

NO REGRETS

STRASBURG, THE NEW GENERATION BOOK 3



PIPPA GREATHOUSE



Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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EBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-056-2
v2

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23RD, 1876...

Lizzie watched from the doorway of the drawing room with a grin on her face. Nick was carrying Katie, his new bride, up the steps to their rooms on the third floor after their wedding. He was making comments about her being heavy; she was mouthing comments back at him. Suddenly, she forgot about the cast on her wrist and whacked him on the back with it, and Nick's expression changed. A storm overtook his face as he began to scold his little bride, afraid she'd hurt her wrist again.

Lizzie shook her head, laughing. Nick was funny, even when he was angry; at least she'd always thought so. It would be fun having Katie in the house *if* Nick ever let her out of his bed. A pang of dismay echoed through her as she wondered if this kind of love would ever happen to her. She had held Thomas in her heart since she was a child but lately had put those thoughts behind her. Since being back home at Pembroke and in his company, it had awakened those feelings once again. She wondered, however, if a marriage between them would ever happen.

"Miss Lizzie?" A voice tried to get her attention but barely registered. Christmas would be here in two days, and there was so much yet to be done. Her mother and father were about to leave town to travel after Geoff's wedding in a week. Neither of her brothers had agreed to run the estate while they were gone. That left it to her alone, and she wondered if she could do it. In January, the semester at the women's college would begin again, and it would be time to finish the spring semester and complete her certificate. But the house needed someone to run it *now*, and it seemed to be falling to her. Was no one else willing to accept the responsibility of it?

"Miss Lizzie? Thomas is still waiting for you in the drawing room." Miss Hazel's voice lowered in volume suddenly, although it was never very quiet. "And after that, I need some final instruction on decorating for Christmas and planning the meal."

Lizzie's eyes opened wide. *Thomas!* She'd completely forgotten he was here. Whirling around, she realized he was standing right behind her and began to apologize profusely. "Oh, Thomas! I'm so sorry."

Thomas, usually good-natured, had a frown on his face. "I think perhaps this is not a good time," he said firmly.

"No, it's just—" Lizzie's disappointment showed in her voice as she drew him toward the drawing room. "No one around here wants to be responsible for the household just now, and I—" She scowled. "But that isn't your problem. I said I was sorry."

"Would tomorrow afternoon be a better time for our chess game?"

She sighed. "Perhaps. I'm truly sorry, Thomas. Please remind your family they are welcome to come for Christmas? Miss Betsy, too?"

He smiled and leaned down to kiss the top of her head. Just as he did, however, James cleared his throat from the doorway.

"Pardon the interruption, Miss Lizzie. Simms is here from the Wilmington estate."

Thomas dropped his arms from her shoulders, and Lizzie stepped back.

"Yes?"

James moved to allow in a rather scruffy-looking gentleman. He looked tired and impatient. His riding whip still in his hand, he stepped forward into the drawing room.

"I bear a message from Lady Wilmington," he said, "for the Wellingtons. It's of urgent importance."

The news caught Lizzie by surprise. "I'll get them," she announced uncertainly. Realizing Thomas had taken a protective step toward her, she glanced up into his face.

"I should go," he said, a worried frown etching its way into his eyes.

Lizzie rose up on tiptoe and leaned toward his ear. "Thomas? Please stay?"

Dark brown eyes studied her face a moment before he nodded. "I'll stay, then."

Lizzie moved toward the doorway, pausing as she waited a moment for the man to move out of her way. His frown was strange, almost sinister, as he glanced from her to Thomas and back.

"Pardon?" Lizzie raised her chin, staring at him.

As if realizing he was staring, he moved out of her way.

Lizzie felt her shoulders tremble as she heard Thomas' voice in the drawing room.

"Feel free to take a seat, sir. She'll return with them soon enough."

Pausing again, she waited to hear his answer.

"I'll stand."

Thomas' answer was as abrupt as the visitor's had been. "Suit yourself then."

Lizzie ran up the curved staircase and then up again to the third floor as fast as she could go.

When she came back down the stairs with her parents, she felt

as if she'd just interrupted a stare-down. The visitor was standing, erect, and tapping his whip against his boot, while Thomas was sitting in a relaxed pose on the settee, glaring back at him as if daring him to move. Lizzie moved back and allowed her mother and father to move into the room first.

"Simms," Geoffrey nodded. "What brings you?"

Simms frowned, glancing toward Thomas. "It is of a private nature, my lord."

Lizzie turned to her father. "I asked him to stay, Father."

Geoffrey glanced at Lizzie and then Thomas and turned to face the visitor.

"Anything you wish to say to me; you may say before Thomas. Proceed."

Simms cleared his throat. "Very well. Lady Wilmington wishes you to come soon. It is imperative, sir. She has something she must discuss with you."

Lizzie watched her father as he began to pace slowly back and forth before the grand piano.

"Of what nature?" he asked.

"I am not at liberty to say." Simms seemed to have expected the question.

Geoffrey frowned. "Then answer me this. Can it wait until after Christmas?"

Simms closed his eyes briefly then opened them again and fixed his gaze on Geoffrey.

"I have not been given liberty to share this with you, but the doctor has given her only a few weeks to live, sir. She's adamant that you come."

Lizzie watched as her mother raised a hand to halt her husband's pacing. "I'll go with you, Geoffrey—"

He put a hand over hers. "I don't like the idea of you going at all, my love."

Simms stepped forward. "Pardon. It is the younger Miss Wellington she wishes to see."

Lizzie met her parents' eyes with misgiving. "Why ever would she want to see *me*?"

Her father echoed her sentiment. "Yes. Why indeed?"

Simms considered what to say as Geoffrey stared. "Forgive me, but I honestly don't know."

Geoffrey took a deep breath. "It seems that you know more than you're saying, Simms, as usual. I will come this afternoon. My wife and daughter will not."

Simms gave a long sigh. "I will take your message. Be prepared, however, for her to refuse your entrance without your daughter." He put his heels together, saluted and bowed before turning to leave. "Thank you for your time, sir." His voice was curt.

Geoffrey moved to the window to watch him as he mounted his horse and rode away stiffly

"I can't think she would refuse to see me. I've checked on her at least once a month since the elder Charles died."

"And since the younger was killed, I couldn't possibly be in any danger." This came from Angelica, and Lizzie turned to stare at her incredulously.

"What do you mean, Mother?"

It was as if she hadn't spoken. She watched as her father raised her mother's hand and kissed it. "Still, Angel," he insisted. "I will allow you and Lizzie to go early in the day, when there will be no travel after dark. And only then."

"I could go with you, sir," Thomas said from across the room.

Geoffrey swiveled slowly to face him. "An excellent idea, Thomas. Nick is not likely in any mood to go since he just married, and Geoffrey Francis is who knows where with Miss Polly." Glancing down at Lizzie, he smiled. "Sorry, Lizzie. I can't allow you to go. Surely, she'll tell me what's going on. James?"

The butler moved closer. "Sir?"

"Please fetch Sebastian and have him prepare the coach."



LIZZIE WAITED until Thomas and her father had left before facing her mother. "Whatever did you mean by saying you shouldn't be in any danger since the younger Charles was killed?"

Her mother looked weary. "Oh, Lizzie. It was a long time ago. Charles Wilmington grew up with your father and Francis Adams. There was always such rivalry between them. When Geoffrey married me, Charles was very difficult. He didn't want me; he just didn't want Geoffrey to have me, either. Not me. Anyone. At our first ball after our marriage, he kidnapped Merrie Adams and me. I was expecting Geoffrey Francis, and your father was worried to death for the both of us. But he and Francis found us before it was too late. We were blessed."

Lizzie leaned back into her chair and breathed a heavy sigh of relief. "And Charles?"

"I awakened within a few moments and demanded Geoffrey allow me to confront Charles at the ball. He'd returned, certain no one would suspect him. When he looked up and saw me standing there, with both Francis and your father next to me, he became white as a sheet. The sheriff and some of the other men escorted him to his coach. But he ducked under it and took off running out the front and across the road."

Lizzie sat up straight. "Toward the cliffs?"

Her mother looked exhausted. "Yes. He plunged down in the darkness toward the bottom and broke his neck. His evil deeds killed him."

A hand flew to Lizzie's mouth, and her mother nodded.

"He met a bitter end." She paused, lowering her gaze to the chessboard, still lying on the small table in front of her. "But your father is still unsure how much a part Lady Wilmington played in all that. He has continued to go and check on her through the years out of a sense of duty to his own father because they had been friends, but he's been very careful over the years about letting me go there to visit with him. All the servants there seem still quite loyal to her, but on the other hand, they may have no

place else to go. Woodstock hasn't many opportunities for employment."

Lizzie frowned. "I see. It explains a lot."

"Yes." Her mother nodded.

"Miss Lizzie?" It was Miss Hazel this time who put her head in. "Oh, my lady, I didn't realize you were down here."

Angelica shook her head. "I do have a dreadful headache, Miss Hazel. Lizzie, if you're willing, please allow Miss Hazel to direct her questions to you? Perhaps tomorrow will be a better day."

"Of course, Mother." Lizzie tried to keep her voice from showing her disappointment as her mother rose to leave. "Yes, Miss Hazel?"



THOMAS STUDIED Elizabeth's father as he sat across from him and relayed the story of what had happened all those years ago. As he finished, Thomas nodded.

"It's no wonder you were reluctant to bring her. Mrs. Wellington as well."

"Yes. I still don't trust the Wilmingtons."

"And rightly so. Simms seems quite loyal to them."

"He is. Simms is not a bad man, only disillusioned. I've watched him through the years. He'd give his life for Lady Wilmington." His eyes crinkled at the corners. "I'm sure you noticed he referred to me as 'my lord'. It comes from the old days when my parents came over from England. It's taken me all these years to get the staff at Pembroke to stop calling me that, although they slip and forget at times. And the Wilmingtons reveled in it, particularly Charles' mother. I must admit I have never lost my distrust of the family. Charles' mother doted on him. He came along late in life, and they failed to teach him the one thing a parent should. Honor."

Thomas moved his gaze toward the window. "Which you've passed along to your children in abundance, sir."

"Thank you, Thomas. But I failed to have passed along to my sons the importance of responsibility. Except for Lizzie, perhaps." He was smiling. "And she takes it to extremes, like everything else she does. But, I'm sure you know that."

"About Elizabeth, sir," Thomas stopped abruptly and shook his head. "This is not the time."

Her father met his gaze. "Go ahead."

He took a deep breath. "I'd like very much to ask for Lizzie's hand in marriage. Although I'm not sure, at this point, she'll have me. Pembroke seems to be first in her priorities—and I'm not saying it shouldn't."

"Patience, Thomas. It seems so, I realize that. Lizzie is troubled at the moment. I can tell you this, however. She cares for you deeply. I do intend to speak with my sons in the near future and remind them of their responsibilities. Taking care of Pembroke is not Lizzie's responsibility. At the same time, Angel and I have wanted to travel for so many years now, and if we don't do it soon, I'll be getting too old. Don't give up on Lizzie, son. Not if you love her."

A shout from Adam at the helm drew their attention to the slowing of the coach. Geoffrey leaned forward and peered out the window.

"We're here."

He led the way as they ascended the steps, and the butler opened the door for them.

"Lord Wellington," the man said respectfully but solemnly.

"Simms informed us that our presence was required."

"A moment please."

"Of course."

They were led into the drawing room and waited there. A long period of time passed, and Geoffrey leaned forward, ready to speak, when the family doctor entered and bowed.

"I apologize," he said quietly, appearing uncomfortable. "You did not bring the young Miss Wellington with you, I see."

"No, I did not."

The doctor shifted from one foot to the other and shook his head. "I regret to tell you, sir. She will not see you without your daughter."

Geoffrey rose to his feet. "Can you tell me expressly why she insists on Elizabeth being here?"

"No. Again, my apologies. She only says it's of utmost importance."

As Thomas also rose, Geoffrey nodded. "I cannot promise to return with her. It troubles me that after all these years of my looking out for her, she would refuse to see me after summoning me."

"I understand."

Geoffrey sighed. "Give her my best, sir."

"I shall."

A nod to Thomas and both men left. The butler gave a brief bow as they approached.

"The utmost appreciation for your coming, sir."

Geoffrey paused and put a hand on the gentleman's shoulder. "Please let us know if she changes her mind and decides to see us, Edmond."

"Yes, sir."

The trip on the way back was silent. Thomas studied Geoffrey, wondering at his ability to continue to befriend a family who treated him with such disregard. He was awed.



SUNDAY MORNING MASS...

Lizzie approached St. Mary's in the carriage early for Sunday morning Mass, the only one in the family to come in early. She knew her brothers would be coming but had decided not to wait for either of them.

She wasn't entirely sure Thomas' invitation would still be open for her to come after Mass; she dearly hoped so. Father had come home late from the Wilmington Estate, and although she had run to meet him, Thomas had already left for home. Father had looked tired, and she had not pressed him for information despite how curious she was.

The coach pulled to a stop and she rose, leaning forward to peek out the window. Greenery and red bows were hung on the outside of the doors of the church, and it reminded her that Christmas was the next day. She was pleasantly surprised to find Thomas on the steps of the church, waiting for her.

"Good morning, imp."

She shot a withering glance at him.

"Ah. Perhaps you'd rather I called you brat, then."

"No." Her eyes were twinkling now.

"All the better for me to do it, then. We can stand out here in the cold and argue or go inside where it's warm. Father Michael has lit the fireplace, and the church looks festive." He held out a hand. "Mind the steps. We did get a skiff of snow last night here in town, and I came up this morning and knocked it off the steps. But they're still a little slick."

Lizzie grinned. "That was sweet of you."

"No." He shook his head. "Father Michael is aging, and it's hard for him to do the things he's always done. But look what's been done inside. I think the Wilder sisters helped to make the wreaths."

Lizzie gasped with delight when she looked at the inside of the sanctuary. Wreaths made of fresh greenery and decorated with red bows were placed between the windows. The Wilder sisters, Eleanor and Audra, were inside and rushed to greet her when Thomas brought her in. She tried not to grin at the way Audra bounced from side to side as she came forward.

"Welcome, this morning, Miss Lizzie. Are you hoping for snow for Christmas? I am. Not Eleanor, of course, but I'm afraid we had all our snow early this year."

Eleanor nodded, her head bobbing up and down. 'Oh, I do hope not. My sister is too adventurous, don't you think? But I've seen all the snow I care to for a good while.'

Lizzie smiled. "I tend to agree with you, Miss Eleanor. I think Strasburg has seen quite enough snow for one year. But Miss Audra, if you really want to see snow, we still have a good bit left at Pembroke. You're coming tomorrow, aren't you? We'd be very disappointed if you didn't. And I wanted to tell you, the church looks wonderful today."

"Oh, we wouldn't miss it. Which brings us to our question for you." Audra looked full of enthusiasm. "After Midnight Mass tonight, there will be all these wreathes and no one will see them again. Would you care to have them for Pembroke to decorate for Christmas tomorrow?"

Lizzie was pleasantly surprised. "Miss Audra, that's a superb suggestion! Are you sure? They would go wonderfully in the ball-rooms where the guests will be."

"Yes, your mother invited us," Miss Eleanor answered, her eyes full of excitement. "We could bring them out in the morning. It would be lovely to see them there."

Father Michael's voice spoke up from behind her. "Gleason volunteered to pick us up in the coach in the morning when he comes for the Thatchers. We'll be bringing Mrs. Billings from the dormitory with us. Please, Lizzie, tell your parents thank you for the invitation."

Lizzie smiled into his pleasantly crinkled face. Despite his age, he was looking well. She leaned forward to whisper in his ear, "Father, we'd love for you to announce that anyone who can come is welcome tomorrow at Pembroke. We can send Sebastian to pick up anyone else who would like to come."

But later, as he made the announcement, she thought of all there was to be done and wondered if she dared take the afternoon off to spend it with Thomas. She was also irritated. Geoff hadn't been seen this morning; he'd gone to the Andrews' house to see Polly and

eat breakfast there. Nick hadn't come out of his rooms on the third floor with Katie, but that wasn't at all surprising since they had just married yesterday.

Only her parents had come down for breakfast. She'd spoken to them about the situation at the house. She had not even referred to Christmas and all its festivities but had explained she didn't feel as if she should have to be responsible for the decision-making. But when her mother earnestly looked up at her father and said, "She's right, Geoffrey. Perhaps we should cancel our travels for now until one of the boys makes a decision."

At her mother's suggestion, Lizzie had felt terribly guilty.

"Imp?" Thomas whispered in her ear as Communion was over, bringing her back to the present. "You look beautiful this morning."

"Thank you, sir," she said, giving him a weak smile. "You look quite handsome, yourself."

It was the truth. He did; a lopsided smile emerged as he held out his hand. "My offer still stands, you know. Betsy is fixing roast goose with the hopes that you'll come."

Lizzie took his hand, realizing how eager she was to spend the afternoon with him. At least they'd be free from interruptions from the housekeeping staff. It was indeed a relief, and she relaxed. The next time she looked up into his face, he was smiling down at her.