

## THE VICAR'S WIFE

After spending her childhood in Canada and then three years as a diehard New Yorker, Katharine Swartz now lives in the Lake District with her husband, an Anglican minister, their five children, and a Golden Retriever. She enjoys such novel things as long country walks and chatting with people in the street, and her children love the freedom of village life – although she often has to ring four or five people to figure out where they've gone off to!

She writes women's fiction as well as contemporary romance for Mills & Boon Modern under the name Kate Hewitt, and whatever the genre she enjoys delivering a compelling and intensely emotional story. Find out more about her books at [www.katharineswartz.com](http://www.katharineswartz.com).

# THE VICAR'S WIFE

Katharine Swartz



LION FICTION

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*To the lovely people of St Bees,  
who made the village feel like my home.*

*Other titles by Katharine Swartz*

Far Horizons

Another Country

Down Jasper Lane

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## CHAPTER ONE

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### Jane

It started with a shopping list. Jane Hatton had been painting the second pantry; it seemed ridiculous that there were two, but then this huge, rambling monstrosity of a vicarage was ridiculous.

A month ago she'd been in New York City, playing with the children in Central Park and touring the Met, trying to forget the fact that she was about to move countries, that she had, albeit rather passively, agreed to her husband's long-held dream of finally returning to the land of his birth and living in the middle of nowhere.

Now there could be no avoiding it. The wind rattled the kitchen windowpanes and Jane could feel the draught from under the back door, unforgivingly raw even though it was only early September. In New York City, Jane had checked that morning, it was a balmy twenty-three degrees. In Cumbria the thermometer hovered around a miserable ten.

"Stop moaning," she told herself as she took out the old, weathered shelves of the second pantry in preparation to paint the walls. When she did a thing, she did it properly, which was why she'd started with the second pantry. The formal sitting and dining rooms with their fourteen-foot-high ceilings and long, curling strips of old, peeling paint were far too overwhelming. The pantry, and the second one at that, she could just about manage.

"You agreed to this," she reminded herself, her voice ringing out through the stone-flagged kitchen. "You did. There's no use complaining about it now."

And even though she knew there wasn't, she could not keep from feeling painfully homesick for the city's bright lights and frantic energy. She'd been born there, and after a childhood stint in the suburbs had lived her whole adult life there. She'd raised their three children there. They'd liked New York, liked the verdant expanse of Central Park, the traditional outings to Radio City for Christmas, to the Natural History Museum the day before Thanksgiving to watch them blow up the floats, the buzz and excitement of living at the very centre of the world.

Just the thought of all the things they'd done, the *life* they'd lived, made Jane close her eyes, a shelf still held in her hands. She missed it so much. There was nothing to do, among these barren fells and morose sheep. *Nothing*.

Natalie, her oldest child at fourteen, had already given this scathing indictment three days ago. Jane had, somewhat doubtfully, cajoled her children to play in the garden, even though the sky was heavy and grey with lowering clouds and a freezing wind – it was *August*, for heaven's sake – came straight off the sea.

She'd watched them from the dining room window as they mooched around the expanse of overgrown grass, looking bored and even bewildered. It was, she had told them in a too-cheerful voice, quite an *interesting* garden, surrounded by high stone walls, and with plenty of overgrown borders and intriguing nooks – Merrie, their youngest, had found a stone bench built right into the hillside and covered in mulchy leaves.

Still, it wasn't familiar; it wasn't New York. There was no modern Swedish-designed climbing equipment, no ice cream

and balloon vendors, no towering rocks to climb on like in Central Park. After three minutes Natalie folded her arms and sat in a plastic chair – their only one – while she glared at Jane still standing there hopefully by the window.

When she'd finally ushered them all back in – it had started to rain, *again* – Natalie had turned to her and hissed, "There is *nothing* to do here."

Jane had stayed silent, mainly because she agreed and did not want Natalie to know.

Maybe things would be different now, she thought as she reached for another shelf. Today was their first day of school, and surely they'd all feel differently once they made friends. Even her.

Sighing, Jane eased the next shelf off its braces. This one was slate, and very old; its heaviness surprised her and she almost dropped it. When Andrew had bought the former vicarage last spring – Jane hadn't even seen it – he'd raved about all the period details, cornices and fireplaces and an ancient Aga in the kitchen. Tucked up in their Upper West Side apartment with its double-glazed windows and air conditioning, Jane had been vaguely charmed.

"And the pantry has a slate shelf," Andrew had said happily. "You know – a cold shelf, to put meat and milk and things on."

"Well, I hope we'll have a fridge," Jane had replied with a little laugh, but she, like Andrew, had liked the idea of it. It all sounded very charming, sort of like living in a period drama. Next she'd be churning butter.

The reality, however, was that the house was a mess of peeling paint, warped floorboards, and dodgy electrics. It was freezing even in summer and the slate shelf she held now was ridiculously heavy. With a sigh she placed the shelf carefully on

the floor – she really didn't feel like picking up a million pieces of shattered slate – and that's when the yellowed piece of paper fluttered off it. It must have been stuck to the back, trapped against the wall, and with a flicker of curiosity Jane picked it up.

It was just a scrap, torn carefully from the corner of a larger sheet, and the writing on it was a spidery kind of cursive no one seemed to use any more. Jane squinted to read the few lines.

*Beef joint for Weltons, 2 lb, 2s/3d*

*Potatoes, 5 lb, 6d*

*Tea, 1/4 lb, 4d*

*Mint Humbugs for David, 1d*

Jane read it through again, slowly, trying to make sense of it. It was a shopping list, obviously, but she didn't know what the *d* stood for. And who were the Weltons? And David?

She sat back on her heels, intrigued enough for her own homesickness to abate for a moment. She had no idea how old the shopping list was, but by the crackly age of the paper and the spidery writing she guessed at least forty or fifty years. And it had been stuck behind that slate shelf the whole time.

"I don't suppose anyone wanted to move that heavy thing," Jane murmured. She stood up, wincing at the cramp in her legs. She hadn't even started painting yet, but she felt due a coffee break. She put the kettle on and stared out the kitchen window, the sky heavy and grey, the wind battering every tree and shrub in the garden into woeful submission.

They'd arrived in Goswell on a beautiful sunny day two weeks ago. It had been mid-August, warm although not hot, and the sunlight had bathed everything in a mellow, golden light. Jane had climbed out of the rented estate car and blinked up at the stately old vicarage in wary surprise. It was

a place, she'd felt, that had a huge amount of history and she could not quite imagine becoming a part of it.

"It looks like something out of an Austen novel," she told Andrew, who was already hurrying towards the door with the big, ridiculously old-fashioned iron key he'd picked up at the estate agent's in Penrith.

"It should do," he called back. "It was built in 1819, right around the time she was writing."

The children had tumbled out of the car like puppies, racing around the huge garden, and Jane was heartened to hear their cries of delight upon the discovery of an old wooden swing in a horse chestnut tree.

Breathless and red-cheeked, eight-year-old Merrie had run up to Jane and tugged her sleeve, her eyes wide with rapture. "There's a horse in the field over there – *right next door!*"

Jane had smiled. "Is there, sweetheart? Maybe we can find a carrot to feed it." Even Natalie, persistently and determinedly sullen ever since the move had been announced, had sloped around the garden, looking begrudgingly interested. Ben, eleven and full of manic boy-energy, was romping and whooping like a joyful savage.

Jane had felt a wave of relief. Perhaps it was going to be all right after all. They'd make a home here, find a kind of bucolic life for themselves. It would be, as they'd told themselves over and over again, good for the children. David opened the door.

The first thing Jane had noticed when she stepped inside was how musty the house smelled.

"Look at that Victorian tile," Andrew enthused, pointing to the intricate pattern of coloured tile on the floor, blood-red and army green. It looked, Jane thought, like something out of *Oliver Twist*. Victorian orphanage decor.

The children pushed past them and raced upstairs, and Jane could hear them laying claim to the best bedrooms.

"How long has it been empty?" she asked, taking another step inside. She could not deny the gracious, soaring space of the rooms was both imposing and beautiful, if a little overwhelming. The entry hall alone was bigger than their sitting room back in New York.

"A year or two," Andrew replied with a shrug. "The last vicar left and the diocese decided to sell it, buy a modern bungalow for the next incumbent."

"I see." And frankly, staring around at the huge, musty rooms, Jane could see the appeal of a smaller, warmer house with a fitted kitchen, an electric cooker, and central heating. She let out a long, slow breath. "Well, let's see the rest of it."

"You'll love it," Andrew assured her. "It was a complete bargain – we'll have to do it up slowly—"

As he took her through the house, clearly brimming with excitement, Jane knew she could not say or do anything to dampen his enthusiasm. She remained mostly silent, taking in the period details Andrew had raved about – fireplaces in all six bedrooms – as well as noting the flaking paint, rotten floorboards, and rattling windowpanes. It was a beautiful house, and it hadn't been cared for properly in years. And they were meant to be moving in tomorrow, when their things arrived from the States.

"Let's go to the kitchen," Andrew said after they'd toured the whole house and decided which bedrooms everyone would take. "I'll put the kettle on and we'll all have a cup of tea."

"There's a kettle?" Jane asked dubiously, and Andrew grinned, excited even about that.

"Yes, a huge brass one – it must be almost as old as the house. I instructed them to turn the Aga back on before

we came, and I've brought a packet of tea and mugs." He grinned again, clearly pleased with himself, and Jane smiled weakly back.

Even after sixteen years in New York, Andrew had not lost the British belief that a cup of tea made things better. Jane was not so sure. Even after a mug of English Breakfast the house would remain in all of its unkempt glory. They would still be living in a tiny village in Cumbria, having given up everything in New York. The pre-war, full-service three bedroom they'd saved and saved for. A circle of gracious if busy friends. Places for all their children at some of the city's best private schools. And a job – a calling, managing a nonprofit for disadvantaged women – that she'd dearly loved.

She knew there was no point thinking about it now. They'd discussed it all, the pros and cons, the possibilities, five months ago, when Natalie had been suspended from school for two weeks after being busted for drinking at a friend's party.

Jane had been furious, because several other girls had weaselled out of a proper punishment since their fathers were on the Board of Trustees. The Hattons didn't have that kind of pull, and so Natalie had paid.

Andrew, of course, had seen things differently. Natalie had done wrong; Natalie deserved what she got. And the whole episode, unfortunately, had served as a wake-up call to him that he did not want to raise his family in New York City.

Jane still remembered the shock that had trickled icily through her as Andrew sat across from her on the sofa, the children in bed, her laptop on her knees. She'd been going over donor figures for the end of the year and she hadn't been in the mood for a deep conversation.

"I've been thinking," Andrew had said, his face worryingly earnest, "about moving out of New York."



Jane stared at him blankly, for the first thought that had crossed her mind was that Andrew meant he would move by himself. *She* wasn't about to leave the only place she'd thought of as home.

"Moving," she repeated, noncommittally, and Andrew nodded, wrapped a hand around her bare ankle.

"Yes. Somewhere where the children have more space, more freedom."

She wrinkled her nose. "You mean New Jersey?"

He gave her a small, patient smile. "No, Jane."

*Thank God.* "Connecticut?"

"No." Andrew let out a little sigh and squeezed her ankle. "I mean back to England. You know I've always wanted to live there again, let the children see where half of their family comes from—"

Still she refused to understand, some stubborn part of her insisting on confusion as the safer option. "You mean a trip."

Andrew shook his head, still earnest. "No, Jane. I mean a move." He took a breath, his fingers tightening around the fragile bones of her ankle. "There's a position at a technology park near Keswick. The kind of engineering research I've always wanted to do—"

"A job in *Keswick*?" Jane shifted, slipping her legs away from Andrew, her feet firmly on the floor. They'd gone to visit his mother in Keswick nearly every year since they'd been married, and although decidedly quaint it was not a place she'd ever considered living in. It was five hours from London, for heaven's sake. Not even near the motorway.

"It's not in Keswick. It's about half an hour away, near the coast."

"Farther away than Keswick."

Andrew gave her one of his endearing, crooked smiles, the kind she'd always loved. "Farther away from what?"

*Everything.* Jane just stared at him blankly. Nothing, absolutely nothing, had prepared her for this moment. Oh, Andrew had made noises about wanting to move back to England one day, but that's all they'd been. Noises. Jane had, on rare occasions, entertained an extremely vague notion of retiring to some delightful thatched cottage in the Cotswolds, near enough to London and with plenty of culture and sophistication.

And now Andrew was talking about moving to the remote northwest corner of England, near *nothing*, and raising their children there? It was inconceivable.

"I'm surprised," she finally said.

"I know."

"I didn't realize you were actually thinking of moving." She'd meant to sound neutral, but it came out like an accusation.

"This whole thing with Natalie has really made me think."

Jane kept her temper with effort. She already knew they disagreed about "this whole thing" with Natalie. She felt it was a blip on the radar; Andrew thought it was huge. A wake-up call – but to what? "So," she finally said, "you think kids don't drink and go to parties in Cumbria?"

Hurt flashed across Andrew's face and Jane looked away. He could be such a little *boy* about some things. So innocent, so eager. It was at least in part why she'd fallen in love with him back when they'd both been students at Columbia – Andrew visiting for a term – but twenty years later, almost all of them spent in the city, she would have thought he'd have developed some hard city gloss. She wished, in that moment, that he had.

"Of course I don't think that. But I'm tired of life here, Jane. I'm tired of snarling with cab drivers and shoving my way to work on a crowded pavement. I'm bored with my job teaching over-entitled college students who are even more bored than I am and trekking seven blocks to Central Park to kick a football with my son. I don't want this any more."

She heard the urgent sincerity in his voice. She felt it. And she remained silent, because she knew in that moment that all the arguments she'd been poised to launch like missiles would fall crucially short of their target. Andrew had sacrificed the kind of life he'd wanted to live so she could live the kind of life she wanted, and he'd done it for sixteen years. It was that simple. She'd had her turn, and now he wanted his.

Tit for tat. It was about what was fair, what was right, even if it felt completely unjust in that moment. She got that, even if she didn't want to.

"OK," she said. "I'll think about it."

She tried not to think about it and yet it constantly occupied her thoughts. It seemed as if every few seconds her mind broached the terrifying possibility, only to back away from it with panicked speed. Andrew had applied for the job, got the interview. He asked Jane if she wanted to accompany him, and she'd made excuses about needing to stay with the children. She knew she should go, she should see what this life of theirs might be like, but she was too afraid. Some childish part of her psyche insisted that if she didn't go, if she didn't *see*, it wouldn't happen.

Andrew got the job. It was time for another serious and earnest discussion, and in a panic Jane conducted countless frenzied internet searches on the region – West Cumberland – and found it all incredibly depressing. The local schools' OFSTED reports – Jane wasn't even sure what those were

– seemed mediocre. The hospital was overcrowded and the unemployment was one of the highest in the country.

"If you reduced Manhattan to a bunch of similar statistics," Andrew told her, "it would be worse."

Of course Jane knew that. Manhattan's statistics would be much worse, and yet it didn't make her feel any better. Andrew, however, seemed remarkably placid about the whole thing, seemed irritatingly certain that they would all thrive – his word – in this new environment. As if they were houseplants.

"Do you know," she told him once, "there are only four Starbucks in all of Cumbria? One in Carlisle, and three in the Center Parc."

Andrew had smiled and patted her shoulder. "We're not moving so we can be near a Starbucks," he said. "We're moving away from them."

"And no take-out places." She thought of the vast array they had on their doorstep; take-out was often an easier option than cooking, and her children had learned to dial and order for themselves – all part of a Manhattan childhood.

"Thank goodness," Andrew answered lightly. "I'm ready for some home-cooked meals."

She'd reared back then, struck by the awful possibility that this move wasn't just about changing lifestyles, but changing her.

"I'm not going to turn into Betty Homemaker," Jane warned him and Andrew just chuckled.

"I'm not asking you to, Jane. I just want an easier pace."

Yet despite Andrew's wish, things seemed only to pick up speed, decisions made faster and faster, so Jane felt like a spectator in her own life, everything a blur of activity around her. Even as Andrew accepted the job, even as they sat

down and told the children, even as they put their gorgeous apartment up for sale, and she cried the first time someone came in and looked at it, turning their noses up at the granite countertops in the kitchen – “*but they’re not marble*” – even as he went back to look at houses and Jane stubbornly refused to accompany him, still in some kind of outrageous denial, she’d felt removed from it all, like it wasn’t really going to happen. It wasn’t going to happen to her. It *couldn’t*.

And now they were here.

“More tea?” Andrew asked cheerfully and Jane took her mug to the huge, stained sink. It looked as ancient as the rest of the house, and the depth of it was sure to give her backache.

“No, thank you,” she said. “I’m going outside.”

She stood on the crumbling front steps and shivered. It was a beautiful day, but it was still cold. It was *freezing*. Directly outside the house was a horse paddock, and beyond that a sheep pasture. Besides the animals all she could see were a few miserable, terraced cottages, the woebegone rail station, and a plume of smoke curling up to a greying sky.

She swallowed, sniffed. She’d already done her grieving for the life they’d left in New York, or at least she thought she had. She’d cried, alone in the shower, and presented a determinedly cheerful if rather brittle front to her friends.

She had accepted that Andrew needed this, that the children probably needed this. And she’d told herself that maybe she needed this too, because she’d been pulling sixty-hour working weeks and juggling childcare while pretending she didn’t get migraines or ulcers – and that was no way to live your life, right?

Right, Jane told herself as she stared out at the verdant hills, the trees fringing the crest a dark green smudge, the whole world silent and empty around her except for the

relentless howl of the wind and the mournful bleating of the sheep. Right.

Once their things arrived the next day she was kept busy enough not to dwell on all the things she didn’t like about their new home, such as the fact it was on the church grounds, basically in the middle of a cemetery, with no neighbours to speak of. Or that the nearest supermarket was a fifteen-minute drive away, the only takeaway available was a kebab place with an extremely limited menu, and the silence at night rang in her ears, kept her from sleeping, and just about drove her mad.

She was not going to be a snob about things, she told herself. She had plenty of friends in New York who thought Brooklyn, never mind anywhere actually out of the city, was the back of beyond. Most of them had been shocked when she’d announced she was moving to a tiny village on the coast of one of England’s least populated counties.

“It will be so atmospheric,” they’d cooed, as if enthusiastic or even envious, but Jane saw the look in their eyes that they couldn’t quite hide. *Better you than me*.

And she’d tried not to agree with them, tried not to want so desperately to stay in New York, to keep everything just as it was.

And here she was, two weeks in, the children off to school, alone in this great big rambling place. The house seemed to stretch in every direction, empty, endless, unfriendly. Their furniture filled all of three rooms.

She had not met anyone in the village beyond a cautious hello when she’d walked to the little post office shop for a newspaper. The only person she’d had an actual conversation with – if she could call it that – was the postman, when he’d delivered their post. He’d engaged her in a lengthy discussion

in a West Cumbrian accent so thick Jane had not understood a word. She'd clutched their first telephone bill to her chest and made what she hoped were appropriate noises of interest until the man, giving her a look as if he thought her a complete idiot, had taken himself off in his little red van.

She felt, she finally admitted to herself as she took a sip of coffee, the pantry shelves lying all around her, quite unbearably lonely and homesick, without purpose or happiness. Tears threatened, and she blinked them back. She had not cried once since they'd moved here, and she wasn't about to now. Crying alone in this great big house would only make her more miserable. Drawing a shuddering breath, she stared down at the aged shopping list once more.

*Beef joint for Weltons, 2 lb, 2s/3d*

*Potatoes, 5 lb, 6d*

*Tea, 1/4 lb, 4d*

*Mint Humbugs for David, 1d*

She wondered what woman – for surely it was a woman – had written the little list, and if she'd ever felt as lonely as Jane did right now.

## CHAPTER TWO

.....

# Alice Cambridge, 1931

"You remember David James, don't you, Alice?"

Alice Mobberley wiped her floury hands on her apron and wished she'd thought to crimp or at least brush her hair. She was wearing her oldest house dress because she'd been baking – Father did always like his scones – and she hadn't expected visitors, and certainly not a handsome young man like David James.

"Mr James," she said hesitantly, for her father, a tutor in Theology at Trinity College, had had many young men troop through their house, and sit in the study with cups of tea precariously balanced on their knees, arguing quite passionately about church doctrine or who actually wrote the book of Hebrews.

"I'm sure you don't remember me," David James said, smiling. He had sandy brown hair and friendly, hazel eyes, and he held his hat in his hands. "I was a student here ages ago."

"Not that long ago, surely," her father protested with a genial laugh. "It seems only yesterday..."

Alice didn't bother to listen as her father began one of his long-winded reminiscences about being David James's tutor. The way Peter Mobberley talked, every student who came through the door of the tall, narrow house on Grange Road was his favourite and most gifted. And perhaps, in her father's