

*Elephant in the
Room*

by

Kristen Harper

Chapter 1

Candlelight flickered warmly. The long red tapers stood erect in their brass holders like lighthouses signaling their locations, beacons calling some to draw near while warning others to avoid a destructive crash.

The mirror behind the sideboard reflected the candles' flames, casting a pleasant and festive glow on the dining room. Spread across the table were many casserole dishes, deep bowls with spoon handles protruding over the edge, and serving platters stacked precariously on racks. Except for a few cold dishes, everything steamed with fragrant, savory aromas of the season. There was no room for decorative ornaments or even a fall centerpiece; the woven tablecloth in autumn hues was barely visible under the serving dishes.

The mashed potatoes were flecked with green scallions while the fragrance revealed generous doses of butter and garlic. Brown-speckled wild rice competed with golden-yellow cornbread stuffing piled too high in matching bowls. Rosemary. Oregano. Sage. Savory scents abounded. Displayed on a long platter, a line of small acorn squash had been hollowed out, the contents blended with seasonings and sweetness before being whipped up and dolloped decoratively back into their shells. They looked good enough to eat!

In the basket, the forest green napkin barely wrapping around the fresh hot bread could not restrain the comforting odor of yeast from mingling with the other familiar scents. Golden cornbread muffins were speckled with yellow corn kernels and green chilies while the dark pumpkin bread slices revealed their treasure of walnuts and raisins. The butter had been molded into pretty shapes. It would almost be a shame to cut into them, but the spread was needed for the bread and freshly steamed corn.

Which would be the favorite this year, the traditional dark cranberry sauce or the light cranberry relish which was chopped fine with oranges? A beautiful layered Jello was cubed so that each piece revealed a creamy-white base with thin lines of fall colors: red, orange, yellow and green. The scent of cinnamon wafted from the baked apples with just a hint of cloves.

There was, of course, a large, creamy green bean casserole, its border generously sprinkled with fried onions, a classic and family favorite. Other greens were displayed in their more natural state, such as the tossed fresh spinach salad and lightly steamed asparagus, the

hollandaise sauce served from a small gravy boat nearby. More elaborate vegetable dishes were created by frying the okra or glazing the carrots with honey and brown sugar.

While the table was overflowing with food, the sideboard remained, temporarily, less crowded. Several pies, a few cakes and a variety of cookies and candy left a little space to set out the cold accouterments later: ice cream in several flavors, including vanilla, and pure white mountains of homemade whipped cream.

At just the right time, a gigantic ceramic platter was brought to the place of honor amid this bountiful spread. The thirty-pound Thanksgiving turkey glowed as the candlelight shone on its glossy brown skin braised with herbs and spices. The steam wafted into Eric Harvey's face as he hefted the platter into place. He looked around the room, pleased.

“Wow! What a feast!” he exclaimed to his wife Jennifer and her mother Beverly as they glided out of the kitchen with even more food to add to the table. “It looks like we have enough food for thirty people!”

Beverly and Jennifer giggled delightedly at the compliment. “Well, we do like to go all out for Thanksgiving,” exuded Beverly, “but it's just our little family this year.” Her son Darren's family couldn't come to town over the short Thanksgiving break. Eric's parents were spending this holiday with his sister's family in California.

The other family members soon gathered around the dining table. Beverly's husband Leonard Douglas hefted himself out of the recliner to stand by Beverly who, although she had been slaving away in the kitchen most of the day, had taken a few moments to return her frosted crop of hair into place and add bright lipstick to match the flush in her cheeks. Leonard patted her on the back and smiled lovingly at her before he leaned on a nearby chair. He looked across the bountiful table at his daughter Jennifer, whose darker coloring matched his. Her smile, resembling her mother's, beamed with delight while she hosted this smaller family gathering this year in her suburban Albany, Georgia home. Eric called their children to join them. Hannah, who had been trying to convince her grandpa Leonard to take her out to practice driving over the weekend, scrambled up from the floor, unfolding the long limbs of a growing teenager to spring up as tall as her mom. Twelve-year-old Samuel had been sitting on the sofa showing his big brother Chris and Chris's wife Ashley his latest book about African animals. The children came over to complete the circle around the table. Everyone commented about the sights and smells of the delicious food spread out before them.

Even though it was his house and he was the pastor of the local church, Eric honored his father-in-law by asking him to say the blessing before the meal. As everyone held hands and bowed their heads, Leonard intoned in his strong voice.

“Dear Lord, we thank You for this bountiful food. Your blessings come through the hard work of our dear ladies who planned and cooked this meal that we are delighted to share with our family. Lord, we thank You for Your numerous blessings from this past year, and we look to You to strengthen us and refine us through the coming year with all of its trials, temptations, and blessings. Great is our God and greatly to be praised. Amen.” The others echoed the amen.

“Let's spend a few minutes going around the table for everyone to thank God for something He has done for us this past year.” Leonard paused to give everyone a moment to think about what they wanted to say. Then he started the list. “I'm thankful for 49 years of marriage to this wonderful gal!”

“Oh Leonard,” gushed Beverly like a new bride. “You say the sweetest things to me! You know how thankful I am for you, and for renewed strength and health for you after a few health challenges this year. I'm especially thankful to God for my precious family!” she announced enthusiastically.

“Now, Grandma, you say that every year,” teased Hannah.

“Well, when it stops being true, then I'll stop saying it,” replied Beverly, laughing with her granddaughter.

“I'm thankful for growing up and getting more opportunities for adventures, like driving,” said Hannah, looking hopefully at her parents and grandpa.

“With those opportunities for adventure also comes responsibility,” reminded her father, “but we're thankful to the Lord to be around to watch you growing into a lovely young lady.”

Hannah blushed sweetly.

Eric continued. “It has been a great joy for me to watch many of the youth in our church growing up over the past twenty years in this congregation. We've had weddings of former nursery students, and we've welcomed the next generation of little ones into the fold when their parents stay connected to God and church attendance. Thank You, God, for blessing our ministry to Your people.”

“Yes, Lord,” chimed in Jennifer after her husband's praise. “And I'm thankful for the new people we have come to know in the past year. New friends!” She thought about several families

who had joined the church as well as a few single older people looking for Christian fellowship to enjoy on their walk of life.

“My turn,” broke in Samuel enthusiastically. “I’m thankful that God made all the different animals! Does anyone know what my favorite animal is?”

“Last year it was the cheetah, son, last month it was an ocelot, and just last week you were raving about a sloth,” chuckled Eric. “So, what exotic animal is your favorite now?”

“An elephant,” Samuel stated matter-of-factly.

“An old classic and all-time favorite, to be sure,” said his grandfather.

“Excuse me, Grandpa,” interrupted Chris. “It will be two years in December that Ashley and I have been married. We’re hoping to catch up to you and grandma, so watch yourselves. I’m thankful for our new house and how my wife has decorated it to make it such a nice place to come home to after a hard day at work.”

“Thanksgiving at your house next year?” teased Eric. Jennifer elbowed him with a knowing look.

“Oh...I don’t know about that,” stammered Ashley, turning red. “I don’t think I could make a meal like this yet.”

“He’s just teasing you, honey,” comforted Jennifer. “We don’t expect you to host until you’re ready, but we sure appreciate the dishes you brought and your help in the kitchen today,” she said encouragingly. “So, what are you thankful for, Ashley?”

“I’m thankful for your kindness to me, welcoming me into your family over the past few years. First, you Jennifer, mentoring and discipling me. I don’t think you thought of me as your future daughter-in-law back in those early years of counseling. But now I have Chris, a lovely home of my own and a loving extended family with all the trimming like this meal here! It means a lot to me, coming from a broken home with hardly any traditions or celebrations,” Ashley said humbly.

“Well, it’s not our tradition to eat cold food on Thanksgiving, so let’s wrap this up by saying thanks to God for these blessings and by loading up our plates!” Grandpa Leonard declared.

All of them piled their plates high with their favorite holiday foods. With so much food on display in the dining room, a separate table was set and decorated in the living room for the

family to gather around. Lively chat around the table continued about things each person was thankful for over the past year. Grandpa's health was reviewed, the children's achievements were discussed, and church events were remembered fondly.

In their mid-seventies, Leonard and Beverly were both extremely overweight. While Beverly still maintained an active life serving her family and friends in the community, Leonard had become more sedentary. Yet when Beverly called him for help, he still came running to try to do the same things he used to be able to handle as a young Marine. On several occasions, he had strained his back, and his legs, which were already enduring the extra burden of weight, had started failing under him, causing him to stumble and fall. These personal accidents had brought him into the hospital where they had begun to monitor his cholesterol, blood pressure and blood sugar levels. Beverly tried to soothe Leonard in her usual fashion, baking delicious treats in her pristine white kitchen of the home they had shared most of their married life together.

Eric married their elder daughter Jennifer about twenty-five years ago, shortly after he had finished Bible Seminary. He served as an Associate Pastor of Grace Community Church in Albany, Georgia, for a few years before he was called to take over when the older pastor retired. Eric's square shoulders caused his preaching suits to hang handsomely when he was standing before his congregation even when his curly hair was a bit disheveled. That, along with a friendly smile, gave him a boyish charm even at his age, as he was now closer to fifty than forty. Around home and on weekdays, he preferred polo shirts, jeans, and sturdy boots. His sons Chris and Samuel had inherited his mop of disheveled locks and boyish grin. Hannah was disappointed with her straight brown hair from her mother, but she tried not to mope about it, hoping it would begin to thicken to grow long and strong like her mother's had. Until then, she pulled it back in a ponytail frequently. Thankfully, her brother Samuel was forbidden from tugging on it, but since she didn't see Chris as often anymore, he still had big-brother-teasing-ponytail-pulling privileges.

After a short time, several people rose from their chairs to head back to the dining room for seconds. "Does it count as 'seconds' if we just get things that we didn't get to try on our first plate?" Eric tried to ask reasonably. There were still many dishes that were, in fact, untouched from the first go-round but now would be attacked with serving spoons. Favorites began to dwindle. Back at the family table, more conversations continued as the plates were cleaned again, a little slower than the first time but just as thoroughly. Ashley enjoyed talking to Jennifer and Beverly about some of the decorating ideas for her new house. Hannah listened in and

offered to go shopping with her anytime. Since Ashley had been around the Harvey house for years, Hannah grew up loving and respecting Ashley as a cool older sister and had been only too delighted to serve as a junior bridesmaid when Ashley married her big brother. The men moved to settle into the recliners and sofas as they were looking forward to the football games coming up in the afternoon.

“So, Dad, do those athletes have a Thanksgiving meal at home or together with their team before the game?” Samuel asked in his usual curious, but slightly concerned way.

“They're in training, son, so I don't think they would have this kind of meal before a big game,” Eric gestured back to their family's big spread as he explained what he thought was probably true. “Not only do they miss out on the traditional food but they miss out on the family gathering on this day.”

“I hope they have a big family celebration on another day, maybe even tomorrow after the games,” suggested Samuel. “But they can't have our leftovers. We have plans for those!”

Later, Eric and his father-in-law Leonard stretched out in the comfortable overstuffed recliners in the den. On the side table, they each had a plate scattered with an assortment of the desserts. They worked on these treats over the next few hours of the games. Eric almost upset his plate once when the game action got exciting. They both snoozed in their comfortable chairs, but they were often interrupted by different family members. Chris kept them updated on the games if their eyes were closed for too long. Samuel sat playing with his African animal figurines, squaring the elephant to face off with the rhinoceros and wildebeest, then racing the cheetah against the ostrich and giraffe. Hannah was checking to see if her grandpa would take her out in the car, hoping he could be pried away at halftime. The ladies offered more goodies for the first half of each game and offered to remove their plates many times during the second half of those games, which they were reluctant to give up until everything had been sampled. Occasional bursts of laughter could be heard coming from the kitchen as the young ladies enjoyed special bonding time with Jennifer and Beverly over a sink full of dishes. It was a comfortable and sweet time with family.

Chapter 2

“Good night, Grandpa! Good night, Grandma! Thank you for the delicious pies,” Samuel called out into the dark night as Leonard and Beverly were getting into their car. “And thanks for leaving the leftovers! I'll share if you come back over tomorrow.”

Leonard gently pulled away from the curb. The headlights of their Toyota shined brightly through the dark neighborhood streets, empty now after 10:00 p.m. Leonard turned right onto the major street with several unoccupied lanes and headed for their home just a few miles away. They enjoyed the tree-lined avenue, noticing a few houses and apartment buildings with Christmas decorations already up. Beverly remembered that tomorrow she would start on her own Christmas decorations. It was a quiet drive after the hubbub of the family Thanksgiving meal.

“What a delightful evening with our family,” sighed Beverly. “Those kids are getting bigger every time I see them.”

“You see them every week, dear,” teased Leonard, as he glanced in the rear-view mirror to see a sleek car racing up behind him at high speed. After several more glances in the mirror, Leonard became concerned. “What's this guy doing?” exclaimed Leonard. What happened next seemed like a slow nightmare. The car that Leonard had seen approaching slammed into the rear of their Toyota, catapulting them at an awkward angle towards the parked cars on the right side of the avenue. The sound of their screeching tires soon gave way to the stench of burning rubber. Leonard heard Beverly scream as he tried to control their car to no avail. The maniac driver's Cadillac high-performance sedan crushed Leonard's Toyota Camry like an accordion into a white, full-size Chevy truck parked at the curb before it spun out of control into a lamppost on the other side of the street. The grating noise of clashing metal rang out through the peaceful night. The air bags exploded for protection. Then all was silent.

After what seemed like hours in the cold, dark silence of the night, Leonard realized that he could feel metal pressed sharply against his body in several places. He tried to turn his head to check on Beverly, but pain shot through his neck. He called out to his beloved wife, “Beverly, Beverly! Are you alright?” but there was no response. While it felt like a lifetime, people soon came out of the surrounding houses and apartments. Cell phones lit up as some called the sheriff

and the fire department for emergency services. The owner of the parked truck moaned loudly and ran his hands through his bed-head mop of hair while he gazed at his damaged vehicle. Other men and women rushed toward the accident looking for victims to help.

“Sir, are you awake? Can you tell me how you are?” one neighbor questioned Leonard assertively but with genuine concern as he peered through the shattered window, shining his cell phone light to look in.

“Yes, I think I lost consciousness for a moment, but I'm awake now. I can't move; I'm pinned in. But I can't see what's happened to my wife. I can't turn to look at her in the passenger seat. Please go check on her,” Leonard pleaded.

Other neighbors circled around their car. One man, with his hand wrapped in a towel, wiped away the broken window glass to check on Beverly. “Ma'am, the rescue team is on their way. We're right here around you,” he said, even though he could tell that Beverly was not conscious. Her eyes were closed, and her head drooped to one side. There was blood trickling from a gash on Beverly's head, but the airbags had done their job of protecting them from greater injury.

Thankfully, Leonard began to hear sirens getting closer. Before long, a paramedic in full emergency garb strode up to Leonard's window as he assessed the situation.

“Sir, we're here to help you. Can you tell me your name? Can you tell me how you feel?” the paramedic questioned.

“My name is Leonard Douglas. My wife Beverly and I were driving home from our Thanksgiving meal with our family. I'm stuck and can't turn my head to check on my wife.” Leonard tried to answer clearly, but he was growing more concerned for Beverly.

“Thank you, Leonard. Can you tell me how you feel? Do you have pain or even loss of feeling anywhere?” again the paramedic questioned.

“I feel metal squeezing my legs and body. I feel sharp pains on the skin of my face and arms. Is my wife OK? We need to help her.” Leonard pleaded again for his wife.

A fireman stepped over to explain. “Paramedics are already assisting her, sir. We need to assess the situation. You appear to be trapped. There is no immediate risk of fire, but we're going to take some precautions and cover your car with foam. That will give us time to get you released safely from the vehicle in order to take you to the emergency room for medical care.” Next, the paramedic covered Leonard with a light blanket and moved away before a hiss signaled the

spraying of the flame-retardant foam.

Leonard tried to wait patiently for further help but could feel his anxiety building as his heartbeat became louder in his ears. He listened as the fire officials coordinated with the police and paramedics to make plans for their rescue.

“The male driver is conscious, slight lacerations on his face and arms, but wedged into the seat between the steering wheel, airbags, and the crumpled frame. He has complained of pain and restriction in his neck. The female passenger is unconscious, possible concussion with trauma to her forehead, with multiple skin lacerations, and wedged in as well. We were unable to assess for breaks, so we'll have to treat her with care and possible neck injuries. Let's remove the doors first, then cut the frame away. These people are so fat that we can't pull them out easily.”

Shame flooded Leonard's emotions. *Trapped. Wedged in. Too fat to be rescued.* He was thankful Beverly didn't hear that. He hoped she was unconscious at least for that. But then she moaned.

The next few minutes were spent carefully deconstructing their crumpled vehicle with the Jaws of Life to make a safe means to remove their traumatized bodies. Leonard was aware of the crushed tailgate in front of them, recognizing it as one from a new truck that had been safely parked on the avenue. He hoped that it had been empty. He wondered about the driver of the sporty luxury sedan that ran into them. A police officer was now on the scene and came over to question Leonard some more. Leonard was still stuck, but he was relieved to see the paramedics working to get Beverly out first.

“Mr. Douglas. I'm Officer Stanley. I go to church with you.” Leonard recognized the young man. “Sir, if you're up to it, I'd like to ask you some more questions about this incident. Sometimes our memory is pretty clear right after the event. Can you tell me what you remember?” asked the officer as he pulled out his notebook and pen.

Leonard tried to explain, “My wife and I were driving home after our family celebration...”

The officer interrupted him. “Sir, did you drink any alcohol at the celebration? Anything at all?”

“No, sir!” Leonard responded with a sharp tone, then calmed down. “I'm not a drinking man. Our family does not serve alcohol at family events.”

“Thank you for the information, sir. I had to ask.”

Leonard took a few more minutes to describe for the officer how he had noticed the speeding car in the rear-view mirror as it raced towards them only seconds before impact. It happened so suddenly that there weren't much more details. He had seen no one else on the road. He gave Officer Stanley the home phone number for Eric and Jennifer, and he promised to contact them as soon as possible. Then, a whole squad of paramedics came to pull Leonard out of the vehicle. After covering Leonard's body with protective gear, the power saw rang out in the quiet night. Men carefully hefted the metal framing pieces that had held him in. Leonard's neck was braced before they hefted him out and slid him onto the waiting gurney. Before he moved into the ambulance, he looked around for his wife.

“Where's my wife?” he shouted.

A nearby medic explained that she had been removed before him and was already on her way to the same hospital where he was going. But there was still another emergency vehicle on the scene. The back doors were open, waiting to receive the driver of the other car. Before Leonard left the scene, he saw a gurney sliding into the coroner's van, but the whole body, including the face, was covered. The driver was dead.