

A
VICTORIAN
CHRISTMAS



CATHERINE PALMER



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A Victorian Christmas

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ANGEL IN THE ATTIC



PROLOGUE

December 1880
Silver City, New Mexico

"If I so much as catch a glimpse of a single hair on your scrawny hide, I'll pull the trigger. You hear?" Fara Canaday lowered the shotgun and flipped her blonde braid over her shoulder. Her latest suitor was scurrying away across Main Street, his hat brim tugged down over his ears with both hands—as if that might protect him from a blast of pellets.

"And stay gone, you ol' flea-bit varmint!" she hollered after him.

"Ai, Farolita, you got rid of that one." Manuela Perón, the housekeeper at the redbrick Canaday Mansion, shook her head. "And the one before. What did you do to that poor man? Spill hot tea into his lap?"

"He tried to kiss me!"

"Is that so terrible? You have twenty-four years, señorita. Long ago, you should have been kissed, wedded, and made into a mama."

Fara shrugged. "They're all after Papa's fortune, Manuela. Why should I let some greedy, no-good, moneygrubbing—"

"It's *your* fortune, Farolita. Your papa has been gone almost a year now. If you wish to do well by his memory, you will marry

and bear an heir. What use is a daughter to a wealthy gentleman? None. None but to marry a wise man who can manage the business and bring heirs to his line.”

“I can manage the business. I looked after Papa’s affairs all five years he was ill—and we didn’t lose a single silver dollar. In fact, the Canaday assets grew by leaps and bounds. We bought the brickworks. We cut a wider road to the silver mine. We invested in two hotels and a restaurant. Manuela, the Southern Pacific Railroad is on its way to Deming, and if I have my say, Silver City will join it with a narrow gauge branch line. In a couple of years, we’ll have telephones and electricity and—”

“Ai-yai-yai!” Manuela held up her hands in a bid for peace. “These are not the words of a lady. Why did your father send you away to that school in Boston? To learn about telephones and electricity? No. He sent you to learn elegant manners. To learn the wearing of fashionable clothes. To learn conversation and sketching and sewing!”

Manuela ignored Fara’s grimace and rushed on. “Why did your papa want you to learn these things? So you can marry well. Look at you now, Farolita. Have you been riding the horses again? If I lift your skirts, will I see those terrible buckskins from the *Indios*? Your hair is wild like an Apache. Your skin is brown from the sun. You never wear your bonnet! And you put on men’s boots! You pick your teeth with hay stems—and you spit!”

“If I learned one thing in Boston, it’s that housekeepers aren’t supposed to lecture their mistresses.” Fara let out a hot breath that quickly turned to steam in the chill December air. “For three months now, Manuela, I’ve been giving you lessons from the Boston lady’s book. You’re supposed to wear your black-and-white uniform—not that flowered mantilla. You’re supposed to knock softly and introduce your presence with a little cough. You’re supposed to insist that all visitors put a little calling card in the silver tray by the front door . . . and *not* let them come barging into the library where I’m making lists for the Christmas tea!”

"But . . . but . . . that man didn't have a calling card." Manuela's brown eyes filled with tears. "I don't know where is the silver tray. I think it went the way of the crystal goblets—with Pedro, the thieving butler. And the black uniform you brought me is so . . . tight. I have ten children . . . and . . . and . . ."

"Oh, Manuela, I'm sorry." Fara wrapped her arms around the woman who had served her family with love so many years. "It's just these confounded gentleman callers. They come courting and wooing, and they get me so riled up I start hollering at you."

"Sí, Farolita, my little light. I know. I know." Manuela hugged Fara, calling her by the pet name that evoked images of the soft yellow candles set out in bags of sand on Christmas Eve to light the way of the Christ child. "We must have peace in this house."

"Peace and goodwill," Fara said.

"Goodwill to all—even men."

Fara crossed her arms and fought the grin tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Not to men with marriage on their minds," she said firmly. "Godspeed but not goodwill."

Touching the housekeeper lightly on the cheek, Fara started back into the house. As she shut the door behind her, she heard Manuela whisper to a throng of imaginary suitors, "God rest ye merry, gentlemen. Let nothing you dismay."

Fara chuckled and added, "But don't have dreams of marriage—not to Fara Canaday!"



Phoenix, Arizona

The memory of the previous night's choking nightmare swept over Aaron Hyatt as he strode through the lobby of the Saguaro Hotel in downtown Phoenix. He had dreamed he was going to marry Fara Canaday. Stopping stock-still on the burgundy carpet and

staring up at the hideous gargoyle that had reminded him of the nightmare, he ran a hand around the inside of his collar.

Marriage? What a despicable thought. What a gut-wrenching, spine-chilling, nauseating idea.

"Evenin', mister." A young bellboy peered up at Hyatt. "You look a little pale, sir. Are you all right?"

Hyatt's attention snapped into focus. "Why am I going to New Mexico?" he demanded of the lad. "I've been sitting in my room most of the day pondering the question—and I still don't have a good answer. Why would a sane man travel across mountains and deserts—give up two good months of his life—just to meet a woman?"

The bewildered boy swallowed. "Maybe . . . maybe she's a beautiful woman?"

"She's not. If I were a gambling man, I'd wager half my fortune she's plain faced, oily haired, dull witted, and lazy. She'll be all done up in silks and ribbons. She'll giggle and mince around the parlor like a little lap dog. She'll have nothing in her brain but bonbons and fashions. I know the type. Know them well, trust me. So why am I going?"

"Because . . . because you were told to?"

"Asked. Asked by my father on his deathbed." *Go and find Jacob Canaday, the best man I ever knew. Honest. Hardworking. Loyal. A Christian man. Go and find him. He has a daughter. If you can, marry her, Aaron. She'll make you a good wife.*

"She might make a good wife," the boy ventured.

"Pah! You have no idea. None whatsoever. She'd nag me to death. The rich ones always do. They've had life too good. Too easy. She'd want everything she doesn't have—and twice as much besides. She'd make my life a sludge pool of misery. Well, I'm not going. I'm a praying man, young fellow, and I surely believe the Lord speaks in mysterious ways. That dream must have been a sign." He reached into his pocket for a coin. "Send word to the livery stable for me, will you? Tell them Aaron Hyatt wants to be saddled and out of town by six."

"Hyatt? Are you Mr. Hyatt?" The boy's eyes widened. "There's a gentleman's been lookin' for you. He's waitin' upstairs with his pals. They've been drinkin' whiskey for hours, but he says he'd wait all day and all next year if need be. Says he's been expectin' you to track him down these fifteen years."

"Fifteen years? I was no bigger than you fifteen years ago—and sure as summer lightning I wasn't tracking anybody but Sallie Ann, the girl next door with the pretty red pigtails." Hyatt glanced up the staircase. "Who is the man?"

"It's Mr. James Copperton, of course. He's famous. He owns the biggest saloon in Phoenix and half the trade in loose women. Maybe he wants to do business with you."

Hyatt scowled. "I wouldn't do business with a man like that if my life depended on it. But I reckon I'll have to speak to him. Run up and tell him I'm here." He glanced at the gargoyle again. "Then hotfoot it to the livery, boy. Tell them I'm riding out tonight."

"Tonight?"

"I'm not one to waste a single minute once I've made up my mind. The more miles I can put between Miss Fara Canaday and me, the happier I'll be." He flipped the coin to the boy. "Hop to it."

"Yes, sir!"

The lad raced up the curving staircase, taking the steps two at a time. Hyatt pondered the gargoyle a moment longer. *Spare me, Lord*, his soul whispered in silent prayer. *If I must take a wife, give me one with fire in her spirit, brains in her head, and the smile of an angel. Amen.*

As he started up the stairs, the young bellboy flew past him. "They're waitin' for you, Mr. Hyatt," he said. "I'm on my way to the livery."

"Good lad." Hyatt reached the landing and turned the corner to start up the second flight of steps. As he placed his hand on the banister, a strangled cry echoed down.

"It's him! It's him!"

Hyatt looked up—straight into the barrel of a trembling six-shooter. *Ambush.* Fire shot through his veins, tightened his

heart, stopped his breath. The small pistol tucked under his belt seemed to burn white-hot. Could he reach it in time?

"You sure it's him, boss?" someone shouted. "He looks awful young."

"It's him. It's Hyatt!" The man holding the pistol swayed at the top of the staircase. Hyatt had never seen the drunkard in his life. "Fifteen years you've been after me, Hyatt! Every time I look over my shoulder there you are, haunting me like a devil. I'll stop you this time—"

"Now just hold on a minute, mister—"

"Is your name Hyatt?"

"Yes, but—"

The pistol fired. The pop of a firecracker. Pain. Blood. The smell of acrid black smoke. Gasping for air, Hyatt flipped back his jacket, drew his pistol, aimed, and fired.

"I'm hit! I'm hit!" the man moaned.

A bullet struck the mirror on the wall beside Hyatt. Glass shattered. Screams erupted in the lobby below. Hyatt jammed the pistol under his belt and grabbed his left forearm. Searing purple pain tore through him as he turned on the landing.

"After him! After him, boys. Don't let him get away!"

Another shot splintered the wooden balustrade. Hyatt hurtled down the steps, his pursuers' feet pounding behind him. *The livery. Get to the livery.*

He raced through the lobby. A woman fainted in front of him, and he vaulted over her. He burst through the double doors. Dashed out into the chill darkness. Down an alley. Across a ditch. He could hear men running behind him. Shouting.

His head swam. The livery tilted on its side, lights swaying. The smell of the stables assaulted him, made him gag. In the doorway, the bellboy's face looked up at him, white and wide-eyed.

"You're bleeding, mister!" he cried. "What happened?"

What happened? What happened? Hyatt didn't know what happened. Couldn't think. His horse. Thank God, his horse! He wedged his foot in the stirrup. Threw one leg over the saddle. The

stallion took off, hooves thundering on the hollow wood floor of the ramp. Galloped past the men. Past mercantiles. Houses. Foundries. Corrals.

Hyatt cradled his scorched and bleeding arm. He no longer heard his pursuers. He turned the horse east. Mountains. Caves. Tall pine trees. Fresh springs. Better than desert.

Yes, he would head east.

LONE STAR





“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. . . . When you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me.”

JEREMIAH 29:11-13

CHAPTER ONE

December 1886
London, England

"Howdy, mister." Star Ellis snipped off a length of cotton thread and laid her diminutive swan-neck scissors atop the piecework on her lap. "Colder than frog legs out there, I'd say."

"I beg your pardon?" The gentleman entering the coach paused to appraise her with a pair of eyes the exact shade of a Texas bluebonnet. He took off his top hat and sat down on the leather seat facing hers. "Did you mention amphibians, madam?"

"I was talking about the weather. Polite conversation, you know." Shaking her head, Star threaded her slender silver needle. As the passenger coach began to roll away from Victoria Station, she picked up the length of bright cotton diamonds she was stitching together and began to work the needle back and forth through the fabric. If the only other traveler on this journey couldn't grasp the rudiments of good manners, so be it. She didn't have much of an appetite for talk anyway.

Weeks of steamship travel from Houston to New York to London had frayed the edges of her patience. Star had never had much patience to begin with, and her current circumstances left little room for feminine niceties and grace. Back in Texas, terrible

blizzards had descended on her father's cattle ranch for the second winter in a row. Ahead on the frigid moors of northern England, a British aristocrat—a total stranger—waited to marry her. The first calamity had pushed her toward the second. She was trapped in their midst with no way out.

This would be her first Christmas away from home. The carriage driver had decorated his rig for the season, and his efforts at festivity were consoling. He had tacked a sprig of mistletoe over the door, and he'd tied garlands of fragrant pine twined with red ribbons on the window frames. All the same, memories of the Ellis family fireplace hung with bright knitted stockings, the cinnamony scent of hot apple cider bubbling on the stove, and the chatter of brothers and sisters threading popcorn into long garlands made Star's heart ache.

"Excuse me, madam, are you mending?"

She lifted her head as her traveling companion's voice penetrated the cloud of gloom and irritation swirling through her. "Mending?" She picked up the carefully stitched fabric on which she had labored for two months. "This is a quilt, buckaroo."

"Bucka-who?"

"Quilt, quilt, quilt." She thrust out the piecework. "I declare, you act as if you've never seen a quilt."

"Haven't," he said, tugging off his kid leather gloves and leaning forward, elbows on his knees, to examine the fabric. "Has this *objet d'art* a purpose, or is it merely decorative?"

"Both, I guess. You lay it across your bed like a blanket. Or you hang it over the window if your shutters won't keep out the cold. You wrap it around your shoulders in the wintertime. You bundle up your newborn baby in it. You spread it under a tree for summer picnics. And if worse comes to worst, you cut it up and feed it to the fire when there's no wood around for chopping. It's a quilt."

"May I?" Those blue eyes pinned her. "I'm fascinated by primitive handicrafts."

Star reluctantly surrendered her patchwork to the man.

Primitive? She could teach this British tenderfoot a thing or two. After all, who was the best quilter in the whole county? Who had won the blue ribbon at the fair last summer? Whose quilt went for twelve whole dollars at the harvest auction? She watched the man holding her fine piecework up to the light from the coach window and studying the tiny stitches.

"Intriguing," he pronounced. "Calicut, I'd say. The fabric."

"Calico, you mean."

"Calicut, actually. It's a port on the west coast of India. They export inexpensive cotton fabrics in little prints of flowers and such. You've a selection of Calicut cottons here in your quilt. This yellow one I'm sure of, and this blue, as well."

"The blue patch is from my granny's best bonnet, and don't try to tell me it's cheap. I happen to know Grandpa brought the bolt all the way from Abilene when he came back from his last cattle drive right before he died. We made Granny's bonnet, a skirt for my sister Bess, and a tablecloth out of that bolt of blue calico. Granny wore the bonnet to Grandpa's funeral, and everyone said she looked as pretty as a picture, even though she'd been crying her eyes out for three days."

"Good heavens."

"Give me that, please." She took back her quilt. What did a man like him know about fabric, anyway? "I've been sewing and piecing all my life. Mama taught me how to use a needle when I was knee-high to a grasshopper, and she says I have a way with cloth."

"Knee-high to a what?"

"To tell you the truth, I think it's all in the colors. Before I start to cut the pieces for a new quilt, I work with the fabrics, arranging them this way and that, until I'm sure they're just right. Some gals will put any old colors together, but not me."

"I see."

The corner of the man's mouth was twitching, and Star had the distinct feeling he was trying not to laugh. She shrugged. Let him mock her. This wasn't the first time she had felt alone and

awkward since leaving the ranch. It wouldn't be the last. By the following evening, she would be cooped up in a stone manor house with portraits of dead aristocrats hanging on the walls. By Christmas, she would be betrothed to the son of her father's business partner. By the new year, she would be a married woman far from the loving support of home, family, and friends. But she wasn't completely alone. Long ago she had entrusted her life to Christ, and now she would have to depend on Him more than ever. Though she knew she was far from perfect, Star believed her Creator had a good plan for her life. Oh, she had made mistakes, and those had brought consequences. Yet when she stumbled in her walk of faith, God never let her fall headlong. He held her hand, guided her, and brought joy in the midst of sorrow. Now He had brought her to England to marry Rupert Cholmondeley. She didn't understand this plan of her heavenly Father's, but how could she argue?

"I recently looked into buying a mill in India." The man across from her spoke up as she flicked her silver needle through the bright fabric. "Decided against it. Rather hot on the coast, you know. All the same, I made a thorough study of fabrics—cottons, silks, muslins, the lot—and I'm quite certain you've Calicut cotton there."

Star kept her focus on her needle. The man had a strong face and mesmerizing eyes, and she didn't mind looking at him. But he seemed to enjoy baiting her, trying to draw her into an argument. Star, herself, had been labeled feisty by more than one suitor. In fact, her most recent episode of spunk and mule-headedness had lost her the catch of the county and helped land her in this predicament.

"Look, mister," she said, "I don't want to be contrary. If you tell me this calico is from India, even though I know good and well it's from Abilene, that's fine with me. I've learned my lesson where arguing is concerned. The owner of the ranch south of us courted me for almost a year, and finally I ran him off by wrangling with him over one thing or another."

“Wrangling?”

“He’d tell me Luke was one of the twelve disciples, and I’d pull the Bible right off the shelf to prove him wrong. Or he’d insist Scotland was an island off the coast of England, and I’d haul him over to the atlas to set him straight. He’d tell me a woman couldn’t string bob wire, and I’d march him out to the barn and pull on my bull-hide gloves. Sure, it’s an ornery job, but I’ve helped my daddy string bob wire since I was a colt.”

“Bob wire?”

Star looked up from her stitching. Lost in her memories, she had all but forgotten she was in an English passenger coach, jolt-ing along down a cobblestone street at the edge of London. The man across from her leaned forward on his elbows, his blue eyes intent and his attention absorbed by her words. The realization that he was actually listening caught Star off guard. Since the start of her long journey, she’d had no one but the Lord to hear when she poured out her thoughts. Why this man? And why now? Maybe the Father had felt her utter loneliness, her edge of despair, and had sent this stranger to lend a measure of comfort.

“Bob wire,” she said softly. “It’s used for fencing. Little sharp metal points stick out between the twisted wires and poke any critter that tries to get through. You’ve got your ‘Scutts Clip,’ your ‘Lazy Plate’ bob wire, and about six other kinds. My daddy’s been using ‘Glidden Four Line’ for ten years, and we like it best. Of course, I don’t suppose I’ll be stringing bob wire anymore.”

“Barbed wire,” the man said. “In England we call it barbed wire, and I would suspect you are the only woman in the kingdom who knows how to string it. Perhaps such a skill will be of some use to you whilst you visit.”

“I’m not here for a visit, mister. I’ve come to stay.” Letting her hands relax in her lap, Star leaned back and looked out the coach window. A light snow had begun to drift out of the leaden skies. The flakes floated through the gray air like puffs of dandelion down to settle on the wreaths of holly and fir decorating the doors of the houses that lined the street. “I’m about to marry a

baron from Yorkshire. His father is in partnership with my father, you see, and I'm the link that will forge the two families. My sister Bess was in the chute to marry the baron, but now she's engaged to the neighboring rancher."

"The chap you wrangled with over Bible history, geography, and barbed wire stringing?"

"That's the fellow. He decided he wanted a nice, quiet, obedient wife like Bess."

"Which left you to the Yorkshire baron."

Star nodded. The man was smiling now, his chiseled features softening from rigid angles and planes to crinkles at the corners of his eyes and the hint of a dimple in one cheek. For the first time, she noticed the breadth of his shoulders beneath the black greatcoat he wore. Strong shoulders. Shoulders like a bulwark against all trouble.

An urge swept over Star, compelling her to ask if she might lay her head on the man's shoulder and if he might put his arms around her and hold her tight and warm. But then the dam holding back the tide of emotion inside her would break and she would start to cry, and such a display would never do. Star Ellis might be a rancher's daughter, but she had attended a finishing school for a whole summer in New York City. She knew how a lady ought to behave.

"I'm traveling to Yorkshire myself," the man said. "It's not such a bad place, really. Not a great deal of barbed wire about; ancient hedgerows are used for fencing. But we've a lot of sheep and cattle. Villages are scattered here and there—jolly nice people. And of course, there are some enjoyable prospects—the Yorkshire Dales in the north, the Lake District to the northwest, and Scarborough on the coast."

"Is Yorkshire your home?"

"Was." He leaned back and let out a breath. "I've been away a long time. The prodigal son, you know."

As Star studied her fellow passenger, he began to transform from a mere object of information and slight annoyance into a

human being. *Prodigal son*. What could he mean by that? Why had he left his family? And more important, why was he returning home now?

"I've always wanted to go to India," Star said. "Africa, too."

"You must be joking."

"I heard a missionary speak about India once at a tent revival. He'd been in China, and he talked about crossing the Himalayan mountains and traveling down into the steaming deltas of the Ganges. It sounded exotic and beautiful—not a thing like west Texas, which is flatter than a chuck wagon griddle. But when he mentioned the crowded villages and the people worshipping fearsome idols made of clay and stone, that's when I knew I wanted to go. I think if I could teach one woman how to sew clothes for her naked little children or tell one old man about the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, I'd be as happy as a little heifer with a new fence post. I just want to do something meaningful, you know, something worthwhile."

"A heifer?" The man's dark brows drew together, but the dimple in his cheek deepened. "With a new fence post?"

"Heifers like to scratch against a tree or a post. They get fly bit sometimes, and the bites are itchy." Star picked up her quilting again, embarrassed that her common way of talking had made her notions about India sound silly. For all she knew, the man seated across from her was a baron himself, or even a duke. He probably thought she was addled.

"May I inquire as to the name of the missionary who spoke to you about India?" he asked.

Star glanced up. "I don't remember. I was a little gal at the time."

"A missionary named William Carey worked in India for many years. I met some of his students. Remarkable experience."

"Why?"

He shifted on the seat. "Well, actually . . ." He ran a finger around the inside of his stiff white collar. "It was . . . ah . . ."

"I'm sorry," Star said, reaching into the traveling bag at her feet. "It says right here on page 22, 'Do not be blunt when conversing

with gentlemen. Bold, straightforward questions are never lady-like.' This is my etiquette manual from the New York finishing school, and I reckon I've read that page fifteen times. Madame Bondurant told me I have a terrible habit of blurting right out what's on my mind. You know, you grow up with five brothers and three sisters, and somebody says, 'Dinnertime,' and you holler out, 'Hand over the biscuits.' You don't think about *please* and *may I* and *thank you kindly*. Somebody says, 'Remarkable experience,' and you ask, 'Why?'"

"And I shall tell you why." He gave her a nod of acceptance. "I'd been taken to church all my life. Mother always went. Father couldn't be bothered. Nonsense, he called it, and I must say I quite agreed. Incense, Latin, Gregorian chants, a great deal of formality and tradition. Lovely at Christmastime but a bit much the rest of the year, to my way of thinking. What was it all about? I hadn't the foggiest. Far more interested in tying my brother's knickers in knots than in listening to the minister."

Star laughed. "You tied your brother's knickers in knots?"

"It's an expression rather like yours about the heifer and the fence post. I liked to annoy my brother during the service. Make him wriggle. Great fun, you know." He chuckled. "At any rate, I went off to public school and then university. When I'd had enough and struck out on my own, I might as well have been wearing a suit of armor for all the religion that had penetrated my heart. Regular rake I was—women, wine, and cards. Good fun, I thought. Spent reams of money, bought a house in London, roved off to the Orient, gadded about the Continent. Thought I'd take a look round India, the Jewel in the Crown, you know."

"Oh, my." Star couldn't help but stare. What a different life this man had experienced. And yet, there was something about him that appealed to her. Something warm and honest.

"Whilst I was in Calicut," he went on, "I grew deathly ill. I'd a raging fever, thought I was going to die, and didn't particularly relish the notion. In the hospital I met a couple of chaps—students of William Carey. As I recovered, I watched them work,

saw the things they were willing to do, talked to them, questioned them. And that's when it happened."

"When you realized you had confused religion with faith."

"Exactly." He smiled at her. "I'm not much good at . . . well, at feelings. They're unfamiliar territory to me. But this was more than a feeling. It was as though I could hear Christ Himself knocking on that suit of armor I wore. I took it off, and in He came. Right inside me. Changed everything. I can't explain it, but I became different. A new man."

"And that's why you're going home. You want your family to meet the new man."

"Indeed." He unbuttoned his greatcoat to reveal a fine suit of black worsted wool, a stiff white collar with pointed wings carefully turned to the sides, and a knotted silk tie stuck with a gold pin. "The reformed rake, so to speak. Bit of a sticky wicket, going home. My father's been in a red rage at me for years. Mother can hardly speak my name. My younger brother, no doubt, hopes I'll wander off and get eaten by a tiger so he can lay claim to the titles and the inheritance. Both sisters married while I was away. I've nieces and nephews I've never seen. Bad business."

"Consequences," Star said. She watched as the coach rolled past the last of the redbrick houses and entered a vision of snowy white fields crisscrossed by black hedges. Flocks of woolly sheep clustered together for warmth, observed here and there by fat snowmen garbed in red knitted mufflers and black top hats.

"Some things grab you by the throat," Star said, "and you can't escape the consequences. Last year Texas had the worst winter anybody can remember. Dead cattle lay piled up against the fences for miles around. The water holes froze. The grass was buried. Those poor creatures bawled so piteously it nearly broke my heart. The few that survived were all frostbitten and scrawny. Oh, it was a terrible spring, let me tell you. This year it's happening all over again. They're calling it the Big Die-Up."

"Dreadful."

"You can say that again. There's not a thing my daddy or any

other rancher can do but pray for a warm spell and hope the investors won't pull out. On the other hand, I've learned that some consequences we bring on ourselves. Like when I ran off that rancher by being so ornery. So my Christmas present this year is going to be a wedding to the baron. Consequences."

"Consequences." The man tugged off his coat and laid it on the empty seat beside him. Then he leaned one shoulder against the coach window and with his knuckle traced a pattern on the steamy glass. "May I ask the name of your baron, madam? Perhaps I know the man."

"The name is Chol-mon-deley, or something like that." Star had practiced her new surname for weeks, but she thought she was probably botching the pronunciation. "Awkward as a bear in a bramble patch, if you ask me. Now, I'm Star Ellis. Plain and simple."

"I wouldn't call you plain, Miss Ellis, and you're certainly not simple." He thought for a moment. "I'm afraid I don't know your intended husband, though I've likely met him. Yorkshire's hardly a place where one can stay anonymous for long."

Star shrugged. It wouldn't do much good to learn about Rupert Cholmondeley anyway. Her intended husband had written her two letters since the announcement of their fathers' agreement. Both missives had been short and uninteresting. The man's primary occupation seemed to be foxhunting.

"Permit me to introduce myself, Miss Ellis," the man said. "I am the viscount Stratton, at your service. Lord Stratton, if you like."

Star felt her whole frame stiffen up like a buffalo hide in a snowstorm. This man was a *lord*? And she'd been rattling on and on like he was one of the cowhands over at the corral. Mercy!

"I'm pleased to meet you, Viscount," she said. "Wait a minute, I don't think I got that right."

Grabbing her etiquette manual, she began flipping through the pages. If only she could find that section on introductions and titles. She tucked away a curl that had strayed from her bonnet and ran her finger down the index.

"Lord Stratton," he said. "That's the formal name. My friends call me Stratton, and you're welcome to do the same."

Swallowing hard, Star shut her book. "Don't you have a real name?"

"Grey is my given name, but you won't hear it. If you need rescuing from your baron, you'll have to ask for Lord Stratton."

"I'll call you Grey." She picked up her needle again. "And I don't think anyone can rescue me."



"Righty ho!" the coach driver called as he swung open the inn's door. "This be seven o'clock an' time to leave Nottin'am. A fine inn, good eats, an' decent beds, hey? Show yer thanks in a sovereign or two for the innkeeper, that's right. Climb aboard everybody, and we'll be off."

As Grey waited for Miss Ellis to emerge from the room in which she had spent the previous night, he peered out the window at the quaint little village with its half-timbered houses and snow-lined streets. Wreaths tied with red and green ribbons hung on the streetlights, and shoppers were filling the streets in pursuit of the ingredients for holiday feasts.

Grey had enjoyed the journey thus far, and he was dreading its end. Miss Ellis had kept up an amusing and interesting conversation all the previous afternoon as the coach wound its way north. She fascinated him with her friendly banter and amusing colloquialisms. Moreover, she was as beautiful a creature as he'd ever seen. Masses of dark curls framed a pair of sparkling green eyes, clear white skin, and a smile so dazzling it fairly radiated. Star Ellis, he'd learned, was quick to laugh and was not the least abashed when it came to defending her opinions.

Grey admired her godly spirit and her desire to help the less fortunate. But her underlying sadness disturbed him. He would like to give that baron of hers a swift kick in the backside. The

least the man could have done was send a family carriage to London for the girl. Obviously, he didn't know what a treasure awaited him. Although she'd spent the evening in her room, Grey was looking forward to seeing the young American again this morning.

"No wonder Nottingham is the center of England's lace industry," a familiar voice said beside him. Grey glanced over to find the woman herself tugging on a pair of bright red gloves. "Look at the frost on all the windows, the icy tree branches, and the patterned cobblestones. The village reminds me of a fancy piece of lacework."

Grey studied the scene, trying to see it through her eyes. "I believe you're right, Miss Ellis. It does look rather lacy."

"You know, if my future didn't look as dark as midnight under a skillet, I'd be tempted to slip right into the Christmas spirit."

"That dark, is it?" Grey realized a grin was already tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Surely not. It's a fine morning—lots of snow, a comfy coach, and a dashing traveling companion."

She shot him a look that arched her dark eyebrows and set her eyes to sparkling. "Dashing? A little vain, I'd say. I hope you're not one of those roosters who thinks the sun comes up just to hear him crow."

Lifting her chin, she set out through the door. Chuckling, Grey joined Star near the coach as an elderly couple boarded. They had joined the party, the driver informed him, intending to go to Yorkshire to visit their daughter for the holidays.

This would be his first Christmas at home in many years, Grey realized. Not a particularly warm thought. A large tree always graced the ballroom at Brackenhurst Manor, but it was the servants who decorated it and laid the family gifts beneath. No doubt his parents had already issued invitations for the Christmas Eve party, a festive occasion with dancing, charades, and a charity auction. Good fun, if you didn't mind sharing your Christmas with two hundred people.

His hands shoved deep into the pockets of his greatcoat, Grey

watched the snowflakes falling like autumn leaves in a strong wind. "Cold?" he asked Star.

"As the legs of an amphibian," she said, flashing that brilliant smile. "I didn't sleep worth beans last night. If I can just thaw out my toes, I might be able to take a little siesta."

"Sí, señorita."

Her pink lips parted. "You've been to Mexico?"

"Spain. I've only a smattering of Spanish, I'm afraid, and not much more German or Italian. But I'm rather good at French, and I can count all the way to ten in Hindi."

"Hindi!" She laughed, a musical sound like the ringing of Christmas bells.

Grey couldn't hold in a returning chuckle. "May I help you into the carriage, Miss Ellis?"

"Star," she said, holding out her hand. "You're the only friend I have on this side of the Atlantic. You might as well call me Star."

He took her slender gloved fingers in his and slipped his free hand beneath her elbow. Miss Ellis was every bit the proper lady in her polished button boots, black velvet-trimmed coat with long, pleated peplum, and elegantly draped red dress and bustle. Her hat, trimmed in feathers and ribbons, had been purchased in New York, she had informed him the previous afternoon. As she tipped her head to step into the coach, a cascade of loose snowflakes tumbled onto his arm.

"Mercy," she said, turning toward him and brushing away the snow. "I'm sorry about that. A lady never knows what she'll find in her hats these days. When I was packing my trunks, I discovered a nest of baby mice hiding in the brim of my summer straw bonnet. They were the cutest things, so tiny and white and nestled down in among the silk ribbons. I just left that bonnet right there, figuring if I'm going to marry a baron, he can just buy me another summer bonnet. Don't you reckon?"

Grey sucked in a breath to keep from laughing. Mice in her bonnet? What would this intriguing woman say next?

"Indeed," he managed. "By rights your baron ought to buy you a new summer bonnet for every day of the week."

"And two for Sundays!"

Her smile sent a ray of blinding sunlight straight through Grey. His heart slammed into his rib cage with all the force of a cannonball as he helped her up the steps. The warmth of the woman's light seemed to shine all around him, above him, inside him, and he frowned in confusion at its unexpected brilliance.

As Star's tiny waist disappeared into the depths of the coach, Grey took off his top hat and ran his fingers through his hair. True, he had opened his soul willingly to God. But he'd always kept himself guarded against humans, whom he'd experienced as a faithless, scheming, and generally selfish lot.

So what was this softness inside him, this gently aching warmth? He'd climbed the Alps, boated on the Nile, and hunted tigers in India. How could a woman with mice in her bonnet threaten the insurmountable walls he'd built around his heart?

"Getting in, milord?" The coachman looked up at him and gave a snaggletoothed grin. Then he leaned over and whispered, "I couldn't elp but notice at the inn that you and the American miss are gettin' along famously. A pretty lass she is, eh?"

Grey shrugged. He didn't intend to discuss such matters with a curious coachman. It pained him to realize that his fascination with Miss Ellis was so apparent.

"The young lady is to be married to a Yorkshire baron, my good man," Grey said. "And I should thank you to keep your opinions to yourself."

"As you wish, milord," he said. "But I can tell you this, Lord Cholmondeley is a lucky fellow."

"Cholmondeley?" Grey grabbed the man by his sleeve. "Rupert Cholmondeley, younger son of the earl of Brackenhurst?"

"The very same, sir. Miss Ellis 'anded me the direction on this piece of paper, and I knew the family straightaway." He held out the carefully printed address. "She says they're to be married in the new year."

Grey stared at the inked letters, trying to recall the name of the Yorkshire baron Star Ellis had said she was to marry. *Cholmon-deley*, she'd pronounced it. Of course she had. And why not? The young Texan had likely never heard an Englishman say the surname, which was rightly pronounced *Chumley*.

Brushing aside the coachman, Grey stormed into the coach and took the only empty seat—right beside the young woman herself. He jerked off his top hat, gave it a whack, and sent snowflakes in a shower over the carriage floor. Blast.

The prodigal son was on his way home to make peace with his family. And the woman who had captured his imagination, his fancy, his very heart, it seemed, was Star Ellis. Grey Cholmondeley, the viscount Stratton, had managed to trip head over heels on the radiant smile of his younger brother's intended wife.

UNDER HIS WINGS





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

RUTH 2:12

CHAPTER ONE

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 anything 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 griddle. 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 curtseys. "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 easily 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 parings. 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!"

BEHOLD THE LAMB





*The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look!
The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*

JOHN 1:29

PROLOGUE

"I won't forget what you taught me," the boy whispered as he looked up into his father's blue eyes. Flakes of powdery snow drifted down like confectioner's sugar, settling on the shoulders of the two figures crouched in the shadows. Just over the top of an evergreen hedge, a full moon gleamed as bright and silver as a new shilling.

"And what did I teach you, Mick?" the father asked.

"That I must never be discovered."

"That's right, lad." The man bent and tousled his son's thick brown hair. With grimy fingers, he opened a burlap sack. "Now tell me again—what are we goin' to put in 'ere?"

"Silver forks and knives and spoons. Silver candlesticks. Silver coins. Silver trays, teapots, and anythin' else we can find."

"Good lad. Them silver things makes a bit o' noise, they does, so you must be quiet as a kitten, eh?"

"Yes, Papa." Mick pulled his stockings up over his knees, but an icy chill crept through ragged holes in the knitted wool. "I'm very cold, Papa. I want to go 'ome."

"Soon enough, Mick. But we've come all this way out into the countryside to do our work. Are you ready, my boy?"

"I'm ready, Papa." Mick peered around the corner of the tall hedge and studied the rambling manor house a short distance

away. In the moonlight, its pale stonework gleamed a soft silver as it settled deep in the silvery snow. An icy pond stretched out—slick and coated with silver—in front of the manor house, and the boy wondered if rich people made everything they owned from that precious metal.

Shivering, he slipped his hand into his father's warm palm. Though he was proud to be considered old enough to work, Mick knew this was a dangerous business. His father had been home for only a month after serving a two-year sentence in the London gaol. Not long before their father was released, Mick's only brother had been captured by a constable while doing a job at a shop on Regent Street. Barely fifteen, he'd been shipped off to Australia to build a railroad. Mick didn't know if magistrates would send six-year-old boys away on a ship to Australia. But he didn't like the idea at all. He would miss his mummy.

"Now then, lad, you see them bars?" His father whispered the question against Mick's ear as he pointed out the wrought-iron grillwork covering the ground-floor windows. "See the way it curves round there? I want you to slip in through that little space until you're standin' on the windowsill. Then push open the glass pane and let yourself down inside the kitchen. After you make sure nobody's about, I want you to 'urry across and open the door where I'll be waitin'. You understand that, Mick?"

His father gripped his shoulder so tightly that it hurt. The boy nodded, though he didn't see how he was ever going to fit through that tiny space between the iron bars.

"And what did I teach you, Mick? Tell me again."

"Never be discovered." The boy repeated the admonition, silently reminding himself that he must be as quiet as a wee kitten, moving about on soft tiptoes, never making a sound.

"Go on then, lad. That's my boy."

His father gave him a rough shove, and Mick scampered through the snow toward the manor house. As he crouched beside the window, his heartbeat hammered in his head. Papa had assured him the family who owned the house had all gone out

to a Christmas party and wouldn't be back until much later. But what if someone were still about? A small child might have stayed behind. Or a cook preparing a pudding for tomorrow's lunch.

Mick leaned his cold cheek against the frigid iron. Through a crack in the glass, he could smell something wonderful. His small, empty stomach gave a loud gurgle, and he caught his breath in fear. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw his father waving him onward.

"Never be discovered," Mick whispered as he slipped one leg through the curved place in the grille. He was going to do better than his brother, he decided. He was not going to be sent away to Australia. He would be so quiet that he would never have to build a railroad across the hot desert far away from his mummy.

Mick worked his other leg through the grille and then edged himself down into the cramped space beside the closed window. Holding his breath, he twisted one arm until it fit through. The other arm took more work. When his elbow bumped against the glass, he stiffened in terror.

If Mick was sent away, who would look after Mummy as she lay in bed coughing and coughing? Who would wipe away the blood with a rag? Who would stir the thin broth and keep coal on the fire? Papa was usually at the Boar's Head Tavern talking about business with his friends, or working his way along the riverfront where he sold his goods. Someone had to look after Mummy.

Taking a determined breath, the boy twisted and turned his head against the iron bars as he tried to pull it through the curve. One of his ears caught on a lump of jagged iron, but it tore loose as his head finally popped free of the bars. Mick imagined showing the wound to his mummy like a badge of honor. She would smile and pat his hand.

Bare fingers against the cold glass, Mick gave the window a gentle push. To his relief, it swung wide. Instantly, the aroma of a hundred magical delights wafted up through the air. The smell of freshly baked bread and apple tarts and roasted turkey and clove-studded ham and things Mick couldn't even name swirled

around him like a dream. Catching himself before he exclaimed in wonder, he clung to the wrought-iron grille.

“Never be discovered,” he mouthed again. Perched on the windowsill, he spotted a long table just below. A layer of fine, white flour covered the pine surface where a cook had been rolling out dough. Mick knew better than to tread in the flour and then track it across the kitchen floor.

Lowering himself down the wall, he balanced for a moment on the edge of the table and then leapt gingerly to the floor. The cavernous kitchen was dark, save the remains of a fire that glowed brightly in the grate. Though he ached to warm himself, Mick crept across the chilly black-and-white tiles toward the far door.

He was a kitten, he told himself, and far too clever to make noise. Reaching the door, he stood on tiptoe and drew back the bar that held it shut. Like a stealthy black cat, Mick’s father appeared suddenly through the opening. He pressed his back flat against the kitchen wall and gave the boy’s hair another tousle.

This was wonderful, Mick thought as he followed his father up a steep flight of stairs and past a green curtain of heavy felt. He was a part of the business now! He was doing quite well, too, copying the way his papa walked along the edge of the corridor, staying in the shadows, making not a single sound. They were a team, and soon they would have enough money to buy Mummy some porridge and a blanket. And they would buy a whole sack of coal for the fire. Maybe Mick would even get a new pair of stockings.

“Come in ’ere, now,” Papa whispered against the boy’s ear as he pulled him into a huge parlor. For a moment, Mick could only stare, blinking in shock. The whole room was blanketed in warmth and richness. Heavy red velvet curtains hung over the windows, thick patterned carpets covered the floors, and immense tapestries draped the walls. Portraits and landscapes hung by cords from picture rails. Shelves of books stood sentry near the doors. Like the women who spent their evenings in the alleyways near Mick’s flat, the furniture lounged about the rooms—brocade set-

tees, wicker chaises, sumptuous chairs, tables covered by layers of silk and taffeta.

"The dinin' room will be that way," Mick's father whispered as he pointed toward a distant door. "I'll collect the silverware and the candlesticks. You stay in 'ere and gather up clocks and snuffboxes and anythin' else you find."

"Silver?" Mick clarified. He wanted to be sure he got it right.

"That's it." His father gave him a grin that sent a thrill of warmth right down to Mick's toes. "You're a good lad."

As his father crept away, Mick began to slip across the parlor in search of things to put in the burlap bag. He found a small silver box on a table, and he dropped it into the sack. Then he spotted a fine clock under a glass dome. Careful to make not a sound, he lifted the dome, gathered the clock into his arm, and set the dome down again. He was doing very well indeed.

On a desk, he found a silver pen. He slipped it into his bag as he stepped toward something silver that seemed to dangle in the moonlight. Stopping before the object, he studied it carefully. Egg-shaped, it was pointed at each end, and it twisted and spun gently in the cool night air. Gingerly, Mick put out his finger and touched the thing. It swung away and then danced back again.

How was this magical thing suspended in midair? Mick took a step back and peered upward into the darkness. As his eyes adjusted, he slowly realized the silver ball was hanging from the branch of a tree. And beside it hung a red ball. And a gold one. Tiny white candles, too, had been balanced on little clips all over the tree. The more Mick looked at the tree, the more he saw. There were strings of cranberries and long strands of crystal beads and tiny paper cutouts of a man with a long, white beard and a red suit.

Mick thought about taking one of the silver balls for his father's sack. Surely that would buy the finest wool blanket in all London. But what if Mick gave a pull and the whole tree fell down? And why did the rich people grow trees in their parlors? And why did they hang silver balls on them? And who was the man in the red suit?

Moving on, Mick found another silver box and a pair of silver scissors lying beside an embroidery hoop. He tucked them into his sack. He was almost back to the main door when he noticed a strange little house sitting on a table.

Mick peered at the house, wondering if tiny people might be living inside it—tiny people with their own silver boxes and parlor trees. As his eyes focused on the shapes, he realized that indeed it was filled with people. But they were only statues carved out of wood and painted in bright colors.

A mummy and a papa stood near a small box filled with hay. Their baby lay on the hay with a white cloth wrapped around him. The child looked sweet and kind, and something inside Mick longed to pick him up and hold him. Next to the mummy and papa stood three kings, who were also looking down at the baby boy. At the other side of the little house, Mick spotted a man carrying a long stick. He was standing next to a donkey and a cow. And right at his feet lay a tiny lamb.

“What did you get, lad?” The voice at Mick’s ear nearly startled him into dropping his sack.

“I have silver, Papa.”

“Let me see it, then.” His father held out the burlap sack and peered into its depths.

“That’s a clock,” Mick whispered as he pointed out the prize.

“Good boy. And I got me a load of silverware and a couple of candlesticks.”

“Can we buy Mummy a blanket now?”

“Aye, we can.”

“What about some of that tonic from Mrs. Wiggins? It ’elps Mummy not to cough so much.”

“We’ll see. I’ve got to pay off some debts at the Boar’s ’ead first.” The father stared at his son a moment. “You’ve done good this time round, Mick. Why don’t you choose somethin’ for yourself, eh? I’ll just take a peek at the master’s desk while you decide what you want.”

Mick held his breath as he watched his father walk away.

Something for himself? A loaf of bread from the kitchen would be nice. Or maybe he should take a soft pillow from the settee. Either one would make his mummy feel better.

But Papa had told him to get something for himself. Mick looked across the parlor at the dark tree in the corner. Wouldn't he be the envy of the alleyway if he brought that silver ball out of his pocket and dangled it in the air for all his chums to see? Starting toward the tree, Mick thought of the boys' faces, their hungry eyes and rough hands. Someone bigger and meaner would take the silver ball away at once.

Across the room, Mick's father was rifling through papers and envelopes, eagerly stuffing some of them down into his bag. Maybe Mick wouldn't take anything from the house. He knew that all the things in the room belonged to the rich people. Even though Papa said the master of the house wouldn't even miss what was gone, Mick couldn't deny how bad he would feel if another boy stole his silver ball.

"Come on then, lad," his father whispered, taking the boy by the shoulder. "Let's go home to your mum, eh?"

Mick nodded, eager to slip back into his mother's arms and give her a warm hug. She would want to hear all about their evening's work. And she would be so proud of Mick—proud that he had not been discovered. But how could he prove he'd actually been inside the manor house? What sort of trophy could he show his mother? He needed more than a tattered ear to prove his bravery.

As his father hurried him toward the door, Mick spotted the strange little house sitting on the table. Again, he felt something pulling him toward the happy baby and his loving family. Pausing, he glanced at the carved figures, wondering if he should take the child. It would feel so good to pull the baby from his pocket now and then and stare down at that sweet face. But how could he take the baby away from its papa and mummy?

And then Mick's focus fell on the lamb. Small and gentle, it gleamed a silvery white in the moonlight. Legs tucked comfortably

beneath it, the lamb lay curled on the table. It seemed to be smiling at Mick.

“Don’t dawdle, lad!” his father hissed, giving his arm a jerk.

As he stumbled forward, Mick shot out his hand and grabbed the lamb. It fit perfectly into his tight, hot fist, and he clenched it with the thrill of possession. He followed his father down the long corridor and past the green felt curtain. He followed him across the kitchen with its sumptuous aromas. And he followed him through the door out into the snowy night.

As they staggered through the deep snow, across the lawn toward the hedge that rimmed the lane, Mick tucked the lamb deep into the pocket of his ragged shirt. The lamb proved that he was brave and smart. It showed that he had not been discovered, and he never would be. It was his own lamb now. His treasure. And no one would ever take it away.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine Palmer lives in Atlanta with her husband, Tim, where they serve as missionaries in a refugee community. They have two grown sons. Catherine is a graduate of Southwest Baptist University and holds a master's degree in English from Baylor University. Her first book was published in 1988. Since then she has published more than fifty novels, many of them national best sellers. Catherine has won numerous awards for her writing, including the Christy Award, the highest honor in Christian fiction. In 2004, she was given the Career Achievement Award for Inspirational Romance by *Romantic Times BOOKreviews* magazine. More than 2 million copies of Catherine's novels are currently in print.

With her compelling characters and strong message of Christian faith, Catherine is known for writing fiction that "touches the hearts and souls of readers." Her many collections include *A Town Called Hope*, *Treasures of the Heart*, *Finders Keepers*, *English Ivy*, and the *Miss Pickworth* series. Catherine also recently coauthored the *Four Seasons* fiction series with Gary Chapman, the *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Five Love Languages*.

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