

Advanced Reading Copy not for sale

Christmas Delights

Also by Heather Hiestand

The Marquess of Cake

One Taste of Scandal

His Wicked Smile

The Kidnapped Bride
(novella)

Christmas Delights

The Redcakes

Heather Hiestand

[K] logo
eKENSINGTON BOOKS
KENSINGTON PUBLISHING CORP.
www.kensingtonbooks.com

eKENSINGTON BOOKS are published by

Kensington Publishing Corp.
119 West 40th Street
New York, NY 10018

Copyright © 2014 by Heather Hiestand

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the Publisher, excepting brief quotes used in reviews.

All Kensington titles, imprints, and distributed lines are available at special quantity discounts for bulk purchases for sales promotion, premiums, fund-raising, educational, or institutional use.

Special book excerpts or customized printings can also be created to fit specific needs. For details, write or phone the office of the Kensington Special Sales Manager: Kensington Publishing Corp., 119 West 40th Street, New York, NY 10018. Attn. Special Sales Department. Phone: 1-800-221-2647.

eKensington and the K logo Reg. U.S. Pat. & TM Off.

First Electronic Edition: November 2014
eISBN-13: 978-1-60183-258-0
eISBN-10: 1-60183-258-3

First Print Edition: November 2014
ISBN-13: 978-1-60183-259-7
ISBN-10: 1-60183-259-1

Printed in the United States of America

In memory of my grandmother Mildred Ruhoff and her Christmas fudge which always helped make the holidays special for our family.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Eilis Flynn, Mary Jo Hiestand, Delle Jacobs, Judy Laik, and Jacquie Rogers for your critique assistance and support. Thank you to my boys for making Christmas a time of wonder and excitement.

Chapter One

December 22, 1889

I'll tell you a story while we wait for the carriage," said Victoria, Lady Allen-Hill. "Once upon a time, long ago, in the south of England, a princess was left behind to guard the family castle while her father was at war in France."

"Is this the castle where we're spending Christmas?" Penelope Courtney asked from her seat against the wall in Redcake's tearoom. Cutouts of Father Christmas dangled on green ribbons above her head, dancing against the wall as waitresses called cakies walked around briskly, serving customers.

"Yes. Though it was in sorry shape in those days." Victoria had to bend over the table to be heard through the din of patrons clattering teacups against saucers and talking excitedly about holiday plans.

"Continue," said Penelope.

Victoria thought her nine-year-old cousin sounded very grown-up, but then, she had little experience with children. "Very well. This princess, Everilda by name, had spent the beginning of winter stuffing herself with all sorts of game, every bird that could be slaughtered, bread, and frumenty. She'd made herself so ill that when a strange old serving woman approached the dais of her father's great hall on Christmas Day, with the first mince pie of the Twelve Days, she refused to eat any of it.

"Her retainers looked nervous. The chamberlain bent over her shoulder and whispered, 'Princess Everilda, it is bad luck to refuse mince pie.'

"'Oh good heavens,' the princess said. 'Here, serving wench, bring me your pie.'

“The woman approached, offering her enormous pie with trembling arms. Princess Everilda stuck in her spoon and pulled out a steaming mass of liberally spiced shredded meat and apple. While she had never heard of the chamberlain’s superstition before, she did know you were supposed to make a wish with your first bite of Christmas mince pie. So she closed her eyes and wished for a husband to take all the cares of running the castle away from her. Thankfully, this was a reasonable wish, as she was betrothed to none other than her beloved, after overcoming a number of obstacles.

“No sooner had she swallowed her first bite when the old woman dropped the mince pie on the long table in front of the princess. She seemed to grow before the princess’s very eyes, until she stood upright, much younger than she had seemed, and now dressed regally.

“‘Queen Avice!’ the princess shouted in horror. It was her stepmama, returned from the grave.”

“Ewww,” Penelope said, then coughed as her soup went down the wrong way.

Victoria stood and patted her on the back. “You have to expect ghosts in fairy tales.”

“And wishes,” her cousin added with another cough.

“Exactly.” She reseated herself.

Penelope took a sip of milk. “I’m fine. Go on. We still have lots of time before we have to go to the train station.”

Victoria nodded. “The shade cackled and pointed her finger at the princess. ‘Twelve times shall the clock turn round and round before you find your love. Strife and spice, mummery and magic, ghosts and goblins, quests and questions shall fill your days and nights.’”

“My goodness, what a stirring tale!” exclaimed Penelope. “Are you just making this up as you go?”

“I’m glad you like it,” Victoria said. She was enjoying her story spinning. “Yes, it is my own creation.”

“Will you tell me more? I’ll try to be quiet.”

“Finish your soup,” Victoria told her young cousin. “Redcake’s makes the most delicious cream of broccoli.”

“Why didn’t you want any?” Penelope asked, spooning up a glistening green-speckled spoonful.

“I’m reducing,” Victoria said mournfully.

“Haven’t you reduced enough? Why, you are entirely a different shape than you were on your wedding day.”

“From the mouths of babes,” Victoria said, raising an eyebrow. Was her cousin correct? Had she beaten her unruly curves into submission?

“I could never say no to a bun,” her cousin said.

“Not at Redcake’s, certainly,” Victoria murmured. “They make the best in London.” She sighed and looked down at the crumbs of her abstemious plate of clear chicken soup and single slice of gingerbread.

“I expect, now that’s it’s been almost a year and a half since Sir Humphrey died, you’ll want to find another husband. Is that why you’re reducing? You didn’t have trouble finding your first husband.”

“My father found him for me,” she said. A cakie leaned over their table and lifted the lid of their teapot, then poured in more steaming water.

“Didn’t you like him?” Penelope’s forehead wrinkled. She was much too young to understand the complicated getting of titled husbands.

“I hardly had the time to discover whether I did or not. He died so soon after the wedding.” Victoria smiled her thanks to the cakie.

“You didn’t even know if you liked being married or not,” Penelope stated.

“Exactly.” Sir Humphrey had been red-faced and sniffing on their wedding day. By the

next night, he'd had a fever. A week later, his cold had gone into his chest. Bronchitis followed, then pneumonia. He'd left her, his still-virgin bride, for a permanent home in Highgate Cemetery less than a month after their wedding. She'd always wondered if she'd been more physically appealing, would he have managed to consummate the thing on that first night, before he'd become too ill. As it was, she'd been denied the mysteries of physical love.

Penelope spooned up her last bite of soup, then cut her scone in half and layered it thickly with strawberry jam. Saliva pooled in Victoria's mouth. To distract herself, she spun more of her tale.

"Princess Everilda knew her betrothed was meant to arrive at the castle that very evening. What could possibly happen to keep him away for another twelve days?"

"What have you done?" she shouted at the dead queen's shade. "Prince Hugh is supposed to ride in at any moment."

"The ghost's eyes were nothing but dark pits as they stared into the princess's very soul. 'You have treated him badly.'"

"He was your stepson," the princess hissed. "I assumed he was as wicked as you are. But I've learned he has a heart of gold. What must I do to save him?"

"I'll make you a bargain," said the shade, its voice as caressing as shards of ice.

"No bargains," Penelope said around a mouthful of scone. The jam had stained the corners of her mouth red. "Bargains are always bad."

"Tell that to the princess," Victoria said smartly. "Now, back to the story."

"What must I do?" Princess Everilda gasped. Her stomach grumbled and she dearly wished for a bowl of frumenty.

"The shade smirked, as much as shades can smirk with their faces going in and out of focus. 'Save the merman in the sea, visit two croaking ravens, let three bells stay unring, allow four jars to be unopened, notice five melting coins cold, see six tarts untasted, bring seven swans

their lives untaken.”

“That’s only seven,’ said the princess sharply, for she was no fool,” Victoria said.

Penelope giggled and thrust out her foot, kicking over an overflowing bagful of Redcake’s Tea and cookie tins that belonged to patrons at the next table.

“Oh, dear. Terribly sorry,” Victoria murmured without looking up. Penelope added her apologies.

“‘You’ll give up long before that,’ said the shade, with a hint of the black humor the dead queen had possessed in life. ‘You never had much sticking power.’

“‘How dare you!’ Princess Everilda cried. ‘This is Prince Hugh’s life at stake!’” Victoria said.

Someone at the next table tittered, and Victoria glanced over to see one of the Redcake sisters, the youngest one the same age as she, staring at her with amusement.

“What?” Victoria asked. Had she been too loud or overly dramatic? Her story was carrying her away.

“That isn’t a very Christmassy story,” the blonde Redcake said with a cough. “It sounds like something for All Hallow’s Eve.”

“Dickens used ghosts in a Christmas story,” said Victoria, defensive.

“Very well,” said Miss Redcake. “But it needs refinement. Why is the princess so obsessed with food? Aren’t princesses all perfect?”

“Not my princess,” Victoria snapped.

Miss Redcake tilted her head. “You can’t ever have been terribly concerned with food. You have a dashing figure.”

Victoria blinked. “You must never have seen me before today. I used to be as plump as a Christmas goose.”

“Actually, I thought we were acquainted,” Miss Redcake said. “Or I wouldn’t have

spoken. I'm in London so rarely that I simply thought I'd forgotten your name."

"I'm Lady Allen-Hill, but I was Victoria Courtney before I married Sir Humphrey."

"Oh, your name does sound familiar. I'm Rose Redcake," she said.

"I've met your brother-in-law and his brother," Victoria said. "The Marquess of Hatbrook and Lord Judah? I've seen the rest of you at parties and things, ages ago."

"You haven't been to London recently?" Miss Redcake inquired.

"No. I was in mourning, you see. My husband died." Victoria picked at the jet mourning ring she still wore on her left hand.

"How dreadful. One goes to such trouble to find a husband, you don't want to lose him."

"Exactly," Victoria murmured. "Found one for yourself yet?"

"No, I'm buried in the country, thanks to my lung problems," Miss Redcake said. "I can't come into Town without becoming ill, you see."

"You're here now," Penelope interjected.

"Just to run errands, really. I only spent one night here, but I had some new dresses ordered. Then it's back to Sussex on the train."

"We're leaving for Sussex soon too," Penelope said. The high pitch of her voice told Victoria her cousin was eager to join in the adult conversation. "We're going to Pevensy."

Miss Redcake smiled. "We live near Polegate, only about four miles from Pevensy. Are you going to the house party at Pevensy-Sur-Mer Fort? Some friends of ours are going, and we've been invited for dinners and balls and such."

"Speaking of the Fort, we should leave for Victoria Station soon," Victoria said.

Miss Redcake looked up at the clock on the wall, which had been wrapped in red ribbon for the season. "So should I."

"Let's share a carriage," Penelope said eagerly. "Then we can hear more of my cousin's story."

“I’m sure Miss Redcake doesn’t want to hear that,” Victoria protested.

“But she was listening to every word,” Penelope insisted. “I saw her.”

“It’s not polite to watch people,” Victoria said, her cheeks flaming.

Miss Redcake looked amused. Then her expression shifted and she lifted her handkerchief and coughed, a phlegmy, rattling sound. “I would be happy to join you. I didn’t expect to travel alone, but my sister was delayed in Bristol.”

“Uncle Rupert was delayed in Liverpool. We weren’t supposed to travel alone either,” Penelope said.

“I’m sure three ladies together will be perfectly safe,” Victoria said, pulling out her reticule and putting coins on the table. Miss Redcake hoisted her rattling bag, which made her cough again. This time, a wheeze came with it.

Victoria reached out her hand and grasped the bag. “I’ll take that, shall I? We sent our baggage on ahead.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Miss Redcake, flustered. “I just have this small valise.” She hefted a heavy-looking leather case that had been resting under her table.

Victoria looked at the case, then at Penelope. The girl was too small to carry it. She handed the shopping bag to her cousin and took the valise herself, thankful her new slimness and less cumbersome second-stage mourning attire gave her the energy to haul heavy luggage.

Thankfully, her carriage was only a couple of paces away from the front entrance of Redcake’s, and the luggage was soon stowed away for the trip to the station. An hour later, they were seated in a first-class compartment heading to Sussex. Victoria found the gentle jostling rather restful, but she could tell the train fumes made Miss Redcake increasingly ill.

“I have a flask of cognac. Would it help?”

“No,” said Miss Redcake, pulling out a vial. “But I shall apply my smelling salts.” She opened the vial and breathed deeply. A hint of color returned to her pale cheeks.

The scent of lavender oil filled the cabin. Penelope wrinkled her nose, but Victoria found the scent soothing.

“You know,” said Miss Redcake, “ghost stories go very well with Sussex. We’ve been told Roman and Norman soldiers haunt ruins near our house. There are shell keep remains on the grounds.”

“Can you tell us a story?” Penelope asked.

“I think Miss Redcake should rest,” Victoria said. She hoped this part of her holiday didn’t foreshadow how the house party would go. She was hoping for some good old-fashioned fun of the sort that had doors opening onto corridors and tiptoeing around late at night, not tea with children and ghost stories. By Twelfth Night, she wanted all the mysteries she’d been denied exploring to be completely open to her.