

Kissing
FATHER
CHRISTMAS

ALSO BY ROBIN JONES GUNN

Finding Father Christmas

Engaging Father Christmas

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Kissing
FATHER
CHRISTMAS

A NOVEL

ROBIN JONES GUNN



New York Boston Nashville

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For Marlene, Sandy, Stephanie, and Bill

Your unwavering faith in the true
Father of Christmas ignites your
vision for what could be.
The four of you inspired this story
without even knowing it.

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FATHER
CHRISTMAS



Chapter One

I awoke as the pale light of the December morn was finding its way into the upstairs guest room at Whitcombe Manor. The heavy drapes appeared to be etched with a silver lining that trailed like a single thread across the dark wood floor. I propped myself up in the cozy bed and folded my lily-white blond hair into a loose braid, letting it cascade over my shoulder. A contented smile rested on my lips in the hushed room.

I'm really here. I'm back in England.

This place, these people, had been in my waking dreams ever since I came to the enchanting village of Carlton Heath for my cousin's wedding last May. Ian was raised in Scotland, so I'd never met him. His mother passed away several years ago and his fiancée, Miranda, did something I'd never seen before. She included a personal note with their formal wedding invitation. The last line really got to me.

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*It would mean the world to Ian and me if you could be with us
on our special day and represent Ian's mother's side of the family.*

Somehow I convinced my mother to make the trek and honor the memory of her sister. We stayed at Whitcombe Manor, the gorgeous estate that had belonged to Miranda's family for generations. It turned into a life-altering experience for both of us. For me, Ian and Miranda's wedding day was the stuff of fairy tales. And I have long been a dreamer and a secret believer in fairy tales.

The men wore dress kilts. Miranda's shimmering white gown had the longest train I'd ever seen. The storybook couple whispered their vows inside a quaint sandstone chapel while holding hands in front of a glowing stained glass window. Bagpipes played as they exited beneath a bower of woven forest greens dotted with dozens of fragrant, deep red roses. Their reception was held in the gardens at Whitcombe Manor. All the guests kept smiling at them as they danced until the first stars came out to watch them, to bless them.

I fell in love with love that day.

In my twenty-six years as a sheltered only child, I'd never dreamed of so much beauty and such elegantly expressed affection. My parents were practical and efficient and held to the notion that feelings should be kept to oneself and all artistic expressions were for private reflection only. They were minimalists when it came to celebrating birthdays and holidays.

That's why I had never danced before. At least not in public. But at Ian and Miranda's wedding as the stars looked on, everything changed. I knew then that one day I would return to

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Carlton Heath. I would once again stay at Whitcombe Manor. Love would draw me back.

Today was that day.

The morning light now infiltrated all the open crevices around the drapes in my guest room. I tossed back the puffy down comforter and padded over to the grand picture window. With a hearty tug I pulled back the thick fabric and watched the room fill with soft light. A puff of swirling dust particles spun in midair.

The garden below that had hosted Ian and Miranda's glorious wedding reception on that pristine day last May now slumbered in a state of deep resignation. The hollyhocks, foxgloves, and vivid pink cosmos were gone. The lights and lanterns as well as the party tables that had been covered in crisp, white linen had been taken down. All that remained were rows of shorn rosebushes and mounds of waiting perennials.

I stared through the thick-paned window, narrowing my eyes and trying to remember the colors, the music, and the expression of sincere intrigue in Peter's pale blue eyes when he held out his hand to me. Every detail of that dreamy night returned to my mind's eye, starting with the moment when Uncle Andrew drew me out on the dance floor in the middle of the festivities. He spun me around with a great bellowing of Scottish pride for his son and new daughter-in-law and I laughed at the sheer boldness of his demeanor.

I felt welcomed into the clan and gladly entered in when Miranda motioned for me to join a circle of young women. We were all soon laughing and holding hands as we jiggled forward into a close huddle and then hopped back to expand the circle and

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invite others to join in. We were like the Midsummer's Eve fairies I'd read about as a child. In my elation, I motioned for my mother to come join us, but she would not.

She watched me from a corner table as if I were someone she'd never met before.

The jig concluded and I chose to take my slice of cake and enjoy it at Uncle Andrew's table. I sat beside his new wife, Katharine, whom I liked very much. She and I sipped tea from china cups and I decided in that moment that these were my people. I had been born into the wrong branch of our family tree. I had grown up in the wrong country.

In the wake of that epiphany, I looked up and saw tall, gregarious Peter Elliott striding across the garden in his best man's kilt and dress jacket. He was coming to me, coming for me.

He held out his hand in a wordless invitation, and without hesitation I placed mine in his. In the glow of a dozen swaying lanterns, we danced. We danced and danced and I was forever changed. His short brown hair and athletic build were instantly fixed in my memory.

As we danced I thought I saw a touch of sadness in the corner of his eyes, and that hint of vulnerability endeared him to me. I hadn't seen it the night before at the rehearsal dinner. At the restaurant he had been the rowdy life of the party with great stories to tell about Ian since the two of them had been friends so long. The camaraderie between Peter and my cousin was impressive. Ian and Miranda trusted Peter and I did, too, when I let him lead me to the dance floor.

Even now I closed my eyes and swayed in front of the guest

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room window as I remembered how warm his hand felt as he rested it on the small of my back and our eyes did their own sort of dance, connecting for a shy, momentary gaze and then pulling away. We slow danced with our lips drawn up in thin, half-moon slivers.

One dance, then two, then a third and a fourth. We conversed in sparse paragraphs, asking each other about jobs and family and both saying what a beautiful night it was.

The last dance began and Peter asked how long I was staying in Carlton Heath. I said we were leaving in two days.

"Two days? That's not much of a visit," he murmured. "You really should stay on."

"I'd love to stay longer but I can't."

He held me a little tighter. We danced until the music came to a lingering finish, and then it happened.

Peter kissed me.

Chapter Two

A quick tap sounded on the guest room door, jolting me out of my daydream by the picture window. I jumped back into bed and snuggled under the comforter.

"Anna? Are you awake?" Ellie, my spritely, red-haired hostess, entered carrying a breakfast tray that appeared entirely too large for her petite frame. Ellie would manage it with aplomb, of course, just as she managed everything else at Whitcombe Manor. She was Miranda's sister-in-law and like Miranda, Ellie had found her place within the clan of the late Sir James Whitcombe. His fame as an actor was known internationally but his extended family had carved out an admirably normal and fairly private sort of life in this quiet village.

"I'm not too early, am I? I thought you might like a cup of tea." With a twist of her foot, Ellie closed the door behind her and placed the breakfast tray on the bedside table. "How was your sleep? Good, I hope. Shall I pour?"

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Before I could answer, Ellie was filling the china teacup on the tray with steaming, dark breakfast tea. Two slices of dry toast awaited in a stand-up holder along with a small dish of jam.

"You really didn't have to bring breakfast up here for me."

"Of course I did. It's your first morning. We must welcome you with at least some manners. I dare say, though, that before the week is out you will undoubtedly find yourself foraging around in the kitchen like the rest of us when hunger strikes."

I smiled and took the china cup and held the saucer in my open palm.

Ellie lowered herself into the comfy-looking chair in the corner. "I do hope someone has told you how the week before Christmas turns into complete chaos around here when it comes to mealtimes. I'm sure you've heard about the play at the community theater and the lovely receptions that come with it. Christmas day is always the main event and we're so glad you're here with us this year."

"I'm glad to be here, too. Thanks again for letting me stay with you. I hope I won't be a bother with everything else you have going on."

"Don't be silly, Anna. You're family."

I wasn't sure that being the cousin of her sister-in-law's husband qualified me as "family" in the prestigious Whitcombe lineage, but the truth was, those were the exact words I hoped I'd hear when I returned to Carlton Heath.

"I will say that it took no small effort on my part to convince Miranda and Katharine and Andrew to let me keep you here instead of with either of them." Ellie adjusted the wide green

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scarf that held back her wavy hair. "You've been to Rose Cottage so you know how tight the quarters are at Ian and Miranda's place. And as for Andrew and Katharine's nest above the Tea Cosy... well, it only made sense for you to stay with us since this will be the hub of so many of the Christmas comings and goings."

"Well, I appreciate it." I took a sip of the soothing tea. "And I hope you'll let me help out wherever I can. I meant it when I said it last night. Put me to work while I'm here."

Ellie's face took on an impish expression. "In that case, I do have a favor to ask of you."

"Of course. Anything."

"I should first tell you that this request is my secret Christmas wish and only you can make it come true." She put her hand over her heart as if to emphasize the sincerity of her plea.

"Oh my!" I gave her a teasing grin. "A secret Christmas wish. Sounds intriguing."

"It's about your drawings. Edward and I were impressed with the handmade thank-you note you left for us after the wedding. Your watercolor image of our garden was lovely. So lovely. I showed it to Miranda and she told me about the illustrations you did on those children's books. I was able to hunt down four of them and Julia absolutely adores them. So do I."

I felt my face warming. I wasn't used to receiving compliments on my artwork. At home in Minnesota I kept quiet about my invisible career. All six of the books I'd worked on didn't even list my name as the illustrator because they were all work-for-hire projects. People who'd known me all my life thought I simply

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lived with my parents so that I could help care for my invalid grandfather. I did help out with Opa, but I also had a small, budding career as a freelance illustrator.

"Edward and I discussed it," Ellie said, switching to a confident-sounding business voice. "We would like to commission you to do a series of sketches of Whitcombe Manor. It's been over a hundred years since any drawings have been made. Our plan is to use them for our letterhead and perhaps for other commercial purposes."

"I'm honored that you asked, Ellie. I'd be happy to make as many drawings as you'd like."

Ellie clapped her hands and grinned wildly. "Wonderful! Edward thinks we shouldn't bother you about working on them during this visit since it is Christmas, after all. Would you be willing to return and stay with us again? We'd cover all your expenses and you could stay as long as you wish."

I felt tiny glistening tears forming in my eyes over the joy I felt at Ellie's invitation.

"I'd love to come back. But I can start working on the sketches this week if you'd like."

"Would you? Yes, I'd like that very much. Is there anything you need?"

"I don't think so. I brought my pencils and sketch pads with me."

"I'm so pleased. Edward will be delighted." Ellie popped up from the chair. "I'm going to tell him right now and leave you to your tea and toast. Take your time. We'll be in the kitchen. Julia and I are making cranberry orange bread this morning for the cast supper this evening."

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Ellie blew me a kiss and swished out the door. The green scarf tied around her short, amber hair trailed behind her like the tail of an elf's cap.

I reached for a slice of toast and smiled. Sketches of Whitcombe Manor may have been Ellie's secret Christmas wish, but being invited to return again, before I'd even been in England for twenty-four hours, was mine.

Well, one of my secret Christmas wishes. The other wish involved a certain best man who had been, shall we say, conservative in his communication with me over the past seven months. Peter's most recent e-mail simply said,

I'm glad you're coming.
I look forward to seeing you.

I made the mistake of sharing his e-mail with my mother. She thought his words were too noncommittal and suggested I consider canceling my trip so that I didn't run the risk of making a fool of myself.

"You're turning into a feathery sort of woman, Anna. Don't you see how dangerous it is to put yourself in such a vulnerable position?"

What my mother hadn't realized was that I wanted to be a "feathery" woman. Ever since the wedding, I had been inching my way out of the cocoon she and my father had so carefully constructed around my life. I was more than ready to flutter away and was way past the normal stage when it's a healthy choice to release the deeply embedded need for my parents' approval. My

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flights of fancy resembled the route of a homing pigeon more than the expansive and graceful loops of an artistic butterfly.

But in my heart, I knew I was a butterfly. I was an artist and my "family" in England recognized that, even if my own parents still found my chosen vocation to be unstable and disappointing. I was free and capable and ready to become the woman God hand-crafted me to be.

What my mother also failed to understand was that Peter had been the catalyst for my metamorphosis. I had every reason to believe he would be as eager to pick up where we left off as I was.

I look forward to seeing you. That's what he said in his e-mail. My being here means as much to him as it does to me.

I took a nimble bite of my jam-slathered toast and gathered all my hopeful thoughts around me like a fan club. *You'll see, Mother. All your fears are unfounded.*

Chapter Three

I wasted no time starting on the sketches of Whitcombe Manor.

As soon as I'd helped Ellie and her daughter, Julia, pop the pans of Christmas bread into the oven, I bundled up, collected my sketch pad and pencils, and settled into the comfortable garden chair Edward had set up for me in the front yard.

The sunlight filtered through the trees behind me, giving the face of Whitcombe Manor an enchanting glow.

Seven-year-old Julia joined me as my self-appointed assistant. Just like her mother, Julia was all sweetness, clever ideas, and boundless energy. She spread a blanket at my feet and contentedly combed the tail of her toy pony while telling me about her older brother, Markie, and how he never came along when she and her mum went into London for Christmas shopping.

"We are going to London this week. Did you know that? Miranda

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is coming with us. Will you come with us, too, Anna? Mummy and I always go to tea at Harrods. It's our favorite tradition."

"It sounds like a very nice tradition."

"Well, we actually only had tea there one time before, on my birthday, but now it's our tradition. We're going to go Christmas shopping and then have tea."

"How fun."

"Oh, it's very fun. You have to come with us. Please!"

"Yes. Of course. I'd love to come."

"Goodie!" Julia looked up at me as I tried to get the outline of the turret just right. "My daddy says you're quite talented, you know."

"No, I didn't know that."

"He said he was glad you were coming for Christmas because this house must always have an artist and that's why you're here."

"Is that right?"

"I like all the books you made very, very much, but you know that because I already told you that when we were baking." She paused before changing topics slightly. "Did you know that my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather who built this house was an artist and his friends came here to paint?"

I was pretty sure Julia had gone a few too many *greats* past the mid-Victorian era when Whitcombe Manor was built, but I did know about Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which was the group of artists to which she referred.

"I've seen some of their paintings," Julia said. "In a museum in London. Have you been to see their paintings in any museums in London?"

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"No. Not yet." I took my eyes off the sketch and smiled at Julia. Her wispy brown hair fluttered around her pixie face.

"Am I bothering you? Mummy said I'm not to bother you."

"No, you're not bothering me. Not at all."

"Good." Julia popped up and came over and stood by my side. Instead of examining the sketch, she seemed to examine me. "Do you ever wear your hair flowing down like a princess?"

I chuckled. "Like a princess, huh?"

"Yes, because you already look like a princess because you're so pretty. But you also have very long hair."

"Yes, I do have long hair, don't I?"

"I wondered," Julia said, taking on a coquettish stance in front of me. "Do you ever let anyone brush your hair or make braids in it?"

"Would you like to braid my hair?"

Julia's eyes grew wide. "Could I? Really?"

"Yes. Unless it distracts me from my work." I put on a stern look that didn't seem to fool her one bit.

"I won't keep you from your work. I promise. I'm very good at braids."

I undid my hair and let it hang down over the back of the chair.

"I want my hair to grow as long as yours." Julia gently smoothed her small hand down my mane. "I would brush it every morning and every night."

A sweet memory floated over me as I remembered all the bed-times when I sat cross-legged on the end of my bed and my mother would brush my hair.

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Julia looked over my shoulder at the sketch pad. "Anna, what if you were in the turret of our house and you couldn't get out? You could let down your hair like Rapunzel and the handsome prince would climb up and rescue you."

I smiled and kept sketching. At that moment my childhood bedroom in Minnesota seemed far away. I found it easy to believe in castles and princes and dreams about to come true. It made me happy that Julia shared my love of all things fanciful and enchanting.

As Julia did her styling, I could tell that instead of folding my hair into a single braid, she was adorning me with a haphazard assortment of small braids going every which direction. When she ran out of the ties she used on her pony, she pulled a long pink strand of yarn from the frayed edge of her sweater. She then made use of the rubber bands that held my pencils together.

She tugged a little too much as she secured a tight, thin braid that felt as if it were sprouting out the side of my head above my left ear. I was finding it impossible to draw but I didn't have the heart to say anything.

Fortunately, Julia realized she needed more ties and took off in her usual skip-hop-trot manner. I concentrated on getting the lines of the windows on the second floor to come out in accurate proportion to the roof.

From the end of the long gravel driveway came the sound of the front gate opening. I heard the rumble of a sports car engine. A shiny Austin-Healey came into view and stopped directly in front of the house. The top was down despite the chilly weather and a bicycle protruded from the passenger side.

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Everything around me seemed to hush. The driver opened the door, got out, and tossed his cap onto the front seat. My heart fluttered like a butterfly going around in dizzying circles.

Peter!

He turned and gazed across the lawn. I knew he saw me. For a moment, I held my breath. I didn't move. I'd practiced what I'd say when I saw him but at the moment all those clever, rehearsed lines escaped me.

All I could think was, *My hair!*