

## MERRY'S MOST WONDERFUL CHRISTMAS GIFT

Even though she was alone, Merry Damonson forced a smile as she settled into a chair by the fire in the front drawing room with her knitting in hand. She was determined to find a way to enjoy Christmas this year. After all, Mama and Papa and the twins would be aware if she was merely putting on a front, as she had done for the past two years, and they did not deserve having a pall cast over the season.

But she found she could not maintain the smile. It faded, just as her joy in the Christmas season had faded two years ago when Edward—no, she must not think of Edward, not if she wanted to enjoy the season.

Or if she simply could not avoid thinking of him, she must recall that he was now the Earl of Branford. She must not refer to him by his given name even in her thoughts. If she could not banish him from her memory, she would think of him as Branford. He would seem more a stranger that way.

Sighing, she lifted her knitting needles and started the ribbing on a pair of mittens she was making for old Mrs. Creighton. Merry had always enjoyed making gifts for their servants, as well as for people in the nearby village, and with Boxing Day now only three weeks away, she needed to concentrate on her project.

But despite the pleasant crackle of the fire and the enticing aroma of spices drifting through the house as Cook undertook her usual Christmas baking, Merry found herself too restless to concentrate. She laid her work aside, then stood and ambled across the room to the front windows where she looked out on the fresh fall of snow.

The flash of a red cap caught her eye and a genuine smile lifted the corners of her lips. She might have known. The twins were engaged in a snowball fight. David had been home from school a full week now, and he and Dora had immediately fallen into their old ways, each trying to best the other. Obviously Dora had forgotten that at the age of fourteen, she was expected to behave like a young lady instead of a scamp. Merry decided she'd better intervene before their mother looked out a window and spied her snow-covered daughter. Mama would no doubt set poor Dora to tatting lace for the next two weeks.

Merry paused long enough to grab a shawl to wrap around her shoulders before making her way to the front door. Fortunately, none of the servants were nearby, so she quickly slipped through the entrance hall and opened the door. David and Dora now stood on the porch, both laughing as they tried to brush snow off the others' clothing.

"Here, let me help." Merry stepped out into the chill air and quietly closed the door behind her. "Turn around, Dora. Your back is covered in snow. Have you been making snow angels?"

Dora giggled, a habit she'd developed over the past few months. "I'm not telling. Ouch!"

"Sorry," Merry murmured, aware that she'd brushed Dora's backside a bit too enthusiastically. "But I do wish you'd learn not to giggle, Dorie. Gentlemen do not find it attractive."

"And I don't find gentlemen attractive," Dora shot back, stepping away from Merry's ministrations. "Never mind the rest. It'll melt when I get inside."

Merry shrugged. "As you wish. David, you'd best stamp your feet. If you track that much snow into the house, Foster will have your hide."

“Foster’s our butler, not my keeper,” David pointed out. But he also started stamping so that the crusted snow fell off his boots.

Merry nodded. “That’s better. There’s a fire in the front drawing room. Both of you should try to dry off while I find Foster and order some hot chocolate and biscuits.”

“Ask for some cake too,” David said. “I’m half starved.”

“You’re always half starved,” Dora said, sticking out her tongue and then dashing inside.

Merry sighed. She was well aware that because he had been away at school, David’s level of sophistication was rapidly outpacing his sister’s. “I do wish you’d use your influence with Dora to get her to behave more sedately.”

David bent to brush snow from his knees, then straightened, a frown pulling at his brow. “I’ll try, Merry, but you know how strong-willed Dorie is.”

Merry smiled and ran a finger over his chapped cheek. “I know, love. And at some point in the future, no doubt, I’ll be wishing she were not so grown up.” She turned to go inside but David grasped her arm and pulled her to a stop.

She looked into his face and felt her heart drop. “What’s wrong, dear?”

David appeared to have trouble meeting her gaze. He again bent as though to brush more snow off his knees but his trousers were now clean. He straightened and swallowed. “It’s about Branford. I hear he’s returning to Summerton for Christmas. Probably next week.”

“Summerton?” Merry realized she’d phrased the word as a question, just as though she didn’t know that the estate named Summerton bordered her Papa’s land for miles on the east side.

Just as though she and Edward hadn’t once had a secret meeting place beneath the limbs of a massive old oak that straddled the border.

Just as though she hadn’t once believed that someday she’d be the mistress of Summerton.

David nodded. “That’s what I heard at school.”

“But what about his other estates? What about Branford Manor? Why isn’t he going there for Christmas? Why would he come back to simple little Summerton?”

“I don’t know.” David took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Mer. I hated to tell you but I thought you should be forewarned.”

“Thank you, David.” She turned away from the sympathy in his gaze and stared, unseeing, at the tree line that marked the edge of the forest. “I think I’ll go for a walk.”

“Well you can’t, Mer. Not in your satin slippers and with just a shawl for warmth.”

Merry glanced down at her clothing and forced a smile. “Silly me. But I would like some fresh air. I’ll change into something warmer and then go for my walk.” She stepped back inside and hurried up the stairs to her bedchamber, leaving David and Dora to order their own refreshments.

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The oak had not yet shed its leaves although they had turned brown and now rustled in the breeze like a dozen old ladies exchanging whispered confidences. Merry had not set out to visit the oak, at least not consciously, but her steps had led her here anyway.

Today was the first time she'd returned to this spot in nearly two years, not since that afternoon when she'd discovered the missive that Edward had left for her in a deep crevice of the oak. They'd made plans to meet there that afternoon, two days prior to Christmas Eve, and walk back to Merry's house where Edward would ask her father for her hand in marriage. They had no doubt about his response. The two families had always been good friends.

Not that Merry and Edward had been close when they were growing up. He was away at school much of the time, which was true for most men of his station—sons of country gentlemen. But in the summer when Merry turned seventeen, they're accidentally met at the oak when each was out for a walk. They'd started talking and discovered they had much in common. They met again the next day and for several days and weeks thereafter until Edward asked if he could call on her.

But Merry was scheduled to leave the following day to accompany her mother on a visit to Papa's sister who lived some fifty miles away. They would be gone for a month and by then, Edward would have returned to school.

They met at the oak again when Edward returned home for the Christmas break and their relationship immediately deepened. Edward had again suggested he call on Merry, but his father sickened the next day and within a week had died, leaving Edward to oversee the estate and care for his ailing mother.

Because Edward's father had been estranged from his only brother, the Earl of Branford, Merry's father had stepped forward to assist Edward in handling his new responsibilities and the two men soon became quite close. Edward had indicated to Mr. Damonson that he was interested in calling on Merry, but because he was in deep mourning for his father, they decided the courtship should not be formalized just yet.

But Merry and Edward continued to meet at the oak two or three times each week. They would then wander through the forest, holding hands and laughing together as they discovered new joys in each other's company.

With increasing frequency, Edward would pull Merry to a stop, then wrap his arms around her and gently lower his lips to hers. Merry had always loved those moments. Sometimes she wished Edward would deepen the kiss, but he invariably pulled back, although she detected a promise in his eyes of more intimate embraces to come at some point in the future. For they had agreed that they would marry as soon as Edward was out of mourning and, because his mother had already indicated her desire to move to Bath to take the waters in hopes that her health would improve, Edward and Merry discussed plans about what they would do for the estate when they were husband and wife.

In much this way, another year passed and another Christmas was upon them. Edward was no longer in mourning, so he and Merry decided to meet at the oak two days before Christmas Eve and walk together to visit her father.

Merry's spirits had been high when she approached the oak, and she was only mildly concerned when she spotted the note in the crevice. No doubt a small crisis with one of Edward's tenants had caused a delay.

But the note had been both brief and cryptic. "Family emergency requires me to go out of town. Mother is fine. I'll be in touch soon."

Two days later, a special messenger brought Merry a longer missive from Edward in which he explained that his cousin Howard, the Earl of Branford's only son, had been killed in a duel. When the earl was told about his son's death, he had collapsed and died, leaving Edward as heir to the earldom and all of the responsibilities that went along with the title. In his letter, Edward apologized for missing Christmas with Merry but said he'd be back as soon as possible.

But he had not written again, nor had he returned to Summerton. Merry was positive that something terrible had befallen him until Papa's sister returned from a visit to London the following spring and reported seeing Edward in the drawing rooms and ballrooms of the *ton*. She informed Merry that Edward appeared to be under siege from the many relatives who now considered him the head of the family.

"Dear Edward always took his responsibilities seriously, you know," Aunt Martha had reminded Merry. "You must not blame him too much if he has yet to learn how to give his cousins the set-downs they deserve."

While Merry was relieved to know that Edward was well, she was even more distressed by his abandonment of her. She was well aware that he took his responsibilities seriously, but that was even more reason he should have kept in touch with her. If a man did not feel a responsibility to the woman he'd planned on marrying, then what kind of man was he?

And so she had begun to attempt to exorcise Edward from her thoughts but with very little success until recently when the passage of time had begun to ease her sorrow.

But now another Christmas season had rolled around and her determination to find happiness in the holiday seemed at risk. If Edward returned to Summerton next week, he would no doubt be invited to all of the neighborhood parties, and she would have to think of some excuse not to attend.

Perhaps she could develop a debilitating disease over the next couple of days.

Or perhaps she could find some way of irritating all of the hostesses so they would strike her from their guest lists.

Or perhaps—

"Hello, Merry."

Or perhaps she would start imagining that she heard Edward's voice when he was not yet in the neighborhood. Then she could beg off from the parties by announcing she'd come down with a brain fever.

The voice sounded again from somewhere to her right. "I said, Hello Merry."

So she had not imagined hearing Edward after all. She turned slowly, and as she turned, she pulled her anger close around her like an invisible suit of armor.

He had changed, and not just in superficial ways. There was a slight air of melancholy about him and a suggestion of bleakness in his eyes. Well, he was not the only one standing under this oak tree who had changed in the last two years. Merry squared her shoulders, lifted her chin, and narrowed her eyes just slightly. "Hello, Edward." Perhaps she should have referred to him as "Lord Branford," but she would not give him the satisfaction. "I'm surprised to see you back in these parts again."

He ducked his head a bit. "You're angry. I suppose I can't blame you."

"Yet you sound surprised."

"Not surprised as much as disappointed."

Shock held Merry speechless for long seconds. Her eyes widened. “*You’re* disappointed? That’s strange, considering that you are not the party who was abandoned.”

He grimaced and took a step toward her. “I’m sorry if you felt abandoned. I had hoped you might understand, considering the situation I was thrust into when I arrived at Branford Manor. First there were the two funerals for me to arrange, and then I discovered that my uncle and cousin had practically run the estate into the ground. The farms were in dire condition and the tenants half starved. Relatives I didn’t know descended on me, wanting favors I couldn’t afford. I put off coming to see you, hoping I’d get affairs in order at Branford Manor so I could return to Summerton without feeling burdened. I tried to explain all of this in my letters, but when you didn’t respond, I assumed you wanted nothing to do with all of my new problems.”

Letters? Merry frowned. Why was he talking about letters in the plural? There had been the very short note left in the crevice of the oak and then just one letter. And he’d explained nothing. Surely...

“But then,” he continued, “when you didn’t respond, I feared something was wrong and had made up my mind to travel back to Summerton to check on you. But then, of course, I heard that you had—”

“Branford! My dearest Branford! There you are!”

The words sounded from Merry’s left. She twirled, surprised to hear a voice she did not recognize, and was stunned at the sight that greeted her. The woman who approached them through the snow was beautiful, with dazzling blonde hair piled high on her head and topped by a green velvet bonnet. Her slender form was wrapped in a lush velvet cape the color of holly and her feet were clad in shiny black boots.

Merry glanced down at her second-best woolen coat, which had faded over the years from black to a dingy brown. Her boots, too, were her second-best, and the scuffed toes most definitely spoke of much wear. When she lifted her gaze, she saw that the woman was also critically examining Merry’s ensemble.

After a tiny shake of her head, the female stepped closer and addressed Merry. “And who are you, my dear? One of Lord Branford’s little friends from the village?”

Merry elevated her brows. “Actually, I’m his former friend from the neighboring estate. And you would be...?”

Merry thought she detected a soft moan from Edward as he hurried forward. “Regina! I had hoped to have a quiet walk in the woods. How did you find me?”

The woman cocked her head to one side and flashed him a coy smile. “Why, I followed your footsteps through the snow, my dear Branford. I did not like to think of your being lonely.”

“I see,” Edward responded with thinned lips. “Well, now that you’re here, allow me to introduce my neighbor and long-time friend, Merry Damonson. Her father owns the estate that borders Summerton.”

Regina gifted Merry with a regal nod. “I’m pleased to meet you, Miss Damonson. Considering that you’re an old friend of Lord Branford’s, you must join me in attempting to cajole him into holding a Christmas ball at Summerton. After all, if he simply must bury himself here in the country for the holidays, the least he can do is plan some entertainments for those of us who have joined him.”

Merry glanced at Edward and saw that his face was turning quite red, just as it had the few times in the past when she’d seen him grow really angry. His lips when he

spoke barely parted, as though he was speaking through clenched teeth. “Regina, please refrain from pestering Miss Damonson. I’m sure she already has a full schedule of holiday entertainments.”

An impulse that seemed to come from nowhere lifted Merry’s lips into a smile as she responded. “Why no, my schedule is not full at all, Lord Branford. I would adore attending a ball at Summerton. Is your mother to serve as your hostess?”

Edward’s eyes widened as he turned his gaze toward Merry. “Mother is not fond of travel this time of year.”

“No doubt that’s true, so it’s especially fortunate that she is already visiting your Aunt Bertha. As a matter of fact, I chatted with both ladies last week when I ran into them in the village. Your mother didn’t mention that you would be visiting Summerton but she informed me that her health is much improved and that she is looking forward to the Christmas season here in the country. Knowing how much she always enjoyed her Christmas festivities in the past, I believe she could be persuaded to serve as your hostess at a Summerton ball.”

Edward sighed. “Even if you’re right, there’s not enough time to plan a ball before Christmas.”

“Of course there’s enough time,” Merry responded. She really did not understand why she was behaving in this manner, practically forcing a ball upon Edward that he clearly did not wish to host. Nevertheless, she persisted. “You can invite all of the neighbors. In fact, I’ll help write out the invitations, just as I did for your mother when she held the harvest party four years ago this past fall. And your newly acquired relatives will wish to attend too. It’s time we all got to know each other.”

And suddenly Merry understood her motivation. Clearly when Edward inherited the earldom, he had been thrust into a world in which he was still a stranger, and obviously he was still being hounded by family members such as Regina who were attempting to force him into a mold for which he was ill prepared. Even though he had forsaken Merry, she still loved him and wanted him to be happy. This ball would be her final Christmas gift to him. She would help him learn how to interweave his two worlds so that he could find some comfort in his new role.

And so she forced a smile. “That’s settled then. I’ll visit your mother this afternoon and ask if she will serve as your hostess for the ball. I’ll also seek her approval of a date. What do you think, Edward? Would two evenings prior to Christmas Eve be agreeable?”

Edward stared at her for so long that Merry had trouble maintaining her smile. Obviously he knew she was up to something and he was attempting to figure out what. Perhaps he had an inkling of her motives because he finally returned her smile. “Two evenings prior to Christmas Eve will be perfect for me, Merry.”

Regina stepped forward and placed a hand on Edward’s arm. She glanced at Merry, then at Edward. “Calling each other by your given names? Goodness! I had not realized you two were so close. Or are manners much less formal in the country than in the city?”

Merry did not answer. She couldn’t because Edward was now gazing deep into her eyes. She tried to look away but his expression held her enthralled. In his eyes she could read a bit of confusion, possibly even some irritation with her, but underlying all of

that, she was almost positive she detected a healthy helping of the love he had once professed for her.

But that could not be. Obviously he did not love her or he would not have ignored her for so long. So she wrenched her gaze away and instead looked into Regina's narrowed eyes. "It was a pleasure to meet you," she murmured, then turned and hurried back through the forest toward her own home.

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For the next three weeks, Merry threw herself into preparations for the ball to be held at Summerton. First she had visited Edward's mother, who at first refused to have anything to do with a Christmas ball. In fact, she informed Merry that she was not best pleased with Edward, who had allowed himself to be too much influenced by his deceased uncle's friends and in-laws.

Merry had returned home, intending to write to Edward suggesting they cancel plans for the ball, but before she could finish composing her missive, she received a note from Edward's mother saying she had changed her mind and would be delighted for Merry's help in writing out the invitations and planning the refreshments.

Excitement in the neighborhood appeared to grow with each passing day as evidenced by the number of callers who stopped by to visit Merry on the slimmest of pretexts so they could quiz her about the arrangements. But as the date for the ball grew nearer, Merry's spirits spiraled downward even though she had reason to believe her plan was succeeding. The neighbors had once expressed dissatisfaction because Edward had deserted the neighborhood when he came into the earldom. Now almost everyone sang his praises. The men described him as "the best of fellows" because he had invited all the gentlemen to hunt with him in the days following Christmas. And the ladies were also enthralled, reporting that there was "nothing high in the instep" about Edward despite his now being an earl.

But Merry had seen nothing of Edward all week so she could not add to the superlatives that were being bandied about. In fact, if she had possessed less pride, she would have found a reason not to attend the ball.

But she reminded herself that she was one of the main instigators of the ball and could not leave Edward's mother to deal with the details alone. So she allowed her maid to help her into her new ball gown. Had she been left to her own devices, Merry would have worn last year's dress, but her mother had insisted upon having the village seamstress sew a lovely new gown for Merry—a soft green satin with an overdress of lace and tiny rosebuds embroidered around the hem.

On the evening of the ball, Merry's mother was unusually slow getting dressed and so they were among the last to arrive. The receiving line had already dispersed and the musicians were playing a jaunty reel.

Merry had hoped to slip into the hallway and back to the kitchens to help ensure that the refreshments were being prepared properly, but as soon as a footman relieved her of her coat, Edward appeared at her side. He looked unusually handsome in his formal evening clothes, and the tender smile on his face set her heart to skipping in some strange rhythm as though it were trying to keep pace with the reel the orchestra was playing.

"There you are at last," Edward murmured, taking her hand. "I have been watching for you."

Merry blinked. "You surprise me, my lord. I had not been under the impression that you were particularly interested in my company."

Edward grimaced. "That's exactly why I've been watching for you, my dear. I have much to explain, and I've just this week come to discover some important facts. I need to talk to you. Will you join me in the library?"

"Now?" Merry raised her brows. "Perhaps it has escaped your attention, my lord, but there's a ball in progress. Can this conversation not wait until tomorrow?"

"Absolutely not. It's of critical importance that I talk with you right this minute."

Merry glanced around the ballroom. She and Edward were already attracting attention, judging by the various glances and outright stares being directed toward them. She sighed. "Very well, my lord."

"Thank you." Edward smiled and led the way down the hallway and into the library. Once there, he walked to the desk, picked up a rather large bundle of papers, and held it out to her.

She has paused just inside the door. Being alone with Edward was certain to start rumors flying and she still had her reputation to think of. When she made no move to take the papers, Edward walked back to her. "Please, Merry. I'd like you to see these."

She took the bundle, which was several inches thick and tied with a ribbon. "What is this?"

"All the letters I wrote you after I inherited the earldom. You'll find dozens of them. At first I wrote every day, then every other day, and after that, every week for a year. Finally, after I was told you had accepted a marriage proposal from another man, I stopped writing."

"What?" Merry stared at him. "How could this be? I never received any of these letters and I certainly never accepted a proposal."

"I know that now. You see, Regina was living at Branford Manor when I arrived. She and my cousin Howard, who were distant cousins on his mother's side, were engaged to be married. When Howard was killed in the duel, she decided she wanted to marry me in his stead, so she bribed one of the footmen to intercept all of my letters to you. Then, after a certain time had passed, she forged a letter to me that was supposedly from the local rector saying that you were engaged to another man and I should quit writing to you."

"Merciful heavens! How did you learn the truth?"

"Regina had instructed the footman to burn all of my letters, but he kept them instead. She quit paying him but apparently he had already developed a gambling habit. He came to me a few days ago and offered me the letters for a price. I paid him and then fired him."

"But what of Regina?"

"I sent her packing yesterday, back to her parents' home near the border with Scotland. I doubt we'll ever see her again. But let's not discuss her any further. Merry, I never stopped loving you. Not for a minute. Not even when I thought you'd found someone new. I know it's been two years since we had originally planned to talk to your father, but I talked to him this past week and told him what Regina had done. I also asked for his permission to marry you and he agreed. So Merry, if you're still willing, I'd like to announce our engagement at the ball this evening."

Merry felt tears gathering in her eyes. “I’m sorry, Edward, but it’s too late. You’ve moved on. You’re an earl now, and you’ve had two years to grow accustomed to the role. I could never fit into your world.”

“Nonsense, my dear. You already do. No one but you could have planned a function blending the two aspects of my life so successfully. Not only do I love you, but I also need you as my helpmate. You will be the perfect hostess for both Summerton and Branford Manor. Please say you’ll accept my proposal and become my countess.”

He took the bundle of letters from her hands, placed them on the library table, and grasped her hands in his. “What say you, Merry? Will you marry me?”

A slow smile lifted the corners of Merry’s lips and she gazed deep into Edward’s eyes. He had not changed. Not really. He was the same sweet, kind, and responsible man she’d planned to marry two years ago. She could not blame him if circumstances had forced him to take on responsibilities he had not asked for.

But now he was asking her to be his wife and share those responsibilities. And she loved him far too much to deny his request.

Her smile widened. “I’d be honored to be your wife, my dear Edward.” And she went willingly into his arms for a deep kiss filled with promises of future joys.

A few minutes later, when they walked back to the ballroom hand in hand, every head turned with expectant looks on every face—whether it be one of the neighbors or one of Edward’s newfound relatives. And when the guests saw Merry’s and Edward’s happy smiles, cheers and clapping filled the room and spilled out into the star-filled night.

It was then Merry realized she and Edward had already received the most wonderful Christmas gift of all—their love for each other and the friendship and support of family and friends. No one could ask for more.