



*The Wish Book
Christmas*

a novella

LYNN
AUSTIN

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“Lynn Austin’s tradition of masterful historical fiction continues in *If I Were You*. . . . While longtime fans will appreciate this introspective tale from a writer who deeply feels the nuances of human nature, those uninitiated will immediately recognize why her talented pen has led her to near-legendary status in the realm of inspirational fiction.”

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THE WISH BOOK CHRISTMAS

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All Things New

Wonderland Creek

While We're Far Apart

Though Waters Roar

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Faith of My Fathers
The Strength of His Hand
Song of Redemption
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Candle in the Darkness
A Light to My Path
Fire by Night
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Wings of Refuge
Eve's Daughters
Fly Away

The Wish Book
Christmas

L Y N N
A U S T I N



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Designed by Lindsey Bergsma and Libby Dykstra

Edited by Kathryn S. Olson

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For Lyla and Ayla

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given . . .

ISAIAH 9:6

Prologue

DECEMBER 1951

Bobby Barrett stepped off the kindergarten school bus and his foot sank into a pile of fresh snow. Some of the snow fell inside his galoshes and soaked into his socks, making him shiver. He couldn't remember there being this much snow back home in England, where he was born.

“Yay! It's snowing again!” his friend Harry Dawson cheered as the bus roared away. “If you stick out your tongue, you can catch snowflakes on it, like this.”

Bobby watched, then imitated Harry, opening his

mouth wide and sticking out his tongue. Bobby had moved to America only a year and a half ago with his mum, but Harry had lived here ever since he was a baby. He was always teaching Bobby new things. Snowflakes fell from the gray sky like feathers from a torn pillow, and they tickled Bobby's tongue as they landed on it.

"Come on, let's make footprints," Harry said a moment later. They stomped through the snow that had piled up on their neighbors' lawns as they made their way down the block to the house they shared. Mummy had been friends with Harry's mum for a long, long time, and now they all lived together in the same little house.

"I love it when it snows," Harry said. "Know why?"

"Why?"

"Because that means Christmas is coming, and Christmas means toys! Lots and lots and lots of toys!"

"Where do the toys come from?" Bobby asked.

"From Santa Claus, silly! You tell him what new toys you want and he brings them to your house on Christmas. Didn't Santa Claus ever come where you used to live?"

"You mean Wellingford Hall? In England?"

“Yeah.”

“Hmm. I remember Father Christmas,” Bobby said, “but I don’t think I remember lots of toys.”

Harry dropped to his knees and scooped up a pile of snow between his mittens, packing it together to make a ball. Bobby dropped down to do the same thing and felt the cold snow soaking through his mittens and the knees of his corduroy pants. He hoped Mummy wouldn’t get mad at him for getting all wet.

“Santa Claus is very rich, and he likes giving toys to children,” Harry said. “He left some under the tree for us last Christmas and some more at Nana and Granddad’s house, remember?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Everything had been new and strange last year after he and Mummy had sailed across the ocean on a big boat. America was loud and noisy and hard to get used to compared to the peace and quiet of Wellingford Hall. Everyone was always in a big hurry here, and they talked funny. It had taken a while before Bobby could understand what people were saying. Bobby had wanted to leave America at first and go back home, but Mummy said they couldn’t.

Harry stretched his arm back and threw the ball of snow as far as he could. Bobby did the same, but his ball

fell apart, and the loose snow fluttered to the ground. Harry was better than Bobby at everything.

“Come on, let’s run,” Harry said. “I’m hungry! I hope your mommy made hot dogs for lunch.”

Dogs? For lunch? An old woman was walking toward them with a big yellow dog on a leash, and it took Bobby a moment to remember that the Americans called sausages “hot dogs.” They weren’t really made from dogs, Mummy told him. He backed away as the dog got closer, his heart beating fast. He was afraid of most dogs, and this one was very big and frisky. It tugged on the leash as if it wanted to get away, and the lady had to pull back hard to make it stop.

“Hi, doggy,” Harry said, waving. The dog looked at Harry and barked really loud, making Bobby’s heart race even faster. He turned and ran the rest of the way home without waiting for his friend, hoping the dog wouldn’t chase after him and eat him.

He arrived home breathless, beating Harry through the door for once. Mummy had lunch waiting for them on the kitchen table—tomato soup with saltine crackers and bologna sandwiches. He took off his galoshes, coat, and mittens and slid onto his chair, beating Harry a second time.

“How was kindergarten today?” Mummy asked as Bobby bit into his bologna sandwich.

Harry answered before he had a chance to. “We had fun! We painted pictures using our fingers. The paint felt all squishy and cold.”

“I didn’t like it,” Bobby said. He had worried that the paint wouldn’t wash off afterwards and he would have colored fingers forever. “Why don’t they let us use paintbrushes in America?” he asked.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. “Because then they wouldn’t be called finger paints, silly.”

Bobby remembered what else they’d done in school today and hurried to tell his mum before Harry did. “Mummy, guess what? We’re going to be in a play at school, and you and Harry’s mum and Nana and Granddad can all come and see us.”

“A play? How nice. Do you know what the play is about?”

“It has a baby and a lot of sheep in it,” Harry said. He was talking with his mouth full, which Mummy said not to do. “Most of the kids are sheep but me and Bobby and another boy are going to be three smart, rich men.”

“No, the teacher said we’re rich *kings!*” Bobby said.

“Like the king we have back home in England. We’re going to wear crowns and everything!”

“That sounds lovely,” Mum said. “I can’t wait to see it.” She brushed Bobby’s hair off his forehead. Her hand smelled like flowers.

Harry finished his lunch first, leaving the crusts of his bread behind. Bobby copied him—he hated the dry crusts, too—then followed him into the living room, after putting his dishes in the sink. They were trying to decide what to play when Harry spotted a colorful magazine on the coffee table that hadn’t been there when they’d left for kindergarten that morning. “Look, Bobby! That’s Santa Claus—see? He’s the one who’s going to bring us toys for Christmas. Now do you remember?”

Bobby picked up the magazine and studied it. The cover showed a fat, white-bearded man in a red suit putting presents beneath a Christmas tree. Santa held one finger to his lips as if saying, “*Shh . . . these presents are a secret . . .*”

“He looks sort of like Father Christmas,” Bobby said, “with his white beard. But Father Christmas wears a green coat, I think. And he isn’t this fat.” He opened the book to see what was inside and saw pictures of all sorts of toys.

Harry grabbed the book from him. “Oh, boy! Look at all these cars and trucks!”

“Mummy, is Father Christmas the same as Santa Claus?” Bobby asked as she walked through the living room. She was carrying a basket of dirty laundry on her way to the basement.

“Yes, love. Children call him by different names in different countries. By the way, did you and Harry forget that we’re going to see Santa Claus in the Christmas parade tonight?”

“Tonight?” Bobby asked.

“Yes, after we eat supper.”

“Yay!” Harry cheered, bouncing in place. “We can sit on his lap afterwards and tell him all the toys we want him to bring us.”

Bobby couldn’t imagine sitting on this plump, red-suited stranger’s lap. He felt shy around people he didn’t know. “I don’t know what toys to tell him.”

Harry waved the magazine. “Well, there’s lots of them in this . . . this . . . What’s this book called?” he asked Bobby’s mum.

She bent over to look at the cover. “The Sears Christmas Wish Book.”

As she walked away, Harry leaned close to Bobby

to whisper in his ear, “We’d better hurry if we’re going to pick out all the toys we want to tell Santa about tonight. Come on.” He sank to the floor, lying on his tummy, and opened the book to the toy section. Bobby stretched out beside him, excited at the thought of picking out a whole bunch of new toys. It wasn’t even his birthday!

“Oooh! Look at these fire engines!” Harry said. “And Santa will bring us everything we want!”

“Everything?”

“Yes. But only if we’re good. Bad kids get sticks and coal for Christmas.”

“What’s coal?”

“Black lumpy stuff that looks like rocks.”

“What do the bad kids do with it?”

“I don’t know. I guess they have to play with it because they don’t have any toys. Listen, Bobby. We have to be real good from now until Christmas, okay?”

“Okay. How long is it until Christmas?”

“I don’t know. Maybe your mommy does.” They studied a few more pages of toys until Bobby heard his mum come upstairs from the basement again.

“Mummy? How many days is it until Christmas?” he called.

“Ehm . . . let’s see . . . twenty days.”

“Oh no!” Harry groaned, slapping his forehead.

“Is twenty days a lot?” Bobby asked him.

“Yes! That’s like . . . all of your fingers and all of mine! We’ll have to be good for a long time if we want lots and lots of toys.”

Bobby sighed. This all seemed like a lot of work. But the toys pictured in this wonderful Wish Book dazzled him, and like Harry, he wanted all of them. Most of the toys in their bedroom and at Nana’s house had belonged to Harry before Bobby moved in, and although Harry was pretty good about sharing them, Bobby wanted some new toys of his own. “Start at the beginning again and go real slow,” he begged. “I need to remember everything.”

“Okay, okay,” Harry said, turning back to the first page of toys. “I want these Tinkertoys, don’t you? We can build fun towers and stuff with them, see?”

“Yeah! I want them, too.” They continued through the pages, turning them slowly, studying the pictures. By the time they reached the end, Bobby could hardly wait to see this red-suited Santa Claus tonight and tell him about all the wonderful toys he wanted. Yes, Christmas was going to be great!

Chapter 1

20 DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

Christmas was coming. Eve Dawson saw signs of it all around her Connecticut town as she walked home from work. Pine boughs and wreaths decorated front doors. Christmas lights and tempting gift displays adorned shopwindows. Even the snow blanketing lawns and rooftops and sitting in puffy mounds on all of the bushes looked festive. Yes, Christmas was coming, and with it, the anxiety of trying to squeeze a few extra dollars from her tight budget to buy presents for her five-year-old son, Harry.

The afternoon was growing dark as she hurried along. The shortened December days meant it was barely light when she left for work in the morning and nearly dark when she returned home. Harry would be watching for her from the picture window, eager to show her something he'd made in kindergarten or to talk about the latest exploits of his TV heroes, the Lone Ranger and Tonto. Eve remembered watching for her mum the same way, waiting outside Granny Maud's cottage for the first glimpse of Mum coming up the road. At least Eve's job in the typing pool allowed her to return home to Harry every day and tuck him into bed at night. When Eve was Harry's age, her mum, who'd also been a single mother, had worked as a live-in servant at Wellingford Hall and was only able to see Eve once a week.

A hunched figure hurried up the sidewalk toward Eve—Mrs. Herder, bundled against the cold and the gently falling snow, walking her dog. Eve smiled as they passed. “Hello. Lovely evening, isn't it?”

“If you like snow.” Her words were muffled by the thick scarf wrapped around her neck and chin. Mrs. Herder continued past, her rambunctious yellow Labrador stopping to sniff at mailbox posts one minute, then tugging on his lead the next. They seemed a

mismatched pair, the young dog too large and energetic for the small, white-haired woman who reminded Eve of her granny.

Eve quickened her steps, gazing at the houses she passed, wishing she had a home of her own for her and her son. What would that be like? Lights glowed from behind her neighbors' windows, revealing glimpses of their lives, as if peering at distant television screens. She knew very little about her neighbors, including Mrs. Herder, even though she passed the older woman and her dog nearly every day. Eve only assumed her name was Herder because it was printed on her mailbox out front. She lived in an historic house with a wide front porch that stood at the very edge of Eve's neighborhood of new, postwar bungalows. Mrs. Herder still displayed a gold star in her window six years after the war had ended, as if she didn't want anyone to forget that she had lost a loved one. The star stirred memories of Alfie Clarkson, Eve's first love, who had also died in the war. Alfie and Mum and Granny—Eve wished she could hang gold stars somewhere to tell the world how much she missed them.

She turned to watch Mrs. Herder and her dog walk up the steps and enter their house and felt a wave of

homesickness for the English village of Wellingford, where she'd grown up. Her neighbors had known each other's names and had watched out for each other, their brick and stone cottages sitting shoulder to shoulder as if closing ranks against the outside world, not separated by private lawns and picket fences as they were here in America. The cottage in the village that she'd shared with Granny, and the nearby woods where she'd loved to roam, were the only true homes Eve could recall. But she had needed a new start for herself and Harry after the war, in a place where no one knew the shame of Harry's birth. While she wasn't proud of the way she had maneuvered that fresh start, things had turned out better than she deserved, for both her and her son. They lived with Eve's widowed friend, Audrey Barrett, paying rent every month, and the four of them had become a family of sorts. But if Eve could wish for any gift this Christmas, it would be a home of her own.

Harry wasn't in his usual place, watching for Eve from the front window as she walked up the driveway to Audrey's bungalow. She went inside through the kitchen door, stomping snow off her boots. She pulled off her hat, then smoothed down her hair. "It's snowing again," she told Audrey.

“The boys will be happy about that.” Audrey stood at the kitchen stove, mashing a pot of potatoes into gooey submission. “Personally, I don’t much like driving in snow.”

“We drove our ambulances on some rather slippery roads during the war, remember?”

“At breakneck speed. With bombs falling. But it had to be done.”

Eve hung up her coat and followed the happy sound of Harry’s voice as he played with Audrey’s son, Bobby. She found them sprawled on the rug in the living room, paging through a brightly colored catalogue. The boys were the same age and nearly the same size and might have been twins in their corduroy pants and plaid flannel shirts, except that Harry had ginger hair—a redhead, the Americans would say—and was friendly and talkative and boisterous. Bobby had inherited his father’s ebony hair and his mother’s shy reserve.

“What has you so charmed that you can’t even say hello to your mum?” Eve asked.

“Hi, Mommy.” Eve sighed inwardly at her son’s American accent and wording. It was her own fault, since she had brought him to the States as an infant. Bobby, having been here for a year and a half, was

starting to adopt the same type of speech, but at least he still called Audrey “Mummy.”

Harry barely glanced up, as if he might miss something if he looked away for too long. “We’re picking out all the toys we want Santa to bring us from the Christmas Wish Book.” He pointed to the page, saying, “I want that airplane. Oooh, and that submarine, too! And I want this army truck and this tank and this motorcycle . . . We could play army, right, Bobby?”

“That would be fun!” Bobby laid his hand on the page for a moment as if claiming territory. “I want *all* of the trucks on this page—and especially this motorbus!”

Harry waited until his friend lifted his hand, then flipped to the next page. “I want this pickup truck. Look, it has lights that really light up! And wow, look at this steam shovel! We could dig holes with it!”

“I want one,” Bobby said. “This army jeep has real lights, too!”

Eve squatted beside the boys for a better look as they continued turning pages, gleefully pointing to fire engines and bulldozers and police cars. “It looks to me like you’re asking for every toy in the book.”

“Not the *girls’* stuff,” Harry said, making a face. “We don’t want *dolls!*”

“Or baby toys,” Bobby added. “Just the boys’ toys on all of these pages.” Eve watched them flip through a few more pages, chorusing, “I want this and this . . .”

She frowned. “There isn’t room in this house for all of those toys. And besides, you have so many playthings already.”

“But they’re *old* toys, Mommy. These are *new* toys. We’re going to ask Santa for all of these new toys when we see him at the parade tonight.”

“The parade? That’s tonight?”

“Yep. Did you forget, Mommy?”

“I may have, yes. I had a busy day at work.” A mind-numbing day, actually. One that was exactly like the day before it and the one before that, clacking out letters in a windowless office as part of a typing pool. After paying her rent and a portion of the debt she felt she owed Audrey, Eve would be lucky to have enough money left over to buy one toy for Harry, let alone an entire catalogue full of them.

Audrey poked her head around the corner from the kitchen. “Dinner is ready. Wash up, please.”

Eve stood and walked toward Audrey. “Where did they get the catalogue?”

“It’s called the Wish Book, Mommy,” Harry called to her.

“I think it came about a month ago, but I found it again when I straightened up this morning. They’ve been glued to it all afternoon.” The boys stood to wash their hands, carrying the catalogue to the bathroom with them.

“Look at that, Bobby!” she heard Harry saying as they went. “It’s a whole service station, with gasoline pumps and cars and everything!”

“I want one!”

“That Wish Book seems to have opened a Pandora’s box of greedy longing,” Eve told Audrey with a sigh.

When they finally sat down at the kitchen table, Harry bolted his food in record time. “Hurry, Mommy, hurry!” he begged. “We’re gonna miss the Santa Claus Parade.”

Eve continued to eat at a leisurely pace. “Don’t worry. We have plenty of time.”

“Do you have to go away tonight, Mummy?” Bobby asked Audrey. The worried look on his face was exactly like his mother’s. Audrey had been a worrier for as long as Eve had known her, which was most of their thirty-two years. They had met as twelve-year-olds in

the woods surrounding Wellingford Hall, where Eve's mother served as lady's maid to Audrey's mother, the wealthy and aristocratic Lady Rosamunde.

"No, my classes are all finished for the semester," Audrey replied.

"Don't you remember how anxious your mum was when she was studying for her exams last week?" Eve asked. "We barely got a full sentence out of her."

"My final marks came in the mail today," Audrey said quietly.

"Well, are you going to show us or were they a disaster?"

Audrey smiled her shy, Audrey smile, dipping her head as if bowing before royalty. "They weren't bad."

"Let me guess—you earned top marks in both classes, am I right?"

"Yes."

"Good job, you! We'll have to celebrate."

* * *

After eating, they stacked the supper dishes in the sink to save for later and bundled up for the short drive into town. On the way there, Eve heard the boys whispering

in the backseat, and she swiveled around from the passenger seat to look. They had the catalogue open and were pointing and murmuring, "I want a gun and holster set like that!"

"We can pretend we're the Lone Ranger!"

"You brought the Wish Book with you? To a parade?" she asked in astonishment. The boys stared at her as if she'd asked a silly question.

"Did they really?" Audrey asked, glancing in the rearview mirror. "You've been studying it all afternoon, Bobby."

"I know, Mummy, but I might forget to tell Santa something I really, really want."

"We're gonna just *show* him everything instead," Harry added.

"You cannot sit on Santa's lap with the entire Sears Wish Book in your greedy little hands," Eve said.

"Why not?"

"Please, Mummy?"

"Well, for one thing, Santa Claus brings toys to a lot of other children besides you two," Eve said, "and the things you're asking for would fill his entire sleigh."

"He can make lots of trips, Mommy. He has all night."

Eve glanced at Audrey and saw her trying to hide a smile.

“Besides,” Harry continued, “Santa only brings toys if you’re good, and there are lots of kids at school who aren’t being good.”

“They’ll get coal in their stockings,” Bobby said solemnly.

Audrey found a parking spot near the village square, and as the boys tumbled out of the backseat, Eve spotted the catalogue peeking from beneath Harry’s jacket. “The Wish Book stays in the car,” she said, yanking it out and tossing it onto the seat.

“But, Mommy . . .”

She shut the car door. “If you can’t remember everything on the list, maybe it’s because your list is too long.”

A huge Christmas tree stood in the picturesque town square, waiting for the mayor to throw the switch and light it up at the end of the parade.

“When are we going to get a Christmas tree?” Harry asked.

“Maybe this weekend. We’ll cut one down from Uncle Tom’s farm like we did last year, remember?”

Audrey’s late husband’s childhood friend Tom Vandenberg had been like a father to both of the boys,

and he also held a special place in Eve's heart. In fact, he'd made it clear that he'd like to marry her and be more than just a father figure in Harry's life.

Beneath the village Christmas tree was a throne for Santa and a roped-off section where the children could form a queue to talk with him. Eve took Harry's hand in hers as they headed down the town's main street, wading through the crowd of pedestrians, searching for a place to stand along the parade route.

The quaint Connecticut town had been decorated with Christmas lights that twinkled against the snow, and the store windows were beautifully staged to tempt shoppers. Eve paused to look at a display of the latest aluminum kitchen appliances and coffeepots for modern housewives, along with aluminum ladders, Thermos bottles, and saws for their husbands. These were items that belonged in a home—a real home with a mother and father and children.

She closed her eyes, fighting off the familiar emptiness when she considered her and Audrey's makeshift family. At least Audrey had a respectable reason for being a single mum. And Eve should be thankful that her friend had invited Eve and Harry to share her home. She had lived off Audrey's insurance money and her

husband's inheritance for nearly four years, living in Audrey's house, driving her car. And although Audrey wasn't demanding a penny of it, Eve was determined to pay it all back.

"Wow! Look at that airplane, Bobby!" Harry pointed to a large propeller plane, also made from aluminum, dangling behind the store window from a wire. "Was there a big airplane like that in the Wish Book?"

"I don't think so. I want it!"

"Me, too. We'll tell Santa tonight. What's the name of this store, Mommy? We need to tell Santa where he can buy it."

"Santa will know," Eve said, tugging his hand. "Come on."

No matter how far they walked, the sidewalks were so crowded with families and children standing three- and four-deep to watch the parade that Eve couldn't find a place where all of them could stand. The cadence of drums sounded in the distance. The parade was about to begin.

Harry hopped up and down in frustration. "I can't see! I can't see!"

"Mummy, look," Bobby said. "They have daddies to help them." He pointed to the families in front of

them, and Eve saw that many of the fathers had lifted their small children onto their shoulders or held them in their arms so they could see. Eve and Audrey were both petite, and besides, the boys were too heavy to hold for the entire parade.

“I need a daddy so I can see,” Harry told Eve. “Everyone else has one.”

“It’s not fair,” Bobby pouted.

“Oh, dear,” Eve murmured. She met Audrey’s worried gaze.

The next moment, Harry dropped Eve’s hand and ran up to a well-dressed gentleman who was just coming out of the department store. He carried a brightly wrapped box tied with a silver bow. “Will you be our daddy?” Harry asked him.

“*Harry!*” Eve gasped, horrified.

“Mine, too! Mine, too!” Bobby echoed, running to the man.

A tide of heat rushed to Eve’s face as she hurried over to apologize to the gentleman and yank her son away. But before she could utter a sound, the man crouched down to talk to the boys. “Hello, Harry and Bobby. Are you here to see Santa Claus?” Eve recognized him then. Mr. Hamilton was the leader of their

Boys' Club at church. But she was still horribly embarrassed. And judging by her friend's expression, Audrey was too.

"Yeah. We were going to show Santa all the toys we wanted in the Wish Book," Harry told him, "but Mommy made us leave it in the car."

"I hope I can remember everything." Bobby wore his fretful look again.

Mr. Hamilton smiled. "I'm sure you'll remember the important things." He was probably in his midthirties and movie-star handsome. When millions of American GIs had landed in England during the war, Eve and Audrey and all the other women used to comment on how handsome the American men were—and here was another one, not wearing a uniform but a very expensive-looking overcoat, fedora, and cashmere scarf.

He stood again as the high school marching band approached playing "Jingle Bells."

"It's starting! The parade is starting!" Harry said, hopping up and down. "And we don't have a daddy!"

Mr. Hamilton gave Audrey and Eve a questioning look, as if not understanding.

"To boost them up," Eve said quickly, gesturing to the families around them.

“I see. I’ll be glad to help.” He handed his package to Audrey and crouched again, then lifted up both boys, one in each arm. Mr. Hamilton was a big man, tall and broad-shouldered, as solid as a Frigidaire. He looked as though he could easily manage two boys.

“But . . . I’m sure Mr. Hamilton needs to get home to his family and—” Audrey began.

“I don’t mind at all,” he said with a smile.

“Well . . . thank you. You can put them down whenever you get tired,” Eve said.

Fire engines rolled past, red lights flashing. Prancing horses carried Roy Rogers and Hopalong Cassidy look-alikes shooting cap pistols. The mayor waved from inside a Model A Ford strung with fairy lights. Local business owners towed homemade floats with Christmas decorations and pretty high school girls singing carols. Santa’s elves gave out candy canes to the children along the way. Then Santa Claus himself arrived, his sleigh pulled by a shiny new John Deere tractor.

“Hey! Where are all his reindeer?” Harry asked.

“Maybe they’re resting up for their big night,” Mr. Hamilton replied.

“They’ll need a long rest after pulling a sleigh filled

with all the toys you boys want,” Eve said. She and Audrey thanked Mr. Hamilton profusely when the parade ended and he had set the boys down on the sidewalk again. He tipped his hat to them and retrieved his package from Audrey.

“My pleasure, ladies. I hope you have a very merry Christmas—and that you boys get everything you want from that Wish Book.”

“Not a chance,” Eve mumbled. They followed the rest of the crowd back to the village square, applauding when the mayor flipped the switch and the towering Christmas tree lit up.

The queue of children waiting to sit on Santa’s lap seemed miles long, and Eve was weary. The cold had seeped through her boots, chilling her toes. “It’s going to take hours for you boys to have your turn,” she moaned. “And then another hour to recite the unabridged version of the Wish Book to him.”

“I have an idea,” Audrey said. “Why don’t you write letters to Santa instead? That way, you can take your time, and you won’t forget anything.” Audrey’s cheeks were as red as apples, and she was shivering. The boys seemed oblivious to the cold.

“But I can’t write yet, Mummy. Just my name.”

“I’ll help you. I promise.”

“That’s a great idea,” Eve said. “Let’s go home.”

“He’s only Santa’s helper, anyway,” she heard Harry telling Bobby as they trudged back to the car. “The real Santa lives at the North Pole and has lots and lots of toys to make.”

* * *

Harry got into a tug-of-war with Bobby at bedtime, arguing over which of them would get to sleep with the Wish Book under his pillow. “It isn’t going under either one of your pillows,” Audrey said, taking it away. “It’s not as though you’ve lost a tooth and are waiting for the tooth fairy.” She set the book on their dresser for the night.

“But, Mummy . . .,” Bobby whined.

“Didn’t you see all of those other children at the parade tonight?” Eve asked. “Santa has to bring presents to them, too. He can’t bring you every single toy in the Wish Book.”

“We’ll ask Nana and Granddad for the rest,” Eve heard Harry say as she switched off the light. “They always buy lots and lots of presents.” Eve started to

argue but knew it was true. She looked at Audrey helplessly.

Eve went into the kitchen with Audrey afterwards, talking while they washed and dried the dishes. “I wasn’t familiar with all of the American Christmas traditions last year,” Audrey said as she rinsed suds off a plate. “But I do remember that my in-laws gave Bobby a great many toys, and it did seem a bit too much. I guess I was so overwhelmed by the love Robert’s parents showed Bobby and me that I didn’t want to speak up about all the toys.”

“I’m quite sure Nana Barrett will repeat her performance this Christmas. She does it every year.” Eve and Harry had spent every Christmas with the Barretts since Harry was a baby, and while she still felt uncomfortable with the extravagant generosity, she had come to expect it. Harry, of course, didn’t have any problem with it at all. Until last year, Eve had allowed the Barretts to believe she and Harry were their daughter-in-law and grandson, and it was only by God’s grace that they still wanted to maintain a close relationship with Eve after she confessed her deception.

“Even if the Barretts can afford every toy in the Wish Book,” Audrey said, “I don’t want Bobby to grow up

craving so many things—or expecting to get them. It isn't right.”

Eve wiped a plate dry and put it in the cupboard. “I remember being grateful for just a few simple gifts at Christmas when I was their age. I would hang my stocking on my bedpost for Father Christmas to fill, and in the morning, I'd find a doll or a toy on top . . . maybe an orange and some candy. Granny would knit new mittens or a hat for me. I learned later that Mum had saved up for months to buy me those things. She always had to work on Christmas Day, but we could spend Boxing Day together.” Eve wondered if her mum had felt the same sense of loss at missing out on her child's life because of her need to work.

“I remember how our gardener would cut armloads of greens and holly branches,” Audrey said, her hands submerged in the soapy dishwater. “Wellingford Hall looked and smelled so splendid. There would be a huge tree and presents to unwrap, chosen by my tutor, Miss Blake, I'm sure. Not by my parents. And we always had Christmas crackers to pop open at the table. But best of all, Alfie would be home from boarding school for a few weeks.”

They worked in silence, Audrey scrubbing a pot with

a Brillo pad. Eve supposed they were both remembering Audrey's older brother, Alfie, and how much they had both loved him. "During the war," Audrey said, "we were grateful if we got through Christmas without being startled out of our beds in the middle of the night by air-raid sirens, remember?"

"Oh yes. And I remember how the American GIs would hold sprigs of mistletoe over our heads at the Christmas dances so they could steal a kiss."

Audrey fell silent again, and Eve knew she was thinking of her husband, Robert. "I want Harry to have lovely memories of Christmas, but I don't think getting every toy in the Wish Book is going to accomplish it. Besides, I can't spend wads of money on presents with my budget."

"My brother felt entitled to anything and everything he ever wished for, and it ruined him in the end. I don't want that to happen to Bobby. Is there some way we can teach them not to want so much?" Audrey handed Eve the pot to dry and pulled the stopper from the sink.

"I don't know. I'll have to think about it. But I agree. They need to learn that Christmas is more than getting every toy they could ever wish for." She finished drying

the pot and put it away. “That was nice of their Boys’ Club leader to help us tonight, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, but I was so embarrassed! And I’m worried, Eve. The boys are starting to notice that the other children have fathers and they don’t.”

“There’s at least one other family at church who lost their father during the war.”

“That isn’t the point, really. It’s a father’s role that’s missing from their lives. Even for simple things like a ride on his shoulders. We both know what it’s like to grow up without a father’s love, and now our sons will know it, too.”

“They have Tom Vandenberg. He’s been like a father to them.” Eve was sorry she’d mentioned Tom the moment the words were out of her mouth.

“Do you think you’ll marry him someday?” Audrey asked. “I can tell that he loves you.”

“I don’t know.” Eve shrugged as if it didn’t matter. But it did. “Are you going to get married again so Bobby can have a father?”

Audrey looked away. “Let’s go to bed.”