

WAITING FOR

CHRISTMAS



a novella

LYNN AUSTIN

Praise for Lynn Austin

[An] engrossing family drama against a cloistered, glittering world of Gilded Age wealth. . . . Austin brings a complex tangle of family bonds to life with nuance, delivering an inspiring message.

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *All My Secrets*

There's no putting down this nostalgic, appealing read that conveys the feeling of a child's wonder and the building of a caring community.

LIBRARY JOURNAL on *The Wish Book Christmas*

The Wish Book Christmas is a "wise man's" gift to readers as Austin unwraps the true meaning of Christmas. . . . This is a "curl up by a crackling fire with a cup of cocoa" book, a reminder of 1950s America and the reason for the season.

HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY

[A] lovely standalone Christmas tale. . . . This charming book will also be a delight for inspirational readers looking for a feel-good Christmas story.

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY starred review of *The Wish Book Christmas*

Lynn Austin is a master at exploring the depths of human relationships. . . . a beautifully woven page-turner.

SUSAN MEISSNER, bestselling author of *Only the Beautiful* on *If I Were You*

Waiting for Christmas

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Waiting for Christmas

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PART 1

THE CANDLE OF HOPE



The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.

PHILLIPS BROOKS,

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

*Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.*

PSALM 42:5

CHAPTER 1

NEW YORK CITY

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 1901

Adelaide Forsythe held on to her hat in the wintry wind as she hurried home from the trolley stop. There weren't many things she missed from her former life as a wealthy heiress, but on blustery evenings like this, when the skies were gray and the sun set late in the afternoon, she longed for a carriage and a driver to deliver her to her front door. The meeting she'd braved the cold weather to attend had brought disappointing news. Her efforts to make a difference had made very little difference in the end.

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She turned the corner toward home in the growing darkness, plowing through a carpet of rusty leaves. The windows of her modest limestone town house were dark, which meant her husband, Howard, wasn't home yet. She hurried up the brick walkway toward the front door, then halted when something moved in one of the bushes beside the front steps. A shadow shifted, something too large to be a squirrel. She held her breath, listening. Should she run past whatever it was and fumble with the door lock? Or maybe turn back to stand beneath the streetlamp and wait for Howard? He should arrive home shortly.

The bush rustled again. Addy steadied herself, determined to be a brave, modern, twentieth-century woman and not wait for her husband. She heard a muffled sneeze and inched closer, bending to peer beneath the bush.

“Is someone there?”

The huddled shape shifted, and a small face looked up at her. A child! Nestled among the bare branches. A little boy with short, raggedy hair, wind-reddened cheeks, and without a hat on this cold November night. Children lived and slept in the streets in the poorer parts of New York City but not in the quiet Manhattan neighborhood where she and Howard lived.

“I won't hurt you,” she said. “You can come out.” The boy

eyed her warily from his nest inside the bush. “You look cold. Would you like to come inside and warm up by the fire?” He sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve. She thought she saw him nod. “Well, come out, then.” After a short pause, the brittle branches swayed and snapped as he crawled out from beneath them. He stood before her, shivering in his threadbare coat, his teeth clacking from the cold. He couldn’t have been more than eight or nine years old. “What’s your name?”

“J-Jack.”

“Let’s go inside, Jack. This way.” She climbed the steps and unlocked the door, gripping the knob as the wind tried to snatch it from her grasp. The boy followed her as she made her way down the main hall, lighting lamps as she went, then downstairs to the kitchen where a fire smoldered in the cast-iron range. Addy opened one of the round lids and poked the coals to stir them to life, then shoved in several logs from the woodbox. She was proud of herself for remembering to turn the knob on the stovepipe to open the flue. The task of kindling a fire was still new to her. Teams of servants had performed such chores for her until her marriage a month ago.

She turned to the boy, a skinny little child with a dirty face and shabby shoes. His too-short pants revealed bare, bony ankles. He stood with shoulders hunched, hands jammed into his pockets, his cheeks and the tips of his nose

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and ears red with cold. “So, Jack. Why were you hiding in my bushes? Shouldn’t you be home on such a cold night?”

“I don’t got a home.”

She was about to say that everyone had a home, then remembered where she’d been this morning. Adelaide and her mother had delivered a Christmas donation to the Children’s Aid Society’s orphanage. She hazarded a guess. “Did you run away from the orphanage, Jack?” He gave a shrug that might have meant anything, but he didn’t deny it. “They’ll be worried about you. Why did you run away?”

“I wanted to ask the penny lady to help me. I hid in her carriage but she drove away from here before I could talk to her.”

The penny lady. “You must mean my mother, Mrs. Stanhope.” Mother had continued the tradition that Addy’s grandmother, Junietta Stanhope, had begun years ago, giving pennies to the children whenever she visited one of the city’s orphanages. But how on earth had the child hidden in the carriage?

The boy sneezed, drawing Addy’s attention. After wiping his nose on the shiny spot on his sleeve, he folded his arms across his chest, whether in defiance or to warm himself, she couldn’t tell. She glimpsed strength in the set of his jaw and experience beyond his years in his wary blue eyes. Addy knew

nothing about children, and wasn't sure what to do with this one. If he'd been motivated enough to run away in freezing weather, it was unlikely that he would want to return to the orphanage, even if she did have a way to take him there.

The kitchen was growing warmer and smelled a bit smoky. She removed her coat and draped it over the back of a chair. "What sort of help do you need?"

He didn't reply. Instead, he pointed behind her and said, "Miss, look!" She turned and saw smoke oozing from between the lids of the stove. Wasn't it supposed to go up the chimney?

"Oh, dear! Do you know anything about stoves, Jack?" He shook his head. The smoke was slowly filling the kitchen. Before she could decide what to do, she heard footsteps upstairs, and a moment later, Howard ducked through the kitchen door, arriving just in time to rescue her like the hero in a fairy tale.

"I thought I heard voices—oh, hey! I think you forgot to open the flue, Addy." He crossed the room and turned the lever on the stovepipe, just as she had done.

"But I did open it. I remembered that I was supposed to, I promise I did."

"I think you may have turned it the wrong way and closed it altogether. But don't worry, everything will be fine in a

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moment.” He opened the kitchen door and used the newspaper that had been tucked beneath his arm to fan the smoke toward it. Addy sank onto a chair, relieved but annoyed with herself. She still had so many things to learn now that she’d willingly given up the life of the idle rich, who had servants to take care of all the mundane household work. Howard made a few more swipes with his newspaper before closing the door again. Thankfully, the smoke was dissipating.

“Who’s your little friend?” he asked, studying the boy.

“This is Jack. I found him hiding beneath our bushes.”

Howard crouched in front of Jack, smiling his wonderful, warm smile. “Nice to meet you, Jack. I’m Adelaide’s husband, Howard Forsythe.”

Her husband. They’d been married for all of thirty-four days, and their life together was still wonderfully new. “Before I nearly burned the kitchen down, Jack was explaining that he stowed away in Mother’s carriage when we visited the orphanage this morning. He says he needs her help.”

“Hmm. It’s a little late to bother Mrs. Stanhope tonight. Let’s find something to eat, and warm you up a bit, shall we? Then maybe you can tell us more.”

Leave it to her brilliant husband to think of something practical, like food. Addy heard him clattering around in

the pantry, and he soon produced a plate of cold ham, some pickled beets, a loaf of bread, the butter dish, and a glass of milk for Jack.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t have time to fix anything for our dinner,” Addy said. “The meeting ran late and I waited forever for a streetcar.” Although in truth, any meal Addy prepared wouldn’t have amounted to much since she had never cooked a meal in her life.

“It doesn’t matter. I had a big lunch with a client.” He removed his coat and draped it over a chair, then smoothed his dark hair, disheveled by the wind.

Addy set plates and cutlery on the kitchen table and the three of them sat down to eat. Jack wolfed his food as if he’d been starving. Addy looked up at Howard and made a helpless gesture, asking, *Now what?*

“Do you feel like telling us why you ran away?” Howard asked. Jack eyed him suspiciously as he swallowed a mouthful of bread.

“Promise you won’t take me back? Promise you’ll help me?”

“I don’t want to make any promises I can’t keep.”

“Well, I won’t go back! They’re gonna make me get on a train and move far away from here. They think I’m an orphan but I’m not! I’m not!”

“He must mean the orphan trains,” Addy said when

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Howard gave her a questioning look. “The Aid Society finds families in the Midwest to adopt orphaned children.”

“I don’t need another family because I already got one!”

Howard rested his hand on Jack’s shoulder. “Tell us about your family, son. For starters, can you tell us your last name?”

“It’s Thomas. Jack Thomas,” the boy said. “There’s me, my sister Polly, and our papa. And it’s almost Christmas, right?”

Addy glanced at the kitchen calendar. “Yes, in about four weeks.”

Jack groaned. “Papa is coming home for Christmas and he won’t know where to find us. I gotta find my sister and we gotta get back home before he comes.”

“Is your sister in the same orphanage as you?” Addy asked.

“I don’t know where she is!” His words came out strangled, as if he was fighting not to cry.

“And your father?” Howard asked.

Jack swallowed. “He works on a ship but he’ll be home for Christmas. He promised.”

“Tell us about your mother,” Howard said gently. Jack lost the battle with his tears and they spilled over, trailing down his dirty face.

“She got sick after Papa left. I tried to take care of her,

but she went to live in heaven.” A sob escaped after he spoke the last word.

Addy didn't know what to do. Should she try to hold him, console him? His filthy clothes and runny nose weren't endearing. She wondered about lice. Before she could decide what to do, Howard gently brushed a dried leaf from Jack's hair, then rested his hand on his shoulder again.

“I'm guessing the people from the Children's Aid Society brought you to the orphanage after your mama died?”

“Polly and me tried to hide. They found me but not her.”

“How old is Polly?”

“She's three. Almost four. I'm the only person she'll talk to.” He swiped his tears again, leaving dirty smears. “Will you help me find her, mister?”

“I'll do my best, but it's too late to start searching tonight. Let's clean up the kitchen and fix you a place to sleep, then we'll see what we can find out in the morning.”

Howard washed the dishes and Addy dried them, as they'd been doing since they'd married. “Hopefully, this is the last night you'll have to do kitchen work,” Addy told him. “A woman is coming to be interviewed for the position of cook and housekeeper tomorrow. She worked for one of Mother's friends and comes highly recommended.”

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“Good. I hope she works out, for both our sakes. You shouldn’t have to do kitchen work, either, Addy.”

Jack helped Howard refill the woodbox and coal scuttle, but when Howard tried to lead him upstairs to sleep in one of the extra bedrooms, he wouldn’t budge. “I can sleep down here.”

Where he’d be close to a door, Addy guessed, so he could make a quick escape. “There’s a little room for the maid, right there,” she said, pointing. “But we don’t have a maid. Will that do for tonight? It has a small bathroom, too. I’ll fetch you an extra blanket.” She hurried upstairs to the linen closet and brought one down for him, uneasy with the thought of having a stranger in their home, even if he was a child. She gave Howard the blanket and waited in their parlor while he got Jack settled. The front room was chilly but Addy wisely decided not to try to stoke the fire again. The room’s furnishings were a mixture of things Howard had used in his bachelor lodgings and items that Addy’s mother had given to them after she’d moved from her seventy-five-room mansion into a smaller one. This town house was small, but it had the modern amenities Addy was accustomed to, such as gas lighting and indoor plumbing. The kitchen was on the lower level, the parlor and dining room on the first floor, and three bedrooms and a bathroom on the second. It was their first home, and Addy loved it.

“Won’t the people at the orphanage be worried about him?” she asked when Howard joined her in the parlor. “Should we try to contact them?”

“I don’t know of any way to do that, short of going out into the cold ourselves. Tomorrow is soon enough. He’s warm and safe, for now.” Howard rekindled the fire in the parlor stove as he spoke, then joined her on the settee. Addy hated to bring up financial matters but it had to be done.

“Can we talk about the housekeeper who is coming to be interviewed tomorrow?”

“Of course. What about her?” Addy wasn’t sure she had his full attention as he began kissing her neck and a tender place near her ear, sending pleasant chills through her.

“She might be expensive since she worked for one of Mother’s wealthy friends, so I’ve decided that I should pay her wages from my own funds. Once I learn how to cook and keep house, we—”

He stopped kissing her. “Addy, we already decided that we aren’t going to spend any more of your inheritance.”

“It’s *our* inheritance. That money isn’t mine anymore. It belongs to both of us.”

“Be reasonable, darling. Haven’t you and all your friends in the suffrage movement been fighting for financial independence for women? This is the twentieth century and—”

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“And I can decide whatever I want. And what I’ve decided is that my inheritance belongs to both of us.”

He took her hands in his and gave them a little shake. “Listen, there’s room in our budget for domestic help. I had a woman who cleaned for me and did my washing before we were married. I don’t expect you to do that kind of work, Addy. Ever. I’m going to support you. Your inheritance is going to remain tucked away for your future.”

Addy decided to drop the matter. She had convinced Howard to use some of her inheritance to purchase this town house, but he remained stubborn about spending any more of it. “Now, speaking of independent women,” he said, “how was your suffrage meeting tonight?”

She sighed. “Discouraging. After all our hard work these past few months, it turns out that we didn’t help as many candidates get elected as we had hoped to. Only two men who support women’s suffrage won seats.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I know how hard you worked and how hopeful you were.”

“If women in Colorado and Utah can vote, why can’t women in New York?”

“It’s very unfair, darling.” Howard kissed the backs of her hands, then her wrists. She loved him for his patience with her and for his support for her causes. And for the way he’d

sympathized with the raggedy child in their kitchen tonight. “Do you mind that I invited the little orphan boy into our house tonight without asking you? It seemed like the right thing to do.”

“Not at all. He would have been frozen by morning.” He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close to his side.

“What do you make of his story?” she asked.

“I don’t know what to think. Hopefully, the orphanage will have more details.”

“I wonder if his sister died the same time as his mother.”

“Mm. Maybe. It sounds like the father might have abandoned them. If so, someone needs to explain it to Jack in a way he can understand, and help him with his grief. It must be a terrible thing for a child to watch his mother die.”

“I can’t imagine.” Although Addy’s father had died very suddenly three years ago, altering her own circumstances. “If his sister is only three, she’s more adoptable than an older child.”

“I thought the authorities didn’t separate siblings.”

“They usually don’t. But if she and Jack weren’t found together, maybe they didn’t realize he had a sibling. I want to help him, but where do we begin? This city is so huge it seems like an impossible task to find a lost child and a missing father.”

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“We’ll just do the best we can. After all, we fell in love while searching for your long-lost relative, remember?” She did. And Addy’s grandmother had been reunited with her missing son before she’d passed away. Howard began nuzzling her neck again, sending chills of delight all the way to her toes.

“What do you say we head up to bed a little early tonight, Mrs. Forsythe?” he murmured. She smiled up at him.

“I say yes, indeed, Mr. Forsythe.”