

Star of Wonder



CRYSTAL CAUDILL

*When they had heard the king, they departed;
and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east,
went before them, till it came and stood over where
the young child was. When they saw the star,
they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.*

MATTHEW 2:9-10

Chapter One



December 2, 1884

THE DAY CELESTIA Isaacs met Aldrich Weise at a shareholder soiree, she knew they'd marry. Too bad the man was too thickheaded to realize it. Call her impatient, but two years was long enough for him to come around. By the end of this Christmas voyage on his family's newest steamer, marriage would be on his mind. Even if she had to propose to him herself.

The image provoked a smile she quickly squelched. It wouldn't do for her brother, Josiah, to notice and question her motives for joining the otherwise male investor tour of the New York City docks. While the operations behind the *Golden Gestirn* genuinely interested her, she would have forgone the chilly outdoor excursion if it weren't for Aldrich's presence.

At long last the carriage rolled to a stop at the end of Clarkson Street, where pier after pier extended into the North River. Celestia repositioned herself to better see through the window, and her grin escaped. She'd never traveled by ship, let alone been to a port. Overwhelming smells of salt water, fish, and machine grease saturated the damp air. Warehouse-like buildings ran the length of the piers. The black funnels and tall masts of moored ships rose to greet cornflower skies. Dockworkers, fishmongers, and wagons intermingled with the polished carriages, hired hacks, and travelers arriving to board ships destined to cross the great Atlantic. The noisy bustle of it all

reverberated through their closed carriage and thrummed through her with the promise of excitement and adventure.

“You look as if you wish to jump from the carriage and sniff the area like a dog.” Josiah chuckled from his reclined position opposite her.

“Not a dog, but perhaps a bird. Then I could soar about and perch on the masts to take it all in at once.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to use your legs and be content with seeing the docks from your position at my side.” His teasing tone turned serious. “This is no place to wander off. Pickpockets, lechers, and worse would target you in less than a minute. I promised Mother you’d be safe, and I need your word that you’ll stay with me.”

“I’m not three anymore. I know the dangers, and I promise to be an angel.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that answer. Devils were once angels, you know.”

Celestia smacked his arm. “If anyone’s devilish, it’s you, Mr. I’ve-had-nine-engagements-in-ten-years.”

“Better nine engagements than nine marriages. Losing one wife was enough for me.”

Their driver opened the door, and the intensity of the noise and smells smacked her afresh. Renewed excitement scattered all her thoughts. She almost forgot to accept the driver’s hand down before hopping to the ground. Josiah’s easy laugh behind her indicated he hadn’t missed her near faux pas, but he didn’t chide her as Mother would have. He led her to the entrance of Pier 40, where a large group of men smoked and conversed.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen. It’s a fine day for a tour,” Josiah greeted from a distance.

Their attention skipped over him and riveted on her. A flurry of stomping out cigarettes and waving away the smoke followed.

Oh dear. She hadn’t meant to infringe upon their relaxed fellowship.

Aldrich emerged from the group, and her stomach fluttered at the sight of his handsome face and the tenderness in his hazel eyes.

Whoever said absence makes the heart grow fonder trivialized the effect separation had on two people. Fondness failed to describe the magnitude of joy Aldrich's presence brought after not seeing him since last month's joint astronomy club excursion. As he drew nearer, his lips curved upward and conveyed not only he'd missed her, too, but that the subtle allusions to a future together had not faded from his mind either. Maybe it wouldn't be difficult to encourage a proposal from him after all. Emboldened, she reached for his hand.

He responded in kind, but when their fingers brushed, he dropped his hand and stiffened in reconsideration. Deep furrows formed in his high forehead, and his face became a study of disconcertion.

"Why are you here, Fräulein Isaacs?"

His callous welcome struck her dumb. Had she done something wrong?

Josiah's gentle nudge reminded her of his earlier warning. This was not an astronomy club gathering where she and Aldrich could talk and disappear into a world of their own. It was a business meeting, and business and women rarely mixed. Perhaps that was all that was amiss.

Even so, this was Aldrich, a man who openly admired his mother's participation with managing the New York office. Didn't that mean he wanted a wife who took an interest in the business as well?

Aldrich released a frustrated sigh. "Forgive me. I expected you to remain at the hotel."

"Is my presence unwelcome?"

He shifted uncomfortably and looked to Josiah.

Josiah shrugged, as if saying, *I tried to convince her to stay behind.*

All confidence in earning Aldrich's favor with her presence popped like a soap bubble.

"You are most welcome." His wan smile belied his answer. "However, I fear you will find the tour a tedious affair."

"On the contrary." She gifted him her brightest expression. "I'm eager to learn about the operations of my family's newest investment."

"Then may everything be found to your satisfaction." He dipped his head, closing their discussion, and addressed her brother. "Does this change our meeting plans for after the tour?"

“No. Celestia will wait with the driver until we’re finished.”

She opened her mouth to object, then clamped it shut. Obviously she’d intruded on more than a tour. Perhaps that explained his reticence.

Aldrich nodded and hesitated at her side in awkward silence. After shaking his head, he rejoined the group of men without a word.

What were Josiah and Aldrich up to? Josiah wouldn’t relegate her to a carriage in an unfamiliar area without a serious reason. “What—”
“Please, Celestia. No questions. I cannot answer them.”

Couldn’t answer them? “Would this meeting have something to do with your profession?” She knew better than to name it in public. Even Mother and Father abided by his requirement that his position as a Secret Service operative be kept quiet, and Father rarely allowed anyone to dictate anything to him.

Josiah drew in a long-suffering breath, giving her his answer.

Why would a Secret Service operative from Philadelphia need to meet with a shipowner based in New York City?

Aldrich’s voice rose from the front, where he addressed the tour group. “Before we begin, allow me to introduce *meinen Bruder*, Brenner Weise, the newest addition to Deutsch-Amerika leadership.”

A young man who appeared several years Aldrich’s junior stepped to his side. The family resemblance was undeniable. Brenner bore their father’s high forehead like a family branding. His eyes were a far lighter shade than Aldrich’s, although that probably resulted from the gaiety emanating from them. Even his smile declared him a jovial spirit.

Brenner’s attention landed on her, and his lopsided grin grew impossibly wide. “Guten Tag. I look forward to making your acquaintance during our journey together.”

His gaze lingered on hers, giving the distinct impression he specifically meant her. She severed eye contact and pretended to pick at her sleeve. Her behavior bordered on rude, but she wanted to send a clear message that his was not the attention she desired.

Aldrich cleared his throat.

Was that jealousy she detected? He need not be concerned with

where her affections lay. They were—and always would be—with him. Before she could reassure him with a smile, he redirected his attention to Brenner's continued speech.

"After eighteen months of promises for a victor in the competitive market of ocean travel, we present to you *der Golden Gestirn*." Brenner gestured to the enormous ship behind him.

Celestia craned her neck to read the gold lettering of the ship's name against the black hull. Three masts capable of bearing sails flanked the two red-and-black funnels near the ship's center. White lifeboats capable of carrying dozens of people hung from rails along the top deck. How such a behemoth moved at anything more than a snail's pace was beyond comprehension.

Aldrich continued where Brenner left off. "Today, passengers desire a combination of speed, safety, and luxury. The *Golden Gestirn* provides the best of all three. Three-crank compressed engines give her the potential to reach a designed speed of 19.5 knots. The hull is divided into ten watertight compartments, and the bulkheads are carried to the upper deck and are fitted with fireproof and waterproof doors. Saloon passengers will experience luxury that exceeds the exquisiteness of Europe's finest palaces. Already the public tours have generated sales beyond expectation and suggest a payoff on your investment well in advance of the promised timeline."

A rumble of approval arose at his last statement.

They followed Aldrich down the pier as he identified the various features engineered by the genius of ship designers, William Pearce. Not that she could make out much of what he said. Josiah held her captive at the back of the group. With great effort, she eventually escaped his overbearing hold and slipped to the front beside Aldrich. Certainly no danger awaited her here. All of their party were respected shareholders and Aldrich a perfect gentleman.

While Aldrich didn't take her arm, he did adjust his position to provide a protective boundary between her and the edge of the pier. Probably a wise decision, given the sound of his voice mesmerized her. As a second-generation immigrant, Aldrich mostly spoke German with his family, giving his speech an accent that never ceased

to fascinate her. His enthusiastic hope in breaking the *Oregon's* Blue Riband speed record with the *Golden Gestirn's* maiden voyage brought out a thicker tinge to his speech, and she adored it.

Midway through the tour, Brenner came alongside her and offered his arm. Etiquette demanded she accept, especially given who he was, but she'd have much preferred Aldrich to extend the courtesy. Brenner was a gentleman by all means, but he slowed his steps, forcing the space between her and Aldrich to grow. When they fell into step with Josiah, she suspected her brother had arranged her subtle return.

She sent Josiah an accusing scowl, which he deftly ignored.

"Do not hold it against him," Brenner whispered. "This meeting is important to Aldrich, and there were several men who appeared distracted."

By her.

Her shoulders sank. She hadn't meant to disrupt Aldrich's meeting. "I suppose Josiah was right. I shouldn't have come."

"I disagree. Your interest is admirable. In fact"—he bestowed his smile and sparkling eyes upon her—"I am rather pleased by it."

How to respond? She didn't want to encourage his flirtations, but she was thankful for his soothing over her mistake. "Please accept my apologies and extend them to your brother as well."

"Apology accepted." He winked. "Might you consider promenading on the dock with me while our *Brüder* meet instead of waiting alone in the carriage?"

"I'll have to ask Josiah. He's exceedingly protective of me."

"As he should be."

Much to her surprise, when the tour ended and Brenner asked, Josiah consented. "So long as you stay within view."

Aldrich didn't seem pleased, but he and Josiah moved to a more secluded area.

"Shall we?" Brenner offered his arm and led them along the boundary of the loading area.

They paused to watch as a crane attached to the front of the ship lifted one of a dozen crates from the pier to the deck far above them.

Once unloaded, the net lowered over the side once more to claim its next cargo.

“What do the crates hold?” she asked.

“Most are supplies for the journey, although that is not even a quarter of it. A sailing of more than a week with five hundred crew members and nearly eight hundred passengers requires a great deal of preparation.”

“So many people?”

“It will be more on the return trip. Thirteen hundred passengers, in addition to the crew. The vast majority of those in steerage are immigrants, so more travel west than east.”

“Is it profitable to sail a ship with more than five hundred empty berths?”

That lopsided grin appeared again. “Very astute. Our eastbound sailings are not as profitable as our westbound. However, we fill the unused steerage with cargo and recover the majority of the deficit.”

Raised voices near the crates stacked at the pier’s edge halted their conversation. The words sounded foreign. Not German—she’d spent the last year and a half studying it in hopes of impressing Aldrich and his family—but the language was familiar. She tugged Brenner past crates toward the ruckus.

Two men with olive complexions and dark hair lobbed their foreign conversation back and forth. Their hands spoke as much as, if not louder than, their words. Palms smacked against chests, and they parried one another until they were dangerously close to the edge.

The lankier one shoved a few banknotes in the stockier one’s face. “*Non va bene.*”

A romantic language. While not French like she’d studied before meeting Aldrich, the languages were similar enough to garner a basic understanding. *No good.* Did Lanky mean he wanted more? Or that the money he waved in Stocky’s face was spurious?

Stocky replied too fast for a translation attempt, but his return shove was clear enough.

Someone was bound to get hurt. “We should do something.”

“Not *we*.” Brenner frowned. “I will return you to your carriage and then intervene.”

That might be the wisest choice for her safety, but an imprudent one for the men. She glanced back at the fight, undecided if she should comply or force the issue.

Stocky held a roll of money out of reach, and Lanky lunged.

Bills scattered across the pier and into the water.

With a furious growl, Stocky delivered a punch that sent Lanky flying over the edge.

“You have to help him now!” Celestia pushed Brenner toward the fight and then screamed for help.

Stocky’s attention snapped from collecting the money to her. Eyes equal parts brown and green locked onto hers, icy as the Delaware River in January. A shiver coursed through her even as her heart beat with wild fury.

He shot to his feet. With a speed she didn’t expect, he slugged Brenner in the gut, shoved him aside, and sprinted straight toward her.

She tried to step out of the way, but her heel met air.

Stocky slammed into her, and her body sailed backward.

By the time she pushed through the shock of impact, she was falling with nothing to grab. The bright world above the pier disappeared, and a shadowy underbelly replaced it. She opened her mouth to scream or pray—or something—but the river rushed in to greet her with its frigid embrace.