
the Widower's Christmas Grace
MALLARY MITCHELL

The Widower's Christmas Grace

Mallary Mitchell

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

The Widower's Christmas Grace
COPYRIGHT 2026 by Mallary Mitchell

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever, including but not limited to being used to train AI, without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version(R), NIV(R), Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com
cripture quotations, marked KJV are taken from the King James translation, public domain. Scripture quotations marked DR, are taken from the Douay Rheims translation, public domain.

Scripture texts marked NAB are takn from the *New American Bible, revised edition* Copyright 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
White Rose Publishing Circle and Rosebud logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History
Wild Rose Press 2009, as
(micro-story) *Snakes and Jails and Puppy Dog Tales*
First White Rose Edition, 2026
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0558-3
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For Melise, Elaine, and Marlene
And in loving memory of those no longer with us.
You are missed beyond measure.

Prologue

December 23, 1889

"You can't let him send me to the state penitentiary, Levi. They'll kill me in there. They'll put me on a chain gang."

Levi Wallace had planned to spend the afternoon cutting down one of the many long leaf pines that dotted his father's property and hauling it to Grandma Trask's house for Arabella and her grandmother to decorate. Instead, he was in the jailhouse. Or rather what served as the jailhouse—a musty old cellar with a make-shift cell. Two kerosene wall sconces and one anemic beam of sunshine revealed little particles floating in the air. He didn't care for the pungent smell of kerosene, but in this instance, it cloaked some far worse olfactory assault.

Dejected, he almost put his palms flat to the wall, nearly rested his forehead against the granite block. Before his skin touched, he thought better of it. He turned from his brother and the varying and questionable tones of gray etched into what had once been bright, fresh white-washing.

His brother had completely ruined what had been a beautiful, sunny afternoon.

And what was that smell?

Two years his junior at nineteen, Giles often seemed much younger. He should know better. Giles was reading the law, for goodness' sake. Apparently, neither that nor his recent marriage to Hulda McFarland had transformed Giles into an adult.

"Why couldn't you keep your hands to yourself?" Levi finally growled. He faced the reprobate who had the audacity to look chagrined instead of penitent. "You have a wife. Isn't one woman enough? Obviously not for you. No, you had to be cavalier with your affections and the sheriff's daughter." He glared at his not-so-dapper sibling.

Gile's ran a hand through his floppy hair. "I don't appreciate your tone, Levi. And have you ever spent much time with my wife? She has the warmth of a fish and the personality of a bottle of tepid milk. I deserve so much more than her." Giles worried with his hair and gave a grimace as he rubbed his stubble—as if his looks mattered at this juncture. He apparently had no remorse about this whole situation.

"You *deserve*?" Levi mimicked in a whisper of disbelief. "You *deserve?"* He was so angry with his brother that the stench of this place no longer bothered him. "You *deserve* a good switching."

Giles now flashed a cocky grin and tilted his head to the side. "Look, if you do this, I'll pay you back tenfold." He then started wiping at a stain that marred the fabric of his fine waistcoat. "I can't lose my social standing in this community."

Unbelievable.

"That's not a problem for you, Levi. You don't have any social standing."

Did Giles think that was an acceptable and persuasive argument?

"Joelle is pretty thing. I'm only asking you to do right by her."

Did his brother have fever of the brain?

"Right by her *for you*." Levi pinched the bridge of his nose. His heartbeat throbbed in his ears. If he didn't quell the rapid flow of his blood, his brain might explode.

"Are you really going to let them lock me up and ruin three families at Christmas?"

Yes! This was all *Giles's own* fault.

"Do you ever think of anyone other than yourself?" Levi dropped his voice to a quiet, growling whisper.

"I happen to be thinking of three whole families."

"Unbelievable."

After their mother's death when Giles was three, father had coddled Giles—way too much. Now, their father was probably sequestered in the church house attic preparing Sunday's sermon while the town's children learned to read and cipher below him, blissfully unaware of Giles's idiocy. His father was a great pastor, responsive, reliable, always there when someone was in need. However, the man spent so much time tending to church folk, he'd not had time for the two boys in his home.

This scandal would be a blight on his family, a stain on their good name. Worse, it would besmirch his

father's ministry. If a man couldn't train up his sons, how could he shepherd an entire flock of parishioners?

Levi, take care of your little brother. His father's admonition rang in his ears.

"What you're asking me to do will break Bella's heart." *Mine, too.*

"You two are still courting?" Something between a snort and huff came from the cell. "A marriage to Arabella Trask will get you nowhere. She's penniless."

Levi looked up to Giles, but only because his brother was about six inches taller. The man was a mountain.

"Is that how you gauge the worth of a person?" At times like this Levi could scarcely believe the same blood ran in his and his brother's veins.

As if he were hawking a cure-all, Giles met Levi's gaze and held it. "Joelle is pretty as a peach, and her Pa is sheriff of the county. You couldn't get a better marriage prospect."

Levi ignored the pounding in his skull. Above his head, in the main room of this jailhouse, the sheriff's metered footsteps made the wooden basement ceiling creak and moan like a tortured fiddle. The irate lawman had already met with a judge and was ready to tell all to Zeb Wallace's flock, all because Giles—once again—hadn't considered anyone but himself. Levi didn't know what charges Giles faced; all he knew was that Sheriff Barker was hopping mad because his daughter was expecting a baby, and that baby belonged to his irresponsible brother.

Levi let out a frustrated growl. How could he fix

this mess? And why did it have to fall on him to make things right? He gave his brother a disgusted glare and stomped up the staircase.

Barker sat with his elbows propped on an old desk, his head bowed and resting in his hands. As floorboards groaned under Levi's feet, Barker lifted his head and regarded Levi with a flinty gaze that reeked of anger mixed with despair. Levi recognized it because he imagined that's also how he looked.

He felt for the sheriff, he truly did.

Levi opened his mouth to speak but then thought better of it. Levi couldn't say any words yet. Still, the hard-working man kept staring as an unspoken plea for a solution seemed to hover in the air. He'd raised his only daughter after the death of his wife to some wasting sickness. Barker's life couldn't have been easy, yet Levi was certain he'd never seen Barker appear as defeated as he did now. Barker was a rock in the community. Now the big man stared his way, red-faced and red-eyed. There was only one thing the man wanted to hear, but Levi just couldn't utter those words. He couldn't agree to marry Joelle. He loved Bella.

With a quick jerk of chin in greeting, Levi left the oppressive atmosphere of the jail and let the door close behind him. He inhaled deeply, yet even in the fresh air, he still felt suffocated. He walked toward the church at the edge of town, which doubled as a schoolhouse, and when he reached it, he kept going. He left the plank road to walk through the soft dirt of a fallow field and then up an incline to his destination,

an overgrown oak. He'd climbed it as a young boy, picnicked under its branches. Lately, it had been his private place of prayer. Levi sank to the ground. *He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.* He tried to pray, but no words would coalesce in his brain.

Bella would be ringing the school bell presently to dismiss her students, and normally, he would be there to walk her home. He hadn't asked for her hand yet, but he'd planned to do so on Christmas Day. Bella was the air in his lungs, the blood in his veins. She was his reason for living. Yet now, if he didn't marry Joelle Barker, Joelle would be ostracized, his family would be shunned, all his dad had done—his entire ministry—would be for naught because Giles was a thoughtless, selfish man-child. Not only would Giles's indecency reflect poorly on his father and, by association, his ministry, the lawman was also ready to send Giles to the big county jail in Carthage. Giles deserved punishment, but that? Jail time was flat out revenge, not justice; and although Giles was in the wrong, so was the sheriff.

Father, what should I do? Levi prayed under the branches, fallen leaves crackling as he moved. He'd heard God's answer. *Father please. What if I helped Joelle find a place to live where no one knows her?* Levi's shoulders fell. *Surely there's someone else who could do this.*

A gentle cold breeze stirred the hair on the back of his neck. He waited for a different answer, but it didn't come. Instead, scenes from the Bible filled his head.

Abraham willing to sacrifice Isaac.

Hannah leaving her beloved son, Samuel, with Eli the old priest.

Do you think Daniel wanted to go into that lion's den?

All of these men sacrificed. What will you sacrifice, Levi?

Father, not Bella.

Is she more important than I am to you?

Levi bowed his head. How could he marry a woman he didn't love? How could he marry a woman whose child wasn't his?

The men and women of the Bible had made sacrifices. They'd risked themselves for the greater good. But to take this woman to be his wife.

However, with great clarity, he knew what he must do.

Lord, I don't want to do this.

Do you count yourself better than the patriarchs of old?

He bowed his head again. This time he prayed for Bella, that someday, somehow, she would forgive him, that someday she would understand this decision. He prayed for Joelle, that he could be a husband to her without resentment. He prayed for his family, the Barkers, and even his brother.

Although the weight of remorse and responsibility felt as if it would crush him, Levi stood and walked back to town, toward the jailhouse. Prayers had been answered, just not in the way he wanted. If God gave him a task he was resolute to do it. He didn't imagine

Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego were pleased to go into the fiery furnace, nor were Paul and Peter happy to get beaten or go to jail. And this? This was nothing compared to what those great men had endured. His life wasn't being threatened. It was his heart being sacrificed.

Had he put Bella above God?

Levi wasn't a liar, but sometimes it was hard to be truthful to himself, and truth was, he'd been so focused on his future, his plans, and his own happiness, that he hadn't sought God's council on any of it. Instead he'd forged ahead, determined to make Bella his wife. He didn't ask for God's direction or approval. He'd been wrong. So, he'd go see Bella, and then he'd go see the sheriff about a wedding.

Chapter 1

Seven years later, December 1, 1896

Arabella Trask hugged her sister for the fifth time, but at least she was outside of the imposing two-story hotel. She had never seen such an array of decorations in her life. The long second-story balcony sported huge evergreen garlands from its railing, decorated Scotch pines graced each end of the wide front porch, and two large wreaths graced the double front doors. When she had arrived Wednesday evening, the flicker of gaslights had cast a cheery glow over the entrance. The inside had been equally impressive, but it was time to continue on to the house left to her by her grandmother—despite Minnie's protests.

She gripped her plain buggy tightly as if the excess of the inn and the pleas of her sister would somehow pull her back inside, but having spent Thanksgiving and the following weekend with Minnie, she was ready to leave and establish some normalcy in the upheaval that had become her life.

"Are you certain you won't stay longer?" Minnie's brows lifted.

"I really have to go to the homeplace and check on things." Red bows decorated every windowsill of the opulent octagonal carriage house where her

cantankerous horse and equally bothersome carriage had been quartered. "I'm going to be residing there. Better to get in and settled while the weather is nice."

"Yes, it has been a nice warm spell for this time of year." Minnie then gave a little wince, and Arabella knew what was coming. "I'm so sorry about your hair. I didn't realize the poker was so hot." Her sister rushed the words.

Arabella lifted her eyes to the short bangs that now adorned her forehead. "So was it your intention to maim me?"

Minnie gave a giggle. "No. And truly you look lovely, and in a month or so you can cut off those crispy ends." Then her face turned once again to a penitent pout. "I am so sorry."

"Hair grows, Minnie." For good measure, she hugged her sister a sixth time. "And who's to say I won't start a trend."

"Won't you take some festooning?"

Oh, heavens, no. She had nothing to festoon.

"Minnie, darling." Theodore's pleading voice carried through the screened door and saved Arabella from a box of over-the-top ornamentation that would be appropriate should President Arthur or Queen Victoria come calling—but that was certainly not happening.

Thank you, Theodore.

"Can you help me with these guests?"

"That man. He still hasn't figured out which rooms have guests and which don't. It's a grid with buttons. How difficult is that? I must go. Be safe, watch

out for miscreants."

Bella loaded into the buggy. "There are miscreants on the road?"

"No. I think not. Just be safe. Are you going to be all right being so close to him? You know he's a widower now."

Bella waved away the words as if they meant nothing to her, a deflection she hoped Minnie could not see. "Of course," Bella said brightly. "I'll be fine. That whole incident happened so long ago. Besides what are the chances of me running into Levi Wallace?" She planned to stay in her house and keep to herself, therefore, there should be no chance of seeing Levi, regardless of how close their properties rested. "Not that I care, but just how long has he been a widower?"

Minnie cocked her head. "I think that Joelle died right after the twins were born. Did you not know?"

"No. I didn't want to know anything about him." Still Bella digested the information with an audible *humph*. He would have been free to—she waved away the thought. "Oh, well. No matter."

But somehow, even after all these years, it did.

"You are so brave." Minnie climbed onto the slightly warped running board and went in for hug number seven. "Love you."

"Love you, too." Bella waited until the screen door closed and Minnie was ensconced behind the registration desk. Her sister was wrong. Arabella wasn't brave. She was stoic. What happened had happened. She was bitter. And now to find out he'd

had years to seek her out but he…hadn't. The betrayal still smarted, regardless of how irrational that emotion was. And she certainly wouldn't put herself face-to-face with Levi Wallace…that's what she told herself.

She tried not to recall the pain as she readied to depart the seasonally overadorned, albeit opulent hotel. Many came to the purported healing springs situated nearby. Tracks even ran past on their way to Raleigh in the east or Charlotte in the west, so trains could bring those who hoped the waters would treat their physical ailments as they were pampered with a relaxing stay at the lovely resort. If only it were that simple. If only the touted curative waters would mend her heart, erase the memories and heartache.

Her gaze flitted over the wide wooden porch that stretched the entirety of the building, flanked by round fluted columns that supported a second-floor balcony. It was a striking architectural affectation at the front of the grand structure built where it nestled among the numerous long-leaf pine trees. Christmassy pine boughs and red and green ribbons dressed each window. Cedar garlands bedecked the porch railing, and a massive wreath hung above the grand entrance. Guests had spilled from their rooms. Happy families sat at tables sipping morning tea and coffee. The soft chatter of their muted conversations carried on the breeze.

It was all too joyous. Too happy. Tears pricked Arabella's eyes as she longed for something she'd never have. She looked away and attempted to distract herself. A squirrel rooted in the russet pine needles as

the soulful whistle of a train echoed in the distance.

Despite her efforts, she was overtaken. Like the train that was sure to stop at the nearby station spilling its passengers onto the platform, the memory disembarked, filling her with the vision of her sister's tear-stained cheeks as she ran into the Derby schoolhouse. The memory buffeted her with the words she could still hear. "Levi, your Levi, is getting married to Joelle," Minnie had said. "Joelle was crying on her back porch, so I stopped to see what was wrong."

"That is ridiculous. You must have misunderstood."

"I didn't. Joelle is all upset. She told me a secret." Minnie could barely speak for the hiccupping gasps brought on by her crying.

"Well, then you shouldn't tell it."

"But I have to tell you. You have to know." Minnie began bawling in earnest again.

"Oh, please, Minnie, I'm—"

"She's in the family way."

"Don't speak of this to anyone." Bella hugged her sister, certain her sister's antics were just that of an over active imagination. Minnie had quite often made mountains of mole hills. "That is not the sort of thing you repeat. Now, go home, splash some water on your face, and I'll be there as soon as I finish tidying up the schoolroom."

But her sister hadn't been mistaken. Levi had come by the school and knocked on the door. One look into his hazel eyes was all it had taken for her to know the truth.

"I don't love her." He'd stood there hat in hand on the porch of the school. Arabella had wanted to hit him. Instead, she'd lifted her chin.

"I wish you all the happiness you deserve." She'd given him a trite smile and closed the door. That had been the last she'd seen of Levi. He'd married Joelle that evening.

Bella forced herself from her musings and clicked her tongue. "Come on, Trapper." It was definitely past time to head home.

Trapper just turned and gazed at her. He probably would have been sent to some glue factory had she not intervened when his previous owner got rid of him. Trapper ought to give her a sliver of appreciation for boarding him and feeding him.

"Please?"

He didn't budge.

She unloaded herself, picking up the heavy skirts of Minnie's early Christmas gift. Apparently this design was all the rage in the big cities. To make her sister happy she'd donned the navy-blue dress this morning. It really was quite lovely, even though it was wool and therefore itchy. Minnie had also purchased one for herself, but she was saving it for social gatherings this season. She'd gotten a discount for buying two. Her sister couldn't pass up a bargain.

Arabella reached into a basket of root vegetables she'd purchased yesterday and dug out a medium carrot.

"If you're good, there's more for you in the buggy." She sing-songed the words and rubbed the

horse's neck.

After he took the vegetable and was happily crunching, Bella climbed onto the springy seat. This time when she clicked her tongue, Trapper moved. The buggy lurched, and she eased onto the plank road.

~*~

What was that dog barking at?

The obnoxious repeated yips roused Arabella from her semi-doze. Her joints ached from hours of jostling about in the little second-hand buggy pulled by the ill-tempered former plow horse. Trapper seemed intent to lead the conveyance over every root, rock, and rut that lined the road from Jackson Springs to Derby.

Taking in her surroundings, and the property she was passing, Bella calculated she was about fifteen minutes from her grandmother's house.

Good. She knew these roads and was still breathing steady. She didn't, however, recognize the short puppy chugging along beside the buggy. She shook her head and released a breath that fluffed the bangs that Minnie had cut after the hot poker incident two days ago. *It's all the style.* Minnie had stated before nearly catching her on fire. At least most of the singed bits had been removed leaving her a short fringe of hair. A poker-wielding Minnie should have been the first warning.

Disheveled damp tendrils of unruly hair had escaped the confines of her somewhat prim bun. The strands tickled and bounced around the high neck of

the ready-made dress, where stiff lace had rubbed raw her neck. However, the pleats of her skirt were crisp, and her leg-of-mutton sleeves still puffed the appropriate amount.

As if wishing to increase her discomfort, the bright morning sun assaulted her with radiant beams that seemed unaware it was only a few weeks until Christmas. The sweltering heat was out of season.

But then, as a spinster, so was she.

She chastised herself for the maudlin observation. Being an old maid was simply a frame of mind. She pushed up her sleeve a bit. Her arm was blue. *No, no, no.* The dye from the perspiration-damp dress had turned what she could see of her skin to a vibrant blue. What would the rest of her look like?

She'd hoped to reach her childhood home unnoticed. This was the reason she clopped in on back roads. Now she had more reasons for the furtive maneuvers; she was sure that what was left of her bangs had become a frizzy fuzz, her skin was sunburned from not having a bonnet, and apparently, this lovely, itchy dress had turned her skin a bruised shade of indigo. No wonder that dog was barking at her. Arabella would be alarmed too if she saw a sweaty blue woman with fuzzy hair. At least she'd forgotten about losing her job for a bit.

She'd become a teacher after her original plans of being a wife and mother had not been realized. Now it felt as if teaching had also been taken from her. For the past two years, she'd lived in the Boscoe boarding house and worked at the school. The town, however,

had closed the school due to falling enrollment.

Arabella used her handkerchief to wipe an errant bead of perspiration from her brow and from the back of her neck. It came away blue.

No, no. This would not do.

How had she become this was jobless, husband-less, childless, frizzy-haired, indigo woman?

So stop this sniveling right now. You should be ashamed. She'd lived alone for so long that she'd begun to take herself to task. Someone had to know that her grandmother was gone. Arabella would sit straighter, put a smile on what was most likely her sour face, and enjoy the lovely (albeit miserably warm) weather. She clicked her tongue, and the horse sped up for about two steps only to fall back into his plodding gait as the dog continued to yip.

She could enjoy the lovely scenery of the rutted road. Take in the beauty of the fallow fields. Admire the… wire grass, scrub oaks laden with web worms, and tufted green pine seedlings. She squinted in the bright sunlight and pulled at her collar.

"What a lovely day. Right, Trapper?"

The horse ignored her. Perhaps he couldn't hear her over the buggy and yipping. He was quite old. More likely, he was ignoring her, irritated she'd strapped him in and carried onward this morning instead of remaining at the hotel and allowing him another day of rest.

Soon she'd reach her grandmother's home. Granted, her grandmother was no longer there, having passed away over two summers back. The Mabry