



*Child of  
Light*

A TALE OF HOPE  
FOR THE ADVENT OF CHRISTMAS

ANNETTE O'HARE

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### **Child of Light**

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## *Dedication*

Dorothy "Memaw" McRae

~ Your prayers are my shelter ~

~ Your words are my encouragement ~

~ Your faith is my example ~

I wouldn't be the person I am today were it not for  
you.

Her children arise and call her blessed...Proverbs 31:28

I love you, Mama.





# 1

*And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*

*Matthew 25:40*

*Boston Massachusetts 1870*

*First Sunday of Advent ~ Hope*

“Father God, on that very first Christmas You gave us the gift of hope wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. Thank You, Father, for Your immeasurable gift. Lord, let the lighting of this candle be a reminder of our hope in Your coming. You are the light that overcomes darkness. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.”

~\*~

Margaret stared out the third story window of Boston’s St. Agnes Refuge for Young Women. Plump, shimmering snowflakes floated gently from the heavens, and collected into fluffy white mounds on the ground below. She shuddered at the sight and gathered her warmest knitted shawl tighter around her neck. Nary a day above fifty in the three months since she and Thomas arrived; she longed for the warmth of South Texas.

Had it been only four days since she'd singlehandedly prepared a Thanksgiving Day feast for the entire Murphy clan? And now...Christmas was upon her.

"How does this look, Mrs. Murphy?"

The bright-eyed young woman jarred Margaret from her daydream of a more temperate climate. She proudly displayed her sewing for her teacher's inspection.

"I think I did better this time. Don't you?"

The girl handed Margaret what was to be a proper skirt for her job interview at Lowell Mills, north of Boston. She examined the sloppy stitching on the garment and sighed.

"Oh! I know what that sound means." Snatching her botched work from Margaret's hands, the girl mocked the words she'd heard Margaret repeat time and again. "Tear out the seam and start over."

"Eugenia Clappett." Margaret scowled. "You'll watch how you speak to me. Your inability to sew a straight line is not my fault, now is it?"

"No, ma'am." Eugenia hung her head. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Murphy."

"Don't fret." Margaret glanced at the wall clock across the room. "It's time for your shift in the kitchen now anyway. Give it to me, and I'll work on it."

Eugenia didn't hesitate in relinquishing the garment. "Oh, thank you, Mrs. Murphy." Gathering her things, she headed for the door and called over her shoulder. "I know you'll do a much better job than I ever could."

Margaret smirked at the girl's ridiculous remark. *Of course I can do a better job. I'm the teacher. Oh, what's the use?*

She huffed out a frustrated breath. Opening a drawer on the sewing desk, she retrieved a seam ripper and went to work on Eugenia's skirt. The process of splitting apart the muddled stitch-work was akin to how she felt leaving her home and family in Bolivar, Texas. But when news arrived of her father-in-law's injury, they had no other choice but to come to his aid.

Thomas's father had fallen off a ladder and broken both an arm and his leg. Poor old Pappy Murphy was unable to walk, much less work at the seafood processing business he had partnered in. Powerless to do anything for himself, he moped about like a piteous child, never asking her for a thing and not wanting to be a bother. Margaret loved the dear, sweet man and tried her best to act happy in his presence despite how much she disliked having to move from her home.

Margaret sighed and returned the small embroidery scissors to the drawer. Even though she dearly loved her father-in-law, her heart ached for the family she'd left back home in Bolivar. She'd never lived apart from them and had no idea how long she and Thomas would be staying in Boston. Oh, how she missed Mama, Papa, and her little siblings.

Each day when she finished teaching at St. Agnes, Margaret ate a quick bite before heading off to her second job. She opened her purse and reached for the fish and buttered bread she'd wrapped in paper that morning. Beneath the parcel of food, an envelope addressed to her in a familiar hand brought a smile to her face and warmth to her heart. She had forgotten bringing the missive to read on her break.

The letter called to her, but so did her stomach. An appetizing aroma of chicken and dumplings wafting up from the kitchen below had taunted her all

morning. Unrolling the paper around her meal, she took a bite of the fish before opening her mail. Mama's voice spoke to her as she read.

*Dear Margaret,*

*You won't believe who showed up at our door this past Sunday. Elizabeth and her new husband, Calvin Littleton!*

Margaret gasped, and in doing so, choked on the food in her mouth. She coughed up bits of fish and cleared her throat. The news of her younger sister's marriage came as a shock.

*Elizabeth married Calvin Littleton? Goodness, Mama! Aren't you even one bit concerned about that?*

Admittedly her sister had known the boy a very long time. But they met at the State Lunatic Asylum in Austin, Texas—as patients. Margaret took another bite of fish and continued reading.

*The best part of all is that Elizabeth and Calvin are expecting their first child. I'll be a grandma, and very soon too!*

Margaret held the letter in one hand and fish in the other. She almost gasped again but thought better of it. *Oh, Elizabeth...I pray you weren't forced to marry because you were in the family way. Of course, that would explain a lot.*

Mama went on to say: *I hope you won't mind, but we've allowed the newlyweds to move into your house next door until you return. Your papa and I have gotten used to having just the two little ones at home, and we knew you wouldn't mind them staying at your place for a while.*

*What?* Anger burned in her stomach, and her appetite disappeared. She tossed her fish plank onto the paper wrapper. The edge of the letter crumpled in her tight grip. *You don't have the right to let them move into the house Thomas built for us! And now she'll have her*

*baby in my house. I'm supposed to have the first baby...*

Margaret wanted to throw the letter in the wastebasket, but she couldn't. Her hunger for news of any kind from back home overruled her desire to discard Mama's letter. She continued reading about the latest gossip around the peninsula and the most recent antics performed by her little siblings, June and Jeremiah. Messages from Mama were usually the highlight of the day, but this one rubbed her the wrong way. She dropped the offensive piece of mail into her bag and pouted.

Mama had to know how hurtful hearing the news about Elizabeth's pregnancy would be for her. How many times had Margaret cried with her mother concerning that very subject? Not only was Elizabeth going to have the first grandchild, it would be born in Margaret's very own house. She crossed her arms over her middle, hating everything about herself, from her unfruitful womb to her shameless jealousy. Tears rimmed her bottom lids.

*Lord, how can You be so cruel to Thomas and me? What have we done to make You want to punish us? Five years we've been husband and wife. Five years we've put You first in our marriage and our lives. And for five years we have remained childless. Father, I beg Your forgiveness for my covetousness and please...have mercy on Your children.*

Once again Margaret pleaded her petition to God. Would He hear her, or would her prayer go as far as the ceiling and fall to the ground like every time before? Either way, there was no time to worry about it. There was a dress and romper she needed to finish sewing that evening in order to get it in the mail in time for her little brother and sister's Christmas. And

now there was a little niece or nephew on the way she needed to consider.

Wiping away the single tear that slid down her cheek, Margaret turned her attention to cleaning the work area. She picked up sewing supplies and scraps of cloth and thread her students had left behind. There would be a talk about the girls picking up after themselves in the very near future. But that was a job for another day, because there was somewhere she needed to be. A few blocks away a much more demanding job awaited her arrival.

## 2

A raucous noise came from within the upscale townhome owned by Michael Murphy, the younger brother of Margaret's husband, Thomas. The heavy knocker cast a loud report when Margaret rapped on the door. She waited for an answer and tried again. Every day was the same. The inhabitants were too loud to hear her.

The outline of a little one approaching filtered through the etched glass window on the door. A muffled voice bearing the thick New England accent that belonged to her sister-in-law hollered to the youngster from somewhere inside the house.

"Who is it?" The oldest Murphy child yelled from behind the door.

Margaret smiled. "It's your Aunt Margaret. May I come in, please?"

The boy twisted the lock and opened the door. He looked as though he'd lost his best friend. "Hello, Aunt Margaret."

"Hello, Mikey. Why so glum?"

With furrowed brows, five-year-old Michael Murphy, Jr. stared at his aunt. "I'm not so glum."

She stifled a giggle. "I'm sorry. I thought you looked kind of sad."

"Oh, I am sad. But I'm not so glum."

Their conversation came to a halt as a fight broke

out across the room. When three-year-old Mattie relieved one-year-old Milly of her baby doll, all-out war broke loose.

Mikey smacked his forehead with his palm. "Here we go again."

Margaret rushed to the scene of the crime, wading through an ocean of playthings scattered across the room. She pulled the chubby baby girl off her screaming big sister. Unfortunately, Milly came away with a handful of hair she had yanked from Mattie's scalp.

Margaret gasped. She set the youngest on the floor and shook her finger at the child. "Millicent Murphy! Shame, shame on you for pulling out sister's hair."

"Mommy!" Mattie screamed, covering the small bald spot. Huge tears flooded down her crimson cheeks.

"There...there now." Margaret lifted Mattie and comforted her.

"Thank you, Margaret." Hattie, whose given name was Harriet, shouted to her from another room in the large townhome.

"You're welcome," she hollered back.

Hattie didn't come, but her voice carried to them. "Send Milly to my bedroom, please."

The little offender sat on the floor poking out her bottom lip, her sister's hair still clenched in her hand. She wouldn't look at Margaret.

"Milly, you heard Mommy. Now go."

She stood and crossed her arms in a huff. "No."

Mikey marched across the room and grabbed Milly by the arm. "Come on, Milly. It'll be worse if you don't do what Aunt Margaret says."

"No, no, no, no, no!" She hollered at Mikey as he

dragged her to their mother's bedroom.

Margaret picked up the baby doll from the floor. Mattie reached for it, but it wasn't given to her. "No, ma'am. You're the one who started this whole mess when you took the doll from your sister."

The little girl hung her head.

"I'm sorry you got hurt, but hopefully you learned your lesson," Margaret said. She placed the doll on a high shelf, and then sat Mattie in a small chair at the children's play table.

The little boy rested balled fists on his hips. "Whew. Glad that's over."

"You and me both." Margaret smiled and picked up enough toys to make a walkway through the room. Talking with Mikey was usually her favorite part of each day. She always got tickled by the things he came up with. "So, when I came in, you said you were sad. Is everything OK?"

Mikey released a long, labored sigh. His whole body went limp. "It's Mommy."

She gave him a sideways look. "Oh? What's wrong with Mommy?"

He spoke through pursed lips. "She's too fat to do anything."

Margaret dropped her load into the toy box while stifling a laugh. "It's not nice to talk about Mommy like that. She's...*fat* because the baby in her tummy is growing big and strong like you and your sisters."

"It's OK, Aunt Margaret. Mommy says it all the time."

She looked down at the precocious little imp. "Well, it's OK if she says it, but I don't think she would appreciate it if she heard you calling her fat."

"I just wish she would stop having babies so she

could take us to the park sometime."

Mikey's pitiable whining broke Margaret's heart. "Oh, honey, it's too cold and snowy to go to the park now anyway."

"But we have the Texas boots you and Uncle Thomas sent us." Mikey pointed toward the mudroom.

She couldn't take the pressure any longer. "OK. I tell you what. Later this week, if the snow lets up, I'll take the three of you to the park."

The little boy's eyes grew wide.

She held up her finger. "Now, mind you, that's only if the snow lets up."

Mikey grabbed her arm and jumped up and down. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Her bargaining must have worked; he released his tight grip and ran off down the hall. *I mustn't forget to bring my heavy coat with me...and my Texas boots of course.* Margaret chuckled and picked up more toys.

Her cleaning was interrupted by a loud groan. Hattie padded into the great room in stocking feet since her shoes no longer fit. She supported the middle of her swayed back with her hand. The pink cotton gown she wore was stretched to its limits, and her enormous belly protruded between the buttons on her housecoat. Margaret deposited the toys she had collected in the box with the others.

"Hello, Hattie." She joined her sister-in-law and braced her arm. "Let's get you into a chair. I was just about to make the afternoon meal."

"Oh, food sounds wonderful." Hattie moaned and held onto Margaret's arm as she eased down into a kitchen chair. "Sorry you had to break up a fight first thing."

Margaret opened the large wooden icebox in the

corner hoping to find leftovers of the bean soup she'd cooked the day before. "It's not a problem. I just hate that Mattie lost a chunk of hair. Bless her heart. She didn't have much to begin with."

"She did?" Hattie laughed, holding both sides of her tummy. "She probably deserved it; little troublemaker."

Margaret found what she was looking for, put the meager pot of soup on the stove, and lit the fire. On her way back to the icebox to look for something more to feed them, she gave her sister-in-law a scolding glare. "Now, Hattie, don't talk like that about Mattie. You're tired and miserable and need someone to blame for how you're feeling."

"Yes, you're right." Hattie took an apple from the bowl on the table. "It's not her fault. I should be mad at Michael. He's the one who did this to me."

The women exchanged looks.

Hattie's lips curled into a grin, they both burst out laughing.

Margaret turned back to the icebox and removed a small package of ham she could use to stretch the bean soup. "Were you this big with your previous pregnancies?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder.

Hattie patted her ample belly, twisted her mouth to the side and sighed. "No, I certainly wasn't."

Margaret smiled at her as she took a knife from the drawer. "Perhaps it will be twins."

"Oh, wouldn't that be just lovely." Hattie's words dripped with sarcasm. "Two babies. That's exactly what we need." She put her swollen feet on a chair.

Margaret giggled and dumped a cup of water into the pot along with the ham she had chopped. Her thoughts turned to her own younger sister back home

in Texas. Was her pregnant belly as big as Hattie's? Margaret wished she could be there to see for herself. *Shouldn't think of such things. Wouldn't want the green-eyed monster to make an appearance and reveal my true, wicked self.*

As much as she loved helping Hattie care for her three precious children, Margaret couldn't help feeling jealous. Both Thomas's and her younger siblings were building their families while she and Thomas remained childless.

Hattie interrupted her thoughts with a long groan and pushed off the chair.

"What do you need, Hattie? I'm right here to help you."

The young mother waddled across the kitchen floor to the cabinet where she stored her dishes. "I'm not completely helpless. Besides, I could use the exercise." She reached for a glass on the bottom shelf and took it to the sink to fill with water.

Margaret smirked. "That's not what your husband, *the doctor*, said. He told me to make sure you are staying off your feet as much as possible."

Hattie returned to the chair. "I'll be sure to remind him of that tonight when he's tired and doesn't want to help with the children."

Margaret chuckled and stirred the bean and ham soup. "How does Michael like his new position?"

Hattie shook her head. "Ever since they opened Boston Children's Hospital he hasn't had a moment of rest. Good thing he likes it, because they keep him busy day and night. He's hardly ever home anymore...it's no wonder he's always exhausted."

"Goodness. That makes it hard on the both of you."

"Yes. That's why I'm so thankful for your help. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Margaret smiled as she took small dishes from the cabinet. "Well, I'm happy I can do it." She set the bowls and spoons on the table and filled each bowl with the warm, hearty soup. "I can sympathize with you, though. I don't see much of Thomas of late, either. Pappy's job at the processing plant is very time-consuming."

"Oh, is that right?"

Mikey peeked his head through the kitchen doorway, enticed by the delicious aroma. "Mmm. Is it ready yet, Aunt Margaret?"

"Yes, sir," she answered.

"Go wash up and get your sisters." Hattie hollered to the boy.

"Yes, ma'am."

Hattie sighed. "Oh, Margaret you have no idea how blessed you are. No children, your husband is never around, you can do whatever you please."

"I suppose so." Margaret gave Hattie a polite smile, took the soup pot to the sink, and let it slip beneath the murky dishwater. *Yes, I am so blessed...*

She leaned against the counter as the three little Murphys filed into the kitchen. The two elder children took their seats at the table, but Milly rubbed her eyes and cried; her nap cut short. She walked straight to her aunt and raised her arms wanting to be picked up.

"Come here, sweet one." Margaret picked her up, snuggled the precious baby close to her heart, and kissed the top of her head. She closed her eyes and basked in the moment. *Oh, my dear, sister-in-law, if you only knew how very blessed you are. What I wouldn't do to have my own house full of little Thomases.*

### 3

"There's me girl."

"Hello, Pappy." Margaret shut the door and greeted her father-in-law with a kiss on the bald spot atop his head. "How are you feeling?"

"Old as dirt and stiff as yesterday's catch." The old Irishman leaned forward and groaned as she plumped the pillows behind his back. "Ye look as tired as I feel."

"Long day."

"Ay, me grandbabies running ye ragged, then?" Pappy grunted as Margaret lifted his broken leg onto a stack of pillows.

"You're supposed to keep this leg up. I don't want Dr. Murphy hollering at me because you're not following his orders."

"Och!" Pappy waved off her comment with his good arm. "You let me worry about me son. As long as I'm still able to take me own nourishment, he'll not be the boss of me."

Margaret chuckled as she approached the small kitchen that occupied a corner of the living room. "You're so funny, Pappy. And to answer your question, yes...your grandbabies have enough energy to keep three women busy. This snow and ice doesn't help. Poor Mikey longs to go to the park. Told him I would take him later this week if the snow lets up. Let's hope it does." She placed a stockpot beneath the

tap.

"You and me both, daughter. Makes me joints ache."

The large kettle was hard to carry filled with so much water. Margaret hefted it onto the stove and added salt before lighting the fire. She chose an onion and four potatoes from the bin and took a knife from the drawer. The sharp blade sliced through the vegetables with ease, making quick work of dicing them for the chowder. With a father-in-law as a partner in a seafood processing business, the fare was never in short supply. It reminded Margaret of all the oysters, crabs, and fish her family had eaten back home on the Bolivar Peninsula during the war. Food had been scarce, and they were thankful for God's provision from the sea.

Margaret opened the icebox and removed a dish of butter, some pork trimmings, and a bowlful of fresh clams. She put the butter, meat, and diced onion in an iron skillet to cook.

Pappy eased his bad leg off the pillows and pushed himself from the chair.

"What do you think you're doing, mister?"

"The fire's waning. Need to add a log."

Margaret rolled her eyes as he hopped across the floor pulling his lame leg behind him.

"What am I going to do with you? I'm here to help, Pappy." She scowled. "I'd stop you, but it'll do you good to move around a bit. Besides, it's freezing in here. I can see my breath."

"That's why I'm stoking the fire." Pappy laughed at her, pitching a log in the fireplace. "Me daughter's always cold."

"Oh, you hush," Margaret scolded. "I can't help