



'Twas the Night After Christmas (The Duke's Men Book 6)

By Sabrina Jeffries

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Unwrapping her talent for creating “scintillating wit and heart-stopping sensuality” (Library Journal), Sabrina Jeffries gives readers a gift to cherish: a touching new novel of an unexpected Christmas reunion—sparked by a cunning ruse, family secrets, and the mysterious ways of the heart.

Dear Sir,

... I feel I should inform you that your mother is very ill. If you wish to see her before it is too late, you should come at once.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Camilla Stuart

Pierce Waverly, the Earl of Devonmont, has led an unabashed rogue's life, letting no woman near his heart. Inexplicably abandoned as a child to be raised by distant relatives, he never forgave his parents, refusing to read any of his mother's letters after his father's death. Then came a letter that shook his resolve. A Christmas visit to Montcliff might prove his last chance to discover the truth of his past, and come to terms with the stranger he calls “Mother.”

But two surprises await him at Montcliff. His mother is perfectly healthy, nowhere near a deathbed, as her meddling lady's companion led him to believe. The second is Camilla Stuart herself, a lively vicar's widow, too bright and beautiful not to arouse the scoundrel in Pierce. Though she alone is reason enough to prolong his stay, he is soon faced with other tantalizing riddles: What secrets lie in his mother's past to explain his childhood abandonment? Why is the captivating Mrs. Stuart so determined to mend the breach between mother and son? Meanwhile,

Camilla herself is caught up in love's complications since the arrival of the irresistible earl. As his bold flirtation and suggestive whispers draw her

dangerously close, can anything protect her vulnerable heart? If they are destined to share real happiness, there must be honesty between them—yet telling him the truth about her own life may shatter that chance.

None of them can predict the startling revelations to come. Or the secrets, both heartening and shocking, divulged between a mother and son, and between two lovers haunted by their respective pasts, that will make Christmas night at Montcliff one to remember—and the glorious night after, one to treasure for a lifetime.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Bestseller Jeffries (To Wed a Wild Lord) delivers a moving Regency with heart, soul, and holiday spirit ... The compelling, fast-paced, and lively tale wraps up with several surprising, tear-jerking twists." --*Publishers Weekly*

"Sharply witty, deliciously sexy, and infinitely endearing, this holiday gem strikes an emotional chord that will resonate with fans long after the book has been closed. Jeffries's first hardcover release, it serves as a bridge between her recent "Hellions of Halstead Hall" quintet and a new series that is slated to begin next spring." (*Library Journal*)

"Bestseller Jeffries delivers a moving Regency with heart, soul, and holiday spirit.... The compelling, fast-paced, and lively tale wraps up with several surprising, tear-jerking twists." (*Publishers Weekly*)

"Jeffries' latest historical romance is an enchanting holiday charmer with a complex and captivating plot; characters that interact with emotional authenticity; and a rich set of conflicted, heart-tugging obstacles--all of which combine to provide a satisfying happily-ever-after set against a fun holiday backdrop. Skillful writing and storytelling, compelling sexual and emotional tension, and a cast of realistic, vulnerable characters contribute to a lovely, spirited Christmas winner." (*Kirkus*)

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. Whatever time is not spent writing in a coffee-fueled haze is spent traveling with her husband and adult autistic son or indulging in one of her passions: jigsaw puzzles, chocolate, music, and costume parties. With more than eight 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.

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1

December 1826

Thirty-one-year-old Pierce Waverly, Earl of Devonmont, sat at the desk in the study of his London town house, going through the mail as he waited for his current mistress to arrive, when one letter came to the top, addressed in a familiar hand. An equally familiar pain squeezed his chest, reminding him of that other letter years ago.

What a naive fool he'd been. Even though he *had* grown bigger and stronger, even though he'd become the kind of son Father had always claimed to want, he'd never been allowed home again. He'd spent every school holiday—Christmas, Easter, and summer—at Waverly Farm.

And after Titus Waverly and his wife had died unexpectedly in a boating accident when Pierce was thirteen, Titus's father, General Isaac Waverly, had returned from the war to take over Waverly Farm and Titus's

orphaned children.

Even though Pierce hadn't received a single letter from his parents in five years, he'd still been certain that he would finally be sent home—but no. Whatever arrangement Titus had made with Pierce's parents was apparently preserved with Pierce's great-uncle, for the general had fallen right into the role of substitute parent.

Despite all that, it had taken Pierce until he was eighteen, when neither of his parents had appeared at his matriculation from Harrow, to acknowledge the truth. Not only did his father hate him, but his mother had no use for him, either. Apparently she'd endured his presence until he was old enough to pack off to school and relations, and after that she'd decided she was done with him. She was too busy enjoying Father's fortune and influence to bother with her own son.

Pain had exploded into rage for a time, until he'd reached his majority, at twenty-one, and had traveled home to confront them both . . .

No, he couldn't bear to remember *that* fiasco. The humiliation of that particular rejection still sent pain screaming through him. Eventually he would silence that, too; then perhaps he'd find some peace at last.

That is, if Mother would let him. He stared down at the letter, and his fingers tightened into fists. But she wouldn't. She'd poisoned his childhood, and now that Father was dead and Pierce had inherited everything, she thought to make it all go away.

She'd been trying ever since the funeral, two years ago. When she'd mentioned his coming "home," he'd asked her why it had taken his father's death for her to allow it. He'd expected a litany of patently false excuses, but she'd only said that the past was the past. She wanted to start anew with him.

He snorted. Of course she did. It was the only way to get her hands on more of Father's money than what had been left to her.

Well, to hell with her. She may have decided she wanted to play the role of mother again, but he no longer wanted to play her son. Years of yearning for a mother who was never there, for whom he would have fought dragons as a boy, had frozen his heart. Since his father's death, it hadn't warmed one degree.

Except that every time he saw one of her letters—

Choking back a bitter curse, he tossed the unopened letter to his secretary, Mr. Boyd. One thing he'd learned from the last letter she'd written him, when he was a boy, was that words meant nothing. Less than nothing. And the word *love* in particular was just a word. "Put that with the others," he told Boyd.

"Yes, my lord." There was no hint of condemnation, no hint of reproach in the man's voice.

Good man, Boyd. He knew better.

Yet Pierce felt the same twinge of guilt as always.

Damn it, he had done right by his mother, for all that she had never done right by *him*. Her inheritance from Father was entirely under his control. He could have deprived her if he'd wished—another man might have—but instead he'd set her up in the estate's dower house with plenty of servants and enough pin money

to make her comfortable. Not enough to live extravagantly—he couldn't bring himself to give her *that*—but enough that she couldn't accuse him of neglect.

He'd even hired a companion for her, who by all accounts had proved perfect for the position. Not that he would know for himself, since he'd never seen the indomitable Mrs. Camilla Stuart in action, never seen her with his mother. He never saw Mother at all. He'd laid down the law from the first. She was free to roam Montcliff, his estate in Hertfordshire, as she pleased when he wasn't in residence, but when he was there to take care of estate affairs, she was to stay at the dower house and well away from *him*. So far she'd held to that agreement.

But the letters came anyway, one a week, as they had ever since Father's death. Two years of letters, piled in a box now overflowing. All unopened. Because why should he read hers, when she'd never answered a single one of his as a boy?

Besides, they were probably filled with wheedling requests for more money now that he held the purse strings. He wouldn't give in to those, damn it.

"My lord, Mrs. Swanton has arrived," his butler announced from the doorway.

The words jerked him from his oppressive thoughts. "You may send her in."

Boyd slid a document onto Pierce's desk, then left, passing Mrs. Swanton as he went out. The door closed behind him, leaving Pierce alone with his current mistress.

Blond and blue-eyed, Eugenia Swanton had the elegant features of a fine lady and the eloquent body of a fine whore. The combination had made her one of the most sought-after mistresses in London, despite her humble beginnings as a rag-mannered chit from Spitalfields.

When he'd snagged her three years ago it had been quite a coup, since she'd had dukes and princes vying for her favors. But the triumph had paled somewhat in recent months. Even she hadn't been able to calm his restlessness.

And now she was scanning him with a practiced eye, clearly taking note of his elaborate evening attire as her smile showed her appreciation. Slowly, sensually, she drew off her gloves in a maneuver that signaled she was eager to do whatever he wished. Last year, that would have had him bending her over his desk and taking her in a most lascivious manner.

Tonight, it merely left him cold.

"You summoned me, my lord?" she said in that smooth, cultured voice that had kept him intrigued with her longer than with his other mistresses. She had several appealing qualities, including her quick wit.

And yet . . .

Bracing himself for the theatrics sure to come, he rose and rounded the desk to press a kiss to her lightly rouged cheek. "Do sit down, Eugenia," he murmured, gesturing to a chair.

She froze, then arched one carefully manicured eyebrow. "No need. I can receive my congé just as easily standing."

He muttered a curse. "How did you—"

"I'm no fool, you know," she drawled. "I didn't get where I am by not noticing when a man has begun to lose interest."

Her expression held a hint of disappointment, but no sign of trouble brewing, which surprised him. He was used to temper tantrums from departing mistresses.

His respect for Eugenia rose a notch. "Very well." Picking up the document on the desk, he handed it to her.

She scanned it with a businesswoman's keen eye, her gaze widening at the last page. "You're very generous, my lord."

"You've served me well," he said with a shrug, now impatient to be done. "Why shouldn't I be generous?"

"Indeed." She slid the document into her reticule. "Thank you, then."

Pleased that she was taking her dismissal so well, he went to open the door for her. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Eugenia."

The words halted her. She stared at him with an intent gaze that made him uncomfortable. "That's the trouble with you, my lord. Our association has always been one of business. *Intimate* business, I'll grant you, but business all the same. And business doesn't keep a body warm on a cold winter's night."

"On the contrary," he said with a thin smile. "I believe I succeeded very well at keeping you warm."

"I speak of you, not myself." She glided up to him with a courtesan's practiced walk. "I like you, my lord, so let me give you some advice. You believe that our attraction has cooled because you're tired of me. But I suspect that the next occupant of your bed will be equally unable to warm you . . . unless she provides you with something more than a business arrangement."

He bristled. "Are you suggesting that I marry?"

Eugenia pulled on her gloves. "I'm suggesting that you let someone inside that empty room you call a heart. Whether you make her your wife or your mistress, a man's bed is decidedly warmer if there's a fire burning in something other than his cock."

He repressed an oath. So much for this being easy. "I never guessed you were such a romantic."

"Me? Never." She patted her reticule. "This is as romantic as I get. Which is precisely why I can offer such advice. When we met, I thought we were both the sort who live only for pleasure, with no need for emotional connections." Her voice softened. "But I was wrong about you. You're not that sort at all. You just haven't realized it yet."

Then with a smile and a swish of her skirts, she swept out the door.

He stared bitterly after her. Sadly, he *did* realize it. Leave it to a woman of the world to recognize a fraud.

Matrons might panic when he spoke to their innocent daughters, and his exploits might appear so regularly in

the press that his Waverly cousins kept clippings for their own amusement, but his seemingly aimless pursuit of pleasure had never been about pleasure. It had been about using the only weapon he had—the family reputation—to embarrass the family who'd abandoned him.

Leaving his study, he strode to the drawing room, where sat his pianoforte, his private defiance of his father. He sat down and began to play a somber Bach piece, one that often allowed him to vent the darker emotions that never saw the light of day in public, where he was a gadabout and a rebel.

Or he had been until Father's death. Since then his petty rebellions had begun to seem more and more pointless. There'd been no deathbed reconciliation, but also no attempt to keep him from his rightful inheritance. And no explanation of why he'd been abandoned. None of it made sense.

The fact that he *wanted* it to make sense annoyed him. He was done with trying to understand it. The only thing that mattered was that he'd triumphed in the end. He'd gained the estate while he was still young enough to make something of it, and clearly that was the most he could hope for.

Of course, now that he was the earl, people expected him to change his life. To marry. But how could he? Once married, a man had to endure the whims of his wife and children. He'd grown up suffering beneath the whims of his parents; he wasn't about to exchange one prison for another.

He pounded the keys. So for now, everything would stay the same. He would go to the opera this evening to seek out a new mistress, and life would go on much as before. Surely his restlessness would end in time.

Leaving the pianoforte, he was walking out of the drawing room when the sight of Boyd heading toward him with a look of grim purpose arrested him.

“An express has come for you, my lord, from Montcliff.”

He tensed. His estate manager, Miles Fowler, never sent expresses, so it must be something urgent.

To his surprise, the letter Boyd handed him hadn't come from Fowler but from Mother's companion. Since Mrs. Stuart hadn't written him in the entire six months she'd been working for him, the fact that she'd sent an express brought alarm crashing through him.

His heart pounded as he tore open the letter to read:

Dear Sir,

Forgive me for my impertinence, but I feel I should inform you that your mother is very ill. If you wish to see her before it is too late, you should come at once.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Camilla Stuart

The terse message chilled him. Based on Mrs. Stuart's recommendation letters and references, not to mention the glowing accolades heaped on her by Fowler, Pierce had formed a certain impression of the widow. She was practical and forthright, the sort of independent female who would rather eat glass than admit she couldn't handle any domestic situation.

She was decidedly *not* a woman given to dramatic pronouncements. So if she said his mother was very ill, then Mother was at death's door. And no matter what had passed between them, he couldn't ignore such a dire summons.

"Boyd, have my bags packed and sent on to the estate. I'm leaving for Montcliff at once."

"Is everything all right, my lord?" Boyd asked.

"I don't believe it is. Apparently my mother has fallen ill. I'll let you know more as soon as I assess the situation."

"What should I tell your uncle?"

Damn. The Waverlys were expecting him in a few days; he still spent most holidays with them. "Tell Uncle Isaac I'll do my best to be there for Christmas, but I can't promise anything right now."

"Very good, my lord."

As far as Pierce was concerned, the Waverlys—his great-uncle Isaac and his second cousin Virginia—were his true family. Mother was merely the woman who'd brought him into the world.

He ought to abandon her in death, the way she'd abandoned him in life. But he still owed her for nurturing him in those early years, before he was old enough to be fobbed off on relatives. He still owed her for giving birth to him. So he would do his duty by her.

But no more. She'd relinquished the right to his love long ago.

Users Review

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