



*A Husband
for Christmas*

SUSAN M.
BAGANZ

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Dedication

To Benjamin, my real-life husband for Christmas.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above,
and cometh down from the Father of lights, with
whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

(James 1:17.)

1

1810

LEIGHTON BUZZARD, ENGLAND

“To lose one’s husband is bad enough, Mother. But to lose two is beyond the pale,” With the tilt of her head, a wink, and hands on her hips, Miss Adelia Donovan infused a teasing undertone to her words.

“Oh, hush!” Lady Barnes said as her cheeks colored. “You act as though I left them somewhere and forgot where I put them. When your father died, I was devastated. You were but a small child then. Now that we are out of mourning for your dear stepfather, God rest his soul,”—she made the sign of the cross—“I intend to lose no more husbands but find one for you. A dowry and money for your come-out have remained untouched. My dearest Herbert loved you as much as any daughter born of our marriage. He would have wanted you to have a season. But, I declare. You will need to curb your humor if you wish to make a good match.”

“Papa Herbert didn’t seem to mind and even encouraged it. A season won’t be beneficial for me. My birth father had no title, and I am not the kind of lady who would interest any man of resource. I have little to recommend me. Besides, will Lord Westcott approve of

this plan of yours?" She cocked her head and raised an eyebrow.

"Did I hear my name?" Lord Oliver Westcott strode into the room. He was Lord Barnes's only heir as Lord Barnes and his wife had produced no progeny. Oliver and Addy had been lifelong friends and occasional enemies. She never begrudged him his title or inheritance and he'd been generous in allowing her mother and herself to move to the dower house, promising they'd always have a home. Hence, there was no reason for Adelia to consider searching for a husband.

"Yes, dear boy," Lady Barnes said as she raised her hand for the young man to kiss. "I've determined it is time for Adelia to have a come out and find a husband. Do you agree?"

Lord Wescott frowned as he sat on the settee adjacent to the dowager. "Addled Addy finding a husband? That's asking for a lot, isn't it? Her dowry isn't large enough that a man would overlook her quirks."

"Oh, you beast!" Adelia exclaimed. "As if you could find a wife? Who would take you when you can be so overbearing?" She folded her arms and plopped in a most unladylike way into a chair across from him.

Oliver quirked an eyebrow and the corner of his mouth twitched. "Always so easy to tease, Addy. You'll need to practice better manners if you are to go out among the *ton*."

"I have a perfectly fine life here with Mother. There is need for me to be anywhere else. Why would I

care about such fripperies as bonnets, bows, matching dancing slippers and the perfect parasol? And loathsome dress fittings. No. It's too much time and resources for too little in return. I shan't do it."

"Finding a husband who can care for you is important, my dear. There are many blessings to the marital state including but not exclusively, financial security. I won't be around forever, and Oliver has no obligation to provide for you until your dotage. I would like grandchildren as well."

Oliver nodded. "Besides, what if I take a wife and have children of my own? What will you be to them? The annoying Auntie Addy?" His wink took the sting out of his words.

"Oh, bother." Addy sulked as her mother and Oliver talked about neighborhood gossip.

She enjoyed her life here. Why should that need to change simply because she was of age and finally out of mourning for the only father she could remember? Oh, if only he hadn't passed on as well. Now a season to be endured with awful Ollie pestering her along the way. How would she ever keep her composure when he was around?

However, he had been amongst the *ton* and understood the ins and outs of polite society. But how could someone as silly as she find a man? Most of those aristocrats were too puffed up in their own consequence to deign pay attention, much less humor, the likes of her.

"Well, I believe it's settled then." Lady Barnes said. "We'll leave for my sister's townhouse in London

in three days. That way we'll have time to procure the proper wardrobe and all the fripperies as you call them. You might find it enjoyable, Adelia."

"I'll accompany you. I have quarters in town and can help make introductions and get all the proper invitations. There isn't as large a crowd at events this time of year, but it is possible you might find an appropriate beau before Christmas."

Lady Barnes's eyes grew wide as did her smile. "Oh, a Christmas wedding would be wonderful, wouldn't it dear?"

Addy shook her head. "Fine. I'll go to London. Seems I have no choice in the matter; but will you agree to allow me the right to accept or reject any marriage proposal as I see fit? I'm not convinced that finding a husband in so short of time is possible much less feasible or profitable for long-term happiness. I will not be rushed into a wedding, Mother."

Lady Barnes stood as did Oliver. "Let me walk you to the door, Oliver. I have letters to write and bags to pack."

"I'd be delighted." He extended and elbow and Lady Barnes put her arm through it. "Good day, Miss Donavan."

Without further conversation the two departed the room.

Addy sat and stewed. When she awoke this morning, she'd had no clue that her pleasant everyday life would be upset so.

A husband could be distressing. She adored her stepfather but wondered at how her mother could

cater to his whims and desires without complaint. Of course, he seemed to dote on her as well, and the marriage had been without strife. Her mother missed him terribly, and the past year-and-a-half had been a journey through that grief, even for Addy. Her joking about him was only at his insistence, not a form of disrespect.

“Addy dear, when I am gone, I want you to laugh and even make sport of my passing when you are able. I’ve lived a wonderful life with two beautiful women and have nothing to fear on the other side of death where Jesus awaits me. Promise me, Addy? Some laughter amongst any tears. Of course, that is assuming you’ll cry for me. Maybe you’ll be grateful I’m gone and not haranguing you anymore.”

“Oh, Papa, I don’t want you to go.”

“When I meet your father at the pearly gates, we’ll toast to what a lovely young woman you’ve become.”

“Oh, Papa.” Tears had streamed down her face.

“And then I’ll regale him with all your misadventures over the years.” His hazel eyes had twinkled in delight

“Fine, be that way. Remember I am aware of yours as well since you were often party to mine.” She raised her eyebrows at him. “I love you, Papa.”

“And I you, sweet Adelia. Take care of your mother. And don’t belabor Oliver too much with your shenanigans. Neither of you are children any longer.”

“You’d spoil my fun?”

“Enjoy life. Laugh. But have a care, Adelia. Not everyone will appreciate your sense of humor.”

"I'll try. You ask an awful lot of me."

"Only because I am confident that you are capable of great things." Lord Barnes coughed.

Adelia hugged the man. Her mother entered the room. "Come. Let your father rest now. You can visit him on the morrow." Lady Barnes shooed her out of the room closing the door behind Addy.

Adelia's mother had been in denial that her husband was dying, but that evening, he'd passed away, and there were no more morrows to be had with him. For a time both women had struggled to find any laughter, but Addy strove to fulfill her promise. She'd go to town only because it would have made him happy for her to do so.

~*~

Lord Oliver Wescott walked back to the manor home he'd inherited as part of the baronetcy. As he was also the son of Viscount Westcott, that title remained first for him. His mother had wed the viscount and had been close to Ollie's uncle Harold. Ollie hadn't even counted on inheriting anything when Lord Barnes passed away. He'd matured into his responsibilities, grateful his father was around to advise when needed. Lady Barnes had been like a second mother to him in some ways, and Adelia had grown from a wretched, annoying cousin to a lovely young woman. Still bothersome but worth the effort to tease.

How would someone with spirit endure a season

in London? He didn't enjoy them himself, as he wasn't on the hunt for a wife yet. None of the debutantes tickled his fancy. Most wanted a higher title and larger purse than he possessed.

Or they thought he had.

He entered the house and called to his manservant. "Gerald. Prepare for a trip to London three days hence."

"Yes, m'lord," the efficient man answered and left to do whatever it was he needed to do to prepare.

Oliver strode into his office with that task delegated and sat at his desk to write letters to a few people to inform him of his imminent arrival in town.

When the letters were finished, he sat back to consider how a season with Adelia would fare. It could be quite entertaining. He sobered at the thought. He didn't want her to become a laughingstock due to her less refined ways. Sure, she understood proper behavior, but she was too easily amused, and that could work against her in finding a husband.

But what if she did find one? Who would be worthy of her? Would they treat her well? There were many scoundrels on the hunt for a wife, and some found it great sport to seduce innocent ingénues. He'd be keeping his eye out. It was after all his job to keep her safe. *God, why would You give me such a difficult task?*

He had his work cut out for him. Addy would not make any of this easy.

2

LONDON

Adelia couldn't sleep. It had been three nights since their arrival, and the stench from the Thames was nauseating. The noise at all hours on the streets with horses' *clip-clopping* had made rest almost impossible. At least tonight the wind was in another direction, so she leaned against the windowsill to gaze at the stars.

These were the same stars that mesmerized her at home. Why had she come here? Oliver had been serious yet solicitous. To where had her *playful* friend disappeared? Was London bereft of any fun? Day after day, they'd been at the shops. Dress fittings were tiresome, but it seemed her mother had good taste, and Addy couldn't complain about the choices of colors and fabrics. She even anticipated wearing her new dancing slippers. She hadn't danced since before her papa's illness. Would she even remember all the steps? She'd asked that question to Oliver on the way south to London.

"Ollie, you'll help me practice my dance steps, won't you?"

"You'll be fine. You've always been light on your feet. Just remember: the man leads."

“But—”

“No. Don’t worry yourself into a dither. You’ll do fine on the dance floor as long as you don’t say anything silly.”

“Me? Why would you...” She’d lapsed into silence.

Did Ollie doubt her ability to act appropriately in society?

Were his concerns valid? Her mother had cautioned her as well.

There wasn’t much to find to laugh about at the moment. The real test would come in a few days when they mingled at a picnic. She had a new dress for that event as well as a new bonnet.

Adelia turned from the window towards this room decorated with light green, pale apricot, and vanilla accents. The bed was so tall that she needed a step to get into it. Her favorite chair was solid and larger than most of the more delicate furniture downstairs. The pretty striped pattern of green and vanilla soothed her spirits. She settled into it with her diary.

What am I doing here? God, is it possible that I could find someone who would love me and enrich my life with his friendship? That’s not the way most marriages are made. Mother was hesitant to give me veto power over any proposal. And Ollie? He said he’d keep an eye out for me. Can I stay serious and poised in this new place? I prefer home and our friends and neighbors...and the quiet. Oh, it’s noisy here. I pray I can sleep. Afternoon naps have been a challenge as well but Mother states I need to get used to them as parties go late. I’m afraid I’ll be yawning during a

dance with a handsome man and make a fool of myself. Help me!

Setting her book aside, she rose, closed the window, and crawled into bed.

~*~

The day of the picnic arrived. Ollie rode in his carriage to collect Lady Barnes and Adelia. This first event should be easy enough for the young woman to survive. If she did and could maintain her poise, she might gain a voucher to Almack's.

Soon the carriage arrived at the door to Lady Richfield's home. Ollie alighted and strode to the door, which opened before he could knock.

"Lord Westcott, the ladies await you in the blue room." The butler closed the door behind him, collected Ollie's hat and now escorted him to a front room of the house where the ladies indeed waited, ready to leave.

"Good afternoon, Lord Westcott," Adelia said. He barely recognized her with her hair put up in a becoming way and a gown that gave the appearance of sophistication that belied her inexperience with Society. There was a purity and innocence shining from her brown eyes. He was stunned. She curtsied before him. "We are ready to depart."

Lady Barnes rose and collected her hat. Her new gown became her as well. A year of mourning colors must have inspired her to try other hues, and the blue gave her fresh radiance.

"You are both enchanting. I'll be the envy of every man there."

"Flattery, Oliver?" Addy asked with an eyebrow raised.

"Truth, Miss Donovan. I speak nothing but the truth."

"Thank you." Adelia grabbed her bonnet and fastened it to her head as Lady Barnes did likewise.

Once in the carriage Oliver, seated facing backward to allow the women the preferred seats, could barely take his eyes off Addy. If she continued to look this beautiful, she'd likely have the husband by Christmas that Lady Barnes wished for.

Arriving at the house for the picnic, they were welcomed into spacious acreage where various entertainments were to be had. A string quartet played music. Some were visiting in chairs and there were a few who were at the archery range. Others wandered the paths down by a pond.

Before Ollie could ask, a friend rushed to him.

"Lord Wescott, I beg you introduce me to this angel beside you."

"Gladly. Lord Rush, this is my neighbor, Miss Adelia Donovan, daughter of the Dowager baroness, Lady Barnes."

Lord Rush bowed before Adelia, and the young woman's cheeks grew rosy. Was it a man's attention or the sun?

"What a pleasure to meet you, Lord Rush," Adelia said.

"Would you do me the honor of walking with

me?"

Addy gave a slight nod. "Of course. Excuse me Lord Westcott, Mother." She put her arm through Rush's elbow, and they proceeded down a path.

"Well, that didn't take long, did it?" Marcella Barnes said. "He seems like a nice young man."

He's a puppy. "Yes, he comes from a good family, but he is third in line and must seek a profession," Oliver said.

"Oh? And what is wrong with that?"

"Nothing. I thought you wanted a title and wealth for your daughter."

"I never said that. I want a man worthy of her who will cherish her. Oh, I see my old friend Lady Farnsworth over there. Will you excuse me?" Lady Barnes bustled off, and Ollie stood alone.

But not for long. Lady Seraphina Woods sauntered over with a gleam in her eye that raised suspicion in his breast.

"Lord Westcott. I didn't realize you'd returned to town. Well met."

"Lady Seraphina. Well met, indeed. How do you fare?"

"Very well now that you've arrived to relieve my tedium. These events often bore me."

"A walk then?" he offered his arm.

"I'd be delighted." They took off in the direction Addy had gone with her suitor.

~*~

Adelia had to admit that Lord Rush was handsome and charming. He spoke about his horses and his lands and mentioned his family.

"I'm the third son so I've yet to figure out what I want to do with my life. If anything, I have enough of a stipend to keep me comfortable for some time if I'm wise."

"And what is the financial benefit of all those horses?"

"I shouldn't mention this in polite company, but breeding is highly profitable."

"So you possess your own property and are able to afford stable hands, the feeding, and the horses?"

"Not exactly. I stable them at my parents' home. We have a lovely spot in Derbyshire."

"So, you live with your parents?"

"Of course, don't you?"

Adelia forbore answering, and they walked in silence a little farther and stopped by a stream. She spied Oliver with a lovely young woman who was handling the bulk of the conversation. Interesting.

Lord Rush had spoken, and she'd tuned out.

"Would you repeat that? I fear I was woolgathering," Addy said.

"I was wondering if I could claim a dance at Almack's this week."

"I've not obtained vouchers yet. Perhaps we should head back to the others."

Lord Rush extended his arm again and she latched on with her own. He continued to bore her with his breeding program for racehorses.

They passed Oliver and his companion and soon were at the refreshments. Adelia moved towards a chair in the shade. "Perhaps a rest would be good. It is still fairly warm out."

"But of course. May I fetch you some lemonade?"

"That would be lovely." Adelia sat stiff and proper as she'd been taught. She gazed longingly at the archery course. She really shouldn't want to do that.

Lord Rush returned. "Here you are." He pulled up a chair next to hers. "What are you gazing at?"

"The archery. There are some skilled guests here." She sipped the small glass, and the liquid was quickly gone. It wasn't ladylike to gulp her drink. Perhaps Lord Rush hadn't noticed.

"Would you like to go over there? I'm fairly good with a bow and arrow, if I might say so myself."

"I would love to see it." They set their cups on the nearby table.

Together they wandered to the archery course.

3

Once they arrived at the course, Adelia was quietly instructed on how to hold the bow and set the arrow.

Lord Rush held his pose for a few moments. "This is the challenge now. It takes strength and a keen eye to release this to hit the target." He released the bow and the arrow flew through the air and fell just short of the target.

"I am out of practice, of course." He pulled out another bow, readied it, and released it. Sweat dampened his brow and the scowl on his face as he focused as most unbecoming. He released the arrow.

Adelia swallowed the urge to laugh as the arrow hit the bottom part of the target and bounced off, falling to the ground, inert.

"Perhaps I could give it a try," she said. She really should not do this.

Oliver had come up close and had a young lady on his arms. "Miss Donovan, I don't think it would be wise—"

She raised her eyebrows as she glanced his direction. "Really? And why not?"

Lord Rush stepped in. "She'll be fine. I'm here to help her."

Lord Oliver Wescott gave her a nod. "Then by all means, Miss Donovan, please..."

She stretched the bow string and eyed the target. She too was out of practice. She released the bow and watched as her arrow soared to the target and landed down and left of center. A slow smile spread across her face as she glanced at Lord Rush. There was no affirmation coming from him. If she weren't mistaken, his face had grown a shade redder. Perhaps too much sun?

"Lucky break. I bet you can't do it again," he said, handing her another arrow.

"Perhaps you're right. I am out of practice," she whispered half-hoping he heard her. She raised the bow and arrow and stretched the string back and eyed a farther target slightly to the left. "I'm going to try for the second target this time."

Lord Rush gave a huff. "Fine, lotta good it will do you."

She released the arrow and it sailed past the first target to the second, hitting the center. She lowered her bow but raised her eyebrows as she turned towards Lord Rush. "Would you like to try again?"

He took the bow from her and set it on the table which was designated for such things. "No. You are obviously skilled at archery. Was that display to make sport of me?" Indignation dripped from his words.

"No. Was it unladylike for me to shoot my best, or is that too much for a man of your caliber to handle?" she riposted.

"You are quite outspoken. I should return you to

your mother." He held out his arm and she put hers around his elbow as he escorted her back to refreshments without another word. He left her near her mother, and with a short bow, took his leave, not only of their company but also of the picnic altogether.

"Did you have an enjoyable time, my dear?" Lady Barnes asked.

"Quite pleasant, but I believe I may have wounded the tender sensibilities of Lord Rush by outshooting him in archery."

Lady Barnes shook her head. "Oh, my dear. It will not benefit you to have him spreading tales amongst the eligible bachelors."

"Oh, bother. Much ado about nothing, I say. It shouldn't matter if a woman can shoot an arrow better than a man, should it? It never bothered Oli—Lord Wescott."

"You would tease him for it, and he retaliated by besting you on horseback. Dearest, you don't need to outshine a suitor. You want him to believe he can protect and provide for you."

"I have no qualms about a man doing that. I didn't brag about how good I was as he did. I simply gave it a try. Beginner's luck, ha." She shook her head and took a seat nearby.

Oliver had witnessed the event. She wondered what his perspective might be.

~*~

Lord Wescott assisted his companion with her