

the
HEIRESS
and the
WOODSMAN

a novel

CHRISTINE HILL SUNTZ

Praise for Christine Hill Suntz

Set in the Canadian wilderness of the 1830s, *The Heiress and The Woodsman* brims with family drama, danger, and romance. Both the heroine and hero are well written, likable, and brave. You'll root for their happy ending, as I did!

JULIE KLASSEN, author of *Whispers at Painswick Court*

A smartly paced, faith-filled adventure set against the unrest of 1837 Canada, brimming with danger, devotion, and tender romance. This story shines with a slow-burn relationship forged under pressure, beautifully exploring loyalty, sacrifice, and the quiet strength of trusting God with the unknown when everything familiar is at risk.

LAURA FRANTZ, Christy Award-winning author of *The Belle of Chatham*, on *The Heiress and the Woodsman*

Romantic and intriguing! In this lovely story, Christine Hill Suntz expertly sketches this little-known aspect of history with all its difficulties and dangers, then paints it to colorful life with compelling characters. Despite their differences, Joshua and Charlotte share big hearts devoted to family and community, and they clearly belong together. *The Heiress and the Woodsman* is delightful at every turn!

SARAH SUNDIN, bestselling and Christy Award-winning author of *Mists over the Channel Islands*

Fans of Lori Benton and Laura Frantz will be captivated by this evocative historical romance—an atmospheric blend of danger, devotion, and desire. With vivid wilderness settings and heartfelt stakes, this story shines with hope, courage, and enduring love.

JENELLE HOVDE, author of *The Light of Stars*, on *The Heiress and the Woodsman*

There are few books for which I will drop life and hole up to read from cover to cover in one fell swoop. This is one of them. In a single word: wow. I loved Joshua and Charlotte, and the plot is **chef's kiss**. Yes indeed, you need this one in your life. Fans of Laura Frantz—this is a must-read!

MICHELLE GRIEP, Christy Award-winning author of *Of Silver and Secrets*, on *The Heiress and the Woodsman*

In *The Heiress and the Woodsman*, Christine Hill Suntz has created an atmospheric, richly detailed historical backdrop for a love story sure to captivate readers. There's something here for everyone: adventure, romance, vivid details of frontier life, and characters who spring to life on the page.

AMY LYNN GREEN, author of *The Codebreaker's Daughter*

A captivating tale of forbidden love and second chances in mid-19th-century Toronto. . . . Suntz's nimble prose burnishes the propulsive plot as the pair find their way to each other while tackling the social strictures that separate them. Fans of Julie Klassen and Laura Frantz will be transported.

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *The Lawyer and the Laundress*

Original, deftly crafted, and a clean and wholesome 'marriage-of-convenience' historical romance novel. . . . A fun and memorable read from start to finish.

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW on *The Lawyer and the Laundress*

The Lawyer and the Laundress is a sweet and historically rich romance set against the unique backdrop of the Upper Canada Rebellion. Christine Hill Suntz skillfully conjures the era, while grounding her story with themes of faith, friendship, and the healing power of love. A beautiful read.

MIMI MATTHEWS, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Muse of Maiden Lane*

Suntz weaves a rich tale of second chances, hope, and faith set during a unique and unsettled time in Canada's history. This story will surely capture your heart from start to finish.

J'NELL CIESIELSKI, bestselling author of *The Socialite*, on *The Lawyer and the Laundress*

I was completely swept away by this debut! The spunky laundress and her “upstairs/downstairs” courtship hooked me right away. Beautiful prose and lovable characters make this marriage-of-convenience story a can't-miss romance, set during a little-known time in Canadian history. Perfect for fans of Sarah Ladd, Laura Frantz, and Julie Klassen. Christine Hill Suntz is a stunning new voice in historical fiction!

ASHLEY CLARK, acclaimed author of the *Heirloom Secrets* series, on *The Lawyer and the Laundress*

Christine Suntz shines in her debut novel filled with beautiful prose and engaging characters, set in a little-known slice of history. *The Lawyer and the Laundress* is the perfect addition to the historical romance genre. Fans of Tamera Alexander and Tracie Peterson are sure to enjoy this delightful new offering.

SARAH MONZON, author of *An Overdue Match*

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CHRISTINE HILL SUNTZ



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Chapter 1

NEAR TORONTO, 1837

Charlotte inhaled, the scent of hay and horse invading her senses and calming her spirit. Holding the lantern aloft, she trod the worn dirt hall, past empty stalls with nameplates painted in careful letters. *Apollo. Demeter.* Once they'd been her father's pride and joy, shipped from England so he could build his stable and his fortune in Upper Canada. She stopped at the largest, which had once housed Zeus, the huge stallion he'd ridden into battle at Waterloo.

It was Scarlett's stall now.

The horse stretched out her velvety muzzle and nickered an eager welcome.

"Sorry, my love." Charlotte ran her hand up Scarlett's petal-soft cheek to scratch the tiny dip behind her ear. "No saddle today." November's short days and icy rain curtailed

the long afternoon rides that were their chief entertainment. Quiet moments in the stable or a quick jaunt to the market on Saturdays were all they had now to break the monotony of the days.

Scarlett nudged Charlotte and paced to the side of her stall, looking for Tuck, her lifelong friend. The mare still wasn't used to being in the stable alone, and her eyes seemed to beg Charlotte to bring him back.

"I know," Charlotte whispered. She leaned forward, resting her crossed arms on the stall, and let the wave of worry and loneliness wash over her. "I miss them, too."

"Company, Miss Charlotte." Fulton's quiet voice at the door made her jump.

She turned to face the older man. "Company?" The word was so unexpected, she repeated it to be sure she'd heard correctly. Since Papa's investments had failed along with his health, visitors from the city had been few.

"Aye. Mr. Ballantine is here."

Charlotte ran to the door, all thoughts of comforting Scarlett forgotten. It must be important for her father's old friend to make the hour-long trip from the city on a day like this. "Where is he?"

"I showed him to the study. Then I came to fetch you straightaway."

"Thank you, Fulton." She sent him a grateful look. If it had been up to Papa, Ballantine might have come and gone, and she'd have been none the wiser.

Hitching up her skirts, she dashed across the muddy yard, leaving Fulton to follow as fast as his wooden leg permitted. Papa had written a letter to beg Ballantine's help. Perhaps his

inquiries had finally borne fruit. Perhaps there was news of Simon.

She burst through the back door into the kitchen. Her favorite room, though she had no time to bask in the warm glow of the fire or share a pot of tea with Fulton while he listened patiently to her plans for Edenbrook. She tore off her shawl and apron and poured water into the basin for a quick wash. Smoothing back her hair, Charlotte glanced down at her worn gown with a frown. Mama would have disapproved of the smudges around the cuffs. *There is no greater indication of gentility than a tidy toilette.*

If she took the time to change now, she might miss Mr. Ballantine and be dependent on what news she could eke out of Papa. This dress would have to do.

Decision made, she followed the sound of male voices to Papa's study and slipped through the door. Warmth enveloped her, a stark contrast to the dark, icy hall. In this room, time stood still. The furniture gleamed from careful polishing that smoothed away the nicks and scratches. Book-lined shelves and thick velvet wall hangings surrounded Papa like cotton wool, protecting him from the reality outside its doors.

Her father didn't look up as she entered, but his shoulders, usually slumped with exhaustion, were straight. Thank goodness Fulton had convinced him to shave and don his waistcoat and cravat this morning. Since Simon left, he'd taken to sitting in his dressing gown all day.

Mr. Ballantine stood in front of the fire, his gaze on Papa's ornate dress sword mounted above the mantel. At the sound of her entrance, he turned and bent his form in a courtly bow. Nearing sixty, he was still a tall, imposing man, though the deep

lines across his brow hinted that his life hadn't been easy, despite his financial success.

She curtsied, biting her lip to contain the questions that would have bubbled out. *A young lady never initiates conversation.*

"Charlotte, my dear." Mr. Ballantine patted her hand. "You grow lovelier every time I see you." He glanced at Papa. "You must be turning the young men away." He chuckled at his jest and Charlotte summoned a weak smile, though they all knew no suitors would call on poor Charlotte Carruthers. "She's the very image of Elizabeth, wouldn't you say, Charles?"

Charlotte's attention snapped to her father. Papa never talked about Mama. Maybe he'd say things to Ballantine he wouldn't say to her. She had Mama's chestnut hair and brown eyes. She remembered that much, though the lines and curves of Mama's face had blended in her memory, leaving behind only the image of her smile.

Papa turned to Charlotte, ignoring the question. "Where is the tea tray? I'm sure Mr. Ballantine could do with a hot cup on an afternoon like this."

Charlotte forced a smile, though her fingers clenched into fists in the folds of her skirt. Papa didn't want her here, but that was nothing new. "Fulton is preparing it." At least, she hoped he was, for there was no chance she'd miss this visit. "I'm sure it will arrive any moment now." Papa's lips pursed, and Charlotte lowered her eyes and chose a high-back chair, leaving Ballantine to resume his seat in the leather armchair across from Papa.

"I doubt I have time for tea today," Ballantine said quickly, smoothing over the tension and drawing Papa's attention back to himself. "Militia meeting tonight. Pity you can't join us,

Charles. You'd make quick work of those rebels." He swiveled, winking at Charlotte. "You don't remember your father decked out in his regimentals. What a swordsman he was."

An opening such as this would usually bring back a flood of reminiscences, but today, only one word caught Papa's attention. "Rebels?" He straightened, the thick wool blanket slipping off his shoulders.

"Aye." Ballantine shook his head in disgust. "We've heard of meetings north of the city. Agitating for an elected assembly, of all things. Imagine every riffraff in Upper Canada deciding the course of the colony. The next thing you know, we'll be signing a declaration like those traitors to the south."

Telltale red appeared on her father's cheeks. Charlotte couldn't let him digress into a rant about loyalty to the Crown, not when they still hadn't heard if Ballantine had news of Simon.

"I'm sure our brave militia will stamp out any threats," Charlotte said, hoping to redirect her father's thoughts along more congenial lines. "They're well trained. Papa said so himself the last time he visited the fort."

"Oh, indeed. Nothing to fear, my dear." Ballantine's voice took on the patronizing tones of a kindly grandfather assuring a child there were no wolves in the forest. "I'm sure Cole will keep a close eye on everything up here."

Charlotte recoiled at the mention of her neighbor Deacon Cole. "Oh, yes, he keeps a close eye on things." Too close an eye.

Oblivious to her sarcasm, Ballantine clasped his hands and sent Charlotte a keen stare. "Young Simon's not at home yet?"

"Ah . . . no." Charlotte scrambled to make sense of the question. Papa had written Ballantine weeks ago to inform him of

Simon's disappearance and beg for his help. She'd posted the letter herself. Unless . . . She looked at her father, but he avoided her gaze. Unless he hadn't told Ballantine the truth.

"I assumed Simon would be back from Montreal by now. The term ended a week ago."

Charlotte stifled a gasp and tried to piece together the story Papa had fed Ballantine. Studying at McGill? It was laughable. Where would they ever get the money for that?

Ballantine looked between father and daughter, a trace of impatience crossing his face. "When do you expect him back?"

Her gaze flew to Papa. His expression was pained, almost pleading, and at once she understood. He didn't want his former friends to know Simon had abandoned his family and his inheritance.

All these months, she'd assumed help was on the way, but he'd done nothing to find her brother. Frustration bubbled in her gut, rising until she couldn't hold back her questions. Papa might care more about his reputation than Simon's safety, but she did not. Ballantine, of all people, should understand the flight of a rebellious child. Rumors still circulated about the probable fate of his own daughter, who'd disappeared more than a decade ago.

Charlotte cleared her throat. "Mr. Ballantine, about my brother. You see, he's not—"

"Likely to be back for some time." The sharp warning in her father's voice silenced her as effectively as a hand over her mouth. He might be an invalid now, but there was a time when he'd commanded men. "You know Simon." He focused his attention on Ballantine with a thin smile. "Probably got waylaid by a falling leaf he wanted to sketch."

Charlotte bit her lip, stifling the urge to defend Simon. She'd tried long enough to get her father to see his merits. Nothing would change now.

Ballantine looked from Charlotte to her father, as though he realized there was more to the story. "I came to talk with him about joining up," he said finally. "Young men from all the finest families will head up the regiments." He glanced at Papa. "Simon should be there."

Even though they were no longer one of the finest families? The bitter question was on the tip of Charlotte's tongue, but she swallowed it back, her attention riveted by the look on Ballantine's face.

His jovial mask fell away to reveal the shrewd intelligence that had made him the best business mind in the colony. "There's been talk, Charles. No one has seen Simon in the city for months." He sent a hesitant look at Charlotte before continuing. "And there are some who claim he was never in Montreal at all. He's well known as a rather . . . impetuous boy."

"What are you implying?" Charlotte asked. There was a stern note in Ballantine's voice that gave her pause. It was almost as though he warned them. But of what?

"Now, now, my dear, nothing to get upset about. We just want to squelch any suspicion that Simon might have joined Mackenzie." Ballantine grimaced as though the name of the rebel leader left an unpleasant taste in his mouth.

"See here, Ballantine. My son is no rebel." Her father spoke with all his usual bluster, but Charlotte could see the fear and uncertainty behind his words in the way his fingers twisted the folds of his blanket.

"I came as your friend, Charles, not to accuse. I know where

this family's loyalty lies." His gaze slid to the side. "Wouldn't hurt to prove it, though."



If defeat had a scent, it would be this. Joshua took another sip of tepid water from his canteen, but it did nothing to drive away the stench of rotting produce and animal dung that permeated the market.

A small crowd gathered at the far end, and Joshua wandered over to join them—more to escape the odor of the fishmongers than out of curiosity. He moved through the crowd until he could see the figure at its center, a small man with a red wig standing on a wagon bed.

"There are rich men now as there were in Christ's time." The man spoke with passion and authority that belied his small stature. "A wicked government has trampled the law." His voice rose with each sentence, the hint of Scots more pronounced. "They will roll their fine carriages and riot in their palaces at our expense. Are we poor, spiritless peasants who were born to toil for our betters?" A man next to Joshua shook his head and joined the chorus of negative replies. Joshua turned away. While he didn't disagree with the man's sentiments, he couldn't allow himself to be distracted.

Out of habit, Joshua shoved his hand in his pocket and pulled out the smooth piece of walnut wood he'd carved into a wolf. Did Henry love wolves as much as he used to? He hoped so.

Another hour passed, but no one stopped to inquire after his wheat. Not since word had spread of his prices.

“Don’t like to say I told you so, but . . .” The farmer beside him rounded the corner of his wagon with a sympathetic smile.

“But you were right.” Joshua rubbed a weary hand across his face. He’d set his price slightly higher than last year’s, giving himself room to bargain. And he’d nearly been laughed out of the market.

“You’d best sell soon. Market closes at four.”

Joshua sighed. He’d spent years working for other men, watching their farms grow and prosper, waiting for the day he’d be on his own. Now he’d be lucky to feed himself through the winter. “I don’t understand. Last year, wheat was double the price.”

The man’s face hardened. “That’s not what the farmers get for it.” He jerked his head toward the group of farmers still huddled around the man on the crate. “It’s true what Mackenzie said. All the profits go to the mill or get shipped back to England. He took our concerns to the assembly, but those bigwigs in the council don’t care nothing for us what does all the work.”

Joshua nodded. He had few expectations of those in power. They’d done nothing to help him before.

The farmer drew closer and turned his back to the market, his voice lowered to a murmur. “Few of us are meeting tonight. North of the city at Montgomery’s Tavern. I won’t work my fingers to the bone to see my family starve so the likes of him can prosper.” He jerked his head toward the man who sauntered toward them in an ill-fitting wool suit and dusty beaver hat. Joshua straightened, the hope for a customer dying a second after it kindled.

Higgins was back.

The farmer shook his head in disgust and retreated to the

other side of his wagon. The negotiator for the largest grist mill in the city was not a popular figure at market.

"You ready to give up, my boy?" Higgins grinned, confident of Joshua's capitulation. He'd sought Joshua out within moments of his arrival, with a price so low that Joshua turned him away in seconds. It was the only bid he'd received.

If he took what Higgins offered, it would barely be enough to purchase supplies to see them through the winter, never mind seed or a second plow so Henry could help him prepare fields next year.

Joshua swallowed back the dark wave of disappointment. He couldn't lose sight of what was most important. Henry. They could get by on ten pounds. They'd have to.

"I'd give it away before I'd sell to you, Higgins." Joshua bluffed and Higgins knew it, for the oily smile on his face didn't fade at the insult.

"Need another week in this stinking dump to come to your senses, eh?" The older man gestured toward the men gathered a few yards away. "Or maybe you'll join Mackenzie's rebels?" His lip curled in scorn. "Lot of good that would do you." Higgins turned away.

Defeat rose in Joshua's throat like bile. He couldn't afford to house his horse at the livery all week until the next market day. "Wait."

Higgins froze, then wheeled about with a knowing smirk. "That didn't take long." He snapped his fingers, and a ragged boy trotted over pushing a handcart. "Load this up."

The boy struggled with the heavy sacks of wheat. His dirty clothing hung loose on his scrawny frame, his feet bare even

though it was nearly winter. He could have been Henry. *Oh, Lord, please don't let this happen to Henry.*

Joshua helped the boy load the grain, trying not to think about the hours of backbreaking work each sack represented. Half the yield he'd expected, though he couldn't understand where he'd gone wrong.

All too soon, he had a nearly empty wagon and only ten pounds in his pocket.

The farmer returned as Joshua hitched Bess. "Don't forget what I told you. Tonight. Montgomery's Tavern."

Joshua knew the place, a main posting inn for those entering and leaving the city on the north road, but he didn't have the time for politics today. He nodded farewell and turned the wagon away from the shops and public houses surrounding the market and toward Irish Town, the heart of the city's poor.

He had another mission. A year ago, he'd made Henry a promise. Today it was time to fulfill it.