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Edited by Kathryn S. Olson

Designed by Zandrah Maguigad

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~ *The Legend of the Hedgerow* ~

LONG AGO IN ENGLAND, two knights—Hewes and Sherbourne by name—defended the king with such valor that he elevated each of them to the rank of baron. Furthermore, he endowed the men with adjoining expanses of Yorkshire moorland.

Hewes—Lord Chatham by title—built a stately home of gray stone and named it Chatham Hall. Sherbourne, who became Lord Thorne, erected a home of similar size and grandeur and called it Thorne Lodge. Best of friends, the two men purchased flocks of sheep, hired shepherds from the nearby village of Otley, and married beautiful young ladies who soon saw to it that Chatham Hall and Thorne Lodge rang with the laughter of children.

Many generations came and went, and someone—no one remembers who—planted a hawthorn hedge near a stream in order to protect the sheep and to divide the Chatham and Thorne properties. On observing the new border, the then Lord Chatham declared that the hedgerow had lopped off a

substantial corridor of his property. Lord Thorne countered that it actually encroached on *his* land. Both men applied at once for a royal survey. Sadly, all records of the original transaction had been destroyed in 1666 during the Great Fire of London.

Chatham then took matters into his own hands. He and his men marched upon the offending hedgerow by dark of night and chopped it down. Thorne, on seeing this foul trespass, attacked Chatham's group and pushed them back to what he deemed to be the true property line. A violent sortie occurred, in which two men and six sheep were slain. Chatham and Thorne now swore enmity and posted guards along their supposed borders in order to prevent further encroachments.

In the ensuing hundred years and more, the row of hawthorn stumps sent roots deep into the Yorkshire soil and branches high toward the Yorkshire sky. Hedgehogs toddled across the pastures and set up housekeeping in the hedge. Toads and frogs hopped by and decided to stay. Blackbirds, robins, and wrens found the hedge a quiet haven in which to raise nestlings, while butterflies and bumblebees flitted over the blackberry vines that threaded among the branches.

As the hedgerow went on nurturing life, the Chathams and Thornes occupied themselves with despising one another. Yet, no one dared touch the hedgerow, which grew and thrived until at last it became a haven for all living creatures.

Chatham Hall and Thorne Lodge, meanwhile, housed the most resentful, bitter, and distrustful souls in Yorkshire. Though they purchased goods in the same shops, shared many of the same friends, and worshiped God in the same

church, they neither looked at one another nor spoke a single word.

It was at church, in fact, that one day the unthinkable happened. . . .

One

The village of Otley
Yorkshire, England; 1813

“ ‘LET THE PEACE of God rule in your hearts.’ ” The young minister lifted a hand and held it over his congregation in benediction. “ ‘And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.’ ”

Olivia Hewes, heiress to the Chatham family fortune, blew out a breath that sent the dark curls on her forehead dancing. Thank heaven, the service was over at last. She reached for the beaded bag in which she had placed a lemon sweet to freshen herself before greeting friends.

But as she drew apart the gathers of the reticule, the Reverend Berridge cleared his throat. “ ‘Finally, brethren,’ ” he spoke again, his voice resonating from the high oak beams of the stone chapel, “ ‘whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely—’ ”

Oh, get on with it, Olivia fretted. To her dismay, she had discovered that Otley's new minister enjoyed sermonizing for what seemed like hours. On and on he went—and who could attend to such lengthy discourse? Weighted by her many pressing responsibilities, Olivia tugged on the fringe of her pink cashmere shawl. How could she manage to slip away from church without undue delay? And would she arrive home before disaster once again befell the family?

As was customary in the morning, her mother had not been at all well, and her brother, Clive, had stayed behind to look after her. In Olivia's opinion, this was a most unsatisfactory arrangement. Yet nothing she said could sway Lady Chatham from her decree that one of the family must make an appearance at church every Sunday morning.

“‘Whatsoever things are of good report,’” the minister droned on, “‘if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.’”

There is not. Olivia threaded her gloved fingers together and squeezed them so tightly that her blood stopped flowing. *There is neither praise nor virtue to be found in Otley,* she thought. And certainly there was nothing of good report in her own life. Her father's death when she was barely nineteen had forced her to take on the management of Chatham manor. With no preparation for such a task—and with her mother ill and her brother requiring much attention—she had thus far failed to turn any profit. Indeed, the financial situation had grown dire.

Though Lady Chatham believed the answer to their problems lay in a good marriage for both her children, Olivia had no desire to repeat the misery of the union she had witnessed

at Chatham Hall. She loved to read tales of grand adventure and romance. As a young girl, she had often prayed that a handsome young hero might sweep her off her feet and carry her away to everlasting happiness. But over the years, she had seen enough of reality to dampen that dream. Besides, God rarely answered her prayers—so rarely that she often wondered why she bothered.

No indeed. Now that she was responsible for the manor, Olivia planned never to marry but to focus all her attention on bringing the estate back to solvency. To that end, she was planning to urge old Mr. Tupper, the family steward, into retirement, and she was searching for a new steward who could assist her in all her goals.

Olivia thought of herself as something like a tuft of the wild heather that grew on her beloved moor. She had set her roots into the stony soil of her homeland, and she would not be budged. The winds of change, the hail of misfortune, the storms of sorrow—none of these could dislodge her. Though she grew dry and old, she would not surrender. The land belonged to her—to every Chatham who had come before her and to every one who might follow—and she would cling tenaciously to it with a determination that had been bred into her through the centuries.

“ ‘Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in Me, do.’ ” Reverend Berridge closed his Bible. “ ‘And the God of peace shall be with you.’ ”

As the young man turned away from the pulpit, the congregation began to rise. At last. Olivia drew her shawl over her shoulders, popped the lemon sweet into her mouth, and slipped out of the pew. She would have no choice but to greet

the Bowdens of Brooking House and the Baines of Nasmyth Manor. Though beneath her in society, they were respected families and must be acknowledged. And she really ought to invite Mrs. Berridge to tea. Being new to town, the young woman must be in want of female solace.

“Mrs. Baine, good morning!” Olivia dipped an elegant curtsy before her elderly neighbor. “How delightful to see you. And how well you look.”

Moving on quickly, Olivia escaped the Billingsworths by tilting her bonnet just so. She evaded the Kibbles and the Seawards, who evidently were greeting the Thorne family. The Thornes occupied pews in the western side of the church—and Olivia, whose family took residence on the eastern side, would never deign to glance in *that* direction.

The owner of the Otley worsted mill, John Quince, who could not be avoided, touched her elbow. “Dear Miss Hewes,” he said, bowing smartly. “You are looking bright today. Very lovely indeed.”

An elegant man of great wealth, Quince employed many of Otley’s citizens, whose wooden shoes could be heard clattering along the cobblestone streets as they hurried toward the mill at seven every morning and home again at eight each night of the week. Quince sent wool to individual families to be combed clean, while in his factory, men and women earned five shillings a week for their labors at the sixty-horsepower engine that ran the spinning machines. Children who pieced the worsted fabric earned two shillings a week. Olivia had heard rumors that the harsh labor often caused crippling injuries. Though she had no sure evidence of this, she knew the mill’s overseers severely beat the children, for she had seen

these little ones in the streets and had observed for herself the dreadful evidence of their cruel mistreatment.

Olivia did not admire John Quince, but his influence in the community must not be underestimated, and so she gave him a warm greeting. "How pleasant to see you, Mr. Quince. And how do you get on, sir?"

"Very well, indeed, thank you. But where is your dear mother?"

"She is unwell, I fear. She lies abed."

"Shocking news. Do convey my deepest sympathies. I shall call at my earliest opportunity."

She tipped her head and forced a smile. "You are always welcome at Chatham Hall, Mr. Quince."

And, finally, only the Bowden family blocked her path to the church door. "Mrs. Bowden, charmed," she greeted the stout lady whose husband was fond of quoting Scripture and poetry. "Ah, Mr. Bowden, was that not a fine sermon?"

"Capital, Miss Hewes," he replied with a bow. "None finer, nor more appropriate to the current deplorable contention in our town."

For an instant, Olivia was stricken mute. As landlord of more than a score of tenant families, she made it her business to be informed on every issue of import to Otley and its surrounds. In the midst of the difficulties that plagued her own family, had she failed to learn of some discord among the townsfolk?

She laid her hand on Mr. Bowden's arm. "Of which contention do you speak, sir?"

"Why, the doctrinal matter plaguing our village, of course. Reverend Berridge could not have chosen a better sermon

topic than that of peace. As King Solomon so eloquently reminds us, ‘Wisdom is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.’ ”

“You have it backward, Father,” his eldest daughter, Ivy, said gently. The lovely young woman smiled at Olivia. “The verses in Proverbs—they go the other way round.”

“My dear girl, their meaning is the same,” her father replied. “It is most unwise for the town’s leaders to perpetuate this divisive, injurious, and most disputatious of issues!”

Olivia clenched her jaw. “And the issue is . . . ?”

“Was the earth created in six days, or was it not? By extension, one must ask if the Bible should be taken literally in its every word—or might it be allowed some small flaw of translation or be open to personal interpretation? I tell you, this topic is of great doctrinal import. Conversation in our drawing rooms cannot escape it. Indeed, the matter colors even the discourse between husband and wife, father and daughter.”

“In *our* house it does,” Ivy said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Miss Hewes,” Ivy’s father continued, “I must be frank. I believe it behooves your esteemed mother to make every attempt to resolve this issue and quell the discord.”

Olivia longed for her fan. She felt hot and annoyed and terribly anxious, yet she had no choice but to stand and engage Mr. Bowden in this meaningless chatter. Was the earth created in six days? How silly! How utterly trivial in comparison with the issue of the moment—the chaos Olivia’s brother might be wreaking even now at Chatham Hall.

She willed herself to concentrate. Her mother, who ought to tend to duties in matters that beset the townspeople, was

all but unable. No one knew the extent to which the mantle of responsibility had fallen on Olivia's shoulders. And she intended to keep Lady Chatham's condition a secret for as long as possible. Indeed, Olivia would do everything in her power to protect her family's reputation.

"To be sure, Mr. Bowden," she said. "The Chatham family are committed to the good of everyone in Otley."

"But what of this lecture to be given by William Buckland on the fifteenth of the month?" he asked. "You know what that man believes, and his speech can only foment hostilities. Miss Hewes, can you be persuaded to speak to Lady Chatham about the situation?"

"Of course. Yes, certainly—oh, can this be Miss Clementine?" Olivia spotted the golden-haired child peeking out from behind a pew. Gratefully turning away from Mr. Bowden, she knelt on the stone floor to greet the little girl. "What a lovely young lady you are, my dear. And how tall you have grown! I declare, you must be eight years old by now."

"No indeed, madam, for I am barely six." Flushing with pleasure, Clementine Bowden made a curtsy. "Miss Hewes, you must come to Brooking House and see our polliwogs. We have ever so many in our stream."

"Polliwogs." A genuine smile came to Olivia's lips for the first time that morning. "I liked polliwogs once . . . and I believe I should like them still. But I fear I must hurry home at once to my own dear mama."

With that, Olivia attempted to stand. But for some reason, her gown refused to budge. Disconcerted, she straightened, and the fabric suddenly gave way with a loud ripping sound.

"Upon my word!" She looked over her shoulder to discover

her hem trapped beneath the heel of a man's large leather boot. "I declare, sir—you are treading upon my gown!"

The man turned, and their eyes met. His were blue . . . the bright and glorious blue of a Yorkshire lake in midsummer. Olivia stared, her lips parting and her breath unmoving as every rational thought in her head, every worry in her heart vanished. She looked into a face that might have been chiseled by a Greek artisan—a noble nose, a jutting chin, a square jaw, and the plane of a cheek so fine and smooth it could have been hewn from marble. Yet the color that suffused the flesh of this face gave it life and beauty and bearing.

Such a man! Such breadth of shoulder, such imposing stature, and such a head of hair . . . warm chestnut curls that tumbled over his ears and brushed his collar as he removed a top hat of the finest beaver.

"Dear madam," he said, and his voice was deep and rich. "I sincerely beg your pardon."

His blue gaze tore from her eyes and fell to her gown. Olivia glanced down, too, and saw the astonishing rent. Great ghosts! The embroidered white lawn fabric of her skirt had ripped cleanly away from the back of her bodice! A button hung by a single thread, and the gathers in her skirt were even now unfolding like accordion pleats.

"Lord Thorne has torn Miss Hewes's gown!" Clementine Bowden exclaimed. "I can see her petticoat!"

The announcement brought cries of dismay from those around her as Olivia snatched her pink shawl and attempted to cover the gap with the length of cashmere. The man reached to assist, but someone stayed his hand.

“This is Miss Hewes!” John Quince said quickly. “Do come away, Lord Thorne.”

Thorne! As that most hated of names registered in her brain, Olivia dropped the corner of her shawl. She sucked in a shocked gasp, and the lemon drop flew to the back of her throat. Lord Thorne? Could it be? She began to choke. Had she actually looked at a Thorne? Had he looked at her?

“Miss Hewes, I fear you are unwell.” Thorne took another step toward her, his hand held out solicitously. “May I assist—”

“No, no!” She backed up, coughing the lemon drop into her palm as she stumbled into the group of stunned onlookers behind her.

“Indeed, I can see I have caused you great distress.” He was surrounded by Thornes—relations, friends, associates . . . oh, dear!

“Miss Hewes is the daughter of Lady Sophia Chatham,” Quince sputtered in warning. “I insist, sir, that you—”

“But she is . . . I have torn her—”

“I am well, my lord,” Olivia blurted out. “Do not trouble yourself, I beg you.”

“Come, brother!” A man in the Thorne party spoke up. He was nearly as tall as Lord Thorne but younger. “Miss Hewes has pardoned you. Leave it at that. We have had enough trouble from her family to last a lifetime.”

The bitter tone slid through Olivia’s bones. “Trouble from *my* family?” she retorted. “What is your meaning in this accusation, sir?”

Not deigning to answer, the younger man took his brother’s elbow and turned away. “Randolph, the ladies await us in the carriage.”

Lord Thorne detached himself and gave Olivia a bow. “I assure you, madam, I meant you no affront.”

“Good morning, sir,” Olivia managed while executing a self-conscious curtsy.

His blue eyes fell upon her once again. She clutched the sticky lemon drop in her glove and hung suspended in his gaze. For a moment, she felt certain he would speak again. Instead, he returned his top hat to his head and followed his brother through the church door.

“Dear Miss Hewes!” Ivy Bowden appeared at Olivia’s side. “Please allow me to offer you my own shawl, for it is prodigiously large. Folded into a triangle, it will—”

“Lord Thorne trod upon Miss Hewes’s gown!” Clementine cried, jumping up and down on tiptoes. “He tore it!”

“My shawl is finer than yours, Ivy,” Caroline Bowden, another of the sisters, said. “Put two together, for no one will think twice—”

“Two together?” Old Mrs. Baine stared in horror. “Two shawls on one lady?”

“I have a needle and thread,” Mrs. Berridge spoke up. The minister’s young wife stepped through the crowd clustered around Olivia. “I keep them in my reticule in the event my husband tears his robes while climbing the steps to the pulpit. Miss Hewes, will you allow me to—”

“No, please!” Olivia held up her hands. “Thank you all, but I must go home. Truly, I must.”

“But your gown,” Clementine blurted. “I can see your petticoat!”

“Hush, child!” Ivy Bowden clapped a hand over her sister’s mouth.

“Good morning to you all.” Olivia draped her own pink shawl over the widening gap in her skirt and hurried out the door. Her carriage awaited, and the footman was ready to assist her. As she slid onto the smooth leather seat, she tore off her bonnet and buried her face in her hands.

Olivia fought back the tears that stung her eyes as the carriage pulled away from the church and began the journey to Chatham Hall. How could she bear this new mortification? How much more must she be asked to endure? Her mother hovered at the edge of a deadly affliction. Her brother—labeled a lunatic by physicians who had examined him—became more volatile and unsteady with each passing day. The burdens of managing tenants, overseeing flocks and land, tending to her family weighed heavily upon her.

And now . . . now Randolph Sherbourne, Lord Thorne, head of the dynasty that had brought such suffering upon her own dear family, had dared to trespass on her person. He had trod on her gown! He had torn it!

Olivia opened her hand and stared at the small lemon sweet stuck to her white glove. But he had not meant to step on her hem. She knew that, just as she knew that she had not meant to look into his blue eyes and suck her lemon drop into the back of her throat.

For countless generations, Chathams had avoided every contact with Thornes. Thornes had done the same. They averted their eyes when standing near. They crossed to the other side of the street when their paths might meet. And no Chatham ever spoke to a Thorne.

Now it was done. For one instant, Olivia Hewes had forgotten she was heir to the Chatham fortune. Randolph

Sherbourne had neglected the duties of his role as Lord Thorne. And for that brief and very public moment, they had bridged the chasm between their two families.



“Did you see her face?” William Sherbourne chuckled as he addressed his brother. “I do believe she considered herself horribly violated by you!”

“As indeed she was.” Randolph gazed thoughtfully at the young woman now fleeing the church to the shelter of her carriage. “Bad enough that any man should trespass upon a lady in such a way. But I am a Thorne and she a Chatham. Can you not see how my error will be perceived in the town?”

“Come, man, your gravity is mistaken.” William grinned at the pair of elegant ladies who occupied their carriage. “Do you not agree, Miss Bryse? Miss Caroline?”

“I view the occurrence as a subtle and brilliant revenge for the tragic loss of your father,” Beatrice Bryse responded. “And cleverly executed.”

As the carriage rolled forward, Randolph leaned back in the seat. The death of the late Lord Thorne just a month earlier had wounded him deeply. Though Randolph had spent many years away at Eton and then Cambridge, he cherished fond memories of his father. As a boy, he had followed the tall, dignified gentleman everywhere. They hunted and fished together, took long rides across the moorland, and sat by the fire discussing the affairs of the manor. The elder Lord Thorne was devoted to his three sons, but Randolph always received the special attention due the primary heir. The

untimely death and its cryptic circumstances had been a bitter blow, and Randolph could not dwell upon his loss without considerable pain.

The funeral had brought the younger of his two brothers home to Yorkshire. The other—a missionary in India—could not break free of his work there. But William Sherbourne had arrived from the Royal Naval Academy in Portsmouth with a close friend, Captain Charles Bryse, and his two sisters, Beatrice and Caroline. The entire party had stayed at Thorne Lodge nearly a full month now, and Randolph had long been eager to send them all on their way.

“Clearly my misstep in church today was accidental, Miss Bryse,” he said to the older of the ladies. “How can you term it revenge?”

“Unless you can prove the culprit, the law prevents you from taking retaliation for your father’s death,” Miss Bryse explained, “yet we feel certain the Chathams were the cause of it. How could it be otherwise?”

“Exactly,” William concurred. “Our father was known as an excellent hunter and would not have been careless with his weapon. Clearly someone shot him, and the marksman must have been hired by the Chathams.”

“We have no proof of this,” Randolph said. “None whatever. Though Father’s death is suspicious, you know I have taken great pains to investigate it, William. The constable questioned countless people, including those in Chatham employ, and we have studied the scene at length. The only conclusion we can draw is that Father accidentally dropped his gun, and it discharged.”

“Impossible! We may have no evidence of it, but I am

certain the Chathams are at fault. Who else but that family desired his death?"

"True," Beatrice Bryse concurred. "Sadly, your suspicions against them cannot be substantiated, Lord Thorne. But you have taken some revenge upon them today, for in the most innocent of places . . . and with the most sincere regrets . . . you tore that vile creature's gown."

"A master stroke!" Captain Bryse said with a laugh. "It was a direct affront upon her person—and a perfect stab at her family. You cannot be accused of anything, Thorne."

"Best of all," William continued, "in some measure, you avenged our father. Well done, my good man!"

"Enough, brother," Randolph said, annoyed at their light-hearted air. "The matter is ended."

"Come now." Miss Bryse reached across and laid a gloved hand on his arm. "You must not be so glum, my lord. I wager that one day you will recall this event with great amusement. We shall all laugh about it. Indeed, I wish Caroline and I had not been waiting in the carriage. I should like to have seen the look on Miss Hewes's face when her gown began to unfold."

"And her petticoat!" Miss Caroline spoke up. "Did you actually see it beneath the—"

"What I saw," Randolph cut in, "was a most elegant and . . . I daresay lovely . . . young woman who—by my clumsiness and inattention—was publicly humiliated. She was shocked to the point of choking."

"Choking! Oh, that is rich!" Miss Bryse laughed.

"Indeed, her face went as red as a tomato," William chimed in. "I thought she must swoon. But she was too busy attempting to cover the gap in her gown as her skirt unraveled."

“How diverting! My lord, truly you must see the humor in this.” Miss Bryse leaned against Randolph. “You have honored your family name by this ‘accident,’ and you must learn to laugh at the sport you made of the girl.”

“I do not take pleasure in making sport of anyone, madam, let alone an elegant and beautiful young lady.”

“Beautiful?” William chortled. “Come, brother, she is a Chatham! Do you forget yourself?”

“Chatham or not, Miss Hewes is lovely.”

“What—brown eyes and brown hair? I thought her plain.”

“Did you not note the curve of her brow? the pink of her cheeks?”

“Pink cheeks, aye, for she was choking to death!” William’s grin faded as he glanced at Miss Bryse. “She was very plain, I tell you. A mousy creature.”

“Were she not a Chatham,” Randolph said, “I should not hesitate to call her a great beauty.”

“But that is the material point, is it not, brother? She *is* a Chatham. Neither of us should have deigned to look at her. Nor should you have spoken. She is beneath us.”

“Her family has caused ours undue suffering—that is true. But Miss Hewes herself cannot be held responsible for evil done by every Chatham in history.”

“As a Christian and a gentleman,” Miss Bryse said, “you feel the weight of this morning’s incident, my lord. But do not let this discomfort blind you to the truth. Your dear brother has told us of the many atrocities committed by that family through the centuries. And now you labor under the grief of your father’s recent death. The Chatham family—and this lady is one of them—have caused every woe that

has befallen the great Thorne dynasty. And you must not forget it.”

Randolph stared out the window at a large flock of sheep grazing on the fell. This land, these animals, and the people who tend them must be his primary concern. Yet his brother and Beatrice Bryse were correct in stating that his sadness over his father’s untimely death colored everything in his life.

“Not only have Chathams caused us pain for centuries,” William said, “but this particular family is said to be reaping the harvest of malevolence their own ancestors have sown. Lord Chatham died three years ago of an illness that must go unmentioned in the company of ladies. Lady Chatham—after the birth of their daughter, Olivia—bore countless hideously deformed babies who survived no more than a day or two. Indeed, their family cemetery is littered with tiny gravestones. And at last the poor lunatic was born—what do they call him?”

“Clive,” Randolph said.

“Yes, Clive. An imbecile. Unable to attend university. Unable to go out into society. Unable even to ride a horse. Can you imagine? And now the mother lies abed day after day, rarely making an appearance even among friends. Some say she is afflicted with the disease that killed her husband. Others believe she is a besotted old—”

“William!” Randolph barked. “Enough of this recitation of rumors and gossip. We truly know nothing of that family save the litany of sins they have committed against us. And lest we pride ourselves too highly, we must recall that for every one of their trespasses, we have responded with a revenge equal or

worse. All of that culminating today in my effrontery upon the person of Miss Olivia Hewes.”

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of Thorne Lodge, and Randolph threw open the door without waiting for the footman. He had started up the steps into the house when his brother called after him.

“Randolph, your behavior frightens Miss Bryse! And you have reduced Miss Caroline to tears. You are altogether too serious.”

Randolph paused. “Life is serious, William, and you would do well to begin to see it as such. For my part, I have had quite enough of your whist games, enough of charades, and more than enough of the pianoforte.”

“Good heavens, Randolph!”

“Lest you forget, I am now Lord Thorne, and my greatest aim is to live up to the expectations of my father. I have a manor to oversee. I have sheep to be washed and shorn. Wool to be sold at the worsted mill. Meadows to be mown. Fields to be plowed. Carts to be greased and repaired. I have a town to look after—a town that seems determined to tear apart its own church in an argument over the infallibility of Scripture. Moreover, I am charged with the responsibility of continuing the Thorne name by marrying and siring sons. Each of these, dear brother, is a serious matter. I take them all seriously, just as I take seriously the fact that this morning, I publicly affronted not only the heir to the Chatham legacy, but a very lovely young woman.”

He gazed at the astonished faces of William and the three Bryses. His brother shifted uncomfortably, looking more like a confused child than a dashing navy captain.

“Well, what do you intend to do about it? Miss Hewes, I mean.”

Randolph thought for a moment. “I shall do what any gentleman ought. I shall write her a letter of apology.”

As he stepped into the house, he heard his brother give a cry of exasperation. “But she is a Chatham, Randolph! We do not converse with them or acknowledge them in any way! And we certainly cannot write them letters of apology.”

Randolph strode past the butler and began the long climb up the staircase to his rooms. *Yes*, he thought, *we can*.

~ *A Note from the Author* ~

Dear Friend,

I'm always amazed at the things we Christians allow to divide us, aren't you? Whether it's over the choice of hymns, the calling of a pastor, or a point of theological difference, we leap at the opportunity to fuss and fight with each other. I know of people so hurt by these battles that they refuse to set foot in a church ever again. And what a message we send to unbelievers who view our self-righteous hissy fits!

Recently, my husband was caught in the midst of an ongoing denominational battle that is surely making Jesus weep and Satan clap his hands in glee. What great suffering our family faced as Tim struggled to bring journalistic integrity to the forefront. Finally, he chose to walk away from the fight and take another job. As we look back on what we endured during those years, we have learned how important it is to keep our focus centered squarely on Jesus Christ—and on Him alone.

God wants His children to be at peace with each other. I encourage you, like Olivia and Randolph, to do your part to foster harmony instead of dissension. Let's not allow something like a hedgerow or a minor doctrinal dispute to divide us.

And if you've read *Wild Heather* and you're not a believer, please forgive us Christians for our many human flaws. Remember, Christians aren't perfect. Only God, in the person of Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit, meets that ideal.

Blessings,
Catherine Palmer