



What Happens Under the Mistletoe

By Sabrina Jeffries, Karen Hawkins, Candace Camp, Meredith Duran

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New York Times bestselling authors Sabrina Jeffries, Karen Hawkins, and Candace Camp, and *USA TODAY* bestselling author Meredith Duran come together for a sizzling historical romance holiday anthology.

Stunned by the heat of an unexpected kiss on a cold winter's eve, two strangers from vastly different worlds turn hotheaded principles into burning passion in **Sabrina Jeffries**'s delightful yuletide story, *The Heiress and the Hothead*. In the snowy Scottish countryside, **Karen Hawkins**'s rakish duke has an unforgettable holiday encounter in *Twelve Kisses* when the alluring lady he surprises under the mistletoe is not who he expected, but a long-lost love with a score to settle. In *By Any Other Name*, Edinburgh is aglitter for Christmastime as **Candace Camp** sends a curious gentleman in hot pursuit of an intriguing lady in disguise—one who refuses to reveal her true identity, though she fears he has already stolen her heart with his kiss. In *Sweetest Regret*, will the festive spirit of the season sweep **Meredith Duran**'s feisty heroine beneath the mistletoe—and back into the arms of the dashing rogue whose carelessness soiled her reputation and sent her into exile in London?

In this all-new story collection sparkling with sexy charm and heartwarming wit, four beloved bestselling authors reveal the mix-ups and make-ups, the missed chances and golden opportunities that come but once a year.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Sabrina Jeffries is the *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author of several Regency-set historical romance series, including the Royal Brotherhood, the School for Heiresses, the Hellions of Halstead Hall, the Duke's Men, and the Sinful Suitors. When she's not writing in a coffee-fueled haze, she's traveling with her husband, caring for her adult autistic son, or indulging in one of her passions: jigsaw puzzles, chocolate, music, and costume parties. With more than nine million books in print in twenty languages, the North Carolina author never regrets tossing a budding career in academics for the sheer joy of writing fun fiction and hopes that one day a book of hers will end up saving the world. She always dreams big.

Karen Hawkins is a *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author of many wickedly funny historical romance novels set in Regency Scotland, including the wildly popular MacLean Curse series, the enchanting Hurst Amulet series, the funny and charming Duchess Diaries series, and now the romantic Oxenburg Princes series. Karen is also the author of two sassy contemporary romances set in the little town of Glory, North Carolina. Find out more at Facebook.com/AuthorKarenHawkins and KarenHawkins.com.

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What Happens Under the Mistletoe

Chapter One



Walton Hall, Hertfordshire

December 19, 1829

Lord Stephen Corry, youngest brother of a marquess, might be considered too radical for polite company, but clearly he still had some credit in society. Otherwise he wouldn't now be a guest at the manor house of American artist Jeremy Keane and the man's new wife—Stephen's old friend—Lady Yvette.

He entered the drawing room to find Yvette directing footmen who were hanging a large painting on one wall.

“Ah, there you are,” she said. “And just in time for the unveiling of my new portrait. Jeremy hasn’t seen it framed yet, so I’m surprising him by showing it off to our guests. The gentlemen are changing clothes after a day of shooting, the ladies will arrive any moment from shopping in town, and this must be hung before I can summon Jeremy from his studio.”

“He didn’t go shooting with the men?”

She laughed. “Jeremy is not the shooting sort.”

Stephen well understood that. "I fear I'm intruding on your house party."

"Nonsense. Clarissa was absolutely right. It's absurd of you to spend the night at the village inn when we have so much room here."

What would Yvette think if she knew that her best friend—his cousin—had her own reasons for wishing him here? It had been a stroke of luck when he'd run into Clarissa earlier in the day.

I'll convince Yvette to invite you if you'll kiss me under the mistletoe in front of Edwin, Clarissa had said.

Why on earth would I wish to attend some society house party? he'd asked.

You told me once that you wanted to meet the owner of Montague Mills. Well, she'll be at this party. I'll introduce you.

Though Stephen hadn't been sure what Clarissa was about with Edwin Barlow, the Earl of Blakeborough, he'd found the promise regarding Miss Amanda Keane, Yvette's sister-in-law, impossible to resist. He had an article to write, after all, and he'd have no chance of meeting the American mill owner otherwise.

By all accounts, she was a colorless spinster with a hard-nosed view of life, who ventured into society as little as possible. He'd heard she'd be leaving England in a couple of weeks, so this would be his only chance to interview her.

"Well, I promise not to cause too much trouble," he joked.

"Somehow I doubt that. Between our tendency to provoke people and the way women react to you, I imagine there will be trouble aplenty." She grinned. "Fortunately, I enjoy a lively party. As does Jeremy."

"Wait—how do women react to me?" he asked, genuinely curious.

Yvette eyed him askance. "You know perfectly well that every lady you meet wants to fall into your lap. The older you get, the more unobtainable they find you, and now that you're nearly thirty, they're practically salivating to catch the elusive Lord Stephen."

"I'm only twenty-eight," he said sourly.

"Close enough. Especially when you stalk about with that air of dismissive impatience that perversely attracts them all."

"Have you been reading gothic novels again?"

"No, as a matter of fact," she said lightly. "I've merely spent years watching you trail women behind you as though you were a prodigal son pied piper."

The prodigal son part certainly fit. And it wasn't his fault that his pursuits left him no time for the fairer sex. Or that his lack of interest only seemed to attract them more.

Sounds of horse hooves crunching on the snowy drive outside wafted to them. "We can continue this discussion later," Yvette said. "That's the carriages bringing the ladies from town, and I'm sure the

gentlemen will be down soon, too. Go corral everyone and move them into the drawing room quietly, so as not to spoil the surprise, will you?"

Before heading off, Stephen asked, "Does my brother know I'm here?"

"How could he? When I arrived earlier, he was still out shooting with the others. But I'm sure he'll be happy to see you."

"I doubt that." Ever since Stephen had begun writing for *The London Monitor*, he and Warren had been at odds. "He thinks me a dangerous radical determined to foment revolution and destroy England."

"He does not. He merely worries you'll do something rash and get yourself killed."

Stephen snorted. Granted, some of his speeches had been known to rouse tempers, and his series of articles regarding the poor treatment of workers in mills hadn't been well received by his peers, who cursed him for his lack of loyalty to other Englishmen of his class. But no one would murder him for them.

And once he interviewed Miss Keane and demonstrated that American owners were no better than English ones, people would see he wasn't just throwing stones at his countrymen. That the situation in English mills mirrored an equally bad situation in America. Perhaps then they would finally regard working conditions in the cotton industry as a problem that spanned continents.

Perhaps then they would finally do something about it.

He entered the foyer to find chattering women everywhere, stamping the snow off their boots as footmen hurried to take their bonnets, cloaks, and capes. Some gentlemen had already come down, including Blakeborough.

Overhead hung a kissing bough, a ball of evergreens with a bunch of mistletoe dangling from it. Here was Stephen's chance to discharge his obligation to Clarissa. Now, where was she?

Ah—there she was, with her back to him; he recognized her forest-green cloak and deep-brimmed bonnet. She was near the earl, so she must be setting up the scene she wanted him to play for Blakeborough's benefit.

Making sure that the earl was looking on, Stephen strode up to his cousin and spun her around. "I've been looking for you everywhere, you little minx!"

But as he bent to angle his head under the bonnet's brim, he caught sight of a freckled nose that was decidedly not Clarissa's.

That arrested him—especially when the woman gave him a startled look from eyes the color of a sparkling brook. With her sweet-featured face turned up to his, he could now clearly see the curls beneath her bonnet.

A low simmer began in his blood. Her hair was vibrantly, gloriously red. His favorite. Besides, they were under the mistletoe, and he couldn't balk at kissing her now or it would look as if he'd found her lacking.

Everyone had fallen silent to watch what he would do. So he pressed his lips to hers. For her sake, of course.

He enjoyed it, too, despite the tittering and whispering around them. Her mouth was soft, supple. She smelled of apples and tasted of cinnamon. And when she raised up slightly to meet his kiss, it made him want to stand there forever with his lips sealed to hers . . .

God, what was wrong with him? He had no time for this.

Pulling back, he reached up to pluck the requisite berry from the kissing bough, then forced a smile for his blushing mistletoe miss. Or perhaps not a miss. Damn it, what if he'd kissed someone's wife?

Seeking to recoup, he handed her the berry. "Thank you for that, madam."

She took it with a look of confusion. "Pardon me, sir," she said in an accent he couldn't quite place. "Is this some quaint English custom for greeting guests?"

English custom? Wasn't she English? "Actually, kissing under the mistletoe is a quaint Christmas custom. I take it you were unaware of it, Miss . . ."

"Keane. Miss Amanda Keane."

That froze the simmer in his blood. "Miss Keane," he said disbelievingly. She certainly didn't look like a colorless spinster. "Owner of Montague Mills."

That seemed to amuse her. "As a matter of fact, yes. And sister to the man of the house." Removing her bonnet, she handed it to a nearby footman. "Though I don't believe we've ever met."

"No." This was bad. She would think him a complete idiot to be kissing a stranger, and then he would never get his interview.

She was even more fetching without the bonnet, her hair a flaming beacon in the foyer. She had the sort of freckle-faced country girl appearance that fired his blood and made him want to tumble her in a haystack.

God save him. He hadn't reacted this fiercely to a woman in a very long time. Why did it have to be with her, of all people?

Then Blakeborough stepped up to cast Stephen a chastening glance. "Miss Keane, this is Lord Stephen Corry. Knightford's brother. I'm sure you've heard of him."

Her smile faltered. "You're Lord Stephen? Who writes the articles in *The London Monitor*?"

"You've read my articles?" This got worse by the moment. How had a woman with her family connections encountered a radical newspaper? That would make it damned hard to get her to answer his questions truthfully.

"Yes, I have." Her pretty eyes hardened. "Every ill-considered, blustering word."

His temper flared. "If that's how you feel about bettering conditions for workers," he said coldly, "then I suppose I know where you stand on the matter of reform."

"That's how I feel about your depiction of mill owners, sir." She was a tiny thing, but somehow her voice

expanded to fill the room. “You write only about the worst ones, then tar the rest of us with the same brush. I’ve toured several English mills and have seen none of the things you describe.”

He laughed harshly. “And who arranged these tours? The owners? Because they aren’t about to show an esteemed foreign visitor how matters really are.”

“Yet they’re willing to show it to a lord whose idea of hard work is writing an article?”

As he bristled, Yvette hurried up to take Miss Keane’s arm. “Come, Amanda, your mother has been asking for you in the drawing room.”

Sparing a disgusted look for Stephen, Miss Keane let herself be led away.

She’d so roused his temper that he’d already started after her when someone grabbed his arm. “Leave her be,” Clarissa muttered.

He halted, though his eyes followed Miss Keane as she marched purposefully into the drawing room. Like a man. Or a woman with a very firm will. Oddly, that attracted him even more.

No, he was not attracted to the termagant. How could he be? She was an owner, for God’s sake.

“What were you thinking, to kiss Miss Keane so blatantly?” Clarissa went on. “I realize you were under the bough, but still—”

“I was thinking to do you a service.” He dragged his gaze from the doorway through which his mistletoe miss had disappeared. “It wasn’t my fault I mistook her for you.”

“How could you? We look nothing alike.”

“She was wearing your cloak and bonnet.”

“Not mine. Her own.” She scowled at him. “Yvette bought matching sets for the three of us. She thought it might be fun to have them for Christmastide.”

“How was I to know that? I saw Miss Keane from behind.”

Clarissa rolled her eyes. “You could have actually paused to speak to her before you put your mouth on her.”

“In hindsight,” he snapped, “that does seem the more sensible choice. But you weren’t in the room, so I assumed she was you, setting the scene for Blakeborough.”

“I forgot my reticule in the carriage and had to go back for it,” she said defensively.

His eyes narrowed. “How fortuitous. Did you plan this?”

“Oh, for pity’s sake.” She huffed out a breath. “Yes, I planned for you to sneak up on the poor woman and kiss her senseless without stopping to think.”

When she put it that way . . . “I wouldn’t exactly describe her as a ‘poor woman,’?” he grumbled.

“No,” Clarissa said with a faint smile. “Unlike most of the ladies who set their caps for you, she actually has a mind of her own.”

“I noticed. And it’s dead set against me. I’ll never get my interview now.”

“Well, I’ve lost my chance, too. Edwin is going to be highly skeptical about your interest in me if you’re kissing every other woman in the house.”

“Wait, is that what this is about? You’re trying to make Blakeborough jealous?”

She blinked. “Don’t be ridiculous. This is about . . . something else.”

“If you say so.” He headed for the drawing room door. “Whatever it is, it looks like we’re both on our own from now on. And I, for one, mean to try again with Miss Keane.”

There was more than one way to go about this. Her reaction to his kiss before she’d learned who he was had been decidedly enthusiastic. Perhaps he could use that. Flirt with her. Tease her. Gain her trust so he could find out what he needed to know.

That’s right—this is all for my cause. It’s not because of any attraction to her. No, indeed.

She was a means to an end, no more. And he would do whatever he must to achieve that end.

With that resolved, he entered the drawing room. Unfortunately, he was immediately confronted by the one person sure to ruin his plans: the Marquess of Knightford.

Who was also his eldest brother, Warren Corry.

Users Review

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