



*A Dragon Caern  
Christmas*



*by*

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“One ball is hanging low.” Jacquelyn cocked her head and narrowed her eyes at her husband.

“That, my love, is the condition of most men.” Gabriel glanced over his shoulder and waggled his dark brows at her. “But how you can tell from there is a mystery.”

She swatted his well-muscled *derrière*. “I meant the spice balls. The left one is lower than the right. See if you can tie it up higher.”

Gabriel stretched to reach the kissing bough he’d just hung from the arched center of the solar’s ceiling. He hiked the clove-encrusted suet ball a few finger-widths. The spicy fragrance mingled with the fresh evergreens in the bough.

“Any particular reason they have to match?”

“Because it will please me if they do.” Jacquelyn waggled her brows back at him and stepped close to wrap her arms around his waist. “And I’m sure you want to please me.”

“It’s what I live for,” he assured her. Gabriel couldn’t reciprocate with an embrace while he tied up her Christmas folderol, but he bent to kiss her anyway. His lips covered hers in a warm, wet promise of even better things to come.

“And I . . .” she said between love nips, “want to please . . .” Jacquelyn pressed herself against him and rocked slowly. He groaned. “. . . you, too, milord.”

“Ow!” He broke off their kiss and shook his hand, blowing on his fingertips. “That holly is prickly.”

“That’s because it represents *men*,” Jacquelyn explained as she took his injured hand and kissed each finger tip, pausing to suck the one with the angry red mark. She smiled when Gabriel’s breathing hitched a bit. “Holly for men, ivy for women and mistletoe for—”

“Trust me, love. I know what mistletoe is for.”

Gabriel pulled her close for a demonstration that had her gasping for air and not wanting to come up for it at the same

time. He tasted of the mulled wine they'd shared earlier and his kiss sent an intoxicating sizzle through her veins. When his hands slipped over the curve of her breasts, heat spread down her body. Jacquelyn wondered if there was time to hoist her skirts for a quick—

“Ow!” Jacquelyn jerked back and rubbed her crown. The spice ball had come untied, landed on her noggin, bounced to the floor and wobbled across the flagstone to a lopsided stop. “I thought sailors were supposed to be handy with knots.”

“Sailors, aye. None handier.” Gabriel grinned sheepishly as he bent to scoop up the offending ornament. “But *pirates* are known to play fast and loose with the rules from time to time and I may have skipped a step with that last knot.” He pressed a quick kiss to the top of her head. “You have to admit, I was being distracted.”

“Well, I’ll not distract you this time.” She crossed her arms under her breasts.

“Lyn, you distract me just by breathing.”

Her insides melted when Gabriel used his special name for her.

“You know, you’re supposed to pluck a mistletoe berry each time you steal a kiss,” she said. “When they’re gone, the free kisses are ended.”

“What if the kisses are freely given?” he asked.

“Oh, that’s another matter entirely.” She leaned toward him for another kiss, but a mighty clatter and scuffle made her pull back. She tossed him a look that said, *‘Later’* as their children burst into the room.

“Mother, Garrett says he won’t take the role Cousin Daisy gave him for the Christmas play,” ten-year-old Charlotte complained.

“Make him do it,” Griffith urged with a wicked gap-toothed grin. The twins were only seven, but Jacquelyn despaired of them living to the ripe age of eight. They were perpetually either threatening to murder each other or standing back to back, ready to take on all comers. No one could predict with accuracy which stance they’d take in any given situation.

“I won’t!” Garrett declared, swiping his nose on his shirtsleeve.

“You have to,” Charlotte said. “It’s the most important role of all. How can we be a proper troop of Mummings if you won’t play?”

“What does Daisy want you to do?” Gabriel ruffled his son’s mop of russet hair.

“He has to be Baby Jesus,” Griffith said helpfully. “Because he’s the youngest.”

“Not by much, you scurvy bugger.” Garrett launched himself at his brother like a cannon shot and they boiled across the room in a tangle of spindly arms and legs.

Gabriel separated the pair of them, lifting them off the floor by the scruff of their collars. “What did I tell you about fighting?”

“He started it,” the boys said in unison.

“And I’ll end it,” Gabriel said with a glare. “Throw another punch and you’ll both celebrate Christmas with warm bottoms.”

“And where did you learn such language?” Jacquelyn demanded.

“Reckon that would be from me,” a gravelly voice said

from the door way.

“Meri!” Jacquelyn exclaimed. *Scurvy bugger, indeed.*

Since Joseph Meriwether wed Mrs. Beadle, that worthy lady had succeeded in cleaning up the outside of his disreputable hide. Even his beard was neatly braided now, but Meri’s language would always be peppered with remembrances of his days as Gabriel’s first mate.

Charlotte ran to hug the old pirate and the boys squirmed free to join her. Meri turned a couple circles with the three hanging on him like a troop of monkeys. “Happy Christmas all, me hearties!”

“Don’t over-excite the children, Joseph,” his round, merry-faced wife said as she waddled over to kiss Jacquelyn’s cheek. “Happy Christmas, dear. How is the new cook settling in?”

Jacquelyn still thought of her as Mrs. Beadle sometimes, since that had been her name when she served as the castle’s head cook and housekeeper. Dragon Caern had engaged and subsequently lost a dozen cooks thanks to Lady Meri’s interference. Every time she visited, Lady Meriwether refused

to relinquish her reign in Dragon Caern's kitchens even though she was now had servants and a kitchen of her own to oversee.

"We aren't expecting the crofters for some time yet, but I think the Christmas feast will do us proud," Jacquelyn said.

"We're having roast pheasant?"

"Yes."

"Venison?"

Jacquelyn nodded.

"Black butter?"

"I peeled the apples myself."

A frown creased Lady Meri's face. "What about the plum pudding?"

"I believe Cook started it yesterday."

"Yesterday! Why, a good pudding can take weeks to age properly." Lady Meri turned and bolted for the door in a flurry of lace and frippery. "I'd better see about it. Good thing we came early, Joseph!"

Jacquelyn started to head her off, but Meri stopped her. "Best to let her go, missy. Hagitha won't be happy unless she's

got her finger in every pot. And if Hagitha ain't happy, there's nary a hope for the rest of us."

"Is that Meri I hear?" Daisy appeared in the doorway and greeted the crusty old fellow with a hug. She spied Charlotte and the boys over Meri's rounded shoulder. "Oh, there you are! I've been looking all over for you three!" Despite the fact that Daisy was now a spinster of twenty, she still loved the amateur theatrics the Drake family always foisted upon their guests. "We're waiting to rehearse."

Gabriel snatched his sons back up till they stood tiptoe and fixed them both with a stare. Then he lowered their feet to the ground. "Garrett, you will listen to your cousin and make me proud of your re-enactment of Our Lord at His birth. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," Garrett said sullenly.

Griffith didn't stifle his giggle quickly enough.

"And you!" Gabriel turned a dragon's glare on his oldest son. "What's your part in the play, Grif?"

"He's a wise man," Daisy said.

"Not today, he isn't," Gabriel said. "Every stable needs a

jackass and you've proven yourself equal to the part, Griffith."

Now Garrett enjoyed a giggle at his brother's expense.

"See to it he has nice long ears," Gabriel told Daisy.

"Don't want anyone mistaking him for a horse."

"But now I'll be short a wise man," Daisy said with a frown. "How can we do the play with only two?"

"I'd be willing to fill that berth," Meri said. "No speechifying needed, is there?"

"No, but—"

"Weel, that's grand, then. I'll be along directly."

Daisy disappeared with Charlotte and the twins in tow.

"Thank you, Meri," Jacquelyn said. "What a lovely things to do, stepping into the play like that."

"Ach! Don't be thankin' me, missy. If I'm *in* the blasted thing, I don't have to *watch* it now, do I?" He laid a clever finger alongside his nose. "I'll expect a bottle or two of that French brandy you're hoarding, Gabriel."

"Done," Gabriel said with a chuckle.

Meriwether trailed Daisy and the children out of the solar singing "What Shall We Do with A Drunken Sailor?" at the top

of his lungs.

Jacquelyn looked over at Gabriel and smiled.

“We’re alone, Lyn,” he said.

“Yes, we are.” She pointed to the kissing bough that hung lopsided as Meri’s drunken sailor. “But you haven’t fixed my balls yet.”

His dark gaze grazed her. “Come over here and fix mine first, you little minx. Then we’ll see about your spice balls.”

She didn’t need a second invitation.

They met beneath the kissing bough, lips seeking, hands roaming.

“Ah, Lyn.” His voice sank to a growl of need. “Have I told you this day how fine you are?”

“Only once or twice.”

His mouth trailed fire down her neck to the tops of her breasts. Her hand brushed the front of his breeches. He was hard and ready. She trembled with need. When he started to ruck up her skirts, she hooked a leg around his hip in encouragement. It wouldn’t take long and their guests weren’t due for a bit.

Her hands found his breeches buttons. He grasped her buttocks and lifted her. The ache flared into a deep throb. Their wanting rattled the solar's green glass windows.

*No, wait.* That was the heavy knocker on Dragon Caern's thick oak door.

"Gabe," she murmured.

"Yes, love." His hand found her damp curls. Her knees threatened to buckle.

"There's someone at the door," she gasped.

"Someone else will get it."

The knocker banged with more insistence. Jacquelyn pulled away from him with a groan. All the servants, along with Lady Meri, were in the kitchen and the rest of the family had been pressed into service for Daisy's play. No one else would answer the door.

She kissed him once more. "I have to go. Fix the ball on my kissing bough."

He grumbled under his breath as she slipped away but she knew he'd do it. She also knew he'd make her pay later.

That was a debt she looked forward to settling.

When she opened the massive door, she found her mother, Isabella Wren Haversham and her young husband, Lord Wexford.

“Happy Christmas, lovie!” Isabella trilled.

“Mother, we weren’t expecting you.”

“I know. That’s what makes it such fun.” Her violet eyes sparkled. “Lord save me from doing the expected. Besides, now my grandchildren are well out of napkins and beginning to be interesting. Where are the little dears?”

“Probably dismantling the Great Hall,” Jacquelyn admitted. “Daisy is leading them in our entertainment for this evening—a Christmas play.”

“Oh, then perhaps we have arrived a day early,” Isabella said doubtfully.

“Nonsense. You love the stage,” her husband said. “You always say there’s nothing like good theatre.”

“Unfortunately, this will be nothing like good theatre.” Isabella’s sigh was worthy of a martyr. “Well, best put a good face on it. Come, Geoffrey. Let us see if we can be of assistance while there’s still time to make improvements.”

She grasped Lord Wexford's elbow and led him toward the Great Hall, calling over her shoulder. "Don't bother about the baggage. Jerome and Nanette will see to our things. Only a dozen trunks or so. We're traveling light this time."

Jacquelyn held the door open for her mother's long-time, long-suffering servants. Once the trunks were all dragged from the bailey into the keep, she hurried back to the solar.

Gabriel was standing beneath the kissing bough, staring up at his handiwork. He cocked his head as if dissatisfied.

"I think that'll do," she said.

"I don't know," he said, spreading his arms wide. "We'd better try it out first."

Jacquelyn ran to his arms and he twirled her around a few times.

"Happy Christmas, Lyn." Then his lips found hers for a long, deep kiss.

"The kissing bough works," she said when he finally lowered her feet to the ground. The white-hot passion was back with throbbing vengeance. "It works very well."

"How long do we have?" Gabriel's voice was husky with

need.

“Long enough.” She took his hand and together they ran for the stairs to their bedchamber like naughty children escaping their tutor’s dull lesson.



Daisy looked around the long, feasting table. Kissed by the glow of candlelight, all those she loved were gathered round, their faces softened in the flickering illumination. Laughter and music filled the Great Hall as her Uncle Gabriel’s crofters and retainers basked in the Christmas bounty of their lord.

Her little play had been declared a shining success by the simple folk of Dragon Caern, who knew no better. Garrett refused to stay scrunched up enough to make a convincing Baby Jesus, but, with only a few stern looks from his father, at least he sat still on his sister’s lap. Charlotte was a serene and lovely Mary. Griffith, however, was a less than stellar jackass, braying at inopportune moments and causing more hilarity than worshipful awe.

Daisy glanced at the Lord of Dragon Caern and

intercepted an intimate look of quiet joy as her uncle silently pledged her aunt across the length of the long table.

Would a man ever look at her like that? Daisy sincerely doubted it. She sighed.

“I heard that,” her Great Aunt Isabella said at her side. “Is something troubling you, sweeting?”

“No, it’s just . . . well, I love my family and all, but I suppose I’m spoiling for an adventure.”

“An adventure? I have it!” Isabella declared between delicate sips of her frothy syllabub. “You should return to London with Geoffrey and me.”

“The last thing I want is another Season,” Daisy said wearily. Her hefty dowry drew in the worst of suitors and her sharp, sometimes acerbic, wit drove away the best. All her sisters but Lily were either married or betrothed in the course of their first Season. Daisy turned out for three Seasons and turned down twice as many proposals. None of the men who offered their troth had looked at her with half the passion that passed between her uncle and aunt. She was beginning to think marriage was not for her. “In truth, I don’t know what I

want.”

“Then give yourself time to figure it out. Don’t think of it as a Season. Just come for an extended visit. I’ve several amusing fetes planned for the spring. I think you’ll find London most diverting,” Isabella promised.

“Ah, but will London find *me* diverting? It didn’t before. Meri always says it doesn’t pay to run from your problems because wherever you go, there they are.” Daisy leaned her cheek on her palm.

“Don’t run from them. Take your problems on holiday. See if they don’t lighten up.”

“All right. I’ll do it,” Daisy said. Making a decision seemed a step in the right direction. “But it still doesn’t help me know what I really want.”

“I noticed Jacquelyn has hung a kissing bough in the solar.”

“I know.” Daisy had been careful to keep from standing beneath it all evening. Baron Chutley’s oldest pimple-faced son had been following her about, clearly hoping to sneak a kiss if he caught her under the decoration. At least, she knew, most

forcefully, what she *didn't* want.

“When I was a girl,” Isabella said, “a gypsy woman told me once that a kissing bough held special magic.”

“Hector Chutley seems to hope so.”

Isabella laughed. “Aside from forfeited kisses, she told me that if one falls asleep beneath the kissing bough on Christmas Eve, one’s dreams would be magical.”

“Truly?”

“One’s dearest desires would be revealed,” Isabella promised.

“Have you tried it?”

“No need, sweeting. My desires are the one thing that have always been plain to me,” the former courtesan said with a laugh. “But it might help you. So long as you wait until well after Hector Chutley leaves.”



Daisy had never put much stock in magic. She was more interested in Latin poets and astrolabes and scholarly pursuits—another reason the more desirable suitors failed to arrive on her doorstep—but she decided if ever there was a

night filled with things beyond the natural scope, it must be Christmas Eve.

So long after midnight mass, she tiptoed down the long stairs, blanket in hand, and curled up beneath the fragrant greenery. At first the flagstone was too hard to let her find sleep, but after several deep breaths of the crisp evergreens' scent, she drifted off. And in disjointed colors and flashes of light, she saw one thing quite clearly.

*A man. Hair like a raven's wing . . . snapping dark eyes . . . he bore a heavy burden . . . an invisible hand closed over her heart and squeezed . . . he was looking for something . . .*

Daisy woke with a start and stared up at the kissing bough in the pale pre-dawn. Whoever the man in her dream was, she hoped he was looking for her.



Thank you for sharing *A Dragon Caern Christmas* with me! I hope you enjoyed it. If you'd like to find out who the man in Daisy's dream is, be sure to look for *VEXING THE VISCOUNT*, available for pre-order now from Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Borders. In a store near you February 24, 2009!

Happy Christmas, dear friends! And a blessed New Year!  
*Emily*