

THE *Christmas*
HEIRLOOM

Four
HOLIDAY NOVELLAS
of Love Through the Generations

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A decorative oval frame with intricate scrollwork and flourishes, rendered in a light gray color. The frame is centered on the page and contains the title text.

Legacy *of* Love

A Haven Manor
NOVELLA

KRISTI ANN HUNTER



1827

LANCASHIRE, ENGLAND

From a purely rational standpoint, Sarah Gooding should have been ecstatic with her present position. She was wearing a silk gown and playing piano in a grand aristocratic home while more than a dozen people of good family sat within hearing distance. She was more at home behind the keys of a pianoforte than anywhere else and had dreamed of having a prestigious chance to exhibit her talent.

This was nothing like she'd dreamed.

The roughened texture of well-used ivory-covered keys was as familiar as the overwhelming feeling of not quite belonging. Actually, she felt rather unwanted.

That could have something to do with the fact that the enormous vertical cabinet piano designed to crawl grandly up the wall of elegant homes had been turned to create a divide between the player and everyone else. It was difficult to misinterpret such an arrangement.

At least no one could see her yawn as she plunked out the notes to the incredibly simple score of the Italian songbook that had been laid out for her.

Lady Densbury, the current Countess of Densbury, didn't care

for ostentatious or distracting music during an intimate gathering such as a family dinner.

Sarah didn't particularly care for Lady Densbury.

As her fingers slowly drifted through a series of plodding arpeggios, Sarah leaned to her left. If she angled her head perfectly, she could see around the tall side of the ornate giraffe piano. Since the top of the piano cabinet stretched at least four feet above her head on the left side there was no way she'd be able to see over it. And while the green brocade panels that decorated the tall cabinet were gorgeous to look at, they wouldn't let her know if the cake had been brought to the table yet.

Since Sarah's employer, the Dowager Countess of Densbury, insisted that Sarah's job as her companion included attending excruciating weekly family dinners, Sarah always focused on the cake. It was the only thing that made the ordeal bearable.

Well, the cake and the hope that Mr. Randall Everard might be home for a visit. Third in line for the earldom and therefore generally ignored by his parents, he'd been raised largely by his grandmother. He didn't come back to the family seat often anymore, much to the dowager's dismay.

But he was there tonight.

If she couldn't get a glimpse of cake, catching sight of Mr. Everard was almost as good.

Unfortunately, even leaning as far to the left as she comfortably could, Sarah couldn't stretch far enough to see anything but the back of the earl's head.

She made a face at his greying hair as she straightened back into her seat.

Sarah didn't particularly like the earl, either. Or his heir. Or even the spare. They were mean and the wives the older sons had procured this past year weren't any better.

Mean probably wasn't precisely the right word. *Overly aware of their heightened position in society and Sarah's extraordinarily lower status* was more accurate, but that didn't quite roll off the tongue as well. It was much easier to think of the family as mean.

Not all the family, of course. Sarah's employer was a dear. The dowager had been a veritable angel to Sarah since hiring her as a companion back in January.

Which meant a few hours of agony once a week was worth it, if it made the dowager Lady Densbury happy.

And then there was the cake.

And if Mr. Everard was home, she got to sit in the corner, eat cake, and make cow eyes at him as he did his best to make his grandmother laugh. Her life wasn't likely to get much better than that.

She turned back to the music. A curl of panic shot through her when she realized she hadn't a clue where she was on the page or even if she was still on the page. Her fingers had been frittering about on the keyboard, playing at whim for who even knew how long. Swallowing hard in an attempt to ease the sudden dryness in her mouth, Sarah picked a line at random and drifted back into the song she'd been requested to play.

It was simple.

Predictable.

Boring.

How long had she been playing for? An hour? Two? The countess enjoyed interminably long dinners. Part of Sarah was convinced it was because Lady Densbury was hoping Sarah's fingers would fall off, or that she'd have some sort of breakdown from being asked yet again to gulp down a plate of plain food in the kitchens before playing sedate, quiet music while the family consumed four courses of elaborate dishes.

What the countess hadn't yet learned was that as long as Sarah got a piece of cake at the end of the night, she didn't care a groat if she missed out on the ruffs and reeves.

After a glance at the music to make sure she played the next several lines generally as they were written, Sarah shifted her weight to lean to the right. That side of the piano cabinet was considerably lower, and it was possible she'd be able to look over it enough to see if the cake had been delivered to the table. At the very least

she'd be able to see the dowager, and Mr. Everard seated across from her. If she were lucky, his crooked smile would be visible just beneath his nose, which was a touch too wide to be fashionable but balanced out his features perfectly in Sarah's opinion.

Not that anyone ever asked her opinion.

Her quick stretch hadn't allowed her to see much other than the current countess's eerily emotionless face. Was Sarah sitting closer to the piano than normal tonight? Had they somehow moved the instrument this week to cut her off from the assembly even more?

She flipped the page without missing a note—easy to do when the song never called for more than three notes to be played at a time. Her shoulders sagged a bit as she continued playing. The countess obviously needed more to do in her life since she had time to scour the shops for the most mundane music in existence.

Her gaze drifted from the music back to the lower corner of the cabinet. Normally the dowager made sure Sarah didn't miss the cake, but she was engaged in some sort of entertaining conversation with her grandson about menagerie drawings she'd seen in a recent publication. She might be too distracted to notice the cake.

Sarah nudged the chair back from the keys a bit and leaned to the right once more. There were heads, shoulders, even an elbow, which meant the table was only a little bit farther. If she could shift just a bit more . . .

Her body tilted and started to tumble over the edge of the chair. With a jerk of her arm she caught herself on the piano keys, sending a loud, discordant clang through the dining room.

Everything stopped. There wasn't a clink of utensil against china or even the whisper of clothing. It didn't even sound as if anyone were breathing.

Sarah certainly wasn't.

Her only consolation at the moment was that no one could see around the large piano cabinet to witness her clinging to the edge of the keys, praying her chair didn't slide out from underneath her hip.

A prayer that was actually going to require divine intervention.

A single glance down revealed that the chair was tilted, the far legs inches above the ground. The slightest shift on her part sent the chair sliding a bit farther away. There was nowhere to go but down.

Heat flooded her face and pounded in her ears as breath rushed in and out of her lungs in a panicked race, as if she'd be able to inhale a solution to her horrifyingly embarrassing predicament.

She should drop to the floor. She knew she should. But she couldn't quite bring herself to loosen her white-knuckle grip on the edge of the piano.

"Might I be of assistance?"

The voice was smooth and low and aching familiar. They'd had a number of short conversations over the past year. One hundred forty-two of them to be exact. Short discussions about nothing and everything. Books, birds, even an occasional examination of the week's sermon if he happened to stay at the estate through Sunday. She never said even half of what she was thinking, of course, but she'd loved hearing his thoughts on the matter, whatever the topic was.

She tilted her head to look up into his blue-grey eyes. That slight adjustment was enough to send the chair skittering across the floor, leaving Sarah to crash down onto Mr. Everard's leather shoes.

One side of his mouth kicked up into a crooked grin as he extended his hand to her. "Are you hurt?"

"No," Sarah choked out as she allowed him to help her to her feet. Once standing she glued her gaze to the keys in front of her. "It wasn't that far of a fall."

He chuckled and reached over to right the chair. "No, I suppose not."

Against her wishes, Sarah's gaze swung to the table. She may not like the majority of the people seated there, but that didn't mean she wanted them to have a reason to think ill of her. In the center of the table rested the most glorious sight. A golden ring of delicious dreams with a thick, white blanket of icing and candied lemon peels dancing across the top.

The cook called it her Madeira Pound Cake because she'd created the cake by blending the two recipes.

Sarah called it bliss on a fork. She'd even been known to wrap a portion in one of the linen serviettes and sneak it out of the house if the evening had been particularly grueling.

If she wanted a piece of it tonight, though, she'd have to face the laughter and disapproval of the earl's family.

"Are you quite well, Miss Gooding?" Lady Densbury's sharp voice cut through the room.

Sarah blinked and forced herself to look at the countess frowning from her position at the foot of the table. "Yes, my lady. Quite well."

She sniffed and nodded. "Then you should probably return to playing. Like getting back on a horse, you know."

Sarah was fairly certain that no one in history had given up playing music because they'd stupidly fallen out of the chair while trying to see around a vertical cabinet piano placed ridiculously in the middle of a room, but it really wasn't worth arguing about. Arguing at the family dinner disturbed the dowager for days, so Sarah simply nodded and dropped back into her seat, making sure to keep her eyes far away from Mr. Everard and even farther away from the tempting cake.



Randall's hand curved into a fist. His grip tightened until his entire arm trembled. Then he shook the tension out and returned to his seat at the table. His mother's treatment of those she deemed socially unworthy shouldn't bother him anymore, but it did. He hated seeing her try to put people in their place, simpering as if she were doing them a favor, reminding them of the way the world worked.

As a third son whose place in the social structure was as questionable as three-day-old milk, Randall found it more than a little disturbing.

Still, she was his mother. And his grandmother's companion seemed the type to let insults slide by like water.

She let nearly everything slide by like water. Oh, he enjoyed talking to her, had enjoyed playing piquet with her when he visited his grandmother, but there was nothing remarkable about her aside from her unusual features. When he'd first met her, the pointy angles of her face that framed wide-set eyes had intrigued him. But when those eyes had spent the entire time staring at the floor, he'd moved on.

Her meekness didn't mean his mother should treat her the way she did, though. He glanced at the piano, the tall back covered by a custom-made painted silk drape depicting St. George fighting a dragon. It was an awful lot of work to go through to make sure the family dinners weren't tainted by the presence of one quiet woman.

"I've an announcement," Randall's oldest brother George said from his place near the head of the table. "Harriet and I have decided not to move back to the London house after the first of the year."

Randall's eyebrows lifted, but it wasn't an announcement that truly interested him. He'd been living at Bluestone for nearly four years, managing the earl's small estate in Yorkshire that was more farm than anything else. George moving back to the family seat in Lancashire wasn't going to impact Randall's life very much.

"That's wonderful," Mother said with a stiff smile. It was her real smile, the one that indicated she was actually happy. Everything Mother did was stiff, so it was difficult to distinguish between the emotions if one didn't know where to look, but Mother's eyes had crinkled at the corners so she was genuinely happy at the prospect of George returning home.

She'd frown if Randall proposed such a thing.

Which was probably why Randall had spent so much time with his grandmother during his youth. They'd suffered Mother's disapproval together, and he'd learned how to follow Grandmother's lead in not letting it bother him—or at least not letting it show. He wasn't sure if his parents' general embarrassment over the dowager countess's less-than-conventional attitudes actually bothered his grandmother or not.

“Well,” George said with a smile at his wife. “Harriet is rather looking forward to setting up her own housekeeping somewhere, you know, so we can start our family properly.”

And now both mother and father were ecstatic. The potential heir of the heir was on his way.

“Marvelous!” The earl banged one hand on the table and beamed at his eldest.

“You’ll want to think carefully about where to set up your own home. You don’t want to take on too much in a delicate condition,” Mother said, sending her smile in Harriet’s direction.

Randall’s other brother, Cecil, looked at his own wife with a smile. “Does that mean Beatrice and I can use the London residence?”

Other statements of congratulations drifted up from the occupants of the table—his grandmother, Beatrice, the local vicar who was always invited to these gatherings, and two cousins he wasn’t even entirely sure how he was related to.

And behind all the cacophony, a gentle melody trilled from the piano, lending a strange sort of refinement to the noise.

George smiled and nodded his thanks. “It’s made me realize I need to take my future more seriously, Father, so I want to be close, learn more about the earldom.”

Randall stuffed a large bite of cake into his mouth to stifle the urge to laugh. George had done nothing but learn the earldom since he’d been born. It was Father’s obsession, making sure George and Cecil both knew everything there was to know about holding the esteemed title. As a second son himself, the current earl was well aware of the duties of the second in line, so he made sure Cecil was included in any and all teachings.

As the lowly third, Randall had been allowed to learn fun things like fishing.

“I was thinking,” George continued, “that perhaps we would set up at Cloverdale.”

Another discordant combination of keys had Randall’s gaze flying to the piano. Had Miss Gooding fallen again? But no, there

were her wide-set icy blue eyes, peering over the lower side of the piano cabinet. Two deep lines had formed between her eyes, and for once her gaze was aimed directly at the family instead of the floor.

Her sudden interest in the conversation made sense. Cloverdale was the dower house where his grandmother—and therefore her companion—lived. Grandmother had resided there for ages, at least two decades. And to his knowledge, he'd been the only member of the family to set foot in the place for at least five years, maybe more, relying on the dowager traveling to these weekly family dinners instead of visiting her themselves.

How could George even suggest living there? How was his father not immediately denying the suggestion?

Randall cleared his throat. Normally he didn't bother entering the family conversations, but in this case . . . "I'm not sure Grandmother wants to live with a new, young household."

Slashes of color appeared on George's cheeks as he looked from his father to the dowager and then finally to Randall. "Of course not. But Cloverdale is a rather large house for one person who doesn't really entertain. I thought Grandmother would be much happier at Stagwild."

Silence fell over the table.

Randall couldn't look at his grandmother, couldn't look at anyone, really. Whether it was because he didn't want to see her hurt by the suggestion or couldn't quite fathom George was actually serious, he didn't know, but he was frozen in his chair, not blinking, hardly breathing.

The earl cleared his throat. "It's not a terrible idea."

Another jangling chord filled the air, making Randall jerk and cover his ears. Miss Gooding stomped around the piano and stood in front of it, chest heaving as if she intended to breathe fire like the dragon in the picture. She stared down the men at the head of the table, eyes narrowing until the pale blue was nothing but a memory.

"This woman has lived through wars, through the death of

her husband and the death of her son, and through the ridicule of people who thought themselves better than her because of their birth.” Her gaze swept the table to encompass the countess. Randall squirmed in his seat. His mother had always been a bit condescending toward the dowager.

“And now you want to rip her away from her home, deprive her of the company of her family, and run her off to the wilds of Durham?” Miss Gooding thrust her pointy chin forward, looking like an avenging angel come to put the fear of the Lord into sinners. “You ought to be ashamed of yourselves.”