

THE
*Christmas
Carving*



Kelly Goshorn

To Debb Hackett.

*Thank you for showing me how to be the hands and feet of Jesus.
Writing may have brought us together in friendship, but the Lord has
made you a sister of my heart.*

“When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.”

-Matthew 2:10

One



Loudoun County, Virginia
December 1867

Pine boughs dotted with red bows draped the windows of the Taylorstown mercantile. Madelyn Cunningham's lips curved upward. She loved everything about Christmas—the festive decorations, special foods, and cherished celebrations all designed to point a weary heart toward a King born a babe so long ago. After so many years of hardship during and following the war, Madelyn was pleased to see that perhaps folks were finally ready to put differences behind them and make merry again.

Nearly three years had passed since she'd observed Christmas here in the community where she'd grown up. She hadn't wanted to leave then. She'd wanted to stay, hold her chin high, and help bring reconciliation to the town she loved. However, a broken engagement and no source of income meant she had little choice but to follow her father when he picked up stakes and moved to Leesburg.

It had been a cowardly response. After all, *they* hadn't done

anything wrong. Her eldest brother's hotheaded inability to see reason, to see those who were still friends beneath their Federal uniforms, *that* was to blame.

Madelyn leaned forward and peered inside the shop. Her frosty breath fogged the glass, and she swiped at the condensation with her gloved hand. She squinted into the dim interior. A few lanterns were strung overhead, and the shelves were stocked fuller than she'd seen in a long while. Mr. Sullivan chatted with someone in a side aisle. Otherwise, the place appeared deserted. Just as she'd hoped.

She gently fingered the back of her chignon. The eleven-mile ride from Leesburg hadn't done too much damage. She reached for the doorknob. The little bell above the door jingled cheerily as she stepped inside.

"Good evening, miss. May I help you?"

The storekeeper's cheery greeting faded, along with the light in his eyes, when Madelyn stepped from the shadows. "Good eve to you as well, Mr. Sullivan."

He scowled. "It's been a while since we've seen a Cunningham in these parts."

Madelyn's gaze darted to the well-dressed woman beside the shopkeeper. Her eyes pinched closed.

Amelia Jackson.

Of all the luck. In town less than an hour, and she'd already crossed paths with her worst detractor—the one who'd turned Wyatt against her. Though they'd known each other since childhood, she and Amelia had always been more enemies than friends.

Madelyn lifted her chin, determined not to let the past dictate the future. "Yes, well, I think it's about time to change that, and Christmas is the perfect opportunity to—"

"Christmas is what sent you and yours packing."

Amelia's curt tone reminded Madelyn she'd need more than her spunky Christmas spirit to turn things around in Taylorstown. She'd need divine intervention.

“Maddy Cunningham. Well, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?” Olivia Sullivan rounded the corner and grasped Madelyn’s hands. “It’s been too long,” she said after placing a delicate kiss on each of Madelyn’s cheeks.

“Not long enough,” her husband mumbled.

“Oh, hush, Gideon. It’s time to put the past to rest—time to build a bridge to the future.” She looped Madelyn’s arm and tugged her toward the display window. “And Christmas is the perfect time to let forgiveness reign in our hearts again,” she called over her shoulder.

Mrs. Sullivan paused in front of the intricately carved nativity scene—the same one that had been in the Hawkins family for generations. The one Madelyn had looked forward to displaying in her and Wyatt’s home before he’d broken their engagement, adding to her own family’s plummeting reputation in the community.

“I ... I can’t believe Wyatt is selling this.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Mrs. Sullivan made a tsking sound as she shook her head. “My brother Nathaniel would roll over in his grave. But my nephew is not the same man you knew. Joy has fled his soul. Bitterness is choking him to death from the inside out.”

A chill snaked down Madelyn’s spine. She couldn’t imagine Wyatt as anything other than content and gentle spirited, his deep green eyes twinkling when he teased his younger siblings.

Madelyn lifted one of the shepherds and examined the meticulous detail. The thin staff, the folds of his clothing, and the expression of awe chiseled on the man’s face all spoke to the love that had been poured into the carvings over the generations. If Wyatt was willing to part with the treasured heirloom, then nothing his Aunt Olivia had written in her missive begging Madelyn to come had been an exaggeration.

“I’m not sure anything I have to say will be able to change that, Mrs. Sullivan. In fact, there’s a real possibility my presence will only make matters worse.”

“Nonsense child. I don’t care what Wyatt says, he’s never stopped loving you.”

“Olivia. Customer,” Mr. Sullivan called, exasperation garnishing his voice.

“Be right there.” Mrs. Sullivan tugged her arm free and turned her dark brown eyes on Madelyn. “I think you’re just what Wyatt and this entire community need to find their Christmas spirit again.”

Had three years been enough for some of the wounds to heal? Madelyn didn’t know, but if things for Wyatt were as bad as his aunt had described, then she needed to see him. See if any part of his heart would respond to her. She owed him that much, didn’t she?

And maybe, just maybe, the spirit of Christmas would bring hope and healing to weary souls once more.



WYATT HAWKINS GLARED at the pine garland draping the iron fence and shook his head. Here, of all places. But it shouldn’t surprise him, not really. Holiday decorations were popping up all over Taylorstown for the first time since that wretched Christmas Eve. The entire town seemed ready to move on—to let what Josiah Cunningham did slip from their memory.

But not Wyatt. He’d never forget, and as such, Christmas would forever be tarnished.

He lifted the latch. The rusty iron gate creaked on its hinges as it swung wide, granting him entrance. Hard-packed snow crunched beneath his boots. Wyatt shivered and hunched his shoulders against the cold. Avoiding this place hadn’t made the pain of that night any less, nor had it granted him a lick of peace.

Reaching the spot where his friend slumbered eternally, he removed his hat. The chilly December breeze nipped at his bare ears. He stooped and dusted the snow from the face of the jagged stone.

Sgt. F. B. Anderson
Co. A, VA Volunteers
Loudoun Independent Rangers
April 17, 1843 - Dec. 24, 1864

Wyatt glanced over his shoulder. Seeing no one, he brought his fist to his mouth and cleared his throat. “Been busy helping your ma with the farm and making repairs to her house. She and Mollie are doing just fine. I promised I’d look out for them, and I’ve been keepin’ my word. Your family will want for nothing.”

He crumpled the brim of his hat between his palms. “It’s probably silly for me to talk to you. It’s not like you can help me sort things out. The preacher reminds me you’re not here, not really. That you’re in heaven with the Lord, but it still eats at me—your body lyin’ here. It’s just not right.”

Tears stung the backs of his eyes. “I know you’d be the first person telling me to forgive, but I can’t help believin’ it should be that scum, Josiah Cunningham, in the ground instead of you.”

His cold fingers traced the shape of the cross engraved above his friend’s name. Three years, and he still hadn’t any peace—not with himself, or Maddy, and certainly not with God. The emptiness inside gnawed at him, devouring him like a cankerworm feasting on the tender leaves of spring. He’d not only lost his best friend, but he’d also shoved the woman he loved away. If there was any sense to be made from this tragedy, Maddy would’ve been the only person who could’ve helped him find it.

However, Maddy had seen it all unfold that night. Seen the small band of Confederates rush into the family Christmas gathering and take their revenge on Flemon. Had seen their friend mortally wounded and die in his mother’s arms. And saw her betrothed frozen in shock and fear, unable to use his sidearm or saber to protect Flemon from armed intruders in the Andersons’ own home.

But it was the way she’d looked at Wyatt that night, as if she

saw right through him, to the coward he really was. How could she ever depend on him to keep her and any children they might have safe? If he couldn't protect Flemon with two weapons at his disposal, how could he protect the woman he loved from the countless hardships and trials life would thrust at them?

No, he'd done the right thing in insisting she leave with her father. Maddy Cunningham deserved better than the likes of him.

Wyatt scraped a hand over his beard. This was exactly why he avoided coming here more often. Visiting made every detail of that awful night burrow deeper in his memory while doing little to ease his guilt.

"Hello, Wyatt."

He stiffened. *Madelyn?* What was she doing here? He'd been lost in thought and hadn't heard her approach.

She stooped beside him and laid a bouquet of pine boughs and winterberries at the foot of Flemon's gravestone before placing her gloved hand on his forearm. "It's been a long time. How've you been?"

His muscles tensed at her touch. Three years later and the woman's presence still sent his pulse careening through his veins. "About the same." He fought to keep his tone even, as if seeing her here was exactly what he'd expected.

"I couldn't stay away any longer. It's time to let the wounds heal."

He gave no response, just fixed his gaze on her simple, yet elegant, offering of remembrance. She'd taken care to wrap the stems in a burlap bow. It was so like Maddy to pay attention to every detail.

She rose to her full height. "I'm staying in town through the New Year."

Great. Wyatt exhaled, his breath crystalizing when it met cold air. He supposed it was a bit ungentlemanly to ignore her, but what was he supposed to say? *Nice to see you again, Maddy, but you remind me of the worst day of my life?*

Who was he fooling? He'd never had trouble talking to Maddy. Truth was, he rarely had to say what was on his mind. Somehow, she always knew. The real problem was how to avoid looking into those chicory blue eyes of hers when he spoke to her.

He shoved to his feet. "What are you really doing here?"

"Spreading a little Christmas cheer. You look like you could use some."

Her brows lifted in conjunction with the corner of her lips. Was she trying to elicit a smile from him? If you could store Christmas cheer in a well, then Wyatt's would be bone dry. He had no more use for Christmas than he did a ruffled petticoat.

"Not sure that's a good idea, Maddy." Something tightened in his chest when he'd spoken her name. "There are still a lot of folks around who remember what your brother did and won't be happy to see a Cunningham."

"Does that include you?"

He met her inquiry with silence and what he hoped was a penetrating glare. "I mean it, Maddy. There's no need to come back here stirring up trouble."

"I didn't pull the trigger, Wyatt."

"And you're not the one lying in that grave." He flinched at the harshness in his voice.

Maddy eyed him. "Neither are you. Leastwise, not your body."

Bullseye.

Right to the heart of the matter. How'd she do that? It was like the woman had a special gift to see inside his deepest thoughts.

"I should head back to town. I'll stop by your shop tomorrow. I have a favor to ask you." She dipped her chin and stepped onto the shoveled path that led toward the rickety gate.

Wyatt watched her slim figure disappear around a bend. He couldn't imagine what favor a sensible woman like Maddy needed that would bring her back to a town that no longer

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welcomed her, or to a man who'd sent her packing. But he had a feeling whatever it was, he wasn't going to like it.