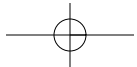
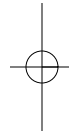


*Christmas*  
**ROSE**



# *Christmas* ROSE

*A Novel by*

**ROBYN BUTTARS**



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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Buttars, Robyn.

Christmas Rose / Robyn Buttars.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-59038-988-1 (pbk.)

1. Girls—Fiction. 2. Mothers and daughters—Fiction.  
3. Cooks—Fiction. 4. Congregate housing—Fiction. 5. Christmas stories.

I. Title.

PS3602.U8923C48 2008

813'.6—dc22

2008013024

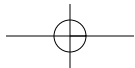
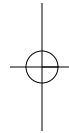
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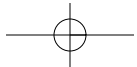
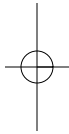
Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



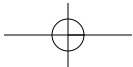
*Dedicated to all who recognize and appreciate the power  
of unconditional love,  
and in memory of my dear parents,  
June and Blake Butterfield*





*Contents*

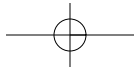
<i>Acknowledgments</i> .....	ix
CHAPTER ONE: HOME .....	1
CHAPTER TWO: BESSIE .....	10
CHAPTER THREE: CLESTON .....	17
CHAPTER FOUR: CHRISTMAS SURPRISE .....	27
CHAPTER FIVE: HELEN .....	37
CHAPTER SIX: JAKE .....	47
CHAPTER SEVEN: FRED .....	59
CHAPTER EIGHT: THE GARDEN .....	71
CHAPTER NINE: ALONE .....	79
CHAPTER TEN: INA .....	88
CHAPTER ELEVEN: HALLOWEEN .....	97
CHAPTER TWELVE: THE GIFT .....	104



## *Acknowledgments*

I express my sincere appreciation to Chris Schoebinger for understanding *Christmas Rose* and encouraging my final re-write; Lisa Mangum for her persistence in getting my manuscript read and editing it; Vicki Parry for her valuable editing; Richard Erickson and Sheryl Dickert Smith for the beautiful cover and design; and Tonya Facemyer and Rachael Ward for excellent typesetting work.

I gratefully acknowledge my proofreaders, Sarah Buttars, Chalese Buttars, and Crystal Burningham.



*Chapter One*  
**HOME**



Pleasant Manor stood among the surrounding cornfields like an oasis in the desert. Freshly painted white siding glistened in the sun except on the sides where golden tassels of ripened cornstalks stroked at the walls with each wisp of wind.

“This is my stop.” Rosie’s words were barely loud enough for the driver to hear.

“Here?” The bus driver turned in his seat to look at Rosie.

She knew his next question before he asked it. Each time a new bus driver took her home the same thing happened.

“You live at Pleasant Manor?”

Rosie was looking down at the floor, letting her thick, brown ponytail cover her face. “Behind it.” She

ROBYN BUTTARS

stepped past the driver and waited on the bottom step for the automatic door to slide open.

“Do I pick you up here tomorrow?”

“Yes.” Rosie’s voice blew in the breeze as the door shut behind her. She stood for a moment, needing the calming peace of her quiet country home after her first day of fourth grade.

Corn and grain fields stretched in every direction. The distant city, which she could barely see, seemed like another world—a world she had to put up with each day, but a place in which she could never feel at home.

New bus drivers were always surprised when they dropped Rosie off in front of the care center, as if a child could not belong in such a place. However, Pleasant Manor was where Rosie felt at home. It was like Bessie said: “Home is a place where you are surrounded by love.”

The heavy wooden door creaked on its ungreased hinges when Rosie pulled it open far enough to slip through. As she walked down the hall and into the great room, the smell of hot, sticky, cinnamon rolls made her stomach churn with anticipation. Her eyes darted around the room, jumping past each empty chair until

CHRISTMAS ROSE

she spotted the tip of a gray bun of hair, barely showing over the top of Bessie's old wing-backed sofa.

Rosie slipped quietly behind the sofa and placed her hands around Bessie's eyes. "Guess who?" Her voice was deep as she tried to fool her friend.

"Well, it couldn't be Harry or Lily or my little Rosie. No, indeed, it couldn't be my little Rosie or she would have given me a big hug." Bessie's delight with the game was obvious as she pulled Rosie's arms away from her face and around her neck in a grandmotherly squeeze.

Rosie clung to her longer than usual, drawing pleasure from the scent of her lilac perfume. Bessie's large, fleshy arms cuddled her in the warmth of love.

"Now tell me about your first day of school." Bessie slid to the corner of the sofa and patted the seat beside her so Rosie could sit down.

"It was all right. My teacher's nice but—"

"Help me! Get the dog!" Helen's cry streaked across the great room as she stumbled through the doorway, pushing her walker in front of her. "The dog—it's in my room!"

ROBYN BUTTARS

“Can you help her, Rosie?” Bessie’s gentle push on her elbow moved Rosie to her feet.

She walked toward Helen as Bessie called, “Helen, don’t you worry. Rosie will come and help you with that dog.”

Helen had already turned around and was walking as fast as her swollen legs would allow. “That dog shouldn’t be in my room—”

“Helen, don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.” Rosie had to take giant steps to keep up with her. It was always a surprise to see how quickly Helen could move when she was upset. Any other time her steps were slow and seemingly painful.

Rosie wanted to get to the room before Helen so she could have a quick look around. If Helen got there first, Rosie would be in for a good ten-minute check of every corner and shelf before Helen would calm down.

She ran into the room, looked under the bed, in the bathroom, and in the closet. Then she ran and met Helen at the door. “Helen, the dog’s gone. It won’t hurt you.”

Helen looked at her for a minute, questioning her words, and then, as suddenly as the incident began, it

CHRISTMAS ROSE

was over. Her look of fear changed to one of haunting emptiness. Helen walked off down the tiled hallway.

“Rosie, you’re late today,” Mama said as Rosie came into the kitchen. She looked up from the tray of rolls she was frosting. Her words were not a rebuke, just a question.

“I was helping Helen with the dog.”

“Oh.” The simple word held understanding. “How was school?”

Rosie pulled a chair next to the counter and took the cinnamon roll that Mama placed on a napkin for her. “Okay, I guess. We had a new bus driver and he didn’t want to let me off here.”

Mama laughed. Her long dark ponytail that was so much like her daughter’s swung back and forth as her body shook with the sound. “Adults stay away from care centers until they have to come to one.”

She picked up the tray of rolls, set it on the service cart along with a spatula, then opened the door of the oversized oven and pulled out a large tray of meat.

“Mmm, that smells good.”

“It’s your favorite. You’d better go to the house and

ROBYN BUTTARS

get your homework done so you can be back in time for supper.”

“It’s the first day of school, Mama. There’s no homework.”

“Do you want to help me?” Mama handed Rosie a tray of salt and pepper shakers before she could respond.

Rosie didn’t have to be told what to do. Her routine tasks had been a part of her life as long as she could remember. Each meal, each day, Rosie carried things from the kitchen to the dining room tables, saving her mother a few steps. “You’re my legs, Rosie,” Mama often said as she sent Rosie on a task.

It wasn’t that Mama didn’t have legs; it was just that they were crippled, deformed from the hips down. A visitor to the Manor had once commented that Mama’s walk looked like a waddling duck in pain. In the kitchen, where everything was close at hand, she moved quickly, but walking any distance took her twice as long as anyone else.

As Rosie straightened the napkins and placed the salt and pepper shakers on each table, she thought back to the first time she had helped her mother at Pleasant

## CHRISTMAS ROSE

Manor. In her mind's eye she could see herself reaching up to place a roll on the table next to Bessie. But she was never really sure what she actually remembered. The tale of that first experience had been repeated so often, and by so many people, that she could not separate their memories from her own.

Rosie was two-and-a-half years old when they moved into the three-room stone farmhouse behind the care center. Mama was just nineteen.

Although the job as an assistant to the cook was supposed to be temporary, it offered more security than Mama had known since her husband had walked out. For over a year, she had faced the fight to provide for two with the stoic determination she had mastered as a child. To live had always been about survival, not ease or happiness.

Since there was nobody to watch over Rosie, Mama received permission to keep her in a playpen in the kitchen. All had gone well for the first few months—until Rosie decided to have an adventure.

Some parts of that day were clear in her mind. One thing she remembered was the feel of cold metal in a chamber that was quiet except for the hushed echoes

## ROBYN BUTTARS

that played on the sides. Rosie had climbed out of the playpen when Mama stepped into the dining room with a water pitcher. When Mama returned, Rosie was not there. She had been told what happened—after eight years, the tale still lived!

The cry went out that Rosie was missing. Everyone forgot about dinner as the residents combed the Manor looking for the toddler. People who had not moved by themselves for years pushed their wheelchairs along the halls as they called out for Rosie. It was not clear how long the search lasted. The time it took to find her ranged from fifteen minutes to an hour and fifteen minutes, depending on who was telling the story. But when Rosie toddled out of the huge metal mixing bowl where she had fallen asleep, their shared joy was unreserved. Nobody knows how the bowl got on its side, but it was the perfect size for a toddler to curl up in when she could not find her mother.

At that moment Rosie had become everyone's special friend. "Please send Rosie out with a roll," a resident would request, wanting a chance to get a hug from the toddler.

Mama quickly realized that Rosie would never stay

## CHRISTMAS ROSE

in the playpen once she had tasted freedom. Her only hope was to keep Rosie busy while she completed her shift. Rosie thought it was a great game, going from table to table for hugs or tastes of her favorite dessert. When Mama took over as chief cook, Rosie became chief runner.

She grew up day by day, year by year, eating, playing, and living at Pleasant Manor. It was only in the evening, when the kitchen was clean, that she and Mama stepped out the back door and walked to the small house. That is where they slept—in the house—but when Rosie thought of home, she thought of the big building next door, the place where she was surrounded by love.