

CANDLE
for a
CORPSE



A BERDIE ELLIOTT ADVENT MYSTERY

Marilyn Leach

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Dedication

To Brad Leach and his family for the tenacious support
and encouragement.
Jolly well done.

Praise for *Candle for a Corpse*

"This is an engaging mystery with likeable and interesting characters. I hope we'll be seeing more of Berdie and friends. ~ Liz Carey's Library

You will not be able to put the book down until you're finished. ~ Cindy Loven, *The Borrowed Book*

Oh, Come, Oh, Come Emmanuel

Oh, come, oh, come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!

Oh, come, O Key of David, come,
And open wide our heav'nly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!

Oh, come, our Dayspring from on high,
And cheer us by your drawing nigh,
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!

Oh, come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Oh, bid our sad divisions cease,
And be yourself our King of Peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!

Prologue

September

In the grand hall, the front door opened, and the September rain raged upon the white marble floor. The North Sea squall had finally hit inland. The man stepped inside, pushed the formidable door shut, and then slipped out of his soaked overcoat. He shook the dead leaves that had littered the front steps from the soles of his shoes. Dampness of the English autumn permeated every corner of the hall that bore old World War II relics on its austere white walls.

At the far end of the cavernous space, a stately valet descended the polished staircase so rapidly he nearly lost his footing. "Sir, come quickly. Your father's asking for you."

Immediately upon entering the bedroom where his father lay, the man was aware of a sense of panic in the elder's face. "Father?"

Sickly, yellowed, and drawn, his father motioned the valet to his side. "Up," he growled.

"No Klaus. I can do it." The son pushed past the servant and maneuvered his father into a sitting position.

With the flick of his forefinger, the master dismissed the valet from the darkened room. Faltering, he grasped at a wadded piece of newspaper from the

night table at the bedside. The sweep of his arm toppled multiple medicine bottles, most crashing to the floor. His son sat on the edge of the bed, close to the beleaguered body of the man who was once robust and determined, the leader of armies. The old soldier pushed the paper into his son's hand then grabbed the back of his firstborn's neck, pulling him to his face. The beads of perspiration about the ill man's forehead smelled of death.

"There's one left," he rattled. "One left."

His son's face blazed. "I thought—"

"My death's cheating them, but you and your sons are next." He gasped for air. "Get them before they get you." The old man's grip tightened, making his son wince. "Promise me."

"As sure as I live, Father, it is done."

The old man slumped upon the pillow. The gripping hand loosened then fell limp to the bed. He writhed as if a giant hand pressed his chest. A faint breath escaped between his sallow lips. It was his last breath this side of forever.

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Berdie Elliott smiled. *What an odd lot*, she mused.

“God rest ye merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay...”

The song filled the frosty night air as several carolers stood in the front garden of Twenty-nine Westwood Road.

The village solicitor, Preston Graystone, stood shoulder to shoulder with the long-standing town electrician, Edsel Butz. A fine young university student, Mathew, and his childhood sweetheart, Cara Graystone, shared a caroling book with the electrician’s stout wife, Ivy. Mr. Raheem, the start-up greengrocer sang tenor notes with Mr. Webb, the recently elected council member. And there was the aged spinster, Miss Livingston, leaning on her cane, melodious and determined even in her old age. With her stood her constant companion, a dear but forgetful neighbor, Natty. The choirmaster, Lillie Foxworth, a bright, cheerful woman, conducted the carolers with great exuberance. All walks of life joined together, celebrating in festive song.

Berdie snuggled closer to her husband, Hugh, and tucked her hair into her stylish, yet warmly practical, holiday hat. She felt the nip of the December night air on her nose and was sure it must be glowing holiday red. Her husband had often told her that her brown eyes held the warmth of a hearth fire. At this moment,

she wished they literally could start a fire, because her large tortoiseshell glasses felt as chilly as fairy frost. Berdie's wool blazer was doing a fine job of keeping that part of her body quite warm, but it fit a bit snug this evening. Though she had been involved in both energetic community service and active investigative journalism most of her life, having two now grown children had taken its toll. It all came with becoming "mature," she decided. But then there was also the Devonshire cream she loved to lavish on her afternoon scones. *It's the holidays, after all*, she excused. Neither bone-chilling weather nor the complexities of aging could lessen her joy in being here with this mix of people as she lifted her heart in song with them. They were, in a sense, family—all a part of her husband's flock.

Hubert Elliott carried his tall muscular frame with military bearing as befit a man with an honored past in Her Majesty's Royal Navy. He had tried putting things right using armed force and discovered in the end that putting things right was more a spiritual matter. The very day of his retirement from service, he registered for seminary. Now here he stood, with his congregation and his wife. Beneath his dark winter coat lived the keen ability to put people at their ease. The silver hair, which some said gave him the air of a film star, was just barely visible beneath his attractive homburg hat with a curved brim. And it drew even more attention to those ardent blue eyes.

"Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day..."

Hubert's voice became invigorated. Berdie shot a quick glance to the man with whom she had shared her heart and life for twenty-six years. He couldn't deliver

a tune in a wheelbarrow, but apart from that small detail, she knew he was the best-suited person in all of Great Britain to be the vicar of Saint Aidan of the Wood Parish Church. And although she and Hugh had been serving the parish for only three months, the majority of members were warming toward their new vicar.

All continued as with one voice. "To save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray, O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy; o tidings of comfort and joy."

Berdie moved on with the jolly troop to the home of the present parish council chairman. It was the much-awaited moment for Miss Livingston to sing her exquisite solo. Though she was considered by many to be a bit of a curmudgeon, when she sang, all but the sweetest notes were left behind. The door was opened to the carolers, and Miss Livingston's voice lifted in hallowed song. "O come, O come, Emmanuel, And ransom captive Israel." Even at her advanced age, her voice was strong. "That mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear." Berdie thought she caught a glint of tear in the woman's eye. Then the rest of the chorus joined in. "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel, shall come to thee, O Israel." A slight tingle played its way into Berdie's awareness. How lovely was this moment of song, despite the cold.

The transcendent solo behind them, the carolers moved on. They followed ancient cobbled streets to warm homes and cottages as was the tradition in Aidan Kirkwood on the first Sunday of Advent. Some dwellings boasted large back gardens. The tiny stone row houses were dressed for the English winter, and a battery of newly built dwellings were awash with fresh paint. When the troubadours moved across High

Street, the usually vibrant shops were abed for the night.

In no time at all, they approached Oak Leaf Cottage, the vicarage that was just a stone's throw from the ancient church. Everyone was in anticipation of the evening's Advent party, complete with the lighting of the ring.

Upon arrival, three people were waiting at the decorated door of the vicarage.

Standing eye to eye, Hugh shook hands with the fellow who was also a man of the cloth—Gerald Lewis. He was currently visiting Aidan Kirkwood on ecclesiastical matters. "So glad you could join us this evening, Reverend Lewis."

"Thank you for the generous invitation. I'm delighted."

Hugh turned. "Mr. and Mrs. Reese, glad you're here. Please come in."

"We can't," Mr. Reese rushed. "We just need a word with Mathew."

Mathew Reese, home from university for the weekend, handed his caroling book to his fiancée. The tall blond man—smartly dressed, trim, and handsome—put Berdie in mind of her Hugh when he was university age.

"Mum, Dad, are you here for the party?"

"No Mat, we are not." Mrs. Reese was untouched by the prevailing holiday spirit.

"Why don't you step into the library? Get out of this frightful chill," Hugh offered.

"We'll stay right here, thank you." Mr. Reese had fire in his voice.

"Well, let's the rest of us move in." Berdie yearned for warmth.

As soon as the manse door was flung open and the troupe entered, the smell of fresh pine mingled with the scent of cinnamon and oranges. It tickled Berdie's nose like a Christmas partridge feather. The comfortable stone manse had been holiday dressed by Hugh and Berdie that very afternoon with help from her close friend, Lillie Foxworth. Polished woodwork showed off the fresh garlands draped around doorways, mirrors, and mantelpieces. Garland also wound its way along the central oak staircase that stretched up to the next floor. The evergreens were punctuated with deep burgundy bows and sprinkled with little gold stars that caught the light and seemed to beg a Christmas wish.

The entry hall was alive with guests. Mr. Graystone removed his overcoat and hung it on a hook of the ample pub mirror. Berdie thought he rather looked like his name—gray stone. He was tall and angular, sharp-featured, with prematurely gray hair.

Always dutiful, he helped old spinster Livingston with her long lavender coat, the poor woman getting her cane all twisted up in the works. By the end of the kind gesture, it became a tussle.

"Silly man," was all the silver-haired eighty-four-year-old offered Mr. Graystone as she scraped her cane across his newly polished shoes. The scars that littered her left cheek went crimson as she moved on to the sitting room.

"Now Miriam, you need to thank the gentleman." Natalie Bell known to the village as Batty Natty, had so few lucid moments. Natty was a neighbor to Miss Livingston, more like her shadow half the time. Natty reached in her pocket and pulled out a one-pound coin. "Thank you, sir, for your services," she said to

Mr. Graystone.

"Oh, Natty, put that away." It was Cara Graystone, undeniably the prettiest young woman in the village and Mr. Graystone's daughter. "You're in the manse, Natty, for a party. My father helped Miss Livingston with her coat as a matter of courtesy. He's not a doorman."

The old dear seemed a bit embarrassed when she came clear and returned the money to her pocket. "Of course."

Cara took the oldster's coat and hung it on an empty hook. "I'm going in the sitting room, Natty. Come along." She'd apparently decided against waiting for her fiancé, who was still talking with his parents outside.

Ivy and Edsel Butz both looked at the decorations with delight. They were the only married couple in attendance besides Hugh and Berdie. Well, Mr. Raheem was married, but his wife was not a singer and so he was unaccompanied this evening.

"Beautiful!" Ivy Butz exclaimed, hands spread wide.

Edsel nodded his large head in agreement.

"Indeed," said Mr. Raheem with a slight Punjabi accent. "My compliments to the hostess."

Berdie delighted in their appreciation. "Thank you."

These guests moved on to observe stands of airy orange pomanders throughout, holiday bowls of spiced nuts at every turn, and of course, the much-loved nativity set which had belonged to Berdie's mother. It sat in pride of place on the sitting room mantel. The Christ child was conspicuously missing from the crib, and the three wise men were at the far

end of the mantelpiece. On Christmas Eve, the holy babe would be placed in the waiting manger, and on Twelfth Night, the three wise men would add their presence to the stable scene. Ah, yes! This was the Elliotts' living holiday greeting card; wishing joy, peace, and beauty to all who entered.

The merrymakers drifted into the sitting room. While Hugh lit holiday candles, Berdie flew into the kitchen with Lillie, her best friend and comrade, on her heels. Hot spiced cider and tea simmered on the stove.

"I don't think we'll be playing the Albert Hall soon." Lillie, the musical director extraordinaire, was appropriate in her appraisal. "But we are having a jolly good time!" Her dark hair formed ringlets of natural curl around her thin tawny face. She and Berdie had been dear friends since university. "So, what's your take on the temperature of the gathered crowd?" Lillie's bright hazel green eyes couldn't hide the intrigue she found in Berdie's gift of smelling out trouble. "Who seems a bit shifty, who's hiding something, who's smoldering beneath their calm exterior?"

As rectory hostess, Berdie began placing holiday mugs on a gracious wooden tray. "I'm a vicar's wife now, Lillie. My forays into newsworthy investigations have given way to dalliances with altar flowers and women's guilds."

"You don't fool me, Berdie. Vicar's wife or not, I can see that twinkle in your eye when you're on to something." Lillie took the ladle from the hot spiced cider and poured the simmering liquid into the awaiting cups. "Come on," Lillie quipped, "just a general temperature of our assembled saints."

Berdie turned on her heel. "The general

temperature, Lillie, is somewhere between roasting chestnuts and the winter hoar frost." She grabbed an oven mitt decorated with snowmen. "You know I've given my word to Hugh that I'd keep this perky little nose clean and out of the fray."

Just then, Ivy Butz waddled into the kitchen with her usual jovial spirit, and Berdie was glad the electrician's wife had interrupted the conversation.

"And are you snuggin' the holiday cheer?" Ivy laughed. Just the sound of Ivy's voice brought a certain amount of glee into a room. "You found us out, Mrs. Butz," Berdie piped. This was one of the few times Berdie had seen the stout woman without one of her children clinging to her skirt hem.

"Can I pitch in as well?"

Before Berdie could answer, Mrs. Butz picked up the freshly brewed pot of tea perched on the edge of the stove. "Such a lovely holiday teapot. I love the little birds, Christmas robins by my sight. Shall I pour?"

Berdie had barely parted her lips to say, "Please do," when the willing helper was out the kitchen door, teapot in hand.

"No grass grows under her feet," Lillie offered. "Five children and a husband who can hardly keep up with the demands of his job. Still, it amazes me how she seems to keep so jolly."

Berdie put a stack of burgundy napkins with gold trim on the drink tray. "Mr. Butz isn't home much?"

Lillie brightened. "Why? Something's going on there, isn't it? I knew it."

"Lillie. They are simply a part of our parish, and I'm asking a simple question."

"Edsel's father passed on just two years ago, leaving the family electrical business to him, and Edsel

was the sole heir. With our recent building boom, he's been busier than a goat in the garden, new houses springing up like April dafs. He had to hire a new man—well, an apprentice really." Lillie picked up the fully laden tray.

"Oh yes. Edsel hired Jamie Donovan." Berdie opened the kitchen door to the hallway. "He was in church this morning. I invited him to the party."

Lillie started, nearly dropping the tray. "Oh no, you didn't!"

The front door chime rang.

"Go on through, Lillie. That could be Jamie."

Berdie entered the hallway as Mathew Reese burst in from the front entrance, the lighted wall sconce casting a shimmer upon his fair hair.

"I'm my own person now." Raging, he slammed the door behind him.

"Are you all right?" Berdie wondered at his hostile action.

He stiffened. "It's not really your business, is it, Mrs. Elliott?"

Suddenly, Mathew didn't seem like a young Hugh at all. In looks perhaps, but certainly not in manner.

The door chime rang out impatiently, once, twice, and a third time in rapid succession. Both hostess and guest stared at the door.

"If it's my parents, don't let them in." Mathew's jaw set.

Without comment, Berdie went to the door and opened it only to find Jamie Donovan listing off the front step along with Lucy Butz—Edsel and Ivy's teenage daughter—and Mathew's parents retreating from the gathering. Jamie, one step ahead of danger, was agile enough to regain his balance and hold Lucy