



A QUILT *for* Christmas

A Christmas Novella

MELODY
CARLSON

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CHAPTER ONE

Vera Swanson used to love Christmas. Back in her roomy Craftsman house in Western Oregon, she'd decorate to the nines, then welcome the season as family, friends, and neighbors popped in to admire the holiday décor and partake in homemade goodies. For more than forty years, Vera had played host to homemade storybook Christmases. Oh, they weren't perfect, but what in life was?

Vera's holiday to-do list had always been long and carefully crafted. By Halloween her spare room closet would be neatly stacked with gifts—mostly handmade. And every year on the Friday following Thanksgiving, which she never called Black Friday and never ventured out to a store, Vera would put on her favorite Christmas music and begin decorating her house.

She'd start with the grand oak staircase, artfully wrapping the handrail with evergreen garlands, trimmed with mini pine cones, plaid bows, and white fairy lights. In earlier days she never settled for anything less than aromatic cedar

garlands for the stairs project, but as age crept up, along with a weariness of sweeping needle debris from the stairway runner, she switched over to a realistic fake. She'd regularly spritz it with a woodsy pine spray, and no one was the wiser. Her Christmas tree, which had to be real, was put in place exactly two weeks before Christmas. And the next day would find Vera carefully arranging those artfully wrapped gifts beneath it. Picture-perfect.

But Thanksgiving was five days behind her now, and Vera hadn't lifted a finger in holiday preparations. Nor did she intend to. That life was over . . . and there was no turning back the clock. As her father would say, she'd made her bed and now she had to lie in it.

Vera sadly shook her head as she gazed out the window of her condo unit. The view here, even on a clear day, was a bit dreary. Oh, the common grounds had looked promising enough last summer, back when she'd relocated to Eastern Oregon. The leafy trees and grassy areas around the parking lot had seemed almost parklike. But today the browned grass and bare tree branches, draped in freezing fog, seemed to reflect her soul. Bleak and gray and cold.

As Vera turned around to stare blankly at her neatly arranged condo, she knew she had no one to blame but herself. Her son, Bennett, had questioned her abrupt decision to give up the beloved family home and move to Fairview. But after Vera's husband, Larry, passed on, the big old house had grown bigger, emptier, and lonelier with each day. A downsize seemed the only answer, and when a condo unit became available in her daughter, Ginny's, town, Vera had snatched it up. She'd looked forward to being close enough

to spend more time with her two grandkids. She imagined attending school functions and keeping them overnight with her. Making cookies and craft projects—playing full-time grandma.

As much as Ginny had wanted her mother nearby, she, too, had questioned the sensibility of giving up the spacious family home that she and Bennett had grown up in. “What will we do for Christmas now?” Ginny asked Vera last summer while helping to sort and pack. “You know how the kids love your house for the holidays. It just won’t be the same.”

Vera had assured Ginny she was simply passing the torch on to her. “Your lovely home is perfect for family gatherings,” she’d said as she insisted Ginny take possession of Vera’s plastic bins of treasured Christmas decorations. “I’ll even come over to help you decorate.”

As it turned out, decorating Ginny’s house, or even spending Christmas together, became an impossibility. Ginny’s husband’s job was transferred to Southern California not long after Vera unpacked her last box. He left immediately, and less than a month later, Ginny and the grandkids followed. Vera vaguely wondered about her Christmas decorations. Had they gone to California too? Or had they wound up in Ginny’s castoff pile to be picked up by the Salvation Army?

Then last month, Bennett had called Vera to inform her that he and his new bride would spend the holidays with Lola’s family in Montana. He hoped she didn’t mind. So Vera would be alone for Christmas—not that she planned to acknowledge the holiday. Who was there to celebrate with anyway? After five months in Fairview, she hadn’t made a

single friend. She'd heard that as one got older it grew more difficult to make new friends. Perhaps her loneliness was proof of that.

A loud knocking at her door brought Vera's little pity party to a halt. Hurrying to see who was pounding so urgently—since no one ever called on her here—she suddenly remembered she was still in her pajamas and robe. She cracked open the door with a cautious *hello?* but could see no one.

"Please, please, can you help me?" a small voice pleaded from down below.

Vera blinked at the small child who stood on her doorstep. With two messy blond pigtails, bare feet, and widened blue eyes, the little girl looked somewhat lost and confused. And like Vera, the child was dressed in sleepwear, except hers was a thin, summery nightgown that looked none too warm.

"Wh-what?" Vera fumbled to unlatch the chain and fully open the door. "Who *are* you?"

"I'm Fiona," the girl reached for Vera's hand and, grasping it tightly, tugged. "We live right there." She pointed to the opened door across the hallway. "Mama is sick. *Please help me!*"

"Oh my!" Leaving her own door wide open, Vera let the child lead her across the hall and into the condo.

"Mama's in there." The girl pointed to the master bedroom. "She can't get up, and she keeps crying and crying."

"Oh dear." Vera bit her lip. Should she call 911? Find out what was wrong? Or run the opposite direction? "Hello?" she said timidly as she stepped through the door. The only answer was a low groan. "Are you okay?" Vera ventured farther into the dimly lit room. "Your little girl came to—"

“Oh, no, no.” A thin woman with dark, matted hair tried to sit up in bed. She waved a hand dismissively. “Fiona should not have—” Her words were cut short as she grabbed her midsection and collapsed backward, gasping in pain.

Vera hurried to the bedside. “Clearly something is wrong. What can I do to help? Should I call someone?”

“No, there’s no one . . . nothing. I will be . . . all right.” The woman’s eyes closed. “A tummy ache. I must’ve eaten—” She bent over in pain.

Vera leaned over to look more closely at the woman. Her skin was pallid with droplets of perspiration on her forehead. Was she suffering from some kind of flu? What if she was contagious? Or perhaps she had a hangover or drug-related problem. Those things happened. If this was substance abuse, the woman might just need to sleep it off.

Rocking her head from side to side as if to shake off the pain, the woman’s knuckles turned white as she gripped the edge of a tattered bedspread. Vera bit her lip. She didn’t care if the woman was contagious or suffering from addiction. Something had to be done. “I think you need medical attention,” Vera said. “Should I call 911 and request an ambulance?”

“No, please! *Don’t* do that.” The woman grabbed her hand, holding tightly. “We lost insurance when we moved here. *Don’t* call 911. *Please!*”

Vera glanced back to the doorway where Fiona watched with frightened eyes. The light from the room behind her filtered through the thin nightie making her look slightly ethereal and very small and helpless. “I really believe you should see a doctor,” Vera insisted, laying a gentle hand on the woman’s shoulder. “Is there someone I can call for you?”

The woman's pale lips drew into a tight line as she opened her eyes. "No, no. We're new here. We have no—" Her words were severed by a gasp.

Vera tried to think. She was new here too, and suddenly more alone than ever. "You need help," she declared. "I'm going to throw on some clothes and then *I* will drive you to Fairview Hospital."

The woman's only response was more moaning. Vera turned to the little girl. "Fiona, can you get yourself dressed and maybe find your mother's coat and some shoes or slippers for her?"

Fiona nodded. "I can do that."

"I'll be right back." Vera hurried back to her condo. Her hands trembled as she awkwardly tugged on her clothes. What was she getting herself into? The woman clearly wanted no medical help. What if she had religious reasons and sued Vera for intruding? But hadn't she mentioned medical insurance—or the lack of it? As Vera shoved her feet into shoes, she wondered what she'd do if the woman refused to go. She couldn't force her. Well, whatever the case, Vera wasn't going to let the poor woman die with her young daughter looking on.

It wasn't easy, but after a shaky trip down the elevator and through the parking lot, supporting the sick woman as best she could, Vera got her and the child into her back seat. She tossed a woolen car blanket over the two, then jumped behind the wheel and, trying to calm herself, started the engine.

Vera navigated the short distance to the hospital, listening to young Fiona's attempts to comfort her mother by saying, "You'll be okay, Mama," again and again. Bless her little

heart—what a trouper. The nearby medical facility was one reason the condo location had appealed to Vera. At her age, accessible medical care seemed prudent. But at the moment the short trip seemed to take forever.

Finally, at the ER entrance, help came out and the woman was transported inside. Vera parked her car and helped Fiona out. “Your mother will get good medical attention here. Don’t worry, dear, she’s in good hands.”

“Is she gonna die?” Fiona furrowed her brow. “Like Gramma Albright?”

Vera took Fiona’s hand. “No, no, honey. Perhaps it’s just—just food poisoning.”

“*Poisoning?*” Fiona sounded horrified.

“Not like that. I just meant her stomach might be upset from something she ate. The doctors know how to help her.” She squeezed Fiona’s cold little hand. “How old are you, anyway?”

“Four.” Fiona seemed to walk taller. “I will be five on ninth of January.”

Vera tipped her head to one side, studying the child. “You seem to have an accent.”

“Accent?” Fiona frowned.

“The way you speak. It’s a little different.”

Fiona held her chin high. “That’s the Irish.”

“You’re Irish?”

“Yes. Mama is all Irish, but Daddy is all American.”

“How interesting.”

“I was born in Dublin,” Fiona said with pride. “I am Irish American.”

“Well, you’re a smart girl. You did the right thing to ask

for help today, Fiona. By the way, I don't think I told you my name. I'm Mrs. Swanson."

"Mrs. Swan song?"

"No. Mrs. Swanson."

"I like swans," Fiona said. "And I like you."

"I like you too, Fiona." Vera led them into the entrance of the hospital. "Now tell me, what is your last name?"

"Albright. I am Fiona Margaret Albright."

"What a pretty name." Vera remembered seeing kids' stuff in the girl's sparsely furnished condo unit. "Do you have siblings?"

"Huh?" Fiona tilted her head to one side.

"Do you have a brother or sister?"

Fiona nodded vigorously. "I have a big brother and a big sister."

"Where are they now?"

"School."

"Three children. What a nice family. How old are they?"

"Nolan is eleven. Maureen is eight."

As Vera led Fiona toward the reception desk, she calculated the children's age differences—each about three years apart. Perhaps Mrs. Albright was expecting a fourth and simply having morning sickness. But that small condo with three children . . . no insurance. Vera hoped not.

She told the receptionist who they were and then took Fiona to wait in the lobby. After more than an hour of reading the limited children's books to Fiona, Vera went to check with the receptionist. Explaining the situation more plainly, she admitted she barely knew Mrs. Albright and was unsure of what to do next.

“You see, I have Mrs. Albright’s youngest child with me, but she has two more children in school. I expect they will be home soon.”

The receptionist seemed as uncertain as Vera. “I can’t tell you anything about the patient’s condition without her consent, except to say it’s unlikely she’ll be released today. We’re still trying to reach her husband. It seems he works out of town during the week.”

“I see.” Vera felt relieved to hear the man would be contacted. She glanced over to where Fiona was perched on a chair, her feet kicking back and forth. Her expression was a mix of boredom and fear. “Maybe I could leave Mrs. Albright a note, to let her know I’ll go home and see to her children while she’s here.”

“I’m sure that would be a comfort.” The receptionist slid a small pad of paper across the desk, then waited as Vera penned a note to Mrs. Albright, including her phone number. “I’ll make sure she gets it,” the receptionist assured her. But as Vera led Fiona out of the hospital, she felt uneasy . . . and a bit like a kidnapper.