

A Regency Romance

MARIAN DEVON

MISTLETOE
AND FOLLY



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A Fawcett Crest Book

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Chapter One

"THE MATTER IS not open to discussion, Jemima." Mrs. Forbes's scissors snapped a thread for emphasis. Her usually amiable, still pretty countenance grew stern. "You will spend Christmas at Lawford Court."

"But I haven't been invited," her daughter protested as she laid aside the nightgown she'd just mended and pulled a ripped petticoat from the workbasket. It was a last-ditch argument, and a futile one at that, but it was not in her nature to accept a situation meekly that she found intolerable in the extreme.

"Perhaps not in the particular," her mother conceded, respecting her daughter's face-saving pursuit of a lost cause. "Your aunt did mention Clarissa specifically. But she also declared she felt a duty toward her widowed sister's family. And high time, too, I must say." The scissors clicked again, viciously this time, and Jemima gave her mother a startled look.

It was uncharacteristic for this almost saintly lady to be out of charity with anyone. She had borne up well when five births had failed to produce a male heir. Then, when her husband had died and the entailed estate had gone to a distant cousin, she had

uncomplainingly removed her young brood to a small cottage. Some sacrifices she had not been prepared to make, however. The walls of the withdrawing room, where she and her second eldest were now working, fairly bulged with an excess of furniture she'd refused to leave behind at their former manor house.

Aware of her daughter's shocked reaction, Mrs. Forbes forced an apologetic smile. "I should not have spoken sharply. My sister, I'm sure, has not intended neglect. Like most of us, she has simply been taken up with her own affairs."

"With the affairs of that loose-fish, Marcus, more likely."

"That's no way to speak of your cousin, Jemima. The point I was attempting to make is that even though my sister mentioned Clarissa specifically in her invitation, she of course had no way of knowing that your sister is indisposed."

"Indisposed!" Jemima chuckled. "That's certainly a delicate way of stating the case."

Her mother looked pained. "Really, it's quite beyond me why you seem to find your sister's malady humorous. I should think you might instead be sympathetic."

"Well, you must admit it is a bit ridiculous to come down with a case of measles at age twenty. Most folk are still in the nursery when they have them. And how Clarissa managed to escape when the rest of us had measles and then succumbed with little Edith is past all understanding.

"But I am sympathetic, Mama. Truly. I've read to her until I'm hoarse. Every word, at least twice, of that prosy periodical she likes so much. Really, that editor hadn't the slightest notion of the torture he

was causing all her kith and kin when he chose to publish Clarissa's poem in his rag."

"I must own I wasn't best pleased by it," her mother sighed. "It somehow seems—unladylike—to write for money."

"Well, when it comes to that, the payment was far too small to rate as commerce. And since Clarissa's name didn't appear, no harm was done."

That sanguine observation was received in silence, neither lady being quite sure of the level of harm that might have been incurred.

"Well, I will admit," Mrs. Forbes picked up the reins of their former topic, "that I wish it were Clarissa who was going to the Court for Christmas. She's far too inclined to dream her life away and needs to go more into society."

"Needs to meet eligible young men, you mean."

"Yes, I do mean that," her mother replied evenly. "With five daughters to settle and less than a competency to go on with, I'm in no position to let any opportunity pass that could work to my daughters' advantage. And that is why I'm determined to make the most of my sister's invitation. If not with Clarissa, then with you."

"But you know that Aunt Lawford and I do not deal well together. And as for that toad Marcus—"

"Jemima, that will do! You were only thirteen when we last visited Lawford Court. I can only hope that in these six years you've overcome your youthful tendency for hoydenism."

"But the point is, Mama, our aunt was quite taken with Clarissa at the time, and it's no good thinking she'll be pleased by my substitution."

"She'll have no cause to be displeased if you curb your tongue and mind your manners. Which is cer-

tainly what I expect of you," Mrs. Forbes said sternly.

"Yes, but what of the young man she's asked for Clarissa? It hardly stands to reason that he and I would suit. Think of the poor gentleman's disappointment."

"Now you're being absurd, Jemima. You are every bit as attractive as your older sister. Who, I don't mind saying is very pretty indeed. And, thank goodness, dark hair and eyes are quite the fashion now, or so I'm told. No gentleman is going to be disappointed in your . . . appearance."

"Well if he's been led to expect sweet, soft-spoken Clarissa, he will be. And though I promise to try to behave . . . well, you know what they say about leopards and spots, which doesn't make much sense because leopards don't have any, but you know what I mean. I can't become another creature entirely."

"I realize that, dear." And though Mrs. Forbes did not actually utter the words "more's the pity," they did rather seem to hover in the air. "But as for the young man who has been invited for poor Clarissa, I can't imagine that your aunt has put any real thought into making a suitable matchup. But even supposing that she has done so and the two of you do not deal well together, that shouldn't really matter. For according to Ada, Sir Walter is quite determined to celebrate Christmas in the old manner and fill his house from top to bottom with relatives and friends. So you are almost certain to find some congenial young folk among the company."

"Cousin Marcus's friends? You must be funning. Still, perhaps you're right. There may be other poor relations like myself there and we can all huddle together below the salt."

“Jemima, that will do!” Mrs. Forbes’s frown was terrible, and her daughter realized that she’d gone too far. “I shall have you know that in all save fortune your father’s family is the superior of the Lawfords, and I shall expect you to conduct yourself accordingly. But we’re wasting time in this pointless discussion when we need to decide upon your wardrobe. I will not have you appearing shabby. Thank goodness you and Clarissa are of a size. You will, of course, take her new sprigged muslin. And her traveling cloak.”

While Mrs. Forbes strived to creatively combine her daughters’s wardrobes, Jemima’s mind strayed to other matters.

“Will my aunt be sending a carriage for me?” she inquired.

“No,” her mother reluctantly admitted. “You’re to go by public coach.”

I might have known, the old pinch-penny! But Jemima was learning. She kept the observation to herself.

Chapter Two

MISS JEMIMA FORBES was feeling not at all the thing. In point of fact, she was decidedly queasy. Riding backward had never agreed with her, and the erratic progress of the coach, coupled with its miserable springs, was threatening to undo her. She wondered what would happen if she reached across the farmer's wife beside her and lowered the window. Fresh air would be a welcome thing to dilute the mixture of odors emanating from a basket on that matron's lap. There was mincemeat, most likely; an overripe cheese for certain. But worst of all, the woman had proudly mentioned a dressed goose that had surely grown suspect.

Jemima looked at the window longingly. The rain that had pelted the coach at the beginning of their journey had abated, but the drops it had left behind were now frozen on the glass. She abandoned the notion of lowering it. She would undoubtedly be murdered by the other passengers crammed together in the Dover Mail.

The coach hit a pothole and sent them bouncing amid gasps and shrieks and one shocking oath. "That confounded coachman ain't missed a single rut in the road since Canterbury," the source of the

blasphemy, a young tar on the way to rejoin his ship, declared.

"Are you all right, Bess?" Jemima looked at her maid anxiously. The chubby young woman had taken on a decidedly greenish cast. She merely groaned in reply. Jemima did hope Bess was suffering nothing more than motion sickness, but she feared the worst.

She had protested against bringing the servant along. "You need Bess here, Mama. Besides, I can do my own hair better than she does." She had gone on to point out that since the coach passed directly by the entrance to her uncle's estate, and since the coachman would be tipped to set her down there, there was really no need for chaperonage. But her mother had been adamant. No daughter of hers would travel alone. It was bad enough to be reduced to public transportation without being shockingly improper as well. Jemima had ceased to argue, aware at last of the overriding reason: her Mama did not wish to lose caste before her wealthy sister.

"It shouldn't be much farther now." Jemima reached across to pat her maid's plump knee. She had persuaded the farmer's wife to exchange seats with Bess a few miles back. The swap had the double benefit of allowing Bess a forward motion and getting the noxious basket out from underneath her nose. The country woman had opened her mouth to object, but one look at Bess's face had changed her mind. All that was needed on this miserable morning was for someone to cast up his or her accounts.

Jemima gazed past the farmer's wife at the road that they'd just traveled and tried to think bright thoughts. This was no easy task; resentment was

building. What would it have cost her nabob aunt to have sent a carriage to Chatham to fetch them? Or for that matter, a pony cart. Anything that didn't require being jammed together like pickles in a jar with a scruffy group of holiday travelers. She didn't ask for much. Certainly not for a bang-up rig like the one rapidly overtaking them.

Too rapidly by half!

"Oh my heavens!" Jemima shrieked as a blur of gray horse flesh, a streak of bright red harness, a glimpse of a multicolored gray greatcoat, and a flash of rich red leather and gleaming ebony wood whizzed by them, a mere hairsbreadth from the basket woman's window. Their coach lurched sickeningly, the whinnying of its four horses rivaling the cries of the interior and exterior passengers as it headed for the ditch.

It seemed miraculous that after they had been untangled and extracted no one inside the coach was hurt. It was even more miraculous that the passengers on top, comprised entirely of schoolboys on their way home for Christmas holiday, had been agile and alert enough to jump clear as the coach rolled over and, save for a sprained ankle here and there, were also uninjured.

The coach had not fared as well. An axle had been broken. The sailor volunteered to ride to the next posting house for help and the coachman was unharnessing one of the horses for him when Jemima approached. He was castigating the "damned toffs who think they own the roads" with a string of oaths when she cut through the flow with some assiduous throat clearing.

"Beg pardon, I'm sure, miss." The driver turned toward her, and she tried not to flinch before the

redirected powerful fumes of brandy. The cutting wind, still damp with recent rain, was not entirely to blame for his florid cheeks and nose, she concluded. His broad face with its excessive chins was meant to exude the same cheerfulness as the huge holly buttonhole he wore. But now it bestowed a martyred look upon her as if to say, What next?

He answered her inquiries politely, however, assuring her that the entrance to Lawford Court was indeed within walking distance, and, yes, certainly when the repairs had been completed he'd set both her maid and her baggage down there.

Bess insisted that she was going, too, that it would be as good as her life if Mrs. Forbes were to find she'd let her young mistress set out alone. But when she tried to rise from the box Jemima had placed for her on the roadside, she all but fainted.

"Don't be ridiculous," her mistress scolded. "Why I'd have to end up carrying you. Nothing's going to happen to me. Stop holding my cloak, for goodness sake, and I'll have someone back here to fetch you in no time."

That proved to be an optimistic prediction. As Jemima trudged down the highway, Clarissa's cloak was turned into a sail by the strong wind. She clutched it about her as best she could while her cold, wet feet cried out for pattens. She could only conclude that what the coachman considered an "easy walk" when perched behind four mettlesome horses was a far cry from the step-by-step reality.

She was toying with the notion of resting on a large rock that she spied just up ahead when the sound of wheels and horse hooves diverted her. She raised her head, lowered against the wind, to see a cart approaching. Sighing, she abandoned the well-

worn track for the muddy verge. The cart had almost passed her by when the driver, obviously startled to see a well-dressed young lady trudging through the countryside alone, clucked his plodding cob to a standstill. "Oh, I say there, miss." He politely raised a battered beaver, but quickly clapped it down again as an icy blast ruffled his light brown hair. "Are you quite all right?"

If her appearance had startled the driver of the cart, Jemima was equally amazed at his. She had fully expected some farmer on his way, possibly, to inspect a field. But the man's voice clearly bespoke the gentleman, as did his well-tailored, though, on second glance, decidedly threadbare, greatcoat.

She explained her predicament, and the gentleman expressed his sympathy. He had a pleasant face, handsome though rather heavily lined for someone Jemima judged to be not quite middle-aged. His gray eyes were a trifle blood-shot, but that condition failed to mask their genuine concern.

"Lawford Court's still a good two miles away," he informed her. "You look absolutely fagged. Here, allow me to take you."

She was explaining that the Court lay in the direction he'd just come from and that she really didn't mind the walk, while at the same time imagining what her mother would have to say to her accepting a ride from a total stranger when her protests were cut short by the sound of racing horses.

"Move it, Dobbin!" The cart owner slapped the cob's rump sharply with the reins and the animal vacated the center of the highway, barely in the nick of time. Two grays pulling a shiny black curricule with red upholstery were speeding toward them.

Once more the near miss came as a streaky blur.

The curricie thundered by, straight through a puddle that erupted in an arc of muddy water. "Blast you!" Miss Forbes screamed, but her words were no doubt lost in the pounding of eight hooves. At any rate the driver neither slowed nor turned to look.

"Of all the arrogant, unspeakable, insufferable—!" she fumed, then looked down at Clarissa's mud-splattered traveling cloak and groaned.

The shabby gentleman, who had turned his cart to join her, clucked sympathetically. "Oh, I wouldn't do that if I were you," he advised as she began to dab at the mess with her handkerchief. "Best let it dry first, and then it should brush off all right. At least that's my ex-valet used to say."

"This really is the last and final straw!" Jemima gingerly folded her muddy handkerchief clean side out and returned it to her reticule. "That bedlamite should be locked up for everyone's protection. I'll have you know that he's the one who ran the Dover Mail right off the road."

"Indeed?" The shabby gentleman had jumped down and was helping Jemima into his cart. (The question of whether or not she should accept his offer had died aborning.) "That's rather strange. Considering his remarkable speed, you'd think by now he'd be at least halfway to Dover. Of course, he could have stopped to rest his cattle. God knows they'd soon need a breather." The man clucked at his cob who plodded off at a stodgy pace, made to seem more plodding in contrast to the magnificent bits of blood that had almost overrun them.

"That is odd," Jemima agreed. "For I certainly didn't pass them. I'd have given him the tongue-lashing of his life if I had done." She mulled the matter over and came up with a solution. "He must

have stopped to see someone. I recall passing a gate a few miles back."

"That would have been mine," her companion said, "and I'm afraid I don't number anyone so bang-up-to-the-nines among my acquaintances. By the by, in all the excitement I haven't introduced myself. I'm Edward Baldwin. And my estate, at least what's left of it," he grimaced, "marches next to your uncle's."

Jemima acknowledged his introduction rather absently. Her mind was still on the flashy curricule. "I don't see how I could have mistaken the matter. Granted, in both instances there was very little time for observation, but the rig is quite distinctive. And I could have sworn that the driver who caused our wreck wore that same gray greatcoat. And there could not be two such sap-skulls abroad, surely."

He laughed. "Well actually there could be, you know. Perhaps he . . . they . . . are members of some driving club required to have identical equipages and styles of dress. Like the Four-in-Hand Club, for instance. There's most likely some wager afoot."

"Well, perhaps you're right. I did have a vague impression there were two men in the first carriage. Well, we'll never know," Jemima said regretfully as she put aside several diabolical schemes for her revenge.

"At least we won't unless there's a third one coming," the other said, then chuckled as Jemima looked apprehensively over her shoulder.

Mr. Baldwin proved to be a charming companion. And he managed to find out a great deal about her without revealing much about himself, she later recalled. The highway skirted for a considerable distance along the stone wall of an immense park. She

was almost sorry when they came to an entrance and he clucked his cob to a standstill in front of an imposing iron gate whose stark utilitarian bars were surmounted by a fanciful riot of ornate scrolls and flowers.

"I'm afraid you still have quite a distance to walk once you're inside," he said apologetically. "I'm sorry that I can't take you right to the door. But the fact is," he smiled a twisted smile, "I'm by way of being *persona non grata* at the court these days, and it wouldn't do for you to be seen arriving with me." He handed her down from the rickety cart with all the aplomb associated with a crested carriage. Jemima found herself responding to his charming smile with a profusion of thanks that, under the circumstances, might have seemed excessive.

"I do hope that the remainder of your visit will eclipse its bad beginning," he said earnestly, "and I'm sure it will. Sir Walter is noted for his hospitality at any time and particularly during this festive season. Now if you'll just give the bell a pull I'm sure a porter will be Johnny-on-the-spot. Happy Christmas to you, Miss Forbes."

And with a tip of his battered beaver, Mr. Baldwin climbed back into his cart and clucked at his nag. He did not seem to feel it appropriate to wait to see if Jemima was indeed admitted into Lawford Park.

Chapter Three

THE BELL CLANGED loudly. And in the distance she heard hounds baying in response. The echoes had not died away before an ancient lady in an old-fashioned neckerchief and stomacher popped out of the gatehouse almost hidden by trees and shrubbery. As she swung back the well-oiled gates she seemed to think it necessary to apologize for the absence of her son. To make up for this slight she pointed out a path through a wood that provided a shorter route to Lawford Court than the winding carriage road.

Jemima had ample time to observe her uncle's house as she emerged from the wooded area with still a good half mile to go. It was a building of considerable magnitude and much variety, reflecting several centuries of architectural caprice. One wing appeared very old indeed, with heavy stone-shafted bow windows made up of tiny, diamond panes of glass. The majority of the structure reflected a French flavor, which was popular in Charles II's time, while the latest addition smacked of the English Georges.

As she threaded her way through a mazelike formal garden, Jemima's perusal was cut short. She found herself suddenly surrounded by the rowdy