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"Under His Wings," "Christmas Past," and "A Christmas Hope" edited by Kathryn S. Olson;
"Beauty of the Season" edited by Chimena Kabasenché

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A victorian Christmas cottage / Catherine Palmer . . . [et al.].

p. cm.

Contents: Under his wings / Catherine Palmer — Christmas past / Debra White Smith — A Christmas hope / Jeri Odell — The beauty of the season / Peggy Stoks.

ISBN 0-8423-1905-0

1. Christmas stories, American. 2. Historical fiction, American. 3. Love stories, American. I. Palmer, Catherine, date.

PS648.C45V515 1999

813'.0108334—dc21

99-34158

Printed in the United States of America

06 05 04 03 02 01

10 9 8 7 6 5 4

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CHAPTER ONE

*May the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you
have come to take refuge, reward you fully.*

RUTH 2:12

1870—BRACKENDALE MANOR IN CUMBRIA,
NORTHWEST ENGLAND

A light glimmered in the kitchen window. Lord William Langford, the earl of Beaumontfort, breathed a sigh of relief, shouldered his hunting rifle, and trudged through the deep snow around the perimeter of Brackendale House. Annoyed to find his country home shut up tight the very evening before he was due to arrive from London, the earl made a mental note to have a chat with Yardley about the matter. The butler should know better than to lock all the doors and abandon the place. What if someone should need lodging?

Stamping his boots on the stone step, Beaumontfort gave the kitchen door a good pounding. There, that should register his displeasure over the entire situation. No doubt whoever had remained in the house this evening would spread the word among the permanent staff that, upon his untimely arrival in Cumbria, the earl had been miffed indeed.

"I say!" he called, giving the wrought-iron handle a jiggle. "Do be sensible and open this wretched door."

Bad enough he'd missed his shot at a large deer poised on the shore of a half-frozen tarn at the outskirts of his property. There would be no fresh venison for the table tomorrow. An unexpected snowfall had shrouded trees and

blanketed the roadway, making travel chancy at such a late hour. The whole situation had been compounded by his horse's stumble, which nearly sent the earl head over heels and caused the poor animal to pull up lame. Leaving the creature at the deserted stables, he had trudged through the snow, with hopes of a hearty welcome from the small staff he kept in permanent residence at the House. Instead, he found his own home shut up for the night. Abominable.

Restless with the plans, ambitions, and goals that filled his London life, the earl had been felled recently by a minor illness that unexpectedly had drained him of vigor. The doctor had prescribed nothing more than a strong dose of peace and quiet. A few hours of amusement, perhaps a chat with a friend or two, and a great deal of rest would be just the ticket. Beaumontfort decided upon a visit to his country home—a place where he surely would be welcomed and tended to by his devoted staff. So where were they?

"Are you quite deaf?" Beaumontfort cried, giving the door another hammering. When no one answered, he strode to a diamond-paned kitchen window. His feet were nearly frozen, and he could hardly feel his fingers inside his gloves. The fire sending a wisp of smoke from the manor's chimney would warm him—if he could ever get inside.

Lamplight shone through the soot that coated the thick glass panes. He could not discern anyone inside, but he felt confident Yardley would not have left a lamp burning unattended.

The earl tapped on the window. Nothing. His ire rising, he lifted his riding crop and gave one of the small glass panes a good whack. It broke loose from the leading and fell to the stone floor with a crash.

"Oh, what have you done now?" The female voice was angry. "You've broken the window! Wicked man! Be gone at once. Shoo!"

Beaumontfort peered through the empty pane into the

kitchen. At that moment, a single, large brown eye filled the leaded diamond. Startled, the earl took a step backward.

"Good heavens," he exclaimed. "What on earth?"

"Who, don't you mean?" The brown eye blinked. "It is I, Gwyneth Rutherford of Brackendale House. You have broken the earl's window, sir, and Cook will be jolly angry tomorrow, I assure you. I trust you're prepared to pay for a new pane, because I shall not take responsibility for your vandalism."

"Vandalism? Upon my word—"

"I know 'twas you who broke the window. Don't even attempt to deny it. I was standing directly before the fire stirring the stew when I heard the pane fall to the floor. And I can promise you that the earl's glass windows—"

"Enough about the earl and his blasted glass windows, girl. Open the door and let me come in."

"Certainly not!"

Beaumontfort gritted his teeth. He was not the sort of fellow to lose his temper easily. In fact, he admired the young woman's loyalty to the household and her determination to keep out vagabonds. All the same, his toes were likely to begin to chip off inside his boots at any moment.

"My dear woman," he began, calming his voice. "I have journeyed all the way from Kendal this day, losing my path twice, encountering a raging blizzard, having my horse go lame, and failing to shoot the deer that would have been my dinner on the morrow. I have not eaten for a good six hours, and I am ravenous. Should you fail to open this door at once, I am likely to bash it in."

The brown eye grew larger for a moment. "Were you shooting on the earl of Beaumontfort's manor? That's poaching, you know. Highly illegal. 'Tis a blessed thing you missed the deer. No one but the earl and his own personal—"

"I *am* the earl of Beaumontfort!" He jerked off his glove

and pushed his signet ring into the open diamond. "And I am the lord of this manor. I have the right to shoot my own deer, break my own window panes, and—if perchance God still looks favorably upon me—enter my own home. Would you be so good as to open the door, please, Miss Rutherford?"

"M-Mrs. Rutherford," she stammered. The brown eye vanished from the window, and in a moment the door creaked open.

Beaumontfort pushed it back and stepped into the warmth of the cavernous kitchen at the back of Brackendale House. The woman, a slender creature garbed in a plain brown plaid dress and white apron, gave him an awkward curtsy. He would have preferred to ignore her and proceed directly to his private rooms, but the earl knew she was his only hope for a decent meal.

"Mrs. Rutherford," he said, striding across the stone floor toward the hearth. "I don't recognize you. You must be new on staff. Do be so good as to prepare a platter of cold meats for my evening repast. I should like a loaf of fresh bread, as well, and perhaps some gingerbread. And could you please enlighten me as to the reason Yardley locked all the doors and vanished? I'm due to arrive in Cumbria tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow is not today, sir," she said. "Mr. Yardley ordered the house prepared for your arrival, and then he gave the staff the evening off. After all, you'll be in residence until after the new year, will you not, sir? With all the guests and parties and dinners you'll be having here, no one on staff will have a moment to himself until you've gone away to London again. You keep only a small permanent staff here, sir, so all of us shall be required to labor long hours. This is a night for the village families and, no, you may not have fresh bread because all of Sukey's children *and* her husband have come down with influenza. She was unable to bake any-

thing at all today, but I can pour out crumpets."

Beaumontfort turned from the fire and stared. What an impudent young woman. What utter candor. . . . What astonishing beauty.

Mrs. Rutherford's clear, rose-cheeked skin was set off by a wealth of coal black hair swept up into a knot from which stray wisps drifted around her fine little chin. Her lips, though softly pink, expressed confidence and determination. Framed by a set of long black lashes, her intelligent brown eyes met his in an unwavering assessment. The earl felt suddenly not so much lord of the manor as an insect specimen on a skewer. He actually had the urge to wriggle in discomfort as she continued to look him over.

"They were quite wrong about you," she said suddenly. "They told me you were old and crotchety. You aren't old at all."

"Quite crotchety, though."

Her lips parted in a radiant smile that crinkled her eyes at the corners. "Perhaps you are, sir. But 'tis nothing that cannot be cured with a strong dose of cheer and good humor."

"Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of a strong dose of hot tea."

"Exactly," she said. "Nothing warms the heart like tea. Do seat yourself beside the fire, sir, and I'll give my stew a stir. After that, I shall put on a kettle and carve a bit of beef from the shoulder we had this evening. Would you like crumpets?"

"Indeed. Have we jam? I do enjoy jam with my crumpets." Beaumontfort settled into a large square-backed wooden chair and bent to tug off his boots.

"Allow me, sir," Mrs. Rutherford said, kneeling at his feet. "Strawberry jam. And 'tis truly delicious. You really must come out to Brackendale Manor in the springtime, sir. This year the whole village went into the hills and valleys to pick strawberries, and I can tell you I never had such a lovely

time in my life." She pulled off one boot, and landed on her backside in a heap—though she never stopped talking for even a breath. "I used to live in Wales, and we don't often find wild strawberries there—at least not in the mining areas. 'Tis dreadfully rocky, and one wouldn't want to picnic as your staff did by the lake. We had singing and poetry and games. You would have loved it."

"Would I?"

She glanced up, as though she'd forgotten to whom she was speaking. "Anyone would. Even crotchety old earls."

"I'm forty-one, Mrs. Rutherford."

"I'm just past thirty," she said, setting his boots near the fire. "But I'm not crotchety in the least."

"Then why are you alone here in my house whilst the rest of the staff have taken the night off to be with their families?"

"My family is only Mrs. Rutherford, my late husband's mother, though she is more than dear to me," she said, standing and giving him a gentle smile. "She can hardly keep her eyes open past seven, and so the cottage grows a bit quiet in the evenings. I thought I should like to keep myself busy and help out in the village if I could. Mr. Yardley gave me permission to gather up the leavings in the kitchen each night and take them down to the village to feed the hungry."

"Leavings?"

"Scraps of potato, bits of meat, bones, bacon ends, carrots, turnips, that sort of thing."

"I received no word that the villagers were hungry."

"Then you are ill informed." Turning, she began to stir the stew in the large black cauldron. "Honestly, some families are barely getting by," she said softly. "Poor Sukey won't be able to work again until her family is recovered from the influenza. Her husband is an ironmonger, and he's terribly ill at the moment. She's frightened, poor thing. Without their wages, how can they hope to feed all the children? They

have five, you know, and one is just a baby. So I gather the leavings into a pot each evening and boil a big stew. Then I put on a kettle of tea, collect the lumps of leftover bread, and carry it all down the hill in the vegetable man's wagon."

She hung the dripping ladle on a hook beside the fire and vanished into the shadows of the pantry. Beaumontfort wriggled his toes, decided they were thawing nicely, and stifled a yawn. Rather comfortable here in the kitchen, he thought. Though he longed for time to relax, he didn't often take time away from his business. Most evenings in London, he entertained guests at home or ventured by carriage through the grimy streets to his gentlemen's club or to some acquaintance's house. Life had not always been so.

"You look a hundred miles away, sir," Mrs. Rutherford said, returning with a plate piled with thinly shaved cold meat. "Might I ask where your thoughts have taken you?"

"Here, actually. To Cumbria. When I was a boy, I roamed the Lake District entirely alone. I wasn't earl at that time, of course, and I had few responsibilities. I was merely William. Nothing more ponderous than that. Often I vanished for days at a time, and no one bothered to look for me."

"Goodness," she said, sifting flour into a bowl. "I should have looked for you at once."

He glanced up, surprise tilting the corners of his mouth. "Really, Mrs. Rutherford?"

"I wouldn't want you to feel lonely. A child should have the freedom to explore the world a bit, but he ought to know he's loved at home, as well."

The earl considered her words. Unorthodox, but charming. "Have you children, madam?"

"No, sir." She bit her lower lip as she stirred in some milk.

"Nor have I. Never married, actually. Haven't given it much thought, though I've been advised I should. Heirs, you know."

"Yes, sir."

“Should I ever have children, I would permit them to explore the dales and fells,” he mused, recalling his own wanderings across valleys and hills covered in feathery green bracken. “I would give them a boat and let them row out on the tarns.”

“Did you have a boat?”

He nodded. “Two dogs, as well. One of them could go right over a stone fence in a single leap. But the other . . . I had to slide my arms under his belly and heave him over—a great mound of slobbery fur, gigantic ears, long pink tongue, cold wet nose—”

Pausing, he realized the woman was laughing. “Oh dear, I can hardly stir the crumpets.” Chuckling, she covered the bowl with a dish towel and set the batter on the hearth to rise. “We always had corgis. Such dogs! They’re more like cats, you know, always nosing into things they shouldn’t. And terribly affectionate. We had to leave our corgi in Wales, Mrs. Rutherford and I, when we came to England. Griffith was his name, and such a wonderful dog I have never known. Although they do shed, quite dreadfully.”

Beaumontfort took a sip of the tea the woman had just poured for him and felt life seep back into his bones. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d sat before a fire in his stocking feet. The aroma of fresh yeast rising from the crumpet batter filled the air, and the sweet milky tea warmed his stomach. The sight of the slender creature stirring a hearty stew, pouring his tea, and tending the fire transported the earl to a time and place he could hardly remember. Maybe it was one he’d never known at all.

“How have you come here, madam?” he asked her. “And why?”

“God sent me.” She pushed a tendril of hair back into her bun and settled on a stool near his chair. “You see, many years ago Mr. and Mrs. Rutherford and their two sons left Cumbria and journeyed to Wales to find profitable work.

After a time, the men became partners in a coal mine, and the sons married."

"One of them was fortunate enough to find you?"

"My husband was a good man, and all I have ever desired in life is the warmth of home and the love of family. The Rutherford men labored in the mine until an explosion took their lives." For a moment, she twisted the end of her apron string. "After that, the coal mine began to fail. Miners were afraid to work it, you see. Mrs. Rutherford decided she must return to England, where she owns a small cottage and a bit of land. She urged her sons' wives to return to our own villages where we might find new husbands. My sister-in-law agreed to go, but I would not. And so I came to Cumbria."

"But you told me God sent you."

"Indeed he did. Mrs. Rutherford had taught me about Christianity. My family had followed the old ways, a religion with little hope and even less joy. But Mrs. Rutherford explained things I had never heard—how God's Son came into this world to suffer the death I rightly deserved, how Christ rose to life again, how his Spirit lives inside every believer. I became a Christian, but I hungered to learn more. After my husband's death, I couldn't bear to part with Mrs. Rutherford. She'd become more than a mother to me—the only family I really knew. Though she was quite firm in ordering me back to my own village, I begged her not to send me away. Her God had become my God, you see, and that bonded us. I told her I would follow her to England and make her people my own. And so we journeyed here together, Mrs. Rutherford and I."

The earl sat in silence as the woman rose from her stool and began pouring batter into crumpet rings on a hot gridle. As a boy, he'd become acquainted with a village woman very much like the elder Mrs. Rutherford. Her husband had been a distant cousin of little means, but they had welcomed their landlord's child into their cottage during his long

country rambles. Reading from her Bible, the dear woman had taught William the message of salvation—and he had become a Christian. Could the woman in his half-forgotten past be the same Mrs. Rutherford who had been like a mother to this intriguing lady?

“Where is the cottage in which you live?” he asked, straightening in his chair. “Is it just beyond the village, down a dirt lane lined with lavender? Has it a thatched roof and climbing roses near the front door? Pink roses, I think. Yes, and stone walls with small windows?”

“Have you been there, sir?” She slid the steaming crumpets onto a plate and turned to him, wonder lighting her brown eyes. “I understood you never went down to the village. People say you’re always so—”

“Old and crotchety?”

“Busy,” she said with a laugh. She scooped a spoonful of strawberry jam onto his plate and set it beside the platter of cold meats on a small table near his chair. In a moment, she had ladled out a bowl of savory-smelling stew. The table’s boards fairly groaned under the feast laid upon them, and Beaumontfort anticipated the meal as though it had been prepared for a king. More than that, he looked forward to further conversation with Mrs. Rutherford of the sparkling eyes and coal black hair.

“I hope I’m not too crotchety to be joined at high tea by a woman of your fine culinary skills,” he said. “Will you sit with me, madam?”

She swallowed and gave him another of those awkward curtsies. “Thank you, sir, but I must take the leavings down to the village,” she said softly. “It has been a difficult year, and many depend upon me.”

“And then there’s Sukey with her influenza-inflicted family.”

“Yes, sir.”

He studied her, wondering at a woman who could so eas-

ily warm his feet, his stomach, and his heart—all at a go. This brown-garbed creature was nothing like the bejeweled court ladies who often accompanied the earl to the opera or the theatre. They would label her plain. Common. Simple.

Beaumontfort found her anything but. She had enchanted him, and he meant to know how she had managed it. Was it the faith in Christ that radiated from her deep, chocolate-hued eyes? Was it her devotion to her mother-in-law? Or was it simply the crumpets?

"Before you leave," he said to the woman bending over the stewpot. "You tell me you work in the kitchens?"

"Yes, sir. Almost a year." Drinking down a deep breath, she lifted the stewpot's arched handle from its hook. "I'm usually in the larder. Butter, you know. I'm very good at churning."

As she started across the room, the earl could do nothing but leap to his stockinged feet and take the heavy pot from her hands. *Fancy this*, he thought, realizing how fortunate it was that the house had been empty on this night. He carried the stew out the door into the dark night and across the wet snow, soaking his stockings and chilling his toes all over again.

"Mrs. Rutherford, you will work henceforth in the upper house," he instructed the woman as she lifted her skirts and climbed aboard the vegetable wagon. "Mrs. Riddle will see to the transfer of position in the morning. Perhaps you could polish the silver in the parlors. Better than churning butter anyway. I shall tell my housekeeper to put you there, if you like."

"Oh, no, sir! Please, I cannot leave the kitchen. Cook needs me in the larder, and Mrs. Riddle will be most displeased to have her staff turned topsy-turvy." She gathered her gray wool shawl tightly about her shoulders. "What about the leavings? The villagers depend on my help. Mrs. Rutherford and I . . . well, we also eat the leavings, sir. We have hardly

enough money to buy food."

"You'll earn higher wages on Mrs. Riddle's staff, and I'll instruct Cook to allow you the leavings as she has." He picked up the horse's reins and set them in her gloved hands. "But you, Mrs. Rutherford, and the other Mrs. Rutherford . . . I'm afraid I must address you by your Christian name, or we shall be always in a muddle."

"Always, sir?"

"When we speak together. You and I." He felt flustered suddenly, as though he'd said too much. But why shouldn't he have what he wanted? He was the earl of Beaumontfort, after all, and she was merely . . . what had she called herself? Ah, yes. Gwyneth.

"You and Mrs. Rutherford will be sent a portion from my own table each day," he said quickly. "Good evening then, Gwyneth."

He swung around and headed for the kitchen door again, hoping no one had noticed the earl of Beaumontfort traipsing about the vegetable wagon in wet stockings.

"Good evening," her voice sounded through the chill night air. "And thank you . . . William."



"Again, Gwynnie?" Mrs. Rutherford trundled across the wooden floor of the single large room in her thatched-roof cottage. In her arms she carried a heavy basket covered by a white linen embroidered with a large monogrammed *B*. She set the gift on the pine table beside the fire and turned to the chair where her daughter-in-law sat paring potatoes.

"But 'tis t' fourth evenin' in a row t' earl has sent us dinner," she said in her native Lakeland lilt. "Whatever can it mean? And look at you, my dear, you've peeled t' potato until there's almost nothin' left of t' poor thing."

Gwyneth studied the small white nubbin in her palm and realized that most of the potato now lay in the bowl of par-

ings. She tossed the remainder into a pot of bubbling water on the fire and sank back into her rocking chair. "Oh, Mum, I haven't wanted to trouble you, but everything has become difficult at the House. Terribly difficult."

"Don't tell me Mrs. Riddle is treatin' you ill again." The older woman sat down on a stool beside the chair and took Gwyneth's hand in both of her own. "That housekeeper has no heart. I can't imagine how she rose to such a position. Has she been spiteful to you?"

"No, 'tis not that. Mrs. Riddle is as unkind as ever, but 'tis not her at all. 'Tis—"

"Nah, for why would we have such feasts brought to us each night? Is it Mr. Yardley, then? Is he tryin' to woo you, my dear? Heaven help us, that butler is old enough to be your grandfather and thrice a widower already."

"No, no." Gwyneth lifted the old woman's hands and held them against her cheek. "'Tis nothing of the sort. 'Tis just that everything is suddenly so . . . so confusing. For one thing, I've been promoted into the upper house."

"But that's marvelous!" Her olive green eyes brightened. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"And I've been assigned to polish the silver in the parlors." Agitated, Gwyneth rose and began to set out the meal they had received from Brackendale Manor. Lamb! When was the last time she'd eaten mutton? Oh, why was the earl doing this?

"Silver polishin's t' easiest work in t' house," Mrs. Rutherford said. "How lovely for you!"

"And my wages are increased."

"Wonderful!"

"No, Mum. You don't understand."

"I can see that, my dear." After she'd offered the blessing for the meal, Mrs. Rutherford fell silent.

Gwyneth picked up her fork, wondering how she could explain the whirlwind that had blown through her life since

that evening in the kitchen with the earl of Beaumontfort. Her tidy, intimate world had been tossed into disarray like a haystack in a storm.

It hadn't always been so. From the moment Gwyneth had stepped into the snug stone cottage with its tiny windows and blazing fire, she had felt at home. Just as every piece of sturdy white china nestled comfortably in the old Welsh dresser, so Gwyneth's life had been ordered and tidy. On Mondays she baked, and on Fridays she washed. And every Sunday she and Mum walked to the village church to worship their Lord. Each day had its familiar, if sometimes lonely, routine. Gwyneth swept the floor each morning with the straw broom that hung beside the fire, and she nestled under the thick woolen blankets of her narrow bed each night. Nearby in her own bed, Mum would snore softly, a gentle reminder that all the world was at peace.

Now Gwyneth cut a bite of mutton and then another and another, unable to eat anything. Her stomach churned and her palms were damp. She wished desperately that she could similarly divide her thoughts into neat little squares that could be easily managed.

"Gwynnie." The old woman's hand stopped the knife. "T' good Lord is never t' cause of confusion and despair. What troubles you? You must tell me t' truth. All of it."

Gwyneth lowered her hands. "I explained to you about the night I served crumpets to the earl. Now, do you know he must have them every day for tea? And Mrs. Riddle does *not* appreciate my presence in the upper house, because I didn't work my way up as the other girls did. I've been assigned the silver polishing, the rug beating—all the easiest work. Every night this wonderful food is brought to our door. And every day when I'm polishing in the parlor, the earl . . . well, he says good morning to me, and he asks after you, and he inquires as to the health of Sukey's family, and he wonders whether I still think him crotchety—"

"Crotchety?"

"Yes." Gwyneth stuck a bite of lamb in her mouth.
"Crotchety."

Mrs. Rutherford looked across at the sweet woman whose confusion was written clearly in her brown eyes. Mum gave a slight shake of the head and resumed her dinner. The forks and knives clinked in the silence of the room, while Gwyneth pondered her turmoil. How silly to be upset when all was going well. Had she no confidence in her Savior's ability to guide her life?

"I understand what troubles you, Gwynnie," the old woman announced finally. "T' earl of Beaumontfort has taken a fancy to you."

"To me?" Gwyneth gave a laugh of disbelief. "Absolutely not! He likes my crumpets, 'tis all. I gave the man a warm supper on a cold night, and he wished to reward me for my loyalty. But my promotion has not brought me joy as he had hoped. On the contrary, I'm resented and envied by the rest of the staff."

"Do you wish to go back to t' kitchen, then?"

"How could I? The earl would be most offended. Did you know that each evening I find twice the leavings I did before he came? Certainly he has companions who visit him for shooting and riding and playing at chess. He brought his personal staff from London, as well. But I'm quite sure they are not eating such great quantities of food. Mum, I believe the earl has ordered Cook to leave out more than usual."

"Aha, 'tis just as I hoped and prayed then. Wee Willie has grown up into a fine man and an honor to t' titles bestowed upon him when his dear father passed on, rest his soul."

"Wee Willie?"

"T' earl, of course. I knew him when he was but a lad. You must accept t' blessin' God has chosen to lay upon you, my dear. Soon enough t' staff will come to accept you in t' upper house, you'll see."

With a yawn, Mum set her plate in the dish pail and started for the narrow bed across the room. It was just past seven o'clock, and Gwyneth knew there would be long hours of silence ahead. Too much time to think lonely thoughts.

She lifted another bite to her lips, but her focus remained on the flickering fire. For an instant she imagined she'd caught sight of the exact spark that twinkled in the earl's blue eyes when he strode into the parlor each morning. He always spoke to her so briefly, and her replies to him were properly humble and sparse. Yet their few words had become the high point of each day to her. How could she have allowed it?

Dear Lord, she poured out, 'tis not the resentment of the staff that troubles me, is it? 'Tis not the easy labor and extra food. 'Tis him. For the first time since my husband died, I feel alive in the presence of a man. Oh, God, why does it have to be the earl?

"I'll just put out t' lamp, my dear," Mrs. Rutherford called. "We don't want to use up what's left of our oil."

"No, Mum."

"Would you fetch a bit more coal for t' fire? 'Tis so chilly—" She paused, listening. "Now who could be outside at this hour?"

At the sound of a knock on the door—though she had no idea of the nature of their visitor—Gwyneth's heart clenched tightly, and her hand flew to the stray tendrils that had slid from her hair.

"Glory be," Mrs. Rutherford said as she peered through the small window beside the door. "'Tis wee Willie himself!"