

The Christmas Tart



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*A
Holiday
Novella*

NEW YORK TIMES Bestselling Author

Mary Jo
Putney

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THE CHRISTMAS TART

A REGENCY CHRISTMAS NOVELLA

MARY JO PUTNEY



CONTENTS

[The Christmas Tart](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Also by Mary Jo Putney](#)

[About the Author](#)

THE CHRISTMAS TART

It began with a ring. One day late in November 1809, the irritable Lady Guthrie was careless when she searched through her lacquered jewelry case for the best ornaments to adorn her scrawny person. The heirloom diamond ring that had come from her husband's family was valuable but ugly, and she brushed it aside impatiently as she searched for more attractive treasures.

Amidst the clinking of baubles, she didn't notice when the ring tumbled from the case, rolled unevenly across the lace-covered surface of the dressing table, then dropped into the narrow gap between table and wall. Halfway to the floor, the heavy ring hooked over a wooden peg that had worked loose until it projected from the back of the table.

And there the ring stayed, suspended, not to be found until the next year's spring cleaning. But by then Christmas had come and gone, and so had the young French seamstress.



A cold, heavy sky made the afternoon seem more like dusk, and it was difficult for Nicole Chambord to see the riding jacket that she was trimming. Closing her eyes for a moment, she laid the jacket down and straightened up, stretching her arms in an effort to relieve the strain on her back and neck. *Sacré bleu!* but she would be glad when Christmas was over.

During the month Nicole had been sewing for Lady Guthrie, she had not had a single afternoon off. Every night

she worked late by candlelight to complete everything her ladyship deemed necessary for the holidays. While Lady Guthrie's important clothing was done by an expensive modiste, there were many lesser items, such as chemises and undergowns, that could be made by a household seamstress.

And of course there was always mending, refurbishing older garments, and making shirts and cravats for Sir Wilfrid, the master of the house. Nicole had sewed so much that she wore white cotton gloves to prevent her sore, pricked fingers from bleeding onto valuable fabric.

Still, food in the Guthrie establishment was abundant, if bland, and most of the other servants were pleasant. Best of all, Nicole was now living in London, closer to her goal than she had been in Bristol, where she had lived for fourteen years.

Come spring, she would look for a situation with a fashionable dressmaker who would be willing to take advantage of an assistant's design skills. Someday, after much hard work and saving of money, Nicole would open a shop of her own called *Nicole's*, or perhaps *Madame Chambord's*.

She luxuriated in the thought for a moment before she sighed and returned to her work. The happy day when she would be self-employed was many years away. Just now, her task was to use her nearly invisible stitches to attach military-style braid to the jacket in her lap.

She was just finishing the job when the butler, Furbes, swept into the small workroom without knocking. "Her ladyship wishes to speak with you, Chambord," he snapped. "Immediately."

"Of course," Nicole murmured. She was unalarmed by his manner, for Furbes was always rude to his inferiors, and Lady Guthrie was always in a hurry. Likely her ladyship had decided that a project she had wanted completed tomorrow must instead be done today. It would not be the first time.

But instead of normal impatience, Nicole found disaster. As the French girl entered Lady Guthrie's bedroom, her mistress spun around to glare at her. "You stole the Guthrie

diamond ring,” she said furiously. “What have you done with it?”

Nicole was so shocked that for a moment her usually nimble tongue was paralyzed. “But no, my lady, I have never seen your ring, nor have I taken even a candle stub from your room. Could the ring have been misplaced?”

“It’s gone.” Lady Guthrie gestured at her abigail, who looked distressed. “Merkle has searched everywhere, including all the drawers and the floor under the dressing table. And tonight we dine with my husband’s family, and his mother will want to know why I don’t wear it!”

Still not quite believing the accusation, Nicole said in bewilderment, “I am sorry if your mother-in-law will be upset, but why are you accusing me? There are a dozen servants in this house, or a thief could have broken in and robbed you. I swear on my mother’s grave that I have stolen nothing from you.”

“Any thief who broke in would have taken the whole case, not just the ring. All my other servants have been with me for years. You’ve been here less than a month, and you’re clever. I saw that right away. You probably thought I wouldn’t notice if only a single piece of jewelry was missing, especially one I almost never wear. You’ve had ample opportunity, because you often work alone in this room,” Lady Guthrie retorted. “As soon as I thought of you, I had your room searched, and Furbes found the proof hidden under your mattress.”

She lifted a leather pouch from her dressing table, then dropped it again, the coins inside clinking as the pouch hit the tabletop. “Over fifty pounds! Where could you get such a sum except by theft?”

Nicole stared in horror at the bag that contained her life savings. “For years I have spent nothing on myself so I could save every shilling possible.” All of it dedicated to the dream of a future. “Surely if I had stolen your precious diamond ring, I would have more money than that.”

“Stolen goods go for only a fraction of their true value.” Lady Guthrie’s faded blue eyes narrowed triumphantly. “And

just how did you know the ring was a diamond?"

"Because you said so yourself!" Nicole exclaimed, feeling as if she had wandered into Bedlam. "*Mon Dieu*, your ladyship, if you have been robbed, call a magistrate! I am not afraid to be questioned, for I am innocent."

Before Lady Guthrie could respond, her maid Merkle said hesitantly, "Perhaps the chit is telling the truth, my lady. Her references were splendid. She has always done her work well, with not a shred of complaint from anyone. There is no proof that she took the ring."

Nicole could have kissed the other servant for her bravery in speaking up, but it did no good.

Her employer's mouth tightened to a harsh line. "Bah, she belongs in Newgate. But if she blinks those big brown eyes at the magistrate, I don't suppose she'll get what she deserves so there's no point in turning her over to the law." Lady Guthrie scowled as she decided what to do. "You're dismissed right now, girl, without a reference."

She lifted the pouch again, her bony fingers digging into the thin leather. "This I will keep as compensation for your theft."

Appalled, Nicole gasped, "How dare you! That is my money and if you take it, it is you who are the thief!"

"Don't speak to her ladyship like that, you little slut," Furbes ordered. The butler had been a silent witness to the exchange, but now he grasped Nicole's shoulder with cruel pressure. "Shall I allow her to gather her belongings, my lady, or put her out on the street as she is?"

"Let her gather her things, but watch to see that she doesn't try to take anything else," Lady Guthrie decided. Turning back to Nicole, she said viciously, "You can thank the fact that it's almost Christmas for my mercy, girl."

And that was that. Ten minutes later, still dazed by the swiftness of events, Nicole was standing in the alley behind the house, having been escorted out the kitchen door by

Furber. Everything she owned in the world was in a canvas bag slung over her shoulder.

She shivered, and not only because a cold, misty rain was saturating her threadbare cloak. She had never been so frightened in her life, even when her family had fled France to escape the Reign of Terror. Only six years old, she had seen that as a grand adventure, serene in her trust that no harm could befall her when she was with her parents.

But now both parents were dead and she was utterly alone, without a situation, money, or references to help her find another job. If she had been in Bristol, she could have found shelter with friends, but not in London, where Nicole knew no one but the servants in the Guthrie household.

To make matters worse, it was Saturday afternoon. Within a couple of hours all the modistes' shops would be closed until Monday morning.

She set her chin and began marching down the street. She could do nothing to prove her innocence or recover her savings from Lady Guthrie, so there was no point in wasting time on regrets or curses at life's unfairness. All of her energy must go toward survival.

She had just reached the street when the kitchen door opened and a low voice called her name. She glanced back and saw Merkle standing in the door and beckoning. Nicole obeyed the summons, but as she approached the maid, she said bitterly, "Has Lady Guthrie decided I cannot take my own clothing? I should think my things would be too poor for her taste."

"She never changes her mind about anything," Merkle said sadly. "I'm sorry, Nicole, I don't believe you stole the ring, but there's nothing to be done with the old besom when she's in a mood like this. She knows her husband and his family will be furious with her for losing the ring, and she had to take it out on someone. A pity it was you. And to discharge you so close to Christmas!"

The maid had a mass of scarlet fabric draped over her arm, and now she raised it for Nicole's inspection. "Take this cloak.

It was one of her ladyship's mistakes in judgment so she gave it to me after one season. Too gaudy for my taste, so I've never worn it, but it's warmer than that old thing you're wearing. Here, put it on."

Nicole's first reaction was to refuse to take anything that had been Lady Guthrie's, but practicality overcame her principles. Accepting the scarlet cloak, she draped it over her own thin garments. Immediately she felt warmer, though considering the color and the vulgar feather trimming, she understood why neither Lady Guthrie nor Merkle wanted it.

Next Merkle offered a greasy packet wrapped in newspaper. "Here's a meat pie. It's all I could take without Cook noticing. And here's five shillings. For that, you should be able to rent a room for a few nights if you know where to look."

"Where might I find such a place?" Nicole asked. "In the month I've been in London, I have learned nothing of the city."

The maid thought for a moment. "Around Covent Garden might be best. There are plenty of lodgings, and when the market is open you should be able to get damaged produce at a good price. But be careful, child. London streets aren't safe at night. Sometimes not even in the day, leastwise not for a girl as pretty as you." She sighed. "I wish I could have convinced her ladyship not to blame you for the ring's disappearance. Lord only knows what happened to the blasted thing."

Trying to sound confident, Nicole said, "Don't worry about me. I'm on my way now to seek employment. The money and food you have provided will keep me until I can start work." On impulse, she rose on her toes and kissed the other servant on the cheek. "Thank you, Miss Merkle. You are a good woman."

Then Nicole turned and set off without looking back.



For a gentleman about town, there was no more desirable residence than the Rochester. The rooms were elegant and the discreet staff always ready to provide any service required. That was convenient for Sir Philip Selbourne, since his valet had come down with a streaming cold and stayed at home in Northamptonshire.

At the moment, however, Philip was not reflecting on his good fortune. In fact, as he climbed the front steps of the Rochester, head bent and mind absorbed in calculations, he was so abstracted that he quite literally ran into his best friends.

The baronet was murmuring an absent apology when a familiar voice said, "Philip! You've just arrived in town?"

Brought back to the present, Philip raised his head to discover the Honorable James Kirby and Francis, Lord Masterson, another close friend. After greeting both men and shaking their hands, Philip said, "I've been here for two days. This is only a quick trip to take care of some business."

"And you didn't let either of us know?" Kirby said reproachfully. At twenty-five he was the same age as Philip, but his round face and flaming red hair made him seem younger. "With all three of us living in the same building, you can't say that it was too much effort to call! It's been months since we've seen you in town. Surely not since March." Abruptly he stopped speaking as he remembered why his friend had left London then.

Philip grimaced. "I've been deucedly busy since my father died. Having grown up at Winstead Hall, I thought I knew something about farming, but it turns out that I knew a good deal less than I believed. His death has caused a number of unexpected complications."

Lord Masterson's cool voice said, "Problems? That surprises me. I would have thought Sir Charles the last man on earth to mismanage his affairs."

"He didn't," Philip said, quick to defend his father. "One of the difficulties is the unexpected number of investments he left, none of which I knew anything about." He gave a wry

smile. "In the last six months, I've worked harder at educating myself than all the years at Winchester and Cambridge put together."

"Come along and tell us all about it while we dine," Kirby urged. "It's too cold to converse here on the steps."

"Sorry, I can't accept," Philip said regretfully. "In a few minutes my solicitor is coming, and we're going to spend the afternoon finishing the business that brought me to London. I want to return to Winstead tomorrow morning."

"Stay an extra day," Masterson suggested. "So many people have left to spend the holiday in the country that town is rather thin of company." He gave a faint, charming smile. "Under the circumstances, even you offer welcome diversion."

Philip returned the smile, but shook his head. "I really must get back. This Christmas will be hard for my mother."

"Then join us for dinner in my rooms," Kirby said, undeterred. "With the three of us together, it will be like old times at Winchester."

Philip hesitated, tempted, then shook his head again. "I really can't. The solicitor will leave mountains of documents, and it will take me all evening to go over them."

"Surely your fusty documents can wait another day," Kirby said, his wide blue eyes showing hurt.

Before Philip could answer, Masterson raised his dark, elegant brows. "You must remember to take time for your friends, Philip, or someday when you need them, you may find that you have none."

Philip winced. "You still know the best place to strike, Masterson. No wonder you were so good at fencing. But you're right. In the last six months I've spent so much time running in circles and feeling incompetent that I've half forgotten why life is worth living. I'd be delighted to join you for dinner. Seven o'clock in your rooms, Jamie?"

After the time was confirmed, he touched his hat in farewell and swiftly climbed the last steps into the Rochester.

Frowning, Kirby watched until his friend disappeared into the building. Then he turned and fell into step with Masterson as the two young men walked toward St. James, where they would be able to find a hack. “Philip’s not looking at all well. He’s been working too hard.”

“Very likely,” Masterson agreed. “It was quite a shock for him when his father died so unexpectedly—they always got on amazingly well. Being the responsible sort, Philip’s obviously feeling the weight of being head of the family.”

“He really needs to relax a bit before he goes dashing back to the country,” Kirby mused. “Now, what’s most relaxing?”

Recognizing the tone, Masterson eyed his companion with misgiving, for Kirby’s innocent face masked the devil’s own capacity for mischief. “Dinner with friends is relaxing, and just to make sure, I’ll send down half a dozen bottles of my best claret. That will relax all of us.”

Ignoring the comment, Kirby said with an air of great enlightenment, “Females are relaxing. That’s it! What Philip needs is a girl.” Turning his wide blue eyes to his companion, he said, “Let’s find one and put her in his bed tonight.”

Masterson stopped dead in the street. “You’ve finally lost your mind,” he said flatly. “The first day you showed up to fag for me at Winchester and I saw that shade of red hair, I knew your sanity was precarious. Granted, females are sometimes relaxing, but just as often they play the very devil with one’s sanity. Philip is quite capable of finding a girl of his own if he wants one, but at the moment, he has other things on his mind besides dalliance.”

“Which is why he needs a girl to cheer him up,” Kirby said. “A nice jolly one will make a perfect Christmas present. While Philip’s dining with us, your valet can spirit her into his rooms. Now, where can we find one?” He pondered. “You can ask Michelle if she has a friend who’s free tonight.”

“Neither Michelle nor her friends come free,” Masterson said dryly. “And as it happens, she and I came to a parting of the ways last week. If I went to her house and asked her to find another female, she’d likely drop a chamber pot on my head.”

Undeterred, Kirby said, “Then we’ll have to find a girl somewhere else.”

The two men were still arguing as they hailed a hack and set off to lunch, but already Masterson was resigning himself to the inevitable. Kirby was bound and determined on his plan, so Masterson had better cooperate to make sure the thing was done right.



After more than twenty-four hours without eating, Nicole was so cold, hungry, and tired that she was unsteady on her feet. It was time to consume the meat pie Merkle had given her. She turned into a small, cluttered alley and sank wearily onto a stone step. After pulling out the cold pie, she held it for a while. She wanted to postpone the moment when it would be gone.

Her spirits were as low as they had ever been in her life. Her efforts to find a situation the day before had come to nothing. Two modistes had refused to talk to her since she had no London references. Three more had said that they weren’t hiring and wouldn’t be for months, for the Christmas rush was over and business would be slack until spring, when the ton returned to London to prepare for the Season.

Nicole had not expected that. It was terrifying to realize that it might be months before she might find a seamstress position.

Not wanting to spend her five shillings before she had to, Nicole had slept rough the night before, shivering in a deserted corner of a stable yard behind an unoccupied house in Kensington. The night was dry and she was protected from the wind, but she’d been numb with cold by morning. Because it was Sunday, she had gone to church, partly to be under a roof, and partly because prayer seemed in order.

When the vicar read the Christmas story, Nicole had found herself with new empathy for Mary and Joseph, who had found no room at the inn. Closing her eyes, she uttered a silent

prayer that she, too, would find the shelter she so desperately needed.

She considered asking the vicar for help, but when she timidly approached him after the service, he gave her a glance so contemptuous that she left without speaking. That had been hours ago. Ever since she had been drifting through the London streets while she planned how best to eke out her money and what kinds of employment she could seek.

The onset of bone-chilling rain brought her to a reluctant decision. Since she might not survive another night sleeping rough in this weather, she must spend some of her limited funds to rent a room. Remembering that Miss Merkle had said there were cheap lodgings near Covent Garden, she asked directions and set off to find it.

A plaintive meow brought her back to the present. She glanced down to find a scraggly, half-grown cat sitting on the step beside her, its gaze fixed on the cold meat pie in her hands. The little creature's splotchy calico fur was matted with rain, and its huge green eyes were a mixture of hope and wariness.

"Sorry, *ma petite*," Nicole said apologetically. "This is all I have to eat, and the good Lord only knows where my next meal will come from."

She bit into the pie, so ravenous she wanted to stuff the whole thing in her mouth at once. She forced herself to take only a small bite and chew slowly so it would last as long as possible.

Even cold, it tasted wonderful. After she swallowed the first bite, she took another. It wasn't easy to ignore the pleading green feline eyes.

With a small murmuring sound, the cat jumped onto her lap and began rubbing its head against her chest. "Your manners leave much to be desired, my patchy friend," Nicole scolded as she held the pie out of reach. "But you are not as wild as most street cats. Did you also have a home until someone cruelly evicted you?"

The painful thought made it impossible for her to ignore the cat's yearning expression. "Very well, *ma petite*," Nicole said. "Perhaps it will bring me luck if I am generous to one less fortunate than I." She took a morsel of meat and offered it to the calico.

Her companion did not wait for a second invitation. The fragment disappeared instantly. With dainty gluttony, a warm, raspy pink tongue licked Nicole's fingers.

For the first time since she was discharged, she found herself smiling. From then on, each of her bites was followed by a bit for the cat.

When Nicole was done, she stood and brushed the crumbs from her hands. "Au revoir, my little friend, and good hunting."

Refusing to be dismissed, the cat stropped her ankles. Unable to resist such friendliness, Nicole lifted the calico and cradled the skinny little body in her arms. Immediately it began to purr so strongly that Nicole felt the vibration through her layers of cloaks.

Severely she said, "Don't try to turn me up sweet, *ma petite!* The last thing I need at the moment is someone to take care of."

The cat tilted its head up and offered what looked very much like a coaxing feline smile. Nicole bit her lip. "Very well, you silly beast. "If you will travel in my pocket, we will give it a try. But mind you behave."

To her surprise, the cat settled happily into the right pocket of Nicole's cloak. The small furry body created a spot of warmth against her side. Feeling unreasonably cheered, Nicole continued on her way to Covent Garden.



"Who would have thought whores would be so thin on the ground?" James Kirby grumbled as he surveyed the wet, dismal intersection at Covent Garden.

“This weather would drive anyone indoors,” Masterson said dryly. “Besides, even ladies of pleasure are entitled to take a few days off at Christmas.”

They had seen several raddled, gin-soaked streetwalkers, but Masterson had flatly refused to let Kirby approach them on the grounds that the object was to give Philip a night’s pleasure, not the French pox and God knew what else. “Time to give the idea up, James. Let’s go back to my rooms and make a bowl of hot punch.”

“Wait!” Kirby pointed across the street. “She’s perfect.”

Masterson examined the object of Kirby’s interest, a slim girl who stood in front of the new opera house. She was dressed in a voluminous and much-bedraggled scarlet cloak, and it was easy to see why she had caught Kirby’s eye. What was visible of her face under the hood was very lovely—and also very innocent.

“She’s attractive,” Masterson agreed, “but I’m not sure she’s available. Doesn’t quite have the look of a doxy.”

“Who but a whore would wear a cloak like that? She has exactly the right look for Philip. He’s never liked the brazen sort. Come on, let’s ask her. If she’s respectable, she’ll give us a flea in the ear quick enough, and we’ll be no worse off than we are now.” Kirby started across the street.

Masterson had to admit that the garment in question was unlikely to be worn by anyone but a prostitute or a dashing society lady. Decent females didn’t wear such violent, expensive shades of red, nor did they have masses of ostrich feather trim drooping about them. They certainly did not wander alone in Covent Garden. Resigned, he followed his friend.

As soon as Nicole realized that the two young men were heading straight for her, she started to hasten away, for a day on London’s meaner streets had already taught her caution. One of the men called out, “Wait, miss, we want to talk to you.”

The voice was polite and seemed sober, so warily she stopped and turned to face them.

The redheaded young man who had called gave her an ingenuous smile. “We’re looking for someone to keep a friend company tonight. Would”—he considered—”five pounds be sufficient?”

As soon as she realized his meaning, she gasped in shock. How dare he! What kind of girl did he think she was?

Misinterpreting her gasp, he said, “Very well, ten.”

Nicole realized that it was quite obvious what kind of girl he thought she was. She opened her mouth to give him an icy set-down, then slowly closed it when a shocking but practical thought occurred to her. Ten pounds was a substantial amount of money, enough to support her for weeks if she was careful.

Enough to make the difference between surviving or starving.

Though part of her was appalled that she would even consider such a proposition, she found herself coolly evaluating the risks. She would lose her virtue, of course, but virtue would be of precious little use if she starved to death. There was also the disastrous chance of pregnancy, but that was unlikely to happen after a single night.

Her hasty calculations suggested that the benefits of being ruined would outweigh the risks. Nonetheless, the idea of allowing a total stranger such intimacy was abhorrent. The man might be revolting or even vicious.

Stalling for time to make up her mind, she said, “Is your friend such a monster that he cannot find a woman for himself, so he sends you to pimp for him?”

“He’s a perfectly pleasant fellow,” the redhead assured her. “This is a surprise Christmas present since he’s been working too hard.”

Taking a deep breath, Nicole decided to put herself into the hands of fate. “Twenty pounds,” she said firmly. If they would pay such a great amount of money, she would take it as a sign that letting herself be ruined was the right thing to do.

“Twenty pounds?” the redhead said dubiously. “That seems a trifle steep.”

With a mixture of regret and relief, Nicole said, “It is my price, monsieur. If it is more than you wish to pay, so be it.”

“Wait.” For the first time the dark-haired man spoke. He pushed Nicole’s hood back onto her shoulders. Then, while the cold rain spattered her cheeks, he took her chin in one hand and studied her with a detached gaze. “She’s very pretty. A sweet face. I think Philip would like her.”

Nicole’s companion chose this moment to stick its head out of her pocket and give a piercing yowl. Both men gave the furry, triangular head a startled glance.

“My cat,” Nicole said, rather unnecessarily. “Where I go, she goes.”

The corners of the dark-haired man’s mouth twitched with amusement. “James, does Philip like cats?”

“Of course. Don’t you remember that great ugly ginger tom he smuggled into our rooms at Winchester?”

The dark man gave a faint shudder. “Good God, how could I possibly have forgotten Thomas Aquinas and his unnatural attachment to my boots?” He smiled at Nicole. “You are well qualified to please this particular gentleman. Come, let us adjourn to more comfortable quarters.”

For a moment Nicole teetered on the verge of flight, but the streets offered nothing but cold and damp and danger. At least tonight she would be warm, and probably well fed. In return for a few hours of endurance, she would have the money she needed to survive. Face set, she pulled her hood over her dark hair and followed the two young men to their carriage.



Philip had not spent such an enjoyable evening since his father died. It was good to laugh with friends and remember he was

still young and that worrying himself into a decline would do no one any good.

When Kirby's clock began to chime midnight, he got to his feet with reluctance. "A pity to leave so soon, but I must if I want to be off at dawn tomorrow morning."

He expected Kirby to insist that he stay, but his host said only, "You're right. I need some rest myself if I'm to make it to the ancestral home tomorrow." He gave Philip a bright-eyed smile. "When will you be in town again?"

"I'm thinking of hiring a house and bringing my mother up for the Season. She'll be out of mourning soon. Some gaiety will be good for her." Philip made a face. "Unfortunately, she's been hinting that it's time I looked for a wife. If I bring her here, she'll throw every suitable miss in the Marriage Mart at me. She's already introduced me to every eligible female in Northamptonshire."

Horrified, Kirby exclaimed, "That's a dashed dangerous business, Philip. It's all very well to be a dutiful son, but if you aren't careful, you could end up leg-shackled."

"Believe me, I'm aware of the perils. I hope forewarned will be forearmed." The baronet collected his hat, shook hands, and wished his friends a happy Christmas. Then he left and climbed the two flights of stairs to his own rooms. So convenient to live in the same building.

But that wouldn't be true much longer. Regretfully Philip realized that he really must let go of his rooms. He'd had them since leaving Cambridge, but he was unlikely to spend lengthy periods of time in London again. Far more reasonable to stay in a hotel for his brief visits.

He sighed. One after another, the realities of adulthood were catching up with him. He had obligations to his family and his name that could not be neglected. Which brought him back to the depressing topic of marriage.

In an attempt to preserve his good spirits, Philip counted his blessings as he ascended the shadowy steps. Though he had initially been intimidated by his new responsibilities, he

now had them well in hand. He very much enjoyed being master of Winstead. There was something elementally satisfying about working the land and seeing to his tenants' welfare.

Though he did miss London friends like Kirby and Masterson, he had other friends in Northamptonshire. Family as well, so he certainly wasn't lonely. Nor did he mind bearing his mother company, for she was the most delightful of women.

As he pulled out his key and opened the door to his rooms, he acknowledged why marriage was such a depressing prospect. He'd never met an eligible girl who was half so amusing as his mother or his sister, Marguerite. It wasn't mere bias on his part. Both really were exceptionally charming, intelligent females.

It must be the French blood. A pity that the Continent was closed to Britons. Perhaps in Paris he would have better luck at finding a bride who wouldn't bore him. But with Britain and France at war he was unable to put that theory to the test.

His sitting room was warm and he saw a glow of lamplight coming from the corridor that led to the bedroom. A member of the staff must have come in to build a fire and leave a light for him. It was like being in his own home. No wonder there was always a waiting list for rooms in the Rochester.

Whistling softly, Philip hung up his hat and walked down the short passage to his bedroom. He was starting to untie his cravat when his gaze came to rest on his bed.

He stopped dead in his tracks. Kneeling in the middle of the blue counterpane was a dark-haired young female, a delicious-looking creature who wore nothing but a provocative white negligee and an enormous red silk bow tied around her slender neck.

"What the devil?" Thinking that he must have drunk more than he'd realized, Philip gave his head a sharp shake, but the nymph was still there. "Who are you, and how did you get in here?"

“My name is Nicole, Sir Philip,” she said in a soft voice that contained a charming hint of accent. “I am a present from your friends downstairs. They said you have been working too hard, so they hired me to...to entertain you for the night.”

For a moment Philip felt pure exasperation at such high-handedness. He needed a good night’s sleep to prepare for the long drive home. If he had been in the mood, he would have found a girl himself.

But as he examined his visitor, he realized that he could easily get into the mood. She was very lovely, with delicate features and huge brown eyes. Her sheer white gown revealed as much as it concealed. His fascinated gaze came to rest on the spot where the trailing ends of the red bow curved over her left breast.

His pleasant languor vanished under a surge of vivid anticipation. Apparently his friends knew what he needed better than he did.

“Nicole is certainly an appropriate name for the season.” He peeled off his coat and waistcoat and tossed them aside, not bothering to watch whether they hit chair or floor. “But I’ve never seen a St. Nicholas who was half so appealing.”

After tugging off his boots, Philip sat down on the edge of the bed facing the girl. She was even prettier close up, her wide eyes like dark velvet pansies. Seeing green leaves twined in her hair, he leaned forward for a closer look, then chuckled.

“You really are a perfectly wrapped Christmas present.” Touching one of the waxy berries, he added, “Mistletoe is my favorite holiday tradition.”

Enjoying the moment, he let his fingers drift down through her silky tresses and along her graceful neck. He moved his hand to the back of her head and pulled her close for a kiss. He closed his eyes, the better to revel in the soft warmth of her lips and the tantalizing invitation of her spicy scent.

But even as his breath and blood quickened, he realized that something was wrong. Under his hands, her shoulders were rigid and he felt moisture against his upper lip.

He opened his eyes and found that huge tears were silently flowing down her pale cheeks. It was an unnerving sight. While he was no gazetted rake, he'd never had a girl cry when he kissed her. "What's wrong?"

Her eyes flew open, and he saw alarm in the dark depths. "Nothing, monsieur." Raising one hand, she wiped at the tears with the back of her wrist. "Please, just go ahead and do—whatever it is you are going to do."

As Philip mentally reexamined the last few minutes, a horrible suspicion occurred to him. "Surely this isn't your first time!"

She nodded, her expression a heartrending mixture of misery and valor.

Philip felt as if ice water had been poured over his head. While there were men who delighted in deflowering virgins, he and his friends had always preferred the practiced embraces of skilled demireps.

Now that he examined the girl more closely, he saw that she was definitely not of that company. Her demeanor more nearly resembled that of an early Christian trying to appear brave while lions entered the Coliseum. "Why on earth did those idiots choose you?"

"I was in Covent Garden and wearing a truly vulgar cloak, so they assumed I was the kind of female they were looking for," Nicole replied. "Does it matter that I am inexperienced?"

"Yes, it matters," he said shortly.

"My ignorance will reduce your pleasure. I'm sorry. I did not mean to cheat them. Or you." Distressed tears trembled in her eyes again. While Nicole had steeled herself to accept passively whatever was done to her, she was unprepared for talk or explanations.

With some violence, the baronet slid off the bed and stalked across the room. Tall and powerfully built with the breadth of his shoulders emphasized by his white shirt, he was a daunting sight. Still, there was no denying that he was a fine

figure of a man. In spite of what the redhead had said, Nicole had expected someone repulsive.

After muttering something under his breath, Sir Philip turned and leaned back against the fireplace mantel with his arms folded across his chest. His voice over-controlled, he said, “Why did you agree to do this?”

Perhaps there was a protocol for such a situation, but if so, it was not one Nicole’s mother had ever explained. When in doubt, use the truth. “For the money, of course,” she said in a small voice. “I am a seamstress, but I lost my position. Since I’ve been in London for only a month, I had no one to turn to. Even so, it did not occur to me to...to sell myself, but when your friends made the offer...” She shrugged expressively. “It seemed like providence.”

His brows drew together. “So it was a choice between me or starvation?”

“Well...yes,” she said uneasily, hoping he would not take offense.

“How wonderfully flattering,” Sir Philip said caustically. “Are you planning to take this up as a career?”

“Most assuredly not,” she retorted. “I will find another situation before the money runs out.”

He studied her face for a long moment, then sighed and ran one hand through his thick, light brown hair. “Taking advantage of desperate virgins is really not a habit of mine. Perhaps it’s best if you go now.”

He didn’t find her attractive. It was an oddly disconcerting thought, even though at the same time Nicole was so relieved that her knees were shaky when she slipped off the bed and went to the neat pile of possessions she had tucked in a corner.

She was sorely tempted to change into her own clothing and leave without saying more, but unfortunately honor insisted that she could not do that. She knelt and fumbled with her cloak until she found the bank notes in the pocket, then rose and walked to Sir Philip. “Here,” she said, her voice

bleak. "Please return this to Lord Masterson, for I did not earn it."

After a still moment, his hand closed around hers, locking the notes in her hand. "Keep the money," he said gently. "Neither he nor Kirby would expect to be repaid, and your need is greater than theirs."

Nicole bit her lip, wanting to cry again because of his kindness. Before she could become maudlin, the baronet said testily, "Now for God's sake, put on something more opaque before I forget to be noble."

Glancing up, she saw frank desire in his gray eyes. Warm color flooded her face, but there was satisfaction in knowing that he did admire her.

After collecting her clothes, she went to the dressing room so that she could change away from his intense gaze. However, she had forgotten who was closed inside. As soon as she opened the door, small furry feet roared across her bare toes and headed straight for the man by the fireplace.

After a squeak of surprise, Nicole raced after the cat and managed to scoop it up before it could assault Sir Philip.

"I'm sorry, sir," she stammered as she clutched the cat to her chest. "I forgot my cat was in the dressing room."

Luckily he was amused rather than offended. "So it was to be a *ménage a trois*. What's her name?"

Nicole hadn't chosen one yet, so she made an instant decision. "Merkle."

"Merkle? An unusual choice for a cat." He reached out to scratch the cat's chin. As the little calico began to purr under his ministrations, Nicole was very aware that the baronet's fingers were within an inch of her breasts, and that she wore only the sheer negligee that Masterson had provided. How would it feel if those knowing fingers caressed her with the same gentle strength that was enrapturing the cat?

Scandalized by the direction of her thoughts, Nicole stiffened and moved away. "Miss Merkle was very kind to me

when I lost my position, and I wanted to honor her. Though I suspect she mightn't be flattered to be remembered this way."

"How did you lose your situation?"

Nicole stared down at the cat, not wanting to say, but unable to lie. "I was accused of stealing."

"Were you guilty?"

She raised her head and looked the baronet right in the eye. "No, I was *not*. My mistress suspected me because I was new in the household. She had my belongings searched. When my savings were discovered, she became convinced I was a thief. So she stole my money and threw me out onto the street with no reference."

She wanted him to believe her, and was unreasonably disappointed when he frowned. Reminding herself that his opinion didn't matter, she said, "You do not believe me, but then, why should you? I am just a failed doxy." She gave him a slightly mocking curtsy. "I shall be gone in a few minutes, monsieur. You may search my belongings before I leave to assure yourself that I have taken nothing."

Philip raised his brows. "I didn't say I didn't believe you. I doubt that a girl who so conscientiously tried to return money that she hadn't earned would be a thief. What bothers me is the unfairness of what happened to you. It's damnable, but I suppose nothing can be done."

He was rewarded by a faint, sweet smile. With dark curls tumbling around her shoulders and her oversized negligee half off one shoulder, Nicole was a tantalizing sight. What a pity she was an innocent, for if she had been what his friends thought, the two of them could have spent a delightful night.

Instead, she looked as fragile as she was gallant. He could not possibly send her into the December night. "You'd best stay here until morning. I don't want to be responsible for you catching lung fever."

"You are very kind, Sir Philip." She glanced at the window, where icy raindrops were drumming. "It is not a night

fit for man, nor beast, nor pelican. Do you have a blanket? I will sleep on the sofa in the drawing room.”

Pelican? Philip smiled at her turn of phrase as he took blankets from the top shelf of his wardrobe. She had an interesting mind. Among other things. But what would happen to her tomorrow, after he went home and she was left to her own devices? “How much did Masterson pay you?”

“We agreed on twenty pounds, but only half was paid in advance. I was to receive the other half in the morning, in return for the night’s work.” Unexpectedly her eyes twinkled. “Alas, I have not earned that, but the ten pounds you said I could keep is still a considerable sum.”

Philip bit his lip as he calculated how far ten pounds would go. It wasn’t much of a cushion against disaster. “You’re French, aren’t you?”

“By birth, but I have lived in England since I was six.”

Philip switched to speaking French. “My mother was born and raised in France, near Toulouse. Her family name was Deauville.”

Nicole smiled with pleasure. “Then we are countrymen of a sort,” she replied, answering in the same language. “Unfortunately I have never seen Toulouse, but my mother said it was a lovely city.”

Yes, the girl was definitely French, with an accent as refined Philip’s mother. Returning to English, he said, “Are you from one of the aristocratic families who escaped the French Revolution with little more than their lives?”

She shook her head. “My family name is Chambord, and while of decent rank, we were not noble. More like one of your English gentry. My father had a single estate of moderate size.” She added conscientiously, “My mother had a cousin who was a count, but the connection was not a close one.”

Philip suppressed a smile. The girl was nothing if not honest. It’s wasn’t unusual for émigrés to exaggerate the status they had had in the Old Country. Clearly she was wellborn,

and her coloring and gestures reminded him a little of his own sister.

A brilliant idea struck him. “Are you willing to work outside of London?”

She looked hopeful. “Of course. Without references, I cannot afford to be particular in my tastes. Do you know of a position for a seamstress?”

“Not for a seamstress, but a companion,” he replied. “My only sister married last winter, and my father died only a month later, so my mother has had a lonely year. Several times I’ve suggested that she hire a companion, but she always said that was unnecessary. However, if I present her with a fait accompli, I think she would be delighted to have you.”

Nicole looked shocked. “Monsieur, I am an accused thief and obviously no better than I should be, or I wouldn’t be here. You cannot possibly take me into your home, much less introduce me to your mother!”

He raised his eyebrows. “Of course I can. In fact, I have every intention of doing so. For over twenty years I’ve been bringing home stray dogs, cats, birds with broken wings. Even the odd injured hedgehog now and then. If my mother can tolerate them, she can certainly deal with you.”

“I am considerably odder than a hedgehog,” Nicole said severely. “Surely you can see the difference.”

Philip was forced to admit that she was right. It was no small thing to introduce a complete stranger into one’s home. Even the most broad-minded mother was apt to look askance at a fledgling lightskirt.

But his judgment of people was usually good, and he was willing to swear that the French girl was as honest and well-bred as she appeared. “There is no need to mention how you and I became acquainted. I will just say that you are a distant connection of Masterson’s who needs a situation. My mother won’t question that.”

As Nicole frowned, the cat batted at the red bow, causing the white negligee to dip even more precariously. “I do not

want you to perjure yourself on my behalf.”

Philip realized that he was getting new insight into the expression “honest to a fault.” Not to mention a highly distracting view of his guest’s pleasing person. Swallowing hard, he said, “Allow me to worry about that. My conscience will be a good deal more troubled if I leave you here to starve.”

Seeing that Nicole looked unconvinced, he decided to imply that she would be doing him a favor. “If you and my mother get on well, you’ll save me from a terrible fate. She’s been plotting to marry me off. If she has you to fuss over, she might leave me alone, at least for a while.”

Nicole smiled a little. “Clearly it is my duty to save you from disaster.” Her eyes began filling with tears again. “This morning I prayed for a miracle and *le bon Dieu* has sent me one, for your generosity is truly miraculous. Thank you, monsieur.”

With effort, Philip wrenched his gaze away. There was no denying that Miss Chambord was something of a watering pot—nor that she looked dangerously fetching with tears in her great dark eyes. “You stay here, and I’ll sleep on the sofa tonight. Time we both get some rest, for I want to be off at dawn tomorrow.”

Then he beat a hasty retreat, before he found himself trying to kiss her tears away.



Philip was awakened by the faint sounds of someone building up the drawing room fire a dozen feet away. It was still dark, and it took him a moment to remember why he was sleeping fully dressed and in such an uncomfortable position. Then he remembered and sat up, sore muscles protesting at having been laid to rest on a sofa that was hard and far too short.

He vaguely expected to find Stephens, the Rochester servant who had been looking after him for the last few days. Instead he saw a slight feminine figure kneeling by the hearth

and using tongs to set lumps of coal on the embers of last night's banked fire. So the gift-wrapped girl on the bed hadn't been a dream. This morning she was fully dressed in a severe but well-cut gown whose color he couldn't determine in the predawn darkness.

Merkle was curled up in front of the hearth, a pointy-eared silhouette against the increasing glow of the fire. Both girl and cat looked very much at home.

Hearing his movement, Nicole glanced up with a shy smile. "Good morning, Sir Philip. I trust you slept well?"

"Well enough." He raised one hand to cover a yawn, then pushed aside the blanket and got to his feet. As the clock began striking six, he said, "Any moment now, two of the Rochester's staff will arrive with hot water and breakfast. You'd better retreat to the bedroom. Quite apart from the fact that female visitors are frowned on, the fewer people who know about last night, the better for your reputation."

"Why should it matter?" she asked, puzzled. "I am of no account to anyone."

"As my mother's companion, you might be coming to London for the Season. Your reputation will matter then, to her and to yourself." He stretched to loosen his knotted muscles. "In fact, after breakfast, I'll pay a brief call on Masterson, thank him for the unexpected gift, then tell him to muzzle James so this little episode doesn't become common knowledge."

"Isn't it too early to call on a gentleman like him?" she said doubtfully as she stood and hung up the fire tongs.

"If I wake him, so be it," Philip said callously. "However, in spite of Masterson's air of languor, he's an early riser. Kirby, on the other hand, hasn't had firsthand experience of dawn since he came down from Cambridge."

"When you visit Lord Masterson, will you return the negligee he lent me?"

"So that's why the thing was so large on you," Philip said, amused. "His last mistress was a strapping wench." He

frowned. "Sorry. I really shouldn't speak of such things in front of you."

Her eyes danced. "Last night I was a fallen woman and this morning I am respectable, but in truth I feel little different."

They were sharing a companionable smile when the servants' door at the back of the apartment swung open with a gloomy creak. Nicole immediately darted into the bedroom and pulled the door shut before the footmen could see her.

While the senior footman, Stephens, set a large tray with covered dishes on a side table, the younger servant headed for the bedroom door with the copper of hot water. Philip hastily interposed himself between the footman and the door. "Set the water down on the hearth."

The young man gave him a curious look, but obeyed. As he set down the copper, Merkle decided to dash across the room in a flash of calico lightning. Stephens blinked at the cat. "Sir Philip, there is a Feline Creature here."

"Indeed there is." Philip watched uneasily as the cat took position by the bedroom door and began to cry for her mistress. "I saw a mouse here yesterday, so I enlisted expert help."

Stephens looked scandalized. "Mice are not permitted in the Rochester. It is against the rules to have any sort of Lower Creature here."

The younger footman said helpfully, "The way that puss is carrying on, maybe there's a mouse in the bedroom now." He started across the drawing room to open the door.

Once more Philip took several hasty steps to block the way to the bedroom. "I think the cat is just interested in finding its food dish." Anxious to get rid of the servants, he continued smoothly, "I know you must both be about your duties now. Before you leave, allow me to offer my best wishes for the season, and to express my appreciation for your fine service over the last several days."

Substantial vails, augmented by a generous Christmas bonus, served to distract the two footmen from the question of what might be in the bedroom. As Philip ushered them from his rooms, he said piously, "I will take the Feline Creature back to the country this morning, so it shan't cause any trouble." Then he closed the door before anything more untoward could occur.

After the footmen were safely gone, he returned to the drawing room to find that Merkle had leapt onto the side table and was now sniffing enthusiastically around the aromatic covered dishes. Before Philip could intervene, Nicole cautiously opened the bedroom door, then scurried across the drawing room and removed the cat from the table. "I'm sorry," she said apologetically as the little calico protested with a heartrending wail. "The Feline Creature's manners aren't very good."

"Hunger will raise havoc with manners." Philip lifted dish covers until he found a platter of ham. "Give her a few slivers of this so we can eat in peace."

After Merkle had been fed and both humans had washed up, they sat down to break their fast. Nicole's interest in the food was as great as the cat's, though her manners were considerably better. With her pleasant expression and disinclination to chatter, she made an ideal breakfast companion. Philip had a brief, unpleasant mental image of her starving on the streets and gave thanks that fate had put her in his path.

After he finished eating, Philip went into his bedroom and packed the few possessions he had brought with him, plus the Christmas presents he had purchased on Bond Street. Most of the gifts were easily stowed in a leather portmanteau, but the music box he'd bought for his mother began to play when he lifted it. The box was a pretty trifle, its circular base surmounted by a delicate porcelain angel that rotated to the melody of "The First Noel."

As the sweet notes filled the room, Nicole came to investigate, then gave a soft admiring exclamation. "How lovely! A present for your mother or sister?"

He nodded and handed the music box to her. “My mother collects music boxes. I think she’ll like this one because of the Christmas theme.”

When the movement slowed, Nicole turned the key on the bottom again. Her small face glowed as the angel pirouetted, its gilded wings and trumpet shining in the lamplight as the carol played. “I think your mother is blessed to have a son who is not only considerate, but who has such good taste.”

“I’m fortunate to have her and my sister. Losing my father so suddenly has made me aware of how fatally easy it is to take those we care about for granted.” Then, more to himself than his companion, Philip added, “I never told my father that I loved him. Now it’s too late.”

Nicole said gravely, “I’m sure that he knew. Love needn’t be spoken to be understood.”

Philip found a surprising amount of comfort in her words. He had known that his father loved him, though it had never been said aloud. It made sense that his father had been equally aware of his son’s regard. “I hope you’re right.”

Uncomfortable with the extent to which he’d revealed his emotions, he took the music box from Nicole, carefully wrapped it in a heavy towel, and wedged it securely into the leather portmanteau. “My curricule will be brought around in a few minutes, so I’ll go down and speak to Masterson now. Can you be ready to go in ten minutes?”

“Oh, yes.” She smiled. “I’ve little to pack.”

Philip collected the neatly folded white negligee, then took a lamp to light his way down the Rochester’s dark stairs to his friend’s rooms. Hair tousled and suppressing a yawn, Masterson himself answered Philip’s knock.

After identifying his visitor, Masterson smiled lazily and gestured for Philip to come into the narrow vestibule. “I’m surprised you aren’t still enjoying your warm bed.”

“That warm bed is why I’m here,” Philip said dryly as he handed over the negligee. “While I must thank you and Kirby for your generous gift, a mistake was made. Miss Chambord is

a lady, not a lightskirt.” He gave a succinct description of Nicole’s background and his decision to take her to Winstead Hall.

Masterson leaned against the wall with his arms folded across his chest, an expression of amused interest on his face. “So the chit batted those long lashes and said she’s a distressed gentlewoman. You actually believe her?”

Not liking the tone, Philip said shortly, “I do.”

The other man shook his head cynically. “Be careful the little tart doesn’t rob you the moment you turn your back.”

“She’s not a tart.” When Masterson gave him a skeptical glance, Philip’s eyes narrowed. “You may have catastrophic judgment about women, but not all men are such fools.”

The other man’s brows shot up. “A low blow, Philip,” he said without rancor. “But no doubt you’re right. If the girl is an innocent, it would explain why yesterday she gave me a setdown worthy of an Almack’s patroness when I told her I was in need of a mistress and asked if she was interested in the position.”

So Masterson had offered the girl a *carte blanche*. Philip teetered between satisfaction that Nicole had turned him down and a strong desire to plant a fist on his friend’s jaw. “Time will tell which of us is right, but until Miss Chambord’s honesty, or lack thereof, is established, I’d thank you not to say anything that might ruin her reputation.”

“I shall be a model of discretion,” Masterson assured him. “I guarantee that Jamie will be the same. If she is a decent girl fallen on hard times, she deserves a chance.”

Satisfied, Philip offered his hand, then took his leave.

Masterson grinned as he returned to the comfort of his bed. Philip was obviously taken by the girl. If pretty little Nicole was what she claimed to be, she might turn out to be a more lasting Christmas gift than they had intended.



Despite of his defense of Nicole's integrity, Philip found himself troubled by doubts as he made his way up the dim stairwell. He had believed without question everything the girl had said, but perhaps he'd been naive to do so. The fact that she had an air of refinement and spoke excellent French didn't mean she was honest. Perhaps she was a deceitful little vixen who had been stealing his purse while he was talking to Masterson.

Frowning, he entered his rooms and glanced around, but saw no sign of his guest. He crossed the drawing room in half a dozen steps and entered his bedroom, but there was no sign of her there, or of his luggage, either. Cursing himself for a gullible fool, he spun on his heel and barked, "Nicole, where are you?"

He was so sure that she had fled that it was a shock to hear her voice floating from the narrow hall that led to the servants' entrance.

"I am here, monsieur." She trotted into sight carrying a battered wicker basket in one hand. "I found this in a closet. May I use it to carry Merkle?" Her expression became anxious. "You don't mind if I take her with me? I couldn't bear to abandon her to starve."

Her gaze was so transparently honest that Philip felt like six kinds of idiot for doubting her. "Of course she can come. Put a towel in the basket to keep her warm. It's going to be a long, cold drive."

He saw that Nicole had neatly stacked all of the luggage beside the front entrance. He'd been in such a hurry when he came in that he'd rushed right by it.

He was just congratulating himself that Nicole knew nothing of his doubts when her gentle voice asked, "Did you think I had robbed you and run, Sir Philip?"

He could feel hot color rising in his face. "The thought had occurred to me."

She nodded with apparent approval as she folded a towel into the bottom of the basket. "That is only natural. What do

you know of me, after all?”

Deciding to cast his lot with instinct over logic, Philip said, “I know that you are entirely too perceptive, and you have honest eyes. That’s quite enough for me. How do you know that I am not a murderer, or going to sell you to a slaver who will ship you to a harem in Arabia?”

She laughed. “Because you are not. I knew you were honorable as soon as I saw you.” After which placid statement, she scooped up Merkle and put the cat in the basket, making soothing noises to allay feline protests.

After staring at her dark head for a moment, Philip decided that the girl was either a genius or a lunatic, possibly both, but amiable in either case.

Hearing the sound of hooves and wheels outside, he went to the window and saw that the livery groom had brought his curricle right on schedule. “The carriage is here. Don’t you have a cloak? If not, you’d better wear something of mine, though you’ll be lost in it.”

In answer, Nicole lifted a garishly scarlet garment that had been draped over the back of the sofa. Philip blinked in disbelief as she wrapped the voluminous folds around her. Eyeing the fluffy ostrich trim, he said, “I can see why Masterson and Kirby thought you were no better than you should be.”

“It’s a most vulgar garment, *n’est-ce pas?* But warm.” Then, less confident than she pretended, she set out to meet her fate, cat basket in one hand, canvas bag in the other, and ostrich feathers trailing behind.



Reluctantly Nicole left the warmth of the Saracen’s Head Inn for the damp, bitter chill of the stable yard, where the curricle waited with a fresh pair of horses. As he held the door for her, Philip said, “It’s getting colder. Do you think you’ll be all right? I know this is not the season for a long trip in an open

carriage, but this is the last stage. Towcester is less than fifteen miles from Winstead.”

Nicole ached with weariness. Philip must be at least as tired, for it took strength, skill, and continuous concentration to drive safely over the winter-rutted roads. “I’m fine,” she assured him. “You have made the trip such a comfortable one. Fresh hot bricks every time the horses are changed. *Quelle* luxury! And this is the third time we’ve stopped to eat.”

“You need fattening up.” Philip gave Nicole a teasing smile as he helped her into the curricule, then tucked a heavy blanket across her and the cat basket she carried on her lap.

As he climbed into his own seat, Nicole reflected that when he decided to marry, the girl he chose would be very fortunate, for his consideration made one feel cherished. She slanted a glance out of the corner of her eye. He was also kind, amusing, intelligent, good-natured, and handsome. Yes, when he was ready to marry, his chosen bride would be a very lucky woman.

A mile beyond Towcester, Philip swung the carriage from the main road onto a narrower track that led east. “This is a shortcut to Winstead. We should be home just before dark.”

Nicole hoped he was right. Already it was mid-afternoon and the lowering clouds threatened to drop something unpleasant on the hapless travelers. *Eh bien*. There was no point in worrying about it, she decided philosophically as the curricule lurched into an unusually large rut.

She wrapped her right arm around the cat basket and gripped the carriage rail with her left hand. “Will there be hot mulled wine when we reach Winstead?”

“If not that, something equally warming.” The road was getting progressively rougher so Philip slowed the team’s pace. “How did you come to England, or is that something you would rather not discuss?”

“It’s not a dramatic tale. We had been in Paris and were returning to Brittany. A few miles from home, one of my father’s peasants, who had been watching for our return,

stopped our carriage to warn us that Guards were waiting at the manor to arrest the whole family. We abandoned the carriage, and the peasant drove us to the coast in his cart. A fisherman took us across the Channel to England with no more than the luggage we had brought from Paris.

“I was only six, and everything happened so quickly that I didn’t understand that I would never again see my playmates on the estate, or the nurse who raised me, or my pony. But we were fortunate—we had our lives. Others were not so lucky.”

“Did you come to London?”

“My mother had a cousin in Bristol, so we went there. We had hardly any money, so my father found work driving a coach between Bristol and Birmingham. That paid enough to keep us in modest comfort for the next few years.” Her voice wavered. “Then Papa’s back was broken in a coach accident, and he never walked again. Since he could not work, my mother took in sewing. I was almost eleven then, so I helped her.”

Philip hauled back on the reins to let a small group of homeward-bound cows amble across the road. “What a pity. It almost seems like your family was cursed.”

“It sounds dreadful, and in many ways it was,” Nicole said slowly. “Yet the next five years were the happiest of my life. The three of us were very close. Papa became my teacher, for he said that an informed mind was the true mark of gentility. A gentleman who lived nearby let us borrow any book in his library, so I learned Latin and some Greek, read the classics, debated the ideas of the great philosophers. Then Papa died of lung fever, and my mother’s heart died with him.”

Nicole used the icy rain as an excuse to brush at her eyes, which were disgracefully moist. “Maman survived another three years, mostly from a sense of duty to me, I think. Then when I was eighteen and she knew I was capable of taking care of myself, she just... faded away.”

“And ever since, you’ve faced the world alone.”

“It hasn’t been so bad. I have friends in Bristol, and I had a good position there. But I was ambitious and wanted to work in London and someday have a shop of my own. That is how I came to Lady Guthrie’s household.” She made a face. “Going to work for her was the worst mistake of my life, but it seemed like a good opportunity at the time.”

He gave her a quick, warm smile. “You are a remarkable young lady, Mademoiselle Chambord.”

She laughed. “There is nothing remarkable about making the best of one’s lot, Sir Philip. Not when one considers the alternative.”

After that conversation flagged, for the weather was steadily worsening. The mizzling rain froze wherever it touched, and the muddy ruts began to solidify to iron-hard ridges that rattled the curricule and its occupants to the bone. Earlier there had been a steady trickle of traffic in both directions, but now they were alone on the road.

The Northamptonshire terrain consisted of wide rolling hills that took a long time to climb. It was at the top of one such ridge that the curricule’s wheels got trapped in a deep, icy set of ruts that ran at a tangent to the main direction of the road. Caught between the pull of the horses and the ruts, the curricule pitched heavily, almost spilling both passengers out.

“Damnation!” Using all of the strength of his powerful arms, Sir Philip managed to bring the carriage to a safe halt. “I’m sorry, Nicole. In a heavier carriage we could manage, but the curricule is just too light for these conditions. We’ve scarcely eight miles to go, and I’d hoped to make it home, but it’s dangerous to continue. There’s a small inn about a mile ahead. We can stop there for the night.”

Struggling to keep her teeth from chattering, Nicole nodded with relief. “Whatever you think best, monsieur.”

He urged the nervous horses forward again. “What a polite answer when you would probably rather curse me for risking your neck.”

“I’m in no position to complain. Two days ago I was this cold, but then I had no prospect of finding a warm fire at the end of the day.”

The road down the hill was steep and dangerous, so icy the horses sometimes slipped. The light was failing and visibility was only a few yards, but with Philip’s firm hands on the reins, they made it almost to the bottom without incident.

They reached a bare spot where the wind had turned a wide puddle into a treacherous glaze of ice. As soon as the curricle’s wheels struck the slick surface, the vehicle slewed wildly across the road.

The horses screamed and one reared in its harness. Philip fought for control as Nicole clung to the railing and her cat basket for dear life.

To no avail. The curricle tipped over, pitching both occupants onto the verge. Nicole struck the ground hard and rolled over several times, coming to rest in an ice-filmed puddle, too stunned to speak.

While she struggled for breath, a piercing cry split the air. Immediately Philip shouted, “Nicole, where are you? Are you hurt?”

Another shriek came from the vicinity of Nicole’s chest. She wondered dizzily if that was her own voice and she was too numb to know what she was doing.

Then she realized she was still clutching the cat basket in her arms. Poor Merkle had been tossed and rolled as much as her mistress and was now protesting in fierce feline fashion.

As she pushed herself to a sitting position, Nicole gasped, “I’m all right. At least, I think I am. Merkle is the one carrying on.”

“Thank heaven!” Sir Philip emerged from the gloom and dropped to his knees beside Nicole, then pulled her into his arms, basket and all. She burrowed against him, grateful for his solid warmth.

“You’re sure you’re not hurt?” he asked anxiously, one hand skimming over her head and back, searching for injuries.

Nicole took careful stock. “Just bruised. A moment while I check on Merkle.”

She would have been happy to stay in Philip’s embrace, but conscience made her sit up and lift the lid of the basket. Merkle darted out and swarmed up her mistress’s arm, crying piteously until she found a secure position on Nicole’s shoulder, claws digging like tiny needles.

“Merkle can’t have taken any injury either or she’d not be able to move so quickly,” Sir Philip observed as he got to his feet. He helped Nicole up. “Just a moment while I see if the curricule is damaged.”

Nicole tried to brush away mud and crushed weeds with one hand while soothing the cat with the other. The puddle had finished the job of saturating her cloak and the bitter wind threatened to freeze her into a solid block of ice.

Sir Philip muttered an oath under his breath. “The horses seem to be all right, but the curricule’s left wheel is broken.”

“Surely it can’t be much farther to the inn you mentioned,” Nicole said through numb lips. “We can walk.”

“Up one long hill and down another,” he said grimly. “That’s too far on a night like this. Luckily there’s an old cottage just a few hundred yards from here. I don’t know who lives there, but it’s always well kept so I’m sure it’s occupied. Just a moment while I get the curricule off the road and unharness the horses.”

To reduce her exposure to the wind, Nicole hunkered down beside the road and returned an indignant Merkle to the basket. The baronet undid the leather harness straps, tending the job horses as carefully as if they were his own. Nicole’s father would have approved. He always said that how a man treated his beasts was a good guide to his character.

When Philip had freed the horses from their harness, Nicole stood and joined him, the basket handle slung over one arm. “Which way, monsieur?” she said with a hint of chattering teeth.

“Just along here.” Taking the reins in his right hand, Philip put his left arm around his companion, wanting to warm her. He felt her slim body shaking under her damp cloak, but she did not complain. She really was the gamest little creature.

The lane had a surprisingly smooth surface, which meant that it was now treacherous with sheet ice. Even with Philip’s arm to support her, Nicole was skidding with every step. After she had barely survived several near-falls, he turned and scooped her up in his arms, cat basket and all.

When Nicole gave a little squeak of surprise, he explained, “Like the curricule, you are too light for these conditions.”

She gave a gurgle of laughter, then relaxed trustingly against him. Between carrying her and leading the placid horses, progress was slow, but ten minutes of trudging through the dark brought them to the cottage, which was a small thatched building of undoubted antiquity.

Fortunately a light was visible inside. Philip set Nicole on her feet and looped the reins around the gatepost, then guided his companion to the cottage’s front door. A knock produced no results, so after a moment’s hesitation he tried the knob.

The door swung open with a creak and Philip ushered Nicole into the cottage’s large main room. A fire burned in the hearth. The air was warm and rich with the scent of simmering soup, but there was no one in sight.

As he looked around uneasily, a soft female voice with only a trace of country accent came from the chamber behind the main room. “Emmy, what kept you? I’ve been expecting you all day.”

A moment later the owner of the voice appeared. A small, elderly woman with straying white hair, she was dressed plainly, but with neat propriety. Seeing the unexpected visitors, she stopped still, her eyes widening with alarm.

Nicole said reassuringly, “Your pardon, madame, but we are travelers who had a carriage accident on the road outside. The wheel is broken, and to walk to the next village in this

weather would be dangerous. I know this is a great imposition, but may we spend the night here?"

The woman went to a window and pulled the curtain aside with one gnarled hand, knitting her brows at the sight of the icy rain beating against the thick old glass. "I was napping and hadn't noticed how beastly the storm is. That must be why Emmy didn't come."

She dropped the curtain and turned to her visitors. "Of course you and your husband can stay."

Philip asked, "May I put my horses in your shed?"

"By all means. It's no night to be traveling." After Philip went outside, the woman turned to Nicole and smiled apologetically. "You must think me a poor hostess. I'm Mrs. Turner. Let me take your cloak, my dear."

"I am Nicole Chambord," Nicole said as she handed over the mantle. Even soggy, it caused Mrs. Turner to raise an eyebrow, but the older woman made no comment as she hung the garment on a peg by the door.

Nicole continued, "My companion is Sir Philip Selbourne. He is not my husband, but"—she hesitated fractionally—"my cousin. We were on our way to his home, Winstead Hall."

Mrs. Turner's eyes brightened with interest. "So he's the squire of Winstead. I know of the family, of course, they're important folk hereabouts. His father died last winter, didn't he?" She gave an appreciative smile. "I didn't know Sir Philip was so young. He's a handsome lad, isn't he?"

Nicole nodded agreement. Sir Philip was indeed handsome. Not with the flamboyant, Byronic dash of Lord Masterson, but he had a pleasing aspect that was more appealing every time she looked at him. Knowing it was not her place to say any such thing, she asked, "May I let my cat out? Poor Merkle has had a difficult day."

She lifted the lid of the basket. Pushed beyond the limits of patience, Merkle instantly scrambled out and jumped to the floor, then swung her head back and forth as she suspiciously examined her new surroundings.

Before the little calico could take a step, a menacing feline growl sounded from a shadowy corner by the wood box. The growl was followed by a large, bristling tabby who slunk into the center of the room with flattened ears and a dangerous gleam in its green eyes.

Judging discretion to be the better part of valor, Merkle raced across the flagged floor and darted under a low chest of drawers, the tabby flying in hot pursuit.

“Oh, dear!” Nicole said unhappily. She took a step toward the cats, but Mrs. Turner put her hand up.

“Don’t worry,” the older woman said. “Molly won’t hurt your puss. She just wants to make it clear whose house this is.”

Sure enough, Molly didn’t follow the smaller cat under the chest. The tabby crouched down, tail flicking, in a waiting position that effectively trapped the calico under the furniture, but she offered no real threat.

With crisis turned to stalemate, Mrs. Turner said, “I’ll make you and Sir Philip a nice cup of tea. You must be freezing.”

As the older woman hung a kettle on the hob so that the water could be brought to the boil, Nicole drew her chilled self closer to the hearth. “Forgive me, madame, for this is none of my business, but who is the Emmy you were expecting? A member of your family who has been caught away from home by the storm?”

“No, she’s a girl from Blisworth, the nearest village. She helps out sometimes,” Mrs. Turner explained. “My son is coming for Christmas tomorrow and bringing his new wife, Georgette. Robert is a solicitor in London and doing very well for himself.”

She gave a rueful smile. “Vanity doesn’t diminish with age, child. I wasn’t well enough to go to the wedding so I’ve never met my daughter-in-law, but I do know that she’s the daughter of a judge, and my cottage will appear poor to her. Still, I wanted everything to be as nice as possible. Emmy was

going to help me with the baking and decorating, but she must have decided to stay home because of the weather.” Mrs. Turner sighed and spread her hands, which were twisted with arthritis. “So much for vanity. I can’t manage everything myself, so Georgette will just have to accept me the way I am.”

“It is not vanity to wish to put one’s best foot forward.” After a moment’s hesitation, Nicole offered shyly, “Will you allow me to help you? With a whole evening in front of us, together we can accomplish most of what you wish.”

Mrs. Turner gave her guest a shocked glance. “It wouldn’t be fitting for you to do such humble work. You’re gentry.”

Thank heaven her kind hostess didn’t know what Nicole had been just the night before! “Preparing a home for Christmas is not work, but great pleasure.”

While the older woman debated, Philip returned, accompanied by a gust of damp, icy air. He was carrying the baggage. As he hastily closed the door, Nicole said gaily, “We are in luck, Philip. Mrs. Turner is planning her Christmas preparations, and if we are very, very good, perhaps she will let us help her.”

Mrs. Turner chuckled. “You’re a clever minx. Very well, I’d be delighted to have your help, but first, you both need some tea and bread and soup. Take your coat and hat off, Sir Philip, and come warm yourself by the fire.”

“You’re very kind, Mrs. Turner.” Holding his chilled hands toward the flames, he continued, “My sister and I are very grateful.”

The older woman gave him a sharp look. “I thought you and Miss Chambord are cousins.”

Without missing a beat, Philip said, “We are, but Nicole is so much a member of the family that I think of her as another sister.”

Nicole watched with admiration. If this was a sample of his skill at dissembling, he should have no trouble convincing

his mother that the scandalous female he'd brought home was actually a respectable poor relation of Lord Masterson's.

Her levity faded as she perched on the oak settle and accepted a teacup from Mrs. Turner. Even if Sir Philip could lie like Lucifer, it simply wouldn't do. Nicole had done considerable thinking on the long drive from London and had reached the miserable conclusion that she must tell Lady Selbourne the truth, for it would be impossible to work for the woman under false pretenses.

If Lady Selbourne was as tolerant as her son, perhaps she would not mind Nicole's appalling lapse from grace. More likely she would be outraged and refuse to have such a doxy under her roof.

Nicole knew she should tell the baronet of her determination to confess all, but he would try to change her mind and it would be difficult to resist his arguments. With a sigh, she stirred sugar and milk into her tea. At least when Lady Selbourne ordered her out of the house, Sir Philip probably wouldn't allow Nicole to be tossed into a snowbank. Likely he would consider it his duty to buy her a coach ticket back to London. She would be no worse off than she had been yesterday.

She gave Sir Philip a surreptitious glance from the corner of her eye. He was standing, his head almost touching the smoke-darkened beams of the ceiling as he smiled and chatted with their hostess. He seemed too large and energetic for such a small cottage. And as Mrs. Turner said, he was a handsome lad.

No, not a lad, a man, one who was kind and considerate and wonderfully solid. Returning her gaze to her tea, Nicole felt a small, dangerous twist deep inside her.

As an émigré separated from her own class by poverty, she had resolved to build a life as an independent, respected merchant. There was no husband in that picture, for Nicole had never met a man for whom she could feel more than liking.

But it would be easy—so, so easy—to fall in love with Sir Philip Selbourne. He was very close to the dream husband she had imagined for herself when she was a child, before she realized that the Revolution had made it impossible for her to meet such a man as an equal.

Appalled at the thought, she swallowed a huge mouthful of tea, scorching her tongue in the process. *Mon Dieu!* What a fool she was! Her situation was quite difficult enough without developing a hopeless *tendre* for a man she could never have.

The baronet thought of her as a waif, a hapless female who reminded him of his sister. From kindness he was helping her, but that was all there would ever be between them. When he was ready to marry, he would choose a wife of his own class who could bring him a dowry and an impeccable reputation. The sort of honorable female who would starve rather than sell her virtue.

As Nicole sipped more cautiously at her tea, she realized with a bitter pang that she might have been better off braving the hazards of the London streets. Instead, by accepting Sir Philip's offer, she was risking her heart.



Working gingerly to keep from being stabbed by needle-pointed leaves, Philip used a length of dark thread to attach the last silver paper ornament to the last branch of holly. Then he stood and arranged the brightly decorated sprays of holly, pine, and ivy along the narrow ledge of an oak beam that ran across the wall a foot above the fireplace mantel.

After all of the greens had been tacked to the beam, he took a length of shining scarlet ribbon and twined it through the boughs, working from the left end to the right, then back again. When he was done, he stepped back and surveyed his efforts with great satisfaction.

Mrs. Turner's new daughter-in-law would have to be very hard to please not to enjoy the results. The mass of fragrant, brightly decorated greenery turned the whole cottage into a

festive bower. “What do you think—should I use more ribbon?”

Mrs. Turner sniffed the pine-scented air with delight and touched a silver paper star that hung from a spray of holly. “No, it’s perfect just the way it is. I only hope your mother won’t mind that you gave away the ribbon and silver paper she ordered.”

“There’s still ample left for Winstead Hall.” With an elaborate show of casualness, Philip sidled over to the table where Nicole was assembling the last batch of mince pies. “Can I have one?” he asked hopefully.

Nicole looked up just in time to swat his hand before he could snatch one of the three-inch-wide tarts cooling on the end of the table. Laughing, she said, “You are exactly like an impatient six-year-old, Sir Philip.”

“In my family it’s traditional to try to wheedle sweets from the cook.” He made another attempt to steal one of the tarts, this time successfully eluding Nicole’s not-very-determined effort to stop him. The warm, crumbly shortcrust pastry disappeared in two bites. “Mmm, delicious.”

The same could be said of Nicole, he noticed as she slid the last tray of mince pies into the oven built into the wall by the fireplace. With a towel tied around her waist and a dab of flour on her nose, she was adorable. More than that, her bright good nature created happiness all around her.

Mrs. Turner chuckled as she watched her young guests. “Now that you’re finished, Nicole, it’s time for us to relax and enjoy the results of all our hard work. Besides, I want you to sample a Turner family tradition.”

Their hostess lifted a poker that had heated to red-hot in the fire, then plunged it into a wide-mouthed jug of spiced cider. The cider hissed and bubbled around the glowing metal, releasing the rich scent of apples and nutmeg.

After Mrs. Turner had poured them each a mug of mulled cider, Nicole brought over a platter of baked tarts and they all took seats by the fire. Molly had long since given up watching

Merkle in favor of the more fascinating study of food preparation. She promptly leaped onto Mrs. Turner's knees and raised her nose for a sniff of pastry.

Not to be outdone, Merkle slunk out from under the chest of drawers, darted across the rag rug, and hopped onto Nicole's lap, where she turned in a circle three times before settling down.

Outside, the freezing rain still fell, but in the old cottage, all was warmth and good fellowship. As they chatted back and forth, Philip had trouble remembering that he had known Nicole less than a day, Mrs. Turner for only hours. The chance that had brought them together and the time spent cooking, cleaning, and laughing had made them almost a family.

Halfway through her second mug of mulled cider, Mrs. Turner said, "All we need now is Christmas music. Do you both sing?"

"Willingly, but not well," Philip replied. Then he remembered the music box in his baggage. "But I have something that will get us started properly."

It took only a moment to retrieve the music box from his luggage and wind the key. As he carried the box across the room, the bright notes chimed through the cottage, easily rising above the sounds of crackling fire and spattering rain.

After the mechanism had slowed to a halt, Mrs. Turner reached out and touched the delicate porcelain angel, her lined face glowing with pleasure. "Such a lovely thing." She glanced at her guests. "Shall we sing along with it?"

Philip wound the music box again, and together they sang "The First Noel." From there they moved into other carols. While none of them had an outstanding voice, all could carry a tune. Together they made a very decent set of carolers.

Eventually Mrs. Turner yawned, covering her mouth with one thin hand. Removing Molly from her lap, she got to her feet. "Gracious, but I'm tired! You'll find that when you reach my age, sleepiness comes on you very quickly. You young people can stay up late if you like, but I'm going to bed."

“Not quite yet.” Philip stood and picked up the sprig of mistletoe that he had earlier tied with a loop of ribbon. It took only a moment to hang it from a hook on a beam in the center of the ceiling. With a smile, he said, “I’ll not let you go without a Christmas kiss.”

Mrs. Turner laughed and joined him under the sprig. “You’ll turn my head, Sir Philip. I can’t remember the last time a handsome young man tried to lure me under the mistletoe.”

When Philip started to give her a light kiss on the cheek, she firmly grasped his shoulders and pulled his face down for a solid buss. “I’m not going to waste this opportunity!” After she kissed him, she scooped up Molly and retired to the tiny bedroom behind the main chamber.

Nicole followed Mrs. Turner with a hot brick for the older woman’s bed. When she returned to the main room, she said, “I’m tired, too. It’s been a long day.”

“Stay until we’ve finished the mulled cider.” Philip divided what was left into their two mugs. Then they took seats on opposite sides of the hearth.

After a few minutes of companionable silence, Philip mused, “I never would have guessed that I’d spend such a fine evening with two females I’d not even met twenty-four hours ago.”

Nicole smiled. Curled up in Mrs. Turner’s cushioned Windsor chair, she and Merkle were a picture of domestic bliss. “Moments like these are gifts, as lovely as they are fleeting.”

“A pity that we can’t stop time when we’re happy, but life changes so suddenly and unexpectedly,” Philip said. “A year ago at Christmas my father was alive and seemed in the best of health. Then he died, and nothing will ever be the same again.” Perhaps it was the result of the alcoholic kick of the cider, but he found himself adding, “And change begets more changes. A year from now, my mother will probably have remarried.”

Nicole's brows drew together. "She is planning to take another husband?"

"Not yet, but I think she will. The estate next to ours is owned by the Sloanes, who have been family friends forever. John Sloane was my father's best friend, just as Emily was my mother's. The children of both families grew up together. Emily died three years ago, and now my father is gone too."

Philip swallowed the last of his drink. "Just before I went to London, John Sloane spoke to me in my capacity as head of the family. He wanted to let me know his intentions for when Mother is out of mourning. He and she have always been very fond of each other. Now he hopes that in time she'll marry him."

Philip smiled humorlessly. "It's an odd experience when a man who has been like an uncle asks one's blessing to marry one's mother."

"I can see where it would be," Nicole said gently. "How did you feel about it?"

Philip grimaced. "I felt a brief desire to hit him. Then I shook his hand and said that if Mother accepted his proposal, I would wish them both happy."

"Well done." She gave him a warm smile. "But I think you still feel some guilt and resentment?"

"I'm afraid so. Not very admirable on my part. Yet I honestly want my mother to be happy and I'm sure she will be with John Sloane." He smiled with self-deprecating humor. "When I told my sister what John Sloane had said, Marguerite raised her brows and said that of course they would marry. That if John and my mother had died, my father would probably have married Emily after a decent interval had passed. Apparently my understanding is not very powerful."

"Women take a deeper interest in things like love and marriage." Nicole cocked her head to one side thoughtfully. "Will it help if I say that being possessive of your mother was a perfectly natural first impulse? I would have felt the same way if my mother surprised me with the announcement that

she intended to take another husband. It's common for families to oppose the remarriage of a widowed parent. But your second impulse was generous, and that's the one you obeyed."

Philip let out a slow breath. "It does help to hear you say that. Though I don't quite understand why I've confessed such unworthy thoughts to someone I hardly know."

"It is precisely because we are almost strangers," Nicole said with a trace of sadness. "I am a safe repository of unworthy thoughts because I am transitory in your life."

"But if you become my mother's companion, you will be part of the household." At least, until his mother remarried. Then she would no longer need a companion, and Nicole would need a new position, Philip realized. Still, she would be safe at Winstead for at least a few months.

Nicole muffled a yawn. "Time I went to bed. If you wish to stay up longer, I'll take the bed in the loft and you can sleep down here."

Philip got to his feet. "No, I'll take the loft. It's drafty up there, and I wouldn't want you to take a chill." He smiled. "If I haven't given you lung fever yet today, I don't want to do it now."

Nicole picked up the empty mugs and placed them on the kitchen table. As she crossed the room toward the quilts that Mrs. Turner had provided, she passed under the mistletoe, an opportunity that Philip was not about to pass up.

Intercepting her under the sprig, he took her shoulders and said, laughing, "Happy Christmas, Nicole."

She looked up at him, lips parted and brown eyes wide, her delicate features framed in dusky curls. "Happy Christmas, Sir Philip," she replied in a husky whisper.

He bent his head and kissed her. Nicole melted against him, her arms sliding around his neck, her soft mouth spicy with apple and cloves. She felt as delicious as she had the night before in his bed, but this time she did not simply yield. Instead, she welcomed him. What began as a Christmas kiss rapidly developed into an embrace for all seasons. It was a

moment of fire and sweetness that Philip wanted to last forever.

With a shock, he realized that once again tears were running down Nicole's cheeks. He ended the embrace, using his hands to support her when she swayed. "Why are you crying?" he asked in bafflement. She had not been unwilling, he was absolutely certain of that. "This is not like last night."

"No," she whispered as she brushed the back of her hand across her eyes. "That's why I'm crying."

He looked at her a little helplessly. "I don't understand."

"It's better that you don't." She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again, her manner matter-of-fact. "If I am going to be your mother's companion, we really mustn't kiss like that. It's ... it's distracting. It lacks propriety."

Perhaps, but it didn't lack anything else. In fact, Philip very much wanted to kiss her again, so that he could savor the nuances more fully, but the moment had passed.

More than a little confused, he lifted one of the lamps. "Good night, Nicole. I'll see you in the morning." The ladder to the loft was in a corner of the room, and he lost no time climbing up, taking off his outer clothing, and crawling into the narrow bed that had once been used by Mrs. Turner's son.

Despite the tiring day, it took Philip a long time to fall asleep. He kept wondering just what he was better off not understanding.



Christmas Eve morning dawned clear and bright. Outside, ice sparkled on every surface and coated leaves and twigs with crystal brilliance. The magical conditions were short-lived. By the time the inhabitants of the cottage had finished a breakfast of bacon, eggs, and apple muffins, most of the ice was gone and traveling conditions were safe again.

Nicole was grateful when Sir Philip left to go into Blisworth to make arrangements for repairing the curricle. She had made an absolute fool of herself last night, and this morning she could not look him in the eye. Thank heaven the dear, foolish man didn't understand how the female mind worked, or he'd realize how silly she was.

He had been quite right that last night's kiss was different from the one the night before. When she'd been hired to warm his bed, she had been frightened and stoic, but under the mistletoe she had been eager. She loved his touch, loved his taste, and wanted with all her heart to follow the kisses to their natural conclusion.

Sadly, her heart was the only one engaged. Perhaps Sir Philip did not think of her quite as a sister, but he had made it clear that he was not the least bit interested in acquiring a wife. And nothing less would do. Nicole had been willing to sell her virtue rather than starve, but she wasn't going to give it away to a man who didn't love her.

Years from now, when Philip was ready to marry, he would choose a bride whose family and fortune were similar to his own. It was ironic, really. Nicole was too wellborn to be Philip's mistress, but too poor, too déclassé, to be his wife.

It was a depressing train of thought, so Nicole determinedly started decorating an old vine wreath that Philip had found in the shed. The addition of sprigs of holly, fragrant crab apples, and a flamboyant red bow made the wreath perfect for the outside of the front door. After it had been hung and admired, Mrs. Turner said, "You have a gift for making things pretty."

"Thank you." Nicole closed the door again. "I'm sure that Georgette will have a fine time here."

"I hope so." Mrs. Turner rubbed absently at one of her gnarled knuckles. "Robert keeps asking me to come live with him in London, but it will never do if his wife and I don't get on."

"I see," Nicole said softly. "That's why you are so particularly concerned about this visit."

“I’m just a country woman of yeoman stock. I’m afraid Georgette will be ashamed to have someone like me in her house. Her own mother died when she was a child, so likely she’s used to having things her own way. She won’t want me around.”

Nicole wished there was some comfort she could offer, but any words would sound hollow. There was a very real chance that the judge’s daughter would not wish for much intimacy with her husband’s rustic mother. “If Miss Georgette doesn’t appreciate you, it will be her loss.”

Mrs. Turner sighed and changed the subject. “Your feelings for Sir Philip aren’t sisterly, or even cousinly, are they?”

At the unexpected comment, Nicole’s face flooded with hot color. “Am I that obvious?”

“Only to someone who notices such things,” the older woman said. “I doubt that he does. Most men don’t notice love until it hits them over the head. You’ll just have to be persistent. In a discreet sort of way, of course.”

Attaching Philip’s interest would take more than persistence, and it was far too late for discretion. Not wanting to explain, Nicole said, “Is there anything else you’d like me to do? It will surely be hours before the carriage is repaired.”

As Nicole’s mother had often said, work was the best antidote for the dismal.



It was early afternoon when Sir Philip drove up in the repaired curricule. Nicole came out to greet him. “I was in luck,” he said cheerfully. “The wheelwright wasn’t too busy. Are you ready to go? We can be home in an hour.”

“Splendid,” Nicole said, her voice a little hollow. If they were at Winstead in an hour, in two hours she would be on her own again. Briefly she considered postponing her confession for two days, until Boxing Day was over, but that would be too

dishonest. She gave Philip a false, blinding smile. "I'll put Merkle in her basket and get my cloak."

After Philip had loaded cat and baggage into the carriage, Mrs. Turner came out to say farewell. Philip took her hand. "You saved our lives, Mrs. T., and gave us a splendid evening as well. Will you allow me to compensate you for your trouble?"

She shook her head. "Taking you in was the Christian thing to do, so I'll not accept money. Besides, I had a fine time, too. Perhaps sometime when you and Nicole are driving by, you'll stop for a cup of tea."

Philip wished he could do more, but accepted her comment at face value. Then he straightened up and saw Nicole's gaze go very deliberately from him, to Mrs. Turner, to the leather portmanteau that held the presents, then back to him.

For a moment he didn't understand. Then he smiled. Of course; why hadn't he thought of that? He unpacked the music box and offered it to his hostess. "I understand why you don't want money, but will you accept this, as a reminder of a special evening?"

Mrs. Turner took the music box with reverent hands. "You've found my weakness, young man. Thank you! This is the prettiest thing I've ever owned in my life."

She opened the box, and they all listened with pleasure as the carol chimed through the crisp winter air. Nicole knew that never again would she hear "The First Noel" without thinking of Sir Philip and Mrs. Turner, and these brief, happy hours when their paths had crossed.

The music was just ending when the rattle of a carriage could be heard coming up the lane. Mrs. Turner's expression became tense. "That must be Robert and Georgette."

Philip went to hold his horses' heads while Nicole took the music box from the older woman. "I'll put this inside for you." Under her breath she added, "Courage! I'm sure Georgette will love you."

Nicole set the music box on the kitchen table and was stepping through the front door when a chaise entered the yard, passing by Philip's curricule, which was drawn over to the side. As soon as the chaise stopped, a stocky, dark-haired young man tumbled out and swept Mrs. Turner into his arms.

"Happy Christmas, Mother," he said exuberantly. Clearly the young solicitor was not ashamed of his countrified parent.

Robert turned to the chaise to help his wife down. As Nicole watched, Mrs. Turner touched her hair nervously.

Then came the Christmas miracle. The girl who climbed from the carriage was not the haughty judge's daughter whom Mrs. Turner had feared. Instead, she was a golden-haired elf whose huge blue eyes mirrored Mrs. Turner's own nervousness.

As the two women came face-to-face, Robert said proudly, "Mother, this is Georgette. Isn't she everything I said?"

Mrs. Turner smiled. "Welcome to my home, Georgette. You're even lovelier than Robert said."

The elf blushed. "I've been looking forward so much to meeting you. Robert speaks often about you and growing up in the country. How you and he and Mr. Turner worked and read and laughed together. It sounds like the most wonderful childhood imaginable."

Wistfulness showed in the depths of her wide blue eyes. "May...may I call you 'Mother'? I've never had a mother of my own, and I've always wanted one."

Her face transformed by joy, Mrs. Turner said, "Nothing would make me happier, my dear." She stepped forward and hugged her new daughter.

Nicole was edging her way toward Philip when the newcomers belatedly realized that there were strangers present. After introductions and handshakes all around, Nicole and Philip drove off down the lane. Nicole's last glance over her shoulder showed the Turners going into the cottage, Robert in the middle with one arm around his mother and the other around his wife.

Nicole felt a prickle of bittersweet tears. She did so love a happy ending. There wouldn't be one for her, but she didn't doubt that the three Turners would be happy.



Philip was silent during the seven-mile drive to Winstead Hall, but not because the familiar road required all of his attention. Instead he found himself thinking of the young woman sitting quietly by his side.

In the day and a half he'd known her, he had seen her many different ways: as a pretty little tart, as a gallant waif, as an uncomplaining traveler, as a young woman with warmth and kindness for everyone. She was lovely, desirable, intelligent, and agreeable. Everything, in fact, that a man would want in a wife. No dowry, of course, but he could afford to marry for love.

But he didn't want a wife! Moreover, he couldn't possibly be in love with a girl he'd just met. Could he?

The more Philip thought, the more confused he became. He'd never been in love, apart from one or two infatuations when he was younger. Yet even at his most infatuated he'd known that what he felt was passing madness, not true love.

His feelings for Nicole were different from anything he'd experienced before. He liked the idea of having her around all the time, day and night. Definitely at night, but equally definitely during the day. He liked talking with her, and listening to her, and he couldn't imagine ever growing tired of having her around. Was that love?

He had not reached any conclusions when they arrived at Winstead. As they drove up the sweeping entrance road, Nicole drew her breath in sharply.

Her reaction made Philip see his home as if for the first time. Winstead Hall was only a few decades old, built for comfort rather than defense. It was also quite beautiful, a triumph of the Palladian style.

As Philip drew the curricle to a halt in front of the portico, he tried to visualize Nicole coming down the stairs as mistress of Winstead. It was surprisingly easy to conjure up the image.

A groom came to take the reins of the curricle, and Philip helped Nicole down. She was very silent as she accepted the cat basket and accompanied him up the stairs and into the hall. She had the same nervous expression that Mrs. Turner and Georgette had worn when they met, and for the same reason.

Philip gave his guest a reassuring smile, knowing that his mother would quickly put her at her ease. Even as the thought crossed his mind, Lady Selbourne came floating down the stairs. She was a remarkably youthful-looking woman, with dark hair and a face marked by a lifetime of laughter.

She did raise her brows at the sight of the appalling scarlet cloak, but made no comment. She'd always been hard to perturb, even the time Philip had led his pony into the vestibule with the intention of having it to tea.

Giving her unexpected visitor a friendly smile, Lady Selbourne said, "Philip, I'm so glad to see you. I was beginning to fear that you might not be back in time for Christmas. Did the weather cause you trouble?"

"A bit. We had a minor accident near Blisworth and had to spend the night, but it was nothing serious." After kissing his mother's smooth cheek, Philip ushered the two women into the drawing room. "Mother, this is Miss Nicole Chambord."

Her dark eyes bright with curiosity, her ladyship said, "I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Chambord. Let me ring for some tea. You must both be chilled from the drive."

Philip's gaze went to Nicole. Her hands were clenched around the handle of the cat basket, and she looked as if she were riding in the tumbril to the guillotine. Yet her head was high and she had a grave dignity that touched him in ways he couldn't explain.

Wanting to relieve her anxiety, he said, "Miss Chambord is a distant relation of Masterson's and in need of a situation. I thought we had a position here that would suit her."

Lady Selbourne nodded with understanding. “I see. You were thinking she could be a companion for me?”

“Perhaps.” Philip looked into Nicole’s enchanting, expressive brown eyes, and pure madness struck. “Or if she’s interested, there’s another position available. As my wife.”

A bomb thrown into the drawing room couldn’t have struck with greater impact. Both women stared at him with identical expressions of shock. Nicole almost dropped Merkle’s basket.

Philip hastily took it and released the cat. As he did, the silence was broken by his mother going into gales of laughter as she looked first at her son, then at the young woman she had just met.

“Oh, Philip, my only and adored son!” her ladyship gasped when she could speak again. “Have you learned nothing of French *savoir faire* from me? This is not the way to offer a young lady a proposal of marriage!”

Face scarlet, Nicole blurted out, “The situation is much worse than that, Lady Selbourne, for I am not a young lady. My only relationship to Lord Masterson was that he hired me to spend the night with your son as a...a Christmas present.” She blinked hard. “If Sir Philip really meant what he said, it is only because he wants to save me from ruination.”

Lady Selbourne’s laughter ceased and she plumped down on a velvet-covered chair rather quickly. After a long, alarming silence broken only by the ticking of the mantel clock, she said, “It sounds as if you are already ruined.”

Aiming a gimlet gaze at her son, she said in a dangerously reasonable tone, “I have trouble believing that you would bring a doxy to Winstead. Am I wrong, Philip?”

Philip winced, realizing that he couldn’t have handled the matter more badly if he had tried. “I did meet Nicole in an irregular manner,” he admitted, “but she’s not a doxy. As an orphaned émigré, she was forced to earn her living as a seamstress. Several days ago she was unjustly discharged, so

she accepted Masterson's offer because she was penniless and totally without prospects.

"When I realized that she was gently bred, of course I couldn't take advantage of her situation. So I brought her here." After a moment, he added stiffly, "I assure you, nothing improper occurred."

"God forbid that I should consider her turning up in your bed as improper," Lady Selbourne said dryly. Her shrewd gaze went back to Nicole. "Is what Philip says true, Miss Chambord?"

Nicole nodded miserably.

Her fingers drumming on the right arm of her chair, Lady Selbourne studied her potential daughter-in-law. At length she said, "Well, you've a practical mind, and that's no bad thing." Switching to French, she said, "Tell me about your family."

Seeing that Nicole was speechless, Philip said helpfully, "Her mother is related to a count."

"Which one?"

Finding her tongue, Nicole said in French, "The Count du Vaille, but the connection is remote."

Lady Selbourne bit her lip absently. "The Count du Vaille? He's also a distant relative of mine, so you and I are in some way related. Where in France did you live?"

Still in French, Nicole sketched in her background and the story of how her family had been forced to flee to England.

Lady Selbourne thought for a moment, then began tapping one dainty foot. "*Très bien*. With the du Vaille connection, the world can be told that you are a cousin to whom we offered a home. After a few months of proximity, no one will be surprised if there is a happy announcement."

Nicole gaped at Lady Selbourne. "You mean that you would approve of such a match?"

Philip's mother gave her son an affectionate glance. "I have been doing my best to find my son a suitable bride, and you are the only girl who has caught his fancy. Philip is very

like his father—an easygoing Englishman, but once he makes his mind up, nothing will shake him from his path. While I would certainly not approve of him marrying a courtesan, I have heard nothing about your past that disqualifies you from becoming his wife.”

Voice choked, Nicole exclaimed, “But he can’t possibly marry an unknown female with no reputation! He knows nothing of me.”

“I know that you’re honest and lovely and brave and kind, and enchantingly unexpected,” Philip said. “What more do I need to know?”

“But...but I could be lying about everything,” she said helplessly.

“You are the most ruthlessly honest female I’ve ever met!” he retorted. “I may not have much *savoir faire* or a deep understanding of the female mind, but I do know that.”

Lady Shelbourne gave a low chuckle. “Resign yourself, Miss Chambord. If Philip has decided that he wants to marry you, you had best accept it. Granted, his proposal was cabbage-headed in the extreme, but I’ve always found his judgment to be sound.”

She got to her feet. “I think it’s time to leave you young people to sort this out.” Leaning over, she scooped up Merkle, who was sniffing inquiringly about her slippers. “You’re a pretty little puss. Would you like a Christmas ribbon around your neck? Not red, that would clash with the orange in your fur. Green would be better.” She glided out of the room, the calico cat draped across her shoulder.

Nicole stared after her until the door closed. “I’ve never met anyone quite like your mother!”

“She is rather remarkable. You remind me of her a bit.” Philip caught Nicole’s hand and drew her over to sit beside him on the sofa. “Now, ma petite, shall we discuss our future?”

“How can we have a future?” she protested as she settled next to him. “We hardly know each other.” She swallowed

hard, determined to keep her head. “Why do you want to marry me?”

He smiled. “I rather think I’m in love with you. Isn’t that the best of reasons?”

She gave him a level look. “ ‘Rather think’ isn’t enough. I don’t want to be one of your broken-winged birds or injured hedgehogs that you take in from pity.”

Philip’s laughing face sobered. “I might try to help a waif because of pity, but I’m not foolish enough to marry for such a reason. I enjoy your company, I admire you, and I desire you. If you turn me down, it’s myself I’ll pity, not you, for I’ve never met another woman with whom I could imagine spending my life.”

His hand tightened on hers. “But just as you don’t want me to propose from pity, I don’t want you to accept from gratitude or desperation.”

“I wouldn’t,” Nicole assured him. “I’ve seen what love should be like between man and wife. I won’t settle for a marriage that is merely convenient.”

He caught her gaze with his. “Do you think that someday you might be able to love me?”

Philip’s nearness and the warmth of his eyes were rapidly disabling her logic. Looking away from his face, she whispered, “Last night I realized that I was falling in love with you, but it never occurred to me that you might reciprocate. You made it very clear that you didn’t want a wife.”

“I didn’t. I still don’t want ‘a wife.’ What I want is you, *ma petite*, for now and always,” he said softly. “I’ve never thought of marrying before. Now that I’ve met you, I can think of nothing else.”

He gently brushed a curl from her temple. “I know this is very sudden. There’s no need to rush to a decision. Since this is a house of mourning, it will be several months before a betrothal could be announced. That will give us time to become sure of our feelings. As my mother said, you can be a

distant cousin come to keep her company. No one will question that.”

“I don’t really need more time,” Nicole said shyly, looking at him from under her dark lashes. “You make my heart sing with happiness. I think it must be love, for I can’t imagine anything better or more right.”

“Neither can I.” With a burst of exuberance, Philip scooped her up in his arms and whirled her around, not caring if she thought him a Bedlamite. Setting his laughing lady back on her feet, he said, “Shall we seal our agreement with a kiss?”

Not waiting for a reply, he drew her into an embrace. Nicole received him eagerly, her pliant body molding to him with the sweet enthusiasm of a playful kitten. And she was a quick learner; her kissing had improved since the night before.

That being the case, it was a distinct shock for Philip to realize that Nicole was weeping. Lifting his head, he said wryly, “My dearest Christmas tart, why are you crying this time?”

She smiled and ducked her head against his chest. “Because I’m so happy. I’m sorry, Philip, I’m just a watering pot.” She looked up with sudden anxiety. “Perhaps you should reconsider.”

“I suppose I’ll become accustomed to tears, as long as they are mostly of the happy variety,” he said philosophically as he pulled her back into his arms. “Besides, if I cried off, I’d never again see you sitting on the bed with a red ribbon tied around your neck.” He grinned. “The best Christmas present I ever had!”

“With you, *mon coeur*, every day will be Christmas.” Nicole laughed mischievously. “I shall have to think up something very special for Guy Fawkes Day!”

This time when they kissed, she didn’t shed a single tear.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Though I have usually have some vague idea of what triggered a particular story, I haven't a clue where *The Christmas Tart* came from. The story is pure fluff, but I had fun with it. Nicole Chambord is a pragmatic young French émigrée in dire straits through no fault of her own. Then fate gives Nicole a kitten, a kind young gentleman, and a Christmas miracle...

As a minor point, Nicole names her homeless kitten Merkle after a character in the story, but in truth, I chose that name because of Judith Merkle Riley, a most wonderful historical novelist.

Thank you for taking the time to read *The Christmas Tart*. I hope you've enjoyed it—and if so, please consider helping other readers find it by leaving a review of the story at your favorite online bookstore or reader website.

If you'd like to read more of my holiday novellas, look for [Sunshine for Christmas](#), wherein two English travelers find a second chance at love in sunny Naples; [The Christmas Cuckoo](#), in which mistaken identity leads to a Christmas surprise; [The Best Husband Money Can Buy](#), in which a marriage of convenience leads to true love; and [The Black Beast of Belleterre](#), inspired by the classic story of Beauty and the Beast.

Finally, if you would like to know when my upcoming books are published, you can join my newsletter by visiting my website at [MaryJoPutney.com](#).

—MJP

ALSO BY MARY JO PUTNEY

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Sunshine for Christmas (novella, also published in *Christmas Revels*)

The Christmas Tart (novella, also published in *Christmas Revels*)

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Seduction on a Snowy Night (contributor)

A Yuletide Kiss (contributor)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USAToday* bestselling author, Mary Jo Putney is also a recipient of RWA's Nora Roberts Lifetime Achievement Award. She was born in Upstate New York with a reading addiction, a condition for which there is no known cure. Her entire romance writing career is an accidental byproduct of buying a computer for other purposes.

Her novels are known for psychological depth and intensity and include historical and contemporary romance, fantasy, and young adult fantasy. Winner of numerous writing awards, including two RITAs and two *Romantic Times* Career Achievement awards, she's had a number of her books listed as top romances of the year by *Library Journal* and *Booklist*, the magazine of the American Library Association.

Her favorite reading is great stories, but in a pinch she'll settle for the backs of cereal boxes. She's delighted that e-publishing can now make available books that have been out of print.

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