

No Man's Chattel

This is scene from the first chapter of No Man's Chattel, in which you can meet many of the characters who make up the story line of this book.

Hannah picked up the broom and went to the new kitchen, brushing down the cobwebs as she went. As she carried her first load of debris outside, a rap on the door startled her, causing her to drop much of it. Sonny jumped up to greet their first visitor.

"Howdy." Sonny smiled broadly as he pushed open the door.

A tall bronze man, well over six feet tall, stood holding a Union military cap in his hand. "Mornin' to y'all. My name is Marcus Kincaid. Before the war, we was Mr. Hugh's people."

Hannah hadn't considered the possibility that people who once lived and worked at Sanctuary Hill would remain on the property. The Emancipation Proclamation in '63 broke legal ties to slavery. Yet, here at the back door stood a man who had more right to this land than she did. He had worked the land. She quickly walked to the door.

"Is there something you need?" Hannah wiped her face with her arm.

"Yes, ma'am. My wife and me, we seen y'all move in dis house yesterday. We think y'all be Mr. Hugh's kin. We wants to know do we gotta go now?" Marcus looked at the ground and shuffled his feet.

Naomi stepped up. "Where do you live now?"

"We live with our young'uns where we been all our days. Us and my wife's kin, we all got our place down in the quarters. One of her brothers, Lucas, lives with his two boys just down the road a piece."

"Well, I don't remember you. Just who's been takin' care of you since my father left Sanctuary Hill?"

"Why, Miss Naomi, we been takin' care of ourselves, just like we always do. I surely 'member you. We took care of the horses of your weddin' visitors. Lucas and me, just boys then."

"No, no. I don't know you. Go away."

Hannah interceded. "Mother Naomi, please calm down. I know you're still tired. Maybe you should go back to lie down for a while."

"I need to find..."

"No, let me take care of it. Go and read for a while. Your bed is comfortable." Naomi left the room, miffed at being dismissed.

"Tell me, Mr. Kincaid, have you lived at Sanctuary Hill long?"

“I ain’t never lived nowhere else. I was born here. My mam and pap come here when Mr. Hugh bought this place.”

“Didn’t you and your family want to go North when President Lincoln said the Southern landowners couldn’t own slaves anymore?”

Marcus looked directly into Hannah’s face. “Where to should we goes? We don’t know no other kind of life. Mr. Hugh treat us good. We never go hungry when he was here. He never beat us or treat us poorly. When he got sick and left Sanctuary Hill, he say we be free. He even hand us a little money, but we didn’t know a better life was in the North, so we stay.”

“Was ya scared when the soldiers came?” Sonny asked.

“No. We just stayed away from those soldiers in the gray suits. I fought with the Yanks for a time, but when my pap died, I had to come home to take care of my kin.”

“How much family do you have, Marcus?”

“Just me and my wife, Shataka. We got us two chil’ren, our boy Abraham and our baby that we named Glory.”

“You said ya have a brother. I had a brother, but he got killed in the war.” Sonny continued to look at the stranger at the door.

“Lucas is Shataka’s brother, son of Rose, and his two boys are David and Jonathan. My wife’s grandmam is Mom Bec, probably named Rebecca, but no one knows. It’s so long ago. Shataka’s mam is Rose. Shataka’s got a younger sister and brother. Ain’t no more of Mr. Hugh’s people.”

“I’m glad you’ve been able to keep your family together.” Hannah shook her head. The man in front of her wanted an answer. She didn’t know enough about this new state or what provisions would come from Hugh Kincaid’s will to give him an answer that he could rely on. She knew that she couldn’t take on any further financial obligations. Yet these people had been resourceful and industrious enough to care for themselves for more than a year without any assistance from the owner of Sanctuary Hill.

He asked again, “Do we gotta go now?”

“I will be honest with you, Marcus. I don’t know what lies ahead for us or this property. We will meet Mr. Kincaid’s attorney in a couple of days. I see no reason for you to leave a place you’ve called home your entire life if you want to stay and can provide for yourself.”

“We been doin’ that all the time, ma’am. Thank ya. Will ya have work for us?” He looked up.

“There is certainly much to be done here, but right now, I don’t know how much we will be able to pay. Again, we will know more in a few days.”

“Well, to start we can help ya get this house cleaned up. Those soldiers that stayed here in ’64 tore up Mr. Hugh’s house right bad.”

“Thank you, Marcus. I’ll find some way to pay for your labor,” Hannah said.

“I wanna help too, Hannah. Can I help him?”

Hannah smiled. "Yes, Sonny, but it may not be much fun."

Marcus turned to leave but stopped. "I'll get my family, and we'll start after we eat. What you want us to do first?"

"Well, Marcus and Sonny, maybe we can make this room into a working kitchen."

And the work began. By nightfall, the large room was free of debris, clean, and set up as a kitchen with an eat-in dining area. Sonny had worked miracles. Much to her amazement, Hannah learned that her not-overly-bright brother-in-law was a natural woodworker. He had fashioned a table from the desktop and four pieces of lumber from the shed. Four chairs, mismatched and not much to look at, sat around the table, but they were sturdy enough to hold any adult who chose to sit down.

Marcus's mother-in-law kicked at the back door as Hannah's work crew was finishing the last chores of the day and preparing to leave for their cabins. With the infant Glory on her back in a sling, she held a large stew kettle with a heavy cloth. "Open the door before I spill the supper." Lucas pushed the door open, and she stepped in and plopped the pot on the cast iron stove, in which Shataka and Sonny had just built a fire.

"Mam, watcha mean bringin' Glory down here on your back?"

"Hesh yerself, Shataka. I done carried you like that 'til you could walk. Didn't hurt you none," Rose said.

"Hello. You must be Rose. Your family has been talking about you," Hannah said.

"I'm sure they have. Been wonderin' when the vittles would be fixed. I'm sure everyone's hungry and wanna good supper. This stew's fine. It's got some rabbit and a little smoked ham with lots of vegetables. Since ya got that oven a goin' now, I'll fix us a pone, and we'll all have a fine supper."

"Mam, we'd a been home in a while."

"Girl, you just hesh up. We gonna share this supper with Mr. Hugh's kin tonight. You know they ain't had time to lay back a larder."

Hannah's jaw dropped. This family had come this morning thinking she'd send them away from their home and now was offering to feed them.

"You want to share your supper with us?" Hannah asked just as Naomi entered the new kitchen. She stood looking at the conversion of her father's study into a kitchen/dining room.

"Hannah Ruth, this will never do. You know it's too dangerous to have a stove in the house—too much danger of the house catching fire."

"Hello, Miss Naomi," Rose spoke to her old playmate.

"Who are you? Oh, I know. You're Hephzibah, my mama's laundress."

“Yes, ma’am. When we grew up together, we had us some nice times then. I ‘member days when we were little girls, playing down by the creek. We picked wildflowers to make posey crowns for our hair.”

“I don’t remember any such thing. Hephzibah, are you going to cook for us?”

“My name’s Rose, now. Never did like that Bible name much. In the Bible, her son was a cruel king. When Mr. Lincoln freed us, I decided to be Rose because I couldn’t think of a prettier sight. Now I am Rose Kincaid.”

Sonny asked, “Did all of you change your names?”

“I did,” Shataka said. “Mr. Hugh called me Patsy. I don’t think that’s a good name for a strong free woman like me. I read somewhere that Shataka means free spirits that sting or charm. She knows what she wants and why she wants it. That’s who I am.”

Naomi looked at the younger woman. “Can you read?”

“‘Course I can. All Mr. Hugh’s people know how to read and write and do sums. He ‘spected us to read the Good Book.”

“Oh, my. Was my father breakin’ the law?” Naomi grabbed the back of a chair. Hannah knew a fainting spell was in the making. “Hannah, send these people away. I must rest.”

“No, Mother. These people have called this land home as long as your family has. They’ve brought us a hot meal tonight.”

“Hannah! Have you forgotten who you are?” Naomi’s cheeks blanched.

“No, ma’am. I have worked all day right alongside these people. They offered to feed us, and I’m hungry. I’m gonna eat with them.”

Sonny added, “Me, too. I’m real hungry.”

“Well, when they leave, I want to talk with you in my room.” Naomi turned, hobbled across the hall, and slammed the door.

Within half an hour, Hannah sat with Sonny, Lucas, and his sons, Shataka and her entire family, Rose, and Mom Bec—all with steaming cups of stew before them. She cut the pone into wedges and was about to plunge her spoon into the savory dish.

“Miss Hannah, would ya let Lucas speak grace over our supper before we eat?” Shataka’s voice trembled a bit as she asked.