

# Christmas *at* Harrington's



**SNEAK  
PEEK!**  
FREE CHAPTER  
from Guideposts

MELODY  
CARLSON



# CHAPTER 1

The slate-colored sky matched Lena's spirits as she sprinted toward the bus stop. "Don't be late," Mrs. Stanfield had warned earlier. "The bus leaves promptly at 5:15 and there won't be another until tomorrow morning."

Lena hadn't planned to be late. But with two hours to spare, she had ducked into the public library to use the restroom and escape the elements, then found a comfy easy chair. While reading a recipe for cranberry cake in the December issue of *Better Homes and Gardens*, Lena had dozed off, lulled by the warmth, the flickering fluorescent lights, and the sweet, musty smell of books. If not for the librarian's nudge, since the library closed at six, Lena would probably still be sleeping.

Instead, she was running down the sidewalk with the icy wind in her face and her purple parka flapping wildly behind her like a parachute. She waved her arms, calling frantically to the bus driver. "Wait! Please, wait!"

"You were cutting that mighty close," he told her as he opened the door for her. "Hurry up, lady, I've got a schedule to keep."

"Thanks," she gasped breathlessly as she handed him her wrinkled ticket. "I really appreciate—"

"Grab a seat—now." He jerked his thumb backward.

As the bus lurched forward, Lena found an empty pair of seats near the back and quickly ducked in. Scooting next to the window, she clutched her handbag in her lap with trembling hands. That had been close. But she'd made it.

Her stomach rumbled as the bus left the lights of Indianapolis behind. She'd been lucky to snag two seats together. Maybe she could use the space to lie down and really sleep. Except that she was wide awake now. As if on high alert, she watched the bus zip out into the freeway traffic. They were moving so fast that Lena felt dizzy. Was the driver speeding, or was this just one more thing she'd forgotten during her eight years in prison?

Lena tried to peer out the window, but due to the darkness outside and the reading light from the passenger in front of her, all she could see was her own dismal reflection. Pasty round face, weary blue eyes, and dishwater blonde hair in need of attention. She looked away and swallowed hard. Self-pity was something she'd learned to suppress while incarcerated. It served no purpose and could even make an inmate appear weak. And weakness, she'd learned early, was preyed upon. No, she'd quickly decided, bitter was better. And perhaps it would be better here on the outside as well.





“You don’t want to return to your hometown?” Mrs. Stanfield, a volunteer social worker, had asked Lena last week. The older woman had been helping make arrangements for Lena’s release. Getting out eighteen months early for good behavior had been a bit of a surprise to Lena, although she knew the women’s correctional facility was getting crowded, and a number of inmates—some with crimes much more serious than hers—had been paroled. Plus, with Christmas less than four weeks away, perhaps a spirit of goodwill had warmed the hearts of the parole board. Whatever the case, suddenly it was time for Lena to reenter the world at large.

“I want a fresh start in a new town,” Lena had firmly told the volunteer. “Somewhere far away from Willow Creek . . . somewhere outside of Indiana.”

Mrs. Stanfield frowned. “But we have a much better success rate for parolees who return to their hometowns and families—it’s like a built-in support group.”

“Not for me,” Lena said. “My parents both passed away while I was in here. There’s nothing for me back in Willow Creek.” She didn’t add that she suspected her parents’ illnesses and subsequent deaths, within a year of each other, were partially due to the stress and shame she’d thrust into their otherwise calm and slightly boring lives. They hadn’t lasted long enough to hear the truth. Not that they’d been listening—not to Lena anyway.

“So where do you want to go?” Mrs. Stanfield asked with concerned eyes.

“To be honest, I don’t really care,” Lena admitted.

The social worker shook her head as she studied the paperwork in front of her. “I see here that you’re only forty-three.” She said this as if forty-three were young. “And you seem intelligent and well-spoken . . . and is it true that you were a pastor’s wife?” She looked up with raised brows.

Lena sighed, averting her eyes until her gaze landed on a faded poster about STDs that was hanging lopsided on the bulletin board behind Mrs. Stanfield. The headline read, “What You Don’t Know Could Hurt You.” Well, that seemed true enough.

Mrs. Stanfield cleared her throat. “Lena?”

“Yes?”

“I was just saying, how about if I put a release package together for you?”

“A release package?”

“Yes. I can choose what I think would be a suitable town for you, make your living arrangements, set up some temporary employment, get your transportation worked out. Would that be acceptable?”

Lena slowly nodded. “I would really appreciate that.”





Mrs. Stanfield smiled as she closed the folder. “Then we’ll do our best and trust God with the rest. Right?”

“Right.” Lena forced a smile, but as she thanked the woman, her voice sounded flat and lifeless to her own ears. When she returned to her cell, she decided not to think about her upcoming release anymore. It wasn’t that she wanted to remain in prison. But at the same time, she couldn’t imagine life beyond prison. In fact, she couldn’t imagine life at all.

Today, when the head matron had handed Lena a rumpled grocery sack of used clothing—which included this ugly purple parka with a broken zipper, a pair of black polyester pants, and a red acrylic turtleneck sweater—Lena had wondered if she’d been naive to allow someone else, even a kindly older lady, to make arrangements for her fate and future.

Now, as the bus sped north into what seemed the heart of this winter storm, Lena clutched the worn handles of the secondhand bag and wondered about the “release package” tucked inside. Was she a fool to have trusted Mrs. Stanfield? But then, naïveté had once been Lena’s trademark. Even when her own trustfulness betrayed her and naive innocence deceived her, she still hadn’t grasped the magnitude of her own gullibility.

Her stomach growled again, almost as if scolding her for oversleeping in the library. Of course, her laziness had cost her dinner—her just deserts reminded her of her father’s “discipline” when she broke his unbendable rules. He would scowl and remind her that “a rod is reserved for the backs of fools.”

Lena didn’t want to think about that now. Instead she turned on her reading light and opened her oversize handbag. Despite the Ziploc of travel-size personal items and a large envelope that contained her “release package,” the bag was mostly empty. And it smelled funny. She extracted the envelope and looked at it. Her future was contained inside this envelope—it would likely be as bland as manila too.

“Your destination is New Haven,” the social worker had informed Lena as she met her outside the women’s correctional facility earlier that day.

“Connecticut?”

Mrs. Stanfield shook her head. “There are actually a number of New Havens in the country. In this particular New Haven, a small town in northern Minnesota, I happen to have a friend who is willing to give you a job.” As she drove Lena into town, she explained that a bus ticket, directions, names, and addresses were enclosed in the envelope. “You will also find a small amount of cash in there,” she said before she dropped Lena off. “But you’ll have to be extremely frugal until payday.”





As it turned out, Lena had already been frugal by forgetting to purchase tonight's dinner. She flipped through the small stack of bills. Two twenties, one ten, two fives, and five ones—a total of sixty-five dollars to last . . . how long? She tucked the cash into a zippered pocket and decided not to think about this either. So much not to think about. She vaguely wondered if the brain used more storage to repress memories than to remember them. She knew it took more energy.

"Excuse me, do you mind if I sit here?"

Lena looked up to see an elderly woman peering down at her. She had on a scarlet coat with white fur on the collar and cuffs—very Christmassy in an odd Santa sort of way. Although it looked warm.

"I, uh, no . . . I guess not." Lena reluctantly moved closer to the window. If she'd been honest, she would've told this woman that she did indeed mind—that this seat was hers and to just move on, thank you very much. Before doing time, Lena had considered herself to be scrupulously truthful. The kind of person who followed the rules. She corrected a cashier if she received too much change, never sneaked into a movie, and always waited when the sign said "Don't Walk." Almost painfully honest. But prison had taught her how and when to lie. Nearly always for the sake of self-preservation. Now she wondered if it would be a hard habit to break—or perhaps a habit to hold on to.

The old woman sighed as she eased herself into the other seat. "I always feel that two women traveling alone are safer when they pair up. My name is Moira Phillips." She stuck out a gloved hand.

"I'm Lena Markham." She gently shook the old woman's gloved hand. The smooth black gloves felt like good leather, soft and gently worn.

"Lena." Moira smiled. "What a pretty name. I'm reminded of the exquisite Lena Horne. Did your parents name you after her?"

"Actually, it's short for Helena." Lena set her purse between herself and the window as a safety precaution. Not that she actually thought this old woman was a thief, but she just didn't know. Cautious paranoia was another thing prison had taught her.

"Helena is a lovely name too. But that Lena Horne . . . oh my, what a voice she had, and such a beautiful woman too. I saw all her movies when I was a girl. I just adored her. Goodness, I haven't thought of her in years. Have you seen any of her films?"

"I'm not sure."

"Of course, she was long before your time. But she was exquisite." Moira prattled on about some of the Lena Horne movies she recalled and which ones she





had liked best or had seen twice. Lena pretended to listen, but mostly she wished she'd had the guts to tell Moira that she was perfectly comfortable traveling alone and wanted these seats for herself. She wondered if it was too late.

"Do you think she's still alive?"

"What?" Lena realized Moira was expecting a response from her.

"Lena Horne. Do you suppose she's still alive?"

"I have no idea."

"She would be rather old though. At least ninety, I'd venture."

Lena shrugged.

Moira attempted to peel off her big red coat and Lena offered a hand. "That's a nice coat," Lena said as she touched the furry cuff. "Is that real fur?"

Moira laughed. "Just rabbit fur. My sister Lucille forced it on me when the weather snapped cold last week and I hadn't packed a warm overcoat. Then she insisted I wear it home today. I'm sure she was only trying to get rid of it since her daughter-in-law gave it to her a few years ago and she never wore it. I only took it to make her happy. Do you really like it?"

"Well, it looks warm anyway. And it's rather festive." Lena glanced at Moira's outfit—a smoky blue tweed pantsuit with a gray turtleneck underneath and a pretty silk scarf tied loosely around her neck. A stylish contrast to the unusual coat.

"So, where are you headed, Lena?"

"New Haven."

"Oh, wonderful! That's my final destination too." She patted Lena's hand as if this somehow connected them. "Are you going there to visit someone for the holidays?"

"No . . . I, uh, I'm actually relocating there."

"You're moving to New Haven?"

Lena nodded. "How about you? Are you visiting someone for the holidays?"

"Oh, no. I was just visiting my sister Lucille over Thanksgiving. I'm on my way home now. I live in New Haven."

Lena nodded again. She suddenly felt very tired, and more than ever she wished she had the courage to tell this woman that she really needed these two seats for herself.

"So what made you choose New Haven?" Moira asked with curious eyes. "Do you have relatives or friends there?"

"No. I don't know anyone there."

Moira looked surprised. "No one? Then what made you want to move





there? And so close to Christmastime too?”

Lena pressed her lips together. She had a choice to make right now—either tell the truth and risk offending this seemingly nice woman, or concoct a story to make both of them feel better.

“I don’t mean to be nosy,” Moira said quietly. “It just seems an odd time to be moving, especially when you don’t know anyone in town.”

Lena took a quick breath. “The truth is I was just released from the women’s correctional facility and I figured New Haven was as good a place as any.” There, she’d said it.

Moira blinked then slowly nodded as if absorbing this information. “I see.”

“My parole came earlier than I expected, and I didn’t want to go home. So I’m off to a fresh start in New Haven.” Lena forced a weak smile to soften the news.

Moira slowly pushed herself to her feet, and Lena felt certain that her truth tactic had succeeded—who wanted to sit by an ex-con?—but she wasn’t sure whether to be happy or sad.

“Can you help me get my bag up there?” Moira pointed to the overhead storage on the opposite side.

“Your bag?” Lena frowned as she stood.

“It’s a bit heavy, I’m afraid. And the cold is bothering the arthritis in my elbow.”

Lena opened the storage area and waited as Moira pointed out a gray-and-white tapestry bag. “That one right there.”

Lena reached up and pulled down the carry-on, holding it out toward Moira. She was curious as to the contents and why Moira suddenly had need of it. Hopefully she wasn’t carrying some sort of self-defense weapon in there—something to fend off a dangerous jailbird—although the bus terminal security probably would’ve noticed that sort of contraband in their scanner.

“Thank you.” Moira balanced her bag on the armrest as Lena returned to her seat. To Lena’s surprise, instead of scurrying off to a safer spot, Moira sat right back down next to Lena and proceeded to unzip her bag.

Lena pretended to stare out the window, but she was actually watching the reflection of this mysterious old woman as Moira pawed through the contents of her bag. “Ah, here it is.” She held up a crumpled brown paper sack.

Lena continued gazing toward the window. Perhaps she should simply excuse herself to the restroom and then find another seat.

“Are you hungry, dear?”

Lena turned and stared at Moira, who held out what looked like a thick,





tasty sandwich encased in plastic wrap. “What?”

“My sister wouldn’t think of putting me on the bus without enough food for several days.” She chuckled. “Lucille is certain the bus could get stuck somewhere and I’d die of starvation. Would you care for a sandwich?”

Lena looked longingly at the neatly wrapped sandwich. The bread appeared to be sourdough and she spied lettuce and tomato peeking out the edges.

“It’s turkey from Thanksgiving. And Swiss cheese, I believe she said.”

Lena’s mouth was literally watering now. Too nervous to eat lunch at the penitentiary, she hadn’t had anything since breakfast, and even then she’d mostly just picked at the lukewarm, lumpy oatmeal. “Thank you,” she said as she took the sandwich. “I’m actually pretty hungry.”

“I thought you might be.” Moira reached into the bag to produce an identical sandwich. “We also have an orange and an apple and some pretzels and a couple of candy bars.” She chuckled. “I told Lucille that I couldn’t possibly eat all this, but she insisted.”

Lena was ashamed of herself as she slowly unwrapped the sandwich. To think that she’d almost shooed Moira away. Here this kind woman was generous enough to share food—really good food too. In fact, if Lena hadn’t already given up on old ideals of faith and God’s goodness, she might’ve even wondered if Moira could possibly be an angel in disguise. As it was, she didn’t think it likely.