

WETHERBY BRIDES SHORT STORIES

# Jerrica Knight-Catania

*"...the perfect prelude to the Wetherby Brides series."  
Rae Smith*



Christmas Warms the Hearts

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The Perfect Kiss

# THE PERFECT KISS

A Wetherby Brides Short Story

*Jerrica Knight-Catania*

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Dear Reader,

I am so excited to make this short story available to you, as it was my entrée into the publishing world. An entry for a contest that led me to Second Wind Publishing, *The Perfect Kiss* first appeared in their anthology of romantic stories, *Love is on the Wind*. I hope you enjoy the story of how my favorite character, Katherine Hart, Duchess of Weston, fell in love with her duke.

-Jerrica

## THE PERFECT KISS

*Sevenoaks, England  
February 8, 1816*

“Kat, are you all right?”

Lady Katherine Wetherby turned from the window to find her best friend regarding her with great concern.

“Fine, Melinda” she said evasively as she strolled back to the sitting area.

She plopped down on the settee opposite Melinda and picked up her needlepoint again, praying her hands wouldn’t give away her sudden nervousness.

They sat in silence for a moment, both concentrating very hard on the projects before them, but it wasn’t long before Kat’s mind began to wander to the man pulling up in the drive. She could throttle Benjamin for inviting him here for the week. Didn’t he know what that man did to her?

No, of course he didn’t. How could he? Kat had kept that secret for years and she wasn’t about to reveal herself to anyone. Especially not her older brother. He would tease her endlessly for her childish crush on his friend.

*Well, perhaps he’s changed since I saw him last. Perhaps he’s a horrible man now and I won’t want a thing to do with him!*

That was a probability. She hadn’t seen William Hart, Duke of Weston, in well over two years. She had been a silly girl of nineteen then, smitten with the older man, eight years her senior. Now she was twenty-one and so much wiser. She had a good head on her shoulders and would not be swayed by good looks and a bit of charm. And she certainly wouldn’t chase after him like some ninny and make a cake of herself.

No, she would be calm and mature. She would not wear her heart on her sleeve and she would not allow her emotions to radiate through her eyes.

“Ow!” Kat looked down at her finger, now throbbing from a solid stab.

“Oh, dear, are you all right, Kat?”

“Yes, I just wasn’t paying attention.” She tossed her needlepoint aside and stuck her finger in her mouth to catch the blood before she soiled the settee.

“Have you been dipping your fingers in the pudding again, Lady Katherine?”

~\*~

William Hart, Duke of Weston, watched as Lady Katherine’s dark head swung to face him. Her brown eyes were open as wide as they could go, and she didn’t even blink as she stared back at him. Clearly he’d startled her, but he hoped she wouldn’t hold it against him. She was such a pretty little thing and he’d hate to see that exquisite face contorted in anger.

“I’m sorry,” he continued. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything. Your brother sent me here to wait for him.”

“Not at all, Your Grace,” said the mousy brown-haired girl on the other side of the coffee table. He hadn’t even noticed her until now. “We were just working on our needlepoint, see?”

The mousy girl cleared her throat and cast sidelong glances to her friend as she procured her needlepoint to him as a distraction. She obviously thought her friend should remove her finger from her mouth, and William had to agree. Though, not for the same reasons, he was sure.

The sight of her sucking on her finger did things to him he hadn’t been expecting. Self-consciously, he pulled his jacket closed and fastened the button at the front.

Finally, the dumbstruck Lady Katherine pulled her finger from her mouth with a suck and pop, before not-so-discretely wiping it on her skirts. William held back a laugh. Good Lord, she was an unexpected delight.

“I...um...forgive me, Your Grace, I...needlepoint...” She held up her finger as she picked up the needlepoint from the settee. Did she think to play a game of charades with him? “Ow!”

*Oh, good God.* “It’s all right, Lady Katherine, I understand. You pricked your finger, and it appears you’ve done it again. Perhaps needlepoint is not the best activity for you at this moment. May I?”

He took the needlepoint from her and placed it carefully on the table, noticing the horrific pattern on the ring. Perhaps needlepoint wasn’t *ever* the best activity for her.

“It’s a cat,” she said, somewhat dejected.

Trying not to laugh, he turned to her. “Well, of course it is, Lady Katherine, and quite a lovely one at that. I was simply admiring your...choice of color.”

She eyed him skeptically and he fought to keep his lips from twitching upward. He cleared his throat and reached into his pocket for a handkerchief. The simple task helped him gain control of his faculties before he turned back to her.

“Here,” he said, handing her the white linen.

She didn’t take it. She didn’t even move. “You’re teasing me.”

William tried to look affronted. “Teasing you?”

“Anyone can see that’s not a cat. I only said that to see what you would do.”

“You...what?” William couldn’t quite believe the little chit had tricked him, and now caught him in a lie.

“I know it’s horrid, but I was...distracted, if you must know. I’m usually quite accomplished at needlepoint.”

Did she think he cared one way or another how her needlepoint was? William almost laughed but figured that wasn’t such a good idea at the moment.

“I’ve no doubt of it,” he said, his tone as somber as he could make it under the circumstances. “I will not hold this particular piece against you, Lady Katherine. Now, will you please take my handkerchief for your finger, give me a proper greeting and introduce me to your friend?”

~\*~

He made a great many demands on her in a short amount of time, but there was a glimmer of amusement as he did. Kat had to admit she’d not been a very good hostess, and he had every right to tease her for her behavior. But she couldn’t help it. His voice had startled her, even though she’d seen him drive up. Even though she knew he was in the house. She just hadn’t expected to have to face him so soon.

And good heavens, he cut quite a dashing figure in their drawing room. His wavy blond hair swooped over his left brow and his pale blue eyes reflected the white snow just beyond the windows. His expression continued to be one of good humor as he waited for her to say something.

*Say something.*

“Oh, yes, of course! Welcome, Your Grace,” she said as she dipped into a curtsey. As she righted herself, she took the handkerchief from him and wrapped her finger. “And may I introduce my dear friend, Miss Melinda Millbury.”



He bowed first to Kat, then to Melinda. “Thank you for your warm welcome, Lady Katherine. It is indeed a pleasure to meet you, Miss Millbury.”

“Ah, here you all are!”

Benjamin strode into the room, a broad smile on his face. Her brother was quite dashing in his own way. His features were similar to Kat’s—thick, dark hair and chocolate brown eyes. However, her three brothers seemed to have stolen all the height in the family, leaving Kat with a rather petite frame.

“Have you all had a chance to reacquaint yourselves?”

“We have indeed,” His Grace replied, turning amused eyes on Kat. “However, the dinner hour approaches and I do not wish for your parents to see me in these travel-weary clothes.”

“Right this way.” Ben stepped aside and gestured for the duke to precede him into the hall.

With a slight bow and a smile, the two men disappeared from the room.

~\*~

Once he was safely ensconced in the privacy of his chamber, William began to undress and prepare for dinner. As he did so, he reflected on his brief encounter with his best friend’s little sister.

She’d grown up quite a bit since last he’d seen her. Kat had always been what he thought of as a silly ninny, following him and Benjamin around, trying to be part of whatever they were doing. She was a horribly nosy girl, prone to butting into others’ affairs without a second thought.

But as he pictured her as she'd been today, her jet-black hair falling in ringlets around her face, her wide brown eyes blinking in consternation, he didn't think he'd mind her butting into his affairs.

He shook his head as he made yet another failed attempt at his cravat. What was he thinking? He could never have her. She was Benjamin's little sister—off limits, as far as he was concerned. He'd once courted a friend's sister and when it ended badly, he never heard from his friend again. William valued Benjamin too much to allow that to happen.

~\*~

Katherine pinched her cheeks for the hundredth time in three minutes. Good heavens, would Melinda never be ready? She needed her to leave so she could execute her plan. But Melinda continued to flit about the room, doing heaven knew what, to prepare for dinner.

At long last, Melinda announced she was ready. "Shall we go down?"

"Er...I'm not quite ready, Mel. Perhaps you should go on without me."

"Without you?" Melinda gaped at her. "No, no, I can wait. Can I help?"

"No!" Kat shouted and then shook her head. "No, I mean, actually...I'm not feeling very well." She gave her friend a grimace and covered her stomach with her hand.

"Oh," Melinda replied with a sympathetic grimace of her own. "Of course...I'll just see you downstairs, then."

With an embarrassed blush, Melinda darted from the room and closed the door firmly behind her. Kat didn't waste a single moment. She immediately turned the lock in the door and then set to her plan.

In the course of the afternoon, she had decided the only way to get over her silly infatuation with the Duke of Weston was to match him up with another woman. Another woman

that would deem him off limits to Kat for all eternity should he court her. All she had to do was convince them they had a *tendre* for one another, and *voilà!* She could cease her obsession and find a real husband. A husband who was quiet and not too handsome, who was a good match for her station, but not so high that she would feel inadequate as his wife. A husband who didn't have a reputation in London as a rake. A husband who didn't give her heart palpitations whenever he was in a fifty-mile radius or make her lose her very refined powers of speech.

Her resolve set, she marched to the escritoire, dipped the quill in the ink and began to write on a fresh piece of foolscap.

When she was done, Kat dabbed the letter with a bit of Melinda's perfume and then drew a large heart around the seal. She held the folded foolscap straight out in front of her and smiled.

*Time to set the plan in motion.*

~\*~

William returned to his room exhausted, but with a certain raven-haired beauty on his mind. Kat had been just as delightful over dinner as she had been earlier in the day. She seemed constantly flustered, which caused her mouth to run away with itself and she ended up saying the most absurdly amusing things.

He chuckled now as he recalled some of her ramblings. And poor Miss Millbury seemed to be the topic she most wished to discuss. She'd given a list of Miss Millbury's accomplishments over dinner and they continued to flow into dessert and had a prominent place over their game of Whist as well. William was sure there was nothing he didn't know now about Miss Millbury from Hampshire.

He quickly divested himself of his clothing, eager to meet with his large four-poster, but stopped just as he was about to collapse to the mattress. A smile came to his lips as he regarded

the folded up letter with the heart sitting on his pillow. He hadn't expected Katherine to be so forward so soon, but...

He plucked up the letter, broke the seal and began to read.

*Dear Lord Weston,*

*I hope you do not think me too forward in writing this, but I must share with you what is in my heart. Ever since I saw you this afternoon, I cannot stop thinking of you. You are handsome and kind, and I fear I have developed a sort of affection for you. I know we are not well acquainted but perhaps we can become more so over the next week of our stay.*

*With all my affection,*

*Your Secret Admirer*

Well, this was unexpected. He had anticipated the little magpie would have left the note, but looking closely, he determined it could not have been. Katherine lived here—she wasn't just staying here, as the writer indicated. Was it possible that mousy Miss Millbury had developed this affection so quickly?

William sighed and folded the note up again with a smile. No use speculating. His admirer would show herself soon enough, and he was far too tired to try and decipher which of the little ninnies had snuck into his room that evening.

~\*~

Over the course of the next few days, Katherine did everything in her power to push Lord Weston and Miss Millbury into one another's paths. She insisted Melinda show the duke

the fir trees at the edge of the garden. And when Melinda had declared Kat should be the one to show him, she pleaded a headache that prevented her from going in the sun. She asked Melinda to trade places with her at meals, claiming she was getting a stiff neck from having to turn to her right all the time to address her. And she played waltzes every evening, insisting they dance together.

But as the time passed and her friend became more smitten with the duke, and the duke paid closer attention to Melinda, she couldn't help the little twinge in her heart. It wasn't jealousy, of that she was sure. She'd been jealous before. Once. When she'd happened upon Lord Weston canoodling with a widow on the terrace of the Sherwood's London townhome. Shock and horror had filled her at once when she'd seen his fingers graze places they ought not have been. Then the jealousy had settled deep in the marrow of her bones when he'd lowered his lips to hers.

Oh, how she'd wanted to be that woman. How she'd wanted to smell him and taste him as that harlot did. To feel his hands splayed across her back. And his tongue! Oh, dear heavens, to see their tongues mingle made her whole body shiver with need.

“Are you cold, Katherine?”

Katherine's head snapped up from the cards she held in front of her. They'd been playing Whist all evening and she and Benjamin hadn't won a single hand against *the happy couple*.

“No, no, I'm fine, Your Grace. I think I'm a bit tired, though. I shall retire, if no one minds.”

~\*~

The next morning, as William sat down to breakfast, Katherine, in all her exotic splendor, burst through the door. She wore a broad smile, but William could not be fooled. She always wore a smile for him, but she never quite met his eyes anymore. Not the way she had on that first day. And he caught her staring at him and Melinda quite often when they would bend their heads to whisper to one another.

“Lady Katherine,” he ventured as she sat down to toast and tea, “I wondered if you might take a turn about the gardens with me this morning.” He watched as her eyes turned round in her face.

“Me?” she cried. “I mean...that is...”

Her gaze flitted to Melinda.

“I’m not feeling well this morning,” Melinda admitted. “A bit of a sore throat. But please, don’t let me stop the two of you from taking in the fresh air.”

“Oh, well...” Kat looked back to William, a question in the chocolaty depths of her eyes.

“It would please me greatly, Lady Katherine. That is, if you don’t mind the cold.”

Katherine shook her head. “I don’t mind at all.”

~\*~

Kat couldn’t understand why in the world Lord Weston would want to walk with her. Clearly, he was smitten with Melinda, so what could be the purpose of such a solitary walk? If Melinda wasn’t feeling well, he should stay inside and entertain her in a game of cards. Or read to her.

“I meant to have a talk with you, Lady Katherine,” he said as they made their way down the snow-dusted steps to the garden.

“Oh?” She cast him a sidelong glance and tried to calm the resulting flutter in her belly.

“Yes. You see, I have a little situation I may need your help with.”

*Oh, heavens.* “Go on.”

“It has to do with a...female.”

“A female,” she confirmed.

“That’s right. One for whom I’ve developed quite a *tendre*. One that makes my heart leap and my skin prickle. Who lights up any room she enters...”

Katherine listened as he droned on about her friend. She would not be jealous. She would not envy her friend. It was all her doing, anyhow. Wasn’t this what she wanted? For the two of them to fall in love so she could move on from her silly, girlish obsession and marry a respectable man.

*If he’s not respectable, why have you matched him with your very best friend?*

“Oh, shut up!” she wanted to yell at her conscience.

“I beg your pardon?”

*Oh, blast.* “Er...not you, of course. Goodness, I’m sorry. Will—I mean, my lord—perhaps this was not a good idea. I think I feel a sore throat coming on as well. I don’t think the cold air is good for me.”

“But I haven’t finished telling you about my dilemma,” he insisted.

Katherine couldn’t listen to anymore, though. “I’m sorry,” she called as she retreated to the house. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

~\*~

William watched her go, wondering if he’d made the right decision to play into her game. Perhaps he simply should have been honest from the start—told her what he felt about her and asked to court her properly.

But he was knee deep in the mess now, and tomorrow was the day. Valentine's Day.

Right now, she was about to arrive in her room to find Melinda mooning over another fake love note from him. A note telling her to meet him at the gazebo at the back of the garden at sunset tomorrow.

Of course, it was up to Melinda to figure out a way to get Katherine to go in her stead. He wondered now if she would come. After the way she'd run off, he had his concerns. Clearly, she was upset by his attentions on Melinda, despite the fact she'd been the one to encourage them.

His stomach turned. His heart was heavy. He wanted to be with her, wanted to tell her how he felt and feel her kisses of devotion and gratitude.

Tomorrow could not come soon enough.

~\*~

"Oh, thank heaven you're back!" Melinda said as Katherine burst through the door to her room. "I must speak with you, Katherine."

Kat regarded her friend with great concern. Mel rarely referred to her by her full name, even in polite company. "What's wrong, Mel?"

Melinda's face twisted into anguish and she plopped down on a chair by the fire. "This," she said, holding out a piece of folded foolscap.

Reluctantly, Kat crossed to her friend and took the note. She didn't want to read it. She didn't want to know anything about what was going on between William and Melinda, for surely her heart couldn't take anymore.

In the short time William had been there, she came to realize the silly, girlish crush she'd had for him so long ago, was not nearly as such now. It was much more than that. It was love.



She was madly in love with William Hart, but now he was in love with Melinda, and there was naught she could do about it.

So, bearing it as if she were Joan of Arc, Kat opened the letter.

*My dear Melinda,*

*I would ask that you would meet me at the gazebo tomorrow at sunset as there is something particular I wish to speak with you about.*

*Yours,*

*William*

Kat's heart sank as she read and reread the note. He was going to ask her to marry him.

"Kat, what do I do?"

Kat looked up from the letter. She'd almost forgotten Melinda was distressed over the note, but why, she couldn't fathom. She was going to marry a duke, and go from being a simple miss to a wealthy duchess. And she was going to be married to the most wonderful man alive.

"Do?" she repeated.

"Yes! What if he asks me to marry him? What do I say?"

"Well, I think you say...yes," Kat choked out.

"But I can't! I'm not ready to marry. I hardly know William. Oh, goodness, this is a disaster!"

"I thought you cared for him." Kat knelt down beside her friend and took her hands in hers. "What of all your love letters and such?"

Melinda's head nodded up and down absently as she stared into the fire. "Yes, I know. I thought I cared for him...oh, Kat, you must go to the gazebo! You must tell him that I've taken ill and cannot meet with him. That his question will have to wait for another day."

"No, Melinda," Kat said, feeling sick to her stomach. What had she gotten herself into? "I cannot tell him that! He wants to marry you. This is not some childish game. You must act like a grown-up and tell him yourself how you feel."

Melinda stared at her for a moment, her expression blank, as if she'd suddenly found herself in a far away place. "Yes, you're right. This is *not* a game."

Kat sat back on her haunches, as she heard her words repeated to her. *This is not a game*. It wasn't, though it had started out that way. And now there was nothing she could do. Unless...

"Melinda," she said, taking her friend's hands in her own. "Do you love Lord Weston?"

Mel's eyes grew wide. "Love? Goodness, no! Of course, he is handsome and kind enough, and I like him very much, but didn't I just finish telling you I wasn't ready to marry him."

"Yes, but *will* you be? Will you one day want to marry him?"

"I...well, no. I don't think the life of a duchess is one I wish to embark on, especially if the duke is not someone I love."

Kat's heart thumped hard against her chest. Perhaps there was a way to salvage the damage she'd done. Perhaps cupid could take back his arrow and, dare she hope, find another target in her.

"Kat? What's going on in that head of yours?"

She turned to her friend, knowing her eyes shown with tears. She just couldn't help herself. "I love him, Mel. I've loved him since I was a girl. I thought it was merely infatuation,

but it's not. I was afraid of loving him, afraid he would hurt me or reject me, or... Oh, I don't know! I've been a fool and a ninny. With your permission, I would like to make things right. If you do not love him, and do not wish to marry him, then may I tell him so? May I take the opportunity to tell him how *I* feel?"

Mel stared back at her, a stunned expression marring her plain features. But a smile lurked there. "Of course you may, my dear friend. Go to him."

"Go to him," Kat repeated. "Or bring him to me."

"What?" Mel blinked at her.

"Will you deliver a note? On *my* behalf this time?"

~\*~

William made his way to the gazebo just as the sun was about to dip below the horizon. He wasn't sure why, but he'd been summoned there, and not by Melinda. No, his little magpie had insisted he meet her there tonight. She had something important to discuss with him.

He wondered what it was, but he wasn't one to speculate, so he put the thoughts from his mind and picked up his pace.

As he approached the gazebo, he could see her there, kneeling in the middle of the floor. She wore a red velvet cape with the hood brought up to frame her exquisite face. Loose tendrils blew in the winter breeze, and a tentative smile lit up her chocolate eyes.

"Lady Katherine, why on earth are you out here kneeling on the floor of the gazebo?" he asked, climbing the few steps to meet her. "I'm sure whatever you needed to say to me could have been said just as easily in front of a cozy fire."

She cleared her throat. "Certainly you don't believe that," she said. "For you asked Miss Millbury to meet you here tomorrow evening so you might say...something particular to her."

William couldn't stop the smile that tugged at his lips. "Indeed, Lady Katherine."

"Kat. Please call me Kat. We've known each other for years. You're practically part of my family."

"*Kat*, why have you called me out here?" he asked again.

"I-I...I have been a fool, Your Grace."

William laughed. "You insist I call you Kat and yet you still use such a formal title with me? I think not. William will suffice."

"All right, then. I have been a fool, William," she said, putting more gusto behind her words this time. "I made a grave mistake and now I fear...I fear..."

Taking pity on her, William knelt down in front of her and took her hands in his. He kissed her knuckles and then gave her a wide and sincere smile. "My darling Kat, you don't need to say anymore."

Her eyes widened in shock as he continued to kiss her fingers. "What do you mean? What are you doing? You're in love with Melinda! Why are you kiss—"

Unwilling to hear anymore about Miss Millbury, William pressed his lips to Kat's in a searing kiss. A kiss he'd been waiting to give her for days. Maybe even years. All he knew was he couldn't wait another moment to taste her, to show her how he felt about her, and only her.

She didn't question the kiss. She didn't even pull away. She welcomed him in, opened when he reached out to tease her lips. It was perhaps the sweetest kiss he'd ever known. Soft and innocent. Pure, but full of need.

He pulled her to him and her body molded against his. The world fell away—the cold and the snow, the strong wind that picked up as the sun made its descent below the horizon—and all that was left was the two of them.

When finally they broke their kiss, Kat stared up at him with wide, searching eyes.

“What...how...”

“Shhh,” William cajoled as he ran a thumb over her pink cheek. “We knew all along, you silly magpie.”

“You did?”

He nodded in answer. “I’ve known since the day after my arrival, darling. I confronted Melinda about her note and she, of course, denied having left it.”

“But how did you know it was me?” she asked, her eyes wide and confused.

“You’re not the most discreet matchmaker in the world, you know? But your brother had an inkling and told me so. I wanted to wait until tomorrow to tell you how I felt about you. And to tell you that I’ve spoken with your father.”

“My father?”

“I love you, Kat,” he continued.

“But you...me?”

William laughed at her inability to form a coherent thought. It was quite an accomplishment on his part, to render the Lady Katherine silent. “Yes, you and me. Together. Forever.”

Kat apparently didn’t need any more details as to how or why he’d come to claim her and love her, for she threw herself into his arms and met his lips in yet another perfect kiss.

THE END

# CHRISTMAS WARMS THE HARTS

A Wetherby Brides Short Story

*Jerrica Knight-Catania*

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*The Lake District, England*

*December 22, 1817*

Katherine Wetherby Hart, Duchess of Weston, was completely beside herself. It was two days before Christmas Eve and nothing was ready. The blasted snow would ruin their grand Christmas ball if it didn't let up soon. For days heavy flakes had been coming down, draping the countryside in glistening white. Everyone remarked how very lovely it was and how it would make for a perfect, cozy Christmas. But Katherine didn't care for cozy, and she certainly didn't consider cozy to be perfect in any way.

She was the Duchess of Weston, for goodness sake. If she didn't present the most memorable Christmas ball in the history of the title, she would be a complete failure.

"The Harts are famous for their Christmas parties," her mother-in-law had told her when she'd first married William. Katherine hadn't anticipated that her mother-in-law would meet her demise so soon after their wedding. Tragic it was, but nine months had passed since then. The tragedy now was that Katherine was ill prepared to throw this party.

If they were in London and not in the middle of this desolate country, she would feel better equipped. As it was, they were secluded from any kind of city life. Vendors were not simply up the street anymore. And their staff had been seriously diminished thanks to the horrific cold, damp weather. Half of them lay in their beds now with sore throats and running noses.

Katherine tried to feel sorry for them—surely they felt worse than she did.

She shook her head. No one could feel as dreadful as she did at that moment. Fear gripped her stomach again, and she struggled to keep her noontime meal where it belonged.

"Darling?"



Kat looked up to find William standing in the doorway. She used all her strength to muster a smile as she crossed the room to plant a kiss on his cheek. "What are you doing out of your study so soon, William? I thought you were trying to finish everything before your brother arrived."

He returned her kiss with one of his own, only his kiss was to her lips. The kind of kiss that reminded her just why she had married him. For a moment, thoughts of the Christmas ball drifted from her mind as she reveled in his embrace and the way he seemed to worship her mouth with his own. But when he pulled away, the fear came rushing back. She was tempted to pull him into her arms again, but she didn't want him to know anything was the matter. So she smiled up at him instead. His adoring blue eyes quickly clouded over and his brow furrowed into a worried frown.

"What is it, William?"

"I actually just received some news. It's quite unexpected and I fear you won't be very pleased."

"Nonsense! I'm a reasonable woman, aren't I?" She ignored the wry look of skepticism that crossed her husband's features. "Go on. What is it?"

"Well, apparently, I have a distant cousin who has been left in my care. Her parents passed a few weeks ago . . . influenza, they say. And I am the appointed guardian of their child."

"Guardian!" Katherine regarded her husband with a mixture of horror and dismay, reluctant to ask, but desperate to know, the details. "But who is she? *Where* is she? How old is she?"

William gave a soft chuckle, apparently amused by her distress. "She is my *cousin*, as I've said already. She is on her way here from York."

Katherine gasped and her hand went to her mouth. "Already?"

"And she is seventeen."

A flood of relief washed over Kat at this last bit of news. Seventeen. She was already of an age to marry. If there was one thing Katherine loved, it was helping young people find a good match. Surely, there would be some eligible young men at the Christmas Ball. Perhaps Christmas could be saved after all.

~\*~

Miss Faith Hollingberry took a deep breath as the carriage pulled into the front drive of her new home. Goodness, it was huge. And beautiful. And she immediately knew she did not belong there. Her humble cottage in York was where she belonged, where she wanted to be. Not here, with complete strangers, starting a new life that was not suited to her. It made the pain of her parents' deaths far more unbearable.

Faith blinked back the tears that threatened to streak her pale cheeks. She couldn't meet her cousin, the duke, and his wife with puffy eyes and red nose. Besides, she was stronger than that. She had to be. Despite the fact she'd been left in the care of her cousin for now, she was almost eighteen. She might not be able to count on their generosity once she was of age.

*Resourceful.* Her mother had always told her to learn to be resourceful, but Faith hadn't really taken to that piece of advice. Now she wished she had paid more attention when her mother tried to teach her how to cook and sew. She had always preferred to pore over books rather than stoves.

"Miss?"

Faith looked up to find the footman at the door to the carriage, hand extended for her to take. She'd been so lost in thought she hadn't even realized they'd come to a stop.

"Thank you," she said as she took his hand and stepped out into the cold.

The winds were calm, so the snow fell gently to the earth, which was already layered in a thick blanket. It had made the journey difficult, but all that was forgotten now that she was here.

The front door to the manor opened and the most beautiful creature Faith had ever seen stepped out to the landing. Clad head to toe in crimson velvet, the woman wore a bright smile, and even raised a hand to wave rigorously at Faith.

Faith had the inclination to turn and look behind her to make sure it was really her that this woman waved at. But she knew there was no one behind her, only the stately carriage that had picked her up days before to drag her here. So far away from her home.

Shaking her head of the devastating thoughts, Faith picked up her black skirts, tiptoed through the snow and up the stairs, until she was face to face with the Crimson

Duchess. Her heart beat a frantic pace in her chest, but she managed to dip into a low curtsy and greet the duchess anyhow.

“Your Grace,” she said. “I thank you for your generosity in taking me in on such short notice.” When Faith stood again to her full height, she saw that the smile had faded from the duchess’s face and tears now filled her dark eyes.

“You poor dear,” she said, pulling Faith into a tight embrace. “You must be frozen . . . and exhausted! Come in, come in! We shall get you a hot cup of chocolate and something to eat, and you will tell me all about your journey.”

Despite the rapid pace of the woman’s words, Faith was able to fit in a quick, “Thank you, Your Grace.”

To which the duchess replied, “Tsk, tsk, tsk! I’ll have none of that. We are cousins after all. You will call me Kat, just like all my other family. Now come, and we will get you warmed by the fire.”

~\*~

By the time Wesley Hart arrived at the ducal seat in the Lake District, he had had it with snow and travel and blasted Christmas cheer. For Christmas to be cheery, he would have to be spending it with his friends in London. But his brother, William, had insisted he be present for the famous Hart Christmas Ball this year; the first that his new duchess would throw.

While Wesley wanted to support his sister-in-law, he did not care to be reminded of why she was throwing the party this year. He missed his mother. It seemed juvenile and ridiculous for a grown man to pine for his mother, especially after he’d had sufficient time to mourn her. But he couldn’t help it. And Christmas, no matter how wonderful Katherine’s party might be, would never be the same again.

Wesley had done a fine job of avoiding his brother and sister-in-law upon his arrival. It was nigh on one in the morning, so it wasn’t that hard to do. But regardless of the hour, he still ordered a late night repast be delivered to his room, along with a copper tub and hot water. He’d not go to bed with a chill.

Once he had eaten, bathed and donned his nightclothes, he lay awake, staring at the canopy above his bed. Blast it, why couldn’t he sleep? He had set out practically in the

middle of the night and traveled straight through without stopping to reach his brother's home. Exhausted didn't even begin to describe how his body felt just then. However, his brain refused to settle down and allow him to sleep.

*Brandy.* That's what he needed. A nightcap would be just the thing to help him sleep. With new determination, he eased his achy body from the bed and slid his feet into the warm slippers, while stuffing his arms into his robe.

Armed with a candle, Wesley made his way through the house until he reached the library. But apparently he wasn't the first to have gone on a late night hunt for spirits. With her own candle, a young woman stood over the drink cart, clearly toiling over which bottle to choose.

"Does my brother allow his servants to dip into his prized brandies now?" he asked, startling the woman to jump away from the cart.

"You frightened me." Hand on her heart, she spoke with belabored breaths.

"Yes, well, that was actually the point." Wesley moved into the room and shut the door behind him. "If you leave now and promise never to steal from my brother again, I won't have you dismissed in the morning."

"Dismissed!" The woman, who he now saw was actually quite pretty, stood to her full height and sucked in a sharp breath through her nose. "I am not a servant, sir, and I most certainly was not stealing. I just . . . couldn't sleep, is all. I only wanted a sip."

Not a servant? Damn and blast, who was she then? Another of Kat's attempts at finding him a match? Her overbearing mother was probably asleep directly above them.

"You know, it isn't ladylike to indulge in spirits," he told her, inching closer as he did.

Her nostrils flared just slightly and Wesley found it rather endearing, much to his annoyance.

"It's not very gentlemanly to jump to conclusions about people you've never met."

"Touché." He approached the cart and she skittered away like a frightened kitten. Her gaze burned his back as he poured two tumblers of William's finest imported brandy. "Do you have a name?"

"What kind of question is that? Of course I have a name."

Silence. Ha! Cheeky little thing. "Fine, I'll go first. My name is—"

“I know who you are . . . Wesley.”

“Then it appears you have the advantage over me.”

“Faith. Faith Hollingberry. We are—”

“Cousins! Yes, of course.” He handed her the tumbler, which she took with a grateful smile, and then felt compelled to ask, “*Distant* cousins, are we not?”

~\*~

Faith nearly choked on her brandy, and not because it burned like the devil on its way down her throat. She choked because she was rather taken off guard. By the whole situation, really. Wesley had scared the wits out of her when he’d caught her trying to choose a spirit. And then he’d taken her off guard with his . . . well, everything. Neither of them was properly dressed, and he was quite the most dashing man Faith had ever seen. Even in the candlelight it was clear he was even more handsome than his devastatingly handsome older brother.

And then he’d had the audacity to think she was a servant. Did she really look so homely? Certainly she wasn’t dressed in the duchess’s sort of finery—actually, she wasn’t dressed at all, was she?—but at least her nightrail was pristine and white.

She looked up to find him starting, and it occurred to her that she stood directly in front of the fire. In her nightrail. Heat rushed to her cheeks when she realized he could see straight through to her . . .

Faith stuttered an incoherent string of words as she rushed to the sofa and sat daintily on the edge.

“Come again?” came Wesley’s amused query. “I’m not quite sure I caught that.”

“I—I don’t know what it matters if we are first or distant cousins, but yes, distant. Four times removed, if I traced it right.” Deep down, she was somewhat flattered by his question. Did it mean he was attracted to her? She couldn’t imagine any other reason he might care.

“Ah. I was just curious.”

Except that one.

He took a seat next to her on the sofa. “What brings you here for the holidays, Faith? Did your parents travel with you?”

Faith tamped down the sadness that arose at the mention of her parents. She absolutely would not cry—not now, not in front of him. “Not exactly,” she replied. “My parents died of influenza a few weeks ago. It seems your brother is now my guardian, and so, here I am.” She tried to give a little laugh, but it sounded more like a pig being strangled.

When she was sure there were no tears in her eyes, she looked up at Wesley. His beautiful features had lost all humor and now, only the most grave concern could be seen in his pale blue eyes. It made her want to fall into his arms and cry in earnest, but for obvious reasons, she refrained.

Instead, she looked away and said, “Please don’t look at me like that.”

“I’m sorry,” he replied. “It’s just that I know what it’s like to lose a parent. I can’t imagine losing both at the same time.”

“You’ve lost someone, too?”

“Both my parents, but my father died years ago. You may have already known that, since William has been duke for nearly six years now.” He paused and Faith sensed the pain that lay in his heart. “My mother. It’s not been a year yet.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, both staring straight ahead at the last of the embers in the fireplace.

Finally, Faith spoke. “It is getting late, Wesley, and I think this did just the trick.” She held up her half-empty tumbler of brandy.

“Do you enjoy the snow, Faith?”

*Not at all.* “Yes, I suppose,” she answered.

“Perhaps tomorrow we can take a walk and you can help me find some greenery to decorate the house. I’m certain Katherine would appreciate our help.”

A smile started in Faith’s belly and worked its way to her lips. She nodded. “I would like that very much. Goodnight, Wesley.”

“Goodnight, Faith.”

~\*~

Wesley paced himself through breakfast the next morning. He was eager to get out into the fresh air, but he was even more eager to have a little more alone time with Faith.

Despite his exhaustion, he'd spent much of the night awake, thinking of her. Images of her slight form silhouetted in the firelight danced in his head with near painful consequences.

Now she sat across from him, taking her time with the eggs and toast on her plate. She was a dainty eater, her slender fingers moving the fork into her mouth with deliberate slowness. And pulling back just as slowly. Good Lord! If she insisted on being so seductive at mealtimes, Wesley would never know comfort during his stay.

He was thankful for the distraction of his sister-in-law who chattered on like the magpie she was about the trials and tribulations of hosting the grand Hart Christmas Ball. His brother watched her with such adoration it almost made Wesley nauseous. He would have been except he was certain he was gawking at Miss Hollingberry in the same sickening manner.

When Faith finally put the final morsel of buttery toast into her mouth, Wesley threw back the last of his coffee. When the cup clattered to the saucer, all eyes turned to him.

"Sorry," he said, feeling heat infuse his cheeks. Then he turned to Faith. "Miss Hollingberry, I wondered if you were ready to join me for that walk we talked about?"

Wesley could feel Katherine's eyes on him, and he didn't have to look to know the expression that lay behind them. Her curiosity and excitement rolled off of her in waves.

Faith turned a bashful smile to the duchess, clearly feeling the need to explain. "We bumped into one another in the library last night." Her large brown eyes turned to him. "Neither of us could sleep."

Loosening the trance her gaze had put him in, he looked away and focused on his sister-in-law. "We thought to collect some greenery for the party since you have so many other things to do."

"Oh," said Katherine, a smile as wide as the Thames on her face. "Well, that would be wonderful. And perhaps you could place the candles on the tree in the front hall when you're done?"

Wesley could practically hear the gears of the wheels that turned in Katherine's head. No doubt, this scenario thrilled her beyond comprehension.

"Of course," he agreed. "Miss Hollingberry? Shall we?"

~\*~

“Come away from the window, darling.”

“Shhhh!” Katherine waved a hand in her husband’s general direction. She couldn’t say if it was his exact direction as her eyes were glued to the snowy, romantic scene outside. “How can you remain so calm about this, William?”

“You’ll catch a cold,” he added, clearly ignoring her question.

“Hush! I can’t hear them.” She leaned a little further out the open window in hopes of hearing their conversation. Whatever were they talking about?

And what had they talked about in the dead of the night, alone, in the library?

A warm and gentle hand landed on her shoulder and tugged her out of the window opening.

“What are you—?”

She didn’t have an opportunity to finish her sentence because her infuriating husband landed his lips right on hers. Blast him! Why did he have to be so warm? And enticing? He made every rational thought fly from her head.

When he pulled back and stared down at her with his ice-blue eyes, it was all Kat could do to remain upright. The blackguard. He knew just how to wear down her defenses.

But she could not allow him to deter her again from her purpose. There was much to do. A ball to plan *and* a young romance to nurture? Goodness, there wasn’t a minute to waste.

“Katherine,” came William’s deep voice, laden with a slight warning.

“What?” She looked away and shoved her nose in the air.

“The ball. That is your only responsibility right now.”

“But—”

His finger went to her lips, silencing her. “No *buts*. Leave them alone.”

Kat wasn’t typically one to back down, but she figured it would be easier to let William *think* she was acquiescing to his wishes and do whatever she pleased when he wasn’t looking.

“Fine,” she said with a bat of her eyelashes. “I’ll let them be.” She gave a great sigh, and said, “I have far too much to worry about, anyhow, to keep an eye on those two. I’m sure if it is meant to be it will be.”



“That’s my girl.” William planted a kiss to her forehead that warmed her to her toes and then quit the room.

“And I’m fairly certain this is meant to be,” Kat said as she returned to her post at the window.

~\*~

“You’re not too cold, are you?”

Faith turned to look at Wesley, who walked beside her through the snow-covered garden. “No, I’m fine. The fresh air is delightful.” She wasn’t feeling particularly chatty, though, at the moment. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve, and the thought of spending it in a strange home, without her family, was heartbreaking. She feared opening her mouth might cause her to burst into tears.

“Ah, here we are.”

They had reached the edge of the garden and the beginning of the dense forest that bordered the property. Large fir trees loomed before them, rife with long, dark green branches, perfect for decorating the ducal seat. The only problem Faith could see was that the branches started rather high up.

“Shouldn’t we get help from one of the servants? Or at least a ladder?” she suggested.

A mischievous smile tugged Wesley’s lips upward. “Well, that wouldn’t be much fun, would it?”

“What do you plan to do?”

“Climb the tree, of course.”

Faith tried to pick her jaw up from the ground. “You’re not serious?”

“Of course I am. I’ve climbed many a tree in my life, Faith. I promise, I know exactly what I’m doing.”

“Well, then . . .” she said, letting the skepticism drip into her tone, “don’t let me stop you.”

Faith bit her lip hard as she watched Wesley shimmy up the tree. As promised, he seemed to have a solid command of the fir and didn’t falter even once as he climbed higher

and higher. When he reached a sturdy branch, he sat on it and waved down to her. "See?"  
"Well done, Wesley. You have proved me wrong."

He smiled wide at her, making the air seem much warmer all of a sudden.

"I will cut some branches and toss them down. Stand clear!"

Faith backed up a few feet and then stood by to watch as he used a knife to sever the branches. They fell to the snow in a soft *swoosh* and soon there were enough to decorate not just one, but perhaps three ducal estates.

"I think that's enough," she said, laughing up at Wesley. "I'm sure your sister won't know what to do with all of them!"

"Just one more," Wesley said and stood on his perch to reach for one last branch.

A crack loud enough to be heard on the ground had Faith's heart racing. "Wesley, I think you ought to come down, now."

"Almost . . ." He never got to finish the thought as the branch he stood on broke and sent him crashing to the ground below.

Faith hardly had time to process what had happened. One moment he was in the tree, the next he was at her feet. And not moving. Oh, dear God! What was she to do?

"Wesley?" she called as she approached him, fear mounting in her chest. "Wesley! Oh, God! Please be alive." She knelt beside him, uncaring of the wet snow that penetrated her dress. Tears pricked at her eyes. "Please, please, please . . ."

Putting a hand to his face, she tapped him a few times on the cheek. He was still warm. That was a good sign, wasn't it? As she gained more of her faculties, she pulled open his coat and pressed her ear to his heart. *Thump, thump. Thump, thump.*

Relief flowed through Faith, causing her to relax against his chest. The steady heartbeat in her ear alerted her to her other senses. Goodness, he smelled so good. Had he bathed in cinnamon and . . . heaven? She would have lain there all day sniffing him had she not been flipped onto her back all of a sudden. A little squeak escaped her as she landed in the snow, but she was rendered mute when she looked up into Wesley's eyes. His expression was playful and made her want to giggle, but nothing came out.

"I told you," he began slowly, his face close enough to make Faith's toes curl, "that I knew what I was doing."

"Y-yes, but . . ." Faith looked up at the tree and then back at Wesley. "You fell."

“So I did.” His voice dropped to a gravelly tone. “But you see I’m fine.”

“Yes, it would appear that way.”

There was a moment’s pause—a moment ridden with unspoken desire—before Wesley’s lips descended to hers. They were soft and warm, and Faith might as well have been in front of a fireplace for the way the heat spread through her, despite the fact she was laying in the snow.

When he pulled away seconds later, it was with a wince. Faith wondered if perhaps she’d done something wrong, but then remembered the poor man had just fallen from a tree.

“You are hurt, aren’t you?” she said, the alarm clear in her voice.

He moved away to lie back down in the snow while Faith sat up and came to her knees beside him. His face was contorted with a mixture of pain and sheepishness.

“I think it’s worse than I thought it was,” he admitted. “My ankle.”

“Oh, dear. We have to get you back to the house. If you lean on me, do you think you can make it?”

He smiled that delicious smile once again. “As long as you don’t mind.”

She shook her head both to indicate that she didn’t mind and to also break herself of the spell he cast over her. How *did* he do that?

~\*~

Even with Faith’s help, getting back to the house was no easy task. They’d ventured a long way, and the snow was deep enough that it was difficult to trudge through. But at last, they made it. Faith left him in the closest parlor with his foot propped on a pillow before she went for help.

Wesley watched her leave, unable to keep the smile from his lips. *Precious*. That’s what she was. A precious, beautiful, darling girl. He’d always fancied himself with a more society-minded female, but clearly, that hadn’t worked out so well for him. His string of courtships had led only to annoyance, either with the girl or her mother. But Faith . . .

Poor thing was probably missing her own mother something terrible right now. He knew he was missing his. He had been prepared for a dismal and depressing Christmas, but now he had found some unexpected cheer.

“Wesley, what happened?” Katherine swept into the room, servants at her heels with water, bandages and bowls of foul-smelling ointments.

Faith was not with them, and he had to admit, his heart sank just a bit.

“I was trying to get your greenery, madam, and fell from a tree. It appears I’ve sprained my ankle.”

“Good heavens! Wasn’t there any greenery closer to the ground?”

“Only the best for my sister-in-law,” he replied with a wink. It seemed her nerves were worked into a tizzy and the last thing he wanted was for Katherine to blame herself for the incident.

“You could have been killed.”

“But I wasn’t.”

She knelt on the floor beside the sofa where he sat. “Well, I’m very glad of that. William would never forgive me if you died for this silly little party.” There was a slight pause before she added, “I’m sure Miss Hollingberry is awfully relieved as well.”

Wesley had been waiting for that one, and he was prepared with a non-committal answer. “I’m sure she is. I very well could have landed right on her.”

Kat’s lips pursed in annoyance, but she said nothing more on the topic, which was most surprising. “Well, I shall let the servants do their jobs and attend to your ankle.”

~\*~

“Oh, Faith, darling!”

Faith looked up to see the duchess sweeping towards her from the direction of the parlor where she’d left Wesley. “Is he all right?” she asked.

“Yes, of course, but he’s asking for you. I think he would like you to keep him company today now that he can’t get around very well.”

Faith’s heart swelled just a little. “Are you sure? Don’t you need help with tomorrow night’s preparations?”

“Nonsense!” Kat waved her hand in dismissal. “I’ve an entire staff for that.”

“But aren’t most of them ill?”

A wave of annoyance crossed over the duchess's face but was quickly replaced with a pleasant smile. "Honestly, Faith, I can manage. Now go before poor Wesley dies of boredom."

Well, Faith couldn't argue with that, and she had a feeling if she tried, she might get her eyes pecked out. Clearly, the duchess did not want her underfoot while she prepared for the party. It was probably just as well. She wasn't all that good with decorating and such. And she had to admit she would rather spend the day with Wesley than with anyone else.

She crossed the threshold into the small yellow parlor to find Wesley just where she'd left him, only surrounded now by a team of servants. They all went about their tasks, though Faith couldn't have said what exactly each one was doing. She focused on the man sitting on the sofa. Even after falling out of a tree, he was the most handsome devil she'd ever seen. Memories of their kiss came back to her and sent the pink back into her cheeks. And that's when Wesley noticed she'd come into the room.

"Ah, Miss Hollingberry. I thought perhaps you had abandoned me."

"Of course not," she rushed to reassure him, making her way around the servants to his side. "I wasn't sure if you wanted me around, but then the duchess told me you requested my presence . . ."

The sudden height to his eyebrows made Faith stop talking. Clearly, she'd been sent here under a misapprehension.

"You didn't say anything of the sort, did you?" she said, turning to leave the room as the mortification spread to the tips of her ears.

"Wait! Where are you going?"

"I'm going to leave you in peace." *And perhaps let the Duchess of Weston have a piece of my mind.*

"Just because I didn't say it, doesn't mean I wasn't thinking it. Kat can be very astute sometimes."

Faith turned around again, feeling more foolish by the second. Should she stay? Should she go? Could he see on her face how much it mattered that he want her there?

They held their silence as the servants finished their tasks and exited the room. As they brushed past her, she finally found the courage to look at Wesley, who actually smiled at her from his perch on the sofa.

“Come now,” he said gently, patting the empty space beside him. “Don’t let a silly busybody like Katherine keep you from spending time with me when you know it’s what you want.”

Faith pressed her lips together to keep from smiling. He was goading her, she knew, but she didn’t want him to see the good humor in her just yet. She wanted to know it was what he wanted, too.

“And you?”

He smiled wide, and then both of them started to laugh.

“Did not I prove to you how much I desire your company earlier, in the snow?” he said as she settled on the sofa beside him.

She blushed, but couldn’t help smiling. “I suppose so,” she replied.

“You *suppose* so?”

“Yes,” she said, more definitively. “You did.”

Silence fell between them for a moment before Faith asked, “How does your ankle feel now?”

“Better. I think I may have only twisted it. At least, that’s what I hope. I would like to be able to dance tomorrow evening.”

“So would I, but . . .”

“Oh, blast, I’m sorry, Faith. I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s not your fault. Please don’t be sorry.”

“Well, then, perhaps it is a good thing I probably won’t be able to dance. When I said I wanted to dance tomorrow evening, I meant that I wanted to dance with you.”

Tingly joy raced through her at his words and his smile. Part of her felt guilty for feeling so gay and giddy, but really, she couldn’t help it.

“I thought that Christmas wouldn’t be the same without my mother, and indeed, it is different.” His voice was quieter now, contemplative. “But, thankfully, I’ve found a distraction to help drive away my sorrow.”

Faith swallowed over the knot in her throat. “I’m glad,” she said simply.

And then Wesley took her hand and held it tight. Neither spoke, but rather sat in companionable silence, grateful to have found one another.

~\*~

This was a disaster. How could they possibly throw a grand Christmas ball with a skeleton staff? Of their fifty servants, only eighteen were well enough to work. But Katherine would not take any chances. She had quarantined the servants' quarters and moved the eighteen well-bodied men and women to guest rooms on the top floor of the main house.

Now, they all ran about frantically, making last minute preparations. They were mere minutes from the guests arriving, and it seemed there was still so much to do. Kat barked orders, knowing her tone was harsher than it needed to be, but really, her nerves were jumping beneath her skin. She just couldn't be bothered to mind her tone right now.

"Katherine?"

"What!" She nearly screamed at whoever had called her name. "Oh, sorry, darling." She gave an exasperated sigh when she saw her husband there on the threshold to the ballroom. "I fear I'm a little . . . on edge."

"That's putting it rather mildly, don't you think?" he said as he crossed the room and put his arm around her.

"I just don't know how we're going to do this. People will be arriving any minute, Cook is behind with the food, the musicians are late, the decorations aren't finished, and look at me!"

William raised his brows. "Is there something I'm meant to notice?"

"I'm a mess, William!"

"You look exquisite," he countered, but it only felt patronizing to Kat.

"I can't throw a party looking like this." She sighed, and pouted, and was about to launch into a whine befitting a spoiled five-year-old when their butler appeared in the doorway.

"Your Grace, a letter just arrived for you."

William turned and took the missive from Sanders. Katherine waited, though not patiently, while he scanned it and folded it again. Silently, he made his way to the windows

at the far end of the room and peered out. It was all Kat could do not to throw the nearest ball of mistletoe at him. What in the world was he doing?

She was about to let loose her frustration on him when he turned and waved her forward. "Have you looked outside lately, my dear?" he asked.

Kat went to him, grumbling the whole way. "How on earth would I have had a chance to go outside today? Have you not noticed how very busy I've been?"

"Indeed, I have, my love. But I fear it may have been in vain."

"What?" Kat stepped in front of him and looked out the window. Not that there was much to see. The windows were practically whited out with the onslaught of snow. "Oh," she said, not sure if she was relieved or disappointed.

Disappointed. Definitely disappointed. Though it might not have been the most fantastic Hart Christmas Ball the world would ever have known, it would have been wonderful. She had worked so hard, worried so much . . .

"No one's coming, are they?"

"I don't think so. I'm so sorry, darling."

Kat sighed. Not only would it be her first Christmas here in the Lake District, away from her family, but now she had no party to distract her from her homesickness. Her heart ached, and she wished it didn't. She wished she could tip her chin up and say, "No matter! We'll still have a merry time here alone, just the two of us!" But she couldn't. It didn't seem fair to William that she had such a horrible attitude about the whole thing. Now his Christmas would be ruined as well.

"Well, at least we have Faith and Wesley here to celebrate with," William said, and Kat cheered just a little.

They *did* have Faith and Wesley! "Someone has to eat all this food, after all," she added. "Shall we go and find them?"

~\*~

Faith couldn't help but feel relieved at the horrific storm that brewed outside. She really was in no mood for a grand party and crowds of people. This quiet dinner with just the four of them suited her mood much better. She was happy to eat, though, and she ate far more than her fill. The food was exquisite: goose with stuffing, potatoes and vegetables, plum pudding, and a tray that took up most of the table, brimming with gingerbread and



shortbread, sugarplums and other delectable sweets that Faith simply couldn't get enough of.

By the time William suggested they retire to the drawing room to read by the fire, Faith could barely walk she had eaten so much. However, Wesley truly could not walk on his own, so she went to his side and gladly allowed him to lean on her as they made their way to the drawing room.

Once they were all settled, William handed over the book to Wesley. "You're much better at reading aloud than I am," William said.

Faith was glad Wesley would read. The sound of his voice soothed her, set her at ease. They'd spent the last day and half since his accident in one another's company, and it had been heavenly. He was a kind soul, much more than his roguish exterior would have led her to believe that first night they met in the library. And he understood her, understood the pain she was going through now. It helped ease the loneliness she'd felt since her parents had died.

Wesley opened the book and cleared his throat, then began the story.

"Once upon a time, there was a young man who thought his life was all he wanted it to be. He was popular amongst his friends, and ladies fell at his feet where' ere he went."

"Ahem!"

They all looked up when William cleared his throat, but he simply shook his head, and Wesley returned to the reading.

"But one day, a young maiden appeared to the young man. A maiden so fair and so beautiful, of both body and spirit, that it made the young man realize his life was far from complete, for his life did not have that maiden in it. He knew, upon sight, that she was to be his wife, but he feared she would be frightened by his forthrightness. However, he did not wish to waste any time that could be spent with her in his arms.

"And so, when the right time presented itself, the young man went to the maiden and knelt before her. His hands trembled and his voice was unsteady, but he did not falter when he said, 'Faith Hollingberry, will you marry me?'"

Faith, who had been staring off into the roaring fire, turned abruptly to find Wesley knelt before her on his knee. The book had been tossed aside and he reached for her hand.

However, Faith found it impossible to speak in that moment. Could this really be happening? Or was she hallucinating as a result of too much food?

It didn't really matter, though. The duchess was talking enough for the both of them, going on about how she hadn't realized they'd fallen in love, but that she knew from the start they would make a perfect match. William finally took her in hand, encouraging her with a kiss and a whisper to let Faith and Wesley get a word in edgeways.

"Please do not keep a young man in suspense," Wesley said, his eyes lit with a bright, hopeful smile.

"I-I . . ." It seemed everyone held their breath, waiting for her to give an answer. Finally, she found her tongue and said what she knew he wanted to hear. "Yes, I will marry you."

~\*~

It was three weeks later when the snow finally melted enough to allow travel for the newly wed couple. William had pulled some strings through couriered correspondence in the meantime to secure a special license for the pair, as well as a local priest to marry them.

Now, Katherine and William stood on the landing, waving goodbye to the happy couple as they drove away. While William had been busy with the special license, Wesley had been hard at work on another project. At long last, he was able to buy the cottage that had been Faith's home for her entire life. They both claimed to want to raise the next generation of Harts and Hollingberrys there.

Katherine smiled. She couldn't help but feel proud of herself. Her life's mission was to bring joy to others, and clearly, she'd done a splendid job of it this Christmas.

THE END

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