

'Tis About Time

by Yvonne Pont

CHAPTER I



*C*hristmas is going to be different this year. Bess smiled as she gently took the “Lotatea Shoppe” out of its cocoon of Styrofoam. She placed the ceramic building on the mantel.

“I promise, this year no cruises to shorten our time together. Every day for at least the next two weeks, we will enjoy our visit.”

Bess lovingly touched the miniature Dickens house. Her fingertips brushed along the bedroom dormer windows, down the stone brick walls to the two bay windows on the bottom floor. Her nail caught the raised handle of the wooden door, between the two front windows.

“I can’t wait to open you and enter your Dickens world. Oh, how I’ve missed you.”

Bess thought back to two Christmases ago when she first bought her Dickens Village at “Stewart’s China & Gift Store” in Littleton. *How vivid the memory is of my first encounter with Victorian England. Why, when I plugged in the extension cord and the Dickens buildings lit up, my life changed. Oh, not that I was bored with life, I had my garden club, my book club and of course, my dear husband, Evan Turner, but --- I was fifty-seven, recently retired and been married forever.*

Bess picked up the box containing the antiquarian bookshoppe. “My Christmas journey all started when I looked into your lighted

window, 'Tellaway Books,' and found myself drawn back into 1847 London." She put the building next to the tea shoppe. "What lovely residents you have within your walls. Thank you for lighting up my dull life and making me welcome. I look forward to this year's adventure."

Evan came into the living room. "Bess, are you talking to yourself? I don't know what it is with you and these buildings. It's like you are in another world when they are on the mantel." He picked up the empty box, abandoned on the floor. "Where's the seaside buildings I got you for Christmas last year?"

"They're still in the closet. Would you get them down for me?"

As Evan walked towards the hall closet, he shouted back at Bess, "I did enjoy the inn and lighthouse, you put in the bookcase last Christmas. I could almost imagine seeing smugglers coming out of the inn's pub." He chuckled.

Bess grinned. *So could --- did I, Evan.* She took the firehall out of its box and set it at the end of the mantel. A tiny ladder fell on the floor. Immediately, the two cats came to the rescue.

"Spider, Dickens, leave it alone!"

"Meooow!"

Evan came into the living room with his arms full of boxes. "Are you two boys in trouble again? You know, Bess, I'm looking forward to seeing how you make these seaside buildings come to life."

Bess looked at Evan's arms full of boxes. "I don't think they will all fit on this one shelf. You should clear the books off another one --- no, two shelves."

"Good idea, Bess. Say, while I do that, you can make us tea. And, to get us in the spirit of the season, cut a few generous pieces of your Christmas cake."

"Yes, Evan. Spider, Dickens, come on. I might as well get you some treats too."

When Bess brought in the tea, she almost collided with a stack of books. “For heaven’s sake, Evan, move those bloody books. I just missed tripping over them.”

“Watch your language, woman. As soon as the Dickens Village appears, you talk like a bloody Englishman.”

“Ditto!”

“Meow! Meow!”

“See, it’s catchin.” Evan wagged his finger at the cats, and they replied by wagging their tails. He looked over at the sparsely filled tea tray. “Where’s the Christmas cake?”

“It’s yer own bloody fault. If ye hadn’t chastised me over my choice of vocabulary, after yer absent-minded act of depositing those bloody books right in my path, I would have got yer bloody Christmas cake to ye by now.” Bess gasped for air.

“Meow! Meow!”

“Okay, okay! I’ll move ’em. Blimey, woman, I were only tryin’ to be ’elpful.” Hands full of books, Evan moved the pile over with his foot.

Crash!

“Blimey, now look what you’ve done!” Bess shook her head while the cats scattered for parts unknown. “Oh, leave them. Come and have your tea before it gets cold.”

“Bess, luv, I knew ye couldn’t stay mad at me long.” Evan gave her a peck on the cheek as he picked up his cup. “I’ll pour while ye go fetch the cake ---- luv.” He winked.

While they sipped their tea and munched on fruitcake and shortbread, Evan managed to say, “You know, Bess, I am really looking forward to Christmas this year. I have to admit I was disappointed when you first put your foot down about no cruise at Christmastime. After thinking about it, I realized what a disaster last Christmas was. Why, we didn’t even celebrate Christmas Day; pretty hard to do in an airport hotel in Los Angeles. To

be fair, I didn't plan it that way. Mother Nature thought a white Christmas would be an appropriate offering. Unfortunately, the airline did not appreciate the sentiment and threatened to cancel our flight. So, Bess, what could we do, but leave home on Christmas Eve. We couldn't miss our connecting flight to Fiji; our cruise ship was waiting." Evan gave Bess a mournful look. "We did have a good time on the cruise, and New Year's Eve was spectacular."

"Yes, Evan, it was, but so is Christmas at home."

"On that note, I shall take these boxes out of the way." Evan gulped the last of his tea. "Any suggestions where I can put these books?"

"Do you really want me to tell you where you can put them?"



Thud! Swoosh! Screech! Crash!###!

Bess listened to the elf in the attic as she finished the Dickens display on the mantel. After one very lengthy shuffling of boxes across the attic floor, Bess decided *either I put on some Christmas music to drown out Evan's moving abilities or ---*

Crash!

I go up and help him. Bess put Lily, the flower lady figurine, down in front of "The Brown Bread Bakery." She turned away from the mantel and headed up the stairs.

"Evan --- Evan, can you hear me? Hand down those boxes of Christmas decorations!"



"Bess, let's get up early tomorrow and go out for breakfast, then we can find us the best Charlie Brown Christmas tree money can buy."

“That would be nice.” Bess picked up his empty plate off the T.V. table. “Do you want a second helping of stew?” Without waiting for an answer, she headed for the kitchen.

“Good idea! But, not too much; I want to leave room for your mincemeat pie and ice cream.”

“What did you say? I scream? What can you expect? Turn the television down; I can’t hear over the noise of your hockey game.”

“Yes! What a goal! Quick, Bess, come and see the replay.”



Evan sat, feet up on the coffee table, two cats beside him and a smile of complete bliss on his face. “What a great game and the pie, de—li—cious!” He patted his stomach. “What more could a man ask for?”

“Meow!”

“And two of the best boys ever.” Evan rubbed under Dickens’s chin while Spider slightly opened one eye and let it slowly close.

“Speaking of asking for, can you go get the extension cord? I’m nearly finished putting up your seaside buildings, and I thought you might like to see them all aglow.”

“I can do that, Bess. Just give me a few more minutes to digest my supper.” Evan leaned his head back.

Bess glared at six closed eyelids. *A few minutes? Fat chance!* She picked up the last box and looked at the colourful sleeve surrounding it. *“Gillespie’s Cutters & Sleighs?”* She slipped the light cardboard sleeve off the box and opened the Styrofoam lid. Bess stared inside at the timbered building. Her vision narrowed to the sign above the red door. *Hey, it is a skate on the sign. I could possibly see the need for the odd sleigh, but why would anyone need skates by the seaside in England? And, what is a cutter?*

Snoort!

“Ah --- right the extension cord.” Evan wiped the drool off his lower lip and chin. “Excuse me, boys, I have a job to do. Don’t want to upset the boss.”

“Oh, while you’re looking, I need two cords, one for the mantel and one for the bookcase.” Bess shouted to Evan’s stooped back.

“Do we have any Myoflex or that new stuff you bought, Poutry-hen? I must have sat on the loose spring in the chesterfield.”

“Voltaren ---- I’ll get it for you. I keep telling you we need to get it reupholstered.”

Slam!

Five minutes later, the hallway door to the garage opened and Evan came into the living room carrying a long white cord. “Could only find one; will have to get another couple tomorrow. Need one for the tree and the train set. But, let’s see how this one works. Where do you want me to plug it in?”

No suggestions, girl, Bess thought, but politely said, “Down in front of the bookcase.”

Evan crouched down on the floor and plugged it into the socket. “Any lights on?”

“No, not yet.”

“I’ll try this plug. Anything?”

“No!”

“Darn, well I guess I better add another cord to our list.” Evan looked up at a disappointed Bess. “Say, why don’t we watch your favourite Christmas movie, ‘Christmas In Connecticut’? I noticed it is on at eight tonight. Nothing like the soothing sounds of Dennis Morgan singing to brighten your spirit, Bess.”

And he’s not bad to look at either. Bess looked at the clock. “Okay, ’tis about time. Get off your knees. It starts in ten minutes. And, besides, you’re rather fond of Barbara Stanwyck are you not? But --- first thing tomorrow ----”

“The extension cords!!”

CHAPTER II



“Bess, would you hold the tree straight while I tighten the bolts?” Evan flexed his flabby muscles as he turned the last metal rod against the bark of the victim. “Let go! Let’s see if old Charlie is secure. Don’t want to put the screws to him if at all possible. He is a real treasure, in fact, soon to be a lost treasure. Why, look at how many lots we went to before we even found any Charlie Brown fir trees. I wouldn’t be surprised that next Christmas, we won’t find any.”

“I agree with you, Evan. The expensive cultured trees have flooded the market. Besides, most homes have artificial ones now. Should we ----”

“Don’t even go there, woman. Nothing like the smell of a real tree.” Evan took a deep breath. “Yep!”

They both stood back to admire their new friend. Bess took close notice of the position of each branch.

“Turn it around.” Bess moved her head from side to side. “Not too far, Evan. Stop!” She walked around the front of the tree. “There is still a visible bald spot, but I guess the garlands will cover it.”

“Can I come out from behind the tree now?”

“Oh, sorry ---- yes.”

“Say, come to think of it, can you hand me a string of lights? As I am back here, I might as well start stringing them from here.”

“While you’re doing that, I’ll put the soup on to simmer. I’m still full from breakfast, but by the time you finish with the lights, spread the garlands and put the angel on top, you’ll be wanting a bowl of my homemade pea soup.” Bess handed Evan the lights through the branches. “Got them?”

“Thanks, Bess. You know, the stack of pancakes were darn good. ‘I-Hop’ sure knows how to make them.”

“Especially when they are filled with chocolate chips and smothered in maple syrup.” Bess smiled. “I must admit, my pumpkin spice ones were pretty tasty too.”

“I’ve always said, ‘Niki is a darn good cook.’”

“Niki’s a waitress, not a cook. Okay, she puts the happy faces on your pancakes and smiles and wiggles when she brings them.”

“How come you don’t do that, Bess?”

“Because I --- don’t --- hop every time you order something.” Bess marched off to the kitchen.

Through the tree branches, a faint muttering escaped. “I think I’ll stay right here. It is safer.”



Slurp! Slurp!

“Good soup, Bess!”

“Meow!”

“You don’t like soup.” Evan looked down at two expectant cat faces. “Alright, you can lick the bowl, but don’t meow at me if you don’t like it.” He put the china bowl, covered in a thin film of pea green muck, on the floor.

Two heads buried their faces in the container. Moments later, tongues still in motion, Dickens and Spider lifted their heads.

They licked their mouths and whiskers. Then, they sat and stared at Evan.

“Meow!”

“See I told you, you wouldn’t like soup.” He glared into the clean interior. “Bess, did we get new bowls? I never noticed this lighthouse pattern before.”

“No, we’ve had these for years. Every time you look at them, they are always filled to the brim for your consumption. And, heaven forbid if you were to wash and dry them after they are empty.” Bess looked down at the subject in question. “Hmmm, perhaps I should get the boys to clean up the dishes from now on.”

Evan picked up the bowl, and with a smile walked towards the kitchen. Tails held high, two cats followed in close pursuit.

As Evan came back from the kitchen, he looked at his watch. “Well, I hate to eat and run, but I must head out to my meeting. I can’t remember when I last took the morning,” Evan took another gander at his watch, “and part of the afternoon off on a Thursday. Good fun. I definitely must do this more often.”

They both looked over at the decorated Christmas tree. Evan gave Bess a hug and then a kiss on the cheek. The two cats meandered between their legs.

“Enough of this or I won’t make my three o’clock meeting.” Evan turned around to leave and spotted the darkened bookcase. “I was so involved with the lights on the tree, I forgot about the extra cord for the seaside village. Here.” He bent over and pulled the plug for the tree lights out of its socket and plugged in the cord for the bookcase in its place. “This will do until I get back.” He took another look at the now lighted bookcase.

“Wow! The miniature village display looks great. Bess, you sure know how to make them come alive. Why, I can almost hear the sea roaring onto the wharf.”

“Silly, that’s the cement truck across the street.”

“Right!” Evan gave her another kiss and headed out the front door.

Bess smiled and took a closer look at the three bookshelves, empty of books, but filled with quaint buildings. She zeroed in on the first shelf. One of this year’s new purchases caught her attention. The sign hanging from the overhang of the balcony above read, “The Snug.” Another sign dangled from the roof of the second floor balcony. It read, “Snuggle Inn.” *Funny, I didn’t pay much attention to it when I bought it. I just liked its appearance. Why, it appears to look like wooden weatherboard and not brick like the other seaside buildings in Bell Cove.*

Bess took a step back and viewed the tiny building next to it. “*Navigational Charts & Maps,*” *that’s not the same building or name as the one I saw last Christmas. Are my eyes deceiving me, or have I lost my memory? I am fifty-eight; no, fifty-nine.* She shook her head and stepped forward. Bess peered into the lighted window of “The Snug.”

“Cum on, mate, yer in t’ way. We’s bin at sea too long, if we dinnae get sum whiskey down our throats an’ into our bellies real quick, we’ll turn into walkin’ zombies.”

“Nothin’ like pure ’onest drink to dilute t’ salt water t’ captain’s bin forcin’ us to down. Right, Shorty?”

“Aye, Brodie! T’ more we’s drink, t’ more we flush out.”

Shoved through a door by the two brutes, Bess found herself slouched over a wooden bar. The overwhelming smell of spirits, be it liquid or human, invaded her nostrils. As she righted herself, her face brushed the chest of a well-spirited patron. She gagged.

“Blimey, watch where ye land, lad; next mate might not be so friendly.” A bearded bloke bared his toothless mouth and grinned. “Why, look, ye mates, ’e be as pretty as a lass.”

“Leave him be, Sam. He’s only a lad. What can I get ye, sonny?”

Bess looked up into the grey eyes of the barkeep. *Well, you sure aren’t Amos or for that matter Jo’s brother, Robert.*

Unable to contain herself, she said out loud, "Who are you? Where am I?"

"Clive Snugman is the name, proprietor of the finest establishment in Whale's Cove."

"Whale's Cove?"

"New Hampshire, lad."

"New Ham --- England?"

"New England, aye."

"Oh my!" Bess turned and ran out of the pub, bumping into a number of drunken sailors en route. "How? New ---? But, he did say England, didn't he?" She slammed into a brick wall. "Ooooooww!"

"Drunken' pirate! Watch where yer goin'!"

Bess clutched the brick wall as she felt herself falling to the ground. Her fingers grabbed onto a round, cold object, then another. She opened her eyes. *Buttons! Oh no, not another smelly chest?* A pleasant aroma wafted through the air. She sniffed. *But this one smells most appealing.* She raised her head.

"Why, 'tis only a lad. Stand straight, young man!" A tall man lifted her onto her feet.

"That's better. Yer not one of my motley crew. Ye best return to yer ship before ye run into the wrong sailors."

"Captain, I see ye met t' lad. Too young t' 'old 'is drink, I'd say, sur." Smelly Sam came through the doorway, saluted and stumbled off the step.

"Pearson, see that Sam gets back to the ship."

"Aye, Captain."

The tall man looked down at Bess. "And as fer ye, lad, off with ye." He straightened his sailor's jacket and walked into the snugery. "Miss Kitty, how nice to see ye; you're looking lovely this afternoon. And, Miss Dolly, yer rose coloured gown brings out the blush in yer cheeks."

“Oh, Captain!”

The door slammed shut. A cold blast of air smacked Bess’s face. *A fine welcome all around, I dare say.* The cold swirled around her body, from the tips of her runners’ toes to the top of her exposed head. *Oow! It feels like I just ate ice cream.* She rubbed her forehead. *Fat lot of good that did; my hands feel as cold as that frozen brick of ice cream I took forever to rescue from the back of the freezer.* She began to shiver. Bess folded her arms close to her chest. *It would help if I had a coat on, but still I can’t recall being so cold in England before. Something’s rotten in the state of Denmark --- hmmm, maybe I am in Denmark or worse still, Iceland.*

Bess swirled around on her frozen feet. *No wonder, the porch landing is solid --- granite slabs. If it was wood decking, I wouldn’t have noticed the cold.* Another blast of cold air penetrated her body. *What the? Where am I anyways?* She looked around. *Snow? My gosh, there’s snow everywhere; even the ruts are covered with snow*

I know it snowed in Bell Cove last Christmas, but this is ridiculous. Frozen, Bess stood mesmerized by the scene before her. A wall of white, perhaps four, five or six feet high, extended down the far side of the street. On the other side of the wall, Bess saw a much larger one. Suddenly, it began to move. *An avalanche!* She closed her eyes and waited --- Nothing happened. Her heart beat rapidly. She slowly opened her eyes and took a closer look at the wall. *Why, it’s a --- mast --- a gigantic white mast --- of a sailing ship. Silly me; the sail is blowing in the wind --- and it’s deafening.* With her ice cold hands, she cupped her frozen ears. *Of course, hence, sailors and sea captains. But, no large ships could dock in Bell Cove; it isn’t deep enough.* She stretched her neck in each direction. *Nothing looks familiar.* She shook her head. *Not Bell Cove and definitely not England. But, Clive, the barkeep, said it was England --- didn’t he? Oh no, he said ---*

“New England! New Hampshire!”

“Well, well, well, doth my eyes deceive me? No! I would know those trousers anywhere. Miss N-ike!”

Bess lost her balance. She grabbed onto the wooden post as her feet slid off the granite slab. A strong arm came from behind her and wrapped itself around her waist. Hot bursts of air wafted across the nape of her neck. A warm shiver extended throughout her body.

“Bess N-ike, must I always be rescuing ye?”

Mouth wide open, Bess turned her head and looked directly into those all too familiar, enchanting brown eyes. “You’ve shaved off your whiskers!” Her blue eyes took in his handsome face and inviting lips. “But, some things never change.” Lips only a hair’s breath apart, she whispered, “Always a gentleman.”

“Darling!”

Bess felt his arm tense and then move itself from her waist.

“Darling! Darling, is the boy alright?”

“Aah ----” He moved a foot back. “Yes, quite alright, indeed.” A cheeky grin spread across his face followed by a wink.

“Do you know him? I thought you shouted a name as you jumped off the sleigh. Mike was it?”

“N-ike, Miss N-ike, Abigail.”

“Miss? Did you say Miss N-ike?”

Nick grabbed hold of Bess’s shoulders and swung her in the direction of the female voice. “Miss Bess N-ike, I would like you to meet Abigail Thyme, my ----”

“Oh my, he is a woman --- and in ---- trousers!” The pretty young woman, bundled in a fur coat, hat and muff, looked over at Bess. “I do not recall my husband mentioning your name before.”

“Husband?” Bess stared at him. “Nick, you’re married?”

“Of course, miss, Nicholas and I have been husband and wife for five years now.”

“Five years?” Bess looked into his eyes for any glimpse of denial.
“Nicholas Thyme, you -----”

Nick whispered, “You never asked and I felt it unnecessary to volunteer this fact.”

“Unnecessary! You mean, as it did not serve your purpose. Why you ----”

“Now, Bess, is this any way to greet a long lost friend?”

“Friend? After what you put me through last Christmas when I watched you row out to sea? Why, I could have slipped on the rocks and tumbled to my death. Good old Saint Nick, would you have been a gentleman then and turned back to shore and rescued me? Or, would you, as you did, continue rowing out to the pirate ship, leaving your captured smuggler mates behind to the fate of Mr. Biggins and his excisemen?”

“But, did I not just rescue ye again, my fair lady?” Nick’s warm breath tickled Bess’s cheeks.

“Nicholas darling, ’tis about time we were on our way. Mammy will have supper ready.”

Nick stepped back from Bess and shrugged his shoulders. “Yes, Abigail.” For a fleeting moment, he frowned and then just as quick, his eyes lit up. “I say, Miss N-ike, will you join us? Our cook, Mammy, makes the best fried chicken in the country.”

“Nicholas darling, perhaps Miss N-ike, is it, has other plans?” Mrs. Thyme gave Bess the evil eye.

“Well --- I ----”

“It is settled then. Bess, hop into our sled. Abigail, move over.” Nick grabbed Bess’s hand and pulled her over to the open carriage. “Your hands are freezing.”

“Of course, Nicholas, your friend has no gloves, nor a coat on for that matter.” The impatient wife huffed.

“Where are my manners? Please forgive me, Bess.” Nick took off his heavy wool coat and placed it around her shoulders.

“Miss N-ike, is not my Nicholas such a gentleman?”

“Why, Mrs. Thyme, I have never seen such a gentleman. Truly unbelievable he is.”

“Enough of this flattery, ladies. Up you get, Miss N-ike.” Nick somehow managed to give Bess a hearty boost on her round backside without his wife noticing. “You keep bundled up in your blanket, Abigail dear. Miss N-ike and I will share this one on the seat.” He winked at Bess, again unbeknownst to his wife, and wrapped the wool blanket around them. “Warm enough, miss?”

Bess turned her head towards Nick and sneered. “Yes, thank you, sir. You are most kind.”

“Right then, off we go.” Nick took the reins. “Cl’ck, cl’ck! Off with, ye. Biggins!”

“Biggins?”

“Biggins is our draft horse, although, Nicholas refers to him as his daft horse. Shortly after he came back from England last time, he bought Biggins. I asked my husband why he chose this old unreliable horse and he replied, ‘He reminds me of a bloke’ --- that is what he called him --- ‘I knew in England, not quite what he seems, but bloody’ --- that is what he said --- ‘good at what he does.’”

“Neigh!” Biggins turned his head and winked at Bess.

The wife asked, “So, Miss N-ike, what brings you to Whale’s Cove?” Not waiting for an answer, she continued, “I do not recall seeing you here before.” She glared at Bess. “I would remember a woman with your unique hairstyle.”

“Abigail, I met Miss N-ike in England last year while travelling on the train from London to visit my uncle, Reverend Hornblower. She too was travelling to Bell Cove. And, I must add, her short hair made quite an impression there too.”

“So, am I to assume, it is not fashionable for ladies in England to have short hair either?”

“You assume right, Abigail. In fact, when the English realized she was from the colonies, they excused her hairstyle.”

“Oh no, Nicholas, how could they think such a thing?”

“Abigail, my dear, I can assure you, my English countrymen think worse things about the colonies.” Nicholas chuckled. “Speaking of fashion, you neglected to mention Miss N-ike’s trousers; a most practical addition to any woman’s wardrobe. Just think, Abigail, what freedom of movement they would afford you whilst riding or sailing. Next time we are in Boston, you should get your seamstress to make you a pair.”

“Nicholas Thyme, be serious. What would our neighbours say?”

“I can only surmise what the women would say, but I know what the men would say.” Nick winked at Bess. “I say, Miss N-ike, what do you think of Whale’s Cove?”

“Errr--- to be honest, I haven’t seen much of it.” At that moment they passed the only building Bess recognized. “Cutters!” Bess pointed to the sign over the door. “What are they? I know what sleighs and of course skates are, but -----”

“Good question. Obviously, we do not have need of them in England. Your asking proves you are not from New England. I too asked the same question when I first landed here, ten years ago. Cutters are smaller and lighter weight than sleighs. They were first introduced in America at the turn of the century. They have a single seat just perfect for two while the sleigh, being larger, can accommodate a whole family and their supplies. The runners are also different. Sleigh runners are closer together to allow easy turns while cutter’s runners are straighter and closer to the ground. You are in a sleigh right now.”

Oh, sounds like comparing our mini to an SUV. “Very interesting!”

“You did not tell her that the cutter is also used for courting. Nicholas darling, you cannot have forgotten you courted me in a cutter.” Abigail beamed at Bess.

“How could I forget; your father reminds me every time I see him. Abigail dear, you neglected to tell Miss N-ike that you stopped to pick me up. Here I was minding my own business, trekking down the road to the pub, enjoying the brisk cold air, and out of nowhere came a cutter out of control. I leapt forward and grasped the horse’s bridle, forcing the beast to stop. Naturally, the only thing left for me to do was to hop in beside a damsel in great distress and drive her back to her father.”

“Ah, such a true gentleman, and --- just in the nick of time!”

“Miss N-ike, you are right, he is a gentleman, my Nicholas Thyme”

The evening drew near and so did the darkness. Unable to see her surroundings, Bess let her thoughts take over. *How am I going to explain my sudden arrival here? Nick is more in your face, so my explanations will have to be believable. Maybe if I keep firing pointed questions at him, he will be too concerned about not revealing the truth about his smuggling operations, to ask me. But then, does his wife already know?*

“Whoa! Biggins, you stubborn mule, slow down!”

“Neigh!”

The sled slid to a stop. A tall man, dressed in a black suit, came rushing down the veranda stairs. A smaller figure appeared under the glow of a gaslamp. He slid across the pathway and grabbed the horse’s bridle.

“Welcome home, sir. I was beginning to worry. I thought you may have slipped and lost control. The roads are most slippery, sir,”

“Not to worry, Jenkins. We --- I unexpectedly met a friend from our homeland and invited her for supper.” Nick jumped out of the carriage. “Jenkins, help Mrs. Thyme and our guest down. I will assist Tiny in escorting Biggins to the barn. This cold has made him a wee testy. Tiny, start pulling, when I show him the whip. Jenkins, take them in the house before they freeze. The lad and I will bring in the supplies through the scullery.”

“Madam, take my arm; the stoop is slippery.” Jenkins looked back at Bess and the snow-laden steps. “Aah, I see ye have sensible footwear, sir, but still be careful. I must get Tiny out first thing tomorrow and clear them.”

“Jenkins, how is Tiny? He did take a terrible tumble off them this morning.”

“Madam, the lad is a wee bit sore, but nothing broken, only his youthful pride was shattered.”

I can understand the feeling. Thank goodness, old Saint Nick saved me from the same fate. As they walked into the large hallway, Bess felt warmth coming from the room to her left. A blazing fire crackled in the large granite fireplace. Unable to control herself, Bess rushed through the open doorway. With hands spread wide, she embraced the warmth of the roaring fire. She rubbed her hands together and then moved them up and down her arms. She bent over and continued the vigorous motion on her legs. *Keep it up, girl. These poor, old frozen limbs are beginning to thaw.*

At that moment, Jenkins came in the room, followed by Nicholas. Both took a few minutes to take in the scene before them; Nicholas smiled in complete enjoyment while Jenkins, mouth open and eyes as big as full moons, looked stunned.

No longer speechless, Jenkins uttered, “S -- ir?”

“Sorry, sir, how rude of me to just barge into this room without asking.” Bess turned her back to the fire and noticed the oddest look on the man’s face.

“Sir?”

Nick burst out laughing. “Jenkins, I’m sorry, an introduction is in order.” Containing himself, he continued, “Miss Bess N-ike,” Nick glanced over at the once speechless man, “yes, miss, Jenkins. Bess, I would like to introduce you to my most valuable manservant, butler, master of this home whilst I am away, which I must add is more often than I am here, Glanville Jenkins.”

“Errr ---- Miss N ----- I ----”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Jenkins.” Bess extended her hand.

“Please forgive me, miss. I should have helped you outside. I did not realize --- ye were a wo --- The light is poor on the veranda. Sir ---”

“An honest mistake, Jenkins. I will look into getting another lamp installed tomorrow.” Nicholas chuckled to himself. “Miss N-ike, are you now warmed up enough to leave the parlour and follow me into the dining room? Mammy, our cook, has supper ready.” Nick took Bess’s arm and Jenkins sheepishly followed them, three paces behind.

When they walked into the dining room, Bess felt about three feet high. Here before her sat Mrs. Thyme in all her regal splendour. Like a queen, dressed in a royal purple gown, she sat at the head of the table. The candlelight brought out the blush in her cheeks and the golden glow of her hair. *All she needs is a diamond tiara to make her queen of her castle. Shall I curtsy or just run out of the room?*

The queen spoke, “Miss N-ike, do sit down. We have kept the cook waiting long enough. Jenkins, let Mammy know we are ready.”

“Yes, madam.” Jenkins began to pull out the chair for Bess.

“I will attend to Miss N-ike, Jenkins. You best heed Mrs. Thyme.” Nick pulled the chair out and waited for Bess to sit. “Your napkin, miss.” He gently spread it across her lap, turning his body slightly so his wife could not observe his wink and cheeky smile.

“Master Thyme, I’s hope there will be enough fried chicken and grits for supper. You didn’t tell me we was having a guest.” A dark woman came rushing in carrying a large platter.

“Mammy, do not worry; you always cook too much anyway,” said Nicholas.

“Child, would you like some water?” Mammy brushed past Bess with a pitcher of water in her calloused hand.

“Yes, please.”

Startled, Mammy spilt the water. “I so sorry.” She took hold of a corner of her white apron and started to mop up the liquid.

“Not to worry, you didn’t get any on me.”

Mammy stopped what she was doing and turned her face towards Bess. “Land’s sake, you’re a woman!”

“She certainly is, Mammy. I would like to introduce you to a friend of mine I met in England. Miss N-ike, Mammy is the best cook in the colonies. Just ask Jenkins; why, he is now the first to admit she makes the best toad in the hole and bubble and squeak.”

“Land’s sake, what a strange lot these English are; so prim and proper, and then they name their favourite foods after frogs and mice.”

“Mammy, please! Go and get the rest of the supper,” ordered Mrs. Thyme. “Honestly, Nicholas Thyme, you must do something about Mammy. She is too free with her comments. She is only the help and lucky to be working for us.”

“Yes, Abigail, I agree talking about poor frogs stuck in a hole, and boiling mice is not appropriate at the table. But, just imagine how those poor mice would react bubbling in the cooker. You’d squeak too, my dear.”

“Nicholas!”

“The trouble is, Abigail dear, you colonists misunderstand we English.” Nick reached across the table. “We are not being cruel. We are honouring the poor little creatures by naming traditional dishes after them.” He picked up the platter which Mammy had left abandoned on the table, and passed it to his wife. “Dear, would you like some fried mice --- er --- chicken?”

At that point, Abigail put her hand up to her mouth and ran out of the room. Bess covered her mouth with her linen napkin and giggled. Jenkins took the platter of fried chicken from a motionless Nicholas and was almost out the door when he burst into laughter.

Nicholas, with his head bowed, muttered, "Well. I know where I will not be sleeping tonight." As he raised his head, a devilish grin crossed over his handsome face.

"Nick, not very gentlemanly," said Bess.

"I know, but what fun!"

Mammy came into the room grinning from ear to ear. "Master Thyme, shall I serve tea and Spotted Dick in the parlour?"

"Oooh, Spotted Nick --- er Dick sounds yummy," piped up Bess. "With custard?"

"Yessy, Miss. Master Thyme has custard with everything."

"Now, here be a woman trained for my own heart. And to think, Mammy came from New Orleans. French creole be damned!"

"Master Thyme, coming from Africa, you know I never cottoned on to their ways."

"Mammy, if you can be taught proper English faire, why cannot my New England wife? I say, Jenkins, what have we done wrong?" Nicholas slapped his butler on the back and went over to Bess. "Time for a proper English tea, Bess!"

"In the nick of time!"



"More tea, miss?" asked Mammy as she picked up the beautiful china teapot.

"Yes, please. What a lovely pattern." Bess smiled at Mammy as the steaming tea flowed gracefully from the spout to the welcoming cup.

"Missy Thyme has the very best, miss. I don't know what it is called cause I never learnt to read. I jus' know it's her favourite. I didn't think she'd mind us using it. I reckon' as she does like to show it off to her guests."

"Well, we will just have to ask her, won't we, Mammy?"

“Speaking of asking, where are you staying in Whale’s Cove?” asked Nicholas.

Bess’s heart stopped. *Now what do I say? And, here I was starting to enjoy myself.*

“Sir, it is snowing very hard. Perhaps Mammy should prepare a room for her for the night?”

“Good idea, Jenkins. Lord knows Biggins will not appreciate being disturbed at this hour ---- and go out in this weather? Unthinkable!” Nick looked at Bess.

“Aaaah ----”

“Settled then. Mammy, fix up the yellow guest room. It goes with our guest’s hair.”

“Yessy, Master Thyme.”

“Oh, and while you are at it, fix up the blue room for me.”

Ten minutes later, Bess followed Nicholas up to the yellow room. “Thank you, Nick. I know I shall sleep well tonight.” At the door she hesitated a moment before turning the glass door knob. “Goodnight, Nick.”

“Goodnight, Bess. Sweet dreams.”

Bess opened the door and walked into a dimly lit bedroom. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it.

“Sweet dreams, Nick.”

“Dreams? I know I’m late, Bess, but ----

“Evan!”