



*Enjoy this
special glimpse of
How the Duke
Saved Christmas!*

CHAPTER ONE

December 15th, 1814

Coldstream, Northumberland

Ten Days Until Christmas

“The bridge is out.”

Lady Clara Marshall looked out the open carriage door at her brother Anthony, Earl of Camden, as he grimly delivered the news of what had brought them—and what looked like every carriage and wagon in the north of England—to a complete standstill. The line of traffic snaked back along the narrow road behind them and disappeared from view over the hill.

“The recent cold spell froze the river, and the ice smashed against the pilings.” He squinted in the direction of the river against the bright glare of the blanket of snow covering the countryside. “A chunk from the middle of the stone bridge tumbled into the water.”

Her hands tightened on the heavy velvet and fur rug that covered her lap. “Was anyone hurt?”

“No. Luckily, it happened during the night, but word hasn’t yet traveled down the road to the coaching inns to warn vehicles not to come this way.” He smiled, although it did little to reassure her. “We’ll need to rethink our travel plans.”

Around them, wagons were turning around amid shouts and cries from drivers for rigs to move over and give way for them to pass as they returned along the road to the south. A few hearty souls, most likely passengers on the stage and mail coaches, trudged through the snow toward the village to take their chances on finding other transportation to continue their journey.

Fortunate people. She stared jealously after them, not because they were able to walk on while she was stuck here, but because they were able to walk at all.

“There must be another bridge nearby,” she murmured and dropped her gaze to the map she’d used to mark their way since the start of their journey in London. Not that the coachman didn’t know his way—as with all of Anthony’s servants, the man was competent beyond measure and more than qualified to lead them north to Raleigh Hall where Anthony’s wife Marie was already in residence and awaiting the birth of their second child.

No, Clara had the map because she’d refused to enter the carriage at all without it. She had carefully marked on it all the places along their route where they could safely stay overnight

in country houses owned by friends or allies of Anthony's in Parliament, even though their friends and acquaintances weren't in residence. *Especially* because they weren't.

Yet every mapped mile was simply a reminder that Anthony could have traveled faster on his own. Instead, he'd been slowed considerably by having to escort Clara north. He'd refused to leave her behind in London when they'd learned that Aunt Gertrude had suddenly planned to spend the holidays in Brighton. He hadn't wanted Clara to be alone, even though that was exactly what *she* had wanted.

Worse—she suspected that her brother had hoped this trip might bring her back to her old self. Heal her somehow, as no physician had been able to do.

If only it were that easy! But the reality was that she would never be able to walk properly again.

Properly? Laughable. Never walk *at all*.

Her leg had been so badly mangled in the phaeton accident two years ago that she couldn't put her full weight on it without it collapsing beneath her. Her knee had been broken, and now it bent only if forced, with her leg sticking out straight most of the time. Not that she could have used it anyway, because a piece of metal had sliced through her thigh muscle, leaving it shriveled and useless. The best she could do was limp around a few feet with the help of a cane. But each step was painful and precarious. Navigating steps proved impossible. And God help her if she ever fell in front of anyone—the last thing she could have borne was the utter humiliation of it.

Desperately, she scanned the map. They weren't scheduled to stop for another ten miles to the north, bringing them to within one day's long journey of Raleigh Hall. She traced her finger along the blue line of the River Tweed. "It shouldn't take too long to find a new route. Let me see..."

"I've already inquired. The nearest crossing is twenty miles south at Kelso."

Her finger froze on the map. *Twenty miles?* That distance would add another day's journey at minimum if the roads were clear. Judging from the snow that deeply covered the ground and the large flakes that even now tumbled out of the sky and threatened to add another half-foot by morning, the journey would take far longer. Worse, they knew no one in that area to call on for shelter.

She looked up at him. "Then there must be another way across."

"None of the ferries are working because of the ice. It's a bridge or nothing." He faintly shook his head. "In this weather, we'll lose at least two days, possibly three, by going through Kelso."

She added quietly, "By then, Marie will have had the baby." With Anthony not at her side where he should have been. Guilt pierced her. He'd miss the birth of his child, all because of her.

He ignored her comment and said instead, "The good news is that the bridge will only take a few days to repair, so there's no point in going all the way to Kelso. We can just wait here." He paused grimly. "But there are no private rooms available at the closest inns."

She pulled in a deep breath. No private rooms...and shared accommodations were not an option for her. Navigating the uneven floors and rickety stairs of an inn would be impossible, and she couldn't bear the humiliation of Anthony or one of the tigers having to carry her everywhere for the next few days, especially into the common room for meals where all the other travelers would stare at her. For God's sake, she couldn't even use the chamber pot behind a screen by herself! "Are there any cottages or houses we could rent?"

“No.” Anthony’s gaze turned solemn. “But we are close to Northbourne Park.”

The familiar name shot through her. “Absolutely not!”

“We have no choice.” He straightened his spine in preparation for battle. “I know you don’t want anyone to see how difficult it is for you to move around, especially traveling like this. But the Duke of Wakefield would gladly welcome us as his guests for as long as we’d like to stay.”

That was exactly what she was afraid of. “And if the bridge isn’t repaired quickly? If it takes more than a few days?” *Good God, how long do you expect me to remain in his presence—* her right leg flexed involuntarily, and her eyes stung, not from pain but humiliation—*like this?* She hadn’t wanted Wakefield’s pity following the accident. She certainly wouldn’t be able to bear it now.

“Wakefield might not be home. Besides, Northbourne Park is so large that we’ll most likely never see the duke at all even if he is.” Unable to keep up his unworried pretense that all was well, he let his smile melt away. “Wakefield would never refuse us help, you know that. And right now, we need his help.”

What she knew was that she never wanted to see Michael Stanton again. “I’d rather take our chances with the bridge in Kelso.”

He glanced up at the sky which had turned a grayish white while they’d been stopped. The snow fell heavily in large flakes, so much so fast that the shoulders of his wool greatcoat had become dusted in just the short time he’d been talking to her.

He dropped his gaze back to her and repeated her words, “Absolutely not.”

For support, Clara looked across the compartment at Mrs. Bailey, who had been hired to serve as her nurse, maid, and companion a year ago. But the woman knew her place and offered no opinion.

Clara’s shoulders slumped. There was no place for them at the inn, no possibility of traveling around the bridge, and no way to shelter in the carriage with the dropping temperatures should they become stuck in the snow while making a run for Kelso. Pushing on would put all their lives at risk.

“We have no choice,” she whispered, apologizing to her heart for the damage she was about to inflict upon it.

“We do not.” Anthony swung into the compartment, closed the door against the bitter wind, and pounded his fist against the roof to signal the coachman, to whom he’d already given instructions.

With a crack of the driver’s whip, the team started into motion, turning them in a circle and heading back south toward Northbourne Park.

To continue to share the holidays with Clara and Michael...

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