

**UNEXPECTED TREASURE
- YAIRA'S STORY**

MESU ANDREWS

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by Mesu Andrews

Yaira repositioned herself on the donkey, trying to make her left leg stop tingling. “Micah, how much longer till we reach Bethlehem?”

Her brother looked over his left shoulder, frustration crinkling his brow. “Don’t ask again. I told you when we stopped for our midday meal that we’d be there before sunset. Has the sun set?”

She pouted her bottom lip and studied her hands. Micah had been cranky with her ever since Ima and Abba . .

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The donkey stopped its plodding, and Micah’s hands came to rest on Yaira’s legs. “Look at me, little sister.” When she refused, he tipped up her chin. His eyes were ringed with dark circles, and muddy tear streaks stained his cheeks. “I’m sorry I was cross. You’re only seven years old and have never traveled before. I should be more patient.”

Well, now she felt like a baby. She folded her arms across her chest. “I’m fine. Keep going.”

He cupped her cheek in his hand. “I miss Ima and Abba too. I’m sorry I was at the prophet’s camp in Tekoa when the

Philistines attacked.” He dropped his hand and bowed his head, sniffing. “I should have been there to protect you, to protect them.” He wiped his nose on his sleeve.

People stared as they passed by on the merchant’s road toward Bethlehem. Yaira patted his shoulder. “Why can’t you take me back to the prophet’s camp with you? Please, Micah. I’ll be good. I won’t complain. I’ll learn to cook and sew and—”

He wiped his face and looked up at me. “I can’t take care of you, Yaira. You’ll be fine in Bethlehem with Master Abraham and his wife. They’re expecting their first child, and you’ll be a wonderful handmaid to Mistress Esli.”

“Please, Micah. I don’t want to live with strangers. I want to live with you.”

His face grew stern, and she wished she hadn’t argued. “You’re too young to understand, Yaira, but serving in Master Abraham’s household is your best chance at a normal life. You’ll see. Someday, you’ll meet a man, marry, and have beautiful babies I can bounce on my knee.”

Yaira’s final plea came from the deepest sorrow of her heart. “So I lose my parents to a Philistine raid and my big brother to Yahweh’s prophets within a few days?”

Micah raised a single brow. “You’ll make a fine ima someday. You weave guilt the way a weaver works the loom.” He kissed the tip of her nose and started walking again, calling over his shoulder. “No more complaining. We’ll be in Bethlehem soon.”

True to his word, Micah led them to the walled village well before sunset. As they approached, he hailed the judges seated at the southern gate. “Shalom, brothers. I’m looking for Abraham ben Obadiah.”

They pointed toward a fine-looking two-story stone house connected to the outer wall of the city. Micah led the

donkey toward the door, but slowed as they heard a woman shouting inside.

"I'm not without compassion, Abraham. I'm sorry for the orphaned girl, truly, but how will I care for a seven-year-old child when I can barely care for myself?"

Then a man's voice. "You won't need to care for her, Esli. We're taking her in so she can become your handmaid. She'll learn to cook, to clean, to spin, weave—all the things you do."

"And who will teach her, Abraham? You? I'm nine-month's pregnant and can barely care for myself. I'm swollen from head to toe and can't even bend over to lace my sandals!"

"Esli, they'll be here any minute—" It was then that Master Abraham stepped into the doorway and saw Micah and Yaira. His face turned the color of goat's milk. "Um . . . er, uh . . . welcome." He tried to smile, but Yaira couldn't. She wasn't willing to pretend.

Micah stepped toward the doorway and looked inside. "I won't let my sister be a burden, Mistress Esli. I'll gladly take her to the prophet's camp in Tekoa until other arrangements can be made for her well-being. I'm sorry to have inconvenienced you."

Master Abraham grabbed his arm. "No, Micah. Please." He glanced over his shoulder at his wife. "I should have better prepared Esli for Yaira's arrival. My wife is in desperate need of help, and I know your sister will be a great blessing to our household." He met Yaira's frightened gaze. "And I believe we can be a blessing to you too, little one. We want you to be a member of our family, not just a servant. Please, Yaira." He lowered his voice as if sharing a secret, but he still spoke loud enough for the mistress to

hear. "My wife is sort of cranky at first, but she grows on you after a while."

"Abraham!" Mistress shouted from inside.

Yaira giggled in spite of her fear but covered her smile right away and looked at Micah. *What will you do?* He'd made it clear on the way here that she wasn't in charge of her future.

Micah turned from Yaira's pleading gaze and addressed the woman inside the house. "I leave the decision to you, Mistress Esli. Does Yaira stay and become your handmaid, or do I take her to Tekoa and look for another household in which she can serve?"

Yaira heard a shuffling of sandals and then saw a woman appear in the doorway—the most beautiful, most *pregnant* woman she'd ever seen. Mistress Esli inspected Yaira from head to toe, and the girl wished she'd had a chance to at least wash her face beforehand.

When the woman grimaced, Yaira felt certain she would be going to Tekoa, and a piece of her heart rejoiced. But when the woman's grimace turned to a groan, and she doubled over in pain, Yaira realized the mistress' laboring had begun.

Master Abraham led his wife toward their bed chamber and called over his shoulder. "Micah, you and your sister fetch the midwife. Yaira, welcome to our family!"

“**O**ne more strong push, Esli, and your baby will be here.” The midwife crouched between Esli’s knees, holding a clean blanket. Yaira sat on a stool behind her new mistress, who was perched over birthing stones.

“You can do it, Mistress. One more push.” Yaira had never been so exhausted. Nor had she ever felt this kind of excitement. She had labored with her new mistress for nearly two days. They’d cried together, laughed a little. She’d rubbed the woman’s back and feet with scented oils. Now—in just moments—a new little life would enter this world.

Yaira leaned over Mistress Esli’s shoulder and pressed her cheek against the woman’s face. “We’ll push together.” She pressed forward, while the mistress grabbed her knees and grew red-faced with the effort. With the final attempt came a gush of squalling new life.

“It’s a girl!” The midwife caught the babe in the blanket.

Yaira released Mistress Esli, gently resting her back

against the stool. She watched in wonder as the midwife tended to Esli's post-birth needs and then rubbed the baby with salt and wine. The crying infant, intent on trying out her lungs, protested as her skin pinked with the gentle scrubbing. Finally, wrapped and quiet, the little one was placed in Yaira's arms while the midwife helped Mistress onto the sleeping mat beside the birthing stones. Once Esli was settled, she opened her arms, and Yaira offered the baby girl to her ima for the first feeding. The contented sound of suckling brought a smile to three weary faces.

Looking up from her new baby, the mistress called Yaira to sit beside her. "I must ask forgiveness for the things you overheard when you and Micah arrived. My husband's wisdom has often proven beyond my understanding and such was true when he brought you into our lives, Yaira." She pulled the girl close and kissed her forehead. "I'll never be able to repay the blessing you've already shown me."

"You need not repay me, Mistress." Yaira bowed her head, unable to speak past the lump in her throat, and determined to hide her tears on this joyful day.

Mistress tilted up her chin. "I'm so sorry about your parents, little one, and I know you miss them terribly." Yaira nodded. Esli searched her eyes as if looking for a hidden treasure. "Do you know that sometimes our greatest blessing emerges from desolation?"

Yaira shook her head, not sure that she understood the word. "Desolation?"

"*Desolation*. It's like a barren land, where nothing can grow. It's a feeling of forsakenness, abandonment, with seemingly no hope."

"I suppose I know desolation well. I just never knew what it was called."

The mistress' eyes misted. "But remember what I said? Sometimes great blessing comes from that desolation." She looked down at her new baby. "This little one will help you forget your desolation, Yaira. She is mine but also yours. You helped bring her into this world, and you'll help raise her."

Yaira's breath caught as she stroked the baby's downy-soft head. "I thought I was to be your handmaid."

"You will be, but I'll also need a playmate for our daughter—and other children we might have."

"You mean, I can serve you by playing with a baby?"

The mistress laughed, wiping tears from her eyes. "Absolutely. You'll be like her big sister, and she'll be a living reminder to you that Yahweh brings life from desolation."

"Life from desolation," Yaira repeated as she leaned down to kiss the baby's head.

Mistress Esli brushed Yaira's cheek. "We'll call our girl *Ishma—Desolation*. She'll be full of life and joy, reminding us that Yahweh can make even our darkest days shine like the sun."

The door scraped across the packed dirt floor. "Did I hear a baby crying?" Master Abraham poked his head inside. When he glimpsed his wife and baby, he rushed across the room and fell to his knees beside them. He kissed them both and even pecked Yaira's forehead with a kiss. "I'm so proud of all of you."

"Meet your new daughter," the mistress said. "Her name is Ishma."

"Desolation?" His brows knit together.

But before he could criticize, Mistress Esli explained. "It's a lesson for Yaira—for us all—that out of desolation comes Yahweh's most precious gifts."

They exchanged a glance that Yaira couldn't quite deci-

pher. She appreciated Mistress Esli's effort to teach an important lesson, but naming a child *desolation* seemed a dangerous way to go about it. Yaira knew a girl named Joel—*mountain goat*—and the boys always made goat sounds and laughed at her skinny legs. Yaira knew a boy named Gideon—*warrior*—who was constantly fighting with both his enemies and friends. Would this little girl named *desolation* live out its meaning for the rest of her life?

"Yaira?" Master Abraham said. "Did you hear me?"

She felt her cheeks warm. "I'm sorry, Master, no." She stood quickly and bowed. "How may I serve you?"

His features softened, and he laid his arm around her shoulders. "No, Yaira. It is I who wish to serve you." He guided her toward a ladder and pointed toward a second story. "I've taken the bundle of things you brought from home upstairs in your room. It's time you got some rest."

Yaira looked over her shoulder at Mistress Esli. "But what if she needs—"

"You get some sleep." I'll care for Esli and the baby for a while. "When you feel rested, we'll show you what other chores will be asked of you. Go on now."

Tentatively, she climbed the ladder, looking back at the mistress with each step. Would she change her mind and wish Yaira gone by the time she woke? As she laid down on a straw mat and rested her head on a piece of lamb's wool, Yaira wrestled with more questions chasing each other in circles around her mind.

Would the baby be all right? The midwife said she was healthy, but Yaira heard babies sometimes died for no reason at all. When Abba and Ima died, did they just go into darkness, or did they live somewhere else? Would she ever see them again?

An overwhelming yawn nearly swallowed her face, and

she snuggled onto her side, closing her eyes against the afternoon sun. When she woke, she would help fix the evening meal. When she woke, she would prove her worth to both Master and Mistress. When she woke, perhaps she could hold little Ishma again

Yaira stirred the pot of lentils and added half-a-pitcher of water so the stew could cook a while longer without sticking. She'd been helping her ima in the kitchen since she was five and knew three recipes by heart. Simple wheat bread, the staple of every Judean household. Gruel with a little honey for morning meals. And lentil stew with onions and garlic to satisfy evening hunger.

The first week's lunches had been goat cheese, olives, dates, and whatever fresh produce Master Abraham brought home from the market. The women of Bethlehem had helped supplement their sparse menu by sharing offerings from their own tables when they came to visit Mistress and little Ishma.

Only a few careless remarks had been made about the baby's name, but Mistress Esli responded with what Yaira learned was her usual silk-covered brick. "Abraham and I believe it's not the name that makes the child but the child that makes the name." She smiled sweetly at a woman named Abana. "Surely, your parents would never have

named you *Made of Stone* had they not believed you could soften a heart.”

Abana smiled just as sweetly, placed her kettle of lamb stew on the table and wished the mistress good day before scurrying out the door. Yaira tried not to giggle, but failed miserably.

On the morning of Ishma's eighth day, Mistress met Yaira as she climbed down the ladder at dawn. “I'm tired of watching you do all the work, Yaira. It's time I resumed my household duties.” Her eyes looked tired but determined. Master Abraham had already gone to sit in his judge's seat at the city gate. There would be no arguing with the mistress.

Without a word, Yaira hurried back up the ladder and returned with a sling she'd fashioned for the woman. “This is my gift for you and the baby.” She ducked her head. “I suppose it's not a real gift since Master Abraham purchased the cloth, but I sewed the ends together to make an infant sling. Here. Let me show you.”

She slipped it over Esli's head and under one arm, and then wrap it twice around her waist to keep the baby safe and warm. “See? It will hold Ishma against your chest so you can nurse or simply close enough that she can hear your heartbeat while she sleeps. My ima always gave a sling to the new imas in our village.”

Mistress' face lit up as if Yaira had given her all the gold in Judah. “A few of the women in Bethlehem have these, but I never knew how they worked.” She kissed the top of Yaira's head. “Thank you, love. Let's grind some grain and see how Ishma likes it.”

The baby slept while Mistress Esli and Yaira worked together all morning. They ground grain, baked bread, and

spun wool, talking of Yaira's parents, the Philistine raid, and Micah.

"He's much older than me," Yaira said, standing and twirling her spindle beside Mistress' stool.

The woman looked up, brows furrowed. "Did your parents ever say why there were so many years between you?"

"Ima said she nearly died giving birth to Micah, and the midwife told her she might never have another child. She always called me her unexpected treasure." Yaira smiled at the memory despite the heartache. Oh, how she missed her ima.

"She sounds like a lovely woman. I wish I could have met her." Mistress gazed down at baby Ishma, and Yaira was happy for the silence. Sometimes she just wanted to think and not talk.

"Yaira?"

She tried not to sigh. "Yes, Mistress?"

"You are my unexpected treasure too."

Tears burned Yaira's eyes. "Thank you, Mistress. I hope I don't disappoint you."

They finished their morning chores in comfortable silence. Yaira sliced some bread, a little cheese, and set out the olives, dates, and pistachios from yesterday's lunch. They heard footsteps approaching, but Yaira noted the surprise in Mistress Esli's greeting. "Well, shalom. We weren't expecting you today."

Yaira looked up and found both Master Abraham and her brother standing in the doorway. Micah's eyes were fixed on her, sadness clouding his features. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about you, little sister. How unhappy you were when I left." He turned to Esli. "I've come to take her to

Tekoa. There's a family who will keep her until I can find her a permanent home."

The sound of rushing waters filled Yaira's ears, and she reached for the table to steady herself. The air in the room seemed to thicken, and she began to gasp, taking giant gulps of it.

Master Abraham swept her into his arms and carried her into his and Mistress Esli's bedchamber. When Master tried to lay her on the bed, Yaira struggled against him. "No! I can't . . . can't be . . . a bother."

"Shh, Yaira." He stood then, pulling her against his chest with a crushing hug. "Little one, you are never a bother." She felt Mistress Esli's arms surround them both, holding on so tight, little Ishma squalled her complaint from within the sling.

Yaira's breathing slowed, her panic quieting in the reassuring embrace of these people she'd come to love. She kept her face buried in the curve of Master Abraham's neck, still not able to trust her voice. Could she trust her heart? She'd only known the master and mistress for a week, but the thought of leaving them and little Ishma twisted her chest into knots.

"Please, Yaira," she heard Mistress whisper, "you are our unexpected treasure. Stay. Please stay."

Yaira lifted her head and saw *wanting* on both Master and Mistress' faces. Yes, she could trust her heart and these people. "I'll stay forever." She wrapped an arm around each of their necks and squeezed them like the lifeline they were.

Micah stood in the doorway, chuckling. "I guess I can go back to Tekoa then—alone."

Yaira squirmed in the master's arms, and he released her to run to her brother. Micah swooped her up and swung her around. They laughed as they did before the Philistine raid,

before they were orphans. “I love you,” she said. “Thank you for coming back for me.”

He set her feet on the floor and knelt to meet her eye-to-eye. “I love you too, little one. Thank you for letting Yahweh give you a new life in Bethlehem.”

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