her neck. "Yes. Far more than I deserve."

She sighed in contentment. Chuckling, he squinted into the darkness.

"What?"

He pointed. "There. Do you see it?"

She smiled. "A star."

"Mmm. I'll never look at stars the same way again, thanks to Annie."

She smiled. "Does that mean you found your home, Doctor Greyson?"

He pressed a gentle kiss into her temple.

"No, Kizzie. I found it long ago. Home is wherever you are."

"After hearing the king, they went their way; and behold, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them [continually leading the way] until it came and stood over the place where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And after entering the house, they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him." (Matt. 2:9-11 AMP)