



*Under the
Texas Mistletoe*

A TRIO OF CHRISTMAS
HISTORICAL ROMANCE NOVELLAS

KAREN
WITEMEYER

Under the Texas Mistletoe

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HISTORICAL ROMANCE NOVELLAS
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A Texas Christmas Carol
An Archer Family Christmas
Gift of the Heart

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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Witemeyer, Karen, author. | Witemeyer, Karen. Texas Christmas carol. | Witemeyer, Karen. Archer family Christmas. | Witemeyer, Karen. Gift of the heart.

Title: Under the Texas mistletoe : a trio of Christmas historical romance novellas / Karen Witemeyer.

Other titles: Texas Christmas carol.

Description: Bloomington, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, [2021]

Identifiers: LCCN 2021015481 | ISBN 9780764239311 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781493433681 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Christmas stories, American. | Historical fiction, American. |

Romance fiction, American. | Christian fiction, American. | LCGFT: Novellas.

Classification: LCC PS3623.I864 U53 2021 | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021015481>

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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Cover design by Dan Thornberg, Design Source Creative Services

Front porch photographed at the residence of Alyson Petrich, Stillwater, MN

Author is represented by the Books & Such Literary Agency.

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Welcome Readers!

Christmas is my favorite holiday of the year. Time spent with family, singing carols, Christmas baking, and all the nostalgia that comes with trimming the tree. Yet what I treasure most is celebrating the miracle of Jesus entering our world to dwell among us. In this novella collection, you'll find holiday stories rich with history, family, adventure, and romance. You'll also find fun bonus items like Christmas recipes, Victorian Christmas traditions, and a devotional designed to help you see the baby Jesus in a whole new way.

May your holiday season be filled with love and laughter, both inside the pages of this book and outside as you share time with family and friends.

Merry Christmas!

Karen



*A Texas
Christmas Carol*



To all those who brighten dark corners
with kind smiles and words of hope.
These gifts might seem small,
but your light changes lives.
Keep shining!



The joy of the Lord is your strength.

—*Nehemiah 8:10*

One

DECEMBER 1895
LONDON, TEXAS

“IT’S A FOOL’S ERRAND, I tell you.”

Felicity Wiggins shrugged as she collected the list of needy families from last year’s Christmas Basket Committee chairwoman. “Marching around Jericho for seven days probably felt like a fool’s errand to the Israelites too, but their persistence paid off. The walls eventually fell.”

Margaret Talley made a clucking noise as she closed the storage closet on the dozen oversized market baskets that had just been delivered for their congregation’s annual community project. “Yes, well, the Israelites had the captain of the Lord’s army giving them instructions. So unless you have an angel directing you, I’d recommend harkening unto the words of our Savior instead, and cast not your pearls before swine.”

“Don’t worry,” Felicity said with a soft chuckle, “I won’t let Mr. Beazer trample over me. My backbone is strong enough to withstand a few snaps and growls.”

Margaret headed toward the stairs leading out of the church basement, tossing a frown over her shoulder. “It’s your time, I suppose. If you choose to waste it, that’s your prerogative. Just

don't say I didn't warn you. Evan Beazer might be the wealthiest man in town, but he's a Scrooge of the worst order. Not only does he refuse to donate to any of our causes, but he insults anyone with the temerity to approach him." She paused at the top of the stairway and braced a hand against the wall as she turned to face Felicity. "He called me a blood-sucking leech and threatened to have me brought up on trespassing charges should I ever darken his door again." Margaret, her face usually placid and lovely, scrunched her nose as if the memory were so rancid, she could smell it. "The gall of him. He might dutifully leave his tithe in the collection plate every Sunday to keep his conscience clean, but he refuses to donate so much as a penny to any cause beyond that obligation, no matter how worthy. He's a tight-fisted, coldhearted man. Completely void of compassion. Why, you could wring him like a dishrag, and not a single drop of Christian charity would fall out. His soul is as dry as a bone."

Mrs. Talley was a dynamo when it came to getting things done and a blessing to any committee she served upon, but she had definite opinions about how things should go and didn't react well when thwarted.

Felicity patted her arm. "There is nothing the least bit leech-like about you. You probably just caught him on a bad day."

The deacon's wife arched a brow. "*Every* day is a bad day for Evan Beazer."

Not *every* day. Felicity ducked her head, recalling one day in particular when Mr. Beazer had been in rare, heroic form.

Pushing the distracting thought aside, Felicity winked at her friend as she marched past. "I recognize the challenge he presents, but I'm determined to try anyway. With the passing of dear Mrs. Humbolt this year, our donation total is down by a third. I can suffer through a few insults if it means more shoes and winter coats for the children. Besides, forewarned is forearmed. Thanks to you, I know what kind of reception to expect, so I can plan

accordingly. And, believe it or not, I can be rather devious when I put my mind to it.”

“You? Devious?” Margaret shook her head, a huff of a laugh escaping. “Felicity, you don’t have a dishonest bone in your body.”

“Oh, I don’t plan any trickery,” Felicity said, turning to face Margaret while continuing to walk backward down the hall to the main sanctuary. “In fact, my strategy comes straight from scripture itself.”

“Really?”

Felicity nodded, a grin spreading across her face. “Remember the parable Jesus told in Luke 11 about the man who kept knocking on his neighbor’s door in the middle of the night, asking for bread? The neighbor kept trying to turn him away, but the man persisted, and eventually he got his bread. I plan to employ the same technique.” Mischief swirled in her belly, stirring up an excitement she couldn’t quite contain. “I’m going to *pester* him into cooperation.”

Margaret let out a full laugh. “If anyone can do it, it’s you.”

Felicity prayed she was right. Not just for the children’s sakes, but for Mr. Beazer himself. He never smiled. How awful it must be to be so miserable. She couldn’t imagine a world void of happiness. But then, she’d been blessed with a cheerful family who laughed and teased and actively looked for reasons to celebrate. Mr. Beazer had no one meaningful in his life beyond a handful of local staff and a conglomeration of distant employees.

He needed a strong dose of joy in his life, and she was prepared to hold his nose and force a spoonful of medicinal Christmas cheer down his throat, if necessary.



A timid tap sounded against the doorframe, followed by the timid voice of Evan Beazer’s housekeeper. “Sorry to interrupt, sir—”

“Then don’t.” Evan didn’t bother to look up from the stock report he was scrutinizing.

Could the woman not follow the most basic of instructions? He was not to be disturbed while in his study. Ever. The concept couldn’t be more simplistic. Yet here she was, disturbing him.

Mrs. Bell was his third housekeeper in the five years he’d lived here. A widow with children to support, she’d stuck it out the longest, going on two and a half years now. She needed the work badly enough to endure his idiosyncrasies, and he needed someone to cook and clean badly enough to endure her failings. To a point. Today’s infraction veered dangerously near the line.

“There’s a young woman at the door, sir,” Mrs. Bell persisted, “and she—”

Evan slapped the folded newspaper atop his mahogany desk and was slightly mollified when the housekeeper startled and dropped her sentence with a gasp. He didn’t want an explanation. He wanted silence.

“Send whoever it is away,” he ordered. “You know I don’t accept callers unless they are business associates. And even you must recognize that I don’t do business with young women.”

Mrs. Bell bristled at his poorly veiled insult of her intelligence, and one of her hands found its way to her hip. “I tried to send her away, sir, but she refuses to leave.”

He waved her off with a brush of his hand. “Slam the door in her face. That should rid us of her.”

“Tried that.” Mrs. Bell looked far too smug imparting that bit of news. “Even threatened charges of trespassing, but nothing budges her. She promised to continue knocking until *you* come to the door.”

“Bah! Give her five minutes. She’ll weary of the game.”

His housekeeper raised a brow. “I’ve given her twenty. She’s still at it.”

Still at it? After *twenty* minutes?

“She’s taken to beating out song rhythms on the door. At least I think they’re song rhythms. Hard to tell with no melody. But either way, they’re driving me batty.”

“Not a far drive,” Evan muttered under his breath.

Mrs. Bell narrowed her eyes, both hands now resting firmly on her hips. “I hope you’re in the mood for raw bread dough and half-cooked chicken for supper, then, ’cause I’ve reached my limit. If that dreadful knocking doesn’t stop in the next two minutes, I’m taking the rest of the day off.”

Evan rose from his chair, a glower crunching his brows down over his eyes. “I’ll dock your pay.”

Her hands fell away from her hips and slid to hide beneath her apron, but her chin lifted. “My sanity’s worth a day’s wage.”

Of all the frustrating . . . imbecilic . . .

“Fine.”

He charged around the corner of his desk, his limp barely slowing him at all with such irritation fueling his stride. Raw bread dough indeed. Mrs. Bell was lucky she was a better cook than she was a doorman, or he’d sack her this instant. She scuttled out of his way as he charged forward. Most people did. Hopefully the infernal knocking witch at his door would do the same so he could get back to work. Without further interruption.

Evan snatched his cane from where it rested near his office doorway even though it was more of an insurance policy than an actual need. His trick knee hadn’t gone out on him in several months, but one never knew when disaster might strike, and he refused to be humiliated in front of strangers or staff by falling on his face. Besides, the cane made a grand weapon to wave around in a threatening fashion, should his unwanted visitor prove stubborn.

As he neared the front door, the tapping grew louder. His temper heated in equal increments. When he finally grasped the handle, he jerked the door inward. “Cease that infernal knocking!”

A Texas Christmas Carol

The unsuspecting percussionist lurched forward but thankfully caught herself before tumbling on top of him.

The moment Evan recognized Felicity Wiggins, his relief over the near miss turned to a momentary flicker of regret. One he banished immediately. He'd spent the last two years studiously avoiding personal contact with the fair Miss Wiggins, and he wasn't about to let his guard down now, no matter how her eyes lit at the sight of him.

Such a look had to be a pretense. No one actually enjoyed his company. A fact of which he was perfectly aware. And not the least bit sorry.

"Mr. Beazer!" she said, her voice ringing with a delight that sounded almost genuine.

He hadn't thought her such an accomplished actress, but then, she no doubt wanted something from him, and women were at their most cunning when they wanted something.

"Good afternoon to you, sir. Hasn't the Lord blessed us with a lovely day?"

Evan didn't bother to look at the sky to which she gestured. "It's December, Miss Wiggins. It's cold and dreary."

Her smile only brightened, ornery thing. "Nonsense. It's a beautiful day. The cloud cover protects me from squinting, and the wind is gentle as a lamb. A rare gift at this time of year."

Evan scowled down at her, doing his best to quell his fascination with the way the cloud-filtered light brought out the fire in the dark copper hair coiled atop her head. "Surely you didn't seek me out to compare theories on the weather."

"Of course not. I came to enlist your help. I'm in charge of the community Christmas baskets this year, and I—"

"Not a cent. Now leave," he grouched.

It shouldn't surprise him that she wanted money. Everyone did. Nothing else could motivate them to beard the lion in his den. Nevertheless, a twinge of disappointment caught him by surprise.

Until today, he hadn't thought Miss Wiggins was like everyone else. But why wouldn't she be?

"There are children in need, Mr. Beazer," she insisted, her smile finally dimming as a flush of passion colored her cheeks. "It is our Christian duty to help them."

"No one's Christian duty helped *me* when I was a boy. I was destitute and living off my wits after the Panic of '73 destroyed my family. Hard work and frugal living is what saved me, Miss Wiggins, not a Christmas basket filled with a week's worth of food and secondhand clothes. Now, leave me be."

As he stepped back and started closing the door, she followed him, her smile restored and her green eyes sparkling. "If you don't wish to contribute money, then I'll gladly accept a donation of your time."

"Absolutely not. My time is far too precious to be frittered away on fluff and nonsense. Unlike *you*, I work for a living. Good day, madam."

Her smile wobbled a bit but bravely held position. "I'll give you some time to think about it," she said, bending her neck so she could peer around the closing door. "I'll come back tomorrow."

What a horrifying prospect!

Evan widened the door enough to stick his head through the opening and glare at her. "I'll not open this door again to you, Miss Wiggins. No matter how long you knock."

Her eyes danced with mischief. "Then I suppose I'll just have to find a window."