

The
Woodcarver's Snow-kissed
Christmas

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THE SHOPKEEPER'S WIDOW

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Dedication

To Dave and Elaine,
Thank you for your kindness and wisdom. Your
support on this writing journey has made all the
difference in the world. I love you both.

Historical Fiction by Izzy James

The Shopkeeper's Widow

The Dollmaker's Daughter

The Woodcarver's Snow-kissed Christmas

PROLOGUE

WRIGHT'S WOLD
VIRGINIA COLONY
1723

Annie's eight-year-old arm shook with the effort of keeping even pressure as wood curled down the blade of her knife. The curl landed on the toe of her boot as she reached the end of the stick.

"Like that?"

"Yep." Her grandfather affirmed, his own longer curl falling atop the pile growing at their feet.

"What do ye think is in there?"

"That remains to be seen."

Normally, grown-up answers like that irritated Annie Wright, but she understood that her grandfather was not trying to skirt her question. He'd already told her that carving took such a long time because the wood was not always ready to reveal what it was hiding.

"Mama says I cannot carry my knife with me all the time because it tears my pockets and makes extra work for Bessie."

He fixed his blue eyes on her.

"Fix yer own pockets."

An extra short curl hit her shoe. "I hate sewing."

"But ye love carving."

"Yes. But I really hate sewing."

"Do ye think Bessie loves sewing?"

She hadn't thought of that. Her young brain filtered back through all she knew of Bessie. Bessie's scowl as she squinted at the tiny, flawless stitches she plied on Annie's dresses.

"I don't know." Annie said, but she was beginning to think she did know that Bessie did not like sewing any more than Annie did herself. "Maybe I can make a special pocket for my knife so my pocket won't tear."

A smile wrinkled Grandpa's beloved face. "Sounds like a good plan."

She leaned into him and he wrapped her in a leathery one-armed hug that smelled of sawdust and pine needles.

"Mr. King?"

Her grandfather kept his arm around her and looked up at their guest standing in the open barn door.

"Yes?"

"I brought my knife, like ye said."

Annie scowled at Reed Archer. She didn't mind playing sticks and circles with her neighbor, or any of a bunch of other games, but her grandpa was teaching *her* to carve. Not that boy.

"Come on in, son."

Reed cast a look her way. Annie cleared the scowl because Grandpa didn't like her to make faces. Inside she growled.

"Pick a piece from that pile." Grandpa pointed his knife to the pile of scraps they always used. "Lemme see that knife."

Reed handed over the blade.

"This'll do ye just fine. Now find a place to sit."

Annie watched as Grandpa instructed Reed to remove the bark from his stick.

"Wood carving can tell ye a lot about a man. Ye tell a man by the grain. And ye can't see the grain until ye remove the bark."

Annie didn't know how many times she'd heard him say it.

Reed placed the knife to the newly exposed surface. A short curl landed on his boot. He looked up with a grin.

Annie grinned back. She knew the feeling. She gazed down at her own stick, a small ledge remained from her last slip of the knife. She lowered the angle of the blade.

"Take it slow and easy, there's no stage to ketch this day."

Annie relaxed and plied what she thought was an even tension. Just one long curl like Grandpa. That's all she wanted. Just one long curl. The knife cleared the end of the stick. Now was the time. Annie laid the knife near the top. She took a deep breath and relaxed it out. The blade steady in her sweating hand, she plied it straight down the edge. One long curl hung at the bottom of her knife. *Wift*. Done. Laying on her shoe was one long curl. She beamed at Grandpa. From the corner of her eye she noticed Reed grinning back.

Maybe he wasn't so bad.

After an hour of slicing his knife into his piece of wood, Reed claimed he was needed at home and then left. When he hadn't returned after a month, Annie figured he didn't have what it took to be a wood carver. And that was all right. She didn't want to share her grandpa anyway.

1

ARCHER HALL
VIRGINIA COLONY
1740

Reed directed his stallion to the stables.

"Welcome home, Master Reed."

The sight of the old man warmed his heart. How many times had Randall greeted him the same way? Had he ever thanked him? He put his hand on the old man's shoulder. "Thank ye, Randall."

The man's eyes grew to the size of tea cups.

Reed chuckled; he wouldn't be the last one.

He swiveled his gaze as he made his way to the house. So quiet after the noise of London and the ship home. The house, the stables, dependencies in a neat row, all still the same as when he'd left five years ago. There must be changes, but from where he stood, he couldn't see them.

He paused before taking the first step up the porch.

It was good to be home.

The one place where they would believe him.

The one place he could be his real self.

He breathed in a lungful of crisp home-scented air and climbed the first step.

Greenery decked the great hall of the Archer home. A blend of cinnamon and cloves laced the atmosphere.

“Mama! I’m home!”

Ruby made it to the hall first. “Reed!”

He gathered his sister in his arms and swung her around.

“Ye made it for Christmas!”

He noticed his mother silently waiting a short distance down the hall. A mist filled her eyes and threatened her powdery cheeks. He set down his sister.

“Mama.”

“How yer father waited for this day. He would be so sorry—”

Reed gathered her into his arms. “Mama, don’t.”

His father had been gone over six months. It pained Reed that he’d missed a final farewell, but he was not fooled into thinking his father had truly missed him. His father had never been anything but a bully. Reed didn’t miss him, but of course, his mother would.

Soon his mother pushed away to look him in the face. “We have much to discuss. Our guests arrive today.”

“So soon?”

Nervous hands twisted the handkerchief he’d never seen her without. “It is Christmas Eve, Reed. It is the same as it has always been. But I think ye will be pleased, ye will find old friends on the guest list.”

Reed’s gut twisted. “So ye haven’t received my latest letters?”

"I really cannot say, my dear." She ran a trembling hand up to her heart. "I believe I have received them all."

"Let's not stand out here in the hall. What I have to say ye should both hear."

"To the library." His mother, hair grayer than when he'd last seen her, regally led them down the hall to his father's library. "It's yers now, Reed."

The formal library with its oak paneling and tall windows overlooking the grounds also sported festive holly and evergreen boughs. Reed took a seat on the old burgundy sofa. "What I want to say doesn't require that desk."

Ruby sat across from him in an ivory colored chair with hands folded in her lap. His mother sat next to him.

"Have ye shared my letters with Ruby?"

Shaking hands once again twisted her handkerchief. "Ye know yer father. The parts ye requested to be shared, I am sure, were shared." Gray eyes misted again. "Ye know how he was, Reed."

"I know exactly how he was." He took a deep breath. "And that is what I wish to discuss with ye both."

Ruby sat back rigid. His mother trembled waiting for whatever blow she was imagining. And after a life with his father, he couldn't fathom what that might be.

Reed stood and went to the hated desk. Opening the drawers and searching each one, he found the stack on the bottom right.

"I must say that I am heartily surprised to find my

letters.”

“He loved ye, son.”

“We can talk about that another time.” He hefted the stack and sorted out the ones he’d sent the past year. “But ye have not read them.” He addressed his mother.

“Yer father read them to me, and to Ruby.” She placed a hand on her heart. “Sometimes...” her voice trailed off to whisper.

“I have not read them.” Ruby’s voice was forthright. Her strength shouldn’t have surprised him. The relief he felt at his father’s passing must have been at least doubled for her, as she lived never far from his wrath.

“Ye will now.” He handed them to her.

“Something happened to me, and I wish ye both to know. After this meeting ye may read the letters, they will fill in details I will likely miss, but I want ye to know it all.”

Ruby looked down at the stack and when she gazed back at him, her smile radiated across the dim room.

“I don’t understand,” his mother said.

“Things are going to be different around here, Mama.”

Dread shadowed her eyes. “Yer father liked things to be just so...”

“So do I, Mama, but our idea of ‘just so’ is very different.” He sat back down and rubbed his hands along his thighs. “Let us have some tea.”

“Yer father would have preferred wine at this time

of day."

"I will have tea."

Ruby's smile showed itself again.

Yes, it was very good to be home indeed, perhaps John was right after all. Maybe they did need him to set things right again. It took him two pots of tea and a plate of sandwiches to explain the mere outlines of all that had happened in the last year since he'd met the Wesley brothers in London.

"Yer father said yer letters were sophomoric drivel." His mother looked at the carpet rather than challenge him outright.

"He was wrong."

His mother raised her gaze to engage his own. A strength he'd never seen before came from the gray depths. "'Tis an answer to my prayers for ye, my son. Yer father said it couldn't be so, but I prayed it was." She dabbed at the mist in her eyes. "Ye have found yer salvation." Joy radiated from her person like nothing he'd ever seen in her before. No wonder she'd survived the life she'd shared with his father. She stood and enveloped him in a hug that called to the little boy she cured of every bruise and bang.

Ruby said nothing, but tears freely ran down her cheeks.

"My concern is that no one will believe me."

"They won't at first," Ruby said. "Ye were quite a troublemaker when ye were last here."

Reed gazed down.

"It will just take time, big brother." She stood and kissed him on the top of his head. "I have to get ready.

I hear carriage wheels.”

“Oh, my dear.” His mother flew to her feet. “Ruby is right. I must prepare. Thank God ye’re home.”

He touched her arm to keep her back as Ruby left the room. “Is she coming?”

“Who?”

“The Wrights?” He corrected, no need to let all the cats out of the bag.

Eyes wide, hand fluttering over her heart. “Of course. What would Christmas be without our dearest friends? Now I really must go...” She flitted away.

Reed shook his head at her assessment. As far as he’d been able to tell, his father had kept them from ever having friends, let alone “dearest friends”. But it didn’t matter at the moment. What mattered was that the one person who would always believe in him was coming.

The entire trip home his thoughts had been of little Annie Wright with sandy-red hair and storms in her gray-blue eyes.

~*~

Had he made it home in time? Nerves tickled the sides of Ann Wright’s belly as the carriage came to a stop in the circle drive of Archer Hall. Her parents hoped that her long-ago friendship with Reed Archer would blossom into a marriage proposal this Christmas, of all things. Ann fingered the familiar steel in her pocket. As long as she had her carving, she could weather anything. Even matchmaking.

She had no intention of marrying Reed Archer. The friendship they shared when they were children had not survived to their teens, when he'd turned into the worst hellion this part of Virginia had ever seen. If there was trouble of any kind, Reed could be found at its core. Nope. She'd no interest in Reed Archer, and she wasn't afraid to tell him so.

"Ahh, thank ye, Spooner." Her father stepped out of the carriage to offer his hand to her mother.

Mama sparkled at Papa the way she had when she was so pleased with something. Which between them seemed to happen at least once a day.

"May I ask if Miss Olivia will be joining us as well?"

"No, Spooner, she is still on an extended trip with her husband and new baby." Mama answered.

"Sarah?" The call from Reed's mother caused Papa to turn and leave Ann on the first step of the carriage.

Ann hopped to the ground before releasing her Papa's hand.

Mama extended both hands to take Mrs. Archer's offer of the same. "How are ye holding up, Margaret?"

Mrs. Archer grabbed her mother in a fierce hug. "I'm so glad ye came."

"I will always come, Margaret. Ye have only to ask."

Mrs. Archer released her Mama to smile a greeting at the rest of the party. "Merry Christmas Eve! Welcome to Archer Hall."

Still in the house, a few steps behind his mother, Ann saw him. He stepped out of the shadows as their

gazes met. It shouldn't be possible, but the man had grown. He was taller than when she'd last seen him. Shoulders broader. His smile, which she'd once thought arrogant, bloomed with a warmth she hadn't seen since he'd come to carve with her grandpa. Her heart trilled like a leaf in a stiff breeze.

"Miss Wright." He offered a formal bow.

"Mr. Archer." She slowly bent a curtsy.

He turned to extend his hand to Papa. "Sir, welcome."

They made their way inside. Ruby met her in the hall.

"Mattie will be here by supper." Ruby said as she hooked her arm around Ann's.

So she would have all she needed. And gauging by the look of Reed Archer, she would need all her resources. Her heart fluttered again at the mere thought of the man. That did not bode well for her resolve. "When did he get home?"

"Not two hours before ye came," Ruby confided in a low whisper.

Ann would ignore him. It shouldn't be that hard. He'd ignored her for most of the last few years he'd been home. After all, they had nothing in common. She dreaded the disappointment her parents would feel, but there was no help for it. She'd made up her mind. "Would ye show me to—"

"The barn?" Ruby giggled.

Ann's cheeks warmed; she took a breath to strengthen her resolve. "Yes. I am working on a gift, and I should like to have it finished before New Year's

Day.”

Still hooked arm in arm, Ruby led Ann to a small storeroom just inside the barn. Ann took a seat on a plank and pulled back the cover of her basket. A half-carved doll body lay on top of an outfit she'd painstakingly sewn together in the evenings of the last two weeks. The hard part was over, now she just needed to craft the limbs and finally the head. Joy bubbled. This was her favorite part. The part over which she promised herself she could linger as she did the hated sewing required to clothe her dolls.

“What are ye making this time?” Ruby leaned against the arch of the doorway.

“It's a doll for my mother in the likeness of my sister.”

Ruby lit up. “What a wonderful idea.”

“I thought she'd like it especially after Olivia removes to her new home.”

“How do ye come up with such wonderful ideas? I haven't a creative bone in my body.”

Ann blushed and cast her gaze downward at the praise. She never knew what to say to such comments. Her ability came to her as easily as sleeping at night. “Everyone has gifts. I think yers must be hospitality. I've never felt unwelcome in yer company. I am quite sure I am never as welcoming when visitors come to the Wold.”

Ruby laughed. “I love people.”

“It shows.”

“Well, I guess ye don't need me standing here staring at ye while ye work.”

Ann sent her a grin.

"I'll call ye for supper."

"Thanks, Ruby."

Ann stored the basket next to her on the plank. The thin block would soon be a leg and foot. She took her Grandfather's knife from the leather sheath she'd made. She could almost feel the warmth of Grandpa's hand in the smooth, old wooden handle.

She sent a thin curl down the pine block. Peace replaced the agitation she'd felt since setting out this morning for Archer Hall. Soon the block was rounded and ready for ankle shaping.

A whip snapped through the air.

Angry voices followed.

Still carrying her knife, she slipped around the barn door to see Reed Archer with a whip in hand. On the ground before him a man groveled.

"Stay still!"

The whip sliced through the air.

The man rolled to miss it.

Rage rolled off Reed in waves that recoiled in her stomach.

"Hold him down." Reed ordered.

Two men grabbed the man's arms while others watched.

The man howled as the leather tore his flesh. Blood glistened through tears in the shirt on the man's back.

Heart heaving, Ann skirted past the men watching.

The whip connected to flesh twice more before she

made it to the quiet of the house. The sounds of the whip and tearing flesh remained in the front of her mind as she made her way to her room.

Ann found her mother in the guest chamber she and Papa would share. "Mama."

"Do ye think the blue or the green? It is only just Christmas Eve, I thought I might save—" Mama crossed the room in three steps. "What happened?"

"Ye cannot make me marry him."

"Come sit." Mama pulled Ann into her arms and led the way to a chest at the foot of the large canopied bed.

"He was whipping a helpless man."

"Who was?"

"Reed."

Her mother inhaled and sent a comforting hand up and down Ann's back. "Perhaps ye don't know the full story."

"I don't need to know a full story to understand that Reed Archer just asked two men to hold down a man to be whipped."

"Calm down, Ann."

"I will not do it."

"Shhhh." Her mama rocked side to side. Ann closed her eyes. Blood spattered the ripped shirt and appeared to land on the backside of her eyelids. She flashed them open. Mama's left hand clasped her right one as she continued to rock. The blue sapphire of Mama's wedding ring winked in the sunset. Grandpa's knife sat warm in Ann's left hand amidst the sawdust on her skirt.