



CHRISTMAS
at
HARMONY HILL

.....
A SHAKER STORY



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In memory of my aunt,
Lorin Bond Houchin,
who always made Christmas special

1



Heather Worth sat propped against her washboard, listening to her husband's light snores. Gideon could sleep anywhere. Out on the hard ground of a battlefield. In a tent with her on washer row. A man needed his rest to fight the war and push the Johnny Rebs back south. She needed the same. It was no easy task being the army company's laundress, but she wouldn't be washing any uniforms on the morrow. She could sit and wait for the dawn to light up the face she loved.

She clasped her hands in her lap to keep from reaching out to brush the red hair back from his forehead. Her fingers itched to trace across his cheeks and memorize the exact position of his every freckle. She wished him awake, but he slept on. She'd known him to sleep sound as a baby with the Confederates so near they could hear them singing around their campfires.

None of the enemy was that close now, but come daylight, the army was heading toward Tennessee to chase after them. It had to be done, the officers said. Heather had heard them talking. None of them paid any mind to the washerwoman, as if they didn't think she could hear over the slosh of washtubs. But she heard plenty

and the plenty she heard saddened her heart. They were saying they might have to root out and shoot every last one of the Rebels before they could get this war over. Her brother was one of those Rebels. Because Simon wasn't even a whole year younger than she was, they'd grown up almost like twins. The day after Simon turned eighteen, he'd gone south to join the Confederate Army. A month later she left home to marry Gideon.

That had been two long years ago. Two years of washing uniforms for the privilege of following the army. At least it was honorable work, and when no battle was raging, Gideon slept beside her on washer row. Now here in November 1864, the word was General Sherman had taken Atlanta and was headed to the sea, but even that wasn't making the Confederates surrender.

So Gideon's division was headed to Nashville. Off to fight Hood. War was like wildfire. The army stomped it down in one place and the flames scooted out and started up in another place. Heather hated war. Everything about it. The blood on the uniforms she washed. The smell inside the surgeons' tents after the wounds went putrid. The dying men who begged her to write one last letter to their families. She hated it all. Even the times between battles. Living in the open. No house to call her own. Nothing but guns and dirty uniforms. But she loved Gideon. So much that she'd become a camp follower against her father's wishes.

She put a hand up in the dark to block out the memory of his hurtful words. She didn't want to think about her father. This night was Gideon's. But then a dark sliver of her father's anger sliced through her. How could Gideon keep on snoring when this might be the last night they would ever be together?

He had told her she shouldn't think that way. "Two years I've been out here fighting the Rebs without catching a bullet," he said the night before, right after he held her tight and told her she had to go home. That she couldn't follow the army to Tennessee.

She had hidden the swell of the baby growing inside her for months. Even after Gideon knew, they'd delayed her leaving, al-

though he worried about her wrestling the wash pots. She was strong. She could manage. Had managed. Her hands went to her abdomen and caressed the baby tumbling about inside her as though trying to push through her skin to know this last moment with his father.

She almost wished he could, but by her reckoning, it was nearly two months too soon. If they hadn't gotten orders to march south, she might have talked Gideon into letting her stay. But he'd shuddered at the thought of his son being born on a battlefield.

To pull his mind away from the bad memories of those conflicts, she had smiled and said, "Son? What if I carry a girl with red hair like her father?"

No smile came to his face in answer to hers. "Even more I wouldn't want my daughter born in the midst of blood and killing." He leaned over to kiss her rounded stomach, then looked back at her face. "Go home."

Home. The word struck a chord in Heather's heart. She wanted to be home. She wanted her mother to help her bring her child into the world. Gideon was right. A battleground with death hovering over it was no place to birth an innocent babe.

So she said yes. Always before, she had said no, she wouldn't leave Gideon. But last night she agreed to go. She had no other answer. The tubs were getting too heavy for her with the weight of her unborn child dragging her down. So she'd retreat back to her Kentucky home. Her mother wouldn't let her father turn her away. Not when she saw Heather heavy with child.

Heather shifted against the washboard. Her back did ache. No matter what position she tried.

The black of the night softened to a gentle gray. Feet passed by on the other side of the tent wall. The soldier husband of Jenna, the other washerwoman. Jenna's washtubs clanged as she began packing up. Her two boys would be helping her. Heather thought to slip out of the tent to offer Jenna her own tubs and wooden stir paddles.

She moved to get up, but Gideon woke to pull her down beside him for one last embrace before the war ripped them apart. Gideon was right. She shouldn't complain. She'd had more of him than most wives whose husbands marched off to war. He ran his hand over the baby bulge under her skirt. She hadn't put on nightclothes the evening before. She slept in her dress more times than not. Not much privacy on washer row.

She lay silent in Gideon's arms as he whispered love words in her ear. That was what had made her fall in love with him. The way he talked. The way he laughed. How could she bear not seeing that smile for weeks, perhaps months? Maybe never again.

"I won't smile again until we're together once more," she whispered.

A frown crossed his face. "No, no, my Heather Lou. Don't let your smile get rusty. Keep it all practiced up so that it will come easy when you see me coming home to you and our sweet little babe." His eyes softened on her. "You are so beautiful. So very beautiful." His voice was husky.

She almost laughed then, thinking how far from beautiful she must look after living in an army camp for so long. Her hands were red and raw from the soap and scrubbing. Her face windburned. Her dark hair, twisted in a bun to keep it out of the way, was streaked by too many hours in the sun. Bonnets were a luxury in an army camp. A kerchief was all one could expect. Her dress was sturdy but plain and lacking the first hint of feminine frill.

"Only in your eyes," she said.

"My eyes are the ones that matter." He put his hand on her cheek and studied her face. "I'll carry this vision with me until the war is over."

"Will that ever happen?" It seemed to Heather as if the war had been going on forever.

"They're beat. They just don't know it yet. But they will soon, and when that happens, I'll be running home to you." He tapped her nose with his finger. "We'll have a little house and every night,

every livelong night, we'll lie like this and talk about whether the hens are laying or if the corn's ready to pick."

"Will we be happy?"

"We'll be happy as two birds in a ripe blackberry patch, my Heather Lou."

One more embrace and then he was pulling on his boots, buttoning his shirt, slipping the braces up over his shoulders to hold up his trousers. Turning from her Gideon into a soldier. Tents had to be taken down. Everything carried on to the next fighting spot. Heather had done it all over and over. Fold this. Roll that. Make it fit on the wagon or leave it behind. Now she was what didn't fit. What was going to be left behind.

She watched the company form and march away. Gideon risked the ire of his captain by breaking rank for one last goodbye kiss. The other soldiers whistled and made catcalls, but Gideon wasn't bothered. That was the thing about Gideon. He was ready to dance to whatever tune the day might be playing. But he promised to always give her the first and last dance.

The baby twisted and kicked inside her as he turned to run back in line. The captain was yelling at him, but with no anger in his voice as he looked over toward Heather and winked. A good number of the men lifted a hand and waved as they passed. For months, she'd been scrubbing their clothes and paying mind to their talk of families back home.

Good men. She didn't want to think about any of them charging the enemy's artillery. She wished rock fences for them to hide behind. She'd seen too many wounded men. Too many bodies waiting burial. What if this time that fate befell Gideon? Fear squeezed her heart and a prayer rose unbidden within her.

Dear Father in heaven, protect my Gideon. Don't let him be too brave. Protect them all.

He was still looking back at her, so she kept her lips turned up in what would pass for a smile with the distance separating them. A distance that grew farther every second. She wanted to run along

the road after him in order to see him one minute longer, but then he was turning with his face forward. Facing his future. She had no choice but to do the same.

When she could no longer even imagine seeing a glimpse of his hat, she picked up her valise and headed toward the town. It wasn't far, only a mile or two. She could get a train ticket to Kentucky, to home. She'd go as far as the train would take her and walk the rest of the way. Hadn't she walked miles and miles across Kentucky and Virginia as the two armies searched out each other to see who could do the most dying?

She put a hand on the swell of her stomach and a bit of Scripture came to her. *Be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord.*

She did hope in the Lord. She did. Pray God, so did Gideon.