

When You Give a Duke an Indecent Proposal on Christmas Eve: A *Jewels of the Ton* Holiday Story
by Shana Galen

Christmas Eve, Rothingham Manor, Yorkshire

“Your Grace, have you considered *all* of the ramifications of this scheme?” Richards asked in his dry, monotone voice.

Juliette refrained from rolling her eyes. Duchesses did not roll their eyes, or so Will had told her several weeks ago. She had responded by noting that duchesses also did not tickle dukes, and then proceeded to tickle him until his sober expression broke and he laughed despite himself. “It is not a scheme, Richards,” she told the butler. “It is a gift, and I want it to remain a surprise.”

“I fail to see the distinction in this case, Your Grace.”

Juliette pointed to the cart coming up the curved drive to the manor. “You will see the distinction soon enough.” She watched the cart rumble over the snow-packed drive. On either side of the drive, snow banks were piled high and the lovely grounds were covered with a layer of ghostly white. The sun shone brilliantly today, and she was perfectly comfortable in a fur pelisse and gloves, standing on the steps of the gray stone house built by the first Duke of Pelham when he was still the Marquess of Rothingham. Now it was home to the sixth duke and duchess, and Juliette admired the view of the wild Yorkshire moors. They too were blanketed in a layer of sparkling white.

“I believe that is the crofter and one of his children,” Richard said.

“Yes, Mr. Martin and his daughter Beatrice. They call her Bea.” Juliette started down the steps, careful of any lingering patches of ice. Richards followed.

“It appears, Your Grace,” Richards noted with some alarm, “Miss Bea is holding a sack that wriggles.”

“You are most observant, Richards. That wriggling package is the scheme you refer to.”

“Of course.”

Juliette did not wait until the cart had stopped before she ran to intercept Mr. Martin and his sweet daughter. “Is that him?” she gestured to the burlap sack Bea held.

The child beamed. She wasn’t shy by any means, but her excitement today was palpable. “Look, Your Great! Look what I have!”

“It’s Your *Grace*,” her father corrected. Juliette waved a hand, not caring a whit for titles. She watched as Bea opened the sack and a velvet brown nose poked out, followed by a white and brown head, and then a wriggling white and brown body. Before the puppy could escape the struggling child completely, Juliette reached up and took him into her arms.

“Your Grace, he’ll shed on you,” Mr. Martin remarked.

The puppy licked her nose, and Juliette laughed. “I don’t mind. Oh, he’s darling!” she said, rubbing the pointer’s soft brown ears. The puppy licked her again.

“That dog is sorely lacking in manners,” Richards said, his face dour.

“Of course he has no manners, Richards,” Juliette said with a laugh. “He’s a puppy, and how can you look at a puppy with a frown? Here.” She deposited the wriggling ball of fur into his arms.

“But Your Grace!” Richards squeaked.

“I do not mind the fur, but I just remembered he is to be a secret, and I would not wish the duke to see the dog hair and ask questions. So you must take him, Richards.”

“I, Your Grace? But I what should I do with an undisciplined dog?”

Juliette rolled her eyes. Richards was too much. She could not resist. “Take him to the stables. The grooms can feed him and keep him warm until I have a moment to retrieve him. Mr. Martin and Miss Bea, you must be frozen. Please come inside. We have wassail and Christmas cakes.”

“Oh, yes!” Bea cheered at the same time her father said, “We could not impose.”

Juliette smiled and offered a hand to Bea. “The matter has been decided, Mr. Martin.”

A groom approached to tend the horse and cart, and Juliette led the father and daughter toward the house. As they neared the steps, she heard a high pitched scream and turned to see Richards holding the puppy out over the snow. A stream of urine flowed from the dog. The butler had a look of utter shock on his face, and the front of his coat was dark with wetness.

“Oops,” Juliette murmured and hurried her charges inside.

When William Henry Charles Arthur Cavington, Viscount Southerby, Marquess of Rothingham, and sixth Duke of Pelham returned, his wife was nowhere to be found. This annoyed him. He had told her he would return at four precisely, and it was now one minute after four. He knew she was not nearly as punctual as he—no one was—but he had bloody well missed her today and had been anticipating seeing her smiling face.

He'd gone out riding with his cousins because it had been over a year since they had last visited the manor, and he felt he owed them a tour. Actually, Pelham felt he was owed solitary time in his library with a fire, a glass of brandy, and a book, but Juliette had said that while she was not a proponent of rules, at Christmastime when family came to visit, perhaps it was bets to follow some of the social customs.

And so he had entertained his three cousins for the past few days, and now he was tired of them and wanted his bed. And his wife.

He wanted his wife in his bed.

Where the devil was she?

His cousins retired to their rooms to change for dinner, and Pelham sought out Richards in the butler's quarters. “Where is my wife?”

“Your Grace?” The butler had a strange look on his face and was brushing at his clothing.

“My wife. The duchess. Where is she?”

“Why, Your Grace?”

Pelham scowled. “Because I wish to see her. What does it matter?”

“I do not know where she is, Your Grace. Shall I search for her?”

“No. I’ll see her at dinner.” He moved to start up the stairs again and change, but then he turned back to Richards. “Are you well, Richards?”

“Yes, Your Grace!” The butler all but jumped when he answered. “I’m perfectly well.

“Hmm.” The man had an odd look on his face.

The afternoon passed with tedious slowness. He finally glimpsed Juliette as her maid Rosie put the finishing touches on her mistress’s golden updo. The maid saw him before her mistress, and she gave him a conspiratorial wink. Pelham was not used to being winked at. He could not remember ever having been winked at before, but he was relieved to know all was ready before he escorted his wife to dinner with his cousins and the events of the evening commenced.

He offered his arm, and Juliette took it. As he led her out of their suite, he could not help but notice how lovely she looked. Her gown was scarlet and gold and quite festive looking with some sort of holiday flower pinned to the bodice. At her neck and ears, diamonds glittered. Her eyes, a pale blue, shone with anticipation. On the stairs, she leaned close to him and whispered, “I must speak with you alone after dinner.”

“I’ll come to your room when we retire, as always.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I need to see you before that. Meet me in the stables.”

They’d reached the base of the stairs, and he took her arm and pulled her into a small parlor before his cousins, waiting in the drawing room, could spot them. Like the rest of the house, the room was festooned with pine boughs and holly. It smelled clean and fresh, and he’d heard more than one of the servants remark how happy they were to have a duchess in residence. Neither Will nor his father had ever bothered with holiday decorations. “The stables? It is snowing outside. You are not going to the stables.” He gestured to her delicate gown and slippers.

“Let me worry about that. You realize you are standing under mistletoe.”

“I...what?”

Before he could look up, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his mouth to hers. Pelham had the presence of mind to consider that someone might walk in, but his reservations only lasted for a few moments. Her kisses were too sweet. "If you come to the stables," she murmured against his mouth, "you will not be sorry."

"There are warm beds for that sort of thing," he said, closing his arms around her waist and pulling her against him. He loved the way her body felt pressed against his own. She was so soft and feminine, and the gown was thin enough that when he was touching her this way, it left little to the imagination. "You will freeze in the stables."

"Will," she said, nipping at his lips. "A bed won't do for what I have in mind." She stepped back, and he felt suddenly cold and incomplete. A part of him was missing when she wasn't touching him.

"The stables at half past ten," she said with a smile. "Do not be late."

Dinner seemed interminable with his wife across from him, close but untouchable. Every time he looked at her, which was quite frequently, he was reminded of her proposal that he meet her in the stables. He could think of many, many things he could do to keep her warm in the stables. Indecent and highly pleasurable acts. Acts not suited for dinner conversation with his three cousins.

Finally, the clock chimed half-past. Juliette had already retired, saying she was weary, and now Pelham excused himself as well. He left his cousins and their chess game and made his way out into the cold night. The moon was full, casting plenty of light on the path to the stables, and his feet crunched on the hard snow. In the moonlight it looked silver. He stuffed his hands in his pockets to keep them warm and watched his breath puff into the black sky. One or two stars shone particularly brightly on this eve of Christmas, and he wondered what that fabled star of so long ago might have looked like. Had it lit up the sky with its brilliance?

Pelham reached the stables and pushed open the door. "Juliette," he said softly, aware some of the grooms might be sleeping in the lofts nearby.

He heard a giggle, and then she whispered. "I'm here!" She giggled again. Puzzled now, Will made his way along the line of stalls, each housing a horse with a warm blanket and fresh straw to keep the animal comfortable. Finally he reached the last stall and there he found Juliette sitting on the hay with something wriggling in her arms.

"What the devil?"

She turned and held the puppy out to him, and he took a step back. There had been no dogs at Rothingham Manor since his father had killed his own dog, Hunter, when Pelham had been but six. The act was meant to teach Pelham a lesson about punctuality, but it had only served to teach the boy to guard his heart, lest he love something else that might be taken from him. Juliette had understood. Her own beloved Brownie had disappeared after she displeased her former husband. She never knew what happened to her dog, but she feared the worst as her husband had been a cruel, abusive man.

"Where did you find that?" he asked coldly.

"If by *that* you mean this adorable puppy, I did not find him. He has been waiting here to meet you."

Pelham shook his head, stepping back warily when she stood. The puppy reached up and licked her nose, and she giggled again.

"I don't understand," he said.

"Hold out your arms."

He shook his head. "No." If he took the dog, it might lick him. And if it licked him, he might start to think it was endearing. He might start to like it. Will stared at the creature uneasily.

"Will." Juliette's voice was soft. He looked into her eyes and saw there the understanding he needed. "It will be alright. I promise."

He could believe her. He knew he could trust her. Everything was well when she was with him.

"Hold out your arms."

He did, and she placed the small, warm puppy in them. He took a deep breath and looked down into the dog's large brown eyes. They looked back up at him, blinked, and then the dog licked him.

"Ack!"

Juliette laughed again. "Happy Christmas, Will."

His gaze shot to her face. "This is mine?"

"Yes. Richards said he is lacking in manners, so we will have to teach him, but he is yours. Happy Christmas." She stepped close and kissed him. "I love you."

Will did not know what to say. He'd never received a gift like this, a gift given not out of obligation or to teach him responsibility, but a gift given out of love. His throat felt oddly blocked, and he had to clear it. "I have something for you as well."

"I should hope so." She grinned.

"It is in your room. I put Rosie in charge of it."

"Let's go see!" And she pulled him out of the stables with all the excitement of a small child.

Juliette could not imagine what Will might have given her. It was probably jewelry. He was not very inventive, she reminded herself, but the fact that he had remembered to get her a gift and kept it secret was something. She could not believe Rosie had given her no indication of the secret gift.

They scampered inside, Will pulling the dog out from under his coat when they reached the warmth of the house. He yipped, and Juliette said, "Shh! You don't want everyone to come running, now do you? Then we'll never see my surprise."

"We will still see it," Will said, pulling her toward the steps.

"I don't want to wait."

With a smile, he followed her up the stairs. He was still carrying the puppy, and he looked adorable with the little ball of fur in his arms. Will's tousled brown hair and dark blue eyes made her heart beat faster. She knew

just what she wanted to do once she reached the privacy of her bedroom. She'd been wanting to loosen his cravat and see his eyes darken with desire all night.

They reached her bedroom, and the door swung open. Rosie stood in the frame, smiling. "Good night, Your Grace," she said and departed, taking a moment to coo over the puppy.

Usually the maid at least inquired if Juliette wanted help with her toilette. Juliette shrugged and looked back at Will. "Go in," he said. She did, and she saw it immediately.

Juliette stopped and gasped. "Will! How? When?"

"I have my methods."

The portrait of the two of them hung above the fireplace in her room, where once a portrait of Will's horrible father had hung. She's made him take all of them down, but he had been slow to replace them. This spot had been bare for some time. And now it would be filled with an image of the two of them. In the portrait, he looked down at her with love. And she...

"Will, that doesn't look like me. The artist has made me much too beautiful."

"No," Will said, taking her in his arms. "He didn't paint you beautifully enough. I love you, Juliette."

The puppy wriggled between them, and Juliette rose on tiptoe to kiss Will's lips. "I love you, too."

The puppy whined, and they both laughed. "And we haven't forgotten you..." She looked up at Will.

"Lucky," he said, naming the dog. It was his now, like it or not. She had a feeling he liked it.

"A very good name. We love you too, Lucky." She gave the dog a pat, and he reached up and licked Will's chin. Will looked like he might protest, but then he broke into a grin. "Happy Christmas, my duchess."