

# THE TART'S FINAL NOEL

GRAVESYDE VILLAGE MYSTERIES

BOOK THREE



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MONDAY



DECEMBER 18, 1815



## ONE



### VERITY

"OLD RED HAS GONE MISSING AGAIN," MISS BUTLER CALLED FROM the inn's kitchen. "We're short of eggs. We need more good layers."

*Good layers.* The irony pierced her heart. "I'll look in a minute." Clutching her polishing rag, Verity Russell swiped at tears with her shoulder.

If she rubbed the planks any harder, she'd wear a hole through them. Solid walnut and her husband's pride and joy, the heavy Jacobean trestle table suited the derelict medieval inn they were restoring. Making the boards shine was probably a waste but she needed an excuse to be alone.

*More good layers, indeed. That hurt. That hurt a lot.*

Verity had been telling herself that she cried because she would no longer be teaching in here. Starting a school for the village children in her husband's pub had been her very first accomplishment after escaping her narrow London life, and she had a right to be proud.

But the late Earl of Wycliffe's heirs had rebuilt their medieval

tower to allow local children access to the manor's schoolroom. Verity's students would be taught there after the first of the year.

She didn't fool even herself with that blatant fustian. She wasn't crying over the change. Children had no place in a public inn, and she actually looked forward to working with Mr. Bird-whistle at the manor. The students would benefit from having two teachers, a better library, and more space.

She selfishly cried for herself and the child she thought she would bear by summer. She hadn't realized how very much she wanted a child of her own. Foolish of her. She and Rafe Russell had only married a few months ago. They had too little money and too little time as it was. Thank goodness it had been too soon to tell Rafe. With all his other worries, he didn't need to share this sorrow. For him, she had to keep smiling. Sometimes, she simply needed to be alone with her grief.

Having rubbed every stick of furniture plus the centuries-old bar, she ran out of beeswax. Her students were all home, preparing for the Christmas festivities. Even the dour old women in the kitchen were singing hymns in merry rounds. Having exchanged wintry tents for cozy chambers at the inn, their new staff had reason to be joyful.

Time to hunt Old Red. Avoiding the merriment in the kitchen, Verity slipped into the inn's lobby, donned a cloak, and set out in the chilly wind to search for the recalcitrant old biddy who wouldn't stay penned. Best to make a stew for dinner than let a fox have good meat. The biddy was too old to lay much longer anyway.

At twenty-five, was *she* too old to carry babes? Verity fought a fresh spurt of tears, although now she could blame the wind for making her eyes water. With no family and all the women in the manor busy with holiday plans, she had no one she dared ask. Besides, it was too personal, and given her lonely upbringing, she wasn't accustomed to sharing.

As if sensing her distress, her marmalade kitten pounced from nowhere to circle her ankles. She leaned over to pet Marmie's

furry head, then tucked him into the warmth of her cloak. Well-fed these days, the once-abandoned kitten was now almost too large for her pocket.

At this early hour, frost still lingered in the shadows. The old hen most likely had retreated to the warm stable. A city girl, Verity had never learned to cook or wring chicken necks, but she might learn for this foul fowl. Not a charitable thought for the holiday season.

Perhaps she should think about pleasantries, like how to make a kissing bough. She'd been a child when she'd helped her mother decorate for Christmas, but it shouldn't be difficult. Rafe had pointed out the mistletoe in the trees behind the inn. She had no notion of how one harvested it.

Once they reached the large, drafty stable, Marmie jumped out to chase mice. When the manor had an excess of guests, they sheltered their carriage horses in the inn's extensive stable. The income hadn't covered costs as yet, but it was a good start. The inn's bedchambers were scarcely ready for more than a few guests.

She was more comfortable with counting pounds and shillings than cooking. Food was Rafe's domain, but as bailiff, he often had to be out and about, which meant someone else had to prepare meals.

The hen wouldn't go near the horses at the busy end of the stable. She preferred the empty stalls in need of repair. Verity stalked down the hard-packed dirt floor, listening for the old biddy. Red usually roosted on a grain bin, but a rustle in one of the old stalls gave her away. With grim triumph, she eased open the sagging door, prepared to pounce.

Two small shapes dived into a meager haystack that hadn't been there yesterday.

Startled, Verity almost slammed the stall door, but the wriggling rearends attempting to hide in loose straw were too ridiculous to fear. She'd spent these last months dealing with children from five to fourteen and knew when they were avoiding author-

ity. She probably knew these two. The only problem here was why they were in the stable. Some idle game to while away the holiday hours? Or were they hiding from something or someone?

She'd spent many years hiding from her fears. No longer.

She crouched down to a child's height. "Where are you Old Red? I need eggs for my breakfast. The rashers are almost ready. And I have toast browning. I just need your eggs." Promises of food usually lured children faster than yelling.

No whispers. Just more rustling as they burrowed deeper. Shouldn't they have recognized her voice? Were they *not* some of her students? That would be decidedly worrisome.

At the sound of her wheedling tone, Marmie returned to sniff for food.

"I do wish I had someone to share tea and toast with," she said wistfully. "Eating by myself is lonely."

A single whisper. No reply.

"Well, if I can't find those eggs, I shall just have bacon on toast, I suppose. Maybe if I leave the door open, Old Red will wander in later." She stood and eased from the stall. Did she go inside and hope they took the bait? Or wait and pounce? She didn't wish to terrify them. "I wish I had children to share my meal."

She hid behind the door but peered around to watch.

A tousled towhead with big violet eyes popped up cautiously from the stack. A moment later, another towhead, this one smaller, wearing bedraggled blue ribbons in her pigtails, joined him. Verity's heart tore at their tear-stained, dirty, frightened faces. They were so very *young*. . .

Marmie leaped into the pile of hay, lost his footing, and slid down in front of startled blue eyes. Verity used that excuse to return. "Oh, my, Marmie you naughty kitty, you were supposed to find a chicken, not children! Hello, you two. Did the Christmas angels send you to share my breakfast?"

Two children in a stable at Christmas—angels might possibly be involved. For the first time in a week, a shaft of joy pierced her gloom. She had never really believed in angels, but. . .

The smallest child reached for the kitten, cuddling the spoiled creature before crawling out of the straw. Verity thought the girl couldn't be much more than five. Her pinafore was filthy and wrinkled but not ragged. Her gown fit, and her shoes were muddy but solid. This was no neglected child—but Verity had never seen her before. Those huge violet eyes watched her warily.

With an irritated sigh, the boy crawled out. He looked too much like the younger to be anything but her older brother. The only difference was that the girl's hair was silky straight and his curled in ringlets. Men got all the looks.

"Oh, my, definitely sent by angels," Verity declared. "I am Mrs. Russell. And you are?"

"Daniel and Daphne," the boy said curtly. "Do you really have toast?"

"I most certainly do. And rashers and milk, and if we can round up a few eggs, we can have those too." They watched her so hungrily that her heart broke all over again. "Do you know how to look for eggs? Old Red sometimes hides them in here but we'll find more in the henhouse."

The boy nodded. The girl clung to Marmie and simply followed them out.

Mrs. Hatter stepped out the kitchen door. The elderly servant had probably seen them from the window. Verity held a finger to her lips, then gave a shooing gesture. Smarter than most, the stout old woman limped inside and probably continued to watch from the window.

Verity handed Daniel a basket and showed them how to look around the outside of the henhouse. Someone would have already searched the inside. By the back fence, Old Red, the stubborn old biddy, clucked from wherever she'd been hiding and scampered. The little girl released Marmie to crouch down and uncover the nest and an egg. Either the child knew how to find eggs or she was capable of hearing. She simply didn't seem to speak.

The children happily rummaged in weed patches, robbing Rafe of the eggs he was probably counting on for cakes or other

dishes. Her husband loved cooking. . . and eating. But he could go without eggs for a day.

Once they had a nice supply, Verity signaled for the pair to follow her to the kitchen door. She put a finger to her lips and gestured for them to stay behind and to one side. Children loved games, and these two were already prepared to be sneaky. She leaned inside and whispered to the servant watching her as if Verity had taken leave of her senses. "Clear the room, please. I don't want to frighten them."

Too new to this employment to be anything but obedient, Mrs. Hatter hustled everyone out. It was time they started cleaning upstairs anyway.

Verity held a finger to her lips again and gestured for the children to enter. "The kitchen is all ours," she whispered.

In exaggerated stealth, they crept into the warmth of the enormous inn kitchen. Rashers were, indeed, keeping warm by the fire. Verity couldn't cook much, but she knew how to fix eggs. Bread was already sliced, so she had each child take a fork and toast slices over the fire while she scrambled their find, adding cream and cheese and just a bit of salt, having learned that most children liked their food bland.

She hadn't had servants since she was a young girl. She hadn't forgotten how to do for herself in these last few months of being pampered by Rafe and the new staff. She dished out the bacon and eggs, buttered the toast, and boiled fresh tea for herself while the children dug forks and spoons from the drawer under the table. Marmie had followed them in and curled around everyone's ankles. Once a starving alley cat, he was always ready for a meal.

The table was much too tall. Verity poured milk and had them sit on the hearth while she confined Marmie to her lap by feeding him bits of bacon. She hadn't eaten this morning, but for the first time in a week, she was finally hungry. Perhaps she had simply needed a bit of intrigue to distract her.

"Well, Daphne and Daniel, this is so much better than eating alone, thank you! Did you fly in on angel wings last night?"

The little girl giggled, so she could make sounds. Captain Huntley at the manor had hired a deaf-mute boy as an assistant. He mostly grunted, possibly because he'd never heard a laugh.

Daniel was all but inhaling his food. He washed down a huge bite with milk, then frowned. "The carriage had a pony. It will be hungry too."

"I will have someone look for the pony," she said reassuringly, hiding her concern. "Do you know where you left it?"

"Nanny fell asleep and it went off the road," he said matter-of-factly, tearing into his toast. "We were cold, and Mama said we can always find help at the church, but no one was there."

The chapel was just down the road from the inn, on the east end of the village, which meant they'd come from Stratford—or London. The carriage shouldn't be difficult to find. It rather sounded like the driver had passed out drunk, though. Shouldn't this nanny be awake by now and frantically hunting the children? Why in the name of heavens would she be driving children about in the dark on a wintry night?

"The curate was visiting his parishioners," Verity explained, not wanting to discourage them from seeking churches—although it was more likely that Paul Upton and his new wife, Minerva, were dining late at the manor. "Do you know where you were going?"

"Nanny said we was a burden on the parish and we was to be sent back to where we belong." He wrinkled his freckled nose. "We're not very big. How much is a burden?"

Evidently listening, Daphne pushed her eggs around, and a single tear trailed down her dirty cheek. Still, she said nothing. She certainly looked old enough to talk.

But Daniel's explanation was all Verity needed. The children were orphans with no one to take them in, so "Nanny" had been driving them to a workhouse.

"A burden is what someone doesn't want to carry. I am sure

you weren't a burden to your mother or father. Do you know where they are?" Verity let the kitten jump down now that the pair had nearly cleaned their plates.

"Mama died." Daniel said it bravely, as if he'd had to repeat the story more than once, but his eyes looked bleak. "She was sick. She said she wrote our family and they was to take us in. But no one came." Hiding tears, Daniel tried to tempt the kitten from his sister by holding up a tiny piece of bacon, but Daphne had buried her face in the kitten's fur and wasn't letting loose.

His simple statement induced a cyclone of emotions that Verity couldn't quite manage. Tears returned to her eyes, but hope rose in her heart. If their family didn't want these two precious babes. . .

Gravesyde wasn't a real village with taxes and all. They had no money to pay for a workhouse or orphanage. And she wasn't about to allow these children to be abandoned in an awful place like Birmingham, the only town where they could possibly be taken.

Perhaps, when they found the nanny, she could tell them more. Verity wouldn't get her hopes up. Yet.

"Well, then, we must find your family like your Mama wanted, mustn't we?" she said cheerfully. "There must have been some delay on the road. I am sure they are missing two beautiful angels already. Let us get you washed up and tidy and we'll see about finding your nanny and the pony."

And if no one claimed these babes, she would. Relief swelled her heart at that decision.

## TWO



### MINERVA

MINERVA UPTON HUMMED AS SHE PICKED HER WAY PAST THE parsonage drive's half-frozen mud puddles. She'd been practicing Christmas carols with her sister-in-law and the other ladies at the manor last night and the joy still bubbled. All of Gravesyde Priory had reason to celebrate this year, and she could not remember ever loving the holiday so much. She'd spent the early part of her life following her father's half-starved troops across the Continent and these last few years moldering in a duke's library. Now, newly married, she was enjoying her freedom entirely too much.

She truly loved being married, perhaps because she dearly loved Paul. No stiff, formal gentleman, he was a Renaissance man of a sort—kind-hearted enough to handle his wayward parishioners with a gentle hand, talented enough to repair the crumbling chapel and parsonage, intelligent enough to have graduated Oxford and meet her bookish barbs with humor and understanding. How could anyone not love a man like that?

But the foolish creature insisted on eating. Having grown up with pan bread and grease and the occasional overcooked quail wing, Minerva had never developed much interest in food. Not

married a month, and she was already failing as a wife. She wished to please her new husband with a nice meal in the morning, if nothing else. Even genteelly-raised Verity could fix breakfast. Of course, Verity's husband did the baking.

Minerva had to waste the few coins of her meager librarian's salary on buying bread. Rafe's inn wasn't set up for a bakery, but fortunately, the Widow Willoughby provided. She had ancient ovens left over from when there had been a busy village and a real bakery. The bakers had moved away with everyone else, but Willa, with her hermit habits, had remained. She turned out delicious breads and buns and anything else requested. Minerva told herself she was helping a poor widow by providing her with an income.

Unfortunately, her weekly bread-buying meant Paul wouldn't have a new shirt at Christmas. Even if she might afford the fabric, she wasn't much at sewing beyond hems and buttons.

She turned off the main road to traverse what could barely be called an alley behind the village shops. Once-lovely thatched cottages, with large yards for pigs and chickens and vegetables, were scattered along this winding pathway. After the earl and viscountess died, the village had died, too, abandoning the cottages to the bank. Minerva wondered how the widow held onto hers all alone. A bakery selling a few loaves of bread a day couldn't pay a mortgage or even rent. But the lady was reclusive and Minerva didn't like to pry. Well, not too much.

Oddly, no smoke rose from the great ovens on this chilly morning. Had she arrived too late? Was the baking all done for the day? Or had the widow decided to take a holiday? What on earth would she feed Paul if she couldn't buy bread? Perhaps Rafe had some extra?

She supposed there was always porridge, but she had no fruit to make it special. What else could be added to ugly, gray porridge to make it appealing?

Well, perhaps Mrs. Willoughby had something leftover from yesterday. Minerva knew how to soften old bread. She knew how

to make-do with almost anything, but she was as partial to fresh, hot bread as her husband. She'd learned to eat well since returning from the war-torn Continent.

Bypassing the baker's unused front door, she turned down a worn flagstone path to the overgrown backyard, and knocked at the kitchen shutters. Age had stripped them of any paint except a few blue flakes in the cracks where the bare wood had weathered. No one answered.

She tried the door, which matched the peeling shutters. Still no response.

Minerva frowned. She'd only lived in Gravesyde since June, but she had never seen Mrs. Willoughby leave her house. She supposed she must. A baker had to buy supplies. But she never attended chapel and one never saw her about. Presumably, a baker had to rise early in the morning and must go to bed before the tavern opened in the evening. One of these days, Rafe would open the inn's pub, but for now, the tavern was the only neighborhood gathering place besides the church. There was no real excuse not to attend church once the bread was baked, though.

She tested the latch, and to her surprise, the door swung open. "Mrs. Willoughby? It's just me, Minerva Upton. Are you well?"

Middle-aged but still attractive in an overblown sort of way, the baker had never been talkative, but she always replied. The house echoed empty.

"Mrs. Willoughby?" She entered and called louder. *Yes*, she was meddlesome.

The kitchen appeared neat as always, the ingredients for breadmaking set out on the old oak table, The two giant baking ovens, however, barely emitted any heat. That was concerning. The stink caused her to peer in. What had she been burning? Old clothes? Had she run out of kindling? Minerva poked at the embers to stir them and called, "Mrs. Willoughby?"

Was that a groan? Swallowing hard, she gripped the fire iron and swung around to search the kitchen. She didn't dither for long. She'd lived with war. Sometimes, lives depended on speed,

and she wasn't timid. "Mrs. Willoughby? I'm coming in," she cried louder.

She didn't want to face a shotgun. She'd give any intruder a chance to run out the front, but who would rob a poor baker? She suspected the woman must be ill.

She had never gone past the kitchen before. She peered into the front room. The parlor seemed a little disturbed, but the furniture was sparse. A dog having a romp could have made it look messy, not that the widow had a dog. Feeling ridiculous, she continued gripping the poker.

That was definitely another groan. Heart pounding, she made her way past an ancient wooden settle, a faded sofa, and a spindly writing desk, working her way toward the front door and stairs.

Sprawling across the parlor hearth was a gentleman in a fine caped greatcoat attempting to crawl up on hands and knees and slipping on a saddlebag. "Will you cease that caterwauling, woman?" he muttered, righting himself.

Minerva had seen plenty of drunks in her time. She didn't smell alcohol, but she'd wager there was an empty bottle of gin about somewhere. She didn't offer her hand. He wasn't a large man but still twice her size. "Where is Mrs. Willoughby?"

He sat up on his haunches, then caught a worn, upholstered chair and shakily hauled upright on his own. He blinked at her. A head taller than her petite stature, with fashionably cut, mud-brown hair and muddy eyes, he wasn't imposing. She hid the fire iron in her cloak.

"Willa? Didn't she come home?" He rubbed the back of his head and grimaced. "Devil take it, did she hit me? I told her I was coming."

This was a little too much oddity for this hour of the morning, and Paul would be looking for his breakfast soon. But Minerva's instinct for danger had gone on full alert. "And you are?"

Unsteadily, he dropped into the upholstered chair without bowing or waiting for her to sit. "Distant cousin, of a sort, Geoffrey Cooper, Miss. . ."

"Mrs. Upton. It looks as if Mrs. Willoughby took your letter for a warning and left. Hold your head down, let me take a look at it." Minerva's father was a colonel. Telling people what to do was in her blood. She set the poker aside as he followed orders.

He turned his chair to cross his arms on the sofa back, letting his head sink onto them. "Can't hold it up anyway. I quit drinking, I swear. I haven't touched a bottle. . ." He grunted as she found the matted, bloodied bump on the back of his head. He'd smeared blood on his linen, probably from rubbing the wound.

"Mrs. Willoughby is strong if she's the one who struck you," Minerva said, almost in admiration. She couldn't have managed to concuss a man like that. "I can send for a physician, but she'll tell you the same thing. You need to stay awake for a while, don't try to do anything strenuous until the nausea and dizziness settles."

She glanced around for a weapon, but she held the most likely one. She checked the ends but saw no blood or hair. Of course, she'd had it in the oven. "Are you sure you didn't say something rude to her? I've never known her to strike anyone."

"Don't remember a blamed thing. I was supposed to attend a funeral but I was too late. Story of my life. I used to visit my cousins here in summer, many years back. I'd written Willa, asking if I could stop on a night or two after the funeral. I didn't hear from her, but that's not unusual. She doesn't write. I figured she'd find someone to read my post. She has no reason to hit me. May be the only person in the world who doesn't, mind you. . ."

Hospitality required that she provide hot tea, at the very least. With the fires out, the usually cozy cottage was freezing. Caution said this man could be dangerous—but the expensive greatcoat. . . Well, wealth did not a gentleman make.

But concern for the baker was paramount. "Did you look upstairs?"

He rubbed his no-doubt aching head, frowned, and glanced down at his coat. "Doesn't look like I had time."

Definitely signs of concussion if he couldn't remember what

happened. Or a hangover. "Start a fire and I'll make tea in a bit. I'm going up."

The baker had once had a prosperous home, far larger than the parsonage, Minerva observed as she ran up the stairs. A small sitting area with a threadbare carpet graced the hall at the top of the stairs. Two closed doors at the rear, one open overlooking the front. . . very nice. Minerva chose the front first.

And entering—gagged on a scream.

### **The Tart's Final Noel**

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