

Miriam's Rebirth
The Strasburg Chronicles – Book Five

By

Pippa Greathouse

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Prologue

Late November, 1861

Miriam Clarke's hands trembled as she read her husband's neat script.

"My dearest wife Miri,

I hold the letter I received, just today, written by your own hand. Your fine penmanship makes my heart swell with pride, my darling, each time I read it.

My day has been filled with fond memories of you. The very first time I saw you, sipping coffee over breakfast at the restaurant with Lady Wellington, your blue eyes mesmerized me. You seemed so young and vulnerable, I dared not suppose that you were eighteen.

The next time, you were waiting outside the station for the stage, looking so lost and so alone. I knew Lord Wellington would be displeased if you were allowed to share the carriage with Lady Wellington, but the truth was there was no way I could leave you there.

For you see, I loved you, even then.

These past eight years have been wonderful for me. The day you agreed to marry me was the happiest of my life. Yes, you were young; some would say much too young for me. But should I never be able to return home again, know that you have made these years perfect

There is much firing going on here, at present. I must finish so this can get out to you; one of our men is being discharged today and is carrying a load of letters home with him.

Please give the others my greetings. And if you see Henson's wife, once again, give her my thanks; had it not been for her years of classes, you and I would not be able to write to each other. I have no word of Geoffrey or Francis. Henson, I saw a few weeks ago; he was homesick, although well. William, I have not seen for a very long time, but I know he will be writing Gracie as often as possible. The only thing I would ask from you is to send paper, if possible, so that I may write to you more often.

Goodbye for now, my adorable and precious little Miri. I keep you in my heart, always.

Your devoted and loving husband,

Burton"

Miriam pressed the letter to her chest. She would write again to him this afternoon, perhaps two letters, perhaps even three.

Dear God, how she missed him!

Chapter One

Four years later, Tuesday, Feb 21, 1865

Miriam Hanner Clarke knelt in the snow, next to the grave of her late husband, determined to ignore the tears that stung and threatened to escape down her face. The icy winter wind cut rosy patches on her cheeks, causing her to shiver with cold. Small yellow flowers of early spring were everywhere, tenaciously pushing their way up above the snow, and she had stooped to pick a handful on the way.

Quietly, she said a prayer and kissed the flowers, tucking them closely next to his grave in the family plot at the Pembroke Estate.

"I miss you so, Burton," she whispered quietly.

The sound of footfalls crunching on the frozen snow behind her caused her to quickly wipe her face with the backs of her hands and look up, just before a hand descended on her shoulder. Angelica Wellington stood by her, frowning with sympathetic green eyes. She was clutching an older blue velvet cloak around her shoulders tightly, her long red hair tied up and tucked inside the hood.

"Miss Hazel has breakfast ready, Miri. She did not want you to miss it. She said to tell you both of us need meat on our bones."

Miri's deep blue eyes met Angelica's. "I suppose it is good that she looks out for us. Are you going to the hospital today?" She rose slowly to her feet as she spoke.

Angelica nodded. "I am. I must keep busy. It is hard to keep a happy face in front of the children; they know how worried I am. I believe we may stop by and pick up Merrie, if she wishes to go. She cannot handle the sight of blood but she can pass out the cookies Lillie sends. Mollie went today, too, but she has already left in the wagon."

For the first time, Miri's smile was not forced. "Oh, I am glad. I get such enjoyment from listening to her lecture the doctors on the importance of washing their hands."

"Yes!" Angelica was laughing now. "But Mollie has kept many a mother and baby alive with her clean hands. The doctors should be thankful for her advice. I hope to see Gracie and Cinderella while we are there, too."

Miri's face suddenly became grim. "I am sorry about the dormitory."

"Quite all right. I knew when war broke out they would probably take it for a hospital, if they needed it—perhaps when it is over."

Miri nodded. The dormitory was not the only thing the Union, currently in Strasburg, had taken over to use as a hospital. The church, including the basement, had, as well. Some of the houses in town had been taken over by the infantry. Gracie Becker, the wife of William Becker, had been forced to leave her house to them while he was away and had moved in with Cinderella, the wife of the former Sheriff Andrews. Their twin girls were six, now, and as mischievous as they had been at three. Their older brother, Thomas, at age twelve, was doing his best to be man of the house.

Miss Hazel was pacing, when they arrived in the dining room. A stout woman, huffing and puffing, she nodded, glad to see them. "The children have eaten and are back upstairs beginning their studies with the governess. Lizzie demanded to know if her papa had sent a letter yet."

Angelica met her gaze, tilting her head to the side. "What did you tell her?"

The corners of Miss Hazel's mouth were downturned. "I told her that her papa has a war to fight—but he has not forgotten her and he would write as soon as it was possible."

Miri watched as Angelica nodded, lowering her gaze to the table. It had been two months since a letter had come from Geoffrey. "Thank you, Miss Hazel," was all she was able to say.

"Eat, loves." Miss Hazel's voice was softer now. "I shall get the baskets of treats from Lillie for the soldiers." She smiled at them both and turned, disappearing into the kitchen.

Miri ate silently, as did Angelica. It was not long before Lillie appeared, bearing three baskets. "I could not send anything but the shortbread cookies," she said quietly as she handed them over. "There are just too many ill soldiers to send anything else. Please let me know if it is enough."

Angelica and Miriam both smiled at her and rose, heading toward the foyer with the baskets.

They each said a quick thank you to Benjamin as he helped them into the carriage and whistled to the horses, his rifle close at his side. He had brought the older carriage, this time, afraid the newer one would attract unwanted attention, and had brought some of the older horses to pull it.

They caught sight of Union cavalry ahead, on the road, and Benjamin pulled the horses back a bit, waiting for them to pass. Inside, Miri and Angelica leaned forward to look out the window. Miri reached instantly into her pocket, curling her small hand around the smooth barrel of the pistol that Burton had given her before he left. He had spent hours with her, teaching her how to shoot, until her aim satisfied him. She wondered if Angelica had brought hers along, as well.

The moment was tense but, finally, the cavalry moved on. After a moment, the carriage jerked and moved forward and Miri relaxed. It was not long before she saw the small house she and Burton had spent several years of their lives in. It was one of many cottages that sat empty on Pembroke land, now, but it had been theirs.

Angelica's hand covered hers. "You miss it," she said, looking out toward the house.

Miri nodded. "Terribly. It needs someone to live in it. They all do."

"But, Miri, I am so glad you are staying with us," Angelica said earnestly. "I should have been terribly lonely, if you had not moved into the house."

Miri swallowed and turned to her. "Thank you, milady. I appreciate—so—"

"No. For the last time, call me Angel. No more milady. You are my friend, Miri. You have not been a servant there for many years. All right?"

Miri's smile was uncertain but she nodded. After a moment, her gaze returned to the window. "Do you remember the trip we made, coming out here in 1850—"

"When the highwaymen attacked us and Burton was shot—and we both ended up being kidnapped by Mrs. Grimm? Yes." Angelica's mouth became tight for a moment and then relaxed. "Life might have been very different, had Geoffrey not found us when he did. We both stuttered back then, too, did we not? And now, neither of us does."

"If it had not been for Burton working with me so diligently, I still would, I think."

Angelica nodded. "He was such a good man, Miri."

Miriam nodded, with a small sigh. "He was indeed."

The horses began to slow and stopped in front of the big house known as *The Adams House*. Merrie's beautiful face peeked out at them from the window, and a moment later, she came flying out of the front door to meet them. Benjamin helped her into the carriage. She had fastened her hair back this morning, at the nape of her neck, but her eyes were as vibrant as ever as she climbed in and sat down.

"Good morning!" She looked from one to the other brightly.

"Good morning," Miri greeted her, smiling. It was hard not to smile when Merrie was around.

"How is Katie?" Angelica asked softly.

Merrie shook her head. "Oh, Angel, she asks me every ten minutes if her father has sent a letter. I truly hope we receive one in a day or two, for her sake."

"And for yours," Miri said quietly.

Merrie nodded in agreement. "Yes. I wonder if Francis and Geoffrey have gotten separated. Usually, one or the other writes. How is Lizzie? Katie will demand to know, when I return."

"Full of drama, as usual. Except when she is asking about letters."

Merrie looked from one to the other. "I wanted you both to know," her voice was low and worried now. "We have been seeing a lot of Confederate soldiers in the area. Near the house. It would not surprise me if they did not try to take it over."

Miriam's eyes flew to meet Merrie's in alarm. "I have heard there is a tunnel under the house. Do you think they know of it?"

Merrie took a deep breath. "Yes. You heard correctly. There is more than one. One tunnel goes a half-mile, to the tracks. There is an area under the house the slaves have been hiding in, as a stop toward the north. Miss Constance feeds them there and allows them to rest, before they go through the other tunnel to—" She stopped. "Another house further north, but I am unsure exactly which one. The tunnels have been there since the house was built. Francis has never allowed me to go down there and he threatened me, if I did. But he said it had not been in use since the Revolutionary War, until five or six years ago, when the slaves began using it to go north." Merrie's gaze moved toward Angelica. "I wonder if the Confederates *do* know. We have seen them four or five times, in the past two days. They were within sight of the house."

Angelica leaned across and grabbed her hand. "Merrie, you must bring Katie and come to stay with us. It may not be safe there for you!"

Merrie leaned back against the leather seat, deep in thought. Finally, she nodded toward, first, Angelica, then, Miriam. "I shall check and see, when I get home this afternoon. If they have been spotted again, today, I will inquire of Miss Constance and see what she thinks I should do."

* * *

The rest of the trip into town was silent. Benjamin finally dropped them off in front of the church. "Miss Hazel sent me with a list," he said as he ushered them toward the church. "I am to see if Mr. Greene has any of it. Where do you wish me to wait for you, Lady Angelica?"

Angelica chewed her lip thoughtfully. "Behind the sheriff's office? I plan to be here." But she caught Miriam's expression and stopped. Miri was staring down the street, her brow lifted in curiosity.

"What is it, Miri?"

"Look! What is happening at the Andrews'? Gracie is bringing stuff out onto the porch. And she looks quite upset. No. Let me say it again. *She looks enraged.*"

They all turned, simultaneously. There were suitcases sitting on the front porch at the Andrews' house. The home that belonged to Merrie's parents, next door, looked fine, but the Andrews' three story had the front door standing open. Gracie Becker was carrying things out, her long golden braid flying out behind her. "I am going down to see." Miri began to run. Angelica and Merrie were right behind her.

Miri raced against the wind, not realizing that her hair had come loose from its pins and was now flying out behind her.

A moment later, all three of them had reached the Andrews' house. Miri lifted her skirts and took the steps on the porch, two at a time.

"Gracie! What is happening?"

Gracie, her furious eyes a dark indigo, finished dragging a trunk out and stood up straight, placing her hands on her hips. "Oh, hell's bells. It wasn't enough the soldiers took *my* house; they are taking Cinderella's, too!"

"But, where will you go?" Merrie's face blanched.

Gracie flattened her mouth into a flat line. "I have utterly no idea. But we are not staying *here*."

"Well, I do. You are coming to Pembroke. With the children. All of you." Angelica's voice was quite firm. "Miss Betsy, too."

Cinderella, who had come up behind Gracie, was staring over her shoulder, her chestnut curls bouncing. "Angel, we cannot do that. You have enough—"

"I am serious, Cinderella. The more of us who are there, the better. There is room in the nursery for the girls and Thomas can share the room with the boys. And there are empty rooms upstairs for you and Betsy." Angelica began to grin now. "Shall I send Miss Hazel for you, myself?"

"Oh, no. *Lord, no.*"

Miri smiled. "When Burton was killed, Angelica asked me to come into the house. No, let me rephrase that. She *demand*ed that I move in. When I refused, Miss Hazel came after me and nearly dragged me over. Out of my own house! Trust me, you two. *You do not want that.*" She looked from one to the other of them and leaned forward, lowering her voice. "And if you have any weapons, bring those too—and ammunition. Do not leave it for the army to take from you." Then, she straightened. "I shall go down and send Benjamin after you. Then, I am going to the dormitory hospital to see what I can do. Merrie? Are you coming to pass out the treats?"

"Coming." Merrie nodded, turning to go.

But Miri heard Gracie's voice behind her, as she and Merrie began to cross the street, saying, "I swear. She's as bossy as I am."