



The Captain's Christmas Bride (Harlequin Historical)

By Annie Burrows

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Wrong man...

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...Right husband?

Captain Dunbar cannot believe he's fallen for this chit's game! Now he must marry society miss Lady Julia with nothing to connect them other than incredible passion. But he's about to discover that the best Christmas presents come in surprising, and delightful, packages!

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Editorial Review

Review

With unconventional twists on traditional themes, Burrows' latest delights by bringing the spirit of the holiday to readers. She's taken the forced marriage premise and added a masquerade, charming characters, a hero to die for and enough heated love scenes to light up a Christmas tree. The poignancy and humor will make any reader a Burrows fan. - See more at: rtbookreviews.com/book-review/captains-christmas-bride#sthash.X9fXt31x.dpuf

Romantic Times

About the Author

Annie Burrows' love of stories meant that when she was old enough to go to university, she chose English literature. She wasn't sure what she wanted to do beyond that, but one day, she began to wonder if all those daydreams that kept her mind occupied whilst carrying out mundane chores, would provide similar pleasure to other women. She was right... and Annie hasn't looked back since.

Readers can sign up to Annie's newsletter at www.annie-burrows.co.uk

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Christmas Day, 1815

'How long do you think it will take? To make sure I am thoroughly compromised?'

Lady Julia Whitney observed Marianne's face turn a little pink as a frown flitted across her brow. But then Marianne disapproved of the whole venture and was uncomfortable being dragged into it.

'You only need to leave us alone long enough to be sure he is kissing me,' Lady Julia pointed out. 'And then you can burst into the orangery and find us.'

'Yes, but how will I know he *is* kissing you?' Marianne yanked hard at the laces in her valiant, prolonged struggle to do up Lady Julia's masquerade gown. 'The mistletoe didn't work. And we hung kissing boughs *everywhere*'

Lady Julia winced. Not only had they hung mistletoe everywhere, but almost everyone else was making good use of it.

'I'm sorry,' said Marianne. 'Did I pinch you? This dress is rather tight, isn't it?'

'I shall hold my breath until you get it done up,' said Lady Julia, unwilling to admit that it was chagrin that made her wince, at the reminder that after all the hours spent gathering mistletoe, fashioning it into dozens of kissing boughs, and getting footmen to hang them all over the house, she hadn't managed to coax David to stand still underneath a single one of them.

'Thank you,' said Marianne. 'I didn't realise how difficult this would be. I mean, you do *look* about the same size as the Neapolitan Nightingale. I didn't think we'd need to make any alterations when she agreed to lend you her gown for the evening. But actually, you are rather more...um...robust.'

She gave another hard tug. 'There. All done,' she said.

'Oh, my goodness,' said Lady Julia, studying her reflection in the mirror with awe, as well as a touch of dizziness from having held her breath for so long. 'But it was worth it.'

'Lawks,' said Marianne, her eyes widening as she peeped over Lady Julia's shoulder.

Lawks indeed. The peacock-blue silk gown was a lot more daring than even she'd suspected it might be. On the Neapolitan Nightingale—the opera singer from whom she'd borrowed it—it hadn't looked any more daring than any of her other gowns. But with Lady Julia's bosom hitched up like that, and overflowing the straining bodice, it was teetering on the verge of scandalous.

'Lawks,' she echoed faintly, staring with astonishment at the impressive cleavage which had never before had a public airing.

'Well, that puts paid to any worries that people might recognise you,' said Marianne tartly. 'Once you put the mask on, not one single man there will be able to raise his eyes from the front of your gown.'

'And don't forget the wig,' came a muffled voice from behind the screen where the Neapolitan Nightingale herself was changing into the costume supposedly made for Lady Julia.

Marianne and Lady Julia exchanged a guilty look. Just how much might she have heard? They'd been whispering to start with, but the sight of that cleavage had shocked them both into indiscretion.

'Goodness,' said the Neapolitan Nightingale when she came out from behind the screen—in a voice that betrayed her far-from-Italian origins—and saw the way the two young ladies were gaping at Lady Julia's extremely *risqué décolletage*.

'You look far more delicious in that than I ever did,' she said, with a wry twist to her lips. 'You can keep it if you like, after the party is over.'

'Oh, no, really, I couldn't...'

'Well, I shan't want it back. It's been my favourite this season, but it's about time I got a new look.'

Julia took another look at herself in the mirror. The idea had been to make herself look irresistible and completely unlike her rather demure self. Well, she'd certainly done that!

She stroked the shimmering blue-green silk lovingly. She couldn't imagine ever having the nerve to wear such a revealing gown again. But she would rather like to keep it as a memento. Of this party, and the woman who'd lent it to her, and, she hoped, the successful conclusion to her campaign to make David propose.

'Then, thank you. Thank you very much.'

'Now, the best way to trick everyone,' said the Nightingale briskly, 'is to let me do all the work. I've got that rather mannish stride of yours down pat. And some of your other little mannerisms. And your stock phrases.'

'Stock phrases? I don't use stock phrases,' Lady Julia objected.

'Everyone uses stock phrases. Marianne is always saying, "*Oh, dear me, no. Really, I couldn't,*"' said the Nightingale in a voice uncannily like Marianne's. 'And you are always saying, "*Stuff!*", and then sniffing, and tossing your head.'

'I don't toss my head.'

'You do,' said Marianne, trying not to giggle. 'Really, Nellie has you down to a T.'

Lady Julia was on the verge of saying *stuff* before recollecting that she'd objected to having it pointed out that she was always doing so. Her neck muscles clamped up as she resisted the urge to toss her head, or sniff, or do anything else to express her irritation at learning she was so predictable. It was a funny business seeing someone as talented as the Nightingale learn to impersonate you. She'd had Marianne in stitches over the past couple of afternoons, aping attitudes Lady Julia had no idea she affected. Like the way she shrugged just one shoulder, apparently, and made a little moue with her lips when she was struggling to be polite to some crashing bore.

'Now, Marianne,' said the Nightingale briskly. 'Your part is to stick close by me all night, the way you usually do with Lady Julia. And you mustn't forget to call me Cuz now and then, just to reinforce the idea that it is Lady Julia in this modest white gown.'

'I know,' said Marianne in a resigned tone of voice. They'd been over all this dozens of times. And spent several hours, on the pretext of working on their costumes for tonight's masquerade, rehearsing.

'Now for the wigs!'

Nellie the Neapolitan Nightingale lifted a glossy blue-black wig from its stand, and placed it on Lady Julia's head.

'I wish my hair was really this colour,' said Julia, fingering one of the rather coarse-feeling ringlets. Her own was that depressingly dull shade of brown that, were she not the daughter of an earl, people would decry as mousey.

'Nobody really has hair that colour,' said the Nightingale prosaically as she tied Lady Julia's mask over her face. 'Not unless they get it out of a bottle. There.'

Marianne and the Nightingale stood staring at her, while she stared at her own reflection in the mirror. The mask was made of the same silk as the dress, with just the hint of a beak to disguise the shape of her nose, and was topped off with a plume of peacock feathers that made her look several inches taller.

Actually, she was several inches taller anyway, thanks to the heels of the shoes Nellie had lent her.

'Now for the finishing touch,' said Nellie, reaching for a pot of blacking.

With a little brush, she dabbed at the upswell of Julia's left breast, recreating the distinctive diamond-shaped mole that nestled provocatively upon the Nightingale's own bosom.

'There, all done,' said Nellie. 'If anyone can tell that we've swapped places under these costumes, I'll eat my hat. But look,' she said, turning to Julia with a frown.

'If you find any of the men behave a bit too free, thinking you are just me, then we'll stop the charade at once. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if you got into trouble.'

Julia and Marianne looked anywhere but at each other. The whole purpose of swapping identities was so she *could* get into trouble. Naturally, they hadn't let Nellie into the whole of the plan, else she'd never have agreed to go along with it, or been so helpful coaching them. As far as she knew, they'd just thought it would be a lark to try to get everyone thinking that Nellie, the opera singer who'd been hired to entertain her guests, was Lady Julia Whitney, daughter of their host, the Earl of Mountnessing, and vice versa. They'd reminded her of the tradition of having a Lord of Misrule at Christmas, who upset the social order by taking a crown and ordering his betters about, and how everyone thought it a huge joke.

They'd neglected to tell her that the Earl of Mountnessing had never unbent enough to permit a Lord of Misrule to form *any* part of the Christmas festivities.

'I shall be fine,' she said, to Marianne and Nellie, who were both looking at her with a touch of concern. 'You go off now, together, and I shall come down to the ballroom in a moment or two.'

'By the backstairs,' Nellie reminded her, before tying on her own white-satin mask, which sported a set of cat's whiskers, and pulling up her velvet hood, which was topped with a pair of pointy ears.

Marianne was the only one of them not in costume. She'd agreed to don a plain black-silk mask, but that was as far as she was prepared to go. Julia hadn't argued with her for long before realising that actually, her stubborn refusal to have an expensive costume made up would help her achieve her goal. Everyone would recognise Marianne instantly. And would assume that the woman she shadowed, who was dressed, very primly, as a white cat, must be Lady Julia.

Once they'd gone, Julia was able to add the last, final touch to her disguise.

From her reticule, she withdrew the bottle of perfume she'd taken from Nellie's dressing table earlier. Normally, ladies dabbed scent behind their ears and on their wrists. But she couldn't get at her ears through the mass of false hair and peacock feathers. Neither was she going to risk pulling off her elbow-length evening gloves. She'd never get them buttoned up again without help from a maid.

Finally, in desperation, she tipped the bottle between her breasts, hoping she didn't spill too much on her gloves in the process. The cloud of scent which billowed out made her eyes water for a second or two. But at least it would mark her out as the Nightingale. Nellie had this perfume specially made, so rumour went, by one of the most exclusive *parfumeurs* in Paris. There was a lot of musk in it. Not at all the sort of light, floral scent a young girl like Julia would normally use, if she were to use scent, which she didn't. Plain soap and water was enough for her.

Lifting her chin, she opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. As she made her way to the back stairs, she concentrated on the languid way Nellie had taught her to walk, swaying her hips in what felt like an exaggerated manner, but when viewed in a mirror simply looked sensuous. They'd only practised for a couple of afternoons, but the heels, as Nellie had promised, did help her to avoid striding out the way she usually did. Though she wasn't *mannish*. She walked with a purposeful *manner*, that was all. She'd taken on a lot of responsibilities since her mother had died, and she'd never get the half of her duties done if she dawdled about.

She clutched at the handrail all the way down the stairs. The last thing she wished to do was trip and tumble

headlong into the hall below.

'Nellie, my love,' cried a man's voice, as she descended from the last step. 'You look sublime!'

It was a slender young man, dressed as an Elizabethan courtier. She was just basking in a sense of achievement at having fooled him, when he shocked her by walking slap up to her and kissing her cheek, just where the mask ended and her skin began.

She'd sniffed and turned her head away before she realised the gesture might give her away.

'Beg pardon,' said the courtier, raising his hands in apparent surrender. 'Didn't think. Must have taken you hours to get into costume. Don't want it spoiled before you go into the ball.'

Thank heaven this young man didn't know her very well. She slid him a sideways glance, wondering exactly who he was. At this time of year the house always swarmed with all sorts of extra staff, from Nellie the famous singer, to the humble artist brought in to chalk fabulous yet ephemeral decorations on the ballroom floor. He couldn't be one of the extra servants, even though she'd met him in the service corridor, or he wouldn't be all dressed up and ready to attend the masquerade. From the familiar way he'd spoken to her, it was more likely he was one of the troupe of players who worked at the same theatre as Nellie. Wasn't he the one who played romantic leads? Eduardo something or other—that was it. Though the name was patently false. This man was no more Italian than Nellie, for all that people called her the Neapolitan Nightingale.

Still, he would lend credence to her disguise if he escorted her into the ballroom. So she took his arm and drifted down the corridor beside him, thankful that she'd bitten her tongue when he'd accosted her. The moment she opened her mouth, her disguise would fall apart. No matter how hard she'd tried, she simply couldn't imitate the mellifluous tone of Nellie's voice, let alone capture the way she peppered her speech with vulgarisms.

But at least if Eduardo had been fooled by the way she'd moved, the fake mole on her bosom, and the cloud of perfume hanging round her, then it looked as though her plan stood some chance of succeeding.

'Uh-oh,' murmured Eduardo into her ear, a few moments later. 'Here come your admirers.'

She froze as the gentlemen guests of the house party all turned to peruse her through their eyeglasses, detached themselves from the respectable females they were supposed to be escorting and headed her way. Her stomach lurched. Was this what Nellie felt like every time she went onstage?

'Don't worry, I shan't cramp your style,' said Eduardo, letting go of her arm. She was just about to beg him not to desert her, when he slapped her bottom with an earthy chuckle.

Making her wish him at Jericho.

Five minutes later, she realised he was no worse than any of the other men. They all seemed to think her *derrière* existed for the sole purpose of being patted, or pinched, or squeezed. It wasn't long before she was sure it must be a mass of bruises. How on earth did Nellie put up with this kind of treatment? She was sorely tempted to sidle into an alcove and keep her back to the wall, only that might mean losing sight of David.

She'd hoped he would have been amongst the crowd clustering round Nellie. But, bother him if he wasn't being particularly attentive to her tonight—at least, the woman he thought was her, since she was dressed as

a white cat, and attended by a girl who was very obviously Marianne.

Oh, but he did look splendid in the full-skirted coat, long dark wig, and tricorne hat of the seventeenth century. The telescope he held in his hand told the world that he was dressed as Sir Isaac Newton. Well, of course, David being a man of science himself, he was bound to choose such a costume, rather than something more frivolous, like a pirate, or a Roman emperor, or an Elizabethan courtier.

Her own Uncle Maurice was dressed tonight as Henry VIII, a figure he managed to emulate extremely well, since he was rather corpulent and florid of complexion. She smiled at him in relief when he offered her a glass of champagne, feeling sure her dear old Uncle Maurice wouldn't pinch her, or squeeze her bottom. But her relief was short-lived. First, he tried to manoeuvre her under one of the kissing boughs. Then he asked if she would like to come to his room that night. Of course Uncle Maurice was rather foxed. And he didn't have very good eyesight. Nevertheless, it was with genuine indignation, larded with a good deal of revulsion, that she rapped him over the wrist with her fan.

Users Review

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