



*Christmas Eve, 1944*

Ice-tipped rain lashed against the windows while a fierce wind rattled the panes. It was a bitterly cold night, and Charlotte Evans was grateful for the meager supply of firewood a neighbor had so generously given her.

She fed a few more twigs to the flames, pulled her blue shawl across her shoulders, and moved the rocking chair as close to the warmth as she dared. Soon, she would join the children in the bed she had moved into the living room, but she wasn't yet sleepy. Glancing over at her boys, she saw they were huddled together for comfort and warmth. Even with the fire, there was still a chill in the room.

The chair creaked softly as she rocked, and the noise and rhythm soothed her. It was Christmas Eve, a night for hope and magic and miracles, but Charlotte was too weary to believe anymore. She thought of her sons, Thomas and James, and how pitiful their Christmas morning would be.

Despair rose in her like a wave. She'd been able to obtain an orange for each of them, and had taken one of their father's shirts apart to make new ones for them. By hoarding and bartering, she had enough ingredients for a little plum pudding. And that was it. That would be the extent of their Christmas.

*Damn the war, Charlotte thought. And damn Hitler.* The whole world had gone mad, it seemed, and she was beginning to doubt it would ever be right again.

She had tearfully kissed her husband goodbye and watched as he left to join the British Army. That had been two years ago and, in all that time, he hadn't been home once. A handful of letters had managed to make it to her, but five months had passed since the last one. Now she was waiting.

Waiting to see if she was still a wife, or if she was now a war widow.

What if William was dead?

*No.* Charlotte shook her head even as her heart sank. He couldn't be dead. She needed him. She missed him. Not just in her bed, though she ached for his touch some nights.

William was her husband, the father of her sons, the foundation of her world. He was the only man she had ever loved. He couldn't be dead.

A tear slid down her cheek, and she guiltily swiped it away. She wouldn't cry. Not in front of her boys, even though they lay sleeping the deep sleep of the innocent across from her.

Charlotte let her head fall back and her eyes close, drifting toward happier memories. The sound of the door clicking open had her shooting up from the chair, her hand clutching the pistol in her pocket.

She would fight to the death to protect what was hers.

Charlotte began to tremble at the familiar sight. "William?" she asked in a choked whisper.

He was painfully thin, his right arm was in a sling, and his uniform was tattered and worn—but it was her William.

The grin, that cheeky grin, was the same. He held out his good arm, and Charlotte moved to embrace him, pressing an ear against his chest so she could hear his heartbeat.

"It's me, sweetheart," he replied huskily, tipping her head up to kiss her.

Her trembling fingers traced his face, the sling covering his arm. "You're hurt," she murmured.

"Not much," he quickly reassured her. "I took a bullet to the shoulder. It'll heal, and I'll be good as new. Oh, Charlotte," he groaned and buried his face in her hair.

She hugged him back, half-afraid she was dreaming. "You're home. You're home," she chanted like a litany.

"I can stay until Twelfth Night," William told her. "I know it's Christmas Eve, but I wasn't able to get gifts for you and the boys."

Charlotte shook her head. "You being here is a gift. Oh, William, I was so afraid I'd never see you again."

"There are times when I thought the same thing," he admitted. "But I'm here now, my darling."

He caught her lips in a tender kiss as, outside, the rain turned to snow and a shooting star arched through the dark sky.

Charlotte's faith in miracles was completely restored. Her husband was home and all was right in her world this Christmas Eve night.