



My True Love Gave to Me

A HISTORICAL CHRISTMAS
NOVELETTE FROM A CHRISTY
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR



KAREN WITEMEYER

My True Love Gave to Me

Karen Witemeyer

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To all those who joyfully manifest the Christmas spirit through song and who aren't afraid to belt out their favorite carols, whether they remember the words or not.

I'll be singing with you this Christmas!

*Thanks be unto God for his
unspeakable gift.*

2 Corinthians 9:15

My True Love Gave to Me

Bethlehem, Texas

December 11, 1886

Simeon Shepherd had just reached for the bowl of mashed potatoes after Papa's *amen* when a knock thumped against the front door. Not just two or three polite raps, but an insistent pounding. Almost frantic. The kind of knocking that could not be ignored, or really even wished away. The kind that quieted a room and urged a man from his chair to see what trouble awaited on the other side.

Papa rose, set his napkin on the table, and strode from the room. Simeon exchanged a look with his mother, but she just smiled and reached for the basket of rolls in front of her.

"We'll find out soon enough," she said softly, tossing a meaningful glance toward his younger brother and sister. "Get those potatoes passing."

Simeon scooped a spoonful onto his plate without really paying attention then handed the bowl off to his Grandpa Joe. As he reached for the roll

basket, a voice filtered into the kitchen that set his pulse ricocheting through his veins.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your dinner, but something's happened and I need to talk to Simeon right away."

Anna.

Simeon jerked to his feet and made it halfway around the table by the time Anna reached the doorway. Her honey brown eyes met his, and his heart nearly stopped. She'd been crying. His Anna rarely cried. The only time he recalled seeing her in tears was when her father almost died last year. Had Mr. King had a relapse?

Simeon hurried to her side and clasped her hand. "Come," he said. "We can talk in the parlor."

Once away from prying eyes and listening ears, Simeon led his love to the small sofa near the woodstove so she could warm herself after riding from town out to his family's farm. Their knees bumped as they turned to face each other.

Anna's head wagged back and forth, her normally bright eyes dulling with shock. "I didn't think he'd do it, Sim." Her voice broke as words tumbled out of her. "But he has, and I don't know what to do."

Simeon had no idea what she was talking about, but it didn't matter. He'd stand by her and do whatever she needed him to do. This was the woman he intended to spend the rest of his life honoring and protecting. The only reason they weren't married already was because he was saving up to build them a house of their own. Papa had already deeded a section of land to him. Simeon had taken on odd jobs around town this winter to augment his savings and had a little over half of what he estimated they would need. He hoped to have

the rest following next fall's harvest. If all went according to plan, they would be husband and wife by next Christmas.

"Daddy promised me to Herald Fielder!"

Simeon's gut turned to stone. "What?"

"I didn't believe it, either. Not at first. Ever since Daddy's apoplexy last year, he goes on these rants about needing to make sure Mama and I are taken care of in case something should happen to him. After Mr. Fielder moved to Cedar Hollow and bought out *The Ledger*, Daddy's been singing his praises. Talks about him being a good newspaperman. Young. Hardworking. A man of integrity. Someone he could picture taking over *The Gazette* when Daddy retires. I met him last year when I traveled with Daddy down to Austin, and Daddy's been hinting that he'd be in favor of a match between the two of us, but I didn't think he was serious. He knows how I feel about you. How I'd never consider marrying anyone else. But now he's invited Mr. Fielder to come for an extended stay. To court me! Herald showed up at the house not twenty minutes ago with hothouse flowers and expensive chocolates, talking about how much he was looking forward to spending time with me over the next two weeks."

Anna squeezed Simeon's hand so hard, he lost feeling in the tips of his fingers. Fitting since his insides had already gone numb.

"Daddy means for me to marry him. For us to be betrothed by Christmas." Her voice caught on a tiny sob. "What are we going to do?"

"We could elope." The words escaped his mouth before his brain could snatch them back, but once uttered he didn't regret them.

Anna was his world. He'd do whatever it took to keep her. Even if it meant running away. His family would help. Shepherd loyalty ran deep. They'd stand by him. Stand by *them*. For Anna would be a Shepherd too. Yet the

idea of being separated from his family sliced like a knife across his heart. He'd always pictured himself here. Farming the family land beside his father and grandfather. Raising children with their grandparents close at hand. Maybe he and Anna could return one day. After Anna's father accepted their marriage. But who knew how long that would take?

"I can't." Anna shook her head, a tear rolling down her cheek. "It would break Mama and Daddy's hearts. And mine." She turned pleading eyes on him. "There's only ever been the three of us. They're all the family I have. I can't turn my back on them, even if Daddy is being unreasonable. There has to be another way."

Simeon wrapped his arm around her and pulled her into his side. He laid a kiss on her forehead and squeezed her tight. "You're right. It's not fair to ask you to choose between me and your family. Forget I mentioned it. Christmas is still a couple weeks away. We have time. I'll think of something."

But what? Mr. King obviously considered him a poor choice for his daughter. He couldn't compete with some wealthy newspaper owner wielding hothouse flowers and fancy chocolates. What could he possibly do to convince Anna's father that he was worthy of his daughter's hand?

Anna raised her head and cupped Simeon's cheek in her palm. "I won't marry Herald. No matter what Daddy thinks is best. I give you my vow, Simeon. *You* are my true love. The one who holds my heart. If Daddy refuses to relent, I will elope with you. I'll marry you and pray that Daddy will eventually forgive me. But only as a last resort." Her lips curved in a sad little smile. "He's my daddy. He can be highhanded and stubborn, but I love him and don't want to lose him if I can help it."

"Of course you don't. Family is one of God's most precious gifts." How many times had he heard his own father say those words? Family was worth

fighting for, even if that family included a man who believed Simeon a poor match for his daughter.

Simeon had no idea how he was going to win David King's approval, but he *did* know who to enlist for help.



Dinner was long over by the time Simeon returned from seeing Anna home. He'd ridden back by way of the big oak that marked the southwest corner of the Shepherd farm. His thinking tree. A man needed a place where he could go to be alone with his thoughts, and this tree had been his place for as long as he could remember. Unfortunately, he had no productive thoughts about how to handle the fancy suitor Anna's father had brought in, only panicky worries that threatened to paralyze him. He needed a wisdom beyond his understanding, so he dismounted, knelt, and unburdened himself before the Lord. No revelation dropped from the sky on a big white sheet, but the weight on his shoulders lightened just the same. God held the future, and he could be trusted.

Simeon expected the kitchen to be empty and his family busy with other things by the time he straggled home. Instead, he found everyone still sitting at the table, talking excitedly.

"What's all this?" he asked as he came in and took off his coat and hat.

Mama immediately got up and fetched him a plate from the warming oven. "Grandpa Joe overheard your conversation with Anna, and we've been discussing ideas about how to help."

Simeon looked to the head of the table where Grandpa Joe sat with a book open in front of him. "You listened in on my private conversation?"

Grandpa Joe didn't look the slightest bit repentant. "I know what it looks like when trouble comes callin', and when that sweet gal of yours showed up outta the blue with tears in her voice and desperation in her eyes, I knew a storm was a-brewin'. It ain't in my nature to sit around waitin' for an engraved invitation when one of my own is in trouble, so I did what had to be done. Now, you gonna be mad at me, or do you wanna listen to what we've come up with so far?"

Simeon slid into his chair and nodded his thanks to his mother when she set his plate in front of him then looked over to his grandpa. The old codger was an interfering busybody, but his devotion to family was absolute. And truth be told, Simeon could use all the help he could get. Grandpa Joe had lived and loved a long time, having been married to Grandma Angelina for nearly forty-seven years before she passed on. A little wisdom, and a talent for conniving, might be just what Simeon needed right now.

"I'm all ears," he said as he picked up his fork and knife and cut into his ham steak.

Grandpa Joe grinned and nodded to Simeon's little brother. "Gabe's the one who got us started."

Simeon looked to Gabriel as he dragged a bite of ham through his taters before shoving it in his mouth. The kid was only twelve, but he was sharp. Had a head for book learnin' that put Simeon's mediocre school marks to shame.

Gabe's eyes shone as he leaned on the table, eager to impress his big brother. "I got the idea when Grandpa Joe told us about Anna calling you her true love."

Simeon's heart squeezed at the memory. She was his true love, too. His one and only.

"Remember that folk song we would sing sometimes around Christmas? The one about all the crazy gifts?" Gabe looked at him expectantly.

Simeon nodded, a vague recollection coming to mind. Something about partridges and turtledoves.

"Well, all them gifts were given by the lady's *true love*. See? You can prove you're Anna's true love instead of this Herald fella by following the song."

Simeon swallowed his half-chewed bite, his shoulders slumping. "It's a nice idea, Gabe, but I can't compete in gift-giving. Her other suitor has already given her hothouse flowers and expensive chocolates. I'd lose all my savings if I tried to outdo that."

"Money ain't what matters, boy," Grandpa Joe said. "Any fella can give flowers and sweets to a girl. They're easy. Takes no imagination. Gifts of true love come from the heart, not the pocketbook."

Simeon's sister Mary sat to his left and laid her hand on his arm. "We've been discussing ideas. You can't give pear trees and colly birds to Anna, but if we work together, I bet we can come up with gift ideas that sound similar and convey just how much you love her. You can sign the notes, *From Your True Love*."

At eighteen, Mary tended to see romance in everything, but if she thought this gift idea was romantic, maybe Anna would too. But would such a campaign change her father's mind?

He looked across the table to his own dad, silently seeking advice from the most down-to-earth, practical man he knew.

Papa held his gaze. "Way I see it," he said, "you got twelve days until Christmas Eve. Twelve days for twelve gifts. Mighty convenient the way

them numbers line up. Almost as if it were meant to be."

Simeon sat up a little straighter as hope burgeoned in his chest.

His mother touched his shoulder as she set a cup of steaming coffee next to his plate. "We all know that *you* are Anna's true love, Simeon. Not this Fielder person. Anna's father will come to see that too, in time. How can he not?"

Could she be right? Could this scheme actually work?

Simeon pointed his fork at the book in front of his grandpa. "I'm guessing the poem for the song is in there?"

A broad smile broke out on his grandpa's bearded face. "It surely is." He turned the book around and scooted it over to Simeon.

"Looks like I got me some studyin' to do tonight."

"We'll help!" Gabe bounced in his chair.

Mary slid a sheet of paper riddled with pencil markings toward him. "We've already started a list of possible ideas."

Simeon glanced around the table, his throat thickening with emotion. Where would he be without family? This is what Anna needed, too. This connection. This support. This unwavering loyalty. She'd have it as a Shepherd once they married. But he wanted her to have it with her own family as well. And, God willing, when this was over, she would.



"It's just a walk, Anna, not a betrothal march," her mother scolded gently as she continued brushing Anna's hair at the dressing table in her room. "I didn't

raise you to be inhospitable. You must treat Mr. Fielder with the same kindness and respect as you would treat any other visitor." She gathered Anna's long gold tresses, twisted them into a becoming knot, and reached for a hair pin. "Your father's already angry enough with you for running out on our guest last night. You won't win him over with continued rudeness."

"Is there a chance of winning Daddy over?" Anna met her mother's eyes in the mirror, desperately searching for a reason to hope. Her mother knew how much she cared for Simeon. If she were to talk to Daddy, he might listen to her. Might relent.

Mama slid the last pin into her hair, then placed her hands atop Anna's shoulders. "Your father wants what's best for you. He truly does. The Shepherds are good people, but after the drought last year, they're facing hard times. Herald Fielder is a well-established businessman who treats his employees well and his customers fairly. He attends church regularly and has an honorable reputation in his community. Your father didn't select him just for his money, you know. He examined his character to ensure the man would treat you well, should you wed him."

Anna spun around on the stool to face her mother, tears perilously close to the surface. "Herald Fielder only wants to marry me so he can inherit Daddy's newspaper. This is a business arrangement to him, nothing more. I want a marriage built on love, Mama, not on business. Don't you understand?"

Mama took her hands and pulled her out of the chair and into a hug. "Oh, my darling girl. Of course I understand. And I want that for you. Love and joy and laughter. Those are the things that matter most in a marriage. If you have those, you can endure any hardship. I've told your father as much."

"You have?" Anna pulled back, searching her mother's face. Maybe she did have an ally after all.

Mama nodded. "Mmm hmm. Though I didn't really need to. He values love just as much as I do."

"Then why—"

"Love is more than a mere feeling, Anna. More than the tickle you feel inside when you look at a handsome young man. Love is a decision. A commitment. It's the devoting of yourself to the well-being of another day after day, creating a lifelong partnership. Sometimes falling in love happens in a glorious rush. But sometimes it happens slowly over time, building little by little until you turn around to find it in full bloom."

"Like it did with you and Daddy?" Anna knew the story well. Her mother had been a mail-order bride. They'd married as virtual strangers with only a handful of letters to serve as courtship.

"Yes, sweetheart. Just like that." Mama smiled, a softness entering her eyes that spoke of enduring affection. "Love can grow like that between you and Herald, too, if you both commit to it."

"I'm sure it could if I hadn't already committed my love to Simeon." She stepped away from her mother and paced toward the window. "He's my best friend, Mama. My true love. I would sacrifice everything for him, as he would for me."

Though she prayed it wouldn't come to that. Leaving her family would carve a hole in her heart that even Simeon couldn't fill. But leaving Simeon? That would tear her heart completely from her chest.

"Tell me this," Anna said softly as she turned from the window to face her mother once again. "If you had already given your heart to someone who returned your feelings, would you have answered Daddy's advertisement even if it promised an easier life?"

Her mother held her gaze for a long moment before finally shaking her

head. "No. I wouldn't have."

"Then don't force me to do so."

Mama sighed. "I won't go against your father in this, but I'll do what I can to plant seeds. To try to get him to see how much you and Simeon truly care for each other."

Anna ran forward and wrapped her arms around her mother's waist. "Oh, thank you, Mama. Thank you!"

Her mother returned Anna's embrace, squeezing tight. "Your father really does want you to be happy, sweetheart."

Anna closed her eyes, remembering Simeon's arms around her last night and his promise to think of something to change her father's mind.

I believe in you, Simeon. And I'm praying for you—for us—with all my heart.



"What do you like best about the newspaper business, Mr. Fielder?" Anna asked as she dutifully strolled along the path that led through the pasture behind their house to a small stream at the edge of her family's property.

"I thought we decided you would call me Herald." He smiled at her. A rather indulgent, hopeful type of smile. Not condescending or arrogant or any of the other traits she wanted to attribute to him. He truly wasn't a villain. Just a nice man who wasn't Simeon.

"You're right. Herald."

The man was about ten years her senior. Decent in looks and gentlemanly in manners. He dressed well and spoke with an eloquence that came from a refined education. Even now as he answered her question, expounding on the importance of objective reporting and the satisfaction that came from having his words read by others, she could find nothing objectionable in him. Had her heart not been otherwise engaged, he would, indeed, be a fine suitor. Yet her heart *was* engaged, and it wasn't fair to lead him to expect that anything would come of his visit.

The need to confess built inside her all the way to the stream, and when they finally arrived, it burst from her like a bullet from a gun.

"I'm not going to marry you, Herald."

The man blinked, his ever-present smile flattening a bit. "Did I propose? One would think I would recall such an event. Unfortunately, no such recollection is coming to mind."

Anna's cheeks heated. His kind teasing wasn't making this any easier. "I'm sorry. That must've sounded terribly presumptuous of me, but I want to be honest with you. I know that my father brought you here with the expectation of the two of us making a match. However, I've promised myself to another."

All teasing disappeared from Herald's face. He met her gaze steadily, his dark eyes serious. "Simeon Shepherd," he said. "I'm aware."

"You are?" And he still came?

He folded his arms across his chest. "Your father mentioned your infatuation with another young man. A farmer, I believe."

"If he reported it as a mere infatuation, I'm afraid he misrepresented the facts." Anna crossed her own arms, determined to make her position clear.

"Simeon and I have been courting for two years. We plan to wed next fall." If the harvest proved profitable enough.

"I appreciate your honesty, Anna, but there's something you should know about me." A change came over Herald's features. An intensity she'd not seen before radiated from him. "I'm not afraid of competition. I relish it, in fact. If I didn't believe I could win you, I wouldn't have come."

"But why would you even want to win me if my heart belongs to another?"

Slowly his arms uncrossed, and a touch of superiority lit his eyes. "Love is not the only reason to marry. Compatibility comes in many forms. Shared values and goals. Mutual respect. Friendship. I can offer you financial security, a place in society, protection for yourself and your mother."

"And in return, you get my father's newspaper."

Herald smiled. "You make it sound so mercenary."

"Isn't it?" Anna challenged.

"Not to me. I could simply buy your father's business if that was all that really mattered to me. But I want more from life than simply a string of successful enterprises. I want a wife by my side. Someone who understands my work. Someone with whom I can share my thoughts and ideas. Someone who will be my partner and friend. Maybe more, with time. Someone who appreciates the importance of family and will be an amazing mother to our children."

He sounded so earnest. And the picture he painted held its attractions. She wanted the same things, after all. But there was only one man she wanted to share such a life with, and it wasn't Herald Fielder.

"All I ask is that you give me an objective hearing. Don't dismiss what I can offer out of hand without examining it first. You may find the scales tipping in my favor in the end."

Anna considered his words and gave a slow nod. "All right. I promise to give your suit fair consideration. But in return, I ask that you respect my

choice, whatever it may be, and abide by *my* wishes, not my father's."

"Agreed." He held out his arm. "Now that we have that settled, should we head back? It's rather cold out, and I would hate to be the cause of you falling ill."

Anna nodded, more than ready to be done with this awkward conversation. They covered the distance back to the house in half the time, neither one particularly talkative after their conversation by the stream.

Her mother must have seen them coming, for she threw open the back door and waved them in. "Come in and warm yourself by the stove," she urged. As Anna slipped past, her mother touched her arm and stalled her progress. "A gift arrived for you." Her eyes danced, setting off a similar gyration in Anna's belly. "Your father's grumbling about it in the front room."

If he was grumbling, it had to be from Simeon. Without pausing to remove her coat, Anna abandoned the kitchen and hurried to the front room. She found her father bent at the waist, staring at what looked to be a cactus in a pot on the slender table behind the sofa.

"Daddy?"

He straightened and turned abruptly. "I tell you, Anna. That boy has lost his mind. Who in the world sends a cactus as a courting gift? And there's a bullet hanging from the center of the thing. What is that supposed to signify? Is it some kind of threat?"

"Of course it's not a threat." Though it was rather odd. *What are you up to, Simeon?* Anna approached the table and found an envelope, thankfully still unopened, with her name written across the front in an unrefined scrawl she recognized instantly.

"Tell me, Herald," her father said, alerting Anna to her growing audience, "is that not the most ridiculous bouquet you've ever seen? If you can even call

it a bouquet. Next to your roses, it looks like a bulbous weed."

"It is rather . . . unconventional."

Herald's voice faded from Anna's awareness as she opened Simeon's note. There were only two lines, but they made her heart pound.

To Anna, on the first day of Christmas.

From Your True Love

On the first day of Christmas. Why did that phrase sound so familiar? Then it came to her. A children's counting song. *On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me . . .*

She turned back to the gift and looked at it with new eyes. Saw the reddish-purple bulb of prickly fruit. Looked closer at the bullet tied on with a string. It wasn't ammunition for a pistol. The casing was longer. Like that for a rifle.

"Daddy?" she asked without turning.

He broke off his conversation. "Yes?"

She drew her finger along the line of the metal cylinder. "What do you call a bullet that goes into a rifle?"

He scratched at his jaw. "A cartridge. But what does that have to do with —" He broke off when she started laughing.

She spun around to face him, a smile beaming across her face as she held Simeon's note to her breast. "Oh, Daddy. Don't you see? It's a gift of true love."

He scowled. "Are you feeling all right, Anna?"

"I feel marvelous!" She waltzed up to him and handed over the note for him to inspect.

He read the note, grumbled, then passed it to Herald. She should be angry that he would share her personal correspondence without her permission, but she was too delighted with Simeon's cleverness to take him to task.

"Why are you so happy?" her father demanded. "This has to be the least romantic gift of all time. It's a half-dead cactus covered with barbs and a random bullet."

"No, Daddy," she said, her heart awash with love. "It's a cartridge in a prickly pear tree."



Over the next week, the sofa table in the King house parlor came to host an odd menagerie of gifts. The vase filled with Herald's hothouse roses remained firmly in the center of the table—per her father's instructions—even though the petals had begun to wilt. A handful of other elegant gifts preened on either side of the vase. Herald had presented her with a beautiful music box two days ago and a stationary set with a pair of fountain pens just this morning. Yet those items didn't command the attention of Anna's friends, Heloise and Beverly. Easily recognizable items couldn't compare to the lure of the unconventional.

"Just look at these gloves." Heloise picked up the pair of white church gloves and held them toward the window to better see the fine stitching at the inside of the wrist. "Mary Shepherd must've done the work. Her stitches could rival a professional seamstress. Just look at the details on that shell."

"Turtle gloves. I get it." Beverly adjusted her spectacles to see the gray-on-white embroidery better. "No one will even notice the turtles are there unless they know to look for them." A tiny sigh escaped her. "It's like a private love note you can carry with you out in the open."

Anna nodded, taking the gloves from Heloise and laying them carefully back in the small box they'd come in. "I plan to wear them to the Christmas Eve service next week." Where she intended to sit next to the true love who had gifted them to her.

"Why is there an old crate on the floor?" Beverly crouched down to peer at the slatted wood cage Anna insisted on keeping on display despite the fact that it was empty.

Anna crouched down beside her friend and pointed to the letters painted across the top. *From France.*

"Ah. Let me guess. You have three new hens in your coop?"

"Yep. Mama says they're good layers, too."

The girls stood to find Heloise reaching a finger out to gingerly touch the prickly edge of a dried, brown thistle. "I count four of these bur things on this stem, but I don't see what that has to do with the birds from the song."

"It took me a while, too," Anna admitted. "Mama was the one who figured it out. On the fourth day of Christmas, the song's true love gave her four colly birds. Mine gave me four cockleburrs."

Heloise's brow cleared as understanding dawned.

"A prudent substitute." Beverly nodded her approval. "What would you have done with four blackbirds flapping about in the parlor, screeching and making a mess everywhere? Those burs aren't exactly attractive, even with the red silk ribbon tied about the stem, but if you dry some lavender or other flowers, you could make a bouquet to dress them up. One that would last several years."

"What a great idea!" Anna squeezed her friend's hand. "I think Mama hung lavender to dry in the attic last summer. There may still be some up there she hasn't sewn into sachets yet. I'll ask her about it."

"I'm guessing these are goose eggs." Heloise pointed to the wire basket on the far side of the roses. Inside sat six over-large eggs. "But what happened to the five gold rings?" She touched Anna's arm and dropped her voice. "Did Simeon have to skip Day Five? Gold rings are so expensive. No one would blame him. In fact, it proves him to be a man of good sense, doesn't it, Bev?"

"Absolutely."

"You two are the best." Anna grinned, touched by their loyalty. "But no, Simeon didn't skip Day Five."

"Then where . . .?"

Anna patted the edge of an empty, white plate with the tip of her finger. "Simeon's mother made me five of her famous doughnuts. Perfectly round, perfectly golden, and perfectly delicious. Best rings I ever ate." She grinned, and her friends laughed.

"You're so lucky," Heloise said, giving her arm a light swat. "Elizabeth Shepherd makes the best doughnuts in the county. No wonder the platter is empty."

"We all ate one the moment they arrived, even Herald, though he didn't seem to enjoy it very much."

"That's because he was tasting his defeat," Beverly declared with saucy surety.

Anna giggled.

Until she saw her father standing in the doorway, scowling at her. She choked down her laughter and schooled her face into a more sober cast.

"Yes, Daddy?"

"There's a delivery for you at the front door."

Anna shot a glance at her friends as her heart rate doubled its speed. Would Simeon deliver it himself, this time? She hadn't seen him in a week. His gifts

always came with a note, but they'd all been delivered by someone else. No doubt it was awkward with Herald always around, but she missed him.

Her stomach dancing, she thanked her father and did her best to walk at a sedate pace to the front door. It didn't help having Heloise and Beverly whispering excitedly behind her, trying to guess how Simeon was going to handle seven swans. By the time she reached the door, so much anticipation pounded through her that she barely noticed Herald standing on the front porch, extending his arm to her.

"May I escort you, Miss Anna?"

Escort her? Where?

"Good day, Miss King!" A short man in boots and vest stood in the yard a few feet away from the base of the porch steps. He shifted the box he held in front of him to one arm long enough to doff his hat, then shifted it back. "I've got a delivery for you."

"I told you just to leave it on the porch, Wilbur," her father grumbled.

"No sir. I can't do that. I'm under strict instructions to deliver the gift to the lady herself. There's some . . . demonstration involved, you see."

With Herald all but blocking the steps, accepting his escort would be easier than trying to sidle past him, especially with the growing number of people lingering about. It seemed word had spread about her unusual gifts. And Wilbur Darrow was never one to let an opportunity for free advertising pass him by. Half this crowd probably followed him from the general store.

It felt wrong, somehow, to be on Herald's arm while accepting a gift from Simeon, so as soon as she reached the bottom of the stairs, she released him and moved to meet Mr. Darrow on her own. Herald followed. Closely. Too closely. In fact, she was pretty sure she felt his hand brush the small of her back.

He'd never acted like this before. Not even when they took their obligatory walks together in the mornings. Was it because he had an audience? Was he trying to stake a claim? She frowned up at him, but he just smiled and kept himself glued to her side.

Determined not to let him ruin Simeon's gift, Anna decided to pretend he wasn't there. She beamed a smile at Mr. Darrow even as she glanced into the box he held.

"Spurs?" Her forehead scrunched as she looked to the storekeeper for the promised explanation.

"Not just any spurs, ma'am." Mr. Darrow lifted his voice so the surrounding crowd could hear. "See how the spur neck stretches out and upward from the heel band? These are *swan neck spurs*. Seven of 'em." He leaned closer and lowered his voice a bit. "Can't sell 'em except in pairs, so young Simeon has the eighth one if ya need it." He straightened and raised his voice again. "And if you'd be so kind as to hold the box . . ." He handed it to her with a wink. "I've been instructed to set all the rowels to spinning." Using the index fingers on both hands, he quickly flicked all the rowels into motion. "I give you . . . seven swans a spinning!"

Anna laughed in delight. "How utterly perfect!"

She glanced past a grinning Mr. Darrow, past the smattering of townsfolk, searching for the one face she wanted to see most. There. Half-hidden by the tree across the street. Her chest swelled with warmth as her gaze locked on her beloved.

Herald reached for the box she held. She thought the act chivalrous at first until she heard his low whisper. "Now's not the time, Anna."

Not the time? Not the time to publicly declare which suitor she preferred? Is that what he meant? Well, it might not fit into *his* timetable, but it certainly

fit into hers.

Keeping her smile in place she tightened her hold on the box and turned away from him. "Heloise? Would you take this up to the house for me?"

Her friend must have read her mind, for she was already there. Beverly came, too, approaching on Herald's far side. She slid her arm neatly through his as Anna slipped away, turning him back toward the box as she exclaimed over the contents.

Anna felt the heat of Herald's glare against her back as she scurried across the street, but she paid it no mind. For Simeon stood before her, his eyes drinking her in as if he hadn't seen her in a year instead of a mere week.

Not caring who was watching, she ran straight up to him, launched onto her tiptoes, and kissed him on the cheek. "I love you, Simeon." His hand touched her waist to steady her, and she smiled as she clung to his arm. "And I'm ready for everyone to know it."

He brushed a stray piece of hair out of her face, and looked at her with such tender promise, her heart nearly forgot to beat. "Five more days, my love," he murmured. "Five days, and you'll be mine forever."

His gaze lifted away from her to rest on something across the street. Herald and her father, no doubt. His jaw clenched, but he didn't frown. Just turned back to her and gave her waist a small squeeze. "Go on back, sweetheart. I'll come for you in five days."

"Five days." She echoed the promise, her stomach swirling with all that promise entailed.

In five days she would belong to Simeon. One way or another.



Simeon kept a close eye on Anna as the days marched toward Christmas. He hadn't liked the way Herald Fielder acted around her, as if she belonged to him. His hand on her back, insisting she take his arm in public. Simeon had nearly stormed across the street and grabbed her away from the fellow. Thankfully, he'd kept his jealousy leashed and was rewarded by Anna's sweet kiss. Hearing her declare her love for him soothed the doubts that had crept up over the last week as he'd tortured himself with thoughts of another man courting her. A man who could offer her so many things Simeon couldn't. But his Anna hadn't wavered. He'd seen it in her eyes, heard it in her bubbling enthusiasm, and felt it in her touch. She was still as much his as he was hers. That made everything worth it. The sleepless nights spent forging ideas, the time away from the farm searching through bogs for cockleburs, chasing chickens, and recruiting assistants for the second round of courting gifts.

Not only did Anna give him reason to stay the course, but he'd seen something in her father's eye that seventh day as well. Herald Fielder had been shooting daggers at him from across the street when Anna had hurried to his side. But her father . . . he'd looked . . . thoughtful. Not particularly pleased, but *thoughtful* constituted progress. And progress took him one step closer to acceptance.

Simeon watched Mr. King even more closely than Anna. When Mary led eight little girls in a parade in front of the house, each girl with a bottle of milk to hand to Anna, Mr. King had stepped forward to help his daughter manage the volume. The next day when Simeon's little brother Gabriel came through with a noisy band of nine boys all drumming away on pots and pans with their wooden spoons, Mr. King had grouched about the noise and covered

his ears, but he'd made no move to stop Anna from clapping along. Nor did he keep her from running out to march alongside Gabe as he led the troupe in a wide arc in front of the house.

The real progress came on Day Ten, however. Grandpa Joe and nine of his cronies hobbled down the road to the King house and hollered for Anna to come out.

Mr. King had come through the door first, stomped onto the porch and scowled at the motley crew of gray beards assembled in his yard.

"And what are *you* supposed to be, Joseph? I hope you're not going to start leaping around the place like some kind of decrepit jackrabbit. You're likely to throw a hip out of joint."

"You done got yer days mixed up, David. We ain't no lords a-leaping." Grandpa Joe waited for Anna to come to the porch railing then waved at her. She waved back, her grin radiant as she waited for him to proceed with his performance. And Grandpa Joe did love having an audience. "Ready, men?"

He gave a signal, and each man reached into their coat pocket.

"We're pipers," he exclaimed, loud enough for the milling crowd to hear. "And we're about to start piping."

Each man pulled out a tobacco pipe, producing a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Matches were struck, pipes lit, and puffs commenced until a haze obscured the air.

Anna laughed and proclaimed it wonderful. Men in the crowd guffawed. A handful of women shook their heads in disapproval. And Mr. King? Why, he actually cracked a smile.

Grandpa Joe walked straight over to the porch and positioned himself directly below where Anna's father stood at the railing. Mr. King swatted at the cloud that rose up to accost him.

"I thought you gave up smoking, Joe. Didn't the doctor tell you it was bad for that cough of yours?"

"Yep. I'm makin' an exception today, though. For Simeon." Grandpa Joe took the pipe from his mouth and pointed the tip at David King. "That's what we do for family, ain't it? Put our own needs aside to support those we love."

Mr. King turned to look at Anna, saw the pleasure on her face as she cheered on old Mr. Thompson while he blew lopsided smoke rings into the air. Her daddy's face softened, and he nodded, giving Simeon his first real glimpse of hope.

Two days before Christmas, Simeon's mother and sister led a group of eleven ladies of various ages in a dance. Papa played his fiddle as the ladies twirled and dipped in time with the music. With the odd number, they couldn't pair up, so they did a version of a maypole dance, weaving in and out of each other until the music stopped.

When Christmas Eve finally arrived, anticipation and nerves kept Simeon from eating. An icy wind blew in from the north and turned the weather cold. He prayed it wasn't foreshadowing the reception he'd get for his final gift.

As he and Gabe and the ten other little lords they'd recruited turned off the main street to make the walk down to Anna's house, Simeon wiped his palms on his trousers for what must have been the twentieth time. He wished he'd been able to come up with a more dignified final gift. A game of leap frog didn't really make a man look like a mature, responsible fellow, one ready to provide for a wife and children. It was too late to change things now, though. In for a penny, in for a pound, as Grandpa Joe liked to say.

When they neared the house, shock coursed through Simeon's midsection at the crowd of folks he found braving the inhospitable weather to line the street. It looked like half the town had turned out. His parents and sister

huddled by a tree. Mary waved as they passed. Heloise and Beverly called out wishes of good luck. Grandpa Joe and his gaggle of geezers formed a line, each one spouting encouragement as they slapped him on the back.

The King family stood on the porch, waiting. Anna gripped the railing in the front while her parents stood arm-in-arm behind her. Herald Fielder hovered annoyingly close to Anna, but Simeon didn't spare him a glance. Once his gaze locked with Anna's, he couldn't see anything else. She lifted a hand to her lips and blew him a kiss—a hand sheathed in a white glove with a turtle stitched onto the cuff. The red ribbon he'd wrapped around a dried-out bunch of cockleburs adorned her hair. Instead of precious gems, she wore a rifle cartridge around her neck. And while he watched, she kicked her foot between the railing spindles to reveal a riding boot peeking out from beneath her skirt hem—one that jangled when she wiggled her ankle. Pride ballooned his chest. She'd even worn the spurs for him.

"Anna King," Simeon said in a voice strong enough to carry through the entire crowd, "I loved you yesterday, I love you today, and I'll love you for all the days to come. And on this twelfth day of Christmas, I give you . . ." He swept a hand out to the path that led to the porch.

"One lord a-leaping!" Gabriel shouted as he jumped forward then bent down into a ball.

"Two lords a-leaping!" The next boy in line hopped over Gabe then crouched down and ducked his head.

Three lords, then four. They kept coming, each hopping over all those who had come before. Simeon moved into position at the end of the line, his pulse leaping higher than any of the young men in front of him.

When his turn finally came, he looked straight at his love. "Twelve lords a-leaping!"

Then he braced his hands on one rounded back after another, launching himself over each lord who had come before. When he vaulted over the last fella, he swept off his hat and bent forward in a deep bow. He slowly straightened, his gaze locking on Anna. She'd moved away from Herald to stand on the porch steps, directly in front of him. Tears sparkled in her eyes.

Simeon reached out and clasped her hands in his. The love he felt nearly knocked his feet out from under him, but he couldn't bask in her adoration. He still had one last task to complete. Releasing her hands, he mounted the steps and climbed past her to stand in front of her father.

She joined him, slipping her arm through his, her support palpable.

"Mr. King?" Simeon kept his voice low and the conversation private. "I love your daughter with everything that I am. I might not be as rich or as educated as some, but I promise to provide her with a good life, a *happy* life. I'll put her needs before my own and stand by her side through any hardships that come our way. I'll protect her with my dying breath and honor her above all others." Simeon held her father's gaze. "Please, sir. May I marry your daughter?"

For a long moment, no change registered on David King's face. His stony expression remained fixed. Then he stepped away from his wife and clamped a hand on Simeon's shoulder.

"Son, any man with the fortitude to wage a twelve-day campaign of utter ridiculousness to please his lady and not only see it through but garner the support of the entire town in the process is a remarkable fellow indeed. And one I would be honored to welcome to the family."

Anna squealed and launched herself into her father's arms. "Thank you, Daddy! Oh, thank you!"

Her reaction spurred the crowd into cheers and applause. Simeon, heart full

of gratitude, accepted his future father-in-law's hand in a firm shake then shot a grin over his shoulder to his family. Grandpa Joe let out an ear-piercing whistle and threw his hat in the air.

Simeon laughed, the joy inside him too strong to contain. Then Herald Fielder stepped forward. Dread yanked on Simeon's midsection, but he faced his competition square on. No matter what the man said or did, Anna belonged to Simeon. Forever.

"Good show, Shepherd." Herald extended his hand.

Relieved at his rival's acceptance, Simeon shook his hand, a look of understanding passing between them.

Anna grabbed Simeon's hand then, and all thoughts of Herald faded like yesterday's news. Turning to his newly betrothed, Simeon swept her into his arms and spun her around in a circle. Their laughter melded together and spilled over into their audience.

The cheers doubled in volume, then morphed into chants of "Kiss her! Kiss her!"

Simeon slowed the spin, looked into Anna's glittering golden eyes, and kissed his true love. He might have orchestrated twelve days of crazy Christmas giving, but he'd just received the greatest gift of all.



Author Note

I hope you enjoyed Anna and Simeon's Twelve Days of Christmas. I had so much fun reimagining a western version of these true love gifts. The earliest recorded version of this rhyme or chant appeared in a children's book called *Mirth Without Mischief* in 1780. It was titled "The Twelve Days of Christmas Sung at King Pepin's Ball." It became a folk song of sorts in England and eventually migrated to America.

The tune that we recognize as a popular Christmas carol today did not come into being until 1909 when English composer Frederic Austin created a new arrangement of the traditional folk melody.

Over the years, the order of the gifts has been rearranged in various versions. The order in which I present them in this story is the original order recorded in 1780. You might also notice the difference in the birds described on Day Four. The original version recorded "colly" birds, referring to the coal-black color of the bird. When Austin recorded his version, he changed the birds to "calling" birds.

In addition to the fun I had with the song, you might have also noticed the way I played with character names. Nearly every character in this short tale references the biblical nativity story. Anna and Simeon's names were borrowed from the two elderly prophets who proclaimed Christ's messiahship in the temple courts when Jesus was presented for purification. Simeon's family name is Shepherd in honor of Jesus's first visitors. And did you notice that there were three Kings? Anna and her parents.

Then there was Grandpa Joseph and Simeon's sister Mary. Gabriel made an appearance as well as a brief nod to the other heavenly host with the mention of the dearly departed Grandma Angelina. Simeon's mother Elizabeth references the mother of John the Baptist, and Anna's father David references the City of David, where Jesus was born. And Herald Fielder? Well, the herald was harked in the fields to the shepherds, so even our unsuitable suitor was part of the fun.

And of course, I had to set the story in Bethlehem, TX. There really is such a place. Texas has just about everything, after all. In fact, more than one community has used this name through the years. The one I based my story on is a small farming community in Upshur County. I made my fictional town a little larger than the settlement that existed there in the 1850's, though. There's not much there now other than a church and a cemetery, but I like to imagine that the spirit of Christmas is alive and well in that place.



Keep reading for a bonus Christmas devotional.

Bonus Content - Why a Baby?

A Christmas Devotional

I love seeing nativity scenes during the Christmas season—mangers set up in front yards with Mary and Joseph looking down lovingly at the baby Jesus. My own decorations reflect this beloved story as well. I have nativity ornaments on my tree, a small set of figurines at the front of the living room, and a large carved set that holds the place of honor on my mantle. They never fail to bring a smile to my heart as I think of the miracle of Immanuel – God with us.

But have you ever wondered why Jesus came to earth as a *baby*? Why didn't the Word simply become fully-grown flesh in order to dwell among us? Jesus's ministry didn't begin until he was thirty years old. So why didn't he simply arrive as a man and carry out his sacred duty of teaching, training, healing, and sacrificing at that time? Surely that would have been easier and more efficient. Why enter the world as a baby and hide away in Nazareth for three decades?

Jesus as a baby proves his humanity.

The Old Testament is filled with stories of people who were visited by mysterious strangers. The three men who met Abraham and foretold the birth of Isaac. The two visitors who warned Lot to leave Sodom before God destroyed the city. The fourth man in the fiery furnace who preserved the life of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The commander of the Lord's army who appeared to Joshua to give instructions on how to defeat Jericho. In every instance these angels appeared as men. Mature men. Fully-grown men, carrying in their countenance the authority of God. They came to reveal truth, speak prophecy, offer protection, and give instruction. Yet they were only visitors. They did not truly dwell among us.

Jesus entering the world as a baby separates him from the angels who came before. He fully embraced what it means to be human. To experience hunger and pain. Laughter and delight. Annoying little brothers and hometown naysayers who thought he'd gotten too big for his britches. Jesus didn't just put on skin temporarily and pretend to understand humanity. He lived it. For thirty-three years.

How could the Almighty ever possibly understand what it feels like to be powerless? He couldn't unless he stripped himself of all supremacy and became the most powerless being of all—an infant. Helpless to meet his own basic needs or even communicate with those around him. The infinite became finite in every way imaginable, all because he wanted to be closer to us.

"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil . . . For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful

high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" Hebrews 2:14, 17-18.

Jesus as a baby invites relationship.

John opens his gospel with an amazing description of Jesus. Instead of introducing Jesus to us as a babe born of a virgin, he introduces him as the Word.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" John 1:1-3.

Not only was Jesus present when mankind was created, he took part in the creation himself. Therefore, he knows us intimately. From the number of freckles that dot our skin to the secret thoughts of our minds and the dreams of our hearts. There is no aspect of our lives that is hidden from him. Yet intimacy cannot exist if it is one-sided. We must come to know him in return. And what more inviting, non-threatening way is there to start than with a baby?

Babies inspire attachment. It's a biological and emotional fact. Humans are designed to bond with their young. Baby Jesus doesn't simply inspire attachment, however. He inspires devotion. From shepherds, from kings, and from heavenly hosts. All those who encounter Jesus are forever changed. Yet, meeting Jesus as a baby is just a starting point.

Two times in Luke's gospel account, he remarks about Jesus's growth. The first is following his presentation at the Temple when he was likely a little over a month old. Luke says, "And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him." Then we have another glimpse of Jesus at the Temple, this time when he was twelve years of age. He amazed all who heard him with the questions he asked and the understanding he demonstrated. When his parents found him and scolded him for staying behind, he made it clear that he knew he had a Father and a mission of divine origin. Yet he still had room to grow. For after this incident, Luke once again states, "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."

I believe that much of the wisdom Jesus gained during his growing up years was in learning how to relate to people. Understanding our imperfections and insecurities. Learning how best to help and heal. When to use words and when to touch. When to call out sin and when to extend mercy. How to tell stories that would linger in a listener's mind and create analogies from everyday objects to describe the unfathomable kingdom of God.

We, too, are called to grow. Just as Jesus put on humanity in order to truly know us, so we must seek out the divine in order to truly know him.

"Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" John 17:3.

So, the next time you read the nativity story or sing a carol like *Away in a Manger* or *Silent Night*, I hope you'll see baby Jesus not just as an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes who would one day save the world, but as a God who intentionally wrapped himself in fragile, helpless humanity in order to know you more deeply.



For more great Christmas stories, check out Karen's Christy Award winning novella, *A Texas Christmas Carol* as well as her 2-in-1 novella collection *An Old-Fashioned Texas Christmas*.

Review Request

If you enjoyed *My True Love Gave to Me*, please consider writing a quick review. Leaving a positive review is one of the best ways a reader can show their appreciation to the author. Reviews are also a gift to fellow readers as they search for stories they are likely to enjoy. Thank you!

About the Author

For those who love to smile as they read, bestselling author Karen Witemeyer offers warmhearted historical romance with a flair for humor, feisty heroines, and swoon-worthy Texas heroes. Voted #1 Readers' Favorite Christian Historical Author in 2023 by *Family Fiction Magazine*, Karen is a multiple award-winning author and a firm believer in the power of happy endings. She is an avid cross-stitcher, tea drinker, and gospel hymn singer who makes her home in Abilene, Texas with her heroic husband who vanquishes laundry dragons and dirty dish villains whenever she's on deadline.

To learn more about Karen's books and to sign up for her free newsletter featuring special giveaways and behind-the-scenes information, visit her website at karenwitemeyer.com.