

“Three of the most talented pens in inspirational fiction combine in a compilation destined to stand out in a crowded festive marketplace. With resplendent sensory detail and rich history, not to mention a keen cinematic flair, each novella is bolstered by hallmarks of faith and charity and underscored with a winning artistic sensibility. Characters flawed, familiar, and achingly human invite us to slip back to a time that, while far from simpler, was abundant in romance and resiliency. Best paired with sprigs of holly, a roaring hearth, and a gaslit night, *Joy to the World* is a perfectly framed portrait of Regency-era Christmastime, and I look forward to entering its pages again and again—at any time of the year.”

RACHEL McMILLAN, author of *The London Restoration*

A
REGENCY CHRISTMAS
COLLECTION

Joy to the
World

CAROLYN MILLER



AMANDA BARRATT



ERICA VETSCH



KREGEL
PUBLICATIONS

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Miller, Carolyn, 1974– Heaven and nature sing. | Barratt, Amanda, 1996– Far as the curse is found. | Vetsch, Erica. Wonders of his love.

Title: Joy to the world : a regency Christmas collection / Carolyn Miller, Amanda Barratt, Erica Vetsch.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Kregel Publications, 2020.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020025853 (print) | LCCN 2020025854 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Christmas stories, American. | Romance fiction, American.

Classification: LCC PS648.C45 J69 2020 (print) | LCC PS648.C45 (ebook) | DDC 813/.08508334—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020025853>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020025854>

ISBN 978-0-8254-4669-6, print

ISBN 978-0-8254-7719-5, epub

HEAVEN
AND
NATURE SING



CAROLYN MILLER

CHAPTER 1



December 1813

THE MUTED GOLD-and-rose-flowered wallpaper of the drawing room seemed to dip and sway as Lady Grantley's words crept past Edith Mansfield's disbelieving ears.

"I beg your pardon?" Edith's mother raised her chin and sent Edith a look to suggest their hostess could not truly be serious.

Heavenly Father, please let her not be serious, Edith prayed.

"Who did you say was coming?" Mama demanded.

Lady Grantley—Edith's godmother, widow of a baronet whose death disappointed nobody, and long considered one of Wycombe's most hospitable ladies—waved an airy hand. "Why, George, of course. He is my godson after all. I was sure you knew that, Catherine."

"To be sure I did not," Edith's mother replied, thawing not one whit. "And if we had known he had returned from abroad and would be here, we most certainly—"

"Mama," Edith cautioned in a low voice.

Lady Grantley glanced between them. "Surely you're not concerned about that silly matter of last year. It was such a long time ago."

But not quite long enough. Edith pushed aside the guilty sting thoughts of *him* always provoked and concentrated on appeasing her hostess's suspicions. "It was a long time ago," she agreed in a mild tone, of which she was both surprised by and proud. "You may rest

assured there will be nothing to give alarm as far as I am concerned.”
Heavenly Father, please let there be nothing that causes concern.

“I’m sure there won’t be,” Lady Grantley said agreeably.

Too agreeably? Edith eyed her with suspicion.

“Now, our other guests might be less well known to you.”

Therein began a lengthy summary of various guests, ladies, lords, mostly young, mostly accompanied by parents or chaperones whose role it was to oversee suitable matches. Nearly all of whom were people Edith had met at a ball or country-house party much like this one. Nearly all of whom had barely spoken to her after she’d parted ways with the district’s most eligible catch, George Bannerman.

George Bannerman. Her heart grew tight again.

“Now, Edith, you will be in the Blue Room. It has a lovely view to the Chilterns. I know December can be a dreary time of year, but that view is always rather pretty.”

“Thank you.” Surprise layered across her other concerns. Such a room was certainly not what she’d expected, given her lowly status compared to the other young ladies and associated companions their hostess had just mentioned. “I appreciate your thoughtfulness very much.”

Lady Grantley patted Edith’s arm. “I’m sure your mama won’t mind me saying this, but I quite consider you to be like a second daughter to me. And now that my own darling Maria has moved to the wilds of Ayrshire, well, it does me good to see young people in the place again. Especially if they possess such pretty manners as yourself.”

“You are so kind,” Edith said, touched.

“Oh, nonsense. Christmas is a special time of year and worth spending with people one likes, if at all possible, do you not agree? Though I feel it only fair to warn you that I may require something of your assistance in helping with certain matters, if you don’t mind, Edith my dear.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

A noise from without made their hostess glance at the window. “Ah, someone else has arrived.”

Let it not be George.

Fortunately, her mother seemed to read Edith's unspoken thoughts. "We shall go upstairs now and let you attend to your other guests." Mama gave Lady Grantley a smile. "Thank you, Margaret. It is truly kind of you to have us stay again."

"Well, I could not let my oldest friend and my dearest goddaughter suffer Christmas all alone. I'm so *very* glad you agreed to come."

That made one of them. Edith pushed down the uncharitable thought, managed to murmur something of her pleasure, even though it seemed much of her anticipation at such a treat had turned to ashes. She followed her mother up the mahogany staircase—said to rival Hartwell Abbey's as one of the finest in England—past the tapestries of Arcadian delights, of music and feasts with convivial friends.

She had been looking forward to visiting Grantley House, to being away where they need not count the cost of candles and cheese, to remembering their former life, even though it might prove challenging to know there would be others with whom she'd need to practice her rusty social skills. But now to know *he* would be here . . . How ever would she manage?

A few minutes later, having been taken to their adjoining rooms and approving them (and the views of snow-dusted hills) as very fine, they dismissed the maids and perched on the small blue settee beside the freshly lit fireplace in Mama's room.

"Well, my dear"—Mama patted Edith's hand—"how do you feel?"

"I am sure we shall enjoy ourselves," Edith said, smoothing her gray skirts, avoiding the real question. "It will be good to spend time away from home, and Lady Grantley seems determined to ensure we find pleasure in the season."

"Margaret is thoughtful, that is true. But no, I meant about the other."

"The other?" Edith deliberately misunderstood her.

Her mother's brown eyes, so like Edith's own, studied her shrewdly. "You know who I mean. I assure you I had no idea George would be here. If I had, then I would have declined Margaret's hospitality, no matter how kindly she phrased things."

"It is of no matter, Mama. Truly."

Edith looked away from her mother's too-discerning, too-compassionate gaze. She could not afford to let the all-too-easy tears have sway yet again. "I will be civil, and I'm sure he will be also. He is nothing if not a gentleman."

She swallowed. George had been nothing but courteous at that last, most horrid meeting. Still, she could not forget his pale face, the stricken eyes, even as he'd murmured something of his completely misunderstanding the matter, and apologized, and said he would not trouble her anymore.

Edith had no fault to find with him. He had proved gentlemanly through it all. It had been a matter of her pain, her pride, and something she'd promised Grandmama to never speak of again. But oh, how she wanted to explain, to beg forgiveness, to dare believe for a second chance, though she knew her actions deserved none.

"So"—she pasted on smiled brightness to divert her mother's thoughts—"do you think Lady Grantley indulges in all the usual Christmas traditions? I did not see an abundance of greenery decorating the halls." Nor had she spotted any mistletoe or kissing balls. Thank goodness. Her insides churned. For if he was to kiss young ladies as such traditions dictated—

"I know Margaret is generally well disposed to doing whatever she thinks will give her guests pleasure. Judging from her talk earlier, it seems she has all manner of pleasant things planned, including the Christmas Eve ball." She eyed Edith's dull ensemble. "I am so pleased we decided to forgo redecorating the drawing room in order to procure a new ball gown for you. It's time you wore colors again, and I'm sure you will look quite lovely."

Edith hoped so. *Especially* now she knew he was going to be here. She had no desire to look like the dowd she so often knew she was. And the looking glass had confirmed the dressmaker's opinion that the deep green brought out the ruddy tints in her brown hair. She had looked, and indeed felt, rather pretty for once.

"Perhaps we should return downstairs," she suggested.

"And face the other guests?" Mama sighed. "I suppose it has been long enough. But you are quite sure?"

“Quite.”

“Then let us descend. It seems we’ll both need to possess the Mansfield spine, I fear.”

The Mansfield spine that refused to admit to weakness, that pride refused to bend, an inheritance from her father and grandmother that had hidden more than one scandal. “Yes.”

She drew up her courage, lifted her chin, and prepared to meet the dragons in the drawing room.

A few minutes later, the Mansfield spine was in full evidence as she nodded and exchanged courteous greetings with the other guests here at Grantley House for the Christmas season. Acquaintances such as Lady Anne Pennicooke, Miss Amelia Mowbray, and Miss Emma Hammerson were all in attendance, as were accompanying parents and chaperones. There was an assortment of young gentlemen, many of whom Edith vaguely recognized and was able to make appropriate greetings that suggested she had not entirely forgotten them after a year’s absence from the social scene. But why would she remember them, when all her attention had been absorbed by the gentleman she had not yet seen?

Her smile grew tight, her pulse beating rapidly in her veins. Soon he would be here. Soon she would have to greet him, to pretend her wound did not exist, to smile and laugh and say—

“Good afternoon, Miss Mansfield.”

That voice! Her heart whirled wildly. *Heavenly Father, give me strength.* She closed her eyes for a lengthy moment, internally braced, and then turned to meet the green-gold gaze. “Good afternoon, Mr. Bannerman.”

Something flashed within his eyes, then he held out his hand, which she automatically accepted. A warm clasp, a slight pressure, then he released her fingers, leaving her skin, her heart, tingling.

She nodded, summoned a stiff smile, and bade her feet to slowly move to where the other young ladies stood near the fireplace that centered the room’s far wall. Not too fast, to invite speculation as to why she hadn’t lingered, but neither too slow, to suggest she wanted further conversation.

There! The worst was done, and she hadn't died. Her smile might feel artificial—and it seemed from the widened eyes of the young ladies with whom she stood that she would need to keep it pinned in place awhile longer—but she hadn't died. *She* hadn't died. Sorrow panged again, twined with regret. She plucked at the lilac ribbon edging her gown, pinning her emotions under a layer of civility and consideration for her hostess. It wasn't Lady Grantley's fault that Edith still had not mastered these recalcitrant feelings.

She stepped closer to where Lady Anne was speaking, tried to focus on the here and now.

“. . . and Mama says I am to be presented next season! I am certainly looking forward to seeing the princesses.”

When no response from the other ladies was forthcoming, and Lady Anne's countenance drooped, Edith murmured, “I am sure that will be quite thrilling. Have you selected your gown yet, Lady Anne?”

Lady Anne gave her a look that could only be considered grateful and began to discuss in elaborate detail the intricacies of her gown: the pearl beading, the embroidery, the lace and chiffon. Eventually she wound to a stop and tilted her head. “You haven't made your presentation, have you, Miss Mansfield?”

“No.”

“I suppose you could not after . . .” Lady Anne's words faltered, and she gave Edith a quick, anxious look, then turned to Miss Mowbray, whose frequent glances at her fingernails and lack of conversation thus far seemed to denote boredom. “Do you enjoy London, Miss Mowbray?”

“Yes.”

With no returned inquiry, and nothing more said, the moment filled with renewed awkwardness.

Oh dear. Poor Lady Grantley's house party was not starting well. Edith shifted slightly to the fourth member of their circle and motioned to her pink gown. “That color looks very well on you, Miss Hammerson.”

“Oh!” She blushed to the exact rosy shade. “Thank you, Miss Mansfield.”

“Oh, Edith, please.”

“And you must call me Emma. It is extremely kind—”

“I do not like pink,” Miss Mowbray announced. “Mama says it does not suit me.”

After a moment’s uncomfortable silence, Edith managed to murmur, “Certain colors do not suit all complexions, it is true.” She turned to offer the rapidly reddening Emma an encouraging smile. “So when one finds the perfect shade, then it’s important to ensure one wears it as much as possible.”

“Th-thank you. You are so—”

“Always wear the same color and be dressed to bore? I think not.”

Edith bit back the words she wished to say, hitched up her lips, and offered Miss Hammerson a sympathetic smile as Miss Mowbray continued to give her opinion as to gowns and colors and balls before the conversation moved on to the matches and attachments of recent months.

“Have you heard about Lord Hawkesbury?” Lady Anne asked. At the various murmurs of denial, she continued with eagerness. “Oh, he is simply the most handsome man! I saw him but a month ago in London. He fought in the Peninsular with Wellesley and is said to have saved many men. Oh, I *do* love a courageous man.”

“And is he single?” Miss Mowbray asked, a speculative gleam in her eye.

Lady Anne’s brow furrowed. “Well, there have been rumors about him and a certain Miss Ellison—a mere reverend’s daughter, would you believe—who is certainly no great beauty, but she does possess a very fine singing voice. I heard her sing whilst I was in London.”

“So she bewitched him with her voice? If only all men were so easily persuadable,” Miss Mowbray said with a glance at Edith that suggested the exact opposite.

Edith managed to retain her smile and hoped she did not look completely ungracious as she turned to Miss Hammerson. But before Edith could speak, Lady Anne said, “You have quite a fine singing voice too, don’t you, Miss Mansfield?”

“I enjoy singing,” Edith said cautiously.

"I remember hearing you sing last year at Aunt Margaret's musical evening."

"Lady Grantley is your aunt?"

"Well, not really." Lady Anne tugged up her glove, smoothing its soft luster. "She's my godmother really, but Mama and she are such good friends, she always insisted on being called Aunt."

Good heavens. How many godchildren did Lady Grantley have?

"I seem to recall that you have sung with Mr. Bannerman, have you not?" Lady Anne persisted.

Edith's chest grew tight. "Yes."

Some of her happiest memories, before life took a twisted turn for the worse.

Emma offered a timid smile. "I do hope you will grace us with your singing again while we are here."

She could not imagine Mama would allow for anything less. "If opportunity allows, and Lady Grantley agrees, then I am willing."

"I do enjoy listening to good voices," Emma said. "I think it is truly one of life's great pleasures."

Edith smiled, a cord of affection winding through her heart. Miss Emma Hammerson truly was a sweet soul.

"And Mr. Bannerman?"

Her pulse quickened.

"Do you think he might be persuaded to sing?" Miss Mowbray continued. "Or do you think he will prefer to perform solo this year?"

Edith stiffened. "I am sure I could not say."

"Well, I hope he won't mind performing duets with others. I do like to sing with good-looking young gentlemen."

That was hardly a surprise. Conscious of the conjecture in Miss Mowbray's eyes, Edith forcibly relaxed her shoulders and willed her smile to appear genuine, her voice to be gentle. "I am sure he will enjoy singing with you, Miss Mowbray. I cannot imagine a prettier partner than you."

"Oh, you are too kind," Miss Mowbray fluttered.

"I speak only the truth," Edith said.

And it was true. Miss Mowbray owned a golden sort of soft pretti-

ness that Edith had always admired, perfect and dainty like a Dresden figurine. She had never understood why George had once expressed admiration for—

Enough! It was done. It was past. There was no point in regret, even if at times she wondered at the wisdom in so meekly following Grandmama's advice. And if her punishment for her mistake was to see him fall into the arms of another, then it was only what she deserved. God might be merciful, but even His mercies must have a limit. And after the past few years, she was sure she had used up more than her fair share of His grace and goodness. She was content. Mostly. It would be selfish to ask for anything more.

Her gaze lifted, veering to where Mr. Bannerman stood with the other young gentlemen, laughing as if he had no care in the world. As if he had no thought of her, as if she was not part of his world.

Which was true. She wasn't. And after this house party at his godmother's, she would likely never see him again.

A savage sting of tears made her catch her breath, blink hard, and turn away.

And she had no one to blame except herself.

CHAPTER 2



GEORGE BANNERMAN FELT the weight of her gaze shift away. He'd always been conscious of her presence, had a special sense of when she was near. The knowledge that she would be here had filled him with hope; her cool greeting after over a year apart had turned his hopes to dust. It was obvious she did not entertain feelings for him anymore.

"So what do you think?"

"Think about what?" George asked.

"Distracted by the pretty ladies, are we, Bannerman?"

Only one. "Of course," he agreed, to a round of laughter. Of course not. How could he be distracted by mere satellites to the sun?

"I think Miss Mowbray has her eye on you," Mr. Barnard Drake said.

"For my money, I suspect Miss Hammerson is keen." Lord Aylmer Sculthorpe nudged George's shoulder. "Come to think of it, weren't you and Miss Mansfield once an item? Whatever happened to you two?"

"A parting of the ways." More, George would not, could not, say. Who wanted to admit to rejection?

"Then she is available?"

His fingers clenched. He forced them to relax. "As far as I know. I really couldn't say."

"Hmm. Well, that is something to consider. A little flirtation could make this party far more agreeable, don't you agree?"

“I believe the general Christmas festivities will prove more than sufficiently entertaining.” He studied the other man. “I know my godmother has gone to rather long lengths to ensure her guests will find their time here amusing.”

At the mention of their hostess, Lord Sculthorpe reddened, the gentle reproof leading the younger man to glance away.

“I do hope there will be fun with mistletoe and the like.”

But not with Miss Mansfield. George consciously unclenched his fingers again. If he couldn’t kiss her, he’d sooner be hung than see anyone else given the privilege. He’d have to speak with his godmother. There had to be some benefits for being her godson, after all.

But later, when he’d finally cornered her in the library and managed to wheedle the truth, it was to learn she most certainly did plan to indulge in all the Christmas festivities, and if her dearest friend’s only son thought he could charm her into abandoning such plans, he had best think again.

“I know you suffered a disappointment,” she said, sympathy lining her voice. “But all the more reason for you to take the time to look again. Surely your recent travels have shown you that there is a whole world of young ladies out there, George, and you need not consider yourself tied to the apron strings of one.”

He eyed her narrowly. A whole world of young ladies, and Aunt Margaret had just so happened to invite the one woman he’d been unable to forget.

“George? Why do you look at me with such a frown? Do you consider yourself beholden to a particular lady?”

He ground out a chuckle. “Naturally I do not consider myself obliged to anyone, except, it would seem, my godmother.”

“I am very pleased to hear that.” She gave a smile of satisfaction. “I know this past year has been trying, but I truly think the Christmas season is the time when one should make amends where one can. It is not good to let estrangement carry on.”

“Of course not,” he muttered, refraining from pointing out that any estrangement was certainly not of *his* doing.

This was met with raised brows, so he suppressed a sigh, going so

far to try to restore himself into her good graces that he offered to assist with whatever muscle of the decorating was deemed necessary, including directing the retrieval of the yule log.

“Truly? That would be good. Mr. Caddy is a dear but getting on in years. Perhaps we can arrange an excursion tomorrow, if you think the young people would enjoy that.”

“I’m sure they will.”

“Oh, dear boy, I knew I could rely on you.” His godmother smiled, affection in her eyes. “You are such a comfort to this old woman.”

“Old? How dare you speak of my godmother in such a way,” he responded gallantly. “I forbid you to say such things again.”

She uttered a wheezy chuckle and patted his arm.

It seemed he would just need to grit his teeth and trust God to help see all such strained relationships finally restored.



“And I was hoping that tonight I might prevail upon some of the talented musicians amongst you to entertain us. Amelia, might you consider?”

“Oh, I’d be delighted,” a petite blonde almost purred.

He swallowed a smile. Miss Mowbray did not seem the sort to shy away from opportunities to display. He kept his gaze levelled at the front, to not turn, to not attempt to gauge the expression of Miss Mansfield. Not that he’d be any good at guessing her thoughts anyway—she’d proved too good at hiding her true feelings.

He pushed aside the sting of memory, forced his attention to the pianoforte, to the performance from the young lady who appeared undaunted by notes at which more talented young ladies might hesitate. The song concluded, he clapped as an automaton, and was unsurprised when Miss Mowbray quickly acquiesced to a second piece. This was swiftly followed by an encore, after which his godmother rose to her feet and led everyone in a somewhat forceful round of applause.

“Thank you, Amelia. That was splendid. Now, I wonder if I might

persuade Miss Hammerson to share her talent. I believe you have something of a gift for the harp, my dear?"

"Oh! Of course, ma'am. I'd be delighted."

This was said in such an opposite tone to the previous young lady that George had to smooth away a smile. If he were a betting man, he'd wager she was not delighted at all. Amid a hum of quiet conversation, the harp was wheeled forward and hastily tuned, then Miss Hammerson began.

Her nerves were on full display, resulting in a hesitant performance whose conclusion doubtless resulted in as much relief for the poor performer as her listeners. He smiled sympathetically at her, which made her blush, and gave him pause. It would not do to give rise to expectations from other young ladies—he had no wish to give anyone the wrong idea.

"Thank you, Miss Hammerson. That was very pretty." His godmother looked around the room, met his eye. He shook his head slightly, and she quickly pouted and moved on. "Ah, Lady Anne. Might I ask—"

"You must excuse me, Lady Grantley, for I am not at all musical, although I admire talent as much as the next person." Lady Anne turned to Edith, seated beside her. "Perhaps you might prevail upon Miss Mansfield."

"Oh, but—"

"Excellent notion," his godmother agreed, talking over the top of her guest. "Miss Mansfield? Would you grace us with your talent?"

"Of course. I'd be delighted."

This was said in such a low voice he strained to hear the words. But there was no mistaking the irony. Delighted, she was not.

She moved to the pianoforte, and without searching for music, seated herself at the stool, lifted her hands, and began to play.

At once the perfection of her notes and tone filled the room, filling his heart with ease. Her performance held a quality those previously had not held: a poignant strain that blended with a precise confidence to demonstrate the talent she possessed. A confidence she seemed to no longer possess in other areas, if the bowed head and lowered

eyes of the earlier introductions and during tonight's partridge dinner proved any indication.

What had stolen the assurance he remembered? Dare he believe it had something to do with him? But no. Such was vain foolishness. He forced his thoughts away. She'd made her choice. It was pointless wasting yet more time contemplating on what might have been. He joined the applause at the end and strove for his features an indifference he did not feel as she performed her second piece, a sonata by Haydn, and then rose, curtsied, and after politely declining an encore, resumed her seat amongst the audience.

"George?"

He started, swiveling to face his godmother's amused expression. "Yes?"

"Can I persuade you to perform for us tonight?"

"You should know I never wish to disappoint a lady." He moved to the front, resisting the desire to see if his words had any effect on the young lady in question. He only hoped she would not think he was making a general proclamation to the room about whose fault the estrangement had been. Heaven help him if he did.

He sat and immediately began his piece, Mozart's Piano Sonata no. 16. Would she remember that it had been this piece of music that had first drawn them together? Would she remember their shared times of laughter as they had tried to work the composition into a performance for two?

A performance for more than two, really. Everyone here was observing him, watching her, wondering about the cause of their parting. Just as he still did.

Frustration spurted, startling him with its intensity, so that he almost missed a note. He refocused, but his thoughts soon resumed their familiar trail. *God, forgive me, but . . .*

Would he get a proper explanation this time? Something that didn't shock him into gentlemanly civility whilst hiding a tidal wave of disbelief and despair? Something that actually allowed the wounded corners of his heart to heal rather than fester in silence until such moments of disappointment took him by savage surprise?

What a fool he was. Had he ever really thought he could be over her?

For she *should* be his and he hers regardless of whatever she had said. Fresh determination for a chance to speak surged. He gritted his teeth. *Lord, give me wisdom.*

The piece moved to a slower, reflective tempo, then the familiar refrain finished with a flourish. George stood, politely declining his godmother's request for more, and after spying Miss Mansfield's lowered head, refused to glance in her direction a moment longer. She remained unaffected.

"Thank you," his godmother said. "I do look forward to hearing more from you in the future. Perhaps you might even be persuaded to perform a duet?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Perhaps." Given the right partner, he'd perform like a shot. Unfortunately, the right partner had determined to see him as anything but.

The evening continued with poetry recitations and more insipid conversations he only wanted to escape.

Because the only conversation he wanted was with the woman who now regarded him as nothing, the woman who had moved on, the woman who had spurned his proposal just over one year ago.

CHAPTER 3



THE SECOND DAY saw the commencement of the Christmas festivities. Edith's godmother had commandeered her guests after breakfast and informed them of the joys awaiting their pleasure. Seeing as the weather was fine, she was expecting them to participate in such activities as collecting the evergreens, culminating in the retrieval of a yule log her groundskeeper had sourced several weeks ago.

"For I do think it important to keep to the traditions," she said.

"Does this mean there shall be mistletoe?" Miss Mowbray asked eagerly.

"Mistletoe, kissing balls, wreaths, of course."

Of course.

"Oh, how wonderful!" Miss Mowbray shot Mr. Bannerman a look that suggested just which particular gentleman she wished might pluck creamy berries as a token for a stolen kiss.

Edith's heart experienced a strange twisting. Not that she should mind. It wasn't as if she should care whom he sought to favor.

Lady Grantley clapped to regain the attention of the excited guests. "Now, I have asked dear George to assist Mr. Caddy in retrieving the yule log. I know you will all enjoy a walk in our woods. We may not have had much snow yet, but it should still be quite pretty." She turned to the parents and chaperones. "Perhaps some of you might prefer to spend the time nearer the fire. I have the latest periodicals and novels, including something new by A Lady."

Edith glanced at her mother, who seemed as enthused as their hostess. Didn't she see what Lady Grantley was trying to do? Edith did not mind her machinations, but she had no wish to purposely be in Mr. Bannerman's company. Hadn't he made himself plain last night with his comment about never wishing to disappoint a lady? Her heart had writhed—still continued to writhe—at his words, spoken with such *insouciance*. She did not want to think him ungentlemanly, but how else was she—and everyone else—supposed to take his words, to take his actions? It was tantamount to saying he was not responsible for their parting.

And how could he perform *that* song, of all songs? It was not the action of a gentleman to play their song in front of everyone, to play like it meant nothing to him. Anger stirred anew. Didn't he remember all the times their arms had brushed as they performed side by side? Didn't he remember his breath catching when she had held his hand—well, positioned her hand over his—to demonstrate the notes? Didn't he recall the times when they had not practiced at all and had instead spent time whispering hopes, sharing dreams, exchanging hearts?

"Miss Mansfield." Lady Grantley's voice jerked Edith back to her present surrounds. "I trust you will participate?"

"Of course, ma'am."

"I seem to remember you have a particular talent for dressing the holly and evergreens. I do hope you will help us."

Perhaps an opportunity existed to forgo the afternoon's outing to collect the yule log and thus avoid more time with him. "I wonder, Lady Grantley, if I might please be excused in order to speak to your housekeeper about ribbons and the like. It would be helpful to know what has already been prepared to ensure we do not get carried away."

"Oh, I'm quite happy for you to get carried away, my dear."

Lady Grantley spoke with such an intent look that Edith could only blush and lower her gaze. No, she had absolutely no intention of getting carried away in that regard again. Heaven forbid Mr. Bannerman had heard, and understood, his godmother's covert meaning.

"Now," their hostess continued, as if she'd not said anything amiss,

"I shall need to instruct Miss Mansfield about these arrangements." She summoned a servant to find Mrs. Browning, the housekeeper, and go to the library. "Ah, George, might I prevail upon a few minutes of your time too, dear?"

Edith's breath suspended. She willed her countenance to impassivity, focusing on her hostess as Lady Grantley guided them both to the library, a long room papered in crimson and lined with books and deep settees. Edith silently obeyed her godmother's gesture to be seated.

"My dears, I do hope you don't mind me asking for your help in these ways. I know there are some here who might believe they possess particular talents but whose skills tend to demonstrate rather the opposite."

"I am happy to oblige you," Edith felt it necessary to say.

"Are you?" Lady Grantley asked suddenly. "Are you really? For nothing would give me greater joy than to see the two of—"

"Dearest Aunt Margaret," Mr. Bannerman interrupted, "was there something in particular you wished for me to do? I would not have Miss Mansfield feel obliged to do anything she does not wish."

This last was said in such a tone Edith could scarcely misinterpret the meaning. He was still angry with her for her decision. Very well, then. Ignoring the pain in her soul, she gathered her courage and said forcefully, "I am happy to help Lady Grantley. It is no imposition to me."

"Wonderful. I always knew you to have the most obliging nature." A rap at the open door and Lady Grantley gestured someone inside. "Ah, now here is Mrs. Browning. Miss Mansfield, perhaps the two of you can discuss ribbons and such things in here. George, may I have a word?"

"Of course. Your servant, Miss Mansfield." He bowed, offering Edith a look she could not decipher, and followed his godmother to the door.

Releasing Edith from the tension of his presence and forcing her to refocus on the housekeeper, who awaited her patiently. *Heavenly Father, help me to concentrate.*

She summoned up a smile. "Now, Mrs. Browning, about those ribbons . . ."



"Aunt Margaret, I really must insist—"

"On what, my dear? It seems most apparent that you cannot manage things by yourself and therefore must have such affairs managed for you."

"I do *not* require managing," he muttered.

"I cannot agree. Here you are, on your second day in the company of the woman you told me you wished to marry, and you've barely said a word to her. That is not the action of a man who wishes to be reunited."

"Who says I wish to be reunited?"

"You did. Last Christmas, this past January, in February—in fact, every time I've seen you this year, you have expressed regret at how things ended."

He'd said that? He willed his teeth not to grind.

"I am sorry if you do not like my interference, but I am not sorry to interfere. Such a badly managed business as it was."

"It was not my desire to end things," he admitted stiffly.

"Well, I cannot understand how such a sweet and sensible girl as Edith Mansfield thought it right to let you get away. But perhaps it was simply a matter of bad timing, with her father so ill at the time."

"The thought had crossed my mind," he admitted. Edith had grown more and more distraught at her father's illness, something that seemed to have been premonition of his death not two weeks after their final interview, a death he had yearned to comfort her through. But no. She had refused his letters, returning them unopened—he'd realized later, wryly, as any proper young lady should.

"Surely she must have known you would not give up so easily," his godmother continued, drawing him from the mire of regrets. "I have known you to persist long after others faltered. Why, who was the person who saved your father's estate by stubbornly refusing to

sell the fields and insisting on trying new crops? Who was the person who determined to help his scapegrace cousin find a new life in America when all others had washed their hands of him?"

He glanced away, flattening his lips. He might have saved his father's estate, but look how well that second action had turned out.

"So why, dear boy, did you so easily relinquish Miss Mansfield?"

"Because she would not have me." He lifted his gaze and studied his godmother steadily. "She made her choice extremely plain. I know not why the reason. I wish to heaven that I did." Her words still echoed: "A change of heart." How could that be after all they'd shared? How could a person simply change their mind without giving thought to the effects on the other? He would never, could never, understand.

His godmother sighed and clasped his arm. "You are in my prayers, dear boy. I know this has been a trying time for you, what with your cousin's disappearance and your search for him this past half year and all. But please, for my sake and yours, tell me you will use this time to somehow tell her how you really feel."

He glanced away from the earnest eyes. "I cannot make that promise."

"Please? Dear boy, I cannot bear to see you unhappy."

"It is not of your making and therefore should not be of your concern."

She sighed again. "I'm afraid that anything to do with dear Emmeline's boy is of my concern, especially now that she is not here to promote your happiness herself."

His heartstrings drew tight. "Mother liked Edith very much."

"Of course she did. What sane woman would not admire someone so sweet and good? Emmeline was a good judge of character, which is why she and I were such good friends for so many years."

A chuckle pushed past his pain.

"And what sane man would not admire Edith's intelligence and those fine eyes?" Her smile grew sly. "You, my dear George, I have long counted as one of the more discerning young gentlemen of my acquaintance."

His chuckle swelled into a laugh. He bent and kissed her cheek. “You, my dear Aunt Margaret, are the most incorrigible lady of my acquaintance.”

She gave a trill of laughter. “That’s enough out of you, young man. Now, are you going to speak to dear Edith or not?”

He drew a deep breath, feeling as if he teetered on a precipice. “I will.”

Why did that proclamation make him sound like a young boy in leading strings?

But still, he knew she was right, and that this time together was opportunity for healing the past. And perhaps, a little whisper dared breathe, there might even be room to consider the future.

CHAPTER 4



EDITH FINISHED TWISTING the red satin ribbon to approximate another small bow, then sat back to examine her handiwork. No, the ribbons were not precisely symmetrical, but perhaps once the greenery was incorporated into the wreath it would not be so noticeable. In fact, with a little tweaking, she just might be able to—

“Oh, Miss Mansfield, you are still in here.”

Edith glanced at the round figure of the housekeeper at the library door. “I’m afraid I got a little distracted.”

“Are you not joining the others in the collection of the yule log?”

“I hadn’t planned to,” she admitted.

“Oh. Well, Lady Grantley would like to know whether you wish to join the chaperones in the drawing room. Apparently they are playing whist.”

Whist? Had her life descended to such depths she was now expected to find pleasure in whist? Edith glanced back at Mrs. Browning, hoping her expression hadn’t given away her feelings. “Thank you, but I think I will read upstairs.”

“Very well, miss.”

Edith stared at the frivolous concoction of ribbons, the gaiety something she did not feel. Surely hiding in here was not what she should do. Her lips tweaked with wryness. Although hiding in her bedchamber was hardly different. But at least if she could avoid—

No! This was juvenile. As was any trace of former emotions she

might feel. She was nearly six-and-twenty, for goodness' sake. One should certainly be able to carry on without letting the world suspect she still wore the willow for someone. Which she most certainly *didn't*.

She laid aside her materials. Lady Grantley had said Edith might continue tomorrow, if she liked, that this room would be undisturbed. She moved to the door and peered out as voices came from farther along the hall. If she hurried, she might just be able to avoid—

“Ah, Miss Mansfield. We had wondered where you had got to.” A somewhat portly young man with fair hair and cherubic features—Mr. Drake?—smiled and gestured her to join the others in the hall. “We are going with Bannerman to fetch the yule log.”

She could think of nothing to say but “Are you?”

“Oh yes, should be jolly fun. But I'd rug up rather more warmly than that, if you don't mind me saying so. There's something of a nip in the air.”

“I thought I might read instead.”

“Read instead? Come now, Miss Mansfield. Surely you know the purpose of such country parties is for people to spend time getting to know one another. And I must confess that there is no one else I'd prefer to get to know here than you.”

Movement beyond his shoulder revealed that others awaited. “This flattery is too much, sir,” she said in as low a voice as she could.

“Flattery? Nonsense. I simply speak the truth.”

“Miss Mansfield?” Lady Anne said. “You best hurry and fetch your warmest pelisse and bonnet. I think it will be quite chilly out.”

“I . . .” She stopped, the faces watching her with such interest making refusal impossible. “I will just be a moment.”

She was halfway up the stairs when she nearly collided with someone, a sandalwood-scented someone who grasped her upper arms as she nearly toppled backward down the steps.

“Miss Mansfield. Are you all right?”

“Thank you, sir.” She sounded breathless. “I am quite well.”

He released her. “Miss Mansfield, Edith . . .” His eyes caught hers, causing a funny fluttering sensation in her chest. “I was hoping you might spare me a moment of your—”

“Mr. Bannerman!” Miss Mowbray called from below. “Are you quite finished with Miss Mansfield?”

“No.”

The word was uttered so quietly she almost missed it, but she could not miss the look of entreaty in his eye, a look that made her want to hurry to the hills and hide her humiliation. Guilt panged. He deserved an explanation, but not here, not now, not today.

“Please excuse me.” She brushed past him, past the tantalizing drift of spices, and hurried to her bedchamber, closing the door with a resounding thud. Oh, why hadn’t Mama insisted they leave as soon as Lady Grantley had mentioned he would be here? Why could she not suppress these feelings where he was concerned? That look in his eyes . . .

“Heavenly Father, please help me,” she pleaded, moving to the window, leaning her forehead against the cool glass. The rapid pace of her pulse gradually quietened as she stared at the distant hills, their proportions strangely distorted through the bubbles in the glass.

A knock came at the door. “Miss Mansfield? Edith?” a female voice called.

She turned. “Yes?”

The door opened, and Miss Hammerson entered, flush-faced and apologetic. “Forgive me for intruding, but I was hoping you would be joining us for the walk this afternoon.”

Edith glanced at the book, which beckoned invitingly, then back at Emma, her features melded in appeal. “Of course.” She shrugged into her dark-blue woolen pelisse, tied on her mauve silk bonnet, and collected her gloves and scarf. “Let us go.”

“I’m so glad you are coming,” Emma said, looping her arm through Edith’s as they made their way to the staircase. “I find that some of the others here make me quite tongue-tied, and I’m so glad to have someone accompany me that I dare consider might one day be a friend.”

A knot in Edith’s heart loosened. How long it had been since she’d had a female companion she might consider a friend. Since Maria, Lady Grantley’s daughter, had married and moved to Scotland, Edith

had had few people with whom she could share openly. Perhaps God in His provision had allowed this stay to be a time when she could find a friend, *be* a friend, even if He would not provide a renewal of old acquaintanceships.

She shook off the melancholy and offered Emma a smile. "I'd like that very much."

They joined the others in the hall, Edith murmuring her apologies for keeping them waiting.

"No matter," Lady Anne said. She turned to Mr. Bannerman, who was talking with one of Lady Grantley's servants. "Shall we go now?"

He nodded, and the party moved outside, where they were joined by another of the Grantley servants, an older man equipped with saws and ropes.

After a swift look at George, who had been joined by Miss Mowbray, Edith forced her attention back to Emma, who was the blushing recipient of Lord Sculthorpe's attention.

Ah. She swallowed a wry smile. So Edith's company had not exactly proved necessary after all. Never mind. She would enjoy the crisp air, and the sight of white-trunked bare trees, and the sensation of movement, especially after the hours spent sitting before.

And there was something rather lovely, indeed almost magical, about the mist-laden hills, the scrape of coolness on her skin, the tinkle of laughter, and the jingle of the harness as the large cart horse plodded behind them. Indeed, if it wasn't for the two persons walking ahead in the lead—one of whom seemed determined to hold the other's attention, with her nonstop chatter and giggles—Edith could think this afternoon jaunt most pleasant indeed.

"Oh, Miss Mansfield." Emma clutched her arm, forcing Edith's pace to slow. "Lord Sculthorpe was just saying about how he hoped there might be some interesting games this evening."

Edith glanced past Emma to where the dark-haired lordship watched them. "Yes?"

"I do not mind musicales, but I find the attendance of so many young ladies infinitely more diverting, and I would much prefer to spend time talking to them than merely listening to them."

Edith bit the inside of her bottom lip to hide a smile. Surely he didn't mean that to sound quite like it did.

He shifted and eyed Edith critically. "I say, Miss Mansfield, that is a pretty bonnet."

She reached up and touched a feather that was working its way loose. "I fear it is not terribly practical for such cool weather, but it's the warmest I had to bring with me."

"Practical or not, it suits you very well, don't you think, Miss Hammerson?"

Noting the downcast look in Emma's eye, Edith squeezed her new friend's arm gently. "I was saying to the other young ladies just how wonderful this particular shade of pink is for Miss Hammerson. Do you not agree that it matches her cheeks entirely?"

"Entirely," the young lord continued, his gaze returning to Emma with appreciation. "I say, Miss Hammerson, did you see that little squirrel? Quite a quick little fellow. Here one second, gone the next. I wonder . . ."

Edith slowed her steps, allowing the other two to walk on ahead. She'd seen the beseeching look in poor Emma's eyes, and Edith had no wish to draw Lord Sculthorpe's attentions for herself. She looked over the other young gentlemen in attendance and realized there was none of them of whom she wished to garner their notice in any particular way. None, except for—

No! She shook her head at herself angrily. Why did she keep thinking on him? Really, this was most ridiculous. She glanced up at the leaden skies, praying for the strength to overcome, when a cleared throat drew her attention to the elderly man holding the ropes, trudging quietly beside her, an Irish setter scampering at his heels.

"You might want to watch where you're walking, miss," he said, glancing at the muddy puddle ahead.

"Oh, thank you, Mr.—"

"Caddy, miss."

"Thank you, Mr. Caddy." She glanced at the saws he carried. "Have you a particular tree in mind?"

"Aye. I spied it a se'nnight ago. An old ash that fell down a few

months back. I marked it so we could find it again. Should fit the great hall's hearth quite nicely."

"And Lady Grantley sees that it is lit on Christmas Eve?"

"That she does. Though with this year's ball, I think she wishes it to be lit the day afore."

He seemed disinclined for more talk, so she followed in silence until the party moved to a halt beside a fallen giant. A scarlet ribbon was tied around one of its branches.

"Aye, this be the one," Mr. Caddy said to the group's inquiry. "Now we just need to saw off the ends and attach the ropes to drag it back to the house."

"Any volunteers?" Mr. Bannerman asked.

"Surely you can't expect us to participate in such a menial task," Lord Sculthorpe scoffed.

"Why not?" He grinned, stripping off his overcoat. "Isn't that what you came here for?"

"Oh, but Mr. Bannerman, surely you have no wish to get dirty," Miss Mowbray protested.

"What is a little dirt between friends?" His gaze swept the gathered group, seeming to pause ever so slightly on Edith before turning to the man beside her. "Mr. Caddy, may I assist you?"

"I'd be glad for the help," the older man admitted, drawing the ropes and saw from the back of the horse.

The next moments were spent watching, the ladies gathered to one side under the protection of an aged tree while the men encouraged Mr. Bannerman and Mr. Caddy to their task.

Mr. Bannerman's coat and vest soon joined the greatcoat hanging on a nearby branch.

"Oh, he is such a fine specimen of a man," Miss Mowbray said with a sigh.

Edith couldn't help but privately agree. She'd known George Bannerman's shoulders to be broad—impossible not to, when playing side by side on the pianoforte—but she hadn't quite suspected he would appear so strong, nor to such advantage when stripped down to just his shirt.

Perhaps it was the marked attention of the young ladies, but eventually the other gentlemen also took their turns at the saw, exercise that soon saw their faces mottle to dark red and a glow of perspiration shine on their brows.

Mr. Bannerman moved to the side, offering encouragement to the others as they worked. He glanced up every so often, but his face was inscrutable, and it seemed he paid no more attention to her than anyone else.

“Foolish girl,” she muttered under her breath, gaze dropping to study the muddied ground. *You reject what you still want.* But no, it hadn’t been foolishness. Had been necessity. Had been familial obligation—

Creak.

She glanced up. Saw the branch above her quiver. Heard a shout. Then before she knew anything else, she was being pushed just as the branch above fell.